



# LOWTHER HILLS SKI CLUB

## Chairman's Report, 2014

This year has been remarkable. We reformed the Ski Club after two decades of inactivity, we acquired and successfully ran ski tows in Leadhills and Lowther Hill, we got the eyes of the skiing community in Scotland looking at us, we started raising the profile of our area as a potential outdoor capital of the South of Scotland, and we created exciting development opportunities for the future.

I would like to thank the Committee members and Volunteers for their work during the year. The work necessary to support a smoothly running Ski Club is considerable, but the contributions of all the dedicated Committee members and Volunteers makes it appear easy.

In particular, Teresa Brassier, Vicky Cumming and Emma Dolphin will be retiring from the Committee this year and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them personally and on behalf of all the members for their support and for helping to form a working Committee at our 2013 AGM.

Teresa, Vicky and Emma's retirement from the Committee also presents the Ski Club with an opportunity for new talent. If there is anyone reading this before the AGM who is thinking about how they could contribute some of their time to the Ski Club, please make yourself known to myself or another Committee member so we can discuss the role.

### 1. Reactivation of the Ski Club

On 5<sup>th</sup> September 2013 a meeting was held to reactivate the Leadhills Ski Club, which had fallen dormant since the last chairman Bob Cumming passed away. On the 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013 we held an AGM, elected a new Committee, and introduced some amendments to the Constitution. The most noticeable change in the Constitution was the name of the *Leadhills Ski Club*, which became *Lowther Hills Ski Club* to include Wanlockhead and reflect the traditional location of the ski slopes.

We are grateful to our Treasurer Graham Roberts for his assistance in reforming the Ski Club and ensuring an easy transition to where we are now.

At the AGM and subsequent meetings of the Committee we started looking at ways to facilitate skiing in our area in an organised and regular fashion. Our intentions to provide mechanised uplift locally were announced at Wanlockhead Village Council on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013 and at Leadhills Community Council on the following day.

### 2. The Skiing Season 2013/2014

We investigated potential uplift options and, with the winter just round the corner, on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2013 we obtained 4 portable ski tows from Harwood Ski Federation Ltd as part of a larger acquisition of equipment to which I shall refer later.

The ski tows were fixed and tuned up by our Chief Engineer Rab Paul, without whom all our plans would simply not have happened. We are most indebted for his commitment to the Ski Club.

With the much appreciated help of Lowther pioneer Nigel Marsh, a ski tow was successfully tested at the Leadhills Playground on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2013. We were lucky to get a flurry of snow just after the tow was set up and we enjoyed our first day of skiing on barely a couple of centimetres of snow.

Winter came actually very late last season. Despite a cracking season on the higher slopes in the Highlands, this may have possibly been the mildest and wettest winter in living memory in the Lowthers.

When the snow finally came to the village in mid January, we were prepared thanks to Leadhills Golf Club, which kindly allowed us to run the tow on their grounds, and our Chris Penny who generously purchased a quad bike to allow us to carry the heavy portable ski tow around.

On 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014 we ran a tow on Leadhills Golf Course for our own training purposes. Although it was not publicly advertised, it is not easy to keep secrets in Leadhills and many families spontaneously turned up with skis and sledges and everybody enjoyed a fantastic day on the slope. This may have possibly been the first time that a ski tow was operated in Leadhills since Bob Cumming ran his tow in the 1980s.

After finally receiving temporary permission from Hopetoun to run a portable ski tow on Lowther Hill, on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2014 we took an engine to Lowther Hill and for the first time provided uplift for people from outside the village (a family from Penpont).

Thanks to Chris Penny's extraordinary dedication, a tow was operated daily between the 12th-15th February 2014 and provided much enjoyment to local families as well as a few people from outside our villages who caught wind of our activities through the social media.

In total, we ran a ski tow seven days last season, on which it was going to be a test year to train and learn about our capacities before undertaking more ambitious objectives. I am satisfied with what we achieved and, as expected, the experience suggests we will be able to provide around 20 days of skiing per season, provided we have enough volunteers and normal winter weather patterns.

### 3. Preparing for Season 2014/2015

In November 2013 the Ski Club submitted a funding application to the Commonwealth Games for a stock of skiing equipment to borrow to children and adults who may not have the means to purchase their own equipment. Unfortunately the outcome was unsuccessful, but we are grateful to Elysha Ramage for all the work she spent in the funding application.

Also in November 2013 we learnt that Harwood Ski Federation Ltd was closing down their ski field in the Pennines. This provided us with the opportunity to purchase their equipment and relocate it to Lowther Hill.

Since January 2014 there has been a steady flow of meetings and correspondence, mainly with Snowsport Scotland, the Clyde Wind Farm Fund, South Lanarkshire Council and Dumfries & Galloway's planning departments, Hopetoun and Buccleuch estates, and NATS, to ensure that the Ski Club presented a successful proposal to put permanent skiing facilities on Lowther Hill.

Committee site visits were organised during spring and summer to discuss the project and a successful Volunteer Open Day, which was attended by some well-known skiers from the South of Scotland, was held on the 27<sup>th</sup> July to gather support and feedback about our plans.

Clyde Wind Farm funding for Harwood's equipment was awarded in August 2014. The grant covers the purchase of Harwood's ski tow (engine, pylons and rope), quad bike, and tow-behind mower, as well as the transport of the equipment to Leadhills and Wanlockhead, a provision for snow fencing, and a First Aid course for three Ski Club volunteers.

The planning application for the ski tow, engine hut and clubhouse was submitted on the 4<sup>th</sup> August and validated on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September.

As part of our agreement with Harwood, Lowther Hills Ski Club members and our new Volunteers have travelled five times to Harwood in the past months to help them clear their ski slope.

Our friends at Harwood have generously donated us a number of useful items, from stretchers to piste poles. Unfortunately, we were not able to secure their Clubhouse and Engine Hut as the former was claimed first by the local farmer, and the latter turned out to be in a poor condition and not worth to be re-assembled on Lowther Hill.

We are most grateful to all our Volunteers who worked extremely hard dismantling Harwood's facilities and gave their time to help this project become a reality. Thanks to them, Harwood's equipment is now stored in different parts of Leadhills and Wanlockhead, awaiting to be relocated to Lowther Hill after the planning approval comes through between the end of September – mid October.

#### 4. Public Awareness

Last season 2013/2014 we deliberately avoided publicity outside the villages as our main objective was testing, training and learning about the equipment. We were not ready yet to deliver mechanical uplift on a regular basis to the general public, but our local membership was understanding and that suited us perfectly: with over 20 local members at one time on the slopes, our Leadhills and Wanlockhead membership allowed us to gain experience managing small groups of skiers and sledgers.

The plans for new, permanent skiing facilities on Lowther Hill went public on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014 with the publication of our new website. Since then, the project has been catching the interest of the skiing community across Scotland.

Over the past months there has been a need to strike a balance between advertising our project, attracting the interest of volunteers and funders, and carefully avoid raising too many expectations.

Our project has already been reported in practically all the important UK snow magazines and websites (WinterHighland.info, OnTheSnow.co.uk, Snow-Forecast.com, SkiResort.info), as well as in The Scotsman and BBC Radio Scotland. This type of exposure is useful for future funding applications.

The regional press (Carlisle and Lanark Gazette, Wishaw Press, Nithsdale News) has also caught wind of the project. This has been useful for gaining a number of new volunteers interested to help the Ski Club.

There has been much mention of our plans in the social media, both by individuals and by important organisations such as Snowsport Scotland, Glencoe Mountain Resort, or the outdoor retailer Ellis Brigham to name a few.

I should also mention the Ski Club was represented with a stall at Wiston Lodge's "Grand Day Out" in April 2014 as well as in Leadhills Gala.

There will be more media exposure as the facilities are built and we approach our opening day. Up until now, all the aforementioned publicity has generated 249 followers on Facebook, 38 on Twitter, and 84 subscribers to the Ski Club's newsletter.

## 5. Membership, Volunteering and Donations

As previously mentioned, last season 2013/2014 we deliberately avoided seeking a large number of members as training and testing the equipment was our main objective. Our understanding local membership provided us with the flexibility needed to test and train with the new equipment as well as the experience of managing small groups of up to 20 skiers and sledgers on the Golf Course slope.

Around 40 children and adults -practically all of them from Leadhills and Wanlockhead-enjoyed last winter the fun provided by our portable ski tow. Only a few of them took into consideration that the Ski Club operates on a membership-fee basis. At our Committee meeting of 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2014 we agreed that next season we will have a strict policy requesting payment of membership fees to all those who use the Ski Club's equipment.

The Lowther Hills Ski Club is ran by volunteers and gratitude should be expressed to all those who have contributed in different ways to make this happen.

In Autumn 2013 the members of the Committee got together and gave their time to revive the Ski Club. A few of us donated fuel to keep the tows running last winter. Besides being always available to man the ski tow, our Chris Penny loaned walkie-talkies to the Ski Club and bought a quad bike to allow us to carry the portable tow around. Nigel Marsh donated salopettes, 4 pairs of skis and 3 pairs of boots for children, and made half a dozen of metal grippers for our rope tow. And the Foley family has loaned their chemical toilet to be used in the clubhouse next year until a more permanent toilet solution is found.

Since the publication of the website and the Volunteer Open Day in July, the Ski Club has received an additional number of donations. David Warnock generously gave the Ski Club a pair of adult skis and goggles, and a bundle of very useful ratchet straps. Peter Stewart kindly offered to supply us with two sets of skis and free firewood for our clubhouse stove. All the equipment donated to the Ski Club is recorded on a Donations spreadsheet which

is publicly available with the rest of the annual reports.

Also since the our plans went public in July, a number of people have contacted the Ski Club expressing an interest to volunteer. At the time of writing this report, 18 new volunteers from outside our villages, from Dumfries to Bridge of Allan, have expressed an interest to help the Ski Club at work parties. Some of them have specialists skills which will be extremely useful in the future. On top of that figure, we should add over a dozen of volunteers locally available in Leadhills and Wanlockhead. For a volunteer-run organisation, these figures are very promising. The challenge now is the ability to retain and motivate these new volunteers to get actively involved and help the Ski Club regularly.

## 6. The Ski Club's grounds

Every sports club needs suitable grounds to operate and the Lowther Hills Ski Club is no exception to this. The only suitable location for the practice of skiing in our area are the north and west-facing slopes of Lowther Hill, which is divided between Buccleuch and Hopetoun Estates. Access to those grounds is critical for the practice of skiing in our area.

Requests for access and operation of portable ski lifts on Lowther Hill were sent to Buccleuch and Hopetoun after our last AGM at the end of September 2013.

Unfortunately no positive reply was received in the run up to winter 2013/14, so Leadhills Golf Club stepped in and allowed the use of their grounds during the limited number of skiing days that we enjoyed at Leadhills last winter. We are indebted to the Golf Club for their support.

We would also like to thank Troloss Estate for offering us permission to run a ski tow on their land on the south-east facing slopes of Lowther Hill.

As you are aware, a Community Land Buyout public meeting held in Leadhills in January 2014 brought some change to the village. Towards the end of the winter we eventually received temporary permission by Hopetoun Estate to run a portable ski tow on Lowther Hill.

Over the past months we have developed a constructive relationship with Hopetoun Estate. As a result, we have in principle agreed a draft lease which will allow the Ski Club to run a ski tow for intermediates on Lowther Hill and erect a clubhouse at the foot of the Lowther slope at the area known as Whiteside.

On the other hand, no progress has been achieved with Buccleuch Estates regarding our several requests for permission to have the nursery slope on Buccleuch's side of the fence.

A further obstruction has recently appeared as Buccleuch's tenant farmer, Mr Gordon Telfer, has expressed a number of objections to our proposal for a nursery slope as well as to the location of the clubhouse on Hopetoun Estate. Several requests to meet on site and discuss any concern have been extended to Mr Telfer but unfortunately these have not been accepted.

The lack of progress on Buccleuch's side of Lowther Hill since Autumn 2013 has caused strain on our tight schedule to deliver skiing on Lowther Hill by winter 2014/15, as that has

a knock-on effect on our plans for the other side of the fence.

While I have been pleased to report our enormous success on volunteering, fundraising, engineering, planning, donations, media coverage, public awareness, and support from our local community as well as the skiing community from the rest of Scotland, unfortunately I am not today in a position to confirm that this final hurdle has been overcome. I expect however to see some movement on this front before planning permission is granted and within time to allow completion of the development for December 2014 as planned.

## 6. Future opportunities

We have an exciting and busy schedule ahead of us up until the end of 2014. We need to give a final push to build the ski tow, engine hut and clubhouse, and raise the remaining funds needed to finance the clubhouse.

Before we start operations in winter 2014/2015 the new Committee should adopt a Limited company structure to limit the member's liability to £1 should anything ever go wrong.

Over the past months many individuals and organisations have shown an interest in our project and a number of opportunities are there for the next Committee members to take forward: Leadhills school, as well as other schools in our area, could be potentially interested to organise learning experiences at our facilities on Lowther Hill. Snowsports Scotland is keen to work with the Ski Club to develop local talent and organise skiing competitions for the South of Scotland. Ski Mountaineering Scotland has shown an interest to hold races in Lowther Hill. A number of ski instructors in the South of Scotland would be keen to teach children and adults at Lowther Hill. Disability Snowsport UK sees a potential for the provision of snow sports for the disabled at our facilities. A sustainable transport solution between Wanlockhead and our facilities at Lowther Hill is yet to be found when our finances allow. We also need to have proper toilets in place at our clubhouse. Log Home Scotland has offered their Bow House at cost price as a potential brand new clubhouse for the Ski Club. Yad Moss ski centre may be potentially interested to sell us their snowgroomer. NevePlast artificial ski slopes is keen to help the Ski Club to develop a year-round skiing facility as planned by Bob Cumming in the 1980s.

An opportunity has potentially arisen for the Ski Club to apply for Scottish Government funding to employ a development officer for a year to take those projects forward. The new Committee will have the task to decide the future direction of the Ski Club. I believe the Lowther Hills have everything needed to make the area the outdoor capital of the South of Scotland, and the Ski Club could be key to the development of the area.