

IMPERIAL COLLEGE EAST GREENLAND EXPEDITION, 1963

By H. D. D. WATSON

(*Two illustrations: nos. 77-78*)

THE Staunings Alps, which lie on the East Greenland coast a few degrees inside the Arctic Circle, have a lot to offer to a climbing expedition of medium strength. The range is a complex network of peaks and ridges covering many hundreds of square miles, split up by innumerable glaciers, some of which are of considerable size. Many of the peaks are of real character, well defined and impressive. The rock is granite, which gives good climbing though there is often much loose rock and, since melting is very low, most of the higher peaks offer good routes on snow and ice.

The mountains rise to about 9,000 ft., which is not high. However, since the glaciers flow down almost to sea level, one is faced with an undertaking on a scale considerably greater than Alpine, involving the establishment and supply of a series of camps. On the other hand, the problem of getting a party into the field is not fraught with the complications of an expedition to a major range.

It was therefore to the north that a group of us from Imperial College turned our eyes when we felt the urge to tackle some virgin territory. Both interest and convenience dictated, right from the start, that we include in our plans a fairly ambitious glaciological programme, and the Staunings also offered much scope in this direction. There were eight of us in the final party, of which each member had, as a minimum, either two Alpine seasons or Arctic expedition experience: F. Ekman; T. W. Friese-Greene; A. Husselbury; M. H. Key (leader); J. Lovering; G. J. Pert; J. Taylor; and H. D. D. Watson.

We eventually settled for the area of the Bersaerkerbrae, a glacier in the North-east Staunings, primarily because it was not far from an air-strip at the Mestersvig Weather Station, from where we could carry our equipment and food. (There is much drift-ice along the East Greenland coast, and access from the sea in these latitudes is only possible at a late date in the all too brief summer.)

July 7 saw us established in our Base Camp beside the snout of the Bersaerkerbrae. This was just two weeks after sailing from Leith, the second week having been spent in solid work, ferrying loads over a low pass in rather bad conditions. (We had arrived at the height of the thaw—the snow was very unpleasant and the rivers swollen, particularly the Skel, over which we found it convenient to erect a 250 ft. rope system.)

The plan of operations from now on was based on the equal division of labour at any time between mountaineering and scientific work. At any time two men were making regular flow and ablation observations on the Bersaerkerbrae, two others measurements on other glaciers to the north or south, while the remaining four climbed from camps on the Bersaerkerbrae. All our food was pre-packed in boxes of sixteen man-day rations, designed to fit our packs. Each pair lived on one of these for eight days, after which everyone returned to Base Camp, when members of different groups interchanged with one another and the camps were reoccupied by the new parties. In this way, periods of climbing alternated with periods of scientific work, and interest was kept at a high level. This plan, simple in design, was surprisingly effective.¹

At this date, the sun shone high in the sky for twenty-four hours on end, and there was little variation between day and night. The winter snow lay deep on the glacier and on the higher peaks, in a poor state with the consistently high temperatures. We concentrated our attention at first on the lesser summits, mainly of rock, lower down on the Bersaerkerbrae. Ascents of some of the peaks climbed by Sir John Hunt's expedition in 1960—Stirling, Harlech and Elsinore (they were all named after castles)—drew our attention to the Caerleon side glacier, which offered two attractive little granite rock peaks, very reminiscent of Chamonix, Elephant and Castle and, of course, Caerleon itself, which Sir John had attempted without success.

Camp was set up on the glacier, travelling by what "night" there was, when the area was also in the shadow of the ridge to the north. Lovering and Taylor made an attempt on Castle by the East ridge, but were repulsed by a long series of gendarmes. Then bad weather closed down and climbing was out for a week. Eventually, by taking advantage of some barely passable cloudy days with light snow and bad visibility, we had better luck. Caerleon was climbed by the East ridge, gained at a col at the very head of the glacier. Conditions underfoot were so unpleasant that the party (Friese-Greene, Husselbury, Key and Watson) was constantly on the verge of retreat, but the heavily corniced ridge, once gained, was, surprisingly, in good condition. The summit too gave a pleasant pitch of a mild standard. Lovering and Taylor attacked Elephant by a route leading straight to the summit via the South face. They made as much height as possible in a mixed snow and ice couloir and gained the summit over a section of the shattered red granite, covered with black lichen, which is typical of the lower peaks. The weather worsened at this stage, and, with snow falling, they were fortunate to find a descent route to the east over snow and shattered rock.

¹ The scientific work included, besides the glaciology, a small palaeomagnetic programme. Full accounts of this will be published in the appropriate journals, and in the full Expedition Report (R.C.S. Library or Haldane Library, Imperial College).

A few days later, Friese-Greene, Husselbury, Lovering and Taylor climbed Castle, again via the South face, over the shortest route. This gave some good climbing, especially the last few hundred feet, which was grade IV.

Meanwhile, Key and Watson climbed Piccadilly (1,714 m.) via the long East ridge. This lies at an easy angle and would have been straightforward but for the very loose state of the rock, which demanded constant attention. Near the summit stand three impressive dolomitic-type gendarmes, a hundred feet or so high, which were only turned with difficulty. This undertaking took some sixteen hours, and convinced us of the desirability of keeping on snow as long as practicable.

The peaks around the Harlech glacier gave some pleasant rock-climbing, and skis proved invaluable in gaining access. Ekman and Key polished off Blackwall (South-south-east ridge), Bow, 1,705 m. (South-east ridge), Poplar (from the east), Vauxhall, c. 2,150 m. (North-east ridge) and Pimlico (North-east ridge) in almost as few days. These were all rock routes on sharp ridges, with many slate sections and gendarmes. Vauxhall in particular offered numerous pitches of III and IV. A thoroughbred little granite gendarme which we nicknamed 'The Finger', just to the north of Poplar, fell to Lovering and Taylor during this period.

Meanwhile, Lovering and Watson moved a camp up the Bersaerkerbrae to just below Tintagel. Conditions were atrocious at any time of day or night, and travel, even by skis, which sank inches deep into the snow, was extremely tedious, with a lot of trouble from crevasses. They could hardly believe their eyes one day when they noticed a caravan of fourteen men, dressed in identical fashion, slowly moving up the far side of the glacier! This party was observed later to turn back. In fact, this was a group of Italians led by Guido Monzino. They had been using snowshoes and ski-sticks, and had found it impossible to progress any further.

Lovering and Watson decided to attempt a high peak, capped with a conspicuous snow-plateau, and lying between Grandes Jorasses and Bersaerkerstinde. This we named Islington. The attempt was made via the East spur of the North-east ridge.² There was much shattered rock about at first, and the going was slow. Then the rock improved but the difficulties increased. There were two pitches of V before the shoulder below the snow was reached, after six hours. At this point, it became clear that the top section was itself quite difficult and the attempt was abandoned.

They were joined by Ekman and Husselbury, and camp was moved to the upper snow basin (1,500 m.), near Col Major. It appeared that, from here, there was a better chance for Islington, with possible routes up

² This route is shown in illustration no. 77; it follows the rock ridge rising from the glacier in centre foreground.

Grandes Jorasses, and two other peaks which we called Lambeth (between the latter and Col Major), and Kensington (to the east of Bersaerkspire). All these peaks, apart from Grandes Jorasses (2,521 m.), seem about the same height—approximately 2,300 m. The North and East face of Grandes Jorasses is a tremendously impressive granite wall, over a mile wide, rising for more than 3,000 ft., at a very steep angle and plastered with much powder snow. The only breaks are steep snow or ice couloirs which are raked by avalanches. At the western extremity of this, the angle relents and a hanging glacier of twisted and contorted ice flows down at about 50° . There seemed a possibility of gaining the summit ridge by a rock spur parallel to the (true) right edge of this, and all four made an attempt. The rock was gained over a large bergschrund, but proved to be deceptively difficult, and the going was slow, with intervening sections of ice. After four hours, cloud closed in and it started to snow. The party retreated in a series of abseils to the glacier. It was depressing to note how little progress had been made in that time—not more than seven or eight hundred feet. There followed two days of white-out conditions, and Lovering and Watson retreated to base, followed forty-eight hours later by Ekman and Husselbury.

About this time, August 7, there seemed to be a definite change in weather conditions. Previously, we had not had much wind at any time, temperatures were consistently high and periods of cloud-cover and snow came and went apparently at random. From now on, we almost always had good weather, with a noticeable katabatic wind coming off the ice-cap, clear skies and a marked temperature-fall at night—the sun was by now getting quite low in the sky in the evening. Good snow conditions became the rule rather than the exception, and we started to have sea-mists low in the valley.

The new party (Ekman, Friese-Greene, Key and Taylor) occupied the top camp with a minimum of difficulty and turned their attention first to Islington. They gained the snow above the highest point of the first attempt, from the north-west, winding their way through some large crevasses, and started on the ridge proper. The route now rose steeply over a section of ice overlaid with snow, then went to the left, on steep ice, above an impressive bergschrund and under a snow arête coming in from the right. The arête was gained, and then a small col. Above this was an extremely sharp snow-ridge, which it was possible to traverse, keeping at times to the steep side in the shade, at times along the crest. This led out on to the summit plateau, 2,500 ft. above the glacier. They had not touched rock during the five hours of the ascent—it had been a really classic route. The descent was by the same way (three hours).

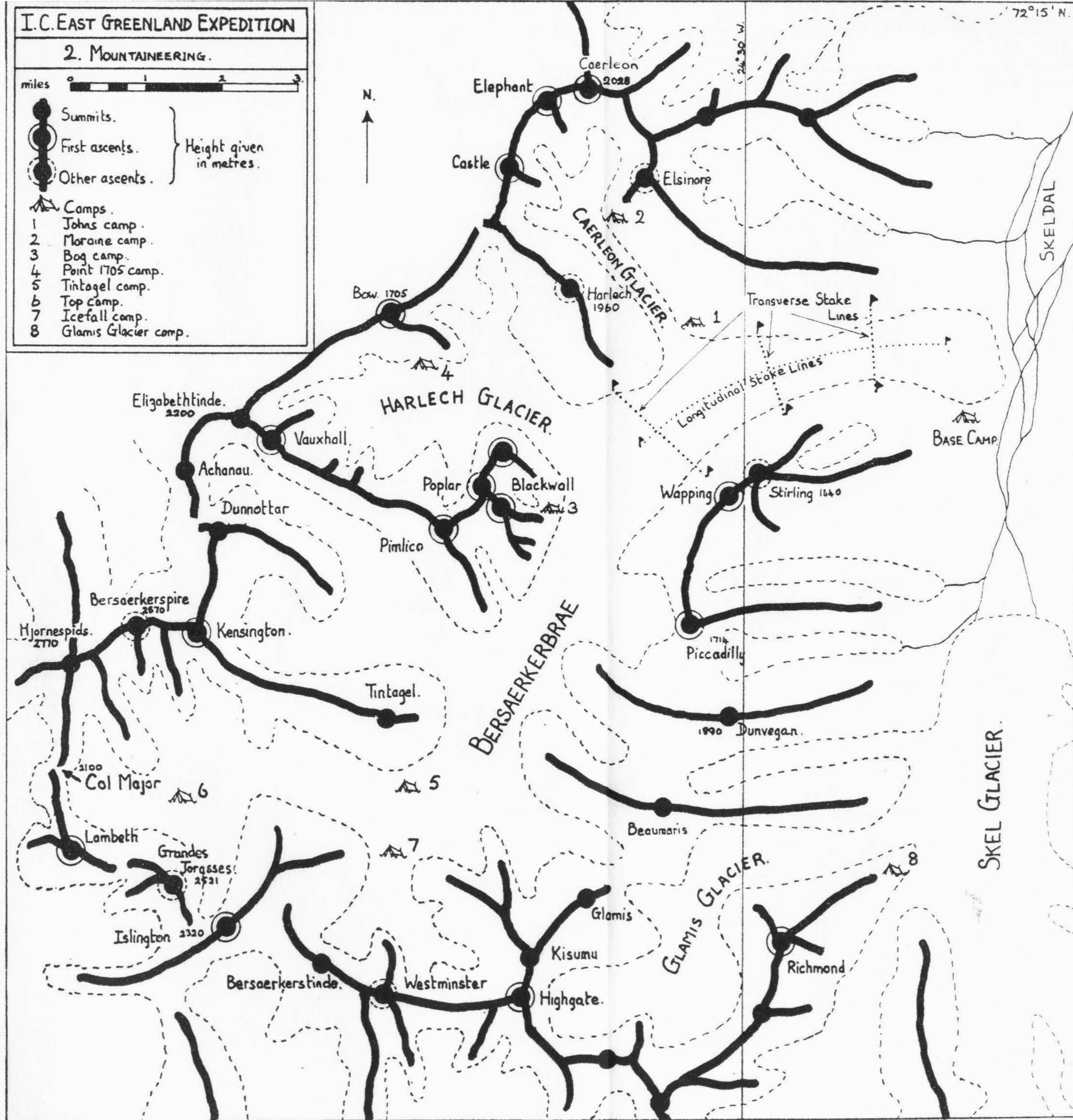
Lambeth was next on the list. This was tackled via Col Major, and

I.C. EAST GREENLAND EXPEDITION

2. MOUNTAINEERING.

miles 0 1 2 3

- Summits.
 - First ascents.
 - Other ascents.
- } Height given in metres.
- ▲ Camps.
 - 1 John's camp.
 - 2 Moraine camp.
 - 3 Bog camp.
 - 4 Point 1705 camp.
 - 5 Tintagel camp.
 - 6 Top camp.
 - 7 Icefall camp.
 - 8 Glamis Glacier camp.



STAUNINGS ALPS: SKETCH MAP OF THE AREA IN WHICH THE IMPERIAL COLLEGE EAST GREENLAND EXPEDITION OPERATED. (Names are unofficial. The map is based on the Danish Geodetic Survey, 1936.)

over a subsidiary summit. Then followed a steep 600 ft. section, but with good cramponing conditions. Towards the top, they were faced with much powdery snow to plough through, but the small rock summit was eventually gained (seven and a half hours). The route, which was very tiring, was descended in bad weather.

The group then decided to attempt Grandes Jorasses, though we now knew that it had just been climbed from the back by a Cambridge party. In view of previous experience, they plumped for a snow and ice route up the *opposite* side of the hanging glacier, keeping always above the séracs. The ridge between the summit massifs was gained over two thousand feet of steep ground with conditions varying from blue ice to powder snow. The route wound its way through crevasses and ice-cliffs, taking the easiest possible angle. Much step-cutting was needed, and the three hours required were a considerable strain. Some easy going along the ridge, followed by a section of step-cutting, led onto the first (rock) summit. This took six hours to traverse in extremely cold conditions with a lot of snow and ice about, and required one 120 ft abseil down a vertical face which it would not be possible to reverse. The second (middle) summit was turned, via easy snow to the west, and the top gained after eleven hours. The descent was made by a long detour down the easier, western slopes to avoid the rock. The drop to the Bersaerkerbrae proved a serious undertaking, requiring extreme concentration, as it was very late in the day and conditions were poor. The whole outing took twenty hours.

A few days later, Friese-Greene and Husselbury climbed the south (and lower) summit of Bersaerkspire³ by a long snow gully on the south-west, Husselbury getting mildly frostbitten in very cold conditions. Watson and Pert, the latter free for the first time from the demands of glaciology, climbed Kensington by an ice-rake giving access to the West ridge—a short but exacting outing.

Camp was now moved to the foot of an ice-fall defending two impressive peaks, Highgate and Westminster, both around the 2,300 m. mark. A day was spent in finding a route through the crevasses, which proved much less difficult than anticipated—the crevasses were extremely large (we saw some up to forty feet wide in the area) and where bridges existed they were large and solid. All four tackled Highgate by a snow ridge leading onto a subsidiary summit to the north, which involved some patches of hard ice, and the crossing of a peculiar fault on the surface where a wind whistled through any hole in the ice-crust. From there a

³ A correction has been received since this article went to press. What is here referred to as the south summit of Bersaerkspire was in fact a new peak, 'Notting Hill', situated on the ridge west of 'Kensington'. The sketch map illustrating this article shows the position of Bersaerkspire incorrectly. Bersaerkspire should be shown as a summit on the ridge between 'Kensington' and 'Tintagel'. It was climbed by Sir John Hunt's party in 1960.—EDITOR.

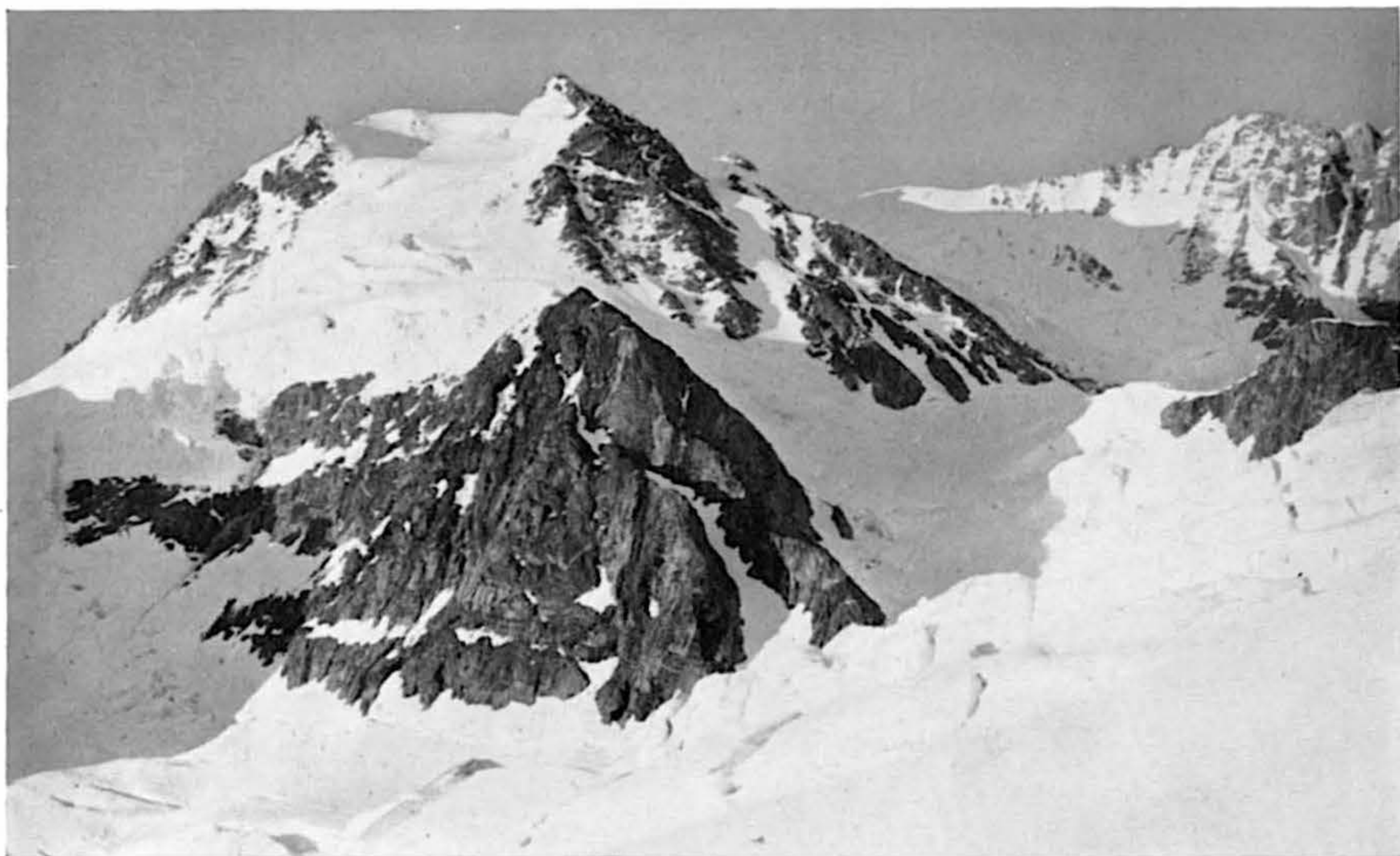
heavily corniced ridge and a few hundred feet of rock-scrambling led to the top (six hours).

The same party attempted Westminster the next day. Once through the ice-fall the route doubled back to the right up a steepish glacier which led straight to the summit ridge. Crevasses gave some trouble and progress was slow, with much indecision as to the best line. The angle steepened and an unpleasant section followed, of soft snow on ice which was rapidly losing its adhesion in the heat of the sun, by now high. The angle lessened but the snow was settling quite violently, and the party decided to wait until nightfall before attempting the descent. Six hours saw them on the ridge. Soon rock was reached, and then followed a fairly difficult section with quite a lot of ice on it, and a corniced pitch. The summit block was gained after nine hours—much to everyone's surprise a cairn was found, 'Bangor J.M.C., 1961'—apparently climbed from the south. There did not seem any hope of gaining the next peak to the west from here—it was separated by a sharp, deep gap with much loose rock and some snow, so the party lay in the sun in warm clothing for nine hours or so, brewing up drinks on a petrol stove—surely the word 'bivouac', with all its unpleasant suggestions, cannot be applied in the Arctic? The view all round was extraordinary, a hundred miles or so in all directions with peaks and glaciers of all conceivable sizes and shapes, from the ice-cap in the east to Scoresby Sound far to the south, the sea to the north and east deep blue and flecked with ice. And all this soon illuminated by an Arctic sunset! They set off down at 10 p.m., and made the descent in three hours in perfect conditions.

During this last period, Wapping (c. 1,700 m.) fell to Lovering and Taylor—straightforward, via Stirling—and Richmond, an interesting rock peak beside the Glamis glacier, to Ekman and Key. We left Greenland on August 31, by which time the nights were quite definite and snow was beginning to lie on lower hills.

There does not seem much scope for first ascents left on the Bersaerkerbrae—a large gendarme to the east of the Hjornespids, a couple of 'sugar loaf' rock peaks to the west of Beaumaris and Dunvegan, and two peaks between Westminster and Bersaerkerstinde—that is all that comes to mind. Certainly the ascent of either of these last two from the north would be a considerable undertaking. In other areas in the North and Central Staunings, many ascents have by now been made. Perhaps the time is near when some enterprising individual will sort through all the literature and produce a comprehensive record?

For general interest, I will add that the approximate expedition budget was £1,500, which kept the party in the field for about eight weeks. Our thanks are due, in particular, to the Mount Everest Foundation who supported us with a grant of £500, and to the Imperial College Exploration Board for a grant of £300 and a lot of assistance.



Expedition photo]

STAUNINGS ALPS: 'ISLINGTON', LOOKING UP FROM THE GLACIER TO THE NORTH. THE SHOULDER IS TO THE LEFT; THE CENTRE SNOW WAS GAINED FROM THE RIGHT.

(No. 77)



Expedition photo]

STAUNINGS ALPS: VIEW NORTH FROM 'GRANDES JORASSES' SHOWING THE TWO SUMMITS OF BERSAERKERSPIRE (CENTRE) AND 'KENSINGTON' (LOW ON RIGHT).

(No. 78)