

## Plas Y Brenin, 14-18 July 2022: Mountain Skills Course Report By Mary Eddowes

After a long drive through hot heatwave air from Saltford in the south west, up through soft green mid Wales and into rugged Snowdonia, I arrived late on Sunday evening at Plas Y Brenin. It was my first time at the National outdoor centre in Capel Curig, and as I unpacked the car and got my bearings I felt a little nervous as well as excited for the week ahead. I had hoped to do the 5-day mountain skills course in 2020, but the pandemic meant plans had to change. But finally I was here, with the intention of reminding myself of forgotten skills, learning some new ones and spending a week fully immersed in the beautiful welsh mountains of Snowdonia.

We were a group of five, aged between 20 and 52, all here for different reasons, but united in our love for the hills and our curiosity to learn and explore. Our instructor was Iona, a highly qualified and enthusiastic mountaineer who led us through the week with endless positivity, encouragement and patience.

### Day 1: Navigation

After a slow start in the classroom and incredibly high heatwaves temperatures in the valley, Monday was a gentle introduction to the area and each other, with the main focus being navigation techniques and choosing strategies. We began by looking at the 5 Ds of navigation:

Description	Distance	Duration	Direction	Danger
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These became the top takeaway of the week, and Iona's favourite quiz for us at each turn.

We left Plas Y Brenin on foot, lathered in suncream and in sun-hats and took our time to navigate Iona's planned route with precision, using only the natural features of the landscape as guides.



*The group! Steven, Guy, Louise, Mary and Jo by Nant Gwyd, with Snowdon behind.*

Many wild flowers, (including heath spotted orchid and dwarf checker mallow) were noted during the early part of the walk, with flora changing as we moved up the valley and ascended towards Crimpau. Before the summit, we left the marked footpath and ventured onto access land in the hot afternoon sunshine, taking compass bearings from the map and land features to navigate to the unnamed '405' peak, and back down to the Gwydr forest and the relief of leafy shade below.



*Louise and Iona precision map reading*



*Heath Spotted Orchids*

I was already feeling confident with map reading and navigating using features (from an early life of Eddowes family adventures), I was however aware that my compass reading was unpracticed and I was out of my comfort zone in using one. I hoped that the week would help me improve in skill and confidence.

On our return to Nant Gwryd lake, the group stripped off sweaty clothes and bathed hot bodies in the silky cool lake. What a refresher! What a relief! And then for tea and cake on the terrace Plas Y Brenin style... a brilliant end to a great first day!

During the week we also looked at other navigation techniques, including aiming off, pacing, hand-railing, contouring, following a bearing, taking a bearing down a feature and night navigation.

Route: From Plas Y Brenin centre, Towards Crimpiau, across to '405' and back through Gwydr forest, crossing the river at Capel Curig and finishing with a dip in the lake at Plas y Brenin.

## Day 2: Scrambling

Starting early to avoid the continuing heatwave, we drove to the Ogwen valley cottage at Cwm Idwal, and began our walk at the visitor centre at 8.30am in 24 degree temperatures. We took the main path up to Llyn Idwal, and enjoyed the slate window stones which helped us get our bearings on our premier visit as a group to the valley. My fast heart rate and slow going pace reminded me that I'd had covid only 2 weeks before and needed to take it a little easier than normal.

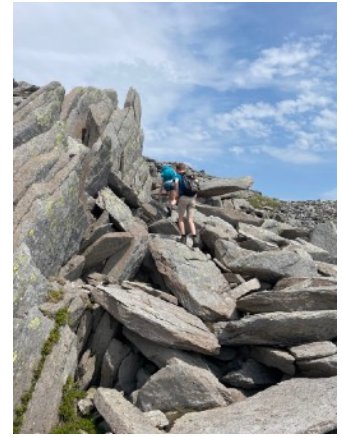
Upon reaching the path to lead us up Y Gribin's grade 1 scramble, we paused for some scrambling pointers from Iona "Goat feet, small steps, quiet feet" and to learn the important equation; "Risk = Likelihood x consequence". We then had a gentle practice on a jumble of rocks over looking the lake. Stunning views! One of the group had a nasty fall on Tryfan 4 years earlier, so was nervous in anticipation of the scramble to come. Moving slowly as a group and in support of each other, we had a fantastic climb in glorious sunshine and increasing wind along the ridge and up to the col between Glyder Fach and Glyder Fawr.



*Slate window stones*



*Mary representing the ABM at Llyn Idwal*



*Glyder Fach - last leg*

Upon reaching the col, we turned eastwards and skirted underneath Castell Y Gwynt and scrambled up and over the other worldly rock formations to the summit of Glyder Fach.

With the hint of thunderstorms on the horizon, we were hurried off the summit (sadly missing the Cantilever stone) and back down the mountain, descending via the southern col of Tryfan and the Cambrian way past Llyn Bochlwyd and making it back to the minibus before any lighting could catch us. Another refreshing swim for me and then a hearty PYB dinner with the group outside on the terrace.



*Scrambling Y Gribin. From left to right - Steven, Guy, Iona, Louise, Jo*

Route: Starting at the Ogwen valley cottage, at Cwm Idwal, we took the path up to Llyn Idwal, to then enjoy the grade 1 scramble up Y Grybin, Glydr Fach, back up to the col between Tryfan and Glydr Fach each and down the Cambrian way past Llyn Bochlwyd.

### Day 3: Expedition

Today was a morning of expedition list writing, packing, and preparing to put gear to the test in the wild. I decided to try out the kit from the centre, with the intention of later investing in my own gear. Other members of the group brought their own kit and it was great to have a proper look at the various tents, stoves and rucksacks in the mix. I borrowed a Fjaelraven Abisko Lite 1-person tent, RAB sleeping bag, Trangia ethanol stove and 55 litre rucksack.

Iona talked us through route planning and due to the north westerly high winds, she decided to take us closer to the coast and to a valley where we would be protected in our camp.

We set off in windy overcast weather, but as we traversed around the side of Drum on the old Roman road, views over to the Menai Straights and Anglesea were clear with blue skies in the distance over the Irish Sea. The clouds cleared further as the day progressed.

The chosen valley to set up our camp had numerous ancient hut circles, the beautiful Afon Anafon and about twenty wild ponies cavorting around it. I pitched my tent close to the stream in a gorgeous spot. The beautiful golden sunset was shining up the valley.



*View west down the Afon Anafon valley towards our camp (mine was the green tent in the foreground).*

It was Guy's birthday, so after dinner (rehydrated spag bol!) we played some silly games, sang happy birthday and two of us made a 'pass the parcel' out of the groups' dry bags, chocolate, cheese and rehydration pudding. Lucky Guy! And apparently a first for a PYB training course!

Then once it was dark we all headed off, armed with compasses and head torches on a night navigation walk up and around the valley, taking in steep terrain, many streams to cross, impenetrable bracken and huge furry moth caterpillars. We all commented at how disorientating the dark can be, even with all the tools to navigate! It was certainly a brilliant learning experience.

Route: Minibus to car park at the base of Foel Lwyd, west along Roman road overlooked by Foel-Ganol and Yr Orsedd, up the Afon Anafon valley to wild campsite.



*Night navigation session*



*The cross country ascent from Llyn Anafon to Drum*

#### Day 4: Expedition & river crossing

After a night of broken sleep with the sound of wind, rain, hooves and horse breath, we breakfasted in the hut circle before packing up camp and stomping up the valley to Llyn Anafon in light drizzle. Navigating across the bowl of the upper valley we came to the Cambrian Way footpath along the ridge and ascended Drum to have hot chocolate on the summit, heated on the Trangria. What a treat! We took in the far views to Anglesea again with lunch, before finding our way back down past the sheep to the van and to Plas Y Brenin and the hot showers.

Back at the centre we had a session focussing river crossing (in helmets and buoyancy aids although the river was only a trickle). Iona got us to try crossing as a group in 'line astern' and 'wedge' formations. Then it was tea and cake time before unpacking and a post expedition rest.



*Line astern crossing formation - from left to right - Louise, Steven, Mary, Iona*

Route: Afon Anafon valley camping spot up to Llyn Anafon, cross country to join the Cambrian way and summit Drum, then following the Cambrian way back to roman road and to the van.

### Day 5: Rope skills

The heatwave was definitely over. Achey tired bodies and wrapping up of the week were taken into consideration for our final day. Iona planned a shorter walk and rope work session after requests from the group. Using three different maps (OS 1:25, 1:50 and Harveys 1:25) we navigated up to Ffynnon Llugwy and then up to the col between Carnedd Llewlyn and Pen yr Helgi Du. It was great to compare the different levels of detail and note our personal favourites - mine was the OS 1:25 . We made the decision that with limited time, it would be best to summit Pen yr Helgi Du and take the shorter route home in time for cake! Iona found a suitable place on the rocky ridge for us to try body bee-lay and anchoring.



Mary belayed by Jo on the ridge



Carnedd Llewlyn - Iona, Guy, Louise, Jo, Steven, Mary

After a soggy lunch on the ridge, we ascended the summit and were tasked with defining the exact highest point of the flat topped mountain using compasses and precise contour and rocky outcrop observation with magnifying glasses. A challenge but good practice at precision nav!

On our return to the centre we ate our final tea and cake in the bar and all reflected on our week in Snowdonia and favourite moments of the training. The scramble and expedition camp were my highlights - and meeting such a fantastic group of people. They all expressed an interest in coming along to an ABMSAC meet to see what our club is all about.

Route: Parked at Gwern Gof Isaf NT campsite, walked up To Ffynnon Llugwy, and the col between Carnedd Llewlyn and Pen yr Helgi Du, descending on the southern path via the leat.



I'm grateful to the ABMSAC for their financial support, through the 'Development and Training' scheme, which allowed me to take part in this training. Thank you very much for the opportunity!