

THE (2nd) WELCOME WEEKEND

If the first weekend was informative, professionally organised and well structured, the second was, well, there is only one word for it really – FUN!

Actually, there were about thirty odd words for it, as Chadders discovered at the closing session on Sunday morning. Re-stimulating, inspiring, positive, thought provoking, warm and friendly were all words which came out at the summing up. So did 'animals', 'disco' and 'sticky toffee pudding', but then, as Kenny Everett used to say, "I'm giving away the plot, Michael!"

Arrive any time after 8pm, they said. Here's a map, they said. OK, so I know I am a poor map-reader. (You know the sort? – "If you get to a hump-backed bridge, we've gone the wrong way!"). I realised it was a bit previous of me to feel smug as I drove past the turning for Abergavenny on the A40. Fifteen minutes later I was cross with myself, had finished the family sized bag of liquorice allsorts meant for the walk and was back on the A40.

As I made it up Llanbedr Road, I realised that Jill T and Japheth were in front. Japheth was navigating. We stopped where it said Perth-Y-Pia, but the shut gate was not on the map, so they drove passed it and up the hill, turning into all sorts of drives and ditches, before realising that a shut gate might actually be the way to go. By this time, Gemma had joined the vehicle merry-go-round. Resourceful as ever, I rang the hosts and discovered that, yes, driving up a very steep track, into the deep velvety Brecon darkness and arriving at deserted barns was, in fact, our destination. There was nobody there.

We did a quick recce – Jill T brought a torch which helped – and we started unloading cars. Headlights appeared and the distant sound of drums alerted us to the arrival of the Burnley Bunch. Pouring themselves out of the cars, they quickly made up for the quiet start. Within minutes, everyone else arrived, with tales of wrong turnings, steep hills and record journey times. Graham lit a fire.

Saturday morning found us up and about fairly promptly, greeted by Martin, looking fresh in spite of his orthodontic experiences of the night before. Mark took a posse to the village, foraging for breakfast, and everyone else drank in the stunning views, steaming mugs of tea in hand. Martin cooked up a fine feast, aided by Caroline and Val, and Graham, Kate, Gemma and I did the washing up. Sean joined us for breakfast.

Two activities were planned – well, three actually. Mark and Dig led the 'stay at base and do the paperwork' group, whilst Tim did the walk and Martin the treasure hunt. Searching questions, such as 'what sort of walk is it?', and 'how far will we be walking?' were answered by Tim. 'Well, as far as we get, really, I mean we'll just go up the hill a bit and see what happens!'

The walk took us up and up into the hills, a steep climb for an hour resulting in the exhilarating views of peaks and ridges. The weather was kind, being mild and clear, if a touch breezy. We walked in a horseshoe along the ridges, looking back and marvelling at our progress. We reckoned that Sean walked three times further than everyone else did, as he bounced from boulder to cairn, cheering everyone up with his banter as he went.

There was time to talk and explore ideas, whether work or otherwise, and the descent into the valley seemed to be done in no time. Most of the group headed to the pub, whilst Chris and I trekked up the steep track to the barns. There is nothing quite like a hot shower after four hours of walking, and the feeling of clean clothes and soft shoes to restore ones spirits. I took the car back to the pub to collect weary souls, taking Dig and Mark with me. The pub was small and friendly, although the landlord nearly lost it when he asked me to move my 'tosser trolley'! (I had, admittedly, parked my 4x4 extremely badly, it has to be said.)

Jane, our hostess, was cleaning the kitchen when we got back, with the delicious smell of baked potatoes and beef casserole greeting us upon our return. The treasure hunters had, by the way, had a good day out, if not quite sticking to Martin's map. The dinner was as good as it smelt, and the sticky toffee pudding was definitely TDF*. Mark presented some ~~holiday snaps~~ slides of expeditions, with some fabulous evocative music. We all felt good. Graham lit the fire.

I had written a wee poem, and Sean did a couple of his works too. Caroline sang – what a stunning voice – and Mark did his thing with the mop. Actually, Mark lost his 'Mr Supple' title, the crown being taken by Sean. In the process, there may have been one or two groins strained, as people tried to do the splits and pick up objects – starting with a photocopy paper box and ending with a Smartie – from the floor. Oh, we know how to give ourselves a good time.

The disco was spontaneous, with a definite bent for music of the 70's and 80's. The mixture of house, garage, garden shed and Sam's aerobics was interesting, and was that really Graham, like the rest of us tired after the 18K walk, break-dancing with Caroline on the floor. I think it was. (Graham was heard to mutter later "I have the mind of a 23 year old!")

Sunday, and we were spoilt. Jane returned to cook us breakfast, doing all the washing up as well. Fabulous. We split into groups after breakfast, and played with Dig's balls. Graham had been resource investigating – scavenging for waste paper baskets to you and I – and placed three baskets in a line. We had to throw juggling balls from a distance to land in the baskets, with the nearest basket scoring 5, the second 10 and the third 15. We had ten minutes to discuss strategy.

After the first round, groups 1 and 3 were level, with group 2 (mine) lagging behind. We had a further ten minutes – frantic practicing – and then, just as we were about to start, Graham moved the baskets to the other end of the room and changed them around, but still having three in a row and still scoring as before. In a stunning finale, group 2 went last, and Kate, having scored 15 with her first throw, had the last ball and everything to play for. The

cheer went up as the ball landed firmly in the last basket – 15 points and we took the title.

In the review of the session, each group had to evaluate what percentage, out of 100, it felt it had achieved in working together as a team. That was harder than throwing the balls! Dig has learnt also from this session never to sit behind the third basket when it is young Tom's turn!

Chris and Sam introduced us to the last session, where a typical village was mapped out. In groups we had to spend 20 minutes discussing how we would approach organising a project in the village. There were many ideas shared by each group, and some novel ideas put forward – Martin suggested that the first 'paddle-thru' McDonalds might be a touch ambitious in the 12 days, although they usually build the drive-thru's in 3 in this country! The need for forward planning matched with flexibility was the key message here, and lessons from the ball exercise – keeping a strategy flexible whilst the environment changes – became more relevant.

Packed bags and packed lunches drew the weekend to a close. The rounds of hugs and kisses showed that the fun, friendship and time spent together had bound us all closer together.

Next session – 8th and 9th April at Reaseheath.

Jill Mitchell, 7th February 2000.