

**Yorkshire Tokositna Glacier Expedition 2005**  
**Expedition Report**



Mount Huntington from our base below 11,520' the day of our attempt

**May 1<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 2005**

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Extract From Mount Mckinley Map by Brad Washburn (not to scale)

## 1. Introduction

This report details the activities of the Yorkshire Tokositna Glacier Expedition, which took place from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2005 in the Central Alaska Range USA.

### 1.1 Members

There were two expedition members who equally planned all parts of the expedition

Andrew Saxby – Age 35 from Richmond, North Yorkshire. Occupation: Purchasing Manager. Leader for MEF purposes & author of this report. Previous experience included as a member of Scottish Lemon Mountain Expedition 2003, Alpine & Scottish winter climbing, British European & USA rock climbing.

Jago Trasler – Age 46 from Barnsley, South Yorkshire. Previous experience as a member of British Gauí Shanker Expedition 1995, Scottish Lemon Mountain Expedition 2003, Alpine & Scottish winter climbing, British European & USA rock climbing.

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### 1.2 Planning etc.

All expedition planning gear packing etc. we carried out by Trasler & Saxby over a weekends at one or other of their homes or whilst climbing during the previous winter. Grateful thanks are given to British climbers who have previously visited the region. Specifically Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg & Nick Colton. Jago also researched the area in American Alpine Journal's that are available for viewing at the Alan Rouse Library in Sheffield. We also read books on climbing in Alaska (titles in bibliography). Talkeetna Air Taxi also provided invaluable help in the planning of the expedition

### 1.3 Expedition Goals

The main aim of the expedition was to ascend the unclimbed peak 11,520' by a new route on its North Face the style of this climb was to be lightweight Alpine. To achieve this goal we would charter an air taxi to transport us to the Tokositna Glacier & establish a base camp under our intended route. If time permitted we would attempt an established route on Mount Huntington such as the West Face Couloir.

## 2. 2. Diary of the Expedition

### 2.1 Journey from the UK to Talkeetna, Alaska, USA

#### Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May

We flew from London Heathrow direct to Seattle with BA, approximately 9-hour flight (at the time of writing a flight which is available most days). From Seattle we took an Alaska Airlines

flight to Anchorage approximately 3.5 hour flight. All above can be booked direct from UK through anyone of a number of Internet providers although interestingly not through BA despite Alaska Airlines been a partner of BA. Due a variety of reasons we had to fly on the Sunday whilst researching flights in the previous November It became obvious that the flight we took was the best for our needs however there was over £100 difference in cost depending on who we booked through. We used onlinetravel.com who were cheapest & offered good service. My advice would be to look around as savings can be made.

We stayed in The Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel on the night of Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May in Downtown Anchorage. Plenty of hotels are available in this area of Anchorage & usually deals are available at the time of year we travelled. Again I would advise a good trawl of Internet.

### **Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> May**

We did our food shopping in Anchorage. It is possible to pre-order food & kit from the REI in Anchorage a service we used. There is also a huge Carrs (part of Safeway group) supermarket almost next to REI. There is also a large whole food shop, Natural Pantry, (supermarket size) which is also worth a visit. Please note shops do not open until 10am, which basically resulted in us doing our shopping in 4 hours, a good job we were organised.

We used Denarli Overland to ferry us from Anchorage to Talkeetna a 3.5-hour journey Tom Waite the owner of this service was able to arrange for us to share with another party that keeps the cost down we arrived in Talkeetna just before 5pm.

**Permits** no permit is required for climbing in Tokositna Glacier in-fact permits are only required for routes on Denarli & Foraker. However we voluntarily registered as a Backwoods expedition with the Denarli National Park Service at a cost of \$10 each. As well as being a good idea this organisation have done a lot of work over the years in cleaning up rubbish and human waste from Denarli. We took advantage of their CMC Barrel service. This basically entails being provided with a screw top barrel which solid waste is 'deposited' in & the full barrel is returned to the Ranger Station at the end of the expedition.

We had pre-booked a flight for the following day with Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT) weather permitting. TAT has a bunk barn in town & it is also possible to sleep in a more basic hut on the airfield the option we used.

## **2.2 Waiting in Talkeetna! – Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> to Friday 6<sup>th</sup> May**

Having been up until after midnight the previous evening packing up food etc we had all our gear packed weighed & ready by 7.30am. Each expedition member is allowed 125lb of kit, which is included in the price of the flight. Any extra kit is charged at \$1 per lb. Gear will be weighed. We having spent countless hours sorting & weighing kit in UK & food purchased in US weighed in on the nail at 250lb for the pair. However, it should be noted some US teams seemed to take more kit & pay extra.

On advice received from Malcolm Bass we had elected to use TAT for our air taxi. This proved to be good advice. Whilst there are a number of operators flying from Talkeetna into the Central Alaska Region TAT are the operator chosen by most climbers. Most of the other operators only fly to Denarli Base Camp & TAT fly to more places than any other operator including being the only one to fly to the Tokositna. Paul Roderick the owner of TAT & his staff were also invaluable in advice & latest info. That was communicated by e-mail right up until departure. We also purchased our white gas & hired a VHF radio from TAT.

To fly you need the weather unless conditions are good you are not going to fly! The Tokositna (Tok) is one of the most difficult landing sites in the area due to its position re surrounding mountains & that cloud holds in there longer than other areas. The weather was not kind to us on this expedition & this poor weather started to rear its ugly head whilst in Talkeetna. As previously mentioned we had booked a flight for the morning of Tue 3<sup>rd</sup> we would in-fact not reach the Tok until after 5pm on Fri 6<sup>th</sup> May!

The pattern that emerged for these days was as follows. No flights take place until Base Camp Lisa (Paul Roderick's sister) has made a call to TAT at 8am each morning from Denali Base Camp (DBC). After that the first flights are to DBC the pilot inspects the weather before landing at any of the other landing sites. Obviously therefore, a weather window can open & close before you have chance to fly. This is what happened to us on each of the waiting days. Every day we were on the next flight only for the weather to clag in again & that was only when there was any flying often we would hear the result of the call from DBC, Lisa would just ring & say 'ping pong'!

TAT is very fair to their clients when this sort of weather sets in. Basically you have your place in the queue & this does not alter we were therefore always at the top of the list after the first day. When the weather improved enough TAT would send up their planes (before other operators) to DBC however the weather was not good enough for the Tok. In return we waited at the airfield ready for the call.

The real low of this part of the trip was on the Thursday afternoon when Base Camp Lisa's partner Mark Westman got flown into the Ruth Mountain House not the gorge where they wanted to go. This was the first non-DBC flight we had seen since arriving Paul Roderick having made this flight decided the weather was just good enough to attempt a flight to the Tok. We loaded the plane took off but the weather was failing fast as we got up to the cruising altitude the mountains 60 to 80kms away disappeared from view we were forced to land again. To add insult to injury someone had taken 'our hut' as well!

Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> looked no more promising than the previous 3 days & another morning was spent hanging around the airfield. At lunchtime flights started to DBC, finally the call came for us to get ready so again we geared up & put our kit out ready to go. We shared our flight with 2 guys attempting Thunder Mountain who were dropped first. We flew with Paul Roderick in a De-Haviland Beaver aircraft (production of this aircraft stopped in the 1950's!). Due to the conditions there was no possibility for us to be dropped under 11,520' (East, West Fork of Tok) instead we were dropped at the Huntington Base (West Fork of Tok) arriving at approx 5pm.



**Skiing of from Huntigton Base towards 11,520'**

### 2.3 Establishing Base Camp Friday 6<sup>th</sup> May to Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> May

On arriving at Huntington landing strip we were to be presented with another problem. As well as 2 climbers who were flying out another party of 2 were in camp, Americans Seth Hobby & Coley Gentzel this pair of guides had been on the Tok for 2 weeks in the first few days they had climbed the Harved Route on Huntington after this they had been sitting out bad weather in their camp. They had skied over to 11,520' & reconnoitred a route! They only had a couple days left on their trip & considered flying out that evening. We learnt the above as we unloaded our kit Seth asked Paul what he knew about 11,520' Paul replied 'not a lot but these guys have come to climb it'. This was enough to make Seth & Coley stay.

Jago & I had a brief discussion on what action we should take. Right from the start of the planning of the trip we had decided if we could not be dropped under 11,520' we would ski over with all our 250lb of kit & establish a base camp beneath our route. This Journey would be approx 6kms starting at 8,200' dropping steeply down to 7,500' then climbing back up to 8,600'. It was obvious that Seth & Coley's plan was going to take as little gear as possible climb the route & return to Huntington Base & fly out as they were already acclimatised we would have our work cut out to get on the route before them! We discussed the options, which were not many & decided to carry on with the above plan & see what happened.

With the benefit of hindsight we probably had made a mistake in our planning here. People we spoke to before we set off had generally been dropped under their route & we underestimated how hard hauling our kit on lightweight plastic sleds over the terrain & snow conditions would be. Added to this we had the experience of hauling a similar amount of kit almost 40kms in 2 days in Greenland in 2003. However, the terrain in Greenland was easier the snow was better & we had 1 fibreglass sled which we got most of the kit into this type of sled is vastly superior to the plastic sleds we used in Alaska in-fact my journal records later that Friday evening 'these poor sleds are barely up to the job'.

Having said all that the time we were to take to get to base would not have mattered if Seth & Coley had not been there. We also felt that changing our plans drastically (e.g. leaving most food & fuel at Huntington Base) could potentially have caused more problems & overall we felt the only course of action open to us was to proceed as planned.

Looking at this decision 'In the cold light of day' after the expedition we still feel it was the right one. As you will see from the conclusions we would fully investigate the use of different tenting arrangements etc on future trips to the region however, this is with the benefit of what we learned on this trip. Unfortunately 20/20 hindsight was not available to us.

Sleds loaded we set off as soon of to our base camp the descent to 7,500' was steep & we had to be careful of crevasses we crossed the level area at 7,500' & began to climb up the other side. This was back breaking work. Jago was in front & his skis kept burring in the soft snow our heavy sleds were to force every inch of the way not one pleasant inch of glide was experienced. By 10pm we were little over ½ way to our destination & despite our efforts it was very cold. We decided to set up camp for the night. I cooked whilst Jago built up a wall around the tent we eventually turned in for sleep at 2am.

The following day dawned without a cloud in the sky we were not that quick in setting off due to the late night previously. Whilst having breakfast we saw Seth & Coley skiing across to us we let them pass by. They presented quite a contrast to our set up. As they were at the end of their trip time wise they knew they would only have one attempt on 11,520' as Coley needed to get back to Washington state a couple of days later. They therefore only had 1 sled, food for the route & for an extra day, climbing gear, a bibbler & bags.

We had decided that hauling both sleds at the same time was too hard considering the amount of food we had. We therefore made 2 trips both pulling a sled in tandem. We established our base camp just below Seth & Coley's turning in for sleep at 11.45pm on Sat 7<sup>th</sup> May. We were therefore finally at our base camp. However, if conditions had been good we could have been dropped here the previous Tuesday lunchtime! This is the game we play.



A view from our base camp 11,520' is in the foreground, Hunter is covered with the interesting cloud formation.

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> May dawned clear again there was no activity from the American camp as expected they had set out on the route the previous night! They had held all the cards in this race, experienced in Alaska, acclimatised, already looked at the route in the flesh rather than just on pictures. We reccyed the options Seth & Coley were on our original Line B (which having pored over the photos at home had become our favoured option). Line A was much thinner than our photos & would not go, as it would leave us under a serac for far too long. A final line C was also threatened by seracs. Our only option was to attempt a second ascent of what is now Seath & Coley's route as by teatime they were on the slopes below the summit ridge.

#### **2.4 Monday 9<sup>th</sup> May – Seth & Coley's Triumph**

The wispy clouds of the previous night had been replaced by heavy clag after a breakfast brew it started to snow so we retreated to the tent. Just before lunch Seth & Coley came past. The ascent had taken them 16 hours to climb 17 pitches of mainly steep ice to a summit ridge of similar conditions; descent was by snow picket abseil from summit ridge, then multiple abolkov thread abseils. We gave them our congratulations they were in the right place at the right time we had no complaints we wished each other luck & they continue back to Huntington Base as Coley needs to fly out today. The weather improves in the mid afternoon & late in the day a plane comes in to take them home.



Red line shows the line of Seth & Coley climb. Black star shows our high point, the black line is a line we considered in UK as our pictures had more snow on them. The other line we considered was further to the left.

## 2.5 Attempted 2<sup>nd</sup> ascent Tue 10<sup>th</sup> to Wed 11<sup>th</sup>

The morning of Tue 10<sup>th</sup> is much better weather wise we spend the day planning our ascent we go as light as possible our rack is 8 ice screws, 1 & ½ set of wires, 3 hexes, 4 pegs, 8 normal quickdraws, 4 screamers. 2 snow pickets & slings. A MSR stove, pan, some noodles & a cup a soup each. We each take a lightweight bivi bag each for safety.

We left camp at 6pm & skied with sleds as close to the bergschrund as possible, on the way up my stomach did not feel good this is a harbinger of things to come. We geared up & hydrate ourselves as much as possible before starting. At 8pm Jago lead the first pitch over the Bergschrund at approx 9,000' to belay on Seth & Coley's last Abolokov. By the time I joined him my stomach was worse the next pitch is Scottish Grade V ice climbing I belay on pegs however I need to hang in my harness which caused excruciating stomach cramps. We continue up until approx 9,600' by which time I am feel much worse Jago decided we should go down at 12.30 I was grateful to him for making the decision I am was happy but as I crouched retching on at the stance it is obviously the right decision. We made multiple Abolokov abseil retreat & we were in bed by 5am.

I spend most of Wednesday in bed asleep only waking when Jago made a brew I only ate one bowl of granola all day. Even now I do not know what caused this illness. The previous day my dehydrated meal had had pockets, which had not been fully hydrated. All I know for certain is I felt increasingly awful on the route & abseiling whilst retching from pain of hanging in my harness is an experience I would rather not repeat in a hurry.





Jago leads over the Bergschrund.

## 2.6 The Waiting Game Thur 12<sup>th</sup> May to Tue 17<sup>th</sup> May

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> May I felt much better by the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> however my health is inverse proportions to the weather it started snowing during the night & continued until 3pm. We ventured out of the tent late in the day & ski back up to the base of the route to inspect it & put ski tracks in. By the time we go to sleep at 11.45 pm it is snowing again hard we each had to wake up at least twice during the night to clear the snow of the tent. Luckily this was achievable by banging from the inside

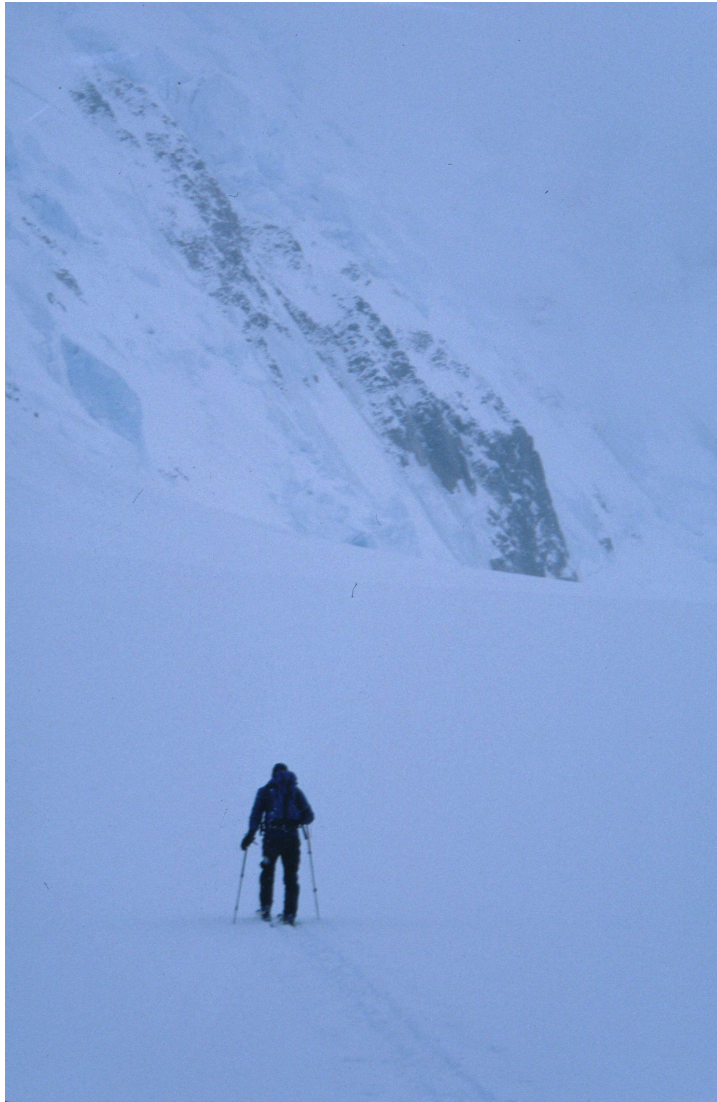
Friday 13<sup>th</sup> May Finally stopped snowing at about 1pm. We emerged from the tent only to be forced back inside 1 hour later by more snow until 4pm. Ski up to route again for something to do

Sat 14<sup>th</sup> May Snowed again all night & all day until 5pm the day was spent reading playing cribbage. By this time we have realised even if the weather picks up as we have arranged our pick up for May 19<sup>th</sup> we would be unlikely to get more than one route done. It was snowing again well before bed time

Sun 15<sup>th</sup> May The worst day of the trip it snowed all night & all day, we only left tent to use CMC barrel & get food from stash.

Mon 16<sup>th</sup> May Finally stopped snowing a about 8am finally got out of tent about 10am. The day was spent alternating between sunshine & cloud or fog. We herd planes for the first time in days & put on the VHF when Paul from TAT landed in a Cessna & then takes of again Dave from TAT then landed a Beaver but is unable to take off because of fog this is despite reassurances from Paul, who was circling above appearing to touch the mountains, that the fog is only at ground level. We also saw a flight of small white & black birds that landed close to our camp. This was the only wildlife we saw during the trip however, when we returned to camp after our climbing or skiing there was often tracks of large birds, probably ravens, around camp. For this reason it is good practice to burry all food when out of camp.

We skied up to look at the route everything is vastly changed from before the storm however our route still looked as if it will go. We decided to leave it 24 hours for conditions to settle before a final attempt



Skiing up to look at the route.

## **2.7 The Final Attempt & return to Huntington Base Camp Tue 17<sup>th</sup> May**

We woke to a fine but cloudy day but by 11.30am it was snowing again but this time only lightly . We decided to have some food & leave for a final attempt perhaps the snow would not amount to much! By he time we left it was snowing heavily. Once we were under the route it was obvious no climbing will be possible snow was cascading down the route especially above our high point.

We returned to our camp low we had realised that our time was up! It was Tuesday & our pick up was on Thursday even if the good weather immediately returned we need 24 hours before it would be safe to go back on the route. This would not leave enough time to climb & get back to Huntington Base Camp in time for our pick up.

We therefore decided to pack up our tent & return to Huntington Base Camp we left at 5pm in foul conditions the fist part of the ski back to 7,500' is not to bad. The last part up the steep climb is back brakingly hard even though our food is now depleted. We were lackey there was a decent set of tracks put ln by climbers at Huntington Base Camp. We arrived there at 11pm.

Marcus from Mark Westman's team provided us with tea (they along with Jack Tackle have transferred from The Ruth) however, despite the fact there are 6 teams in camp nobody has got any significant climbing done. This makes us feel a little better.

By 2.30am we have eaten, the snow has stopped and we go to sleep on what is our coldest night so far.



Return to Huntington Base

### **2.8 Return to Talkeetna Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> May**

We had learnt the previous night that a plane was due the following morning. As we now did not have enough time left we got up at 7am & by 9am we were ready to fly out it was a perfect day. Dave from TAT arrived in a Cessna (this plane is relatively youthful having been built in the 70's) at 9.30am there was not enough room on the plane for us. Dave tells he will return weather permitting. We spent the morning talking to Jack Tackle, Mark Westman & friends. This camp is cold the sun only hits at 12 noon & goes at 5pm. Dave arrived before 1pm & we fly back to Talkeetna before 2pm ready for showers food & checking in at the Ranger Station.

### **3. Conclusions**

Ultimately our expedition was entirely unsuccessful in its main aim of a first ascent of 11,520. This was due to the following reasons

- 1) Beaten to first ascent by American pair as described earlier in the report

- 2) Second ascent failed due to illness.
- 3) No further attempts were possible due to bad weather.

I have already detailed at some length how the Americans got ahead of us & I do not propose to say much more on the subject. We still feel we had no opportunity to have got ahead of them

Our attempted second ascent failed due to my illness, which was very unfortunate however; despite my beating myself up over it in the intervening months there was no option but to retreat on the day in question.

The weather was the biggest factor in the failure of the trip. If conditions are good a 3 week trip from UK to UK is sufficient (in-fact Malcolm Bass was able to do two new routes in 2003 in a 15 day trip). If however, the weather is poor then you can have little climbing on a longer trip (as Malcolm also experienced on his 2002 trip). We did experience poor weather, which was basically keeping us Alaskan climbing 'old hands' pinned down equally.

The final question is therefore what would we do differently on subsequent trips.

- 1) Tenting arrangements: In the future we would take a bibbler style tent to sleep in & a cook shelter and base ourselves close to the landing strip. If we were tackling an objective away from the landing strip we would take the bibbler & a couple of days food & make the approach much lighter.
- 2) We were hit hard by the 4-day wait in Talkeetna. What we learnt by actually being in Alaska is how close the various areas are in the Central Range it is very possible to land at 2 or more strips on a single trip. Therefore having more diverse objectives may give more opportunity.
- 3) In future we would explore the option of having an objective close to a landing strip. On this trip the best weather was as we moved our kit across the Tok. In-fact there was only other day fit to climb on (the day of our failed attempt)

Overall we enjoyed the expedition greatly & feel we have gained a great deal of experience for other expeditions we are planning. We were pretty single minded In not changing our plans despite delays o the outward journey we put ourselves under the route & stayed there as long as possible to attempt the route. However, the weather & my illness were to scupper those plans.

## 4. Sponsors

The expedition would not have been possible without funding & sponsorship of the following organisation, whose assistance is greatly appreciated

**Mount Everest Fund (MEF)**  
**British Mountaineering Council (BMC).**

We are also grateful for help & support given to us by my local club Swaledale Outdoor Club (SOC)

## 5. Useful contacts

Air Taxi: Paul Roderick at Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT) e-mail: [info@talkeetnaair.com](mailto:info@talkeetnaair.com) web: [www.talkeetnaair.com](http://www.talkeetnaair.com)

Transportation in Alaska: Tom Waite at Denarli Overland e-mail: [denaliak@alaska.net](mailto:denaliak@alaska.net) web: [www.denalioverland.com](http://www.denalioverland.com)

Climbing kit freeze dried food etc: REI Anchorage, 1200 W. Northern Lights Blvd. Anchorage AK 99503 web: [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)

Food: Carr's supermarket, 1650 W. Northern Lights Blvd. Anchorage, AK 99517  
Natural Pantry 3801 Old Seward Highway, Anchorage, AK 99517

## 6. Bibliography

Alaska a climbing guide, Michael Wood & Colby Coombs The Mountain Press 2001 ISBN 0-89886-724-X This book gives route descriptions of some but not all of the classic routes in Alaska

High Alaska Jonathan Waterman photos by Brad Washburn The AAC Press 1988 ISBN 0-930410-41-6 this book is an historical guide to Denali Foraker & Hunter only but is essential reading

On The Edge article Issue 130: Kings of Kahiltna Queen by Malcolm Bass.

Climbing article Dec 1998: The Ruthless Gorge by Gregory Crouch

Ascent article from 1983 also in The Edge an anthology of climbing adventures: Aurora by Jon Waterman

Surviving Denarli a study of accidents on Mount McKinley 1903-1990 Jonathan Waterman second edition revised. The AAC Press 1991 ISBN 0-930410-48-3

Map: Mount McKinley 1:5000 by Brad Washburn published by Swiss Foundation for Alpine research & University of Alaska Press

American Alpine Journals available at The Alan Rouse Library in Sheffield Central Library



**Residents of Huntington Base the day we flew out including Jack Tackle & Mark Westman**

## Yorkshire Tokositna Glacier Expedition 2005

### All Totals in UK. £

Item of expenditure	Total Cost
International Return Flight - London Heathrow to Anchorage International (Via Seattle Tacoma International)	£1,272.60
BMC Insurance (Worldwide Expedition Cover from 1/5/05 for 24 days)	£540.00
Talkeetna Air Taxi	£516.05
Food & Kit for use in the field etc.	£447.18
Transfer from Anchorage, Accomodation in Anchorage, Meals etc.	£358.46
<b>Total</b>	£3,134.29
Item of Income	Total Cost
MEF Expedition Grant	£525.00
BMC Expedition Grant	£1,000.00
Paid by Jago Trasler	£804.64
Paid by Andrew Saxby	£804.65
<b>Total</b>	£3,134.29