

A Cairngorm Diary

24th -29th July, 1932

Written 'en route' by

James Nicoll Kerr Henderson (1908-1989)

Tuesday 27th and 28th July, 1932

Wednesday 27th July, 1932

Wakened at about 5.30 a.m. by the Nethy boys making breakfast - roasting 'mealy jerkers'. Later, on becoming more fully conscious, we found the bothy deserted, so had porridge and eggs alone in our glory. The porridge are really successful, especially when you've taken the time to steep the meal overnight. Shave next and a cold plunge in the nearby stream - both new men - ready for anything!

We leave our stuff in the bothy but take one empty rucksack and set out with light hearts and burden for Aviemore about 11 a.m. It's a lovely morning and the walk along the valley past Glenmore Lodge and the northern shore of Loch Morlich is very refreshing. Away to the South we scan the now familiar landmarks of the Cairngorms and our minds are well occupied with many recent associations.

As we get closer to Aviemore, we have a fine view of the northern entrance to the Lairig Ghru and, further to the West, of our first day's journey up Glen Einich. We can also follow quite clearly now, that ghastly descent from Cairn Gorm, 'midst mist and rain. Soon we reach Coylumbridge, just two miles from Aviemore, and, as the local 'hold-all' store offers nearly everything we need in the way of food, we grace the helpful, talkative proprietrix with our order and promise to return to uplift it at about six in the evening. Before leaving her we purchase seventeen postcards - views of hills and, while choosing them, are amused by the way the said woman gleans her information about the hills and stores it up for the benefit of her many patrons.

Aviemore, drier than when we last left it, is reached by about 2 p.m. and we lunch well, digesting concurrently, the heavy mail which awaited us there. After further necessary shopping was done, we repaired to the Temperance Hotel for tea and both of us agreed that it was a queer, unnatural feeling to be amongst houses and people and shops etc. - cramped, confined and bored. We made a good tea, including honey we shouldn't have had, before squaring the proprietor. He asked us where we had been and told us of three young men who'd taken refuge in his establishment the previous night. On further inquiry we discovered them to be the same fellows that we'd left at Corrou Bothy on the Tuesday morning.

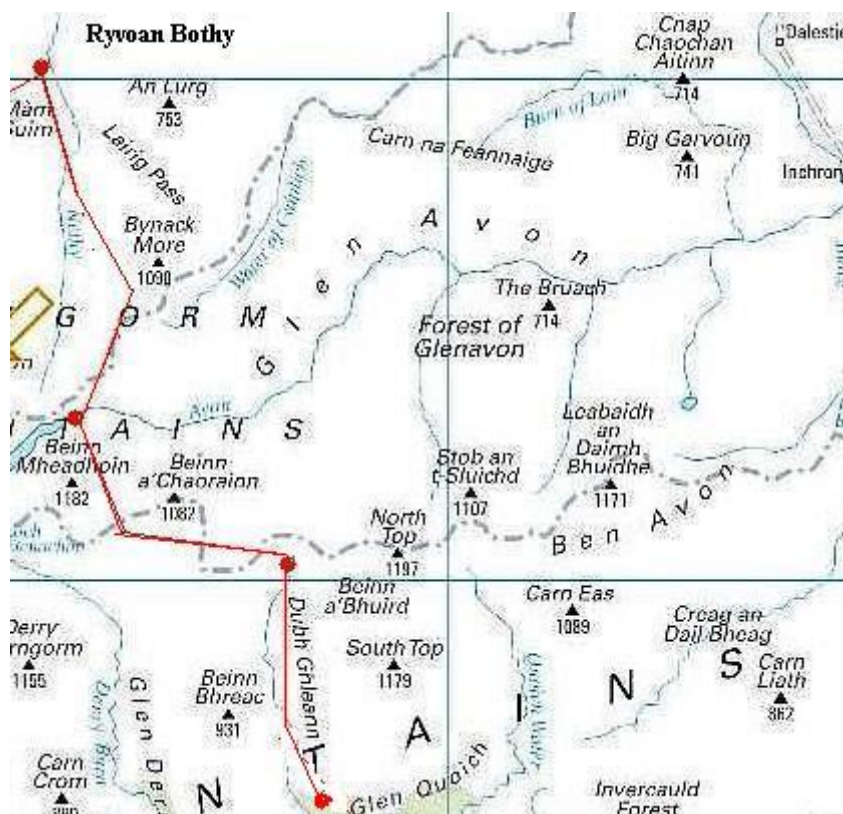
On our way back to uplift our other purchases at Coylumbridge we met many of the 'elite', out for their pre-dinner strolls. They looked at our mud-stained shoes, tanned faces and heavy pack of provisions with what appeared to be awe and wonderment - and a tinge of admiration too, we hoped! Good progress was made on our road 'home' to Ryvoan and, it being a beautiful night, we thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the ten miles tramp. Walking along pine guarded roads, the wind whispering in the tree-tops, the burn chattering by

our side, we remarked on how one could adapt and settle to such solitude, especially after our boisterous camp life of the previous three days.

Soon the stream gave way to Loch Morlich again, still processing its abundance of fine sand - on then, past Glenmore Lodge, lovely little Lochan Uaine and so to Ryvoan. We were both tired, a different kind of fatigue compared to the day before, but a cold tub, rub down and supper of bread, butter, jam and biscuits revived us somewhat. Preparing for my bed, I see JJ firmly installed before the huge log fire, dreaming up fine phrases for his diary and my thoughts turn to the morrow and Deeside. It's raining slightly now - hope it's fair for tomorrow's trek.

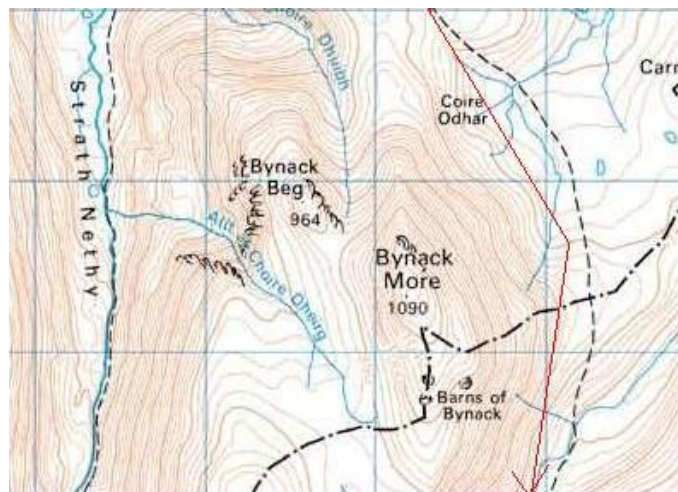
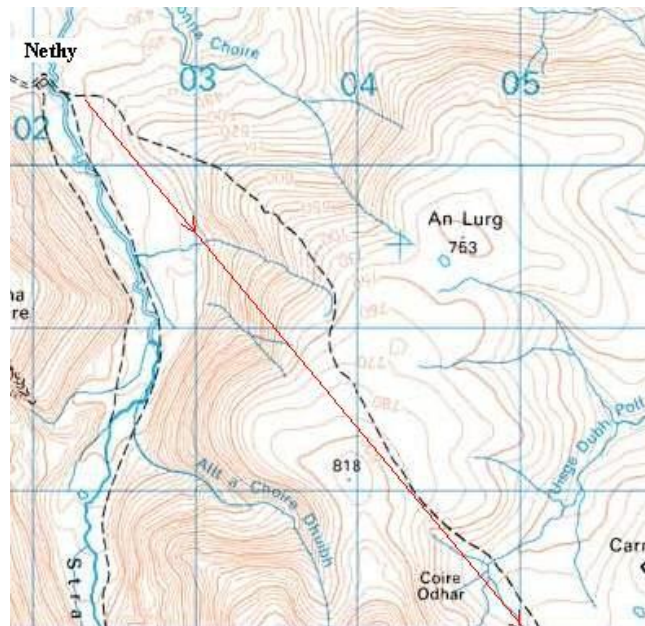
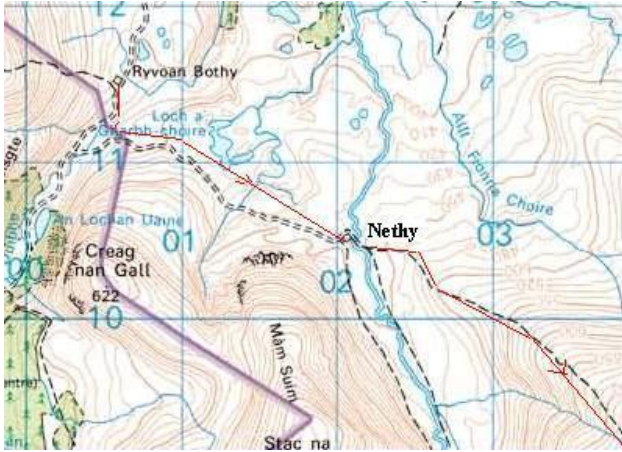
Thursday 28th July, 1932

In spite of good resolutions to get up at 6 a.m., it was 8 o'clock before we dragged our weary limbs without our sleeping bags. However as the porridge had been cooked the night before and eggs could be boiled in the tea water, we were seated by 8.30 a.m.- like lords - before a sumptuous repast. Unfortunately, there was a thick Scotch Mist all around and it didn't look promising for our 17 mile walk through the hills to the foot of Dubh Gleann.

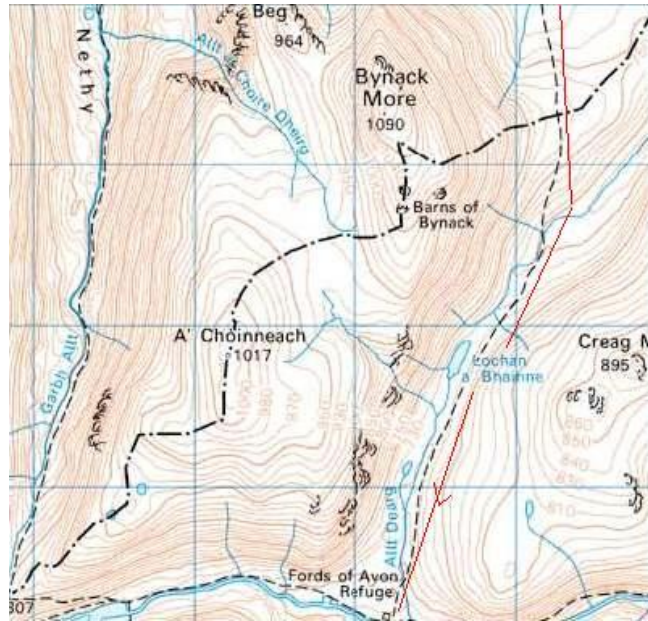


However by 10 o'clock blinks of sunshine brightened the prospect and we prepared to leave after duly charcoaling our names on the wall and photographing the bothy. No sooner had we started than the rain came on again and, at the end of a mere half mile, our feet had that cold, damp, clammy, feeling which is bad enough later in a day on the hills, but more than a trifle demoralising early on. But we just had to shrug our shoulders and soldier on.

As our way lay over the shoulder of Bynack Hill after we crossed the Nethy, we became more or less shrouded in mist and battered by driving rain. It was wretched going but we had a fairly decent path, albeit streaming with water. It also disappeared at times but little heaps of stones kept us in the right direction, so we made good progress over the summit on an easterly bearing, down past the Barns of Bynack (a huge pile of stones) into Lairig Laoigh. The map indicated a path but it seemed to have been transformed into one of the many burns which flowed around us.

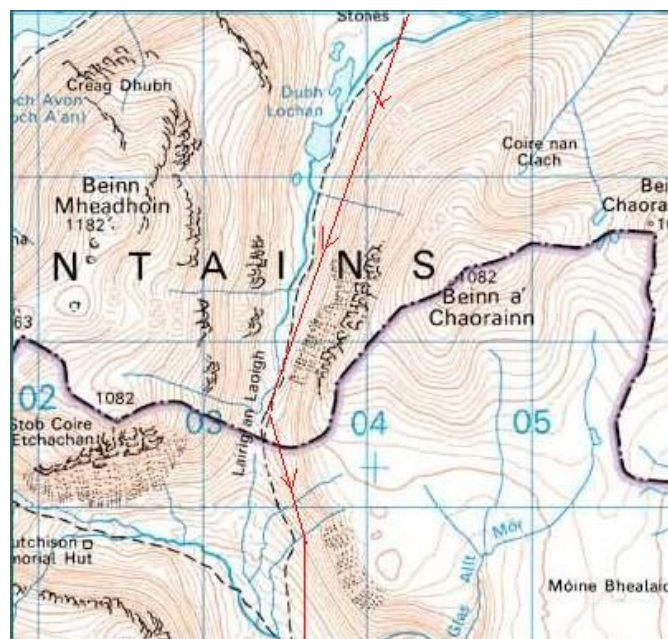


Then quite suddenly the rain stopped for a few minutes - the next cloud wasn't all that far off - and in that blink of sunshine we spotted Lairig Laoigh looking South, and soon approached the East end of Loch Avon - a dismal sight!



As the weather looked ominous and it was almost 1.30 p.m., we decided to try to snatch lunch before the storm. Alas! 'Davy' was having no mercy today and, just as we settled behind a hopelessly inadequate rock, he let it rip. Nevertheless, and nothing daunted, we 'set to' with a will, consuming soup, corn beef, peas and fruit salad in the vilest of weather. Never, in all my life, have I eaten under such cold conditions! Needless to say, we didn't linger, but hastened on to restore the circulation. Verily, people would have considered us mad had they seen us and no one ever gave rheumatism or pleurisy a better chance!

Just after wading through the Avon, which flows East out of Loch Avon, - the ford was in flood but we were wet through anyway - we struck the semblance of a path once more. It's a great sensation wading through a stream with your shoes and stockings still on and knowing that you won't get any wetter!



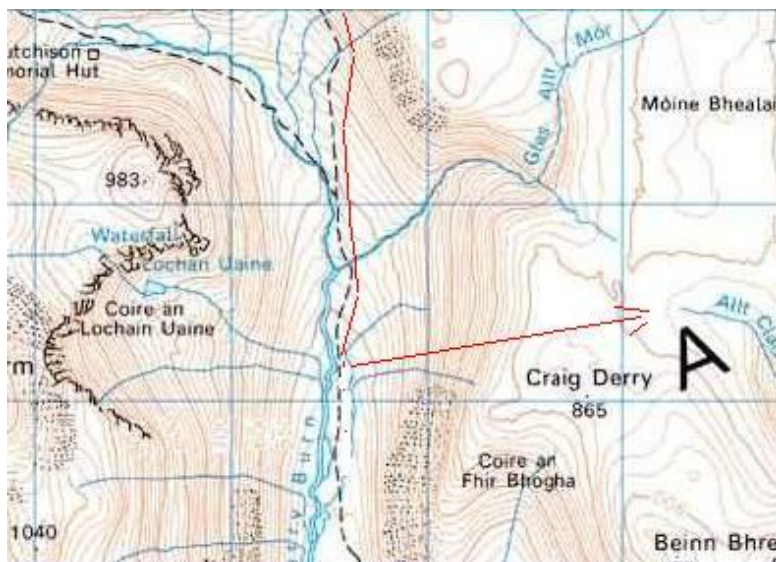
When the summit of the pass comes into sight the path becomes very rough and stony. We stumble on, falling occasionally and feeling our limbs, especially our fingers, becoming gradually stiffer and numb. What a 'road' - it was supposed to be a cattle-pass at one time. Well, we thought aloud, 'We can't be quite all animal yet', for we found it nigh well impassable at places. And still the clouds came sweeping over us with intent to drown and they nearly succeeded with monotonous regularity!

About 3.30 p.m., we at length reached the summit of the pass - a very stony desolate place - and just opposite in the West, we were able to feast our eyes on the rugged Corrie Etchachan with a ridge of Ben MacDhui providing a suitable backdrop. This fleeting look was soon blanketed by mist and thus photography was prevented in that direction. However, looking North into the Lairig did provide a view for JJ to snap.



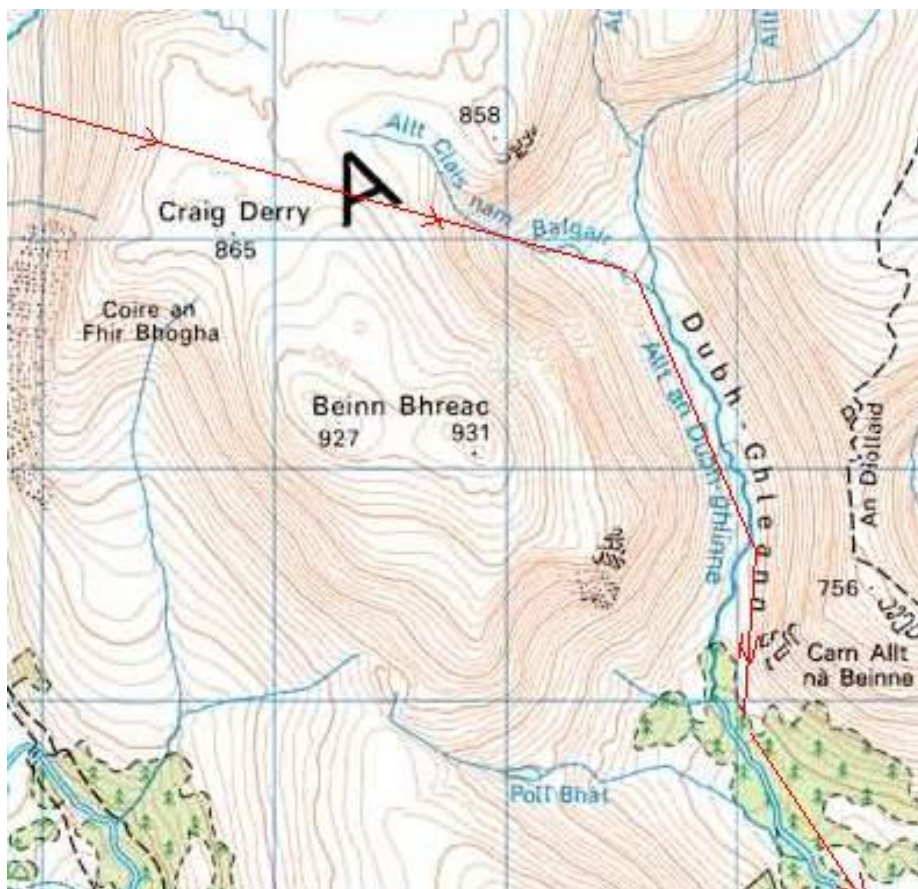
Lairig Laoigh looking North

Moments later away to the South we just managed to snatch a glimpse of the Forest of Mar and as our way lay several miles to the East of the forest and time was precious, we decided to win two miles away from the track by climbing the hill on our left, crossing its flat top diagonally, and then going down a steep, dark glen, known as Dubh Gleann, at the foot of which we hoped lay our bothy for the night.



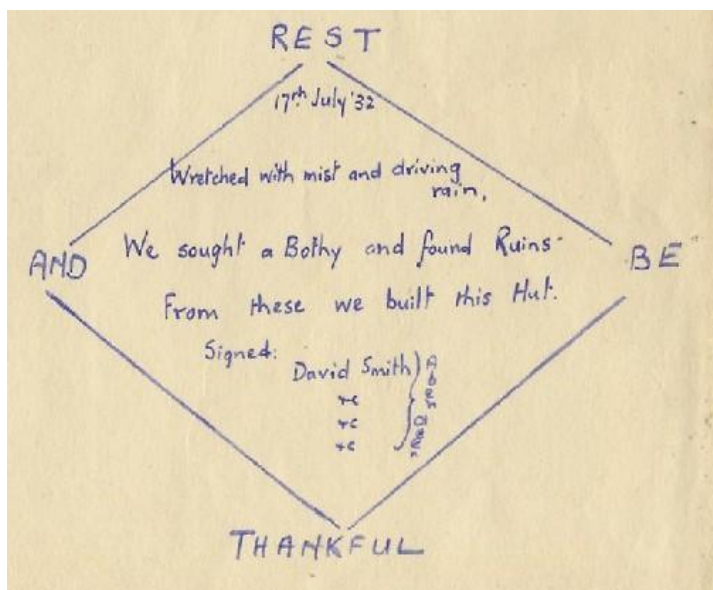
All that sounds relatively easy, but the going was boggy and the ground, if that is what it was supposed to be, smelt not in the least like 'Yardley's'! And still the clouds hovered ready to drift down at any moment, so we had to hustle to be safe.

Despite our worst fears and predictions, the weather improved dramatically for an hour or so as we hurried along, giving us some really fine views of Deeside from various 'velvety plateaux en route. Indeed these were the first clear glimpses of anything we'd had all day.



Soon, but not too soon, we reached the top of Dubh Gleann and, while scrambling down its fairly steep head, we were met with a wonderful sight - at least a hundred red deer in two herds, startled by our advent, making their stately way up the sheer face of the hill. The worst of the descent over, we consulted the map for names etc. and found we'd only about two miles to go now to our bothy. Were we sorry? Not likely! What a harrowing day it had been! One doesn't worry for one's own sake - it's the people who worry about us! Tired, but looking forward to a tin of 'Skippers' and a 'Youma' loaf for tea, we hurried on, hoping to find a fire to dry our clothes at. But then, strange cries, high up above us, met our ears as we plodded down this glen - like a child crying. On looking up, we were amazed at the multitude of deer to be seen - appearing like ants to us in the distance. Then the rain came on again; but the bothy should be somewhere near here! 'Holy smoke!' 'That's not it, is it?' - A ruin of wood, chairs, glass and masonry lay before us and our hearts sank. Not one decent bit of cover for having our tea, far less spending a night in. We look around and, just beside the ruin, I find, a little 'box'. It is about 6 feet by 5 feet by 4 feet, closed on three sides and with a wooden 'roof', almost watertight, or so it appeared. 'Fair enough, this would have to do, at least until we've had our tea. Then we'll rig up a better shelter for the night from this shell.'

While the kettle is boiling, we doff our shoes, stockings, shirts etc. and change into dry ones, discussing the prospect the while. Then we noticed the following on one of the 'walls'



And were we thankful! And we blessed our companions in misery for their shed.

Tea was a great success and soon after 7 p.m. the rain ceased, then to be followed by a fine dry night - blue sky and high clouds. JJ kindled a lovely pine fire just two feet away from the open South side of our 'box' and we soon dried four stockings and two shirts, to say nothing of making ourselves as warm as pies too. There we were, writing our diaries, poring over the map for names and directions and looking like real 'old timers' with a certain amount of stubble further adorning our tanned faces.



Jim Henderson - Dubh Gleann



Jim Walker - Dubh Gleann

Supper and bed early to-night as to-morrow, God willing, we mean to do Ben an Bhuid and Ben Avon before going on down to Deeside. It's been tough work today. Hard? Yes, and miserable sometimes, but then we have that 'something accomplished, something done feeling'. We've kept to our time-table despite the weather and, now, gloriously tired, we are enjoying the consequent peace and quiet of an idyllic evening outdoors before a lovely fire. 'Kings may be blessed

Supper is over, the washing all dried, and, having knocked the knob off the door which serves as floor and mattress, I have a Craven 'A' until JJ is ready for diary audition and reflection. In due course we settle down for the night, gazing out at the 'pioneering in the wilds' scene, fitfully lit by the gleam of the log fire now dying. The night looks calm, and anyway, two ground sheets on the roof will keep us dry. Oh my! I'm tired!