



Rob Mitchell on the Finding Our Way podcast

Content Alert: In this episode Rob, a gay man, talks about discrimination linked to homophobia. He also talks about the importance of a supportive community to help individuals deal with stress and life challenges.

Intro music

Mary-Ann Finding Our Way is sponsored by Berghaus. For a long time, Berghaus kit has helped people access and enjoy outdoor experiences, and we're delighted to have them as partners for this podcast.

This episode involves a conversation about discrimination linked to homophobia. For more detailed information, have a look at the episode description.

Mary-Ann Hello and welcome to Finding Our Way, the new podcast from the British Mountaineering Council or the BMC. I'm Mary-Ann Ochota

Cress And I'm Cress Allwood. This podcast is about diversifying the voices we normally hear talking about the outdoors. So in each episode, we'll be chatting to someone who's usually busy climbing, mountaineering or walking...

Mary-Ann ...And instead we're going to grill them about the highs, the lows and the most surprising things they've learnt from their adventures. So expect good chat, memorable stories and bursts of inspiration from people who are actually making real change happen.

Cress So, Mary-Ann, who's on today?

Mary-Ann OK, joining us today is a man who is, by day, a senior manager in local government for Redcar and Cleveland Council. And he recently went part time so that he could spend more time exploring Scotland, the Lakes and more. He's a huge advocate for the power of supportive outdoor communities at all times. He's a mountain, camping and hostels event leader for Outdoor Lads, a UK-wide community who run a range of sociable outdoor activities for gay, bi and trans guys. He says the Outdoor Lads is all about getting out more. Connecting with us from the North York Moors, welcome, Rob Mitchell!

Rob Hello. Good to be with you. Hi.

Cress Thank you for joining us today, Rob. So if we start off, can you tell us - Outdoor Lads, what's this all about?

Rob Well, Outdoor Lads, it started back in 2006. And it was born out of a group of gay guys in Manchester who were socialising, you know, gay bars, the gay scene. But they had a shared passion for the outdoors and they wanted to do something different. So they decided they'd organise a camping weekend away and let it be known locally through local press, to encourage other people to come and join them, get away from the gay scene and enjoy the outdoors for the weekend. And that's how Outdoor Lads was born.

As it happened, it was the very first weekend of February and they were camping in the Lake District at Langdale. So a very wintry scene all around! But that's become an iconic annual event, our winter camp - every winter, beginning of February, to mark the anniversary of the birth of Outdoor Lads.

Since then, the group has grown. We've gone up to having a couple of thousand members or so right across the UK, even some members elsewhere in Europe, and the whole raft of activities for the group, not just camping, but walking, mountain walking, climbing, bouldering, canoeing, hosteling, wild camping, fell running, mountain biking, road biking and even skiing, going into the Alps from time to time. And there's longer distance hikes like going to Everest Base Camp, would you believe. So it really has grown in that time since 2006.

Mary-Ann Were you part of the original 2006 group or did you join at some point later?

Rob No, I used to live in Manchester, but no, I wasn't part of that group. I found out about it in 2008, through a friend who heard of it. And I found it online and signed up, found a walk locally and joined. So I've been an active member since 2008, and was so inspired by the people in the group that I thought, 'I could lead walks like this'. So I started leading walks here in the North York Moors.

Then I was following Outdoor Lads into more wild landscapes like the Lake District and then eventually venturing up into Scotland. And it's broadened my horizons immensely. So from not knowing Scottish mountains at all, you know, I now consider the West Highlands to be my second home, all thanks to the stuff with Outdoor Lads. And as a result of that, I've boosted my confidence and my skills. I'm hoping to complete my Summer Mountain Leader qualification in about three weeks time - I missed out on a couple of categories when I first did it a couple of years back. So I'm going back to - hopefully - knock those two on the head and become a fully qualified summer ML.

Mary-Ann 'ML' is Mountain Leader?

Rob Mountain Leader, yeah. Which is all down to Outdoor Lads, to be honest, inspiring me to get out more, to push myself and to enjoy and to be a bit adventurous. So it's fantastic.

Cress That's great to hear, Rob, because doing your ML is quite an undertaking.

Rob Yeah. I never set out to do anything like this, you know, at all. I mean, I think my passion was really triggered by being on top of Great Gable on a very misty day in November on an Outdoor Lads event. And you couldn't see a thing, it was really thick mist. And the guy that was leading, John Cornley, he said to me, 'Oh, Rob, see if you can find

the route off'. So I was looking around, fumbling around in the thick fog. I couldn't find the way off at all! And then he got his compass out and his map, lined the two up and then bang, straightaway, there's the route down. And that's when I thought, 'I need to learn to do that'.

As it happened, that same guy was running a navigation course through Outdoor Lads, a couple of months later. So I signed up. And that has been the trigger for me to just go on and on and on. And it's been wonderful.

Mary-Ann I love that a map and a compass are the tools to freedom, in some way.

Rob Well, yeah. I mean, I've always been pretty au fait with maps. I would navigate on family holidays aged six or seven years old, to get us down to Devon and Cornwall with the road maps. I've always been very comfortable with maps and especially Ordnance Survey maps. And I've been broadly familiar with a compass. But I've never really known how to use it properly until about ten years ago on that mountain top with John and then on the training course a couple of months later up in the Coniston Falls on a snowy February weekend, you know, learning micro-navigation in the dark, that kind of stuff.

And when things come together, when you're aiming for something in the dark and you're pacing yourself...when you find what you're looking for in the pitch black - Wow! I know it sounds bonkers, but that feels fantastic. So it just gives you the confidence to know that [if you] remember those basics, remember those skills, even if the weather turns for the worse and you can't see more than 10 metres in front of your nose, you can get a group off a mountain top fairly safely.

Cress I absolutely concur with that. And, you know, if you put the time and commitment in, there's absolutely no reason why all our listeners - if they want to improve their navigation - couldn't achieve that too. They don't have to do their ML, but, you know, navigation skills courses. And using other technologies as well, in addition to the map and compass, I guess nowadays.

Rob To me, maps are my artwork. You know, you can look at a map and see the beauty of the landscape from what's on that sheet of paper. You know, you could look at it, envisage what it is on the ground. The contours tell a story, the streams tell a story, the plateaus tell a story. Being able to look at a map and interpret it in your mind and think, 'that's what it's going to look like', that's good. And it takes time to do that, you've got to be very familiar with Ordnance Survey maps to be able to do that. But that's the kind of thing that just builds up over time.

Mary-Ann Now, Rob, a question that I'm sure is not the first time you've been asked, but when we look at Outdoor Lads - so it's for gay, bi and trans men - do you face the accusation that it's divisive? Why do you need a special club for those people?

Rob I would argue that it's not divisive. I think as human beings, we all need to form groups. We all need to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of community. Some people get that through their local school, or mothers, fathers, or connections through school. Some people get it through the church. All sorts of different avenues. But we do need to feel part of a group. Outdoor Lads, we are just that - part of a group that was set up by, and is intended for, gay men but that's not to say others can't join. In fact, it would be unlawful for us to say you cannot join our group because you're a woman. Absolutely unlawful, and nor would we want to. But I think it opens the door for people to think, 'Well,

if Outdoor Lads can do it for gay men, so-and-so could do it for lesbians, or for people with disabilities or for the BME community or for anything else. I mean, there are groups that are set up for, you know, geographical areas. You might hear the, I don't know, the Birmingham walking group or something, I just made that up off the top of my head! But they're communities of interest of human beings, and it's simply around that. It's not about being divisive, it's recognising that there are groupings that are absolutely fine within that broader family. And especially if it helps people to get outdoors as well. If it encourages more people to get outdoors, then that's got to be a good thing.

Cress And that perhaps leads us onto the question or shall I say problem of language and acronyms, because, you know, LGBTQ...I...'+', etcetera... What's your view on some of these labels, Rob? Are they helpful or not?

Rob It can be a bit of both, to be honest. Language is absolutely critical, of course, it's our number one means of communication, however it's done - verbal, written, whatever - it is incredibly powerful. So we've got to get it right. If we use language that's straight away putting barriers up, we've got a problem. So whether it's the written language or the verbal language, saying that we are welcoming to people from all sorts of different backgrounds, it's important to get that across. So phrases like LGBTQI+ can have their advantages, because if somebody identifies with the 'I' or the 'T' or is even aware that they might be part of the 'plus' at the end of it, at least there's a smidgen of something there that suggests, 'Actually this could be good for me.' So there is an importance there.

In my own mind, I do struggle sometimes that the list of abbreviations is getting longer and longer. When I first came out in the 80s, at the end of my student days, you know, I was coming out as a gay man, I'd struggled as a youngster, a teenager from a background with no positive role models whatsoever. Margaret Thatcher was in power. So Clause 28, all of those things for anybody that remembers that far back, it was fairly right wing and a tough time for growing up gay. And eventually when I did it, I thought, 'Yeah, I'm coming out as a gay man!' And at the time, all of the groups that were there to support were called "Lesbian and Gay whatever-it-was", "Lesbian and Gay Switchboard", "Lesbian and Gay support group". And I was thinking, 'Well, hang on, I'm coming out as a gay man, not as a 'lesbian and gay' man!' But that was my identity at the time. And of course, you soon realise the oppression and the difficulties that people face are very, very similar. So there's a good reason for grouping people together. And if anything, especially when you're facing oppression, you need people to work together to fight oppression. There's no point with just the gay male community having one agenda, the lesbian community having another agenda...you have to work together. And that's what we found in the 80s and 90s and thankfully so many social and legal changes occurred.

But again, it comes back to the point that the language we use is important. We've also got to back that up with actions and meaning and genuinely try and get to grips with those things, because that way we open the door for so many more people to come and join us. We can be inclusive and everybody can have hopefully a great time together.

Cress Yeah. And feel welcome and valued.

Mary-Ann Rob, do you think things have changed? Is it easier being a gay man now? Or coming out now?

Rob Yes, I would say it probably is. Obviously that's from my own experience, you only come out once! And I came out in the late 80s and that was hard. What I hear from people,

younger people, that have gone through that similar journey in the late 90s and now the first couple of decades of the 21st century, it does seem to be much, much easier. Which is great. There are still some issues, though. When you think about it, heterosexuals don't have to come out as straight, and fear what the reaction might be from people that aren't keen on heterosexuals. That's just not something that heterosexual people ever have to countenance. Gay people grow up thinking, "Oh God, I'm going to have to come out!" Unless they're really, really lucky and grow up in the most supportive environment and never come across any negativity in their school days or whatever.

So I often liken it to things like crime and the fear of crime. There's much more fear of crime - loads of people fear crime even if they've never experienced it. That fear of coming out is bigger than the reality - that's what I've seen myself in recent years. So I think it is getting easier. Again, groups like Outdoor Lads are really important there. [For example] if somebody is feeling particularly vulnerable because they really want to come out to their family but if their family reject them, what happens then? If they've got a big network of friends that they've managed to build up through Outdoor Lads or any other means, you've got a kind of cushion behind you. People that will support you, whether it's a good journey, whether it's a bad journey or just a downright ordinary journey. You've got people there to support you.

So I think it is easier now than it used to be. Attitudes have changed. I mean, gay marriage has been around a few years now and seems as normal as anything. I couldn't have imagined that, when I was coming out. So what a change. Still a long way to go, but what a change. We've got to fight to hold onto those changes as well.

Cress So what advice would you give to clubs to encourage greater inclusion?

Rob I think any club can think long and hard about the messages it sends out, in terms of all sorts of things. First of all, if it has its own aims and ambitions, to make that clear. And - the aims of the group, are they inclusive? Does the wording of anything on their website suggest 'We are for this particular type of person only'? Also things like the imagery that you use, because most groups are now based on the Internet. So does the imagery on the website suggest inclusion or is it all just, you know, grey-haired ageing white people? You know, we can't make things up, but let's try and make sure that whatever we do to communicate with the outside world, that [we say] the groups are accessible to other people.

And make it clear that there are different types of events that will be inclusive - not everybody wants to go on a 25 mile hike in 18 hours over half a dozen different Munro summits in Scotland. Some people like to do something a bit more casual. So making sure you've got different types of events, different levels of ability, can actually be very inclusive as well. So you're not just narrowing it down to a limited number of people that are already very experienced being out and about in the hills. Because that in itself is...well, you could argue it's indirect discrimination...because there are lots of people out there that need introducing to the hills and will be put off by a big challenging event. There's loads of opportunities out there for groups just to think about what it might look like to other people, the messages that they're sending out.

Mary-Ann I've been quite struck by looking at the Outdoor Lads website and social media that it feels so welcoming to people who might be nervous, [or if] they might not have done much stuff outdoors. So it says, for example, that leaders will know who's on their first event, make a special effort to make you feel welcome, and that the four values of Outdoor

Lads are: Friendly and Welcoming, Fun, Adventurous and Professional. Love that, I mean, that kind of makes me want to join!

Cress There's no mention of conquering mountains, you know, it's really inviting.

Rob Well, absolutely. I mean, there's a number of things in response to that. Yes - the values you mentioned are absolutely central to what we do. The thing about being friendly and welcoming, especially for new members. When people sign up for an event, it's on the Outdoor Lads website. So I'm leading an event on Monday, I can see who's coming and I can see how many events they've done. So I can tell if they've been around for years because they've done a hundred or more events or if there's a big fat zero next to their name, then that means they're new and that will be their very first experience of Outdoor Lads. So it's essential that we make sure that people who are new feel, straight away, part of a wider community.

So it's about welcoming them. Sometimes I'll send them a message in advance to say, 'Really looking forward to meeting you, we're a really good group', just to try and reassure them in advance and remind them, you know, where to meet and what to bring, that kind of thing. But it's also on the day introducing newcomers to other members of the group, making sure they feel part of it. I suppose part of your leadership qualities, as you're going round on a particular walk, is making sure that the new person isn't walking alone. You could have a group of 20 or 30 of you, and you want to make sure that that new person is chatting. And when you can see them clicking with other people and you can see smiling, laughter, that kind of thing, you think, 'Yeah, that's fantastic'. That really is what we're about.

We pride ourselves as a group on being welcoming and inclusive, to try and make sure anybody and everybody feels valued. But the other values that we have - things like fun. We want Outdoor Lads to be fun, we want people to have a great time. Some people have a great time by pushing themselves to the limit and walking for hours and hours and hours in driving rain just to get to a summit. Even though we can't see a thing from the summit, you come back down cold, wet and happy. There are other people that would hate that. Their idea of fun is a nice, gentle walk on a canal towpath with a really warm tearoom at the end and go and have cake and coffee for four hours as well. Fun means lots of different things to different people.

We try to make sure everything is fun. And especially when you get to things like weekend events, we pride ourselves on things like hostel weekends. So we'll book an entire youth hostel for sole use. And the first night is always the classic Outdoor Lads buffet. Everybody's asked to bring some food to share and it's a great social event. Really nice way to meet people, make people feel welcome. You're sharing each other's food, a lot of which is homemade, they're great fun.

Adventurous: we're very keen on making sure people get lots of new experiences. So the sheer list of types of activities that people can get involved in, we hope will inspire people to try something new. And I know what it's like when...I've taken people up their first Munro. And, you know, their reaction to having achieved something they never thought they would have done is hugely satisfying to me. And you can see what an achievement it is in the expressions on their faces. When they get to the summit, you can say, 'Oh, welcome to the top of Ben Blahblah, you know, this is a Munro.' And you can see them [saying] 'Wow!' So it's that sense of adventure as well. It doesn't have to be about dangling

on a piece of rope off a cliff. You know, adventure comes in many different forms and that's part of it.

But I think underpinning all of this is the professional bit. We have professional standards, we follow BMC guidelines and we're affiliated to the BMC. We're also affiliated to Sport England. We follow various guidelines around making sure our leaders are suitably experienced and trained in different skills, you can't become a mountain leader until you've passed at least two assessments with other experienced mountain leaders in the group, you've got your Outdoor First Aid qualification lined up and you've got a reasonable history of leading mountain walks. You come with a level of experience, so there's all that professional background to it.

We have a training budget as a group, so we are always encouraging people to undergo training, whether it's formal or informal. It's supporting people through professional qualifications like the Summer Mountain Leader or the Hill and Moorland walking qualifications, navigation qualifications, all sorts of things. So professionalism does underpin it, even though we're all volunteers.

Mary-Ann Tell us a bit about what walking means to you. What place does it have in your life?

Rob For me, it's well, it's been a part of my life for just about all my life. I think my original passion for the outdoors, if I'm honest, is thanks to my mum and dad. Now, they weren't great hill walkers or hikers or anything like that at all. I was born and brought up in the Fens, you know, pick up a map down there, see if you can find a contour in the first half an hour! You'll be very lucky indeed. But we used to go on holiday to places like Devon and Cornwall, to Exmoor, Dartmoor, all around the Cornish coast, up into Scotland, a couple of holidays up there. And that really introduced me to a three dimensional landscape and I absolutely loved it. So I fell very much out of love with the Fens! I loved those family holidays. We didn't have much money as a family, so we always used to go camping. At the time, I thought that was a really obvious statement about a poor family that couldn't afford to do anything else because friends at school were going on Spanish package tour holidays. And I thought, 'Wow, that's really posh. Why can't we do that?! Though we can't afford it...' Looking back, would I change that for a million quid? Absolutely not. I got so much out of those holidays that's still with me. So that is absolutely where my passion comes from. We never really went to big hills or, you know, certainly not up a mountain as a family. But it was just the walking thing. And even then I can remember my dad saying, 'We'll just go to the top of this hill and see what we can see'. And I'd tag along. It's that sense of achievement, of getting somewhere that you set out to get to, and you get to the top of the hill. You feel satisfied that you've done it, the sense of achievement and the view that you would usually get - being able to see and feel like you're on top of the world. That can be your local tiny hill, even in the centre of your municipal park. Or it could be, you know, one of the UK's finest mountain summits. You can still get that sense of achievement.

So that's really where my passion for the outdoors has come from. It's perfect for switching off. You know, throughout my career in local government, it's been pretty demanding at times, as most people's are. Being outdoors allows you to switch off from all of the stuff, the pressures at work, deadlines that are coming up, all those kinds of things that can keep you awake at night... When you can put your boots on and disappear, I find I can switch off from that. So that has been absolutely vital to my mental wellbeing for many, many years. So as well as enjoying it for itself, it's a great way of switching off. And again,

if you're out leading a group, your focus is on making sure they have a great day out, keeping everybody safe. Clearly, you don't want any broken limbs, people falling over or down a cliff edge or something. So you're focused on stuff like that. You can really switch off and focus on great things.

I think we often worry about far too many things. Being out in the wilderness, especially on your own, you can feel so insignificant. You know, things that felt so important, worrying when you were at home, feel like nothing when you're out in the middle of the Scottish wilds on your own, wild camping or something. It's a great way to forget all of that. Recharge your mental batteries, as well as exercise your physical ones.

Cress That's so great to hear. What I'm hearing from you and certainly it resonates with me, is that need to balance the responsibility of being a leader in the outdoors and all that goes with that - when you're making sure that everyone else is having a good time - with perhaps the personal need for connection with nature and the outdoors, which is perhaps a different type of cathartic release?

Rob I think that's absolutely true. I think you've summed it up really well, I couldn't sum it up any better. You do need that balance in your life, full stop. I mean, people get that balance from all sorts of different interests, but for many of us, it's the outdoors. If they've just got one interest in their life, just work or something, it's not a very rich life. Our lives, doing this kind of stuff, are thankfully really pretty rich!

Mary-Ann Do you sometimes find Rob, that within a group that you're leading, people feel that release, finding that they feel like they're in a safe space, a supportive community, actually brings mental health issues up? And you're on the hill keeping a group safe, but also going, 'Oh, hang on a minute, this person's going through something that we need to support them with'.

Rob Yeah, that does happen quite a lot. I mean when you're out all day with a group, you have conversations about 1001 different subjects and invariably issues related to mental health come up. It's not very often somebody would say to you, 'Oh, by the way, I've got a mental health issue I want to share with you'. But it's clear things like that can emerge. People start to talk about the worries they've got just through conversation.

It's not about thinking, "Oh, my God, this is a mental health challenge! How do I deal with it as a leader?!" It's really about being normal, and how you would be if you were out with a friend who was talking and started to talk about something difficult. You'd listen, you'd have a chat, you'd ask them questions to try and unpick it, to help them find solutions. It's not an absolute art, it's the kind of thing you would do, not just as a leader, but as somebody that you're there with.

I suppose, as a leader, what you would want to make sure is that the whole group follows the ethos of being welcoming, supporting, and that would follow through. There have been some examples where having come back from events I've heard people say, "joining Outdoor Lads, going on this walk, has been far better than any anti-depressants I've ever been on". So, you know, little nuggets like that, you think, bloody hell, that's powerful.

That is really, really good. So if the NHS and government could put on prescription going outdoors, sometimes for days at a time to really get to grips with your, um, I suppose, your soul, your inner self, whatever it might be, that might save billions in drug costs. Who knows?

Mary-Ann There is a movement towards that, isn't there? Where it's...what do they call it? Social Prescribing.

Cress Yeah.

Rob Yeah. And exercise on prescription as well. Yeah. And I think that has been tried in small areas, and probably shown to work, but it's not yet taken off. But it is the kind of thing that really should be pushed. You know, maybe all GPs ought to be given a list of all the outdoor groups across the whole of the UK, whatever they are, and then they can perhaps say, 'Go on this, join this group for a couple of months, and then come back and see me and see how you're feeling.'

Mary-Ann Maybe we need to take the GP's out? And then they'll be like, "Oh! I realise the power of this medicine! Everybody needs this special medicine!"

Rob Yeah, yeah, yeah. Good idea. I'm just thinking of the GP's I've had, and whether all of them would actually manage to get outdoors! But I think most of them would. They might start with the canal towpath and then work up!

Mary-Ann And the coffee and cake! I mean that sounds great. Yeah.

Cress Rob, what have been your highlights so far with Outdoor Lads?

Rob Oh, blimey, highlights. To be honest, there's so many highlights I could witter on for hours! I suppose for me personally, it was that sudden realisation I could get out and explore. And I've discovered so much of the UK's upland landscapes that I'd never even dreamt of visiting until I joined Outdoor Lads. It gave me the confidence, the skills to go on to do that. Specific highlights when I look back - one New Year's Day, probably about eight years ago, at one of our Hogmanay events. We have a really good Hogmanay event, obviously New Year time, up in Scotland. And on this particular New Year's Day, we decided to go up Schiehallion. It was really snowy in places, we struggled a bit to make sure we got to the top safely, but we did, [by going] a circuitous route. It was a cloud inversion: you get to the top and the peaks are just sticking out from the top. As we emerged, we got the most amazing Brocken Spectres. Now, I don't think any of us on the group had ever experienced a brocken spectre before. So to see them that particular day, with a cloud inversion, having got to the summit of Schiehallion with a hangover on New Year's Day, was just one of those memories that will always be with me.

It's things like that that you hold dear. Also, things like visiting some of the remotest youth hostels in Britain is just amazing. So places like Black Sail in the Lake District are clearly magical. Skiddaw House is one of my favourites. You know, the hike in, the sense of adventure, even before you get there, is palpable. So you're not driving your car to the front door, you're having to hike there against the elements. And then in Scotland, Loch Ossian hostel is one of my favourites. Getting off the train at Corrou station, hiking across the edge of Rannoch Moor to get to Loch Ossian hostel, right by the shores of the loch. I was there a couple of years ago in October. The deer were rutting. It was a still time, very little wind, and you could hear the stags bellowing from miles away. It was just a wonderful experience. And then, of course, Glen Affric hostel up in the far north west. [It's] an eight mile walk in from the nearest place you can leave your car, surrounded by some of the most stunning mountain landscapes in Britain. What an amazing place to be. You know, there's so many highlights like that.

I made up my own coast to coast route across England, obviously inspired by Wainwright. So I made up my own route from the west coast of Cumbria and ended up on Holy Island in Northumberland, over the course of about 12 days. I felt a huge sense of achievement. One of my ambitions is to do something similar in Scotland, to pick a route from the most westerly points of the Scottish mainland to the most easterly. So close to Ardnamurchan Point, which you hear on the shipping forecast, across to Peterhead and take in all the four thousand foot summits of Scotland en route as well. So that's one of my ambitions to do before I get too old to manage such things. Hopefully [I've got] another 20 years at least!

Mary-Ann Rob, for listeners who are feeling inspired by the passion, the energy, by the obvious impact the Outdoor Lads has had within its community... For people who are going, "I want to do something like that for people in my community, or my peers", what would be your advice?

Rob I think the simplest piece of advice is go for it. You don't need anybody's permission to try something new. You know, you might just have a couple of friends that have got a similar feeling, a similar ambition. Just go for it. Put your heads together, come up with a plan, see if anybody else wants to join you and just do it. If it works, even if it's just two or three of you doing something and it works and you come back buzzing, other people will think, 'Oh, that sounds good. I'd like a piece of that. Can I join? Can I come next time?'

And that's how things happen. That's how Outdoor Lads happened. A group of people starting things informally. And things like constitutions and funding and all that kind of malarkey follows much, much later on. And it will be such a shame if people let worries about organising groups or charities or whatever get in the way of actually starting something. Just do it.

Cress So what's next? What does the future look like?

Rob I think what's next is coming out of the Covid pandemic. I mean, let's face it, it's been a pretty miserable year on many fronts, and it's desperately affected people's ability to get outdoors. So as a group, we're very much focused now on getting as many events up and running to get people back outdoors within the government guidelines. And, of course, the advice that we get from bodies like BMC and Sport England.

I'm really pleased amongst our leaders, we've managed to get over 100 events in those first couple of weeks on our website so that people all over the country can get out in small groups. And that's a way of rebuilding the group. Because individuals have suffered, people have been stuck indoors. I'm lucky, I live in the North York Moors. I can shove my boots on, I disappear with the dog, with my partner, and I can have a fantastic day out. Most people don't have that kind of luxury. So people's mental health has suffered, we need to get doing that for individuals, for the members of our groups. We found our membership dropped somewhat during the pandemic, because people are paying an annual subscription and if they feel they can't get out, why would they pay the subscription? I get that. So the sooner we get more and more events and especially ones that people pay for, like the hostel events, camping events and so on, where there's a small premium that people pay that helps to financially support Outdoor Lads, we need to get those back up and running as well. We've got loads in the pipeline and then people can enjoy a much wider experience with Outdoor Lads. And then we can go from strength to strength and get our membership up from the current 1300 back up to well over 2000 where it used to be. And who knows, the sky's the limit.

Mary-Ann Brilliant. Thank you so much. Cress, should we finish off with our Quickfire Questions?

Cress So there are ten questions that we ask every guest on Finding Our Way. Are you ready?

Rob Deep breath. Go on, let's go for it.

Mary-Ann Describe yourself in three words.

Rob Adventurous. Contours - unusual word to use to describe yourself! Hungry. I'm always hungry - for food, for adventure, yeah.

Cress What's your favourite mountain snack?

Rob It would have to be homemade cake. You can't beat a slab of homemade cake when you get to a summit. It's got to be the good thing. I mentioned earlier about the events that we go on, people often make cakes to bring along. So having somebody's homemade cake on a mountain top is just magical.

Mary-Ann Particular flavour or any will do?

Rob Anything, as long as it's got lots of fat and sugar in it, that's all that matters!

Mary-Ann Best mountain memory?

Rob Well, I mentioned earlier the Schiehallion experience, that's got to be up there. Reaching Ben Nevis for the first time was pretty special, knowing you're on the highest point of the British Isles. But there's loads and loads and loads.

Cress Bucket list destination.

Rob I suppose there's two things I really want to do in the next couple of years or so. I've always wanted to do the South West Coast Path. No mountains involved, but, you know, the sheer length of it is 630 of miles and the ups and downs you do is the equivalent of climbing Everest nearly four times. Obviously not with the snow, ice and thin air, but it is a challenge. It's something I want to do in a seven week blitz. And that one I mentioned earlier, going from west to east of Scotland, Ardnamurchan Point across to Peterhead, across all the mountains in the Cairngorms and so on, will be a magical thing to do.

Mary-Ann How often do you get lost?

Rob I can honestly say not very often. There'll be plenty of times I think, 'Hmm, I'm not exactly...I can't pinpoint myself exactly'. But it's usually fairly quick to get back and know within minutes exactly where I am. And if I'm honest, I probably get lost more in Morrison's than I do on mountains!

Cress Rob, are you funny?

Rob Well, I hope so. I hope there's a bit of humour there because that's part of the leadership thing, isn't it? You want to bring people with you, you want to have a laugh and a joke. It's sad if you don't.

Mary-Ann If you were an animal, what animal would you be?

Rob This is easy. I'd have to be a Jack Russell. I take Cilla, our Jack Russell on my camping and hiking trips, and she loves going up mountains. So I'd be a Jack Russell if I had to be something else.

Cress And one thing apart from Cilla that you always take on the hill?

Rob That would have to be the memories of my mum and dad, because they're the inspiration behind it. My mum always used to love me telling her about the experiences of my Outdoor Lads adventures, you know, mountain tops, watching the sunset from the top of the mountain, the wildlife. I see. She used to absolutely love that. My dad was always quite proud of it too, although he would never articulate it. So even though they're both gone, taking their memory with me is really, really important.

Cress Aw, thank you.

Mary-Ann What does walking mean to you?

Rob It's about feeling totally, totally free. And in a world where there's so much - I'm tempted to say 'crap' if that's not too strong a word - it's nice to feel so insignificant at times. When you're out there either alone or with a group in the middle of nowhere, you can feel insignificant and it's wonderful.

Cress And lastly, Rob, we want more of you and Outdoor Lads, where do we go?

Rob The best route to access us is through our website www.OutdoorLads.com. And of course in this day and age, with social media, so you can also find us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram with a quick search.

Cress Brilliant. Thank you. And we'll make sure we've got all those hashtags and social media connections included with the info. Thank you so much, Rob!

Mary-Ann Thank you Rob, and the Outdoor Lads!

Rob I've really enjoyed it!

Mary-Ann Here's to a summer of freedom.

Cress And fun!

Rob Absolutely. We all deserve it. And cake.

[Cress and Mary-Ann laugh]

Mary-Ann Thank you, lovely listeners, for listening. Let's grow this thing. If you want more of Finding Our Way, then subscribe so you don't miss an episode. Share the podcast with

your friends and your networks. And do let us know what you think. Use @TeamBMC on Instagram and Twitter and the hashtag #FindingOurWay.

Cress See you on the next one!

#outro music

Mary-Ann Finding Our Way is brought to you by the British Mountaineering Council and is proudly supported by Berghaus. It's produced and presented by Cress Allwood and me, Mary-Ann Ochota. It's edited by Chris Stone. The artwork was designed by Neil Arch. Follow us on your podcast app so you don't miss an episode, and join the conversation on social with the hashtag #FindingOurWay.