

From Tan Hill to The Cat and Fiddle in Winter

By JOHN RICHARDSON

'I suppose it's about time someone in The Club thought about doing another Winter Tan Cat'. Geoff Bell dropped the remark, with a carefully studied casual air, into a quiet moment of a walk some time in the summer of 1978. There could be no doubt who was indicated by 'someone in The Club', and none of us were crude enough of mind to think that 'doing a Winter Tan Cat' had anything to do with either shoe polish or the feline species. No, we all knew what Geoff was on about. And what an exciting, stimulating prospect sprang to mind: one hundred and fifteen or so miles of Pennines under English winter conditions - enough to turn one's blood to water.

There is probably a lot of truth in the widely held view that the miseries of longer walks shrink in the memory with the passage of time. Why then, eleven years on, are my recollections of that first winter Tan Hill-Cat and Fiddle walk, ones of unending darkness? The only bits of daylight I can easily recall are times when we were resting. And why, since one Tan Hill-Cat and Fiddle walk is safely behind me, can I find no sufficient reason for non-participation in another such banquet of self abuse?

The answers lie somewhere between the pen of Philip Brockbank and the rigorously Roman Catholic nature of my upbringing. Brockbank it was, who in the R.C.J. for 1967 wrote, 'It was a pity that the strain of the two long winter nights and the relapse of the weather on the second day, forced them to by-pass Bleaklow and Kinder,.....such temptations should be resisted'. Now whilst it may be taken as read, that the immortal Brock meant no slight to any member of that first successful winter party, nonetheless there was one for whom his words were barbed, thus ensuring that their censure -though surely unintended- found lodging in the memory. My personal feelings of dissatisfaction with that first winter walk gradually grew, fuelled by memories of the unusual mildness of the midwinter weather in that year, and the 'soft' line from Malham to Cowling, rather than the omission of Bleaklow and Kinder over which Philip quite rightly took us to task. With such a burden of guilt, who could refuse the chance of another go?

So there we were, Geoff Bell, Mike Cudahy, Eric Mitchell and myself, being driven north by Geoff's generous wife Mary, for a noon start on the Saturday between Christmas and New Year. It

was raining heavily, as it had for most of the previous thirty-six hours, and as we passed through Keld, there were one or two nervous jokes as thoughts of what the next fifty - odd hours might have in store, and of our foolhardiness in daring to set out in such conditions filled our minds. Between Keld and the Tan Hill Inn dry-mouthed silence prevailed.

Wind and rain fought to prevent us from opening the car doors. An omen. Had we heeded it, we would have missed perhaps the most magnificent failure of our walking careers and we Brits do love a glorious failure.

The rain between Tan Hill and Hawes, where we arrived shortly after dusk, was of such an outstandingly heavy and hard driven variety that, alongside the feeling that we could not possibly succeed in such conditions, one could scarce keep at bay feelings of optimism: 'Rain like this never lasts and so, might we not look forward to a clear starlit night? Cold, windy perhaps with the odd cloud driven occasionally across a brilliant three quarter moon and maybe a short, sharp snow shower now and again'.

Well, it wasn't quite like that. A picture which, for me, encapsulates the pleasures of that night, is of four damp walkers descending the road towards Cray, while the water swirled down that road with sufficient depth and force to cause it to cream over the tops of their boots.

Above Linton, we stopped in the small hours at a barn well stacked with dry hay where Alan Wiggins, a friend, supplied a splendid breakfast and we dozed briefly in the dry warmth. The rain had actually stopped an hour or so before this point and, ever the optimists, our spirits naturally began to rise. But within half an hour of leaving the comforts of our barn, the bad weather was back with renewed venom. At this point too, an unfortunate misunderstanding led to the separation of Eric from the party, and although he headed up towards Watt Crag Monument in hopes of crossing our path, thickening mist and deteriorating weather meant that we did not manage to re-establish contact.

Near Skipton we stood, the three who were still in the race, behind the van of Eric's friend, in the familiar lashing rain, munching moist sandwiches and contemplating by turns the next quarter mile of road, now flooded to mid-calf depth, the next few miles to Cowling through muddy fields, our rapidly diminishing chances of traversing the desolations of Jacksons Ridge and Boulsworth Hill before dark, and consequently, the lengthening odds on our being able to complete the walk.

We described a meeting place in Cowling to Eric's friend,

assured him that we would be there in less than two hours, and waded off apace through the flood, affecting not to heed the big flash car which bore down upon us, catching us squarely with its bow wave, (just as its driver chose to ignore our gestures of admonishment and rebuke) and striving both to recoup lost time, and to drive out the chill palsy which had gripped us during our short rest. At Cowling there was no support, nor had we any news of Eric, and a vital forty five minutes was spent in waiting for our support van, brewing up and telephoning Mary Bell to check whether Eric had phoned in. He had, and was making his own way home from Skipton.

Out across Ickornshaw Moor from Cowling, the rain turned first to sleet then to heavy snow. Despite the extreme saturation of the moors, the white stuff forced its attentions on the soggy surface, and this caused progress to become more slippery almost by the minute. We seemed scarcely to have set foot upon the wastes of Jacksons Ridge before night caught us, and the blizzard in the torch beams appeared to redouble in intensity. Mike, who navigated this section, took a careful and accurate line, but before we reached the rough road which leads to the Widdop road, both Geoff and I were fighting to stay warm and awake. Every third step over those sodden, snow-covered turksheads sent me sprawling on front, back or side, and I noted in an ominously detached way, first that my reactions were no longer sharp enough to correct a loss of balance, and second, a waning inclination to rise again from the comforts of the heath. Trudging along that mile of track, we each, Geoff and I, took what seemed to be an inevitable decision. Mike was still going very strongly, partly I think because the attention he had given to navigation kept his mind occupied with matters other than the difficult conditions. Had we left Cowling an hour and a half earlier, the whole venture could well have had a different outcome, for we could then reasonably have expected to be somewhere on Black Hameldon as darkness fell, and safely down into Todmorden for a fish supper, a roof over our heads, a couple of hours rest and a change of wet gear.

The final bitter laugh was yet to come. Neither Geoff nor I need have owned up to the frailties of the flesh, for the driver of our support van had himself decided that enough was enough, and he must retire. We drove down to Colne in gloomy silence, and long-suffering Sue drove out to take me home.

During the planning stages of the walk, we had found support rather difficult to come by, and had eventually worked out a somewhat complicated hotch-potch, with support passing between various wives and friends. It was complex, but all the people

involved were tried and true, as well as being sympathetic to the needs of the walking party. Two or three days before the off, Eric let it be known that an acquaintance of his would be able to support us from a van as often as we felt necessary. It seemed to be the answer to our problems, and if one had any misgivings one felt it would be churlish to voice them. But Eric's acquaintance proved inadequate to the task for which he had volunteered.

He was completely without experience of big walks, not to mention big walks in winter. It seemed beyond him to anticipate our needs at the places where we met each other, and we for our part, seemed incapable of spelling out our needs in a manner which he could comprehend. I suppose we simply did not consider that someone waiting beside a lonely moorland road in a rain lashed van for four men to loom out of the darkness, would need to be told that it would be a good idea to have hot drinks ready in the flasks, and that a bit of room to squeeze into the van out of the weather would be most welcome. Poor chap, he will probably remember those two days for as long as the four walkers.

Ah well! I suppose the best thing to come out of the failure, was the success of the following year. For I think, that neither Geoff, Mike nor myself ever seriously countenanced not trying again, and when we did, on the same weekend in 1979, it was in temperatures which rose above freezing point perhaps for only three or four hours throughout the whole walk.

It had rained all day Wednesday and Thursday (26th and 27th December) but the weather had cleared during the Thursday night and Friday morning was clear and frosty; enough to delay our proposed 7.30 am start by fifteen minutes, due to a steep icy corner on the road to Tan Hill from Keld. Fortunately, there was a strategically placed pile of grit at the roadside which quickly remedied the situation. Mike, Geoff and Ted, enjoying the warmth of the car were also helpful in shouting advice on where to put the grit, though I had one or two ideas of my own as to where a few handfuls might profitably have been placed.

Alan Wiggins, who had once more volunteered his help, drove us to the start and thereafter met us at Hawes, Cray, Park Rash and Grassington. He also joined us for the second day of the walk - but more of that anon. His support was most valuable, and we appreciated it all the more after the unfortunate events of the previous winter.

The ground was frozen hard, with frequent icy patches due to the heavy rains of the previous forty-eight hours. A brisk wind blew from North-West, helping to keep our pace similarly brisk and

quickly changing the mind of anyone inclined to loiter at a rest place. We had about a quarter of an hour each at the next two inadequate places. We had about half an hour of rest at Hawes (11.30-12.00) and only a quarter of an hour each at the next two stops. We left Park Rash for Great Whernside at 4.30 pm and were soon in darkness and mist with the odd flurry of snow. The tricky route down to Grassington was found with only a few slight errors, and Alan was waiting there having ordered us a pub meal and secured a recent weather forecast — cold with occasional snow showers.

It was snowing as we left Grassington and settling well before we began to climb Rylstone Fell. (Here the snow ceased just long enough for Mike to remove his cag before beginning again.) 'it continued to drift down, gently, thickly, persistently on a light South Easterly breeze — into our faces — making detailed route finding rather difficult. I had been over Rylstone Fell very recently in order to reconnoitre a route through to Embsay, and thence by field paths to my home at Farnhill where we planned to rest for an hour or so. Between Watt Crag and Embsay lies a lot of heather, now liberally covered with snow, the tiny path — indistinct even in daylight — would almost certainly not be found in darkness and the present conditions. Reluctantly we agreed to head more directly for Skipton, and so we followed the edge from Watt Crag, and came eventually to the valley where the snow lay wet and thawing over a quagmire of gooey mud. Someone noticed an open barn as we neared the road, and so we stopped for a drink only to discover that several previous short-term occupants had used the place for more personal bodily functions. We did not stay long. By the time we had passed through Skipton the brief thaw was over. The night was now brilliant and cold.

When, about an hour before first light we set out from Farnhill, it was again snowing heavily. Alan Heaton, unable to be with us from the start, had joined us here, and Alan Wiggins, as some intended recompense for the selfless support he had given us on the previous day, was to walk as far as Todmorden. Before we had stepped off the road and on to the Ickornshaw Moor, it was clear that we were in for a hard day. The snow, falling on a very light breeze was settling both evenly and deep.

Alan Heaton, fresh and very fit, set such a pace that none could catch him to argue the case for seeking out the path, probably it was not worthwhile anyway, as the said path is a very indistinct trod, at the best of times. After a short refuelling stop, in the porch of a shooting cabin near Water Sheddles reservoir, we struck out for Jackson's Ridge. Once more Alan Heaton 'broke trail' at a

fearsome pace, and as we neared the ridge, Alan Wiggins succumbed to one of the most severe attacks of 'bonk' I have witnessed for some time. Being fairly new to this type of activity, he had not realised the importance of eating regularly and consequently, as he did not feel hungry, he had eaten nothing at our recent pit stop. He lay on the snow and we forced two Mars bars down his throat, (later he described graphically his feelings as he lay there 'focussing every ounce of effort into an unsuccessful attempt to lift my eyelids') and a swift and almost complete recovery was made. Mike suggested an alternative route to Todmorden, missing out Black Hameldon. Whether we saved any time may be open to doubt, but anyway our arrival there was some three hours later than we had hoped and Sue, waiting to feed us, was beginning to worry.

We felt somewhat battered by the strenuous going of the day but the joint mood seemed to be one of determination as we faced our second night until, during our preparations for departure, Ted observed that there would be a train to Manchester in five minutes and he had just bought himself a ticket. We were amazed. Ted had shown no outward signs of flagging throughout the day - but on reflection our departure from Farnhill had been delayed while he doctored his feet - and he did go down with influenza very soon afterwards.

Leaving Todmorden at 4.30pm. we were soon in familiar darkness. The good tracks to the White House, however, saw us there by 6.15pm. looking forward to disturbing the Saturday night dinner and dance set by strolling in and demanding four pints of shandy. We had no opportunity to act out our fantasies; the place was not open for business. The mist which made for careful navigation over Blackstone Edge began to clear over Waystone Edge but we still managed slightly to miss our line perhaps due to the extraordinary effects produced by starlit snow and thin shifting mist. We emerged on to the Nant Sarah's road about a hundred yards from the start of the Marsden path and reached that town at about 10.00pm. The long awaited pints finally oiled our throats at Marsden's first pub, though our tastes by now had modified and it was orange cordial that we swigged and fell asleep over in the languorous warmth. Scarce an eyelid was seen to bat among the locals or the landlady, perhaps there had been several other parties such as ours passing through that evening.

Peel Street Chippy supplied each of us with a 'special' (fish, chips, peas and a teacake for 55 pence) heavy stuff, but sustaining for the plod up the Wessenden and the flounder towards Holme Moss Mast. The night was now crystal clear, floodlit by the moon

and ten million stars. The steep short climb up to Holme Moss became a thing of terrible and daunting beauty, immediately reminiscent of an Alpine face in Winter. Mike and I were amazed to compass the ascent in only a few hard-breathing minutes. The frozen desert of the Moss itself brought us to the road which was closed to traffic so we had it to ourselves as far as Crowden. Alan and Geoff, going well, took a different route, failed to acknowledge the existence of the mast looming over them and suffered a desperate descent to the Crowden Outdoor Pursuits Centre where John Beattie had arranged shelter and Mary Bell (blessings be on both their names) had shipped out food and sleeping bags. When Geoff and Alan arrived shortly after 4.00 am I had already crawled into my bag.

A mere hour of sleep did little to brace one's nerve for a third hard day. The ritual doctoring of feet and donning of clothing was a slow lugubrious chore. Even slower and more strenuous was the climb via Wildboardclough to Wain Stones accompanied by mist and deep snow. It seemed, fifty hours out from Tan Hill that some Machiavellian deity was out to test our mettle: to ascertain if we were yet capable of precise navigation. Well, following a long, desultory argument we found Wain Stones, after which the mist cleared on the instant. Progress to Upper North Grain was still slow but accompanied by a magnificent view of Kinder's North Edge.

We took four and a half hours to reach the Snake, and a further hour and a half to Edale which would have been much longer but for Mike's fine strong lead up to Seal Stones. Any temptation to stop for pints of tea was brusquely brushed aside, daylight being such a precious commodity, and so we passed on along Chapel Gate. Generous Ted met us at the A625 with egg and bacon sandwiches and a huge flask of coffee.

Somewhere around Edale we must have begun to scent success, for we fairly galloped the next five miles to Black Edge, and were undismayed by the powder snow which covered its Turks' heads. We knew it was the last of the really rough going. Still more sandwiches and drink at Mike's Buxton home set us up for the final few miles to the Cat and Fiddle. The time was 8.45 pm, it was sixty one hours since we first turned our backs on Tan Hill.

In retrospect I can see aspects of the execution of this walk which are not entirely satisfactory but whether this will eventually lead me into feeling impelled to have yet another go is doubtful..... unless, of course, Philip Brockbank should once again and in his own articulate journalistic style put his finger on the source of my dissatisfactions.