
Alpine Club Notes

Honorary membership of the AC has been accorded to Riccardo Cassin and Hamish MacInnes.

Riccardo Cassin died in August 2009, seven months after celebrating his 100th birthday. Cassin's centenary jogged the Club's memory that the Italian legend had never been accorded AC honorary membership and amends were quickly made. A certificate according Cassin honorary membership was presented to his son, Guido Cassin, by President Paul Braithwaite at a gala dinner in the Majestic Hotel, Chamonix, during the *Piolets d'Or* ceremonies in May.

There could hardly have been a more appropriate situation, with the scene of Cassin's greatest masterpiece, the Walker Spur on the Grande Jorasses, so close at hand. Writing in the *AC Newsletter*, Paul speculated on the Italians' journey after making the first ascent in 1938.

'Imagine arriving in Chamonix from Lecco then asking a local a farmer 'did he know how to get to the Grandes Jorasses' and showing him a picture of the face on a postcard... And can you imagine the joy of having climbed one of the greatest classics of all time, possibly the hardest and certainly the finest and most elegant route of its type – they must have had one hell of a good time on the journey back to Lecco!'

MacInnes, a mere stripling at 22 years Cassin's junior, accepted Paul's invitation to honorary membership with the minimum of fuss, simply replying on a compliments slip: 'Aye that'll be fine thanks!'

* A full obituary of Cassin is included in this *AJ*.

CHAMONIX SALUTES HILLARY AND HERZOG

Martin Scott writes:

One year Zermatt – the next Chamonix! Following the AC's 150th party in Zermatt in 2007, a year later (July 2008) we were at that other 'home of alpinism', Chamonix, where the *Mairie* hosted an event billed as *Rencontres aux Sommets* celebrating the first ascents of Everest and Annapurna.

Before the event, some of us went climbing in rather indifferent weather and in the evening the mayor, Eric Fournier, kindly hosted a dinner for various Club people and our President Paul Braithwaite made a short speech and presentation of the Club history to the mayor.

As regards the event itself, despite extra chairs being brought in, the lecture room was packed out with 400-500 people and many standing

at the back. First we had a satellite link to Christian Trommsdorff and Yannick Graziani on K2, preparing for an attempt on the south-west face (later called off just before the major tragedy with 11 deaths). This was followed by the speakers – George Band paid tribute to Ed Hillary and Maurice Herzog talked and showed slides from Annapurna. Henry Day presented Herzog with a photo from his own second ascent as “a gift to the first ascensionist from the second’. Doug Scott recounted the 1975 ascent of the south-west face of Everest and Norman Croucher introduced the AC’s Spirit of Mountaineering initiative to recognise and encourage selfless behaviour on the mountains.

The next day we were shown round by Claude Marin from the Mairie and in the evening had a large Alpine Club party – or rather a ‘Françoise Call party’ as the Club contributed wine and Françoise and husband Mark prepared everything else and hosted us all at their splendid chalet with *tartiflette* and other tasty food. The following day was glorious and some went climbing in the Aiguilles Rouges. Very many thanks to our Hon Sec Françoise Call for organising the AC end and to Claude Marin and the Chamonix *Mairie* for their hospitality.

HIMALAYAN CLUB 80TH ANNIVERSARY

Martin Scott writes:

I was privileged to be a guest at the Himalayan Club’s 80th Anniversary events in India in March 2008.

On the first day in Delhi there was an interesting art exhibition followed by an enjoyable dinner. The following day the main function was held with the President Suman Dubey in the chair. The chief guest was Sonja Gandhi who is chairperson of the ruling coalition in India, with Mani Shankar Aiyar, the Sports Minister, and Sir Chris Bonington as other leading guests. A delightful film, *80 Years on the Top*, specially made for the occasion, was premiered (review p362) following which came presentations by Sonja Gandhi, then the sports minister, and lastly Sir Chris. The day ended with a relaxed rooftop dinner under the stars.

Next morning about 30 members made an early start on the Shatabhi Express up to Haridwar, just before Dehra Dun, where 4x4s were waiting at the station to take us to the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering. Later the 4x4s took us into the Garhwal hills and we trekked up to the beautiful meadows of Dayara Bugyal.

On returning from Dayara Bugyal, most of the party took the 4x4s back south and rafted down the Ganges to Rishikesh. Meanwhile AC Hon Member Harish Kapadia took a small group of friends, including my wife and myself, on a long drive further into the Garhwal up to the Tons river. We then trekked for a week up the Mautar valley, round and down another valley back to the Tons. The Mautar feeds into the Tons’s right bank about seven miles from where the Obra also feeds in on the same side (see article

'Temples and Mountains', p13).

All the events were most enjoyable and impeccably organised, and I was left with a warm impression of the close links between our two Clubs.

ALPINE CLUB LIBRARY – ANNUAL REPORT 2008

This has been the year when the Library has taken on a new look both metaphorically and physically. Metaphorically; because lots of issues, usually out-of-sight, have been addressed; for example, the master book catalogue system has been expanded and expedition reports are now on the Club website. Physically; because major cleaning has taken place, shelves reorganised, and a new set of mountain guidebooks has been established. Overall, it looks much the same Library but many volunteers have worked hard to make it provide a better service for Club members.

Whilst we sought a new Librarian, Barbara Grigor-Taylor, ably assisted by Ian Smith, took on the temporary role of running the Library. At the same time, Barbara took a hard look at the internal systems and many improvements were made; some will be further improved as we move into 2009. Meanwhile, Jerry Lovatt, our Hon Librarian, was searching for the right new Librarian. This culminated with the appointment of Tadeusz Hudowski to the post. He comes from the Polish Library in London so he knows about care of books; he is also a keen climber who knows his mountains. Tadeusz has taken up the role of our Librarian with enthusiasm.

The Library is now open for certain (or as certain as we can make it) every Tuesday and Wednesday from 10am to 5.30pm. On those Tuesdays, when there is a lecture meeting in the evening, it is open until 7pm. It is closed, as tradition, for the month of August and during the Christmas to New Year week. In addition, it is also open by appointment on many Thursdays – call 0207 613 0745.

As an initiative, we have run a number of afternoon 'open day' exhibitions to show books that describe 18th century visits to Chamonix and early ascents of Mont Blanc. Jerry Lovatt explained the context and members were able to examine the historic volumes. Numbers have to be limited but if you would like an invitation to attend a future exposition, please contact us.

The work to conserve the Club's collection of photographs continues, though it is clear that this is a Herculean size task. Anna Lawford has done really well but she needs more help. If you would be interested to work with the 40,000 historic photos, we would love to hear from you.

Financially, the year started reasonably but went from bad to worse from the summer onwards. The Library receives contributions from the Club but we pay rent and rates on the space we occupy, which costs more than we receive from the Club. The income from the Library endowment fund has to bridge this gap and pay for our professional Librarian. But our fund has now lost significant value – not good news. So, very careful money

management has been necessary. We are grateful to our Hon Treasurer, Richard Coatsworth, who has kept the situation under control.

Early in the year, Margaret Clennett, our Hon Secretary who is also the Charity Company Secretary, retired after many years of service to the Library. We thank her and wish her a happy retreat to the Welsh border country. Mike Hewson has kindly stepped into the Hon Secretary role in addition to his work organising the second-hand book sales.

We have the duty to care for the Alpine Club's splendid collection of mountaineering books, the most important English language collection anywhere. Every member must be proud of this Club heritage.

Hywel Lloyd

Chairman of the Council of Trustees of the Alpine Club Library

DEDICATION OF THE BINER PLAQUE: ST PETER'S ZERMATT 12 OCTOBER 2008

Michael Baker writes:

Paula Biner of the Bahnhof Hotel in Zermatt died in 2007 not very long after the AC's 150th anniversary celebrations in June that year. She was present on that happy occasion and in good spirit, although very frail. Her death marked the end of a chapter both in the resort of Zermatt and in the annals of alpinism. In recognition of the debt owed by English-speaking mountaineers both to her and her brother Bernard, the legendary Swiss guide, a plaque has been placed in St Peter's, the English Church in Zermatt, and a substantial donation made in their memory for the upkeep of the Church fabric. Paula Biner held the English Church in great affection and the AC Committee was happy to support this project, to which many members subscribed.

The following is an edited version of the address I gave at the Service of Dedication of the plaque conducted by the Archdeacon of Switzerland, the Ven Arthur Siddall on 12 October 2008:

We are here to celebrate the lives of two well-known and much cherished natives of Zermatt – Bernard and Paula Biner. And perhaps more important, we are here to recognise the debt that English-speaking climbers owe them and to give thanks for their friendship and kindness to us, and to those who came before us, over a period of close to one hundred years.

Bernard Biner was born in 1900, the second and oldest surviving son of Alois Biner, himself a mountain guide of the Seiler Hotels and Chief Guide of Zermatt. Bernard's professional introduction to the mountains seems to have started young. According to what he told Paula – who was some 16 years younger than him – he would carry the coats of his father's clients to the Riffelalp Gornergrat or Schwarzee when he was only 12, though they were often too heavy for him. He first climbed the Matterhorn when he was 16 and, according to his führerbuch, was taking clients from 1918 onwards.

He was one of the most active of the Zermatt guides between the wars.

Among his favourite routes was the Younggrat on the Breithorn – of which more shortly. Such was the warmth of his personality as well as his prowess as a guide that many of his clients, particularly the international ones, came back to Zermatt year after year.

Perhaps the best measure of a man is the esteem in which he is held by his peers. Bernard was elected President of the Zermatt Guides in 1926 and held that office for five three-year terms, though not all consecutively, until 1956. He was for 24 years a member of the village's seven-man *Gemeinderat*. For many years too he was also President of the Ski Club of Zermatt, doing much to build up Zermatt as a winter resort. In recognition of his service he was made its Honorary President in 1961. Had he been well enough he would have served as President at the Matterhorn Centenary Celebrations.

A heart attack in 1945 caused Bernard to reduce his mountaineering, though he continued to climb on a restricted basis. Then in 1951 he was immediately behind his close friend, the guide Otto Furrer, when a fixed rope broke on the Italian ridge of the Matterhorn and Otto fell to his death. Bernard rendered first-aid to Furrer's client and probably saved her life, but the death of his friend profoundly affected him and virtually spelt the end of his own active guiding.

It was however at that point that the Hotel Bahnhof was opened by Bernard and Paula. It had been built by their father and for many years had been rented to the Seilers. But in 1951 the hotel was closed, being in need of modernisation. The story goes that a party of French schoolboys in the charge of a priest enquired about cheap accommodation. Someone suggested to Bernard that he might allow them to use the disused Bahnhof Hotel. He agreed, then forgot about it. Time passed. They arrived. Consternation. Bernard and Paula were found. The building was hastily unlocked. It was the beginning of a new life both for the Biners and for the hotel.

For the next 13 years Bernard and Paula made the Bahnhof a cheap informal lodging and a real home for young climbers. It has been said that no genuine climber was ever turned away. And during that time Bernard kept a fatherly eye on all who passed its doors. He was a shrewd judge of character and could divine after the briefest of talk and observation both a man's personality and his climbing ability. He was full of encouragement to the properly enterprising, however modest their attainments. He became synonymous with the Bahnhof and many are those who to this day recall his willingness to advise on mountain expeditions and his pleasure in their fruition. And so it continued.

Although Bernard had been seriously ill in 1964 his actual death in April the following year was both unexpected and sudden. When I made my first visit to the Bahnhof a year later in 1966, people still spoke of him as the doyen of Swiss guides and the friend of the British. He was a sort of unseen presence in the entrance corridor of the hotel.

In 1966 the snow lay late. I was a very inexperienced alpinist, my companion only slightly less so. We had aspirations somewhat in excess of our ability and all the impatience of (in my case) the 23-year old. We had set

our sights on the Breithorn by the Younggrat. It was not in condition. We had to wait to for several days. Bernard was no longer there to provide advice. With the presumption of youth, we turned to Paula instead, pestering her for advice about the weather and the route and when it would become climbable. We had no idea at the time of the burden this placed upon her for she patiently tried to answer our questions and did not reveal how difficult it was for her to do this.

Eventually the time came when she said that the conditions had improved enough to make the route viable – or at any rate we construed her answers to our questions in that way. So off we went. We walked up to the Gandegg hut and on; we bivouacked at the foot of the route, started off before dawn and made our way up. It was a protracted business, the ridge being heavily snowed up. I recall only one true rock pitch, the crux, and that principally because there was a plaque at its foot commemorating a fatal accident. We were, I suspect, very slow but we made it in the end reaching the summit quite late in the day and then descended, eventually getting to the Trockenersteg lift far too late to avoid a very long walk down in the dark. We reached the Bahnhof very late indeed, but I said to my companion that I was confident Paula would not have locked us out. And so it proved. I was more than right. We crept in through the door into the lobby and there she was, in the little receptionist's cubicle that the hotel used to have, having waited patiently for our return. She told us then how she had spent her day. She had been worried about us. She had taken the earliest train up in the morning to Rotenboden. She had taken with her Bernard's powerful binoculars. From the other side of the Gornergletscher she had watched us through them as we climbed. She had watched anxiously until we reached the very top. Then, she said, we disappeared on the summit slope, and she felt her responsibility for us was over and she had come down. She was, she said, so pleased for us, for this was Bernard's favourite route. I realise now that she must also have been mightily relieved.

For me that was the start of an enduring friendship. It illustrates how Paula took on Bernard's mantle and hints at the cost. However, it is but one example of the kindness she displayed to scores, perhaps hundreds of British mountaineers, kindnesses which perhaps in our youth we took for granted but which in later life we have come to recognise more fully for what they are and how much they mean.

When I first met Paula she must have been 50. She was an established, if modest, personality in Zermatt. She had been a keen skier long before the days of chair lifts and cable cars. Among her skiing companions was Cicely Williams (author of *Zermatt Saga*) who to judge from Paula's conversation had been a close companion before and after the Second World War. Also she had climbed with Bernard. Paula had worked in the tourist office, among other things, but perhaps most importantly for her she was a member of her Church choir. This endured well into her old age.

But from the early 1950s it is for the Hotel Bahnhof that she will most be remembered, especially by English-speaking climbers, though in reality

many nationalities stayed at the Bahnhof and were made welcome.

At the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Alpine Club, Paula was invited as an honoured guest to the Sunday Service of celebration held in this Church. Frail as she was, she was determined to attend and was collected from St Theodul's Altersheim. A special place had been reserved for her in the front pew of the crowded Church. It was typical of her, however, that she found herself a seat near the back, and there she stayed. The place where she sat on that happy day is almost exactly beside the plaque that is about to be dedicated in her and Bernard's memory. How fitting that is. May this plaque speak to generations yet to come not only of the gratitude we feel for their deeds but also of our respect and love for the memory of two of Zermatt's, indeed of Switzerland's, finest mountaineering ambassadors.