

Summits On The Air

A Guide for the new SOTA activator



The operating location on the summit of Skiddaw.

TRYING SOTA. If you have ever visited the Lake District you will know this area provides some of the best hill walking in the UK. The Lake District is also SOTA country and provides both hard and easy opportunities to activate summits. The Lake District has some 56 recognised SOTA sites and they are all listed online [1]. The program is accessible for both SOTA activators and for operators at home working stations on the hills. The full rules of SOTA activation have been very well defined; the program is based on points, the most points being given to the hardest to activate summits.

In the Lake District (code LD) you have the option to activate / work 56 recognised locations, ranging from LD 001 Scafell Pike at 978 meters (worth 10 points) to LD 056 Arnside Knott at 159 meters (worth 1 point). Our chosen activation site was LD 004 Skiddaw, mainly because we could identify a clear route up the mountain and the site was located just 7 miles from our campsite near Keswick. We had pencilled in the SOTA activation on two previous days, but the weather in the Lake District is changeable and we could see no point in trying to complete the walk in wet and windy conditions.

July was chosen mainly because the weather was forecast to be 'reasonable' and activity is usually high at the weekend, giving us the maximum chance of working as many stations as possible. The VHF calendar also showed Sunday was a 144MHz backpacker's contest day, so we knew this would add further band activity. John was keen to try out HF, while I was mainly focused on VHF, so we opted to take both antennas. We had already completed some hill walking earlier in the week, although never with this much equipment, so we were prepared for a slow ascent taking everything in our stride. The route we chose meant that the car park was at 295m ASL, meaning we already had a head start over other routes. Parking was limited and if you don't arrive in good time you will find no spaces available.

We left the camp site at 9.30am giving plenty of time to get parked, check back packs once again and prepare for the ascent. We used a GPS to track our progress and had the 2m hand-held monitoring S20. The path is well defined; we had a large scale map, compass and GPS so felt re-assured in our navigational skills. At the start of the path it was quiet, just 2 or 3 other people on the route. With the temperature around 13°C it was reasonably warm once you're walking.

Just before 1pm we reached the summit. The temperature had dropped significantly and wind chill was now becoming a problem. Thankfully we had packed hat, gloves and extra layers and these were needed. We had gained around 630 meters in total ascent and the temperature had now dropped to 9°C; this, coupled with the wind-chill, could have been a real SOTA stopper.

Thankfully our preparation paid off, and we headed for some shelter behind some rocks. Our first activation was going to be VHF SSB and we quickly set up the VHF beam and FT-817, getting on the air in around 15 minutes. The wind was quite strong, maybe gusting to around 30mph, so we decided on a two person strategy. I would hold the antenna support and rotate



Dave, MOTAZ.



FT-817 setup from the top of Skiddaw.

Activating Skiddaw LD-004 at 931 meters (3,054ft)

Equipment Taken: FT-817, 2 x 3Ah gel cells, roach pole, HF inverted V, home made 5-el 144MHz beam, 145MHz handy, various tools, logbook, MFJ Tuner, Gamin GPS, digital camera, warm clothing, 3 litres water, lunch (x2).

Start location: 54°37'4.76"N, 3° 6'54.84"W

Start ASL: 295 meters

Distance walked: 5.2km (each way).



John, MOUKD working HF from Skiddaw.

the beam, leaving John to log and operate. The band was very busy, so we decided to use 2.5W to conserve battery power.

Almost immediately we received calls and, once the spot had been placed on the SOTA website, we had some mini pile ups. We worked 27 stations in quick succession. Many stations wanted to work us for the back packer points, but we also completed some SOTA to SOTA QSOs with GW4EVX on NW051 and 2EOPHL on NPO16.

I had planned to take some video footage of us operating VHF, but this was nearly impossible due to the wind and cold. We decided it was best to operate first, completing as many QSO as we could in our limited operating time, fighting against the wind, cold and limited battery power.

Lunch was taken sheltering behind the rocks, after a successful VHF SOTA activation. Other walkers looked on inquisitively, with the odd person asking, "Can you get Channel 5 from up here?" We were conscious that the summit is enjoyed by many people and tried to make our activation as unobtrusive as possible.

Once we had completed around 2 hours of operating – and explored the summit – we decided to move down a little for the HF activation. It would have been impossible to set up the roach pole and large HF antenna



John, MOUKD holds the home made 5-el 144MHz beam.



The view from Skiddaw.

right on the summit as this would have caused a major obstruction to walkers. SOTA does allow for this and recognises the need to operate in a way sensitive to the needs of other hill walkers.

Having found a suitable location a few metres away from the summit, at 4pm we set up the roach pole. Our plan was to try 3.5, 5 and 7MHz using a 66ft doublet fed with 300Ω ribbon and tuned with a MFJ tuner. HF was slow to start, needing quite a few 'CQ SOTA' calls to generate some activity. One of the contacts added a SOTA spot on the cluster and that prompted many of the stations that had worked us on VHF to find us on HF. We completed 18 contacts and still had plenty of battery power available.

At one point a very strong gust of wind,

probably 40+mph, almost ripped the ribbon feeder from the tuner. Everything worked as planned, although we did have a small drama when the HF antenna would not present anything like 50Ω to the radio. Having checked and re-checked all the connectors the problem cleared.

By 6pm we were almost back to the car, having been on the hills for eight hours. We had packed in a great walk and highly successful VHF and HF SOTA activation – and very tired legs! We obviously didn't learn our lesson and Monday was followed with a further SOTA activation of Robinson LD 021 at 731 meters ASL...

REFERENCE

[1] www.sotawatch.org/summits.php