

A VISIT TO SKYE: WHIT. 1963

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"Everyone talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it", said Mark Twain. This comment may well have been aimed at the notorious weather of Skye and the Cuillins. The weather there is positively frequent, but I resolved that it would not dampen my ardour.

I rented a cottage and bothy, strategically near the Sligachan Inn, for the Whit. week. (For the uninitiated, a bothy is what the farmhand and his family, and sometimes his traditional livestock, used to live in). I inveigled various innocent characters to join me ostensibly to share the delights of gabbro and the fleshpot (very singular) of Portree, but in practice to spread the burden of cooking, rent and portorage, in this context the carrying of bottles of porter from Sligachan, and the cost of an extravagant surplus of loaves brought in anticipation of long wet periods of enforced indoor gourmandising to while away the time between coffee breaks.

It was a mixed party, comprising climbers and non-climbers. Accommodated in the cottage were Janet and I, Peter and Kath, and Liz. Harold and Phil were in the bothy and in the absence of any complaints—from the traditional livestock—I gathered that they all settled down together quite amicably. Despite Dick's incantations at Glan Dena witnessed a fortnight before, the week's weather started cloudlessly and continued predominantly excellent throughout.

Consequently, on the first day the climbing party proceeded up the Pinnacle Ridge to Sgurr nan Gillean and a twosome continued past the gendarme on the west ridge to Bealach nan Lice and climbed Naismith's Route up the Bhasteir Tooth and on to Am Bhasteir. The rest had meanwhile been beaten back by the heat. After all, the top of Gillean at 3,167 feet is indisputably nearer the sun than the bar in Sligachan Inn nestling on the banks of the river near sea level, which is where all the expeditions start from in Skye when accommodated under a roof.

On the Monday, a group descended upon Glenbrittle and dispersed itself in the queue on the Cioch Direct before following the ridge over Sgurr Sgumain and the mauvais-pas to Sgurr Alasdair, the highest summit in the Black Cuillins at 3,251 feet. We then galloped down the Great Stone Shoot and strode past the lochan out of Coire Lagan, along the paths which skirt Sron Dearg and Lochan Fhìrghaillach, and down to the car across the unusually dusty moorland. The Great Stone Shoot's name becomes every more accurate, as the smaller stones are run off leaving great stones on the

surface ready for the unwary ankle, and consequently much nerve and sinew is called upon to run down its length in less than 9 minutes these days, whereas it could be done equally readily in 6 minutes eleven years before—or is the writer eleven years slower than he was?

On the following day, a posse of two cars followed up a previous skirmish to Elgol. The intention was for the faster car to establish a parking lot at the roadside near Loch Slapin whence to ascend Sgurr nan Each, Clach Glas and Blaven and for the second car load to join it. However, while Car No. 1 lay unintentionally concealed in Broadford, Car No. 2 sped past and there followed a cat-and-mouse game along the road wending around the Red Hills until the cars met almost head-on near the cul-de-sac at Elgol to the accompaniment of much mirth and astonishment. Steps were retraced and the Blaven Ridge was duly ascended.

On the Wednesday, an alpine start was made and a foursome left the roadside at Glenbrittle at 0540 hours and started the long plod across the moorland and the slow tread up the screes of Garsbheinn. A cold wet mist blew across the summit with gale force, and after a brief rest, the Main Ridge was started at 9 a.m. By the time we reached Sgurr nan Eag, two of the party found that their breakfast eggs lay heavily within them, and the drizzle which then prevailed added further to the greasiness of the rocks there. With a wave, they took their leave and escaped down Coire a'Ghrunnda back to the car. The remaining two continued through the customary swirling cloud and experienced the occasional shower—there were for instance a few walkers on Sgurr Dearg, and it was before this audience that the last man down the short side of the Inaccessible Pinnacle ignominiously roped off in the wet.

It was shortly after this that the clouds cleared and the array of peaks and the distant views unfolded themselves, drawing the eyes and limbs ever onward along the ridge to a successful conclusion. A particularly pleasant surprise was relished at the summit of Gillean where the two relaxed at 9 p.m. in the evening glow—two tins of sardines which had been left, amongst other morsels for an earlier successful R.A.F. team's attempt on the Ridge. Another pleasant surprise awaited us in the sub-arctic twilight an hour or more later—a bottle of ale each on our arrival in the cottage.

Not content with traversing the Blaven Ridge on Tuesday and the Main Ridge on Wednesday, Harold strolled up Harta Corrie on to Druim nan Ramh on Thursday while the rest of us lazed about in Portree and gazed in awe at the Old Man of Storr.

On Friday, a trio tackled Slingsby's Route on the Third Pinnacle, Phil nipped up a couple of peaks from Glenbrittle, and two others

wandered along Loch Brittle in search of the seal colony. Following upon some "porterage", the end of a heartily enjoyed week was celebrated that night and all traces were dutifully returned to Sligachan the next morning. The party departed on Saturday morning with many a backward glance to the skyline, which in such fine weather had become so familiar . . . and so back to the grind until the same time next year.

