

The R O Downes Hut

R O (Bob) Downes, is a former Climbers' Club member who, in five years, contributed so much to the climbing world and yet is known by few. 'Downes, one of our brightest stars, died on Masherbrum'. That was how the Editor of the *CCJ* officially announced the news of the death of Bob Downes to the Club in 1958. The now famous photograph taken by Roger Chorley of Bob on *Diagonal, Dinas Mot*, accompanied his Obituary.



An extract from the photograph of Bob Downes on *Diagonal, Dinas Mot* by kind permission of Roger Chorley

Bob was an active member of the Cambridge University M.C. who had started climbing in the early '50s. During his formative years he had steadily worked his way through the V Diffs gaining experience and developing his technique. He was first recognised as a young and up and coming talent during a CUMC meet in the Lakes at Easter 1953 when he was halfway up *Eliminate B*, an HVS on Dow Crag. Geoff Sutton and Roger Chorley were checking out the routes and called up to

Downes: "Do you know what you are on?"

"Yes" replied the leader "*Murray's B*." As neither Downes nor his second seemed to be having any problem nothing was said. However, at the top of the route Sutton met the two youngsters and after a short conversation it became apparent that they still had no idea they had just completed a climb several grades above their usual standard and without experiencing any difficulty. Following their brief encounter Bob often turned to Sutton for recommendations as to what to do next. During the remainder of 1953 he worked his way through the classic Welsh and Lakeland VSs, none of which gave him any problem. That summer he briefly but productively visited the Dolomites and on his return he again met up with Sutton for frequent gritstone outings.

Bob realised that by keeping himself 'match fit' he wouldn't waste any part of his valuable vacation working up to his peak performance. Consequently he spent the winter combining his rock-climbing with gym work, not in preference to weather conditions but because of the constraints of time. In fact, the weather was just 'weather' to him and consequently he made no allowances for it. There are many stories of Downes making fine and committing ascents in appalling conditions; after all 'a good route was a good route' whatever the weather.

Bob's ability was quickly becoming apparent to his circle of friends and his awareness of what was happening on the greater crags rapidly developed, as did his distinctive climbing style. By 1954 Bob had already met up with Eric Langmuir and John (Toby) Mallinson and in August they went north to Scotland where they made an early exploratory visit to Loch Etive and The Trilleachan Slabs.

1955 was an excellent year for Bob and as if to add insult to injury and a further blow to Scottish prestige after the Brown-Whillans's ascent of *Sassenach* the previ-



The newly refurbished R O Downes Memorial Hut, Froggatt, Derbyshire. Ian Wall collection



Bob, who with Eric Langmuir and John (Toby) Mallinson, went on an exploratory visit to Loch Etive complete with the prized possession – a pair of PAs, 12th August 1954. Eric Langmuir collection

then made the second ascent of two hard routes put up by Brian Kellett solo 11 years earlier, first on Minus Three Buttress and then Gardyloo Buttress. The Cambridge team climbed *Right-Hand Route* in damp conditions and were impressed by the 'daring performance' of Kellett. *Gardyloo Buttress* had also stretched Kellett on his first and solo ascent where it had taken an hour to climb a 15-foot corner, which Downes found reminiscent of *Piggott's Climb* on Cloggy though steeper and more

ous year he pioneered *North Eastern Grooves* on Minus One Buttress. This was the possible line first noticed by Downes the previous year. It was his original intention to follow the crack-line on the buttress. However, at just over a third height a belt of overhangs crossed the face and forced Downes and O'Hara to traverse into Minus Two Gully before they could ascend the 40-foot flake to find the final pitches and summit. Downes pioneered the first part of the route with O'Hara on the 17th June but then completed the ascent with Langmuir on the 21st June. This was the first new route of the year on the Ben and Bob

Bob and Mike O'Hara in Glen Coe. Eric Langmuir collection





Bob leading on the first ascent of N E Grooves, Ben Nevis 1955, in the company of Eric Langmuir and Mike O'Hara. Eric Langmuir collection exposed.

Downes and O'Hara, this time in the company of Mike Prestige, returned to Ben Nevis where O'Hara had the idea of straightening out their route up the Minus One Buttress. The line eventually corkscrewed its way up the rock but the team did manage to eliminate the sling that had been used on the first ascent. The fourth pitch was the crux and consisted of an exposed rib and a groove section of committing moves; *Minus One Direct*, now described in the modern guide as 'one of the most enjoyable climbs known to mankind; sustained, and on perfect rock', had succumbed to the Cambridge onslaught. By now Downes had the feel of big Scottish rock routes in his hands and a list of possible ascents planted firmly in his mind.

In June 1956 he was again travelling north. Now the proud owner of a pair of PAs and this time in the company of Mike O'Hara he headed up to complete an 11-hour second ascent of the Whillans and Brown route *Sassenach*. On the crux pitch Downes and O'Hara noted the rock required 'delicate handling' but was at the same time technical and difficult. The crux pitch alone took four hours and in describing their ascent Downes demonstrated his characteristic modesty; his determination had been tested by a prolonged hailstorm during their ascent causing the considerable delay. In *Sassenach* was one of the greatest mountaineering routes in Britain and its ascent in 1954 had stunned the Scots; complacency had been revealed.

A few weeks later Bob went to the Alps where he had a very good season though the weather was indifferent. He climbed the South Face of the Aiguille Dibona in the Dauphiné, the South Face of the Guliermina and the Gervasutti Couloir on the Tacul. Bob also made the first

British ascent of the North East Face of the Badile by the Cassin Route with Alan Blackshaw, Geoff Sutton and Eric Langmuir and the first British ascent of the Triolet with Blackshaw. Downes and Blackshaw describe both of these ascents in the *CCJ* of 1956.

Bob's initial meeting with Don Whillans was when the latter returned to the Biolay camp site after his eventful ascent of East Ridge of the Crocodile and soon the pair started talking about the routes they would like to do, they eventually decided on the East Face of the Capucin. Unfortunately this attempt ended in the darkness of a violent storm causing the pair to retreat in the most atrocious conditions. Before leaving Chamonix, Downes tentatively suggested to Whillans a trip to Scotland on their return to the UK.

So in late August they met and the two travelled to O'Hara's residence in Cambridge to try to persuade him to take up the empty place in Whillans's motorcycle combination that was outside ready for the journey north. Mike O'Hara did not join them, a decision that he was later to regret. There was a corner line on the Carn Dearg Buttress that a few parties had previously shown an interest in, Kellett climbed the first pitch back in 1944 during which he found an old sling 30-40 feet up the big corner. Marshall, accompanied by Richie, made a commendable effort in '53 but it was the Whillans/Downes route that later became known as *Centurion*. Whillans's powerful climbing pushed seven of the eight pitches but Downes masterfully spotted a more subtle way to avoid the vicious line that Whillans had ascended on the last pitch and this is now the normal route taken by parties wishing to make a successful ascent. Not content with inflicting another national disaster on the Scots, Downes and Whillans went out the following day and made the first ascent of *The*

Bob on the first British ascent of the N E Face of the Badile by the Cassin Route August 1955 with Eric Langmuir and Geoff Sutton and Alan Blackshaw. Eric Langmuir collection



Shield in wet conditions (September 1st 1956).

Two weeks later Bob was in North Wales with Judith Clark where they made the first ascent of the fierce overhanging crack of *Penammen Groove* on Carreg Alltrem on September 18th. The following day Bob led the fifth ascent of *Cenotaph Corner* with Judith following for the first female ascent.

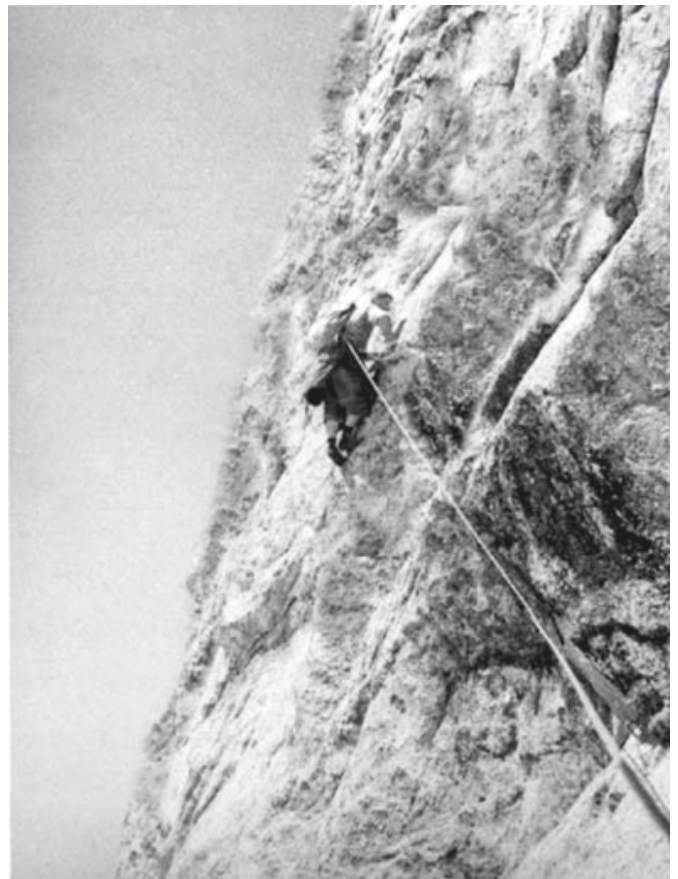
This was to be the last contribution Bob Downes made to pushing the frontiers on British rock. Reference to Scottish activities – *Ben Nevis* by Ken Crocket 1986

Aside from climbing and his many frequent and productive trips Bob Downes achieved a 2:1 in history from Clare, Cambridge and was a capable secretary and later President of the CUMC. Previously during his national service he became an officer in the Royal Corps of Signal. After Cambridge he decided against a career in the Colonial Service and he worked at the White Hall Outdoor Pursuits Centre near Buxton where Geoff Sutton was Warden. His aim was to raise money for a trip to the Himalaya.

In 1957 the Rucksack Club were looking for another member for their expedition to the then unclimbed 25,600ft Masherbrum in the Karakoram. Ron Moseley had dropped out and Downes had taken his place asking if Whillans could join the team. Downes paid Whillans a visit "How would you like a trip to the Himalaya?" he asked, "You'll have to contribute £150".

"I'll manage it all right," replied Don and the team was complete.

On June 15th 1957 the Masherbrum expedition established Base Camp at 13,000ft. On the 16th, Don Whillans set off to reconnoitre the route and possible camp sites, it was to be six weeks before he returned to Base Camp. The first summit bid failed at about 24,500ft after a poor bivvy and in worsening weather conditions Don and Geoff Smith returned to Camp 6. A major storm developed and for the next few days the two climbers were trapped in their two-man tent. During a break in the weather two more climbers arrived, the storm was still blowing and the situation became serious with the four of them trapped in one two-man tent. It was obvious to all that they couldn't go on in their condition so it was planned that all would descend to Camp 4. Whillans took a major fall resulting not only in a badly damaged ankle but also in him being separated from the others. Luckily he managed to get down to Camp 4 where he sat and waited for his companions. At this point Joe Walmsley and Bob Downes arrived from Camp 3 eager for news. Downes had been ill on the walk into Base Camp but had made a good recovery and Whillans suggested that Downes and Walmsley should go for the summit but this time from a small camp situated at the site of Don's top bivvy. Don stayed in Camp 4 only to discover it was virtually empty of supplies but particularly of matches, the key to the life giving liquid that is required at that altitude. Don sat out another storm then descended to Camp 3 only to find that supplies were lacking as in the higher camp. While on his way down to Base, Don considered the situation that Joe and Bob were in with the empty camps between the high point and base. A team was organised to go up to replenish supplies, Don and Ted Dance would go to Camp 2 and the porters to Camp 3, once these were restocked the climbers would return to Base Camp. While resting in the by now lush and green haven Don noticed four people descending from high on the mountain and realising that there should have been five he became anxious. Eventually when the climbers came into camp the following morning they explained that Bob had died at Camp 6. It was suggested that a team should go to bring Bob's body down but that they should also try one



The first British ascent of the South Face, Aiguille Dibona, July 1955 Bob Downes leading. Eric Langmuir collection

more time for the summit. Having taken the body down to Camp 5 Don and Joe then went for a final summit attempt. They reached the previous high point but then because of poor snow conditions in the gully, the line of the proposed route, they had to deviate to the adjacent rock buttress. After some extremely hard high altitude climbing, the lack of daylight, the severity of the pitches and the physical condition the two men were in as a result of their long stay at altitude it was decided to return to the top camp from about 400ft below the summit. *Portrait of a Mountaineer*, Don Whillans 1971

Bob's body was taken to Skardu where the post mortem showed that he had died of pneumonia (possibly pulmonary oedema). He was laid to rest on a small grassy hillcock overlooking the Indus which is marked by an inscribed stone. By the age of 25 years, despite having only been climbing for just over seven years Bob had achieved a great deal and was in the top echelon of the climbers of the day.

A memorial fund was established and the *CCJ* of 1961 described the result '1960 saw great activity surrounding the CC Huts. The Trustees of the fund in memory of R O Downes have purchased a building at Froggat, Derbyshire, to be known as the R O Downes Memorial Hut and presented it to the Club'. The trustees of other funds in memory of G J Fraser and G Cruickshank and of P W F Mayo, have made contributions to assist in the furnishing and equipping of the hut and recently the parents of M J Harris have made a donation in memory of their son which will enable the equipping of the hut to be completed. The hut will be in full use by the time the *CCJ* is published in 1961. Eric Langmuir who was at that time warden of White Hall Open Country Pursuits Centre and on the BMC Peak District Committee had agreed to become custodian', *CCJ* 1961. The hut was officially opened on the 29th April 1961 at 5pm.

The hut has always been well-used not only by CC



The official opening of the R O Downes Memorial Hut with Veronica (Ronnie) Phillips, Frank Fitzgerald, Mrs Downes (Bob's Mum), Geoff Sutton and A B Hargreaves. Centenary CCJ Harry Pretty collection

members but it is also a popular venue with visiting outside booking parties and was continually in use up to the 7th June 1997 when it was closed for refurbishment. The 'refurbishment' was virtually a rebuild for the building had in its previous life been the pumping station for Derbyshire Water.

On the 27th November 1999, 42 years and four months after Bob's tragic death on Masherbrum it was entirely appropriate that Mrs Dinah Evans, nee Downes; Bob's sister re-opened the R O Downes Memorial Hut. The large assembled gathering heard of the great love, affection and esteem people held for Bob through the reminiscences given by some of those in attendance, Peter Evans, Ted Dance, Mike O'Hara, John Peacock, Ted Maden, Alan Blackshaw, John Gaukroger, Tony Moulam and Roger Chorley. Many of those who spoke had not come prepared to say anything but the images conjured by those who were prepared jogged the memories of others who wanted to share their experiences of Bob's company, such was the stature of the man. Ann Sutton told of how she personally made all the down gear for Masherbrum.

Through the reading of background material for this article and from the impression presented by the people I have spoken to it is evident that Bob Downes, had he have survived Masherbrum, would have gone on to become as much a household name as those other distinguished climbers with whom he associated. It is a sad fact of our time that many of these names and the characters are totally unrecognised by many of the younger generation of visitors to the R O Downes Memorial Hut. It is important that the history of the Club, its roots and the endeavours of its membership should be remembered.

As I have mentioned previously the Hut Log Books provide a great insight into the life of the Club and the Downes Log is no exception. There are many entries, a linked conversation in the style of the emails of today which relate stories of broken windows, snow building up inside that had to be excavated before the place was habitable, no fire wood and of course the continual custodial cry 'put the bloody pots away'.

I make no apologies for rewriting in full one of the more poignant entries dated 24.7.93 and signed John Gaukroger

'Can't believe the numbers – but 40 years ago this summer Bob Downes hitched out to the Dolomites where I joined him at Canazei. We had a variety of ambitions including the South Wall of the Marmolada (neither of us had climbed anything particularly hard up to then). First we camped up near the Sella Towers where – if my

memory serves me correctly – we were rained off on three successive days. We then walked over the pass between the Cirque Dita (Funffingerspitze) and the Sassolungo (Langkofel) to the Rifugio Vicenza, from which we had a satisfying but scary ascent of the Thumb (Il Pollice) of the Cirque Dita (Scree slopes at the top of the cliffs, and miscellaneous loose rocks around the summit were a new experience!) then a carry or trudge round and over into Rosengarten, in rain and mist, only to be defeated by bad weather again, before returning to the starting point in Canazei. We decided to give it another last (for Bob) chance, by heading up to the hut for the Marmolada. There, however, (about this time in July) we woke up to find about four inches of snow! Understandably Bob had had enough by then; good friends were busy in Scotland, so he headed off back there, where he really got going as a rock-climber. I stayed on a bit longer and got three good climbs, including one of our chief ambitions, the Vajolet Towers.

Hut Custodians

E D G Langmuir	1960 -1963
P E Evans	1963-1968
D K Morrison	1968-1976
T C Chatterley	1975-1981
R J Treglown	1981-1984
K Sanders	1984-
D Ibbotson	1984-

I am much indebted to John Peacock who helped me by supplying a wealth of his personal reminiscences much of which I have been unable to use due to a lack of space here and to Eric Langmuir who kindly gave permission to use previously unpublished pictures from his private collection. Thanks also to Derek Walker who added background information and helped me get the facts in the right order. I hope to use the information John and Alan Blackshaw gave me in a more complete article later.

Ian Wall

The living room in the R O Downes. Ian Wall collection

