



Sandy Saunders

A Challenge of the National 3 Peaks

The Journey North - Friday 18 June 1999

The meeting point for the challenge was at the Northampton home of Mike Finch, the organiser. This was to be my first meeting with Mick and other members of the 'challenge' group. I was greeted by Mick's wife Sue, Mick had gone with the drivers to collect the four mini-buses. Our 'homes' for the next 60 hours.

Rucksacks etc were loaded onto the mini-buses on arrival. Mick had nominated people to a bus to avoid conflict of interest between friends. Didn't affect me, at that point I had no mates (sad).

The time arrived to take our seats and at 12:40pm, the adventure began. Four mini-buses, one 4 x 4 support vehicle, 32 walkers and 11 drivers rolled north in convoy to join the M6. The journey north progressed well until a 'mega' traffic jam north of Birmingham. This held us up for some time. A meal break at Gretna Green service station was welcomed; the 'hot meal' stop before the first ascent.

Glasgow arrived, 9:30pm, and proved interesting. Suffice to say that all drivers 'unintentionally' took different routes on the complex motorway system. Mobile phones had to be used to co-ordinate a meeting north of Erskine Bridge. That escapade over, it was a steady scenic drive through the Scottish Lochs and Glens. We eventually arrived at Fort William almost 12 hours after leaving Northampton. It was 12:20am no rain, quite mild, low cloud but potential for clearing.

There was excitement in the air with anticipation of the first challenge. More so for me as it was my first visit to Ben Nevis.

The Highest Peak First - Ben Nevis (4409 ft with a round trip distance of approximately 9.5 miles)

Mick did a final check on the time, it was 1:00am, and the challenge started. A string of 32 lights wandered down the track from the car park, over the first stile that took us up to the start of the Pony Track. The gentle up-hill start gave the legs time to loosen up after 12 hours cramped in the mini-bus. Being a team event we had to make regular stops to allow the party to re-group. Eventually, we reached the loch that was about the half-way point. Here the path levelled out for a few hundred yards, a 'wee' break for the legs. We started up the steep zig-zag path that led up to the summit plateau. It was about 3 o'clock, dawn was breaking, but being in the clouds prevented us from enjoying the view. The temperature too had become cooler.

We reached the first patch of snow at about 3500ft, and a short while later, a larger area that had to be crossed. This required care as the snow was firm and slippy. It was not long after the snow that I saw 3 walkers coming towards us from the direction of the summit. I was rather intrigued to see that one guy was wearing a rather smart looking kilt on top of Ben Nevis in the early morning cloud.

The final stretch had to be taken very carefully as the path passed close to the edge of the north West Face, a drop of some 2000 feet. The danger was from overhanging snow close to the path. One wrong foot on the snow could have spelt disaster. Safely passed we arrived at the top of Scotland and the British Isles with visibility below 20 feet. The time was 5:15am. Photographs were taken, drink and food consumed then the start of the descent.

It is often thought to be easier going down hill, but I know differently. 4400 feet of continual

stress on the knees was no joke. Progress down was OK, eventually getting below clouds. At last a view of the Scottish scenery. At this point Mick decided it would be safe for the group to split. The 'speed merchants' (me included) set off at their own pace. Mick remained with the rest of the walkers.

The final few hundred feet put a little strain on my right knee although my 'fell walking' stick helped to take most of the shock. It was 7:45am as I reached the car park. Just in time as the rain started within minutes of my arrival. So, that was the first Peak out of the way. A big plus for me as it was my first climb of 'the Ben' and my first 'Munro' bagged. (*Seasoned walkers participate in bagging 'Munros' - Scottish hills over 3000ft*)

Passage South

After a quick wash and brush-up, it was breakfast at Safeways in Fort William. Mick continued with his usual routine of having breakfast before the journey south. With reasonably full 'tummies' we were heading for our next peak Scafell Pike in the Lake District. No problems negotiating Glasgow, this time straight through onto the M74. It had rained since we left Fort William, and the weather showed little sign of improving. A quick stop at Gretna Green (2:30 pm) then on to Keswick and through to Seathwaite farm in Borrowdale. The start of Peak 2. It was 4:25pm on a wet and windy Saturday afternoon when we arrived at Seathwaite farm.

Rainproof clothing was required for the start as the weather did not look too good. Overcast sky, wind and rain with clouds low on the fells.

To the Top of England - Scafell Pike (2995 ft of climbing and approximately 6 miles of walking)

We started walking at 4:50pm. The transport left at the same time for Wasdale Head which was the end of the walk. (*This was the one Peak we did not re-trace our route*) The walk up Grains Gill was reasonably gentle until the approach leading to Great End. Here the weather became increasingly windy with driving rain. The stream at the top of Grains Gill was in full flood. It took almost 15 minutes to get all walkers safely across. We reached the exposed area of Esk Hause after about 2 ½ hours of walking. Here the wind and driving rain made things extremely unpleasant. To make matters worse we were in the clouds with visibility down to about 50 metres. We hoped there would be a little shelter from the wind on the other side of Scafell Pike.

A couple of the group were beginning to suffer from the cold so we had to keep on the move. Mick suggested that I took the quicker walkers to the foot of Scafell Pike, find shelter in the rocks and wait for them to catch up. Having climbed Scafell Pike a couple of times I was happy with following the path, plus I had a map and compass to provide confidence checking.

It took about 45 minutes to arrive at the col below Scafell Pike. Peter, the young lad who was suffering from the cold had cheered up. (*He later told me that he suffered from claustrophobia and he was not too happy being in the clouds at that height.*) Eventually Mick appeared through the clouds with the remainder of the group. We proceeded up the small scree slope to the top. I led Peter up and he was the first to the Trig point at the top. He was pleased to be the highest person in England! It was now 8:20 pm.

So that was the second peak climbed, all we had to do now was get down.

The wind was not as severe on top, though the rain continued incessantly. Mick decided it would probably be too slippery to take the Brown Tongue path from Mickeldore below Scafell. Another path dropped down to a col at Lingmell then down to Wasdale. It was decided to take this route.

After a short, and it was short, break we were on our way down the Wasdale side of Scafell Pike. At times it was difficult to distinguish the path from the many streams that had suddenly developed through the continuous heavy rain.

We struggled on with the aim of being out of the clouds before darkness. Although we all had

torches, the poor conditions were better to cope with in natural day light rather than rely on artificial light. The decent went on relentless. It was decided to split into two groups again with me leading the quicker walkers. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, lights became visible through the clouds. What a wonderful sight that was.

After more decent we eventually joined the Brown Tongue path. We soon found ourselves with a final problem. A swollen stream, which resembled roaring mountain rapids. The only solution for crossing was to find the shallowest point and wade through the water in small groups. This allowed us to support each other for stability thereby preventing individuals from being washed down stream. Unfortunately, it meant my dry feet were about to be submerged in 18 inches of water.

It was just turned 11:00pm, and with much relief, we arrived back at the mini-bus. It was onto the bus and a change into dry clothing - wonderful feeling. (*All the wet clothes went into polythene bags.*)

It was midnight by the time the remaining 'wet and bedraggled' walkers arrived back. Considering what we had just being through, Mick asked everyone if they wanted to carry on. Fortunately, the majority thought we should proceed to Wales and check the weather conditions.

Onward to Wales

We set off in convoy heading for the M6. I decided to try and get a little sleep on the journey to Wales. The next thing I remembered was arriving at a service station for a meal break. (*It was 2:45 Sunday morning and just over 24 hours since the start at Fort William.*) A cheese burger and coffee at that time of day is not the best of food, however nourishment was needed.

I was wide awake at 5:00am as we travelled along the north coast of Wales. Weather looked good, blue sky with a few clouds inland.

We passed through Bets-y-Coed arriving at Pen-y-Pass car park at 6:10 Sunday morning. It was still sunny with a freshening wind though the ridge of Grib Goch across to Snowdon was shrouded in clouds.

It was 6:50am as we all set off for the final peak.

The Final Summit - Snowdon (2381 ft of climbing, least ascent of the three, and approximately 8 miles of walking.)

The Pyg Track is the easiest and, other than the train, probably the quickest way to reach the top of Snowdon. It was a steady climb to where the path split into two, one climbed up to Crib Goch, the other along the hill side below the ridge of Crib Goch. Snowdon was covered in cloud but still no rain. We eventually arrived at the constructed path that took us up to the rail track. As we approached the rail track the full force of the wind could be felt.

The clouds cleared for a couple of minutes as the first train, minus passengers, approached. We plodded up the last couple of hundred yards to reach the third peak surprise, surprise, shrouded in clouds with, yet again, no view. The time was 8:50am. Took the mandatory photos then made our way to the café for a hot drink.

At 10:00am we headed back to joined the Pyg track to start our descent. After an hour or so we split into groups and I found myself in the lead group. The going was quick and it was not long before we were on the final drop to the car park. Into the final mile we increased the pace eventually running the last few hundred yards. That extra bit of energy, mixed with a bit of excitement, helped us to complete the walk in 34.5 hours. Not a spectacular time for the National 3 Peaks, but a wonderful feeling of achievement.

More photos followed, with a can of beer to celebrate, and then wait for the organiser Mick and the remainder of walkers to complete the challenge. A big welcome for all as they approached the car park, with more photos and more beer. Everyone was elated at having completed the challenge..... especially having endured the appalling conditions on Scafell Pike.

The time arrived for the journey back to where it all began - Northampton. However, a final stop at Betsy-y-Coed for a very welcome portion of very 'scrummy' fish & chips, then on to Northampton. It was 6:30pm Sunday when we arrived back at Micks house. What an end to a splendid adventure.

Conclusion

So that was my account of the 'Mick Finch National (36 Hour) 3 Peaks Challenge'.

In the 60 hours I travelled by road approximately 1200 miles, visited 3 countries, climbed three mountains, a total distance of just over 26 miles with a total ascent of over 9000ft. I raised £520.00 in sponsorship, which I know will be greatly accepted by Naomi House Children's Hospice.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks for your kind sponsorship for this event.

Credits

First and foremost I would like to offer my warmest thanks to Mick Finch, the organiser. It was his kind invitation via the Internet that enabled me to complete this challenge.

I would also like to thank the two drivers of my mini-bus (bus 3) for such a brilliant job, often driving in miserable conditions. They also provided plenty of happy banter that helped to lift our spirits.

Finally, my utmost thanks to all the walkers and other support members who made me so welcome as part of their group. All complete strangers before we met on Friday 18 June. It was a pleasure to be part of such a high spirited challenge.

Sandy Saunders