

## ***Excursion to Barmouth – a high-level challenge route from Llangollen***

---

Charlie Leventon (June 2002)

**BACKGROUND:** I have always been attracted to a logical or classical line - whether rock climbing or hill running. It is never more satisfying to me than to journey using the most sensible, or direct, line from one point to another, from bottom to top (and back) or, from top to top.

So it is that some of my best hill memories include trips like the Welsh Three Thousands, the Old Man of Hoy, the Cuillin Ridge, and fell races such as the Kentmere Horseshoe or even the manic dash that is the Roseberry Topping race. In contrast I still have no idea of where I have been for much of the time during races like Lantern Pike or the Corris Forest Challenge. With this in mind, the unidirectional challenge of the Little Stretton to Stiperstones Time Trial is my small addition to my local Shropshire hill race calendar.

If you are similarly motivated here is a suggestion: a route over the high ground between Llangollen and Barmouth – a trip to be enjoyed ‘mountain marathon’ style or tackled in a single (supported) push.

This particular trip had lingered in my mind for a number of years. As a school-boy, I had tramped through ‘Wild Wales’ (Berwyns to Rhinogs) from youth hostel to youth hostel (Cwnwyd, to Bala to Kings). I was also familiar with Jim Perrin’s essay in Big Walks where he recounts his experience traversing the Berwyns and Arans. In 1990 I finally organised my own thoughts into a route that would use OS trig points as waymarks and Rick Robson was easily persuaded to join me in a ‘Karrimor style’ two-day adventure.

The essence of the route is derived if you place a straight edge between the summits of Moel Fferna in the Berwyns and Cadair Idris. You will see there are a number of summits (with trig points) on, or very close to, that line. Add the starting leg from Llangollen (The Square) and a finishing leg to Barmouth (the Station) via the Mawdach estuary bridge, and the ‘excursion’ is complete – in design, that is.

**MAY 1990:** Rick and I were dropped in The Square at Llangollen by Stuart Cathcart and we set off in our ‘High Sports’ sponsored tracksters and threatening weather. Before reaching the moorland there is a delightful path and track that leads up and out of Llangollen. Strangely, and under the influence of trig point fever, we visited Y Foel (Grid Ref: 188391) but this now seems less logical – perhaps better to make directly for Moel Fferna. Disappointingly the trig point on Moel Fferna is virtual. Marked even on recent maps, there are only vestigial remains on the ground. Although you will experience heather, boggy sections and parts where the path is less distinct, progress over the more popular Berwyns via Cadair Berwyn to Milltir Gerrig should be relatively rapid. We were met at the Milltir Gerrig road crossing by Stuart, offering every temptation to scratch the attempt, particularly as we were already wet through. It was nearly June so we had been hoping for fair weather and intended to make the most of extended daylight.

The next section is the character-building bit – mountain marathoners will understand what this means. Firstly, the top of Foel Cwm-Sian LLwyd is only won by swimming against a tide of deep heather. There follows an interminable track, reached only after you have navigated carefully across the featureless terrain south, south-west from the summit. In poor visibility we lost too much height and added a mile of the interminable track.

At the summit of the pass (Bala to Lake Vyrnwy) the route to the top of Foel y Geifr is painfully obvious and, once you have reached it, the route onward to Bwlch y Groes is (in mist, anyway) disconcertingly not obvious. Compass work and careful reading of the terrain should minimise unnecessary height loss whilst avoiding the worst underfoot conditions. Before reaching Bwlch y Groes Rick and I pitched our tent for the night. It was still raining, we had been on the move for nearly nine hours and I was tired so we didn’t pass up a suitable site near a stream. In planning I

## ***Excursion to Barmouth – a high-level challenge route from Llangollen***

---

had hoped to camp on to or beyond Aran Fawddwy but I had been overly optimistic given the weather and the conditions under foot. This misjudgement didn't lose me any sleep.

Early morning wobbly legs and shallow lungs made it feel just like the start of the second day on a 'Karrimor'. We crossed Bwlch y Groes and headed into the Arans ignoring all notices forbidding access. Progress over this section meant contending with peat groughs, crossing deep channels and, perhaps, a landowner. Once clear of the hummocks and hollows steep grassy hill-slopes need to be carefully identified and contoured for the most efficient route, via Craiglyn Dyfi, to the summit of Aran Fawddwy.

The next milestone summit is Waun-Oer but to reach it the wearying excursionist has to cross more 'keep out' signs, Glasgwm summit and the Welshpool to Dolgellau road (A470) at Ochr-y-bwlch. The terrain is generally fast (duck-boards in places) following fences and sometimes the forest boundary, but there are a couple of short sharp ascents as well as a particularly trying decent on steep grass to the pass of Ochr-y-bwlch. The traverse of the Dovey Forest Hills (Cribin Fach, Waun-Oer and Mynydd Ceiswyn) is exhilarating provided there is still some running in your legs – open views to either side – forests on the left, Snowdonia to the right and the looming shape of Cadair Idris creeping closer. At this stage in our trip the sun had emerged to stay with us for the remainder of the day. As we approached Mynydd Ceiswyn we encountered our first fellow traveller since leaving Llangollen. To honour our obligations to 'High Sports' we flashed our trackster clad, advertising laden legs at him and exchanged grunts.

Before reaching Cadair Idris there is just one more bwlch to cross – the A487 Dolgellau to Machynlleth at Bwlch Llyn Bach. The route to reach the road is straightforward provided you leave the ridge at the correct place - a small col at Grid Ref: 767135. I think we both struggled to summon up the necessary resolve when faced with the steep fence line that rises from the road and leads to the top of Gau Graig. However, once on the shoulder of the Cadair massif, Barmouth beckons and the couple of miles from Gau Graig to the summit of Cadair Idris via Mynydd Moel felt to us like a walk in the park – even more so when we encountered the usual noisy congregation at the summit shelter.

For those who have not at this point had enough ridge exposure you might want to follow the escarpment edge of Tyrrau Mawr and Craig-y-llyn before dropping down to the Mawdach estuary. However, sticking to our original objective of trig point to trig point with start and finish legs being as direct as practicable, Rick and I descended the Pony Path and took to the intricate field paths that skirt Llynau Gregennen and the small-holdings of Cregennan. A bit of careful map reading will ensure that the 'A' road does not have to be followed for more than a hundred metres before joining the disused railway track leading to Barmouth Bridge.

At Llynau Gregennen I had 'bonked', hardly able to mount a stile or raise a smile. This is a particularly attractive spot for a picnic so we drank, ate and rested in the sun. By the time we reached Barmouth Bridge the picnic had taken the desired effect and adrenaline kicked in so we stormed the bridge – running the entire length, pounding the boards, fifty feet above the water. At the Station I looked at my watch and confirmed we had completed another nine-hour day. The journey home to Shrewsbury felt so short in contrast.

REFLECTION: The appended summary shows the route described as being about 60 miles long and involves 12,000 feet of ascent. Given that the Bob Graham Round is accepted to be 72 miles long with 23,500 feet of ascent to be completed in 24 hours, perhaps 18 hours would be a suitable challenge target for Llangollen to Barmouth?

## ***Excursion to Barmouth – a high-level challenge route from Llangollen***

### APPENDIX: SUMMARY INFORMATION - LLANGOLLEN TO BARMOUTH

The principal route (i.e. without extensions to Y Foel; Tyrrau Mawr; Craig-y-llyn; etc.)

<b>Stages</b>	<b>Grid Ref.</b>	<b>Leg distance</b>	<b>Leg ascent</b>
<b>START: Llangollen</b> The Square (90 m above sea level)	215418	0.0 miles	0 metres
Δ Moel Fferna	117398	7.5 miles	660m
Δ Cadair Berwyn	072327	6.5 miles	460m
)( Milltir Gerrig (B 4391)	305017	4.5 miles	30m
Δ Foel Cwm-Sian LLwyd	314996	1.5 miles	170m
)( Bala to Lake Vyrnwy road	273946	6.0 miles	100m
Δ Foel y Geifr	276938	0.5 miles	140m
)( Bwlch y Groes (half-way point)	233913	4.0 miles	90m
Δ Aran Fawddwy	224863	6.0 miles	430m
)( Ochr-y-bwlch (A 470)	171803	6.5 miles	330m
Δ Waun-Oer	148785	2.5 miles	400m
)( Bwlch Llyn Bach (A 487)	757139	2.5 miles	70m
Δ Cadair Idris	130711	3.5 miles	665m
<b>FINISH: Barmouth Station</b> (5 m above sea level)	612158	9.0 miles	120m
<b>Total</b>		<b>60 miles</b>	<b>3,665 metres</b> <i>12,000 plus feet</i>

### POSTSCRIPT NOTES – ADDED JULY '06; WITH FURTHER ADDITIONS AUG '09:

1. With negotiated access agreements and implementation of the CROW Act, access is no longer the problem it once was.
2. In May 2005 Yiannis Tridimas (marking his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday) and Ray Baines completed the route (with extra bits and support at road crossings) in a time of 18h 17m. Yiannis has written up his account in The Fellrunner Magazine (June 2005).
3. In June 2006, Lawrie Jones and Alan Duncan (supported by Yiannis) completed the extended version in 20+ hours. Starting later than intended they completed in the dark without torches.
4. These achievements would seem to indicate that 18 hours represents a challenging benchmark whether one chooses to complete the principal route or add extensions.
5. In April 2008 Rob Woodhall completed the excursion (with the inclusion of Pen y Garn at the end) in 15h 23m. NB Rob has carefully calculated the distance at 56 miles with 14,500 feet of ascent.
6. Don't forget money to pay the bridge toll at Barmouth!
7. There is of course plenty of scope to add summits to the challenge. However, the principal challenge route would seem to remain valid: a straight line (via trig point 'waymarkers') between Moel Fferna and Cadair Idris – Penygadair, having started in Llangollen and finishing in Barmouth – two well known resort towns.
8. Successful excursionists (with or without additional summits) are invited to log information with me: [charles.leventon@btinternet.com](mailto:charles.leventon@btinternet.com)