

WAITING FOR THE PERFECT WINTER'S DAY: Meet No. 346 (Saturday 14 – Friday 20 January 2023)

Saturday: Normally we would have a walk on the first day of the January meet but a poor forecast knocked this idea on the head. As I left the centre of Edinburgh on the bus to Moffat, I was wondering if this was the right decision as it was quite nice and sunny. But as I left the outskirts of the city, the weather deteriorated, becoming wet and miserable, so I was pleased we heeded the forecast. Arriving at Moffat, I got off the bus and made my way to the holiday accommodation just a short walk away. Chris Knowles, the meet organiser, had arrived at the holiday cottage (Daisy Cottage) just a short time before me. It was good to see Chris again and catch up on news on what hillwalking he had been doing since the AGM meet in Ingleton in October. As usual, he had been quite active in taking advantage of some of the good days in November and December and had headed over to the Lakeland fells to climb some of his favourite hills from nearby Morecambe. This was in stark contrast to me who had tolerated a winter of inactivity with a total absence of any hillwalking and I concluded that I would be the least fit of the two of us.



We settled in quickly at the cottage as we had stayed there on the January meet last year so were familiar with everything. Daisy cottage is quaint and old fashioned, located along a narrow one-way street near to the centre of the town. It is fully modernised inside but still retains its original stone fireplaces in the kitchen and living room. The January meet had been a success last year with Chris and I managing to climb 13 Donalds in good weather, though there was a total lack of any snow. We were hoping for a repeat of the good weather this year.

Sunday: A night of heavy rain was followed by a cold and bright sunny morning. Wary of driving any distance due to the possibility of icy roads, Chris suggested that we did Hart Fell being only three miles from where we were staying. Our walk started at the community hall at Newton where there was a small parking area. We were the only ones parked there. The rain overnight in Moffat had fallen as snow on the hills. From there being a complete absence of snow the previous day, the hills now looked resplendent in winter raiment. We followed the long, grassy ridge above Hartfell Spa, a chalybeate spring meant to have health giving iron salt properties but we did not investigate to find out if this was the case. Certainly the climb up to Arthur's Seat, a subsidiary top of 2,398 feet, was health giving as I exerted myself to struggled and try to keep up with Chris. However, I did have the advantage of being able to follow in his footprints in the snow which, at this point, must have been a couple of feet deep. From Arthur's Seat, the ridge broadened out to the summit of Hart Fell, 2,651 feet, making it a Corbett and a Donald. Rather disappointingly, it was misty and grey at the top and penetratingly cold. We did not linger and followed the west ridge which fell steeply down to the narrow col between Hart Fell and Whitehope Heights. This was an ideal place to stop for lunch

which we did. Ahead of us, we faced a steep climb up from the col. Again, I enjoyed following in Chris's footprints but grew alarmed when I heard a loud curse. He was suffering from cramp, the last thing you want on a winter's day in the hills. It was my turn to go in front and for Chris to follow in my footsteps. Progress was inevitably slow as Chris stopped to rest between bouts of cramp. It was with relief when the gradient eased off and his bouts of cramp subsided. Chris attributed it to dehydration so I gave him what water I had. It was also with relief when we saw that there was a stile in the deer fence to gain the cairn at the top of Whitehope Heights, a Donald (2,090 feet). A stile over the deer fence, rather than in the fence, might have induced another bout of cramp. Without any further incidents, we enjoyed the descent to pick up the path along the Annandale Way and back to Newton. The adage for the day must be "all's well that ends well".

Monday: With the prospect of another fine day in store, Chris proposed that we drive over to Durisdeer and do a walk in the Lowther hills which would involve a drive of 30 miles. However, we did not pay enough attention to the satnav and missed turning on the B719 which would have taken us onto the A74 where we would have turned off at Elvanfoot then headed down to Durisdeer. With laybys snow covered, we could not pull in and do a U-turn shortly after realising our mistake. Proceeding along the A701 towards Biggar, thoughts of having the time to drive over to Durisdeer and do a walk started to evaporate. Eventually, we found a suitable place to do a U-turn so we headed back to Moffat, faced with the question of what to do with the rest of the day. Chris came up with the excellent idea of simply driving to where we started the walk the previous day and climb the hills above the Devil's Beef Tub. When we arrived at our parking spot, there were another two cars there with the occupants getting ready to climb Hart Fell. Chris and I walked up to where the road ended at the head of the glen at Corehead then made a steep ascent up to the top of Chalk Rig Edge, which was the highest point of the walk (1,640 feet). We then headed on to Great Hill and followed the brim of the 1,000 feet-deep, steep-sided corrie bowl of the Devil's Beef Tub.



Annanhead Hill was the final hill of the round, with a height of 1,568 feet. Modest heights, in comparison to what we normally do, but a fine set of hills just the same. There was the luxury of a bench at the top of Annanhead Hill which provided a comfortable lunch stop with a grand view looking over to Hart Fell. The return route required a short walk along the A701, which we had driven along earlier, before picking up a path which led back down to Ericstane from where it was a short walk back along the road to the car. An interesting and enjoyable walk which made best use of the time we had available to salvage the day.



Tuesday: Ensuring that we did not make the same mistake we made on Monday, we avoided the B719 and took the shortest possible route onto the A74, turning off at Elvanfoot then heading down to the attractive village of Durisdeer. Parking was available next to a church which dated back to the 13th century. It interested me to read subsequently that the church contained a vault containing lead coffins of the Douglas family. I digress, we were there to climb Wedder Law, which largely involved following an intrusive track (presumably built for grouse shooting). However, it did have the advantage of gaining height to 2,000 feet up to the shoulder of Scaw'd Law. This was a Donald which both Chris and I had already climbed so we continued along the track until we reached a boundary fence. At this point we left the track and made a short ascent to the top of Wedder Law (2,205 feet). Unfortunately, the top was covered in cloud and there was no sign of a cairn to mark the summit. This resulted in us wandering about for a while, trying to find the highest point. After satisfying ourselves that we had covered most possible locations, we headed back down to the track, finding a dip between Wedder Law and Scaw'd Law in which to stop for lunch. By this time, the cloud had lifted from the tops and the sun had come out. Replenished, we continued along the track, enjoying the views looking over to the Galloway hills, and back to Durisdeer.

Wednesday: Saw a return to the Lowther hills but approaching from a different direction by driving down the A701 to Ae Bridgend and then following a minor road through the Forest of Ae to the farm at Mitchellsacks. Contrary to the SMC guide, we found ample parking area from where we followed the access track to Mitchellsacks. Heading past the farm and through fields, we missed the path we wanted which would have taken us across a small hill called The Law. But as it was distinctive hill, it was easy enough to correct our error by simply heading up the hill to find the track. With navigational problems behind us, we enjoyed the scenic approach up the glen to where the track ended at the ruined house of Burleywhag. From there, we had a steady climb up to the top of Earncraig Hill which involved bypassing some crags not shown on the map. One of the smaller Donalds, with a height of 2,005 feet, nonetheless, it was a fine conical hill, making it different to most of the Lowther hills with their broad, rounded summits. Our next Donald, Gana Hill, was only a couple of kilometres away but looked further across the snow covered landscape. We descended to the col between the two hills which was an ideal sheltered spot to stop for lunch. Even though we were enjoying a lovely, sunny day, there was a biting north-westerly wind. Route finding up from the col was very straight forward as we could follow the line of a fence up the shoulder of Gana Shank and up to the summit (2,192 feet). From there we had a grand view over to Wedder Law,



which we climbed the previous day, along with its neighbours, all sparkling in the winter sun. For the return route, we followed a recently constructed track (not shown on my map) down the spur of Gana Shank and passing over Hard Hill and Haggie Hill. Leaving the track and cutting down a steep slope, we successfully spotted the bridge over the Capel Burn and below the Law. No mistakes now, we picked up the outward track, through the fields, past the farm and back to the car.

Thursday: Our third consecutive day in the Lowther Hills, this time to climb three Donalds: East Mount Lowther, Lowther Hill and Green Lowther. I had previously climbed the latter two in January 2014 with hillwalking companions, Brian Billington and Roger Reeves. Our sole objective that day was to climb Green Lowther which is the only Graham out of the three. It had not been a



particularly good day, with low cloud covering the tops, so I was looking forward to revisiting with cloud free summits and hopefully some sun. All three Donalds were new hills for Chris. Our walk began at Wanlockhead, the highest village in Scotland at a height of 1,394 feet. From there we followed the Southern Upland Way for one kilometre before descending a small distance to pick up a

path leading to the top of East Mount Lowther. This was undoubtedly the most attractive of the three hills with a fine, conical summit, which we enjoyed reaching with the sun having appeared. As East Mount Lowther is an outlier, we retraced our steps down to where we had started the ascent. From there we followed a tarmac service road up to a radar station which resembled a giant golf

ball. A fenced compound surrounded the radar station so there was no access to the highest point. However, having made the effort of getting to the unsightly structure, we felt justified in 'ticking it off'. By this time, the weather conditions had markedly changed as it had clouded over and a keen north-westerly wind had sprung up. With the wind blowing strongly to our sides, we continued along the access road to where it ended at the top of Green Lowther. We had the satisfaction of reaching the trig point, which was the highest point, surrounded by a clutter of masts and concrete buildings. We sheltered from the wind behind one of the concrete buildings and had a quick bite to eat. Our return route was the way we had come which meant heading more into the wind which was making the temperature feel like minus 15 degrees centigrade. Descending from Lowther Hill, conditions steadily improved and we picked up the Southern Upland Way again to take us back down to Wanlockhead.



Friday: Originally, Chris had intended to return home on Thursday but the prospect of the best day's weather of the week on Friday made it compelling to stay for another day. After all, the holiday cottage was booked for seven nights so we could have actually stayed on until Saturday, if we had wanted. Could Friday be the perfect winter's day we had been waiting for? In anticipation, we headed up to Innerleithen in order to climb Windlestraw Law and Whitehope Law, two Donalds on the opposite side of the B709 to each other. We decided to climb the higher of the two hills first which was Windlestraw Law (2,162 feet) and also a Graham. Finding a parking spot from which it was convenient to climb both hills, we gained height quickly following a track up Glentress Rig and then on to Wallet Knowe. Eventually the track petered out and we followed the line of a fence which lead near to the summit. Leaving the fence line, we made our way to the trig point and summit. We had reached the highest point of the Moorfoot Hills in glorious weather, not a breath of wind, not a cloud in the sky. The hills looked at their best in winter raiment. We descended the way we had come up, looking forward to climbing another hill in the continuous sunshine. However, back down at the road, we were perturbed to find that access to Whitehope Law was a wooden pole bridge over the Glentress Water. We quickly concluded that the bridge would be very easy to slip on so started to wander along the banks of the river to find an alternative place to cross. Chris did just that and beckoned on the other side for me to join him. Gingerly crossing where he indicated (Chris has longer legs than me) I joined him on the other side, grateful that my leather Scarpa boots had

prevented any ingress of water. With no tracks or paths on this hill, we made a steep ascent, gaining height quickly. The gradient eased the higher we got and we soon got a view looking across to the summit of Windlestraw Law. With the absence of any cairn, it was still easy to determine the top of Whitehope Law (2,044 feet) from where we had a view looking down to Glentress Forest. The return route was back the way we had climbed up which was easy to spot as we could retrace our footprints in the snow. Back at the car at four o'clock, we drove back to Innerleithen where Chris dropped me off before heading back home to Morecambe. With dusk approaching and the temperature dropping, I was grateful that I did not have long to wait until a bus to Edinburgh arrived. Indeed it had been a perfect winter's day.



My thanks to Chris for organising another excellent January meet. As good as last year's but different.

David Douglas