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SIMON RICHARDSON

## The Chardonnet from End to End



Rick Allen on the lower section of the *Scottish Route* on the Grande Fourche.  
(Simon Richardson)

Chamonix, July 1979. Peri-Jane Cheal and I were both 19 years old and eager to get to grips with alpine climbing. After a warm up on the Petits Charmoz traverse we made our way up to the Albert Premier hut. Our ascent of the *Forbes Arête* on the Aiguille du Chardonnet next day was a wonderful life-affirming experience. Other teams rushed past us on the glacier in the night, but unperturbed we followed their steps over the ice bulge of the Bosse and, all alone, we emerged onto the east ridge at daybreak.

The weather was a little unsettled and we followed the perfect crest of granite and snow in swirling mist. Every so often we caught tantalising glimpses of the great icy faces of the Argentière wall glistening white through the cloud. Helpful footsteps led down from the summit to a couple of abseils and we were back in Chamonix by mid afternoon. The *Forbes Arête* proved a steppingstone to bigger things and a week later we were climbing the north face of the Obergabelhorn.

I returned to the Chardonnet five years later for the popular *North Spur*. Although it is not a difficult route, some say it is one of the finest mixed climbs in the Alps. Sure enough, the route did not disappoint, but at that stage in my climbing career it was all about moving fast. My two-hour time



The classic view of the north face of the Aiguille du Chardonnet from the Albert Premier hut. The *Forbes Arête* follows the near left-hand ice ridge over the curved hump of the Bosse before following the skyline arête to the summit. The *North Spur* takes the central buttress right of the fluted ice face and the descent down the west ridge follows the right skyline to the sloping col Adams Reilly. The recalcitrant double bergschrund lies directly below in the shadow of Aiguille Adams Reilly. (Simon Richardson)

was rather average and certainly did not compare with Roger Everett and Phil Bartlett's lightning ascent in 1975 when they climbed the route so quickly that they were back in Snell's Field before breakfast.

After that, I forgot about the Chardonnet for nearly 30 years, until my interest was rekindled when Tom Prentice and I started to explore untravelled rock features in the range. On the mountain's south-west face, just north of the col du Chardonnet, there are three attractive pillars comprising perfect Chamonix granite. Jean-Franck Charlet climbed the right and left pillars in the 1970s but the central line was unclimbed. Tom and I made the long approach up the Chardonnet glacier in August 2013 and, after a bivouac, climbed the pillar in 10 sustained pitches to the summit of Pt 3660m, a prominent sub-peak of the mountain. We wore rock shoes and after tagging the top, abseiled back down to our boots and crampons on the glacier.

Our climb on Pt 3660m pointed to a forgotten side of the Chardonnet. Viewed from the Albert Premier hut, the *Forbes Arête* appears to climb the full length of the mountain's eastern crest but, hidden behind the frontier ridge, a steep extension plunges nearly 500m into Switzerland at the head of the Saleina glacier. It is a major structural feature and quite incredibly, there was no record of an ascent. Slowly a plan began to form. How about



Above: Peri-Jane Cheal climbing the *Forbes Arête* in July 1979. (Simon Richardson)

Right: Rick Allen on day one of the *East Ridge Integrale*, climbing the right-facing corner leading to the lower crest.



traversing the complete spine of the Chardonnet from east to west? The route would start from the Saleina glacier, ascend the unclimbed lower east ridge, continue along the *Forbes Arête* and finish by descending the west ridge. The plan had simplicity and elegance and Rick Allen was up for the challenge in early summer 2017.

I was astonished how dry the mountains looked as I travelled from Geneva to Chamonix on 22 June. It felt more like September than late spring but the weather was good, so we immediately set off for our first objective on the Grande Fourche. The south-east face of the mountain above the Saleina glacier was particularly intriguing as its 500m central spur was unclimbed and, equally important, it would give us a good view of the eastern end of the Chardonnet.

After a night in the Albert Premier hut, we crossed the Fenêtre de Saleina and started up our spur in bright sunshine next morning. The most difficult climbing was near the start where a 'sea of slabs' led to a steep tower. We expected to climb the route in a day and were travelling light but had underestimated the difficulties. By early afternoon we were only a quarter of the way up the route. Still, June days are long and the weather forecast was good, so we pressed on up easier climbing on the upper part of the spur in the full knowledge that we would be spending a night out.

We settled down on a good ledge just below the summit as dusk fell and were a little surprised when it started to drizzle. We were even more surprised when the drizzle turned to rain and we spent the night curled up in our lightweight waterproofs willing morning to arrive. It was cold, wet and miserable, but I was determined not to make a fuss. I've known Rick for over 30 years, and I knew full well that he would be the last to complain. After all, this was nothing compared to his open bivouac on Nanga Parbat after the Mazeno ridge. Cold muscles meant it was slow going next morning and we made our careful way over the summit in thick cloud to descend



Looking up the lower east ridge on day one. (*Simon Richardson*)



Left: Rick Allen climbing the lower east ridge on day one. (*Simon Richardson*)

to the Tour glacier. Next day Rick took us shopping in Chamonix to buy emergency bivouac sacks.

The weather became cold and unsettled but we made the best of it with short rock routes in the Aiguilles Rouges and a wintry traverse of the Aiguilles d'Entrèves. It started to snow on one of the Aiguilles Rouges routes and we caused consternation among neighbouring continental teams when we continued climbing rather than abseiling off. The weather was just like Scotland, so unperturbed we continued up. Finally on 3 July we had a good weather forecast so we made our way up to Albert Premier hut all set to traverse the Chardonnet from end to end.

*Tuesday 4 July.* We're up at 3.30am and away from the hut an hour later. The fresh

snow on the glacier has consolidated quickly after the bad weather and it is quick going up to the Fenêtre du Tour. We cross into Switzerland, traverse the head of the Saleina glacier and cut across to the Chardonnet where a horizontal traverse across the bergschrund leads to a snowed-up right-facing corner leading up to the lower east ridge. The sun is rising fast but the left wall of the corner is in shade and still frozen so we make good progress in two long rope lengths to the crest.

A natural line of weakness on the right flank of the ridge leads to a snowy gully cutting through a tower. The gully walls are smooth-sided and I'm lucky to find a jammed flake belay when the rope runs out. The rock is horrible decomposing granite and the gully steepens and narrows above. But luck is on our side as the recent storms have lined the gully bed with a thin sliver of ice. Rick delicately front points up to a giant chockstone and threads his way underneath: a great lead and very Scottish.

Above, an overhanging flake-chimney leads up to a small ledge. It's rather disconcerting because the corner is formed by a giant flake of rotten granite lying against the wall and we can see daylight shining through at several points. I belay at the top and am relieved to see that our line continues up a slabby wall and rather than blank out. More importantly, the rock quality has improved, so I change into my rock shoes. The slabby wall is surprisingly awkward, but after a difficult start I reach flakes and belay below a snowy chimney.

Rick leads through and kicks steps up the left edge of the first of two slanting snow patches above that are noticeable landmarks on the route. We are making good progress but the upper ridge looms above, guarded by a smooth vertical headwall that is looking increasingly difficult as we gain height. I continue up the barrier wall separating the two snow patches. Water is dripping down from the upper patch and there are a couple of hard moves through a steep slabby section. The route is starting to put up a fight and the climbing is significantly harder than it looks.

Rick moves up to the headwall and belays on some grey flakes. The granite is more featured than it looked from below and we're hopeful of finding a way to the horizontal crest above. My pitch goes well until I reach a blank section below the first summit tower that appears to overhang in all directions. An awkward step right onto a hanging V-groove leads to a good ledge. I continue up a difficult snowed-up corner and then back and foot up a snow-choked chimney dividing the first two towers on the crest. As I reach the narrow gap at its top, I'm disappointed to see that the second tower is as monolithic as the first. There is no way of continuing so I lower off a sling back to the ledge.

My legs and right arm are dripping wet and I'm not in a good mood. We've been climbing well, but it looks like we've run out of options. The only possibility is to aid climb up an overhanging corner at the right end of the ledge but it's running with water, with a small stream pouring down its left wall. The wintry conditions that helped us lower down the climb are now conspiring against us.



Rick Allen following the smooth slab-corner above the crux corner on day two. Grande Fourche in the background. (*Simon Richardson*)

‘Hey Rick, let’s bivvy here. Hopefully things will look better in the morning.’

I’ve played this trick several times before. The way ahead is in shadow and it is difficult to see exactly where to go, but I know that a good night’s sleep will make everything look far more amenable, especially in the morning sunshine. We settle down to a comfortable bivouac and Rick melts water and feeds me bread and cheese. He is happy and calm and exudes confidence. Slowly I begin to relax. The weather had clouded in during the day,

Looking back on day two along the horizontal crest with the north face of the Aiguille d'Argentière in the background. (Simon Richardson)

but the sky clears through the night and it is just cold enough to freeze the drips on our ledge.

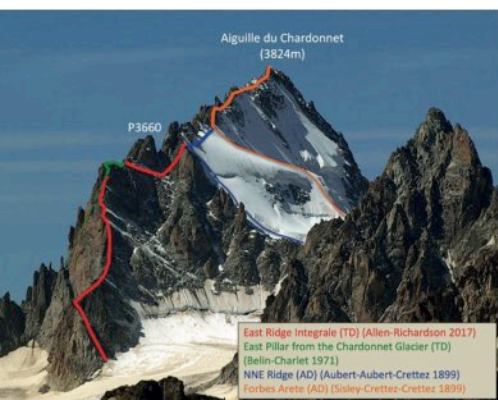
*Wednesday 5 July.* We wake to the pink glow of dawn over the Valais skyline and the familiar outline of the Weisshorn, Dent Blanche and Matterhorn. There is no urgency as we wait for the rock to warm up but we're packed and ready to go by 7am. As we hoped, the morning sun makes everything look far better. The overhanging corner is the only way to go, but fortunately the water has stopped running and it doesn't look verglassed.

I put on my rock boots, sort the gear and start to aid up the corner. Initially it takes small wires but higher up I leapfrog cams. And then, horror of horrors, as I pull over the bulge at the top there is a peg. The only explanation is that Charlet must have passed this way. (Later, I check the guidebook later and this is exactly what happened. Starting from France on the south side of the ridge the *Charlet-Belin* pillar gains the same notch that I reached the evening before. Unable to continue up the monolithic rock above, they crossed over to the north side of the ridge and climbed the corner to gain the crest. And like me, they used aid to climb the pitch). A few free moves gain a small flake ledge. I haul my sack and Rick skilfully follows, replacing gear where I had removed it. Above a smooth slab-corner leads to the crest. I look around the edge and the way ahead is clear. The route is going to go.

The horizontal crenelated ridge is as difficult as it is spectacular, with vertical walls plunging either side. From the summits of two successive towers we abseil into deep notches before finally gaining easier-angled ground leading to the base of Pt 3660m. The going is slow and awkward with soft snow overlying steep slabs. Eventually, Rick leads a difficult pitch down and right under Pt 3660m into the line of the east couloir. (Charlet and Belin were canner than us. Rather than follow the exact crest they bypassed the towers on their north side before crossing back over and descending into France).

The east couloir should have been full of snow but we find instead a discontinuous ribbon of grey ice leading up the left side of the gully bed. Rick carefully picks his way up the ice to gain the col immediately west of Pt 3660m where he hesitates.





Above: Rick Allen on the *Forbes Arête*. Grande Fourche in background. (Simon Richardson)

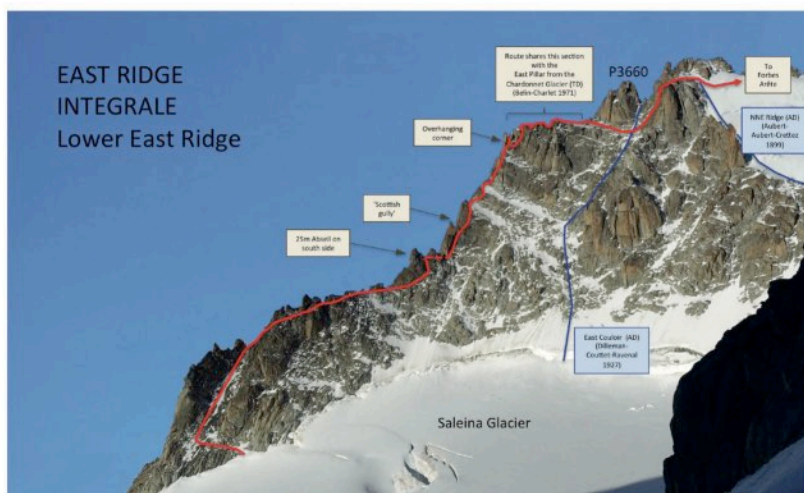
Left: A topo showing the *East Ridge Intégrale* and how it relates to other routes on the mountain. The orange line is the *Forbes Arête*. (Simon Richardson).

‘Er, Simon? I thought you said it would be easy from here?’

Instead of scrambling terrain, Rick is confronted by a knife-edge rocky ridge leading over big towers.

This is not the easy access onto the *Forbes Arête* that I had promised so I dig into my rucksack and flick through a collection of photos of the Chardonnet that I’d downloaded from the Internet. These show that moving across to a notch on the north-north-east ridge is possibly a better way to go.

Rick reverses carefully back down and I lead across broken ground to the notch. We can see easy snow slopes leading across to the *Forbes Arête*; footsteps are only a couple of hundred metres away! We settle down on a broken ledge for an early bivouac at 5pm. I have the better position this time



Another view of the *East Ridge Integrale* above the Saleina glacier. The blue central line is the *East Couloir*, climbed in 1927. (Simon Richardson)

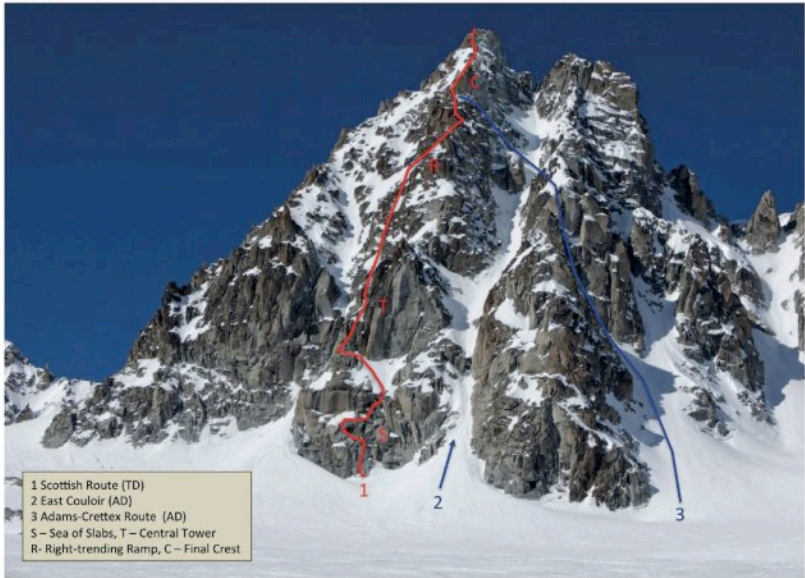
so do the cooking. Unlike the night before, we're both happy and at ease. We've completed the new route part of our ascent and are looking forward to an enjoyable journey along the Forbes Arête in the morning.

*Thursday 6 July.* We wake early and are soon front pointing across névé slopes to join the *Forbes Arête* above the Bosse. The weather is perfect, but conditions on the ridge are lean and the climbing is more involved than we expected. The crest has lost its helpful covering of snow, so we traverse around individual towers on hard water ice. The situation is spectacular, although I'm a little disappointed that the great ice faces of the Argentière wall are dry and grey and not gleaming white like they were when Peri-Jane and I passed this way 38 years ago.

On the summit there are no friendly snowy footsteps leading down the west ridge; instead we are greeted by a long convex slope of black ice. When the ice runs out, we start abseiling. Eventually we gain the gentle slopes leading to the col Adams Reilly but the ice is so hard that we have to abseil here too.

Now on the glacier we hope for faster progress but soon encounter a huge bergschrund. We front point down this as far as we dare, skirting under smooth rock on the right until we find a spike for an anchor. A long abseil just takes us over the lower lip of this double-lipped monster; we're very grateful for our 60m ropes. We find a sling wrapped around a couple of large stones buried in soft snow halfway down and can only imagine the horror of a previous party negotiating this obstacle with a single rope.

The glacier is very crevassed and the route finding complex, so it is late when we reach the hut. The guardian has been watching out for us and saved us dinner. He said he was worried as part of the Bosse had collapsed



Topo showing line of the *Scottish Route*.

that morning resulting in a huge avalanche that swept across the approach to the *Forbes Arête*. My holiday is nearly over. I need to travel to Germany early next morning, so we walk down to the valley through the night, happy and fulfilled after an exciting adventure.

Our difficult descent from the Chardonnet makes me reflect on how lucky we were to be able to climb in the Alps in the 1980s and 1990s. All around the world, global warming is changing glaciers fast. Even at the beginning of the summer season in the Mont Blanc range, glacier travel can be problematic. Looking back to when Peri-Jane and I climbed the *Forbes Arête* in 1979 it is inconceivable that two teenagers, on their first ever glaciated alpine climb, could have safely negotiated the terrain that Rick and I found in 2017. And as for climbing the mountain and arriving back in the valley before breakfast like Roger and Phil – we can but dream.

### Summary

*Scottish Route* (500m, TD, 6a), Grande Fourche (3610m), Rick Allen and Simon Richardson, 24 Jun 2017.

Complete east-west traverse of the Aiguille du Chardonnet (3824m) via *East Ridge Integrale* (800m, TD), Rick Allen and Simon Richardson, 4-6 Jul 2017.

- Rick Allen died in an avalanche on K2 in July. His obituary will be published in next year's *Alpine Journal*.