

HELÔ SNOWDONIA (ERYRI) 2009

Saturday 12th September

A beautiful sunny day dawned as we awoke in South Wales, it was a good start to the holiday. Yesterday, Dan and Paula had told us we were to have another grandchild, so the holiday vibes were in fine fettle and we spent the first part of the morning happily engaged in packing-type activities. Willow (20 months old) was engaged in her own packing-type activity, which involved unpacking the bags of food Paula had prepared and lined up in the hallway. She seemed to have a particular penchant for fruit and ran away with two nectarines, one plum and many grapes (and that's only what I know about).

We managed to leave Pontardawe in two cars at about 10:15 and after stopping at Tesco for supplies, set off with eager anticipation for North Wales. Dan took the lead and fairly soon we were zig zagging up and down steep roads amid picturesque, dramatic hills. This only lasted for a short while, though, as the scenery then became more 'normal' countryside in between lots of mid-Welsh villages, some bigger than others. I began to wonder when does a village become a town? The answer is when it has more than 500 inhabitants.

Dan and Paula had suggested a lunch stop at Elan Valley Reservoirs, a chain of man-made lakes created from damming the Elan and Claerwen rivers in mid-Wales. The reservoirs were built to provide clean drinking water for Birmingham, but at the cost of over a hundred people in 1892 losing their homes, church and school beneath one hundred feet of water. I believe we were at the Caban-Coch reservoir, next to the Visitor Centre, which was clearly a popular place.

It was a delightful spot, as we sat at a picnic table and ate our packed lunch, courtesy of the pizza leftovers from last night and Tesco's excellent sandwich deal. We were next to a river, which was fenced off with wire and hence safe for Willow, who naturally needed to explore after we'd eaten. While walking around with her, I came across a statue of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who is associated with the area and apparently (and quite understandably) loved the landscape.



Scenic lunch stop at Elan Valley Reservoirs

As our journey northwards continued, the hills grew in number and height and the scenery became much more dramatic. There were swathes of dark green fir trees and dotted here and there were pretty rowan trees with clusters of hanging red berries. Further along, we came across industrial landscapes, slate caverns, miners' cottages and familiar names, such as Blaenau Ffestiniog and Betws-y-coed. Then, at just after 15:00, we were there – we had arrived at Nant Cottage in Llanrwst, on the edge of the Snowdonia National Park.

The cottage seemed very old, full of character and set amid some lovely rural scenery. Willow was very excited and soon made herself at home, sitting at the table to eat a few grapes. There were some much appreciated welcome touches from the owners, namely a vase of fresh flowers and a cream tea for five.

The owners had been at the cottage to greet us when we'd arrived and were obviously proud of the cottage's fascinating history. While Dan, Willow and I were acquainting ourselves with the cottage's interior, Alan and Paula were outside for at least 20 minutes, while the owners told them about the history of both the cottage and surrounding area. As I understand it:

In the 14th century, the land belonged to the Knights Templar and thus wasn't Crown property. The Knights Templar left in the 16th century, when there were a lot of brigands roaming around the area. It was very feudal and the inhabitants were wealthy, with lots of sheep, etc. The neighbours used to raid a lot – there was a saying that there were the Welsh, the English and those at Llanrwst.

The Wynn family were very wealthy and decided to claim the land by building a castle, a great house and a church. While the Wynn family were at church one day, the great house was ransacked, so the lord (Lord Wynn, I presume) decided to raise a private army of 130 to protect his property. He also decided to protect the land by building seven identical houses at the boundary of this land, in which the captains of his army lived in order to keep out the brigands.

The houses all had big, round chimneys, were built according to a designated plan and were known rather romantically as sun houses. In the 17th century, an addition had been built to the back of this particular house. According to information since found via the internet on the Wales Gazetteer of Markets and Fairs' website, Llanrwst was a borough in 1334 with a large Welsh population, suggesting it existed as a settlement before the Edwardian Conquest. An attack by the famous Owain Glyndŵr seems to have been devastating.

After Alan and Paula had managed to relay this history to Dan and me between them, we consumed the cream tea and set about settling in. A certain amount of unpacking was necessary, of course, but since the weather was still fine, we all moseyed out into the garden and were pleasantly surprised.

As well as a conventional lawned area with surrounding flower beds and a tree or two, there was an archway cut into a tall hedge that led into a kind of secret garden that contained a living willow arbour. Our living Willow zoomed gleefully into the living willow arbour and out again! The structure of the house seen from outside was decidedly distinctive, with the large, round chimney very obvious and impressive – several photos were taken, despite the tricky light:



Nant Cottage

After this, it was time to eat. Paula had cooked pasta with tomato, onion and mushroom, followed by apple and blueberry pie (made yesterday). We were all tired and content to sit around – except Willow, of course, who continued to zoom around – mostly the coffee table and around the back of the big settee. It was discovered that the bedroom Alan and I are using has an en suite directly above the living room. Dan had been sitting quietly on the small settee in the living room, wondering why he could suddenly hear a waterfall above his head...

Dan, Paula and Willow went to bed quite early, so Alan and I retired not long afterwards at just gone 21:00, up the creaky, wooden staircase. There were no street lights and the darkness of the bedroom when the bedside lights were out was dense. It almost felt palpable and I was strangely uneasy, as if all those centuries of bygone inhabitants had left some sort of energy imprint. I wished I could turn on the bedside light again without seeming like a complete wimp.



The view from our bed – in daylight

Sunday 13th September

The ghosts didn't get me after all and I must have dozed off after a few restless hours, but slept fitfully and awoke groggily to the sound of Dan, Paula and Willow downstairs. Regardless, it was the second day of our holiday, so I opened my eyes semi-eagerly. It still seemed quite dark in our bedroom and I thought it must be a dull day, but it was actually fine and sunny outside, as I'd merely forgotten that the house is situated in a valley.

Alan went downstairs in search of a morning mug of tea, while I stayed upstairs to prepare myself mentally and physically for the day. I was creating another waterfall when Alan brought Little Miss Tree upstairs to find me – I'd already heard the plaintive and repetitive question, "Mamma? Mamma?" This is Willow's current and most endearing word for Grandma. It's not quite as personally endearing as it sounds, though, because she calls Alan 'Mamma' too, plus she has another set of grandparents presumably named the same.

When we were eventually ready after breakfast, we all piled into Dan's car and he drove us to nearby Betws-y-coed, which as expected was reasonably quiet at 9-something on a Sunday morning. Willow was put into her rucksack and we set off on a walk alongside the river. Yes, Willow was put into her rucksack, namely a special state of the art rucksack for babies and small toddlers that Dan carried on his back. I don't know how much Willow weighs, but speaking carefully as a mother in a purely athletic sense, Dan must be fit.

The first part of the walk was mostly through some woodland and was pleasantly picturesque, if not a little boggy in places. We also had a fair bit of clambering up and down rocks to achieve. If I'd been at all psychic, I would have had a premonition of a great deal of rock clambering in the near future, but we won't go there yet. In the meantime, Alan posed for me beside an old tree trunk:



Alan posing beside an old tree trunk

The latter part of our walk was back along the road, on an actual pavement, which led us again into the main shopping area of Betws-y-coed and a coffee shop. To be honest, it was just a shop that sold coffee, but it's difficult to suss out the coffee shop situation in a new place and the coffee was ... coffee-like.

After that, Dan and Paula wanted to look around the outdoor clothing shops and Alan and I were in no way averse to that, so to make things easier we went our separate ways for an hour – except that we kept bumping into each other in an amusing and possibly slightly irritating to Dan and Paula kind of way.

Back at the car park, which was a lot busier than when we'd arrived, Dan was the owner of a new pair of shoes and Willow was the owner of a new raincoat. I was the owner of 9 postcards and 12 Welsh 2nd class stamps, but that's not important right now. Apart from that, it had been enjoyable look around.

Lunchtime was imminent, so we returned to Nant Cottage and consumed cheese and pickle sandwiches, crisps and fruit while sitting at the table outside under the sunshade, as it had become quite hot. Paula decided to stay behind for a rest in the afternoon, as she had unfortunately started a cold (and, of course, was in the early stages of pregnancy), so the rest of us decided to go for a local walk to Grey Mare's Tail Waterfall, as suggested by Dan. It was quite a good waterfall as waterfalls go and cameras were used:



Grey Mare's Tail Waterfall

We then continued, partly along a road until we turned off alongside a river and walked through fields and grassland. I don't actually know where we walked, to be honest, I was happy enough to enjoy the air and the scenery. The only drawback was that there were a lot of people out (presumably also enjoying the air and the scenery) and loads of bikers, some of them roaring along on their bikes and spoiling the peaceful ambience of the Snowdonian Sunday afternoon.

The final part of our walk was back through woodland in the Snowdonia National Park. Willow had been asleep for a lot of the time we'd been walking, the holiday excitement must have worn her out. After a lifesaving mug of tea, Dan and Paula took Willow to the nearby stream to paddle her feet and throw stones into the water, although they said later she hadn't been keen on getting her feet wet.

Dan and Paula prepared jacket potatoes with baked beans and cheese, so Alan and I contributed by washing the dishes afterwards. Willow was very tired but wouldn't sit still, so after her bath, Dan, Paula and Willow all went upstairs at 20:30. Meanwhile, Alan and I watched a spot of television before wending our way up the creaky, ghostly, wooden staircase to the ghostly dark bedroom.

Monday 14th September

The ghosts and I must be friends because I slept much better. OK, I kept the bedside light on for an hour or so, but decided I was being ridiculous and turned it off. It had previously been arranged to be ready to leave the cottage at 08:00 this morning, so Alan had put on his alarm for 06:30 – aargh!

Our destination was the Glyders (Glyderau), a National Trust area of land within the Snowdonia National Park. We'd decided to give our original plan of walking up Mount Snowdon a miss for several reasons, including the fact that Alan and I had failed to practise walking up steep bits of Dartmoor and/or Bodmin Moor. Dan has walked the Glyders several times and Alan once with Dan in 2004.

It was unfortunately a mostly cloudy morning and when we arrived at the car park at the foot of our walk (romantically referred to by some as the toilet block at Ogwen Cottage) it was rather cold. Paula, who had intended to come part way on the walk with us and then return to the car, felt she hadn't worn warm enough clothes, so remained behind in the car park with some food and a book.

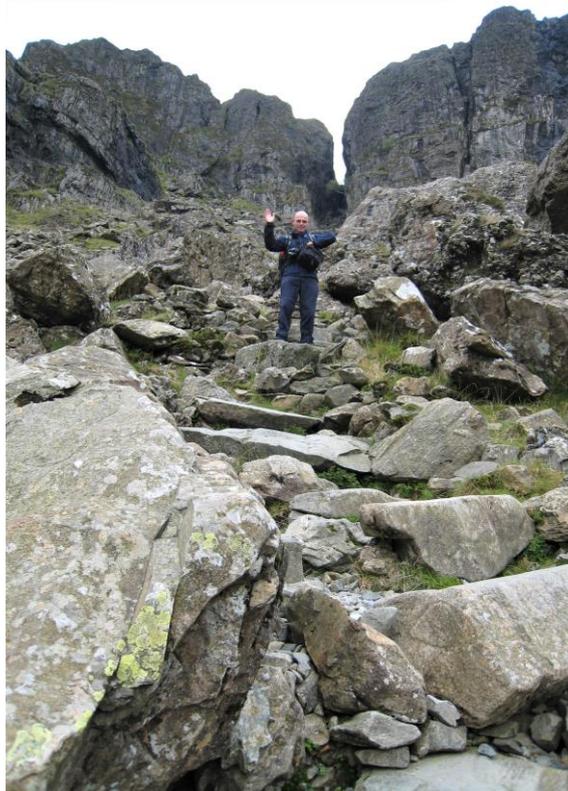
Willow was put into her rucksack and off we went! It was still relatively early at 9-something and there weren't many people about. Although still cloudy, blue sky was starting to show through in places, creating some beautiful scenes:



Looking back at Llyn Idwal tarn

For a while, we walked alongside Llyn Idwal tarn on a path consisting mostly of boulders that varied in size, so it wasn't exactly easy going. I noticed that the further along we walked, the bigger in size the boulders became, until eventually it had turned into a real 'clambering up rocks' situation.

Dan informed us that the climb up through the Devil's Kitchen had begun in earnest, but I didn't know whether to be glad of the boulders that were like steps or to dislike them intensely, as it was very tough on the little old legs and knees. People with longer legs than mine simply don't realise... However, a part of me was feeling very pleased with myself that I was attempting it at all.



Alan in front of The Devil's Kitchen

The Devil's Kitchen is so named because the rock formation, a deep rock cleft, resembles a chimney and when the weather is cloudy (which is probably quite often), it's said the cloud looks like smoke coming out of a chimney. Folklore goes further and says it's the devil cooking. Cooking up a storm, perhaps? Or maybe hikers and rock climbers in the past have been hallucinating?

Be that as it may, I was certainly very warm up by the Devil's Kitchen, but I'm pretty sure it was a result of my personal exertions rather than any diabolic culinary presence. In Welsh, the Devil's Kitchen is known as Twll Du, literally meaning black hole. Ascending and descending this black hole is said to demand respect, which seems a much more creditable approach to me.

I found some of the ascent was more like scrambling up scree, but mostly it was those big boulders that were doing my little legs in and it really was quite hard at times. We stopped at one point, at 10-something, to eat a banana each as energy food. Willow definitely enjoyed her banana, as well as being let out of the rucksack for good behaviour – but I'm only joking.



Banana Girl and Banana Dad

The next part of the ascent was even more difficult and a cold wind blew in some places. Willow had decided the best option was to sleep. I was becoming tired too, especially in the leg department, as the clambering had intensified and I was having to hold onto rocks with my hands. Further on the boulders became fewer, but the climb still seemed very hard and needed a lot of concentration.

We stopped at Llyn y Cwn tarn, where Dan decided that the conditions weren't favourable to continue up to the Glyder peaks (Glyder Fawr and Glyder Fach). It was too cold, we had Willow to consider and my legs were losing strength. As we sat down to eat our packed lunch, I looked up to where the mist was covering the top of the Glyderau and descending, feeling a mixture of relief and regret.

We tried to sit out of the wind and it was just about bearable – the food was definitely very welcome at 11:20. Willow seemed cold once out of the rucksack, but she had two little walks down to the tarn and back. We saw only one other person coming down from the top but earlier a small group of young people had overtaken us on the way up. Apart from them, though, we'd mostly been alone.

Willow wasn't exactly happy, so we soon started our descent. The first bit was scree and I hated it, my antics to try to walk carefully must have looked very comical. I've since looked on the internet and the descent of the Devil's Kitchen has been described as 'a scramble down a ravine'. Yes, thanks for that!

The big boulders felt safer to go down, but my legs and knees suffered – I used my hands and behind quite a lot of the time to ease my way down safely. There were more people we met who were on their way up whilst we were going down. Willow was fretful and kept asking for Mummy, but then she fell asleep again.

My legs began to tremble whenever they had to manoeuvre a large boulder, which was frequently. Then Alan fell over. I was quite close behind him and saw him fall slowly towards his right. He seemed to regain balance, then fell towards his left and put out his left hand to save himself from crashing into a rock. He stood up again immediately, but I could tell that he'd hurt his hand.

Dan and I kept asking him, "Are you OK?" and although he kept answering, "I'm fine", I knew he wasn't. However, after a few minutes we continued our descent.



Dan (with Willow) and Alan descend

My legs were protesting more and more as we continued, until towards the end it seemed like they didn't want to carry on walking at all. Dan admitted to feeling tired with the weight of Willow on his back. I must say here how much I admired his sure-footed confidence, balance and stamina all throughout this climb, as it's hardly a bog-standard walk in the park. Thankfully, there were no bogs, because that would have made it a lot worse, although at one point we did have to cross a stream running down from the peaks to Llyn Idwal tarn.



Back at Llyn Idwal tarn

On arrival back at the car park, we took advantage of the facilities and I didn't half enjoy a mint Cornetto. Then it was time to drive back to Nant Cottage for a mug of tea or three. Alan revealed that when he fell, he'd dislocated the little finger on his left hand and his middle finger had been bent back.

Since he'd dislocated the little finger on his right hand during his much younger RFA days, he knew how the best action was to push it straight back where it belonged. He also said that how he hadn't screamed, he didn't know. Despite our encouragement to go to A & E to check that his fingers were OK, he refused, saying that they just felt a bit swollen and would heal in due course. He even helped to cook the evening meal. What a guy...

Meanwhile, I was doing my grandmotherly best to keep Willow amused, as she seemed quite fretful – hungry – tired – teething – all of those? Because of this, after our omelette, mashed potato and runner bean tea, Dan and Paula gave her an early bath and afterwards Paula took her to bed at 20:00 instead of the usual 20:30. Perhaps the fresh mountain air of the Glyders had worn her out. It had certainly worn Alan and me out, but we watched some television until 22:00, before our nightly creaking session up the dark, ghostly, wooden staircase. I didn't care about any ghosts, to be honest, I just wanted to sleep!

Tuesday 15th September

We both slept well, with not too many aches and pains, although Alan's hand had been giving him a bit of trouble. His little finger and middle finger looked swollen and bruised, which wasn't an attractive sight, but he insisted that he could move his fingers and everything would heal in time. Paula, however, said she felt a bit worse and her cold was definitely running well, so we decided to stick to our original plan and go our separate ways for the day.

Alan and I had recently been watching *A Garden in Snowdonia* on television, featuring the much-renovated Bodnant Garden, run by the National Trust. I vaguely remembered a visit back in 1990, but being more avid gardeners now, we were soon heading past Betws-y-coed again and then a few more miles down the road to Bodnant. The temperature at that point was 13° C and the sky was cloudy, although looking as if it would change for the better.

The time was just after 10:00 opening time, when our trusty Sat Nav informed us that we'd reached our destination. There were already quite a few people there as we gazed around what seemed to be an inviting, exciting, sprawlingly big garden. We walked expectantly along the pathway to the ticket entrance (a mere £6.80, or free for National Trust members, which is brilliant value).

Alan enquired about coffee availability and was directed back to a tea room we'd passed on the way in that hadn't appeared to be open. We therefore retraced our steps and were the first customers of the day to enter the Pavilion Tea Room, where we enjoyed a most welcome cappuccino each.

We had to walk along the pathway to the ticket entrance once more and show our receipt (although the woman recognised us) and then we were free to start our walk around the different areas of the garden. First of all we walked through the laburnum arch, although it naturally wasn't blooming at this time of year, unlike when we'd seen it on the television, literally dripping with flowers.



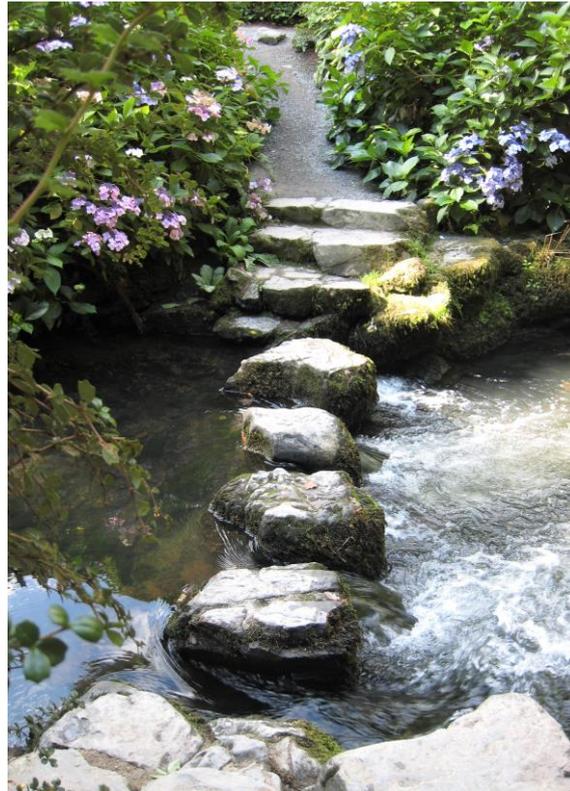
Bodnant House

The whole garden was far beyond our expectations despite having seen the television programme and it's obviously tended with a great deal of loving care and hard work. It was controlled, but in a natural and even wild way. There were formal gardens, shrub borders, a round garden, bridges and waterfalls, terraces, streams, ponds, an old mill, a family mausoleum and a wealth of majestic old trees, including several sequoias. In contrast, there was a much younger *Chamaecyparis Lawsoniana* planted by Prince Charles on 25th April 2008.



Pretty clematis in the Bodnant sun

Although at 11:45 we sat on one of the numerous seats and ate a cereal bar, by 13:15 hunger was prevailing, so we went outside to the other, much smaller tea room (the Magnolia Tea Room) for some lunch. This consisted of a shared egg and cress sandwich, salt and vinegar crisps, a piece of flapjack and tea for two. We had to share our table outside in the sun, which had appeared almost fully and seemed to be attracting a host of people to seek refreshment.



Stepping stones

There was no choice but to go via the ticket entrance once more to get back into the garden and to my surprise, the woman still recognised us. It seemed a bit of an odd arrangement with the two tea rooms outside the garden, but we continued our walk around and took a few more photos until we'd visited most areas. Although we were beginning to tire, I think we were both reluctant to leave such a glorious, peaceful garden. However, we'd been there for five hours, so after a quick visit to the shop and a place selling local ice cream, we finally left. I wish Bodnant was closer to where we live, but at least we have the wonderful Eden Project in the same county, so I don't feel too hard done by.



Verbena bonariensis

On the way back we made a quick stop at Llanrwst to post postcards, before returning to Nant Cottage and enjoying a welcome mug of tea. Willow was asleep, so peace reigned, but not for all that long. Dan, Paula and Willow had been out and about locally and Willow was the proud owner of some lovely sheepskin mittens and a beautifully hand-knitted woollen hat.

Paula once again cooked tea (pasta, tuna and other numerous ingredients) and I once again washed the numerous dishes. How do they multiply so quickly? Paula then retired upstairs with Willow at 20:15, Dan a little while later and after desultorily watching some television, Alan and I departed up the old, dark, creaky, ghostly, wooden staircase at 21:15. As we prepared for bed, a massive spider scuttled out of the woodwork and into the room, but we managed to catch it between us and swiftly reacquainted it with the nightlife outside.

Alan's finger had been bothering him during the evening and was very swollen. My legs had felt quite stiff throughout the day and also my shoulders (which I'd been using to hoist myself up the boulders the day before). However, we were very tired and soon switched out the bedside lights, ghosts or no ghosts.

Wednesday 16th September

Alan and I were both rather restless in the night and awake for a couple of hours at least. Then a certain someone was ever so slightly noisy downstairs in the early morning. I really must ask Dan to keep the volume down... However, we arose for a glorious morning mug of tea + breakfast + chaotic Willow time.

Paula said she was feeling a bit better than the day before, although still not up to a medium or big walk. We therefore opted for a short walk, after a reasonably short drive, to go and look at some standing stones. The sky was very overcast, but at least it was dry and we were out exploring the countryside.



A small stone amid the gorse and heather

The site was very reminiscent of prehistoric settlements on Dartmoor. It seemed to be someone's property with resident cattle and sheep, although access was allowed. We had to open a gate and walk past half a dozen cows, but they were docile. Willow was wrapped up against the cold wind in her new woolly hat and mittens. She was polite and said "Bye!" to some sheep as we walked past them.

The heather was mostly past its best, but the gorse looked good in a yellow kind of way. Unfortunately, there were electricity pylons stretched across the top of the nearby landscape and when we reached the standing stones after about 10 minutes, they were fairly small and mostly hidden by long grass.

Willow seemed a little cold and underwhelmed, so Paula took her back to the car for a morning snack banana. Alan, Dan and I then walked back the way we'd arrived to try to find a stone circle close to the road. Dan succeeded after a search and more photos were taken, despite the heavily clouded sky.

We then drove back to Nant Cottage and had various items on toast for lunch (food items, naturally). After a mug of tea, we were wondering what to do with the afternoon and following some holiday confusion and indecision, Alan and I ended up at Somerfield in Llanrwst. I suppose there are worse places...

We took the groceries back to the cottage and found Paula and Willow had gone to bed, so Alan and I went out to make the best of the afternoon. We weren't sure where to go, but ended up at Llandudno, about 16 miles away. As we were parked close to the Great Orme, we headed in that direction – the Great Orme is a limestone headland, 2 miles/3.2 kilometres long and 1 mile/1.6 kilometres wide, rising 679 feet/207 metres above sea level. Its archaeology, wildlife, geology and landscape are so important that it's been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Area of Conservation and a Heritage Coast.



The picturesque coastline of the Great Orme

As we started to walk around this very important headland on the toll road (on a pavement, thankfully) it was obvious that some event was taking place. The view down to the beach and then the sea on our left was very pleasant, but quite soon we started to hear the sound of many pounding footfalls and were suddenly overtaken by a horde of sweating, heavy-breathing, gasping, and in some case grunting, men and women dressed in shorts and sporty t-shirts. Yes, it was the Police Sport UK Road Race around the Great Orme and back again!

Apparently, over 400 officers from 39 forces around the country were taking part in a challenging 10-mile run and I felt like taking my hat off to them, except I wasn't wearing one. True, it was a little less than peaceful enjoying the Orme-like scenery, having to keep in a bit so as not to be mown down when some of them ran on the pavement instead of the road, but in my book it's a great achievement. We named one contestant the Great Grunter, because he'd been very audible coming up behind us on the first part of the race and then a while later, we heard him similarly approaching us from ahead on his way back.

As for us mere pedestrians, the walk itself was enjoyable, if not a little up and down in places. When we reached the halfway point after 2.5 miles/4 kilometres, we dived into a café to indulge in a pot of tea and some home-made sponge.

As we then continued our second half of the 5 miles/8 kilometres around the headland, the runners had all disappeared and we hardly saw anyone at all. There were a few solitary walkers, a lone fisherman down on the rock below us and a couple of goats who decided to cross the road just where we were.



A handsome, smelly goat

These wild goats are descended from a pair of goats from the Windsor Royal Herd who were introduced to the Great Orme in 1900. The goats and the Great Orme obviously got along very well together, as by 2002 the herd had risen to over 200 and measures had to be taken to reduce numbers – measures like tranquillising darts and hormonal implants. The goats were very smelly, even from a distance, but they contribute to the unique qualities of the Great Orme by their grazing, which allows a huge number of wild flowers to flourish.

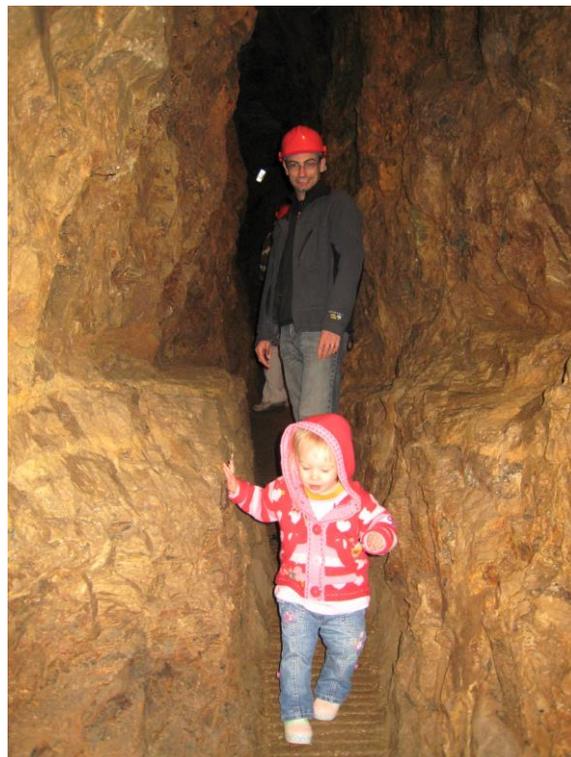
We noticed a wind farm out at sea and then Llandudno Pier came into view, so we could appreciate the expansive sweep of Llandudno Bay out to our left. To our right, not far from the road, were some interesting looking caves at the foot of a hill, with freestyle rock climbers loitering with intent outside. There seems a lot of interest on the Great Orme, but I must admit I hadn't heard of it before.

We came to the end of the toll road and found ourselves in Llandudno again. It seemed a very big seaside town, with hotels and hundreds of big, posh old houses used nowadays as guest accommodation. Alan wasn't completely sure of the way back to the car, so we had to follow his nose (fortunately attached to his face). We finally located it, having walked six miles, so plus the couple of miles we'd covered in the morning, we were undisputedly tired and glad to return to Nant Cottage for fishfingers and mashed potato, plus chocolate cake and custard – the walking had definitely worked up an appetite.

A usual evening followed. Willow was very good and spent ages writing with a pen (on the puzzle page of a newspaper, thankfully). She began to experiment with making small marks like letters or numbers, possibly in imitation of what she saw in the crossword and sudoku. She even wrote a perfect letter 'a', so perhaps she's going to be a writer. It seemed colder this evening as we wound our way up the old, the very old, dark, creaky, ghostly, wooden staircase...

Thursday 17th September

Alan and I were a bit dopey this morning and didn't make it downstairs until 08:45. After breakfast and getting ourselves together, we were all ready to go out to our decided destination. This was the copper mine on the Great Orme, or rather a very small part of the Bronze Age copper mine that had been uncovered in 1987 and is being excavated and part-shown to the public. Although the sky was overcast, it was dry again as we arrived just after 10:00.



Willow tries out the copper mine for size

We had to put on hard hats and proceeded down the mine. Willow was mostly well-behaved as we walked through the narrow passageways, only being a bit of a nuisance at the end – maybe she knew the exit was in sight. The self-guided tour was well signposted with simple, easy to understand information, such as how Bronze Age miners of 3,500 years ago would dig with stone and bone tools. There was more to see outside, which was also well signposted. After a foray in the shop, we then went outside for Banana Girl's favourite mid-morning snack.

Our next stop was at the top of the Great Orme, where our feet led us to The Captain's Table for lunch. It was a large café and gift shop and was a little on the expensive side, with a cappuccino costing £2.45. However, the cheese and onion sandwich and shared chips (shared also by Willow) were good.

After wandering around outside for a while, Alan and I walked up to the highest point and watched the cable cars that go around the headland. After a quick look around the Visitor Centre, we (Paula mainly, as she was feeling 'delicate' on and off) decided to walk around a lake that was quite close to Nant Cottage.

Dan drove us back and then along some very narrow roads to the lake (Llyn Geirionydd), which wasn't at all well signposted. We finally arrived, but by then Paula didn't feel like walking. She offered to stay in the car while the rest of us walked around the lake, but Dan declined. Alan and I had a short walk up a road by the lake, but the sky was very overcast and not conducive to photos at all.



Llyn Geirionydd (not conducive to photos)

We returned to the car, where Dan said he'd like to come for a walk with us after all, but then Willow went all 20-month-old Willowy and made it clear she really didn't want to go in the rucksack. At that point, poor Dan gave it all up as a bad job and we didn't really know what to do. It was turning into one of *those* days.

Alan and I just had another short walk the other way up the road to find some berried rowan trees to photograph, although even this didn't work with the overcast sky. Then we returned yet again to the car and took Willow down to the lake's edge, where a group of schoolchildren were having a lesson with canoes.

The instructor had two canoes tied together alongside each other and a child was instructed to walk up to the prow of each canoe and stand with arms outstretched. The instructor then pushed the canoes with the two children gently out into the lake, before suddenly jerking the canoes back and causing the children to take a nosedive into the water with quite a splash.

This happened several times as every child was given a turn and every time the children fell into the water, Willow laughed out loud. I wonder if one day, little Welsh Willow will find herself having a canoe lesson in a Welsh lake?

After that excitement it was back to Nant Cottage for a mug of tea, then Dan and Paula went to Llanrwst for supplies while Alan and I looked after Willow. We took her for a walk down to the stream and threw stones in the water – the cottage really is in a lovely, natural, interesting setting.

Dan lit the wood burner in the living room when he returned, as it felt a touch chilly again. To be honest, I think he just wanted to play with fire, but it was very cheery and warm and why not? Willow was intrigued and seemed to enjoy the fire. After her bath, she sat with Dan watching it for a while.



Fire

The evening passed as usual and this time it was a warm departure from the living room and up the cold, dark, creaky, old, ghostly, wooden staircase.

Friday 18th September

Willow wasn't very happy last night and judging by the amount of dribbling, is most definitely teething horribly, poor soul. I was dopey again this morning, but Dan and Paula seemed even dopier, so Alan and I offered to take Willow out.

It was quite a sunny day and we left at 10:00 to drive into Betws-y-coed for coffee and a cash machine, but not necessarily in that order. Both were achieved and Willow was amenable. Alan and I were given small biscuits with our coffee at the Cadwalader coffee shop, which Willow enjoyed (plus a swig or two from the bottle of water we'd taken along with us for her).

Alan then drove us along a road with picturesque, mountain-type scenery. At about 11:30, we arrived at Penrhyn Castle, with only one faux pas from the Sat Nav, whereupon we'd ended up turning around at a crematorium. Unfortunately, a cremation service must have just taken place, as we became a little caught up with an emerging stream of cars, but nobody seemed to notice.



Penrhyn Castle

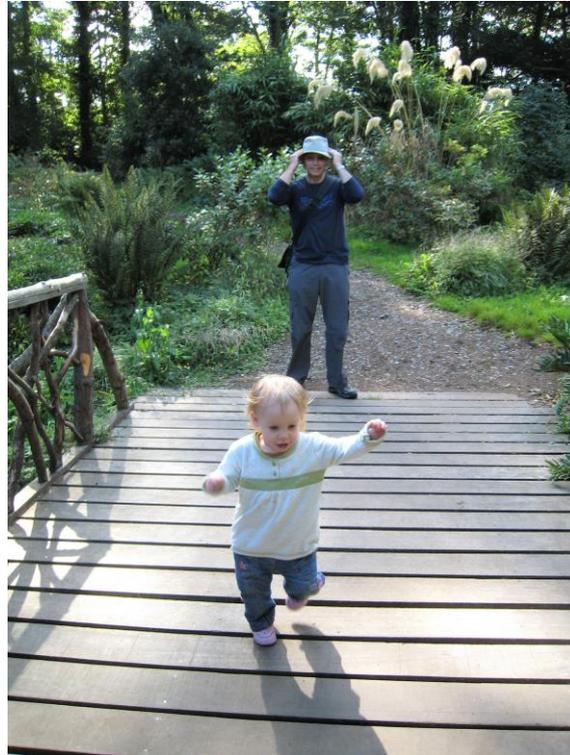
Willow had slept in the car, but woke up on arrival at the castle. We first walked around the gardens, with Willow feeling the different textures of various plants and flowers. She was also taken with a black cat that was prowling around.



Willow expresses surprise at the feel of a gunnera

We were unable to try a woodland walk as we didn't have a pushchair and Little Miss Tree is becoming heavy to carry when she tires of walking. However, we spent a lot of time in the walled garden, where we sat for a small packed lunch. There were many tropical plants and the bog garden was also a favourite.

The whole of our time in the grounds proved interesting, from the more formal gardens to the wilder, natural woodland, enhanced by a most wonderful view of the Menai Strait and Snowdonia. Alan pointed out the Great Orme, which was interesting to see from a different perspective. We spotted a huge flock of birds that seemed to be either ducks or geese, resting at the water's edge.



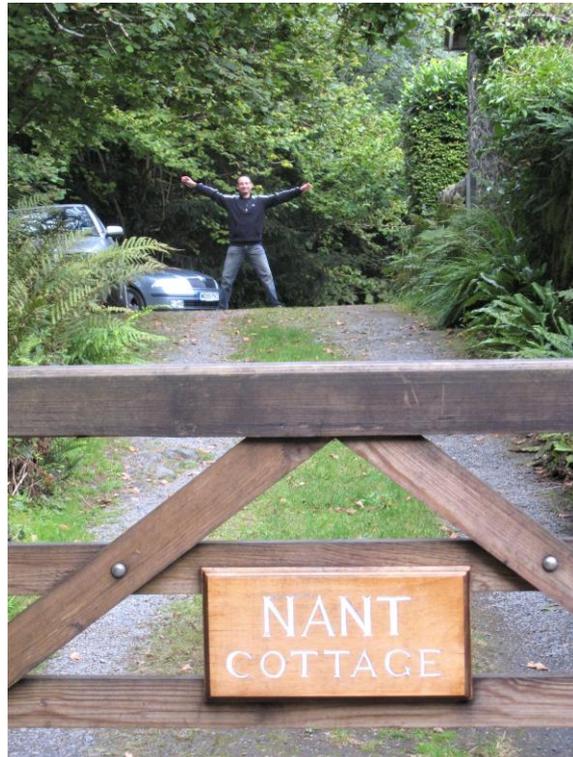
Willow attempts to escape from Granddad

When interest was flagging, we went to the tea room for an afternoon snack. It was quite crowded, but Willow was generally good, only becoming very squirmy at the end. We were all tiring, so after a quick nappy change in the boot of the car (for Willow) we decided to head back. Willow fell asleep, after 'reading' to herself from a book and singing softly to herself. Along the way, Alan and I saw two more of the famous round chimneys – this seems such a historical area.

After a mug of tea at Nant Cottage, Alan and I went to Somerfield in Llanrwst in search of vegetarian sausages (which we found). These were consumed hungrily at 17:30, as if a lot of calories had been used today looking after Willow.

Dan rather surprisingly decided it was a bit too warm to light the wood burner, so our last evening was spent fireless. Then, unbelievably, it was time to walk up the musty, cold, dark, creaky, old, ghostly, wooden staircase to bed. Goodnight Nant Cottage, it's been very interesting staying in you for a week!

NB: This was actually my third visit to North Wales, the first one being in 1973 and the second one in 1990. There is no doubt that this is an exceptionally beautiful area and I was very happy to be close to the mountains again. I was sorry not to have visited Mount Snowdon as on the previous two visits, but this time I became acquainted with the Great Orme and the Glyders instead. I also wouldn't have missed our day at wonderful Bodnant Garden for a whole year's supply of the creamiest, frothiest, most chocolatey cappuccino ever 😊



Goodbye!