



LOWTHER HILLS SKI CLUB

Annual Report, 2016/17

1. Thank you

This is already the 5th Annual General Meeting since the old Leadhills Ski Club was reactivated in 2013 and changed its name to Lowther Hills Ski Club.

In 2013/14 we used the season for building, training and testing the equipment with our understanding local members in Leadhills and Wanlockhead. The season 2014/15 was the first time that we actively promoted the Ski Club to the general public and proved that we could run the ski tows for at least 20 days. The 2015/16 season was poor for skiing but continued to see further development on the hill and redoubled efforts to obtain the funding for the club's key development: the clubhouse. The last season 2016/17 was the poorest ski season in living memory in the Lowther Hills, and our regular volunteers found themselves unable to dedicate as much time to the club as they had in previous seasons. On the other hand, we were pleased to announce that the club had at last convinced funders to grant the £88,956 funding for the clubhouse at Lowther Hill, a major development over which we fought and worked very hard for over the past years.

Before going through last year's achievements, let us remember that Lowther Hills Ski Club is run by volunteers. Volunteers are the life blood of the club. They dedicate hours of their time and energy, working unpaid in a variety of ways. Operating a ski lift, building a snowfence, servicing the quad bike, borrowing tools, donating building materials, designing a ski pass, welcoming visitors at the nursery slope... there are many ways to help the Ski Club and gratitude should be expressed to all those who have contributed in different ways to make this happen.

This year we see Tim Mullens, Cath Hault and Des Reid retiring as Directors. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them on behalf of all the members for their support and for helping to form a board at our 2016 AGM.

To everybody, members who support Lowther Hills Ski Club with their membership, people who have donated towards the Club's crowdfunding campaigns, and the volunteers who give unpaid hours of their time and work for the common good, thank you for making this happen.

2. The Ski Season 2016/17

The 2016/17 was an extremely poor season across Scotland, some reported to have been the warmest in the past 60 years. In the Highlands, which see more snow than the south of Scotland, most ski centres just managed to open barely more than a dozen days. Lowther Hills only run the tows 5 days due to a mix of the warmest season in living memory and a lack of volunteers just on some of those days where we had the snow. Still, had we had volunteers available at all times, last season we could have probably run the tows around 15 days.

The first dusting of snow on Lowther Hill came on the 7th November, six days earlier than in the previous season 2015/16, but still a bit later than usual as the hills usually see the first dustings of snow in October.

The best snow of the season arrived on Lowther Hill between the third and fourth week of November, but all our volunteers with ski tow operation training happened to be unavailable during that period. We unfortunately lost there not just a week of skiing, but possibly the most important week of the season. Most ski club memberships are issued before Christmas; few people get their ski club memberships after the Christmas period. Missing the week of snow in November eventually meant that the club lost most of its memberships revenue as sufficient snow did not return until the 12th of January – and by then many people were already going into spring mode.

December was a mild month across Scotland which only left a thin dusting of snow on Lowther Hill after Christmas, as well as the usual storms we see in the early winter – this year they were Storm Barbara and Storm Connor- which fortunately made no major damage on the hill.

On the 11th of January Alan Mackay of WinterHighland unveiled a new webcam in Leadhills which is extremely helpful to see the road conditions in the village. It started snowing just as the webcam went live.

The first day of operations took place on the evening of the 12th of January at the nursery slope in Leadhills thanks to an unexpected snowfall and the last minute availability of a volunteer. This was a reminder of how skiing conditions in the Lowther Hills can be. If skiing in Scotland can be unreliable, in the Lowther Hills of the south of Scotland it is like a lottery. The Lowther Hills do get snow, but it can come at any time and you need to be available at short notice to enjoy the best of it. This is a message that the club needs to keep making clear to all their members to avoid disappointment amongst those that might expect the south of Scotland to have more reliable conditions like in the Highlands or even the Alps.

While sleet and thin dustings of snow came and went over the following weeks, there was no further skiing until the 10th February. This happened at the nursery slope in grassy conditions. As the little snow that was in the village melted away, we opened Lowther Hill on the 11th. The conditions were not ideal with wind gusts of over 60mph, snowfall and poor visibility, but we were concerned that there were not many days left of the season and we decided to open Lowther Hill. We spent most of the day fixing sections of the tenax snowfence that was about to take off, but we did manage to run the tow and the three members that braved the weather on the hill had the opportunity to enjoy a slide.

We opened again Lowther Hill on the 14th in the only day of sunny skiing although in very thin conditions. We were able to open thanks to the new snowfence that allowed the towline to be skiable all the way to the top, and the combination of mowing and pallet snowfence alongside the boundary fence. Without snowfencing, we would not have been able to open. Again, this is a reminder of the importance of a proper network of snowfences on the hill, which could see an average season extended up to 30 to 40 skiing days when the snowfencing works are complete and we have the snowgroomer.

The wet and mild weather pattern continued for the rest of the month. We were able to open the village slope on the 23rd of February in wet conditions; that turned out to be the

last skiing day of the season. Despite the mild weather, January, February and March had a number of brief snowfalls with enough accumulation to allow the tows to operate. However, the past season was also exceptional in the sense that trained volunteers had been unavailable in those precise days when they were needed.

The last dusting of snow on Lowther Hill last season happened on the 16th of April, closing the warmest winter season in living memory.

3. Membership and volunteers

Membership of the Lowther Hills Ski Club currently stands at 226, slightly down from last year's 232 members. 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.

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.

At last year's AGM we reported that membership numbers have doubled from the previous season 2014/15, but volunteer participation had 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 remain grateful 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 suitable 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. The ski club has tried to employ a ski lift operator in the seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 without success. There has been a lack of people interested in the job, and those who have showed an interest found the job could not provide a reliable income due to its irregular dependency on suitable snow conditions.

Let us remember that Lowther Hills Ski Club was created to ensure the permanence of skiing facilities on Lowther Hill. Skiing had taken place in the Lowther Hills since the 1920s thanks to the initiative of a number of enterprising local people and ski clubs. However, they all eventually gave up due to the demanding nature of skiing operations. We have done a great job so far at Lowther Hills Ski Club; of all the people who have operated ski lifts in the area in the past hundred years, we are the only ones who have managed to build permanent facilities on the hill: a 450 metre long rope tow, an engine hut, and a clubhouse in 2018. We are in the right path and have plenty to celebrate, but there is still more to be done until Lowther Hills Ski Club Community Interest Company becomes a self-regenerating and sustainable organisation.

4. Current and new developments for 2017/18

In the past year we have completed the first phase of planned snowfence works. A 450 metre line of snowfence posts was put along the Lowther Hill towline, 220 metres of timber rail snowfence was completed on the upper half of the tow up to chest height, and a basic snowfence was built with pallet slats alongside the 600 metres of the boundary fence between Leadhills and Wanlockhead thanks to a generous donation of pallet slats by Abington's haulage company Rieve and Grossart.

Phase 2 of snowfencing works should see this year more timber rails along the Lowther Hill tow and at one of the nursery slopes on Whiteside. Funding applications are due to be submitted before the end of this year.

Ongoing improvement of the Lowther Hill ski tow was carried out last year with new emergency stop buttons, refinements to the electrical installation and fuel lines, and new nylon wheels which will lengthen the life of the rope. This season we will replace by a set of small nylon wheels the metal hooks which hold the rope away from the ground. This improvement will reduce the wear and tear of the rope. It will also allow to run the rope without the need to take the rope off the hooks, thus saving the ski tow operator over 30 minutes of work time at the start of the shift.

A system of cargo straps was put in place at the bottom of the tow as a temporary tensioning system which, although it has been an improvement, it is not yet a fully

satisfactory time and work efficient solution. New improvements on the tensioning system will need to be carried out in the coming season.

The tow's rope has been suffering weather damage over the past three years as it has been lying permanently on the hill due to a lack of storage space. Routine maintenance and repairs has been carried out but there may be only one to two seasons of life left on the rope. We will need to investigate suitable replacement options for the rope in the course of the next season.

The mower and quad bike are also in need of attention and will need to be serviced soon. The thread on the quad's tyres is nearly gone after four years of work, so they will need to be replaced before the new season starts.

Thanks to Alan Mackay, the webcam at Lowther Hill went through further improvements last year with a new solar panel and a new more advanced high resolution camera. This seems to have solved the issues of lack of power during the dullest months of the year. A new system to recharge the tow batteries directly from the engine was put in place by our Des Reid.

The clubhouse is the key development that will mark a major milestone in the sustainability of the club. At present, the club can only offer outdoor recreation in winter, on the open hillside with no shelter from the cold. The ski tow at Lowther Hill is a 45 minute walk from the nearest parking place. This is not everybody's cup of tea and definitely not suitable for families with young children.

The issue of a lack of lease with Hopetoun Estate has been ongoing over the past four years. As of today, the estate still refuses to offer reasonable security of tenure over the ski area. We were obviously disappointed that no lease was in place by the time that the funding was available, as the ski club and contractors were ready to start with the building this year.

We therefore will not be able to have the clubhouse built this season. This will have a critical knock on effect on many aspects, from a reduction of the club's income to the paralysis of the crowdfunder for the snowgroomer, or the lack of storage space for the many items that have been donated to the club.

Despite the estate's intransigence, the current prospect of a community land buyout in Leadhills may get them to compromise on a limited licence which is still undergoing negotiation. While this would be short of a satisfactory agreement for future development and investment at the ski club, it could potentially allow the club to not lose the grant funding and to start building the clubhouse as soon as the winter is over, by mid-April 2018. Works could then be completed by summer 2018.

Pending on volunteer availability, we will look into start holding summer events such as the Lowther Hill Cycling Sportive which brought much exposure, entertainment, and funds to the ski club two years ago.

Transport from the villages to the clubhouse with a ski bus has been discussed at past ski club Committee meetings. We will continue to explore options after the clubhouse is built, with the purpose of facilitating young children and families access to the ski slopes at Lowther Hill.

The Engine Hut has reached the end of its life and needs to be replaced with a fit for purpose building with more storage space, a suitable First Aid point, and a space for the lift operator. A number of options were considered last year, none of which produced a result. We will need to continue looking into solutions and ensure that a new hut is in place before the season 2018/19.

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 very little funding -considering the levels of funding that the average ski centre needs.

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.