

Haute Hut Cuisine

by PETER HARDING

By the time I applied to join the Rucksack Club I was already well known in some mountaineering club circles; not simply as a veritable vanquisher of vertiginous and often virginal verticalities, but as a masterful maker of the most magnificent hut meals. I must admit though, during those early post-war years when many food stuffs were still on ration or in short supply, my competence in the culinary arts could be said to be artificially aided. (Dirty descriptive words about any activity in the mountains at that time!) You see, my parents managed an urban hotel and therefore I had reasonable access to a sure supply of food. Most of it was in packets or tins and, of course, these included well known wartime products - household names such as SPAM, that famous canned compound of pork and ham (or whatever else happened to fall into the mixer!), and POM, the ubiquitous dried potato powder. There were also packets of powdered egg and tins of various vegetables. Thus my cheffing know-how owed as much to the printed instructions on labels and packets as it did to the necessity, when I was at home, of making most of my own meals whilst hard-labouring parents were kept busy behind bars, pulling pints of beer, or in back rooms serving sarnies. And when I started cooking for others in huts, I soon found that a really good evening meal was most important to young climbers, especially after a cracking day out on the hill or crag - in those days one usually managed to keep going for a whole day on the odd bar of chocolate or a few dried prunes or even a small lump of cheese. Such items could be easily stuffed into the pocket of one's anorak, thus obviating the need to carry a rucksack. A pair of heavily nailed boots and a coil of full weight manilla rope was quite enough load to go out on a mountain with, particularly if you also had a few steel pegs and karabiners plus a peg hammer hanging from your waist!

My reputation as a mountaineering club hut chef had by 1947 become so legendary that any young tyro climber would volunteer, without hesitation, to carry my 200ft rope and stand for hours in pouring rain, even on some stochastic stance with bugger-all to belay to, while I battled away, often without success, trying to lead a deceptively difficult pitch - all for the possibility of being in on a

Harding hut meal! Not that my main courses were anything to rave about; usually they consisted of a sizeable slice of SPAM or corned beef together with a handsome helping of POM mashed potato and plenty of peas from a can. But the *pièce de résistance*, my traditional treacle sponge pudding with nice hot custard on top, really was something special particularly in a hut! That old traverse round the Black Rocks Promontory, the Phoenix Climb on Shining Clough, Cratcliffe Tor's Suicide Wall as well as Valkyrie on the Roaches and Goliath's Groove at Stanage may have been regarded by the climbing cognoscenti of the time as some of the best gritstone routes one would ever sample, but those treacle sponge puddings of mine were definitely out of this world. Moreover, anybody, but anybody, could tick them off - no bother at all.

So, in 1947 it might just have been that my application to join the Rucksack Club was approved by its committee solely on the basis of a revered reputation as a climbing hut masterchef. But I doubt it since that very year saw the sad loss of the Club's one and only hut - Tal-y-Braich. However, it is true that an urgent search was instigated to find a new hut in North Wales and a place called Beudy Mawr, near Nant Peris, was the subject of hasty negotiation. Because this was difficult to finalise quickly, a vacant one-time chapel(?) in the Ogwen valley a tiny, shed-like, green painted structure of timber and corrugated iron sheet - was temporarily rented for use as a hut. Situated between the Climbers' Club's Helyg and the MAM's Glandena it was aptly named Tyn-y-Shanty. Could it possibly have been intended as a test for my haute hut cuisine?

Early in 1948, with Norman Horsefield as my most regular climbing companion on weekend visits to North Wales, I sometimes stayed at T-y-S (each time we were its sole occupants). Norman would travel down on Friday evenings using the Crosville bus from Manchester to Bangor, whilst I took the train from Shrewsbury to Ruabon to join the same bus there. We got the driver to drop us right outside the hut. However, after a day on the hill, on Saturday evening we usually transferred ourselves to Helyg where I would set about making our evening meal - the CC hut's all-electric facilities enabling me to practise my culinary arts to the full. Thoughts of my treacle sponge pudding always outweighed the 1ml dash down the road from Tyn-y-Shanty to Helyg, even on the foulest of nights.

At Easter in 1948 I was allowed to book Tyn-y-Shanty for the

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sole use of the Stonnis Mountaineering Club (a small Derbyshire based club formed in 1945)^(*). So it was that 10 stalwarts of the Stonnis occupied the little green hut for two or three days with yours truly as their Meet Leader and, more importantly, Head Cook and Bottle Opener. (Mention of the latter reminds me that I lugged a huge suitcase filled with bottles of ale on and off various buses and trains between Burton-upon-Trent and Bethesda, eventually to be man-handled by four of us from the station there to T-y-S with the aid of two ice axes!)

After an excellent first day out, on Tryfan, the Stonnis lads all returned to the tiny hut tired and looking forward to those gastronomic delights which their Meet Leader would magically produce. So, well after dusk, aided by one Graham Robinson (the Stonnis Club's Commis Chef), the ML cum HC and BO set about his much awaited cheffing act.

Now it has to be explained that the T-y-S facilities were basic in the extreme - primus stoves had to suffice for the jobs of both lighting and cooking. Nevertheless, despite such impediments to any attempt at haute cuisine, everything seemed to go well. After adequate starters of bottled Worthington an ample main course of SPAM fritters, carrots, peas and chips was avidly consumed, although those chips did taste rather strange - one of Graham R.'s specialities, they were skilfully produced from re-constituted POM potato powder by carefully slicing, then frying the results. However, my own speciality - that highlight of the evening, the treacle sponge pudding - was a definite disaster. Utterly inedible. Ugh!

What I had thought was a packet of sponge mixture in that dimly lit hut, turned out to have been the potato powder which Graham R. should have used to fabricate his chips (which explained their unusual spongy texture and taste!). As for my own *spécialité de la maison* it was almost immediately dubbed by Gordon Dyke as 'Pete's 3P Pudding' - the second and third P's standing for 'poor' and 'POM', while the first one stood for a rather rude gerundive prefix. From that moment on, since bad news travels fast, my reputation as a hut masterchef was finished. So what else could I do but turn my hands to the job of cooking up new delicacies and *tours de force* on the crags? Without the abject failure of my haute cuisine in the Ogwen valley a good deal of raw rock in the then peaceful Pass of Llanberis might have remained untouched by human hand for at least another decade.

(*) Six of its 16 members were also Rucksackers at one time or another, but only one remains so.