

SOLITUDE IN THE SOUTHERN UPLANDS: Meet No 339 (Saturday 15 – Thursday 20 January 2022)

After months of stagnating indoors, I was looking forward to the January meet. This was despite the countryside being shrouded in mist as I made the bus journey from Edinburgh to Coulter where I met the meet organiser, Chris Knowles. As usual, Chris had a hill in mind to climb before we settled into the holiday cottage. The 'hill of the day' was Hudderstone, the first of a number of Donalds which we would climb over the course of the meet. In the misty conditions, we did not get a view from the top. However, on the way up we did get some good views of Culter Fell and Tinto, with its pointed summit emerging from a layer of cloud. Pleased to have fitted in Hudderstone, we travelled on to Moffat and our holiday accommodation, Daisy Cottage. The holiday cottage was quaint and old fashioned, located along a narrow one-way street near to the centre of the town. It was fully modernised inside but still retained its original stone fireplaces.

The next day we decided that the scenic Donald circuit of Loch Skeen, taking in the Corbett White Coomb as its highest summit, would be an excellent walk and one of the best in the Southern Uplands. The walk started at the National Trust car park at the foot of the Grey Mare's Tail waterfall. The car park was busy but it was a Sunday after all. We followed a good path up the steep slope above the waterfall. The path then traversed the hillside beside the Tail Burn where we found a suitable place to cross. Having now escaped the crowds, we followed a faint path leading up to and then through some crags and then eventually on to the summit of White Coomb. The top was covered in cloud and there was a keen wind so we pressed on, following the ridge until we reached Firthybrig Head. From there we headed out to Molls Cleuch Dod, an outlying Donald but easily included in the round. By the time we returned to Firthybrig Head, the cloud was breaking and the sun starting to appear. At the col between Firthybrig Head and the third Donald, Lochcraig Head, we stopped for lunch. Replenished, we headed up to the top of Lochcraig Head and then made a steep descent before heading over some rough heathery ground. We had some nice views looking over to Loch Skeen, nestled below the steep crags of Lochcraig Head. As we got nearer the Tail Burn, the view of the loch disappeared and we picked up the path leading back to the car park.

Monday started the same as the previous day with the hills covered in low cloud. We decided to do another Donald round taking in Talla Cleuch Head, Broad Law (also a Corbett) and Cramalt Craig. Starting at the high point of the road that crosses between Talla Reservoir and Megget Reservoir, we proceeded to climb the lower slopes of Broad Law. When we reached Cairn Law (a subsidiary top), we headed out to Talla Cleuch Head, an outlying Donald. At this point, the cloud was starting to lift and we could see our intended hill ahead of us. The cloud was also starting to break over Hart Fell and White Coomb, producing some dramatic cloud effects. Chris and I were inspired to brush the dust off our cameras and capture the scene. After some debate of where the highest point of Talla Cleuch Head was (there was no cairn), we headed back to Cairn Law and then on to the summit of Broad Law. A large beacon, like some rounded spacecraft, and a number of aerals marred the summit, especially on a bright sunny day like today. When I climbed Broad Law on a previous visit, when the top was covered in cloud, these intrusions just looked eerie emerging from the gloom. But the views from the summit were grand and we could see Cramalt Craig inviting us ahead. We dropped down a short way to the high col between the two hills and proceeded on to Cramalt Craig. At the top we huddled behind the cairn to shelter from the wind and have a quick lunch. We headed southwards from the summit to reach the end of the ridge and made a steep descent down to the road and the Megget Reservoir. It was an uphill walk of a couple of miles along the road back to the car.

On Tuesday we planned to climb another three Donalds, starting at the south-east end of the Talla Reservoir. But when we got there and surveyed the misty and drizzly conditions we thought 'naw' and returned to Moffat to have a rest day instead.

Wednesday saw the return of the good sunny weather. The plan for the day was to climb just the two Donalds, Gathersnow Hill (also a Graham) and Hillshaw Head but would involve a long walk along the Kingledoors glen. A small loop of old road at the entrance to the Kingledoors farm provided a convenient place to park. We walked through the mucky farmyard and followed a good track along the glen. When we reached the deserted farmhouse of Hopehead, we left the track and climbed to the top of Coomb Hill. From there it was an easy and pleasant walk along a grassy ridge to reach the summit of Gathersnow Hill. We had a good view looking over to Culter Fell and, further in the distance, Tinto, its pointed profile unmistakable. Unfortunately, nearby wind farms were a blight on the landscape. We skirted the edge of one of these wind farms as we continued on to Hillshaw Head. Descending Hillshaw Head, we escaped the sight of the wind turbines and climbed to the fine summit of our final hill, Coomb Dod. From the top we descended into the Kingledoors valley which provided a very pleasant four mile walk back to the car.

It was a cold and frosty but sunny start to Thursday morning. It was also the last day of the meet but the good weather meant making the best of the opportunity and fitting in another day's walk before returning home. A series of eight high-level grassy hilltops runs along the ridge between the Moffat and Ettrick valleys, opposite White Coomb and the Grey Mare's Tail waterfall. This ridge contains four Donalds of which Andrewhinney Hill (also a Graham) is the main summit. The conditions were ideal for a good ridge walk so we drove over to the remote Ettrick valley and parked near Brockhoperig farm. From the opposite side of the road to the farm, we headed up the narrow ridge between the waters of the Black Grain and Black Burn to reach our first summit and Donald of the day, Herman Law. The start of our fine ridge walk began as we climbed over two minor hilltops to gain the highpoint of the day, Andrewhinney Hill. This vantage point provided the best view of the day, looking over to Loch Skeen and its surrounding hills, and was also an appropriate time to stop and have lunch. However, we had not quite yet reached the halfway point of the ridge until we got to the col between Andrewhinney Hill and the next Donald, Bell Craig. After Bell Craig, we had another two minor hilltops to head over to reach the final summit and Donald, Bodesbeck Law. We descended from the summit to reach the edge of a forest where we picked up a track which took us back down to the road. It was a four mile walk, following the route of the Southern Upland Way, back to the car.

My thanks to Chris for organising an excellent meet which was made all the more enjoyable by the good weather. We were lucky to have walked five out of the six days, climbing 13 Donalds, including two Corbetts and two Grahams. There was only the one day when we encountered other walkers on the hills, the rest of the time we had the hills to ourselves.