

# Keswick Mountain Rescue Team

## Lieutenant Colonel Horace 'Rusty' Westmorland OBE (1886 – 1984)

Paul Horder – with grateful thanks to Lindsay Elms for his research

### *Rusty, but roadworthy*

Lieutenant-Colonel Horace Westmorland was one of those *Boys' Own*-type characters which seemed to flourish in the pre-war British climbing scene. As a pioneer surveyor in the Canadian Rockies, he served in both world wars, returning to his native Westmorland after being invalided out of the army in 1944. Here, undeterred by injuries, he set to climbing and skiing with gusto and in 1947 formed the first Lakeland mountain rescue team with the help of 36 volunteers from Keswick. He is probably best known to present day climbers for his classic Severe up Dove Crag, the eponymous *Westmorland's Route*, and, like Ivan Waller, he continued impressive feats of climbing and walking right into his 90s. He probably bankrupted his pension funders.

### Horace "Rusty"

Westmorland was born in Penrith, England in 1886 and educated at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School. He worked in the family's tannery and leather business until the death of his father in 1909 and then



the estate was divided between his mother, his sister and himself. With no professional training he was advised by the brother of the British Ambassador in Washington to enter the Forestry Service in Canada. In 1911 Westmorland went to the prairie province of Saskatchewan but prospects were poor there so he moved on to Vancouver where he met Arthur O Wheeler for whom he had a letter of introduction from GA Solly of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. He asked to spend the summer working on one of the mountain survey parties as he was a rock climber and had some alpine experience in the Engadine and Dolomites. He spent the next six months working for \$2 a day with the surveyors

around Tetachuck Lake as part of the Alberta/British Columbia Interprovincial Boundary Commission and continued working seasonally for the surveyors until 1914 as a mountaineer. In the winter of 1913/14 Westmorland did the tracing work over the working maps for the Mount Assiniboine region.

In 1912 Westmorland was invited to take a commission in a Canadian 'Territorial' Highland Regiment. He qualified at Military School and was transferred to the Canadian 'Regular' Army where he served in Belgium and France from 1915 to 1919. Lieutenant-Colonel Westmorland remained in the Service until invalided out in October 1944. He then returned to his family roots at Threlkeld in the Lake District for his remaining years.

Westmorland's mad-keen fell-walking father (the Westmorland Cairn on Gable was built by Rusty's dad and uncle because they considered it the finest view in the Lakes) inoculated his son with the climbing bug early on. And

his love of the outdoors began when his father introduced his family to Ullswater and the surrounding fells - camping, rowing, sailing, fell walking and scrambling. However, "Rusty" Westmorland's real climbing career began in 1901 at the age of fifteen when he climbed Pillar Rock in the Wasdale region of the Lake District with his father Tom and his sister. His aunt Mary had been the second woman to climb Pillar Rock, in 1873. His father was a keen and competent scrambler, however he never adopted the use of a rope.

In his late teens Westmorland, and his two cousins Arthur North and John Mounsey, began climbing with a rope. They climbed some of the classics at the time: The North Climb on The Pillar, Scafell Pinnacle by Slingsby's Chimney, Moss Ghyll, Central Gully, Oblique and Doctor's Chimney, Kern's Knotts, Tarn Crag, and Needle and Napes Ridges. One notable ascent with his cousins was on Dove Crag. Initially they thought they would climb either the left hand or right hand route of the Y gully but failed. They then tried and succeeded on a buttress which is now called

the Westmorland Route (S). They also made the first ascent of Chock Gully (V.Diff) on Tarn Crag, Helvellyn Range.

In that same year that he first climbed The Pillar with his father, he met George Abraham (author of British Mountain Climbs) and in 1910 joined George Abraham and his brother Ashley on a climbing/photographic trip to the Bernina Alps and the Dolomites, climbing the Torre Grande, Croda da Lago, Torre Inglese and the Zsigmondy Kamin route on Cima Piccola. Ultimately, it was Pillar Rock which held a particular fascination for Westmorland and in his later years celebrated by repeating the climb on his 65th, 75th and lastly his 85th birthdays. He also loved skiing in the Scottish Cairngorms which he did into his eighties.

Westmorland was elected into the Fell and Rock Climbing Club in 1909, was President in the early 1950's and remained a lifelong member.

In Canada he was a member of the Alpine Club of Canada and attended their camps in 1912, 1913, 1919 and 1944. Some of his ascents in the Canadian Rockies include The Mitre, Mount Storm, Mount

Whyte, Isolated Peak, Mount Magog, Mount Louis and the second ascent of Whitehorn Mountain in 1913. He also climbed Mount Balfour on the Waputik Icefield with Ivor Richards and his wife Dorothy Pilley (author of Climbing Days) and while working for the surveyors he made the first ascent of Mount Tyrwhitt, with the well-known climber/guide Conrad Kain and the surveyor Alan J. Campbell. In 1922 he visited Vancouver Island and climbed Mount Arrowsmith with the local Victoria Section of the A.C.C. and Mount Maxwell (Baynes Peak) on Saltspring Island. He was awarded, in recognition for Mountain services, the "Silver Rope" badge by the A.C.C. in 1947 and received a Testimony of Appreciation by the British Mountain Rescue Committee. In Europe he climbed and skied throughout the Bernese Oberland and the Dolomites, and with Edward Feuz Jr. climbed the Hornli Ridge on the Matterhorn, however, his one unfulfilled wish was to climb Mount Assiniboine, the Matterhorn of the Canadian Rockies.

In 1946 he founded what was originally called "The

Borrowdale Mountain Rescue Team" but was switched to the Keswick Mountain Rescue Team in 1951. This rescue team came about when Wilfred Noyce, who later became a key member of John Hunt's successful 1953 Everest team, fell while climbing Shark's Fin on Tophet Bastion, Great Gable. A gust of wind blew Noyce off his holds and he fell onto a ledge breaking one of his legs. Noyce's climbing partner went for help and a scratch group of six was collected and, after a complicated and gruelling rescue lasting all night, Noyce was safely taken to Wasdale Head. One of the rescuers, "Rusty" Westmorland, was disturbed by the lack of any organisation, trained and willing to help injured climbers and fell walkers. Legally, the responsibility lay with the police, as it still does, but they were neither trained nor equipped for mountain rescues at the time. "Rusty" decided there was an urgent need for a team of volunteers. An appeal in the Keswick Reminder produced an encouraging response; some thirty men were recruited to form the initial team.

Initially there was some scepticism in the valley about the motives and effectiveness of the team, however this was dispelled when it became obvious that here was a group prepared to go out at any time in all kinds of weather to help anyone in trouble on the fells. In 1965 Horace "Rusty" Westmorland was awarded the OBE by the Queen for his services to mountain rescue.

In 1964 "Rusty" Westmorland wrote a book as part of a series for Pelham Adventure Library entitled Adventures in Climbing, which gave information and advice on the techniques of climbing illustrated by incidents from his own life. The last chapter, entitled "Mountain Life," relates some of his adventures in the Canadian Rockies.

Horace "Rusty" Westmorland passed away at the age of 98 on November 24, 1984 but will be remembered for turning up immaculate on the crags and for his concern with upholding the highest traditions of the mountaineering sport.