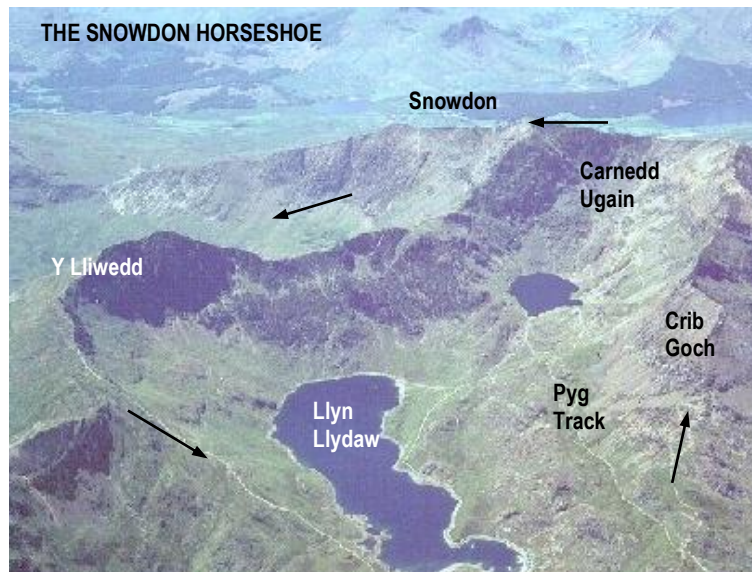


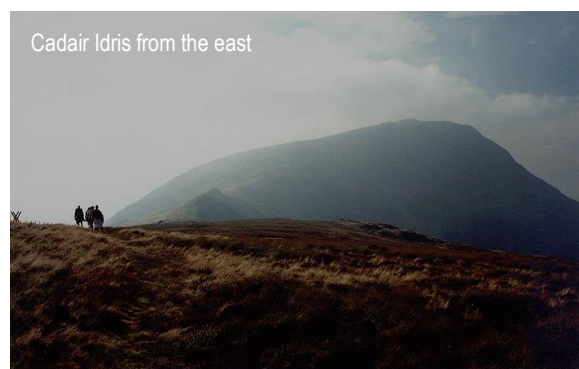
BASTARDS GO CLIMBING – SNOWDONIA 2000



Getting away from it all and hauling yourself and a chum up a peak or two is a particularly good idea when one of you needs a break from writing your 3-gazillion-word PHD thesis on wave dynamics and the other is about to cart a 200-person symphony chorus around the world for a month. So the end of July 2000 found my good pal Tim and I jumping into a Renault on a sunny day in Birmingham and piling off in the direction of one of the world's most beautiful places, the Snowdonia National Park, with the straightforward aim of conquering the infamous Snowdon Horseshoe. There are few ridge walks to compare with it, and what we had seen, heard and read had built up the perfect mix of excitement and fear to bring us to the conclusion that it was simply not on to find ourselves no longer in this life having not experienced the manifold adventures of this unique walk.

Day 1: The Warm-up

Being unfit and out of practice, we headed out to Snowdonia the day preceding the Horseshoe walk to get our legs in an upward frame of mind. I had visited North Wales on countless childhood holidays, but Tim was a Snowdonia virgin, so I decided that we should approach the Park along the picturesque A458 from Shrewsbury, a route which follows tantalising foothills increasing in height all the way from the Welsh border, draws you up the A470 and then dumps the gigantic mass of Cadair Idris in front of you and says "welcome to Snowdonia!". We lunched on the Panorama Walk – a superb viewpoint on the corner of the Mawddach Estuary – and headed up the coast to pitch Base Camp at our caravan in Tal-y-Bont (no we don't use bloody tents – being at one with nature during the day is one thing, but we like to stay right out of its way when it gets dark thanks very much).



And so to the warm-up walk, and a fine lesson it turned out to be in tempering lunatic enthusiasm with common sense. It was a cloudless day, for the simple reason that it was the day *before* the main walk, an unfortunate fact of life for mountaineers, care of Mr Sod and his law. We drove into the remote tranquility of the Rhinogs – a relatively little-visited range hidden away in the south of the Park – and drew up in Cwm Bychan endeavouring to take a simple stroll up the Roman Steps (an ancient packhorse route over the Rhinogs, now considered to be

bigger-all to do with the Romans). Of course, when one is out of practice, one gets 200 yards up a moderate slope and is ready to lay down and die from exhaustion, and even the feeble contours of the Roman Steps had us panting and wheezing for the first half-mile. But as usually occurs, it all coughed itself up and our bodies finally dragged themselves kicking and screaming into second gear by the time we reached the Steps proper.

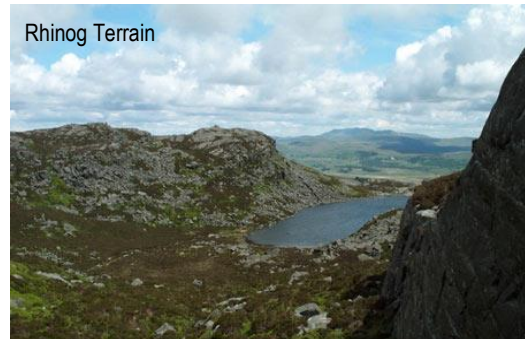
Roman Steps



And then it's all too predictable. On reaching the top of the Steps, with a pleasant view east over to the Arenig peaks, our bodies had cruised into overdrive and we were ready to take on Everest's north ridge. In its absence, the ridge north over to the impressive mount of Clip looked most inviting, with a simple plod across a rocky pavement which would pick up the path below Clip and take us back westwards down into the valley. Had we an OS Outdoor Leisure Map – which clearly shows a mass of crags and squiggly contours resembling a knitting pattern – about our persons, we might have thought twice, but instead blindly set off for a traverse so grueling that Crib Goch the next day was a stroll over Hampstead Heath in comparison. The apparently seamless ridge did not exist; instead rocky col after rocky col ensued, pulling us down west into a series of deep broad gullies. I've since read literature warning asses like us that this area (known colloquially as 'The Celtic Badlands') hides some of Britain's most difficult terrain; loose angular boulders form the walking base, covered by a treacherous layer of heather so thick that you can't see where your foot is going. From a distance it looks like a carpet; in reality it's like walking across a building site blindfolded.

There are few things more horrible than the feeling of mild panic which starts eating at you when you get into a situation like this. You're too far along to turn back, you've no idea what's ahead, there's no sign of a path, any moment you're going to tread on something that isn't there and break a bone, the afternoon is getting on, and on top of all that, one of you is supposed to get home in one piece so you can circumnavigate the globe with a large bunch of singers and their families, and the other's got to drive you home! This is no place for a walker, and the absence of footprints anywhere from the proximity of the Roman Steps northwards confirms it.

Rhinog Terrain



Things did not look good. Each deep cleft took us further down and away from the ridge, but there was also no visible way down into the valley where the car was, (we'd long given up on the prospect of getting to Clip). We both had some nasty slips and tumbles, and would be lying if we said that despair wasn't having a concerted attempt at taking hold. And then, in story-like fashion, we glimpsed hope – a stream of reasonable proportions a few hundred yards away seemingly heading straight down into the valley. It was not an easy descent to get to the stream, but we chatted away to keep our hopes up and take our minds off the fix we were in, and eventually reached it. I had prepared myself for the worst, for a stream too unstable or deep to step-stone along, with banks too soggy or rocky to walk on, and leading to nowhere or vanishing down some unassailable waterfall. But what followed was a really delightful, straightforward stroll down a mainly grassy bank or easy stepping stones, which brought us out – I kid you not – about 10 yards from the car!

Tired, worn, hot and heavily scratched – but immensely relieved – we dunked aching feet in our saviour stream, and needless to say the lager in Harlech which followed lickety-split after Tim broke the Renault-infused sound barrier over the hills, was the taste of paradise.

So of course this gruesome adventure completely took the wind out of our sails, and we lost all confidence in tackling Snowdon the next day...

...did we fuck.