

Lauterbrunnen Breithorn — North face

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This is it. This will be the confrontation.

Last time, we left the hut for the moraines with children's laughter counter-pointing the translation that their father had made for us: 'sustained difficulties of the first order on both rock and ice . . . much stonefall . . . not recommended'. I remember how lonely I felt looking back, but there was already a tension in the air, the keen excitement of crampon crunching on glacier and things afoot, that kept my mind spinning and wide awake for most of the bivouac. In the morning I felt it. The sky was clear and cold, the face silent, but something was wrong. Sometimes one feels an affinity, a kinship for the hills, but that morning we were alienated, floundering and groaning in a desert of indifference. Finally, manifestly for our churning guts and wheezing lungs, we turned back, back down the ice-fall and way beyond to the hut, relieved at surface, but deeply knowing the truth of it.

So now we try again. Perhaps the recognition of our weakness will bring with it strength, perhaps just an easier capitulation. At least I feel fitter now, and the ice-fall passed quickly. We are both moving rapidly now, still unroped, doubts lost in the technicalities of loose ground. Awkward step here, just knock off the *verglas*, and then a short traverse, yes, and then the little groove there takes us on. . . .

We cross a nasty gully with a water-ice bed, but we haven't time for crampons if we are to beat the sun, so it means an unnerving teeter across inadequate toe-scrapes, breath caught, hammer planted in supreme optimism.

Higher up there was a transition from limestone to gneiss, which seemed an improvement until we realised that although the holds and small scale features were solid, there were many large poised blocks which were often impossible to avoid. I made for a steep, icy chimney, while Pete took a line to the left. The chimney was a frightening place, and I was just about to retreat and follow Pete up his line when he forestalled me by appearing at the foot of the chimney. This narrowed our options, so we scrambled up the chimney until a small ledge gave respite and allowed me to uncoil the rope, and arrange a pitiful belay. Above, Pete led a complex traversing pitch up the steep wall which separated us from the first ice-field. The loose block that he had used did not withstand my passage.

I've arrived at the ice-field now. I feel very committed. To climb back down the face below without belays would be very trying, and by now there is stonefall too. We have been counting on being able to front-point quickly up the ice, but here the surface is hard and glossy, enforcing an incompatible mixture of



30 *The Breithorn at the head of the Lauterbrunnun valley* Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office

caution and speed. A hundred feet up it steepens and I try to rest and place a screw, but cutting a step is so tiring that I decide that it is easier to carry on, scraping and splintering a million miles from a dream of *névé* until a boulder in the ice allows a sling and toescape belay that is almost as tiring as the climbing. Pete carries on past and I eye the wall above. The obvious line is a central couloir that looks highly dangerous, but over to the right a slim crescent of ice divides the crags before disappearing into the shadows. We move towards it; it is very steep, and ice as hard and brittle as this will require an immense labour of step-cutting, blow by blow.

Away over the Gspaltenhorn a roll of thunder sounds, and boiling clouds have drifted in and obscured the sun, transforming the world from the sparkling blue and white of Alpine memories to the dull grey reality of the struggle. I look at my watch and keep repeating my calculations, but all the parameters say that we will be too slow, trapped somewhere in the physics of ice that splinters and stars beneath the points. I feel a little cheated, but along with the doubts there is resignation.

We continued, and eventually I moved wearily into the gully, the ice rearing in a memory of Nevis. I went a few feet, and then came the realisation that swept away all my preconceptions. The ice in the gully was perfect, and in that instant I felt an insight into the mechanisms of success and failure that seemed to belie mere technical difficulties and the physical problems of progress. I knew as definitely as one knows anything that we would succeed; that the balance had tiptoed from uncertainty to an assurance of success. Looking back, this seems a foolish illusion, but then, at that time, on that face, the feeling was real.

We're much higher now, and here the face is much more open. Rock barriers frequently cross the face, but there is always a gully line snaking through to allow a continuity of movement. We are moving together, only taking belays when the ground demands it. The climbing is magnificent. Here I'm bridged across a near-vertical ice-runnel, hanging in a white silence with only ourselves and the mountain, the rope dropping away below, taking the eye down, down to the ice-fall far below. On our left a narrow rib sweeping to the summit marks the Welzenbach route, but we decide to stay on our own line of steepening rock and ice, moving fast and free and yet motionless, on a slope that seems endless and without perspective.

Just below the cornice I contrived a good peg belay, and Pete tiptoed on. The ice was brittle again, and thinly layered on the slabs, and the suspense was enormous. I think we suddenly realised how near we were to success, and yet how much could go wrong. The last few feet seemed to take an age, exaggerated by my impatience, and then with a flurry of snow Pete disappeared through the small cornice. I suddenly noticed how cold it was, the rope stiff and frost-whiskered, and then I was climbing again, hurrying forwards, but looking back to cache against time's dilution the memories of failure and success, and the crystalline moment when the balance tipped.

The rope tugged, a couple of steps, and then we stood rather self-consciously on the ridge, cold, but grinning and well-content.

SUMMARY Bernese Oberland—Lauterbrunnen Breithorn, N face. First British ascent by a line approximating to the earlier part of the Welzenbach route, and the final part of the Direct Route. 12 July 1973. R. Barton, P. Boardman. TD sup. Nine hours.