

CULTER HILLWALKING CLUB

- The First Ten Years

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Further Education in Culter

Way back in 1989, **Liz Henty** – a Culter resident and mum of two daughters – wondered why she had to travel as far as Cults Academy for out-of-school classes for them and evening classes for herself.

She approached **Peter Sanderson**, Senior Community Education Worker at the Cults Community Centre, to ask him whether more activities could not be held in Culter. (At the time, only art classes were held in Culter Primary School.)

Peter took up this challenge by advertising a meeting at the school for anyone who was interested. Three people turned up: **Liz Henty**, **Alison Skinner** and **Val Street**. Peter threw them the ball, saying they were now, respectively, Treasurer, Chairman and Secretary of a new working group, aimed at bringing both adult and children's further education to Culter!

Culter Leisure Programme

From this small beginning, the **Culter Leisure Programme** was born which, like Topsy, grew and grew until it involved large numbers of people – mostly women – who threw their energies and time into creating an incredible number of classes.

Before the “Gang of Three” could get started, they held an open day at Culter Village Hall, at which people were invited to write down the sorts of activities they would like to see held locally.

From these suggestions were born the following classes:

- French Conversation
- Spanish Conversation
- Hair and Beauty
- Local History
- Flower Arranging (a short course)
- Interior Design
- Cycling Proficiency for School Children
- Badminton for Children and Adults
- Judo for Children
- Mah Jong (an ancient Chinese tile game)
- Carpet Bowls
- Car Maintenance for Women
- A General Interest group, which was to be addressed by a different speaker each week, and
- Hill walking.

The final suggestion was the idea of Val Street who had newly acquired “Sam”, a collie cross flatcoat, and had begun to enjoy walking with him but they hadn’t ventured as far as the hills.

When the pieces of paper showing all the ideas were scrutinised, it fell to each of those who had innocently suggested a topic to set up the interest group themselves! A meeting was held in the Playgroup behind the Village Hall for anyone who might be interested in hillwalking to come along and discuss the possible form the group would take.

By default, **Val Street** found herself the organising Secretary of it and **Peter Fraser** became the Treasurer. The group didn’t have a Chairperson to begin with, the first incumbent of that position being **Gordon Stokes** some years later. Other founder members were **Brenda Noble**, **Dorothy Gordon** and **Rosie Hastings**, all of whom are still members.

Hillwalking was a particularly successful spin-off from the Culter Leisure Programme and is now in its 22nd year, having operated for a couple of years under the aegis of the Culter Leisure Programme but becoming a properly constituted club in its own right in 1992, under the new title of Culter Hillwalking Club.

But there are other activities which have survived - Mah Jong for example, with the faithful still meeting every week in the Playgroup to enjoy this absorbing game. Cycling Proficiency for School Children is also still running, now known as Road Safety and run by Culter School, with the help of parents. And Carpet Bowls at the Village Hall continued for a long time, up until perhaps three years ago, when its members unwillingly gave up in the face of anno domini!

As a matter of historical interest, other CLP classes met their demise eventually through the sheer exhaustion of the (mostly) young mums who organised them. Not only did the latter have to rally their supporters, liaise with tutors or arrange speakers, but also arrive at each meeting either to collect the subs (which went to the tutors or into the interest group's funds) or to physically lead the groups themselves. Most of them had young children and whilst wishing the groups to continue, they yearned for some professional support.

Representations were made to Cults Community Centre's Further Education staff and a meeting attended by Phil D'Arcy (Grampian Region Community Education Organiser) and Alan Findlay (his Deputy) was held at the village hall, when the original Gang of Three were told that they **could** have help - in the form of young people on the Youth Opportunities Programme (who became known colloquially as "YOPs") but it would be down to the CLP to teach, monitor and generally

oversee these “helpers”. Understandably, the volunteers quailed at the prospect of yet more responsibility and, one by one, most of the activities came to an end, other than the four mentioned above.

Culter Hillwalking Club and its first leaders

The new Secretary of the CHC was completely clueless about where, how and when to climb what hills or which long-distance paths to follow, so she contacted the Outdoor Pursuits team based at Garthdee who suggested a member of the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team as a leader, and so began CHC’s association with **Alan Crichton**.

Alan did not do things by halves and took us up Lochnagar and Clachnaben on our first two walks with him, initiating us into the pleasures (and sometimes heartbreaks) of hillwalking with great gusto. Where a hill had two or three false summits, he would cajole, encourage and support us with silver-tongued lies about our goal being “just over that next bump” but the degree of satisfaction we felt when we finally achieved a summit could not be underestimated.

Sadly, Alan’s job (he was then a quantity surveyor although now he has his own award-winning Mountain Skills safety company) and his overriding need for regular practice sessions with the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team meant that his time was limited, so once again we had to cast our net for another leader. Local man **Alfie Massie** (and also his son, **David**) leapt to our rescue and took us on some lovely and well-researched walks backed up with photocopied route maps.

Building the Necessary Skills

However, eventually, in early 1991, we had to stand on our own two feet and, by default yet again (!) the leader became Val Street who rapidly learned the hard way how to read maps, recce and lead walks, and try to instil some safety consciousness into the group.

One particularly misty climb on Lochnagar, when the group became separated at the boulder field as members struck out on their own in various directions, gave her some sleepless nights afterwards as regards what might have happened. So she joined a series of Safety on the Hills lectures run by the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team, culminating in a highly enjoyable winter weekend in Braemar, putting newly learned skills into practice, including map reading and even ice-axe work on the southern slope of Glas Maol led by **Mario di Maio**, the then leader of the Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team.

For a long time, many other members of the Club were less than eager to share the responsibilities of leadership and preferred to be “sheep” but gradually, with encouragement, people became surer of themselves and by “buddying up” with another Club member, they gained the courage to recce walks in advance and lead them on the appointed day.

Safety Aspects

Recce-ing was and is a very important part of club walking. It means less time is wasted on the day itself, searching for tracks that are shown on the map but no longer seem to exist, finding suitable coffee- or lunch-stop sites (preferably with some shelter), checking on the suitability of a walk for taking one's dog (depending on the route, the time of year, lambing, shooting etc), finding places where a bus or cars can park safely

and so on. There is much that the leader can do in advance to iron out problems on the day itself, and so it was most welcome when everyone began to take their turn in recce-ing and leading walks. It also perforce taught everyone a little more about the hobby and made them more conscious of the safety angle.

A first aid kit was purchased and taken on all walks, as an extra insurance in case of mishaps, although the Club cannot and does not accept responsibility for any accidents; it's a hobby with inherent risks and participants have to take personal responsibility.

From time to time, Peter Fraser would hold a navigational skills session up by Rhynie, where he was accustomed to teaching ATC lads the same thing, and members became a little more adept at map and compass work.

Posters constantly encouraged members to wear proper walking boots and enough appropriate warm and waterproof clothing, whatever time of year a walk was planned, and to take food and drink sufficient for a day on the hills.

Changes over the Years

Naturally there have been many changes in the Club's practice over the years, as times and the membership have altered, but it is interesting to look back to our roots, to notice "the way we were".

For example, in the early days when we wanted to advise the membership of a forthcoming walk, six posters (sometimes even hand drawn!) would be prepared and placed in the windows of notable venues round the village, like the Pop In, the Library, the Village Hall, the Post Office etc.

This practice gave way to sending photocopies of typed posters through the mail to individual members and finally, with the advent of e-mail, it became very easy to alert everyone to forthcoming walks, although posters were still necessary to encourage new members. Came the day, we even had our own web-site set up for us by Webmaster **Jackie Potts**. We had entered the 21st century!

Christmas was always marked by a special short walk (due to less light and possibly poor weather conditions) linked to refreshments in a café or a meal in a pub, but nowadays it is also “de rigeur” to wear an appropriate Christmassy hat for the entirety of the walk or at least something a trifle out of the ordinary (Brenda Noble’s knitted Christmas pudding hat springs to mind!).

Frequently in the early days we seemed to be mostly women, with only a sprinkling of intrepid men (perhaps this was due to the relatively short walks we undertook of, for example, 12 miles or so). This often induced passing walking groups to enquire whether we were an all-women outfit? But nowadays the club has a good mix of men and women.

Transport in the early days was almost exclusively by bus or coach, and more rarely by individual cars, but that was in the days of affordable coach hire! Because it has grown unsustainably expensive to hire coaches, due to the increasing fuel and insurance costs, the trend today is for members to group themselves into as few cars as possible to travel to a starting point. This does of course mean either that walks are usually “there and back” or circular, whereas it was possible with a coach to do a long A to B walk, in the comforting knowledge that the bus would follow you round to some far distant glen to pick you up at the end. A to B walks with car

transport require some deft car shuffling but, with experience and not too long a distance between the A and B points, this has proved to be successful as well.

Happy memories of coach outings include journeys home with most people dozing, tired but happy after a day on the hills, and exhausted but contented dogs lying in the aisles. Val's "Sam", Brenda's "Sandy" and **Lauranne Sharp's** "Shandy" no longer walk with the "pack" but are no doubt recce-ing the Elysian fields for us as we speak.

We have lost some good friends too, along the way, **Donald Elrick, Ann Leiper, Hamish Noble** and **Morag McLay** among them. Each of them in their own way contributed to the pleasure of the walks and will be remembered fondly by their colleagues.

Away weekends were often taken by coach, and the drivers became well-kent friends. In our first ten years, we visited Ullapool to climb Stac Pollaidh, visit the Hydroponicum at Achiltibuie and have a wee boat trip out to the romantic little island of Tannera Mor, where rain dramatically fell like stair rods all around us but strangely never on us!

Another year we climbed Ben Loyal at Tongue, all of it from sea level to the summit (none of your easy Cairngorm half-hills). The next day we continued round the coast in our coach, visiting Smoo Cave at Durness, and taking a memorable trip across to Cape Wrath in a virtual coracle, where half the party, awaiting their turn on the shore, witnessed large waves attempting to board the first boatload, much to the audible horror of **Phyllis Connon!** Once everyone was safely on the opposite shore, we paid a visit to the last men manning the lighthouse at the furthest tip of the country, and were

somewhat taken aback to find them less than heroically watching television in their socks.

At Loch Leven we discovered the pleasure of staying at HF hotels (Holiday Fellowship) and walked part of the West Highland Way, albeit a very easy stretch (the Devil's Staircase) from high in Glen Coe down to Kinlochleven.

Another trip to an HF hotel was on the Isle of Arran, where parties of differing abilities undertook various walks with different leaders provided by HF, but all of them in Glen Rosa, prior to circumnavigating the island on the following day and visiting a distillery and Brodick Castle before sailing home.

One weekend when we didn't take a coach with us was a trip by train via Inverness over to the west coast on the scenic West Highland railway line ending at Mallaig. Our memorable walk on that occasion was beside the sea Loch Nevis and back along Loch Morar in a heatwave. The following day we sailed across from Kyle of Lochalsh to Kyleakin on Skye (there was no bridge then), taking a local coach down through the Sleat peninsula, and sailing back to Mallaig from Armadale, just for the pleasure of the views.

Today fewer people seem to go on the weekends away, meaning that cars are the preferred method of travel, but their occupants more than make up for quantity in the quality of their hillwalking – not for them the tourism of yesteryear, they usually manage to fit three good walks into two and a half days away.

Soon after the Club formed, walks were held only on the first Sunday of each month but nowadays there is a thriving group of Monday walkers too in the third week of the month, striding out under **Catherine Lacy**'s leadership and sickening those who

are still not retired and therefore cannot join them, as well as those lapsed members like myself, with recalcitrant knees who can no longer participate.

In all the club's 22 year history, there have only been 3 Secretaries: Val Street, **Elsa Brown** and **Della Russell**. Val laughs to think that for several years, she was Minute Secretary, Membership Secretary and Social Secretary, as well as a frequent leader and the person who reported on the club's activities in the "Culter Courier", whereas each of these functions belongs to a different postholder now.

Looking back, I remember very few disagreements. The Club has always had great fun walking together – it is such a sociable and life-enhancing activity and offers its members the opportunity to help others, whether it be lending a hand to negotiate a stream (and sometimes actually carrying them across the stream!) or just being aware if someone is falling behind. Walking is a useful social "glue", bringing together all types and characters of people, including our Camphill Tigh a'Chomainn friends who have often walked with us in the past.

Long may the Club continue to flourish!

Val Street

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following, who were very helpful in supplying information I couldn't recall:

Liz Henty
Alison Skinner
Peter Sanderson
Brenda Noble

Elsa Brown
Sheila Watt
Dorothy Gordon
Babs Lappin

CULTER HILLWALKING CLUB

- In 2013

All clubs are bound to change over the course of time. The children of those young mums Val mentions grow up and the young mums go back to work. Their interest in play groups and pre-school ceases as their children start school and others come in to take their place. At the other end of the spectrum, it is sadly those of us who have such problems as the recalcitrant knees who are eventually forced to reach the conclusion that hill walking is no longer for us and so the membership is in a constant state of flux.

It is good that some of the original group are still members – Val herself, Brenda Noble, Dorothy Gordon and Rosie Hastings for example, but we now have a more varied membership. There are the men for instance, sometimes going at breakneck speed but always helpful for the odd carry across a burn, as long as they aren't too far in front! With the advent of the internet, more members now come from places other than Culter and it is usually via the internet that we attract new members. We have members from Torry, Westhill, Aberdeen itself, Stonehaven and a little group of members from Banchory for example.

Some of our members have a passion for Munros. We continue in our policy of offering 2 Munro Sunday walks in the summer and the same for the Monday walks, but we do try to offer an alternative when possible, sometimes a coastal walk, for those who would prefer a less taxing way of getting out and enjoying the countryside. For the earnest Munro baggers, the Club provides a forum to get together to arrange separate walks and this has proved invaluable to some of our members.

We continue to offer weekends away each year and amongst the places we have visited are Crianlarich, Fort Augustus, the Ochils and Newtonmore and we returned to Arran for an extended weekend in May 2012. In 2009, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the club by visiting the Lake District Mountain Festival and made the most of a week of unusually fine weather which enabled us to walk each day. In 2013, we are hoping to stay near to Ben Cruachan, at the Cluanie Inn and to revisit Glenmore Lodge.

As Val says, we tend to take cars more often these days. The rising cost of hiring coaches has become prohibitive and we are not alone as a club in resorting to car transport. Not very green I'm afraid, but a necessity. This doesn't stop us from enjoying walks at a distance – the Angus Glens are a favourite for example and we always try to go there at least once over the year. We have also had trips as far north as the Bin of Cullen and Knock Hill, and Ben Rinnes and Corriehabbie Hill are popular too.

Choosing walks is a skill. The longer walks obviously have to be in the summer and shorter ones in the winter but daylight hours have to be taken into account if the walk is a distance away. The roads and parking are also criteria which have to be considered in case they are iced up. I remember one particular occasion where we skated merrily over a car park and were in danger of breaking a leg before we even embarked on the walk!

And then, of course, there is the weather. Do we go or don't we go? We can be dissuaded from walking by mist when its presence will ruin great views. We are reluctant to go for one of the Cairngorm Munros if the weather looks really dreich; our planned trip up Carn a' Mhaim recently was put off because it was so wet. Wind speed is watched avidly on the Mountain

Weather Information Service web site. No-one wants to be blown off an exposed ridge. Then there's snow in the winter which can wreak havoc with walks, both in terms of walking and the drive to the walk (I remember one particular instance when we gave up the struggle battling through feet-deep snow on the way to Coils of Muick) and, in extreme cases, there might be thunder and lightning. So there's a lot to consider

Having said all this, and bearing in mind the vagaries of the weather in this area, surprisingly few walks are cancelled, and even if we don't go on the intended route, another can always be found, due to the knowledge of the area of many of our members. In fact we're often spoilt for choice. The Coils of Muick walk ended up as the Ballater 7 Bridges Walk, only to be reinstated the following spring.

Apart from the AGM which is in February, we hold a "Walks Meeting" in October to thrash out ideas for the following year's walks and who will co-ordinate them. We have a very large spread sheet showing past walks, both Sunday and Monday ones, and we endeavour not to repeat a walk within 5 years if possible. We also try to find different routes in familiar places to ring the changes.

After each walk, a report on the day's activity is sent to members and a recent innovation is to post this on the club web site so that prospective members can see what a great time we have. It is also planned to set up a Facebook page with a link from the web site.

Periodically, we run courses for members and in the last few years, there has been one on navigation by our old friend Alan Crichton who always provides us with most informative evenings tinged with his own subtle sense of humour. This year he was invited to talk to us about incident management and first aid on the hills, which ended up with half of us on the floor being turned over by our partners in the correct way!

Two other topics worthy of note are special discounts which are available from various gear shops and the forwarding of information on events of interest, such as North East Mountain Trust lectures.

And lastly, the “training” which members undergo with us leads to bigger and more challenging walking. Two of our members have been to Everest Base Camp, and we have enjoyed sharing their experiences with slide shows, and another two have been to Kilimanjaro, with a slide show to follow again.

All the above will give you a flavour of what Culter Hillwalking Club is about in 2013. People who join always comment on what a friendly club we are, not too big to be daunting but large enough to utilize the vast knowledge of the hills of our membership. And one of the most satisfying aspects I find is that, when we get together each month, it is great to hear the walks that people have enjoyed outside the Club and to use their experience to include in future programmes. It’s all about enjoying the hills safely, whoever you’re with.

As Val says, long may the Club continue to flourish!

Della Russell