

THE SECRET VALLEY OF WALES.

Long long ago, in a forgotten time when we were free to wonder, and fear not of getting too close (2m rule, a bit like when we were kids and had a 5 second rule for dropped sweets and not getting germs), I ventured off on an expedition with a team of explorers into the wilds of deepest deepest Wales. This place has become known as The Secret Valley. On a beautiful morning the gang set out to have a nice walk around the rugged mountains of Bethesda. It was rumoured that there existed a very unfrequented path out the back off?????, (it's a secret) and being the intrepid 'Livingston's', we were, this was for us. The trek started in a north easterly direction up a road leading from the village and was then left to join a farm track. After a short time, we left the track heading east into open fields and marshland.



The leader set a good pace and soon we found the surrounding land started to enclose on both sides, as if we were being funnelled just like a herd of wild horses into a corral. As the ground around us became higher, it became the perfect terrain for magical, perhaps even mystical creatures. Alas we were not to see unicorns or dragons. But we did see wild ponies and a large bird of prey. After about two hours we came to what seemed a dead end. How could this be a secret valley?



We all decided to take a break and soak up the scenery. The ground on both sides of us was quite steep. It kind of just grew around us!



Following some refreshments, we were all keen to push on and find this mythical valley. But before we did, the obligatory 'Bravo 2 zero' photo was required to document our team.



Did it exist or not? Well, what seemed to be a dead end turned out not to be. This was the 'Shangri-La' moment. 10 minutes later, the head wall became the side wall once again, as a sharp turn to the right revealed the 'Brigadoon' of Wales. The Secret Valley revealed its glorious self to us.



We still had one more steep section of grassy terrain to ascend before the valley let us into its inner self. Once we arrived at the top, we were welcomed into what could only be described as the classic geological example of glacial cwm, complete with a tarn.

One of the 'Livingston's' revealed to the rest of us that they had heard there was a mine somewhere in the area. As this was 'the secret valley' could it? Could it possibly be a lost gold mine? Well we proceeded forward deeper into the vast cwm, ever aware there was no escape from this place unless we doubled back on ourselves to the beginning of the high plateau, where there was the start of a very steep ridge. Did we continue to go further into the cwm exploring its beauty and hope to find the mine? We chose to continue. As we did, we could all see a very small black mark on the back wall of the cwm; at water level of the tarn which looked like a mine entrance. There was even a shaft of light pointing to it.



The strange thing was, the further we went on, the focus of our attention seemed not to get any closer. Eventually we took the decision that the Secret Valley was not going to give up its prize. We turned back on ourselves, taking a diagonal line across the face of the cwm wall to reach the lower levels of the ridge. This was a tough ascent for the normal explorer but not for the senior citizens. Two well-seasoned athletes powered their way up on a more direct line, cutting off the lower ridge's very easy broken scramble bits. For the others it was not the direct steep ascent but more of the contouring line. This was longer but had the reward that once the true ridge line was attained, a very low standard of scrambling was available. If you really used your imagination you might have thought that you were scrambling over the back of a long extinct stegosaurus with its disjointed back blades. Taking a line more to the right-hand side of the ridge gave a more interesting scramble. Not even graded to be honest, but if you chose the right line, you still had to use your hands.



There were many opportunities to be able to look back along the route travelled and enjoy the magnificent scenery, but this would be bettered when the summit was conquered. The only section that bore any real resemblance to a scramble was near to the summit. A short sharp 10m section which was the secret valley's way of rewarding you for visiting, and as in Agatha Christie's play the Mouse Trap, you are asked not to reveal the secret. Once at the top, one could take a north westerly heading and take the gentle slopes back to Bethesda, or extend the route in a south easterly direction around the top of the cwm and onto greater heights of (ssssshhhhh, it's a secret). The Livingstone's decided as this had been a great discovery and the day was still sunny and dry, they should push on and upwards.

The explorer's decision was a good one. As they made their way round the back of the cwm, the airy heights and sheer face of the cwm walls were revealed. There were some impressive gulley's that on appearance could be good winter climbing. When asked by the uninitiated if the gulley's could offer good winter climbing, the veteran alpinist, in a humble but very polite response said "yer, I'm sure they would". Was this just a tentative answer because there was the frill of planning a future winter expedition, or was it a feeling of serenity for the Secrete Valley, that it should be left alone, we will never know. The expedition leader now gave way to his second, third and fourth in command. Well-seasoned leaders in their own rights. Each with vast experience of the local mountains and routes. It was at this point that two of the party became lame. Two Falkland war heroes, (this is where the author of this story has poetic licence, and a big one it is) started suffering from their old war wounds. Pieces of shrapnel from exploding fake penguins, began to wobble around in their knees, causing some severe pain. Should they be 'put down'? If they were animals, this would be a strong option.

Should they stop and make a shorter detour, or continue and lengthen the route, and suffer the inevitable excruciating pain that was sure to develop. Being the war heroes, and with the spirit of the British stiff upper lip, there really was only one outcome. Pick up your bundle, tighten the chin strap and start tabbing. So, push on was the outcome.

About 40 minutes later the terrain levelled off and the team were at cloud level. Sporadic breaks in the cloud revealed the Lec Du Spur across to the right. A classic grade 1 scramble in summer, and a severe (not grade) undertaking in winter or spring snow, as some adventures had experienced earlier on in the year.

We now headed south west and began to wonder if we were in a place that 'time forgot'. For the view before us was just like the scene from the movie. A mountain top majestically threw its head above the cloud inversion, just like when a whale breeches the sea when surfacing for air, or when great leaps are performed and smashing back on the surface and disappearing once again. This was Tryfan. One, if not the most iconic mountain in Wales.



All of us began scrambling through rucksacks or pockets for our cameras or phones. This was one of those photo moments that should not be missed.

As soon as we got our cameras out, Tryfan wrapped itself in a blanket of cloud. Was Tryfan going to show off. Would it allow the breeze to blown away the high cloud one more time? Would we have to sacrifice the most senior member of our party as an offering? Then by the grace of the Gods, we were rewarded. Tryfan did not let us down. Phew, the SENIOR member did not realise how close he came to be being staked out, eyelids cut off and left to

the crows. He would have 'taken one for the team' I'm sure.



Photos taken we had well-earned fuel break and reflected on our journey so far. It was soon time to leave the comfort of our summit shelter and head for home. The senior members set a blinding pace. Too good for some. This is when you get to know your team. Being an old war veteran of the Falklands, and a secret SAS member, you learn to not leave anybody. "All for one and one for all." Having the shrapnel in the knee, the pain became worse with every step. Pain killers were not enough. Morphine, 50mg might have done it, I reckon I could have flown down the steep paths.

Looking due west from Carnedd Dafydd cairn across to Carnedd y Filiast range of mountains, a geological marvel could be seen. That of Atlantic Slabs.



So called, because 160 million years ago this 60° angled slab was an ocean floor. This can be seen in the wave pattern appearance of the rock surface. The pattern you can see in an estuary sand bank when the tide is going out. The slab is now way above water level because of volcanic eruption and action, which then pushed up the ocean floor to the 60° angle we see today.

The small section of 'wavy' slab we see exposed today is because of the bed rock, which was volcanic ash, slid away, much like a snow avalanche. Much of this can still be seen and experienced on the approach route if you want a mountaineering excursion. The slab route is 1000 feet high of very long 'run-outs of unprotected climbing. But there are some VD's along the edge of the wavy slab. But enough of this. This is a tale for another team, or perhaps the same team if they get funding from National Geographic Society, or from the sale of this novel if it goes to print.

The journey back still had a sting in the tail. The first section of the route down from Carnedd Dafydd was steep and through a seemingly never-ending boulder field,



and in many places, these large boulders were balanced precariously on each other and got dislodged instantly when you trod on them. I personally found this area very painful. My knee was twisting, and trekking poles were not of much use in this terrain. I was even having to 'down climb' though large boulders. I must have gone off route big time. This must have been a punishment dished out to me by the 'secret valley' gods for conquering its loneliness. Eerrrr, finally got through the boulder field. Now came a steep scree section. The angle of decent was now forcing my knees to take all the weight, even with the poles, every step felt like a red-hot poker being inserted into the joint. If I were a husky dog, I reckon I would have been put down. If anybody reading this has knee trouble, they know exactly what I'm feeling. It hurts. Once I got through this section the terrain levelled off and became a soft grass, much to my relief.

I was bringing up the rear, even my beloved was a country mile ahead, my progress was painfully slow, for me, and the rest of the explorers.



There was an eagerness now to get back to the car park, it had been a long but rewarding expedition, the gap between the veterans on point and the rear guard was quite some distance now, and there must have been a sympathy call to halt and 'take 5'. Then came the 'help the hero' moment, the scene you get in the movie when John Wayne or Bruce Willis goes back through enemy fire or the jungle to rescue the colonel, "can't leave the old boy to die what what". In this story the hero must be named, Richard Craig suffering great pain himself with similar knee problems walked back up the steep path near on a quarter mile and offered to carry my rucksack. Even though deep down I wanted to offload my bundle, pride could not let me do it. This soldier standing before me was also suffering. As expedition leader, I had to keep up appearances. One has standards you know. If it had been an overnight wild camp I would have got up from the encampment and declared those immortal words to my fellow campers "I'm just going outside, I may be some time" what a hero!!

The gang waited for me to catch up and it was good to be a group again. There was just a couple of miles to go now across very soft terrain. This was bliss. Gentle slopes leading back to farmland and signs of habitation. It was reminiscent of the scene when Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa, two survivors of the plane that crashed in the Andes, (a must-read book called Survivors. A true account of 72 Chileans whose plane crashed in the high Andes) when they reached green fields after hiking over snow, and ice-covered mountains. Relief!

Not far now, nearly there. Just the walk back along the road. Back to the car and boots off. Sit on a wall or in this case a road barrier, socks off, wiggle the toes, rub the instep and soles over the inner socks, then the knees. Oh, Mary Mother of Jesus (if you're Catholic) is an expression that comes to mind. I need some amber nectar to dull the pain, so much better than medication in my opinion. You can have more than two within four hours.

What a fantastic day. Despite the aches and pains, this had been epic. Mystery, adventure, solitude, expectation, history and beauty What more can one write about? The Secret Valley expedition had it all. I only hope that if one day when you're out in the wilds of North Wales and you feel that you're getting lost, you can find your Brigadoon. You never know it might be mine.

The Livingston's

John and Alison Mills, (Mr and Mrs Livingstone)

Tim Smith (Marco Polo)

Ron Crow (the rocket)

Richard Craig (medic/stretchers bearer)

Jerry Wright (out on point)