

# Helyg

by Ian Wall



Imagine an autumn such as the one experienced in 2000, instead of the black sweep of tarmac with its fluorescent spine, nothing but a small ill-defined track, vanishing into the eternal blackness. A mixture of driving rain, low cloud and the sombre outline of the precipitous hills on either side all punctuated by the howl of the wind and that frequently screaming dervish, the water spout. The nearest centre of communication and supplies is over an hour's walk away and the neighbours separated by acres of wet lands with fast flowing streams and deep tussocky pasture. On the south side of the track one possible sign of a haven from the storm, a small low roofed hovel nestling against a large boulder that seemed to be anchoring it to the bleak moor like a ship tethered to its mooring buoy in the teeth of a gale. The building consisting of a solid external wall forming an inner space that was sub-divided by a partition into two rooms with a loft. The only access to the roof space was via a small ladder in the inner room. So it was that Helyg was first introduced to the travellers of *Wild Wales* in 1862. A road mender's hovel occupied by a Mr Jones, the second generation of Jones to inhabit the hovel and to bring up a total of 21 offsprings in that meagre wild abode.

Since the formation of The Climbers' Club in 1898 the membership had slowly risen to approximately 350 as an increasingly active band of 'gentlemen'. The 1914-18 war then robbed the Club of almost half of this small, close climbing fraternity and those who had survived often finding themselves in positions of responsibility,

Herbert Carr in 1985.



which allowed them little leisure time. The prospect of new blood was restricted by the fact that prospective members were not coming forward for election. So it was that in the early '20s the spirit of the CC had sunk to an all time low. From one senior and influential member it was even suggested that 'the Club had fulfilled its usefulness and that it should be

## The legacy of Mallory's drive, of S A Marples's foresight and Carr and Greene's vision

wound up forthwith'. Mallory, the President (1923) at the time, would hear of no such talk and immediately set about measures to put the Club back on its feet. Amongst a number of significant suggestions put forward was one to either pursue the purchase of

a Club base in North Wales or premises in London. The committee had a split vote and but for the sense and casting vote of the Vice-President S A Marples the Club would not be where it is today. Carr and Greene researched and eventually discovered a suitable property that appeared ideally located. "The place somewhat hidden from the road gave it a seclusion that would be much appreciated. Water would have to be fetched from nearby and the sanitary arrangements improved. A rough shed, when repaired, would form an admirable coal store or wine cellar. One could sleep a dozen men in comfort, but the door should please be left open." Over the intervening years from 1863 the road menders must have made substantial improvements to the property prior to the CC acquiring it.



So with the acquisition of Helyg in May 1925, and the subsequent formal opening on the 31st October of that year, the first Climbers' Club base in North Wales became a reality.

Since Charles W Marshal (1926-1928), the first custodian, Helyg has shared in many historical events and been a friend to many an active club member and guest. Within the first 12 months of its official status there were between 30/40 member bed nights varying in residency from one night to 14 nights and more than 20 non-members were entertained as guests; the hut fees, sixpence a night for members and two shillings a night



*In the lounge area at Helyg there is a permanent memorial to those members of the Club that played such a large role in the ascent of Everest. The carving over the fireplace in the lounge is on fumed oak and the panorama is a copy from the air photograph that was printed in the Journal of the R.G.S. Mr Eric Saunders, a handi-craft master at Harrogate Grammar School completed the memorial work in December 1954. This is a fine and inspirational tribute to the efforts of fellow Club members of whom we should be proud to be associated*

for guests. It is interesting to note that the total income for that 12-month period was in the region of £16 and more than **covered the running expenses**. It is also interesting that the **first recorded 'abuse'** of Club facilities took place when a member of a 'senior educational establishment' entered the hut by picking the lock, a severe warning was issued and a Yale lock fitted to the door. Only six weeks after the official opening **a woman** signing in as Peter Hughes stayed as a guest. No rules had been broken since there were none to break, however, Matthews, who was then President after Mallory who had died on Everest in 1924, stamped his Presidential authority on the matter and with much finger wagging pronounced that he was not having women staying in his huts. An article then appeared in the *Journal* stating that "Some members do not seem to understand that a small charge is made for the use of the Club cottage. It may be mentioned that after repeated requests for settlement of these accounts the Hon. Editor (CC Bulletin Nov. 1926) was in favour of a black list being published, but the Hon. Treasurer preferred to deal with the offenders more leniently over this matter." The editor contented himself saying as forcibly as the conventional politeness of print permitted at the time – **PAY UP**.

The early code of practice was established.

Many days of good and bad weather were spent using Helyg as a base from which to explore the many crags of vertical virgin rock, not all within easy reach of Helyg. As would be expected in those early days many of the mountain and valley cliffs were duly surveyed and investigated but expeditions were also mounted further afield, to Lliwedd, Clogwyn y Bustach, Clogwyn Du'r Arddu, the Llanberis cliffs and the Crib Goch area amongst others.

When Marshall was elected as Custodian in 1926 the Club was deemed to be in urgent need of a garage. No ordinary shed would satisfy Marshall but the Committee was aware of the low level of funds and it was almost suggested that they should borrow the necessary capital from the members. However Marshall met with Mr W E Corlett at the Liverpool dinner, where, after a little reflection the latter volunteered that 'the project should go ahead without further ado' and at his expense and so the Helyg garage came to be. Its cost was born by the brewery of which Mr Corlett was Managing Director. For the price of the garage you could have bought most of the Ogwen Valley in 1927.

November 1927 witnessed disaster and tragedy. A party of one experienced climber (Giveen a prospective member to the Club who had just been blackballed by Raymond Greene — though he didn't know this when he set out for Wales that weekend) and three novices set out from Helyg in atrocious weather to climb Great Gully on Craig yr Ysfa. They were no doubt quite fatigued before reaching the foot of the climb and it was seven o'clock that night before the four men reached the top of the route. On the descent in the cold and driving rain the compass was first dropped, then soon after the lantern gave out. Without light or navigational aid two of the men fell into the icy Ffynnon Llugwy. When both managed to struggle ashore they collapsed and were left behind by the two remaining men who set off for the hut. It took the fatigued pair another four hours before they reached Helyg where they ate a meal and after a sleep, drove to a hotel five miles away for assistance. When help arrived it was too late. On the lake shore the rescuers found a watch belonging to one of the dead, it had stopped at 6.40. Giveen, at a club meeting that week, heard of his blackball from the club and left the meeting cursing the members. After investigations and countless interviews it came to light that 12 hours had lapsed between the accident and the survivor's arrival at the hotel. Ugly rumours began to circulate and eventually the full story came out that the stronger, more experienced, of two survivors had hurried away from the scene of the tragedy anxious for his own safety per-

*March 1931 saw the first mention of 'water slowly rising through the Helyg floor' (now the kitchen) and in May 1932 plans were made to purchase the site to safeguard the water supply and allow Helyg to be enlarged so as to provide more bed space.*





suading the fitter, weaker-willed member of the party to go with him. It turned out that the two survivors had, on arriving at the hut, slept till morning and even then on reaching the hotel, breakfast was ordered and eaten before the alarm was raised — even then no sign of urgency was exhibited. Shortly after Giveen became a patient in a mental home, after his release he attempted to shoot a member of the club, failed, and then turned the gun on himself.

The formal opening of the extension took place on March 18th 1933. During May 15th-29th 1942 Helyg was used as a Toughening School for an armoured formation under the leadership of John Hunt and a programme of extremely vigorous activities were completed in appalling weather conditions staffed by CC members. At the conclusion of activities it was reported that it was believed that the course had succeeded in what it had set out to do and that the Club had rendered a very real service to the Army. This was the prelude to turmoil in Europe and once again many members were enrolled into the armed forces, men like Mike Banks who entered the service of the Cliff Assault Wing of the Royal Marines. Sadly history repeated itself and many did not return from duty overseas and the Club's rank and file was depleted yet again.

Famous climbers throughout the ages have visited Helyg and their adventures are well-documented. The like of A B Hargreaves, Colin Kirkus, Menlove Edwards, Jack Longland, George Mallory, Tom Longstaff, Eric Shipton, Tilman, Tom Bourdillon, Pigott, Ivan Waller, Peter Harding the list is too long to complete and the chance of excluding somebody from it would cause too much embarrassment to risk. Take the opportunity to look through the *Journals* and discover the Club's history and its personalities.

Helyg has also been the subject of many a good yarn: the Helyg rat, various epic car journeys, some ending in disaster and some in just long walks. Long days climbing and walking have begun with fumbling in the darkness within the thick protective Helyg walls. How many of us could compete with the exploits of Harding and Dyke? Peter Harding had been accused of doing too much climbing to the exclusion of mountain walking and on his late return one evening announced that he and Dyke had just been over Tryfan, Glyder Fach, down to the Pass and back over Glyder Fawr. "Very good but a good walker would have been back within four hours" came the reply. Rather than just a ramble the pair had during their day out completed 30 routes, sometimes in descent, routes on Tryfan, Glyder Fach, Craig Nant Peris, Dinas Mot, Carreg Wastad — up Bryant's Gully, down Idwal Slabs and up Bochlwyd Buttress finishing up Soap Gut in the dark. All in a day's work for a guidebook editor. Now there's a challenge.

Over the years Helyg's Custodians have tenderly looked after the hut and our needs. The unpaid efforts of this fine breed of men make all the huts better places from which we can enjoy our way of life and reap the pleasures of the mountains in greater comfort. They work



*A B Hargreaves with the Helyg Rat.*

often without the gratitude of the membership and frequently, I'm ashamed to say, at the receiving end of some inexcusable profanities from those who do not appreciate the facilities the Club provides. These insensitive remarks are often displayed publicly for all to read in the logbook, that is not the place for such views to be aired, especially when seldom backed up with offers of help.

#### **The Custodians Role of Honour for Helyg**

1926 – 1928	Charles W. Marshal
1928 – 1957	E Stuart Chantrell
1957 – 1962	Tony Moulam
1962 – 1972	Trevor Jones
1972 – 1973	Johnnie Lees
1973 – 1993	Tony S G Jones
1993 – 1994	C I Dunne
1994 – 1997	D May
1997 – 1999	M Pycroft
1999 -	N Clacher

There are many other anecdotes from more recent times.

Did you know that it is reputed that an esteemed Bethesda prostitute of pre-war years who went by the name of Marie Helyg was brought up in Helyg? She is said to have died around 1976.

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'So it is finished, this monumental, impossible task that has been so much a team effort. Now the critics crouch amongst the grey, wet boulders out there. But in here, alone in front of the Helyg fire, I have been sustained by the querulous ghosts of this place. Their voices have made the final, silent vigil of selection a surprisingly exciting one. Their words, arguing eloquently, wittily with each other, have made this a book, which I hope will leave members greatly amused, rather proud and not a little in awe.



Some Helyg Custodians with Herbert Carr (seated) left to right, Johnnie Lees, Trevor Jones, Tony Jones, Tony Moulam.

It is slowly getting dark again.

Be cautious, critics. A B has the Helyg poker in his hand. (*Reference to the Helyg rat.*)

Not that the task has turned me mad, you understand. I have come through the thickening mist that even now

descends the flanks of Gallt yr Ogof. I keep going to the door. It clears my mind of guilt for those I've not included'. (An extract from Terry Gifford's editorial in the *Centenary Journal*)

As recently as last June Mike Bailey the builder was quietly working away on the new kitchen when there was a polite knock at the door. A lady peering round enquired as to whether Mike knew of the history of the building. It turned out that this was the lady's ancestral family home. She actually lived in the south of England but had traced her ancestor's back to 'Helyg in North Wales' and after searching through the Records Office in Caernarfon eventually arrived at the hut completely unaware of its history.

Like the anchoring boulder, the ghosts of previous residents of Helyg will remain and shelter through the long winters' nights.

When the rain rattles against the windows and the creaking shadows in the trees cause one to recoil in shock from the reflection staring back from the blackness of the night. Remember those moments and characters from the history of Helyg, be proud, be comforted, be inspired and above all be honoured to follow in the wake of such adventurous forefathers.

I should like to thank Geoff Milburn for his permission to use extracts from *Helyg Diamond Jubilee 1925 – 1985* book and Terry Gifford for use of extracts from his editorial to the *Centenary Journal* which he wrote from the peace and tranquillity of Helyg.

A limited number of copies of *Helyg Diamond Jubilee 1925 – 1985* are available from Geoff Milburn (address in Handbook) price £6.

