

# The Keswick brothers

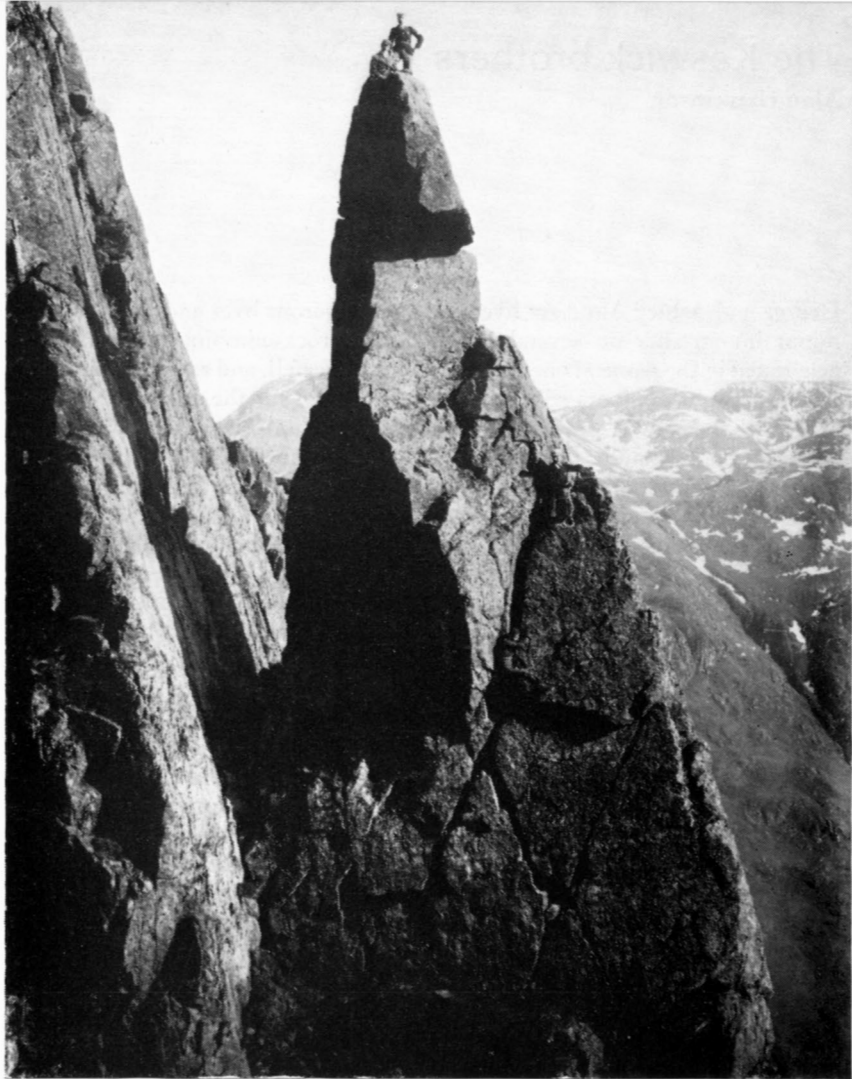
Alan Hankinson

George and Ashley Abraham lived long and vigorous lives and laid claims to minor immortality on several counts. Their rock-climbing partnership is celebrated in the name of one exposed route on Scafell, and as long as the sport finds followers, climbers will be indebted to them for the discovery of such classics as the New West on Pillar, Slanting Gully on Lliwedd and Crowberry Ridge on the Buchaille. They supported, sometimes with shoulders and heads, many of the more desperate adventures of Owen Glynne Jones. They were pioneers of mountain travel by motor car. Their mountaineering careers spanned more than half a century, from 1890 or thereabouts until after World War II, and took them repeatedly to the Alps and the Dolomites as well as to all the British climbing centres. And if their climbing in Europe was not as formative as that at home, it was still of a high standard and pursued with characteristic gusto.

If that were all, they would be remembered merely as two men among dozens who climbed well in the early days and contributed their share of new routes. Their special claim to gratitude rests on the fact that wherever they went, however testing the route or long the day, they took their camera with them—‘our ubiquitous camera’, George calls it in one of his books, ‘probably the most important member of the party’—and found time for careful photography. The pictures they took, published as separate prints or post-cards or as the illustrations to books, form an exhaustive and invaluable record, evoking more vividly than any written words can do the nature and ‘feel’ of climbing in their day.

They were professional photographers. Their father, George Perry Abraham, had founded a photography business in Keswick in 1866. George was born six years later, Ashley four years after that, and they were brought up to join the family business. They began scrambling about on the crags around Keswick, unexplored at that time, about 1890. Gradually they became aware of the mainstream development of rock-climbing at Wasdale Head, and at Easter, 1896, they joined Owen Glynne Jones, ‘our indomitable leader’, to form the team which dominated the vanguard of the sport in the Lake District and Snowdonia for the next three years. From the first, their camera and its attendant accessories went with them.

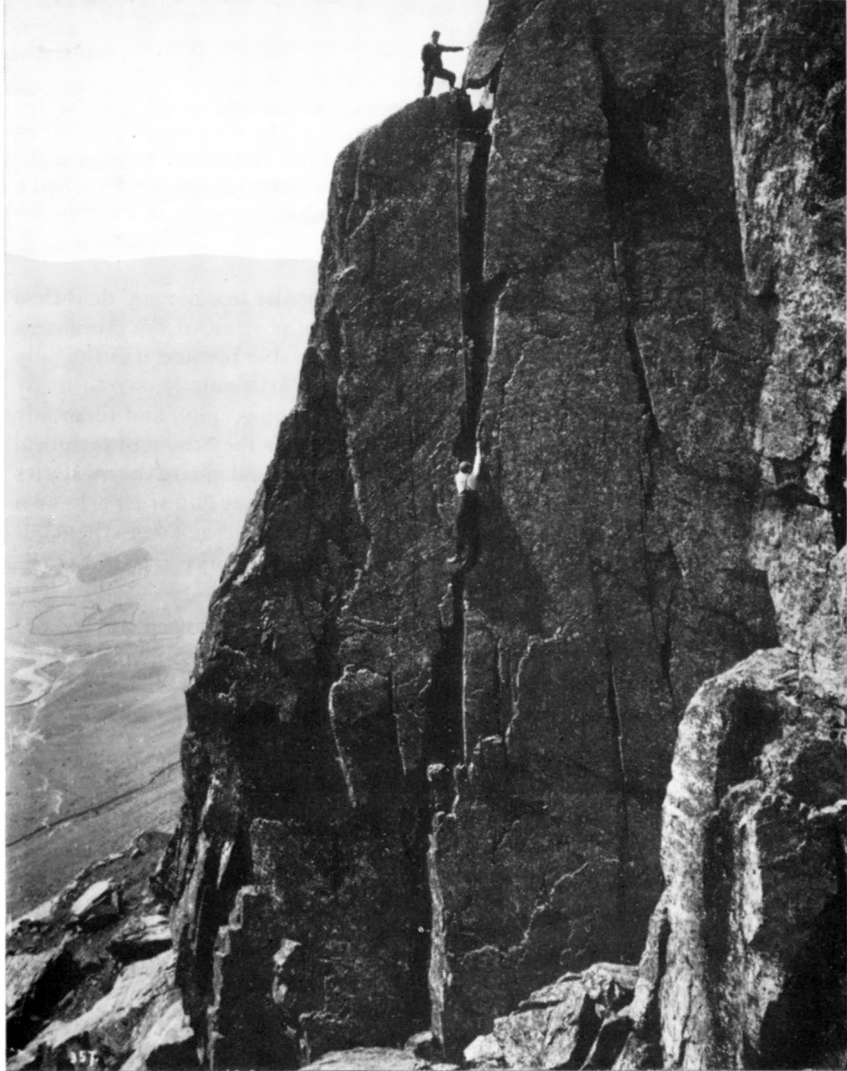
When they began climbing together Jones was already planning a book about Lake District rock-climbing, making copious notes after all his expeditions. He must have been quick to realise how much his book would gain from illustration by a series of photographs, professionally taken, of rock-climbers in action. In the book, in a typically ebullient passage, he describes the taking of their first photograph of a new route under conquest. The route was the one



21 *Napes Needle* This and next six photos: F & RCC and AC Collections—Abraham, Keswick

still known by the cumbersome title 'Scafell Pinnacle by Jones' Route from Deep Ghyll'. They might more neatly have named it 'Long Exposure' or something of that sort but these were days long before climbers sought to be anything more than descriptively prosaic in the naming of their discoveries. At all events, Jones was leading up the curving crack with George second and Ashley still at the foot of the cliff:

'I could hear another climbing party finishing an ascent of the Pinnacle by the ordinary route, their voices echoing down the ghyll and cheering me with a sense of neighbourliness. My companions were holding an animated discussion below on the subject of photography. The light was excellent, and our positions most artistic. The cameras were left in the cave at the foot of the ghyll. Ashley was afraid I meant to go up without him; but his professional instinct got the better of his desire to climb, and, shouting out to us to stay where we were for five



22 *Kern Knotts Crack*

minutes, he ran round to the high-level traverse on the other side of the ghyll, and down the Lord's Rake to the cavern. George had the tripod screw and could not hand it to his brother; so, asking me to hold firmly with the rope, he practised throwing stones across the gully to the traverse. Then, tying the screw to a stone, he managed to project this over successfully. We composed our limbs to a photographic quiescence. Ashley had a splendid wide-angle lens, which, from his elevated position on the traverse opposite, could take in 400 feet of the cliff, showing the entire route to the summit. It was his turn to take the lead. "Mr Jones! I can't see you, your clothes are so dark." I apologized. "Will you step out a foot or two from that hole?" I was in a cheerful mood and ready to oblige a friend, but the platform was scarcely two feet square, and to acquiesce was to step out a few hundred feet into Deep Ghyll. For this I had not made adequate preparation and told him so. "Well, will you take off your coat?" That I could do with pleasure, and for a while his instructions were levelled at George. He

was in an awkward place and was much cramped in ensuring safety, but Ashley was dissatisfied and insisted on his lifting the left leg. This gave him no foot-hold to speak of, but in the cause of photography he had been trained to manage without such ordinary aids. . . . The ghyll had become rather gloomy and we had a lengthy exposure. I was glad to slip on my jacket again and draw in the rope for George's ascent.'

The passage, although composed in Jones's best jocular manner and doubtless enlivened to some extent by exaggeration, gives a portrait of the Abrahams at work as photographers which is particularly valuable because it is the only such portrait. Although the brothers, and George particularly, wrote many books about their climbing, they rarely mention photography, and then only in so far as it impinges on the climbing itself. Perhaps they thought technical detail would be boring; more likely they were anxious to safeguard the mysteries of their craft. Whatever the reason they gave nothing away and what is known now about their methods, the secrets of their success, comes not from them but from men who worked with them and watched them at work.

About one point there is no mystery at all. The camera they used throughout most of their career still exists and is still occasionally used for publicity pictures by George Fisher, who took over the camera equipment a few years ago when the Abraham business was wound up and he acquired the site for his climbing shop.

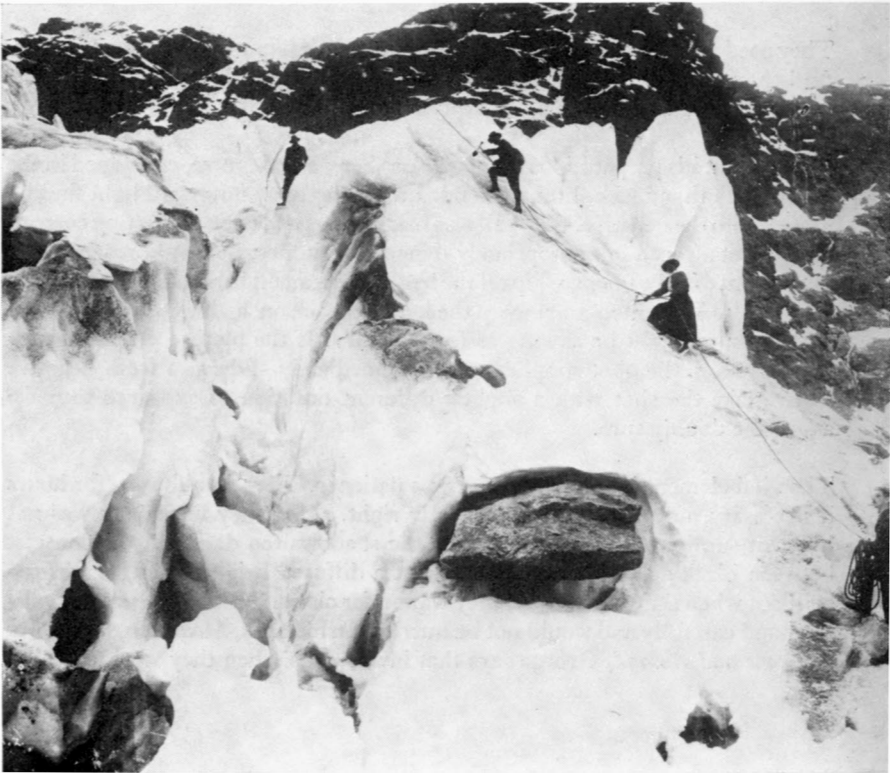
23 *Pigne d'Arolla, crossing the Chermontane Pass into Italy*



Altogether the equipment for a day's photography, tripod and camera, two lenses and a dozen glass-plate negatives, meant an additional weight of about 20 lb. Before internal combustion came to the rescue, and it is hardly surprising that the brothers were pioneers in this field too, they would hump this load up Borrowdale in the early morning, over the passes to Pillar or Gable or Scafell, put in a day's climbing and photographing, then walk back the same way in the evening with their twelve exposed negatives to be processed in their workshops on Lake Road. On the actual climbs it was usually the strong shoulders of Ashley, who already had some 15 stone of his own to haul up, which took the burden. In the Alps and the Dolomites they generally surrendered it to a hired porter or apprentice guide.

The art of photography was already, by 1890, well past its infancy and Victorian ingenuity had devised many much lighter and smaller cameras, some of them miniature enough to be disguised as pocket watches or binoculars or concealed in the handle of a walking-stick. The Abrahams, however, thought it worth their while to accept the heavier burden, and were wholly justified by the results they gained. The best of their pictures—and there are scores of very good ones indeed—still seem excitingly alive today. By comparison with the work of the general run of their contemporaries, the grey and blurred and ill-composed shots which appeared in club journals and books, the Abraham photographs are brilliant.

24 *The ice-fall of the Gorner glacier*



They were successful, basically, for two reasons—the quality of the gear they used and their own expertise.

The camera was an Underwood whole-plate, which means it was made by Underwoods to produce an image on glass-plate negatives which measured  $8\frac{1}{2}$  in by  $6\frac{1}{2}$ . Screwed firmly on to its tripod with adjustable, telescopic legs, the camera was nothing more really than a sturdy wooden box, about 12 in long, 8 in across and 9 in deep, with a hole at the front for the lens to be screwed in and a concertina-bellows, made of fine soft leather, at the back. At the rear end of the bellows there was a ground-glass plate and focusing was simply a matter of winding the plate forwards or backwards, by rack and pinion, until the image on this plate (an inverted image) was of the required sharpness. Then the bellows was locked in that position, the ground-glass plate lifted out of the way, and the glass-plate negative was slotted in, ready for exposure. The Abrahams always used the Orthochromatic plate which, in most circumstances, gave a more natural, less heavily contrasted effect. By modern standards it was a very slow emulsion, requiring a lengthy exposure but leading to the production of virtually grain-free negatives, capable of being enlarged considerably without perceptible loss of quality.

They had a choice, usually, of three lenses: a Taylor and Hobson 'Cooke' lens with a 12 in focal length and an aperture range from f6.3 to f32, which they used mainly for set-piece landscape shots; a German Goerz lens, with a similar range, which they took climbing; and a wide-angle lens with a 6-inch focal length and an aperture setting from f16 to f64. Whenever possible they stopped down to f32 to get pin-sharp detail.

They used no filters, which is presumably why their pictures rarely show clouds. And they never carried an exposure meter, relying on their judgment of the light to estimate the duration of exposure required.

Throughout his preparations the photographer was, of course, enveloped in the focusing cloth, a black shroud intended to prevent any untoward light finding its way onto the negative. When all was ready, focus and aperture setting correct, his subjects frozen in appropriately dynamic attitudes, he would reach round to the front of the camera, whip off the lens cap, count off in seconds the duration of exposure he wanted, then whip the lens cap back on again. On a dullish day the exposure might be as long as four seconds. If the picture promised particularly well, the photographer would immediately slide in a fresh negative and re-take the shot with a slightly different duration of exposure to make assurance doubly sure.

The vital element in their expertise was patience. They would wait, for hours if necessary, until the light was exactly right. What they were after was not brilliant sunlight, which would make the shadows too dark and the contrast between black and white too strong, but a diffused brightness. If it was too brilliant when they were ready, they waited for cloud. They operated methodically and carefully and would not be hurried. In his book, *Mountain Adventures at Home and Abroad*, George says that in the Alps when they were climbing





25 *Inside the Bertol hut*

guideless but employing two porters, the sight of the tripod and camera coming out of the rucksacks was invariably taken by the porters as a signal that they might settle down for a sleep.

Their mountaineering experience must have been a great help. They were well acquainted with the climbing cliffs of the Lake District and North Wales, they knew the character and alignment of the crags and the routes, and so they could plan with some precision to be at the right place when the angle of light was most propitious. The angle was a matter of importance. If the sun shone on to the subject from directly behind the camera, the effect would be too harsh. Ideally, for their purpose, it should fall across the photographer's shoulder, at three-quarter angle. And it seems to have been axiomatic with them, as with many other professional photographers of those days, that the best results were gained when the sunlight came over the right shoulder, though why this should be more effective than the left remains a mystery. Whichever shoulder was used, however, the slightly oblique fall of the light ensured adequate over-all clarity to the picture and at the same time gave just enough shading to bring out all the grain and texture and detail of rock formation. In my opinion, the special excellence of their best pictures springs from this quality: they seem to express the essential 'rockiness of the rock', so that you feel you might almost reach out to the photograph and grasp a handhold.



26 *The Guggi hut*

Their aim, in their climbing pictures, was to portray the sport—to represent as truly as they could the nature of the terrain, rock face or gully, snow-ridge or ice-fall, and the character of climbing, sometimes strenuous, sometimes delicate, sometimes dangerous. So they concentrated, for the most part, on climbers in action. It is a pity that the thick tweeds of those days were so uniformly sombre in colour that the climbers tend to blend, chameleon-like, into their background, particularly in the gullies and chimneys. And it is remarkable that, even in these circumstances, the Abraham brothers usually succeeded in capturing the outline of the climber's figure.

The demands of photography added to the excitements of mountaineering. The call for a comparatively long exposure often meant that the climber-subject had to stay perfectly still, balanced on the edge-nails of his boots over a dramatic drop, looking composed but purposeful, in places where most climbers would be anxious to move on quickly. Fortunately George Abraham, who was called on to pose most frequently, was a superb rock-climber, one of the pioneers of the balance techniques which carried rock-climbing out of the gullies and on to the open, airy faces of the cliffs in the 1890s. There is no record of his ever falling off because of photography, or indeed for any other reason.

Others were not always so reliable. On Dinas Mot Pinnacle one day, when, by Ashley's account, 'the dark rock necessitated a lengthy exposure', the lead climber fell off before the lens cap had been replaced. 'The plate was ruined,' Ashley says.



But it was the photographer rather than his subject who ran the greater risks. The Abraham books recount several narrow escapes of this kind. On a ridge of one of the Chamonix aiguilles, before World War I, Ashley perched himself and the camera tripod on a ledge so exiguous that one of the guides climbed across to just below him to steady Ashley's foot with one hand and support one of the tripod legs with the other. When the guide's foothold collapsed, the whole group was momentarily endangered. And in the Dolomites once, when Ashley had spent some time beneath the focusing cloth lining up a picture of George, he stepped backwards right off the ledge and was saved by the rope. The disorientating effect of the focusing cloth was something to be wary of.

Simply transporting the extra equipment, gear so heavy and yet so fragile as their camera and negatives, could create difficulties. In his book, *On Alpine Heights and British Craggs*, George describes an attempt they made in 1911 with two guides to complete the year's first ascent of the Fünffingerspitze. It took the leading guide an hour to master the crux, the ice-wall above the Daumenscharte. Then he brought Ashley and the second guide up to him and the three of them carefully hauled up the photographic gear on a doubled rope. Unfortunately George had unroped to make this manoeuvre possible and he was now alone and ropeless at the bottom of the pitch, and all efforts to throw a rope down to him failed. He had to climb up unprotected. In a characteristic sentence he says: 'It would scarcely be wise to expand on the sensations of the lonely journey up one of the most desperate places in the Alps the while anxious friends peered nervously down upon every movement.'

27 *Gleckstein hut interior*



The Abraham brothers, George especially, published many climbing books. They travelled widely, Ashley especially, to lecture and show lantern slides. In the first twenty years of this century no one publicised the sports of rock-climbing and mountaineering more assiduously or effectively. They introduced the scenic picture post-card to Britain, having collected the idea from a season in Zermatt at the beginning of the century. And a few years later they were part-offended, part-flattered to find their card of Napes Needle on sale in Chamonix and masquerading as a local pinnacle called 'Aiguille de la Nuque', a salutary lesson in the dangers of literal translation.

Their evangelistic endeavours were not universally welcomed. There was strong feeling around the turn of the century that it was vulgar and irresponsible to spread the word too widely. Archer Thomson had to be cajoled into writing his guides to Lliwedd and Ogwen and these were designed very strictly for limited circulation among established enthusiasts. The Abrahams were restrained by no inhibitions of this kind. They sought the greatest possible circulation, made their books as popularly attractive as they could, and, though there are many passages of solemn warning about attendant dangers, their whole style and manner, the thrilling pictures and the swashbuckling text, were calculated to stir the blood of the armchair adventurer and encourage more active readers to try climbing for themselves. To some of their fellow-climbers this sort of thing was anathema, a deliberate assault on the sweet exclusivity of their sport: crags and mountains would become overcrowded; fools would rush in and disasters certainly ensue; climbing would grow common and competitive.

In some ways, at least, the critics have been proved right. But history has undoubtedly sided with the Abraham brothers. The production of climbing books of all kinds—practical, expeditionary, autobiographical, poetical, philosophical even, some predominantly pictorial and most of them generously illustrated by photographs—has become a minor industry. Many are better written than the Abraham books—few, even today, are more tellingly illustrated.