

ERIC

THE

MOLE

4



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Welcome to **Eric The Mole 4**

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Artwork

Many thanks to Brad Foster for the brilliant front cover!

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It's been a long time coming

So Eric is here as well! Eric The Mole last appeared quite recently – recently for a Ron Gemmell fanzine that is – back in the Summer of 2005 for Interaction.

This is a special 'There And Back Again' issue, with reflections on the changes in my lifestyle interests over the intervening years, and what's possibly coming next!

There is a piece on backpacking, looking back on a major walk in Scotland that I did a few years ago, something I don't feel I'll do again – or at least not as often. I'm also inspired to add a couple of 'fillers'; one about changing holidays, the other my return to Fandom. There will be a piece on how First Aid training seems to have taken over my life and another on how cycling might well be 'The Next Big Thing'.

Eric has generally been a 'small blue thing' of a zine (apologies to Suzanne Vega), normally only an eight pages or so. It would appear that this time he's likely to have put on a bit of weight – which is ironic as his creator has lost quite a bit recently (two and a half stone over the last fifteen months, the last time I was this size ABBA had a number 1 UK hit with Waterloo..), looks like a least ten pages or more – with luck you should find at least some of it interesting!

Well here goes, try and stay with it.

Seemed like a Good Idea

One boring afternoon in the office back in November 2008, I found myself drawn (as I often am) to the UK Ordnance Survey website looking at interesting walks across mountains. Big walks, short walks, half a day, half a week – doesn't really matter. That day was a big walk day, and actually more like half a week!

I was developing a 'cunning plan'. Whilst looking at the map of the Central Highlands I had noticed that at one point on the map the railway going to Inverness on the east and the one going to Fort William on the west came pretty close. In fact the distance from Dalwhinnie to Corroul was probably 'only' about fifty kilometres with 'only' Ben Alder in the way (a mere eleven hundred and forty eight metres of mountain with long approaches from either side). Corroul Station comes complete with a bed and breakfast hotel. The plan looked definitely 'do-able'. Initially I was thinking of trying this trip as a winter walk over a two or three days, however the more I discussed it with friends the more it looked like autumn would be better; the plan was shelved until September the following year.

I enjoy planning trips as much as actually going on them (sometimes that's the best part!) and this one was an epic. The idea was to travel to Dalwhinnie on the Friday and walk into the Culra Lodge bothy, ideally before nightfall. We were to carry on west over Ben Alder towards Corroul Station on the Saturday (wild camping on the other side of the mountain) and finally return to civilisation on the Sunday at the Corroul B & B with a rail journey back south on the Monday. The plan was to

travel as light as possible, food and clothing for two days walking plus shared stoves and tents. We would send up to Corroul a change of clothes and toiletries for our return on the Monday (by rail, there's no public road to the B & B), after two nights out on the trail we would no doubt be in need of a decent shower and good bed!

There were three of us on this trip. Laura Limer (whose husband, Adam, had sorted the rail tickets, only just to find that his employers had other plans for his long weekend), Pat Moran and myself. Of the three of us, Pat was the eldest (sixty four) and maybe the fittest, Laura being in her early thirties, probably just behind Pat fitness-wise, and me – early fifties, overweight, not so fit, dodgy knees and full of a cold. Part of me really wasn't looking forward to the trip.

We arrived on a grey late afternoon at Dalwhinnie station, Culra bothy sixteen kilometres to our west with just three hours of daylight left. The track ahead was good going (a black top track for the first ten kilometres), but it was still a push to cover the distance in such a short time. A fast walking speed with a daysac is about five kilometres per hour, to cover the same with a three-day expedition sac straight from a 6 hour train journey was a bit of an ask for this middle-aged bloke!

Ben Alder itself wasn't even visible for the first two hours, and when it was, its bulk dwarfed everything. Another thirty minutes on and the evening light shining on the galvanised roof of Culra Bothy was a welcome sight, but still a bit too far away for these tired legs. We arrived just as dusk was falling.

Bothies are strange places, the Mountain Bothies Association manage over a hundred of these unlocked, remote simple buildings (mainly in Scotland) scattered across the country in places where a dry roof and maybe even a fire is a welcomed sight. There's no piped water, no

electricity, no lighting, probably no firewood and definitely no beds (though there's usually a few wooden sleeping platforms). Very rarely there is a toilet, though it's more likely that you'll find a spade. Bothies are life savers, and have served the walking community in Britain for decades.

Culra is one of the larger bothies, with a couple of rooms and a good-sized fireplace and plenty of handy sleeping platforms. There's a decent water supply flowing fifty metres due south of the door and good size 'toilet area' fifty metres north, well away from the water source. Culra's facilities comes complete with a serious cutting 'spade' welded to a long piece of scaffolding pole – definitely not the sort of trowel that you could consider lightweight and therefore certainly in no danger of being 'borrowed' for long! The bothy itself is still five kilometres from the foot of Ben Alder, which portrays itself as a five kilometre long mass of rock and heather eight hundred metres above the bothy. Big and grey and still in the clouds, I wasn't really looking forward to slogging up the side of it.

There were only another couple of people at Culra, and by the assortment of candles, wine bottles and the likes that they had with them, they were making the bothy their basecamp for a few days. Turns out that they were lecturers at Edinburgh up for a weekend's cycling and walking (Culra being the definite end of the track), and it turned out that we would meet them again a couple of times on the hill. The evening entertainment included malt whisky and bothy ghost stories, Pat lifting the spirits of us by recounting the ghost story relating to Ben Alder Cottage (the next bothy along, twenty kilometres away) and another about a night his friend had spent in the Dulynd bothy in North Wales, I slept surprisingly well considering that one eye seemed to be always open waiting for the door to burst open for a spectre to glide in!

The morning was actually greyer than the evening before. There were a number of plus's though, 1) it wasn't raining (yet), 2) my right leg hadn't seized (yet) and 3) the rucsacs were marginally lighter (breakfast and evening meal duly eaten). On the negative side my cold hadn't improved and we couldn't see the summit – rain would no doubt follow...

Off we went.

You really don't want to know me when I have a cold. I moan, I whimper, I've even been known to be a bit self-pitying... I would not have been a good walking companion on even a fine day by a glistening lake. It certainly wouldn't have been much fun for my companions as we slogged up through heather, peat and wet rocky outcrops to the top of Ben Alder. The mountain was in cloud with a strong westerly wind along with plenty of unwelcome driving rain, visibility was less than ten metres for most of the climb and top always seemed to be 'just over the next rise', not a good day on the hill.

And then it cleared...

And the clouds went, and the sun shone and the wind dropped and the visibility changed from tens of metres to tens of kilometres. A typical Scottish mountain day, at least three seasons in three hours! The view was amazing; we were standing near the summit not far from the eastern face that plummeted down to the valley below. Cameras left their pouches and images duly saved for a time when our memories would fade. After a brief bearing check we headed towards the western spur (avoiding the crags to the south) which was to be our route off the mountain, to join with the river Uisge Labhair (which translates into the Noisy Water) flowing south east into Loch Ossian. The Loch itself (still a dozen kilometres away) became visible from the spur and ten kilometres beyond the head of the lake we saw the tell-tale smoke of a steam train making a trip down the line

from Fort William. We finally reached the river at about three in the afternoon; having walked seventeen kilometres and climbing nearly a kilometre in total height gain since leaving Culra. There was still the river crossing ahead of us and another four kilometres before we could stop walking for the day and pitch by the side of the river. But first we had to cross the river; there wouldn't be a bridge.

As it turned out we were lucky with the crossing: the fords were shallow and easy to get across. On the way down, we had spotted a herd of deer and really wanted to get a closer look. The westerly wind was still blowing, and the deer were upwind so we thought we might be in with a chance. As it happened we managed to get within an hundred metres of them. Deer are understandably nervous of humans up here in September, the rutting and hence the stalking season well underway.

We never actually saw the stag of course, but we heard it a lot!

There's nothing quite like the sound of a bellowing 'monarch of the glen', the deep, throaty roar carries for great distances across the hills and is a firm warning to stay away from the herd. The stag itself is almost impossibly to see (they tend to avoid presenting a profile for some reason...) though you definitely know it's there. I've got it on good account (from a local apprentice gamekeeper), that it's no coincidence that the rutting and stalking take place at the same time – the stags being 'a bit pre-occupied' and hence an easier a target. Controlled culling of red deer is essential in the Highlands and forms a real part of the local economy. Personally, I would prefer photograph a stag rather than shoot one.

By five we were pitched by the banks of the river and prepared our evening meal.

Wild camping like this is totally different from any other kind of camping you might

experience. It is allowed in most parts of the Highlands, providing no damage is caused and that you are not visible from local dwellings and holiday lodges. There are no facilities, water will be taken direct from a stream or river (a water filter makes this a lot safer if not actually easier), no toilet (hence the backpackers trowel) and no need for clocks. When it gets dark you go to bed, when it gets light you get up. We were tucked up for the night by 9.30, and probably asleep by 10 – the sound of the river not being as noisy as its name would suggest.

Sunday was to be a lazy day, the final walk out to Corrou station, just fourteen or fifteen kilometres to the west down an easy path and track. At least that was the route I was taking. Laura and Pat had decided to detour off the route and 'bag another Munro' on the way, Beinn Na Lap. I had decided that the mountain would be there another day, so chose the shorter low level route instead. We walked together until we reached the impressive shooting lodge at the head of Loch Ossian.

The day could not have been more different than the one before, glorious sunshine with hardly a breath of wind. The track ran down through the woods on the south bank then past the youth hostel at the end of the Loch. Loch Ossian youth hostel is ultra-environmental friendly with solar roof and wind power, grey water recovery and a host of other clever tricks. It looked very inviting, but it wasn't my bed for the night, Corrou B&B was still a twenty minute walk away.

It was a very, very, long twenty minutes...

Arriving at the door, it was a relief to finally take the rucksack off. I was early for my room but not too late for lunch, so tucked into a fine soup and a roll and marvelled at being able to sit on a chair again. The owner confirmed that our box of clothes and toiletries had indeed arrived a day or two earlier, so there was no

danger of us having to walk through Glasgow in our grimy walking gear – the boots were duly swapped for trainers.

Corroun B & B (now actually taken over by the SYHA and renamed the Corroun Station House) is the main building structure adjacent to Corroun Railway Station. The station is one of the most remote in the UK, fifteen kilometres from the nearest public road and at 408 metres above sea level the highest as well. Situated on the northern edge of the seriously boggy bits of Rannoch Moor, the station – and for that matter the line itself (The West Highland Line) is far, far from busy. A special train coming through was something of a minor event, the steam train we had seen the day before was due to return in an hour or so; without the flying car...

The Hogwarts express arrived on time, in-between the scheduled services from Glasgow to Fort William, and seemingly full of people in high visibility jackets rather than school uniforms. The Rannoch Moor stretch was often featured in the Harry Potter movies (as is the impressive Glenfinnan Viaduct fifty miles or so up the line to Mallaig), it just so happened that our walk coincided with that year's filming. All very surreal!

Laura and Pat arrived about an hour after the train left.

So the journey was finally over. The showers found and the beds bounced on. We went about the business of making ourselves fit to return back to 'normal life' – with the watches and television and mobile phone signals and all other traps and trappings of modern times.

Good food, good beer and good whiskey. Turned out, it had been a Good Idea after all!

Travelling Time

I'm writing this from the comfortable lounge in the woodland lodge at Whinell Centre Parc up in the Vale of Eden, it's a grey but dry autumn morning, we've had breakfast and the pool now beckons.

I like holidays, in fact I like holidays a lot! Wanda and I have travelled together now for over thirty years, the last twenty or so with our two boys, Josh and Ben.

It occurred to me recently that our holidays have changed over the years – definite periods that suited our pockets and circumstances at the time – and that these times and even holiday places may or may not ever be repeated. That they change, just as we do.

There were our 'no cash' years which saw the two of us on multiday youth hostelling walking trips in the Peak District and camping holidays in Wales. These were followed by the Greek and Turkish pension holidays with cheap road trips along the Turkish Aegean coastline from Istanbul to Bodrum.

With the coming of the boys came the packaged trips to Spain, Portugal and Italy, the gites in France, the self-catering holidays in Cornwall and Scotland, the camping at Barmouth, the Centre Parc breaks in Britain and Europe, Legoland and Euro Disney.

And now; with the boys aged 20 and 16, what next? It's more than likely that Ben will holiday with us always; and Josh will join us as and when. The holidays will change again, and we've no real idea how; quite exciting really!

First Aid Course Anyone?

I've been on many first aid courses over the years – it's a Scout Association requirement and I've been a scout leader for well over twenty years. The kind of courses that I've done over the last dozen years or so though do differ from the 'norm', these being aimed specifically at outdoor pursuit activities.

There is a difference; most courses assume that professional help in the form of paramedics and doctors are thirty minutes away from the phone call – outdoor remote first aid assumes that it's easily thirty minutes before you can get a signal. In remote areas it could be hours or even days before professional help will arrive. A different ball game altogether.

The organisation that developed the courses that I'm interested in is Recue Emergency Care (REC), set up in the 80's by an inspirational doctor up in Scotland who realised that the 'normal' first aid courses just didn't fit the needs of the outdoor professional, and so he set about creating one that did.

I liked the course so much that I decided to become a trainer and offer the courses myself. It took me five years from the first step to my first 'delivered' course back in May 2011. I trade under the business name Outdoor Approach First Aid – though the word business is probably a grand name for it, more like a 'paying hobby'!

I certainly won't get rich teaching first aid, it seems like an awful lot of effort to earn a few hundred pounds for a weekend's

work every month or so – but it's definitely highly rewarding in other ways!

The standard REC course is run over two days (16 hours) is jargon-free and very 'hands on'. The main thing about this course however that differentiates it from 'carpet first aid' is that at least six of the sixteen hours training will take place outdoors – in as realistic a scenario as possible, regardless of the weather. Courses are run all year round, and believe me some of the weekends have definitely not enjoyed the best of weather over the last eighteen months!

I've run four courses so far in 2012, and I've another one coming at the end of November. It never ceases to amaze me how the courses actually fill, so far each one has had between eight and a dozen clients on them, all from different walks of life, male and female, eighteen to sixty-eight year old. Add these courses to the one-day courses I also run, and with luck this year I would have trained over a hundred people in life saving skills. A Good Result.

I really, really enjoy doing it – far more interesting than my day job of building sewage works! The Cuning Plan is to develop the business and client base to such a size that in ten years time or so it will be a nice little earner to subsidise the pension scheme. But there are inklings that Things Are Developing...

I've recently gone back to college, studying part time on a Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS – known as 'Petals'). Since 2010 any provider delivering courses to public sector needs to have this City & Guilds qualification as a minimum addition to any skill qualification they need. It also turns out that the PTLLS is the starter block for part-time lecturer qualifications, something else I might well consider in the years to come.

You Never Know!

I Could have been a Contender...

'This is Ron Gemmell, he could have been a Big Name Fan' was the way a certain Ian Sorensen introduced me at a convention bar a couple of years ago. This was certainly an accurate description of my fannish past. There are those amongst you remember me from those ancient days back in the early '80s when it was still possible to find duplicator paper and personal word processors were just arriving. There are some of you out there who think that my name is vaguely familiar. For those of you who don't recall me at all, don't worry, I effectively gaffiated after Conspiracy in 1987 and resurfaced at Interaction in 2005.

Facebook has a lot to answer for. Who would have thought the emergence of social media sites would be responsible for the fannish revolution with fans across the world re-establishing contact in ways that we would have only dreamed about in Brighton that summer 1987. I'm actually still amazed by the swiftness of the present day communications and the vitality of it all. I found myself only yesterday glued to screen checking on minute by minute progress updates of Hurricane Sandy from Moshe Feder over in New York. The web, and its associated social media sites, has not just made the world a smaller place, it's also made it a much more personal one. Facebook effectively brought me back out of deep fannish sleep...

Well, only just! With the publication of Eric The Mole 4 this Autumn, my zine publication rate would have tripled since Interaction – three fanzines in seven

years! I'm a long way from what you could call a 'regular publishing frequency', with luck an annual issue of Eric The Mole and Eat That Duck might be achievable before the decade is out. The aim is to reach this goal before NASA restarts manned flights up to the ISS, which should be possible!

Conventions wise, I've recently returned back to Novacon as my 'annual live appearance' and even managed my first overseas convention in Sweden last year (something I spoke about at some length in Eat That Duck 3 published last year). I will definitely be going to Loncon in 2014, and have in fact volunteered to help.

And it's volunteering at Loncon that worries me a touch. The last con I worked on was Conspiracy back in 1987, twenty-five years ago. At that con I was hidden in the depths of the print room for seemingly weeks, venturing into the hotel proper from time to time and even on occasion seeing daylight. I will not be making the same mistake again!

But is there still time to Be a Contender? Do I want to be one?

I have to admit; that back in the early 80's this was an unwritten and even unspoken goal of sorts. For a crazy pocketful of years I attended three or four conventions a year and published a dozen fanzines. Even if I had the time, money and selfish attitude to life that I had back then – I couldn't imagine doing that again. No this time round, I'm playing the long game.

It looks now like Novacon is a definite fixture in my diary for the conceivable future, as well as any other UK con that catches my eye. One day I might finally get off to a North American or Australian con. Being self-employed and the only member in the family interested in SF conventions, this does however present Big Difficulties. Eurocons are easier, especially if there's decent mountain walking or an archipelago in the area...

Bike Rides – The Next Big Thing?

I've had a decent bike for years now, and plenty of ambitions to actual use it more often than I do. There's always though so many Very Good Reasons why it stays in the garage for days on end – especially in the winter months, which in the UK at present is effectively October to May. It's often dark, often wet, often windy and often just too much hassle to ditch the car.

Recently however, I have discovered with the help of a few like-minded friends that riding fifty miles a day across a county can be fun! In our case it was a convoluting route on the surprisingly hilly byroads of Cheshire, from east to west riding headlong into a thirty mile per hour wind for most of the day. Certainly character building. The last time I had ridden a bike for anything like that distance, I had been barely out of school – quite some time ago.

After what seemed to be unending hours in the saddle (this being surprisingly comfortable – it appears that proper seat adjustment and decent padded bike shorts are definitely a good plan) we finally reached Chester. I would have no doubt enjoyed the city centre pubs a lot more if I wasn't on a course of dental antibiotics at the time, but the local Indian was great, as was the company.

The following day the wind had dropped, the sun was shining and a different set of roads beckoned, this time eastward back home to Warrington; just forty miles that day. Amazingly the saddle stayed comfortable, the hills seemed easier and

we only collectively suffered two punctures (the return journey included a number of canal tow paths – which though fortunately rather flat, they did suffer from a profusion of brambles and thorns).

All in All, a very good trip.

I began to think. I could get into this, maybe it was time to trade in my multi-day walking weekends (complete with accompanying back, hip and knee aches, pains and general wear and tear) for multi-day cycling trips instead. Maybe it could be that a long last I had found something else to spend money on (I have spent all I can on walking gear over the years, and could easily fit out a small gear shop with the equipment I have at home, all still in pretty good condition).

Then the guys started discussing the Coast to Coast trip for next year, 140 miles with Very Big Hills, yet taking a leisurely pace over three days. We would of course need to undertake a couple of practise days in the Spring of 2013, maybe even another practise weekend to be on safe side. It all began to make Good Sense.

I suspect that I could well be hooked.

The problem is, I'll probably have to get another bike, honest. My present one is a decent mountain bike - duly fitted out with semi-slick tyres designed for road and track use (the standard mountain bike knobbles offer too much friction for tarmac and make it all too much work) however it's still a bit heavy. It makes perfect sense to get a second bike, something for Christmas and birthday monies from loving friends and family. Something like a hybrid bike, specifically designed for road and modest track use, something designed to manage a decent pannier rig if my interest goes that way. It just so happens that I've been looking at one quite recently...

So it all looks very possible. Over the next few months the plan is to get bike fit, hopefully snatching a couple of decent winter days on the road to fine tune both me and the bike. At the same time I intend to delve into the specifications and reviews of mid-range hybrid bikes for the Spring.

So, where does all this leave mountain walking? Is this the end of the multi-day mountain trips?

If you had asked me that question a week ago, the answer would have been a most definite maybe, however just yesterday the December Trail magazine came through the door.

In it was a rather interesting article on an epic multi-day trip above Glen Lyon. The route is over two days and runs east to west. Forty kilometres with three thousand, four hundred metres of climb of high and sometimes rough ground (but with only a few places you could fall off – one of my pre-requisites these days, I'm a bit of a wimp really). Nine Munros and a handful of Corbetts – a full traverse of the Ben Lawers and Tarmachan ridge, with a wild camp midway.

Definitely a big enough trip for me next Summer. Time to txt my mate Pat.

Pat's answer came back within half an hour – it looks like this particular trip is on. Time now to start planning routes and fixing dates (probably a mid-week trip in June, quieter than weekend), time to sort out kit and travel arrangements, time to contact friends who might be up for it, time for me to get hill fit as well as bike fit next year.

I'm quite looking forward to it!

Which takes me back again to the opening piece of the zine, with reflections of a previous Big Walk and a vision of the next, perfect timing for...

There and Back Again

I've really enjoyed writing the issue of Eric. I've even managed to hit my 'final deadline' – it now being 1 am in the morning of Thursday 1st of November.

Time is at a bit of a premium over the next few weeks with family parties, two evening first aid courses (the first one being the Friday night before Novacon), college course work to finish and bike rides to go on. I might even find time to work and sleep.

One of these days, I might even consider slowing down.

With regards to Eric The Mole 5, there's every chance that he will be back out of his hole sometime next year – probably boring you with news of journeys over the mountains and bike rides from coast to coast – he might even tell you of a trip to Sweden in the Summer. LoCs will be appreciated and will form part of the next issue; it will be great if you could drop me a line!

Have a great Christmas and New Year wherever you are, stay well and happy!

See you Soon

Ron