
LUKE HUGHES

Lindbergs and Lemons

The British Mountaineering Expedition to East Greenland 1992

(Plates 44–46)

In old Norse sailing directions it was laid down that to reach the Greenland settlements one must steer from Iceland north-west until a great mountain, Hvitserk, is sighted, then hold this course until the mountain bears north, when the mariner should steer south-west along the edge of the ice to landfall in South Greenland. That mountain landmark, now known as Gunnbjørns Fjeld, was suspected by 'Gino' Watkins, the leader of the Arctic Air Route expedition 1930–31, of being the highest in Greenland; it was certainly the dominant peak amidst the majestic basalt massif which now bears Watkins' name.

From the windows of a Twin Otter more than 60 years later, the geological patterns of the region and the magical light made school-book geology crystal clear; in the north, the lumpen basalt mountains with their horizontal zebra-like patterns of snow and rock; below, rolling bands of sandstone, like huge beached whales lying among the glaciers; to the south, the virgin granite summits of the Lemonbjerger and hundreds of needle-pointed peaks puncturing the horizon; most noble of all, the snow-covered summit ridge of the Cathedral.

It was instantly recognisable from the many aerial photographs taken in the thirties by the team of pilots and aerial photographers on Watkins' expedition (many of the archives are now in the Scott Polar Research Institute). Captain Percy Lemon was the first to identify it in 1931 and it has been a treasured, secret, inaccessible prize for Arctic mountaineers over the last 60 years. It is only in exceptional years that the sea is navigable and neither the Inuits nor the Danes had ever bothered to explore most of the east coast.

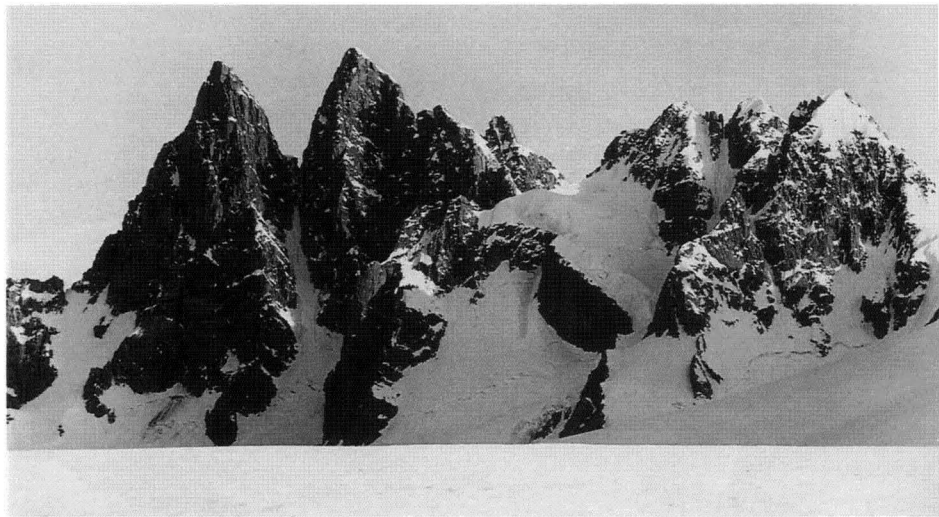
But in 1931 the Norwegians laid claim to a portion of the east coast and, although the claim was rejected by the International Court at The Hague, the Danes were sufficiently concerned to want the area more thoroughly explored, even by the British. The following year, the Danish Geodetic Institute made a map using a new technique using oblique air photographs (with additional surveying material by Michael Spender). And in 1935, the geologist Lawrence Wager led a year-long survey to further investigate some of his own findings whilst under the auspices of Watkins' expedition some years earlier. He had, in the meantime, taken part in the 1933 British Everest Expedition with Jack Longland, and had acquired both some serious mountaineering experience and some committed climbing companions.

Now with a team that included Longland and Augustine Courtauld, Wager successfully climbed Gunnbjørns Fjeld and was able to prove (from the summit) Watkins' supposition that it was indeed the highest mountain in Greenland. He then set up field-bases near the coast along with his botanist brother, a meteorologist, two families of Inuits, and other forbearing colleagues. His discovery and investigation of the Skaergaard Intrusion, a geological formation of 'cumulates', dominated the rest of Wager's later life as Professor of Geology at Oxford, and prompted more than 30 articles in learned journals; his subsequent research was to inform the geological experiments conducted during the Apollo space missions to the Moon. Since 1980 annual field expeditions have been sponsored by the University of Toronto and the mining company Platinova Resources Ltd who now claim to have found gold and platinum in minable quantities.

Yet despite all this prospective activity at the coast, the mountainous areas further inland remained unexplored. We aimed to fill in some of the gaps on the map. Our team of nine included Phil Bartlett, myself, Robin Illingworth, Gary Baum, Mike and Jenny Woolridge, Barry Mills, the photographer David Stewart-Smith, and the American climber Bill Pelkey. Few of us could spare more than four weeks and it was going to need bold moves and tight logistics to achieve all the objectives we had set ourselves. We had the advantage of Danish aerial photographs, some of Stan Woolley's notes, and considerable research from the Scott Polar Research Institute. We planned to land on high ground amongst the Lindberg range, to get fit and a feel for the surroundings (the stability of the glaciers, the best times to travel, the optimum gear) and sweep down towards the coast like peak pirates, setting up raiding bases as we went.

On the first night, barely 24 hours from Heathrow, we seized the opportunities offered by nocturnal daylight and climbed four peaks before bedtime, bewitched by the enormity of the ice cap, the dreamy tranquillity of Arctic summer and the knowledge that we could never be benighted. A similarly frantic climbing pattern continued as we moved south (mostly at night when the snow is least sticky) away from the ice-covered basalt lumps towards the granite needles and the first human views that anyone has had of Cathedral from the north-east. We skied across dune-like glaciers in the long, low shadows of evening light and scuttled up peaks from which we could survey potential routes. Intoxicated by the pure aesthetic pleasure of the landscape and the knowledge that no one had ever been here before, we revelled in our very own Playground of the Arctic. No bivouacs, minimum gear, unknown ground, experienced partners, stable rock, sensational views – how the Alps must have seemed to Leslie Stephen.

The important climbs began on Cathedral (2600m), the mountain that was supposedly attempted by the Bonington/Lowther/Knox-Johnston expedition of 1991. There appears to be little doubt, however, that the peak that Wager had in mind is a snow and ice mountain which lies some 6km further into the range than the peak attempted by the Bonington expedition. It has a high roof of snow supported by rock buttresses and is clearly higher than all the



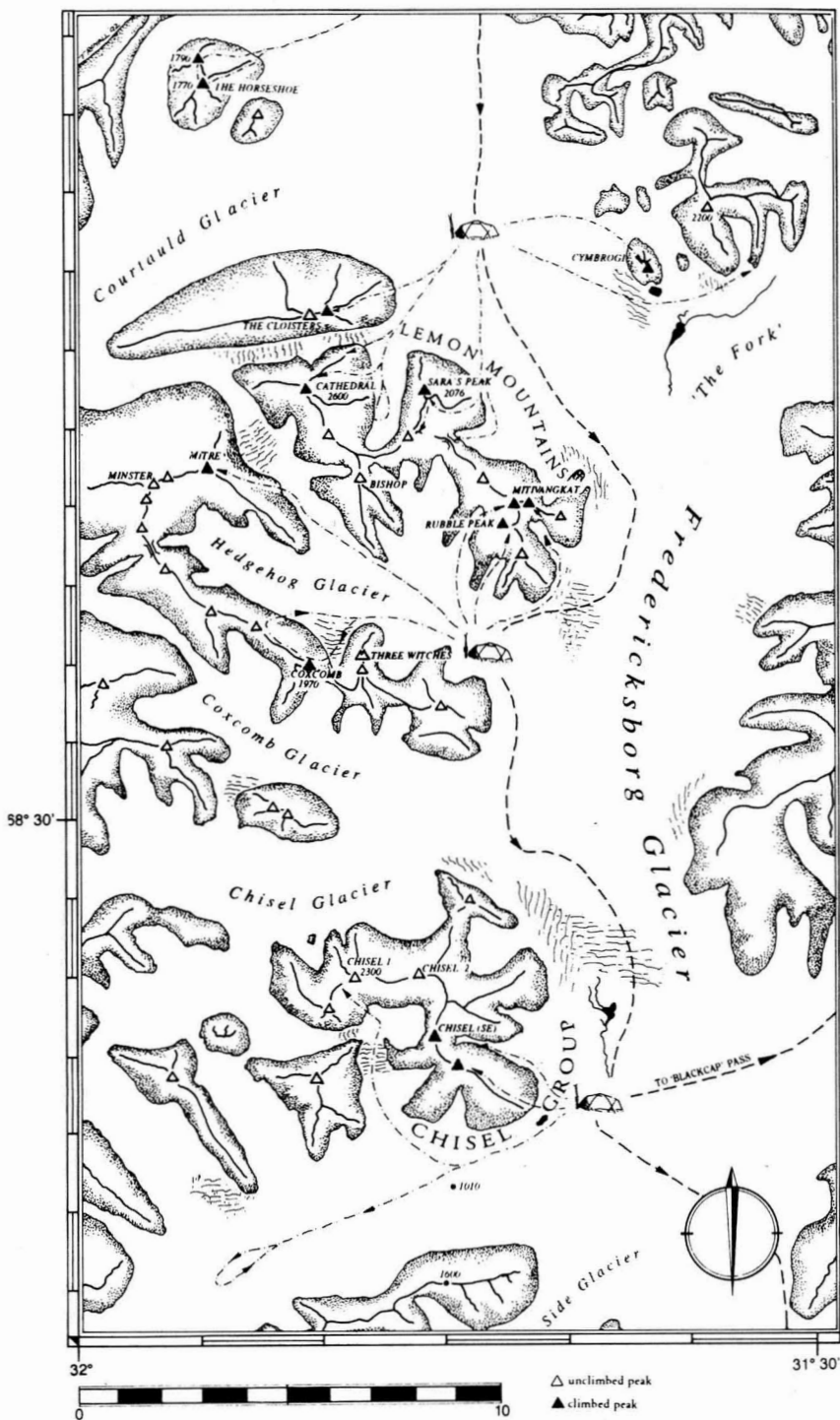
Above

44. East Greenland: the Lemon Mountains. East Peak and West Peak from the north. (*Luke Hughes*) (p147)

Below

45. The Three Witches (L) and Coxcomb, 1970m. In the foreground: the Hedgehog glacier. (*Luke Hughes*) (p147)





Lemon Mountains and Chisel Group - Kangerdlugssuaq
(British Mountaineering Expedition to East Greenland 1992)

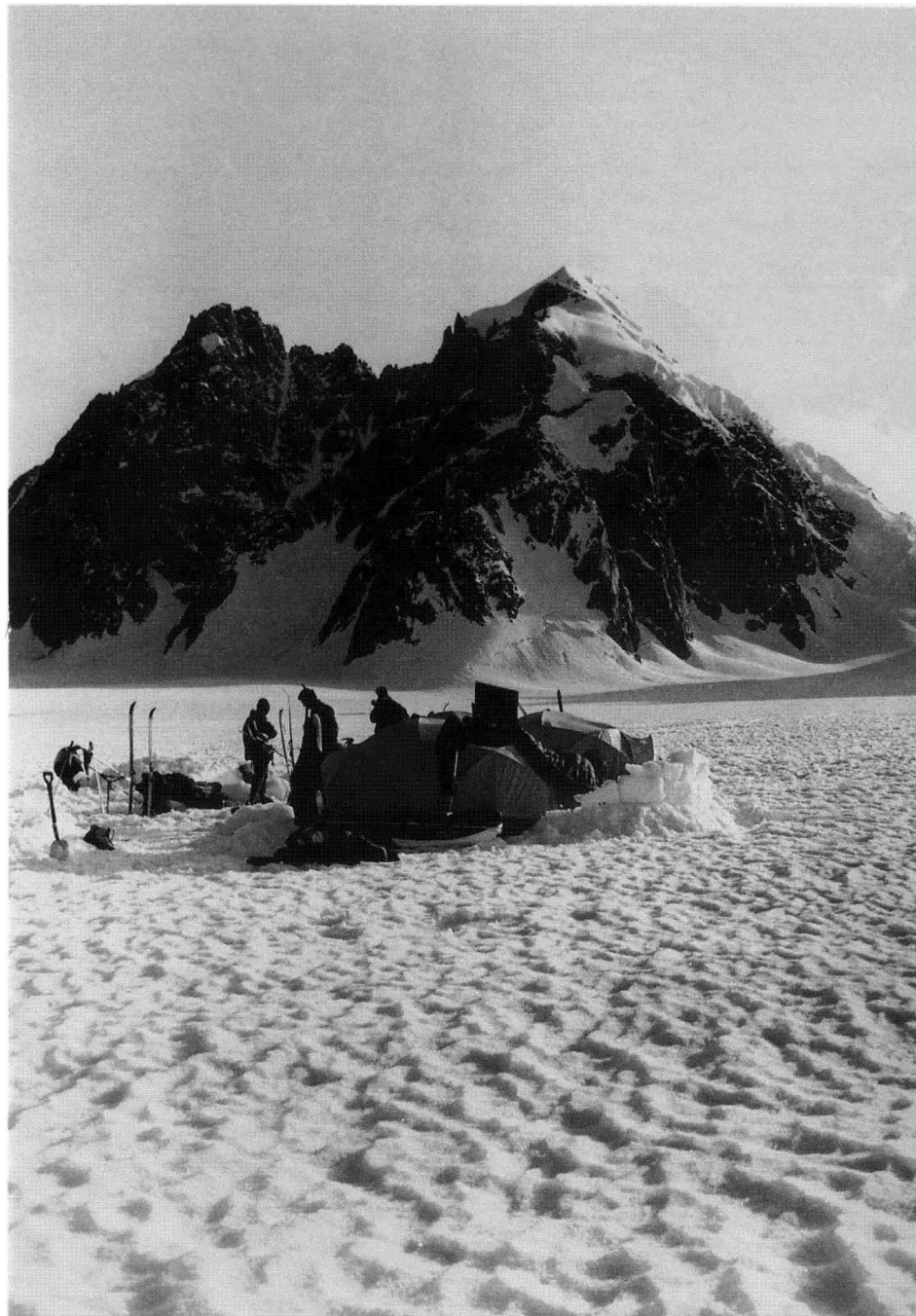
surrounding peaks. The first ascent, by Phil and me, followed a fine mixed line up the NE ridge, descending by east-facing gullies. The following day, Robin made a second ascent with Gary, Mike and Bill. Several routes were climbed on other nearby peaks, and glacier systems were explored, before we moved our camp towards the coast. The glacier to the south of the Cathedral, which we nicknamed the Hedgehog glacier, is dominated by a prickly group of pinnacles, since christened 'The Minster' (in fact the mountain attempted by Bonington and Lowther) but there were other enticing summits. Technical routes included 'Coxcomb' by myself and Gary, the E summit of Mitivangkát ('Maiden's breasts' in Inuit) by Phil, Gary and Robin, and 'Mitre Peak' by Phil, Robin and David. Much of the climbing had its problems, principally because of deep powder sitting on steep, black ice on all the north-facing slopes, but everyone in the team was able to climb on virgin ground to the level of his ability, on rock and ice.

Moving further south and towards the coast, the Chisel group was found to include no less than five peaks. Two were climbed but Phil and I retreated 50m from the razor-sharp rocky summit that gives the Chisel its name, timid perhaps about retreating through a precipitous icefall once the sun was on it, but in reality chilled to the bone by an Arctic night spent looking out to the pack ice that clogged the fjords and distant sea. This was isolation.

Wager had meticulously recorded leaving a food dump on the first visit to the Watkins mountains, and half our group were curious to see what might have remained 57 years on. Time was short, and this led to a 24-hour dash some 60km east towards the Christian IV glacier, one of the largest glaciers in the world. We crossed the sandstone belt of 'Black Cap' Pass (abundant marine fossils) and the inappropriately named Sorgenfri ('Sorrow-free') glacier, with its bizarre ice formations. To our surprise we found the food under a cairn by the side of a small glacial lake, the tins in immaculate condition and barely rusty, such is the dryness of the air. The pemmican and even the New Zealand butter would have been perfectly nutritious to any party in trouble, though the Fortnum & Mason Dried Vegetable ('Julienne') was judged to be a little past its prime.

We met up again at the coast. Then began the arduous task of man-hauling sledges across the fearsome glacial debris that has so far protected the approaches to this magical region. In the moraines and riverbeds we witnessed the glistening of the myriad highly-coloured crystals that had teased Wager on his first visit and have continued to tempt geologists to this day. But we were there as mountaineers, basking in the conquest of 17 new routes in virgin territory.

In his lecture at the Royal Geographical Society in 1936, Augustine Courtauld described how some of his team had been interested to see the effect of taking wives on the expedition and added 'I am pleased to say the experiment was entirely successful'. Molly Courtauld, for her part, described a more tender image: 'As to the country itself – well, the only word to describe it is fairyland. It is more beautiful than I thought possible.' And it has left its spell on us.



46. Camp on Fredericksborg glacier. Cathedral (R), 2600m, from the NE. The first ascent followed the snow ramp onto the ridge, then crossed mixed ground to the summit. (*Luke Hughes*) (p147)

Summary: the nine members of the British Mountaineering Expedition 1992 to East Greenland climbed in the Lindberg and Lemon ranges of the Kangerdlugssuaq basin in July/August. Philip Bartlett and Luke Hughes made the first ascent of Cathedral Peak (2600m). The party explored the Hedgehog glacier, making 16 first ascents including the Minster, Coxcomb, Mitre Peak and the E summit of Mitivangkak (see map). They visited Wager's 1936 food dump and collected plant and lichen samples from the Lindberg and Lemon mountains.

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