

The Association of British Members of the Swiss Alpine Club — The First 75 Years

Maurice Bennett

Photograph 63

In 1984 the Association will celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of its foundation. It was formed in 1909 with the principal object of encouraging British climbers to join the Swiss Alpine Club. At that time a number of British climbers were members of the Swiss Club which had been formed only a few years after the Alpine Club itself. These climbers felt that as the Swiss Club had done so much to make the Alps accessible to climbers, and in particular by the provision of climbing huts, British climbers who used them should help to maintain them by becoming members of the Swiss Club.

With this object in view, a strong Committee was formed and the Association was brought into being with the late Clinton Dent (who had been President of the Alpine Club in 1887/89) as its first President. The late J. A. B. Bruce played a very energetic part in the formation of the Association and in the running of it for many years afterwards.

A further object of the founder members was to provide a rallying point in Great Britain for those who had become members of the Swiss Club. It was not possible under the rules of the Swiss Club for a Section to be formed outside Switzerland but the Central Committee of the Swiss Club was consulted and approved of the formation of the Association. Accordingly, a room was acquired in London in which members could meet together and the Association took upon itself some of the functions of a Club. These functions have increased over the years with the result that the Association has become an active Club of which the principal qualification for full membership is membership of a Section of the Swiss Club.

Within two years of the start there were 300 members of the Association and, with the exception of the periods of the two world wars, this number continued to grow until the early 1970s. At the end of 1959, when the Association celebrated its golden jubilee, the total number of members was 680, and small increases in membership were achieved after this. For the reasons mentioned later in this article, membership has declined in recent years.

There have always been close links between the Association and the AC. In the early days it is probable that the majority of the members of the Association were also AC members and there has always been a high proportion of AC members in the Association membership. Nearly all the Presidents of the Association have been AC members and Brigadier-General The Hon. C. G. Bruce (1927/1930) had, like Clinton Dent, previously been President of the AC. During the second world war, the meeting room used by the Association was damaged by enemy

action and since that time the Association has generally held its Committee meetings and lectures at the AC premises at 74 South Audley Street.

One of the first projects undertaken by the Association was the raising of a fund for the building of the original Britannia Hut above Saas-Fee and this was successfully completed in 1912. Celebrations were held in Saas-Fee in 1929 to mark the re-opening of the enlarged Britannia Hut in that year. The Association again returned to Saas-Fee in 1959 as part of the celebrations for its golden jubilee.

The author of this article was present at the 1959 Meet and one element of the celebrations stands out very clearly in his memory. A banquet was held in the evening of August 8th at the Hotel du Glacier at which some 74 members and guests were present. This was to be followed by a walk up to the Britannia Hut next morning when, after lunch, a plaque was to be unveiled to mark the presentation by the Association of a new set of furniture for one of the rooms in the Hut.

Shortly before the banquet was concluded in a mild alcoholic haze, those who were going to walk up to the Hut the next day were asked to hold up their hands. Seventeen hands went up. Early the next morning a telephone message was sent to the guardian of the Hut asking him to provide soup and fendant for seventeen: he said 'certainly' and provided soup and fendant for seventy!

So as not to disappoint the guardian, those who walked up to the Hut did their best with the soup and even better with the fendant. After the formalities had been carried through those who were not staying up for a climb next day prepared to start for the walk back to Saas-Fee. The party consisted of several members of the AC and Margery Broadbent — a member of the Ladies Alpine Club whose husband, Jack, was also a member of the party. Someone suggested that it would be quicker to descend by the Egginerjoch rather than by the Plattjen path by which the ascent had been made. All the men professed ignorance of the Egginerjoch route. Margery stated that she knew the way, to be greeted by a chorus inviting her to lead. She subsequently confessed that she immediately regretted having spoken because she felt that a party of AC members would find her normal pace far too slow. She accordingly set off like a bat out of hell and there were times when the tracks of those following bore a greater tribute to the Hut's fendant than to the best techniques of glacier walking.

It is planned that further celebrations will be held in Saas-Fee in 1984 to mark the Association's seventy-fifth anniversary. Perhaps the Hut will provide fendant for seventy-five!

The two world wars naturally led to a considerable decrease in the membership of the Association. On each occasion, however, a dedicated nucleus of officers held things together so that the activities would be resumed with the return of peace. Although the office of President is normally only held for three years, the author A. E. W. Mason held that office from 1913 to 1922 and C. T. Lehmann remained in office from 1937 to 1945. In addition, Charles Lehmann was Hon. Treasurer from 1926 to 1954 and Hon. Librarian from 1919 to 1928. None can have rendered greater service to the Association than Charles Lehmann.

Mention of the second world war would not be complete without a reference to



63 At the Britannia Hut on 9 August 1959

Photo: Frank Solari

M. N. Clarke. Marshal Clarke was one of the joint Hon. Secretaries from 1929 to 1948 and continued as Hon. Editor from 1949 to 1962. A former Hon. Secretary and President of the Association, the late George Starkey, once said that the Association would never have survived the war but for the presence of an ABMSAC fanatic and in Marshal Clarke they had such a person. Despite the ravages of the blitz and the loss of his own parents in an air raid, he was tireless in keeping the Association together and sending out regular circulars which kept in touch with those members who were away serving in the Forces.

Two others who rendered great service in various capacities after the war and were made Honorary Members of the Association were the late George Starkey and Roy Crepin.

The Association has been lucky in having a considerable number of its distinguished members with the attribute of longevity. At the time of the golden jubilee celebrations in 1959 at least seven of the original members were still alive. Two of them, Gerald Steel, who was one of the original Hon. Secretaries, and C. Scott Lindsay, who was a member of the original Committee, were present at the jubilee dinner which was held in November of that year. The Association lost its last surviving original member with the death of Sir Arnold Lunn in 1974.

One distinguished member of the AC who has had long contacts with the Association is Professor N. E. Odell. Noel Odell became a member in 1914, having met J. A. B. Bruce during his second visit to the Alps in 1912. It was the influence of Bruce which led to Odell becoming one of the joint Hon. Secretaries of the Association in the period 1920 to 1922.

Noel Odell's visit to the Alps in 1912 led to a fortuitous and happy contact with the Association. His party, consisting of H. M. Dobson, Alexander Burgener fils and himself, descended to the Britannia Hut after doing the Mittaghorn-Egginer traverse and found themselves in the middle of the opening ceremony. The party was deemed to be the first visiting climbing party to use the Hut and the free meal offered was gratefully accepted. It is, perhaps, a happy coincidence that the writer of this article, with the late Freddie Smith and Siegfried Bumann, did the Mittaghorn-Egginer traverse during the 1959 Jubilee Meet at Saas-Fee.

In the period after the war one of the most active of the Association's older members has been Walter Kirstein who died in 1983. Walter was still climbing and skiing in his mid-eighties and he was a regular attendee at Association Meets and functions. He always retained the enthusiasm of a schoolboy for everything connected with the mountains and endeared himself to all. A tribute to Walter appears elsewhere in this issue.

For many years membership of the Swiss Alpine Club carried other financial advantages in addition to the right to priority in the huts and lower overnight fees as compared with those paid by non-members. Reductions in the fares paid on various railways, cable cars and chair lifts were available simply on production of a current membership card. In some cases these reductions were as much as 50%. Regrettably, these concessions were withdrawn in 1960; a fact which was regretted even more by the Swiss members than by overseas members because the Swiss tended to use public transport frequently at week-ends to get to the climbing areas.

In addition to the withdrawal of the concessionary fares, membership of the

SAC has over the years become more expensive for the British by reason of the decline in value of Sterling as against the Swiss Franc. Naturally, the subscriptions to the Swiss Sections have increased in Swiss Franc terms, but the effect of these increases has been small as compared with the effect of the changes in exchange rates. Having regard to the United Kingdom rates of inflation over the years, the increases in the Sterling equivalent of the Swiss subscriptions have not been unreasonable but they have led to a considerable decline in the number of new members from the United Kingdom joining the SAC and the Association.

The Committee of the Association has long recognised that changed circumstances are bound to lead to changes in its membership. It has done its best to cater for these changes while at the same time preserving the essential theme of encouraging membership of the SAC and maintaining close links with that Club and with Swiss climbers.

In the mid 1970's it became apparent that many younger climbers who would have been potential candidates for membership of the Swiss Club were unable to afford the subscription. Accordingly, a new class of membership of the Association was evolved — affiliate membership. One of the conditions for becoming an affiliate member is that the candidate is a man or woman who has a genuine love of the hills and an interest in Switzerland and the SAC or the Ladies' Swiss Alpine Club. It is hoped that by bringing younger climbers into contact with members of the Association their interest in the Swiss Alps would increase as would the likelihood of their subsequently becoming members of the Swiss Alpine Club. For the first time it thus became possible for ladies to become members of the Association as affiliate members although it was not then possible for them to become full members because full membership necessitated membership of a Section of the Swiss Club. As a result, however, of the amalgamation of the Ladies' Swiss Alpine Club with the SAC there are now ladies who are full members of the Association.

Over the last twenty years or so, the Association has pursued a policy of increasing the number of climbing Meets at which its members can get together. For most of its existence the Association has held regular lectures and meetings in London as well as dinners, but for many years the climbing Meets were rather limited. An Easter Meet was regularly held in North Wales, the Lakes or Scotland but these were the only Meets based in the United Kingdom. For some ten years before the second world war summer dinners were held in Switzerland and some members arranged to climb together at that time but these were not official Meets.

For a few years after the war, Association Meets were held in Switzerland in the summer to assist in reducing the cost of climbing in view of the very stringent restrictions which were then in force as to the amount of currency which could be taken out of the United Kingdom. The Association was much indebted to the late George Starkey for the work he did in leading those Meets.

After the immediate postwar Meets, no further Meets in the Alps were held until the Jubilee Meet in 1959. That Meet was very well attended and views were expressed that Alpine Meets should be held more often. It was decided to experiment by holding an Alpine Meet every other year and further Meets were held in 1961 and 1963. By that time it became clear that there was a demand for

an Alpine Meet every year and one has been held in every year since 1963.

In the mid 1960's it emerged that there was a demand for home-based week-end Meets in addition to the Easter Meet and over the years a tradition for many week-end Meets led by members of the Association has grown up. It has also become the practice for a Northern Dinner to be held in the Lake District in February or March in addition to the Annual Dinner in London in November.

Some of the home-based and Alpine Meets have been run jointly for members of the Association and the AC thus further strengthening the bond between the two Clubs.

The great increase in the number of home-based Meets inevitably led to the question of the Association acquiring a climbing hut. After some false starts elsewhere, the Association acquired in 1974 a long lease of the old Parish Rooms in Patterdale with the object of converting the premises into a hut. The cost of conversion was some £13,000 of which about one-half was covered by a grant from the Sports Council. A generous donation was received from the Central Committee of the SAC and considerable funds were also raised from members of the Association. There was still, however, a shortfall from the amount required to enable a satisfactory conversion to take place. Fortunately, at this stage the Association was put in touch with the Tuesday Climbing Club by members who were members of both Clubs. The TCC had also raised funds with a view to acquiring a hut but had not sufficient moneys to go it alone. The TCC's hut fund was therefore brought into the project and the Hut is administered for the benefit both of the Association and of the TCC.

The formal opening of the Hut took place in October 1975 with the Bishop of Leicester officiating. The Hut was named after George Starkey, a former distinguished member of the Association to whom reference has been made above.

The total membership of the Association is now about 300. It would be idle to pretend that the financial advantages nowadays are such as to attract members who do not feel an attraction to the Swiss Alpine Club. Nevertheless, there are many existing members who continue their membership for that reason and because the Association itself has a happy club atmosphere. Also, there are still new applicants for full membership, even though not at the rate the Association would wish. It is the intention of all concerned to continue to pursue the objectives for which the Association was brought into being seventy-five years ago.