
The Diaries of Hester Norris

Edited and introduced by

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Hester Norris was born near Preston in 1910, one of two children of a clergyman; her brother also became a member of the clergy. She spent a large part of her working life as Secretary to the Headmaster of Rydal School in Colwyn Bay. She visited the Alps regularly from the early 1930s until the mid 1950s and was a member of the Midland Association of Mountaineers (MAM) for some time in the 1940s and 1950s.

After her death her climbing diaries passed to a friend, Tony Hughes of Windermere. He offered them for safe-keeping to the MAM, into whose care they came in 1995. Each diary is an account of one Alpine season from 1934 to 1956, written in a neat clear hand sometimes covering over 200 pages of hard-backed exercise books in great detail; the accounts of some of the best days are over 30 pages long. Her technique at first was to write it all out in the evenings and on rest days, copying it into the book once home. Later she took to making notes, often while on a climb, using these to jog her memory while writing up the diary later. There are many photographs and postcards, sometimes with the route taken on a mountain carefully marked in. She missed some seasons including, of course, the years of the second world war

The diaries are written in a fairly personal style; in places she almost talks to herself, and is quite prepared to share her feelings of joy on a successful climb and of frustration and despair if the weather caused an ascent to be called off. However, it is clear from a number of remarks that she intended them to be read and it becomes obvious that they were circulated among her friends, who she refers to as 'my regular readers'.

These were her Alpine diaries and they contain little other than passing remarks about climbing activities in Britain. Some exceptions to this will be mentioned, but it is probably because she makes no bones about her view that climbing is all about the Alps; Britain is fine for keeping fit and good enough fun, but the hills are too small and rock climbing is no good end in itself. We learn a lot about Hester's character and attitudes, but little about her life away from the Alps other than from passing remarks which sometimes intrigue rather than inform; no doubt her intended readers already knew all they needed to know about her.

As the diaries cover the 23 years from 1934 to 1956 they inevitably tell us a great deal about climbing in the Alps then: guides, equipment, transport, hotels, food, huts, all these and other topics are discussed extensively, and

all are very different from the modern era. There is as much social comment about the Alpine scene as about the climbs themselves. Hester felt that she lived a busy, useful life, though far and away her happiest days were in the Alps, and she felt deeply sad when the time came to go home. We all feel this at times but I suspect that to her it was sometimes an almost intolerable wrench and on a number of occasions she discusses how the Alpine life is the only thing that truly matters. In her 1954 diary she speculates on the nature of happiness and asks if the readers can remember the happiest day of each year in their past. She can and lists them. The list starts with her first Alpine season and the happiest day in each year is a day of her Alpine trip. The only exception is for 1945, VE day, though there are gaps in the war years. This list will be referred to later as 'The 1954 List'. She worried about money, saving hard for her holidays, generally travelling third class on French railways and always watching the pennies, though one drain on her cash must have been the fact that she always climbed with a guide.

She first climbed in the Alps in 1934, when she was 24. For two years prior to that she had had skiing and skating holidays at Lenk in the Upper Simmental in the Bernese Oberland, staying in the Sternen Hotel, run by the Zahlen family with whom she became good friends. It is not clear how these holidays started though she obviously had contacts in Montreux. Being on her own was probably a bit unconventional for that period and she seems to have had a highly independent outlook with forthright views. Skiing was a minority sport then and instruction tended to be on a one to one basis. Her instructors were Victor Biner and Hans Griessen who were both mountain guides in the summer, Victor based in Zermatt and Hans in Lenk. Her first two climbing seasons were as a paying client of Victor. Thereafter she nearly always employed a guide as that was the established way of doing things; though a member of the Swiss Ladies Alpine Club she had no other climbing contacts for the Alps and she was not far removed in time from the era when alpinism amounted to a personal calling that only touched a few. There were no magazines, it was difficult to find anyone with useful knowledge of the Alps and the only guidebook she had was Ball's *Alpine Guide*, 1907 edition. Indeed, she only ever climbed with guides until 1949; she always held to the view that to climb guided was the ideal way. There was a greater chance of success on unknown ground, and the leader was always to be trusted in judgement as well as in technical competence. For Hester, climbing was all about successfully getting up mountains and big ones at that, Switzerland being her ideal. 'My beloved Switzerland' she called it, and she entertained ideas of one day living there. Easy snow plods were not of much interest, being dismissed as 'cow routes'.

Her relationships with her guides are interesting, though it was probably much the same as it was for most competent guided amateurs then. She only employed a few guides altogether, as she would engage one for the whole fortnight of the holiday and tended to return to the same ones. Thus they became good friends, but it was always a formal employer/employee

relationship; Marcel Bozon of Chamonix with whom she climbed for three seasons and during some trying times always addressed her as 'Mademoiselle'. While Hester seems to have spent hours poring over her maps and climbing books, it was very much the choice and decision of the guide as to what they did on a given day; on a few occasions they left a hut in the dark with Hester not knowing where they were going. Her wish list of peaks for a holiday was her own affair and while she made it known what her hopes were she had little part in the actual decision-making. The security of the rope was very important, the more so as she never claimed to be expert, particularly acknowledging her shortcomings on snow and ice and in route-finding. Words of praise from her guide always made her very proud.

The diaries offer a worthwhile insight into the period in which Hester was climbing, although in these pages it is only possible to give the briefest details of her climbs, and almost nothing of the great range of content and comment in the complete version.

1934

This diary sets the pattern for most of the later ones. There is a sketch map of the area, an extract from *On High Hills* by Geoffrey Winthrop Young – she quotes Young quite a bit – and an index of contents which comprises List of Illustrations, Summary, Foreword and the location within the diary of the three best days. It is worth quoting a few phrases from the Foreword as they illustrate perfectly Hester's view of climbing in the Alps: 'September 6th was the best day of my life'; 'a wonderful, thrilling pastime'; 'the benefits and joys derived from [the holiday] are everlasting'.

She travelled to Newhaven on Archiebald, her motorbike, and by train to Zermatt. She met Victor, bought some boots, did some training on the Gorner Glacier and on the Riffelhorn; '... my first rock climbing of any sort ... I liked it'; and on the Furgengrat: 'I had no idea what a 'ridge' meant'; and then progressed to somewhat bigger things with a traverse of the Untergabelhorn and a night in the Schönbühl Hut, her first, followed by an ascent of the Pointe de Zinal. Times of leaving the hut, lengths of stops etc are carefully noted, something she continued to do throughout her climbing career.

Victor must have been satisfied with Hester's competence as he went up to the Hörnli Hut the same evening that they arrived back in Zermatt to guide two English clients up the Matterhorn, suggesting to Hester that she should bring some food up to the hut next day so that they could climb it the following day. At the hut 'I was excited, alarmed and amazed ... at the most wonderful mountain in the world.' They set off at 5am, overtook a few parties, rested for half an hour at the Solvay Hut and got to the top at 9 am. 'Surely this was, and always will be, the happiest day of my life.' It took them two hours and forty minutes, plus an hour sitting in the sun at

the Solvay Hut, to get down. She almost envied the slow parties as they were still up there.

Two days later they traversed the Rimpfischhorn. Descent was made to Täsch; the start of the route down has a steep step '... the most ghastly place I have ever seen'. Hester slid down this on a very tight rope, while Victor abseiled, the first time she had ever seen this done. It had been a grand day and harder on the whole than the Matterhorn. They did the Riffelhorn again with Hester leading and Victor playing the part of an incompetent tourist, and then the Mettelhorn and the Plattenhörner and the Trifthorn by the Triftgrat, somewhat harder technically than the routes done so far. From the top there was a good view of the Zinal Rothorn; Victor said that on her next visit she should climb it: 'I'm sure I shall too, it looks magnificent'.

That was the end of the holiday, but the diary goes on to summarise her winter sports holidays in Lenk from 1932 to 1935, the first of these being in charge of a party of schoolgirls. In the Foreword she reveals that from 1933 she had longed to climb and Victor had told her that after a few days training with him, she could climb the Matterhorn. After all, he had already done it 52 times and by 1934 she had done it. The diary also describes a ski ascent of the Wildhorn with Hans Griessen in January 1935.

Her first rock-climbing holiday in England was at Wasdale Head over Easter 1935, one of her companions being Harry Lucas, of whom more later. This is just a short summary, but there is a long account of an ascent of North Climb on Pillar; quite an epic in terrible conditions, with hail and thunder. 'We were absolutely soaked to the skin and so we waded through the streams as it was pointless using the bridges. A perfect end to a perfect day and I mean that.'

1936

The only Alpine visit of 1935 was the winter sports trip to Lenk mentioned above; the 1954 List gives the ski ascent of the Wildhorn as the best day of the year.

The diary for 1936 starts with an enigma. The trip was marred by bad weather and in the foreword Hester bemoans the fact that they were unable to do the two biggest routes that she had set her heart on, the more so as: 'While enjoying this holiday so much there was just one thought which overshadowed everything at times – it was probably the last Alpine mountaineering holiday I should get for many years, as I had decided to save my money for a different kind of adventure. ... However the adventure failed and 1937 found me back in the Alps again ... seeking the one and only real adventure ... the mountains and all they stand for will never be put in the background again by me.' What adventure was this?

With Victor, she warmed up on the Riffelhorn and then went up to the Théodule Hut and the Breithorn. She acknowledged the usefulness of this as altitude training and also the fine views, but 'it is nothing but a long

wearry trudge ... I came to climb, not to walk!' They added the Klein Matterhorn on the way down. Then they climbed the Dufourspitze of Monte Rosa from the Bétemps Hut, taking five hours and twenty minutes for the ascent of over 6000 feet. Hester found most of it to be a monotonous snow plod, but was quite worried by the final narrow ridge. Next they traversed the Obergabelhorn, up by the 'Old Route' via the Gabelhorn Glacier and down by the Arbengrat, on which Hester revelled in the exposure 'grand, thrilling and sensational!' A photo taken from the Obergabelhorn is captioned 'The Rothorn Ridge of the Zinal Rothorn. Oh how I have set my heart on climbing this ridge. I wonder when I shall do it, if ever; but I must!'

Then the weather broke. They were turned back from an attempt on the Zinal Rothorn by wind and verglas and did not even leave the Hörnli Hut for a traverse of the Matterhorn as it was snowing heavily. All that remained were some of the harder routes on the Riffelhorn and some abseiling practice. Victor wanted her to stay on for the Matterhorn, but the weather looked poor and she had overspent. She makes the point that Victor is a great pal and a good guide but that he charges top prices '... just as well to know this beforehand which is more than I did'.

There is a supplement covering some other mountain activities in 1936. This comprises a short summary of a winter sports holiday at Lenk, Easter at Wasdale – another minor epic on North Climb on Pillar – and ten days with a novice in the Lakes in the spring, walking over most of the tops in the central area and some easy climbing. There is a clue here to the origin of Hester's concerns about not visiting the Alps again. The novice is identified as 'Lewis' and some photographs suggest a relationship rather more than just walking companions, the more so as at the end of the diary there are some similar shots which are among the very few indeed in the whole series of diaries taken away from mountains; one dates from 1933. There is also some other evidence to suggest that Hester was contemplating marriage at this time. We do not know what happened, but did she find herself having to make a decision between mountains and marriage? In the event she never married. She also visited Scotland and climbed the Buachaille Etive Mor and Ben Nevis via the Carn Mor Dearg arête; and with no explanation at all, there are a few photos taken in Newfoundland in November 1936. Perhaps this is something to do with Lewis.

1937

This time the Bernese Oberland with Hans Griessen: '... a genuine companion and friend ... a good all-round mountaineer and not one of the moneygrubbers!' They started with a training day on the Spielgarten – Hester's first serious abseil – and then a tour over country already known from skiing days; Wildhorn Hut, Wildhorn, Wildstrubel Hut, Wildstrubel by the North-west Ridge – 'Hans: "Today we go over everything and round nothing". I replied eagerly "That suits me fine" and pulled up my socks.' – and down to Kandersteg, a long way.

Then came another long trip, the route being the Blümlisalp Hut, Blümlisalphorn, Mutthorn Hut, Breithorn and on to Lauterbrunnen. Hans said that he never expected to cover so much ground in six days. 'No wonder we were divinely happy and walked on air without a care in the world.' From there they went by Kleine Scheidegg to Grindelwald, Hans spurred on at the thought of his girl friend, Gretel, who lived there, and who he married soon after. Grindelwald was buzzing with talk of an attempt on the as yet unclimbed North Face of the Eiger. (It was Vörg and Rebitsch, who retreated safely from the Death Bivouac.)

Hans had suggested the Mittellegi Ridge of the Eiger, but the weather was poor so they decided on the Andersongrat of the Schreckhorn together with a guide friend of Hans and his client. At the Strahlegg Hut the weather was still bad, though on the first day there they did the Strahlegghörner after a late start. The next day was a washout. Hester was not at all happy: '... the events of the past year [had] seemed long since forgotten. But this day of enforced inaction seemed to bring all those things right back in my mind ... so far as I know, this has been the only day of my life when I had nothing to occupy myself with, and I did not enjoy it.' Next morning there was new snow everywhere, so they retreated via Grindelwald to Boltigen where they spent a day on the crags used by the locals, the Jüngferli. Hester enjoyed this very much; the photos make it look quite interesting. There was just time for the Weisstadhorn, the only hill at Lenk which Hester had not been up by foot or ski, with the promise of the Mittellegi and the Andersongrat for the next year.

There is a supplement to this diary which is an account of Easter 1937 at Wasdale, mainly photos, the only lines of text being a lesson learned: '... don't go on trying to lead a pitch when you feel you can't or have lost confidence in yourself. It was only the enormous amount of new snow in Central Gully that prevented my fall, which involved my partner too, from being a serious one.' Tucked in the back of the book are a few photos taken on Tryfan of members of the family of Professor G I Finch, later to be President of the Alpine Club, and of Clare and Berridge Mallory, daughters of G L Mallory, and also of G W Young with the Finches at Pen y Pass.

1938

With Hans in the Oberland again. They traversed the Kingspitz from the Engelhorn Hut going up by the SW Ridge – 'what a fine ridge' – but easier than Pillar North Climb or Gashed Crag. Over lunch on the top, Hester marvelled at being there less than 48 hours after being on the Channel and how the views and atmosphere made what had been a difficult year at home now so easy to forget. Next day they traversed the Klein and Gross Simelistock; 'highly enjoyable', and on the top of the Klein Simelistock she wrote in her notebook: 'Hans said that we'd only just begun our climb and we've come up miles of glorious ridge. What wonderful mountains.' The descent was by abseiling down the McDonald Chimney in increasing mist.

Two days of unsettled weather saw them move to the Dossen Hut and up the Dossenhorn. This was a Sunday, and Hester allowed herself what is just about the only expression of religious faith to be found in these diaries; despite her family background she seems never to have had much interest in religious matters. 'I love being on an Alpine peak on Sunday mornings ... because I always think of the hundreds of people in church, and how much nearer the Almighty I feel on an Alpine summit than I ever do in church.' Next day, in better weather, they made a long trek to the Wettersattel and climbed the Wetterhorn, Hester telling herself sternly that her confidence on glaciers and on steep snow must improve. A long, rough descent in mist again led to the Gleckstein Hut, from where they teamed up with another guide, Christian Inabit, and his client and traversed the Klein Schreckhorn to the Strahlegg Hut.

After a day of rain they descended to Grindelwald for supplies before returning to the Strahlegg and a quick trip up the Strahlegghorn to spy out the route on the Gross Schreckhorn. The account for the day finishes: 'I summed up my feelings in my notebook thus: "Will it go? Please, yes."'

Next day the weather was doubtful, and Hans led off without committing himself to the South Ridge, which was their ideal option, rather than the ordinary route. Hester willed him to plump for the harder route, as ordinary routes tend to be somewhat uninteresting. 'This is particularly so of the Matterhorn and until I have climbed it by the Zmutt and Italian ridges, I shall not feel I have justified my climbing career.' The weather looked doubtful; Hans looked at the ordinary route and said: 'That way means nothing to me except to come down by: I would so much rather climb the Sudgrat.' After some debate, Hester said, 'Let's risk it and we will climb together as much as possible.' So they did; the weather broke and the descent became a battle with mist, a fierce wind and driving hail and snow. At one point they took a wrong turn onto dangerous ground, eventually regaining the hut after 14 hours.

The weather stayed bad so they retreated to Grindelwald, teaming up with local guide, Fritz Kaufman-Almer and his two clients, to snatch the Eiger by the West Flank (not the Mittellegi, alas), in deep snow, getting back to the Eigergletscher station with half an hour to spare before the time of the last train Hester could catch to make her connections on the way home.

The supplement contains a two-page summary of her 1938 winter holiday in Lenk and a similar summary, but with many photos, of two weeks in Snowdonia in April 1938 with the Finches, meeting some members of the Climbers' Club and being taken up *Terrace Wall* by the well known climber Brenda Ritchie.

1939

In the previous diary Hester had mused on doing something different this year after having had four seasons in Switzerland, and it was *very* different.

For the first time she had a companion, Harry Lucas, from the Wasdale days; they were unable to engage a guide before setting out and 24 August 1939 was hardly an auspicious time to be heading for Chamonix. While they were there France ground to a halt; hotels closed down, guides were mobilised into the armed forces and some huts were taken over by mountain troops. But the food and drink were always a consolation and Hester loved the mountains of the area.

They hired a guide, Armand Couttet, and went up to Montenvers. On arrival there Armand was summoned by phone to report for military service at once, but Armand found a replacement by the name of Marcel Bozon who turned out to be ideal. The three of them did the Petits Charmoz (Harry's first Alpine climb) and the Pélerins and next went up to the Requin Hut. There is a splendid photo of a smiling Marcel, cigarette in hand, and Hester positively beaming, on the col between the Grands and Petits Charmoz, the caption reading: 'Here I am just itching to be off again for some more: happiness personified!' The Requin Hut was occupied by the military, but they were mainly guides in civilian life and friends of Marcel's so there were no problems.

From the Midi they had a long, hot descent in exasperatingly soft snow in which both Hester and Harry had some difficulty in keeping their feet. Hester records that Marcel, who was unfailingly patient at all times and somewhat laconic, remarked to her at one point: 'You know it is better to glissade on your feet for you have no nails in your behind!' An old Chamonix guide's joke, no doubt. Next day it was the Requin. Dorothy Pille, who they had met at Montenvers, had worried Hester by taking her aside and saying, 'I wonder if your man is able to lead it properly?' Rather proudly, Hester records that Marcel climbed it with perfect ease, chain-smoking or whistling little tunes to himself all the while. And it was a splendid climb, just taxing enough.

Back in Chamonix things were falling apart; they had difficulty in finding somewhere to change money and Harry decided to make for home while the trains were still running rather than risk losing his job. Hester's secret wish was to do the Grépon; she did not dare to suggest such a relatively difficult climb to Marcel, so when asked what she would like to do merely said 'something fairly difficult'. She was overjoyed when Marcel promptly suggested the Grépon from the Plan de l'Aiguille. She left her luggage at Marcel's chalet at Les Pélerins and they took the téléphérique up to the Plan.

Next day was: 'A red letter day in my mountaineering career'. Marcel paced up and down looking at the doubtful weather, then suddenly sat down, ate his breakfast, packed and set off, only telling Hester that they really were going up the Grépon when she asked where they were going. Her account of the climb covers many pages, but it is enough to say all went well on a splendid climb. On the summit Hester allowed her mind to dwell on the thoughts that the mountains would always be there and that

she would visit them every year that circumstances permitted, even when she could only do the easy ones and gaze at the big ones '... which have afforded me so many hours of unrivalled joy'.

The descent passed off without incident. Back at the hut someone had brought up a newspaper: '*Les Allemands attaquent La Pologne sans pitié.*' What should they do? In the event they did the Peigne and decided on the traverse of the Ciseaux and the Fou for the following day. That evening, though, an old man came up to drive down some sheep with the message: '*L'Angleterre a déclaré la guerre aujourd'hui à 11 heures, et la France aussi ce soir à cinq heures!*' Next day the mountains were shrouded in mist anyway, so they descended to Marcel's chalet where she spent some time with his family, deeply worried about what would become of them. Eventually the time came to go; Hester and Marcel made the final mutual wish of 'À L'ANNÉE PROCHAINE!' Hester wanted to do Mont Blanc by the Brenva Route but, of course, next year in the Alps was not to be. The lights were going out all over Europe. Hester had become very fond of Marcel: '... he cycled away. I watched him disappear in the torrential rain and wondered unhappily if he will be spared from the firing line of this hateful war.'

The journey home took three and a half days of uncertainty, catching what sounds like one of the last ferries to leave Dieppe. '... it remains to be seen when the world will be able to resume its normal activities once more ... In the meantime I must be content with the glorious memories contained in my five Alpine diaries.'

The diary contains also a list of all the mountains she had climbed in order of merit – Matterhorn first, Grépon second – and Harry Lucas added a short summary of his recollections of the trip.

During the war the school moved to Loton Park in Shropshire. Visits to the hills were almost impossible; the only entries for this period in the 1954 list are for 1942 when she climbed Snowdon from Loton Park, travelling by motor bike, and for 1943 when she again climbed Snowdon, this time by push bike, sleeping out on Grib Goch. There exists a letter to Hester from T Graham Brown of Brenva fame, dated 7/12/44. This is presumably in reply to one she had written to him, recalling that they had met in the Strahlegg Hut in 1937 and asking for advice on the Brenva Face routes. Hester had commented favourably on his book *Brenva* – this letter was tucked inside her copy of the book – and he responded by looking forward to seeing her photos and her book, when she got round to writing it.

1946 (1)

Sunshine and snow

From this point onward Hester gave her diaries titles; there are two for 1946, both relatively slim. This first was written about a ski-touring and ski-mountaineering holiday in Lenk. Hester started with an extract from *Finale* by G W Young:

'I have not lost the magic of long days;
I live them, dream them still ...'

She also noted that the ban on private travel to Switzerland was lifted on 1 April; on 6 April she was on her way! The rail journey across France was tedious but the welcome in Lenk, where not much had changed, made up for it. They wasted no time, and set off for the Wildhorn Hut where Hester spent a couple of days relearning all she had forgotten about skiing, culminating in an ascent of the Wildhorn. They crossed the Rawyl Pass to the Wildstrubel Hut from where they climbed the Rohrbachstein, the Weisshorn and the Wildstrubel before descending to Kandersteg. One day in the valley was enough, 'but as I only have money for the simplest of souvenirs ... it is almost too much.' One consolation of a day in the valley was a brief respite from having been badly sunburned: 'It was exceedingly painful to smile.' Another consolation was the quantity and quality of the food.

They took the train to the Jungfrauoch and then skied to the Concordia Hut, touring around the Finsteraarhorn Hut and the Hollandia Hut. An attempt on the Ebnefluh was called off in the face of mist and spindrift and then it was time to go home. They made their way out to Goppenstein by way of Fafleralp and thence back to Lenk. 'I thought for a moment of my last departure at Chamonix in 1939 and how I had watched Marcel cycle away through torrents of rain and how numb and dejected I had felt. Now at least I was happy in the knowledge that I was not leaving the Alps indefinitely and that it would only be a matter of months before I would be among them again, if not among the Swiss Alps.'

1946 (2)

Making the Best of a Bad Deal

It was indeed only a matter of months, made possible by careful saving, and to Chamonix and the guiding services of Marcel Bozon. Not only had Marcel survived the war, he had been exempt from active service as the father of seven children and as a guide he had spent the time training mountain troops. France was difficult; Hester was held up on the way by a sudden train strike at Dijon, everything seemed pretty chaotic, most things were very expensive and food severely rationed, though at a price they ate well enough from the black market. Stuck into one page are some French food coupons: cheese, coffee, meat, vegetables, even wine. Perhaps these memorabilia are now collector's items.

The main reason that this diary is short is that the weather was terrible and there was little climbing to record. From the Couvercle Hut they climbed the Moine before the weather broke, and then went down to Chamonix. With no sign of improvement they wandered through the Aiguilles Rouges, crossing into Switzerland before returning. They started with an ascent of L'Index, 'the self-satisfaction that I was still able to climb,' stayed at the

Lac Blanc Hut, traversed the Aiguille de Belvedere in wintry conditions, descended to the Pierre À Bérard Hut, where Hester relates how she got stuck in the hole in the loo, then over the Buet and into Switzerland by the Col des Vieux and down to the Chalets of Barberine. The weather deteriorated as they climbed La Tour Salières. The photos they took of each other are captioned: 'An old man and an old woman, who looks at her last gasp!' After that they took the easy way back by Vallorcine and by bus over the Col des Montets and that was the end of the holiday.

On the last page of text Hester wrote: 'This concludes yet another of my Alpine Diaries, my seventh, and the least interesting of them all.' But there was always 'l'année prochaine'; and Hester was hoping to visit the Dauphiné. The diary ends with photos. Hester had become interested in photography and was doing a lot of her own developing and printing, often with the help of Mr Ross, father of one of the pupils at Rydal.

1947

Dauphiné; High Life in L'Oisans

Even before the holiday, Hester wrote that 1947 had been one of the most enjoyable years of her life. This trip with Marcel must have added to that enjoyment. They started by traversing from the Col de Lautaret to La Bérarde by the Tour Carrée and the Pic Nord des Cavales. Then, from the Promontoire Hut, they did the famous traverse of the Meije and carried on to La Grave in a 16-hour day. This had been one of Hester's great ambitions: 'I shall cherish my memories of the Meije among the very best of my mountain memoirs.'

Next, from the Evariste Chancel Hut, they traversed the Pic de la Grave and Les Têtes du Replat back to La Bérarde. A noisy night in the Temple-Ecrins Hut followed and then it was the South Face of the Ecrins. Marcel had not done it before: 'The ordinary way does not interest me ... because you love the mountains so much I like to take you up them by the best way.' Conditions were not good, windy and cold with verglas and Hester found it hard, though: 'It had been a dangerous, more than a difficult, day in my opinion but it was good to feel that we had accomplished my second ambition of the holiday ...'

They descended to the Ernest Caron Hut and did the Roche Paillon in poor weather before returning to La Bérarde, whence they went their separate ways. It had been 'one of the best of my Alpine Holidays'.

1948

Castles in the Air

Hester felt very positive about this year. 'I decided to "bag" as many Oberland giants with Hans Griessen as weather and funds would permit.' But the weather was very poor and these plans became so many 'Castles in the Air.' Hans was very pessimistic; many peaks had had no ascents yet

that season and a leading Grindelwald guide, who had recently done the North Face of the Eiger, had just been killed in an avalanche. (Hans Schlunegger, who made the third ascent with his brother Karl and Gottfried Jerman in 1947.) Also, 'I felt that Hans had lost a great deal of his former pluck and determination.' Hans was 48 years old at this time; no excuse but perhaps he did not feel the need to try as hard.

However, in poor weather they pottered about on the lesser peaks near Lenk, climbing the Morgenhorn on a better day: 'Gosh! how wonderful everything was.' And then the Gspaltenhorn as the weather deteriorated, making a long trek out to the Fafleralp. From there they traversed the Mittaghorn ('Another peak for when I am sixty!') to Concordia and on to the Finsteraarhorn Hut. At least from there they managed the Finsteraarhorn, the highest point in the Oberland.

Back at Concordia it snowed. Hester admitted that she sulked and refused to talk to anyone until Hans persuaded her to come down for a meal. Later she berated herself; 'my mood that morning was despicable – utterly selfish, self-centred and inexcusable.' For once she met a large British party also marooned in the hut on an Alpine Club organised training trip; from them she learned to play liar dice, admitting that they cheered her up no end. They went out to Kleine Scheidegg, where she had a bust-up with the railway staff: 'The Kl. Scheidegg station officials must have a very low I.Q.' She was then offered a six-month job in the office of the Kleine Scheidegg Hotel for the next year; it was tempting, but her loyalty to Rydal would not allow it, though it made her wonder about such a possibility for the future.

She had been in correspondence with Arnold Lunn whom she had never met and had tea with him in Grindelwald, an appointment which she just managed to squeeze in before starting the journey home. He spent the time explaining copyright and she offered to help with typing manuscripts. This all seems a bit obscure, but near the end of the diary Hester wrote: 'When it comes to writing my book, however, this holiday will occupy no more than a paragraph.' So the book she had mentioned to Graham Brown was still in her mind. The journey home was enlivened by chance meetings with some of the crowd from the Concordia Hut.

The diary ends with a short essay on her improving skills as a photographer, and besides the Alpine photos there is a portfolio taken in the UK to demonstrate 'The Changing Seasons', not all of which are in the hills and many of which are missing. Some were taken in Snowdonia with the Rydal Hillwalkers, a group of pupils from the school. Some shots were taken on the Carneddau; one of the Hillwalkers remembers these being taken on a holiday granted to mark the birth of Prince Charles, while another relates the tale of being on the Glyders in thick mist, needing to return to Ogwen. Hester produced map and compass, emphasised how important it was to be able to navigate and then led them off confidently; straight down to the Llanberis Pass!

1949

Norsk Enterprise

In 1948, Hester had wondered about a trip to Norway. Two of the party she had met in the Concordia Hut had proposed her for membership of the MAM and she was delighted to find that the summer meet for 1949 was to be to the Sunnmøre area of Norway, led by Showell Styles and Cyril Machin. The diary is dedicated to the two of them, each adding a short contribution at the end; she climbed with Cyril and Olwen James. Cyril had the reputation of being a bit headstrong in the hills; he certainly gave Hester a few scares, being just about as different from an Alpine guide as it was possible to be, but: 'Such success as Olwen and I achieved was entirely due to his brilliant leadership.'

The first 50 pages are about the members, the journey out and her impressions of Norway. After training days on Slogen and Setertind the three of them did the SW Face of Smørskredtind, starting from the Patchell bothy. Hester honestly admitted that she was scared stiff; it was steep, mossy, difficult, lacking in belays, no obvious route and Cyril just forged on into the unknown without listening to her pleas to be allowed to traverse off onto one of the bounding ridges. At one point Cyril made a solo traverse to their descent ridge to leave boots and ice axes, returning to lead on but not allowing them to go to the ridge with him! After a desperate pitch off-route, where Cyril used a peg, they reached the top. The descent ridge was a long succession of towers; they got back to the Patchell at about 10.30pm. They found out later that they had made the first British and the first female ascents of the route.

At one point she had said to Olwen: 'I am never going to climb with Cyril again.' She did, only a few days later. After a day's walking they climbed Brekktind, a good all-round mountaineering day, some more walks and then Råna. 'I had no qualms about what lay ahead ... Oh-ho, Hester, how are the mighty fallen and the dreams of the carefree perished.' It was a long approach, the climbing up an excellent ridge then taking four and a half hours. The descent was long and complex, followed by a struggle in the dark through scrub along the fjord side, eventually gaining access to the hotel through a toilet window. 'The time was 2.15 am. What would Hans, or Marcel, or Victor have said?'

Another walking day and then it was time to sail home. 'I had a wonderful holiday to relate and indeed I sincerely hope that next year I shall set off with the MAM to some new centre.' Talk of the Dolomites was in the air.

1950

Madness of the Heart

Hester's family could understand her wish to visit the Dolomites but not her wish to climb them. 'Madness of the Heart' they called it. This was quite a different MAM party from Norway, though Cyril Machin was there. The party had two guides, Johann and Toni Demetz. From the Sella Pass

they did various routes on the First and Second Sella Towers and then the Gross and Klein Fermeda Towers from the Fermeda Hut. Hester felt that she was climbing quite well in an environment that was new to her, and was pleased to be included in a party which did the Kienekamin on the Funffingerspitze, along with Toni, Cyril, and two other MAM members. It went very well: 'Life was too good to be true ... such confidence as I have never known before.' She did have considerable difficulty on a pitch now graded IV+.

The next day some of them trekked to Mount Boé by a primitive via ferrata, getting back in the dark, followed by a 13-hour day on the Langkofel. Then came the Adangkamin – some good photos – and a return to the Sella Towers, on harder routes this time.

Hester's private ambition for the trip was the South Face of the Marmolada, it being the biggest thing around. They never got to it, though Hester showed some signs of annoyance when a member of the party did it by slipping away and hiring another guide. They moved on to the Vajolet Hut to do the Winkler Turm on which she required a pull up on the rope on the notorious Winkler Crack, another IV+ pitch: 'Pull, pull!' I gasped ... I crossed over to Priestley (Phillips) and Cyril to thank them, nay congratulate them, on their superhuman strength.' The Stabler Turm was much easier.

That was the end of the meet, but Hester and two others went on to the Ortler. Terrible weather prevented them from trying the Cevedale, though they did struggle up the lesser Punta Madrecchino and Cima Pozzo. The photos which go with this diary show steady improvement over earlier years and Hester clearly looked on photography as a hobby in itself; indeed she records that she had two photos accepted for Blackwells Alpine Calendar, and years later some of her photographs were used in some of Showell Styles' books.

In the last section of the diary, 'Armchair reflections', Hester concluded that she was unlikely to go on the MAM meet in 1951, not because she failed to enjoy the meets, but because it was scheduled for Austria and she fancied something bigger. She admitted that a smaller party would be more to her liking and while she was aware that other MAM members were doing harder things in the Alps she did not know any of them. She also wondered if she should save her money for a winter holiday instead. In domestic climbing she was staying in Glan Dena, the MAM's hut at Ogwen, at times, often climbing the standard classics with the likes of Cyril and Showell 'Pip' Styles. Pip remembers her as a pleasant companion and as a competent climber, but with little desire to lead, preferring to be a good second, which is probably just what she would have said about herself. Jack Grant, who was on the Dolomites Meet, also remembers her as a competent climber and good company.

There are no diaries for 1951 or 1952. The 1954 list gives the a traverse of Cir Mhor as the best day of 1951, during a holiday in Arran reached on the

pillion of a motorbike with her good friend Tony Hughes, at that time also a member of the MAM, and a ski traverse of the Mulkerblatt in January as the best day of 1952. By now she had another drain on her purse; Archiebald the motorbike was long gone and now there was Belinda the motorcar.

1953

Belinda's Great Adventure

Belinda was a small, red, pre-war MG convertible, registration number CTC 684, part of the Preston Mobile Police Force until 1945. Hester bought the car in 1949, her first, and imbued Belinda with a life and character of its own, talking as though the car was a member of the party rather than just a means of transport. Belinda appears to have brought out a new and not inconsiderable talent in Hester, as the diary is full of skilful pen and crayon sketches, virtually all featuring Belinda in a variety of situations. A large part of the plan was to have a driving holiday with a non-climbing friend, Sally Jones, and most of the diary concerns what turned out to be quite an adventure on the roads. Among other things they broke both a spring and a half shaft!

They drove out through Belgium, down the Rhine and into Switzerland. Plan 'A' then involved a short stay in Zermatt, hoping to afford a guide for at least one major route; plan 'B' involved a visit to Lenk with the hope of some lesser climbs with Hans, all of it depending on the weather. Hester was a little worried about both of these as she had sprained an ankle badly shortly before setting out. In the event the weather was terrible; they visited Lenk but climbed nothing.

They went home by a circuitous route; in the village of Aigle above the Rhône Valley Hester gave a glimpse of a former activity of which there is no more information at all: '... more memories of Mlle Bard's choral auditions came to my mind, for we had sung in the village church here in my "conservatoire days".' They reached home via the Italian Lakes, Genoa, Monte Carlo and Lyon.

1954

Part 1: Belinda Goes Abroad Again!

Part 2: Putting the Clock Back Twenty Years

This diary is divided into two distinct halves, the first concerning the drive out to Zermatt and home again and the second, the climbing. This time the driving was less eventful but Hester had doubts whether Belinda, now 17 years old, would be good for future Continental trips. Interesting though this part is, it is not relevant to cover it further.

Hester's companion was Marjorie Garner of the MAM, a walker rather than a climber. The idea was that Hester would do some walks with or without Marjorie to get really fit and then engage a guide to do what was still number one on her list since her failure on it in 1936: the Rothorn by the Rothorngrat. The training went well; Plattenhörner, Hotäligratt, etc.

In Zermatt she had met Victor Biner again but he was booked up and so he introduced Hester to Walter Biner (no relation). They went up to the Rothorn Hut but in the morning the weather was doubtful and soon it was sleeting. They descended to Zermatt in heavy rain. 'I was thoroughly despondent. ... I was dreadfully disappointed in a way I seldom feel in England and it just can't be thrown off lightly.'

After a few days to allow some of the new snow to melt they stayed in the Schönbiel Hut '. . . and I must give Walter full marks for being the only guide I've known who does not snore!!'. They left the hut at 3am and had a splendid climb in cold, windy conditions getting to the top of the Dent Blanche in six and a half hours. 'I felt exquisitely happy.' The wind increased and they had quite a rough descent, but without mishap. The only minor difference of opinion occurred as Hester found she needed to eat little and often but was a slow eater, whereas Walter never seemed to eat at all. Then it was time to go home: 'Yes, it was a wonderful climax to a most enjoyable holiday. Thank you, Walter Biner, for making it such a wonderful day ... the happiest day for years and years.'

1955 - 1966

Part 1: Belinda's Last Trip Abroad

Part 2: From Sea Level to 14,219ft

As before, the account of the 1955 Alps trip to join the MAM meet in Saas Fee is in two parts. Hester travelled out with Isabel Boag; again an eventful trip with a broken spring and a cracked chassis on the way out, repaired in Laon. At this early point in the story there is a short break in the narrative and a note dated 1978 inserted. In this, Hester tells how, at that point in writing up the diary after the holiday, the urge to write died and that most of this diary was written up 23 years later from notes made at the time and kept, with the result that the rest of it is in note form rather than the usual extended narrative. Strange for such a dedicated diarist, but she explains that in 1955 she took up the violin, spent much time practising each day, soon becoming good enough to play in an orchestra and organise musical soirées in the school. However, in view of some remarks in her notes for the rest of the holiday there may have been more subtle influences on her feelings and motivations which became alarmingly obvious in 1956, more of which shortly.

While at Saas, in various MAM groupings she climbed the Mittaghorn, Portjengrat, Weissmies and much the best of all, the Nadelhorn. '. . . felt quite depressed by my poor performance. I can recall feeling uneasy. . . I wonder now if this was the first flicker of warning.' However she must have felt better later as they did the traverse of the Fluchthorn and the Strahlhorn to finish a trip marred yet again by the weather.

In September 1955, with her brother John, she drove to Aviemore, left Belinda in the Rothiemurchus Forest, went by train to Blair Atholl and then traversed Glen Tilt and the Lairig Ghru back to the car, overnighting

in Inverey. This was written up in 1978, of course, and she adds: 'I am so thankful that I made the most of those days when my energy never seemed to flag ... I accumulated a store of the happiest memories that life can offer.'

The 1956 notes in this diary are subtitled 'Nature's Decision'. She had been spending more time at the violin and less in the hills and had been helping her family move from one vicarage to another so that when she joined a small group of MAM members in Chamonix, travelling out by train, she was unfit and felt tired, hoping the Alpine air would buck her up. However, it soon became apparent that something was going badly wrong; even walking up to Montenvers was difficult.

First they did the Aiguille de l'M: '... ghastly gully which nearly finished me.' Then up to the Requin Hut where she met Marcel Bozon. She had mixed feelings; she longed to climb with him again but was depressed that he would be disappointed at her poor performance. They traversed to Courmayeur via the Torino Hut and back again. Hester had considerable breathing problems and feared that she had tuberculosis: 'I wanted to curl up and just be left in the snow.'

They decided to move on to the Alpes Maritimes. In Grenoble disaster struck; she suffered a minor stroke which affected her speech and her right hand. She was taken to a doctor who told her that her heart was 'fini' and that she must never do anything in any way physical again. '... whenever I thought about what he'd said about my future my mind seemed to cloud over and go blank ... my mountaineering days would come to an abrupt end with more than half my dreams unrealised.' She records that she was set against her companions sending for her brother, but common sense prevailed, as a member of the party recalls that in the event John came out and escorted her home by train.

She seems to have made a full recovery from the stroke. Investigation showed that she had a damaged heart valve, the legacy of rheumatic fever as a child. With characteristic optimism and single-mindedness she threw herself into her music, but '... my love for the mountains is always there,' so in 1958 she visited Skye in Belinda's replacement, an MG TF rather over-romantically christened Candlelight. She walked up into Coire Lagan and then went up Sgurr na Banachdich '... the pinnacled Cuillin ridge which I bitterly regret never having climbed'.

In 1959 it was Lenk again. Hans Griessen was in a sanatorium with TB; he recovered but died later from leukaemia. With the guide Arnold Ludi she did her last Alpine peaks, a two-day traverse of the old favourites, the Wildhorn and the Wildstrubel. She saw Hans in the sanatorium; '... sad about Hans, who will always be my most cherished mountain companion'.

It was 'My Last Ambition: Zermatt Once Again' in 1960. She went on a number of walks, including to the Hörnli Hut: '... there I was in a trance gazing up at the source of the happiest day of my life, 6 Sept 1934.' But sadly '... an alien feeling that I didn't belong to this mountain world any more ... I was a stranger up there in this climbers' world ... I felt shy of so

much as peeping inside the hut.' She also reached the Bétemps Hut, which meant crossing the Gorner Glacier solo: '... revelled in the feeling of crossing a real glacier again.'

Further trips followed, the Shetlands with ascents of Ben Loyal and Ben Klibreck on the way home, a tour of Ireland by car and pony trekking in Scotland but in 1965 the big event of the year was surgery on her damaged heart valve. In spring 1966 she paid her last visit to Lenk, 'my second home,' staying with Gretel Griessen and doing some walking and skiing with Arnold Ludi; later in the year she went pony trekking in Norway. It was now 10 years since the Grenoble setback; as she was within four years of retiring she moved out of her rooms at Rydal and bought a small stone house overlooking the Conwy Valley and with views of the Carneddau. 'A new challenge confronted me, and at last the wanderlust has died.' And there her diaries finish.

A small outhouse was converted into a music room with the walls covered with her photographs. She retired in 1970, gave up the violin and, unable to walk the Welsh hills as she wished, drove around the lanes in her MG, occasionally visiting her old friends at Rydal. In 1978 she was in hospital again with further stroke symptoms and while these seem not to have been too bad it is tempting to wonder if it was this which prompted her to get out the final diary, at that time barely started, and to finish off the tale of her exploits. The 1978 note has the feeling of a summing up and signing off. It finishes: 'My house and garden are a delight and I have settled down to a solitary but happy existence looking after them. I am reluctant to admit the onset of old age but something has to suffer and since I lost my original music friends I decided to let Rydal have my instruments now rather than posthumously – mountains and music are still my greatest source of pleasure – my only regret being the physical limitation which prevents my undertaking long hill walks in fine weather which I had envisaged myself enjoying for many more years to come.'

August 1978

The worst summer weather I've ever known

The comment about the weather was probably added later as it is in different ink; she would never miss the chance of commenting on something or anything! The very last entry, written after she had finished all the updating, is characteristically headed: 'Concluding clap-trap'. It reads: 'So ends my mountain saga, brought abruptly to its end by that childhood illness which I've outlined on pages 60-61. I enjoyed more than one more trip abroad since 1956 but now at 68+, my health is governed by pills and my home and garden are my chief source of happiness and I must be grateful that I remained active until the 45th year of my life.'

She seems to have accepted her later years in a philosophical if rather solitary style with her house and garden, music, large collection of mountaineering books and photographs and of course, her memories; but the

surest reminders of the days when she took part in what was in her own view that most wonderful of all activities must have been these diaries which she must have read often. If only she had been able to climb the Zinal Rothorn! She continued to buy mountaineering books until late in her life and never lost interest in current climbing issues.

The diaries are fascinating to read and, by their candour, a wonderful and valuable record of the climbing life and times of a rather remarkable person. She left an impact on many who knew her by her sheer energy and enthusiasm. Rydal maintains a small exhibition in her memory: her ice axe and rope, some of her books, and a few excellent enlargements of her alpine photos. In the Rydal library are two more volumes of diaries; these are the diaries of the Rydal Hillwalkers which existed from 1947 to 1951. They certainly covered northern Snowdonia thoroughly, with some very long walks, often in winter conditions. There is a further volume entitled 'Index of Mountains'. This is a gazetteer of all the world's mountains in alphabetical order, country by country, with first ascent information, short essays of the climbing history of a few main peaks and occasional potted biographies of the main protagonists. The historical information suggests it was compiled in the late 1940s, obviously a labour of love and perhaps the first real attempt ever to assemble this information.

She died at home at the age of 81, on the 29th July 1991; her ashes were later scattered on a mountainside above the Conwy valley. In one of the 1946 diaries she quoted G.W. Young's poem, 'Exile'. In her later years she must have dwelt upon one of the verses of this poem, which also forms a fitting epitaph:

“What if I live no more those kingly days?
Their night sleeps with me still.
I dream my feet upon the starry ways;
My heart rests in the hill.
I may not grudge the little left undone;
I hold the heights, I keep the dreams I won.”

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