

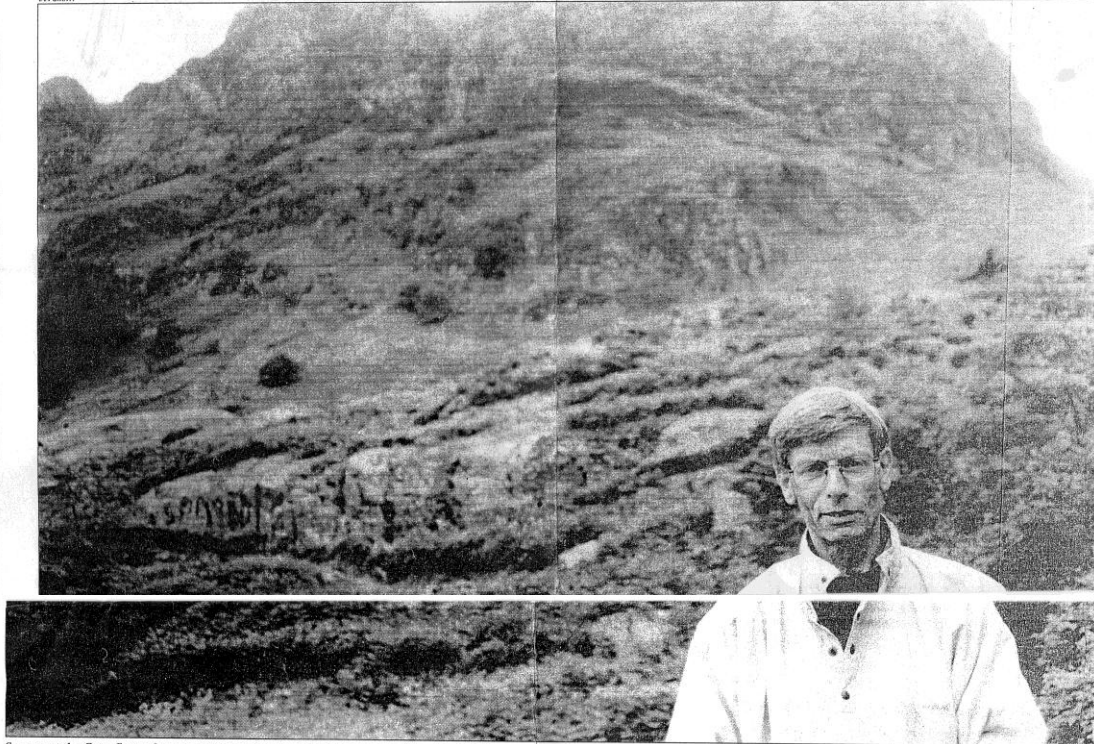
OBITUARIES

JOHN SUMNER

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Alpinist who opened up hundreds of routes in Wales and pursued great climbs in Europe and the Americas

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Sumner at the Cwn Cowarch crag in Wales: from the 1960s he helped the Mountain Club to open up good-quality routes there and on other crags in the Arans, Rhinogs and on Cader Idris

John Sumner was a pioneering rock climber and powerful alpinist of exceptional durability. After taking to the hills in the early 1950s, he continually pushed his limits, tackling really hard objectives in every decade. It was a long career and embraced many disciplines within mountaineering, and it has been said of him, jokingly but with great respect, that he burnt out climbing partners every couple of years.

His most constant partner on the rope was his wife Jill, who seconded hundreds of his first ascents over more than 30 years, climbing all over Britain and in Europe.

Growing up in Blackburn, John Sumner took up potholing before climbing, introduced to it by his father. At weekends, his father would undertake often massive drives, ferrying him to and from the different caves where his club was meeting — particularly after John started work in Stafford, though most of the caving took place in Yorkshire.

It was around this time that Sumner picked up the nickname "Fritz", which stuck tenaciously among those who knew him from the early days. A great number of climbing clubs had sprung up around Britain after the war. Among the largest and most active of them was the Mountain Club in Stafford, many of whose members, including Sumner, were apprentices at English Electric.

Besides rock climbing, the club earned a reputation for marathon hiking, or "bog trotting", and it was during these expeditions that Sumner demonstrated the relentless toughness that would characterise him throughout life. With Ronald (Larry) Lambie in 1953, he inaugurated the Derbyshire Horseshoe, a walk of more than 60 miles around the dome of the White Peak, completed in just over 37 hours. This feat, and others like it, became touchstones for him, to be

repeated regularly to test his fitness. The 48-mile and exceptionally wild Derwent Watershed walk was his favoured training for alpine winter mountaineering.

He relished the harshness of it, the more dire the weather the better — even if partners such as Steve Cones regarded it as annual torture that had to be endured.

Having cut his teeth on the gritstone edges, by the mid-1950s Sumner was pioneering new rock routes, and he found himself climbing with members of the legendary Rock and Ice Club. The Thorn and the Ivy Gash, two fine routes on Beeston Tor, date from this time.

By now, British climbers were visiting the Alps and the Dolomites on a regularity. Inspired by some of the big wall routes there, they began seeking out vertical and overhanging limestone in Yorkshire and the Peaks. In 1956 Sumner put up Cave Route at Gordale Scar with A. Knox; and the following year he seconded Ron Moseley on the first ascent of the Main Overhang of Kilnsey Crag in Wharfedale. Employing pitons, crices and a spider's web of rope and slings, the climbers dangled horizontally under the great overhang for 11 hours, while Moseley, with rawlplugs and screws, worked his way out and over the bulge.

Aid climbing had arrived in Britain, but it was not universally welcomed. Apart from its brutal strenuousness, it offended many purists, and would prove relatively shortlived. Sumner added a few more pegging routes, notably Gordale Main Overhang with D. Sales in June 1963, but by this time his attention had been caught elsewhere. Some, but by no means all of Sumner's aid routes have since been climbed free.

During the 1960s the Mountain Club discovered Cwn Cowarch in Merioneth, mid-Wales. They built a hut there, from where Sumner and fellow clubbers began

developing Craig Cowarch and other crags in the Arans, Rhinogs, and on Cader Idris. The quiet Cowarch Valley proved one of the few places in Wales where climbers could climb all day in relative tranquillity, and the routes proved to be of high quality on good sound granite, even if a fair amount of "gardening" was required to release them. Eventually more than 150 were created, of all grades.

Sumner's wife Jill, who took part in many of the first ascents, remembers with special affection Will-o'-the-Wisp, a popular warm-up climb, but says that perhaps the most memorable for her was Keel Haul (XS — Extremely Severe), climbed in 1969. "That was a really necky route, with one long reach over an overhang, which was too high for me. John had to yank me over, hence the climb's name."

Their most recent new route was Pack Rat on Craig y Merched (EI) in April last year.

Sumner's preoccupation with finding new routes in Wales did not exclude other climbing. There would be raids into Scotland, stealing routes from under Scottish noses; a spirited attempt on the Dru West Face with Morty Smith. In 1970 he made early British ascents of the Brandler/Hasse route on Cima Grande and the Squirrel's Ridge on Cima Grande in the Dolomites.

In 1971 his climbing career and indeed his life nearly ended on the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses when a falling block of rock shattered his head and shoulder. He was climbing with Roger Cully, who was able to arrest the fall, but both were stranded on a ledge for three days before a daring rescue by Gerard Devouassoux with a strong band of Chamonix guides, who arrived by helicopter. Sumner's injuries were such that he was warned that he would never climb again, but with training and extreme stoicism he proved the medics wrong.

The winter of 1978-79 saw some of the best winter conditions in Britain for a decade when, as Sumner wrote, "the mountains of Mid-Wales gave up some of their closest-guarded wintry secrets". With John Codling and Glen Kirkham, he produced two masterpieces. One, the Maesglassau Falls (Grade IV) near Cowarch, a 400ft cascade of cauliflower ice. The other, Trojan on Cader Idris (V) took the line of a slender 300ft frozen watercourse. The "streak of near-perpendicular ice beckoned siren-like and sinuous," Sumner wrote later in *Cold Climbs*. "It called to every ice-man worthy of the name to come and climb." Sustaining suspense throughout its length, the route rivalled top Scottish ice routes in "purity of line, continuous ice, and exposure."

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Sumner's Welsh routes got harder. He teamed up with the younger southwest pioneer Martin Crocker on a new-routing blitz of extreme routes. "It was impossible to keep up with the guy's energy and enthusiasm," recalls Crocker.

At the same time his passion for winter ice was growing, driving him to harder and more remote routes in the Alps and Canada. He was gradually ticking off his wants list of North Face routes and superb icefalls, and it was these big winter routes of which he was most proud. It wasn't just the climbing; he revelled in cold bivouacs and deserted winter huts, the sheer time-consuming business of brewing up and cooking with ice and snow. Many climbs were done in company with his friend Steve Cones, who remembers, "I will always see John at the deserted Couvertle Hut on the Talétre Glacier with his mug of tea outside the aluminium doors, feeding alpine choughs and reliving his many, many successes. Looking intensely at the back of the North Faces of the Verte, Courtes, the Droites; remembering a fair old epic

up and down on the Triolet and the Talétre, starting into the Walker pur. Further round still, looking up the allée Blanche at the hard technical 'acul routes' he had enjoyed and marvelling at the glory of sunrise and sunset on Jent Blanc and the Chamonix Aiguilles."

One year on the Midi, Cones sustained frostbite on one hand, forcing a retreat to get it seen to. On the way down, he was amazed when Sumner, irrepresible as ever, remarked, "If you're going to hospital, I'll just pop up to La Crémérie and get some ice in!" Retirement at 65 allowed Sumner to pick in even more climbing.

Last year he and Terry Kenyon went climbing in Austria and Canada, but after their ascent of the Wildspitze Sumner developed a blood clot that praged his final illness. A climb of the 10th Face of Canada's Mount Stanley in August had to be aborted and was followed by three months in hospital.

Sumner never separated his climbing from his home life. The whole family would pile into the car for weekers in Wales; several of the climbs in the guidebooks reveal that first ascents were done with his children. Many climbers developed their skills through him and made their best climbs with him. He will be remembered particularly for his routes in Mid-Wales, for his guidebook work to the area and for single-handedly inventing Welsh ice climbing. He always had an eye for a fine natural line, producing climbing routes of quality; and no climber can have had a longer new-routinng career.

He was twice married, and is survived by a wife and five children.

John Sumner, climber, was born on March 17, 1935. He died following a heart attack on February 10, 2004, aged 68.