
GRAHAM LITTLE

Gneiss and Ice: Greenland on the Rocks

The 1993 British Lemon Mountains Expedition

(Plates 39–42)

'How do you fancy a trip to Greenland? – we're going to the Lemon Mountains – I sailed there with Robin Knox-Johnston in 1991 – I'll send you a copy of the book – you must come – it's only for a month – it will be a fabulous trip!'

The famous Bonington enthusiasm left no place for a negative response. The other two members of a four-man team were to be Greenland 'old hands': Rob Ferguson who had taken part in Stan Woolley's Northern Group Greenland expedition in 1990 and Jim Lowther who, at the relatively tender age of 29, had already been to Greenland on ten previous occasions. I had climbed with Chris in the Indian Himalaya in 1992 (making the first British ascent of Panch Chuli II by a new route), so I knew that we would be compatible climbing partners.

The characteristics that allow two individuals to function well together as a climbing team are difficult to specify. The closest that I can come to a definition is to talk about complementary strengths, intuitive understanding, similar aspirations and a respect for one's partner's 'gut feelings'. But compatibility is only truly tested during periods of danger and stress. Harmony between all members of an expedition is even more difficult to predict (and achieve). Given the sheer diversity of human nature and the general strains of expedition life, it is not surprising that friction sometimes occurs between expedition members and that there is as much scope for antipathy as there is for friendship.

A first meeting with Rob and Jim promised good company and the probability of a cohesive team despite our varied backgrounds, and age differences that spanned 30 years! The opportunity for some good games of bridge, once we had tutored Rob into the skills of this most noble of card games, provided us with an alternative, non-climbing focus.

I can't remember whose idea it was to take a global positioning system (GPS) with us but it fell to me (being the 'surveyor') to obtain one at nil cost. I also hastily volunteered to draw up the food list, knowing of the dietary masochism traditionally associated with Arctic exploration. This fear proved well founded when Rob sent me a menu from his previous trip – dehydrated mince and green beans for every main meal didn't sound exactly mouth-watering fare!

So it came to pass that the 1993 British Lemon Mountains expedition left Glasgow on 20 June *en route* for the Chisel glacier via Keflavik and Akureyri in Iceland and Constable Pynt (sic) in East Greenland, clutching a hand-held GPS, courtesy of Garmin (Europe) Ltd, with plans not only to make first ascents but to obtain three-dimensional positional fixes on the peaks climbed. Our short stopover at Constable Pynt coincided with a traditional Greenland midsummer feast. While Jim and Chris tucked into whale meat, seal blubber and raw narwhal, Rob and I declined such gastronomic adventures and nibbled on a little dried fish.

The chartered Twin Otter flies south under the control of a couple of very cool dudes wearing leather jackets and the kind of shades that only pilots and poseurs can wear. Jim's complexion turns pale, which he claims is due to the altitude. We know better! Chris, his digestive tract obviously better acclimatised than ours, dashes around the small aircraft in camera-happy mode, looking in the best of health.

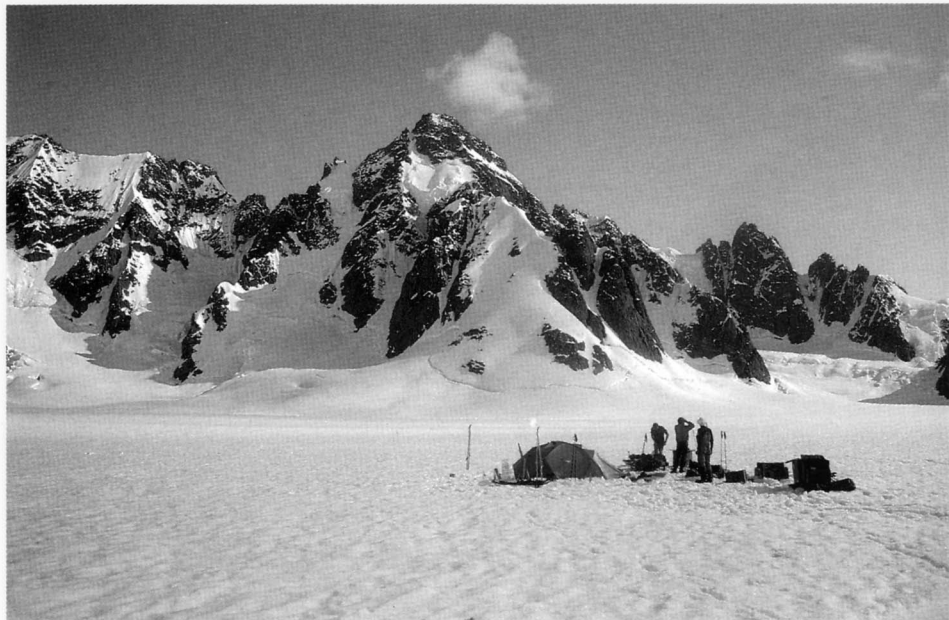
Sharp granitic teeth pierce the swirling clouds and wide glaciers are glimpsed far below. We are 250 miles from the nearest human habitation. 'Where would you like to land?' one pilot asks in the casual manner of a taxi driver asking where one would like to be dropped off. A massive rock and ice peak suddenly looms into view. Jim recognises it as Mejslen (Chisel).

'Just to the north of that peak,' he replies, managing to sound almost as cool as the pilot. One dummy run to check out the glacier for big crevasses and we are bumping along the slush-covered ice, spot on target.

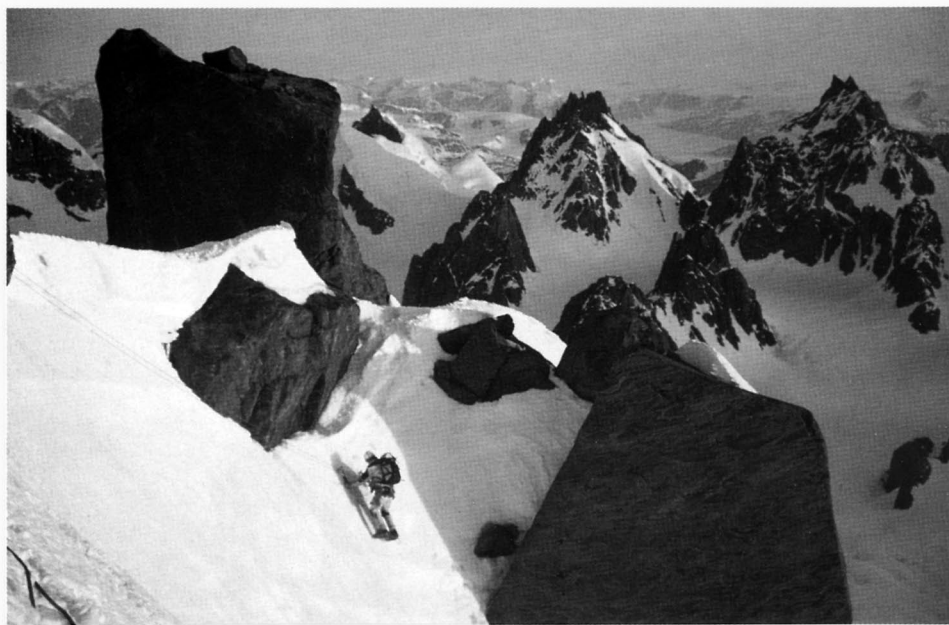
'This is the first plane ever to land on this glacier,' somebody says. Shortly afterwards, we are the first people to stand on it. The Otter is soon a fading speck on the horizon. We are left, surrounded by our supplies, in the heart of an incredibly beautiful mountain world – one of the remotest places on the surface of the earth.

Soon tents are erected and our first Base Camp established (at N 68 29 03, W 31 49 36). There is no need to acclimatise (the peaks reach a maximum height of 2600m) and I'm keen to get to grips with our first mountain. A unique feature of climbing north of the Arctic Circle in June is 24-hour daylight which usually allows the mountaineer to dispense with bivouac gear on a climb. However, on the negative side, it can have a strange effect upon the body clock and, with little night time freeze, produce some very worrying snow and ice conditions. Our first climb has to be the N face of Mejslen, which we identified from the plane – a complex 1000m rock and ice wall due south of Base Camp. We tackle this as a four-man team to get the feel of the place and to consolidate group dynamics prior to splitting into two-man teams with separate objectives.

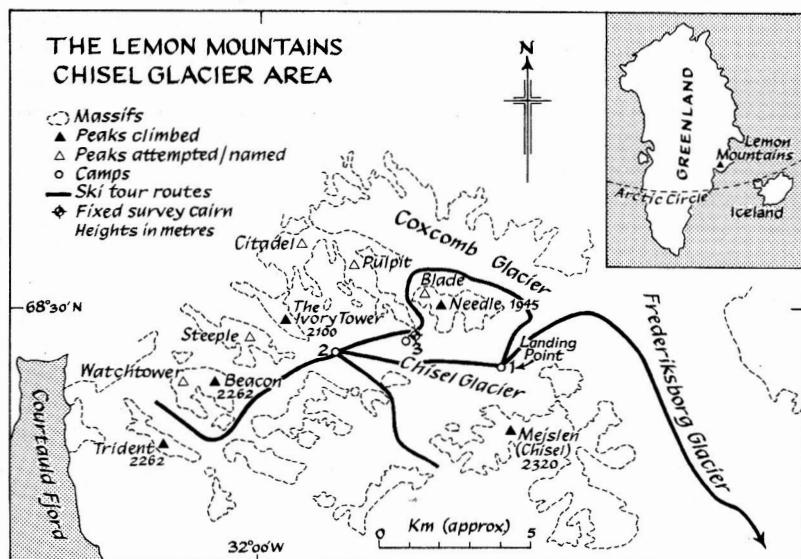
Mejslen proves a magnificent introduction to Greenland, with technical mixed climbing via a series of ice arêtes and rock traverses giving difficult route-finding and an uncertain outcome. We reach the summit ridge by a pitch of hard ice, then top out at 02.30 in the low glow of the Arctic sun,



39. East Greenland: Mejslen (Chisel), 2320m, and Base Camp I on the Chisel glacier.
(*Graham Little*) (p64)



40. Graham Little on the summit ridge of Mejslen. (*Chris Bonington*) (p64)



only three days after leaving Scotland. The true summit is a small split rock tower perched at one end of a short level arête. I set the GPS tracking and in a matter of 40 seconds it has observed four orbiting satellites, producing latitude and longitude values. The height value readout (a less reliable aspect of a 'stand alone', hand-held GPS) eventually settles at 2320m (for the technically minded, the GPS was set to WGS84 and Geoidal Height). 'Official' duties over, I soak in the grandeur and vastness of this frozen land, gazing out to the great ice cap (which we were to learn later, from Danish scientists, has recently been drilled for ice core extraction to a depth of over 3000m!).

The descent, reversing our ascent route, is interrupted by a three-hour rest on a scree-covered rock ledge at half height while we wait for the slopes below to creep into shadow. I sit contemplating a cramping pain in my left foot and the nature of our fine madness; the others sleep blissfully! We arrive back at Base Camp, tired but happy, after a 29-hour round trip, Jim and Rob skimming in on skis over sodden snow, with Chris and me plodding behind.

Our plan to move Base Camp further up the glacier leaves me no option. This is the moment of truth! Donning telemark skis and strapping myself into the harness of my pulk (a smooth-based fibreglass and alloy sledge) gives me a powerful feeling of apprehension, as if preparing for some strange initiation ceremony. 'You'll soon pick it up,' Chris assures me, but during the course of the expedition I can't say that I ever really enjoyed the experience. From our new Base Camp, 6km further up the Chisel glacier, Jim, Rob and I snatch an ascent of Beacon, 2262m, by a long icefield and a rock ridge of biscuit-like consistency, before several days of heavy

snowfall pin us down at Base Camp. This period of bad weather gives us the excuse for a good rest and some major bridge sessions. The whisky supplies also see some serious activity!

A metre of fresh snow has fallen but the hot sun soon melts it down, encouraging a spot of ski-touring. This involves the crossing of a hitherto unexplored col to the west of the Needle massif and down onto the Coxcomb glacier. A stunning blade of grey gneiss takes my mind off my skiing incompetence and I join the others line-spotting and swapping superlatives. It is a truly eye-boggling wall – a clean 300m sweep of perfect rock. The mist descends as we ski back around onto the Chisel glacier and damp snow begins to fall as we skin back towards camp on a compass bearing.

When the weather clears, Chris and I head off to climb a magnificent tower of pale gneiss, the highest on a many-towered mountain spine lying at the head of the Chisel glacier between the much greater bulks of Steeple and Citadel. Dumping skis, we solo up steepening snow to cross the bridged bergschrund and then clamber up mixed ground to a ledge at the toe of a long, slim tongue of rock descending from the right edge of the NE face. Exchanging double plastic boots for rock boots and leaving ice tools and crampons on the ledge makes us feel slightly vulnerable but greatly enhances the pleasure of climbing. Following a distinctive fault line we gain height quickly on dry rock.

Strange cries above demand our attention. Dark silhouettes wheel high against a cloudless sky, their almost human screeching and aerial antics drawing closer. They are the first birds we have seen in this empty land. We feel a curious empathy, as we share with them our common affinity for high and lonely places. (We confirmed later that they were Ivory Gulls. Little is known about these enigmatic birds, which are among the very few larger forms of wildlife in this Arctic wilderness.)

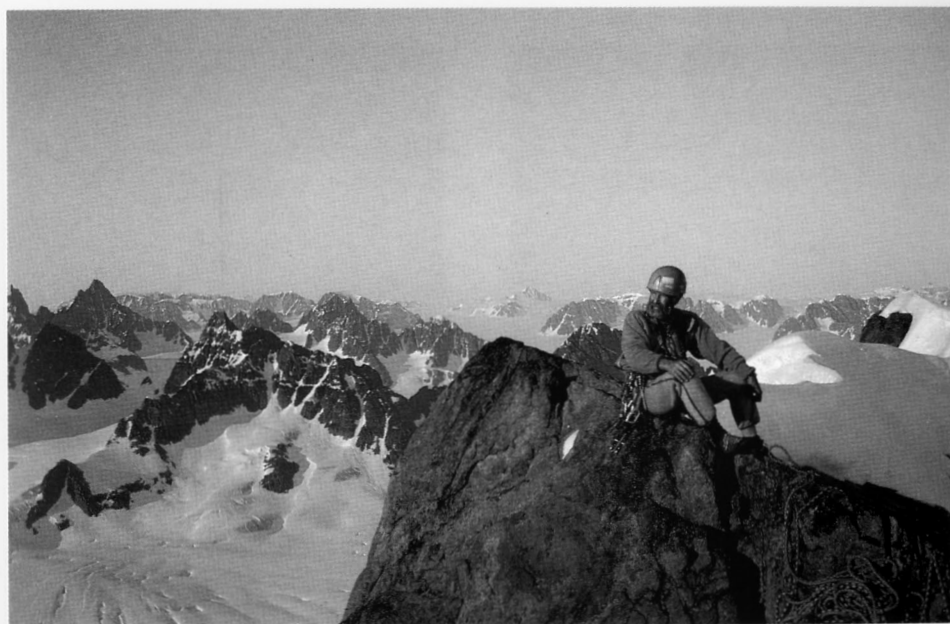
A skin-mincing cracked corner slows our progress. It is strenuous and technical (5b) and I'm relieved to take a belay below a capping overhang. Using aid, Chris soon climbs over the overhang and shouts down: 'We've cracked it!' This seems a premature assumption, but three pitches on find me in a small rock bay with little but blue sky above. Chris brings me up onto the broad summit platform and we exchange broad grins. The views are so captivating that, despite enjoying nearly an hour on top, we forget to build a cairn.

Jammed ropes and loose rock test our composure as we descend The Ivory Tower (it could have no other name) but soon we are reunited with our ice gear and then with our skis. We arrive at Base Camp, drenched with sweat, to a generous welcome from Jim and Rob, which means a lot after their disappointing retreat from the vast S face of Pulpit. Although we are now operating as two independent teams, there is a powerful feeling of cohesion and mutual support.

After a day's rest, I persuade Chris to have a go at Steeple by the long thin gully that we had spotted from the summit of The Ivory Tower. Although still tired, he agrees to the plan. 'You're the greyhound, I'm the



41. The Needle massif from Base Camp II. (*Graham Little*) (p64)



42. Chris Bonington on the summit of Needle, 1945m. (*Graham Little*) (p64)

labrador,' he adds with a wry smile. I think this is intended as a compliment but I'm not sure! Jim and Rob have left in the early hours of the morning to attempt a fine looking peak that we had explored on an earlier ski tour. After a substantial lunch of salmon and oatcakes, we head off at 1600, intending to climb the gully on Steeple during the 'night' when the snow and ice should be in its most stable condition. As we ski up to the col the clear skies give way to flat grey clouds. A chilling wind blows, yet it isn't really cold. Our gully terminates well above the base of the face so we climb diagonally up from the right, following a snow/ice ramp. The snow is dreadful and after three pitches Chris says he thinks we should go down. I suggest another pitch but agree that the omens are not good. Suppressing disappointment, I soon accept that Chris's gut feelings are common sense and I fix up our first abseil anchor. Three spectacular abseils down a compact, vertical wall take us onto the snowfield again. As we return to camp, the wisdom of our retreat becomes evident, as heavy wet snowflakes fill the darkening sky. Crawling into the security of our tent, we feel concern for the well-being of Rob and Jim. If anything goes wrong, we are the rescue team. Our isolation is complete.

I am awoken from a restless sleep in the early hours of the morning by the welcome sound of two voices. Though snow-plastered and tired, Jim and Rob smile broadly as they tell of their successful climb. While Chris makes a brew we hear of many pitches on good ice and excellent rock. Collapsing séracs and a nightmare descent with frozen ropes and nil visibility were mere details. Trident has been a total experience!

Ever since first seeing it I have harboured an overwhelming desire to attempt the stunning rock monolith that dominates the lower Chisel glacier. Fortunately Chris shares my passion. The SW pillar of Needle (1945m), as we named the peak, is by any standards a magnificent objective and one that will demand a special commitment. Another move of Base Camp puts us in the ideal position to make an attempt.

The slabby lower wall of the SW pillar gives climbing of a high standard and quality, five pitches on immaculate gneiss. I take the first pitch, a glacier-polished and strenuous 5b, but Chris gets what turns out to be the crux – a soaring, cracked corner and ramp above (5c). He leads this in perfect style under the warm Arctic sun. One more pitch and we return to camp, leaving fixed ropes for a racing start in the morning. We spiral up and around the great grey pillar, carrying with us the minimum of gear and a determination to top out. Eventually we gain the W face of the mountain, where the upper pitches carry ice and banks of unconsolidated snow. Feeling rather foolish and ill equipped in my rock boots, I swim up a slope of slipping slush to finger-jam a crack in a bald wall streaming with meltwater (5b). I slump, wasted, on an island of dry rock above.

A couple more pitches and we are on the summit, gazing out over golden glaciers, mesmerised by the array of jagged peaks casting long, ragged shadows far below. It is shortly after midnight, yet we are bathed in the low light of the sun; there is not a breath of wind. I experience a feeling of utter contentment, knowing, for these few moments, why I climb.

Chris and I share the ritual of photography before commencing the long descent. The elation of the summit slips away as we settle into the broken rhythm of abseiling and down climbing, forcing mind and body to move with deliberation, to rebuff the seductive voice tempting careless action. Elated at having made what is probably the most difficult climb yet achieved in Greenland, we ski back to camp after a 24-hour round trip. Rob gives us a warm welcome, but it is obvious that all is not well. The story of their attempt on Citadel soon unfolds – a fast ascent to the upper tower, the cannonball-sized falling rock glancing off Jim's helmet and impacting upon his collar-bone, followed by the epic self-rescue. Jim is very disappointed at having to retreat from so high on Citadel (probably the highest peak in the Chisel glacier area) and is clearly experiencing considerable pain. However, he is very much alive and mobile and it soon transpires that, even with a broken collar-bone, his skiing ability is still far superior to mine!

The weather is still very settled, with cloudless skies and a chill breeze. I spend the morning listening to my Walkman and luxuriating in the buzz that a good climb gives you. I potter around in the afternoon, skiing over to a rock outcrop to build a cairn and get a GPS fix. This innocent diversion nearly ends in disaster when one ski breaks into a hidden crevasse. I throw my body to one side to avoid following it. Rob, showing his usual consideration, skis over from the tents with a rope to belay me on the return journey.

In a characteristic fit of over-optimism I convince Rob that the route that Chris and I attempted on Steeple would now be in condition. Rob falls for it and we set off late that same evening. The weather is certainly better than on my earlier attempt, but sadly the conditions are not. We gain the narrow lower reaches of the gully, to be confronted with steep, soggy ice. Rob squelches up a pitch, as copious floes of iced water are released by every axe placement. I lead on through, up steepening rotten ice reminiscent of Point Five Gully about to fall down! Ten metres up with no protection, and sanity suddenly returns.

'Let's get out of here,' I shout, above the sound of flowing water. Rob concurs.

Now the great pulking experience is imminent. We must bid our farewells to the Chisel glacier, which has been our home for the last three weeks, and head down to the coast to rendezvous with our pick-up plane. Much of the first day's pulking is almost pleasurable as we cover many kilometres down the wide, smooth Frederiksborg glacier. Jim, scouting out the route with one arm in a sling, is constantly ahead of the rest of us. The monotony of the journey is broken by frequent references to the dominant nature of the true Cathedral (c 2600m) which stands with embarrassing grandeur in the heart of the Lemon mountains. That peak, the highest in the range, is the one that Chris and Jim failed to locate in 1991!

The mighty Frederiksborg glacier is forced to bifurcate by an inconveniently placed peak. We take the left fork and are soon ensnared in a maze of crevasses, then brought to a standstill by an area of unfriendly

pressure ridges. We camp. A short section of backtracking allows us to gain a sinuous route through the ice maze to a lake on the fringe of the glacier. Ethereal silver light and pewter-grey clouds reflected upon its surface compel us to try to capture its magic on film. A snow-filled runnel, caught between the tormented glacier and the ravished cliffs on its E bank, gives us swift, safe passage for a while, but not for long. Numerous obstacles make it necessary to carry the pulks and ferry individual loads. Jim, still in considerable pain, is heroic.

After crossing several meltwater channels, we reach the head of Watkins Fjord, choked with pack ice. Abandoning the pulks (an act that has played upon our environmental consciences ever since), we spend a couple of days carrying the rest of our kit over the hills, past Twin Lakes, to our pick-up point on a glacial outwash plain at Sodalen. Unseasonally, the 'airstrip' is snowbound and, although our skiless pick-up plane lands spot on schedule (interrupting a critical game of bridge), an hour's energetic digging is required to clear enough snow for it to take off.

Soaking in the thermal springs back in Iceland, I reflected upon what had been a very enjoyable and successful expedition. As Chris had promised, it had been a fabulous trip, with magnificent mountains, memorable experiences and, most important of all, the best possible company.

Summary: The 1993 British Lemon Mountains Expedition made the first ascent of five peaks in East Greenland during June/July 1993:

Mejslen (Chisel), 2320m, via the N face	1000m	D sup
Beacon, 2262m, via the NE face/E ridge	750m	D inf
The Ivory Tower, 2100m, via the NE face	590m	TD
Trident, 2350m, via the NE face	900m	TD
Needle, 1945m, via the SW pillar	765m	ED

Expedition members: Chris Bonington, Rob Ferguson, Graham Little and Jim Lowther.