



The rescue crew members were (left to right) Flight Lieutenant Patrick Thirkell, Sergeant Neil Finch and Flt Lt Fiona Bailey

RAF team commended for rescue of father and son in Cuillins

A Lossiemouth Royal Air Force Search and Rescue team will be at Number 10 next month to be personally congratulated by the Prime Minister on the rescue of two climbers on Skye last year.

John Sheldon, Fiona Bailey, Patrick Thirkell and Neil Finch, who saved a father and son who were in trouble whilst walking in Skye, will join nine other winners at a special Downing Street reception on Thursday 17th November. They will then go on to a gala luncheon at the Savoy Hotel to be presented with the award.

Supporting this year's Vodafone Life Savers Awards, Mr Blair said: "The prospect of risking one's own life to save another requires a huge strength of will. The brave people who have been nominated for these awards are fantastic example of courage and fortitude and must never be undervalued. I commend them all."

The RAF team's award is in recognition of their efforts when faced with back-to-back rescue operations in appalling conditions in September last year.

The crew of SRG 137 were returning to Lossiemouth from a routine training exercise when they were called to rescue an injured walker on the Isle of Mull. After successfully completing that mission the team landed in Oban at 3am and, after a few hours' rest, set off for home through gale-force winds and low cloud.

However, a call came through reporting a father and son walking in Skye were in trouble after the father fell and sustained serious head injuries.

The combined factors of bad weather and crew fatigue would have been more than enough to justify turning down the task, but the 137 team knew they could reach the injured walker quicker than any other unit and time would be critical if he was to be saved.

The crew were able to narrow the pair's location to one particular buttress, but by now fuel was running low and the weather was getting worse.

Dangerous downdrafts were buffeting the aircraft and the rotor blades were perilously close to the mountainside as Winch Operator Flight Lieutenant Patrick Thirkell lowered Sergeant Neil Finch to the stranded climbers clinging to the rock. In the cockpit, Flight Lieutenant John Sheldon, helped by co-pilot Flight Lieutenant Fiona Bailey, was wrestling with the controls knowing any sudden movement of the helicopter would send the dangling winch man crashing into the mountainside, spelling disaster and costing lives.

In spite of their exhaustion and the conditions, Rescue 137 successfully lifted the two walkers from the mountain face, administered emergency first aid and delivered the badly-injured father to a waiting ambulance.

Grateful thanks to the RAF Rescue Team

AS a family we are eternally grateful to the Lossiemouth Royal Air Force Search and Rescue Team for their rescue of John and John Joe. An enjoyable weekend away could have had such a disastrous end if not for their fortitude.

The planned outing was to walk the Cuillin Ridge with an overnight bivvy on Dubh Ridge. The walk up the valley was made in reasonable conditions which drastically changed overnight. A decision was made to descend in very wet, wild conditions and walk back to the car and camp at Sligachan.

Unfortunately events overtook them with John falling about 60 feet. Luckily John Joe had a mobile phone and was able to alert the Mountain Rescue and guide them to their position.

After an overnight stay in Broadford hospital on Skye to be treated for shock and exposure, John was transferred to Inverness to sort out head injuries.

A phone call from here said, "Dad has had a bit of an accident but is OK" - not to be alarmist.

Thankfully father and son have recovered and lived to tell the tale.

Ann McGonagle

Report reproduced courtesy of West Highland Free Press, Isle of Skye

My Jura Trip

by Molly Broome

A McDonalds breakfast and a Brufen for dad and we were on our way to Arran, cycling out of Brodick we saw some seals and a deer but the hostel in Lochranza was the best sight of all. We went to the Lochranza Hotel for tea and Guinness and kicked a golf ball all the way back to the hostel in the dark without losing it.

We missed the first ferry in the morning, but we made it to Jura by Monday afternoon, met up with mum, Olivia and the dogs and headed to the beach. That night we had a bonfire on the beach and dad read a dodgy ghost story which wasn't as scary as Sean jumping out of the long grass and scaring Becky witless.

The next day we cycled to the three-arched bridge so dad could reccy the fastest line on the road section of the race route. We headed back via the pub to shelter from the hailstones before returning to Jura House and settled in for the night with another rubbish ghost story by the fire.

We drove to Islay so my mum, dad and Sean could taste some whisky. We took the dogs to the beach for a swim at Bowmore, Caol Ila, Bunnahabhain, Bruichladdich and Port Ellen where the grown ups had coffee. That evening, back to the beach for another dire ghost story round the fire.

The next day was very sunny (for once.) We found a broken lobster pot and decided to fix it. We spent about two hours mending it, baiting it with a variety of squished shellfish before lobbing it off the rocks. Later that night we went to check it and we'd caught three crabs and raced them back to the sea. We made up are own ghost story but we lost the plot in the end.

Race day arrived and we were all looking forward to it, first my dad set off on his race. It was Olivia's turn next

she had good fun running her race to the pier and back. Next it was Becky and me, halfway round I heard Becky slip over in a stream and bang her head. Becky overtook me in the last three metres, we finished 9th and 10th. Dave was first out of the adults followed by my dad; we watched the runners go through at the three-arched bridge. That night following dinner the 'whistling haggis' awards were presented to my mum and me for outstanding incompetence throughout the week, one last trip to the beach to check on the lobster pot and off to bed in readiness for the trip home.

Sunday morning was very windy and really hard to cycle against. We couldn't get across Arran in time for the ferry so we had to look for a hotel, things were looking a bit grim by 22.30 hrs with still no place to stay. Right at the end of Brodick near the ferry port was a spooky hotel not yet open for business, we persuaded the owner to open up and we collapsed in our rooms feasting on coke and crisps as everything in the town was shut. Sean said it was like the 'Shining' but we were too tired to listen out for ghosts. In the morning we only had to walk across the road to the ferry, which was good because it was cold and raining. We got on the ferry and had a massive breakfast and that was the end of my Jura trip 2006.

Scotland West to East – 3 Munros & 74 miles in 6 days

By Fred Bagley

THIS all started back in 2004, I had been lucky enough to survive a heart bypass operation, and was scarcely on my feet when my very dear friend, John Taylor died. He also had endured a very serious heart operation some years before, and was the first man to complete the London Marathon with an artificial aortic valve. In latter years when his health was deteriorating he often said he would love to walk Scotland from West to East finishing at his native town of Wick. When he died I was pleased to deliver one of the funeral eulogies, and thought then a fitting memorial would be to accomplish his dreamed of walk on his behalf.

By 2006 I felt fit enough to have a go and started some detailed planning. Looking at the map it soon became apparent that Ullapool to Wick would be extremely difficult, because of the shortage of any sort of accommodation. So feeling unable to carry a tent, I settled for the lesser alternative of finishing at Evanton on the Cromarty Firth; still a coast to coast route.

To reduce costs I chose Express Buses with an overnight stay in Glasgow. Arriving at Buchanan Bus station on Tuesday 20 June, and shouldering my pack I set off to find Eurohostel amid cold driving rain. The wind was strong enough to make walking difficult, definitely not a day for hill walking. After paying £35 for the privilege of a room to myself, I was quite disappointed to find Eurohostel really was a hostel, albeit a rather modern one with tiny en-suite rooms, but no room service. Being determined to maintain my fitness I used the stairs to the seventh floor, but was dismayed to find the stair well was indescribably scruffy, with dangerous tears in the edge of the carpeted stair treads. Next day after a meagre buffet type breakfast; “cook your own toast and no cooked meal”, I was glad to catch the Citylink Express which deposited me in Inverness to much better weather; leaving just enough time to grab a sandwich before boarding the Ullapool bus, which arrived mid afternoon.

Booking in at Brae Guest House overlooking the harbour, I asked the landlord about the ferry across Loch Broom to the Western shore at Altnaharrie. Having bought all the latest Explorer OS maps, I was dismayed when he told me the ferry hadn't run for two years!! The former hotel at Altnaharrie was now a private residence. However he said he would make some enquiries in the pub that evening, as he believed a resident of Ullapool regularly serviced the boat at Altnaharrie, and might be able to take me across.

Thursday after breakfast, I was soon out on the pier, and asked some workmen if they knew of anybody who might help me cross Loch Broom. My luck was in, as they directed me to the captain of the Summer Queen. His elegant looking craft was moored some way offshore, and normally would be carrying 50 or so tourists on excursions; but as it was blowing a gale, trips were cancelled and he was busy repairing the steering cable of the outboard motor of a small boat, used for ferrying passengers at low tide. He said it might take some time, but once the repairs were completed to his satisfaction, he would gladly ferry me to the other side, because he believed the new residents of Altnaharrie didn't welcome visitors, but the people of Ullapool were keen to see the public right of way kept open. So there was time to waste, some of which was occupied watching a Caledonian McBrayne ferry dock and disgorge its diverse cargo of cars and unbelievably large wagons. It had reloaded and headed out to sea again before repairs were complete on the Summer Queen's little tender. At about one o'clock we finally cast off, at first in the shelter close to the harbour the little flat bottomed craft planed quite smoothly, but once we were clear of the land, it was good to know an experienced man was steering; as a heavy swell combined with a considerable choppiness, made it essential to keep the bows into the weather. After 10 minutes, a quick jump onto the beach and I was safely ashore. A rough track led upwards past a peaceful tarn, Loch na h-Airbhe, soon joining a minor road on top of the peninsula, between Loch Broom and Little Loch Broom. Next a long downhill stroll with the crags of Beinn nam Ban shrouded in cloud on my left. An ancient suspension footbridge provided a short cut across Strath Beag, and I headed along a farm track towards the Dundonnell Hotel.

A gate barring the entrance to the farmyard carried a warning notice “Beware of farm dogs”. As this was the only way forward, I negotiated the gate and walked through the farmyard, being greeted by a noisy bunch of scruffy mongrel collies. Thinking this was the usual sentry type barking to alert the owner, I ignored them, but one particularly aggressive dog grabbed me behind my right knee. I shook him off, and they soon ran away when I threatened the culprit with a kick. That dog must have had particularly sharp teeth, it penetrated both my overtrousers and the corduroys I was wearing, I only discovered this when I got to my room, and changing for dinner; found my leg covered in blood, but no visible teeth marks in either pair of trousers. Good job the dog wasn't rabid!

I enjoyed a very nice casserole of venison that evening with a pleasant view across the loch from the dining room window. My intention was to do a round of An Teallach next day, returning to the hotel for another comfortable night; so I went to bed early.

After a good breakfast including porridge on Friday morning, I collected a packed lunch and set off at 9.00 looking for a track a few yards along the road, this was quite difficult to find at its boggy beginning, but much easier to follow once it was negotiating rocky outcrops on the steeper ground. Unfortunately the cloud was covering anything above 1000ft, also it was very cold with a strong wind. Still hoping for some improvement, I pressed on over the shoulder of Meall Garbh, soon losing a fine view of the loch behind as the cloud closed in. I was very glad of my overtrousers and even donned some mittens, but these were wool and were soon sodden. Finding some shelter from the cold wind, behind an outcrop, I ate my lunch before reaching the trig point on top of Bidein a'Ghlas Thuill at 1062m. With visibility reduced to 30ft, I descended to the broad col North of Sgurr Fiona, intending to ascend and continue over Lord Berkeley's Seat and Sail Liath. But the poor visibility made small outcrops appear enormous in several directions, so I decided to abandon my original scheme, and descend westerly along the side of Glas Mheall Liath. When the cloud lifted slightly, I got a brief view down into the big eastern corrie with Loch Toll an Lochain far below; thus confirming my position. After a difficult descent the best route was along the northern side and then across the stream leaving the loch. The walk in Lochain Corrie was awe inspiring, with the huge cliffs of An Teallach disappearing far into the cloud across the water.

After the steep ground down to the loch, the stretch along the quartzite escarpment above Coir a'Ghiobhsachain felt a deceptively easy scramble, until I realised I had made a mistake in my planning, and should have been on a proper track leading to the road at the Coir Haillie car park. Too late to alter course, I plunged on through a tangle of rocky outcrops, small waterfalls and thick heather; eventually emerging on the road at 18.10, about 2 miles from the hotel. Panic stations! – the restaurant was fully booked for a wedding reception, and bar meals would be served only up to 19.00. So I was worried I might miss a meal; however I was saved by a kind fairy, a young lady driver returning from shopping in Dingwall, who gave me a lift. She said her husband always cautioned her against picking up strangers! She must have thought I looked too old and tired to make any trouble! So there was time to have a shower before the evening meal.

Saturday was planned as an easy day, with a mere 17km to walk over the hills, to Braemore Square in Strath More. A sunny day, so I was able to look back at the mighty precipices on the Eastern side of An Teallach, which had evaded me the day before. The track over into the next valley was very pleasant, with easy well grazed grass under foot most of the time, once over the top and descending a lovely view unfolded below into the head of Loch Broom. On the way down a young man carrying

an enormous pack caught up with me; he had been camping in Strathnasheallag, and was making for Ullapool. Obviously glad of the company, he slowed down and we had a good chat until our ways were to part in the valley bottom. But engrossed in conversation we paid scant attention to the map, and so wasted 30 minutes struggling through a difficult 500m on the edge of a plantation, where a storm had created a veritable assault course of fallen trees. Having said goodbye, there remained an easy walk along a farm track until emerging on the A835 near my destination, Braemore Square Guest House. This was the most luxurious stay of the holiday, the house had an entrance under a clock tower into a large yard surrounded by stabling and was formerly the shooting lodge for the Braemore estate. The owners had bought it in a very run down state 6 years before, and converted it into three large self-catering apartments. The estate was originally owned by Sir John Fowler, the engineer of the famous Forth railway bridge, and also the London Metropolitan line. I made myself an adequate meal from the well stocked fridge and relaxed over a book until bedtime. The next day was planned as an ascent of 1084m. Beinn Dearg, followed by a long descent down the watershed to the Altguish Inn at the Eastern end of Loch Glascarnoch, about 37km in all. Unfortunately when I had made my booking by phone, the proprietor had warned me that the restaurant closed at 21.00; so there was a need to press on rather quickly. Bearing this in mind I asked the Braemore landlord, Ed Hughes, about the best route up the mountain; as he was a keen fisherman he had often walked up to some of the lochs around Beinn Dearg. He reckoned, the best way was along a pony track up to the Southern shoulder of Iorgill, the Western outlier of the big mountain.

Sunday dawned sunny, and after a good breakfast, I set off at 9.25. Arriving at the estate gates after a mile of main road, I assumed Ed had meant me to follow the estate road through the forest as far as the beginning of the pony track. So I ignored a notice on the gate which read: "walkers on the hill please use the stile to the E of the car park". As my aim was to walk for six days without using either cars or car parks, it seemed a reasonable thing to do; however on reaching the keeper's cottage a small dog alerted the owner, and a large rather irate Scot came striding out demanding "what was I doing within his curtilage?" Quite a lengthy argument ensued but when I told him my destination he calmed down and we parted shaking hands instead of fists! Unfortunately establishing good relations had wasted much valuable time, and the dog had now decided I was friendly and accompanied me along the pony track, trying to induce me to play with its squeaky ball. I ignored it at first, thinking it would go back, but after five minutes I tried throwing its ball down the slope. This had the opposite effect, merely encourag-

ing the poor creature to stay with me, little did it realise what it was in for! The "pony track" had been recently "improved" for the benefit of SUVs for the coming shooting season, but in its rough state was hard walking, little better than the thick heather on either side. The dog soon abandoned its ball, and trotted along quite happily at first, occasionally stopping to quench its thirst in a puddle. On stopping for a rest near the top of Iorgill the dog started to whine with hunger, so I had to share my packed lunch with my unwanted companion! Soon after this we reached the enormous dry stone wall on the Western side of Beinn Dearg. Difficult to understand the reason for a wall here except that beyond it the crags fall steeply into Gleann na Sguaib. Eventually we reached the summit cairn and a welcome rest to enjoy the scenery, including a very foreshortened view of An Teallach. My companion promptly curled up and went to sleep! Time was passing, so I struck out across the easiest walking that day, over broad grassy slopes leading to a descent into the big eastern corrie holding Loch Tuath. Now in a less frequented area, a large herd of deer appeared on the skyline, with several smaller groups down below in the corrie. Once down near the Loch, walking deteriorated into a struggle across a mixture of peat hags, stony areas and thick heather. I doubt if the little dog enjoyed it, though it still had the energy to chase the occasional deer that had straggled from the herd. Now and then a deer track would be heading in my direction to offer some respite, but it was extremely tiring. On reflection a better route would have been over the top of Cnap Coire Loch Tuath whose forbidding crags lowered over the north of the Loch; but I wasn't at all sure how easy it would be to outflank the eastern end of the these cliffs, to take my intended route going south along the long shoulder running down to Loch Glascarnoch; so instead I kept close to the outflow from Loch Tuath until it ran into Loch Prille, which is fed by a small stream running from the NE. I followed this up to a broad col, then turned S and headed over Meallan Ban and Am Faochagach (954m), both broad grassy summits. It was here the dog must have cut its paw on the treacherous boulder fields which interrupted the grass; these were particularly difficult as one could step on a large rock maybe 2-3 metres across to find it suddenly tipping. Anyway by now the poor creature was limping on its rear right leg and trying to sleep at every rest stop. One redeeming thing was the beautiful view on the right into a deep valley containing a series of Lochs, and further West the magnificent corrie between Beinn Dearg and Cona'Mheall.

The way now went over a number of small summits, eventually joining a broad track going over Sron Liath, Creag Rannich, and Tom Ban Mor. The original plan was to continue to Meall Coirenan Laogh, and then due south over Meall an Torcan, to join the track which serves the pump-

ing station on the north side of Loch Glascarnoch. However by then I was too weary to face another 70m uphill, and decided to short cut by contouring between the last two tops to emerge by the Loch, where a large stream flowed in. This turned out to be a bad decision; as I had to fight my way over a complicated mixture of peat hags interspersed by small streams with no apparent direction, as hard as some of the notorious going over the moorland round the Trough of Bowland. Eventually on reaching the track by the Loch side it was reassuring to know there was only 2km left to reach the Altguish Inn, although by now it was long past the deadline of 9.30 when the restaurant closed. Looking back as I crossed the dam just above the inn, there was a most magnificent sunset outlining all the mountains to the NW in a red glow. On arriving at the inn at 10.30, I was greeted by a worried landlord asking if a dog was with me! I was very glad to hand it over, I don't know who was the most tired myself or the dog! Going to the bar I collapsed onto a stool and soon downed a pint of Guinness, but was rather surlily reminded that the restaurant had closed. I declined the offer of a sandwich and instead settled for a bowl of porridge, and soon after a shower I was snuggled down in bed, too exhausted to be disturbed by an almost empty stomach.

I must have overslept because the following morning I woke and wandered downstairs at 9.00 to be greeted with "I told you last night that breakfast was 7.30 to 8.30"! A most inhospitable Inn! Their excuse was they were preparing for a coach party booked in that day. In the end I had to be content with a bowl of cereal, and some coffee and toast; at least they made a packed lunch. It was a fine day and by 10.05 I was shouldering my pack, heading for the hills again. The route was over an old drovers road which went through the Corriemoillie Forest and down into Strath Garve; thus avoiding a long stretch of the busy A835, and giving an undulating route of 13km with a mere 170m of total ascent. It was easily the most peaceful walk of the holiday, one was soon out of sight of the inn with only the tiniest of sounds to interrupt ones' thoughts: the tinkling of small streams and the occasional buzz of a bumble bee on the heather. No sign of the works of man, other than faint signs of the ancient track, by which livestock were once taken to market. The quietness of my surroundings encouraged me to wonder how the drovers organised their beasts, they must have needed grazing on the way in order to maintain condition, but it would still be necessary to travel a good distance each day to arrive at the market in time. Other problems would be obtaining the consent to travel over various estates and also thieves waiting to ambush the unwary. Still pondering over these things I stopped for lunch by the tiny Lochan nam Breac, and having eaten, I stretched out still pondering over the drover's skill, and fell asleep for a

delightful siesta in the heather.

This air of indulgence was rather shattered on the way down into Garve, as the route was frequently blocked by fallen trees, sometimes these were too low to go under and I was forced to make lengthy detours through the chest high undergrowth. Crossing the A835 just above a large cutting, I found a welcome quieter route, over the old stone arched bridge across the river, and on past Little Garve and down a fine avenue of trees, to rejoin the main road at Garve station. This was only a short step from Birch cottage, where I was soon relaxing in a hot shower. The owner was a former chef and soon prepared a sumptuous three course meal, including roasted duck in orange sauce; especially welcome after the frugality of the previous night.

Tuesday morning 28 June, a fine day for the sixth and last day of the big walk, with Ben Wyvis to ascend before reaching my final B&B in Evanton on the Cromarty Firth. I had planned to head directly east, but the chef kindly offered me a lift up the main road to the Forestry Commission car park at Garbat; where a good path led up the mountain. It felt a bit like cheating being driven rather than walking, but this was soon forgotten as I enjoyed the first good track of the whole six days. The going resembled one of those improved paths in the Lake District. Obviously there had been popular demand for "path improvement", as I encountered several groups of walkers on the way up to An Caber (946m); even though this was a weekday. After eating my lunch on top of An Caber, I pressed on over easy ground to the trig point on Ben Wyvis (1046m) and spent some time enjoying the very extensive view. Next followed a descent in to the big eastern corrie, Coire Mor with huge cliffs brooding over Lochan a'Choire Mhor. Once down to the water's edge, difficulties really commenced, with a mixture of peat hags and tangled heather; occasionally a deer track in the right direction made things easier. Staying on the north side of the Allt nan Caorach, I meant to cross to the south side to get onto a track shown on the OS map, at its junction with the Allt Coire Misirich. This would have led on, through some interesting country, past the famous Black Rock Gorge into Evanton.

But crossing the tumbling waters of the Caorach stream proved impossible; my first attempt nearly ended in disaster trying to jump from one prominent boulder to another. Next I wasted time trying to construct a causeway, but the biggest rocks I could lift were easily washed downstream; so I resolved to wade across. Stripping down to my underpants and tying my trousers and boots to the pack, I stepped into the icy water, the patches of gravel though painful at least were secure footing, but as soon as my feet stepped on a slippery rock I knew it was time to give up. Even if I had reached the far side without mishap, the overhanging

5ft peat bank would have been extremely difficult. I didn't fancy a complete ducking, and then having to walk the last six miles dripping wet, and with my change of clothes wet through as well, the black plastic bag inside my rucksack probably only serving to insure they stayed wet!. Once dressed I was soon striding along a rough alternative track on the north side, which eventually joined a minor road at Eilleanach Lodge. Having wasted at least 40 minutes trying to cross the stream there was some urgency to get to my destination before closing time. There followed 5 miles of downhill pounding on hard tarmac; and my feet were soon complaining at this harsh treatment. Arriving at the Novar Arms at 21.35, I was told; "Sorry we finished serving food at 9.30! But there's another pub up the road which may still be serving." Too tired to argue or walk any further, I settled for a pint of Guinness. Soon, after a very hot shower, I was fast asleep, not even bothering to watch the TV weather forecast. After that harsh day I was really ready for my porridge and full fried breakfast the next morning.

Well that's all except for a relaxing two days bussing back, via Inverness where I bought a luxurious pair of loop pile socks to ease my aching feet, well worth the £16! An overnight stay in Glasgow gave time for an enjoyable meal in one of the city's many good restaurants, where I got talking to a American professor, who was over here to give a paper on Media Studies at the University.

As my bus on Thursday didn't leave until 3.15 pm I had time to visit the Kelvingrove Transport Museum. This has an excellent collection of old motor cars, from around 1900 right up to some of the immediate post war models and some from the 60s. Browsing around was very evocative of my childhood and of my first days as a car owner. Some old steam railway locomotives also inspired memories of my early childhood; hiding behind my dad on a station platform as one of these enormous monsters passed with a great noise amidst billowing steam. Then the sleepy journey back to Liverpool; waking enough to negotiate the Wirral and arrive to a warm welcome home from Marie.

Finally, I am writing this; feeling very pleased to have given John a fitting memorial: three Munroes and more than 74 miles in six days.

The Manx Mountain Marathon

By Neil Hodgkinson

Mark Harris from Todmorden Harriers had finally managed to persuade me that spending the Easter holidays on the Isle of Man was a good idea. Beautiful scenery, lots of child friendly beaches, steam railways, oh and a 31 mile race with 8,000ft of ascent on Easter Saturday. Surely that would involve running around the island three times at least? When I dug out the map, I was surprised to find that the course is not as contrived as one might think. The route follows the wild, rugged backbone of the Isle of Man, from Ramsey, in the North East, over Snaefell (the highest point at 2,038ft) to Port Erin, at the southern tip. Not bad for an island 30 miles long and only 15 miles across. The race was first run in 1970 and ever since has attracted competitors from across the British Isles. This year there were also a good number from Clayton and Calder Valley.

We rented a cottage in Foxdale with the Harris family and spent the week walking around some of the stunning coastline, building sandcastles on unspoilt beaches and getting out for the odd run. We had all sorts of weather and one day awoke to find three inches of snow in the back garden. Helen and Ali, Mark's wife, took the opportunity to run up South Barrule that morning and from the summit across the sparkling sea could see Scotland, the Lake District, Snowdonia and the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland.

Mark ("I used to be a climber") had badgered me into doing the race with his usual energy and enthusiasm. He has even been muttering about Bob Graham rounds. This is what having two young children does to you – anything to get out of the house.

Before leaving home, I sought the advice of Jim Smith, the veteran Tod Harrier who knows a thing or two, having done the race 20 times. Jim recommended that I familiarise myself with the middle section of the course which can involve some difficult route finding in bad weather. So on a wet and windy Wednesday we set off to recce the section from Colden to St John's. All went well until the final descent from Greeba Mountain. We only had grid references for check points so didn't really know where the route went. We took a bearing and in thick mist descended straight into a waist-deep sea of gorse bushes. Tracksters are not very thick. We spent all evening removing small thorns from our legs – a very painful process, much to the amusement of Helen and Ali. Mark and I could not walk past a gorse bush after that without wincing. To make it worse on race day the route was flagged all the way from the summit down a gorse-free grassy trod. The descent recce had been

pointless.

Race day arrived and conditions were perfect, sunny with a slight breeze. We found our way to the market square in Ramsey where there was assembled the scruffiest bunch of fellrunners I had ever seen. It was a low key start and at 9.15 the race set off with 86 runners. The slower runners and walkers had set off an hour earlier and it was heartening to know that this was a race where I was guaranteed to overtake at least somebody. Mark shot off and I did not see him until the finish as usual. I took it steady – it's a long way.

I hoped that there might be some support at the first road crossing and sure enough, as I was descending the tussocks off Clagh Ouyr, a small crowd stood by the roadside cheering on the racers as they came through. Just before the road, a short flagged section led the runners through a deep bog, and one poor woman had to be dragged out by fellow competitors. I think Mandy Goth would have gone in up to her neck. Was this to provide entertainment for the spectators I wondered?

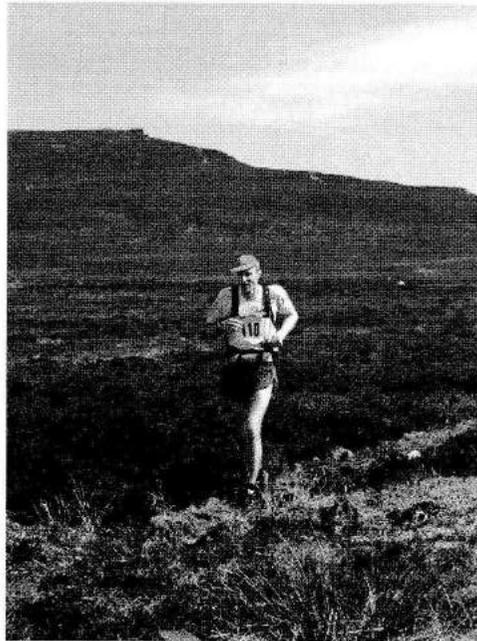
Thankfully, route finding wasn't a problem and I didn't get the map out once all day. It would be a very different story in mist, a lot of the ground was featureless even though you are never far from a road. The terrain is similar to the moorland of the South Pennines – lots of tussocks and heather bashing.

We had great support from Helen and Ali, who appeared at every road crossing with plentiful supplies of food and drink, though I think Mark had set off with enough food for a two-day event judging by the weight of his rucksack. My steady start paid off and I was starting to pass runners looking exhausted who had set off too quickly. I knew how they felt having done the same thing in the Wuthering Hike the month before.

I was now getting reports that Mark was suffering with cramp and slowing down but he was too far ahead to even think I might catch him.

The last part of the race was very enjoyable, running down the coastal path to Fleshwick Bay, but there was a sting in the tail, a nasty climb up to Bradda Hill. There always seems to be one in every race and this one is a killer. Just when you think the climbing is over, the route descends all the way to sea level then requires a 600ft scrabble up a steep grass





bank to the summit cairn. Then the end is in sight as you approach the final checkpoint, Bradda Tower, which overlooks Port Erin and the finish!

I ran onto the promenade to see Helen waving me into the finish area, clearly relieved to see me as we were due to catch the ferry home in a couple of hours and she had told me she was catching the ferry no matter what. It was a good job I hadn't got lost.

I was fairly pleased with my time, 6 hrs 31, which placed me 33rd. Mark came 22nd in 6 hrs 6. The event was won by Paul Thompson from Clayton who finished in a time of 4hrs 54.

The Manx Mountain Marathon is classic race, one I think anyone who enjoys long races would love. It's got a very laid back feel about it even though it was extremely well-organised. The only slight downside is a lack of good pubs, but then again, I was unable to carry out much detailed research. I'm sure other members of Achille Ratti would be able to recommend a few!



By Phil Hodgson

Thursday, 12:30. Easyjet book-in desk, Liverpool

"Did you all book together?" the Easy lady in bright orange clothing asked.

"Yes," said John.

"No?" interjected Dave.

Kate and John looked at Dave and Janet. "I thought you'd booked all our tickets?"

"No, we just booked ours. I sent you an email telling you."

Silence. John looked stunned. "Are there any seats left?"

"Yes," said the orange lady, "you'll need to go to the booking desk over there."

Kate and John soon returned. "Six hundred pounds? That's bloody ridiculous." Kate and John went home.

Not the most auspicious start to a race. Our five man "Achille Ratti Ultra Team" was now down to four (Dave Makin, Richard Leonard, Rhys Watkins and myself – together with supporting "ultra chicks", Mandy Goth and Janet Makin) and we'd hardly set off. Chamonix, via Geneva, was our destination; the North Face Ultra-Trail Tour du Mont Blanc our objective, billed as the toughest ultra in Europe. The race, an anticlockwise circuit of the Mont Blanc Massif, was 158 kilometres with 8700 metres of climbing and descent, taking us through France, Italy and Switzerland in under 45 hours; hopefully. I put it in perspective for the team, "It's just a Bob Graham with an extra hill and a marathon to finish." "Bloody hell!"

Friday, 18:30. Startline, centre of Chamonix

We were, by now, back at full strength, Kate and John Broome having flown over that morning on a cheap flight from Gatwick. We struggled just to get to the start. Thousands of supporters crammed the narrow streets. Over 2000 runners were trying to line up, shimmying their way through the crowds. It was a scene from a sci fi movie, innumerable raidlight clones silently converging. An immense gathering of finely honed athletes, thin muscular bodies encased in body hugging lycra with a combined body fat index in the minus numbers. Ourselves excepted of

course. Although we'd abandoned Walshes and Hellys for poncy trail shoes and smart fabrics we were still rufty tufty fellrunners at heart. We managed to jump over a barrier and insinuate ourselves into the melee behind the starting banner. Dave attracted a few unamused gallic mutterings as his poles, fastened like antennae on the back of his rucack, came perilously close to piercing the nostrils of several, somewhat taller, runners.

What a grand occasion. The cameras panned the gathered competitors relaying nervous and impatient faces onto a giant screen. The speeches sounded cheesy, even in French. Motivational music boomed round the town square. 7:00pm and

we're off. Through the enthusiastic crowds lining the streets, far too fast at first, trying to hang onto John who was obviously aiming to justify his flight costs. We passed a Scottish chap on the first big hill. We could tell he was Scottish because he was wearing a kilt. "It's my sports kilt" he explained. The stunning mountain scenery faded as we climbed out of Les Houches and darkness enveloped us. A head torch parade zigzagged up the hill in front of us; a glittering snake of lights following behind. The mountains faded to dark silhouettes against a starlit sky.

Friday, 23.00. Les Contamines

"Can you hear that?" It sounded like Ski Sunday, a bedlam of cow bells and "Allez, allez." Turning a corner our eyes had to adjust from dark mountain path to bright village lights. There were welcoming parties thronging the narrow track cheering us on and forming two lines to



*"Achille Ratti Ultra Team" ready for the start.
Richard Leonard, Rhys Watkins, Phil
Hodgson and Dave Makin. John Broome
missing again!*

funnel us into the village centre. We ran through the narrow passage of bodies accepting the accolades, "Bravo," they called, "magnifique." Kids leaned out from the crowds giving us high fives, "courage," they shouted. It was a carnival, a celebration of mountain sport in a style that the athlete worshipping French excel at. What an experience. We were plied with mountains of food and drink as a live band played to the revellers. Fuelled up on emotion as well as sustenance we ran off into the darkness.

Saturday, 01:47. Summit, Croix de la Bonhomie

More cow bells. These supporters get everywhere. Imagine climbing a peak in the middle of the night just to watch some runners come past; in the dark. Our way was guided by fluorescent yellow markers every 100 metres or so like cats' eyes meandering across the hill. A few kilometers further and we heard another bell. "Another reception committee?" we surmised. But no, it was a cow, and it was eating the fluorescent markers. We spied the way ahead but pity the poor runner, who following behind us sometime later, might suddenly discover that he was following a trail of luminous cow dung. We ran down the rocky path to another village, passing lots of Johnny Foreigners who can't run downhill for toffee, especially when it's pitch black. Our bat training proved its worth. Another rapturous welcome from the villagers, their party was still going strong, no doubt fuelled by strong alcohol. We reluctantly stuck to Maxim energy drink. The fine selection of food at the first food stop had been followed by exactly the same selection at the second, and the third ... We were now at the seventh, with 12 more to go, and the same old menu of noodle soup, cheese, salami, biscuits, energy bars, chocolate, and crackers was becoming less and less appealing. This may have contributed to our dizziness on the next big climb (it certainly contributed to Dave's toilet requirements – every 10km or so!). Dave and myself had decided to stick together for mutual moral support. We needed it. Staggering slowly up to the 2500 metre col the cold seeped through us. We admitted to each other later that the same thought had crossed our minds, "If we pack it in now we could be back in Cham for breakfast beers." But, self pity was dispelled by a stunning sunrise. By the time we careered down the 1000 metre descent to Courmayeur it was warm and our spirits rose. A longer pitstop at Courmayeur to change clothes, Vaseline feet and drink yet more noodle soup revitalized us and we set off with new legs.

Saturday 13:40. Arnava

We'd enjoyed the last four hours, passing group after group of runners as we negotiated undulating paths through alpine meadows. Disaster came close when the local residents took umbrage at our intru-

sion. The herd of alpine cows, obviously fitter and decidedly more vicious than our home grown Fresians or Jerseys, decided to cross the path and, if we were in the way, that was tough. Horns passed uncomfortably close to our swerving bodies as they skittered past. The Grand Col Ferret towered ahead of us, the highest point of the route at 2537 metres. A long, long pull but, still strong, we crossed over into Switzerland. Several checkpoints later, at La Fouly, a team of masseurs was on hand. You might have guessed that Dave would attract the soothing hands of a pretty young girl while I received the attention of a rather burly chap.

Saturday, 19:50. Champex Lac

72 miles in. Only 26 to go! "There's only two biggish climbs between us and Chamonix," I assured Dave as we changed into dry gear in the village nuclear bunker, "and they don't look as bad as the earlier climbs." The bunker was cold but at least we were out of the rain which had changed from drizzle to torrential in the past hour. As we jogged off into the dark of our second night any vestige of new legs had dissolved. The climbs proved to be horrendous, zig after zag of steep, muddy forest path. The descents were more fun as we slipped and skied down the slime. Another bedraggled group of 15 runners appeared in front of us, slowly picking their way down the narrow path. We queued behind them like good Brits for a few minutes before impatience kicked in. "Scusee mwa," I called in my best Lancashire French, "a la droyt." We didn't give them time to reply. We skipped by as they recoiled, taken by surprise and dumbfounded by the fleet feet of these lunatic foreigners. "Aah, zee Engleesh," they shrugged. Further unintelligible mutterings were our only pursuers.

The last 15 kilometres were the worst. Cold and wet we trudged up a track. "I'm sure I just fell asleep," Dave said.

"Me too," I replied. The Red Bull and caffeine tablets had worn off. We were in our own surreal world of torchlight, never ending paths, and painful feet.

"I was sure we were going fishing," Dave exclaimed. His walking poles might explain that. His comment might explain the scattering of pink prawns I saw on the track a few minutes later. Further hallucinations followed. We were both aware of a third person walking line abreast but no-one was there. We saw imaginary people in the trees. I saw something move up ahead. A rabbit? No, it was a dog, but as we passed it proved to be an inanimate rock.

"Watch out," I cried to Dave as I swerved while running down a road into Argentiere.

"What for," he quizzed.

The street furniture that had been in our way dissolved into a pattern of reflections on the wet road. Weird.

Sunday, 07:43. Chamonix

The adrenaline kicked in and mentally overriding the pain from blistered feet we somehow ran the last couple of kilometres spurred on by Mandy, Janet and Kate who had walked out to meet us. Chamonix, at last! We ran through the streets, teeth gritted but grinning inside. We'd done it! We were cheered across the line by a few early morning supporters. Our time just over 36 and a half hours. Elated, we sat down in the finish tent. "That's the best cup of tea I've ever had," I sighed as I drained my third cup. Later, after a couple of hours kip, we returned to the finish. Thousands of cheering spectators were welcoming every runner in. Rhys, followed a few hours later by Richard, ran in to rapturous applause. John had finished in an amazing time of 31 hours. The Ratti Ultra Team had all made it round. Can you believe the race was won in 21 hours by a 58 year old Italian chap despite hundreds of young fit rivals. He's obviously the Italian equivalent of Joss Naylor.

What a race, certainly the best organized event I've ever taken part in. The presentation was accompanied by the same stirring music echoing across the square. Janet told me it was from *The Last of the Mohicans*. I'm still humming it.

Three Bens in a day – CIC Trip January 2006

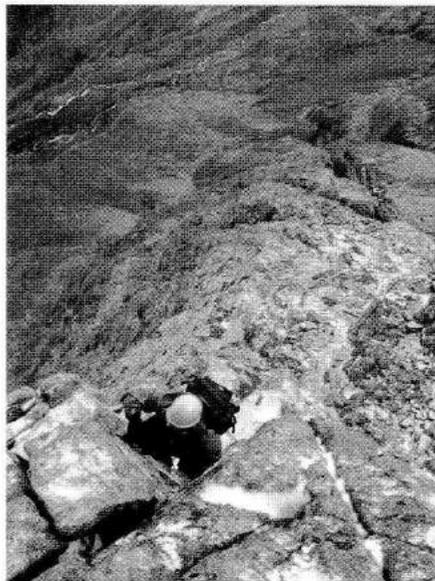
By Phil Hodgson

WE'D hoped for a weekend in February or March when, whilst not guaranteed, there was a good chance that we'd find some decent ice on the Ben. Unfortunately we were allocated our CIC hut slot for the middle of January. "We'd better take our fell shoes just in case," we agreed. The forecast didn't promise much but we travelled up anyway, lured by the outside chance of another outing on a big winter ridge.

The wet walk up to the hut in the dark certainly didn't inspire us. It was raining when we set off and the lower cliffs lacked the glittering coat of ice that we'd hoped for. But, up at the crack of dawn, the mists had lifted to reveal snow in the higher gullies. As the lower buttresses were black we didn't fancy our chances on Observatory Ridge. We'd been up to recce it in the summer and the thought of thinly smeared verglas, particularly on the awkwardly angled lower slabs, resigned it to a future attempt. We decided on Castle Ridge which, although easier, would be our second classic winter ridge on the Ben. The scramble over to the start of the climb was devoid of snow or ice but we could see that the ridge, although not plastered, became more verglassed and rimed as it

gained height. We were going to need our crampons after all.

Climbing as four ropes of two we made easy progress, moving together Alpine style. The guidebook informed us that the crux was "a flaky chimney in a very exposed position overlooking the North face." It wasn't exaggerating. Leading the chimney I snatched the odd glance down at the void below, psyching myself up to make the final bold move up and out of the airy crack. Another interesting pitch before more easy ground took us to the boulder fields leading up to the summit. It was only 11.00am. The descent down No.4 Gully proved a little more interesting than the usual bum slide. Although there was no cornice it was



The Crux Chimney on Castle Ridge

steep at the top and consisted of icy scree lower down.

"What next?" we considered. While Neil and Jim went off to do No.3 Gully Buttress, a grade III mixed route that looked pretty lean, we opted for No.3 Gully itself which looked to have a reasonable covering of snow and proved to be a relatively easy solo plod back up to the summit plateau. The sessions we'd had at the Xscape indoor icewall had certainly boosted our confidence on steeper ground. We watched Neil and Jim complete the impressive finish to their climb before descending back down No.4 Gully.

"That looks good," we agreed, weighing up a steep smear of ice that disappeared up into a cleft above us but not sure which route it was. "What do you think?" Dave and Neil were already roping up while John and myself still pondered. Mandy and Jim had had enough. "We're heading down," they called, "it'll be dark in a couple of hours. Dave disappeared up the icy groove his steady progress indicated by the showers of snow ice funnelling down. "Oh go on then," I said, "I'll give it a go. I could tie on to your rope?" Neil handed me a loop.

"I might as well come as well," John chipped in, "it looks OK, we might as well all tie on."

Dave's call floated down, "I'm safe." We all tied in and started up the ice. It was pretty thin in places and I was glad I was first in our short rope of three. By the time Neil brought up the rear much of the ice had been hacked off by John and myself. The steep start eased after 12 metres and we entered a narrow, easier angled gully filled with thick snow ice. As our three heads popped up we could see Dave frowning at us in an alcove above. "You could have told me there were three of you on the end," he growled. Our shout up had obviously floated away on the wind.

"Have you got a good belay?" we asked.

"Yes," he lied, "I'm sat on one axe, there's nothing else here."

"It's a good job we didn't come off," we grinned. Our combined weight would have pinged poor Dave somewhere out into Corrie na Ciste.

"No problem," said John, "with three of us we always had 12 points of contact!" Dave didn't look convinced. Fortunately the gully above looked fairly easy and we solo'd good neve to reach the summit plateau for the third time that day. We descended back to the hut in high spirits as the light faded. A great day out with three routes snatched from a narrow window of weather. Back at the hut we sussed out that the last route had been the grade II North Gully.

The highlight of the following day was breakfast down at Nevisport having woken to the hiss of rain and the Ben shrouded in thick clag. But, we'll be back. We're still hopeful for that February or March slot and some fat ice on Observatory Ridge or NE Buttress. Maybe next year?



Tom Finney, 11 May 1926 – 28 June 2006

By John Foster

A few months ago I lost one of my oldest friends. Our acquaintance began in 1945, when I joined the Boys' Club of our parish, St Mary's Lowe House the Mother Church in St Helens.

We did not become friends because of the disparity in our ages, for I was very much a junior member at the minimum age of 11, whereas Tom was 19 and one of the seniors.

The priest in charge of the club was Fr Herman de Caires SJ who had not long been ordained, and was an all-round sportsman. While at Stoneyhurst he had occasionally played cricket for Lancashire as an amateur. The previous summer he had initiated the custom of an annual summer camp for the Boys' Club at what is now the National Centre of the YMCA at Stott Park, a mile or so north of Lakeside. So in August of that summer of '45, I was the youngest member of the party of boys and youths who travelled by train all the way to the station at Lakeside, and walked up the road for a never-ending mile to the camp. A row of bell tents were to be our home for the next few days, pitched close to the west bank of Lake Windermere, and I still remember it as the most wonderful week of my life.

Tom Finney and Jack Case were among the seniors who Fr de Caires relied on to help to keep an eye on we galoot youngsters who might have gone astray otherwise. So came about my introduction to the lower hills of the Lake District, and over the following years I and my close mates expanded our knowledge and fell walking experience of the Lakeland hills, initially under the guidance of Tom Finney.

In our very late teens we learned how to handle a rope and took to the rock, and we joined the ARCC in August 1955 on learning that it had acquired the big barn at Rawhead to convert into a climbing hut. Regulars at Bishopscale in the late 50s will remember Tom well, in the days when the row of motorbikes parked along the front wall of Bishopscale outnumbered four-wheel vehicles, but by 1960 almost all the bikes had gone replaced by Austin A35 vans in "Achille Ratti green".

In the autumn of 1966 the club bought Tyn Twr complete with tenant in the western half, and appointed me warden as I had been the principal advocate of a hut in North Wales. The half we had was just a shell, with a kitchen sink and tap, but that was all. A local builder constructed a septic tank in the field opposite and brought foul water drains across

Camping at Seathwaite, Borrowdale, Easter 1956



Tom on the left looking young for his 30 years, then John Thorpe, Bernard Potter, Tony Welding and his brother Terry. All were club members at that time. Why I am still wearing my RAF shirt and tie with hill trousers and boots I don't know. I had ridden my 350 Ariel up from RAF Kirkham, where I was on the riggers course.

the road and round to the back of the hut. The rest was up to us.

Derek Grace did the plumbing in that first half, I rewired the lights and installed a cooker circuit and some sockets. I then started on the original wood and canvas bunks, assisted by various members with a trade background. As Tom had been in clerical work up to then, he had no particular skills, and so dropped in for all the odd jobs, like shovelling debris into buckets and carting it away, and brushing up other mess we made. Never once did he complain or grumble, no matter how mucky the job.

In May 1972 the tenant we had inherited did a moonlight flit owing 2 years rent (about £40). I thought that now we had the whole building, I could convert it leisurely, by working on the hut on the bad days, and getting on the rock when the sun shone. But after a committee meeting that September Derek Price as club secretary, asked me was there a long walk in North Wales comparable to those we did from our Lakeland huts? The 14 peaks came obviously to mind, but he wanted me to put it on the following May. The rush was on again to get the second half ready in time. Bernard Potter did the plumbing this time, and took over

from John Liptrot as my principal skilled assistant, while Tom carried on as before, doing all the odd jobs that no one else did. The work was completed on time, so on 19 May 1973 all was ready. The hut capacity was 48, for as well as the triple bunks I built, there were two triple steel bunks where the upstairs women's toilet and shower are now, and every bed was occupied.

I knew that Tom didn't want to attempt the walk, but I had a special job for him, I also knew that on such a rough, long route with nearly 12,000ft of ascent, by the afternoon thirst would be a problem on the longest leg of the walk over the Carneddau. I made a reconnaissance around the refuge on Foel Grach to check that there was an adequate water supply within reasonable distance, and asked Tom would he set up a tea stall in the refuge, to which he readily agreed. Never once did he ever refuse a request I made of him in his long association with Tyn Twr. He also looked after Tyn Twr in the weeks that I was on Skye every summer, keeping it stocked with consumables.

I woke everyone by 03.00 on the Saturday morning, so that as dawn broke at 04.10 at Pen-y-pas, 31 members set off up the Pyg Track for Crib Goch, the first of the 14. Much later Tom set off with his Primus stoves, can of paraffin, kettles and pans, and empty water bottles to set up his tea stall in the refuge, accompanied by Keith as his water bearer.

At the Ogwen feed point I told walkers to be sure they didn't miss Tom's tea stall on Foel Grach, but some did not believe me. So it was a pleasant surprise and much appreciated, when they found it. Four years later on 14 May 1977 Tom did a repeat performance for the walkers on the second 14 Peaks walk, this time with Mike fetching the water. I think he also did the tea stall in 1981 and 1985, but I can't be sure.

Tom died on Wednesday 28 June. When John Liptrot, his cousin, called round to pick him up that evening to bring him to the Abbey Hotel to meet the rest of us as usual, he found him sat in his chair with no lights on and the curtains open, so reckoned he had died that morning. As peaceful an end as any of us could wish for. He had not been well for some years, but managed to keep going, with an interest in life.

Tom's funeral was on 7 July, with Requiem Mass at St Mary's, opposite which he had lived for most of his life. It was well attended by parishioners who had known him for many years, friends and relatives, and almost all our club members living in this area, which included the Parish Priest, Fr Paul Glover. I was very sad to be the only member who could not attend, who had known him the longest apart from his cousin John.

A loyal and reliable friend, may God rest his soul.