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# Looking back

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TREVOR BRAHAM

## John Tyndall (1820–1893) and Belalp

(Plates 74, 75)

Belalp 2137m has a magnificent situation on the northern edge of the main alpine chain where it joins the Bernese alps. To the south, rising above the Rhone valley and Brig which can be clearly seen, there is a panorama of mountains, dominated by Monte Leone, situated to the east and west of the Simplon pass. To the north the Aletschhorn and Nesthorn are hidden behind rocky spurs which divide subsidiaries of the main Aletsch glacier, whilst to the north-east the ridge of the Eggishorn descends gently to the popular tourist areas of Bettmeralp, Riederalp and the Aletschwald. The great charm of Belalp is its relative isolation which has enabled it to preserve an atmosphere of unspoilt beauty so rarely found nowadays in an alpine resort. Once considered difficult of access, Belalp can today be reached by a motor road from Brig via Naters and Blatten, 1322m. At Blatten a cable-car transports summer visitors (and winter skiers) in 15 minutes to the top station at the western end of the alp. But a much more interesting approach from Blatten village is along narrow well-worn tracks through rich mostly conifer forest, climbing at first gently then more steeply before breaking out above the treeline to the edge of the alp. This is dotted with no more than a handful of dwellings locally populated in the summer but abandoned in winter. A single foot-track stretches across the alp from west to east providing a panoramic terrace facing south. At the far eastern end of the alp stands the only major building in the area, the Belalp Hotel, which seems to be poised directly above the massive final sweep of the Grosse Aletschgletscher.

Belalp Hotel, or rather a wooden inn containing 10–12 rooms, was built in 1858 by Leopold Bürcher-Anderledy. In 1861 Gervas Klingele, who was then operating three hotels in Brig, obtained a part interest in Belalp and by 1866 he became the sole proprietor of the hotel. Thereafter the large stone building as seen today was constructed.<sup>1</sup>

The hotel's most prosperous period occurred between 1870 and 1890, alongside the development of mountaineering in Switzerland. Over 80% of the summer visitors were English, and between June and September each year the hotel was filled to capacity; this despite the long 1500m climb from Brig on foot or by muleback, and for ladies in a sedan-chair carried by four porters. The outlines of a tennis court, laid out for the benefit of the hotel's English guests, can still be seen today! The Belalp Hotel was run by members of the Klingele family for over 100 years until the summer of 1968, when its proprietorship passed into the hands of the present owners, the family of Thérèse Jaeger-Eggel. Caesar Jaeger, son of Thérèse, writing to me recently,

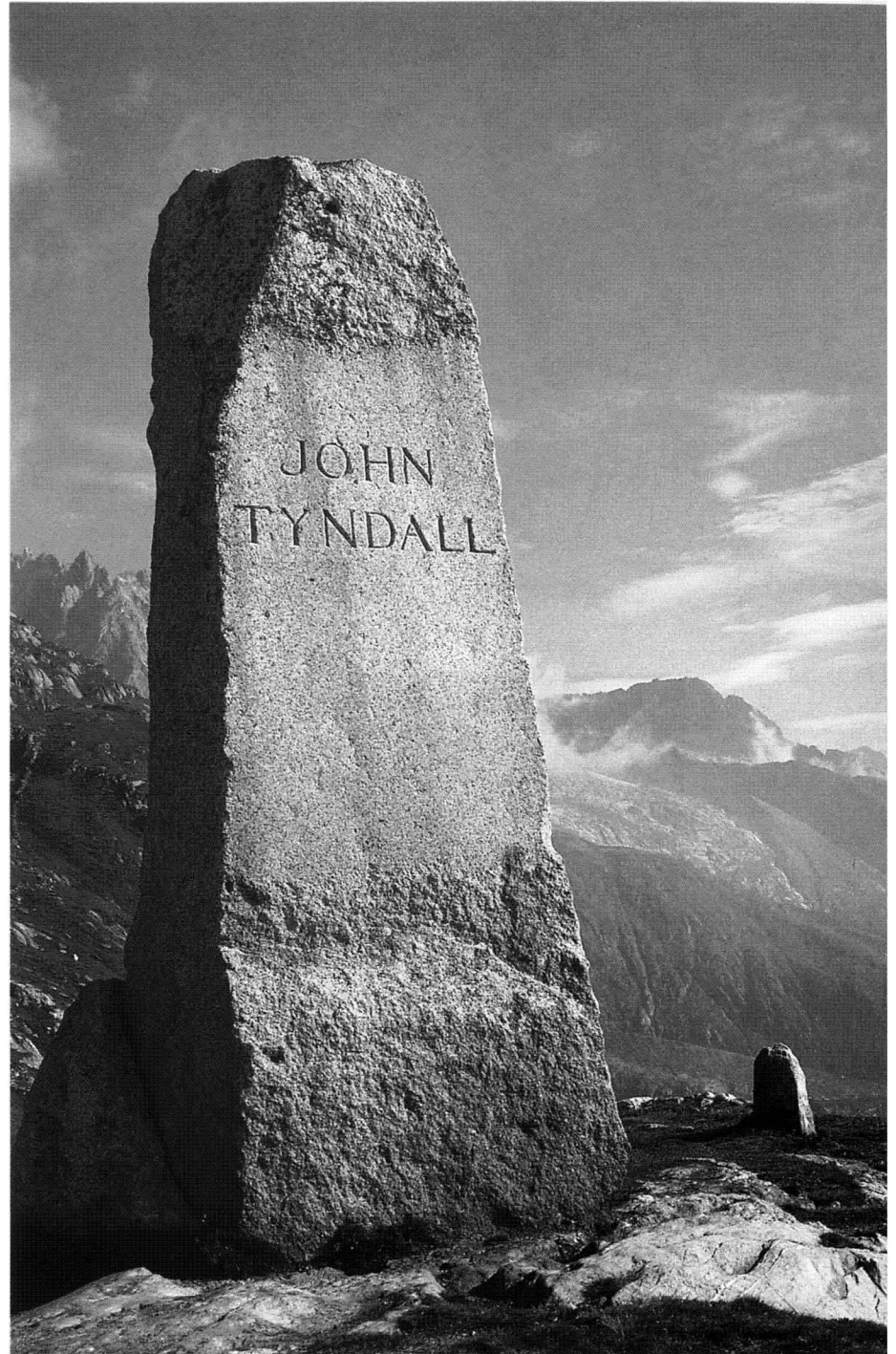


*Above*

74. Hotel Belalp and chapel seen from Villa Lusgen. (*Trevor Braham*) (p196)

*Facing page*

75. Tyndall memorial above Belalp.  
(*Trevor Braham*) (p196)



has hinted that the family are in discussion with a group of persons who are interested in acquiring the hotel for redevelopment and extension. If the inevitable should happen, I for one will be immensely thankful for the privilege of having been a guest at the hotel whilst it still breathed what seemed to me an atmosphere and charm not very different from that experienced by so many distinguished earlier visitors. Amongst these were A W Moore, F F Tuckett, Horace Walker, A A Reilly, C E Mathews, Miss Brevoort, W A B Coolidge, John Tyndall and many others, as entries in the Visitors' Book, commencing in 1861, amply illustrate.<sup>2</sup>

John Tyndall made his first acquaintance with Belalp on 13 August 1861, six days prior to his success in achieving the first ascent of the Weisshorn with the guide J J Bennen, and a year before his climb with Bennen and the brothers Carrel to the shoulder on the Italian ridge of the Matterhorn which is still referred to as Tyndall peak. The 'alpine wildness' of Belalp appealed strongly to Tyndall, and he wrote that he considered the view from there to be 'the most beautiful in the Alps'. Shortly after his marriage to Louisa, daughter of Lord Claude Hamilton, in July 1876, Tyndall received permission from the town council at Naters to construct a villa on the Lusgen meadow above Belalp. Although the price of the land was fixed at SFr 900, Tyndall donated altogether SFr 2512 to the school and other local causes.<sup>3</sup> The villa was ready for occupation in November 1877. It stands above the Belalp Hotel and the little chapel which dates from the same period. Although Tyndall built his 'London' home in the Surrey hills near Hindhead, he regarded the Villa Lusgen as his 'spiritual' home. Here he returned year after year to wander, to meditate, to work, and to entertain friends. The villa is regarded by some as ugly. It has never seemed to me that it fits wholly into the landscape, sitting there inexactly as some piece of foreign creation. Following his first visit in 1861 Tyndall visited Belalp every summer until 1893. In 1887 the Naters Town Council elected him to honorary citizenship, citing his kindness and loyalty to the people and the medical assistance that he regularly provided to the sick during a period of over 25 years. His last sojourn at the Villa Lusgen took place during September and October 1893, shortly prior to his death at Hindhead on 4 December 1893. His wife Louisa continued to visit the villa for several years, spending a few weeks there during the summer. She died in 1940 at the age of 95. In 1964 her nephew Sir Richard Proby sold the property to a Swiss buyer who still owns the villa today. It is rarely occupied. Its future conversion into a museum filled with Tyndall memorabilia would seem to me to provide the villa with more purpose.

Above the Villa Lusgen, where the alp rises to an eminence before falling gently to a rolling expanse that leads to the foot of the Sparrhorn ridge, stands an impressive granite stone, drawn from a nearby glacier, which was raised to John Tyndall's memory by his wife. The Communal authorities at Naters maintain the area, and have installed notices directing visitors to the memorial. The stone, simply engraved, commands a superb aspect in every direction and conveys a sense of loneliness and dignity. It is isolated from view until one is almost within its reach. The unveiling of the memorial took place on a

Sunday at the hour of sunset on 27 August 1911 in the presence of a large local company and invited guests including members of the Swiss Alpine Club which had elected Tyndall as their third Honorary Member. The ceremony was followed by a dinner at the Belalp Hotel and a fireworks display.

1993 marks the hundredth anniversary of John Tyndall's death. It would be nice to think of a small group from the AC gathering at the Belalp chapel and at the monument in remembrance of one of their former Honorary Members.

#### NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 1 I am grateful to Barbara Dangar for passing on to me originals of the correspondence exchanged in the years 1947-48 between her husband and A Klingele, grandson of Gervas Klingele, about the history of the Belalp Hotel.
- 2 For details of the earliest Visitors' Book of the Belalp Hotel, see article by D F O Dangar 'Early Expeditions from Bel Alp', *AJ* 56, 347, Nov 1948.
- 3 I acknowledge my thanks to the Communal Authorities in Naters for information about the Villa Lusgen, Tyndall's honorary citizenship of Naters and the Tyndall memorial, together with other details about Tyndall's connections with Switzerland based upon research carried out by Peter Rudolf Merz (1928-1975) of Visp and Dr Werner Sackmann of Basel.