

After 20 years, the first steps for man who defied doctors

David Sanderson

They were 70 stuttering steps in a couple of minutes. For Andrew Renton, though, it was the equivalent of a marathon and a testament to his determination to return from the brink of death.

Two decades ago, he slipped and fell on the snow-covered mountains of Glen Coe and doctors said that he would not live. When he proved them wrong, they said, according to Mr Renton's father, that he would be a "complete cabbage". After he once again defied medical opinion, they said he would never walk.

This week Mr Renton, 48, took those first faltering, public steps. "It feels very good," he said afterwards. "It's always been my goal to walk. Hopefully, I will be able to move without the frame in the future — that's the ultimate goal. Every day it gets better. They [medical staff] did not think it was possible. I have showed that it is."

He said he would be "proud" if his determination inspired others. For his parents, Allistair and Maureen, who

Andrew Renton steps out with help from his parents

have unstintingly cared for their son, the moment made them "speechless".

"I certainly am proud," Allistair said from the family home near Ipswich yesterday. "We never gave up hope but we never really thought he would get here."

It was only at the start of this year when a physiotherapist supplied by the Headway charity contradicted two decades of medical opinion and began teaching Andrew Renton "to rewire his brain" to ensure that he could leave his wheelchair and walk.

"Andrew is a very determined guy," his father, 74, said. "He always had this ambition to get out of the wheelchair."

Andrew's first life-changing incident happened in February 1994 as he was climbing with a friend.

He lost consciousness following a fall and, while his friend left to fetch help, he slipped and fell up to another 100ft, crashing his head on a rock.

It left him in a coma and, later in hospital, on a life-support machine.

"Andrew had bleeding on his brain and after it was treated they weren't

getting any response. After two or three days, we were told by the medical team we had to make a decision," his father said. "We had this conversation around his bed, and the next day he began breathing by himself. We're both convinced he subconsciously knew. He has always been a fighter."

Before his accident Andrew, who had worked as a computer consultant with British Telecom, pursued many outdoor activities. During his long rehabilitation sailing became increasingly important. "That's one of the things Andrew can do," his father said. "Once he is hoisted in, he can helm as good as anyone. He gets a real buzz out of that. On the helm he is everybody's equal."

The family said they were grateful that Andrew had not had a partner when he had his accident because of the emotional turmoil involved. "As time goes on he does long for some kind of relationship," his father said. "That is not beyond the realms of possibility."

Given his public walk this week in front of a cheering audience at a Suffolk Headway conference and the journey it already represents, one would hesitate to cast doubt on that hope.

"It was wonderful to see him make those steps," said Helen Fairweather, the chief executive of Headway. "It's something Andrew wanted to do, and it gives hope to others."

