

SOARING AT GLEN FESHIE, SPRING 1999

Wednesday 19th May

Slowly I am awake to the smell of cotton canvas and warm bedding, remembering I am in a tent, in Scotland. Apart from Fiona's breathing the only sounds I can hear are the chuckling waters of the river Feshie nearby, and the occasional "phweep" from a passing oystercatcher. It's peaceful. Insects humming. Distant sheep. A curlew bubbling, also a long way off. Scotland at dawn is very quiet.

Sunlight dapples the fabric with leafy patterns from the birch saplings near the tent. The leaf shadows are perfectly still, there is no wind. The kettle boils on the gas stove and we make tea, unzip the porch end of the tent and sit watching the river while we eat cereal breakfast. We have pitched the tent in an almost idyllic spot, in a shallow gully that is being gradually eroded by the river. The bed of the Feshie, a tributary of the Spey, is about a quarter of a mile wide here, littered with sandbanks and boulders. Judging by the undergrowth in the river bed, it has been a very long time since the river was in full flood. But there are distant memories of past torrents in the tangled piles of dead tree trunks lying here and there, bleached by the sun.

Our tent is a few feet from the river bank. The turf overhangs the edge in precarious sagging curves where the pebbly subsoil has crumbled into the river about 20 yards away, down a gentle shingle bank. As we are without electricity and other modern conveniences, the river doubles as our fridge to keep the wine cool. Behind the tent are dilapidated sheds of wood and tin, abandoned now by the gliding club due to the slow advance of the riverbank. There are new grant-aided buildings at the other end of the airfield far from the river's clutches. The top of the gully marks the edge of the airfield, a surprisingly flat strip of land, perhaps an ancient flood plain. Beyond the airfield the ground begins to rise, covered with pines, and emerges above the tree line steeply to the top of the local hill, that Fiona has promised to climb one day. The summit is about a thousand feet above airfield level and is craggy and bare.

The sky is a blue vault settling comfortably over Scotland today. The sun becomes hotter as we drive across the glen to Alvie estate. Fiona has booked an hour at the nearby riding stables for tomorrow, but today we turn instead through a granite quarry, where huge bandsaws are cutting Scottish bedrock into building blocks, some with intricate shapes for pediments and lintels. Our destination is the trout farm beyond the quarry, a neatly built shed surrounded by large circular tanks where water flows continuously. There is no-one around so we loiter, gazing into the tanks where the unsuspecting fish glide in dark formations through the cool mountain water.

The "farmer" appears, T-shirted and sweaty, apparently returning from a jog up the hill. He grabs a net on a long pole, and a red plastic bin, and heads for the biggest tank at the end of the row. The surface of the water churns with frantic fish as he throws in a handful of food, then a swift lunge with the net and a dozen or more gigantic trout are jostling in the bin. We want three unfortunates for supper, so out they come onto the

gravel, flapping and twisting until they are despatched with a blow to the head. The lucky ones are returned to the tank, to cruise the clear water for another day. Their dead comrades are dusty and gravelly now, but the rainbow colours on their scales still shine through as we carry them off in a bag. Barbecued trout for supper tonight.

Back at the airfield the breeze is northerly, blowing along the length of the airstrip. I hitch up the glider trailer to the back of the car and tow it to the southern end where Fiona and I assemble the glider. Trevor the resident instructor is tinkering with the winch at the far end, but he drives up in the Land Rover to point out that in the past few minutes the wind has changed ends, so we will have to swap places. These mountain valley winds take some getting used to! After securing the trailer we tow the glider slowly to the other end of the grass strip, while Trevor drives the winch, modified from an old Bedford truck, along the gravel road to the side.

The winch had been reported as under-powered after its winter overhaul costing £5000 but it gives me a jerky launch to a decent height - about 1200ft. Looking down I see the river bed snaking in and out of the trees and fields (mostly trees) and the rocky mountain tops still above me. The air is bubbly but there are no coherent thermals and I'm back on the airfield for a hurried landing in about 10 minutes. At the second attempt I gradually gain height by circling in a choppy thermal, and spend about 1 hour 45 minutes under the cloudless blue vault, up to a mile high at times, marvelling at the views. The Cairngorm peaks, still covered with substantial patches of snow on their northern slopes, stretch as far as I can see, the glens between them becoming misty and indistinct. Here and there in the distance, the mysterious lochs are bright tongues peering between the slopes.

After I land back on a deserted airfield, I realise that Fiona and Trevor are airborne in the Falke motor glider. I wash the gleaming trout in the Club kitchen, borrowing a rectangular roasting tin, covering it with foil. Fiona comes back all smiles after a sightseeing trip around the mountains that rivals my own. We picket the glider safely for the night and I get the BBQ going. The third trout is Trevor's, and he brings Jim and Luisa (who have cooked their own moussaka) for a pleasant evening dinner party in our tent, overlooking the river as the sun goes down. The blue vault turns to rose, then purple and dark grey but never really black, and our visitors depart. There is twilight all night here in the far north of Britain at this time of year.

Night time again in the tent, listening to the occasional deer barks and owl hoots, and the river Feshie still chuckling over its stones, keeping our milk cool for breakfast. I wonder what tomorrow will bring?