

LONG DAYS IN THE CUILLIN

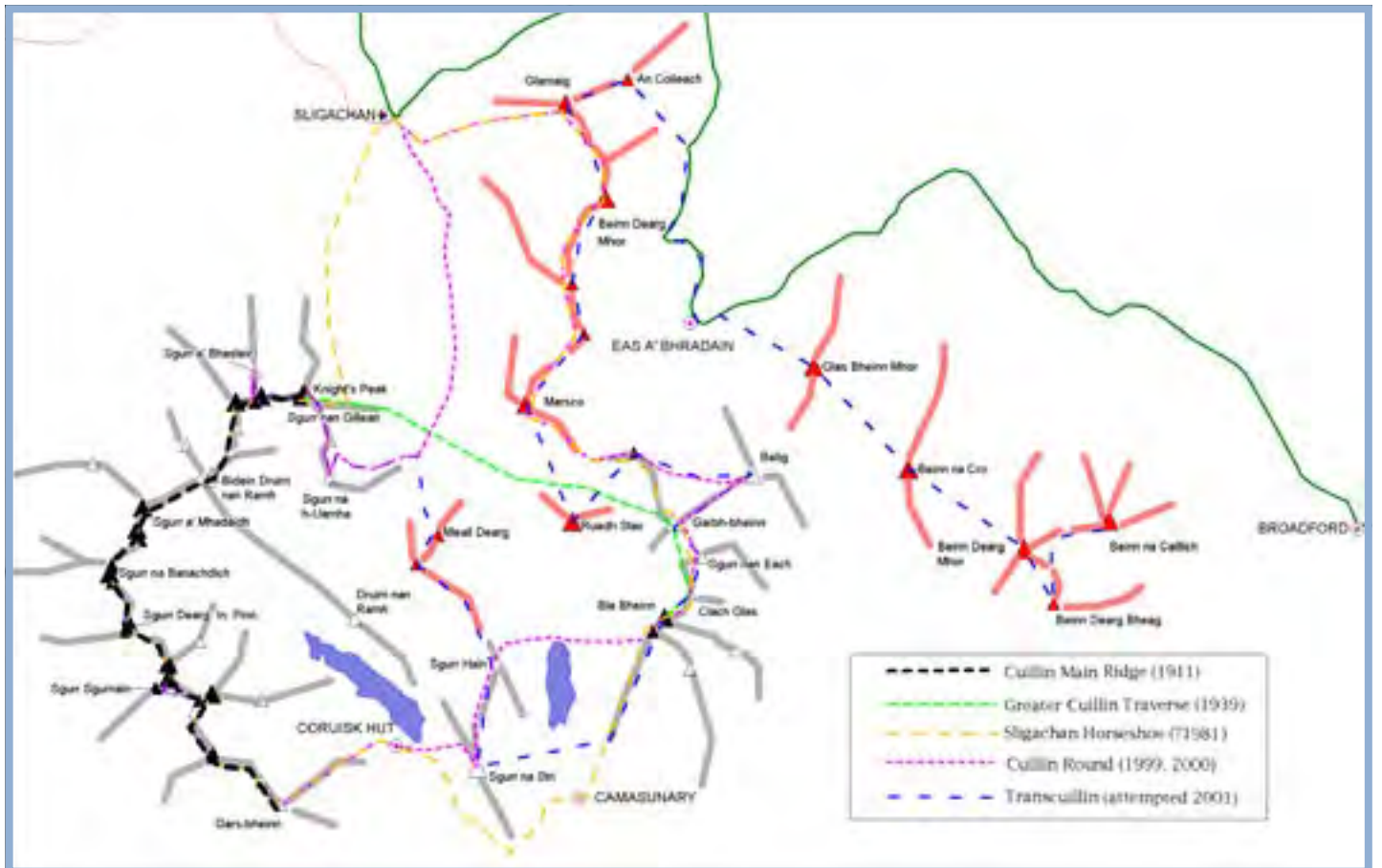
History

It all started with the magnificent **Cuillin Main Ridge Traverse** which was first completed in 1911, by Shadbolt and McLaren, after much exploration from the late 1800s onwards by Norman Collie et al. The **Greater Cuillin Traverse**, which included the equally spectacular Clach Glas – Bla Bheinn traverse, fell to Charleson and Forde in 1939. The first female completion of the GT is thought to be by Anne Littlejohn, in 1956.

Much less well known - but a much bigger challenge - is a circuit which, following Paul Chilton's lead, I will call the **Sligachan Horseshoe**. I am aware of five completions - there have surely been others. As far as I can tell (going on hazy recollections from 20 years ago in some cases), the route followed by all of them was more or less as follows. Starting at Sligachan, climb Glamaig, traverse the Red Cuillin to Marsco, then Garbh-bheinn, Sgurr nan Each (some excluded this outlier), the Clach Glas – Bla Bheinn traverse, bypass the Sgurr na Stri group via the Bad Step, then return to Slig via the Main Ridge (usually



Photo courtesy of John Donnelly



taking the climbs direct, roped).

The first completions I'm aware of, date from the early 1980s. Clive Rowland in an (until now) "unrecorded fun day" left Slig at 10 a.m. on 21 July (in 1981 or 1982), carrying rope and slings for the harder climbs, finished the Main Ridge in about 12 hours, then waited for 3 hours for the mist to clear before completing the eastern side of the horseshoe, in a total of about 31 hours. Also in the early 1980s, Eifion Jones and Rob David from Kendal, did a clockwise (Reds first) circuit. Although the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean was on the agenda, in the event they left it out in order to sneak inside 24 hours by a few minutes. Calum Smith of Glasgow completed an anticlockwise round during 29-30 Jul 1991, in 34 hours including a 7 hour bivvy. Comfortably inside 24 hours is the clockwise round by Paul Chilton and Pete Meads on 8 June 1989. They left Slig at midnight, and despite the traditional running out of water on the return leg along the Main Ridge, still got back to the Sligachan Hotel in 22:15 – crucially before closing time! The fastest and most recent circuit known to me, is by Mark Shaw (Lochaber AC) who completed a clockwise round in 16:46 on 21 July 2002.

It is curious that while the Main Ridge and Greater Traverse are well known, these longer outings have remained out of view. Thus Noel Williams wrote in the SMC Islands District Guide in 1989, "An obvious remaining challenge is to extend the Greater Traverse to include the Red Hills bordering Glen Sligachan (i.e. starting and finishing at the Sligachan Inn) – all within 24 hours". As late as 2002, Mark Shaw too was apparently unaware of any previous completions.

Following this tradition – again in ignorance of the history of the Horseshoe – Paddy Buckley and I devised the **Cuillin Round** during 1998 as a sub-24hour challenge, and I ran it 31 May 1999 in 23:28, with full hill support (*Fellrunner* Jun 1999). The following year, Yiannis Tridimas added Sgurr a' Bhasteir and reduced the time to 21:22 (FR Oct 2000). The original 1999 route includes the Sligachan Round with the following differences:

- before Garbh-bheinn, add Belig and both Sgurr nan Each tops
- after Bla Bheinn, add both Sgurr Hain tops and Sgurr na Stri
- bypass the T-D gap and instead take in Sgurr Sgumain (unlike the Main Ridge Traverse, the Cuillin Round takes in every Munro Top on Skye).
- after Sgurr nan Gillean, add Knights Peak (now recognized as a Munro Top) then Sgurr Beag and finally, the magnificent Sgurr na h-Uamha

The Cuillin Round amounts to 59 tops each having a drop of at least 50 ft - a total of 32.8 miles and 7,055m (23,150 ft) of ascent. No graded rock climbs are involved, and no rope is used, although there are several tricky passages of scrambling (up to about Diff standard).

The next challenge? The **Transcuillin**: a west-east traverse taking in every Cuillin top between Gars-bheinn and Beinn na Caillich, in less than 24 hours top to top (include everything with at least 50ft drop all round, minus a few outliers). 70 Tops, 38 mi, 29,000 ft.



View from top of stone chute to Inn Pinn

Photos courtesy of John Donnelly



Sgurr a Mhadaidh

CUILLIN TRAVERSES AND ROUNDS

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1911 | Shadbolt & McLaren | Main Ridge (first completion) | Gars-bheinn to Sgurr nan Gillean | 6.7 mi 10,000 ft | 12h 18m |
| June 1939 | Charleson & Forde | Greater Cuillin Traverse (first completion) | Ditto + Glach Glas + Bla Bheinn | 12 mi 13,200 ft | 20h |
| 20 July 1956 | Anne Littlejohn | Ditto, said to be first female GT | No details | | Time unknown |
| Date unknown | Winky O'Neale | Dito, possible fastest female GT | Ditto + Garbh-bheinn | 12 mi 14,700 ft | c. 12h |
| September 1993 | Mike Lates | Greater Traverse | GT including Garbh-bheinn | Ditto | 11:15 (Record?) |
| 21-22 July 1981 or 1982 | Clive Rowland | Sligachan Horseshoe (a/c/w) | ditto + Reds, Bad Step | 28 mi 20,000 ft | 31h incl 3h bivvy |
| Early 1980s (June) | Eifion Jones Rob David | Ditto (clockwise) | Ditto | Ditto | Just under 24h |
| 8 June 1989 | Paul Chilton Pete Meads | Ditto (clockwise) | Ditto | Ditto | 22h 15m |
| 21 July 2002 | Mark Shaw | Ditto (c/w) | Ditto | Ditto | 16h 46m |
| 31 May 1999 | Rob Woodall | Cuillin Round (supported) | Ditto + Sgumain, Knight's, Belig, Hain-Stri | 33.4 mi 23,275 ft 59 Tops | 23h 28m |
| 14-15 June 2000 | Yiannis Tridimas | Ditto | Ditto + Sgurr a' Bhasteir | 34 mi 23,300 ft 60 tops | 21h 22m |
| 18 June 2001 | Rob Woodall | Transcuillin (unfinished) | Ditto + M Dearg + Ruadh-stac minus Belig | 30 mi 21,000 ft 64 tops | c. 19h (to Eas a' Bhradain) |

Sadly the route didn't quite work out for me in 2001: hopefully someone will finish the job...

Photo courtesy of Rob Woodall



Transcuillin 2001

I had formed a Cuillin habit. 1995 reccying, 1996 Main Ridge, 1997 Greater Traverse (as a circuit from the Elgol road), 1999 Cuillin Round. 2000 it was Yiannis Tridimas' turn – adding a summit and taking 2 hours off my time.

June 2001 we assemble for the traditional Skye week: Paddy Buckley and the Lancaster crew; the Cliffs; Yiannis; a couple of Mercia-men, a Finn. Several arrive at the Coruisk hut on

Sunday 17/6; Yiannis, Wendy Dodds and Wayne Percival the next day, fresh from the Laggan LAMM. Sunday I take a slow (I mean slow) walk from Sligachan. The new route means doing a couple of sections in the 'wrong' direction - these needed looking at.

As usual, the Internet forecast is confusing and/or depressing. Sunday is (would have been) excellent. Monday good at first with rain later. Then appalling; or maybe OK, or good for the rest of the week. Monday it is. Ronnie Jackson is supporting me on the first part of the ridge - he has his own plans for when he leaves me. I over-eat, go to bed bloated, all too soon it's 01:30 and we're up again. It's not really dark and we quickly decide not to bother with torches. We make a leisurely ascent of Gars-bheinn - the clock doesn't start ticking until this first summit is reached.

Gars-bheinn at 03:18 in midsummer is a magical place. We stand and marvel. Already there is enough light for fast progress so we set off, with Sgurr nan Gillean a 7-hour stones-throw away.

With every traverse this ridge becomes a little slicker. In good visibility, Caisteal a' Garbh-choire goes better than usual, as does the traverse out to Sgurr Dubh Mor. At this summit, an hour into the run, we catch a magnificent fiery sunrise, across the assembled ranks of Black, Red and mainland hills. The routes are falling easily today. After the In Pinn, Ronnie and I part company. I stuff my remaining provisions into my sac and head off. It's four years since I've soloed this thing, and as usual, Bidein Druim nan Ramh looms like Damocles' sword over the centre of the Ridge. After Banachdich I see first signs of life - 4 climbers, albeit bivvied up and dead

to the world. It's after 7 - the sun is shining - a perfect morning on the Cuillin!!! They sleep on. I get to Bidein, marvel at the unique exposure and otherness of the tiny summit. Then get That Downclimb out of the way; push on over the easier terrain of the next few tops. On the way out to Sgurr a' Bhasteir (Yiannis' 'new' peak) I fall headlong on the rocky path... luckily no damage done. Increasing interest again: Basteir Tooth, finally race up Sgurr nan Gillean's West Ridge, 6:38 after leaving Gars-bheinn. Again a sense of wonder, a milestone passed, fine peaks ahead. My eye is led out to Stri; back over scrambly Blacks; huge intimidating Reds reaching their zenith at Glamaig then fading east to the distant bulk of Caillich. But first it's north. I hate the messy formless steep descent to Knight's Peak, and curse the SMC Munros committee for including it - yet it's a great little summit, which is partly why it got into the Round. The Main Ridge comes to a dramatic stop (really a semi colon) at Sgurr na h-Uamha. Today I am parting company with the Cuillin Round here and heading south, seawards. Yet the direct super-steep slabby descent would be slow and error prone, as yesterday's recce proved, so I first downclimb the north ridge before heading back south (on grass!) into Harta Corrie.

Heading for what is possibly the best stream in the world, for a drinks refill, I had a notion there might be some support here, and am only faintly surprised when Yiannis pops out from the shelter of the Bloody Stone, replenishes my supplies, then leaves me to my own devices for another 2 hours.

Next is a geology field course. Behind me, Sgurr na h-Uamha was Black, gabbro. Next, Meall Dearg is Red, granite. After a short easy

angled descent, granite rubble leads to the steep scramble on gabbro to Druim Hain's unfrequented rocky summit. This ridge leads me to Sgurr na Stri, a lowly 497m yet among Skye's very best, perched above the sea, and right below is Coruisk, my starting point. Yet today I'm headed east, away from the hut. Yiannis fields me and whisks me up onto Bla Bheinn. Now the cool breeze which has made this very special morning so comfortable, has become a strengthening wind. Descending from the summit we are greeted by Paddy and Wendy. We're heading for Scupper Gully - the key to reversing the Clach Glas - Bla Bheinn traverse reasonably swiftly and safely. This easy scree gully was recommended by Noel Williams - his excellent *Skye Scrambles* demonstrates he knows this place backwards - as did his swift recommendation of this route in response to my enquiry. I'd checked it out yesterday and it's the sort of secure route which I needed to know was there - glad not to be downclimbing the Diff chimney at this point.

Clach Glas seems sheltered from the wind by its own verticality: on Sgurr nan Each there is no hiding place, my windshirt clapping like a sail. We fight our way over Garbh-bheinn, then face a route choice. I want to include Ruadh-stac, which has a view of Clach Glas - Bla Bheinn to die for. Yet I can't really miss out the less interesting Druim Eadar da Choire as it's a Cuillin Round top. I opt for both: the very attractive NW ridge of Garbh-bheinn, then the little Druim, traverse back for Ruadh-stac, cross a wide grassy corrie, then in increasingly boisterous conditions we stagger over Marsco's two tops. Below, in the Mam a' Phobuill, we collapse in the shelter of a big boulder, before tackling the irritating wind-and-scrree slog up Ciche na Beinn Deirge, pushing on over the Deargs, tackling the more than usually intractable Glamaig, then leaving Yiannis I skitter along to its fine eastern summit - An Coileach. This is another milestone - and my last unclimbed Skye Cuillin peak.

9 p.m. Beyond lie just 6 - big - hills. Three valley crossings. And darkness. The outcome now will be down to the weather. If it stays dry, I might just deal with the stormy wind. If it rains, on those tough bouldery trackless hills I'll have no chance. I've recied the descent from An Coileach (with binoculars, from the road). In reality it's better than I hoped - 2000ft of easy short grass. Then across the burn, and the rain starts - soon sheeting down. And the easy grassy contour my 'bins' told me about, is boggy heather. I slog across to the main A87, then run over the road pass and down towards Eas a' Bhradain, with the gale in my face blowing water



Coire Ghrunnda

straight through my clothes. I round the corner at such a pace that for one terrible moment, hill support crew Steve and Wayne waiting in the car, think I'm actually going to continue. Instead of hypothermia and broken ankles I choose life. A night's sleep. A distillery tour the next day with the rain still lashing down and the river threatening to break over the road at Slig. It will finally clear up on Friday - by which time it is a bit hot for fast progress.

The final stats

(excluding the initial 2,900ft Gars-bheinn climb):

- 30 miles, 21,000 ft ascent,
- 64 tops, 19 hours. All CR tops were included except Belig (which I'd left until after Glas Bheinn Mhor - probably a mistake), plus 5 extras.
- 5 hours left for 6 hills,
- 7.5 more miles,
- 7,500 ft of ascent.



Inn Pinn

Photo courtesy of Rob Wodall



Gilleann from Bidein DnR