

THE WELSH THREE-THOUSANDS

The nice old name for this classic mountaineering expedition seems somehow much more evocative than the slightly functional "14 Peaks" (or 15 Peaks, as some would now have it, following the promotion of Camedd Uchaf). As with any route, there are different ways of doing it: some start on Crib Goch; some ascend Pen-yr-Ole Wen from the east end of Ogwen; some even do it north-south, finishing on Snowdon; whichever way is chosen the Welsh Three Thousands is a memorable experience.

For someone who prefers the old name for this walk there is, of course, only one way of doing it: start on Snowdon, descend to Nant Peris via the north ridge of Crib Goch, ascend Pen-yr-Ole Wen from the west end of Ogwen, contour round to do Yr Elen before Carnedd Llywelyn, finish at Bwlch y Ddeufaen (Pass of the Two Stones). You are unlikely to meet anyone who claims that the Welsh Three Thousands is easy. At 24 miles (plus getting up Snowdon and getting down Foel Fras) and some 10,000ft. of ascent, this is a very hard day on the hill. Of course, even traditionalists will agree that there is nothing wrong with starting on Crib Goch, or doing Pen-yr-Ole Wen from the east end of Ogwen, or any other variation that comes to mind, as long as one ascends all the summits in a single expedition unbroken by a night's sleep.

To a large extent, The Welsh Three Thousands is as much a mental problem as a physical one. This especially applies to one's first attempt: after that, you know you can do it, it's not impossible. But some people have to feel right on the day and anything less than perfect mental fitness just will not do; on the other hand, some people plod over it every year no matter what the conditions and can confidently expect to get to Two Stones eventually.

The GMC's first properly-organised 14 Peaks was held in 1968, with tented checkpoints above the Devil's Kitchen and on Foel Fras, in addition to the roadside ones at Nant Peris and Ogwen. That year, the pick-up was at Aber. It's quite a long haul down to there so the following year it was switched to Bwlch-y-Ddeufaen (Pass of the Two Stones). The "modern" approach is for checkpoints at Nant Peris and Ogwen only, with the final pick-up at Bwlch-y-Ddeufaen (Pass of the Two Stones), although members of the support group often walk over the Carneddau with some of the finishers (usually the last ones to cross) or go up onto Foel Fras to greet them there. There has been a Fourteen Peaks Race every year since 1968, with only one blank year (1978) when due to bad weather there were no finishers in spite of having two attempts at it.

In addition to the main trophy a Ladies Trophy and a Veterans' Hip-flask (for the over-forties) can now be won. Although the event is run as a race, most entrants just want to finish and from a Club point of view the most successful years have been those with a large number of finishers. The great thing about the event is that it involves a large number of people, either competing or supporting: this is surely what Club events are all about.

Early in the morning on the last Saturday in June (and indeed on other weekends during this period), the car park at Nant Pens is a busy scene as the various support groups wait for their respective competitors to come through. Those rare smoking members can be unusually welcome at this time because the midges can be dreadful. Some groups provide a full cooked breakfast but the GMC sticks to tea, coffee, orange juice and biscuits (plus, of course, insults and encouragement as appropriate).



At the Nant Peris checkpoint in 1979 with (l to r) June Ewing, Les Fowles, John Huxley Mike McEneaney, Simon Glover & John Hall



Mike McEneaney at the top of Elidir Fawr a little while later



Neil Harris, Sue Taylor and a very young Dave Gray at the Ogwen checkpoint in about 1983/4



Don MacIntosh greets Bill Sutherland on the summit of Foel Fras, the finish of the Welsh 3000's

Records of finishers and their times are only available for the most recent years, alas, but of course we have a complete record of winners. Just picking out a few years:

1974: one Nick Steen won, having only appeared at Club for the first time the previous week. "But he's not a member!" someone said. "Ah, but we gave him permission to take part without any restrictions." someone else said. The latter view prevailed and Nick's name was duly engraved on the trophy.

1976: Robin Payne (see "Going Long-Haul") won and presented us with a new tankard on his departure for New Zealand.

1977: Pete Hailing won for the third time, the only person to do so before the Sutherland era.

1981: There were joint winners, Mike McEneaney and Anne Harnden, the year of the Great Support Cockup (we shall mention no names). The only other joint win was by Fred Heywood and Bernie Machin in 1969.



Bill Sutherland at the 1981 Capel Curig Show

1983: The beginning of the Sutherland era, when Bill Sutherland ran the race as a fell-run and won that year and six out of the next eight years, the exceptions being 1989 and 1991 when Cress wrestled the crown away from Bill by running even more suicidally. This was the height of the Bill S./Cress rivalry, a harmless battle which provided great amusement to the rest of us. Cress in fact holds the all-time Club record of 6 hours 53.

One year, Al Rouse decided to have a go, probably to get fit for some overseas epic. "Have you seen Rouse?" I asked a weary competitor on his arrival at Ogwen. "Yeah.-he was messing about on Tryfan, rock-climbing and stuff. He probably got bored."

Another year Pip & Ian, friends of Nuala's, came out on the Friday of the 14's to assist with the support. Ian asked all about the event. "How far is it?" he asked.

"Well, its twenty-four miles summit to summit and about ten thousand feet of ascent; but of course you've got to get up Snowdon and down from the final summit to Two Stones"

"Twenty-four miles?" he said. "That should be no problem, I used to be in the army".

The following day, at about 18.30, a sadder and wiser man staggered into Ogwen. He had in fact done very well.

Records are unfortunately not available prior to 1994, but it was not uncommon for there to be fifteen to twenty starters with the number of finishers varying wildly depending on the weather and other factors. Numbers have declined somewhat since those days but the event still involves a large group of people (twenty-four at the 1998 event, twelve of whom were competing). From 1994 onwards the figures for people entering the walk itself and those finishing have been:

Year	Entered	Finished
1994	17	14 – an excellent result
1995	10	7
1997	8	3
1998	12	4



Anne Harnden, the first female to win the Trophy (in 1981). Pictured in South Wales with Bryan Gilbert

In 1988 a Veteran's Trophy (for the over-forties) was introduced. Jim Metcalfe was the first winner and then Mike McEneaney came surging back with three successive wins in 1989, 1990, and 1991. Mal Bonner, the current holder, then won it in 1992. Pete Smedley, Tom Bolt, Jim Metcalfe again (twice) and the Gilberts shared the intervening years and in 1997 we even had to give it to that man Sutherland.

In 1993, a Ladies Trophy was at last introduced. There had been no shortage of female finishers, of course, but with only one female winner, Anne Harnden in 1981, it was felt that many people had gone unrecognised. Sue Taylor, for example, has finished twice and on both occasions would have had her name on the trophy had it then existed.

(See the appendices for the full list of winners.)

[Return to Contents page](#)

[Go to next Chapter](#)