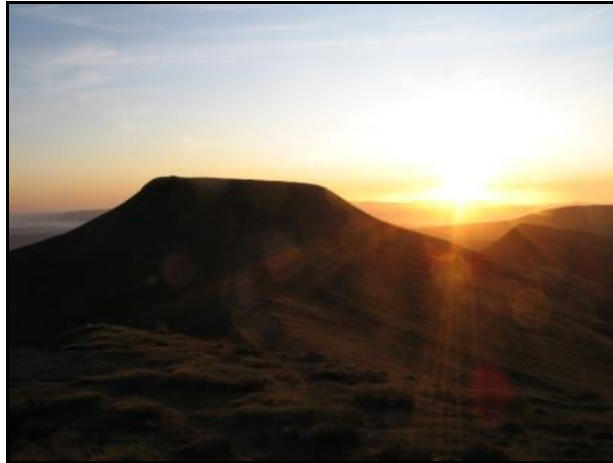




## A PORTRAIT OF PEN Y FAN Chris Barber



**During many years of roaming in the Brecon Beacons I have made countless ascents of Pen y Fan by all the various routes, yet the lure of this very special summit remains undiminished and I can still find the view quite breathtaking on a clear day. Hill walkers who are not familiar with the Brecon Beacons are sometimes not particularly enthusiastic about making a visit, no doubt having pre-conceived images of the area for the name suggests hills of limited height, shape and quality. But when people visiting the area for the first time, drive along the A40 towards Brecon, they are always surprised and impressed when the dramatic, shapely skyline of the Beacons comes into view. North facing, this escarpment with its distinctive table-top summits of Pen y Fan and Corn Du and the sharp nosed profile of neighbouring Cribin is certainly majestic in appearance.**

The Brecon Beacons were formed from the sand and mud of a great marine estuary which covered the area in Devonian times, about 300,000,000 years ago. The tops of the Beacons are capped by 'plateau beds' of Old Red Sandstone, giving the peaks their characteristic 'table top' appearance. Few landscapes could more perfectly illustrate the effects of glaciation than the quartet of magnificent northwest-facing cirques that overlook smooth u-shaped valleys. During the Ice Age great depths of ice accumulated in these north facing cwms, enlarging them by grinding out bowls in the

bases of the valleys. Corrie lakes were often left behind in such hollows when the ice receded, but now, with the exception of Llyn Cwm Llwch (below Corn Du), only head streams remain. Pen y Fan is not only the highest mountain in South Wales, but it also represents the geographical centre of the Brecon Beacons National Park which was created in April 1957, the third of such designated areas to be established in Wales and the tenth in total at that time.

At just under the magic 3,000 feet, it is the highest peak south of Cadair Idris

and the tallest Old Red Sandstone summit in Britain. The exact height is 2,907 feet (886 m) which means that it is just 600 feet lower than Snowdon.

I may also reluctantly add that it is probably the easiest summit of nearly 3,000 feet to reach in the whole of Britain. The most popular route starts from about 1400 feet on the A470 at Pont-ar-daf. One follows a well worn path, rising at a gentle gradient to Bwlch Duwynt (Black Wind Pass). From this col it is just a ten minute walk to the roof of South Wales and the full ascent can be easily accomplished in less than an hour. Such accessibility makes Pen y Fan a magnet, drawing walkers from far and wide, attracted by the lure of climbing the highest peak in South Wales. Local walkers, familiar with the area, generally prefer to make their way to the top by the more interesting routes on the north side.



The National Trust were given 4,048 hectares of land in the Beacons by the Eagle Star Insurance Company in 1965, and this includes the central summits. Both the National Trust and The National Park Authority have made admirable progress during the last decade or so, in dealing with erosion problems on the main tracks leading up the main peaks. The traditional methods of 'pitching' once used by the Romans have been

employed, and for those carrying out this back breaking work it involves great skill and patience, but must seem a never ending process.

If you have an out of date map it may show a trig point on the summit of Pen y Fan. Unfortunately this once familiar structure was demolished some years ago when an archaeological dig was carried out to investigate a Bronze Age burial cairn dating from about 2,200 BC to 1,400 BC.



The view from the summit of Pen y Fan is particularly fine and it ranges from the Carmarthen Fans in the west to the Black Mountains in the east. Llyn Syfaddan (Llangorse Lake) is seen shimmering to the north-east and Plynlimmon can be seen beyond Mynydd Epynt. Between Radnor Forest and the Black Mountains appear the north Herefordshire plain and the Shropshire hills. Cadair Idris in Snowdonia may reveal itself to the north-west in exceptionally clear weather. To the south down the valleys of the old South Wales coalfield the Bristol Channel may gleam and sparkle in the sunshine. One may also glimpse Dunkery Beacon on Exmoor and the Preselli Hills of Pembrokeshire, giving an outlook over no less than four National Parks. In the days of the old counties it also used to be claimed that the all round view embraced thirteen shires.



On the north east side of Pen y Fan's often windswept summit is a steep gully seamed face which in true Winter conditions (now quite rare), can provide excellent sport for the snow and ice climber. We used to get such conditions in the Beacons more frequently during the 60s and 70s and with various companions I have made ascents of several of the gullies on this face.

It was Robert Sandeman, a keen local mountaineer, who claimed to make the first Winter ascent of the north east face of Pen y Fan in 1939. He dramatically described his adventures in his book entitled Mountain Journal which is now a collector's item. The following extract describes his ascent of the final section of the central gully with his companion whom he refers to as 'Jenkins':

'... we found ourselves at last beneath the summit cliffs. Through the mists and falling snow they loomed up like great white and grey walls. To the right they were utterly impossible. But directly above us were a series of good ledges which, although plastered with snow and ice, looked just within the bounds of practical climbing. We went at them with a grim determination. More shoulder work ensued before I gained the first ledge. Here it was just possible to stand and

help my companion up to me. Then a nasty traverse enabled me to gain a sloping ledge. From that point the climbing became less severe. At last we drew ourselves over the last pitch and stood on the snowy summit.... Triumphant but a trifle breathless and trembling.'

It is only in Winter that the face is suitable for climbing for it consists of a steep mass of friable Old Red Sandstone with crumbling bands of shale and narrow grass ledges dividing the gradually steepening gullies. The final section of cliff in the centre of the face is vertical for about 40 feet and the competent climber needs a good covering of snow and overnight freezing to provide suitable conditions for an ascent.



But this journal is aimed at hill walkers, so finally, a note of caution, for although the Brecon Beacons are grass covered and easily accessible, they still demand the regard that must be accorded to other areas of high peaks and steep escarpments and should not be approached carelessly. Today, most people take the name Brecon Beacons for granted, and are unaware of the fact that it dates back to the time when a complex warning system consisting of a chain of inter visible hill beacons was established. Their use can be traced back to the

start of the troubles with France in the fourteenth century, when cross channel raids made the threat of invasion a constant worry. News of the approaching enemy could be conveyed along the coast and inland by fire signals. Such a chain would include a high point which would be visible from a wide area and Pen y Fan would have been ideal for this purpose.



When the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria was celebrated in 1887, beacon bonfires were lit throughout the country and also in 1897 to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee. A beacon was fired on Pen y Fan on both these occasions. On 31 December, 1992 a beacon was lit on the summit to celebrate the new European unity and the advent of the European Market. Thousands of beacons were lit on this night throughout the twelve EC countries and spectacular firework displays held on the summits of many hills and mountains.