Kangchenjunga

' ... Bejewelled against the soft rose-pink of dawn reflected in the sky, the whole Kangchenjunga group of mountains is massed high in the heavens. Misty hills, as yet untouched by the morning glow, reach down to soft folds in the still dim regions below. A transcendent wonder fills the valley before us, as the sun slowly rises and illuminates mountain after mountain ... '

Bip Pares
Himalayan Holiday

A Kangchenjunga Seminar

At the Alpine Club on 13 June 1995

INTRODUCTION

Dr Peter Catterall: I would like to start by explaining that I am something of an interloper here. I am not actually a member of the Alpine Club and not even a climber. My justification for being here is that this is a special seminar organised jointly by the Alpine Club and the Institute of Contemporary British History, of which I currently have the honour of being the Director, to celebrate the first successful ascent of Kangchenjunga on 25 May 1955; and, informally, to discuss the history of climbing on Kangchenjunga and, more generally, in the Himalaya.

I wonder if I could start off by asking you to introduce yourselves and refer to your connection with Kangchenjunga:

George Band: I was lucky enough to be a member of what we called the Kangchenjunga Reconnaissance in 1955 and we managed to reconnoitre right up to the summit. Four of us reached the near-summit. I was also the youngest member of the 1953 Everest expedition.

Michael Westmacott: I am President of the Alpine Club and I have virtually no connection with Kangchenjunga but I was on Everest in 1953.

Tony Streather: Like George Band, I was lucky to be a member of the Kangchenjunga Reconnaissance party in 1955 and was one of the four that reached a point quite near the summit. I was on the second ascent, with Norman Hardie, a New Zealander.

Doug Scott: I was concerned with the third ascent of the mountain, and the first from the NW, in Spring 1979.

[**John Hunt**, who had planned to take part in the Seminar, climbed on Kangchenjunga with C R (Reggie) Cooke in 1937 while on leave from the East Bengal police. Unfortunately he was indisposed and unable to attend, but some of his notes were referred to.]

Dr Catterall: I would like to start off by looking at the background to the Kangchenjunga story and the developments in the 1950s leading up to the 1955 expedition, then to discuss the 1955 expedition itself, and finally to look at its aftermath and some more general questions.

BACKGROUND

Dr Catterall: This seminar marks not only the 40th anniversary of the first successful ascent of Kangchenjunga, but also the 90th anniversary of the first attempt on the mountain in 1905 which, interestingly enough, focused upon the same face that was successfully climbed in 1955: the SW or 'Yalung' face. Subsequently there was a long neglect of this particular face, perhaps partly because of the fate of the 1905 expedition.

I am wondering whether anyone has any comments about why the SW face should have been neglected by the expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s?

George Band: Frank Smythe, who was a participant in the International Expedition in 1930, looked at this face in detail through a telescope from Darjeeling, 44 miles away, and spotted all these avalanches coming down. And there is also a famous area known as The Sickle, visible from Darjeeling, which was the site of a huge rock fall in the 1800s, and Smythe wrote the face off as being too dangerous. That, coupled perhaps with the ill-fated Aleister Crowley expedition in 1905, when the Swiss Lieut Pache and three porters were avalanched, was enough to deter people. So the Austrians under Paul Bauer's leadership tackled the mountain from the east side, which is the natural way in to the mountain from Darjeeling.

Dr Catterall: Was it actually easier to get in to the mountain from the east (Sikkim) side?

George Band: Yes. The frontier between Sikkim and Nepal runs more or less N–S over the mountain and until 1950 Nepal was virtually a closed country. After Freshfield's journey round the mountain in 1899 and the 1905 expedition, things got rather more political and by the 1930s it wasn't possible to go to Nepal as a Westerner. In the thirties, Sikkim was ruled by a Maharaja and was as independent as Bhutan is now. So I suppose people were limited to approaching from the east side.

Dr Catterall: What was the impetus to go climbing in the Himalaya at that time? Was the Alpine Club involved in organising expeditions?

Tony Streather: Many of the people who took part in early climbs had some reason to be in India anyway. John Hunt and myself, for instance, were both in the army.

Michael Westmacott: None of the expeditions at that time were organised by the Alpine Club or any other organisation. They were arranged privately by people who wanted to go. The Alpine Club only got involved, jointly with the Royal Geographical Society, with Everest expeditions.

George Band: After 1953 the Mount Everest Foundation was formed with the £100,000 capital which came in from the books, the lectures and the film. That money has been well invested and over a period of 40 years it has paid out over half a million pounds. Mostly it has gone in small grants of up to £1000 to help smaller expeditions, but in the early days a few expeditions were totally financed by the Mount Everest Foundation and I think Kangchenjunga was virtually the first of those, followed by Annapurna South Face.

Dr Catterall: The people who climbed in the Himalaya at that time – had they all already climbed in the Alps?

Michael Westmacott: Most of them had, but not all. Some of them were living and working in India already.

Dr Catterall: But did these people have any experience of ice climbing like you get in the Alps? For instance, had Joe Brown had any experience of ice climbing prior to 1953?

George Band: Joe Brown initially made his tremendous reputation as an absolutely brilliant rock climber in Britain but probably he hadn't really done enough general Alpine climbing, including ice climbing, to warrant being selected for Everest in 1953. In the 1920s and 1930s the members of the Everest expeditions tended to be drawn from the Establishment but on Kangchenjunga the choice of Joe Brown, amongst others, pointed very much to the fact that the best climbers were selected.

Doug Scott: The Kangchenjunga trip in 1955 marked a turning point really. For the first time a non-Establishment figure was chosen.

George Band: And the fact that it was considered a 'reconnaissance' allowed Charles Evans, as leader, a pretty free hand to choose his team. Perhaps if it had been seen as a major national attempt, mountaineering politics might have entered into it.

Dr Catterall: Is Himalayan climbing very different from Alpine climbing?

Michael Westmacott: You need a lot of Alpine skills but, until recently, the level of technical skill required was a bit lower, because the main problem was getting yourself and your stores to the mountain and to altitude.

George Band: And you would still have been choosing the easiest route up the mountain, rather than seeking a particularly difficult buttress or face as is usually the case now.

Michael Westmacott: But Alpine skills such as getting people out of crevasses, or how to avoid falling into one in the first place, were absolutely vital and as much 'Himalayan' skills as 'Alpine' ones.

George Band: Tony was one of the few exceptions, if he doesn't mind my saying so, who had done very little, if any, Alpine climbing before he started climbing in the Himalaya. He happened to be living and serving in the Subcontinent when a Norwegian expedition came to tackle Tirich Mir, the peak behind his Officers' Mess.

Tony Streather: Often we would cross 10 or 12,000ft passes in the course of our duties, but we didn't call it mountaineering. We were just 'patrolling' the Afghan border.

Dr Catterall: So how did you actually get involved in the Tirich Mir expedition?

Tony Streather: I was serving in the army in that part of India [the Hindu Kush] when these Norwegians came out in 1950 to attempt the mountain. I offered to go along to help as liaison officer, organising porters etc.

George Band: Tony is a very conscientious chap: he 'liaised' right to the summit!

Tony Streather: Sadly, on the first attempt, one of their party caught pneumonia (which would today be recognised as pulmonary oedema) and I took his place. It was originally planned that I should go fairly high with them but, the way things turned out, I was given the chance to go on to the summit.

Dr Catterall: When you were chosen for Kangchenjunga, you had only climbed in the Himalaya?

Tony Streather: On Tirich Mir I had been higher than anyone who was available at the time, so I was a 'starter' for Everest. I went off to the Alps with one or two climbers and reserves, but the others weren't overly impressed by my technical skills – things like putting on crampons and so on – so I was not finally chosen. But, as it happened, almost at the same time that I failed to get my slot on Everest, I was offered one by the Americans on K2

Dr Catterall: So at the time, in 1953, the experience and technical skills that could be acquired in the Alps were not considered vitally important?

George Band: I think that was a period when there weren't all that many British climbers with Himalayan experience. The exceptions were those who had gained it either in the 1930s, like John Hunt, or, at the end of the Second World War, if they had happened to be out in the Subcontinent and had managed the odd expedition. But a lot of the 1930s people were getting on a bit and that was perhaps why younger people like Mike Westmacott and me were lucky enough to be selected for Everest, purely on the basis of our Alpine experience.

1951 TO 1955

Dr Catterall: There were expeditions throughout the 1930s to the east of Kangchenjunga, such as the climb by C R Cooke and John Hunt towards the North Col in 1937, but then there seems to have been a gap in attempts on the mountain from 1945 to 1951. After '51 the interest seems to have shifted to this long-neglected SW face. There would seem to be two questions: firstly, why was there this gap after the war before people started climbing again in 1951 and, secondly, why was there this shift of attention to the SW face?

George Band: In the 1950s, with Nepal just having being opened, the British were rather preoccupied with Everest. It was Gilmour Lewis in 1951 who suggested that maybe a look at the SW face of Kangchenjunga would be worth doing, because the Bavarians had been such a strong group on the E side in the 1930s and on the NW side they had hardly got off the ground owing to the avalanche danger. So it was a process of elimination. Also, it was now known that the members of the 1951 Everest reconnaissance expedition had got up the Khumbu Icefall of Everest, so it was concluded that perhaps, after all, there was a chance of getting up some of the icefalls on the SW face of Kangchenjunga.

John Kempe, who was headmaster of a school out in India, managed to put together a small reconnaissance party. Turning over some papers at home recently, I came across a report, probably by John Kempe, of their expedition in 1954. They had found a rock buttress, which became known as 'Kempe's Buttress', on the right-hand side of the Lower Icefall and after climbing some of that buttress they realised that you can bypass quite a bit of the Lower Icefall, which was the more heavily crevassed one, and at least you could get launched on the mountain that way. They thought the Upper Icefall was rather more stable, with steep ice, but no steeper than that on the Lhotse Face of Everest which by now had been climbed quite a few times.

I remember attending the meeting at the Alpine Club in the autumn/winter of '54 when they gave their report. 'We think there is a way up there,' they said, 'if you can avoid the avalanches that come down on the

right. If you can get across that broken icefall, there is just a chance that you could get through before the avalanches sweep down on that side.' That was enough encouragement to persuade the Joint Committee of the Alpine Club and the RGS, fresh from the excitement and success of Everest, to consider launching a more ambitious reconnaissance to the SW face.

Tony Streather: At this stage would it be sensible to comment on Kangchenjunga having been lined up by the British as an alternative if the Swiss had been successful on Everest in 1952? That was one of the reasons why Kangchenjunga was very much in people's minds at the time, because the Swiss very nearly *did* climb Everest, getting well above the South Col.

George Band: After his experiences on Kangchenjunga in 1937, John Hunt was, I think, keen that Kangchenjunga should be tackled. I remember something he said that might seem a bit over-the-top these days – that the ascent of Kangchenjunga would be the greatest feat in mountaineering, involving technical climbing problems and objective dangers of an order even higher than those we had encountered on Everest. That was his opinion and I think many people's opinion of the mountain.

Doug Scott: Perhaps we should record the fact that, in my experience of the Himalaya, Kangchenjunga is the *most* active mountain regarding avalanches. It stands proud of the Himalaya and gets the monsoon early and a lot of snow gets deposited on it, so it is a very active mountain.

Dr Catterall: If the Swiss had succeeded on Everest and you had gone to Kangchenjunga in 1953, which side of the mountain would you have attempted?

George Band: That would be a fascinating question to ask John Hunt. He might have wanted another crack at the NE spur because the Bavarians did get almost to the top of the spur where it abutted against the North Ridge.

Doug Scott: Reggie Cooke nearly reached the North Col from the E side, so it would probably have been that side that John Hunt would have chosen.

Tony Streather: I can quote from John Hunt's notes: 'Cooke was launched on the upper ice face, only 200-300ft below the Col, when he called off this hazardous venture. Stones and lumps of ice were hurtling down from the edge of the col, detached by the west wind. It was clearly no suitable line of approach to the summit of Kangchenjunga.'

Dr Catterall: Were there religious restrictions in force when you climbed the mountain?

George Band: In '55 there was no actual prohibition; it was simply a

matter of courtesy. Charles Evans went to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, and talked with the son of the Maharaja and the Dewan. They said: 'It is a holy mountain and we don't really want you to climb it'. In fact we were planning to climb it from the SW, so that, since we would be entirely in Nepal once we were on the mountain, there was no strict obligation to defer to their wishes. But, as a matter of courtesy, Charles Evans gave them an undertaking that we would go no higher on the mountain than the point from which we could see that there existed an easy route to the top. However high that took us we would not actually tread on the summit itself. So they reluctantly agreed to that and we made it very much a feature of our climb. The Indians, who made the second ascent, also observed our undertaking and so did Doug Scott's party who made the third ascent.

Doug Scott: But the Japanese, who made the fourth ascent, trod all over the top! So it remained an untrodden peak only until 1980.

THE EXPEDITION

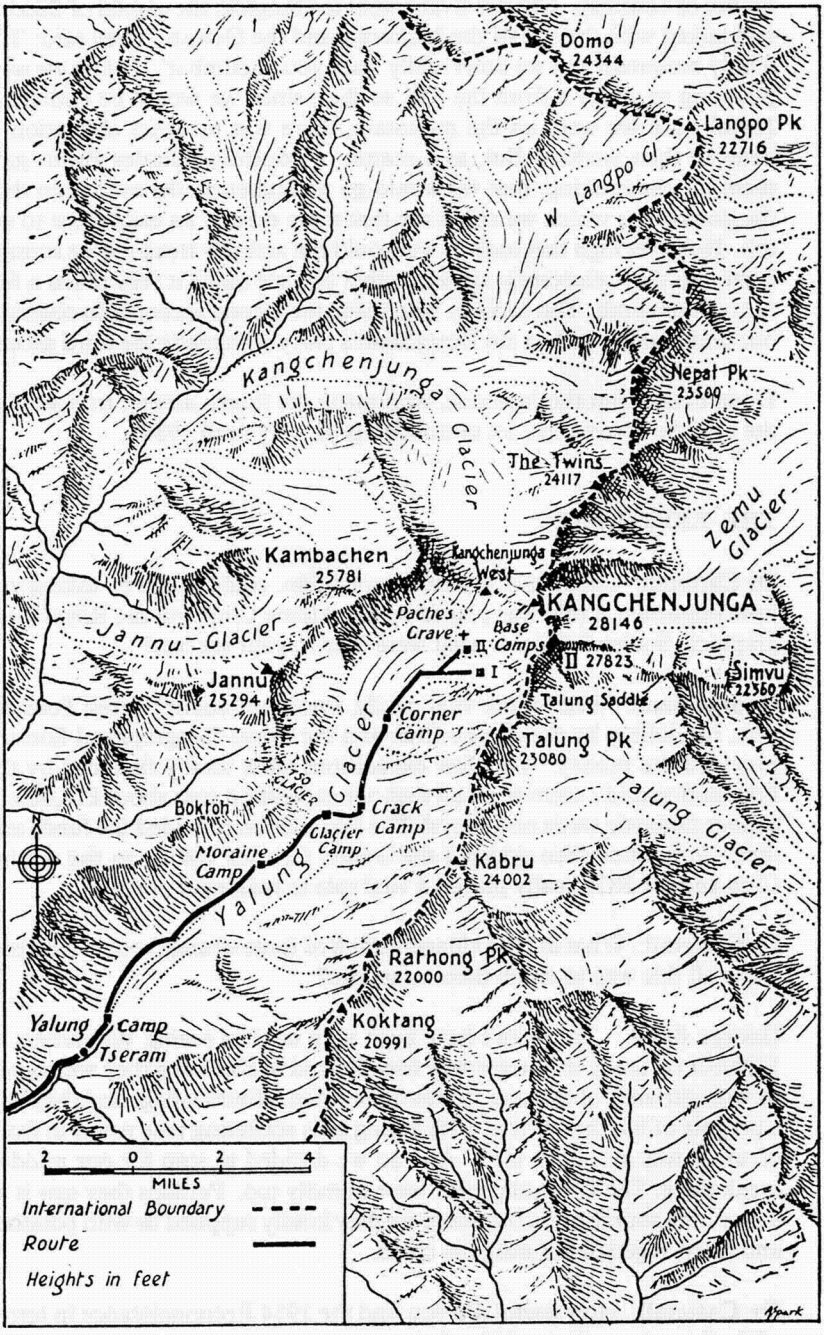
Dr Catterall: Looking at the 1955 expedition, could I start by asking you how important a role was played by the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society? How crucial were they to your success?

George Band: Well I think vital, really, since the Mount Everest Foundation, run jointly by the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, provided the money. Very few expeditions were totally financed by the Foundation and I seem to recall that our expedition cost about £18,000. It sounds fantastic value nowadays! The Foundation provided the funds and their Committee then selected the leader, Charles Evans, so the Alpine Club and the RGS really played a vital role in making it possible.

Dr Catterall: What did the villagers think of these strange people who had come all this way to climb their mountain?

George Band: They can't have been very used to seeing Westerners in 1955 but certainly they were very friendly and in Khewang they welcomed us with garlands of flowers. It was quite a rich, Hindu village and they had a pergola of bamboo leaves, with young girls scattering rose petals in front of us. It was all rather nice! And so we decided to stop for our midday break there. The Ghunsa people were friendly too. Perhaps they saw it as a nice little source of income because they kindly supplied us with potatoes and dried vegetables during the climb.

Dr Catterall: How useful did you find the 1954 Reconnaissance in terms of finding what route to follow?



The approach to Kangchenjunga in 1955

George Band: I suppose it was really the 1954 Reconnaissance that triggered our expedition, because they realised that if we were able to get through the two great icefalls, we would then have reached this feature known as the Great Shelf at about 23,000ft and from there it would be fairly straightforward for a couple of thousand feet. Then we would be within shooting distance of the summit.

We started off on Kempe's Buttress – the buttress to the right of the Lower Icefall. We tried quite hard from that side and we got nearly to the top of the Lower Icefall, but, knowing that that was still quite low down at 19,000ft and that we were going to need porters to carry stores, we realised that it was far too difficult and dangerous a route for laden porters.

But as a result of being there we were able to spot a little gully which enabled us to go round to the left and circumvent most of the Lower Icefall. This turned out to be pretty safe from avalanches. The Upper Icefall was fairly convex in shape so that avalanches tended to fall down the channels on either side. So, in the end, we found a route that was relatively safe up to the summit and that was our great good fortune and led to our success.

Dr Catterall: You shifted Base Camp didn't you?

George Band: Yes. When we switched our route, we changed the Base Camp site. The natural place to move to was a little rock *nunatak* at the junction of the Yalung glacier. That was the site, known as Pache's Grave, where the 1905 expedition had buried Pache and the three porters that perished, and we found other evidence of their occupation – firewood and even a few champagne corks.

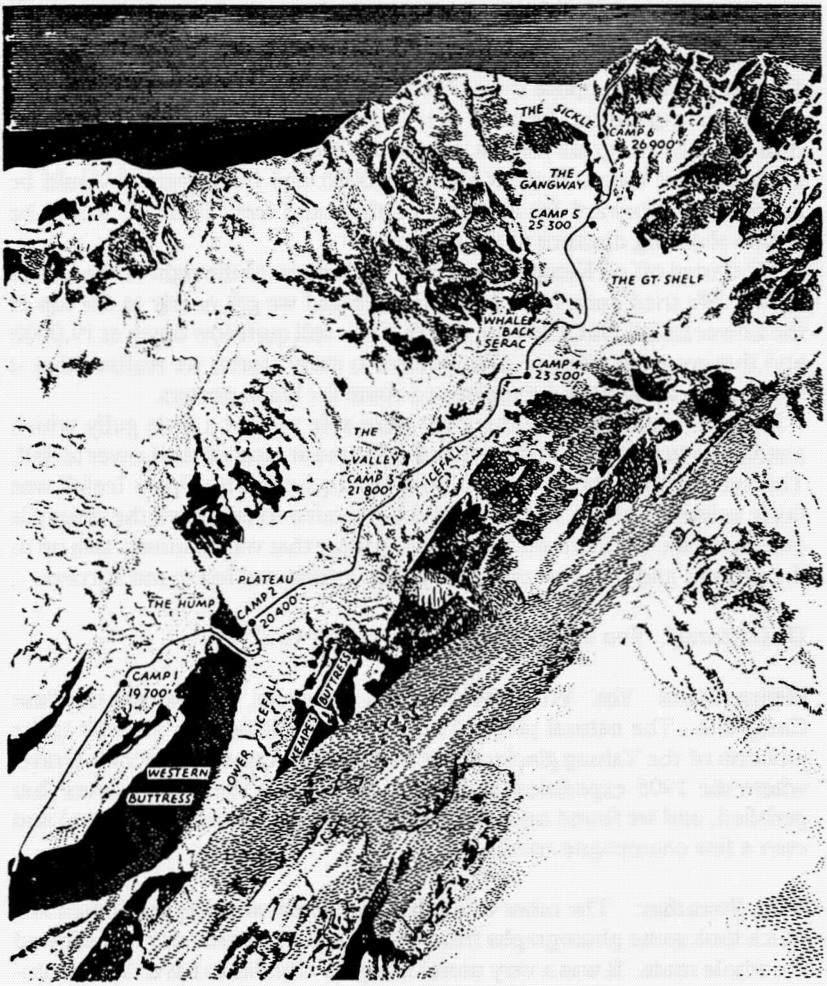
Tony Streather: The other thing that happened was that the Indian Air Force took some photographs from the air and one particular one showed the whole route. It was a very useful thing for Charles to have. The photographs were sent up later, halfway through the expedition, and they were useful, too, in considering the best final summit route.

Dr Catterall: So you had advantages that previous expeditions had never had?

George Band: Certainly, yes. But equally, it was a very interesting challenge, in contrast with Everest which had had so many parties to within about 1000ft of the summit, because no one had been above 20,000ft on that face before.

Doug Scott: What kind of leader was Charles Evans?

George Band: Outstanding. He was a very quiet, soft-speaking Welshman, highly intelligent, very safe, with excellent judgement, and a real



The Yalung face from the air

friend. He had a very nice way of choosing his party. I think he obviously wanted to choose a group that would fit together well. I never thought of him as a particularly firm or authoritative person, but ...

Tony Streather: ... he would make a suggestion and we would all get on and do it.

George Band: And we were all very keen to make it succeed. In those days probably one was more ready than people are today to accept leadership and of course Charles had more Himalayan experience than the rest of the party and we respected him for that.

Dr Catterall: Since it was originally billed as a reconnaissance, were some people rather disappointed to have missed the big show, as it were?

George Band: I know there were one or two very well qualified and senior climbers whom Charles may well have asked but who probably thought that, if this was going to be only a reconnaissance, with a big serious attempt the following year, 'I can't possibly take two years off in succession, so maybe I'll stand down on this one and come in for the big show!' So at least we saved a lot of money, and denied them, sadly, their opportunity!

Dr Catterall: What would you consider to have been the contribution of the Sherpas to your success?

Tony Streather: The contribution of the Sherpas was absolutely crucial and without them we would never have got the camps established and we wouldn't have done it.

George Band: They were a pretty well-knit group and a very strong team. Charles Evans had asked Dawa Tenzing, who was quite an old Sherpa from the Village of Khumjung, to pick them from his village. They all walked over from Sola Khumbu in a month, to join us in Darjeeling.

Dr Catterall: [*To Doug Scott*] When you went to Kangchenjunga you took the decision to have as few Sherpas as possible and take them only as far as the Col, did you not?

Doug Scott: Yes. We wanted to go by ourselves. But we also made a conscious decision not to take oxygen. If you take oxygen up there you have to have your Sherpas, because without them you have no chance at all.

George Band: With an oxygen attempt you need to have about three times the weight of stuff at the high camps, so that dispensing with oxygen does transform the logistics.

Doug Scott: When you have big 'siege' expeditions it is usually because you have decided to take oxygen, although that's changing now with lightweight oxygen bottles.

Tony Streather: The financial implications have completely changed too. In the early days the most expensive part of the business was getting to the area and, having got there, the Sherpas were relatively inexpensive. That has now changed completely, and quite rightly so, because the Sherpas' wages now are much higher and air travel is relatively cheap.

Dr Catterall: Can you comment on the environmental implications of your expeditions, in terms of discarded oxygen bottles and so on?

Doug Scott: They're just cosmetic. A lot of people make a big fuss about

these things but they do much less damage to the environment than chopping down trees. It may be an indication that people are careless, but leaving a few bottles here and there is not really doing any damage to the environment. Cutting a tree down is a hundred times more damaging, and all the clean-up expeditions cut trees down because their porters require fire. They probably cause more damage really.

George Band: I'm glad to say that nearly all trekking parties now in the Himalaya are using kerosene, so they are minimising the burning of wood to a degree, although, of course, if you have a lot of porters with you, they are not going to use kerosene.

Doug Scott: It's very hard to get the porters to use kerosene and fossil fuel. You can't really get round a roaring Primus, as against a roaring fire! Cooking is more difficult for them, too, on the narrow flame of a Primus. The only thing to do is to reduce the number of porters you need and not taking oxygen helps with that. Messner made a big stride in climbing Everest from the north side, with just his girl friend at Base Camp, and going without any oxygen whatsoever on the mountain. It showed that if you are fully acclimatised you can do big mountains without oxygen and just take your own team.

Dr Catterall: I think you took it for medical purposes only. I was quite struck by that because in the account of the 1955 expedition there are references to George Band turning his oxygen up to full flow and suddenly having this burst of energy to chop out space for a tent, so that the account seems to suggest that it was actually quite important.

Doug Scott: I think we were lucky by 1979 in that we were able to go off to the Himalaya more regularly – about twice a year – so that we could build up our confidence in not having oxygen, which wasn't possible earlier on when travel took much longer ...

George Band: ... But another point is that people like Messner and Doug are really, you might say, of Gold Medal Olympic standard in capability, whereas in our day we were much more sort of 'London Irish', local club kind of standard. I guess we weren't as fit and didn't climb anything like as consistently and regularly as young people do now ...

Doug Scott: ... but we had the advantage of knowing what others had done before us. Everyone climbs on the shoulders of those who have gone before. In 1986 all those people who had camped out above 8500m without oxygen were taken to Switzerland for testing and I was one of them. We were all hoping we would be shown to be supermen but in actual fact we were all shown to be quite ordinary.

THE AFTERMATH

Dr Catterall: What was the response to your success in 1955, particularly in the aftermath of Everest?

Michael Westmacott: Not many of the big mountains had been climbed so it made quite an impact.

George Band: Just after the climb, when Charles was composing a telegram, those of us who had been on Everest remembered how the coded message that was sent back had mentioned just Hillary and Tenzing and nobody else in the party. Although they were a great pair, I think some of us felt that they perhaps got a slightly disproportionate amount of the ... how shall I say? ... the accolades. So deliberately, the telegram we sent back from Kangchenjunga mentioned no individual names at all – just the success. We recognised that we were part of a team.

Dr Catterall: What was the significance of the climb of Kangchenjunga in the history of mountaineering techniques?

George Band: We were applying the same techniques on Kangchenjunga as were used on Everest, so perhaps one should not claim too much special significance for Kangchenjunga in 1955. The Everest template had set the pattern for the climbing of all the 8000m peaks in a very short period.

Dr Catterall: Was there any explanation for that sudden flourishing?

George Band: The main reason was that it had been demonstrated that it could be done – like the four-minute mile. Suddenly everyone can do it! Griffith Pugh's scientific reports and their application on Everest had shown that it was possible to climb to this altitude, and it was a natural progression to apply the same techniques to climbing the other 8000m peaks.

Dr Catterall: What is the place of the 1955 climb in the history of British mountaineering in the Himalaya?

George Band: It was much more of a 'mountaineer's mountain' than Everest. I remember how Alf Bridge – a great character who helped us with our preparations – said to Joe Brown:

'What are you going to be like, Joe, if you get to the top of this mountain?' Joe drew himself up.

'Alf,' he said, 'I shall insist that you always call me Sir Joseph.'

Doug Scott: I think it stands very high in the rankings though to me, as a lad, climbing on gritstone, the thing about the 1955 expedition that meant

most to me personally, to someone of my generation, was that Joe Brown, the guy that climbed *Cenotaph Corner*, dropped a peg on his second's head, knocked him unconscious but carried on and completed the route ... that same Joe Brown was now climbing hand-jam cracks at 28,000ft! Even then it struck me – he ought to have been on Everest.

George Band: Did you have any special reason for choosing Kangch for your climb in 1979, as opposed to anywhere else?

Doug Scott: It was partly to do with this sense of history. You caught my imagination in 1955.

Dr Catterall: Any final comments?

Michael Westmacott: Just that I think Kangchenjunga has been one of the more important Himalayan peaks in the long tapestry of British climbing.

Tony Streather: The great thing is that we are all still very close friends.

Dr Catterall: George?

George Band: Well I don't think it is for us to say, who were actually on the expedition. We must allow history and other people to form their own opinions.

Dr Catterall: Thank you all very much.