

The History of The Mountain Club

The Mountain Club was formed in 1952 by a group of employees from the English Electric Company. The focus of The Mountain Club was mountain walking, hill walking and rock climbing, therefore club members made regular trips to Wales.

The Building of Bryn Hafod (Nick Smyth)

In 1952, R.E. (Larry) Lambe, a Midlands scouter, walked off the Aran Mountains in Mid Wales into a remote and very beautiful valley. Larry was a member of a small mountaineering club in Stafford newly formed in that year, called "The Mountain Club". He was immediately struck by the valley's unspoilt beauty and the sight of a truly magnificent crag, closing off the northern end. "That would be a wonderful place to climb" he thought. "I wonder who owns it?"

In the same year, W.A. Poucher, the well-known photographer, produced his calendar with its usual crop of excellent pictures. The month of July featured a long valley, with a huge crag at the far end. Larry saw this picture and excitedly showed it to his friends, telling them that this was his "magnificent crag". Dyffryn Cywarch (Cywarch Valley) had been "discovered" and would never be quite the same again.

Cywarch means "hemp" but no one knows how many years it is since it has been grown in the valley. The members of The Mountain Club started visiting the valley regularly and in 1954, one of the farmers was persuaded to rent them a tumble-down old cottage, "Ty'n y Twyll" (the house in the hollow). Much renovation work was done and the cottage soon became habitable. The Mountain Club, a small, provincial climbing club had "come of age" with a haven of its own in the hills, like most of the other hundreds of similar clubs in Britain.

The club members were young and enthusiastic and soon started putting up new climbing routes on the crag. They were tolerated by the farmers across whose land they walked, because, apart from anything else, they were able to rescue sheep that had got themselves trapped on narrow ledges and would otherwise have starved to death entirely out of reach of the shepherd. The Red Lion in Dinas Mawddwy, owned in those days by Mr & Mrs Powell, welcomed the thirsty mountaineers on Fridays and Saturdays - but only until 9.30, when the doors were firmly shut. The local policeman, whose 6' plus frame was made bigger by the long spike on his helmet, was known as "Beano" and would come in at 9.25 to make sure there was no drinking after time. The pub was closed on Sundays. .

In 1957, the owner of Ty'n y Twyll wanted his cottage back (now much improved, it has to be said) to house a shepherd. The Mountain Club were hutless and for two years roamed all over North Wales searching for any available or disused building that might be bought or rented, to no avail.

Then a remarkable person appeared. His name was David Adcock and apart from being a good rock climber, he possessed a special kind of energy. Back in the Cywarch Valley, in 1959, he had spotted an old ruin that had, at one time, been the count house of the valley lead mine. Only one and a half walls were standing but in David's mind he already saw it rebuilt as a mountaineering hut.

The fact that it was over half a mile from the nearest road access didn't matter. The fact that it was situated on land over which two of the farmers had grazing rights could be overcome. The very idea that the authorities would not give planning permission could not

be entertained for a moment. The fact that the club had very little money didn't matter. Small obstacles like these failed to deter David Adcock.

Originally it had been part of the Buckley Estate. Predecessors of the two farmers had purchased the land on which their farm houses stood but not the vast tracts of land used for grazing where the ruin stood. They had simply acquired grazing rights. The Buckley Estate had ceased to exist in its original form. The Crown was not interested in ownership of the land. The farmers were encouraged to establish whether they owned the land in question but they were unable to do so and in spite of widespread advertising, no one at all came forward to claim ownership.

The only person outside the valley who could claim an interest was the MP for Torquay, Sir Frederick Bennett, who owned an estate in Aberangell, a small village near Dinas Mawddwy. He had recently purchased the Lordship of the Manor of Mawddwy and as the Lord of the Manor with its manorial and mineral rights in the Cywarch Valley had right of access to the old mines.

Permission to buy the ruin or to rebuild it was sought from the farmers who refused. Drawings were prepared and planning permission was sought and refused. Plans were redrawn and planning permission was again asked for and this time there was an enquiry.

The British Mountaineering Council assisted the Club with legal advice and Sir Frederick Bennett gave the Club permission to use the access along the farmers' sheepwalk which had suddenly reappeared as a mining access track after over 100 years. Eventually, after David Adcock had written, wait for it, over 1400 letters to farmers, solicitors, planners, the British Mountaineering Council, their solicitors, Sir Frederick Bennett, surveyors, map makers and many, many others, working sometimes until 4am in the morning (I know, I shared a room with him in our bachelor flat) and against all the odds, planning permission was granted and early in 1960, the work commenced

In retrospect, one feels very sorry for the nearest farmer. In the face of authority for planning permission, the specific OK for the Club to use the sheep walk as a mining access track by the Lord of the Manor and the implacable ambition of a band of active youth, led by such a determined person, there was not much he seemed able to do.

Transport up to the site from the nearest vehicle access was done on people's backs and in wheelbarrows each with two pulling and one steering. It was incredibly labour intensive. Early in the project, Stafford Council decided to rebuild Stafford Station and 1600 slates in good condition were obtained for a pittance. The transport manager of a local firm was "recruited" and a lorry going west was diverted to pick up the slates and drop them off at the end of the road.

The site had first to be cleared of the debris of old walls and the stones stacked in piles around the site. Then a level area was established, drains put in and the ground floor laid. The carpenter member, one Johnny Downes, was the only person who had actual building experience. He planned the all the work and he was a veritable inventive genius.

Gravel was obtained by washing the heaps of small stones left by the lead miners of the previous century. A "polythene river" was constructed to capture water from the stream and it ran down onto a grid. Gravel, earth and vegetation mix was heaped onto the grid and the high speed water washed everything through it except the gravel which was left nice and clean to be barrowed up the hill to the dump above the mixer.

The internal walls were to be made of concrete blocks. Johnny produced a sketch and a metal frame made out of old youth hostel beds duly appeared, accompanied by two wooden boxes, the internal dimensions of which were identical with the standard 9" x 9" x 18" concrete block. This construction, using a mix of exactly the right moisture content, enabled several hundred blocks to be made on site.

A lot of timber was required. Just by chance, our builder hero Johnny happened to find out that the Vacuum Salt Works in Stafford had decided to demolish a warehouse-like building. He offered to knock it down for nothing if the Club could have the timber. Club members pulled the building down and acquired a fortune in beautiful, 100 year old pitch pine beams. Each roof truss was a 40 foot span of 12" x 6". The timber was sawn up by hand into manageable lengths on the spot then moved to a farm where we could use a tractor-driven saw to cut it into the right lengths for wherever Johnny had planned it to be used - lintels, floor joists, door frames . . . He had it all worked out – in his head!.

At various times the Club ran out of money. One way to raise it was to "rescue" a lot of old wrought iron from the wheel pit of the mine crushing plant. Most of it had been removed by the army during the second world war but enough remained to provide over 10 tons of iron that were transported down to the nearest lorry access and a local contractor took it to the scrap dump who paid 1(old) penny per pound. This raised over £100; a fortune in those far-off days.

About this time, the Club was running out of steam as well as money. The constant, time-consuming barrowing had caused a lot of the initial enthusiasm to wane. David Adcock had long since moved on to pastures new. Then Nick Smyth bought an ex WD Land Rover and trailer (without telling his bank manager!). The barrowing problem disappeared overnight. All the roof timbers, the flooring, the continuously required supply of cement, pipe work, an army barrack room boiler, 30 mattresses, the fireplace, chairs and many other things all went up the track in this go-anywhere machine.

Finally came the official opening ceremony. The Duke of Edinburgh politely declined the invitation, so did the Prime Minister. In the end Sir Jack Longland did the job beautifully. 139 invitations were issued and over 200 people came, including all the farmers in the valley (sadly except one) with their families.

The cottage was named (by an Englishman) "Bryn Hafod" which was meant to mean something like "Haven in the Hills". Johnny Downes, who in effect built the place, was heard to say on one occasion that "The walls would stand for a thousand years after the roof had blown off". It was in fact "Rough but Strong" he added. Someone translated this into dog Latin and so the motto "ASPERUM SED FORTE" came to be cast into the bronze plaque which stands over the door to this day.

Below are a variety of reminiscences, stories and pictures from the club's early days:

Nick Smyth's Reminiscences (1957-59)
Weekend Rations for Visits to Bryn Hafod (c1966)
Plants found in the Cywarch Valley (c1973)
Various Photographs

Nick Smyth's Reminiscences (1957-59)

Numbers weekend –1957 (August?)

Every meet was memorable for some reason, almost always amusing. One such was an attempt on the 3000s when we all ended up at Llyn Ogwen on the Saturday night, soaked to the skin by vile weather and even the bravest gave up. By the time we came out of the pub that night the weather had abated and it was a beautiful, quiet, starry night, where even a whisper carried for miles, let alone a beery conversation, evidently laced with swearwords, between Dick Kendal and me as we got into our sleeping bags.

The next morning I woke to find a blue cupid-covered pyjama bottom sitting next to me and someone stroking my face. "Nick, please take me to church" (I had a company car for the summer work activity.) It was Monica of course. "Cook our breakfast woman!" I said (hoping to put her off). She meekly cooked our breakfast so there was nothing to be done but go to church. On the way into Bethesda, we were reprimanded for our colourful language of the previous evening.

"Why can't you swear by numbers?" she suggested.

So later, two or three car loads of people got to thinking about this while waiting impatiently for the lady to emerge from her worship and all sorts of amusing situations evolved: Two of the lads having epics on the crag – "3569!" floats down to his worried second who gets out his swear book to translate: "Hmm, John must be having epics up there".

Of course there are so few swear words in English. I think we got to 14 that Sunday. On the way home, we reached the Mermaid at Atcham in the pouring rain. Then Laurie Galpin arrived and announced that it was "No 25-ing" it down outside. Hoots of delighted laughter greeted a number for "pissing down" that no one else had thought of.

That wasn't quite the end of what became known as the "numbers weekend". Months later, at the Club dinner, my companion turned her nose up at the Chateaufneuf du Pape I had chosen with an ignorant guess from the wine list. I looked to see if there was anything else I could afford and noticed that said wine was No 25 on the wine list. She totally failed to understand my hysterics.

Langdales Weekend, Late '50s

It was a Tuesday evening at the Elephant & Castle in January, in the late 50s.

"Let's go to Langdale this weekend".

Fred Williams, along with most of the rest of us, could not afford a car, so relied on others to take him out when a) there wasn't a coach meet that weekend or b) it was going somewhere he didn't fancy. My current climbing partner, John Cantrill (Neddie) had an almost new A30 van; obviously a friendship to be cultivated.

That Friday, two pairs of us - Fred Williams and Dick Kendal, Neddie Cantrill and I set off for Langdale, where we camped near the Old Dungeon Gill. The tops were covered with hard frozen January snow. Next morning we were woken bright and early by Fred who announced that we were going snow and ice climbing and that we were going to camp on the tops somewhere.

It was then that we discovered that we had only two ice axes and one 120' full weight rope between four of us. Undeterred, Fred set off up Bow Fell. Walking round the ridge we heard sounds of activity below the cornice and suddenly a dog burst through it with rope attached, shortly followed by Johnny Downes, Trevor Goodwin, Graham Martin and someone else. The dog was hopping around uncomfortably as its feet were cold on the frozen surface and having passed comment on their choice of leader, we went on to end up at dusk on the top of Scafell Pike. The surface of hard frozen ice meant that even the slightest slope needed steps cutting to make progress.

"We'll camp here" announced Fred when we eventually made the top and we obediently dug our tents (old Black's Mountain tent and ancient US Army bivvie) into the hard ice, using ice slabs on the snow flaps to anchor them, as pegs were useless.

It was cold; very cold indeed; the coldest I have ever camped in; at a pure guess, 40 degrees of frost or so in the light wind. Next morning the roof of the tent was a solid sheet of frozen breath and cracked and creaked in the breeze. The view was amazing, looking down on a distant Windscale nuclear station through gently drifting, patchy clouds. I lit the primus and as the roof ice melted and rained down on us, prepared the porridge adding milk with lots of lovely sugar and cream to the mixture. Having cooked it, salivating at the thought of our energy-giving breakfast, we dug our spoons in, waved them around to cool them a bit then took huge mouthfuls – and simultaneously spat them out again. UGH! All we could taste was paraffin!

We quickly discovered that the primus had leaked into the sugar tin and made our wonderful, much anticipated breakfast uneatable...

Then I had an idea. "Fred!" I called. "Do you want some porridge?" The Mountain Tent a few yards away bulged and heaved as Fred leapt out of his sleeping bag and came galloping across the ice, his beard a mass of icicles. He grabbed the billy and climbed back into their tent. I could hear mutterings of anticipation.

"Look what we've got Kendal!"

We sat and waited for the explosion. It was not long in coming. A yell of sheer mortification echoed round the mountain as the billy was ejected from the tent and described a long, graceful arc down the icy slope.

I never did find it.

Barrie's Epic (1958 or 59)

There was a particular meet to Coniston which those of us who were on it will never forget.

The lads were dispersed all over Dow Crag. I was half way up something, climbing with Howard 'Oz' Lawton. Not far away was Barrie Knox who was climbing with Graham Martin, who although slightly built was a miner and had the most powerful grip of anyone I knew; he could grip the sides of a beam and do pull ups or hang from a beam gripping the sides with one hand. You try it!

Barrie had led off and up the first pitch, put on a runner and was traversing horizontally round a nose, which just came off and took Barrie down with it. His yell alerted Graham

who clamped himself onto the rope. Barrie's weight pulled Graham clean off his belay and up the runner, where he hung on grimly, not letting an inch of rope slip through his hands.

Barrie hurtled down, head first towards the rocky scree below. The rope started to stretch as it tightened and it finally pulled him up just as Barrie's head hit the rock below, so that all he suffered was only a shallow cut on his eyebrow. Literally another inch and he would probably have fractured his skull, three more inches and he would have been killed outright. If Graham had let a tiny length of rope slip . . . if . . . the possibilities were endless. It must be one of the narrowest escapes ever.

On the coach on the way back, we always used to sing. No one could follow Barrie that evening singing "As I was out climbing the steep slopes of Cloggy . . ."

Suggested Weekend Rations for Club Visits to Bryn Hafod (c1966)

Submitted by Jim Wiltshire

For 10 People

Thin-Sliced Loaves	6
Butter	2lbs
Sugar	4lbs
Tea	8oz
Instant Coffee	2oz
Eggs	25
Biscuits	2lbs
Oxo	4
Baked Beans	2½lbs
Evaporated Milk	1lb
Potatoes	14lbs
Carrots	3½lbs
Onions	2lbs
Cake	1¼lbs
Bacon	20 rashers
Cheese	1¼lbs
Tinned Fruit	3lbs
Tinned Meat for Sandwiches	2lbs
Fresh Meat	5lbs
Tinned Peas	2lbs
Milk	10 pints
Jam	1lb
Salt	small packet
Matches	2 boxes
Cocoa	small tin
Lard	8oz

Plants found in the Cywarch Valley (c1973)

Compiled by Sally Haddon, submitted by Jim Wiltshire

Plants which withstand grassing

Bed Straw
Bracken
Buckerfern
Foxglove
Malefern
Milkwort
Nettles
Pearlwort
Sheeps Sorrel
Thistles
Thyme
Tormentil

Plants which grow by the stream an in damp gullies

Alpine Scurby Grass**
Butterwort
Hair Moss
Lady Smock
Lesser Meadow Rue**
Saxifrages (Golden*, Mosey*, Starry*)
Sphagnum Moss
Sundew*

Plants which grow under bracken

English Stonecrop
Globe Flower
Gorse
Hand Fren
New Zealand Willowherb**
Parsley Fern (on scree)**
Pennywort (in cracks)
Ramsons
Racomitrium
Roseroot*
Upland Enchanter Nightshade*
Woodsape

High mountain plants

Clubmosses
Lemon Scented Fern*
Mountain Sorrel

Sheep-free ledges etc.

Dandelions
Devilsbit
Hawlesbits
Herb Robert

Honeysuckle
Orchids (Heath Spotted, Dark Early Purple)
Primroses
Rhododendrons
St. John Wort
Wild Strawberry

Lightly grazed

Bilberry
Heather
Yellow Pimpernel

Trees

Ash
Birch
Hawthorn
Hazel
Holly
Ivy
Oak
Rowan
Sycamore

* is the rating of rarity

Various Photographs



The 1954 Climbing Team on the Summit of the Alphubel (13,800 ft) – taken by Geoff Nodin



1956 Cywarch Group, taken from The Memoirs of Alan and Beth Mills (submitted by Nick Smyth). Left to Right: Two unknown women, Fred Williams leaning against the wall, Chris Pennack, who joined English Electric Stafford on the same day as I did but after two years National Service in the RAF, sitting on the ground in front of Tony Vereker, seated in the background, two more unknown women, Sheila Williams leaning forward just in front of me, another unknown women, Don Gilbert and three unknown men.

This photograph was taken outside The Mountain Club's first cottage in the Cywarch Valley, which the Club rented from Peter Williams from 1954 to 1957.

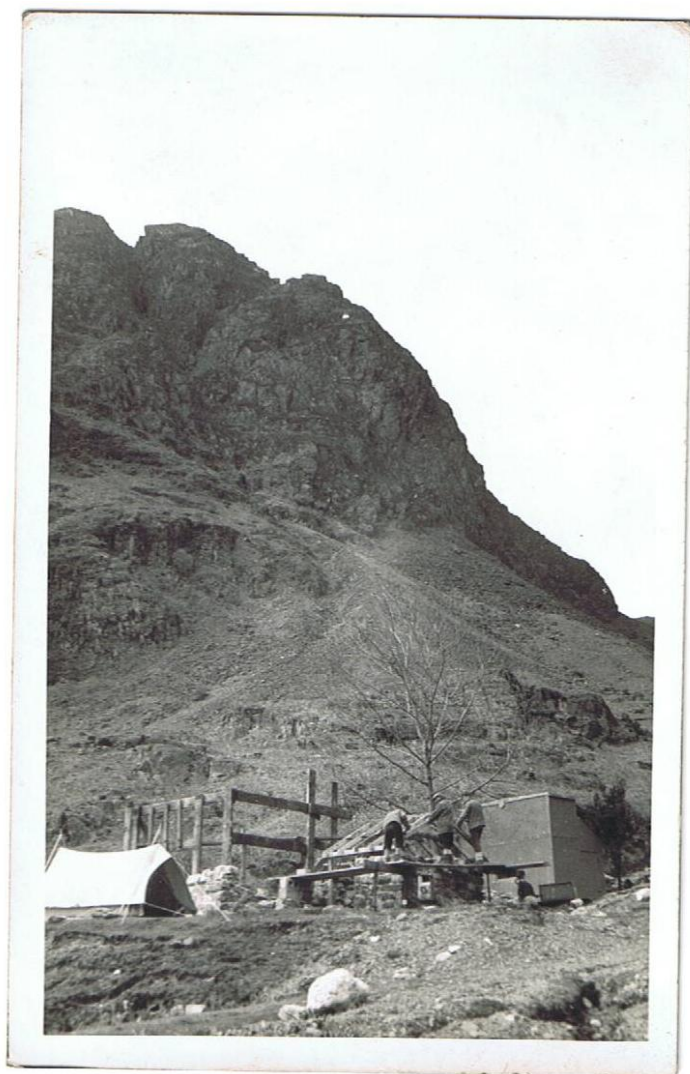


Penzance, 1956 - taken from The Memoirs of Alan and Beth Mills

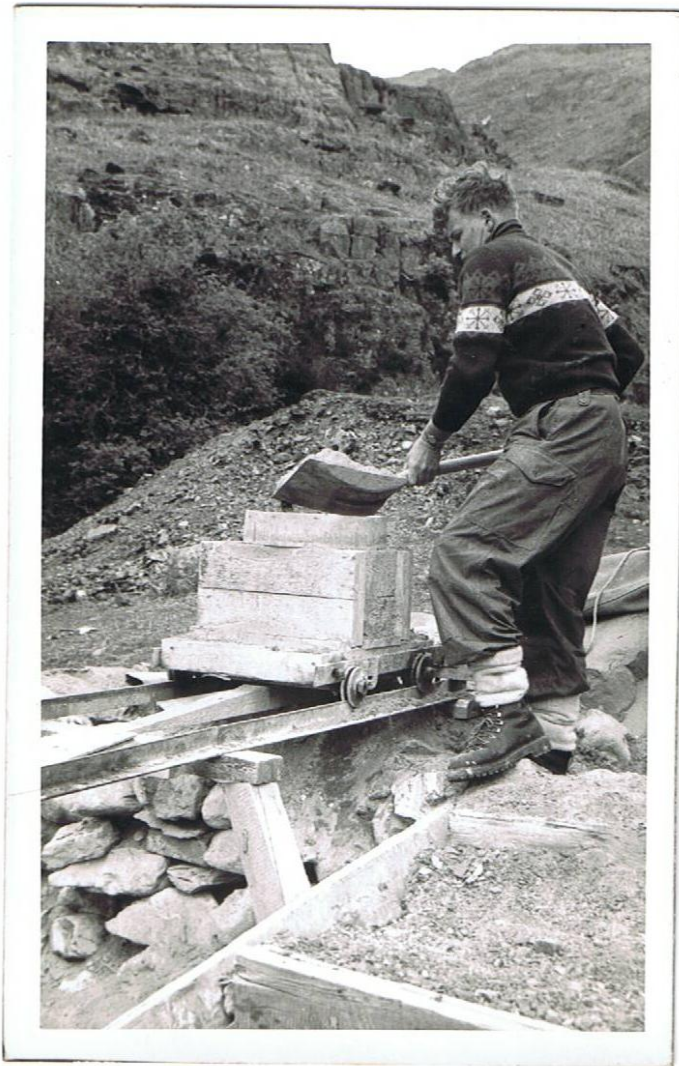
Left to Right: Unknown young woman, Beth, Don Gilbert in the wheelchair, Stu Taylor and a pretty nurse pushing Don from the West Cornwall Hospital into a car to take him back to Stafford. We were camping on the North Coast at Bosigran where the Climbers' Club had a palatial hut. The previous night, returning to the campsite in the dark, Don had put his foot down a rabbit hole and broken his ankle. The wheelchair looks quite Dickensian rather than mid-twentieth century.



The Bryn Hafod Site, 1956 – submitted by Nick Smyth, from the Archives of David Adcock's family



The Loo Roof being put on Bryn Hafod – submitted by Nick Smyth



Loading the Cement Mixer (Building Bryn Hafod) – submitted by Nick Smyth



The Kitchen Wall of Bryn Hafod going up – submitted by Nick Smyth



Building the Sitting Room Wall (Bryn Hafod) – submitted by Nick Smyth



Putting the Finishing Touches on Bryn Hafod – submitted by Nick Smyth



Bryn Hafod: Nearly Finished – submitted by Nick Smyth



The opening of Bryn Hafod in October 1965, Left to Right are: Barrie Knox, Dave Eaton, Unknown, Eric Byne, Margaret Boon (only just visible), Harry Pretty in front, Nick Smyth behind, Dave Steele, Jack Longland, Trevor Thorndyke, Larry Lambe, Johnny Downes, Laurie Galpin and a local farmer whose name escapes me – taken by Staffordshire Newsletter, submitted by Nick Smyth.