

A Walk on the Bara Shigri Glacier in the shadow of Robert Pettigrew MBE

In 2014 I received an unexpected invitation from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) to visit the Bara Shigri Glacier region in the Himachal Pradesh to review and offer advice on the IMF Expedition Leadership program known as 'Climbathon'. Having little idea as to what challenges the area might provide my first objective was to search out a good map, a task not easily accomplished even in 2014. However, persistence resulted in the said map being located in a small shop in Manali. As with most of the Indian Himalaya Maps there are always historical and trekking notes on the reverse side and during a quick 'scan' my eyes were immediately drawn to a familiar name – Robert Pettigrew.



Bob Pettigrew MBE Nepal 2014 © Ian Wall

I first met Bob in the mid nineteen sixties when our paths crossed on the sandstone outcrops in the south of England, time drifted on during the course of which our universes occasionally collided through the field of mountain training. In more recent times we enjoyed a trek together in Nepal. Now I had another interest in the Kullu region, what exactly had my old friend Bob been up to in his younger years?

Due to various visa delays I was not able to join the IMF training program from the outset, so playing a game of catch-up my fast track journey took me from Kathmandu to the Climbathon Base Camp at 3800m in a matter of 36 hours. The next stage, which had to be completed in the following 24 hours, was to climb of another 1100m over 18 km up the Bara Shigri Glacier to Advanced Base Camp. In the lower section this approach is one of the most 'gnarly' glacial moraines I have ever had the pleasure

to traverse, large boulders, small rocks, deep holes, gravel and crevasses, not to mention difficult route finding, and all sliding about on a bed of clear blue ice.



Jayant Sharma Bara Shigri Glacier 2015 © Ian Wall

I clearly recognised the environmental challenges ahead but these were only compounded when I was introduced to my companion who would accompany me up to Advance Base Camp. Jayant Sharma, a lean fit young man eager to engage in conversation and obviously not carrying an ounce of spare fat anywhere on his body. Setting off early the next morning it quickly became apparent that while gasping for breath and between trying to respond to Jayant's continuous conversational topics and keeping up with his pace, I was unlikely to see much of him over the next 24

hours never mind being able to hold a conversation with him, especially with him being at least 45 years my junior!

The Kullu area is one of the finest and most accessible Himalayan-Alpine regions in the Indian Himalaya. The true left wall on the Bara Shigri Glacier forms the watershed and great divide between Kullu-Lahul-Spiti and is the long ridge that keeps the monsoon precipitation to the west while to the east the mountains remain dry being in the rain shadow area. Despite ease of access and excellent mountaineering opportunities I have yet to encounter any other teams of mountaineers in the locality.

In 1912 General C.G. Bruce, the first mountaineer to explore this region along with his chief guide, Heinrich Fuhrer together with a Gurkha soldier, Lal Bahadur Gurung lead an attempt for the first ascent of Hanuman Tibba 5,928m (Soldang Weisshorn), unfortunately Bruce while on the approach march slipped in the Solang Nullah and tore all the deltoid muscles off his shoulder. Heinrich Fuhrer continued the ascent, without Bruce, and reached the summit with two Gurkha orderlies - forerunners of

the Sherpas. The team then went on to explore both the Indrasan and Deo Tibba mountains.

Jimmy Roberts led an exploratory expedition into the region in 1939 again in an attempt to climb Indrasan and Deo Tibba. In 1941 Roberts returned and succeeded on Dharamsura, now known by its more popular name White Sail 6,446m.



White Sail 6446m first ascended by Jimmy Roberts in 1941 ©Ian Wall

R.C. Evans tried Indrasan and Deo Tibba albeit unsuccessfully in 1952, however, success on Deo Tibba finally went to the Dutchman Van Graaf later in 1952. A few other expeditions followed into the region between the 1950 and 1960. A British Air Force expedition successfully climbed Shikar Beh 6,200m in 1955 while in 1962 a Japanese expedition visited the area and successfully summated the elusive Indrasan. In 1957-58 Major Geoffrey Douglas, accompanied by Hamish McInnes undertook a Yeti hunting expedition in the Kullu region. But the persistent and regular activist in the area for over the next decade was Robert Pettigrew, now Robert Pettigrew MBE.

In his younger years Bob had been focused on alpinism, he transferred from the sixth form into RAF Buxton Mountain Rescue Service in 1950, which led to him completing first ascents in Arctic Norway. In 1952, as a National Service man, he entered Loughborough University as a student, eventually following in John Disley's footsteps as President of the Loughborough University Mountaineering Club. This became the stepping stone that lead to his arrival in the Kullu.

In 1958, Robert G Pettigrew, Bob, was staying at a guest-house in Manali owned by Major Henry Banon where he elaborated his idea of an attempt on the unclimbed Indrasan 6221m. Other invited guests in the house included climbers in transit to and from various parts of the world. Bob was at the time working for the Outward Bound Trust (OBT) and was on his way back to the UK from a working visit to Malaya. He had been mulling over the idea of an expedition with friends as a result of receiving information via a letter on the 28th February 1958 from TS Blakeney (AC Secretary) in response to his request for suggestions for a suitable expedition region in the Himalaya. Blakeney responded by saying 'You might make a trip from Tos over to Indrasan, an unclimbed peak and probably harder than Deo Tibba'. Blakeney went on to point out the advantages of Kulu as a venue for a light-weight expedition. By the beginning of May 1958 Bob had completed his research on possible objectives; he had recruited expedition members and had embarked on several exploration trips into the high valleys of the region. With the help of a local cobbler in Manali

adjustments were made to footwear, tents were modified and sleeping bags sourced, the technical equipment comprised of items suitable for British winter climbing with the addition of crampons (10-points) and a few rock pegs, the stage was set. The expedition finally set off from Manali on the 7th May 1958 forging a route up the Duhangan Nullah (river) towards the Chandra Tal. After three weeks of difficult route finding and being buffeted by storms the expedition decided to return to Manali to take stock. Feeling refreshed they set out again on the 8th June and retraced their steps in quick time back to their high camp. Due to time limitations the expedition decided that Indrasan would have to live to fight another day and instead they turned their attention to Deo Tibba with the secondary aim of reconnoitring the approach route to Indrasan. However Deo Tibba also remained elusive and with the monsoon weather clouds hovering ominously over head the expedition headed back down towards Manali but not without a foray onto a small 5334m summit directly south of Peak 5229m in the close proximity to the Duhangan Col. The expedition consisted of Bob Pettigrew, Mike Thomson, Basil Poff, Pat Morrison and Ron Mowll, but by now Bob's imagination and love for the region had been ignited.



Cathedral 6250m, Gunter's Col and the Tiger Tooth 6035m ©Ian Wall

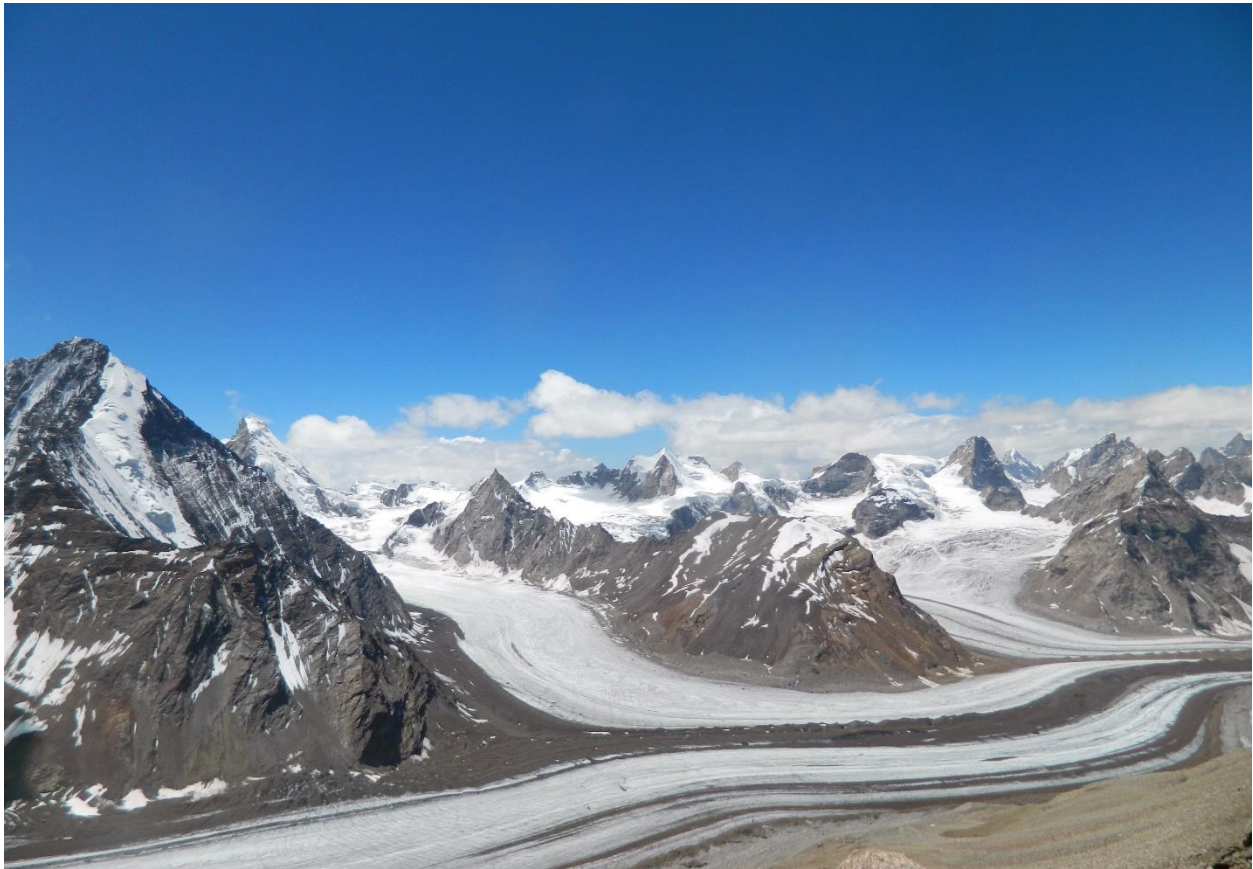
In 1961 The Derbyshire Himalayan Expedition began to take shape after received support from the Duke of Devonshire, as its Patron, the Mount Everest Foundation and other notable Derbyshire residents and companies, however, a third of the expedition costs of £4,500 had to be met by the members themselves, J. Ashcroft, D. Burgess, D. Gray, R. Handley, T Panther, R Pettigrew, S. Read and N Symthe. The expedition's objectives were to `make a useful contribution to the map of the Kullu / Bara Shigri Divide, to ascend what is now called Gunther's Col from the Kulu side and finally to complete a recce of Ali Ratni Tibba, a splendid granite obelisk, approached from the Parbati tributary known as the Malana Nullah', a job previously undertaken by Jimmy Roberts. This area is approximately 10 miles to the east of Manali and approached via the Malana Nullah and glacier.

Initially, the expedition believed it would be left to its own devices, however, two days before arriving in Bombay by boat a letter arrived informing the expedition that Cpt. Balgit Singh would be joining the expedition as the LO, a complication and cost that had not been envisaged during the expedition's planning stage. In 1961 the vehicular road along the Beas Valley terminated at Nagar, south of Manali, and from the crossing of the Beas River progress was only possible on foot or with ponies and mules. The expedition from this point made good use of 57 ponies, 11 muleteers and Ladakhi porters to move the 12 miles onto Manali, it then went on to succeed in making the fifth ascent of Deo Tibba on the 20th June (Pettigrew, Read, Handley along with Jimet and Zangbo, the local staff). This was the fulfilment of Bob's three year ambition. Unfortunately, again, there was no success on Indrasan where Burgess and Gray reported that in their opinion the only possible route from the south was via a diagonal line that was continually swept by avalanches. By the 9th July the party had recharged their batteries at Base Camp and were ready for phase two of their expedition – to complete a plane-table survey and a climb of the Bara Shigri / Kulu Divide via a Col seen by Gunther in 1954 from the north-eastern side, and to complete a recce of Ali Ratni Tibba.

Ashcroft and Burgess along with Bob and the Ladakhis, Jigmet and Ang Chook, ascended the Malana Glacier. Eventually this team found a manageable crossing linking the Malana and Tos Nullahs and thus completed the first crossing of what they then called, and is identified on modern maps as, Animals Pass 4580m; the name comes from the animal shaped rocks that stretch across the col. This passage now represents a modern three day trek from Manali directly into the upper Tos Nullah. In 1941 Roberts wrote 'the lower four miles of the Tos Glacier constitutes just about the most boulder-strewn, dirtiest stretches of glacier I have ever seen', in my opinion this could be said about many of the glaciers in this region! Even Bob described the East Tos Glacier as being 'arduous and ugly terrain unrecognisable as ice' however, the higher you climb the more traditional and photographic these glaciers appear. The head of the East Tos Glacier provided an excellent camp site from which the small team completed the first crossing of the col referred to as point 5410m on the present day map linking the East Tos and the Tichu Glaciers. On the 13th July the expedition made a short descent into the upper Tichu Glacial basin and headed towards a dip in the northern retaining wall of the glacier believing this to be the potential crossing point of the Divide leading down onto the Bara Shigri Glacier, the col first identified by Dr Gunther in 1953 from the Bara Shigri side. Locating the key passage up a hidden couloir to the skyline, Bob along with Burgess, became the first people to look down into the Bara Shigri Glacier from the pass. Bob describes the view down into Concordia as having 'a text book appearance with lateral moraines being straight from the drawing board!'

This 'text book' appearance is still as much in evidence today as it was back in 1961. Pettigrew and Burgess completed the day's activities by building a cairn right on the Col before retiring to their camp just west of Col 5410m on the East Tos Glacier. However, during the return journey down into the East Tos Glacier the team decided to stretch out their meagre rations so as to facilitate an attempt on White Sail 6446m, the peak climbed in 1941 by Jimmy Roberts and also situated on the Kullu-Kahul-Spiti Divide. Having now become reunited with the survey team Pettigrew, Ashcroft and Burgess set off for the Col south of White Sail. Leaving their tent at 3.45am on

the 16th July and within eight and a half hours the rope of three had surmounted steep ice requiring, in those days, step cutting, ascended exposed rock and in diminishing visibility and weather conditions reached the summit of White Sail (Dharamsura) 6446m, the second ascent of the mountain had been accomplished.



Looking down into Concordia and the 'text book appearance with the lateral moraines being straight from the drawing board'

Returning to Base Camp the whole expedition met up again to exchange stories, the other team consisting of Handley and Gray along with Wangyal and Zangbo had succeeded in making two first ascents of peaks known as the Manikaren Spires on the east ridge of Ali Ratni Tibba, but had failed to find a route to the latter before the monsoon arrived and forced them to retreat.

At the time there was some confusion as to the correct location of 'the Col' as there are two possibilities on the main watershed but both present difficulties. As the

original sighting by Gunther was from the north-east and Bob's expedition was approaching from the south-west. Joining up the dots was always going to prove problematical, one crossing, was reported, as presenting serious difficulties and was located to the eastern side while the other difficulties were on the western side of the Col. In the end one Col was given the inscription Gunther's Col while the other DHE (Derbyshire Himalayan Expedition) Ice Col the latter being to the east of the former named col. However, on the Indian Himalaya Map in use today, Gunther's Col is shown as being at 5399m and is located as the first point of weakness to the west of Cathedral Peak 6250m, the Ice Col does not appear on the map by name. During 1962 and 1963 Bob visited Manali on family holidays but never wishing to miss an opportunity took a few days out to continue his exploration of the greater area. He trekked into the Solang Nullah, to the north of Manali, and then back into the Malana Nullah valley to the east, but in general, his forays were beaten by the inclement weather and frequent snow falls. From May 27th to the 31st Bob and party crossed the Chandrakhanni Pass in wintery conditions and then the following day made an ascent of Peak 4426m, the last major peak on the long southern spur of Indrasan, to the north of the Chandrakhanni Pass. During the second world war the Kangra Valley was used to house Italian POWs and on the ascent of Peak 4426m a carved stone with the inscription JEL 10 1944 was found just below the summit, yet possibly further evidence of the excursions of Italian imprisoned climbers during their stay in the region?

As a result of Bob's family holidays and his exploratory trips into the Solang valley in 1962 he was fired up and ready for more adventures. An opportunity presented itself in the autumn of 1963 when Bob Menzies, a friend of Bob's and who was visiting India on business, suggested that he could spare a few weeks climbing in the Kulu. The stage was set and after the usual preparations and packing sessions based in the Banon's guest house in Manali the team set off in the direction of the Solang Valley. The following two weeks saw exploration of the upper Solang Valley and after several nights with recorded 20° F temperatures Bob, along with Wangyal, completed the first ascent of Ladakhi Peak 5341m.



Kullu Makalu 6349m ©Ian Wall

The Sara Umгла La had long been used as an old trading route when the conditions were right. The Rajput warrior chieftains of the 17th century closed this route and put an end to the Tibetan occupation of Kullu. They then applied vigorously levied taxes which forced the local traders to find ways round the customs houses. The old route, and Custom House, crossing the Rothang La was now an expensive option so a new route across the Kullu-Lahul-Spiti watershed was urgently required; the Sara Umгла La was open for trade!

Bob's next expedition was to locate and cross the Sara Umгла La pass. The expedition set out from Manali heading for the now familiar Malana Nullah and along the way Bob intended to use this expedition in a bid to complete a reconnaissance of Papsura 6451m. The approach was long and arduous but coincided with the twelfth anniversary of the first ascent of Everest and so it was decided that a first ascent of a virgin peak would serve as an appropriate celebration. An objective was located that met all the requirements and on the 29th May 1965 Bob along with Langford, and the trusted Ladakhi staff Wangyal and Zangbo completed the first ascent of Ramchukor Peak 5189m situated immediately south of Animals Pass in the east retaining wall of the Ali Ratni Tibba Glacier, now referred to as the Dudhon Glacier. Relocating Camp 1 on the Pass of the Animals the expedition was easily able to identify the Sara Umгла La. By the 3rd June the expedition was again in forward motion. Aiming diagonally across the Tos Glacier they made for an obvious couloir and steep rock rib that would give access to the pass and eventually connects the Tos and East Tos Glaciers to the Chandra River valley immediately to the west of the outfall of the Bara Shigri Glacier. Once on the La the expedition was subjected to gale force winds that at their height split one of the tents down the side seam. The resourceful Ladakhi crew then proceeded to mend the split while battling to hold the canvas together so it could be sewn. On the 8th June the expedition, now a light weight reconnaissance team, set off for a closer inspection of Papsura 6451m from the south and western aspects. The North West Ridge, the West Face and the South Ridge of Papsura were all carefully scrutinised but the team failed to identify a safe and feasible route through the difficulties to the summit. The expedition concluded their reconnaissance of the region by including the circumnavigating Ali Ratni Tibba via its east and west glaciers and then making the first crossing of the Pass of the Oblisk 4876m before heading down into the Parbati Valley at Jara on the 17th June.

In the spring of 1966 Bob was back in Manali this time leading an Indo-British expedition to Hanuman Tibba organised by the Bombay Climbers' Club. The approach route was laborious traversing steep hill sides of thick birch forests and steep and exposed sections of rock cliffs. To avoid the difficulties of the lower Manalsu Nullah

the expedition climbed high on the flanks of Khanapara traversing above the nullah before descending back into the mid nullah basin. The route chosen by the recce team took the expedition across the upper slopes of the eastern ridge before heading diagonally westwards and up the south face of Hanuman Tibba towards the summit. It was just as the lead climbers were approximately 160m below the summit that the loud 'CRACK' was heard accompanied by a dull roar of a big slab-avalanche that had broken loose. The climbers were engulfed and carried 160m down the slope to where they eventually slowed to a halt just above one of the many lower ice cliffs over which the main flow of snow and ice was passing. Shaken but otherwise unhurt the party reassessed their choice of route in consideration of the 160m of avalanche prone slope that still remained about the break line and that was so far still intact. Crossing the debris the climbers retraced their steps back to the East Ridge where they then pitched the remaining shoulder to the summit acutely aware of the poor snow conditions and the unstable cornice overhanging the precipitous north face and the lack of adherence of snow to the south face. After six hours from leaving BC the team reached the summit, first stood upon by Heinrich Fuhrer, Bruce's guide from Meiringen. The Indo-British expedition had ascended initially, from the north and then the Salong valley, before crossing Bruce's Col, now called the Solang La, and traversing the west face before finally climbing the South Ridge to the summit. Bob's party descended through the ice cliffs and finally glissaded back into Camp 2 by 1530hrs. While the main expedition was on Hanuman Tibba two of the base camp staff Nadkarni and Chering Namgyal completed the first ascent of Peak 5303m via the South East Ridge immediately due west of Seri to the south of the Manali Pass. Finally on the 5th June Bob together with Warhurst and Chering Namgyal made the first ascent of Shakuntla Tibba 4954m. And so the season drew to a close with the Indo-British expedition members gathering in the Banon's guest house on the 7th June before finally departing Kulu.

Looking into the Chhola in the 1967 season got off to a rocky start during an attempt on Papsura 6451m, the Peak of Evil, and 'twin' peak of Dharmasura (White Sail). On the 1st June Colin Pritchard, Mike Payne and Bob took a 500m fall down Avalanche

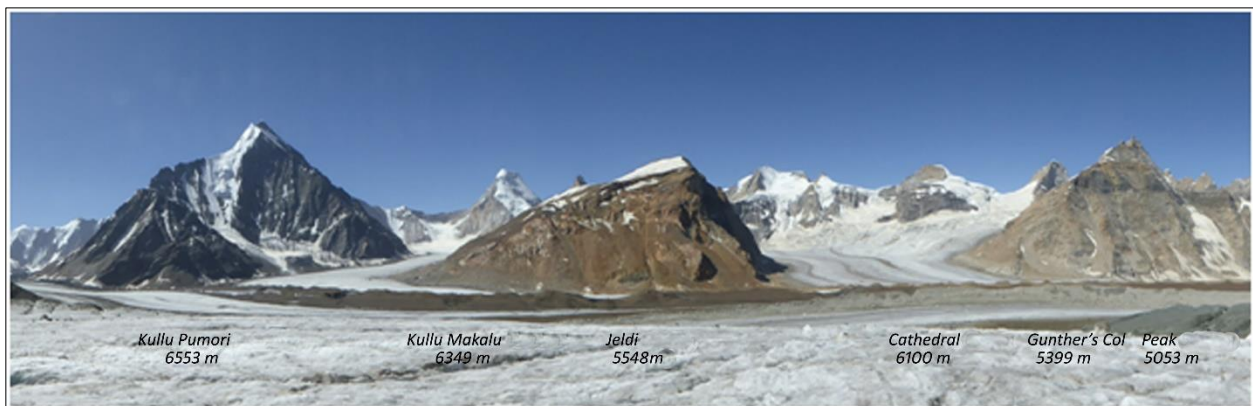
Couloir, Hill and Payne escaped relatively un-harmed while Bob suffered a dislocated hip. Papsura is the third highest peak in the Kullu / Lahul divide. The expedition started on the 4th May from the Parbati River, BC was established near the snout of the Malana Glacier, a site previously used by Bob and his trusted staff. The next two weeks were taken up ferrying loads across the Pass of the Animals, again the expedition was beset by bad weather. Camp 1 was eventually established in the cwm to the west of Papsura on the 22nd May but only after Pritchard had taken a fall into a large crevasse when a bridge collapsed. The team was then bogged down by a severe snow storm which deposited enough snow over the next six days to bury the tents. A 160m rope was fixed to the foot of Avalanche Couloir the chosen route for the ascent. On the 31st May, nearing the top of the couloir it became obvious that the way was blocked by a big boss of ice, the only option left was to descend, always easier said than done. No sooner had the team started their retreat than they were struck by a small side avalanche that quickly gathered speed and strength pulling all three roped climbers off their feet. Their downward momentum came abruptly to a halt at the bergshund. Mike Payne had 'flown' across the 'shund' but had in the process twisted his arm, Bob came to rest straddling the lower lip with his legs bound together in the climbing rope and Colin Pritchard, well, Colin might well have acted as a sea anchor and could have been the reason why the party fell no further, he was in the depths of the bergshund being strangled by his rucksack straps and acting as the 'team anchor'! It turned out that Bob had dislocated his hip and had to be evacuated the next day to a safe location. Half the party descended to let wives and family know the situation and at the same time to arrange for a rescue party to ascend to Camp 1.

Meanwhile back at Camp 1 the remaining 'fit' team members elected to have one last attempt at the peak with Hill and Pritchard going for a New Zealand style dash. Their proposed route was up the main South Face Couloir that had previously been discarded because of the objective danger created by the large amount of snow and ice suspended higher on the face. This danger was ultimately reduced as a result of following a mixed snow and rock rib situated to one side of the couloir and out of the

main fall line. Leaving camp at 3.15am the pair climbed quickly reaching the top at 10am by way of the western couloir on the South Face. Whilst preparing to cross the heavily corniced couloir the rucksacks were tied into the rope to be lowered into an icy basin, unfortunately the knot slipped and the sacks with all spare clothing, food and cameras fell nearly 1,000m down to the base of the face. Both climbers agreed to push on, although the climbing was straight forward it required a bit of 'grunt' with strenuous moves on the rock band and the summit snow ridge. By 14.30 hours the pair were on the top. During the descent Hill slipped twice while cutting steps on the steep hard ice and in rapidly deteriorating weather and heavily falling snow. By the time they had reached the less steep part of the lower couloir the snow was waist deep. The pair returned to Bob, nearly 21 hours after departing camp that morning and who still awaiting rescue in Camp 1.

Once the rescue team had arrived the return trip to BC, with a laden stretcher, took four days crossing the Animals Pass and the Tos Glacier before climbing over the Chandar Khanni Pass and down into the Kullu Valley with the use of fixed ropes in the icefall. The expedition comprised of John Ashburner, Charles Henty, Geoff Hill, Mike Payne, Bob Pettigrew (leader), Colin Pritchard, supported by the high altitude porters, Sonam Wangyal and Pasang Lakpha, local boys who came from Malana and Manali and were there to help with logistics along with the rescue.

This epic brought to a close Bob's golden decade of exploration of the Kullu region. However, the wilds of Kullu eventually got back into his system and in 1980 he



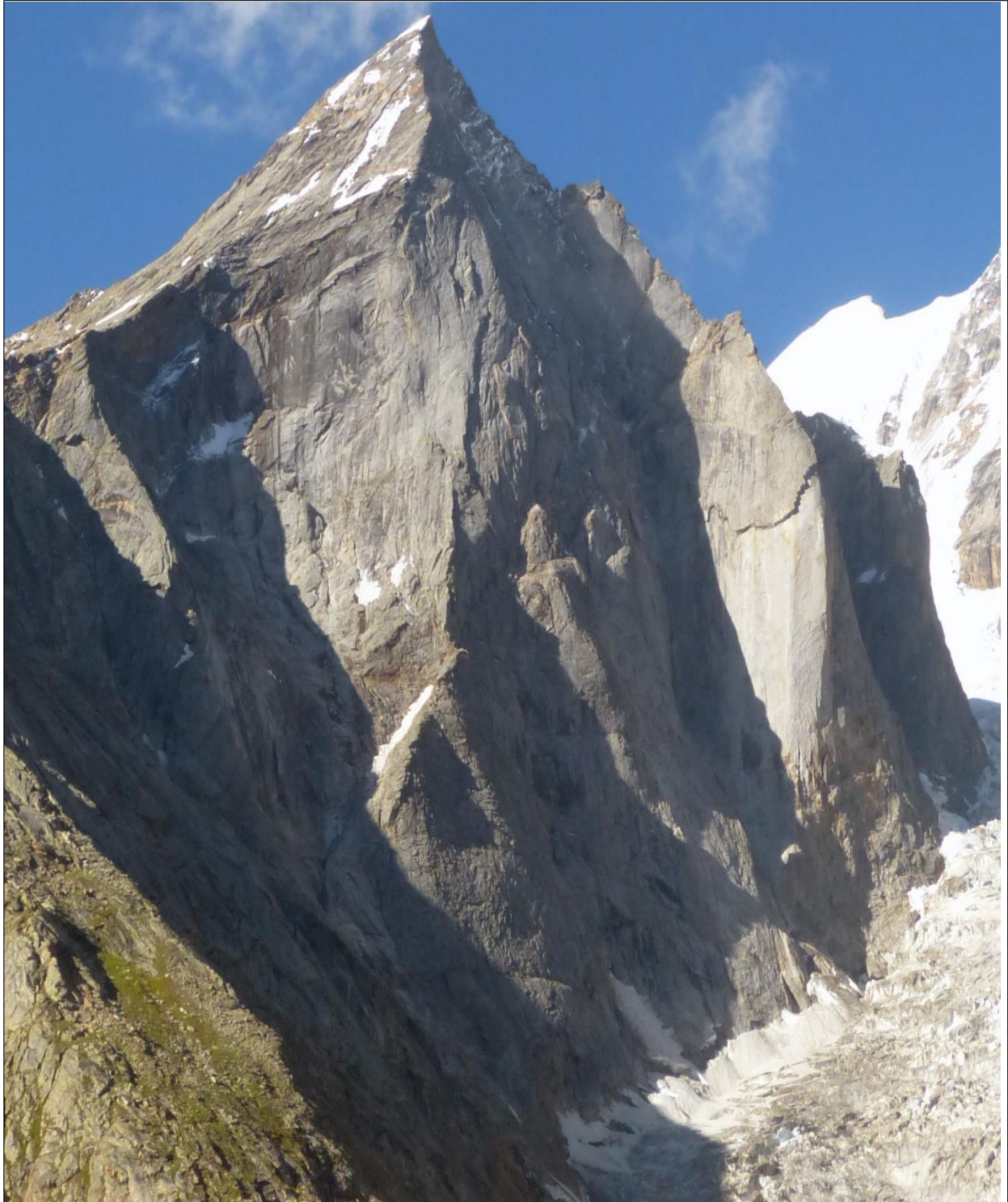
returned to Manali where he has consistently, over the subsequent three and a half decades, continued with his forays into the hills and valleys of Himachal Pradesh.

Back to my, by now, solitary wanderings up the Bara Shigri moraines, trying to pick out the newly erected cairns carefully camouflaged amongst the glacial rubble by Jayant and at the same time trying to spot the blurred silhouette of him breaking the skyline many hundreds of metres in front of me. The ascent seemed never ending and I took frequent stops to catch my breath under the guise of taking photographs. It had been suggested that I might manage the journey within the day but that was not to be the case. Thankfully Jayant realised that I was neither his age nor at his level of fitness and, within an hour of my thinking that this was all a bad idea, I crested a moraine ridge to be greeted by my grinning minder who suggested we bivied on the relatively flat grassy plateau in amongst the boulders that I had just arrived at. The food that I had set out with was still festering in the top of my rucksack and which would now have to do for the evening meal and to be stretched out for breakfast as well and for feeding the both of us. After a few hours rest the dawn seemed to come quickly, the warmth of the sun much later. Although the second part of the moraine journey starts to lose its steepness the moraines continue on for another 4 kilometres before it is possible to descend onto the flattish ice normally associated with glacial travel. In the distance the collection of tents indicating the end of that part of my journey and my first introduction to the Kullu – Lahul mountains much loved and traversed by Bob.

I have now completed this moraine trek four times and it never gets any easier either in ascent or descent. However, the mountains at the end of the trudge are worth every aching moment and every word uttered under the breath.

Bob, you have another convert!

And for those whose idea of exploration is on rock, there are still some gems to be found, although I wouldn't like to guarantee the quality of the rock!



Pinnacles 5630m ©Ian Wall