

1986 ALPINE MEET

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The 1986 Alpine meet took place during the last week of July and the first week of August with the proposal being to traverse east to west through the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland. As the crow flies, or Alpine chough, the total distance covered was only about 50km but we were crossing at high altitude over the glaciers. The route started near the Grimselpass, passed south of the Jungfrau, dropped down to the Lotschental for a well earned rest, before finally continuing to Kandersteg.

The trip was organised and led by Peter Bellarby with the remainder of the group consisting of myself, Karin Froebel, Anne Cordiner, Anne Murray, Peg Forster, Nick Boss, Paul Carter, Hal Taylor, Willie Robb and Eddie Bakewell. This was a diverse group of wide age range, varied Alpine experience and mixed character type from the totally unconfident through the infinitely patient to down-right infuriating (at times!).

Before we ever left Aberdeen many thoughts and fears invaded my mind, not the least being whether I would enjoy a walking holiday with such a group. Would I get on with this diverse bunch of people all of whom were at least ten years my senior; could I cope with the physical demands of carrying my gear for a fortnight, especially at altitude, to say nothing of the mental demands of crossing crevasses and scrambling along exposed ridges; would my fair skin burn easily in the rarified air with lots of sun and snow around; had Glenmore Lodge taught me all I needed to know about crampon use? My worries proved not unfounded but added to the excitement and interest of a most memorable trip.

We left Aberdeen on Thursday 23 July to travel to King's Cross and it was here that my impressions started. Paul and I were standing worrying about how much unwanted clobber we had and what we could possibly do without when Hal appeared carrying a sac about half the size of mine. Next morning when we checked our luggage in at Heathrow we watched with interest to see how heavy the sacs were - Hal's was a lightweight at 7kg, Nick's a heavyweight at 16kg, mine about average at 13kg. Here our ice axes had to travel separately, tied together in a bundle, because they were classified as dangerous luggage. Our crampons were well padded and buried inside our sacs.

Nine of us flew from Heathrow to Zurich where we were met by Peg who had flown from Bergen that morning. From Zurich we travelled by train which took us through fertile agricultural land, past blue lakes dotted with yachts and windsurfers, past red tiled houses with their brightly coloured flower boxes to Meringen. Here we found ourselves surrounded by the snow-covered mountains that would be around us and beneath our feet in the days to come. A small tram took us to Innertkirchen where we had the luxury of good food, comfortable bunks, hot water and showers - our last bit of

civilization for some days!

The next morning we all squeezed into a minibus with umpteen rucksacs jammed between us - I was convinced there were more sacs than people but at least this stopped us falling around as the minibus climbed steeply up, round many zig-zag bends to the Grimselpass. While we waited for our turn to travel along the single track road to the Oberaarsee, Peter had a great struggle fitting his new Yeti gaiters to his boots which caused much amusement. And then it was our turn to go along the road, and everywhere butterflies were fluttering; we were nearly at the point of no turning back.

At the Oberaarsee we lost the minibus and gained the final member of the party. Now the moment had come to shoulder our rucksacs and set about the business we had come to do. As we crossed the dam we had a splendid but awe inspiring view of our day's walk. First we would walk alongside the lake, or 'see', then onto the glacier which would take us 900m up to the col where we should find our first hut. The walk alongside the lake was pretty with many flowers but as we approached the snout of the glacier the vegetation diminished, the path became rubbly and we had the odd patch of snow to cross.

Where the glacier ended there was a big arch of blue ice under which a river rushed into the lake. Here we had our first photo call, got out our ice axes, plastered ourselves in suncream and donned snow goggles and sun hats.

Running up the side of the glacier was a path which seemed to be based on the current year's snow. We didn't rope up at this stage but, although I have walked on snow many times in Scotland, this stuff held an unknown quality about it. What was snow and what was glacier, were there any crevasses? Despite these apprehensions I led the way and the party became quite strung out behind. Too strung out for Peter's liking and a 'hoy' from behind brought Nick and I to a halt on a large boulder on a sea of gravel, beneath which the blueness of ice glinted at us. When the troops were all assembled, minus Hal and Eddie who were well ahead, we strapped ourselves into belts and harnesses, tied onto our assigned ropes and attached our prussicks to the rope and ourselves. Hopefully we would never need to use our prussicks as they are a means of climbing out of a crevasse if you are unfortunate enough to fall into one. I had practised prussicking whilst dangling over a cliff near Cove and having found climbing 15ft or so up the rope totally exhausting I could only hope that I would not have to do it for real.

Hal and Eddie, much to Peter's annoyance, were by now well ahead having roped up and making good time across the snow. Knowing that Hal had a lot of Alpine experience and Eddie none, we wondered how they would get on. As we set off from our safe boulder island I was glad to be roped between Anne C. and Peg as I knew they were both experienced. On the 'dry glacier' I felt safe because here no snow covered the ice and the cracks and crevasses were easily seen. As we stepped onto snow covered

glacier I was less happy and resolved to put my feet into Anne's footprints. If she had not gone through nor should I. I learnt to pick out hairline cracks in the snow that could indicate a crevasse and to take a large step across them, but at first it was a large expanse of white, covering up who knows what mischief.

As number two on the rope I was responsible for the leaders's safety and would have to ice-axe break as quickly as possible to prevent her falling too deeply into a crevasse if she should go through. Being in the middle of the rope could be frustrating because you carried coils of rope in one hand and an ice axe in the other and every time we changed direction as we zig-zagged up a slope you had to step over the rope and swap the contents of your hands. After a while I became quite adept at this juggling trick but initially I felt I was tying myself in knots.

As well as the newness of techniques and the worries of what was beneath your feet, all around us were enormous, jagged snow capped peaks which we were cricking our necks to see when we started out, but by the end of the day we were more on a level with them. For the first few days I felt I was walking through a picture postcard; it did not seem quite real.

Our progress up the glacier was slow, which was hardly surprising as we were climbing to over 3200m where the oxygen supply is less. At the col, or 'joch', we could see our hut perched well above us. To reach it we had to climb a fixed ladder and then follow a short rock traverse round to the hut's platform holding onto a fixed chain. At the hut we found an exhausted Eddie whilst Hal, who obviously could not be tired, had gone to climb the Oberaarhorn (3637m) which was above the hut. This was our introduction to a 'hutte', the main type of accommodation of the trip. They are situated high in the mountains and all supplies of food and fuel are helicoptered in. In most cases there was a collection of buildings, a large hut for eating and sleeping in, perhaps secondary dormitory accommodation and the ubiquitous toilet hut. These were primitive and the least pleasant aspect of the trip. I caused much hilarity at our third hut by announcing with great delight, after my visit to this establishment, that this one had a urinal. But not for my own use, rather it meant the chance of a dry seat was greater!

Bedding in the huts was communal, allowing little room for modesty. The beds, or 'mattresslagen', were two tiered, with mattresses laid out alongside each other. At all the other huts we were fortunate to get a room to ourselves which meant women could go upstairs and men down. On this occasion, though, there were nine of us squeezed together on one layer, and the other two tucked in elsewhere.

Food was a focal point of each day, breakfast being huge bowls of coffee with much not-quite-fresh bread, cheese and jam. Supper was never 'haute cuisine' but it was nearly always good and plenty of it.

One's level of personal hygiene dropped considerably on realising the washroom was either a stream or pipe which issued icy water outside the hut.

On the second morning I found the water supply was virtually frozen so no clean teeth that day. On the occasions when we arrived early at a hut and nobody else was around we would have a ladies' and gents' session at the water supply to try and keep ourselves feeling semi-clean. At one place even a shaving session was instigated, with one wise man acquiring a mug of hot water from the warden.

I tend to be an early to bed, early to rise person but not at the extremes of this trip. By the end of the fortnight I was rarely in bed later than 8pm, and we were often on the move by 6am. Twice we rose at the ungodly hour of 4am. The reason for such early starts was to get as much of our walking done before the sun got too high, melting the snow making it soft and heavy going, weakening snow bridges over crevasses and making the risk of avalanches higher.

After our first hut night, when I do not think anybody slept very well, it was exhilarating to stand on the col watching the sun turn the surrounding mountain tops to a golden colour as we got ourselves ready with crampons, ice axes and ropes. We were crossing to a col due west of us but to get there the hut warden had advised making a long sweep into the corrie to avoid the heavily crevassed area we would encounter by crossing directly.

I was rather apprehensive when I realised I was on Hal's rope that morning, after his speeding of the day before, but with Peter's rope leading, this ensured that we walked together, as much as you can walk as a group when you are all strung out on lengths of rope. When we reached the col we abandoned our rucksacs so that we could climb the Finsteraar Rothorn (3530m). Of all the climbs that we did, this was the one I found most terrifying. Whether it was the most difficult or maybe just the newness of everything I do not know. Willie, who was the fourth person on my rope, had a broken crampon so he was left at the col. The rest of us climbed across steep, soft snow before starting the ascent up the exposed ridge. On both sides it was a long way down and underfoot the going never felt very firm, being either ice or loose, crumbly rock. I wondered if I would ever get back down in one piece, assuming I made it to the top, and was thankful for Nick's words of encouragement and the feeling of a rope round my middle. The reward for this nightmare was a bird's eye view of the big Fieschergletscher (a glacier) 700m below us, stunning views of the surrounding mountains and many beyond including the Matterhorn. Someone else was also enjoying this tremendous view for occasionally we would hear a swish above us and a glider would sail overhead.

Most days we were lucky with the weather and walked in lightweight shirts and trousers but if it was necessary to stop for anytime at high altitude we quickly found that the air was cold. With this in mind our rope wasted no time in descending to the col to collect Willie, who was by then shivering. From the col we descended to the glacier down a very steep scree slope and, near the bottom, scree over ice. This allowed no decent belays and there was



Figure 1 Finsteraar Rothorn and Finsteraarhorn from the Oberaarjoch. (Photograph by Janet Armstrong.)



Figure 2 Freschergletscher from summit of Finsteraar Rothorn. (Photograph by Janet Armstrong.)

the constant danger of the person above you sending down a shower of stones. We eventually made it onto the snow but here I found myself in the middle of a tug-o-war with Hal wanting to push on and Willie feeling apprehensive on the snow. When we reached the hut we had been walking for 10hrs and I was glad to find a path to the hut and not more ladders. The rest of the party did not appear for another two hours by which time we were feeling a bit concerned for them.

We spent two nights at the Finsteraarhorn Hutte, which allowed us to climb the Finsteraarhorn (4274m) without full sacs. Not everyone chose to make this ascent, opting for a quieter day near the hut.

The climb to the Breakfast Platz was a fairly straightforward ascent using our crampons to cross hard névé and some ice. At the Breakfast Platz we had a good rest and refuel (a second breakfast perhaps?). From here we were looking into a large crevasse and to the west we could see our path wending its ways between two such crevasses. After passing between these we had a long uphill snow plod to a col at 4094m. Here we removed our crampons as we were about to start a rock scramble. This did not prove too difficult until we reached a steep patch of snow where it was necessary to don our crampons again. The other ropes had some difficulty in crossing this snow and by the time our rope came to move I was cold and nervous, sufficiently so that I felt I would be a liability if I went on. Nick ensured I was firmly belayed to some rock before he and Hal moved on.

I was disappointed not to reach the top with the others but found that the views from my perch were magnificent. Straight ahead, but 3000m lower, was Grindelwald, to one side the Jungfrau, Monch and Eiger, to the other side a 900m drop to a glacier that looked like a motorway with medial moraine for the central reservation. Although I had wrapped myself up in all my layers and the sun was shining on me I was still quite cold, so I was glad when Hal appeared solo to 'rescue' me. We returned uneventfully to the hut except for a short stretch just before the hut and just above an active icefall. Here the ice was deeply runnelled and it was difficult to pick your way through the maze and I was concerned that we might stray too near to the edge of the icefall. Thankfully we got through safely and were welcomed by the resters with lots of tea. Tea became a lifesaver at the end of this and many other days. You could purchase 'teewasser', which was cheaper than tea, add your own teabags, and we consumed it by the gallon at the end of the day. This was essential as we found ourselves quite dehydrated over the first few days, until we got our water table equilibrium right.

Again it was another two hours before the others appeared, making it another 12hr day for them. As Nick had been unwell on the final stages of the ascent we were quite concerned, but it turned out that they had rescued a group of Americans who were stuck above the snow patch that I stalled before. For their pains they were rewarded with a bottle of wine but the latecomers were too exhausted to appreciate it or their supper.

The next day was a rest day by comparison, with the most strenuous part of the day being the climb up 200m of ladders to reach the hut. From this hut we looked down on the Konkordia Platz which is where five glaciers converge. It appeared to be a complete maze of crevasses and moraine which we somehow managed to pick our way through, avoiding the crevasses which could be 2m wide and 3-4m deep, fording rivers and scrambling over heaped moraines.

But this crossing was two days ahead. Before this we spent a day climbing the Gross Grunhorn (4043m) which for me was the most rewarding day. Again two stayed behind whilst the rest of us squelched our way up a glacier (which had a lot of surface water) before striking up the ountain side. This was a straightforward climb up hard snow with a few icy patches until the final few metres up to the ridge. Here we had to climb over obvious avalanche debris, cross a bergshund and climb up through a gap in the cornice where many had obviously been before us. The ridge was initially broad and snow covered but became narrow and predominantly rock. A final steep ascent on hard névé took us to the summit of the Grunegghorn (3860m), which was Anne C. and Eddie's objective.

To reach our summit we first had to descend steeply to a col. This descent was on steep rock and ice making for slow progress. As it was exposed to the cold wind, Hal, who was only wearing a shirt, became cold. Rather than dig a jacket out of the body of his rucksac he borrowed my *caçoul* which was more accessible. As we were perched rather precariously he slung this jacket over his rucksac giving him a 'Hunchback of Notre Dame' appearance. At the col we all donned jackets, and even balaclavas, as cloud kept engulfing us. Here we also left our crampons and axes as the remainder of the climb was on rock. Technically the rock scramble was probably the most difficult the majority of us encountered on the trip, but we all got to the top with only one person finding it difficult. The most exposed section was a 'tightrope walk' along a narrow ridge of snow just before the top.

The top was busy, with several groups squeezed into a small space, so after we had eaten we began to retrace our steps. All went well until we came to the drop off the main ridge. Since the previous party had descended, there had been a small avalanche that had swept away a section of the path. Hal and I were leading, so Hal belayed himself firmly to some rock whilst I set out onto what seemed like fairly dodgy ground. As I was crossing above the place where the path had been swept away BOOM! Count to five, yes I was still in one piece and in the same place but with my heart beating at twice its normal rate. The noise had been from a Swiss air force supersonic jet and thankfully it had not triggered another avalanche. We heard several supersonic booms but no other was quite so well timed!

Having reached the bergshund I had doubts about the rigidity of the snow bridge as the sun was obviously melting the snow. With a great deal of apprehension and a sharp intake of breath I leapt across. On touch down I



Figure 3 Ascending the Gross Grunhorn.
(Photograph by Janet Armstrong)



Figure 4 Ascending the Tschingelhorn with the Blumisalhorn range
behind. (Photograph by Janet Armstrong)

lost my footing and slid some distance before arresting myself with my ice axe. Everyone else crossed this section uneventfully and we returned safely to the hut. Although Hal was the member of the group who seemed to have boundless energy and enthusiasm I was quite surprised to find him making much slower progress than me up the ladders to the hut even though I was the one carrying the supersaturated rope.

The next day was relatively quiet with the traverse across the Konkordia Platz to reach the Hollandia hut. We spent one night here before some of the group climbed the Ebneflu (3962m) and we all descended 1450m into the Lotschental valley for our rest day. The Ebneflu was supposed to be a fairly straightforward climb and Peter had hoped to get everyone to the top. Unfortunately there was a mutiny, instigated by myself, as the descent from the hut to the valley was going to be great enough without the extra descent from the top of the Ebneflu. This resulted in only half the party reaching the Ebneflu summit. The descent from the hut took us to Fafleralp - a land of green grass and trees and real food, quite a contrast to the landscape we had become used to. We spent two nights here before climbing back into the world of snow and ice, and to the Mutthorn hut. To reach the hut we had to cross a small ridge called appropriately, the Petersgrat which stuck up through the glacier.

Our final climb together was the following day when we ascended the Tschingelhorn (3577m). This was not an entirely uneventful day but we did all reach the top. The climb was technically mixed with snow, rock, ice and a final summit of hard névé. Some had found themselves in a very loose rocky gully and refusing to descend the same way, insisted that we try a snow couloir. This was one occasion when I would have been grateful not to be on Hal's speedy rope, because I ended up exploring this couloir. With Hal belayed above, I front pointed down into the head of the couloir looking for a suitable point to place a 'dead man' belay plate. I could not find anywhere and above, there was a heated debate, so I got myself onto some scree to have a rest. Whilst waiting for a decision from above someone dislodged a rock which came hurtling down the slope narrowly missing me. Peter decided he had better assess the situation himself so he came down to join me. We were discussing the pros and cons of the route when more loose stuff came down. Hal then became insistent that we all returned the way we had successfully come up, before someone was seriously injured or worse. This was my sentiment exactly and I was much relieved when Peter agreed. I was a nervous wreck, and a piece of Kendal mint cake from Paul has never been so gratefully received.

Having expended three days worth of nervous energy in the space of an hour I wanted to get back to the hut with plenty of time for a relaxed lunch before we pushed on. Consequently Hal, Paul and I were making good time. However, when we got round the mountain and saw a large black cloud coming towards us we really started to move. I was leading and I do not think

I have ever covered a mile of snow so quickly. We just made it to the hut when the heavens opened; unfortunately this meant the others were soaked through. This led to the second mutiny of the trip because the plan for the next day was to climb the Gsalptenhorn which was technical rock and Peter reckoned only a few would be successful. I was one of those deemed capable but the thought of pushing on with the threat of soaking rain was not appealing. In the end Peter and Hal went on their own and we were to meet them at the Blumisalp hut the next night.

Peter and Hal successfully climbed the Gsalptenhorn (3437m) but we were unsuccessful in our double hut crossing. A mist engulfed us whilst we were crossing a moraine covered glacier, and not realising how much the glacier had receded since the map was drawn, we were unaware that the path we eventually picked up was not the one we had intended to follow. The end result was that we stayed in an upmarket hayloft on a cow farm, and proceeded straight to Kandersteg the next day. Peter and Hal, who had been more successful in orientating themselves, spent the night in the hut before climbing the Blumisalphorn (3664m) and then descended to Kandersteg to meet us.

I think everyone enjoyed the trip in the end, though there were moments when nerves were fraught. We all reached the top of one mountain together, along with at least one other conquest each. I did not return with third degree sun-burn, nor a broken leg. I rose to the technical and physical challenges that were thrown at me and even enjoyed them to such an extent that I would jump at the chance to participate in a similar trip again.

Thank-you Peter and all the others for making it such a memorable fortnight.

