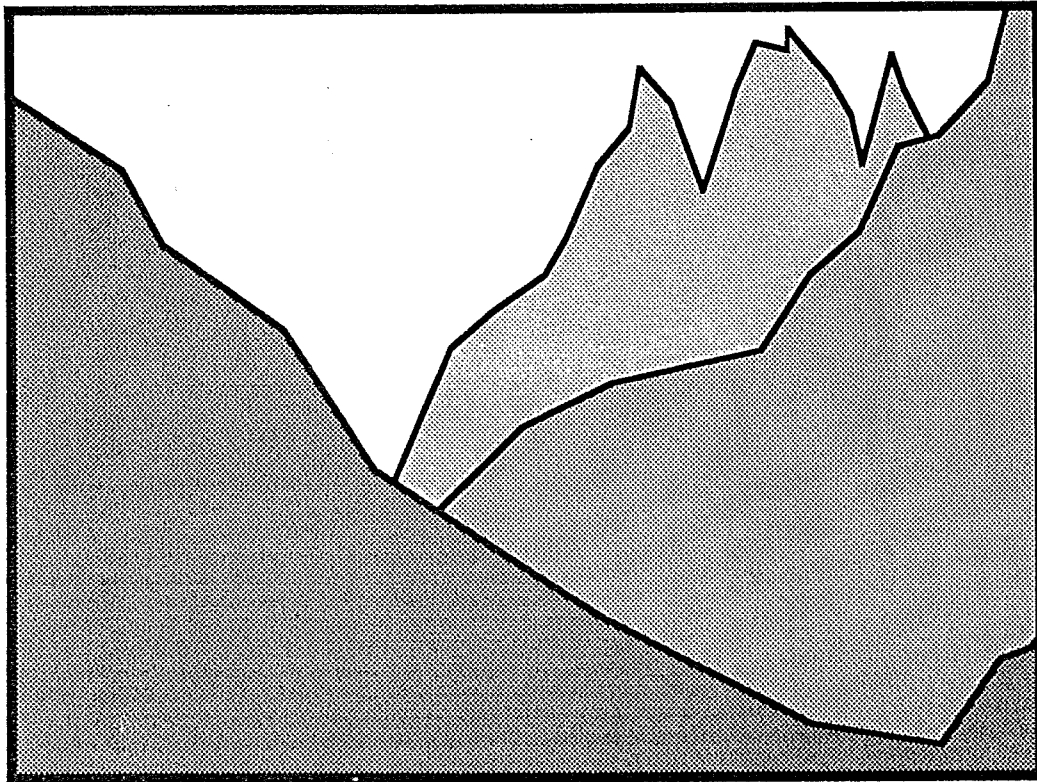


Yorkshire Ramblers' Club

Alpine Meet - Argentiere

July - August 1989



*" It was a forcible reminder that mountains
are never conquered; nature is the master
and changes from one day to the next"*



YORKSHIRE RAMBLERS' CLUB ALPINE MEET 1989

THE MEET

The fourth YRC Alpine meet was held "officially" between 22nd July and 6th August 1989 based just outside Argentere at the north-eastern end of the Chamonix Valley in the Mont Blanc range. The following 17 members and guests joined the meet for part, all or more than the "official" time:

Dermis and Joan Armstrong	Alan and Madge Brown
John Devenport	Mike and Marcia Godden
Chrls Hayes	Alan and Angela Linford
David Martindale	Mike Middleton
Graham Salmon	Mike Smith
David and Elspeth Smith	Catherine Smith.

THE VALLEY

The Chamonix Valley lies on the French (western) side of the Massif du Mont Blanc in the Haute Savoie Region of France. The valley is dominated on the eastern side by the snows of Mont Blanc and the rocky spires of the Chamonix Atguttles, and on the western side by the Alguille Rouges, part of which is a nature reserve and abundant in a wide range of wildlife. The valley sides are very steep and wooded, but there are several cablecars along both sides of the valley saving climbers and ramblers several hours uphill trudge to get out of the main valley and into the heart of the mountains. The area provides something for everybody - not only alpinists but anybody who enjoys walking among truly spectacular mountain scenery. Chamonix is the very busy focal point of the valley with a wide range of shops, hotels and restaurants - all expensive! The town and valley are steeped in several hundred years of mountaineering history, much of which is displayed in the excellent Alpine Museum, visited by just about everybody on the meet on one of the rainy days. Argentere is much smaller, and was about ten minutes walk through the woods from the campsite. It had all the basic shops and at least one good restaurant - Le Yeti Bar, which became something of a "local" for several members on the meet and which was the venue for a Raclette evening enjoyed by the whole YRC party.

THE CAMPSITE

Base camp was at Camping Du Glacier at Les Chosalets just outside the village of Argentere. The campsite was cheap and fairly basic, but well run and maintained by three French sisters. The main points of discussion amongst those present were the slope (the whole site was located on a steeply sloping field causing obvious problems for those in tents, but also meant fun and games for those who had to level their caravans) and the showers (which cost about 5 Francs and which required a course in semaphore to get the water turned on by the campsite warden!). Being during the middle of the French holidays the site was always full, but never particularly overcrowded. During the sometimes prolonged periods of inclement weather, the campers were very grateful for the shelter and hospitality provided by those members with caravans.

THE WEATHER

To say the weather was changeable would be something of an understatement! Most of the party arrived on the Saturday in blazing sunshine, the previous week having been fine and very hot. However during the first night there was a severe thunderstorm lasting almost three hours, which really shook the ground and provided a spectacular pyrotechnic display. After that, the weather stayed fairly hot and sunny for the remainder of the first week, although there were several small storms in the early evenings. The second week was very changeable with prolonged periods of extremely heavy rain and storms, which fell as snow in the high mountains, and rather interrupted activity in the mountains. On at least one occasion there was a heavy frost in the valley during the night, although generally the temperature both in the valley and in the mountains was very mild, even at high altitudes. Amazingly, during the whole length of the meet there was very little wind. The previous winter had been

exceptionally short and mild, with very little snow, meaning that the glaciers were unusually heavily crevassed, making many of the routes more circuitous. Our French vocabulary increased by several new words, mostly to do with stormy weather, from the "Meteos" (weather forecasts) posted in several shop windows and guides bureaux.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

The two most useful maps were the 1:25,000 scale French IGN maps, sheets 3531 Est (St Gervais Les Bains) and 3630 Ouest (Chamonix Mont Blanc), which together cover the whole of the Mont Blanc range and the Aiguilles Rouges, and also cover the whole route of the Tour de Mont Blanc. Three Alpine Club Guide Books present a selection of climbs over the whole of the Mont Blanc Range:

Volume 1; Mont Blanc-Trelatete-Maudit-Tacul-Brenva

Volume 2: The Chamonix Aiguilles-Jorasses-Leschaux

Volume 3: Triolet-Verte/Dru-Argentiere-Chardonnet

In addition, for those fluent in French the Vallot Climbing Guides present a more comprehensive range of climbs.

THE EXPERIENCES

The remainder of the report is given over mainly to accounts of some of the excursions and activities undertaken by members and guests on the meet, and is a joint effort, as all Alpine efforts must be

THE QUOTE

Attributed to a first time alpinist, somewhere on a glacier in the dark:

"I didn't realise there were two four o'clocks in the day until I came on a YRC alpine meet!"

DAYS IN THE AIGUILLES ROUGES by David Smith

The success of any alpine venture must always be dependant upon a variety of factors; the mountains to be climbed, the weather, the campsite, the fitness, experience and compatibility of the party, getting a feel for the area at an early stage and a generous helping of good luck!

On the first day two of us decided to test our fitness and the effect of altitude on our bodies, and at the same time to get a feel for the area. With the best part of forty years separating us in age, it would prove to be an interesting day, comparing youth, fitness, strength and age, accompanied by stamina and experience. Leaving the campsite at Les Chosalets about 08.30, we walked through the relatively unspoiled village of Argentiere, from where a path leads off south-westerly. The gradient was not too taxing even for a first expedition and took us through the trees to a point at 1865m where the first clear view of the vast chain of the Mont Blanc range can be seen in its entirety. At this stage the path changes direction, heading north to the Chalet des Cheserys, from where it twists and turns before joining the main tourist route to the refuge at Lac Blanc at 2662m. Lac Blanc appeared somewhat unimpressive, and it was not until later in the holiday that it revealed its great attraction; a beautiful mirror image of the great snow peaks contrasting with the reality of the mountains themselves.

From the refuge, the path disappears and the real day begins with an enjoyable rock scramble before the first taste of the snows. Ropes and axes were not used, there being no crevasses to contend with or steep couloirs to concern us. We were (or at least I was) aware of the altitude and a number of halts were necessary before reaching the Col des Dards at 2790m. The rock ridge that presented itself was of Skye proportions. Two interesting chimneys blocked our way, but a few cautious moves took us out of difficulty. It was a delightful ridge heading ever nearer to the summit, before a traverse across the

east face brought us out onto the north-east ridge. Here the ridge is crossed and the final scramble is on the north side of the mountain revealing a completely different new set of mountains. We had now reached the-lower summit of the Alguille de Belvedere. minutes away from the 2965m top. From this vantage point the majestic massif of Mont Blanc can be admired from the impressive Chardonnet at the northerly end. to the elegant spires around Montanvers and the splendid dome of Mont Blanc to the south. The Massif des Atgufles Rouges. of which the Belvedere is the highest point. offers wildlife in the form of choughs, chamois and marmots. and flora including rare species of orchids. The area is criss-crossed with well maintained tracks joining various points of interest. The descent of the rocks was a little more difficult than the ascent. especially the open chimneys where considerable exposure was in evidence. On reaching the Col des Dards and the glacier again. the speed of descent increased. We took the most direct route to the refuge. taking gigantic strides down the safe snow slope. We arrived back at the campsite at about 6pm to await the arrival of the President and First Lady. We now felt tuned up for the great peaks of the valley.

At the end of the holiday. my daughter and I made a second attempt on the mountain. this time via La Flegere, but how different were the conditions. An addition of 30cm of new snow completely changed the character of the climb. It was a forcible reminder that mountains are never conquered; nature is the master and changes from one day to the next.

Like Great Gable. The Aiguilles Rouges have their own needle. affectionately known as the Alguillette d'Argentere. This impressive rock spike projects 25m into space at its shortest side. with only sufficient room on top for three people. Two interesting and well protected climbs were accomplished. one whilst it was sleetmg, The second spiralled around the pinnacle and included an exciting hand traverse. Well worth a visit on a half day off.

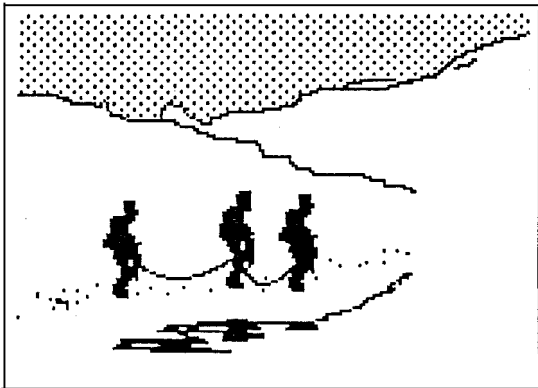
THE FIRST HIGH DAYS by Mike Smith

(An account of the first high peaks ascended on the meet by David Smith. John Devenport, Graham Salmon. Michael Smith. David Martindale and Chris Hayes).

The Albert Premiere Hut sounds right for our first sortie into the glaciated peaks. So that we do not over-extend ourselves so early in the meet, the approach to the hut starts by car to Le Tour, then cable car to the Col de Balme. All well thus far. The six of us. including two comparative novices on Alpine peaks then start the traverse along a pleasant path to the moraine below the hut. The final pull up the crest of the moraine reminds us what it is all about. The hut is a large affair, able to sleep 130. but by mid-afternoon on this sunny day there are scores of tourists scattered around the nearby rocks sunbathing. Boots off and donning an ill-fitting pair of plastic clogs we book in for the night. These conversations with the guardian are conducted in a mixture of French and English with the odd word of German. The most difficult part is convincing her of the validity of the Alpine Club card in the face of common usage of the B.M.C.'s reciprocal rights card.

No basking in the sun for us though; it is straight onto the glacier to get used to the crampons and placing ice screws. The skills are best sorted out in daylight. We return to the hut as a storm

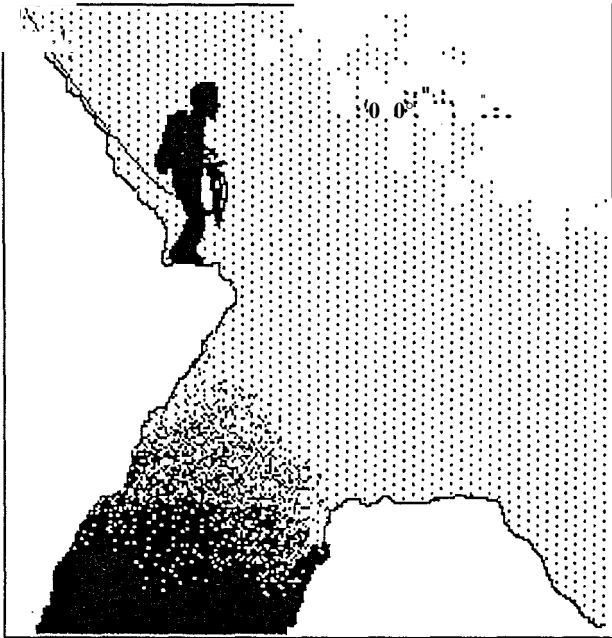
breaks. Getting off to sleep on the large mattress is not easy in the strange surroundings. what with all the shuffling and late arrivals. So it seems as if we have only just drifted into sleep when our 4am call sounds. Forcing down coffee, dry bread and jam is what passes for breakfast. Then out into the bustle of climbers each straining into harnesses, clipping on bits of gear or pulling on boots, gaiters or rucksacks by the beams of headtorch light. Strings of lights climb away over the rocks behind the hut to halt at the glacier. Here we roped up as two ropes of three and started the trudge up the Tour Glacier. A trudge it is too, head down, a pool of light at your feet, trying to keep a steady rhythm. not too fast or slow lest the rope should tug.



wondering all the time if you are the only one who is still half asleep and wanting to stop. The crevasses are rarely more than a foot wide and the route takes us rising steadily past a lump of rock, called Signal Reilly, to a less steep section of the glacier.

As dawn breaks, we are looking up the rock ridge of the Aiguille du Tour, capped by the magnificent rock table. This is not our route though. We plod steadily round to the right, past another ridge and aim for a col to the south of the summit, the Col Purtscheller. The guide book describes the ascent of the couloir as a "pleasant and straightforward" route but that did not allow for this winter's lack of snowfall and the warm summer. The glacier and steep snow slope give out well short of the col leaving us teetering on loose rock and scree. Inevitably some rocks are dislodged causing John and Chris to separate on their precarious stance to make way for a descending rock. Things improve towards the col and when we can all move together the guide book writer is partially forgotten!

After a second breakfast just on the col, looking across the Trient plateau, we cross from France into Switzerland without border formalities, and follow the side slopes of the glacier towards the rocky summit. The bergschrund requires a steep step or two up, but with good plants for the ice axe, it is not difficult. Steep snow, then we get rid of ice axes and crampons before taking to the summit rocks. These are steep but sound and take us to the small pointed summit in a matter of minutes. The only hazard here was a Swiss Army knife dropped by someone eating cheese on a slab of rock above us. A guided party make room for us as we arrive at 10.30am. Their enthusiastically singing guide accompanies our view of the Matterhorn, Weisshorn, Rimpfischhorn, Pligne d'Arolla and Grand Combin with a selection of 1960's hits. Thankfully they left, leaving us to enjoy the the Aiguille du Tour Sud, our first top of the meet, in glorious sunshine.



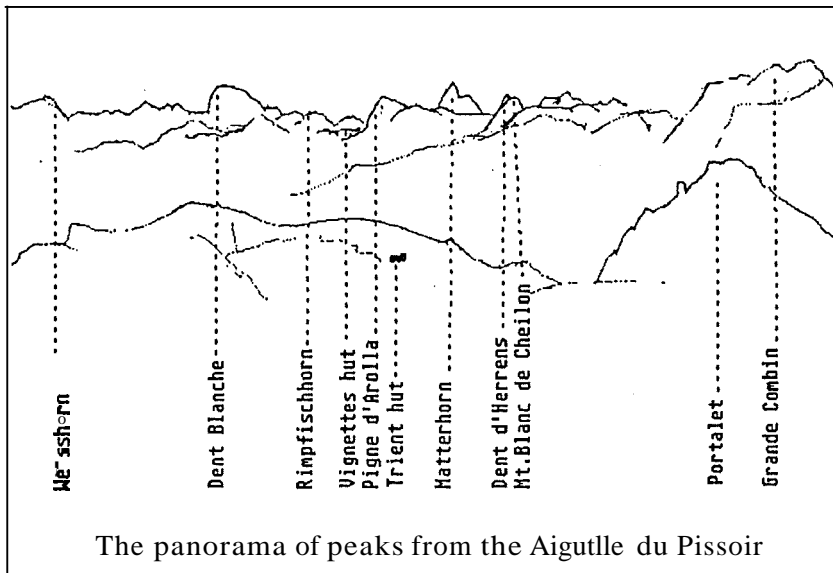
The descent went easily apart from the bergschrund, the snows of which have by now melted. Our path of an hour earlier is now a channel of granules pointing down a black void. The trick is to stand on the upper lip of this, and jump down and over onto the lower lip. Each of us hesitates a little, checking the rope has enough slack and readjusting our footing before launching off. Below that obstacle it is a steady path further south than our ascent route, crossing the Col Superior du Tour and back to the hut by 1.30pm. The return journey is shortened by David's account of his ascent of the Forbes Arete on the Aiguille du Chardonnet, a magnificent peak that towers impressively above our glacier.

The afternoon is whiled away with photography, reading, drying out boots, wetting our throats or dozing, then it is eat, bed and up again at 4am,

This time the objective is to be the Aiguille du Ptssoir, just north of yesterday's peak. The route is the same as far as the Signal Reilly, where we turn directly uphill and keeping to the right hand side of the glacier ascend good snow and ice to the Col du Midi des Grands. We dine just below this col to keep out of the cool wind that has sprung up. Over the col we traverse the upper part of the Glacier des Grands, cross the col between the Pissoir and the Aiguille du Pissotr before looking up at the true summit.

In front of us is a steep rock ridge with hard ice at its foot. A guide with a string of girls passes us and starts on this. His charges slip and slide on the ice before he can reach any rock for a belay. We wonder how many of them would have to slip together before they all come off. We don't stay around to find out! We decide to try the steep snow slope to the left on the east side of the ridge. Despite the odd patch of ice, it leads easily to the summit rocks. These start off as a scramble but a good head for heights was needed at the summit as drops of several hundred feet had to be stepped over.

Our third breakfast at 8.30am, sitting in warm sunshine on the top, is spent naming and arguing over the names of the numerous peaks visible to the north-east. The guided party had still not arrived at



The panorama of peaks from the Aiguille du Pissoir

the summit as we depart and follow the same route down. On less steep slopes below the last col, Chris practices ice axe braking, and we enjoy superb views of Mont Blanc from the north,

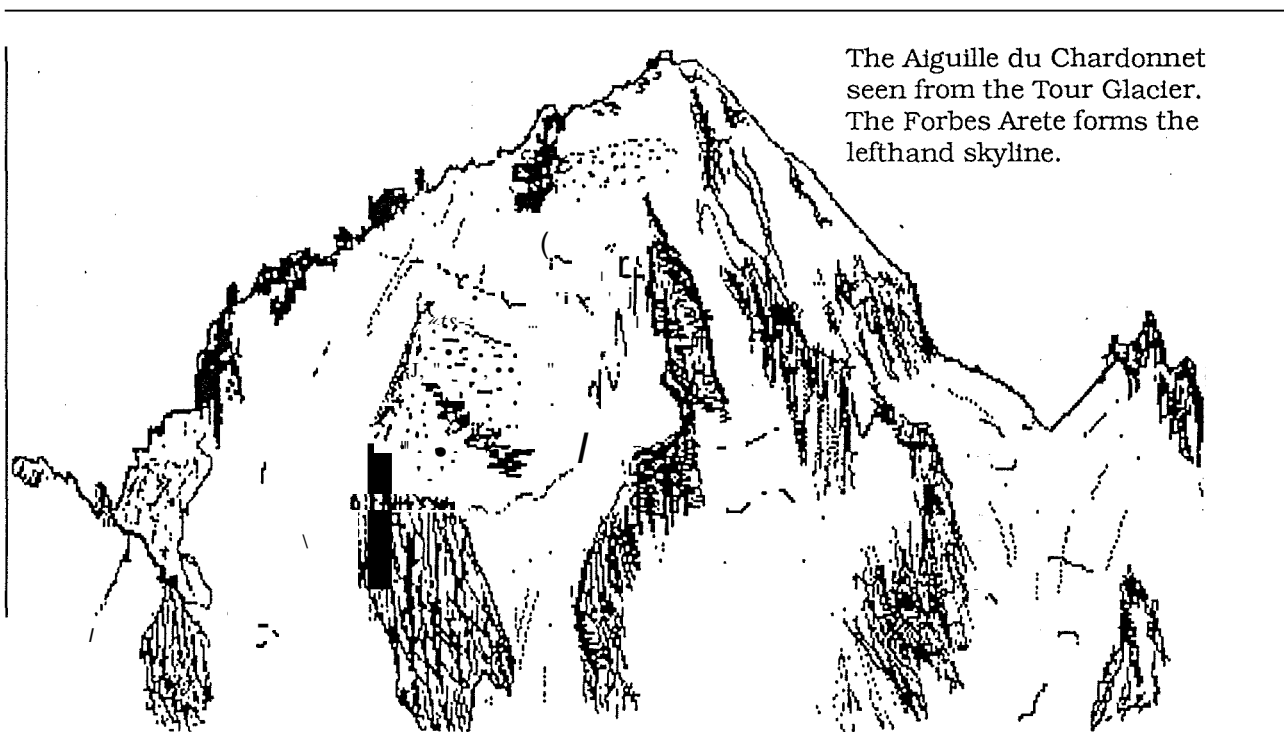
After refreshments at the hut, we pay the bill of £14 for two brief nights sleep and another £20 for those who bought their meals at the hut. The walk down proved to be a real knee wrecker. Straight down the crest of the moraine, across a steep face down to Le Tour. A drop of 1250m in less than 3KIn. The six of us climbing onto the 4.30pm bus for Chamonix look a hot and ragged sight.

By the evening though, drinks and a shower have restored some vitality to our minds and bodies, and planning starts for the next sortie,

TWO NIGHTS IN THE ARGENTIERE HUT by John Devenport

The same party of six set off from the valley base for a couple of nights at the Argentiere Hut, letting the Grand Montets telepherique take some of the uphill effort out of the approach to the hut, whisking us rapidly to the summit of the Aiguille des Grand Montets at 3295m in glorious hot sunshine. After soaking in the spectacular views of the Dru, Verte, the Argentiere basin, the Chamonix Aiguilles and Mont Blanc, we began the descent to the hut. Immediately we had to cross a large, slushy bergschrund onto the Glacier des Rognons, leading down to the Argentiere Glacier some way below us.

The author had previously descended this glacier twice before without any problem, However on this occasion the crevasses were more numerous and larger, and the snow bridges extremely delicate, due



The Aiguille du Chardonnet seen from the Tour Glacier. The Forbes Arete forms the lefthand skyline.

to the warm summer and lack of winter snow. Consequently, great care was needed when making this tiring and at times nerve wracking descent to the Argentiere Glacier, but once down to the valley floor the party was able to appreciate the breathtaking scenery in the Argentere basin, which must be one of the most spectacular valleys in the world. Its south side is enclosed by the precipitous north faces of the Verte, Les Droites, Les Courtes and the Triolet, at the east end by the sheer rock walls of the Pre de Bar and Mont Dolent, and on the north side by the splendid Atgullles d'Argentere and Chardonnet and the Tour Noir - a truly magnificent amphitheatre of rock, snow and ice. The silence was broken on several occasions by large serac avalanches crashing down the Cordier Couloir on the Verte.

No further problems were encountered as the group made its way up the relatively level, "dry" Argentere Glacier, which was void of almost all of last winters snow, then across the moraine to the modern hut, cantilevered out from large slabs high above the glacier, and below one of the ridges curving down from the Atguille d'Argentere, which was to be the objective the following day.

The Argentere hut was relatively empty, probably due to the major north face routes in the valley being so out of condition due to the lack of snow and ice. The cuisine provided by the guardian, sampled by three of the group was truly excellent; the other three opting to cook for themselves which necessitated carrying food, stove and cooking pots up to the hut.

The Aiguille d'Argentiere

The following morning, we were woken at 3.30am by the guardian, and after the usual silent ritual of forcing down breakfast at this unearthly hour, the group set off in the dark, scrambling over rocks to the moraines at the right hand side of the Milieu Glacier, snaking down from the summit. After strapping on crampons, the first problem was actually getting onto the glacier, which required a delicate traverse along a narrow ice ledge across the steep face of the glacier snout. Once on the glacier proper, the route was fairly easy, if somewhat circuitous due to the size and nature of the numerous crevasses which had to be crossed or bypassed. As the day became lighter, the party was able to look back across the valley and see the distinct line of light and shade as the sun cast its light onto the faces of the Verte and Les Droites.

The guide book accurately describes the route as "An elegant and scenic glacier expedition taking a direct line to the summit between the two long parallel ridges that descend to the Argentere Glacier". After a steady plod up the Milieu Glacier, a large bergschrund was reached below the long steep slope to the summit. From here progress was steady but slower as the snow slope steepened and in places was very icy; two smaller bergschrunds cut across the slope, but these were negotiated easily. Towards the summit ridge the crusty ice steepened even further but we were glad that our route was in the shade so that the ice remained firm. Just below the summit ridge one group opted for the rocks to the left hand side while the other group took the direct route straight up the ice.

Eventually, both parties reached the narrow, heavily corniced snow ridge leading the last few yards to the summit (3902m) at 9.15am, and had a much needed rest and a well earned breakfast. It would have been easy to sit around in the warm sunshine admiring the stunning views across to the Argentere Wall and beyond, but we were conscious that the warm sun was beginning to hit the snow slope, so without much delay the descent was started. Even a few minutes in the sun had deteriorated the snow slope considerably, meaning that particular care was called for in descending back to the main bergschrund, as we were fighting a losing battle to keep in the shadows as the sun rose higher in the sky. Many belays were made to ensure a safe if slow descent. From the bergschrund the rest of the descent was made more tedious by the soft snow, but soon we were back on the moraines below the glacier snout, reflecting on what had been a marvellous, memorable mountaineering day.

A few minutes later the group of six arrived back at the hut, where the afternoon was spent resting, basking in the sun after a tiring day.

Wandering on the Glacier des Amethystes

The following morning the party again had an early start, but poor weather - the cloud was well down below the summits of the Argentere Wall - and tired limbs from the previous days exertions meant

that there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm for another strenuous day. Consequently, it was decided that the objective for the day would be the Polnte Inferleur des Amethystes on the south side of the Amethystes Glacier.

Progress was slow-on even reaching the glacier due to us fumbling across very steep, loose moraine, but eventually we reached the boulder strewn dry glacier, and even managed to find some fine quartz crystals on a boulder in the dark! We later discovered that we had got onto the heavily crevassed glacier too low down, and had made more work for ourselves. A circuitous walk up and across the glacier led us to a very steep slope leading up to a gap in the ridge we were aiming for, but instead of being snow as described in the guide book this was brittle ice, so after a few tentative steps up the slope the party decided to retreat, taking the correct route down the moraine to the hut.

Spare gear was picked up from the hut. then the group descended the Argentere glacier back towards the Lognan, from where there were superb views across to the icefall. The final descent back to the valley was hot and steep, and the party was grateful for the cooled beers thrust into their hands on arrival back at the campsite.

A DAY ON MONT BLANC DE TACUL by Dennis Armstrong

After a few days it became clear that the young tigers were moving well and collecting peaks at a disgusting rate. So the President and I decided that we must do something to hold the end up of the Old Brigade. From a visit to the Club Alpin Francals in Chamonix, we saw that they were offering to take people up Mont Blanc de Tacul on Saturday 29 July by the "vole normal", so with relatively little hesitation we decided that this was for us. Mont Blanc de Tacul (MBT) at 4250m may be described as a Corbett to the Munro of Mont Blanc. The normal route goes up the steep snow slope to the shoulder and hence round a rocky outcrop to the summit. There are other routes up the east face of MBT, but those were another story!

The proposal was to meet at the Aigutlle du Midi telepherique station at 6.00am, take the first cabine and ascend to the top of the Aigutlle du Midi (3850m) the easy way. From there it is a descent to the Col du Midi (3650m), cross its broad expanse and make the ascent of MBT, returning by the same route. In all some 800m of climbing (say 2650 feet). We would be back in Chamonix in time for tea. All qualms evaporated at that prospect.

Being with the President, we were at the telepherique for 5.30am, and it was clear that we were not the only ones there. We got the last car parking spot and around the cabine station in the darkness there were hundreds of climbers with gear to match. It was an indication of the popularity of Chamonix in summer. We met our Guide, Alain, who spoke good English, and the fourth member of our rope, a Frenchman called Martus, and we booked places in cabine number five, the first available spaces. Prompt at 6.00am the first cabine went off and we waited our turn. At about 6.50 we got in and by 7.20 we were at the top of the Aigutlle du Midi. It was beginning to get light but very cold.. Alain organised the rope, himself leading, then Martus, then me, then our worthy Pres, and out we went from the tunnel, onto the snow arete that leads down to the col. It looked and was rather narrow and coming straight from the rock tunnel the exposure made itself felt. But soon the angle slackened and we were on the col, with the sun already shining over Switzerland and feeling much warmer.

We crossed the col, and into the shadow of our peak. It was about 8.00 by this time. Alain showed us how to go uphill with economical steps, and to overcome the effects of altitude, how to breathe deeply. The pace was quite slow, very deliberate, and there was one stop halfway up when we came out into the sunshine again. There was a distinct well-trodden path up the slope with three awkward crevasses to overcome. We reached the top by about 10.45. Not a cloud in the sky, only down below us over the valley. To the east, there was the Grandes Jorasses, the Verte and beyond that the Grand Combin and the Matterhorn protruding out of the cloud base. To the north the Aigutlle du Midi, well below us looked rather insignificant. To the west, just above us, Mont Blanc itself and in front of it Mont Maudt, It was superb!.

We stayed on the summit for about 20 minutes, enough time to get some food down but not too long for the effects of altitude to take effect. When we came down to begin the descent, there were parties still coming up, round the rocky nob, so Alain sent us straight down the snow slope, confidently telling

us to take a good grip of our pioletts, and exhorting us to get a move on "Allons-y, allons-y". He said later that it was important to cover as much ground as possible before tiredness inevitably took hold. So down we went, half-pulled by the man in front, half held back by the man behind, at a swift trot. It was about 13.00 hrs when we reached the Col du Midi again. We then realised that we had a lot of work still to do, the 200m back to the telepherique station! By this time tiredness had set in and somehow the psychological shock of having to go up again was acute. Alain felt it as well as us! It took about an hour to go up that last 200m, no one spoke, and I had to draw upon all the reserves of energy to get me up.

When we entered the rock tunnel, it was 14.10 hrs, and we were cheered in by the tourists looking out of the tunnel onto the arete. One grabbed the President's arm, saying "Bravo, les Alpmistes!". As he said, it made it all worthwhile. Pity she was not a little younger!

WALKING PARTIES by Dennis Armstong

Chamonix being in a valley, the walking was mainly on either side of the main valley and up various adjoining valleys. There were what was called the Grand Balcon Nord and Grand Balcon Sud. There was a longish climb up to Lac Blanc (2350m), the footpath wandering in and out of the forest, through a rocky defile by means of iron steps and so up to the little lake, so called because for most of the year there is snow around it. There was the Argentere Glacier to be explored, looking up to the Chardonnet and the Aiguille d'Argentere. Here the President tried very hard to move by mental shockwaves a huge ice stack poised obliquely, ready to fall, but his powers were unavailing. There was the route up to the Albert Premiere Hut onto the Glacier de Tour. Behind the Aiguille Rouge, there was the walk up the valley to the Refuge de la Pierre a Berard. There was the walk underneath the panorama of all of the Chamonix Aiguilles, from the Mer de Glace back to Chamonix.

All these were enjoyed, sometimes using an available telepherique to get over the main slog to gain height. Parties were off in good time, and there was enough variety to meet all needs. With hindsight, it should have been possible to think about organising a Tour du Mont Blanc party and organise modest climbing parties from the various huts onto the ridges. But these thoughts will be available for our next visit, for assuredly there will be one! Chamonix and Argentiere may be busy in summer, being so easy to reach from the autoroutes, but the Aiguilles are so dramatic, and the glaciers so huge, it cannot be ignored!

A FIRST EXPERIENCE by Mike Godden

As a new member, with no climbing experience and precious little experience of walking in high places, I was rather apprehensive about attending the Alps meet. Marcia and I were quite in awe at the prospect of walking above 6,000 feet, and glaciers were a whole new concept.

However, we need not have worried and the holiday commenced in good weather and good company on the ferry from Hull to Zeebrugge. The overnight trip enabled an alert start to a pleasant drive to Colmar, where we camped by the river in the two man (well, one man and one woman) tent. The following day, we arrived at the campsite near Argentiere. Our pitch was in a raised commanding position, suitable for taking salutes and the odd flypast.

The following day we were straight into the thick of it with other YRC colleagues, when an excursion to the Refuge de la Pierre a Berard and beyond took us to over 2200m. The views were magnificent and the flowers beautiful, but we did notice a lack of birds. Later in the holiday we were to hear the sound of shooting, but goodness knows at what.

The weather was very warm but noticeably cooler at altitude, and the thunder storms during the first few nights did not upset our plans greatly except for one very wet morning. Another day was marred by what appeared to be a chill that I had developed. However I recovered the next day and proceeded to drag Marcla around the mountains, becoming more enthusiastic as the days went by.

.As with all cocky individuals, I was soon knocked down to size on our trip to the Col de Balme. We decided to ascend the ridge to Les Grandes Autannes (2680m), but having got almost to the top my legs gave up, and also some of my "bottle", so we retraced our steps to the col. We then ascended the Croix de Fer (2343m) and completed an excellent days walking via Tete de Balme, Col des Posettes and L'Aiguillette des Posettes to Le Tour. The gentians on the ridge were magnificent.

During the holiday, several trips were made to Chamonix, with a super morning spent in the swimming pool. The sight of tourists going up to the Atgulle de Midi (3842m) inspired us to make the trip a few days later and on to the end of the line at Pomte Helbronner. A truly memorable day when we chided ourselves for not taking our ice axes and crampons with us. Suddenly we had become brave expectant walkers, but afterwards a more sensible attitude prevailed.

Further good walking days were enjoyed to the Argentiere Glacier Pointe de View, Lac Blanc, and the Grand Balcon Nord and Sud.

Sadly, we had to leave for home and planned to camp near Metz, but on arrival the site was closed so we drove to a site at Volstoff, which had been attractively described in the "Guide Officiel 1989" only to find a poor attempt at a country park with a permanent caravan site and vile toilets!

The return sea crossing was uneventful and we arrived home in Huddersfield rather subdued, but with happy thought in our minds. The events which took place in the Alps on this, our first Alps meet left Marcta and I with a feeling of gratitude towards the friends we had met. The help and advice given were greatly appreciated and attendance on this meet is to be recommended.

THE ASCENT OF MONT BLANC by John Devenport

The trials and tribulations of Mike Smith, Graham Salmon and John Devenport (and Chris Hayes).

Day One

.As the end of the meet approached, it seemed that we should make the most of the last few days, and also the good spell of weather that was forecast. After a short discussion in camp, a party of four decided to attempt Mont Blanc, via the Grand Mulets hut rather than the Gouter hut about which there were many stories of squalor and overcrowding. A telephone call managed to book four beds at the hut, so after stocking up with hill food for a couple of days and packing (and repacking) rucksacks to minimise weight as much as possible, the group set off confidently from the campsite late in the morning in blazing sunshine, taking the bus to Chamonix. The plan was to take the Atguille du Midi telepherique as far as the middle station at Plan de l'Atgutte, but on arrival at the station the group was confronted by a long snaking queue of people waiting to buy tickets, and several hundred others who already had their tickets waiting to go up the Midi! From announcements over the tannoy it soon became apparent that we would not be able to get on a telepherique until after 4pm, which would not give us long enough to get to the hut in time for a meal. In fact we would probably arrive well after we should be tucked up in bed!

After racking our brains to find possible alternatives we rapidly came to the conclusion that it was not feasible to continue our attempt that day, so highly embarrassed set off back to the campsite! It was particularly disappointing for Chris who had to return home on Friday so was unable to make another attempt on Mont Blanc, to crown what had been a very successful first Alpine season for him.

Day Two

At least we didn't have to pack the rucksacks again! And the President chauffeured the party of three to the telepherique station to ensure an earlier start. Even though we arrived at the station shortly after 9am, there were still long queues, and we didn't expect to get away until about mid-day, but when we reached the ticket office we were pleasantly surprised to find that there were three places left to the middle station on almost the next telepherique. So, sooner than expected, we were sat in the blazing sun at the buvette at Plan de l'Algutlle having elevenses and admiring the grandstand view of the Atguilles, particularly the north face of the Midi towering above us, including the curving snow arete of the Frendo Spur picked out in the sun.

Somewhat reluctantly, we shouldered our packs and set off for what we thought would be a shortish walk to the hut. Almost immediately the route crosses the Pelierins Glacier, and we made the mistake of following someone else's tracks, and ended far too high above the main track, causing us to lose time. Descending steep scree we reached the proper track which contoured round to meet the Bossons Glacier, where we roped up and strapped on crampons. From there we had to negotiate the maze of contorted, jumbled crevasses and seracs at the top of the tcefall, but route finding was made easier by the steady stream of people descending the Bossons Glacier from their attempts on Mont Blanc earlier in the day, providing us with clues as to practical routes through the ice.

The glacier steepened slightly above La .Jonction, with apparently only a short distance left to the hut, but soon we found our way barred by several large crevasses and seracs requiring a bit of ice climbing. We could also see two large groups of people clustered either side of a very large, long crevasse a short way above us. As we moved closer it became apparent that this was a bottleneck on the glacier with no other practical route in the vicinity. Soon we took our place in the long queue to cross the crevasse on a collapsed snow bridge, followed by a very steep ice climb up a narrow ice pillar on the far side of the crevasse. International cooperation was working well with groups on either side of this obstacle helping to belay each other, although there were of course the exceptions who tried to jump the queue, climbing down while others were trying to climb up, causing a dangerous tangle of people and ropes! Once we had crossed the bottleneck, a short sharp uphill slog brought us to the base of the large rock fin rising out of the glacier, on top of which is located the Grand Mulets hut at 3057m. Despite setting off early, we only just arrived at the hut in time for our evening meal, but afterwards sat out in the evening sun giving a warm glow to Mont Blanc du Tacul, Mont Maudit and Mont Blanc itself. We were also amazed to see several groups still descending the Bossons glacier from Mont Blanc well after 8pm. And so to bed, to try to get some rest before what was bound to be a long, tiring day tomorrow.

Day 3

1 a.m.!! It hardly seemed worthwhile going to bed as the guardian informed us that it was time to get up. Bread and jam were forced down with hot coffee, before the three of us set out at 1.40am into the inky blackness of the moonless but clear starlit night. A short steep scramble down the rocks below the hut brought us onto the glacier where several other groups were roping up and strapping on crampons. From there on it was just a case of following the distinct track up in the recent snow, winding its way up the glacier.

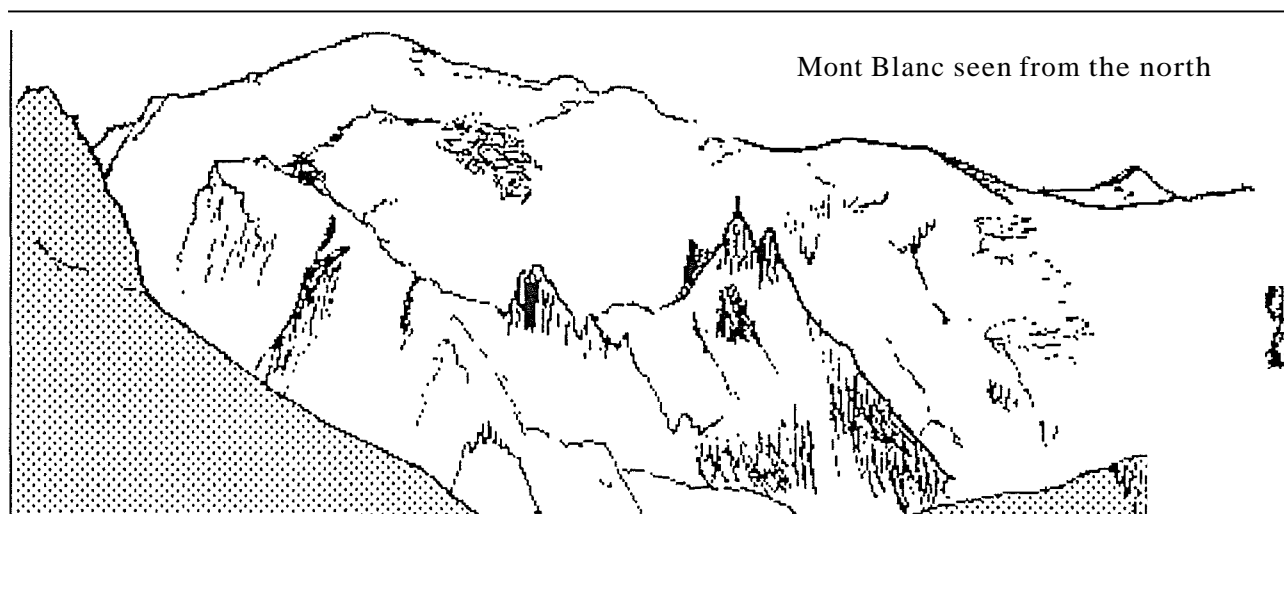
We were going at a good, steady pace and overtook several other ropes, probably starting to suffer with the altitude. Our entire world was contained in the small pools of yellow light cast by our headtorches, as we made plodding progress, forever upwards into the darkness of the night. Although it was a cloudless sky, the lack of moonlight meant it was virtually impossible to say exactly where we were as we wound our way up the glacier; it certainly would have been difficult to navigate in the dark without the good track to follow. Only one large crevasse had to be crossed on the ascent, bridged by an aluminium ladder and it was a weird experience crawling across with the dim light from the headtorch hardly penetrating the blackness of the deep crevasse below.

Rest stops were taken every hour, and by about 4.30am the sky started to lighten slightly at the coldest part of the night. A longer rest was needed to warm the feet of one of the party, before we set off again to climb the short steep slope to the Vallot refuge at 4362m, by which time it was light. At this point the tracks from the Grand Mulets and Gouter Huts met and there were literally hundreds of people to be seen snaking up the Bosses Ridge towards the summit. We joined the queue and started to make slower progress as one member of our party was beginning to suffer from an upset stomach. After a long stop on the Bosses ridge, he was persuaded to continue the ascent as we were now so close to the top. Eventually we arrived on the last very exposed, but almost horizontal snow arete leading to the summit. Here there was an almost total impasse, with dozens of people trying to pass on the narrow arete, and we became conscious of the icy blast from a chilly wind blowing across the ridge from the south. After literally not moving for over half an hour, we decided to retreat at about gam, after having got to within 25m horizontal and 3m vertical distance from the actual summit!

The descent of the rollercoaster Bosses Ridge was without incident, and we were soon warmed again with a brew in the sunshine near the Vallot hut. We decided to descend via the Gouter Hut, where we stopped for food and a much needed drink, and also confirmed that this hut really was becoming extremely squalid. This couldn't detract from the magnificent view across to the north-west face of the Algtulle de Bionassay. Great care was needed when scrambling down the very steep rocky ridge

below the Gouter Hut, which was covered in slush, and also when rushing across the Grand Couloir down which there was the usual stonefall. A rapid descent was made across the rocky desert to the Nid d'Aigle at the end of the Tramway Mont Blanc, which we hoped to take down to the valley. Hundreds of daytrippers (all with tickets) also had the same idea, and we had a long confusing wait before we could buy tickets and force ourselves onto the last train of the day! The last mistake of the day was getting off the train at the wrong station on the way down, which meant that we had to take two taxi rides and a train ride before arriving back at the campsite at Argentiere at about 9pm, after a long but very enjoyable day, to be greeted by the YRC group with the now customary (and very welcome) celebratory drinks.

And the moral of the story: - if you want to get away from it all, choose somewhere away from the hordes on Mont Blanc!!



A NIGHT AT THE COUVERCLE HUT by John Devenport

To mark the end of an extended stay in the Alps, I decided to ascend to the Couvercle Hut for a night. One of the main reasons for wanting to visit this hut was to see for myself its spectacular setting, described to me by my father, who visited this hut in 19511.

From the railway terminus at Montanvers the route descends ladders down steep slabs onto the Mer de Glace, then follows the centre of the glacier until it splits into the Leschaux and Tacul Glaciers. I was slightly nervous of going such a long way on a glacier by myself, but it was "dry" along its entire length and most of the larger crevasses were clearly visible, so there was little real danger.

The glacier revealed superb views of the Chamonix Aiguilles and deep into the heart of the Mont Blanc range. Near the junction of the glaciers it became necessary to cross an extensive area of unpleasant moraine but before long I arrived at a large arrow painted on the vertical slabs at the east side of the glacier indicating the start of the "eschelles" or ladders, providing a long and airy route up through the slabs. The ironwork and steps cut into the rock were a work of art, but eventually the slope levelled out and a pleasant track led the last few yards up to the nearly empty Couvercle Hut, with smaller winter hut sheltered beneath the enormous "Pierre de Couvercle" located a few yards away.

After a welcome meal provided by the guardian, I joined the other climbers on the balcony outside the hut, soaking in the views of the north face of the Grand Jorasses, the Dent du Geant, the Brenva face

of Mont Blanc, the Chamonix Aiguilles and countless other peaks. Closer to hand were the Motne, the Verte, Les Droites, Les Courtes and the Triolet, all of which looked possibilities for future trips to this part of the Alps.

The following morning I felt positively decadent not getting up until 6am, at first light, to photograph the sunrise over the mountains. After a late breakfast, several hours were spent sat around the edge of the Talefre Glacier amongst a colourful array of alpine flowers, looking at and photographing the magnificent mountains, and watching a family of marmots playing on the moraine. A large group of snow finches flitted between the rocks, and the brilliant scarlet and grey plumage of a wallcreeper added to the overall colour of the scenery.

The forces of nature were much in evidence as I was mesmerised by the awesome sight of the huge moraine, at the eastern end of the Talefre Glacier, being undercut by glacial meltwater, causing almost continuous landslides, sending hundreds of tons of boulders and other glacial debris crashing onto the Leschaux Glacier, several hundred feet below.

Eventually I made my way back down the ladders to the Mer de Glace and back to the hustle and bustle of Montenvers. The rest of the day was spent on the Grand Balcon Nord, traversing below the Chamonix Aiguilles to the Plan de l'Aiguille, followed by a long steep decent back to Chamonix.

Although no peaks had been ascended, this had been a very enjoyable two days, providing me with an enjoyable solo venture and several stimulating ideas for future trips to the area.

JCD
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