

The Inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award Meet

15-23 June 2024

An overview

The inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award Meet was held in Chamonix in June 2024.

Over seven days, the four AC participants – Richard Ive, Tom Shaw, Jeremy Letwin and Dai Richards – climbed with three British Mountain Guides. Guy Steven joined us for the first half of the week. Jon Bracey joined us for the second half of the week. Kevin Avery was a source of continuity for the whole Meet. The emphasis of the instruction was on helping us to develop the independent decision-making skills that will allow us to progress to more adventurous and committing routes. This is the approach that Rick took with his own climbing.

Having had the opportunity to climb with Rick in the Alps in 2017, it was poignant to be a participant on the inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award Meet. Rick took a keen interest in sharing his knowledge with less experienced AC members, so – although Rick is, very sadly, no longer with us – I hope that he would be proud to see the legacy that he is supporting.

The aims of the inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award Meet: Who is it for?

The Rick Allen Skills Award Meet is designed to help full and ACG members of the Alpine Club develop multi-day alpine skills. The course runs on a two-to-one climber-guide ratio. It is not objective driven.

The emphasis of the 2024 course was on developing independent decision-making skills in the mountains, to allow completion of more adventurous routes. This is the approach that Rick took with his own climbing.

The 2024 Rick Allen Skills Award Meet

The inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award Meet started with a dramatic, last-minute change in location. In view of difficult conditions (unseasonal amounts of snow on the ground and an unsettled forecast) in the Écrins, the decision was made to move the Meet from Ailefroide to Chamonix, where the conditions were much better. Holding the inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award there provided the team with great options for nipping in and out of the mountains – something that is just not possible in the Écrins. In many ways, this echoed my previous approach to Alpine trips – where friends and I would book a flight to Geneva airport, but not decide on an onward location until we had picked up the hire car at Geneva airport. Flexibility is key.

We had Dai to thank for managing to book us a central Chamonix Airbnb the day before the Meet commenced. The four of us – having travelled from London, the Northern Lake District, and Rosehall, a hamlet in the Northwest Highlands – happily rendezvoused there before the Meet. We had all been hoping for more space than camping, and that just about proved to be the case – but only just! Over the course of the week, we all grew rather fond of our very cosy apartment. One room had space for a bunk bed, while the other room was a twin – although, to

our amusement, it was only possible to open the bedroom door by pushing the two single beds together...

The Meet, which officially started on the morning of 17 June 2024, began with a chucklesome case of mistaken identity. We had all arranged to rendezvous at a boulangerie in central Chamonix at 7am. Tom Shaw, keen to get going, was the first of the four of us out the apartment. A hard climber who shuns expensive mountain clothing, he was kitted out in his casual red sweater, with white paint liberally splattered across the front and down the sleeves. Tom's unassuming appearance had thrown off Guy Steven, who was sat in the corner of the boulangerie on the look-out for four young AC members. During our introductory chat – and much to my amusement – Guy revealed that, upon seeing Tom stroll into the bakery in his paint-splattered attire, he had turned to Kevin Avery ('Kev') and asked him: 'Is he one of ours, or is he the local, Chamonix painter?' This was the perfect icebreaker.

On the first day of the Meet, we set out for the *Traverse of the Perrons*. This is a non-glaciated ridge traverse of AD standard. We climbed in three pairs. I climbed with Tom (my climbing partner for the week), while Jeremy and Dai (who were also to be climbing partners for the week) also teamed up.

Just before we set off for the traverse itself, Kev and Guy provided us with general and specific advice for the day – and, indeed, week – ahead:

- i. Gear up and put the rope on early;
- ii. On the approach to the route, make a plan for the route ahead;
- iii. Think about when best to put on crampons;
- iv. Don't take crampons off until you are absolutely sure you will not need them again;
- v. Always be doing something to be moving forwards.

The ridge was great fun, and it was the perfect first day. The emphasis was on moving together safely and efficiently. With lots of snow still on the ground in June, we were able to enjoy a long – and occasionally elegant – glissade down from the ridge. Just as we rejoined the road, we nipped past a perfect bivi spot. With a waterfall running through the middle of it, I could not but help wonder how many stars it would get on Mick Fowler's bivi rating scale.

After an excellent first day, plans were soon afoot for Day 2 of the Meet. Kev and Guy suggested a day hit on the 245m *East Ridge* of the Pyramide du Tacul. On Tuesday morning, we rendezvoused at the Skyway Monte Bianco ticket office at 7.15am, booted and ready to go. This enabled us to catch the first lift at 7.30.

For me, it was poignant to be back at the Skyway. The last time that I had caught the Skyway was with Rick in September 2017. Equally poignantly, Guy shared a memory of his from 2021. He remembered being in the Rifugio Torino hut, which of course sits right next to the top of the Skyway, when he heard – through Sandy Allan, who was staying in the hut at the same time – the very sad news about Rick's death on K2.

Leaving the Skyway and the Torino Hut behind, the six of us made our way across to the Pyramide du Tacul. Despite having caught the first lift, several teams were already on the *East Ridge* when we arrived at its base. They had either come across the Géant Glacier from the Midi lift or stayed the night at the Torino Hut. Eventually, Tom and I were presented with an overtaking opportunity, courtesy of a neglected, wet overhang. With two teams bunched up

directly ahead of us, this meant smoothly overtaking four climbers at once. It was here – by outflanking both teams – that Tom and I could utilise the efficiency skills that Kev and Guy had been imparting.

There is no abseil from the very top of the route, so I left in the gear as Tom and I scampered up the final pitch of glorious, golden granite. We could then then clip this on the way down, so that the last man had some protection as he retraced his steps. At the top of the route, we were treated to staggeringly beautiful, panoramic views. Jeremy, Dai, Kev and Guy – all of whom had been blocked by traffic jams on the ascent and had decided against the final few pitches to the top of the route – were well under way with their abseils by the point that Tom and I reached the first abseil anchor.

Before starting our abseils, Tom and I reminded ourselves of Kev and Guy’s top abseiling tips:

- (i) Even if you are the second person in the team to abseil, put on your prusik before the first person has finished their descent;
- (ii) When you reach the ground or the next anchor, give lots of slack – so that the next person can easily put their belay device on;
- (iii) Stay the other side of the rope to the anchor that you are aiming for;
- (iv) Put in a central point at each anchor which both climbers can easily clip into;
- (v) Thread the rope through the next anchor before you start pulling the rope;
- (vi) Start pulling the rope as soon as it’s free;
- (vii) One climber should pull the rope down from above while the other climber throws down the rope for the next abseil.

Despite making good progress on the first few abseils, the rope got stuck about halfway through our descent. Mercifully, after some sharp pulls, we were able to continue onwards with our descent. We were all able to put into practice the abseiling tips that Kev and Guy had shared with us.

Jeremy, Dai, Kev and Guy – quite understandably keen not to miss the last lift on account of mine and Tom’s summit ambitions – had started the journey back to the Skyway by the time that Tom and I touched down on the glacier. Tom and I managed a quick turnaround at the base of the route and, happily, we were soon reunited with the rest of the team. All six of us were pleased to make the last lift with a little bit of time to spare.

The plan for Wednesday – the third day of the Meet – was to rendezvous at the Brevent lift station at 9am. From the lift, we headed for the Jumeaux area. This was quieter than the *East Ridge* of the Pyramid du Tacul, while the route of choice – a fantastic, 165m TD rock line – was ideal in enabling us to achieve all our objectives. The emphasis was, again, on leading safely and efficiently. It was also an opportunity for us to deploy Kev and Guy’s Alpine rock tips.

After a series of abseils to reach the base of the route, I set off up the first pitch – a steep, technical slab. I had an audience for my lead of the first pitch. The pressure was on. Tom, who was belaying, took delight in heckling me about my (poor) jamming skills and lack of chalk. This proved to be the perfect motivation for upwards progress. It was then Tom’s turn to tackle the second pitch – a superb, delicate slab – with Kev, Guy, Dai (showing off his “bulging guns”) and Jeremy following on close behind. After some easier pitches, the difficulties ramped up again. The final pitch – a steep groove – led us, with interest, to the top.

By this point in the day, the heat was overpowering. Tom and I, while waiting for Kev, Guy, Dai and Jeremy, lay – like lizards – under the shadows of large rocks. Jeremy pulled over the top of the route in some pain. The combination of expanding feet and small shoes had – for poor Jeremy – been excruciating. Jeremy’s solution? To buy some ‘speed shoes/slippers’. More on this later!

The forecast for the Thursday – Day 4 of the Meet – was for a deluge. The decision was made that we would use this as an opportunity to prepare for the final days of the Meet. For me, that meant spending the morning stocking up on chocolate eclairs – the staple of every Alpinist’s diet. In the afternoon, jealous of Tom’s sporty visor, I devoted some time to Chamonix visor shopping.

On a rather more sincere note, Tom and I visited the newly restored Mathews Monument Following a three-year project to relocate, restore and rededicate the Monument in Chamonix, it has finally landed in its new permanent home at the entrance to the Couette Park. Originally, it was dedicated to the memory of CE Mathews (founding member and former president of the Club). It has now been rededicated to also represent the shared history and comradeship between Chamonix and the Alpine Club. The rededication, which is in Latin, is, in many ways, a tribute to lovers of the mountains. Here is a rough translation:

Charles Edwards Matthews

To a Lover of the Mountains

From his Fellow-Members

To the sole surviving Founder Member

From his Brothers

To a Most Agreeable Companion

From his Friends

Who died, much missed,

AD 1905, aged seventy-two.

After our visit to the Monument, the AC’s ‘Lovers of the Mountains’ enjoyed a spontaneous, Big Mountain (Brewery) Meet. There, we met with seven other, young AC members who all happened to be in Chamonix at the same time as us. The eleven of us enjoyed raising a few pints to the AC. That evening, while admiring the views of the Chamonix Aiguilles from the apartment’s cosy balcony, Tom, Jeremy, Dai and I enjoyed salmon and dry, white wine. Brown and Whillans would be turning in their graves...

The forecast for Friday – Day 5 of the Meet – was for afternoon rain. To make the most of the dry weather in the morning, we spent the morning at Le Fayet, a local crag, practising crevasse rescue and prussiking. Jon and Kev’s crevasse rescue advice was clear: ‘Don’t fall in!’ We had company at the crag – French, Aspirant guides. With their Guides Test fast approaching, they were practising climbing 6b in big boots. We decided against showing them up.

The forecast for Saturday – Day 6 of the Meet – was also for afternoon rain. To make the most of the last Day of the Meet, we caught the first lift to the Brévent. This was to be the first outing for Jeremy’s ‘speed shoes/slippers’ – B3s so light that we wondered if Jeremy was seeking to set the Fastest Known Time on the Chamonix Vertical Kilometre. Jeremy’s yellow ‘speed

shoes/slippers' clashed beautifully with his orange trousers. Fashion advice was soon dispensed.

The conversation soon turned from sartorial choice to the aim of the last day of the Meet. This was to master moving together safely and efficiently. Kev and Jon reminded us that, on Alpine routes, you should always be doing something productive and 'never be just taking in the view'. Kev and Jon encouraged us to embrace an attitude of professionalism. They tasked us with pursuing the ultimate Alpine objective: 'flow state' – the joy of flow.

Tom and I found the joy of flow courtesy of a Micro Traxion. This was the first time that Tom or I had ever used one of these devices. It was fantastic. It enabled us to safely move together. Once we had it on, the teams climbing behind us soon disappeared out of view and into the mist. For Tom and me, the climbing highlight of the week was – with clear and careful instruction from Kev – learning to use the Micro Traxion safely and effectively.

Summary

In summary, the inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award was great fun. Tom, Jeremy, Dai and I want to thank the Alpine Club for their generosity. And, once again, we also want to say a massive thank you to the Guides – Kev, Guy and Jon. Thanks also to Jon for being a member of the AC. We are hoping that Kev and Guy will join this merry band. No pressure, Kev and Guy! I can think of four, young AC members who would happily lend you a signature...

Looking to the future

The Rick Allen Skills Award Meet is due to return to the AC's calendar in June 2025. The closing date for applications is 21 March 2025. Applicants are expected to be available for all of the dates, including a preparatory meet in Scotland.

A total of four places will be available to Full AC members. The Meet can be tailored to the participants.

It is good to work in strong teams. With that in mind, the Alpine Club Committee welcomes applications from established teams of two climbers. They should be of comparable ability and fitness. They should also both be full – or ACG – members of the Alpine Club. Applicants should be in the process of developing competence on alpine routes of AD+, and have experience of leading adventurous multi-pitch rock routes on mountain crags at a standard of VS/HVS. They should have a resumé which reflects this.

Post-script

On the Monday after the Meet's conclusion, Jeremy and Dai climbed the *Rebuffat Gully*. This gave them an opportunity to use the skills they had learned during the week. They quipped that they 'would have had a much closer call with the last lift' had they not been 'slick' and utilised the skills that they had been taught by the Guides. Reflecting further on their ascent, they had

this observation to share: ‘we only did things that kept us moving forward, and all our prussiks were the perfect length!’ I am sure that the Prusik Police would be proud!

Jeremy, upon first reading this account, wanted to set the record straight in respect of his mountaineering attire: ‘I maintain that the yellow speed slippers – with orange trousers – was the height of sartorial elegance, and I regard the averments to the contrary as scurrilous. However, I think sadly you are off the hook for libel as your statements would fall under the defence of ‘honest opinion’ or perhaps even ‘truth’.’ Who does he think he is? A university lecturer in tort law?

Tom Shaw was so enamoured with the Micro Traxion that he announced that, as soon as he got back to his home in the Highlands, he was going to buy one and test it on the multi pitch sport crag near his office. To quote Tom, he stated – in his typically understated manner – that he was ‘quite excited’ for this experiment.

My own post-script is, perhaps, a little more unconventional. The next weekend, I was at a friend’s wedding in Devon. Along with the other groomsmen, I – dressed in a three-piece suit – enjoyed putting my Rick Allen Skills Award skills to use when climbing a tree on the morning of the wedding. An essential skill for all alpinists, surely.

Having graduated from the inaugural Rick Allen Skills Award, Tom, Jeremy, Dai and I are hoping to go on to safely climb many more adventurous routes (and, in my case, trees!). We are all excited for a lifetime of adventures in the Alps.

Participants: Richard Ive, Tom Shaw, Jeremy Letwin and Dai Richards.

- Richard Ive

Rick Allen

The Rick Allen Skills Award Meet was set up in memory of Rick Allen. Very sadly, Rick lost his life on K2 in 2021. He was a long-standing member of the Alpine Club, and one of the world's finest Himalayan climbers.

Rick was born in London in 1953. He got his first taste of the hills thanks to his father, with whom he made ascents of Schiehallion and Ben Nevis. But it was at university in Birmingham that Rick truly found his passion for climbing. In an interview at the Banff Mountain Film Festival, he recalled that: 'one day was enough to know this was what I wanted to do.'

Rick progressed quickly from rock climbing to Scottish winter and made, perhaps, his greatest contribution to Scottish climbing in 1984 when, alongside Brian Sprunt, he made the first winter ascent of *Raven's Edge* (VII 7) on Buachaille Etive Mor. It was also in the 1980s that Rick made his first trips to the Himalaya. His contributions to Himalayan climbing are too numerous to list in full here, but include climbing the south face of Ganesh II (7111m) with Nick Kekus in an audacious alpine-style ascent. He established a direttissima on the north face of Dhaulagiri (8167m) in 1993 with a Russian team (an expedition for which he learned to speak Russian), and multiple attempts on the northeast ridge of Everest (8849m).

It was on one of these Everest expeditions that Rick first met Sandy Allan with whom he was to share a deep friendship and an incredible climbing partnership. Together, the pair made the first ascent of the southeast face of Pumori (7161m), and repeated Nanga Parbat's Diamir Face. Then, in 2012, they found themselves the subject of global headlines when they succeeded on the 'last great problem' of Himalayan Mountaineering – Nanga Parbat's Mazeno Ridge. This complete ascent (and harrowing descent) earned the pair not only headlines but also a Piolet d'Or.

Rick was undoubtedly one of the finest Himalayan climbers of modern times, but his friends also remember him as a kind and generous soul. Driven by a strong Christian faith, he dedicated much of his life to helping others. When he died on K2 in 2021, swept away by a series of avalanches, he was not only pioneering a new route, but also raising money to support young people in Myanmar. As news of his death reached higher camps on the mountain's normal route, Pakistani guides returned to basecamp to help recover his body, a mark of the deep love and respect that so many people held for Rick.



The *East Ridge* of the Pyramide du Tacul with the Géant Glacier behind. Photo – Kevin Avery



Jeremy Letwin and Dai Richards climbing the *East Ridge* of the Pyramid du Tacul. Photo – Guy Steven



Tom Shaw out in front on the *Traverse of the Perrons*. Photo – Guy Steven



Richard Ive leading setting off on a TD rock route, with the Mont Blanc massif behind. Photo
– Kevin Avery



Dai Richards enjoying the *Traverse of the Perrons*. Photo – Kevin Avery



The rededicated Mathews Monument at the entrance to Couttet Park. Photo – Richard Ive