



# LOWTHER HILLS SKI CLUB

## Chairman's Report, 2014/15

### 1. Thank you

Rope tows have operated sporadically in our area over the last 50 years thanks to the time and work given by a number of generous individuals. But setting up and running a ski tow, even the odd weekend, requires an enormous amount of time, dedication, and personal sacrifice. Local history shows that at some point the tow operator would lose interest or become tired of the work involved, and a few years would pass until someone else would come up with a similar initiative. This is what we are trying to change, by creating an operation that is a permanent fixture in our villages, that provides skiing regularly, that ensures that there will be skiing again next year, the year after, and the year after that.

Creating such a structure needs time and work, even more so when the people behind it are volunteers who do this in their spare time. Running a skiing operation, even for small groups, involves an extensive deal of paperwork, Health and Safety compliance, training, and an understanding of the sport and the rigours of working in a mountain environment.

In 2013/14 we used the season for training and testing the equipment with our understanding local members. Last season 2014/15 was the first time that we actively promoted the Ski Club outside our villages and operated like a proper sports club.

We have done remarkably well over the past year. Only a year ago we were just a few local residents starting this up. Now, we can say we have an increasing number of members and volunteers. We proved we are able to provide at least 20 days of skiing locally. Our work on Lowther Hill got many people all over the country talking about our villages. We lived up to expectations, received much praise, and created great opportunities for the future.

Before going through last year's achievements, let us remember that the Lowther Hills Ski Club is run by volunteers and gratitude should be expressed to all those who have contributed in different ways to make this happen. Before we all stand down I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee personally on behalf of all the members for their support and for helping to form a working Committee at our 2014 AGM.

Volunteers are the life blood of the Club. They dedicate hours of time and energy, working unpaid in a variety of ways. From mountain operations to fundraising, there are many ways to help the Ski Club. If you can give some of your time helping your club, please make yourself known to myself or another Committee member.

### 2. The Season 2014/15

At our 2014 AGM we reported that the previous Winter the portable ski tows were operated seven days at Leadhills Golf Course in what was a training and learning exercise for us

before undertaking more ambitious objectives. We had just dismantled and brought Harwood's ski tow to Leadhills and Wanlockhead, and a target of 20 days of skiing operations was mentioned, provided we had enough volunteers and normal Winter weather.

After the 2014 AGM at the end of September discussions continued with Hopetoun Estate with a view to obtaining a lease for Lowther Hill as soon as possible to allow us to start works on the hill. In the meantime we started our famous work parties: Rab Paul started the lengthy process of servicing all the ski tow's pylons, Donald Chalmers from civil engineering firm Chalmers Construction carried out for us a range of valuable technical jobs, the Engine Hut was disassembled in Leadhills and flatpacked ready to go to Lowther, agreement was reached with our friends at Leadhills Golf Club to use their facilities, and we tried to do as many jobs as possible offsite while we did not have access to the hill.

The first pylons of the Lowther Hill ski tow were erected on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November, right after the Lease with Hopetoun was signed. Over the next month we worked intensively, holding work parties three or four times per week. Wanlockhead builder Tom Moffat kindly carried out ground works with his digger, more pylons were erected, the banks of the Engine Hut site were re-turfed, the 1km long rope was brought to the hill, and the heavy ski tow engine was brought to its new home.

The first snow of the season arrived late, in the second week of December, while we were still in intensive building mode. Ross Dolder, Chris Penny, and Des Reid went skiing to Lowther Hill on a PR exercise, producing quality photos which were republished by the BBC and other media and provided great publicity to our club. Work parties continued over the Christmas period, having all pylons erected by the 21<sup>st</sup> December and Alan Guild starting the engine for the first time on Lowther Hill on the 31<sup>st</sup> December.

Back on the hill on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, the dynamics of the work parties turned from heavy construction where everybody saw real day-to-day progress into a plethora of small jobs which seemed never ending. Our indispensable tool -the quad bike- broke down. When the snow arrived to the village on the 11<sup>th</sup> January, the portable tow did not start. But we kept calm and carried on. We fixed the equipment and we continued works on the hill, including several days strengthening the Engine Hut, which survived January's hurricane gusts of 100mph.

The snow came back to the villages on the 17th January and gave us several days of fantastic skiing conditions. For the first time ever, we had to operate two rope tows to cater for the more than 100 members who gathered at the Golf Course on a sunny Sunday 18<sup>th</sup>. Cath Hault and Des Reid became the first volunteers from outside our villages to help with the operation of the ski tows. There was so much excitement and happy faces around. It all went very smoothly and we received a mountain of compliments for bringing back skiing to this beautiful part of the South of Scotland.

Our work shifted again to Lowther Hill as the snow thawed in the first week of February. Volunteer numbers were down as people were enjoying good skiing conditions in the Highlands, but we still never had to cancel a work party due to lack of volunteers. We started the most successful crowdfunding campaign carried out by a ski club in Scotland in recent times. We went back to finish works on the ski tow's drive wheel, and erected 200 metres of snow fencing to gather data for next season.

As the snow came back on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, we re-opened the Nursery slope at Leadhills and ran a portable tow on Lowther Hill on the 26<sup>th</sup> with possibly the best snow conditions of the season. So beautiful it was that our photos of Lowther Hill made it to InTheSnow's World Snow Report for March 2015.

We had the last day of skiing in Leadhills on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March and on the 4<sup>th</sup> we ran the portable tow on Lowther Hill, where Ross Dolder, Tim Mullens and Ed Forrest filmed a fantastic run on the Throw Rig piste which became the ski club's most popular video.

As the snow melted away, work parties came back. The temporary club hut donated by Clarks Tracks was brought to the site by Wanlockhead's Garry Weir and Tom Moffat, and the Lowther Hill ski tow was finally tested for the first time on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March. Later, in the second week of April, the very dedicated Alan McKay of WinterHighland.info spent five days on Lowther Hill installing for us the highest webcams in the South of Scotland, which we are very proud of.

In total, we ran the ski tows 20 days in the past 2014/15 season, 13 of them being at the Leadhills nursery area and 7 on Lowther Hill. This is an encouraging figure which suggests that -if we have slope maintenance equipment and a full rota of volunteers- we may be able to provide between 30-40 days of mechanical uplift in an average Winter.

### 3. Membership and volunteers

Membership of the Lowther Hills Ski Club currently stands at 232. With 85 members in Leadhills and Wanlockhead, the ski club has the highest membership of any club in our villages with most families with children being members of the ski club.

As a local resident, it makes me proud that we have been good at attracting people from outside our villages to come, visit, and do work that promotes and benefits our area.

Over the past year a total of 51 volunteers from as far afield as Inverness and Cumbria have helped us on the hill. This makes Lowther Hills Ski Club the largest volunteer-based ski development in Scotland since Scottish Ski Club members and Clyde shipyard workers created Glencoe in the 1950s. What we are doing is clearly inspiring many people.

Volunteers give us their time and work for free. Although we have not really experienced that problem so far, shortage of volunteers is chronic in every volunteer-based organisation. We should not take all our volunteers' help for granted, but do everything we can to retain and motivate them to keep them coming back, benefiting the club and our villages with their work and skills. We need to keep looking after them by maintaining a friendly and constructive environment. To the most committed volunteers, we must be able to offer them ways to participate in decision making or the management of the Ski Club.

### 4. Funding

Our Treasurer's report shows a healthy state of the club's finances. We have done what a small club like ours has to do, which is not spending more than we have.

We have shown that we are good at finding funding and making the most out of it, sustainably. Our main funder in 2014, SSE's Clyde Wind Farm Fund, were so impressed by what we have done so far that they put the Lowther Hills Ski Club as a best practice case example in their national Community Investment Annual Report for 2014.

We are not a club that relies on grants. Our operating costs structure is designed to be sustainable and covered by our membership fees. We are proactive and know how to crowdfund, like the £1600 raised in 30 days to buy our webcams. The current Committee also started discussing plans to raise additional funds by selling Ski Club merchandise, and by potentially allowing day membership ski passes in the future.

Grants however are there as an opportunity for sports clubs, so where possible we should seek to use them and get some extra funding spent in our club and local community. Applying for grants involves a huge amount of work and it is not always successful. When we asked the Scottish Government Minister for Tourism if we could benefit from the same funding sources as the Highland ski centres -the answer being No as we first need to establish a track record of operations- we were referred to the Sport for Communities Fund which had funding for project officers and feasibility studies for new facilities. We applied to both and both were unsuccessful. On the other hand, we were lucky at the South Lanarkshire Council small grant application for portable floodlighting at the Leadhills' nursery slope.

We have proved to be quite good at convincing people to donate equipment. We would like to express our gratitude to Lochside Education Centre in Dumfries for their generous donation of over 100 ski helmets. Leadhills' Hopetoun Arms Hotel kindly donated a generator to power the beginners' area floodlights next season. Our generous members have donated fuel, engineering services, building materials, skiing equipment...

The Inventory spreadsheet available with the rest of the annual reports shows the Ski Club owns equipment at an estimated value of over £10,000. This equipment is currently stored in different locations in Leadhills and Wanlockhead. The next Committee will need to obtain funding for the Lowther Hill clubhouse, which will not only provide shelter and social space to skiers on the Lowther slopes, but also much needed storage capacity for our growing list of equipment.

## 5. Showcasing our work and making friends

It is important that we show what we are doing well. It makes our members proud, it attracts volunteers to work for us and keeps the club running, and makes it easier for us to find funding when needed.

We have tried to be as proactive as possible communicating with our membership and the wider public. In the past year the Lowther Hills Ski Club held three Open Days and over 30 work parties -which are not just a way to get things built, but also a social opportunity to meet other members and comment on club matters. We also have, to my knowledge, the most active ski club newsletter in the country. We maintain a very active social media with regular updates on what is new at the club. We regularly attended meetings of Wanlockhead Village Council and Leadhills Community Council. Other events attended since the last AGM include the inauguration of Leadhills' Multi-Use Games Area in October 2014 and Thrive Dumfries & Galloway business event, where the Ski Club was the VIP

speaker at their May's event. At our last Open Day we were pleased to welcome many good friends and supporters of the Ski Club, one of them being the Scottish Government Minister for Youth and Children.

We made new friends and shared our exciting plans with organisations like the Moffat Mountain Rescue Team and Leadhills' Fire and Rescue brigade back in November 2014. We received support from local businesses in the form of sponsorship and donations from the Hopetoun Arms Hotel, and much appreciated permission to use parking areas in Wanlockhead by Harry Wilson, owner of the land below Mountain Lodge, and the Wanlockhead Inn. Local builder and contractor Tom Moffat supported us with valuable help on the hill, as did local mechanic Garry Weir. Renowned illustrator Andy Foley designed our much acclaimed ski pass, and, inspired by our success, Leadhills' Bearly Reminiscent launched her first little ski bear.

At all times we have tried to find a balance between advertising our project, attracting the interest of volunteers and funders, and carefully avoid raising too many expectations.

As our planning application for facilities on Lowther Hill was ready to be granted in October 2014, the Ski Club appeared in the Lanarkshire and Galloway press, and shortly after in the BBC, ITV Borders, The Times, Herald, Scotsman, Daily Record, and all UK snow magazines and websites. WinterHighland.info, Scotland's most popular skiing website, permanently added Lowther Hill to their front page as Scotland's 6th ski area. All this publicity not only benefited the club, but also got the name of our villages on the screen, radio, and print, advertising Leadhills and Wanlockhead to a new type of clientele. Up until now, all the aforementioned publicity has generated 346 subscribers to the Ski Club's newsletter, 148 followers on Twitter, and 1715 followers on Facebook. This makes the Ski Club the most popular village organisation on social media.

## 6. Change of legal structure

When we first got together in Autumn 2013 to create the Ski Club we started from scratch. We had no permission to use the hill, no tows, almost no members. The first year we just managed to form a working Committee. We used the structure of the dormant Leadhills Ski Club, which was an Unincorporated Association. We did things one step at a time.

A year later, when we acquired the equipment from Harwood and prepared ourselves for running a ski lift operation, we started having the first discussions on adopting a suitable legal structure to protect those of us who, on a voluntary basis, manage the affairs of a club which organises what is considered as a high risk sport.

In last year's Chairman's Report it was stated that "Before we start operations in winter 2014/15 the new Committee should adopt a Limited company structure to limit the member's liability to £1 should anything ever go wrong."

A number of your Committee members strongly feel that this is a pressing matter that should be organised before starting next season's operations. A vote is to be held at this AGM asking members to support changing the legal structure of the Lowther Hills Ski Club from an Unincorporated Association into a Community Interest Company.

A report has been circulated amongst the membership explaining why is this being

proposed, and what the proposed change of legal structure means for you as a member and for those who give their free time to manage the club on your behalf.

## 7. Next year's opportunities

As a local resident and father of two, I feel proud that the Ski Club has made such a good start at awakening interest in the sport amongst our local children.

We are grateful to Leadhills Golf Course for allowing us the use of their grounds and clubhouse during Winter. It is a good learning area for beginners and, with the addition of snowfencing and portable floodlights next season, we will be able to make the most of the slope whenever there is enough snow at village level.

As these school children now aged 5-12 grow up, we have to make available proper ski instruction and training so that they can better enjoy the sport. We also have to improve the quality of our facilities to keep them interested in the sport as they grow out of the beginners' areas. They are lucky to have such a facility in their doorstep.

Every sports club needs suitable grounds to operate successfully. The slopes on Lowther Hill are the optimal grounds for skiing in our area, and in the South of Scotland. Lowther Hill is the reason why so many people across Scotland are excited about what this small club from the highest villages are trying to achieve. We have done quite a good job over the past year, but more is needed so that everybody is able to enjoy accessible, comfortable, attractive, sustainable, and lasting facilities on Lowther Hill.

A proper clubhouse and permanent timber snowfencing on Lowther Hill is the next objective for the club. We have also been given an opportunity to acquire a snowgroomer, which is an essential machine for ski slope maintenance. I am sure the next Committee is looking forward to the endless hours of work needed through the whole funding process. We should be satisfied if we could secure funding by Spring 2016 with a view to start building the new clubhouse and fencing by Summer the same year.

There are other projects in the pipeline. Over the past two years we have been scratching our heads about the most sustainable way to bus members to the facilities on Lowther Hill. We discussed accepting Day Members to get the facilities used during mid-week and increase our revenue. We will need to ensure the new club's facilities are disabled-friendly to truly allow access to the sport to everybody.

There are many things the Ski Club could do, but will do them only if they are sustainable. That is, if we have enough volunteers to do them today and in the future.

Volunteers remain the blood of this club. We need to keep attracting, training and retaining people. A solid group of committed volunteers is key to ensure the Ski Club will keep providing fun in the villages year after year. Volunteers are more likely to stay with us if we have attractive facilities and a friendly environment that shows appreciation for their work and time. I believe most volunteers who have been involved so far have enjoyed it – at least they keep coming back for more despite the often horrendous weather conditions. As a local resident, I am proud we got so many people supporting and working for something which raises the profile of our villages. So, thank you very much everybody for an exceptionally rewarding year.