

# Early History of the Perth Mountaineering Club

Iain A Robertson

Perth Mountaineering Club began life in 1929 as an offshoot of the Edinburgh Junior Mountaineering Club of Scotland, which then became the Perth Section of the J.M.C.S. Since then, apart from a brief period of inactivity during the Second World War, the Club has provided a focus for mountaineering activity in all its forms for those living in the Perth area.

The J.M.C.S. was originally formed as a "feeder" club for the Scottish Mountaineering Club (S.M.C.) along with the other Sections in Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Lochaber and Inverness. All but the last of these are still active mountaineering clubs though, perhaps with the exception of the Glasgow Section, members rarely "feed through" to the S.M.C. in any great number. The four Sections still occasionally come together once a year for the "Whole Club AGM" and for joint meets. The influence and purpose of the "Whole Club" is endlessly debated, but it must be said that sections are, to all intents and purposes, autonomous.

The founder members of the Perth Section were:

- Alastair L Cram
- Chris Rudie
- James M<sup>c</sup>Nab
- Matthew "Fred" Gloag
- Denis W Howe

Prior to the Second World War membership and attendance at meets were too small to justify hiring

a bus (Hiring a bus was considered at the 1934 AGM, but at £6-3s-9d for a journey of 100 miles it was considered too expensive) and members' cars were used for frequent day and weekend meets throughout the year.



Founder members in Glencoe

The Minute Book of the Club notes that members enjoyed skiing during winter meets. One initiative which unfortunately came to naught was a guide book to the rock climbs in the "Sma' Glen, Ochils, etc."

Current members who attend meets to the CIC Hut may be interested to learn that prior to Easter 1930, the secretary had written to Fort William "regarding a pony for taking the food supplies to the Hut, but had received no reply".

Some flavour of the early days is given in the Perthshire Advertiser of 23 October 1954, which, under the heading "Perth Mountaineers Hold Silver Jubilee Celebration", gives a report of the proceedings at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner which had been held at the Spittal of Glenshee Hotel.

Here is the excerpt from Chris Rudie's speech.

“A few of us in Perth, including the late Denis Howe and Alistair Cram, used to go away on odd Sundays into the hills. As we soon found more chaps of like ideas, Alistair, a member of the J.M.C.S. [Edinburgh], hit on the plan of forming a Perth Section of that body. This was duly put into effect in 1929. The first unofficial meet was at Coylum Bridge in the Cairngorms over Easter, 1929, when those present were Alistair, Denis, Fred Gloag and I. We had quite an outing on our first day. In perfect weather we walked all the way up Glen Einich, Braeriach, Caim Toul, Angel's Peak and over the Great Moss to the head of the glen. Four Munros and some 25 miles later we staggered to the cottage where we were staying. Our feet were pretty raw when we put on our boots the next day. However, we were mountaineers now and in indifferent weather we had some grand scrambling on one of the buttresses of Scoran Dubh. Next year (1930) saw our first official meet on 2 March when, in brilliant sunshine, nine members ambled up Beinn Ghlas and Ben Lawers”.

The report continues: Mr Rudie, who is president of the Dundee Ski Club, said their most exciting meet was on Ben Nevis at Easter 1931. They started and finished in brilliant sunshine, but had a rip-roaring blizzard in between. No. 3 Gully nearly defeated two strong parties. After an unusually long day of step-cutting on neve and ice they were held up for a long time by a tricky overhanging cornice, which they eventually tunnelled through. It was dark when they reached the summit and less than half-an-hour after returning to the hut - about 11pm - a most fearsome blizzard descended. They were fortunate to be safely inside, for it lasted all through the next day.

Turning to personalities, he had this to say about Alistair Cram, who is now a Judge in Kenya:

"Alistair was selected by the leader of the Everest expedition and passed various strenuous tests, but, unfortunately, could not spare the time. But that showed the class of climber he was. It would have been particularly fitting if he could have been with us on this occasion, but as he is still in South Africa, it is not to be. And that is a great pity, not only because he initiated the formation of the Section, but because he was also, and no doubt still is, a great character. He had the makings of a great athlete and in fact won the Scottish mile championship one year. But the regimented training was too much for him and he withdrew from competitive running. He was a great individualist and hated regimentation, so it was a considerable surprise to the rest of us when he



The "Hut" Ben Nevis Easter 1931 Chris Rudie, John M<sup>c</sup>Nab and Robert M<sup>c</sup>Intyre

joined the Army early on in the war. He was eventually captured and spent most of his time escaping, being recaptured and escaping again. Each time the Germans would put him in a worse place but the bold Alistair would scale the most fearsome walls and be off once more. He did this, I believe, 5 times (the actual number was 14 times) and his escapades are mentioned in quite a few books of escape stories. He must surely be one of the few who was decorated MC for his exploits as a POW.

The 5<sup>th</sup> founder member, Denis W Howe, was tragically killed while climbing in the New Zealand Alps. He was 42 and quite the most popular man I have ever met. He was an all-round athlete, a great man at a party and yet with a serious purpose in life. He was a Rover Scout, organised summer camps for poor Perth children and also started a TOCH Group in Perth. He served with distinction throughout the war."

Writing to the Section from H.M. Supreme Court of Kenya, Nairobi, Mr Cram was also in reminiscent vein. He observed that the attitude to climbing had greatly changed in the last 25 years. At the beginning they were urged to exercise the greatest care, and any climb that was more than difficult according to the then standards was frowned upon. In those days they never saw other parties on the hills. There were no mountain schools and no techniques but the ones they learned as they went along.

Between the wars there was a dangerous tendency to elevate mountaineering into a kind of religion.

Mountaineers came to think they were super-men. But when World War II came along and ordinary men in the street became Commandos and frogmen, tank-men and pilots and extraordinary feats became commonplace, mountaineering dropped into perspective. "After all these years, the conclusion I have come to," wrote Mr Cram, "is that climbing is the finest



Meet to Ben Lawers, March 1930. Standing Colin Alien, Fred Gloag, Alistair L Cram: sitting, George Spence

psychological corrective there is. It provides the answer to the intellectual professional man, as well as to the busy - and today extremely skilled - artisan and factory worker. It enables us to go back to our offices and shops and studios refreshed." The Perth Section continued to grow in numbers during the 1930s - members included one minister of religion - with a programme of regular monthly meets.

Below is a Typical 1938 AGM Meet report

- November Ben More and Stobinian
- December Ben Vorlich and Stuc a'Chroin
- January Glen Clova, rock climb, winter conditions
- February Ben Lui, snow climb
- March Tarmachans
- April Stob Gabhar
- May Lochnagar
- June Cairngorms with Inverness Section
- July Cam Mairgs, Glen Lyon
- August Lochnagar, rock climbs
- September Buachaille Etive Mor, rock climbs
- October Sgoran Dubh, rock climbs

The joint meet with the Inverness Section was no doubt because a Perth member, J.D. Sturrock, had just moved to Inverness and initiated the Inverness section.

The Minutes of the 1938 AGM also record that it had been decided to buy each member a "Climber's Song Book"! The Section was in abeyance during the Second World War, but resumed its activities with the first post-war meet to Loch Earn on 24th November 1946.

This article is an excerpt from the PMC Millennium Journal, and much of the post-war history of the club appears in its pages.