TOM CHAMBERLAIN

Bishops, Actresses and Witches ...

Sitting on a huge glacier in the blazing sunshine, surrounded by stunning unclimbed peaks, sipping whisky and reading; this was not how I had imagined rest days to be on the British Lemon Mountains Expedition to East Greenland. I had never been any further north than Torridon, so my visions of Arctic Mountaineering were of grim, frozen struggles on shattered rock and deep snow, interspersed with stormbound sessions avoiding frostbite at base camp.

The Lemon Mountains lie just inland from the east coast of the world's largest island, at a latitude of some 68 degrees north. The general area was first visited in 1932 by Lawrence Wager, who returned in 1937 with Jack Longland and Augustine Courtauld to climb Gunnbjørns Fjeld, a fair way to the north of the Lemon Mountains. At 3700m, this is the highest peak in Greenland and in the whole of the Arctic. There was then a distinct lull in exploration, and it wasn't until 1978 that another expedition returned to the more immediate area, when Stan Woolley's team came to the Frederiksborg Glacier. Woolley was to return twice; this is an area which draws people back. Then it was the turn of Chris Bonington to sail in and try Minster in 1991, and to return in 1993 to make many ascents in the central part of the range. Phil Bartlett also made some fine first ascents in 1992, including the highest peak, Cathedral. Finally, Steve Brailey's Cumbrian team made many ascents in the south of the range in 1998. However, we knew that above the Hedgehog Glacier (which had only been visited a couple of times in the past) many mountains were still unclimbed. True, our first taste of the Lemon Mountains was a gruelling 25km skiing journey dragging heavy sleds from where the ski-plane had landed us, up to the Hedgehog Glacier, where another plane had airdropped all of our barrels of food for the next four weeks. But once we had established base camp, dug a deep pit for our ingenious mess tent and sorted out which food had survived the drop and which had exploded, life was suddenly a great deal more comfortable than you would think. And the opportunities for adventure looked truly awesome.

Our team of eight loosely linked friends, and friends of friends, was of mixed ability and experience. Rupert Finn and our leader Richard Pash were on their third and second respective visits to East Greenland. Others had good alpine experience and we had two or three talented rock climbers with us. In addition to this, Sarah Walmsley was a doctor and Tim Harvey a photographer and operator of the shotgun (a precaution against polar bears) and the radio beacon (a precaution against accidents, which would

call help from Iceland). At 21, I was the 'youth' of the expedition but nobody was any older than 27. Given our varying abilities, we decided to attack our first objective en masse, and chose an apparently easy peak on the north side of the glacier.

'The School Room', as the mountain was later christened, proved to be a lot bigger and harder than expected and set the pattern for the rest of the trip: in the deserted environment of Greenland it is often hard to judge the scale of peaks and the distances between them. Roped in pairs, we panted our way up the initial snow gully before breaking left up a mixed ridge. This was covered in a generous amount of the kind of blancmange-like snow with which we would become all too familiar in the coming weeks. An awkward ice chimney led onto the sunlit rock of the fore-summit, from which an airy ridge took us over some interesting pitches and on to the intimidating-looking summit tower, which yielded two pitches of immaculate granite corner climbing. It was a good introduction to climbing in the Lemon Mountains: steep, alpine terrain; good ruddy-brown granite; occasional steep ice pitches and lots of big snow gullies which must be accomplished when they are in shadow or still very cold. It was this characteristic which meant that our descent variation line took longer to complete than the route of ascent. We skied back to camp, arriving there an exhausting 20 hours after setting out.

The scenery around base camp was simply unearthly, and the abundance of obvious untried lines was enough to drive your average Chamonix queue connoisseur into a frenzy. This I promptly did, and in one of the more grandiose cock-ups of the expedition, Richard Pash and myself teamed up on the very impressive mountain to the south-west of camp, climbed a hard and committing snow and ice route to the summit, and were pointing it out on the map to our envious companions in camp the following day when we realised that this was the famous Coxcomb, one of the few mountains for miles around that actually had already been climbed. (Luke Hughes and Gary Baum having topped out in 1992 as part of Phil Bartlett's expedition). Still, our line was almost entirely new, and with a hard section of 65-70° ice, acres of risky snow faces, strenuous mixed climbing through an intriguing 'window' under a jammed block and a delicate final pitch up beautiful red rock on the summit block,we felt we had climbed a truly classic route and not an easy one either. We graded the ten-hour ascent a committing D+.

Bad weather was an eventuality we were expecting and prepared for, and in fact I'm surprised we didn't experience more. Even if we were initially held up in Iceland for four days, we only had one three-day spell of bad weather whilst in the field. In the blizzard we kept morale high with endless games of cards and cups of tea in the mess tent. When it became too chilly sitting there, we could retire to our sleeping bags to read, although this had to be interrupted regularly in order to dig out the tents. Richard's stereo, an item sniffed at by some in the first instance, was invaluable, as it meant that

no one took a personal stereo, and we all grouped together to listen to the same thing rather than closing ourselves off from one another. It was chilly, however, and using the snow-hole toilet was very unpleasant during the blizzards, so we were all happy to see the return of blue skies and sunshine.

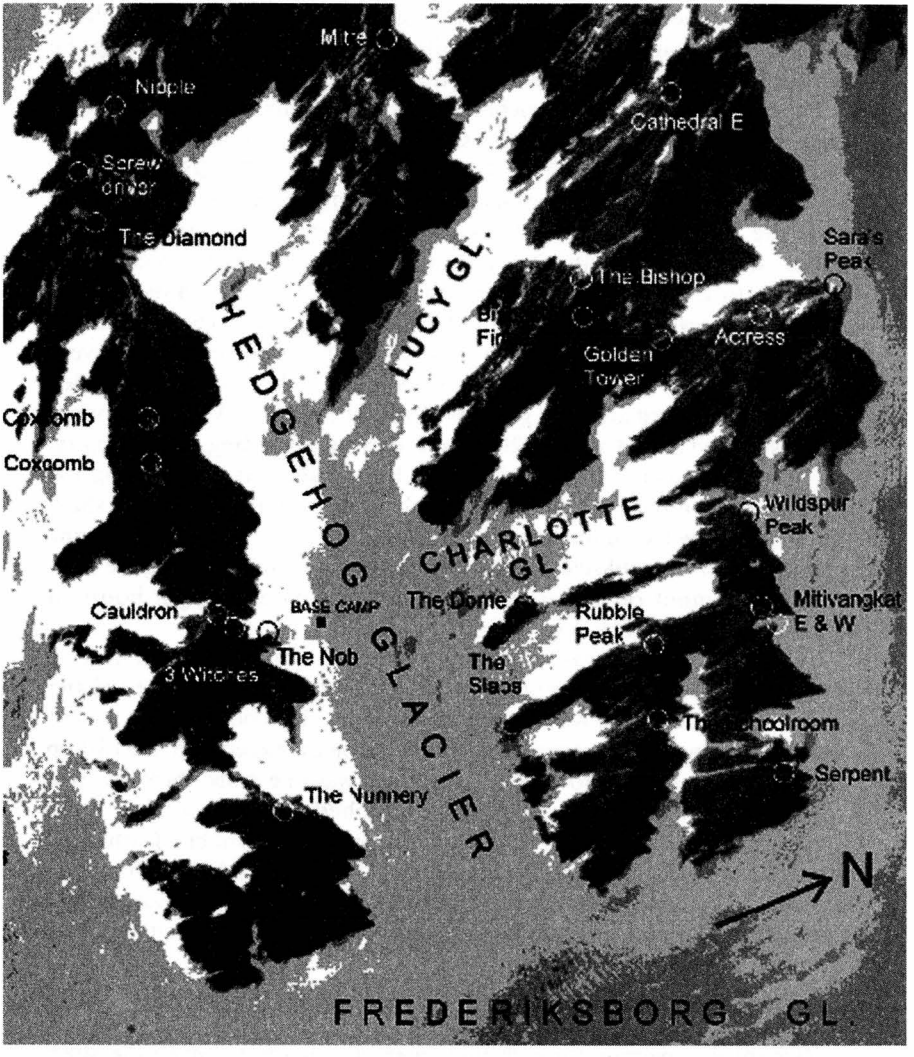
The end of the storm was celebrated by a rock-climbing blitz on our local crag, the 150m-high 'The Nob', consisting of corners and slabs, where three interesting routes were created in the course of one afternoon. Another popular venue was 'The Dome' and its accompanying slab, across the glacier from the Nob. Andy Parker made forays here with Dan Heywood and Sarah, and climbed multi-pitch routes on immaculate rock which varied from VS to E3, probably incorporating some of the more difficult rock climbing achieved in East Greenland to date. Andy and Rupert Gladstone took the rock climbing to another dimension when they attempted a very compact granite peak near to Cathedral, which they christened 'The Golden Tower'. On the first attempt, going well at half height on VS-type ground, Andy snapped a hold and fell 20 metres, narrowly avoiding serious injury, resulting in retreat. On the second try, Rupert seemed to be taking the lightweight approach a little too seriously as he only took one rock shoe! They made the two-hour ski journey one more time, however, this time crossing the formidable cleft in their chosen buttress, and reaching the well-deserved summit on yet another perfect morning after eight hours of excellent climbing (D+/VI–, 500m).

Good rock climbing was something which we had expected after hearing Bonington's and Bartlett's reports on the area. What we were surprised and excited to come across was superb ice climbing. This occurred on two of the more awkward characters we encountered on the expedition: the Bishop and The Actress. Seen from base camp, there was one route, there was one route, for me,which cried out to be climbed, on a beautiful, high, symmetrical peak along the ridge from the previously climbed Cathedral. It was this mountain which we christened 'The Actress'. Although mainly a rocky peak, its impressive south face was split by an almost dead-straight couloir of snow and, as it turned out, water ice, which continued for 700m from the glacier to the summit.

'The problem with that cleft in The Actress is that it's always in the shadow so you can't quite see what's inside.'

Richard was peering through binoculars at our route. Given the steep rock walls of The Actress, our couloir looked the easiest way up, but we were slightly worried about the top. At about three-quarter height, the gully disappeared into a large cleft in the rock. On either side, the vertical rock meant that once we entered the cleft we were committed to the final 200 metres of climbing and to whatever fell down the slot from above. At about 10am we watched the sun enter the cleft, so we knew we had to be at the top by then.

'Piece of piss,' said Richard and everyone laughed. We decided to leave camp at 10pm.


Mitre
Nipple
Cathedral E
Screw
The Diamond
Sara's
The Bishop
Acress
Golden
Tower
Coxcomb
Coxcomb
HEDGEHOG GLACIER
LUCY GL.
CHARLOTTE GL.
Wildspur
Peak
Cauldron
BASE CAMP
The Dome
Rubble
Peak
Mitivangkat
E & W
The Nob
The
Slabs
3 Witches
The Nunnery
Serpent
N
FREDERIKSBORG GL.

In the long shadows of the Arctic midnight we set off across the Hedgehog Glacier. Although we had 24 hours' daylight, at night the sun was only just above the horizon so the light was pretty flat. We had a five-mile ski to reach the foot of the climb. Five miles of grey-white, grey-white white and grey-grey white. In perfectly flat snow it is easy to go crazy, as though you are skiing through space. The most surprising thing is going over a bump, because you don't see it until you're on it, so you feel drunk. It was only made worse by my pre-climb nerves, and only 20 minutes' sleep. I found myself rushing and out of breath for no reason, even though we had allowed plenty of time to reach the mountain.

Disaster struck at the bottom of the climb. Andy was standing on the lower lip of the bergschrund trying to get a hold on the other side. The mushy snow poured into the hole below, mocking his efforts. The idea of climbing a south face couloir was obviously stupid. On all our previous routes the north face snow was in far superior condition to the wet and sugary south-facing slopes. Would the snow harden up above us? Was this water-laden slope dangerous? We swam up to the couloir.

From hell to heaven: the snow was in better shape above and we found steps of delightful grade III ice; our points sinking pleasurably into the plastic surface. Then from a small shoulder, a view to take our breath away: a jawful of mountain fangs gleamed orange in the 3am sunlight. Lit orange for us! No one had ever seen this view before. Now we could see properly into the cleft above us and it seemed more interesting than we had thought. The summit snows melt into the chasm and run down a series of giant chockstones inside, so we were looking up at 120m of grade V ice waterfalls at the back of a 150-metre vertical slot of blank rock. Telegraph pole-sized icicles clung to the top of the slot; we had six hours before these would start falling. It looked intimidating and extremely exciting.

Andy, with the most experience on Scottish ice, was ushered forward to lead the first pitch, which he did but by the skin of his teeth. At one point, high above his last ice screw, his feet came off, and he dangled from the wrist loop of one axe. The pitch was hard, awkward and not entirely sound, involving sustained Scottish V.

I was anxious for my turn. The protection and climbing was reasonable to begin with, but soon I was on 80° thin water ice. After a vertical plaque of ice, I was obliged to move onto a glassy overhanging bulge, but as I moved up the overhang, I heard Andy below me: '... I said you've got two metres!'

I looked in disbelief at the blank wall of ice and the smooth rock wall and knew I had to go down. What annoyed me was that I had already climbed two overhanging sections faultlessly, but now my flow had been interrupted. At the top of the rope I felt lonely; the emptiness of millions of square miles of Greenland was weighing on my mind. Then it suddenly struck me that I was leading the hardest ice anyone had ever climbed in Greenland. I teetered, but now in a rather smug way. Then I found my saviour, a rock spike to my right after an interesting traverse through a snow bank.

We were tantalisingly close to the sunlit top of the cleft but conditions were deteriorating. The sun now glimpsed into the slot and some of the smaller icicles were breaking off. They made a frightening, unexpected sound as they bounced crazily down the falls. Richard and Rupert below us were not enjoying the result. A rather wet pitch of awkward mixed climbing (IV) led to the spacious summit of The Actress. I sat with my best friends and looked across the breathtaking view to the north beyond Sara's Peak and over the main ice cap.

On The Bishop, Richard and I climbed a long and complicated line which we called *Snakes and Ladders* due to the obligatory abseil from the suddenly impossible ridge into a steep gully on the face to the left, on which the rope had to be left in place to ensure an escape on the descent using prussik slings. Here too, the gully yielded a short, hard waterfall ice section, sadly in warmer conditions than I would have hoped, so that I was soaked to the skin whilst leading it. The reason why The Bishop is most memorable, however, is for the awe-inspiring view we got, across the gulf of the E face, of Rupert Finn and Sarah Walmsley completing their compelling route up the unbelievable pinnacle of the Bishop's Finger; this had looked totally unclimbable until views from other mountains such as Wildspur Peak suggested possible route options. As Richard and I progressed along the high summit ridge of the Bishop, two tiny figures struggled with the last pitch of hard rock climbing, disappeared for a while, and then, as we sat on the summit, reappeared and reached their dizzying goal, high above the surrounding glaciers and peaks hanging in space below us – a truly stomach-turning sight. The air was so still and clear that we could communicate with one another, our voices echoing hundreds of metres across the void.

The Lemon Mountains offer variety and incredible exploratory opportunities. Halfway through the trip, Rupert Gladstone and Tim Harvey took a break from technical mountaineering and spent three days skiing across the unknown ice cap summits to the east of the Fredericksborg Glacier. They reached two immense, dome-shaped tops in the orange light of the Arctic night, and slept during the day when the snow was softer. Tim's photos of his companion, sled-dragging in the vast loneliness of these unexplored glaciers, were later to prove simply breathtaking. On another day trip, we experienced wonderful, mixed 'credit card' ridges which looked as if they would disappear in a strong wind, followed by traditional style rock climbing up to the top of the Three Witches massif, another unclimbed group, to the main summit which we christened 'The Cauldron'. Dan and Tim climbed one of the more desolate technical peaks in the range, around the end of the ridge characterised by two peaks known as Mitivangkat ('The Breasts'). Lots of unstable snow made this a very long undertaking, as suggested in Dan's name for the route, *Not Enough Hours In A Trip* – actually a line from a Gomez song. The peak was eventually named 'The Serpent' owing to the distinctive 'forked tongue' gully on its eastern flank.

A word of warning though. Not all the rock is perfect in the Lemon Mountains. The team attempting the Nunnery was bombarded by stonefall, and Dan's helmet was all but destroyed. In another unpleasant incident during our cragging session on The Nob, I was nearly wiped out by a TV-sized block, which fell from the overhangs high above me and exploded on the slabs two metres away, miraculously leaving me unhurt, and only glancingly striking Sarah. My scream of fear was apparently audible back at base camp! The snow, too, needs to be treated with caution, as it often doesn't freeze on certain faces for days at a time. When five of us set out to climb The Nipple, we timed things badly, but got away with a 'hell for leather' ascent of the enormous snow face. In such circumstances, the customary thing to do is rest or even sleep on top, until the sun has swung round to leave your descent in the shade, and this proved to be a highly enjoyable and slightly surreal solution on many of the mountains we climbed. Apart from all of this, it has to be born in mind that this area is extremely isolated, being hundreds of kilometres from the nearest habitation or even the nearest expedition. Little things such as a broken sled or ski, and the most minor injuries, can have very serious consequences out here.

All too soon it was time to leave. Three productive weeks in the Lemon Mountains; financially we were a lot poorer, but had enjoyed the experience of a lifetime for anyone interested in adventure and mountaineering. The return to the Exit Glacier to the south of the Chisel Peaks was perhaps the most worrying and unpleasant part of the trip, as the gigantic Fredericksborg Glacier had lost most of its snow cover since we pulked up it, and in spite of doing the journey in the cold of the night, many of the snow bridges were too feeble to hold our weight, and certainly too weak to support our tortuously large sleds. We nearly lost people and pulks down crevasses, and only three of us possessed Snowsled pulks, which was the only model to stay upright in such difficult terrain. It was twelve hours of frustrating, roped skiing before we reached the Exit Glacier and could untie to complete the exhausting journey at our own pace, reaching the spot where the three-week-old tracks left by the Twin Otter ski plane were still visible in the blazing early morning light.

We knew that the plane was supposed to pick us up on 8 July, but in the course of the night of 7 July the weather started to deteriorate. With minimal food supplies, we would face a long, hungry wait if the weather prevented the Icelandair pilots from flying in. In the early afternoon, having packed up, it was so grey and cold that most of us unpacked our sleeping bags. I lay in mine, little waves of surface spindrift washing over me, with a resigned feeling of disappointment: I was sure that a multi-day storm was about to imprison us in Greenland. I had just fallen asleep when the alien drone of the Twin Otter was heard, followed almost immediately by the plane itself coming into view. Minutes later we were all aboard, and flying away from the Lemon Mountains through increasingly violent turbulence. I had one

last view of the mountains in which I had lived for the last few weeks, before the weather closed in behind us. Our expedition had been timed to perfection.

Summary The British Lemon Mountains Expedition (leader Richard Pash) made 18 new routes, including 12 first ascents, in June 1999. They reached this remote area by ski plane from Iceland, followed by a 25km ski tour to the Hedgehog Glacier.

Author's Note: I would like to thank Richard Pash for his help in writing this article.

ROUTES CLIMBED/ATTEMPTED

Name and route	Grade	Height	Position
The Schoolroom			
SE ridge from W facing gully	AD	≈1925mW	68°33'N 31°45'W
Coxcomb			
N face of E ridge	D+ (V–)	1970m	68°32'N 31°52'W
The Dome			
SW face	VS (4a 4b 4c 5a)	≈1550mW	68°33'N 31°47'W
Rampant Slab			
Wildspur Peak			
W ridge	D (IV)	≈1870mW	68°31'N 31°50'W
Blancmange			
Wrestling			
The Nob			
N face	VS (4c 4b 5a 4c)	≈1350mC	68°31'N 31°50'W
The Daft Side			
NE face	VS (4b 4c 4a 5a)	≈1350mC	
Poke in the hole			
NE face	HVS (5b A0 4a 5a	≈1350mC	
Toad in the hole			
Cauldron			
E facing gully to SE ridge	AD+ (IV)	≈1950mC	68°31'N 31°50'W
Slap my pitch up			
The Nunnery*:			
Workmate Buttress			
NW Spur, left buttress	D+		68°32'N 31°47'W
Hard as nails			

Name and route	Grade	Height	Position
Serpent			
Central gully, SW face	PD	≈1900mC	68°34'N 31°43'W
Not enough hours in a trip			
Nipple			
NE face	AD– (III)	≈2260mW	68°33'N 31°57'W
The Actress			
Central gully, S face	TD+ (V/6)	≈2300mW	68°35'N 31°48'W
Nice work, if you can get it			
The Nunnery*			
N facing gully, SE ridge	AD–		68°31'N 31°47'W
Headbanger			
Smurf			
Ski ascent from W	F–	≈2100mM	68°38'N 31°22'W
Jean-Luc			
Ski ascent from NE	F–	≈2100mM	68°34'N 31°31'W
The Slabs			
S face, lower buttress of Dome			
Sunshine Slab	HVS (5a 4b)	≈1300mC	68°33'N 31°47'W
No rest for the wicked	E2 (6a 5b) (5a 4b)	≈1300mC	
The Bishop			
SE face then SW face gully	D+ (IV/5)	≈2350mW	68°34'N 31°51'W
Snakes and ladders			
Bishop's Finger			
SW gully then corkscrew	TD– (5a A1)	≈2200mC	68°34'N 31°51'W
Lumps of it, around the back			
Golden Tower			
S ridge	D+ (VI–)	≈1950mC	68°35'N 31°50'W
Biggles flies again			

Note: Peak heights were estimated as follows: W = using Casio altitude watch, C = comparing to peaks of known height, M = estimated from map.
* = failed attempt