THE GWYDYR MOUNTAIN CLUB NEWSLETTER – EXTRA!

February 2025: Editor Dave Gray

Introduction

Welcome to the February Newsletter! This is an Extra! edition, with an article from Richard Smith on some varied aspects of the recent successful Ecuador meet. Many thanks to Richard, and also to Chris Harris, Helen Grant, Janet Coates, John Simpson, Nicki Hickin, and as ever DLJ for help with this edition. Please let me have material for the next edition, the final deadline for that is **early this month** being **19th February** owing to the timing of some of the other things I'm hoping to be doing.

Looking Ahead

Here are the upcoming meets venues for February and March, details are on the Club Website. The meets list is constantly being updated, please **check it out regularly** on the Website. Meets added to the programme since the last edition are in bold as a reminder **in case you've missed them…** Also, if you are interested in climbing meets a programme of **outdoor climbing** beginning in May, in addition to ongoing **indoor climbs** at the Boardroom, is now on the website.

4 February	Ecuador! – Slide show at Gallaghers
8 February	Saturday Walk – Sandstone Trail
15 February	**Saturday Walk – Wirral Walk: Heswall to Meols circular**
21-23 February	Hut Weekend
23-27 February	Fort William Trip
1 March	Saturday Walk – Minera and Esclusham Mountains
8 March	**Saturday Walk – West Yorkshire**
14-16 March	Hut Weekend
22 March	**Saturday Walk – Wirral (venue TBC)**
23-27 March	Fort William Trip

Venues in Focus

The **Fort William** meet is a highlight of the year. It's a great centre for the hills. The finest walk I've done based around here was the Carn Mor Dearg Arete. In summer conditions the last time in June 2002, it was a great day out and the difficulties of the Arete one can pass by on an avoiding route. It took us all day. It's a very different proposition in winter conditions, being a grade 1 snow and ice winter climb. Full winter gear the knowledge of how to use it is essential, and also an early start given the reduced daylight. Plenty of stuff on line about it!

Alert! - 'Old Fart' Warning Ahead! - I came nearest ever so far to dying in the hills on the Arete one March – lulled by easy snow on Ben Nevis we descended the arete, we had ice

axes but no crampons, and discovered 20 feet of concrete-like narrow sculpted snow covered the avoiding route. It's the only time I've seen someone ice axe break for real, and I remember desperately cutting steps up the final cone of Carn Mor Dearg as the only way to move at all. Not a clever idea.

The main 'tourist route' up the Ben is a long way on – subject to snow conditions and weather – a path. I think it's much maligned, the view from it of the Mamores particularly are very good. A safe descent in mist or heavy snow from the top depends on prior acquaintance with the safe compass bearings and the ability to follow them, which includes the ability to pace count well to measure distance travelled. Amongst other sites this one https://www.abacusmountainguides.com/blog/navigation-on-ben-nevis addresses this issue.

The SMC guide gives a summer conditions timing of 3 hours 50 minutes for the ascent of the tourist path, so a long day again. When I last did it we managed to get up in 4 hours, but took that time to do the descent as well.

What to do if you want easier stuff or the weather gods give you a heavy hint? If you are looking for possibly the easiest munro in the area and are not one of those people who demand constant unspoilt aesthetic beauty, you might try Meall a Bhuiridh from the Glencoe Ski Centre, as an up and down. Still needs respect though!

View from Meall a Bhuiridh (credit: Flickr.com)

I did this and its munro mate Creise years ago in thick mist – we saw nothing and were navigating hard on the second munro by compass and pace count. A website indicating how to get up Meall a Bhuiridh is at https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/fortwilliam/creise.shtml .

If you want a relatively easy lower hill, with superb views (despite some picky guide writers saying the hill is 'undistinguished'), try Beinn na Gucaig from Inchree, which we did on the 2018 Club trip. It's 2,018' high and is a Scottish 'Graham'. There is plenty of information on it available online, for example some posts describing the route are on the website page https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/Forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=115480 .

From Beinn na Gucaig – Garbh Bheinn)…. *….and Sgurr na h-Eanchainne.*

'

Undistinguished'?…good enough for me!

Moving down to sea level, on the same trip on an on-and-off mizzly day, Mark Barley and I did a fine atmospheric out and back walk from Polnish on the Fort William-Mallaig road, to the bothy in the deserted coastal village of Peanmeanach on the Sound of Arisaig. Sadly the bothy is no longer available, I think it was closed by the estate because people were misusing it. I should have had a stay there when I could!

This is not a long walk but it's pretty rugged and rough going. There's a description at https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/fortwilliam/peanmeanach.shtml .

Here's the river and the rockier bit of the beach, Mark in the bothy, and Loch Beag near the start/finish of the walk.

One point to note is that in wet weather the burn crossing may be a boots off job not stepping stones. That happened to us.

Mark is a keen and knowledgeable amateur geologist and had been picking up rocks. As we tackled the lively burn, knee deep, I was a bit concerned he'd meet a Heroic Victorian Style End: swept away by the weight of his own geological samples!

A final idea at sea level. There is a scenic coastal path/cycle track that goes south from Ballachulish towards Kentallan and Duror Bay. Near to the southern end is Cuil, the best sandy beach in the area. I've only ever done the start of this, and the OS mapping I found online on Bing Maps for this edition is rather contradictory, the 1:50K and the 1:25 tell different stories. The trail is Sustrans route 78 and their website map does indicate it goes all the way through, see https://www.sustrans.org.uk/find-other-routes/the-caledonia-way/ . I think it's a case of putting the three maps together!

Nearer home Janet's organising a Saturday walk on the **Sandstone Trail** focusing on the area of Bickerton, Raw Head, and Maiden Castle. The Sandstone Trail, which is a great long distance walk, broadly follows the line of the Mid Cheshire ridge. This must be in loads of photographs, as it's a prominent feature of views from both N. Wales and the Peak District.

The sandstone rocks are from the lower (i.e. early) to mid Triassic periods, starting approximately 250 million years before the present. The whole Triassic geological period lasted till about 201 million years ago. I got hooked on all this…so…

Climb aboard the time machine! Who and what will we see that long ago?

Well, ‘this is us being them’ because we are standing on lots of sand – ‘soon’ to be rock - in a semi desert at the same latitude as the present Sahara…

We’re not in North Africa though – there’s no Africa. The continental plates of the Earth’s crust have merged to form Pangea, one vast continent. Essentially, the sandstone rocks of the ridge were formed in the deltas of large rivers that bore loads of desert sand, and pebbles, in flood. This material was laid down as the rivers slowed towards their mouths, and over time the sand deposited was turned into rock by the pressure of its own weight and the chemical changes that pressure produced. Over the millions of years, different layers of rock were laid over each other.

Here's a picture of this sort of river in a desert landscape today (*photo: pinterest.co.uk*)

A long history of subsequent faulting, and the erosion of later rocks mean the sandstones are once again revealed on the surface today, with the different layers – called ‘formations’ looking like a gigantic cake. The main layers on the Trail are in ascending order of age to around 225m years ago: Chester Pebble Beds, Wilmslow Formation (mainly on the south of the ridge), and Helsby Formation (mainly seen in the north, and on the hill tops along the ridge).

This is the (early Triassic) crumbly, sandy red Wilmslow Formation seen at Raw Head, and the (mid Triassic) Helsby formation, darker, denser and harder, seen on Helsby Hill itself.

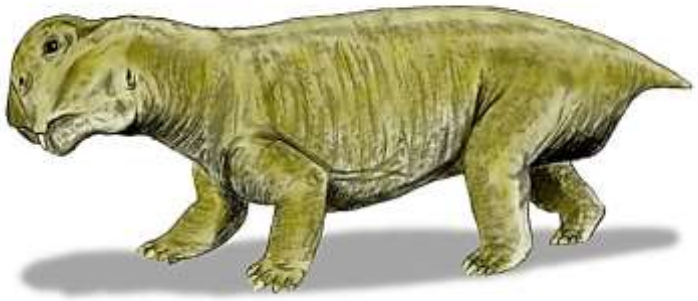
What we see from our time machine growing and wandering around on the sand depends on what rock we're standing on, as lifeforms change over the first half of the Triassic.

The Triassic dawned with the 'Great Dying' at the transition from the previous Permian period. The biggest known mass extinction in Earth's history, wiping out around 95% of species including most vertebrate animals. Scientists think it was caused by a severe toxic greenhouse effect, a result of the volcanic eruption of massive amounts of basalt in what is now Siberia; and/or an asteroid impact. Earth took around 10 million years to recover.

Our semi desert doesn't bloom – there are no flowering plants, which have yet to evolve. Grass hasn't evolved yet either. So it's ferns and conifers that dominate the available habitats, in forms many of which are not present today. It's believed there were huge prairies of ferns – so a bit like a Denbighshire footpath!

In terms of animals, the Early Triassic was dominated by Therapsids. This is a branch of the reptile lineage of animals, that has already split off from the descent lines that lead to modern reptiles, dinosaurs, and birds, who are called the Diapsids. Some later models of Therapsids, called cynodonts, evolved into mammals many millions of years later in the Late Triassic. So we are more closely related to now-extinct Therapsids than to birds or reptiles. We share with them a skull structure at a detailed level that differs from that of the Diapsids. Only us mammals now survive from the Therapsid lineage.

The most commonly found Therapsid, which we'll see, is a *Lystrosaurus* whose species ranged from the size of a small dog to up to 8 feet in length (see right). They were vegetarians with a powerful beak for biting plants and strong digging feet. Their life in burrows might have helped them survive the Great Dying.



The Diapsid lineage hasn't gone away. Fossils in Early Triassic rocks at Storeton on the Wirral show that *Chirotherium* , probably related to the ancestors of crocodiles, were active.

So watch out on your time travel as species of *Chirotherium* range up to about 8 feet long. Those found in Germany (see photo above), are believed to have eaten large horseshoe crabs, so packed a big bite.

As the Mid Triassic segued into the Late, the dominance of Therapsids was ended by the rise of the Diapsids in particular the dinosaurs, and the 'Age of the Dinosaurs' had truly begun. This process is thought by scientists to relate to a drying of the global climate.

Most of the information and photos for the above material came from Wikipedia and the more specialist websites below:

https://www.sandstoneridge.org.uk/geology-2/our-geological-heritage.html

https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/the-triassic-period-the-rise-of-the-dinosaurs.html

Grand Days Out (and In) – Recent Meets Highlights

Here's some great pictures for walks we've done around **Christmas and New Year**:

Tryfan…

… and Fynnon Llugwy…

…from the Carneddau

A cloud sea below Elidir Fawr

Twelve members and one prospective member enjoyed a nine mile mid-level walk taking in the **'3 Peaks' of Halkyn Mountain**. The snow was supplied by Good King Wenceslas – deep, crisp and even! Some of us also enjoyed an off the hill pint in the Bluebell Inn nearby.

View west to the Clwyds

A break below the lime kilns

Morning sunshine and snow…

…and fading light - looking SW from Halkyn Mountain summit…

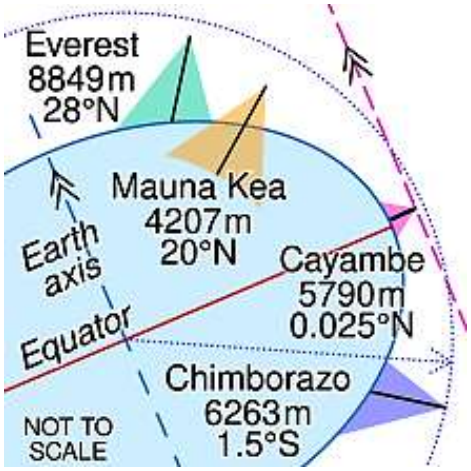
EXTRA!

ECUADOR TRIP – NOVEMBER 2024 – by Richard Smith

It had long been an ambition of mine to visit Ecuador and climb some of its volcanoes. The idea was circulated within the club in 2019 but then Covid came along, and everything had to be put on the backburner. We eventually got round to thinking seriously about it last year and finally, in November, six GMC members travelled out to Ecuador on a KE trip called “The Ecuador Triple Crown”.

Why Ecuador? Well firstly it is a beautiful country set in the northern part of the Andes, with dramatic scenery and exotic wildlife. And it boasts three high altitude volcanoes – Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Cayambe, with several notable geographical features:

- The point on the earth surface which is furthest from the centre of the earth (due to the equatorial bulge, the top of Chimborazo is 2000m further from the centre of the earth than is the top of Everest).
- Cayambe is the furthest point from the earth’s axis of rotation; therefore, it rotates faster than anywhere else on the planet, and it is the only point on the equator with snow cover.
- Cotopaxi is an active volcano and is known to have erupted 87 times, the last time in 2023.



We arrived in Quito, the capital city, which is 2850m above sea level, to start our acclimatisation and do some sightseeing. The Spanish influence was to be seen around the city, including San Francisco Square with its monastery full of dark religious paintings, clearly designed to warn the indigenous people what would become of them if they didn’t convert to Catholicism!

Statue of the Virgin of El Panecillo

The statue is taller than the one of Christ The Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, and is the tallest aluminium statue in the world.

We managed to squeeze in a day trip to the cloud forest NW of Quito, where we had great views of hummingbirds, tanagers, vultures and toucans. The hummingbirds would land on your hand to drink a sugar solution from a bottle top, provided by the ranger.

The main part of the KE trip started with a circuit of a volcanic crater lake, followed by a four-day acclimatisation trek, where we trekked through the high Andean plateau and camped by remote lakes. Most of the gear was carried by horses, so we could get used to the altitude whilst carrying our daypacks.

Remote camp below Yanuarco

On day 7 of the trip, we climbed our first volcano, Yanuarco, which was a good test of acclimatisation at 4535m.

Next came a higher volcano, Imbabura at 4609m, which featured a rocky scramble around the volcanic ridge at the top. Imbabura is classified as Inactive as opposed to Extinct, meaning it could potentially erupt again and is monitored by vulcanologists just in case.

After descending from Imbabura, we stayed at a homestay run by an indigenous couple, who served us with local dishes and persuaded Richard and Simmo to dress in native costumes.

Simmo and Richard M get all native!

We were now ready to tackle the first of the Ecuador Triple Crown, Cayambe. This involved a drive up to the Refugio Ruales Oleas Berge followed by an early night and wake up call at 11.00pm. We forced down some breakfast before donning headtorches and heading out into the dark.

It was hard going up the volcanic ash before reaching the glacier and putting crampons on. A cold wind blew down the glacier and it was a relief when daylight arrived. The glacier became snow covered as we gained height and some fearsome looking ice cliffs appeared. The altitude made progress slow and some of us had to turn back before reaching the summit. Well done to John Simpson and Richard Merry, who reached the summit at 5790m.

The Gwydyr team on Cayambe

After a day's rest back in Quito, next up was Cotopaxi, where we visited another lake and saw some Andean Foxes by the side of the track.

Another trudge up volcanic ash led up to the Cotopaxi refuge at 4864m. After a sleepless night, I didn't feel up to attempting the summit so stayed at the hut, whilst the others slogged up to the crater rim at 5897m, John, Richard and Chris all reaching the top.

Andean Foxes (closely related to wolves)

Summit crater of Cotopaxi

We visited another spectacular crater lake at Quilatoa, a settlement of indigenous Quechuan people and had lunch in a local restaurant. Any thoughts of trying the local dish, roasted guinea pig, were put off when we saw the (live) guinea pigs being delivered in a wooden crate.

Quilatoa crater lake

The last of the Triple Crown, Chimborazo at 6310m, now remained to be tackled. 4x4 vehicles took us as far as Refugio Hermanos Carrel at 4800m, and we then trekked up to a high camp at around 5200m.

Another midnight start saw us ascending towards the glacier, unaware in the darkness of the steep drops on our right. As a consequence of global warming, there was little snow on the lower reaches of the glacier and the going was tough and steep over the rough hard ice. Helen and I decided to turn back at around 5800m as our guide advised that we would not get to the top within the allotted timescale. But John, Richard and Chris carried on and all three made it to the summit. Congratulations all round!

High camp on Chimborazo *Simmo on the summit of Chimborazo*

We can definitely recommend Ecuador as a destination; the people are very friendly and hospitable, the scenery is superb, the accommodation was great and KE are an excellent company to travel with.

Richard Smith

January 2025