



New major line on Grandes Jorasses

Text for Climber magazine, October 2016: Lindsay Griffin

Over three days this summer the well-known Scottish activist Simon Richardson, climbing with Micha Rinn, made the first ascent of a major line on the Italian side of the Grandes Jorasses - the Diamond Ridge on the Tronchey Face. This is only the third time this face has been climbed to the summit of the Jorasses, on each occasion by a different route.

The Tronchey or south-southeast face of the Grandes Jorasses is sandwiched between the Pra Sec and Tronchey Ridges, both long, serious, and established climbs that see very little traffic. At around 1,400m in elevation it is the highest in the Mont Blanc Range. First climbed in August 1972 by Alessandro Gogna and Guido Machetto, their line had difficulties of UIAA VI and A1, with Gogna feeling the ascent to be 'undramatic', grading it a surprising TD. It is almost certainly more like ED2 in today's currency and has not been attempted since. The second line - the Phantom Direct (ED3 V/5 or 6) - fell to the visionary Giancarlo Grassi, with Renzo Luzi and Mauro Rossi, in June 1985. Grassi had hoped to finish direct through the huge deep gully that splits the upper wall but found the ice there unclimbable. In May 2010 a four-man French-Italian party managed to climb Grassi's dream line at VI/5 M6+R, reaching a point just 50m from its junction with the Tronchey Ridge, where they met a complete dead end (which they felt would require either bolts or very bold and sophisticated aid climbing). They called their line Plein Sud.

Before 2010 Richardson had spent several years studying photos of the Jorasses south face, looking for potential new lines. He logged the long ridge line to the right of the couloir that would later become Plein Sud but as it was such a prominent feature he dismissed it as having already been climbed. But when the French-Italian team made their ascent, all reports indicated that ridge on the right to be untouched. Richardson could scarcely believe it.

Richardson met German web designer and mountaineering instructor Micha (Michael) Rinn in 2014 at the Envers Hut. Rinn was keen to winter climb in Scotland and Richardson encouraged him to join a BMC International Meet, which he did this January. Richardson and Rinn climbed together for several days, including doing a new route at Lochnagar, got on well, and arranged to go climbing in the Alps.

After acclimatizing with several rock routes in the Mont Blanc Massif, including an ascent of the 4,000m Dent du Géant, the two bivouacked in the Val Ferret below the Jorasses. Accessing the base of the unclimbed ridge had always appeared complex and after a thorough reconnaissance Richardson came to the conclusion that it was best done by climbing the left flank of Punta Grassi, a formation first climbed by Tony Penning, then crossing a couloir leftwards to reach the crest.

The pair left the valley before dawn at the end of July with the knowledge the fine weather would break in a couple of days. They reached the base of the Punta Grassi spur (ca 2,600m) at 9am and started rock climbing, using an axe to assist overcoming the first four very grassy pitches. They reached the crest of the Diamond Ridge around midday and climbed 10 pitches up to F5c on marvellous granite with stacks of excellent features, reaching a notch at around 3,250m where they managed to find two, small, separate bivouac sites about 15m apart.

Next day in cloudy but still fine weather they found the step above the notch to be the crux (three points of aid were used but these could be easily free climbed at about 6a). Another 16 pitches (up to 5c with one move of A0, which would again go free at 6a) took the pair to below the towers on the Tronchey Ridge, where the natural line took them direct to the base of the Second Tower. Here, things got awkward, with banked up snow on ledges that required much changing into and out of boots, crampons and rock shoes. Following the established route on the Tronchey Ridge they climbed the left flank of the Second Tower, finding it severely undergraded at IV+. At the end, and expecting a series of ledges, they were faced with steep unprotected wet slabs with snow banks above, leading to below the Third Tower. Rinn led a full 50m runout before having to retreat because the final moves were covered in ice and he could find nowhere to put on crampons. He then had to repeat the entire traverse in crampons so that he could deal with the final moves - a fine lead. In the dark, it had proved an intense time for both climbers. They bivouacked immediately, digging into a snow bank atop the Second Tower.

On day three they finished up the final 400m of the established route on the Tronchey Ridge to the 4,208m summit of the Grandes Jorasses and began to descend just as the forecasted storm swept in from the west. They found the glacier in such good shape after the cold spring that they were able to follow the normal descent route direct from Pointe Walker, arriving at the Boccalatte Hut by 5pm. Richardson's 10-year dream of adding a new route to the Grandes Jorasses had been achieved and the Diamond Ridge was rated 1,600m, 5c A0.