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A Tribute to a Friend and loyal Alpine Club Member

"Chris Astill was the one on Liathach".



Smiler and Chris at Puente del Inca after Aconcagua in 2007 © Smiler

Of the three avalanche victims on December 30th 2009, the news that Chris was one of them had slowly entered my brain, cutting like a chainsaw through my feelings.

Since Jimmy Jewel had died so many years ago now, I promised myself I would not allow myself ever to get hurt again. Some hope!

Chris and partner Jo had been in the Highlands, over on his favourite north-west coast, as usual over the Christmas period. He had even called me to say 'hello' and to ask where he could get snow shoes from. He was obviously aware of the great depth of new snow that had recently come down and it was still falling.

I pointed to Martin Moran for the snowshoe advice and asked Chris and Jo to call in again, like last year, on their way back to Derbyshire.

It wouldn't happen. Nearing the top of a gully on Liathach, the avalanche took him down some considerable way. His pal Oliver climbed down and got to him. Although Chris was talking, things were serious and the helicopter rescue was probably minutes, hours, too late, who knows, as he died later that night in Inverness hospital.

I was, and still am, devastated.

"Eyeeup Kid, ow's it goin' youth?" The standard Nottingham welcome which was always truly meant with real friendship. Chris was that kind of guy, one of the nicest blokes I've known for nearly forty years. Intellectually always very smart, a neat and determined man and without question a great all-round climber. To me he had no faults, except maybe even for me, a touch too keen, ready for any escapade, a Scottish winter adventure, that wet rock climb, our South American odyssey to Aconcagua with my clients, Bill, David and Sandra (I must tell them!), an Alpine adventure in Chamonix or even a Himalayan sojourn. He was the true all-rounder. And one of my best climbing friends.

I first met him when I was a 19 or 20 year old, when we were both coming through the ranks, grabbing those elite north faces, I would bump into him everywhere. In the UK, mostly in Llanberis but often in Stoney cafe. In the Alps, on the Bioley, then Snell's Field, and later, Pierre

D'Ortiz, legendary campsites used by the best alpinists of the times, as mere breaks between great climbs.

Lately he would join fellow members of the Alpine Club and venture up bigger peaks in the Himalaya. I believe he was due to go to India again this year?

We soon became good friends.

Sadly, as I grew older and slowed down, with my last fourteen years being spent up north, and with that golden era of British alpinism long gone, it would be a less regular meeting, with those famous words ringing out across the Llanberis high street, or in Pete's Eats, or as I would unload the sacks at Ynys for the weekend.

I was grateful for the Climbing clubs we were both in - the Alpine Club, Climbers Club and the Fell & Rock CC. These would keep us more in contact over the last and next few years. So I looked forward to some more great times in the Alps and Greater Ranges with him.

December 12th 2009 was one such event. I would fly down to Manchester to avoid the 8-hour drive. It was also much cheaper with Flybe than to use my car. Chris assured me it was no problem and he would be waiting at the arrivals for me, as he was intent on whisking me to Tideswell and the local pub, to join the boys. I wasn't sure who would be there, but I was pretty certain the gang, Hughie, Howie, Ron and Pam, and of course, Jo, his beautiful lady as always by his side, they would all be there. I couldn't wait.

The plan was thwarted by heavy snow in the Highlands. Twice I tried to fly on the Friday but on both occasions the runway was out of action, and the dense fog didn't help. Eventually on Saturday morning I had to drive, or I would miss my final CC committee meeting as President. It was a daunting task in that weather but at least I was moving at last.

It was dark by the time my Sat Nav had got me to within shouting distance of Chris and Jo's lovely house in their neat little village. Chris stood proudly outside his house, and directed me to a parking spot alongside his brand new garage. He had restricted his free time for quite a while to build it, and a super building it had turned out to be.

"I've only got the loft insulation to put in and that's that", he announced proudly. So sad to know he wouldn't see the finishing line.

I spent a great weekend with Chris, Jo, and Rachel, one of his two daughters from his first marriage; she had turned up from University to spend Christmas with them.

On the Sunday, Chris and I had a special day together on Kinder Scout. It would be my first visit to this wild place, and not only would we ascend to the bleak plateau, we'd walk through the mire to the Downfall, which I really wanted see, and Chris announced we'd do a rock climb as well, on one of the high crags there. Ok, it would only be a Severe, but in that damp and gloomy atmosphere, you could argue about my keenness. Chris, however, was on fire, and I would not douse him.

We had a great day, the Downfall was in full flow and I pondered the sight when it would be frozen. Later, on the rock route, I was watching carefully for sandbags. On a convenient ledge I craftily avoided finishing the top pitch with a "I'll bring you up. It's not clear where it goes from here?" He came up, took the rack off me, and proceeded to show me why I held him in such

esteem, as he smoothly climbed the slimy, green groove, which I had been convinced wasn't the normal way forward?

Recently we'd been doing some talking. Our future alpine plans, given some breaks in my annual summer guiding programme, and Chris's ability to break off his 'pole counting' for BT, were for the Freney, even the Innominata and the Pueterey Integral. How I could put back the clock now.

His new day job, recently acquired after a successful and rewarding career in the mining industry, always amused us all, but it secured the finances along with Jo's outdoor centre instructor role, and he was happy strolling along the fells in many different locations in the country, and in all weathers. I'm sure there was much more to it than counting poles, but I never got the chance to find out more. He told me he felt so alive.

I'll do my best to remain strong, to give you courage, Jo, but it's not easy.

Smiler Cuthbertson

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