

ACROSS WILDEST KILMALLIE

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After four or five days of the M.A.M. Easter Meet in Fort William the party as a whole had reached a definite tiredness peak, if one may quote the I.T.V. Apart from sprained ankles and the like, the comforts of Rhu Mor were such as to induce a feeling of lethargy in otherwise keen mountaineers and there was a marked inclination for parties to disappear surreptitiously in cars to visit the sea and spy on the wild life there. This was all very well at the time, but details of expeditions had to be entered in the Log at the end of the holiday, and the leader of the meet required some enterprising goings on to raise the M.A.M. entry above that of the common herd who stay at Rhu Mor between Easters.

A determined study of maps and S.M.C. guides was therefore undertaken with the objective of locating some inoffensive Munro that nobody in the party had ascended before and which could be duly knocked off. The specification for a suitable peak was somewhat tight as the members present had been fairly thorough in their coverage of the ground on previous occasions. Also a fairly logical day had to be made of the ascent, so as to make it attractive to climbers suspicious of the leader's every suggestion.

Working through the S.M.C. guide to the Western Highlands a number of remote Munros were detected, lying in the area between Glen Pean and Glen Finnan, which seemingly goes under the general title of Kilmallie. That is the name with the biggest print on the map anyhow. The most easterly of these peaks, and thus the nearest to Fort William, is called Gulvain, or possibly more correctly Gaor Bheinn. The guide book was fairly restrained in its enthusiasm for this mountain, such words as "somewhat uninteresting" being used, but it is a Munro of 3,224 feet with a subsidiary top joined by a ridge providing "a very pleasant high level walk."

Gulvain seemed therefore, to be an eminently satisfactory objective. The guide however, mentions that the only practical route is from the south, hence implying that a route in from the north must be impracticable. This made it obvious that our ascent must be made from the north, and with glowing prospects of the name of the M.A.M. being printed in future guides as the pioneers of a great new route, the map was studied in detail.

Our mountain lay approximately half-way between Loch Arkaig, to the north, and Loch Eil, to the south, and the obvious plan therefore was to traverse from one to the other, collecting our Munro en route. The Director General of the Ordnance Survey

appeared to favour this plan too as the long reaches of Glen Mallie run in from Loch Arkaig, and reaching a fairly low watershed under Gulvain one can then descend Gleann Fionnlighe to the head of Loch Eil. A route of this nature of course needs some traffic arrangements and as certain members of the meet were doggedly set upon viewing some herons that day, their services were obtained to deposit the party at the foot of Loch Arkaig in the morning and to collect them at the head of Loch Eil in the evening.

One's recollections are dimmed by time of course, but I have no clear memory of any great tension in the party while at breakfast before the start. Each member stuffed himself cheerfully with the good fare as if unaware of what lay between that and the next proper meal. Good stolid Midland Mountaineers were these, content to keep their deep thoughts to themselves and not to dramatise their imminent departure for a route deemed impractical even by the hardy Scots.

Fully equipped with map, compass and Rhu Mor sandwiches the party duly left, to be transported to the foot of Loch Arkaig, using a stately Rover for the purpose to impress the natives. Some charming examples of the latter were observed being carried in the back of a Land Rover but our driver unsportingly passed before friendly relations could be established. Thus in a final triumphant crescendo of sound as we bowled over the loose wooden planks of the bridge over the River Arkaig, we came to the expected point where the owner of our vehicle refused to allow it to be taken further.

Bidding a regretful farewell to our last link with civilisation we turned our faces to the pleasant track leading off amongst the trees by the loch side. A pile of skeletons beside our way shortly brought home to us the fact that we were now very definitely on our own in unknown country and that some 19 miles of rough going lay between us and where we hoped to be collected in the evening. A sober thought.

The track took us easily along by the loch beyond whose wide-rippled waters rose snow-tipped peaks gleaming in the occasional shaft of sunshine that penetrated the high grey cloud base. The weather seemed to be settled dry for us, despite the cloud, and we had hopes of it clearing right up. The mouth of Glen Mallie opens out on to the south shore of Loch Arkaig at Inver Mallie some $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles along from where we had started, and reaching this point we crossed the River Mallie by a bridge and headed up the glen on a good track.

Glen Mallie is an open bleak valley running some 8 miles into

the hills. At some time in the past this must have been extensively afforested, but now there are few of the fine old pines remaining, the majority standing as gaunt white skeletons. These give the place an odd air of desolation which is not relieved by any outstanding form of the enclosing ridges. These latter only gain in height slowly as one penetrates upwards, and we had seemed to be walking for a very long time before we felt that we had really entered the glen. By contrast, the River Mallie comes down through rocky gorges on our left and is as fine as only a Highland burn can be.

Way ahead of us already we could make out a grey mass lifting itself smoothly into the mists and this could only be Gulvain itself. It was, nevertheless, a few hours away from us as yet, and we had soon settled to a steady and unrelieved plod. The track underfoot was luckily a good one which could easily be covered by a Land Rover, so we made a reasonable pace. After some miles the track tended away from the river, leading us over the easy lower slopes of the glen side and opening the view out ahead to where plumes of smoke from burning heather showed that natives had been at work.

The first stage of our journey to Gulvain was completed on our reaching the derelict Glenmallie Lodge. After a quick survey of its possibilities as a bivouac we pushed on a little further till we stopped at an attractive pool in the river and set to our provisions. The prospect was pleasing, we were very ready for a breather, the victuals were good, and as a shaft of sunshine symbolically lit up the uninspiring hump of Am Mam back down the valley, our morale was high.

Nevertheless having devoured our lunch, thoughtfully retaining a piece for emergencies later on, we foolishly consulted the map and realised that we still had a long way to go. Rousing ourselves, we continued up the glen and before very long passed beyond the last traces of the track and were left to take our own line of advance. We were by this time getting to within striking distance of our mountain and shortly commenced a rising traverse up to the 1,758-foot saddle below its East Ridge. This gave us an easy enough gain in height despite a few peat hags higher up.

From this broad peaty saddle our view of Gulvain rising before us was carefully masked by mist although the East Ridge which we intended to ascend and the impressive depths of Coire Screamhach to its right were reasonably attractive. Away to the north under the cloud one could see a glimpse of the head of Loch Arkaig over the ridge rejoicing in the name of Monadh Ceann Lochairceig. Our ridge was approached after a short pause to peer at the map and hope that we were somewhere near where we thought we ought to be, and we soon started mounting its lower slopes.

A very enjoyable, and also easily angled, walk took us then up the ridge which became a little rocky in places. We were caught up in the mist fairly quickly, but this probably added to our impressions of the locality. Surprisingly easily and rapidly we gained height and duly reached the main summit ridge from whence a short stroll and a plod through a deep snowdrift took us to our summit. A triumphant cry of "Munro" echoed through the mists, startling the occasional feeding sheep, and the party settled for a short rest by the cairn.

The conditions, though dry, did not really encourage a lengthy laze and it was hoped to have time for a noggin before returning to Rhu Mor. We therefore decided to leave, dropping down by a fairly narrow ridge and enjoying a good walk to the South West Top with some excursions on to rather soft snow. In clear weather this must be quite a fine ridge and even in the mist was quite pleasing.

Beyond we descended a broad, rough slope to the south and witnessed some very impressive effects caused by up draughts on emerging from the cloud. To our surprise we were placed exactly where we hoped to be with Gleann Fionnlighe stretching away before us. The burns emerging from the head of Gleann Fionnlighe and from Choire Reidh converged and joined at the foot of our ridge, a fairly common occurrence in the Highlands, and one that tends to involve some wading or hair raising leaps from brickend to boulder. The guide book in its helpful way stated that "there may be a bridge" and "the route was clearly visible forty years ago," but in fact this bridge was shortly seen to be still in existence, luckily, and also the track running to it.

The descent was quite straightforward on a uniform slope relieved only by some cunning traps, presumably erected by Ancient Celts to capture climbers descending at high speed. These took the form of dips faced on the outside by a high dyke running horizontally around the slope. Luckily, due to our infirmities, we were proceeding at a gentlemanly pace and negotiated these without mishap. At speed however, one would presumably be either compressed into the ground by the "g" force in the dip, or, if surviving that, shot high into the air by the dyke.

Down in the glen we shortly reached the bridge over the Allt a'Choire Reidh and enjoyed a pause sitting on it with our legs swinging over the cool, clear waters of the burn. We had to get on with it, however, if we were to have time for our noggin and so set to it down the glen on a good track. This gave fine easy going through scattered trees by the river with pleasing slopes on either side, and the view astern should have been quite impressive had the cloud not hidden the summits.

We covered the ground at a good speed and were quite surprised to reach the modern-looking farm of Wauchan so quickly. Beyond, after the track had crossed the river, we had a straightforward walk on down the glen to the main road, although a bit of a drizzle annoyingly set in at the finish. Our organisation was slightly out of gear at this time and no car awaited us, which could have been a bit serious as Fort William is some 13 miles distant. To begin with, we sat under the bridge and, amidst screams of agony, dunked our steaming feet in the icy waters of the river.

Encouraged by the success of these operations we soon got on to the road again and headed east along it, not with any intention of walking to Fort William but of getting to a telephone at Kinlocheil and rousing a rescue party. Luckily this was rendered unnecessary as our chauffeur turned up before we had gone far—held up allegedly by some liner negotiating the Caledonian Canal. Our recriminations were however, stilled by his offering of beer at a suitable hostelry and afterwards we regained Rhu Mor, not very late for dinner.

So ended a very fine day which most certainly must in future be included by the M.A.M. in their repertoire at Fort William. The participants in fact will be only too pleased to provide any information to parties thinking of doing this route, but will themselves in future stick to watching herons. Later that evening Munro's Tables were produced and with due ceremony a further peak and top were ticked off and the log now carries a report that it is practicable to ascend Gulvain from the north.

