

THE EARLY YEARS

Late in 1966 John Huxley fell in with a crowd from the Ex-Aber Club, which comprised former students (he having been there briefly in 63/64) at University College, Aberystwyth.

"I groaned inwardly as John Jenkins vanished enthusiastically round the next overhang. I blamed drink for my predicament. I was staying with the ex-Aberystwyth crew at their hut in Capel Curig and the previous night had seen quite a session at the Ty'n-y-Coed Hotel. The conversation, naturally, was about climbing and, fuelled by alcohol, I was in full flow about the climbs I'd done. The suggestion of the Carreg Hyll-Drem girdle seemed at the time to be a good, if slightly exciting, idea. So here I was, me, one-time leader of Hard Severes and a small selection of mild VS's and pretty rusty to boot, seconding Jenkins, a seasoned rock-climber, on a girdle traverse graded HVS on a cliff then still spoken of (by me anyway) in hushed tones!

"I will not dwell on the details of the route except to say the overhangs impressed me. I fell off on several occasions and was saved only by the superb, divvy-proof protection that my fearless leader had wisely put in place. The following day the merciless Jenkins dragged me up Oxo and Shake on Clogwyn y Wenallt, where falling was prevented by the provision of the kind of tight rope not possible on a girdle traverse. I resolved to give up climbing and start a mountain-walking Club.

In February, 1967, several months after his Jenkins experience John Huxley found himself under heavy parental pressure to abandon his odd-job existence as a fork-lift driver (for Batchelors Peas), a supply driver (for PGL Holidays) and latterly as a potato-picker (for Meurig Owen) and find a proper job. He secured steady, if dull, employment as an audit clerk in the City Treasury in Liverpool, living, initially, with his sister-in-law's mother, Doris, in Aigburth. Following an inconclusive brush with the Ibex Club, based in Woolton, he returned to the idea of starting a new club. Les Fowles had also returned to the Northwest from London and Penny Wilson was back from Basingstoke:

"At that time there was no mountaineering club presence on the Wirral, and as our old social scene seemed to have dissipated I thought that forming a club would perhaps kill two birds with one stone. I telephoned Fowles with my suggestion. He was keen and we agreed to share the cost of an advert in the Liverpool Echo which, because of the horrors of my Jenkins experience, would announce the proposed formation of a mountain-walking club based on the Wirral. A number of people rang Doris' phone number as instructed in the advert....."

Penny was also enthusiastic about the venture and it was agreed that the new club should have a Welsh name because North Wales was to be the main activities base. One Sunday Penny and Huxley were bowling through Betws-y-Coed in her baby Austin en route back from a day on the hill:

"There you are!" she said.

"What?"

"That hotel we've just passed, the Gwydyr Hotel, we'll call the club The Gwydyr!"

"The Gwydyr? Good idea. Don't you think you should put your lights on?"

"There's no need, I can see perfectly well."

"Yes, but can other people see you?"

"Do you want to walk back, or what!"

"Gwydyr. It's a jolly good name for a club."

Penny, Les and Huxley sat nervously in the lounge of the Horse and Jockey at Upton. They knew from the telephone calls to Doris' number that a number of people should, in theory, turn up. How they were supposed to recognise each other was a different matter. They had chosen, hopefully, a quietish night in a quietish bar. It was just before 6.30 in the evening on Tuesday, March 7th, 1967. It's difficult at this distance in time to remember exactly who arrived first and what order everyone arrived in but there were certainly a total of 13 people present at that inaugural meeting. One guy, who turned out to be Bruce Jensen, the first club president, spent about two hours at the bar before deciding finally that the group in the corner must be this proposed club he had come along to discuss. One important decision was that they should hold an outdoor meet as soon as possible and an ascent of Moel Siabod the following Sunday, the 12th, was chosen as the Club's first ever meet on the hill. The name Gwydyr was also announced, to some bafflement! To quote from Roger Hughes' excellent article in the 1992 magazine "What's in a name":

"Huxley sprang upon us the name Gwydyr and this was greeted with a resounding silence. When we had collected our thoughts (and another pint), we asked him what it meant. Well, he wasn't too sure but it was a good old Welsh name, there was a Gwydyr Castle, a Gwydyr Forest, a Gwydyr Hotel and anyway it tripped off the tongue nicely. We should call ourselves The Gwydyr Mountain Club!"

We remained unconvinced. The assumption was that we would operate in the Lakes as well as in Snowdonia so it seemed odd to choose a name so obviously Welsh. What about the Wirral Mountain Club? That way we were not committed to one particular mountain area. Well, said Huxley; (bringing to bear the sharp intellect we have now all come to know and love) there are no mountains on the Wirral. Difficult to argue with that!"

After some interesting research into the name Gwydyr the article concludes:

"Oh, for goodness sake let him have his way" said Penny," after all it was his idea to form the club in the first place."

Will he buy us a pint?

Yes.

Done!

What's in a name?

The Gwydyr Mountain Club for ever!!!!"

Also, it was decided that they should seek a private room in a pub in which to meet and the Birkenhead Brewery Company was approached to see what they had available. Either at this meeting or shortly afterwards the first club officers emerged: they were Bruce Jensen as President, Roger Hughes as Treasurer, and Les Fowles as Secretary. The contribution made by these early pioneering club officers was invaluable in setting standards for the future. The following week they met up at the Horse & Jockey again (March 14th) and agreed that a Snowdon meet would be held on Sunday the 19th and that all members would pay 2/6 (12.5p) for all indoor and outdoor meets attended so as to build up a club fund. A group of eight was emerging: Penny, Les Fowles, John Huxley, Roger Hughes, Bruce Jensen, Bernie Machin, Bob Rowlands and Dave White. All these appeared on the Snowdon meet and each were duly relieved of 2/6 each by the Treasurer. In the meantime the Birkenhead Brewery Company had written offering a room in the Park Hotel on

Charing Cross in Birkenhead and the first meeting there was on Tuesday, 21st March, where members duly parted with another 2/6 and so it went on.

A burst of administrative activity characterised the club's first six months: the club's formation, and its early meets, were advertised in " Ramblers Notes" (letter April 28th) and in the Liverpool Echo and "Climber" magazine (letter April 13th). The Club applied for affiliation to the British Mountaineering Council. On 9th May 1967, the first Club Constitution was published, a model of clarity and brevity and almost seeming to date from a lost age of innocence:

GWYDYR MOUNTAIN CLUB CONSTITUTION

- 1) The club shall be known as the Gwydyr Mountain Club and shall exist to promote an interest in mountains and activities thereupon.
- 2) The Club shall meet weekly for indoor meets and every three weeks for outdoor meets, or as shall be decided by the members.
- 3) Members shall become full members on payment of not less than four half-crown subscriptions including attendance at, at least, one outdoor meet.
- 4) Subscription to the Club Treasury shall be at the rate of half-a-crown (2/6) per meet attended.
- 5) A member not attending meets for a period of three months without notification of reason will be considered to have lapsed membership.
- 6) All issues except alteration to the constitution will be decided by discussion between, and voting by, members present. A quorum of 10, of which 5 must be full members, will be necessary at weekly meetings.
- 7) The constitution will be subject to revision at a General Meeting of members, the time and date of which is to be circulated to members. A quorum will consist of 50% of the full membership.
- 8) The officers of the Club shall consist of President, Secretary and Treasurer who shall be elected annually by popular vote. There will be two auditors (who shall not hold any other office in the club).
- 9) In the event of the winding up of the club by a General Meeting all funds to hand will be donated to the Mountain Rescue Committee.

And that was it!

Compare this with the current constitution (see Appendices) which needs twenty-two main clauses and twenty-seven sub-clauses in order to cope with an admittedly more developed and complicated set-up.

In May the Club wrote to Liverpool University enquiring about the use of their climbing wall (The "mountain-walking only" idea was already in retreat); in August the Club was already enquiring about a bigger premises; at the end of August Roger Hughes, the treasurer, published the first Statement of Account for the six months to 31st August 1967.



Lyn Crafnant, December 1967
At back: John Huxley, Dave White, Penny Wilson, Mike McEneaney
In front: Roger Hughes, Bruce & Cynthia Jensen,



Alan Cowderoy and Paddy at Tremadoc



John Huxley and Carol Doodson at Tremadoc

The half-crown donations were an excellent way of giving club funds a kick start, with the keenest members paying £3-15-00 (£3.75) each for the first half-year and this was in 1967. A footnote showed that there were fifteen members (i.e. those who had paid at least four half-crowns and had attended at least one outdoor meet). Female members were something of a rarity: the breakdown was Penny and fourteen males.

The meets list for 1967 showed a wide variety of destinations in North Wales, The Lakes and the Pennines, particularly when one considers the limited number of cars, scooters etc available. Certainly, some members hitch-hiked to meets.

Whether all these meets actually took place is lost in the mists of time but a good number certainly did. The list read as follows:

March 12 th	Moel Siabod
March 19 th	Snowdon
April 8 th /9 th	Langdale
April 29 th /30 th	Peak District
May 20 th /21 st	Fellsman Hike
May 27 th -29 th	Lakes
June 10 th /11 th	Helvellyn
July 1 st /2 nd	Rhinogs
July 22 nd /23 rd	Ogwen
Aug 12 th /13 th	Pennines
Sept 2 nd /3 rd	Skiddaw
Sept 23 rd /24 th	Arans
Oct 14 th /15 th	Cader Idris
Nov 4 th /5 th	Arenigs
Nov 25 th /26 th	Carneddau
Dec 16 th /17 th	Nantlle Ridge

On 23rd October the Club wrote to the Forestry Commission enquiring whether they had any properties available for rent or purchase. Access to the hills from November to February was, however, severely restricted by the appalling foot-and-mouth disease outbreak of 1967/68. During this period local walks and climbing at Irby Quarry came into their own, plus trips to the University climbing wall which commenced in October 1967. By the time the epidemic had run its terrible course, no fewer than 212,000 cows, 108,000 sheep and 114,000 pigs had been slaughtered across the U.K.

Membership in that first year grew slowly, based on the "Group of Eight". On May 9th Alan Rouse, Mike McEneaney and Ian "Squire" Patton came along (The "Squire" was Hon.Sec. for two years, 1969/70 and 70/71). Hartley Gherkin also appeared - the only entry in club records of that resounding name! He paid 2/6 and was never seen again-perhaps it was a bit expensive for him. Of Rouse and McEneaney, much more later. Ross Larsen arrived on 27th June, "Johnnie" Sandhu, a Gherkin-style one-off, on 1st August, Phil Cryer on 16th January 1968, Nick Parry (who was to become a climbing partner of Al Rouse) on 26th March and Fred Heywood (who was also to become a Rouse partner) on 2nd April, the date of the first AGM. In the minutes of that historic meeting the Club President, Bruce Jensen, commented as follows:

"The meeting marked the completion of a most successful first year for the Club. It was hoped that during the coming year there would be larger numbers of members attending official meets regularly and that individual members would make every effort to introduce prospective new members, especially female." (This all sounds very familiar)



 TALBOT ROAD, OXTON, BIRKENHEAD
 CHESHIRE - L43 2HJ
 Tel.: 051 - 652 4847

18th March 1971.

Gwydyr Mountain Club.

Dinner

		£	p
30 Dinners @ £1.25		37	50
Service + 10%		3	75
7 B&T. Entre-deux-Mers @ £1.		7	00
2 " Mateus Rose @ £1-20		2	40
		£50	65

A committee was formed for the first time comprising the President, Secretary, and three other members. A Club Expedition was noted as a good idea for the future. The first Annual Dinner had been held on Friday, 1st March 1968 for 24 people at the Riverhill Hotel in Oxtton. The cost was 23/- per head. This was the first of seven dinners at the Riverhill, 1968-1974 (1975 saw the first dinner at the Ty'n-y-Coed).

An advertising campaign in the Birkenhead News in April 1968, proved to be very worthwhile. On 7th May, John Beamer and Maurice Ewing arrived (although they came because Al Rouse found them at The Breck, a local climbing outcrop), on 14th May, Joan Craddock, on 21st May, Ruth Craddock, Sheila Baxter and Betty Leather, on 28th May, Ros McBride, on 4th June Hilary Pinches. Everyone, Penny especially, was pleased that the almost exclusively

male mould had been broken at last. New members continued to arrive: on 9th July, Arthur Davies, on 16th July Wally Davies and Dave Cannon, on 23rd July Carol Doodson, on 6th August George Robinson, on 3rd September John Hall, on 8th October John Fraser (a future chairman), on 22nd October Eddie Edwards (of whom more later). Chris Hall and Chris Read came along on 5th November and Terry Clare and Darrell Swift on 17th December. "We felt we had moved forward from the original Group of Eight towards the foundations of a more substantial organisation".

In May 1968, C.D.Milner, author of "Rock for Climbing" and a famous local bank manager, gave a slide lecture at the Park Hotel, the first of many such evenings over the years. During the year there were meets in various places: the Club booked the University of London hut at Gwern-y-Gof-Uchaf, the Keswick M.C hut above the Honister Pass and the Mountain Club (Stafford) hut in Cwm Cowarch (Arans). The search for a permanent North Wales base, which had started back in October 1967 with a letter to the Forestry Commission, continued and an unsuccessful tender was submitted for a cottage at Dolwyddelan.

By far the most significant event of the year was the renting of the Llanrwst hut as a stop-gap measure. This was taken on a rent of £2 per week plus rates. Hut fees were, of course, 2/6 per night (non-members 4/-). Les Fowles solemnly signed the agreement as Club Secretary on 24th November 1968: The tenancy was for a minimum of twelve months, after which it could be terminated by three months notice on either side. Fowles and Huxley drew up some eminently sensible but somewhat optimistic Hut Rules, mainly to do with not living in a shit-tip and not annoying other people. Rule number one said :

"Please keep noise down to a reasonable level, especially at night there are permanent caravan dwellers with young children on the site." Oh dear!



Ken Clowes and Maurice Ewing



John Beamer and Gill Morris/Beamer
in the Llanrwst hut



Joe Ronayne returns from a day's climbing



Gill Morris/Beamer and Heather Read/Huxley
outside the hut

The impact of the Llanrwst hut, a "permanent" base close to the mountains, on the level of activity was enormous for both climbing and walking. (The vibrant Llanrwst climbing scene is covered in "On Rock"). From 1968, the 14 Peaks became an annual event. One of the many advantages of being in a town (apart from its eight pubs) was the railway station. On one occasion this was used to get to Blaenau Ffestiniog and do the Moelwyns, there being time for an off-the-hill pint before catching the train back to Llanrwst.

The hut was not many steps up from a hovel, especially with the GMC inside it. Easy access to eight pubs, particularly in the winter, could cause problems. Although this was one of the Club's most active periods it was also a rich source of stories and no account of this formative period would be complete without a few of the more savoury ones. It has to be remembered that most of the members were in their early and middle twenties, with few older people to exert a controlling influence.

Ross Larsen was a merchant navy officer, fearsome drinker, and solid, all-round mountaineer. During his global travels he had met a girl called Judy in Sydney. The Larsen charm worked and she became his fiancé. One time, when Judy was over in the U.K. for a visit, Ross dragged her down to Wales, probably with reassurances like "superb place" and "super people" etc. What she made of the cheerful slum of the Llanrwst Hut is not recorded but what is certain is that the following morning she thought even less of it or, more accurately, less of Ross, who had disgraced himself following an excessive intake of Guinness at the Fairy Falls in Trefriw.

Eddie Edwards was a tremendous character with a somewhat accident-prone reputation. He was particularly prone to losing his denture when eating cheeseburgers and his driving habits were legendary. To this day no-one can have seen a finer example of molehusbandry than Eddie's fabulous right-angled parking efforts on Llandudno promenade. However, in spite of this, Huxley did manage to get him safely up the Ordinary Route on the Slabs, and down again.

At the opposite end of the driving spectrum was Maurice Ewing of broad bridging fame (see "On Rock"). He possessed a Mini Cooper (now that John Beamer had learnt to drive and had taken charge of the Mini-van) and one morning gave Huxley a lift down to the Cheese & Egg (The GMC's favourite breakfast stop) in Betws-y-coed:

"I can't remember why I was in Maurice's car - his driving scared me to death-but there must have been some good reason. That was the last time I ever travelled with Maurice-not because we crashed or anything like that but because of something he said. We were travelling down the fairly bendy B-road. As we drifted round a corner at about 90mph, he began to fiddle with his glasses. 'You know' he said 'I really can't see too well with these'. All I could see was a wall, approaching fast. I dosed my eyes. About three and a half seconds later, we had arrived. Two men entered the cafe. One was relaxed, smiling benignly. The other was shaking, ashen-faced. I'll give you one guess which was which".

The hut was in a place called Kerry's Orchard (sadly, today covered in houses, following years when new members would be taken to see "the Shrine"). It comprised two wooden huts, one of which the GMC occupied (the other was empty), a few caravans, some permanently occupied, and, in summer, a few campers. The Kerrys were moderately prosperous farmers who lived in a rather nice stone house just up the hill. Although Mrs Kerry seemed to be in charge of the Orchard, it was to see Mr Kerry that Fowles and Huxley were summoned whenever there was a complaint from our fellow

orchard dwellers. On these occasions Mr Kerry, an extremely courteous man, would pour them each a sherry and lecture them gently about their behaviour and general lack of contribution to Welsh culture. He must have wondered whether the income from the hut was worth the trouble. Mrs Kerry was, I think, rather embarrassed by these affairs and would appear at the hut in subsequent weeks saying "Oh, you are naughty boys and girls but I do like you!" Well, Club members always had a certain charm.

Away from Llanrwst there were plenty of other things going on: 1969 saw the first of five successive meets at Chamonix (See "The Alps"). There were meets elsewhere in the U.K., especially in The Lakes and Scotland; Al Rouse climbed "Beatnik" at Helsby; the AGM in March 1969 saw a new constitution and the demise of the beloved 2/6's in favour of an annual subscription of £4 (or quarterly £1-2-0).

However, the main activity centre continued to be Snowdonia and our base in Llanrwst. The Welsh Three Thousands (14 Peaks) had become an annual event although it was to be 1971 before it was established on the late June week-end where it has been ever since (see "The Welsh Three Thousands" . Then as now, it was an excellent Club event, with a large number of members either competing or supporting. The rock-climbing, dominated by Rouse's activities, continued apace. In 1971, he fell 30ft on the second ascent of Falls Road. Undeterred, he went on to solo Boldest Direct and Great Wall in the same day, He led Suicide Wall on sight in one pitch, subsequently soloing that as well. Clearly, there was greatness in the making.

It was June 19th 1971: Roger Hughes and John Huxley were ascending the Devil's Kitchen path in lashing rain, assisted by a considerable intake of ale in Capel Curig. The intention was to camp at Llyn y Cwn so as to be on station for the mountain-top blessing the following morning. This involved that great romantic, John Hall and his first wife June, Huxley's brother Keith, who was a Church of England vicar, and sundry GMC members. Hall had asked Huxley to see if the Rev K. would be amenable to such an event and the Rev., being a keen hillwalker himself, had readily agreed. Apart from something of a battle to pitch, the next thing our intrepid duo can remember was Chris Hall throwing stones at the tent in the morning. They all duly assembled on the summit of Y Garn and Keith read a nice little blessing service and a bottle of bubbly was breached. John & June split up in the Alps a couple of years later but the blessing has passed into Club history.

One of the funniest incidents involved Alan "Daffodil Eater" Cowderoy (known as Cowboy) and the flamboyant Kenny Clowes, who was then the Treasurer. One dark night, having returned from the usual Llanrwst pub-crawl, it was decided that they should tour the town on Cowboy's trusty scooter:

"For some reason they set off with Kenny wearing only his underpants and headed for the town square where they were firmly stopped by the law. Cowboy beamed: 'Just out for a ride round the block, officer!' 'Nothing wrong with that' said the officer, 'It's your naked pillion passenger I'm objecting to. Maybe you can do that sort of thing in England, sir, but it's not allowed in Llanrwst'."

By all accounts the constable was quite a decent bloke but I think they had quite enough anarchy from the locals without us adding to it. Cowboy was sent back to get Kenny some clothes while the latter jogged up and down a nearby alley, trying to keep warm, with the policeman on guard at the entrance. No charges were laid and Cowboy hardly drank

anything so there was no question of drunk driving. These days we would call it good community policing"

It was raining heavily in Llanrwst one Sunday. The Club had a wide range of contingency plans for times like these: they included low-level walks like the Crafnant/Geirionydd circuit; climbing at Tremadoc; and drinking and other Llanrwst-based activities (such as fooling about on the river). "Let's go to the Victoria Gaming Room!" shouted Hughes. Enthusiastically, he grasped the mid-air conduit and swung from where he was perched on one of the top bunks. Alas, a lack of speed control or, indeed, any kind of control, caused him to smash with some force into the opposite bunk and collapse in a painful heap on the floor. The session in the Victoria (now, sadly, long since closed) was excellent but I think Hughes was a little quieter than usual.

One time Frank Bennett caused a slight problem:

"It was some unspeakably early time on a Sunday morning and the previous night the GMC had as usual rounded off a hard day on the hill or on the rock by drinking at a selection of Llanrwst's eight hostelrys. They were all semi-comatose in their sleeping bags when Mr Kerry's unmistakable Welsh accent was heard, saying something like 'Mr Frank Bennett is lost on the moors'. Frank Bennett, GMC character and piss-artist, was on some meet at Wildboarclough with the Manchester lads, an excellent bunch of characters whose unofficial leader was Willy Ogden, a Manchester stockbroker and guitarist. We arose on hearing of this emergency and crossed three counties to arrive at the police station at Macclesfield only to find out that he had turned up, having fallen asleep in someone's garage. Oh, was he popular!"

Another scare occurred when Alan Parker and Wendy Burrows went off to do Great Gully on Craig yr Ysfa in January 1972. They had left it rather late and when Wendy declined to follow the final diagonal pitch they were left with no option but to bivvy. The rest of us had no option but to call out the Ogwen Mountain Rescue Team (OMR). The rescue took place the following morning: Wendy came down in the helicopter but Alan walked down. They were both O.K. and duly made a contribution to OMR funds.

Away from the hills there was the Club social scene: one of the most enjoyable events was the annual football match between The GMC and Heswall Lawn Tennis Club, held at a playing field in Pensby and followed by disco & drinks at the Tennis Club in the evening. Unfortunately it ended because a few people on both sides starting taking things rather too seriously. And there were parties, of course, including some at the legendary Val Greenwood's.

For some members it was traditional to round off a hard day on the hill with a good sphagnum moss fight. This unobtrusive activity consisted of grabbing handfuls of the bog-moss *Sphagnum Papillosum* and projecting it towards the nearest member. On one unfortunate occasion in Cwm Silyn Huxley hit John Beamer with a particularly juicy specimen: it removed one of his contact lenses and had four of them crawling through the bog in search of it. Incredibly, they found it. But then Beamer's contact lenses always had a hard time of it (see "North of the Border").

Another alternative activity took place at High Park, a derelict mine in the Gwydyr Forest. Although this was also the scene of some serious underground work by the caving-inclined members, it also provided a chance to descend the side of its enormous slag-heap at speed on

an old car bonnet. Then there were the antics on and around the river, especially the famous river race and general fooling-round off the bridge at Llanrwst.



John Beamer outside the Llanrwst hut

One of the great post-pub activities was listening to John Beamer reciting from the Hut Log: sometimes, he wore a road cone on each foot while doing this. More normally, though, he would dance around in the road cones afterwards. Water fights provided a much messier alternative.

The Llanrwst Hut days ran from 8th December 1968 to 7th May 1972. They were brought to an end by the building of a row of semis overlooking the hut. Complaints mounted and Mrs Kerry found her position as a town councillor increasingly embarrassing as news about activities on her property flooded in. So Fowles and I were summoned up the road for the final time: Mr Kerry, true to form, politely gave us a sherry and then

gave us our marching orders, three months notice. I remember thinking what a civilised man he was. Our behaviour had possibly improved slightly but the proximity of the houses was always going to be difficult: how would you like a mountaineering club at the bottom of your garden? However, the end was really just the beginning: three weeks after leaving the Llanrwst hut we completed the purchase of Tan-y-Garth at Capel Curig.....

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