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Ben Nevis – A Brief History Of Humans On The Mountain

By Trish Haill

If you are planning to attempt to walk up Ben Nevis this summer there are some interesting facts

you might like to know. Standing at 1,344 metres high (or 4,408 feet) Ben Nevis is the highest mountain in the British Isles, and as such is the major challenge for any UK climber or walker. It is also a challenge for people to get into the record books by attempting the climb in peculiar ways!

For the novice or non serious walker, once this peak has been achieved you can sit back and hang up your walking boots knowing that you have beaten the ultimate walk (as far as height is concerned, anyway).

Ben Nevis, translated from the Gaelic means 'Mountain of Heaven'. The first recorded ascent was in 1771, and in 1883 the footpath and observatory were built all thanks to Clement Linley Wragge, nicknamed Inclement Wragge.

Ben Nevis Weather

If you plan to walk up Ben Nevis you will find it hard to pick a day with perfect weather. The mountain summit is only clear on one day out of 10 on average. The old observatory records show 261 full gales per year, and 4,350 mm of rainfall, compared with less than half that amount in Fort William, the town at the foot of the Ben. The wettest month of the year is December. Only in April, May and June is the monthly rainfall less than 25 cm.

The AVERAGE temperature at the summit is one degree below freezing.

Deep snow lies all year in large pockets at the foot of the northern and north east cliffs, and snow can fall in any month of the year. h

Every year around 100,000 visitors find their way to the summit. Following the path on a summer's day is a fairly safe way to the top, but going off the path or rock climbing can be very dangerous. In a five year period there were 13 deaths on the mountain. Although most averagely fit people can reach the top safely, it is not a walk in the park, and common sense safety precautions should be followed.

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Check the weather before you set out! Always make sure someone knows you are going to climb the mountain so they can raise the alarm if you do not return! Keep to the path!

Meteorologists on Ben Nevis

Wragge was a meteorologist who climbed Ben Nevis every day to collect weather information. Wragge would collect information from various points on the way up and down the mountain, and his wife would collect readings from their home at sea level. His journey took him four hours to reach the top, and he was away from home for around 11 hours per day. From the 1st June 1881 to the 14th October 1882, and for a similar period in 1882 Wragge climbed the mountain every day without fail. In 1883 sufficient funds were raised to build the path and the 13 foot square room with 10 foot thick walls which was to be the Observatory. To help raise the funds walkers using the path were charged 1 shilling (5p in modern money), and 3 shillings if they were on horseback. Permits could be bought from a shop in Fort

William, or from a path maintenance man based at the half way hut.

By 1884 an office, two bedrooms and a visitor's room was added to the observatory, together with a 30 foot tower (which would rise above the snow in the winter. The observatory was connected by telegraph, and later by phone to the Fort William Post Office. From 1884 to 1904, when funds ran out, the observatory was permanently manned and weather conditions were rigorously recorded. The normal summer shift at the summit was two months. They had fresh food in the summer. In the summer tinned food for nine months was taken up by horses, and coke, for fuel, was carried the same way.

To amuse themselves the staff of the observatory made sledges, used snow shoes and skis, and made an outdoor ping pong table out of frozen snow. They carved wood, and played the pipes, violin, flute, mandolin and accordion. One of their more alarming pastimes was to hurl large boulders over the cliffs so they could hear them rumble and crash into the glen below.

Temperance Hotel

A small wooden hotel annexe was also opened, the Temperance Hotel, run by two young ladies who provided food and a bed during the summer months. They charged 3 shillings for lunch, and 10 shillings for tea, bed and breakfast. A fashionable way to ascend the mountain was by pony, and 21 shillings hired the pony and a guide.

In 1916 the hotel also closed, and the buildings gradually fell into disrepair, aided by fire, and climbers who in 1950 were seen stripping the lead from the roof and rolling it down the mountain.

Ben Nevis conquered by Car

In 1911 a 20 horse–power Model T Ford was driving to the top of the mountain as a publicity stunt by the Ford agents in Edinburgh. Henry Alexander Jr, the son of the owner, was the driver. The car was not simply driven up the track – it involved 10 days of preparatory work finding and checking a driveable way to just the half way mark, and to put in bridging planks. It took three further days to drive the car to

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this point and just two more days to cover the stones and snow to the observatory. The car would sink axle deep in the boggy ground and would have to be hauled out by role. The 'Daily Telegraph' reported at the time that a false turn of the wheel would mean a fall which would have caused total destruction to the car, and certain death to the driver!

Me Alexander was feted as a hero when the car returned to Fort William. After the brakes were adjusted no other repairs were necessary, and the car was driven back to Edinburgh.

Mr Alexander seemed to enjoy his feat so much that he repeated it in 1928, this time in a Standard New Ford (Model A Ford). The last quarter of a mile was driven with four passengers.

Ben Nevis conquered by Bed

In 1981 a group of Glasgow University medical students pushed a bed to the top – they were accompanied by the former newscaster Reginald Bosanquet (then 48) who collapsed 1000 feet up. He later recovered and was able to walk down.

Other weird ascents:

A man from Fort William pushed a wheelbarrow to the summit and back before 1911.

A horse and cart has also been driven to the top.

In September 1980 the kilted Kenneth Campbell of Ardgay, Ross–shire carried a barrel to beer to the top to raise funds for cancer research. The barrel had legs down either side so it could be put down on the ground whenever he needed a breather.

The same Kenny also carried a piano to the summit and back.

So, whilst your planning your walk or relaxing after having achieved it, just spare a thought for the man who climbed the mountain day after day to take readings at the observatory, or those who have attempted the climb in improbable circumstances. For me, once was enough to say I had done it. But maybe the tales of the endeavours above have inspired you.....?

Pat Ransom has walked both Snowden and Ben Nevis and encourages others to do the same on the website

<http://www.mountainwalk.co.uk>

. Being a keen photographer the site is full of photos of both mountains and the surrounding areas.

Walking On The Mountains – Check The Weather!

By Pat Ransom

Many people planning to holiday in Snowdonia, the Highlands of Scotland or the Lake District this summer will be considering a walk on the hills or mountains. If you are planning one of the high walks, apart from your fitness and how sore your feet will get, one of your main considerations will be the WEATHER.

Before you start on your walk you will be getting together your hiking shoes, filling your backpack with provisions but please don't forget to CHECK THE WEATHER! The Met Office has forecasts for the Lake District, Snowdonia and Scotland. Even if it looks like it is going to be a nice day you can never be certain what is going to sweep in across the hills. If you are walking Ben Nevis or Snowdon you can be on the hills for most of the day - plenty of time for the weather to change! Knowing and being prepared for the weather conditions will add to your enjoyment of your day, and will keep you safe.

Weather on the mountains is very unpredictable - almost unbelievably so at times. It is very possible that you will choose a lovely clear day for your climb, and will start the day in a tee shirt with the sun beating down on your back.

As you start to climb higher you may find that cloud begins to form, and the summit will be hidden from view! You will be safe if you keep to the well trodden paths, but it is really not advisable to go too far from the track. The cloud and mist can form very quickly and become very thick and it is very easy to quickly become disorientated and lose your way.

Another thing you will notice as you climb the mountain is that the temperature will drop. It will certainly be much colder at the top than at the bottom – particularly in low cloud. The average temperature on the summit of Ben Nevis is –1 degree centigrade. You will need to take a jumper even if you start off on a warm summer's day, and will also need a waterproof in case of low cloud or mist – this can be very wet, and if you are not suitably prepared, your clothes will get sodden.

Visit

<http://www.mountainwalk.co.uk/weather.html>

to see examples of weather changes on walks up

Snowdon and Ben Nevis. The photographs on this page were all taken on the same walk on an early August day up the Watkins Path of Mount Snowdon. The day started off without a cloud in the sky – three hours later we were scrambling through thick cloud and near gale force winds, getting very wet. Once the summit of Snowdon was reached there were no photo opportunities - apart from being able to see nothing through the cloud, there was also the strong wind that threatened to blow walkers off the top of the cairn!

Snowdon does have the benefit of its summit cafe although it can get very crowded. When you walk up Snowdon you can feel that you have achieved something, even if mist spoils the view.

And just to show mountains have the same typical weather, the same web page shows a walk up Ben

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Nevis. Again the start of the walk up has the sun shining, but the summit shrouded in mist!

The lesson is be prepared – and especially so on in late spring or early autumn where you could find yourself scrabbling through snow on the higher peaks and hills.

And if you are a novice walker it is best to avoid the worst weather of the winter months entirely, unless you go with an experienced guide.

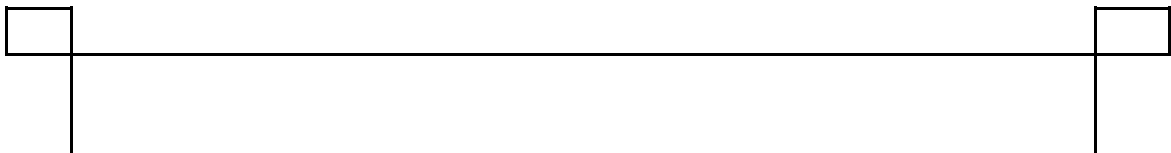
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