

OVER THE LARIG

Sandy Fleming

In 1930, in our CTC Gazette, a letter was published under the name of H.G. Haxton, giving an account of a two-stage crossing of the Larig Ghru by some members of the DUNDEE D.A. As there was always a healthy and friendly rivalry between Fife and Dundee, I resolved to do the — to me — longer journey in one stage to prove, if only to myself, the superiority of Fifers as pass-stormers.

I worked at the pit-bottom of LOCHHEAD COLLIERY, sixty fathoms down, feeding two relentless cages with loaded hutches; eyes full of dust and lungs full of concentrated fresh air. Pushing, hauling, slewing; seven-and-a-half hours per day, eleven shifts per fortnight; a monotonous repetition of a few movements, with the cycle completed every thirty seconds. The sort of work to build up stamina; to engender an appreciation of wide horizons.

When I finished my shift at 9.30 p.m. on that Friday night in July, 1930, I was clear off the pit till a few minutes before six on the following Monday morning. By 12.45 a.m. Saturday, I was pedalling away from the linoleum smells of Kirkcaldy, heading for Perth, Dunkeld, Aviemore over the Larig to Braemar, to arrive home 29¼ hours later.

My equipment was cut down to a minimum: acetylene lamp, spare fill of carbide, 10 slices of bread (spread with treacle!) half pound block of chocolate, puncture repair outfit; inflator, soap and towel (both small) in linen bag, and possibly, most important, Bart's ½inch map sheet of the Larig area. My gear was a low fixed in the sixties. Now, I would rebel at the single-fixed monotony of 205 road miles (with walking miles 13 in between) but, at that time, my gear was the 'only gear' for club tourists, providing the fine control necessary for riding in close formation. About that time, or not much later, Sturmey produced a 2-speed fixed — not popular).

There were a few who had different ideas. During a teatime debate on 'fixed' versus 'free', one of my clubmates pawkily asked if there was any relationship between fixed gears and fixed ideas. Though I was the hottest debater in favour of fixed, I took the joke in good part and admitted that there might be some connection.

I was riding with a fixed idea that night, blind almost to everything but a mental picture of the LARIG GHRU PASS as I had last seen it; a sunlit gap in the Cairngorms a challenge and an invitation. With only 10 miles covered, I was overtaken by another cyclist. Here was another challenge, readily accepted and I dropped him within a mile.

Perth, Dunkeld, Pitlochry, Blair Atholl; none of these had any interest for me: Blair Atholl was simply the beginning of a long grind up to the summit of Drumochter Pass; a climb of 1,000 feet. I was not enamoured with the prospect: it looked rather bleak, in the light of early morn. (BUT, THEN, HOW OFTEN HAVE I SWORN THAT IF 'IT' CANNOT

SURVIVE THE COLD GREY LIGHT OF DAWN, 'IT' IS NO USE TO ME!) My eyes noted stiff going for a long way ahead: my legs remarked it was even stiffer! The wind, coolly resistant, was dead ahead. The rustle of the wind in heather, the bleating of sheep and the rushing burns made sad music. I wondered why I should be punishing myself instead of lying abed. (So vivid is the memory, even after a lapse of nearly 42 years, that I found my spirit flagging slightly as I wrote the foregoing paragraph!)

My only comfort was the thought that I should have an easy passage from Drumochter to Aviemore. I was confident that the wind-twisting formation of the Grampians would put the wind behind for that stretch. False hope! I was very weary at Aviemore, for the headwind persisted. There may be something in the air of ROTHLEMURCHUS FOREST to restore vitality, for I got a new supply of energy.

My eyes lifted to the upward path and my spirit returned from depression. A new day was well on its way and there was warmth among the pines. There were also swarms of flies and I had an attendant buzz till I climbed clear off the forest. Roughly half way up to the summit I found fresher, more welcome company: two ladies who were strolling leisurely up to the summit. They were resting, pleasantly relaxed: we conversed, lightly, for a short spell, but I was not tempted to adopt their easy method of progress and I strode on.

I had the luck of the weather: though young and foolhardy, I knew the risk of the crossing, for, at 2,750 feet, there is a fair risk of cloudy, misty conditions. As I gained the summit and scrambled over the boulder field, the sun mounted in a clear sky. Beyond the boulder field, I met three walkers, all men, going the opposite way. There were no greetings as we passed: probably they thought it best to leave such a madman undisturbed!

As my modest provisions show, I was not prepared for wayside feasts. My ten slices of bread and block of chocolate were divided into five snacks, each spaced according to time or distance, rather than the demands of the stomach. Except for a share of orange from the leisurely ladies and an occasional sip from a burn, I had no liquid refreshment. At the source of the River Dee, I stopped for a snack that nearly ended in calamity. The heather was so green that I never dreamt that there was any risk in burning a few sticky paper wrappers. I lit the papers and strolled the few yards to the POOLS OF DEE for a bathe. As I was about to take the shallow plunge, I glanced back, to see the heather afire near my bike. I tore madly over the heather armed only with the linen bag containing soap and towel. I beat lustily at the flames. With a picture of flaming celluloid guards and burnt tyres in the forefront of possibilities, I flailed mightily with right arm. To move my machine to safety would have been easy, but I was afraid that even a slight delay would prevent me from beating the fire. For a few panicky minutes, I thought I had lost the battle. When I was absolutely sure that not even the tiniest spark was left, I sank into the cool waters.

Refreshed, I pushed doggedly along the faint track, alternately carrying and wheeling my bicycle. To save the front guard from damage, I removed it and tied it on top of the

rear guard. It was impossible to dodge all the boulders that interspersed the path, and pedals and toe-clips got a few nasty knocks. The few feet that tread that way don't make much impression on stony ground. I doubt if the track would provide a reliable guide in a Scotch mist: even in ideal weather it may be possible to stray, but I was not worried, for I have a good sense of direction.

There is only one way to carry a bicycle when pass-storming if there is plenty of elbow room with the head poked through the frame members, top tube resting across shoulders, left-hand on front fork and right hand on seat stay. This method is more balanced and comfortable than that so often depicted on cycling sketches.

Near the foot of Glen Dee, the track was very faint, but I was on familiar ground when I reached the junction of the track which leads through GLEN TILT. Near the LINN O' DEE, roughly seven miles west of Braemar, I was back in the saddle, with 85 miles between me and bed. Braemar was so quiet as I passed through that it was hard to believe that the place ever echoed the sound of pipes and drums.

Braemar, like Blair Atholl, was just the start of another long grind, up GLEN CLUNY to the Devil's Elbow. It was cold coming up Glen Cluny but I was feeling fit by the time I reached the Elbow. I flew down from there in the half dark, with a reckless disregard of the real danger of sheep lying on, or crossing, the road. Fitness evaporated at Blairgowrie. Over the last 25 miles of the journey I was dozing in the saddle. I was becoming quite adept at falling gently off my bike and walking a few yards to clear my head then remounting.

Perhaps the best advice I can give young would-be pass-stormers and rough riders is:-