

therefore harder whilst by the time we got to the upper part the sun had come out and I found the climbing easier. I realised that the handholds and sometimes the footholds were much smaller than those on the lower rocks but the warm sun made the climbing more pleasant. Looking down through the trees to the river below I saw a waterskier pulled by a motorboat and thought that was something I could probably do better than climbing, though not in such cold conditions as on this damp September morning.

When I first looked at the high wall I thought the rocks would be much too difficult for me. However, Les climbs with such speed and ease and inspires such confidence that any doubt about my ability to climb soon disappeared.

This climb was something very special for me. It is perhaps natural that a few days before my 85th birthday I was concerned about doing a difficult climb especially under poor conditions. There is also the thought that this kind of activity may soon be a memory, but what a pleasure to partake once more in a climb with Les, knowing that the date for retirement from climbing had been pushed back at least for another year. But, 'for how much longer?'

## Portraits of mountains I

# The Dent Blanche

Michael Craig

The Dent Blanche (4357m) lies at the S end of the ridge which separates the Val de Zinal from the Val d'Hérens in the Pennine Alps; its S and SE slopes fall to the Z'mutt branch of the Nikolaithal. The plan view takes the form of a cross. The S ridge, known as the Wandfluh, separates the Glacier de Ferpècle from the Schönbielgletscher; off on its W side is the Dent Blanche hut from which the ascent is usually made. The W ridge, the Arête de Ferpècle or the Arête Jones, falls steeply towards the Val d'Hérens, while the NNW ridge falls abruptly to the Col de la Dent Blanche, on the far side of which rises the Grand Cornier. Finally the E ridge, the Viereselgrat or the Arête des Quatre Anes, plunges towards the Val de Zinal.

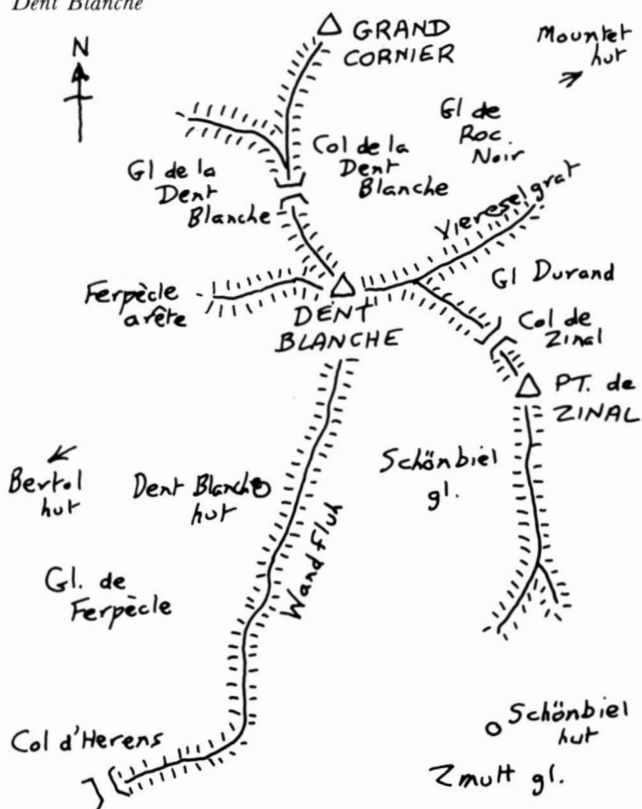
A mountain of simple structure, it rises in comparative isolation overtopping its immediate neighbours by some hundreds of metres. The guide-book likens it, as seen from the Bertol hut (SW), to a wild animal squatting on its haunches, 'the front paws tensed, the front bent back ready to charge'. The resemblance to a tooth is very marked from some aspects, 'rising vertically from its gum in one huge bound'. Seen from the Mountet

hut the mountain is supported by massive plates of slabs plastered with ice; from the Schönbiel hut it appears only as the culminating point of the long Wandfluh ridge. The name Dent Blanche was first used in 1791. It had been Wys Zänehorn, and has since, before the name became really established, been referred to in some works as Ebihorn, Hohwänghorn and Steinbockhorn.

The first ascent, by the S arête reached from the W side, was made on 18 July 1862 by T. S. Kennedy and W. Wigram with Jean Baptiste Croz as guide and J. Kronig, porter. A few days previously Kennedy had attempted the mountain guided by Peter Taugwalder, but had turned back when the guide had lost his nerve after a near fall. Subsequently Kennedy returned to Zermatt, where he met the Wigrams (C. and W.); the new guide was engaged and the party returned to Abricolla in the Val d'Hérens.

Next day they left for the mountain at 3.00 am. It was calm and clear but wispy clouds streaming over the summit promised worse conditions higher up. Several of the party were temporarily indisposed and, when they made a dump of luggage at the start of the climb, C. Wigram decided to stay behind. The rest climbed on up to the ridge inspired by the view of the summit high above. Finally they roped (100 ft for a party of 4), each man having a strong belt above his jacket to which the rope was made fast.

Map 1 Dent Blanche





3 *Matterhorn and Dent Blanche right (Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)*

At first good progress was made, but as the day wore on mists hid the glaciers of Zinal and Schönbiel and a heavy bank of clouds drove in from the N. As Kennedy described it in *AJ 1*:

‘The wind roared and boomed over our ridge, making fearfully wild music among the desolate crags. A smooth rock lay above us, covered with snow; it was very steep ( $52^{\circ}$ ), but my footmarks from the week before were still visible in the snow. Croz went up on hands and knees, sticking in his axe head for anchorage. The rest followed in like fashion, and we then crawled along the stormy and blasted ridge till the base of a second huge and tottering ruin was reached. To climb this I knew was very difficult; it was the place from which we had retreated the week before; but today the snow was in first-rate order, and we prepared to turn the flank of the enemy. Croz went ahead, cutting small steps for his feet to rest in. I enlarged them after him, so as to serve for our descent, and thus we divided the labour. The rocky towers above us were broken into wildly fantastic groups and suggested many an odd resemblance. But the weird and terrible predominated to our anxious eyes; it seemed as though a single thunder-clap might have shaken the whole structure to ruin; and the furious wind threatened to bring some overhanging crag on to our

defenceless heads. Gradually we became enveloped in clouds, the turrets began to loom through them ominously, and soon nothing at a distance greater than fifty yards could be seen at all.'

To escape the falling stones they climbed back on to the ridge top:

'We ascended slowly, kicking steps in the half consolidated snow. The north wind, charged with icy spiculae, drove fiercely in our faces, and Wigram's hair, unprotected by his hat, became a mass of white icicles. A steep overhanging cornice was on our right, but this was more formidable in appearance than in reality. We calculated with the nicety of experienced men where we could safely tread. Sometimes, when the cornice was higher than our heads, we drove our alpenstocks through its weak part in order to try its condition, and could see white rolling clouds beneath through the hole. I began to calculate, with a thrill of exultation, that we ought to be nearing the top, but nothing was visible ahead. Presently Croz stopped and



4 *Dent Blanche from the S (Photo: John Cleare)*

looked somewhat vacantly around, in a moment I was by his side, and a warm flush ran through me as I felt that we had conquered one of the giants of the Valais. The ridge ran forward on a level; we had reached the top. Still, as the clouds rolled and opened, a point six or seven feet higher appeared before us; it was merely an accumulation of snow upon one little point of the ridge, and the mass of snow between us and the little cone was so completely overhanging, that Croz gave his advice against venturing on it, and I agreed with him. The scene was awfully grand, and hardly a word was spoken as we clustered together on the sharp snowy ridge. Thick mists and driving clouds of snow swept over and past us; at one moment we could see the lower rocks and buttresses of the mountain far down in the depths around; another instant, and all was again hidden, and we seemed to be alone in the midst of chaos.'

The temperature was 20°F, and in 10 minutes they started back. They climbed down slowly and carefully to rejoin their fifth man, whose lonely sojourn had lasted for 10 hours in the vilest of weather. Sixteen hours after leaving they were back at Abricolla.

Edward Whymper records in *Scrambles* that he was trying out his tent at 12,550 ft on the Matterhorn at this precise time only 4½ miles away:

'With me, and in my immediate neighbourhood, the air was perfectly calm, and the temperature was agreeably warm; even during the night it fell only two or three degrees below freezing-point. During most of the day the Dent Blanche was perfectly unclouded, though, for a time, light fleecy clouds were hovering about its upper 2,000 feet. Still no one would have supposed from appearances that my friend was experiencing a storm such as he has described.'

Two years later John Finlaison arrived on the scene convinced by his guides, Christian Lauener and Franz Zurfluh, that the mountain was still virgin. After inspecting the W face of the Wandfluh on the way over from Zermatt they descended to Evolena for provisions and rest. The next day they went up to Abricolla where the recent burning down of the hotel had left nothing but peasants' chalets. The shepherd offered to make room for them by sleeping in the pigsty but, says Finlaison, 'we found that the sacrifice, though ostensibly imposing, was in reality infinitesimal!' The traditional fleas, there in force, were only a part of the discomfort.

Leaving at 3.30, they made for a route on the W flank of the mountain aiming to reach the S ridge high up close to the summit. The going was hard on rocks thinly covered with ice and snow, avalanche and stone-fall danger threatened and the weather was worsening. Then, when all seemed lost, a gleam of sunshine encouraged them on:

'As the arête had appeared to consist of a series of miniature Matterhorns, we still maintained our diagonal course till we reached a little cluster of rocks, where we were induced by a violent gust of wind and snow to pause once more. Once more the clouds broke away as if by magic, and we saw the summit close to us, but separated



5 *Bergschrund on the Dent Blanche in 1865 (Reproduced from Scrambles amongst the Alps)*

by a very steep wall of ice. Lauener now became so excited that he cut his steps with the most reckless disregard of the known laws of gravitation, and as for Zurfluh, he found a passage along some little diagonal crack in the ice, which seemed to offer a footing to nothing but an athletic fly. I believe these fellows could crawl along a ceiling, but my powers being more limited, and this being the steepest part of the ascent, I preferred to cut steps suited to such a dangerous inclination before putting my foot into them, rather than risk a slip which must have brought us all down. At last we reached the arête, which was a mere bank of snow; Lauener climbed to the edge, but quickly scuttled back again, saying that it overhung the precipice on the other side. We therefore descended a little way to some rocks, from which we worked laboriously along the side, cutting steps until we got within twenty yards of the summit. We then ventured once more on to the arête, and at 10.30 stood victoriously on the topmost peak.'

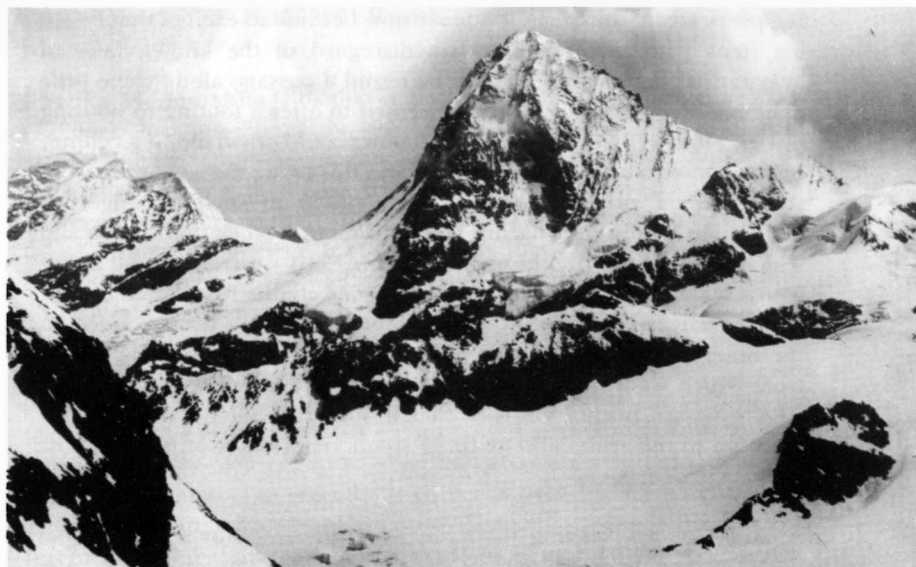
They built a cairn, leaving their names in the traditional champagne bottle, and turned back immediately. The descent, though hectic, was without major incident and they arrived back at Abricolla after 14 hours out. Sheltered at last from the snow, rain and wind, they gratefully accepted the discomforts of the chalets in the knowledge of a job well done.

In 1865, Edward Whymper with Michel Croz, Christian Almer and Franz Biener climbed the mountain on this side a few days before the Matterhorn tragedy. Their purpose was to follow the steps of Kennedy and settle the doubts expressed in some quarters that he had not actually found the top in the near blizzard conditions. They struck up the face, finding the ascent, says Whymper, 'one of the hardest I have ever made'. On top they found a cairn of stones, but this was the one erected by Finlaison; Kennedy it transpired had left no such mark. Ascent and descent took 11 hours; Whymper made a fine engraving of an incident on the route, reproduced here.

Nowadays, these face routes, subject to avalanche and rock-fall are deemed dangerous and are seldom climbed. However, it was not until 1876 that the S ridge was climbed over its entire length by Fred Gardiner with Peter and Hans Knubel.

The SE face of the mountain above the Schönbiel glacier was climbed in 1874 by E. R. Whitwell with Christian and Johann Lauener. Whitwell was a forceful character, who once on the Aiguille de Blaitière went into the lead when his guides gave up on the climb, and took them over the difficulties. There is a second route hereabouts, done by a German/Austrian party in 1931, but the usual way on this face climbs the flanks of the Wandfluh well away from the summit pyramid, reaching the S ridge some way down.

The next arête to fall was the ENE, climbed by J. Stafford Anderson and George P. Baker with Ulrich Almer and Aloys Pollinger in 1882. Their route came to be known as the Viereselgrat (Arête des Quatre Anes) from Ulrich Almer's cry on reaching the summit—'Wir sind vier esel'. The arête divides in the lower part, the more southerly branch descending to the Col



6 *Dent Blanche from the Bertol Hut (This and next 2 photos: E. Pyatt collection)*

de Zinal, the northerly towards the snowfields of the Glacier du Roc Noir and the Mountet Hut. The 1882 route followed the latter, the former was climbed in 1900 by Leon Dufour and Albert Martin.

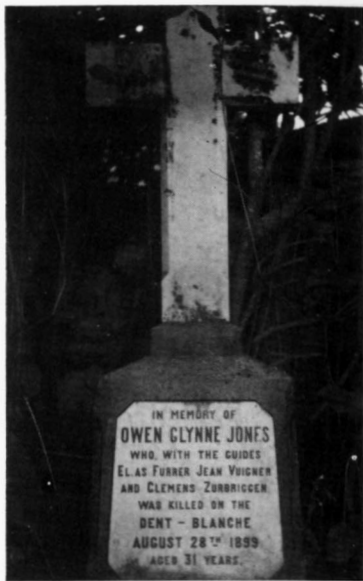
The W (or Ferpècle) arête was traversed in descent in 1884 by Mrs E. P. Jackson and Karl Schulz with Aloys Pollinger and J. J. Truffer and first climbed in 1889 by Walter Grobli, also with Aloys Pollinger. It was the scene, in 1899, of the death of the greatest British rock climber of the last century, Owen Glynne Jones, a man whose enthusiasm for mountaineering and work rate made him seem unusually modern. Now, for him, it is often called the Arête Jones.

On Sunday 28 August, Jones, F. W. Hill, with their guides Elias Furrer, Clemenz Zurbriggen and Jean Vuignier left Arolla and proceeded to Bricolla. There they slept, departing for the mountain at 3.00 am the following morning. At first all went well and by 10.00 am they had reached a point high on the ridge. Now the way was blocked by a short and difficult rock wall. Hill describes what happened next:

‘When I reached the level of the others, Furrer was attempting to climb the buttress, but, finding no holds, he called to Zurbriggen to hold an axe for him to stand on. Apparently he did not feel safe, for he turned his head and spoke to Jones, who then went to hold the axe steady. Thus we were all on the same level, Vuignier being some 25 or 30 ft distant from them and also from me. Standing on the axe, which was now quite firm, Furrer could reach the top of the buttress, and attempted to pull himself up; but the finger-holds were insufficient, and before his foot had left the axe his hands slipped, and he fell backwards on to Zurbriggen and Jones, knocking them both off, and all three fell together. I turned to the wall to get a better hold,



7 *Owen Glynn Jones*



8 *The grave at Evolena*

and did not see Vuignier pulled off, but heard him go, and knew that my turn would soon come. And when it did not I looked round, and saw my four companions sliding down the slope at a terrific rate, and 30 ft of rope swinging slowly down below me.'

Jones had an exaggerated respect for the climbing prowess of his guides; there is little doubt that at this point he was much better qualified to lead. As it was the party carried out questionable tactics in a very exposed situation without any sort of belay, and paid the penalty. Only the chance looping of Hill's rope over a projection by the guide Vuignier had saved him.

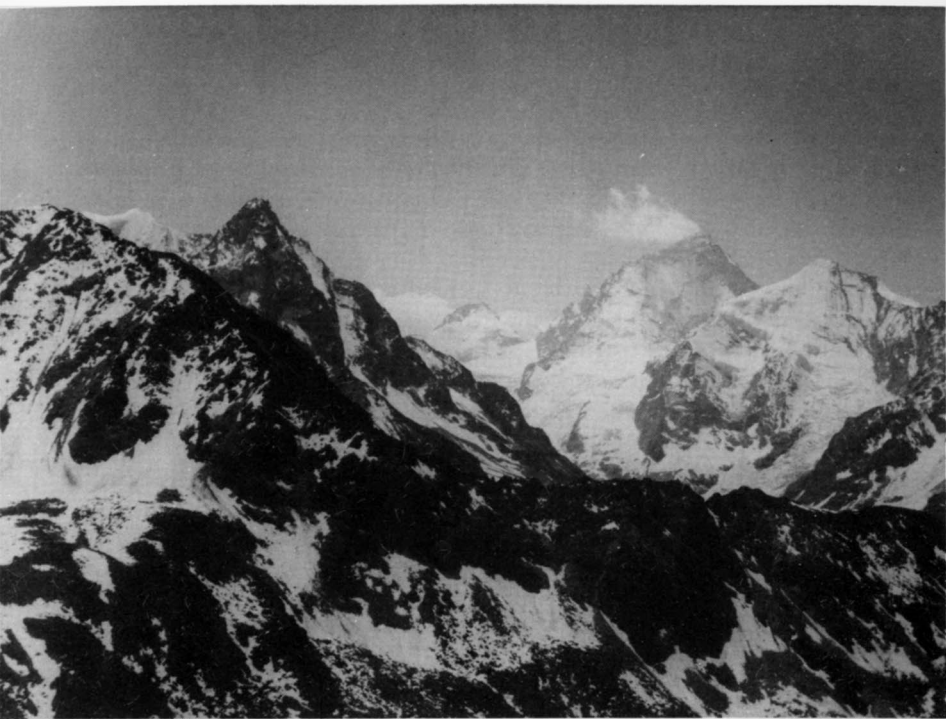
A real Alpine epic ensued. Hill, fearing to retrace their steps down the long descent, managed to by-pass the place from which the others had fallen and eventually reached the top of the mountain. He began to descend the S ridge but was forced to bivouac high up on it at nightfall. Continuing the next day he at last, after many vicissitudes, found his way down on to the glacier. Here he was again overtaken by darkness and so spent another night out beside a glacier stream. Only the day after that was he able to carry the news into Zermatt.

The NNW arête, steeper and more uncompromising looking than the others held out until 1926 when W. Kropf with Jean Genoud and Marcel Savioz traversed it in descent. The first ascent followed in 1928 with Joseph Georges (le Skieur) and his brother Antoine leading I. A. Richards and Dorothea E. Richards. This was much harder than anything that had gone before. The crux turned out to be 150 ft of very steep rock undercut at the base. After failing on either hand, Joseph Georges attacked the very nose of the ridge itself:



9 *Dent Blanche from the Trift Ridge (Photo: C. D. Milner)*

'The first step was to mount the initial overhang. There happened to be a cleft in the rock under the eave into which an ice-axe shaft could be fixed, leaving the rest protruding like a spring-board over nothing. We made sure that it *was* fixed, but to gain its vibrating head without assisting holds was no easy matter. From this vantage point the overhang could be breasted. The next stretch turned, it seemed to us later, upon one rather rounded hold. Hand, knee and then foot it served, while the fingers found only pressure thrusts to direct the balance. Breathlessly we watched Joseph's smooth, seemingly effortless movements. He kept up a flow of *patois* remarks to Antoine as he worked across and upwards. Soon he was only a shapeless silhouette against the dazzle of the sky above. It seemed impossible that he should be able to stay at all in as steep and smooth a passage, much less that he should be able to continue. After a while, as the rope still ran out, his voice grew dim with distance and we lost sight of him in the glare. Suddenly came a sharp exclamation; it sounded like



10 *The head of the Val d'Annivers with the Dent Blanche (Photo: M. Barnes)*

“*Je chouques!*” Antoine, calm as ever, translated, “*Il est là*”. The tension was over; or, rather, changed in direction altogether. Now it was our turn!” (*Climbing Days* D. E. Pilley)

At the top of the pitch the amateurs found themselves standing together on a platform the size of a dinner plate with only one handhold, clinging tightly to the sacks which had been hauled up from the depths. Meanwhile the imperturbable Antoine came up as last man. Arriving and spying them on their exiguous stance, he exclaimed “*Ah, les amoureux!*” The rest of the route flowed straightforwardly to the mountain top.

The couloir between the Ferpècle arête and Finlaison’s SW face route was climbed indirectly in 1905 by H. Symons and O. K. Williamson with Jean Maitre and Pierre Maurys and direct, a very dangerous climb, by André Roch, Robert Gréloz and Jean Weiglé in 1944.

The NW face between the W and NNW ridges was ascended by Ludwig Steinauer and Karl Schneider in 1934.

The NNE face between the NNW ridge and the Viereselgrat has a number of alternative lines, some of them of the higher standards of the post World War II period.