

## The Crossing of the Cairngorms from Deeside to Strathspey via the Lairig Ghru.

Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2009

The past few days had seen heavy rain and during at least the two previous nights, fresh snow had been falling above 3000ft. However, the morning began fine and with the snow covered tops of the Cairngorms clearly visible we set out from Aviemore at about 7:30am. Due to only 3 of us doing the walk we decided to take my car around to Braemar and collect it in the morning rather than share a taxi, so I collected Steve and Gill, clad rather worryingly in trainers and shorts, from their B&B and after a tour of the freight yard at Aviemore Railway Station courtesy of our satnav, set off. We drove around the eastern foothills of the Cairngorms via Grantown-on-Spey and Tomintoul and passing the Lecht ski centre we descended first into Strathdon and then Balmoral and Royal Deeside.

It was in pleasant sunshine then that we started off from the bustling NTS car park at the Linn of Dee just after 9am, with the first part of our route taking us through pleasant woodland. After crossing Lui Water, we were then afforded easy walking on the track up to Derry Lodge which although boarded up and derelict looked in good repair. Just beyond here the path split and branched off north up Glen Derry to the Fords of Avon, via the other great pass of the Cairngorms the Lairig an Loigh. Leaving this for another day we took the western branch and shortly arrived at the fording point of Luibeg Burn. Favouring dry feet, at least for the time being, a short detour upstream was required to the Cairngorm Club footbridge which kindly reminded us we had 16½ miles to go. This also signified the end of the easy riverside walking and the donning of cagoules as we began to climb and turned in towards the weather.

Through some fairly hefty showers we climbed gently west over the shoulder of Cairn a Mhaim as the rain blackened crags of The Devil's Point (Bod nam Diabh) came into view. The story goes that when Queen Victoria enquired as to the English translation of this distinctive mountain, her Ghillie John Brown, gave the above answer to spare her blushes rather than the actual translation; 'Penis of the Demon'. Whatever it is called it is an impressive sight yet is one of the smaller tops in the area and easily ascended from the north. We were soon descending and bearing north, heading the right direction once again and several miles in the distance we could see the narrowing of the glen into the Lairig proper, which through the showers which swept across from the west, looked a long way away. Our route continued northwards, passing by the tiny but popular Corrou Bothy, dwarfed by the crags of The Devil's Point and accessed from our side of the glen by a fairly rickety looking metal bridge.



*The Devils Point*

After another hour or so we started to climb gradually and eventually reached a point at which we decided we were roughly half distance; 10 miles from the Linn of Dee and 10 miles from the Aviemore road. Although not yet at the summit of the pass we felt very insignificant. 4 of Britain's 5 highest peaks surrounded us; Ben Macdui(2), Braeriach(3), Cairn Toul(4) and Sgurr an Lochain Uaine(5). Whilst the size of Ben Macdui could not be fully appreciated due to our proximity to it, the other three summits rose into the clouds across the glen. The huge summit cliffs of Braeriach and massive corrie of An Garbh Coire were still plastered in snow; winter is a long season in these parts and it hadn't even begun to think about relinquishing its grip.



*Braeriach*

Gales could be heard up high on the plateau as we climbed alongside Alt na Lairig towards the Pools of Dee and the upper reaches of the pass. The path was rough and got rougher as it wound its way up the side of, and occasionally through, the burn. It crossed hollows of wet snow as heather gave way to bare rock and not far above us there were considerable snow fields even though we were well below 3000ft. This was now the roughest part of the walk and in places the path disappeared altogether as it crossed wet, lichen covered boulders which we just about managed to cross with our dignity intact.

After stopping near the Pools of Dee for a quick lunch and a wee dram (well, when in Rome) we headed across the continuing boulder fields, and through the narrowest part of the pass, to the summit of the Lairig at 2733ft. A brief stop here and the long descent to Aviemore began, still looking some way off across the pine forest of Rothiemurcus. Sron na Lairig and Lurchers Crag soon signified the end of the steep restricting sides of the pass and crossing Allt Druidh we passed a party brewing up at the site of the old Sinclair Memorial Hut, removed in 1991 due to over-use. The whole atmosphere now changed, after the dark, enclosed remoteness of Glen Dee and the barren and claustrophobic Lairig, the sky brightened and these northern slopes felt warm and welcoming. We and were soon upon Rothiemurcus and as the paths improved our paced quickened and we were soon striding out through woodland once again.

It felt like a long time since we had left the car but after only 7 hours we arrived in Coylumbridge, leaving only a foot sore mile and a half back to Aviemore. We finally got back to the Old Bridge in just in time to gate crash a wedding party, the dress sense of which could only be described as contemporary. I must admit to being a little disappointed with the Bridge, it was once a cosy little pub tucked away from the town centre, but changes in the restaurant, no doubt for the skiing crowd coupled with London prices for drinks have lost it much of it's character.

After a quick change we hit the bright lights of Aviemore. Firstly the excellent Cairngorm Hotel with 2 real ales from the Cairngorm brewery just up the road, well priced quality food and friendly staff. We then walked up the road to the rather bizarre Winking Owl which we had seen earlier in the morning. Resembling an alpine style lodge with lots of mountaineering and skiing photos it initially seemed a nice quiet place to sample their whisky collection. One hour later it was packed to the rafters with hen and stag parties and the remnants of those who had been out since the Old Firm derby earlier in the day, all waiting for the nightclub to open downstairs.

Taking note of this for future reference we turned in for the night, Gill and Steve returning to their B&B and me to my tent where I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I thought it had been a tough walk, especially the rough underfoot conditions which were worse than I had expected, but it was extremely satisfying to look at the map the next day and follow our route which I reckoned was eventually about 21 miles.

The one downside was that more people didn't venture north to experience this classic route and the dramatic scenery, but it may be something we would look to do again if there was enough interest as I think we thoroughly enjoyed it.

Finally I would like to thank Steve and Gill for their excellent company; it would have been a lonely weekend without them.

Antony Lord



*The Lairig Ghru*