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ANDREW POLLARD  
**'Big Bird Flapping Wings'**

*The British Chamlang Expedition 1991*

(Plates 34-36)

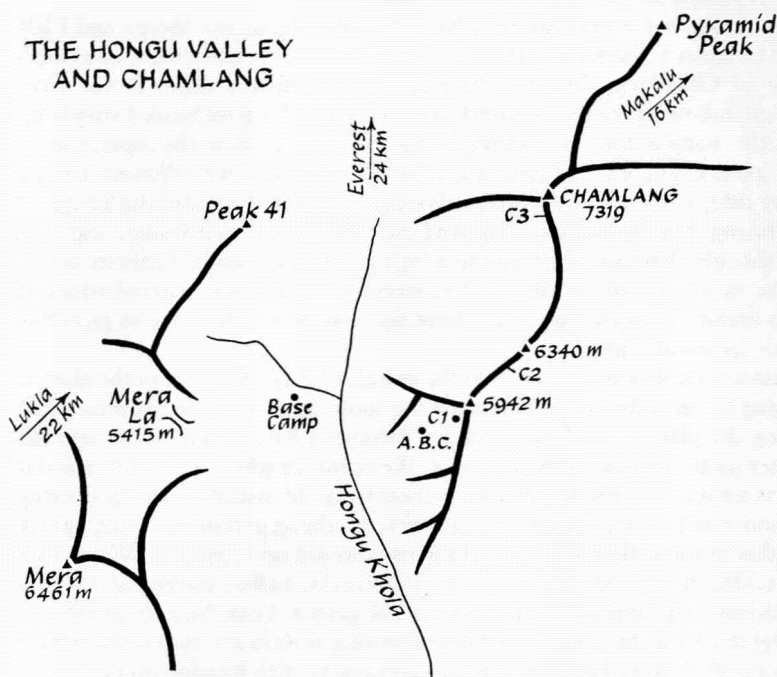
At 12.30pm on 1 August 1990, Andrew Knight and I met in the bar of the Ski Club of Great Britain to plan an expedition. We spent the afternoon reading in the library of the Alpine Club, which had temporary accommodation there, about peaks and valleys in Nepal and realised that we didn't know where to start. By the end of the day we knew where to start. After another week of almost continuous research, one mountain, Chamlang, had caught our imagination.

Chamlang (7319m), which in the Sherpa dialect means 'big bird flapping wings', was first climbed in 1962 by a Japanese team by the S ridge, a route repeated by the Koreans in 1987. The mountain has also been climbed via the W ridge, by the Japanese in 1986 and, more recently, by the Germans in 1990 on a variation of the original W ridge route. Our attempt on the S ridge was to be the first British attempt. Chamlang was surveyed in 1954 by the New Zealand Barun expedition, on which Sir Charles Evans, patron of our trip, was a member. The Japanese ascent (1962) was inspired by the survey in 1955 of Chamlang from the west by Norman Hardie who wrote 'Chamlang has a minor weakness in its line of defence when viewed from the west'.

We arrived in Kathmandu in mid-September 1991, a year after the expedition's conception. The march to Base Camp took two weeks and the variety was tremendous. We began our trek almost at sea-level in the Arun valley, with temperatures in the sun of over 45°C and 100% humidity. These days were sweaty and I remember one evening drinking five litres of tea! During the trek, David Collier, our scientific officer, was conducting experiments in ambulatory blood pressure. The expedition members were enticed into his tent late at night, even invited into his sleeping-bag to be connected up to a selection of gadgets measuring everything from arterial oxygen saturation to blood pressure. Our Nepali staff were fascinated by his flashing lights and rude mechanical noises and sat for hours watching. At least they were impressed, but in true Bart's tradition we were all reluctant subjects, seizing every opportunity to scorn the progress of science. But I believe there is a tremendous amount of data shortly to be released on an unsuspecting Physiological Society. Meanwhile, Richard Hancock, our botanist, collected seeds endlessly - a most curious occupation. For Richard, the pinnacle of the trip was a discovery about the sex life of the gentian.

From Naulekh at the head of the Hinku valley, we headed east, ascending to 5400m and crossing the Mera La below which we made our Base Camp. From the eastern side of the pass we had our first view of Chamlang, an enormous sheer face of snow, ice and rock: the 'big bird'. It was breath-taking and wonderful and I was filled with doubt that we could climb it. Because of a strike by some of our porters it took several days to ferry loads across this glaciated pass and I stayed behind to escort the porters while the rest of the team set up Base.

### THE HONGU VALLEY AND CHAMLANG



On 4 October I arrived at a deserted Base Camp; the others, who had gone in two parties to reconnoitre a route to the S ridge of Chamlang, were expected back the next day. Base Camp (4700m) in the early morning sun was glorious. It was a grassy place strewn with large boulders beside a babbling brook from the banks of which hung cold fingers of ice. Before the sun was hot our wigwam-shaped Base Camp tents were covered in frost, and frozen condensation inside the tents fell as snow on our sleeping-bags. The tents were pitched about 100m above the Hongu river, a wild torrent draining innumerable glaciers.



34. Chamlang, 7319m. On the S ridge: Angus Andrew approaching the first rock tower. (*Andrew Pollard*) (p112)

Across the river and now 2.5km straight up above a tremendous face of rock and ice stood the snow-covered summit of Chamlang, golden in the sun. Beautiful and terrifying. Over the previous two days a feat of engineering had been accomplished by various members of the team constructing a rope bridge across the Hongu river, facilitating access to Chamlang. At lunchtime the two parties returned from their reconnaissance. Neither group had found a straightforward way to reach the S ridge of Chamlang and the mood was solemn during the afternoon. In 1962 the Japanese took nearly two weeks to find a route onto the S ridge; we didn't have that amount of time if we were going to reach the top.

On 6 October Angus Andrew, Neil Howells, Ngatempa Sherpa and I left Base Camp at 3.30am resolute in our determination to push a route onto the S ridge of Chamlang. First we descended with difficulty down to the river Hongu, following the brook from Base in the dark. Then we headed steeply up the other bank of the river, resting frequently, weighed down by ropes, stoves, gas, axes, crampons and gear for a bivouac. Initially, we followed a loose rocky ridge to the right of a glacier flowing west from the end of the S ridge of Chamlang. On the previous day Andrew Knight, our joint leader, and Neil had thought that this might lead to a high point which would facilitate access to the mountain. As we approached steeply sloping snow-covered rocks, it soon became clear that we didn't have the resources or the time to push this highly technical route.

Instead, we dropped down onto the moraine below the snout of the glacier, passing a meltwater stream amongst the loose unconsolidated boulders and noting the place as a possible site for Advanced Base Camp. From here the glacier snout dominated the view east. We could see why Andrew had ruled it out as a route, since in several places there were old avalanche tracks scarring the snout and beautiful toppling ice towers overhung part of the route; but we felt that in the early morning cold the risks would be acceptable. We pressed on, taking the glacier on its left up loose rocks, before traversing across a threatened platform to the right side of the glacier. From here the climb was straightforward on steep snow but exhausting with heavy rucksacks at over 5500m. We bivouacked that night in a crevasse in thick freezing cloud.

Morning was clear and we found ourselves 100m below the crest of the glacier. On its right rose the 250m S ridge of Chamlang. Here we chose for Camp 1, launching place for the skies. Later that day, back at Base Camp in the afternoon mist, we reported to the rest of the team with excitement that we had cracked it. Furthermore, this was an original start to the route; the Japanese had started their climb further north and had missed out the first part of the ridge.

On 8 October the arduous task of load carrying began. The fittest of us carried 70lb rucksacks (32kg) and it took all day to reach the site for Advanced Base Camp (5170m). We pressed on to Camp 1 (5740m) the next day and set up siege headquarters – a collection of three tiny tents in a desert of snow. During the next two days two parties investigated the first part of the

S ridge and laid fixed rope down the 250m trade route to its start. We could soon see that the first part of our climb would be to negotiate two rock towers which barred access to the next part of the ridge. Angus and Ngatamba struggled over the first rock tower to be faced by a seemingly impassable wall of rock on the second tower. Back in camp we talked all day about alternative routes, the danger, and giving up. Finally, we decided to push the ridge. However, Andrew who had only been married a few months made the brave decision to turn back. For him the danger was unacceptable. Peter, my elder brother, a man of hidden depth, wild ginger facial hair and enormous appetite, had not acclimatised well and he agreed to support us by carrying loads of food and equipment from Base Camp to Camp 1 alone. This thankless task of support was the key to our success, preserving our strength now that we were reduced to a climbing team of four: Neil, Angus, Ngatamba and myself.

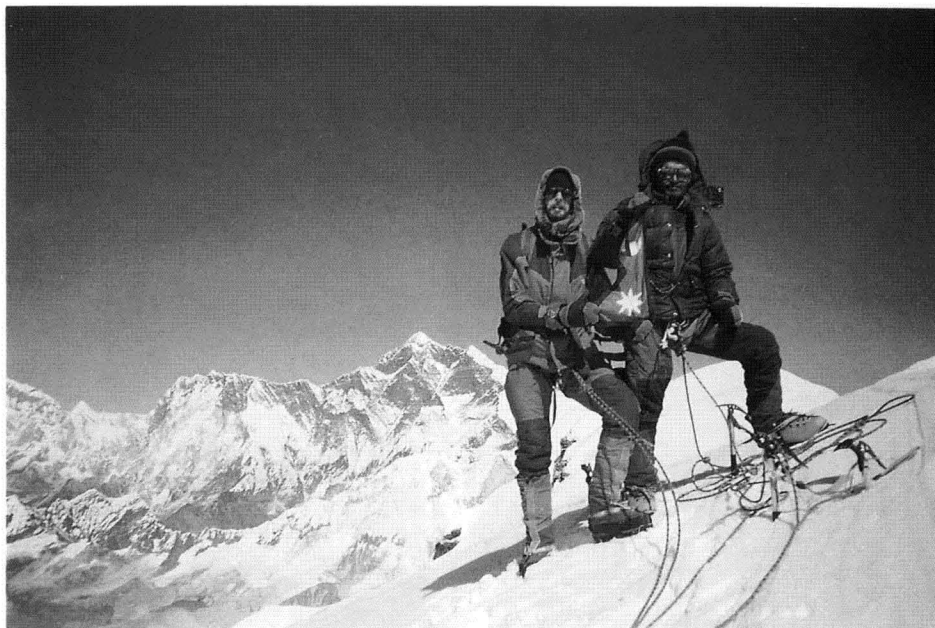
Our next task was to make the first rock tower safe and we spent a day fixing rope in a rising traverse on loose rock. All day our hands and feet dislodged boulders which tumbled down thousands of feet to a distant glacier to the east. After that hard day's climbing Angus and I needed a rest day and we spent the next day at Camp 1 while Neil and Ngatamba pressed on to the second rock tower with more fixed rope, planning to bivouac that evening and go further in the morning. At the same time Dave Gwynne-Jones and Annette Carmichael carried a load of food and gear up the fixed rope to be picked up later. They had a marvellous day and returned buzzing.

The next day we rose early and climbed the fixed rope along the first rock tower. At one point I turned round to see Angus sitting with his head bowed on his chest, emotion hidden behind his reflective goggles. He was clearly quite shaken. Whilst unclipped from the fixed rope, he had stumbled and fallen onto his left shoulder narrowly escaping an enormous fall to his death.

It was nearly midday and we spotted the other two already on the top of the second rock tower some four hours ahead of us but just within earshot. Neil shouted that they were going on. That afternoon was the most glorious climbing for me. We descended from the first rock tower to take a line between the snow plastering the W face of the ridge and the second rock tower above. We were carrying heavy loads of climbing equipment and food to dump in preparation for the summit bid. The climbing was mostly straightforward on nasty soft snow but with the safety of fixed rope that the other two had left. Every now and then our progress was hampered by a difficult rock pitch, but this was exhilarating in the thin still air, brilliant sunshine and dramatic scenery. Behind we could see Camp 1 and ahead was the summit of Chamlang; in the distance to its left rose the black SW face of Mount Everest looking most unfriendly.

At the end of the fixed ropes we buried our loads in a small cave, blocking the entrance with climbing hardware as protection against theft of food by ravens. These enormous birds had been a repeated problem for us, pecking holes and ripping our tents and then spreading the contents of packets of noodles and cup-a-soups all over the campsite.



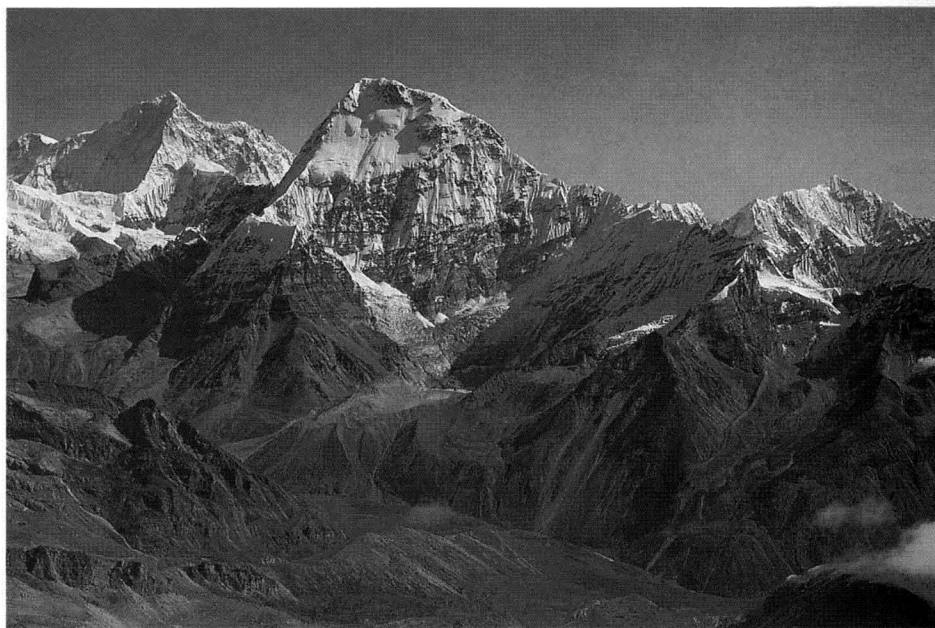


*Above*

35. Andrew Pollard (L) and Ngatempa Sherpa on the summit of Chamlang, Everest behind. (*Neil Howells*) (p112)

*Below*

36. The 1st British ascent of Chamlang followed the R skyline up the S ridge, Makalu behind (L) (*Andrew Knight*) (p112)



Angus and I returned to Camp 1 that night, while Neil and Ngatamba established Camp 2 at 6280m on a thin snow arête on the crest of the S ridge of Chamlang – Base Camp was still visible as a collection of red dots far below. That night I lay awake for a long time. We were almost in a position to go for the summit. We all wanted a rest at Base Camp, some real food and a wash, but this would make us very short on time, and the long walk back to Camp 1 would undo some of the good to be gained by a rest at Base. The next problem was who to send for the summit. Neil and Ngatamba were the strongest. Angus had the most technical expertise and I wanted to go because it was my expedition. Finally, I decided to send the two strongest, realising that this would probably exclude me. Neil and Ngatamba returned the next afternoon and the arrival of Andy and Peter with buffalo fried rice and cooked potatoes decided our fate. We would rest for two days at Camp 1 and then all four go for the top together.

On 18 October we set off for Camp 2, fixing the last 100m of the second rock tower and arriving to pitch tents in the afternoon mist. We ate well on our stocks of food, frozen potatoes reheated in soup, and slept soundly. The morning of 19 October was fine and we set off over the frozen snows northwards at 7.45am. The morning was a long and terrific ridge bash, with incredible exposure and hard work as the sun softened the snow. We climbed as two pairs, Neil and Ngatamba ahead breaking trail. By mid-afternoon we reached the feared rock band which had dominated our conversation as we viewed the mountain from Base Camp. This had been the crux of the climb for the Japanese on the first ascent. Neil led the climbing on the rock band, 50m of technical rock followed by a steep ice slope. Above this, we roped together again as a four, Neil still leading. We were now on steep, unconsolidated snow, 3m deep, and we found ourselves almost swimming to stay on the mountain. Neil fell. Angus shouted, 'He's off!' There was nothing I could do – I was struggling to make any upward progress myself let alone arrest a fall. He whizzed past me and momentarily I realised that we were all about to plummet down the W face, over the rock band, 2300m down, pulled by the rope. Then it was all over, he stopped just past me, incredibly held by Ngatamba, I don't know how. As darkness fell we clambered into a crevasse and dug out places to sleep, brewed and spent a fitful night at 6800m, short of air and desperately cold.

The morning of 20 October was again clear but, as we climbed out of our crevasse leaving behind all of our bivouac equipment, the full force of a high-altitude easterly wind hit us. Painful spindrift struck all exposed flesh and dropped chilling flakes inside our clothing. The slopes were straightforward now and at 10.50am we stood on the summit of Chamlang at 7319m. Unknown and unseen, Peter was watching us through a 1.2m lens from Base Camp as we reached the summit of Chamlang more than 2km above him. From the summit of Mera (6476m), Andy Knight, Annette Carmichael, Carolyn Knight (expedition doctor), David Collier and Dave Gwynne-Jones shared in our success.

Ngatamba took out a Nepali flag and we all posed beside him for photographs. The wind was terrific, burning our faces and taking our breath away. Neil took off his gloves to take some pictures and his fingers were frostbitten within seconds. We hurried down from that unpleasant spot to escape the cruel wind. In no time we reached our bivouac, packed up, had a drink and set off for Camp 2. Just below the bivouac we had to abseil to cross that dangerous unconsolidated snow that had caused us problems on the ascent. We had little climbing hardware left and three 50m abseils to perform. On the first, we placed a snow stake as an anchor and Neil and Angus abseiled down. I followed and as I descended the stake began to pull out of the soft snow, my full weight relying on it. Ngatamba stood on the stake and I thrust my axe into the snow and climbed the rest of the way down. We descended the rock band without problems and Neil and Ngatamba set off for Camp 2 at a terrific pace.

At a rock step some distance further along, Angus made a belay and I descended as he payed out the rope. I followed the footsteps in the ice that the others had made ahead of us, but after a few steps the ice gave way and I was left hanging in my harness over the W face, held by Angus. We could afford no more near misses.

It was dark as we climbed along a knife-edge of snow, following our footsteps of the day before back to Camp 2. The wind was still roaring but with less ferocity than it had seven hours previously when we had stood on the summit where, in the dim moonlight, a plume of snow was blowing unrelentingly east. I was staggering with exhaustion after 10 hours of climbing at high altitude. My mouth was completely dessicated and my lips caked and swollen. I couldn't see Angus but I heard him groan behind and then the rope came tight between us. He had stopped. I turned back to find out what had happened. I found him half buried in a crevasse which split the ridge and into which he had stumbled in the dark. Snow had packed in on top of his legs; he couldn't move. For 15 minutes I lay in the snow vigorously digging him out. I stopped occasionally as waves of nausea brought about by the exertion made me cough and retch down the precipitous W face of the ridge. At last I got him out and at 7pm we collapsed into Camp 2. Neil and Ngatamba Sherpa had been back for an hour and had some hot orange ready; we sat rehydrating in silence and relief.

We spent many hours eating and drinking without conversation. We had done it, but the elation was numbed by exhaustion. Two days later, as the mist swirled up the Hongu valley, we returned to Base Camp to be reunited with our camp staff and the rest of the successful Chamlang expedition team.

**Summary:** On 20 October 1991 the first British ascent of Chamlang, 7319m, was made by the British Chamlang Expedition. The joint leaders were Andrew Knight and Andrew Pollard. The following members reached the summit by the South Ridge: Angus Andrew, Neil Howells, Andrew Pollard and Ngatamba Sherpa.



## HISTORICAL APPENDIX

**Survey expeditions**

- 1953 Survey of Inukhu and Hongu valleys by J O M Roberts.  
1954 New Zealand Alpine Club Barun expedition. Exploration and survey of the Barun, Iswa and Choyang valleys.  
1955 Mt Chamlang survey expedition led by Norman Hardie noted a possible route on the S ridge of Chamlang.

**Ascents of Chamlang main summit**

- 1962 1st ascent of Chamlang main summit via S ridge by Japanese Academic Alpine Club of Hokkaido.  
1986 2nd ascent by the Japanese via W ridge.  
1987 A Korean–Nepalese expedition climbs the S ridge.  
1990 A German expedition reaches the summit via the W ridge and W face.  
1991 1st British ascent, via S ridge, led by Andrew Knight and Andrew Pollard.

**Ascents of other summits of Chamlang**

- 1981 Reinhold Messner and Doug Scott climb to a minor summit of Chamlang at 7010m via N face.  
1984 Doug Scott and party climb the east summit of Chamlang (7325m) via NE ridge and N face and then traverse to the central summit (7180m).  
1989 A successful ascent of the east summit via the N face by a Netherlands women's expedition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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