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Echoes from ‘Headquarters’

The AC’s record above Zermatt

What on earth has happened to the Church of England? Doing my homework for next year’s 150th anniversary gathering of the AC in Zermatt, which I have been subtly manoeuvred into organising, it struck me how many of the great peaks of the Zermatt skyline were first climbed by clergymen. Muscular Christianity indeed.

Of the 19 first ascents involving Alpine Club members (including ascents by ‘members to-be’ prior to the club’s formation), no less than 10 had Anglican ministers in the party. When did you last hear of a first ascent by a man or woman of the cloth? I thought not. Climbing kit, it seems, has been consigned to the rectory shelf along with the King James Bible and the old Prayer Book.

With the Zermatt jamboree coming up, this brief article is intended to whet appetites for a return to the resort the AC virtually put on the map with a peak-by-peak reminder of how much our forebears achieved there. It is merely a sketch. Fine detail abounds elsewhere, mainly in old *AJs*, with Alan Lyall’s compendious *The First Descent of the Matterhorn* (Gomer 1997) standing as the definitive work on the single epic that sealed Zermatt’s reputation.

What I was unable to find, however, was a general summary of significant ascents associated with AC members. (I don’t say such a summary doesn’t exist and I expect one will now be pointed out to me.) Cicely Williams’ *Zermatt Saga* (Brig 1964) includes a useful chapter on ‘peaks and passes’ but like the various guide books, including Whymper’s own, there is no distinction made between peaks ascended by AC members and the minority that were not. And why should there be, save for our own particular curiosity? It is, however, rather easier to spot the clergymen, dog-collared by their titles, though inconsistently. (The latest AC Valais guides – the ones you’ll need for Zermatt – sensibly omit all titles for men, then chivalrously include them for women.)

The Zermatt of the ‘Golden Age’ no longer exists. From a village with just three guest beds in 1839 it has grown to an upmarket resort with 6,800 beds in 116 hotels and another 8000 beds in 1800 holiday apartments. A plaque on the wall of the Monte Rosa Hotel, still mercifully without too much ostentation, recalls AC president Charles Mathews’ description of the hotel as ‘the mountaineer’s true home’, but the days when its high table was reserved for club members are long gone. Active mountaineers today are far more likely to be found down the high street cooking pasta in the kitchen of the Bahnhof Hotel or at the campsite in Randa.

Above the tree-line, though, Zermatt's attractions remain much the same, if better documented – the greatest concentration of the highest peaks in the Alps, arranged in a vast pear outline above the Mattertal. Tackle any of the peaks listed below and you are treading in the footsteps of AC pioneers. Each one of these first ascent parties included someone who was, or would become a member of the Alpine Club, with peaks listed clockwise from the north (St Nicklaus) end of the valley. How many of these routes can members repeat during the AC's 150th summer?

Lenzspitze (4294m) August 1870, Clinton Thomas Dent (AC president 1887) with Alexander and Franz Burgener by the north-west ridge (PD). Dent recalled that the elderly Franz chivvied him on 'with a stick after the fashion of an old Smithfield drover persuading a refractory beast to enter a pen'.

Dom (4545m) 11 September 1858, Rev John Llewellyn-Davis with Johann Zumtaugwald, Johann Krönig and Hieronymus Brantschen by the north-west ridge (Festigrat) (PD+).

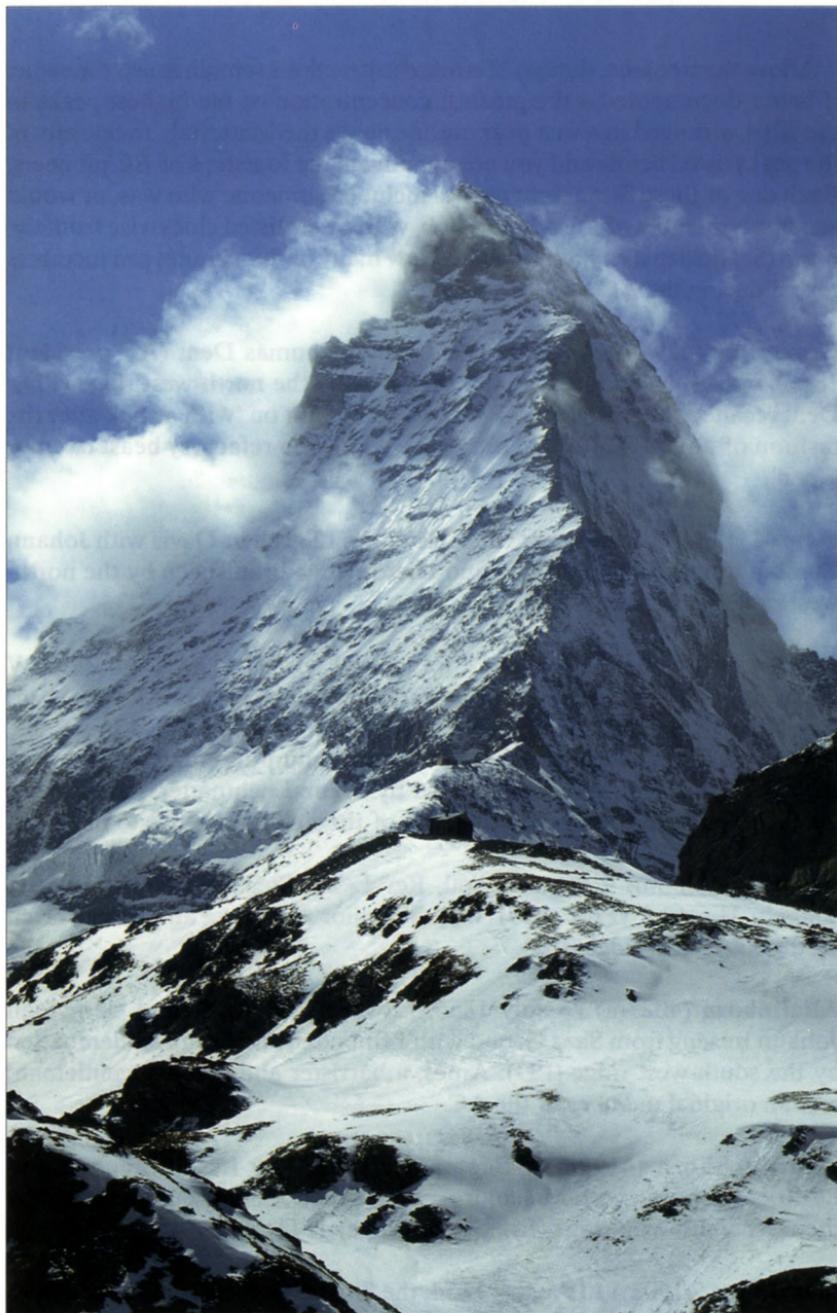
Täschhorn (4490m) 31 July 1862, Rev John Llewellyn-Davis and Rev J W Hayward with Johann and Stephan Zumtaugwald by the north-west (Kin) face (PD+). In 1906, Geoffrey Winthrop Young was involved in an epic first ascent of the south-west face (TD+), penduluming crazily off the final rock pitch that had been superbly led by Franz Lochmatter. Part way up the face Young had estimated the odds of their escape at 'five to one'.

Alphubel (4206m) 9 August 1860, Rev Leslie Stephen (Pres 1866) and Thomas Hinchliff (Pres 1875) with Melchior Anderegg and Peter Perren by the south-east ridge (PD).

Allalinhorn (4027m) 28 July 1856, Edward Levi Ames and clergyman Johann Imseng from Saas Grund with J Imboden and Franz Andenmatten by the south-west ridge (PD). Ames, a barrister and country gentleman, was an original member of the AC.

Rimpfischhorn (4199m) 9 September 1859, Rev Leslie Stephen and Dr Robert Liveing with Melchior Anderegg and Johann Zumtaugwald by the west-south-west ridge (Rimpfischwänge) (PD+).

Strahlhorn (4190m) 15 August 1854, the Smyth brothers (reverends James Grenville and Christopher and Indian Army officer Edmund) with Franz Andenmatten and Ulrich Lauener by the west-north-west flank (PD). Though this ascent was before the formation of the AC, both James and Christopher Smyth became members.



117. Matterhorn: looking up the Hörnli ridge, east face catching the sun, north face in shadow to the right, April 2006. Not a day for climbing, with high winds even at the Schwarzsee. (*Stephen Goodwin*)

Monte Rosa (Nordend) (4609m) 26 August 1861, Edward and T F Buxton and John Cowell with Michel Payot and Binder by the south-west ridge (PD).

Monte Rosa (Dufourspitze) (4634m) 1 August 1885, the Rev Charles Hudson, reverends James and Christopher Smyth, John Birkbeck and Rev E J Stevenson with Johann and Matthais Zumtaugwald and Ulrich Lauener by the north-west flank and west ridge (PD). This clerical quartet, plus Birkbeck, a Quaker and original AC member, packed a wealth of experience and cajoled the guides to the west ridge, away from the trodden route to failure at the Silbersattel.

Liskamm (4527m) 19 August 1861, W Hall, J Hardy, C Pilkington (Pres 1896), A Ramsay, T Rennison, F Sibson and R Stephenson with J Cachet, F Lochmatter, K Herr, J & P Perren and S Zumtaugwald by the east ridge (PD).

Castor (4226m) 23 August 1861, William Mathews (Pres 1869) and F W Jacomb with Michel Croz by the south-east ridge (F).

Matterhorn (4477m) 14 July 1865, Edward Whympere, Rev Charles Hudson, Lord Francis Douglas and Douglas Hadow with Michel Croz and the Peter Taugwalders (father and son) by the north-east (Hörnli) ridge (AD). For all the printers' ink consumed by the 1865 ascent and tragic descent, the finest route on the mountain is perhaps that climbed for the first time on 3 September 1879 by another AC legend – Alfred Mummery with guides Alexander Burgener, Johann Petrus and Augustin Gentinetta on the Zmutt ridge (D).

Dent d'Hérens (4171m) 12 August 1863, Florence Craufurd Grove (Pres 1884), William Hall, Reginald Macdonald and Montagu Woodmass with Melchior Anderegg, Jean Pierre Cachat and Peter Perren by the south-west flank and west ridge (PD+). Hall recalled that Anderegg led all day, hewing steps 'the shape and size of Glastonbury chairs' and that Woodmass danced a Highland Fling on the summit, everyone drunk with delight.

Dent Blanche (4356m) 18 July 1862, Thomas Stuart Kennedy and Rev William Wigram with Jean Baptiste Croz and Johann Krönig by the south ridge. In wild weather Wigram's hair became a 'a mass of white icicles'. Twenty years later, the guide Ulrich Almer coined the phrase that stuck as the name of ENE ridge (D) after a difficult first ascent with fellow guide Aloys Pollinger and 'Herrs' John Stafford Anderson and George Percival Baker.

Anderson recalled the summit moment in *AJ* XI:

Our first proceeding was to shake hands all round, then Almer, grasping the situation in its entirety, exclaimed in a loud and solemn manner, 'Wir sind vier Esel,' (*We are four asses*) a sort of concentrated summary of the day's proceedings, which, it has since been suggested to me by a friend, who I need hardly say is *not* a member of the AC, might be appropriately worked up into a motto for our club.

Ober Gabelhorn (4063m) 6 July 1865, Adolphus Moore and Horace Walker with Jakob Anderegg by the east face. Lord Francis Douglas arrived at the summit just a day later via the NNW ridge or *Couergrat* (AD). It was his third attempt on the mountain that season, but much worse luck was about to befall him.

Zinal Rothorn (4221m) 22 August 1864, Rev Leslie Stephen and Florence Craufurd Grove with Melchior and Jakob Anderegg by the north ridge (AD). Stephen found it a tough one, observing that, 'the last rocks of the Rothorn will always count among the decidedly *mauvais pas* of the Alps'.

Schalihorn (3974m) 20 July 1873, Thomas Middlemore with Christian and Johann Jann Lauener from Moming pass. 'Thomas Middlemore always lived strenuously,' recorded his *AJ* obituary.

Weisshorn (4506m) 19 August 1861, John Tyndall with Johann Josef Bennen and Ulrich Wenger by the east ridge (AD). However, the Weisshorn is more readily associated with Geoffrey Winthrop Young who made four first ascents on it, notably, on 7 September 1900, the west face rib, or *Younggrat* (D-).

Bishorn (4153m) 18 August 1884, George Barnes and Rev R Chessyre-Walker with Josef Imboden and J M Chanton by the north-west flank (F). Three years earlier Mrs Aubrey Le Blond (as Mrs Fred Burnaby), who would go on to found the Ladies Alpine Club, reached the Bishorn east peak (4134m) with guides Josef Imboden and Peter Sarbach yet unaccountably did not continue up the easy-angled ridge to the summit.