

Cwm Eigiau Centenary

by Roger Booth



Unidentified Members at The Hut – 1912.

Photo EA Watson

The minutes of the inaugural meeting of the Club on 13th October 1902 record that ‘Mr Minor thought it might be within the province of the Club to establish a Club House in the climbing area of the Lakes.’ Philip Minor was promptly elected as our first Treasurer, a post which he held until his death twenty-five years later, doubling up as President during the last three years of WWI. Minor got his wish within ten years – though in Wales and not the Lakes – when on 15th June 1912 we opened the first climbing club hut in Great Britain in Cwm Eigiau below Craig-yr-Ysfa in the Carneddau.

In pre-WWI days hardly any of our members would have had their own motor transport, so travel to the hills was mainly by train. With many men working at least a half-day on Saturdays, Wales was probably more accessible than the Lakes, particularly the peripheral areas of Snowdonia rather than the now most popular valleys of Llanberis and Ogwen. This led to areas such as Nantlle, Dolgellau and the Conway Valley being explored, in the course of which a run-down shepherds’ cottage (too insignificant to have its own name) in Cwm Eigiau was identified and then leased. The cottage was eight miles from the nearest station, half a mile beyond the reservoir impounded behind the Llyn Eigiau dam (completed in 1911 to supply water for the Dolgarrog Power Station), and was reached along a cart track from Tal-y-Bont.



Stanley Jeffcoat. Photo Club Archives

The prime mover in the acquisition of the Hut and its conversion for our use was 28-year-old Stanley Jeffcoat who, together with a small group of mainly young members, had been scouting for suitable premises. In March 1912 a friend of Tim Wyldbore living in Rhosneigr put him in touch with Rowland Jones who lived at Ty Rhos in Tal-y-Bont and farmed at Tal-y-llyn Eigiau as a tenant of Lord Aberconway of Bodnant, and was in a position to sub-let the cottage. On 28th March the group, referred to in the Committee minutes as ‘The

promoters of the scheme’ proposed that the Club should acquire these premises, which they believed could be got at a low rental and put it into habitable condition for a sum of about £20. The idea was considered sound and feasible, and authority was given for details to be obtained and presented to the Committee.

A delegation led by Jeffcoat visited Jones on 20th April and came to a verbal agreement, and Wyldbore, Jeffcoat and Harry Porter (who was an architect) reported to the Committee on 3rd May with their detailed proposal. These three, plus Arthur Thomson and with power to add, were appointed as a sub-committee to submit estimates of the costs and raise funds, and with authority to acquire the place at an annual rental not exceeding £4. Jeffcoat, in his professional capacity as a solicitor, wrote to Jones on 8th May with a formal offer to lease the cottage for £3 per annum, paid half-yearly in advance. Mrs Jones – saying ‘Jones is ill all the time’ – accepted the offer on 18th May on condition ‘only we want to have the use of it for cooking when we do gather the sheep and to boil water on our dipping’. Jeffcoat paid the first rent on 30th May and our tenancy became effective that day.

Jeffcoat confirmed this to the Committee on 7th June, and reported that Wyldbore, Jack Uttley, Alex Johnston and he had spent four days in Whit-week putting ‘The Hut’ (as it immediately became known) into habitable condition. It was decided to open the Hut formally on Saturday June 15th 1912 when the Club was already scheduled to have a meet at Craig-yr-Ysfa led by William Bennison, and an appeal was made for a representative muster on this important occasion. An informal Committee meeting was held on 14th June to approve the new Rules and arrange the management, but no report of the actual opening the following day has survived.

There was no elected Hut Warden, and the Hut was managed by the sub-committee with most of the correspondence going through one of the Joint Secretaries, John Entwisle or Arthur Burns, but usually the former who doubled as Hut Treasurer. Liaison with the landlord was in person by Wyldbore or Jeffcoat, who paid the rent in cash, though not always before

receiving a reminder. Jones died early in 1913 and was replaced as landlord by Samuel Hughes, who was very cooperative in checking and reporting on the Hut from time to time. The main point of contact for individual members was Harrison, the gamekeeper, who lived nearby at Hafod-y-Rhiw, just south of the Eigiau dam, and was the custodian of the key. Walking up the valley to Cwm Eigiau from the station at Tal-y-Cafn or Llanrwst took two or three hours – particularly if heavily laden, though there are records of members hiring ponies – and calling at Harrison's cottage for the key which he was authorised to hand over upon presentation of a card which had been issued to every member. Despite one report of him being drunk in charge of ponies, and a rumour that members had been in the habit of 'treating' him, Harrison and his wife gave great support and, whilst there is no evidence that they received any regular stipend, they were given presents from time to time.

The pace of events was so fast that the Hut was in use almost before the appeal for funds to equip it had emerged from the printers. By November 59 members (out of a total membership of 127) had contributed a total of £18, mainly in sums of five or ten shillings, though a handful could only spare as little as half a crown. There was just one higher contribution – as Jeffcoat wrote (triumphantly?) in October 'I called on Thomson and got a sovereign from him'. Thomson provided another £2 in May 1914, and in later years there were occasional donations from other members, notably the presumably relatively affluent solicitors Minor and Charles Pickstone, whose Presidencies spanned the period from 1914 to 1920 inclusive, which included most of the life of the Hut. The hut fee was set at one shilling per night or five shillings per week, with half as much again for guests, plus 2d for a bucket of coal.

The cottage was not in good shape in May 1912, and Jeffcoat's offer promised we would 'put the cottage in water-tight condition and do all the repairs and decorating that would be required ourselves' but that Jones would 'clear the cottage out and remove the things that are at present stored there'. Hardware and building materials had to be purchased in Manchester, sometimes from members' own firms, and sent carriage-paid to one of the stations for collection by either a member or a local carter. For the first working party at Whitsuntide 1912 a total of £3/5/0 was spent on a long list including pots, pans, glass, cement, tools and cutlery – the most expensive being a hurricane lamp at three shillings. The filthy conditions during that working party are graphically described by Wyldbore in his article in the 1913 Journal, and it is clear that Uttley did much of the improvement work in the Hut, especially the interior woodwork, making 'shelves and doors all neat and well-behaved, just as his fancy dictated, and we desired.'

Further improvements made at Easter 1914 by Jeffcoat, Uttley, Percy Cookson and Thomas Seaton, were summarised as 'fixed stove, made cement floor in private room, fixed frame and made door, whitewashed and generally cleared up. Does not sound much, but was a devil of a lot, working twelve hours a day.' There were no more working parties after the

outbreak of WWI, and the accounts show only minimal outlays for supplies and minor maintenance. Individual members provided some materials themselves, and a consignment sent by Charles Ashley in June 1914 included 'enough flower seeds to smother the surroundings with one glorious riot of crimson & gold & sulphur as will almost shame the sun'.

Accommodation was very rudimentary, but six camp-beds were bought together with a dozen scarlet blankets which cost four shillings each. There are references to the rats chewing the blankets – hopefully the building was unoccupied at the time – and the manufacturer's advice was to tie them in bundles with wire and suspend them from the roof. There was an open fire for heating but the stove (a major expense at £2/1/0) was not installed until Easter 1914 when the private inner room was made lock-fast. Peat and coal were brought up from the valley by horse and cart, charged at about £1 a time, or by pony, and were augmented by wood salvaged from the disused quarries up the valley. The Hut was fully equipped with crockery and cooking utensils, but the newness of having a mountain hut is shown by the Hints to Hut Users that were issued, which even including advice on amounts of food to be taken.

Two Primus stoves were available for cooking, but parties were expected to take up their own paraffin, guidance in the Handbook being that 'a quart is sufficient for four persons for a week-end'. The Primus was still quite a novelty in 1912, and 'many pages of humorous comments in the Hut Book' suggest that our rather inexperienced members had frequent difficulties with them and found it prudent to take a plentiful supply of meths and prickers. In 1915 Burns advised an outside party 'If none of your men understand a Primus they must follow the printed instructions very carefully'.



In The Hut – 1912.

Photo EA Watson

Residents were advised to take flash lamps if going down the valley to visit Harrison as ‘the Club lamp goes out in a wind and the road is bad and dangerous’. Water was drawn from ‘our’ stream where there was still a plentiful supply during a drought in August 1916 when other watercourses had failed. The Rules stipulated that ‘sanitary arrangements are to be executed in the rocks not less than 100 yards behind the Hut’.

The original log-book was lost long ago, but an extract up to October 1914 showed that 38 different members had made 68 visits since 1912. In 1914 both the Holiday Fellowship of Conway and members of the Climbers’ Club arranged to use the Hut, though outside parties ceased soon after the start of WWI which imposed all sorts of constraints on travel and outdoor pursuits. Whilst there were 37 individual visits in 1914 prior to the outbreak of war in August, there were only three in the remainder of that year. Reduction in usage was steady, with 24 visits in 1915 falling to 19 in 1916 and then fewer than 10 each year between 1917 and 1919, with no records at all for 1920. Despite dwindling use during the war the Hut account was in credit to the end, the majority of the expenditure being rent which remained at £3 throughout.

No Club policy regarding use of the Hut by women was announced, but in 1914 Burns declined a request from the Holiday Fellowship to take a mixed party, writing ‘Ladies have stayed there but use is limited to wives of members of the Club’. Certainly Frank Mason was there with his wife in May 1913 – the earliest record of a woman staying at a Rucksack Club Hut – and Bennison and his wife were reported to be in residence in October 1915. Any restrictions had relaxed by September 1917 when Haskett-Smith took Henry and Blanche Scott-Tucker as guests, a visit described by the latter (writing as Mrs B.E.S.T.) in what was the first contribution to our Journal by a woman.



Count Orloff (non-member), Tom Arnfield, Bill Richards, Jack Capper and Harry Summersgill at The Hut – 20th April 1913. Photo Alf Schaanning

Whilst financial considerations were never a problem, minor difficulties with the condition of the Hut and its security arose from the outset, partly due to its intermittent use by shepherds. In 1914 Wyldbore persuaded Hughes to stop his men sleeping there, after which some security was achieved by storing Club possessions in the locked inner room. As early as September 1914 Harrison had reported that 'Boy Scouts had burst the door' (around that time Scouts were reputed to be searching for German spies), but serious trouble started in 1919 when former member Albert Wood wrote to Entwisle saying that he 'found the door open, someone having wrenched the hasp off, drawing out the screws that held it'.

Despite the best efforts of Hughes and Harrison, it was such vandalism attributed to navvies working on reservoir construction at nearby Llyn Cowlyd which led to the eventual demise of the Hut. The last recorded stay there was by two members of the sub-committee, Uttley and Frederick Dust, in October 1919. Rent was duly paid in January 1920, but by Postal Order rather than in person as before, and a report on the state of the Hut that Easter led to a decision to close it while 'the navvies and other doubtful characters were about', in the hope of resuming possession when it was safe to do so. After Eustace Thomas investigated in September 1920 the Committee concluded that there was no adequate safeguard against further frequent thefts and acts of wilful damage while the public works were going on, which would be for at least another three years. William Huntbach (always known as the Major) lived in Llandudno and conducted negotiations with Hughes on behalf of the Committee to agree the termination of our tenancy of the Hut in Cwm Eigiau, which took place formally on 28th February 1921.

Hughes was told he was welcome to make use of the stove and remaining fixtures in the inner room which it was not practicable to remove and Harrison was invited to take any loose articles, (other than books), which actually consisted of five blankets, four camp-beds, the Primus stoves but not much else of importance. These were still in Harrison's possession early in 1922 apparently awaiting our next hut, but their ultimate fate is unknown. The logbook was already missing and, though it was recorded in April 1921 that it had last been handed to Jesse Wallwork, it has never been seen again.

Epilogue

The foregoing history of the Cwm Eigiau hut may seem rather dry and factual, but the magnitude of the Club's achievement is worth emphasising. The promoters were young men, none of them as old as forty; Jeffcoat and Porter were professionals, but many were relatively humble clerks who probably had little disposable income. They had no model to guide them, because no British climbing club had operated a hut prior to 1912, and it was more than a decade before any followed our pioneer efforts. As John Llewellyn pointed out when he reviewed the draft of this article, the novelty of having a mountain hut is shown by the publication

of Hints to Hut Users, especially amounts of food and how to use those new-fangled Primuses. So much of what they did set a precedent, and even the term ‘hut’ to describe the cottage has been adopted by every club for the hundreds of similar establishments set up in the subsequent century – Jeffcoat and Johnston had used Alpine huts in 1911, and may have borrowed it from there. The core group put enormous effort into their venture and, after all their labours, the May 1912 working party still had the energy to rise at 3:30am on the final morning to tidy up, before leaving the Hut at 5am for the eight-mile walk to the station to catch an early train back to their workplaces. The journey to Manchester by the London & North-Western Railway took 3½ hours, for which the 3rd Class return fare was a not inconsiderable twelve shillings.

After we relinquished the lease on Cwm Eigiau there were strenuous efforts to find a substitute. In 1922 we declined a proposal for a hut in the Ogwen Valley jointly with the Climbers’ Club, which went on by itself to open Helyg in 1925. (Helyg has the distinction of being the oldest climbing club hut in Britain, but obviously not the first as is sometimes claimed.) Shortly afterwards a nearby property was also offered to the Climbers’ Club, but fortunately its Secretary, Herbert Carr, was a former member of the Rucksack Club and passed the offer on to us, so we eventually took over Tal-y-Braich in 1927. Only the SMC, FRCC and Wayfarers had followed suit before WWII. We lost the lease of Tal-y-Braich in 1945 and, until we moved into Beudy Mawr in 1948, our temporary facilities were the minuscule Tyn-y-Shanty in Ogwen and Tyn-y-Weirglodd near Bettws Garmon, where we ‘enjoyed the hospitality’ of the MUMC, which had leased the latter hut in 1944. Our gratitude is one reason why we continue to offer the MUMC reciprocal rights even though it no longer has its own hut for reciprocation.

Subsequent events in Eigiau were dominated by the failure of the dam in 1925 after exceptionally heavy rainfall had caused scouring under its concrete wall, the remains of which can still be seen. The impounded water deluged down the valley, overtopped the downstream Coedty Dam and went on to inundate the village of Dolgarrog where sixteen people were killed. This disaster, the worst of its kind in Britain, led to the introduction in 1930 of legislation to place the design and maintenance of dams under the supervision of suitably experienced civil engineers.

Since 1967 The Cwm Eigiau Hut has been leased by the Rugby Mountaineering Club, which kindly invited Frank Collins to perform its opening ceremony. Frank, who had contributed his three shillings to the original appeal in July 1912 and then stayed in the Hut in August 1912, was our last surviving member from that era.

Acknowledgements

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*Frank Collins at the reopening – 29th April 1967.
Rugby Advertiser*

Some Journal References

- 1913:204 'The Rucksack Club Hut' by T Wyldbore
1915:93 'Rucksack Club Hut' (Anon)
1916:152 'Hints to Visitors to Club Hut' (Anon)
1918:238 'Cwm Eigiau' by WP Haskett-Smith,
1918:239 'The Hut' by Mrs B.E.S.T.
1918:273 'Stanley F Jeffcoat' (Obituary by HE Scott)
1945:104 'T Wyldbore' (Obituary by HE Scott)
1950:251 'John Uttley' (Obituary by J Wilding)
1996/97:18 'Several Weekends Each Year' by JD Llewellyn.