

ALPINE MEET, 1984

FRANCES MACRAE-GIBSON

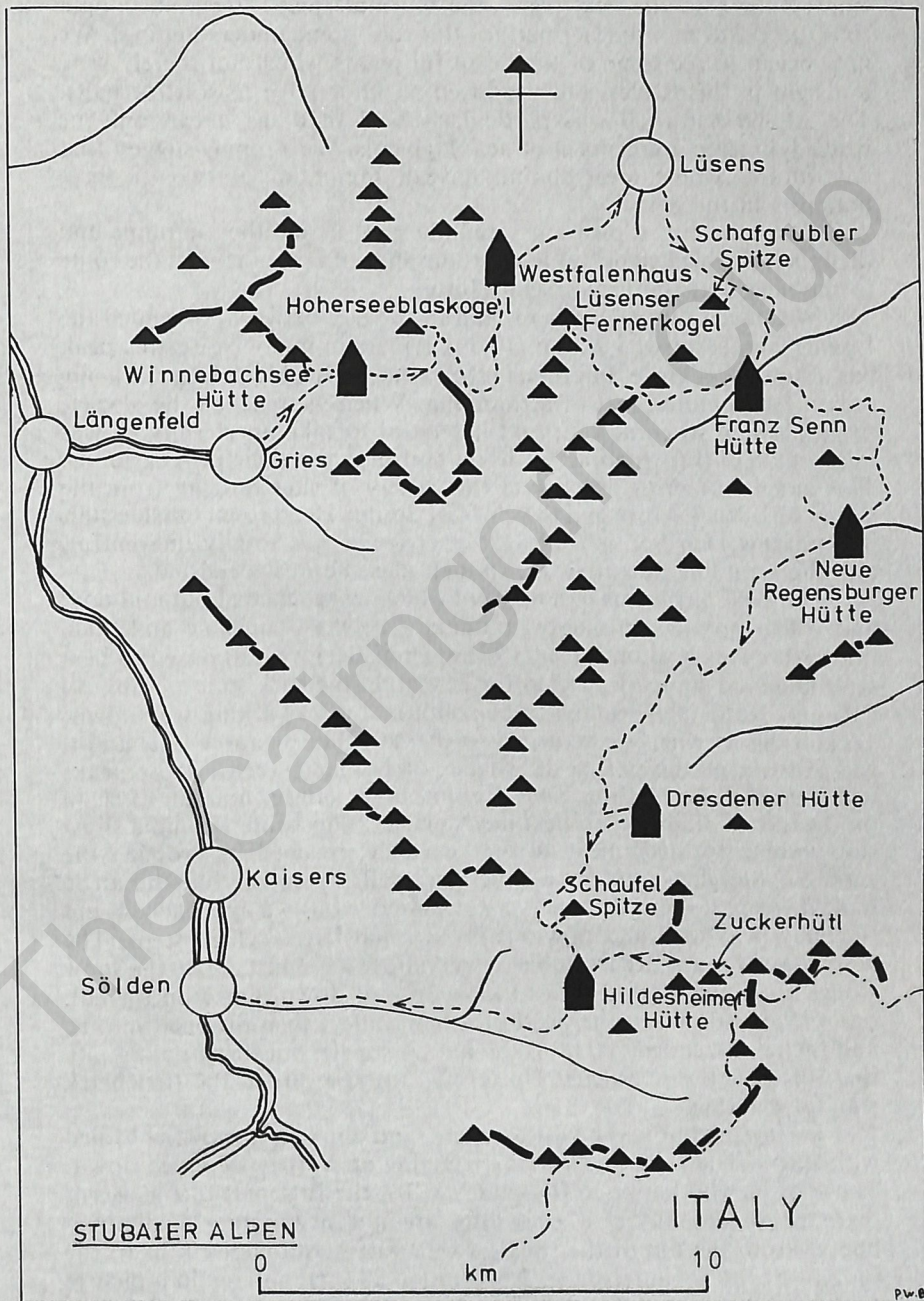
The idea of this meet was floated as far back as early 1983. I suppose we thought that as it was some good number of years since the Club had graced the Alps, it would take time to stimulate the necessary interest. However, once the plan began to take shape, and we had a meet leader in Peter Bellarby, a viable size of party quickly formed itself. The original party was not identical with the final one, but in fact we used all the 10 aircraft seats booked, using the Independent Touring arrangements of Ramblers Holidays, and even had an additional member who joined us by way of train and boat.

As we left on Friday 13th July it was perhaps appropriate that massive disruption should be scheduled on the Channel ferries, so the rendezvous at Oetzal Station with the train traveller was awaited with interest. The programme for the first two days appeared capable of being carried out in one day, should some of us have to wait at Oetzal; had we known what these days would involve in route-finding and in total effort, this prospect would have appalled us. The rendezvous however was successfully made, and we went up valley to our starting point by Funktaxi, unexpectedly cheaper than the bus. Funktaxi means radio taxi and is nothing to do with the prospective tourer's feelings!

All good things have to come to an end, and so finally we picked up rucksacks and headed for our first hut. The sun beat down upon us, and the pack's dead weight seemed to increase inexorably with each gain in height. The path, fortunately, was well made, and when we arrived we were able, being abroad, to drink deeply. Thus revived, four of us even managed to walk for another couple of hours to take in the first summit of the trip, the Gansekragen, 2,902 m (9519 ft).

Our first full day started too much like home; mist to hut level. Our route at first was an undistinguished path, which changed to very steep scree based casually in mud, with no sign of a trail. From the ridge top, a way was supposed to lead down to a glacier, but our arrival was above a precipice, and Peter had to search before a line was found. Both now and later, the contrast between the paths, and the route finding on the areas where the paths gave out, was dramatic. Once on the glacier – no crevasses on this one – some of us headed for a summit, the Hoher Seebaskogel, 3235 m (10,611 ft), others for the hut, the Westfalen haus. The mist cleared on the top, and there was a fine view, though in dark, stormy colours. We caught up the rest by a series of glissades, the last of which was mistaken, as the snow was by then too soft to provide proper braking, and one of the party scraped himself on the rocks. Luckily, blood on snow gives a very dramatic impression of a minor actual injury.

The next day we started downwards, and about 8 a.m., arrived at a Gasthof, which provided a second breakfast to strengthen us for a



lengthy climb to the next pass – the Horntalerjoch. We even bought rolls (deep frozen – the German for this took some understanding). We now began to see some of the beautiful plants which not merely were a delight in themselves, but produced an imperative reason for halts. The Alpine Snowbell was particularly well sited, as it can only be studied on steep gradients at or near high cols. We strongly suggest that any future Alpine meet should have a minimum of two or three botanists in the party.

From the col, a pleasant scramble gave us another summit; and then the valuable height was lost – thousands of feet of it – on the route to the next hut, the Franz Senn Hutte.

We stayed two nights here, and in the day between, ascended the Lisener Fernerkogel, 3,229 m (10,591 ft). As in many cases, this peak has a superb rockface, but on its other aspect has a high glacier, leaving only a few hundred feet of scrambling. When we reached the glacier, the ropes had to come out, and it seemed to take an eternity (it was misty and cold) for people to tie on and organise their prussik loops. This in spite of prior practice at the variety of sites ranging from the slopes of Bynack More and the cliffs of Soutar Head to an outside stair in Rubislaw Den South. The glacier crossing was totally uneventful, and the scramble not difficult, though alas the mist persisted.

Our next day led us to a high col which we reached about mid-day, and which provided a narrow boundary between sunshine and thick mist. Above us a summit (the Schrimmenneider) was supposed to be a scramble, and some of us tried for it, to find the rock so loose that we gave up. None of it seemed to be solid, and it was a long way down! To console us when we returned to the col, the sun came out, and it was Austria of the postcards; shades of brilliant greens, snow peaks and blue sky. And at the Neue Regensburger Hutte, hot sun to sit in on the terrace, looking up next day's glacier. Our route was up a snow slope which formed one wall of the valley, reached by crossing the snout of the glacier below a superb ice fall. From the hut the angle looked steep; it seemed to get very steep indeed as we approached, but the snow was firm and previous groups had left excellent steps. The worst part was a short scramble on very loose scree just above the snow slope; it seemed a good idea to look up, not down. Once on the col, our way contoured to the head of a new valley, then dropped into it, and then re-ascended 500 m to the hut. A superb but tiring day; a pity that this hut (the Dresdener Hutte) had to be awarded the first black star for catering.

Facing the hut was a vast moraine, and above it a snowfield filled with skiers. The next day we were trudging up as they swooped down. Those of us who had used the cable car for the first part of the ascent regretted profoundly that drag lifts are not negotiable in climbing boots. From the top of the snow, a very easy scramble took us to the summit of the Schaufelspitze, 3,333 m (10,932 ft), and again a picture postcard view of endless peaks. The euphoria of our third ten-



Figure 1 Approaching the summit of the Zuckerhutl.

thousand-footer, led to a snowball fight, and we were glad of hot sun to dry out as we made our way over a series of beautiful snow fields, and past a frozen lake with, in its centre, a melt-water patch of brilliant blue, to the next hut, the Hildesheimer Hutte.

A very early start took us next morning to the glacier below the Zuckerhutl, 3,505 m (11,496 ft), while the snow was still firm. Here, our path led between crevasses, over a snow bridge whose solidity we had to take on trust, but the prussik loops were again not needed.

This peak has a very steep snow cone summit, and the route leads up a ridge with a spectacular curve of snow below it, at whose foot is a vast crevasse. The way up was easy, the way down, with the sun beginning to loosen the snow, more interesting, and we had to wait

while several earlier parties manoeuvred themselves down the steep section before we could get up. Going down the glacier the snow was getting steadily softer, and it was good to reach firm ground.

Our destination was Sölden, right down in the main valley, so in all we dropped 2400 m, nearly 8000 ft. The temperature of course got higher and higher, and we were almost melting when we got into Sölden, to meet our advance party with the news that there was another half hour's walk. However, a superb mixed ice with fresh cream turned us into new beings, and we made it in 25 minutes.

There followed a rest day, in which the extravagant paid about a pound for a shower and the good Scots (some by adoption) washed all over for free in a small hand basin. Also, a large lunch was eaten instead of a slice of bread left over from breakfast, postcards were



Figure 2

The summit of the Wildspitze.

written, waterfalls admired, beers drunk (the prices slightly less astronomic than at altitude), and in fact we reverted to being ordinary tourists. Next day we took a bus but only to reach our next objective, the Breslauer Hutte, from which the Wildspitze is climbed (3340 m), the highest mountain in the area.

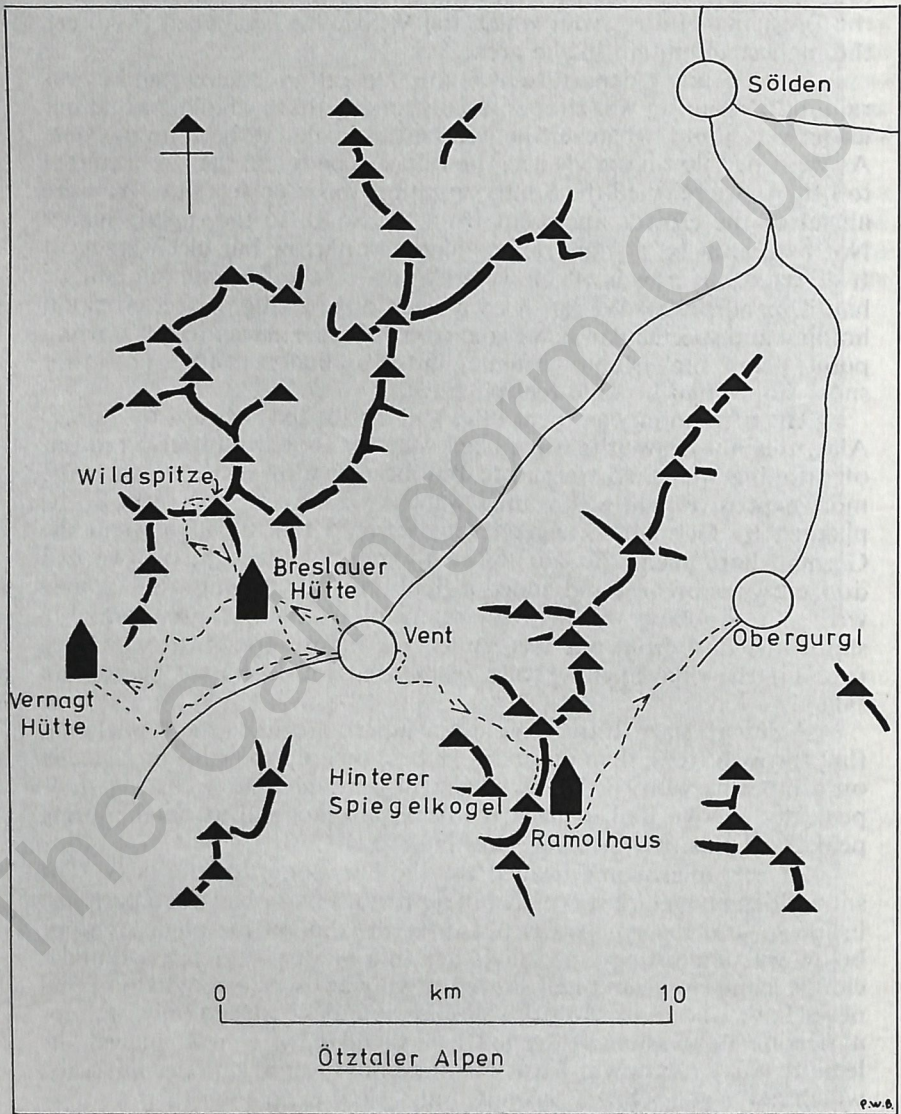
Up at 5 a.m., departure at 6 a.m., to get good snow, and it was raining! Pessimism was rife, especially among those who knew that our leader was going, whatever the weather, as he hadn't been up this one. As we roped up on the glacier, the rain stopped, and the cloud started to lift. As we reached the South summit it was a perfect day. We were ahead of the crowds and went from the South to the slightly higher North summit by a snow ridge which was narrow but nicely tracked. It deterred the crowds which were by now on the first summit and we had it to ourselves. We left it by a steep ridge giving perfect crampon holding and spectacular views, and re-crossed the glacier to our starting point, below snow slopes glistening in the brilliant sunshine. The lower snow slopes had become real porridge.

The afternoon was spent idly, and we looked forward to dinner. Alas, this hut draws the triple black star for food, and it also ran out of drinking water, so we had to buy beer or Skiwasser, which is the most expensive lightly flavoured water. We went to bed early, to be plagued by German teenagers, who seem to talk all night, and the German hard men who got up at 4 a.m., put the light on (we had dressed with torches) and added a final touch by leaving it on as they went out. Luckily, we met very many nice Germans elsewhere. We shook the dust from our feet by leaving before breakfast, which we found in the village below; rolls, real coffee, lots of butter, cheese and salami.

A superb start to the day, and a superb ascent to the Rameljoch, first through trees, then up grassy slopes, then up the edge of a glacier on a moraine with the most wonderful gentians, and a curving snow peak above. We looked back to the Wildspitze and its neighbouring peaks. All this and brilliant sunshine too.

At the Joch, some headed for the hut, some for the peak. The snow ridge had a large cornice, but a previous party had put a path just inside it, and the going was not difficult, though the angle of slope below was interesting especially when in a matter of minutes, thunder clouds came close, and hail started driving at us. We speeded up, and never have I been on and off a summit so quickly. I had only time for a fleeting impression of serried peaks and dark clouds; indeed the leading party ran down. I was counting the flash to thunder intervals, which never got below 2 seconds, but several people felt their ice axes singing.

From the Joch, a route was marked down easy rocks, but at the edge of the rocks it looked as if we had to jump. Closer inspection revealed a ladder down to the snow. We reached the hut, one of the highest, in quite thickly falling snow.



Next day, it was all downhill to end the walk at Obergurgl. The cloud cover lasted almost all the way. Then, suddenly, we were back in civilisation, and catching the bus again.

The return trip was broken briefly to take in the sights of Innsbruck, and we flew out from Salzburg in such torrential rain that we were given umbrellas to use between departure gate and plane. It must make a habit of raining at Salzburg airport.

On the plane it was felt that the experience should definitely be repeated, and Summer 1986 has been suggested. To those of you who haven't tried such a trip, I think we'd all say that you would find it at least one of the 'experiences of a lifetime'.

Those taking part were:

Peter Bellarby
Nicholas Boss
Stuart Ford
Rhona Fraser
Harry Hancock
Ian Lowitt
David Moseley
Frances, Duncan, Margaret Macrae-Gibson
William Robb.



Figure 3

Relaxation! One of the plusher huts.