

SICKLE MOON EXPEDITION



Patron: Chris Bonington C.B.E.

Leader: Alan Hinkes, 22 Oakfield Gardens, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE 15 6QU. Tel: 2723045.

Expedition Artist: David. F. Wilson, West Farm Cottage, South Hetton, Co. Durham. Tel : 267737.

Altitude 21570 ft.

The paintings in this exhibition were produced as a result of my journey to the Kashmiri Himalayas of North West India in August & September 1936

Every picture can tell a story: the story behind these paintings is of a journey from the heat of Dehli to the lush green vallies of Kashmir and higher to the remote rock and ice landscape of the Sickle Moon Mountains. I hope by telling this story in words and pictures you will begin to understand how I felt as I ventured into this remote, rarely visited region. Hopefully my story and paintings will capture your sumgination and encourage in you, an enthusiasm for this landscape. True success will be if you enjoy looking at these paintings. I hope you do.

David.F. Wilson

SICKLE MOON



EXPEDITION

If you are a mountain painter and mountaineer, you've climbed and painted British and European mountains; what's the next step? Well, it's obvious. Probably the aim of most lovers of mountains is to visit the Himalayas. In May 1986, I took the first steps towards my 'trip of a lifetime' by organising two months unpaid leave from work and scraping together the $\pounds2000$ I'd need to join the 1986 Himalyan Sickle Moon Expedition. The expedition's aim was to climb a new route on the 21570 feet Sickle Moon peak, the highest in the Kishtwar Himalaya. The attempt, if successful, would be the first British ascent of this remote, picturesque peak. My aim was simple by climbing with the expedition I'd be able to paint images of this endeavour.

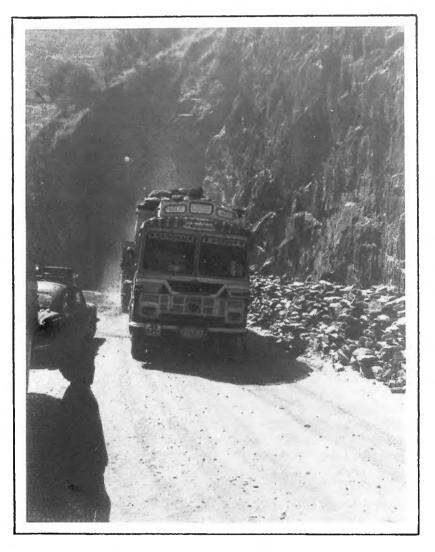
With my lightweight drawing board, pre-stretched paper and a determination to record the Himalayan landscape, in all its magnificence, I joined the international team at Heathrow in August 1986. As anybody who's been on a self funded Himalayan expedition will know, getting on the plane without incurring extra weight penalties is an 'art' in itself. Part of the 'Himalayan Experience', I was told, a statement which was used again and again as an excuse for all forms of difficulties, tortures and pain I'd experience. With hand luggage weighing at least 501bs, wearing down gear, waterproofs and plastic boots we eventually sweated our way onto our connection flight to Schipol, Amsterdam. It must have caused great amusement to the passengers of this flight; why should an obvious group of mountaineers be going to Holland?

I knew India was going to provide a wealth of experience. Old hands like the expedition leader, Alan Hinkes, had surprised me by maintaining that if he could, he would fly by helicopter to base camp, missing out India altogether. I was sure India was not going to make me so 'bitter'. My Indian experience did not disappoint me. The range of feelings India provokes in you is vast. For me one of the greatest experiences was the contrast between the cramped excess of humanity in the towns to the uncrowded wilderness of the Himalayan mountains, which was our goal.



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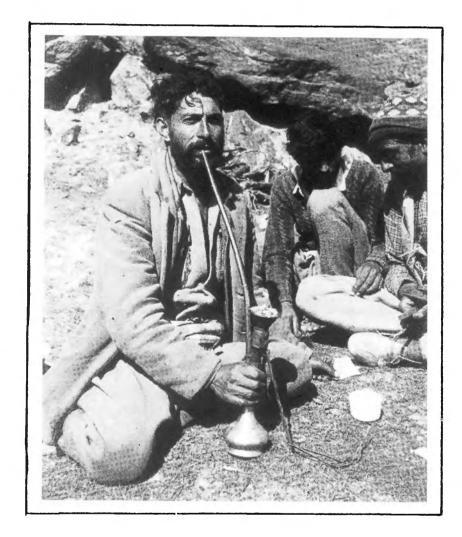
We stayed at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation Hostel in New Delhi for a couple of days. Delhi in August is in the 90's and humid. I was glad to board the overnight 'super deluxe' ,'super fast' , 'super safe' bus to Jammu. It was such a shame that the air conditioning didn't work and the video did, twelve hours of Indian videos is enough to.....



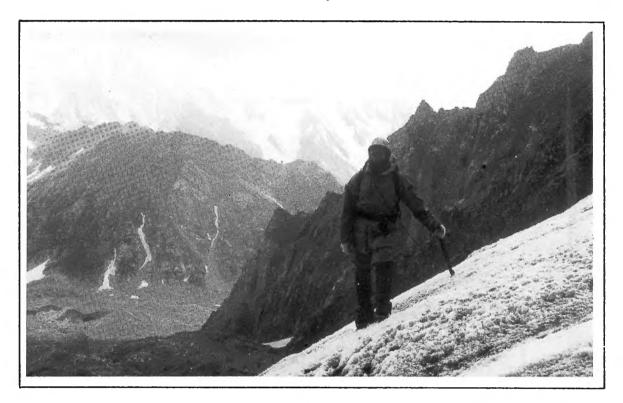
The fun really began on the 100 klm/17 hour bus journey from Jammu to Kishtwar. The bus with its 'Best of Luck' slogan proudly displayed, wooden seats, and no windows, wound its way up increasingly rough, dusty and precipitous roads. To describe this journey as bumpy is a great disservice to the road; which in wet weather frequently disappears towards the boiling torrent, some 2000 feet below. We took turns sitting and clinging on to the roof, guarding our luggage against being thrown off. This was to no avail as one 'gunny' sack containing a tent and some pans made it's parabolic way to the depths below.

Kishtwar is the last main settlement; a place to collect provisions and post mail. It is a true frontier town, (it was under curfew on our return) consisting of a sprawling collection of shacks and jerry built houses. Strange but not so wonderful smells emit from roadside cafes and from the open rivers of sewage which flow along the main street. Add this smell to the noise of fighting dogs, clouds of flies, heat and chronic over-crowding and a picture of Kishtwar is obtained.

I was glad to leave this behind and enter a land of deep gorges and towering pine forest scenery. If it was not for the unfamiliar jungle noises and the incessant heat you could have been walking through English I began to feel that this was what I'd come for. On the track woodland. you would meet mulemen ferrying goods up to the mountain villages or the 'Dogras' nomadic herdsmen and their families heading to lower pastures for The renowned Kashmiri friendliness was evident, as fellow the winter. travellers always had the time to greet you'Ram Ram!' Arriving at a mountain village, we seemed to provide a great source of amusement for the villagers, who would turn out in force to stand and watch us doing nothing in particular. It was at one of these villages that we recruited 'Sarrup' our faithful cook whose self proclaimed culinary ability and knowledge of world cricket got him the job. Unfortunately he'd never encountered 'Fairy Liquid' which he insisited on rubbing on pans after he'd cleaned them with his familiar gravel.

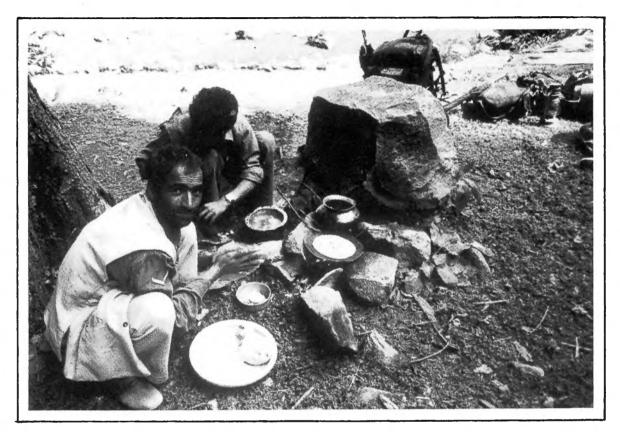


As we moved up the mountain, gaining altitude the dense jungle gave way to alpine pasture, then the glacier began. On our fifth day from the roadhead we reached our base camp, situated on the terminal moraine of the massive boulder strewn Brammah glacier. This site was still a day's walk from the start of the climb, but no amount of money could induce our mule drivers to risk their precious mules, which were their livelihood, on the Brammah glacier. The Kishtwar region has fantastic potential for climbing. It doesn't have any 8000m peaks, but by nature of its comparative inaccessibility it has that extra bit of isolation that more accessible Himalayan climbing areas like the Garwhal and Kulu have to some extent lost. On the trek in we heard the explosions of road construction gangs blasting a route for an extended roadhead. How long this area will remain inaccessible I don't know; but at present the opportunities for mountaineers and rock climbers to enjoy infinite new routes on the most dramatic peaks in a remote beautiful area still exist. We enjoyed our climbs on virgin rocks, but I wonder how people in the future will feel when on their 'new route' they find our awkward number two chock that just wouldn't come out.



I was, at last, in the heart of the country I'd come so far to climb in and paint, and it was certainly inspiring. Towering above base camp was the unclimbed granite face of the 6000m Eiger peak (its similarities to the Swiss Eiger evident). To the North West was Brammah 1 (first climbed in 1973 by an Indo-British Expedition led by Chris Bonnington, our expedition patron) and the impressive, odd shaped Brammah's Wife first climbed in 1979 by a Polish team. Over the battlefield landscape of the Brammah glacier 'Brammah 2', 'Crooked Finger', 'Cathedral', 'Consolation' and other was peaks living up to their wonderfully descriptive names. Sickle Moon, the highest in the area at 6574m, sits proud at the head of the valley. The peak was first reported by an Austrian mountaineer Franz Kolb in 1947. He decided to call the mountain 'Sickle Moon' because of its distinctive coll between the two main peaks which gives the crest of the mountain its sickle Sickle Moon was first climbed in 1975 by members of the Indian profile. High Altitude Warfare School. Several attempts since led to failure, ours if successful would be the first British ascent. I never found out what the local name was for Sickle Moon, none seemed to know of it, consequently it was much easier to satisfy inquisitive locals as to our destination by pointing a finger to the sky and saying 'Brammah, Brammah'! As Brammah is a 'Holy mountain' (you are safe from snake bites in its shadow!!!) everyone

knew of it and the answer seemed to satisfy. What is definite about this landscape is the variety of rock towers, aiguilles and wild looking ridges meaning that adventurers have the potential for endless enjoyment in the absolute 'middle of nowhere'.



For the first few days we acclimatised to the altitude. The weather was great and I'd been able to complete a couple of paintings when I asked myself what was different about painting Himalayan peaks compared to painting in the Alps?

At first I found this difficult to answer, for up close the Himalayan peak looks similar to an Alpine peak. I concluded that the difference is in yourself; how you are seeing and feeling about what is around you. Another mountain painter described this feeling as the 'inscape' - the spirit of one particular place to which the heart responds. The inscape of the Himalayas is about being remote, miles from home, settlements, and other people. I'd only experienced a similar feeling in North West Scotland in winter. Being in a remote, inaccessible place, I develop a more intimate relationship with the landscape around me. I guess this is why many landscape artists are mountaineers and, in fact, a reason why people venture onto mountains.

I felt in a unique position: I knew expeditions had been up this valley before and I was sure that these magnificent peaks had been photographed; but in the history of their existence, had anyone tried to paint images of them? For me, photography is not enough. For sure, a skilled photographer can stamp his personal skill with a camera onto a frozen image of time by the use of filters or creative printing techniques; but he will never be able to be as intimate with a subject as a painter. A painter has to control all his medium, manipulating paint by the physical action of turning a white piece of paper or canvas into an image which is totally dictated by how he is feeling and seeing change before his eyes. As this is such a personal feeling the image he produces is unique and belongs to the painter alone.



Himalayan image making, photography, film and especially painting is in it's infancy. In the Alps, traditional strong images of dramatic peaks such as the Matterhorn are well known. In the Himalayas, on the other hand, opportunity still exists to capture new and spectacular views of mountain shapes and environment which are just as impressive, but unknown. As a climbing artist the combination of this opportunity, the remoteness of the mountains and the infinite climbing possibilities in such areas, will draw me back again and again.

Unfortunately the elements did not favour our climbing endeavours. After three days at base camp (at 17000 ft.) the weather broke and a storm that lasted a full 14 days brought our expedition and others throughout the Himalayas to a halt. Nothing can describe the bored frustration of being so close to a mountaineering goal, so far from home. I was lucky that in the short breaks in the storm I was able to indulge my love of mountain painting; for the others the repetition of rice, curried dal and jappaties every day was demoralizing. To add to our problems was the lack of reading materials, breath, and toilet roll which I was informed with annoying regularity was: "all part of the Himalayan Experience".

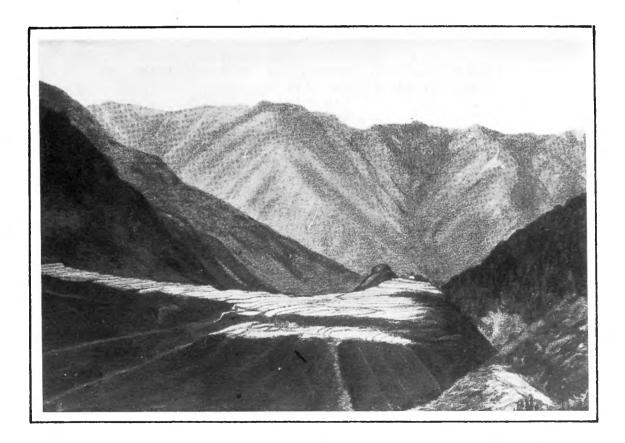
The Paintings

1. SONDA RICE FIELDS

This picture is a view looking back down the valley we had come up during the trek in from the roadhead. We were getting quite high having covered 25 klm that day. The scene is at about 4.00 p.m. and the sun was just dropping, beginning to cast shadows. I'd stopped in the shade as it was about 100°c and looking back, the sun began to illuminate the Sonda rice fields that we had crossed at midday, making them stand out against the dark blue's and green's of the surrounding forest.

Sonda is a small mountain village based on this flat spur of alluvial material which 'hangs' above the main valley gorge. The rice fields being the only flat land around, and being different in colour made an obvious contrast to the precipitous gorge scenery we were passing through. The village itself lies just out of sight over the crest of the hill. The small white hut which stood out so brightly is a ramshackle forest lodge where we had stopped for lunch. Built by the Indian Government Forestry Service to provide accommodation for workers and trekkers, its location was strange with no running water and quite some way from food supplies in the village.

The mountain villages themselves are collections of two-storey wooden huts designed to accommodate several families, their animals and food supplies. The houses had an outer 'summer' accommodation and an inner house where whole families spend the long winter period (5 months) huddled together in this dark smoke filled confinement.

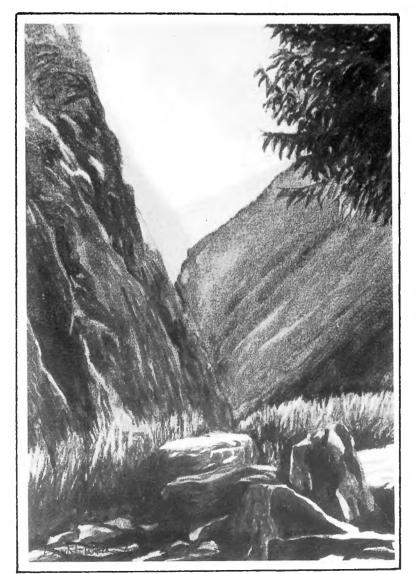


2. FIRST VIEW

Trek in, day 3

Three days past the last road and about 40 klm up the 'Nath Nalla' gorge a group of small ragged children were bathing a small baby. I stopped to take photographs and noticed painted on a boulder in huge white letters: "Brammah 1, 22,000 feet" with an arrow pointing up the valley. I quickly looked in the direction of the arrow and saw the peak, covered in snow, gleaming in the intense mid-morning sun. This was the first 'really high' peak I had seen. This was our goal and I was overcome with enthusiasm at the prospect of reaching such heights.

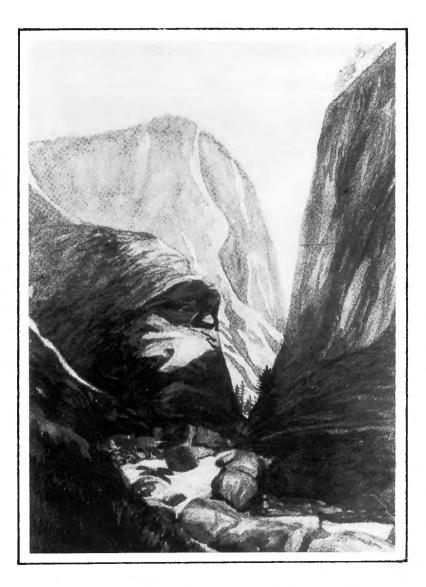
I had to stop and record this personal moment. In the shade of a tree beside the children who stood and watched me the whole time I gathered the sketch reference material I needed. As it turned out, it was a fantastic composition. The V shape of the valley reminded me of the V shape of a gunsight, a gunsight made by nature pointing towards the target that was our aim. As I sat, the image of this high mountain changed before me as a cloud bank built from nothing around it. This change of nature emphasized the seriousness of our climbing endeavours for down here in the heat and lush vegetation the beauty of such a scheme hides the difficulties and danger of high mountaineering, for it was winter up there, on that other planet.



3. SUID GORGE

At the end of the third day we reached the last mountain village, Suid. This high village is the extent of human habitation at about 13,000 feet. It is a beautiful village with a natural hot spring where you could take a bath and wash clothes. We recruited our cook Sarrup here; who indicated the culinary adventures that were to come by preparing for us a seering goat curry (my first meat for some days). We started in the dawn twilight pushing hard up into a narrow tributary gorge of the main 'Nath Nalla' valley. We would follow this gorge valley until it reached the snout of the Sarbal glacier.

At about 8.00 a.m. I stopped to record this landscape image. Beside the deafening roar of the river the sun was illuminating the far gorge wall, it seemed to say "This is where the heat starts" - as by this time you really hate the heat, from which there is no escape.



4. LOOKING BACK ON MONSOON CLOUDS Day 5

We were now surrounded by the moraine debris of the Sarbal glacier at about 16,500 feet.

This painting is at the end of day 5, looking down the valley gorge at its head two days walk away in Suid village. The last rays of the sun in a sky filled with foreboding monsoon storm clouds created, for me, a unique atmosphere of isolation and beauty. I had come to India, to the Himalayas hoping to experience this feeling of being 'out on a limb', away from everything and miles from England. Dusk is just the time to have these feelings and to think of home. By combining the approaching night and the dramatic ominous clouds, I hoped to produce a picture which captured the feeling I had of isolation, being away from home, alone and in a strange, remote and dangerous landscape.

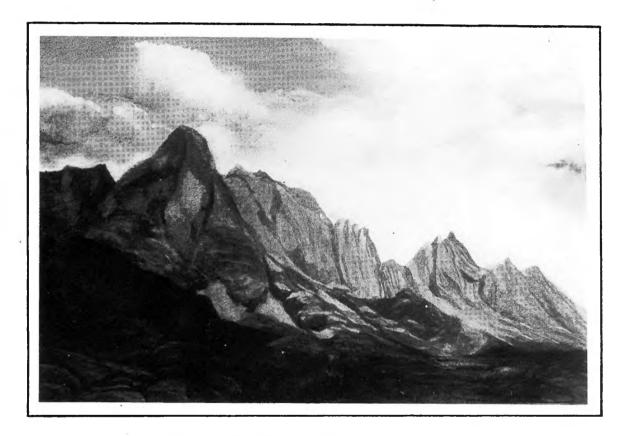


5. EIGER RANGE, DAWN

The next morning very early and very cold, from my tent door, still in my sleeping bag, I watched for the first time the dawn sky lighten behind the Eiger range. I never sickened of this experience and although too cold to paint there and then, from sketches, photographs and my memory, I produced this painting of a series of jagged unclimbed peaks dominated by the massive 6000m (and unclimbed) Eiger South Face.

Day 6

This line of peaks mostly unnamed and certainly unclimbed, provided a deep blue/purple silhouette to the growing light. If the previous dusk had made an ominous impression on me, the sight of this dawn landscape enlightened my spirits and encouraged me to look forward to the day ahead.



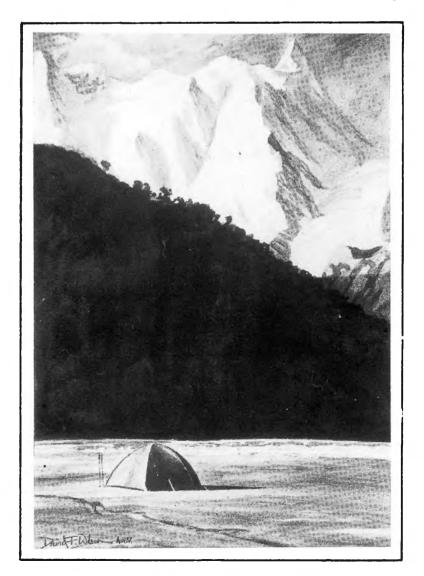
6. THE SCALE OF THINGS TO COME

For the next several days, we acclimatised by carrying out a series of reconnaissances about the Sarbal Glacier, visiting a potential advance base camp at 18,000 feet. The weather still remained fantastic and our spirits were high.

This painting was produced looking south towards the Brammah's Wife peak. My aim here was to emphasize scale between the start of a climb and the top of the peak. This view is definitely Himalayan, for nowhere in the Alps had I seen such a difference in height from base to summit.

The painting was sketched out again in the early morning. The morning sun had not reached the far side of this broad valley and was still in shade making an interesting shape that actually divides this composition in two. In the foreground, the base with its man made tent colours, then the valley in shade, a blue/black and purple obstacle that appears as a kind of wall between the foreground and the image of the peak high in the background.

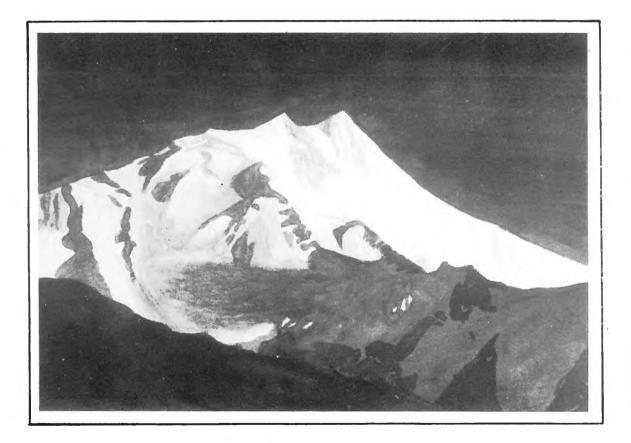
Later on we climbed this tree lined ridge where we bivouaced for the night. From here we had some fantastic views of Brammah 1's ascent ridge, the unclimbed North ridge of Brammah's Wife, Cathedral, and Brammah 2 and we were treated for our endeavours to a fantastic sunset image of Brammah 1.



7. DAY'S END AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

This view was from the tree lined ridge of painting number six at the very end of the day. The night had reached us hours earlier and from our bivouac site we watched the impressive bulk of the 22,000 feet Brammah 1 peak which towered above us catching the very last rays of the sun.

I have never before had to use colour so boldly for a watercolour painting, but there was nothing weak or washy about this view. The sky was dark, dark blue (I imagined, like outer space) shadows were definitely purple and blue and they moved across the peak like extending fingers. The last rays of sunlight hit the snow of the mountain, turning it to gold.



8. AVALANCHE SLOPE - BRAMMAH 1

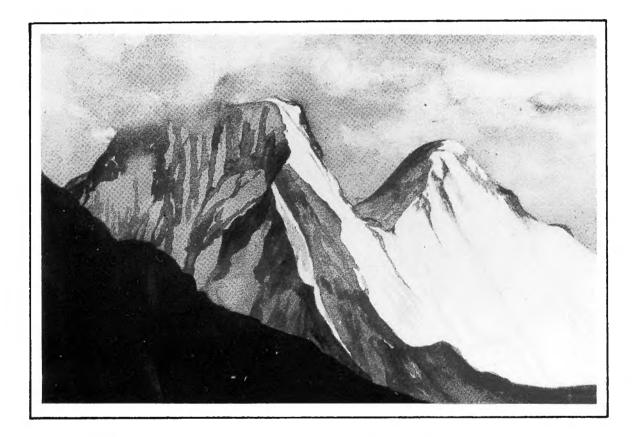
From the same ridge earlier that day we sunbathed and watched the avalanches roll down this impressive snowslope. The ridge on the horizon is the main ascent ridge for this massive peak first climbed by Bonnington and Escort in 1975.

This image is produced straight from a photograph taken with a telephoto lens and colour sketches done at the time. My aim was to shrink the foreground so that the view is one you would get if you were looking through binoculars. This creates a basically flat image, because I wanted to produce a painting that emphasised the scale and nature of this rock ice wall and not the peak itself. If you could add the sound of the avalanches to this painting it would add to its quality. As I can't paint sound, try to imagine that explosive rumble, and match it to this painting.



9. CROOKED FINGER

At the far end of the ridge and at the extent of our reconnaissance, two dramatic peaks stood out. Crooked Finger and Brammah 2. Hidden in cloud by this painting is a rock pinnacle that points towards the sky at a distorted angle.



10. BASE CAMP SOUTH FACE EIGER (DUSK)

Sickle Moon base camp was situated on the lateral moraine of the Sarbal glacier directly below the massive Eiger South Face.

This painting was taken from a sketch just out of the base camp at dusk. The summit of the Eiger was just catching the last rays of sun, creating a fantastic range of colour and form. Again my emphasis was to show height and as with painting number six 'The scale of things to come'. The painting falls into three sections; i) the blue/purple advancing night of the foreground divided ii) by a soft area of mist which marks the boundary to the upper section where iii) the peak is illuminated by the last rays of the sun.



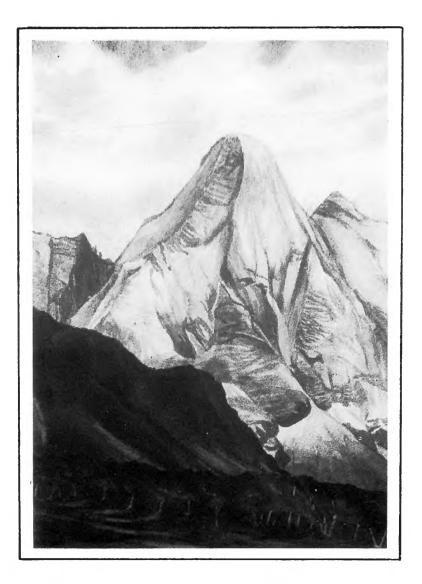
11. EIGER SOUTH FACE (DAWN)

The Eiger was a fascinating peak in terms of both painting and climbing potential. At 6,000m it remains unclimbed. As a mountaineering endeavour, its formidable South Face is potentially the hardest route I witnessed in the area.

The Central main gully fed by several smaller gullies came to be known as 'gunbarrel' gully as it narrows near it's lower section. Rock, ice and snow avalanches are compressed at this point and are forced through this narrow section to emerge as if fired from a gun barrel. The South West ridge looked a little like the Matterhorn Hornli Ridge with a distinctive rock pattern resembling skin and ribs.

We reconnoitred the South West gully which has potential but is guarded at its head by massive serrac ice cliffs at impossible angles.

The picture was painted well out of Sickle Moon base camp at dawn. The sun rises behind the peak and as with painting number five the whole peak turns a luminous purple that accentuates its features. Again by the inclusion of trees, I am trying to emphasise height.

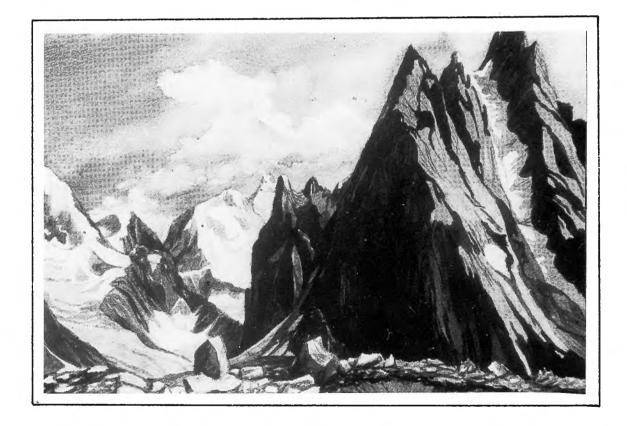


12. CATHEDRAL

After several days of good weather and acclimatisation, we visited Advance Base Camp at 17,500 feet high on the Sarbal Glacier. I spent the day just behind the main group painting this dramatic moonscape. The passage to A.B.C. was over the moraine covered battlefield landscape of the Sarbal Glacier.

About four miles from Sickle Moon base camp the glacier dog legs to the left. Once round the dog leg a whole new landscape vista emerges.

At the dog leg I stopped to sketch Cathedral Peak, impressive with its narrow glacier running directly up it's front, my eye though, was drawn to the peak further up the glacier which was unnamed on my map.



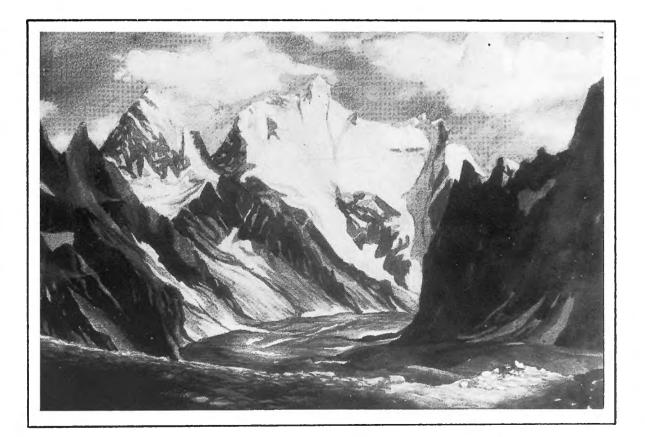
13. UNNAMED PEAK

About another hour further up the Sarbal Glacier, I stopped to complete a full colour sketch of this magnificent peak. I was so absorbed by this task that time did not allow me to get any further, I was totally impressed by this new landscape.

The peak that attracted me most was shaped like a huge whale's back with a massive shark shape fin which must have taken this peak's height to around 22,000 feet. To its left was a similarly impressive peak called Consolation peak which I believe has been climbed from the other side.

It was an incredibly remote place. I was sure that very few people had been to that peak or had even reconnoitred the head of the Sarbal Glacier. I was inspired by the idea of setting off on my own to this peak to reconnoitre a possible crossing of the Himalayan Crest which would have taken me across the Himalayas. But like all good ideas, the practical realities of such a crossing later put me off - perhaps something for the future.

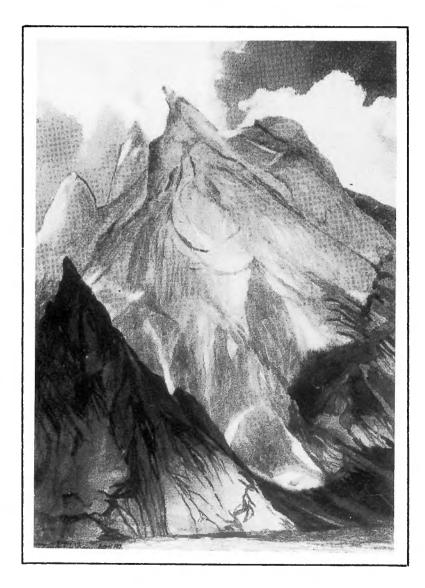
The painting itself is a broad traditional landscape, the glacier leading the eye to my main subject, my unnamed peak. It was whilst I was putting together material for this painting that I realised it was getting late and that I was on a glacier by myself in a situation so alone and remote it was unnerving. I thought of my friends back home, my parents and my fellow climbers, I developed a sudden need for human contact. I don't think I have ever felt so alone in my whole life.



14. FINS

Just out of base camp towards the glacier dog leg is a fantastic rock formation which I called 'The Fins'. This feature must have been part of a huge anticline which the elements have shaped into these distinctive features.

Clouds were casting shadows onto these features as they moved rapidly across the sky. The shadows. I feel, give this painting depth. Unfortunately I could not find any reference to give these features scale, so you will have to take my word when I say they are at least 18,000 feet high.



15. **MONSOON**

The weather broke, the monsoon moved in and the whole atmosphere of the area changed. Movement was now difficult and uncomfortable, inactivity and boredom replaced activity and exhaustion and the amount of painting sketches I could do was limited.

Bob Egelstaff and I, fed up with such inactivity, did a number of day walks. It was on one of these walks that number 15 - 'Monsoon' and number 16 - 'Grey's Monument' were painted. 'Monsoon' shows the instability and dramatic atmosphere created. It is a different painting in many ways from the others. The bright sunshine with its definite colours had been replaced by mist cloud, dark pastel shades. This suited a more 'fluid' watercolour painting where the use of water and shades of colour replaces the dramatic lines and construction techniques used on earlier paintings.



16. GREY'S MONUMENT

To relieve the boredom of being trapped in the tent we climbed the first pinnacle separated by these two small glaciers at the base of the Eiger Peak. As a form of tribute to our local North East we named this pinnacle 'Grey's Monument'.

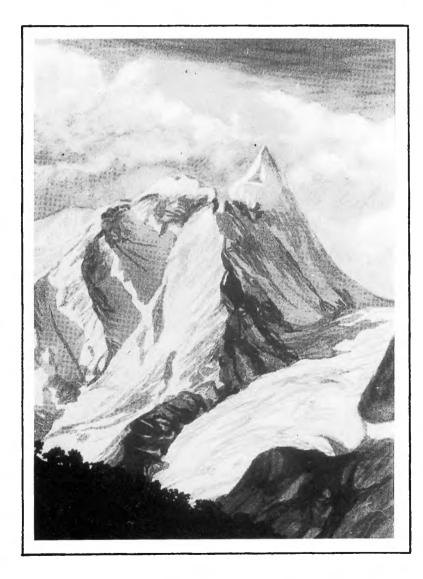
The painting was produced on the way up to the day climb. The lines of moraine which were catching the light of a watery sun, I feel lead the eye to the vertical of the pinnacle. The ice of the glacier frames the pinnacle, a natural composition of natural beauty.



17. ASCENT RIDGE BRAMMAH'S WIFE

Brammah's Wife is a perfect fairytale shaped peak. It was first climbed along the West Ridge by a Polish Team in 1978 (skyline ridge from right). The North Ridge is unclimbed and looks a fantastic route.

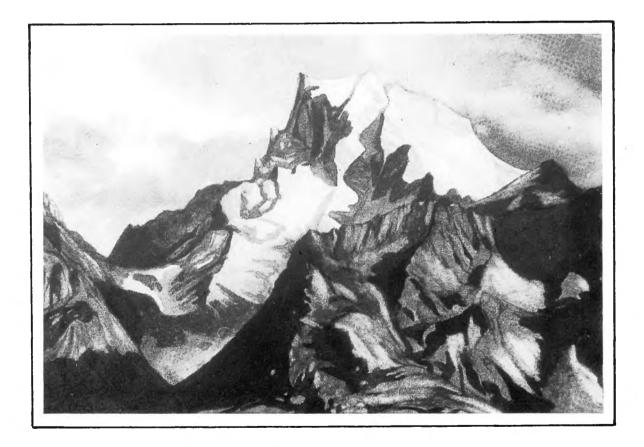
Brammah's Wife is one of my favourite peaks, and consequently I did several sketches and paintings of it. This painting is in the early morning, with the sun still yellow on the snow. By including the ridge (where we had previously bivouaced) I hoped to emphasise the heightand scale of this magnificent peak.



18. STORM CLOUDS BEHIND AN UNNAMED PEAK

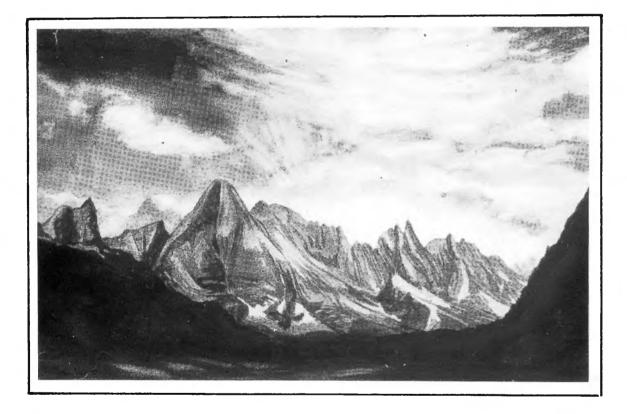
This is another of my favourite peaks with its obvious ridge running to a central gully (300m) at about 20,000 feet.

I painted this picture as I was leaving for the United Kingdom. Storm clouds surround the peak and a weak sun highlights new snow and casts long purple shadows. This peak, unnamed, stands alone and will, no doubt, have a fantastic panaoramic view from its summit - perhaps the best reason for a climb in any mountain lovers book.



19. EIGER RANGE (2) (DAWN)

This is the only complete painting included in this exhibition which was started and finished in the Himalayas. I almost froze to death whilst painting this. It is about 7.00 a.m. on my last day. I felt strongly that no matter what the weather, mist or snow, I was going to produce a painting for the exhibition in the Himalayas itself. I was rewarded with a fantastic colourful dawn. The whole painting from start to finish took about twenty minutes.



20. SICKLE MOON

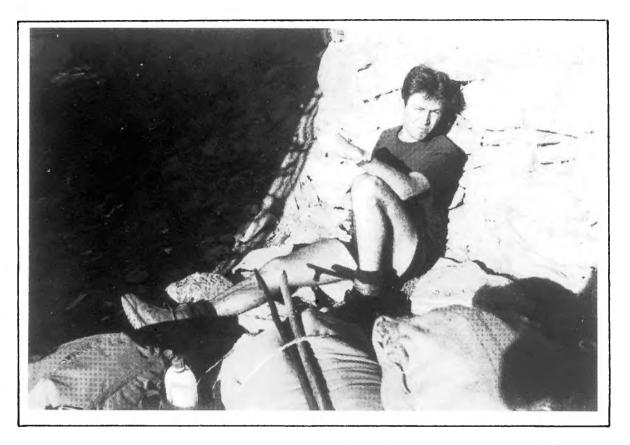
The only view of the peak that we had come to climb was from some distance away but still the route showed itself to be the difficult technical climb that had defeated several other expeditions. The ascent line takes a route directly up to the central 'icefall' glacier to the obvious coll at the base of the massive 'gendarme' tower (A rock pinnacle that blocked the way to the summit ridge which either had to be climbed or traversed). It was this gendarme that had defeated other expeditions.

The painting was produced from a rapid sketch as it was late in the day and I had to return to base camp. All I remember of painting this image some months later is the impressive bulk of the gendarme which was catching the rays of the sun and the rumbling crash of collapsing ice cliffs in the central ice fall.

The summit of Sickle Moon in perspective appears much lower as a snow dome to the left of the gendarme.



David F. Wilson was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 19th November 1959. He was educated at Heaton Comprehensive School, Newcastle, the University of Manchester where he read Geography and the University of Durham where he qualified as a teacher of Geography and Art. He now works as Project Manager for East Durham Community Arts, County Durham.



Dedicated to Freddy and Joan

Special thanks to:-

Bob Egelstaff for helping me in India and gently reminding me what it was all about back in the United Kingdom.

Bill Saunders for helping me so much.

Janice Nicholson for putting up with the mess and being the number one critic.

Thanks to:-

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Northern Arts The Northern Regional Sports Council Tioxide U.K. Ltd



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East Durham Community Arts Easington District Sports Council

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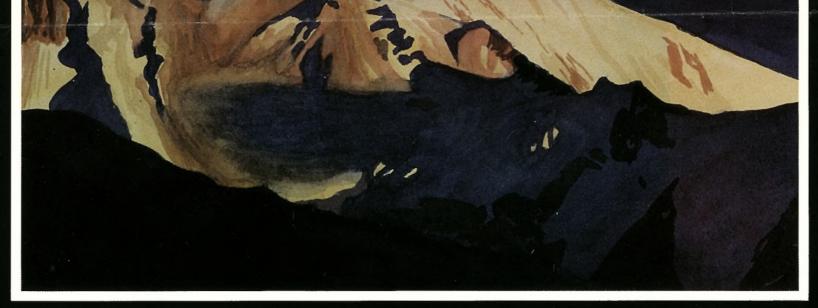
For further details on the exhibition and tour programme ring the following Telephone numbers: 091 - 2651880 or

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