

HASLEMERE UNCOVERED



The Whympers and the Matterhorn

When the Haslemere Society unveiled its fine blue plaque on the Town House in the High Street in 2012 I wondered how an engraver became involved with mountain climbing. When a Haslemere resident recently lent me a book by Whymper, *Scrambles With a Camera, a Victorian Magic Lantern Show*, I was prompted to write about his exploits.



Edward Whimper

Edward Whimper (EW) was born in 1840 and was the second son of a Lambeth engraver, Josiah Whymper. In 1862 Josiah was invited by publishers, William Longmans, to prepare the illustrations for a forthcoming book entitled *Peaks Passes and Glaciers*. The young EW, who had joined his father's firm, saw an opportunity to explore. He had long nursed an ambition to be employed in arctic exploration and between 1862–65 he carried out a series of brilliant climbs in the French Alps.

In 1864 Edward took part in the first climb of the Dauphin Range, the 'Pointe des Ecrins', one of several peaks in the Mont Blanc chain, and it was then that he developed his great ambition to conquer the allegedly unclimbable Matterhorn (14,780ft). He made seven attempts from the Italian side of the Alps but eventually, after his efforts were foiled by appalling weather, he decided to try an approach from the Zermatt ridge in July 1865.



The allegedly unclimbable Matterhorn

At 5am on the 13th July 1865 the party set off on the attempt which was to meet with both success and tragedy. His party of eight climbers was too big and, in part, inexperienced. There were two experienced guides, one of whom brought along his two sons as porters. EW in his commentary said: ‘...to ensure steady motion, one tourist and one native walked together... the wine bags fell to my lot to carry and throughout the day, after each drink, I replenished them secretly with water so that at the next halt they were found to be fuller than before! This was considered a good omen and little short of miraculous”.



...a very challenging terrain

The ice and terrain were very challenging but they reached the summit the following day. However, on the return journey the youngest tourist, Hadow, slipped and fell headlong down the glacier. All the climbers were roped together and the expert guide Croz who was helping Hadow to find a foothold was dragged down, followed by Lord Douglas and the Reverend Hudson. Fortunately the rope was severed (apparently on a rock) and EW survived with the remaining companions. As he wrote, ‘The inaccessibility of the Matterhorn was vanquished but the joy turned into grief and the laughter into mourning’.

EW went on to climb other peaks - in Greenland (1867- 72), Ecuador and the Andes (1879-80) and Canada (1901 – 05). He also wrote several books on the subject.

EW’s father, Josiah Whymper, was not only a skilled engraver but also a water colourist of considerable ability, a skill inherited by Edward. The photos in the book reveal that Edward Whymper shared his father’s considerable artistic sense and judgement of composition.

Josiah Whymper, born in 1813, came to live in Haslemere in 1859 and lived in the Town House until his death there in 1903. Edward was a frequent visitor to Haslemere and produced much of his writing at his father’s house. He remained²



...slipped and fell headlong

single until 1906 when he married Edith, 45 years his junior. They had one child but the marriage was not long-lasting and they separated in 1910. Edward died in Chamonix on September 16th 1911 aged 71.

Robert Serman

(Any points of view etc expressed in these articles are entirely personal.)