

A RETURN TO THE NORTH WEST: Meet No 342 (Saturday 14 – Saturday 21 May 2022)

The accommodation for this meet had originally been booked for May 2020 but with the advent of Covid and the resulting lockdown meant carrying the booking forward to May 2021. However, the situation with Covid and lockdowns one year on meant carrying the booking forward a further year to May 2022. I followed the weather forecasts over the two weeks we were due to have been away and got some consolation from observing that the forecasts for those weeks had not been particularly good.

It seemed that a long time had elapsed since Roger Reeves and Val Bailey had picked me up from home en route to a meet in the Highlands. In fact it was back in September 2020 when an easing of restrictions had allowed our meet to Skye to go ahead. However, numbers were restricted and it ended up with only the three of us going. Thankfully, this year, NWS activities were getting back to normal and I was starting to get a sense of that as we embarked on a major shopping expedition to Sainsburys to buy the food for the meet. With Val's car already packed with our luggage, I have to admit that I was wondering whether there would be room for all the shopping. But I should not have doubted Roger's car packing skills and, with just enough room left for me on the back seat, we headed off to Stag Lodge and Achnashellach.

Chris Knowles and Brian Billington were the first to arrive at the cottage, shortly followed by Roger, Val and I. Stag Lodge is a Victorian estate worker's cottage which was refurbished in 2013. Particularly useful was a utility room where we would be able to leave our hillwalking gear at the end of the day. The cottage's elevated position above the road gave a fine view from the lounge, looking over to Moruisg (a Munro) and Sgurr nan Ceannaichean (a demoted Munro). We were soon settled in and tucking into a spaghetti carbonara, one of Roger's specialities. With dinner done, thoughts turned to possibilities for the first day's walk. Nothing too strenuous or far to drive was the consensus so Creag Dhubh Mhor, a Graham, 10 miles from where we were staying, seemed a good option. This was also a hill that friends John and Jeanette Fenwick were keen to climb so I phoned them to arrange to meet us at the cottage in the morning. Living in Gorstan, near Garve, they only had a relatively short distance to travel. Things were starting to fall into place with one exception and that was Ron Wyvill had not yet arrived. This was a bit concerning as it was 10pm so I thought I had better try phoning him. Ron was just a few miles away but was having difficulty in finding the exact location of the cottage. I gave him a description of what the cottage looked like which probably wasn't very bright as it was starting to get dark. It then occurred to me that it might be more helpful if I stood at the bottom of the driveway and give Ron a phone to alert him I was there. Val joined me and had on a fluorescent yellow top. It worked and Ron was with us after making the journey from North Uist, via ferry to Uig on Skye.

Sunday was rather an unusual day as everyone decided to do the same walk. Brian had recovered from a new hip operation which he had done 18 months ago but his new hip had yet to be tested on the hills.

We parked at the Strathcarron Hotel and followed a path which eventually leads to the Bernais bothy. This was an excellent approach as the path climbed to 500 metres before descending to the bothy. We left the path at the high point, climbing up steep slopes to reach the summit at 612 metres. The views were magnificent with Skye to the west, the Torridon hills to the north and the remote Munro of Bidein a' Choire Sheasgaich, with its sharp pointed summit, to the east. After lunch and taking summit shots, we headed down to a point between two lochans and then made a short but steep ascent to the trig point on Carn Geuradainn at 594 metres. Our way down was to follow the south-west ridge before gaining the Bendronaig path. It was quite a broad ridge so we tended to lose sight of one another as we headed down at different speeds and in slightly different directions. It took longer than expected before we found the path which came as a relief once everyone was on it. From then on it was a straightforward walk back to the Strathcarron Hotel

where Ron had the good idea for us to call in for a drink. I suppose we felt that we needed a drink after the 'easy first day's walk' which took us more than twice the four hours estimated time in the SMC guide to the Grahams! It was an unusual day after all.

A rather dismal start to Monday morning seemed to affect the will of the group as we congregated in the lounge instead of sitting down straight away for breakfast. But the forecast was for the day to improve and Roger had a Graham in mind for the day – Beinn a' Chlachain at Applecross. Six of us necessitated taking two cars, Roger and I in Val's and Brian and Ron in Chris's. The journey over to Applecross is exciting in itself, driving along the narrow road over the Bealach na Ba and then down to the sea at Applecross. Not a suitable road for camper vans though it does not stop them from making the journey all the same.

Val pulled in at the parking area at the north end of Applecross Bay and we were soon joined by Chris, Brian and Ron. Conditions were rather wild and blustery, with rain still present in the air, and it was only Val, Roger and I who decided to brave the elements and tackle Beinn a' Chlachain. The others chose to have a more leisurely day around Applecross before driving back to the cottage.

Conditions started to improve as we walked along the private road to the Hartfield Adventure School and then followed a track to the end of a forestry plantation. We left the track and headed uphill to gain the western edge of Coire Glas, a fine recess which bites deep into the side of the mountain. It was a steep but steady climb to about 500 metres. Val had the good idea that we stopped for lunch while it was sheltered and Roger and I welcomed the suggestion. The angle relented to a broad ridge and up to the summit trig point. Val had been spot on with her suggestion for it was very windy at the top and even the stone enclosure round the trig point would not have afforded much shelter for lunch.

After taking the obligatory summit shot for Roger, we made a gradual descent down the long south-west ridge with its numerous knolls and lochans. We had an intriguing view over to Skye with mist swirling round it, which is why it is often referred to as the 'misty isle'. The end of the ridge dropped sharply to give a short and steep descent down to the road from where it was a short walk back to the car. Instead of driving back over the Bealach na Ba, Val took the long way back via Glen Shildaig which was also very scenic. It had been an excellent day of walking and driving!

On Tuesday, Roger, Val and I tried to climb Carnan Cruithneachd from Glen Elchaig, taking in the Falls of Glomach, but decided to turn back as time was against us. However, the walk was well worth it as we managed to see the Falls of Glomach which were very spectacular. The pointed profile of Carnan Cruithneachd was also seen to its best advantage from Glen Elchaig.

Similarly, Ron was unsuccessful in his attempt to climb his intended hill, Ben Wyvis, having to turn back after suffering from bouts of cramp. Chris managed to achieve his objective which was Sgorr Ruadh. Brian went for a stroll through the woods and along the River Carron in the vicinity of the cottage.

On Wednesday, Ron decided to join Roger, Val and I in our pursuit of Grahams. I think, after the previous day, the four of us fancied something short and An Ruadh-mheallan looked a good option. However, located to the west of Beinn Alligin up at Torridon, it was quite a long drive to get to.

We found a layby to park at the highpoint of the twisty single track road between Torridon and Diabaig. From the layby, it was a matter of picking a route through a maze of knolls and lochans before climbing more steeply to reach a small lochan. The final climb up the summit cone was steeper still, leading to a fair-sized cairn amidst large platforms of sandstone. The bulk of Beinn Alligin blocked views to the east but to the south, Upper Loch Torridon sparkled in the sunshine with Beinn Damh and the peaks of the Coulin Forest beyond. The lonely expanse of the Shildaig Forest lay to the north with Baosbheinn rising majestically in its isolation. To the west we could see over to Skye. Unfortunately, a cold wind put us off from staying at the top for as long as we would have

liked. For the return route and to avoid a steep descent, we headed down the east ridge before veering round to pick our way through the knolls and lochans we had negotiated on the way up.

While the four of us were heading off to climb An Ruadh-mheallan, Chris gave Brian a lift to Craig before heading up to Achnasheen to also climb a Graham, Meall a' Chaorainn. From Craig, Brian walked up Gleann Fhiodhaig behind Sgurr nan Ceannaichean and Moruisg as far as Glenuaig Lodge to visit the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold. A former owner of the Glencarron Estate, she had converted to Islam and in 1933 became the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. She had requested to be buried on a hillside on the Estate with appropriate Muslim ceremony.

Thursday was to see Roger, I and Ron turn our attentions again to Tuesday's failed attempts of Carnan Cruithneachd and Ben Wyvis, respectively. Not to be defeated, however, Val dropped Roger and I off at Morvich to tackle Carnan Cruithneachd from Strath Croe, a different and shorter approach than that followed on Tuesday. After dropping us off, Val and Brian went to the National Trust estate at Balmacara on the way to Kyle of Lochalsh. Woodland walk and gardens in the morning then to Balmacara Square for lunch and visit to a photographic exhibition before coming to pick up Roger and I at Morvich after successfully climbing Carnan Cruithneachd. Ron was also successful in getting to the top of Ben Wyvis and had not experienced any problems with cramp. Chris had spent the day climbing Moruisg and Sgurr nan Ceannaichean, the two hills which could be viewed from the lounge of the cottage.

It was an early start for Ron on Friday morning. He had a long drive to Oban to catch a ferry back home to Uist, unable to return via Skye. The rest of us had one more day of walking to look forward to. Over the course of the week, Val, Roger and I had travelled to Applecross, Torridon and Kintail to climb new Grahams but we still had Sgurr a' Gharaidh, situated north of Lochcarron, left to do. The hills that Chris's had climbed during the week had been within the Achnashellach area so he was happy to join Val, Roger and I to continue to do another hill in the locality. Sgurr a' Gharaidh would be a new Graham for him as well.

We parked just off the road at Loch an Loin and followed the track round the southern shore of the loch. After a kilometre, we left the track and ascended through a field to reach open heath. As we continued to climb, the hillside became a succession of craggy promontories and knolls. We reached a small lochan from where we had 150 metres of rocky ascent to reach the summit. Unfortunately, the top was covered in cloud otherwise we would have had fantastic views of the Applecross hills. We were also getting drizzle which often accompanies low cloud in the Scottish hills. But we could not complain as this was the only day of the week we had not got a view from the summit. In the conditions, the option to extend the walk and go back a different way were less appealing so, taking a compass bearing, we descended the way we had come.

Back at the cottage, we met up again with Brian and found out how his day had gone. Brian had taken the train from Achnashellach down to Plockton for a walk round the village and headland before catching the train back.

Saturday and it was time for us all to head back home. It is always a wrench to leave the North West Highlands. However, it is lessened when the weather deteriorates which it was forecasted to do. My thanks to Roger for taking on the catering, to Val for all her driving and to everyone for their company at various times.

David Douglas

