

British Lowell Glacier Expedition 2007



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The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for purposes of private research.

Cover: Simon Richardson clears snow from the tent during a rare clearing in the weather. The south face of Lowell Peak lies behind the tent.

1. Introduction

Our objective was to make the first ascents of the South Face of Pinnacle Peak (3714m) and the South Pillar of Lowell Peak (3630m).

The majority of expeditions to the St Elias range have focused on classic mountaineering lines on the higher peaks, but these two mountains offer several possibilities for high standard alpine mixed routes. The best ice climbing conditions in the St Elias typically occur on the south faces where winter spindrift runs down the gully lines and then consolidates during warmer temperatures in May.

Pinnacle Peak has seen five ascents from the north, but is unclimbed from the south. The South Face is 1200m high and has two prominent lines – a gully on the left side of the face, and another cutting up the RHS to join the steep headwall of the South ridge. We planned to choose the appropriate line depending on the conditions. Lowell Peak lies to the west of Pinnacle Peak and has been climbed only once, from the north. The south side has several potential new routes including the long South Ridge, but our objective was the attractive 1000m South Buttress, which is cut by a series of steep gullies on the crest and leads directly to the summit.

We flew onto the Lowell Glacier from Kluane Lake at the beginning of May, and made a camp on the Lowell Glacier at c.2000m where we could easily access both mountains. Unusually high levels of winter and spring snowfall meant that all aspects of all peaks were seriously avalanche prone. An attempt on the South Face of Lowell Peak failed when the slope beneath us slid whilst we were approaching the bergschrund.

In the event, we made the first ascent of the West Ridge of Lowell Peak. This was the first time the mountain had been climbed from the south, and the second overall ascent of the mountain. We did not attempt Pinnacle Peak.

2. The Team

Simon Richardson 46 yrs, British, Petroleum Engineer

Scotland: Approx 500 new routes up to Grade VIII and E4.

Alps: Approx 100 routes (25 ED1 or harder). Highlights include Walker and Croz Spurs, Colton-MacIntyre, East Face Grandes Jorasses, Freney and Brouillard Pillars etc. Several first ascents including South Pillar Freney Direct and SW Pillar Aig Sans Nom.

Expeditions to India, Nepal, Karakoram, Alaska, Patagonia, Peru and Canadian Coast Range. Highlights include first ascents of Agyasol and Chomochior (Kishtwar Himalaya), first alpine style ascent S Ridge Hunter (Alaska), Salathe Wall (Yosemite), Taulliraju (Peru) and first ascents of SE Ridge Asperity, S Pillar Tiedemann, W.Pillar Gilbert (Canadian Coast Range).

David Hesleden 39 yrs, British, Difficult Access Consultant.

Scottish Winter: has climbed existing and new route up to VIII. New routes include Extasy (VIII,8) Creag Meagaidh, Foobarbundee (VIII,7) Liathach, Il Duce (VII,7), Fuar Tholl, Genesis (VII,7) Beinn Bhan.

Alps: Climbed extensively though out Alps both summer and winter including: Dru Couloir Direct, Colton-MacIntyre Grandes Jorasses, Croz Spur Grandes Jorasses (Winter), Hyper Couloir du Brouillard (Winter), Ratikon - Hanibals Alptraum E6, Wenden - Caminando E5.

Expeditions to Karakoram, Alaska, Patagonia, Canadian Coast Range

3. Gurus , Climbing Literature and Maps

There is no substitute for local knowledge in the mountains. We discussed our plans with Andy Cave and Jon Bracey who have climbed in the St Elias Range before. We also contacted Paul Knott, one of the most frequented British visitors to the range.

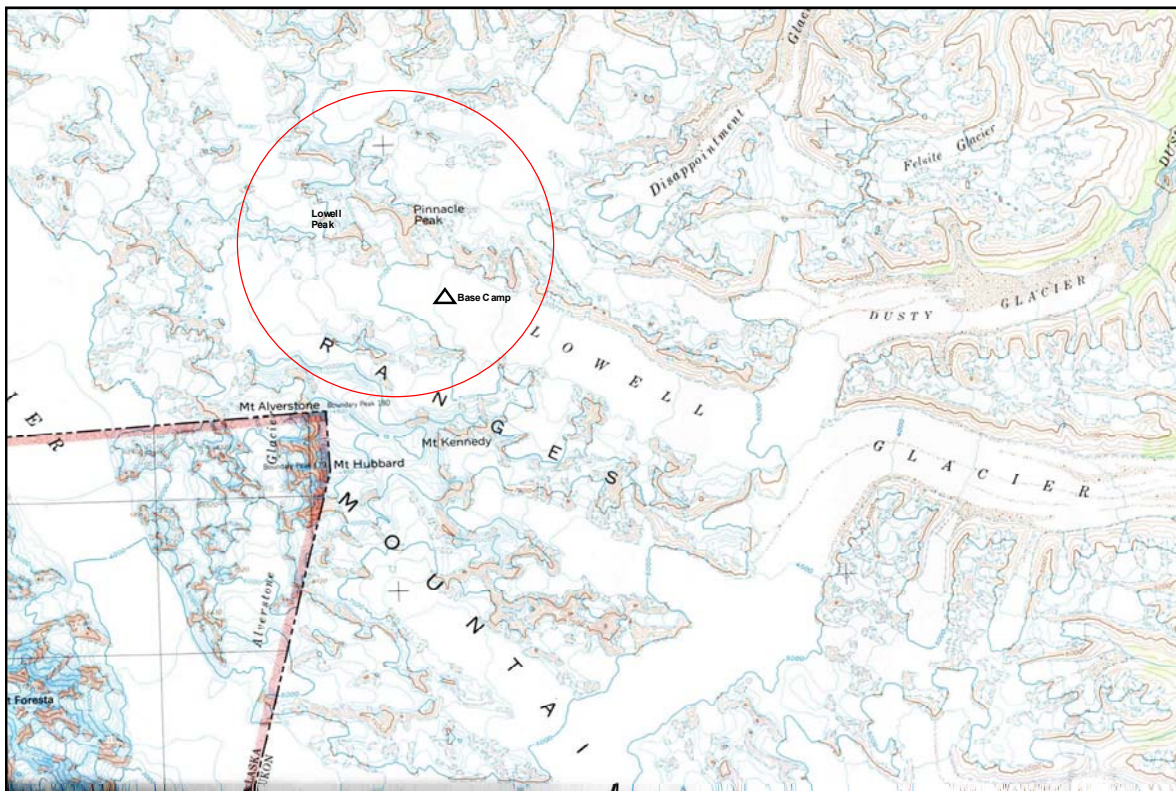
In 2005, a guidebook to the St Elias Range was written by Richard Holmes and published privately by Icy Bay Press. The book is obtainable on www.amazon.com. It is an unusual guidebook, in that approximately half the routes described have not yet been climbed, and the author describes hypothetical ascents. This would appear to be a new router's dream, but close examination of the mountain photos in the guide (and those on a supplemental CD), show that many of the author's proposed routes carry high potential danger. St Elias Range aficionados (Joe Josephson, Ade Miller etc) have heavily criticised the book for its poor accuracy, but despite it's many flaws, it does provide references to first ascent accounts in the journals, and presents a strong photographic record take from aerial flights in summer.

Fortunately the majority of visits and ascents have been documented in the Canadian Alpine and American Alpine Journals, and these remain the primary reference source. The Canadian mountaineering resource on www.bivouac.com also contains a listing of many of the peaks in the St Elias Range, although it does not mention Lowell Peak.

The most accurate listing of the peaks in the range appears to be that published by Roger Wallis in the 1992 CAJ pp 8-9. On this listing, Lowell Peak is shown as 'North Lowell Peak'.

We used the US Geological Survey 1:250000 map 'Mt St Elias' whilst researching the trip. This gives a good overview of the area. On the glacier we used the 1:50,000 topographical maps 115 B/7 and 115 B/6 that were obtained from Mac's Fireweed Books in Whitehorse. We found that Lowell Peak was higher than 3499m stated in the Holmes guide and was in fact closer to 3630m as per the Wallis listing. The higher altitude of 3630m matched our altimeter readings.

British Lowell Glacier Expedition – St Elias Range 10km



4. Getting There

Travelling to the Yukon proved to be very straightforward with an Air Canada flight from London Heathrow to Vancouver on 27th April. A well-timed connection then took us to Whitehorse. The flights were on time, and we even made an earlier connection to Whitehorse, and all our bags arrived safely.

It was cold in Whitehorse, and we were surprised at the amount of lying snow. We spent the day buying food and fuel, and confirming our transport from Whitehorse to Kluane Lake where we'd meet our pilot, Andy Williams. The day was fraught with tension because Andy had warned us that the late spring had meant that the gravel landing strip at Kluane might be unserviceable during the spring thaw. It was impossible to contact Andy, because his telephone was out of order, so we would just have to travel up to Kluane and find out for ourselves.

At 7am next morning, Woody from Royal Limo arrived in his ancient black limousine to take us on the three-hour ride up to Kluane Lake. The vehicle took our gear and stores, and despite the apparent extravagance, this is the cheapest way of transferring between Whitehorse and Kluane, and has been used by many previous expeditions.

After two and half hours we arrived at Haines Junction and the gateway to Kluane National Park. We are met by friendly ranger Andrew Lawrence with the good news that Andy started flying from the airstrip the day before. We registered, paid our peak fee, and watch the compulsory climbing safety video, before heading off the Kluane Lake and the Silver City airstrip. It was cold and windy, and Kluane Lake, the largest freshwater lake in the Yukon, was frozen with thick ice. We met Andy, examined his 40-year old Helio Courier STOL aircraft, and then moved our personal gear into the Kluane Lake B+B close by.

Next morning, we attempted to fly in with Andy, but 30 minutes into the flight, he turned around and headed back. "We should be able to see Pinnacle Peak from here", he said, "but it's obscured by cloud, so no-go." Although we were the first climbers in the queue, the weather was unsettled; it looked like we were in for a long wait. Other teams have waited up to three weeks to fly in the past, and we wonder how long our patience would last.

We're lucky though, for next morning (1st May), Donjek Upton (Andy's other pilot) flew us into the Lowell Glacier in a break in the weather. The south side of Pinnacle Peak appeared a lot snowier than our photos, but there were lines and they looked climbable. More ominously, Lowell Peak had a huge cornice that stretched eastwards from the summit ridge.

Donjek made a textbook landing exactly on the spot I indicated between Pinnacle and Lowell peaks. It was incredibly beautiful and we were awed by the surroundings. We unloaded the plane, and then Donjek took off. He had to udege up and down on his seat to give the plane enough momentum for the skis to start sliding in the deep snow. The plane disappeared in a cloud of ice particles and we were soon alone with a pile of bags and four boxes of food.

5. The Climbing

We were hoping to climb new routes on the south faces of Lowell and Pinnacle Peak. In the event, we found that the mountains had encountered unusually high levels of snowfall during the winter and spring - this was the case throughout the west side of Canada this year. As a result there was extreme avalanche danger everywhere. Slopes on all aspects were sloughing off huge windslab avalanches. We even saw a slab avalanche originate from a point on a ridge and slide off both sides - something neither of us had ever seen before. The situation wasn't helped by a big storm the day after we arrived on the glacier, followed by a day of strong winds blowing from the west, and then a second day blowing from the east. A perfect set up to load every slope around! All this was very frustrating because our proposed routes on Lowell and Pinnacle both looked good, logical and very feasible lines.

After about a week of skiing around and checking things out (during which we climbed P.2800m to the south-west of Lowell Peak via it's East Ridge) we decided to climb a series of runnels on the South Face of Lowell that would enable us to get good rock belays, and not expose us to climbing long unprotected snow slopes. In the event, we failed to even reach the bergschrund when the whole approach slope slid about two feet with us on it and then stopped. We turned tail and fled!

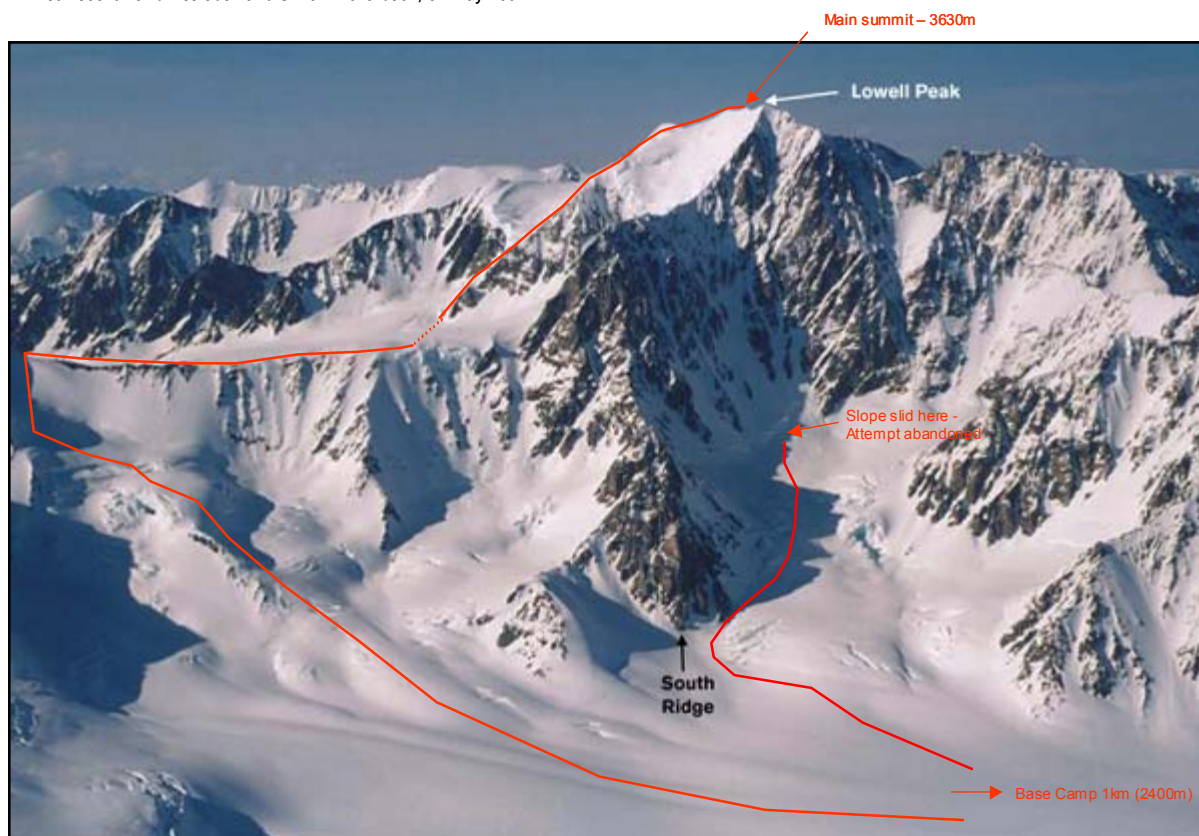
By chance, a long ski tour the next day gave us a view of the West Ridge of Lowell, which is more of a pronounced rib. More to the point it looked a safe line, and facing into the prevailing wind, there was less chance of windslab. We climbed it next day (8th May) in a 12 hour round trip from base camp. Overall there was 1400m of ascent, initially on skis, then along a horizontal ridge carrying skis, then skiing across a snow bowl, and then climbing the rib itself. The climbing was straightforward but hard work - initially waist deep snow at 45 deg, then Scottish III on loose snow over rotten ice to the easier summit slopes. The weather then deteriorated and we continued upwards in a whiteout. This was a real concern, because we'd seen on the flight in that the summit of Lowell was capped by a huge cornice. You could see it from several miles away from the plane - it's easy to exaggerate these things - but it must have stuck out horizontally at least 15m. With the full rope out we belayed each other one by one from downslope to the highest point. We descended on Abalakovs and by the time we'd skied across the bowl the weather was beginning to clear. To add to the frustration I lost my film of the climb, but we got down that evening feeling relieved to have climbed something.

We decided that there was nothing else we could safely climb, so we decided to fly out next day. It was really frustrating because there was an attractive peak (P.3400m and unclimbed, we think) that we could have skied up just west of Lowell, but the summit slopes just looked too avalanche prone. Contacting Andy Williams was stressful in itself as our two satellite phone batteries were faulty and only had three minutes total life in them each (and we'd used one!). Furthermore, since Andy's phone wasn't working when we flew in, and we weren't sure whether it was just ringing and not working, or that he wasn't picking up the phone. To cut a long story short, he did manage to get us out next morning, but we were lucky as the Lowell Glacier was the only part of the range not fogged in. The flight itself was touch and go, and with a strong tail wind running down the glacier we only managed to get airborne by a whisker. When we got back to Kluane Lake, there was a queue of 40 climbers waiting to be flown in. It turned out we were the only climbers to have

successfully been flown into their peak from Kluane, so the fact we got out again was remarkable. The only other climbers in the range we knew about was a Swedish team who'd skied into Logan starting in March, and Jack Tackle and party who had flown into Logan from the US side, but his pilot had subsequently crashed his plane, so he was going to have to fly out with Andy via the Canadian side.

West Ridge Lowell Peak (3630m), St Elias Range

First Ascent David Hesleden and Simon Richardson, 8th May 2007



The weather was poor (cold, snowy and windy) the whole trip, except for one day, and the times we flew in and out. This was the least of our problems though - it was the dangerous snow conditions that were the limiting factor. Clearly, we completely failed in our objective of doing some technical climbing on the south faces of Lowell and Pinnacle Peak. We'd expected ice to form with the freeze thaw, but this did not happen. There was no ice formation at all. The sun just turned the powder into granulated corn snow that just sloughed off whenever we touched it with an axe. There was rotten ice buried deep down on the west ridge of Lowell, and you could see the occasional black streak of hard ice on the north faces, but mostly they were just obliterated by tons of powder.

So, all in all, it was quite an adventure. The concept behind the trip was to do something technically hard but safe, and we ended up doing the complete opposite. But we had a good experience overall, came back stronger friends and spent time amongst some of the most beautiful mountains we'd ever seen.

6. Diary of Events

| | |
|------------|--|
| Fri 27 Apr | Fly to Whitehorse via LHR and VAN |
| Sat 28 Apr | Food shopping in Whitehorse |
| Sun 29 Apr | Travel to Kluane Lake |
| Mon 30 Apr | Attempt to fly in to Lowell Glacier. |
| Tue 1 May | Fly in to Lowell Glacier. Recce S Face Lowell Peak. |
| Wed 2 May | Poor weather. Stay in tent. |
| Thu 3 May | Climb P.2800m |
| Fri 4 May | Bad weather. Tent-bound. |
| Sat 5 May | Recce South Face Pinnacle Peak |
| Sun 6 May | Attempt on South Face Lowell Peak. Unable to reach bergschrund due to unstable slopes. |
| Mon 7 May | Recce West Ridge Lowell Peak |
| Tue 8 May | Climb West Ridge Lowell Peak |
| Wed 9 May | Fly out to Kluane Lake. Travel to Whitehorse |
| Thu 10 May | Fly Whitehorse, VAN – LHR |
| Fri 11 May | Arrive LHR. Travel home to Sheffield and Aberdeen |

7. Other Climbing and New Route Possibilities

Most climbing teams flying into the Lowell Glacier (also referred to as the Dusty Glacier on some maps), land 20km to the east of our camp with the intention of climbing a route on north side of Mount Kennedy. Few climbing parties appear to have ventured further west up the glacier. The notable exception was Fred Beckey, Hank Mather, John Rupley and George Lowe who made the second ascent of Mount Alverstone via the North-East Face in July 1966 (CAJ 1967 pp 57-58).

Lowell Peak (3630m) was first climbed by Canadians Larry Stainier and Rodden McGowan on 7th May 1993 by the east face and north ridge (AAJ 1994 pp 154-155). This was the only ascent of the mountain prior to ours. Like most of the parties climbing in this general area, the pair was based on the South Arm of the Kaskawulsh Glacier to the north of Pinnacle Peak. The South Pillar of Lowell Peak, one of our original objectives, remains a fine climbing target. There are numerous lines up the steep buttress rising up to the summit or the runnels to its left. Our route of ascent would make the easiest descent, although would involve extensive wading through snow. P. 3400m to the west of Lowell Peak looked a fine objective, although dangerous-looking snow conditions on its East Ridge precluded any thought of an attempt. We could find no record of an ascent.

Pinnacle Peak (3714m) has seen several ascents from the Kaskawulsh Glacier side. The West Ridge is the most popular route with at least three ascents to date, and the North and East ridges and North-East Face have also been climbed. Pinnacle Peak has not been climbed from the south, and the South Face (our second original objective) looks a fine mountaineering challenge. The best line of ascent is up the tapering gully line on the right side of the face. This steepness to a left-trending steep fault-line on the summit tower that leads to easier summit slopes. In the heavy snow conditions we encountered, any attempt on this line would have been suicidal.

There are no records of ascents P. 2800m, but due to the simplicity of its ascent, it is likely that it has been climbed before by ski touring parties in the area.

8. Expedition Accounts

The expedition made a small surplus, and was able to return small amounts to the MEF and BMC. The calculation was based on £1000 contributions from the expedition members, with the surplus being divided in proportion to the grants given by the BMC and MEF as follows:

Expenditure

| | | |
|--|---|-------|
| Travel to Canada | £ | 1,918 |
| Insurance | £ | 166 |
| Travel and accommodation within Canada | £ | 1,220 |
| Food and stores | £ | 217 |
| Satellite Phone and Maps | £ | 174 |
| Total | £ | 3,695 |

Income

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|-------|
| MEF | £ | 1,150 |
| BMC | £ | 800 |
| Individual Contributions | £ | 2,000 |
| Total | £ | 3,950 |

Surplus

| | | |
|------------|---|--------|
| | £ | 255.35 |
| MEF Return | £ | 150.59 |
| BMC Return | £ | 104.76 |

The expedition gratefully acknowledges the generous grants made by the BMC and MEF.

9. Acknowledgements

The expedition would like to pay special thanks to the following whose help and support was gratefully received.

The Mount Everest Foundation

British Mountaineering Council

UK Sports Council

Chris Cartwright

Andy Cave

Paul Knott

Outdoor Designs Ltd