

A West Highland Fling

(29 April – 2 May 2011)

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What a wonderful walk five friends (Martyn, John, Tony, Nick, Geof) and I had during the Royal Wedding weekend, completing the 96 mile West Highland Way (WHW) from Milngavie, a northern suburb of Glasgow, to Fort William in only four days (fig 1).

Fig 1. The route



We enjoyed cloudless skies and sunshine every day but, most importantly, there were no midges! All accommodation and the transport of our bags from one hotel to the next was organised by Euan of Macs Adventure based in Glasgow (www.macsadventure.com) – he did an excellent job.

The reason for this crazy venture was training for the Caledonian Challenge (CC) which, as a team called The Over Sixtys, we planned to attempt six weeks later.

www.caledonianchallenge.com
 The aim of this annual charity fundraiser, for the Scottish Community Foundation, is to complete 54 miles of the WHW from North to South in less than 24 hours. An achievement which we thought might be possible in spite of the dubious distinction of being the oldest team entered in the 2011 event.

Day 1- Milngavie to Balmaha (20 miles)

After uneventful flights from London to Glasgow and a comfortable night in a Premier Inn, within walking distance of the start of the WHW (fig 2), we set off at 09.30 for our first night's stop – Balmaha on the Southern end of Loch Lomond.



Fig 2. At the start

The weather was perfect, not a cloud in the sky (fig 3) and with a gentle cooling breeze. I carried a small radio to listen to the Royal Wedding live on Classic FM.



Fig 3. Cloudless sky – day 1

We were able to average over three miles per hour until the one and only real ascent of the day up the side of Conic Hill (361m). When we reached the highest point of the path some of us did a detour to the summit (fig 4) for a spectacular, if somewhat blustery, view of Loch Lomond.



Fig 4. Rather windy on Conic Hill

The descent to the loch side was quite challenging due to the uneven ground, but we arrived safely at the Oak Tree Inn in Balmaha (fig 5), our destination for the first night.

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Fig 5. Balmaha Bay - day 2



We were accommodated in well equipped cottages (fig 6) about 5 min walk from the hotel (www.oak-tree-inn.co.uk)

Fig 6. Cottage at Balmaha



but no staff were available to help carry our cases, a problem for me as my rather heavy Life Adventure bag had no wheels. The gastro pub at the hotel was justifiably very popular but a very helpful young South African manager found us a table. We had a good meal, the Cullen Skink was particularly memorable.

Day 2 – Balmaha to Inverarnan (21 miles)

I had been warned this was going to be one of the toughest days of the whole WHW because of the terrain over the final six miles along the east bank of Loch Lomond from Inversnaid to Inverarnan. This did indeed prove to be a bit of a scramble across large roots and up and down significant rocks (fig 7).



Fig 7.-The path from Inversnaid to Inverarnan

The problems we encountered were really nothing compared with those of the participants who ran that day fifty mile plus from Milngavie to

Tyndrum in an annual event known as the Highland Fling.

Fig 8. Runners en route to Tyndrum



We were passed by some impressive athletes (fig 8), only three and a half hours from the start after they had already covered 21 miles including the arduous ascent and descent of *Conic Hill!* It was another beautiful day during which we enjoyed the scenery along the whole eastern side of the Loch (figs 9,10, 11).

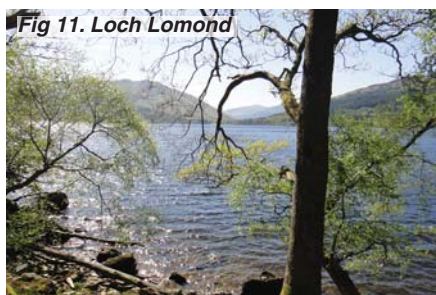
Fig 9. Loch Lomond



Fig 10. Loch Lomond



Fig 11. Loch Lomond



We stayed that night in the *Drover's Inn*, (fig 12) a place one could say had a great deal of character. It is described in Charlie Loram's guide to the West Highland Way as 'an eccentric mix of smoke blackened walls, sagging, velvet covered chairs and moulting stuffed animals with



Fig 12. The Drovers Inn

bar staff wearing kilts and T-shirts'. The bar was absolutely packed and service was provided by some amusing staff, mainly Antipodean.

Day 3 – Inverarnan to Kingshouse (32 miles)

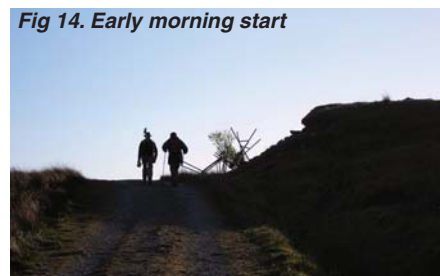
This was our longest day and took us via Crianlarich (fig 13), Tyndrum and Bridge of Orchy to the Kings House Hotel in Glencoe.

Fig 13. Above Crianlarich



Due to the distance we decided to miss breakfast and depart at 6.00 am (fig 14).

Fig 14. Early morning start



The day was going well for me until about two miles South of Tyndrum. Just after passing the remains of 13th century St Fillans Priory (fig 15)

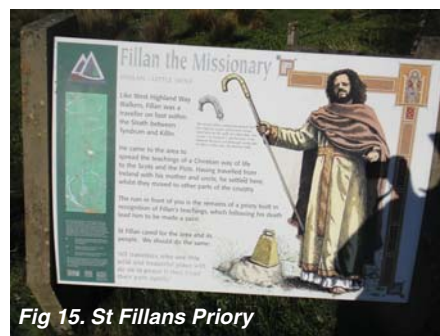


Fig 15. St Fillans Priory

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and Auchtertyre Farm (the finish of the CC), having become separated from my colleagues with three in front and two behind, I somehow managed to take a wrong turn over a bridge (fig 16),

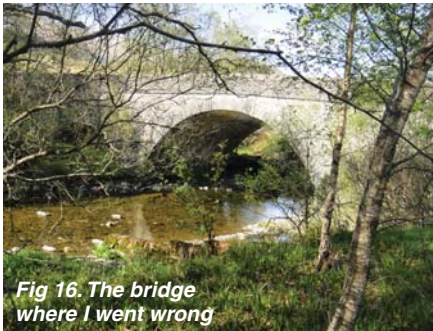


Fig 16. The bridge where I went wrong

missed a Way marker (fig 17) and



Fig 17. WHW route indicator

proceeded at least two miles up a track towards Ben Lui (fig 18).

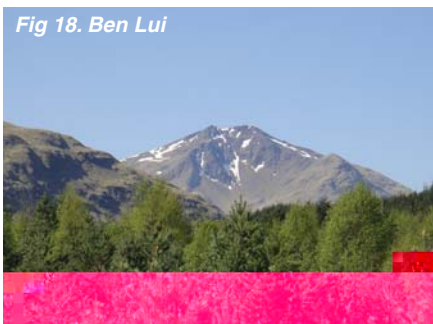


Fig 18. Ben Lui

Eventually when my progress was blocked by a 12 foot high deer fence with a padlocked gate, I began to suspect that I was no longer on the correct path! Luckily, ahead were three men who had just climbed over the gate and were near enough for me to enquire whether I was still on

the WHW. One of them replied "No laddie, it is several miles back doon the valley." Forced to retrace my steps I eventually arrived in Tyndrum over an hour later to find no sign of any of my friends. Nick, I discovered later, was still there having decided to take the bus to Kingshouse but I did not spot him among a gathering of several hundred leather clad bikers! So after a quick lunch at the *Green Welly stop*, I called my wife from a phone box (no mobile signal) to ask her to contact the others and tell them I would be at Bridge of Orchy, seven miles from Tyndrum, within the next two hours (fig 19).



Fig 19. Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy

I arrived at the Bridge of Orchy Hotel to be greeted by Martyn and John. After some fluid resuscitation and a change of socks we set off for the Kings House Hotel, a distance of only thirteen miles which started with three miles of pleasant walking over a small ridge to the Inveroran Hotel (fig 20) and then round the



Fig 20. The Inveroran Hotel

head of Loch Tulla (fig 21).



Fig 21. Loch Tulla

John chivvied me across the bleak landscape of Rannoch Moor (fig 22), said to be the remotest and most desolate part of the WHW.



Fig 22. Rannoch Moor

We stopped for a ten minute break (fig 23) and after a Mars bar and dried pear I acquired a new lease of life setting off at such a rate that it took John the next couple of miles to catch me.



Fig 23. Time for a Mars bar

During this time we saw a beautiful herd of red deer (fig 24).



Fig 24. Deer

We eventually arrived at our destination in Glen Coe, just in time for supper 13 hours after we had set out from the *Drovers*. The others had covered 32 miles but with my earlier detour, I had walked at least 36. The positive attitude, I realised was that I had done more training towards the 'big one' in June.

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Fig 25. Kings House Hotel



Supper at the Hotel (fig 25) was passable apart from the bread and butter pudding which was the worst I have ever had. I couldn't even cut the bread with a knife it was so hard!

Day 4 – Kings House – Fort William (23 miles)

After an excellent breakfast of porridge and a full Scottish, we set off on a beautiful clear morning with the spectacular Buachaille Etive Mor (fig 26) dominating the south side of the Glen.

Fig 26. Buachaille Etive Mor



Two miles down the valley we arrived at the bottom of the 'Devil's Staircase,' an 850 ft ascent, which all of us managed to walk up without even pausing for breath, just an occasional photo opportunity (fig 27)!

Fig 27. On the Devil's Staircase



From the summit ridge (fig 28) it was a 4½ mile downhill slog to Kinlochleven which has been described as an ugly modern

village set amidst dramatic highland scenery.

Fig 28. Road to Kinlochleven



The aluminium smelter is now closed but the water pipes still remain (fig 29).

Fig 29. To the pump house



I noted that the reverse route would probably be the toughest section during the CC in June.

After refuelling in a local pub we set off for the final leg of our journey. The initial long 820 ft climb out of Kinlochleven on a steep winding trail through birch trees took me by surprise (fig 30) and seemed tougher than the Devil's Staircase.

Fig 30. Leaving Kinlochleven



The next few miles were on an exposed and remote trail to Lairigmor (fig 31).

Fig 31. Derelict cottage on Lairigmor



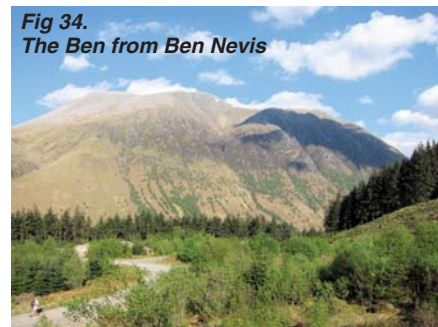
Fig 32. Cut down forest

After this the way descended and climbed through both denuded areas (fig 32) and dense conifer plantations, with occasional views of Ben Nevis (fig 33).



Fig 33. Glimpse of Ben Nevis

Fig 34. The Ben from Ben Nevis



After reaching Glen Nevis (fig 34), a few miles before our destination, I received a call from Martyn and Geof, I assumed to inform us 'stragglers' that they were already in a Fort William pub but they had taken a slight inadvertent detour (fig 35) and were in fact behind us!



Fig 35. The site of Martyn's navigational boob

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All six of us (fig 36) eventually arrived in Fort William at 6pm with enough time for a welcome shower at the station facility, followed by a much needed pint with a plate of fish and chips at a nearby pub before boarding our overnight sleeper to London Euston which departed on schedule at 7.50 pm.

In Summary

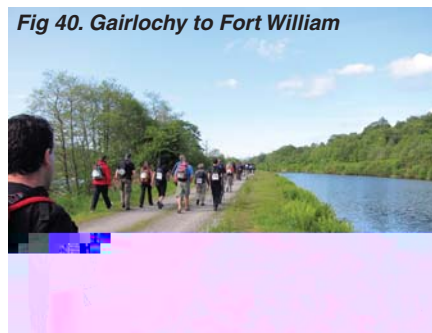
As a group we were well acquainted, five hospital doctors and one businessman (Hon doc Martyn!), having walked together in Scotland during the early May bank holiday on and off for the past 20 years. That fact, combined with conquering the WHW in only four days (most guide books quote 6-9 days), would hopefully contribute towards success in the forthcoming Caledonian Challenge.

Caledonian Challenge – June 11-12 2011

It was a great help to have walked all but seven of the 54 miles already. This definitely contributed to the strong performance of 'The Over Sixtys'.



After registration and briefings (fig 37) followed by an excellent dinner at the Crannog restaurant (fig 38) in Fort William the previous evening our team, the oldest in the event (fig 39) crossed the start line at Gairloch (fig 40), just West of Spean Bridge at 9am on the



11 June and the finishing line just after 7.30am the following morning. We had raised over £7000 for charity. Our time of 22hr 33min 5 sec put us 69th out of 128 teams who completed the distance. None of us rested between any of the four official checkpoints (CP) which were situated 10, 23, 33 and 41 miles from start. At the first three personalised food (porridge, rolls, macaroni cheese etc) and fluids were provided by our official backup team (fig 41)



consisting of 4 of the wives (Ros, Jane, Jeanne and Fiona) and at CP 4 (Inveroran – 2.30am) by the CC organising team.

Fig 42. The Ice Factor in Kinlochleven



The long slog from CP1 to CP2, the Ice Factor (fig 42), in Kinlochleven, was well marked (fig 43).



I had identified the 4½ mile 1800 ft rise continuously uphill stretch from Kinlochleven (CP2) to the summit of the Devil's staircase overlooking Glencoe (fig 44) as the 'make or break' section.



All members of the team managed this without stopping, passing a significant number of other participants en route, a testament to our fitness. Descending the Devil's Staircase, at some pace, with the aid of a pair of Leki walking poles, I overtook a couple about half my age. When I asked them what time they had started, they replied 7am – what a boost to 'an old man' who

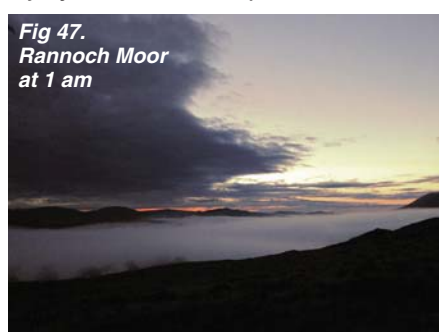
had started two hours later! Sadly at CP3 the team after an excellent supper (fig 45) were photographed



together for the last time (fig 46) as Tony had to retire with an Achilles tendon injury.



The night section from CP3 to 4 with head torches ablaze across the remoteness of Rannoch Moor (fig 47) was one of the most enjoyable for me – I knew that there were no more serious gradients and bar injury we would complete the event.



I had time to converse with some interesting fellow participants including an English woman who managed a hotel in China and an Egyptian lady who was in charge of sporting activities at a holiday resort in Egypt. Both had travelled to Scotland specifically for the event.

At Bridge of Orchy (fig 48) at about 4am Ros and Jeanne kindly arrived to cheer us onwards (fig 49) as we



Fig 49. Tyndrum – here we come



started the final 10 miles to the finish at Auchtertyre (fig 50) three tiring hours later.



One of the remarkable facts was that we experienced no wind, no rain and most important of all, no midges, so our supply of 'Avon skin so soft' was unused. 605 people started but sadly 98 failed to complete many I believe with foot problems. I managed to finish without a single blister which I attributed to wearing three different pairs of boots and five different pairs of socks. I changed to different but well-worn boots at CPs 2 and 4 but dried my feet and changed my socks at every CP. (I also changed my underwear and T-shirt at CP 1,2 and 3!) This supported my theory that blisters are caused by wearing the same pair of wet socks in wet boots for too long. Two prophylactic doses of Ibuprofen 400mg also worked well on my aging joints.

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Mention must be made of Martyn's redoubtable black Labrador, Quince, who not only completed the whole event put probably covered more than twice the distance of any other member of our team. He quite rightly received a medal at the finish (fig 51) where much needed breakfast, fluids and massage were provided for all the weary but elated finishers.



In that morning's edition of the *Sunday Post* Euan Duguid wrote about the success of the Dad's army of the walking world (fig 52)!



Our achievement was perhaps put more concisely by Martyn quoting Sir Edmund Hilary after he conquered Everest in 1953 – 'We knocked the bugger off!'

Postscript

Nick apparently said to Martyn 'at least now Keith has got this sort of thing out of his system.' To which Martyn replied 'don't you believe it.' He was correct! The next suggested event for 'The Over Sixtys' will be the Caledonian 100 in September 2012 – watch this space!