

# NORTEL HILLWALKING CLUB ATTENDS THE MCI SCOTTISH WINTER MEET 2008

Eight o'clock in the evening on Wed 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2008 found us assembled in the Old Lodge at Inchree centre with a handful of other MCI pioneers, the second batch of members to attend the first ever Scotland Winter meet. Having dined on curry in a jar after the long drive from Edinburgh Airport we were ready to hear about what we had come to do – a Winter Skills course in the Scottish mountains. Tim Orr opened the session with a welcome and an outline of what was intended for the three days of the meet. He then took us through the weather and avalanche reports for the coming days: our worst fears were confirmed, the next day's forecast was rain and wind, with the avalanche forecast at 4, High. Our guides and tutors, Clive, Sinéad, and Darach told us that they would have a plan for us in the morning, and then sent us off to get our snow gear to have it checked over. My borrowed axe was too long by far; the other guy's axes were too technical. So we signed out axes from the MCI stock, along with helmets and harnesses. Thankfully, my 3-season boots and strap-on crampons passed muster. We then had a long discussion on what we should wear the next day. Ski salopettes were frowned upon (though others had told me that's what I would need), extra gloves were emphasised, and we returned with our extra gear to the chalet, pondering the seemingly conflicting advice. I wouldn't have been a holiday without a visit to the pub, so we popped in for a quick pint or two (coke for the non drinkers), and hit off to bed. Our chalet was comfy, but tended to get cold and was prone to condensation.

## Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> February

The next morning Trevor and I started the day at 06:30, Trevor cooking scrambled eggs and bacon, me trying to get my lunch stuff together before the others got up. One by one the other lads emerged, and soon the table looked like the counter of O'Brien's at lunchtime. With soup made, lunchboxes full, and stomachs satisfied by Trevor's culinary skills, we were all set up and tramped down to the old lodge at 08:10m to hear the plans. Clive gave the briefing and told us we were heading up to Coire Leis on the North side of Ben Nevis, so that we could avoid the high winds. We set off with us five in the hired estate and the rest of the group in the ancient jeep, which had first rolled off the production line the same year that I was born. Because we had kindly been given keys by the Forestry Service, we were able to drive up the track from the Aonach Mor gondola station to get a bit of height and distance in before we started the walk. This is important in Scotland, as the snow doesn't always start where your

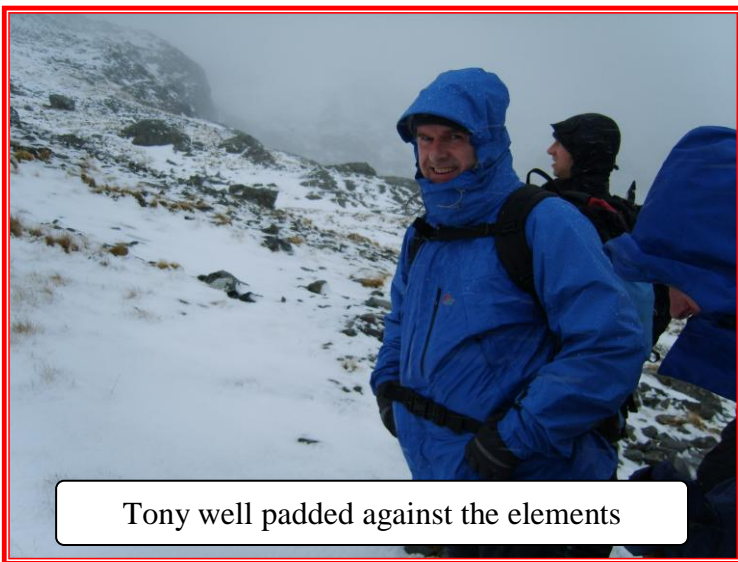


Darach points the way up Coire Leis

climb does, and you might have to get 500m under your belt before the white stuff is underfoot. Anyway, despite our apprehension, we made it up the track without taking out the sump or the exhaust, and geared up for the climb. Hefting our packs onto our backs, we set off up the track to the CIC hut. This is no track like the casual ones you find on the Bens or in the Turks, but a well surfaced footpath with neat culverts for the streams, and stepping stones where needed.

We set a good pace, the climb being only 400 metres over 4 kilometres, and we were soon helped along by a gale and steady rain whipping us along from behind. By the time we reached the MCI hut 80 minutes later; all our outside layers were thoroughly soaked. But, on the final approach, we had at last come upon snow in reasonable quantities. We stopped for a quick sandwich and popped on another layer. The style of eating in winter climbing, we were to learn, is lots of quick breaks instead of one big lunch. We continued on up the valley, and the quantities of snow increased until we were crunching along on a continuous blanket of the stuff. Darach ran across the stream and started to recon good spots on the South facing side of the valley while we trudged on, gaining height. I planted my feet in each of Clive's footprints as instructed, a good idea as it stops you finding new spots in the snow where you can sink to above your knee! Finally Darach gave the signal and we carefully crossed the snow bridge over the stream, and gathered together at the bottom of the selected slope.

We threw on another layer (I now had a thermal long-sleeve vest, two light woollen jumpers, and a medium-weight fleece under my shell – it wasn't too much!) sucked in some water,



Tony well padded against the elements

and the lessons proper began. To move on snow you need to know about the four S's: the first of these is stepping. There is a method for getting around without crampons, and that's what we started with. When moving across the slopes you cut in a step by "sawing" with the edge of your boot. To turn, you kick in both toes continuously as you rotate. My relatively soft boots weren't very efficient at this, but they worked OK. If going straight up the slope you kick in hard, keeping you heel higher than your toe. It's solid, but a serious workout for the calves. Descending is the

good ol' heel plant, beloved of those who climb the boggy Irish mountains. Having learned stepping, we had to deal with the next S; slipping. The technique to be learned is a quick plant of the axe into the snow with the uphill hand (where it should be) and grabbing the haft with the downhill hand right where it enters the snow. We did this a few times, faking slips by throwing ourselves to the snow. Next was the fun bit; Sliding. You have to learn how to slide in the snow, and especially how to stop yourself, stopping being the fourth S. There are eight combinations in total: you can slide head first or feet first, on your front or on your back in each case, with or without an ice axe in every case. It's kind of like a primitive ski school, and lots of fun, but unfortunately snow gets in every bit of your clothes (where it promptly melts!). After doing all the feet first slides, we took another break. I got stuck into the contents of my flask: the soup was great! Unfortunately the insidious snow demonstrated an incredible ability to get into every nook and cranny of rucksacks, camera bags, etc. where, again, it melted. I was also beginning to discover that the whole "gloves off, gloves on" routine was becoming a bit painful. Obviously everyone else was finding the same as there was a fair bit of discussion with our guides as to the best glove system to employ.

The head first sliding went off without a hitch, and a bonus is that you get less snow up your coat. The weather was treating us to frequent bursts of snow shower, driven in by the constant wind, between which we got impressive views down the valley. At this stage we had done each of our eight

combinations at least three times, thus averaging 28 climbs back up to the starting position, approx 280 metres of climbing with you heels kept high – ouch! The lighter members of the party, of course, were cruising it, but those with, let us say, bigger builds, were bumming, due to sliding faster and farther down the slope each time. Maybe their builds are not as big now after all the extra exercise!



*Sinéad explains the finer points of sliding to Trevor*

Finally it was time to put on crampons and learn a whole new way of stepping. This is totally different to the no-crampons method, except for one of the downhill options, which is the good ol' heel plant. The other downhill method comes straight out of Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks. Having covered the basics we finally set out for some climbing, and moved higher into the corrie and up one of its sides. Did I mention that climbing in crampons is just as rough on the calves as without? As we moved higher up the corrie, of course the

slope kept getting steeper – Aaaaaargh! We ended up on a slope that I wouldn't even have considered if it was grass and I was in regular boots, lungs heaving and searing calves burning holes in the gaiters. Darach pointed out that there was avalanche potential in our desired route, due to accumulated snow, so we turned tail, and crossed the corrie bottom. The wind got up and blew the falling snow and spindrift right into our faces so after a bit out came the ski goggles or shades. I really felt the part now, fully kitted with everything except the harness. As we came to the other side of the corrie the slope steepened as it dropped from the North West Buttress and there was ample opportunity to practise our stepping technique. We descended the last bit on our butts, fine example of sliding with the self-arrest at the end, but now with the added caution to keep the crampons out of the snow. About half way back to the CIC hut we removed the crampons, and apart from a short break to lose a layer at the hut, we did not stop till we got back to the cars. Thankfully the weather lifted and we didn't get any wetter, and it also gave me time to get acquainted with two other members of our group, one of the Brian's from Waterford, and Pearse from Limerick. Even with the chat, the trip seemed very long. When we got back to the car we had to line the boot with our bivvy bags before piling in all the wet gear. We managed to make it out of the track again without damaging the car, despite "Patience" Clive trying to blow us out of the way (we had offered him to go first, and he had to wait for us at the gate anyway!) Everyone wanted to get to Ellis Brigham to invest in bag mittens, but we did not make it in time. Back to the chalets, but of course there was no time to rest just yet. Practically everything had to go up to the drying rooms. We got into the restaurant about 19:15 and ordered food. However, at nearly 10 to eight we still hadn't been served. This was bad news in that the evening lecture was scheduled to start at 20:00, and it was an outside visitor from the Scottish Avalanche Information Service. I trotted down and let Clive know our predicament, we would be late, but there was no way we were going to skip dinner. Thankfully the guys were OK about it, and so the lecture commenced about 20 minutes late.

Blair Fyffe works for the AIS, and has a PhD on slab avalanches. He gave us a lot of detail on how avalanches work, the conditions that cause them, and how to recognise the signs of those conditions. He had some fabulous photos, especially the one of the nutter standing out on a big cornice, unroped, trying to peer over the edge! At the end of the lecture the group reviewed the weather and avalanche forecasts for the next day – the weather was going to be dire!

### **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> February**

We started a bit late due to having to get stuff out of the drying rooms etc. Clive reviewed our options, and with 100mph gusts on the peaks, the freezing level well above the tops of the Munros, and bucketing rain, our options were limited. Clive proposed a choice of low level walks, with the possibility of a visit to the Ice Factor if we could get a booking for their ice room: 2 hours on their ice walls for £20. Rather than be penny wise and pound foolish, we jumped at the chance to go to the Ice Factor. Tim made the booking (after initially being told to bugger off for ringing before 09:00!), we were all set for a 15:00-17:00 slot.

We took off for the walk to Steall Falls, minus Trevor who had caught a chill on the way down from Coire Leis the day before. Driving along the South of Ben Nevis, we had a good look at the area of the tourist path and Five Finger Gully, the scene of one of the rescues featured in my “Mammoth Book of Mountain Disasters”. We also got to meet the highland cows, the local version of the mountain sheep that swan around the roads in the West of Ireland (only a damn sight bigger). It was pouring when we arrived at the car park, so we readied ourselves with little to-do, and set off up the path to the gorge. This was a fabulous place, surrounded by mostly birch woodland, the quality path winding around crags and over streams, with a steep (and at times perilous) drop into the gorge on our right. The gorge itself was impressive, massive tumbled blocks of stone wreathed in raging white water gushing and squirting over and between them. We broke out of the woods at the top of the gorge for a bog slog across to the cable bridge that gets you over to the base of Steall Falls. This bridge consists of just three cables: one for each hand, and one for your feet. I was unenthusiastic about crossing; I'm sure others were too but didn't want to say it! Anyway, Brian 2 from Waterford followed Sinéad across, so in true Lemming fashion I hopped up next.

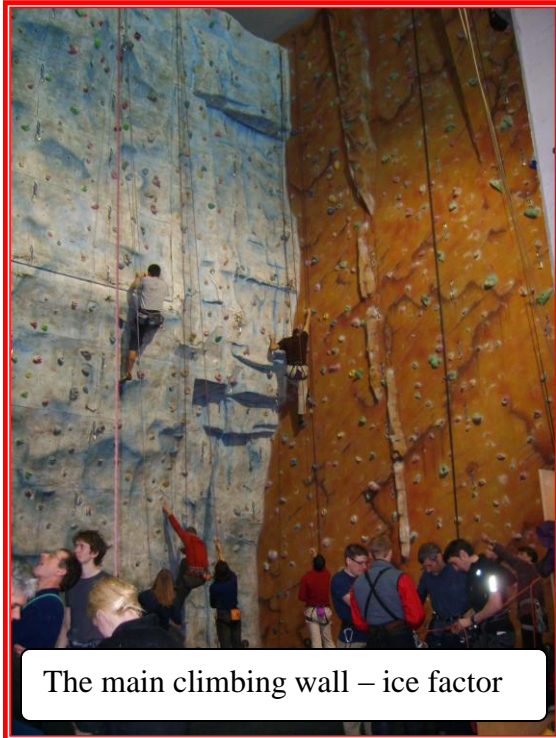
This was genuinely the most hazardous undertaking of the trip, as with arms akimbo to grip the wires, and boots scrabbling on the tightrope, I couldn't help contemplating the dark and hungry water swirling below, and the slim chances of getting out of the river before being sucked down the gorge to certain death if I fell in. As the others crossed they described their disorienting experience of having the wire appear to move upstream while they were trying to place their feet. Being of shorter stature, I'd been more concerned about the increasing stretch between my cold wet hands and between shoulders and feet, and whether I'd be able to keep a grip. But we all made it across without incident, for the dubious pleasure of splashing over to the base of the falls to be wet some more by the mingled spray and rain. The falls were impressive, no doubt about it, and I began to regret not having taken my camera (I'd been concerned about how wet it got the day before). It is a testament to my boots that my feet stayed dry.

The trip back across the bridge was a little better, as the water became shallower along the way, so I didn't really mind Darach giving the bridge a shake just as I got over the beach on the Northern bank. We slopped back to the path, and headed down the gorge to the cars, to make our way to the Ice Factor.

The Ice Factor in Kinlochleven was set up in a disused factory, and just as well for Kinlochleven, as the town is well off the beaten track. I drove, and the roads rivalled the worst of Connemara, with blind turns, humps, and deep puddles, none of which went well with the Peugeot's handling being sloppier

than I am used to, and the miserable weather conditions. I was almost surprised that we arrived safely, with Trevor “boy racer” Fahey right on our tail.

The Ice Factor is a dream for climbers beset by poor weather. There are two indoor rock climbing “rooms”, one for instruction and one for practise, a bouldering room, and the star attraction, a giant freezer with walls of hand-applied ice for ice climbing. The £20 fee included 2 hours in the freezer, and all day access to the climbing walls, sauna, and steam room. (You can have all this minus the ice for £10.) The café isn't half bad either.



The main climbing wall – ice factor

Needless to say, it was packed. With our booking on the ice starting at 15:00, we had about 2 hours to have lunch and do our basic belay instructions. I opted not to change out of my wet pants other than to change the base layer: my hope was that the fridge would dry everything out a bit! I was just finishing my packed lunch when a member of staff advised us firmly but politely that we weren't allowed to eat our own food in the café. Fair enough, but I was finished anyway. We kitted up with harnesses and the supplied rock shoes (you must use the Ice Factor shoes on the walls). Clive showed us how to rope up with a figure-eight knot, and how to set up a belay with a belay plate. He then demonstrated how to take up the rope using a system such that the belayer always has a hand on the braking end of the rope. Then we paired off to have a go. Robin and I teamed up, as the lighter members of the party, and picked a spot in the corner of the training room. Darach came over and coached us through a climb and abseil each, until we had it down. Then we moved to another pitch and did that as well.

And the waiting was over; it was time to kit up for the

ice. As I strapped my crampons onto my Grade B Meindls I wondered if they would be up to the job! Front pointing into vertical ice with soft boots and flexible crampons.... After some important comments from Clive about not cutting up the ice with repeated hacking, and avoiding standing on the belay ropes with your cramponed feet, we started off. Robin climbed first, up a half-height easy section. Then I took a turn. Sinéad was on hand with useful advice: we had the bum pair of axes, one shorter than the other, but she helped adjust the slings and it got a little better. We then moved on to a full height pitch. The boots and crampons were performing just fine, but calves and forearms were beginning to burn.

The next section we tried was a chimney located in the corner of the room. This gave good opportunity to cross brace the legs for additional support. Half way up, Robin gave up, burned out, and came back down. I was dubious about completing it then, as I know Robin to be a paragon of fitness in both soccer and hillwalking, and an avid scrambler. But Sinéad recognised the issue and gave us some pointers on resting the arms. I had been doing this already, having unconsciously picked it up from all the ice climbing YouTube links Trevor kept sending me in advance of the trip. Sinéad then did the section herself to give us a welcome break. I followed next, and then Robin completed it. We moved to another pitch which had a slight chimney feel to it, and all of us completed that. By now we had the smart moves, and used previous climbers' spots to place the axes, to minimise the whacking that blows out your forearms. Incredibly our time was running out, and we moved onto a more challenging section, which had (I believe on purpose) an unclimbable

patch in the middle that you had to work around. I just about managed this, and unfortunately as we swapped positions on the rope for Robin's attempt, Clive called time and we had to exit – not before we caught him on video “cutting up the ice with repeated hacking”! Tut, tut!

We hung about for afterwards to have a drink (soft) and relax a bit. I browsed the shop, which wasn't that interesting. It had been a great experience and I felt I had learned a lot – in some ways the bad weather had been a blessing, as otherwise we would have missed this. I was surprised at how well my soft boots and flexible crampons had worked, though I would say that for continued icework, proper equipment would be needed. We went back to the chalets to cook up some dinner. The drying rooms were much emptier tonight, a sign that very few of the Inchree residents had taken to the outdoors that day. Thankfully most of my gear was not that wet, apart from my rucksack, which was drenched. The MCI had moved their base to one of the kitchens of the new lodge, so that's where we went for the debrief and talk. Our choice of talk was either mountain weather or a slide show of Tim's pictures: we unanimously voted for the slide show, having seen more than enough of mountain weather already that day! Tim's grandly titled 52 weeks of climbing slide show (which turned out to be actually 31), took us through every sort of climbing from weekend walks in the Reeks to via ferrata and Everest Base Camp. Delivered in Tim's casual style, it included all sorts of ideas to get the mountaineering juices flowing, illustrated with some fabulous pictures, and the odd good story. The one-man Irish Eiger 'expedition' is a howl and well worth hassling Tim to visit your club for. No decisions were made for the next day, but conditions seemed more promising, even if the avalanche forecast was still a 4. And so we set off to bed early in the hope of a good climb.



Robin scales the ice wall at the Ice Factor

## Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March

Our third day started even more busily than the others, because we had to pack up and leave our chalet for the more spartan shelter of a bunk room in the new lodge. Even with all possible efforts to pre-pack the night before, we still had to recover gear from the drying room, get everything into the cars, and clean up. No fried breakfast, but we dined well on microwave porridge, boiled eggs, brown bread, ham, and cheese. Most of us had made our lunch the night before, and so soup was the only main prep work in that department. At the briefing we learned that we were off to Stob Coire nan Lochan in Glen Coe, where we should get some good snow while still being sheltered from the wind. But we would need to be careful of avalanches, as the corrie faced North East.

We set off and arrived in Glen Coe about 30 minutes later. The snow seemed impossibly remote from the vantage of the carpark, as we looked right across the valley and up a gorge between two of the Three Sisters. We set off for the estimated 80 minute climb. The pace, though not fast, was relentless, Clive pausing just once in 40 minutes, while our legs burned, sweat streamed, and lactic acid pooled in our boots. I completed the climb steaming hot in just a thermal vest and my shell (all vents open). As we gained height, light snow swirled down, and I was thankful that we weren't getting rained on again. At last we stopped beside the stream, on the other side of which was unbroken snow, and broke out the ice axes. A short convex slope stretched away above us, hiding the corrie from sight. We moved up this without crampons, giving us a chance to practise our stepping technique, though in fairness, with a few people having gone before us, there were plenty of steps available already. As we reached the top of the slope the sun came out, and simultaneously the corrie came into view, an Alpine vista behind the only blue skies of the trip.



The ice catwalk: Les Poseurs at Stob Coire nan Lochan

This was it! Exactly what we had been dreaming about. And the added bonus was that we were dry. Out came the cameras and the whole affair descended into an unabashed frenzy of posing, like some sort of outdoors catwalk. Some even threw on the sunglasses, though the glare hardly merited this move. As if it wasn't cool enough already! We strolled on up the easing slope, our spirits lifted, into the corrie proper. It was all candy-shop stuff, happy grins, wide eyes, and pointing everywhere. Already we had begun to see and pick out the

sign of avalanche conditions: sustragi, spindrift, windslab, and above in the gullies signs of fallen debris, with overhanging cornices above. We gathered by some large rocks beside the now only partially visible stream, for the now familiar ritual of adding a layer and grabbing a sandwich. It was a bit early to break out the soup, so I stuck with my rapidly cooling water bottle.



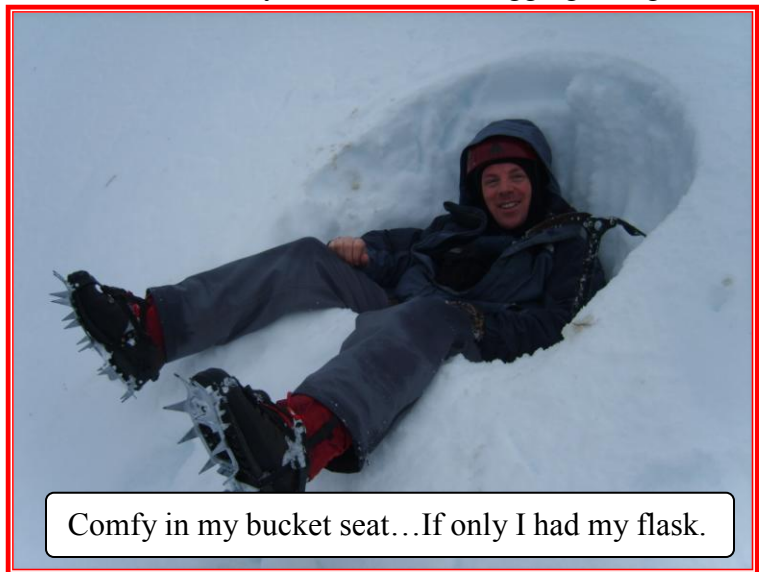
Man it's bright out here:  
Les Poseurs part deux, avec  
les lunettes.

Then we donned crampons, only to take them off again as Clive decided that harnesses would be needed. So, harnesses, then crampons then helmets went on, and we gathered our rucksacks and moved higher up the quarry to dig a snow pit. Darach broke out his glorified tent pole and probed around for a good spot. Having found one, he and Sinéad got stuck in with the shovels, while we watched from a safe distance and tried to prevent our rucksacks getting buried. Once the pit was ready, Darach demonstrated how to examine and test the snow using progressively smaller probing (fist, then four fingers, followed by one finger, and finally a pencil). This allowed identification of the various layers, and we discussed how they related to the recent weather conditions. Next Clive showed us how to dig easy pits, triangular ones that you pull out with your axe, and square ones that you test progressively with by pulling with finger power, wrist power, then elbow, then shoulder. This shows you how well the snow holds. With snow exams over, we reclaimed

our rucksacks from the snow that had been tossed down the slope onto them. Now was definitely the time for soup! Unfortunately I took a little too long enjoying lunch and ended up burning my mouth as I hurried to finish to meet Clive's call to move.

We climbed across the slope, spreading out to 5m spacing for safety, but still using each other's footsteps. This became a pain after a bit as the axe starts to strain your hand when you follow only one direction for a long while. Anyway, we were soon instructed to dig snow steps for our rucksacks and headed further up to dig belay buckets. Recalling Simon Yates' and Joe Simpson's adventures on Siula Grande, Clive demonstrated how to dig out a bucket seat belay. These involve digging a large hole with a vertical inside front deep enough to take the full length of your thigh. You sit into this with your lower legs hanging out, and you are all set in a secure position to belay your colleagues. We each took off to our own area of the slope and dug out our own. Clive pointed out that mine was more like a bucket chaise long: what can I say, I like to think big and I'm not shy of comfort either.

When I had to test it he made me use a body belay, so I was glad of the extra elbow room! Soon the slope looked like it had been colonised by arctic prairie dogs, with heads popping up and down and spiky feet waving in the air. Robin, Paul and I worked together to test each others belays and found them very effective, though the body belay from



Comfy in my bucket seat... If only I had my flask.

this position is a bit uncomfortable. Clive also taught us how to take in rope from a body belay, a useful technique to learn.



Clive shows Paul the ropes

Next we moved on to ice axe belays. This can be used in conjunction with a bucket seat belay for additional security. For these you dig a vertical slot across the slope, with a perpendicular groove down slope. You tie a sling to the axe (not in the middle, but where you think you have an equal area on each side of the sling) with a clove hitch, and place it in the slot with the sling downhill in the groove. While testing one of these, Robin, Trevor, Darach and I found ourselves hurtling downhill, crampons flying, when the axe

suddenly broke through the snow. Well, it had held us for four previous pulls, so we were pushing our luck. We all managed to arrest, but not before Trevor had cut his glove and his coat on someone's crampons (he blamed me), and I had received welts on my thigh from someone else's crampons (I blamed him). A salutary lesson in some of the risks involved in messing about with sharp things on a slippery surface. After we each had practised our own axe belay, we moved on to snow bollard belays. It's worth noting that at this stage we had moved up the slope to a point where it was pretty steep. Snow bollard belays are constructed by digging into the snow in a semi-circle upslope and drawing this out to V shape down slope, leaving a teardrop-shaped "post" or bollard in the snow. The post can hold a rope looped around it, so that you can abseil down the doubled rope, and then pull one side to recover the rope when you hit the bottom. They can be built in four sizes. Due to the poor snow, we started at size 3. However, despite all our careful digging,, the rope just cheese wired through the bollard. So then we built the biggest size. This held OK while reinforced with ice axes, but when the axes were removed, the rope immediately started cutting through. For whatever reason Clive pulled on the rope a few times 'till it went all the way through – the bollard followed the rope, and Clive had just caused a mini slab avalanche to fall straight at him! To add to the excitement, he was preoccupied with picking up the rope and didn't immediately notice the 3x4m slab of snow heading right for him. Hearing our warning shouts he looked up and managed to scuttle to one side just in time to avoid an embarrassing and potentially harmful incident. That concluded the lessons for the day and the more energetic of us took off for the top of the ridge. Again the climb was harder than it had looked, but when we broke out on top we were rewarded with a fine vista of snow capped peaks that had not been visible from within the corrie. Time was pressing, however, as some of the lads needed to get their hired gear back to Fort William before 17:30. Just time for a couple of quick snaps, and we set off down at a cracking pace, frequently sinking up to our knees in the deep snow.



On the ridge above Stob Coire nan Lochan

We slid down much of the slope to the stream on our butts, took off the crampons, gear, and extra layers, and flaked it down the path: quite unpleasant as the stone steps jarred the knees, the cobbled bits providing uncertain footing. There was a pleasant surprise when we reached the valley, a small herd of red deer stags browsing their way across our path. A final kicker for the day was the short climb back up to the car park, just to make sure we weren't slacking. We clambered into the cars, Trevor and Tony zooming off for Fort William, the rest of us returning to the lodge, satisfied with the experiences of the last few days, and

already yearning for more. There was no lecture that night, just a chilled out sit around in the pub, discussing mountain stuff with the others. We came away not only with our new skills and shared experiences, but with lots of new ideas for future activities. Overall it was a valuable and rewarding few days. Will we be supporting another MCI Scottish Winter Meet? Absolutely Yes!