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**BRITISH
Mt St ELIAS
EXPEDITION
1988**

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Supported by:
IMPERIAL COLLEGE EXPLORATION BOARD
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by Mark Dixon June 1989

An attempt to climb the Northwest Spur of Mount Saint Elias
in alpine style

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Frontspiece - NW Spur of Mt Saint Elias from the Columbus glacier
Photograph - Doug Smith

THE BRITISH MOUNT SAINT ELIAS EXPEDITION 1988

A personal account by Mark Dixon

The idea of an expedition to Mount Saint Elias was initially proposed in 1985 whilst all the members of the team were at Imperial College. The initial aim was to climb the northwest spur by using expedition tactics in the summer of 1986. However due to an inability to raise the funds required the expedition was postponed until 1988.

In the intervening period the team underwent a certain amount of metamorphosis due to job commitments, other expedition plans and an unfortunate rock climbing accident to Ian Johnston; the final team place was only finalised three weeks before we left for the Yukon. The result was a four man expedition consisting of Doug Smith, Jeremy Lay (Jay), Adrian Parsons and myself. We hoped to make the first ascent of the NW Spur of Mount Saint Elias in alpine style.

The total expedition budget was £4,800 and we were generously supported by the Imperial College Exploration Board, the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council. The balance was scraped together with the help of various flexible friends!

We departed from London Heathrow on June 22 and arrived at Edmonton International Airport later the same day. At once we were into the usual expedition routine, the freight we had dispatched a week earlier seemed to have disappeared en route to Edmonton. All the parties involved; British Airways (London and Toronto) and Air Canada (Toronto and Edmonton) denied any knowledge of its whereabouts and we began to suspect a conspiracy. We were not worried as the items involved were not particularly important - most of the tentage, all the bottled gas, all the ice axes and crampons and most of the remaining climbing hardware!

After making many irate phone calls we ascertained that Air Canada in Toronto had rejected the freight due to incomplete paperwork and returned it to British Airways (Toronto) where it had languished for five days. In order to proceed British Airways in London had to forward the appropriate paperwork, which we knew they had done in the first place. This was done efficiently, thanks to Simon Lamb, without whom we would probably still be in Edmonton waiting for the freight. It arrived belatedly a mere three days after us.

The next stage of the expedition involved driving from Edmonton to the Yukon - 1500 miles. To do this we hired a minibus, and headed for the Alaska Highway. We arrived two days later despite valiant efforts by Doug and Adrian to crash the van on several occasions. The following day provided our last chance to buy provisions before we left for the airfield at Kluane Lake. The result was a shopping bill for £300 in the Whitehorse hypermarket. After checking in at the National Park, we arrived at the airfield in the early evening, it was good to finally meet Andy Williams, our pilot, after two years of correspondence. We were now ready to leave as soon as the weather permitted. This was to become all too familiar a

proposition in the following weeks!

This time however we were lucky, the skies were clear and after an insect ridden evening the final stage of our journey beckoned. I realised a dream that been formed whilst I was at school was about to begin. The mixture of excitement and doubt that accompanies the beginning all climbing trips took hold as I watched the fixed wing aircraft bump down the rough airstrip. Jay and Adrian were in the first flight, a bit of cunning really, I thought it would mean one less carry to base from the Seward Glacier air drop, and my previous expedition experience had matured my attitude to hard work - avoid it if possible!

Andy arrived back two hours later, after refuelling and repacking we left, it was a sobering experience as the small plane hugged the mountainside in order to gain as much uplift as possible. Within a few minutes we could see the Saint Elias icefield, the largest outside of the polar regions, stretching away into the distance. The mountains loomed nearer, many of the unheard of in Britain - Vancouver, Queen Mary, King George V - but they are awesome in size, appearing like Himalayan giants. The south side of Mount Logan came into view, the infamous ridges of the Hummingbird and the Warbler being clearly visible. After an hour we could see Saint Elias, the features we had gleaned from the journals becoming apparent, only bigger and more majestic than we could have imagined. The NW Spur towered 8000ft from its base on the Columbus glacier, this was not going to be a holiday jaunt.

We landed on the Seward glacier in knee deep snow, Jay and Adrian had established a site for the base camp, about a mile from the landing site and they had carried the first load. A further three loads for all the expedition members established us at base, the carry had been hard work but the good weather was encouraging and buoyed up with this enthusiasm we planned our acclimatisation period and argued about the line to be taken on the lower section of the spur. Just after having a good meal it began to snow.....

The first day of snowfall wasn't too discouraging as we needed to dig in at base camp and get the Stormhaven tent up, but as the persistent heavy snowfall continued we realised that our progress would be somewhat slower than we had anticipated. The cloud was low and for most of the time we could see no further than 100 yards and the temperature was disconcertingly high. Standing at base camp was uncannily like standing on a tube platform at rush hour as avalanches thundered off our flank of the mountain every two to three minutes.

The bad weather lasted for three days, during which time we lazed about at base camp, the only excitement being the daily radio call back to the airfield in the evening. Even Tolstoy's Anna Karenina was becoming interesting!

On the evening of Friday 1 July the weather appeared to clear, so we planned a recce for the following day, Doug and Jay were to head round of the base of the mountain to establish the feasibility of the N ridge of the mountain as an escape route; whilst Adrian and myself would head for the base of the spur itself. The weather was clear and we set off at 6.00am

refreshed to actually be achieving something. The approach to the base of the spur passed over many gaping crevasses and after a couple of hours we came to a cul de sac hemmed in by yawning 50ft wide chasms, but we could see the spur more clearly now. It was obviously possible, but the "Brenva like" seracs at the top looked less than inviting, our initial problem however was establishing ourselves on the spur. All of the alternatives appeared to be exceptionally avalanche prone. We decided that the best approach would probably be up the lower lefthand gangway, but it was from here that the Austrians had been avalanched in 1981.

We were happy with our recce, given good weather we could at least have a good go at the mountain. We arrived back at base two hours before the others, they thought that the descent of the N ridge would be difficult though not impossible, but they had witnessed some spectacular avalanches on the North face of the mountain. As we sat and discussed the options the weather deteriorated again and we were hemmed in at base for another two days.

It was becoming obvious that the weather window we required for an alpine style attempt on the NW spur was unlikely to materialise, and we discussed the alternatives. This meant an expedition type approach to the climb, the NW spur appeared to be too precarious for this, so we turned our attention to the SW Buttress (or Boundary Commission) route. The plan was for Adrian and Doug to push out to a first camp on the summit of Windy Peak, with Jay and myself following with the first load a day later.

Adrian and Doug set off on Tuesday 5 July, but they were forced back by dreadful snow conditions, the SW buttress looked possible, but it would be long and arduous and the weather was deteriorating again, with further heavy snowfall. Morale was now falling almost as quickly as the snow, the bad weather seemed interminable, and the temperature was barely dipping below zero, even at night.

The bad weather continued for a further three days during which we discussed and re discussed our options. The result was to make an attempt at the NW spur in alpine style as soon as the bad weather broke. Jay decided that he could not accept the potential risk involved in this, and it was resolved to continue as a party of three.

We finally managed to leave at 2.00am on 9 July, the weather had settled and there was at last an air of expectation. The approach to the spur was quite slow, the snow being just crusted over on top with depths of soft material lurking just below the surface. At the base of the spur, the lower gangway was frightening, it was convex in shape with obvious fractures at the apex. There was evidence of recent snow slurries on the surface and a quickly dug pit confirmed the existence of exceptionally avalanche prone conditions. As avalanches thundered off other parts of the mountain, we were in no doubt of the outcome. The mountain would be here next year, and we wanted to make sure that we were.

We returned to dejected, the weather was finally good but the mountain was in a potentially lethal condition. Our last option appeared to be an attempt on the N Ridge, with Mount Newton as our primary objective, but also giving us time to recce the continuation up Saint Elias.

All four of us left for an advance base on Sunday 10 July, we hoped to make an attempt on Newton that night. The weather was perfect all day up until about 5.00pm. We were looking for a site to dig a snowhole, when the weather broke again. We postponed the attempt until the next night and an abortive attempt to dig a hole ended in a snow trench bivouac. I woke to the sound of Jay and Doug preparing to recce the approach to the route. I remained in my sleeping bag incredulous at another change in the weather, it was now clear and becoming very hot.

Doug and Jay returned moaning about treacherous snow conditions. We spent the rest of the day trying to utilise what little shade we could find in the intense sunlight. We departed at 10.00pm for our attempt on the route and made good progress for a couple of hours until we approached an area of complex bergshrunds. The way through was unclear and the unstable snow made any route through potentially hazardous. The obvious choice was a traverse between two huge shrunds for about 400ft to allow access on to the lower spur. Jay began the traverse but came back, he was going no further, the risk was too great. Adrian was feeling unwell so he decided to descend with Jay.

Doug and I decided to continue, we could not yet accept defeat. Doug found a tenuous deadman belay and I began the traverse. For what appeared to be such a benign piece of climbing it was nerve shredding. The slope being traversed was 45 to 50 degrees and once the crust was broken all that remained was unconsolidated snow with the texture of ball bearings. This gave the uninviting prospect of sliding down into the waiting mouth of the huge lower bergshrund, the chances of survival of such an excursion were decidedly limited. The battle was one between my ego and its urge to succeed, and my instinct for self survival. After one retreat and a further attempt during which I got a little further I gave up, the risk was too high. The expedition was over, Mount St Elias was one huge avalanche risk and there were no immediate signs of a change in conditions occurring. To continue would have been futile.

The descent was depressing, my dream was over, only reality remained, we had to return to base and then evacuate to a landing strip on the Seward glacier. This would be a two day task, involving considerable hard work. As we came down, the weather closed in and it began to snow, the mountain began to laugh again, loudly, as the avalanches poured off its flanks. Two days later during another brief interlude in the weather, we managed to get the plane out. Out of the frying pan into the fire, during the wettest July on record in the Yukon (by the 15th!) the Alaska highway had been washed away on both sides of the airstrip, and we spent a further two miserable days, without food, awaiting our release.

When it came it was glorious, we ended the trip with a superb week in the Rockies, climbing at Lake Louise and Dune Wall. Jay and Doug made impressive ascents of Edith Cavell and Assiniboine. The walk in to Assiniboine knackered Adrian and myself so we retired to food, beer and more beer.

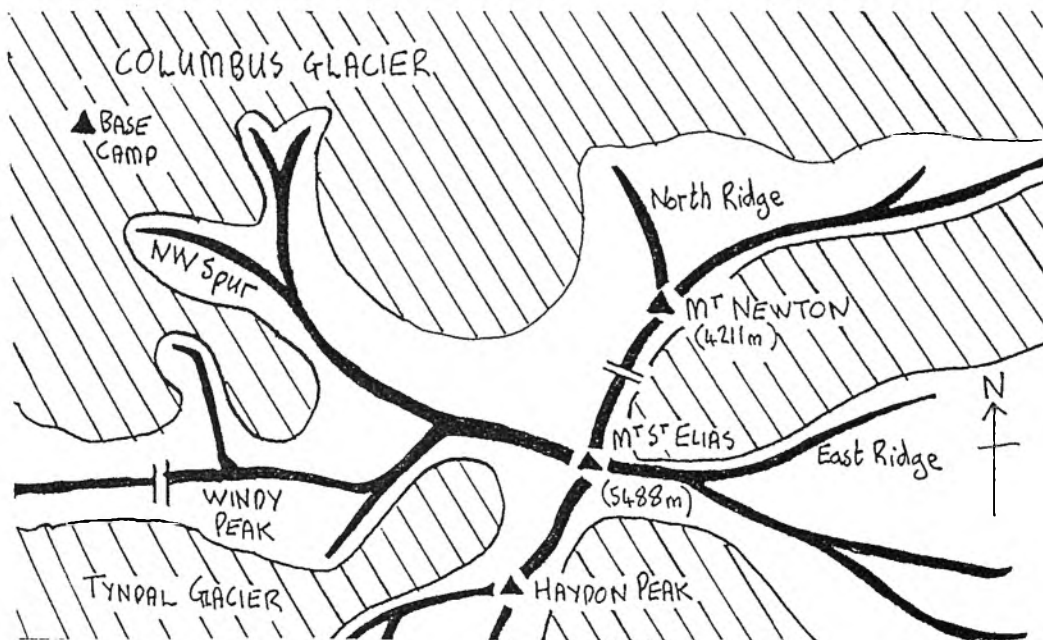
Though we did not achieve what we hoped the trip was a success, we were all friends at the end and we had all returned safely to Britain. We returned

It was an unforgettable experience which left a desire to try again in the near future. It was just another illustration that in the game of mountaineering, climbers are just little pawns in a huge, unforgiving and uncontrollable arena.

Mark Dixon 15 January 1989



Location of Mt St Elias



The position of base camp at the base of the NW Spur

Climbing in the St.Elias Mountains

The Saint Elias mountains are generally unfamiliar to British mountaineers. Consequently, they have made very few visits other than to Mount Logan. The mountains are on a himalayan scale, and are situated on the largest icefield outside of the polar regions.

Climate and Climbing Season

The climatic conditions can be appalling particularly near to the Pacific coastline, the main feature being the huge amounts of snow that can fall in a short time.

Generally the best time to climb in the region is May, though April is reported to be stable climatically, though obviously colder. Though the mountains have all been climbed in June/July the snow conditions are generally deteriorating and experiences such as ours may not be that uncommon. September experiences similar conditions to May, though with shorter daylight hours and more difficult glacial conditions. The winter remains virtually unexplored, due to the savage conditions, limited daylight, and difficulty of access.

Access

The most obvious flight destination for an expedition to the Saint Elias mountains is Anchorage, but we flew to Edmonton due to a cut price fare being available. It is possible to get a bus to Whitehorse / Haines Junction from either, however as we had large amounts of equipment we hired a van to drive to the Yukon. Given the marginal increase in cost and the large increase in flexibility this appears to be a preferable option. It is two days drive via the Alaska Highway from Edmonton to Haines Junction. If time is at a premium (and money is not) it is possible to fly to Whitehorse from Calgary and Vancouver.

Access to the mountains is possible from the American side for the coastal routes on Mount Saint Elias, however most expeditions approach from the Yukon Territory. There are three options for approaching the Saint Elias mountains from the roadhead.

1. Walk or Ski in - a long way, but it is highly recommended for the purist (enough said!) by Chic Scott in Mountain 65.
2. Helicopter - useful for expeditions with heavy payloads
3. Aircraft - probably the most common approach.

Climbing in the St.Elias Mountains (cont)

The local chamber of commerce have a list of all the local operators. For an alpine style expedition such as ours, the price of the return flight was £250 per head (this was for the longest trip possible in the range - Mt St Elias). There was no problem in getting all the gear to base on the same flight as the climbers. We used Icefield Ranges Expeditions for our flight, Andy Williams is an excellent pilot and I would recommend him to any other expedition.

Administration

All expeditions must register with the park authorities three months before the arrive. This involves the following:

1. Name of expedition, expedition plan and route.
2. A complete list of equipment and man days food.
3. Confirmation of air support.
4. Confirmation of radio communication
5. All participants must complete an application and medical form. Available from the parks authorities.

Though this appears to be very officious it is actually very flexible and is a small price to pay for the excellent rescue facilities that the parks service have available.

All expeditions must have a radio communication capability. Most air operators hire radio sets at a small daily charge.

Miscellaneous

Most provisions are available from the stores in Whitehorse, however there did not appear to be any technical climbing equipment available, so be prepared.

Similarly if you intend to use parafin stoves at base it should be noted that fuel is very difficult to find in the Yukon. We also found out that helicopter fuel does not provide an alternative.

Expedition Timetable

- June 22 - Depart London Heathrow 1430 hrs; Arrive Edmonton International Airport 1700 hrs.
- June 23 - Awaiting arrival of air freight at Edmonton Airport.
- June 25 - Arrival of air freight. Depart for Whitehorse 0200 hrs.
- June 26 - Arrival at Whitehorse 2300 hrs.
- June 27 - Purchase of supplies in Whitehorse and Haines Junction. Registration at the parks office, and arrival at Kluane Lake airfield.
- June 28 - Flight from airfield onto Seward Glacier. Base camp established on the Columbus Glacier.
- June 29 - Bad weather, Digging in at Base Camp.
- June 30 - Continuing bad weather with persistent
-July 1 heavy snowfall.
- July 2 - Recce of N.Ridge of Mt.Newton by Jay and Doug, and of NW Spur of Mt St Elias by Adrian and JJ.
- July 3/4 - Bad Weather
- July 5 - Attempt to position first camp on SW Buttress by Doug and Adrian. Retreat due to adverse snow conditions and bad weather.
- July 6/8 - Bad weather.
- July 9 - Attempt on NW Spur by Adrian,Doug and JJ. Retreat due to exceptionally bad snow conditions.
- July 10 - Walk in to base of N.Ridge of Mt.Newton in deteriorating weather conditions. Attempt on Mt.Newton postponed due to white out conditions.
- July 11 - Attempt on N.Ridge of Mt.Newton, retreat due to severe avalanche conditions and incoming bad weather. Decision made to abandon expedition due to continued adverse weather and avalanche risk.

Expedition Timetable (cont)

- July 12 - Return to base camp in white out conditions.
- July 13 - Evacuation of base camp.
- July 14 - Flight out to Kluane Lake airfield.
- July 15/6- At Kluane Lake waiting for re-opening of the Alaska Highway.
- July 17/8- Drive to Rocky mountains.
- July 20 - Mount Edith Cavell.
- July 24/6- Mount Assiniboine.
- July 28 - Return to London Heathrow.

Income and Expenditure Account

Expenditure

Airflights	London to Edmonton	1790
	Haines Jct. to St Elias	1080
Food		725
Van Hire		650
Equipment		325
Petrol		185
Insurance		160
Administration expenses		100
Radio Hire		60
Medical		25

		5100

Income

Personal Contributions (4 at £775)		3100
Imperial College Exploration Board		800
Imperial College RCC		500
Mount Everest Foundation		400
British Mountaineering Council		300

		5100

Short biographical details of the team membersMARK DIXON

Aged 23

British

Trainee Chartered Accountant - Ernst and Whinney - Newcastle
President Imperial College Mountaineering Club 1985-6
(Vice President 1984-5)

Rock Climbing to E3 in Britain, Ireland, France, Austria, Italy and Canada
Ice Climbing to VI in Scotland and Wales.

5 Alpine Seasons (2 Winter) - Routes including:
Grosshorn - North Face Direct
Petit Dru - West Face (American Direct)
Cima Piccola - Spiallo Gallo

1984 Imperial College Ecuadorian Andes Expedition.

El Obispo (5319m) - Italian Couloir
Monja Grande (5160m) - SE Flank (New route & First British ascent)
Huascaran Sur (6768m) - Ruta Normale.

JEREMY LAY

Aged 25

British

Electrical component sales executive.
Member of Imperial College Mountaineering Club 1982-8

Rock climbing to E4 in Britain, Ireland, France, Kenya, U.S.A and Canada.
Ice climbing to V in Scotland and Wales.

5 Alpine Seasons - Routes including:
Petit Dru - West Face (American Direct)
Les Courtes - NE Spur
Mt Edith Cavell - E Ridge

1985 Imperial College Mt Kenya Expedition:

Batian (5199m) - NW Buttress
Nelion (5188m) - Ice Window

Short biographical details of the team members (cont)

DOUG SMITH

Aged 26

British

Mechanical Engineering Research Assistant - Imperial College
Member Imperial College Mountaineering Club 1984-8

Rock Climbing to E5 in Britain, Ireland, Spain and France
Ice Climbing to V in Scotland and Wales

3 Alpine Seasons - Routes including:

Mt Edith Cavell - E. Ridge

Mt Assinniboine - N. Ridge

El Naranjo des Bulnes - W. Face

ADRIAN PARSONS

Aged 29

British

Petroleum Engineer
Member of Imperial College Mountaineering Club 1987-8

Rock climbing to E3 in Britain, France, U.S.A, and Austrailia.
Ice climbing to V in Scotland and Wales.

7 Alpine Seasons - Routes including:

Petit Jorasses - West Face

Mt Blanc de Tacul - Supercouloir (Winter)

Les Courtes - N Face

1979 Liverpool University Alla Dag (Turkey) Expedition

A brief history of mountaineering on Mt.St.Elias

- 1741 - Mount Saint Elias was first sighted by Danish navigator Vitrus Bering, who named the area Cape Saint Elias after the patron saint of the day of discovery - June 20th.
- 1778 - Captain James Cook names the mountain after the cape.
- 1888 - An expedition led by W H Topham reaches 11,400ft on the S Ridge before turning back due to technical difficulty.
- 1890 - Professor I Russell reaches 14,000ft on the N Ridge above the Russell Col before turning back.
- 1897 - North (Abruzzi) Ridge - The first ascent of the mountain is made by the Duke of Abruzzi via the Russell Col. The ascent taking 31 days.
- 1913 - The boundary commission refutes the claim of Mount Saint Elias of being the highest summit in North America after discovering Mount Logan.
- 1946 - South Ridge - M.Millar's party make the second ascent of Saint Elias via a new route on the S Ridge.
- 1964 - North Ridge Direct - A Japanese expedition repeats the Abruzzi ridge approaching via the N Ridge of Mt. Newton.
- 1968 - North West Ridge - After a prolonged effort the long NW Ridge falls to an American expedition.
- 1970 - Attempts on E and SE ridges fail.
- 1972 - East Ridge - Climbed by seven Americans in a capsule type expedition. An excellent achievement along this tortuous double corniced ridge.
- 1978 - First failure on the NW Spur by a team of American climbers.
- 1978 - Southwest Buttress - First ascent of the boundary commission route by a Japanese expedition using seige tactics.
- 1979 - Boundary commission route repeated by an American expedition.
- 1980 - First Traverse by an American Team, by climbing up the S Ridge and down the Abruzzi.

A brief history of mountaineering on Mt.St.Elias (cont)

- 1981 - An Austrian expedition fails on the NW Spur, after being avalanched off at 9250ft.
- 1982 - Club Alpin Francais expedition abandons expedition to S Face due to "huge avalanches."
- 1983 - An expedition of five Americans fail on the Abruzzi route.
- 1986 - **South Face** - First ascent by two Americans, both suffered severe frostbite.

SUMMARY

Up to 1972 there were 33 attempts to climb Mt St Elias -
 - Only 7 were successful

Analysis of ascents up to 1984

The thirteen ascents to 1984 can be analysed as follows:

N (Abruzzi) Ridge	5
S Ridge	3
SW Buttress	2
E Ridge	1
NW Ridge	1
N Ridge (Direct)	1
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Total	13
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The abysmal success rate on attempts to climb Mt St Elias since the first ascent in 1897 is perhaps a result of the rapid deterioration in glacial conditions caused by the retreat of the icefield.

Medical details

Fortunately we had no health problems on the expedition

We are grateful to Dr Jeremy Scratcherd for supplying the following drugs:

Temgesic	-	Strong pain killer
Panadol	-	Pain killer
Stemetil	-	Anti vomiting/nausea
Phenergan	-	Antihistamine
Augmentin	-	Antibiotic
Flagyl	-	Antibiotic
Aureomycin	-	Eye antibiotic
Sno Tears	-	Eye lubricant
Immodium	-	Anti-diarhoeal
Decadron	-	Emergency anti oedema treatment
Ponstan	-	Anti inflammatory
Adalat	-	Vaso dilator
Milk of magnesia	-	Indigestion tablets
Daktarin	-	Anti fungal
Hydrocortisone	-	Antihistamine ointment
Cetavlon	-	Antiseptic liquid
Savlon	-	Antiseptic ointment
Bonjela	-	Mouth infection ointment

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