

The adventure  
begins...







The history of mountain rescue has been well documented and many comprehensive accounts have been written. Five-barred gates and shepherds usually feature significantly in the telling. In this article, **Bob Sharp** takes a broader look at our history, not just in the UK, but the Republic of Ireland (RoI) too<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, he identifies every team that has been formed and the year they started, and looks at the pattern that emerges when all the dates are compared, revealing a picture that team members may find interesting. He also seeks to explain this pattern.

My starting point was a UK Mountain Rescue conference some years ago. Someone commented that mountain rescue started in Scotland. Having previously carried out research on the background of mountain rescue teams (MRTs), I doubted this and it seemed appropriate to look at the subject more objectively.

Many downplay the value of historical information, taking the view that what we do today and

And it's quite humbling to appreciate the hardships and initiatives of the early pioneers and the enormous contribution they made. All this puts into perspective our own efforts, and helps generate a measured and reflective approach to what we do. For the duration of our involvement in mountain rescue, we all serve as guardians of our own team and therefore have a duty to record fully all that we do for those who follow.

time to organise and initiate (occasionally several days) and rescuers might have to travel great distances before they arrived on scene. There were no speedy means of calling out people to help other than word of mouth or letter. The position was the same across the whole of the UK/RoI.

A number of excellent publications, which provide much more detail on these early days, are listed at the end. For now, let's now turn to the key reasons teams were established and the timescale of their development.

fisherman who broke his ankle near a high mountain loch. Evacuation was challenging, involving the fisherman being carried down an icy path in darkness by a group of people, many in wellington boots or golf shoes! As a result, a public meeting of interested parties agreed a team should be formed. The Moffat Hill Rescue Service was formally established in January 1969.

Many other teams owe their foundation to one or more tragic incidents.

## Increasing incident numbers

In many cases, fledgling rescue groups were gradually inundated with more and more calls for help as increasing numbers of people flocked to the popular walking and climbing areas. The Brecon Beacons in South Wales was one such location. Due to the rise in incidents, a local police officer was asked to gather together a group of people with experience of the outdoors, to form a team. The original group, comprising police officers and civilian friends, became known as the Police Civil Defence Mountain Rescue Team — now Central Beacons MRT.

Elsewhere in Wales, the popularity of Snowdon and the Llanberis Pass had increased to such an extent that demands on the volunteers summoned to help had become too onerous. This eventually bought about the formation of the Llanberis MRT. A similar pattern emerged across the high moorland and mountain areas across the land.

## Organisation and coordination

We are well aware that today's mountain rescue service is



**Above:** First combined Winter and PFI Course, February 1953. On the last day, a party of reporters and cameramen were rigged to the Lairig Ghru in near blizzard conditions to see the results © Heavy Whalley. **Main image:** From the archive. Coniston Fell Rescue Team 1947 Picture Post.

the issues that currently influence our work are more important. I have great sympathy with this, but we shouldn't dismiss historical evidence. It's always good to understand our roots and reflect on how this has shaped current practice. Indeed, it is quite refreshing to see that some things change very little over time, that ideas and practices long forgotten sometimes resurface and impact again.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Most will know that before the formalisation of the mountain rescue service, if anyone had an accident it was left to their companions and others to arrange a makeshift rescue party. Rescuers were drawn from the local community, friends of the injured and other hillgoers. Self-reliance and resourcefulness were key skills. Rescues sometimes took a long

## CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

All teams have a distinctive history and are justifiably proud of the early days, the challenges they faced and their determination to move forwards. In many cases, the extraordinary efforts of a small number of individuals who had the required skills and vision were instrumental in laying the foundations for the teams we know today. However, a number of common factors provided the stimulus for change.

## Tragedy

It often takes a significant (and sometimes tragic) incident to stimulate action and focus minds on change or the formation of new systems to cope with similar events in the future. The recent floods, for example, have stimulated many organisations and government agencies to take action. For many teams, a serious incident was often the catalyst for change and the key reason behind the launch of a bespoke organisation.

For example, in the Scottish Borders, the idea to establish a formal mountain rescue team came from a local GP, prompted by a number of accidents in the area, not least of which a

<sup>1</sup> Many people were supportive and helpful in researching their own team's archives for relevant information. Of those who helped, I would like to make special mention of the late Tony Jones. Tony thought it vital to record historical information, particularly for the benefit of future generations. He was well aware how difficult it is to record accurately events from half a century ago, especially when relying on anecdotal evidence and fading memories! He was mid way through comparing my figures with his own rich archive of materials when, sadly, he passed on. This study is a very small token of my appreciation of Tony's wise counsel over many years.





highly structured, organised and focused. But prior to this, the choice and deployment of personnel was typically ad hoc, complicated by poor (or non-existent) communication systems, the absence of specialised equipment and lack of specific expertise.

Whilst the police had overall responsibility, the procedures for calling in relevant agencies or personnel were either non-existent or very crude. The will to help was strong but the ability to cope was often lacking. Many teams cite this as the reason their own team was created.

In Tayside in Scotland, following a serious incident in the early-1970s it was realised that existing provision for mountain rescue was inadequate, falling far short of that provided elsewhere. In one particular search for two missing people, a vast number of people were engaged in what is believed to be the largest airlift undertaken on a mountain rescue in Britain. Over 150 people were transported to the search area in hundreds of lifts by two RAF SAR

Whirlwind helicopters. Despite this, the missing persons were not found for a further two days, raising serious questions about whether the operation could have been more effectively organised and coordinated. This was the catalyst for change and the formation of civilian teams in the area.

In the Peak District, following a number of high profile fatal incidents, including the Four Inns Tragedy of March 1964, there was a strong view that the police needed greater assistance and there was a need for improved cooperation of all the relevant agencies. The outcome was the establishment of the Peak District Mountain Rescue Organisation.

## Skill and expertise

In addition to organisational and communication problems, fledgling rescue groups were often hard pressed to cope because they lacked key skills or relevant assets.

The Tramore Cliff Rescue Team in the RoI was formed as a result of a tragic accident

when a youth lost his life after falling down local cliffs. A number of individuals put their own lives at risk attempting a rescue, but the difficulty of access and recovery from both the cliff top and the lifeboat, prevented further intervention in the tragedy. Urgent meetings followed. There was clearly an urgent need for a specialised cliff rescue team, along the lines of the already established Sea Rescue unit. Many of the original volunteers came from the RNLI and Sea Rescue lifeboat crews as they had the skill and knowledge and were familiar with the coastline.

## Other factors

The above factors are often cited but others, such as the absence of local resources, perceived need, delays in response and unsuitability of equipment played a part.

In 2000, troubled by poor cover in Argyllshire in Scotland, Strathclyde Police contacted the Oban Mountaineering Club to see if it could muster a mountain rescue team. This proved

successful and a year later Oban MRT was established. In other cases teams were established to fill a gap in provision or ease pressure on neighbouring teams.

But, to highlight again, in a large majority of cases, a variety of factors combined to stimulate action. And for most teams, whilst there was an initial exploratory period, there came a point when change became urgent and formalisation took place.

The official starting year for each team is the focus for the next section. The very first team established was the Cave Rescue Organisation in 1935. The last (Hebrides MRT), was set up in 2010. All the others started life between these two end points. The distribution of 'start years' reveals an interesting pattern.

## WHEN WERE TEAMS ESTABLISHED?

What I've tried to do is produce a definitive list of all teams<sup>2</sup> that have existed, with their starting

**Table 1:** Complete list of all teams (those in orange text no longer exist). A fuller list, arranged by country with notes for each team, can be obtained from the author at [Lomondbob@gmail.com](mailto:Lomondbob@gmail.com)

<b>Ambleside Fell Rescue Team</b>	1967	Dundonnell MRT	1972	<b>Moelwyn Rescue Team</b>	1973	SARDA England	1971
Aberdeen MRT	1964	Edale MRT	1956	Moffat MRT	1969	SARDA Ireland	1987
Aberdyfi SRT	1973	<b>Eskdale OB Rescue Team</b>	1950	Mourne MRT	1962	SARDA Ireland North	1995
Aberglaslyn MRT	1996	Exmoor SRT	1992	NE Wales SAR	1980	SARDA Isle of Man	2004
Arran MRT	1964	<b>Furness MRT</b>	1962	North of Tyne MRT	1974	SARDA Scotland	1971
Arrochar MRT	1978	Galloway MRT	1975	North Wales CRO	1995	SARDA South Wales	2002
Assynt MRT	1976	Galway MRT	1975	North West MRT	1980	SARDA Southern Scotland	1983
Avon & Somerset SRT	1990	Glen of Imaal Red Cross MRT	1983	<b>Northern Rescue Organisation</b>	1962	SARDA Wales	1971
<b>Avon Rocks Rescue Team</b>	1976	Glencoe MRT	1961	Northumberland NP MRT	1963	Scarborough & Ryedale MRT	1965
Bolton MRT	1968	Glenelg MRT	1973	NSARDA Anglia	2006	Scottish CRO	1966
Borders SAR Unit	1963	Glenmore Lodge MRT	1972	NSARDA Kent	2010	<b>SARDA</b>	1965
Bowland Pennine MRT	1980	Glossop MRT	1957	NSARDA Staffordshire	2015	<b>Sett Valley MRT</b>	1959
Braemar MRA	1965	Gloucestershire CRG	1962	Oban MRT	2001	Severn Area RA	1973
Brecon MRT	1969	<b>Gordonstoun School MRT</b>	1951	Ochils MRT	1971	<b>Shropshire Mining Club</b>	1965
Buxton MRT	1964	<b>Goyt SRT</b>	1964	Ogwen Valley MRO	1965	Skye MRT	1962
Cairngorm MRT	1963	Hebrides MR	2010	Oldham MRT	1964	Sligo/Leitrim MRT	1991
Calder Valley SRT	1966	Holme Valley MRT	1965	Patterdale MRT	1964	South & Mid Wales CRT	1946
Cave Rescue Organisation	1935	Irish Cave Rescue Organisation	1961	Penrith MRT	1959	South East CRO	1968
Central Beacons MRT	1959	Kendal Mountain SAR Team	1953	Police Scotland (Grampian) MRT	1960	South Eastern MRA	1977
<b>Cheddar Gorge CRT</b>	1977	Kerry MRT	1966	Police Scotland (Strathclyde) MRT	1975	<b>South Ribble SRT</b>	1962
Cleveland MRT	1965	Keswick MRT	1947	Police Scotland (Tayside) MRT	1971	South Snowdonia SRT	1991
Cockermouth MRT	1953	Killin MRT	1967	Police Service of N Ireland SRT	1975	Swaledale MRT	1968
Coniston MRT	1947	Kinder MRT	1971	<b>RAF Aldergrove MRT</b>	1949	Tayside MRT	1976
Cornwall SRT	2003	Kintail MRT	1965	RAF Leeming MRT	1944	Teesdale & Weardale SRT	1968
Cumbria Ore Mines RU	1978	Kirkby Stephen MRT	1952	<b>RAF Leuchars MRT</b>	1944	Torridon MRT	1971
Dartmoor SRT (Ashburton)	1976	Lake District MRSDA	1992	RAF Lossiemouth MRT	1944	Tramore Cliff & MR Ass	1978
Dartmoor SRT (Okehampton)	1969	Langdale Ambleside MRT	1970	<b>RAF Millom MRT</b>	1944	Tweed Valley MRT	1968
Dartmoor SRT (Plymouth)	1969	<b>Langdale MRT</b>	1965	<b>RAF St Athan MRT</b>	1944	<b>Ullswater OB RT</b>	1956
Dartmoor SRT (Tavistock)	1968	Llanberis MRT	1968	<b>RAF Stafford MRT</b>	1945	Upper Wharfedale FRA	1948
Derby MRT	1964	Lochaber MRT	1969	RAF Valley MRT	1942	Wasdale MRT	1965
Derbyshire CRO	1952	Lomond MRT	1967	<b>RAF West Freugh MRT</b>	1944	Western Beacons MSRT	1964
Devon CRO	1965	Longtown MRT	1965	<b>RAF Wick MRT</b>	1944	Woodhead MRT	1964
Donegal MRT	1984	Mayo MRT	1989	<b>Rannoch School MRS</b>	1959		
Dublin & Wicklow MRT	1966	Mendip Cave Rescue	1936	<b>Rhinog Rescue Team</b>	1986		
Duddon & Furness MRT	2003	Midlands CRO	1975	Rosendale & Pendle MRT	1963		
<b>Dudley CRT</b>	1966	<b>Millom FRT</b>	1967	<b>Royton ATC MRT</b>	1943		

dates. This was not straightforward. Over the years, several teams started life, but then ceased operation. For some of these, there is little evidence of their role and background. Some began life as independent organisations but then combined with others. One (the Search and Rescue Dog Association) spawned a number of other organisations. In addition, not all teams were civilian-based. We know that the bedrock of mountain rescue in the UK is the civilian operation, but a small number of police and military teams have played a significant role. Further, some teams no longer in existence, were attached to schools and outdoor centres.

In regard to the dates that teams were founded, I have used the date agreed by the team. In some cases, this was the date when a key meeting of interested parties took place. With others it was the date the team carried out its first operation. For many, it was the date the team gained affiliation to its national body (Mountain Rescue England and Wales, Mountain Rescue Ireland, Scottish Mountain Rescue, British Cave Rescue Council, National Search and Rescue Dog Association), became formally constituted or was officially recognised by a police authority. In every case apart from one or two, teams started life before the formal date given here. For this reason, the overall time picture given in this article, could be shifted a few years earlier. But, it is not possible to quantify the exact period involved.

Information was gathered from a variety of sources including team websites, published books and leaflets, emails and telephone conversations. The absence of key information from the early years made it difficult for some teams to clearly specify their starting year. Where possible, to improve accuracy, dates from two or more sources for each team were cross-referenced.

Table 1 (opposite page) lists all the teams and their starting year. The left-hand column lists the name of every team (140). Those teams in black are currently operational (113).

Those in orange no longer exist (27) — having either ceased to exist with no further development, amalgamated with other teams or combined to form new ones.

Here are some examples. The Sett Valley MRT (established in 1959) and the Goyt SRT (established in 1964) ceased to operate independently in 1971 when together they formed the Kinder MRT. Ullswater OB Rescue Team (formed in 1959) ceased operation following publication of 'RESCUE 2000', and merged with Patterdale MRT. RAF Leuchars MRT was founded in 1944 (as RAF Montrose MRT) and disbanded in 2013. Finally, the Search and Rescue Dog Association, which was established in 1965,

effectively ceased to exist in 1971 when it divided into SARDA Wales, SARDA England and SARDA Scotland. Today, there are twelve search and rescue dog associations recognised by one of the national bodies.

To summarise, since the CRO was formed in 1935, a total of 140 teams have been established across the UK/RoI. Today, the number of operational teams is 113. Without wishing to complicate matters, and with a view to further analysis, I have established for each country the number of teams, which I call the 'foundation' teams. These are the teams that started and are either still operational or ceased to exist, but not the teams that developed from or

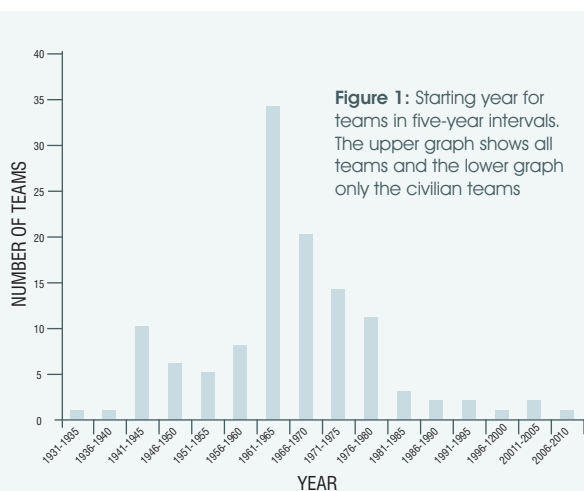
combined with others. For example, sixteen teams are identified within Ireland, but only fourteen are 'foundation' teams. That is because the two SARDAs evolved from the original SARDA in 1965.

To take an example from England, Duddon & Furness MRT started life (in 2003) through the amalgamation of Furness MRT (established in 1962) and Millom Fell Rescue Team (established 1967). So, the latter two teams are defined as 'foundation' teams, whilst Duddon & Furness is not. Applying this logic to all teams yields the pattern shown in Table 2 (below left), which gives a breakdown by country for the 'foundation' and current teams.

It is the 'foundation' teams that provide data for subsequent analyses. Because Table 1 is a simple listing of teams, it doesn't reveal the distribution over time of the starting years. This is shown in Figure 1 (below). There is a clear pattern. It is broadly 'normal' in nature with two high points: one in the 1940s and one in the 1960s. The first reflects establishment of the RAF Mountain Rescue Service and the formation of teams such as RAF Montrose (later to become RAF Leuchars MRT) and RAF Llandwrog (later to become RAF Valley MRT). If the RAF teams and the Police MRTs are removed from this picture, the distribution of starting years for the civilian teams shows little difference except there is now only a single high point in the 1960s — see Figure 1.

**Table 2:** Breakdown of teams according to country.

	England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales	Total
'Foundation' teams	57	14	35	15	121
Current teams	52	15	31	15	113



## WHY THE MID 1960s?

The distribution shown in Figure 1 begs the question why did so many teams start up in the 1960s? Indeed, almost half of all teams were established in the 1960s and just less than one quarter in the three-year period 1964-1966. What was special about this period in our history? I suspect the answer lies in the rapid and unprecedented social changes that took place in the 1960s. The 'Swinging Sixties' were a defining decade for Britain in numerous ways. Consider some of the significant

<sup>2</sup> Every team has a unique name, but not all are referred to as mountain rescue teams per se. A variety of terms are used. Most are mountain rescue teams, but there are also search and rescue teams, rescue organisations, rescue units, cave rescue teams, mountain rescue associations, fell rescue teams and associations. Without wishing to diminish the nature or importance of each organisation, for simplicity, I have used the word 'team' from hereon.







events. The decade saw the end of conscription for teenagers; feminism became an influential ideology in society; technological advancements such as colour TV, pocket transistor radios and microwave ovens appeared and reforms in education led to the effective elimination of grammar schools and the rise of the comprehensive school. No doubt readers can cite many more.

Critically, the 1960s saw a rise in economic prosperity and personal wealth with disposable income at their highest levels ever. For many people there was an increase in annual holiday entitlement and a gradual reduction in weekly working hours, both of which led to an expansion in the amount of free time people had for leisure. The vast increase in car ownership and road networking gave people greater freedom of movement and independence. All these things led to a burst in the leisure and recreation industry and a growing attraction for people to explore the 'great outdoors'.

Indeed, the early part of the 20th century had already seen an emerging appreciation of the great outdoors and the benefits of physical exercise. As early as 1931, a government inquiry had recommended the creation of a 'national park authority' to select areas for designation as national parks. No action was taken and this led directly to the mass trespasses on Kinder Scout in the Peak District, and the rise of leisure activity enthusiasts and nature conservationists, who lobbied the government for measures to protect and allow access to the countryside. This pressure culminated in the 1949 Act of Parliament to establish national parks. It was no wonder that when the first national parks were established in the 1950s — such as those in the Lake District, Snowdonia and the Yorkshire Dales — all experienced a rapid increase in visitors and outdoor participation.

As a result of developments like these, the 1960s saw a significant rise in participation and as a direct consequence, a rise in the number of people lost or injured and in need of outside help. It is probable this is the most significant reason for the rapid formation of rescue teams across the country in the 1960s. Indeed, many established during this period — including,

for example, Arrochar, Llanberis and Cleveland — comment on increased participation, rising incidents and the need to formalise and better coordinate rescue provision.

## WHICH COUNTRY LED THE WAY?

The starting point for this study was a question: which country was first in setting up mountain rescue? Putting to one side the RAF Mountain Rescue Service whose foundation in the mid-1940s was common across the UK, the figures show that many of the civilian teams were established in England a long time before Scotland. Indeed, the CRO in Yorkshire was established in 1935, several years before Gordonstoun School MRT (1951) and the Rannoch School MRS (1959) in Scotland. It was a quarter of a century before Glencoe MRT was founded in 1961.

A detailed analysis of the figures shows that by the end of 1960, 33% of all the English teams had been established and 20% of all the Scottish teams. By the end of 1965, the figures were England (67%) and Scotland (49%) and by the end of 1970, the figures were England (86%) and Scotland (63%). Based on these figures, one might conclude that mountain rescue was established earlier in England compared to Scotland.

These figures are of academic interest only, although some readers may question why the service first gathered pace in England. The answer can't have anything to do with the respective geographies of each country else one might have expected Scotland (with significantly more high mountains) to be 'ahead' of the game. It might be that the surge in outdoor recreation and the efforts to open access were more advanced in England. The pressure to extend access in Scotland may have been less. Certainly, the 'right to roam' was a well-established tradition in Scotland in the 1960s. It is possible that the ad hoc provision for mountain rescue in the UK worked better (or was tolerated longer) in Scotland, thereby delaying the need to formalise and restructure the service. There may be other factors or a combination of reasons. There is an interesting study here for a curious reader!

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The emergence of the mountain rescue service in the UK/Rol, especially the civilian operation, took place over a period of several decades, with a particular surge in the 1960s. The last new team was Hebrides Mountain Rescue, which was formally affiliated to the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland in 2010. Its emergence was designed to fill a serious gap in provision, particularly in light of the proposed closure of the Stornoway Coastguard station (and consequent withdrawal of the cliff rescue teams).

Will there be any more new MRTs? It seems unlikely, since all the high ground in the UK/Rol is now systematically covered by the existing service. There may be a continuing rise in the number of lowland organisations as evidenced by the recent establishment of NSARDA (Staffordshire) in 2015. At present, there are 36 lowland teams affiliated to the Association of Lowland Search and Rescue. And it is possible that some teams may cease operation or combine with others as their workload changes.

But, nothing remains still for very long. Whilst new teams may not emerge, there is bound to be a continuing look at how teams are governed, their relationship with the statutory organisations and widening role in the community, and how they are funded, to list a few current issues. Most important, we should recognise and applaud our history. There are many rich stories to be told and lessons to be learned from others. We have a massive depth of experience and should recognise that future developments may well be steered and shaped by that experience.

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