

Alpine Meet
Ailefroide,
Dauphine Alps
July / August 1996

Compiled by John Devenport from contributions supplied by members and guests recounting their experiences on the meet.

The President's Overview

by Derek Bush

The Club last visited Ailefroide in 1991. In John Devenports excellent introduction to that meet report he described in detail the location, the camp site, the maps and guide books required and even the weather! I have no intention of plagiarising John's report and will merely remind readers that Ailefroide lies at the head of the Gyronde {Vallouise} Valley at a height of 1500m.

For some of us towing caravans, the most exciting, perhaps I should say terrifying part of the whole holiday was the ascent {and decent} by road from L'Argentiere. This is ignoring the one way tunnel systems which still seem to be operating on the east side of the Lautaret pass! It is hoped that next years Alps meet is more caravan friendly. Older members will scoff and say the Club is becoming too soft. I am sure there is scope for an article, humorous or otherwise, in a subsequent bulletin.

The only other variation to the 1991 account was of course the weather. 1991 seemed to be better. The first week or our 1996 meet was excellent but mixed weather arrived the second

Monday onwards although this did not deter several parties having excellent mountaineering and rock climbing days as the reports will reveal.

We had as guests of the Club, brought by Tim Bateman, Jennie Allen of the Rugby MC and Pete Hardy of the Hinchley MC. They were assets to the party both on the mountain and socially back in camp. It is only when you are sharing a rope with much younger people, on what for the writer are serious mountains do you realise that Anno Domini is catching up with you.

As a first visit to an Alps meet I was somewhat apprehensive. Would I cope in the huts and the early starts? 3.30 am was never my best time of day, never mind thinking about donning plastic boots, gaiters, climbing harness, head torches and all the other paraphernalia of the 'modern' climber. Did I cope? You had better ask my companions but I can only say my holiday would have been far more traumatic and therefore much less enjoyable without the help, assistance and cajoling of all my companions young and old alike.

I thank them sincerely.

Maps and guide books

The most useful map was Cartes IGN 3436ET 'Meije and Pelvoux' which covered the whole of the Parc National des Ecrins at a scale of 1:25,000. Walking and ski-touring routes, together with the refuges were clearly marked.

The Alpine Club Guide 'Ecrins Massif - Selected Climbs', though not giving all of the routes, was more than adequate for the mountaineering needs during the meet.

The attendees

The following members and guests sampled the delights of this part of the French Alps for all or part of the meet:

Jennie Allen
Dennis Annstrong
Joan Annstrong
Tim Bateman
Derek Bush
John Devenport
Marcia Godden
Mike Godden
Pete Hardy
Katrina Holt
Mark Pryor
Alister Renton
~~Chris Renton~~
Neil Renton
Arthur Salmon
Graham Salmon + Sally
David Smith
Elspeth Smith
Frank Wilkinson

KEVIN RENTON
SITENA RENTON
ALEX RENTON
ELLEN RENTON

Montagne des Agneaux

by Neil Renton

This mountain was to be the first peak of the Alpine Meet and my first major snow peak. The first Sunday of the meet trip saw the departure of Alister, Alex and Mark, Jenny, Tim and Pete, and finally David, Derek and myself, for the Glacier Blanc hut. The two hour walk to the hut gave us all fabulous views of Mount. Pelvoux and Ailefroide

Upon arrival at the hut we booked in, finding the small self catering room. Dinner lived up to the usual standard - all appreciating David's culinary expertise. Everybody rose at four to find horrendous weather conditions - the majority headed off back to bed,

but Mark and Alister kept a look out for any improvements in the weather. After a slight improvement in conditions we departed from the hut at approximately six o'clock.

The peak provided a varied route, initially over moraine leading to a snowy col. The col enabled me to put on my strap-on crampons, for the first time, in extremely windy conditions - it was almost inevitable that they would come off on descent. The second part of the ascent was in cloud, over a forty five degree snow slope. This was an excellent experience, although traffic on the slope was bad, from those people who had begun an early descent. At the second col we removed our rucksacks for a fifty metre rock climb, which Alister impressively led. The final part of the peak was a scramble over rocky terrain before a second snow slope leading to the summit cairn. The view from the 3663m peak was poor but the pleasure of reaching the top subdued this disappointment.

The descent was, for me, surprisingly rapid - although the clear in the weather was untimely - giving a view of the exposed abseil. Arrival back at the hut saw better weather and enabled a dry walk down to the car park - where David and myself saw a marmot which, according to David, had been tamed at the circus! The mountain was a thoroughly enjoyable day out that gave me the desire to have a go at the Barre des Ecrins.

A bivouac in the Ecrins

by Pete Hardy

It was hard work ascending the winding path from Pre De Madame Carle toward the Glacier Blanc. Each of us was hampered by the 40lb. pack

we shouldered under the hot afternoon sun. Every step an agony, the Refuge Du Glacier Blanc seemed to take an eternity to reach. We had travelled this way before, yet we each still revelled in the fantastic views afforded us; Mont Pelvoux its summit partly obscured by cloud with the Glacier des Violettes draped over its northern flank; L'Ailefroide massif clearly visible showing its East summit, scene of our earlier adventures closest to us. If hard labour was the price to pay for all of this, then it was surely worth it.

We stopped off at the refuge and each of us paid 16 Francs for a can of cold pop and we sat in the sun watching Choughs gliding in the mountain air for a while. We resumed our journey; upwards over the moraine heaps above the refuge at first, and then onto the glacier itself. This late in the season there was no problem with deep layers of snow hiding crevasses, and so we did not rope up. We travelled along the northern edge of the glacier, avoiding impressively contorted crevasses as we did so. It was approaching 7pm by the time we reached the point at which Mark, Derek and Neil would depart for the Refuge Des Ecrins. By now the Glacier was mostly in shadow as the sun dropped low behind the surrounding peaks.

We carried on along the glacier for a short distance, and could already see one party bivouacking on the ice ahead. Tim suggested we did likewise, but I said we might be wiser investigating the rock spur above us. I let Tim go ahead of me - his energy seemed boundless even now - whilst Jennie and Alister waited on the ice below. I was almost up with Tim when he shouted his enthusiastic approval to the rest of us.

What a lucky stroke! We were clearly not the first to spot the sites potential. There were already stone shelters erected for the siting of two bivi bags (Alister and I) and there was ample room for Jennie and Tim to erect the tent they had carried up between them. This was a site made in heaven; flat (relatively), free of stone fall or avalanche danger, close to a supply of clean snow (for drinks) and even with a supply of wood. (There were about a dozen small planks of wood scattered over the platform, some partly buried in snow). Quickly realising the potential, and ignoring the rule about open fires, we built a small fire over which to cook.

The fire was fantastic. We melted the snow I had dug from deep in the snow field and prepared drinks. We cooked the usual dehydrated meal (rice and curry or something similar) and used rocks warmed by the fireside to fend off the night chill. We were in great spirits, taking photographs aplenty. We were amazed at 9pm to see two parties descending the north face of the Barre des Ecrins. The first was quite fast, but the second was desperately slow. We watched them descend as far as the col des Ecrins, but failing light caused us to lose sight. We could only assume they had bivouacked high on the glacier or that they were descending to la Berarde (rather than us!).

It was close to 10pm by the time we turned in; I slept in my thermals, my fleece, my four season bag and a Goretex bivi bag. The muffled sound of running water kept me awake for a while, the imagination running wild, but after about an hour I managed to get to sleep.

3.30 am next morning and I was awake to my alarm. I donned my contact lens, grateful that I did not drop it onto my bivi bag which was

covered in a thick layer of frost. I sprang promptly out of 'bed'. The valley below was full of cloud but at 3,300m we were cloud free. Ten minutes later as Tiro. emerged from his tent we were enshrouded in the cloud from the valley. Another ten minutes and it had receded again - a reminder of how quickly things can change in the mountains.

It took about an hour to melt snow for drinks, to eat a frugal breakfast and to get roped up. As we descended towards the glacier Blanc the Barre des Ecrins was free of cloud and hopes were high.

Dome des Ecrins

by Mister Renton

After successfully completing Montagne des Agneaux and Ailefroide we decided that we were ready to go for the big one. Ecrins is the largest peak in the area and as such it had to be done.

The party included Neil, Mark, Jennie, Tim, Pete, Derek and myself. We backtracked up the path to the Glacier Blanc hut passing the large number of tourists who were giving our massive rucksacks very funny looks - due to the plan of bivi-ing I was carrying about 17.5 kg.

Once at the hut the President treated the team to a well earned can of coke. I will not tell you how much the drinks cost!!! Once refreshed we headed on what was now the glacier. The going was quite easy but the size of the pack made it difficult. Once near the hut the party split in two. The more wealthy members stayed in the hut, having all meals provided, while the rest of us had a rather nice bivi.

I slept very well that night after spending a little while looking at the stars and spotting the passing satellites. It was soon morning and the weather was initially good. We walked down to the path to meet the others from the hut.

We made good progress up the path but there was a large number of parties on it. The whole team was doing fine - Neil and Mark had not before scaled a 4000m peak but they had no problems. After a while cloud started to form over the summit and it was not long until we could see no further than the end of our noses!!! The weather gradually got worse and it started to snow!! We finally arrived at the col where you turn left for the real summit and right for the dome. We at first turned left but soon turned back as the route was very unclear and the weather was getting worse. We decided it was unwise to travel much higher and as such we visited the dome and descended as quickly as possible.

Once back down onto the glacier Neil, Derek and Mark moved off down while I headed back to the bivi site to collect my gear. It was still snowing and moral was quite low!!

I moved off down the glacier and bumped into Tim, Jennie and Pete so I duly waited for them as I did not fancy walking down by myself!!

Quite quickly the snow turned to rain. Before we knew it we were at the Glacier Blanc. From then on the path was never ending!!

The trip was an excellent experience and not to be missed. It was a shame to have missed the real top but it will be there another year.

A First Alpine Ascent

by Katrina Bolt &

John Devenport

It was all rather different to the rolling countryside of the North Downs in deepest Kent and even higher than the Lakeland Peaks. It was Katrina's first attempt to climb in the Alps, but we hoped that during the course of our stay in Ailefroide we'd make an ascent of one of the surrounding peaks.

After a few 'warm up' walks during the first few days, we took the plunge and set off after lunch for the Glacier Bland Hut. A steady plod brought us to the glacier snout from where the hut seemed tantalisingly close, although in reality there was still some way to go. A very heavy shower in the late afternoon kept the hordes away, so the hut was surprisingly quiet, and after a filling meal we retired to the luxury of a whole row of bunks to ourselves. However, I still didn't sleep!

Our intended peak was the Pie de Glacier d'Arsine {3368m}, so we were not woken by the hut guardian until 5 am. From the hut, we made our way up the broken ground to the glacier, where we roped up, strapped on crampons and picked up the ice axe, all of which were new experiences for Katrina.

Progress along the side of the glacier was steady, before we cut up to the right, initially through rocks, then up a broad cwm towards our mountain. We made slow but steady progress winding our way around short bands of rock, to keep to the snow slopes almost the whole way to the col, with frequent stops to catch our breath in the rarefied atmosphere.

From the col, a rocky ridge led towards the summit in just a few minutes, where we took a well deserved rest amongst the magnificent scenery. Highlight of the panorama was the north face of the Barre des Ecrins, looking absolutely pristine at the head of the valley, covered in a generous coat of new snow, which was captured on film, of course.

We did not hang around too long, as a cloud was now starting to swirl around us, and it looked most impressive as it boiled up from the south side of the Barre des Ecrins.

It was a straightforward descent back to the hut, where we stopped briefly to rest and eat, then back down to the campsite, where Katrina partook of another fine YRC 'tradition' as Elspeth very kindly greeted us with a bottle of cold beer each, to celebrate a successful first alpine ascent!

East Summit of

L'Ailfroide (3847m)

by David Smith

This being my third visit to the area it becomes increasingly difficult to add another major peak when others have their eyes on different ascents. My luck was in when a group of us decided on L'Ailefroide. The mountain is a particularly complicated massif and I am not sure which of the three summits we were aiming for, but in the end fate took us to the top of the east summit.

It is quite a pleasant walk to the new Sele hut, about a mile nearer than the old one, from our camp site through beautifully wooded country following the liver Celise Niere for about seven miles. Then the path divided, a zig-zag track heads off northwards to the

Pelvoux hut, whereas our track skirts the Coste de Sialouze moraines to what appears to be an impregnable wall 300m high. A spectacular path picked its way up the wall with exposure at places demanding extreme care. At some points the path is protected by wire cable covered with green plastic garden hose.

Over the ridge the final track to the Refuge Sele soon appeared at 2511m, the most modern hut in the Massif. It had good facilities for self-cookers unlike the pathetic situation at the Glacier Bland hut. The temperature in the dortoir was not oppressive, so for once we all had a reasonable night's sleep.

All too soon it was 4 am and time to depart, we were the last away and confused by other climbers' head torches we followed the wrong lights. After a map check we changed for the alternative route. The track took to a gap between the snow and a rock wall where an overhang and our rucksacks made the transfer awkward. Good rock scrambling followed until we came to an open gully dropping hundreds of feet steeply below us. It was a potentially dangerous place and a fixed rope was used.

The route followed a descending traverse to rocky couloir which is climbed on the lift until a series of snow fields is gained. Relatively steep snow in good condition led us to the 3847m Orientale summit where we were lucky to have excellent views down the Glacier Noir. The president and the writer were the last to gain the summit and had the mountain and its magnificent views to ourselves until the mist took away the vista.

The snow condition had deteriorated with snow balling up dangerously under our crampons. The younger

members were now well out of sight but as soon as we were off the snow we found them basking in the sunshine. We had little difficulty retracing our steps as it was well cairned. Back at the steep gully we had no problem in crossing it without rope as all the holds seemed to be in our favour in this direction.

There were threatening clouds in the sky, the younger members having escorted Derek and lover the difficult bits were very soon out of sight. We took our time, at one point misleading information painted on a rock wall caused us some unnecessary ascent. The rain came before we reached the hut where we rejoined our friends. After a brief rest we set off down the steep wall track to regain the valley.

We were certainly glad of the protection of the rope on the wet slippery rock. Before we reached the valley the rain stopped for the last stage of the expedition. It was a first class climb with much variety in the terrain and in the make-up of the team which did much for the enjoyment of the trip.

Team: Jenny Allen, Derek Bush, Tim Bateman, Pete Hardy, Mark Pryor, Alister Renton and David Smith.

Pelvoux South Face

by Mark Pryor

With just a few days of the Alpine Meet left, Tim Bateman and I decided to round off an excellent fortnight with an ascent of Mont Pelvoux, via its South Face, pioneered in 1828 by AADurand and party.

The peak is one of the most majestic in the range, at 3946 it is also one of the highest. We had both been impressed by the sight of its awesome

north face, which dominated the skyline on previous trips to the Glacier Blanc and Ecrins huts.

In his book 'Outline sketches in the High Alps of Dauphine' T.G.Bonney described the locals: "The people in many parts are stunted, cowardly and feeble, and appear to be stupid and almost cretins". With this in mind, we decided not to stay in the Pelvoux hut, but to bivouac on a large hog's back of scree about twenty minutes' walk further on. This also gave us the chance to see where the route went for the following morning. After a quick meal of soup and bread, we were in our bags, staring up at the cloud filled sky. "I want to see the stars when I wake up" said Tim, hopefully. We pondered this remark in our own separate ways as the first spots of rain hit our bivi bags.

In the morning the weather had not improved, a light drizzle joined us for breakfast, and great swathes of mist obscured the route ahead. In the hut below, nothing stirred, As we drank our tea, we decided to make an attempt on the peak anyway. There was no way we were going down to the campsite without at least giving it a try, after spending such a wretched night out in the open!

The first part of the route went along the left bank of the Clot de l' Homme glacier, across snow slopes which had failed to freeze overnight. Her the difference in our relative experience showed. Tim striding purposefully ahead, a blend of confidence and ability, me blundering along with all of the attributes of the 19th century French peasantry mentioned earlier. It wasn't long before I slipped clumsily on the snow and fell. To my surprise I braked well with my axe, text book style, and thus served to boost my confidence for the rest of the route.

With these treacherous snow slopes out of the way, we made good progress, scrambling up greasy, wet rock to the edge of the Sialouze glacier. Here, we decided to rope up as we looked at the next part of the route. You have a choice at this point; either climb the Rochers Rouge, a great mass of rock which takes you right up to the Pelvoux Glacier, or climb the Coolidge couloir, also to the Pelvoux Glacier, where the routes rejoin. Being British, we chose the couloir, first climbed by W.A.B.Coolidge with the famous Christian Almer father and son combination as guides. Halfway up the couloir, I wasn't feeling so patriotic. In fact, as I stood bent over my axe gasping for breath, I was thinking where Mr Coolidge could shove his stupid couloir. However, we were soon on the top, and it was only short walk along the ridge to Pointe Puiseux, the summit of Mont Pelvoux.

The weather, meanwhile, had improved all the way up the mountain. It had long since stopped raining and patches of blue had even appeared in the sky. But when we reached the summit, it was in cloud. We agreed that this must be the top, but both of us had nagging doubts as we began the descent. Suddenly, the clouds parted and all around was clear, so we hurried back to the top, just to be sure. There was no need for concern, however, and soon the cameras were out for heroic summit poses.

The descent was largely uneventful, stopping once to coil the rope, and again at the hut to buy a drink. We were hoping to be greeted with fanfares and rapturous applause on arrival at the campsite, but the place was deserted. Elspeth was there though, and she rewarded our efforts with cold bottled beer.