

THE SCOTTISH FOUR-THOUSANDS

I. PREPARATION

BY PHILIP BROCKBANK

The Scottish four-thousand-foot summits were first all climbed in the one expedition in 1924. The conception was the Rucksack Club's but the trophy went to the Fell & Rock, Eustace Thomas's party being narrowly forestalled by Chorley, who was not then one of our members. The dramatic story is told in the respective journals of the period.

The weakness of each of these expeditions was that a car was used to convey the walking party from the Ben Nevis group to the Cairngorms. No doubt the idea of visiting all these summits in one continuous walk without intermediate car transport occurred to the members of these early expeditions, and has occurred since to many other keen hill-walkers, but as far as can be ascertained such a walk has never previously been carried out. I thought of it first some nineteen years ago when suffering from an attack of excitement over the Welsh Threes. One glance at the map was sufficient in those days to scare me off: from Ben Nevis to Ben Macdhui was about 54 miles in a direct line, and nothing like a direct line of reasonable walking seemed available.

After our ideas of the possible had been widened by Tan Hill, I had another look at the Scottish maps. For a while I was still defeated. The trouble was that any direct approach to the Cairngorms from the west seemed barred by the Sgoran Dubh range. To turn this obstacle on the north meant going almost into Aviemore; to turn it on the south meant resorting to the desolate fastnesses of upper Glen Feshie, reached heaven knew how. For a time I meditated a fantastic scheme of linking the two groups by way of Loch Rannoch and Blair Atholl; I abandoned this when I realised that it would necessitate walking the full length of Glen Tilt, which from my recollections of descending it with the present Hon. Treasurer in 1939 is a glen about twice as long and four times as boring as the Alport on Bleaklow.

Hope dawned with the discovery that the Sgoran Dubh range was not a serious obstacle after all, for owing to the loftiness of the

col which connects Carn Ban of that range to the main massif of the Cairngorms a careful route from one to the other would involve a loss of barely 500 ft. Moreover, there was a track up Carn Ban from Achlean in lower Glen Feshie and a series of by-roads to Achlean from the neighbourhood of Newtonmore. From Newtonmore, therefore, an economical and attractive route seemed available for the last part of the walk.

From the Ben Nevis group a way looked promising—assuming that one could evade the swamps at the head of Glen Nevis—as far as the head of Loch Treig. The central part of the walk from here to Newtonmore admitted of a choice: either north along the loch to Tulloch followed by the 28 miles of the main road past Loch Laggan; or by Loch Ossian, the Uisge Labhair, the Bealach Dubh (north-west of Ben Alder), Loch Pattack, Benalder Lodge, and Loch Ericht to Dalwhinnie, followed by 10 miles of A.9.

A rough and optimistic estimate confined the expedition within a 40 hour day. An early morning start from Fort William (a west-to-east direction seemed preferable because the prevailing wind would then be astern) should get one to Aviemore on the late evening of the second day, after only one night out. As this night would occur during the central part of the walk, the Loch Laggan choice of route looked preferable—a cosy conversational progression in padded rubbers along a friendly road rather than a dark struggle with the trackless complexities of the Uisge Labhair.

Convinced now that the expedition was feasible, I suggested it to Frank Williamson over a Saturday morning coffee. I can still see the gleam that came into his eyes. From that moment the Fours never had a chance. We immediately sealed the compact in our blood—that shed by our feet during the secret rehearsal in Derbyshire of the 28 miles of the Loch Laggan road.

I also broached the matter to Frank Bennett, past comrade of the Welsh Threes, at Edinburgh. He expressed great interest in our plans and said that if we should want any help on the expedition he was entirely at our disposal. As it happened we did want help; we wanted it pretty badly. I need hardly record how greatly he was to assist the enterprise and how much we were to be stimulated by the ardent appreciation of such a master of the craft.

We fixed the date at the Trinity end of Whitweek (1954) to which we added the adjacent Friday and Monday, this being the

only long weekend that my companion could manage. We should have liked to reinforce the party with others of the Tan Hill team, but at the time when we had to make definite bookings we understood that all the others had nefarious designs of their own for that weekend.

We decided to keep our own plans secret, at any rate to the threshold of the date. Repeated experience has shown how rapidly and how widely the news of such a proposal spreads among the walking fraternity and we did not want an Amundsen of another club to beat our own to the Pole.

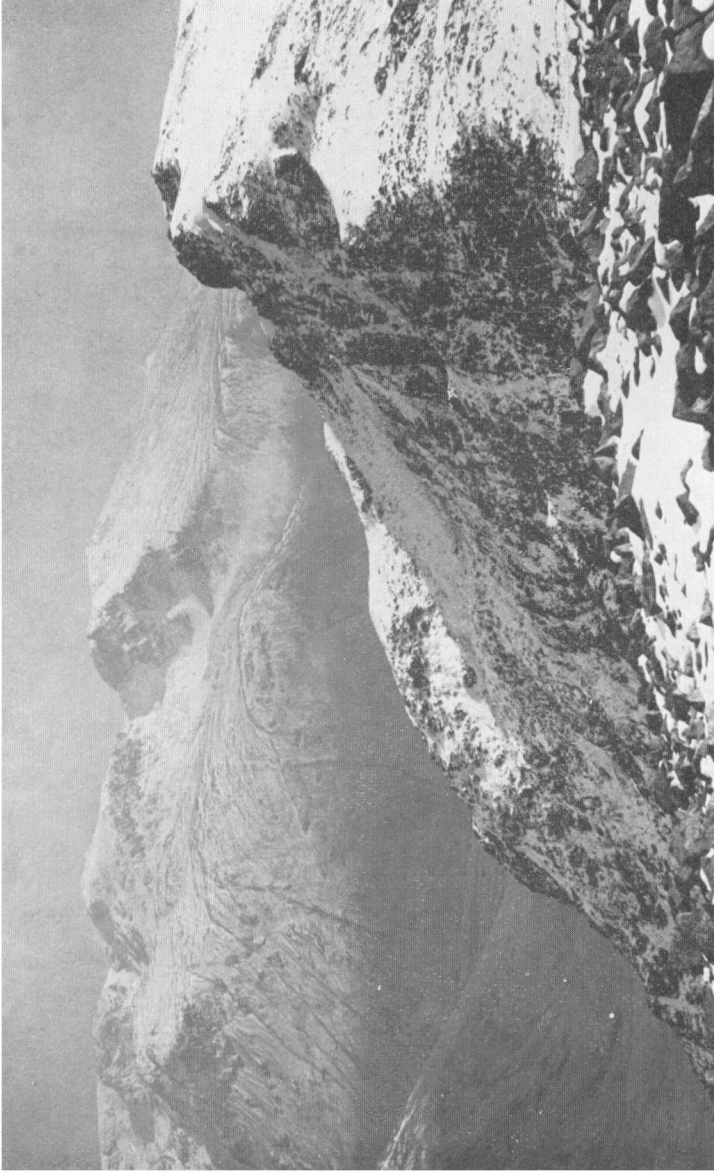
During the Easter holiday I measured the course again, this time with care, and on the inch maps. Naturally this disclosed that the walk was a lot longer than I had thought; from Fort William to Aviemore the distance came to close on 100 miles—there was little difference in distance between the Loch Laggan and Loch Ossian routes—and would involve about 12,000 ft of climbing: a 48 hour trip.* At this discovery I was for abandoning the venture. But my companion would not hear of surrender: we must tackle it as a double-night walk, that was all.

Replanning on these lines was easy. We would spend the first night on Ben Nevis (I was then under the delusion that the Carn Mor Dearg Arête was something like Rushup Edge) and the second on A.9. As the central part of the walk would thus be in daylight Frank was firm that we must take the more sporting route by Loch Ossian rather than the road slog by Loch Laggan.

We now prepared detailed plans. In outline, the time schedule involved reaching Fort William by the Friday (11th June); starting the walk from there that evening; reaching Dalwhinnie the next evening; finishing at Aviemore on the Sunday evening; and returning home from there on the Monday morning train.

A big difficulty arose at once. With two nights out in prospect, we must if possible have a full sleep of eight hours on the night before starting. But how were we to get a full night's sleep between finishing work on the Thursday evening in Manchester and starting the walk on the Friday evening from Fort William? We could sleep that Thursday night at home and catch the 9.40 train from Manchester to Glasgow on the Friday morning, but that train, even if punctual, does not quite allow sufficient time for catching

* More accurate measurements put the distance from Fort William to Coylum Bridge at 98 miles and the total height at about 13,100 ft.



C. D. Milner

Scafell

the afternoon train from Queen Street to Fort William. The idea of travelling to Glasgow by air on the Friday morning to catch that train did not occur to us. Instead, we booked sleepers on the Thursday night train from King's Cross to Fort William (to be joined at York), and booked a room at Fort William for the Friday morning and afternoon in the hope that we could there consume the large residue of sleep left by the train journey.

Dinner at Dalwhinnie (where Frank Bennett was to meet us) on the Saturday evening and beds at Aviemore (whither we despatched a dry change) were easily procured.

Another difficulty was meals on the march, since Dalwhinnie was the only place on the whole route where we could be sure of buying a meal. We decided to carry all the food we should want for the first 24 hours (Fort William to Dalwhinnie) and my pocket primus to brew up with; and we would get Frank Bennett to bring with him the food for the last day.

The question of what food to carry was settled by my partner. Ruthlessly heaving overboard such old ballast as bread and chocolate and such modern nostrums as Vitagluose tablets, he decided on cream crackers with plenty of butter as the foundation of all meals, with sliced chicken, sliced ham, or jam, as alternative superstructures, together with a little fresh fruit. This proved to be a very palatable and satisfying diet.

But the most acute of all problems was how to ensure a warm rest and a satisfying breakfast in Glen Feshie after the second night out, for by this stage of the walk (if I got as far) I felt sure that I, at any rate, would be beyond any brewing-up activity and would be too chilly for a long halt in the open. There were one or two farms or keepers' bothies in the glen but we felt that we could not rely on their help, especially as the morning would be a Sunday, and pretty early at that. This problem was also solved by our assistant, who on hearing of it at once volunteered to motor round to Achlean and provide breakfast for us himself whilst we rested in the warmth of his car.

Becoming eventually anxious about the loads we should have to carry, I suggested in an evil hour for myself that we should pool the four maps that covered the route. I would carry the two for the first half of the walk, and Frank the other two. I thereby deprived myself of a map for that part of the route, unexpectedly awkward to

find, between Speyside and Glen Feshie on which in the event I was to become irrecoverably lost. I should mention that although each of us had been on the Ben Nevis group, and I was fairly familiar with the Cairngorms, which Frank had not yet visited, the 68 intervening miles between Carn Mor Dearg and Cairn Toul was new walking country to both of us.

My own chances of success, very slender at the best, were reduced still more by a slight cold contracted in the chilly air of that most miserable of all Whit Sundays. Despite desperate efforts to throw this affliction off during the few remaining days I did not fully succeed in doing so.

Our night journey from York was not a success. The carriage possessed a transverse wobble of about six inches amplitude which during the fast run north subjected each of us to a longitudinal vibration of like extent relative to his sleeping-berth. At Edinburgh the Fort William carriages were detached and for some considerable time were mercilessly baited by the local shunting engines, which took turns at charging the defenceless vehicles at full tilt in alternate directions. After which the railway authorities rightly decided it was not necessary to send a man along to clout the carriage wheels with a hammer in order to make sure that we were awake. Similar sport was had with us at Glasgow. Not till the slow run up to Crianlarich did we get any continuous sleep worthy of the name.

At Fort William, where Mrs. Sinclair cordially welcomed us, we could not get much sleep either, partly through excitement, perhaps, and partly because it was daytime. I doubt whether the total of sleep enjoyed by either of us since rousing on the Thursday morning had amounted to much more than three hours when the time had come this Friday evening to let battle commence.

2. PERFORMANCE

BY FRANK WILLIAMSON

The day had progressed from dullness to a bright and promising evening. A slow uphill plod by the pony track on Ben Nevis in what seemed an endless sunset gave us an ever-changing view on each uphill zigzag, views we shall never forget. It was 12.30 when

we arrived at the summit cairn, having taken $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours from Fort William. It was still light enough to manage without torches. The night air soon cooled us and after half an hour we were quite ready to move on.

We had to use one torch on the descent to the Carn Mor Dearg Arête. Locating this route in the dark is not easy : if one is not careful one may find oneself knocking at the door of the S.M.C. hut. We did however manage it, not without some hard words about the man who had thought up this expedition and some stern rebukes from my partner for dazzling him with the torch.

The arête, he said, was a Rushup Edge with a little rock to scramble on ; it was quite easy. But the antics of his torch, which gave me the impression that he was conducting an orchestra through a black-out scene of a pantomime, not to mention some occasional mutterings of "*Was* like Rushup Edge," disclosed his disillusionment. I was quite relieved to reach the summit of Carn Mor Dearg myself ; had the weather been wet or windy the ridge would have been very trying in that half light.

With the dawn we descended to the Saddle and then made very heavy weather of the ascent to Aonach Beag. On the descent to the upper Glen Nevis we were soon halted by a hard ground frost concealed by the grass and had difficulty in even "kicking-in" with nails. We did not descend immediately to the river but contoured parallel with it to its watershed, Tom an Eite. Here began the tedious task of finding the track, which meanders in any direction but the one you want to follow. The whole district had been without rain for three weeks ; what the track would be like after rain hardly bears thinking of. The sun was becoming warm as we reached Luibeilt. This looked like being a good breakfast place ; but as no inhabitants were visible we breakfasted by the stream, Philip performing with the primus whilst I endeavoured to extricate the chicken from the jar and to butter the cream crackers.

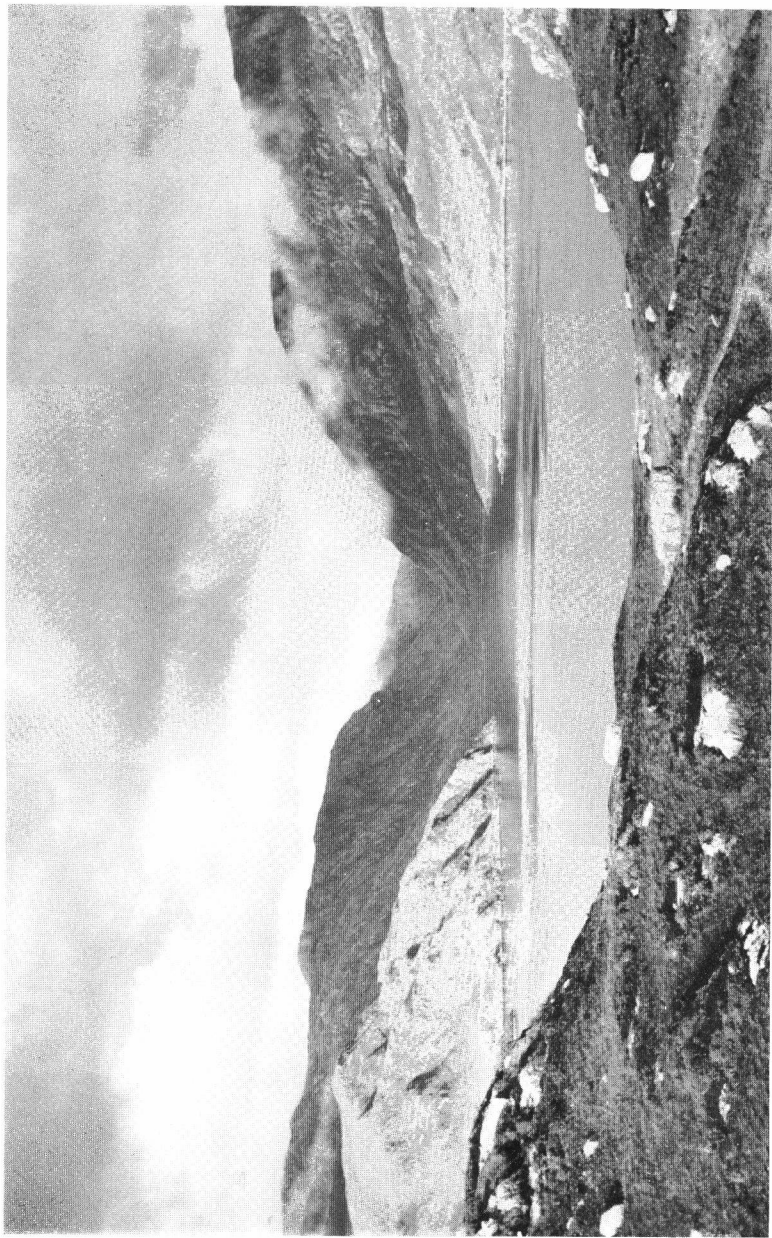
Refreshed by the food and the thoughts of an easy path to Loch Treig in the morning sun, we felt that, after all, life was worth living. We patted the dog and the cat at the farm and pushed on. We were soon enlightened as to the easiness of the route by the successive crossings and recrossings of the stream needed to pick up the muddy broken fragments of the track ; we did not welcome

the prospect of a dipping at this stage. We were still speaking to each other when we reached the loch, though it was only to comment on the morning train from Fort William pulling hard up the bank. By the loch the track became solid and defined; eventually it passed under the railway in the direction of Loch Ossian. We had planned for a meal at Loch Ossian, but not knowing what accommodation there was, apart from the S.Y.H.A. hostel, we were prepared to eat again out of doors. Temptation crept into me; without a word to my partner I walked meekly to the hostel door. The warden was out; but we were invited by two hostellers to share their newly-brewed pot of tea, for which and for the indoor rest we were very thankful.

The rest wasn't for long: the Master was soon looking at his watch and maps. I *did* try to hire the services of the two hostellers to row us in the hostel boat to the far end of the loch, but the finances involved soon had me on my feet. From the hostel the walk along the shore through beautiful trees intermingled with brilliant rhododendrons was very pleasant. Philip had a sudden bout of sleepiness and must have shaken a local man by lying full-length in the road when I had stopped to adjust my boots; as soon as Philip rose to his feet the man made off quickly.

From Loch Ossian the route runs through the Ben Alder forest, crossing the shoulder of the Ben by Bealach Dubh (a matter of five miles from the loch) and climbing very little to do so. The heat of the day soon gave me intermittent bouts of sleepiness; the crossing and recrossing of the stream which runs through the heather-mixture of this valley made it a very arduous journey towards what seemed an endless horizon. It shattered even Philip, who however left me well behind, on all-fours. At the bealach we had a welcome brew of tea and began to look forward to the descent to Loch Ericht. It was true we moved a little faster than uphill but the flat ground by Loch Pattack seemed interminable. At last we reached the end of it and halted whilst I finished the chicken and grapes and Philip relieved the hunger-knock by spooning jam into his mouth at a remarkable speed, much to the interest of a number of bullocks which came in close to watch him, open-eyed. A short descent and we were at Ben Alder lodge.

By Loch Ericht the staunch figure of Frank Bennett rose from the grass verge. He had trundled a large flask of hot coffee and



D. J. Bernick

Glendhu

several tins of grapefruit juice and other refreshments along the five miles of road (closed to cars) from Dalwhinnie. Whilst we indulged ourselves in coffee, then in grapefruit, he assured us that the hotel at Dalwhinnie would save our evening meal, for now we were well behind schedule. The tedious walk by the loch-side passed quickly because of conversation. We arrived at Dalwhinnie at 9.30 p.m., 1½ hours late.

After a meal and a wash and the dumping of surplus equipment and a final briefing of Frank, we left for our second night. Here we took the A.9 road in the direction of Kingussie. We had changed into rubbers in the hope of resting our feet, but padding the road soon became very wearing. Our sufferings were redoubled when the cold night air descended. I myself felt very envious of the cars, perhaps returning from a Saturday-night orgy, especially when we found that a transport café at Ettridge Bridge, which we had hoped would be open, was closed. Sore feet made us very slow. Philip became exceedingly cold. Eventually he decided that I should press on, if I could, leaving him to come along in his own time and if necessary to be picked up by Frank when he motored out for our early morning rendezvous in Glen Feshie. We separated a mile short of Ruthven, on the by-road (B.970) between Newtonmore and Tromie Bridge.

At Tromie Bridge, according to the inch ordnance map, a "good motor road" (coloured yellow) leaves B.970 and crosses over some foothills to Achlean in Glen Feshie. Frank Bennett had planned to reach Achlean by this way. On coming to this road junction I was dismayed to discover that the hill road was like a rutted farm-track; the map however confirmed that it was the one to Achlean and I accordingly followed it, reaching Achlean at 7.30.

Though this was the schedule time, there was no sign of Frank or Philip.* After twenty minutes' lonely wait Frank appeared on foot without Philip. Frank had tried to follow the hill road from Tromie Bridge but had soon found it impassable and had had to retreat and make for the road that passes into Glen Feshie from Kinraig, only to be stopped two miles below Achlean by a locked

* My own adventures can be briefly concluded. In the comparative warmth of the dawn, soon after we had separated, I recovered, and reached Tromie Bridge in good heart. I had not a map of this locality with me, but remembered that the inch one indicated a coloured road going over to Glen Feshie. I could find nothing like that sort of road except the continuation of the one I had arrived on. After exploring in turn the tracks and lanes which converge here (one of which, had I known it, was what I was seeking) I relied in desperation on the continuation road, only to find my error when it was too late to correct it. In any case, however, even if I had found my way to Achlean, I should not have had enough energy to have finished the whole walk.—P.E.B.

gate. From there he had carried up to Achlean all the cooking equipment and food for the breakfast ; this he now prepared, while I was made to sit back in luxury. Over breakfast we discussed the probability of Philip's having been kidnapped by the tinkers whose camp we had passed at Ruthven, and the prospects for the crossing of the Cairngorms. Time soon passed ; when it was apparent that Philip could not possibly catch us up, Frank insisted that I went on alone, reluctant though I was to do so ; I walked back to the car with Frank to pick up my boots and on returning to Achlean began the ascent to Carn Ban Mor.

I found this comparatively easy, perhaps because of Frank's encouragement. From the top I had an almost complete panorama of the western Cairngorms. I had at first to pick out each summit by compass and after a time was able to decide on as easy a route to Cairn Toul as the intermediate country permitted. The route went over rather broken ground, where unexpected herds of deer startled me several times, to the foot of Angel's Peak, which I ascended first. There I was much impressed by my first sight of the cliffs of Braeriach and, across Glen Dee, the steep scree slopes of Ben Macdhui. From Angel's Peak I dropped down to climb to the stony summits of Cairn Toul, reached at 3.15 p.m. Turning back, I contoured to visit the unnamed cairns of the two plateaux on either side of the Wells of Dee. As I took a little refreshment by one of the cairns the clouds, which for some time had looked threatening, suddenly descended, covering Braeriach ; this however I reached without undue difficulty. I was also very fortunate in finding the track down to the Pools of Dee from Braeriach.

From the Lairig it was clear that to reach the summit of Ben Macdhui I must tackle the alarming scree slopes which had been in view throughout the descent. I left the Pools of Dee at 6 precisely—the time was checked by the watches of three campers—and made very heavy weather of the ascent of the screes. By now the mist was thick and since a line of cairns which I followed led me nowhere I took a chance bearing and was fortunate enough to reach the main summit (7.30). Here as I ate a little more food and examined the indicator rain began to fall.

Having taken a quick bearing to collect the other summit cairns I made my way rather diffidently in the direction of Cairn Gorm. The route I had chosen led by Lochan Buidhe, whence I hoped to

proceed by contouring. Unfortunately I arrived, to my dismay, at a point overlooking Coire an t-Sneachda, and the mist gave me no chance to pick up a direction. I was by this time very tired ; for a few minutes I was unable to cope with the situation. However, I retraced my steps practically to Lochan Buidhe, and on my way the mist lifted for long enough to allow me to see the Loch Avon gorge and to discover my error. I pressed on to correct this, and without further incident gained the summit of Cairn Gorm at 9.42.

Fortunately Philip had previously briefed me as to the descent from here to Glenmore Lodge. Dropping out of the mist I could soon see Loch Morlich. The rest of the descent, through the shapes of men and animals raised by my imagination, was not very pleasant. I arrived at Glenmore Lodge at a few minutes before 11. Without resting there I plodded on, and with several sit-downs came near to Coylum Bridge. Here when a car approached I disregarded all unwritten laws and thumbed a lift into Aviemore.

As the time was now nearly 1 a.m. I had difficulty in locating the guest house at which we were to spend Sunday night. After a little wandering I was directed to it and by devious means succeeded in rousing Philip, who had left a note of instructions on the front porch.

We were by now well into our fourth wakeful night, and despite a large supper I found it easy to fall asleep. By 7.45 we were up and about our packing, to catch the morning train home from Aviemore.

We did not sleep much during the journey ; perhaps it was excitement that kept us awake, or the interesting scenery. As we had had an immense breakfast we did little or no justice to our sandwiches but instead devoured most of a quarter-pound tin of acid drops, sent us by Mrs. Bennett ; they not only satisfied our needs but kept a small boy quiet and away from our feet.

After ten hours the journey became a little wearisome, so that we were thankful on arriving at Manchester to find Alfred with his car, ready to deliver us to our homes, there to rest and to ruminate on a very full Trinity weekend.