

## Gold Duke of Edinburgh Expedition

Over the summer, a mixed group of explorers and senior section guides completed their Gold DofE Expedition by canoe. For Gold DofE, the expedition must be four days and three nights and take place in wild country. This led on from our Silver DofE Canoe expedition last year which was completed by some of us from the Gold group.

For our practice expedition, we travelled to Wales where we had a couple of days training on Lake Bala and the River Dee. We then completed our practice expedition along the River Severn, including some white water at Jackfield Rapids.

In late August, we travelled up to Scotland by train for our assessed expedition. We paddled the Caledonian Canal, a route that goes from coast-to-coast from Fort William to Inverness through several Lochs. Between the canal segments and the lochs were locks which we were forced to carry all of our boats and equipment around.

We set off from the top of Neptune's Staircase (a series of eight locks leading up from the sea to the start of the canal). Our first day we had a favourable wind behind us and so we rafted together and rigged up some tarpaulins with poles in order to sail the length of Loch Lochy. Unfortunately, the winds proved a little too strong and we were forced to pull over briefly to avoid being swamped by the waves.

Towards the end of the first day, we got our first proper taste of the Scottish weather in the form of a rain cloud that descended upon us for most of the day. Because of this, we were forced to pitch our dry tents in the rain, soaking them completely.

The second day dawned drier although the cloud was still extremely low and the temperature took a while to rise. On the second day, we had a great number of portages around locks, finally bringing us to Fort Augustus, the entrance to Loch Ness. Here we had to carry everything a total distance of 750m down the hill to the Loch.

Loch Ness is large enough to qualify as an inland sea and it is easy to see why. In bad winds, the waves can apparently reach three metres high. Thankfully we were spared such conditions on our journey that day. We decided to skip our planned camping spot and push on a bit more to another spot further along the loch.

Once we had pitched and unpacked for the second night we learned that the forecast was for a storm to blow in from the east coast the following day. If we were still on the loch when that happened then we would almost certainly become stormbound and be unable to complete our planned expedition. This meant that we would have to complete our entire planned third day and most of our final day in one go, doing over 30km against the wind.

As a result of this as well as the Scottish Midges, we all had an early night so we could set off as early as possible the following morning.

We set off before 8.00 and were soon hit by the wind. We pressed on as much as we could before being forced to pull over for a break while the wind passed. This was the first of many, many times we would be forced to do this.

While on the Loch, we saw a cloud allegedly shaped like the Loch Ness Monster as well as seeing a Double Rainbow. However, towards the end of the day, we began to see the storm in the distance. Despite still being out at sea, it still managed to worry us all

when the lightning lit up the sky above the large, flat expanse of water on which we were sitting and holding metal paddles.

We came to the end of Loch Ness and, after a much shorter loch, reached our destination, Dochgarroch Locks. We hauled our equipment out of the water, pitched camp and made dinner before collapsing asleep, exhausted from our arduous journey.

On the final day, we had a much later start and could afford some lengthy breaks due to the extremely small distance left to cover. Annoyingly, the predicted storm did not arrive and we instead had the best weather of the entire trip. We arrived in Inverness in good time, completing our expedition.

The expedition was excellent and will be something we will all remember for the rest of our lives. Thanks to Sam and Keith for organising it and thanks also to Sue and John, our supervisors and assessors.

If anyone is thinking of doing their Gold DofE, then I absolutely recommend that you do so. We have all had an awesome time and I'm sure you will too.

*-Matthew Axbey*



Jackfield Rapids



Training on Lake Bala



Ironbridge



Paddling on Loch Ness



Stormbound on Day 3



Team Photo