The 125th Anniversary of the First Ascent of the Matterhorn

and a personal Reminiscence

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(*Plates 60, 61*)

It was 25 years ago that my wife and I, with other members of the Alpine Club, attended the festivities in Zermatt and Breuil which marked the centenary of the first and second ascents of the Matterhorn, on 14 and 16 July 1865. Bad weather somewhat marred the excellent Swiss programme, not least an attempt on the Hörnli ridge by an Anglo-Swiss rope composed of Albert Eggler and Fritz Luchsinger (members of the first Swiss ascent of Everest in 1956), with my wife and myself. We had to abandon the climb after ascending about 800ft, the ridge being covered by deep snow, with fresh snow falling.

The Matterhorn has always held me in thrall, as it has the millions of people who visit Zermatt or Breuil to gaze in awe at what George Finch called '. . . surely the most wonderful mountain in the world'. My last encounter with the mountain was in August 1966, when Jo Kretschmer and I climbed the Hörnli ridge in a storm. I was intent on avenging my defeat in the previous year. The weather conditions were almost identical, but this time we pressed on regardless and were greatly rewarded. Only one other rope – a British foursome – reached the top that day. In the late afternoon we emerged above the wind and the gloom into bright sunshine, a few hundred feet below the top; only Monte Rosa and the Weisshorn among the surrounding peaks stood above the sea of cloud. The experience exacted its price. We missed the last lift at the Schwarzsee and reached Zermatt at about midnight, exhausted, having lost our way in the dark. But that adventure remains as one of my best mountain memories.

The 1990 celebrations in Zermatt (8–15 July) – under different management and with better fortune with the weather – were a most successful and enjoyable affair. In 1965 the Swiss Alpine Club and the Swiss Tourist Office had played a leading part in the organization; this time the planning and management were undertaken by the *Gemeinde* of Zermatt. The programme was arranged in three parts. There was a series of events for the general public which continued throughout the week, consisting of art exhibitions and climbing demonstrations; there were showings of mountain films and a jubilee concert. Events during the weekend overlapped with the other two programmes for invited guests and for the International Association of Mountain Guides.

British alpinists were represented by Tony Streather and Mike Esten on behalf of the Alpine Club, by John Whyte and Peter Ledeboer for the ABMSAC,

by Stephen Venables who represented the BMC, and by myself. Nigella Hall and Tim Woodgate were present as descendants of Whymper, but Major Hadow had to cry off on grounds of ill-health. The national clubs of France, Italy and the Netherlands were represented by their Presidents, and a distinguished member of the Japanese Alpine Club also attended. Pat and Sylvia Limerick were also present with a group of fund raisers for the Royal Marsden Hospital; they planned to make a number of sponsored ascents of the Matterhorn.

We feasted sumptuously at two evening banquets in the Monte Rosa and Zermatterhof Hotels, each occasion being preceded by a large outdoor reception. We lunched *al fresco* at the Schwarzsee and in the Hotel Pollux. We listened to many long speeches, to which Tony Streather, John Whyte and I were called upon to contribute. We took part in a splendiferous procession through the town, looking very British in our dark blazers and sporting small Union flags; we were honourably positioned behind a large banner bearing the legend GROSSBRITANNIEN (as though it was not self-evident!), one end of which was held by that good friend of all British climbers, Paula Biner. Ahead of us marched two bands and a platoon of attractive drum-majorettes, unfortunately obscured from our view by the nearer of the two bands. As we made our way through the narrow streets, crowds of tourists and many local people demonstrated their enthusiasm. It was an emotional experience.

But apart from all this wining, dining and junketing, meeting old friends and making new ones, a serious note was struck. Services of remembrance and thanksgiving were held: outside the little chapel beside the Schwarzsee, over which the Bishop of Strasbourg presided; and in front of the main church in Zermatt, conducted by the local priest and assisted, among others, by our own Bishop of Dunwich. A number of addresses were given at these ceremonies, inspired by the story of the first ascent. Our bishop preached on the lesson which this provided for brotherhood and unity among the Christian churches. A third service of dedication was held in the English church of St Peter.

The Catholic services were notable for their pageantry and colour. Beside the Schwarzsee chapel a quartet of long Swiss horns boomed sonorously and a female choir sang, dressed in traditional Walliser costumes. Outside the Zermatt church the Swiss and Italian mountain guides, and the Chief Guide from Chamonix, looked smartly professional in their formal uniforms; the Swiss guides provided both a choir and an orchestra. Banners were prominently displayed. Beside the altar stood a large painting depicting climbers tackling the final few feet below the summit of the Matterhorn. After that service a procession was formed and we moved down to the cemetery, where the renovated tombstones of the four pioneers who were killed during the descent were blessed by the presiding priests. Members of the Club will be aware that the AC had contributed towards the cost of restoration.

Other events took place on the mountain itself. On the 14th a number of special guided ascents were made, whose arrival on the summit was reported by radio-telephone to the crowds gathered at the Schwarzsee. Among the climbers was Ulrich Inderbinen, a 90-year-old guide who, after an interval of eight years since he had made his 125th ascent of the Matterhorn, reached the top in four

hours from the Hörnli hut. Not surprisingly, he was the centre of many admirers and much media attention that evening, during a reception outside the Zermatterhof Hotel.

All in all, this was a most successful and memorable event in the long history of the mountain. Much tribute is due to the *Gemeindepräsident* Daniel Lauber, the *Bürgerpräsident* Erwin Aufdenblatten, the Chief Guide Hermann-Josef Biner, and many other hospitable local officials of Zermatt.

Tony Streather made a gift of a handsome bound copy of *Scrambles amongst the Alps* (1900 edition) and John Whyte presented a Visitors' Book to St Peter's Church. We felt privileged to represent British climbers at an event which recalled a milestone in mountaineering history.

Festivities analogous to those at Zermatt also took place later on the Italian side of the Matterhorn. They followed somewhat simpler lines, but were extremely enjoyable and friendly. Mike Esten and Peter Ledeboer were able to attend and were entertained most generously. The Alpine Club was greatly honoured to receive an invitation, from a descendant of Jean-Antoine Carrel, to unveil a plaque in the main square of Valtournanche to the memory of the two great local guides, J-A Carrel and J-J Maquignaz, with whom the first ascent of the Matterhorn is so inextricably connected, and who both died within the space of a few days 100 years ago. Mike Esten performed the honours and made the leading speech (in French) which was well received.



60. Jubilee procession, 15 July 1990. 125th Anniversary celebrations for Edward Whymper's first ascent of the Matterhorn, 14 July 1865. L to R: Paula Biner, Peter Ledeboer, John Hunt, Stephen Venables (part hidden), Tony Streather, John Whyte. (p 132)



61. A meeting between Nigella Hall and Antoine Carrel, with Mike Esten (centre). (Tony Welling) (p 132)