

# SECOND ASCENT OF MAWSON PEAK, HEARD ISLAND

An account of a recent ascent of Mawson Peak, Heard Island by Martin Handy (ANARE Expedition to Casey in 1981). The summit of Mawson Peak was reached on the 8th of February, 1983, by Martin and companion, the following day a further three people reached the top. There were in total ten people in the mountaineering team.

By - Martin Handy

*A group of twenty people left Perth at the end of December 1982 aboard the 26m ocean racing yacht, Anaconda II, bound for Heard Island.*

I was one of six mountaineers amongst the group, keen to make the **second ascent of Mawson Peak, the summit of the Big Ben mountain range.** We planned to set up a base camp of tents on Skua Beach at the north-eastern end of the island, and to reach Big Ben via Long Ridge, a rock spur rising from the lower glaciers.

Heard Island is approximately 80 per cent glaciated with only a narrow coastal fringe. The mountain range, Big Ben, is the rim of an old volcanic crater which rises steeply from this fringe. The old crater is now a snow plateau approximately 2 km across and on its south western edge is Mawson Peak, the summit, at 2745m and a dormant parasitic cone. The coastal slopes of Big Ben are steep scree for about 400m which give way to easy angled glaciers. At 900m elevation the crater sides rear up steeply out of the glaciers. From the crest of Big Ben it is 100m down to the snow plateau, and 300m above this is Mawson Peak.

We reached Heard Island, Australia's isolated sub-Antarctic territory, after three weeks pound-through the southern ocean. Two ham radio enthusiasts and their gear were off-loaded at Atlas Cove, the abandoned ANARE station, and then we sailed to Skua Beach. Spurred on by the excitement of arrival and impending adventure, in one afternoon using 4m rubber inflatable dinghies, we unloaded all food and equipment brought to sustain ten people for up to six weeks. Our few tents and hastily arranged piles of gear and food, situated 50m up Skua Beach were insignificant against the bluffs, glaciers and sentinel of Scarlet Hill beyond.

Next morning we consolidated our base camp erecting tents, sorting and stacking our stores and gear. For a kitchen I helped build a low rectangular stone shelter using the beach stones which were ideal shapes and sizes. As a roof we used a nylon tarpaulin anchored to large boulders. The abundant wildlife seemed undisturbed by our presence -

Elephant seals slugged their way up and down the beach past our campsite, and fur seals stuck their heads up above the grassy tussocks. We were glad to be free of the confines of the yacht and enjoyed the relaxed island atmosphere whilst we prepared for the objective of the Expedition the ascent of Mawson Peak.

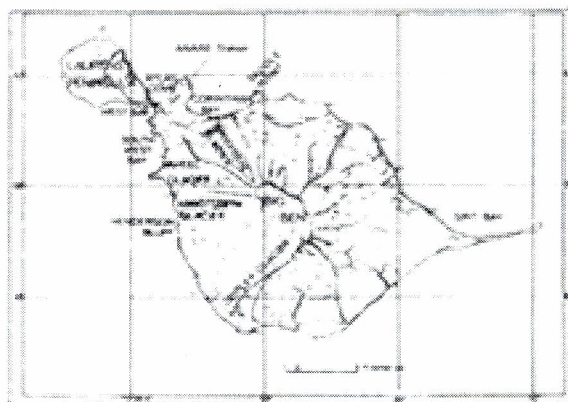


Figure 1.1 Heard Island

Above the camp rose the slopes of Big Ben; the first 400m was loose steep scree which gradually merged into the tips of glaciers flowing down from the upper mountain slopes. From about 400m to 900m elevation these glaciers and adjacent snow slopes were relatively easy angled. At 900m the snow and ice ramparts of the crater of Big Ben reared steeply, a chaotic jumble of huge ice cliffs, seracs and gullies. These ramparts appeared a formidable obstacle traversed by snaking rock ridges. The top of this monolithic wall dropped away steeply for about 100m to the interior snow plateau of the old volcanic crater. Two kilometres across the plateau on the south western edge of Big Ben was Mawson Peak, the parasitic cone and summit at 2745m.

With base camp established, we began to move our gear up the mountain. A cache of food and



equipment for the climb was made at the top of the scree slopes. Once the cache was ready, I began the climb with two friends. The first morning was clear and cold with a fine sunrise. Leaving Skua Beach at 0600 hours we lumbered up the scree behind, fighting with grotesque loads in our rucksacks. From the cache we gazed at the panorama of Big Ben's steep ice walls and snowfields stretching from Graham Ridge to the North Barrier. Directly in front was Long Ridge, our planned ascent route, one of the many rock ridges creasing the side of Big Ben.

Continuing up, we reached a nunatak of rock 200m below Long Ridge at 1100 hours. Early morning chills and the smells of the populated beach environment were now long lost in the serenity and vastness of the snow and ice landscape. Our only companions were the ever present winds and billowing fluffy white clouds swirling around the cauldron of Big Ben. The once firm snow was now like soup, wet and slushy; the sun was intense, perspiration ran freely even with only skivvies on as we laboured through the wet snow reconnoitring Long Ridge.

No easy route was apparent to the crest of the ridge and we dug a platform for our tent in the lee of the rocks. At 1800 hours we retired to the spacious comfort of our nylon tent, ate dinner and discussed plans for climbing Long Ridge. Although the wind was rising noticeably, we felt well protected by the high snow walls we had built around the tent, and relaxed in our warm sleeping bags expecting a good night's sleep.

### Storm Flattens Tent

Cold nylon cracked in the wind and slapped me in the face as a now ferocious wind flattened the tent walls in upon us. It was I am, and for the next few hours we lay half out of our sleeping bags bracing the tent against the onslaught. A quick glance outside confirmed my worst suspicions, the wind which had been blowing from the north west when we pitched the tent, was now streaming into us from the south west. The rocks were no longer giving us any protection, and, as it was pouring torrential rain, our five foot high snow walls were completely demolished. Tent guys whipped around in the wind, the rain had melted out all the tent pegs, rocks and ice axes used as anchor points. Only the weight of ourselves and our gear kept us on the narrow snow ledge.

The wind was at least 50 knots and increasing as we decided what best to do; I was all for collapsing the tent until the wind eased so as to avoid major damage. Before we had a chance, the tent, with all three of us and our gear inside, was lifted completely off the snow and blown about five feet. A large hole was ripped in the floor of the tent, in desperation I reached out and grabbed a nearby ice axe and swung it into the snow as a

belay, keeping a firm hold on the ice axe and the tent. Some of the poles broke, the outer fly was ripped from the tent, and the wet nylon collapsed upon us. The interior was a jumbled mess of people, clothes and gear. We took it in turns to hold the tent, and in the dark struggled with boots and clothes.

Gear was hurriedly stuffed into large nylon bags and we emerged into a maelstrom of wind and rain. We moved everything into another lee area of the rocks, and sat rather miserably through the early morning waiting for daybreak so we could assess our position. The wind tore on relentlessly, but abated in the early evening. The tent was unuseable so we slept out in our bivouac bags. Given fine weather tomorrow we would continue searching for a route up Big Ben.

### Up Long Ridge

The next five days, spent searching for a route up Long Ridge, were the most frustrating on the trip. Our search involved slogging through waist deep soft wet snow, wending our way across and around innumerable crevasses on the northern side of the ridge, traversing ramps of loose scree high on the rocky sides of Long Ridge, where every step released a cascade of rocks to the snow 250m below, and finally, moving along the southern side constantly threatened by rockfall and gaping crevasses.

Where Long Ridge abutted the side of Big Ben we found an icefall which was free of avalanche debris and led via steep snow slopes to the top end of Long Ridge. Here we dug a snow cave from which we had magnificent views spectacular sunsets and cloud formations.

From the top of Big Ben we abseiled 50 metres into the snow plateau of the old crater, passing over a gaping bergschrund. The weather which had started fine, was now deteriorating with a solid high cloud cover and moderate wind. With the summit of Mawson Peak clearly in view no more than 300 m above us and the threat of approaching bad weather, we left all except our emergency gear at the base of the abseil and headed straight for the summit. **It was a race against the weather.**

Two kilometres separated us from the base of Mawson Peak and from there 300 m of climbing to the summit. The plateau surface was reasonably firm and we were able to maintain a good pace. Soon the angle steepened and visibility deteriorated. I took repeated compass bearings on our gear back at the abseil. Steadily we gained height, crossing numerous crevasses and gaining extraordinary views of the interior walls of the old volcano. These walls were up to 100 m high, carved with a myriad of massive flutings, a result



of wind and water erosion. On our left, across the huge Godley Glacier, towered the massive South Barrier, a bastion of rock draped with curtains of snow and ice.

We zig-zagged back and forth across crevasses, and as the slope began to ease, wound our way past bulbous mushrooms of snow, probably formed by rime deposition due to the mixing of warm air rising from Mawson Peak.

Our approach to the summit ridge sheltered us from the wind and there was little indication of any movement. The silence, stillness and whiteout conditions lent an eerie atmosphere to the final ascent. A number of snow ridges ran in various directions and I carefully chose the correct ridge. Eventually it ended in a cornice 20 metres from the summit. There was no way onto the summit from here. I tried to the right without success, however, to the left the ridge connected to a snow mushroom which appeared on its far side to meet the summit rocks. I attempted to climb this mushroom but the snow was so brittle and granular that neither my ice axe or crampons would hold, instead huge buckets of snow just collapsed on top of me. The situation looked desperate, we had come up against impasses in all directions. As a last alternative I moved even further left to where a tunnel led down between the snow and rocks.

### The Summit Reached

Scrambling down the rocks next to the ice, I entered a misty ice cavern where the roof dripped water, and rocks gave off a wet sheen in the subdued light. The warm sulphurous fumes of the volcano were slowly melting the snow and ice. Climbing upwards along a narrow passage we reached the summit and stepped into a strong cold wind. **In contrast to this were the hot sulphurous updrafts from beneath the rocks, and in the space of 3 m it was possible to be quite warm or uncomfortably cold.**

Visibility had worsened even more, and only fleeting glimpses were obtained of the southern coastline, not enough to identify any features. After taking many summit photographs and collecting some geological samples we made our descent. Our tiredness was catching up with us now as our bodies relaxed the tensions built up during the ascent. Although the weather remained overcast and the descent was uneventful, we reached our cached gear late in the evening, and met three more of the party coming up for a summit attempt the following day.

We all decided to camp in the bergschrund at the edge of the plateau; with some searching we found a suitable site and spent an hour digging our sleeping platforms for all five of us. Overnight the weather deteriorated to a full blizzard and we spent two days in the cave before completing our descent of Big Ben.

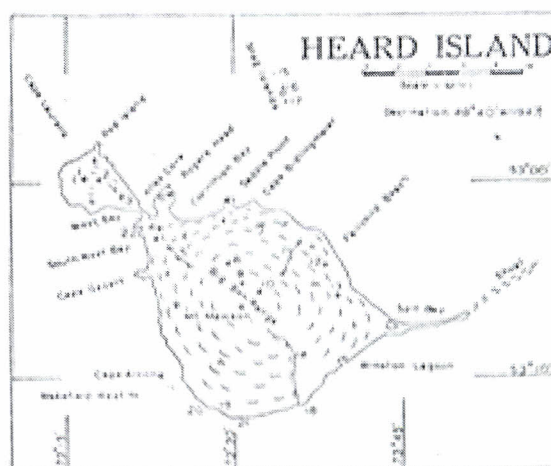


Fig. 1.—Key to Map of Heard Island. Major Geographical Features.

Major Geographical Features		Glaciers	
A. Mt. Deane	2558 ft.	a. Godley	
B. Mt. Asner	2547 ft.	b. Shackleton	
C. Mt. Gage	2060 ft.	c. Mawson	
D. Mt. Duggan	880 ft.	d. Challenger	
E. North West Corner		e. Godley	
F. Gorchow Head	662 ft.	f. Shackleton	
G. Mollison Bluff	2265 ft.	g. Mawson	
H. Little Mollison	2425 ft.	h. Godley	
I. Freestone Peak	1605 ft.	i. Unnamed	
J. Campbell Peak	2012 ft.	j. Unnamed	
K. North Barrier		k. Godley	
L. Round Hill	1372 ft.	l. Unnamed	
M. Scarier Hill	1349 ft.	m. Challenger	
N. South Barrier			
O. Seal Rock	88 ft.		
P. Stag Island	561 ft.		
Q. Deary Rock	127 ft.		
R. Cape Lambert	700 ft.		
S. Long Beach			
T. Cape Deary	150 ft.		
U. Cape Lewis			
V. Cape Bay			



Ceremony at Kingston