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PETER FOSTER  
**One Hundred Years Ago**



'Dent d'Hérens at Dawn' by Victor Ellwood. Shown at the Club's photographic exhibition in December 1923 and reproduced in the *Alpine Journal*.

On the evening of Tuesday 4 December 1923, 226 members of the Alpine Club and guests, wearing formal evening dress, illuminated by chandeliers and reflected in gilded mirrors, took their seats for the annual dinner in the plush surroundings of the Edward VII Rooms at the Hotel Victoria on Northumberland Avenue.<sup>a</sup> That afternoon the Club had been 'at home' to about 400 members and friends at an exhibition of photographs in the hall at 23 Savile Row. The subject matter of the photographs was

a. Members had paid £1 2s for their ticket; a proposal to raise the cost to £1 11s so that champagne might be served had been rejected by an abstemious majority at a previous general meeting of the Club.

overwhelmingly Alpine, reflecting the activities of members who, five years after the Armistice, had returned in increasing numbers to their playground to enjoy classic climbs of the pre-war years.

During the summer season the weather in the Alps had been generally good and by August Chamonix was heaving with visitors: 'all the huts were crammed, and the Couvercle had as many as a dozen or more people sleeping outside. What the inside must have been like is easily imagined.'<sup>1</sup> On 17 August George Bower and Fred Pigott set out from Montanvers to make the first guideless ascent of the Mer de Glace face of the Aiguille du Grépon. Eleven and a half hours later they reached the final tower and were faced with the notorious final crack which on the first ascent Joseph Knubel had overcome by jamming his ice axe and using it as a horizontal bar. It was snowing gently. Bower tried hard but failed to climb the crack; he invited Pigott, who earlier in the year had made the third ascent of the *Flake Crack* on Central Buttress on Scafell, to have a go but Pigott stuck at the final chockstone, where from the summit block, six feet above, he heard a voice: 'voulez-vous la corde, monsieur?' and a rope end brushed his nose. 'Er, s'il vous plaît,' Pigott answered in his best French. In a few seconds he was on top of the Grépon.<sup>2</sup>

Swiss huts were busy, too.<sup>b</sup> One evening at the Mountet hut, 40 schoolgirls arrived. 'Their harassed mistress could not keep them quiet. They effervesced. And all through the night spluttering giggles went off like fireworks',<sup>3</sup> complained a sleep-deprived Dorothy Pilley. Bivouacking offered a more tranquil alternative and for their ascent of the Weisshorn's *Schaligrat*, Raymond Bicknell and Harold Porter adopted a minimalist approach, simply donning a woollen waistcoat and extra pair of socks and lying down on the dry rocks of the Schaliyoch. A cold and sleepless night followed making the next day's climbing up the pinnacled ridge arduous: 'long before we got to the top' Bicknell recalled vividly, 'I was beginning to feel like a microbe crawling around the unending edge of a circular saw.'<sup>4</sup>

In the Oberland, Pilley and her husband, Ivor Richards, with their guide Joseph Georges, escaped the crowds thronging the Jungfrauoch by making the second ascent of the north-east ridge of the Jungfrau, a long route involving some difficult climbing on sometimes rotten rock. Approaching the summit the party was caught in an electrical storm, a particular feature of the weather in the region.

*To the peculiar feeling in the muscles which tells of a big electrical disturbance was now added music from the axes. The party was slightly reassured by discovering that one was rendering 'God Save the King' and the other 'Rule Britannia'; what J.G.'s axe was doing we had no means of ascertaining.'*<sup>5</sup>

Ninety-five years later in 2018, a party comprising Ben Tibbetts and two recent past presidents of the Club, Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders, en-

b. In 1923 the total number of visitors to all the SAC huts was 41,186, a 25% increase on the previous year.



A similar view by Ben Tibbetts, illustrating the growing impact of climate change on the mountain's snow and ice cover.

countered similar alarming conditions on the route, as Tibbetts recounts: 'Every time I raised my hand to pull in rope, it fizzed and vibrated. Soon my head was buzzing; even the rocks were humming.'<sup>6</sup>

During a fortnight in August, a 28-year-old Austrian, Alfred Horeschowsky, who had already caused a stir with his solo ascent of the Pallavicini couloir<sup>c</sup> on the Grossglockner, made a meteoric appearance in the Western Alps. He traversed the Grandes Jorasses, climbed the Aiguille Blanche from the Brenva glacier, continuing via the Peuterey ridge to Mont Blanc and made the first attempt on the north face of the Matterhorn, reaching the base of the couloir that slants rightwards up the middle of the face and is the key to the route, but 'continuous stonefall made it impossible to gain a single inch of height' and they were forced to escape by difficult rocks to reach the Hörnli ridge, 'a few steps from the Solvay hut'.<sup>7</sup> Horeschowsky's technical competence and endurance drew admiration from Percy Farrar, recent past president of the Club, but he worried about the willingness to take 'outrageous risks': 'If Mr Horeschowsky continues like this he will not go on long, which would be regrettable.'<sup>8</sup> Horeschowsky died in 1987, aged 92.

Another prodigious talent, Willo Welzenbach, a 22-year-old engineering

c. The first ascent in 1876 had been a remarkable feat. The guide, J Tribusser, cut 2,500 steps in seven hours. Forty-five years elapsed before the second ascent.



Alfred Horeschowsky

student from Munich, was on his first visit to the Valais where he made the first continuous traverse of the Matterhorn and Dent d'Hérens, spending a night at the Italian hut on the Matterhorn where 40 climbers competed for space in the hut designed to accommodate 12. From a point high on the east ridge of the Dent d'Hérens, Welzenbach observed a 'mysterious trail of cut steps curving like a string of pearls'<sup>9</sup> that rose from the glacier terrace extending across the north face at mid-height, the track made 10 days earlier by George Finch and his companions on their attempt to

climb the north face. Their route had avoided the obvious challenges of the ice wall to gain the terrace and the steep snow and ice slope above. Two years later Welzenbach would return to make a direct route, ushering in a new age of technical ice climbing.

To the east in the Bregaglia, Walter Risch made the first ascent of the north ridge of the Piz Badile with his client Alfred Zürcher who declared that Risch's ascent of the crux slab 'without exaggeration, reaches the extremest limits of human possibility.'<sup>10</sup> One hundred years later it is not unusual to find a dozen parties on the now classic route.

## References

- 1 *Alpine Journal* 36, p44.
- 2 P Brockbank & E Byrom, *A Short History of The Rucksack Club 1902-1939*, privately published from a 1977 MS, 2011, p76.
- 3 D Pilley, *Climbing Days*, London, 1935, p224.
- 4 *Alpine Journal* 36, p56.
- 5 *Alpine Journal* 35, p171.
- 6 B Tibbets, *Alpenglow*, privately published, 2019, p64.
- 7 *Alpine Journal* 36, p156.
- 8 *Alpine Journal* 36, p409.
- 9 E Roberts, *Welzenbach's Climbs*, The Mountaineers, 1981 p57.
- 10 *Alpine Journal* 37, p147.