

THE ALPS

GMC interest in the Alps began in July 1969 when the team of Maurice Ewing, Nick Parry, Fred Heywood and Alan Rouse travelled to Chamonix. Nick Parry again:

"We had no idea what to expect and took all our food with us in tins. We camped in squalor at the Biolay, until the Gendarmerie came and closed it down for public health reasons. We were up in the mountains at the time and came back to find a notice pinned to the tent. After that, we made the shepherd's hut at Montenvers our base."

Alan and Fred started with the Menegaux Route on the Aiguilles, taking ten hours instead of the guidebook six, while Maurice and Nick did the NNE ridge. Next they all climbed the Requin from the Mer de Glace side by different routes. Shortly after this there was an appalling tragedy:

"On the way up the Nantillons Glacier to climb the Charmoz-Grepon we heard a shout and saw a party of English lads, with whom we had shared the hut the night before, fall from the Spencer Couloir. We were the first on the scene but despite numerous attempts were unable to reach them where they hung on the rock face. Two were dead but the third hung upside down alive and bleeding. He died later after the rescue team arrived."

The GMC party were deeply affected by this and although some more climbing was done, their hearts were not really in it. They were, however, impressed with the Alpine scene.

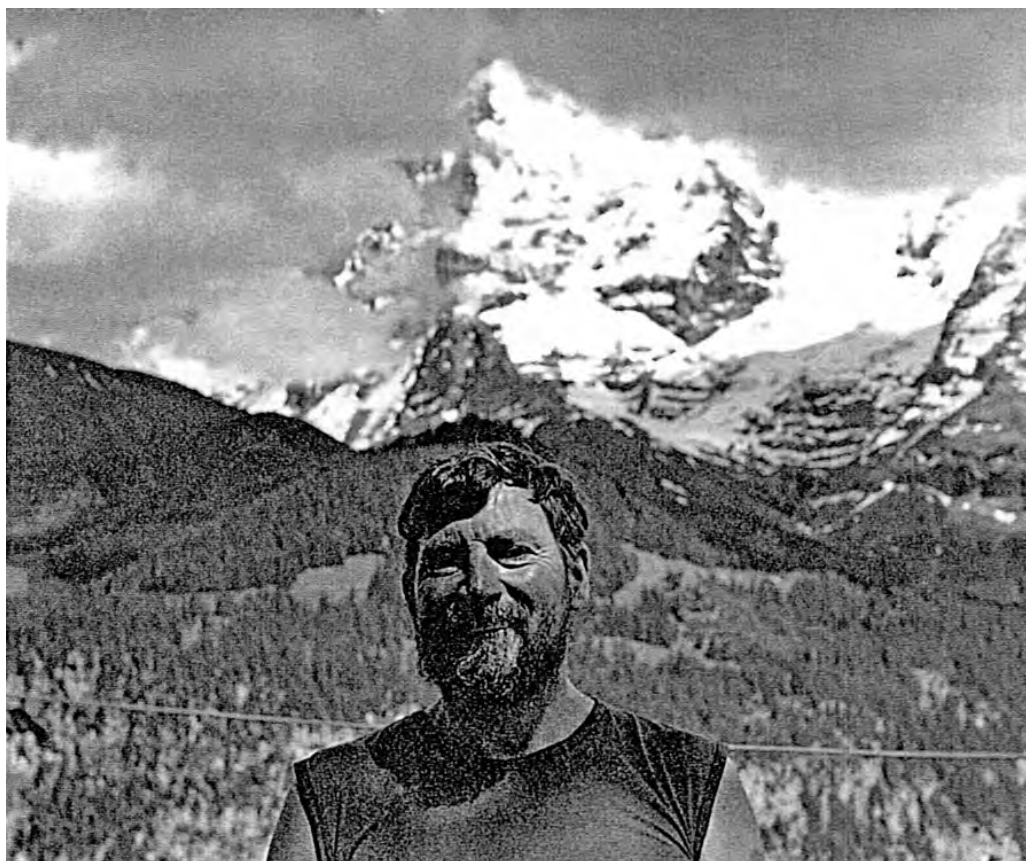
In 1970 Alan Rouse had been accepted for Cambridge. He and Fred had become apprenticed to Minx & Molyneux, and, aware that with Leo Dickinson they had plans to film an ascent of the Eigerwand, Al thought it would be a good "wheeze" to get there first. However, there was no sign of Leo and the film stars and Fred had a job to get back to. They did the Eiger via the Mitteleggi Ridge and down the West Flank, followed by an attempt on the Nordwand:

"The first pitches were quite easy in the late afternoon. We had decided to climb to the first ice field in the evening, bivouac at the Swallows Nest then up early to get to the Traverse of the Gods by nightfall. This, we thought, would avoid Harrer's stonefall. We were wrong, very wrong. The fixed rope on the Hinterstoiser was very fragile-looking and amid a continuous bombardment of stone chippings the HVS traverse was hairy. Epics on the Difficult Crack in semi-darkness led to an appraisal of our situation and the stores."

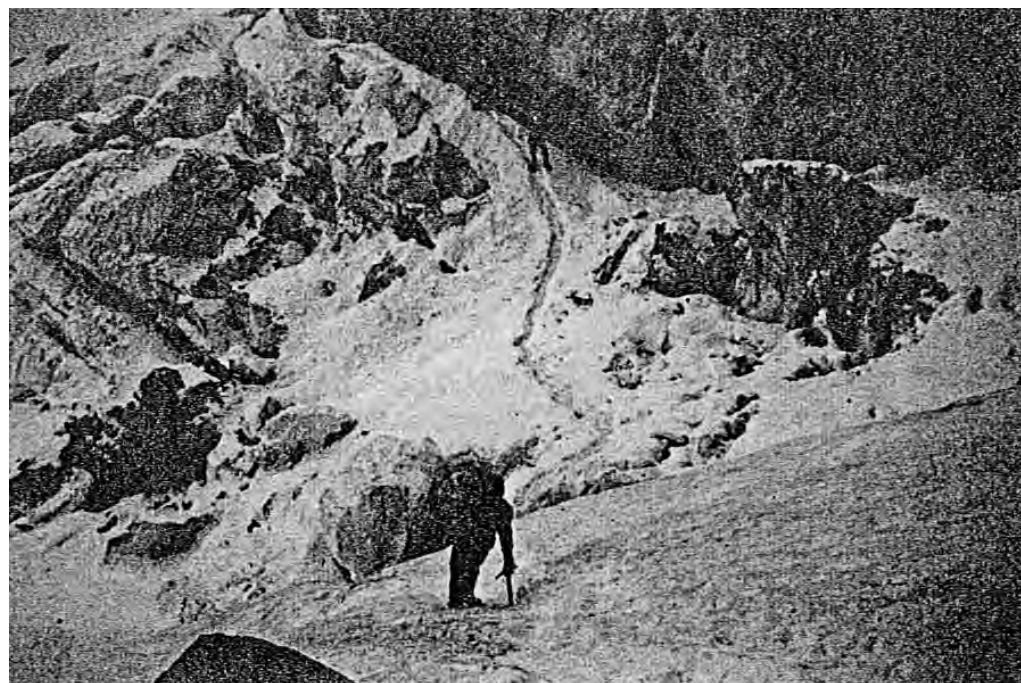
The next day, after a start in the semi-darkness, the stonefall problem returned, well before the sun was even on the face:

"When a stone the size of a London taxi whooshed by we held a council of war, then fled!"

The group then headed for the French Alps and on to the Grandes Jorasses, where they became involved in a ferocious storm that caused many deaths in the area. Al Rouse and Geoff Birtles (compiler of "A Mountaineer's Life") were also involved, although fortunately they were well into their descent off the Blaitiere. Even so, Geoff lost sight of Alan and arrived at the Bar Nash to confess he had no idea of where Alan was. In fact he turned up the next morning, much to everyone's relief. They heard later that between thirty and forty deaths had been attributed to the storm, fifteen climbers being killed by lightning on Mt Blanc alone.



Fred Heywood, with the Eiger in the background



Early days in the Alps (Photos: Fred Heywood)

In "A Mountaineer's Life" Alan Rouse himself writes of his solo epic on the south face of the Fou in 1971 (from Chapter Five, although the article originally appeared in the 1972 Cambridge University M.C. Journal):

"I plodded up the Mer de Glace in the fading light. A heavy pack was my only companion and hardly a commendable one at that."

Having thrown out the stove in Chamonix to save weight he invested in a final brew at the Envers hut before stumbling through endless crevasses on a moonless night to the entrance to a couloir. There followed some desperate climbing, in the dark, with his light going out from time to time until:

"Grotty chimneys led to a pleasing delicate wall and the foot of the route proper. it was very hot already despite only being 8 a.m. but I felt too committed to think about retreat."

Later:

"The ledge was none too comfortable to sleep on and after my initial tiredness had worn off I tied the no.2 rope on to the end of the other rope and abseiled down to its extremity to look for water. I penduled back and forth in the pitch dark, eventually finding a drip, so I banged a peg in and hung from it. Twenty minutes produced about a pint so I set off up the rope. By the time I had arrived back at the bivvy ledge it was nearly light, so I collected the gear and continued jumaring back up to the long diagonal crack"

And later still, having stood on a rump and caused a peg to disengage:

"My foot seemed to be growing out of my leg at a rather peculiar angle. I decided my ankle was broken. Some English lads were doing the East face of the Pointe de Lepiney and I asked them reluctantly to get a rescue."

Multiple abseils followed until:

"Diagonal abseils on snow finally took me to the rock walls of the couloir. Axe in, kick a step, axe in further over, axe out, 50ft pendule, axe in, kick a step; this will definitely be my last climb. Near the bottom of the couloir the rescuers reached me and I relaxed, glad to be alive."

In November the following year Alan found himself lecturing at a BMC conference in Manchester on "The Challenge of Solo Climbing"; he had to be assisted on to the stage due to a very large plaster, the result of an epic on Half-Dome.

In 1972 Fred Heywood and Maurice Ewing were in the Alps with Brian Daynes, a British teacher based in Grenoble. Brian introduced Fred to a French friend as "a top-class ice climber". During an ascent of the south face of the Chardonnet the Anglo-French combination fell into a crevasse and got stuck; Fred and Maurice thought better of it! The Club commissioned a picture of the Chardonnet (taken from one of Fred's slides) for his wedding to Dot in 1973.

There were trips to the Alps (Chamonix) every year from 1969 to 1973, but the first one to be documented in a Club magazine was that in the summer of 1973. Writing in Magazine number one (September 1973), Chris Hall reported on the Chamonix meet:

"This year saw a record attendance at that well-known five-star residence, Snell's Field - fourteen at its peak to be exact. Well done, particularly those members who managed to avoid

the beri beri that was prevalent on the campsite. Those who forgot their wetsuits (Shame on you!) will no doubt recall the excellent drainage facilities on the field which on all but a few occasions enabled one to wallow outside one's own tent"

(It so happens that the Gilberts, with Hugh Nettleton and Pete Payne, were also camped on Snell's Field, on and off for a period of six weeks, in the summer of '73. No known contact was made with the GMC party and it was another six years before Bryan & Mike joined the Club. This only came to light when Mike was asked to comment on a draft of this chapter. As a matter of interest, routes done included the Spencer Couloir, Aiguille de Blaitiere and the Bossons Ridge on Mt. Blanc.)

After six days of continuous rain two of the party headed for home; the rest stuck it out and were rewarded by a party of two (Alan Cowderoy and John Hall) being able to traverse the Chardonnet by the Forbes Arete and the West Face, the first ascent for eighteen days. At the same time the Aiguille de Tour was climbed "*although Mrs Beamer's beri beri got the better of her a mere five hundred feet from the summit*".

Let Gill speak for herself (from magazine no.2, January 1974):

"I awoke to the sound of stifled movements as Alan Cowderoy and John Hall belatedly collected their gear together before leaving the Albert Premiere Hut to ascend the Forbes arete of the Aiguille du Chardonnet. John, Les and I followed them into the kitchen a few minutes later, but we were delayed by John's attempt to train a French lady with some boxes full of food and stoves, We brewed tea, sweetened with conny-onny, and finally left the hut some twenty minutes after the others.

The frozen stillness, impressive as it was, did not make us pause. It was not as cold as I had expected and after stumbling among the boulders on the edge of the Glacier du Tour I discarded my cagoule. We crossed a lateral moraine and set off up the glacier proper following tracks made the previous day in soft snow which appeared to lead towards the Col de Purtscheller. At this stage I felt no excitement; this was my first Alpine holiday, my first time on a glacier, but my mind seemed blank. Remorseless plodding was the order of the day; even for our comparatively short route time was everything. I glanced behind once or twice to see, about half a mile away, a series of tiny lights as other people made their slow trek up the glacier. As we made the final steep ascent to the col the sky lightened. To the south the Ice Boss on the Chardonnet glowed richly in the first sunlight. At last, scrambling up between enormous rocks; we reached the col, stepping into warm and brilliant sunlight. The dazzling white of the snow plateau provided the foreground to a magnificent panorama of the Swiss Alps.

We drank some water and continued along the edge of the plateau below warmly coloured rock aretes and jagged peaks of which the Aiguille de Tour was the major one. I was still suffering from symptoms of beri-beri and did not make the summit. I waited for the others at the foot of a snow gully. Ten minutes later myriads of Germans and French appeared at the col and were soon swarming about the nearby summits. I festered on. At 8a.m we started down; the sun would already be melting the snow on the glacier. We hastened back to the col and descended to the glacier, in deep shadow but with a glorious blue sky above.

We wondered how Alan and John were faring on the Chardonnet. We couldn't see them although some tracks were visible on the Ice Boss. With some trepidation we crossed the glacier and, after a quick brew at the hut, returned down the steep moraine then along the

winding track, the Chamonix valley still in shadow below us. Down there the day was only just beginning."

No account of the early Alpine trips would be complete without Gill's informative account of *"the dangers and horrors of les cabinets de toilettes et les pissoirs"*, an entertaining account of the perils of French toilet facilities, both on and off trains (see Magazine no.2).

There must have been other Alpine trips in the meantime but the next documented trip came in summer 1986, when, in Gwydyr 21 (1988, magazine no.6), the newly-arrived Christine Davies reported on her ascent of Mt. Blanc. with two friends, Steve & Gloria:

"Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Western Europe. 1986 was the bicentenary of the first ascent and wouldn't it be great if we could do it in this year of all years."

Steve was an experienced Alpine walker and knew all about preparation for big mountains. The rules were strict:

"No late night drinking in the many bars, no lie-ins, no browsing through gift shops in this 'tourist centre'. For us it was early starts, doing progressively longer walks at higher altitudes".

After a weeks training, including spending three days sleeping at 10,000ft, the trio headed for the Goûter Hut (3,817m) to spend the night before the final assault. After a 2am start and a long slog up the Dome du Goûter they arrived at the Vallot Hut (4,362m) and waited for the dawn:

"By this time I was beginning to wonder what on earth I was doing up here but with daybreak the full splendour of the mountain was revealed and we set off again".

They reached the summit ridge:

"The ridge was narrow and very exposed and the wind was quite alarmingly strong. We were glad of our ice axes which gave us the confidence to proceed."

Finally:

"The view from the summit was magnificent, with spectacular panoramic views. Having paused for only a short time to survey the view we were aware of the sudden loss of body temperature and realised it was necessary for us to begin the descent."

In 1988 Mal Lamb, Lin Gillison, Christine and Huxley set off for Lauterbrunnen in Mal's Fiat Strada, which was so full it was almost egg-shaped, They spent two weeks at Camping Breithorn in the Lauterbrunnen Valley and did things like the Schilthorn, the Faulhorn and the Schwarzhorn, peaks in the plus or minus 9,000ft range, a sort of large-scale version of British hill-walking and most enjoyable too.

The next year saw Mal, Ronnie and Huxley return to the Oberland, this time in the luxury of two cars, with plans to do the Finsteraarhorn. Heavy snowfall intervened so the trio contented themselves with pottering around on the Aletsch Glacier and spending the night at the Monchjoch Hut, which was unbelievably crowded. They had two weeks of excellent walking, enlivened by a Huxley attempt to walk from Lauterbrunnen to Murren via the Soustal and back over the Schilthorn. The time needed for this was, to say the least, underestimated, and come late afternoon he found himself crossing huge snowfields, interspersed with large boulders, at

the back of the Schilthorn. Arriving at the col, he took one look at the cliff up which the "path" went to the Schilthorn and thought "no way!". Retreating over the difficult ground he had just crossed was equally unattractive so he chose just to descend to avoid possible benightment and ended up at Kiental, some ten miles west of the Lauterbrunnen valley. This is what you get for applying a North Wales scale to this much bigger landscape. Anyway, it cost him £48 (believed to be a Club record) for a taxi back to Lauterbrunnen, having of course alerted an anxious Ronnie & Mal on arrival at Kiental.

In 1990, a large group including Christine & Geoff Rowlands, Bill Kelly, Mal Bonner, Nuala Mulholland, Doug & Mary (friends from Australia) and Anne & Mike Borland, headed for the Oberland. Events included a twenty-four hour epic on the Wetterhorn, with only Mal Bonner making the summit; and Geoff, Billy and Mike Borland being struck by lightning on their way down the Monch. The Faulhorn and the Schilthorn were also climbed.

Also in 1990 Mal and Ronnie decided to go on a two-week Alpine course that would, weather permitting, include an ascent of Mt Blanc. The training included ascents of Mt Blanc du Tacul and the Cosmiques Arete on the Aiguilles du Midi. This was a great success, and at 08.53 on the morning of 13th September the group duly summited out, Ronnie being the only woman in the party.

1991 saw the team of Ronnie, Mal, Bill Sutherland and Dave Gray head for northern Italy and the peak of Gran Paradiso (4,061m). Their arrival in the area was not auspicious. Mal wrote in the 25th Anniversary Magazine (no.9) :

"The whole area was wreathed in mist with not a mountain in sight. On visiting the shop to buy food we were confronted by empty shelves with the exception of numerous bags of pasta, a huge salami sausage, and various cans of unidentifiable vegetables. The one consolation was what appeared to be endless supplies of Chianti."

On the third day the weather cleared and the group climbed up to the Vittorio Emanuele hut where Mr Lamb came under some criticism for his cooking. He vainly pointed out *"that altitude dulls the brain thus rendering the instructions on the packet illegible."*

An early start saw the team on the somewhat crowded summit in good time and they enjoyed good views of Mont Blanc, the Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn.

In August of the same year Dave Gray did the Tour de Mont Blanc as a solo backpack, taking eleven days in good weather.

1992 was of course occupied by the Silver Jubilee trip to the Himalaya (see elsewhere).

In April 1993 Roger Hughes finally completed, at his third attempt, the Haute Route, the classic 100-mile ski expedition from Chamonix to Zermatt.

1993, saw a team going to the Dauphine (Parc des Ecrins) which included a four-day backpack on the GR54 from Chambran to Besse (Chris, Geoff, Andy Pierce, Andy Williams) and the ascent of the Aiguille de Dibona. The group were joined by Mike and Anne Borland on the second week of their honeymoon.

Also in 1993, Mike Gilbert, returning to the Alps after a break of sixteen years, drove to the Oberland with Hugh Nettleton to join the annual Alpine Club meet. Poor conditions dictated easier routes: the first ascent of the season of the Weissefrau was made (on 26th July!); the



On the Aletsch Glacier: Mal Lamb



On the Aletsch Glacier: Ronnie Waters and Mal Lamb

Jungfrau was climbed on 1st August, only a week after its first ascent of the season; and ascents were also made of the Monch, the Wetterhorn (in thick mist) and the Dossenhorn.

1994 saw a return by a large group to the Bernese Oberland (Lauterbrunnen). This was a complicated three-week affair involving frequent arrivals and departures; some people came by plane and train, others drove; some people camped, the rest were in chalets. Apart from Ronnie & Chris who did get some climbing done in spite of the snow, this was a serious walking and tourist holiday in wildly varying weather, with hot sun one day and snow down as far as Wengen the next. Social highlights included a meal in the McEneaney chalet to mark Mike's 49th birthday and a Chinese banquet in Wengen.

Later in the year, on Boxing Day in fact, Bryn Roberts, Andy Williams and Mal Bonner headed for the Ecrins (quotes from "The Good, the Sad, and the Ugly", Magazine no.10). It was not an auspicious start: Andy had forgotten his plastic boots ("*walked right out of the house with them smiling at him from the hallway*") and there was a sorry lack of ice, with a grade three called "La Gorge" being a waterfall. However, a 'phrique' from Alpe d' Huez finally got them to "*a stunning grade 4 called Symphonie D' Automne, lovely water ice, bolt belays, blue skies -it's music to my ears*" (writes Bryn) . After transferring to Chamonix for New Year's Eve and experiencing some pretty hefty blizzards, the group gave up mountaineering and took to snow-boarding, where Andy had a slight prang while avoiding a four-year old:

"We decide to get Andy bandaged up. Salanches hospital does the job and we're heading home. Andy slumped in the front seat, Mal in the back, rustling round for food like an alleycat, and me propping my eyes open behind the wheel. A snowstorm, fog, and a breakdown in France results in a record 36-hour trip from Cham. to deposit the good, the sad and the ugly back on Merseyside to reflect upon an 'interesting' trip "

In 1995 Nuala Mulholland, Helen Beddows and Christine went to Chamonix (quotes from "Girls on Tour" in "The Gwydyr", no.11):

"Christine, Helen and I had some good ideas and not much knowledge of French! Our first day was spent driving up and down the Chamonix Valley showing Helen where Mont Blanc would have been if you could see it, where the Dru was behind the cloud etc."

Their first route was on the Aiguilles Rouges, a tour of the Chroues, a grade three scramble:

"The ridge itself was fairly straightforward with a short abseil and a few steeper pitches but we hadn't bargained for the extra interest of snow (it was great). We carried on and on and after a while began to wonder where we actually got off the ridge (did it really carry on to Switzerland?)"

Descending to the cable car station on a Scottish winter-type day, Helen slipped and sprained her ankle "*but slowly and heroically managed to hobble there without a single moan.*" They went to the hospital, where Helen was given a prescription for crutches on which she "*hobbled with great ease.*" Later in the week Christine and Nuala went up to the Petite Aiguille Vert and had "*a fantastic day on a snow ridge and a short scramble*". The rest of the fortnight was spent walking on both sides of the valley, drinking, swimming and other enjoyable activities which included dancing in the street on Bastille day .



The Gourmet Trekkers at Hourquette de Heas in 1989

From left: Neil Harris, Mike McEneany, Les Fowles, Sue Taylor, Mal Cliffe, Pam & Garry Benton

1996 saw the 10th Anniversary of the Gourmet Trekkers, an organisation started by Sue Taylor & Neil Harris and also now including Mike & Marilyn McEneany, Les Fowles and Dave Gray. Only Sue & Neil and Les from the GMC were able to attend but the group had an excellent fortnight, with the first week spent in self-catering accommodation at Alvaneu in Switzerland and the second walking between huts in the Austrian Alps. Previous trips by this group included the Swiss Alps (1986 and 1988) and hutting in the Pyrenees (1989) during which Pic du Taillon (3,144m) and Hourquette de Heas (2,608m) were ascended.

Bill Sutherland was based in Switzerland for a while (Zurich, then Bern) and sent us "Notes from Switzerland" for the Autumn 1996 magazine. This included the Swiss Mountain Marathon, 67 km in length and with a 2,300m height gain and loss, which Bill finished in 7 hours 51 minutes (the winning time was 5 hours 32), a pretty stupendous effort. The route included the 2,800m Sertig Pass at the 50 km stage. He also entered the Jungfrau Marathon, which ran from Interlaken to Kleine Scheideg via Lauterbrunnen and Wengen, with a height gain of 1,800m. Bill comments on the luxurious conditions at the start of the race:

"The local Casino/Hall was being used as the race headquarters so instead of queuing in the rain to use a Port-a-loo, competitors were able to use the marvellous and spotlessly clean marble panelled toilets. Never have I seen such luxury at the start of a race".

And at the finish:

"There can be few races run in such spectacular scenery". The winning time was three hours exactly so Bill was extremely pleased with his four hours 12. He also did some skiing, in places like Gstaad, Port du Soleil, Verbier and Grindelwald and a fair amount of walking (yes, Bill

does walk occasionally) in the ranges most accessible from Bern. Alas, he returned to Britain before anyone had got round to using his Swiss bases.

Also in 1996, Mal Bonner spent an exciting couple of weeks with some friends in the Dolomites (magazine no.13).

The love affair with our nearest major mountain ranges continues: A trip to the Swiss Alps is planned for summer 1999.

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