

Dick Phillips – Adventurous Acting Editor

Reminiscing with Jules Cadie

Dick Phillips has decided that he will no longer be the Acting Editor of this newsletter. He has reluctantly but diligently occupied the position since the first editor, his wife Nan, died in 2002. Initially this seemed to be an opportunity to look back at his time on Alston Moor. However, Dick claims that local people “know enough about what I do here”, so was keener to talk about his life and adventures in other places.



He was raised in SE London, near Bromley. He remembers seeing Spitfires in action in the skies above him, attacking the notorious Heinkel 111 bombers, and the Junkers 88s, both of which were responsible for so much destruction to London during the Blitz.

He signed-up to regular Military Service (at 46 Shillings-a-week – better pay than National Service) as aircrew in 1951, and trained as a navigator but never left the ground. He and the RAF parted company to the relief of both parties in 1955, and Dick spent the next 18 months wandering around with his bicycle, walking in Scotland, picking grapes in France, and making his first trip to Iceland – a month-long cycle

tour. Dick describes his dominant activity from that time as cycling. He raced all distances from 440-yards to 12-hour, usually finishing about two-thirds down the field; hence largely unknown beyond the cycling fraternity. He also describes himself as an activist, even a militant, because of his involvement, not with the National Cyclists' Union, but with the British League of Racing Cyclists. This organisation campaigned to bring modern cycling races onto Britain's roads. Previously, only participants in the Isle of Man annual event were able to race on roads specially closed for the occasion. Since that time,

both organisations have amalgamated to become British Cycling.

Ironically, it was not tarmac roads that caught Dick's imagination, but the lure and adventure of wild places. He joined with another forty or so like-minded people to become a founder member of the Rough Stuff Fellowship (RSF), now claiming to be "the world's oldest off-road cycling club"; an organisation that still exists today, of which Dick is a former Vice President. It was under the auspices of the RSF that Dick organised an expedition with three other members to make the first unassisted coast-to-coast crossing of Iceland 60 years' ago, in 1958. Dick had been to Iceland on four previous occasions, including an unsuccessful attempt to cross the high plateau and pass of Sprengistandur in Iceland's centre, so he was both organiser and guide. A definition of "Sprengistandur" provides a dramatic insight to what members of the expedition could expect to endure - it is derived from the Icelandic noun *sandur* "sand", which denotes Iceland's volcanic black ash deserts, and the verb *sprengja* that means "to ride a horse to death; to be on the point of bursting after running for too long" – a vast area with no fodder for horses, no human habitation for shelter, and fast-flowing glacial rivers. Although an achievement worthy of its own book, Dick simply said in an interview "...it was just that we were the first people to do it".

Dick worked for a tour operator in London in 1959 and 1960, before deciding to cut loose. "I thought I'd have a go at running my own show", he says. "I thought to run it for a couple of years. It would be worth doing even if it failed. I ended up running it for 52 years!" He compiled and printed his first programme and arrived ashore in Iceland with £110 in his pocket. He found an old farmhouse, which he converted into his headquarters and a hostel, Fljótsdalur, with its view of the ice-caps, the world-famous Eyjafjallajökull, and its bigger neighbour Mýrdalsjökull, and from where he led his walking tours. He lived there, summer and winter, working on a local farm and exploring the area to seek out new routes through the mountains for his walking groups.

The Icelandic language is difficult to learn, and Dick felt he did not have a sufficient understanding of it to be a full-time resident. On a trip back to Britain in 1970, delivering lectures in Skipton and Darlington about his Icelandic experiences, he decided that Kettlewell in the Yorkshire Dales would be a nice place to live. However, comparing prices of £4K in Kettlewell with £1.2K in Nenthead meant that Wharfedale's loss was Alston Moor's gain, and he consequently bought Whitehall above Nenthead, "with no complaints". He was still officially a resident of Iceland until 2000, but it was when he was asked by

The Times to write an article about Iceland at the time of an Icelandic state visit to the UK that he realised that Nenthead meant home for him. In 1983 he contested a seat on Alston Moor Parish Council and won (he was the only one of seven to produce a manifesto) with 117 votes. He has held the seat continuously since then, making him Alston Moor's longest-serving parish councillor. Someone at some time may like to calculate how many times an Icelandic woolly jumper has been seen at a council meeting. Dick would surely be responsible for the greatest number by far. He is also a founder member of the British Mountain Bothies Association, has been chairman of Greg's Hut Association, and been committed to various other organisations to do with tourism and cycling.

Meanwhile, his Icelandic travel business continued to develop. He acted as an agent for several organisations, making arrangements for school parties, calculating the logistics and keeping stages supplied, and always working to keep the price down. In 1963, Fljótssdalur was designated as a Youth Hostel. He established a tourist bureau in what was a country with undeveloped transport and tourist infrastructures. Dick now believes that the Icelandic tourist industry has become overdeveloped. Although he was well accepted in his own valley at Fljótssdalur, Dick did experience some xenophobia and resentment from elsewhere in Iceland. Even the tax revenue could not provide documentation in English. Since those times, the population of Iceland has more than doubled to over 300,000, with immigration from Poland in particular. His British-born first wife, Margaret, became fluent in Icelandic, and after their divorce she married the neighbouring farmer, looking after Fljótssdalur in the winter months when he would return to England, even when their marriage had ended. Her child, Anna, spoke English as her first language and used to correct her English teacher at primary school and later attended Edinburgh University. Anna now runs the farm; the last remaining in the upper valley that is not a weekend retreat or a hobby farm.

By 1973 Dick needed an extra leader. Paul Stevens fitted the role perfectly, and they went on to form a partnership in 1977. In an increasingly commercialised industry, Dick and Paul continued with the use of simple mountain shelters and maintaining a light footprint. The hostel at Fljótssdalur is still run by Paul and his wife Judi, whose professional life is as Senior Librarian at Keele University. Reading the comments on Trip Advisor about Fljótssdalur vindicates the policy embraced by Dick in 1963 "... to get the most from visits to Iceland without adding to expenses. The principles of self-help

will come naturally to those who find Iceland most attractive, and it is not his policy to provide services of a type which would change the essential character of the country.”



Dick wanted to learn all he could about Iceland, so sought out bookshops and book sellers wherever he was. As the collection of books, magazines and articles grew, he found the need to catalogue them, firstly by means of a card index, which he later transferred to computer. The collection, entitled “Books on Iceland and Faroe”, is kept at Flijótsdalur and at Nenthead, and currently numbers about 1600, cross-referenced and bound. They are mostly in English, with some in German, French and Faroese. In time to come, they will be placed in a special archive in the folk museum at Skógar, close to the spectacular Skógafoss waterfall.

What is missing from Dick’s catalogue is his own story of recollections of Iceland, and the unique perception that only he possesses, as an adventurer and first-hand observer, of the social and political changes that Iceland continues to experience, against a background of an extensive knowledge of Iceland’s history. This ranges from memories of pack horses carrying hay, to the arrival of the first hay balers in 1963. From the dates for clipping sheep, for sending them out to the fells and bringing them back to winter barns, and how the first flush of spring green coincides at Flijótsdalur – a mere 400ft above sea-level – with his Nenthead home at 1500ft. In 2003, the broadcaster Magnus Magnusson said of him: “Dick Phillips is one of the great pioneers of Iceland right ‘off the beaten track’”.

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