

HILLWALKING AND SUNDIALS – An Unusual Combination?

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Hillwalking and sundials – it seems an unusual combination, and not two hobbies that you would expect to be compatible with each other, but just occasionally these two completely different hobbies come together. It would seem sensible that if I was in the north of Scotland on a hillwalking trip, that I should take the opportunity to search out any local sundials if time allowed.

In the late summer of 2011, I set off to climb Bidein a' Choire Sheasgaich, popularly known as 'Cheesecake', and Lurg Mor, two rather remote mountains in Wester Ross in the North West Highlands of Scotland near to the tiny village of Strathcarron. I had attempted these two mountains the previous year but had to give up due to very poor weather. Just to get to the foot of these two mountains entailed a two hour cycle over a fairly rough path followed by another hour of walking over an even rougher path and the crossing of two rivers in the process – see Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Cycling to Attadale.

Once at the foot of the mountains it took another two hours to reach the summit of Lurg Mor and another hour and a quarter to reach Cheesecake. It took another four and a half hours of walking and cycling to get back to my starting point. An altogether exhausting day of around 40km!

My car was parked in the car park for Attadale House which the owners quite kindly make available to walkers in the area. I was aware of reports of a new (2009) giant sundial, 35 feet across, located to the west of the house, so this was a good opportunity to have a look at it. I was therefore on a mission on my return cycle journey to get back to the car park before closing time, cycling far too fast on the rough path, especially on some of the downhill sections. I made it with half an hour to spare.



Fig. 2. The sundial at Attadale House.

The stone-work of the sundial (Fig. 2) was cut and laid by Tom Nelson and his team from Drumnadrochit whilst the gnomon was carved by Graciela Ainsworth from Edinburgh, who also carved the compass, numbers and other furniture. The gnomon itself incorporates a rampant wild cat of the Skye Macphersons in honour of the owners Ewen and Nicky Macpherson symbolising the Macpherson's clan motto 'touch not the cat but (without) a glove'. The dial is placed in front of a semi-circle of rhododendrons, hydrangeas and ground cover plants (Fig. 3). The dial has Roman numerals from 8am to 7pm and incorporates a stone with the initials of the owners, NM and EAM, and a protea and thistle (national flowers of the owners – South Africa and Scotland), see Fig. 4. There is also a stone with the date of "MMIX".



Fig. 3. The green surround for the Attadale dial.



Fig. 4. Close-up of the date stone of the Attadale dial.

There was however a surprise in store as on my way out I noticed an old horizontal sundial in the centre of the sunken garden (Fig. 5) that I was not aware of. It was on a stone balluster shaft on a circular base and the circular metal dial plate incorporated an eight point compass with all points named. It has Roman numerals from 4am to 8pm and was made by Gilbert, Wright and Hooke of London who I understand were in business between 1794 and 1805. Unfortunately, my camera was acting up by now, probably because of dampness during the day, and I was unable to get a decent close up photo of the dial. The photo at Fig. 5 was the last decent photo from the camera and I had to buy a new one shortly afterwards!



Fig. 5. The horizontal pedestal dial at Attadale House.

In the late summer of 2012 I spent the weekend at Invergarry, which is in the Great Glen stretching from Fort William in the south to Inverness in the north. The purpose of the trip was to climb Aonach Beag and Aonach Mor which are the seventh and eighth highest mountains respectively in Great Britain. They are situated near to Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain. Unfortunately, the weather was not great as most of the day was spent in the clouds (Fig. 6), but some decent views were had on the way up the mountains (Fig. 7), but those views quickly disappeared as we entered



Fig. 6. Aonach Mor in the clouds.



Fig. 7. Aonach Mor: just about to enter the clouds.

the clouds. The day lasted only about six hours as we cheated somewhat and took the gondola half way up the mountain.

Whilst at Invergarry and before I returned home, I took the opportunity to visit the Glengarry Castle Hotel which lies on the shore of Loch Oich between Loch Ness and Loch Lochy in the Great Glen. In the grounds of the hotel stands a fine stumpy octagonal faceted dial on a moulded octagonal stem, standing on a low octagonal base (Fig. 8). Possibly from the late 18th-century and looking rather like a petrified alien, the sundial has no surviving markings.



Fig. 8. The Glengarry sundial.



In April 2009 I had a couple of days in Kinlochleven on the banks of Loch Leven in order to climb Sgorr Dhearg and Sgorr Dhonuill known collectively as 'the Ballachuilish Horseshoe' (Fig. 9). The weather was quite good and my companions and I enjoyed eight hours on the mountains once we had navigated through the forest which blankets the lower slopes. The weather however had deteriorated by the next day when I visited Ballachuilish House to see the sundial that was reported to be there. The house is behind the golf course and was all locked up with no one apparently living there, but the garden was well kept. The horizontal sundial was in the garden (Fig. 10) on a slender circular stone column. The dial plate itself was of stone, square shaped and had Roman numerals from 3am to 8pm with a noon gap and a fine gnomon (Fig. 11).

*Fig. 9, above left.
The Ballachuilish
Horseshoe.*

*Figs 10 & 11, above
and right.
The Ballachuilish
sundial.*

So just occasionally I do get the opportunity to combine my two hobbies. Unfortunately they both rely on the sun to some extent, which is not the most reliable factor in Scotland!



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