

High times at High House

CELEBRATING its seventy-fifth birthday and about to tell its remarkable story in a book to be launched next spring, K Fellfarers is a walking and climbing club with a claim to fame that ranks alongside the major climbing clubs in Britain. What brings this self-admittedly humble gathering of 150 like-minded people into this 'elevated' position?

Like the Climbers' Club has Ynws Ettws at the head of the Llanberis Pass, the Scottish Mountaineering Club has the Charles Inglis Clark Hut high on Ben Nevis and the Fell and Rock Climbing Club has Brackenclose on the shores of Wastwater, Fellfarers has High House, not only the second oldest in the country but it is set in a dazzling location. This substantially-built mountain

refuge – its postal address being Seathwaite, Borrowdale – is set beneath the waterfalls of Sour Milk Ghyll. Gillercombe Buttress towers above it, and a few trees set it off on its emerald green grass bank, with a bubbling beck alongside.

It was the first climbing hut I stayed in, back in the days when I began rock climbing under the guidance of Fellfarers member Bruce Greenbank. He was no relation but delighted in signing our death-defying exploits in the High House book – no doubt in homage to Keswick's famous Abraham Brothers – as the 'Greenbank Cousins'

Those were the days of 'The White Tower' starring Glenn Ford and 'The Mountain' with Spencer Tracy literally in the lead, and much blood and guts in evidence as climbers went hurtling down the face of the cinema screen – events we were not unfamiliar with during our Sunday epics on the crag in nailed boots. And, oh, how we metaphorically belayed to our red moquette seats in Kendal's Palladium (or was it the Roxy) as the dramas unfolded in glorious technicolor, gripped to the eye-



Left, High House bunkhouse looks stunning in the winter snow, above, members climb Seathwaite Slabs in 1939, below, climbers at High House in 1952





balls. But we also laughed our white wool seaboot socks off at what we perceived from our elevated position (not just being on the balcony but being 'real rock climbers') as howlers perpetrated by Hollywood.

So to stay in a real climbing hut, as featured in these films, was great. Bruce, who worked in accounts in K Shoes, first introduced me, ashen-faced, tight-lipped and trembling like a leaf, through the hallowed portals of High House into a crowded world of steaming wet clothes drying in the firelight and with tree branches scraping the windows in the howling gale.

Everyone was shouting across the room to each other as the door opened to compete with the roar of the wind and Sour Milk Ghyll in spate.

The piratical-looking figures looming in the flickering lamplight gave it the appearance of a robber's den. It was only enlivened by the dazzling beauty of the women accompanying this band of ruffians and the roaring log fire beyond.

If I looked wan-faced it was because I had been trying to stay on the back of my mentor's 500cc Matchless motorbike as he cranked it over on the bends of the Borrowdale road from Keswick between Grange and Rosthwaite. But my travel sickness was soon forgotten in the buzz of High House. Here was a veritable home from home in Borrowdale, full of Kendalians, some K Fellfarers, some guests.

From Dixon Levens to Dinger Bell, Bernard Morris to Tom Philipson (and daughter Pavia, named after Pavey Ark),

Top left, present club chairman, Roger Atkinson; left, Bruce Greenbank; overleaf, K Fellfarers' 'A team'



Pete Walker to Alan Sutton and his girlfriend Ada Roper, everyone seemed to be here. Also among the throng were Janet Airey and Bryan Sutton, Alan's elder brother. Here was everlastingly good-natured Mop, aka Raymond Heigh, and Brian Stilling and Marion and Alec Duff, parents of Himalayan climber Jim Duff. Not forgetting Ron Fidler and Jackie Bewsher, legends I had heard of but who were now here face to face.

Oh, and Big Pete O'Loughlin and his wife Marjorie. Then there was Beryl, Dinger's girlfriend, and Jean Lambert who was to become Bruce's wife. I can see them all now.

K Fellfarers originated at K Shoes and many of the people here were employees at the Netherfield factory on the banks of the river Kent in Kendal. K Shoes is one those household names that have sadly long departed in the passage of time, like Royal Enfield bicycles, John Collier suits and Woolworths. It was taken over by Clarks Shoes, a firm that has kept the brand name but otherwise the name is not in current use.

The club was started in the 1930s by the Somervell Bros (who later became K Shoes) for the benefit of its employees. During this time a lease on High House was taken to convert the former farmhouse into a bunkhouse. And today? The ownership of High House has long been passed to the National Trust, with the Fellfarers still being the leaseholder.

Howard Somervell, the Kendalian who twice visited Everest on expeditions did the honours at the official opening of High House in 1934. On one of his attempts for the summit he and Edward Norton set the world record for the highest altitude reached. His hopes that K Fellfarers would prosper have proved far-sighted to this day. Now totally independent, it is still a thriving

club that anyone can join – with High House continuing to be its focal point.

Far removed from those origins when the 4,500 Netherfield employees (and associated plants at Lancaster, Shap, Workington) produced 100,000 pairs of shoes a week, it still has active members today who were among that esteemed workforce producing quality footwear for the K Shoe shops around the UK.

Long-standing club chairman Roger Atkinson is one such luminary. He began work on the shop floor in 'Lasting' and eventually became a manager at Netherfield. He has a fund of tales involving the skivers, clickers, welters, sole channelers and lasters who became K Fellfarers for some weekend respite – far removed from the work bench permeated by its aroma of good quality leather.

One of the names of the past was the late Sid Cross of Kendal who first climbed Great Eastern Route on the East Buttress of Scafell with Maurice Linnell (after walking over in the dark after work from Langdale via Rosset Gill and sleeping out below the overhanging crag under a sheet). Once he worked at K Shoes. It was only afterwards he and his wife Jammie began their successful tenure as hosts of the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel in Great Langdale for many years.

Roger laughs at the memories of the camaraderie of the throng, bringing to mind the ghost of High House – a man in a check suit who has been known to rearrange ropes and boots and who appears in the dormitories even when full of people – as experienced by Ginger Cain, the mountain artist who has his studio in Llanberis.

Many other occurrences have happened here through the years from comic to epic, from romantic to sad – including times



when Eskdale Outward Bound school and Keswick Mountain Rescue Team have used the hut as a temporary base.

Like any High Houser Roger has first-hand experience of these tales. He met Margaret, his wife-to-be, at High House before asking her for a date when they did a Cross Bay walk on a Fellfarers 'do'. And there are several other couples in the club who also met on the fells via High House and who are still together these years later.

He was staying at the hut during the floods of 1966 following torrential rain. "Sour Milk Ghyll was thundering down, the noise was terrific," he says. "High House itself was above the water level, but fields were submerged and Seathwaite was flooded. Cars were even floating downstream heading for the valley.

"I sat in a window and watched a wall by the track up Sty Head topple over like a pack of dominoes as the force of the water got underneath. We could only rescue our cars the following weekend as the road

through the valley became choked with gravel and boulders."

Roger had not realised that the saga to build a road over Sty Head from Borrowdale to Wasdale Head had resulted in Parliament giving this controversial project the go-ahead. It was an 'honorary' K Fellfarers member, the late Stan Edmondson from Seathwaite Farm, who remembered as a small boy watching the tar boilers and steam rollers and gangs of navvies already starting work widening the road at Seathwaite when war broke out in 1939.

High House would have been a different place today had that road been built. And one far removed from my unforgettable introduction to the K Fellfarers that Saturday evening all those years ago.

"I like your Three Musketeer Shoes," remarked one of the throng, glancing at my feet. "Three Musketeer Shoes?" I repeated, not realising this was a stock in trade Netherfield cobbler joke.

"Aye, lad. Dark Tan Yans." ■