

Scotland 2013

Aaran and I made plans to go to Scotland during one of the heaviest snowfalls in March for a long time. Due to the roads in the north of England being blocked with heavy snow we made a quick change of plan and booked flights from Gatwick to Edinburgh. We arrived at Edinburgh 11:00 pm after a short delay to be greeted by the strong easterly winds which were going to be a theme for the weekend. Due to the delay, the cheap car hire company that we had booked our car with had already closed and gone home so we had to part with more money than expected by hiring on the spot from the desk that was open. We set off towards Fort William. The roads were clear for 20 miles then we started to encounter heavy snowfall. The roads were now becoming a bit dodgy, apart from the lone gritter we were the only ones on the road. We got as far as Crianlarich and decided the roads were too dangerous to continue. We slept in the car for a few hours before continuing, thinking the roads would be safer after the gritters had been out. We were concerned that the snow gates at Tyndrum would be shut, thankfully they weren't and we continued our journey up over Rannoch moor. The scene along this stretch of the road was akin to a scene from disaster movie, we saw three vehicles that had left the road and were badly damaged. We could only hope the occupants were not hurt.

We finally arrived in Fort William after the dramatic drive. We had planned to stay in the CIC hut at the foot of the North East face of Ben Nevis

We collected the key from a mountain guide called Alan Kimber so we took the opportunity to pump him for some route information. He said everything was in condition but the heavy winds had already caused a casualty. A climber had been blown over on the walk up to the CIC which had resulted in a dislocated shoulder. Alan had various ridge tiles blown off his home which he said was the first time he could remember this happening.

We walked up from the North Face car park with a continual breeze in our faces, we encountered a steady stream of climbers coming down saying the winds are very strong and every one had turned back at the CIC. As we gained height the winds became very strong we had wear goggles due to the windblown snow. It was very difficult to stand but we continued on with the thought of a warm hut not far away the path was becoming very slippery so crampons were donned.

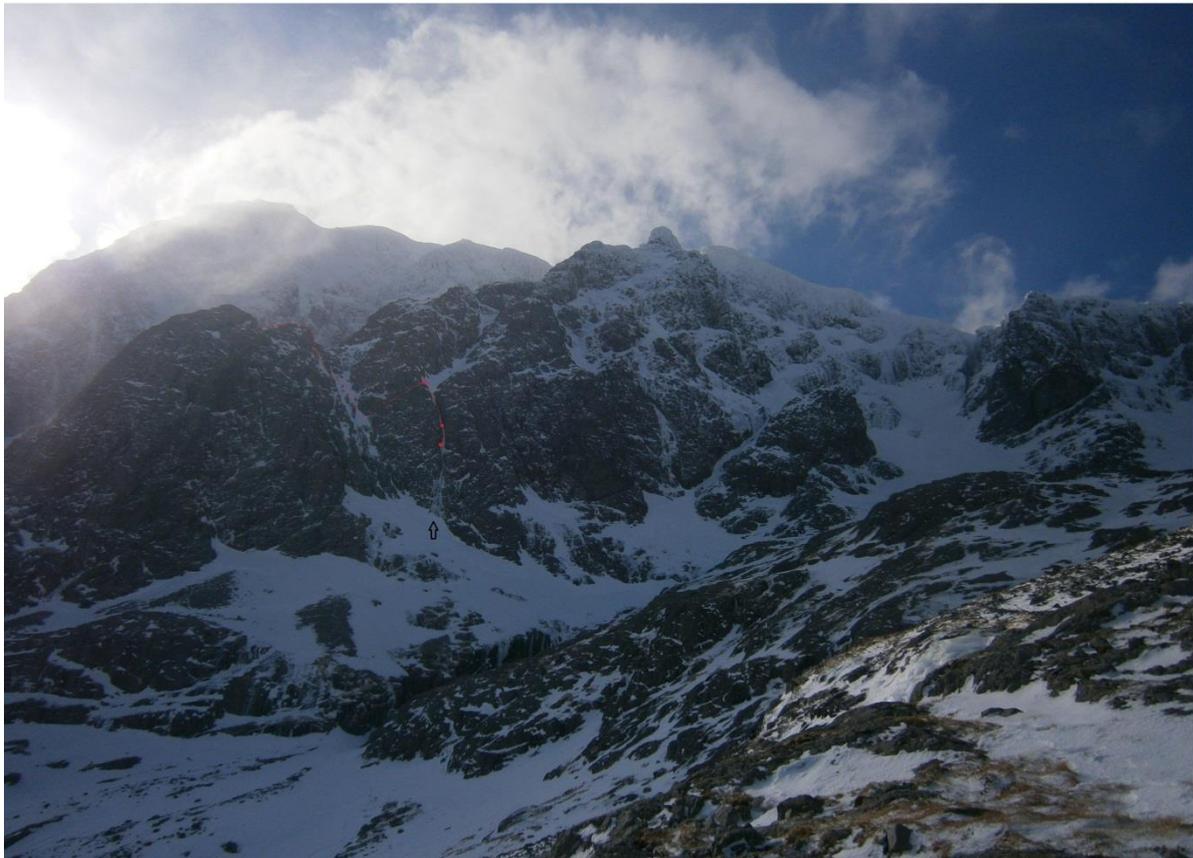
We arrived at the hut after a titanic struggle against the wind only to find the door would not open, we were concerned we had been given the wrong key, trying to open the door without success after some frantic blowing into the lock to un-freeze it finally opened and we escaped the maelstrom outside

Outside the hut looked cramped and damp but inside it was warm and cosy. The hut sleeps 24 but due to the weather only the two of us had made it. We finally got the fire on and spent the next few hours drinking hot chocolate and warming ourselves by the fire. Eventually we were joined by two members of the Scottish mountaineering council who decided to fire up all the gas rings in the hut to raise the temperature to a sauna like level.



We went to sleep, hoping the winds would die down for the morning. We woke to the constant sound of strong winds outside battering the hut that sounded like the roof was going to be ripped off at any time. We had a quick look at the guide book and decided on Vanishing Gully a grade 5, 3 star ice route that is on the western flank of Tower Ridge and which we hoped would give us shelter from the wind.

The approach to the route is via some steep slabs which had been loaded with windblown snow. We linked up a series of rock buttress to try and reduce the risk if the slope did avalanche.



We arrived at the climb which looked to be in good condition and surprisingly not much spindrift coming down. The route follows a narrow gully which eventually narrows down into an ice chocked crack.

I set off first, the ice was good and not too brittle despite the cold conditions , the whole pitch was protected with ice screws and felt like climbs we had experienced in Norway (apart from the 60mph winds). Aaron arrived at the belay with a bad dose of hot aches (the joys of Scottish winter).

The next pitch was vertical straight off the belay. For 10 meters it was awkward to get established on the ice but after a few moves I really enjoyed the pitch. I belayed just as the angled eased, thinking it would be sheltered from wind (no such luck)!

The following pitch was straightforward up to the abseil point. A quick abseil brought us onto 1934 route, a grade 3. We had decided to continue up to Tower Ridge and descend the other side which would avoid the suspect slopes below our route. Aaron led us onto the ridge



The view that greeted us was fantastic, Orion face covered in ice and Point Five looking really fat. We descended Tower ridge fighting the wind as we went, buffeted from side to side we arrived at the abseil point into Douglas gap. We threw the ropes down only to see them blown back up the ridge. We finally arrived in the gap and were greeted with an almighty gust. We down climbed the gully and had a short walk back to the hut. It had been a great day feeling quite adventurous, only seeing two people all day



Next day we decided to do the first pitch of Waterfall Gully, grade 4, which is low down on Carn Dearg Buttress, the wind was still blowing and the walk to it was a struggle as the wind was again fierce. The first pitch is short but a nice water ice pitch. We completed the pitch and set off back to the hut and then the long walk back to the car.



It was a great trip despite the conditions.

Steve Reeves

