

Fifty Years Ago

John Allen

Fifty years ago in 1969 I was planning an overland mountaineering expedition to Nepal for the post-monsoon season of 1970. That journey is not something you would wish to undertake in 2020 because the obvious land route would pass through the politically troubled and dangerous countries of the Middle East. Six of us, members of the Rucksack Club bar one who was a woman and not admissible for membership then, even if she had wanted to join (she didn't - 'misogynous bunch'), clubbed our time and money together so that we could load up a vehicle and drive the few thousand miles with all our mountain food and kit. Nowadays pre-expedition worries seem to be limited to making it through an airport for a long-haul flight.

From a 2019 perspective, the world in 1969 seemed smaller. The first jumbo jet had only just had its first flight, and flights to the Himalayas were not yet within our budget. Our planning for an overland journey took months of time. We wanted a remote objective, not too high, and unclimbed; plenty to go at in Nepal. My researches discovered that in the far west end of Nepal, the Api/Nampa range had been visited in 1953 by WH Murray and JB Tyson (name-dropping here), so in June 1969 I went to talk to Murray at his home at Lochgoilhead and he recommended the unclimbed Nampa (22,162ft).



Nampa.

All photos John Allen

However, on my arrival his excitement had been stirred to provide an update on the infamous Coruisk bridge affair (Skye). He was well-placed to comment. A suspension bridge had been hastily constructed across the short river that flowed from Loch Coruisk to the sea at Loch Scavaig! Mountain rescue was the excuse. Apparently a sole policeman had reported that without a new bridge, rescues would be almost impossible, so Inverness County Council had immediately recruited the Army's Royal Engineers to fling a swing bridge across the river; no contact with the mountaineering or environment community, who would have advised that rescue victims were usually evacuated by boat. So a bridge was thrown up. Pristine environment violated! Access road begun from Kilmarie! Bad Step to be blasted for a path to carry a stretcher! Mountaineers were outraged. Eyesores in the sacred wilderness of the Cuillin!



Coruisk/Skavaig river.

As Army bridges go, they can usually be as quickly removed as erected. A few spanners and a de-commissioning contingent could do the job, hinted Murray to me, well-known among Scottish mountaineers for his views on the environment. But on a stormy night in November 1969, the environment took the situation into its own hands and swept the bridge away. I still have before-and-after photos from the Guardian Newspaper report of 10th November 1969. Sceptics muttered into their beards, having a shrewd idea of other factors at work!

Now back to Fifty Years Ago, and the Nampa trip. In those times we all basically expected to take time off normal work and return to chosen professions - there were relatively few people who made a living from climbing with sponsorships from gear manufacturers. We were prepared to finance the trip from our own pockets, but there were contributions from food and gear manufacturers, and the Mount Everest Foundation.



Rob Beighton on summit of Aiguille de Bionnassay.

In fact we began to make some of our own gear, both to save money and because we could design our own specific clothing not available commercially e.g. Jimmy Lomas, long standing member of RC, made 14 pairs of nylon fabric overboots for us, several female helpers knitted short fingered woollen mitts with overlaps. We made gaiters with velcro fastenings (velcro was relatively new at that time); and some cagoules from proofed nylon. Obviously some things we had to buy: a 150ft number 2 nylon hawser-laid rope (for climbing) cost in pounds, shillings and pence (decimal currency did not begin till 1971) £4 5s 6d, that is £4.27p in today's money; a Joe Brown helmet cost £3 17s 6d (£3.83p). We made our own 'deadmen' (snow anchors) and snowstakes.

1969 was also the summer of the Apollo 11 landing on the Moon. On the same day, 20 July, Rob Beighton (former member of RC) and I had just bivouacked on the summit of the Aiguille de la Bérangère prior to a traverse of the Dômes de Miage to the old Durier hut, next day continuing over the Aiguille de Bionnassay to the Goûter hut. A two week holiday in the Alps during the summer required best use of conditions. We could not sit around in the Bar National in Chamonix waiting for Neil Armstrong to make 'one small step for man'; we needed to make giant leaps while the weather stayed good. Starting from Les Contamines, this traverse, now called the Royal Traverse, with Mont Blanc and satellites to the north, would have brought us to Montanvers, overspent, clapped-out and far from our car. So we descended to Les Houches from the Goûter hut; and then drove through the Mont Blanc tunnel to Courmayeur.



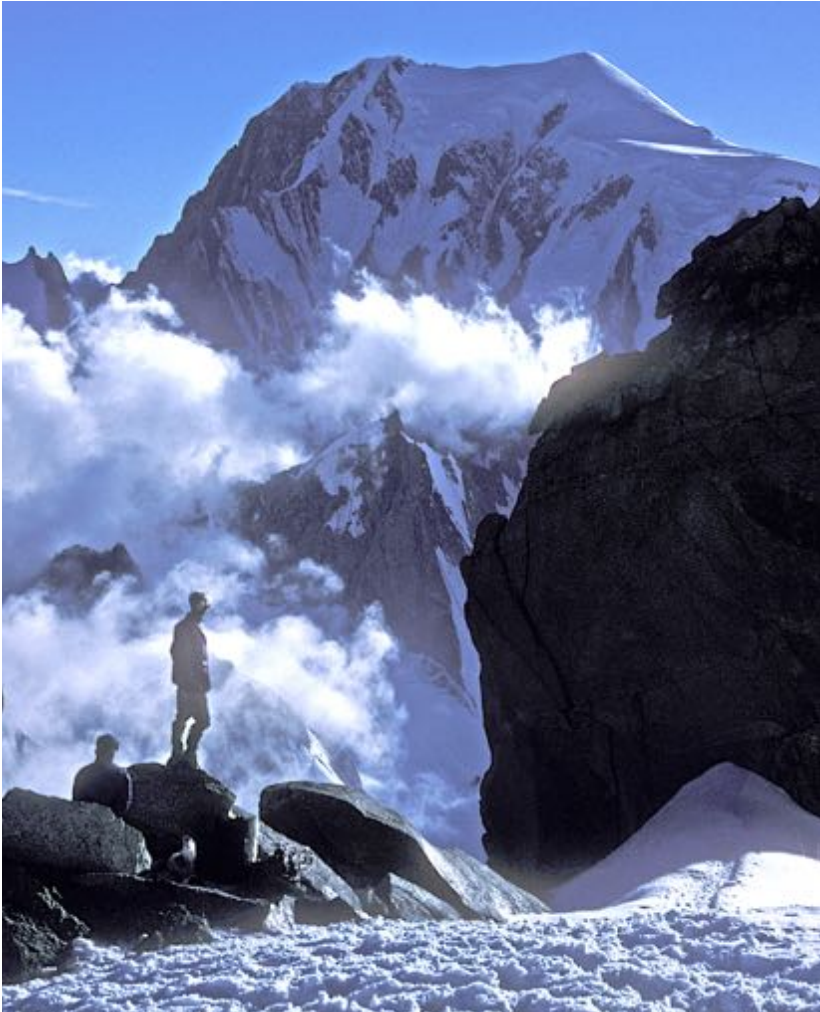
On Domes de Miages with Aiguille de Bionnassay on left and Mont Blanc on right.

Next up on our plan was the SW Ridge of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey, but that failed after a storm-bound bivvy below Pointe Welzenbach, followed by a series of hair-raising abseils. Then we found the Frontier Ridge of Mont Maudit, close to my favourite place on the planet - the Brenva face of Mont Blanc. Why such an affection for place? Formerly I might have favoured the Langdale Valley, or the Beudy Mawr valley, or the Allt a'Mhuilinn, but now this remote of access, glacier valley on the east face of Mont Blanc. I was first captivated by it in 1965 while climbing the wonderful Old Brenva route from a bivvy by Col Moore, exactly a hundred years after the first ascent. I knew the area held more promise for me than this one and only route.



M Aiguille de Bionnassay (left) from above Col Durier.

Rob and I were persuaded by a group at the Torino hut to start the Frontier Ridge from the Trident hut, (this hut was removed in the 1990s and is no longer available. This attempt failed because of the time it was taking us to traverse awkward ground from the Col du Trident to the Col de la Fourche. We returned next day from the Torino hut to the Col de la Fourche directly and succeeded on perhaps the most scenic of all routes adjacent to the Brenva. By dawn we had passed the hut there and by 8.15am were beside the Aiguille de l'Androsace on the Frontier Ridge, and then by-passed the summit of Mont Maudit for a short-cut (!) back to the Torino. Route done, missed the 4000m peak! At that period of my mountaineering life, high quality routes were more important than 4000m summits.



Mont Blanc from bivvy under Dent du Geant.

My 1969 ended with an opportunistic foray into the eastern Cairngorms with Gerry Gee. For us the holiday week of Christmas/New Year was not to be wasted on frivolities. 24th December 1969 was spent on the roads to Braemar, it was cold there. In fact winter snow was hard on the mountains. By a flash of inspiration (aka madness), we abandoned the tent in favour of snowhole tools and the folly required to make do with a hole in the snow. High up the eastern corries of Beinn a'Bhuird we found frozen snow of adequate depth; little wind and a full moon from a misty sky provided the lighting after sundown; we slept with the depth of hibernation in our hole. A day followed in the low sunlight of Arctic latitudes wandering over the nearby peaks, dinner in the Fife Arms, Braemar, and a night camping along the driveway to Invercauld House. No-one seemed to mind. In fact there was no-one.



Gerry Gee and snowhole.

Back we went to the snowhole. Weather set fair, temperature still below freezing, with long, low sunbeams, we made best use of our frozen den, with cloud-walking and moonlit climbing shared with nature alone, transcendent moments more potent than any words or photographs can say. Gerry thought that if he waited and listened for long enough, he would hear the secret of creation. Out there in the moonlit night, cramponing over such high frozen landscapes certainly felt like imaginary walking on the surface of a different, imaginary planet.

And so to 1970.

Nampa Expedition 1970

The team of six bought an ex-Army lorry (Bedford RL), loaded it up and drove to Delhi. We made various personal and admin visits to Kathmandu, then drove through northern India to Jhulaghat at the confluence of the Chamlia with the Kali river in North West Nepal. We then hired local Dhotials as porters for the twelve day walk-in up the Chamlia valley. We reached 20,500ft (Nampa, unclimbed summit 22,162ft) when a case of suspected pulmonary oedema and frostbite afflicted a lead climber.

The climbers retreated, the casualty was put on our life-saving oxygen system and descended further to base. We did not have enough strength to mount another attempt and we all returned home overland as planned. The illness was eventually diagnosed in Liverpool's centre for oriental and tropical medicine as hookworm, picked up through bare-foot trekking during the walk-in. He made a full recovery.

We were mountaineer friends who had wanted a journey to a remote part of the Himalaya with an ascent of an unclimbed mountain. The project required a huge effort from all of us, we had no sponsors, non-existent phone communications while in NW Nepal and no emergency rescue or medicine possible; our friendships stretched to bursting. Nampa was ascended by our route the following year, but the two climbers from Japan were sadly killed in a fall during their descent. We were all eternally grateful to many in Manchester, India and Nepal - impossible to quantify our thanks for their assistance which could not be reciprocated by us. We will freely offer advice to later enthusiasts to pursue their horizons.

(Details extracted from mountain diaries written at the time)

All photos by John Allen, and digitised from 35mm transparencies by Keith Ratcliffe.