

KESWICK MOUNTAIN RESCUE TEAM

Keswick Mountain Rescue Team History

2006-2017

Peter Little
(2018)

A supplement to the “Call-Out The First 50 Years” book by George Bott (1997) which was updated by Brian Martland (2006) to give an account of Keswick Mountain Rescue Team history 1947-2005. The first 70 years of Team history are now covered by the updated book in combination with this supplement.

Keswick Mountain Rescue Team History 2006-2017

2006 turned out to be a busy year, with 86 callouts, making the total 2397 callouts to date.

The year saw the first involvement with a major water-based rescue on Derwentwater, when the Team was called to help rescue eight people who had crashed in their speedboat on to rocks, in the early hours of an April day. This was a multi-agency operation, which involved rescue boats from several sources, including the Team boat, a RAF helicopter, and, on shore, the police, ambulances, paramedics, and local Coastguard Agency personnel.

That day proved to be an exceptionally busy day for the Team, with four callouts.

As a background against this level of commitment by the Team, training was, of course, a major issue, with Team members undertaking course and experience locally, and in Scotland, and elsewhere, including Chamonix in France.

Support work continued to increase in the year, including attention to equipment inspections and log books, and other record-keeping. The year marked what was thought to be the 70th anniversary of the design of the Thomas stretcher used by the Team.

The year also marked 45 years since the first recorded incident, in 1961, on Sharp Edge on Blencathra. During that period there had been 50 incidents, with, tragically, eight fatalities.



Training in Coire an-t-Sneachda, the Cairngorms

The next year, **2007**, saw the Team being called by the police 115 times, resulting in 90 callouts and 25 alerts, (the latter being situations which don't result in the Team being deployed). There were many major developments and initiatives during the year, including those to do with a progressive approach to Team training.

A defensive driving training programme had been started some five years previously, and now Team members had been on Emergency Response driver training. Team members were also sent to other external training courses including Swiftwater Rescue training, winter skills in Chamonix, and advanced first aid training. In addition to the weekly training exercises, this all amounted to a big commitment by Team members, and that is not to mention the estimated 3500 man hours expended on the 90 callouts.

A complete update of the radio system was successfully implemented. This included the introduction of GPS-enabled microphones on the handsets. Thus, each Team member's location can be followed on digital mapping software in the Control Room in the Base. Major benefits were realised in incident and search management.

A DVD was produced to mark the 60th anniversary of the Team.

Another event of 2007 saw Team members being involved in the filming of several episodes of the television 'soap-opera' *Coronation Street* in the Lake District. Two of the series' characters went on the fells ill-equipped. The Team assisted in many ways on- and off-camera. The finished episodes were screened in early 2008, with an emphasis on mountain safety. The character 'Liam' was winched in a stretcher on to a RAF Sea King helicopter above Honister Pass.

After the filming, Keswick MRT Leader Mark Hodgson noted that he must be the only Team Leader "to have had two stunt-doubles"!



The KMRT Annual Report cover painting 2008: Fleetwith Pike (by Venus Griffiths).

Honister Quarries were set locations for the filming of some 'Coronation Street' episodes in 2007. Local artist Venus Griffiths has kindly donated the painting for each Annual Report cover since 1999. Each year the framed original painting is sold to the highest bidder, with the proceeds going to the Team.

Just before Christmas 2007, the Team learnt with sadness of the death of Mrs Ada Hillard. Ada had been a staunch supporter of the Team, and had made a very generous contribution towards the funding of the new Team Base which had opened in 1996.

2008 saw 90 callouts, and 24 alerts.

Amongst the typically varied range of incidents through the year, one event in particular attracted a lot of national and international press coverage. This incident was the occasion of the 'Original Mountain Marathon' based in Seathwaite, Borrowdale, in October. The weather for this fell-running event was 'extreme', as had been forecast: high winds and long periods of torrential rainfall.

The Team called in other MRTs to assist. A total of eleven casualties were treated by Keswick, Penrith, Cockermouth and RAF Leeming Teams, all operating in Borrowdale. Injuries included lower leg injuries, head injuries, and hypothermia. Other MRTs in the Lake District also had several callouts over the weekend.

A special occasion this year was the 80th birthday of former Team Leader Mike Nixon. Mike remained a very active hill-going Team member, and was President of the Team. He celebrated by climbing Tower Ridge on Ben Nevis with several Team members and others!



*Mike Nixon on Tower Ridge, Ben Nevis 31st May 2008.
On the left is son Chris, Team Leader of Kintail MRT.*

The Team had an extraordinarily busy and varied year in **2009**, with a record number of callouts, which, at 136 was over 50% more than the previous highest number, (90 for 2007 and for 2008).

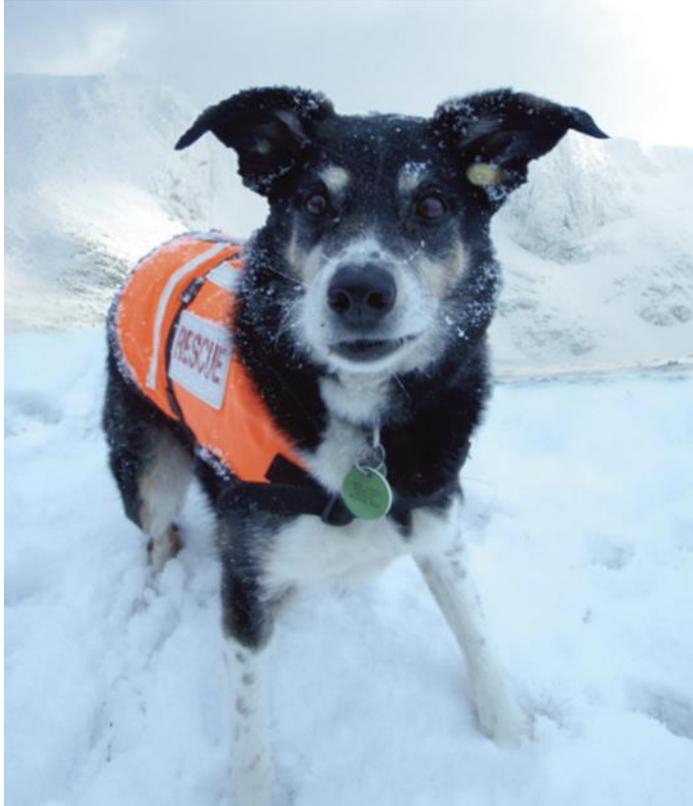
Some of the rescues were of particular note.

In January, the Team was called to help four walkers encountering difficulties on the summit ridge of Skiddaw, in extreme winter conditions. It transpired that there was a fifth walker who was unaccounted for. The Team was helped by members of Cockermouth MRT and Patterdale MRT, together with search dogs. The lone fifth walker was found by search dog 'Mac'. Two casualties suffered severe hypothermia and cramps. Three casualties were able to be walked down.

Also in January 2009, there was an incident near the Lodore Falls, Borrowdale, when a woman was trapped by a tree, after it had rolled over her. The Team took part in a joint operation with Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service, and the National Trust, to free her. A RAF helicopter then took her to hospital.

In November, there was widespread flooding in the Keswick area, and down the River Derwent valley to Workington. The Team helped in the checking and evacuation of flooded properties and vehicles. Several Team members, although affected personally by the floods, nevertheless played a part in the Team's operations.

In total 190 people affected by the floods were helped by Keswick MRT. The Team was also involved in assisting the Fire and Rescue Service in getting pumps to flooded properties, and helping a doctor reach Rosthwaite. When the Northside bridge in Workington was swept away, swiftwater technicians from the Team helped in the search for a missing police officer. He lost his life when the bridge collapsed. Teeside, Swaledale and Kirkby Stephen MRTs and local National Park Rangers were all part of the rescue operations.



Search Dog 'Mac'

After the floods, there was a particularly hard winter, and so all the ongoing training throughout 2009, including more winter skills training in Chamonix, proved to be invaluable.

The Team was involved in two Royal Visits during the year. In May, the Team staged a simulated crag rescue at Woden's Face, Borrowdale for the visit of the Duke of Gloucester. In July, some Team members joined others from all Lake District MRTs, in accompanying Prince William to the top of Helvellyn. The purpose of the exercise was to give the Prince, patron of 'Mountain Rescue England and Wales' a taste of mountain rescue life.

At the end of November, towards the conclusion of a very busy year, the Team was presented with what turned out to be a false alarm about an alleged incident on Skiddaw. The police later arrested a woman on suspicion of wasting police time in making hoax calls.

2010 saw the number of callouts reach a new record, this time 140.

Twenty two of the rescues involved crag-fast or rock-climbing incidents, some of which were attributable to the winter conditions at the start of the year, and, again towards the year's end. Two incidents involved avalanches.

The Team was heavily involved in two non-mountain incidents.

In May, a school bus overturned after a collision with a car on the A66 road at Thornthwaite. This was a major incident involving all the emergency services, including three air ambulances, a RAF Sea

King helicopter, a Royal Navy helicopter, and three mountain rescue teams. Keswick MRT provided first aid treatment, and evacuation assistance, along with marshalling the helicopters at the scene.



June 2010 – a callout at Hanging Haystack, Stonethwaite.

In June 2010, the Team was asked to help in search operations, with other MRTs, following a series of shootings and shotgun injuries in West Cumbria. The Team was involved in the search of verges and fields alongside all the roads used by the person involved.

During the year, training activities included attendance by a group of Team members at a technical rope rescue course in the Bugaboo Mountains in Canada, and a group of Team members attended winter skills training at Chamonix in France.

The next year, **2011**, saw 96 callouts. 2011 witnessed a significant shift in the proportion of incidents attended by air ambulances as opposed to military (RAF and Royal Navy) helicopters. Air ambulances attended twice as many rescues as the military helicopters. The Team expressed concerns about the timely tasking of the most appropriate resources, including the Team itself, to casualties, and continued to work hard with the police and the ambulance service to that effect.

Mobile phone reception in the fells can often be intermittent or non-existent. This year saw the availability of a 999 text service for calling for rescue. Now, if you were involved in an incident on the hill, and couldn't make a voice call, due to poor phone reception, you had the ability to make a 999 call using a text message from your mobile phone. (Registration with the service is needed.)

In **2012** the Team responded to 102 callouts. The dedication of all Team members was again noted by Team Leader, Mark Hodgson, in respect of attendance at training sessions, and commitment to ongoing Team tasks – maintenance and replacement of equipment, and running the business side of Team operations. Average annual running costs were now approximately £80K.



A callout in April 2011, on High Spy.

An additional major item of expenditure in 2012 was the purchase, at a cost of over £40K, of a second crew-bus/ambulance. The decision to acquire a fourth vehicle was based on many factors, including: the increase in number of occasions when the Team had concurrent rescues, and therefore the need to be able to transport Team members efficiently, including on off-road tracks, and to be able to transfer casualties.

The Team's fleet of vehicles now included: two Land Rovers, two 4X4 Mercedes Sprinters, and a boat, (the latter being recently replaced by a more flexible model). Previously, in 2009, what was the Team's third road vehicle, a 4X4 Ford Transit, was replaced by the first 4X4 Mercedes Sprinter.

Keswick MRT has had a policy of helping, wherever possible, other Teams with fewer resources. The Ford Transit had been donated to North of Tyne MRT in 2009. In 2012, the old boat was donated to Aberglaslyn MRT, in Wales.

Outside the field of rescue operations, Keswick MRT was very proud to host the 2012 Prince's Charities Day, on behalf of 'Mountain Rescue England and Wales', (MREW). For the previous four years, MREW (whose patron is Prince William), had hosted this event, where three charities, (Centrepont, Child Bereavement, and Wellchild) come together to provide a day-out for children.



Prince's Charities Day – lunchtime at Derwentwater Hostel



June 2012 – Incident on Causey Pike.

In 2012, Team stalwart and one-time Deputy Leader, (1987-1992), Donald Angus retired after 43 years of service as a Team member.

2013 was yet another busy year for the Team with 96 rescues.

In the New Year Honours List, Team Leader Mark Hodgson was awarded the MBE for services to mountain rescue. Mark had been a member of the Team since 1973, and Leader from 1994.



*Rob Grange Martin Bell Phil Newton Chris Francis Elly Whiteford Mick Guy
 Rona Isla Crag Beck Meg Bracken Ginny
 Keswick MRT now had three graded search dogs and four dogs in training.*

The Team was very shocked and saddened by the sudden death, after a short illness, of Team stalwart Allan Alcock, in November 2013. Allan had been a Team member since 1968.

For many years Allan was vehicles' officer for the Team, ensuring that the vehicles were always ready for action, and undertook multiple jobs around the base, always with great enthusiasm.

At the Team's AGM in March **2014**, a new Team Leader was elected to the post – Chris Higgins, one of the current Deputy Leaders. Mark Hodgson stood down as Leader after 20 years in the role, but remained a fully active Team member. Mark naturally reflected upon the changes that had occurred in mountain rescue over the years, specifically those to do with Keswick MRT, and his own personal experiences. Chris, too, reflected upon changes and events since he joined the Team in 1996, and thanked Mark for what he'd done for the Team in those 20 years of leadership.

The Team had 106 callouts in 2014.

Two new Land Rovers were brought in to service, with one of the 'retired' vehicles being subsequently donated to the South Snowdonia Search and Rescue Team, and one to Kintail MRT in Scotland, both donations being made in 2015. A project to develop a new stretcher had produced a useable prototype model. Training continued apace, and included rope rigging courses in The Dolomites in Italy.



Rigging training in The Dolomites – September 2014

In **2015** there were 117 callouts, with several alerts, and with "many hours of training, cleaning, maintaining, repairing, restocking, fitting, reprogramming, servicing, charging...the list goes on", as Team Leader Chris Higgins noted. Air ambulances and military Sea King helicopters assisted the Team in 2015, but, there was a development in the area of air rescue resources that had been 'in the offing' for some while. This was the launch of the UK's civilian search and rescue helicopter service to take over from the familiar Sea Kings of the RAF and Royal Navy. Coastguard aircraft operated by a subsidiary of the Texas-based Bristow company would gradually take on the duties formerly operated by military helicopters, with Sikorsky S92 helicopters.

Team personnel changes this year included Simon Hodgson stepping down as Deputy Leader after 17 years, (and like his brother Mark remaining a Team member), and the retirement of Brian Spencer after 45 years' service, with more than 1000 rescue incidents attended. At one time, Brian was a Base Quartermaster, but, over the last 16 years he was the Collection Box Co-Ordinator. The Team at this point had approximately 280 collection boxes dotted around the town and vicinity. It was estimated that during the period that Brian managed the boxes more than £370,000 was brought in from the boxes.

During the period of winter conditions on the fells in early 2015, there were several very serious rescues on Blencathra, Great End and Helvellyn, unfortunately some with very sad outcomes. These

callouts were often in very harsh conditions and through the night, and highlighted the importance of winter skills training.

In early December 2015, the Team was again involved in a major multi-agency operation to deal with the effects of flooding in Keswick, caused by the advent of Storm Desmond. Later in the month, the Team helped in flood situations in Whalley, Lancashire and in York. Team operations in dangerous flood waters proved the value of having highly skilled Swift Water Technicians within the Team. It is unfortunate that Keswick MRT, along with many other rescue groups, has become well practiced at helping when Keswick suffers flooding, (incidents in 2005, 2009, and now 2015).



December 2015: Keswick and Cockermouth MRTs helping with evacuation of residents in York.

In July 2015, the Team introduced a new internet website, and during the year the Team also developed a presence on the Facebook network service.

In **2016** the Team had 94 rescues. Three especially notable rescues were as follows.

- In May, the rescue of a man taken ill on Blease Fell, Blencathra with a suspected cardiac event: air ambulance crew used a defibrillator to restart his heart.
- In October, the rescue of six climbers from 'Troutdale Pinnacle', Black Crag, Borrowdale. This involved technical rescue rigging, and, for one person, being winched by a Coastguard helicopter.
- In November, the rescue of a man who'd fallen from Sharp Edge, suffering head, neck and chest injuries: a Coastguard helicopter, an air ambulance, Penrith MRT and a visiting RAF MRT were all also involved in this incident. Poor weather necessitated a relay of rescuers to carry the casualty down to the foot of the fell, instead of a helicopter evacuation.

In 2016, former Team Leader Mike Nixon MBE retired from active service and was awarded Honorary Membership of the Team. Records showed that he had attended over 1340 incidents!

There was a significant increase in the number of donations received through the 'Just Giving' website. Another kind of much-appreciated support had been established through a close collaboration with Keswick Women's Institute. The local Institute membership had volunteered to help at times of major incidents, such as the floods, with catering for Team members at the base.

Many joint training exercises occurred with other organisations in the year. For example: in January, an exercise with Cockermouth MRT and Cumbria Ore Mines Rescue Unit (COMRU) at Honister Slate Mine; in July, a multi-agency training exercise on Derwentwater, with Keswick MRT and Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service running the mock-incidents from the Keswick MRT Control

Room; in December, an exercise on the 'via ferrata' facility at Honister Slate Mine, with Cockermouth MRT.

In 2016, after receiving advice and consultation, the Team completed its change in status to a 'Charitable Incorporated Organisation'.



February 2016: A callout at Keskadale, Newlands

2017 saw the Team attend 99 rescues, in its 70th Anniversary Year. Rescues that were "a little bit out of the ordinary", as Leader Chris Higgins recalled, included the rescue of a rock climber with an arm stuck on 'Little Chamonix' at Shepherds Crag, rescuing a group of summer scramblers stuck in Central Gully, Great End, the rescue of a woman stuck underground at Doves Nest Crag, Borrowdale, and the rescue of a dog stuck underground near Bowderstone Pinnacle, Borrowdale.



October 2017: an incident in Langstrath.

In January, the Team had the Introduction of further online systems to record Team members' training and development, and a gathering at the base of former Team members from the early years of the Team. The latter proved to be an occasion full of memories and anecdotes.



A long-wheelbase Mercedes Sprinter was acquired to be used as a dedicated boat rescue vehicle.

Paul Horder stepped down from the Team after 47 years in mountain rescue work. During that period he had been in Cockermouth MRT from 1971-1978, and since then in Keswick MRT. He had many roles in each organisation through the years, including Keswick Deputy Leader 1987-2000. Paul was involved in leading roles in very many aspects of mountain rescue work at Team, national, and international levels. Paul attended well over 1500 rescues and searches.



Plans for a new structure for the Sty Head Mountain Rescue Box were developed in 2017.

Peter Little