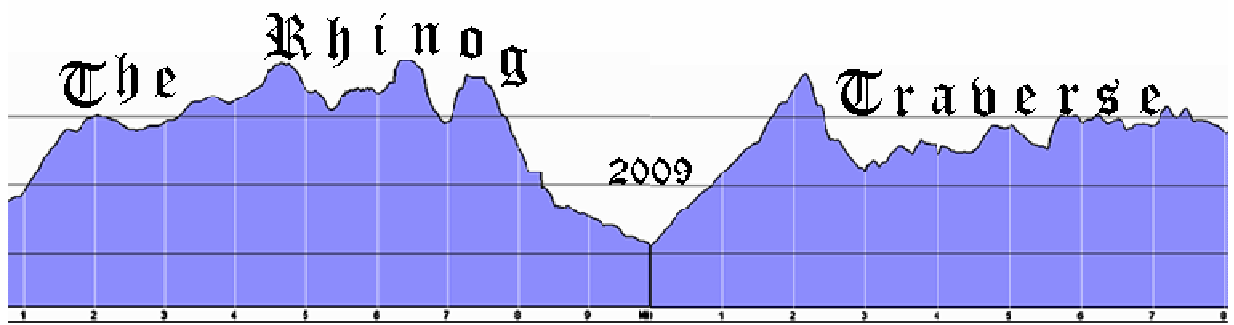


“All paths in the Rhinogs lead to the same place...”

....nowhere!"



From my earliest memories I've liked being up high. Ironic, really, as my head for heights is not great. But as a child, if there was a wall to climb and walk along instead of the footpath, I'd do it. Heading south from Trawsfynydd on the A470, the Rhinogs appear as a massive wall - a barrier of epic proportions stretching into the distance. And their allure, crafted over many years of travelling along that road from my childhood, had developed a longing in me to walk the full length of the range long before I actually came to explore any of its summits and ridges.

The walking of the Rhinog Traverse had been the planning of nearly 10 years, and can reasonably be dated back to Tim's and my first failed crossing of the Celtic Badlands in 2000, the day before our first experience of the Snowdon Horseshoe. Since then, Sherpa T and I have failed again in the heather on the ridge north of Clip, walked the Southern Rhinog Circuit, and completed The Paths of the Dead Walk over the northern Rhinog peaks; I have also carried out reconnaissance missions over the Celtic Badlands and around Rhinog Fawr. All was to come together this year, as we strung these many adventures into one immense, 20-mile, 6,000-foot walk over 2 days.

Day 2 – The Rhinog Traverse – South Leg

'Hang on', I thought, 'this path's running out again'. The old familiar feeling of unease crept over me as I stood, high on the steep western face of Rhinog Fach, and looked down over rocks and heather to where Tim stood, in a sea of nothing path-like. Beyond him, a precipice, and the backdrop of a vast expanse of moorland, which had recently revealed itself as we emerged beneath the cloud base. Here we were again, high and remote, making a steep and awkward escape down the flank of a Rhinog peak, along an unknown path, with confidence in our situation hanging in the balance.

"Sherp, is this path running out?" I waited for Tim's response....

*

The day had started majestically. Our adventurous road above Barmouth brought us high onto the southern end of the Rhinog Ridge, overlooking the Mawddach Estuary. The earliness of the hour had temperature inversions dotting the wide vista, lending an eeriness to the already subdued atmosphere as we stepped out of Car 1, and donned gear with hushed tones.



The sense of epic adventure rose within us as we headed north, tracking up over farmland below the ridge, and enjoying the long dawn shadows and the wisps of cloud across the landscape. Turning steeply to our left we pushed up to the crest of the ridge, and enjoyed a brief panorama west over Harlech Bay. Rather naively, I had assumed the ridge crest would bring all but an end to our ascending, but this merely revealed a lack of research on my part, and we turned right and slogged a fair amount further upwards into the cloud, cursing and discussing film soundtracks.

And the next section, of no inconsiderable length, can be filed amongst those special experiences which the true hillwalker comes to appreciate as much as any rocky scramble with spectacular views. We set to the soft path – accompanied only by cloud, grass, bog and a wall – and walked. And walked. And walked. The hours and miles ticked by, and we moved into a trance-like state, neither expecting nor desiring any change. Great landscapes give the walker the opportunity to become a part of them, rather than a visitor. We sort of ‘evolved’ along the Rhinog Ridge, until finally, much later, we pulled up to the domed grassy summit of Diffwys and rested for a short while.

No problem with navigation in the cloud, given the single path, and we moved easily on, curving around to walk westwards, and dropping down to a peculiar col between Diffwys and Crib-y-rhiw, whereupon first lunch was enjoyed, punctuated with fleeting glimpses of the valley below. Half distance. Much still to do.

As I recall, the length of the narrow Crib-y-rhiw ridge was filled with nostalgic conversation about computers and computer games from our youth, until finally we drew up to the foot of Y Llethr’s summit dome and turned north once more. Here the gradient sharpened considerably, and we put our heads down and got ready for a long hard pull up to the highest Rhinog summit. Both feeling fairly fit, we move steadily and surely, and the gradient eased much quicker than expected. We knew we hadn’t gone wrong, because the wall we were following was the only wall around, and it went straight to the summit. We’d just nailed the ascent particularly well; so, delighted to have summited early (the opposite normally happens!), we toasted our fathers and moved on – cloud was everywhere, and second lunch was calling to us from below, at the head of Llyn Hywel.

A descent involving lots of juicy gossip, and finally the cloud cleared to show this absolute jewel of lakes: Llyn Hywel – nestled in the high col between Y Llethr and Rhinog Fach. Its drama matches that of any other lake in Wales, and never fails to provide an optimum lunch spot – albeit with the mandatory gale force winds charging up over the lake.

Llyn Hywel & Rhinog Fach



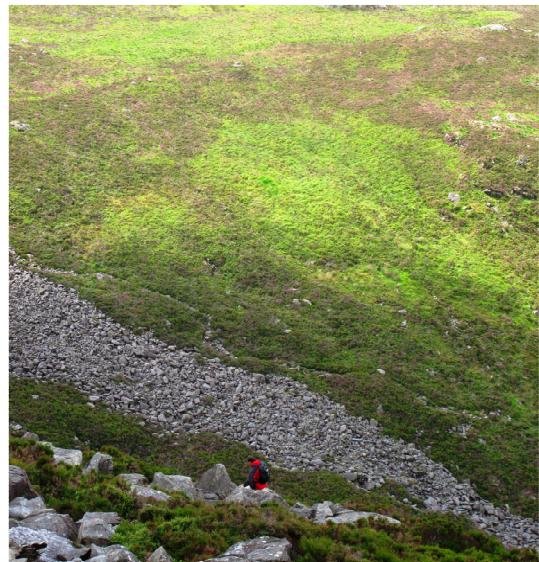
Next, a highlight of the day, clambering up the shattered southern shoulder of Rhinog Fach (on a path by the wall in the picture), and once again achieving the summit of the hill with comparative ease. Now the big challenge began – to find the elusive descent path off this elusive mountain. We had elected not to rediscover the bonkers steep mud path off the northern shoulder, but to explore a new route down the western face. In the cloud, GPS guidance was essential, and we initially went about 100 feet down a truncated spur before thinking better of ourselves, because we didn’t seem to be quite tallying with the GPS. A discretionary retreat brought us a little further along the summit ridge, where we found a slightly more obvious path and began the descent into cloud.

After a timeless period, with all going well on our path, it resorted to Rhinog form and decided to begin to fade, so I found myself stood at a quandary: press on or reconsider our route once again? I knew only too well what terrain we might end up with if the path vanished: heather-covered boulder scree, the very worst possible terrain to walk on, and even more of a challenge on this steep incline. Tim was well below me, and I needed his assessment of the situation.

“Sherp, is this path running out?...”

A pause. Tim responded: “No it’s alright Sherp – there’s a path here. Well, sort of”. Even a faint path in these places is beyond value, but it comes with the warning so eloquently encapsulated by Tim in his quote at the top of this account.

“Er”, said I, “would that be a path that looks like it’s going somewhere, or one that will fizzle out at any moment?.....”
“Yeah, I think so”, said Tim. I didn’t pursue which he part of the question he was concurring with, as he carried on downward, and I trusted his judgement. And rightly so; the descent turned out to be rather good, as it constantly challenged – crossing huge slabs, weaving through heather and dropping down tiny gullies, always threatening to disappear, until eventually it dissolved into an immense river of boulders at the foot of the mountain – dandruff from the crags above.



From here we connected with a veritable motorway – a path nearly a whole foot wide – and stumbled down onto the pass between Rhinogs Fawr and Fach. In these environs we saw our first humans since Barmouth. The first group were walkers, the second, probably young squaddies, trudging up the path with vast packs and bikes. They looked pissed off (apart from their instructor, who was relishing the opportunity to piss them off), and lord knows how far they were going, or had come, or where they would end up camping. We chortled at their misery, then got pissed off ourselves by the absurd length of the Bwlch Drws-Ardudwy path before it finally descended to Car 2 at Maes-y-garnedd farm.

*

As we drove south to collect Car 1 (before dropping it at the northern end of the Rhinogs for tomorrow’s return – complicated, huh?), we reflected upon the walk past, and our exit from Rhinog Fach. Rhinog Fach is, for me, the most challenging of all the Rhinogs. Rhinog Fawr has the infamy of its brutal south ridge and its sheer bulk, and Y Llethr is higher than both, but Fach is the only one without *any* major path, without *any* gentle approach to its summit, and without *any* side that isn’t steep - it therefore packs a particularly hard punch.

Sure, it had been an intrepid, and slightly bonkers, descent. But as the trustees of the organisation for which I work are swift to point out, risk awareness is very different from risk aversion. What makes us now connoisseurs of the Rhinogs is the constant checking and caution, tinged with adventurousness, *not* the other way around. We have shrugged off the cavalierish shackles of the past, and now enter these difficult realms knowing our adversary well. But the Rhinogs – with luck – will never be properly tamed by humans; we should never achieve any more than a faint scouring of paths through their wilderness, and a continual search, sometimes in vain, for the correct route. The constant threat of difficulty is absolutely what gives these beautiful mountains their character, and as I have stated before, long may they remain the playground of the few.

So that was the easy leg out of the way....