

## **Hill Walking Diaries**

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### **Volume 4 – The Corbetts, Grahams and Donalds**

Being the 504 Scottish Mountains that fall between 2000 and 3000 feet.

Following the Scottish Mountaineering Club's list of mountains.

This is a work in progress and I intend to update this account year by year until the task is complete.

These 504 mountains are the most exhaustive list of the Scottish mountains between 2000 and 3000 feet:

- Corbett's Tables – The 222 Scottish Mountains over 2500 and under 3000 feet in height with a re-ascent of 500 feet on all sides.
- The Grahams – The 223 Scottish Hills over 2000 feet and under 2500 feet in height with a re-ascent of 500 feet on all sides.
- Unique Donalds – The 59 unique hills, from Donald's list, that are neither a Corbett nor a Graham. In completing these and the Grahams and Corbetts, all of the Donalds will have been claimed.

## **2002**

I'm in Scotland meeting and re-supplying Alison Ashton, Adrian Ogden and Kate Wilson, at Ruigh-aiteachain bothy, on their TGO cross Scotland walk. I walk with them for half a day, taking in Mullach Clach a' Bhlair, my first Munro since completing, before a return to the bothy, a walk out and a drive south to climb my first Corbett – a sub 3000 foot Scottish mountain.

Sat in a B&B on Sunday May 19th the landlady, serving me, looks out the window and exclaims, "Oh my God." I look in the direction of her gaze, towards the opposite hotel, to witness the tail end of six naked motorcyclists whizzing through. The landlady is out like a shot to get a better view; I continue my breakfast whilst checking the menu for streaky bacon.

I meet Willy Newlands at 0900 to walk the Cobbler - one of the most famous Corbetts. Remembering guide book descriptions of a perilous ascent I ask, "We can get to the top?"

"Aye Steve."

"Just that I heard it was a bit tricky."

"Nah, it's a flat summit."

Through the mist we plod, with me back to my normal slow self. But it is good to walk with Willy again with his edgy humour.

The route to the Cobbler takes a sweeping arc as you encroach the summit through one of its weak defences. A ridge connects its dual summits and we head for the most southerly, the highest. Stood on the plateau I look to the east and ask, "Willy this is the top?"

"Aye Steve."

"Just that bit is higher," I add, pointing.

"That's the eye of the needle, you won't catch my going through that. It's too exposed."

"But this is not the top."

"Well some might say that, Steve."

"Well that bit is higher, so it must be the top."

"Nah, this is the top Steve."

"But that is higher."

"You want to try it?"

"No," I reply.

"Then this is the top."

I leave the Cobbler, for another day and perhaps a paid guide.

Corbett Count:	0 out of 221
Graham Count:	0 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## 2004

As a new twist to my Scottish hill walking Alison Ashton persuades me to sign up for the 2004 TGO coast to coast walk. This is an annual walk, held in May each year, where you pick your own way from the west to the east coast. I plan a route, starting at Oban, with proposed deviations to take in a Corbett or Graham.

It's Thursday May 13<sup>th</sup> and I travel up from Doncaster with Alison, following the East Coast of England and the stunning castle of Lindesfarne. We pass through Edinburgh then have two hours to change trains at Glasgow where, in the sun of early summer, I act as a tour guide showing Alison some of my old haunts.

The train trip through the Southern Highlands, branching west through Tyndrum to Oban, offers stunning scenery. I feel a mix of excitement and apprehension about the walk.

We arrive at Oban in the afternoon, a lovely port with old buildings and folly looking down over the town. The Ferry goes out to the islands, fishing still appears to be an occupation. An imposing cathedral hangs heavy at one end. In the distance is the Isle of Mull with its mighty Ben More.

Friday May 14<sup>th</sup> and we are off! Signing the register to mark our start we are walking by 0915 but are soon halted by my desire to purchase new insoles for my boots. My right heel is feeling heavy, hot and complaining. The new insoles lift my feet - I'm now in danger of blistering as my feet now touch previously unreachable leather. But my soles are comfortable and I follow Alison as she guides us along the 12 miles of roads to Taynuilt.

We pick up other TGO people. I joke with Geoff Yarnell, who resembles Michael Palin, that he should be walking the other way, around the World, to get to Montrose. The joke falls flat, I must make a note not to be so obscure in my humour. Or at the very least make an attempt at being funny.

Geoff, like me a first time challenger, is a friendly chap and is soon very much part of our day. We reacquaint our breakfast meet with John Jordan who is walking despite having seven tumours and no bladder. My sore knee and breathing suddenly fall into perspective. He was on the bunk above me during the night at Oban Youth Hostel. Thank the lord for modern rubber ware. Then there is Penny and Bernie Roberts who we criss-cross with throughout our day. Another walking couple are Stuart and Maria Scott who met on the challenge

two years ago and were married within months and are still smitten with each other. I'm reminded that I am not so good with new people. It often takes me a day or so to bond, this will be another challenge.

From a welcome meal, rest and more TGO bonding at the pub in Taynuilt we take the forestry track to Glennoe where we pitch our three tents. I wander back and wait, just north of some farm buildings, for Kate Wilson and Amanda Cowking, joining us for the weekend. A dog with more bark than bite warns me of their arrival.

I lead them back to our campsite where we all huddle into one tent for food, completing the day of low cloud and a little rain.



**Glennoe with, from foreground to rear, the tents of Alison; Geoff; my own; Kate and Amanda. I'm in conversation with John Jordan.**

It's Saturday May 15<sup>th</sup> and, due to low cloud Alison, Kate and Amanda give up on their high route and accompany me from Glennoe around to where the Allt Hallater stream meets the River Kinglass. I find it very tough going and, with the weight of my pack, I am extremely slow.

The weather is okay and, with Geoff having left us, we pitch the three tents facing each other.

I grab an hour of sleep before the evening brings a joyous game of guess the OS map from the map number. We then become a little risqué and confess the OS map number on which we each lost our virginity. Alison can't decide which of two neighbouring maps it is which prompts me to ask if she were travelling in a car at the time.

We take a short evening walk to a bridge across a stream, disturbing deer who greet us with their graceful bounding off.

It's Sunday May 16<sup>th</sup> and nearly noon as I sit on a rock, overlooking Loch Dochard. The cloud is broken, high. The hills are alive with patches of sun, shadow, snow, heather and rock. An underground stream is running its echoing way down towards the loch. I'm surrounded by mountains, some Munros. Conquered with a lighter pack. I've been struggling today. It was to be a day of going into the hills, leaving my tent for a whole day. But I need to get a day ahead as I'm painfully slow so have separated from Alison, Kate and Amanda.

I'm due to meet with Adrian, Alison's husband, for a re-supply either today or tomorrow. It looks like today now, but late in the evening. I plod on and meet challenger 326, Brian Hill. I take his number as I promise to phone in for him at

Bridge of Orchy. He plans to walk on beyond Bridge of Orchy, perhaps as far as the bothy at Gorton.

The tar sealed road from Victoria Bridge to Bridge of Orchy, is hard and painful. It's taking me awhile to settle into the challenge. For 'challenge' is what it is generally termed. "Are you doing the challenge?" you enquire of fellow walkers. No need to mention TGO, just 'challenge' is the currency of comradeship.

I arrive at the Bridge Of Orchy at 1700. I'm not sure what time Adrian is due, with baby Ellen, for my re-supply. I phone into 'challenge control' and speak with Roger Smith. He congratulates me on getting so quickly involved as I mention the legends of Brian Hill and John Jordan. I really have Alison to thank, she warned me what to expect so I was able to speak with Roger in a knowledgeable way.

I eat then check into the hotel bunkhouse and rejoice in the luxury of a twin room, all to myself for the mere sum of £10.

Adrian arrives at 2100 so I can now shower and change clothes. We then have a couple of hours in the non-smoking end of the bar. Baby Ellen, eleven months, is into everything, including a passion for Adrian's pint of beer. It starts with a curiosity that Adrian attempts to satisfy by allowing the beer to touch her lips. Like some Microsoft product there was a delay in response to then be greeted by a wide grin and two outstretched arms to begin her drinking career. I'll remind her of this when she is older. It's a good couple of hours chat with Adrian. Being a Doctor I show him the pack rash on my shoulders. He winces. It must look bad. I take the glory of revelling in injury to bed with me.

On Monday May 17<sup>th</sup> I set off at 0700 for Gorton Bothy. The first section, along the A82 road, feels hazardous and I'm glad to turn and head across the glen towards Gorton. The weather turns wet and, rather miserably, my jacket lets water. As I walk in the rain I sing and whistle and dream of soup at the bothy. I'm glad that nobody else is around, I'm of no doubt that it sounds awful. I pass a tent, I guess it to be that of Brian Hill. I consider etching 326 and an arrow into the dirt track but think better of it.

They say that the early bird catches the worm, but I've long held the view that life is down to timing and indeed an early bird could be full of disappointment if the worm chose to have a lie in - my being an early bird today got me very wet.

The weather perks up and, at 1100, I'm delighted to be inside Gorton Bothy, sipping soup. It's a classic bothy, two rooms and that's it. I read in the log book that, like many bothies, it was once a shepherd's cottage.

This morning I passed the ruin of Barravourich, unroofed - falling down. Due to the rating system owners of unused cottages remove the roofs to avoid paying tax. The Mountain Bothies Association (MBA) agrees with the owners to re-roof the odd ones as mountain shelters. Due to a quirk in the law they remain free of the rates tax because the owner does not own the roof. Long may this quirk last.

Brian Hill joins me, I should have carved his number into the ground, he'd have enjoyed the joke. Brian is seventy-five, like most challengers he looks ten years younger than his true age.

I leave Gorton and soon realise I've lost the clip for my drinks tube. I back track to the bothy but cannot find it. Brian makes me one from a piece of string and a slipknot, I enjoy accepting his help and I think he enjoys helping me.

The afternoon's walk is over wet ground, tough going with no track. I camp at 1500ft above Rannoch Forest. I am a little worried as the tent takes a bashing in the wind. I'm in for a rough night. I hope all will be well but I feel snug. On a positive note I find my drinks tube clip in my pack.

It's Tuesday May 18<sup>th</sup> and it's been a rough night. I wake many times with the tent being pounded and it feels like I'm bedded down with an excited Labrador. Fortunately only a bit of rain falls. At 0700 I stick my head out and the sky is every conceivable shade of colour. Light, dark, angry, enticing! A call of nature requires me to get up. I don't feel like it and it's painful to break camp.

My biggest fear is getting the tent down without it taking off so I wait for a break in the wind and manage it before setting off on a ten hour walk.

I follow the tall deer fence (though I see no tall deer), which I'd followed for an hour yesterday evening, to the south of Rannoch Forest, looking for the route through to Bridge of Gaur. I have little luck and follow the deer tracks running parallel to the fence. At one point I pause to take in the stunning view right up the distant Glen Coe.

Eventually I realise that the fence is new and the forest has changed against the layout shown on my map. I pluck up courage and cut through the forest on a stream and pick my way down.

I find a faint deer track (ironic as the deer fence is supposed to keep them out). It's hard going, with ups and downs and continual re-crossings of the stream to get myself down. Then where? The tracks on the map are not here so in the end I pick a new track out which was a lucky guess. I'm not a happy person as for over two hours I am very uncertain.

At Bridge of Gaur I cross to civilisation and hope for a tearoom or pub. I have no luck so take the long haul to the bothy of Ben Alder Cottage which, by all accounts, is haunted. It rains and is tough going. My energy is poor and with 1km to go I slump down and have to will myself to get moving again. I keep chanting "Come on Steve, just 1KM more".

On arrival I make soup and am grateful for the dry pair of socks in my pack. I read up that it was last occupied, as a home, by Mrs McCook. I feel lonely, this could be the low point of the crossing - it's 29 hours since I last spoke to anybody.

I light a fire, it brings me some cheer as my day socks steam away.

It's Wednesday May 19<sup>th</sup> and I wake at 0430. There's been no disturbances from the ghost, but two mice did disturb me with their rustling.

Last night's rain caused me to postpone a call of nature, this morning there's an urgent need that requires the use of the bothy spade. A sign up gives guidance as to where one might crap (their words not mine). It pleads that using the outhouse, open ground, the bothy wall or porch, covering over with a mole hill or building a nice little rockery over ones steaming achievements is not on. I have to grab walking boots and spade and make my way to the recommended turd graveyard some two hundred meters from the bothy.

I set off at 0700 and find it very tough going with my body was complaining. In places the path meets the shore of Loch Ericht and I have to scramble around rocks to avoid an icy plunge.

The weather varies, and I can't get comfortable with my kit. Passing the shore in one place an Oyster Catcher decides I'm too near its nest. I have to pull my hood up and attach the mouth protector as it continually dive bombs me to see me off.

It takes me six hours to get to Ben Alder Lodge and I'm disappointed that the estate has, with consent, moved the path around the lodge. This makes a full pass up the side of the loch impossible and adds considerable height to the walk. Somehow the planners who agreed to this, along with permitting a series of buildings with every conceivable piece of Scottish architecture crammed into a building too small to accept it, must have missed the point somewhere. They look like castles from a Scooby-Do story and are a 'face lift too far' for the Scottish hills.

It's now a three and a half hour further trudge to Dalwhinnie. I stop to speak to a mountain biker - my first human contact in 49 hours! I almost pull him off his bike to have a conversation with me. I'm low, down and convinced that everybody else is ahead of me on the challenge.

I look back down the loch as the sun hits it. Trees, mountains, water and the shades of light conspire to lift my spirits and remind me of why I do this.

I continue to the sounds of a cuckoo. A solitary bird that I am convinced is also doing the TGO. I keep myself going by allowing daft things to enter my head, like is this 'The TGO' or just 'TGO' as TGO stands for The Great Outdoors. 'The TGO' would imply a stutter as it expands to The, The Great Outdoors.

The event used to be called The Ultimate Challenge, which never, to my knowledge, got the acronym of TUC. You could imagine it in its early days:

"Now brothers we are on TUC. We've made it half way and now we propose to strike out-"

"Right, strike. Everybody out."

I'll spare you the rest, it's all tripe coming into my mind to keep me company. You poor reader, are in fact lucky as you only have a snippet of the constant crap that churns inside my head.



**Loch Erich. I didn't take a camera with me so this is from the web.**

I'd arranged to send a parcel to the only hotel in Dalwhinnie. When I called a few weeks back they said they'd be full this night but could hold a parcel for me. It rains as I approach the village and feeling desperate for a bed and a bath, I try

the railway station to see if I can get a train to the next town, Newtonmore, where there are lots of hotels. If successful I'd then get the first train back in the morning to pick up where I left off.

As I'm reading the timetable a train comes in, stops briefly and then sets off again. I quickly realise that there are no more trains for over six hours. I trudge to the local hotel, to collect my package and, convinced I'm going to have to camp in the rain, half-heartedly enquire of a room, keeping the hope in my heart in check. The manager checks his books and says, "We've one left." I ask him the price. I'd have taken it at any price, but £25.50 is a bargain.

He leads me to the room and as he opens the door and shows me around, I spout the most painful series of words of praise, gratitude and gratefulness ever to have passed my lips (well apart from to the girl on OS sheet 198 some twenty years previous). The bath is the most pleasurable of my life as I lower my aching limbs bit by bit into the pool of warm water.

When I eventually extract myself from the bath (believe me this is a long while later) I make my way to the restaurant for a meal. Settling into my seat it does not cross my mind that I might not be the only TGO participant taking refuge in the hotel that night.

"TGO?"

I look up to an enquiring face. "How did you know?"

"Tanned, tired, unshaven and no shoes!"

Yup, that about sums me up and I shake hands with John Hooper as I contemplate how dumb my question must have sounded. John goes to fetch another challenger and I'm introduced to the infamous Di Gerrard. Soon we are joined by John Jocys. From 49 hours alone, which surprises them, I'm suddenly buzzing, alive and starting to feel part of something. All the pain suddenly feels worthwhile as we share stories of our adventures. The struggles make the journey even more satisfying when the discomforts are replaced by ease.

It's Thursday May 20<sup>th</sup> and I wake feeling a little ill, my stomach has been churned up. A voice comes into my head as to what is wrong. Vitamin C! Okay scurvy has not yet kicked in but, whenever the waiting staff are not looking, I take another glass of breakfast orange juice. Eight in all with the last one being sank with my rucksack on my back ready for the off.

As I make to leave I spy a familiar figure alighting from a car. At first glance it looks like Geoff Yarnell. At a second glance I notice the odd handles on his trekking poles and realise that it is indeed Geoff. I shoot out to humiliate him, whatever the excuse, over the use of a vehicle. Of course it was innocent, a train trip to Newtonmore the night before and a lift back to restart his walk. I think we are both pleased to see each other, it has been five days.

I'm able to introduce him to John and they set off together. I walk with Di after briefly meeting Val Hadden and Mary Brook. Walking with Di is fun, and we make good progress alongside the aqueduct with various connections with Val and Mary.

Near Coire Chuaich there's a parting of the ways and I'm left lone to walk down the Allt na Fearna before the cut across the lower reaches of Maol an t-Seilch and a cut down to the bridge at the dam on the loch north of Gaick Lodge.

Approaching the dam I see two figures pause and wait for me. It's Geoff and John, having taken the longer route via Gaick Lodge. We make good progress and

my original plan to camp is slowly replaced by the possibility that Ruigtheadain Bothy might be within reach.

I lose John and Geoff on the lower slopes of Can Dearg, my breathing not allowing me to keep a pace. Today my breathing on ascents only allows me to walk a few yards before I need to pause and allow my breathing to catch up - doing ten yards up hill feels like doing a 100m dash, all I can do is then rest. I can never find a maintainable pace.

Some of the views today are stunning and I recall why Scotland is so beautiful. The Alps, for sure, are beautiful yet it's every person's ideal image of mountain scenery. Only viewable from certain angles and often in nice weather. Scotland has the moods of the added weather and unlike an artist's canvas you can be amongst it, part of it, embracing it not just looking on.

Cutting through the forest above Allt na Cuilce, picking between the fallen trees on a track, I meet with John again. We keep each other going and share the pain of the track down into Glen Feshie. My quick fire appalling jokes keeps John's minds from the pain of the walk.

Crossing the River Feshie takes careful picking of the way, stepping from stone to stone, watching out for currents when splashing across wider sections.

It starts to rain and I can't really make out the bothy in the poor light. Eventually my nose picks up the scent of a fire. It feels warm, welcoming.

Bursting through the door, after over ten hours walking, I'm met by a huge array of people, a hearty log fire and John Hooper and Geoff ready to spring up and shake my hand. A chair opens up for me. The comradeship strikes me. We are all, as individuals, trying to get across Scotland but to each one of us the success of each other's crossing is just as important as the success of one's own. The Munros are about the mountains you climb, the TGO about the people you meet. Yet in both cases the soul is worked upon. Both offer hard, tough, gruelling days yet when rest comes a satisfaction descends that words can barely express.

Also in the bothy is Maggie Hems, a retired teacher, who'd I'd met in this very same bothy two years previously; Alan Hardy, a well-known walker who had vetted my route and Bob Lees who falls prey to my bad jokes: he has bought some super glue to mend his boots and the chap in the shop reluctantly sold it to him, saying he doubted it would solve the problem. I said he should go back and say that it had fixed the problem, but now how does he get the boot off?

The evening passes by with good stories of the hills, simmering hot drinks and simmering socks.

It's Friday May 21<sup>st</sup> and I'm given a cracking pace this morning by tailgating Alan Hardy. He's interesting to talk to, very knowledgeable about the hills. I also like the way he engaged in conversation and was interested in my tales too: I have met some other well-known walkers in the past and have been disappointed by the self-interest.

After an hour or so I lose Alan, he's just too quick though I'm grateful for him having got me through what is normally the slowest part of my day.

I pick up with John Jocys and Mike Fallon, and we get a thing going about craving for fried eggs, beans and chips. Every excuse we can we get it into the conversation. Continually adding to our fantasy meal. We see an aerial in the



distance and fantasise that it is on top of a café, selling fried eggs, beans and chips.

We lose John and then I lose Mike so I walk alone towards the Linn of Dee. Mike is heading for Braemar with John planning to camp at White Bridge. Other people pass and through them I hear stories of a couple, MA and Mike (female and male). They are obviously even paced to me, as they never catch me up but through the various stories I hear I build up a mental image of them.

I camp, on a bend in the river, just short of the Linn of Dee, avoiding hitting the road into Braemar. I sit with the tent open looking back towards some of today's walk. The wide river gently passes within a few feet, some snow-capped mountains frame the horizon. Heathers, trees and grass pick out contours and gullies. Rocks mark the crags.

I lay in the tent and draw a compass onto my TGO cap with the peak facing east.

After eating I spy a fellow challenger descending the path. I wander up to meet and greet him. It's a wee fellow called John Dodd from Liverpool - full of personality, bubble and enthusiasm. It's great to meet him

It's Saturday May 22<sup>nd</sup> and it takes three hours to walk to Braemar, arriving at 1000 in the beautiful morning sunshine. The Fife Arms Hotel has a single room for me which I can have at 1500. So I stroll, happily, around Braemar, eating in cafes (especially enjoying fried egg, beans and chips) and generally chill with fellow TGO participants. I soak up the atmosphere.

Bernie and Penny approach me. "We are having a small gas problem," she says. I was about to reply, "Oh please," when I realise that it is not dehydrated meals that are the problem but a lack of camping gas on which to cook them. I'm able to donate a half used cartridge and promise more when Adrian arrives with my re-supply. Scotland never ceases to amaze me when such basic supplies as gas cartridges are not available in the shops.

A good evening is had in the Fife Arms. Plenty of atmosphere with a jamming session having Steve Wagstaff and John Jocys on squeeze boxes with a superb rogue fiddle player playing the most amazing music. His pace and Steve's alcohol consumption make an amusing contrast with Steve often left with swinging arms trying to regain a hold on the proceedings.

Adrian arrives, baby Ellen recognises me which is very sweet. They both enjoy the music too.

I eventually meet MA and Mike and watch MA's mouth drop with slack jawed amazement as I recount her life history that I've heard from people feeding the information down the line of TGO challengers.

On Sunday May 23<sup>rd</sup> Alison arrives at lunchtime, she'd called Adrian and we both, in the wonderful sun, walk up to meet her at the view point overlooking Braemar. As we approach her I can see her on her mobile. "She's on the phone," I say.

"To me," replies Adrian as he lifts his mobile to ear. Alison's request for our progress is met with a more primitive form of communication in the form of hand waving to identify ourselves.

It is good to catch up after a week. I thank her for the dehydrated food she'd made me and the maps she'd laminated for me. She tells me that I'm animated and enthusiastic, a far cry from how I appeared when she last saw me.

We lunch and I then set off and walk into the mountains, as far as the bothy at Lochcallater Lodge. I soon bump into Val and Mary and am embarrassed as I cannot recall when I saw them last. They soon fill me in and we are able to fill each other in on our progress so far.

It's a lovely walk up the side of the Callater Burn in the beautiful sunshine. The actual lodge custodians, Stan and Bill, are inviting TGO participants in and I have tea. Sat on one of an array of odd matching chairs I survey the kitchen. Wood clad walls, papered with photographs and newspaper cuttings. A fire does its bit, drawing a focus, warming the room and heating two blackened kettles with water for tea.

The lodge is owned by the Invercauld Estate and Stan and Bill get the use of it if they maintain it and keep it available for the odd needs of the estate, including royal visits and stalking.

I had been warned of their hearty greetings and that a bed for the night would often then be offered. I'm one of the lucky ones, having a room on the first floor, high in the mountains, with an original Victorian bed (iron framed and not moved from this room for over 100 years) and gaslight. No electricity here. Stan and Bill are kindly chaps, in their 60s who take in TGO people in this remote mountain location.

As I settle down for the night there are a number in downstairs enjoying drams, including the larger than life Denis Pigeon who let me know that my night might be disturbed by some internationally recognised award he has for snoring. I stuff ear plugs in.

It's Monday May 24<sup>th</sup> and I wake early, 0500, and sneak downstairs, passing Alan Fox in an adjoining room, to make my breakfast. Denis stirs and comes into the kitchen, I think he'd passed out in the lounge, on route to going to the loo (pee on the grass). He says something about it being the middle of the night and wishes me luck for my day ahead.

I'm off at 0545, my earliest start of the challenge. Yesterday and the day before were the best two days, weather-wise, of the challenge and were, unfortunately, my two half days. My route today is very high (1100m across Lochnagar) and I'm hoping it will be wonderful views. Unfortunately it's nothing like it, instead it rains and I have to use map and compass all the way but still manage to get myself lost twice.

At one point I see a metal object and descended to it. It's part of a Wellington Bomber that crashed on Carn an t-Sagairt Mor during the war. One of the engines is on display in Braemar, it held my fascination whilst I was there. A memorial to the British, Commonwealth and USA mixed crew. The damage to the lower cylinders, the elongated hole where the propeller shaft was mounted gave forensic clues that the plane crashed into the mountains nose first, with the engines running.

After passing over Lochnagar I look back to see it now bristling out of the cloud, so much for the early bird.

At 1500 I make it through to the bothy at Shielin of Mark after nearly nine and a half hours of walking and barely a rest. Two other TGO participants, Myra Watson and Terri Lane, head off as I arrive. In fact I catch Terri with her pants down as she was answering a call of nature. Val and Mary pass through but head off to camp a little further on.

The bothy is a dingy small place, I miss the bed of Lochcallater Lodge. In all seven tents appear, its small confines encourage most to camp and I get the bothy to myself. Alan Fox emerges from his tent and lights the fire in the evening, I drift off to sleep with the fire blazing. I don't remember him leaving, just remember being cosy in my sleeping bag.

Starting at 0655, on Tuesday May 25<sup>th</sup>, it's a walk over Muckle Cairn and then a drop down into Tarfside, about 6 hours in all. The top is heathery and I have to pick my way down to avoid turning an ankle on the uneven ground. My right leg slips into a hole and I buckle over, disturb a grouse which launches into the air with its familiar squawk. Though I'm sure it was laughing this time.

On the shores of Loch Lee I bumped into Val and Mary, now for the fourth time of the walk. We watch an old tractor go by and Mary remarks on its age.

"Nineteen eighty one," I say.

They looked at me, curious.

"X Reg."

Val and I then have a flowing conversation reminiscing the various years and the registration letters for them. How 1967 was cut short as they only ran an 'E' plate for seven months. Mary listens with a bemused interest of witnessing two people with such a weird interest connecting in such scenery. I recount one my first holidays to Scotland in 1978 when 'T' registration had just come out. Being in the licensing region of 'SH', and to my parent's dismay, I spent the week desperately looking for the car number plate 'OSH1T' whilst ignoring all pleas of my parents to enjoy the fantastic scenery that they'd brought me to see.

It's great to walk with Val and Mary. I enjoy their company so much. We dream of the hostel in Tarfside. With so many people heading that way we pick up the pace to ensure we beat off the opposition for beds. At one stage we think the people ahead of us were racing us too and we strike a deal if there are two beds Val and Mary would get them, just one and it will be mine.

On arriving at the hostel we all get single rooms – though my socks could have done with a single room of their own, having not changed them for 12 days. An Austrian chap is also staying, enjoying the TGO. He does not get my joke when I ask if Austria has a coast to coast walk. Some jokes just fail.

The hostel is lovely, cheap at just £8 for my own room. Belonging to the church it is opened to the TGO and staffed by lady volunteers. They are so kind and welcoming. It is another one of the treasures of the TGO.

Alison arrives and we will now finish the TGO together. The TGO does get me talking to people, this is good.

The hostel has showers and in it I notice my right hand is getting much browner than my left. This is an incredible effect of walking west to east. If I get lost I could check which side of me the moss has grown on and navigate from that. I imagine a Sherlock Holmes story called 'The brown sided man':

"This man was not killed in London, Watson."

"By Jove Holmes! What makes you say such a thing?"

"Elementary. You'll observe my dear Watson that the poor wretches right hand is browner than his left. Clearly he was on the TGO challenge when he met his fateful end."

"Great Scott Holmes!"

"He could be but it has been noted that many of the TGO participants are from England."

"What about those tartan underpants then Holmes?"

"That could be the clue we've been looking for."

It's Wednesday May 26<sup>th</sup> and, sat in a cafe in Edzel with Alison and Adrian and baby Ellen, I reflect on the days four hour walk so far. Walking with Alison along much flatter terrain I realise the walk is starting to come to an end. The mountains behind us, the coast will be with us tomorrow. I'm feeling very fit, my pace is good and I could do it all over again.

Two hours of further walking take Alison, myself and Ros Stokes to the North Water Bridge camping site. Along the way we pass the disused air base that has recently been rejected as a centre for asylum seekers - hopefully the noise of passing *trekking poles* does not alarm the locals.

Passing a beautiful house with perfectly kept lawns I pose the idea of knocking their door and asking, "We are doing the TGO and you either allow us to use your loo or we cut little holes in your lawn. And by the way can we camp?"

In a lovely summers evening twenty tents fill part of the official site, a party atmosphere ensues with people strolling and chatting. I meet Sue Oxley, her and Alison had connected earlier in the walk.

Alison gets a leg massage from Keith Leonard. I ask if he is a professional masseuse.

"No, I'm a chipper by trade," he responds.

"You should have a word with that Paul McCartney," I suggest.

"Why?" asks Alison.

"Well you can do both Heather's legs."



**Alison took this of me having a sleep at North Water Bridge**

It's Thursday May 27<sup>th</sup> 2004 and a beautiful clear sunny day when Alison, Sue and I walk from North Water Bridge to the beach at St. Cyrus. I sense the three

of us feel close as we share the experience of finishing. We chat freely, openly and enjoy the views of the countryside, the wheat shimmering in the gentle wind like a sea.

On the real beach I strip to my undies and charge straight in the sea – it's mightily cold. Both Alison and Sue say they are impressed. Ah, at the age of thirty-eight I eventually impress some girls on a beach.



**St Cyrus**

Adrian joins us and we chill with the lovely sand and sun warming our bodies. We share handshakes and claps with other finishers. We all agree that this is one of the most relaxed and chilled moments of our lives. Neither Sue, Alison nor I want to leave. We go for a lovely meal where Adrian buys us champagne.

We report into the Park Hotel and go to Challenge Control to sign in, receive certificate, badge and handshakes. The obligatory T-shirt is handed to each person perhaps, to the delight of the waiting staff, as an attempt to ensure that each participant has a fresh top to wear for the evening meal.

I sense some sadness in me now the walk was over. I slip off to my room to shower and return to Challenge Control to be warmly shaken by the hand by Denis Pigeon. It is now I realise that the question of was I smelly when I arrived is given an overwhelming affirmation. Now being washed and fresh my bodies own odour is not able to mask that of the others. As Denis pumps me warmly by the hand I'm gripped in an embrace that even at an arms length has me saying, "Aye Denis, aye so nice to finish. Must dash, catch you later."

The evening of festivities includes the meal with speeches etc. It's quite a grand occasion with over 200 people present. Also some famous British hill walkers are here, names I'd just read about suddenly all in one place. It is good to sit with John, Alison, Adrian, Sue and John Jordan. Good to chat with Val, Mary, Geoff, the Johns, Brian Hill, Di Gerrard and everybody else I'd connected with on route.

It's sad to leave on the Friday morning, sad to say goodbye to so many people that have rapidly become friends. Friendships are made through time or by sharing adversity. Going into a cafe for lunch on the way home I look to see if there are any fellow challengers. Of course there are none, but I had got used to

being on the look-out for fellow challengers. My car keys in my pocket remind me of home, work and responsibilities. Only fifty weeks to go before the challenge starts again.

The astute of you will notice that I failed to deviate to take in any Corbetts or Grahams. All my efforts went into getting myself across Scotland. I hope for better things next year.

Corbett Count:	0 out of 221
Graham Count:	0 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## 2005

It's a wet day in May as I descend the steps of the Airbus at Inverness airport and exclaim 'Bloody Scotland!' Other passengers look at me, bemused as they too are blasted by the wind and rain. I sense they know I have a greater tale to tale. The hood of my jacket is in my pack, in the hold. I did not want to risk it becoming un-popped and lost in any crush with the business suits who, at this very moment, are fighting past me.

So far my trip has consisted of train, bus and plane. There is another bus to come, another train ride followed by a car ride to my hotel to start the 2005 TGO cross Scotland walk.

I meet David Lee, an American, at the airport bus stop. This is his first visit to Scotland, and he's planning to get the bus down to Cannich and walk towards Glen Affric Youth Hostel. I tell him some things he may encounter. He's interesting, interested and asks many questions. He's nice and polite – a good American. There are many but in the shadow of Bush it's easy to imagine a different country. We say our goodbyes as we reach Inverness and joke that we may see each other on the 'trail' (I'm using his language, welcoming him) as he'll be heading West on bits that I'll be heading East on. I think we like that connection.

I've a number of hours to kill in Inverness. First things first, I buy a gas canister – they weren't allowed on the plane. This will be additional weight to the 28lbs already weighed in. There will be water to carry too. I then post some stuff home, my passport and the handy plastic wrapper British Midland protected my pack with. Passport? After 911 we all need photo id to fly.

I buy a copy of Orwell's Animal Farm (lightweight and easy reading) and sit in a café and start to read it. I take a walk, a drunken woman approaches me and asks, "How are the love bites on your bum?" Here we go, I think. More strange people. Perhaps it was gaelic and I miss heard? No, I'd heard all right. You'd never get that in Great Bedwyn. I laugh, kill more time, feast and walk to the station.

There's a group with backpacks. They look like TGO. I catch their eye, they catch mine and I'm welcomed across. I've made the mistake of thinking that I'll be alone on the train. Far from it. We pack it out and tell tales of the previous TGO. We travel through fantastic scenery, a prequel of our two weeks to come. We see snow on the high ground, or is it Orwell's sheep huddled together to fool us? I feel inspired by the company, the light shines between the hills forming search lights on the ground below. Rick Smith, partnered by Sue Graeme, mentions Alan Sloman's pictures in the TGO magazine. How they were credited to some other

fellow. I admit that I was this 'other fellow' and am determined to track Alan down on this walk and explain that the mistake was not mine.

I phone the Lochcarron hotel, asking for the lift from Strathcarron Station they had promised me when I booked. It isn't on offer now, instead they give me the number of a taxi firm. I phone and arrange the ride. A taxi feels decadent but there's something psychological about walking coast to coast, the walk is so important that no risks should be taken with additional footsteps.

The train gets in on time, I see Dennis Pidgeon in the next carriage and shake hands with him on the platform. The taxi is waiting but, after the ride, nobody is at the hotel. Eventually somebody appears and I'm led to a room in poor repair. I sleep off and on with the TV broadcasting the election night news. I wake to my own labours, breakfast and a taxi back to Strathcarron. I sign the TGO register, one of the twelve dotted along the west coast, before setting off.

Day 1 and Initially I walk along the road, then dive off to the beach, wetting my boots in the sea water of the loch - a TGO tradition along with gathering a pebble to deposit on the east coast. A washed up football, amongst the rocks, catches my attention and I kick it along for a few hundred yards. I contemplate being the first man to kick a football across Scotland. Soon bored I give it one last kick into the distance.

Lochcarron, on the opposite shore, is lit by the sunlight, a morning glow picking out the white buildings of a village sprawling the coast of the loch.

At Craigton I take a path across the hills. Battling with heather and my pack I make steady progress, using map and compass when amongst hills with no clear view. At one point I slip, steadying myself I take an immediate sip from my hydration tube. Something primeval, perhaps? When I disturb a lamb it will run to its mother and suckle. I get a deep sense of self exploration, slightly closer to my primeval brain. Closer than our 'perfected' world would normally allow? Perhaps the TGO gives two weeks a year to satisfy a deep sense of what our society has lost yet not enough to turn our backs on everything that it gives us? I ponder some more, as I'm prone to do amongst the Scottish mountains. It's not just about the beauty of the outward view of my eyes, something clicks, those eyes turn inwards for resolution and understanding.

Passing through Killilan I discover the hotel room key in my pocket - I have a stamp with me so post it back. I'm now on a good track, a sheep follows me, bleating - I wonder if it is saying "Four legs good, two legs bad." I drop my trekking poles to the ground, I'm sure that sheep bleats that trekking poles do not count.

I intend to stop at Faddoch but instead decide to keep on the track and camp by a bridge which will start me off nicely for tomorrow, Saturday. I miss the bridge and, imagining guiding a companion, apologise profusely until I find the next bridge along.

By now the rain is heavy (I could do with that room key right now) and I erect the tent as quickly as I can. This is no fun, I sit inside and slowly dry under my own heat. I have a disturbed night, lashings of rain wake me then later the cold. I shine my head torch on the label of my new sleeping bag, it says good down to three degrees (I was more of a Blondie fan myself). I rue this, the catalogue had advertised it to zero degrees. I invent the argument in my head with the shop. 'When Will I See You Again' and 'Woman In Love' echo around my head. A call of nature beckons, I take my socks off and stand on a plastic bag just outside the

tent. It's 0200, the stars light the heavens, one just poised above a mountain top. I get back into my sleeping bag and then into my plastic bivi. I wake with the sleeping bag drenched in condensation. I hope for a break in the weather to be able to get going.

Day 2 dawns in drizzle, I eventually brave it and get the tent down, packing it away in the wet. I view the scene, snow on the hills, fallen in the night. Other hills scooped out like ice cream. Things could be worse, things could be better. Things could be dryer, not wetter!

Braving the steep path it takes me a few hours to reach the Falls Of Glomach. Once they come into view I settle on a rock, wishing to take it all in - savouring and remembering it for days in the office. They're amazing - a torrent of water with mist lifting from the spray. A buttress of rock, never to give in to erosion, protects a flank.

I make the tiresome walk along the streams and lochs, boggy in places. I come across a tent and call to anybody inside. Out, asleep or abandoned I'm unsure. I continue on and see distant figures walking up Gleann Gniomhaidh. I join the path but alone, sometimes the way I prefer it.

After seven hours walking I approach Alltbeithe (Glen Affric Youth Hostel). I'm wet, muddy and have had to rest often amongst peat hags and rough tracks. I stop to relieve a call of nature, ducked out of the hostels sight yet still on the path. I've never had a tick bite before. I've read about them, how they can cause serious illness as these little biters anaesthetise the area then sink their teeth in and suck your blood. I look in horror as I see one burrowing into the end of Mr Naughty. I finish the call of nature then spend some fifteen minutes with my manhood laid on my left hand, whilst I try and extract this beast - both with our teeth firmly fixed. I ignore the fact I'm on a path and only after a few minutes realise what a sight I must be. Hunched over, "examining myself". One could imagine mothers hurrying their children past. I get a grip on it (the tick that is) and remember the advice of turning them anticlockwise. But I'm sure this bastard is reverse threaded, it won't give. I break half of it off, but its front end is still buried. I resolve to think of nothing other than mathematical puzzles, I don't wish to feed this thing.

I get to the hostel. I love this place. No roads, a wind generator and a bed spare! I am pleased. The warden tells how she went to some meeting of hostel wardens in Inverness. She turned up, covered in mud announcing she is from Alltbeithe. "We'd gathered that," was the response.

The remoteness appeals. I ask around about ticks, not advertising where I'd been bitten though. I get some advice. "They breathe through their arses." "They breathe through their arses," I repeat whilst pondering the full ramifications of this. "Well I've broken the back end of it off," I add. "You've killed it then." I was pleased to hear this. Just the little devil to get out. I have an attempt in the shower. Still no joy.

The evening whiles away, talking to other challengers, guests and the warden, Ellen. John Hall and Richard Smith are good to chat to. The last arrival is at 2130, dark and pouring rain. He took the last bed and looked mightily relieved. A small gathering remained in the lounge until late. Ellen tells of how she is escaping life to be warden of this place, and we get round to talking about our home areas. One chap is from Huntingdon. "I once had a curry there," says Ellen. "So did John Major," I reply. I end up having to explain the joke.



Day 3 and I wake early and sort my kit out in the lounge. Wet yet good to get it sorted. I slowly get ready and ask around for a loan of a pair of tweezers. The guy that turned up last has a pair. I borrow them, it works and I sterilize them and fail to mention what I used them for. I feel guilty yet needs must. I hand them back and realise this guy has very poor eyesight. I've no idea how he made it to the hostel in the dim wet light.

Today is pleasant and it takes me two hours, on good track, to reach the end of Loch Affric from the hostel. A dusting of snow holds the contour on each mountain - nature's spirit level. From here I ascend the muddy path and head east along to the forest around Cougie. Passing a loch that appears tiny on the map I'm pleased to bump into Richard and John again to confirm that we all feel that the map was wrong.

Not having the map to get me to Cougie I plan to skirt up the edge of the Cougie forest. The intended path looks barren, wet and boggy - I'm deterred. I keep the company and arrive in Cougie, planning to trace their map for my different route out. Craig, a nineteen year old abandoning with a groin injury and billeted in the same cabin as me, has a copy of the very map I need. He donates it, kind and a relief for me. He also donates a gortex patch for a tear in my jacket and keeps his fellow cabin mates, myself, Richard and John entertained with his tales.

I go up to the house and accept the tea and scone on offer. I chat for hours with Val (the owner) and Craig. David Lee, the American, appears, we did bump into each other!

I ask Val of old names of people that live in the vicinity. Did the Lawetz still have the cottages up Mullardoch? What became of the Birmingham couple that took the Loch Affric hotel? She was able to fill me in. Val has lived here for 40 years, still married after 53 years as a 17 year old bride. Seven children arrived in the first eight years. I guess she eventually realised what was causing it! She's entertaining and later tales how she incubated a ducks egg in her bra and its untimely hatching during a friends of the earth meeting.

David, trekking the opposite route (or rowt as he says), asks about paths and tracks. Craig mentions about tick bites, David takes an interest. Wishing to avoid them.

"I guess you call them check bites in the States." I suggest.

"Check bites?" he asks.

"Don't you call ticks checks in the US?" I'm beginning to rue this joke, the moment you have to start to explain...

"Oh you are thinking of when you get your work checked."

"Yes," and I gave up there.

Day 4 and I wake very cold, the sleeping bag is poor for warmth. Looking out the cabin I see snow falling, it takes me awhile to get up.

I make good use of Craig's map and, to start with, the route from Cougie goes well. Richard and John keep to the tracks, but I decide to do one side of the triangle. Initially I follow a stream through ascending woods before an open hill climb and a marshy descent to Glen Moriston. I miss a possible 'Graham' on route, instead electing to keep a pace. Dropping down into the glen I take a last look back at the snow-covered mountains I'm leaving. Passing a number of ancient abandoned cars (anybody wanting bits for an ancient Vauxhall Wyvern could contact me for a grid reference) I cross the river at Torgyle Bridge and start the tortuous ascent via the pylons. It takes hours, soft ground and uphill. I reach the top (glancing Richard and John on the track across the glen) and I pick up

pace and navigate wooded tracks to reach Fort Augustus. Warmth and the smell of the trees welcome me to near sea level.

I walk through Fort Augustus, feeling exhausted after an eight hour walk but glad of only the odd rain shower. A fatal combination of my credit card and a hotel with a vacancies sign is too much temptation for me. The hotel owner looks at me, unshaven, tanned and very sticky. I can see the look of a pattern formulating in her brain. "Are you on this TGO thing?" she asks while possibly weighing up the price of carpet shampoo in comparison with the £40 for a night's stay.

I'm pleased to have the room, it's a nice one. Nice to have my own space to dry, sort my things and wash some clothes. I contemplate whether the shower rail will take the weight of my tent.

I pop out to the village shop. It's easy to have ones view of Highland communities tainted. I could imagine gossip in the shop between the assistant and well known customers. "Did you hear about Mrs MacPherson? Well would you know she unpicked her husband's best jumper to make herself a new hat." Or "Hello Mrs Macleod, I hear you won first prize in the church raffle." No, when I'm queuing to pay I'm confronted with the conversation between two women as another young woman explains to the assistant, "e took er up the bee-hind and he didnae use a condom."

Day 5 and I'm eating the hotel breakfast at 0830, the earliest possible and walking at 0915. The first bit is along a road then a long pull up General Wade's Military Road (built in 1731 as a pass through the mountains for troop movements). I stop for lunch at Blackburn Bothy – a lovely place, recently re-roofed. Stuart and Catherine Brown and their friend, James Spittal share soup and their company with me. I then continue up the Corrieyairack Pass – a popular TGO funnel and I see and chat to many. It's a long, long slog. Passing over ancient bridges and setting foot where many a person had before. Looking to the right I can see Ben Nevis and then the final pull over the summit and a last look back at the snow capped peaks of the mountains I'd spent the previous days coming through. I pick out most of the previous days route, progress is slow yet it all conspires to make up the challenge. I enthuse to Stuart, Catherine and James how much I love Scotland, how beautiful a place it is. Being Scots I can sense their pride.

I plod on and pause, in the late afternoon, at Melgarve Bothy. I think about sleeping here but sense I have another hour in me. I have hot spots on my feet and, fearing blisters, plaster up. I do another hour, my body packs up at 1820 and I camp in glorious sun on a small island, which I paddle out to, near the edge of the River Spey.

The late sun is just above the trees. The trees on the edge of the forest have their bark stripped, probably deer. I saw many today, high up on a mountain breaking the skyline. The heather, peat and shadows adorn the hills. Streams flowed into rivers. The river is gently gurgling past now.

I eat noodles. Tasty outside though the couscous I've mixed in is hard going. I also eat lots of peanuts, my body reminding me of protein. I've brought vitamin c tablets this year; I suffered from lack of that last year.

Day 6 and it's been a cold night. This darned sleeping bag is going to be the centre of discussion with the shop that sold it. I put on two tops, two pairs of trousers, gloves and socks and still feel cold. I struggle out about 0600, eat a cold breakfast, collapse the ice covered tent, and pack it away wet.

I'm walking at 0700, though very wrapped up I'm sensing a glorious day. I pass Garva Bridge in about thirty minutes. Many tents are around, a few folk emerging from the ice including a downcast looking Richard and John. I say "hi" and plod on. As the sun gets higher I shed garments, down to my shirt. And even that has to have its sleeves rolled up. I make good progress on the track, crossing a mix of old and new bridges. Some the originals from 1731, one now in the middle of a field as the track had been diverted.

I pass a lodge house, the elderly lady resident outside. I stop for a chat. Her Dad had taken the place, as an estate tenant worker in 1948. She's been able to stay on. She tells me much history. How a barn, now fallen in, was disused in the 1940s when the dam came. How the road had been diverted. We speak for ages. How the estate won't repair her beautiful house. It is decaying.

The mountains have been cast by snow, shadow and sun. There is barely a cloud in the sky. I get to Laggan and get a phone signal. I call in to Challenge Control, reporting my progress. I check my emails, with palmtop computer, and find a message from a friend, Mary Spurr, explaining her father has just died. I'm sad, I knew him, I liked him. I send my condolences and don't feel like the hill walk. Instead I walk up the road to Newtonmore. It's very hot. I've no water and I start to dehydrate. I see a fallen tree, its trunk snapped at the base yet enough still connected for shoots to ascend upwards like the teeth of a comb. Its fight for life reminded me of the descriptions of how Mary's father had been the last months. I see a new born lamb, umbilical cord still dangling and mother licking its coat. It's wobbly on its legs, taking in its first view of the world, eating some grass. I pass a duck with its chicks following on behind. So wee and tiny. Renewal.

I bundle into the first hotel and am offered a room with ensuite. They advise me of a forty minute wait. I cannot so take the room without ensuite. My head is hurting. I need water. The lady of the hotel asks me to fill in the form, then looks at me. "No, you get yourself sorted then come and register." I'm grateful, kind of her to realise my plight. I drink lots of water, the headache becomes distant. I go for a walk and bump into the lady from the lodge I'd spoken to during the day. A small world.

Richard and John arrive, I sit with them in the bar. I also chat to Bryan who I discover was walking with Craig and his father, Peter. Peter has now dropped out and Bryan, at the age of 66, is the last remaining member of their team. He makes us laugh. Peter had been passing blood in his urine and had been evacuated from Melgarve the night before. Bryan apparently comforted him with, "I expect that's your aorta leaking."

Later Cameron McNeish is in the bar and a former Doctor Who, Tom Baker ('The Docket'), stands at the actual bar opposite. Sat in the middle I sense an anti-vortex of anonymity. At one stage I catch Tom Baker looking at the time – "You're the time lord," I think!

Day 7 I wake early and go for a walk, buying a few supplies. I don't remember the Police Box having been there the night before.

It takes just over an hour to walk from Newtonmore to Kingussie, I see Bryan behind me, the last of Craig's party. I purchase a few more provisions, a brief sit in the park follows before I set off. Passing the old barracks I take the tracks to the forest and, on breaking tree cover, head for the bridge. Here I sit in the glorious sun. I'm joined by Doug Cockburn, Tom Letswaart and Nik Lawcock.

Their company is great and aids the trip down to Ruighaiteachain bothy. I'm glad we stick together.

When we get to the bothy Bryan has already arrived, getting ahead of me at Kingussie. We pitch our five tents, a couple of teachers (leading a Duke of Edinburgh award party) use the bothy. Bryan has us in stitches with tales of his own disasters, jokes and manner. He lights a fire and a number of us pile in. Bryan mentions how lucky in love he is despite his first wife leaving him and his second dying. It was also a delight to meet Heike Lies and her walking partner, Karl. Bernie Marshall, on his nineteenth crossing, joins us around the fire.

Some noisy people arrive at 0100. I'm awake now and can hear the F and C words being used as aggressively as punctuation. I listen intently for any hassle, worry about the two female teachers in the bothy, Nik alone in her tent but I do not hear the door open or any disturbance. I fear getting up would inflame them. I get back to sleep and then awake and wait for the sun to dry my tent.

Day 8 and it is a late start. The revellers that arrived look rough. Now sober they talk but I feel nervous about them. Nik said she was nervous so I hung on for her to be ready. I did not wish them to observe a lone female setting off down the glen. It's 1000 and we are off. Nik and I soon talk deeply about life. I'm grateful for her company. I feel sad over Mary's Dad. As we pass the glen which I entered Glen Feshie from last year, I remark to Nik how I kept John Jocys company last year, in the pouring rain, with the most awful puns and jokes.

We catch up with Bryan, Bernie and his wife, Pauline. They say they are pleased to see us, having been worried about the aggressive guys at the bothy. I expect the guys were okay but with alcohol it sounded very, very different. Then, seemingly out of nowhere John Jocys appears. I explain to Nik this is the John I was mentioning earlier. John says, "No jokes, Steve. No jokes." Nik gives an odd look of, "What jokes?" The three of us set off and I'm pleased that Nik gets along with John okay. With the drunken guys I suddenly feel responsible for her – something male clicking in. John and I descend into silly jokes and Nik mentions how what she considered to be a deep thinker is suddenly revealing a very different side. I blame John. A man has as many personalities as his friends.

We set off, enjoying passing the obvious watershed coming off the hills, leaving another walker preparing to take an early night under nothing other than a tarpaulin. The glorious day continues and we walk the 9.5 hours to White Bridge, finishing a little tired at 1930, and camp. One usually looks forward to snuggling into a sleeping bag. Not this one. I sit outside and watch the sun going down dreading another freezing night.

Day 9 I wake in the night to find my drinks bottle, housed between the tent inner and outer, frozen. I get up to relieve myself and laugh as I prod John's socks that he'd left to dry on trekking poles – they are now frozen solid.

The three of us walk towards Braemar, via the Linn of Dee. My Mum and Dad, up on a weeks holiday, are waiting where it joins the public road. It's nice to see them and I introduce them to my friends. We walk on, Nik's feet are playing her up and she does not have a room booked. Mum and Dad go down to Braemar and book her in and return. Nik is very pleased. John aiming for Lochallater Lodge, goes ahead and Nik and I walk on to Braemar. A challenger stops to talk with us, a second or so passes before I exclaim, "Bernie!" Bernie Roberts is on his twelfth crossing – solo crossing this time as his wife, Penny, is taking a break this year. They are the couple that announced a "gas problem" in Braemar last year. Nik and I sit on a seat and watch an entire herd of deer paddle in the River Dee.

In Braemar I eat with Mum and Dad. I feel very tired. It has been a long hot walk in from White Bridge. I apologise profusely for my tiredness, they understand. Back in my hotel room I'm looking at a rather bearded figure in the dressing mirror.

I pop to the local outdoor shop and buy a sleeping bag liner. I rue the £40. It is also bulky and heavy but the thought of another freezing night is not appealing.

The evening was a combination of eating and chatting to other challengers. I briefly speak with MA Harper. I catch up with Alan Sloman and explain the crediting of his photographs, in the TGO magazine, to me was not of my doing.

After breakfast, on Day 10, I talk with MA and Mike Akin-Smith. A lovely pair to talk with, kind and give you their time. At 1100 I set off and Mum and Dad meet me at Auchallater and we set off to Lochallater Lodge. I feel the role of a tourist guide and, after about two hours, am delighted with their reaction to the lodge. Bill and Stan welcome them in and I can see their enthusiasm for this remote escape. Bill and Stan maintain the place for the right to use it. Gas lights and a roaring fire are its modern conveniences. A gentle calm place which extends into the time after Mum and Dad leave.



**Inside the lodge. Bill and me. (P.G. Smith)**



**Lochallater Lodge. Myself in the foreground with cap, Stan looking out. (MA Harper)**

As I erect my tent I take in the views. Mountains surround it, and a loch lays before it. To the left is a bothy. The lodge is L shaped with green windows and a slate roof. It's been a gentle afternoon with many challengers congregating for a chat. Basking in the sun. It's been good.

The evening brings one of Bill and Stan's legendary parties. Not one for drinking and singing I find myself as an observer. At one level entertained yet at another finding one particular drinkers desire to get me to accompany him with "My Old Man's A Dustman" a little challenging.

Imagine this – your name is Sheila Matheson and you live in a remote spot on the West coast. You plan a high level crossing and you've been out for over five days without passing through any town or village. You've heard of Lochallater Lodge but are unsure what it's about. Very late in the evening, you stumble upon this wild and remote place without a neighbour for many miles. You make your entrance to a wild whisky fuelled party taking place. Singing, some dancing and very crowded. Your eyes shoot around, bemused and unsure. She was quite a picture but soon became part of the atmosphere. I get to my tent at 2330.



**Lochallater (P.G. Smith)**

During the night it gets very windy and when I stick my head out of the tent, to start Day 11, I find it is snowing. I take the tent down between showers and have a quick breakfast in the lodge, discovering other revellers managed to keep going until 0300.

At 0850 I set off and find it very hard. I had the impression that Jock's Road might just be that – a road. In places it is nothing, not even a path. A remote rights of way sign stands at the head of the glen. Oddly pronouncing a route that would require many other such signs if it were to be of any guide. I can only assume that it serves some legal requirement to keep the access open.

This is a hauntingly lonely place. Just before the TGO I flew to Switzerland, to see a friend, and we bagged Chli Aubrig as a warm up for my TGO. Higher than any Scottish mountain it was easy in comparison, no wind and even the knee deep snow was easily manageable. Scotland's mountains are not high but they are steep, rugged and harbour atrocious weather.

I struggle with the final ascent at the head of Glen Callater, I see a walker ahead of me and two in red behind me. I get myself onto the high ground, tired, demoralised and lonely. I think of changing my route and heading for the Shielin of Mark bothy. I see the two red jackets and head towards them. It's MA and Mike and I'm delighted for their company – it lifts me and I walk with them a few miles.



**On Jock's Road on Crow Craigies (myself the higher figure). (MA Harper)**

We come across Alan Keegan, making very slow progress. At 77 the oldest challenger. I'd seen him walking into Braemar and was quite concerned – he looked very tired. We walk on together but, after a while, I soon I'm on my own: MA and Mike kindly stayed back with Alan.

I descend towards Clova stopping only to investigate a mountain shelter. An iron door opens into a flat tin roofed low shelter – damp and uninviting to all but those in need of refuge.

The Clova Hotel Bunkhouse is a welcome sight after seven hours of walking. I'm given a room in a dorm of ten. I hope for not too much snoring.

Day 12 and I start at 0610, hoping to get over to the hostel at Tarfside whilst beds remain. I start with a long pull up Green Hill (870m) then make my way to my first ever Corbett (peak between 2500 and 3000 ft), Ben Tirran. I smile at the significance of the time, it's 0914, and Munros start from 914m. I can also see the sea! Yippee!

I check my phone, I have a signal and text Gisella saying I'm atop my first Corbett, and she replies "What's a corbet? A sexy woman called Elizabeth!" I also pick up a text from my Dad, "Have seen Nik's kit in foyer she is in bar knocking it back with a girl missed as a newt!" I'll have to have a chat with Dad about predictive texting.

It's now a long route over with changing weather – all sorts blow through. Approaching Burnt Hill I glance to the glen below where a snow storm is blotting my view like an air brush in Paint Shop Pro. It soon nabs me. I drop down to the road and walk along to Tarfside. I miss the beds even though I arrive at 1310, with my body in fine form.



I have cheese on toast at the hostel, made by the ladies that staff it for the TGO. I put the tent up in pouring snow, shame about the bed. Again I'm warm with the sleeping bag liner. I observe one other walker sleeping below a raised sheet – rather him than me.

Day 13 and I walk by river and road to Edzell, taking five hours in all. It's the same route I took last year and I'm amazed by how well I remember it.

I see blood on my nose, no idea how I did it. I keep wiping it away and it keeps seeping back. I bump into MA and Mike and we have lunch together, lingering for ages in the Tuck Inn café. I scratch my calf muscle, and I am alarmed by its size.

After some hour and a half I start to walk on to North Water Bridge. Just beyond Edzell I notice the same bull that was there last year. It has unfeasibly large testicles and Alison Ashton and I had thought of having a photo taken with the caption, "A couple of nuts on the TGO."

MA and Mike catch me up as I'm sending a text to Alison. One might imagine I was sending a message enthusing over the scenery but instead I'm merely saying that the bull with the unfeasibly large testicles is still here. Funnily enough Alison does not reply.

MA, Mike and I walk on and pick up Russ Manion. The night before I'd got talking to Boyd Potts. What great names some people have – I'm left with a pure simple "Steve Smith". Russ, early sixties, has long white hair which a wide brimmed hat perches on. We make our way through the farm tracks, avoiding the road and get to the campsite at North Water Bridge.

It's sunny all day but starts to rain as I erect my tent and this cocoons me for the evening. Having mentioned my tasteless couscous to MA and Mike I'm delighted when MA's hand appears under my flysheet and passes me a couple of sauce mix packets. Later in the evening I take my newspaper to them, passing it through a small gap I'm immediately returned with Strawberries and Cream. A true delight.

I'm lifted by the day.

Day 14 and I wake at 0430, sensing something not quite right. I'm soaked from the waist down. I've rolled onto my drinks bottle, now in the tent to prevent it from freezing. The contents are discharged into the tent. I'm very wet. I get up and shower and use the hair dryer in the gents to dry my wallet out.

I set off in the pouring rain and reach St Cyrus a little before 1100. Mum and Dad are waiting for me and accompany me down to a rain soaked beach. I paddle my feet and throw my pebble into the North Sea. That's it. The TGO complete.





**Me at St Cyrus (P.G. Smith)**



**Me and Dad at St Cyrus (P.G. Smith)**

Room is made for me in Mum's car to give me a lift to the hotel. I can see Mum eye my sodden gear up and down. "I'll walk Mum, honest it's okay." Her car is her pride and joy.

The hotel room does not have ensuite – after two weeks of roughing it I feel stupidly disappointed. Mum and Dad stayed the previous night and had got talking to challengers in the bar, as they did on their extended stay around

Braemar. I almost began to think they'd talked to more challengers than I had as they relayed tales, names and faces.

The evening celebrations in Montrose go well. I catch up with Di Gerrard and hear how a torn calf muscle had her crawling to Barrisdale and subsequently evacuated by boat. I hear more of Dennis Pidgeon's trekking pole collapsing on the first day and relegating him to retirement. I'm lucky with my table, sharing it with MA, Mike, Richard and John. I catch up with Nik and exchange tales of our final days. Later catching up with John Jordan and Bernie and Pauline Marshall. Seeking out Roger Smith, thanking him for organising the event.

I also catch up with John Dodd. A man who has every piece of equipment clipped about his person. He amusingly shows off the items, many I've never heard of. I assume when he visits a shop the assistants clip items onto him and debit his credit card on the way out.

The TGO has gathered a life of its own. An eclectic mix of people, ages and professions. Could the originators have perceived how the human spirit would drive it to what it now is? Any competition has gone out of it; it's all about the wonderful people you meet and helping one another across Scotland. Nobody can invent a legend or a tradition. They just happen, guided by the human spirit. A few years ago somebody invented 'The Metros' – a list of peaks above 1000m. It's never caught on – formulated at a desk humans have rejected it. There has to be a special something that people find.

The term 'challenge' is a catch all for the multitude of challenges that go to make up one person's challenge. Whether that be an injury, a missing piece of equipment, being downcast, exhausted, lost or just soaked through. The Great Outdoors Challenge is just a title that encompasses so much.

So I managed to do Ben Tirran on this trek and break my Corbett duck.

Corbett Count:	1 out of 221
Graham Count:	0 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## **2006**

Always a sucker for punishment I sign up for the 2006 TGO with the aim to do some more Corbetts and Grahams.

It's Thursday May 11<sup>th</sup> and a sunny day in Glasgow.

"It's a she wee." Alison Ashton is responding to my query of what the device next to her trowel is. I know what trowels on hikes are for.

"It acts as a penis for women," she adds.

"Where do the batteries go then?"

"It's for peeing through."

"Oh." I'm trying to absorb this.

"You don't know how hard it is to squat."

"No. Have you tried it out?" I ask.

"Yes, at home."

"What you mean you stood at your loo at home?"

"Yes."

"What did the children say?"

"They were out." This was said with some emphasis.

"They didn't comment on Mummy leaving the loo seat up now? And which way round does it go, this scoop affair," I'm ignoring Alison's right to remain silent, "does that go at the front or to the rear?"

I must have gone on about it for quite a while because Alison eventually adds, "I wish I'd not told you now."

I was of much the same opinion.

We meet up with Sue Oxley and join the TGO gathering and greetings on Queen Street station. Alison catching her bus, Sue and I the Mallaig train with me alighting at Lochailort. As we cross the glorious Rannoch Moor, with the hills out basking in the sunlight, we spot the point, near Loch Ossian, at which we've arranged a rendezvous for Wednesday.

On the Friday morning I paddle my feet in the sea loch, sign the register and set off walking on the short road leg before turning into the hills. My first uphill slog takes me to the long hassock, tussock and hillock boggy walk across to the Graham of Glas-charn, at 633m. The weather though a little wet, does not hamper me and I'm pleased that my new toy, an altimeter, ascends at the same rate as myself. I'd never appreciated how useful it could be, not only a countdown to the summit but it reduces the need to pace (or estimate the distance travelled) when wishing to change course on a slope.



**The view out towards the Atlantic**

The descent takes me to a small stream before the ascent of Sgurr an Utha. At 1500, thinking my knees have had enough, I perch my tent at 430m on its westerly slope. The weather has cleared for a nice evening and my open tent flap reveals a view down a glen. A rocky mountain ahead, a loch to its right and folds

of hills guarding the head of the loch. The heathers and grass are a deep mustard colour, flattened by the recent melt.

It's Saturday and I start the day by resetting my altimeter to the reading when I finished walking yesterday. Then the two hour pull, in good weather, up to the Corbett summit of Sgurr an Utha - heavy going with ascents, bogs and bumps to navigate. I take in the views out to the sea, and beyond to the Cuillin Hills on the Isle of Skye: towering beautifully, their menace hidden from all but those that dare to cross them.



**The view from Sgurr an Utha**

I then make the steep drop down to Allt a Chaol-ghinne where I meet fellow challenger, David Boyd. He's had a tough day crossing the absent path alongside Loch Beorald.

We descend to the bothy at Glenfinnan where I leave David resting as I set off north east to the bealach, my aim to then ascend Streap and take in the mountains east to Spean Bridge.

At the bealach, after a long old pull, plans change. Streap looks impregnable from this angle and my own fitness is sending me a warning signal to stay low. My low level alternative involves back tracking and heading out via Glen Finnan. I'm demoralised my lofty expectations have been halted. The thoughts of throwing open bothy doors late in the evening with tales of grand adventure, have been set to one side.

Wondering what to do my eye casts to the very top right of my map. The slither of yellow road and the tiny hamlet, Strathan. I know my way from there to Spean Bridge. In better spirits I descend a little and camp. It's a low level route for a few days yet better than back tracking.

It's now Sunday and on each step of the descent of Gleann Cuirnean, following its burn, Streap looks more menacing. There does not appear to be an angle on view through which it could be breached. The decision to change route is the right one although the long road walk down Loch Arkaig will be a tiresome alternative.

I reach the little hamlet of Strathan and play a game of dodge the bog as I fight my way to the road. I pass what was once the old school house for the glen, now nothing more than a shut up tin shed. Here I meet fellow challengers Stuart Brown and James Spittal who I shared lunch with at Blackburn bothy a year ago.

I start the long road walk, the weather is good, the loch is fine yet I'm disappointed by the amount of rubbish strewn along the loch side. Beer cans the modern graffiti, saying 'I was here. I got drunk here and am so stupid I left these tins behind.'

A car draws up, offering me a lift. I explain the challenge and get a good luck wish. I catch up with the La Borwit's. Gretchen, their granddaughter, is this year's enlistment. Her achilles is sore, I hope she makes it.

I bump into David Boyd again. It's a long walk and we talk about many things.  
"What I need, Steve is a wife waiting at the end of each day. With a camper van."  
"What about lunches?" I ask.  
"Yes, that too. Lunch. She could pull up and have my lunch ready too."  
"And supper?" I ask.  
"Yes, supper too. Just when it's time to end the day."  
"If only Carlsberg made wives?" I suggest.

I camp at 1600, after seven hours. The spot is not so great, on the side of a hill in farming land - though nobody to ask permission of and no fences crossed. I spend a dull, long evening worrying about getting run over by some farm vehicle. Sleep comes very slowly.

I wake in the early hours of Monday, rain pelting against the tent with only the BBC World Service to keep me company. I don't sleep again and come 0700 pack my rucksack and brave the rain to dismantle the tent.

With it hastily shoved into the pack I'm off walking, hood up and pulled tight. I pass the end of the loch and its sign saying not to dump rubbish. There is so much in the glen that a couple of carrier bags, full of empty beer cans, leant against this sign would have set the scene off a treat.

I soon realise that my over trousers are on back to front and the pack is so badly arranged that I have the choice of it pressing into various parts of my back or hanging off one shoulder. Not until Achnacarry can I sort myself out, then by courtesy of the telephone box. Hurrah for the old K6, sadness for its demise. The phone disconnected, the directory mouldy and decayed. A lack of cleaning gives that oh so familiar K6 whiff, so familiar of a Saturday morning.

I set off again and I'm passed by two logging lorries, neither acknowledge my hasty retreat into the verge. An old man on a mission in his VW Polo looks nothing but ahead as I dive out his way. Only an old lady in some red hatch manages to raise a hand of acknowledgement. There again it could have just been an age related twitch, I should not get my hopes up.

I plod on, struggling. I should stop to eat yet the Little Chef in Spean Bridge beckons and sets my focus. After three hours of clouded hill tops, dripping self

and tar sealed roads do I reach the Commando Memorial. I know not to trust the sign announcing, 'Spean Bridge' - it's still a trudge, yet the Little Chef fantasy keeps me going.

On the last bend into town a sign grabs my attention - "All Day Food". This will do. As I approach, dreaming of fried eggs on toast, do I read the small print - "12 noon to 9PM". Now call me Mr Picky but "All Day Food" really does mean 24 hours, possibly a 7AM start to be fair. But all day is not a noon start.

I'm tired, hungry and grumbling. I pass my hotel, The Spean Bridge Hotel, and set forth to the last building, The Little Chef. I barely make it to the table. I feel exhausted and slump. I take out a menu and can barely focus. The print swimming in front of me in a dyslexic haze, everything looks odd, double. I think I'm seeing things on the menu. The waitress approaches and by dead reckoning I fancy she wishes to take my order. I mutter something about being vegetarian and could she point out what dishes I can have.

"They're the ones with the wee green men next to them." Thank Christ I think, I really was beginning to worry.

I eat well, set off back to my hotel and announce to the receptionist, "I've a booking. Steve Smith."

She scours the booking list, taking just the right amount of time to cause my heart to sink.

"Nobody of that name. When did you book?"

"A few weeks back and I arranged to send a parcel," I reply.

She looks at her feet, "Sorry we've only got a parcel for a Mr Smith."

"That's me then."

"But you are Mr Stephenson."

"No, Steve Smith." It takes a couple more seconds to convince her and she produces a key.

"You're in the annex." My heart does sink. An annex is all too often an euphemism for a very long walk. She attempts to show me on a diagram how many corridors, stairs and how much open ground I need to cover. I think she realises the game is up and leads me through the maze of different eras and styles of additions until we break cover to the car park.

"It's over there, in the corner and up the stairs," she adds (I've just knocked a painting off the wall with my pack).

"Behind the hut?" I enquire.

"Hut! It's a chalet."

"Call me Mr Picky," I add, "but that is a hut."

I decide it's time to solo this out, time to not try my luck or her patience any further. I find the door, ascend the stairs (18ft by the altimeter) and open the door. The bed is unmade, the bathroom a mess, bin full and half a cup of tea in the cup. I drop my pack and wander back. She's settled back in reception. "The room hasn't been serviced."

"Thought it might be," she replies, "it's a bit early for you to check in."

It's 1130 and I bite my lip as I'm about to say, "Call me Mr Picky but aren't I already checked in?" Instead I ask when it will be done.

"Hard to say," she replies, "they are doing the rounds. Could be hours yet."

"Do you have any other rooms?"

"No."

We then enter into a staring competition. Who will break first I'm not sure. On one hand I could offer to wait, on the other hand she could offer to find the cleaning staff and ask for a change in order of room cleaning. We look at one another, both holding out. She breaks first, I thank her and head back.

Slumped in the armchair the cleaner arrives in minutes. I'm impressed, he diligently and efficiently cleans the room, changes the bed and scrubs the bath, empties the bin and tea cup. It's left spotless. We exchange regal nods of approval. Twenty minutes later I've trashed the place.

The bath is excellent, welcome. The shower rail perfect to hang the tent over. I check myself over. Those who read my 2005 article will recall my horror of the tick burrowing into what we will now call the "he wee". Fortunately I'm spared. I doubt Alison will have the same problem with she "she wee", yet I resolve to ask.

I check my upper half, my shoulders are erupted in septic spots from the pack straps. A problem I'm prone to. These are beauties. The type that, as a teenager and if on ones face, one would spend a happy hour in front of the bathroom mirror with. That's the great thing about the teenage years, if you don't get spots then you are out with girls, if covered in spots those long evenings can be whiled away in front of the mirror instead.

Talking of which (and this is poor linkage but I wish to get this in) has anybody else noticed that TGO magazine has hit a late adolescence? It's suddenly discovered girls. Even down to discussing what the best knickers are should a girl wish to venture out into the hills. I mean, girls in hills - who'd have considered such a thing? All those equipment manufacturers making false beards to allow women to disguise themselves in hills are now out of business. (Incidentally, in case anybody is confused, I'm being ironic).

On Tuesday I start, after a monster breakfast, at 0900. Initially things are very slow along a small public road. Trees shroud my path, full of the falling rain. I branch into the glen towards the Lairig Leacach. A slow pull up the track - I'm struggling with the huge amounts of food to last me to Braemar. To reduce weight I jettison my water, thinking I can gather more later. It helps, so does taking extra medication for my asthma.

I bump into Colin Tock, a route vetter who does about 30 reviews a year, and he asks me my views on organising the challenge. I enjoy the chat.

A Land Rover stops, an elderly gent gets out and, without us needing to ask, describes his life on the hills. Berating those that move the stones or leave the bothy messy. He goes on a little, retired from hill farming but now in charge of checking the water supply fed from the hills to the houses, below.

"Is all the local water passed by you?" I enquire.

"Aye, aye."

Jeff Rowe joins us as he continues on about the beer cans left in the bothies.

"I told them if they felled all the trees," (it's the forestry's turn), "that the water would be undrinkable for days. They said it would be fine. Well bugger me it was undrinkable for days."

None of us takes him up on his offer. I once did get a kiss from a girlfriend on top of Driesh but nothing like this. It's then about young men not wearing ties.

Apparently he never ventures out the house without one.



"I guess it's a generation thing. Not meaning you are old like," adds Jeff. This breaks the flow and I accompany Jeff. A fit 63 year old himself, yet not 63 in mind or body.

We walk on up the glen, the mountains coming in and out of cloud. As we pass the Corbett of Cruach Innse it clears. We are tempted and spend four hours bagging it. A long slow pull but I've pumped myself with drugs to help my breathing. The views from the summit are good. There's snow still in the Grey Corries across the glen. The track is now far below. We give the next mountain, Sgurr Innse, a miss, a menacing looking affair like a spot risen from a face. These wild places capture your heart. Where life is truly lived.

We make it to the bothy. Graffiti on the door dates back to 1937, its age giving it permission to be there. The later stuff has me feeling scorn.

Jeff brews tea, drinks it then moves on. His company was good. I'm now alone, writing by torch light as it's dark inside. I wonder if I wish for company. As time ticks by one begins to own the place, almost a feeling of resentment should anybody else arrive. With the fading light I set a candle in the window to welcome any walker. I'm pleased when the bothy door swings open in the late evening and Graham Brookes enters. It's good to have somebody to chat to.



**Cruach Innse and Sgurr Innse**

On Wednesday I set off down the glen, planning to camp and meet Sue Oxley where the track, after passing Loch Treig, passes under the Corrour to Tulloch stretch of the railway. It's tough going and I mean that in many senses of the word. Diarrhoea has set in, my pace is poor as is my navigation which has me peering into a 100 foot drop to the Allt na Lairige. The diarrhoea beat the fear to it, but my nerves were a little frayed for a while too.



It takes me five hours to do what should have been done in three and I'm almost in tears when I turn a corner and see how far my destination still is.

I've arranged to meet Sue to do an evening hike up Beinn na Lap. She arrives one hour after me (having walked twice as far, starting around the same time). I set off with her but feel weak, and uneasy. One normally needs to find a secluded spot every other day in the wilds, today so far it's been seven times. I make my excuses and return to the tent. Unable to eat an evening meal I try some cereal.

Sue returns later happy to have done her Munro and pleased to have got a phone signal which she used to explain to her husband that he should open the laundry package she posted him at his peril. Now I always thought it was the norm to send such things only to an ex.

She says a storm is blowing in. Within an hour we are hunkered in our respective tents, being buffeted and blasted by wind and rain. It's a real gale. I'm desperate to relieve myself but hold on and on. I hear a motorised engine and peer out. Two guys on a caterpillar vehicle are heading up the hill. It looks like madness in these high winds and rain.

I can't sleep and it's 0100 when desperation gets the better of me and I don waterproofs and head out. I'm violently ill, both diarrhoea and vomit. High on the hill a powerful light is moving around. Who would be out on a night like this? Then I remember the two guys. I retreat to the tent in agony. Constant stomach cramps have me groaning.

A couple of hours later I venture out the tent again to be ill. This is about as welcome as Albert Pierpoint a pair of scales and a tape measure. The light is still moving around on the hill, mixing with the wild and lonely shadows, lashing rain and howling gale.

I root through my first aid kit to see if there is anything to make me feel better. The kit has been added to over the years but never turned out. I find no sign of anything for stomach bugs, instead there's a mixture of plasters, safety pins, creams, blister second skin, more creams and a condom. Oh how I rue the irony of the last thing I need right now. I rue further as I discover its use by date has long expired.

In all I have ten bowel movements during the night, eight of which I manage to get out of the tent for. At 0600 I get up and discover that Sue and I are now on an island, our tents due to be flooded within minutes. We rapidly have to help one another get our tents down. It's just too windy to be able to do alone. I explain how ill I've been and I need a hotel room with ensuite. Sue said she heard everything above the howling wind, including my groans of agony. She was relieved when she heard me vomiting, knowing I was still alive.

Our next challenge is to get off the island. This proves hard, what were trickling streams when we set up the tents are now raging torrents. Our only hope are the three iron bars of a derelict bridge. With each three inches wide I balance my way across, knowing one slip would land me in this raging torrent. Sue, with shorts and sandals, prefers to wade and hang onto one of the iron bars. It looks perilous.

"I'll be glad to be out this swirling brown stuff," she shouts.

"Hmmm, I know the feeling," I ruefully shout back.

When she is halfway across the current starts to take her. I see her body rise as she clings to the rail. I lean forward to reach out, shoving my lower right leg deep

into the water. But she manages okay, regaining her own balance and arrives at my side laughing at our bizarre encounter.

"This is not going to be a night I'll forget," she says.

"Never had a woman say that to me before," I add.

With that the mood is set and we make for Corrour Station making the most bizarre puns. The ground is so wet the only way out is to walk up the railway track. There are moments where there is no escape if a train were to come – we hurry past these.

Sue sorts her things in the station shelter and sets off towards Loch Ossian. I'm relieved to be getting out. I'm joined, on the platform, by two teachers and a group of adolescent school children from Edinburgh. They are polite as we chat, waiting for the train. For some of the time they're in part as they act out the scenes, shot at this station, from the film Trainspotting.

We flag down the sleeper up from London and I travel, in a luxurious seat, to the nearest place with medical help: Fort William. The school kids alight at Tulloch and wish me well.

I find a hotel. The receptionist takes one look at me and asks if I need a doctor.

"Just a room, for two nights? I need to lay down."

She books me in and I struggle to my room. The walls are bright yellow, the sheets are pink. The counterpane and curtains a matching tartan. Nausea returns.

I rest up for a number of hours, thankful for the ensuite. Iodium improves things and I'm able to hold down some soup. I stroll around Fort William, checking out the map section in WH Smith reference library for alternate routes out.

I get commiserations from Challenge Control and a call from Alison. "Steve, if you get going on Saturday you can still do your original route."

"Do you reckon?"

"It'll be long days. Corrour to Dalwhinnie, Dalwhinnie to Ruigh-aiteachain. Ruigh-aiteachain to Braemar then Braemar to Clova. But it might be possible."

"I was thinking perhaps walking out via Kinloch Rannoch."

I later get a text, relayed via Alison, from Lorraine McCall, saying that the Kinloch Rannoch route was thought to be the quickest, yet hard on the feet.

On Friday I manage to eat more. Slowly rehydrating and rebuilding my strength. Unsure of my route I purchase a road atlas and tear out the pages for the road walk out from Kinloch Rannoch.

Saturday and I'm still been having a battle with the decision, whether to cross from Corrour to Dalwhinnie, staying as low as possible, or to walk to the road leading to Kinloch Rannoch. The latter would entail a road walk out for six days. As I alight the train, and start walking at 0825, I've still not made my mind up. Over the last 24 hours I've swayed between one and the other. It's not until I pass the quaint Loch Ossian Youth Hostel that I make a decision, Dalwhinnie. My aim therefore to meet Alison and Sue in Clova on Tuesday night requiring 86 miles of walking and 11,000 feet of ascent in 4 days. This is a challenge within a challenge.

I make good pace along the side of Loch Ossian, passing the fabulous rhododendron bushes I get to the end of the loch in 1.5 hours. I look for the path and start to panic that I might inadvertently walk up Strath Ossian. With careful map checking and sifting through the myriad of paths and tracks I gain confidence that I'm bound for Dalwhinnie.

The Uisge Labhair is flowing fast and its many feeders are difficult to cross. Twice I have to ascend high and to find crossing points. The bealach forever feels in the distance, yet I set a good pace and, unlike the remains of the crashed WW2 plane that lie up there, I make myself over it 4.5 hours from setting off.



**The remains of a WW2 Plane**

Down the other side the path is good, much work has been done on it. I get to Culra Bothy at 1415 and pop in, hoping to also get a signal to call the hotel at Dalwhinnie to book a room. No luck on the signal but the maintenance officer is staying and a log burning stove explains the pleasant smells I'd been getting wafts of. It's snug and warm, gorgeous in fact. He's pleased I'm a member of the MBA and makes me a welcome cup of tea.

I depart at 1440 and decide to follow the tracks around Loch Pattack, longer yet it looks better than the path. This, like a wrong turn at chess, is a bad move. After 45 minutes of walking I discover the track is flooded, impassable. The alternative, via peat hags, has me swearing, cursing and blaming everybody but myself. It feels like an endless maze of swamp, tufts and filthy slopes of peat. I eventually realise that the game is up and have to back track to the bothy to take the path.

I feel so annoyed, angry and emotional. I say 'fuck' about twenty times a minute, all the time gained by my earlier pace lost by a single wrong turn. My lower legs are filthy from constant sinking in the peat, it's been two hours of walking in treacle.

This two hours has cost me. It takes, in all, 11.25 hours to the hotel. I know 9 is my usual limit. To add to the pitiful day the last two, the lost two hours, are in a downpour and I discover that lightweight kit comes at the price of being not so waterproof.

I cannot get a signal on route so I arrive at the hotel very wet with no room booked. Initially they have no room, but look on me with pity and open up another room. I'm pleased yet I ache and my heart is racing at 66bpm.

I wake on the Sunday: the hotel is under new management and they have been so good to me that I am sorry to be leaving. I could quite easily sit out the rest of the TGO here - my feet are blistering more, the walk up Loch Ericht was hard.

I plaster up and set off at 0930 via the leat, and its path, towards Loch Cuaich. Looking back a wonderful rainbow hangs across The Fara, setting off the snow that has fallen in the night.

From Loch Cuaich I close navigate around every piece of high ground: making the journey longer but less of a climb. I'm not as quick as yesterday, instead this is more of a plod. I follow the loch's feeder burn with my compass angling towards the right of Clach-mheall Dubh. This is a delightful little passage, likewise the estate bridge at Bhran, crossing the Allt Bhran is very beautiful.

I then make the hard slog above the Allt Bhran. With long drops, heather and an intermittent path I rest often. At one point I almost sit on an adder before it slithers away. It's then an uphill pull to meet the track to take me into Glen Feshie. I urge myself on, needing the bothy, unable to face the tent. My feet are painful, my right heel especially.

I fancy the River Feshie will be too deep to cross, unlike two years ago when I crossed with John Jocys. This time I have no company, just pressing on alone. As I turn into the glen I'm met by the most delightful scene imaginable, smoke from the bothy chimney. There will be warmth to dry my wet things. Who is there I try to imagine, a party of walkers? Surely I must be the most westerly TGO participant remaining?

I have to go past the bothy to cross the river by the dilapidated bridge 1KM further up. I arrive at 1845 to meet Colin Pritchard, having set out on the Monday I'm the first challenger he's met. I thank him for the fire, I'm so grateful. I'm amazed at his route, high level he'd travelled so far and high in his time. Able to run up and down Ben Nevis in under two hours he's a league ahead of me. I congratulate him on his route so far.

"You've not seen my feet yet," he replies. At about this time I'm removing my right sock. We both look astonished at the red slug attached to my right heel. "Forget my feet," he continues, "My goodness."

It is mightily impressive. I puncture it to release the blood and lymph, nothing happens so I apply gentle pressure with my fingers. It then turns into a garden sprinkler system, dousing everything in reach.

We talk about our lonely walking, I mention the loneliness of the long distance walker. Colin gets my reference straight away and we discuss the films of Tom Courtenay.

We drag camp beds down from the upstairs and arrange them to sleep by the remains of the fire. As we doze off Colin says, "I think it's you that's the most westerly challenger."

"Why?"

"You're on the west side of the bothy!"

I wake about 0300, very cold. The fire is out. I go upstairs to get some blankets, climbing the ladder through the hatch in the floor. I miss my footing and have to throw myself against the lip of the floor to rescue myself. So nearly a 6ft drop, so nearly out the challenge again.

On Monday I wake then pop and dress my blisters, with Colin and I helping one another out to get those bits one cannot reach. I get going a little after 0800. My feet are sore, yet workable. It's day three of my catch up, the longest at 25 miles. I make good progress, picking off the bridge near the watershed, Geldie Lodge then the Linn of Dee. My right foot feels sore and after about eight hours I slip my boot off and inspect it. The dressings and padding are dripping with an unpleasant red and yellow mix of body fluids.



**My very unattractive right foot**

All day I walk alone, just the footprints of the wave of challengers ahead of me remind me I'm still part of the greater thing. I was heartened to see all the names in the bothy book, especially the La Borwit's. Gretchen was still making progress, her achilles tendon at least getting her this far.

The final road walk to Braemar is hellish. I go via Mar Lodge but it does not detract from how depressing and draining the walk is. I keep counting grid squares, timing myself and predicting my arrival time: adjusting continuously.

The weather varies, the hills on view are fine. My feet ache, every press down on my right foot feels like stepping on a bed of pins. The River Dee in fine form flowing its way towards the sea: encouraging me with it.

I get to Braemar at 1845 and arrive exhausted at the Fife Arms. Barely able to take any more steps I'm first told that there are no rooms. I don't know if it's the dour side of the Scottish humour but seconds later she's found me one. She apologises for there being no bath, I'm happy to just have a room. I ask about dinner in the restaurant and am looked at as if I've asked for the impossible. "It's too late for that."  
It was not even 1900.

The apology for the lack of bath turns out to be a moot point, there's no hot water. Though believe me I am so grateful for this room.

I wake at around 0500 on the Tuesday feeling extremely odd. I've been muttering in my sleep, like my mind is competing with hallucinating drugs, I keep coming in and out the land of lucidity. It's sheer tiredness, my body aching alongside my mind. This four day catch up is a gruelling test. I visit the ensuite and realise I can put no pressure on my right foot. The second toe is swollen and the heel is equally complaining. I wonder if I'm out of the challenge.

I manage to sleep for another two hours and feel good enough. Patching up my feet, I've lost count of the blisters, though more than a British Leyland paint job. I gingerly take my first steps. I can just about do it, it feels like walking on a bed of pins. I make it down to breakfast, busy because of an elderly coach party in. To a person they look in better shape than me.

I set off at 0915, hobbling towards the Loch Callater track, aiming to make it across to Clova. I meet Stan driving down the Loch Callater track, looking about as bad as I feel yet for different reasons.

I stop at the bothy, 1150. My right foot hurts with each step but I press on and make my way through to where the Jock's Road path runs out during the last sharp ascent.

I've had word from Roger, at challenge control, that Alison and Sue would definitely be waiting for me at the Clova Hotel. This is the tonic to keep me going, a precious incentive to keep me focussed. I know if I can just get to Clova I'll then have moral support for my last two days.

The weather varies from sun, to rain, to hail to sleet, to snow. I get some impressive views back towards the hills above Braemar. I make it to Crow Craigies, over 3000ft. The weather clears and I peer down Glen Doll and just above I catch sight of the sea, 45 miles in the distance. I'm overcome, overwhelmed. My body aches, this catching up so painful. I can't believe I can see the sea. My eyes well up, seeing the sea just means so much. Never ever, ever give up. Ships are safest at harbour but they are designed for the high seas. No person can realise their dreams, find their potential or fully know themselves by staying in harbour. I repeat to myself, over and over, "There's the sea. The sea." I can't believe it. A man must break his back to earn his day of leisure. This was reward in itself. This moment made the days of pain more than worthwhile. It would have been so easy to have pulled out when I was ill, nobody would have blamed me. Yet I'd have always had that nagging thought that I should have given it another go.

From here the descent to Clova is long and tortuous. Jock's Road into Glen Doll has my feet yelping at each press on the ground. The forest walk dank, long and tedious, the final 4 mile road walk painful on the feet. I feel so tired. It's nine hours into the day already. I swagger in the pouring rain, the hard road sending shockwaves through my feet. I fall asleep whilst walking, with my eyes shut I stagger into the centre of the quiet, single track road, coming too with a dazed jolt.

I start to count off landmarks, rewarding myself with sips of water. If I can just get to that clump of trees, then that building. I break it down into chunks. It takes me until 1910 to get to the hotel. I'm hoping Sue and Alison have got my text asking for them to get me a room. I stagger into reception, restaurant guests staring at this sodden mass.

I start to ask if I have a booking. I hear footsteps running. It's Alison. She does not care how wet I am, I feel her arms go round me and I get a huge hug. Then Sue hugs me too. They give me permission to be very proud of myself! 86 miles in four days is a long walk.

"Let's get you to your room," Sue says.  
I turn to the receptionist, "What do I have to do to check in?"  
She takes the form back, "I think just the key will do."

Sue and Alison help me to my room. I shower and meet them and order supper. The stories of our last days pouring from us. I have to swallow hard. I appreciate them waiting, having got a day ahead of themselves, so very much.

On this, their day off they climbed Driesch and Mayar and say they kept looking west towards Jock's Road observing the weather I was walking through. They'd been in touch with Challenge Control, this rendezvous was made by message passing through Control as phone signals became poor. Knowing they'd be there was the biggest thing that kept me going. They tell me my story has got around, the guy catching up after two days off sick. I'm deeply moved by all the messages I've received. Texts, relayed phone messages. Roger, Pauline, Robin and Alan in Challenge Control keeping me going. Fellow challenger John Jocys coming on the line to give me encouragement. Texts from my Mum and Dad. So many people urged me on.

Wednesday starts with a knock at my door. It's Doctor Alison with her medical bag. My feet are dressed with the correct dressings for open and closed sores. I stand up, it feels good. I can exert pressure on my right foot.

There's a different air at breakfast. Sue and Alison truly mothered me last night (and I truly revelled in it) but I'm quietly aware that we have about 35 miles to make it to the coast. They tell me of the route, straight up 2000 feet of ascent. It's the quickest route.

"Are you okay with that?" they ask.  
"Yes, I'm in your care now. I'll do whatever you tell me to." It's taken everything I had to get here. From now on all I wanted was to follow in their footsteps.  
"Now if you'd only said that yesterday," jokes Sue.

We set off at 0900, Sue is a strong walker and I find myself ascending at 400m per hour up Green Hill. Here it's misty and close navigation, which I take no part in, drops us down and then the long descent to the road to Bridge End. I find the road tiring, exhausting. Hard on my feet. It's a three hour power walk. Sue and Alison fancy Brechin, I can only promise to get to the next milestone.



"Every mile we walk today is one less tomorrow," says Alison. Sue repeats this later, so does Alison. Elementary mathematics has not escaped me yet I sense an underlying plot to keep me going. They deal with me in a business like way. We've still a long walk. I sense they are in cohorts, if they allow me to dwell, offer too much sympathy about my aching body I might give up. Yet it's a long way for all of us. We keep on another's spirits up by a long discussion of Enid Blyton books.

"The Infamous Three," Sue calls us.  
I point out the unfortunate acronym.  
"We are the TITs," yells Sue.

About an hour from Bridge End I pull up. I've been getting stitch in my side, my feet ache but now my calf muscle, where it attaches to the achilles tendon, pulls tight. It's a hobble from there on to Bridge End. I lean to my left to reduce pressure. Alison and Sue get ahead. Suddenly I'm soaked, I've not noticed the top coming off my rehydration pipe. I follow the trail of water back to pick it up.

Now out of water I press on and meet Alison and Sue at Bridge End. Alison straps my calf muscle, I can proceed at a slow pace. If I quicken I yelp, slower and I'm okay. We're now in remote farm land, no place to camp, no B&B. It's nearing 1800.

I fantasise about each dwelling offering B&B. Only to be thwarted as we reach a sign-less dwelling. I start to lag behind. Most the day I was determined to keep pace but now I'm slow. I start to get chest pains.

"Alison, I'm getting chest pains," I call out. I've no wish to take chances.  
"Whereabouts?" she calls back.  
"High up, above the breast line."  
"Does it hurt more when you twist?"  
I do a test, and call back that it does.  
"It's just muscular then," she reassures me. Not a stride is lost in this conversation.

We make it over the twin hill forts at Caterhun and we see the sea. We shout with joy and look back to the hills basking in the evening sun. The mist, snow and rain of earlier behind us. We are walking into the nicer weather of the coast. Now ten hours into our day.

A cyclist pulls up, out training. "Where are you heading?" he asks.  
"Breachin we hope," adds Alison, "but Steve here's pulled his calf muscle."  
He gives us his address. "I can put you up. I've lots of room."

As he pedals off we confirm with one another if what we heard was true. There's no stopping Alison now. She goes ahead to buy some wine, Sue helps me through the next two hours. Again I fall asleep whilst walking, stumbling into some tree branches.

We arrive around nine, after a 25 mile day, at the address offered. A beautiful Victorian Manse with matching grounds. Simon and his wife, Jill make us supper, add in pudding, wine and damson gin. Then we are each shown to our beds. There was us thinking we'd be having rehydrated food, in a tent with mere water to wash it down.





**The modest bothy in Brechin!**

On Thursday we are given porridge and toast for breakfast. As we make our way down the long drive we look at one another.

"Did that really just happen?" asks one of us.

"I think so."

"Doesn't feel quite real, does it?"

Carlsberg do make people you meet on the road.

We get to the coast, in a gentle sunny breeze in four hours. Hugs and photos on the beach at Montrose. Alison and Sue apologise for slave driving me the last two days. It needed to be done, all my emotional energy went into getting to Clova. I'd not be here without them.



**Montrose beach - Sue and Alison having just made it over from the Atlantic to the North Sea.**

Checking in at Challenge Control news of my plight had got around. People approaching me to say well done.

This has been very tough for me, my toughest challenge yet. I like that it's about survival. Like that one appreciates the small things. A loo is a luxury, a bath and a good meal an unimaginable dream. All the things that just happen in our daily lives have to be planned and fought for on the challenge. But it's the word 'challenge' that sticks with me. Not just because it is a challenge to get across Scotland but there are so many challenges that are met along the way. It's having the resources, the determination and the help to get through them.

With the Corbetts of Sgurr an Utha and Cruach Innse and the Graham of Glas-Charn climbed on this TGO the numbers are starting to creep up.

Corbett Count:	3 out of 221
Graham Count:	1 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## **2007**

It's a week before the TGO. I'm sat at my kitchen table in a state of realization. You see I don't cook. Never have. I just heat things up. Cooking to me is heating a jacket potato and pouring a can of beans over it. A balanced diet comes with pouring yogurt over chopped banana. In 1983, when I went to start my degree, I was sent away with a cookery book. It ended up many years later, unopened, in a charity shop. Years after this my Great Aunt asked me "Do you have a cookery book, Steve." Sensing I was about to receive some family heirloom I tried to

deflect it with, "It always says on the packet what to do." Auntie Joan was in stitches; somehow this was the funniest things she'd heard in eighty years.

So here I am, a week before the TGO and I'm reading the instruction booklet of the dehydrator my generous parents bought me for Christmas. I'd asked for it but now I'm seeing the flaw. You can't stick a jacket potato and baked beans in, nor yogurt and banana. No, you actually have to cook things then dehydrate them. There's recipes for all sorts. I feel cornered. Mum is bound to ask how I got on with it. I look for inspiration. On my kitchen table I spy a flyer for a home delivery Indian takeaway, my mobile phone and my wallet. I don't even have to get out of the chair. The Indian voice answers and I put in a rather large order of main dishes.

"Rice?"

"No," I reply.

"Nan?"

"No," I reply.

"Pepsi?" I hear suspicion in his voice.

"No," I reply.

"You have credit card." I'm really sensing some suspicion.

It's Wednesday May 9<sup>th</sup> and I'm waiting for Mary Spurr at Heathrow, flying in from Canada to do the TGO with me. With rucksack full of dehydrated Indian curry we board the short flight to Glasgow where we rest the night before taking the train to Fort William then the coach to Shiel Bridge. I wanted to take Mary across Rannoch Mor, one of the finest rail journeys in the world. I enthuse over it, hoping to see a look of delight on her face.

"I think this is the same route I did in ninety eight when I took the train from Glasgow to Mallaig! It was lovely," she offers.

I feel deflated. I'm wishing to show Scotland off to her. I hunt around my pack and pull out my reading material for the trip.

"What's the book?" Mary asks.

"It's on calculus," I reply. I catch a look.

"Both integral and differential," I offer as if I need to explain its merits.

"You told me to pack light," she says.

"Well it's not that heavy. I've wanted a chance to read it for sometime. It's an old text, written by Sylvanus P. Thompson, published in nineteen ten. I managed to hunt a copy down on e-bay."

There's silence, a hole. I can see she's pondering this.

"It was only ninety nine pence," I add.

"You mean there were no other bidders."

"Yes, that's right."

I get a bemused look.

We talk more about the TGO. Mary had not had a chance to get fit or fully understand the extent of what she's letting herself into.

"You will suffer pain," I say.

"You almost say that with glee, a badge of honour. A badge of war."

"Well you will. I never said it was without pain."

"But I didn't think it would be a requirement."

"Good point. I also didn't tell you about rain or bogs. You see Scotland and walking are synonymous with rain and pain. If you go to Cyprus you'd be unlikely to mention that you were going for the sun - it would be obvious. So with Scotland it's rather assumed that it'll rain and you'll encounter bogs and pain on the TGO. Sorry if I forgot to mention it." I return to my book.

In Fort William we have a six hour wait for the coach to Shiel Bridge. I'd not booked on the earlier coach in case we'd had delays. But Mary's flight and everything since has been bang on time. We resign ourselves to sit it out, buying food, gas and having lunch.

We meet Ken and Nina Stimpson who tell us they are on the earlier coach. We are inspired to give it a try, Fort William claims to be the outdoor capital of the UK. In fact I find the place rather boring and I look forward to spending six hours wandering around as much as Mary would relish reading a book on integral calculus. A TGO tip is when walking in a pair bring reading material both can share.

We decide to try for the earlier coach, to beg to bring our tickets forward. We have brief time for Mary to check the Internet and for me to go and buy the lunches for the next three days. I dash to Tesco with Mary's parting words of not wishing for chocolate. I grab flapjack, fruit bars and some chocolate. Back with Mary I'm trying to convince her.

"Chocolate is great energy food. High calories for the weight. Very efficient."  
"It just sends you on a high, crashes you to a low then gives you spots and fillings," she retorts.

We go to the bus station where I volunteer Mary to sweet talk the driver. We have to wait for the inspector, we throw ourselves at her mercy and she tells us we'll have to wait for the departure time and if there is space we can switch. We watch with anticipation as other people board, hoping for two spare seats. The time approaches and the bus is being readied for departure. We await our fate – Fort William for another four hours or an early ride to our hotel.

"Okay, there's room for you," the lady inspector says as the bus driver takes our packs to load.

"Can I say something," I say.

"Yes," she replies.

"We love you." She smiles and the driver asks if we feel the same towards him. Mary confirms yes, I remain silent. There's a coach ride ahead, I don't want any misunderstandings.

On the Friday morning we wake to glorious views down the loch and check our kit in the bay window of the bedroom. I show Mary the international distress signal to a helicopter, letting them know it's not just a friendly wave. I tell her the correct procedure for attracting attention with a whistle and ask her to tie hers to the outside of her pack. It's an impressive teacher's whistle.

We make a leisurely start after breakfast. An initial stroll to the beach of the sea loch where we gather a pebble each and paddle our feet in the usual TGO traditions.

Mary has brought a pebble from the shores of Halifax, Nova Scotia (New Scotland). She throws it into the sea here to mark the start of her crossing and we set off up the main road before branching onto the minor road past Morvich and the slow climb towards Belach an Sgairne. We pause for many rests, we both struggle a little but I'm impressed by her speed. We take in the mountainous views, the forest opposite in deep commercial green with just the odd birch intruder in a lighter shade.



**Mary at Alltbeithe with Jenny Wheeler in the background**

There's high cloud and a little rain. We pause by Joan and Bryan Crick, resting with Peter Lumley. I like Bryan's tales and take on life, Joan jovially trying to silence him. We chat briefly before crossing the river and taking the climb through the bealach where we soon pick up the path I joined in 2005 after coming up via the Falls of Glomach. From here on we are in path, bog, path.

Mary's fabric boots soon leak and she feels uncomfortable. I worry if this will get her down on the Challenge. I offer chocolate, predicting her response. She settles for flapjack. We make the hostel at Alltbeithe in seven hours where a good evening follows chatting to Jenny Wheeler, Barbara Peers, Margaret, Chris and Peter Lumley.

Barbara is proud to carry a hairdryer and no tent.

"If you carried a tent you'd keep your hair dry," I offer. The point is lost. She asks us our route and I mention it including the Lairig Ghru.  
 "You're not taking Mary down the Lairig Ghru are you?"

We retire early to our bunks in the annex. I feel some strain from its confines, losing pieces of equipment to discover they've got tucked down elsewhere.

On Saturday we wake early and move into the main hostel lounge where we gather our gear, repack and set off. Barbara soon passes us on her seventy year old legs. We, in our forties, are mere youngsters on the Challenge.

"You've got a good pace!" says Mary.

"Oh it's just having long legs. I merely sit on top of them," she replies.





**Bryan and Joan at Cogie**

We start well on the tracks, enjoying the moody clouds hanging around the peaks, the beauty of Loch Affric and the peace of the wilderness. Mary does well but I have to reassure her this is a 20KM day, just 2KM further than yesterday. She takes it in, mentally preparing.

We meet with Bryan, Joan and Peter. We start to join with their banter. I tease Bryan about his 2005 crossing where on this day, the second day, he lost one of his trio and later lost Peter and finished alone.

"You do realize you are jinxed walking with Bryan," I say.  
 "Thank you very much," replies Bryan.

I struggle with the uphill alongside Allt Garbh; the weight of my pack pulling me back. We meander on the easier sections before a left turn and pull up then down towards the loch that barely exists on the map. Mary having to watch her footing on burn crossings, trying to avoid soaked feet where I can just splash through in my Scarpa boots.

By the time we reach Cogie, Mary is at the end of her energies, it's looking as if a 20KM day is the most she can manage.

Val, who runs Cogie, does not have a room, our hearts sink but she sends us up to her son's place - a wooden house which started as a caravan, has been extended and extended until the caravan was eventually cut free. We have a room under the eaves, welcome amongst tools, sawdust and the lifestyle of a bachelor.

We return in pouring rain, fortunately missed on the trail, to Val's kitchen for tea, cakes and sharing our day with other Challengers. Cougie is one of the Challenge institutions, homely, warm and still the family home where Val and John's children and twenty six grandchildren still visit.

"Some people are so fast," says Barbara, who has made it in long before us, "I lead for the ramblers and there's me with my asthma."

Bryan starts with one of his long stories, Joan signals him to zip his mouth. There's real banter between this couple but obvious genuine love. We catch up with Peter and Jenny too.

After a fine supper, cooked and served by Val, Mary and I retire to Paul's house. Before bed we sit and listen to music awhile as the resident bat does a circuit of the lounge. We are pleased the generator goes off at eleven, its noise cutting into the silence of the area. I sleep poorly, waking after just a few hours. Then the rooster starts in the early hours. It kills any hope of further sleep, I slip out to use the loo.

"Where have you been?" Mary asks when I return.

"I went to strangle that bloody rooster," I reply. At that moment it starts up again.

"Trouble was there was four of them and I only got three," I add.

On the Sunday with my poor sleep and Mary's apparent 20KM limit we manage to phone a B&B at Torgyle Bridge, cutting our day back from a 30KM day into Fort Augustus.

We follow the easy track to Hilton Lodge then the uphill and cross country tracks, following the power lines, to Torgyle bridge. We look back towards our trodden route, the mountains in cloud yet sparing us of rain. I point out the pass we came through to reach the hostel then Cougie - following a fold between the hills which towered above us.

We meet with Bryan and Joan. Peter has taken off on a different route wanting to try a shortcut. Bryan is a mix of concern and annoyance for his missing companion. We continue, enjoying the fabulous mountain views to our right. Peaks, snow and sunlight dancing through.

We arrive at Torgyle Bridge where we find Peter, forever a striver, having beaten us all. We are desperate for the B&B and excuse ourselves.

I'm always cautious with B&Bs. With hostels and hotels there's an acceptance for drying boots and making a mess. With B&Bs you are entering another's home, truly a guest house. We make do, rinsing out shirts and draping them over radiators, hanging rinsed out undies from a conveniently shaped lampshade. A peacock struts in the grounds, its call competing with the rooster of the night before to deprive me of sleep.

I wake early on the Monday and use the bathroom. I spy a bottle of 'Skin so Soft'. This is the best midge repellent known. Discovered by chance, by foresters finding its properties repel midges. I have my own product in mind called 'Midge so Dead'. I'll breed midges in my own midge farm then immerse them in water and fill atomizer bottles. When the purchaser sprays some on they'll be amazed at the instant success as dead midges will immediately be found on the skin.

Back in the room I explain to Mary we need to head for Blackburn Bothy on the Corrieyairack Pass. A night in either the bothy or tent.

"Is Fort Augustus too near to stop?" she asks.

"We need to do twenty K a day, at least. We can stop there and eat well. Then it's the curry for supper tonight."

"Will there be crockery at Blackburn?"

"Erm no."

"What do we use?"

"We eat out the cooking pots." I wait, worried that I've not really explained things so well. But it's fine, she just needed to know.

We have breakfast with Jenny, a first time Challenger and solo too. She's lucky to be on the Challenge having seriously put her back out whilst lifting her cat. These things can so easily happen. We chat about our days.

"We'll also need to buy some more lunches at Fort Augustus."

"Not chocolate," Mary adds.

"It'll help you," I reply, "A good boost if you are struggling."

Jenny, who works in the medical field, now gives a thorough explanation of the fallacies of using chocolate on the trail. She explains that slow release food is much better. I sense the expertise that I had professed to Mary is now in doubt.

We get going and make our way up through the pylons above Torgyle Bridge. It's a tortuous route, boggy and uneven. Mary's boots quickly leak and it gets her down. We press on eventually cutting through Jenkins Park where we are greeted by the tarmac of Fort Augustus. It feels an affront, roads and massive tar sealed car parks. We've gotten used to the open country, paths, tracks, trees and rivers. It just feels so wrong.

It takes us another three hours to get to Blackburn. A long pull up the track, Mary does well. Although she is struggling, sometimes feeling unwell she does okay on the uphill sections. We arrive and I'm surprised nobody else is there. I was half expecting Bryan, Joan and Peter. We manage to get the tent up before it begins to lightly rain. We cook and sort things in the bothy then munch through our home delivery curry: amazing the distances they will deliver.

Retiring early to the tent we ponder what to do, a little early for sleep but good to be warm and cosy.

"How about doing some five minute writing I suggest?" We both like writing, Mary takes copious notes of her journey.

"How does it work?" she asks.

"We pick a topic and both write nonstop for five minutes. We then read to one another. It's good for developing writing skills."

"Okay. What topic? How about if we jot down all kinds of ideas on bits of paper and then draw for a topic?" she replies.

"It needs to be a more instant topic that we can both leap into. Anyhow my hat is tucked into my pack for putting the bits of paper into."

"Fine, fine, fine!" she says laughing, "Have it Your way!"

"Not like you're 'put out' or anything?" I drawl. "I know, that'll do the topic can be 'Being Put Out'"

So we embark for five minutes on this exercise, each silently and intently scribbling away. Time's up. I go first, reading out my ponderings on all forms of being put out, including putting the cat out. It's Mary's turn. I hear repressed glee as she starts.



"Being Put Out. It's NOT that I'm 'put out!!' The Shit!! How come he gets to choose the topic? ALL I said was, 'How about if we jot down all kinds of ideas on bits of paper and then draw for a topic?' Well, that was quickly dismissed! We didn't have a hat at hand.... Like who needs a hat?! 'Fine, fine, fine!' I said, 'Have it Your way!' 'Not like you're 'put out' or anything?' he glared. 'Okay,' he went on, 'The topic is 'Being Put Out' .. ..' and he went on outlining the rules, timing, and blah, blah, blah. But you know what?! He was just going on, making noise in the background as my mind raced off. 'Being put out????,' I thought, 'It's NOT that I'm 'put out'!! ... the Shit!!'."

"I think I need to go and pee," says Mary. I lay flat to let her climb over.

"Is it okay if I go in the porch?" she asks.

"No, it bloody well isn't."

"But it's cold out there."

"Same for me."

"But you don't have to squat."

"I think," I add, "we need a chat about tent etiquette. Peeing in the porch is not allowed."

"How about peeing in the tent?" Mary asks mischievously.

"Nor the tent. Nor is rolling over in the night allowed. Excessive use of the torch or snoring." I pause, "But farting is."

"Oh I could have guessed farting would be allowed. Along with telling silly jokes I suppose."

"Yup farting and telling jokes are allowed. They're not silly jokes. And farting is funny."

"Steve..." it's said in a way that I sense the need to turn to face her, she looks earnestly at me, "I teach eight year old boys." I look a little hurt and Mary adds

"You look just like an eight year old boy now, just like at breakfast when Jenny told you about chocolate not being a good trail food."



### **Mary at Blackburn**

We wake early on the Tuesday, both feeling the cold. Mary more than me, she's had poor sleep. She peers out the tent. "There's been a frost." It explains how cold we both feel.

We emerge into the sharp air, yet enjoy the blue skies. The gas stove, heating water, gives us a little warmth in the bothy as we eat our breakfast and sip tea.

We set out for another long incline on the excellent track, we enjoy the mountains in the beautiful light of the morning sun. The odd snow slither setting off the high corries of the mountains.

Looking back we see our passage of the last few days. A lone deer stands on the high pass, its ears and head silhouetted against the blue sky. We soon pass Joan, Bryan and Peter packing up their tents. Peter is in a bad way with his feet, Bryan is tending them. Joan is bantering with Bryan over his stories. We chat for a while. Bryan asks us our route.

"Glen Banchor, Newtonmor, Feshiebridge, Lairig Ghru."

"You're not taking Mary down the Lairig Ghru are you?" asks Bryan.

"Well it's the bit I've never done, I've only ever peered down into it from the surrounding Munros."



### **Views from the pass**

"You do like this girl don't you?" asks Bryan.

"Yes."

"She might not like you after the Lairig Ghru," adds Peter.

"Well we'll judge it when we get near. Glen Feshie is always an alternative."

We press on, passing large puddles full of tadpoles. I spy a sleeping lizard, submerged and point it out to Mary.

"The tadpoles look like sunflower seeds with tails," she says.

"I was thinking they look more like sperm," I add.

"What was I saying about the mentality of an eight year old boy," she adds.

We meet Bryan and Joan again near the summit of the pass and sit awhile. Bryan is worried about Peter but is a little frustrated at the differing pace being kept. We sit and enjoy the views and food.

As we descend the Corrieyairack we find great chunks have been washed away leaving it in a sorry state. River and path often becoming one.

We make it to Melgarve Bothy, originally our planned stopping place for the night before. We sit on old seats outside, looking at the hills opposite, ever changing in the sunlight. A glorious place to rest up and, though we are the first walkers to arrive having had our head start from Blackburn, the stream of Challengers soon start coming through. Birds join us, knowing the tidbits of food surround walkers. We get talking to Jenny and many others. I'm asked about our route again and mention the Lairig Ghru. There's some silence.

"You're not seriously taking Mary down the Lairig Ghru are you? There's boulders the size of small cars."

A few others join in and I concede that perhaps we'd go via Glen Feshie. I'd chosen this route to give Mary the best TGO experience. The Lairig Ghru was the one day truly for me.

Mary quietly says to me, "When you realized that the Lairig Ghru was no longer an option your bottom lip quivered."

"Oh," I reply.

"Just like an eight year old boy refused an ice cream," she adds.

Bryan and Joan arrive, no sign of Peter and his bad feet.

"He's determined! He'll would crawl in on bleeding stumps," says Mary. I'm reminded of the Monty Python, 'It's just a flesh wound'.

We press on and camp on a small piece of high ground above the road after Garva Bridge.

"What's for supper?" asks Mary.

"Curry," I reply and gently inform her that curry is the main meal of our nights of camping.

As we settle Mary needs to go for a pee. Each time I offer what I call 'the pooh bag'.

"So what is this pooh bag, is it biodegradable?" she asks.

"Erm, no. It's just what I keep the essentials in. Paper and wet wipes. Are you telling me that if I'd not explained this you'd have returned it to me with something hot and steaming in?"

On the Wednesday we make an early start, 0620 and get to Laggan in two hours, passing Bryan, Joan and Peter on route. We rest, enjoy the views looking back the way we've come, make use of the public loo and village store. It's a nice gathering of many Challengers.

One wonders if one pongs with the walking, how shop keepers and accommodation providers cope with smelly walkers. As Mary walks back from the loo I can clearly smell the soap but nothing else. I now realize you only smell the smells that are not on yourself.

We set off up Glen Banchor. It proves boggy, hard and drizzling. We stop at the bothy for rest, damp and smelly – as are we. Mary really struggles from here on, she starts to fade and feels ill. She's not slept well. The path is sporadic, her boots leak badly and the terrain is hard going. Light rain does not lift her spirits. We make it to Newtonmore and grab the first hotel room we can find.

It's Thursday and Mary is not well. She's struggling. We walk into Kingussie with Rob, an American doctor. He offers some reassurance but we book Mary into the doctors. My heart sinks at a 1630 appointment. This would not make for a good day.

We bump into Nik Lawcock and Andy Desmond. Mary braves the doctors, asking for an earlier cancellation. A nurse takes her blood pressure but can't listen to her chest. She's feeling real tightness. The nurse thinks it's exhaustion.

We go for lunch with Rob and I leave it to Mary to make the decision. Do we head for Rhuigh Aiteachain bothy now or wait for the doctor's appointment? Eventually, with lunch and rest, she picks up so we set off, not cancelling the appointment until we are sure she is up to it.

We transfer Mary's sleeping bag, sleeping mat and share of the food to my pack. She is just left with the bare essentials – water and her clothes. I'm weighed down, my GoLite pack is not designed for this weight.

Mary picks up and we do well. At Kingussie Peter and George (from Holland) offer us extra food as their parcel they collected now represents oversupply. I take many of the bars of chocolate being offered by George. They're keen to get rid of it as it was destined for the bin.

As we pass Tromie Bridge we meet a group, having done this route before I lead the way. Dutch George asks if I'm sure of the way through a myriad of tracks. Privately I am.

"I am sure George," I look him earnestly in the eye, "but if I'm wrong I'll give you a bar of chocolate."

He grabs my face with both hands and laughs. In the woods I'm a little unsure at a junction in the tracks, not marked on the maps. I make rare use of my new toy, a GPS, to confirm where we are. We press on, losing the group of people that we have spent the last hour or so with.

When we meet the tar sealed track down the edge of the Feshie I reassure Mary that we are doing well. She is doing a little better, the weight off her.

In the distance I catch sight of what looks like MA Harper and Mike Akin-Smith. It is and it's great to see them both. I like their company and so does Mary.

Privately I'm so pleased to see Mary lifted by conversation, it takes her mind off the struggles of the walk. She'd not trained in advance and has never more than day hiked. All things considered I feel she is doing well.

We cross the new Landrover bridge and walk the east side of the Feshie. This is better than risking the dilapidated bridge near the bothy. As we approach Rhuigh Aiteachain the hills above are lit by the sun, the pine trees and the Feshie guide us in.

The bothy is surrounded by a shanty of tents. Mary and I claim upstairs places as it looks to be a wet night. In the cosy downstairs room Dave Skipp is getting a good fire going. Nik, Andy, Croydon, Peter Sheppard, Bryan, Joan, Peter, Fran and Allen Mellors enjoy the fire. It's a nice evening and I'm glad Mary can see a true bothy night. I've picked this route with TGO highlights.





**Mike, MA and Me.**



**The sky on the bothy approach**



**Approaching the bothy**



**In the bothy with Andy, Nik, Allen, Fran**



**In the bothy with Fran, Peter, Croydon**



**Dave Skipp and fire**

On Friday we set off into the rain. Mary asks if it is possible to get a bed for the night, reluctant to risk further damp and cold on top of how she's been feeling. The only place possible is the Youth Hostel at Inverey. I warn her it's a risk, a long day and perhaps no bed. She wants to press on. I'm being drilled into the ground with all the weight. Mary takes just the two lightweight pots and the stove. We walk on and she goes quiet.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I'm feeling ill again."

I try something. I readjust her pack so all the weight is on her hips, none on her shoulders. We walk on.

"How are you now?" I ask.

"Better, I don't feel unwell anymore."

"I'm wondering, Mary. There's something called extraneous cervical ribs."

"What are they?" I'm sensing my pronunciation might have sounded a little gynaecological.

"They are small extra ribs, high up. It's known that a pack will cause problems. I think they press down and cut off vital blood supply and make you feel ill. I'm just wondering. It'd explain you feeling unwell and why you picked up when I shifted the weight off your shoulders."

We pass through the often trackless terrain, picking it up again before the welcome junction with the Geldie where a Landrover track will see us through White Bridge and onto the Linn of Dee.

We sing, in the rain and the wind, to keep our spirits up. It's a lonely route. When we arrive at White Bridge we rest.

"There's nothing here," says Mary.

"What did you expect?"

"Well. I'm not sure. So many people mentioned it."

"It's just a landmark. Like Geldie Lodge on the map. That's just a ruin."

I think Mary is understanding the remoteness of the Highlands. She is an outdoors type but has never been through this kind of terrain before.

Looking up at the bridge I see a box with wires protruding from it.

"Looks like The Bridge on the River Kwai," I say.

"I never watch war films," replies Mary.

"Well, I rarely do too. I tend to restrict myself to ones with good stories like The Bridge on the River Kwai. Or just ones where our brave boys blast the hun out of the sky."

Fortunately Mary sees my irony. It's something I find myself explaining often. Foreign nationals sometimes think we really mean what we say.

We reach the hostel at Inverey and are initially told that there are two spare bunks but it's in a room of four and we have to wait the arrival of the other occupants to see how they feel about sharing. Then we're told it is fully booked anyhow. We resign ourselves perhaps to camping.

I'm worried about Mary. She'd said she needed a warm bed. We'd pressed on to near 30KM, way beyond what she was used to. She feels that the walk into Braemar tonight would be possible but I doubt it. I'm concerned. A young Australian couple arrive, pre-booked for two the bunks in the room of four. They are clearly city dwellers and the look on her face is one of "I'm not staying here." I think the outside loo and cold tap have put her off a little.

The Australian chap is asking the warden about a refund of his £30 if he moves on. The warden looks flustered and confused and retires to his upstairs office to check other people in.

By now a large group of us are sat in the lounge sipping tea. I make the Australian an offer which I consider fair. "If he won't refund you I'll give you twenty pounds as a helper." I want this bed for Mary and thought I could tempt him to not worry if he could not get a refund.

The room looks aghast at me. I'm surprised. It was a fair offer I felt. After all I'd be paying for the beds too, and an extra £20 on top.

I repeat the offer, trying to look earnest. Again the room looks aghast. I'm shocked at the shocked faces. Am I being too generous? Somebody pipes up that I'm being mean.

"Mean! He wants to move on and is worried he might not get a refund. So I'm offering to help him. What's the problem?"

"You could offer him the full amount."

"The full amount. But then I'd be paying twice over. Once to him and once to the Youth Hostel association."

There's a look of realization about the room. But nobody apologizes. They'd all thought I was trying to buy the beds cheaply when I was in fact offering to pay more. I feel very put out. Mary teases me that if everybody had mistaken me then perhaps it was the way I said it.

"Well I am put out. I'd not ever have considered a rip-off, that's all your sad interpretation of my honest motives."

I go and see the warden with the Australian chap and it is too hard to do a refund. But the warden says if I pay the chap £24.80 directly it'll be okay if we stay under their names.

"Would I only get a twenty four eighty refund then," he asks. "What about the credit card fee and the booking fee?"

I feel sorry for him. His partner is giving him a hard time over this booking.

"I'll give you thirty," I say.

So we leave the warden but I'm struck by a minor concern. Paying out cash on a verbal agreement with the warden, who often looks a little confused, would leave me vulnerable.

"Where is your partner now?" I ask. Wondering if she might be resting on one of the bunks I was about to unofficially purchase.

He looks me in the eye and firmly says, "She's sat in the car." I'm unsure if this was offered as a reflection on their relationship or to reassure me. She'd obviously point blank refused to stay here and he'd been sent back into get the money back. I feel very sorry for him.

Later Phil Lambert arrives complete with Dan Pawlak, a Polish guy, who has collected an antler and skull set. He has it strapped to his outer pack. It looks quite a site and Phil is using it to dry things out on.

I have poor sleep: waking early on the Saturday we breakfast in hushed whispers then sort our kit as others stir. Soon the kitchen is busy as we make to leave. I peer out the window and see it's raining.

"Mary, shall we hang on until the rain's passed?"

"Steve, you're not really the outdoorsy type are you," says Phil.

We start the wet walk to Braemar at 0630. It takes just two hours. The highlight was looking back and seeing around a hundred deer, just off the road stood in line watching us. As is typical of deer they stared for a while then the leader, a proud stag, led them off.

We find a café open and have a welcome hot breakfast, catching up with a few other Challengers. I'm worried about Mary, she is very tired. I've already said



we'd walk out via Ballater, an easier route then going over Jock's Road or Lochnagar. I try to cheer her up.

"There's a few nice art shops in town. It's where I bought one of my pictures of the Inaccessible Pinnacle."

"Where's that?" she asks.

"It's on Skye. One of the Munros."

"So you've not done it then."

"Yes, I have."

"So why is it called the Inaccessible Pinnacle then?"

"Well..." I'm floundering with the teasing. In fact I'm beginning to wonder if it is teasing, or whether some petulance is creeping in.

We wander around, check into our hotel. Mary rests and I go out in search of maps to get us to the coast and to book a hotel for the next night. I realize that Mary needs some comfort to see her through.

In the map shop I rue, to the shopkeeper, this purchase as I have the very maps at home.

"No use to you there," he commiserates in practiced dour tones.

At another store I witness Rob, the American, asking a shopkeeper if he can draw cash out anywhere.

"The machine's no working."

"Can I draw cash here?" he asks.

"You should have asked me before you bought your things then I could have given you cash back."

"I did not realise," he said.

"You should have asked first," retorted the shop keeper.

"How was I supposed to know?"

I suggest to Rob he buy something else small to get cash back and quietly added that he's just met a dour Scot.



**A nice welcome in Braemar**

I'm in a dilemma over the hotel booking for Sunday night. Not cheap at eighty five pounds but we have the choice of that, a 10KM walk, or to Ballater a 30KM walk. There are no alternatives accommodation on route. I book the hotel at the end of the 10KM walk, thinking Mary could use a half day. On getting back to the hotel she feels the 30KM walk would have been better and suggests I've made a mistake in booking such an expensive room. I take a short breath then take a judgment to overrule her, thinking she looks pretty exhausted. Plans, like accommodation, are in short supply and at least this is one.

We eat with Phil and Di Gerrard. A lovely bistro place and fine food. Di is shortly to emigrate to Kazakhstan to marry her man from Kenya. She wonders how he'll fare on the Challenge next year.

"We could get married on the Challenge," she muses.

"That's getting a bit old hat," says Phil.

"What about giving birth on the Challenge," I offer.

"That'd confuse Roger," says Di.

"Three hundred start and three hundred and one finish," I add.

"It could be just like a nativity scene at Callater Stable," says Phil.

"Would we find three wise men on the Challenge?"

"You can imagine the scene," says Phil, "the first thing the baby sees is Croydon peering down with his headlamp."

After the meal we pop into the Fife Arms to catch up with people. We see many people milling around and in the Fife Arms. Sue Oxley, MA, Dave Albon, Humphrey Weightman to name but a few.

On Sunday we see Bryan setting off alone. We'd heard Joan had twisted her ankle. My prophecy of him losing his entire party again appears to have come true.

We kill the morning then pop into a café where we catch up with Dennis Pidgeon, Bernie Roberts and Russ Manion. I ask Dennis his route.

"To the Fife Arms," he replies.

We set off on the short walk to Inver and its hotel. We chat with Margaret and David before branching off the road at Invercauld Bridge where we take the forest track and enjoy more mountain scenery. We try some more singing, I'm pretty tone deaf.

"We'll need to train your ear," says Mary.

"I've already trained the left one to fetch me a beer each evening," I add.

Mary likes the hotel, it's a nice room. "Does it go up to five stars?" she asks after observing the three star rating sign.

"It does, I don't," I reply.

There's a nice bar of soap, nicely wrapped that Mary bags. I have to use a cheaper version, taken from an earlier hotel.

When I wake on the Monday I'm feeling achy and stiff.

"Do you feel like you've just been hit by a truck?" asks Mary. She immediately realizes what she has said. For in February I had the misfortune to be driving on the M25 when Mr Radisa Radovanoviic, having just driven his truck up from Serbia, mistook me for a piece of tarmac. Being sent into the crash barriers at 70MPH had not done any favours to my back or left knee. The stupid trucker.

Indeed I'd wondered whether I'd have to withdraw from the Challenge but fortunately the pack has acted as a splint. And there was Jenny Wheeler who did far worse to her back by lifting her cat. It's a strange world when fate takes a hand.

We set off in glorious weather to walk along Royal Deeside. Just a few wisps of cloud hang in a royal blue sky. It's a very pretty walk, though hot on the minor roads.

Just before the final stretch into Ballater we meet with Andy and Nik on an otherwise challenger free day. We stand at the shrine at the Bridge of Muick built to the honour of Queen Victoria who once inspected a line of soldiers here. This was prior to them going off to be slaughtered in Africa. Well it actually said they laid down their lives for Queen and Country but I prefer to say it as it is.

Nik and Andy are in good form and Nik and Mary are able to confer that they both were walking with men whose humour hangs around the eight year old mark.

We set off and I say "There might be a shrine to my jokes one day."  
"There's another one that died," quips Mary.

At Ballater we take the old railway to Dinnet. We hope this will be easier but in fact it's a little tedious. Mary takes a bit more of the weight back and soon goes downhill. Though she assures me she can manage.

We stay in another three star hotel in Dinnet, changing rooms to get away from a noisy kitchen fan that's stopping Mary from resting.

My worst problem is a scalp that has got bad eczema. After stepping from the shower I announce, "I've just done something I've not done since Christmas day."

"What's that?" I hear concern in Mary's voice.

"Washed my hair with shampoo. I normally just rinse my hair with water."

On Tuesday I wake and look at Mary. Her eyes are very sunken. "How did you sleep?" I ask.

"Not at all." We talk it through, we are just thirty five miles from the coast. She is exhausted. I offer her a day off, offer her a 17KM walk to the next hotel. It's no good. I can see she is finished. I've done all I can with varying the route and taking more weight, I've no more options left to ease it for her and, to be frank, I'm starting to feel a level of criticism which is somewhat unfair. I've been doing my best, but if I try and persuade her it'd be bordering on bullying.

I book her on a National Express down south, to my house and get her on the local bus to Aberdeen to pick it up.

I set off, just wishing to finish now. I stop for lunch at the Potarch Hotel and from there I feel very alone, I'm now missing Mary, forgiving her her petulance.

I camp in a glorious wooded glade near Moss-side. Just wishing the time away now. I want to finish, am excited about completing my fourth Challenge but it feels different now. I used to walk the hills alone, now I seek more company. I manage to enjoy the meadow grass, Scots Pines. During the night I hear animals moving around, the morning brings close calls of deer and pheasant.

On Wednesday I make an early start through Fetteresso Forest, close navigating and comparing the forest operations against a map I've only just purchased. I

feel annoyed with the OS for selling maps they proclaim as new when they are so out of whack with the forest surroundings. I also feel annoyed with the estate that claims they will be shooting May through February. It's a ploy to distract walkers.

I make it through and at Mergie I pass the house of a former Challenger, Lorraine. She invites me in for tea where I join Suus and Bert from Holland. It's welcome company and the three of us walk into Stonehaven with Bert suffering from a sore ankle he picked up on the second day. We make for the beach. I throw in my pebble, call Mary on my mobile and throw her pebble as we speak. She sounds tired and drained.

On Thursday I spend a leisurely day before the meal. I find out that Joan did make it. This is good news. I catch up with many other Challengers milling about.

As I set off from my hotel to the meal I spy Polish Dan walking in. This time minus his stags antlers and skull. I catch him up and find he has posted them home. He says he has run out of food for the last three days and was pleased to find some spare food at a bothy. I make conversation and ask him what he does for work.

"I work in a factory making sure that everything is in the right place for production control. Sort of stock control if you like."

"And you ran out of food?" I ask.

"Ironic isn't it," he adds.

On Friday I get the train home, Mary meets me at my house with a big smile, and she appears excited to see me.

On the Saturday we go shopping in Marlborough, she tries to tempt me into buying lots of expensive wooden garden furniture. Something holds me back.

On Sunday Mary wakes and announces that she has the unused half of a return plane trip to Canada that she can use today. She's hatched a plan to fly back and collect more of her things, then get a cheap flight back.

I warily drop her at Heathrow, she's full of smiles and reassurances as she kisses me goodbye.

I never see her again. I later read an online account of her walk across Scotland staying in tent and hostels. No mention of me, no mention of the three star hotels and no mention she didn't actually make it across. I think I'm destined to be a solo walker!

With no Corbetts and Grahams added on this TGO the totals remain the same:

Corbett Count:	3 out of 221
Graham Count:	1 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## 2009

Before May 2008 I'd not paid much attention to Glenmore Lodge. I was vaguely aware of its existence from TGO magazine and seeing their emblazoned minibuses travelling the roads of the Aviemore region. It was not until I hired a guide, Garry Smith, to help me bag Tryfan in Wales (I'm a coward for exposure) that I got sold on the place. A former guide at the centre himself he spoke of its virtues and I duly booked an introduction to winter skills course. This is my story, from February 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>, told through snow goggled eyes.

Having travelled up, with an overnight stay in Edinburgh, I'm waiting in the cool of a winter's Sunday evening at Aviemore station. Anything that looks like a minibus raises my hope for the pre-arranged pick up to Glenmore Lodge. Along the main street I see a suitably sized red vehicle approach, but my heart sags as I realise it is a van and not a minibus. Then the coincidence hits me for along the side of the van is a simple logo advertising "Get High". It's Garry's van - the very Wales based guide who put me on to this place.

Coincidences set to one side I'm grateful when the Glenmore Lodge minibus arrives and whisks a few of us up into hills. The centre is clean and neat. The first evening is spent with a bar meal and it feels like that first night in halls of residence when I was eighteen. "What course are you on?" "Where do you come from?" The only difference being is that the years have killed the need for discussions about driving tests and girls.

My room is excellent, hotel like, ensuite without the telly. The centre has grown from its simple beginnings to offer incredible value for money. I get the sense that this is a significant step up from the YHA centre based courses I've been on before.

At breakfast I've still not met anybody from my course and sit with a police officer, Andy, on the further winter skills course.

Mark, who I met the night before, joins us and I get to introduce two people on the same course to one another.

The food is fantastic, a clear difference from halls of residence. We discuss our winter experiences, mine pretty low with some bad mistakes I've made whilst soloing in snow. Andy describes his life as a police dog handler. I chip in with "I guess you're looking forward to the ice axe arrest training." "Aye, we did that on the introductory course, Steve," he replies with no hint of having got my joke.

With my humour pride dented I collect a packed lunch and fill my flask with coffee. All provided inclusive of the price, unlike my YHA experiences where the misunderstandings between the warden and the suppliers of the course are legendary including what nights' accommodation is included, what meals, packed lunches, coffee and use of drying facilities are permitted. And here there is a distinct lack of notices instructing you to take your boots off, it's largely left to the individual to determine when boots may or may not be worn.

I then make my way to the handsome lecture theatre for the introductory talk by Nigel Williams, head of training. His professionalism and confidence exudes and I like his straightforward approach, even his words, "I can't guarantee your safety", have an air of reassurance about them.

Then it's time to meet our instructors an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Spaniard. For the want of this being the opening line to an old joke their names are Rupert, Clive and Rafael, but I'll leave you to wonder whether I have listed them respectively.

We gather by the stores, a tall open garage like area with a climbing wall in one corner. Large double doors protect us from the elements and the line of minibuses waiting to take us further into the mountains.

We queue and the store man lists the kit we need, surveys what we've got then fills in the gaps. With bits of kit dangling from every place possible we are instructed to head for the bar. This is fast becoming like the first day in halls of residence! Alas the bar is shut and we use the space to adjust crampons, try on goggles and helmets. The instructors circulate, testing the fastness of our equipment. I'm keen on the loaned plastic boots, they are solid, fit well and I feel my feet will just be along for the ride.

It's then off to the minibus and the Ski Centre car park. We disembark and start to make our way into Coire Cas; first following the funicular railway, a raised concrete structure snaking its way up the hills like the route illustrations in one of Poucher's guides. Its conception, construction and concrete are still heaped in controversy.

The instructors circulate amongst us, getting to know us. Rupert asks me "Have you done any hill walking in snow before?" I start to think about my first Munro and a companions helicopter rescue when his bum sliding in snow got out of hand. The time I was ascending Stob Coire Raineach, in Glen Coe, and climbed into such a steep snow face that I had to rely on a couple of other walkers to bail me out. And the time I was following a ridge in the mountains in the Ben Alder area, using what I thought was a line of boot prints to lead me to the summit until it dawned on me that I was walking on the gash in a cornice about to break away. "No," I reply.

I find the walk tough going, the boots give excellent protection but I'm aware of their weight. We are soon taught how to navigate an icy slope by using the side edge of the boot to kick and form steps. How to turn safely and how to descend through snow by kicking ones heel in.

At Coire Cas we drop our packs by a collapsed igloo and Clive instructs us to don helmets. "Treat your helmet like a tortoise," he says.

"What leave it in the shed for the winter," I reply. I think the wind wisps my words away as I'm spared a glare and discover the advice is useful as it refers to placing the helmet on the ground open side down so it does not take off on the ice.

I note we each listen by way of our own personality. Some offering quips, shared ideas or past experiences. People like John listening quietly and thoughtfully. A character can be judged simply by the way he or she listens.



**A motley crew – picture Ben Wallis**

We are then instructed in a selection of ascent and descent techniques using the ice axe. Sticking the shaft in, cutting steps, digging a ledge to sit or stand on. The biggest thing I learn is the importance of making flat ground to move or rest on.

The cutting of steps is hard on my back, each swing just touches the snow to create a ledge but it's a long way down for me. Rafael, Rupert and Clive circulate; correcting our mistakes, watching until we get it right then moving on to the next. Rafael speaks perfect English, narrated through a distinctive Spanish accent. From the Basque region he's settled in Scotland, distinctive in looks, as well as accent, with the blackest hair I've ever seen, nose stud and earring sleepers.

The sinking of the ice axe shaft requires aggression. Clive tells me to pretend it's somebody I don't like. I adopt a "Yer bastard" each time I thrust it into the snow. This catches on with Clive, and he explains my technique to the rest of the group.

The exercises require frequent regroupings at the rucksacks. Each time we are reminded of the conditions as our packs are quickly covered in snow. Things could easily disappear.

Snow Buntings hang out and move in for crumbs each time we graze on our lunches. It's good to see the wildlife, earlier a mountain hare darted across the slopes above us.

I'm glad when Clive calls an end to the day. I'm tiring and we've been at it a good few hours. We don crampons that make for a comfortable descent. As we meet the ski runs snow boarders zip past at great speed, their equipment built to not stick to the mountains whereas ours is built to do the very opposite.

The evening passes with a three course meal and instructional talks in the lecture theatre.

Tuesday dawns with the news of snow down south. The biggest for years the reports say. Here's me come looking for snow and it's arrived on my very doorstep. I'm reminded of my 1999 Christmas in Canada, hoping for my first ever white Christmas. For the first time in living memory Southern Ontario was devoid of snow whilst family and friends back home experienced the first southern England white Christmas in my lifetime.



**Glenmore Lodge - Picture Ben Wallis**

I purchase a pair of inner gloves from the store. Goggles and gloves are a few of the items not provided free of charge. I'd found it very cold having to remove gloves to eat yesterday so I welcome the chance of a handy base layer.

Again it's a drive up to the ski centre and this time a walk into Coire na Ciste in search of a suitable slope to practise ice axe arrest. Again I find it tough going, I ask Stefan how he is doing and am reassured I'm not the only one finding the walks in tough. I'm glad when the instructors find some sloping ground, test the gradient and snow quality and declare it suitable.

We kit out in wet gear consisting of a pullover top and over trousers. This is to protect us from the worst of the wet and damage to more expensive clothing beneath. With my goggles and balaclava Jon says that I and the others look like we are equipped for biological warfare. "After that breakfast I think we all need it," I reply.

Both my hands ache from the "Yer bastards!" of yesterday so I'm glad when the first lessons are axe free involving throwing yourself downhill head first, feet first on your stomach then on your back. Then it's repeated many times with the axe as we learn the art of correcting your position and braking.



I envy our youngest member Ben, little older than a student with laid back attitude to match, as he appears to be able to make the moves without fear of later aching limbs.

We stop for lunch, and I take a look at the relics of an ancient chair lift we are working beneath. The timbers of the seats rotting through as they gently swing in the breeze. We sit beneath the dilapidated wheel house and munch our food and sip our warming coffee.

When the day's work is done we return to the centre and practise and count our pacing on a 100 metre stretch of woodland path. We need to know for navigating in poor conditions. Mine is around 60 paces for 100m on the flat and, once we migrated on to the uphill paths, rose to 72 paces and 90 paces on descent. There was a considerable variance across the group so it's important to know your own. There then followed a series of navigation exercises amongst the trees. Each designed to take you back to the start via squares, rectangles and triangular courses of varying lengths.

The evening lecture is on avalanche awareness. We learn to watch the forecasts and review the information supplied at the Scottish Avalanche Information Service website to determine the weather of the past few days. Avalanches occur because of snow build up on the lee side of windblown hills.

It's important to know as much about what has happened as what will happen with the weather. Like cavers who review the rainfall of the last few days winter mountaineers should review the snow fall and wind patterns of the last few days. Each day the warnings are about 80% chance of avalanching in the Aviemore area. I'm glad of the instructors' careful checks.

Wednesday I wake to a corking bruise on my stomach, so many times had I thrown myself down that slope yesterday that I can't recall which slide was the culprit.

I pull back the curtains and find that a large snow dump has taken place during the night; this turns out to be too much snow to be able to get the mini buses up the road to the Ski Centre. A change in plan, which we are told is key to mountain safety, is to have us walking on the track towards Ryvoan Bothy then the Corbett overlooking it.

Clive says, "You can leave your extra wet weather gear behind, we shan't be practising ice axe arrests today."

I'm delighted to shed some weight then catch Clive eyeing my pack. "Can you take the snow shovel there Steve?" His eye is focused on an extra outer piece of material on my pack.

"Is that what that loop is for?" I ask.

"Yes."

"I rather wished I'd known before."

"Why?"

"I'd have taken it off."

We pace off landmarks, sometimes very accurately, other times worryingly inaccurately to reach the bothy. I'm looking forward to our group being able to congregate within its confines, eat and drink our coffee. Alas the romantic ideal is scuppered by a large group of well-behaved youngsters that has filled the single roomed shelter.

We manage to eat and survey the Corbett of Meall a' Bhuachaille. We make out two paths, branching a few hundred feet above where we stand. Although the left one looks more tempting we opt for the straight up option as this follows the path marked on our maps. Clive makes a welcome statement that we don't need to pace out sections as the way looks fairly clear. He also talks over Naismith's rule which is to allow a minute per contour. Worried about my pace, and preferring Steve Smith's rule of two minutes per contour, I set my altimeter and tuck in behind Jane and Roger, clearly fit for the hills.

As we spy reindeer on high ground we pass over areas of soft powdery snow, pure ice and ice covered in snow. I notice the tread on Jane's boots is caked with snow and assume mine must be the same. I kick off the snow and I have much more grip. I tell Jane to do the same, she's says thanks not realising it's her boots that have actually helped me. We traverse west over steep ground and see how avalanches happen by no more than a desktop sized piece of snow breaking away from frozen older snow below.

We make the summit in 85 minutes, just 12 minutes longer than Clive's rule of thumb calculations, like us it's all very iced up. The Velcro on my sleeves is covered in thick ice, my jacket is stiff and I'm covered in what one would describe as a sharp frost. It's strikingly cold and Clive urges us to get moving. We are set the task of heading west into the col. We have to each calculate, agree and set bearings before setting off and pacing the downward slope to meet the col.

After a while Clive calls a halt to the shambles. We've headed south west instead of west. I sense he's hiding some frustration. I'm not sure if we are as far off as he says but dare not speak up, at least my altimeter has us south east of the col, where Clive has us more due south. Fortunately we are not made to re-ascend and we follow a sweep search downhill to meet the path that leads through the forest and ultimately to the lodge.

The visibility is good and our sweep search does not hold line. With each of us falling into holes and struggling across some of the deep snow it's welcome when the gradient slackens off and we meet the very outer edges of the forest. Alas no path to be seen so I surreptitiously take a look at my GPS. It has us not far from where we need to be but I know I need to keep my sudden "expertise" very quiet. We head to the right, still searching out the path into the forest. Jane says to me, "It could be by that signpost saying footpath."

"Looks about right," I say as I share the irony of the situation with her and reveal my GPS. At this point I figure I should put it away and in doing so drop my compass. This gives Clive the delight in telling us how important it is not to drop your kit. In all my years of walking this is only the second time I've dropped a compass and it had to be in front of an instructor.



**Meall a' Bhuachaille – picture Ben Wallis**

It feels like a long final slog through the woods and back up the track. We do a final pacing as the 100m course we used yesterday was free of snow, today it's covered.

A debrief follows in the dining room around a circular table. Very welcome tea, coffee and cake is provided at the end of each day. We look out the window and see the principal taking photos of a hastily built snowman. Clive says, "I never thought I'd see something so bizarre."

"Not as bizarre as if it were the snowman taking a picture of the principal," I suggest.

In the evening I take a walk around the centre. Photographs from the 1950s, showing young people having fun in the early basic accommodation, fill the walls of the stairs. It gives me a level of sadness, moments in time snapped for history. The subjects will be bordering on old age now. Photographs and artefacts from renowned lost climbers, lives cut short in the pursuit of dreams.

I'm cheered by a thoroughly entertaining evening talk by Kirk Watson. As a climber he's spent a number of winters and summers at the British Antarctic Survey base. His film clips, stills and stories are entertaining and have most of us dreaming of spending some time there. In particular Alan Maw, a welder from the North East of England, learns that his type of skill is in high demand. Alas I could not see a role for me as a software engineer does not fit into the category of climber, scientists or skilled labour.

Thursday I wake to see the snowman up to his neck in snow. Rafael is unable to make it in and we are allocated Kirk to take his place. The snow is too deep to

even get out of the centre so we start with building snow holes, something Kirk had covered with some instructional video clips the night before.

We split in to two groups and the party I'm in pile our rucksacks in a heap. Mine is still in my room, which gives me mixed feelings of guilt and relief as we pile on snow. We continually pack it down before adding layer after layer. A couple pass and the woman of the party asks what we are doing. Clive replies, "Making a snowman."

"Why not a snow woman?" she asks.

"Ours is going to have snow balls," I offer.

"That's the tone just lowered," says Clive.

"If a guy can't just have a joke," I mutter. "Only trying to cheer people up, I thought it was quick, witty and relevant."

"Steve, shut up and keep digging."

Jane is sent in to dig the entrance. She reaches the packs which are then pulled out, we then take it in turns to slide in on our stomachs and hollow out a cavity. It's unlikely this form of shelter would be used in emergency as it's a lengthy process. The other group start to dig what is known as a snow grave but becomes more of a snow wall. This is then used to shelter a group bivi which holds about ten.



**The Snow Shovel Parade – Picture Birger Vilen-Peterson**

During all of this a RAF search and rescue helicopter lands three times. Once to pick up search and rescue dogs. Two people have been out all night in the hills. Texts had been received the night before and they were told to "dig in." This morning the ominous lack of contact has rescue workers concerned.

The dogs are eager to board and be taken high up into the mountains. The snow, and wind kicked up by the helicopter gives us some idea of whiteout conditions. Our beautiful blue sky day, with mountains edged with snow as an artist would pick out shadow on a picture, is turned in to howling snow swirling conditions. We

have to turn our backs in to it and brace ourselves. On the third landing the snow cave is sufficient for Jon and me to dive in and take refuge.

Birger, our dry witted Danish representative, has some fun with me. I'd earlier explained the helicopter rescue I was involved in on my first ever Munro. As it lands this time he says, "They're here for you again, Steve."

A BBC camera crew turn up and we learn that the two climbers have been found alive and well.

The blue skies continue into the afternoon and the instructors find that enough snowshoes are available. Solid plastic flipper affairs, which you fasten into with a hinge at the toe end, make for easier travelling across the deep powder snow. We set off on a circular route, following forestry tracks, with the aim of touching the shores of Loch Morlich before the return to the lodge.



**Picture Ben Wallis**





**Picture Ben Wallis**

We are all taken with the pure beauty. Each lump and bump on the ground is picked out by rises in the whitewashed blanket that's folded into every contour. Blue sky sits above the higher branches, rays of light draw our eyes as it splashes its way from canopy to carpet. Trees hold snow on every skyward face, rocks in streams like sleeping polar bears, bridge rails with perfect vertical white extensions.

We meet cross country skiers and they share our enthusiasm for the nearest to perfection that Scotland can produce. As a group we fall into a line, grouping into a circle when it's time to rest and talk. A skier that Kirk knows passes us. He's young, designer stubble and shades, flowing dark hair. "Russ!" calls out Kirk. "Hey, Kirk," comes the reply from the biggest smile I'd seen in a long while, "Perfect day, man." If he'd been smoking a spliff the scene would have been complete.

We reach Loch Morlich and all fall silent. Beyond are perfect snow covered hills, the sun lowering yet still above them casting its light over the secrets of their folds and bringing a shimmer across the loch. Ducks float in flowing water where the ice is not. It's a long while before anybody speaks, we walk along the snow crusted beach with our heads turned left, savouring every moment.

Sat with coffee and cake in the lodge we reflect on the day. It's been the biggest snow fall for ten years, Clive tells us that it's been years since he's been out on snow shoes. They've done us proud, what earlier looked to be a day of hasty improvisation became an experience that nobody expected and could not be planned.

Clive asks each of us for our personal highpoint of the day. I reply seeing the party of school children disembark from a luxury coach with 'MacPhallus'

emblazoned down the sides. Clive pauses, raises his eyes and says, "McPhails Steve, McPhails."

Friday and the road is open to the Ski Centre, and our first day out by minibus since Tuesday. The car park feels alpine, skis being unloaded from roof racks, folk kitting themselves to the gentle anticipation of the hum of ski lifts.

We opt to walk and trail up into Coire Cas. It's tough going, the blue skies of yesterday now hidden by low cloud and occasional wind whipping up snow. I see Clive keeping an eye on Stefan's broad frame. He's trailing at the back and I can sense some mental calculation is being made whether he's fit for the summit of Cairn Gorm. We hear the instructors talking, via radio, to the three other courses, all more advanced than us and one by one we hear the news that they've turned back. It just leaves us; the least experienced that have picked the route where conditions are most favourable.



### **Me at the summit of Cairn Gorm**

Clive and Rafael huddle in conference. I pick up enough that Clive wants to walk Stefan off and there is debate too whether the summit is really suitable today for any of us. Stefan is approached but feels up to it. Clive is not convinced but we settle on splitting into two groups. On we march until time for a coffee and a snack is called. Clive starts to dig a snow grave.

"It does not look good for you, Stefan," I quip.

We are instructed to each dig our own hole for shelter and comfort to eat. A few minutes of flurry ensues as we each open out our homesteads.

We carry on, Rafael selects Jon to lead via bearing and pacing. Deep snow is negotiated until we reach the ice encrusted building and weather station that

marks the summit. It's no place for a lengthy rest and we are soon instructed to move on. I'm not ready and feel frustrated. My frustration grows during the descent as my goggles freeze over to the point I'm seeing the white ground, white sky and blowing snow through a couple of square centimetres.

I trip often as I desperately try to find the footsteps in front of me. We rest infrequently, but I'm glad for Ian's realisation and hands as he chips the ice from my goggles.

Rafael's paces us on a bearing to the Ptarmigan Restaurant which adorns the top of the ski lift. I'm relieved when we finally halt and our destination is declared – though we cannot see the building as the visibility is so poor. An exploratory party sets forth and then calls the rest forward.

Now amongst skiers we look and feel surreal. Bright clothing, cool ski wear, without a drop of snow or ice is the typical garment of people stepping off the ski lift. We are ice and snow encrusted like some Edwardian photograph of an Antarctic expedition.

Amongst curious gazes we follow the edge of the ski slope back to the car park and to the end of our week.

Saturday morning I wake in Euston Station, having come down by the sleeper. The bulk of London's snow has melted but as I get the train out to Great Bedwyn the scenes of Scotland return. 0830am and I'm in our village bakery, hearing how our village, three miles from the nearest main road, remains cut off to all but those with a 4x4. I'm glad for the train, and my new found skills, as I make the final short walk home.

## **May**

It's the Friday evening before the TGO and I'm sat in my favourite Marlborough coffee shop. A text comes through from my sister and we arrange weekend visits for our ninety two year old Grandmother.

"Just out having a curry this evening," she adds.

To outdo her I reply, "I've just ordered eight curry dishes to take on the TGO and I'm having a coffee waiting for them to be cooked."

"What at an Indian take away? Do you then dehydrate them?"

"Yes and yes."

"You are joking aren't you? Tell me you are?"

"No and no."

"Have you ordered rice?"

"No, I managed to do that bit myself."

"Nan?"

"I thought we'd already sorted the visits."

Like all things culinary I've left it until the last minute and there's no time to cook anything so I've dragged myself, under very little protest, to the Raj in Marlborough. Through language difficulties and our opposite meaning of shaking and nodding our heads, I made the order. They apologise for keeping me waiting and give me a couple of bottled beers. I figure the language barrier might make me sound rude trying to explain that I can't drink so I take them.

It's the evening of Wednesday May 6<sup>th</sup>, the food is dehydrated and my bag is packed. I'm online double checking my train journey from Bedwyn station to Strathcarron. It requires the first train out and the last train in with five changes.



I'm debating whether I should print off a compensation claim form to take with me when the doorbell rings. It's a neighbour and, in my role of helping to run the 'Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group', she says "Do you know what's happened at Little Bedwyn?"

"No."

"Well, the line is blocked - a woman and her dog have been killed on the crossing."

Amongst the "Isn't it terrible for the family" and "It's somebody's wife, daughter or sister" I'm thinking "I hope this doesn't mess up my journey."

After the door is shut narcissism subsides and I think of my friend Susannah, who lives by the crossing. I text her to see if she is okay, I'm thankful for the text back but she says it's pretty awful.

Later I check the trains, they report the line blockage, due to a fatality has been cleared but there are scheduled engineering works for the rest of the night. My heart sinks; I've had experience of this before. Although reported to clear at 0300 there's often an overrun which causes the first train to be cancelled. With nervous anticipation I don't sleep well and find myself at 0430 checking online. There's nothing useful so I ring the helpline number. It's voice activated and we struggle to get my start station into the system, then it's the destination of the first leg, Paddington. It starts off with "Did you mean Cuddington?" We then go through a series of options which, after I'm not sure what got said, culminates in "Did you mean Pluckley?"

I give this up and wander down to the station and press the helpline button, and they know as much as I do. If I'd left it all to chance I'd have had the same result as, by the time I leave the house for the second time, I can hear the 0607 pulling into the station.

The journey goes well with changes in London and Glasgow, I meet with Alison Ogden (formerly Ashton as her partner has now made an honest woman of her) and Sue Oxley at Perth and we journey on together to Strathcarron.

The weather varies from sun to cloud then descends to lashing wind and rain. Alison is lucky to be on the challenge - a torn cruciate knee ligament and a cartilage operation less than two months before, have curtailed her preparations.

I'm impressed by how her knee holds out in the run across the Strathcarron railway bridge as we struggle against the wind and rain which does nothing to break us gently from the warmth of the carriage to the rigours of the challenge.

A wet and sorry mob land in the hotel, some checking in, some just buying a drink, or two, before pitching their tent. Routes and plans are exchanged, my eyes light up when, amongst the tales of dire weather forecasts, I hear of a previously unknown bothy that might suit my Friday night.

On Friday May 8<sup>th</sup> we set off in the dry towards the bothy at Bendronaig Lodge. I feel slow, the weight of the pack, which has not been on my back for two years, pulls heavy on my left shoulder, and the poorly distributed weight needs little excuse to kick into my lower back.

I rest to repack and lose Ali and Sue as they walk on. With large items now stowed transversely it feels easier but the rough incline has me wondering about my 'get fit on the challenge' philosophy to preparation.

It starts to rain and I catch Ali and Sue at a beautifully refurbished bridge crossing the River Ling. I enthuse and point out the craftsmanship of the restoration.

"How do you know it's restored?" asks Ali, "It could be new."

"Not with rivets that size," I reply.

"I guess you have to be male to know about rivets," she adds.

I'm unsure whether this is praise or mockery but am happy to plod on in company. It's a wet group that arrives at the bothy after some three and a half hours of walking.

People pour in as, having just experienced more rain on this challenge than in the entire previous one, a roof and walls are welcome. I'm happy to rest, my jacket is leaking. Our oldest comrade arrives; Jack Addison, aged 73, who soon announces his intent to press on. Only myself plus Ann and Alvar Thorn declare our hand and decide to cut the day short with a night in the bothy. The ensuite loo, complete with paper, bucket to flush and toilet duck is too tempting.

Ali and Sue feel the bothy is too far to the west (there's no pleasing some people) and elect to make this only a rest and press on to Loch Calavie in the hope of positioning themselves for some Munros. I have my eye on an afternoon walk up the Corbett of Beinn Dronaig but not before lunch and rest.

"I'm cold," complains Sue sat huddled in her coat.

"You could chop up the firewood for us later," I suggest.

I get a scowl and then Sue tries to cheer up engaging in conversation with each person that arrives which unfortunately becomes a series of gaffs.

"Bad hair day," as, what she believes is a woman, arrives.

"What's your name?"

"Gordon Green," replies the man with a full head of long white hair.

"Let me guess your age, most people on the challenge are about ten years older than they look."

It was just one of those days where the foot was firmly stuck in it.

I strip my pack to the bits required to do a day walk up the Corbett and set off. But I can't get comfortable. First my insulated, waterproof hat feels loose on my head when - my recent number two head shave, a brave and long thought out decision, offers little purchase. And secondly I quickly realise I've forgotten my trekking pole. I return to the bothy and, amongst curious glances, reclaim it and head up the rough craggy slopes of Beinn Dronaig.

I find it easier going without the full pack weight, though I still appreciate frequent rests to peer back towards the bothy and admire the snow-capped peaks with angry cloud above them.

My ascent is entertained by periods of rain blowing in followed by snaps of blue sky and chill wind to blow the water off me. As I reach the bealach of the undulating, rocky summit plateau the wind picks up and I get to see out towards the Mullardoch hills whose peaks are picked off by a strip of snow.

As I approach the summit a hail storm strikes the void between the clouds above and below me. I'm grateful for the guidance of light snow which marks out the shallow indentations of otherwise indistinguishable paths. At the top there is some welcome shelter.



**View to the Mullardoch hills**

The first part of the return is a hundred meter drop back into the hailstones, pelting and sandblasting my face as I hurry to escape their domain.

Back at the bothy I'm pleased with my efforts. To have sat out the day in the bothy would have left me feeling stuffy and unfulfilled with this remote Corbett left unconquered.

Alvar had tried to get a fire going, but the stove just smoked the room so we are warmed only by a succession of gas stoves heating the evening meals - curry for me.

Five challengers sleep the night and the morning begins with the rustling of plastic bags and the flaring of stoves. I slowly gather my things, barely looking forward to the day ahead which appears to be one of grotty weather.

I set off towards Loch Calavie on a good track but am soon slowed by a deteriorating path which becomes a bog hop on the approach to Pait Lodge. I am slow, it takes five and a half hours to get to this lodge, an oasis of construction and garden in the boggy wilds and shores of Loch Monar. I decide, through a conspiracy of fitness and weather, not to ascend An Cruachan and instead cut up Allt Rabhachain to a bridge that Ann had recommended. The advice is good and I reward myself with munching some lunch in the heather.

I'm passed by Phil Turner, setting an impressive pace as I ponder the rough walk through the bealach to collect the path towards the hydro works below Beinn Dubh an Iaruin. I find the going tough, each step, each ascent is a strain as I stagger under the weight of eight days food. I use each stream to try and wash my boots and gaiters from all the peat gathered in the bog hoping and sinking. I cut a sorrowful figure descending the glen and rue the rain that comes down hard

on my approach to the camp. Only the arch of a rainbow cheers me and there's just enough let up to get the tent up. I'm glad to be inside, snug as the rain pelts the outer skin. I wonder where Ali and Sue got to and am a little surprised to be camping away from any other challengers.

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> and I wake and put on the wet socks of yesterday. My feet feel sore and ready to blister, I patch up as best I can. Last night it was too wet to get out of my tent to clean my teeth and I'm glad to clean up this morning and rid myself of the taste of curry. Tonight I'm heading for the Struy Inn so the evening meal will be a change.

The day is nice, but I make slow progress in the sun. I see Ann and Alvar set off from their camp and pass Terry Leyland as he packs up. I look back to the route I covered yesterday, snow-capped peaks and high cloud give invitation to the missed mountain of yesterday, An Cruachan - you have to catch them on the right day.

My feet get wet as they squelch into Glen Strathfarrar, the bridge at Inchvuilt requires a climbing move to overcome the locked gate and by the time I hit the road I can feel blisters coming on. I stop to pad them up and find blood. I do my best but it's painful. I catch Ann and Alvar, having stopped for an hour for lunch I realise that I'm slow. It becomes a route march down the glen and my heart sinks when I pass my 2001 parking place, to capture a couple of Munros, and recall the length of time it had taken to drive up the glen to that point.

A single pine tree, alone on an impressive mound, becomes my focus as the road twists and turns towards it. I'm glad the glen is not straight. The walks in Glen Clova and along the side of Loch Ericht, are straight, boring, long and in the latter case a dam teases you by forever being on the horizon. Here there is a pretty twisting glen to enjoy.

I arrive at Struy Bridge after an eight and a half hour trudge. I'd not marked the exact location of the inn; I guess a right turn and am pleased when my resting place comes into view. Though my heart sinks a little when I find it locked up and note saying it does not open until five thirty. I flop onto a bench, pleased for a rest and am eventually rescued by the hotelier.

"I'll get the wee lassie to open up," he says. The 'wee lassie' turns out to be a very tall Polish girl with the most amazing black hair. She shows me to my room, I check the blisters and find a scene of gore on my right foot. A red grape appears to have taken root between my big and second toe. Like an aging car, where surface rust rarely implies a good underneath, there is a horror story on the underside. A large blister has popped leaving a raw area, on the ball of the foot, about the size of a fifty pence coin. I limp my way to the shower to get it as clean as possible and soon find a new danger. The ancient shower appears to have two settings, freezing or third degree burns. Surveying it I'd not be surprised if it had cleaned the very first challengers to ever pass this way. I soon discover the trick which is to control it by the stopcocks on the inlet pipes. I find a balance, clean up then patch up and limp my way down to the bar. I order food and am soon joined by Alistair and Lynsey Pooler, at twenty eight and twenty seven they look so young and do well to reduce the average challenge age. Alison and Sue join us, looking tired but elated to have achieved the four Munros to the north of Glen Strathfarrar.

The conversation flows and for Ali and Sue so does the wine. The purchase of an extra bottle, to decant into a plastic platypus, sees them off to bed with the rest of us following, and limping, that way too.

Breakfast is a fine affair. The hotelier, realising we are all on the challenge, sits us together and it's a feast of fine food and conversation. We depart to pack, and I bargain with every item to see if I can throw it away to reduce weight

We meet outside. "I need to walk with you today," I say to Sue and Ali.

"Why particularly?"

"Well, this quicker road walk is my foul weather alternative. I forgot to print the maps."

Though it's not foul weather today, in fact quite nice, the forest tracks looked very boggy and we need to be at Drumnadrochit for five in the evening to catch a pre-booked ferry across Loch Ness. I sense a quietness about Ali and Sue, I'm not noted for my speed walking so know I have to raise my game to not slow them down.

The roads are steep, hot and unforgiving to both my blistered foot and Ali's knees. We pass through hamlets, Kiltarlity we rename as 'Kill a Tity' (I tried for 'Lik a Tity' but get outvoted) where we rest by a chapel. The entertainment begins with an inspection of my foot followed by Sue's wet pack.

"Looks like your platypus is leaking," says Ali.

A general inspection follows and we find what looks like a leak near the neck.

"This isn't good," says Sue. She's not kidding, without a watertight container the challenge is nearly impossible. "This could be me out of the challenge."

"I've got a spare," I say and am immediately declared a hero. Once the spare is in place, and as much water transferred as possible by the careful hand of Doctor Ali (a self-claimed expert in decanting urine samples), we are set to go.

I don't mind the small risk that my platypus will spring a leak and curtail my challenge. The TGO is all about helping one another out by selfless acts.

"Thanks for that," says Sue, "my spare is full of wine, I'd not want to have wasted that."

Setting off, and rather feeling that I've been duped, I keep my cool by frequently dipping my cap in clear puddles. The water drains down, running between my shirt and skin, cooling me on the uphill sections.

We pass lamas alpacas and the cutest ponies. I feed them longer grass and they look sorrowful as we depart.

We turn on to the Great Glen Way for the final leg to Urquhart Bay, which protrudes from Loch Ness to the shores of Drumnadrochit. We stop at a picnic area for lunch. It's nice to sit at a table and enjoy the sun. I'm low on water so refill from the tap in the loos. It looks uninviting and I emerge into the sun with a plastic bag that looks like something you'd find hanging on a hospital bed.

The walk between the trees is gorgeous, light shining through dappling the path in sun and shadow. Trees bend against the blue sky and a chorus of birds share our delight in the day. Sue keeps us paced but I bargain for a two minute break, which turns out to be a longer one as we sit on a viewpoint overlooking Loch Ness.

By now the muscle, which connects my right leg to my bottom has strained. It's painful, especially on uphill bits.

"I could massage it for you?" says Sue.

I await the punch line.

"With my boots," she adds.

"And what state of dress would I be in?"

"Naked," says Sue.

"It's rumoured that one normally has to pay good money for that," I add.

We make the ferry at five past five. We realise we are on the second boat load so rest, bask in the sun and chat to other challengers. I'm grateful to Ali and Sue, for Ali's navigation and Sue's pace got us here in time. There's no time to walk into Drumnadrochit - I've not visited it for many years. The last time there was a sign for "Official Loch Ness Monster Museum" and "Original Loch Ness Monster Museum"; one wonders if there was some competition.

The crossing is in the subtle evening glows of light with about ten of us crowded onto the boat sailing for the eastern shore and the hamlet of Inverfarigaig. As the western shore shrinks, the eastern shore grows and what were faint outlines become clear to the eye and what was clear to the eye dwindles into a pinprick of memory.

We alight onto the derelict jetty and plod our ways to B&B, pitches and for us the friendly confines of the Sutherland's hill billy ranch at Ault na Goire. We approach apprehensively and enquire if the rumour of free pitches is true. We are welcomed in, fed tea and biscuits then directed to the field. In glorious evening sun we chat with Shirley Worrall, Peter Shepard and many others. A sink and a welcome loo make it all mod cons amongst eccentric sculptures involving old bicycles and Dyson vacuum cleaners.



**The Sutherland Homestead**

I don't get much sleep. The welcome cups of tea went down a bit too well and caffeine pumps through my system forcing sleep to snatched moments between periods of trying to get my aching body comfortable on my thermarest.

An early hour's call of nature has me admiring the heavens, millions of stars lighting those that choose to sleep away from the lights of the cities. I sense a frost in the air and crawl back to the welcome warmth of my sleeping bag. Life is simpler in a tent, just the bare necessities of survival with the attendant list of jobs to sustain a twenty first century lifestyle left far behind with their significance. The TGO is a travelling community, leaderless comradeship with just a few basic rules in which to flourish. I've always been unsure of what love means but somehow the TGO fosters that spirit: at the very least it's one definition.

The calls of animals and the roar of neighbouring gas stoves serve as an alarm clock and I start to get going. A frost has settled on the tents and we wait for the sun to clear the high trees and dry the worst off the tents. In the meantime we all sing 'Happy Birthday' down Alison's mobile to her fifteen year old daughter, Madeleine. Alison is younger than me and has a fifteen year old daughter, the years creep by and one barely notices until a little reminder, and an aching body, awakens us to a world getting younger.

We get going at a quarter to eight. I feel slow, lacking the hearty breakfast and time constraints of yesterday. We are in a long procession of people, funnelling from where they rested their heads towards Errogie and the splendour of the Monadhliath Mountains beyond.

I soon need to rest and ask Ali to check my foot. Sue turns away as she sees the gore, fortunately this is all in a day's work for Dr Ogden and she patches me up with an appropriate dressing, supplies me with a spare and off we set again.

I still feel slow, am slow and don't mind Ali and Sue getting ahead. I sense I'm becoming a burden, yet don't mind the space opening up but sense some concern each time I catch them at a rest stop. I find myself in a second party, chatting to new people as we find ourselves, unintentionally trespassing through a beautifully manicured garden with the destined hills beyond. A woman emerges from a grand house and, before she can say anything, I'm apologising on behalf of us all. If there was wind in her sails it is taken away as we explain our mistake and she gives helpful route advice. Catching the front runners we choose to ignore said advice and find ourselves in an even more beautifully manicured garden. This time there's only a gardener and from him we receive a cheery wave.

At a junction in the path I feel beat with tiredness. I've already decided to tell Ali and Sue that we should separate as I'm holding them up. I'm just about to make my magnanimous gesture when Ali, who's obviously been in conversation with Sue, says "Is it okay if we go on, Steve?"

"Yes, no worries," I say. So I bid them and Phil Turner farewell and settle for a rest. My right foot has been painful with each step so I take some Ibruprofen, drink lots of water and graze on nuts and raisins. I've avoided chocolate bars this year, dietary advice on C28 from Jenny Wheeler (and a follow up email a month or so back followed by confirmation text on day one) did not let me dare pack any chocolate. I could kill for a Mars bar right now. But the healthy Steve, who at this point can barely move, sets off again and forces his legs along the track.

I'm soon passed by Peter Shepard and companion as I follow the steady pull towards the Corbett of Carn na Saobhaidhe. I lose myself in a work problem,



passing the additional tracks to the wind generator – a solitary structure requiring access roads and power lines. It switches my mind off from the fitness struggles as my mind plays through ideas, possibilities and scenarios. Like life the purity of walking, the purity of the mountains makes everything simpler. The solution comes to me and even the lack of timesheet to record the event is not a bother.

As the map indicates the tracks imminent demise I catch sight of a group of three huddled over a map. Realising it's Ali, Sue and Phil I catch them and ask, "What happened?"

"We stopped for lunch and dried the tents."

"I'll accompany you to the top then let you off the leash again."

Accompanying to the top becomes a tortuous bog hop over the final slopes to the bealach between Beinn Bhuraich and Carn na Saobhaidhe. Super fit Sue and youthful Phil leave Ali and I standing as we work our way with tender knees, and tender feet, to the higher ground. I rest often, allowing Ali to catch up, though I sense she's happy to make her own pace. I find it hard going and am glad when the south westerly climb becomes an easier south easterly final ascent to the Corbett's summit. I expect to spot Peter but he's long gone (though strangely he did not pass Sue and co) so instead I rest around the high, breezy plateau of the summit cairn.



**Only Sue hears me say 'cheese'. Phil Turner and Ali Ogden to the left.**

The deal to separate is not required as we all descend at equal pace to the Allt Odhar and its short, yet impressive, waterfalls.

"You're a new man," says Sue.

"Something clicks in with me," I reply. "Sometimes I'm on a roll other times I'm just so slow."

We follow the river downstream to Dalbeg, where I rest by the closed up bothy. Peter is camping and comes over to say hello.

"We were shouting to you from the track to the wind turbine, did you not hear?"

"No," I reply.

"That was the way to the Corbett."

For the life of me I could not see how, and a later inspection of the map makes me none the wiser (or certainly no further informed).

I press on for the bridge south west of Coignafearn Lodge where an evening appointment with MA Harper awaits me. Having said goodbye to Ali, Sue and Phil I lose myself in my thoughts as I follow the comfortable track along the river. I'm glad of the gentle descent but wary that this will require more ascent tomorrow.

As the bridge comes into view, and the lodge building, new yet Victorian styled, fills the glen beyond, I spy my three comrades of the day sat resting by the bridge.

"We can't lose one another," I say as I slump myself down having completed my day of ten hours walking.

"We miss your sparkling company," says Ali.

I sit next to her and trim my nails.

"You are showering me with bits of nail," says Ali.

I pitch my tent, alone and admire the evening light as the sun drops below the hills to a deepening blue sky. With no sign of MA I slip into my sleeping bag and have a restless night as each time I turn my body reminds me of my aching hips.

I snatch just enough sleep and wake to Wednesday May 13<sup>th</sup> dawning another glorious day. I make a slow start; heating breakfast in the same pot in which I cooked curry last night. The smell of gas reminds me of the static caravan holidays of my childhood. Rain soaked South Coast sites, making model airfix kits to try and take the mind off the tedium.

Muesli and dehydrated skimmed milk is not the most appetising and I won't claim that a curry twang sets it off any better. After I scrape the last of it into my mouth I set to patching up my feet then packing up the tent. It's the bit of camping I like the least, the bit of camping that will always make my preference a bothy. Or as my friend, Gisella puts it, "Camping is a B&B without ensuite."

I take the climbing track, south. Looking back along the track, running parallel with the river, I see a fellow challenger. I wait awhile in case it's MA but as the figure draws closer and the distant movement grows legs and arms I see it's male. I press on, making reasonable time and making use of the tracks. Oyster catchers and cuckoos keep me company; the sky is a promising shade of blue and the burns emit a mass of noise that can be listened to intently or phased out at will.

As I rise I find the wind cooling. I rest awhile and the male challenger catches me up. His map shows more tracks than mine and I memorise them for my walk to the Corbett of Carn an Fhrericeadain. I skip a tempting bridge, continuing on the track until I have to boulder hop the Elrick Burn. Then it's a rough, ascending walk following an ever diminishing stream until all that remains is the sound of water pouring through underground sumps. Then it's a drop to a shelter with the stream once more my loyal companion. I peer into the structure, a table crowds the room and I only guess at its purpose.

A rest then a track has me ascending to a window to the right of the Corbett. I go well past it before the track turns back and leads me to its summit. I rest, phone

in to control and, at a little after one in the afternoon, I'm pondering my descent to the Insh House at Kincaig. I could follow the ridge then drop almost on to Kincaig, drop in to Kingussie for a meal or aim for Balavil then take the old A9 route to Kincaig. This latter option becomes my plan and downfall in terms of time.

At first I get the wrong track and have to traverse east across heather and peat to pick up the right track. I shelve thoughts of doing the same again and continue on the track to Balavil. I'm slow, it's tough going and I don't make the road until half five. It's then a gruelling road walk, my feet reminding me of their blisters, the long day so far and unforgiving tarmac becomes a battle with them. I count the kilometres off against my watch, every few minutes re-estimating my time of arrival in Kincaig. Cars are forgiving; mostly I'm given a wide berth, a few people smile and wave. It's seven when I reach the village; almost the first building is a hotel serving bar meals. I've been going twelve hours, unsure just where the time has gone. I'm hot, dehydrated and tired. I fall inside, prop myself at the bar and order two pints of orange juice and lemonade. The barman becomes distracted, a food order to take to a table, a phone call to answer, a local to pass time with. Doesn't he realise the gravity of the situation! My head is tipped forward, more slumped in fact. He then pours me my two pints and like John Mills in 'Ice Cold in Alex' I savour their sight, slug one back then take my time over the second. A third follows before I feel recovered enough to order food.

I feel ill with the wait, it must be dehydration as I'm getting that 3 a.m. alcohol swimming feeling of, "Why did I do it."

When they come the three courses of food are welcome, I don't feel I could have walked another yard, I'm sore and tired. I check the map over two coffees and realise I've another mile and a half to walk. This feels cruel, the bar stops becoming the welcome end to my day and is relegated to a mere rest stop.

I shoulder the pack and plod slowly and begin to seriously wonder if this is the end of my challenge. My right foot feels really bad, it's been painful with each footstep today and another hour on it is not going to help. Cars pass me, headlights on. The cool of the evening descends and I keep checking my watch, counting off any kind of marker that I can see. The walk is in two stretches, I'm grateful for the first turn then the walk down the side of Inshriach Forest and the final welcome view of the B&B.

Sue and Ali should be there I think. Actually I'm not thinking at all for when I walk up the long drive, ring the doorbell I'm met by three concerned faces. The owners, Nick and Patsy Thompson, and Ali are all by the door. In an instant I realise my lack of thought.

"We've been worried about you. And I've just reported you as overdue to Challenge Control," says Ali.

It sinks in rapidly. I should have phoned from Kincaig and reported my recovery at the local hostelry. It's twenty five to ten.

"If I had my time again I would have phoned," I offer. I think I get away with it. Ali phones Challenge Control and reports my safe arrival. Patsy offers me the floor to collapse on to remove my boots, a room with a bath is supplied and I crawl off to refresh and recover.

With rinsed out clothes draped on radiators I pull myself between the sheets. I ache from head to toe. Pains shoot from my hips to meet those on their way up from my feet. I feel I'm out. Too tired, too blistered.

I wake in a different mood. That will to keep going and some hours of sleep just tip the balance back in my favour. It's a short day today, no rush. Ali comes in and dresses my right foot and gives me a prescription for antibiotics: just in case it gets infected.

It's our last day together today as our routes diverge. I make use of their re-supply box and post back everything I can. Spare hat, gloves, used up maps, book, radio, spare top, undies, hankies and just about everything else I can think of.

After a cooked breakfast, and a £20 note to Mr Thompson to cover the postage of our three parcels south, we are out the door. That's the easy bit because between the door and the road is a long drive with one or two rather inviting picnic tables. The three of us slump at the first and wave the Thompson's goodbye as they depart for their day.

Once every excuse to rest has been exhausted we set off. It's still painful to walk, the first few paces making me wonder 'how on earth'. But after a few minutes a stride is found and the pain becomes a less tiresome companion.

I notice a horn tucked into Sue's pack. "What's that doing?" I ask, "I thought you were telling me I was carrying excess weight."

"Phil Turner gave it to me," she replies.

"Phil gave you the horn then?" I chip in. There's silence. The world stands still while I prepare for a reaction and prepare my response for every reaction. Fortunately there's a laugh and I'm off the hook.

We make the pretty walk to Feshiebridge, taking the forest track I bargain for a rest. With Ali and Sue both being dog lovers my humorous negotiating is circumvented by a team of husky dogs, chained to individual stakes, resting as their owners, a middle aged couple, sort their mobile support unit, in the guise of a long wheel based van, and wheeled cart.

The dogs bark our entrance and are slowly calmed, one by one, by their owners and our stretched out hands. Ali and Sue embark in long conversations on dog ownership whilst I take the chance of a rest. My contribution to the intellectual conversation is restricted to the following:

"Do you compete with them?" asks Ali.

"Yes," replies the man.

"You must do well to keep up," I chip in.

Ali raises her eyebrows; it's lost on the chap.

We set off, enjoying the forestry tracks in a day with little cloud, a freshness in the air and a richness of blue in the sky. Ali and Sue become deep conversation about buying their own B&B. Even the respective labour divisions of their husbands are discussed. My only contribution is to request disposable razors in each room.

We bump into another dog owner, I realise how useful they are as I take another rest. It's hard to get going again as, after each stop, my right foot is very painful to get moving again. I'm also troubled by a multitude of smaller blisters, but the TGO is about tenacity and the human spirit. The Montrose check in, at the end of the challenge, is made up of the walking wounded.

At Drake's Bothy we pause to rest, chatting to some cyclists. The familiar voice of fellow challenger, the Reverend David Albon comes from the entrance to the

bothy. Ali and Sue abandon our conversation and leap towards him and greet him with hugs and kisses. I take my time and offer a polite handshake.

We lunch then set off for a camp pitch that David knows. This consists of some careful navigation around forestry tracks, the crossing of the Cairngorm Club Footbridge then about a one mile walk to meadow grass on the bend in a river by a clutch of Scots Pine trees.

It's a beautiful setting, the hills behind us glow in the light, the water of the river glistens, high trees gently bow and swish in the light breeze. We pitch our tents for conversation and slowly sort our things. Tomorrow the forecast is not so good for a few days, I use the phone signal to try and book in for Saturday night at the Fife Arms in Braemar. They can't confirm the booking until the next day so I leave them my parent's number, assuming I'll be out of signal range before office hours.

MA, who has had car troubles, bikes into meet us, stays and chats awhile. We then prepare our meals in the warm evening sun. David, like all blokes, thinks dehydrated takeaway is an excellent idea.

"The trouble is you've got curry every night," says Ali.

"And your point is?" I reply.

Ali then points out that I don't attach the security tabs on the central hoop of my tent.

"What happens if I don't?"

"The guy lines don't work unless you attach all the hoops."

"That's something I now have to worry about. Ignorance was bliss."

The conversation goes on in to the evening, Ali and Sue crowd into David's tent, I elect to sit in the doorway of my own.

When I eventually turn in I recall my walk of yesterday and my state of tiredness when I arrived at the B&B. What a difference a day makes.

Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> dawns overcast with drizzle, the forecast likely accurate. I say goodbye to my departing camp mates and make a slow start on the fifteen kilometres to Corrou Bothy, over the infamous Lairig Ghru.

Tumbling streams and Scots Pines accompany the gentle forestry ascent, my body copes better and the softer ground is kind to my feet. A light rain starts as the skies grey and the clouds hang low on the mountains ahead. As I rise the temperature drops, the wind picks up, the clouds descend and the rain meets me with gusting lashes. I meet others passing the other way, brief words are exchanged about the conditions offering little hope of improvement. My jacket starts to leak. I rue not having donned my fleece, now too windy to contemplate opening the pack for. The wind cuts into my chest and I have the persistent feeling of having just jumped into a swimming pool.





### **Our tents dwarfed by the trees**

The conditions are not the worst I've experienced, in my younger days I was the archetypal southerner who'd drive to Scotland and loiter into the mountains whatever the conditions. At times I've not been able to stand on summits, a crawl being all the elements would allow. Today is poor though and I have to stand and brace the wind and rain, all efforts going into staying put than moving forth. Lulls allow progress into the headwind. What a difference a day makes...

I fear hypothermia, the wind and rain are ripping the warmth from my body. I've experienced it once before, sat soaked and sorry at a Munro summit cairn. Again with no fleece the wind and rain had sucked the heat out of me. My co-ordination had gone, my reactions tired and slow and a little voice, deep from inside, slowly woke me and got me off the mountain. Today I plot and plan, I grip the map in my soaked glove and, with the aid of my altimeter, count down to the high point of 2750 feet. I keep mentally alert, dreaming of home yet wonder if home I'd remember my gratitude or miss being in Scotland.

Over the summit and after some descent a little shelter is offered. The wind is still in my face, I've passed a hail storm on the summit, but it's now bearable as the worst of the weather is funnelling over the high pass between the steep Munro slopes that guard the Lairig. I'd planned this TGO to take in areas that I'd not previously done. This includes Glen Strathfarrar, the ferry across Loch Ness, the Monadhliath and the Lairig Ghru. These conditions are awful, I'm having no fun and make a mental note to make a diary entry for October marked 'Don't apply for the TGO.'

My hands go numb under the soggy gloves, making a call of nature impossible to attend to. The descent feels long, over five kilometres until the roof of the bothy comes into view. It's welcome, the gable end having appeared in every rock face

like a mirage in the desert. I cross the bridge, admire the attached toilet block, enter into the porch then the main building.

"Hello," I say.

"Hello," come the Belfast accents.

"Are you on the TGO?"

"No, what's that?"

I explain and they mention the larger than usual number of people they've seen. They are two brothers, Stuart and Andy, snatching a week in the Highlands before Andy's return to Afghanistan. They are kitted out in army gear, my pack is draining water so I go to lift one of their packs to save it from the puddle. I can hardly lift it, the weight is unimaginable. We while away the time, the futility and hopelessness of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I hear first-hand accounts of what the politicians would rather not hear, or perhaps rather not tell you.

My day has taken six hours, it's three in the afternoon. I'm aware the bothy may be busy later so I choose to cook now. The parcel I sent home included as much food as I could possibly do without, so this is my last food of the day.

I use the nails driven into the walls to hang wet gear and, after Stuart and Andy mention they plan to camp, bag the one raised sleeping platform. I explain the bothy is likely to get busy, and Andy promptly goes out and sets up his tent. "That's the last we'll see of him," says Stuart.

Over the course of the next five hours twelve more challengers arrive into the tiny confines of the bothy.

"Trust you to take the best bed," announces Maggie Hems, greeting me for the first time in two years: her charm has not deserted her.

"I simply got here first," I explain.

Frank Row with Lesley and Lawrence Dark arrive. Frank elects to camp but after an hour reappears asking for rescue. The central pole of his tent had bent down in the wind. His companions dart out and his tent is rescued. This halts all plans Stuart had of camping, and he decides to stay in the bothy.

Fiona Bennett, Marion Mitchell, Fran Mellors and Marie Donohoe arrive. Glad to be out of the growing storm yet in good spirits. Stories of the pass are exchanged. I venture out to the loo. A wooden structure attached to the southerly gable. By now the roof of the main building is making ominous rattling sounds. A couple of times we'd all just stopped and looked at one another as a ferocious gust had blown through and tested the workmanship of the MBA.

I fight the loo door open and pull it closed behind me and drop the simple latch built into the handle. I take my seat on the loo which is a hole on a raised platform. The door blows open and smacks my bare right leg. I now begin a wrestling match, similar to a 'who owns the sock' game with a determined Labrador, with nature to close it. The wind is so strong that all I can do is hold it off my leg. Its power is equal to my power to close. It's the first time I've ever felt the need to fight off the wind while sat on the loo.

Eventually there is a pause and I manage to close the door and hold it fast with my right foot. This does not make the job in hand any easier yet my modesty and fear of being beaten to death by a wooden door, are protected.



Back in the bothy Fiona offers chocolate. I'm grateful for the fine Green and Blacks as by now I'm hungry and have no food spare. Vicky Allen her aunt, Barbara Johnson and cousin Kathy Powell arrive. Barbara is eighty, on her tenth crossing and appears in the doorway in a very sorry state. Soaked through, exhausted she's been caught out by a day that started mildly then a storm that increased by the hour until the safest course of action was to keep going to the bothy.

Fiona, Marion and Fran go to her aid. Barbara has reached an age where her reserves are low, we can all dig deep and find the energy to keep going – all Barbara's have been spent getting here. Her clothes are changed and I watch the situation with worry. Never having used my foil blanket I'd posted mine back from Kincaig. I ask if anybody has one, Leslie has a fine one and that is draped over the barely lucid Barbara as she is offered a hot drink. She vomits and I wonder if I need to walk on for help. Fiona, Marion and Fran do an excellent job.

By now I've pushed my gear to one side of the sleeping platform so I can share it. The place is booked for Barbara and she is lifted up. I take her right hand, Fran her left as we try and get warmth into her. A spare tin of Heinz tomato soup was in the bothy when I arrived, I'd nabbed it but now offer it back and that is heated. Whilst doing so I'm given the job of talking to Barbara to keep her awake.

"Where did you start?" "How many crossings have you done?" "Where will you finish?" are all met with a whisper of an answer. The soup is ready, Barbara takes sips then vomits again. Though by now her voice is stronger and her temperature is getting back to normal. We think it'll be okay.

Koos Schellevis is the last to arrive, making fourteen in all in the small room. He's dripping wet and is shown the toilet to change in. He looks nonplussed, I don't blame him. It feels a cruel gesture. He leaves his things in the porch and takes the last place by the door. Leslie gives Koos some food, and I embarrassingly ask if she has some spare. A bread roll and a piece of cake are very welcome.

We settle for sleep, many sit up as there's not enough floor space for laying out. I manage to sleep well, the platform being shorter than me means I have to bend my knees. This acts as persistent check on Barbara as each time I move I disturb her and am relieved to feel her move.

The long wild night is replaced by the dim glow of dawn through the tiny bothy window. People start to move and everybody is very polite and considerate when moving round one another. Kit had been disbursed to the four corners of the bothy and it's a major operation to reunite people with their belongings. Stuart, not on the TGO and the youngest person in the bothy, is a true gent. He'd slept sat up (a generous gesture and one I'd not made) and uses a powerful torch to guide anybody searching for a lost item. Koos, with his dry Dutch manner, says "Careful" after every trip or slip.

Barbara sits up and speaks, "Thank you everybody for saving my life. This is my tenth and last crossing."

"This is my first and last," adds her daughter, Kathy.

I get going at eight, out into the rain again, unsure if I have a room in Braemar or whether it's the campsite. I need a room to sort my gear, feet and get dry. I soon catch up with Barbara and Kathy, with Vicky just ahead. She asks me my name, in the melee of the wild night we'd not been introduced. As soon as I mention it she reels off my adventures as written up in previous accounts. I'm

touched yet slightly embarrassed that I can't recall the adventures of others as some remember mine.

Ahead on my own it's a squelch to the short double back to Luibeg Bridge. I recall my Munro exploits to this area - a fifteen hour walk that had me making a late evening bid to return to Braemar Youth Hostel before closing time. Today I'm not against the clock, just against myself. I count the distance off, passing small patches of trees before the track through the forest and the drop to Mar Lodge. I cross the well-kept grounds and emerge on the road to Braemar, sparing myself the tiresome and feet wearing tarmac between the Linn of Dee and Victoria Bridge.

I check my texts and find I have a room in Braemar. This lifts my spirits and I make good progress and bump into Jenny Wheeler as she makes her way east to Mar Lodge after a shopping trip to Braemar. It's good to see her, it's been two years. We chat for a while, exchange stories and I hear of how her new boots hospitalised her in Fort William with badly blistered toes. She praises Mar Lodge and I wish I'd called in for at least a cup of tea. I confess to having had chocolate the night before, she forgives me the one slip.

"Time to move on from the rabbit," I say as our conversation comes to an end. She catches my gaze and says "Thanks for pointing that out Steve!" as we both observe the decaying corpse that we've been standing by.

Braemar takes its usual form, checking into the hotel, showering, hanging the tent over the shower rail, milling around, chatting to people, sharing stories. My foot inspection shows swelling and tenderness and has me visiting the chemists and making use of Dr Ali's prescription.



**Baring my sole - The state of my feet**

I phone into Challenge Control and speak with Alan Hardy. He's done a usual quick crossing and is manning the desk. He is so fast I wonder if he's ever phoned in and answered it himself. I ponder what it must be like on Challenge Control. There are over three hundred people heading your way, trying to keep tabs on them all, concern at those overdue. I wonder if it feels like wartime Bomber Command, counting the planes home with worry about those that are not answering.

I have supper in the hotel with Russ Manion. He's on his tenth crossing, celebrating by wearing a kilt which, with his long white locks, sets him distinctively apart. We are the only two TGO guests in the hotel, long gone is this the throbbing hub of the challenge. A switch to the ownership of a tour company has this hotel catering for those seeing Scotland from a coach.

"You were one of the first with a Laser Lite tent," says Russ in his smooth fireside voice. Again I'm flattered by the memory of another.

"I don't fancy putting it up again."

"What's your route to the coast?" he asks.

"I don't feel up to the high ground or the road walk."

"Have you thought of Gelder Shiel?"

I had to admit my lack of knowledge so he promises to bring maps to breakfast. I spend part of the evening in the bar, catch up with sleep then rise before six to sort my kit.

Russ is true to his word and shows me the route to Gelder Shiel. It looks like a fine route out, and perhaps within my capacity of being tired to the bone and my feet which bleed at the slightest additional knock. My maps don't show the entire route so I sketch in the missing portions.

The last few days remind me that the non-competitive nature of the challenge means that people are there for you and you for them. It's an often said thing that when you have a problem it's the challenge folk who are in touch first.

Somehow the TGO is what we yearn for - a community offering freedom, support. It brings out the best in a world that can encourage prosperity by the worst of behaviours. The news on my hotel room TV reports a terrible illness sweeping the land which causes people to delude that their members of parliament are dishonourable.

I'm in no hurry to set off and instead relax in the hotel lobby. I see the standard residents, grey, pale and overweight wobbling down the stairs. They are no older than many of the challengers but their life path so different. Ali, on her first challenge, realised that the TGO folk are the people she does not see in her surgery.

I wander around, Jenny sees me and I shyly show her my purchase of chocolate. I have lunch, visit an outdoor shop to buy one extra evening meal - I'm one short to last me to the coast. The first one I see is dehydrated vegetarian curry, I elect to try something different so choose pasta in tomato sauce.



**So easy if one had a car**

It takes an hour and forty minutes to the Invecauld Bridge, a welcome turn off the A road away from traffic that sees the walker as an intruder. I navigate the forest in rising temperature. I sit, contemplate, free from all worry other than what's in my pack and the few days ahead. The skies are good again, fluffy white clouds intermingle the blue sky. Scots pines are either side of the track but with room for heather, luscious grass and light to pour through.

Out of the trees, on high ground I walk below the towering cliffs of Cnapan Nathraichean. I turn and look back and bid the Cairngorms farewell, gracious in the gentle calm - innocent to the storm of forty eight hours before.

I make good progress on the track and ahead is Lochnagar, a long mountain towering from the plains. I arrive at the bothy, a simple building on the opposite side of a track to an attractive lodge. Vicky, Kathy and Russ greet me at the door. Barbara is asleep inside. I choose a bunk, cot like making keeping ones possessions together an ease. Shawn Grund, an American and the youngest challenger, joins us. Barbara at eighty the equal oldest means we have an age range of fifty nine years below our roof. We are also joined by the spirited Anna Tertel from Poland. Both she and Shawn are making solo crossings having planned from foreign lands.

Compared with Corrou Bothy the space is luxurious. Many camp and use the bothy to cook and chat. It's a peaceful atmosphere in a beautiful setting with the sun sinking to a low glow over mountains and travelling burns. Behind the bothy is the loo, a back window allows us a view of those opening its door. To a person there's the same reaction – an eager face, pleased not to have to poo and bury in the wilds, opens the door, pauses, draws in eyebrows, drops chin and reels back. I choose to hold on and not pay a visit.

I get a fitful night of sleep; the bothy's layout offers comfort and reassurance as companions lie a few feet away. The stir starts a little before six, people dress, stoves go on and I stay put. It's a short day today, over to the next bothy, the Shielin of Mark.

I listen to conversation and Vicky's entrance, from her tent, to ensure Barbara and Kathy are making progress for the day ahead. I lay through the chat, the packing, the breakfasts as the many that have camped make use of the bothy's chairs and tables.

I'm last to rise, pull my things together, breakfast on Jacob's Cream Crackers then set forth. I'm suckered by a useful looking bridge and find myself on a rising mountain track: I return and pick up the right path, following the stream then branching across a boggy mush to reach the landrover track that heads south then east to the head of Loch Muick.

Lochnagar has her head in the clouds, and I recall a long day up there doing a succession of Munros. It starts to rain as I bump into Russ and others. They rest and I set off, Anna a little behind me. We play rest and catch up for a while before we walk together. I struggle a little with her accent, as I'm sure she does with mine. She's good fun, strong minded and, judging by the size of her pack physically very strong too.

The rain is tiresome, I feel damp on my arms and chest as we drop down the track, through a brief pine forest before reaching the visitor centre at the Spittal of Glenmuick. It is unstaffed so we make use of its dry confines and the drinks machine does a roaring trade as sixty pence after sixty pence is exchanged for

hot chocolate and soup. I'm pleased to be out of the rain and stay as long as I can, making use of the clean loo before setting off up the steep south easterly path that follows an impressive river in a deep gorge.

It rains, it drizzles and I keep my spirits up with thinking how lucky I am to still be in the challenge. I thought I was out at Kincaig but now it all appears to be coming together, even if a little damply. I catch Barbara, Kathy and Vicky. They urge me to go on but I want to stay with them. They're good company which I enjoy but also the terrain is rough, the day is short and there is security in numbers.

As we emerge from the gorge, break out on to open land it's just a mile to the bothy. Yet this is no ordinary mile, a mile can be short and mile can be long because said quickly no account is taken of the terrain. And this is tough ground, few routes are fitful through the peat hags and bogs and then there's the matter of the bothy being out of sight. Situated in a dip you almost stumble onto its roof before you see it.

Barbara is slow, her age having caught up with her over the last year and it feels a good idea to keep on a compass bearing to ensure we hit the bothy and don't waste unnecessary steps. Keeping on a bearing is impossible so Vicky and I 'box'. This involves agreeing on the bearing, one person staying rooted while the other walks forward, avoiding bogs and hags then drifting back onto the bearing. The rooted person then waves them left or right to get them perfectly aligned, then goes forward, passing the other, who is now rooted, and getting ahead is then waved onto the bearing. We do this half a dozen times until I see the bothy, just a dozen or so meters off bearing. I wave Barbara and Kathy, who have been making their own route using myself and Vicky as markers, to my left.

The bothy is welcome, yet dingy and damp in comparison to the fine one of the previous night. There are two raised platforms. Anna joins us and ponders whether to go on. The river, usually an easy crossing, is high, swollen as it gutters the water off the high ground. Vicky is concerned and surveys the bank. "There's a possible crossing a little upstream," she says while I'm trying to dry Barbara's, Kathy's and my jackets in the breeze between showers. I leave the jackets to hang on a line and wander up.

"You see that island, I think you can easily wade to it. It's then a short knee deep crossing. Though I'm worried about Barbara being able to withstand the current." I peer at the proposed route, it's not enticing, nor is a long walk north to avoid the crossing and risk finding an even worse swollen river. I decide to take the head in the sand 'worry about it in the morning view' and return to gather the jackets as the rain blows in again.

Anna is still debating whether to stay or go. I make her a platform out of an old door and two benches. This does it for her and she decides to set off with Russ, Mick and a few others. Vicky and I go to watch. Mick crosses, throws his poles back which I gather for Anna. She makes it but looks rather wet. The rain blows in again and without my jacket, I return to the bothy. Vicky returns and reports them all safely across.

The evening starts to slip by with supper and arrivals falling between those staying and those attempting the river crossing tonight. Jenny arrives and camps, so does Bernie Roberts and a few others. Maria and Stuart Scott arrive late, eat but decide to make use of the last of the light and cross.

Shawn, having climbed Lochnagar and arrived after us, makes use of the final sleeping platform. Last night, at Gelder Shiel bothy, somebody read from the bothy book "Walked in with twenty kilograms of coal to find no fireplace." That has to be the hamlet cigar moment of all bothy nights. Tonight is more typical - a fireplace but no fuel. We make attempts with some pre-cut peat but all that burns is the methylated spirits we try to light it with. It gives a few moments of hope, then, like the preverbal Christmas pudding flickers and dies. "Lovely fire," we all say with irony as we edge forward for warmth from the imaginary flame.

Kathy and Barbara share a platform, both for warmth and consideration to not use up two. Barbara having spells of quietly resting then chatting sits up in her sleeping bag, wearing her hat she touches Kathy arm through gloved hand and in a soft mesmerising voice begins to recite the 'The Cremation of Sam McGee by Robert W. Service'. We all fall silent and listen as the rain drums on the bothy roof, the wind gentle wisps and howls and the bothy feels oh so cold.

There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who moil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;  
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,  
But the queerest they ever did see  
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge  
I cremated Sam McGee.

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.  
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.  
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;  
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in hell."

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.  
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.  
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see;  
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes beneath the snow,  
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe,  
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, "I'll cash in this trip, I guess;  
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he says with a sort of moan:  
"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.  
Yet 'taint being dead—it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;  
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains."

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail;  
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he looked ghastly pale.  
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his home in Tennessee;  
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and I hurried, horror-driven,  
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of a promise given;  
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: "You may tax your brawn and brains,  
But you promised true, and it's up to you to cremate those last remains."

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code.  
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my heart how I cursed that load.  
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the huskies, round in a ring,  
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows—O God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;  
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;  
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;  
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;  
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May."

And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;  
Then "Here," said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;  
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;  
The flames just soared and the furnace roared—such a blaze you seldom see;

Then I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;  
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.  
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;  
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with grisly fear;  
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again I ventured near;  
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: "I'll just take a peep inside.  
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked;" . . . then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;  
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said: "Please close that door.  
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm—  
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who moil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;  
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,  
But the queerest they ever did see  
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge  
I cremated Sam McGee.

There's silent reflection, Barbara has lifted and lowered her voice to the rhyming flows, lifted and lowered her hand to Kathy's arm as the poem flickered between speech and narration. I'm amazed anybody could commit such a long poem to memory. The best I ever did was a playground limerick about a young lady from Leeds who swallowed a packet of Suttons finest.

Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> dawns after a night of rough sleep. It's starting to feel like the challenge is coming to an end; today will be the last of the mountains as we cross to Tarfside via Muckle Cairn and Glen Lee. First we rise and breakfast. Barbara offers me a triangle of Dairylea - welcome with my dry Jacobs crackers. Just the smallest of otherwise taken for granted things feels so different on the TGO. I shall never forget this piece of Dairylea, it's up there with the excitement of going to the theatre or seeing a great film for the first time. Everything is relative and in a society where food is taken for granted what gives us a thrill is getting bigger by the decade. Rollback to the basics and the small things become big things, they shine through with the people that come with them.

I finish packing, including the daily routine of setting my curry and rice to re-hydrate. This involves emptying the dried flakes into my cooking pot, filling it with water, covering with thin plastic, pushing the lid on, taping over the steam hole then securing in a plastic bag.

Postulations long aside there's a river to cross and seven of us to do it. I go first and, on Vicky's advice, unclip my pack so if the worst happens I can free myself from it. The first part is easy, made with ankles above water. I pause on the island, spot a submerged rock and move as quickly as possible. I scramble up the bank and find that my gaiters have held tight. I look back and realise I have to be the anchor man. I slip back down the bank, perching myself on a peat hag that's determined to reflect my every movement. One by one the crossing is made, I realise the benefit of my long legs as my suggested instructions for the last bit



are of little use. I offer a hand to those that need a little encouragement. Barbara is escorted and we manage to lift her out onto the bank.

A rest of draining boots and changing socks follows before the damp trudge up Muckle Cairn in the company of Barbara, Vicky and Jenny. Barbara tells me of her exploits, trekking in the world in her senior years. She then recites a poem her son, Frank Johnson, wrote from his home in Australia on the day of President Barack Obama's inauguration:

I sat and watched his speech today  
This man who will lead the USA  
and though I was a world away  
I had to brush a tear away.

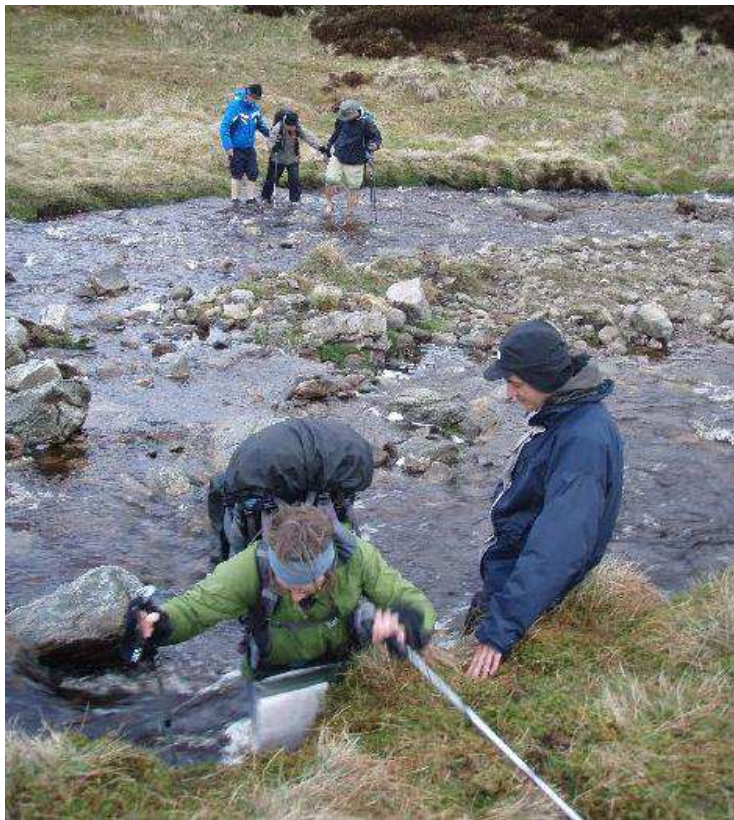
He's given all of us some hope  
Not just the usual old soft soap.  
The world is on a slippery slope.  
Is this young man our safety rope?

He called to us, the teeming throng  
to listen to his stirring song.  
Now come my people let's be strong.  
The course we take is steep and long.

Six billion people heard that man  
The sceptics wondered if he can  
affect the change in uncle Sam.  
The crowd roared YES, OH YES WE CAN!

"Your memory is amazing," I say.

"There are lots more where that came from," adds Kathy.



**River Crossing (Photo Jenny Wheeler)**



**Barbara, Jenny, Vicky and Kathy empty their boots**

I love the company and we join with Ian Shiel who, in his true gentlemanly style, trades his trekking poles with Barbara's as his are much better for the descent into Glen Lee. A river crossing has Ian as the anchor man as we cross through the funnelled rush of the waters draining from the mountains. Ian, the son of a sure footed shepherd, has us all over in no time.

It's raining and Barbara and family urge Jenny and I to walk on ahead. I feel a little unsure but the track is now good so it'll just be a slow plod into Tarfside for them. Jenny and I know that by now there's no chance of a bed at the hostel but elect to go on to spend more time enjoying the social scene. As beds can't normally be booked ahead Russ has been tasked with asking if one can be reserved for Barbara.

"I do hope mum has a bed," says Kathy.

"With Russ' charm I've no doubt they'll hold one for her," I add.



**Lunch on the porch! (Photo Jenny Wheeler)**



It's good to walk with Jenny, great company and somebody I can lose myself in conversation with and forget the foot pain. We think about a lunch stop and, given the rain, we sit in the porch of a derelict house. Glass and dead mice have to be evicted before bottoms can be parked.

"Is that your lunch?" asks Jenny as I unwrap a single piece of flapjack.

"I've reduced my rations to keep the weight down."

Jenny takes pity on me and I'm offered pita bread and peanut butter which is delicious.

We reach Tarfside, in what feels like a longer and wetter walk than five years ago, and pitch our tents on the village green. Retiring to St Drostan's Hostel we drink the tea and eat the cake supplied by Ann, Janet and Carole. As ever the ladies do a sterling effort amidst the chaos of people arriving and what must be a pungent whiff of unwashed walkers.

Given the number of tents about a third of the challenge are here this evening. You spot a face, think hard and recall you spent a few hours walking with them just a week ago. Others call hello and you stop, think and remember when you last walked. Val Hadden and Mary Brook are all smiles and it takes me a second to remember that I walked with them into Tarfside on this very day of the challenge five years ago. Old acquaintances becoming renewed acquaintances trigger feelings of guilt as I feel I'm abandoning the people I've walked with over the last day or so. Alas I worry needlessly for everybody is deep in conversation with others. Tales of wild nights, wild drinking and the bizarre and peculiar one meets along the way. News of our wild night in Corroul bothy has travelled far and wide and is being restored brick by brick as so many challengers pass through the natural funnel of Tarfside. With most of us there we become legends and are referred to as 'The Corroul Fourteen'. We discuss T shirts and reunion events.



**Tarfside Meal (photo Jenny Wheeler)**

It feels good, a buzz, and we all eat at the hostel before drifting back to our tents and in Barbara and Kathy's case a welcome room in the hostel. Jenny and I have pitched next to one another. A sorry looking Sue and Ali are a few yards away, Ali's knee is playing up and Sue's dog, sick back at home, is causing her concern. I try for conversation but realise the timing is not right and slink back to my tent.



### **Tarfside Tents**

Tent sorting and chatting follows, Jenny goes off to the loo and a few minutes later I see she is being helped back to her tent.

"Steve, guess what I've done," she says. Her face looks pained and distressed. "What?" I ask, concerned.

"The wooden ramp out of the ladies loo was very slippery. I went flying and landed heavily on my back." This could be serious for Jenny. She has osteoporosis, three slipped discs and, due to associated nerve damage, can't lift her right foot. She drives a modified car, is amazing to be on the challenge and to not allow adversity to get in the way of the life she wants to lead. But if a slippery ramp out of ladies loo has ruined her crossing this would be unjust in the extreme.

Myself and the chap, John, that's helped her are very concerned, she also has a badly bruised and cut arm. We help her to her tent where she slowly sorts herself out. I spy in the distance a council grit bin, borrow Jenny's bright orange trowel and set forth to help prevent another accident.

I'm waiting for the calls of, "You don't need a trowel for these loos, Steve" but I'm spared it. About a dozen trips between the grit bin and the ramp (there is no suitable bucket to hand) has it more or less safe. I return and see Jenny is very uncomfortable but she says she's taken some strong pain killers that she is waiting to take effect. I ask if she needs to visit hospital but she assures me that rest is better. Having been hospitalised once already on this challenge I'm sure she's reluctant to add to her visits. I promise not to wear ear plugs and she promises to shout and wake me if she needs help in the night. She gives me an energy bar which I enjoy in my sleeping bag.

Sleep comes slowly, a distant car sound system is blaring away as local youths share their pleasure with all who'd rather sleep. Though I count my blessings, it's not raining. I eventually drift off and come to a little before six. The tent feels damp and I struggle to get myself moving. I look at the cream crackers for breakfast then look at my cooking pot. As I ate at the hostel the curry and rice, that I set to re-hydrate twenty four hours ago, is still there. It'd be a waste – wouldn't it? I put on the stove and likely become the first man to ever purchase a curry in Marlborough and have it for breakfast in Scotland.

Jenny and I set off a little before seven thirty, deep in conversation we miss each bridge that crosses to the pretty tracks on the south side of the River North Esk. Instead we remain on the road realising, each time too late, that we've overshot a crossing point. Cars, buses and lorries give us space until a large Vauxhall comes round a bend towards us. Tilted at speed he honks and shakes a wild fist gesticulating us to walk single file. We return to our peace and let him speed on to wherever his life is taking him.

Jenny shows me how she manages her right foot. Unable to lift it she lifts her leg, to clear the foot of the ground, and manages to drop it down with an almost imperceptible limp.

"How is the back?" I ask.

"I used a hand mirror this morning to check the bruise on my coccyx."

"That'll be a rear view mirror," I quip then realising I need to not be so flippant ask, "What was it like?"

"Quite large."

Dead rabbits litter the road. It's as if they've been dropping out of the trees. Not one or two but an exceptional crop interspersed with the occasional bird (which could be excused for dropping out of its tree). They are in varying states of decay and we ponder the quantity.

We pass Millden Lodge and, with the realisation of another missed bridge, we turn back.

"Don't let me hold you up, Steve. You can go on and I'll meet you at Edzell."

"No, it's okay," I reply.

"I worry I am too slow for you."

I think 'perfect pace, keep it up' and we venture back and walk into the grounds of Millden Lodge, cross the bridge only to find it gated and locked on the south shore. Covering the same ground again we try for the bridge just north of Haughend.

"I think we've missed it again," I say.

"Let's try this track," replies Jenny. It leads towards the river then loops back.

Jenny gives me a GPS reading and we've overshot. We climb down to the banks of the river and make a determined northward charge along the riverbank. After ducking overhanging growth, circumventing undergrowth, twists and turns we see the bridge. Slightly dilapidated yet serviceable enough for our purposes we emerge amongst a strange array of wooden barrack like buildings. We are now on the beaten track and in celebration rest awhile whereupon we have a pre-Edzell lunch break which involves me eating more of Jenny's pita and peanut butter.

We take more care over navigation and manage the tracks that cut the corner off the road into Edzell. Proud of ourselves we indulge in a game of inventing acronyms for the three letters of each car number plate that passes us. We award bonus points if they are relevant to the TGO.

"TSW."

"Tired Scottish Walkers."

"BSF"

"Blistered Sore Feet."

"JSB."

"Jenny's Sore Back."

In Edzell we stop at a familiar café where I lose all sight of healthy eating and order deep fried mushrooms followed by a kaleidoscope of ice cream. Sat opposite Jenny, a vegan I worry about what the deep fried mushrooms will do to me. As for the ice cream – that blue sauce was delicious.

Once lunched we shop for evening food, make use of the Post Office where upon a lapse of concentration has me leaving my bank card in the machine. Fortunately the next customer spots it and with Jenny still in the shop it is returned to me.

Outside an elderly gent, accompanied by his wife, arrives on his bright red three wheeled tricycle.

"That's a fine machine," I say.

"I'm unstable on two wheels now, so I bought this," he replies.

"Great basket too," says Jenny admiring the white framed basket that I secretly wonder if his wife rides in.

We mill about for some time, chat with Kahy, Barbara, Vicky, Bernie and many more. We then set off down the track between the Post Office and the garage. We'd missed Mrs Trike setting off as part way down the dropping track we come across her trying to push the bike downhill. It's tilted towards her, riding on just the front and one of the back wheels. She's having trouble controlling it.

"Do you want a hand?" I ask.

"Oh would you, I'm having some trouble with it."

Jenny takes her in conversation as I take over steering the fine, bright red machine. At the bottom is a T junction in the path.

"Where do you live?" asks Jenny.

The lady points to the other side of the river and for the first time I observe her closely and realise she is very elderly, likely in her nineties.

"Did your husband come across the footbridge?" asks Jenny.

"No, we came round on the road."

We wheel the trike to the left then onto the footbridge. It barely fits, just a half inch either side. By now Jenny and I are pondering the wisdom of this.

"I think we should turn back," says the lady. We do so and back on the path a long line of challengers pass us and I'm heavily ribbed for my new mode of transport.

"There's an old chap in the High Street looking for his trike," says one.

Once the crowd has past it's the three of us left.

"I think I should wait for my husband here."

"Do you normally bring the trike this way?" asks Jenny.

"No, we don't," she replies.

"Let's go back to the High Street and find your husband," I suggest.

"Yes, yes I think we should do that now."

We set off, slowly with Jenny holding the old lady in conversation. At the foot of the slope the elderly gent appears. I don't know if he's more pleased to see his wife or his trike.

"Thank you," he says, "I'll push it on from here." I look at him, look at the trike, look at Jenny. She kits him out with two walking poles and I push the trike. It's

slow and I need them to be able to keep me in sight as I fear they will worry that I'm making off with it.

We make it back to the High Street amidst a conversation of her explaining her reasons and him, unable to fully appreciate his wife's confusion, saying what trouble she's put this nice young man to. At the top I swap the trike for Jenny's poles and he takes my hand to shake.

"God bless you, you've booked your place in heaven." I look into his elderly eyes, observe his height and build and see my grandfather who we lost last year, just a month before his ninety third birthday. He even takes my hand as Grampy did, shaking my right, covering it with his left.

I return to Jenny and we are pleased for our good deed of the day.

"He must have cycled that in on the main road," says Jenny.

I ponder this, "yes, he must."

"I'm full of admiration for him to want to keep going but it must be dangerous," she replies.

"You sense they shouldn't be out on their own, especially in charge of a tricycle."

We make for our route and I explain that we are possibly about to pass the bull with the unfeasibly large testicles.

"Believe it or not these are the biggest pair of nuts you'll see on the TGO," I explain. Alas he's not there, his field empty and my chance of further schoolboy humour in tatters.

We pass through farmland tracks, avoiding the straight road to our left with its speeding traffic. Beyond is the disused airfield with associated hangars. Then there's the bull, quietly munching in the field. I point him out with glee. Actually I point out nothing more than his pendulous assets but Jenny gets the idea.

We decide that the farm tracks are getting too complicated, the ground too boggy and head towards the road. Bert Hendriske is on hand to drive away nosey bullocks and help open heavy gates. On the road we are joined by Shawn and we wonder on his take of our number plate game.

"HTS."

"Helping The Seniors."

"NAC."

"Nearly across."

Shawn is quietly spoken, and there are gaps in conversation as we play our game interspersed by chat about his university life and plans. Then quietly he joins with our game, coming up with acronyms to while away the monotony of the road.





**The Crimewatch CCTV footage showing me having just mugged an old man for his tricycle**

At the North Water Bridge campsite the volume of tents grows in the evening sun. I count over fifty, Shawn had counted sixty seven at Tarfside. There's the chance for wandering and I'm called to two groups to explain the story of the red tricycle. Back at the tents Kathy joins us for a chat, then Alison and Sue.

It's sunny as I wake, not able to believe this is the last day of the challenge and tonight will be a hotel room and the celebratory meal. Tomorrow will be the train ride home and home is where somehow survival feels a little harder. More chores to distract, phones to shrill, emails to answer, bills to pay and more than one pot to wash each night. And perhaps Jenny to miss?

I hear Jenny moving, call out and we have an out of sight conversation. I head for the washroom and make use of the hot water. Dave Skipp is using the sink next to me.

"Steve, mate I'll tell you. People actually use this campsite for their holiday, right next to the A90. I don't know what lives they live but if this is a holiday they must live by the M8 in Glasgow."

Packed up we set off for St Cyrus following the familiar road walk to the foot of Hill of Morpie (or Hill of Morphine as I indulge a fantasy) where we rest.

"Thanks, Jenny," I say as she hands me chocolate and a banana.  
"Thank you for seeing me to the end."

The mutual appreciation society lingers (especially as the chocolate was bought specially) until I spot a discarded Kit Kat mug behind a post. I pick it up and clean it off. It's a fine red one.

"We've had a break and a Kit Kat Mug! I've got lots of chocolate mugs," I say, "but not this one." I wrap it well in my pack and we set off for the final three miles.

"How are the back and foot," I ask.

"Fine and you?"

"My foot is still killing me but otherwise okay," I reply. I think of another 'Ice Cold in Alex' analogy where the truck breaks a spring on the final ride in.

We get to the top of the cliffs and survey the pure sand stretching between the land and the blue, blue sea. We can see south towards the lighthouse and on to Montrose. It feels a long way since Strathcarron.



**St Cyrus**

We make our way to the beach, Shawn is with us now and Jenny paddles her feet. I survey my options and decide to do it. I strip to my undies, run into the sea, hesitate, hesitate again then duck under for a second or so. A couple of strokes to say, 'I swam in the sea' and I'm running back up the beach.



**Jenny and me propping one another up**

We shake hands with Shawn and both congratulate him wholeheartedly on his achievement. "Shawn you chanced by the TGO on the internet, applied, planned your own route, kit and transport. Arranged for time off university and came and did it unsupported. And you are only twenty one. That's incredible."

He smiles, shyly then says, "I'll regret it if I don't." Strips to his underwear and runs into the sea.



**Sun, sand sea and Shawn (photo Jenny Wheeler)**

We walk back up the long cliff path, a car passes.

"SBY, Shawn, Shawn..." I say reading off the letters of a car that passes us.

"Shawn's Bloody Young," says Jenny and we get a broad smile from our North American colleague.

We eat at a café then head for the bus. We just miss one then realise it's an hour wait to the next. This is fortunate as Shawn has left his wallet and passport in the café. I order a taxi. A big red one arrives with room enough in the boot for a big red tricycle, if such a thing were being carried (the rumour going round is I have it stashed and am cycling to the coast).

We arrive at the signing out spot, The Park hotel, Montrose. We prepare for the ribbing of arriving by taxi but we are spared. We make our way to the Kinnaird Room (up a flight of steps it feels just that way) and receive our handshakes from Roger Smith and Alan Hardy, our badges, certificates, a bright red celebratory T shirt and a small bottle of malt whisky (which lasts as long it takes to bump into Croydon).

So I'm happy (far from seeing red despite the T shirt, taxi, tricycle and Kit Kat mug), relaxed but just a little sorry this is the end. Jenny is booked on tomorrow's meal so we say our goodbyes for now. She's been great company and we swap contact details and promise to 'Meet soon'.

I wash and clean-up in my room then mingle around Montrose and its proliferation of charity shops. Back at The Park I feel guilt with dividing my time, not wishing to appear rude when needing to flit from one to another. There are so many familiar faces to talk to yet so many that you also never meet on the trail. As if people swing from route to route on mass.

The time for the dinner comes and I sit with Shawn, Barbara, Vicky, Kathy and Maggie. I look around the room. There is so much noise, so much contrast and a sea of red shirts with the occasional sunburned face to match. I watch people leaning forth, turning to their left, their right for conversation. Some wander between tables, catching up and taking photos with people that mean so much. Shawn with his backward baseball cap and black body warmer makes the TGO commemorative shirt look cool. For some reason I feel this is my most memorable crossing, the one I sense I'll miss the most, the extremes of weather offered a variety and despite my own hardships I feel I've enjoyed this crossing the most. As this is my fifth crossing I must have past the one thousand mile point somewhere on the trail.

I await my vegetarian option and, in true Park Hotel tradition, I'm left waiting and waiting. A bowl of pasta arrives, just a bowl no salad or extras. It looks like five minute pasta with a cheap sauce. Before I can say "you're having a laugh" the waiter disappears knowing he's having a laugh. I tuck in to what I could throw together in five minutes.

"I feel I've been done, this must account for about ten pounds of the cost of the meal." Everybody nods in agreement. As I finish it pudding arrives, sat at the end of the table I slip the bowl of profiteroles onto my lap and cover it with my napkin. As a waitress does the other side I catch her eye and say, "I did not get one."

"Did you not?" she asks.

I shake my head and she pops a bowl in front of me. I eat it down then, with deft hand, switch the second bowl up.

"Steve," says Vicky, "you've just shot up in my estimation."

Sat next to Barbara I ask, "Is this still your last?"

"Yes," she replies with a definite voice, "I'm too slow to do it again."

"Will you do it again?" she asks me. I nod and make a mental note not to make a mental note to make a diary entry for October marked 'Don't apply for the TGO.' The TGO community is too good to miss.

I look over to Kathy, "Your first and last still?"

"At Corroul I said so, but I think Vicky would like me to do it with her now Mum is retiring."

I smile. "And there's this fantastic comradeship," she adds. And we look around the room.

Footnote.

Back home Jenny and I keep in contact, and we arrange a date to meet up. She then cancels, cold feet I surmise. I think I *am* destined to be a solo walker!

## July

After completing the May TGO, and having feet full of blisters to prove it, I decide to press all the easy buttons for a July trip to Scotland. A rather nice cottage, in Blairgowrie, takes my eye and I book it for two weeks. The sleeper up on the



night of Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> of July is added to the shopping list of ease coupled with a hire car, to be collected in Perth.

At 1900 on the Friday evening of my departure I'm sat at my home computer checking that the 1917 from Westbury will leave on time. It duly does and I gather heavy rucksack and holdall for the stagger to Bedwyn station. I feel a sense of pride as the HST pulls into our little station. We'd campaigned for connections to and from the west and, although going east, I was pleased to board the service from Westbury.

It's a hot, sticky evening and, with restricted luggage space, I just wear a T shirt and jeans, taking the risk that my one packed fleece will see me through two weeks.

Paddington brings a transfer onto the Hammersmith and City line where a series of delays has me arriving at Euston with only two hours to spare; such is my caution at not wasting expensive onward tickets. I kill the time with some not so healthy food before a very tired, hot and weary person drags himself the full length of the sleeper service to find his bunk. Whereupon he promptly wakes up and spends the seven hour journey snatching no more than an odd hour of sleep.

The romantic idea of breakfast in the early morning of Glasgow is soon relegated to a marmite panini in a Costa Coffee shop. This is all that is hot and vegetarian, and you either love it or hate it and I'm on the hate side of the fence. Needs must.

The onward trip to Perth goes smoothly with a collection by Enterprise Rent-A-Car at the station. After being whisked to their offices things begin to not go so smoothly.

"So that's £231 plus £150 deposit, Mr Smith which gives you the two weeks and basic insurance."

I checked my booking form then asked, "But it says here it includes collision damage waiver."

"Yes, that's right a basic insurance."

"I'm a bit worried by what you mean by basic."

"Well there is the £500 excess."

"It doesn't say anything about that here."

"If you'd read the small print online you'd have seen it."

"I did read the small print," I add (I am that sad).

"Here it is under the optional extra link," he adds.

"But I just read that it included CDW. I did not think to look under any optional extras."

"Well," he drew that word out, "if you had you'd have seen that there was an excess for £500 which you could bring down to zero by paying an additional £10 per day or £100 for a week."

He's truly having a laugh, I think. What's the difference between a collision damage waiver and an excess? Clearly £10 a day. My mind then heaves with the obvious thoughts that it should tell you under the primary text that there is an excess, not under optional extras. And then there's this matter of £10 a day for a week (i.e. £70) can be reduced by paying £100 instead. But before I could respond he adds, "But for a two week hire we keep it at £100."

"But it does not state there is an excess here."

"Where?" he asked.

"Here on the contract."

"That's not the contract, that's just the booking confirmation. This is the contract," he said tearing off a form he'd just printed which would require a magnifying glass to go through the detail. "I'll tell you this sir," he adds, "nobody has ever raised this before."

There was no point arguing, he was not going to budge and I was not going to insure £500 for a £100 premium. A 20% of value insurance for a two-week period is a lousy rate in anybody's money. We then go and inspect the car where he marks up any pre-existing damage on a sheet. There were just a couple of scuffs to mark down before I inspect the front valence.

"Are all these marks damage?" I ask.  
"No, they are all just dead insects."

I stopped myself from adding, "I see you've washed it then." I can't be bothered, even with cleverly put sarcasm.

"This is how you start it," he says, showing me.  
"Oh, I put the key in that little slot."  
"That's right," he adds.

Two miles down the road I suspect that showing me how to adjust the door mirrors would have been more useful. I eventually spy the button and make it to Blairgowrie. Two hours early I take the chance to wander round and have an early lunch. It takes me awhile to sort out the geography, find a supermarket and a café for lunch.

Again being a vegetarian in Scotland does not work so well. "I'll have the vegetable lasagne," I say, selecting the only choice that is free of meat. She gives a grunt and I add, spying the option of French fries or baked potato, "with baked potato."

I also order a decaffeinated coffee, which comes quickly enough to leave me to believe it is instant. It takes a few minutes before another girl brings a plate with a microwaved jacket potato and a few bits of relish. All it is missing is a baked potato and the vegetable lasagne.

"Is that right?" she asks, having caught my stare of disbelief. It takes me a few seconds to think straight, "Well I ordered vegetable lasagne with baked potato."

She calls over the girl that took my order.

"The customer says he ordered vegetable lasagne but you only put baked potato on the order."

"Oh, did you want vegetable lasagne then?" she asks.  
"Yes."

"We've no got any," adds the serving girl.

"So where is this on the menu?" I ask as I gesticulate towards the plate and the menu.

"It's that there," a deftly finger directs me.

"It says it comes with filling," I add.

"You did not say you wanted a filling when you ordered," says the girl who took my order. I'm about at the 'God give me strength' stage but simply add, "but that was a baked potato with a lasagne where one would not expect a filling."

"Which filling would you like," adds the serving girl seeing a way through this.  
"I'll have cheese."

It was whisked off and came back with cheese. I did not follow the path of a baked potato is not a microwaved potato (it's a jacket potato) nor did I rise to the temptation that this particular tuber would have fitted in any oven ever created – and that includes those in a dolls house. There is a phrase called 'choose your battles'.

Lunch taken, shopping done, wandering around complete I pull into the drive of the holiday cottage proprietors; their house and cottage sharing the same grounds. I'm hoping all will be okay. Two weeks ago I received a letter from the agents explaining there would be a £20 deposit for 'good housekeeping'. This worried me as, having dealt with many a dodgy landlord in my time, to what I'd have to do to see the money back. I phoned and they'd contacted the landlord and he sent a message back via them that they had no intention of keeping my £20 if I kept the place tidy but as I was worried they'd waive it. So I arrive hoping I'd not got off on the wrong foot. I need not have worried, the Major is a charming chap and spends time showing me round the magnificent coach house, explaining where everything is and how they'd restored it.

In the utility room he stops by the fire extinguisher and fire blanket and shows me in detail.

"Sorry, I have to do this. Health and safety you know."

"That's okay," I say and add, "I've managed to get myself out of the four burning buildings I've been in." There's a pause as I suspect he wonders whether the £20 deposit would have been a bit on the low side anyhow.



**The Coach House**

I unpack, shower and have another walk around. I love the wooden floors, the open plan and the minimalist effect. After my escapades with cars and cafes I feel relaxed, too tired to hit the hills but just right to relax and enjoy. I settle down to write this account and become engrossed.

I'm shaken back to the present with a small bird traversing my eyes and coming to rest against the window to my right. It's flown in through the upper half of the stable door and is now convinced that a solid, un-openable piece of glass is the best way out. It goes through periods of calm, its tiny breath steaming the window then turns, looks at me and flutters its wings in desperation.

I'd often wondered if birds pee. One of those little queries on existence that one is either too embarrassed, or not interested enough, to ask. The bird shows me that they do, and also a good display of what they are more noted for.

Until two weeks ago I'd never handled a bird before (oh please, you know what I mean!) and now it's three in a fortnight. The first two were on June 20<sup>th</sup> when I visited my friend, Rona in Hove. Our normal pattern is coffee, chat, lunch, DVD, more chat, snack then I get the train home.



But on this visit our day started a little differently as Rona had booked a flat viewing. Sat in her garden, waiting for the time to set off, over a coffee she casually mentioned that last night there was a crash and since she has heard noises from behind the fireplace.

After coffee I took a look at the fireplace and found a metal panel which I pushed open, peered in to see a baby seagull peering back. With the 1100 flat viewing appointment looming we passed it sustenance in the form of moist bread. We rushed out and back, skipped lunch and phoned the RSPCA who said they would be quite a while. We phoned some other numbers and eventually are recommended Roger's Wildlife Rescue in Woodingdean. Rona phones him and I hear one half of the conversation.

"Oh you can't come out, but you will take it."

"I've never handled a bird before."

"No, I don't think we could get it back up on the roof. It's a tall three storey Victorian building and I'm in the basement flat."

By this time I'm viewing the rest of the fireplace and, with a few screwdrivers of varying size, I managed to get the thing detached from the wall. Lifting it away exposed Michael (the recently christened baby seagull) sat nonchalantly looking at us. He'd won my heart, he'd been calling quietly back to his parents with cries of, "Where in the hell are you."

We found a box, made air holes and Rona handed me gloves which gave me the hint that it was to be my job. I started to dither, "Best be quick," said Rona. So I was, it flapped, squawked but I managed to get it in the box. It was then a case of 'fireplace refit' or drive to Woodingdean? We chose the latter, animal welfare at heart.

We got very lost and the long drive distressed Michael. We arrived at Roger's to find a garage and workshop crammed with rescue animals in all states of rearing and recovery - he uses his mother's garage for overflow.

There's a discrete sign saying it costs on average £45 to raise a baby bird to a state it can be released into the wild. I only had £30 on me, but he was delighted with the donation.

Michael initially had an 'I wasn't expecting this, weren't you driving me to my doom?' kind of look as he stood on the edge of a large pen with about thirty other baby seagulls milling around (mainly having fallen off roofs). He dropped down and stood in a corner but then, like a shy toddler, moved forth and was soon making friends and sharing their food.

So it was a virtuous Rona and Steve who, having had a late lunch, made their way back to Hove. As we were going through Rona's door, I made a quip. "It'd be funny if another has come down the chimney."

In her lounge, things looked a little different. We can't quite explain it. Rona peered behind the fireplace which, unattached, was standing in front of the hole. "Steve, you know that joke you made."

I look at her face; I know she's not joking. I went for a peer, and there is Frank, Michael's brother - if you are wondering about the naming think of, "Some mothers do ave em" - giving us a, "And what are you going to do about me?" kind of look, "I want my broth!" Rona and I are not very demonstrative people but we hug laughing.

We'd left the box behind at Roger's rescue place, so this time it's a cat basket. Frank barely complained when I caught him and off we set to Woodingdean, again. We stopped by a cash point so I could get money to fully pay for both their board and lodging (by this time Roger's work, and shoestring operation, had touched us deeply).

Walking up his garden path Roger appeared to greet us. Rona said, "You'll never guess."

"You know I had a funny feeling about this one," replied Roger.

He then informed us seagulls normally hatch three chicks. So it was a daunted pair of wildlife rescuers that re-entered her lounge. Thankfully no extra bird but what we then noticed was that when Frank pulled 1G coming down the chimney he displaced rather a lot of soot - and with the fireplace removed the lounge was covered.

Now, back to this wee chap in Blairgowrie, each time I make a move he flutters wildly then stops and turns his head towards me.

"This isn't easy for either of us," I say.

I get a pair of thermal inner gloves and just manage to catch him. Not positive enough he escapes half way between window and door. Of course it flies back to the window, the open door possessing no interest whatsoever. It lands on the little opening section at the top, which duly does not open because it is locked and no sign of keys. I move everything out of the way, make another grab which only results in him dropping to the original resting place. With confidence rising I make a firmer grab, surround his body with gloved hands, walk him to the door and launch him into the air. He takes to it and, with a little chirrup, flies high and away.

I then wander up to the co-op, a fair hike but the only supermarket around. Blairgowrie is a plethora of small shops serving every need. I'm glad that there is no Tesco to rip the heart out of this micro-economy.

I wake after 0800 on Sunday July 5<sup>th</sup>, pleased to have got some rest. A leisurely breakfast and kit preparation precedes the drive to the road east of Cray and the start of the ascent of the Graham, Mount Blair. This is a mountain of many shoulders and I've chosen to attempt the gentlest. Overshooting the starting place I turn around, drive back and pull off the single-track road just on the Angus side of the Perthshire border.

Out of the car I enjoy the sun from a sky of mixed blue and cloud. I take a closer look at the hire car. A Toyota Airus, an enjoyable little machine and just a few months old. Then I see that the sun picks out a series of dents in the roof. I did not spot them when I picked it up and, having only done thirty miles so far and left it parked in Blairgowrie, all thoughts of 'conspiracy' fly through my mind as my mind races to the worst possible scenario and the loss of £500.

It's a disillusioned walker that takes to the hills. Choosing a hire car for ease is now causing me stress. I make good progress on a grass track, through the knee high grass, with high voltage markers at varying points. The sky is now a mottled picture of the whites and greys of high cloud. Duchray Hill, to the north, looks tempting for the afternoon but I continue to the top, resting every few minutes on its manageable slopes. The summit, which takes less than an hour and a half, is made up of a series of transmitters (which explains the high voltage cables), a

trig point and a well constructed circular windbreak which serves additionally as a memorial and a semi-decayed panoramic board pointing out the more significant peaks in the area.



**Mount Blair (from Duchray Hill)**

I return to the car and decide to give Duchray Hill a miss. It'd take me about three hours to bag and the voices of my friends Rona and Kerry play on my mind. "Go careful Steve, you've been overdoing it." It rains on the drive back to Blairgowrie, making the decision feel even more right.

The evening is warmer and I stroll into the centre of Blairgowrie and sit in the central park area. I read, enjoy the sun and listen to a distant pub band. On rising I turn to head back to the cottage, that's when I see it. Blazoned in bright letters, standing proud of the buildings before it is Tesco. I vow not to go there and to continue to use the co-op instead.

Monday July 6<sup>th</sup> enters with the hint of sun and the hint of rain. I check the forecast and it's expected that the day will be a mixture of thunder, rain and sunny spells. I set out on the same road as yesterday, passing my starting place before taking the dead end road to Auchavan with the view to climbing the Corbett of Monamenach and the Graham of Duchray Hill (also known as Mealna Letter).

With just a thin T shirt, to protect my upper body, I set off at around 1010 on the easy westerly track which gently lifts me, via the course of a stream that drains a high plateau, to the south westerly slopes of Monamenach. Resting, and taking a compass bearing, I realise that the lack of response from my Silva compass is due to all the fluid having disappeared from the bezel housing. This is the second compass, of the same make, that this has happened to inside a year. I could just be unlucky but I make a mental note to see if others have had the same problem.

Fortunately I have an old Eurohike spare in my pack. It's not that great, very sensitive which is proving the complete antitheses of its travelling companion.

Bearing set, with the hills alive with birdsong, I climb the northeast slopes, pausing only to don waterproof top, as the edge of a storm, from clouds lowering themselves on to the hill of the south, clips me in its wake.

The rounded, smooth summit is shy to the storm's presence, only the wind picking up over the top, and my altimeter, tell me I am almost there. With the summit bagged I sit and admire the rough, rocky and sunny slopes of Creag Leacach to the northwest. To the south is Mount Blair, looking menacing with a storm over its head and lightening flashing down, with the following rumble timed to confirm the distance with my map.



**Mount Blair and Duchray Hill from Monamenach**

To take in Duchray Hill requires a three kilometre southwesterly descent then a sharp pull up the final kilometre to its summit. I set off, in two minds as the clouds look menacing. I alert a mountain hare that bounces off in to the distance. A herd of red deer are gathered in the basin shelter of the hills: it's around this time that they give birth.

As I descend the clouds blacken, the light drops and the time between lightening and thunder claps reduce. Kerry and Rona's words revisit me; sometimes you need your friends to be wise for you. The exposure of Duchray Hill is not worth the risk so I head east to pick up the ascent track. It proves the right decision as the rain closes in and ensnares me as its victim. By the time I reach the car it's a heavy downpour. The radio weather forecast and persistent crackle of each lightening strike reaffirms the correct decision was made.

Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> is a non-hill day and instead I meet with Val Hadden, a TGO friend, and her partner, Merv Savage. They are lovely people to spend the day with, and we do a circuit from east of Dunkeld to Loch Ordie and back. Her daughter's dog, Ollie a friendly bull terrier, accompanies us and is great fun – even if a little dim at times.

Merv quickly gets used to my little quips while Val plays catch up as he raises eyebrows. And the kid in me is never too far from the surface. At Loch Ordie Val clips Ollie on to his lead and holds onto him. I pick up a stick, get Ollie's attention and throw it into the loch. He pulls while Val hangs on.

It's a good walk round in a day of high cloud. Val and Merv, both retired, are about to set off on a bicycle ride to Australia. I think today in no way counted as a warm up.

We part in Dunkeld and, after a visit to a coffee shop, I head back to Blairgowrie. I aim to pull up outside the Co-op but the few bays are taken and the rest is double yellow lines. I try Tesco, the parking is free and plentiful. They get you!

Wednesday July 8<sup>th</sup> and it's time to finally bag the Graham of Duchray Hill (also known as Mealna Letter). It feels like a daily commute via the A93 and B951, though I'm a late starter today, as I'm not walking until 1030.

I walk through a boggy field of buttercups, flowering thistles, moss hovering over squelchy ground and tall grasses thriving in the wet conditions. I pick my route carefully, keeping in line with the wall and fence that edges the forest plantation.

The climb proper takes a varied route, avoiding the undulations of the nose of the hill. I meet the corner of the forest and, after donning my waterproof top, can follow the wall, and its offset fence, to the summit of Duchray Hill. The top appears to be right on the line of the fence, though I spy a cairn the other side. This requires a quick step from Angus to Perthshire to ensure that the mountain is claimed.

I stand and survey my walks of Sunday and Monday before heading downhill, crossing the bog and the return to the car at 1220.

Thursday July 9<sup>th</sup> and I'm taking it easy again. A leisurely start and breakfast rules out an attempt on the Corbett of Ben Vrackie and instead Blath Bhalg, a Graham a little to its southwest, catches my eye. Travelling the almost single track A924, and using a telephone box as a navigation aid, I park at Dalnacarn and am walking at 0950.

I follow a good grassy track and, avoiding the temptation to follow spur paths, which, through experience tend to soon peter out, reach a small wooden hut with a tin roof, red with rust. It's in dilapidated condition, windows almost out of their frames, cladding either having fallen off or tempting a prod. I try the door, it opens and the inside is good in comparison. A long bench, with accompany seats, fills the length. Candles on the table and in the windows hint at some purpose.

I shut it up and take a bearing to the summit of Blath Bhalg. The route is through heather, which I find hard going. It's slog, rest, slog with tempting grass sections being too boggy to bother with. I make the summit line and, crossing a fence, pick off a minor bump before the summit proper. The views are extensive, Schiehallion to the west, Mount Blair and its transmitter to the northeast. To the north the mountains are in rain, heavy in comparison to the very light precipitation of my ascent. Hints of rainbows hang in the glen below.





**View from Blath Bhalg**

The roof of the hut lends a handy guide as I descend through the heather. From its waypoint I pick up the track and arrive back at the car within three hours of my start.

Friday July 10<sup>th</sup> dawns bright and sunny which has me soon out of bed, packed and driving to Kirriemuir, then minor roads to Glen Prosen, north west of the town. I have my eye on the Grahams of Cat Law and Corwharn. Stopping to check the map, and realising an error means I have to go to a spot called Spott and backtrack the car down the other side of the glen, I note how close I am to Glen Clova. Glen Clova has featured in two of my TGO crossings of Scotland and this is typical of me in not being able to logically connect regions.

I drive to Easter Lednathie and wonder how this place is connected with a Christian festival. Then I notice Wester Lednathie, where I drive to and park, and suppose these are geographical and not religious names.

I'm walking at 0900, initially through a farmyard where, as always, dogs bark my entrance but not a soul is in sight yet I feel eyes are upon me.

I follow the track then cut up through open fields to meet the track that rises to Monthrey. It is hot and I wear a thin top and a baseball cap to keep cool. I slowly reach a digger working on the high ground: cutting a track to the summit of Cat Law. Unsure why, and fearing I might be enjoying this mountain pre-wind farm, I bypass it and follow a faint track to a gate where a conveniently placed stone allows an easy passage into an enclosure containing trig point and summit.

It's taken an hour and twenty minutes and the views are well worth the climb. I can see right up into the Highlands in one direction and out to sea in the other. I

sit with my back to the trig point with the sun gently warming me. A bee buzzes around, birds scoot past and the wind picks up the grass in waves. It starts from a distance and the rush, the swish and the moving grass pass me in a stroke. I wait in anticipation and it happens again, nature finding some cyclic formula.

I return to Monthrey and follow the track to the wide mouth of Glen Quharity. A small burn trickles through what was once a mighty river of the ice flows. It takes me a moment to spot the track north.

It's an easy to follow the tracks, preferable to the heather slopes, and I make good time to the foot of Corwharn. A flowing stream allows me to re-hydrate and take on a spare supply. I survey the slope west, not too steep but it's enough to have me frequently resting. As it levels out I swing right for the final pull to the top of Corwharn. An impressive pillar cairn sits to its east where I rest my back and survey Cat Law and my route over.

I head southwest, cutting across heather, to pick up the ascent track. It's an easy route off and I'm soon on the main track and swinging into the steep and very narrow Glen Uig. The slopes tower above me until I reach another dried up riverbed with a burn running through its middle.

I drop back to Wester Lednathie, completing a five and a half hour round. Feeling hungry I stop in Kirriemuir for a late lunch and ice cream. It's typical of the rural Scottish towns with some shops empty, some boarded up, some not having changed in fifty years and others giving the appearance of being modern and thriving. I don't know if I'm tired but I have trouble picking up the local dialect and wonder if this is an enclave of Gaelic, or just the modern influx of Polish people.

July 11<sup>th</sup> dawns bright and sunny, appropriate for a highlight of my two weeks in Scotland. John Hutchison, who I know from The Over The Hill Club, is finishing his Munros today on Schiehallion. It's effectively a club meet with many members converging on the Braes of Foss car park. People of different ages and states of health set off at different times with the aim of a summit rendezvous.

I make a start at 1000 and rise quickly on the well engineered path, taking in the stunning views that open up as this whale backed mountain is conquered. I find a steady pace, unusual for me who tends to walk, rest, walk, pausing only once to take on water.

I'm at the summit, joining the gathering crowd, a shade before noon, quicker than my three hour 1997 ascent: I put this down to better medication and lightweight footwear.

John is half an hour behind and we all look out for his distinctive red T Shirt and companion group to step onto the final, rocky rising plateau to the summit. When he comes into sight cameras, whisky, champagne, applause and Steve Wagstaff and his accordion are at the ready for those final few steps into the hall of fame as a Munroist.

He stands, looks around, says a few words, the applause begins and the corks pop. Celebratory cake is handed around; views and memories are shared. Ben Nevis is clear to the northwest, mountains surround us doing justice to Schiehallion's status as the most recognisable mountain in Scotland.





### **Big John's summit party on Schiehallion**

It takes me an hour and a half to descend, spent mainly with Sue Oxley and her dog, Susie. From there I travel on to Val and Merv's leaving party for their cycle ride to Australia.

Monday July 13<sup>th</sup> brings a second day of rest from walking but not a day without feeling part of the walking community: I'm visiting MA Harper, a TGO friend, and also plan to catch up with her neighbours Val and Dave Machin plus Doreen Stewart who I also know via the TGO.

The drive to MA's house takes me along the B9512 that was a tiresome, lonesome and painful walk back in May. Today the road feels long, even by car. The Insh Watersports centre, that I could only look at as a haven of rest, with wistful eyes when passing in May, proves to be a let down as MA and others are forced to return their poorly prepared food.

Redemption comes in the afternoon when taking a Canadian canoe out. We circle the loch and pause to observe an osprey nest on a RSPB island. Built high in the tree we watch wings flap and await the return of a parent that had circled us earlier. The rain comes on so we paddle to the shore.

Tuesday July 14<sup>th</sup> and I'm back on the hills again for an attempt on Ben Vuirich. A remote Corbett with a lengthy walk in from the west. I spy a shorter route, from the south, breaking off the A924 at Tarvie. A local resident, asking me to park further on as he is expecting a delivery of gravel, disturbs my parking. He's very helpful, apologetic but I'm only too pleased to move the car away from anything that might dent the £500 excess.

At 0920 I'm striding up the tarmac path that, after passing an impressive Victorian mansion, buried in the trees, dwindles to a gravel then grass track. Rain

sweeps in and I pause to don waterproofs before pressing on to a small hut. It's likely a hunting bothy – the key is in the door so I take a look around. Wooden tables, chairs, benches and brushes fill the one room wooden structure.

Leaving the hut I disturb a young deer that sets off into the distance with a repeating bark. It stops, looks back towards me, barks and sets off again.

Underfoot is wet and I feel water seep through my trail shoes. It does not hamper my ascent rate and I pass over Druim Moor before the pull up Carn Dubh. I could avoid this but I fancy taking it in on the way around. A slight drop takes me into cloud, rising up onto the col, before the final ascent of Ben Vuirich. Ptarmigan call and take off, distant rain clouds hint at what's in store for my return journey.

The summit is marked as having a trig point and I only confirm the location, at spot on noon, when I stand above the horseshoe summit wall, which protects the trig point. At some 30ft below Munro height I enjoy the views until a cooling wind has me setting off south, crossing boggy ground, picking up the hut, track and then the car at 1410.

July 15<sup>th</sup> brings a day of forecast poor weather. I downgrade my ambitions of the Ben Vrackie Corbett to the Graham of Badandun Hill and a familiar drive, on the B951, past Mount Blair. I pull up near the hamlet of Fergus and take the track through a collection of buildings undergoing renovation. A short pull through a forest takes me onto a track that, although shown on the map as petering out after a mile, now winds its way to the summit of Craig Lair.



**Badandun Hill**

I break off the track and head southeast up the steep slopes of Badandun Hill. I climb slowly against my altimeter through short heather while being swarmed by

flies. I flick them away but they return within seconds. I rest on the few rare surface rocks, batting the flies away, before I spot a track snaking down from Craig Lair that likely goes to the top of Badandun Hill. I break my steep ascent and head on a gentle diagonal to pick up the track, where a thunder clap greets me, and the easier ascent to the summit.

A trig point and cairn mark the summit, but not enough wind to see off the flies. I rest briefly, take in the views across to Monamenach, Duchray Hill and the infamous Mount Blair, until lightning flashes from the easterly mountains urge me on – I descend quickly on the track to rapidly lose height.

Nearing its low point I break left, onto the rough ground, and cut across to the track from Fergus. An easy walk takes me back to the car: seconds later the storm breaks overhead.

The evening brings a ride out to Letham to visit Graeme and Marion Dunsire, son and daughter in law of Val Hadden. I drive down to Perth, out towards Cupar and thread my way down to the small hamlet and call Graeme.

"Hi Steve, where are you?"

"In Letham."

"Ah good. Whereabouts?"

"By the bus stop, near the phone box."

"Okay, I'm just trying to picture that. Can you see the hotel and the pub in the square?"

Having just driven around Letham the idea of a square and a hotel feels a bit of a farfetched luxury.

"You do live in Letham, Fife?" I ask while things start to dawn on me.

"No, Letham, Angus."

"Ah!"

"I did not think to tell you that."

I'm thinking the evening is in ruins when Graeme adds, "It's only a forty five minute drive." He plies me with directions and I set off and phone again. "Hi Graeme, it's Steve I'm in Letham, Angus in a square with a hotel and pub."

I get directions, easy and quick and I'm pulling up the lane where they live. And my chin is dropping as I look at their house. Well, house is not quite the word. Let's start with the clock tower and the adjoining hall. It would be more than worthy of a slot in Channel Four's Grand Designs programme.

I'm shown in, welcomed and we sit and eat in the vast kitchen. We discuss walking, they are soon off to do the Aonach Eagach (which I privately know as 'The A-n-E') in Glen Coe.

"Is it bad, asks Marion?"

"Yes, many places it's one slip and you are dead."

She looks a little concerned while Graeme adds, "It's not that bad. I don't remember anything like that."

"We are talking the same Aonach Eagach aren't we?" I ask in case the theme of the evening is repeating.

We agree we are and that likely I was misguided over it. It's then time for the tour. And it is a tour, the kitchen, dinner, lounge leads onto a sitting area with office, loo and other rooms off it. A mezzanine floats above which we take the most beautiful wooden spiral staircase too and look back to where we came. Three bedrooms and a family bathroom lead off. Up another flight and the floor is

completely open with internal windows looking down on to the mezzanine and the ground floor. Internal solid oak roof trusses set it off. I think we are nearly done. "There's more," says Graeme. That's when I remember the tower. It's three or four more flights of stairs, each with floor in the tower, one with the clock, before we break onto the roof with stone battlements and a view across the village and the surrounding hills.

It was originally built as a church, never used and mothballed for a hundred years. Then it became a joiner's workshop for sixty years before falling into disuse. It's been an amazing project. I dare not ask how much was spent but what they've produced is both beautiful and likely highly desirable.

We chat some more and it comes time to depart. Passing through the utility room I notice what can only be described as a plant room. They've rigged up a ground thermal system to heat the water and the house. It consists of large cylinders, and an array of pumps, pipes and valves. This slips us into deep conversation until it's time to go again.

"Head for Coupar Angus," says Graeme. He must catch my look, "Not the Coupar in Fife, that is."

"Thanks," I reply.

"Do you know the way, from there?" he adds.

"Yes. I'll be fine, I checked the map and there's only one Blairgowrie."

Sleep comes poorly - having had three cups of coffee, to make my late night drive safe, I toss and turn and snatch two lots of two hours, finally waking with memories of disturbed sleep in Youth Hostel dormitories.

The day has dawned clear with very high cloud, the forecast rain free and I fancy a go at Ben Vrackie. It's a fifty-minute drive to Moulin, passing its geographic and lexical neighbour Ben Vuirich, and a further few minutes to navigate track like roads to find the car park in a wooded enclave.

This is an unusual mountain as its route is signposted through the woods and out onto the open hill. I climb steadily, passing lochs and burns, only resting occasionally for a sip of water or a top up of food. The path is well made, no bog or heather to negotiate. It drops slightly to the small Loch a Choire before the final steep pull to a noon rendezvous, after an hour and three quarters, with the summit of fine trig point and memorial cairn. There's a fine circular, bronze direction finder pointing out Ben Nevis and many other hills. It feels like a spiritual place, unusual but somehow the views and the way the land drops off, leaving a rocky island of a summit gives one with the thoughts that this is a special place.

A few other walkers join me, various nationalities. A trio of Scots with a dog, Clover start to chat. They ask me what I'm up to. I explain I'm staying in Blairgowrie, walking Corbetts and Grahams. They are impressed I've made the effort from the south of England.

"Ever tried a Munro?" Clover's owner asks.

"Actually, I've done them," I reply while munching my way through a peanut and jam sandwich. There are impressed nods and Clover moves closer and eyes my sandwich.

"What about Wales, it's closer to you."

It's a gift, "I've done the Welsh two thousand foot mountains too." Clover moves even closer. She stares me out and gets the last bit of sandwich before begging

an apple core off a group of French people. Clover's owner is demonstrating his new GPS to the other two. He reads off the location and height. "See this, it's a breadcrumb trail of our route up." I'm sure that dog picked up its ears at the mention of 'breadcrumb trail'.



### **Ben Vrackie**

A few words are exchanged with others but largely it's just the view we are all here for. To the north are the fine and mighty Munros of Carn Liath, Braigh Coire Chruinn-bhargain and Carn nan Gabhar, to the south the more gentle Perthshire hills. I stay half an hour, until I feel cold and make it back to the car in just over an hour.

Friday July 17<sup>th</sup> brings my last chance to walk. I've loved having the cottage, a relaxing place to spend the late afternoons and evenings. My eyes flit OS Sheet 43 for an easy Corbett to finish the fortnight on. I've had good use of this map as I see a series of Munros where I'd written 03/05/1994 against. Initially I have it in mind to head up to Braemar and take in Morrone – an easy Corbett which always eludes me on the TGO. However, just northwest of Spittal of Glenshee, I notice the nearer Ben Gulabin.

The trip up is familiar, passing the roads that have been my stomping ground of late. I park up, kit myself out and start the pull up the track in the chill air. The weather for the afternoon has been forecast as poor so I'm pleased for my 0950 start.

It's easy going on the track and what once finished at the remains of an old building now divides in two, one track leading around to Creagan Bheithe and the other, to the left, heading to the col between the two summits of Ben Gulabin.



The wind assists me up the steep northerly slope, meeting a path at the top. By now the wind is blustery, the straps on my pack feel abandoned to the wind. The sleeve of my jacket finds a harmony of vibration. I turn right and, having set my altimeter wrong, claim the summit earlier than anticipated in just an hour and ten minutes from the start.



### **Ben Gulabin**

I settle for a while but feel chilled through my thin top and walking shirt. I look around, likely my last Scottish summit this year. I spy Mount Blair in the distance, I don't appear to be able to shake him off! I head down, the wind now acting as a useful brake as I descend the steep slope. I meet a couple on the first track. They confirm the poor forecast, ending my lofty ideas of taking in Morrone too. We discuss the Corbetts, I know I've been doing the easier ones. They confirm how remote and hard many are.

Back at the cottage it's a leisurely afternoon of writing and gathering kit together for the trip home. I reflect on the two weeks, four Corbetts, six Grahams and of course a repeat Munro.

Saturday morning and I've arrived at the Enterprise Rent-A-Car depot before it opens. Fortunately it's raining, making the dents in the roof harder to spot. I park it up a slope, away from the door. The same wee guy that served me before arrives. This is good, part of my plan.

"Any problems?"

"None at all," I reply.

"I'll just go and take a wee look around the car and I'll be back with you."

I watch him walk to the car, as before he bends down and looks around the bodywork. His stature does not draw him to the roof. And the uphill walk to it

keeps the dents over the horizon - which are now puddles in the rain. He comes back.

"That's all perfect," he says.

\*

On 15th July 2009, Sgurr nan Ceannaichean (NH087480) south of Glen Carron was re-surveyed by the Munro Society at 913.43m. I climbed it as a Munro and as it's re-classified a Corbett I've added one to my Corbett count (the total of 221 Corbetts allows for this).

Corbett Count:	12 out of 221
Graham Count:	7 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

## 2010

My late place, from the TGO standby list, has me ordering freeze dried pouch food and visiting the South Cerney Cotswold Outdoor walker's 'sweetie' shop. I cast my eye over gear and start with the practicality of a long handled, aircraft aluminium, spoon (those pouches are deep). As spoons go this is likely to be the most expensive I've ever purchased but, having become a lightweight freak, the new type of food means I don't need a knife or fork, just a long handled spoon. And, as an added plus, I don't need any pot washing utensils because the pouches just take boiling water.

After a number of trials on day walks I've decided to take the plunge and switch from walking boots to trail shoes. Having strong ankles the lack of support does not worry me (it's my knees that are my Achilles' heel). Instead my concerns lay in how my feet will fair getting wetter than usual. I wander to the sock display and select a waterproof pair and hope for the best.

Next lightweight over trousers, a new trekking pole, lightweight fleece, map case and energy bars drop into my basket.

Now for the tricky bit - "Do you have a lightweight trowel?" I ask a carefully selected female assistant. She looks at me at me in a, "This isn't a garden centre, sir," kind of way.

"I mean for camping," I add in a hopeful manner. She still looks confused. By now I'm feeling a little hot under my collar and wishing this conversation had not begun. I try humour and chip in a "We're not talking geocaching," smile and nod hoping that this will get through. No such luck and we part company before she starts to list various ironmongery shops I might care to visit. I escape the shop at a little under £300 spent, return home and book my tickets for the sleeper train to Scotland.

As my new company mobile contains a camera I pack this, and its lightweight charger, instead of my usual digital camera.

The final task is to find the smallest tube of toothpaste to see me through two weeks. This proves rather harder than one might imagine. I try the local shop, I try Tesco, I try the Co-op then Waitrose. None has a small tube of toothpaste instead they appear to be targeting the family market or those with a rather excessive number of teeth. In desperation I look to the children's end of the market. 'Age 3 to 6' has me doubting whether it'd be right for me but then, on



another tube that looks the perfect size, I spy 'For Ages 6+'. Well, correct me if I'm wrong, that does, at the age of 44, include me. Okay the DreamWorks picture of Shrek and his lady friend might not have me falling into the target market but there's nothing else to indicate it's not for me.

Friday May 14<sup>th</sup> and I step out of Glasgow Central Station into the cool air of a grey morning. I am pleased to have had the sleeping cabin to myself, pleased to have managed to get some sleep despite an annoying buzz from the cabin's electrics. My radio picked up nothing but white noise but this was preferable to the buzz and I dozed off to what, I recently was amazed to learn, is the noise of background radiation from the Big Bang.

Judging by the niggling of the couple in the cabin next to mine, I'm grateful not to be married. It started as I boarded with, "I don't want you in here" as the woman evicted the man so she could attend to their child. I heard his protests, from the corridor, about how hard he works and he'd, "Bloody paid for the tickets." Later, when presumably he'd been allowed in, I heard him negotiating for leave to go to the buffet car. "It's only a nightcap," I heard him repeat and protest. Whether he got leave or not I do not know but the only other noises from that cabin was some serious snoring.

I've become savvy to the limited choice of vegetarian breakfast available in Scotland and have brought two boiled eggs and some slices of bread - gone are the days of the sleeper ticket including breakfast. These munched I walk to Queen Street Station with my 10kg pack swaying on my back in retaliation to my failure to fasten the waist and chest straps.

I watch the people milling around, day trippers, cycle touring parties, pie eyed revellers and the odd hopeful hobo. I'm glad when the train to Mallaig is called, glad when I find my seat, force my pack into the overhead rack and sink into my reserved seat. If nothing else I've made it this far and now just have to sit for five hours.

A journey of small station stops, trains dividing, meeting, crews chatting and gazes up the carriage, looking for other TGO people. A journey of bridges, viaducts, curved tracks, snow tunnels and the rhythmic clacking over the old style short rail lengths. Crossing Rannoch Moor with its mountainous views, snapped by those doing the journey for the first time as others gaze out the window onto old friends.

As we approach Mallaig I get chatting with an Australian and an American girl, both touring Scotland. The Australian is on a tight schedule, the ferry leaves Mallaig ten minutes after the train gets in and the ticket advises to be there ten minutes early. Such is British joined up thinking. A man joins our conversation, he's trying to get the ferry too, a hired sailboat his destination.

"What are you up here for?" His question is directed at me.

"I'm walking across Scotland." This gets some appreciative comments from all around.

"Have you got your Skin-so-soft?" he asks.

"What for the Midges?" I ask.

"Yes."

"It's a bit early for them. And as long as I don't camp in still air near water I should be okay."

"They never fly across salt water," he adds.

"Superstitious are they?" I ask and he looks at me as if I'm some form of cretin.

Mallaig brings lunch, the purchase of food for the evening and a quick hunt for the West Highland Hotel.

"I'm on the TGO, do you have the signing out sheets?" I ask at reception.  
"You're the last to sign out," replies the man. I'm surprised, it's only 1435.

And so I set off down the road, make good time and take a track east to a small loch and then trail south east and pick up the road and track along the north shore of Loch Morar. I've not yet set up my drinking water bag and pipe so fill a small plastic bottle from the frequent streams. A man with a camper van offers me a cup of tea, I decline but we chat. He advises against collecting water and cites the proverbial tale of a dead sheep being just upstream. Actually in my twenty years of walking the highlands I've never come across a dead sheep in a stream, yet, according to folklore, there are literally thousands bunging up the water supplies. He does convince me that a camper van is the ideal walking accessory. It's something I've pondered many a time and with that I take the dream along the track. Layouts and body styles pour through my mind along with unrealistic assumptions of cost and whether it would make a practical daily vehicle too. My mind then wanders to natural navigation, how, in reality, so much is done subconsciously. That one would never pass through mass forestation, or ascend a crag where indigenous trees have escaped the mouths of even the most agile deer. That when climbing through mist a rising wind indicates a sudden change of terrain, a running stream or the position of the sun give a rough idea of direction. My mind goes through many.

These thoughts slow to admiring the light on the distant hills, the cloud, the blue sky, a rainbow. The breeze catches my neck and I tire into the evening and, at 1945, fall short of Tarbet, my planned stop. Instead a small piece of flat ground, just beyond a remote house, tucked out the way with a stream running past has me thankfully putting up the tent: though erecting and packing away a tent is my least favourite part of wilderness travel. Something bores me, it feels like a chore and I procrastinate over sorting inner from outer, peg from pole and front from back. I realise I'd forgotten to make all the repairs to the tent that I'd promised myself I'd do over the winter. A midge attack speeds me up and I realise I've camped in still air near water.

I eat, the pouch food is tasty and filling and I'm so grateful that I'm not re-hydrating this year and bulking out the meals with couscous. In fact I've eaten that much on TGOs I don't think I could ever stomach couscous again. It starts to rain. I hold off a call of nature and slip into sleep only to wake in the early hours with a pressing need. I slip out and add to the sounds of flowing water. Pulling myself back into the sleeping bag I wonder what time it is. I grope around for my watch, find it and press the button. It briefly lights the tent and tells me it's 0245. I shut my eyes and have a strange glowing image of Shrek printed on my retinas. I press the watch light again and see my toothpaste tube.

Saturday May 15<sup>th</sup> and, having struggled to find the energy to get going, I set off at 0940 and quickly make my way round to Tarbet Bay. I pass through the buildings of a tiny community and, with the sea of Loch Nevis lapping the shore to my left, do not see a soul. A polluting generator rattles from within a building, a hostel, with beds laddering its walls, teases one to believe that others do venture this far. Moored boats bob against gentle waves and I follow the path on, looking for a steep route to take me onto a 15km ridge and the Corbett of Sgurr na h-Aide.



**Dropping down to Tarbet Bay**



**Gaining height and looking back towards Tarbet**

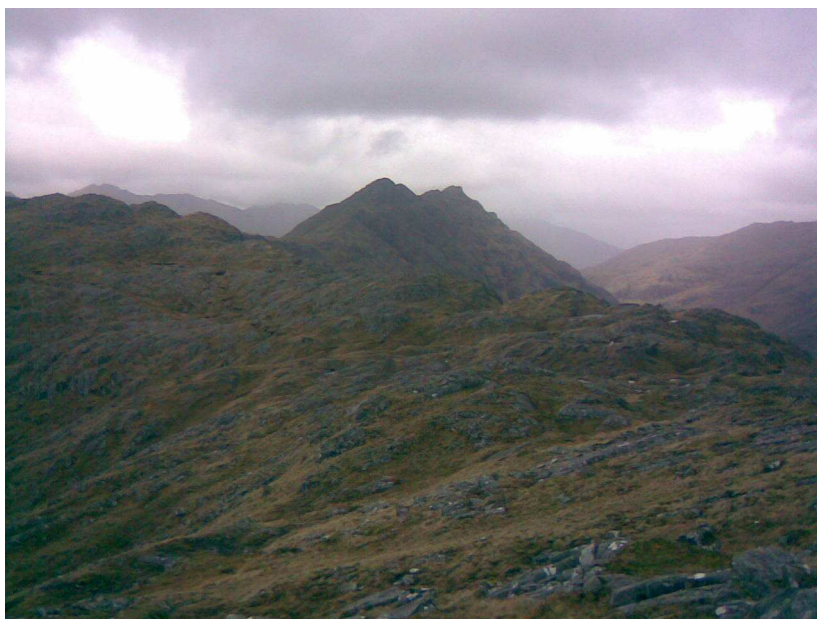
As the cliffs steepen to my left, and no path cuts into the hills, I set my compass and head for the ridge. I get into that inefficient stride where my pack weighs heavy on my back and my upper legs ache as I put foot in front of foot. Each step is deliberate and I feel that the mountain wishes to pull me down into the sea each time I lift a leg.

I make a highpoint and rue the lack of close navigation for I have ascended a minor hillock and only a descent will get me onto a course for the main ridge.

I don't make the ridge before 1300 and I wonder at the lightness of my lunches. I mentally pace my route; at least another 3000ft of ascent is required as many separate mountains have to be gone over. I eat what is prudent and follow the ridge at a painfully slow pace while I jiggle the days ahead against this benchmark of my fitness.

It's a sorry walker that, at 1815 and after many undulations and circumnavigations, pulls himself onto Sgurr na h-Aide and promptly gets swept over by a snowstorm. I settle awhile, send a text or two describing the view, look up to find the view has gone, hidden by mist. I drop quickly, the mist lifts, my aim of A Chuil Bothy but it looks, and feels, an unbelievable distance and, as my legs begin to wobble, I quickly look for a pitch. The ground falls away for nearly 3000ft and is a myriad of rock, heather, moss, lochains and forest. A small lochain and a square of flat ground above its northeast bank catch my eye. With each pace towards it my mind reassesses my entire life, wishing to feel safe and secure it jettisons all plans and has me virtually nailed into my home toasting my feet by a log fire.

I rapidly put my tent up, fighting the threatening clouds and my shaking hands with dropping strength. I collect water, dive inside and cook my meal and feel thankful to make my world as small as possible. As my strength starts to come back, as I start to feel warmer my mind expands with lofty plans and ambitions.



**Sgurr na h-Aide from its westerly ridge**

Before sleep comes and later, as I wake, I know my ambitions of the three Corbetts, at the head of Glen Dessarry, will remain unclimbed and the best I can hope for is to get myself back on schedule by making my way directly to Kinbreack Bothy.

Even the alternative of the single Carn Mor Corbett feels an impossibility. But first is the little task of getting myself off the mountain I've camped on: this is not aided by taking two and a half hours to get myself moving. The ridge continues to undulate and does not bode well for an easy start to the day. Instead I peer southeast and carefully, by means of surveying each stretch to avoid becoming cragfast, make my way to the river that gathers the mountain burns into Loch Morar.

It's a deep slit of a glen that leads to the forest which, if I'd pressed on, I'd have been passing through in fading light of last evening. My pace gathers as I drop to a deer fence that guards it. I curse the thing, climbing high and swaying on its wire, with my right foot slung into one of its squares I swing my left leg over and pray not to rip my jacket or gortex over trousers, donned against the rain. I take a leap of faith and stagger up on the other side.



I can't find the marked path so follow the fence to where a burn passes below it. I then find the path, complete with a proper passage for walkers through the fence. It's hard on my feet, the thinner soles of the trail shoes means the roughness of the track digs into me.

I emerge from the forest and miss the track and feel coaxed to the one above A Chuil Bothy. It's off my map but I reckon I can navigate it from memory. I ascend for a bit, look back and catch sight of the one I missed. I cut across country, bog and peat until I reach it, meet the rare sight of two other walkers, and make the good track that passes the houses of Upper Glendessary and Glendessary.

I keep a look out for the northeast track around to Kinbreack Bothy and am pleased to see three ladies heading down it which perfectly shows where it branches from my track. They warn me that the ground floor of Kinbreack is uninhabitable and advise the upper floor.

As I ascend to the 350m bealach between two of my missed Corbetts I look back and spy a party of men trying a number of false paths until they branch onto mine. It looks like I'll have some company. I expect them to catch me but as I swing into Glen Kingie, and look hopefully for the bothy, they are still a way behind.

There's a light breeze and the afternoon sun cheers me but it feels slow, I am slow, this distance today should be easy but instead I'm hours over what it should take. I can't find a pace; body energy is used inefficiently as it feels I'm trying to lift myself out of one rut after another.

It's 1830, and eight and a half hours of walking, before I approach the bothy on the edge of the wide basin floor of the glen. An identical shaped ruin lies to its left and a tiny ruin lies beside the burn that rolls past it. I think to myself, 'the ground is likely to be wet and soft as that's always the case near a bothy' and the next moment my right foot sinks deeps into the soft wet ground. It makes a satisfying pop as I extract it but I fear losing a shoe in such circumstances and make a mental note to splay my toes and take great care when it happens again.



**Glen Kingie**



### **Kinbreack Bothy**

I make my way up to the bothy loft. My pack catches against the hatch, and I lean in and negotiate my way on to the floor. Two sleeping mats are already laid out. I grab a pitch and sort my kit as the chaps behind me arrive. Nobody else is on the TGO; I'm twenty four hours in and feel twenty four hours behind.

They are kindly, retired men. I'm surprised when I get speaking to Joe to find he's seventy one. He knows a town near me, Devizes (where many of my ancestors came from) having done his national service there. He could pass for fifty.

I make my meal; these pouches are great, everything you need already mixed in. And, of course, there's no couscous.

Monday 17<sup>th</sup>, no more than an hour into my day and moving well, I rest on a high vehicular track looking east along the wide Glen Kingie. Through the night I'd managed to pick up Radio 4, then the World Service, which drowned out the inevitable snoring, and slept fitfully. As I finally woke I switched my radio off and came round to a dawn chorus of farting and subsequently concluded that the ear is the best behaved orifice.

High cloud, not threatening, casts its shadow over the glen. The river meanders towards a forest drawing the track I'm on with it. My plans have changed, the Tomdoun Hotel, just east of my planned camping spot, has proved too much a temptation. My struggles with fitness, my tiredness and achy feet of the last few days deserve a hotel.





**The wide basin of Glen Kingie**

I press on, wishing to make the most of the good weather, and trust the track through the forest as it bends and dips and climbs around the forested slopes. I tick off the odd bridge, the odd junction against the map and am pleased to emerge on the minor road just over a mile short of Tomdoun. A walker passes me at speed: he looks like he's on the TGO. I find him in the hotel bar, pausing for three pints of Guinness on route to Invergarry.

"Do you have a room for tonight?" I ask an Australian bartender.

"Don't know mate, I'm not in charge," he replies.

"Who can I ask?" I ask.

"The fellow who does the bookings is out."

"When will he be back?"

"Within the hour I guess. But it's a bit pricey, might not be right for you."

I privately think that it'd have to be quite pricey to see me walking on and I order sandwiches and soft drinks.

"What's your name?" I ask the fellow challenger, the first I've met.

"Anthony Driscoll. And you?"

"Steve Smith."

He pauses, looks at me and asks, "Do you write a blog?"

"Yes."

"I've read it. It's good."

"Thanks, I enjoy doing it," I reply and I'm pleased and feel famous in my own lunchtime.

In the event the owner is back within fifteen minutes and the room is £40. I take it, room three, and he points me up the stairs. A few seconds later he's sprinting after me. "It's that way," he says. I'd turned the wrong way, west in fact, at the top of the stairs.

"East, the Challenge is east. I must remember to always turn east," I reply.

I spread myself out in the room, wash out my clothes then notice two toenails have turned black and my heels and big toes have an irritating sore itch about

them. I make use of the bath, sinking an aching, sighing body below a warm water line.

I wander to the bar to eat. The menu is not vegetarian friendly, in fact there's not one option I can have. "Can you do me something vegetarian?" I ask the owner (now smartly dressed in chef's attire).

"I'll just go and check." I wait expectantly, thinking that I'll even take the Scottish standard response to vegetarianism of macaroni cheese and chips.

He returns, "I can do a lovely range of lightly roasted vegetables on couscous base," he says. I don't know if my face quivered with the disappointment

Back on the landing, just before I turn east, I try and work a piece of couscous from between my teeth as I survey the bookcase for reading material. The complete works of HG Wells (never knew he was so prolific), some Penguin classics, two copies of a Leeds & Bradford street map and the Brownie Annual, 1939 get flicked through. That's the thing with pub and hotel bookcases, they're never put together by the same collector. I choose a Sherlock Holmes and read two short stories.

Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> dawns another bright day, the breakfast is welcome (vegetarians well catered for) and I set off at 0940 on the road walk: destination Invergarry, destination hotel. I keep my pace slow, it's just a twelve mile walk, and am caught up by Nicky Crawford, a sprightly 69 year old who, as it turns out, lives not far from me.

We walk until the road meets Loch Garry and turn off south to Greenfield where I bid my fellow challenger, only the second I've met so far, adieu and promptly sit down for a jolly good rest. The jolly good rest is only tempered by a desperate need for water so I set off and follow the wide forest tracks, and its logging lorries shuttling back and forth, until I find a good stream where I can gulp back the water.

I press on with Pete and Dud sketches spinning about my mind. It's only when I reach Mandally that I realise why (I'd been on the road to it and, it being one of their sketches, I must have subconsciously picked this up from the map). Another mile takes me to the hotel and, after just over four and half hours from Tomdoun, I'm sat on another barstool in.

I explain I've booked a room and am directed to reception where I'm handed my re-supply package and shown to my top floor room - negotiating the two flights of narrow stairs with the pack, becomes the hardest part of my day.

I quickly shower, change, wash out my clothes and return to the bar, order lunch and a drink. I sup outside, watch the world go by, chat to two guys cycling from Lands End to John O'Groats and gaze across to the impressive road bridge and its deep river washing through it.

I inspect the bookcase, less thought out as all the books are long novels. You'd have to be staying a while. I spy a Conan Doyle, but it's not a Sherlock Holmes. But it does make me think that Scottish hotel bookcases are rather littered with the works of Conan Doyle. Southern hotels tend to have a proliferation of Dick Francis books. Realising these thoughts are the indicators of the onset of boredom I walk to the local garage and buy a paper.

I read in the garden, read in the lounge. Some food safety test is going on where the examiner appears to be telling the delegate the answers which he dutifully is writing down. I go for a wander, pass an alcove where a large table is surrounded by suits on some management meeting. "I see this as a learning centre conduit," announces one - I make a hasty retreat.

Finally 1930 comes and it's time for dinner. I have the choice of a single table by the bar or by the kitchen door. I elect for the latter and get an insight into how a hotel kitchen is run. "Fucking hell don't tell me we are out of cod," yells the duty manageress. She emerges, crosses the bar to the offending table and says, ever so sweetly, "I'm really sorry I'm out of cod would you care to order something else?"

As I get through my soup, which I dare not complain is a bit cold, the kitchen door swings violently amongst the crashing and gasps of exasperation. My main course arrives, piping hot vegetarian lasagne. "Can I get you anything else?" asks the young waiter.

"No," and I flick my eyes to the kitchen door, "I wouldn't put you through it."

"Yes!" he says, "Result!" and salutes the air.

Given I missed the three Corbetts on Sunday today, May 19<sup>th</sup>, is to be my biggest day so far. From Invergarry I try and spot the tracks through the forest but end up on the A82 for well over an hour. I walk in the right hand verge and wave to the car drivers who indicate and move out to give me room, to those that just move slightly I raise the fingers of my left hand from its trekking pole. To the bastard that crossed onto my side of the road, while overtaking a car approaching from behind, and misses me by no more than an inch I give an angry V sign. I'd have made it two handed if I didn't have to hold my trekking poles.

I reach Aberchalder and enjoy the sight of the swing bridge being opened, to make way for boats to pass into Loch Oich. I then tentatively make my way through a farm looking for the track up onto the hills. By a process of elimination, and sniffing out the general direction, I climb steeply on a track before cutting into forest which leads to Glenbuck bothy. I rest a while, enjoying its comfy chairs and plan how I might come back and spend more time here. I eat lunch then press on to the 815m summit of Carn Dearg.

The warm wind wisps about my face as I stand in the bealach before Carn Dearg. High cloud is scattered across a blue canvas. A stag stands in the coire, staring down at me. He bounds off, stops, turns and looks at me some more. At last he bounds off again and the last I see of him is high on the skyline, silhouetted by the sun, his short antlers bold above his head.

I take in the Corbett of Carn Dearg<sup>1</sup> and make a slow progress towards Luib-chonnall bothy. I arrive at 1730 to the shadows of the evening light, deer grazing and watering on the flat grounds and the loneliness of a bothy book entry describing how Alan Sloman, Phil Lambert and Alistair Pooler had spent a good evening the night before. All that there is to keep me company is a copy of Zoo magazine. Not my choice of reading material and something that always winds me up in WH Smiths as such magazines are listed under, "Men's Lifestyle." I always think "Not my bloody lifestyle." Anyhow, with nobody around I feel it's safe to take a flick through, indeed it would feel rude not to. It's all headlines with little substance, somewhere between the Daily Sport and Daily Star. Anyhow the centre spread is a young lady by the name of Alice. She reveals, shall we say, her

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<sup>1</sup> This is the 815m summit at 349967. I can't exactly remember my route beyond this point so have to accept, due to bad planning, I probably did not cross its namesake Corbett at 357948.

upper half with an invitation to text a code to a particular number (where one is presumably charged a sum similar to the length of the code) with the promise to be sent (presumably to one's mobile) pictures of various other parts of her anatomy. It actually does not say which parts but I'm rather guessing it'd not be her left knee and ankle.

I sleep fitfully; thankfully it's a warm night as a bothy is always colder than a tent. I make an early start on the route through Melgarve, Garva Bridge to the Laggan Gaskmore Hotel where hopefully a re-supply package awaits me. It's to be my longest day, by distance, so far but the ascent is minor, the tracks are good and I'm confident of making the hotel in good time to clean up and relax.

To the calls of the cuckoo, the diving of the oyster catchers I make my way along the River Spey. I'm fooled by Shesgnan, from a distance it looks like Melgarve Bothy, the approaches similar. When I reach it, and see it's boarded up I realise my mistake and follow the forest edge and wing round to Melgarve and Wade's road. From here the walk is boring, not only is it a repeat of ground travelled before but the ground is straight, monotonous and distant landmarks take their time to be passed. In the backdrop are glimpses of the Cairngorm Mountains, their tops encrusted by snow. It reminds me of the road between Linn of Dee to Braemar, a pitiful route of tar sealed road and distant landmarks that refuse to become part of the foreground.

I reach Laggan around 1500, ready to make use of the excellent public loo (I'm sure many a challenger has fond memories of its spacious confines) and stores. I buy what I need for lunches and see one pastry shaped item in the "hot counter."

"What's in that thing?" I ask. Somehow, perhaps because I've not spoken to anybody for fort eight hours, my words sounded scornful for the assistant falls about laughing.

"That thing, as you put," she says, "is a vegetable pasty."

"Okay, I'll take it then," I reply.

I sit on the bench outside, chewing my way through the thing (which judging by its brown outer, dryness and high temperature has been being heated all day) and hear the two assistants having a chuckle at the way I said it. One comes out and is surprised to see me there, "Oh, you're still here," she says and I smile back.

I walk the mile to the hotel, it looks a little run down and I have to circle the building to find a door that is not surrounded by weeds.

"I've a booking, Stephen Smith," I say.

"Ah yes, and a package." This is good I think.

"What time is breakfast?" I ask.

"It's between eight and eight forty five. But tomorrow it's at seven."

My room is on the ground floor, functional and designed for coach parties. I make use of the bath, wash out my clothes and end up watching "Deal or no Deal" on the TV. I'm always amazed how people think that which box they chose is significant, it's merely a game of chance and the skill is knowing when to quit and not play it to the last box. I recall a conversation with a fellow challenger, the late and dear Bob Lees. He'd recently bought a lottery ticket and chosen the numbers one to six. A friend of his had said "I thought Bob was brighter than that. Does he not know he'd have more chance if he spread them out?" We'd then had an in depth conversation about maths and how frustrating it is to hear non mathematical people (friends, colleagues, media and politicians) making

sweeping statements when the maths does not back them up. I sometimes find myself shouting at the radio in despair, "no, no, no do the maths." I wind myself up by recalling the fallacy in Gordon Brown scraping the 10% tax band and how the lower paid would now be paying more. It took me about a second to spot the flaw then having to endure the frustration of it not being challenged until the lower paid started getting their reduced pay packets, and the media patronisingly explaining it to us all, was too much to bear.

I made my way to the conservatory and found the preverbal Sherlock Holmes anthology and started to read "The Sign of Four." I shouldn't have switched the TV on, it always annoys me, the reading calms me down.

The coach party arrives, a large group of older Australians making jokes about Haggis Farms and recounting endless visits to the distilleries. Evening arrives and I order a meal and am told I can eat it in the conservatory, away from the coach party. A piper appears and pipes in the meal for the Australians. I'm near the bar, the bar tender a friendly stoutly built Scot, chats to the piper as he returns, covered in sweat, and gasping for a drink.

"Do you want a Sheepshaggers?" asks the barman. I assume he means the beer and not one of the Australians.

Friday May 21<sup>st</sup> comes and with it 0700 with no sign of breakfast being ready. Come 0730 the Aussies are fed up and break their way into the breakfast room. I follow, food is almost ready and I select a feast to help me through the day. Classic mellow music of the sixties plays; somehow it leaves me feeling sad. As if somehow it emphasises that for many this coach trip is a swansong.

Next follows the tricky bit of trying to pay. I wait at the reception desk, there's no sign of anybody. I notice a buzzer, press it and Glenn Miller plays in the distant bar. At first I think it's coincidence (the breakfast music continuing), I wait and press it again and find the buzzer does fire Glenn Miller into life.

A member of staff passes and I grab him and force him to take my money.

I have to head the mile back into Laggan before taking the road east towards the A9. Passing another hotel I realise that better planning would have saved me this backtrack.

The road is hard on my feet, the thinner soles of the trekking shoes offer less support than a boot and I wriggle my feet to free the pain. It takes me around three hours to hit the A9, fortunately road works, and associated traffic lights, make my crossing easy to the wide east verge. I walk north, looking for the track up to Phones, a hunting lodge. I peer amongst the trees to my right, hoping to see a shortcut up but the track comes before I feel brave enough to take a chance through the trees. I negotiate my way through workmen and heavy machinery and set off on the switchback track. It's a good one and has me elevating the contours. Phones is a clutter of buildings freshly painted in cream which ties the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1930s architecture together. I think perhaps the odd building might stem from the war.

I rest by the stream that runs past it, eat my lunch, rationing myself a packet of peanuts for later, slug back water, swing my pack onto my back, fasten the waist strap, tuck the map into it then secure the chest strap. With trekking poles working their march I set off up the incline into open moor land.

With so many mountain tops to choose from my mind plays a game as to the route over to the Corbett of Meallach Mhor. Minor adjustments in compass bearings have me pointing at wildly different hills. I take a GPS co-ordinate, set my compass and take off over the moor hoping that covering some ground will narrow the options and show me what I'm aiming for. The ground rises gently and I negotiate around bog and peat hags. I begin to notice squares of cut peat, stacked as little turrets on the tops of rises in the ground. On each are scattered grey pellets. I wonder what they are for and am alarmed to think they might be the estate attempting to poison birds of prey. I check my phone for a signal, it's strong and I phone into Challenge Control and speak to Alvar Thorn. He speaks to Ann and they reckon it's to feed the grouse. I feel they are right as the sheer number of them would leave the estate vulnerable to being caught out.

Feeling better I press on and drop down to Bhran Cottage, cross the bridge onto the tar sealed road. It feels an extraordinarily remote spot for such a fine road, a car passes me and it looks as if children have just been collected from school. The time is drifting and I review the map. My aim of Meallach Mhor and Carn Deag Mor now look ambitious and I temper my plans to just the first Corbett. The bargain gives me new zest and I initially manage the tiring slopes of Meallach Mhor at a quicker pace until I slow to having to take a pace or two and then rest. I reach the summit at 1745, around nine and a half hours from the hotel.



**On Meallach Mhor – if only I'd looked behind me!**



**View from the summit from whence I came**



I can see across to the distant Laggan and plot my route. I eat the peanuts and watch distant rain greying out distant glens. I spend so much time looking at it that I do not think to look behind me. Suddenly I'm pelted by rain at a forty-five degree angle. It's not just heavy, it's a jet wash. There's no chance to get my over trousers on. Fortunately I'd put my gortex jacket on to keep warm so I'm able to zip it up and then press on. The rain pings musically off my trekking poles as my legs get soaked and my trousers cling to my skin. It takes over twenty minutes to pass: my plans to camp are put on hold as I walk until I'm dry.

Before the slopes of Carn Dearg Mor my watch clicks over to 1900 and I find a small water source and force myself to find the energy to put the tent up. I place it just off a track, always fearful of late night poachers' quad bikes, and just manage to bundle myself in before the next shower hits. So ferocious is the storm I'm able to use the tents skin to channel enough rain water into my cooking pot to boil for my meal.

I wake on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and force myself to get a move on. To get myself back on target I need to bag the missed Corbett of yesterday, Carn Dearg Mor, and also complete the two Corbetts already planned for today.

I struggle to pull on my soggy knee supports, I'd not appreciated how wet they'd got below my trousers. I plaster my knees with Deep Heat in the hope that this will keep the joints warm while the supports dry under my own body heat.

I'm off at 0800, drop down to the good track that heads north east to below the bealach that approaches Carn Dearg Mor. From here I head north over sharp, steep ground until I hit the gentle pull to the summit. As I do the beautiful clear sunny weather slips into minor puffs of cloud. I admire the views from the top and feel pleased with myself for having managed to get myself back on target for one and a half hours effort.



**View from Carn Dearg Mor**

I gaze across to the route ahead. On the horizon, and on the track to be followed, is the Corbett summit of Leathad an Taobhain: just shy of 3000ft. It looks a distant dream yet it's only a small part of the day.

I drop back to the track and start following its passage east. I peer down the long glen into Glen Feshie and consider cutting down to Ruigh-aiteachain bothy and follow the route around to Linn of Dee and Inverey. It'd be an easy option but the road walk into Braemar is pitifully long, boring and far worse for tedium than the one from Melgarve to Laggan. And I recall putting on my route sheet, as reason not to give a foul weather alternative, "If I make it this far wild horses will not make me walk that bloody road from Inverey to Braemar."

I press on, rest and stagger often in the heat while trying to plan water stops so as not to be overburdened by weight. At the final bealach, before the pull to the summit of Leathad an Taobhain I rest by the remains of a shelter. I'm struggling for energy: my light lunches are not proving enough. Having the unscheduled night at the Tomdoun Hotel I have an evening meal spare. I set up my stove, boil enough water to hydrate the meal and make a cup of tea. It's enough to replenish me and I follow the track that dwindles out at the summit and arrive before 1400. I drop down and follow a high level plain across to the foot of Beinn Bhreac. I feel lonely, it is and feels remote. For once the lack of companions haunts me and I rely on my GPS for reassurance. Somehow it feels that each step is taking me further from safety, like a conversation you wished you'd never started (such as buying a trowel from the South Cerney Cotswold Outdoor shop).

In the distance deer graze, they clock me, stand and stare before lolloping off. A single one, an outsider (perhaps a young male being cast from the herd) stands in my path until he decides it's his turn to move off. A walker is passing far to my left across the high flat ground. I steer towards him, crossing bog, hags and scuffing quartz grit, desperate for company. As I approach he waves but his pace is too good and he gains on me until I give up the chase.

I keep north of Beinn Bhreac before tackling its north easterly flank. I wobble and pant my way to the top, in all three hours to regain the identical height of Leathad an Taobhain. The bothy is five miles away, I'm keen for it but bargain with myself that if I don't reach it in three hours, twelve hours since the start of my day, I'll camp.

With this deal in mind I drop to the head waters of the Tarf Water. It's easy to cross here and I follow the southerly bank through broad flood plains and narrow paths on steep banks where I cling onto heather to avoid a slip. The water flows east, meaning I'm following a welcome downhill route. I cut corners where I can and am always pleased to return to its safe confines. It's wide, rocks peek through the flowing water and the evening sun glints from the surface like a million dazzling diamonds.



**Tarf Water**



**Tarf Water**

I make the bothy, five minutes within my self-imposed twelve hour day. From a distance it looks a large structure, its two chimneys giving a sense of proportion. Two people sit outside, a man and a woman. They're not on the TGO. I sift through its rooms and plump on an uninhabited, concrete floored room with its own entrance. Even with the company of people I shy to the privacy of my own area.



**The Tarf Hotel (bothy) with the amateur photographer's gaff in the foreground**

I make my dinner and sit outside and chat.  
 "Where are you from?" asks the woman.  
 "Marlborough, Wiltshire. And you?" I reply.  
 "We've lived in Aberdeen for the past twenty years but I went to school in Chippenham."  
 "So did I. Which school?" I ask.  
 "Sheldon."

This was getting spooky. "Me too, which year?" It turns out she was two years behind me and we discuss the teachers we shared, for good or for bad.

The three of us talk until the sun disappears and the long evening light turns into a cool chill. I make my way into the bothy, close the door and check my route for tomorrow. "What the hell was I thinking of!" I exclaim. I'd worked out an eighteen mile route with 1123m of ascent. Experience rapidly tells me that this is impossible and all to claim one more Corbett on the way into Braemar. Yet my lofty ambitions mean I've planned no alternative and I only have the maps for this mad route. On the bothy wall is pinned an OS Sheet, the very one I'd need to make my way to Braemar by the Linn of Dee. I eat my route sheet words, "If I make it this far wild horses will not make me walk that bloody road from Inverey to Braemar." For this now is my only alternative. I have the subversive thought of stealing the map but, captain conscience getting the better of me, instead sketch out the missing section to White Bridge, from where I know that I can get myself to Braemar from memory.

I wake on the 23<sup>rd</sup> at 0400. The other bothy inhabitant, a middle aged man, had wandered over in the evening casting doom on my choice of room. "The sun will rise through the window and you'll be awake by four", he had said. I'm glad for the early start (even if it takes me two hours to get myself going); one man's meat is another man's poison as the saying goes. Well actually I am a vegetarian so I set off thinking that one through.

My aim is Mar Lodge, on the road into Braemar. I've heard they offer accommodation and a warm welcome to those on the TGO. I follow the Tarf Water on its south bank, east towards the Falls of Tarf. I need to cross and keep an eye out for suitable places. One is not forthcoming and I have a number of abortive attempts seeing me perched on rocks, midway across, before backtracking. Finally I accept that it's not going to be possible to cross and keep my feet dry. I find a wide patch, change into my canoe shoes and step out as far as I can on the rocks. I then wade the rest, using my trekking poles to keep balance in the flow yet moving rapidly to not allow my nerves to fall victim to the current.

Back into my trekking shoes I reach the Falls of Tarf in thick cloud, a beautiful area where four deep gorges meet. I take the northerly route along a narrow path. It's a wild deep place, the mountains tower opposite and four decomposing deer are testimony to this not being a place to be trapped when the snows come.

From the ruin of Bynack Lodge the going becomes frustrated by a multitude of shallow rivers and waters and I find myself making endless crossings until I pick up the track to White Bridge. I manage my final crossing, by the decaying parapets of an old bridge, without changing into my canoe shoes. On the other side I lean against a concrete stump, which once formed part of the bridge, and eat my lunch. As I'm set to leave I'm attracted by moss which covers it and, by chance, appears to be spelling words. I look closely and see that the moss has formed in sunken lettering - I just manage to make out that the bridge was built in 1966.

I pass a few folk walking into the mountains, we bid our hellos and I reach the Linn of Dee eight hours into my day. A forty five minute road walk takes me to Mar Lodge, from memory the road feels further than on previous years. I tentatively follow the helpful TGO signs and arrive at reception.

"Do you have room? I'm on the TGO," I say as if mentioning the fact that I'm a smelly damp walker will help my cause.



"As long as you don't mind sharing," says Jane the helpful manageress. I'm shown the kitchen, and am told I can pretty much help myself to whatever food I want for an additional £5. I can't pay the total of £20 quickly enough, nor can I get into the bath at the same speedy pace.

The lodge has been rebuilt after a fire, though my room is furnished with old beds, wardrobe and chest of drawers. It feels like I'm staying at the house of an aged relative.

I make my way to the high vaulted kitchen, make a cup of tea and sit at the long table. Another challenger arrives, sixty nine year old Alan Kay sporting a pack twice the weight of mine. Jane introduces us as roommates and Alan's first words to me are, "You don't snore do you."

"No, do you?" I reply.

"No."

"That's good," I reply, "we'll get along well."

Another challenger arrives (making him the fourth I've seen since the start) and the evening drifts into eating and chatting. They are good guys to talk with. Both are carrying huge packs and we compare notes and weights.

I take a wander around the ground floor of the lodge. The corridors are a mix of straights and bends with the heads of deer, mostly shot in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, peering down from the high hooped ceilings.

Alan asks Jane to show me the ballroom. Over one hundred years old it sits in a separate building. I sense from the mood that I'm about to be shown something quite spectacular. We walk across the neatly mown lawn and Jane unlocks the door. If I'd only looked down I'd have not seen this as anything more than a large village hall with furnishings to match. But I don't, I look up. In fact one could not fail to look up.

"This place is macabre," I exclaim as Jane and Alan smile at my reaction. For the walls and ceilings are lined with no less than 2435 deer heads.



**The 2435 deer heads in the Mar Lodge Ball Room**



**Mar Lodge**

The evening continues with food and chatting before we retire to bed whereupon Alan starts a chorus of snoring. I reach for my radio, plug in the earphones and tune into the only available radio station. I stir through the night and finally come to with Neil Diamond's "Beautiful Noise" playing into my ears with the backing track of Alan's snoring.

Over breakfast Alan asks how I slept.

"Well you snore," I say.

"I was going to say you snored," he replies and it appears we had had a shift system going of keeping one another awake.

We share the concerns of the package waiting for Mark Storey. He's two days late and no sign of him. Challenge Control had phoned the night before trying to locate him. I reach Braemar, along the boring wet road, and call in. He's still not been located and they are now out looking for him.

Braemar is cleared out of food. Challengers have been through the stores like a plague of locusts. I feel constrained by narrow shop doorways and people milling around. I manage to pick together a few things, go to the outdoor shop and buy additional breakfasts and evening meals, lunch in a café then flee for Gedler Shiel bothy, road walking south, taking the tracks past the Lion's Face, enjoying the viewpoints, road walking to Invercauld Bridge then the lovely open tracks, where I feel very achy, that curve their way to the bothy.

In all it takes me five hours and I'm surprised, yet pleased, to find TGO company in the form of Paul Farrar. He's a police inspector and, having previously had a career in Police IT myself, we find lots to talk about. He's practical and down to earth in his views of policing which is always refreshing to hear.

Tuesday the 25<sup>th</sup> dawns cool with high cloud. I make it a lazy start, chatting to Paul and aiming for just the eight miles to Shielin of Mark, via the Corbett of Conachcraig. Paul's aiming for Lochnagar but it's likely we'll meet at the bothy later.





### **Lochnagar**

Conachcraig proudly fills a bend in the track and, its three summits form a shallow coire. I start my climb towards the middle summit, taking it slowly through the cold air and gentle wisps of wind. I fool myself that I have a full head of hair as I keep catching sight of a fringe. I sink into disappointment as I realise it's no more than my eyebrows growing bushy with age.

I reach the middle summit in over two hours then bend south east to the true 865m top. From here a good path leads west, though the wrong direction it meets the track in the glen below which I follow around to the Spittal of Glenmuick. I recall my last visit here, in pouring rain, taking shelter and making good use of the hot soup from the dispensing machine. This time I'm able to sit outside and enjoy the weather and sip my soup.

I press on up the steep gorge and take Ian Shiel's, my route vetter, recommended route around to the bothy. It avoids the bog hop of previous years, following a stream upwards until it dwindles to sump holes and underground gurgling of water.

I drop down the burn, easily crossable and not the raging torrent of last year, and approach the simple structure of the bothy. A man approaches, older, late sixties, wild in features with a full head of grey wiry hair. He wears tweed trousers down to the shin, below are wrapped homemade cloth gaiters, tied with string, sitting above stout boots. His jacket is white, cloth and multi pocketed. In his hand is a substantial pair of garden secateurs.

"What are you looking for?" I ask.  
"Heather for me bed."

He follows me into the bothy, his manner kind, his voice a thick Scottish brogue. I look around, his kit is substantial and old. It could have been the 1940s, he's spread tins and things tied up in string over the bench. It took both my grandfather's a lifetime to litter a bench with so many eclectic items, it appears he's done it from the contents of his pack in one afternoon. The five bottles of whisky make me cautious and I plan to camp.

Bernhard Koeglmeier arrives, a challenger from Germany, having just walked in from Braemar. We exchange glances as the man lights his ancient stoves. He chats away, saying he's two bottles one of petrol, one of paraffin. The flames shoot high, three to four feet and he does a dance as he puts the fire out that spreads to the floor. "Don't ya worry, it'll ney explode," he says.

He heats his food then transfers it to a smaller stove to simmer (such is his method of controlling flame). Paul arrives and sits with us: our eyes can't avoid the eccentric activities of the man. There's just one bed space spare, "Bernhard and I are camping, as you've only a tarp you can have the bothy," I say.

Paul nods gently, "That's very kind." I felt a little stuck. I'd not really been honest. I didn't really fancy the bothy. I felt cautious about all the whisky.

I put my tent up, come into eat and the man says he'll get a fire going. He does, a roaring success and we toast ourselves as he stirs the fire with his bare hands. There is wood to be chopped up, this is when I notice the axe and the bow saw (tied up with string). "Did you bring those?" I ask.

"Aye."

"How heavy is your pack?"

"About seventy pounds there."

And I struggle with mine at 22 pounds.

He puts on large spectacles, lights his pipe, I wonder if he is a lover of combustion as I find a pipe smoker spends more time reigniting the thing than ever drawing his breath through it. I pick a piece of wood to cut. "You'll be better with this," he says and from his pocket draws a hand saw.

"Will you take a dram?" he asks Paul and me. I decline, am pleased he does not push it. His manner is so gentle and kind. He pours a generous measure for himself and Paul. As I start to nod with sleep I make my way to my tent and sleep fitfully.

Wednesday and I enter the bothy to make my breakfast. The fire is still going and the man offers me the nearest seat. I make my food and notice that two and a half of the whisky bottles are empty. I wonder if Paul has further imbibed but he looks fit and ready to go and assures me he has slept well. We bid farewells to the man, cross the burn and head for the summit of Muckle Cairn to pick up the track to Loch Lee.

"That wasn't exactly true about me having a good night's sleep," says Paul. I'm not altogether surprised to hear this but ask why. "I think I had the measure of the man but he sat up most the night drinking, when he laid down he snored, was restless, talked and muttered endlessly in his sleep and would continually sit up and yell, 'For Jesus Christ's sake' in a Father Jack kind of fashion".

"Whilst admiring his axe?" I ask.

"I didn't look," said Paul.

We peep into a bothy at the head of Glen Lee. It's strewn with straw, a large open fire, with spit hook for meat, is the centre piece of the gable wall.

"Is this the bothy that chap said he'd be moving onto I wonder."

"I think so," replies Paul.

"I don't like the look of that hook in the fire. It looks just right for roasting a challengers head," I reply.

"With an apple in its mouth," adds Paul.

From here our conversation continues until we have convicted the poor fellow of a multitude of crimes. Some of which are quite heinous indeed. We chat some more and discover we both know Gary Smith, a mountain guide from North Wells. Like the lady at the Tarf Hotel bothy it feels a small world at times.

The conversation then extends to the mating habits of deer and how the male rolls itself in his own urine to make himself attractive to the female.

"Not something that'd work for us humans," says Paul.

"He could say 'sorry love I've been out on the piss, it was a stag night you know'," I add.

"Very good. Did you just make that up?" he asks.

"I have to confess, no," I reply, "although it's my own joke I made it up years ago and have been just waiting for the opportunity to use it. Today was the day."

I recall last year's route march of soggy walkers heading for Tarfside. Being a day late there's only the two of us until we break onto the track to Westbank, where we are caught up by Roger Wiltshire who I can't help but notice is wearing odd boots. His two companions, having dropped out at Braemar, mean that some of his essential kit is in the wrong rucksack. Most importantly this appears to include his cigarettes and the money with which to purchase them. Paul lets him have one and Roger draws on it with relief.

We walk into Tarfside, we are the first to arrive, just missing the rain, and lap up the kindness of Ann, Janet and Marion. There are rooms galore and we each have one to ourselves. The evening passes with the meal, endless pieces of cake, conversation and tea.

I take my time getting going in the morning. It's a long walk to North Water Bridge but being split by a welcome rest in Edzell, it does not feel so far.

I set off again and amble down the road in the wake of Roger and Paul. I look for the bridge to cross the River North Esk to the good path of its south bank and like last year, miss it. I pick up one later which I only find by ploughing through marshy ground, in a ferocious hail storm, then following tracks back to the bridge.

On the far side I find a new pace and make good progress via Dalbog then the footpath that cuts the corner off the road into Edzell. As I pass the corner of a wood I jump out of my skin at a large explosion. It's right by my left ear and as my heart rate rescinds I see that it's a gas powered crow scarer located perfectly by a public footpath. This is my second experience of these for many years ago, while walking, I settled down for lunch without knowing one was right next to me. Like this time when it went off my whole world stood still for a moment.

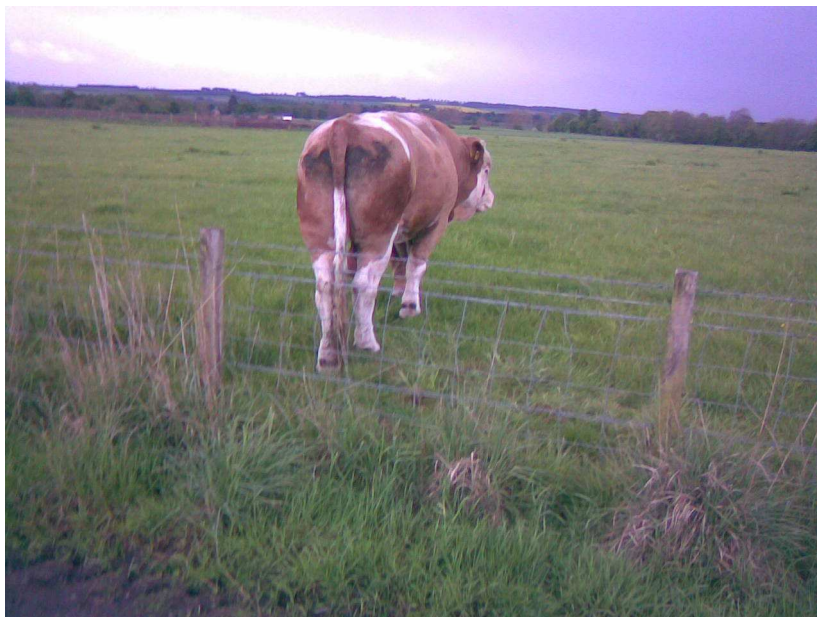


**The Crow Scarer, strategically positioned to scare walkers**

The pine trees of the wood sway and bow in the breeze and the wind rushes through the tops like the sea running up a sandy shore. To my right the short wheat shimmers in the wind, and gleams in the sun, as it rushes up the hillside. So perfect and green that if two Telletubies came bounding over the horizon I'd not have been surprised.

I rest and eat in Edzell and visit the Mace Shop. It's closed, early closing Thursday. I go to the Post Office for cash, this is closed too. Thankfully they were both shut; if only the shop had been open I'd then not have had the money to camp.

I take the familiar route across the River North Esk, pass the bull with the unfeasibly large testicles (he's a landmark and a legend in my book) and make my way through the farm roads to Chapelton before breaking off towards the public road that leads to the camp site.



**The bull with the unfeasibly large testicles in a shy pose**

This involves crossing one more field and, with my mind away with my thoughts, I suddenly become aware of a herd of young bulls prancing towards me. In a group of males there always has to be a cocky one and this is no exception as one stands forth, leaps and bounds and kicks its back legs like an Irish Setter. It takes me a second to realise it's my red jacket.

"Oh bullocks," I exclaim as the bastards move in. I'm walking next to a fence so I press my left hand down on the top wire and go to vault it. The next moment I'm yelling, "For Jesus Christ's sake," for the fence is electrified and my hand has just been flung off and is stinging like crazy. I now know what the man in the bothy was dreaming of, a thousand bullocks chasing him towards an electric fence.

In the excitement one of the bullocks tries to hump another, his prey is not having any of it and sharply moves forward which sets the others prancing closer to me. I suddenly discover why farming communities so often have deep West Country sounding voices. For, instinctively, I raise my trekking poles and yell, "Goo onnn, get out of 'ere". Surprisingly this works and they back off, though I do have to practise my new found skill twice more before I make the gate. On the roadside they gang up against the fence and stare at me. It takes a while to



switch on my mobile to take the picture, below, so I taunt them with my red jacket to keep their minds focused on the impending photo opportunity.



At the campsite I spend my last £7.31 on the camp fee, an ice cream and a bar of chocolate.

Roger Wiltshire is already here and watches intently as I make a mess of putting up my tent. A bearded, long haired chap arrives. I ask his name, it's Mark Storey. I ask of his adventures, how come he was missing for two days. It appears he'd changed his route and his message did not reach Challenge Control. We are joined by a couple from Surrey and Sheila Farley from Cousldon. Just five tents - the night before there'd have likely been seventy or eighty.

When I wake I breakfast then peer out. Roger has made one of his early starts and left me an egg by my tent flap (he'd offered eggs the night before). I'm bemused as to know what to do with it. Thoughts of having a baseball bat and getting it bowled to me merge with placing it on the road and watching a car crush it to throwing it as hard as I can against a wall. But my best plan feels to be to pop it into the toilet bowl and wonder at what the cleaner will think. Fortunately Mark stirs and claims it for his breakfast.

I change my destination to Montrose Bay, the plan of St Cyrus has been shelved because of the lack of bus fare to then get me to Montrose.

I pass more bullocks that, safely behind a fence, skip and charge. As I rise over a hill I get the first view of the sea. A welcome sight on what's been my quietest crossing. It's the first where I've not planned to meet anybody else and I wonder at myself for working alone, living alone and holidaying alone.



**First view of the sea**

I pass through the sand dunes, paddle in the sea and throw the small pebble I've carried from Mallaig. As I walk along the beach towards Montrose the sea runs up the sandy shore like the breeze rushing through the tops of the pine trees.







### **Montrose Bay**

I climbed the Corbetts of Sgurr na h-Aide, Carn Dearg, Meallach Mhor, Carn Dearg Mor, Leathad an Taobhain, Beinn Bhreac and Conachcraig on the TGO.

Corbett Count:	19 out of 221
Graham Count:	7 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

### **2012**

On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2012 the Scottish Mountaineering club demoted the Munro of Beinn a'Chlaidheimh to Corbett status. I climbed it as a Munro and as it's re-classified a Corbett I've added one to my Corbett count (the total of 221 Corbetts allows for this).

Corbett Count:	20 out of 221
Graham Count:	7 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59

### **2014**

"You're in my seat." It's May 8th, the train is somewhere between Euston and Glasgow and the stops are being called out of turn. A rather tall, slim forty something guy, who boarded at Wigan with the automatic announcer insisting on Warrington Bank Quay, is glaring down at me.

"I have it booked," I reply, fumbling for my reservation card.  
"No, it's mine," he replies.

We get into pathetic debate as to whether my reservation is for the aisle or the window seat. An argument I lose and, to be fair I had booked a rear facing, aisle seat close to the buffer car and the railway company has given me a forward facing seat as far from the buffer car as possible. Thus the likelihood of them having met my request, and given me an aisle seat, is very slim.

I conclude the negotiation by saying, "I can see you're going to be a pile of fun to sit next to for the next three hours." Always best to get the last word in, especially when you've lost.

After a further hour, entertaining myself by the train calls mismatching reality, my need for the loo has me plucking up the courage to ask the lanky, officious bastard (for that is how I've come to know him as he appears to have booked the armrest too) to let me out. He does so without comment and I make my way to the loo and read the instructions. There's a button on the outside to open it (okay I get that) then three buttons on the inside, Close, Open and Lock. I'm never quite sure if I have to press the Lock button after I have closed the door. It's fifty, fifty but I press it and a locked symbol appears. An announcement then begins confirming I have successfully locked the door followed by a list of things not to flush down the loo and I'm certain it includes goldfish. I press the Open button, the curved door swishes back and, while confusing the hell out of the guy waiting in the corridor, I press Close and then Lock again and re-listen to the announcement.

*Please don't flush Nappies, sanitary towels, paper towels, gum, old phones, unpaid bills, junk mail, your ex's sweater, hopes, dreams or goldfish down this toilet.*

I hadn't misheard.

At Glasgow I walk towards Queen Street looking up at the buildings I first saw when I worked here in 1990. A lot of years have passed since I was a mere twenty-five-year-old: I hope for many more to come. It feels like an age ago, it was "The European City of Culture" back then, a good buzz. Now as the years tick by things feel a little more serious, if more relaxed. I notice how many people smoke, a badge of honour for the Glaswegians about their daily tasks.

I buy a ticket for Fort William and start to feel the buzz of the TGO. I'm here, the first time in four years. I spot a woman, full pack and walking boots already on. I gamble on her being a TGO participant and wander into her proximity until the British-ness deserts us both and we strike a conversation. She's Brenda Manders from Nottingham. We are joined by two others and we exchange notes on starting places and routes and Jim Taylor – the ninety-one-year-old starting at the same place as me, Lochailort. Brenda reckons if I meet him he'll probably not look a day over seventy.

We join the same train but in separate sections as four carriages are for Oban and the other for Mallaig. The carriages are clearly marked on the station but the on-board display has my half for Oban when I need the Mallaig section. The announcement puts our minds at rest and I strike up a brief conversation with fellow challenger Karl Winkler, who has the window seat booked, before he promptly drops off to sleep.

He wakes on the crossing of Rannoch Moor and we comment on the station announcements being out of sync with reality. What I had put down as a Scottish brogue now sounds more Antipodean and I tease out his life story. Originally from Australia he emigrated with his English wife some twenty years ago.

I disembark at Fort William and stroll the main street and find the hotel. The receptionist, Rachel, on sharing some memory of the town tells me she was born in 1993. I definitely am feeling the passage of time. I sleep well, cook porridge in the bedroom, making use of the kettle, while ruing the changes where breakfast is no longer included in the room rate.

I get the bus to Lochailort, after a confusing conversation with the bus driver who had never heard of my pronunciation. Apparently you have to spit as you say it to make yourself understood. Fortunately I'm wearing my waterproofs so it all ends satisfactorily.

The bus pulls in and I'm just preparing to make the walk to the sea loch, to paddle my feet, when I disembark into a large puddle. Feet already wet I contemplate missing the walk to the coast but the purist in me wins through and I walk the mile to the coast, take in the sea air, walk back, sign out and note Jim Taylor signed out half an hour before me.

I walk along the road to Arieniskill, the preverbal cuckoo keeping me company, and take the path north east to the wooded area around Prince Charlie's Cave. That chap certainly got about a bit, there's caves named after him all over the place. The path through is not clear and I watch some distant challengers on a higher path and make my way up. I find myself in a deep gully with a stream hammering down to the lower ground. Watching the higher ground people turn back I contemplate descending the gully but figure some of the drops would not be re-ascendable should I not be able to make the bottom. I climb out the gully and pick my way down to a bridge over the River Meoble followed by a welcome track to Meoble where I head east over tough ground. Pigging peanuts as I go (I have replaced just about all day time food with dry roasted peanuts) I find flat ground a kilometre short of my proposed camp. I pitch at 1730, just in time for the rains which close in at 1800.

I wake, Saturday May 10<sup>th</sup>, to a damp tent; the underside of my sleeping mat is soaking. I search for a leak but reckon on condensation, dry it off with my towel, pack and take one look at the proposed route over the Graham of An Stac and abandon it. However, I partially take the route to find a safe crossing over the river before the drop to Loch Morar and the path to Oban bothy.

I find the uphill section towards Glen Pean painful going. There's headwind and my body is not getting into the spirit of what I am trying to achieve. I rest often as my legs ache and my breathing is laboured. The ground is boggy and the glen is a deep ravine with boulders the size of houses laying on the floor with the ominous gaps in the overhang marking their departure points.

I make it to the small loch that, on the map, appears trivial. I look to the right where the water meets a sharp face, cast my eyes to the left to an even sharper face with the water lapping against a shore-less boundary. There's a path stretching high up which I do not fancy the ascent of. I turn my attention back to the right and figure, with some scrambling and hand/toe traversing, I can get past the 500 meters of loch. Inhaling a handful of peanuts I set off and have a few hair-raising moments as I envelope my body around land protrusions with the water of the loch awaiting my every slip.



Beyond becomes downhill and the weather improves and I arrive at Glen Pean bothy at 1730, just before the rains set in. I was last here in 2001; only graffiti, adding to the earliest from 1966, marks the passage of time. A party of non-TGO walkers have the downstairs and I spend a lonely evening in the attic rooms. I note my habit of picking lonely routes with lofty ambitions of Corbetts and Grahams which I invariably abandon due to the weight of my pack.

Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup> and I am off at 0620 on a tricky route through tree felling operations. I'm frequently stumped having to backtrack around boggy ground and felled timber. It saps the strength from my legs before I get back onto decent tracks that take me to Strathan. I survey my proposed route on the high ground south of Loch Arkaig and promptly elect for the road walk that I once swore I'd never do again. I meet fellow TGO walkers and we share stories. I ask after ninety-one-year-old Jim Taylor and there are stories that he arrived at Kinbreak bothy soaked through after falling into a river; that he's not carrying a stove, is mixing porridge with cold water for sustenance and likes to keep himself to himself.

I find the road walk tiring and boring with my only company the call of the cuckoo. I munch through handfuls of peanuts and recall how difficult it is to find a place to pitch my tent on this road. After six hours I spot an ideal place to camp: although short of how far I planned to get it gives the advantage of a longer walk into Spean Bridge tomorrow and, perhaps, not a repeat of my last visit when I arrived early and had time to kill before my room was ready.

The tent is sodden from the night before last but it soon dries inside before it starts to rain again. I keep the flaps open to stop the inside becoming too damp and the downside of over consumption of peanuts at bay. Let's just say that

striking a match had to be done with some consideration. I manage to tune into an Irish radio station that obligingly covers the English football.

I wake in the early hours but don't get going until 0720 having spent around 17 hours tent bound. The weather is fairly kind through the laborious road walk to Spean Bridge via Achnacarry and Gairloch.

I stop to watch some tree felling and am impressed and absorbed by the modern machinery. A head of multiple cutters and universal joints sits at the end of a long arm attached to a caterpillar type of vehicle. A tree is grabbed by its base, sawn through and is allowed to drop to the ground with the cutters still gripping it. It is then pulled through the cutters that strip the foliage and bark and chop the tree into lengths. Each 200ft tree is dealt with in the matter of a minute.

I press on to Spean Bridge via the Commando Memorial and arrive at the Spean Bridge Hotel at 1255. I ring the bell a number of times and, at 1310, am greeted with, "Are you waiting?"

"Yes," I reply politely, and we then go through the routine of hunting for my booking.

"You are in one of the chalets," she says.

"Not the hotel?" I ask, chalet to me has the hint of a ninety seventies shed.

"No you have asked for a chalet on your booking."

"Did I?"

"Yes, 'a non-dog friendly chalet' is what you put on your booking form."

I take a look and read back, "A non dog-friendly chalet please as I have allergies."

"That's right," she says.

"No what I meant was I didn't want to be in a dog-friendly chalet as advertised as being available on your website."

"That's right and we are putting you in a non-dog friendly chalet."

"But I didn't mean chalet," I add.

"But that's what you have asked for."

"No room in the hotel?"

"No we have a party of eighteen in."

"Okay, never mind. Does it have en suite?"

"Yes. You are in chalet 2A."

"Okay," I reply while thinking 2A suggests that number 2 has been partitioned. She leads me through the rear car park to a series of ninety seventies looking sheds. At 2A she turns the key and gives the door a deft kick to get it moving. She doesn't go in and instead hands me the key.

At £53 for a room only (what happened to the built in breakfasts we all once enjoyed?) it's lousy. The window frames are caked with mould and set off the pine cladding and woodchip wallpaper a treat. The curtains are pink, old, translucent and depressing; the bathroom has equal quantity of mould with a laughable sign explaining that the hot water, which is barely lukewarm, can scold.

I shower, which floods the floor, and set about hanging up the tent to dry. I switch on the two fan heaters to dry the clothes I wash out using hot water from the shower. I then realise my mistake, I've littered the room so a complaint might involve an inspection.

I wander into the hotel for a look around. The commando museum is interesting but the VHS video at £4 can hardly be a hot seller. At least it wasn't Betamax. I walk down to the Little Chef, closed for good then back to the coach trip orientated café attached to a shop and wool mill. It's as depressing as when I was here in the ninety nineties. Nothing has changed with tourists presumably

underwhelmed by banality of the food and facilities. Scotland, one of the most beautiful places on the planet, has nothing very exciting for the tourist that does not want to venture out on foot.

I order a baked potato and a peppermint tea. When it arrives I refrain from my tired argument that a microwaved potato is a jacket potato and not a baked potato. I've had the discussion too many times, I'm beyond caring, and although I consider I do well on the intellectual side of the debate I never quite feel I get my point across. The tea is a pot of hot water, a cup and an unopened teabag. Getting your teabag popped in the hot water is like the costed in hotel breakfast or NHS dentistry - both just slipped away with nobody really noticing or complaining.

I spend an hour trying to get a decent picture on the TV in the room. There's a constant buzz on one channel with all the others silent and flicking. I give up, read, do more washing then go in search of an evening meal. At reception I ask, "What time is the dining room open?" "It's closed this evening, booked out by the party of eighteen. You can eat in the bar."

I venture to the bar, nothing for the vegetarian on the menu but they manage to make me a vegetarian lasagne. I get a text from Alison Ogden saying that David Albon had a fall and was walked out by Heather Thomas-Smith and picked up by Alison this morning. This has left Heather with a 40km walk with an estimated arrival time of 2100. I take a stroll to see if I can find her walking in. I pick the wrong route so call at her B&B around 2130 to find she's arrived safely. I text Alison back then hear more of David's accident. He fell around 200 meters, bouncing past Heather and going over a lip. Heather descended to his motionless body fearing the worse. Fortunately David was only badly bruised and had a deep cut to his leg which Heather (according to Doctor Alison) did an excellent job of patching up.

I wake early on the 13<sup>th</sup>, the aged thin curtains cutting out no light. I take my time repacking and estimating the amount of peanuts I'll need. My digestion moans at the thought and I manage to give away two packets to the hotel receptionist. Breakfast is served at 0730, half an hour early, and the hotel further redeems itself by providing an excellent feast which, by all calculations, will delay the need to reach for the peanuts.

Peanuts are not the only variation I've made for this crossing. Investing in a lightweight pack with a frame is a great improvement on my previous frameless one. It's comfortable whichever way I load it and there's a large side pocket which means I can erect and dismantle the tent while keeping the rest of my kit dry. Finding the pack cover and the drinking water pipe more hindrance than help I've dispensed with their services: the biggest hardship is now the mere two hundred miles of walking.

I make my way past the station and, accompanied by the call of the cuckoo, I take in the minor road to Corriechoille where I branch south east onto the tracks. It's warm and I find the gentle ascent tiresome and elect to miss the planned Corbett of Sgurr Innse and rest for lunch at the bothy. I am joined by John and Sue Plume and their companion, Jane Asell and shortly after by John Sanderson. I tuck into my peanuts and, as they pull out readymade sandwiches from the Spar Shop in Spean Bridge, I rue not having done the same. We share humorous incidents from past challenges and hill walking, including stays at Gerry Howkins independent hostel at Achnashellach. We also discuss she-wees at length.





**Looking back in the direction of Spean Bridge**

Sue mentions a group of German lads that are walking through the Glen and they obligingly put in an appearance. On their departure, with reference to Gerry's independent hostel, I take leave to recount the time I was relaxing alone in the common room when I was interrupted by a minor commotion outside terminated by the opening of the common room door.

"Hello, how much is it to stay in the hostel?" the accent was distinctly German.

The figure was a strapping young German man.

"Nine pounds a night," I replied.

"Nine pounds a night. But we have, how you say it, a Youth Hostel discount card."

"This is not a Youth Hostel," I replied in what I hoped was a helpful voice.

"But it says on the map that it is a hostel." These Germans were sticklers.

"Not a Youth Hostel, it is a private hostel." With that the spokesman disappeared. I sensed, heard and saw much movement about the outside. The door then swung open again and there appeared a second appointed spokesman.

"You are Gerry?" he asked.

"No, English," I replied.

Jane, who is Danish, finds this particularly amusing. Though from my perspective I know a comedian is dead when he has to draw on old material to beef up new work.

I mention the impressive tree felling machine I'd witnessed the other day and John Sanderson explains that it is computer controlled with the saw mills requirements programmed in such that the machine will sense the width of the trunk and cut the logs to length to fulfil the order. For better or for worse the days of two chaps with a saw have long gone.

I press on but take the wrong track and have to cut east, in a bitterly cold breeze, to pick up the route via the Allt na Lairige to the southern shores of Loch Treig. It warms up and I find the route slow and draining and constantly review the time it'll take to get to Peter's Rock.



**The Southern Shore of Loch Treig**

At 1655, eight hours into my day and five days into my walk I catch glimpse of the West Highland Railway line that I travelled up on. At 1840 and very slow, I reach what Sue Oxley refers to as "Puke Island", the site of my upset stomach in 2006 where I spent a miserable night, camped alongside Sue, in a massive gale and a stomach that required me to exit the tent on numerous occasions all but two of which I made it out of the sleeping bag.

Due to a hydroelectric scheme "Puke Island" is no more and now sports an impressive bridge.



**Puke Island with new wooden bridge in the bottom right. The metal bridge is the West Highland Railway.**

I look at the map and figure I've gone as far as I can for the day and start to pitch the tent. I make poor progress until I discover the inner is twisted such that at one end I'm effectively pegging it upside down.

I cook and remove my walking shoes to discover a new phenomenon – swollen ankles. They both look quite puffy and I start to prod them in some attempt to explain what is going on.

I doze, sleep and listen to the occasional train pass. I have to force my aching body out of the sleeping bag to get going. Half a mile in to the new day I smell a cigarette and soon get talking to its owner, an old chap from the North West with a musical Scottish accent employed to work on the new roads for the hydro project. He points out Schiehallion and I press on and pass Loch Ossian and, amidst a game of distinguishing between the noises of trains, plant machinery and rushing water, I take a total of two hours, across boggy ground, to get to Peter's Rock.





**Loch Ossian**

My plan is to take in the Corbett of Meall na Meoig but, having started at 0700 and taken until 1230 to the branch in the path to start the ascent, I elect to take my foul weather alternative with a view to getting myself on schedule to take in the fellow Corbett of Beinn Mholach tomorrow. However, it soon becomes apparent that my pace is so slow that my estimate to get to the Struan Inn at Calvine tomorrow is slipping back to a very late arrival.

I survey the map for alternatives and reckon on dropping to the B846 and B847 and road walk it. I don't have all of the route on the map but, luckily, at this precise moment a walker passes who has the full OS maps. I'm able to check the route as he points out Schiehallion and gives me an apple and advice that the terrain of my original route would be extremely hard going. I ask if he knows of any places to get food on the road, he shakes his head. I resolve to make do with road kill cuckoo.



**Not a very helpful sign**

I press on down to where the track meets the road a few miles east of Rannoch Station and begin the long road walk. Schiehallion looks very distant. With a good phone signal I text Challenge Control requesting the grid reference of where the B846 and B847 meet and then text my boss at work asking him to use [www.theaa.com](http://www.theaa.com) to calculate the distance for me.

Both come up trumps and I know the task ahead of me. I pause at the Bridge of Erich to gather water. The signs of human occupation have me climbing over a fence and lowering myself via the bridge parapet through discarded garden waste to the river below. I press on and am impressed with how the local council have embraced the land reform act by providing bins and helpful signs along the shores of Loch Rannoch. A woman stops her car to check I'm okay and we have a nice chat. At 1630, and a short distance past the Rannoch Power Station, I camp on the beautiful shores of the loch. The water laps gently against a sandy beach as birds call and the trees swish in the evening breeze.

I wake early on the 15<sup>th</sup> and get going at 0725 for the 21 mile road walk to Calvine. It's a long plod without a map to check progress against. Therefore I use my GPS and the grid reference texted by Roger Smith on Challenge Control to plot my progress towards the B847. It feels like that, at last, I'm beginning to rein in Schiehallion and, after making use of a café in Kinloch Rannoch for lunch, reach the junction at 1310.

I slog my way up the initial section of the B847 and, to mark progress, pick off distant power lines and hamlets until I reach the edge of Calvine. As I take the small road which branches off to the Struan Inn I reflect that, after a ten and a half hour day, I've never been so pleased to see the A9.

"Mr Smith?"

"Yes," I reply to man waiting at the gate of the Victorian hotel.

"Welcome to the Struan Inn."

"Great, thanks."

I'm shown into the bar area where a log burner radiates its welcoming heat. I contemplate whether they'd mind if I dried my undies in front of it. I complete the registration and my order for evening meal and breakfast (included in the room rate) are taken. I'm shown to my lovely room and take a shine to the piping hot radiator where I can dry clothes. In all it's only six pounds more expensive than the Spean Bridge Hotel. They should pay a visit, especially if they want to watch the telly.

At the evening meal the chair is pulled out for me as I take my table. I couldn't imagine such service at the Spean Bridge Hotel but reflect that to be fair, the chairs are bolted to the wall there.

I listen to the distant chat from the bar. The baritone of an aged colonial type describes his days fishing. The food is delicious but I decline pudding and a cup of tea but do rather suspect that if I'd imbibed the teabag would have been taken out of its envelope for me.

I sleep well and at breakfast an elderly lady is shown to the table next to me.

"Is the colonel having a nice time?" asks the waitress.

"I think he is," replies the old lady. The ancient colonel arrives, leg stockings to the knee with tweed breeches above, and announces his presence with his baritone voice. His wife chooses her conversation to test his mood as he complains about the wages he has to pay his gillie.

I get going around 0920 and cross under the double-decker bridges formed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century road bridge and the 19<sup>th</sup> century rail bridge that flies over. I'm slow along the roads and tracks to Old Blair but the weather is warm with a gentle breeze which the trees rustle their leaves to as the proverbial cuckoo makes its call.

Beyond Old Blair I'm on mountain tracks and, as I descend towards Gilberts Bridge, I spy a couple in front of me. They appear to be man and woman and are donned with full packs. Without TGO company for the last three days I pick up my pace and make better use my trekking poles. Suddenly, with a cooling wind behind me, I'm really motoring and I catch them at Marble Lodge. I then debate whether they are man and woman or woman and woman. It's a close call and, neither being on the TGO, I am bereft of an answer or company. I press on at my new found pace until I rest beyond Forest Lodge in Glen Tilt. I reflect I was last in this glen in 1998 with accompanying mountain bike aiding my Munro tally.



**The beautiful Glen Tilt**



**Forest Lodge, miles from the nearest road**



The glen is stunning, beautiful with a meandering river, rich green grass set off by a deep blue sky. I am caught by fellow challengers Sue Foss and Bill Rettie with Robert and Fionna Ridgwell shortly behind. It's good to hear their stories.

"What challenge is this for you?" I ask.

"The first and the last," replies Fionna. Only Robert has done a challenge before, Bill and Sue are enjoying themselves but Fionna is really struggling. We compare maps and discover my campsite is the same as theirs. It's a lovely spot, just beyond the Francis Bedford Memorial Bridge.



**The Francis Bedford Memorial Bridge – a fine Victorian Structure**



**The view upstream from the bridge**





**Our campsite on the north bank of the bridge**

I pitch next to Sue and we exchange challenge stories so far. Apparently ninety-one-year-old Jim Taylor is still going well and I catch a few other familiar names. We chat until the cooling air has me snuggled away in my tent and I sleep to the sound of the river tumbling on by.

I add clothes throughout the cold night and, when dawn comes, wait for the sun to rise to begin to dry the tent. I finish it off with my pack towel and we are all ready to set off together. Fionna discovers a hole in the bottom of her rucksack, a

hole in the bag of raisins inside and the bag of raisins now empty. Sue has duct tape to patch up the passage of some pesky mouse.

It's 0900 when we say our goodbyes some half a kilometre north of our campsite. I'm heading across to the ruin of Altanour Lodge where I plan to camp for a foray across the Corbett of Morven tomorrow whereas the others are aiming for Mar Lodge via the Linn of Dee.

I'm quick up onto the high ground then very slow across. The highest point is peaty but manageable before I descend into Glen Ey. I reach the ruin and recognise it from a Munro mountain biking approach in 1998. I look for a pitch and view the route to Morven. I'm just not up to it. The Corbetts I have selected for this crossing should be straightforward but my mind and body are protesting at the thought. I look at the ascent, descent and re-ascent and, with a sore throat and a tight right calf muscle, elect to head to Mar Lodge, via Inverey, for some company.

Mar Lodge is full so I sit in the annex room and get through two mugs of soup and exchange stories with other challengers. I ask after Jim Taylor and hear he is still going. I mention whether he's the last challenger to cross having fought in the Second World War. This is likely confirmed and I learn he was RAF ground crew.

I camp by Victoria Bridge, twisting my body around the lumpy ground and my now punctured sleeping mat. At just after 0700, on Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup>, I'm ready to tackle the road to Braemar, a tedious journey I had vowed never to walk again.

I make Braemar at around 0830 and attempt to book myself a room at The Fife Arms hotel.

"Yes, we have one room free."

"How much will that be?"

"Sixty five pounds," replies the young Romanian woman.

"Does that include breakfast?"

"Yes. Do you want an evening meal?"

"How much extra is that?" I ask.

"For a non-resident it'll be twenty one pounds."

"Given I'm resident how much will it be?"

"Sixty five pounds."

"Erm, I think I'll give dinner a miss."

"Okay, let me check again." She types on the computer, "Oh I see it's the same price. Sixty five pounds is for dinner, bed and breakfast."

"I'll take it. What time can I have the room?"

"Three o'clock."

"Any chance of sooner?"

We agree on 1300 and I go in search of today's breakfast. The Old Bakery, a favourite with challengers, does me a fantastic meal and I get chatting to fellow challenger, Martin Angell.

Sat in the lounge of the Fife Arms I get chatting to Alan Sloman, Phil Lambert, Andrew Walker and Mike Akin-Smith. All challengers of old it's good to see the familiar faces. I pop back to the Old Bakery for lunch and am joined by Sue Foss, Bill Rettie and Kate Kowalska. I ask after Fionna and she's still struggling.

I have supper with Mike and Paul Myerscough with a repeat performance at breakfast. Setting off at around 0900 I walk with Mike for the three hours along the tracks and forest to Gelder Shiel bothy. I settle down for the rest of the day as he heads off to Shielin of Mark.



**Gelder Shiel – the bothy is to the right**

The skies form a backdrop of tranquillity as the afternoon light contrasts the trees from the land and draws ones eyes into the distance. The leaves make their whispered hushes as the shadows become the objects.

I am joined by Stuart Dixon and Darren Fowler, prison officers from Durham. I glance over the bunk filled room and figure this must feel like a busman's holiday. We chat about the state of the nation, the state of crime and the state of the prisons. I ask how drugs manage to get into prisons. There's a variety ways from a dead pigeon thrown over the prison wall, kissing a prisoner goodbye to an offender 'loading up' on the day of sentencing.

Darren declares himself a snorer and duly camps outside. Stuart keeps quiet. That is until about 0100 whereupon he tests the structure of the bothy with some roof raising snoring. I make do with snatched sleep while listening to the BBC's World Service.



**Lochnagar from Gelder Shiel**



I make a good start at 0810, cutting from the bothy up to the track which, in the cool blue sky of the morning, sweeps around the mountains and drops towards Loch Muick. My throat is sore but the light breeze and blue skies make up for it. Lochnagar towers on the horizon behind me as I meet a woman ascending. We stop for a chat.

"Are you camping out?" I ask, while surveying her pack.

"No, I've a wee job collecting water samples."

I contemplate asking her how often she's practised that sentence. A slight mix up could be embarrassing.

"Is that your main job?"

"No I'm an artist, based in Aviemore."

"Watercolour or oils?" I ask trying to appear knowledgeable.

"Mixed media, I tend to do people and animals."

We enthuse on the beauty of the surroundings. She asks why I don't move up, the prospect suddenly got better but I relay my time in Glasgow when I got hassle for being English.

"That's a real shame," she adds. We then say our goodbyes.

From the Loch Muick Visitor Centre I make the streamed gully ascent towards the high ground of the Shielin of Mark. I plan to stay here but, sat in the bothy at 1330 with a lonely afternoon of peanut munching ahead I wonder about pressing on. There's an unopened flapjack on the table along with other food left behind. The flapjack is welcome and I munch my way through. I resurvey the table and a thought strikes me that perhaps this is a walker's supper who is currently out for a hike. I make a swift exit after logging my progress in the bothy book and noting Sheila Farley is only half an hour ahead of me.

I reach Muckle Cairn in half an hour and get caught in a brief storm. I check my compass so I hit Glen Lee and pass the uninviting Stables of Lee. My throat is still bad and my right calf muscle tight but I am making good ground. I run into Sheila, resting with sore knee and ankle. We walk to the end of Loch Lee then on to where the path branches off to Tarfside. We say our goodbyes, she's been great company and is very strong with a pack weight almost twice that of mine.

I cross the fields and tracks to Tarfside where, in the evening sun, I'm chasing down my lengthening shadow. I've now caught up with the TGO pack and first run into Bert and Suus from Holland. Other familiar faces appear on the village green and I pitch the tent before wandering up to the hostel. This year it's being run by the Over The Hill Club. I get made a bowl of soup and made to feel welcome. I drop in at The Mason's Arms and the barman has trouble finding me something non-alcoholic.

I enjoy the company and ask after Jim Taylor and Fionna. There's no news on Jim but there are many stories of how much Fionna is struggling.

I wake to rain drumming on the tent and some impressive, unshielded by canvas, snoring. I gather my things, make my porridge and set off on the long road to Edzell. I walk awhile with Barbara Sanders and Peter Kenyon before catching up with Tina Davis and father and son team of Graham and Peter Lewis. They show me an alternative route via the Rocks of Solitude. We are caught up by Mike Akin-Smith and we walk out together. The scenery is stunning, with a deep gully to the river below the path hangs on the edge of the ravine with the light playing through the trees onto the clear, tumbling water below.

In Edzel I eat with Tina, Graham and Peter before the haul, with a painful calf muscle to North Water Bridge. It's a lovely evening but I'm tired and retire to my tent. I wake at some unearthly hour and, by get walking at 0520, dip my feet into the North Sea a little before 0900. I can't enjoy the finish as I'm desperate for the loo (the type of desperation where it's impossible to paddle both feet simultaneously) so make a hasty retreat to the Park Hotel.

The receptionist takes a look at me and says, "You'll be wanting the Kinnaird Room."

"It's been hard enough as it is," I reply.

She doesn't get the joke but tells me the Kinnaird Room is where the TGO sign out point is.

"I need the loo first," and she points me in the direction.

As I wash my hands a sun bronzed challenger walks in.

"Is that John Hooper?" I ask.

The man stops in his tracks.

"Yes," but I don't know you.

I tell him how we walked together on his first challenge, about his redundancy package and the death of his mother-in-law.

"You've got an incredible memory," he says.

"Things just stick in my mind," I reply.

"I'm really sorry but I don't remember you at all."

"No problem," I say and to be fair if some random bloke stopped me in the gents toilet and told me my life history I'd deny all knowledge.

I walk into the Challenge Control room and am greeted with a hug by Alison Ogden. I never got that service from Roger Smith, but hey ho times move on. Alison is in the process of moving her family to Newtonmore, having taken over the hostel there with Sue and Neil Oxley.

"We are about to exchange contracts on a house there," she says excitedly.

"Oh great. What's it like?"

"It's a shed with a toilet."

I try and look enthusiastic. As a bothy goes it would be luxury but as domestic accommodation I'm having reservations.

"You'll have to come and stay."

"Sounds like it needs a lot of work," I reply.

"It does, it's made of wood, six bedrooms, four fire places and up a track. But the toilet is fantastic. Great views."

"What from the toilet?"

"Turret Steve, turret."

"How is Jim Taylor doing?" I ask.

"He finished yesterday, amazing and he doesn't look a day over seventy," Alison replies.

I get a handshake from John Manning and some nice comments about my blog from Gayle Faulkner. I check the train times, 1033 there's a direct train to Kings Cross and I head off. Challenge number seven complete and the certificate to prove it.

With no Corbetts or Grahams climbed this year the totals remain remarkably the same as last year's.

Corbett Count:	20 out of 221
Graham Count:	7 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	0 out of 59



## 2015

May Day and I set off, from Great Bedwyn, at 0900 for three weeks in Scotland. I've not applied for the TGO the year so this is my first trip to Scotland in the campervan. I make good progress despite feeling the need for frequent stops and the craving for Pringles. The assistant, at one service station, is apologetic at the £3.39 price but when you've got the craving needs must and all that.

I park up north of Moffat on a high pass. I switch on my phone and it reports no wifi signal. Well 'no shit Sherlock' but I suppose I'm grateful for it letting me know.

I wake on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, am out walking at 0900 sporting, of all things a truss. My right hernia has become so troublesome that a wise investment is paying dividends. Though my family, on my announcing of this purchase of "my first truss", found this all highly amusing.

A warm wind turns to a bitter chill as I ascend on the Annadale Way with its dips, ascents and spiky grass shimmering as the wind caresses the pale green hills. A tedious wind farm rotates, beyond a plantation of conifers, to my left.

At 1050 I reach a tall stile which beckons me across a deer fence to the Donald summit of Whitehope Heights. My first attempt has me slipping off and grabbing at a rail. My second attempt has me more cautious with a now broken thumb nail catching on the inside of my glove. There's an attractive cairn surrounded by small outliers poised like a primary school reading group.

I push on, through some high level snow, and at 1230 reach the trig point denoting the Corbett summit of Hart Fell. With some navigation, requiring persistent adjustment and passing some very impressively horned goats, I take in the Donald summit of Swatte Fell and its tops of Nether Coomb Craig and Falcon Craig. It's four hours forty five minutes into the day and I'm at my furthest point. Snow is blowing in, the undulations are tiring and with frequent stops, pangs of hunger I make it back to Hugo (my campervan) at 1820.

As the evening unfolds a storm sweeps in. The exposed position has the van rocking. My Australian friend, Steve Hampton, on first seeing the van informed me that in Australia a sticker stating "If the vans a rocking don't come a knocking" would be mandatory. Under the circumstances of the storm a poor soul coming a knocking probably would have been allowed in.

At around 0900, and with no further chance of sleep, I open the back door which is promptly wrenched out of my hand and swings violently against the body of the van. I fight it shut then try my luck with the driver's door. This also is wrenched out of my hand and unidentified bits of paper, from the door pocket, take off with no chance of catching them.

As I gingerly make my way to Moffat I reflect on how, in my days of Munro bagging, I used to set off in such conditions. With luck, and wisdom, on my side, I find a parking place by a café. With a welcome cheese and mushroom omelette consumed I return to the van and take a look at possible routes. "Gathersnow Hill" is the nearest and lowest but the name gives me the hint to steer clear. I text Alison Ogden for news of weather in Newtonmore: despite dire forecasts the local Grahams are clear of snow and, with an invite for a visit and supper, I drive up and have great company with her, Adrian and their daughter Ellen. I take delight honouring a pledge to myself by telling Ellen how, in 2004 as a baby, she first tasted beer, from her dad's pint glass, when I met up with them on the TGO.

I sleep in the camper but, with use of their loo and washing facilities, I'm in the lap of luxury. Alison, who is building up for the forthcoming TGO Challenge, accompanies me up the Graham of Creag Dhubh. Well to be strictly true I accompany her as my contribution to the route extended no further than lending her my new SMC guide to "The Grahams & The Donalds."



**The summit of Creag Dhubh**

My hips give me grief (a new found problem) so I bargain for breaks and, like a child using delaying tactics to avoid going to bed, spark up a new conversation each time she makes to set off.

A fence crossing, some heather clad steep climbing, and a final rocky ridge walk has us at the summit at 1115. The view down to Newtonmore, the snow clad Cairngorms beyond, has us scanning the landscape for familiar tops and locations in and around the area. The valley river, with oxbow deviations, tributaries and pools glints in the sun and shimmers in the wind.

We head back down, following the ridge all the way this time. The wind is sharp and I have to rest often as my hips are smarting. We talk about the TGO, Ali and Sue Oxley are now the event coordinators. It's a mammoth task, sometimes thankless. The final stretch through a budding birch wood sees us to the road at 1345.

May the 5<sup>th</sup> I wake to the ongoing radio election coverage. It's getting interesting with Labour announcing no deals with the SNP which appears to have left the SNP dumbfounded and their plot to hold the balance of power in tatters. I'm parked in Danny Alexander's seat (well not quite as it sounds): he may well lose to the SNP

having served the UK, in what I feel is a statesman like way, for the last five years.

Still, never mind, there's hills to be bagged and I'm off at 0830 heading for the Graham of Creag Liath from the road head of Glen Banchor. Memories flood back of my TGO and Munro bagging exploits in this area. My map, dating from 1989, is out of date with forestry plantations so the wisdom of the guidebook is held in check as I walk to Glenballoch. I stop to cover skin worn off my ankle and adjust the truss which experimentally I'm wearing on the outside of my trousers. Though I have slipped my waterproof trousers over the top so I don't appear as somebody a mother would hurry her children past.

I take the rough track on the east bank of Allt Fionndrigh making the bridge at 1000 in persistent drizzle. To my left the Graham looms above me with an overhanging cornice of snow on the col between the main and minor summits.

From the bridge I climb the slope before starting the ascent for real. Only a minor path tracks through the sodden heather which, in most places, is perpetuated with the imprint of hoof rather than walker's boot. The col brings some rest before the ravaging wind fights with me to the summit. It's 1115, early so I head west to take in a minor top before the wet descent back to Hugo, arriving at 1300.

I drive into Newtonmore and order an all day veggie breakfast at a tearoom as the rain smacks the windows and water drips off me. The café is run by an elderly woman with a gentle peaceful nature that makes one slow down for her and return every smile and every act of kindness. My next stop is the co-op to buy cheese and Pringles – fat, protein and carbohydrate, perfect mountain food. I then drive to Garva Bridge with the intention of reading, listening to the radio, cooking supper and having the Pringles and cheese as a late evening treat. Half an hour after parking the Pringles and cheese are gone, half an hour after that I'm fast asleep and don't wake until after 2300. I stay awake for about an hour and sleep through to 0700 on the 6<sup>th</sup>.

My stop at Garva Bridge is twofold, to bag the Corbett of Meall na h-Aisre and to reconnoitre the area as a place to park up next week and offer out hot chocolate to those funnelling through on the TGO.

I start walking at 0835 and note a new road carved under the power lines. At my first pee stop I realise I have forgotten the truss but feel none the worse for its absence. I follow the rumbling burn, passing the fresh smell of the pine forests. There's rain in the air but I feel in my stride, home is a distant memory, and am quite at ease with the 'one a day' nature of the Corbetts and Grahams. With 445 in all it means a lot of days in the hills but without the option to string many multiples into single walks the days are shorter reducing the need for rest days.

I pass a rotting sheep, where an ill placed foot would have been most unwelcome, sinking into the waterlogged peat. Its hollowed out eyes and protruding ribs a reminder of the harsh terrain.

I'm casual about crossing a stream and the final rock tilts and my left foot slides for a dunking. I ring out a sock and look ahead, past the trees and, across a snow line to the clouds protecting the summit beyond.

Near the summit is a myriad of channels of melting snow and peat. I cross a snow field, kicking my trail shoes deep and steadying with my trekking poles to avoid a slide. Beyond the going gets easy and I reach the cloud clad summit

plateau and the rounded trig point pillar of Meall na Arse (as I have just renamed it) at 1200.

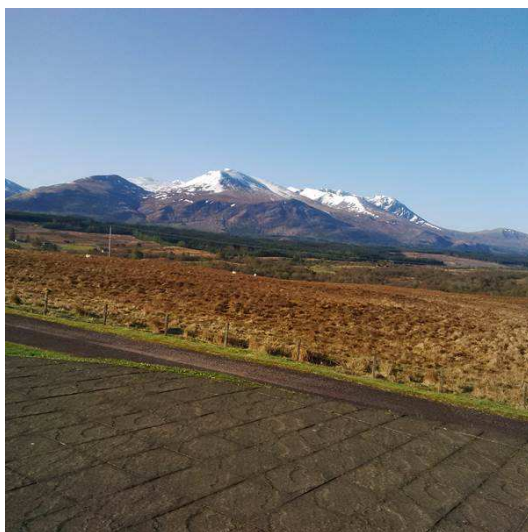
The rain becomes a constant drizzle as I begin my descent. I find myself in a deep gully, picking my way down towards the stream. It's not a place for a slip and I risk assess every step, lowering myself slowly on the wet grass and rock. I pass a receding snow field, the grass still flattened on its perimeter. Garva Bridge comes into focus as I squelch my way back to Hugo.

May the 7<sup>th</sup>, General Election day with my postal vote already sent off, I head towards Melgarve Bothy to take in the Corbett of Garbeinn. Pulling up, with snow beating against the windscreen and a view of snow clad mountain tops, has me turning around and heading towards the bridge east of Glenshero Lodge for an ascent of the Graham, Creag Ruadh.

Another 0835 start as I follow lovely tree lined gravel tracks with blue sky and white clouds and a blustery chill wind. Birds call, others chirp and there's not a soul in sight. The track hugs the massif of Meall and Sithen until I branch off where the forestry fence scoots off up the hill. It forms a virtual handrail and I make good progress through the wet, tussock ridden ground. There's a rocky outcrop to scramble over, it takes a few minutes and I look back. A wall of snow is belting down the glen and, like a pedestrian about to be soaked by a passing car, I brace myself for its slap. I shudder with its cold, press on and navigate around the water of Loch na Lairige before another pull up onto high ground reveals the summit trig point in front of me.

It's another cylindrical, vertical, concrete affair and at 1020 I tuck below it and take in the superb views. To my right is a mountain encompassed loch with a tree clad island with waves of water breaking into white ripples. Cloud moves rapidly and the wind chills me.

I make some navigational errors on my descent and map and compass until I sort myself out. Another snow storm catches me before I find my handrail of the deer fence. The track is as delightful as before, the weather is consistent and varies only with my altitude. I make it back to the campervan at 1210.



**My first and last Munros**

I park up at the Commando Memorial above Spean Bridge and look out on the fantastic views of the snow clad tops of Carn Mor Dearg (my first Munro in May

1990) and Aonach Mor (my last Munro in July 2001) with Ben Nevis poking up behind.

I people watch as various parties stop for photo opportunities of the vista, the Commando Memorial and themselves. Some with arms round one another, others a few feet apart and a few with the new fad of a stick attached to a mobile phone for the modern day 'selfie'.

The election coverage begins at 2200, I get two hours sleep during the night as I listen to the events unfold. When I open the blinds, on May 8<sup>th</sup>, the only thing remaining blue in Scotland is the cloudless sky.

I drive past Spean Bridge Station and take the minor road then track to Lairig Leacach at just over 500ft above sea level. The landscape is open with mountains on every backdrop. I start out at 0930 for the long track walk before I can start the climb of the Corbett of Sgurr Inse. It's at least my fourth trip on this track but this Corbett has always evaded me; I climbed its neighbour, Cruach Innse, in 2006.

From the track the ground is wet and I pick my route to keep my feet dry. The morning ground frost has visibly cleared but my feet slip on the semi-icy grass. Sgurr Innse towers as a block of rock sat on a grassy mound. As I reach the outer confines I pick my route, taking care not to place my foot on ice. I crack the top of a puddle and press on as the icy air teases my face.

A faint path zigzags around the hazards until I reach the small summit cairn at 1230. Cloud is drifting in but the tops remain clear. I backtrack, find a better looking path that I soon abandon as it takes me to a scree encrusted chimney. I re-ascend and find the path I followed up. Crossing open peat ridden ground I pick my way to the track for the lengthy walk back to Hugo (1440).

Saturday May 9<sup>th</sup> and I start, at 0810 from the car park below the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Church, Cille Choirill, in Glen Spean and pass through the well kept churchyard which sits on either side of a mound. Crossing its corner fence I enter a bracken clad sloped field before an open gate takes me onto the open hillside leading to the Graham of Creag Dhubh.

The sky is pure blue, a cuckoo calls and the hills are a mixture of snow, squares of commercial pine forest and red heather. It feels like I'm covering a lot of ground as the forgiving slope takes 2km to reach the summit trig point and cairn.



**Creag Dhubh and the view beyond**

I reach the summit at 1010 and sit and take in the views. The road and railway snake through the floor of the glen, a bumble bee takes an interest in my blue pack. I sit for an hour and a half; all thoughts of taking in the Graham on the opposite side of the glen are put to one side as I soak in the peace and shake off my tiredness. I make the hour return to Hugo as the cloud blows in.

Sunday May 10<sup>th</sup> starts with rain hammering on the roof of my campervan. I get going, from my parking place by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Church, at 0850. The summit of Cnap Cruinn is in cloud as I walk down the church track, crossing the road, rail bridge, river footbridge before walking amongst derelict Landrovers and ancient Austins converted into sheds. Sheep guard their lambs, and the mend and make do nature of the farm is everywhere to be seen.

After some muddy farm tracks, and a few gates climbed over, I make for open ground. The ground squelches pitifully under foot, streams are burst and the ground is awash with running water. I make the lower summit of Beinn Chlinaig and, in thick cloud, navigate the humps, bumps and minor tops across to the Graham of Cnap Cruinn. It's around noon; I'm pretty sodden so I set my compass for a direct descent. It's tough going and I question myself whether I am on the correct side of the mountain. I feel more settled when the road and a distant spec of Hugo come into view.

Near the river I negotiate a network of fences and gates until I reach the shores. I meet a young lady on the East Highland Way. She's set off from Spean Bridge this morning and, with full pack, now looks bedraggled. We bid one another goodbye and I go in search of the bridge. I overshoot and backtrack through a wood until I glimpse it. It sways as I cross and I am glad to be roadside again. I get back to Hugo at around 1405.

I drive into Spean Bridge for my regular omelette and chips. My fourth visit and the proprietors are getting the gist of how things pan out. I pop in to the shop and buy two tubes of Pringles (one for tonight and one for tomorrow night) and a block of cheese before heading back to Laggan and, at 1600, park up on the road to Melgarve bothy.

I set up my drying rail. This is a length of 22mm copper pipe that I have cut to sit across the shelves that run the length of either side of the interior. Various items of clothing are threaded through the pipe and I have the heater on in an attempt to dry them. This includes the truss looking like something, as a small child in the early nineteen seventies, one might find hanging in your granny's bathroom but have the sense not to enquire as to its use.

I lay back on the bed - both tubes of Pringles and the block of cheese don't see the later side of 8 p.m.

I wake on May 11<sup>th</sup> and force myself, at 0850, out into the wet, along the track, passing Melgarve bothy, to a ford then a steady pull up the slopes of the Corbett of Gairbeinn. I take in the smaller hump then the higher ground where the weather deteriorates with closed in cloud and battering rain. There are a few contenders for the summit and only when the ground falls away am I convinced I am at the top. It's 1055 and I, a soggy mass, duck down for shelter, sip some water and turn back on my compass bearing.

The rain smacks me in the face and I draw my hood and collar in so my visibility is a slit through which I have to move my head up and down to survey the ground underfoot and the ground ahead.



I try and keep on my bearing but the weather has me staggering like a drunkard. The minor hump, taken in on the ascent, looms as a mountain in its own right. When I get closer there's a lull, the rains stop and the magnification effect of the water in the air disappears and once more it becomes a minor hump.

I make the track, burns are fast flowing, some raging torrents, as the fallen water makes its way off the mountains. The weather clears again, the sun appears and I stop and chat to a chap ten days into a hike: he's just taken shelter from the storm. I get back to the campervan and use the break in the weather, and the abundance of available water, to fill Hugo's water tanks before I shut myself away from the returning storm.

The next two days I spend being, what the Americans call, a 'Trail Angel'. On May 12<sup>th</sup> I park first at Melgarve then in the afternoon at Garva Bridge handing out hot chocolate to passing TGO challengers. The weather is poor with frequent rainstorms. My standard greeting of "Would you like a hot chocolate?" is not once turned down and at one point I am challenged to reveal whether the Pope is a catholic or not.

I was thinking that I'd be handing cups out of the back of Hugo but quickly his welcoming confines become a small cafeteria. In fact I don't even have to invite anybody in as the query of "Could I interest you in a hot chocolate?" is taken as a welcome aboard. Some, so eager to please, don't even delay proceedings by taking their packs off.

The only ones to remain outside are a group of Norwegians. On opening the door to them I am presented with a man wearing a tent. It turns out to be a jacket and trousers fashioned from tent material. The chap has made it himself and the stitched seams and poppers look a very professional job.

On May 13<sup>th</sup> I help out at Newtonmore Hostel serving tea, coffee and cake. It's great to be so much part of the TGO without having to walk in excess of 200 miles. I catch up with a few of the people I saw yesterday, a few new and answer the common enquiry of who won the election.

May 14<sup>th</sup>, following a large breakfast at a transport café, I am back on the hills for the Corbett of Geal Charn Mor to the west of Aviemore. The track in is what is known as 'The Burma Road': a well made track which takes me onto high ground. The sky is a perfect blue, there is no wind. I meet a few people passing through on the TGO. I make the summit, and its trig point, at 1215, two hours twenty minutes from the start. I sit for an hour and a half and take in the views. The tree lined glen floor and the Cairngorms to the east and the western Munros are a feast to the eyes.

There is no wind, a distant drone of a piston engine aircraft is broken by three fighter jets whizzing through.

I make it back to Hugo at 1510 and drive into Aviemore and wander between shops. It really strikes me at the space between shops and houses. Down south we are so packed in, up here space is the norm.

I drive in the mellow late afternoon sun to Dorback Lodge to take in the Corbett of Geal Charn tomorrow. The setting sun makes an orange glow as the hills become silhouettes and the air cools and the stars begin to glint in the sky.

During the night I sustain the worst injury so far. I have a dream where I am being attacked. I lash out with my left leg smashing my big toe into the side of the camper van. I wake in a mix of relief and agony.

My next stirring is around 0630 and, given the forecast is sunny first thing with late afternoon rain, I'm off and walking at 0730. I drop down from the road to an inland beach where oyster catchers protest at my passing and sunlight glistens on the shallow waters of the passing burns.

I miss the main track and rest where I pick up its last stretch at the crossing with the Allt nan Gamhuinh. It's a windswept spot with stunted Scots Pine. It's now a long pull up a ridge spur which flattens out and I feel the top is reeling me in. I make the summit, which looks more like a pile of rubble a rogue builder would dump in a farmer's gate, at 0950.

I make a quick decision, it's early and I need to be in Braemar over the weekend, to catch up with Alison Ogden and Sue Foss. The Corbett of Morrone, which frowns down on the village, is quite straightforward. I set off back: my pace sends a grouse up revealing her clutch of eggs. I find the track this time, passing a ruined house and through the sand dunes to the complaints of the oyster catchers.

On the drive round I make another decision to concentrate on the Corbetts and only add Grahams and Donalds where they are conveniently nearby. Taking on the complete list in one go feels too daunting. I am a man who likes to tick things off but a list of 555 tops feels like a daunting prospect. Whereas to concentrate on the 221 Corbetts makes it feel more manageable.

I park where the transmitter access road branches from the minor Glen Clunie road south of Braemar. There's rain in the air so I set a cracking pace. Departing at 1325 I make 407m in the first hour, possibly my record. A Dutch couple warn me of icy winds on the top. I slow off and reach the summit at 1450, rest a while then head straight back and get back to Hugo at 1605.

I park up in Braemar and have an interesting evening with Keith Leonard, Graham Gledhill and Charles Karugu. I order a salad which consists of a number of hard boiled eggs sliced in two and lubricated with mayonnaise. Charles is a native Kenyan and, while placing an entire half a hard boiled egg in my mouth, describes to me, in some detail, his tribal passage, of non-anesthetised public circumcision, into manhood. At the horror I take a sharp intake of breath which propels the said lubricated half a hard boiled egg into my throat. I can see Charles is touched by my watering eyes as he continues with his tale. I debate whether to cough or swallow, a swallow gets the vote and, with some discomfort, the egg dislodges and makes its passage southwards.

I wake early and make the short drive to Auchallater where I park and attempt to pay the £2.50 parking fee. The machine rejects all my coins so, with an explanatory note on my windscreen, I set off at 0820. I take the easy track then branch off onto the lesser track that zigzags onto the minor peak of Sron Dubh. The forecast of rain spreads in but it is light and I make steady progress onto the long ridge towards the Corbett of Creag nan Gabhar. The weather descends into a peppering hailstorm with an accompanying wind that buzzes the hood of my jacket against my face.

With so much water in the air I reach a high point and hope it's the summit. It turns out to be Sron nan Gabhar and, as the rain clears, Creag nan Gabhar looks

nearer than I had feared. I make the summit at 1020 and spend the next hour and forty minutes battling the wind back to Hugo.

Sunday the 17<sup>th</sup> is breakfast with Sue Foss, on her second TGO crossing, at the Braemar Lodge Hotel. Despite her having booked me a breakfast they have no record of it but, with the promise of an extra £10 in the till, they appear to be able to accommodate me.

It's good to catch up with Sue who I met on last year's TGO in Glen Tilt. She had a mishap in Glen Banchor this time, falling into the river up to her neck. But she appears none the worse for it.

She heads off to church while I read. I get a text, mid-religious service, asking if her walking boots are in my van. I have a quick look around, no luck. A few further texts are exchanged to get a description and I pop back to Braemar Lodge to retrieve them.

We then lunch early which has the net effect that, on top of my cooked breakfast and bowl of grapefruit and own lunch, I consume half of Sue's.

We then set off for Callater Lodge (truss free), pick up Toby and Vicky Grace on route and, after two hours, arrive at this remote Victorian hunting lodge for the traditional TGO welcome. Bill and Stan's widow (who now run the place) have laid on a gigantic spread of food and drink. I declare myself as a teetotal vegetarian. This is no problem as a vegetarian option is rustled up. So much is made, and being the only vegetarian, it's two portions which, added to my breakfast and lunches, leaves just about enough room for the late night cheese and nibbles.

There is much signing, reciting of dubious poetry and guitar playing. Andrew McKinnon and Mick Hopkins are the star performers on the guitar. I have little talent to offer, join in a few songs and chat with old friends Alison Ogden and John Jocys. When the finger is pointed at me I elect a little ditty that I learnt in the primary school playground about a young lady from Leeds who swallowed a packet of Sutton's finest only to find some hours later weeds and flowers about her person. It went down well which is in marked contrast to my first recital to my parents during the early 1970s.

I leave at 1105 and, staggering with tiredness, get back to Braemar and Hugo at 0050.

I sleep on and off then drive northeast to give the Corbett of Morven a go. I set off at 0955, bidding 'hi' to a party of three about to do the same, cross the fields to a ruined farmhouse then start the ascent. My legs are heavy and I feel drained. Too much food and not enough sleep. After a steep ascent I pick up speed as the hill flattens off then gently rises again. Snow blows in and I reach the summit, after a few false subsidiary tops, at 1155. Visibility is down to about fifty feet as the snow falls and settles (mainly about my person).

The wet heather soaks my feet on the return and I arrive wet, fed up and, with both heaters running, turn Hugo into a diesel fuelled drying room.

Tuesday May 19<sup>th</sup> and, after an uncomfortable night of hip pain, I drive over to Cock Bridge. I remember this well from a family holiday in 1978 where my parents, spotting the sign a millisecond before their young son in the back of the car, awaited the inevitable guffaws. I have to admit 37 years on it still raises a smile.

I start walking at 0850 for Brown Cow Hill; the easiest of all the Corbetts to pronounce. The guidebook, which gives a phonetic translation of each mountain, declares this to be "as spelt". That's as far as I follow the guidebook because the suggested route is a wider circuit and I spot a simpler route that begins on a track then heads across open countryside to an east top before a snow blasted pull up to the summit proper. The weather has been changeable and the Radio 4 forecast did say, "Don't be fooled by the bright weather first thing."

The descent is much the same, the snow turns to rain then sunshine and back to rain. Crossing a small river adds to the fun as a useful rock proves to be clad in slippery moss which results in a foot dunking itself in icy water.

I get back to Hugo at 1310 and, spying a hotel nearby, go and enquire about lunch. It transpires the cook is busy ripping out an outhouse so is unable to oblige. I drive up the steep road as a hailstorm sweeps in and, with wipers on full swing, I gingerly reach the summit of the road to find an oasis of a ski centre with an open café. The lady behind the bar is very cheerful, a contrast to the oft dour Scot that is the public face of many a tourist business.

It is too exposed to park up for the night so I spend a sheltered night at the parking spot by The Wells of the Lecht. Waking early I return to the ski café area with a view to doing the Corbetts of Carn Ealasaid and Carn Mor. In typical Cameron McNeish guidebook style there's a mistake with one of the grid references extending to seven digits. Grid references can be expressed in different numbers of digits (depending on required accuracy) but one thing for sure is the northings and eastings are never expressed with different levels of accuracy.

I debate whether to do the shorter Carn Ealasaid walk first or the longer Carn Mor. I settle it by figuring that if I did Carn Mor first I'd feel too tired to do Carn Ealasaid but not vice versa.

I begin walking at 0745 via a track amongst the quiet ski slopes. It takes me to open hillside where, across peat bogs, I make the ridge around to Carn Ealasaid. It's blustery with views and I make the summit at 0845. I stay higher on my return and avoid most of the peat. Seagulls circle the hill above the ski centre and I narrowly avoid treading on an egg in a hollowed out nest. As the seagulls call, swoop and squawk a wind turbine spins with its ghostly hum.

At 0945 I slump down behind a wooden outbuilding and rest before the long route over to Carn Mor. First is a sharp pull up the hill the other side of the road to a spot height of 747m on the Aberdeenshire/Banffshire county boundary. From here it's a very tough walk with deep, soggy bottomed, peat hags to continually climb down into and out of again. Black bottomed is indeterminate, a foot may sink or stand fast, bright green bottomed is waterborne vegetation guaranteeing a plunge whereas stony bottomed is sure underfoot.

A headwind slows my progress and only a newly installed fence adds comfort, though the scattered metal wire of the one it replaced is a persistent trip hazard.

I contemplate turning back as there are two tops to cross before the 804m top of Carn Mor. The wind continues to wallop me as I press on, convinced that the Radio 4 forecast of no rain is good enough to keep me engaged.

The peat hags continue; the bed sores of the mountain tops. One serves as shelter for my lunch. I make Carn Mor at 1220, a lone trig point on a grassy rise on an ocean of thumb high heather.

The return is aided by the tailwind and I reach Hugo at 1435 and head for the ski café for lunch. The same lady serves me. She says she spotted me heading for Carn Ealasaid first thing, my return and heading off for Carn Mor followed by my return as I cut across the slopes back to the ski centre. Luckily I was wearing the truss as it was the main thing that prevented me from stopping for a widdle on my cut back through the ski slopes.

She comes from Tomintoul and describes its virtues including a police station, fire station, post office and shop. I go in exploration, the post office is closed (I have a map to post back for Sue Foss) and the shop does not sell Pringles so I'm left having to buy healthy stuff.

May the 21<sup>st</sup> and I set off at 0745 for the long track walk to take in the Corbett of Corryhabbie Hill and the neighbouring Graham of Cook's Cairn. My new strategy, of only doing Grahams where it would be rude not to, comes into play as the walk in is identical for these two mountains.

After a quarter of an hour, and a needlessly crossing a bridge and back tracking, I realise I've set off without the truss. I decide to risk it (noting stopping for a widdle will now be easier) and press on via a semi made up track following the River Livet. This is Highland malt whisky Glen Livet territory.

The walk takes two and a half hours. I feel fatigued and, ideally, need a rest day but as I am so close to my drive home on Saturday I'm determined to keep going.

I pass through abandoned houses, their roofs deteriorating. I'd guess they were vacated in the nineteen seventies. I ponder what characters lived in them and how the glen and isolation shaped them. The homogenisation of education and common media exposure is making unique characters a thing of the past.

A fork in the track takes me onto the slopes of Corryhabbie Hill. My hernia aches and there's rain in the air and, as I near the summit the wind picks up which makes the shelter encircling the trig point all the more welcome.

It's 1125 and a large triangular lump of iron hogs one side so I tuck myself behind the trig point, eat lunch and share texts with Alison Ogden and Sue Foss on their last day of the TGO.

Cook's Cairn looks a daunting prospect. The lower green slopes are sat on by brown heathery upper slopes. I compass bearing off a few subsidiary tops before selecting my route. I drop back to the main track, descend to the 450m line then head south east to pick up the summit track. When I reach the heather animal tracks become welcome as routes through the maze. The climb is steady and I make the top at 1315.

The descent is into a gruelling headwind. It fills the back of my hood causing the mouth piece to pull hard against my lips. I count off the familiar way marks of my route in and get back to Hugo at 1550.

A trip to the post office at Duffton is as fruitless as yesterdays. Clearly nobody needs to post a letter after 1600. I console myself with a Chinese takeaway in the back of Hugo.

I wake at 0430 on the 22<sup>nd</sup> with a view to bagging Ben Rinnes then drive home. It takes me awhile to cook porridge and prepare. I decide to walk without a pack so

drink plenty of water and get going into the early morning light at 0530. It's cold as I pull my way up the well-made track. I break into cloud and the wind beats a chill. I have my map, compass and GPS buried away in my jacket so, in true Famous Five style, I scratch waymarks into the gravel for my return.

I make the summit at 0700, formations of Dartmoor Tor style rocks to scramble around. The trig point, sporting a direction finder, is fractured but still standing.

As I descend my mind wanders from my trip, back to the routine jobs of home that will need attending. I make it back to Hugo at 0800 and set off. The drive south takes in much of the ground I've covered over the last week. I find the Braemar post office open and post Sue's map back.

It's a 550 mile journey, plenty of stops but as the south looms, and the roads busy and the buildings move ever nearer together, the peace and purity of the trip morph back to modern living. But enough stays with me and I think I am starting to get the message.

Corbett Count:	34 out of 221
Graham Count:	13 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	2 out of 59

## **2016**

April 29<sup>th</sup> and I'm parked up at the Birdlip viewpoint above the Air Balloon pub in the Cotswolds. Memories of the drag of a drive have me putting in an hour before bed so I can be on the M5 first thing.

A fitful sleep and a reasonably early start, coupled with an M5 service station breakfast, a few more stops then the resignation that I need caffeine to keep me safe, has me in Scotland around 1400. I abandon plans for a first Corbett in the borders and press on, via a complicated set of directions from my sat nav around Glasgow, to Arrochar.

On route I'm taken back to the start of my Munro exploits, some quarter of a century ago. I recall no sat nav, the search for accommodation, constantly getting lost on route and the hunt for a working payphone to call home. I pat Hugo's steering wheel, glance in the rear view mirror at my bed, check the sat nav and sneak a look down to check my mobile is still safely charging and smile. A quarter of a century has brought many changes. It's a week when the Hillsborough family finally got the justice they deserve and the old boy networks, protecting the likes of Jimmy Savile, and the police are slowly being broken down.

I soon find I'm lost, having set the sat nav for the wrong section of road I've overshot my stopping place. A daring three point turn, on a fast stretch of road, has me heading back. I find an inn to eat at, one of the types where you have to bag a table first and, if on your own, explain to the bar tender that you hope to be on a certain table provided nobody has nicked it in the meantime. At £9.50 for veggie lasagne with £1.85 for a glass of plain soda water, I do wonder if I was hoping too much for table service.

Disgruntled I eat up, head off and park up, listen to the radio and am only disturbed in the early hours by an articulated lorry pulling in for the night.

I start, on May 1<sup>st</sup>, at 0930 and trudge, in drizzle, the steep, peat drenched foothills of Binnein An Fhidhleir. The tops are in cloud, I recall the Munro spirit of



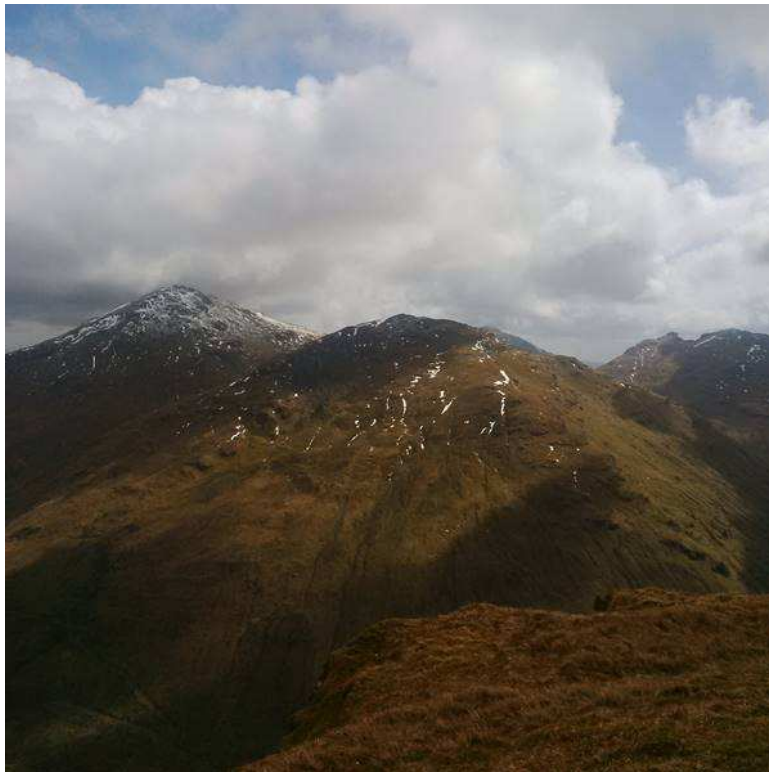
setting out in all conditions and mental calculations of timings. To the east I note my map has the times scribbled on of three Munros I did with Ady Glover on a bank holiday weekend in 1992: a tortuous day of some eleven hours and three Munros.

I check my GPS once or twice, reset bearings and press on through cauldrons of bog surrounded by deep gullies of despair. I ascend the tiers, my feet wet and icy until a final pull up a deep gulley has me taking the utmost care through minor snow fields and peat only too happy to eject copious amounts of water with every step. The wind blows into my mouth and aches every filling before I make the summit ridge. I've hit it too far to the east so have to descend and ascend to the true summit.

It's 1210, there's not much to see as the cloud is down. I descend to the low point on the ridge and descend via a soaked gulley that is only too willing to tip my balance as each foot touches saturated ground or small rocks poised to slide away.

I make it back to Hugo at 1345, looking forward to seeing if Leicester City can win the premiership title.

I stir around 0630 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and listen to the Radio 4 weather forecast. Rain in Scotland at first (confirmed by the persistent drumming on the camper van's roof) set to blow through mid-morning. That's good enough for me and I pull the quilt over my head and next wake at 1030. I make a slow start, emerging, in full kit, at 1130 for an ascent of Beinn Luibhean.



**Beinn Luibhean**

My legs feel heavy but the sun blesses as I view the gullies of yesterday's Corbett. I make out where I went wrong, schoolboy errors in the mist. I rest often next to the descending burn, crashing from the higher reaches, forming

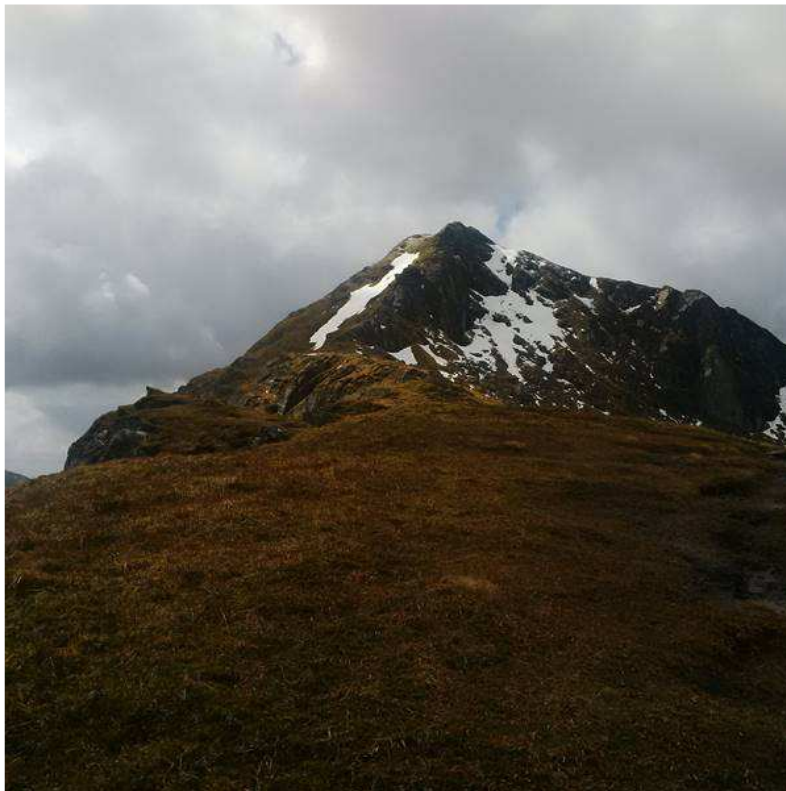
small waterfalls, from which the wind blows spray back up the mountain, and pools of bubble-bath like foam.

The ground is saturated, so are my trail shoes and my feet ache with the cold. I branch west towards the rocky outcrops of the summit. A snowstorm blows in, rattling my hood and peppering my face. Soon I'm leaving deep footprints in the settled snow. The storm breaks as I wind my way to the draughty summit, snack on some food, sip water then, rather casually, head off and am faced with a rather unfamiliar view. I use the GPS to confirm where my lack of natural direction finding has deposited me.

With some close compass work and pauses for reassurance I reclaim the burn of the ascent and drop down to the road. I review my timings – slow. It took me ten minutes short of three hours to reach the summit for a walk lasting a total of five hours.

The evening is spent curled up under the duvet listening to Chelsea putting their rivals, Tottenham Hotspur, out of the premiership title race and giving Leicester City one of the greatest title wins of all times. They started the season at 5000-1 to win the title which, if the bookies and my maths are correct, would mean you could re-run the season 4999 times and they'd not win it again.

I wake early on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and aim for the towering, and rather ominous looking, Beinn an Lochain by following the saturated old drovers road to Loch Restil then a sharp pull up a gully to follow the windswept, and in places a little precarious, rocky ridge. It's 0955 when I get a good view of the summit, a sharp snow clad protuberance. I make the summit at 1145 and descend the same way with the odd blast of harrowing wind and the odd slip where the ground is grassy and wet. Otherwise it's a case of treading carefully down rocky staircases until I reach the road and a return to Hugo at 1355.



**Beinn an Lochain**

It's time to break camp, three days in the same layby has the leisure battery flat and my laptop needing some serious recharging. I consider staying and running the engine but elect to head north to the Tyndrum area. The first thing is to hook up the recently acquired inverter to a two way extender I've bought for the cigarette lighter; the other outlet destined for recharging my mobile. It's a first try at this and I note the laptop flickers a light to show the electrons are heading its way and the mobile dutifully follows suit. I start to pull out of the car park and note the light on the laptop flickers and goes out in unison with the mobile phone. I give the wires a wiggle - a technical term that does not improve the situation. Nor does the smoke that starts to bellow out of the two way extension socket which, given the sudden evidence, isn't really designed for the load. A quick unplug and the laptop plugged directly into the car, has me on my way.

The next chore is to find somewhere to eat. I sail by a number of places which advertise their whereabouts hundreds of yards ahead only to be firmly closed on passing.

The odd hotel looks too posh for a smelly walker so I pull up at a roadside tearoom. No hot food, clearly around 1500 on the first week of the summer season is too much to ask for. I make it to Crianlarich where my need for food has me, shall we say, slightly irritable. I remember the station tearooms and the breakfasts after driving up overnight. I follow the signs gleefully advertising what one could expect - that is if it were open.

Dejected I find the local shop and buy a sandwich which I have trouble getting in to. As I finally manage to open its plastic coffin it kind of flops open to reveal a bog like mire of bread. I take a bite, it tastes rank. I peel it open and note the mould. Back in the shop I exchange it for something a little more modern and head to Tyndrum.

A café serving hot food, marred by cardboard plates and failing to give me my change, is the best I can find.

I sleep, undisturbed, in the Tourist Information Centre's car park and awake to a dry morning and a short drive to Tyndrum Lower Railway station. I'm off at 0910 along a track that I last took in August 1991, as a mere 26 year old, to bag the Munros of Beinn Dubhcraig and Ben Oss. I'd got the train up from Glasgow for the day and walked in sodden rain that felt compelled to quickly penetrate a light weight coat and suede gloves. I remember being scared, my first solo trip into the mountains with cloud so low that I was forever checking my map and compass.

Today the cloud is higher, the two Munros are shrouded but the timings from twenty five years ago are still scribbled on my map. I think back to that time, half a lifetime ago, and gently smile at my spirit. Against the odds I was going to do the Munros.

The track passes through pine woods, ascending and (disappointingly) descending to the track that passes Cononish Farm with its lime green corrugated barns. Shortly after I break onto the open hillside of Beinn Churin. I'm very tired, I need a day off but I press on with aching legs and an all-in disposition. As I ascend the summit becomes shrouded by cloud and I meet the hood drumming wind that rattles everything that can be rattled. I walk away from a sharp edge and press on and reach the summit at 1220. I duck down for some shelter, graze on some food, swig water, draw in every strap and drawstring and brace myself for the descent.

I'm caught by the rain but, for the first time this trip, my feet stay dry. I'm glad to get back to the track, glad of its easier pace and I am glad to join back up with the pine wood. I get back to Hugo at 1435.

I visit the café, once the Little Chef, that I dried myself off in some quarter of a century ago. Thanks to Dyson the standard of hand dryers has improved as I recall spending ages hunched over a weak stream of hot air in an attempt to get myself dry as I waited for the train back to Glasgow.

The café has free wi-fi and I check in emails. There's one from ebay asking "How do you like the 12v 24v 2 Way Car Cigarette Lighter Multi Socket Twin Ports Adaptor?" Given it's now burnout and in the bin I delete the email.

In desperate need of a rest I take, what turns out to be, the fine, sunny Thursday off. I read, write and listen to the radio but am generally bored and a little morose. I head to the Bridge of Orchy hotel for lunch and am impressed by a series of arrows directing me to its facilities. Only when I read "Polling Place" do I realise that I'm far from attempting to order a meal but closer to voting in the Scottish elections.

I tuck Hugo into a pull in on the B8074 and warily eye what looks to be an abandoned caravan. Sleeping well I'm off at 0810 for the rare treat of two Corbetts in a day – Beinn Udlaidh and Beinn Bhreac-liath. However, since my map was printed in 1989 somebody has stuck up a forest. Not fancying picking my way through I change plans to do Beinn Bhreac-liath first; the theory being when I descend I'll be able to see a route ahead.

I'm soon down to my base layer as the sun warms the day. It's a three hour hard pull onto its long north ridge where I get an unwanted attack of hay fever. At the 2000ft level the air cools and I don an extra layer before the half hour gentle incline of the ridge walk of small bogs and rocky outcrops. At 1135 I sit at the summit viewing the drop and rise to Beinn Udlaidh. I pick a half-hearted path that takes me via a handy gate in a deer fence. I see two other walkers as I ascend to the multi summited top. I pick the quartz backbone of the mountain to descend and, via the burn, find the access point into the forest and the boggy trail back to Hugo. In all it's been a seven and a quarter hour day of clear views and the background noise of tumbling water.

With a trip via Crianlarich to top up with supplies I get chatting to the shop assistant about yesterday's elections and the general state of the economy and the forthcoming in/out EU referendum.

"What we up here are worried about," she says, "if Scotland votes one way and the rest of the UK the other. We'll have a crisis."

"Yes, and of course England could vote one way and the rest of the UK the other," I reply. The point is lost on her. She's in favour of staying in, saying the local hotels could not run without EU migrants.

"And," she goes on, "the house prices down south are so high."

"Yes," I reply, "a modest terraced house in Brighton now costs four hundred and fifty thousand. Youngsters don't have a hope of getting on to the property ladder."

"Aye," she says, "it's not fair on us up here. We can't afford to sell up and move south."

I give up and take the A85 for a few miles and park up for the night near Auchessan. It's a dry night and the day dawns with high cloud for a 0850 start. I follow the farm tracks then the new hydro scheme tracks until I'm deposited on open hillside. My right hip starts to nag me so I stop for Ibuprofen and Deep Heat.

Feeling slightly mended I press on: the ground is relatively dry underfoot and I skirt round the bogs as the terrain is a succession of terraces. To the northeast are the Munros of Meall Glas and Sgiath Chuil, and I avoid accidentally setting my compass for their highlighted points on my map.

I'm slow but not as tired as a few days back, and haul myself to the summit of Beinn nan Imirean at 1220. I descend on a reverse bearing until I catch sight of the hydro road. Abandoning any assistance from my compass I cross the open ground until I'm faced with a six foot deer fence. Alas it's not the same hydro road I ascended on but, given it its due, does appear to be going in my direction. I make a wobbly climb of the fence and jump down to the building site the other side. A few hundred meters on the track is blocked by another six foot fence. My climbing skills are required again before the long descent on a track made of scrapings.

Near the bottom I find a sign stating, "You Are Now Leaving the Restricted Work Zone." Funny as I don't recall entering it. A few hundred meters later and I'm penned in again, another six foot fence to scale, a river to cross and I'm back on the track I ascended in the morning. Feeling a bit frazzled I return to Hugo at 1430.

I drive in to Killin for some supplies then follow the Loch Lochay road in the hope to use the hydro board mountain road to park up for an ascent of Meall nan Subh. A long and twisty drive terminates with a "Private Road" sign stating from here on belongs to Kenknock Farm. My 1989 map shows the public road extends further but, to be sure of myself, I set my GPS to adjudicate. It takes ages to settle then comes up with a series of questions involving (i) have I moved hundreds of miles since I last used it and (ii) am I indoors. I take a closer look and note the battery level has dropped back. I change the two AAA cells for the spares I've been diligently carrying in my pack for the last couple of years. These prove to have even less power than the ones I'm replacing. Not wishing to chance it and press on, I return to Killin for new batteries.

I ask at the Co-op's counter, "Can I have a pack of Duracell AAA batteries please?"

"I expect we've run out," replies the assistant.

I then point to the shelf behind her and the overwhelming evidence to the contrary that they have not. I've noticed this tendency in other shops and especially when asking a hotel if they have a room available. Claims they are full, but they'll just check, result in rooms being available.

I park up for the night on the Bridge of Balgie road and, on waking, make a mile journey to ascend Meall nam Maigheach. I frustrate myself by losing a number of items around the van so it's 0930 before I get going. I'm starting from high, the cloud is high and the wind is gentle warming gusts.

I have to rest often, far too often. My body isn't really working for me. The guidebook suggests this Corbett as part of two in a day; I know I'll have to split

it. I lay back in the grass and view snow on a nearby mountain that has retreated into the form of sea lion. The sun punches its way through then retreats as a warm wind brushes the grass and soothes my face.

I get to a summit at 1050, it's not the correct one so I arrive for real at 1110. The wind is stronger, I find a foxhole and lean back, rest and enjoy the view.

The descent is straightforward and I reach Hugo at 1230. With the blinds up I wash and shave. I hear some engine revving outside and am disconcerted as I hear somebody walk around the van. There's a thump from the front so I drop the rear blind to find a car stopped on the single track road. I then receive a notable level of abuse for having parked in a Passing Place causing this chap to have to reverse. Of course I am in the wrong but the guy (who I guess is around sixty and due a heart attack) has me labelled as having done it deliberately whereas I had just made a mistake and missed the sign. Which to be fair, at some six foot high, as he points out is difficult to miss.

"Did you not see me reversing?"

"I had the blinds up," I reply. I think my English accent doesn't help and, given his level of anger, my mind isn't racing towards an apology. When I sense he has finished I say, in a very bemused tone, "Well I hope you have a nice rest of your day."

"I won't be having a nice day thanks to you pal."

I always know that the use of the word 'pal' is anything but an invitation to friendship. Just like when somebody calls out "Guys, guys" you know they are not really engaged with the rest of the group's way of doing things.

He takes a step towards me then thinks better of it and yells, "Fuck off." I suggest he needs therapy and he returns the suggestion while pointing a finger and reasoning that only a therapist could get me to see the wrong of parking in a passing place. I don't quite know whose side his wife is on as she sits impassively throughout the entire proceedings.

He sets off and I see a note on the windscreen (the cause of the thump which caused me to lower the rear blind). His writing is not that good and I can't make out every word but I'm sure two of them are 'cretin' and 'reject'. I turn it over and read his wife's shopping list – I prefer this side.

I spend an hour or so mulling it in my mind. I wish I'd been quicker and said, being dyslexic, I'd misread it as 'Parking Place' or claimed to have some form of prostate problem, coupled with dyslexia, and had misread 'Passing Place'.

I enjoy the evening sun, sleep well and start at 0930 for what I consider to be the easy Beinn nan Oighreag.

I realise my mistake after hauling myself up a distant ridge spur of Meall nan Tarmachan. Below is a drop to a peat plain and then a steep ascent to the Corbett's ridge. I press on, the sky is blue and I'm just wearing a base layer. My right hip decides it's really time to let me know that it's not happy. Every time I put pressure on it a sharp pain spreads around the top of my leg.

I follow the path of a stream, heavy snow still fills a gulley and a patch, on higher ground, looks like a West Country hill figure – yet its shape is more of a flattened hippopotamus than a horse or some unusual looking fertility symbol.



I make it to a top at 1240 but realise I'm a bit far south and the real top, of a very similar height, lays half a kilometre to the northeast. I sunbathe awhile, take Ibuprofen and Deep Heat my hip. At the real summit I sunbathe some more before the hobble back on a reverse bearing. I find the re-ascent painful and wonder if I'd have been better doing the walk, and avoiding the descent and re-ascent, from the lower starting point of Glen Lyon.

In a final dip I look up and spy the road via the welcome top of a six foot high 'Passing Place' sign (I've gotten used to spotting them) and return to Hugo at 1515.

I drive round to the Loch Lyon dam, take the Hydro Board road (that I'd failed to get on the other day) from the north side and park on the highpoint where the mountainous views, and tumbling streams, chill me into an early sleep.

The morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> has Radio Four claiming that the place to be is Scotland as the weather is bright and sunny. I set off at 0930 for the relatively straightforward Meall Nan Subh. Though my body feels a wreck and I find the climb a drag.

There are many humps to navigate over and the footing is often squelchy. A couple of false summits lead me onto a plateau before a final pull to the top. The wind is too blustery to stay for long so I drop down to rest and savour the view of distant hills splattered with snow. The wind whistles through the grass and distant mountains shimmer in the haze.

My right hip gives a twinge as I set off down. With my head full of thoughts I step onto squelchy ground and am dumped onto my rear. I feel the water penetrate my trousers and lower back before gravity has me doing a bizarre twist whereupon I come to a halt, filthy and soggy.

I get back to Hugo at 1150, drive back to the Loch Lyon dam, park up by the side of the road and hang my sodden kit out to dry.

I watch activity at the dam, water is being loosed off in a fountain like spray. A lorry is being loaded and when it sets off it pulls up alongside me and the driver hops out.

"Sorry, am I blocking your way?" I ask while checking for a 'Passing Place' sign.

"No, no I was wondering if you were taking photographs."

"No," I reply in case the Scottish Hydro take a dim view of this.

"Well if you are the best place is from the other side. You can park up and look right long the dam."

I thank him.

"That's okay," he replies, "I'd not want you to miss the best view."

The 11<sup>th</sup> dawns as another fine day, and I feel more positive for a crack at the two Corbetts of Meall Buidhe and Sron A'Choire Chnapanich. I start at 0735 and take the track, past the dam, to the north of Loch Lyon. In just under a mile I reach a dry stone wall heading steeply north. To its left is a wooden post and wire fence. I walk in the metre gap between the two. It's tough going with frequent

stops and no opportunity to zigzag as I'm rather hemmed in. Though the ground either side is rough so I figure I'm best off where I am.

The gradient eases at around 2000ft. I spy deer on the high ground who, upon getting a whiff of me, head off. I haul myself up into a bealach where the remains of an iron fence leads me to a subsidiary top of Meall Buidhe. The wind gusts but the sun is warm as I skirt a snow field and make my way over to the real summit. It's 1055 and too windy to rest so I drop down and shelter. Another two walkers appear and we exchange distant waves.

I head back to the bealach, take a bearing to Sron A'Choire Chnapanich and have a distant standoff with a fox. Its coat is a beautiful mottled effect of fox, straw and pepper. I try to pacify it but it elects to bound off to higher ground while making the odd stop to look back and check my progress.

I have to descend, along a tumbling stream, before navigating some corrugated ridges in the gully. The final climb is a drag, my energy is dropping. I slow my pace, am pleased my hip is behaving, before making the tinder dry and breezy summit at 1320. I rest here and listen to the wind hiss through the grass. The distant mountains all bask in the sun. The descent is straightforward until I hit the road. I feel tired and haul myself back to Hugo at 1500.



**View from Sron A'Choire Chnapanich**

After washing and packing up I'm driving down Glen Lyon and with windows down, music playing, the glen glistening, anything feels possible.

I stop for a few supplies at the Post Office shop in Bridge of Balgie before the short hop to Innerwick. A picnic area, with ensuite loos, has me stopping for the night.

With another fine day I'm walking at 0830 via the long rough, hot track to the foot of Carn Chreag. A sharp pull up, crossing some ice crunching snow, has me on what feels like a Lakeland ridge. The mountains to the west are in all their splendour offering peace and temptation. The summit of Carn Chreag is a rocky bump to the north and I stagger up its final slopes before, at 1115, laying on the grass and surveying the view.

The return makes for a gentle decline with the blue sky, and warming air, making for a sticky walker having completed this mountain in a shade under five hours.

Friday May 13<sup>th</sup> dawns with a chill in the air and grey sky. I get going at 0810 to bag the Graham of Meall a Mhuic and the Corbett Beinn Dearg. Having diligently copied out the route, around the lower tracks, described in the Grahams guidebook I get it wrong and find myself on the first section of Beinn Dearg. I have three choices, backtrack, press on and do the Corbett first or attempt to correct the error by crossing rough ground.

I elect to backtrack. If I go on for the Corbett I know I'd then abandon the Graham and experience tells me trying to track hop across rough ground is a tiresome affair.

The correct track heads north up Meall a Mhuic, peters out and deposits me, in chilling breeze, to do the rest unguided. With my hands frozen I reach the clouded summit at 1025.

I head northeast to the upper reaches of the track I'd earlier turned back from, set my compass and ascend over rough, heather clad ground. I pick up the iron uprights of an ancient fence and, with my altimeter counting me down, reach the summit cairns of Beinn Dearg at 1230.

I have a choice of descent, either a steep southwest or northwest back to the track. It's one side of a triangle versus two. My knees win the vote and I take the longer route.

About an hour into the return the track irritatingly splits in two. As this is not shown on the map and given they are on such a similar compass bearing, I'm a little stuck. I bargain on the higher one and peer down at its parallel neighbour as the gap between, which would form my way of correcting a mistake, steepens beyond the point of wanting to take it.

I note the lower track is newer whereas the one I'm on has an older, more packed down appearance and therefore the likely candidate for the one on the map. This proves to be correct, returning to Hugo at 1425 having defeated Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

The guidebook recommendation for Meall Tairneachan and Farragon Hill is a south easterly approach. Looking at my recently purchased Ordnance Survey Sheet 52 the forest to the south of Tummel Bridge has some tracks to tempt an approach from the west. It's one of those very rare areas that overlaps three OS

maps and, as one would expect, the tracks through the forest are different on each. Oddly the 1988 version shows more tracks than the 1989 version whereas my 2012 sheet has the most.

So I drive around, confirm the presence of the tracks, sleep over and start out at 0805 to a weather report that parts of Scotland had dropped to minus five overnight.

The track is steep yet even and I make good time, leaving the forest at 0915, and continuing uphill. The trig point adorning Meall Tairneachan is a short climb off the icy wind blasted track. I pat its summit at 0935 and take a bearing to check I have Farragon Hill in sight.

I look down on the diminutive Loch Farleyer with its clumps of Scots Pine tugging at its shores. Arable fields are intermixed with areas of brown peat as the runoff from heather clad mountains rising to form a snow touched skyline.

The track now twists and drops to opencast mine workings. I see a white pickup that had passed me while I breakfasted in Hugo. Nobody is around but a strange humming sound penetrates the air and manmade pools with lifebelts dot the ruptured landscape.

After about two miles of descent the, now ropey, track ends and I continue across bog before the final climb up Farragon Hill. The fact it's my fiftieth Corbett escapes me but I'm pleased to have reached it bang on noon. I look back to Meall Tairneachan and the towering form of Schiehallion beyond.



**The summit of Farragon Hill (foreground) looking towards Meall Tairneachan and Schiehallion beyond**



I return via the same way. The open country back to the track is tiresome and I find the ascents wearisome. I spy the white pickup leave then return to the mine workings. At the highpoint I find a BT van and the driver explains that the phone line, to the mine, is faulty. With 6 km of buried copper cable, just to reach the road, the job is a tough one. I ask what type of mine it is and he replies barite. "If they struck copper I guess they'll not be able to phone anybody to celebrate with," I quip. He gives me a blank look, the joke is lost on him.

I drive on to the B847 which I recall a lengthy walk along while crossing Scotland in 2014. Parking up I'm surprised by a 4G phone signal, the first of this trip. I start walking at 0835 on the 15<sup>th</sup> and have my first battle of the day with a clasped chain holding a six foot gate shut. The owner has been a bit mean with the number of links requiring it to be tight shut. This is all very well on the roadside but when trying to close it behind me I have a real effort to keep the gate snugly closed and thread the chain and link it from the other side.

That challenge complete I turn to the hillside for the initial steep ascent followed by a gentler section then a final steep climb through a coire. The cloud is high, the views are distant as I reach the trig point, and nearby massive honeycomb cairn, of Beinn a Chuallaich at 1125.

I pose for a 'selfie', which I post on Facebook, enjoy the views and descend back to Hugo arriving at 1310.



I take the scenic route over to the A9 and am surprised that my sat nav has heard of my destination, the tiny hamlet of Dalnaspidal. After days of moving around on minor roads the speed of the A9 and volume of the traffic, unnerve me. I keep an eye on things and, having noted the turn off for Dalnaspidal is just after a stretch of dual carriageway, am glad when the turning appears. With very little room to get my speed down, many a motorist behind not expecting a manoeuvre and me not knowing whether to expect a layby or a road, I'm glad to pull up on a large tarmacked area some thirty foot below the level of the A9.

I'm parked next to some railway cottages and I see a Virgin train heading for Inverness. Close examination shows two redundant platforms. A bit of Wikipedia on my mobile phone informs me that it had a station until 1965.

I sleep rather uncomfortably, the traffic noise is unnerving but I manage to rest up and get walking at 0815. Noting a typical Cameron McNeish (the author of the guidebook) error of quoting a seven digit grid reference. By definition a grid reference, having a northing and easting, must be an even number.

Grumbling about the man I set off with a view to taking in The Sow of Atholl and Meall Na Leitreach. Crossing the railway, following a track over a bridge I bear off for The Sow. I rest in a grouse shooting bunker (well-made of dry stone) and contemplate my weary body. Everything aches and it screams at me in weakness. I decide to do just the one Corbett and summit at 1005 and return to Hugo at 1130.

I snooze during the afternoon which means my night's sleep is shorter. Therefore I'm up and walking at 0650 on the 17<sup>th</sup>, just as the Calendonian Sleeper passes through Dalnaspidal.

Passing through the same drained land, with its leats, pools and impressive drainage valves, as yesterday I break off southeast, disturb a few sheep and geese, and pick up a quad bike track which guides me to the high ground. The surrounding hills hover in the lifting morning mist. I find it tough going, each step tires my legs and, as quad bike passes me, I wonder if there is room for a passenger.

I haul myself onto the ridge then follow the track southwest, across the plateau like top, until I reach the summit proper, in cool breeze, at 0840 before a business like descent reaching Hugo at 1005.

A short trip up to Newtonmore has me helping out at Alison Ogden's hostel as TGO folk pass through on the cross Scotland walk. It's good to catch up with people and help a few out. The TGO had appeared in the US press which caused a number of our North Americans cousins to apply and take part this year. Sadly, many have underestimated and dropped out. Some were disappointed to find out everything marked 'Lodge' is not a place to stay while another, on enquiring if she'd get her boots wet crossing rivers, was told, 'Not if you hang them around your neck.'

On the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> I say goodbye to Ali and co, stop for a monster meal in a local curry house before driving up to Glenmore Lodge (above Aviemore) to rest up for the night.

The weather on the 19<sup>th</sup> starts dry with the threat of rain. I get going at 0720 for a long walk in to bag Creag Mhor. A well-made forest gets my body off to a good start though my mind (having battled all night with cheese fuelled dreams) is still far from awake.

The forest gives me a bad bout of hay fever before I emerge onto open ground, and a series of landmarks (bridges, gullies and cloud clagged high ground) poise me, at some three and a half hours into the walk, for the final climb.

Having been at over 2000 feet for most of the day it's only another half an hour, in peppering rain, to the rocky summit, of Creag Mhor (1120). As I return I meet



ten separate TGO challengers heading south as the rain and hay fever, causing a blocked nose and eyes that prick and stream, make for a miserable day.

Back in Hugo I can barely look at my eyes in the mirror. A couple of puffy, weeping masses peer back. I'm taken back to my summers as a child where, throughout the entire season I'd wake each morning with my eyes glued shut. Walking blind to the bathroom I'd feel for the sink, reach for the cotton wool and slowly bathe them open. They'd then prick and weep for the rest of the day.

I manage to drive into Aviemore and stop at Tesco for some strong relief tablets. I note they are two packs for £6 or £4.50 a packet. At the till things have gotten worse and I have to keep my head bowed, away from any light. I just make out that they go through the till without the discount. I query it, get it resolved and dwell on whatever my eyes can and cannot do they still have an eye for a bargain.

Drugged I manage to drive round to Braemar, stopping frequently to clear my nose and dab my eyes dry.

Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> I drive round to the Linn of Dee, pay the £2 to park and set off, on the track to White Bridge, at 0910. This brings back memories of tiresome walks out on the TGO and long days Munro bagging.

I bump into Val Hadden, on the TGO. Well into her seventies she's as fit as a fiddle and making good pace for Braemar. We first met on the TGO in 2004 when she was walking with her friend, Mary Brook. Tragically Mary was killed in a cycling accident some years ago. We both attended her funeral, it's good to catch up again.

I'm wearing sunglasses and, given the fairly dull day, am feeling a bit conspicuous. Needs must and, knowing how disconcerting it can be to talk to somebody whose eyes are covered, I apologise to some other TGO walkers that I can't take them off.

I pass White Bridge and turn onto the rough pass that follows the wide waters of the Chest of Dee. At 1030 I sit admiring a wide three tier waterfall and examine the path that overhangs a long drop into the waters below.

Leaving the path at 1110 I head north over tough, dry heather interspersed by bog. The ground is steep so the view of the summit is only revealed when I make the final pull up, at 1230, over the windswept rocky lumps that form the highest point. A manmade windbreak is the only concession to humanity. I head southeast and pick up some rain before the path and track, in warming wind, get me back to the Linn of Dee at 1505.

A quiet night in the car park is followed by a drive down to the Linn of Quoich and a 0825 start for the Corbett of Carn Na Drochaide. I'm quickly thwarted by the bridge over the Quoich Water having been swept away. I take the track to a bridge further north to find it has been closed, boarded up and signs saying 'No Unauthorised Access'. It's tempting to climb over it and chance my luck with an angry estate worker. However, knowing my luck the imaginary chap in question will still be getting over a campervan parked in a 'Passing Place'.

I battle on up the track with a plan to cross the Quoich Water by a bridge some four miles to the northwest. About a mile and a half into this detour I'm thwarted for a third time as, with the river changing course, the track has been completely swept away with the river now lapping a sheer escarpment.

It has been steadily raining and realising that all possibilities have been exhausted, I look west to the Graham of Creag Bhalg. It's a very steep climb from the river, through heather and saturated moss. The occasional tree makes for a foothold. Other fallen trees are so rotten that my foot crunches through their remains.

The heather, about shin height, tugs and soaks my boots and legs. I battle this thumping my trekking poles in hard and pressing down and using them as handholds. After one mile, and seventy-five minutes of this, the incline eases, the rain doesn't, the heather fades and I'm on easier ground. It's 1205 and a number of cairns and a windbreak adorn the top.

The dullness of the day is not helped by my, hay fever deterring, sunglasses. I head west, pick up a track that drops me to Mar Lodge. A road walk has me back at Hugo for 1205.

I spend an afternoon in Braemar catching up with TGO Challenge friends, swapping stories and making some new friends. I take my laptop to a café to write this up. Alistair Pooler sits opposite at the same moment that Facebook tells me it was his wife's birthday yesterday. I interrogate him as to whether he'd performed his husbandly duties. He had.

Another challenger looks across to me, looks at the size of laptop and my suntan. "You've not carried that thing all the way with you have you?" he asks.

The evening gets me an invite to Gordon's Tearooms where a table, for some sixteen of us, has been arranged by Val Hadden.

I get going at 0755 on Sunday the 22<sup>nd</sup> for the drive round to Tarfside to claim Mount Battock. My walking shoes are still sodden from yesterday (in fact they were banished from the van overnight due to their unpleasant odour) so I upturn them against the windscreen vents and, with door window down, blast them with hot air.

With my sat nav taking me on every shortcut known to the A93 I arrive some two hours later at Milten Lodge, slip on my rather toastie walking shoes and set off in the rain. Having spent some five minutes wandering around somebody's front garden I return to the road and pick up the correct track that starts me into the hills. It soon becomes clear that a great number of new tracks have been cut since my map last saw a printing press. Using my GPS I cross open ground (whereupon my toastie walking shoes return to a sodden mass) and reroute to the tracks via Hill of Saughs.

At just before noon a massive roll of thunder echoes around the hills. It's of such a magnitude that if The Royal Tank Regiment appeared over the hills one could be excused the mistake. I look back to the source of the noise and watch three separate downpours (to the southwest, south and southeast) descend from the sky like strands of dark cotton against a grey backdrop.

I rest awhile, eat and, having ended up on tracks near no streams, ration my water. As the storms blow closer I batten down my pack, pull up my hood and press on over the Hill of Saughs.

The track ends and I'm on open boggy ground. I duck my head so I can watch every step. Next time I look up I see nothing. Literally nothing. The cloud has

dropped and the visibility is no more than a few yards. At 1245 I clamber over a ladder stile, touch the trig point and enjoy a brief glimpse of a view.

The sun comes out on the descent, I dry off a little and return to Hugo at 1430 for a trip round to Tarfside – another TGO Challenge gathering place. After catching up with TGO friends I drive on to the Park Hotel, Montrose to help on the TGO Control Desk for four days. It's great fun seeing, and being part of, the Cross Scotland Challenge from the organisational point of view. Taking phone calls reporting progress, entering the data into the circa 1981 paper system, collating who has forgotten to phone in and sending texts and making calls until they are located.

Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> is the big day for finishers. The hotel staff give it an hour before they produce air fresheners to combat the arriving hoards of unwashed walkers. There's often a queue at the desk to sign people out and present them with certificate, new T shirt (a must) and badge. When things die down I take my leave and drive to the Brig o' Turk to park overnight before tackling the two Corbetts that sit to its north.

My overnight parking space is midge infested and, however careful I am, hundreds of the little blighters join me in Hugo for an evening of partying.

I get walking at 0815, the cloud is low and I first head towards the dam on the Glen Finglas Reservoir. This is the first navigational error of the day, I should have taken the higher track. Realising my mistake, and not wishing to backtrack, I climb the steep wooded slope and pop out on the metaled track.

It's about a kilometre before I branch east, taking another track running parallel, across the glen, to another being bulldozed out of the hillside. I find the going tough so strip back to shirt sleeves whereupon it decides to drizzle so I have to don waterproofs for the long pull, across rough, trackless ground, towards Ben Ledi. My hay fever returns and with my sunglasses and the cloud down, I struggle to see very far ahead. So intent on map and compass I surprise myself with the summit ridge at 1115. Not sure whether the top is left or right I'm checking my GPS when another walker has me jumping out of my skin. With the direction sorted I make the trig point summit at 1120.

With the cloud down I sense it's going to be a tricky navigational exercise over to Benvane. This is not helped by my decision to follow the ridge path which I discover, when the cloud lifts for a few seconds, as a path leading from the low ground to the east. I have to work my way around the steep slopes, and re-ascend, to correct the mistake. The cloud is still low and my eyes stream behind my sunglasses. I'm now faced with a winding ridge which, given the poor visibility, has me stopping every few minutes to check the GPS and reset my compass. I have to take my sunglasses off to do close map and compass work which, in turn, causes my eyes to sting and prick even more. In my pre-GPS Munro bagging days this would have been an abandonment.

Some reassuring clunks from workmen, building the track, tells me I'm passing the right area. Masses of crane fly dot the ground and circle around. I make the summit of Benvane at 1455, a shade under four hours to cover over three miles from Ben Ledi. A cairn of rocks is littered with crane fly and it appears that I have interrupted some form of Tipulidae gangbang. A few break off and make some daring attempts to land on my face.

The return is by the long south ridge of Benvane. I reach Hugo at 1720; a nine hour day, I'm fed up and don't fancy a similar day tomorrow. So I set my sat nav

for home and put in four hours, interrupted only by a series of navigational errors in road works.

Corbett Count:	58 out of 221
Graham Count:	15 out of 224
Unique Donald Count:	2 out of 59

## 2017

It's the first day back at work after Christmas and I know I've got to do it. My ambition to climb all the 1444 mountains of the British Isles is burning too great, work is getting more stressful and, at the age of fifty-one, my technical edge is starting to slip. Mistakes are creeping into my work, I'm managing to catch them and sort them myself but my own standards are dropping.

I ask to go for a coffee with one of the firm's directors. The words come out like I'm asking a girl for a date – I hear myself saying them but it isn't quite me.

"I've decided to retire."

Terry buries his head in his hands and says, "Oh no."

"But I'm giving you three months' notice."

We chat, he's sixty-five and wants out too. He doesn't try and talk me out of it. He can see I'm serious.

Come early April the two directors announce, entirely coincidental to my departure, that they've sold the company. I meet the owners – corporate types, not like the family feel of the firm I've enjoyed for the last twelve years. My decision was the right one. I wouldn't have been happy.

April the 7th is my leaving do, a meal out at a Chinese restaurant. A card is presented to me. Though Rich's, the salesman, leave me bemused – "Steve you are a bit odd but I've enjoyed working with you." Okay I don't have a TV, freezer, dishwasher or a modern car, never raised a family, live alone and am retiring at the age of fifty-one to go and climb all the 2000ft mountains of the British Isles. What's odd about that?

April the 8th I drive to Scotland and park up in brilliant sunshine in the Southern Uplands.

I wake around 0630 on April the 9<sup>th</sup> and, being now retired, it takes me until 0900 to emerge from the camper van. I get going at 0910, following the well made up path that rises to the north east of the Tail Burn waterfalls. I'd looked at the maps the night before and had been combining two walks into one when the reality, of my slow pace, reminded me to stick with what's possible.

The path is well made and I'm making good progress when, at around 0945, I feel my eyes start to prick and my nose start to run – hay fever caused by heather pollen. As I felt so miserable with it last year I've been eating the odd spoonful of Scottish heather honey to try and build up some resistance. However, it's time for more drastic action. I put on my snow goggles and shove the two probes, of a newly purchased red light device, up my nostrils and pray nobody else comes my way: a couple from Selkirk arrive while I'm wiping the last of whatever needs to be wiped off the probes.

My eyes and nose settle straightaway and, relieved, I press on until the path levels off above some waterfalls. I spot a stone wall that is the guide to the summit of the Corbett, White Coomb. There's the little matter of a burn to cross which, being out of practise, I manage to submerge my left foot in.

Shaking the dripping mass off I press on, slowing now as the slopes are rugged grass tufts. I rest awhile and decide to set my altimeter. In the past it has been in the habit of switching from meters (which match the maps) to feet. Looking at it set to 2017ft I press numerous buttons to try and get it into meters. Only a closer inspection shows I'm actually adjusting the year not the height.

I reach the summit at 1140 in blustery wind. I make the Donalds of Molls Cleuch Dod (1310) and Lochcraig Head (1415). Then a navigational error has me striding in the wrong direction until, with the help of my GPS, I navigate back round, then through peat hags, until I meet the path of ascent. The weather clears up and I make it back to Hugo, the camper van, at 1645.

A couple up from Dumfries are sat in the car next to me. Both middle aged and smoking. They ask about the falls and I point out an easy walk to a viewing point. They didn't look impressed, only when I suggested they drive 100 meters down the road and look left, to see the falls, do I see any indication of temptation.

Back in the van I attempt to put into practise my regime of better housekeeping. I now have a waste bin and a bedside cabinet in which to store all the things I frequently lose – such as my watch, wallet, keys... When I say bedside cabinet it's actually something I bought from a charity shop for a tenner. Then realising it was ever so slightly too wide and a bit too tall, I took my electric circular saw to it to, shall we say, trim it down a bit. It now fits a treat but is not worthy of inspection by an expert cabinet maker.

The next change to regime is the elimination of frying eggs. This had three problems: (i) spitting oil around the cooking area (ii) the washing up and (iii) the setting off the smoke alarm. The new regime is pickled eggs, Smash potato and baked beans. To save gas I've worked out I can boil one kettle a day and, with the use of flasks, have porridge for breakfast and lunch with Smash potato, eggs and beans for supper. Needless to say this new diet does require a degree of solitude and the saving of gas is a moot point.

I wake early on the 10<sup>th</sup> but again feel lazy so, after a drive around to the foothills of Broad Law, I'm walking at 0930. I puff and pant and rest my way up the unclassified Cairn Law before heading west towards the Donald of Talla Cluch Head. I follow a tall deer fence, the wind hums through it like an eerie presence. A distant glen heads south with a wide river, trees and shadows. Only a distant windfarm blots the landscape.

I reach the summit at 1135, rest awhile and contemplate the speed at which I live my life. I'm always planning ahead, this morning the remaining mountains have been plotting themselves out in my head. Can I finish in 2018, 2019? And what does it matter, time is now my own. Thirty years of work, following years of education, is going to take some time to detoxify from.

The wind picks up again and sets the fence rattling. I take my leave and head back to Cairn Law then the long pull up Broad Law to its masts, trig point and a very pleasant lady from near Edinburgh. She's walked up the track from Hearthtarie and is enthusiastic about the route I've taken. I show her my map, she asks about navigation and I demonstrate how to set the compass and walk on a bearing.

It's 1315 and I take the sharp descent and ascent to the Donald of Cramalt Craig, arriving at 1440. The wind has picked up and the sky now has parallel lines of broken cloud like battleships off to war.

I backtrack to the campervan, distant hills look like they've been scooped out by an ice cream spoon. Light rain patters against my hood as the wind chatters in my ear.

I make it back to Hugo, basking in the early evening light, at 1715 and set off on a rather twisty two and a half hour drive to Carsphairn, stopping in Moffat for supplies.

I start out at 0915 on the 11<sup>th</sup> and take the long track to the foot of the Corbett of Cairnsmore of Carsphairn. I've chosen this one as there are no pesky Donalds in bagging distance. I think I like the purity of one mountain per day.

As the track comes to an end on the map I note it now snakes up an outlying ridge. I look at the stone wall ahead and, given the steepness, elect for the longer route up onto the ridge. I drop in to dawdle mode, one foot in front of the other, no big strides. It helps my breathing and, on reaching the ridge, the waiting wind does anything but help my breathing.

I follow a wall and fence for the long, cloud clagged, haul to the summit trig point. An accompanying cairn, wind generator and solar panels, anchored down by 2.3 tonnes of concrete (as advertised) grace the summit. I backtrack and drop, glad to be out of the wind, to the original track. I make it back to Hugo at 1430.

I spend part of the afternoon attempting to fix the tap over Hugo's sink. It's decided to weep water around the swivel joint which, in turn, is duly making everything it can wet. I fail.

I wake on the 12<sup>th</sup> and drive round to Forrest Lodge for an attempt on the Corbett of Corserine and its three Donald neighbours. I get started at 0850 and at 1020 am still not out the forest. I check my GPS which decides to paint a black screen and refuse any further communication with the outside world. With the sink tap, a broken water softener back at home and now a dead GPS I revert to making some notes in my waterproof notebook with my waterproof pen. The only snag is that I've lost the pen. I'm sure it was in my map pocket but alas no luck. I curse somewhat and pull my hood tight against the rough wind and pattering rain. As I swing my pack back on I notice the pen on the ground. I don't know who to thank but I say "Thank you" out loud.

I press on and, following some helpful signs about a stile over a deer fence, emerge onto open ground. The signage is welcome but in fact I could have stepped over the deer fence with a simple stride. This is in contrast to the many fences I've come across in the past where I'm climbing over eight foot without a stile in sight.

I recall that my Munros were done with just map and compass. I did have a GPS for a while but it was so inaccurate I barely used it. And it was only during the last one hundred Munros did I carry a mobile phone. Today, with just map and compass, I somehow feel vulnerable, less complete. I reflect I've had the privilege of living through a revolution in technology.



I press on and start to bargain with myself over this entire project. Retirement is supposed to be about fun and enjoyment and I'm having no fun and very little enjoyment. I'm tired, blown about and the rain isn't helping the situation either. As ever I've set myself a tough goal. Ever since the age of nineteen when I realised, with a big push, I could get a First in my degree I have set myself very challenging goals. I graduated thirty years ago this summer having done a very ambitious undergraduate final year project. I couldn't do something simple, something just enough to make the grade. Instead I designed and built my own local area network, and not prepared to stop at that I used fibre optics between each access point. And, like there was some angry god looking over my shoulder, I used different types of fibre between each which entailed designing different transmitter and receiver circuitry for each connection. Only when I demonstrated it as a fully working sub-network of the college's own network, and my tutor's jaw actually dropped, did it dawn on me that perhaps I had gone too far.

On graduating I set myself a goal of being the technical architect on major public sector IT projects. I got there at twenty-four. Then I wanted a house, so I pushed on and worked all the hours I could and got on the property ladder at twenty-seven. When I say property ladder I went straight in with Gisella, my then partner, for a four bed Edwardian semi in Marlborough.

Then I decided having a mortgage was too restrictive so I pushed on, worked every hour I could and became mortgage free at the age of thirty-three. Then I decided I wanted to retire at the age of fifty so pushed on and saved as much as I could into the pension and managed it at the age of fifty-one. So here I am now having bagged over eight hundred mountains along the way. Perhaps, as Rich the salesman said, I am a bit odd!

And now I'm on the side of this bloody hillside reviewing this whole catalogue of events. I've set myself the goal of finishing the Corbetts next year and the Grahams the year after with the plan to pick off the Donalds along the way.

So I re-plan. I'm retired. My body will hopefully last out until I'm sixty so I can slow this down and take the next eight years over it. I can also take tomorrow off and try and get the tap fixed and buy a new GPS. Oh and today I can just do the Corbett and its nearest Donald and leave the other two, at the far end of a long ridge, for another day. It's a hard bargain I drive, I've got to stop being so driven all of the time.

I follow a faint path onto high ground, pass a cairn then onto the Corbett of Corserine. I then head east, battling wind and rain, until I make the Donald summit of Carlin's Cairn at 1310 before a return to the Corbett at 1350 – five hours into a walk that the guidebook advertised, including the two other Donalds, as a five hour forty minute round trip.

I head back down and, via a fire break in the forest, get back to Hugo at 1610. I then drive to Ayr, park on the windswept promenade, and check out caravan and outdoor shops on my phone. I eat out at a chip shop and locate Blacks and the Mountain Warehouse for early visits in the morning.

I'm rocked to sleep by the wind buffeting the campervan. Knowing I'm just about to spend over £100 on a new GPS I refrain from breakfasting out and instead have porridge in the van.

I walk in to the town centre. Neither Blacks nor the Mountain Warehouse stock GPS receivers. I must have looked incredulous in the Mountain Warehouse for the assistant suggested I could try Argos.

"Where's that?" I ask.  
"Here in Ayrton Senna."  
"Sorry?"  
"In Ayrton Senna."

Hmm, that's what I thought she said. What the late, great Brazilian Formula One star has to do with Argos is anybody's guess. Then it dawns on me. "Oh Ayr town centre," I reply.

"Aye, take a right out the shop then a right again and that's you."

Argos only has ones designed for golf courses so I drive to Glasgow and visit Tisos. They have a good selection and the assistant is very helpful. Sat out in Hugo I try and workout the new purchase. All I want is to be able to switch it on and for it to tell me where I am. But that takes rather a lot of cussing and configuration.

I decide to eat in Tiso's café but soon wish I hadn't. The Scottish food service is up to its usual standards. The veggie option contained slices of beef and they questioned my ordering skills when I queried it.

I drive up the A82 and pull in at Inverarnan with a view to taking in the nearby Corbett tomorrow. However, the volume of Easter traffic sets me ill at ease and instead I head for the tranquillity of the B8074 through Glen Orchy.

Rain sets in as I pull into the newly laid carpark at the foot of the Corbett of Beinn Mhic-Mhonaidh. I chat to a lady in a 1972 VW Camper Van before the weather has us beating a retreat to our separate vehicles.

I read, watch a DVD then sleep and stir to rain drumming on my camper's roof. I emerge at 0920 and the lady in the VW Camper, who introduces herself as Bridget, walks with me and her husky looking dog for the first twenty minutes. She's another person that's opted for the simpler life and left the rat race of the south behind her.

I press on alone, along the forestry tracks, for a few minutes before being caught up by John, a sixty-seven year old, triple Munroist, retired GP from southern Scotland. He sets a cracking pace and has me through the forest at 1040. I then confess to my asthma and that if he wants to enjoy his day he'd better go on ahead.

I meet John on his way back down at a point where I still have 150m of vertical ascent, and forty minutes walking, to complete. He says he's just heard a couple of plumbers. I spare my ignorance by thinking this through and, realising he's unlikely to be referring to Eastern Europeans out looking to fix your lavatory, assume he's referring to birds.

"Do you know much about birds?" he asks, confirming my own conclusion.  
"Not really," I reply.

I set myself back to dawdle mode, picking my way through the grassy slopes before reaching the summit, with light snow in the air, at 1300. I look for somewhere to sit – having bought new over trousers yesterday I'm parking myself on grass to avoid wearing the seat out on stone. My old ones had gone through on the seat which made sitting on wet grass an unpleasant option.

I take in the views, eat my porridge, send a couple of texts then set off back, reaching the camper at 1550. Tucked into my driver's window is Bridget's address, phone number and email.

I drive round to the Cruachan power station and tuck Hugo away in a layby. The leisure battery decides to die a slow death during the night, leaving me without heating. What with the GPS, the tap, and now the leisure battery, the first week of retirement is proving rather expensive.

I set off for the Corbett of Beinn a' Bhuidh at 0830 through a narrow, wet steep woodland path of rocks, mud and tree roots. As I approach the skyline the mud thickens until I'm squelching my way through ankle deep treacle as I head towards a stile over a tall deer fence.

The stile is around five foot high and on a steep left-hand slope. As I mount its first rung the entire structure tilts back towards me. I lean my body in to counterbalance and ascend the slippery steps until I'm perched astride the fence. A massive gust of wind does little to help the situation as I gingerly lower myself down the other side.

I can now see the dam road and the dam above it. I find it tough going on the tarmac, my body aches from yesterday and the distant snow-capped mountains are far from tempting.

At the dam I head northeast across steep, boggy ground. Cloud blows in and out with the icy wind. The summit comes in and out of view and, with the escalating dusting of snow, I'm clearly heading into a storm.

The wind is cruel and blows right through me. At 1150 I duck down behind some rocks and eat my porridge. The flask is not that good but this time, given the contrast with the ambient temperature, it tastes really hot.

I press on into the storm. Snow batters my face and, for once, the snow goggles do not look out of place.

At times I can barely stand up and my body decides this is the most optimum moment to inform me that it wishes to proceed with a bowel movement. It's never easy at the best of times in the hills but with wind speeds around 60mph and the need to wrestle off the pack, I find somewhere appropriate and do what needs to be done. I am, shall we say, a little frayed around the edges.

I press on and reach the icicle encrusted summit cairn at 1250. I hang around for no more than a minute before backtracking. The route isn't obvious so I take a bearing and, after some ten minutes, pick up a line of footprints in the soft snow. I wonder if there's another soul in the vicinity until I press my own sole alongside and compare the result only to confirm that they are my own left from the ascent.

The short grass is ice encrusted, one clump, no more than four inches high, has each blade individually entombed in ice.

I take it steady towards the dam. My knees ache a little and I use my trekking poles to keep myself steady. After negotiating the rickety stile I descend through the steep forest and get back to Hugo at 1515.

I drive round to Tyndrum and make use of a café and its Wi-Fi. I manage to order a new leisure battery and a tap for Hugo and have them sent to Alison Ogden in Newtonmore. The first week of retirement has cost me £250 in replacement bits.

I check my maps and elect to head towards Glen Ogle. A National Park car park, with a shut burger van, is my home for the night. I get a fair mobile signal and catch up with friends.

I set off at 0925 in light drizzle and low cloud, towards the Corbett of Creag Mac Ranaich. I briefly follow a disused railway line before clambering over a low fence and treading carefully across a marsh ridden plain.

The ascent is a tortuous bog of crags, streams and tussocks. Snow starts to fall vertically (there is no wind) and my eyes focus through it like one of those domed snow shaker scenes that you'd have once found on your granny's mantelpiece.

I press on through the sodden grass with underground streams burbling away. Near the summit I have to map, compass and GPS my way through the crags until I find the summit at 1300.

I abandon any idea of pressing on towards its neighbour, Meall an t-Seallaidh. In my Munro days, and my youth, I would have done. But the warmth of Hugo beckons and it can wait for another day.

I get back at 1450 and make full use of the fact the, now open, burger van serves vegetarian food.

I sleep well, wake early and, after taking the short drive round to Balquhiddar, am setting off, slowly, through the forested Kirkton Glen at 0835.

My body isn't into it and the pull up the forestry tracks feels like a tortuous slog. However, my spirits are lifted by it being a much nicer day with a warm breeze and many peaks below the cloud line.

I break out of the forest at 1010 then head east then south east for the slopes of the Corbett of Meall an t-Seallaidh. I have to drop and rise a few times as I cross outlying humps. A tiny bit of snow falls but the views from the top, at 1320, are well worth it. A few snowclad Munros sit in the distance.

I take a direct west route back, barging my way through the forest, via a steep stream bed, to meet the track then a shortcut to drop down to the original track up. I make it back to Hugo, after a bit of backtracking, at 1555.

I check maps and, given I'm a bit short of day food, decide to head to Crief to restock then head to the Loch Turret Reservoir for an attempt tomorrow at the Corbett of Auchnafree Hill.

In the early hours, with a dropping temperature, I realise that I've parked in an exposed spot. I pop out for a call of nature and, with little ambient light, wonder at the sky littered in bright stars.

Back in the van I start the engine to give the dying leisure battery enough juice to run the heating pump, and tuck myself into the quilt and shiver to the bone.

I get going at 0800 to the myriad of bird sounds coming from the loch. I recognise gulls and ducks but that's about the limit of my ornithological knowledge - I wouldn't recognise a plumber if it was carrying a monkey wrench and a float valve.

The track along the right hand side of the Loch Turret has numerous frozen puddles which glisten in the light permitted by the high cloud. Birds continue to call and sheep scuttle from my path. A line of hills, with their mixed colours of heather and peat, border and guard the southeast shore.

My body is not happy. Yesterday it was bargaining for a day off, today it's demanding one. As I age I'm no longer seeing my body as me. It's a carcass that's getting slower, more painful whereas my mind still holds itself closer to my youth.

The track gently rises and the calls of the birds accompany, until it forks right for a more serious incline. Large black drainage pipes are tunnelled under the track and water splashes out and tumbles down the hillside. Blades of nearby grass have caught and frozen the spray and formed individual fingers like upturned test tubes.

I break off the path at the 700m contour and head, via a burn, for the summit. There are peat fields to cross but the ice gives my feet a firm base on which to tread. I dislodge a couple of hares which bound off, look back then bound off some more.

The summit, which I reach at 1140, has a cairn but the ground to the right looks higher which I confirm by using my altimeter.

I take in the views and check my phone. Theresa May has called a general election for June – May's election in June – which will probably annihilate the Labour party. With Brexit, the Syrian Crisis and Donald Trump sabre rattling with North Korea I wonder how much we really need this.

I head back the way I came and, alongside the loch, watch a shepherd whistling and calling his dogs as they roundup sheep. He asks me to walk with him so I don't cause sheep, yet to be gathered, to shoot off. I ask about the lambing and he explains the ewes are due in a week and they get them in to give birth. I mention the lambing has already taken place down south and he says "Aye, it's the land of milk and honey down there." The Scots just can't help themselves when they get the chance for a little jibe. I was only being friendly. However, he thanks me for my patience saying that many people wouldn't be so tolerant and hang back for him.

He has four dogs, Jim is sent high up to gather a group of sheep. The shepherd whistles and shouts instructions which echo off the surrounding hills. Jill, a grey with piercing blue eyes, is itching to go and help. But she stays put until some instruction, that doesn't require a second asking, has her shooting up the hill to join her colleague.

I get back to the campervan at 1405 and prepare to take tomorrow off.

After a restful day I get going at 0750 on the 20<sup>th</sup> from the minor road, below Kincaigie, and head towards Glen Tilt. The weather is warmer, the cloud higher and my body more fit for purpose.

I'm on a wide grass track with interspersed forestry, fields and pregnant sheep. I look into the glen below for signs of Gilberts Bridge, the only way to cross the river for the long pull up the Corbett of Beinn Mheadhonach. I overshoot, drop down to the track, double back and find the splendid 18<sup>th</sup> century bridge.

Across the other side I look for the path that hugs the river bank. It's blocked by a very tall padlocked gate. I then notice, some yards further on, a diamond shape gate set into the fence. I duck through it and follow the path and track to another bridge crossing an impressive feeder burn into the main river.

Again this is an 18<sup>th</sup> century bridge which bridges a deep gorge where water pummels through, thumping like the low drone of a beam engine. The rock has been carved out, leaving menacing deep, dark water where one would certainly not like to find oneself.

I now follow the high path that charts the northeast bank of the burn. It's not a place to have a slip for the slope is an unforgiving slide into the raging waters below.

I make the third, and final, bridge of the day at 1000. Again it's an attractive stone bridge from the 18<sup>th</sup> century which leads me onto the long slope to the summit at 1230. My hay fever starts to play me up and, remembering the misery of last year, I immediately stop, take a pill, administer eye drops, use the red light therapy on my nostrils and don a hay fever mask.

As I ascend the covering over my mouth mists my goggles so I have to do without it as I climb towards the main ridge. There are three rises on the main ridge, my altimeter tells me the middle one is the higher whereas the cairn size would have you believe the first is the highest.

There is a moderate breeze but there is enough warmth in the air to sit and eat and take in the fine views to the north. The sound of a distant commercial jet is the only interruption to the sounds of the wind and far off water tumbling through the glens.

As I descend the afternoon warms up and, for the first time this year, I'm able to walk without over trousers or jacket.

The route back is much the same as the way up and I reach Hugo at 1550 – an eight hour round trip.

I get a call from Alison Ogden – my leisure battery and new tap have arrived for Hugo. I drive north and park to take in the Corbett of The Fara tomorrow. The weather forecast is good but it rains throughout the night and I have difficulty motivating myself.

I emerge from the van at 0855 into a murky looking day. The rain greets me such that in the few minutes it takes me to find the forest track, I'm already dripping and feeling somewhat miserable.

The track is not on my map but, by using compass and GPS, I'm reassured it's taking me in the right direction. It takes just over an hour to reach the top of the forest. There is a tall padlocked metal gate that I need to climb. One foot on it and the entire thing tips towards me. I leap back. On closer inspection I note it's off its hinges so I'm able to prise it open and slip through into the cloud.

The ascent is through sodden, foot long grass. I keep on a bearing, follow a handy wall and make the summit at 1130.

I slip my soaked gloves off and have a snack. There's no view and the rain is still peppering me. Putting the gloves back on becomes impossible. The wet lining has



rucked and my fingers are too cold to sort it out. I half get them on by fisting by hands and set off back down.

The dam of Loch Ericht comes into view and I recall my long, and tedious, walks towards it in the days of Munro bagging and the TGO.

Back in the forest I disturb three red deer as they lazily graze in the short strip of open land either side the track. They take a look at me, and possibly have a sniff or two, and lollop into the confines of the conifer trees.

The rain now stops and I arrive, a little bit drier, back at Hugo at 1320. I then drive round to Newtonmore, fit the new tap and battery and spend a lovely evening with Alison, Adrian and their daughter, Ellen.

I retreat to my campervan around 2300 and have a restless night not helped by a cockerel crowing from 0400 onwards. I therefore get going early, drive across to Glen Roy and am starting up the slopes of Beinn Iaruinn at 0915. It's a very steep, heathery slope but the day is dry and the views are fine. I make the Corbett's summit at 1145 and, with my back to a good sized cairn, rest and take in the views for half an hour. Ben Nevis has her head in the cloud, patches of snow occasionally show through as the wind moves the cloud around.

I continue southwest along the ridge then, faced with an extremely steep southeast descent, continue along a sheep path until the walk off becomes more concave than convex. Even then I take a steep dried up stream bed, offering a few more foot holds. I find it very hard to keep my nerve.

The road appears below and it still looks very steep. I drop to my haunches and wobble down a few hundred feet until I find the confidence to stand again.

From around 600 feet up I spot a car draw up alongside Hugo. I imagine watching him being broken into and only able to watch from afar. After some ten minutes my fears are allayed as three figures emerge and head up the hill.

I make a traverse, along another sheep path, and slip, buckling my left foot in the process. It's painful for a few minutes before settling.

I make it back to Hugo at 1400, make use of a nearby burn to fill his water tanks and bottles, then drive a short distance further up Glen Roy to bag Carn Dearg tomorrow.

Having the new leisure battery, and the heating working, makes for a comfortable night's sleep. I get walking at 0810, first crossing a footbridge followed by two smaller summits that are reached via grassy slopes, before the final pull up Carn Dearg. There are a few boggy patches to cross before I hit the cloud line, the summit ridge and the summit itself at 1125.

The return journey has adjacent similar folds in the hills so I have to get my compass bearings correct to be able aim for the correct route down. The weather is 'drafty' and I get back to Hugo at 1335.

Monday the 24th lives up to the expectations of the weather forecast with strong winds and snow. I huddle in the van feeling sorry for myself and ruing the demise of my Windows tablet. Refusing to boot I am relegated to typing this in on my smartphone.

I drive back to Newtonmore and, as Tuesday 25th dawns bleak and snowy, I note cars in the High Street are covered in snow. I am glad I have de-icer with me.

I pick up Alison and we drive south on the A9 to Dalnacardoch for the six mile walk to bag the Corbetts of An Dun and Creag An Loch.

Looking at the weather I opt for my walking boots. Somehow trail shoes don't feel appropriate.

We cross the A9 and the walk starts as a battle with strong head wind blowing snow into our faces. I have my hood drawn tight and my snow goggles do a good job. I'm wearing my snow gloves with a built in plastic gadget that I can use to clear the goggles.

The boots feel heavy and, with Alison's pace faster than mine, my hips are soon muttering away that they aren't happy.



Conversation is impossible and communication is reduced to the odd turn of the head to check on the other's whereabouts. The two Corbetts are on view but snow clouds are swirling around them and we note the dusting of snow is growing into snow fields. We press on and, surprisingly, cover the six miles in just two hours.

At the end of the track lies the decaying Sronphadruig Lodge, surrounded by a tall deer fence. We push open a slatted gate and are surprised by how heavy it feels against the strong wind. It slams behind us.

The lodge's front door is hanging off its hinges. Some of the ceilings are out and the best bit is the hall. We sit on the stairs and eat our lunch - many a decade has gone by since anybody took these stairs up to bed. We debate the weather and decide to press on.



We let ourselves out of the deer enclosure and continue on the track. The clouds have dropped and the two mountains are now out of view. And the snow is blasting head on: greater than the walk in. Alison and I have a shouted conversation. She asks me what I think. I tell by her voice she is doubting the wisdom of this. "Turn back," I reply. Alison nods. "There's risk of fatality if we ascend," I add.

We have the wind behind us on the walk back. The weather clears but as we take a final look behind us at the mountains we note they are still in a snow storm. And the same snow storm soon chases us down and engulfs us.

I drop Alison back in Newtonmore and feel a bit sad to say goodbye to her and Adrian. Despite being an independent soul, who needs to often be on his own, I have a sense of unwanted solitude as I set off back to Glen Roy.

I get going on the 26th, at 0750, from the head of the glen for the final Corbett named Carn Dearg. It is one I accidentally missed on the TGO in 2010.

There is light snow but I am struck by how still everything is. After yesterday's snow sandblasting this feels a little sinister. Like a quiet moment in a film where the director is lulling the audience to only then throw the protagonist into danger.

I pass through the tracks that weave amongst the buildings of Brae Roy Lodge. A diesel generator putters away as the river gurgles its way by.

I follow the tracks until it is time to head northeast to meet the ridge. The horizon is peppered with deer whose silhouettes look like cardboard cut-outs.

The pull up is sharp and my right hip jabs away with pain.

I reach a snow encrusted plateau at 0945. On a warmer day this would be a sodden peat bog, today the ground is solid and I manage to make good progress.

As I rise the snow gets deeper and the best line to the summit is via a knee deep drift. I drop back to where grass still pokes through the snow and weave a maze like route until I reach the summit cairn at 1100.

I enjoy some views. A number of glens can be seen forking off from the low ground. I set my compass so I hit the right one. I get back to Hugo at 1305.

I drive to Spean Bridge, eat in a cafe, and then take the short trip around to the base of Beinn Bhan.

I manage to sleep for twelve hours and get going at 0910 on Thursday the 27th. It's a day to take care as forty years ago today I was in an accident at school where I managed to head butt a Stanley Knife and had eleven stitches around my right eye socket - fortunately the last time I ended in A&E.



**Forty Years ago Today**

I weave my way round a diverted footpath, a tumbling burn, a rickety bridge and a fence.

The ground is very uneven, boggy and tiresome. I ache nearly everywhere it's possible to ache. My shoulders, hips, abdomen, knees and legs are all protesting.

When I get onto more open ground the wind picks up and light rain, from high cloud, peppers me.

I walk on a bearing until the distant outline of a trig point and cairn become visible. I slump down out of the wind at 1210.

I make a navigational error on the way back and find myself on very steep, wet ground. Opposite the hill has a smattering of snow like an artist has flicked white paint against a khaki canvas.

The ground is too steep and too wet. I attempt to traverse but it is unnervingly steep so I head straight back up, at a fear induced pace, until I reach a ridge which I can descend by. I get back to Hugo at 1410 and take the minor road to Fort William, stock up with supplies, buy a new compass and drive round to Kinlochleven and park up for the night.

I lay in and get started for Glas Bheinn at 0900. The first thing to navigate is a series of new woodland paths which confuse the hell out of me until I use my compass to cut directly through the trees. I relax when it becomes obvious I am heading up hill to the paths and tracks described in the guidebook.

I hear distant bagpipes, well at first I think it's somebody murdering a cat until my hearing tunes in properly.

I pick up the track to Loch Eilde Mor then fork onto the path that leads round to the small dam. Within a hundred yards of it I find a sign saying the track across the dam is closed and alternative route should be sought. Like where? A sign like that should be set miles back.

Not only is the track closed it is in fact entirely absent. Only a wide river channel sits where it once was. I head downstream amongst drainage works and machinery. I find a spot where I am able to make a stepping stone ford and, with only one foot dunked, I am scrambling up the civil engineering works that resemble a battlefield.

I check the time, my progress is slow for meeting my former work colleague, Mat at the Clachaig Inn for the evening. I pick up the pace, following a path until at 550m I branch off northeast for the summit of Glas Bheinn. It is a gentle incline, easier on me and I make the summit cairn at 1350 in breeze and light rain.

The cloud is high, the views are good. To the northwest are the impressive Munros of the Mamores. They are a series of very individual mountains that each tower above me. I really do wonder how I managed them all in the 1990s.

To the southwest are the equally impressive mountains of Glen Coe. Particularly on show is the Aonach Eagach ridge which Mat and his friends plan for tomorrow.

I head northwest, steeply down to take a land bridge across Loch Eilde Mor. From here it's track and path out. The only disruption is a group of people, surrounding a sign, blowing a horn. This appears to attract a group of flag carrying men who, when passing me, barely say hello. A distinct foreign tongue adds to the mystery.

I take a tumble on the steep wooded descent back to Kinlochleven. One of my trekking poles, stuck in a tree root, is the culprit. I get back to Hugo at 1650.

Mat (short for Mateus), Gus (short for Angus), Sam (short for Samuel) and Pawel (short for Pawel) arrive at the Clachaig Inn at 1945. Having spent the last two hours fending off requests for the table I am holding my heart sinks when Gus announces they should go and camp before eating. We lay out my map, and line up an array of beers to ward off any further sorties for the table.

They find a pitch quickly and we eat then examine my map - the very one I have used for this area since 1990 - when these guys were either still in primary school, nappies or not even born. Mat is keen for me to join them on the Annoch Eagach ridge tomorrow but, having done it in 1997, nothing will persuade me to go up there again. It is one slip and you are dead land.

I also point out that I am 19 years older than any of them. A point they, very kindly, say is not a problem. *It certainly feels like a problem to me*, I think.

Mat says he needs his 'manager' up there with him. I point out that, given this is my official last day at Solchar, I ceased to be his manager at 5 p.m. today. A point he concedes.

Gus spots a young lady he knows from a pub in Dorset. He chats her up, she has just moved up and looks keen on him. He gets as far as finding out her name is Emma.

I sleep well in Hugo join them after they emerge from their illicit camp to sort their kit for the day from the back of Gus's car. Sam is debating whether to take a loo roll. Given my memories of the exposed nature of the ridge I think this is essential equipment.

I get involved in some car logistics so that they have their car at the end of the ridge. With a day off planned, and damp socks that are even offending me, I set off for a village, near Fort William, where Google tells me there is a launderette. I reflect how modern technology makes life so much easier. A smart phone, a car GPS and I find a launderette. Yesterday Mat was able to keep me posted on their long drive up from the South of England. Years ago I'd have been waiting in the Clachaig Inn with no knowledge of their progress.

I pop into the launderette and ask how it works. In fact I am pretty nervous - I've not been in one since 1988. However, the helpful ladies show me how the machines work and I manage to overcome my nerves.

I then pop in to Morrisons in Fort William and stock up with Mini Cheddars, pickled eggs, baked beans and instant potato. Such is the volume, and lack of variety of my purchase, I use the self-service Isle to save inquisitive looks from an assistant. I recall Fort William in the 1980s when it had the one tiny high street Tesco that shut at 1700 on a Saturday, not to reopen until the Monday morning. Times have changed.

My final popping to places for the day has me going into the town centre where I get chatting to a couple of guys manning an SNP campaign table. We have a constructive chat about future referendums. They want to leave the UK, adopt their own currency and remain in Europe. My view is they would have more chance of independence if they allow the UK to leave the EU first then go to the people for a mandate to leave the UK, join the EU and adopt the Euro. One of the guys takes the party line but the other nods and agrees with my view.



I drive back to the Clachaig Inn and await the return of Mat, Sam, Pawel and Gus. I doze in my camper and come round to Mat knocking on my door. They've enjoyed the ridge but, being hardened climbers, find it easier than my warnings.

Another evening is spent in the Clachaig Inn where I note the menu of single malts is longer than the food menu. There is a live Gaelic band in and the place is jumping. Gus spots Emma and hones in on a front row position with her.

There are lively songs involving fiddles, bagpipes and the accordion. The band try and get people dancing and start by asking for a pair to do the gay Gordon's. A woman from LA volunteers and the hunt is on for a man to accompany her. Gus shouts to the band, "Ask Steve." There is a call out for Steve that within a few seconds over a hundred people are chanting. Nobody knows it is me until Gus looks my way and by nature of the fact, and potentially my downfall, I'm the only person not chanting Steve, I am pinpointed. Being an introvert this is hell. A chap (not called Steve) steps forward and rescues me by taking the girl from LA as his dancing partner. I return to skulking in the corners.

Mat suggests revenge and I hatch a plan. Gus is clearly keen on Emma and she looks fairly keen too. I suggest we buy a packet of condoms and I go up to him and, in front of Emma, say, "Are these the ones you are after?" But alas there is no machine in the Gents so my plan fails at the first hurdle.

The band play to gone eleven, the place is heaving, the atmosphere electric. It reminds me how the South is so money and career focused. Nobody has much fun. The pub in our village, that did live music, is now closed with a developer hell bent on turning it into a house.

I sleep in a bit on Sunday the 30th of April before the short journey down the A82 to where the West Highland Way crosses. I alight from the van, fully kitted out, only to notice I have odd walking shoes on. Remembering the 1970s adverts of not mixing radial and cross ply I change one to make a matching pair.

I get walking proper at 1010 in a cold wind to take in the Corbett of Beinn Chrulaiste. It is a series of steep sections followed by more level ground making me feel like an ant on a giant staircase.

The wind gets brutal and cuts right through me. However, I am feeling fitter and make the circular trig point summit, perched on a sea of red granite on a grey granite mountain, at 1230. I make it back to Hugo at 1410.

I drive down Glen Etive and park for the night with the view to bagging Beinn Mhic Chasgaig, one of four Corbetts in the glen, tomorrow.

It's a windy night and I don't pull back the blinds until gone 0900. I'm surprised to see a blue sky and my preparation gets a lift.

I get walking at 1000, crossing a bridge with a very sturdy gate on the far side. I cut diagonally across to meet a path following a wide burn. The path rises both in height and away from the burn until it feels like I am peering into a ravine. The drop is very steep and I am glad when it's time to branch away and climb the steep slopes.

I hear my first cuckoo of the year, no doubt enjoying the blue skies and warm winds.

The ascent is very steep. I have another deep drop to a burn on my right. My progress is slow and wary. Around 1300 I really start to struggle so I sit for a while and appreciate all the mountains that form the skyline. Peaks with specs of snow in the high corries. The green, grey and blues of the grass and rocks - a multitude of hues that glow on a sunny day but brood when the weather closes in.

I press on and, as my altimeter tells me I am approaching the summit, I find a small stream trickling down the mountain. I cup my hands and drink its fine, cool, pure water.

A hundred yards further on and the ground levels into a wide summit plateau: out of sorts with the steep battlements that protect it. It also explains the stream - an impossibility so near to a pointed summit.

I reach the summit at 1340 - one of the many small rises.



**The summit area of Beinn Mhic Chasgaig.  
The goggles are to protect me from hay fever.**

I lay in the grass for forty five minutes, taking in the grand, pointed peaks that make up this area. They make for sharp climbs but each mountain stands alone and stands out.

I head off down the long ridge that faces Glen Coe. Cars on the A82 are silver dots flashing along the road.

I cut down to Glen Etive through steep ground where I have to take the utmost care.

At the river I am more blasé and hop from stone to stone to get across. It's then a tarmac walk back to Hugo. The river is crystal clear with falls over rocks, twist and turns. There are many people about. Some canoeing, some camping, some just pulling up in their cars to take in the awesome mountains that guard each side of the glen. I get to Hugo at 1655.

I drive down the glen in glorious sunshine playing an old Al Dexter track on the CD player. It's one of those moments where everything feels just perfect.

I park up for Stob Dubh tomorrow. The mountains, glen and evening light shimmer in unison. I keep the back door of the van open and drift off to sleep with the blinds down. I come round some hours later to a cool breeze and the mountains as dim shadows against the horizon.

During the night I'm treated to a starlit backdrop between sleeps. I wake around 0730 but don't get walking until 0920. First I set off in the wrong direction along the road. I backtrack to find the track that leads to a bridge which crosses the river.

Turning left I'm faced with the daunting face of Stob Dubh. It looks extremely steep.

I pass a cottage, two black dogs belt out and confront me. I take off my goggles to try and calm them. Their owners call them off.

I feel very tired as I start the ascent. There's no let up, it's as steep as it looks. A mixture of rock and grass which I can only climb at a snail's pace. I'm concerned about the descent later in the day. Going up steep ground is much safer than descending it.

Such is the steepness (an average of 1 in 2.3) that it's not until 1315 that the ground levels enough for me to be able to slip my pack off and take a drink.

I get to the summit at 1350 in a cold breeze. I slip off my over trousers and my map case and stow them away - they are shiny and would slip on the grass should I take a tumble. I also pack away my compass - it has sharp edges. I then check my telescopic trekking poles are tight at each joint before setting off.

I keep three points of contact with each step as I ease myself down the mountainside.

I look for signs of paths, signs where others had trod before me. I follow one and it leads me to a deep gorge, the accompanying hoof prints show me it's nothing more than where the sheep go to drink.

I backtrack then press on, one foot at a time against alarmingly steep ground. A lizard backs away from one of my trekking poles then climbs onto my shoe for protection. For further protection it scurries up my trouser leg. So there I am standing on one foot, with both trekking poles stuck in the ground, on a perilously steep slope trying to shake a lizard out of my trousers.

It takes the hint, drops out then scurries away. I spot better routes down and I'm soon on an easier line. I get back to Hugo at 1630.

I take May the 3rd off and drive to the end of Glen Etive and spend the day admiring the lochs, mountains and clear blue sky. I even manage to swim and

sunbathe. This is such a contrast to eight days ago when Alison and I were snowed off the mountains.



**View looking down Glen Etive**

Things take a nose dive in the early hours. I first wake at 0230 feeling nauseous and open a window to get some cool night air. At 0430 I'm vomiting for England and at 0630 the other end gets involved.

Feeling very sorry for myself I have to abandon any thoughts of walking today. At 0930 I pull down the side screen on Hugo and, in this very remote spot miles down a dead end single track road, I'm very surprised to see a paramedic, on a call out, stroll past. I get up and ask for advice. This consists of drinking lots of water and getting the contaminated porta-potty emptied as soon as possible.

I laze around, feeling ill but come lunchtime am feeling quite hungry. All the food I have in the van repulses me so I set off, abandoning the last two Corbetts in Glen Etive, to drive to Fort William.

Along the single track road there are numerous passing places. It's fifty-fifty whether I'm pulled in or an approaching car is. Until that is I meet a car where there are no passing places between us. It'd be hard for me to reverse but Mr Helpful, in his easy to drive car, demands I reverse. I get up onto the bank but get stuck. Forward and reverse both spin the front wheels. Fortunately a few other cars arrive and they push me back onto the road. Mr Helpful then nudges forward as I reverse a few hundred yards.

I get to Fort William and present myself at the till of the cafe in Morrisons. I order an omelette and a hot drink.

"That's five pounds and fifty-five pence," says the assistant.

"It was only three pounds fifty the other day," I reply.

"That's after 3 p.m." she explains.

I check my watch, it's 1457. Given she's already rung it through, and given I feel ill, I pay up. The meal arrives at 1510 - an interesting point I feel but, again, I can't be bothered.

I eat up, buy some other provisions then attempt to return to Hugo. People are milling everywhere and it takes me awhile to get out the shop, get to Hugo then navigate my way out of the car park and Fort William.

I haven't packed the back of the van very well and, as I drive, bits fly and crash around the back. My temper feels frayed.

I drive past Loch Lochy then cut round, on a single track road, to the foot of Beinn Tee. There's a handy wide piece of tarmac where I park. Twenty minutes later a farmer appears demanding a fiver. I look at the tarmac, there's no join with the road, so it was laid at the same time. He concedes the road is public but claims the square of tarmac belongs to him. Given he is subsidised by the EU, subsidised by the Barnett formula (giving him and his relatives free prescriptions and free university fees) I choose to move on.

Noting his gate, rather surprisingly, does not display a sign saying 'Beware of the Bull' I drive round to the A87 and park on a nice wide public lay by. As I get into the back of Hugo I miss the fact that one of the overhead cupboards has swung open. I promptly crack my head on it and simultaneously completely lose all my sense of humour.

I take Friday the 6th off in an attempt to recover. I'm not over the bug and am suffering bad heart burn. Checking my guidebook I drive to the dam car park at Loch Loyne. However, it is now closed. I can only assume Farmer McFiver and his mates have taken it over and, whenever anybody is sucker enough to pay, they pocket the fiver safe in the knowledge that the said note was made from an animal they were subsidised to raise. Not that he annoyed me you must understand.

I park a bit back from the dam and use Hugo as a sickbay. Cars pass, cars pull in. A passing Romahome gives me a toot.

I doze and wake to a woman taking a picture of the front of Hugo. Given my issues with McFiver I open the door and enquire what interest she has. She points to her 55 plate Romahome - she was just getting a photo of them both. I then find out she's a bit of an expert. Perhaps even an anorak. She reels off all the model numbers she's passed, their engine sizes and their MPGs. Her's is a two litre and did sixty mpg on her trip up from Herefordshire.

Saturday the 6th dawns as another faultless day. The views over Loch Loyne, from a high up lay by, are stunning.

I push myself to get going. I feel weak and not myself. However, if I am to complete the Corbetts someday I need to do at least five a week and I've been here four weeks today and done 19 so far.

When I notice the hill is clad in a wind farm all guidebook references to the route up Meal Dubh go out the window. I get going at 1005 and follow an uncharted plod up a very long track. The turbines are numerous and I am in touching distance of many and feel like I am in some HG Wells story.

In bright sun and a low breeze, I branch off the track, cross rough ground and, at 1325, slump down at the impressive summit cairn. I am shot, feel weak. I am not at all hungry and only manage to eat a very small packet of Mini Cheddars.

I take a more direct route back across rough ground. My legs feel as though they don't belong to me. I cross ground where a digger has cut thousands of square

holes. It takes me awhile to realise this will soon be a forest and each hole will raise a tree.

I hit the A87 some mile downhill of Hugo. It's a blistering walk up the road in the heat. I get back at 1605.

I drive onto Shiel Bridge and park up with a view to taking in Sgurr an Airgid tomorrow.

I get walking at 1020 and am back at the van at 1100 - my body just isn't up to it. I hang around the area, eat out twice and enjoy the views over Loch Duich.

I set off at 0910 on the 8th following the stalkers path up Sgurr an Airgid. Although my pace is okay I'm out of sorts with this entire project. A few weeks back I renegotiated with myself to do 64 Corbetts this year and a bunch of the Donalds. Now this feels unbelievably daunting. I'm constantly playing stats through my head. After getting sick I need to do a minimum of five Corbetts this week to catch up. I think through my retirement. The purpose of it is to take the pressure off deadlines and targets. I started school aged five and have now had forty-seven years of deadlines and goals. I've retired to make life easier but have just gone and set myself another ultra-ambitious target. I renegotiate with myself again and decide it will be good to finish the Corbetts, Grahams and Donalds in my fifties. That's nine summers in which, from the outset of this year, to complete 429 as yet unclimbed peaks. That equates to 48 per year. Okay, that's the new target and, given this is an extended trip, anything else is a bonus.

I press on up the zigzag path. It's another fine day with clear views and a cooling breeze. I take a call from my local MPs PA. They want to use a picture, in their election leaflet, where I'm standing next to the MP. I say it's fine by me.

I reach a ridge, the Corbett is off to my left. I get some rest bite from the gradient before the steep ground returns. Two older chaps pass me on their descent. One has a beard which appears to be full of snot. He snorts out a conversation as bubbles pop from his nose. I make my excuses and get back to my solitude.

The summit area is broader terrain with a number of outcrops. I wind my way through the battlements of the true top, reaching its slain trig point at 1220.

I eat and take in the views. A haze guards the distant hills and loch.

I'm happier on the descent, now I've cleared my head of tight deadlines I reflect, with the new strategy of 49 peaks this year, I am now more than halfway through!

I miss the last bit of path on my final descent and end up on a track that comes out at a graveyard. A short road walk has me back at Hugo at 1430.

I drive down the road to a craft shop that also has a few general provisions. It's the kind of shop where there is no hurry. In a trance like state I spend ages choosing a can of macaroni cheese. My body feels nauseous at the thought of any food I'd had in the run up to the sickness. Even the cover of the DVD I watched on the evening before I was sick has me feeling nauseous. I guess one's body writes anything off that may have been the cause.

I ask if they have peanut butter - I fancy that with jam and bread. Alas the last pot was sold to a family of pine martens at the weekend - actually some humans



bought it for the pine martens but it amounts to the same. Further enquiry informs me that they have no idea when the next pot will be in.

I drive on a little further to a garage. I remember it once had a restaurant where they did an excellent all day breakfast. I was staying at Ratagan Youth Hostel (now closed) and had a bad cold and throat. The place ended up being my daily treat as I recovered.

I spent the evening reading Damon Hill's autobiography. I recall the mid-nineties and being a dedicated fan. I went to see him race three times and, when Munro bagging, would tuck my radio into my hood during his races.

I set off at 0910 on the 9th on the well-defined track that skirts the south-westerly side of the Corbett of Sgurr Mhic Bharraich. I follow a fast flowing burn and, to save carrying too much water, pre-load with as much as I can bear to swallow.

The track swings round as it climbs. I have no more energy than to plod, rest then plod some more.

The day is warm with just a bit of cool breeze. Young trees, with a vibrant green canopy, track a stream joining from the left.

At a lochain I branch on to steep ground and, ever so slowly, take on the final, steep ascent. The grass and heather are tinder dry and crunch below my feet.

I make it to the summit at 1255. Shiel Bridge is a distant spec below. Its road, with miniature cars, winds round and crosses the head of the loch. Fields beyond are straight edged, flat with each having its own shade of green.

It's cooler, I need my fleece so I start to descend. I meet a couple near to the start - the only folk I've seen all day. I get back to Hugo at 1505.

I move along the road and park up for the night in a layby a mile east of the Cluanie Inn. I don't sleep that well so, after a snooze in, get walking at 0945.

The sky is a blanket of cloud, a real difference from the blue skies of the last few days.

Given there is a Munro beyond the Corbett of Am Bathach there is a well-defined path to flow up its slopes. This Corbett is a ridge back with its navigable width down to 30 feet in places.

I have to wear fleece and inner gloves to keep warm. I rest often and enjoy the views back towards the Cluanie Inn and the matchbox cars on the road below.

I reach the summit at 1205 and look across to the Glen Shiel Ridge where, in 1992 in an attempt to do seven Munros in one day, I managed to damage my knees. So much so that to this day I still have to heavily strap them to walk in the mountains. That was a long day and I didn't get off the ridge until late evening and was grateful for a lift, back to my car, from two Italian women.

I start to descend and, given the well-drained profile of the mountain and its narrow undulating ridge, I consider it the best Corbett to date.

As I near the start I get chatting to a middle aged chap on his ascent. He's an ex paratrooper who, some years back while waiting at a pedestrian crossing, was hit

in the head by an overhanging lorry. He shows me the major surgery scar and apologies for his lisp. He's doing well, only 24 Munros away from completing.

I drive back round to Loch Loyne and park up for the night. I'm on a slope so I don't sleep well and therefore get going at 0825 for the long walk to Druim Nan Cnamh.

After a short road walk it's not obvious whether one can cross the dam at the head of the loch. I drop down on a track which winds me through a bit of woodland before bringing me out on the northwest shore.

The east end of the ridge looms above me but first marshy ground has to be covered before I start the sharp ascent through grass, boulders and slabs of rock.

As I pull onto the high ground the ridge, unlike yesterday, is poorly defined. Instead of a neat thirty foot width there is a mass of hummocks, wet ground and boulders. I'm continually in a dip without a point of reference to follow. I rely on compass and altimeter to find my way; I feel like a lead soldier walking in a dirty roof gutter.

The ridge has a number of distinct summits. I soon pass the unnamed easterly high point and then head to Beinn Lonnie.

The drop off Beinn Lonnie, and the distant peak of Druim Nan Cnamh are depressing - it's no fun dropping down from ground hard won.

I arrive at the cylindrical trig point of Druim Nan Cnamh at 1255. I'm pleased with my fitness - it's the first day this year I've not had thoughts of throwing the towel in and driving home.

I take in the views and am surprised to see the Cluanie Inn and Am Bathach to the northwest; geography was never my strongest subject.

I drop down to the low point before Beinn Lonnie and, instead of covering old ground, take the slightly soggy direct line back to the dam. I get back to Hugo at 1605.

After the sickness last week things have been fairly quiet on the need for the loo front. I'm in quite a bit of pain during the night so, first thing, I drive to Morrisons in Fort William and pop the strongest laxative they sell into my shopping basket. With my head down I make my way to the automated pay section. Normally I hate these things - a modern invention that normally gets me confused and irritated. However, today I am well and truly ticking the 'No Publicity' box. But the modern technology has a twist in store. Apparently I am buying something with an age restriction which requires an assistant to come and type some form of code in. And to add to my embarrassment it's a young female assistant who herself looks too young to be allowed to purchase the said item.

She flashes a card at the machine and it gives a reassuring beep. She doesn't take this as her cue to leave but instead watches over me. The machine beeps again and she utters the words, "Unexpected item in the bagging area." As foreshadowing goes that's spot on.

At 0800 I'm sat in the station loos at Fort William in excruciating agony. The laxative is not working as advertised. The recommended fifteen minutes rolls into an hour.

I move Hugo to an all-day car park and then present myself at the Belford Hospital A&E department - I spoke too soon about not having been in A&E for forty years.

The nurses opening gambit is to ask whether I've tried a local GP. As their waiting room is empty they relent and book me in.

So after a couple of hours of being examined and given a bed by a loo, with some accompanying eye watering and embarrassing application of an unspecified liquid, the loo, shall we say, is put to full use.

Needless to say, with my dignity in tatters, I take the rest of the day off, make use of a launderette and feel decisively fragile.

In the late afternoon I drive round to Fort Augustus then take the B862 and find a place to park for the night near Glen Doe Lodge.

I sleep well so don't get walking until 1010 for the Corbett of Carn a'Chuillin. The track marked on the map has been massively widened as an access road to the Stronelairg Wind Farm.

I pass by a large compound with numerous earth movers, trucks, tractors etc. The track is well signed for the modern ways of site safety. Lots of instructions to drivers, including to be on the lookout for hill walkers. And the requirement is if a hill walker is spotted then to radio into control so all other workers can be warned. There's service for you.

In one place the track is three car widths wide with a passing place - they must be expecting some seriously bigger vehicles than the ones I saw in the compound.

I break off from the track at around the 1000ft height to the bemusement of a sheep and its lamb. I head across rough and twisty ground, under a gathering black cloud, to reach the lovely pointed summit cairn at 1350.

I get to the wind farm track at 1315 then back to Hugo at 1620 to start to pick up texts from my old school friend, Peter Wanless. He and his son, Bertie, are big Ebbsfleet United fans and today is their National League South play off final. They are 1-0 down with a player sent off. I then get a text saying it's 1-1 then 2-1 up then a phone call saying they've done it and next year they will be in the National League proper.

I take Sunday the 14th of May off so I can rest up for a long day tomorrow, taking in the Corbetts of Geal Charn and Meal Na H-Eilde. I'm due to meet Ali Ogden, crossing Scotland on this year's TGO, on Geal Charn between 0800 and 0830 - outside that window we'd agreed not to wait. She's invested in one of these new-fangled Spot devices which broadcasts your position every ten minutes. I have an App on my Smartphone where I can monitor her progress. In conversation with her I refer to it as 'The Alison Stalker App'.

Come 1730 she's approaching her overnight camp so I drive around to Loch Arkaig to set off early following the Alt Dubh burn.

I get up at 0430 and set off at 0540 along a path which had been upgraded to a track. After a few miles it returns to being a rough path which disappears and reappears a number of times.

At its head I branch northwest for the ascent of Geal Charn. About half a mile from the summit the wind picks up and, by the time I reach the trig point, I'm being pummelled by wind and rain.

I only have a base layer and my jacket on. I slump behind the trig point which doesn't really give much shelter. It's 0812 and there's no sign of Ali and no 4G signal to use the 'Alison Stalker App'. I walk around to get a view into the glen below. The wind fights my every move and I'm down to having to brace myself for every move.

I dip down and manage to get enough shelter to get my fleece and inner gloves on. Back at the trig point the wind and rain gets worse. If this were an A road it'd be a severe weather warning.

I wait until 0924 when, unable to feel my fingers and realising my core temperature is starting to drop, I head towards the col to the northeast.

I slip and the wind bowls me onto my backside. My pack cover becomes a kite and I find I'm stumbling around - a sure sign that I'm borderline hypothermic. I manage to warm my fingers enough to text Ali, giving her the time I'm abandoning. All plans for the second Corbett are now off - I'd not get warm enough to stay on high ground.

I swing southeast, then south to pick up the path and track of my ascent. I get back to Hugo at 1125, switch on his heater and arrange my trekking poles, and a length of copper pipe, as a clothes dryer.

After sorting myself out I figure that I should drive back to Spean Bridge for a 4G signal to check the 'Alison Stalker App' in case she has a problem. As I open the driver's door I find a note tucked in the door handle. At first I'm concerned it's a farmer demanding a fiver. A quick read settles my mind as it's from Ali. She'd left it at 1020 saying she'd abandoned the Corbett, due to the wind, at 0805 just seventy metres (vertical) from the summit. I'd arrived at 0812.

I'm now in a dilemma. I really could do with staying put and tackling the abandoned Corbett of Meal Na H-Eilde tomorrow. However, I now have no phone signal and it's possible that if I don't show up in Spean Bridge Ali will be concerned I'm stuck somewhere on the hills. So I drive back and find Ali about an hour's walk away from Spean Bridge. She'd literally got blown off her feet seventy metres from the summit - approximately where I had slipped. In fact on the 'The Alison Stalker App' I can literally see the exact spot she turned back.

We meet later in the Bridge Cafe. She buys me lunch for having waited on the top for over an hour. I then drive back round to tackle the abandoned Corbett tomorrow.

I get walking at 0900 on the 16th - a far cry from yesterday's 0540 start - via another well-made track. I'm following a steep sided glen called Gleann Cia-aig. It's about three miles to a bridge where I branch northwest up the slopes of Meal Na H-Eilde and my pace drops to a crawl. The wind picks up and there's drizzle in the air. I just manage to keep placing one foot in front of the other.

Around the 2000ft mark the wind goes berserk. I find a 'fox hole' in which to shelter. Given yesterday's antics I now get my fleece on, under my waterproof outer. I put on my pack cover, eat as much as I can, redo my shoe laces and tighten my cuffs. I spare a thought for the soldiers of the Great War, exactly a hundred years ago, as they left the trenches and faced a hail of bullets. All I have

to contend with, when I leave my own private trench, is a raging wind that's about to blast me with rain. Then was a time when the men owned the women and the state owned the men. Refusal got you an accusation of cowardice, 'lacking in moral fibre' and a volley of bullets in the chest at dawn the following morning. A time when a man who killed a woman would walk at dawn to the gallows, but a man who killed a man would get a medal to wear on his own chest.

It's an awful ascent and, as you no doubt can tell, my mood is dark, almost as black as the sky which lurks beyond the swirling cloud that envelopes me. I have my hood drawn tight and, with my goggles on, I'm peering at the world through a letterbox; my field is narrow. But at least the wind is behind me.

Fifty-five minutes later I make out the cairn of the summit. An old iron fence post sticks out among its rocks. I cling to it as the wind debates what to do with me.

I about turn, the wind and rain now in my face. Water goes through my jacket, fleece and base layer on its way to soaking my stomach.

I feel a strange sensation on my right foot. I look down to discover I've disturbed a frog that has leapt onto it. I don't know who is more surprised. He leaps off and takes a tumble, rights himself then sits perfectly still.

I'm relieved to get down below the 2000ft level where the weather settles. On the walk back I loosen as much clothing as possible to try and get dry.

I get back to Hugo at 1525 in breeze and sunshine. I attach bits of clothing and gear all around him to dry off in the wind. The evening turns to a blue sky. I reflect on the timing, my freedom from the state, no need to go to war and the letterbox width of time we are all allotted.

I sleep well and drive round to the land of Farmer McFiver for another go at Ben Tee. His hallowed piece of tarmac is taken so I park on the grass and get walking, alongside the burn, at 0955.

There is heather pollen in the air and I stop to take a pill and use the red light therapy on my nostrils.

The path rises and the drop, into the burn to my left, steepens until I start to become a little freaked. A fine waterfall comes into view: a single long drop of thundering water with a large pool at its foot. The path rises around it then becomes nothing short of a rock climb. Suddenly heather is my friend as I grab clumps of it to use as hand holds. With rock and heather pressed against my chest I eek out an ascent until a welcome fence denotes easier ground.

At 1115 I'm glad to be sat on an open moor reflecting the foolhardy nature of the route up. Ben Tee is basking in the sun as I follow the boggy high ground then the windswept climb up its easiest flank.

I rest around 150ft from the summit and take in the distant views of Loch Ness, forestry plantations, mountains and a wind farm.

I reach the summit at 1345 in a strong wind. I don't hang about in the cold and pick a route back that avoids the waterfall.

I get back to Hugo at 1550 and leave in case Farmer McFiver should come my way. I drive round to Tulloch Station, park up for the night then get myself onto

the platform for the first train of the morning to Corrour as my starting point for Leum Uilleim.

A chap, in conversation with another, is waiting for the same train to Corrour. He appears to be rather proud of his poor memory. I've noted that the sayings, "I'm no good at maths", "Well I'm not technical" and "I've a memory like a sieve" are all socially acceptable and often said with pride. I feel miffed, it rakes up long battles I've had in the work place. I'm good at maths, am technical with a good memory. Where does it leave me if those are deliberately underrated by those that don't have those attributes? These people often end up as managers who feel the need to play down technical people instead of seeing them as useful allies. When did you last hear somebody say, with pride, "Well I'm no good at English"?

A woman comes out of the station hostel informing us that Corrour is a request stop with a short platform and we should board the middle coach and tell the guard we need the train to stop at Corrour.

The train arrives, it's two carriages which makes boarding the middle one a bit hard. "Two for Corrour," I say to the guard. He neither replies nor acknowledges me. I ask if he caught that because of it being a request stop. He then answers informing that it is not, and the train will be stopping there regardless.

The trip is beautiful, alongside Loch Treig. At Corrour I say goodbye to my fellow passenger and wish him well for the two Munros he's attempting before, like me, catching the 1524 back - if he remembers that is.

I take the obligatory photo of Leum Uilleim, framing it as per how it appears in the film, Trainspotting. I get walking at 0835, taking the long horseshoe route. It's a sympathetic gradient and, at 1015, I'm high enough up to be above a Hercules aircraft sweeping its way across Rannoch Mor.





I reach the summit at 1125 and soak in some rain and magnificent views across Loch Ossian.

I descend by Leum Uilleim's steep north-easterly ridge that becomes a succession of noses by which to descend.

I get to the station at 1325 and eat at the station house. I'm joined by the chap who did the two Munros and feel a bit guilty about my thoughts of his pride in having a bad memory. He's remembered me and is a lovely chap.

An elderly couple come in with their two small dogs. They were also on the train on the way up and have bagged one Munro today. She's a throwback from the past. Eighty years old, likely public school, and been walking the Scottish hills since her twenties. She tells tales of dodging keepers and staying in abandoned shepherd's cottages long before they became bothies.

Her rucksack dates from the nineteen fifties and sports heavy repairs from when it was washed away in New Zealand.

Her partner has just four teeth remaining, almost protruding at forty-five degrees from the front of his upper jaw. His accent is broad Scots and an ill-fitting bobble hat perches on a head of straggly, long grey hair. They are your preverbal odd couple and questions, such as "Just how did you two meet?" remain unanswered.

I take the 19th off and first visit Adrian Ogden - Ali, his wife, is now struggling with Achilles tendinitis but is still continuing on the TGO.

We pop down to the hostel which they jointly run with Sue and Neil Oxley. Neil is picking some dandelions for a small, wild rabbit that, looking very sorry for itself, has parked itself in a flower border. Molly, their female dog, is locked in doors as it'll see the rabbit as a light snack. Harvey, the boy dog, is a soppy old thing and takes more of a paternal role by guarding the said bunny from cats.

The rabbit eats some dandelion then perks up and hops onto the lawn for its next course.

Now Maddi, Adrian's step daughter, enters the scene with Pearl, a border terrier. Fortunately Adrian grabs her but, after a quick cuddle, puts her down. We all shout, "No" as Pearl, who by now has clocked the presence of the rabbit, launches herself forward. She gets the rabbit in her mouth, and we all launch ourselves forward to rescue it. Pearl lets go and the rabbit runs off.

I follow the rabbit and find it cowering down the side of the hostel building. Concerned about another attack by Pearl, and cats, I pick the rabbit up. It rests in the crook of my elbow. Fortunately there are no puncture wounds but the rabbit is rather wet with dog saliva.

We find it a home in the kindling wood shed and leave it with grass, dandelions and a dish of water.

I then set off, do a shop in Aviemore and then head round to Braemar. Just north of the town there appears across the road what looks like, from a distance, to be coils of tumble dryer extractor piping.

I slow down and navigate my way through. There's a putrid smell of rotting flesh and it's only then do I realise that the road is covered in the carcasses of sheep that evidently died some while ago.

It's over an hour's drive to Braemar and I can't get rid of the smell. It's an overpowering reek of death. I look for a garage with a hosepipe but, on reaching Braemar, I've had no luck.

Inspecting the underneath and wheel arches I note multiple strands of dripping, rotting flesh.

Ignoring the problem I go for something to eat then drive round to Invercauld Bridge and park up for the night.

I phone Neil for an update on the rabbit. Sadly it died during the afternoon.

I sleep well through a night of heavy rain. I wake and abandon my plans to do the two nearby Corbetts. Instead I plump for the easier Carn Na Drochaide from the Linn of Quioch. Also it's an opportunity to drive through every available puddle to try and wash the underneath of Hugo from the indignity of rotting sheep carcass.

I get walking at 0825. Last year I had to abandon this one because all three bridges, over the Quioch, had been washed away in December 2015. One has been reinstated by the Cairngorm Club and I gratefully cross it and follow the track then path, in light rain, around to the minor top of Carn Na Crichel before the final pull up Carn Na Drochaide. There are effectively two summits, each with a well-built cairn. The second is the highest. It's 1035, wet and miserable so I take a straight line, through fresh deep heather, back to the bridge and get back to Hugo at 1155.

I spend the afternoon and evening in Braemar catching up with friends on the TGO. Alan Sloman kindly posts the following picture of me on Facebook:



I then drive round to Invercauld and park up for the night. I get walking at 0750 on the 22nd, via the estate tracks, for the Corbetts of Cullardoch and Carn Liath.

I'm soon caught up by a couple from Dundee - Morag and Dave. I pick up my pace but they are then slow over the steeper ground.

There are more tracks than on the map and I have to pause often to take bearings. On high ground, with wind and light rain in the air, I break off the track and reach the summit at 1035.

Dave arrives within a minute with Morag a few minutes later. Our pace was different over different terrains but over all our times match.

They are great company. She is an accountant and he is the Chief Executive of Mountaineering Scotland. We set off together for Carn Liath. At first we descend the track for about half a mile before taking the rough ground west. There are two summits marked but in fact there are four possibilities. Morag and Dave, not being out and out peak baggers descend, following a fine drystone wall, on the southerly spur from the first spot height. I carry on and, after a few pauses to check GPS and map, find the true summit at 1240.

I backtrack to the main track and get back to Hugo at 1520 before driving to Braemar and parking up on the track to Loch Callater. I walk up to the lodge for another legendary TGO party with singing, musicians and tales of the trail. I don't leave until 0135, and it's nearly 0300 before I get back to Hugo.

I wake around 0800, breakfast then promptly fall asleep again. In the afternoon I drive round to Ballater and meet Ali and Sue Foss for afternoon tea then an evening meal.

I then drive, following the A939, to its high point some three miles south of where it meets the A944. In places this A road is single track and there are one or two impressive eighteenth century bridges.

I don't realise how windy it is until I get out the van. The door is yanked from my grip as the rain pummels into me.

Once in the living area I switch on the heating and snuggle beneath my quilt. I turn the radio on and, for once, can receive Radio Five Live. Shortly after 2230 horrendous news starts to edge in of a bombing at a pop concert in the Manchester Arena. By the early hours it becomes clear that the victims are mainly young with the assailant being a suicide bomber.

Needless to say I don't sleep well and, when I set off for the Graham of Mona Gowan at 0835, I'm particularly slow.

The guidebook warns of adders so I've completely covered myself, including full waterproofs, on what has dawned a clear day. However, the need for a comfort break foxes my plan. I inspect the ground for slippery customers - I hear that making a snake feel defensively inferior is not a good idea.

I struggle with the climb which, by Scottish standards, is very straightforward. There are a few ups and downs to follow, a fence to use as a virtual handrail and a splattering of cairns to keep me company.

I arrive at the massive summit cairn at 1000 and return to Hugo at 1115 feeling hot and sticky.

I drive down to Dalnaspidal on the A9 and park up for the night. Feeling weary I don't get walking until 0910, on the 24th, for the Corbett of Beinn Mholach.

It takes me two hours to trudge up the track alongside Loch Garry and reach the bridge over the Allt Shallainn. The highlight being disturbing a mouse who runs in a circle and arrives at my right foot. His little eyes look up at me and blink several times. I drag my foot back gently to not alarm him.

From the bridge I make heavy weather of the north-easterly slopes of Beinn Mholach.

I soon reach the cloud line and walk in swirling mist with the blue hue of the sky trying to break through. Without a clear view of the summit, and the numerous humps and bumps of the ridge, I find it hard to find the route up. I eventually reach the beehive summit cairn at 1325.

The route back is equally hard to navigate until I break through the cloud line around 2250ft. From here I appreciate how the profile of Loch Garry has changed since a 25,100ft pipe was put in during 1937. There's now a mile of flat grassed head land which would have once been below water.

I get back to Hugo at 1705 feeling hot and tired.

I take the sunny 25th off and drive round to near Rannoch station and chill in this glorious setting.

I get walking, in the hot weather, at 0850 on the 26th. I use the track to Corrour station until I reach the bridge over the Allt Eigheach. Here I drink a litre of water and fill my water bottle with the same amount. Like a camel I don't know when I'll next find an oasis.

I take a bearing and my compass promptly decides to fly to pieces. This is the second compass this year. During my Munros I kept the same compass for ten years. Now they don't last.

There's a welcome cooling breeze up the steep slopes of Meal Na Meoig. I make good progress as I daydream about changes I'd like to make to my house. I notice that if I think of the walk, or think negative thoughts on any subject, I struggle more than if I lose myself in planning some project. It also helps that I'm wearing just a T-shirt as a top - no need to sweat away in a waterproof.

The broad summit ridge houses over a mile of significant ups and downs. Fortunately it's a fine day so I can see my way to cut corners. I get to the modest cairn at 1220, rest, eat, swig back water and take in the panoramic views.

I drop down and pick up the track further north. It's then a route March back. I get to Hugo at 1515 then take the short drive to Bridge of Ericht and park up in a wooded car park alongside the loch with the evening sun glinting on its water as it gently laps the sandy shore.

I get to bed early in preparation for a long day to bag Stob an Aonaich Mhoir. The forecast is for afternoon thunder storms so I fancy an early start to try and avoid them.

I get started at 0700 after a short debate with myself as to whether I should take my trekking poles. With a chance of lightening they'd be a liability. However, without them I'd be slow and increase the risk of running into the storm.

I take them and take the track behind the power station and then follow the massive water pipes that feed its turbines. These date from the 1930s, made of metal with industrial sized rivets holding them together.

A useful bridge leads me across to the main track I need to follow. However, new forestry tracks fool me and it takes me an hour and a half to do the first mile.

Back on track, after crossing one or two tall deer fences, I rue the lost time and the possibility this could run me into the thunder storm.

It's a long traiipse up the track, I don't leave it until it reaches 2000ft high. I navigate through dry peat hags before the ground opens up and I crunch my way across short, tinder dry heather.

The summit is shy, it appears to forever want more from me. It's a sense of relief when I get there at 1215. There's a fine view down the steep northwest face to Loch Ericht.

I spend no more than two minutes at the summit before I head down. I hurry back, it rains a little. I get to Hugo at 1550 just before the heavy rain starts. However, not a bolt of lightning is to be seen or heard.

I rest until the rain passes then drive round to Kenmore and the picturesque minor road to the south of Loch Tay. I manage to turn up an even more minor road and park for the night.

I get to sleep early - eighteen miles and nearly nine hours has taken its toll. Between 0600 and 0800 I enter one of those half sleeps where you are conscious of your surroundings but tired enough to still have weird dreams.

I ache all over but decide to give the Corbett of Creagan na Beinne a go. I shut the van door at 0910 and after a few paces my demeanour feels like I have enough energy for today, but tomorrow should be a rest day. I am sunburnt and today's sun reminds me of sore forearms and a sore head.

However, my pace quickens on the track and, as I take to the open hillside, over sheep grazed grassland, I feel good. So much so that when I hit the broad ridge I'm setting a good pace. A good view opens up all round, modest mountains, like the rolling hills of the southern down lands, and lush green fields towards the Tay.

I get to the summit, in a brisk breeze, at 1140 and back to Hugo at 1335. I spend the afternoon cleaning out the van, fabricating a watch strap for my altimeter and driving on to Ardeonaig for a look at Creag Uchdag tomorrow.

The warm afternoon air turns to a mid-evening wind, clouds arrive and it rains during the night.

I get walking at 0900 from the track southwest of Ardeonaig. I want to head southeast but am quickly thwarted by the burn being in a deep, wooded ravine.

Instead I walk down the steep track to Ardeonaig. It's a quadruple whammy because I'll effectively have to walk down and back up this piece of track and the equivalent the other side the burn.

There's a footpath signed from the road but nothing obvious on the ground. So I press on via boggy grassland, scattering ewes and their lambs as I ascend.

At the 2000ft level I walk into cloud. At around 2500ft I come across a murder of crows circling and squawking. I love that collective noun for crows - one crow is a crow, two crows is attempted murder and three or more a murder.

The crows give me no bother and I press on until I meet the remains of a fence. Only the odd iron upright remains with the intermediate tensioner posts still remaining. On one upright I try and spin the tensioner cogs - only one has avoided rusting up.

The posts lead me to the summit trig point at 1230. I sit in a pocket of warm air - clouds above, below and off to the sides but none immediately around me. I fancy a nearby hump is higher so I walk over to it. I turn to compare it with the trig point only to find it has disappeared in the cloud. I use my altimeter to prove to myself that this hump is actually higher.

Initially I backtrack using close compass work to guide me. Then the squawk of the crows confirms my location.

I decide to try and avoid dropping down to Ardeonaig and instead cut across due west to emerge on the track above the ravine. This is a good saving and I return to Hugo at 1530.

I drive to Killin, stock up at the co-op and make use of the coin operated launderette, before the drive round to the end of Loch Voil. It's a foreboding, narrow single track, dark road. Trees and bushes overhang each side and drip with rain. I pull up at the small car park. The evening is muggy and heaving with midges.

I wake to light rain and low cloud and lay in until 1135. The weather clears, even some blue sky appears. I decide to give the Graham of Stob Breac an afternoon stroll.

To start with the guidebook steers me well onto a zigzag forestry track. However, like all forestry tracks they are open to change and I probably zag more than I zig and find myself on a southerly track. I cut my losses and decide to take a firebreak onto the steep open ground to the mountain top.

At this point my compass springs apart and it starts to pour with rain. Fed up I decide to turn back and traipse, getting wet, through the puddle ridden pine needle carpeted track.

I jump as a German voice calls out hello. It takes me a few seconds to spot two German chaps sheltering under the trees. They look like brothers, same shaped bald heads and identical black rimmed glasses.

Like me they were heading to Stob Breac. They make a remark about whether I am skiing. At first I think they mean my trekking poles but then realise they mean my snow goggles. I explain the hay fever. They then question whether I need them in the rain. I insist I do. Then they move onto whether they cause me to sweat. I bid them adieu (German voices coming from trees is getting a little surreal) and plod back to Hugo.

I spend some time drying myself out and building one compass out of two. A strong evening breeze sees off the rain, the mugginess and the midges.



I get walking at 0840 on May 31st for the Corbett of Stob a Choin. At first it's an easy walk up a track then, following very helpful signs, through farm buildings before a bridge crossing to the open hillside.

From here things get tough. It's very steep and my first attempt gets me onto unnervingly steep ground. I backtrack and take its northeast flank. Again this is steep but manageable. The land below me appears to fall away, the track now a mere grey contour through the glen. Munros of old, with dates, on the map, scrawled against them from August 1994, guard the northern horizon. A significant burn descends from them with an accompanying roar like distant traffic.

I plod on up the steep slopes. Like the sheep grazing I keep four limbs, via the use of my trekking poles, firmly planted.

The mountain is a myriad of rocky outcrops, each a saw tooth on the horizon. I navigate the steep grass between them and make it to the summit at 1225. There's two tops with small cairns. My altimeter gives an identical reading for both.

Full of trepidation, for the steep descent, I tread carefully back the way I ascended.

The biggest danger turns out to be a field full of bulls. They complain bitterly at my presence. I hurry my way back across a fence and fabricate a longer route back.

I get back to Hugo at 1530. The inside is cooking in the afternoon heat.

In contrast June 1st dawns a dreary day. I drive round to Ballimore Farm and set off for Ceann Na Baintighearna at 0805. I follow the Scottish Rights of Way fingerboard for a mile and a half then take to the Corbett's east flank. After nearly eight weeks walking it no longer hurts when I ascend. I still need my rests but the leg pain, due to asthma induced lack of oxygen getting to the muscles, has gone.

It's a long undulating ridge with the wind picking up. The final incline takes me onto a northern south ridge that sits as a T to the easterly ridge.

There's a trig point at the top with a small nearby cairn sitting, according to my altimeter, one meter higher.

The remains of an ancient fence, sitting ghostly in the cloud, heads off to the north.

It's 1110 and too cold to hang around, so I head back much the same way, passing some earth movers building some unknown works, and get back to Hugo at 1315.

I drive round to Killin, lunch then drive to the south side of Loch Earn to tackle Meall na Fearna. I find some loch side parking but it's a miserably wet evening.

I sleep in and don't get walking until 0925. The weather has lifted, there are high clouds but none threatens rain.

I walk through the park like grounds of Ardvorlich House before following a hill track. In fact I don't follow the track far enough, branching off too early I ascend

to ground which then requires me to drop down, cross moorland peat hags before the final pull up to the Corbett's summit.

It's 1300, sunny and cool as I slump down and take in the views. The Munro of Ben Vorlich is to the west, Loch Earn to the north with a multitude of mountains dotting the horizon.

I cut down and meet the ascent track higher up before the plod back to Hugo: arriving at 1540.

Feeling a bit tired I drive round to Crianlarich with the aim of taking the Saturday off and make use of the day by catching the train down to Glasgow.

I get to sleep early so end up catching the 0633 and get into Glasgow before the shops open. I wander around a bit before going in search of bookshops and outdoor shops. I'm looking for some easy reads so buy four Peter James detective novels. I then venture to Tisos and, after much deliberation, buy an ultra-lightweight jacket. Hopefully I'll not feel so hot in this one.

As I walk back to Glasgow Queen Street Station I become aware of drums, horns and general shouting. It's an independence march with many shouts of protests against Theresa May, The Tories, Trident, London rule and the fact the BBC are not filming the march.

I make my way through the hoards to the station. I just catch the train and get back to Crianlarich a little after 1400.

I then set off for Glen Etive to complete the two Corbetts that I missed due to getting sick. It starts to pour with rain and, just outside Crianlarich, I take pity on a young, Indian looking female hitchhiker. We put her pack in the back and I clear off the passenger seat for her.

I ask her where she's heading for. In clearly what is not her native tongue she says as far as I am going.

I try to engage her in conversation but she doesn't respond to any of my further questions. I quickly let the conversation go. To be fair if I was a young female hitchhiker I'd be a bit quiet if I'd hitched a ride off a middle-aged guy who had just bought four detective novels about serial killers.

I switch on the sat nav and set it to large scale and turn it towards her. This appears to moderately please her.

Looking at her features I wonder if she's closer to Nepalese than Indian. This is almost confirmed by her complete lack of interest when I point out mountains - presumably to her these are merely foothills with the real peaks lurking behind the clouds.

When we get to Glencoe the rain eases and I pull up in the entrance to Glen Etive to drop her off.

"I thought you were going to a town," she says.

"Sorry no," I explain.

"But I only took a lift from you because I thought you were going to a town."

This isn't quite my memory of it. If I recall correctly she was standing, with her thumb out, in the pouring rain and I was the only person who stopped.

She pulls a face and makes no attempt to get out the van. I begin to think that perhaps, given this outright liberty of accepting a favour then demanding more, she is in fact neither Indian or Nepalese but instead a cat.

"Okay I'll take you to Fort William," I say. I don't fancy getting cross or forcefully evicting her. As I guy I could get myself in a spot of bother.

I drive on and she returns to absolute silence. My previous questions of where she comes from, what's she doing over here remain unanswered. I begin to wonder if her family have sponsored this trip and are busily relocating at this very moment.

I drop her in Fort William town centre. She refers to it as 'the city centre', which confirms my thoughts that she is not long in the country.

As I hand her her pack I notice she has streaks of grey hair. I thought she was younger, either that or the journey has aged her. She does thank me. I drive round to Morrisons and order omelette and chips and, in a show of somebody that does not like to be taken advantage of, argue the toss when I'm overcharged by five pence.

The liberty, of cat-woman, reminds me of an elderly cat I rescued just before Christmas. It was about 1700 on a freezing evening and I was just popping in to our village post office when a thin, old, threadbare black cat approached me.

"You look like a sucker," she said.

"Are you lost?" I asked.

"Not anymore," she replied.

I bought her some GoCat which she demolished in seconds. Realising she must belong to someone I took her home. After putting her photo on Facebook the local jungle drums pinpointed her as Chloe, who, six weeks before, disappeared from a village five miles away.

However, before this detective work I'd shown her my lounge. She'd had the briefest of glances around and made a beeline for my antique French solid walnut, very comfy chair. The cheaper furniture did not get a look in.

I offered her water, she held out for milk and when her owner arrived, to collect her, she took one look, snuggled into my chest and announced she was now sorted.

I sleep in on Sunday so don't click my radio on until 0900. I listen to the shocking news of another terrorist attack - this time in London. It is indeed troubled times. There are many accounts of bravery and kindness. To get people home taxi drivers refuse to take fares. This rather puts my taxi service of yesterday into perspective.

I get walking at 0935 for the Corbett of Meall A'Phubuill. There's a good track up Gleann Suileag before a steep, rough track branches north just before Glensulaig.

I get to thinking about the woman I gave a lift to yesterday. Was she suspicious enough to call a terrorist hotline about?

It starts to rain heavily and my pace sinks to that of a snail as I ascend the broad, steep, open ground. The new jacket does its job well.

Eventually the ground levels out and I make the summit just after 1300. It's too cold and wet to hang around so I descend steeply back to the track. The rain is against my face and makes the goggles appear as if I'm swimming under water.

I get back to Hugo at 1535, rest awhile then drive a bit further to attempt Streap tomorrow.

I park just off the A830 in what can only be described as a midge combat zone. Hugo is descended upon by black swarms of the little bastards. When I venture outside, with the door open for no more than a few seconds, thousands of the blighters hop aboard. I have to shut all the blinds and then turn on one light only and wait. Only when they have amassed around the light does the massacre begin.

I am slow getting moving on the 5th and make a mad dash for the track to avoid the midges. After about twenty minutes I do a GPS check - I'm on the wrong track. Its start tied in with points of reference on the road but in the hills I'm about half a mile out.

I descend back to Hugo and from about a hundred yards survey the scene. Clouds of midges still circle him. I get ready with the keys, take my pack off and carry it in one hand. Within ten yards I press the button to unlock his doors, within three yards they've cottoned on and are swarming around me. I open his driver's door, throw the pack and trekking poles in then dive in myself and slam the door.

Many midges make it through but it could have been worse. I have to climb through to the back to lower the blinds before a quick drive along the road for the correct track.

It's now 1015 - a late start. I follow the Dubh Lighe river for two miles before realising there is now more forest than on the map. I run out of track so drop to the river. There's a track on the other side but it is impossible to cross.

I follow the bank through trees and swamp. My feet get so wet I may as well have waded across. It's 1210 before I'm out of the woods and, just as the river is crossable, I find a bridge.

There's still some wet flat land to cross, with many burns feeding the river, before the very steep southerly slopes of Streap are reached.

It's now 1245, my typical time to actually be on the top. I feel tired but plod on. At 1500 I get to a single rock, in a grassy expanse that marks the top of the outlying top of Streap Comhlaidh. It's swarming with crane flies which, give them their due, barely bother me.

From here I am in mist and there's a multitude of spurs. I take the wrong one, it's a bit narrow. I turn back and can't fathom the way off Streap Comhlaidh. I begin to fear my day might be wasted. Only by using the GPS do I creep along the correct spur.

Again it's narrow. Parts of the mountain's other ridges are described as 'knife edge'; I have the disheartening feeling I might need a guide. However, it still feels manageable, if a little unnerving. I recall trying this mountain, from the west, on a TGO crossing. It was impossible. Streap guards herself well.

After more ascent I reach the summit at 1555. Still in mist I lay my trekking poles in the direction I need to return in. This is my 100th Corbett. I take a photo for Facebook. Well I take three before I get one that doesn't show the fear in my eyes.



I descend back the way I came but, on the lowest point before Streap Comhlaidh, I head off down the steep south-westerly slopes. I'm treated to a lovely, warm evening with gurgling burns and waterfalls sliding over rocks.

I use the bridge to get myself on the right track. In the forest I briefly rest at the well maintained Dubh Lighe Bothy.

The track takes me to the river and another bridge I missed by just a few yards on my way up. If I'd found it I would have been able to miss the earlier swampy walk up the riverbank.

I get back to Hugo at 1930 feeling pleased I'd persevered through a day of snags.

I take the 6th off to do laundry, recover and to find a hotel for the 8th and 9th to watch the election on a TV. One place I try offers a special discount of £122.50 per night. The receptionist looked most put out when I said I'd leave it.

I walk around Fort William, each place I try is full. I resort to the Internet and one of those room booking sites. Only one hotel shows as having a vacancy. £188 for two nights. Being the tart that I am I phone the hotel directly and get it for £168 for the two nights. I then check the booking site and make sure it's disappeared.

I eat in Morrisons then drive back along the A830 to climb Streap's neighbour, Braigh nan Uamhachan, tomorrow.

Being well rested I get going at 0625. This time I know the way and reach the Gleann Dubh Lighe Bothy in under an hour.

I manage to work out how I got suckered on my way to Streap. An inviting new track had taken me away from the correct route.

At 0740 I branch off the track and climb the steep south-westerly slopes to get on the long ridge to the Corbett's summit.

The ridge is broad with many drops and rises. There's light rain and wind in the air.

On the final pull up a steep, menacing gully lays to my left. I reach the summit at 1110 - nearly five hours in a straight line from Hugo.

I tag the cairn then note another top, just a few yards away looks higher. I walk over and my altimeter confirms it is superior by one meter.

Despite the wind and light rain there are great views. The Munro of Gulvain is to the northeast and the beautiful Loch Shiel draws out the mountains to the southwest.

I return the same way, rest in the Bothy and get to Hugo at 1520.

After feasting in Morrisons I head south to Ballachulish and the short trip to Callert House. I find a layby to park for the night. One other car is there.

I plan to do the Corbett of Mam na Gulainn tomorrow. A boggy track leads into the woods, which border the road, and I wonder if that's the way up.

After about an hour the car owner emerges from the track and confirms the route. He's in his early sixties, has done five rounds of the Munros and now, with over 200 Corbetts bagged, looks set to complete soon.

His fitness makes me realise just how far behind I am from anything close to athleticism. He's done two separate Corbetts today and once did the Munros in 79 walking days.





### **Evening view from Hugo**

I wake on the 8th to a weather forecast predicting that rain is heading up from England. This is enough to get me out and walking at 0720. The track through the gap in the woods is easy but the steep slopes to Mam na Gulainn slow me to a snail's pace.

I make it, through long grass, to the blustery summit, depicted by a cylindrical trig point, at 1000.

There's cloud teasing the tops of the Glen Coe mountains. Loch Leven, far below, looks like a dark piece of roughly cut sheet metal. There's a bit of rain in the air so I head straight down, getting to Hugo at 1140.

I eat at Morrisons again then head to the Clan Duff Hotel. I'm given the keys to room 10. Given it's the general election today I make a quip about having just been handed the keys to 'Number 10'. The receptionist, an Eastern European gives me a blank stare.

A Scottish lady shows me to my room and opens it up for me. I look at the wardrobe and announce it as my new cabinet in number 10. Again this is lost.

Election night is, to say the least, interesting. Theresa May's gamble of a snap election is a political mistake and she's left governing a minority government. She offers no apology, instead announcing that as she has won the most seats she'll remain as prime minister.

I've booked two nights in the hotel. The plan is to laze around for the day after the election and catch up on sleep. However, I feel a bit flat and fed up and am glad when it's time for bed and sleep.

I wake at 0630, imagining I'm in Hugo. Only when I notice how far the walls are from the bed do I realise where I am.

I make full use of the inclusive breakfast before packing and venturing out into the pouring rain.

I drive round to Loch Arkaig then along to Strathan. I start walking at 1005 for the Corbett of Sgurr Mhurlagain.

At first it's a good track but the path following the Dearg Allt burn has been ruined by off road vehicles - it is now miles of bog.

My feet sink into mud more times than I care to count. There's light rain in the air and a troublesome neck muscle lowers my mood. I can't get my pack adjusted to alleviate the discomfort. Instead the pain shoots around my head, giving an ice-cream like headache above my right eye and a thumping, migraine like pain at the back. I get some relief with paracetamol and deep heat.

Around 1500ft I reach a big barren plateau. From here I branch east, then northeast into the cloud and rain. I feel really tired, fed up and grumpy with the pain as I plod through the sodden grass slopes.

I make the summit at 1415 - a cairn on the south end of a narrowing ridge.

I take a couple of aspirin and squelch my way back to Hugo. He's parked in a row of four vehicles. One has a note saying the occupants will be back on Tuesday. Another belongs to two women runners who get back a few seconds after me. They change and head for A' Chuil Bothy with the intention of doing a Munro tomorrow. A minute or so later there's a massive downpour.

I settle down figuring I need to take tomorrow off. I felt lethargic today; the result of staying up for election night is still hanging over me.

I wake around 0600, the day has started quite brightly. I get back into a deep sleep and wake at 0835 to a thundering downpour. The two ladies, who had headed for the bothy, soon return. Clearly they've abandoned the hills. My decision to stay put for the day is ratified.

There are moments during the day when the weather clears enough to consider venturing out. But they are brief, no more than an hour maximum.

A massive storm blows in during the evening. Hugo rocks on his suspension, rain is hosed against his windows.

I have trouble sleeping but eventually drift off in the early hours. I wake around seven and lower a blind. It's as if I'm submerged in a swimming pool. Visibility is a few yards and distorted by the refraction of light by the water.

I boil water and pour it into my breakfast bowl for porridge. Hugo rocks in the wind and the boiled water swirls in the bowl. I watch in stunned amazement as it gathers pace, swirling anticlockwise. Seconds later it breaches the rim and cascades over the edge. Only when half the bowl has emptied itself, does the remaining whirlpool stay in the bowl. I pour on porridge to dampen the motion.

Around 1000 I decide I can't face another day sat in a plastic box being hosed from all angles. I therefore pack a few things away and begin the 21 miles of single track road back to civilisation. To give an idea of how remote this area is it takes 16 miles before I see another vehicle. I've walked this road twice, while crossing Scotland, and both occasions felt pitifully arduous experiences.

I use the journey to recharge my electric toothbrush via an inverter hooked up to the cigarette lighter - one must have the occasional luxury.

In Spean Bridge I call in at the Bridge Cafe. There's only one table free: a table for four. The waitress gives me the look of, *I can't turn you away but I'd like too*. Two Americans arrive shortly after, I offer they can join me.

Eric and Neil are interesting guys. Early forties, on holiday, touring around. They immediately apologise for Donald Trump. This is a common occurrence among Americans with passports.

We talk about the state of the USA, Brexit, the UK and Europe with emphasis on the EU. They are surprised by how much I know about American politics. I explain that it's heavily covered in the British media.

We talk for over an hour and we all feel we have gained from sharing our knowledge. When they depart I turn to the weather forecasts. It looks dire; anywhere near the coast, over the next few days, is to be avoided. I decide to head north to Glen Cannich where it looks a bit more promising.

I'm glad to get walking at 0835 on June the 13th. Two days of enforced break have me yearning for the hills. Ten minutes later I'm cursing this hobby as ankle biting heather, and knee grabbing ferns slow my progress.

Ahead I hear birds chirping in fear. I look up to see a bushy red fox, complete with a white end to its tail, searching through the undergrowth.

On the map it looks like a straight ascent but in fact it's a long series of rises and dips which are sodden under foot.

Nearer the top, and in drizzly wet cloud, the terrain becomes rockier. The final pull is through a channel of boggy moss between two long walls of rock.

The summit of Sgorr Na Diollaid has two peaks, it's a scramble to the first then a scramble along to the second.

It's 1145, there's very little to see so I set my compass to the return bearing and begin the descent into the mist.

After about an hour Mullardoch Dam, way off to my right, emerges from the mist. I'm pleased when the bridge, near to where I'm parked comes into view. The weather eases and I get back to Hugo, relatively dry, at 1355.

I drive back to Cannich and stop to look at The Glen Affric Hotel. I first visited it in 1989 when on a group holiday. Then it was run by a couple from Birmingham whose purpose in life was to rip us off. From charging us for one more mountain bike than we hired, to charging us for more desserts than we ordered, this couple had no shame. I visited it again a couple of times in the late nineties when, to be frank, it was falling to pieces.

Now it lies abandoned, crumbling back into the earth. The first floor has a mix of boarded up and broken windows. I peer through the downstairs windows: there's white mould covering the fixtures and fittings. Even though the windows are intact I can smell the damp and decay.



I call Andy Glover, who was a co-victim of the rip-off Brummies in 1989, and describe it to him. We share some memories of over a quarter of a century ago.

I drive up the long road to Loch Affric and park up for the night.

I wake on the 14th and make the short journey to the Loch Affric car park. I put two new one pound coins into the parking meter. It takes my money and issues no ticket. This is not a good start to the day.

I write a note for Hugo's windscreen. A couple of women approach the meter. I call out that there's a problem with it. The woman gives me a look like your cat gives you when it's about to correct your diction. I then realise they are French.

At 0810 I set off along the track on the south side of the loch. There are major earthworks in progress for a new hydro scheme. A temporary sign points me across boggy ground, away from the new road being built. I check my map and conclude it's my best option.

The French couple stop to examine the sign but carry on. They are holding a copy of the Glen Affric tourist map, available free from the car park.

I press on, my feet instantly wet from the sodden path. The path is hard to follow, appearing, disappearing, up and down through the filthiest bog.

I need to cross the river to ascend the minor summit of Na Chapain on route to Carn a' Choire Ghairbh. There's no crossing point and the abundance of long heather on the hill ahead is off putting.

I eventually pull myself up onto the road being built along the route of the Allt Garbh burn. Whether this is the correct route or not feels of little consequence - I'm just pleased to be out of the squelchy bog and away from the impassable river.

The French couple immediately appear. I wave hello, they do not respond.

I plod on and work out where a track, marked on my map, meets the new track, complete with a bridge across the river. The French couple, ahead of me, turn onto the same route. It feels a little odd that they, as tourists, are not sampling the beauty of Loch Affric, but instead are heading into the rugged wilds with a very basic map.

I branch off on the high point of the track and note that the French couple continue on. I feel I've lost them at last.

I start the steep climb towards the main ridge of the Corbett of Carn a' Choire Ghairbh. The cloud is high and I can see all the intricate ridges of the surrounding mountains. So much so the Corbett of Aonach Shasuinn also looks possible.

I look back along the route of my ascent and am rather surprised to see the French couple a hundred yards behind me. I allow them to catch up. The one thing with hillwalking is you get a sixth sense when you need to stop and check if somebody else is okay.

"Is this the way to Loch Affric?" asks one of the ladies in broken English. I shake my head and point to where they are on my OS map.

"Non," she replies and points to various geographical features that she has tied up with her map.

I press my case, producing my GPS as proof that I do know where I am. I point to features, point to my map the show her where she is on her own map.

"We go back," she concedes. They don't say thank you, or even merci. I reflect I'm not the first Brit to have got the French out of the poo only never to be thanked.

I check my water, I am low. I hear gurgling and make my way across. It's an unreachable underground stream.

I continue uphill and am relieved to get to the broad ridge. There's great views of mountains, the cloud is still high and I make the summit at 1240.

It's now a descent, followed by a sharp re-ascent onto the parallel ridge on the other side of the glen.

I am attracted by the sound of running water. However, it's just one stagnant pool draining into another.

I'm now very hot and sticky. But, having lost two days due to the rain, I'm determined to bag Aonach Shasuinn. I walk the ridge, take in the views before the heart-breaking drop and rise before reaching its summit plateau. A short walk has me at the summit at 1605. I feel elated - two Corbetts in one day!

I take the shortest descent back to the new track. I drink from the river and take the long walk back to Hugo - arriving at 1900. I feel very tired, it's been an eleven hour day.

I drive back into Cannich and listen to the growing horror of the London tower block fire last night. I can never understand how buildings can be constructed so tall that they are beyond the reach of a fire engine's hosepipe.

I park up outside the remains of The Glen Affric Hotel, sleep the night and visit the local Spar shop when it opens. The full horror of the pictures, on the front pages of all the papers, hits me. You can never quite get the impact from radio.

I've always felt uncomfortable with dumping our poorer people in high-rise. Poorer people form their communities from those around them - never easy in flats when there are no garden fences to chat across. Whereas the middle classes form their communities by the people they've met through their education and work - they don't need the garden fence to chat across. The middle classes don't suffer from being in flats.

I drive round to Strathfarrar and get issued with a day pass for the private road. I park at the Culligran Power Station and, at 0920, begin navigating my way through the myriad of tracks.

It's initially blue sky, interspersed with white clouds shaped like judge's wigs.

I feel tired, yawning often; the eleven hours of yesterday taking their toll. A black cloud swans in and I drag on my waterproofs as it begins to empty itself.

I find the Neaty Burn and a new track running parallel to it. This lifts my spirits. I think back to yesterday, two Corbetts in one day has me metaphorically punching the air. It's as if I've regained part of my youth. It's as if I've just bumped into an old friend and feel on a high because of it.

The track runs out at a new concrete dam. I take to the hillside of Beinn a' Bha'ach Ard, through thick heather, ankle length grass and glad to find the occasional animal track to follow.

I get to the summit at 1310, a dome in a sea of short heather with a stone trig point.

An icy wind has blown in, I duck down on the sheltered side which, having been in the sun, offers warm rocks to sit on.

I descend into afternoon sun, arriving back at Hugo around 1510 before driving round to the end of the public road that runs up Strathconon.

The forecast for Saturday is better than Friday so I take Friday the 16th off. In fact it's a nice day and, with bad luck, the 17th dawns dark and wet.

I get walking at 0715 on the track to the ruined hamlet at Corriefeol. Two decaying stone buildings are all that remain.

From here I take to the slopes of the Corbett of Bac an Eich. I feel very weary, each step feels like an effort.

The ground is a steep bog with spectacularly deep gorges down into the burns that run off the mountain.

It takes me four hours to reach the summit. The final hundred yards, of exposed ridge, are in winds so strong I have trouble keeping my footing. The accompanying pummelling rain adds to the misery.

There's just enough room to wedge myself between a stone built trig point and the wall of the surrounding stone windbreak. I celebrate my 50th Corbett of the



year by scoffing down some food, gulping water, tightening my pack and clothing, and then bracing myself to stand up into the violent wind and rain.

I rapidly head on a compass bearing; the wind is so strong I even have to battle to keep hold of my trekking poles. I'm relieved to get in the lee of the mountain. From here it's a laborious descent between two deep gullied burns. The final ground, before the burns converge, is a 'cat's back ridge' which requires careful footing.

From the join in the burns I have to make a sharp climb out of the gully. There are some entertainingly steep slopes to the water below, requiring me to keep my nerve before the ground levels out and I can take the more gentle slopes back to the bridge at Corrie Feol. I then follow the easy track back to Hugo, arriving at 1340, damp and wet.

I click on my radio, southern England is experiencing the hottest day of the year so far.

On the 18th I drive a mile or so back down the glen to take in the Corbetts of Meallan nan Uan and Sgurr a' Mhuilinn.

I get walking at 0815 at first following the burn then taking to the steep hillside. I find myself yawning a lot, feeling weary and bargaining with myself for when I can go home.

I traverse the hillside, gradually gaining height. I reach the ridge at around 2250ft in high wind and spitting rain.

There's a final pull to the summit. It's 1130 and, despite the cold and light rain, there's a view across to Sgurr a' Mhuilinn which is reached from a sharp descent, almost reaching a small loch sitting between the two Corbetts, then a sharp incline.

I reach its summit at 1300, fantasising about driving into Beauly and getting a pizza. I then descend a ridge, which has more of a Lake District feel about it, before a boggy return to Hugo, arriving at 1455, before driving to Beauly for my fantasy pizza.

Well-fed I drive to the foot of Little Wyvis with a view to bagging it tomorrow.

I wake on the 19th to rain thudding on the roof, my radio talking of the heatwave down south, and a terrorist attack against Muslims in north London.

I feel a bit ropery: aching limbs and a sore throat. It feels like a mild cold and explains my poor pace over the last few days.

I take the day off and wake, on the 20th, with, what had felt like cold symptoms, manifesting themselves as an upset stomach. Fortunately I'm parked next to a public loo.

I don't fancy another day in the van, and the forecast is that today will be the best weather of the week. This gets me out and walking at 0855, feeling weak, tired and nauseous.

I cross the road and follow the tracks through trees passing by a dumped caravan, microwave and television.

I'm very slow, about half my normal pace. I stop often, taking in the views but feel rotten and grumpy.

I get to a junction in the tracks, take the right fork and soon find myself on open ground. This is tough going, the ground is littered with boulders which I continually park myself on to rest.

I hunch over like a crippled old man. Each time I lift my right foot it hovers and wobbles, in mid-air, until I randomly plant it half a yard in the general direction of uphill. I am most definitely 'weak and wobbly' - rather like the Tory government who tried to get elected on the ticket of being 'strong and stable'.

I get to the summit cairn at 1320, pull my pack off and flop down on the grass. I'm thankful for the warmth and the fine views of mountain tops basking in the sun.

It occurs to me that this is my 111th Corbett - exactly half way through. This cheers my somewhat grumpy mood.

I laze around for about forty minutes before heading back down. This time I work out how I can stay on the tracks. I come across a stag and a goat grazing together. On my way up they were sat side by side, sunning themselves. They are not bothered by my presence. I guess they have found a friendship.

I get back to Hugo at 1525 and make the short drive to Garve. I can't face any of the food in the van. I hunt for a shop, all I find is a house called 'The Old Shop'. I make do with a burger van that has veggie sausages.

I feel rough all night, sweating, aching but pleased to no longer feel sick.

Through necessity I remain camped by the public loo. My frustrations of not being able to go walking are exacerbated by a few days of fine weather.

It's now the evening of the 22nd and I'm feeling well enough to walk tomorrow. Having become discomfotingly familiar with the graffiti on the walls of the Gents loo, company was all but a phone call away, I fancy a change of scene.

I think through my plans. I have done 59 mountains so far this year and, I calculate, if I do just 6 more I can finish the Scottish 2000ft mountains, by doing 40 days walking per year, by the age of 60. This feels like a more realistic plan. I had high hopes of 100+ this summer but the realities of health, age and weather have scuppered this. Besides I feel a tad homesick and very fatigued - just 6 more will get me home in early July.

I sleep on and off then take the short drive round to Loch Glascarnoch. On route I pass the Aultguish Inn where, during the foot and mouth year, I was able to stay for £6 per night. The place looks in better condition now and I wouldn't be surprised if the room rate had experienced some inflation.

I park just beyond the loch and, after the rain eases, get walking at 1045 for the Corbett of Beinn Liath Mhor a' Ghiubhais Li. The wind is very blustery and my pace is awful - I rest every few minutes.

Climbing over a six foot deer fence, with the wind swaying me on the wire, I shake my head in frustration. Things were going well a few weeks back, now I feel completely trashed.

I plod on through the boggy ground with the wind battering me from the right. Suddenly I am aware of a strange sensation - it feels as if someone is trying to pull down my underpants. I have a quick check around and am rather relieved to find that I am on my own. But there it is again, my underpants are definitely sliding down. I'm aware that they are an older pair. The thing is, with an extended trip away from home, you dig deep in your underwear drawer and pack every pair you can lay your hands on. Even those that should have been thrown out sometime ago.

I reach inside my over trousers, then inside my walking trousers and haul them back up. Strangely the elastic is quite tight. Seconds later they are on their way down again. I then note the ventilation zip, on the right leg of my over trousers, is open and the wind is billowing in. It's then blowing through the open pocket of my walking trousers with such velocity it's literally sucking my underpants down. I zip up, pull up and plod on. It takes me a few minutes to realise the irony of wind in ones underpants.

I get to the top at 1310, my feet soaked. The wind is gusting so strong that I settle down in the summit shelter. The road, a streak of tarmac with the silent dots of vehicles, snakes through the glen below. Beyond is the Munro of Beinn Dearg, basking in sunlight with its three Munro neighbours forming attractive ridges and pathways.

I can see Hugo, it motivates me and I head back down, arriving 1445.

I drive to the Aultguish Inn for my supper. I opt for a veggie burger and a pint of soda water. It costs me more than the price of two nights' accommodation in 2001.

I park for the night with the view to doing the distant Corbett of Beinn a' Chaistell. On waking I look at the weather, the length of the walk and promptly drive south to bag the easy Graham of Carn na h-Easgairn. Easy because it is only a shade over 2000ft, the A9 is high enough to drop me off half way up it, and a windfarm company has built a useful track that leads to the summit.

I get walking at 0910 minus my trekking poles and my knee supports. With a few inclines, blustery cold conditions, I miss the poles.

I get to the top at 1005 with good views across the rolling hills that define this area. I make it back to Hugo at 1050.

I drive round to Ruthven to take in the Graham of Carn nan Tri-tighearnan tomorrow. It's a nice afternoon and evening and I enjoy chilling out and reading.

I get walking on the 25th at 0900 with the plan to easily be back in time to listen to the Formula 1 Grand Prix.

There are new windfarm tracks to follow. There are some undulations which I really struggle with. In fact I can't believe how difficult anything uphill has become.

After four miles I branch off onto rough, heather and bog ridden moorland. Each uphill step feels hard. The tummy bug has left me physically floored. I reach the summit at 1215 and back to Hugo at 1440: part way through the Grand Prix. The BBC then lose connection to Azerbaijan So I end up listening to the tennis.

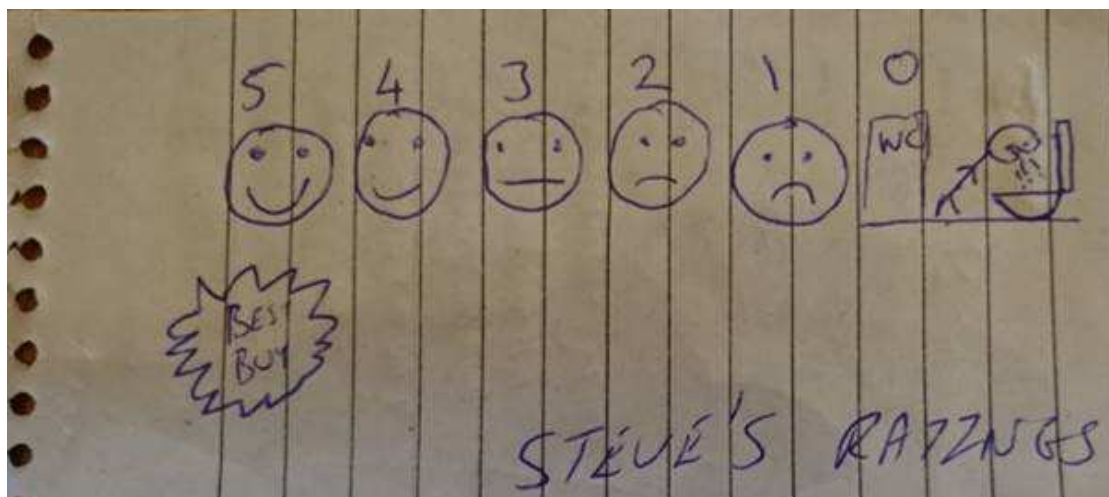
I want to walk on the 26th but feel too tired. I park up in Glen Banchory figuring I'd spend the night there, before going to Alison's and Adrian's tomorrow.

I settle down to reading when Alison calls. She's free this afternoon so I drive round and get involved in a food tasting session at their hostel. It's for a trail food review for a national walking magazine.

Now trail food comes in pouches to which you add boiling water to allow the contents to rehydrate. The prices vary from £4.50 to £10 per pouch. Around twenty free samples have been sent; being a veggie I'm restricted to ten. This proves to be an outright positive because some of it tastes foul. Even in a tent, in a force eight gale with the prospect of starvation, I'd think twice about some of this stuff.



There's six of us partaking, we score each out of five. We soon have to accept zero as a valid score. Indeed we get the idea of what marks somebody is poised to award by the look on their face after the first mouthful. I further adjust the scoring as follows:



I find two that are very nice and award top marks. A couple more are good but the rest, if forced to finish, would result in an uncomfortable night.

I feel a bit guilty, some of the suppliers are small cottage industries that are just trying to eke out a living. But hey-ho, I take my cues from the judges on the cruel world of TV cooking shows.

Alison and Adrian remark on how tired I look compared with my last visit back in May. We reminisce on how we met when, in 2001, I was doing my last hundred Munros. Then I just got fitter and fitter and could have carried on. Now I'm grinding to a halt after 54 Corbetts. Alison and Adrian, both retired GPs, say this is normal with the ageing process. It validates my decision to just do three more Corbetts (leaving a neat and manageable 40 Scottish mountains per year to bag before I'm 60) and then go home early.

I stay until the 28<sup>th</sup>, celebrating my 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Despite Alison and Adrian forcing a comfy bed and a bath upon me I still feel beat. Too beat in fact to do any more hills. So, on the 28<sup>th</sup> I set off home to try and recover.

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It's the evening of July 24<sup>th</sup> and I've just driven back to Scotland for three weeks in the Southern Uplands. Well, to be precise, until August 12<sup>th</sup> when they start shooting things in the hills - that is always a good day to go home.

The three weeks off have been good. In the twelve weeks I spent in the hills I had all sorts of plans of things I could do when I got home. When I got home I kicked most of them into touch on the basis they would involve a certain degree of stress.

Instead I watched Wimbledon, worked in my garden and volunteered to wash artefacts for an archaeological dig going in in Great Bedwyn.

I get walking at 0905 on July 25<sup>th</sup> and, as I record the date in my notebook see that my last walk was on June 25<sup>th</sup>. It's been a full month.

The gorgeous, cloud free evening has turned into a cloudy but dry day. The path through farm tracks, farms and forestry is well signposted and, unlike the Corbetts and Grahams in the northern Highlands, there is a well-made path.

Out of the forest the open ground is clogged up by low cloud, hiding the Graham summit of Cairnsmore of Fleet. However the winding path requires no map and compass work and, at 1125, I reach a memorial to the 25 airmen killed, in eight separate crashes, including the crew of a Heinkel.

I check my altimeter, 707 meters, the map had the summit at 771 meters so I'm surprised to see the trig point just a few yards ahead. Closer examination of the map shows it at 711 meters - my fifty-two year old eyes were confused.

There's also a fine summit cairn and a shelter where I sit and lunch.

Heading back down I disturb a herd of mountain goats, bump into a few people on their way up and get back to Hugo at 1315.

I drive round to Glen Trool with the plan for tomorrow of doing the Graham of Lamachan Hill and the Donalds of Large Hill and Curleywee.



It rains during the night and is still peppering Hugo's roof when I wake. I listen to the forecast, there's a dry weather window due for around noon to early evening. I look at the length of the walk and figure I need to start in the rain to finish in the dry.

It's hard getting going at 1015. All my senses tell me to stay put in the dry. But I haven't just driven back to Scotland to laze around in the camper.

I follow a track which goes downhill (again against my senses) and cross a high sided nineteenth century bridge that straddles a thundering dark river of peat coloured water. It not only flicks up spray but earthy smells too.

I feel hot and sticky in the drizzle. I'm cheered by a fork in the path not marked on the map. No, not a branch in the path but literally a fork (i.e. a piece of cutlery) somebody has dropped. I've been hillwalking twenty-seven years and I've just got to do the joke. Shame nobody is with me to share it.



**The Fork in the Path**



I get to where the guidebook tells me to turn off. It looks harsh. A steep heather, grass and fern clad slope with two waterfalls smashing their way through the undergrowth.

It's very slow going. The vegetation is waist high in places. The angle is beyond what my lungs are happy with and water is tumbling down the faint path.

I soon penetrate the cloud line and with it the ability to navigate by sight. At this point my compass decides to play up - the liquid filled bezel has formed a large bubble which causes the needle to drag and stick.

I use my GPS and reach Lamachan Hill at 1405. It's bleak but calm. I take the spur off to Lairg Hill, getting there at 1450. The cloud clears for a brief moment showing off a fine view out to sea.

I pass back over Lamachan Hill and, with the compass barely of use, get confused with the bearings. I use the GPS to confirm the direction and begin to descend, via rocky protuberances, to the low ground before the sharp rocky pull up Curleywee.

The weather begins to clear, at first the surroundings appear as if I'm looking through cataracts. Then slowly the mist clears until there are fine views. The area is not rugged like the Highlands, instead the slopes are gentler, more typical of the Lake District.

I make the summit at 1650 then head north and begin the sharp drop towards the Southern Upland Way path. Just beyond is the lovely Loch Dee - small but perfectly formed with tiny islands and pier like land masses protruding into it.

From the track it's a route march back. I get to Hugo at 1940, just before the end of the weather window. I wash then eat as rain thunders on his roof.

I spend the evening reading, watching a DVD and making a compass out of the remains of three others - the base off one, the bezel from another and the retaining spring from a third.

I then look at my plans to finish the Scottish 2000ft mountains by the time I'm 60 - another eight years. With the effect of retirement slowly permeating my being I realise that means quite a few challenging years ahead. I renegotiate with myself (which to be honest is like pushing on an open door these days) and reckon with what I'll do this year I can, if spread over a further ten years, do eight weeks next year then six weeks per year. That'll take me to the age of 62. I reckon I can do Ireland in three lots of eight weeks, taking me to the age of 65. This will be enjoyable, not so challenging and keep me fit for many more years.

I wake on the 27th to a dry start to the day. From where I'm parked I want to tackle The Merrick (a Corbett), Mullwharchar (a Graham), the Donald of Dungeon Hill and finally the Donald of Craginaw. It's a dauntingly big round at 12 miles and nearly 4000ft of ascent. The guide book suggests seven hours forty-five minutes, I know it'll take me around eleven hours.

It's not a walk that can easily be split up so, after yesterday's nine and a half hour walk, I have to really push myself to get started at 0840.

I start through a wood, passing a bothy, then more trees until I hit open ground.

The weather is wet then dry, then wet again. A cold wind eats through my jacket as rain peppers me. There's a rough path up as I pass over Benyellary then onto The Merrick (1150).

The weather is too hostile to rest so I descend the steep and slippery ground towards Loch Enoch. A tempting wall, to follow, appears through the mist but, on closer inspection, it's through a bog riddled plain.

I keep high then pick my way towards the outflow of the loch. It proves difficult to cross, I head north until it briefly forks and I can island hop across.

The pull up Mullwharchar is straightforward and I arrive at 1410. The mist is down but the rain has eased.

I descend southeast where the rain picks up again. At a little over 2000ft I make the summit of Dungeon Hill at 1515. At least it is now dry again and I can see across to the final summit of Craignaw.

The drop is littered with flowering heather - deep pink clusters of flowers on thin stems.

At the low point I feel weak. I eat my last Snickers bar, three packets of Mini Cheddars and wash it down with half a litre of water. This is enough to get me up what feels like the unending rocky battlements of Craignaw: slabs of layered rock with grass and moss as the mortar.

I sit at the top, it's 1700 and I'm really pleased to have done this round. The weather is now clear, it feels like a fine evening is opening up.

As I descend I stumble across a memorial to the crew of an American military jet that crashed here on 19th December 1979. Bits of the aircraft have been added to the memorial. A bleak place to die and a reminder that, in life, a split second mistake can mean your time is up.

My energy has now gone. It's a steep descent to Loch Neldricken and I find myself regularly falling over. There are deep pits to lose a leg in and I tumble forwards more times than I care to count. My trail shoes, socks, trousers and over trousers become a dripping mass of mud and water.

The highlight is the golden evening light glowing on the hills above Loch Trool.

I get back to Hugo at 2000 - after nearly eleven and a half hours out.

I take the 28th off and don't get walking again until 0815 on the 29th from the track near Kirriereoch farm.

I still feel tired and I find the forestry tracks hard going. I take a wrong path and it's not until I reach a true unexpected fork in the path do I realise my mistake. I back track and end up taking a dwindling path, through long, wet grass to the edge of the forest.

The open hillside has equally long grass and it's not until I gain height, on the slopes of Tarfessock, that the grass shortens and my pace quickens. At 2000ft I traverse to avoid the climb to the summit - I plan to do it on the way back from the Corbett of Shalloch on Minnoch.

The wind is blustery but the views are good. I reach the Corbett between 1210 and 1215 - the variance in time due to three marked tops which I visit in turn.

I descend south and get to the windswept Donald of Tarfessock at 1305 before dropping and taking in its minor south top.

The rain now sets in and Kirriereoch Hill, another Donald, disappears from view.

The slopes up it are littered with boulders and I have to watch my footing on the wet ground.

The top is in thick mist, blowing by at a rate of knots, and the wind is ear shatteringly bad. I walk between all the high points until I come across a significant cairn. One top, which I think is marked by a large quartz rock, turns out to be nothing more than a dead sheep.

I put my full trust in my new compass, bought in Newton Stewart yesterday, and head west until I meet a boundary wall which dwindles into ancient iron fence posts.

The gap back into the forest is long grass, with deep water filled gullies strategically placed to catch me out and soak me up to knee level.

I'm grateful to reach the track then Hugo at 1730 - another day of over nine hours walking.

I wake on the 30th, drive into Newton Stewart for supplies then drive my way via Clattershaws Loch to an access point for the Graham of Millfore.

My plans to do it in the afternoon are overtaken by a strong desire to lay in the back of my camper van and go to sleep.

After some twenty hours of rest (reading, watching DVDs and listening to the radio) I step out of the van, into sunshine rain and very dark clouds, at 0840 on July 31st.

I still feel tired as I trudge up a forestry track - the long days have taken their toll.

In a forestry break I head southwest up the knee deep grassy slopes of Millfore. My feet sink into hidden pools as I squelch and slurp my way through.

The grass shortens in a stream filled gully and I make my way onto a cloud clagged ridge.

A short southerly ascent has me at the summit at 1040. Three cairns and a trig point mark the summit. In this area of the world they appear to be fond of multiple summit markers with the walker left to work out the most prominent. I head back down the same way arriving back at Hugo at 1210.

I drive, via minor roads that feel like they head to nowhere, to a parking sign, on my OS map, that doesn't even appear to have a road to it.

Fortunately there's a rough track and I park, not surprisingly alone, for the night.

A call of nature, in the early hours, occurs between rainstorms. The sky is briefly clear, the area boasts 'Dark Sky' status and the stars put on a good show above this remote windswept moor.

I get walking at 0855 on August 1st - probably the first year in which I've bagged hills in five different months.

It starts dry, but the rains soon come in, interspersed with the odd moment of tantalising sun.

The grass is long, wet and full of hidden tussocks as I aim for the Donald of Meikle Millyea. I deliberately gain height as soon as I can, finding shorter grass and eventually, after ascending northwest to Meikle Lump, a faint path. The ascent is now southeast and I reach a cairn and trig point at 1130. To some this is the top but the guidebook speaks of a rise to the south: I'm in thick cloud so I set a bearing and use my GPS to hone in on a cairn a full two meters higher than the trig point.

I backtrack then drop northwest towards the Donald of Milldown. I'm soon out of the cloud so rest, eat, check my mobile (noting Facebook has changed my default settings to Romanian) call a friend before heading to the summit, arriving at 1300.

I head back the same way but after Meikle Lump a navigational error has me dropping too far east. This rather inconveniently deposits me in horrible bog riddled long grass. I can only describe the return to Hugo, at 1555, as a wade.

I drive to St John's Town of Dalry to get an evening meal. It turns out to be a rather bland affair and, fifteen quid lighter, I feel my own cooking could have matched it.

I then head north to the minor road running alongside Water of Ken. It becomes difficult to park - a couple of suitable places have unfriendly 'No Parking' signs next to the names of the hamlets that are painted on boards shaped in the style of a pair of men's underpants.

I eventually make use of a long Passing Place by reversing onto the grass and just keeping my front wheels on tarmac. This puts Hugo at an angle and I have to swap beds such that I roll into his offside wall rather than onto the floor. In turn this gives me an uncomfortable night and I wake with hip pain.

I get walking at 0825, passing by one of the cottages with the no parking signs. There are one or two other dos and don'ts which, fortunately, do not apply to me. Apart that is from a sign saying that my every movement is being monitored by CCTV.

I navigate up forestry track but the effects of a minor cold hold me back. It's been rumbling for a few days but today is the first day that I actually feel unwell.

Two logging lorries descend the hill, I stand aside for each and get a friendly wave. As they pass the smell of freshly cut pine teases my nostrils.

I check my GPS and find I've missed a junction in the track and unnecessarily ascended. I backtrack and find the correct turn off, a very overgrown affair that I'm not at all surprised I missed.

I squelch my way to the hamlet of Moorbrock then take the tracks that fade into grassland shortly before the Donald summit of Moorbrock Hill.

It's now chilly and I'm glad I chose to wear a warmer base layer today.

I check my GPS again and try and work out where the summit is. There's no ground immediately ahead that's higher, nor is any of the ground behind me. I then look down, between my feet are a couple of rocks - I'm actually stood on the summit!

It's 1120 and I line up the route across to the wind farm encrusted Graham of Windy Standard - with a name like that I'm not surprised the developers honed in on it.

The cloud level is at the hub height of the highest turbine. Therefore, as it rotates, the blade at the top always disappears out of view.

I make its summit at 1245 after a slow slog up of feeling, rather literally, under the weather.

The turbines swish and drone and, in these robust winds, I get the real sense of power these machines can provide.

I eat and get going into worsening weather. My new jacket, bought in Penrith on the journey up, lets water. I feel miserable as I pop in another couple of paracetamols.

There's a fence to cross - a common occurrence in the hills. But this one, to my cost, is electrified. I get a shock, curse and leap back and grumble at the lack of warning signs. I descend to a large fence post that also acts as a tensioner. By following the cables and insulators I work out which bits are safe to handle. I make it across then descend then rise, in worsening rain, to the Donald of Alhang (1415).

I descend southeast, via a farm, and hit the road at 1520. I then plod for an hour and ten minutes back to Hugo. Three cars pass me, none acknowledges my standing to one side. This is an unfriendly glen - The Glen of Gloom.

I take the 3rd off, shopping in the small town of Dalmellington. I find a small friendly cafe and have egg, chips, beans and an orange juice for £3.60 - one gets the impression there isn't a lot of money in the Southern Uplands.

I park for the night just north of Carsphairn and get walking at 0850 to take in the three Donalds that lie to the west.

I walk along a minor road which dwindles into a track to the old 19th century lead mines. There are deep shafts and areas gorged out of the hillside which, I presume, was for opencast mining.

Sheep now meander and graze over this once hub of activity. The industry, like its workers and their families, long forgotten, long dead.

The remains of buildings, not pillaged for their stone or fallen to the weather, poke out of the ground. A solitary chimney stack points like a finger to the past.

I follow the guidebook's advice to the highest point of the ruins, pass through a wall and cross bog riddled long grass and pick up an ATV track.

I briefly manage to do without my jacket and gloves - the first time for days. But as I ascend a biting wind has me wrapping up once more.

I reach the Donald of Coran of Portmark at 1100. I can see out to sea, a ship reflects the sun like a massive searchlight.

It's too blustery to stop so I press on, via the minor top of Bow, to reach the cloud clogged trig point summit of Meaul at 1200.

I'm cold, there's no view so I follow a handy drystone wall to the summit of Cairnsgarroch (1250). There is now a good view of the surrounding hills and the clouds above zooming every which way.

The descent is initially steep then, after crossing a strong flowing burn, it is via long wet grass with hidden rivulets to dunk ones foot in.

I pass back through the lead mine, get back to Hugo at 1500 then head to Dalmellington for a repeat £3.60 meal.

From there I drive to Glen Afton where I park for the night before tackling the Graham of Blackcraig Hill and the Donald of Blacklorg Hill.

I get walking at 0855, following the track then path via Blackcraig Farm, in a brief interlude between storms.

I'm grateful for the well-cut path, carved through long grass. It begins to rain as I pass over Quintin Knowe. From here I head southwest and make the summit of Blackcraig Hill at 1050. The views of the wind farms, some running, some under construction, disappear as the mist descends.

The summit is grass and rock, some made into cairns to tease the walker as to which is the true summit. I visit them all, along with the trig point.

I set a bearing for a tramp over to Blacklorg Hill. This is more rounded and unlike its neighbour, is devoid of rock, bar from that which forms a stone wall.

It's now 1150 and I return the same route. The descent towards the farm brings dry weather and sunshine. Five minutes before getting to Hugo a heavy shower has me rather bedraggled as I climb into the camper.

After drying out I drive across to the Lowther hills. I note a handmade sign saying 'Save the Lowther Hills'. I presume this is from a wind farm development.

I park at around 1500ft in a steady breeze. I have to run the heating for part of the night, and on one of a number of calls of nature, I note there is a mild ground frost which I do my bit to thaw.

With the heating on I sleep well, waking around 0800. Radio Four news is reporting that Vince Cable has said, regarding the Brexit referendum, that the elderly have shafted the young. A point I have great sympathy with. I know four people from my village, well into their eighties, who voted leave based on a nostalgic view of the past.

I mark-up the map and note interesting local place names: Glen Valentine, Cock Hill, Knockconey Dod, Crooked Bank and Meikle Shag.



I get walking at 0905, the blue sky of the evening, and very early hours, has given over to cloud.

I follow the tarmac roads that leads into the cloud then onto the radar stations on the Donald of Lowther Hill (1025) and the Graham of Green Lowther (1055).

Starving hungry I make use a brick building, at the summit of Green Lowther, and eat a few packets of Mini Cheddars.

The cloud clears a little and, looking back to Lowther Hill, I note that its radar apparatus looks like a gigantic golf ball set on a tee.

On the way back I break off the tarmac road and take in the Donald of East Mount Lowther. It has a viewpoint mapping out all the places I could see if it were not so cloudy.

It now begins to rain and I get back to Hugo dripping wet. I set up my improvised drying rails, switch on the heater and gently roast.

It's another wet night. It's rained just about every day since I've been back in Scotland. As a hill walker you accept getting wet but day after day is tiresome.

I drive, with windscreen wipers hinting at the day ahead, through Leadhills to park up and do the two Donalds to the northeast of the Lowthers. The guidebook had recommended doing them as part of yesterday's walk but it'd have been a very long day.

I find a parking spot on the B7040 and head down a track to cross the Elvan Water. A group of fisherman, with a nice smelling campfire breakfast, are camped on the shores.

What could have been a bridge is a deep ford. Too deep in fact. I walk up and down the bank and, passing the fishermen, make my excuses and return to Hugo.

I drive three miles to the substantial electrical works that are fed by a multitude of pylons which, in turn, are fed by an even greater multitude of wind farms.

What looks like a bridge on the map is non-existent. I backtrack and park at Shortcleugh where a bridge on a farm track is visible from the road.

So at 0940 I'm finally off and walking. It starts warm and dry, I take off my jacket. Five minutes later I'm hurriedly putting it back on as the rain blows back in.

It's the usual long grass tromp to the Donald of Louise Wood Law. I pass by grouse shooting hides, only five days to go before they are in use. The A74M is in the distance.

I get to the summit at 1105, have a bite to eat then, in wind and rain, head southwest towards the Donald of Dun Law.

On route there's a really sharp drop of about 300ft that requires careful negotiation.

I make the summit at 1215 and, given the conditions, and not wishing to renegotiate the sharp drop, head northwest and drop, through deep ankle tugging heather and ferns, to pick up a boggy track back to Shortcleugh at 1340.

I then drive, with the heater full on to try and dry off, round to the Daer Reservoir and park up for tomorrow's adventure.

The adventure on the 8th begins at 0740. I have joined two walks together to attempt five Donalds and one Graham in a day. It leaves the remote Queensberry for another day, and another approach, but it will take my total to 95 mountains for the year and give me the chance to break the 100 mark before I have to come off the hills to allow the grouse slaughter to commence.

I trudge up the minor road, passing the hamlets of Crookburn and Kirkhope before taking to the track, alongside the Daer Water burn, to the abandoned hamlet of Daerhead.

Now I'm off the track and, after a tricky crossing of the burn and my first Snickers of the day, I take to the slopes of Earncraig Hill.

I feel hot so take off my jacket. This is normally akin to a rain dance but today looks good.

The actual dance I do make is to try and brush off a pesky midge that has followed me from the burn. However much I flick the air before my eyes it manages to remain in situ. Only when I realise it's inside my goggles do I manage to part company from it.

I make the summit at 0930 and take in the good views towards Queensberry. I'm half tempted to bag it but it'd make for a very long day as it is out and back, not on the convenient loop of the planned six.

I descend towards the head of Crow Burn before the pull up Gana Hill. The reservoir pans out to the north with the obligatory wind farm beyond.



**Queensferry from Gana Hill**

I look across to the next peak, Wedders Law. A number of vehicles are parked on a track near its summit. I hear shooting and realise I'm walking in the stag shooting season.

I get there at 1155 and am pleased nobody is about to order me off the hills.

From here I follow an excellent track to the summit of Scaw'd Law at 1255 which is on a well-built drystone wall. I duck down and eat, sip water and take in the views - the first decent ones for a while.

Feeling tired I make it across to the Graham of Ballencleuch Law at 1340. Beyond is the minor top of Rodger Law, it has a trig point so I take it in before the drop towards Comb Law. Here I find a stream to quench my thirst and ascend to the summit - the last of the day. I sit for a while and take in the views across to the Lowther Hills with the golf ball like radar station. I get going at 1540 for the drop back to the reservoir and the road walk back to Hugo (1650).

I then drive round to Thornhill, have an omelette in a cafe, before the intricate unclassified roads to the farm at Mitchellsacks. I park up for the night and wake on the 9th feeling rather tired for the walk up Queensberry.

I get going at 0855 but with yesterday's nine hour yomp I'm aching all over.

There's a cooling breeze, I can wear just a base layer as I follow the track, alongside a ravine into a flowing burn, before the haul up the mountainside to the summit at 1115.

The views are great, I can see the (rather long) route I did yesterday and beyond to the Lowther Hills.

There's a fine cairn to lean against and soak this all in. To the south is yet another wind farm. The turbines turn gracefully in the wind like synchronised swimmers.

Beyond is rolling lowlands which, depending on which way I set my vision, either rise to distant mountains or tumble into the sea.

The return route is the same as the ascent and I get back to Hugo at 1335.

I reflect that this is my 96th mountain of the year. I reflect further that, given the hanging tiredness of my six in a day on Tuesday, I won't make the hundred before Saturday. However, if I do one a day on Thursday and Friday my total will be 98 for the year and will give me a total of 900 mountains of the British Isles.

Therefore I drive up to Fallburn, park in a lovely sunny afternoon with the plan to walk Tinto tomorrow.

It's a lovely evening only disturbed by one of four dogs, belonging to a woman in an SUV, racing up to me and barking aggressively. I get a lukewarm apology.

As night creeps on, and I contemplate shutting Hugo's rear door, a serious faced woman appears. "Are you planning to stop here the night?"

I prepare myself for some form of discussion over my right to park up for the night only to then realise it's the woman with the four dogs. Well, to be precise, two dogs as two of them have buggered off. She gives me her mobile number and I promise to text her if they come knocking in the night.

The 10th dawns cloudy, Tinto has disappeared. I lay in then get walking at 0935 on the excellent path.

As it's popular with walkers, and I'm feeling a little self-conscious, I wear sunglasses instead of goggles. Being slightly darker they cloud my view of the occasional dog poo, Irn Bru can and sweet wrapper.

What also clouds my view is the cloud at the top. A fine view plaque lets me know what I would have seen. It's 1100, it's chilly and there is a shelter for every wind direction. I find the appropriate one and duck down.

The path back is an easy scar to follow, across the lower slopes, and, with a sore left eye, I get back to Hugo at midday: I really needed the goggles.

I didn't see the dogs, I text the woman to say as much. I get a reply saying they'd found them in the early hours.

I drive south and take the minor road to the starting point of Cauldcleuch Head. It's mid-afternoon, the sun is shining and I look forward to this, my final peak for 2017, tomorrow.

The wind picks up during the night, rocking Hugo and having me turn the heating on. The radio weather forecast is for rain. I peer out at 0635 to see the hills cloaked in cloud.

All my kit is dry, even my trail shoes. A first for many days. I don't fancy getting wet without a view. I snuggle back into my quilt content with 56 new Corbetts, 14 new Grahams and 27 new Unique Donalds this year. That's enough for 2017.

Corbett Count:	114 out of 222
Graham Count:	29 out of 223
Unique Donald Count:	29 out of 59

2018

It's May the 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 and I'm saying goodbye to Margaret, my new girlfriend. We've been together since January having met at an archaeology talk in Great Bedwyn Village hall last summer (our eyes literally met across a crowded room). Since being together I've spent five weeks away in New Zealand and a week down in Devon and, like this pre-planned trip to Scotland, we are both struggling with another parting. At just a few years younger than me we joke that we've both found somebody to fall to bits with instead of the usual 'somebody to grow old with'.

So it's with sadness that I set off to Scotland to continue my quest to climb all the 2000ft mountains of the British Isles. However, the new relationship has got me to rethink my strategy. I'm now going to take until I'm 65 to complete these Scottish mountains with an aim to do 26 Corbetts or Grahams this year, 23 per year thereafter and add in the remaining Donalds along the way.

The traffic flows freely as I leave the sunny south behind. Passing through Cumbria the rains set in, keeping me company until north of Glasgow where evening sun cheers my mood.

I park up on the minor road in Glen Fruin only to find no mobile signal. I backtrack many miles to find a signal, call Margaret then return to the same spot and notice vehicles glinting as they pass on the ground above me. My OS map

shows no road or track so I assume that there's some new windfarm track and the vehicles are there for its construction.

I mark up the map for the Grahams of Beinn Chaorach and Beinn a' Mhanaich tomorrow. The guidebook makes reference to a 'new road'. I get out my motoring atlas and note that, what I thought might be an access road for a windfarm, is instead the A817 – built since my OS map was printed in 1989.

It's a chilly night, I sleep on and off until I switch on the heater then wake, very dry mouthed, a little after 0700.

I get walking at 0820 in dry weather with hanging cloud over the tops. I follow a track which soon crosses the A817 – it's not fresh tarmac and has obviously been here sometime. Why wasn't I told?

I branch north east from the track and make steady progress through the short bracken. An annoying drop has me crossing a stream before the grass slopes to the blustery summit cairn and trig point of Beinn Chaorach at 1020.

I follow a fence as I descend 1000ft to the low ground that marks the ascent of Beinn a' Mhanaich. It looks to be a long pull up and I rue the loss of height. Grahams only need a drop of 500ft in all directions, this one overdid it a bit.

The rain sets in. Fine penetrating stuff that gets into my neck and wets my chest. I make steady progress and, after a check of the GPS, find the summit at 1240. The rain gets worse, visibility drops and I have to take a compass bearing to follow the ridge line.

With only a few yards of visibility, and raindrops dripping from my hood to keep me company I traipse the ridge, dropping steadily to meet the A817. I cross a few gates to get myself onto the minor road and the short walk back to Hugo (1420).

May 10<sup>th</sup> dawns clouded over, which is not promising for a long day climbing the Grahams of Mid Hill, Doune Hill, Cruach an t-Sidhein and Beinn Eich. I get walking at 0720 following the well signposted route through a field. I realise I've forgotten to pack my fleece. I debate whether to return for it but decide to chance it and press on.

There's light rain in the air followed by patchy blue sky allowing the sun to glisten on the rippling waves of Loch Lomond. Forested islands stand in solitude amongst the lapping waters.

At just after 1010, in hail and snow, I reach Mid Hill. I'm glad to then drop some height but my hands sting through my thin woollen gloves. I'm not so glad to drop a further 1500ft to the low ground before the very tough ascent of Doune Hill, following a tree lined gully.

I make the trig point and tiny cairn summit at 1345. I now briefly drop south west before dropping to the low ground before Cruach an t-Sidhein. The weather cheers up, I change into dry gloves and I cheer up too.

Cruach an t-Sidhein is a well behaved Graham with just 500ft ascent to its pap shaped summit. I arrive at 1520 and slump down and survey the scene from the furthest point of the day. I take in the views of the mountains I did yesterday. The horseshoe of today's hills lay before me. The short grass, in the foreground, cowers against the wind.

I drop back to the low ground and see a rare sight – a fellow walker. Up from Glasgow she's pleased that I share some sultanas and nuts with her. We say goodbye, with her heading up Cruach an t-Sidhein and me off to the final summit of the day, Beinn Eich.

I take a traverse then make the ridge and reach the summit at 1715. I'm now feeling tired so rest awhile, take a video of my route and post it on Facebook.



**View back towards Luss from the summit of Beinn Eich**

I start the descent and head towards Luss. It looks depressingly long, the drop to the road then a two and a half mile tarmac walk back to my campervan. My energy levels are dropping, I've been out over ten hours and it's starting to feel that way.

Diane, the lady up from Glasgow, catches me up and happens to mention she's parked at the top of the road and can, if I like, give me a lift. Do I like? She's my absolute hero. She drops me off at 1905, she's interested in the campervan. I open the rear door to show her the layout. There's a strange smell, along the lines of a smelly sock crossed with a wet Labrador. She's too polite to make any comment other than praise for my purchase.

I call Margaret in the evening, explaining that after my twelve hour walk I will have to review my ability to put in a third consecutive day. I wake at 0925, legs aching with my back complaining about the tumbles, on wet grass, I've taken the previous day. There's no doubt that this will be a day off.

I head into the village of Luss to breakfast. There's a large coach park with an equally large queue for the loos. In the village shop there's a queue for the hot food counter. In front of me are two American men, one sports a pair of tartan trousers to, presumably, acknowledge some distant strand of Scottish DNA. He mentions being part of a former British Colony then corrects himself to "English Colony" to, I presume, not offend any eavesdropping Scottish person. Personally, if Scottish, I'd have been offended by his trousers! I'm one sixteenth Scottish myself but wouldn't dream of being so presumptuous as to give myself permission to wear a tartan. In fact the only tartan I have is a blanket in my campervan, and that is only because it was a bargain on eBay.

I then drive round to Glen Douglas to position myself to tackle the Grahams of Tullich Hill and Beinn Bhreac tomorrow.



I wake on Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> at 0500 still full of aches and tiredness. I had a bout of the flu about a month ago, I still get phlegm and I think that's holding me back a bit.

I step outside to answer a call of nature. The weather looks promising with light mist, poised to clear, covering the hills. I get walking at 0810 and the hills are on show, against a blue sky, as I pass the farm buildings and bungalows that make up Invergroin. I take note of the signs requesting privacy when entering and exiting the land for the hills.

I find the way they want me to head, signposted for convenience, and strike up the hill towards Tullich Hill. I'm very sluggish, back to my old ways of taking a few paces then resting.

After an hour I reach a newly planted commercial forest. The trees are no more than a foot high, making navigating amongst them very straightforward. It's a forest that'll never make it onto my aging map.

The disadvantage of the new forest is that it is surrounded by a six foot deer fence. Still in sight of the farm at Invergroin, and noting that the fence is rather new, I'm reluctant to scale it. Instead I head for the highest point and find a stile.

I make the summit of Tullich Hill at 1050, very slow and feeling rather hot though, once settled down, a cooling wind airs me. There's the sound of chirping birds as I look out at the rolling grassland falling away to the glen below then rising again with its tucks and creases sheltering the naturally occurring trees.

I get a good phone signal and, while enjoying the panoramic views, call Margaret. A seaplane, heading towards Loch Lomond flies overhead.

I head east to a couple of lochains before the north east descent towards the low ground from which I can ascend Beinn Bhreac. I'm soon facing a sheer drop and have to re-ascend before picking up a sheep track that leads me to ground safe enough to descend from.

The ground is marshy and I have to pick my way carefully to the low ground at 1000ft. From here it's a south easterly ascent keeping to the side of the hill to avoid an undulation on the ridge line.

My legs complain all the way and I'm tricked by a few false summits before some rocky ground leads me to the trig point at 1430.

I set my compass for the gate I left the road at this morning, avoiding the ground that the signs requested I avoid. It's boggy going again. I have to cross a few low fences and a stream or two before making it to the road. Passing through Invergroin I get chatting to an old man tending the garden of one of the bungalows. I finally get back to the campervan at 1630.

I park up for the night in Tyndrum and awake to rain pattering on the roof of the campervan. I take my time to get going for the drive around to Glen Coe to tackle the Grahams of Sgor a' Choise and Meall Mor.

I park by the Co-Op in Ballachulish, buy bits for breakfast and mark up the map for the day ahead.

The rain stops so I get walking at 0930 along Gleann an Fhiodh. I feel slow, drawn and sluggish. I'm trying to do at least two peaks a day so I can finish the

26 planned for this year quicker than normal and get home to Margaret. This is making for some long days and today doesn't look like any kind of exception.

There's a good path to follow until I reach a large cairn where I cross a river and pause to drink and take on spare water.

I climb steeply southeast, at a pace befitting a snail, to the summit ridge which, at a shade after midday, I'm grateful to reach.

The weather is now hot and the smell of cut pine, from the forest below, wafts gently in the breeze and enriches my senses. It's a nice ridge, the sun picking out the snow on the north faces of the surrounding Munros. They look menacingly large and I still can't believe that I managed to climb them all.

I pass along bare rock interspersed with short grass and make the summit of Sgor a' Choise at 1345.

I rest for a while and take in the superb panorama. This is really Munro territory with just the occasional Corbett and Graham squeezed in for good measure. So even though I'm on a summit others tower above me.

I set off south east to a lower bump then head north east towards Meall Mor. I'm very slow, painfully slow in fact. My body is protesting at the long days I've given it of late. A few drops of rain have me donning my waterproofs, however it comes to nothing.

I make the summit at 1640, a cairn on a rocky ridge. I briefly rest then head west to another cairn (just in case it's higher). Ben Nevis graces the distance, the Aonach Eagach ridge, with its menacing pinnacles guards the north side of Glen Coe. Being a Sunday I imagine there are walkers on all the surrounding Munros. However, I'm alone.

I look for a way down. My map is out of date and the forest marked has been felled and another has grown. I head for a phone mast but it's a confusing descent. I eventually end up at the disused quarry near to where I'm parked. From here it's hard to make my way through the wooded paths. I take a few wrong turns but eventually, at 1910, reach the campervan.

It's been a shade under ten hours, the book time was just over five. It's been a slow day.

The Pap of Glen Coe (or Sgorr na Ciche to give it its Gaelic name) is a fascinating mountain. Standing pert and rounded, guarding the entrance to the glen, it is one of the most identifiable mountains of Glen Coe but, at 2435ft, one of the smallest. Of course, being a school boy at heart, I'm minded that 'Pap' means breast and pert and rounded is just what it is.

Anyhow today, May 14<sup>th</sup>, I decide to give this Graham my complete attention. I get walking at 1010, following a track which soon dwindles to a rough path through grass, streams, bog and rock. I'm slow going again, finding the need to rest often on this steep mountainside.

There are a few people around today. It's a popular peak so I have some brief chats with French, Dutch, German and Danish people.

I struggle to the ridge then take the gravel ridden paths through the rocky summit region. Here my pace picks up. There's a few twists and turns as the path

winds its way around the back before presenting me with the final pull on to the top at 1310. The views are incredible. The bridge at Ballachulish spans the throat of Loch Leven. The mountains of yesterday and the Munros of Glen Coe grace the panorama.

I set off back. A man and woman are making their way through the rough rocky path. She is nervous, clinging to the ground. I advise her to look a bit further ahead – she's freaking herself by concentrating on every step.

I get on to the easier ground and pick my way. There's so many paths up that I miss the one I came up on but, by keeping the starting point in focus, I'm able to wind my way back and, after a slip up on wet ground, reach the campervan at 1550.

I then drive round to Garva Bridge where I park up for the night and spend the 15<sup>th</sup> being a 'Trail Angel' and making coffee and hot chocolate for those crossing Scotland on the TGO.

I hear news of a guy, Jim Davison, with a broken stove – apparently he needs a pair of pliers to have a go at mending it. I get my pair ready and also look out my stove. When he arrives I surprise him by handing him the necessary pair of pliers and, when he fails to fully fix it, my stove and my address to which to post it back. It's a good feeling to be of service!

A group of four Americans call me 'Trail Magic Steve'. My final cup of coffee is made for a woman, not on the TGO, who parks next to me and goes for a two hour run. As I hand her the coffee she mentions the two hour run was up and down the Munro of Geal Charn. Some people are incredibly fit.

I spend the evening with Alison and Adrian Ogden in Newtonmore. They offer me a comfy bed before a leisurely breakfast. I return the favour by going to lend a hand at their hostel. The four Americans arrive and announce, "Hey it's trail magic Steve!"

In the afternoon I drive a short distance down the A9 to take in the Graham of Creag Ruadh. It's a lovely sunny afternoon and I get walking at 1325 along the hydro track. I overshoot the branch off point so take a steeper route through the tinder dry heather. I settle down, to soak in the views from the summit, at 1525. A cool wind picks up so I don my jacket. Some of the neighbouring mountains have snow in their high reaches which contrasts with the deep blue sky.

Setting off back I cross rough ground before picking up the hydro track again. I bump into three separate groups of TGO walkers (five people in all). I stop for a chat with each.

I get back to the campervan at 1710 before an evening with Sue Foss in Dalwhinnie. We have a nice meal and I hear the stories of her TGO crossing so far. Other challengers are in the bar and we get chatting to Colin who, on his twentieth crossing, is also not far short of what I'm aiming to achieve: all the mountains of the British Isles.

I don't leave until around 2200 and find myself negotiating the dark, narrow roads around to Glen Roy. At 2300 I'm pointing the campervan up the single track glen road and disturbing sheep and their lambs that have bedded down on the tarmac for the night. They look soulfully into my headlights as they slowly winch themselves to their feet and move off.

I sleep well at the viewpoint parking area and then take the short drive to a twist in the road where I set off for Leana Mhor (west) at 1020.

I feel fitter today and I need fewer rests as I take to the hillside, crossing the glen's famous parallel roads (old shores of retreating lakes from the last ice age). I follow a stream under a warm, predominantly blue, sky.

The high ground, in the shade, is damp and the heather and grass flattened – a sure sign that the snow has only recently melted. As I press on the grass becomes tinder dry and crunches satisfactorily below my feet. As I approach the summit cairn the ground softens, my footsteps quieten and I tag the cairn at 1220.

There are great views from the summit. Glen Roy stretches before me, terminating in rising ground. To the south is Ben Nevis with still a reasonable amount of snow.

I rest for a while then set off back, arriving at the campervan at 1340.

I drive a short distance further up Glen Roy, park up for the night by the bridge over the River Roy and get walking, after a chilly night, at 0820 for the longer ascent, than yesterday, of the also named Leana Mhor.

I head to around 1000ft to pick up one of the parallel roads. Being very visible from afar I thought this would be easy but, in fact, they are hard to distinguish on the ground. So I end up traversing what I think is one of the parallel roads round to a deep gullied stream. I keep my height until I can pick my way over then continue my contouring until the slopes of Leana Mhor (east) look sympathetic enough, and dry enough, for my ascent. I reach the summit at 1315 and, for my reward, am presented with a small pile of stones that form the summit cairn.

I sit a while, the mountains are below the high cloud, a few spots of rain come down but come to nothing.

I make my way back and, determined to walk along the 1000ft parallel road, am flummoxed when the battery in my altimeter dies. I arrive back at the campervan at 1355, write up my diary and fill the campervan's water tank from the River Roy.

I then feast in the café at Spean Bridge before parking up for the night at the Commando Memorial with a view to doing Glas Bheinn, above Loch Arkaig, tomorrow. I watch coach parties arrive, I watch the overweight drivers in their kilts, and I watch the passengers take a multitude of photographs of the monument. To me Scotland by coach, or car road trip, doesn't hold enough. If you like the outdoors Scotland has lots to offer, but touring around it feels a little dull.

Saturday the 19<sup>th</sup> brings the fiddly drive via, Gairlochy, Loch Lochy and the head of Loch Arkaig to seek out the parking spot, at Achnasaul, from which to ascend Glas Bheinn. When I arrive I berate myself for the lack of notice I took to the map – the parking spot is the very same that I used last year for the Corbetts of Geal Charn and Meall na h-Eilde. The former of which I waited, in a storm, for Alison Ogden - with a bit more careful planning, I could have taken in Glas Bheinn in the same walk.

I get walking at 0935, in full knowledge that I'll miss the coverage of some wedding going on in Windsor. I follow a well-made track but feel slow and lethargic. My upper legs are complaining as weariness sets in.

Once on open ground I pick up speed and haul myself, through short heather and grass (trying to un-mat itself from the weight of the winter's snow), to the summit at 1155.

It's a fair sized flattened cairn from which the distant mountains, misted by high clouds, peak the horizon with their snow clad corries.

The wind is warm but strong enough to have me seeking shelter for lunch – nuts and sultanas have been my staple diet this year.

I make it back to the campervan at 1320 and set off for Fort William. My first and last Munros, Carn Mor Dearg and Aonach Mor, stand proudly side by side in the glistening afternoon sun. At over 4000ft each they look massive (in fact, compared with the Grahams they are massive). Again I wonder how I managed the Munros. A younger body, sleepless nights in Youth Hostels giving earlier starts, more determination, perhaps?

In Fort William I buy myself a feast from Morrisons, park up and listen to Chelsea v Man United, via a 4G signal, play in the FA Cup final. Chelsea win 1-0 and I reflect how, in the past, I'd had to have driven around to find a Radio Five Live reception. Now the phone masts outdo the BBC transmitters. Smartphones have really taken off in the last decade, before that were simple handsets for phone calls and text only – and I didn't get one of those until 2001.

After the match I drive to Lundavra, on a road out of Fort William that I never knew existed. I park up for the night and get walking, with a festering sore throat, at 0830 for the Graham of Beinn na Gucaig.

The weather has changed, there's light rain in the air which is driven against me by a jostling wind. I head northwest where the rain and wind picks up, battering me into dropping below some high ground to sort out my pack cover which has now become a sail.

I pass a fence which has a sole purpose of carrying a coaxial cable to a TV aerial which services the tiny hamlet of Lundavra. I note a junction box in the cable with its cover blown off and lying on the ground. I do some maintenance and reattach it.

I press on to the ridge where, paradoxically, the wind drops back a bit and I make better progress, through cloud and rain.

At just before 1100 I spy the trig point summit and am pleased to make the final haul, through some minor craggy ground, and tag it at bang on 1100. I note what looks like some higher ground to the southwest so go and stand on that before doing the same for a piece to the northeast.

I cut down, in wind and rain, picking up the road nearer to Lundavra. With some relief I get back to the campervan at 1240.

The guidebook recommends that Beinn na Gucaig is done with Tom Meadoin but, to me, it looks like a long walk round. Instead I drive down to Loch Leven to enable Tom Meadoin to be tackled from the south tomorrow. When I pull up I recognise the car parking place from last year and, like Glas Bheinn from the

other day, realise that I could have easily included Tom Meadoin when taking in the Corbett of Mam na Gulainn. It reminds me that I should mark all the peaks on my maps so when doing a Corbett I can keep an eye out for nearby Graham neighbours and vice versa.

I phone Margaret then my Mum and Dad while keeping an eye on a Kia hatchback car parked in the layby in front of me – one always worries for other hill walkers and, as the wet evening sets in, I wonder how the occupant(s) are fairing on the hills.

Around 2000 two guys, in their sixties, stagger up from the shoreline of Loch Leven. They look dry but are obviously the worse for wear. I feel a bit wary and momentarily check that I'm securely locked in. I wonder what they've been up to. Poaching fish, perhaps?

After they drive off I give it very little thought. They've gone and I'm snug and secure. Around 2300 their car pulls in front of me again, they get out and swagger around, talking loudly. I switch my DVD player off and lie low. Hoping they'll not bother me. They head back to the shores of the loch. I wonder if they'd baited traps, or fishing lines and are returning to collect their spoils.

I sleep well and don't start to make breakfast until 1000. Opening the curtains I see their car is still there. It then dawns on me they are camping and had, most likely, spent yesterday drinking before heading off to the pub, in the evening, for a top up.

As I pull on my kit the slash of car tyres through the rain, from passing traffic, keeps me company. The cloud is down to the shore, visibility is very poor.

I get walking at 1030 into persistent rain. There's no wind so it falls vertically, but it's the kind that soaks through you by finding every chink in the armour of one's hood and collar.

At first I ascend through forest, then open ground before reaching the corner of an adjoining forest. From here it's a lonely, miserable ascent through bog, streams and squelchy ground.

The lack of wind makes me hot and sticky, and I can feel the water soak through my trail shoes and ride up my socks and trousers.

I reach the summit cairn at 1300, have a walk around to ensure I'm at the top before doing some close map and compass work to get me back to the corner of the forest. Visibility is not much more than a hundred feet.

I meet a couple on their way up. A rare sight on such a murky day and on such a small Graham. I get back to the campervan at 1445 and take the long route around to Ballachulish, with the heaters on full blast, attempting to dry out.

Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> dawns with better weather – high cloud and no forecast for rain. I take the short trip south on the A82 towards the layby from which to tackle the Corbett of Meall Ligiche. The thought of doing a Corbett feels daunting, it'll be my first of the year and, having only done Grahams so far, I feel very tempted to keep on driving and go home – the A82 being the main route south.

However, my desire to walk all the 2000ft mountains of the British Isles wins through and, after a bit of backtracking, I find the layby and get walking at 0855.



The first stretch is on a good track to a farm. A detour path keeps me out of some cottage gardens before a rundown farmyard releases me onto the open hillside.

There's a number of converging burns to cross which has me carefully seeking out a crossing point. My trekking poles aid my balance as I take long strides between wet rocks.

The main joint on my right toe begins to play me up – I noticed it was a little inflamed this morning. Yesterday I had some hip and knee twinges but today it's headed south to my toe, reminding me of the footballing injury that caused it: 1988, exactly thirty years ago. And, to show NHS efficiency, I'm still waiting for the results of the x-ray. I live in hope.

I overshoot the main shoulder of the hill and find myself climbing steeply to reach the ridge path. I make good progress, in fact I begin to feel on fine form. I ponder why some days I do well and others I'm misfiring on all cylinders. It crosses my mind whether it's the amount of pollen in the air.

On the ridge it's a straightforward walk to the summit. It's now just after 1200 and I take in the views. There's a few glimpses of Loch Leven. Out to sea there are islands dotted like lilly pads on a pond. Above me the Munros are in the cloud. To the northeast are the Grahams of Sgorr a'Choise and Meall Mor that I climbed nine days ago.

The still wind of the ascent is now a cooling light breeze. I turn on my tail and descend by the guidebook route, reaching the campervan at 1435. A five and a half hour walk and, for once, well within the guidebook recommendation of five to seven hours.

I drive to Tyndrum and park up for the night. I wake with nothing aching so drive around to Glen Ogle for an attempt on the Graham of Meall Buidhe. I pull up alongside an impressive modern motorhome parked up in an ample sized car park servicing a picnicking area.

A man and woman are loitering near an open door giving access to the living quarters. By the glance the man gives me he's up for a conversation. I'm not. I rarely am with strangers. I slip out my driver's door and hurry around to my rear door and let myself in before he's had a chance to clock what I'm doing.

I slip my trousers off and start to slip on my knee supports. Undeterred the man walks around my camper and appears at my long side window on the opposite side to his motorhome. Protecting me is a Perspex window and a fly screen.

"May I ask you a question?" he asks. His accent is German and, if he's not having a laugh, I rather suspect he is a German. I reply in the affirmative while wishing I had some trousers on.

"We are new to this motorhome business. Where do we get water?"

"From streams, rivers, shops or campsites," I reply.

He pauses for a moment. It clearly wasn't the answer he was looking for. I suspect he was hoping for conveniently placed taps. "Thank you," he replies.

I finish strapping me knees, slip on my walking trousers then feel I could be more helpful. I have four five litre containers that originally came from Morrisons. Each

has been refilled from the River Roy. I pick the one that appears the least opaque – river water has a peaty tinge to it which can cause the recipient to question its origin. I knock on their door, hand over my gift and get a few words of gratitude. I'm always more agreeable with my trousers on.

I get walking at 0945 and follow a very convenient track that zigzags up the hillside to a transmitter. Some workers have scaled it and appear to be attaching a new piece of apparatus. At ground level another guy is digging a hole and gives me a strange look.

It's now 1035 and I realise I have ascended 300m – my body is working well. I press on for the summit across bog ridden undulating land. I climb into the cloud which is eerily still and reach the summit, denoted by three cairns, at 1120. The distant ghostly noise of a passing motorcycle rises from the glen.

There's some quartz rocks, about the size of toolboxes lying amongst the grass. Some has been used to form part of the cairns.

I head back, reaching the campervan at 1230. The Germans have gone so I relax without interruption and draw up a spreadsheet of all the walks, to complete the Corbetts and Grahams, I've left to do. I give each walk an 'Effort' factor based on height and distance and tabulate it across the years 2018 to 2030. This will allow me to base a year's target on 1/13<sup>th</sup> of the total effort remaining. Previously I'd worked on number of mountains or number of days walking. But, in an attempt to stop me picking off easy ones first, this will ensure that I'm not left with the tough ones at the end.

I get walking on the 24<sup>th</sup> at 0840 – my penultimate day in Scotland before bagging three newly promoted English Nuttalls (2000ft+ mountains) and a trip home on Sunday.

I mentioned the other day that, if I'd only paid more attention, I could combine a Corbett and a Graham on one day. Today I aim to do just that by taking in Beinn Each then the Graham of Sgiath a' Chaise.

The cloud is hanging low as I climb through a pine wood, cross a track and continue up through the forest until it meets a track. I find it tough going, my body does not want to get started. This is the ninth continuous day of walking and I'm starting to feel it.



The track goes through a gate where a sign warns of the recent harsh winter and the numerous dead deer that has left on the hills. I cross a stream where somebody has piled rocks and stones to form an artistic cairn.

A short distance later a signpost directs me up Beinn Each. There's a path and I begin to find my stride and appreciate the route it leads me on. I'm now walking in cloud and, after a long pull up, I break out into a sunny day. It feels like somebody has turned a light on.

At the summit there are distant mountains poking out a sea of cloud. The foreground has wisps of cloud. I sit for a while, taking in the fine views, the still air and the rich blue sky.



I make my way back down. At the junction with the track is sat a woman. I say hello and she replies with the most gentle and pure of Scottish accents. We exchange a few words about our day before I press on for half a mile up the track before turning off towards the steep ground of Sgiath a' Chaise.

I immediately pass the rotting carcass of a deer and am reminded of the earlier sign explaining they'd be a likely sight.

The ground varies from bog to the fresh heather shoots of the steeper ground. I feel my hayfever twitching away as I drag my body on.

Near to the summit I meet a chap descending. He's planning a walk for his walking group. I get to the summit at 1410.

On the return the forest is approached above a deep ravine where very tall straight pine trees reach for the light that their neighbours, growing up the hillside, have first option on. Above, rock and grassy outcrops set the scene like a movie director's dream setting for a western. A cuckoo calls and it echoes off the mountainside.

I drop into the forest where the trees allow no more than slithers of light to illuminate my path. I get back to the campervan at 1555 before a long drive down to Hawick to tackle Cauldcleuch Head tomorrow.

After a night camping by the A7 the early traffic wakes me and I drive the final stretch to the start of Cauldcleuch Head. As I pull up the terrain feels familiar and I begin to wonder if I've already done it. A quick check of my diary shows that I had planned it as my last hill of 2017 – less than a year ago and it'd completely slipped my mind.

As I get ready in the wind rocks the campervan and I have a fight with my map. The route crosses an inconvenient fold and I have an embarrassing few minutes trying this way and that until I get it under control.

I get walking at 0800 via the heathery slopes of Stob Fell. The wind picks up and bashes me around, only abating when I've crossed over Pennygant Hill. Cauldcleuch Head looks a long way off. Only a rest, a check of the GPS and some compass confirmation has me realising that I'm looking too far ahead. Cauldcleuch Head is the next 'bump' and a simple walk away.

It's 1015 and I'm at the summit and I'm presented with nothing more than some old iron fence posts. For such a proud name as Cauldcleuch Head I'd have expected at least a pile of rocks.

I return the same way, the wind waits for me over Stob Fell and gives me a stern reminder that these smaller hills can offer their own challenges.

As I drop back towards the campervan a newly planted pine forest is in view. There are random spaces between the tress, some are taller than others and it reminds me of a threadbare tapestry.

It's only 1150 when I reach the campervan, time enough to set off for England and spend the weekend bagging the newly promoted Nuttalls of Long Fell, Tinside Rigg and Calf Top. With ten days walking on the trot already complete, I'm now set to do some more.

Corbett Count:	116 out of 222
Graham Count:	49 out of 223
Unique Donald Count:	29 out of 59