

Go Lake District
Do hang on tight!

Nearing flat out as the wind speed floors it:
who says Britain can't do extreme?



SKIDDAW IN A HURRICANE

Apocalyptic forecast in hand, **Trail** does what any other utter idiot would do: takes a wind-speed meter to the highest place around, and holds on tight.

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Firstly, *obviously*, don't try this at home. We did it so you don't have to. Plus, we are very, very stupid people. I certainly wouldn't do anything I told me to.

This tale begins in Abraham's tea room above George Fisher's, in Keswick. Trail had arrived in the Lakes – as is often the case – in the late afternoon, in the rain. There's only so long you can idly potter around drinking tea, badgering sales assistants and prodding bits of kit; and after six hours or so our eyes wandered outside to the weather, then back to the forecast. Something interesting had appeared on it.

"Wind gusting to 95mph..." someone said between mouthfuls of cake and tea. "Hmm. Wonder what that's like?"

It was at this moment that Tom raised an index finger, then produced from his pocket a silver device, which he laid on the table accompanied with the words, "Reminds me: look at this." 'This' was an anemometer, otherwise known as a wind-speed meter. And as our eyes moved from the gadget to the forecast to the window to the forecast and back to the gadget, gradually, somewhere, a light bulb began to stutter reluctantly to life.

And an hour or so later amid the moist gloom of afternoon and the slough of waterproofs, we left the Latrigg car park and began to ascend Skiddaw, England's fourth highest mountain. The aim was as simple as it was daft: to experience and record the highest wind speed we could. Skiddaw made vaguely acceptable sense for this, in that it was high and exposed, yet fairly blunt. Getting blown off it would be quite an achievement. Besides, this was all in the name of science... >

Immediately what you learn when you wander onto the fells with an eye on the weather's numerical value is that you've been way, way underestimating things. A wind of 28mph sounds pathetic; playground speeds for an upland scourge that in 1986 reached a never-bettered gust of 173mph in the Cairngorms. But it isn't – it's the sort of speed that, should you be in possession of an anemometer when you encounter it, is choppy enough to make you produce it hopefully.

"Is this thing working? It only says 28mph," I said, as I held it aloft for a second time and squinted up at it. "Now it says 24. That's more than 24mph. Isn't it?"

Wind is one of those things people know about, but really don't know very much about. In the long, thoughtful moments on a breezy walk, one of the questions that often surfaces in the mind is, 'Where does wind come from?'

Well, like most things, wind is caused by the sun. And just like metal heats up quicker than wood, so too do bits of the earth under the blowtorch of our nearest star. Like commuters disgorging from a packed train onto a platform, wind is the air fleeing from a cooler bit of the world to a hotter bit. Ever wondered why it's always windy at the seaside? Because it's right on the divide between a cold bit (the sea) and a hot bit (the land). Likewise, in the mountains, generally you're moving through a zone where the temperature is dropping as you ascend. As you go up, wind is coming down. Then you have the fact that mountains ramp big, chunks of air up into high places. And they also feature disruptive things like peaks and valleys that throw an unwelcome speed bump in front of the otherwise brisk but smooth movement of air. They feature valleys that squash huge volumes of it into narrow gaps, which makes it angry as hell. And all this is without factoring any unusual weather into the equation, or the fact that air moves quicker and more unencumbered at higher altitudes because there is nothing – apart from the odd peak – to make it stop. If sea-level is the twisty-turny B road, 3,000ft up is the A road, and 10,000ft is the motorway.

This all matters, because as far as tricky conditions go, the effect of wind on those who move in high places is ignored – or at least belittled – far more than it should be. Cold and wet may be Britain's most notorious atmospheric gangsters, but the wind is their real weapon. Nothing sponges heat and strength from your body like wind. To the well-equipped cold-

weather walker, rain and cold without wind is a gun without bullets. Lick a finger on a mild day, and nothing happens. Lick a finger on a mild, windy day and your finger gets cold. Lick your finger on a cold, windy day and your finger freezes.

Then there's speed or, to be pedantic, velocity. These days wind is a manageable foe, but it's not that long ago since it was a destroyer of the highest order. In 1703 high winds in southern Britain led to the deaths of around 10,000 people in a single day.

But back to Skiddaw. Behind us, the summit of 368m hump Latrigg was drawing level through the murk. An insipid rain had been falling long enough to make everything glisten, including us,



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“ This was panic weather: the sort of weather you know you can't stand for long. ”



Our anemometer, with the critical 'maximum' figure bottom left.

Benign Skiddaw from Derwent Water.

and the wind was asserting itself to levels worthy of comment. Every now and again a gust would penetrate the steady breath of the wind, strong enough to buffet. Again, I checked the gadget. I still couldn't believe it. "38mph!" I shouted. I was half gutted that the promised gusts of 90mph seemed unlikely to occur, and half afraid of what might happen if they did.

We had been walking for an hour and a half, when finally – dramatically quickly – things started to intensify. Climb a mountain into bad weather and you often wonder if it's the weather getting worse with height, or simply getting worse with time. Ascending higher and higher on Skiddaw, I didn't. I simply marvelled at what was happening around us – and tried my best to hold on. Through the cinched aperture of my hood, the world below a near horizon had become half dim, hazy brown and above it half dim, hazy grey. And it was vibrating.

The route up Skiddaw from this direction curves upwards in a gentle but determined course over the subsidiary top Little Man, then onward onto the gritty

plateau of the summit. We had reached the point where a series of creases in the mountain's flank open out onto the path just beyond a place called Howgill Tongue. As the path began to flatten onto a shoulder, we realised that this place, in this weather, had become a giant funnel. And as we walked into its path, its contents unloaded suddenly onto us from the left.

Being hit bluntly by steady high winds is fatiguing. And it's not just the wind's push – every step had to be concentrated on: any relaxation of balance or focus, and the wind would catch you with a cheeky uppercut, spinning you off course and sending you stumbling and staggering to regain your composure.

In this sort of weather your kit gives up on you pretty quickly, too. My rucksack was being yanked violently sideways as if manhandled by an invisible bouncer, so I tightened it. Minutes later my arms started to buzz with impeded circulation, so I loosened it again and the buffeting resumed. I was wearing brand new water-proofs that cost the best part of £600, and I was soaked – the water literally being

squashed unstopably through the fabric.

But what really gets you is the noise. Wind alone is silent. It's just air. It's the things that it hits that make the sounds. Landforms cause it to howl and flute; grass causes it to hiss like high-volume static; but nylon clothing absolutely batters you, both sonically and physically. It's the violent, ceaseless pummelling of everything you're wearing trying to blow off that becomes truly intolerable: your hood, your rucksack, your trousers. If there's any bagginess in what you're wearing it instantly becomes your deafening, super-violent enemy, a projectile fighting to launch. And it's doing it so loudly that if you shout, you don't hear yourself.

It was awful and exhilarating at the same time. Everything on my left side was pressed suffocatingly against me like wet cling film, while everything on my right was trying to tear off. My hood was blinding and battering me. It was an assault in every sense, on every sense. This was the wind we had been expecting. This was spectacular.

Fighting with my flailing zips to open the pocket containing the anemometer, I heard a tiny, squashed noise in my right ear.

"How fast?"
"What?"

"How fast?"

With difficulty I pushed the device into the wind. I could barely keep my arm up.

"61mph."

"What?"

"61mph!"

"What?"

"SIXTY ONE!"

A mere 61mph? We couldn't believe it. But we still had a bit of uphill fight left. So on we pushed. On, to the 865m summit of Little Man. And on. Every step was a fight. Darkness was thickening. The wind was still increasing: 65mph, 68mph, 70mph.

Then, as we fought our way through the gate that marks the start of the final push for the summit, the really big gusts began.

Gusting is the most upsetting aspect of walking in wind, adding an element of unpredictability and distrust to an already troublesome foe. Defined as a sudden increase in the speed or a change in direction of the wind, a gust usually lasts less than 20 seconds and is followed by a lull. They are caused by deflections off objects (mechanical turbulence) and cool air mixing with warmer air (thermal turbulence). If you know what to expect, you can take precautions; you can walk leaning into a steady 40mph headwind and not fall over. However, walk into a



Braving the elements near the summit of Little Man: even less fun than it looks.

headwind of 40mph with 50mph gusts and you'll be stumbling around the mountain like a drunk sailor aboard a listing ship.

Given a steady wind of 70mph, and gusts become dangerously strong, almost as if an aerodynamic tipping point has been reached. At this speed, we were already really struggling – we were two-steps-forward, one-step-back by this point – and the added suffering of rain propelled sideways into us like machine gun fire was making things truly desperate.

I heard the first *really* big gust before it hit. A sound like a sideboard falling over followed by an unexpected push from the rear caught me and threw me off balance. I careered into the fence that runs across the summit (which we had sensibly kept in our lee) and found myself unable to push away from it, like a boxer held to the ropes.

Clawing along it, a brief lull enabled me to regain my footing. I felt suddenly vulnerable, the seemingly ludicrous prospect of actually becoming airborne – being plucked like a shrill blue crisp packet and pinged into the stratosphere – beginning to take horrible, plausible shape in my mind. This was panic weather: the sort of weather you know you can't stand for long. The second gust saw to it that the message was rammed home, blowing me flat into intimacy with the rocky ground, which, I was surprised to notice, was covered in a pretty pattern of wind-blasted frost.

This time I had the anemometer ready, and while the gust was racing overhead I forced the hand containing it into the air. Seconds later, I saw Tom crawl to me and, with an emphatic and immediately seconded gesture, pointed downwards.

Conditions on the descent were the reverse of the ascent. First a crawl, then a stagger, then an inclined walk, then a weary trudge. Everything I wore hung heavy and saturated against me. My ears were ringing. I was cold. Silly, silly. But we knew we'd be okay.

As soon as we were out of the assault, we checked our figures. Most anemometers feature a 'maximum wind-speed' figure beneath the rolling speed measurement. There, beneath ours, it read 89.4mph. That was the final gust, just below the summit of Skiddaw. Which, for anecdotal interest, is the speed of a Category 1 hurricane. It wasn't 95mph. And, in retrospect, I'm pretty glad I didn't get to experience what *that* was like.

Trail recovered at Linnett Hill Guest House: www.linnetthillkeswick.co.uk