Glenridding Beck – Investigation Report

Drowning of Max Palmer in Glenridding Beck 26 May 2002

PART E: EVENTS AT GLENRIDDING BECK

These pages describe what happened on the fateful visit to Glenridding.

The lessons learned cover particularly a leader's need:

- for good awareness of environmental conditions and their implications
- to continually reassess the risks and to be prepared to cancel the activity if it cannot be delivered safely
- to manage pupil expectations if the activity cannot be delivered
- for thorough and effective preparation
- for an emergency plan for the rescue and recovery of the party

The left hand column sets out some facts and the right hand column provides comment and further sources of information.

Note: Comments in ***bold italics*** draw particular attention to points that those involved in educational visits and adventurous activities may need to consider.

This Part has six sections:

- Environmental conditions
- Decision to do the activity
- A warning ignored
- The jump into the pool
- The failed rescue attempts
- Recovery of casualties

It ends with a summary of the key points.

Facts	Comment
Environmental conditions	
1. It had been wet for much of the week and rained heavily en route to Glenridding on the Friday night. The beck outside the hostel was fast-flowing and noisy.	***Local knowledge can be very important for assessing the risks of proposed activities. Relevant information might include:*** • ***An understanding of the behaviour of local streams and rivers in response to rain*** • ***Changes in the condition of local watercourses, footpaths, footbridges etc since the activity was last done*** • ***Local weather in the previous few days*** • ***Local weather forecasts*** • ***Advice from other users or local Outdoor Activity Centres/National Parks Service about changing conditions***
2. The next day was cold, wet and windy. The leader dismissed the idea of doing anything in the Glenridding area and took the party to Ambleside and Keswick. The children repeatedly asked when they could do the plunge pool. In the afternoon, they stopped in the car park at Glenridding where there was a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) displaying local weather forecasts. The forecasts warned of cloud and rain and a temperature of 5°Celsius at 3000 feet. The party did not visit the TIC.	Interpretation of the current and past forecasts would indicate that any rainwater running off the fells into Glenridding Beck would be very cold. ***This would be important information for a dynamic risk assessment.***
Decision to do the activity	
3. In the evening, the leader said that they would do the plunge pool the following day.	The leader was under pressure to do the activity because of the pupil expectation that had been created. Leaders need to be careful not to create unrealistic expectations and should not allow participant pressure to cloud their judgement.
4. There was no rain on Sunday morning. The leader looked at the beck and took the view that it had gone down considerably. He told the children that they would go to the plunge pool.	Close to the hostel there was an Environment Agency weir equipped with an instrument to record the water level every 15 minutes. Further up the beck was a depth marker post. These devices might have been used during a site-specific risk assessment to identify possible “cut-off points (see paragraph A6). Furthermore, involving the children in looking at the water level at these devices would have involved them in practical decision-making and subtly educated them a little in risk assessment. There was also a bridge nearby from where they might have thrown sticks into the water to estimate its velocity.
5. Only about half the party wanted to do the plunge pool, but the rest were told they had to walk up anyway. Those wanting to do it were told to put on shorts (or swimming kit), T-shirts and trainers and to take a towel. They left the hostel at about 10.30am.	Reluctance of participants to do a planned activity should lead to a reassessment of the risks because: The activity might need to be modified (with possible implications for supervision levels) or “Plan B” implemented Any genuine concern by a pupil about their ability to do an activity safely should always be taken seriously The pupils should have been adequately equipped for the weather, since it was foreseeable they might be standing around in the wet. They should have carried insulating and windproof clothing with them. Such matters need to be considered in risk assessments.

A warning ignored

6. A party of similarly - aged children from another school (which had also used the plunge pool on previous occasions) was staying at a neighbouring hostel. Their teachers had decided not to use the pool that day because of the weather and water conditions, but to take the children up anyway and show them why it was too dangerous. One of these teachers subsequently gave a description of the water movement in the pool which closely matched the video evidence.

The teachers from this other school took the opportunity to teach their pupils about risk and thus gave value to the "failed" activity.

Videos of the pool taken on the day show foaming water rushing across the middle of the pool towards the exit, but some apparently calm water at the side forming a back current. A short clip forms the background to the Home Page. To see more of the video, click here.

7. Those children accepted that it was too dangerous and the party began to walk back to their hostel. Shortly after leaving the pool, the descending party met Max's party coming up. One of their teachers told the leader that he thought the pool was too dangerous and that they would not let the children jump. The leader replied that he had a rope and continued towards the pool.

The warning from the other school should have led to an immediate reassessment of the risks (dynamic risk assessment). The failure to respond was a grave error.

The rope was in a minibus parked at the hostel about half a kilometre down the valley.

A rope on its own would neither prevent anyone getting into trouble, nor be much help in an attempted rescue unless there is someone trained to use it and the rope is of a suitable type and length.

The jump into the pool

8. The party arrived at the jumping point - a flat ledge about 4 m above the pool. The leader jumped in and got out quickly, saying it was fine. The other teacher went down to the exit point while the leader and Max's mother stayed at the jumping point.

It must have been evident to the leader as soon as he entered the water that it was extremely cold. ***That alone should have caused him to cancel the activity.*** Several of the witnesses from the mountain rescue team said how cold the water was. It was subsequently measured at 8.6°Celsius (47 Farenheit) - as cold as the English Channel in February.

9. When it was Max's turn to jump, the leader asked him if he could swim and if he wanted to go in. Max replied "yes" to both questions. The leader directed him where to jump and Max entered the pool.

It was far too late to be asking about Max's swimming ability. Hence the importance of the "parental consent to swim" proforma for water-based activities (see paragraph D9).

10. As soon as he surfaced, it was evident that he was in trouble and panicking.

A sensation of "having the breath knocked out of you" is a feature of jumping into cold water. It can be very frightening when experienced for the first time and can lead to panic. This should be recognised at the risk assessment stage.

(Note: The "sudden panicker" phenomenon is increasingly being recognised as one of the risk factors in outdoor drownings. It should be considered in the risk assessment and emergency plan). It is recommended that people do not jump into water outdoors without having first swum in it to assess the conditions for themselves. There is more detailed guidance in the AALA "Collective Interpretation" for combined water/rock activities.
http://www.aala.org/guidance.html

The failed rescue attempts

11. The leader jumped in and attempted to get hold of Max, but the boy was so panic-stricken that he kept pushing the leader under the water. He tried a number of times to get Max out. Then Max's mother jumped in to try and save her son. Shortly afterwards, the leader realised that he was succumbing to the cold and went to the exit point where the teacher helped him out. He was by now so cold that he was unable to contribute anything further to the rescue.

The leader might have been able to rescue Max at this point if he had had training on how to deal with a panicking swimmer. Expert witnesses commented that the effective use of a rope at this point could have led to a successful rescue. However, not only was the rope not there, but the other two adults were inexperienced in its use. The leader's bold attempts to save Max were no substitute for proper preparation, organisation and equipment.

The leader had no warm clothing to put on, despite the fact that jumping into the pool was the planned activity

12. There was an attempt to use a string of towels as a substitute rope, but they sank. Eventually Max's mother was also overcome by the cold.

Safety ropes for water-based activities should float.

13. At some time when Max's mother was in the water, the teacher told some of the boys to get the rope They ran to the hostel. Some fetched the rope while others raised the alarm. Three staff from the other school ran towards the scene with rescue and survival equipment.

All the time that these rescue attempts were going on (approximately half an hour), a number of people (including some highly experienced mountaineering instructors) were ascending a path approximately 10 metres away. However, the pool is largely hidden from people ascending the path and the noise of the water that day probably meant that they heard nothing of the incident. Had the party sought outside help at the outset, the outcome might have been very different. The children were only told to get the rope (not explicitly to go for help) and that was after Max had been in the water for about 20-25 minutes.

Risk assessments should consider how the party might respond to a serious incident, including identifying any emergency procedures for contacting sources of help. A few minutes could make all the difference.

Recovery of casualties

14. One of the pupils went into the water to try to grab Max. However, Max was washed out of the pool and down the rocky bed of the stream. This pupil then found Max's mother and, with the teacher's help, pulled her onto a small ledge. He was by now very cold. She was semi-conscious.

The actions of the pupil who pulled Max's mother from the water and of the teachers from the other school who attended to her probably saved her life.

15. The children with the rope arrived back at the pool at about the time that Max was washed over the weir. The teachers from the other school arrived soon after. They put Mrs Palmer in a sleeping bag to keep her warm until the mountain rescue arrived.

Those teachers demonstrated the level of preparedness for an emergency which should be expected from leaders of outdoor activities. Hence the importance of effective NGB training and assessment (or LEA- accredited training, assessment and certification by recognised technical experts). See paragraphs A3 and A4.

16. Max was pulled from the beck further downstream by some pupils. He was pronounced dead at the scene. His mother and the pupil who saved her were flown to hospital and treated for hypothermia.

Despite their lack of experience, some of the pupils acted with great bravery in trying to save Max. Fortunately none of them was seriously harmed, but the conditions were such that these rescue attempts could easily have had a more serious outcome.
These children were put at risk as a direct consequence of the failure to plan for an emergency.

Key points

- Leaders should make sure that they have sufficient “local knowledge” (Paras E 1, E 4)
- It is extremely important to have the best available information to support dynamic risk assessment (for example in this case, pupil and leader capabilities, water temperatures and rescue options) (Para E 2)
- Risk assessments should consider how the party might respond to a serious incident, including identifying any emergency procedures for contacting sources of help (Para E 13).
- Children should be involved in practical risk assessment and decision-making to help them become “risk aware” (Paras E 4, E 6).
- Leaders need to be careful not to create unrealistic expectations and should not allow participant pressure to cloud their judgement (Para E 3).
- Reluctance of participants to do a planned activity should lead to a reassessment of the risks (Para E 5).
- Any warnings should lead to an immediate reassessment of the proposed activity and the likely risks (Para E 7).
- Parties should be properly equipped for the environmental conditions according to the findings of the risk assessments, including dynamic risk assessments (Para E 5).
- Risk assessments for outdoor water-based activities should take account of the possibility of a panicking casualty (Para E 10).
- Emergency equipment is of limited use if people have not been trained to use it correctly (Para E 7).