
JERRY LOVATT

Thomas Ford Hill: An Alpine Footnote

While the name Thomas Ford Hill is not entirely unknown to Alpine historians, it is only recently that the full picture of his involvement in the story of the first ascent of Mont Blanc has come to light. Hill's extensive manuscript diary has been in the possession of the family since his death in 1795 and his descendant Dr Edward Ford has recently started work on transcribing it. I am indebted to Dr Ford for supplying the relevant sections of the journal and for permitting their use in this article.

Brown and de Beer, in their definitive work *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc*,¹ provide a tantalising glimpse of the activities on the mountain of Thomas Ford Hill, one of the earliest of its British explorers. Their account is tantalising in the sense that it introduces this otherwise totally unknown traveller, gives him an interesting supporting role in the story of one of the greatest events in the history of mountaineering but, through lack of documentation, is unable to offer confirmation even of the month in which Hill's activities on the mountain were taking place.

In 1786 Hill made his second visit to the Chamonix valley. Two years earlier, he had ascended to Montenvers in the company of a large party including one M. Le Cointe, a banker from Geneva. From Montenvers, Hill and Le Cointe climbed further towards the base of the Charmoz. On their descent, it would appear that they took too direct a line, straight towards the Mer de Glace; while Hill recognised the danger and retraced his steps, Le Cointe insisted on continuing. Sadly, he did not return and his body was found the next day in what Hill identifies as 'a valley called the Grand Chenot'.

Nothing daunted by the tragic experience of his first visit, Hill returned to the valley in 1786, arriving in Chamonix on the 1st of August. On the 2nd he ascended the Brévent, and on the 3rd he paid a visit to M. Jaquet (Exchaquet) of Servoz to inspect the latter's celebrated model of Mont Blanc. It would appear that a plot was hatched at this meeting to make an attempt to cross the Col du Géant to Courmayeur, and on the 5th they set out via Montenvers for a bivouac at the Couvercle. The following day they ascended the Glacier du Tacul to an unspecified point where 'the chasms became too numerous to permit us to proceed'.

Brown and de Beer note that Exchaquet blamed their failure on the slow climbing of Hill. The latter's journal, however, takes a somewhat different view, indicating that 'Mr. Jaquet' maintained that it was too difficult and that they should return to Chamonix.

Thus, Hill descended to the valley and passed through or close to Chamonix on the day before Paccard and Balmat set out for their bivouac

on the Montagne de la Côte. He continued via Bionnassay to Contamines, where he found his companions Hardy and Hillyard. Together, the three of them proceeded to Courmayeur on the 7th. Hill only identifies one of the guides who accompanied him on this trip to Courmayeur. This was the celebrated Jean-Marie Couttet, doyen of Chamonix guides of the period and regular guide to de Saussure. Brown and de Beer indicate that one of the other two was Pierre Balmat and the second probably Jean-Laurent Jordanay.

On the 9th of August, totally unaware of the momentous event taking place on the other side of the mountain, Hill, accompanied by his friend Hillyard and the three guides, set off to attempt Mont Blanc. He wrote in his diary: 'Mount the mountain or Aiguille called here the Montagne de Friti (Mont Fréty), one of the points of Mont Blanc on this side, with Mr Hillyard of Lincolnshire. Took three guides and provisions to lie a night, to mount the Mont Blanc if possible.'

In 1786 it was clearly something of a forlorn hope that one might ascend Mont Blanc from the south side. However, on the same day as the mountain was being climbed for the first time, Hill and his party did achieve the distinction of making the first known ascent by travellers of the Col du Géant from Courmayeur. A later section of the journal indicates that Hill, while recognising the impossibility of anything like a direct ascent from the Col, felt that it would still be feasible 'by making a large circuit, and lying on the mountain among the rocks, for which we were prepared ...'. Hillyard, however, was apparently having none of this. Thus, after two hours of exploration of the Col, they descended to Courmayeur and relative obscurity, while two explorers on the north side of the range were descending to Chamonix and their unique place in the history of mountaineering.

REFERENCE

- 1 T Graham Brown and Sir Gavin de Beer, *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc*. Oxford University Press, 154-156, 1957.