

## The Mountain That Turned My Head

Many would view climbing a mountain an activity as extremely arduous and have little understanding why anyone would want to engage in such activity.

Admittedly, it requires a great deal of effort. On a smaller scale? There is a question. Why do many visitors to Dartmoor park-up and then scramble to the top of a nearby tor. There seems to be a natural instinct for children to climb something.

When a child, I had a desire to explore places. It then turned 3-dimensional. The hills became mountains. The summit was a point of achievement but also part of the experience of exploration; the views becoming expansive and dramatic on gaining elevation. The environment had all the ingredients of a wilderness; an antidote to regulated urbanism with all its noise.

The pull of the mountains, or even the gently undulating wilderness terrain as on Dartmoor, is still strong despite my advancing years; despite my weak and sensitive knees and breathing more heavily, thus enforcing a slower, sustainable pace.

Where I used to plan a multi Munro bagging day during my visits to the Highlands in years past without contemplating the possibility of failure, now I have to consider my limits. Attaining the summit of a mountain of a 3,000-foot stature cannot be taken for granted.

As our visit to our nephew, Paul, and his wife, Linda, in Scotland was approaching, I considered what options there were for exploring the Highlands, bearing in mind my ageing frame. Upon reading a very reflective book about the Cairngorm mountains, 'The Living Mountain' by Nan Shepherd, I was inspired. I forged a plan to follow a route up the Fiacail ridge onto the plateau and, perhaps, push on to the summit of Ben Macdui. Starting from the ski centre car park at an elevation of 2,000 feet, I considered the expedition doable. Paul took a liking to the route as well.

The forecast for the day after we arrived at Paul and Linda's, in terms of sun and clear visibility, was excellent. However, there was a caveat. Wind! 35mph gusting to 50mph with a very low wind-chill temperature. Because of the forecast of unrelenting strong winds, perhaps gale force for the higher elevations, we put the expedition on hold.

It was while we were travelling en route to Fort William on the A82 that I caught a glimpse of Ben Lui, a twin of pointed summits with a connecting ridge. It was arrayed with snow cornices, with snow in the gulleys and upper corries. It looked every bit like an alpine mountain.

Its beauty of form has been commented on. Walkhighlands states that, 'Ben Lui is regarded as one of the grandest and most elegant mountains in the Southern Highlands' and has also been labelled as 'The Queen of the Scottish Mountains'. Although the glimpse was brief, I was beguiled. She turned my head. The Cairngorm plan was abandoned. I had a better offer. Paul had climbed Ben Lui in winter and produced some stunning summit images. The route he used, however, from the car park by the A85 to the north west, doesn't display the Queen's best side. It is direct, but oh dear...It is a

grind up a featureless slope (he said). Featureless, that is apart from being very boggy; a trackless terrain, *and*, in part, through a forestry plantation that was wet underfoot; never a pleasant attractive experience.

The topography of the mountain is complex. Simply put, it has five ridges containing four corries or cirques. The most noticeable feature is a horse shoe feature facing north east. It consists of two buttresses girdling a cirque thus forming an amphitheatre. In the headwall, are gullies that are snow-filled up until the spring; an invitation for extreme skiers during a 'good' winter. The entrance is via a steep 'staircase' constructed in rock, purpose being to prevent unsightly erosion by thousands of pairs of boots. Squeezed through the 'entrance' is a cascading stream of clear melt water, 'Allt Coire Ghaothaich'. (Pronounced, 'Ault Kori Kyoo-eech' NB Ky as in qu eue, oo as in French u, ch as in loch.) This is, actually, the infant River Tay! The longest and largest river in Scotland. This is a good place to pause and let the sound gently relax the mind.

Paul put it to me that there are two options to consider as what might be the preferred route. The shorter of the two was broadly described above. Ugh! The other commences from a car park by the A82 near Tyndrum and follows a track through Glen Cononish. A major advantage of this route is that one is approaching the mountain that shows its better side. However, there is 4.4 miles of walking just to get to the foot of the mountain. Nonetheless, idyllically, this was the preferred route. For some one not contemplating an ascent to the summit, it is still a worthwhile excursion to view the mountain. Take the camera.

The forecast for Saturday, 23rd April was wall to wall sunshine with excellent air quality, but still with strong winds at elevation. It was decided to go for it anyway. We would have to deal with any strong winds; as long we can keep our feet on the ground.

Linda Smith, the major part of the expedition catering support team, provided the necessaries. We set off from the car park at 0820 hrs. I had opted to wear trainers for the long track approach with the leather boots in the rucksack. My reasoning was why use heavy cast iron pistons instead of light weight aluminium pistons for efficient use of energy. We agreed to take our ice axes. Patches of snow may well be avoidable, but just in case...Paul also took with him his 'walking crampons'.

The actual mountain is not visible initially. She appreciates some effort on our part to get a view of her better side.

Conversation was spasmodic. My thoughts were mostly dwelling on what we may encounter. The route description we had thus far was a bit vague or general. According to the author of the guide book, the long route had a more attractive approach to Ben Lui but was marred, evidently. The author asserted that a gold mine en route had spoiled the beauty of the glen very much. I questioned this as the mine itself was in a different glen and not visible. Paul suggested the author may well remember the glen before the track was constructed and that *it* was the blight on the landscape.

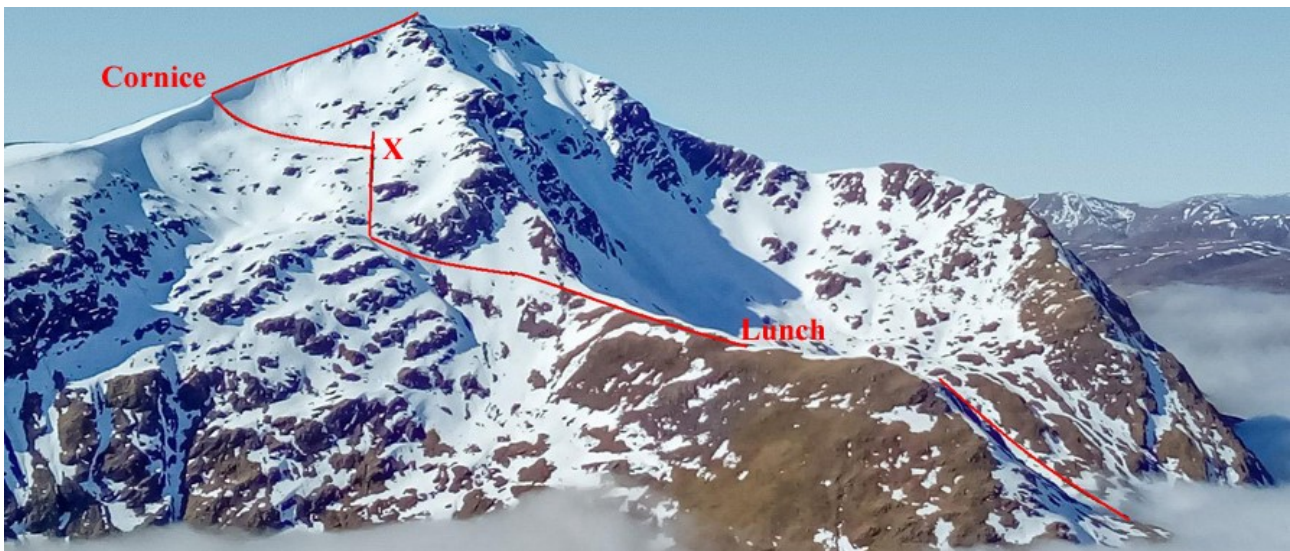
Anyway, the guide book only provides a detailed description for the other route. This may well suit a Monro bagger where consideration for aesthetics has lower priority.



Gradually, an object that was easy on the eye emerged and began to grow in the camera viewfinder. From this perspective, the surviving snow-filled hollows and cornices contributed its alpine appearance. It could well be a 3,707 *metre* peak in the Austrian Alps during the late summer rather than a 3,707 *foot* peak in the Scottish highlands in spring. (I will use imperial units, here. The foot of 12 inches seems to lengthen during my advancing years. The correlation between units of time and units of distance, both vertical as well as horizontal, need to be adjusted. The foot is long enough. Numerically, the metre diminishes.) At the end of the track, the ascent commences in earnest. Gratifying to see the constructed path, particularly when it was getting very steep. To us this indicated a well used route, confident at this stage, that the path to the top would be straightforward. After a brief stop by the infant River Tay, at an inflexion point in the gradient from concave to convex, we entered the amphitheatre. But then the Roman road ceased. Like a pair of teenagers who believe they are entitled, we stood there. Where were we meant to go now? Whoever were responsible for the constructed path must have decided, ‘Well here you are. The rest is up to you!’

Our gaze scanned the sides of the amphitheatre looking for any sign of a path; evidence that someone had climbed out of here before. This provided an opportunity to take in the detail of this impressive landscape of steep cliffs, buttresses and gullies leading to an out-of-sight summit, some

where up there. To the left, the nearest slope to us, was a possible safe way up on to a ridge that led to the left-hand main buttress. It was steep and tussocky. It was more comfortable to follow a rising traversing line. On attaining the ridge and contemplating the steep rising buttress from this ridge, I felt that it essential to take a break and have some lunch. Before embarking on this venture I felt I had considered that I had just enough energy to reach the summit on a straightforward route. I hadn't anticipated spending energy on route finding. Uncertainty can have a negative psychological affect that might drain what precious energy I had left.



Ben Lui in winter conditions

**Notes on the image (not mine) showing our route.**

**The only snow we encountered was in the hollow or shallow cirque below the corniced ridge. 'X' is the spot where we abandoned an attempt to climb directly to the summit.**

While consuming our lunch, a 3-man party caught up. They rode their bikes along the 4.4 mile long track to the foot of the mountain. We engaged. The leader of this trio, then, was reassuring another member of the party who may have found the prospect of the above mentioned buttress intimidating. 'Dunna worry. Just folla the wee narra path.' So off they went; but not onto the craggy buttress. They followed a not-noticed-before path that traversed its side. That was reassuring. Following the same path, led us into a shallow cirque, shaped like a sloping saucer, consisting of a snow field with rocky islands.

As well as the steep buttress on the right, the top lip of the snow field was bordered by a cornice, forming a barrier. Again, the path disappeared, this time into a patch of snow that was devoid of foot prints indicating that the other party had sought an alternative route. We thought we would give the buttress a go. After island hopping crossing narrow patches snow, I attempted the climb. After a



few moves, I realised that the terrain held a lot of moss with very steep rocky outcrops. So steep I had to use the pick of my ice axe to get a purchase in the moss. I reversed my steps back to safety. A tinge of anxiety and uncertainty started to sap my energy levels.

We took stock. There were two options. (1) Walk across to the other side of the cirque, across the snow field, to search for easy ground and then double back along the south ridge to the summit. (2) While scanning the length of the cornice, noticing there were large overhangs, we also noticed a possible safe route at one point onto the south ridge through the cornice. The snow wasn't too soft, allowing easy walking. Actually, it was a pleasure to exercise snow craft, again. It was seven years since I climbed up a snow gully on Blaven, Isle of Skye. Kick stepping and using the axe for security, breaking through the cornice, we landed on secure terrafirma, just leaving a 500-foot height-gain walk up to the summit.



### Snow field and cornice

Predictably, on such a clear day with excellent visibility, views from the summit were panoramic. There is much to take in from nearby corries and glens to the surrounding mountains as far as the eye can see. Ben Nevis was one of the nearer ones at 30 miles distant. Was it possible to see Ben More on the Isle of Mull 45 miles away? The Ben Cruachan range, with its many pointed peaks and



connecting ridges vies for attention to compete with Ben Lui. It is just 13 miles away across the Strath of Orchy. Then it struck us. Where is that ferocious wind that was in the forecast? The challenge for the photographer with summit shots is the lack of foreground objects to complete the frame.



View from main summit. Ben Nevis in background

Having two summits, foreground is provided. The connecting ridge is 60 yards long. The second summit provides a foreground for viewing Ben Nevis. From the second summit the connecting ridge leads the eye to the higher top.



### The main summit

As with many mountains at higher latitudes, gravity has been the sculptor and ice has been the carving tool with a curved blade. One could fashion a model. Start with a shallow, regular, bell-shaped lump of clay and set to work with a curved blade to carve out the ridges and corries. A work of art would then be produced.

While crossing the connecting ridge, I glanced down the main gully. Where at the base it was 30 degrees from the horizontal, here it was more like 30 degrees from the vertical! How can one contemplate skiing down from here? Even climbing with an ice axe would be just too steep to be comfortable for me. When I had more bottle as a 'youngster', I don't think I would...

What next? Oh, the descent.

We didn't fancy descending the other buttress. It looked rather intimidating and unknown not having climbed it. There was an issue with Paul's eye sight. One eye has had a cataract removed. He is now waiting to have the other eye seen to. Consequently, for now, he has only one eye that facilitates useful vision. This impairs his ability to judge distance; a disadvantage descending over uneven ground. He uses a walking pole to probe before committing himself to the next step. Today, the old man with him would of use to make the next step downhill prior to a commitment by Paul. By initially walking downhill in the direction of the 'route de terrible', we reconnoitred by gazing down the immense slope to our right to a glen that would lead us to the approach track, about 2,000 feet below.

Today, not consulting the map proved to be an advantage. This is heresy! The map would indicate rows of cliffs potentially barring our way down to the glen. That might put me off. From aloft, conscious that there may be such obstacles, I couldn't detect anything that might present a problem during my gaze down the long grassy slope. The soft, turfy ground was easy on my tiring knees. Eventually, we encountered an almost invisible line that indicated an approach to a top of a cliff. Fortunately, a gap was found. This was the same outcome with the second cliff. However, the third cliff became a cause for concern. After observing a waterfall plunging some 50 feet over this one, a feeling of dread seeped into my being. Have we descended into a trap? Will we have to climb back up to whatever to find another way down? We reconnoitred along the cliff top and we found a sloping ledge down, where the base of cliff number two met the top of cliff number three. Good, the way was, then, clear to continue our descent to regain the approach track.

Had we pioneered a new route? Had anybody used that way down before,? Probably had.

It felt like **we** had, though.

I was very tired on my return to the car, but immensely pleased.

Looking back at the receding mountain I contemplated, 'The way I feel now, I cannot believe that I've been up there' 'But you have' confirmed my companion.

Statistics:

Journey time from car park and return, including rest stops and time route finding. 10 hours.

Total distance, measured meticulously as possible. 13 to 14 miles.

Elevation of car park. 600 feet.

Height gain to summit 3,100 feet.