Looking Back



55. The Eiger: Mittellegi Ridge photographed during the first post-war AC alpine meet, 1948. (*Charles Warren*) (p189)



56. Grindelwald Ski Centenary, Jan 1991. The Fox guests (Rosemary Greenwood front row, centre) with the original skis used by Gerald and Thomas Fox. (p198)

Innocents Abroad: An Alpine Season in the Thirties

CHARLES WARREN

(*Plate 55*)

It was in 1932 that three of us, student members of the Barts' Alpine Club, ganged up for what turned out to be a memorable summer season in the Bernese Oberland. The members of our party were John Cope, Charles Warren and Bob Williams (all later to become consultants in their respective fields). In those days I was the only member of our party with alpine experience and so I was the one who planned the holiday – and what a gloriously exciting and haphazard holiday it turned out to be!

We travelled to Switzerland by rail, sitting up all night on the hard wooden benches of our third class carriage. We wore our boots and climbing clothes with only rucksacks on our backs, and we lived for all but two days in mountain huts. The total cost of our three weeks' holiday was about £12 each.

We started at Kandersteg where we bought provisions for a week before walking up to the Blümlisalp hut. From there, the next day, we traversed the Blümlisalphorn, the Weisse Frau and the Morgenhorn, coming back to the hut that evening. Next day we moved to the Gspaltenhorn hut, whence we climbed the Gspaltenhorn, a delightful rock and snow climb. We then crossed the Gamchilücke, climbed the Tschingelhorn and went over to Fafleralp in the Lötschental, one of the most lovely spots in the Alps. From here we climbed the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn, not a difficult climb but a splendid summit.

After that we launched into the Oberland proper where our adventures really began. We crossed the Lötschenlücke and made our way to the Konkordia hut. Thence we crossed the Grünhornlücke to the Finsteraarhorn hut where we were marooned for two days by bad weather before we could climb the Finsteraarhorn by the ordinary route. But it was on the descent from this noble peak that things began to happen. When traversing a snow-slope in crampons the snow balled up on these and the foremost member of the team started to slide, dragging off number two on the rope. At the rear I dug in my axe, but when the strain came I was whipped from my holds and we all three went tumbling, head over heels, for about 500ft, ending up, mercifully, a bit to the left of some gaping crevasses. Having picked ourselves up, frightened but unscathed, we climbed up to retrieve our ice-axes and proceeded down to the glacier and back towards the hut. But before we reached it Bob broke through a snow-bridge and disappeared down a crevasse. Luckily he landed on another snow-bridge lower down and we were able to pull him out quite easily.

From the Finsteraarhorn hut we escaped next day to the Jungfraujoch where we dossed down in the bunkhouse before traversing the Mönch on our way to

the Bergli hut. Surely this is one of the coldest and most desolate huts in the Alps, and difficult to escape from because of the intricacies of the Bergli icefall. But eventually we found a way through the maze of crevasses and descended to the comforts of a hotel in Grindelwald for the next two nights.

Our final fling was a traverse of the Eiger, with an ascent by the Mittellegi Ridge and a descent by the ordinary route to Kleine Scheidegg. The nine-hour walk from Grindelwald up to the Mittellegi hut on the crest of the E ridge of the Eiger must be one of the finest hut walks in the Alps. We took it leisurely and enjoyed the flowery lower slopes of the mountain. But as we approached the hut on the crest of the ridge a monumental thunderstorm blew up, with St Elmo's fire all night around the outside of the hut and occasional discharges across the inside; a bit frightening, but a really splendid lightning display in the high alps.

We stayed in the hut the next day to allow the storm to clear; and then we tackled the Mittellegi. It was quite serious rock climbing, helped by some fixed ropes which were, however, rather iced up after the storm. Half-way up a member of our party dropped his ice-axe; but we carried on and reached the top of the Eiger at about 2pm, and then started to go down by the ordinary way on the NW flank. But alas, the weather had changed. In the morning the snow had melted in the sunshine, but by the afternoon it had clouded over and was freezing. So the normally easy limestone slabs had become covered with verglas. It took us hours and hours chipping out steps on those ice-covered outward-sloping slabs.

Eventually, at sundown, when we were half-way down, we decided to bivouac. We put our feet into our rucksacks, made a soup brew-up, and settled down to an uncomfortable night whilst watching enviously the inviting lights at Kleine Scheidegg some 2000ft below. At daylight we descended to the Eigergletscher Hotel where they were startled by our early appearance off the mountain.

Looking back on it, after nearly 60 years, I think that this was rather a glorious excursion into the Swiss Alps.

(Editor's Note: In 1991 Charles Warren celebrated 60 years as an Alpine Club member. He was also a founder member of the St Bartholomew's Hospital Alpine Club and is now their Patron.)