

Scottish Dan Beard Expedition

Alaska

5th - 27th April 2007

Expedition Report

by Vivian Scott



Expedition Reference: 07/06

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Gareth watching dawn on Denali from the summit of Dan Beard.

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All photographs by Vivian Scott, front cover photo- Dan Beard (right), from BC.

Introduction:

Alaska has a deserved reputation for superb alpine climbing objectives coupled with ease of access, logistical simplicity and low altitude summits. This combination attracted me for my first expedition as with limited time available I wished to spend as long as possible climbing in the mountains. In addition, being able to go in April allows the fitness of the Scottish winter to be put to good use.

After researching many objectives in the area, I decided that the east face of Dan Beard looked most promising. As well as the attraction of a completely unclimbed face, it seemed to have a certain mystery about it in an otherwise very well documented area and to offer the possibility of several differing types of objective. I was only able to find photographs showing the face from the south-east, which added to the attraction by not really knowing what the true make-up was before we got there.

Gareth Hughes and I have climbed together in the Alps and Scotland and his experience from climbing in the mountains of Peru was invaluable. The shortish nature of the trip also fitted well with Gareth's work commitments.

Summary:

The expedition aimed to make the first ascent of the east face of Mount Dan Beard (3125m) in the Ruth Amphitheatre, Alaska Range. This was achieved by a route we called 'Sideburn Rib' V 4500' 75 degrees, Scottish IV.

A later attempt at an unclimbed couloir, also on the east face of Dan Beard got to within a few pitches of the ridge before being halted by insufficient ice.

The summit of Mount Dickey (2909m) was also reached by the west flank.



Looking down the Ruth Gorge while descending Dan Beard, Mount Dickey on right.

Expedition Diary:

April

- 5th Leave UK
- 6th Arrive in Anchorage late at night
- 7th Food and supplies shopping, drive to Talkeetna
- 8th Fly into Ruth Amphitheatre, set up camp
- 9th Continue setting up camp: dig snowhole for cooking and build snow walls around tent. Weather unsettled
- 10th Ski over the Amphitheatre to recce the east face of Dan Beard.
- 11th Weather unsettled, stayed around BC.
- 12th Had a lazy morning then packed for climb and left BC at 4pm. Started up the east face at 7pm.
- 13th Reached summit of Dan Beard at 3am, descended north face and returned to BC at 5pm.
- 14th Rest day in BC
- 15th Rest day in BC
- 16th Vivian skied down Ruth Gorge to Bradley, Gareth rested in BC
- 17th Gareth skied to Gateway, weather unsettled, Viv stayed around BC
- 18th Poor weather, continuous snow and strong wind- stayed at BC.
- 19th Poor weather, snow and wind continued- stayed at BC.
- 20th Weather improving by afternoon- dug out snowhole and walls and skied around BC.
- 21st Left BC at 4am to attempt couloir on Dan Beard.
- 22nd Arrive back to BC at 2am after retreating from near top of couloir. Spent day sleeping.
- 23rd Skied up Mt Dickey via Pittock pass and the west flank with American friends Jason and Alex.
- 24th Packed up BC and flown out to Talkeetna
- 25th Returned to Anchorage
- 26th Gareth leaves for UK
- 27th Vivian leaves for UK

The Expedition:

Getting to BC:

Gareth and I flew separately from the UK to Anchorage, arriving on the night of 6th April. We stayed in the Anchorage Guest House whose owner Andy Baker was happy for us to turn up late and extremely helpful and accommodating.

We spent the next morning doing some last minute kit shopping in Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking which is located within walking distance of the guest house and is very well stocked and staffed. We also went to REI which is close by for some other bits and pieces.

We arranged a transfer to Talkeetna with Denali Overland who picked us up from the guesthouse, took us to the supermarket in Palmer for a food shop and onto Talkeetna dropping us off at the Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT) bunkhouse.

Next day we explored Talkeetna (doesn't take very long), and waited for the weather to clear so TAT could fly us in. Talkeetna has only a tiny food shop so all supplies must be bought in Anchorage/Palmer. Late afternoon the weather started to clear so TAT told us to get ready. They supplied us with white gas (buy canisters in anchorage), an aircraft radio for emergencies, pulks and snow wands. We also borrowed a set of skis for Gareth from them as we had overlooked that the bindings on Vivian's spare skis would be too big for Gareth's boots! Fortunately they didn't seem too fussed about the weight of our gear so didn't charge us any excess. TAT also looked after our valuables and town clothes etc. while we were in the mountains.

A spectacular flight to the mountain house air strip took around 40mins flying up the Ruth Gorge. On landing we moved all our kit a few hundred metres away from the airstrip and pitched camp.

The mountain house airstrip is located on the opposite side of the amphitheatre to Dan Beard and is near to the only permanent shelter in the area. The mountain house is a small wendy-house-esque structure perched on small rock ridge, used by groups as a cook-house and by climbing teams from the Alaska Mountaineering School. The airstrip is the most reliable in the area (sticky snow conditions when we arrived prevented landing in the Ruth Gorge), and seemed a sensible location to base ourselves within easy reach of Dan Beard and other possible objectives.

First few Days:

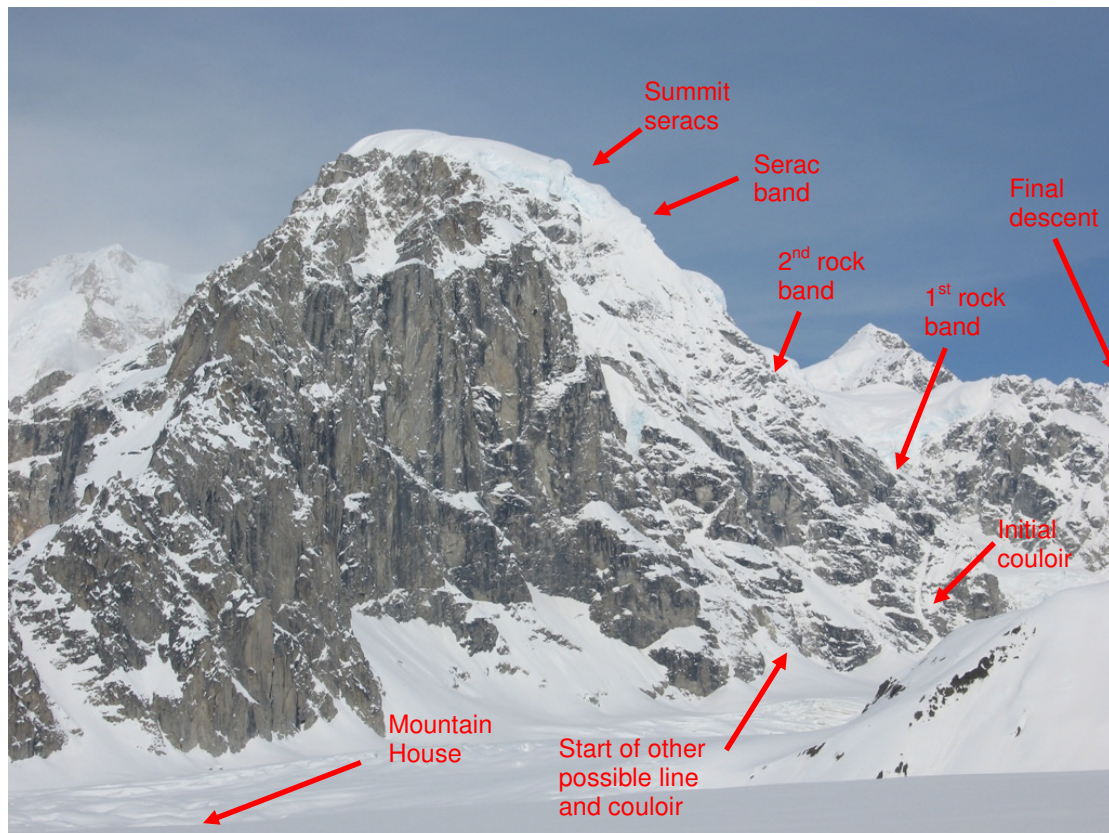
The weather was clear on the first morning but became unsettled with frequent light snow showers so we dug a snowhole next to our tent to cook and melt water in, and built snow walls to protect tent. The next day, the weather pattern was the same- we decided to ski over to Dan Beard to recce the face (about 2hrs ski), but the upper half of the face was obscured by cloud so we we're unable to see the state of the summit seracs or decide on any possible lines. After another day of unsettled weather we decided to head over again to Dan Beard to try the main snow-ice face, leaving in the early evening as the weather seemed to clear each day by this time, so that we could asses the possibilities and possibly start up a route. Climbing through the night would minimize serac danger and give us the chance to descend in the light. We decided to try and climb the mountain in a BC to BC round trip so packed only emergency bivy gear.

Dan Beard East Face:

Going up:

After a lazy morning we finalized packing and left BC at 4pm. Leaving our skis a few hundred metres below the bergshroud we started up the face at 7pm opting for a line on the rightmost side of the face that gained a snow arête in the upper section of the face and was out of the fall line of the summit serac band. Starting up an easy couloir on good neve we cut up and right onto a snowy spur interspersed with short rock steps. In waist deep snow we headed up and through several short rock steps (Scottish II-IV) as darkness fell, gaining snow slopes that lead to a snow arête ending beneath a steep rock wall with a huge serac to its right. Traversing left under the rock wall a small gully was gained which lead to a steep icy mixed step which was climbed via some mixed moves on the right (Scottish IV 5), leading to an icy chimney which opened out to snow slopes above. Climbing these gained the snow arête identified from below which we followed in deep snow to a serac band which gave some short sections of 75 degree ice. Above, more deep snow lead to the summit serac band which proved complex to negotiate requiring some interesting leaps over crevasses and a fair amount of weaving around with some more 75 degreeish ice to gain the summit snow-field. With the first rays of dawn we headed on up, crossing a large crevasse en route, finally reaching the summit at 3am.

We moved together the whole way, stopping only to swap gear and for a brew beneath the first serac band. While not technically difficult, the energy-sapping deep snow and complete lack of gear on most of the route made it a memorable experience.



The east face of Dan Beard. 'Sideburn Rib' follows right skyline- details marked.

Getting Down:

We had initially considered descending the route of ascent but neither of us fancied descending through the seracs so we decided to descend via the more straightforward looking snow slope of the north face and traverse round to gain the ridge between Dan Beard and point 8245, then descend south facing slopes from this ridge back to the skis.

Heading back across the summit crevasse we turned north, descending to a broad shoulder. From this, we headed down eastwards under cornices and down-climbed a short step to arrive above a large serac band. At the northern end of the band we climbed down then across a crevasse to gain a gully feature leading down. More steep down-climbing (75 degrees) on brittle ice and poor snow gained a bigger gully leading down to gentler slopes. We quickly down-climbed the gully underneath huge seracs, reaching the safety of a snow col which leads to the ridge between Dan Beard and point 8245 to the east. Immediately below was a huge steep icefall leading back to beneath the east face of Dan Beard. We followed the ridge east towards point 8245 but were stopped by a very steep drop to a lower col with no obvious solution. Retracing our steps to the col we headed north down-climbing steep slopes to above another serac band. Managing to weave through this, we abseiled over the bergshroud to gain the glacier north of Dan Beard. Descending this in chest deep powder a grueling wade finally gained the col on the ridge we had been unable to reach directly. Continuing approximately half way along the straightforward ridge to the east we then headed down 45 degree slopes via a system of snow gullies in appalling deep sticky snow conditions, finally crossing the bergshroud back to the glacier beneath the east face of Dan Beard. A final powder slog back to the skis and a tiring ski back across the amphitheatre got us to BC at 5pm after 24 hours on the go. In keeping with the 'Beard' theme, we decided to christen our line 'Sideburn Rib' V 4500' 75 degrees, Scottish IV.

We subsequently discovered that our map used 1950's glaciation- showing the north face to be simple snow slope- we do not recommend it as a route of descent! The west face looks more amenable or descent could be made by the classic south-west ridge route, though both these options present logistical problems in returning to the base of the east face.



Gareth starting the descent- Mooses Tooth behind (right).

Back at BC:

After a couple of days recovering, and a welcome invitation for some food and beer! from a group at the mountain house, Vivian decided to ski down the Ruth Gorge to take a look. Gareth stayed in BC nursing bruised shins from climbing the route in his ski boots. Vivian met several other teams in the Ruth who were also struggling with very deep snow on all the approaches to routes. After an extra days rest Gareth tried to ski down the Gorge to take a look as well but turned back at the gateway when the weather started to close in.

The next few days we were tent bound as a south-westerly system moved in bringing snow and strongish winds. Several other teams had arrived by this stage so we spent some time swapping stories and did a bit of skiing nearby to stretch the legs.

The Couloir:

When we climbed the east face, we had spied a superb looking steep couloir line, reminiscent of a massive Ravens Gully, with two huge chokestones clearly visible, tucked away on the north end of the huge rock buttress on the south-east ridge of Dan Beard. Being too lightly equipped and wanting to reach the summit we continued with our original plan and climbed the east face. While waiting for the weather to clear we planned a return to try the couloir for something a bit more technically demanding. Leaving BC at 4am, we retraced our steps back towards the east face of Dan Beard, and skinned up to beneath the couloir. Leaving skis just beneath the bergshroud we moved together up easy, but inevitably deep 45 degree snow, briefly running the gauntlet of being beneath a massive serac coming from the col on the south-east ridge, before traversing leftwards to arrive directly beneath the couloir (this point could be reached more directly but the bergshroud looked very awkward to cross directly beneath the couloir). Continuing up 45 degree slopes we were smothered every few minutes by heavy spindrift avalanches that would plague us for the rest of the day. These we later worked out, were caused by the collapse of snow mushrooms that the storm of the previous few days had built up under all the roofs on the rock walls either side of the couloir. Fortunately they were only snow so were irritating rather than dangerous (we experienced no ice or rockfall in the couloir). A short 80 degree ice step at a narrowing led to more 45 degree snow leading to the base of the couloir proper.

Vivian lead the first pitch which turned out to be harder than expected – what looked like ice everywhere turned out to be mostly compacted powder with good ice only on the right wall, giving a sustained steep pitch with a short 95 degree section before easing to a more amenable angle (WI5+). Above, Vivian led another pitch through an overhanging ice offwidth- one of the more bizarre pitches either of us have ever climbed, requiring the use of arm bars in its confines to make progress- Gareth had an exciting time seconding with the pack, followed by more conventional ice to a belay just left of the first chokestone (WI5+/ungradable). All this had the added pleasure of frequent spindrift pummeling, which proved particularly unpleasant for Gareth, as the side zip on his trousers had burst on the approach slopes, giving him a freezing legfull every few minutes.



Gareth wading up the last of the approach slopes to the couloir- chokestones clearly visible.

Gareth led a mixed pitch leftwards then up (Scottish Vish), outflanking the chokestone and gaining 45 degree snow above. A couple of pitches of snow, then a 10m 80 degree ice section placed us beneath the 2nd chokestone, probably about 100m below the ridge. Sadly, there was no way of outflanking this one, the only option being an unprotectable, 20m vertical thin ice smear leading to a skeletal hanging ice curtain from the right hand side of the chokestone. After some discussion, we decided to leave it for another day as it didn't look as if the ice curtain would hold a climbers weight, and with no protection available it would be an unjustifiably dangerous pitch to attempt with no option of retreat.



Looking down the 'overhanging offwidth' ice pitch to Gareth.

We abseiled the couloir on a mixture of abalokovs and rock anchors in the side walls, accompanied by yet more spindrift, before down-climbing the approach slopes, getting back to the skis just after dark (just as well as Gareth had forgotten his head torch!). An entertaining ski back in the dark with one torch between us got us back to BC an hour before dawn.

With better ice conditions, this couloir will make an excellent route, with the possibility of continuing leftwards up the ridge to the summit of the rock buttress (continuing to the summit of Dan Beard itself would involve a long descent to the col on the S.E. ridge then climbing similar terrain to that encountered on our east face route to reach the summit- would not be a very homogenous or logical route in our opinion). Above the second chokestone, the remainder of the couloir looked reasonable from what we could tell from a distance, though there may have been a pretty big cornice to gain the ridge.

Last few days:

After spending the remainder of the day resting, we decided to round off the trip by climbing Mount Dickey via Pittock Pass (immediately behind BC), and the west flank, a straightforward snow route which we could mostly skin up (see photo p.3). A couple of American climbers, Jason and Alex from Salt Lake City who were camped near us, also had the same idea, having attempted the classic south-west face route on Dan Beard while we were trying the couloir.

Teaming up, we left BC at a civilized hour, gaining Pittock Pass mostly on ski, but booting up the final more crevassed section to the pass. Above, some more crevassed terrain (Jason had an unexpected closer look into one), gained the upper snowfields which we skinned up before leaving our skis just beneath the summit and summiting on foot- a great way to round off the trip.



Gareth, Jason and Alex approaching the upper slopes on Mount Dickey above Pittock pass- Mount Huntington behind.

Having been born with skis (or snowboard in Alex's case), on their feet, Jason and Alex made the 5000ft descent back to base-camp in under 20mins, we made a slower and more cautious descent in traditional British ski style... Jason and Alex fired up their barbeque! for our final night and we did our best to finish off left-over food. A hurried packing session the next morning and we towed our pulks of kit to the airstrip to await collection.

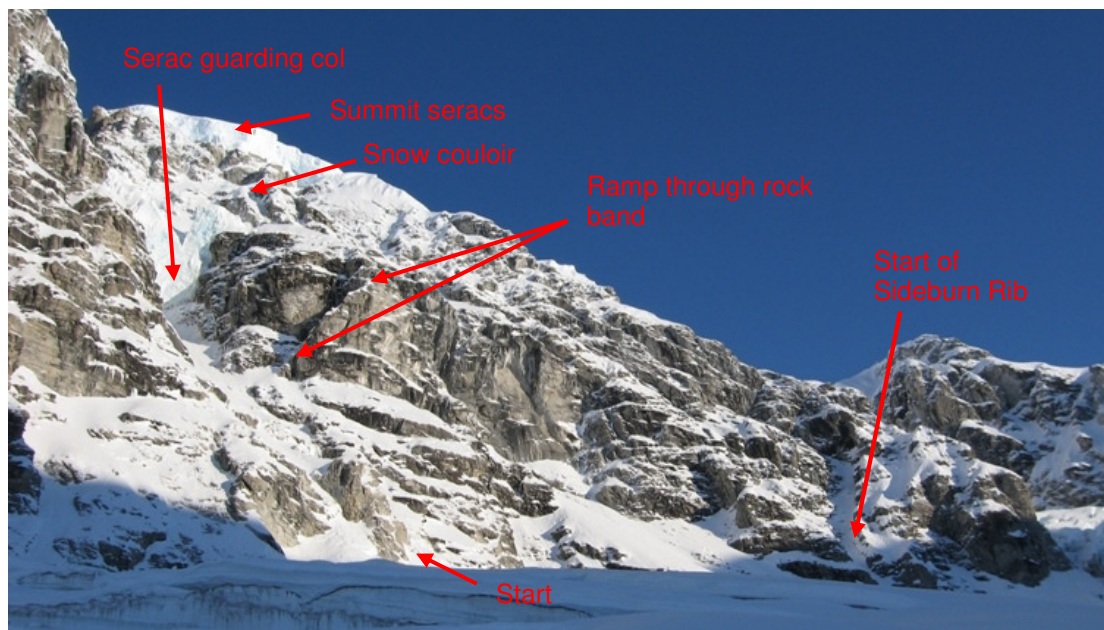
To Anchorage and home:

Paul Roderick of TAT picked us up later than expected, having been dealing with the aftermath of the tragic accident that claimed the life of Lara Kellogg down in the Ruth Gorge the day before- an unpleasant end to the trip. Back in Talkeetna, a much welcome shower, beers and food was enjoyed before collapsing at the TAT bunkhouse. Next morning, we teamed up with a couple of Colorado based climbers to get a transfer back to Anchorage with Talkeetna Shuttle Service. Gareth headed back to the UK late that night, and Vivian spent a day exploring the coastal trail south of Anchorage and sampling the superb seafood and beer before heading home as well.

Observations and further route possibilities:

The east face proper:

Aside from right-hand line we took, only one other line looked to be objectively safe. This would take the left-hand side of the face, using a diagonal ramp in a large rock band before climbing snow to gain a shallow couloir system high on the face reaching the summit plateau close to the top of the south-east ridge. This looked as if it would be of similar style and difficulty to our line of ascent, though a less aesthetic line (see also east face photo p.6).



A foreshortened view of the east face with details of the other possibly safe line on the left side of the face (Sideburn Rib follows the skyline).

The whole centre of the face is threatened by the huge summit seracs, and presents no safe options. The rock quality on Sideburn Rib route was poor- crumbly blind granite reminiscent of some of the poorer granite in the alps, held together in the most part by snow and ice. Our thoughts on descent are discussed in the narrative above.

The south-east ridge and rock buttress:

Aside from the couloir we attempted, the hidden, northern end of the rock buttress also presents a potential very steep mixed line to the left of, and parallel to the couloir. Given the difficulty of the couloir we expect that this might prove very hard indeed- but looks superb.



The northern end of the east face rock buttress showing L-R the possible mixed line, the attempted couloir and the serac blocking access to the south-east ridge col.



The east face rock buttress.

The front face of the rock buttress presents a few possible lines, a couple of steep mixed lines- though they didn't appear to be holding any ice, and the extremely steep central wall that may have some crack systems through it. While the rock around the couloir was solid (we experienced and saw no evidence of rockfall), the cracks are all pretty frost shattered and would be unpleasant to climb and unconvincing for gear- though could possibly be better on the front walls. In between cracks the rock seems very smooth and blind. All in all, the rock appears a bit less inviting than that on other nearby features in the Ruth area such as the Gargoyle and the Stump- though with plenty of potential for new lines.

The col on the ridge between the rock buttress and the main summit is inaccessible directly from the east side due to huge seracs at around half height and possibly above as well (see photos p.12 & 13).

There is also no record of the south-east ridge being climbed- the first section looks straightforward on snow, but negotiating the back of the rock buttress to the col and beyond could prove more complex. The other obvious target on Dan Beard would be a direct start to the existing south-west face route (this currently climbs the south-west ridge to start with). However, this face is apparently notorious for avalanches, though we didn't see any ourselves, and any 'direct' might have to take a fairly circuitous route through the rock bands (see front page and p.16 photos).

Peak 11,300:

We also looked (from a distance), at the east face of Peak 11,300' further up the glacier. There seems to be loads of potential up the many ramps on this huge face, though we are unsure which (if any), have been climbed.



East face of Peak 11,300'.

Equipment, kit and other stuff:

Base Camp:

We used a Macpac Hemisphere tent for BC which performed superbly and was spacious enough to sit out the weather in comfort. Digging a snow-hole to use for cooking also worked very well, allowing us to leave the stove etc. permanently set up. Ravens did attack a stuff-sac we left behind with our skis while climbing Sideburn Rib but didn't go into the snow-hole or get into the tent in our absence. It was necessary to bury the side walls of the tent to stop snow blowing up in between the walls (even with a wall built round the tent). Our only other observations would be to take two snow shovels (we had only one which made digging out slow), a snow saw would also be useful (TAT hire out shovels and saws), and a few extra foam mats to line the floor of the tent with. Vivian had a solio solar charger that worked very well, keeping the ipod and spirits topped up.

Climbing:

We both used the same clothing systems and equipment that we use in Scottish winter and found them to work fine, with synthetic belay jackets for stops and climbing through the night. We took a small home-made bivy shelter along as well but didn't put it to use in the end. In future, given the scale of the Ruth area it would be good to have another smaller tent to use as an ABC for routes further from BC such as those

from the root canal glacier etc. Several other teams in the area were using this approach which seemed sensible.

TAT and the other air services keep a general eye on teams in the area, and are happy to fly in extra supplies if needed when dropping off or collecting other teams.

Waste:

We bagged all rubbish and flew it out to Talkeetna for disposal. Human solids are collected in CMCs (clean mountain cans) and disposed of by the ranger service. On our arrival, the ranger station was shut, so we collected our waste and put it in the CMCs which TAT later dropped off for us.

Useful resources:

Alaska Climbing, by Joe Puryear, published by Supertopo has a wealth of information on Alaskan climbing, popular routes and other possibilities- though we would like to point out that it is now out of date as regards the 'mysterious' east face of Dan Beard. It also contains up to date details of hostels, transfer and air services etc.

TAT (Talkeetna Air Taxi) were quick to respond to emails and gave an excellent and flexible service.

Andy Baker at the Anchorage Guest House (www.akhouse.com) was extremely helpful and flexible during our brief stays in Anchorage- we happily recommend him to other teams in future.



Sorting kit at base camp at the end of the expedition.

Finances:

These are incomplete as details of funding awarded by the MCoFS to the expedition have not yet been received. Expenditure amounts are to nearest £10.

Income:

£525 + £325 from MEF,

£? Still awaiting from MCoFS,

Gareth also received a grant from his company's personal development fund to assist him on the expedition.

Total: £850 + MCoFS grant

Expenditure:

Flights to Alaska- £950

Flights to glacier and transfers- £650

Food and stores- £200

Equipment- £750

Insurance- £300

Total: £2850

Personal contributions: of the order of £1000 apiece (Gareth's including his company grant), less the pending MCoFS support.

Sponsors:

The expedition would like to thank DMM, Crux, Macpac, First Ascent and the Mountain Boot Company for their support of the expedition.

Thanks:

We'd like to thank the following for their help with the expedition:

MEF and MCoFS for financial support.

Blair Fyffe and James Edwards for giving us references.

Joe Puryear for photographs and information on Dan Beard.

Rich Cross, Freddie Wilkinson and Kelly Cordes for advice on the area.

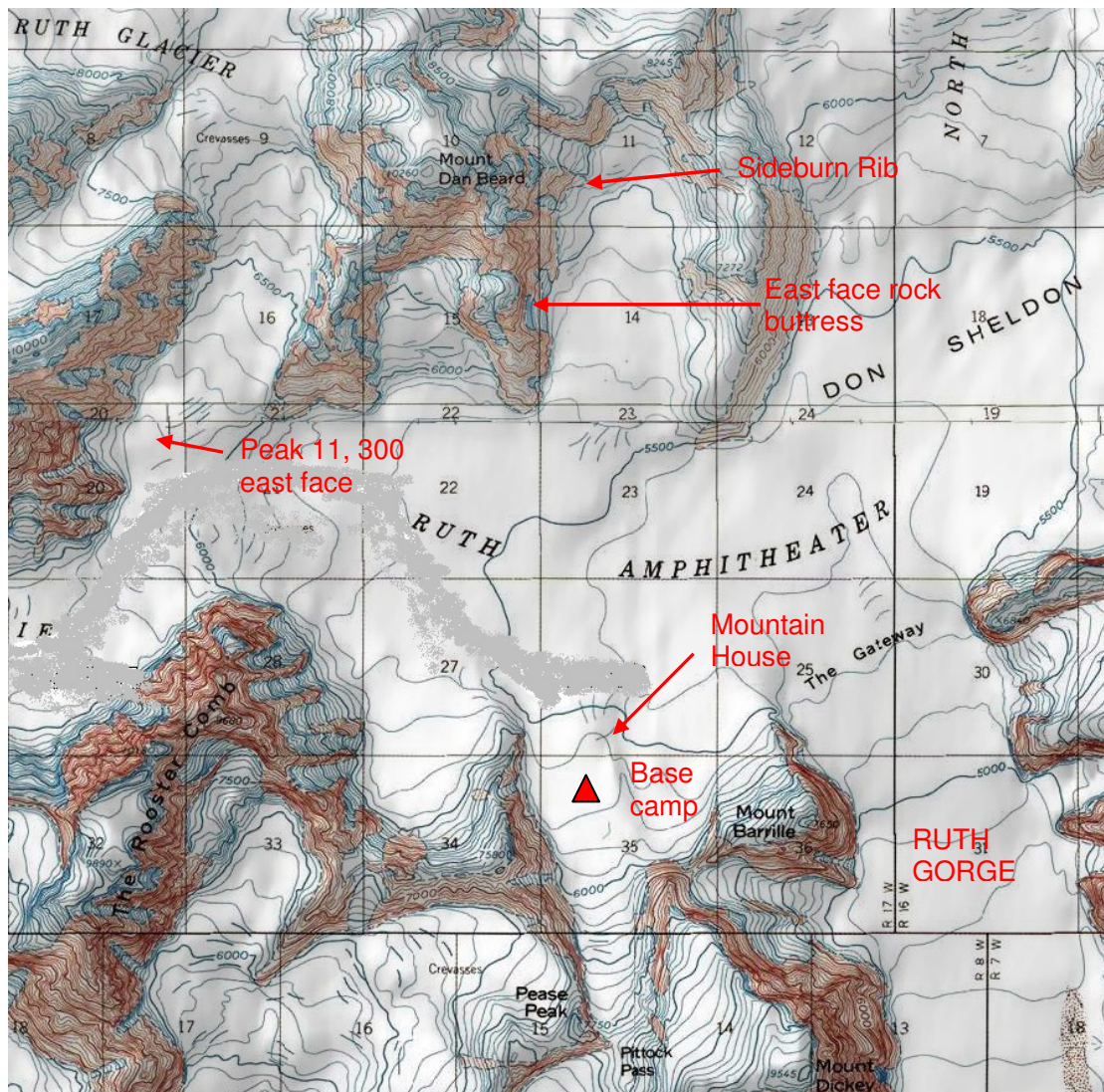
Andy Hein, Es Tresidder, Sam Loveday and Rik Higham for lending us kit.

Contact details:

Vivian Scott: vivscott@excite.com

Gareth Hughes: garethwhughes@hotmail.co.uk

Map:



Area map- main features marked.