

WIFE
2 KIDS
LABRADOR
FULL-TIME OFFICE JOB
45 FIRST ASCENTS
...AND ONE OBVIOUS QUESTION:
HOW THE HELL DOES **MICK FOWLER** DO IT?

WORDS SIMON INGRAM PORTRAIT JAMES ABBOTT

It's 'Mike' at work," says Mick Fowler. "I've always been Mick in social circles and Mike in tax office circles. And the two have always been kept very, very separate." For a moment, he looks a bit sad. "Though these days, they know about my other life. With the internet, all that stuff's just there."

Different names, a double life... you could be forgiven for thinking that what follows is the confession of a superhero; but no. In many ways, Mick Fowler is even more amazing.

Outwardly, the soft-spoken Londoner is an ordinary bloke. He has a full-time office job in Nottingham, a wife, two kids and a Labrador. He's 58, lean but solid, and radiates a kind of fidgety energy in the manner of someone who clearly likes being active. And whether you call him Mick, Mike or Michael (the latter is used by his wife when he's "done something wrong"), he

gets a little shirty when you call his rather starchy day job by the wrong name.

"I'm *not* a 'tax inspector'. I'm grandly called the Assistant Director of Shares and Assets Evaluation for the HMRC – it's the part of the tax office that values things. I've been with the tax office for 37 years." He smiles, and nods, before adding: "And yes, I enjoy it."

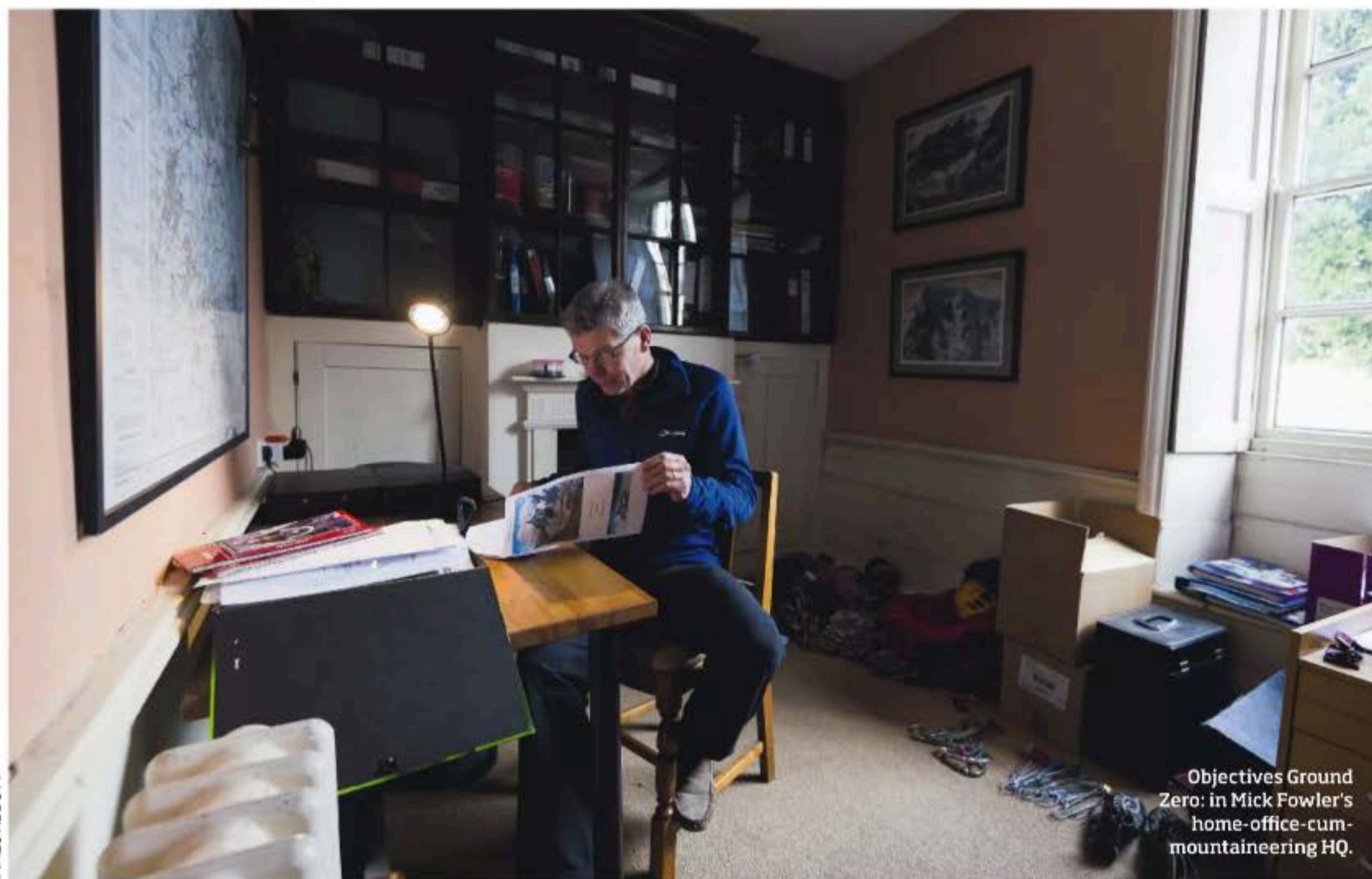
This aside, and with all due respect to HM Revenue and Customs, it's most probably his 'other life' that is of more interest. Once a year, for four weeks, Mike the Tax Man becomes Mick the Mountaineer – and when this happens, history is usually made.

As well as dozens of first ascents on British sea stacks, cliffs and rock faces (he was notably one of the first climbers to achieve grade E6), Fowler's Himalayan mountain CV is peerless. Twice winner of the Piolet d'Or – the closest mountaineering has to

an Oscar – with relentless commitment, Fowler has identified, explored and knocked off a stunning series of difficult and visually exciting mountain routes, many of them on mountains that have never been surveyed or explored, let alone climbed. Most remarkably, since 2010 Fowler has made a first ascent of a little-known Himalayan peak between 6000 and 7000m – in India, Nepal, Tibet, China – every year, and more or less every other year before that. He treks into valleys for which there are no maps, far beyond the head of the road. He meets people who "have never seen a white man". He does things that, in short, most people don't realise can still be done in the modern world. Then he quietly returns to his home in Derbyshire, has a shave, and goes back to work. And were it not for the internet, none of his co-workers would probably be any the wiser about what 'Mike' gets up to. **2**

"FOR ME, ADVENTURE IS GOING SOMEWHERE NOBODY HAS BEEN BEFORE."





JAMES ABBOTT

Objectives Ground Zero: in Mick Fowler's home-office-cum-mountaineering HQ.

"It's amazing how things change. It's only recently that I come back and people say, what did you get up to, have you got any photographs? I'm not a very comfortable social media user. But yes, if I go out and do something... I'll post a few photographs and a couple of comments."

Such understatement in the world of modern exploratory mountaineering is rare these days, let alone the world of holiday heroes. Most people in his position would shout loudly about getting up an Alp or managing a trek during holiday time; Mick manages to frequently find himself in valleys that no westerner has ever been in, climbing things no-one has ever been on.

And what this taxman quietly slides into his lean window of annual leave not only makes him the hero of every weekend warrior, it also makes him the envy of what you might call 'occupational mountaineers' worldwide. The truth is that the gap between Fowler – essentially an amateur – and the professionals of his field simply doesn't exist. In most cases, he exceeds them; and seldom do you find

someone so universally revered by his peers.

He is, the *Observer Magazine* once said, 'the mountaineer's mountaineer': the rascal who once ice-climbed the frozen 63ft outflow of a toilet on St Pancras Station, who bought a house next to the M1 to facilitate 'easy' 1,300 mile climbing commutes up to Scotland from London, and who won the presidency of the Alpine Club in 2010 – unanimously beating a retired Colonel in the first contested election in the club's 153 year history.

"Mick," says veteran mountaineer Doug Scott, "is totally inspirational, a wonderful force. Doing these wonderful, bold routes in such great style, time after time, year after year – he picks these elegant lines, on mountains that are the right height. None of that messing about on 8000m peaks."

The altitude issue is critical in Fowler's rationale. He simply doesn't have time to acclimatise for the highest peaks; nor the will. "I rather like my brain cells and my fingers and toes. And generally the 8000m peaks are crawling with people. That's very much not the kind of adventure that I'm looking for."

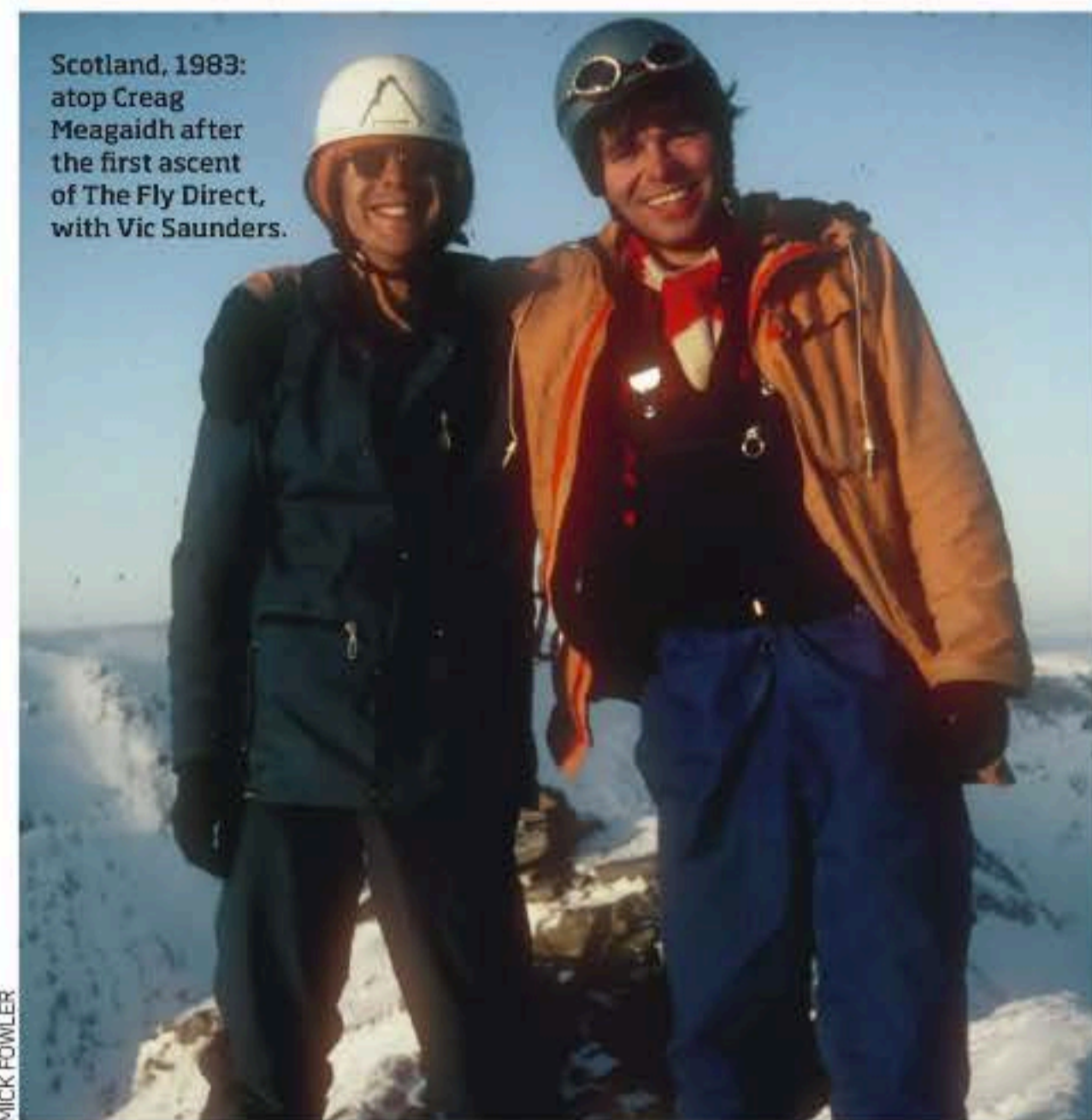
Fowler's attitude towards identifying and collecting his climbs (disguised unflatteringly by the term 'objectives') has become folkloric in itself, and would be quite at home in the brain of an Edwardian explorer, rather than a cutting-edge alpinist who consults for Berghaus. And the enthusiasm with which Fowler greets the task of finding his climbs – were it not for the severity of their eventual execution – could almost be called childlike. "I have a box file of objectives in here," he tells us conspiratorially, leading us into what could be described as the ultimate mountaineering man-cave. "If I see just the smallest little photograph, I'll stick it in my box file. And frequently I will follow them up."

So unknown and obscure are many of Fowler's 'objectives', determining them often amounts in many cases to what is detective work. "A mountain we did in India, called Shiva, came from just seeing a small, fairly nondescript photograph. I got in touch with the photographer, and he sent me some more photographs. I heard about a Russian chap who'd been to the other side of the mountain, I managed to contact him, and so on."

While some first-ascent-seekers look to carve a subtly new route out of a much-climbed mountain, Fowler's approach is rather more exclusive. "I have a list of ideal objective criteria: an eye-catching line,

'SO OBSCURE ARE MANY OF FOWLER'S "OBJECTIVES", DETERMINING THEM OFTEN AMOUNTS TO DETECTIVE WORK.'

Scotland, 1983:
atop Creag
Meagaidh after
the first ascent
of The Fly Direct,
with Vic Saunders.



MICK FOWLER



MICK FOWLER/BERGHAUS

India, 2014: with Paul Ramsden.

“I HAVE A LIST OF IDEAL MOUNTAIN CRITERIA: AN EYE-CATCHING LINE, GOING DIRECTLY TO THE SUMMIT, SAFE... AND THE WHOLE FACE HAS TO BE UNCLIMBED.”

MICK FOWLER/BERGHAUS



Hagshu - looking along the summit ridge.

going directly to the summit, safe. And the whole face has to be unclimbed. I'm not interested in squeezing a route between other routes." Perhaps the most knockout of these was the *tour de force* that made those who weren't already taking notice sit up: a 2000m rib of marble in the shadow of K2 with a name like a sculpture from a mystical land: The Golden Pillar of Spantik.

"It's a combination of a lot of things, but mainly judgment and experience. I choose objectives I think I can do. I want them to be challenging, but I like to think I'm in with a pretty good chance of getting up."

Typically, when his eye is caught and the objective is followed up, a formula then kicks in. "The next step: where is it? The step after that: have I been there? If so I'd probably not be that keen to go again. The third step: have other people been to this valley? What about the descent? You start to balance all these things out. But largely it's the adventure: going somewhere nobody has been before."

When asked what his formula for success is, Fowler is typically modest – though with, you suspect, an undercurrent of self-assurance. "I've been very lucky with my choice of objectives, which I spend a hell of a lot of time thinking about. I've also been very fortunate with my climbing partners."

Over the years, Fowler's hook-ups with Victor Saunders, Steve Sustad and

Andy Cave have yielded some of his most impressive achievements. "In the Himalaya, you get to know exactly how someone is going to respond in certain situations – and you've got to think pretty much the same way. You don't want a climbing partner who is likely to want to continue when you think it's too dangerous; nor do you want someone who wants to go down at the first sign of bad weather when you feel you're safe and equipped to go on."

His Himalayan partner in recent years has been Paul Ramsden, who, like Fowler, also holds a full-time job – as the managing director of a health and safety consultancy. This perhaps puts both men on the same page when it comes to the need for brisk and committed ascents. "We have developed our way of going about things: we go there, we acclimatise, then we go for it. And we don't go down [retreat off a climb] unless we logically and rationally decide between the two of us that there is a very good reason to."

Unsurprisingly, such a lifestyle requires a delicate balance with what he calls his 'other' life. When asked how he manages to swing it with work, his approach makes no allowances for special treatment because of who he is in the climbing world – after all, at work he is just Mike. "I work *hugely* hard before I go on a trip. I'm away for four weeks, which is not a massive period of time," he says. "Also, I arrange things a long

way in advance, which you have to do for a Himalayan trip anyway. I book time off a year ahead. Ask for something a year in advance and people are less likely to say no." He smiles, before adding: "The balance is more with family."

Though Fowler says that typically when it comes to holiday allowance, it is "four weeks for the Himalayas, a week for the family," you get the sense this discipline is, like his choice of climbs, very considered. He says part of his rationale for not going to 8000m peaks is that he likes being at home, and he "wouldn't want to be away from family for that long". Which makes what he says next rather shocking.

"My wife and I have a rule where we never get in touch with each other while I'm away. I don't carry a satellite phone or anything, so there is no way I can contact Nicky – or the other way round." Why?

A pause. "I find it easier. We've had awkward situations on trips where people have implied that they will contact their partners after a certain period of time, and then something happens, and they can't – and then it causes all sorts of stress at home. These things happen; you don't know if a seven-day climb is going to take six or ten days. It doesn't mean there's a problem if it takes ten days; it's just taken a little longer than expected. But to have the family at home thinking 'Oh, he's a day or two

overdue...' – I just think it'd cause a huge amount of stress. So our rule has always been 'no contact'."

His wife Nicky elaborates. "When he used to go when the children were young, during the first couple of weeks, they would ask, 'When's Daddy coming home?' Then after another week, they'd say, 'Is Daddy ever coming home?'" She laughs. "I never wanted to be too specific. You know... just in case."

"To have reminders of my other life when I'm away, of my family," Mick continues, "I'd feel terrible if, say, somebody was ill or there was some problem I could be sorting out if I was at home. I find it much easier to focus entirely on mountaineering, what we've dreamed of for the last year, for a three-week period, then move back into my other life. That's been our routine for 30 years."

But however unthinkable, given the nature of Fowler's hobby, there is always a chance that 'safely back' text from Delhi or Kathmandu never comes. Fowler's brush with the tragedy that stalks climbing has, quite remarkably, been concentrated into only one event. It was a bad one, in 1997, after a successful attack on the north face of Changabang with Cave, Sustad and Brendan Murphy. Murphy was killed by an icefall on the descent.

Unlike many mountaineers – who accept the danger as an occupational hazard and push on undaunted – for Fowler, Murphy's death changed things. "Most definitely. Nicky, in the back of her mind, always thought there would never be a problem with me. And clearly what happened on Changabang made for some difficult conversations at home. It made me think very carefully about the future. And very, very carefully about my choice of objectives. We reduce the risk to levels we're comfortable with."

Potentially, this has been the secret of

Mick Fowler's continued success in the mountains. But in the broader sense, has it taken a toll?

"It's really important, for me, to have a balanced life. There are always going to be pros and cons with the way I've lived it so far," he says. "But it's left me feeling pretty comfortable with the mountaineering side of things, the work side of things... that balance. And while you're always going to feel like you might have spent more time with your family... I don't think my children feel like they were abandoned by their father. We did have family holidays too." So is there a single great pearl of wisdom from the ultimate part-time hero?

"My only advice would be, think about it from the outset. What's most important? When you're in your early twenties you can easily get sidetracked by other things, like earning lots of money. But getting a balance in life that you're comfortable with is probably the most important thing as the years go by."

And while the years keep going by, Mick Fowler is far from finished. "The world is getting smaller. It's getting easier to find the right objectives. You can cheat with Google Earth now – not enough to see detail, but enough to ensure you don't end up in the wrong valley. Plus, I'm going half for the 'ethnic adventure' and half for the mountaineering."

"But I like to go to places where I feel I'm being exploratory. East Tibet – there's about two hundred 6000m peaks there, and I believe four have been climbed. The Chinese government are very reluctant to allow access, so the challenge is to get through the bureaucratic hurdles and climb them." He bobs a little bit excitedly in his chair at this.

"The civil servant in me quite likes bureaucratic hurdles." **T**