

Chapter Three - Snowdon - 38 years old



Snowdon measures 3,560 ft. above sea level and is located in Snowdonia National Park, Wales. Sir Edmund Hilary trained there in preparation for his climb up Mount Everest. There are six main paths, each a little different and consideration is needed when selecting.

- Llanberis Path - has the shallowest incline but longest route
- Miners Track - is the easiest route overall to the summit
- Pig Track - runs along the Eastern flank
- Rhyd Ddu Path - one of the least used routes
- Snowdon Ranger Path - probably the oldest path to the summit
- Watkin Path - the most demanding route

My employer decided to organise a charity event for April 2008 that was open to all employees to participate in. The team bonding exercise was embraced by all departments except engineering who unsurprisingly just moaned and stayed at home. Apparently they wouldn't be paid for attending so why bother. Clients, employees, friends and family were all asked to make a contribution. This took the form of either sponsorship money and / or participation.

We were told our route up the mountain (with a slow group) would take about four hours but would only take three hours coming down. Seven hours though is still a good walk across uneven ground for people who did little or no exercise. But as long as everyone prepared well there shouldn't be any problems.

I signed up to walk up Mount Snowdon without hesitation as it seemed a fun idea. It was something different and I may not have the opportunity again. I considered myself to be above average fitness compared to my colleagues. With my added determination to succeed I could not foresee any trouble. I collected a few hundred pounds worth of charity money. I paid half of it myself in order to boost the amount.

I have heard of the three peak challenge which incorporates Ben Nevis in Scotland, Scafell Pike in England as well as Snowdon in Wales. This was probably the full extent of my knowledge so some research was in order. I bought a book and checked the internet for pictures and advice on what to wear. I also looked into how long it would take to climb and all the different routes etc. All of which I found necessary before setting off into the unknown. I didn't really consider the weather too much, I just prepared for rough terrain.

A few people did decide to travel up and down the mountain by train which would still present them with fantastic views. The railway has a long history but the building was in doubt until a local landowner finally gave permission for the works to begin in 1894.



These days the return journey by train takes two and a half hours to cover the eight miles, including a half hour stop at the top. People who want to walk up but ride down by train have to make their own arrangements on a first come first served basis.

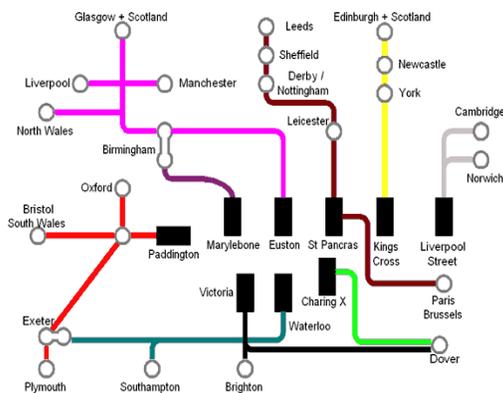
The average speed of the train is five mph, automatic brakes engage if the speed exceeds seven and a half mph.



Rack and pinion technology helps the train retain grip when tackling the steep inclines. Today the carriages carry fifty four people (and a guard) to the summit and back, on a clear day the view at the top extends to five km. The trains are a mixture of diesel and steam driven.

Amongst our group were a couple of employees and their friends who had walked up before. They agreed to act as guides for our trip. It was good to have people with their experience with us because the paths were not marked that clearly. The Llanberis path is known as the tourist path and was chosen as this was considered the easiest route to take. Allowances had to be made for older members of staff and guests as well as their children. I already had a jacket, Denise lent me her hiking walking stick and I bought a pair of Snowdon 2 walking boots. Gloves, hat and a scarf were next and a set of thermals to take the edge off the cold.

I left work at 14:30 from my office in Queen Street and headed for Euston, where I would board the train to Bangor. From Bangor I would take a taxi and be in the hotel bar at 19:30. It sounded quite simple when I planned it. I had reserved a seat and looked forward to a relaxing journey. My only concern was the amount of people wanting to travel home 'oop North' on a Friday afternoon. My knowledge of Britain's railway network was very limited at the time and I know it a little better now.



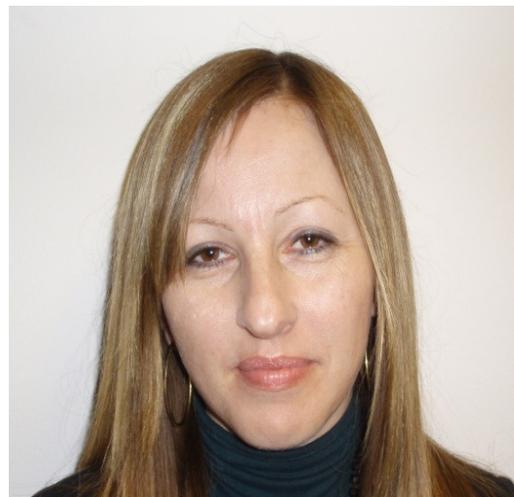
The map above is very basic and it does not account for alternative routes or links. However, it does illustrate the approximate route, Euston to North Wales.

I did not take a train map with me, the route seemed straight forward enough and was direct after all. Anyway information is readily available at the train stations and I did not anticipate any trouble. So when I reached Euston and found it in chaos I was totally unprepared, I had no plan B, which is unusual for me.

I looked up at the departure boards and they all had the same 'cancelled' message across them....there were no trains at all!



I stood for a while looking at the board with my bag at my feet contemplating what to do next. I rang the office manager (Michelle Sussex) and told her I would not be going after all. There was a major signal failure in the Milton Keynes area and everyone was being advised not to travel that night.



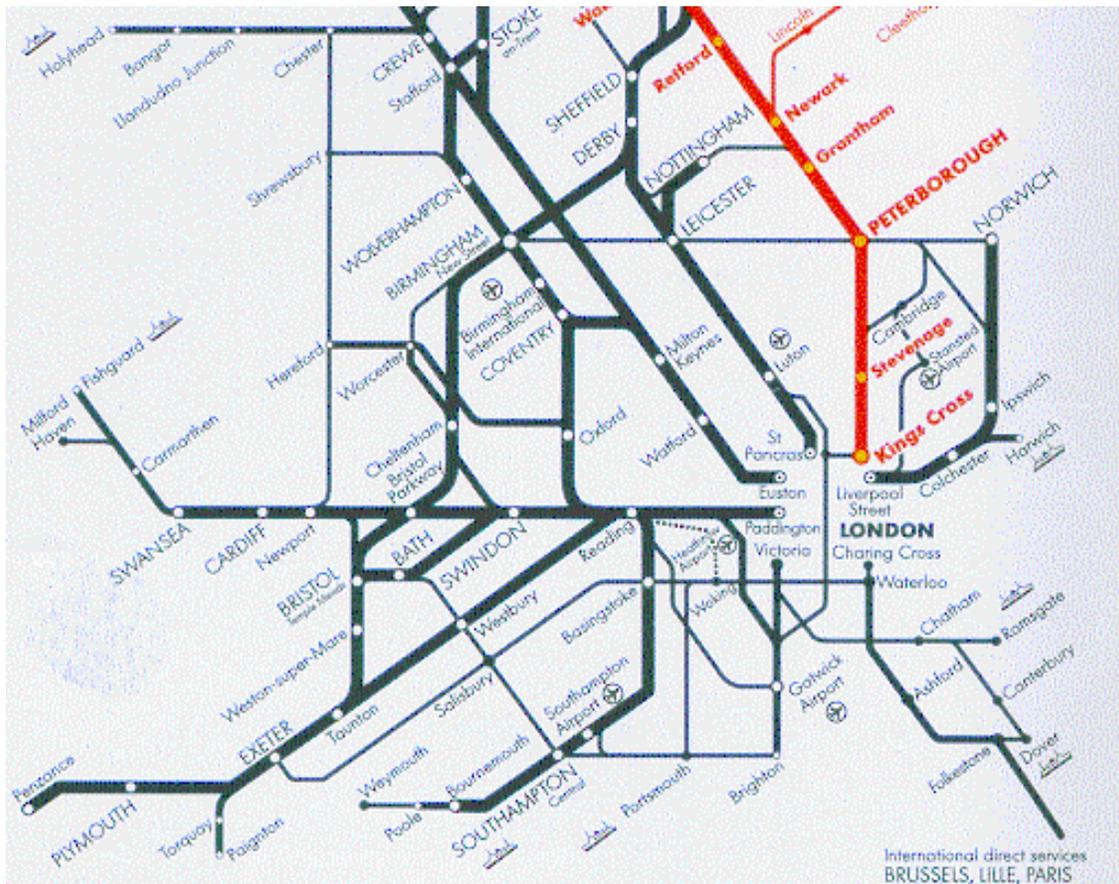
Michelle persuaded me to persevere and wait to see if the line would reopen, so while I waited I queued for an hour for travel advice. I thought I might be able to check other stations but was told not to bother.

Travelling up the next day was not an option as I would arrive too late to join the walk. I knew our party was setting off for the mountain at 10:00 the next morning.

I travelled by underground to Kings Cross, St Pancras and Marylebone not really sure what I was doing. In desperation I also tried Paddington and noted there was a train about to leave for Cardiff. I thought to myself...Cardiff that's in Wales... so I bought a ticket and boarded. Little did I know, at the time, but there is no train network in Wales linking the South to the North of the country. All rail routes are within England.

I rang Michelle again and this time she was at home. I asked her to plan me a route from Paddington to Bangor via Cardiff. She helpfully searched the internet and provided the names of the stations where I would have to change.

Michelle was not travelling up until the next morning in time to take the train up the mountain. Her friend had arthritis and was unable to walk up. They planned to stay at the same hotel and meet up with everyone for dinner after the walk. I settled in for the journey, still without a map but happy that I was at least on my way. Time was the only factor now.



When I pulled into Bristol Parkway station I heard a platform announcement, "change here for stations to the North". I took a chance and got off and sought advice from the ticket office. The man was very helpful and suggested I change at Newport and go to Chester. I should arrive at Bangor around midnight; this was good news as it was two hours earlier than changing at Cardiff.

I boarded the first train to Newport, then on to Chester arriving at 23:00 where I stood on the cold platform with thirty other people. Then an announcement informed us that our train had a fault and had to be repaired before setting off to Bangor. Fortunately the railway depot was adjacent to the station and I only had to wait twenty minutes or so. I was due to pull in to Bangor around 00:15 and my main concern now was transport to the hotel. If there were no taxis then I would have to take the bus, but which one? If the passengers or drivers did not know the location of my hotel which direction should I travel in?

I pulled into a pitch black station and fortunately there was a taxi rank. The driver knew the hotel and we were soon on our way. After twenty five minutes we arrived and I entered the hotel. Before I had a chance to give the receptionist my name he produced a card with my details on it as I was the last to arrive.

It was 00:40 and the bar was closed, the other guests were nowhere to be seen so the only thing to do was to go to bed. The next morning I came down to breakfast and described my journey to anyone who would listen. I had already had an adventure travelling from London and I still had a mountain to climb.

I am not a superstitious person but I am occasionally prone to coincidence. The company referred to the different buildings they managed by site code numbers. The site I was responsible for was Cannon Bridge - 102, which was the same as my hotel room number. So it seemed I was meant to go after all. I told a few people of the coincidence which was to backfire the next day.

We posed for a group photo outside the hotel and it was only then I got to meet the rest of the group. There were around fifty people in total, a mixture of employees from offices around the country and their friends / relatives. A lot of people had driven the day before so transport to the mountain was easily arranged. Before setting off I popped across the road to a supermarket and bought some pre-packed sandwiches and chocolate for the trip. We travelled for about fifteen minutes to the car park at the foot of Snowdon. There we waited for everyone to arrive before setting off up the mountain in small groups.



It was slow going which suited everyone as there was no rush and the path was not made for a fast pace anyway. We set off at 10:00 and planned to return to the hotel at around 17:00 later that day. Our guides led the way and we followed obediently, confident that we were in good hands. I was glad I had prepared by wearing the correct footwear for walking in rough terrain. Some people were not nearly as prepared and were wearing shoes! Clearly this was not a good idea even without the benefit of hindsight.

I was unsure about the walking stick at first and a few people looked quizzically at me. Even I thought that I would just end up with something else to carry. However, as the walk progressed I was glad of it. I even wished I had brought one for the other hand. The walk was a little tiring so we occasionally stopped for a rest. Unfortunately for the stragglers as soon as they caught up it was time to move on. Meaning the people who needed the rest most got the least. I think that's called survival of the fittest.

The train line was on our left and we were told that due to adverse weather conditions it would only travel up halfway today.



This was not good news for the walkers. We approached the half-way house on our right but did not bother to stop. It looked a very basic cafe and we already had our supplies. This cafe is only open in fair conditions but if the weather is poor it is probably not best to be there in the first place.



The facilities at the top were being refurbished as part of a multi-million pound overhaul. In good weather the train stops adjacent to the top cafe and waits for passengers to return. It was a shame it wasn't finished as it would have been good to reach the top and rest up.

It was cloudy and I could imagine on a fine day you could see for miles. The seasons do play a big part in this environment. April is probably not the best time to tackle the mountain for the first time as the weather is unpredictable. If we had of waited a few months the weather might have been ok. If I were to revisit it would be in July. About halfway up we met fallen snow and the journey took a different turn.



The people who had worn incorrect footwear now had to turn back. Wearing shoes when walking up the highest mountain in Wales? One of the guides took the weak and the unprepared back down and the rest of us pushed on. The snow made things heavy going and the wind was starting to blow making it seem very cold. My boots were suitable for the rough ground but spikes were needed for ice. The batteries decayed quickly in my camera so I had to rely on pictures from other people.



There were a number of scary climbs and at one stage we had to ascend with a wall on our right and a steep down slope to our left. The climb upwards was steep, narrow and slippery with the wind howling in our faces. We could barely hear each other talk and some of the admin girls started to cry but it was impossible to turn back, we had to push on. The only way to tackle this section was to take one step at a time and don't look down.

The climb lasted for about thirty feet and then levelled off to a safe flat area with a vertical outcrop of rock where we regrouped.



One by one I watched them appear over the horizon displaying a mixture of emotions. It seemed that this was without doubt the most difficult thing they had ever attempted. The wind was really taking hold now and pulled incessantly at my clothes. I pulled my hood around my face to stop the wind biting at my features but it didn't help much. We were now effectively at a crossroads as we had travelled up the sheltered side of the mountain and had now reached one of the peaks. I would liken the climb to scaling a human body. We had started at the feet, climbed up the front and had reached the shoulder. The choice that now remained was to tackle the head and reach the very top or go over the shoulder and down the back. My only concern was my footwear as a lack of spikes made walking on the ice dangerous. It never occurred to me for a moment to bring something like the boots below.



Even with my stick I was slipping, visibility was poor and I had no idea how far it was to the top. I decided not take any further risks and help the admin girls down. It was going to be challenging enough to walk down from where we were. The wind was incredible, almost knocking us off our feet and I did not like the look of the slopes down to our left. If we slipped down it would be extremely difficult to get back up. The snow was now knee deep and soft, the walking stick earned its keep again on this stretch.

We found a little shelter by some rocks and stopped to have a sandwich, the nourishment boosted our strength. The mountain is unforgiving and it is no wonder that people have to be rescued every year. It was hard to remember that a few hours before we had been tackling rough ground in springtime conditions.

Step by step we plodded on with our heads bowed trying to look for signs of the end of the snow. As bad as this was I was glad we hadn't turned around and travelled down the path we climbed up. Some of the narrow paths would have been treacherous. I am not sure which is the most difficult, walking up or walking down. It is certainly easier to choose your foot placing walking up. I suppose when walking down there is the added benefit of knowing the climb / walk is nearing the end?



Eventually the snow thinned and the familiar stony track appeared before us, before long we were in the halfway house having a cup of coffee. Our weary bones were just starting to get comfortable when I heard the train pass on its upward journey.



It would have been nice to see Snowdon from a different perspective, but as we were only there for a limited time it was one way or the other not both.

The feedback from the train passengers mainly concerned the lack of heating so they had to wrap up warm. I suppose their bodies got cold sitting around instead of exercising. It wasn't long before the half dozen people that made it to the top joined us, so it couldn't have been that far after all. We continued down and before long we were in the pub garden at the bottom. Dinner wasn't until 19:00 so we had an hour or so to relax before travelling to the hotel to get ready. Once everyone was down from the mountain and we were sufficiently unwound (and lubricated) we took the short ride to the hotel. A shower was most welcome and before long I was back downstairs and seated at the dinner table.

Speeches were given by the organisers and I was given a special mention by the father in-law of one of the Directors for my travel efforts. Before long we were in small groups chatting and having another well-deserved drink.

The next morning I rang reception to ask for my breakfast to be served in my room, I was hungry and wanted to depart soon. There was no answer from reception and just as I replaced the receiver the phone rang. Reception were calling me to ask how my stay had been, I was a little confused as they did not answer a couple of seconds earlier.

The Welsh sounding woman asked me a few questions before I realised it was one of the admin girls from our group. I had told Emma Kearney about my coincidence with my room number when I arrived.

The journey home was thankfully uneventful, I got a taxi into Bangor and looked around the shops before catching the train. The journey was direct this time, straight to London. Overall it was a busy few days and a memorable experience. I would like to revisit some day and see the view from the top. I feel the mountain and I have some unfinished business to settle.

