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Anniversary Man: an interview with Chris Bonington

30 years ago, Sir Chris Bonington led the team which made the first ascent of the South West Face of Everest, at the time the greatest unclaimed prize in mountaineering. 10 years later, he returned to the world's highest peak and climbed to its summit. Paul Deegan talks to Britain's most famous – and enthusiastic – mountaineer during his special double anniversary year.

The northern tip of the Lake District is mercifully devoid of tourists as photographer Martin Hartley and myself hurtle along narrow and winding lanes on a damp Thursday morning. We drive past a solitary wind turbine standing like an alien sentinel in a scene that otherwise appears as though it has seen little change since Chris and Wendy Bonington moved into a shepherd's cottage in the locale more than 30 years ago. At length, Martin pulls over to allow a white van to squeeze past. The slogan of a well-known double glazing firm, 'Fit The Best... Everest' are writ large on the side. "We're getting close", says Martin.

Unless you're in the window replacement business, when you think of Everest then inevitably a handful of names spring to mind. Hillary. Tenzing. Hunt. Messner. And Bonington. Since his first brush with the mountain, in 1972, Sir Christian John Storey Bonington has been intrinsically linked with the peak that has been his stage for triumph, tragedy, friendships and fulfilment. 2005 is a special year for Chris as it marks not one personal Everest anniversary, but two.

Bonington's affair with Everest began after he returned from leading the successful 1970 Annapurna South Face expedition, a project which ushered in a new era of Himalayan climbing. Located at a head-splitting altitude, the south face of this 8000 metre giant was larger and steeper than anything that had previously been ascended.

Chris did not personally summit, but as Reinhold Messner (the first person to climb all fourteen 8000ers) explains, to think only about who stood on the top is to miss the most important point. “When we go back to the seventies, Chris was really the motor. And British climbers should finally understand that without him they would not have been leading in this period. He was not the best climber. But he looked for the best ones. He organised the expedition. He found the money. And he had the idea for Annapurna South Face. All over Europe we understood – not only climbers but also normal people who were a little bit interested in mountaineering – this is something new. Something great.”

Annapurna gave Chris the confidence to think about tackling the South West Face of Everest, widely regarded at the time as the toughest challenge in world mountaineering. By the summer of 1972, four expeditions had tried and failed to climb the face. In those days, only one team per season was allowed on the Nepalese side of Everest, so the chance of obtaining a permit was slim. Suddenly, the post-monsoon (autumn) slot on Everest became vacant. Bonington grabbed it with both hands. After contemplating and then dismissing a lightweight dash for the summit via the original South Col route, he was left with a scant eight weeks to launch one of the most ambitious mountaineering expeditions to leave British shores. “What frightened me was the sheer size of the commitment and the challenge. And then, once we got stuck into it I enjoyed the organisation and never looked back.”

The expedition was eventually thwarted at the infamous Rock Band by appalling weather during November. The lessons learned would surely increase the chance of success were a second Bonington expedition to be mounted. But other mountaineers had their eye on the prize, not least Reinhold Messner.

Messner knew the Italian millionaire Monzino had the permit for the mountain in the spring of 1973, and was planning to climb Everest via the South Col. Messner approached Monzino and enquired about the possibility of sharing the permit. Such an arrangement would have allowed Messner and three friends to attempt the South

West Face using oxygen. Despite positive signals, Monzino ultimately rejected Messner's proposal, forcing the world's most accomplished mountaineer to direct his prodigious energies elsewhere.

Unaware (until this interview) of Messner's machinations, Bonington seized the slot for the autumn of 1975 when it became available at the tail end of 1973. With sufficient time to not only secure a single sponsor to underwrite the entire cost of this mammoth expedition, but also to get all the supplies out to Nepal before the summer monsoon enveloped the country, the powerful team which Bonington assembled was able to begin climbing the face much earlier than in '72. This time around, Nick Estcourt and Tut Braithwaite solved the problem of the rock band, allowing Doug Scott and Dougal Haston to reach the summit on September 24th. The South West Face had been climbed.

The irony is that whilst Bonington remains best known for these three siege-style expeditions, it is bold first ascents of remote peaks accomplished in a lightweight style which he enjoys most. "If the South West Face had been climbed by, say, the Japanese in '73, I would have just gone on doing the things I love doing, which are essentially unclimbed peaks like Bramah, Shivling and Kongur."

Nevertheless, Bonington wasn't finished with Everest. Far from it. After Kongur in 1980 he projected his preferred lightweight style of climbing onto the then unclimbed North East Ridge of Everest. This expedition, in 1982, ended in disaster with the disappearance of two of the four climbers, Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker, high on the mountain. The third climber, Dick Renshaw, had already retired from the expedition after suffering a double stroke.

Upon returning to the UK, Chris promised Wendy that he would never go back to Everest. But 'never' is a very long time. In the early 1980s, Arne Naess, a Norwegian shipping magnate, approached Bonington and asked if he would be interested in lending his experience to an Everest expedition that would be attempting the by now

relatively well trodden South Col route. Chris initially declined Arne's invitation, then admitted to himself that reaching the summit was still important. "Arne let me do a lot of the planning. I recommended that he took double the normal number of Sherpas and double the normal amount of oxygen. [This] meant that we kept everyone extremely fit. We were lucky with the weather, they were a really nice crowd, and it was a lovely, relaxed, fun expedition." A decade after the success on the South West Face, Bonington – then aged 50 – briefly became the oldest person to climb Everest when he summited in April 1985.

Earlier this year Chris returned to the Khumbu region (which surrounds the Nepalese side of Everest) with some members of the Norwegian team to erect a plaque to Arne, who died in an abseiling accident last year. It was the first time that Bonington had been back to Everest since 1993. Much has been written about the development of the Khumbu, but Chris thinks that most of it benefits the Sherpa people who inhabit Everest's foothills. "The Sherpas are doing what the Swiss peasants were doing in the mid-19th century. What to me is really good is that it's got that distinct Sherpa feel about it. OK, you can get on the internet, you can have satellite television, you can have hot showers. But that is a natural development. On the whole they've actually done the development sensitively and well, particularly the fact that all the electric wiring is underground at considerably greater expense [than overhead cables]. You want to get away from it, it's dead easy. You go up one of the side valleys. 10 minutes' walk and you're away from it all."

Protecting the mountain environment whilst supporting local communities remains high on Bonington's list of priorities. Over the years he has worked tirelessly to preserve wild places, and used his many honorary appointments (which have included President of the Council for National Parks and President of the British Mountaineering Council) to excellent effect.

Interestingly, the latest environmental threat to appear on Bonington's radar is virtually on his doorstep. The proposed site for the Whinash wind farm project

occupies an area equivalent to 118 football pitches on open moorland between the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks. Supporters of the £55 million scheme, including Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, state that the 27 turbines will produce sufficient energy for 47,630 homes and cut carbon emissions by more than 4 million tons over a 25 year life span. Conservationists, on the other hand, point out that the base to blade tip height of each turbine will be twice the height of Nelson's column, with a rotor diameter precisely two thirds the size of the London Eye. So where does Bonington stand on the debate? After all, he already has one turbine lurking just a couple of miles from his front door.

"But that's tiny. Something like 50 foot. I'm not too happy about it. But I think that is a completely different kind of question to Whinash. I'm not against wind energy, and I think we do need renewable energy, but it's having renewable energy in the right kind of places. I think each site needs to be rationally assessed. You'll always get objecting. You've therefore got to have a clear-headed assessment balancing out the scenic importance of that area against the benefits that renewable energy is going to give, and take the right decisions. My feeling is that the Whinash site is completely the wrong kind of site."

However, what concerns Bonington even more is the wider implication if Whinash gets the green light from the government.

"If they get permission for Whinash – anything goes. It means that they would then be free to ring places like the Lake District and Snowdonia with wind farms. The environmentalists on the other side of the fence do agree there needs to be a balancing of the values because they don't dispute that you don't put wind farms in national parks. But I think having agreed on that value judgement you have also got to look at the environs of the national parks. And that's really what the argument is about. The problem is if Whinash goes through there are no buffer zones."

It's clear from our conversation that Chris is determined to ensure that the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts is able to experience the same wilderness regions that he has spent a lifetime enjoying. As he enthuses about forthcoming trips to East Africa, Greenland, India and Morocco, as well as the tantalising possibility of tackling some unclimbed mountains in a currently disputed territory in Asia ("It would be nice with good Sherpa support to get up a 7000 metre peak in my dotage..."), I'm left thinking that even mountaineers who are half Bonington's 71 years don't usually get this much climbing done.

As Martin and myself prepare to depart, Chris mentions an upcoming cruise around Cape Horn. He's a guest lecturer aboard the Queen Mary 2, and Wendy will be sailing with him. I can't help thinking that there must be an adventurous agenda in there somewhere. There is. "We've got a day in Punta Arenas, so I'll try to hire a car and drive up to the Torres del Paine." It's good to see that Bonington's thirst for adventure remains as unquenchable as ever.

Chris Bonington's Anniversary CV

1970: Leader of first ascent of Annapurna's South Face (8091m)

1975: Leader of first ascent of Everest's South West Face (8850m)

1977: First ascent of OGRE (7284m) with Doug Scott

1980: First ascent of Kongur (7700m) with Pete Boardman, Joe Tasker and Al Rouse

1982: Leader of expedition to Everest's North East Ridge

1985: Reaches the summit of Everest with Norwegian expedition

1988: Leader of first ascent of West Summit of Menlungtse (7023m)

1991: Sailing/climbing expedition to Greenland with Robin Knox-Johnson

1992-95: First ascents in the Indian Himalaya and Greenland

1996: Receives Knighthood

1997/98: Leader of two attempts to make first ascent of Sepu Kangri (6950m)

2000: First ascent of Danga II (6190m) with son, brother and nephew

2003/04: First ascents in the Indian Himalaya

2004: Appointed Deputy Lieutenant, Cumbria

2005: Appointed Chancellor of Lancaster University

2005: Return to Greenland with Knox-Johnson

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