
Forerunners to Everest

GEORGE BAND

Mont Aiguille 1492–1992: An ‘Everest’ in its Day

(Plate 27)

The first ascent of Mont Aiguille in 1492 was possibly the earliest recorded mountaineering challenge – a royal command accepted and triumphantly achieved. This article commemorates its 500th anniversary which by chance falls close to the 40th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest, the ultimate mountaineering challenge.

It was 1987, in the Dauphiné. Mike Banks and I were at the Soreiller hut planning a short route up the impressive spire of the Aiguille Dibona as a final warm-up before, hopefully, traversing the Meije. As we went to bed dark clouds were brewing up uncertain weather and in the morning, when we woke, several inches of snow had fallen, even far below the hut. The high mountains would be out of condition for several days. We thought of driving south towards Nice and the limestone of the Vercors.

Earlier, at La Bérarde, Mike and Sally Westmacott and Natalie Bull had mentioned a possible visit to Mont Aiguille, 2086m, some 40km south of Grenoble. There was talk of an excellent campsite with a warm swimming pool. I had seen the mountain from a distance while driving up from Nice and the Alpes Maritimes some years ago, but had never set foot upon it. With no further information, we approached up winding roads from the north via St Michel les Portes. Suddenly, above the dank pine trees, the huge northern precipice of Mont Aiguille loomed as a ghostly silhouette through the mist. It looked uninviting and repellent. We withdrew and tried again from the southeast, following a *Logis* sign through the meadows of Chichilianne to Richardière and beyond. At the end of the road was the much more comforting Hotel Restaurant au Gai Soleil du Mont Aiguille. As we stepped out of the car a familiar red Nissan drove up and drew in beside us. In it were Mike, Sally and Natalie. Our party was obviously destined to reunite! Within the hour we were sitting down to a huge capon *coq au vin*, with the patron M. Beaume's award-winning *pommes dauphinoises* and two bottles of Côtes du Rhone.

Next day, in the morning sun, we could see the mountain's crenated ramparts towering above the forest. We learnt from the Maison du Parc in Chichilianne that there was no currently available guidebook, but from some topos we were able to supplement our fragmentary knowledge of its climbing history.

Resting on a sloping plinth of shale, the limestone walls of Mont Aiguille stand proud on all sides, a thousand feet high, its summit seemingly remote

and inaccessible. Yet it was the scene of the first genuine mountaineering challenge, accepted and achieved. When Charles VIII of France passed by in 1492 he was so struck by its appearance that he ordered his chamberlain, Dompjulian de Beaupré, to make the ascent. He wisely delegated the task to Antoine de Ville, aged 40, Captain of Montelimar, commander of 450 men, and one of the King's most successful campaigners. De Ville chose a team of seven including Noble Raymond Jubie, siege-ladder builder to the King, Pierre Arnaud, master carpenter, and Cathalin Servet, master stone-mason. Spiritual support was provided by Sebastian de Caret, royal master of theology and chaplain to the King, and François de Bosco, de Ville's personal confessor.

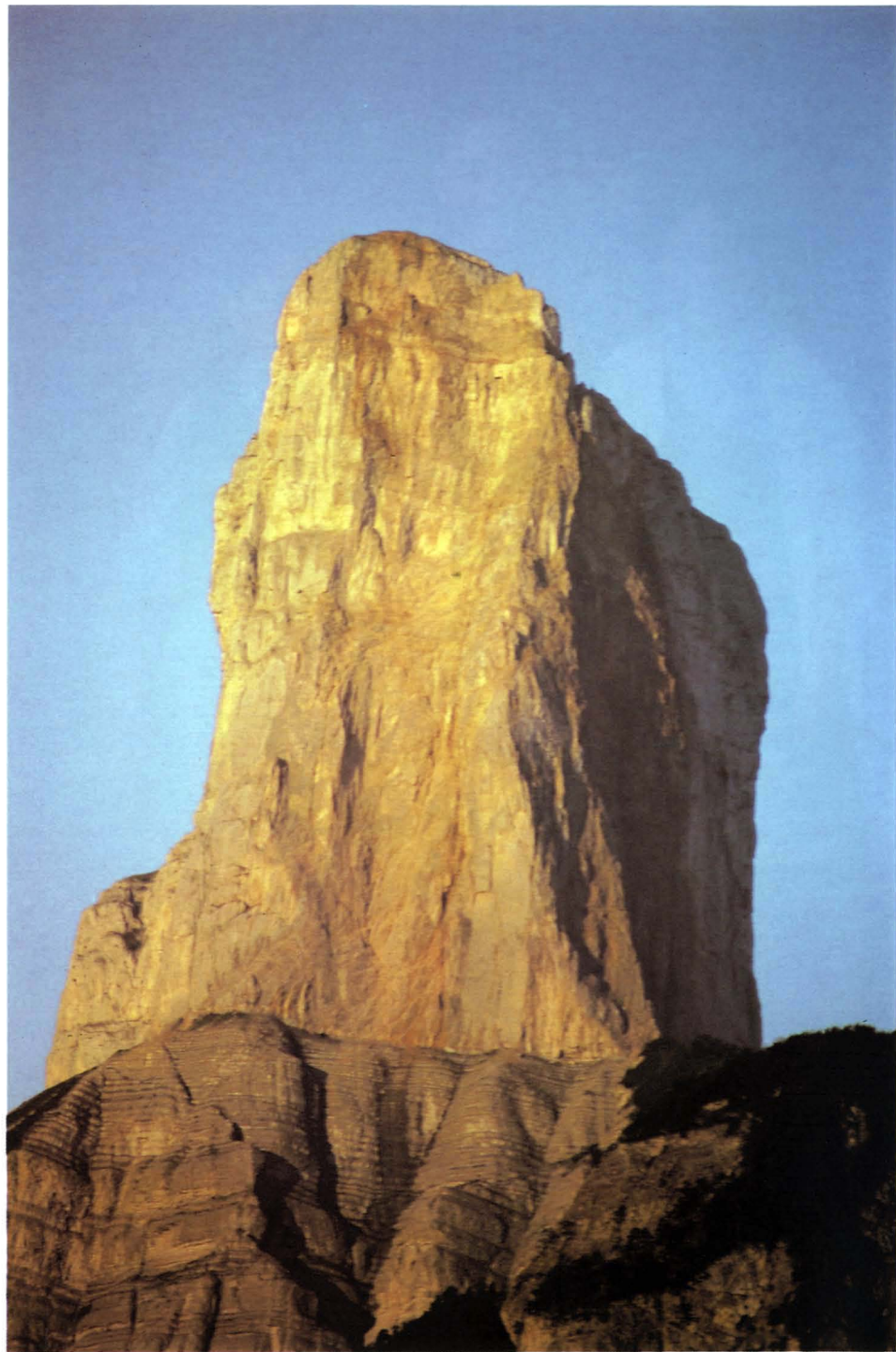
On 26 June, after weeks of preparation and with the aid of 'subtle means and engines' and ascending 'half a league of ladders', de Ville successfully led his men to the top. They remained there for several days until the clerk from Grenoble arrived to verify the ascent. It was not repeated until 1834, nearly 350 years later, by a young Frenchman who found blackened rocks and debris from the earlier expedition.

Two other, much more recent, exploits are worth recording. On 27 August 1957 Henri Giraud landed a light aircraft on the summit plateau. Then, on 27 January 1992, 500 years after the first ascent, the extreme skier Pierre Tardivel skied with René Leclerc from the top down through the precipitous series of gullies known as *Les Tubulaires*, pausing only midway for a short rappel down a vertical section of wall. A little further north, beyond a commemorative plaque placed in 1933, today's normal route of ascent became the world's first *via ferrata* in 1878 when a steel cable was installed by the Club Alpin Français.

From the hotel, a pleasant hour's walk through alpine pastures followed by pine forest leads to a saddle where there is a good view of routes of all grades up the W face. We followed the *voie normale* which is still a very worthwhile climb. After the initial fixed cable which traverses up a steep wall, the route dodges behind a detached buttress known as La Vierge. From there a gully system leads onto the plateau. It must have been a revelation to the original pioneers. As Dompjulian relates, 'I have had mass said upon it and have caused three crosses to be set up. It is about a French league in circumference, a quarter of a league in length, and a crossbow shot in width, and is covered with a beautiful meadow, and we have found a beautiful herd of chamois, which will never be able to get away ... It is the most beautiful place that I have ever visited.'¹

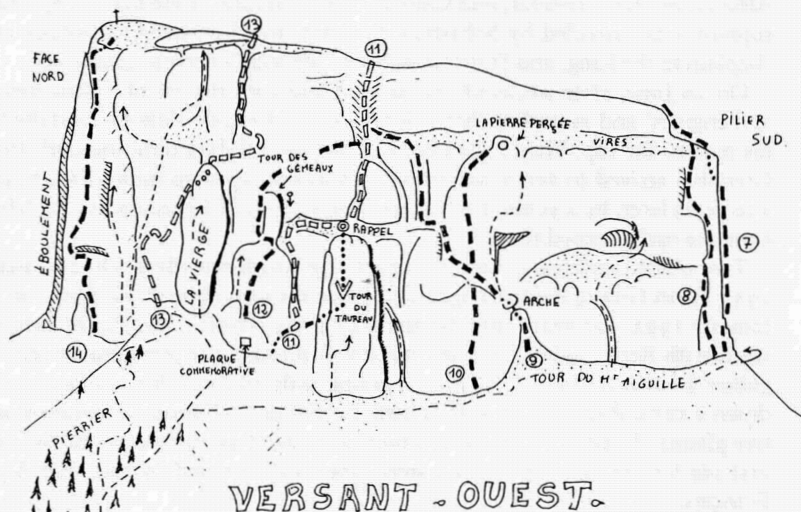
Alas, the chamois are no longer there but the abundant alpine flowers nestling amid the five acres of lush uncropped grass are ample compensation. It slopes up gently towards the north end where Natalie and I lay on our stomachs beside the summit cairn to look over and down the sheer N face.

We spent two more days sampling the few other routes on the mountain which we thought were within our scope. The first day was a mistake. I found myself becoming less and less secure backing up the smooth-flared waterworn runnels of *Les Tubulaires*. I backed down while I was still in control. Later, we learnt that its chimneys are hardly ever ascended these days but do provide an occasional classic route of descent by rappel. Back at the hotel I must still have



27. Sunrise on Mont Aiguille, 2086m, in 1987. (*George Band*) (p78)

LES PRINCIPALES VOIES DU M^t AIGUILLE



(COL DU
LAUDET)
VERS
GRASSE

- ⑦ PILIER SUD.
⑧ VOIE DES ÉTUDIANTS.

- ⑨ VOIE DU PILIER SUD-OUEST. CLASSIQUE (D+) 200m.
⑩ VOIE "MAKIAVELIC" CLASSIQUE (TD+) 200m.
⑪ LES "TUBULAIRES" { CLASSIQUE (AD) à la montée
- VOIE DE DESCENTE CLASSIQUE (± RAPPEL de 40m.)
⑫ VOIE DES GEMEAUX CLASSIQUE (D.) -150m.
⑬ LA VOIE NORMALE { TRÈS CLASSIQUE (Partiellement équipée de câbles.)
- VOIE DE DESCENTE (PD) 350m.
⑭ VOIE DE LA FACE NORD (PARIS-SEIGNEUR) ED (Équipée mais peu faite) 350m.

appeared thoroughly confused, as the response to my fractured French request for tea with lemon was a tray with two Perriers and a crème de menthe!

On our last evening together, two French climbers arrived at the hotel and we were able to seek their advice on a more attractive route. They planned to do the classic *voie Des Gemeaux* next day and were happy to show us the start. If we could manage the initial moves of IVsup/V, where a long reach was helpful, they said we should be able to do the rest and could follow in their tracks. The two Mikes and I resolved to form a mature team: Westmacott in the lead with me in the middle and the veteran Banks, at 63, bringing up the rear; a total of 182 years between us.

It was a superb route. There were six continuous pitches, all around grade IV, steep and exposed, but overly protected with a piton every ten metres and several pitons or a ring bolt at the belay points. The fourth pitch was the crux: a short impending wall where one felt particularly exposed and off balance. Mike led it cleanly but I had few scruples in treating it as an AI. It was followed by a short airy traverse left to an exiguous stance. A strenuous 30m dièdre and a final easier pitch with a small overhang took us to the top of the buttress which was slightly detached from the main cliff. From there a 15m rappel enabled us to traverse into the easier finishing gullies of *Les Tubulaires*.

Our joy on reaching the summit plateau was complete. There we met a father climbing with his teenage son. One of his friends, the father said, had made a first ascent on the E face in 1953 on the very day that Everest had been climbed and, in recognition, had called it the *voie de 29 mai*. I have written this piece nearly 40 years after that historic event, but also in celebration of the 500 years since Antoine de Ville and his seven companions accepted and won the regal challenge of Mont Aiguille. Now that's a real Anniversary!

REFERENCE

- 1 From 'The Ascent of the Inaccessible' in *Early Mountaineers* by Francis Gribble. T Fisher Unwin, 1899.