



Moraine Lake



Darwin Canyon

Iain crossing Wallace Creek and then descending from Mount Whitney



ALPINE MEET - VALNONTÉY AOSTA, ITALY 15 - 22 July 2006



Time to relax



Derek Bush on Gran Paradiso



Half way



Lac Gele from Piccolo Emilius



David Hick & Richard Dover on Monte Emilius Via Ferrata



David Hick on Monte Emilius



Laveciau Glacier



Paul Dover on Punta Vallattaz



Crossing upper snow field



Gran Paradiso summit

The meet was hailed by some attending as one of the best Alpine meets in the club's recent history. Others, after returning home, felt that it lacked the camaraderie of some earlier meets where all were camping together. The venue was selected and the meet organised by Mick Borroff. His comprehensive preliminary notes proposed camping at Lo Stambecco in Valnontey and for those using the hotel accommodation, the adjacent Hotel La Baume, both managed by the Herren family as our base.

The first members arrived on Saturday 15th. The Davids Hick and Martindale had been unable to book in at La Baume so stayed in Hotel Herbetet higher up the village. Mick, having made a solo drive via Lausanne and Grand St Bernard, arrived late to camp at Lo Stambecco. The main arrival day was Monday when Derek Bush, Albert Chapman, John Lovett, David Smith and Ken Aldred booked in to La Baume having flown from Manchester to Geneva and driven via the Mont Blanc tunnel. Andrew and Ann Luck arrived the same day as guests of Albert and also checked into La Baume, Ann having been on our Ladakh meet in 2005. Paul and Richard Dover arrived on Tuesday in Richard's motorhome, their wives having chosen to return home after a foursome holiday in France.

On arrival in Valnontey Richard and Paul went to Lo Stambecco to check who else had arrived. They had no records of any visitor named Borroff nor any visitor references to the YRC, so we searched the other venues in the valley all to no avail. By chance, they met Mick walking from the campsite to La Baume; only then did we find out that every thing was booked in the name of our intrepid traveller Chapman. This continued with the subsequent hut bookings throughout the meet! Jack Short, who lives only 45 minutes from Gatwick Airport took a flight to Turin and picked up a hire car to drive to Valnontey to stay in a nearby B&B. Mike and Marcia Godden attended for the first week staying at La Baume.

Although the party was accommodated in several locations within the village, we tended to gather at La Baume in the evenings either for dinner or for drinks after.

The village of Valnontey is at 1700m is in a narrow valley named after the village. It is surrounded by ridges 3000-4000m high and with a raging river fed by a number of glaciers at its head and is the

eastern of two valleys running north from the main attraction of Gran Paradiso. It is rated as one of the easier 4000m peaks, the ascent of which was to be our primary goal. However, the area had many other attractions. It is relatively quiet, but the weekends were rather different when city dwellers from Milan and Turin migrate away from the unremitting heat at home. It was 38°C and very oppressive in Aosta but a pleasant low-mid 20's at >1700m.

Mick's research had identified a number of 25,000:1 maps of the area and recommended the IGC 101 and 102 as the best. These were purchased in Britain, at great expense, only to find that the local communes publish their own much cheaper versions and on which all the local paths are numbered. These proved to be much more user friendly.

Group members had a range of aspirations: Mick 'needed' to reach at least one peak every day, Richard and David Hick were close behind and Paul wanted to but ran out of energy and so often took a middle route. The others were more content with enjoying walks along the beautiful valleys or up to the mountain huts typically at 2400-2700m sometimes enjoying their hospitality for lunch.

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

Sunday 16th - Mick walked from Valnontey up to the Refugio Vittorio Sella and north along the path traversing high above Valnontey to the L'Ouille col before ascending Monte Erban (3004m) by the south east flank. Near the summit, he was watched by a herd of about twenty chamois. The return was via the col and the Buttier Alp, then Cogne and along the riverbank back to Valnontey.

Monday 17th - He went by car to Gimillan then walked up the Vallone del Grauson and visited Lago Corona (2702m) and onto the three Laghi di Lussert (2907m). The flowers and butterflies in this beautiful valley were outstanding and the Grauson thoroughly deserved its acquired nickname of the "Valley of Flowers".

Tuesday 18th - Mick, Albert, Ann, Derek and David S walked from Valnontey up the Alp Money and traversed to the head of the Valnontey valley, returning alongside the river. They paused to take photographs of a chamois, then later, a vixen collecting bread thrown by passing tourists to feed her cubs.

Wednesday 19th - Mick and David H again walked from Gimillan. They ascended to the head of the Grauson valley and climbed Punta Tersiva (3512m) via the benign Tessonnet glacier with virtually no snow cover. The scree above lead to the large bronze statue on the summit. They returned by the same route. Paul and Richard joined Mike and Marcia for their first walk and followed the same route up to Grauson-Dessus admiring large flocks of butterflies en-route. Derek walked with Albert, David and Ann to Lillaz (John went to Lillaz with them) then they had a steep ascent to a small lake called Loie where Albert and Ann had a swim. They returned by a circuitous route through a very pleasant alp and steep woods, by the Torrent de Bardoney back to Lillaz - a very pleasant day. (Walks 12 & 13 on the AIAT Cogne Gran Paradiso Map) They returned by bus from Lillaz to Cogne where fortunately David Hick picked them up.

Thursday 20th - Mick, Richard and Paul, walked from Lillaz doing a circular route around the Vallone di Urtier towards the Finestra di Champorcher, via Lago Ponton (2602m) and the Refugio Sogno di Berdze. They returned by the Alta Via 2 footpath. Others had a leisurely day round the botanical gardens in Valnontey.

Friday 21st - Most had a restful morning performing either domestic duties or preparing for the big push up Gran Paradiso the following day. After a collective lunch in Valnontey we drove down into the Aosta valley and then up to Pont in Valsaverenche at the road head of the Torrente Savara valley. From here, Mick, Albert, Rod Tozer (Albert's guest), David S, Derek, Paul, Richard, Ann, David H, John and Jack walked up the mule track to the Refugio Vittorio Emmanuelle at 2732m, dodging thunder showers on the way. The hut was full and dinner was accompanied by a hub of discussion. We retired by 21.00 to prepare for our early rise.

Saturday 22nd - Up at 4.00am for breakfast The summing party of Albert, Rod, David S, Derek, Paul, Richard, Ann, and David H led by Mick, finally left the hut at 05.30 for the ascent of the Gran Paradiso. It starts over very large boulders which were awkward to navigate in the dark, followed by moraines and stretches of bear rock. David S decided to return to the hut before we reached the glacier, as he was not feeling well. The remaining members, having donned crampons,

continued via the normal route up the Laveciau and Gran Paradiso glaciers.

The lower glacier was steep hard ice with much gravel embedded in it. For at least four members of the party, this was a new experience and progress was slow but Mick tutored them well. At about 3450m Paul was very tired and decided, albeit reluctantly, to turn back. However, still only 08.00 the glacier was still frozen hard and the solo descent was done with great caution. Below the glacier, route finding was difficult but made easier lower down by the path over bare rock having been swept clean. Lower down, I (Paul) enjoyed watching a marmot scavenging amongst the boulders. For the remaining members the route continued up the Gran Paradiso glacier to the scramble leading to the Madonna and the true summit rocks. This was reached at about 11.00 by all except Rod who had decided to wait at about 3600m for the descending party. At the time of descent the ice was melting rapidly making conditions more difficult. The party split into two roped groups for the descent over the glacier and back to Vittoria Emmanuelle; most people didn't arrive at the cars until between 17.00 and 18.30.

Meanwhile, David S had joined John L and Jack Short at Vittoria Emmanuelle in time for a second breakfast. Jack left the group at this point and walked the traverse to the Chabod Hut for a further overnight stay before descending to the valley. David and John descended via the Mule track to Pont.

The drive back to Valnontey was somewhat rushed to make the 19.30 dinner at La Baume.

Sunday 23rd - This was for many a day of recovery but Mick, still full of energy, went to view the Lillaz waterfalls and then walked up to Lago di Loie, returning the same way. Richard and Paul rashly decided to visit the Pont d'Ael Roman Aqueduct on their mountain bikes. This included an enjoyable 1000m descent. However, before reaching the turning to Pont d'Ael they decided that the return was going to be a much more tiring task and so turned round where they could look down at the bridge from the main road.

Three hours later and a lot lighter they arrived back at the camp site. Paul learned a hard lesson, "so much for our day of rest!"

Jack stayed in the Torrente Savara valley for two nights, had some easy walks watching the Marmots and Ibex, enjoying good food and wine, and dodging the thunderstorms, before returning to Turin

Monday 24th - Mick, David H, Richard and Paul, drove to Pila - a growing ski resort - at 1770m. From here they took the chair lift up to Lac di Charmole and dropped into the Vallon di Comboe. Paul then walked up to the Refugio Arbolle and up to Lago Gele nestling under Monte Emilius at the head of the Arbolle valley to meet the returning party. With no sign of them on the summit ridge, he decided to descend only to meet David just below the lago. David had made a difficult and time consuming decent off the ridge before the west ridge.

After leaving Paul the others had a stiff ascent to the Bivouac Federigo at the Col Carrel, marking the start of the via ferrata del Monte Emilius. This involved negotiating a total of about 1000m of fixed rope. The route progressed over a spectacular and airy suspension bridge strung between two rocky towers, up the north ridge of Piccolo Monte Emilius, before turning up the west ridge of Monte Emilius (3559m). Ibex were seen just below the summit. The descent was effected down the voie normale to the Colle del Tre Capuchini and down to the splendid Arbolle Refuge, where we all enjoyed a superb restaurant quality four-course meal and an excellent night's sleep.



Bivouac Federigo

Derek went with John and President Ken up to the Sella hut. John was very tired when he got there but he enjoyed the bottle of beer the President bought him. So did Ken! They met David Martindale at the top; He was pleased to have got up considering he is waiting to go into hospital for an operation.

Tuesday 25th - After a substantial breakfast at Arbolle Refuge, Mick, David H, Paul and Richard

ascended Punta Vallettaz (3089m) and descended the via ferrata down the craggy southwest ridge to the Col Tza-Setze where the party divided. Paul and Richard descended to Cogne via Arpisson where Paul satisfied his agricultural queries by viewing a relatively modern cheese-making farm. It had two breeds of cows and one of goats with all the milk made into cheese. The herds had only been on the mountain pastures for 10 days, approximately two weeks later than normal. They typically return to the valley on 20 September.

As we arrived at Gimillan, the thunder rain descended on us with a vengeance. The road walk back to Valnontey was very wet, the only time!

Meanwhile Dave and Mick continued west along the ridge to the Colle del Drinc, where a threat of a thunderstorm forced a descent back down to Pila. They observed a distinctively marked black and grey snake on the grassy slopes later identified as a poisonous Asp Viper.

For Derek it was his last day. He needed some solitude, so he decided to go off and solo the traverse between the Sella hut and the Casolari Herbetet. "The walk is graded EE which means it is considerably more difficult than the normal mountaineering track in these valleys. Back up to the Sella hut, a little bit faster than yesterday. The first part of the walk is on an old hunting track and just below the Lauson Lake, Derek saw a herd of chamois grazing quite happily taking no notice of him. The traverse is called the Lauson Crossing - Herbetet. The path runs along 'unprotected and steep slopes'. There is a short passage with cord and ladders. It is a most enjoyable trip. He only saw two other parties of two all day coming in the opposite direction. After the Herbetet the thunder started and at first I thought it would stay in the next valley but eventually it came right up the Valnontey valley and for the first time on our holiday I got quite wet".

We were joined on the Lo Stambecco campsite by Chris Hilton and family for two nights. They were enroute to Tuscany.

Wednesday 26th - Ken, John, David S, Albert, Derek, Ann and Andrew departed after breakfast for Geneva airport. Unfortunately, the road works around the airport resulted in the first five missing their flight which resulted in a very expensive alternative ticket. Ann and Andrew had

a later flight and had time to ascend the Aiguille du Midi by cablecar to 3842 m from Chamonix en-route to Geneva.

Mick walked from Lillaz south up the Vallon di Valeille, ascending to the Casolari de l'Arolla used by the Park Rangers and then to the Colle dell'Arolla (2890m) where he saw several ibex. The col was crossed and a descent made into the Vallon di Bardonney and back to Lillaz on the Alta Via 2 path.

Paul and Richard cycled up the valley from Valnontey to the end of the track above Vermiana and returned to Valnontey. Then further off road cycling to Lillaz via Silvenoire returning via Cogne. In the afternoon, they changed to Richard's motor bike to visit Pont d'Ael Roman Aqueduct, the wine co-operative at Aymavilles and Aosta.

Thursday 27th - Mick and David H walked from Montroz up the Vallone del Grauson but ascended from Crouzet Alp to Lac Money and then climbed Monte Creyaz (3015m) where they surprised two ibex immediately below the summit rocks. A descent was then made down the Vallon di Liconi towards Cogne and down to the abandoned Colonna iron mine and back to Montroz.

Richard and Paul were joined by the latter's nephew Mark from Keighley who was working in Sainte Foie-Tarrentaise and is a keen mountain biker, championship white water rafter, 26 years old and very fit! They followed the same route as Derek had done two days earlier and described above. They too found the walk very enjoyable although the traverse was easier than expected from comments heard. One interesting experience was helping two parties who had become stuck at the Torrent crossing. Mark valiantly got them all across.

Friday 28th - Mick, Richard and Paul departed on the drive to the Channel ports leaving David's Hick and Martindale who left on Saturday. Paul and Richard used time in hand to visit the First World War museum of the Somme at Peronne. This proved to be a rewarding but emotional experience.

This was a most enjoyable meet in a delightful location and with good company. Thanks are due to Mick Borroff, Derek Bush and Jack Short for contributions used in the above report.

Paul Dover

A PERSONAL IMPRESSION OF PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GRAN PARADISO

Having enjoyed more than fifty years in alpine regions and dozens of mountain successes, largely with support and comradeship of members of our remarkable club; came failure for me on the Grand Paradiso. The beautiful unspoiled valleys of the Cogne area directed my thoughts to a new more relaxed approach to the Alpine regions.

It was after midnight before we reached our hotel, the Hotel La Balme, in the lovely village of Valnontey by car from Geneva airport despite having three navigators and Sat Navigation. Our first good impression of the area was stopping for a meal, very late in the evening en route provided by a friendly innkeeper in a busy restaurant. The next good impression; our hotel as left open for us with a note of welcome on the desk directing us to our rooms. In the morning we discovered village buildings that had not have changed since the days of our YRC forebears Conway, Walker and Whympier. The dry stonewalls of these buildings, their heavy stone roofs and the brown weathered timbers provided that link with the past. The inside of our hotel was comfortable and modern and the young owners and their staff seemed to go out of their way make us welcome.

My first excursion was with a few of our group taking us along a route running parallel to the Torrent Valnontey but heading upwards though trees to the Money Hut at 2327 m with splendid views of L'Herbetet mountain to the east. The return route was along opposite side of the river. A semi-tame vixen near our village was collecting offerings from walkers to feed its cubs.

The following day we walked down towards Cogne, skirting the town heading to the pretty village of Lillaz joining route 12, all routes are numbered and well signed, then upwards to a small tarn, Lago Loie at 2396 metres. Two of the party discreetly removed some clothing and enjoyed a refreshing swim. After walking up through the beautiful countryside with tree-lined paths we reached meadowland and passed the clear water of numerous tarns. The hills around were quite reminiscent of Scotland but without midges. We descended into the valley of Torrent Urtler to Lillaz just in time for a timely bus to return us back to Valnontey.

The ascent to Refuge Vittorio Emanuele filled most of another day after a drive round to the west flank of Gran Paradiso; again through magnificent countryside. It was a 5am start from the hut. The first part of the route to the mountain crossed huge blocks of rock leading towards the Glacier du Mont-Grand-Paradis. On reaching 3000m I decided that, not feeling at my best I thought it sensible to return to the hut and the valley. The pleasant descent walking through the beautiful landscape persuaded me that my fascination and drive to climb the higher peaks was not essential to my enjoyment of the mountains; there was much more to these wonderlands. Oh dear, I must be feeling my age! Well maybe not, it's Austria next year.

On successive days small groups of us visited different areas; one memorable trail leaves Lillaz by a steep meandering road that joined route 10 leading to a route that parallels the Torrent Urtier.

FLORA AND FAUNA Ken Aldred

Valnontey, the base for this year's Alpine meet, is the site of the Alpine Garden Paradisia, a botanical garden given over to the plants of the Grand Paradiso National Park as well as specimens from other parts of the Alps and more world wide locations.

Most of our members on the meet spent some time in the garden, busy with notebooks or cameras and generally being fully appreciative of the work which has gone into the development of the site since its foundation in 1955. Unlike a number of botanic gardens this one is a real educational experience with well labelled specimens, a wide variety of growing media including calcareous glacial drifts, peat beds and peat bogs and a variety of petrographic examples from the Cogne Valley.

Lichens, again well labelled, are an unusual added attraction. The garden attracts a very wide range of butterflies, even more than the absolute clouds of them seen on the damp woodland paths in the valley.

On the hillsides, as expected, we didn't see as many flowers as in the Dolomites, but nevertheless we came across sufficient to satisfy the keenest botanist. The two attractive gentians of last year, *G. acaulis* and *G. verna*, were not seen by me, but the tiny snow gentian, *G. nivalis* was seen in a number of localities on the west side of the Valnontey valley at the Money Alp, well below the Glacier de Money. *G. lutea* and *G. punctata* were quite abundant on both sides of the valley. Edelweiss, always associated with any Alpine region, was not seen except in the garden next door to the hotel where masses of it hid some of the more photogenic plants!

Any gardener who has cursed the invasiveness of rose bay willow herb could have taken some comfort from its smaller alpine relative, *Epilobium fleischeri*, a beautiful flower of the higher hillsides. Daphnes, dianthus, campanulas, sempervivums and *Dryas octopetala* were very common as were the dwarf willows and dwarf birch. Seen in one location was a beautiful *phyteuma*.

The symbol of the National Park is the Ibex. I didn't see any but feel sure that other members saw vast herds of them as soon as I was out of sight.

I did come across a chamois which was very carefully stalked in order to get to within two or three hundred metres for a photograph. Later in the week on the way down to Cogne was a fine specimen posing by the side of the road, causing traffic chaos as motorists stopped for a snap. The problem was then trying to take up a position which avoided all the spectators spoiling any chance of convincing friends that the shot was taken in the wild. Marmots were plentiful on the way up to the Vittoria Sella hut, often heard but not commonly seen.

Leaving route 10 near Pinas we joined route 10E that climbed upwards into our destination, the valley of flowers. Not for nothing had the valley been so named, vast areas of colour opened up before us. My companions had however another objective, a swim in the lovely waters of Lago Pontonnet close to Colle del Pontonnet. We returned to Lillaz by the same route.

Our visit to this pleasant part of Italy was all too short and a return should surely be pencilled in for return.

David Smith

Present:

Ken Aldred, Mick Borroff, Derek Bush
Albert Chapman, Paul Dover, Richard Dover
Marcia Godden, Mike Godden, David Hick,
John Lovett, Jack Short, David Smith
Andrew Luck (Guest) Ann Luck (Guest)
David Martindale,

Further detail of the fauna will appear in the next edition of the journal