

Alpine Beginnings

John Allen

When I was sixteen and still at school - it was 1955 - a messenger boy came into the classroom from the Headmaster's office to invite volunteers for rock-climbing to assemble after the 4:00pm bell. Some lads from the Science Sixth Form were there, but I was the only one from our class. The Boss told us he was planning to take a group to North Wales at the October half-term. We should tell our parents, and ask their permission. I don't think they had any idea what they were letting me in for.

We stayed at Helyg, the Climbers' Club hut near Capel Curig. The first rock-climb that I did was Gashed Crag on Tryfan, and with the Boss leading, for I was the real beginner; the other boys and a teacher climbed other routes because they had done this before and needed a different route. Next day we all went to Craig yr Ysfa and in a continuous trail of about six roped boys plus teacher, we ascended Great Gully, finishing in the dark and the rain. I was profoundly glad we escaped out of the depths of this dank and chilly chasm, because the very sight of the cave at the top scared me to death. Back at the hut there was talk about some Joe Brown and Don Whillans. I was frightened witless that the next day I might have to do what they had done. But that was the end and we came home, and went back to the chalk-face.

Come Easter 1956, same routine, same boy around the classrooms, but this time it was to be the Lake District. As a family we had spent Easters near Hawkshead, so I already knew a bit more. This time the Boss had booked us into the Robertson Lamb Hut in Langdale. We climbed first on Scout Crag, then Dow Crag, then walked to Great Gable for the Napes and did The Needle. The Boss took me on Eagle's Nest Direct. At the main pitch he said that I should lead; he gave me the sling and said to clip the rope into the karabiner and sling and belay at the top. So I did what I was told. Well, you would, wouldn't you?

After the Easter trip, the same boy (John Gatiss) came around the classrooms and, when the Boss had gathered us together, he invited us even further afield, to the Alps. This would inevitably become a matter of cost, never mind any other consideration. The UK was still recovering from the austerity imposed by WW2, even though it had ended over ten years earlier. Added to that, this wasn't a long drive up the A6 (no M6 then) to Windermere in his big car or a hired bus, turn left at Ambleside, then head for Chapel Stile and deepest Langdale. This was a journey to foreign countries, on a boat across the English Channel, then old steam-trains, frontiers, border police, a Swiss postbus to Les Haudères, a hired jeep for the muddy track miles to Arolla, and camping (i.e. loose canvas tent and separate groundsheet to lie on). And a passport, and different money, and 'O' level French (eau potable?), and joining the French Alpine Club for discounted charges for overnight stays in mountain huts.

Only two sets of parents would put up the money, £50 per boy, and the aforesaid John Gatiss was the other boy, a year older than me. He was a



Mont Collon above Arolla.

Photo GF Dixon

keen boy scout who knew about tents and rain. ‘Don’t touch the sides when it rains or we would both get wet’, was his first warning. He showed me how to light a Primus, and where we would wash; in the glacier stream that flowed through the cattle field where we pitched up. I didn’t do much washing. I had no real idea what I had let myself in for; carried away on the romance of following in the newspapers the first ascent of Everest by a British team only a few years previously.

For meals in the huts we had each taken out three one-pound tins of stewed steak, one of which would be given to the hut guardian to cook with spaghetti bought locally in Arolla.

Breakfast was 'brose' - porridge oats with hot water poured over and a knob of margarine and sugar added, plus a litre of hot water for tea; and bread and jam from the heavy jar. Lunch on the hill was bread and cheese, or sardines, or chocolate, and more jam to deplete the jar, plus polythene-flavoured water from a bottle boosted by stuffing snow through the neck.

Mum kitted me out with old school trousers and shirts, my white cricket pullover for warmth, a hooded smock-style anorak, leather mitts, Dad's old trilby as sunhat, ex-army sun-goggles, an old pair of silk pyjamas as base layer (no such thing then of course), a canvas framed Bergen rucksack and long-shafted wooden ice-axe (both borrowed), and new boots with Commando rubber soles from Timpsons. We bought heavy steel crampons for me and John in Sion after we got off the train from Paris, a belay sling and karabiner each, foul-tasting but effective glacier cream, and made three prussik loops each from thin hemp line. The Boss had brought a 120ft hawser-laid nylon rope, just invented. He knew about crevasses, had the maps, and could understand the German text of local SAC guidebooks.

The Boss? He was Geoffrey Ferris Dixon, MA Oxon, appointed Headmaster of King George V Grammar School Southport in 1949, formerly science teacher at Uppingham public school, and then during the immediate post-war years was in charge of science taught to officers at the newly established Military Academy at Sandhurst. Adding his own public-schooling (Worksop College) to Army training at Sandhurst, you will understand that a whiff of 1940s army officer aloofness and discipline always penetrated the school corridors, and even beyond, namely on this holiday. A strange Headship appointment, perhaps, from a central England upper-class teaching position to an outpost on the Lancashire coast where successful Manchester businessmen commuted and retired.

But he was a climber, mountaineer and Alpinist too; at least by rumour. From appointment he was allowed a free hand to hire new staff without reference to the school Governors or to local Education officials, and they did not demur when he told them he wanted to start a climbing club. From their point of view they had got themselves a posh Headmaster. I don't think they knew what they were letting the boys into. He had probably dropped a few hints about his qualification to take boys climbing (done many rock-climbs, had climbed mountains in the Alps, pioneering some of them - all true - and no accidents). Otherwise there were no formal qualifications or certificates for climbing - there had never apparently been any need. In fact he did not do his best routes until after he got this job; namely, and with capable contemporary friends, he traversed the frontier ridge of Mont Maudit (1950), traversed the Weisshorn by the Schaligrat (1951), and twice climbed the Matterhorn with a stormy finish on each occasion (1951 and 1954). Back now to the present story.

We were coming down the first route of our holiday, the Petite Dent de Veisivi above Arolla, when I decided to jump down a bit that I couldn't climb down. The Boss must have been startled by the thump behind his back. 'Don't ever do that again' boomed his imperious voice. This was the naughty schoolboy that nearly ruined his reputation by getting killed while climbing.



John Russell and Les Bouquetins from Upper Arolla Glacier. Photo John Allen

We then abandoned Arolla for the Bertol hut, climbed the Aiguille de la Tsa next day, then next day the central summit of Les Bouquetins, then walked over the Tête Blanche to the Rossier hut the following day, and then tried the Dent Blanche but failed and walked straight back down to Les Haudères, and hired a jeep to get back to Arolla. I was exhausted but hugely excited, having been out on glaciers under the stars (i.e. early morning starts), wearing crampons and rope, bowline around the waist, prussiks attached; and no dragging the rope on the ground allowed. I had seen the Matterhorn, been on unbelievable summits, breathed the sparse air of high places, watched choughs, crossed snowfields, glaciers, crevasses, rock-strewn hillsides and hovered over immeasurable abysses. I imagined myself on Everest.

We then walked to the Moiry hut, did the Grand Cornier next day, then the Pigne de la Lé the following day on the way to the Mountet hut, followed next day by the Trifhorn in a snowstorm on the way to the Rothorn hut, then did the Zinal Rothorn next day and walked down to Zermatt that afternoon. I was breathless, had headaches from the altitude, slept badly, and ate voraciously. John and I stayed in the bunkhouse under the Bahnhof Hotel run by Paula and Bernard Biner, the ex-chief guide. The Boss stayed in the hotel, of course, but we ate there together. After the meal I nipped out to buy a big bar of Swiss chocolate for the surge to the next hut, but ate half of it before going back into the hotel. I was so thin that I cast hardly a shadow.



Alphubel from summit of Täschhorn.

Photo John Allen

The Boss had something up his sleeve, a last great problem: a first guideless ascent. This was the Westgrat on the Alphubel (4,206m) above Zermatt. So off to the Täsch hut we went. In his subsequent English guidebook for the Alpine Club, Robin Collomb credited me first in the list of three first British ascensionists: JTH Allen, JW Gatiss, GF Dixon, 6th August 1956. This was probably an alphabetical priority, but if he had ever found out, Geoffrey Dixon, our mentor, might well have used some Army-inspired expletive when he discovered that my name was first and leader! Geoffrey the Boss had been the inspiration of this whole venture, John Gatiss had led the most difficult bit of this climb, now rated IV+, delicate; I was a passenger, so to speak. I had even broken my borrowed ice-axe on the climb. We spent an hour and a half in a snowstorm on the almost level summit area using map and compass to find the way off, and were soaked to the skin back at the hut. Still, you could wrap yourself in those hairy blankets; only to put on those wet clothes next morning to go down, drying out on the way. Back to the Bahnhof hotel bunkroom for two days' rest.

Next day the Boss woke up fresh and raring to go, so there were no days of rest. We had limited time, and needed to get as much done as possible, so I had to hire an axe immediately; and off we set to the Schönbühl hut. Then next day after a 3:00am start we turned back from the Ober Gabelhorn in poor weather and conditions, rallied back at the Schönbühl, and went for the Dent Blanche hut immediately, arriving after 7:00pm. Next day I failed to rise to the occasion, an ascent of the Dent Blanche, and was bold enough to inform the Boss. I was knackered. He got John off his bunk and took him up the Dent Blanche and back in good weather and conditions. John told me later that he had carelessly dropped his ice-axe down one side of the mountain, out of reach from the end of the rope. 'The Boss was incensed and ordered me to untie and fetch it. So I had to untie for the last bit, collect the axe and climb back up to re-tie.' They then overtook other parties to make up time back down to the hut.

Next day we stumbled down from the Rossier hut to Les Haudères, and camped for the last time before the long train journey home. Back at school I would not lose any street-cred because John had left school that summer and was unable to betray my weediness at the end, wimping out on the Dent Blanche. At home for the last week before returning to school I ate double meals at every sitting. I was also too immature to be able to describe the emotional, psychological and spiritual uplift from those three weeks. There was nobody around who would have understood what we had done and what had happened to me. Immediately, I could only present the physical wreckage of my wasted body, and hope deeply that I could do it again.

Comment: The factual aspects of the above tale are as accurate as the letters sent home described at the time. From my 2014 perspective it still seems to have been a very energetic three weeks. It was only possible because Geoffrey Dixon knew how to get things done in the Alps, and he had two willing (mostly) and even obedient (mostly) followers. He had treated us as if we were his contemporary climbing friends, but with the added advantage of being boss. An integral part of that expedition was the total

faith that I (and my parents) had in the leadership. Discerning readers will understand that some levels of risk are inevitable in Alpinism, and even provide the uncertain outcome integral in adventure, but this expedition would not be tolerated nowadays; deemed irresponsible and foolhardy, or was it the experience and good judgement of Geoffrey Dixon, and the usual slices of luck that saw us through?

In 2012 with the considerable help of several former pupils and his oldest son Oliver, I wrote a biography of Geoffrey Ferris Dixon as climber and Alpinist, ISBN 978-0-9928367-0-2. It can be obtained as a digital book from Amazon's Kindle, price £1.80 incl VAT.