

Outward Bound 1965

The Outward Bound Trust is a charity which provides the opportunity for young people, at the very start of their careers, to face and accept the challenge of the mountains and in some maritime schools the unique experience of spending a few weeks under sail. The short courses are aimed at maintaining a sound mix of students from public schools, the armed forces, commerce, the police and fire service and young offenders, especially from Borstal Institutions. The aim is to develop teamwork, leadership and self reliance in a controlled yet demanding environment.

In December 1965 I was serving at Rochdale as a sergeant in the police traffic department when I was invited to be a temporary instructor at the Ullswater Outward Bound School in the Lake District. This had been a remarkable year for me as I had reached the stage in my career when I needed to achieve promotion to Inspector rank but was completely frustrated by the lack of opportunity in my small borough force and the daunting challenge of other ambitious and well qualified sergeants. It was different in a great many of the expanding larger forces who found themselves unable to fill vacancies in senior ranks and the Police Review was full of enticing adverts to police in Oxfordshire, Devon, Cheshire and many other attractive places. I became quite expert in preparing my CV. During the year too I had had a sensational climbing holiday in Skye on the Black Coullin and was in good form for a winter challenge in the Lakes.



Friends drove me on a beautiful Sunday afternoon to the school which was in a country house at the end of Ullswater Lake and I presented Ian with my cigarette case and lighter as this seemed an excellent opportunity to cease this despicable habit. Students were prohibited from smoking during their stay, instructors could only smoke in their common room.

I was met by the Chief Instructor and introduced to Mike who would be in charge of our patrol. He was an ex Metropolitan Police Officer and lived with his wife in one of the cottages attached to the school. I was given a tour of the facilities and deposited my gear in the room which I was to share with four other temporary instructors euphemistically called "THE RITZ". The room could only be described as Spartan. No curtains, bare boards, naked light bulb, iron beds, a locker and no heating. As far as I could ascertain only the offices and the staff common room were heated.

The common room was next to the dining room and its door was firmly closed by a heavy spring. Behind it was the social hub of the school bathed in a haze of tobacco smoke and coffee. Here there were numerous old worn but comfortable arm chairs and the large open fire was kept well supplied with logs. A padded fender provided the best seats in the house but if you were lucky to occupy one you were faced with the dilemma of whether to leave it for that second cup of coffee as to do so would certainly lose you your privileged perch. The book shelves were full of club journals and all sorts of mountaineering literature, it was one of the most untidy, unhygienic yet comfortable rooms that I have ever known and I was to make good use of it during my stay,

I looked forward to this sabbatical from demanding police duties and Mike and I looked forward to meeting our patrol the next day as I spent the first evening studying my duties and our schedule for the next three weeks.

My interview with the Warden, a genial ex Squadron Leader and our Chief Instructor, was short but pleasant, he regretted that there would be insufficient opportunity to grade me as a climbing instructor but agreed to assess me for my BMC mountain leaders certificate.

Our patrol was the usual mix of young men from a variety of occupations. There was my favourite, a Borstal boy with great charm and indomitable spirit whom completed the course in leaking boots but never complained. There were public school boys, Army, Police, Fire Brigade Cadets and young bankers - a wonderful mix and so far as I know there was never any dissension as we all got together to meet the first challenge, the three day expedition.

The grounds of the school were laid out as a military assault course with the large mature trees adapted to accommodate numerous hair raising exercises which involved a great deal of climbing and ended in sliding down from the highest point on a pulley.

At the lakeside landing stage were dozens of canoes and sailing skiffs for when mountaineering palled. It was an action man's dream.

First we had to do the classroom work and work our way through an introduction to surviving on the hills in winter. Aquascutum a very well known clothing manufacturer had donated their latest weather proof anoraks and trousers and over trousers which made sure that we would remain dry despite the weather.

There was no doubt that the temporary instructors were looked upon by their permanent colleagues as favored slaves, and a convenient means of avoiding some of their more odious duties. All the temps recognized this and accepted these duties cheerfully, after all in three weeks time we would be back home with all the creature comforts which this implied, whilst permanent staff would still be obliged to brave the elements daily during the long winter months.



Before breakfast there was the school assembly and a cross country run which included the walls on the assault course. This was followed by a cold shower which the instructor supervised closely ensuring that each boy endured an icy douche of at least two minutes. This meant that the instructor endured 16 minutes of freezing water. Was it any wonder that we all ate very hearty breakfasts in the slightly heated dining room.

The weather became colder and colder and then snow fell for two days and transformed the scenery into an Alpine one.

We had practiced mountain rescue and our contribution to the local community was to use the mountain rescue sledge to get the local farmers milk churns down to the road. It was exhausting but satisfying work and greatly appreciated by the local farmer.



Once the chief instructor had inspected the condition of the snow on the Kirkstone Pass, the whole school was transported up to there for a days instruction in the use of ice axes, which was fantastic especially the glissading. Once the boys were on the way back to the school, most of the instructors found their way into the pub for an illicit dose of alcohol and a smoke for those still slaves of the weed. I, of course, overflowing with virtue, declared that the beer tasted much better since I gave up this disgusting habit. Only myself and another temp, a Royal Marine Sergeant, failed to add to the friendly but choking fog in the bar room.



The First 3 Day Expedition

The snow continued to fall heavily as we busied ourselves in preparation for the boys first test, the three day expedition with two nights camped high on the mountain. In the sheltered conditions of the school grounds we braved blizzards to put into practice the skills learned over the past weeks. We pitched the small three man tents innumerable times and became experts at lighting the antiluvian and smelly paraffin primus stoves in high winds and blizzards. Our kit was checked and rechecked and weighed in at 60 lb. I resolved to secrete my small butane stove as a last resort to ensure a warm drink.

I was extremely proud of my lads but worried about the Borstal boy whose boots were not really up to the snow being cheap moulded ones, single skinned and not really water proof at all. For such a young lad he had enormous feet otherwise he could have had my spare pair of Hawkins. I raised the matter with the chief, who, whilst sympathetic, told me that it was quite normal with students from the prison service and that it would do no good at all to try to take the matter further. In desperation I was given the key to the reserve boot store but none fitted 'big foot'.

The lad himself was quite cheerful about the whole thing and assured me that he was quite skilled in wrapping his feet in plastic bags (with which he had been supplied in lieu of proper boots) and drying out and greasing his most inadequate footwear. As might be expected he was to be my star pupil.



Each day it continued to snow heavily and as we helped to clear the driveway down to the valley road we pondered as to whether the expedition would be cancelled. The Chief Instructor assured us that the warden never ever cancelled an expedition.

With all our kit checked and ready we ate a hearty lunch as the snow came down out of a leadened sky and cheerfully drove in the Land Rovers to the start of the walk.

Almost at once we found that we had to force a path through the deepening snow and as befits a leader, I took more than my turn at leading our column as we climbed through the trees towards the pass I found the work extremely exhausting and was most relieved when someone else took over the chore (I was 40 years and quite elderly compared to the other members of the team and perhaps my years were showing)

In my map pocket was our itinerary and maps but we were climbing into oblivion and I was glad that obviously Mike knew where he was going so just plodded on. Snow fell from the sagging lower branches of the pines but we were oblivious to it and it was my turn again to break the path for the others. On reflection I cannot think when I have been so disorientated and so very dependant on the skill of another. I had never walked this route from Glenridding to Sticks Pass a col between Raise and at about 2500ft above sea level and neither had any of the boys. It never occurred to me what would happen if I was to take over the patrol and it was no good looking for our footsteps to lead us back to the valley the blizzard erased them as the last man moved upwards.

As I write this forty years on I can still feel the pounding of my heart and the determination which I felt to reach the pass before the meagre light failed and establish our camp for the night.

A good indication, I had always found, that when in mist it is the wind which tells you when you are reaching the top. In mist on Pavey Ark it was the sheer force of the wind that warned me to be cautious and advance slowly towards the summit and the sheer drop to Langdale Head below. Now the wind became a veritable gale and ahead I saw that Mike had called a halt.

If I were to be transported to Sticks Pass I am sure that I could not identify the camp site now. Mike just announced that "This would do" and I started into my task of pitching the lads tents whilst Mike supervised from a distance as he put up his own one man tent.

Oh yes we knew just how to do it, we had practiced so long and hard, joining hands like Greek dancers and treading down the snow into a firm base to take the tent pegs but in this blizzard it just did not work and we had to resort to putting one man into the tent to hold it down blizzard. Once inside I cautioned the lads against trying to light the primus in the and advised them to get into their sleeping bags and eat their chocolate and healthy life biscuits whilst the rest endeavoured to secure to the ground. I agree it was fun and I had to pitch three tents against the blizzard.

It was now almost dark and lights were appearing in the boys tents and in Mikes from the ventilator of which issued a plume of tobacco smoke. I reported to him that the boys were all in bed and sought out a likely hump which I was delighted to find was my pack.

Feeling not a little proud of my achievements I set to work pitching my own tent and settling in trying to remember all that I had learned myself and taught the boys. My outer clothing was carefully folded and placed inside the down sleeping bag, along with my boots to stop them freezing during the night. The wind was endeavouring to whip my tent off the mountain but it held firm and , using a candle I toasted a little cheese on a biscuit and made sure that I had eaten enough protein before drifting off into a well earned sleep.

The next thing should have been the magnificent dawn as the sun rose from a clear blue sky to show the Alpine scene of our camp, but no this was not to be.

I was aware of voices and lights flashing into my tent walls but realised that I had no contact with my feet as the blizzard has buried the tent in snow. I resorted to turning over and pressing upwards to displace the snow and opened the tent door to find anxious students seeking aid. Jones, it seemed was in great pain and near to death and I collected my thoughts, dragged on my boots and outer clothing and picking up the first aid kit, followed the lads to the tent carefully forgetting to securely lace up the tent door behind me. Jones was really in great pain but it was thankfully only cramp and I administered first aid and returned to find my tent door flapping noisily in the gale and the tent full of snow.

As I struggled to remove as much of the snow as I could in the cramped entrance of the tiny tent I remembered how, only a few short hours ago I had been lying there smugly congratulating myself on my survival skills and undoubted powers of leadership. I had helped to guide nine tyros up to 2000 feet in a blizzard and to successfully pitch their camp surely my mountain leadership certificate was in the bag! How are the mighty fallen indeed.

I crawled gratefully into the comforting warmth provided by numerous, long gone, ducks and was soon asleep comforting myself with the thought that only I knew of my foolishness.

During the night I remember rousing myself sufficiently to dislodge the snow drift that was threatening to bury me and then it was brilliantly daylight enhanced by the orange fabric of my tent and all was silent and still. My breath indicated that it was her cold out there and my body heat had confirmed that whilst the down was capable of insulating even when wet, most of me and my clothing were rather damp. But, to be positive it was a warm dampness and not entirely disagreeable to a hardened mountaineer as was I now.

I opened the tent door to see a sight that will live vividly in my memory for ever. The air was still and there was a wonderful silence after the torments of the night. The sun shone majestically from a clear deep blue sky and all around was virgin white snow untrodden by man whilst Wainwrights Eastern Fells looked on dressed in their Alpine raiment, magnificent and out of all proportion to their true height above sea level. Even Raise looked a Matterhorn and the Dodds (Great Stybarrow and Watsons) possibly Himalayan.



I busied myself dressing and taking stock. My heavy Brigham's moleskin breeches, wet from the previous day and the night excursion were frozen hard and unwearable. I put on my spare pair of 'long johns' and every other item of clothing that I had and topped it off with the Acuascutum over trousers and anorak. My first job was to visit the patrol whose tents were now peeping above the deep snow whilst from Mike's tent came a steady plume of tobacco smoke and I found everyone cheerful and in good heart even though somewhat damp. I reported to Mike and he agreed that a brew would be a good thing and I went in search of water. I found it quite easily by sinking through the snow up to my knees in a stream which miraculously was still running. My elation when I lit my primus in the still air was soon dissipated as I went out and failed to ignite again. We were disappointed especially after all

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our practice but for some reason none of the primus stoves would remain lit and we had a hearty but cold breakfast happily in the sunshine.

Mike called a conference and decided that we should retreat temporarily from the high ground to the Youth Hostel at Glenridding where he could phone back to the school and report.

My breeches were still frozen solid and I had to beat them with my ice axe in order to fold them and strap them onto my rucksack for all the world like a snowboard. We cheerfully packed up our camp and retraced our steps to the youth hostel where we were favoured guests and were provided with endless toast and tea by the warden's wife. The warden was on leave and with me in "the Ritz" as a temporary instructor. He was somewhere on the other side of the lake with his patrol.

Mike told me that the warden went berserk but had reluctantly agreed to send transport to Glenridding to bring us back to the school in order that we could exchange our sodden clothing and sleeping bags. In great spirits we tramped down to the village to await our transport.

At the post office shop I bought two packets of cigarettes, matches and a bottle of fresh milk. Out of sight of Mike and the lads I smoked two cigarettes and downed the milk before the Land Rovers arrived.

The warden was driving my vehicle and was pretty sour faced. He made it quite clear that he was not impressed by our efforts and warned us that we had one hour only at the school before resuming our expedition.

The drying room at the school was both enormous and very efficient and was soon full of steaming sleeping bags etc as we tucked in to endless bowls of hot stew and fresh bread washed down with tea, watching the clock all the time. All too soon as the sun went down we marched confidently down the drive to start our second day, later than planned but with the school's proud record of never having cancelled an expedition intact, to find a camp site for the night.



The sun, though low in the gloriously blue sky, was warm on our backs as we climbed to gain height in the lower slopes of the mountain and selected a lovely site in a sheep fold with extensive views of the mountains to the south across the lake.

What a contrast this was to the previous night, there was no wind at all and in no time we all had our tents erected in first class order exactly as we had practiced in school. The meal too went extremely well with no problems with the Primus stoves, we had a very satisfying hot meal and were soon bedded down for the night. As darkness fell I lay in my tiny tent listening to the lads singing, I brewed a last drink on my 'illegal gas stove', munched mint cake and smoked, congratulating myself smugly on the momentous day and my growing confidence as a mountaineer, before climbing into my wet and extremely cold sleeping bag!!! I was obviously the only person not to have obtained a dry one (thinks...this boy is a fool)



It says much for the insulating quality of duck down, even when wet, that I was soon warm (even if a little moist) and slept until the sun shone into the tent.

We were camped in a lovely spot and the views of Kidsey Pike and High Raise looked magnificent across the frozen waters of the lake. I again use the gas to make coffee and took one to Mike who, thankfully showed no signs of wanting an early start.

This last day will live in my memory as one of my most perfect mountain days. Everything went according to plan, the hot breakfast was excellent, all the Primus worked, and we spent the day practicing our map reading skills,

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trudging through the deep snow with each boy taking turns to lead using his compass and map. Only skis or snow shoes would have reduced the effort we had to put into progress and I was quite grateful to be given the job of shepherding two of the lads who were feeling the strain a little by bringing up the rear. It gave me lots of time to enjoy the views and, under the pretence of visiting the toilet, to have a crafty smoke.

We marched proudly into the school singing ,in good time for a well earned evening meal.

A message from my force informed me that I was short listed for interview at Chelmsford, Maidstone and Chester for vacancies in the rank of inspector and the following morning Mike drove me over the snow drifts into Penrith to catch the train, my days in the mountains were coming to an end but I would be left with lots of magical mountain moments to savour in my old age.

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