

I know where I'm going

By Mark Lupton

My first navigation task of a recent weekend with the Bremex Mountaineering Club came before I had even got out of the car. More macro navigation than micro, the objective was to get from Manchester to our campsite at the foot of Cadair Idris. In the dark, and in the rain. It didn't help that our destination was called Cwnrhuddfor Farm (how the hell do you ask for directions to somewhere you haven't the faintest idea how to pronounce?)



Eventually, with a bit of luck, and having decided to leave map reading to my co-passenger Amanda, we stumbled across our home for the weekend. Even by Welsh standards it had obviously been raining a lot. The campsite resembled the Glastonbury festival only with the tents a bit more spaced out and a lack of any actual musicians or bands. At least one car was already stuck in the mud. There was little time to regret having chosen canvas over hut.

Introductions were slightly hampered by the fact that everyone was wearing head torches, but I soon gathered we were to be a small but merry band: made up of myself, Amanda, Penny, Steve, Jeff and Sylvia. Only Sylvia was relatively new to the club, so for the entire weekend I was to have the opportunity to draw on the expertise of at least four seasoned pros (actually Sylvia gave the experts a good run for their money too).

We awoke the next day to (shock horror) nice weather. And after a quick breakfast, gear check and a bit of discussion about the day ahead we were off. Destination: Cadair Idris, a mountain I was once told has a strange legend attached to it: that if you spend a night on the summit you either die or go mad (actually, I think David Dimbleby might have told me this on *A Picture of Britain* though he may not have been speaking directly to me).

“Are you up for a challenge Mark?” asked Steve as we headed onto the main road outside the campsite. Blimey, they don’t mess about. “Okay” I gulped. Thankfully Steve had decided to break me in gently with the relatively easy task of getting to the start of the Minffordd Path – which only required the identification of the correct way to turn off an A road and then a point about 1/4mile along where I should turn right onto a B road. Easy peasey.

That done, we did a spot of pacing – or the bit which involves working out how many steps, approximately, it takes you to walk 100m on flat ground. I’m about 64 I think. Jeff then handed me possibly the most useful small piece of laminated paper anyone has ever given me. On it is a pacing chart which tells you how many seconds it should take you to walk 100m, 200m, and so on depending on your speed. And how many minutes to add on for every 10metres of ascent (the correct answer is: one minute). Thanks Jeff, I will treasure this forever, or until the point I lose it having forgotten to close my map case.

I immediately had the chance to put this to good use, as we set off for a series of ‘tick off points’ on the path which lay ahead. These mainly consisted of walls, and we were set the task of working out how long it would take to get there by measuring the distance to said tick off point and the number of contour lines we would climb along the way. I can’t tell you how satisfying this is (does this make me weird, or perhaps perfect member material?)

A good morning of this – and a host of other useful information including how to identify the geographical feature known as a re-entrant – and we were on the summit. Along the way we had each been given the task of getting the party to another of those tick off points, while the rest of the group was asked to say where we were when we got there (again, great fun).

After lunch in possibly Britain’s finest mountain shelter (lordy, lord it has a roof and windows) the weather was beginning to change dramatically. Visibility was technically rubbish (I think this is the proper term) but given we were on a navigation weekend this was unusually good news. As we heading along the ridge in a North Easterly direction I had a couple of chances to get the group to some more tick off points (this time to ring contours, again another new one on me).

My first attempt (an unnamed spot at 852m) was not without its setbacks as I nearly took the group down off the mountain on a path heading north. But as it was kindly pointed out by one member of the group: “You recognised you had gone wrong and corrected the situation which was good.” My second go – destination Mynydd Moel – was far more text book. I decided to pace the last 100m from a wall and as the little summit came into view I felt something I can only describe as glee mixed in with a modicum of smug satisfaction.

From here it was downhill all the way, and a chance to learn possibly my favourite navigation technique of all – leapfrogging. For the uninitiated, this is best used in white outs or very poor visibility and involves firstly taking a compass bearing to your destination. One member of the group (or more if you like) then sets off walking on the bearing. The person who has stayed behind shouts at them to stop at some point, before telling them to move left or right if they have strayed off the bearing. Then, the person at the back catches up before you repeat the process. Simple, but very effective in terms of keeping you in the direction you want to go (always useful in navigation).

More opportunities for smug satisfaction presented themselves on the way down as I was even given the opportunity of correcting one of the ‘experts’ on how high we were. “I think actually we’re at 700m not 750”. “oh yes, you’re right”. Gosh, that’s a first.

We arrived back at the campsites having walked the last couple of hours in driving rain (thank God for Gore Tex) before retreating to our cars to dry off. Then there was chance for a pub meal in the Minfford Hotel and a relaxing debrief.

Day two saw the winds pick up dramatically (as predicted) so we chose to put some micro navigation into practice on the western side of Cadair rather than head up top. Again there was lots more to learn, including setting the compass to the map which for some reason took me an aeon to work out.



We also had a go at safety on high ground which involved getting a rope out and taking it in turns to pretend we were scared on a ‘not really very steep at all’ bit of ground. Again this took me an inordinately long time to grasp – particularly human belaying (as opposed to using a rock) but having since borrowed a rope from a friend I am pleased to report I have mastered both the knot tying and the belaying in the comfort of my own living room. There is hope for me yet.

And then it was time to go home.

So, all in all, an enjoyable, informative and sociable weekend with a lovely group of people who seemed to enjoy passing on their knowledge and experience as much as I enjoyed receiving it. I'll definitely be signing up to join Bremex and look forward to my next planned weekend – the winter skills event in Scotland in February.

Ends