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# British Shel Chakpa Expedition 1999

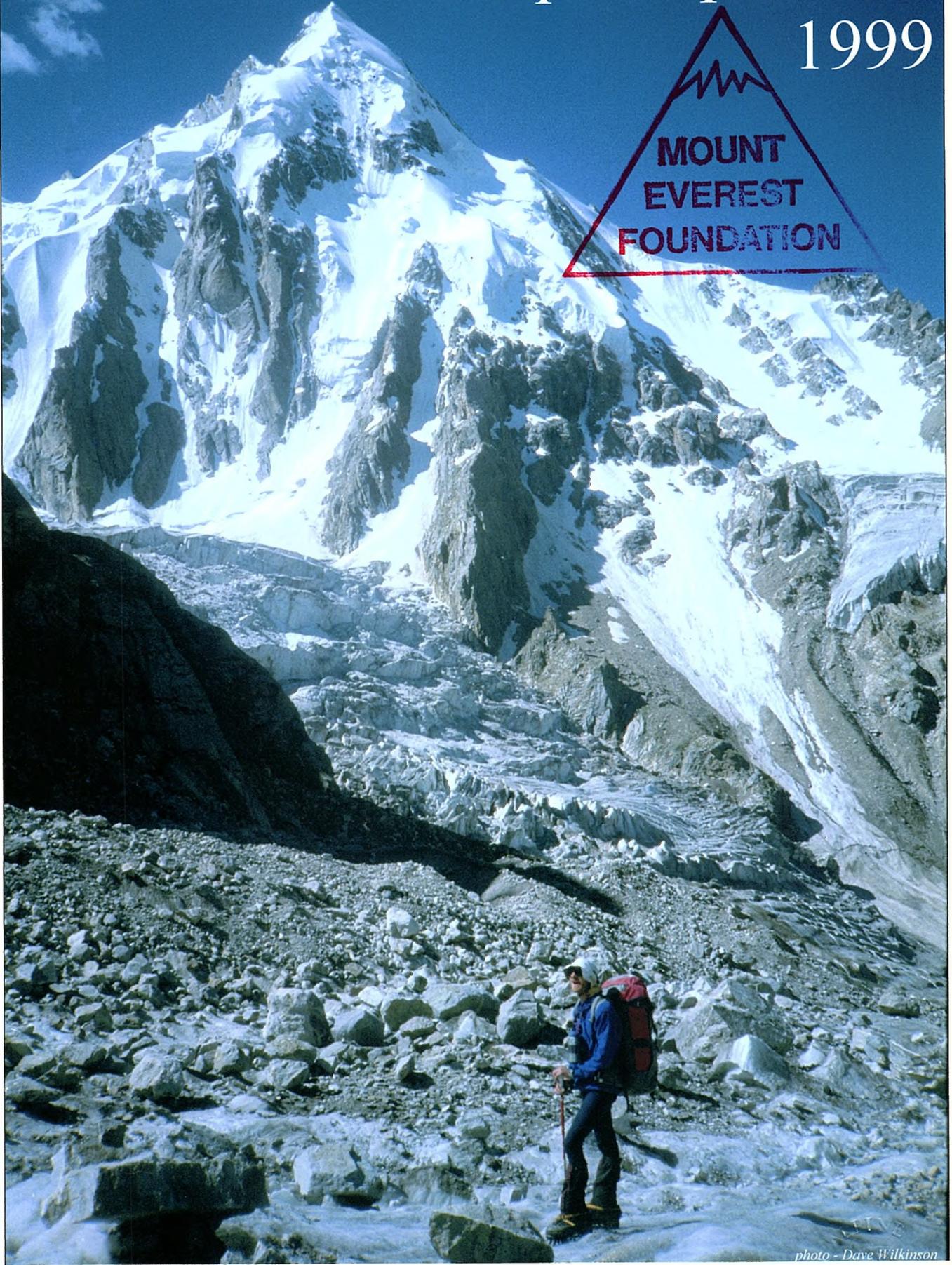
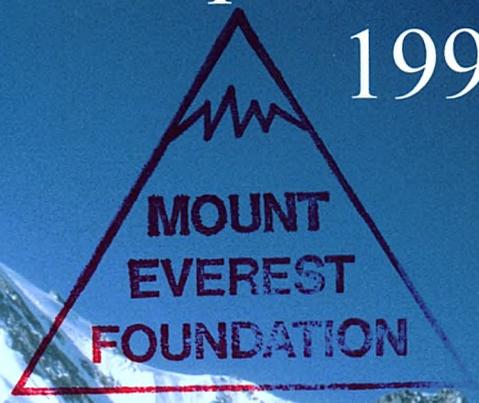
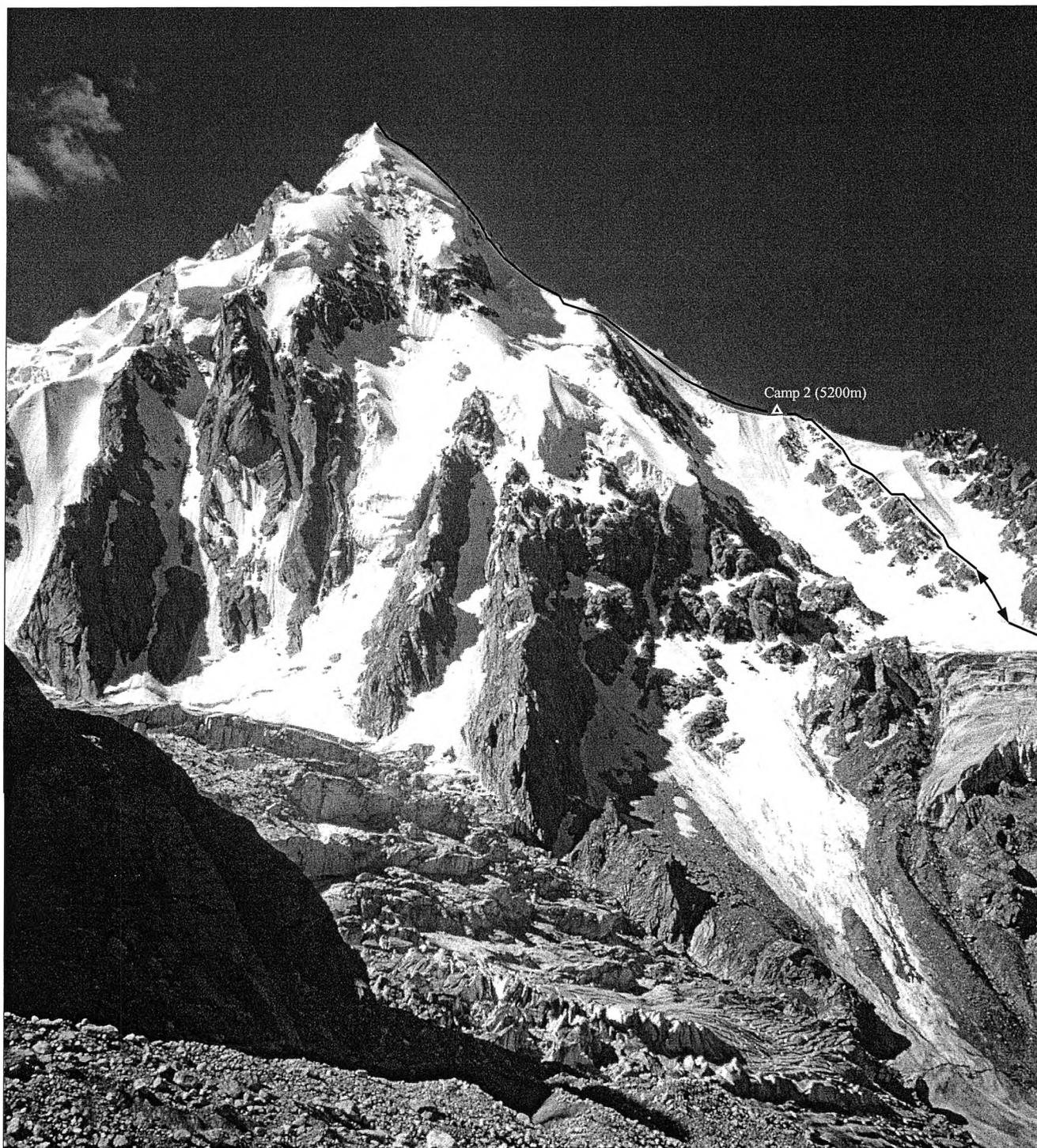


photo - Dave Wilkinson

# British Shel Chakpa Expedition 1999

## Expedition Report



*photo by Dave Wilkinson*

Members; Dave Wilkinson, Stew Muir, Bill Church and Gus Morton

Report text and map by Dave Wilkinson  
Photo production by Stew Muir

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## Contents

page 4	Introduction
page 5	The Approaches
page 7	The Climbing
page 10	Sketch map
page 11&12	Photos
page 13	Diary
page 14	Accounts
page 15	Acknowledgments

## Introduction

I sat in the shade of the walnut trees on the campsite in the village of Doko. It was mid July 1999. Men from the village had gathered, hoping for lucrative employment as porters. One of them asked me where we were going. "To climb that mountain" I replied, pointing up and over my shoulder to the prominent peak across the valley, "does it have a name?". "Shel Chakpa" he replied with a chuckle in his voice, and his friend smiled gently. I detected a hint of incredulity in their responses - they didn't seem to rate our chances very highly. I resolved to prove them wrong.

We were in the valley of the Basha river, draining from the Chogo Lungma glacier. I had noticed our mountain during the Haramosh II trip in 1995, and on subsequent visits the following two years.

This valley is not as frequented as the Hushe or Braldu valleys, but does see a handful of parties each year, en route past Arandu to Spantik and the other Chogo Lungma peaks. No one passing by could fail to notice Shel Chakpa towering above the valley, but apparently all had passed it by. We'd had no idea of its identity, or whether it had been climbed. There are few records of climbing on sub-6000m. peaks in the Karakoram. However, we had heard no reports, and the local men all agreed that foreign parties had never been anywhere near this mountain.

Back in autumn 1998, Stew and I were trying to decide what to do the following summer. Old photos were dug out. The "peak above Doko" looked mouth-watering in one shot, but surely I remembered a serac-infested mountain. Paul Nunn had admired the mountain with me on the approach in 1995, and he had later that summer been killed by serac fall on Haramosh II. I had no wish to follow him. Another photo with a more revealing lighting showed row upon row of seracs, confirming my memories. ("Shel Chakpa" is Balti for "white broken mountain" - a most appropriate name). Looking from one photo to another, the light played tricks. Surely, to the right of the seracs was a ridge, which would be out of reach of their fall. Or was it another trick of the light, and merely the line between sunlight and shade? When is a ridge not a ridge? We decided there was only one way to resolve the matter and that was to go and have a closer look. Maybe the "ridge" was safe, or there might be a hidden way round the back. If not, there would be other things to do nearby. Later on we enrolled an old friend, Bill Church, and a new one, Gus Morton, and so the trip was born.

## The Approaches

Having more time off work, Stew and I went out to Pakistan 3 days earlier to arrange supplies and onward transport. They also had the option of an extra week at the end in case things went slowly, or to do some more climbing. We flew from Manchester to Rawalpindi with PIA. This airline now gives an *official* baggage allowance of 40 kg (plus 5 kg hand baggage) - very useful for carrying all one's gear (and a bit of food). This is good compensation for the "dry" flight. Unlike previous years, this is not a special arrangement, it is shown on the ticket, and even applies to the return journey as well.

As our mountain was not over 6000m, and in an "open area", no permit, peak fee or liaison officer was required, so we had little paperwork to do. The advance party completed the bulk of the purchasing and packing in good time, hired a minibus, went down to 'Pindi airport to meet the others early on the Monday morning, and immediately set off for Skardu, which was reached early the next morning. The foreign office in London and the British Consulate in Islamabad had both, in their ultra-cautious way, advised against visiting Skardu, because of the fighting in Kashmir. I had made my own inquiries from more realistic sources. The BMC thought there would be no problem, provided the Kashmir situation did not get much worse. Commercial trekking companies had been operating in Pakistan, and reported that life in Skardu was normal. We found this to be true.

While in Skardu, we chanced on an old friend, Abbas, who we had employed as cook/head porter/camp guard for our Bolocho trip in 1997. He was "available for work" so we arranged to hire him on a similar basis. He had not been an *ideal* employee in 1997, mainly because he got lonely when left at base camp while we were away climbing and we were reluctant to hire an "assistant cook" to keep him company. But we knew him, he was honest and would do a reasonably job otherwise. In the event, the herdsmen who were frequent visitors to our base camp provided him with sufficient company, so that worked quite well. A couple of days of final p & p, and went by jeep to Doko.

On arriving in Doko, the usual group of would-be porters assembled, but we weren't ready for them yet. We had decided spend a couple of days in a lightweight reconnaissance, to check that the approaches and route were to our liking, and find a base camp site. We had all our food packed in the usual 60 litre blue plastic barrels which can be bought 2nd-hand on the market in 'Pindi. These are an ideal size for making up to 25 kg. porter loads, can be padlocked, protect the contents well in transit, and against raven attack at base camp. They are also useful for base camp home-brew, and for storing drinking water should dry weather cause streams to run out. This year we had an extra trick to ease Abbas's job of guarding in Doko while we were doing our recce. We'd bought a length of chain to connect the padlocks and prevent a locked barrel from walking on its own.

Next day, Sher Mohammed, a charming Doko man, took us across the Basha river by a wire pulley bridge to the village of Zil, and up a scrambly path to a wooded shelf and a herdsmen's encampment called Sil-Sil. One of the herdsmen from Zil was called Abadeen. He sat us down in a shady nook, and gave us tea and chapattis. He told us that we were the first climbing or trekking party ever to come this way (other Zil men subsequently confirmed this). This was the start of a very amicable relationship with the locals. We continued for another 2 or 3 hours to some more herders' huts (these ones unoccupied) where we camped for the night. In the morning we continued traversing above the glacier for another hour to discover a small place with boulders, grass patches, and a clear stream, which would make an ideal base camp site. It was also directly under our mountain and there appeared to be a reasonable route for climbing it - the ridge *was* safe from serac fall. We went back down to Doko the same day, ready to go ahead as planned.

That evening we employed 18 porters, some from Doko and some from Zil, and set off the following morning. Normally, we like to settle matters of porter stages and rates of pay in advance, but this walk-in had not been done before so there were no precedents on the number of stages. Our men seemed glad just to have the work, did not mention pay or stages, and seemed generally well disposed, so we just set off in a cheerful sort of way. We stopped for the night at Sil-Sil with a stewed goat supper, and reached base camp next morning. The walk had been short in distance, but with a considerable and steep height rise. The porters clearly found it hard work, but kept going with no complaints, so we decided to be generous and paid them for three and a bit stages, which seemed reasonable for the effort involved. We gave them 1100 rupees each, and they appeared to be quite happy with this.

## The Climbing

The first afternoon at base camp was spent in various building tasks: tent platforms and kitchen shelter. The weather so far had been fine, but now we had a spell of unsettled weather for a week or so. We had a depressingly common pattern in this region, with reasonably clear weather during the afternoon and evening to get our optimism up at bedtime, then a big let-down with rain and snow overnight and early morning, so climbing was ruled out by unfrozen snow and poor visibility. But this sort of weather was fine for acclimatization and reconnaissance walks. I developed a septic blister which left me grounded in base camp for the best day of this period - the other three did a fine trip up the corrie behind base camp, then up a couloir to the ridge of Shel Chakpa and the site of our camp 1. Above this, the ridge was guarded by ridiculous rock towers and gendarmes. So they went down a loose couloir to the glacier basin below the north west face of the mountain. The way ahead was visible up a face of mixed ground which led back onto our ridge above the towers, and with no major obstacles to come. They then traversed across this basin and down the far side from which a traverse back west above the main glacier gave a quicker return to base camp. This was certainly a faster return, but it was rather exposed to serac fall, did not appeal as an ascent route, and in fact was not used again.

With this successful reconnaissance behind us, we decided to explore the glacier branch on the other side from base camp. From the approach, we had spotted a peak which looked lower and easier than Shel Chakpa. We thought we'd first climb this for acclimatization, and also to give us another view of our main objective. I still had an idea (of which the others were all dismissive) that there might just be an easier way on the far side, and an ascent of our training peak would settle that argument. So we crossed the main glacier and went up the far branch which we later learnt is called the "Barbanchen glacier". This proved to be quite a long day, and deceptively steep, requiring crampons for most of the way on the dry glacier surface. Above an icefall section, we found a camp site on some flat ice at about 4700 m. The weather was fine when we turned in for the night, but the "inverted alpine" weather pattern had set in, and before the night was over, snow had started to fall. This continued throughout the night and much of the morning, clearing up for the afternoon and evening. Next night the pattern repeated, so, with food and patience running low, we returned to base camp empty handed. But this had been useful acclimatization and reconnaissance, from the glacier we had a glimpse of the far ridge of Shel Chakpa, which certainly looked less easy than the near one, having an impressive subsidiary peak. That finally settled our choice of route.

No sooner had we got down to base camp than the weather improved, so we decided to press ahead with our main objective. At camp 1, the only places flat enough for tents were a tiny ledge on the crest of a knife-edge rock ridge and another one just below. Next morning we went down the loose gully to the basin, and climbed snow and ice couloirs through the mixed face to regain the ridge above the towers near our camp 2 site. The climbing was technically reasonable, but the recent mild weather had stripped much of the snow to leave the slopes in very icy condition. We went back by abseil leaving the gear in place for next time, and retraced our way up the loose couloir past camp 1 and so back to base.

We then had a frustrating period of poor weather to try our patience, but life at base camp was tolerable, with books to read, home-brewed beer, and frequent visitors. The men of Zil are keen cattle farmers. Ghee, clarified butter much valued for frying in this part of the world, has a high price on the market in Skardu, so butter is the main export produce in these villages. Several groups of cow men had their animals grazing on the summer pastures in various grassy places not far from our camp. These men paid us regular visits, tentatively at first, but they soon discovered that a brew of tea and a snack were always on offer, so their visits became more confident and frequent. In return we received regular deliveries of fresh yoghurt and cottage cheese. It was all very sociable.

Another sort of visitor was less welcome. Some years ago, the Pakistan government relaxed its laws about mineral prospecting, so hunting for gem stones is now a popular pastime with the Karakoram men. Over the mountains but not very far away is the village of Sassi in the Haramosh valley. The men from Sassi have a reputation for lawlessness. They are also very keen gem hunters, and wander from their home ground in this pursuit. Several teams of Sassi men came to this valley. They carried knives and guns and had an arrogant manner. They are equally unpopular with expeditions who fear that them stealing food and equipment, and with the local villagers who fear rustling of their livestock. Such reputations are often exaggerated, but caution was still called for and we tried not to leave our camp unattended. In the event nothing went missing, but it was still a cause for worry each time the Zil men reported sighting another party from Sassi.

August came, and Bill and Gus started to worry about time. When the weather finally relented, we decided to try and climb the mountain. We shouldered big sacs, and plodded back to camp 1 - two tiny MacPac tents perched on unlikely rock ledges. The weather was much improved, but the view of the route was depressingly icy. The recent spell of bad weather had been mild, and more snow had been stripped than dumped. At such modest altitudes, the Karakoram weather is usually quite mild in July and August. Even in clear weather, night frosts are not very hard, so very early starts are advisable, even on these north and west facing slopes.

Next morning, heavily laden, we suffered on the relentless slopes of black gritty ice. Pre-placed belays from the previous visit provided some relief, but we were thankful to find a comfortable site for our camp 2, with flat snow for tents and a pool of water formed at the base of nearby rocks. On the rocky ridge above this camp, we were surprised to find not only ibex tracks, but also a well-built cairn. Someone had been here before. Ibex are not uncommon at this sort of height (c. 5000m.), and the slopes on the ridge's far (south) side were the sort of broken terraced rocks which would be a nightmare to find a route up, and to climb, but just the sort of ground these creatures are at home on. The previous visitors could have been a climbing party, but the local men had all assured us that none had been to this mountain. Either someone had sneaked up unknown to them, or more likely, the cairn had been built by an enterprising ibex or gem - hunter, following the ibex tracks from the south. This was confirmed the next day; the route above camp 2 had no in-situ gear or other signs of previous ascent.

We had much work to do to get to the top and down the next day. We had decided to travel light, with two ropes between the four of us, enough rock and ice gear to abseil down all the steep bits, a gas stove for brews, but no bivi gear. We rose before midnight and set off at about 1 am. Even the whiter-looking slopes were calf-achingly icy, and we were soon climbing in pitches with ice-screw belays. At one third height, a flat area gave a rest, then a couple of hundred feet of snow allowed faster movement to the foot of the mixed ground which promised to be the day's main challenge. We started this section at first light, but due to its direction, we were not in the sun for some time yet. We took a meandering line up icy ramps and gullies between rock ribs, sustained at about alpine TD grade, but with fairly good rock belays. A rock shoulder gave a welcome rest, then an open ice slope led to the top which was reached at about 9 am.

The weather had been clear, but the view was limited by threatening clouds in all directions especially from the south. In fact, not much happened except a few snow flurries on the descent and some muggy cloud, which may have stopped the snow going off even worse than it did.

We stayed on top for a few moments only, then climbed down to the shoulder for a proper sit-down, and a welcome snack and a refreshing drink of glucose and “tang”. By now what snow did cover the ice was deteriorating fast in the heat of day. We continued by abseil from rock anchors. This proved to be a time-consuming job. The rock structure was not ideal for gear placements, which often had to be searched for. Four people abseiling on one pair of ropes did save weight in ascent, but caused much waiting in descent. We took a more direct line in descent than we had in ascent, glad that we had removed the gear on the way up. The wet snow soaked the ropes, which dripped water onto trouser legs, squeezed from the ropes by passing through descending devices. The final ice slope above the camp had formed a layer of surface slush which had to be cleared before placing screws. The route had been totally safe from serac-fall, but we now heard a few stones whistling past our ears to add a little urgency. We finally staggered into camp at 5 pm, after 16 hours on the go.

The weather was still quite good, and the soaked ropes would freeze hard during the night, so we decided to stay put next day to dry them out in the sun. We could also dry our clothing, and have a good rest with plenty of food and drink (as usual, we were adequately provisioned). For occupational therapy (and in case we needed them the following day), I went back up the previous day’s slope and retrieved our last 2 ice screws.

After our day off, another pre-dawn start, and our abseil descent continued in the dark. We were startled by a mighty roar followed by sundry crashing and bangings - a monster rockfall somewhere to our left. Daylight revealed huge boulders freshly deposited on the glacier below the loose gully leading up to camp 1. They had fallen from the rock towers we were avoiding by this detour. Someone had previously suggested their landing place as a possible camp site! We were thankful that we hadn’t made an even earlier start.

We continued back to base camp, where we were greeted by our cook and a contingent of the local herdsmen. They gave us quite a celebrity welcome back, with our sacs carried the last few hundred metres, much handshaking and hugging, and even garlands of flowers round our necks! The upper part of our route had been clearly visible, and they were evidently impressed that we had climbed “their” mountain. We got together an impromptu buffet lunch, with corned beef on biscuits, nuts and raisins, and other snacky morsels, plus various drinks. One of the herdsmen even joined in by demanding to sample our home-brew beer - a brave move for a Muslim!

The weather worsened, but we didn’t care too much now. Bill and Gus went for an early return home to families and jobs, but Stew and I had an extra week, so we sat out a few days of snow, then went back to our previously tried “training peak”. This time the weather was kinder. The ascent was almost entirely on glacier terrain, with two bergschrund pitches which needed the rope, and wonderful views of Shel Chakpa, K2 and all.

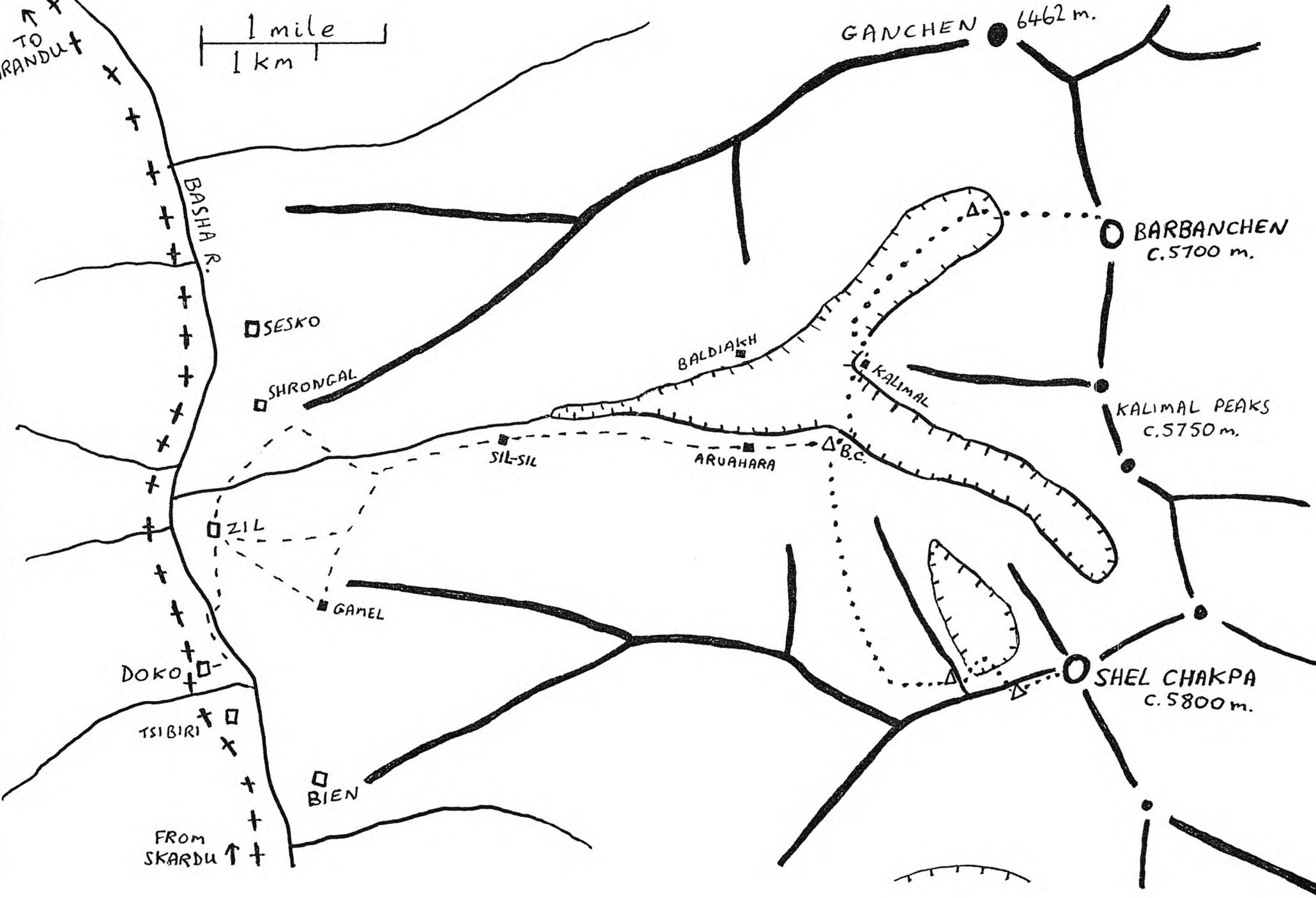
One of our most frequent base camp visitors had been Ali Mos-heen, who had been tending his cattle near our base camp along with his sons. He provided much information on local names, including our second peak: “Barbanchen”. He also invited us to stay and dine (chicken provided) at his house in the outskirts of Zil, on our return journey. Breakfast was taken at Abadeen’s house, and we bade fond farewells and caught our jeep back to Skardu and so to home.

1 mile  
1 km

TO  
ARANDU ↑

↑ N

- ++ JEEP ROAD
- WALK-IN
- ..... ROUTES ABOVE BASE CAMP
- PEAKS CLIMBED BY THE EXPEDITION
- OTHER PEAKS
- VILLAGES
- HERDSMEN'S HUTS
- △ CAMPS
- ||| GLACIERS





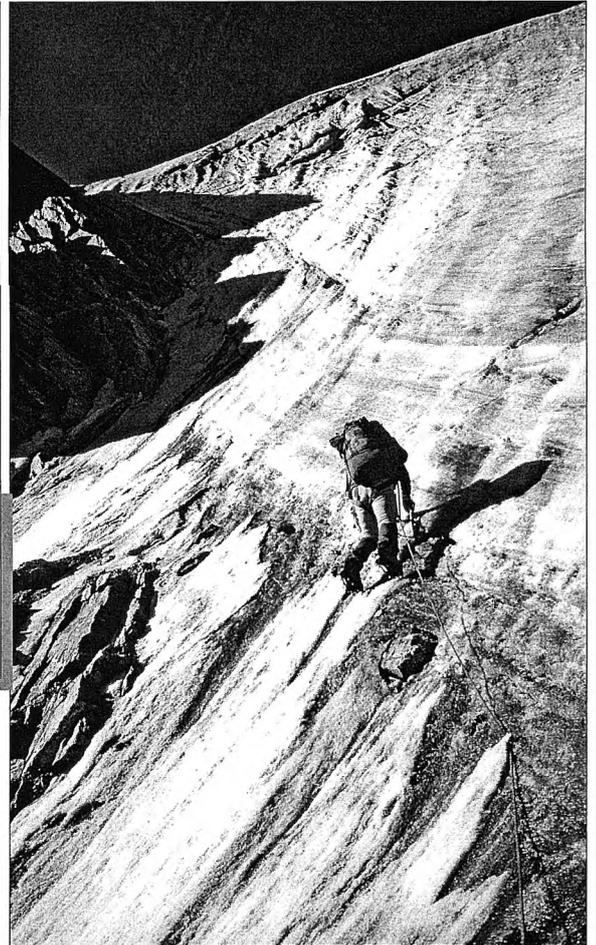
*photo by Dave Wilkinson*

Our objective was clearly seen from the valley. This shot was taken back in 1995 and Shel Chakpa must have been noted by a number of other climbers. Yet it had not been climbed.



*photo by Stewart Muir*

We built up a great relationship with the local herdsmen. They visited base camp regularly and celebrated our success on their mountain with garlands of flowers. Abbas, our sirdar and cook, is on the left hand side



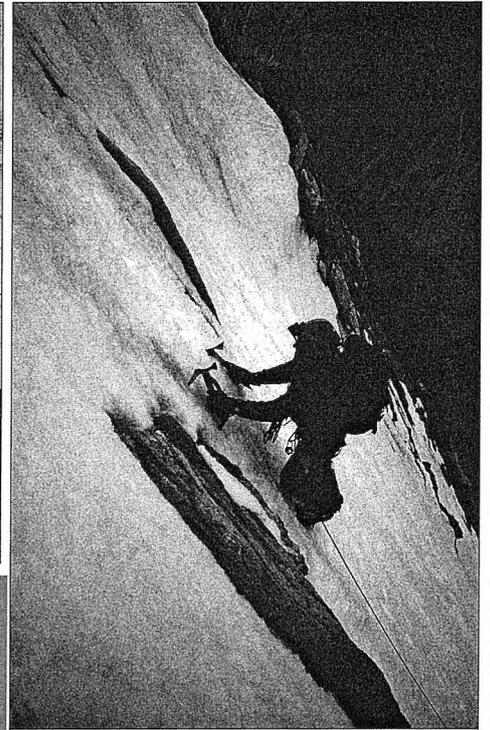
*photo by Stewart Muir*

We pitched the climbing up to camp 2. The large sacs and the icy conditions made it the hardest section of the mountain.



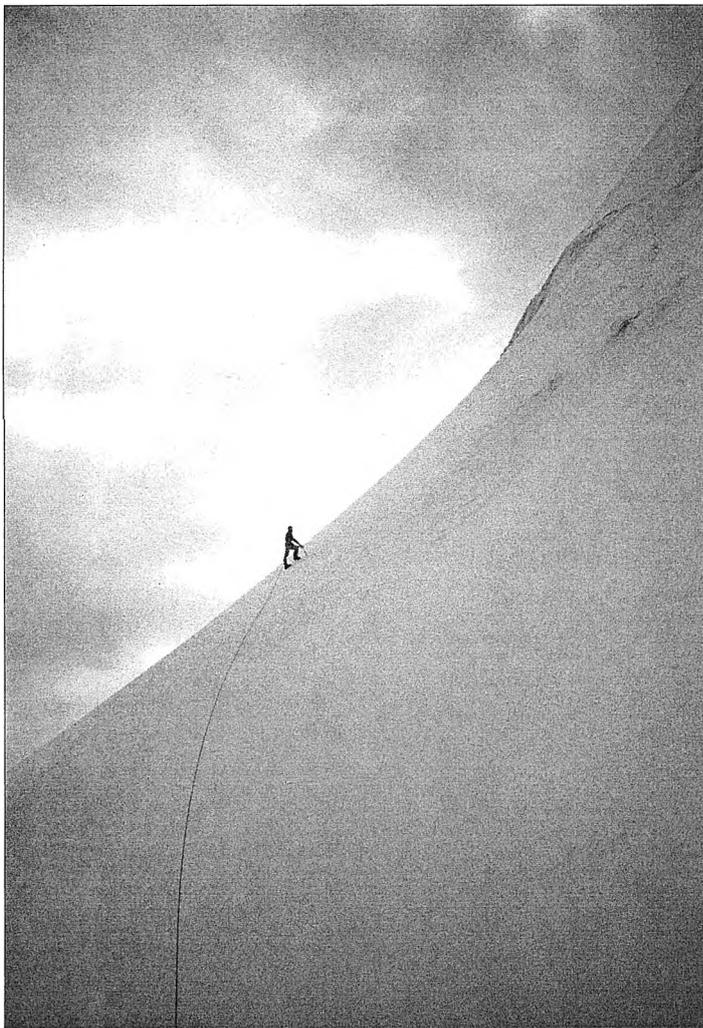
*photo by Stewart Muir*

Camp 2 (5200m) could not have been better positioned. Not only could we reach the summit and back in a day, but also it had a natural pool of water to save melting snow. Our second peak, that we climbed two weeks later, is at the top left hand corner of the shot.



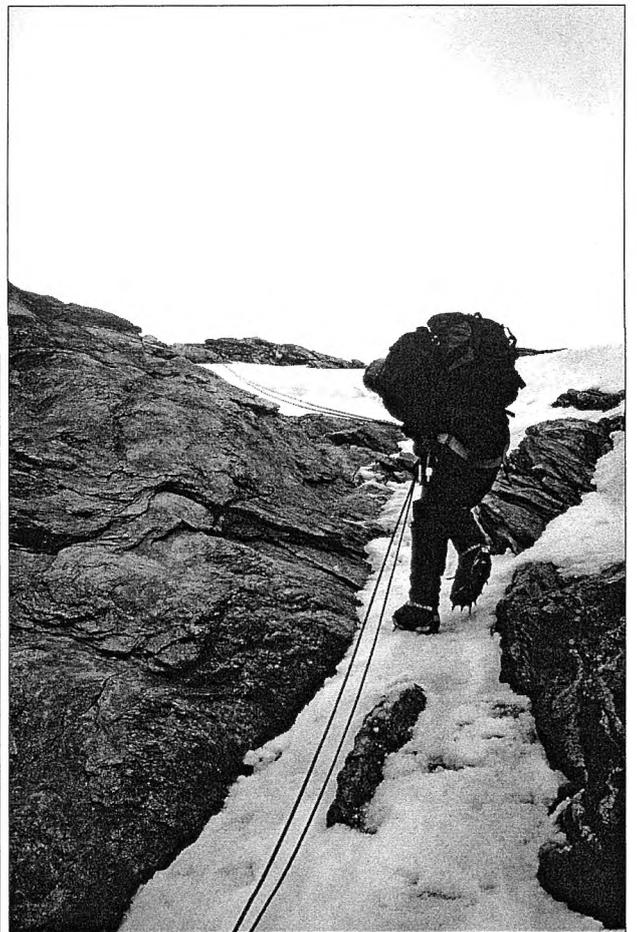
*photo by Stewart Muir*

Getting light, half way between camp 2 and the summit, on good neve. We climbed as two pairs on a single rope each, sharing belays and runners if possible. Climber Gus Morton.



*photo by Dave Wilkinson*

A great sweeping pitch lead onto steeper ground and to the summit by 9am. Cloudy conditions saved us from the real heat of the day. The high temperatures is one of the problems of climbing in the Karakorum in mid summer. Climber Stewart Muir.



*photo by Stewart Muir*

Most of the descent back to camp 2 was by abseil. Pulling the ropes over mixed ground like this was asking for trouble. Never-the-less we got away with no jammed ropes. Climber Gus Morton.

## Expedition Diary

- July 7th Dave & Stew fly from Manchester  
 8th Arrive Rawalpindi.  
 8th-10th Shopping, packing etc.  
 10th Bill & Gus fly from Manchester.  
 11th Bill & Gus arrive 'Pindi, all party leave for Skardu by minibus.  
 12th Arrive Skardu early am.  
 12th&13th Shopping, packing etc.  
 14th Leave Skardu by jeep early am, arrive Doko early pm.  
 15th&16th Reconnaissance.  
 17th Leave Doko with porters.  
 18th Arrive at base camp.  
 19th-22nd Intermittent rain, various acclimatization walks etc.  
 23rd Stew, Bill & Gus reconnaissance to site of camp 1 on Shel Chakpa.  
 24th All members up to camp on Barbanchen glacier.  
 25th Bad weather.  
 26th Bad weather, return to base camp.  
 27th Dave & Stew up to camp 1.  
 28th Dave & Stew up to near camp 2 and back to base camp. Bill & Gus to camp 1.  
 29th Bill & Gus up to near camp 2 and back to base camp.
- July 30th -  
 Aug 4th Resting/bad weather in base camp.  
 Aug 5th All members up to camp 1.  
 6th Up to camp 2.  
 7th To summit of Shel Chakpa and return to camp 2.  
 8th Drying ropes/rest in camp 2.  
 9th Back to base camp.  
 10th-15th More bad weather in base camp.  
 14th Bill and Gus leave base camp.  
 17th Dave & Stew up to camp on Barbanchen glacier.  
 18th Rest.  
 19th To summit of Barbanchen peak and back to base camp.  
 22nd Dave & Stew leave base camp. Bill & Gus fly 'Pindi to Manchester  
 23rd Dave & Stew Jeep back to Skardu.  
 29th Dave & Stew fly 'Pindi to Manchester.

## Accounts

Income	£	Expenditure	£
Grant from M.E.F.	900	Air fares Manchester to Rawalpindi	2097.60
Grant from B.M.C.	2100	(4 @ £524.40)	
Personal contributions	2210.60	Buses 'Pindi to Skardu & back	224.30
(4 @ £552.40)		Local buses & taxis	11.82
Booths Supermarkets	100	Jeeps	141.10
(donation in kind)	<u>          </u>	<b>Travel &amp; transport total</b>	<b>2474.82</b>
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>5310.60</b>	Expedition food donated by Booths	100
		Other food purchased in U.K.	27.86
		Expedition food purchased in Pakistan	351.21
		Food in hotels & cafes etc.	140.67
		<b>Food total</b>	<b>619.74</b>
		<b>Accommodation in hotels etc.</b>	<b>102.98</b>
		<b>Cooking fuel (gas &amp; paraffin)</b>	<b>56.31</b>
		<b>Kitchenware, tarpaulins,</b>	
		<b>cleaning &amp; packing materials, etc.</b>	<b>139.52</b>
		Porters' wages, allowances & tips	352.44
		Cook's wages, etc.	215.58
		Cook's clothing & kit	249.48
		Insurance for porters & cook	19.38
		<b>Porters &amp; cook total</b>	<b>836.88</b>
		<b>Members' insurance (4 @ £164)</b>	<b>656.00</b>
		<b>Visas (4 @ £42)</b>	<b>168.00</b>
		<b>Medical</b>	<b>78.80</b>
		<b>Money changing costs</b>	<b>38.76</b>
		<b>Abandoned abseil equipment</b>	<b>115.16</b>
		<b>Sundry expenses</b>	<u><b>24.44</b></u>
		<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>5310.59</b>

- Notes**
- 1) Costs in Pakistan converted at 82.567 rupees to the £. This was the average rate we got.
  - 2) The £38.76 for money changing costs was mostly the loss on re-exchanging unused contingency funds.
  - 3) All climbing equipment was loaned to the expedition by the members. So it does not appear in these accounts, except for the £115.16, which was the amount reimbursed to members whose gear was left behind during our abseil descent.
  - 4) A grant from Wolverhamptom MBC for a new tent is not shown in these accounts, as the grant was actually made to the Wolverhamptom Mountaineering Club, who loaned the tent to the expedition.
  - 5) Members' personal insurance was handled individually. Some members already had adequate cover previously purchased by them for the whole year. The £164 shown here is a notional figure based on the BMC "Sunpeak" premium for the duration of the trip.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to record our thanks to the many people and organizations who helped us, in both Britain and Pakistan; in particular the following:

The Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council (money from the Sports Council/National Lottery) for grants.

Wolverhampton MBC (Sports Advisory Council) for a grant for a new mountain tent, and previously given grants for base camp tents.

Wolverhampton Mountaineering Club for the loan of this tent and two older ones.

Mr. Edwin Booth of Booth's Supermarkets for a contribution in kind.

Mike Westmacott (Alpine Club Himalayan Index), Mike Thomas and Stephen Venables for information.

The villagers of Zil for such a warm welcome to their land.