Alpine Club Notes



200. John Innerdale, *Rébuffat Route, Aiguille du Midi,* chromacolour, 32 x 45cm, 2008.

PAUL BRAITHWAITE

President's Valedictory Address

Read before the Alpine Club on 4 December 2010

The 2nd June 1953 was my seventh birthday. That morning at the school gates I was surprised to find that everyone was celebrating. Union Jacks were flying from the school tower and at assembly we were told the celebration was, of course, for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, together with the announcement that Mount Everest had been climbed by Sherpa Tenzing and Sir Edmund Hillary. From a 7-year-old's perspective all was well with the world; Britain doing what it does best.

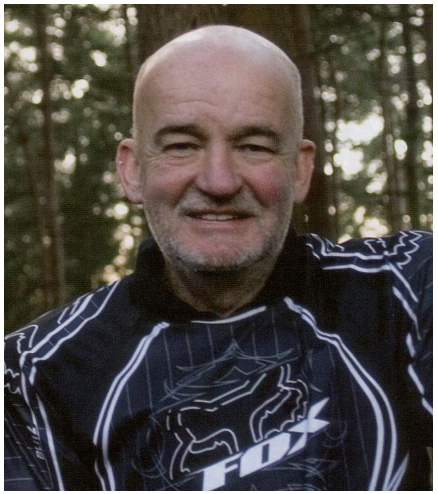
I vividly remember gazing at the photos of Tenzing on the summit that were splashed over all the newspapers. They left a lasting impression on me.

Everest had finally been climbed on 29 May, which coincidentally is Doug Scott's birthday. The day of the announcement was 2 June, my birthday. It seems ironic that 22 years later we would both be key players in the second British expedition to succeed on Everest, this time by the south-west face in 1975. Fate – or just plain old coincidence?

I started climbing in 1961 with school friends in the Chew Valley area close to home. The local gritstone outcrops were ideal for beginners but also provided really hard test pieces of the time. These were first climbed in the late 1940s and early '50s by legends Joe Brown and Don Whillans; *Hanging Crack*, *Overhanging Crack*, *The Trident*, *Blue Lights Crack*, etc. The route names alone would send shivers down your spine. Needless to say, we were content with the easier routes at that time. I couldn't imagine how anyone could climb those overhanging horrors and it wasn't until many years later that I managed them (with far better protection than my predecessors). We had our occasional mini-expeditions to the Peak District but our Sundays were mainly spent on local outcrops and moorland scrambles.

One day, friends and I took the train into Manchester to see a lecture by the great French mountaineer Lionel Terry. His presentation was about his successful climbs in Peru and Patagonia. It was truly amazing and completely blew our tiny minds. Vivid memories of the beautiful red granite, sparkling ice and pure white snow – we had never seen anything like it. A complete contrast to our rather drab moorland outcrops.

The following year, at the age of 18, a school friend and I set off in search of that red granite. We hitchhiked from our village of Springhead, near Oldham, complete with moleskin breeches, mountain boots and ice-axes perched on top of rucksacks. On arriving in Grindelwald, we spent some hard-earned cash on a one-day glacier climbing course and a few days later proceeded to follow a guided party up the west ridge of the Eiger. We applied the same



201. Paul (Tut) Braithwaite.

tactic on the Matterhorn's *Hörnli Ridge* a few days later, mindful of keeping a respectable distance from the guide and client in front. We did all this within our two-week annual summer holidays on about £30 each.

This early adventure to the Alps triggered more interest in me for what was happening in top flight climbing and I began to take note of the escapades of leading British mountaineers of the decade – Joe Brown, Don Whillans, Chris Bonington, Tom Patey, Hamish MacInnes, Ian Clough, Les Brown, John Streetly and Robin Smith. I vividly recall the iconic photo of Don high on the Central Pillar of Frêney, wearing a flat cap and plimsolls; reports of Brown and Whillans' route on the west face of the Blatière (outstanding for its time); Chris and team, on Nuptse; and how a few years earlier Joe Brown had led the route to the summit of Kangchenjunga utilising the new technique of hand-jamming. Finally, the climax of that period must be the *Eiger Direct*, first climbed in 1966 by an all-star cast and including a relatively new kid on the block, the young Dougal Haston. The press coverage was truly amazing, showing technical climbing of the very highest standard for the time, which the public could follow closely from the comfort of Kleine Scheidegg. Sadly, the tragic death of John Harlin tainted the success and in many ways marked the end of an era.

I desperately wanted to be involved at a high level, but where to start? In the mid '60s I spent a couple of summer holidays climbing in Chamonix as a complete novice, making all the usual early mistakes. Wrong place, wrong time, too much heavy gear and always being out of sync' with the weather – the characteristics of two-week holiday mountaineering trips! I was always left frustrated and so in 1968 decided to make some fundamental changes to my life. I packed in my job and teamed up with a friend of mine, tough Lancastrian Dave Barton. On his first visit to North Wales in 1967 Dave had made his mark by soloing *Cenotaph Corner* and *Cemetery Gates*. The liaison proved to be the start of a new era in my life and what was to become a lifestyle I could have hardly dreamed of at the time.

That year we acclimatised on the *Hörnli Ridge* and made our second route the *Bonatti Pillar* on the Dru. After a long, night-time slog from Chamonix to the foot of the pillar we realised that Dave had left his share of the climbing equipment, plus our stove and guidebook, at a rest stop on the glacier. Undeterred, off we set with two ropes, 10 karabiners and one set of tape étriers between us. Several pitches up Dave took a long fall and badly injured his hand. For Dave Barton there was no question of retreat. I would have to lead the rest of the route. After a cold, uncomfortable night sitting on a sloping ledge, we set off the following morning with Dave's hand in a poor state. I followed the steep crack lines on the crest of the pillar which lead the way to the summit of the Petit Dru and by late afternoon we arrived on the summit of the Grand Dru; then came the long descent back to Chamonix. It was a baptism by fire for the pair us and my first alpine *grande course*.

Over the following weeks, along with other mates Jack Firth and Pete Hays (the Burnley lads), we did a stack of good quality routes but the time came for them to leave at the end of their summer holiday. I stayed on climbing with different partners, and totted up over 15 big routes in the mountains, eight of which were considered *grandes courses*. The highlight of that year for me was an ascent of the Walker Spur with the American climber John Martz. 'Not bad for a first season,' I was told by Nick Estcourt who in the autumn of 1968 invited me to join the ACG. I could hardly believe it. The importance of the Alpine Climbing Group to young up-and-coming mountaineers of the time was immense. It felt very special to be accepted as a member of this élite group and it certainly put a spring in my stride, giving me just the sort of encouragement I needed. The vision of those founder members of the ACG back in 1952, which allowed the modern 'young guns' of the time to join the Alpine Club, played a huge part in the club's survival and future.

The following year, 1969, I returned to Chamonix with a regular climbing partner of mine – Richard McHardy. We did a range of classic hard rock and mixed routes including the first British ascent of the Croz Spur on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses. Climbing with Richard gave me some of my most memorable days on both British crags and the mountains of the Alps. He was a few years older than me, already established as one of Britain's best climbers, and so I was very much his apprentice in those early days. Both from similar backgrounds, we had to work hard for our free time weekends and trips to the Alps each year. Those halcyon days gave us the very best of times.

Some of the main players I climbed with on the British alpine scene in the late '60s and early '70s were Al and Aid Burgess, Alan Rouse, Rab Carrington, Bill O'Connor, Paul Nunn, Richard McHardy, Pete Minx, Dan Boon, Cliff Phillips and of course Eric Jones and Leo Dickinson, climber and photographer. Also the influence of *Mountain* magazine, at that time edited by Ken Wilson, should not be underestimated as it provided regular and up-to-date articles containing the very latest information from the world's leading mountaineers. Over the next few years, my visits to the Alps were interspersed with a series of small expeditions to the Caucasus, Baffin Island, South America, Peru and the Pamirs.

Late summer of 1974 saw me driving out to the Alps with Chris Bonington and Doug Scott; during that journey, to my surprise (on Doug's recommendation), Chris invited me to join his team for an attempt on Everest's south-west face in the autumn of 1975. Of course I accepted. Before leaving in July 1975 I spent four weeks in the Alps getting into shape mentally and physically, for the big adventure. The rest is history – a life changing experience for

me. A big thanks to Chris and Doug for giving me the opportunity to climb on Everest and to Nick for being a solid and dependable partner on our big day climbing the Rock Band.

The following summer, 1976, I joined a road trip to Alaska with the Burgess twins, Paul Moors and Don Whillans. Al, Aid, Paul and I did an alpine-style ascent of the classic Cassin Ridge on Denali over a period of six cold days. On the way down the normal route, we spent some time with two American climbers. One of them commented: 'So you're one of those Everest dudes are you?' Fame at last, I thought. I was somewhat taken aback and asked him which magazines he'd been reading. His reply was: 'None dude, you've got your name and expedition written in felt pen on your overgaiters!' The sort of reality check you need every now and again!

By the mid '70s and early '80s other top British mountaineers had emerged; the next generation if you like. Peter Boardman, Alex McIntyre, Joe Tasker, Dick Renshaw, Roger Baxter-Jones, Nick Colton, Andy Parkin and Mick Fowler, to name a few, were all quick to learn and took their skills and ambitions to the greater ranges, producing a string of impressive climbs, sadly not without heavy casualties.

Future generations of mountaineers can look forward to further advancements in technology with regard to clothing, more instant, accurate weather forecasting and increased understanding of the body's behaviour at altitude, along with activity-specific training and fitness regimes. I believe this will lead to cutting-edge mountaineers, who demonstrate the ever-necessary ability, desire and drive to climb bolder, faster and more efficiently in their constant search for exploration and adventure.

Below, in date order rather than preference, I have listed some routes and expeditions climbed with Alpine Club members.

North face of the Eiger with Pete Holden and Tom Leppart
The start of the 1971 season, a warm-up on the north-east face of Lyskamm then the north face of the Matterhorn. A few days later, a trip to Grindelwald. The weather still good, it was time to step out on the big one – the Eiger, possibly the greatest of all the European north faces and certainly the most formidable. Easy access from high grass pasture to the foot of the face and within an hour or so you're at the Swallow's Nest bivvi site.

From here you have to commit. I couldn't have been with a better team on this memorable climb. After the Eiger, Pete and Tom went on to complete all the six great north faces that year – the first Brits to do so I believe.

East Pillar of Mt Asgard, Baffin Island
1972 and my first trip with Doug Scott. The team included Paul Nunn, Dennis Hennek and I. Just the four of us in total isolation in the desolate Arctic landscape. A long approach walk with light rations and heavy sacks. Beautiful red granite; following crack lines and grooves to an overhanging headwall crack system which Dennis led in fine style. A truly great Arctic classic rock climb and an unforgettable expedition.

Everest south-west face, First Ascent
Everest 1975 – a life changing experience for me. Brilliant organisation by expedition leader Chris Bonington. A big team effort from all involved. The Everest story is well documented in the book and film *Everest the Hard Way*. The *après* Everest experience was an unforgettable few months. Lecture tours, invites to Buckingham Palace and Number 10 Downing Street, lavish awards ceremonies etc.

Mountaineering in Patagonia
My first trip to this region, in 1973, included the first attempt to climb Torre Egger. A tough uncompromising route, Martin Boysen and I were thwarted in the final few hundred feet due to high levels of difficulty and a constant barrage of ice falling from the summit mushrooms. After this disappointment we went on to make the first ascent of the Aig Innominata, a beautiful red granite spire in a wild, grandiose setting. The team included Martin Boysen, Eric Jones, Mick Coffey, Leo Dickinson and the great man himself, Don Whillans. American guest stars Rick Sylvester and Dan Reid were also in attendance.

Grandes Jorasses – Walker Spur (winter)
In February 1982, Roger Baxter-Jones and I did the first British winter ascent of the Walker after three attempts in previous years. The very best days of technical climbing imaginable, in full winter conditions. Those final few pitches to the summit in a heavy snowstorm as darkness approached at the end of day three added to the thrill. A makeshift bivvi on the summit, next morning the long descent to Courmayeur, the traditional hitch-hike through the Mont Blanc tunnel to Chamonix just in time for a late night party with live music in the Bar Nash. Life doesn't get better than this!

The crags of Britain and the mountains of Europe and the rest of the world have played an important part in my life for the past 50 years and I've had the good fortune to meet and climb with some of the most inspiring and extraordinary people imaginable. To Richard McHardy and Doug Scott I owe a great debt, for giving me the inspiration and direction I needed during my formative years. It's been a fascinating journey and the icing on the cake has been my time, over the past three years, as president of the Alpine Club. As my predecessors will know, it's rarely possible to realise all one's good intentions. 'Could haves, should haves' – there will always be those! I now relinquish the role of president to the capable hands of Mick Fowler and wish him well over the next three years.

Finally I would like to thank all the committee members, officers and volunteers of the club for their continued support. Without their loyal dedication and hard work, it's hard to imagine how the Alpine Club could maintain its position as such a highly respected organisation.

It's been a privilege!