

ClubSpot

The Jacobites Mountaineering Club



By Alan Walker

All photos: Jacobites Club



The Randolph Bar, Edinburgh, in January 1974 saw six friends germinating the idea of a new mountaineering club, to be open to all and cater for all forms of the sport. They celebrated the club's start with a meet later that month at Creag Dubh and the cliffs of Coire Creagach on the flanks of Sgairneach Mhòr – a bold start considering the time of year and that the only winter climbing guides in those days were the booklets to the Cairngorms by John Cunningham and to Ben Nevis and Glen Coe by Ian Clough.

Soon the club was meeting every Thursday night at the Covenanter Bar in the High Street. There is no truth in the rumour that our club was named in search of a fight with the regulars there; it was due to the coincidental impact of John Prebble's book 'Culloden' on a leading member.

By dint of a poster campaign we soon were attracting a lively crowd and gained a membership of over 100 in the first year. Maybe the annual fee of 75p helped, maybe it was our informality! From the start there was a good mix of technical climbers and hill walkers, with monthly meets in the hills to share sparse motors.

The poster campaigns became well known in Edinburgh attracting mountaineers and the public to our big-name lectures:

Don Whillans, Dougal Haston, Reinhold Messner as examples in the early days. A later highlight was Chris Bonington with Joe Tasker and Pete Boardman to talk about Everest: the Assembly Room in George Street was packed.

Our membership reflects our city – a mixed lot, and we attract enough youngsters to keep the conversation of older members on loftier topics than their aching joints. Now our scheduled meets number twenty a year; mostly in huts. Membership has settled down to a steady 150, with a fair turnover.

Most activity is ad hoc, with several local climbing walls increasingly important for meeting. These walls, and our scheduled summer evenings' climbing and hill walking are especially useful for those new to the sport.

We recently gained Community Amateur Sports Club status for its tax advantage, so now we are open to those under 18. Children seem to be a problem for some clubs, but not for us to judge by the number of marriages and families from within the club! CASC officials did query about training. We explained the need for self-reliance and the complications of amateurs doing a professional's job and that professional training is available at the walls and Glenmore Lodge. Anyone who wants to learn the



sport with us can do so by following the example of partners in active groups.

It would get too complicated to name individuals in describing what we do; here are just a few snapshots of fun: From our first days a speciality of the club has been sea-cliff climbing, with many new routes pioneered. So many routes that what now counts as an unclimbed sea-stack becomes increasingly exiguous; does it have enough guano on it to hold the rock in place?

Ski-touring has long been popular in the club and some members have even spied piste-bashing; their excuse being that the snow was too soft for climbing.

Apart from several parties of club members off to the Alps each year, a quick scan through our annual journals (Vol. 1



issued 1975) reveals visits to: Patagonia (sailed there in a home-made boat); Himalaya (attempts on Pumori); Bolivia (Ilimani); East Africa (Mount Kenya, Kilimanjaro, Hell's Gate cliffs); Canada (Bugaboos, Squamish, Banff ice); Greenland (Lemon Mountains); Morocco (Atlas Mountains); Norway and Turkey for ski-touring.

There are rumoured to be gastronomes in the club who vanish up remote glens to cook exotic dishes in search of relief from bad memories of pot-noodles over a paraffin stove in candle-lit bothies.

There is pride to be had in seeing some members not only joining what can be called guidebook-writing-clubs, but actually writing up new routes and guides.

Sometimes some of us, maybe most of us, want a change from grunting up a hill. So the club gains relief with several yearly social meets. Long ago we dispensed with invited speakers at our annual dinners; now we hire a ceilidh band – much more social.

Final Munros are a great excuse for a party, so the more Munro-baggers the better, although we have lost count of our Completionists.

An urge afflicted some of us in the late 1980s to find a club-hut to play our part in the national network. At least that was the official patter; others suspected a shebeen was planned. The upshot was a small team of enthusiasts scouring the country, eventually to find a place of great potential. Although it was a solid butt 'n' ben building it was heading for wrack 'n' ruin. A rent was reasonably negotiated and the estate pleased to see their property being refurbished at our expense.

Invercroft House had been fully inhabited until the early 1950s, connected by a drove road going east to Achnasheen and southward to Strathconon. We met three of the last inhabitants of the croft recently, of a family of ten born and raised there. They told us of the crofting life, when the three glens that meet at Achnasheen were lively with

rural business, especially during the war years when the railway was strategically important.

They were pleased to see their home brought back to life, whilst retaining much of its original character. Mountaineers and their clubs do contribute, in a financial way, to rural life in Scotland – something we should be proud of, and be less defensive about our presence on the hill.

It was a huge challenge to get the house fit for purpose, but eased by having members working in the construction businesses: first build your bridge over the river! (That was helped by the extraordinary coincidence of a freeze hard enough to turn the river into an icy passage across which the girders could be skidded.) Then dig your hole for the septic tank faster than the water table refills it; then stop the water supply pipe being ripped from the river bed by winter torrents.

And there's plenty more tales to tell by the fireside. After 16 years of use, we had to meet the challenge of changes in regulations for rented accommodation. It was a blessing in disguise. The hut is now properly congenial, with electric light and purified water, thanks to solar panels. Fire safety was made good from the start; now improved. There is space for more visitors than most huts thanks to an ample kitchen; two bedrooms and toilets; a separate lounge room with communal dining tables, plenty of seats and an open fire.

Paying for all this was thankfully aided by a grant and loan from the SMT, together with increased bookings and fund raising events. A major attraction of the site is the peaceful and traditional atmosphere of the building, by Loch Gowan, with Moruig rising above the moor. Within reasonable distance for the day are 40 Munros, 40 Corbetts and 8 cliffs, including Torridon and Applecross.

Some members have been paying their subs for over thirty years. So, as a contribution to the MCoFS debate about the future of clubs, imagine how things



might be in 2040: Scotland will be dynamically adapting to a radically changing world. Carbon fuel will be issued in exchange for ration cards, so mountaineers will become very canny in their use of travel; sharing transport more and using it for fewer but longer trips. The taste for clean safe rock and solid ice that is now encouraged by the climbing walls will be met on sports crags and waterfalls in the Alps. Meanwhile hill walking in Scotland will be booming as more visitors travel from Europe to Fort William and

Inverness by express railway to enjoy our cool breezes, green scenery and excellent guidebooks. Mountaineering is a contradictory mix of individualism and social collectivism, but these adaptations to a changing world will need more social skill and networking than individualism. Thus our clubs will increase in importance as social assets. We trust that mountaineering clubs in Scotland and elsewhere will flourish as we adapt to these challenges.

www.jacobitesmc.co.uk