

THE FORTNIGHTLY FAFF

The Periodical Journal of the Mercian Mountaineering Club

Feb 2014

UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

PHOTO SPECIAL OF MERCIANS
CAVING IN THE YORKSHIRE DALES

Climbing in the dark on
NEW YEAR'S EVE

IMPROV-MEET

Sometimes the best
meets aren't planned

Fiona Boyce on
Snow Week

Langdale

First snowball fight
of the year

Matt Kettle's
CAPEL CURIG MEET



A word from the editor

Welcome good people, to this, the first edition of the Fortnightly Faff. Firstly, I do hope you like my photo. Having trawled through a selection of outdoor magazines it seems that a black and white enigmatic snapshot of the editor is de rigeur. This seemed to fit the bill perfectly. To use a word from the youth of today, it's a selfie I took of myself last year on Tryfan's north ridge.

Anyway, I digress. This publication is named in honour of all of us who at some point have been found guilty having a good old fashioned faff. This might be when you lace your boots at a glacial pace whilst swilling your third of cup of morning tea; or at the bottom of the crag when you untangle your ropes with the aplomb of a child. We've all done it, and we've all been on the receiving end of it! Like it or not it's a part of mountaineering. And whilst we're talking about the name of this journal, let's clear up a misconception about how regularly it will be published. We tend to faff at some point on most meets, and we tend to have a meet once a fortnight, so that is where the name comes from - "The Fortnightly Faff". In case you are wondering, it will be published quarterly. That's not to say that all we do is faff, far from it. As you will see in these pages we Mercians are an active bunch, with a great meets calendar and a diverse appetite for the outdoors.

Please don't forget that this is your journal, so it needs your input. You needn't be the next David Bailey or William Shakespeare, just take some photos of what you get up to or write a few words and email them to me at promosec@mercianmc.org.uk.


I hope you enjoy reading the "Faff", and I hope that future generation of Mercians take pleasure in looking back at the deeds of their predecessors.

Stew.

LONG CHURN CAVE

THE CLASSIC GRADE 1 TICK FOR EVERY
UNDERGROUND ENTHUSIAST

PHOTOS BY STEWART MOODY
AND SIMON HODGSON



HOW DO YOU GET YOUR FUN? DOES THE PROSPECT OF SPENDING A COUPLE OF HOURS CRAWLING ON HANDS AND KNEES THROUGH FREEZING COLD WATER SOUND ENTICING? OR HOW ABOUT SQUEEZING INTO A GAP SO TIGHT YOU HAVE TO TURN YOUR HEAD SIDWAYS? HOW ABOUT BATTLING AGAINST A TORRENT OF WATER IN THE DARK, SOAKED TO THE SKIN? SOUNDS AWFUL? WELL, YOU'D BE WRONG. IT CAN BE GREAT FUN! JOIN US ON A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY THROUGH LONG CHURN CAVE, IN THE YORKSHIRE DALES.

The view out into Alum Pot.
Photo: Stewart Moody

10:00am, and we're almost ready to go. No Tom, there isn't a mobile signal in the cave. L-R : Adam and Tom. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



It's not time to leave the car park yet, first we need to have a competition to see who looks the most ridiculous. Ladies and gentlemen, I present your finalists. L-R : Stewart and Adam. **Photo: Simon Hodgson.**



After Stewart was crowned the winner we set off towards the, well, basically towards the middle of a farmers field where an inconspicuous hole in the ground beckoned us. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



The gateway to the under world. I told you it was inconspicuous. This is your last chance to bail out folks, it's all downhill from here. **Photo: Simon Hodgson.**



Simon takes a very deep breath and squeezes his way through the “cheese press”, a 20cm wide gap between the ceiling and the floor. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



There were stalactites and stalagmites. And there were other rock formations that some people thought looked like other things entirely. I'm not too sure what Tom thinks this was. A bike? A donkey? Answers on a postcard please. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



And you thought climbers needed good rope technique! Phil rigs for an abseil of some 20m so that we can descend to a shelf overlooking Alum Pot. **Photo: Simon Hodgson.**



A particularly gormless looking Stew prepares to abseil, watched over by a particularly ghostly looking Phil. **Photo: Simon Hodgson.**



Abseil accomplished. Jodie taking in the view and the drop into Alum Pot. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



Greetings earthling - take us to your leader. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



Jodie squeezes through the long tunnel that marked the half way point. It was so tight that Stew baulked as the vanguard and had to let Tom take the mantle. Well done Tom. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



Simon in fine form as he bridges his way up the river. Not far to go now folks! **Photo: Stewart Moody.**

Phil circles Dr. Bannisters Hand Basin and eyes up the exit pitch up the waterfall.
Yes, well, erm, your lead Phil. **Photo:**
Stewart Moody.



Having dropped a rope down to us we each take turns to climb the waterfall.
It's Matt's turn... **Photo:** Simon Hodgson.

The last crawl of the day., Simon emerges soaked to the skin but clearly delighted with the day he's had. **Photo:**
Stewart Moody.





Alfred Wainwright once wrote about the cave:

"It is quite possible and in fact easy to die a horrible death by straying off route. The dangers of the Alum Pot system are manifestly obvious. Other death-traps, unseen, occur in the black interiors of some of the caves".

We'd all like to thank our guide Phil Poole for helping us to avoid these myriad dangers; for getting us in one end of the cave, and out of the other end safely.

First there were clouds and then came some rain. Then there was hail, and then there was snow. On the tops everything turned white. But there were Mercians dressed in Gore-tex of every colour to brighten the day. We had a snowball fight by the summit cairn. We were in...

LANGDALE

words by Tom Morris

Summit photo (well, it was probably the summit) on Crinkle Crag. L-R : Beth, Joe, Harriet, Paul, Tom, Karl. Photo: Stewart Moody.



On the weekend of 18 and 19 January, the Mercian Mountaineering Club ventured to Great Langdale hoping for some decent climbing weather and possibly some winter conditions. Ahahahahahahahahaha. After a long catch-up with your friend and mine, the entire bloody M6, Beth and I arrived at the Robertson Lamb hut in Langdale around 10pm thinking we'd be the last ones there. However, we'd failed to reckon with the frankly awesome faffing capabilities of H. Davies esq. Huw, Julie and Paul had set off from Birmingham at 9.50pm arriving at the hut at some point after midnight. (NB Huw had a shocker at work and didn't get out until 7.30 so it's not really his fault, but still funny).

Paul barrelled into the hut, collared the first person he saw (me) to begin the ranting and only the soothing tones of a can opening could tame his ire.

Friday night passed by with a couple of civilised beers and discussions on what we were to do the next day before we retired to our bunks. The Robertson Lamb hut is owned by the Wayfarer's Club which maintains an all male membership. As such, the upstairs dorm is reserved for men only with the annex being a mixed dorm for female guests. Whilst I felt this was an ideal opportunity to construct a no girls allowed bedsheet fortress, I ended up in the annex.

Rock hopping through a river on the walk in to Jack's Rake. Front - Back : Beth, Joe, CJ, Jodie. **Photo: Vicki Cox.**



Pavey Ark summit photo. L-R : Jodie, CJ, Tom Stew, Simon, Beth, Joe, Paul. **Photo: Vicki Cox.**



Saturday morning rolled around with some git forgetting to switch off their 6am alarm. A couple more hours of dozing went by before everyone levered themselves out of bed and put the kettle on. As was forecast the hills looked claggy and damp out of the window though we were hopeful of getting some scrambling in with Stewart having his eye on a grade 2 on Tarn Crag near Sickle Tarn.

Julie and Chloe set off to meet Sandy for a walk a little further up the valley with Geoff, Duncan and Steve heading for parts unknown. That left myself, Simon, Jodie, Beth, Vicki, Stewart, CJ and Paul to head up the path to Stickle Tarn. Huw had decided to become a gentleman of leisure for the day, lazily slurping tea and fixing punctures whilst Karl and Harriet headed to Ambleside to wait and see if the weather improved.

The walk was very pleasant and whilst it rained fairly consistently it was never more than a drizzle and not enough to dampen any spirits. Unfortunately, the visibility was poor and we couldn't identify the start of the Tarn Crag scramble. Instead, we carried on up to Pavey Ark and went up Jack's Rake which had, predictably, turned into a bit of a waterfall. Nevertheless, Jack's Rake is always a fun scramble even if you do get soaking hands.

After arriving at the top of Pavey Ark for a pork pie and summit photo stop the weather was still fairly grim so we took the decision to sack off the other pikes and head down for a pint. Given that we hadn't had a particularly early start I can only attribute our arrival in the Stickle Barn Tavern at 13.40 to our superlative mountain fitness. It is said that sharks can smell a drop of blood in the ocean from 20 miles away and Stewart is much the same with beer and set a furious downward pace.

As we still had some of the day left we linked up with Julie and Chloe to head into Ambleside for a mooch around some gear shops. Whilst most of us couldn't really justify spending any money (although Beth and I did seriously consider some down suits at £650. They looked amazing) Vicki had no such compunctions and walked away with a new (arc'teryx!) waterproof and a shocking pink down jacket.

It would've been rude not to so we took one for the road in the Golden Rule and headed back to the hut for some food. A very convivial evening followed where most of the guys went for Malcom's spag bol, which looked delicious, whilst I and a few others had Thai Green Curry a la Hodgson which was excellent and plentiful. Roland had kindly made a couple of huge trays of Apple Crumble for pudding which went down a storm. As the meet was also near Paul's birthday we also enjoyed some caterpillar cake and malteser fridge cake (made by Beth, so dubbed the Beth-day cake) whilst he played with his new lego.



Walking in towards Red Tarn, with our objective, Crinkle Crag, well and truly hidden by clouds...

Photo: Stewart Moody.

“Paul Rigby, intrepid mountaineer, at your service. Now then, will someone please be so good as to point us in the direction of North”

Paul Rigby near the summit of Crinkle Crag. Photo: Stewart Moody.



Having been stuffed to the gills and washed this all down with a few more beers some traditional Mercian games took place. Huw and Karl once again reached the final of the cereal box game with Huw this time claiming the victory. My alternative techniques let me down this time although I also do feel my choice of legwear played a part. Both chaps were also the only ones to actually complete the, very wide, table traverse despite valiant efforts from myself, Paul and Joe.

We retired to bed with thoughts of a brighter forecast in our minds and vague hopes of a climbing day for Sunday. We woke up to worse clag and more rain. Being the stalwart and upright sorts we are, we only moaned for an hour or so before deciding to still head out for a walk up Crinkle Crag again with thoughts of a scramble up the face. Yeah right. Sticking to the path we soon found ourselves in pea soup with poor visibility. The light drizzle turned into hail and suddenly into big fat snowflakes! It snowed heavily and by the time we reached the top snowball fights and cries of “wahey, should’ve brought my crampons arf arf arf” were the order of the day (there were possibly also some slightly quieter cries of, “err maybe we should take a bearing, the path seems to have disappeared”).

As the afternoon wore on we found ourselves striding purposefully down The Band towards the Old Dungeon Ghyll where a traditional post-walk pint was again imbibed. After this, we headed back to the hut for a tidy before saying goodbye and heading back to Birmingham.

Despite the weather being poor and few views to speak of everyone had a really enjoyable weekend and it was definitely a great way to kick off the 2014 meets calendar. Here’s to our home from home, Tan Y Garth in two weeks time!



A wet ascent to Red Tarn on the way to the summit of Crinkle Crag. L-R : Joe, Karl, Harriet, Tom, Beth, Paul. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



A happy hiker and a not so happy hiker. L-R : Tom, Joe. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



Karl and Harriet and their communal ruck sack. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**



Proudly trooping the Mercian colours. Corporate or what? L-R : Jodie, Tom, Vicki, Stew. **Unknown photographer.**



Vicki displaying slightly less clutter than usual, I can only spot a camera and thermometer in this shot. Rare indeed. **Photo: Stewart Moody.**

New Years Eve 2013 saw myself, Matt Kettle, and my friend Dan Ashfield make a big boots ascent of Little Tryfan.

Whilst it had been dry and light during the day we climbed at the indoor wall near Llanberis, and then, once darkness came and the heavens opened we drove to Ogwen to do one last route of the year. For me the logic of this was simple. By doing an evening route I would spend less time drinking in the hut and have more chance of seeing in the new year sober.

We popped the boot of the car and began gearing up. On went the waterproofs, and then the boots and gaiters, next came the harnesses and climbing hardware. And then, with ropes over our shoulders and head torches on our helmets we marched into the darkness.

We reached the foot of the crag 15 minutes later after a small navigational error on my part. I was soaking wet, Dan and Matt looked no better off. But we were in good spirits and our resolve did not waver. We found our route (Slab 2, a three pitch VDiff) but could not find a dry patch of ground to uncoil the ropes; the base of the crag was a torrent of run-off water.

It was my lead; after all the whole enterprise had largely been my idea. For his part Dan had egged me on, and Matt was our willing accomplice who was just happy to be climbing outdoors. We romped up P1 which was little more than a short scramble to a large belay ledge. P2, which ran on for about 40 meters saw the difficulty increase. The crack I was following became more awkward, holds either side of it became scarce, and the footholds became smears. My big boots suddenly didn't feel very positive.

Pressing on I eventually found myself climbing alone in the darkness, I could no longer see the head torches of Dan or Matt. I climbed on cold hands and the drag from the sodden ropes was horrendous – it felt like I was dragging a bus up the crag.

As a rock climber I generally fear bad weather and the threat of being benighted. But when it's already dark and raining it can't get any worse; that's quite liberating when you think about it. After straying off route for a few moments I finally established myself on second belay. From there it was a simple third pitch, which was really nothing more than a scramble to the summit of Little Tryfan.

We dispensed with the usual back-slapping pleasantries and quickly trotted back down to the car. It had been a bit of a giggle and was one of the more memorable routes I've climbed. Was it worth it? Of course it was, it was an adventure!

Don't forget your head torch

Words by
Stewart Moody

When it's already dark and raining, things can't possibly get any worse - and that's quite liberating when you think about it



CAPEL CURIG

Words by **Matt Kettle**
Photos by **Stewart Moody**



After a rather long January without having any chance to get out in the hills I was very much looking forward to the meet at Tan Y Garth.

Never particularly averse to a bit of bad weather, I wasn't too disheartened when I left Bangor on the Saturday morning and felt the strong winds and felt the lashing rain. My first challenge upon arriving at the Tyn Y Coed (which would turn out to be the first of four visits during that day) was to find the hut. Fortunately the hut location is marked on the map; unfortunately opening the map in the wind wasn't quite so easy. After faffing for a while (I must be learning!) I found my way and arrived shortly after 8.30. I am very new to mountain huts as I have only ever stayed in tents or youth hostels, so I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. My first impressions of the hut were very positive, much better than the one used at New Year (which I actually quite liked also).

Normally I am not somebody who can do a faff in the morning, I'm a get up and straight out sort of person, but on this occasion I was definitely glad to have the chance to sit and have what turned out to be a massive cup of tea thanks to the huge mugs on offer. Having always headed to Scotland at any given opportunity I can't say I know Wales very well at all, so I was very happy to follow everybody else.



The plan was Moel Siabod from the hut. Whilst I stood and waited it looked like the weather was improving. Having explained my love of the bad weather to a couple of people the general consensus was that I should head out before the weather got nice! Unfortunately for those who were hoping for good weather, their hopes would soon have been dashed. As we left the hut it started to hammer it down with rain. Despite my embracing of the bad weather, I wasn't particularly up for it being bad all day. After having bad weather at New Year I was rather hoping to have a view at least.

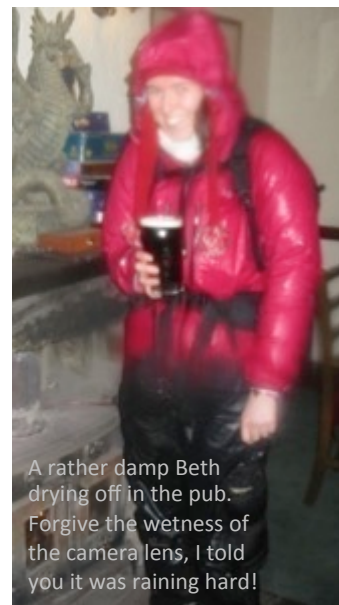
As we headed up Moel Siabod in the progressively heavier rain it began to come clear that our chances of summiting seemed slim because of the wind. We battled on up the hillside for a while before deciding that the wind was too strong for it to be safe to scramble up to the top. After taking a few photos in the freezing cold wind we headed down, not back to the hut, but to do a mini pub crawl through Capel Curig.

Top - Sheltering from the wind on Moel Siabod. Obviously some people didn't get the "red jackets only" memo. L - R : Simon, Matt, Chris, Paul, Tom, Beth, Katie, Fiona and Tom.

Bottom - L - R Simon, Matt and Chris pose in the rain.



Mercians pass each other 50m below the summit of Carnedd Llewelyn. L - R : Matt, Katie, Chris, Tom.



A rather damp Beth drying off in the pub. Forgive the wetness of the camera lens, I told you it was raining hard!

After getting soaked in the rain on the way down we arrived at the first pub of the afternoon, the Bryn Tyrch Inn. This was the best of the three pubs in my opinion. I was up for staying in The Bryn Tyrch longer but the other two pubs were calling. Anybody who was on the New Year meet or on the recent snow week will know how disappointed I must have been when I discovered the room with the pool table in at the Tyn Y Coed was reserved, so we were unable to use it. Fortunately we were able to warm up instead in front of the open fire before heading back for dinner.

Upon arriving back Stewart discovered he had left his gaiters next to the fire so we headed back for our third visit of the day to the Tyn Y Coed. The fourth visit later in the evening was probably the most entertaining, with everybody taking part in a game of 'Cards Against Humanity'. I won't explain here what my favourites were but to anybody who hasn't played or seen the game, it is well worth it and is extremely amusing for a pub game.



Beers by the fire in the Tyn Y Coed. L - R : Beth, Tom, Paul, Fiona.

I was up for staying in The Bryn Tyrch longer but the other two pubs were calling.



Tom and Matt on the summit cairn of Carnedd Llewelyn

Main Image - Fiona (Left) and Vicki on the long pull up the whale back of Y Braich towards Pen yr Helgi du.
Inset - Group shot taken during a quick lunch break. L - R : Julie, Tom, Huw, Paul, Matt, Katie, Chris.



Sunday finally brought decent weather and good views. After what seemed like an especially long faff everybody was ready to go. The plan was Carnedd Llewellyn. We took a march up the Y Braich ridge to the top of Pen yr Helgi Du, which was pretty icy and windswept. (Tom, I believe this may be a 'Morris'.) From here it was a steep drop down to the col beneath Carnedd Llewellyn where a few people opted to head back down. It was on the scramble just after this that I heard about the fantastic plan to crack the Welsh 3000s in a day in June, which is exactly my kind of day out.

I hope the weather will be considerably warmer on the day we attempt that, but if the views are as good it will be very spectacular. Huw and Julie had sadly forgotten to take their crampons, so Stew, Tom and I headed to the top with the added grip of the spikes after struggling for a while in the icy conditions. Chris and Katie were hot on our heels. We posed for a couple of photos on the top before blasting down to catch up with the others. I must admit that having always chosen to go to Scotland, I was surprised how spectacular Wales actually is. An excellent meet and I am looking forward to a couple more trips soon in preparation for the big one in mid-June.



Julie and Hugh on the long pull
up the whale back of Y Braich
towards Pen yr Helgi du



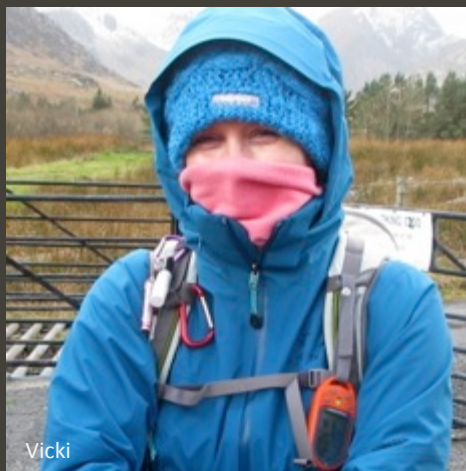
Katie



Matt



FF



Vicki



Chris



Fiona



Paul



BRAEMAR SNOW WEEK

Skiing, hiking, deep fried pizza
and a really cheap can of bitter

Words by **Fiona Boyce**

It was the first day, and we all awoke bright and early to beautiful blue skies. Most of us departed down to the Glenshee Ski resort to do a full days skiing, while Matt decided to embark on his own to trek up Ben Gulabin. Upon arrival we were quickly reminded that it was half term, due to the huge amount of cars in the car park and the gigantic queues for kit hire and ski passes! Still, after a good team effort everyone was sorted and ready to go without too much faff. While most of the skiers took off immediately Louise and I decided to stick around to the beginner slopes - it had been a long time since I had skied and it was Louise's first time! After having a laugh on the slope for a bit, while I tried badly to teach Louise how to ski (at the same time remembering myself) the rest of the group joined us and I decided to try some of the harder slopes, while Louise had her first ski lesson, from a proper instructor.

The rest of the day was spent with lots of skiing and waiting in queues for the lifts, Matt returned in the afternoon having done two Munros on the Glas Maol side! The day was finished off by everyone returning to the bunkhouse where I cooked a tartiflette for dinner followed by lots of Julie's homemade damson gin!

The next day, Huw and Louise decided to take a break and have a pottering day around Braemar, while the rest of us went for a good long walk up Carn a'Mhaim and Sgorr Mor in the Linn of Dee. Carn a'Mhaim was Matt's 100th Munro repeat, which according to him meant he needed to drink a can of really cheap bitter to celebrate. Unfortunately the Co-op wouldn't sell it to him before 10am, so he had to make do and drink it when he got back to the bunk house that evening. It was also my first Munro, so I joined him in his tradition.

A lot of culinary excellence (and experimentation) went on in the kitchen that evening, as Louise decided to make us all chilli for dinner, followed by a lovely bread and butter pudding she made during her day off, on the more adventurous side of things, was Matt's idea of deep fried pizza, which the food places around Braemar unfortunately didn't provide, so we made do by frying it in the bunk house! An incredibly greasy super fried bread like substance appeared from the pan, which many of us enjoyed sampling a small amount of, before leaving Matt to his heart attack on a plate and tucking into our delicious chilli.

On the third day we decided to try a different ski resort; Lecht. This was much smaller than Glenshee but it made for an interesting change of pace. Matt went off to tackle two Corbetts above the resort with the intention of joining us for some skiing after midday. Louise had her second skiing lesson, while the rest of us hit the slopes for another full days skiing. I found some of the slopes in Lecht a lot steeper than those at Glenshee, and managed to go falling head over heels twice on one run! There ended up being no sign of Matt for the rest of the afternoon, and when he finally did return at the end of the day it turned out his map was a square to a mile instead of a kilometre, which almost doubled his trip length!

We then all returned to the bunk house for a good Scottish traditional meal of Haggis, and then off to the pub for a few pints to round off the evening.

On the Wednesday, Tom, Huw, Matt, Louise and I went back to Glenshee again, while Sandy went off for a walk to Creag Leacach, Glas Moal, Cairn of Claise and to Carn an Tuirc.

Julie unfortunately had to have a work meeting via the phone, so went for a run in the morning and then stayed at home the rest of the day. As Huw had sprained his wrist earlier in the week, he didn't actually snow board and instead was our camera man for the day taking some great shots of us all skiing! Tom also had a go at snowboarding, and Matt had a good go at skiing for the first time, managing at the end of the day to do a complete green route.

Everyone did a small walk on the Thursday together, the visibility was brilliant and there were blue skies for miles around, which was beautiful! There were very strong winds however and we were all getting blown around quite a lot! In the evening we went to a restaurant in a nearby town for some Italian food and to a local pub afterwards. The winds really picked up on the last day, Tom, Huw, Louise and I went back to Glenshee one more time to have a last days skiing, while Julie and Sandy attempted a walk up Carn Bhac, however the winds were so strong that they couldn't even hear each other so they decided to turn around.

They then returned to the bunk house with Louise to relax for the rest of the day. Although the winds continued to be strong, the visibility was pretty good toward the afternoon so Tom, Huw and I had a brilliant last days ski.

Matt on the other hand ended up going up the wrong hill on his walk and completed a whopping 34km walk and was still back before 4pm!

We rounded off the evening with a tasty lasagne made by Sandy and some games such as the table traverse and cereal box game, which Tom and Huw showed off some rather mad skills at being able to pick up flat pieces of cardboard off the floor with their mouths, without touching the floor with their hands or knees!

An absolutely brilliant week was had by all, pro skiers, beginners and non-skiers alike! And I know I cannot wait to go skiing again next year!

Stop the presses!

SNOW



WEEK

The Photos



That's right folks, that's Matt Kettle behind me, and yes, to pre-empt your next question, he did bag every single Munro wearing a pair of Aston Villa pants.





IMPROV-MEET

Lake District, February 2014

Words and photos by **Karl Stewart**
Starring **Beth Heeney**

Optimism is a glorious thing. It turns a forecast saying “*wind 30mph-40mpg, gusting 60mph*” to “*(wind as light as) 30mph*”, and translates “*mostly rain, perhaps snow later*” to “*mostly....snow*”

And so, it was with this optimism that Beth and I departed for the Lake District on a meet organised (or at least confirmed) at the very last minute.

We decided to head to Buttermere for a number of reasons. Firstly, Chapel Crag occupies a fairly high position in a corrie just below the ridge that separates the Buttermere Valley from Ennerdale. A high altitude gave the greater likelihood of better winter conditions. Although there had been lots of snow, the temperatures hadn't been particularly cold, and therefore gullies (which is what this crag had) rather than buttresses would more be the order of the day. Secondly, the walk from Buttermere, although steep, was possibly as short as it gets, and it goes from your door, which is always a bonus. And finally, it was a less frequented crag, a good place to escape the crowds guaranteed to be found at the more well-known spots like Helvelyn or Great End. In fact, access to Great End would still be possible from Buttermere, with a short drive over the (hopefully open) Honister Pass. For those that know me well, can I point out that our decision to stay in Buttermere had absolutely nothing to do with me finding a stonkingly good £10 per person per night rate at the YHA when I Googled it the day before.



Beth eager to get some scratches on her pointy things (Curving Gully behind)



The white tops saw on the drive to Buttermere on the Friday night were nowhere to be seen once the cloud had descended to rooftop level by the following morning. Indeed, the steep pull through the rain and sleet up to Bleaberry Tarn at 500m still didn't yield any sign of snow, and I wondered if we were just taking 10kg of winter climbing gear for a long walk instead. However, optimism had not entirely departed us, and by the time we climbed a mere 70m further up into a shallow bowl, we found ourselves walking on snow, albeit of the soggy variety. Also, the clouds had lifted enough to give us a view of the (bottom half) of our crag. As expected, the buttresses were all very much black, but the gullies looked chocka!

Donning out harness, helmet and crampons, and with a technical axe in each hand, we started to ascend the fan of snow beneath Curving Gully, a 160m grade II winter route. Evidence of avalanche debris at the entrance to the gully was not a good sign, but it did look sufficiently melted to have not been especially recent. The gully narrowed to about 12 foot, and as we ascended a tall buttress loomed over us on our right. With every step the snow became firmer, and our exposure grew, although we were comfortable enough to keep the rope in the bag. At about half way the gully opened into a wider bay, and presented three routes forward.

The one on the left was an easy way out into a larger more open gully that ran to the summit. Too easy. The one on the right was a grade III variation, exiting the gully via an iced wall. No ice, no chance. So we opted for the centre route, which climbed through a steep 10 foot section of snow interspersed with rocks. The high steps on crumbling snow required for the first time commitment to both axes, and provided just enough spice to keep things interesting. The final slog up the upper part of the gully produced burning in my thighs as the top seemed elusively far. But we finally topped out, right into a ranging storm that the gully had up until now been sheltering us from.

Breaking out the snow goggles, we hadn't gone 10m before they steamed up and I was cursing buying cheap gear. Half blind we stumbled north on the lookout for the top of Wide Gully, which would make a quick and easy descent. But gullies always look steep when viewed from the relative safety of the top, and I also wasn't keen at the look of how the snow seemed to have settled in the upper part of this gully. The gully we had ascended faced slightly south, and was being scoured by the wind. But this gully did look more prone to avalanche, best to steer clear.

We trudged on, sticking to the same height, until we started to contour west. The slope to our right slackened, and I figured this was the side ridge we were looking for that would provide a safe return back to the tarn. For this part of the descent the wind was probably at its strongest, as it accelerated over this side ridge from the corrie to the north. But soon enough we were in the lee of it, and we could at last stand up straight.



Sunshine and fresh snow

Having been harshly wind blasted, the appeal of climbing another route was overshadowed by the discomfort of the top out, so we opted to descend all the way to the pub. Whilst supping our half pints the clouds lift and the blue sky came out, and it made us wonder if we had made the right decision. Glancing up to crags to see the cloud still ripping across their tops reassured us we hadn't.

The forecast for the next day was better still, but rather than return to the same crag, I picked out a corrie with some 200m long gullies that might prove good fun. From the road across Winlatter Pass, a forest track runs almost horizontally right into Hobcarton Crag after only an hour. But on the approach my optimism was fading, as being perhaps 100m lower than yesterday, there really didn't seem to be as much snow. We kitted up and started up a grade II gully, but the initial section climbed steep rocky hillside, and the snow was collapsing underfoot. I was confident that the snow would fill out and become firmer higher up, but this was a bit of a commitment to make.

Discretion being the better part of valour, we abseiled off (leaving a #7 nut and wire gate crab that I'm intending to go back and recover so don't get any ideas) and decided to go for a walk instead. Figuring the best way up to the ridge was via a shallow runnel of continuous snow on the other side of the corrie, we set off towards it. But glancing up at the very left hand most edge of the crag, we spotted a short but very well defined gully that ran right to the ridge. Seizing the moment, we headed for that instead. And we were rewarded. It was not difficult, and it was not long. But it was **not** in any guidebook, and quite possibly had **not** been done before. It was lovely, and as our spirits rose, so did the clouds, so much in fact that with five minutes there was more blue sky than white, and just 10 meters below the ridge, the sun struck my face, for what felt like the first time this year. The top out was glorious, as all around us the high summits of the northern Lake District were free of cloud and caked in snow.

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On the walk to the summit we just couldn't believe our luck. Not only was the weather "not bad", it was positively "great". Walking in bright sunshine on fresh snow, it just doesn't get better. It took a full two days for that smile to fade from my face, and writing this article has just brought it back.

Top - The steeper section of Curving Gully
Bottom - "Did it!"



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