

Sunday, November 24, 2013 - by James Broadbent

Around Mount Cook

TRANSALPINE JOURNEY AROUND AORAKI / MOUNT COOK

12-16 November 2013

I have wandered up a few pointy bits of landscape in the past, usually by the easiest route, but often after a long approach march to a more remote peak. While I am motivated by the summit, actually my interest lies in the journey, more than the actual destination. I have traversed many remote areas of New Zealand's mountain terrain, often bivvying out, or travelling in winter on skis and staying in tents or snow caves. After a while I have gained a reputation as a "trans-alpine" mountaineer rather than a technical climber.

Add to that my situation at home. I had not done any real climbing for 6 years or so, being busy with children and work and all the rest. So I was looking for a guide to take me back into the mountains and see what I was still able to do. My first thought was the head of the Tasman Glacier being a place with a few easy peaks. I had contacted Alpine Recreation and they had suggested Gavin Lang, a climber I had known from about 8 years ago when we were both on a NZ Alpine Club instructor's course. Since then his career path had gone on to become a professional mountain guide, so he seemed like the ideal companion.

I was eyeing up the weather forecast in the week leading up to departure. It was unbelievably good. November is often sketchy, but I had lucked it. Snow conditions were stable and it was still early season, so it all looked go. I met Gavin in Lake Tekapo and he started talking options to use these great conditions. He had been looking at the map, and with my "trans-alpine" reputation, suggested that we do a traverse from Plateau Hut to Empress Hut via the La Perouse Glacier on the western side of the Mount Cook massif. I was immediately intrigued at the prospect of seeing new terrain, and crossing two high passes. As Gavin said, the transalpine trip was on, and Tasman Saddle can wait. I couldn't fault his logic.



About to fly in to Plateau Hut with Gavin, and also Wolfgang and Chad.



Taking off in the helicopter.



Flying up valley towards Aoraki, the cloud-piercer.



We arrived at Plateau Hut, which is a large and busy hut. It was buzzing with climbers making the most of the excellent conditions, and the Linda Glacier was getting a thrashing. We four settled in to a bunkroom. Plateau Hut has been likened to Grand Central Station and it certainly sounds like it, with parties arriving and leaving at all hours of day and night. It was a friendly bunch of folks though, including a large contingent of ski patrollers from the Remarkables, and everyone was celebrating their successes.

The plan for the next day was to climb Mount Dixon (3004 m). Frequently it is overlooked by climbers and suffers in comparison to its higher near neighbours Mts Cook and Tasman, but it is a fine climb and should not be considered as merely a "warm up climb" for Mount Cook. Gavin and I went up the East Ridge. The crux was getting through the bergshroud at the base of the slope leading

on to the ridge, but Gavin was cool and proficient in his work and we were up on to the ridge in good time and soon sunning ourselves on the summit.



First light on Aorak Mount Cook. Stunning conditions.



Lower Tasman valley and Lake Pukaki in the morning light.



Upper Tasman Glacier. Freshfield Glacier in foreground.



Working our way up the East Ridge.



Silberhorn and Tasman seen from E ridge of Mt Dixon. Syme Ridge in foreground.



Yours truly on E Ridge of Mt Dixon. Fine views of Aoraki / Mount Cook.



Top of Mt Dixon. Looking north along the main divide towards Mt Douglas and Haidinger. We left the hut at about 4.30am and arrived on the summit at 9am IIRC. We could see the Tasman sea far below.



We could gaze all the way up the Tasman valley. This photo follows to the right of the above photo.



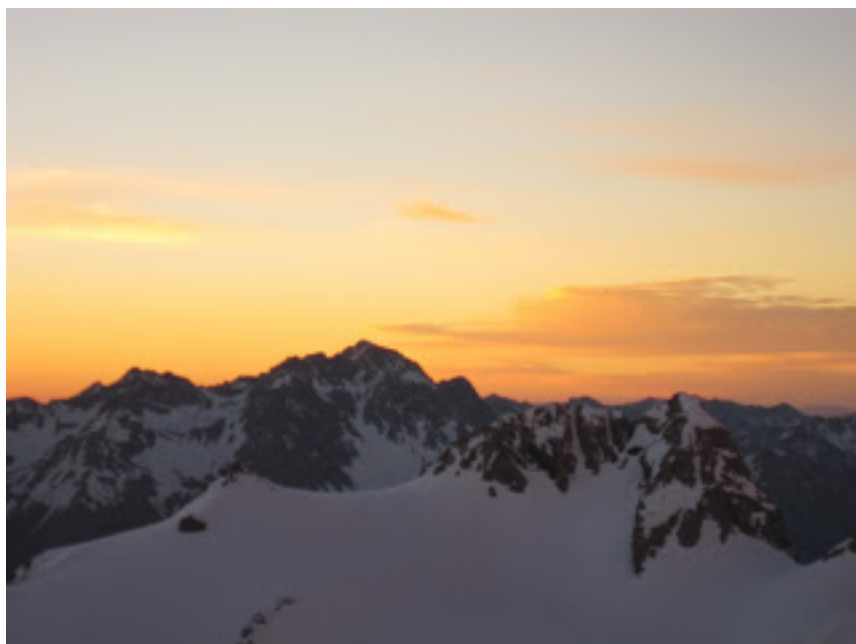
Gavin on the top of Dixon. Malte Brun Range behind.



After we had been relaxing on the top of Dixon enjoying the view for 30-40 minutes we were just about to move off and we heard the voices of Wolfgang and Chad approaching from below. They had taken a more technical route up the West face, so we were reunited on the summit. The lower Tasman valley and lake is seen beyond.

That night we had a chat in the hut. All options were still on the table, Silberhorn, even

Tasman were all on. Wolfgang and Chad were going for Tasman the next day. But I feared that if we tried to climb either of these peaks I would miss out on the trans-alpine traverse through the La Perouse Glacier, which had initially taken my interest. It was my call - and I definitely wanted to head up to Clarke Saddle. Rather than bivvy out on the La Perouse I thought we could travel light and make it to Empress Hut in a long day. I knew I was out of shape, but I also knew I could make it. I had done such big days in the past and I figured could do it again.



Sunrise over the Malte Brun Range, as we climbed the Linda Glacier up towards Clarke

Saddle.



Looking up to Clarke Saddle, 2978m. Getting up there was the equivalent of climbing to a 3000m summit. We had to get through the bergshrend in mid picture, and then climb up towards the saddle right of the large rock buttress.



The upper Linda seen from the slopes of Clarke saddle.



The steep snow ice climb ended in a couloir to the saddle.



It was with a sense of amazement and achievement that I reached Clarke Saddle. I looked out over the La Perouse Glacier and the river flats below. This was just what I had come for.



The western side of Clarke Saddle. Descending these steep slopes was a challenge to my calves as it was firm snow/ice requiring concentration and persistent ankle work. It was about 200 m vertical down-climbing from the saddle to the bergshrund.



Off we went across the upper La Perouse Glacier. It was starting to warm up considerably.



The back side of Mt Hicks.



About this time we were caught up by Gordy and Tubbs of the Remarkables ski patrol, who had been in Plateau Hut with us and set off later than us, on ski touring kit. The snow rapidly became softer. At the lowest point of our traverse around Hicks (2380 m) the snow was literally thigh-deep mush with huge crystals. We were glad for Gordy and Tubbs' footprints to follow. I was starting to cramp up and lose all power in the legs. But willpower, and the sure and certain knowledge that I had done it before in the past, kept me going. 200 m further climbing took us to an abseil point. We teamed up with Gordy

and Tubbs and Gavin set up snow bollards for the abseil, and used sling around rock projections also.

From the bottom of the abseils it was another 150 m up snow slopes to Harper Saddle. From there we could see Empress Hut, the end was in sight!

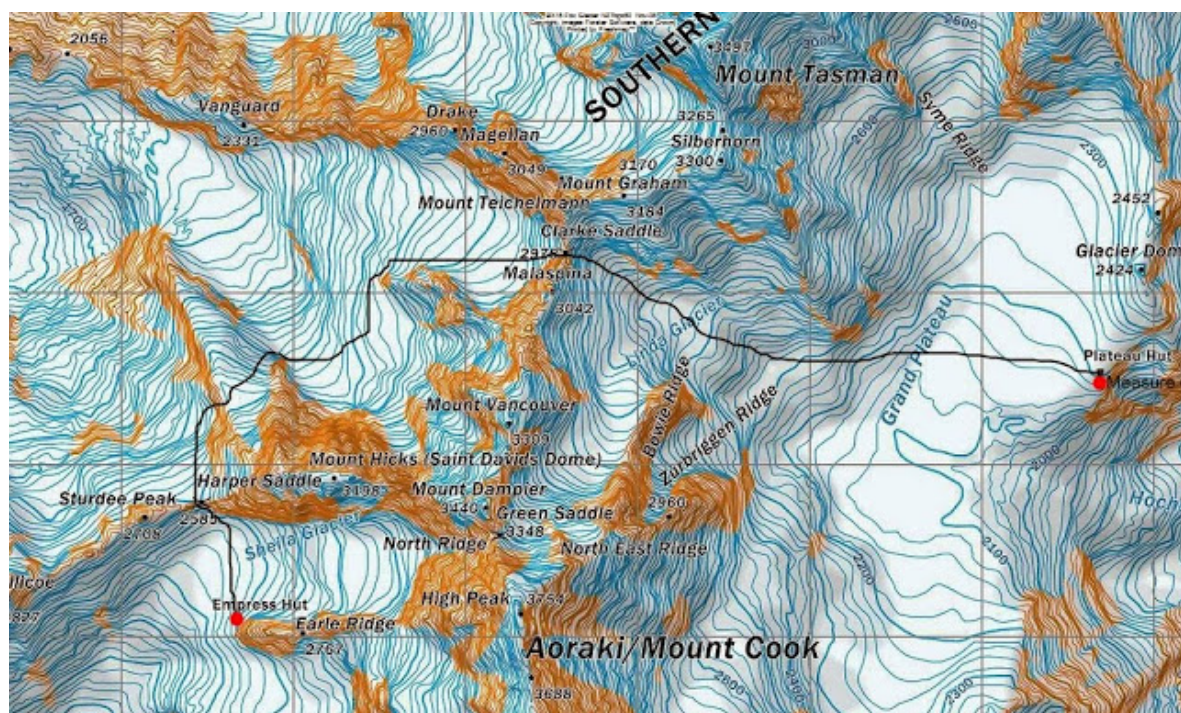


Above can be seen the SE (Sheila) side of Harper Saddle.

Harper Saddle has an anchor bolt on a boulder on its SE (skier's left) side. The next abseil was by V-thread. We were using all sorts of alpine anchors. One more bergshrund to cross and only a short trudge across the Shelia Glacier to the hut. It had been a huge day, especially for someone out of shape like me. Gavin had got me though, leading the way and negotiating the maze of slots.



Empress Hut, seen on its rock outcrop at the Shelia Glacier.
 It was a good feeling to be at Empress. A new hut for me, a new valley, a new aspect of Mount Cook. Apart from the Linda Glacier, the whole day had been new terrain.





Classic view standing on the deck of Empress Hut, S Face of Hicks behind. Image (c) Gavin Lang. Good ice conditions.



View from Empress Hut over Baker Saddle to Footstool and Mt Sefton (L) and Dechen and Hooker (distant centre), and the slopes of La Perouse to the right.



Above: Mount Dechen (2643 m) and Hooker (2640 m) seen from Empress Hut. I had climbed those mountains with some good friends on a big trans-alpine trip in 2001.



A grand view of Footstool and Sefton.

We had Empress Hut to ourselves (much more my scene than the bustle of Plateau!).

Gordy and Tubbs had taken the ski short-cut direct to Gardiner down perfect corn snow.



View down valley from Empress Hut, image (c) Gavin Lang.

The next morning was a good time for a sleep in. I did not have it in me to do another climb, and the clouds were thickening. It made sense to get down valley before the weather broke, and be in Gardiner Hut the next night. A short day was just what the doctor ordered.

Gavin and I had time to chew the fat over a brew or two that morning. I agreed that air access to Empress would be a good thing overall. It would allow quicker (and safer) access to the best ice climbing routes in New Zealand. Multiple sight-seeing helicopters flew over Harper Saddle while we were there, making a bit of a mockery of the supposed "no-fly zone" of the Hooker valley. I am a trans-alpine mountaineer who truly appreciates the value of wilderness values, but I think that the Hooker valley would have more value as an advanced ice climbing area with air access than it has as a wilderness area.



Next morning the clouds were building considerably. We had a short day down to Gardiner Hut (seen on rock left/centre).



The glorious Art Deco door sign of Gardiner Hut, 1934. The hut was named after the famous pioneering climber Katie Gardiner, and there is an informative folder of information inside the hut, about her career, and the building of the hut. Again, it was a treat to stay in such a historic hut in such a dramatic location. Huts like these are the heritage of the New Zealand mountaineering culture. Unfortunately the extreme weather had taken its toll. The back window had been smashed (probably by stones thrown by

the storm-force winds), requiring a previous party to do some patch-up repairs. It is my fear that some bureaucrat will consider this hut as low priority for maintenance due to its relatively low occupancy (which is mainly due to the valley being designated "walk-in") and a great climbing resource will go to waste, while large amounts are spent on big new huts such as Mueller.



The view down valley shows a glimpse of the eroded valley walls (lower right of frame). These unstable slopes overhang on both sides the glacial melt lake that parties are forced to walk under in order to access the valley.

That night the weather hit with full force. The wind was more powerful than the rain was, and by morning it was ok to move. We walked out in about 5 hours, initially good progress on the ice (again good route finding by Gavin), and then just grovelling through the gravel down to the lake. Gavin had his tunes in his ears and I was just cruising. As a "trans-alpine" mountaineer I actually get pleasure from a walk out (!), but walking around the edge of the Hooker lake was no fun at all due to the steep eroded scree slopes and embedded garage-sized boulders hanging above us. I would have been pretty keen on a boat across the lake right then.



Finally we got out to the Hooker Valley track. The Nor'wester was blowing and raining showers at our backs, and the Mt Cook lily was in flower. As the tourists walked past us, the smell of their soap and perfume was overpowering. We must have smelt the opposite! Each of them had the same question on their lips: "How far is it?" You want to respond: "To where? To the lake? To Gardiner? To the summit?" The answer of course for all of us, is that it is always as far as we choose to go.



I came away very satisfied with the trip. Gavin had done a tremendous job, which started most importantly with tailoring the trip to suit the client.

Summary: At the very heart of the Southern Alps there is a jagged wall of rock almost 10 kilometres long that runs from the east ridge of Mt Dixon to the south ridge of Mt Cook, which looms over the Grand Plateau and is over 3000 metres for its full extent apart from where it dips down to Marcel Col (2987 m) and Clarke Saddle (2978 m). We crossed that wall of rock at Clarke Saddle into the rarely-traversed La Perouse Glacier, gazed into Westland and crossed back over Harper Saddle in a virtual circumnavigation of Mount Cook, and walked out down the Hooker.

This is historic terrain and it was a treat to pass through it. Clarke saddle may have been named for Jack Clarke who made the first ascent of mount Cook (?) but the first crossing noted in the guidebook was made by the pioneering Kiwi climber Dan Bryant. Katie Gardiner herself had been this way when she made the first ascent of Mt Tiechermann. Harper Saddle must have been named for Arthur P Harper, the founder of the New Zealand Alpine Club.

My thanks to Gavin Lang and the Alpine Recreation crew.