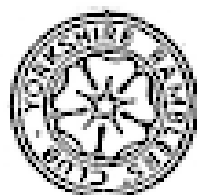


## YORKSHIRE RAMBLERS' CLUB

ALPINE MEET - SAASTAL - 1987



The recollection of past pleasures cannot be effaced. Even now, as I write, they crowd up before me. First comes an endless series of pictures, magnificent in form, effect and colour. I see the great peaks with clouded tops, seeming to mount up for ever.

Edward Whymper

YRC Alps Meet 25th July -9th August 1987

I have been asked to write the Report for this Meet and I hope that I have recorded most of what was achieved in the two weeks by those attending, and trust that I will be forgiven for any errors or omissions.

The Meet was attended by 31 members and their families -our youngest member being Richard Smith aged 1 year who carried his father's ice-axe around the camp site. The Meet was based near Saas Fee at Saas-Grund where the Club took over a camp site in the middle of the village and this was used as our 'base-camp'. Due to a slight misunderstanding one of the early parties pitched at another site close by and then having settled in decided to stay but made regular calls on the main party. The area chosen by our Meet Leader, David Smith, proved to be an admirable one giving plenty of varied walking and both rock and snow routes for all tastes and abilities. Our thanks go to him for all his hard work in arranging the venue and his helpful advice throughout.

The Saas and Zermatt valleys are divided by the Mischabel range which is a spectacular two mile ridge running south to north comprising Taschhorn, Dom, Lenspitze and Nadelhorn. The area is, of course, well known in mountaineering circles, as are the names of the families in the Saas district who for several generations have become guides for visiting parties, and whose names often appear as first ascentionists in the Guide-books, such as Zurbriggen, Andermatten and Supersaxo -names to conjure with, one of which will appear later in this Report in unexpected circumstances.

Despite generally mixed weather seven peaks over 4000m were ascended (Weissmeis (4023m) Allalinhorn (4027m) Rimpfischhorn (4189m) Stralhorn (4190m) Dom (4545m) Lenspitze (4294m) and Nadelhorn (4327m)). A number of lesser peaks were also climbed including Fletschhorn (3919m) P.d Andolla (Portjengrat ridge) (3653m) Sonninghorn (3487m) Egginer (3366m) and Mittaghorn (3143m). Five S.A.C. huts were visited (Weissmies, Almagelleralp, Brittania, Dom and Mischabel huts). Whilst most members carried BMC reciprocal rights cards entitling reduced hut fees, on most occasions it only proved necessary to produce one card per party. Nor was it found necessary to book hut places, most parties arriving "trusting to luck" and with no intention of retracing their weary steps.

A few members left England during the week before the Meet started and drove at their leisure through France. Most took ferries on the Friday evening -from Zeebrugge the motorway route through Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Germany proving the quickest . By Sunday evening the whole party was installed. Guide-books and maps were consulted and conferences held to get the "feel" of the area and see what should be done in the first few days. An initial training day seemed to be the consensus of opinion and so on the Sunday one party walked up to the Zwischbergenpass (3287m) on the Southern shoulder of the Weissmies and back to Camp, (which involving over 5500' of ascent and approximately 12 miles, seemed to one of the party rather more than just a warm up, but nonetheless an enjoyable outing). On the Monday morning we woke to find ice on our tents and after discussion most members drove to the Mattmark Barrage at the head of the valley and then walked to the Monte Moro pass (2868m) on the Italian border and thence to the summit of the nearby Joderhorn (3035m). This walk was notable for the vast numbers of people thronging the mountain sides, a great number of whom had taken the cable car from the Macugnaga valley on the Italian side. Excellent views of the eastern slopes of the Monta Rosa were gained.

On the next day, Tuesday, it was decided that more serious things would be expected, and so that hot sunny afternoon saw ten members loaded up with food and gear for two days take the zig-zag path directly from Saas-Grund to the Weissmies hut, arriving at about 4 p.m., with the intention the following day of splitting into two groups, one to traverse the Weissmeis to the Almagelleralp hut, and the other to ascend the Fletschorn, in both cases by the 'trade' routes.

After being woken at 3 a.m. the YRC parties were off by 4 a.m. The Guide-book describes the Weissmeis as one of the easiest 4000m peaks in the Alps and this was soon confirmed middle of a caravan of some sixty in mind. Nonetheless the scenery marvellous views were obtained at as the YRC party found themselves in the or seventy people all with the same object on the Trift glacier was interesting and first light of the Mischabel chain to the west, the Bernese Oberland to the north and cloud inversion in the valleys. Towards the summit the wind rose, the mist thickened, a brockenspectre was photographed and then mercifully the ridge had been traversed and the party could pause in the shelter of rocks before descending to the Almagelleralpnew hut . The other YRC party ascended the Fletschhorn as planned by the North-West ridge (PD) and spent a second night at the Weissmeis hut. Later on in the week several

other parties spent nights at this hut and ascended those same two peaks by the same routes.

On Thursday morning the party of four at the Almagelleralp hut divided into two pairs at the foot of the Rotblat glacier having started at the customary hour of 4 a.m., the first to traverse the Portengrat south to north (which is described as one of the best rock climbs in the Saas district on perfect gneiss as rough as gabbro, PD in general with continuous climbing at 11, and some pitches of 111); the other to ascend a small but shapely peak lying adjacent to the south called Mittelruck (3363m) (to mark the centenary of its first ascent by W.M. Conway, an honorary member of the Club, almost exactly one hundred years to the day). Descending from the Mittelruck proved to be quite difficult due to the tendency to avoid pitches on the ridge by dropping down onto rotten loose rocks on the side -the soundest rock usually being found on the crest. The second pair also reached about half way along the NE ridge of the Sonninghorn (PD+) before retreating due to heavy snowfall. Later in the week another party successfully completed the same ridge to the summit.

Meanwhile the Portengrat pair realising that they had started their climb on a variation, (that is to say from the wrong place) soon joined the main ridge at roughly the same time as a guide and his client passed them disappearing rapidly into the misty distance. Further on gendarmes were passed, chimneys thrutched with sack and axe, and pinnacles climbed. The guide-books' description of "pleasant climbing" soon became a hurried scramble with huddled belays on the lee side of the crest as the temperature dropped and snow began to fall. Ice-axes buzzed with static as they passed the summit's metal cross as quickly as possible. The way off the Pointe d'Andolla starts with an abseil and the pair needed no encouragement, the old wooden wedge used for abseiling having been replaced by a cemented ring. The younger member was 'volunteered' to lead the traverse of the four gendarmes which marked the short descent and eventually this was successfully accomplished but only after a number of difficult pitches in deteriorating conditions, the 200m from the summit taking 2 hours to cover. Return to Camp as Sass Grund marked the end of a memorable 13 hour day. Later on another YRC pair successfully completed the same traverse.

The same day, the Weissmeis party successfully ascended the summit but were unable to traverse the mountain due to the white-out conditions.

After two good days on the hill most members decided that Friday, not Sunday, should be a day of rest and a pleasant visit was made by some to the Lotschental valley on the north of the Rhone, walking up to the snout of the glacier, looking at the wonderful wild flowers and generally admiring the scenery. Not all could be restrained however since one party walked up to the Britannia hut, thereby forming the advance guard for a larger party, and on the following day climbed the Stralhorn by the WNW ridge from the Adlerpass. White-out conditions were encountered but the broad ridge, although icy in places, caused no real difficulty even in the strong winds and the party ascended and descended in guide-book time.

Besides being Swiss national day (August 1st) Saturday night saw fourteen members sleeping in the draughty attic of a full Britannia hut. This hut is noted for the eccentricity or perhaps ingenuity of its warden whose practice is to rouse the inhabitants at 3 a.m. by loudspeakers blaring traditional Swiss yodelling songs. On Sunday one party set out to ascend the Allalinhorn by the ENE ridge but after getting some 1500' below the summit retreated due to the high winds, their decision being reinforced when three out of the four became airborne, and no doubt by the drop of some 1700' on the downwind side. Other parties attempting the Allalinhorn via the Allalinpäss experienced the same difficulties due to the wind and retreated, the spindrift lashing at any exposed skin quite mercilessly. However, despite the gale one party of three managed to ascend the Rimpfischhorn via the Allalinpäss (PD-). This involved crossing crevassed snowfields on the Mellich glacier in thick cloud and snow to reach the col on the main ridge, then front pointing up a steep ice slope, trending left onto rock turrets looming above, followed by good scrambling and then a curving arete with large drops on both sides leading to the true summit. On returning to the hut at 3 p.m. the round trip for that particular party was 11/12 hours.

The YRC group were honoured that night with a dormitory of their own. Getting up at 3 a.m. is a pleasure after a sleepless night and the first party was off well before 4 a.m. to try the Allalinhorn via the SW ridge from the Allalinpäss. Most routes from the hut start out by crossing the much-crevassed Hohlaub glacier and one member in the first party unfortunately put a leg through and fell awkwardly on his hand on rough ice, breaking a finger in the process. In true YRC fashion he elected to carry on and earned the distinction of traversing the Allalinhorn with his finger bandaged up with a biro as a makeshift splint. A little later on the same party

came across a solitary figure standing in the middle of the glacier in the dark holding a taught rope which disappeared ominously into a hole a few feet away. Quick action was required and soon the rope was tied off to an ice-screw with a prussick knot. Then a rope was lowered into the hole from the opposite side -a second ice-screw would have been helpful but despite shouts and blows on the whistle none of the passing parties stopped to give assistance even though they were only some hundred yards away. Eventually a party did stop -naturally the next YRC team. After pulling from both sides the poor unfortunate was soon out, a little cold but none the worse for wear. It certainly helped operations that the climber understood English and could communicate with the surface, and in any event was only some 6-10' feet down. On our return to the hut that afternoon we were pleasantly surprised with a bottle of wine and learnt that we had pulled out one Ambrose Andermatten, a guide from Saas-Fee!

From the Allalinhorn and again from the summit we had marvellous views to the east, looking onto the Matterhorn, Dent Blanche, Zinal Rothorn and Weisshorn. One party then descended the Allalinhorn by the ENE ridge, a steep rock band near the summit causing some delay; the others descended by the snowfields on the north of the mountain. After refreshment at the hut the parties made their several ways down to the valley for a shower and well-earned rest in more comfortable surroundings. Another party also traversed from the Britania hut via the Allalinhorn to Zermatt returning by road to Saas.

Tuesday afternoon saw a party of three drive to Randa in the Zermatt valley and ascend by the normal path, a well known slog, to the Dom hut. The route taken up on the next morning was the Festigrat ridge (NNW) via the Festijoch (PD-). Most of the ridge was ascended in deteriorating conditions of extreme cold, high winds and thick cloud which reduced visibility to just a few feet. The ridge leads directly to a gendarme which has all the appearance of being the top, a notion which was confirmed by a group of Swiss climbers, only then to be dispelled by the spectacular lifting of the cloud just for an instant to reveal the true summit (the highest top wholly in Switzerland) some 300' higher. This was soon reached and descent was by the Hohberg glacier snowfields to the Festijoch.

A party of two stayed on at the Dom hut and the following day ascended the Lenspitze from the Lenxjoch, the most difficult part being a 250' 55 degree ice wall from the bergschrund to the col. An airy scramble along the ridge was made to the Nadelhorn

- the rock is sound and the climbing not difficult, certainly no more than is encountered along much of the Skye ridge. The traverse consists firstly of some delicate snow ridges looking straight down the tremendous 1700' face of the NNE face (Drieselwand) and then a series of regular gendarmes leading to the summit of the Nadelhorn are traversed or turned, never more than a few metres below the crest, thankfully on the leeward side for the most part. The distance from top to top as the crow flies is less than a kilometre on the map but took some two and a half hours to cover. Descent was made by the Windjoch to the Mischabel hut and thence down the seemingly interminable zig-zag path to Saas-Fee where the first people encountered were another YRC party taking refreshments in a cafe at the foot of the path.

On the same day several other parties of YRC members also made the ascent of the Nadelhorn by the NE ridge from the Mischabel hut, one pair having considered climbing the Drieselwand but thinking the better of it due to the poor conditions. Earlier in the week the same two members also climbed "Take-it-easy" on the Dri Hornli ridge above the Almagelleralp hut (,a IV/V climb of some 400' on superb rock,) attempted the circuit of the Lagginhorn but were thwarted by verglas and high winds, and completed the Mittaghorn-Egginer traverse.

On the last evening a dinner was arranged for all those attending the meet in a local hotel and an extremely pleasant time was had by all.

So much for the facts and figures - what about the personal experiences? Some of my own vivid recollections, selected at random are :-the cloud on top of the Dom suddenly being whipped away by the wind like a sheet off a bed; putting on a sheet sleeping bag under my anorak for extra warmth on the Lenspitze traverse being the only spare clothing left in my sack; my first view of the snow-plastered Matterhorn in the early morning sunlight from the Allalinpass; looking out from my bunk in the Dom hut and seeing in one view the green valley 5000' feet below and the chisel-shaped top of the Matterhorn glowing in pink evening light some 5000' above - and many others.

I have been inspired to go back and climb other peaks which have fired the imagination, such as the Weisshorn with its graceful sweeping lines leading to such a perfect summit, the Matterhorn and the Zinal Rothorn. There is no end to the places and possibilities for future overseas YRC meets both in the Alps

and elsewhere on the continent which I hope will become an annual feature in the Club's calendar. I also hope that members who were tempted but not able to go in 1987 will do so next year.

Certainly, everyone this year enjoyed themselves to the full, whatever their achievements or ambitions.

[List of attendees]

Peter Swindells	Mike, Helen and Richard Smith
Clare Swindells	Jack Davenport
David and Elspeth Smith	John Davenport
Alan and Angela Linford	Roger and Sue Allan
Alan Brown	Peter Alan
John Barton	James McGovern
Peter Chadwick	Arthur and Shirley Salmon
Albert Chapman	Graham Salmon
David Large	David Hick
Ken Aldred	David Martindale
Ian Potter	Ian Crowther
Steve and Barbara Goulden	Frank Wilkinson
John Colton	Harvey Lomas

P.R.P.C.

### Postscript

#### A VIEW FROM THE BOTTOM - by a Camp Follower

Arrival on Sunday was bright but rather windy, not quite what I was anticipating for a fortnight of pottering and sunbathing at base camp Bergheimat Saas Grund. Nevertheless arrival also resulted in the appearance of a cup of tea, a sign of the Y.R.C. hospitality. Monday morning - white over - a keen frost. Perhaps I should have left the bikini at home? A quick trip round the local supermarket - yes, Swiss disposable nappies seem to be the same as English ones and then it was off to join the rest of the party on the Monte Moro Pass. A good day.

Tuesday - the climbers are anxious to start achieving. Early morning the discussions begin. "Where?" "What?" "When?"

10.00 a.m. It's the Wiessmies hut but "What if ... ?" and "What time?" little clusters gather in the centre of the campsite, discuss, disperse, discuss and disperse. Are you

P.T.O.



going I ask? "What time might you go?" "Yes we are . . . . I think". The replies are curt and sharp. I ought to know better and not disturb the mornings deliberations, obviously an essential and integral part of the meet. Decisions are eventually made. "Right all we have to do now is pack". How long can it take to pack a rucksack? Admittedly some can do it in a couple of hours or so, and I must admit that on the whole the operation did get quicker during the course of the meet but there was one group who always began first and seemed to be the last to leave. The floor would be strewn with equipment and food and the pile never seemed to diminish in size although I'm convinced that articles keep reappearing having been packed at least twice already. At last the expedition was ready and, much photographed, departed.

A bit of a let down really. For all my impatience with the slow decision making it was interesting. What does one do now? Go to Saas Fee and take photos of the Wiessmies I decided. A beautiful spot.

Wednesday - the party is due to return. As the afternoon goes on I consult my watch. Various groups drift back. We didn't have milk deliveries at Saas Grund - just beer deliveries to the tents of the weary. Six o'clock - no sign of my nearest and dearest. Most are returned by now. Some of his party return but not he. "Oh - he's just gone on to do something else, he'll be back soon". Something else turned out to be the Portjengrat in an electric storm. I'm quite glad that I wasn't given his personal effects until after he had returned.

The meet continued and the time passed very quickly, despite being a climbing widow for several days. Interesting evenings passed by discussing the state of the nation (the Y.R.C. has a very wide range in political views I discovered), slurping French wine with my immediate neighbour, and there was Swiss National day - a very jolly occasion for all those left at base camp even if we did get frowned upon for talking during the interminable speeches. There were trips to the Lotschental and higher up the valley. And on his "day off" I dragged my spouse on an eight hour walk, our "family day" as someone quaintly called it.

A most enjoyable holiday. Thank you to all the Y.R.C. members who were so hospitable especially when I was left on my own. Thank you for helping to babysit for the youngest P.M. and especial thanks to SS who was his adoptive Grandma for the fortnight.

FLORA AND FAUNA

The most exciting flower seen was a group of St. Bruno's Lily above Saas-Almagell. They are protected in France and possibly also in Switzerland. Quite a lot of edelweiss - I don't know why people like this, it always looks like dirty flannel to me! Very few gentians - small blue ones high up and purple gentians just coming into bloom fairly low down on the path from Gspon to Saas-Grund. Lots of Autumn crocus in the meadows along the river bank. Also above Saas Almagell we found a bank covered with huge spikes of early purple orchids and tiny black vanilla orchids. There were masses of sempervivums everywhere, and saxifrages as well as Dianthus deltoides and another pink which I did not positively identify. I found Aстранtia minor in woodland but no A. major. Lots of forget-me-nots both pale and dark blue, and masses of Linaria. Some mulleins were in flower, but they looked stunted to me - perhaps a result of a poor spring? There were Globe-headed Rampions and other campanulas too, including a white one which I can't find in the book. The most exciting butterfly I saw was the parnassius Apollo, I was pleased about that. They usually flutter off before I have chance to have a good look.

B.G.

Of the mammals, most people saw marmot and chamois but no one seems to have seen ibex. Two of us saw a red deer hind in its natural woodland habitat which was rather nice.

As the breeding season was over birds were difficult, only one lesser whitethroat was singing in the valley walks I did. Alpine choughs as usual high up but more usual were the snow finches up to about 10,000', and a single immature wall-creeper at about the same height. The nicest valley bird was surely the nut cracker which was very common, although on the drive through France and the Jura the number of raptors including red and black kites, buzzards and a goshawk kept me busy. Two members also thought they spotted a golden eagle.

J.D.