
JOHN HUNT

The Everest Reunions

(Plates 63–67)

For the first ten years after 1953 we all used to meet annually to celebrate our climb. From 1965 onwards we spaced the reunions at intervals of five years. But it is an indication of our fellowship that in 1980 Alf Gregory suggested that five years was too long a gap; in that year, and again in 1990, he hosted a most enjoyable interim meet in Derbyshire. All our other reunions, except the one on Skye in 1955, took place in Snowdonia at the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, by tradition the meeting place of British rock-climbers since the nineteenth century.

There have also been Everest reunions elsewhere than in Britain. In 1963 the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research generously convened a gathering, at Meiringen in the Bernese Oberland, of Swiss and British alpinists who had been on Everest in 1952, 1953 and 1956. Tenzing and I represented the 1953 team and Noel Odell was invited as an honoured guest. In 1973 the Indian Mountaineering Foundation hosted an international conference in Darjeeling, both to mark our twentieth anniversary and to celebrate their own success in 1965. Three of us – Alf Gregory, Charles Wylie and I, with my wife Joy – took advantage of this opportunity to travel to the conference the hard way, by trekking across Nepal from Khumbu. We timed it perfectly, taking 19 days to reach the Singalila ridge on the eve of the conference, with the lights of Darjeeling twinkling below us. Ed Hillary and Tenzing were there to greet us. In 1978 that route was reversed when a larger party of 1953 veterans and some of our reserves, accompanied by wives and Tom Bourdillon's widow Jennifer, made the return journey across Nepal to Khumbu after celebrating our Jubilee with our Sherpas, and sharing it with a large gathering of distinguished mountaineers from around the world.

Photographs of our reunions at Pen-y-Gwryd provide evidence, year by year, of the changes which time has imposed on us, but they cannot record the unchanging nature of our relationship. It has endured, undiminished, through all these forty years. Against a background of twenty reunions at home and abroad, it is not surprising, therefore, that 1993 was a very special year for us. It was Ed Hillary's happy idea that we should gather once again in Khumbu; he had hoped to combine a reunion with a formal opening ceremony of the rebuilt Thyangboche monastery, but, in the event, the building was not completed in time. In March most members of the old firm, with some of the 1953 reserves, wives and two daughters, set off for Nepal. One group, including my wife Joy, travelled out a week earlier in order to follow part of our original trek in 1953. The departure of the second group was timed to ensure that we would all meet at Lukla.



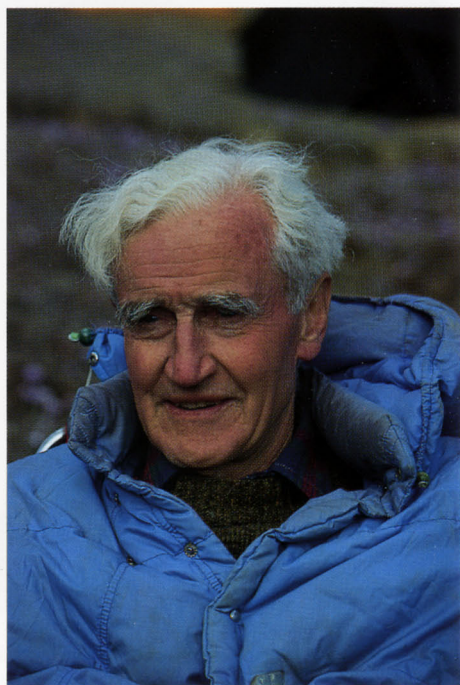
63. John Hunt (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



64. Edmund Hillary (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



65. George Lowe (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)



66. Charles Wylie (*Chris Ralling*) (p121)

As a member of the latter party I travelled with my daughter Prue, Charles Wylie, George and Mary Lowe and their friends. We were joined in Kathmandu by Ed and June Hillary and were fortunate to take part in celebrations in the capital. Our Ambassador gave a magnificent reception, attended by over one hundred guests, including Chris Bonington, Reinhold Messner and other well-known mountaineers. The Nepal Mountaineering Association gave a party at the Everest Hotel attended by the Minister for Tourism and several Ambassadors, at which splendid memorabilia were presented to each member of the 1953 expedition. Seated beside us on the dais was Pasang Phutar, one of our old Sherpas living in Kathmandu.

Most joyous of all was another reception, also held in the Everest Hotel, which was organised by Sherpas from Solu and Khumbu to express their gratitude for the benefits bestowed upon their people as a result of our first ascent. This was primarily a tribute to Ed Hillary, whose work in building schools, hospitals and bridges has so much improved the quality of life in those two districts. The reception was a most generous and touching gesture, for which much financial sacrifice had been made by the two local communities.

At Lukla, our two groups were reunited at a private campsite bedecked with mauve primulas and surrounded by rhododendron bushes, among which a few early blossoms gave a touch of colour. There were many other people on the site, including four television crews and various visitors. Unfortunately, the presence of so many people somewhat diluted our reunion – Ed and myself, in particular, sometimes found ourselves separated from our families and old comrades. But this did not entirely spoil a unique episode in the Everest story.

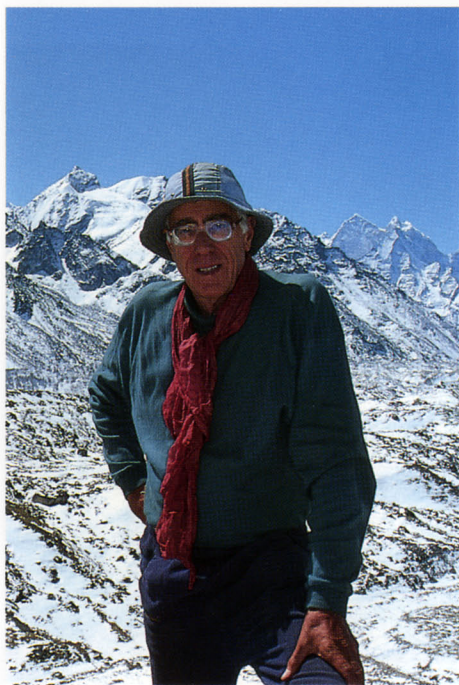
A highlight which, sadly, only a few of us were able to enjoy was a reception by the monastic community at Thyangboche. We were flown there by helicopter and were offered a demonstration of gratitude and affection by the monks and the community they serve. Ed and I were privileged to receive this welcome on behalf of the rest of the team, and everything combined to make it a magical experience: the orchestra of monastic mountain horns, the trumpets, cymbals and conch shells, the dancing of Sherpas and Sherpanis, the showering upon us of gifts, the adornment with scarves (with Ed and me almost submerged under a mountain of silk!). And there, peeping beyond and above the great ridge of Nuptse, was Everest's summit, holding so many memories for us all.

It was just as well, amid such moving ceremonies, that a note of the ridiculous was also struck: the sight of Ed and me, after we had inspected the new building, seated in the courtyard of the monastery, surrounded by spectators, endeavouring to look dignified as we ate the lunch offered by our hosts. Ed fared better than I did, for he was given a tin of Dundee cake, while I struggled to extract the contents of an outsize sardine tin with a knife.

The reunion was followed by various treks. Mike Westmacott and George Band (nearly) climbed Island Peak, one of our original first ascents in 1953. My daughter Prue reached 19,000ft on the ridge of Kala Pattar and had her



67. 'The Magnificent Six' From L: Charles Wylie, Edmund Hillary, John Hunt, George Lowe, George Band, Michael Westmacott. 3 April 1993. (Susan Band) (p89)



68. Chris Ralling, director of the film *Return to Everest*. (p121)



69. John Davey, cameraman. (Chris Ralling) (p121)

first close-up view of our mountain: it was a supreme moment for her. I draw a veil over my own performance.

On the very date of the fortieth anniversary – 29th of May – we gathered at Pen-y-Gwryd for our sixteenth reunion. Predictably, the media journalists and cameramen were in keen attendance. We were royally entertained at Plas y Brenin ('Palace of the Kings'), formerly the Royal Hotel, by the British Mountaineering Council. I enjoyed enormously the opportunity to meet old friends from Europe and beyond, especially Yevgeniy Gippenreiter, with whom I have shared so many experiences: in Moscow and London, in the Caucasus and Pamir, and here in Snowdonia. The last time he and I had been at Plas y Brenin we had tried our skill in a canoe on Llyn Mymbyr dressed in mountain kit, and had capsized in the middle of the lake!

On Sunday 30 May, a very wet day, Jane and Brian Pulley put on a superb meal at the Pen-y-Gwryd, washed down, as tradition dictated, by Bouvier champagne. We missed the company of Charles Evans and Griff Pugh, but welcomed Tenzing's son Norbu Tenzing and his wife, and Nawang Gombu, Tenzing's nephew and our youngest Sherpa in 1953. We were also delighted to welcome Jo Briggs who, with her husband Chris, had entertained us so generously at every previous reunion at the hotel. After the dinner John Jackson gave us all great pleasure with an exhibition of his photographs. We enjoyed a good laugh – and maybe a tear or two – over a film which recorded our reception in Delhi on our way home 40 years ago, which had been presented to me by an Indian photographer.

It was on that happy note that the curtain came down on 'Everest 1993', and the latest of so many memorable Everest reunions.

