

# **British Mt Dickey Expedition 2006**

**(or A Tale of Climate Change and Lost Ice Screws)**



Supported by:

Mount Everest Foundation

British Mountaineering Council

UK Sports Council

## **AIMS OF THE EXPEDITION**

We intended to make the following ascents:

1. First ascent of South Face Icefall on Mt Dickey
2. First ascent of the Laser Line on Mt Dickey

## **THE TEAM**

**Paul Ramsden** (36), British, Health and Safety Advisor.

**Andrew Kirkpatrick** (33), British, Journalist.

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## **PREPARATION**

This is a very straightforward area to climb in. The area is a National Park and there is a small fee payable to the National Park Service. This is an entry fee as no climbing permit is required.

There is no need to take any food or fuel from the UK as all can be bought in Anchorage or Wasilla. The fuel of choice is White Gas, which is available through whatever ski flight service you use.

This expedition was set in motion by an expedition to the same area in the preceding autumn. While that expedition was ultimately unsuccessful we did however spot climbing lines that may be possible during the colder spring season. I therefore schemed to return just four months later.

## TRAVEL TO BASE CAMP

The flight from Gatwick to Anchorage was straight forward with a short stop in Minnesota. Arriving in Anchorage late we stayed at one of the many motels near the airport. In the morning we had a pre arranged pick up with Denali Overland who run a shuttle bus up too Talkeetna.

We stopped in Wasilla at Carr's supermarket to do all our expedition food shopping. Everything you might want and more is available.

We arrived in Talkeetna in the afternoon, delivered direct to the TAT office. They have a bunk house her where you can stay for free before your flight into the mountains.

That afternoon we checked in at the Ranger Station to pick up our permit. When they realise you are half competent this is pretty low key.

To our surprise on arrival in Talkeetna we met a Japanese pair with the same objective as us! They had been waiting for one week to fly in.

Fortunately the next day dawned fine and we were able to fly in straight after the Japanese.

On the flight in Paul Roderick explained that it had been the coldest winter for 20 years. This was quite ironic in that our visit the previous autumn had been thwarted by the warmest summer on record in the Denali National Park.

Due to the huge snowfall that winter Paul was able to land directly beneath the East Face of Dickey though the deep unconsolidated snow made establishing a descent base camp quite time consuming. We camped near the Japanese who due to their earlier arrival had first pick of objective.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE EXPEDITION?**

After Landing on the Ruth Gorge on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2006 we established base camp and began a reconnaissance of the available objectives.

Our primary objective had been a steep icefall on the South Face of Dickey that I had spotted the previous autumn. It had been in condition then but the weather was too warm to allow for a safe ascent. We skied out under the south face and found that unfortunately this route was completely missing. This was a huge disappointment; presumably the unusually cold conditions had caused the route to sublime rather than it melting out. We however did spot a possible line on the East Face that had been attempted by Andy Nesbitt many years ago.

After a day sorting gear we set off at dawn. Unfortunately the bergschrund proved very problematic, requiring hard aid climbing up the overhanging granite on the right hand wall. Short of time we fixed some ropes and decided to try again the following day.

After jummaring the ropes we climbed six excellent pitches until we reached a vertical neve pitch. After leading 100ft of plumb vertical neve I realised I had been climbing a thin crust, which petered out in an unconsolidated snow overhang. In the end I was forced to down climb without protection. This was probably my most frightening experience in the mountains!

Unfortunately this theme continued for the rest of the expedition. The extremely cold conditions had led to the formation of loose and powdery snow mushrooms hanging in the most unlikely positions. These usually proved to be unclimbable.

Back at base camp we reasoned that a sunnier south perspective might have better consolidated snow conditions. We then scouted and attempted the south face of Mt Bradley. In the end we were barely established before poor snow conditions, bad rock and rock fall hazards forced us to retreat.

After a sort period of bad weather we decided to make an attempt on Snow Patrol an appealing looking route on the southeast buttress of Dickey. Again the bergschrund was very hard with difficult mixed climbing so we fixed some ropes and tried again the following day. After a few excellent pitches I found myself in a fairly tight chimney. At some point the gear loop on my harness ripped off causing us to lose half our ice screws never to be seen again.

The climbing above didn't look too bad so after a bit of debate we decided to push on. Unfortunately higher up we were stopped by another unclimbable snow mushroom forcing us to retreat.

Once again back at base camp and now short on ice screws we decide that we should attempt something a bit less technical and hopefully a less steep route would have fewer snow mushrooms.

One route I had always fancied was Ha and Eggs on the South Face of the Mooses Tooth. These days it is climbed by landing an aircraft on the Route Canal a hanging glacier halfway up the south face. We didn't have this luxury so decided to approach by a route I had failed on back in the autumn. The going was good with one hard technical pitch leading to the upper glacier. However be warned that this approach is very vulnerable to avalanches as the debris all around would testify too.

We bivied under the route and experienced temperatures of  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Deep snow and an unexpected very hard technical pitch got us into the gully but soon we were faced with overhanging powder mushrooms and progress ground to a halt.

Once back in the gorge we decided that the conditions were not conducive too safe climbing so decided to head off home.

Paul flew us out a few days later along with the Japanese who similarly had failed on all routes attempted.



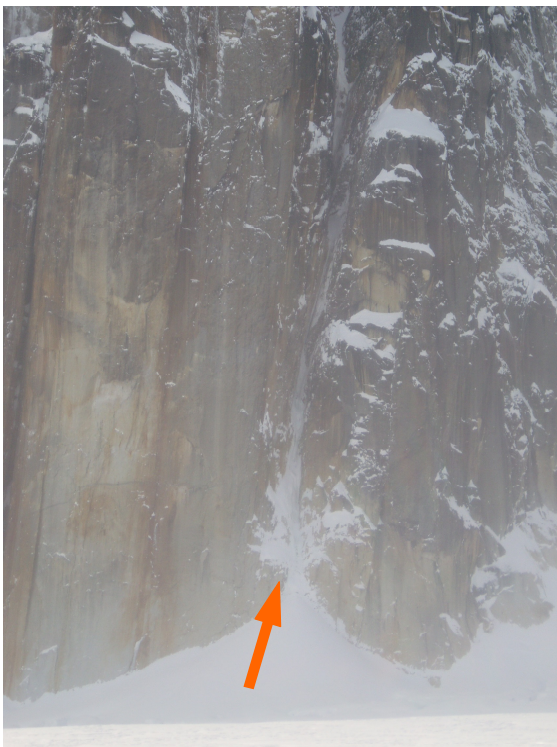
South Face of Bradley. Rock fall and poor snow conditions stopped progress



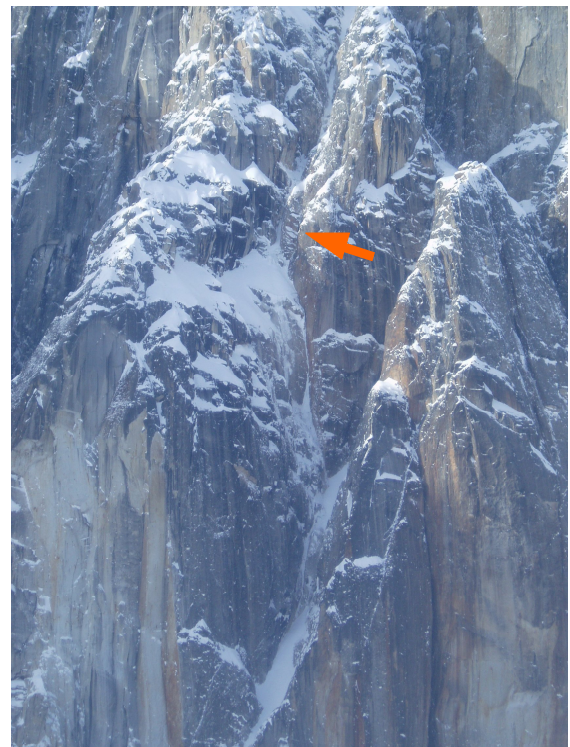
South Face of the Mooses Tooth. High point reached on Ham and Eggs



The South Face of Dickey. Our proposed line was now devoid of ice.



New line attempted on the East Face of Dickey



High point reached on Snow Patrol on the South East Buttress of Dickey

## **COMMENTS ON RECENT TRIPS TO ALASKA.**

Last autumn we arrived in Alaska after the hottest and driest summer on record. The mountains had been stripped bare of ice then covered in unconsolidated powder snow making progress impossible. Over the last few years the weather has been getting warmer and drier in all season.

We arrived this March in the middle of the coldest winter for 20 years. There had been huge snowfall thought the winter, which is quite unusual these last few years. In addition the winter carried on right through March again an unusual event recently. We experienced temperatures of **-35°C with an average around -20°C.**

**I am sure this all adds up to evidence of global climate change but I am not so sure about global warming!**



## ACCOUNTS

<b><i>Expenditure</i></b>	<b>£</b>
Flight to Anchorage	1400
Anchorage to Talkeetna	300
Ski plane flights	425
Insurance	260
Permits	40
Fuel/Food	450
Accommodation	150
Miscellaneous Items	250
Total	3400

<b><i>Income</i></b>	<b>£</b>
British Mountaineering Council/UK Sports Council	750
Mount Everest Foundation	550
Personal Contributions	2100
<b>Total</b>	<b>3400</b>

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This expedition would like to thank:

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The Denali National Park Ranger Service for their help and assistance in organising this expedition.