



# LOWTHER HILLS SKI CLUB

## Chairman's Report, 2015/16

### 1. Thank you

Last season 2015/16 was the second season of operations of Lowther Hills Ski Club. Two years ago, in November 2014, we were at Rab Paul's garage, greasing and welding the pylons of the ski tow that we had just brought from Harwood. At this point, we did not have any facilities on Lowther Hill, or the permission to run any skiing facilities on the hill.

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. Building a snowfence, servicing the quad bike, designing a ski pass, welcoming visitors at the nursery slope... in the past two years over 100 people have helped the Ski Club in different capacities. This makes Lowther Hills the largest volunteer-based ski development in Scotland since Scottish Ski Club members created Glencoe in the 1950s.

What we are doing is inspiring many people. To everybody, members who support Lowther Hills Ski Club with their membership, people who have donated towards the Club's crowdfunders, and volunteers who give unpaid hours of their time and work for the common good, thank you for making this happen.

### 2. Membership and volunteers

Lowther Hills Ski Club closed the season 2015/16 with 232 members. 50% of the membership is based in the Lowther Hills and surrounding areas of Biggar, Lanark and Nithsdale. The highest concentration of members (30%) is in the Lowther villages of Leadhills and Wanlockhead, where the Ski Club remains the most popular local group in terms of membership numbers (most local families with children are members of the Club). The Clydesdale districts of Biggar and Lanark have a 7% and 6% of the membership respectively; Nithsdale on the southern basin of the Lowther Hills has another 7%. A further 24% of the membership comes from the town of Dumfries and adjacent areas, including Annandale and Galloway. The Central Belt's urban areas (Glasgow and Edinburgh) account for 20% of the membership.

By gender, Lowther Hills Ski Club has a good balance between females (45%) and males (55%). By age, children under 16 account for 40% of the members, which gives Lowther Hills a very high proportion of participation amongst children in snowsports, in comparison to other ski centres in Scotland. In terms of membership demographics, Lowther Hills is a family-friendly Club, but there is scope for more family participation outwith the winter season.

Membership numbers have doubled from the previous season 2014/15. However, volunteer participation has not increased. This was expected, as shortage of volunteers is an ongoing issue for every volunteer-based organisation and Lowther Hills is not an exception. We were lucky that so many people came to help the first year when we relocated the ski tow from Harwood to Lowther Hill, but we should not take our volunteers' help for granted. Volunteers give their time and work for free and we should do everything we can to retain and motivate them. We need to look after them by maintaining a friendly and constructive environment, and by offering facilities that they enjoy.

Whilst volunteering is not for everybody and we should never put pressure on anyone to help the Club, it is only fair to ask all members to be mindful of the colossal amount of work and time that a

small number of individuals dedicate to this project so that it can be enjoyed by the many.

Running a skiing operation, even a small one, involves an enormous deal of paperwork, Health and Safety compliance, planning, hill work, and a specialist understanding of the sport and the rigours of operating in a mountain environment. Volunteers have day jobs, families, and other commitments. When a key volunteer becomes temporarily unavailable due to work, personal or health reasons, an important job on the hill may suffer a crucial delay that affects other Club projects. Days of skiing can be lost if no volunteers are available to run a tow. The core volunteers who give their spare time to manage the Club on behalf of the members can sometimes find the responsibility too demanding and intruding to their daily lives. Many community-owned and volunteer-based ski centres have found ways to address this by employing staff to run the facilities during winter, which in turn has allowed volunteers to enjoy the results of the work carried out in summer.

Skiing has taken place in the Lowther Hills since the 1920s. Since then, several ski instructors and portable tow operators have operated in the area, but given up due to the demanding nature of skiing operations. Lowther Hills Ski Club was created to ensure the permanence of skiing facilities on Lowther Hill. We have done a great job so far, received praise, but we only started two years ago and there is still more to be done until Lowther Hills Ski Club Community Interest Company becomes a self-regenerating and sustainable organisation.

### 3. The Ski Season 2015/16

Thanks to our volunteers, the past season 2015/16 saw the Club opened 14 days for skiing, all of them held at the Leadhills nursery area, with 823 skier/days, almost doubling the 469 skier/days achieved in the opening season of 2014/15. Had we had volunteers available at all times, we could have probably run the tows 25 days last season. Had we had snowfencing, a groomer, and a clubhouse, we could have opened even more days.

The first dusting of snow on Lowther Hill came on the 13<sup>th</sup> November, a bit later than usual. There was very significant snowfall in Scotland in the first part of the season with plenty of storms, rain and very mild temperatures.

The first day of operations took place on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of January due to an unexpected snowfall. Our volunteers got ready at a short notice and this was the first time that we offered night skiing. The Nursery slope remained open for 13 days, almost consecutively until Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January, when mild temperatures and rain returned.

Although the season started late, January gave us a memorable long spell of alpine conditions with good snow quality and no wind. Night skiing was a tremendous success as it allowed school children and families to enjoy the sport after school hours.

The nursery slope was reopened briefly on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016 when the snow returned. Very unsettled weather followed during the month of February with a succession of rain, light snow and high winds, which did not allow us to operate the lifts. On the 15<sup>th</sup> February, after a work party, we run the Lowther tow for the volunteers on a wind-scoured hill, only to film how the uplift of the tow looks like.

We kept hope that the second half of February would bring snow and we would be able to run the Lowther tow. The heavy snow that was supposed to fall on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February turned into torrential rain and washed away the remaining snow. Followed by another mild March, and the final dusting at village level on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, this was the end of one of the warmest seasons in living memory.

### 4. Developments in 2015/16

After our last AGM, held on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Ski Club work resumed on Lowther Hill whenever

the weather allowed (2015 seeing one of the wettest summers in recent history).

Improvements on the Lowther tow continued with the installation of a state-of-the art system of emergency stop buttons thanks to Des Reid and Cath Hoult. Rab Paul added an electric pump to feed fuel to the engine and Harry Moffat completed a brand new hand brake system on the drive wheel. In a much needed aesthetic makeover, the ski tow pylons were painted in green. In one of the very few dry weekends of the summer, we organised our first family-friendly work party on Lowther Hill, with young members of the Club visiting the tow and slope, and helping to paint the Engine Hut with a water repellent coat of green wood stain.

Although the fruit of this labour would not be seen until a few months later, in summer 2015 we started planning and costing the snowfencing options. We also looked into the fitting / replacement of a new system of guides for the ski tow wheels. Thanks to Steven Gillespie for his donation of Dexion in response to our appeal for materials.

We were equally busy off the hill. The Ski Club's application to become a Community Interest Company was sent and approved, as was the Planning amendment which allows us to build a bigger clubhouse. The revised clubhouse plans include garage space to accommodate the snowgroomer which has been offered to us by Yad Moss, and extra storing space for equipment that is currently spread in different locations between Leadhills and Wanlockhead. Much effort was invested into finalising the amended design and technical specs of the building while liaising with the potential funders to ensure that the new building remained eligible for funding.

Autumn 2015 was also a busy period. Thanks to Tim Mullens, October saw the launch of the crowdfunder towards the purchase of a snowgroomer PB130D from Yad Moss (previously owned by Cairngorm). This will be the only pistebasher in operation in the south of Scotland and, with the help of snowfencing, could potentially double the skiable days on Lowther Hill.

In the same month, thanks to the support of Alan Mackay of WinterHighland.info, Lowther Hills was added to Winterhighland's App. This is Scotland's most popular snowsports application software for iPhone and Android users with regular lift, snow and weather report data covering Scotland's ski areas.

October was also the month we held our first sport event, the Lowther Hills Snowball Cycling Sportive. The event was organised to help fundraising towards the groomer and raise our profile amongst potential funders for the clubhouse. Over a hundred riders finished on Scotland's highest tarmac road on the summit of Lowther Hill, alongside our ski slope. We cannot thank enough the more than 20 volunteers, who made the event a success. A special thanks to Ross Dolder who brought a few donations to the Club thanks to the sale of his stunning photos of the race.

In November, we presented the much-praised 2015/16 membership pass, kindly designed by our renown illustrator Andrew Foley from Leadhills. On Lowther, there was substantial machinery activity, as a digger was needed to remove the two main hazards to skiers: the remains of the old South of Scotland Ski Club tractor, and the drainage ditch that crossed the ski slope. Improvements were carried out with the electrical and safety systems of the ski tow. We replaced the original single skin diesel tank with a state of the art, bunded fuel tank thanks to a generous donation by the Scottish engineering firm, Blake Group. Thanks also to Chris Penny who single-handedly disassembled, cleaned the tank, and assembled the tank back during a very cold weekend.

The first dusting of snow on Lowther Hill came on 13<sup>th</sup> November, a bit later than usual. The Met Office announced it had been the dullest November in 86 years. The lack of light affected the webcams, which remained unable to gain power during most of the late Autumn and early Winter despite the efforts of Alan Mackay, who came in December to carry out further improvements with the installation.

The summer's poor weather conditions prevented us from making as much progress on the hill as we would have liked. However, November was an even worse month for pre-season works with

storm Abigail, ex-hurricane Kate, and storm Clogagh making it impossible to hold work parties on the hill most weekends. These were followed by storm Desmond, which on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> December destroyed and flew our temporary portacabin shelter down into the Shortcleuch gully. The portacabin was a donation by Dumfries track business, Clark Tracks, and had required hundreds of hours of volunteer work involving: the collection and transport of the portacabin to Leadhills; finding a place where to leave the portacabin while permissions were sought from Planning and landowner; groundworks and preparing a base for the structure; organising a specialist transport, crane, and support for the relocation of the portacabin; re-turfing the site after the groundworks; cleaning the interior of the portacabin; laying a waterproof vinyl flooring; testing the electrics; and, sourcing furniture donations.

We rolled our sleeves up and cleared the debris off the hill just before Christmas in snowy, windy and miserable working conditions. Operating in an environment like Lowther Hill, weather damage can be expected, but the timing of this incident just before the start of the season was disappointing. The clearing up work added further delay to our already very tight schedule and prevented us, for example, from erecting the Tenax plastic snowfencing.

With the skiing season about to start, we got the Nursery slope at Leadhills ready for operations. Chris Penny brought the portable tows to Lanark to be serviced. The great novelty of the season was the floodlit slope, which allowed skiing to take place in the evenings, particularly beneficial to the secondary school children and working parents. Night skiing was a much praised addition to our activities and another example of our ingenuity which we are aware that has already been copied elsewhere. Thanks should be given to Hopetoun Arms for a substantial donation towards the purchase of the floodlights. Thanks also to Jonathan Cook who donated two professional floodlights, which were eventually not used at the Nursery slope, but remain in storage for the future clubhouse.

In December, thanks to the hard work by Alasdair Walker of the snowboarding school 'The Northern Movement', the Ski Club took credit for organising snowboarding instruction for Lowther Hills members at Newmilns dry ski slope. We look forward to building on Alasdair's work and providing top quality instruction and coaching on a regular basis.

All volunteer efforts were diverted to ski tow operations for a couple of weeks as the snow finally arrived on the 8th of January 2016. The month was very busy for administration, particularly for the Club's secretary Kelly Gardiner-Penny, in terms of dealing with over two hundred new memberships and miscellaneous queries. We made progress with our snowfencing plans and secured a generous donation of materials from Dumfries Timber. Works on the exhaust pipe of the Lowther tow were completed. In recognition of our good work, the Scottish Schools Snowsports Association (SSSA) offered Lowther Hills to host the 2016 SSSA Alpine Race Series for primary and secondary schools alongside Cairngorm, Glencoe, Glenshee, Lecht and Nevis Range. We were delighted to have been offered to host a national snowsport event. However, due to the lack of clubhouse facilities and unavailability of core volunteers, we regrettably had to decline the offer.

Due to the lack of time amongst our core group of volunteers, we advertised a seasonal employment opportunity for a ski tow operator. No formal applications were received. Despite this, we managed to open the slope for 13 days in January.

February saw some work activity on Lowther Hill. This included repairs of weather damage to the pylons, as it was expected that the tow would operate in February. Unfortunately, the tow never opened due to lack of snow and unavailability of volunteers. More progress was made off the hill thanks to Tim Mullens, who after months of planning and liaising with the suppliers opened the Lowther Hills shop with a selection of branded hoodies. Also thanks to Tim, the Pistebasher Appeal hit the £3,000 mark in donations, approaching third of the total sum required for purchasing the pistebasher.

March saw the usual packing up of equipment at the Nursery slope in Leadhills. In April, the rope of the Lowther tow was brought to Whiteside and put under a tarpauline for the next season. There was also some reorganisation of storage, including the relocation of the portable ski tows and near

200 helmets to a new location in Wanlockhead.

In May, we finished the works on the eroded drainage ditches that had started in Autumn 2015. The ditch on the upper half of the slope was raked, sown with grass, and dug with small runoff channels filled with shale to prevent further water runoff. The smaller ditch at the bottom of the slope was piped, although further work smoothing the land contour is still needed. Thanks to a donation by Jo MacDonald, turf rolls were laid on the groundworks of the upper drainage ditch along the uphill track of the tow to ensure that ski and snowboard bases are not scratched by shale. Thanks should also be given David Warnock who did most of the slope work in May and remains one of the Club's most regular volunteers on the hill.

There is always continuous planning and admin work running in the background, even when it looks like there is nothing happening on the hill. After much consideration we decided not to hold the Snowball Cycling Sportive this year as it looked like we would not have enough resources and people to take responsibility for organising a successful event in the Autumn.

Substantial progress was made with the funding applications towards the new clubhouse in June and July. In August, Alan Mackay and Ross Dolder upgraded the Club's webcams. This included reconfigurations of the entire system and installations of additional hardware, including a further solar panel and a directional transmitter to isolate the webcam data from the background noise of the NATS radar. As a result, the webcams have been much more reliable.

In September, after several months of admin work, a grant request submitted by Des Reid to South Lanarkshire Council provided £400 assistance towards snowfencing. In addition, applications to Sport Scotland and the Clyde Wind Farm Fund for a total of £89,000 were finally submitted and are being processed. Further progress was made with the outstanding plans to replace wheels and guides of the Lowther tow, and also with the future replacement of the timber Engine Hut. Mel Owen did a fantastic job putting the CIC's books in order, and our friends at the Lake District Ski Club gave a generous donation of skis and snowboards.

October and November, up to this AGM, have seen a final push of activity on Lowther Hill. The Lowther slope was mowed -for the first time in two years- and this is expected to make skiing possible on a much thinner snow base. Three tow pylons were dug out and re-aligned, and two pylons that had suffered storm damage in the last winter were re-welded by Rab Paul and brought back to the hill. Further improvements were made with the emergency kill switches. The alternator at the Lowther tow engine failed during routine maintenance and is currently being fixed. After many months of planning, the Club has purchased 19 new nylon wheels to replace the ageing old car wheels of the tow.

The greatest achievement of Autumn 2016 is the progress with the snowfencing plans. Over two weekends, a tracked post knocker has put 200 posts along the 450 metres of the tow. When the posts are fully slatted next year, the snowfence is expected to provide a large leeward drift on the Throw Rig slope and a smaller drift on the windward uphill line. Finally, we were able to get snowfencing plans ahead of schedule thanks to a substantial donation of pallet slats by Abington's haulage company, Reive and Grossart. The pallets have been inserted into the sheep fence that runs alongside the main slope. That adds 500 more metres of temporary snowfencing, which is expected to last at least a couple of seasons until the Club's finances allow to replace the existing sheep fence with a better performing post and rail snowfence.

## 5. Funding

Our Treasurer will report in detail about the Club's finances. We have shown to be competent at self-financing operations, finding funding and using it sustainably. Considering this is our second year of operations, and despite much of our revenues being channelled towards the construction of the new facilities, we have managed to maintain a satisfactory bank balance.

Lowther Hills is not a club that relies on grants. Our operating cost structure is designed to be sustainable and covered by our membership fees.

However, public funding is available for ski centres. In 2014, the ski centres in the Highlands received £5.5 million of public funding to improve their facilities. We approached the Scottish Government Minister for Tourism to ask if Lowther Hill in the south of Scotland could receive a fair proportion of the public funding available to the other ski centres in the Highlands. We were initially directed to a couple of alternative funding programmes, which proved to be unsuccessful. Over the past year and a half, the Club has been in discussions with Sport Scotland, the national agency for sport. Much time has been invested liaising with the potential funders and amending the Clubhouse plans to suit their requirements. In the past six months, the paperwork and supporting documents have been submitted for the Clubhouse. This has required the equivalent of one month of full time work. It has been an enormous effort for a Club of our size. We hope that our recent funding application to Sport Scotland will commit the Government to develop snowsport facilities also in the south of Scotland.

## 6. Showcasing our work and making friends

It is important that Lowther Hills Ski Club shows its achievements. It makes our members proud, it attracts volunteers that keep the Club running, and makes it easier to find funding.

We aim to communicate proactively with the members, the local community, and the wider public. Although we never managed to organise our traditional Open Day in 2015-2016, we had over ten work parties -which are not just a way of getting things built, but offer a social opportunity to meet other members and discuss club matters. We have the most active ski club newsletter in Scotland and maintain an active social media presence with regular club updates. Updates were also provided at meetings of Leadhills Community Council and Wanlockhead Village Council. A stall was available at Leadhills Gala Day in August 2015 (unfortunately none of the directors were available to organise a stall at the 2016 Gala). In October 2015, we were honoured to be invited to give a talk at Leadhills Miners Library about the history of snowsports in the Lowthers.

We were proud to see Newall Hunter, Leadhills lad who learnt to ski on Lowther Hill, to become the first Scot (and the 14<sup>th</sup> person in the world) to climb the highest peaks on each of the seven continents and reach both the North and South Poles. In September 2016, we were thrilled to report that our Alasdair Walker had been selected for the British Snowboard team, which could lead to selection for the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

As always, we try to find a balance between advertising Lowther Hills to attract the interest of volunteers and funders, and to avoid raising too many expectations. The most relevant media appearances of the last year include: features on BBC Radio Scotland's Out of Doors (August and October 2015) and a headline on BBC South of Scotland News, (published after we lost the portacabin), which read "Lowther Hills Ski Club could thrive with government help". Sanquhar's EME Furniture donated advertising space on the Nithsdale Times in November 2015, and the Daily Record (January 2016) published an article saying that Lowther Hills Ski Club could help people to stick to new year's fitness promises. The Daily Record also reported during the mild December 2015 that Wanlockhead would be one of the only places in Scotland not to feel the effect of melting ice caps. Finally, the publication of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations highlighted Lowther Hills as one of Scotland's top "adventurous social enterprises", and Snowsport Scotland -the national governing body for snowsports- featured "Scotland's newest ski area" on their Snow News as an example of good practice for Scottish snowsports. With almost four out of five local children under 16 being members of the Club, Lowther Hills was credited having the highest ratio of participation in snowsports in any community in Scotland.

Special thanks should be given to WinterHighland.info, Scotland's most popular skiing website, which continues to feature Lowther Hills as Scotland's 6th ski centre. As a result of the aforementioned publicity, Lowther Hills has attracted 491 subscribers to the newsletter, 251 followers on Twitter, and 2289 followers on Facebook.

## 7. Next year's opportunities

Every sports club needs suitable grounds to operate successfully and the slopes on Lowther Hill provide an optimal ground for skiing. The Club obtained a planning permission two years ago to build the clubhouse on Whiteside. However, final funding applications for the clubhouse were not submitted until this year. Having the Clubhouse built before next season 2017/18 is a key priority to ensure that members are able to enjoy comfortable shelter and social space; to have attractive facilities for the volunteers; to have a garage for the snowgroomer; and, to store our equipment which is currently spread in several locations and causes transport and storage problems.

Lowther Hills Ski Club was created to ensure the permanence of skiing facilities on Lowther Hill. The clubhouse is a key development in that vision. It is needed for the continuity of our membership, especially for the 40% of under-16s who will soon grow out of the beginners' area.

The clubhouse, which is expected to be ready before next season, will bring substantial changes to the Club. It will open access to the Lowther Hill snowfields for more skiers than at present. Skier/days and revenues will increase, as will complexity of operations and the management of a larger and a more diverse membership. New issues, such as transport to the facilities on Lowther Hill, group bookings or disability-friendly activities are likely to appear.

Other changes potentially affecting the Ski Club should also be mentioned. The communities of Wanlockhead and Leadhills are both undergoing proposals of community land buyouts. If successful, they could open different opportunities for the Ski Club as the two villages see outdoor recreation and winter sports as key for the future of the area. However, the landowners Buccleuch and Hopetoun Estates are planning a major windfarm development, which, if successful, could alter the landscape of the Lowther Hills and potentially impact the demographics of the villages. Changes may happen in the area and the future directors will have to navigate the Club through these changes.

Snowfencing is likely to be another highlight in the next season. Building on what we have achieved this year, the Club should have sufficient resources next season to complete the recent snowfence along the Lowther tow and the Throw Rig slope, as well as to continue the snowfencing to the clubhouse, and cover the small Nursery areas at Whiteside.

The Engine Hut, which is reaching the end of its life, may be replaced with a fit for purpose building with more storage space, a suitable First Aid point, and a space for the lift operator. Initial discussions have been held with a Scottish university to provide plans for an eco-design building.

The next team of directors have also the opportunity to organise the Snowball Sportive cycling event, which provided great exposure for the Ski Club and has the potential to be an important revenue generator, as well as an important date on the UK cycling calendar. The clubhouse on Lowther Hill would be a great asset for such an event.

There are many things the Ski Club could do, but they will only happen if there are enough volunteers to help or take responsibility for the projects. Volunteers remain the blood of this club. We need to attract and retain people by providing attractive facilities and a friendly environment. We are in the right course and we have achieved a lot considering that we are doing this in our free time and with -so far- no public funding. So, for those who have donated equipment, services and money to the Club; to the directors who have given their time to manage the Club on behalf of the members; and, to our fantastic volunteers, thank you very much for another rewarding year.