



Because It Might Not Be There...

The origins of the Haute Route – a Victorian quest for a high-altitude route between Chamonix and Zermatt





0830 – Col d'Argentière (3544m):

“Standing atop the Col d'Argentière with the Tour Noir immediately to the left. To the right, a rocky ridge stretches away like some gothic arch towards Mont Dolent. Having left Chamonix the previous afternoon and slept at Lognan, the ascent of the snow slopes at the S.E. corner of the Argentière glacier had taken longer than anticipated.

The eastern side of the col is much steeper and has never been climbed. Dropping away between our feet to the Val Ferret over a mile below, the vertiginous snow slope is held to the mountain by the occasional rocky rib. Ominously, there are deep furrows in the soft snow showing traces of snow rolling downwards.”

This was the position Stephen Winkworth found himself in one Saturday morning in June 1861. An early member of the Alpine Club, when holidaying from his job in the Lancashire textile industry, Winkworth usually climbed with his wife, Emma. Together they often made the 'first ascent by a lady'.

Accompanying him were three guides from the Simond family. The oldest, Auguste Simond, also worked as a crystal hunter which was how he had discovered the col a few years before. While Winkworth provided the motivation, it was Simond who guided them up and, most significantly, led the descent. One of his sons also worked as a blacksmith making ice axes and crampons on his forge at the foot of the Bossons Glacier. This became the Simond factory in Les Houches which still manufactures mountaineering equipment for Decathlon.

Winkworth's party was part of a concerted effort by the Alpine Club from 1859-61. Their aim was to open up an aesthetically pleasing high level summer mountaineering route between two centres of interest – Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa. When winter sports became popular in the valley this would be the inspiration for the modern ski tour known as the Haute Route but that would not happen for another half century.

One hundred and sixty years later, the motives of these Alpine Club pioneers are strangely familiar. Just as cheap air travel now makes it possible for more people to go trekking in Nepal, the proliferation of railways in the 1850s had made alpine travel more affordable. Chamonix was no longer a simple farming community visited only by a few aristocrats passing through on their Grand Tour. By the 1860s Chamonix was a tourist trap.

Most of these tourists stuck to a small number of well-publicised routes – the Tête Noire (now the Cabane des Dix), the Col de Balme, the pass of St. Théodule, the Cols de la Seigne and du Bonhomme and the famous St. Bernard Pass. The modern equivalent would be the hordes taking the cable car to the Aiguille du Midi or the train to Montenvers.

This was the height of the Golden Age of Alpinism when most of the iconic alpine peaks were first climbed. Four years after the foundation of the first alpine club in London (the Alpine Club) and a year before the foundation of the second (our own Österreichischer Alpenverein) in Vienna, there was no shortage of people interested in the problem. Overall, during the summers of 1859-61, fourteen members of the Alpine Club and a dozen guides took part in the quest for a 'High Level Route'.

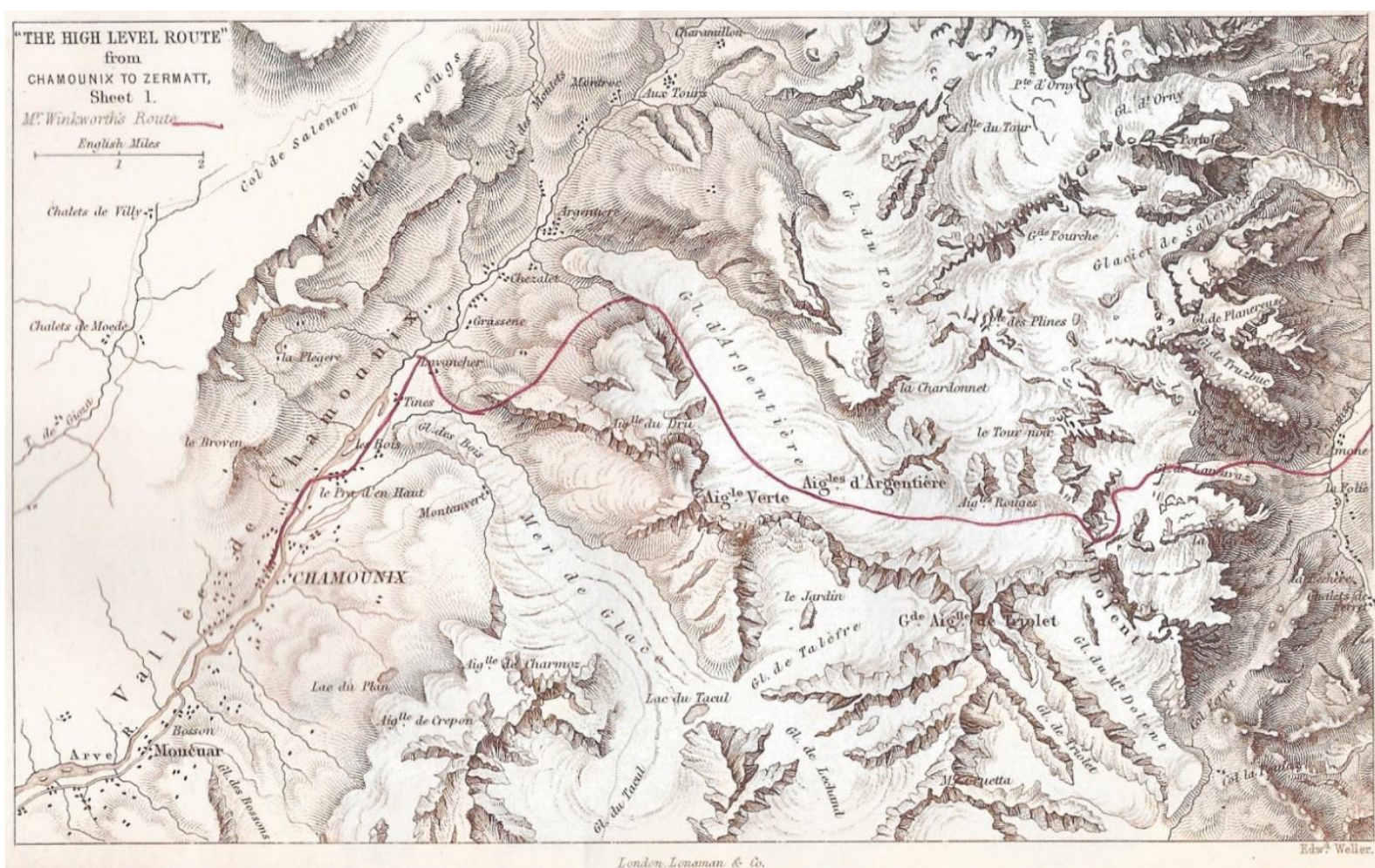
Thanks to the scientific alpinists who pioneered the region in the early 1800s, Alpine Club members were entirely aware of the impressive vistas at higher altitudes. Being aware of the possibilities and finding a viable route, however, were two different things. It was far from clear that such a route was possible. Sitting atop the Col d'Argentière, Winkworth wasn't even sure he would make it down.

0930 – East Face of the Col d'Argentière (3400m)

"Led by Auguste Simond, we start to descend, sticking to the rocks as much as possible. At one point we have to traverse 150 yards of steep snow, scored with deep avalanche channels. Eventually the precipitous rock becomes too difficult and we must once again take to the snow. As the A Neuve Glacier came in sight, the slope ends in a snow-cliff inside bounded on either side by vertical rock."

It is easy to underestimate the difficulty of this task. Nowadays, accurate maps, refuges and insurance are all readily available. In the Mont Blanc Massif, mobile phones and cheap insurance from the AAC(UK) make it possible to call for a helicopter and be rescued within a quarter of an hour. In 1861, "Three-fourths of the line of country (between Chamonix and Zermatt), comprising many virgin peaks and glaciers, remained comparatively unknown".

The maps of the period were better than 'dragons be here', but bad enough to make comparison with modern maps difficult. The map published by the Alpine Club in 1862 showing Winkworth's route is a good example (below). Strikingly, when his party walked past the Glacier du Chardonnet which is now an iconic part of the Haute Route ski tour, Winkworth thought it might lead to the Glacier du Tour rather than the Glacier de Saleinaz. More entertainingly, contemporary maps of the Haute Savoie still showed [Mont Iseran](#), a mythical 4,000er whose existence was only disproved in 1862.



The route taken by Winkworth's party in June 1861

The High Level Route was, therefore, genuine exploration with the potential for surprises.

1300 – Above the A Neuve Glacier (3300m)

“At length, Auguste Simond discovers a channel in the snow cliff deep enough to come out on the A Neuve glacier. Looking into it we see by its colour that it is a frequent passage for debris and stonefall. Hearing a noise from above we duck behind rocks to our left and shelter as an avalanche passes by. It now being the hottest part of the day we consider it prudent to wait before trying again and sit down to lunch and a siesta.”

Starting again later that afternoon Winkworth's party reached the Glacier of La Neuva without further difficulty, reaching Orsières in the Val d'Entremont late in the evening. This valley separates the peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif in the west from those around Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn in the east. It is the one point on the route where, even with the advantages of modern huts, one is forced to descend.

The traverse of the Col d'Argentiere was only the first of four obstacles to putting up the High Level Route. The second, arguably the hardest, and the last to be solved, was finding a way out of the Val d'Entremont, over the defences surrounding Mont Vélán and the Grand Combin and onto the Durand and Otemma glaciers leading eastwards towards Zermatt. This was tackled by two different groups.

Tackling the problem from the west were Frederick William Jacomb, a thirty-something lawyer from Huddersfield, and 33-year-old William Mathews, the land agent and surveyor who first proposed the formation of the Alpine Club.

Guiding them were two brothers – Michel and Jean-Baptiste Croz. Well-known for his mountaineering prowess, Michel Croz would later guide Whymper during the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 but was tragically killed during the descent.

The group approaching from the east (the Zermatt end) was both a stereotype of the era and at the same time recognisably modern – four Cambridge graduates loosely led by a founding member of the Alpine Club, Reverend J.F. Hardy. Their humour and banter would be equally at home with today's graduates. When they told one local of their intended route, he walked off shaking his head and mumbling 'pauvres gens'. Thereafter, the slightest difficulty – be it an awkward crevasse, stale bread or just poor coffee – was greeted with choruses of 'pauvres gens' and hysterical laughter.

Initial efforts focused on the Glacier de Corbassière yet, while the Alpine Club's records suggest they discovered the Col du Meitin, for some reason they judged it impassable. Instead, two successive groups forced a route up between the Tête de By and the Grand Combin below the present-day Bivacco Musso in the vicinity of the Valsorey hut.

Neither group seems to have taken the modern route hugging the south face of the Grand Combin but the slopes further south. Given what was done with nailed boots and axes as long as alpenstocks it seems unlikely that this was due to lack of ability. More probably, the recession of the Sonadon and Valsorey glaciers has changed the terrain significantly.

One of the period's most famous alpinists, Francis Fox Tuckett, overcame the third obstacle by connecting the Italian village of Prarayer in Valpelline with the Otemma glacier via the Col d'Oren. Like us he had a keen interest in 'gear' and invented an alpine sleeping bag with rubber-coated fabric on the underside. Even more than other route descriptions of the period, Tuckett's description talks as much about food – especially an array of Prarayer specialities made from locally-produced milk – as the route itself.



Michel Croz – Almost as long as a traditional alpenstock, his ice axe is very similar to that described in Whymper's book 'Scrambles amongst the Alps in the Years 1860-69'. Weighing just under 4lbs, it would have been about four times heavier than a modern walking axe of around 2'.



Its continued popularity with tourists from the early C19th until the present day makes the Mer de Glace one of the clearest examples of glacial recession. A sign on the track from the Montenvers station to the ladders descending to the glacier shows the level of the ice in 1820. It isn't just age which makes the descent longer than it used to be!

Lastly, a party led by the previously mentioned Jacomb found a way to Zermatt from Prarayer via a more direct route than the popular Theodulpass. From Prarayer, he ascended past where the Club Alpino Italiano's Rifugio Aosta now lies, over the Col de Valpelline and down the Zmuttgletscher.

In Jacomb's party was well-known Zermatt guide Peter Taugwalder. Like Croz, Taugwalder helped Whymper ill-fated party to the summit of the Matterhorn in 1865. It was Taugwalder who, with great skill, tried to hold the fatal fall yet whose career was ruined by the event.

The list of protagonists on the quest for a High Level Route, both guides and alpinists, reads like some sort of alpine Debrett's of nineteenth century mountaineering aristocracy. In some ways, however, they were not that different from us. Just as today, it was common to climb with the same guides season after season. Jacomb, Matthews and the Croz brothers, for example, first climbed together for an ascent of Mont Blanc two years before.

Our forebears' preoccupation with food may also seem familiar. Tuckett's level of enthusiasm was somewhat unusual, and flapjack and power gel have replaced veal, ham and sausages, but the journals of the time are replete with descriptions of 'second breakfasts'. These were typically consumed in daylight 3-4 hours after starting out. Perhaps this ought to be reintroduced as standard procedure for the AAC(UK)? Similarly, it is notable how many climbers carried a small hip flask of whisky. The latter practice has not entirely died out.

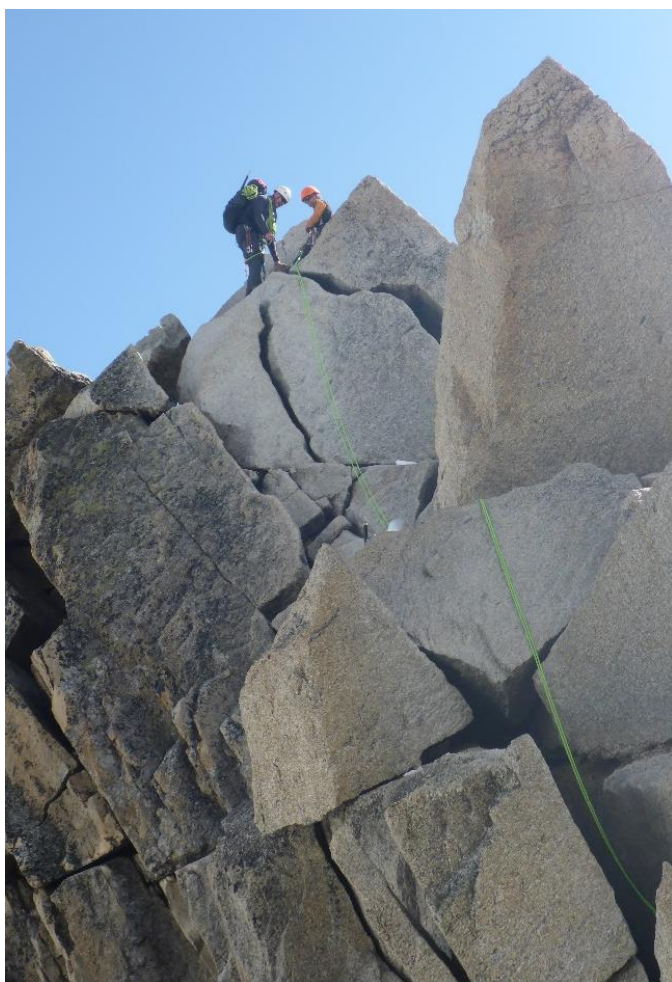
The Mer de Glace Seen from Montenvers – 22 Years Apart



Comparing photographs is not a very objective way to show the effects of environmental change. Note, however, the change in the altitude of what was more or less permanent snow on the Aiguille du Tacul in the distance.

That said, there is no getting away from the fact that these were the elite climbers of their time. Typically in their 30s, they covered prodigious distances and reckoned to do the entirety of their High Level Route in four days. Granted, most alpine refuges were not built until later in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth, so there was no choice but to descend to the valley to sleep, but even ski-touring groups following the modern Haute Route typically allow about a week.

Were our forebears really physically superior? Possibly. Modern endurance athletes and elite alpinists often train according to the principles laid out in 'Training for the New Alpinism' which emphasises the development of a strong aerobic base from long periods of exercise at relatively low heart rates. In a world without cars people would often walk tens of thousands of 'steps per day' even without a 'fitbit'. This is easily equivalent to the 300 or so hours of low heart-rate exercise recommended by modern training programs. Were they a century and a half ahead of their time?



The author insouciantly descending the first abseil on the Arête des Cosmiques in August 2018. Ten days later, a large landslide destroyed the area around the abseils.

Another difference is the changing mountain environment. Since the High Level Route was pioneered, mean alpine temperatures have risen by just over two degrees Celsius, the total area covered by glaciers has halved and rockfall due to melting permafrost is now commonplace. There are also other, more subtle, effects: increased slope angles on glaciers, widening bergschrunds, weakening snow bridges, increasingly dry glaciers and a less predictable alpine season.

The effects of rockfall due to permafrost melting can be particularly insidious and affect even the best. In early August 2018, professional mountaineer and Simond Director Olivier Bonnet was tragically killed by stonefall on the Dent du Géant. We are also losing routes. A recent study of routes described in Gaston Rébuffat's iconic 1973 guidebook "The Mont Blanc Massif: The 100 Finest Routes" found that over a quarter of the routes had been significantly affected and three no longer exist.

For these reasons, just as in 1861 it was not clear whether a High Level Route existed, 160 years later it is not clear how much of the original route is still feasible. In the summer of 2021, therefore, a group of nine of us aim to find out. We have a range of backgrounds and interests – teachers, financiers, artists, ski instructors and cyclists. Several are serving or reservist soldiers or members of the FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry).

The Haute Route ski tour and various ‘Haute Routes for walkers’ are very popular but it is less common to try to follow the original High Level Route which was done on crampons and primarily in August. Nowadays this is quite late in the season. Moreover, the cable cars and refuges have given tourists the means to encroach upon the high mountains and it is increasingly difficult to escape the madding crowds.

Following the ethos of the pioneers, we will strive to find an aesthetically pleasing high altitude route between Zermatt and Chamonix, seeking to avoid crowds and find out whether the goal of the Alpine Club’s pioneers is still achievable.

While less technically difficult than many climbs done by AAC(UK) members, there are other reasons for going. One is that we hope to take non-mountaineers along with us using photography, video and social media via our website – www.high-level-route.com. For those who spend time in the mountains, the changing alpine environment may be an obvious environmental canary in a cage, but the ordinary person in the street can’t see the canary.

This change provides an even more immediate reason to go. When Mallory was asked why he went to Everest he famously responded “Because it’s there...” We are going not because the High Level Route is still there, but because it might soon not be.

Note: For ease of comparison with modern maps we have used modern spelling throughout.

