



62 Kings' Peak (Photo: D. Challis)

Forty-four and a half in the Himalaya

David Challis

The half was 11 years old, and the 44 ranged from just 14 (he had his birthday out there) to 47. Roughly one third of our party was adult, a third between 18 and 20, and a third under 18. We formed the King's School, Ely, Himalayan Expedition, 1978, which visited the Miyar Nullah in Lahul that summer, a relatively unexplored valley with numerous first ascents available, and some 75 glaciers to explore, not to mention the fascinating villages in the lower valley and the nomadic shepherds of its higher pastures.

Such numbers at first sight would seem an unwanted invasion of an unprotected environment, yet the expedition was organized in such a way that it certainly made much less impact than the great extravaganzas of recent years travelling the greater Himalayan peaks. We used few porters, and did much carrying ourselves, partly to get fit and acclimatize—a policy which paid off in the evident good health of the group while in the mountains. In addition there was a minimum of large communal equipment, everybody normally living, working and travelling as pairs using the lightweight camping techniques they were used to in Britain and elsewhere. Finally, in the field the expedition split into manageable mobile groups with a variety of immediate objectives, which only used base-camp at intervals for recuperation and redistribution of personnel. All food was carried in from outside, and only supplemented to a small extent by fresh local vegetables which were in fact readily available as the lower valley is quite prosperous, specializing in the production of seed potatoes.

Essentially 4 main areas of endeavour formed the basis of the expedition,



Map 9

though there was a certain amount of mobility of personnel between groups. First, operating from their own special base camp in a side valley at 4500m and led by Andrew Wielochowski, there was a group of 12 young adults and older teenagers who laid seige to Menthosa, the main peak in the area at 6444m. On the 2nd attempt on 17 August 4 of the group reached the summit by a new route after nearly 3 weeks' work on the mountain, 2 of them aged only 17 and 18. This was only the 3rd ascent of the peak which had previously been climbed by the British and Japanese in the early 70s. I failed myself in 1969, when making the first attempt with Major Bahuguna on the Indo-British Expedition of that year. By any standards the achievement of these boys was considerable. Two other members of the group, aged 18, also made first ascents of 2 other peaks, both over 5800m, with Andrew Wielochowski.

The 2nd and 3rd main groups operated from a base-camp about 30km up the Miyar Nullah at 3500m on an old field terrace above Khanjar, the highest village. One of these, co-ordinated by Theo Quant, our deputy leader made studies of life in the villages below base, and the nomadic shepherds who spent the summer with their sheep on the Alpine pasture which occupies the 30km between the top village and the snout of the huge Miyar Glacier. They worked in small units up and down the valley from base, and also explored a number of the side valleys up to glacier level at about 3950m. Theo also led a party to survey a group of exciting-looking granite spires near the snout of the Miyar Glacier. All unclimbed, and offering routes of 600 to 1200m, on peaks of 5500 to 6100m, they would be an admirable objective for a small expedition with a virgin 6400m summit as the plum. Better still, the area is eminently climbable during the monsoon period which coincides with college vacation time in the Western World, and access is not too difficult provided the correct channels are followed.

The other group working from the Khanjar base was the younger team of mountaineers under my leadership, assisted by John Burrows. We operated in 2 pushes of about a week each up to Camp 3 on a glacial col at about 5350m. We used 2 porter loads only on each occasion, the first only as far as Camp 1 at 4425m. All other carrying was done by the boys, who were in the age range 14-16, and they took an active part in selecting camp-sites and routes. On the 2nd week, only one camp was placed between base and Camp 3, and our youngest member, Neil Emerson, 11 years old and weighing no more than 30kg, carried a 12kg load all the way, and climbed a peak of 5550m, a not inconsiderable feat for one so young. It was first climbed by 9 of us in the first week at Camp 3, the party including 5 boys aged 13 to 16. Three other first ascents were made from Camp 3 in the period: peak 6066m by myself and Peter Martin (15) on 12 August; peak 5912m, by John Burrows, Andrew Wigley (16) and Mark Abbott (just 14) on 17 August; and a peak of about 5425m by the same 3 on 20 August. Technically very straightforward, the peaks were essentially snow-plods, but with the altitude and isolation provided all that was needed by way of adventure for the young mountaineers involved.

The 4th area of endeavour impinged upon all the other working groups, and was manned by 4 highly mobile adults bearing tripods, umbrellas and 16mm film cameras to make a record of all our activities. They operated as 2 pairs, and must be congratulated on a fine effort, as they not only took some good film with a minimum of disturbance to everybody, but also played a vital role as support on Menthosa and with the younger mountaineers in their first week.

Our story would not be complete without particular mention of the independent young team who explored and climbed in the largest side-valley. After initial exploration by Rose Longmate (19) and James Buxton (14), a team of 6 probed deeper into its mysteries in the last week before leaving base-camp. Three of these, Steve Ulliyart (18), Bruce Emerson (15) and James Kemp (14) made the first ascent of a rock-peak of 5478m involving some 450m of roped climbing, with their starting camp 2 days out from base, and no kind of supervision. Presumably this is the sort of experience a mountaineer would seek for his aspiring younger brother, and what the teacher, instructor or guide might have as his aim. It must be emphasized, however, that 2 of the 3 young men concerned had had a great deal of previous experience both under instruction and independently before going to the Himalayas, certainly considerably more than a normal school programme could hope to contain.

It can therefore be seen that the King's School, Ely, Himalayan Expedition, 1978, though a considerable undertaking logistically and financially with a budget of £35,000, was a great success. Health was excellent in the mountains, though it deteriorated considerably on return to civilization when the taboo on local food was lifted, and accidents were minimal, the worst injury being to one of the doctors when she cracked a rib by jumping down a small crevasse instead of over it! The situation was sorted out entirely by four 18 and 19-year-olds with great efficiency and sympathy.

To summarize, the main reasons for the success which was achieved in the face both of criticism and silent opposition in some quarters before we left, were 1) Good health through careful prophylaxis, good personal hygiene, sterilization of all drinking water, a taboo on local food and drink particularly during the march-in, and slow and careful acclimatization to altitude. 2) Work in small groups with the emphasis on the camping pair. 3) Very thorough pre-training within and outside the school programme, done for its own sake rather than specifically for the expedition. 4) A high ratio of experienced leaders where needed. 5) Thorough but flexible planning; and 6) The co-operation and hard work of our very popular and excellent civilian liaison officer, Pranesh Chakraborty, of Calcutta. This is not to say we had no problems or that we learned nothing. In fact we had our share of difficulties, and we learnt a great deal, most of all perhaps about ourselves, which at the end of the day is perhaps one of the greatest justifications for the effort and expense which such an enterprise represents.

Summary of King's School, Ely, Himalayan Expedition, 1978

- 1 Exploration of upper half of Miyar Nullah including main side valley to the N and E above the Khanjar base-camp up to glacier level.
- 2 Topographical survey of granite peaks surrounding glaciers 0, 1 and 2 (see map), and known to us as the Abbott range.
- 3 Study of the villages and villagers for 15 km below Khanjar, with much local contact.
- 4 Study of the nomadic shepherds in the upper Miyar Nullah.
- 5 Study of the general geology of the area.
- 6 Mountaineering with the following ascents (see map):

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| A | 7.8.78 | *Peak (s) c 5475m | Quant |
| B | 10.8.78 | *Peak (us) 5556m (Peanut Peak) | Emerson, B. (15), Evans, Drake, Abbott (13), Martin (15), Challis, Pritchard (15), Harnett (16), Burrows. |
| C | 12.8.78 | *Peak (s) 6066m (King's Peak) | Martin (15), Challis. |
| D | 14.8.78 | Peak (s) 4916m | Townson (15), Quant. |
| E | 15.8.78 | *Peak (us) 5890m (White Dome) | Churches (18), Wielochowski. |
| F | 16.8.78 | *Peak (s) 5827m (White Fang) | Sanders (18), Churches (18), Wielochowski. |
| G | 16.8.78 | *Peak (us) c. 5182m | Evans, Drake. |
| B | 17.8.78 | Peak (us) 5556m (Peanut Peak) | Emerson, N. (11), Challis. |
| H | 17.8.78 | Menthosa, 6444m (s) (3rd ascent) | Methold (17), Pillar (18), Clayton, Wilkinson. |
| K | 17.8.78 | *Peak (s) 5912m (Scorpion Peak) | Abbott (14), Wigley (16), Burrows. |
| L | 18.8.78 | *Peak (s) 5478m | Emerson, B. (15), Kemp (14), Ulliyart (18). |
| M | 20.8.78 | *Peak (s) 5400m (Butcher's Peak) | Butcher (16), Quant, Chakraborty. |
| N | 20.8.78 | *Peak (us) 5425m (Snow Dome) | Wigley (16), Abbott (14), Burrows. |

* = Probable first ascent

us = Unsurveyed top

s = Surveyed top (Survey of India, 1929)