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The Cwm of Hats

How Botanical Prospecting on Snowdon
Led to a Litter Campaign



Cwm Hetiau, cwm of the hats, by the Anglesey painter and printmaker Kyffin Williams (1918-2006). (*Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales*)

Planning can be part of the fun of any mountain outing be it a day stroll on the Downs or a Himalayan expedition; the importance of careful planning is something we are constantly reminded of by pundits in the interests of our health and safety. Nevertheless, sometimes it can be more rewarding to set off without a plan, slave to no fixed purpose but free to follow a whim or an enticing little path or whatever fate or fortune puts our way. It was in just such a spirit of serendipitous enquiry that I drove up the Llanberis Pass last summer.

Too vague to be called a plan, my intention was simply to renew acquaintance with some of the arctic-alpine plants which still linger on in high, cold places inaccessible to sheep, leftovers from the last ice age. Where better to seek them than Cwm Glas on the north side of Snowdon? To be more precise, there is an upper and a lower Cwm Glas. The lower, known as Cwm Glas Mawr is dominated by the steep rocks of Craig y Rhaeadr, best known

for its winter ice falls, and by Cynr Las, vertiginous site of some of the finest rock climbs in Britain: routes like *Main Wall*, *The Grooves* and *The Skull*. The upper cwm is overlooked by the summit ridge connecting Crib Goch and Crib y Ddysgl and is split by the long spur of the Clogwyn y Person arête into two basins shown on the map as Cwm Uchaf and Cwm Glas. To complicate things even further, next to Cwm Glas Mawr to the north and separated from it by the Cwm Glas spur, is Cwm Glas Bach, at the very head of which is the tiny glacial hollow of Cwm Hetiau.

It was in the direction of Cwm Glas Mawr that I made my way initially, over disturbed ground where the pipeline for a thankfully discreet hydro scheme had been buried recently. Once into the cwm I bore away right to pick up a faint but helpful path, seemingly used more by sheep than people, which winds its way up the Cwm Glas spur. The ridge is never narrow but it becomes increasingly precipitous on the east side dropping down into Cwm Glas Mawr. Pausing at a little notch just before a steep step, I noticed that the rock of the walls to my left had changed character and was covered with specks of colour. Most prominent was the purple pink of wild thyme, not an arctic-alpine but an indication of less acid soils than usual hereabouts; and growing alongside were the white five-petalled stars of vernal sandwort, again not an alpine but in Britain found mostly in mountains or near lead mines. Carefully linking grass ledges I made my way leftwards, every step increasing the drop beneath my feet, lured on by the sight of dark rocks covered with bright orange spots. These I took to be lichens though I discovered later they were probably algae. The rock was seamed by cracks full of delicate ferns: brittle bladder fern, oak fern and green spleenwort, the latter easily identified by its green mid-rib and an indicator species of calcareous, or lime-rich, rocks. Clearly this was a band of the base-rich bedded pyroclastic rock that has made Cwm Glas famous for its plants. It wasn't long, however, before the ledges gave out into uncompromisingly vertical rock and I beat a careful retreat noting the tiny white specks of eyebright at my feet, prettily flecked with purple and yellow when I stooped to look closer.

Following the path rightwards to skirt the step, I continued up the spur with the odd section of steeper scrambling to arrive eventually at open grassy slopes below the summit of Crib y Ddysgl. Over to my right walkers could be seen on the Llanberis path up Snowdon and a train appeared from the direction of Clogwyn station, chuffing busily. In the other direction I was looking out across Cwm Glas and Cwm Uchaf, each with its own little lake, to the pinkish scree that give Crib Goch, 'red ridge', its name. Nearer at hand, to the right of the Parson's Nose Arête, were the clean, rhyolitic rocks so attractive to rock climbers and boasting classic routes like *Fallen Block Crack* and *Gambit Climb*, sitting on a plinth of darker, vegetated, horizontally bedded rock, an obvious target for botanists. That was familiar territory, however, so I chose to head down and to my left investigating another band of dark rock. In terms of interesting plants it proved disappointing but I found I could link grass ledges across an increasingly steep hillside until I suddenly found myself back on the Cwm Glas spur.



The Snowdon mountain railway opened on 6 April 1896 and suffered its first and only fatal accident when a descending train lost the rack and ran out of control. The driver William Pickles and his fireman leapt off the engine before it tipped over into Cwm Hetiau, its trajectory witnessed by hikers below. The carriages were luckily decoupled and gradually came to a halt but one passenger, Ellis Roberts of Llanberis, having witnessed Pickles' hasty dismount, ignored the guard's instruction to stay seated and jumped, fatally striking his head. (*Rob Collister*)

What now? At this point it occurred to me that it would be interesting to find a way down into neighbouring Cwm Hetiau, 'the cwm of hats'.

This little hollow at the very top corner of Cwm Glas Bach must have been formed in a final hiccup of the last ice age and has been well known as a repository for hats since Victorian times. It lies immediately beneath Clogwyn station on the Snowdon Railway at the point where the popular Llanberis path crosses under the line. It is the only point before the top at which the path comes right to the crest of Snowdon's long north ridge and it is a notoriously windy spot. In days gone by many a top hat went sailing out into the cwm below, caught by a sudden gust; nowadays it is more likely to be a baseball cap. In 1896, however, Cwm Hetiau became famous for a rather different reason.

On 6 April, Easter Monday, after two years under construction, the Snowdon Railway officially opened with two locomotives, each pulling two carriages filled with excited passengers, making their way to the summit of the mountain. However, when the first train set off on the way back down disaster struck. It later transpired that subsidence under the track in the cutting just below the top had caused the engine to jump the rack-and-pinion braking system so that it began to career downhill out of control. The engine driver and fireman in the cab quickly realised what was happening and were able to jump off without injury. The train itself stayed on the line going faster and faster until it reached the bend just before Clogwyn station where the engine left the rails and plunged straight over the edge down into Cwm Hetiau. Mercifully, the coaches were not coupled to the engine and somehow they stayed on the rails and eventually came to a halt where the line levels out at Clogwyn station. The guard had sensibly ordered the terrified passengers to remain seated and the only casualty was the unfortunate man who chose to jump out, struck his head on a rock



Looking into the little visited but much-abused Cwm Hetiau. (*Rob Collister*)

and was killed. Over the next year a public enquiry was held and modifications were made to ensure that the same thing could not happen again. Exactly a year later the railway re-opened and has operated without major incident ever since. Meanwhile, it was discovered that the main cylinder of the locomotive was, to everyone's surprise, still intact so it was laboriously hauled up some very steep ground to Clogwyn station and taken down to Llanberis to be re-used. Nothing else was worth salvaging but anything that could be removed very soon vanished as a souvenir.

I had traversed into the head of Cwm Glas Bach on a number of occasions, mostly while walking or running the 14 3,000ers, without seeing any evidence of the railway accident. But I realised that the easiest line does not actually go into Cwm Hetiau itself but instead traverses in above it. This was a perfect opportunity to investigate further. Descending the spur as far as the point where I had first paused to look for flowers, I followed a grassy rake cutting back left which took me under a line of black, dripping cliffs bristling with interesting plants including several I had not seen earlier: roseroot, golden rod, meadow rue, burnet saxifrage,

and the dead flower-heads of purple saxifrage. There were other plants that in Britain, curiously, are found in the mountains and on the coast but not usually in between, such as scurvy grass, bladder campion and thrift, or sea-pink.

Suddenly something made me look up and there, peering down on me intently in a slightly unnerving manner, was a hairy, yellow-eyed feral goat with long swept-back horns. Where there is one goat there are usually others but on this occasion I could not see any. Continuing down and across following the line of least resistance, I passed an old moss-grown sheepfold nestled against a huge boulder, crossed a little ridge and found myself in Cwm Hetiau proper. There is nothing of note here, just some clumps of rushes and a streamlet emerging from the hillside to quickly bend away northward. Yet it is a place of great charm and unspectacular natural beauty. Overlooking it are more flower-rich crags, the blue-green leaves of roseroot visible even from a distance and beneath them are scree slopes where parsley fern grows in profusion. Despite the noise of the train up above every half hour, it is out of sight of both railway line and path and feels secluded even in summertime.

Almost the first thing I spotted was a splash of orange in the scree. It proved to be a sheet of rusting metal much too heavy to have been blown down. It had to be a relic from the runaway locomotive and I soon discovered similar pieces scattered about the scree slope and embedded in the stream. But as well as these fragments of history there was also a vast amount of rubbish blown down from the path above along with detritus from the railway: plastic piping and sheeting, pieces of coal, a rucksack empty but for a can of Lynx deodorant. Within five minutes I had filled my rucksack with plastic bottles, aluminium cans and sweet wrappers. As I left I squeezed in a solitary black and pink ladies' mountaineering boot, scarcely used, wondering how on earth it came to be there and what had happened to the other boot and indeed to its owner. A brand new ski stick I had no compunction about purloining for my own use on the steep descent to the road.

As I walked down I encountered yet more debris, mostly accumulated in streambeds and runnels, and reflected gloomily on the profligate, thoughtless nature of our society. Yet it was not all bad. There were mossy and starry saxifrage and lady's mantle all in flower bordering the streams and, as I approached the mountain wall at the bottom of Cwm Glas Bach, the beautiful yellow breast of a grey wagtail acted like a ray of sunshine. It occurred to me that a gang of stalwart volunteers could clear up the whole area in a day and if helicopters could fly in stone for footpath repairs what was to stop them flying out bags of rubbish on the return journey? By the time I reached the road my spirits had lifted and there was a spring in my step once more.

Next day I contacted staff at the Snowdonia Society, a watchdog organisation of which I am a longstanding member, to outline my proposal. Before I knew it the Cwm Hetiau clear-up had been added to the programme for the 'Make A Difference' weekend of conservation activities

being held at the end of September as part of the Society's 50th anniversary celebrations. Peter Rutherford, national park access officer, was supportive of the idea and could see no objection to using a helicopter to lift the stuff out on a return journey. His only concern was that the bags should be heavy enough to hang beneath the aircraft and not swing about. Remembering the weight of the metal plates I had seen in the cwm I had no worries on that score. Peter also rang the landowner to let him know and a few days later I picked up two of the heavy-duty bags used for airlifting stone from the warden's office at Pen y Pass.

Given we were working on a weekend, parking could have been a problem but through the good offices of David Medcalf we were able to leave our cars at Ynys Ettws, the Climbers' Club hut in the Llanberis Pass. Ten of us, including the Snowdonia Society's chairman, David Archer, set off well toggled up against some unpromising weather and armed with litter-pickers and black bin-liners as well as the two big bags. Making our way through fields of dripping bracken and derelict walls, we traversed the hillside into Cwm Glas Bach. Right at the bottom, by the mountain wall, we filled our first bag with corrugated iron and other debris, from the remains of a small hut by the look of it. At first glance it all seemed impossibly buried and the sheets of tin too long to fit the bag but it is surprising what the combined efforts of 10 people all heaving, twisting and stamping can achieve.

Spreading out we made our way up steep slopes of grass and scree frequently losing sight of each other as the mist rolled in. Streambeds contained a fair amount of junk but on the open hillside there was less than expected and there was even some murmuring about the need for so many of us. That soon changed when we arrived in Cwm Hetiau about an hour after leaving the mountain wall: rubbish was everywhere for all to see. We paused for a rather soggy lunch in steady drizzle, glad to be sheltered from the strong south-westerly in this north-facing nook of the mountain, and then set to work. Over the next hour we retrieved numerous pieces of anonymous rusting metalwork, plastic piping of all shapes and sizes, not one but two wheelbarrows, the remains of two tents, a blanket, several tarpaulins, bottles, cans, batteries, various items of clothing including waterproof jackets, assorted sunglasses and goggles, gloves and, of course, hats: a lot of them, at least 20, mostly caps but also a trilby and a straw boater. There was too much to fit in our single lifting bag so we left the residue well weighed down for a later visit. Lest anyone be concerned that we were removing artefacts of important cultural significance, there was at least one sheet of metal, now part of the streambed, which resisted our best efforts to shift it. A large metal frame, nothing to do with the locomotive, had to be left for a park warden with an angle grinder to deal with at a later date. Tired and wet but satisfied with the day's work we headed down for a much-needed cup of tea at the ever-welcoming Siabod Cafe on the way home.