

# THE MYSTERY OF MALLORY

Not just a brave soldier, was he also the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest?  
Brian Parnaby revisits one of history's greatest mysteries

**H**ere is an enigma to perplex people, especially those involved in mountaineering: who was the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest? As we all know (or should), the credit for that achievement is shared jointly by the late, great Sir Edmund Hillary and his loyal Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay, who were acclaimed in Coronation Year, 1953, for this great feat. However, some people believe that another man got there 29 years earlier.

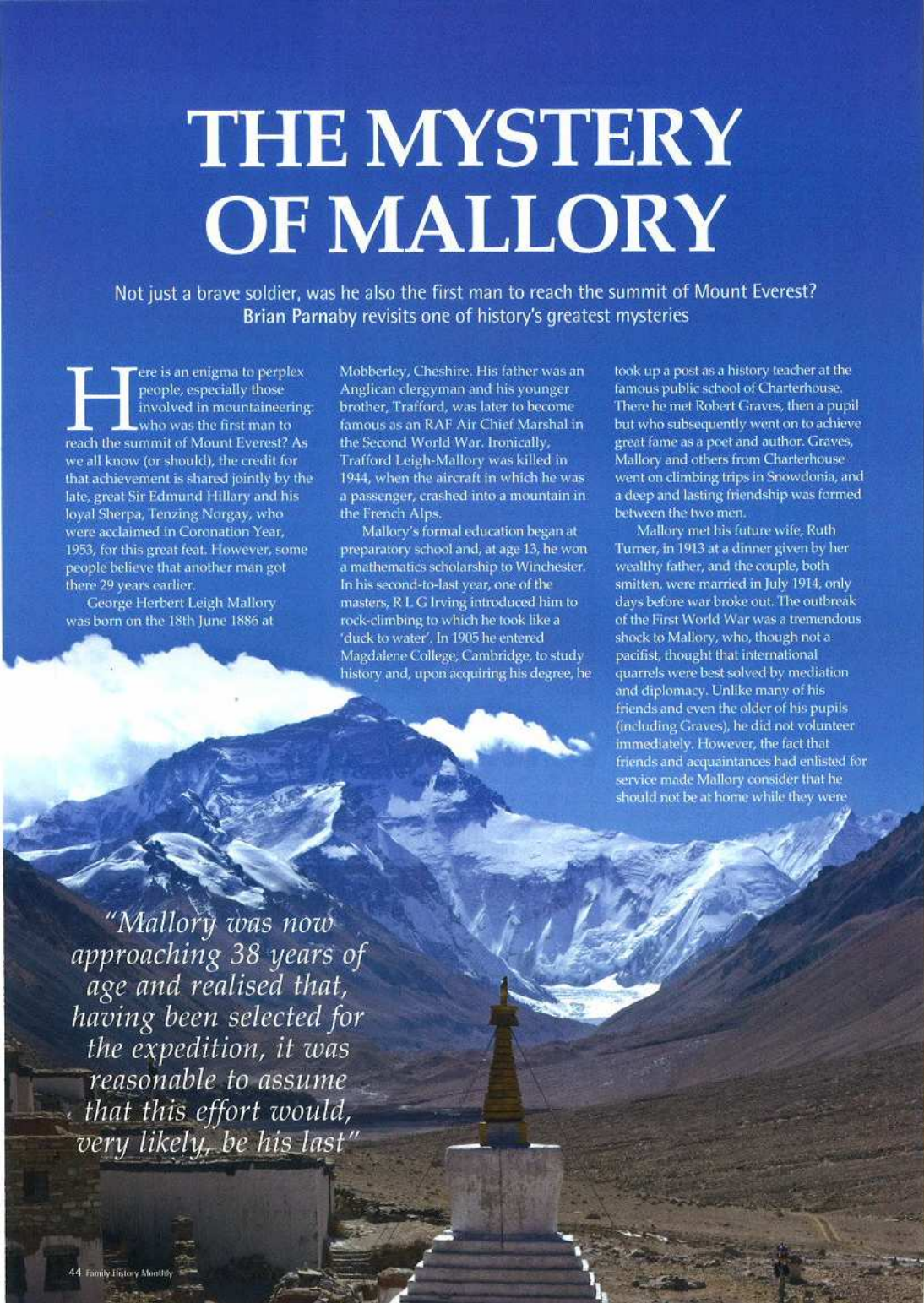
George Herbert Leigh Mallory was born on the 18th June 1886 at

Mobberley, Cheshire. His father was an Anglican clergyman and his younger brother, Trafford, was later to become famous as an RAF Air Chief Marshal in the Second World War. Ironically, Trafford Leigh-Mallory was killed in 1944, when the aircraft in which he was a passenger, crashed into a mountain in the French Alps.

Mallory's formal education began at preparatory school and, at age 13, he won a mathematics scholarship to Winchester. In his second-to-last year, one of the masters, R. I. G. Irving introduced him to rock-climbing to which he took like a 'duck to water'. In 1905 he entered Magdalene College, Cambridge, to study history and, upon acquiring his degree, he

took up a post as a history teacher at the famous public school of Charterhouse. There he met Robert Graves, then a pupil but who subsequently went on to achieve great fame as a poet and author. Graves, Mallory and others from Charterhouse went on climbing trips in Snowdonia, and a deep and lasting friendship was formed between the two men.

Mallory met his future wife, Ruth Turner, in 1913 at a dinner given by her wealthy father, and the couple, both smitten, were married in July 1914, only days before war broke out. The outbreak of the First World War was a tremendous shock to Mallory, who, though not a pacifist, thought that international quarrels were best solved by mediation and diplomacy. Unlike many of his friends and even the older of his pupils (including Graves), he did not volunteer immediately. However, the fact that friends and acquaintances had enlisted for service made Mallory consider that he should not be at home while they were



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Mallory and his climbing partner Sandy Irvine had last been seen at 26,000 feet, but did they make it to the top?

fighting on his behalf. In addition to this, he had an inborn lust for adventure, so he duly enlisted in December 1915, joining as a Second Lieutenant in the 40th Siege Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery, three months after the birth of his first child, a daughter, Clare.

In May 1916 Mallory was posted to the Western Front. Being assigned to a siege battery had some advantages to offer as they were not in the front line, and therefore his chances of survival as a junior officer were considerably greater. Following the Armistice, he remained in France until January 1919 before returning to Charterhouse to resume his teaching career. However, Mallory's serious mountaineering life was about to start in earnest.

### Expeditions of 1922 and 1923

In 1921 and 1922 Mallory joined two Royal Geographical Society reconnaissance expeditions to survey the prospects of climbing Mount Everest. On the first expedition no serious attempt was made to reach the summit, but much valuable experience was gleaned about local conditions and the most suitable routes to attack the mountain. Additionally, essential and accurate map-making was carried out. Apparently, some members of the expedition were adversely affected by altitude sickness, therefore the brunt of the climbing was placed on the shoulders of Mallory, and other more experienced mountaineers.

The second expedition set out with the aim of seriously attempting to reach the summit, although bad weather forced the attempt to be abandoned. But this was not before Mallory and his team had reached 26,985 feet (8,225 metres), almost to the crest of the North-East Ridge. At

the time, this was a world altitude record, and amazingly, it was achieved without the use of oxygen equipment, in extremely thin air.

### The 1924 expedition

Mallory was now approaching 38 years of age and realised that, having been selected for the expedition, it was reasonable to assume that this effort would, very likely, be his last. Mallory's chosen climbing partner was Andrew 'Sandy' Irvine. On the 4th June 1924, Mallory and Irvine left the Advanced Base Camp, located at a height of 21,352 feet (6,500 metres) and quickly began using oxygen. Having once been sceptical of its value, Mallory had now altered his views on oxygen, mainly as a result of observing the success of a fellow-climber, George Finch. Finch had used it on the previous expedition and it had enabled noticeably more rapid climbing. With the help of oxygen, he had reached a height of 27,300 feet (8,321 metres).

On the 6th June they set off again, climbing to a point named C-5 (Camp 5) and reached C-6 (Camp 6) the following day. Mallory recorded in notes (later found on his body) that he had used only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one bottle (he carried three bottles) in two days; this augured well for the rest of the attempt.

Following these preliminary climbs, Mallory and Irvine set out from the highest base camp on the morning of the 8th June. A member of the expedition, Noel Odell (a geologist by profession), who was climbing behind them in a support role, claimed to have viewed both climbers through his telescope on the north-eastern ridge of Everest before heavy cloud had obscured his view. Odell later suggested that the two had

reached what was known in mountaineering parlance as a prominent 'Rock-Step' located at a height of 26,000 feet (7,920 metres).

Had Odell really witnessed Mallory and Irvine's final assault on the summit? Was it a unique experience obliterated by the unwelcome appearance of cloud cover over the two climbers? This was the last ever sighting of the pair as they never made it back down the mountain. Other than Odell's testimony, the only real evidence of the progress made up the mountain was the discovery of one of the pair's discarded oxygen cylinders below the First Step, near to where Irvine's ice-axe was also found.

When news of the presumed deaths of Mallory and Irvine was received in London, there was widespread mourning and they were hailed as national heroes. Mallory's funeral service (without the body of course) was held at St Paul's Cathedral on the 17th October 1924. There is no evidence to show whether or not Irvine was similarly honoured.

For almost 30 years, until the successful attempt by Sir John (later Baron) Hunt's expedition in 1953, several unsuccessful attempts were made on the mountain, by a range of teams from around the world. By then, there must have been some uncertainty about the likelihood of Mallory and Irvine reaching the top, as both Hillary and Tenzing claimed to have searched, in vain, for evidence of a previous successful attempt. However, as they had spent only about a quarter of an hour on the summit, in unfavourable weather conditions, this cannot be considered as absolute proof. Cynics may also say that Hillary and Tenzing did not want to find evidence anyway, but both were honourable men and their reports should be unquestioned.

Something must be written about Andrew Irvine, Mallory's climbing companion in this tragedy. After all, they were partners in their last climb and, most probably, died together. Born in 1902, in Birkenhead, 'Sandy' was 16 years younger than his climbing companion and a keen sportsman, being a member of the Oxford boat crew for the Oxford and Cambridge races of 1922 and 1923. He has been described as a shy and creative man, tall, broad shouldered and of strong and immensely fit physique. Irvine demonstrated a great and natural ability to solve mechanical problems and had natural engineering acumen. Through the recommendation of the well-known mountaineer and friend of Mallory's, Odell, Irvine was selected for the third



Everest expedition precisely because of his strong physical presence and excellent engineering ability, and this still only at the age of 21. Irvine's engineering expertise was to prove valuable during this expedition as he made radical alterations to the expedition's professionally-designed oxygen sets, greatly improving their performance.

The debate still rumbles on as to whether the pair were the first to reach Everest's summit. There are reasonably convincing but inconclusive arguments both for and against. Even should Irvine's body be discovered and reveal clues about his last moments before the probable fall which caused his death, doubts will remain. It has been suggested that Mallory and probably Irvine as well, were so fixated on reaching the summit that they discarded the need to get back down the mountain, and thus were prepared to sacrifice their lives, provided one or both reached the top of Everest.

In 1999, a United States-led Everest expedition, aptly named 'The Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition' and led by Eric Simonson, found Mallory's body at a height of 26,760 feet (8,160 metres), located on the north face of the mountain. An ice-axe, knife, oxygen bottle, and goggles were found at the scene, plus a handwritten letter and other documents contained in a wallet in Mallory's pocket, the clothing clearly marked by name tags: 'G Mallory'. The only thing that was missing was a photograph of his wife which he had promised to place on the summit if he succeeded.

Irvine's ice-axe had been found by a climber in 1933, 300 metres above where Mallory was found. The conclusion drawn was that they had been roped together when an accident happened and they fell, although the injuries sustained by Mallory were not consistent with

## Everest

Mount Everest is 29,035 feet (8,850 metres) high, and the mountain is named after Sir George Everest (1790-1866), one-time Surveyor General of India.

The mountain stands on the border between Nepal and the Tibet region of China, the latter country having been questionably annexed by China some years ago. In 1952, China banned the use of the name 'Everest' in favour of 'Qomolangma Feng' ('Sacred Mother of Waters'), although it is highly unlikely that its Chinese name will ever fall into common usage. Apparently, the Nepalese name for Everest has always been 'Chomolunga' (Goddess Mother of the World). It will be noticed that the two indigenous names bear some similarity to each other.

him having fallen as far as 300 metres. The probable cause of death was a large golf-ball size puncture wound on Mallory's forehead. In the unlikely event that Irvine's body is recovered, and if the condition of the body at the time of the fall can be determined by medical examination, it may be possible to construct in more detail the circumstances of the fall and the position of the climbers on the mountain at that time.

Several reports dispute or at least, question, the possibility of Mallory and/or Irvine having made a successful ascent: Sir Edmund Hillary opined: "*If you climb a mountain for the first time and die on the descent, is it really a complete first ascent of the mountain? I am rather inclined to think personally that maybe it is quite important, the getting down; and the complete climb of a*



The 1924 expedition team before setting out on their mammoth expedition

*mountain is reaching the summit and getting safely to the bottom again.*" Despite forensic inspection, including examination of Mallory's body (which because of the climatic conditions was remarkably well-preserved) and the artefacts found, no conclusive evidence is available to make an informed decision.

The 1999 expedition gave George Mallory the benefit of an Anglican informal re-burial service on the mountain which had claimed his life, albeit 75 years after his death. Not so his climbing partner, Sandy Irvine, who is perhaps fated to remain forever on the mountain. Nevertheless, perhaps Everest is the most appropriate burial site for two of England's greatest mountaineering heroes. ■

## The Wildest Dream

In 1999, renowned mountaineer Conrad Anker discovered Mallory's frozen body high in the mountain's 'death zone' and he became obsessed with his ill-fated story. A new film called *The Wildest Dream* (opening in cinemas across the UK on 24th September) charts Anker's attempt to retrace his hero's final footsteps, much of the time dressed in the same outfits and hobnailed boots that he and Irvine would have worn on the expedition. Narrated by Liam Neeson, Mallory's tragic story is told through the explorer's poignant and evocative correspondence with his wife, and uses previously unseen photos and archive footage.

Anker and his climbing partner in replica 1920s climbing gear retracing Mallory's footsteps

