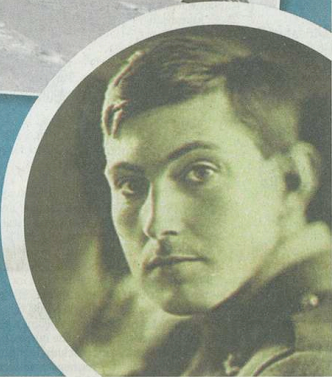
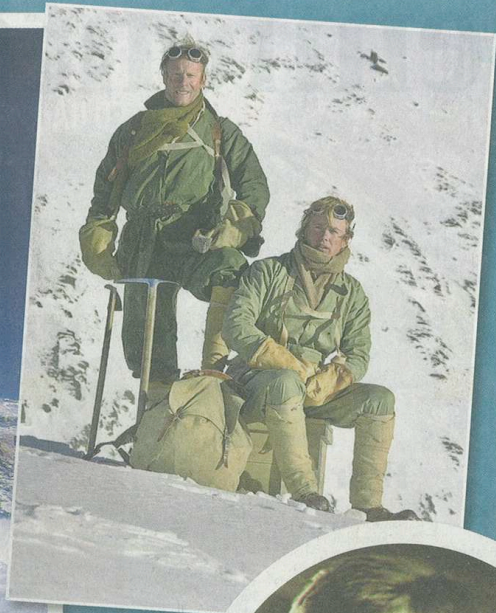


Climbing Everest in hobnail boots

THE MOUNTAINEER WHO RACED
CLARKSON UP A GORGE ALMOST
OVERREACHED WHEN HE AGREED
TO HELP RECREATE MALLORY'S ASCENT



Conrad Anker,
leading Leo
Houlding up
Everest, left,
and standing
with Houlding,
above, traced
the footsteps
of Mallory,
right

HE took on Jeremy Clarkson and won against all odds. Leo Houlding scaled a 1,200ft gorge with his bare hands faster than the Top Gear presenter could drive up a winding road in a 400bhp Audi.

Now the young rock climber has a film coming out of how he tackled a challenge even taller and more lacerating than Clarkson: Everest, the hard way.

Houlding, 29, was filmed climbing the mountain mainly with the clothing and equipment available in the 1920s, including thick woollen jackets and hobnailed leather boots. He and his climbing partner, the American mountaineer Conrad Anker, also scaled the infamous Second Step, a sheer 90ft face just below Everest's summit, without the aid of the fixed ladder that has helped climbers there since 1975.

The pair deliberately had the ladder removed — a choice that nearly cost them their lives.

The purpose of the ascent, to be shown in September as a cinema documentary called *The Wildest Dream*, was to establish whether the British climbers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine could have reached the top by the same route and without any ladder in 1924, almost 30 years before Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing reached the summit.

Mallory and Irvine died on the mountain, leaving a mystery over whether or not they had made it to the top. Since Mallory's frozen body was found 1,300ft from the top in 1999, there has been increasing conjecture that he, and

possibly Irvine too, reached the peak and lost their lives on the descent.

Last week Houlding said: "I now really believe Mallory and Irvine were capable of doing it. Yet before I had actually reached Everest that way, I thought the Second Step would have been impossible for climbers of that time."

For the filmed expedition, Anker, a vastly experienced mountaineer, "played" Mallory, who by 1924 had already

made two attempts on Everest. In turn, Anker chose Houlding, a brilliant rock climber but inexperienced in high mountains, as his partner to climb "as Irvine", who was just 22 when he was selected for the assault.

Irvine was a skilled oarsman and superb athlete, but he was not an experienced mountaineer. Anker said: "That's why I went for Leo — because he was similar in many ways."

Though Houlding had scaled sheer faces such as El Capitan

in Yosemite National Park, and monuments such as the Angel of the North, he had never been above 18,000ft. Everest is 29,035ft.

Houlding's fingers and toes seemed to stick to the rocks. "What really worried me about Everest was getting frostbite," he said. "If I had lost a toe, my career was over."

It took Houlding an hour each morning over the last few days of the ascent to get the circulation going in his feet.

In fact climbing at high altitude proved so demanding that the pair changed into modern clothing and boots for the final 2,000ft. The most testing moment came as they attempted the Second Step.

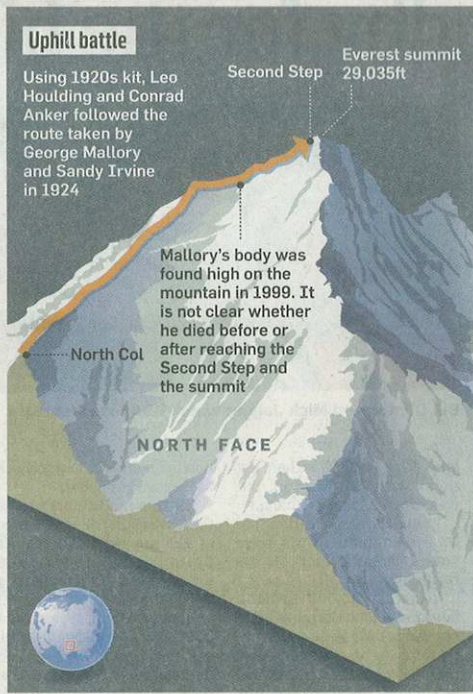
"We'd gone to bed at six, ready to wake at lam for the two hours needed to prepare for the assault," said Houlding. "I slept comfortably for nearly five hours but woke before the alarm."

Neither used oxygen for the final push. Two New Zealand climbers, who had to be trained as cameramen, had gone up earlier, using the ladder before it was taken away for Anker and Houlding's attempt.

The cameramen captured Anker and Houlding on the sheer pitch, including the moment when Anker lost his footing and fell. For 20 minutes there was silence. Then Anker hauled himself back into sight. He had tumbled, but not far, down the Second Step, while roped to Houlding 30ft below.

The director of the film, Antony Geffen, said: "Conrad could easily have fallen 7,000ft, taking Leo, who had a rope connected, with him."

Anker was able to carry on and both made it to the summit



without oxygen. "Conrad suggested we pay our respects to Mallory," said Houlding.

Their climb will reignite the debate over whether either Mallory or Irvine, or both, reached the top. Mallory had carried with him a photograph of his wife, Ruth, promising to leave it on the summit. Though most of his expected possessions were found on his body in 1999, the photograph was missing, leading some to assume it had been left on the summit.

The Wildest Dream, which mixes the heroism of *Chariots of Fire* with the suspense of *Touching the Void*, the award-winning documentary about an ill-fated climb in the Andes, will be released just as two feature films about the 1924 Everest assault are due to start filming.

Both concentrate more on Mallory's relationship with his wife. One is based on Jeffrey Archer's novel *Paths of Glory*, with backing from the US

studio Columbia. Shekhar Kapur, who made the Oscar-winning film *Elizabeth* with Cate Blanchett, is working on another with Julia Roberts as producer.

Yesterday Clarkson recalled the time Houlding beat him to the top of the Verdon gorge in France.

"Of course I was miffed," he said, "though I admit I was amazed at the way he hung on to the rock at one stage by just one fingertip."