

Club Spot

An Teallach Mountaineering Club



By Duncan Little

All photos: ATMC



When I was asked to do this piece my first thought, having read the previous articles in the Club Spot, was that we haven't been around long enough. We're just a wee club, yet to reach our 20th birthday, and here we are in a loch with big fish that have been here for 60 or 100 years even.

Then I thought, well, we were ambitious enough to call ourselves the An Teallach Mountaineering Club, to take on and run a hut (more on that later), a number of our members regularly visit the Alps and the Dolomites, etc, and we have a good programme of weekend meets throughout the year. There must be an interesting story or two in there. So here we go...



Top: Enjoying a Via Ferrata in the Dolomites in 2005

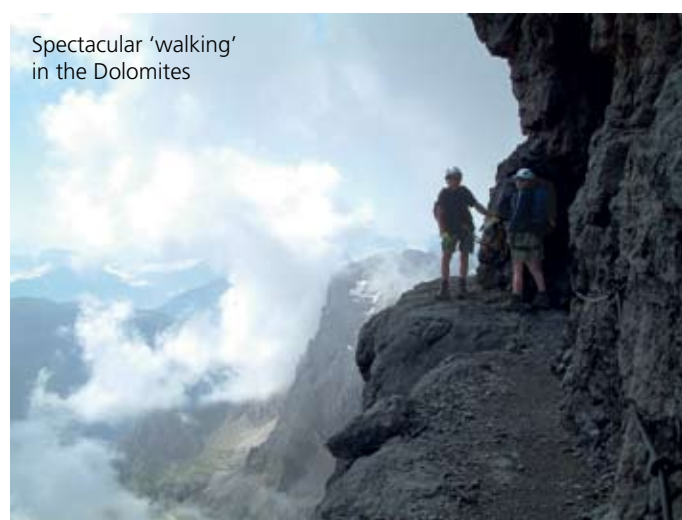
Above: The Club President on the summit of the Stahlhorn

In the beginning

Like many other clubs it seems to have all started with a group of friends sharing a common interest in the hills. The one other thing that the "founding fathers" had in common was that they were all civil servants, working for H.M. Customs and Excise, although that was no condition of membership.

One or two groups of Customs folk had been climbing and walking with their colleagues for a number of years in the 1980s. They used to get access to Muir Cottage for meets. About the same time some folk from the Aberdeen and Edinburgh offices were organising annual charity walks up various hills. These events fired up others who joined in and before long it seemed that the thing to do was to form a club (which apart from anything else would give us access to the huts.)

These things of course don't just happen. There were a few guys, among them Joe Duffin,



Spectacular 'walking' in the Dolomites

Alan Dryden and Willie Bain, who provided experience, direction and vision. Aye, and they could argue as well.

The inaugural meet was held at Morvich on 29th September 1989. The booking was made with the National Trust for the "no name" Mountaineering club. Looking at the first meet report I note that there was one Irvine Butterfield in attendance. We then had to decide on a name; not easy. I quote from the club records: "A very hot debate then raged for three months on what the club should be called. Tempers rose, positions were taken, poses were struck. Finally a totally undemocratic decision was made in favour of An Teallach. The rationale was that An Teallach is a fine hill – in line with the high moral character of the membership – and the name sounds good."

As we had no specific base, most members were from the big cities and as we had no desire to particularly identify with H.M. Customs, the club was to be open to all. The name An Teallach Mountaineering Club seemed to fit the bill.

On our way

We have always had a fairly

relaxed approach to the hills. We used to call ourselves "the no rules club" but in this day and age that's not so easy to stick to. We don't have any graded system for walking as we argue that it would cramp our style. Our members just get together, get organised and get on the hills.

We have a wide range of experience and ability. There are folk who do a bit of climbing and scrambling, the usual bagging, a bit of canoeing and folk who just do their own thing. We do take pride in our welcoming and friendly approach to new members.

The club developed a programme of meets using the club huts, as well as YHA hostels and I can remember being accommodated in at least two village halls. We rarely have day meets because members come from so far afield. The meets are arranged more or less monthly.

Of course, there are some meets you can always bank on, the Burns Supper being one; we have too many excise men in the club to miss that celebration. We have two meets at our cottage, one in June and the other in October. These are "WWW" meets – work, walking and... you



An Teallach Mountaineering Club

An outing to Ossian in 2004



More Via Ferrata



can guess the other. Muir Cottage in August is our Family Meet when we let the bairns loose on the midges and we have our AGM at an appropriate venue. In addition we have had meets in one or two of the Lake District and Snowdonia Huts.

As new folk, and friends of friends joined, we found ourselves with members from a' the airts. We have a substantial number from south of the border including a couple of stalwarts from Northern Ireland. In fact at times they put the locals to shame with their attendance. We believe this adds a great deal to the club although it has its drawbacks sometimes (e.g. for committee meetings – but that makes us think harder about whether we really need them).

As time passed and folk moved on and new members came along the original "Customs" guys are now in the minority, although perhaps not yet vocally. Usually they are found sitting by the fire muttering into their beer and discussing failing parts of their anatomy.

A base of our own

In around 1996 a few of the movers and shakers in the club thought that we should look at trying to acquire a hut. I'm not so sure the idea was universally popular at the time but it was put to the vote and the enthusiasts had their way.

Our search for a hut over a period of about six months

led us to Glen Affric where, would you believe, there were two possibilities. I am still convinced that we were steered into Glen Affric by the stalker in Glen Cannich who, when asked if he knew of any place that would suit us, quickly told us about a hut he knew in the neighbouring glen. However he did us a favour and we ended up with a choice between a Forestry Commission building (Athnamullach) and a National Trust building (Strawberry Cottage).

Strawberry Cottage had been a stalkers' residence before being acquired by the NTS and was in reasonable condition. The club opted for it for two main reasons: we reckoned that it was going to take less work to get it to the condition we wanted and the Forestry Commission still wanted to use Athnamullach as accommodation for The Trees for Life people (the organisation they used in their efforts to regenerate the Native woodlands in the Glen) and we would have been sharing the bothy.

Without going into detail about the work that needed doing let me say that it took blood, sweat, tears and a lot of toil to get it up and running. Oh, and about £40,000. Great credit needs to go to Joe Duffin for all his efforts over the first few years. Joe of course could not have done it on his own although I am sure he often thought that he was; there was input and effort from members (and non members who got

Strawberry Cottage in remote Glen Affric



The cottage opens for business in April 1998

involved for the satisfaction of doing the work, the crack and perhaps the occasional dram).

We have had a great deal of local support for the hut from both the Forestry Commission (who we rely on for access and firewood) and NTS who are our landlords. We are also in the heart of a deerstalking area and we maintain a good relationship with the local stalkers. The club is justly proud of Strawberry Cottage and we believe that

given its remoteness and location it is one of the best huts on the circuit. If you need to be convinced get up there and try it.

Apparently it was known locally as Strawberry Cottage because there used to be a few wild ones growing around the building. The deer have done for them now. A lot of work still goes into Strawberry and there will be more in the coming months as we are about to upgrade and improve our solar power system by the addition of a small wind turbine.

So where are we now?

Well we have a membership of about fifty-five. We still maintain our program of monthly weekend meets. We are, I think, just like every other small club; when we think we are getting a bit thin on the ground and could do with a few more active members to keep the meet numbers up then the meets become fully subscribed again. There is a steady trickle of new members, enough to have kept the numbers fairly static over the years.

Like any club we have had our memorable meets and incidents on the hills. One or two are X-rated and will not be mentioned here. However there are a couple worth mentioning in any piece about this club:

- Frankie losing Spot the collie through a cornice on Beinn Eibhinn. They saw the dog alive under the cornice but did not have gear to recover him, so dashed down and home to get

ropes etc. Back up again next morning, Spot was still there and waiting patiently for his master. Brilliant ending!

- The time the club went in to Coruisk hut and the key would not open the door. It transpired that it was a copy of a copy and had never been tested. They got a message to Donald's uncle who is in the Rescue team and he got a key to them via the post bus. It was 24 hours before they managed to get in and they had a night on the rocks by the hut. Fortunately they had sufficient refreshment to see them through their ordeal.

- Alan and Tony getting separated after being avalanched off Stob Coir'an Albannaich. Tony got off the hill to get help that evening. Alan decided to overnight on the hill and then walked out the next morning; all done in the full glare of the media. A television crew were following the MRT that weekend and the story made the national news. Another happy ending thanks to Alan's experience, Buffalo jacket and survival bag.

- Then there was Susan's memorable response to the toast to the lasses at the Burns Supper in 2007. It is recorded in the newsletter for spring 2007 and it is a classic.

I felt it might be right to conclude with a comment from one of our members who, when asked for a thought or two to help me with this task, responded as follows:

"What sums up the pleasure of the mountain experience is the joy of meeting so many fine human beings who share



the experience of walking miles with full packs just to spend a few days in some little cottage in the middle of a beautiful nowhere. Strawberry Cottage has brought this Irish man into the company of many fine Scottish folk, who always show the best side of the human spirit, especially on Burns' weekends. The experience has taken us to the Dolomites in the

same good company for the fourth year and I look forward to meeting up again at the October meet".

Well that's our story so far. I don't think I will be writing the next episode in twenty years time but I am sure somebody will. For more information about the club, the meets programme and Strawberry Cottage visit www.atmc.org.uk

Club Spot

Does your club have a story to tell? Use this feature in Scottish Mountaineer's Members News section to highlight your club activities, history, achievements or forthcoming events. Simply send details to the Editor, Kevin Howett.

Mountaineering Clubs – on the way up?

By David Gibson

The mountaineering, hill walking and climbing club scene in Scotland seems to be holding its own – there are now more than 130 clubs with a total of about 7000 members in MCoFS membership.

However, we often hear that clubs have difficulty in attracting new members, and occasionally clubs decide to fold due to lack of new or younger members joining up.

We therefore want to ask the following questions:

- With the increasing popularity of mountain walking and indoor climbing, should there be more clubs?
- With the cost of transport and fuel increasing, and spending under pressure, would membership of a club help more folk get into the hills?
- Is your club attracting new members?
- Do you want to grow the membership of your club?
- How do you currently market your club to prospective members?

- Should MCoFS help new clubs to start up?
- Should MCoFS help existing clubs to become more sustainable and develop?

We want to know what you think. Should MCoFS help in this way? We will be writing to club secretaries on this subject during November, asking for their views. In the meantime if you have any views on the subject, or would like to start a club, please email davidg@mcofs.org.uk