

# Preserving the mountain heritage

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# Preserving the Mountain Heritage

By Cicely Williams

The *Swiss Observer* wishes to acknowledge, with thanks, this interesting contribution from Mrs. Williams who, incidentally, is the wife of the Bishop of Leicester.

Mrs. Williams, a life-long friend of Switzerland, is a regular contributor to *The Field* and national newspapers including *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

In 1975, European Heritage Year, conservation becomes almost daily an acutely debated topic; the danger signals have been well and truly hoisted and no one has any excuse for ignoring their portents.

Every aspect of conservation has its enthusiastic adherents and the mountain world has at last come into its own.

Both Houses of the British Parliament, with Lord Hunt in the vanguard, are seeking ways of preventing further despoilation of the mountain areas of Great Britain.

Last year, it was announced at the International Congress of the World Wildlife Fund in Bonn that Mount Everest is to be part of a Nepalese National Park.

Prince Gyanendra of Nepal, who is responsible for conservation in his

country, said that the new protected area would be called the Mount Everest National Park.

In September a six-day congress, organised by the Italian Alpine Club, met in Trento to discuss joint action to save the jointly-treasured Alps from destruction before it is too late.

The six alpine countries, Switzerland, France, Italy, West Germany, Austria and Yugoslavia conferred to decide how their common mountain heritage could best be preserved.

One of the principal aims of the Congress is to draw up a special "Map of the Alps" in which areas of particular natural beauty, as well as existing parks, could be earmarked for preservation while others are left free for development.

While far-reaching schemes are being considered and big decisions taken concerning the general situation in the mountain world, the alpine resorts are busily working out their own strategies for their own particular needs.

The rapid development of many of the better-known districts, owing to the increasing popularity of climbing and skiing as popular sports presents special difficulties.

Zermatt, one of the most famous of all mountaineering centres, has been faced with a multitude of problems, and has already set about solving some of them.

Operations began at grass roots — but rock bottom is perhaps a more fitting expression in an alpine setting

The *Kurverein* of Zermatt has long been worried by the inevitable collection of tins and other refuse assuming enormous proportions outside the mountain huts and, to a lesser extent, beside the lakes.

In the summer of 1974 a vigorous campaign was mounted. It was designated KEEP ZERMATT CLEAN.

Colourful stickers were provided for both villagers and visitors.

Cars leaving the Zermatt valley for distant destinations carried the message to all parts of Europe. Back in Britain the stickers are sometimes blazoned on window panes in village homesteads and city flats.

An enormous work force was enrolled, drawn from the youth of many nations. These young people received free board and lodging and a small wage and throughout the summer laboured away stacking refuse into plastic sacks which were transported to an incinerator outside the village.

Climbers arriving for the 1975 season found the terrain surrounding the huts transformed.

There are other exciting innovations. In the late summer of 1974 the Matterhorn received more than its usual share of comment — adverse and otherwise.

The weather had been unusually dry since March and, by mid-August, the mountain was almost devoid of snow; it was blacker than it had been since the famous summer of 1947!

These, of course, are the best conditions in which to attempt this famous peak; it becomes a *Spaziergang* for seasoned climbers and a "must" for the adventurous and, only too often, for the inexperienced.

It has been reported that, on at least one occasion, there were more than 100 climbers on the mountain at the same time.



Zermatt is beautiful as this picture shows. All praise to those who are fighting to keep it that way.

Such numbers produce hazards of all kinds. Attention was drawn to the unsavoury sanitary conditions prevailing at the Solvay Hut; there was even oblique reference to the typhoid epidemic of 1963!

These were serious allegations and they were not entirely without foundation. What was not known, however, was that the Zermatt authorities were well aware of the situation and had been experimenting for some months to find a satisfactory solution to this difficulty.

A small refuge hut situated at over 13,000 feet is not the easiest of places in which to conduct complicated experiments but, by September, those responsible were near to solving the problem and there was every hope that by the 1975 season the matter would have been adequately dealt with.

Sanitary arrangements were not the only matters being investigated by the *Kurverein* at the Solvay Hut. During the climbing season of 1974 a system of radio communication was installed there, operating in several languages, by which marooned mountaineers can let it be known that they are safe in the hut and thus prevent search parties setting out and, at the same time set at rest the fears of anxious relatives and friends.

By this same system climbers seen to be in difficulties can be reported. A new S.O.S. radio station at the Solvay is in communication with the heliport on the outskirts of Zermatt and a helicopter can take off immediately.

Soon after its installation three Spanish climbers in trouble on the North Face of the Matterhorn were brought to safety.

Indeed, the Zermatt Air Rescue Service, with its prompt service and

unremitting care, is well on the way to becoming world famous.

But there is, it seems, no respite for those who labour to preserve the heritage handed down from the past. Last autumn the Zermatt *Kurverein* and those who work with them could have been excused for feeling that much had been attempted and a good deal achieved towards Zermatt's contribution to European Heritage Year and that at least they had won a breathing space.

Not so – with the opening of the winter season two buses appeared in this mountain stronghold where cars have never been permitted.

Interested parties believed that financial advantage might accrue if lazy skiers could be transported to the Schwarzsee cable car – which happens to be situated within easy walking distance from any part of the village.

As might have been foreseen, there was resentment from villagers and visitors alike. The noise and the smell of these diesel “monsters” engendered considerable opposition – but it was the desecration of sacred mountain territory that was the prime offence.

On New Year's Day 1975, for the first time in the history of Zermatt, there took place a large and well-organised “demo”.

At 1700 hrs. Zermatters and visitors abandoned their après-ski parties, assembled at the station to form a comparatively vast procession, accompanied by banner bearers.

They set out on a silent march through the village streets. It was a dignified and meaningful protest – although it has to be admitted that there were a few who could not resist the temptation to break the windows of one

bus and pour sugar, scarce as it was at that time into the tank of the other.

Like other demos, staged in honour of less noble causes, the “Bus Demo” had its effect. Few people travelled on the “offending” vehicles; most preferred to walk; others made use of the horse-drawn sleighs and arrived at the cable car to the jingle of bells rather than the snort of a diesel.

In the middle of April the buses were withdrawn but the danger was not, and is still not, over. Experiments have been conducted with electric vehicles which run comparatively quietly and do not pollute the atmosphere.

In spite of these much vaunted advantages, the idea does not commend itself to the Zermatters.

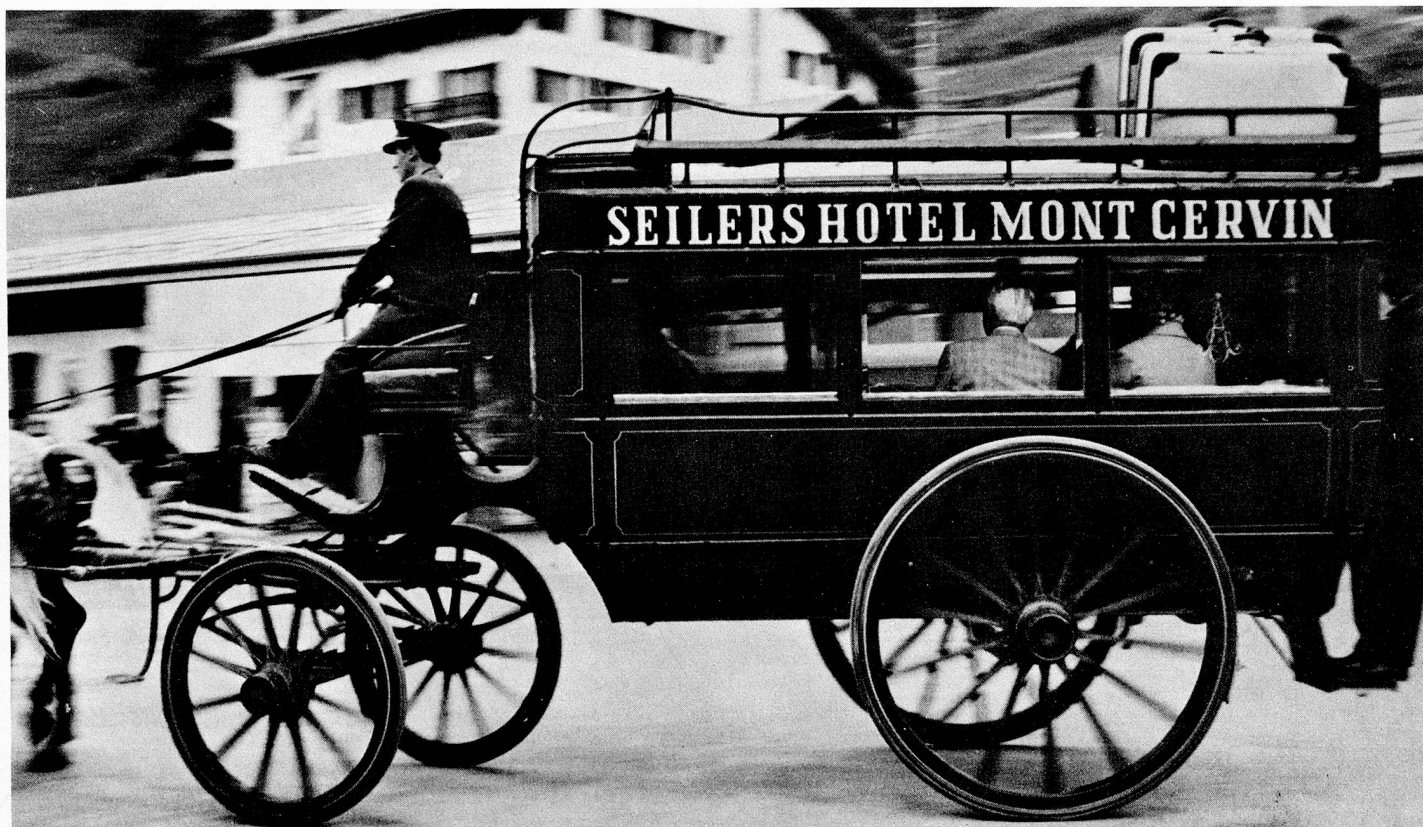
There never have been buses and, if you happen to be a Zermatter, that is a perfectly valid reason why where never should be any!

The bus war still rages; the people are as determined as ever. One trump card they still hold; on 17th December, 1972 they voted against the extension of the motor road up to Zermatt; the voting was comparatively decisive – 927 against, 405 for.

This decision cannot be rescinded; there will never be cars in Zermatt. Whether there will ever be buses on the outskirts still remains to be seen.

Perhaps European Heritage Year will bring victory to those who put tradition and natural beauty before economic consideration.

**That is the earnest hope of all who love and revere the mountains of our Europe.**



*What a nice alternative to the internal combustion engine! This attractive expedient also helps keep Zermatt clean.*