
Memoir



'Everest and North Peak from Rongbuk', Elsie Dixon, watercolour, 35.5cm x 25.5cm, 1934?. (*Courtesy of Tony Astill*)

DENNIS GRAY
Joe Brown, Look Down

Memories of the Master



Balancing act. Joe Brown laybacks up a freestanding pole outside the Wall End Barn in 1951. (*George Kitchen collection*).

Joe Brown, look down from your pillar of fame, Almscliff tiger is my name.

Dennis Gray

*In Langdale's green valley, where the lads are so pally,
As soon as they learn you have food, fags, or dough.
The climber retires, to the barn of Zeke Myers,
Crying ackers and shekels, alive, alive oh!*

The Bradford Lads



A typical Wall End crew in 1951.
(Neville Drasdo collection)



Slim Sorrell picks up Joe Brown
and Pete Cargill at Wall End.
(George Kitchen collection)

The door of the Wall End Barn was pushed open. Outside it was raining heavily, as it had been all that day and the one preceding it. Into the warm fug, created by the number of bodies laying about gossiping, cooking and sleeping, stepped two strangers. One was like an ox, tall and well built, the other smaller but of what was then medium height, both of them dark haired, both carrying huge packs and dripping wet. One of the barn regulars ventured a 'hello', wondering where they had come from, imagining they had got so wet walking from Chapel Stile, where the midday bus turned off to Coniston.

'Scafell,' was the single-word reply from the laconic ox.

This was 1951 and I was 15 years old and, I guess, a bit of a pain, since instead of going to school I spent a lot of time in the Yorkshire Ramblers' library in Leeds, reading journals and climbing books. Intrigued, I began to question the newcomers as to what routes they had done as they unpacked: they had climbed on Esk Buttress and Scafell's East Buttress. This seemed incredible to me in the conditions, but my questioning was obviously so annoying that I was bundled physically into a bag, which was tied up with slings, carried outside and placed on top of a wall on the Blea Tarn Road. I was scared stiff but despite the sharp stones of the wall sticking into me I daren't move in case I fell off.

After what felt a long sentence my jailers reappeared and the ox demanded if I had learned to shut up. Through the rain and cold I admitted I had, at which they carried me back inside, cut me loose and even made me a brew. To be fair to my young self, I was climbing with Peter Greenwood, Harold Drasdo, and more infrequently at that time Arthur Dolphin and none of them would have had the temerity to be on Scafell in such weather. I subsequently learnt that the shorter of the two, Joe Brown, was the best bad-weather climber I have ever tied on with, and that his partner, the ox-like Slim Sorrell, was his perfect foil, being, as I have intimated above, a genuinely strong man. And thus began two friendships that lasted until their respective deaths, Joe in his bed at 89, Slim in a macabre sequence of events that ended with his murder at the age of 47.

A few weeks later I met Ronnie Moseley and Ray Greenall, also at Wall End. They told of the formation of a new climbing club, the Rock and Ice,

and that both Joe and Slim had joined. My loyalty was then to the Bradford Lads, just a loose-knit group of climbers who originally got together by visiting West Yorkshire outcrops; it was never a club but later I learned that was what Joe really believed in. It was his close friendships with many of those involved that meant he did sign up and with his membership the Rock and Ice became legendary, although within their ranks they had other climbers who were almost as adept.

I kept in touch with Ron and learnt that Slim was organising a Rock and Ice bus trip to Glencoe at Easter 1952, so I badgered him and was on board when it set off from the centre of Manchester late one evening. My seat companion was Don Whillans and I had never then met anyone so acerbic. I had met him once before as I jogged down the track having just completed my first route on Cloggy. 'Bloody stuck up,' was the epithet he hurled at me as I passed him, terrified by his aggression. I was pleased that more gentle souls were on board including Joe and his then girlfriend, Mavis Jolley. She had been to school with him, and she told me later he was known as 'that small Chinese boy'. Joe's schooling finished at 14 when the Nazis bombed the building flat and he was apprenticed to Archie, a one-man property-repairing business.

This must have been the slowest bus trip to ever brave Shap for it kept on breaking down and it took most of the four-day holiday to reach our objective. Brown and Whillans spent what time was left exploring the then unclimbed Creag a'Bhancair, whilst I joined in an ascent of the Clachaig Gully, which was rather more like swimming than rock climbing. An amusing aside: sometime after this I was climbing with Pat Walsh and we made the second ascent of *Carnivore* on Bhancair. I told Joe I had found the route 'bloody hard!'

'You must have been off form,' he replied. 'That crag's full of big holds.' Brown was not easily impressed.

By 1952 the Rock and Ice legend was the talk of the climbing world. There were no magazines, no internet; their standing spread by word of mouth, although some of the detail of their new routes was published rather belatedly in the long defunct BMC publication *Mountaineering*. It is a truth that after the Second World War it was the working-class climbers, mainly from the grime and poverty of the northern cities – the Creagh Dhu in Scotland, the Bradford Lads in the Lake District and the Rock and Ice in Wales – that dominated the sport. There had been working-class climbers before the war but they had been limited by a six-day working week or unemployment and lack of funding. The long-established clubs, with a mainly middle class membership looked askance at this flood of newcomers into a preserve they regarded as their own. That prompted this riposte from Slim Sorrell: 'When we met some of the members of established clubs at the outcrops they rather cold shouldered us until we started to climb, then they went all sheepish and moved away.'

Petrol rationing finished in 1950, although food was still couponed. I had found that as a schoolboy climber I was lucky hitch-hiking although there

were few vehicles on the road. I had kept in touch with the Rock and Ice and joined them for my first visit to the Roaches, where we stayed in a barn close by. On the first evening I joined in the 'rough' games session. Every member had a speciality but Joe was the only one who could 'bum skip', literally sitting on the floor and skipping with a short piece of rope. That caused much hilarity.

Next day I was collared by Brown to second him on the *Sloth*. Recent to my visit, he and Whillans had pioneered this fearsome roof climb on the upper tier of the crag. They had spun a coin for who should lead and despite Joe's double-headed penny (a joke around the belief we held at that time), Don won the honour of the first attempt on one of the most famous outcrop climbs of that era. He did not waste that opportunity, and after a bit of a struggle, moving out along the flakes under the roof, managed to reach some good jams, hung down and pulled up. Seconding, Joe hadn't found it technically too demanding, but it rather rankled with him and he wanted to experience an ascent on the lead.

Next morning I climbed up to the pedestal under the roof whilst my leader readied himself. I then securely belayed Joe as he climbed up to a feature we called the Cheese Block around which he draped a sling. He then climbed up and launched himself across the roof, somehow reached round to find good jams, hung down and then with a heave was up and out of sight. The rope went tight between us and I started to climb, easily at first up to the Cheese Block but then my problems started as the rope was pulling me off. Remember also that in those days we tied directly onto it.

Yet I recalled how on the first ascent, Don, being small, had managed to wedge himself across the roof, his body fitting into the flakes. Somehow I managed to do the same. My difficulty was how to extricate myself from this position but suddenly from below me on the pedestal I was offered these instructions: 'reach out your full length, there you will find a jug and stonking jams, lower onto your arms and pull up.' It was Joe offering this sage advice; he had obviously descended at speed down the easier route on our left and I followed his instructions although as I climbed the rope remained slack. I imagined somebody else was up there holding the rope and I kept shouting 'take in!'. On reaching the top I was more than surprised to find the rope securely belayed but nobody there. Later, when I tried to remonstrate with Joe, he answered cheerfully: 'you were firmly belayed and couldn't have fallen far!' Being a *senpai* of the sensei was a real apprenticeship.

That same year of 1954 I travelled to the Llanberis Pass where I found shelter in the road menders' hut, set under the Cromlech boulder. There was a mixed group, mainly members of the Rock and Ice, and we had the door of our dwelling firmly shut with a large boulder stopping anyone we did not wish to allow into our midst. Just a few weeks before the police had arrested one of the Rock and Ice for staying there and we didn't wish to suffer the same fate. The weather outside was abysmal and we spent most of that rainy, cold day in our sleeping bags, playing card games. About five o'clock there came a hammering on the door and the high-pitched voice we all



A Brown study. Joe bouldering at the Roaches while the Rock and Ice look on. Dennis Gray is centre, cheering him on.

recognised: 'Let us in!' Joe was with a companion we knew as 'GG' White. They were wet through and the chorus was:

'Where have you been?'

'Idwal.'

'What on earth did you do there?'

'Suicide Wall.'

'You must be joking.'

'No,' answered Brown. 'It was hard.'

'What was it like GG?'

'Bloody hard, like Joe says!'

I doubt whether any other leader then active would have climbed that route in such conditions.

Shortly after we moved into a club hut, because so many of us crowded into the road mender's cabin that it became untenable. Slim decided the time had come for an eating contest. At that time he was the instigator of the wilder activities of the club, the stone fights up and down the Pass, the wrestling matches, and the demonstrations of how to fall gracefully (one of which at Dovestones Quarry went wrong and he damaged a leg). It took most of the day to make a suitable stew in a baby's bath we had found but initially Slim wouldn't let me take part, being too young and small. After an intercession from Joe I was allowed under sufferance to join the others and

repaid Joe's faith in me by winning the competition, eating several bowls of stew, which was delicious.

Having reached the age of 18 I had to register for national service. I could have been deferred but the head of the printing college in Leeds advised I should get it over and then return to studying. I had strong views about this and registered as a non-combatant but was delighted when I was posted to the Army Pay Office on Manchester's Stockport Road. I lived in a civilian billet on Brynton Road, which led onto Dickenson Road where Joe then lived at his mother's. My very first weekend there we all went to High Tor pegging, the weekend after to Stanage, the weekend after that Wimberry and then up to Yellowsacks, followed by climbs further afield in Wales, the Lakes and Scotland.

Most of these trips were in the cold winter of 1954. I was used to roughing it with the Bradford Lads but this was a different world of dossing: in caves, at the foot of crags, in broken-down shooting cabins. Joe seemed inured to the cold and as I was by then his gentleman's gentleman, as long as he (actually his mother) provided good food to cook each weekend, I dared not complain but secretly planned as soon as I was able to buy a four-seasons sleeping bag: a rather wild dream given I only received 28 shillings each week from the army.

The Rock and Ice were the most together of any climbing club at that time. Mid week they would meet at Ron's parents house one night, the Palais at Levenshulme on another, and the YMCA in the city centre to finalise the venue they would meet up the following evening on the Thursday night. They drank gallons of tea, talked climbing and climbers, and I recall only Ray Greenall ever danced at the Palais. In between times Joe persuaded me to go twice to see Audie Murphy in *Ride Clear of Diablo*. He was a real fan of Westerns and his reading was dominated by Oliver Strange's 'Sudden' novels.

I used to attend the club's venues nearly always late although nobody ever asked why. I was a member of the Manchester Athletic Club and would first go to the Fallowfield track. When Joe returned from the successful ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1955 I ran into him in my running strip in Longsight as I headed home to change.

'What is a gentleman's gentleman doing running around like he's being chased by the police?'

'I have just met the greatest athlete in the world,' I confessed. 'Emil Zatopek. At the Olympic Games he won the 5,000m, 10,000m and the marathon. I doubt anyone will ever equal that.' But Joe remained unimpressed.

It was about that time that Archie retired through ill health. Joe asked me one day to give him a hand as he had now inherited the business. Our task was to break up a large concrete floor for which Joe used brute force and a sledgehammer. I kept having a go with another sledgehammer but after a few minutes was kyboshed and relegated to tea boy. It made me think: I could run many miles without tiring but Joe's fitness was of another kind. Watching with a sledgehammer, I realised he was super-fit; his work had given him an outstanding physique for climbing.

It was also around this time that some members of the group acquired nicknames. Joe became 'The Baron'. Ray Greenall was 'Anderl the Brew' because he looked a bit like Anderl Heckmair and could make a brew whatever the conditions. Whillans became 'The Villain'. The most inspired I think was 'Mortimer'. Joe Brown and Joe Smith had been climbing on High Tor, made illegal by the local council in the early 1950s for some reason unknown to us. Waiting at the top for them to finish was the police.

'What are your names?'

'Joe Brown and Joe Smith.'

The copper in charge rolled his eyes. 'Can't you do better than that?'

It took quite some time before they established they were telling the truth and were then free to go with a caution. In order to avoid any future confusion, and two Joes being one too many, Joe Smith became 'Mortimer', swiftly edited down to 'Morty'.

My two years in Manchester ended in 1956 but I stayed in touch with my friends there. In West Yorkshire, most of the Bradford Lads had moved away, taking advantage of the opening up of higher education. The only one remaining active in the region was the gentle giant John Ramsden. One weekend at Froggatt Edge we met Peter Biven, then from Leicester. He told of the magic land of Cornwall and its granite sea cliffs, of which Trevor Peck and he were pioneers. And so that summer, Ram and I decided to check this out. The ride down on his Royal Enfield Bullet motorbike was exciting and we climbed at Bosigran, Chair Ladder and Sennen. We saw no other climbers during the week we were there, although we did meet a very old A W Andrews, who could justly claim to be the original Cornwall sea-cliff pioneer. I reported all this to my Rock and Ice friends and in 1957 a large number of the membership decided to holiday down in the south-west, although Whillans, who was off to the Himalaya, chided that we should wait to visit such when we were 'old and past it.'

In 1957, Joe married Valerie Gray, a teacher and climber from Blackburn. Slim was their best man. As part of this change of status they joined the Cornish Riviera team. By that time they travelled in an Austin A35 van while I and my passengers drove an A40. They had a hunting horn and we had a bugle and as we passed each other we would give a blast on these instruments. To see the Rock and Ice at the seaside was a revelation. We had a dinghy and Joe exhibited his enthusiasm for fishing. We'd heard that off the coast was a basking shark and we set out to catch it. We spent several hours at sea, all of us were sick and we never caught the shark but we did a lot of climbing on the sea cliffs and all returned with happy memories of cream teas and superb granite.

A planned visit to the Alps in 1958 was almost undone by one of our games. Joe, Morty and I had been climbing on Clogwyn y Grochan and Joe challenged us to a race back to the tents when we had finished for the day. The descent was short but steep and we were all going hell for leather when Brown took a screamer. Turning back I saw him laid out in agony on the scree. Morty and I scrambled back up to him and pulled him back up to his feet,



The Rock and Ice, with Joe Brown turned towards Dennis Gray.

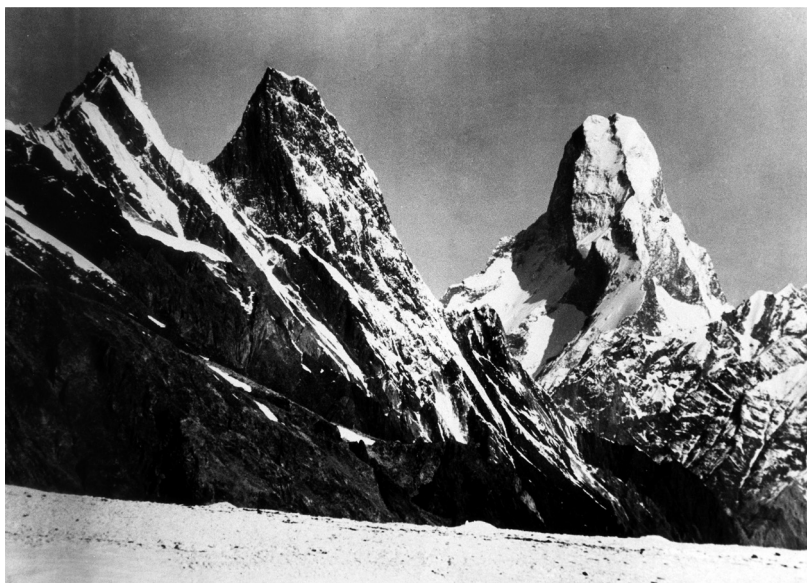
only to find he couldn't move unaided. We helped him down to the tents and he decided he had to go to hospital. But there was a problem. Neither Val nor Joe would countenance going to Bangor accident and emergency, which had a bad reputation amongst climbers at that time. So we laid Joe full length in the back of my van and Val followed driving their A35, Morty directing me to Withington Hospital, Manchester, where we discovered Joe had fractured his leg. I don't know why but Joe seemed to have a blind spot about running; he even had the confidence one weekend to challenge Eric Beard, one of the greatest fell-runners of his or any era, to a race up Catbells in Borrowdale. Beardie gave him a head start of half the fell but still beat him to the summit.

Joe made a quick recovery despite him limping badly on occasion and our plans for the Alps were still on. Val, Morty and I drove the A35 to the coast and left the car there, catching first the ferry then trains to Chamonix. Whilans was already there when we arrived, recovering from an epic ascent of the *Bonatti* on the south-west pillar of the Dru. For our first climb, Joe decided we – Morty, Joe and me – would ascend the north face of the Charmoz but though we made ready to start the weather turned against us. Back in the woods of the Biolay campsite, I shared a tent with Joe, Val having gone off on a journey with some French friends. All around us were British climbers, including other Rock and Ice members. We were our usual messy crowd and I remember one day being embarrassed when some of the Chamonix guides, Lionel Terray among them, visited us. They were dressed immaculately and had come to pay their respects to Joe Brown, leader of the Fissure Brown on his 1954 new route on the west face of the Blatière, the hardest free pitch in the western Alps. I used my schoolboy French to translate.

Don having recovered, he joined Joe and Morty for an ascent of the west face of the Petites Jorasses, which I backed off feeling ill. Down in Chamonix



Joe Brown leading the crack high on Kangchenjunga in 1955, photographed by George Band. (*AC Photo Library*)



Muztagh Tower in the Karakoram, photographed by Vittorio Sella. (AC Photo Library)

I met Eric Beard who had hitched there by himself and went back to the woodcutter's hut, the famous Chalet Austria, which we made our base. He seconded me on an ascent of the *Ménégaux* on the Aiguille de l'M. We then met up with Whillans, Morty and Brown, I to climb the east face of the Capucin with Don, Morty and Joe the Dru via the *Bonatti Pillar*. The weather intervened and although Whillans and I succeeded we ended with a forced bivouac on our descent, whilst Joe and Morty had a less successful outing on the Dru.

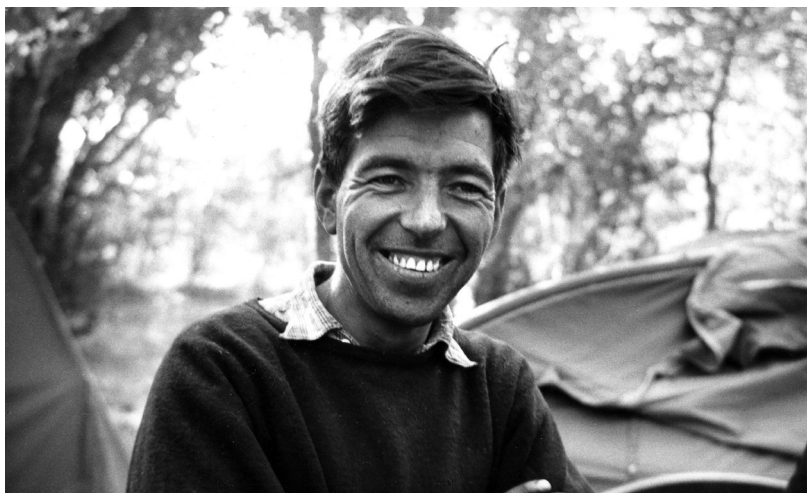
Whilst we were in Chamonix we read that the Rock and Ice was to be disbanded. The reason, we learned, was that those currently the club's officers could not find others willing to take over these positions. Whillans was furious at this news; Joe was his usual sanguine self. I had never formally joined, just attended. But the club's demise marked seven years of achievement and a few years later, when I lived in Derby, Nat Allen and I reformed the club.

On the train coming home was in fact the only time I ever saw Joe lose it. There were no seats available so we were sitting in the corridor on our gear. A ticket inspector came down the train and Joe stood up to show him Val's and his ticket, at which the official called him something unprintable, grabbed his gear and threw it as far as he could. The next we knew, Brown had grabbed him and pushed him up against a compartment door. The day was saved by Val with her excellent French. She explained we were 'les alpinistes' on our way home from the Mont Blanc range, which is why we had so much equipment with us. We were not the idle dossers the inspector had believed us to be.

In 1959 Joe had his first taste of a professional film assignment, taking the role of climbing stand-in for the lead actor in *Hazard*, a steel-industry safety film being shot in the Dolomites. The director was Tom Stobart, who had made the successful 1953 Everest film. I received a message that if I managed to get out to the Dolomites I too could find work on the production. Deciding I had gone as far as I could working for a printer and publisher in Leeds, I recruited Eric Beard, Brian Fuller and Eric Metcalf to travel out with me in my van to share the cost and we met up with the film crew in Cortina. We spent over a month working on *Hazard*, and it was truly an education, mainly on how slow the filming process really is. It seemed that a few minutes of shooting took many hours of preparation. None of the 'stars' were climbers but Joe was in his element doubling as the hero, the beginning of his successful film and television work.

By 1960 I was administering a fine-art plate-gravure unit for one of the biggest printers in the UK. The unit was based in Derby. Joe contacted me in the spring to see if I would accompany him on a trip back to the Dolomites and Chamonix? Of course I would but the longest I could be away would be three weeks. That seemed ideal to Joe and our driver Claude Davies who was happy to go along for the drive. There was, however, a snag. Joe had developed a stomach ulcer (too many bacon butties), and so for the early part of our stay in the Dolomites we lived on Ovaltine and milk. So the mantra was start climbing late and finish early. Nevertheless we climbed half a dozen routes, including the *Spigolo Giallo*, the north face of the Cima Grande and the *Pilastro de Rozes* on the Tofana but had a rather gruesome time on the Civetta. We had not then started wearing crash helmets, and quite a way up the north-west face some stones fell, one of which hit Joe on his head while he was leading. His flat cap offered no real protection but for some reason he just kept on climbing and must have run out at least 300 feet of rope. When I finally joined him his face was covered in blood. The last sections of the climb seemed harder than we expected, but I think it was the conditions rather than the route.

Setting off for the western Alps I had the only disagreement I ever had with Brown. I suggested we went via the Eiger north face but he made it plain he wasn't interested and that it wasn't worth wasting our time on such a diversion. Arriving in Chamonix we were met with the news that it was the worst season ever and the snow level was down below Montenvers. We met up with Robin Smith and Dougal Haston and agreed that during the first break in weather we would try the unclimbed south face of the Fou. When it finally came, the four of us set out for the Envers des Aiguilles hut the very next day. Just to reach the refuge was a challenging climb in itself; the slabs leading up to it were covered in ice and snow and required an axe and crampons. I would have liked a rope but dare not ask this sort of company for one. Robin burnt us off as he started to sing, illustrating he had plenty of puff left. We were the first climbers at the hut for days and were away before light next morning. The way to the south face is via a couloir and we cowered on its left side as soon as we entered it as first rocks and then snow whistled down.

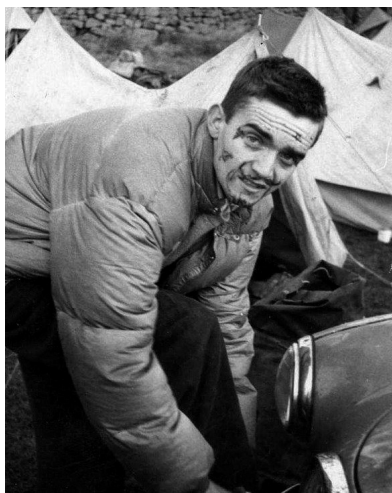


Joe Brown in the Caucasus in 1962. Dennis Gray (opposite) at work on his Austin A40. (AC Photo Library/Dennis Gray)

'I'm going down,' I decided. 'This is suicide.' And as it was now getting light, that's exactly what I did. Before I'd reached the hut it had started first to hail, then snow. I had just snuggled down in a pile of blankets when the others came clattering back to join me. Retreating to Montenvers that day we were in a mood of high spirits, jollity and grip. Back at the Biolay we packed up and set off with Claude driving us home in style.

Joe stopped being a property repairer in 1961 to become an outdoor pursuits instructor and he and Val moved to live in a flat at the Whitehall Centre in Derbyshire. He became keen on canoeing and for some reason contacted me to make a trip with him down the Derwent. I was an absolute duffer at canoeing but agreed. All went well till we hit some faster-flowing water and Brown, who by then who saw himself as an expert, ran flat out into a bridge support. I could feel the 'bang' and followed on as carefully as I could to avoid the obstacle. When we finished, Joe had trouble getting out of his canoe; he had hurt his back in the collision. I phoned the next day to see if he was all right but Val answered. Joe had gone to hospital where the medics had to pass him through the window because his body had stiffened so badly they couldn't get him through the doorway. Typically, he was soon out and about again.

In 1966 Val and Joe moved to Llanberis to open his shop in its main street. One of the more lurid tabloids ran the headline 'Human Fly moves to Wales!' so I sent a card addressed simply to the 'Human Fly, Llanberis'. Of course, it reached him. In April 1966 the BBC had made their famous live broadcast of Joe and an all-star cast climbing Red Wall at Gogarth, so amusingly caricatured by Tom Patey in his article 'The Greatest Show on Earth'. I was a porter and part of the rigging team. In 1967, when ITV's World of Sport got in on the act with a broadcast from Tremadog,



Brown once again showed his calmness under media pressure whilst climbing *Vector*. I was in charge of recruiting the team of climbers who made this possible and was responsible for the camera operator's security. A memento I have of this is Joe singing his party piece 'The Sergeant Major' at the post-event party, recorded by producer Ned Kelly.

After the *Vector* climb Joe and I went our separate ways but we remained close friends. I visited him a few days before he passed away. We both agreed we had been so lucky, having lived the lives we had, starting out in the late 1940s. Joe

was the outstanding climber of my generation and his record speaks for itself with over 600 new routes in the UK and so many first ascents abroad, especially Kangchenjunga, the Muztagh Tower and the Trango Tower. At the age 60 he was still able to lead *Suicide Wall* once again and summit Cho Oyu. Nobody I know remained active so long. But above all this he was good company. When I was with him we laughed a lot, except when we had to be serious. Fame never really meant much to him and he remained the same person as when I first met him as a 15-year-old in the Wall End Barn.