

theclimbers'club  
JOURNAL 2011





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**Cover:** Christian Bickel on pitch 3 of 'Voie Plaisir des Guides Suisses' (100m 6b+) in Madagascar. Photographer: Pete O'Donovan

**Inside Front Cover:** The Meije Traverse from the Aigle Hut. Photographer: Colin Beechey

**Previous Page:** Creag Meaghaidh. Photographer: John Cleare

**These Pages:** Skiing on High Street and Black Mount vista. Photographer: John Cleare

**Back Cover:** Snowdon Horseshoe. Photographer: John Cleare





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# EDITOR'S NOTE

By John Yates

Four years ago Iain Peters reflected in this column on the nature and role of the Club Journal. He traced the trajectory of a debate that begins with those who would see the Journal pickled in aspic, never to change in style, content or format, and ends with those for whom a paper medium in a digital age is utterly redundant, and who would have the Journal consigned to the recycling bin. That there is such a debate within the Club is not a symptom of malady or dysfunction. Quite the opposite: it speaks of a Club whose members have divergent opinions; who relish a good argument; and who thrive on the dialectic of discussion. If the Journal is a part of this conversation then it serves a vital purpose as both a sounding board and reflecting mirror.

No matter how heated the argument, or how passionate the debate, we are all united by a desire to see the Club thrive and prosper in a way that upholds our values and keeps us relevant in a rapidly changing world. The 2011 Journal is a part of that Club-wide conversation. At times, as in Sarah Clough's reflective piece, this conversation is conducted in a quiet and introspective a manner. Her meditation on the power of the hills and mountains to inspire and invigorate, will strike a chord with many. On other occasions the tone is sharper and more acerbic. Nick Hinchliffe's no-punches-pulled assault on the parasitic paper qualifications industry that has been spawned by the growth of climbing as an indoor sporting activity is a much-needed polemic. His voice finds an echo in Nick Bullock's own lament for a time when climbing produced characters and heroes, rather than celebrities and superstars. Bullock's call to arms is a valuable reminder that climbing and the spirit of rebellion and rule breaking have often gone hand in hand.

While many will see the advent of sponsorship and commercial marketing as an entirely backward step, who today goes out climbing without kit that is the result of intensive research, investment and product development? Who can read John Cleare's wonderful account of working with Joe Brown during the dawning of the television age and not think that this was perhaps the beginning of the end for a climbing culture unaffected by the power of modern communications? The challenge for today's sponsored heroes, as Nick Bullock reminds us, is how to retain a sense of personal integrity when faced with commercial pressures that are often pulling in the opposite direction. This may be easier to accomplish than many imagine. Alex Honnold's lonely exploits in Zion and Yosemite, for instance, owe nothing to the demands of the designer labels that he wears, and all to his own inner confidence and the joy he experiences moving freely over hard rock without a rope.

In the end it comes down to a question of character; which is the theme of James McHaffie's essay on the people who have most influenced the direction he has taken in climbing. Anyone who fears that the on-sight, adventure tradition, has been killed off by commercialism and the spread of the health and safety culture, should take heart from Caff's piece. Likewise, Dave Turnbull's understated account of his first ascent of Gojung with Mick Fowler only a month ago, is testimony to the tenacity of our Club members in seeking out new challenges in parts of the world (Everest in particular) that have been over-run by the commercial ethic and the pursuit of profit. The image of Turnbull cocooned in a tent on the 6,300 metre summit betrays the feeling of exhaustion and anxiety the two men must have experienced as a snow storm raged outside and the prospect of a safe descent

Left:

*Jimmy 'big guns' McCormack runs it out on the Cromlech's Lord of the Flies (E6 6a).*

Photographer:  
*Jack Geldard*



seemed to grow ever more distant.

The same pair, earlier in the year, found adventure closer to home, discovering not only a new route, but also a new crag. The photographs that accompany Mick Fowler's account of their ascent (with Steve Sustad) of The Cushion Man (XS) are as twisted and contorted as the logic that seems to drive people to climb this kind of stuff.

Another image of a summiteer also stands out in this issue, but in this one there is no sign of snow. At 74-years-old, Ian Howell could be forgiven for wanting to hang up his boots. But there he is on top of Namibia's Matterhorn, having just climbed a direct VS/HVS variation on the Normal Route with two young climbers – one Canadian, the other Australian – who he had met in the campsite. In a similar vein, another pensioner who thought that his big mountain days might be over, Colin Beechey, provides an inspiring tale of his adventures in the Ecrins and the Oberland. Age, it seems is no barrier to big days and big ambitions.

Indeed, the sweep of the stories in this Journal takes us climbing in the Sinai, trekking in Ethiopia, and to vertical cliff faces in Madagascar. All of which goes to show that this is a Club with a healthy appetite for adventure and a willingness to seek out somewhere and something different.

If there is a note of sadness in this Journal it is brought about only by the passing of so many Club members, some prominent, others less so, whose lives have helped shape the course of climbing and mountaineering in so many ways. George Band, who writes about his friend Chris Brasher, is himself the subject of our first obituary. The youngest member of the first successful Everest team, and himself the first to climb Kangchenjunga, Band's style seemed to epitomise an era. Alan Blackshaw, whose 'Bible' was perhaps the first book that many an aspiring climber read before tying on to a rope, gave so much to the global climbing community that his passing was mourned across the world (as Doug Scott testifies). Ben Wintringham and Chris Astill, by contrast,

both died doing the sport they loved. The tributes from Club members that poured in for Chris were too many to include in the Journal, but we hope that what we have published is a fitting recognition of his contribution to the life of the Club.

Lastly, it remains to say that this Journal would not have been possible without the work of one man: Tim Oliver. Tim relinquished the editorship of the Journal only when the bulk of the work had been done. Looking back at the thorough and efficient way he handed everything over to me, it seems, in retrospect, that he was clearing his desk of unfinished business before completing the last act of his life. I like to think that he would have approved of what we have done. Dick Isherwood, another CC member exiled in the States, who was a key member of Tim's tightly knit team, has been a wonderful support in editing and commenting on the articles. We have not always agreed on matters of style and content, but his advice, wisdom and knowledge are such that I have often – more often than he may think – deferred to his opinion. Ian Smith, a past CC President, has also been a wealth of advice and support, from scanning and cleaning ancient images to holding my hand through the minefield of Club politics he has, on more than one occasion, saved me from great embarrassment. Justin Shiels, Cathy Woodhead and Dave Medcalf, all members of Tim's original team, have been a source of great help, chasing and editing copy, and encouraging potential authors to put pen to paper.

Last, but very far from least, mention must be made of Marcus Wray. Still an aspirant member, it is Marcus who has singlehandedly re-designed the Club Newsletter and devoted so much of his time to the re-design and production of the Journal. He has been helped in great measure by the generosity of John Cleare, whose contribution to the Journal extends much beyond the world-class images and storytelling that he has provided. To them all, and those that I have inadvertently missed, I would like to say – thank you.

Right:  
*Looking back along  
the ridge towards  
the Wyssi Frau and  
Morgenhorn.*

Photographer:  
*Colin Beechey*



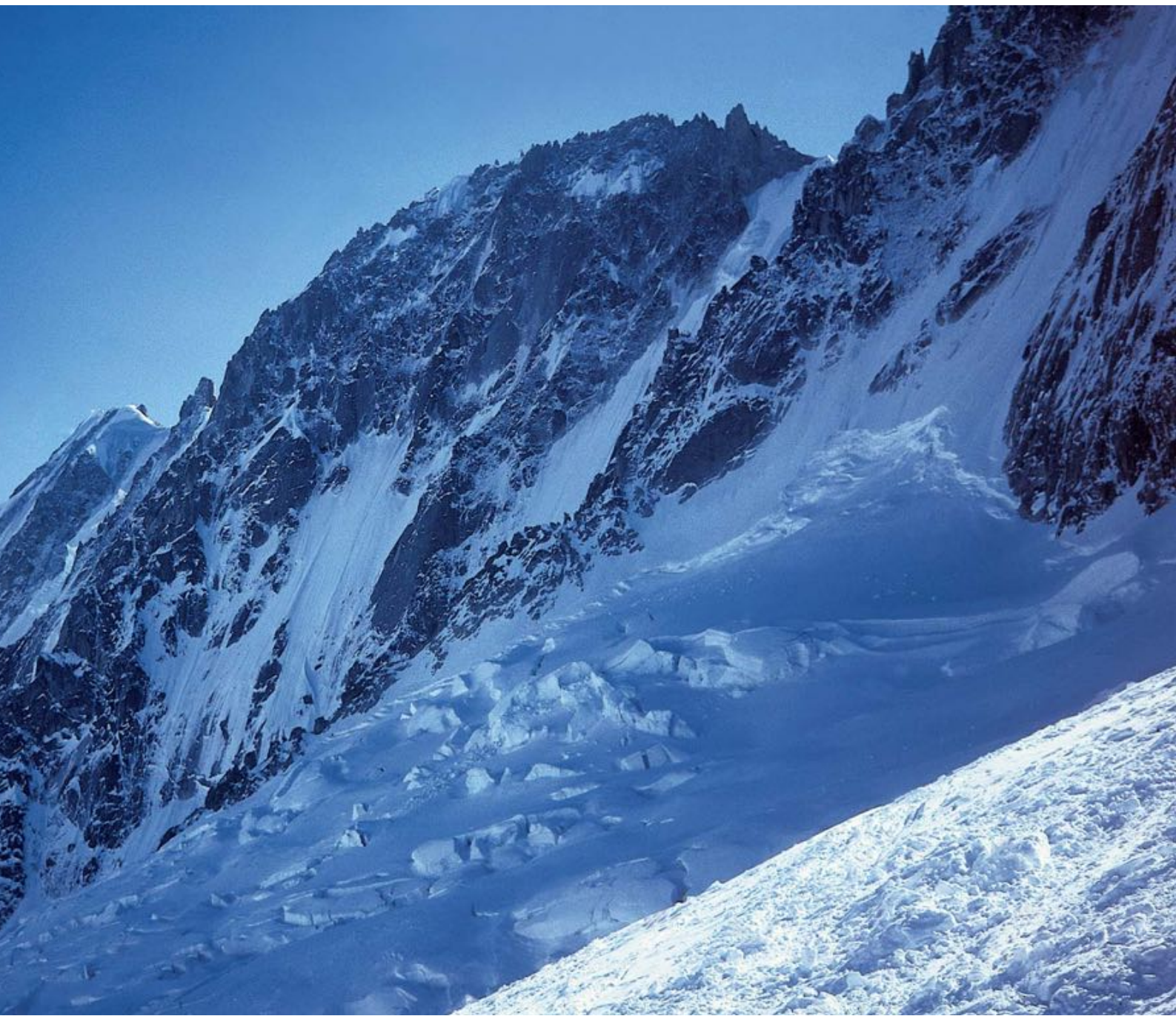
# ALPS AND THE HIMALAYA

*Shelter from the Storm. By Dick Turnbull*

*A Pensioner's Alpine Holiday. By Colin Beechey*

*Himalayan Extreme for Beginners. By Dave Turnbull*

*No Blends! By Dick Isherwood*





# SHELTER FROM THE STORM

*Big personalities need big challenges and few come more testing than a winter ascent of the North Face of Les Droites. In this often gripping account of a route that pushed Dick and his friend, Al Morgan, to their limits we come to understand how critical it is to make the right decisions in the mountains. Dick had had only two summer seasons in the Alps before his winter venture on Les Droites.*

By Dick Turnbull

**I**n 1982 most of my climbing mates were rock-climbers first and reluctant mountaineers second and very definitely reluctant when it came to winter climbing in the Alps. Not surprising as no one in their right mind climbed in the Alps in winter in the early 1980s. In those far-off days climbers equated alpine winter climbing with Desmaison suffering for 28 days on the Grandes Jorasses, Bonatti suffering for six days on the Matterhorn and English climbers suffering whenever they stepped out of the Bar National. With rare exceptions, such as the fantastic Boulton and Robinson one-push winter ascent of the Droites in 1975, and the presence of the infamous Bin Men (including Mark Miller and Joe Simpson) in the early 80s, the Chamonix winter scene was the sole preserve of 'super stars' and then only when they weren't involved in bigger things.

Back then Al was the only climber I knew who had actually done an alpine route in winter (the Gervasutti Couloir) survived it and was keen for more, so we teamed up out of necessity rather than complete compatibility. Despite having climbed before with Al in Scotland, my other mates could only see trouble ahead as I was marked down as 'combustible' and 'direct' while Al was well known as a bit of an intellectual hippy keen on a 'non-confrontational' life-style!

It was February 1982 and things were going well – we arrived in Cham still on speaking terms! We had two weeks in front of us but the weather was looking mixed. We teamed up with some English ski bums who

had an isolated micro chalet in Les Praz where we were allotted half-a-room with only just enough space for the two of us to doss down. Still, we were going to be on the hill all the time anyway so who cared?

After a couple of half-days skiing for acclimatisation (we were poor then!) we set off full of hope for the North Face of the Charmoz. Back then the Montenvers railway didn't run until March so it was a seven-and-a-half hour thrash from the valley on snow shoes – yes, there was snow all the way down to Cham in the 'good old days'! After a cold bivvy below the face and one cut-out 'sitter' below the final exit couloirs we just managed to miss the last téléphérique down from the Plan de L'Aiguille and were faced with the soul-destroying, knee-wrecking flounder down the desperate steep path and slopes to the fleshspots of Cham brightly illuminated far below.

We plunged into the Bar Nat at 10.00pm exhausted, elated and snow-covered, to be greeted by Roger Baxter-Jones who gallantly bought us both a coveted 'grande biere' and, being a 'star' and a seasoned guide, grilled us to make sure we'd actually done it! The route had been brilliant, in perfect nick with steep ice-runnels threading up from the bergschrund to the central icefield with wonderful icy mixed climbing up the Heckmair direct finish. So far we'd survived the car journey, our first winter route in the Alps and we were still talking to each other! So – what next?

Well, as usual bad weather interrupted play and we were forced back onto the slopes and into the bars again. Why is it that I've only ever skied in bad weather when you can't see a \*\*\*\*\* thing? This

Left:  
*North Face of Les Droites.*

Photographer:  
*Dick Turnbull collection*



Above:  
*Al Morgan on big  
icefield.*

Photographer:  
*Dick Turnbull  
collection*

predictably led to an argument with some soft snow, a slow twisting fall and a mildly sprained knee followed by a lot of loud frustrated cursing and a long night of ‘hot and cold’ treatment. Youthful limbs heal quickly and recovery only took a couple of days.

More days of snow and cloud kept us in the Nat and half-days skiing peering into the clag among the trees at les Houches. Then the pressure began to rise bringing back clear skies and plummeting temperatures. Our experience on the Charmoz a week before told us that conditions were perfect for the big ice faces – so next it could only be the North Face of Les Droites.

The Droites was the iconic Chamonix ice route of the time. Boulton and Robinson, fresh from their great success on Labyrinth Direct on the Dubh Loch, had made the first British – and first continuous – winter

ascent in 1975 only seven years earlier. By now the first wave of front-pointing modernity had arrived and we were fully equipped with brand new Simond reverse-curved Chacals and Barracudas, plastic boots and rigid crampons. Alas ice screws were still basic, and basically useless – desperate to put in, worse to take out!

We visited the Compagnie des Guides office in trepidation to get the weather forecast and to tell them where we were going. With so few climbers out on the bigger routes in the late 1970s and early 1980s we were treated with some scepticism – ‘who were these unknown Brits?’ and, ‘would they need rescuing?’ The forecast for the next three to four days was pretty good but not fully guaranteed. ‘Should we stay or should we go?’ as Mick Jones said. We had to go as we had only got three days left before we had to get back

to the real world of home and work. We dashed back to the chalet, threw our gear together and were up at Argentière and on the Grandes Montets 'frique before you could blink.

This was it! We were in the big-time now. Al and I stumbled down the bizarrely hoar-frosted staircase out of the Grand Montets 'frique station into a perfect winter day at 3,300m and -15°. We stood out like sore thumbs among the iridescent skiers resplendent in their fashionable one-piece suits, clutching their head-high skis as they clumped down the stairs. For a start we were obviously Brits – none of the famous French 'élan' in our winter attire! They stepped smartly into their bindings and flashed off down the 10ft drop onto the huge slopes swooping down to the Argentière glacier while we laboriously strapped on our plastic snow shoes and plodded down towards the distant Argentière hut. The winter scenery was impressive with the Verte towering behind and the whole sweep of the magnificent Droites/Courtes wall marching away above us to our right.

The hut was open but with no guardian and already half-full of skiers preparing to skin up the next day to the Col du Chardonnet on their way to Zermatt via the Haute Route. The weather looked and felt really stable. By 6.00pm it was dark, the stars shimmering in the intense cold. Inside the hut it was only marginally warmer, the candles and stoves not enough to let you take your duvet off. After a brew and a bite we 'retired' to our pits ready to be up at midnight. Our night was disturbed by ghostly noises as the thin wind sighed around the hut and with skiers going bump in the night. We were off at midnight, out into the winter cold to get an early start to the huge 2,000ft initial icefield that guards the 2,000ft of steep mixed climbing above.

One of the pluses of winter climbing in the Alps is that most bergschrunds are pretty full with snow. This one was no exception and it was only a short snowy wall between us and the unrelenting 50°/60° ice above. One of the minuses, however, is that winter ice is like concrete! The other is that the nights are

long and Achil head-torches were iffy to say the least! Conditions however were good and we were able to follow streaks of firm névé for long distances before stepping on to the brutal, steely black smoothness that stretched up to the towering rock band above us.

We pitched the climbing at the start as we weren't familiar enough with each other to solo comfortably.

Al was cautious and insisted on placing time-consuming screws so I ended up doing all the leading, an arrangement we came to without any major disagreement! As the climbing on the névé was easier than we expected we soon started to climb together with one screw between us. This arrangement finished with a bang when we hit the hard stuff near the top of the icefield and we reverted to pitching it.

Half way up the icefield we spotted two head-torches racing up behind us. This was a bit of a shock! Where had they come from? New Mills as it turned out. They were young, confident lads from the Mynydd Club, Geoff Hornby and Dave Crowther who had come up to the hut from the last 'frique and now were pelting up the icefield as if it was a running track. Dave passed us with a cheery 'Good morning' whilst the older, more cautious Geoff stayed with us partly for company and partly for a sense of security on the implacable, black concrete at the top of the icefield.

Two pitches from the mixed ground Geoff shot off to join Dave and they roped up and disappeared with a wave into the chaos of ice runnels and rock buttresses above. Soon it was our turn to launch off into the 'proper' climbing stretching above us.

It was 9.00am when we started up what looked like a huge wave of rock and ice above us. What followed was a day of fantastic mixed climbing of the highest quality. Sinuous runnels of ice finished abruptly in short rock walls, then carried on weaving and twisting past small overhangs, through chimneys, up steep grooves, ever, ever upwards. Protection was good but not always obvious with slings on spikes, occasional pegs and nuts but thankfully the ice was too thin for our evil ice pegs. Once the Mynydd lads had gone we didn't see them again and we were alone, immersed





in the vastness of the face with only the next pitch to lead us on. Route finding didn't seem important – just going up was enough. I led all that day, 16 dream pitches up intricate rock, ice, soft snow and perfect névé with solid belays, adequate protection, calm conditions and an empty blue, blue sky. What more can you want?

Well, better made ice axes for a start. Halfway up pitch 13 my brand new Barracuda pick broke. The idyll was well and truly broken and progress became a tenuous struggle. By then I was knackered, falling asleep on one belay only to be woken by an irate Al shouting for me to take-in. Luckily the angle had relented and the climbing had eased – just the sort of place where tired climbers make mistakes. We were now high on the face as darkness arrived. I traversed left to find somewhere to bivvy but fear, tiredness and hard ice drove me back to Al perched on a blunt snowy arête. Here we decided, on reflection, was good enough!

We were both out on our feet. We had climbed 3,500ft that day and been up for 18 hours. I put in three of our ice screws, hung in my harness draped in my lovely thick Gore-Tex covered down pit and went out like a light. Al spent an hour fashioning a large arm-chair in a snow patch 15ft away and was still awake when I woke two hours later to make a very necessary brew. Strangely we both slept well – Al too well as he just couldn't be bothered to get up when nature called! Next morning was again perfect – clear with views far across the clouds in the Geneva basin. A brew, a quick bite of salami and chocolate, more for morale than nutrition and Al led across the rock-hard ice to the final couloir. Everything seems so much harder after a cold night out. Packing up was torture with sore hands, raw with cold and bruised by constant battering. Such a steep situation meant that you had to hang on tight to everything and even then my flapping Karrimat caught a stray gust and vanished. At 11.00am and eight pitches of solid toe-numbing winter ice later we were at the Brèche de Droites, in sunlight at long last, and the route was done.

No time for celebrations. Peering over the top I was shocked to see a storm rapidly brewing below in the Talefre glacier. The hard climbing was over and now the danger-time began. A quick drink and we were away abseiling down the south-facing couloir, sliding down to meet the storm racing up towards us. Suddenly the sun was gone and we were in a full-blown wild winter storm. At the bottom of the couloir the wind lessened and snow no longer stung our eyes. Thank God for the others' tracks! It was snow shoes on and start the long trudge contouring round the head of the Talefre Glacier towards the ladders leading up to the Couvercle Hut perched below the Aiguille du Moine.

Should we stop at the hut? We were tired and damp but we couldn't be sure what the weather was going to do so we regretfully trudged on dodging crevasses across the Talefre to the landmark bivvy boulder, the Pierre a Berenger. The snow was still falling thickly obliterating the guiding footprints – should we stop here or go on? We went on, plunging down the deepening snow to the Leschaux Glacier. Here there was no indication of where to go apart from rough compass orientation. We couldn't see anything around us and worried about how true our compass was surrounded by so much rock. Then I stumbled on hardened snow! Ski tracks! All we had to do was follow these downhill as we knew they headed for the Mer de Glace, the Vallée Blanche and safety.

Following the ski tracks was easier said than done. In complete white-out we couldn't see the tracks. The only way we knew we were on course was by sensing when we were walking on packed snow. The moment we strayed and sank we were off-course! By now it was 5pm with darkness coming. Al was tired and increasingly exasperated by the bindings of his snow shoes. Suddenly he screamed with rage, tore off his snow shoes and flung them into a yawning crevasse. A short altercation followed! The upshot was I gave him mine as he was tiring rapidly – the argument went that I had bigger feet than him so I wouldn't sink as much! On we went – one step up and one down – as

we traced our way into the gathering darkness and on through the crevassed zone where the Leschaux Glacier met the Mer de Glace.

Suddenly we were definitely on the wide ski tracks of the Vallée Blanche. What a relief! By now it was dark but the stress factor was falling and we could relax somewhat and concentrate on keeping upright and on our path. We were in amongst the crevasses nearing the Montanvers ladders when suddenly the wind died, a calm descended and the clouds parted above us revealing a vast moonlit Dru high above us to our right, surrounded by stars with a huge plume of wild cloud and snow erupting from the summit. It was a magnificent sight, one that we would never forget, showing the full, awesome and humbling power of winter in the mountains.

After that we somehow felt safe. We found the Montanvers ladders and plodded down to Cham in huge, heavy flakes of silently settling snow. At 10.00pm we staggered into the Bar Nat covered in snow looking like 'richtiger bergsteigers'\* only to be met by none other than Roger Baxter-Jones! 'Not you two again!' was his reaction followed by 'Deux grandes bières, Maurice, s'il vous plait!' Everything had worked – just! We were a team now, together forever in a great and testing route. It was as good as it gets.

It didn't end there. After a couple of 'grandes bières' we staggered up to the chalet only to see all the furniture outside covered in snow, all the lights on and music thumping out into the snow saturated night. Great, the boys were having a party! In we went like conquering heroes. Al suddenly didn't smell too good as he stripped off in the heat whilst I just threw down the drinks and waxed lyrical! Sometime later someone asked again 'What was it like?' 'Easy, when you know how' was my inebriated reply – then I fell over and all I could hear was 'Come in' she said, 'I'll give you shelter from the storm'.

*\* Real mountaineers!*

*This piece is dedicated to Al Morgan who died in 1999.*

Right:  
*North Face of Les  
Droites from the  
Argentière Hut.*

Photographer:  
*Dick Turnbull  
collection*







# A PENSIONER'S ALPINE HOLIDAY

*With more than four decades of alpine experience behind him, Colin Beechey was beginning to suspect that his days on the lofty peaks and ridges were numbered. But in this article about a recent visit to the Ecrins and Oberland areas he shows that age has not wearied him. The fire of ambition, combined with a good climbing partner and the right choice of route, ensures that the magic of the Alps is still obtainable.*

By Colin Beechey

Depressingly, age catches up with us all. I was approaching my 60th year, recently retired from my job and a few months away from the dreaded birthday. After 40 alpine holidays I felt as if all those years of bodily abuse in the mountains had finally caught up with me. My knees ached and injuries were more common. It was getting harder to find the motivation for the big alpine classics that I had always enjoyed.

My climbing partner of many years, John Daniels, had his own theory. When he reached his late 50s and retired from such adventures, he assured me that 'It's all down to testosterone, I've used all mine up and these days I prefer a nice ramble in Wales rather than all that macho alpine stuff.'

The knowledge that even older members of the Alpine Club were still climbing well just depressed me further. Whatever 'Grande Course' I aspired to, no doubt some ancient member had already climbed it in nailed boots and tweeds and still had an easy day.

Despite my doubts, Tim Perkin and I planned a holiday in the Ecrins in July 2008. We started with two training routes from the Selle hut, Le Rateau by the West ridge (PD), and the much harder Pt Thorant by La Voie des Lezards (D+), a superb 11-pitch rock route with pitches of V. Rather than descend after the hard pitches as most parties do, we had carried onto the true summit, giving us a 13-hour day, almost missing supper at the hut.

After this we felt fit enough to attempt the Traverse of La Meije. According to the guidebook, this is 'one of the great expeditions of the Alps' and a route I had wanted to do for over 30 years. The Meije was first climbed from the Promontoire side in 1877, a remarkable ascent for the time, involving very difficult route finding. The classic traverse was negotiated in 1891 by the Scottish climber JH Gibson, along with Fritz Boss and the great guide Ulrich Almer.

I had first approached The Meije during the 1980s during a very poor summer but never even attempted the route as it was clearly out of condition. In 2006 Tim and I had actually started the route and reached a point several hours above the Promontoire Hut on a superb day. Only one other party, a guide and client, were on the route. As dawn broke we caught up with them but the guide announced that: 'There is a storm coming, we are going down'. Thinking that he knew something we did not, we also retreated, only to find that the weather was fine until well into the evening. On that occasion we had approached the Promontoire Hut from La Bérade. The problem with this approach is that, if successful, the descent is into a different valley, many miles by road from the starting point. This time we approached the hut direct from La Grave, using the cable car to reach 2,500 metres. From here we had to climb the impressive Enfatchores buttress by hundreds of feet of exciting scrambling, with none of the usual paint flashes to mark the way.

Left:

*The Meije Traverse from the Aigle Hut. The Grand Pic is on the right with the Doigt de Dieu and descent in the centre.*

Photographer:  
Colin Beechey



Eventually we reached the Meije glacier, which we followed to the Brèche de La Meije, from where the Promontoire hut was easily reached across a snowfield. There were only five other parties attempting the climb and several of these were already above the hut reconnoitering the route.

The Meije is very unusual in that the rock-climbing starts from the hut balcony rather than after the usual long moraines or glacier plods of most alpine routes. In the morning darkness we too practised the grade 3+ pitch close to the hut that we had found very awkward two years earlier. This time Tim found a slightly easier way by grovelling leftwards under a projecting block, rather than climbing steeply over it as we had before. We returned to the hut for supper, anxious about the long committing that lay ahead.

At 3.00am my alarm went off, although I had hardly slept due to doubts about attempting such a long route at my age. After a quick brew we were off at 3.45am, close behind the leading parties.

The grade 3+ pitch was quickly led by Tim but seemed terrifying in the dark with a huge drop on the left. I went in front and headed up a pleasant firm ridge, then gradually leftwards towards the Duhamel Couloir. This was familiar ground from our previous attempt. We descended into the couloir by an awkward swing and Tim led on above. We soon became aware of excited babbling from another party above us. The rocks were covered in verglas, making progress very difficult, and they were clearly having epics. After a few tense moments Tim found a way to the left, but there were no belays or protection on the compact rock as we moved together.

We soon reached our high point of two years previously, a ledge system where the route traversed right. A difficult slab pitch with little meaningful protection was well led by Tim and then I took over the lead, traversing exposed narrow ledges, always rightwards. The route continued traversing leftwards, at about grade 3 with some awkward short chimneys. Eventually we reached a large terrace, next to the glacier Carré. This is climbed on its left edge, followed

by a traverse to reach the Brèche du Glacier Carré. Here the wind hit us, casting doubts about the summit which was covered with fast moving streamers of cloud. There were still several hundred metres of rock to climb and the correct route was not clear. Tim led upwards seeking the easiest way and trying to avoid icy patches and verglas. At a steepening below the Grand Pic I led the awkward 'Cheval Rouge' slab, and after one more difficult little overhang the summit ridge was gained.

We reached the Grand Pic summit at 10.15am, six and a half hours after leaving the hut. It had not been easy, the route constantly traversing through much harder ground. To our amazement the wind had dropped and the weather set fair. Descent in bad weather the same way would be very serious as any abseils could end up on ledgeless walls. To continue the traverse is probably the best option even in poor weather. This seriousness is why few people would argue with the route's grade of 'Difficile'. To continue the traverse we were now faced with several 50 metre abseils, something I was dreading, into the Brèche Zsigmondy. Contrary to my expectations the abseils were not vertical or overhanging but still extremely exposed. We spent a lot of time untangling our ropes after each abseil. After the last abseil we traversed a sharp arête to belay on the first fixed cable. These cables were fixed in the 1960s when the brèche suffered a major collapse, making the route much harder.

Tim led on and disappeared from view. We continued moving together but I had a shock when the cables disappeared under thick ice. Hoping Tim was still clipped into them above, I climbed a steep icy chimney, struggling with my one axe. It was desperately strenuous in the icy conditions even when the cable reappeared, and I was glad to reach the end of this section and regain the ridge. The climb now continued as wonderfully exposed snow arêtes, another party visible a long way in front. I led on, grateful to find that the snow was still well frozen. At one point we abseiled to avoid some icy down climbing and soon reached the impressive steep snow below the

final summit, the Doigt de Dieu. This was climbed by traversing left on nevé then climbing straight up the edge of the peak, proving much less intimidating than it looked.

It was 2.00pm, and we were glad of a brief rest. We found several fixed abseil points down to a brèche north of the summit. Here we traversed a short horizontal ridge to a point where we found another abseil point. A final abseil on our 50m ropes got us over the bergschrund and all that remained was a long walk in soft snow to the tiny Aigle Hut. We were both overjoyed at completing such a fantastic route. It had taken us 12 hours from hut to hut, a respectable time. We indulged in a couple of beers only to find out that the hut was full, only sleeping 20, and a large party were on their way up. We had no choice but to descend to the valley, several hours below. This descent was a nightmare in our tired state. We lost the path, wasting a lot of time. When we finally reached the valley we had several miles of road walking, including a dangerous passage through unlit road tunnels, dodging traffic. We collapsed in our tent very tired but content at achieving such a brilliant climb.

To remind us just what a game of chance mountaineering is, we woke the next day to several hours of torrential rain, allowing us a well-earned day of rest. Our minds soon turned to another classic route. We decided to drive to Kandersteg in Switzerland and attempt the snow/ice traverse of the Morgenhorn, Wyssi Frau and Bluemlisalphorn. This climb, graded AD is highly rated and the 2003 guidebook suggests that: 'The traverse of the three summits makes for one of the best climbs of this standard in the Alps', while the 1979 guidebook states that it is: 'more demanding than the Rochfort Ridge (Mt Blanc) or the Liskamm traverse (Pennine Alps)'. Having done both the latter climbs it sounded a fine objective.

A day later we were at the Bluemlisalp Hut, an unrelenting flog from Kandersteg, no doubt made worse by our fast time of two-and-a-half hours as opposed to the guidebooks four hours. The next morning dawned fine but cold and we were first to

Left:  
*Tim Perkin traversing the fixed cables.*

Photographer:  
*Colin Beechey*





Above:  
*Looking back along  
the ridge towards  
the Wyssi Frau and  
Morgenhorn.*

Photographer:  
Colin Beechey

leave the hut at 03.30am. It was only a short walk to the glacier that was in superb, crevasse free condition. We soon reached the steep snow ridge of the first peak, the Morgenhorn, guarded by many seracs. In the darkness we managed to locate and follow a ramp leftwards that conveniently bypassed these. Tim led on up the ever-steepening ridge to the summit that we reached as dawn broke, a little over two hours after leaving the hut. It was extremely cold and windy, and the way ahead looked very impressive, consisting of beautiful curving snow arêtes to the next summit, the Wyssi Frau, then beyond to the Bluemlisalphorn. We continued along the arêtes, occasional rocky sections safeguarded by large steel stanchions. There was hardly any evidence of other parties as nobody had passed this way for two weeks according to the hut guardian. In just over an hour we reached the Wyssi Frau. The way ahead towards the Bluemlisalphorn looked much more difficult and included a long steep descent down a very narrow snow arête. Knowing how precarious such descents can be I was nervous but the snow was perfect and hard enough to allow secure axe belays.

We alternated the leads, moving together over several tricky rock sections, followed by more superb and very photogenic snow arêtes to the final summit, the Bluemlisalphorn. We had taken just over three hours

from the Morgenhorn, a fast time, no doubt helped by the good conditions. We now joined the hordes of guided parties who had come up the normal route on the crowded summit. While taking photos with my faithful old Rollei 35mm camera, one of the guides pointed towards me commenting to his clients that there was an 'old classic', hopefully referring to my camera rather than myself.

The descent of the normal route was at first straightforward, down a pleasant snow ridge, then a long awkward rocky section littered with long belay stakes, giving it the appearance of a porcupine. To reach the glacier a long steep snow slope had to be descended. Much of the snow had now gone leaving hard grey ice, always precarious to descend. To save time and the strain on our nerves I banged in one of my old drive-in ice screws and we abseiled down the slope and over the bergschrund, abandoning the screw for others to use. A long trudge down the crevassed glacier got us back to the hut at just after noon – a total of nine hours.

It had been a brilliant route, one of the finest snow traverses I have ever done in the Alps. It had, along with the Meije traverse, shown me that perhaps there were still a few years yet left to enjoy the great alpine classics after all. My mind was already turning towards new challenges for future years.



Left:  
*Another party on the  
snow arêtes of the  
Bluemlisalphorn.*

Photographer:  
Colin Bleachey







# HIMALAYAN EXTREME FOR BEGINNERS

*After years spent repeating some of Mick Fowler's more esoteric routes, and then sharing a rope with him on a few shale adventures, slow learner Dave Turnbull teams up with the quietly spoken taxman for the first ascent of Gojung (6,310m) on the Nepal/Tibet border.*

By Dave Turnbull

For many people the prospect of climbing with Mick Fowler would strike a deep fear in the heart, such is the reputation of the smiley taxman from Wembley and his legacy of sea stacks, shale and chalk epics and near death bivvies in the Greater Ranges. But reputations are a funny thing and reality is often quite different. Having known Mick for quite a while and spent many years repeating some of his more esoteric offerings, I'd always considered him the ideal partner if ever I wanted to do something interesting in the high mountains.

For me this trip had stemmed from a speculative four-word email fired off to Mick when Nick Colton told me Paul Ramsden had pulled out of the trip. 'Potentially interested in Nepal', my short note said and that was it. Five minutes later Mick was on the phone so full of enthusiasm that before I knew it I was committed (without home clearance) to spending the next six months worrying about just what I'd committed myself to.

A week later the other two members of the original team also pulled out so we set to work recruiting a replacement duo (four being the ideal number to share the costs and provide an element of backup). A chance Facebook conversation led to a nibble from Graham 'Streaky' Desroy (retired hippy and veteran of six Himalayan trips in as many years) and within days Streaky together with Caernarfon based whipper snapper Jon 'the Hobbit' Ratcliffe had committed. Fast forward six months and we're crammed into the

back seat of a bus making the 16 hour journey from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj – a dusty lowland town in Western Nepal – to catch an internal flight to Rara Lake and the start of the five day walk-in. Julian Freeman-Attwood, Ed Douglas and team had visited the Mugu area two years previously so we knew what to expect. So with 11 mules carrying our kit and provisions, two mule men, a porter and two cooks we began the approach through a series of beautifully lush lowland river valleys, steep sided with rustic villages and terraced fields of red chillies.

Mugu is a quiet backwater compared to Nepal's well documented trekking and climbing centres. In our 24 days we didn't hear a single motor, engine or generator of any kind. There are no roads, no motorbikes and no electricity except for the odd light bulb powered by solar panel on individual houses. Village life is tranquil and unchanged and the sight of westerners is rare.

A series of landslides made the track difficult for our mules and impeded our progress, so that it took eight days to reach base camp (4,400m). Worried about our schedule Mick immediately dragged me further uphill for a spell of acclimatisation on the 5,200m slopes opposite our mountain. The upside of the resulting three sleepless nights was that perfect daytime weather gave us a great opportunity to scope out our descent options from the route. We knew from Nick and Ed's descriptions that the 6,310m unclimbed mountain (named Mugu Chulli by a previous Spanish party and 'Gojung' by the local people) offered a great looking

Left:  
*Easier ground on the central icefield, climber: Dave Turnbull.*

Photographer:  
*Mick Fowler*





line but also that there was no obvious way off it. This was a big unknown and had concerned me over the past six months. In our minds the main options had always been to abseil down the route or walk out along 25 miles of untrodden glacier into Tibet then take a circuitous loop back to base camp. Neither option was particularly appealing and on close inspection we switched to Mick's Plan C – a 'relatively easy looking walk-off' (Mick's words) down a series of snow and ice slopes a mile or so to the north.

Our rations for the route were based on six days' supply and comprised a total of six one-person packets of dried food (pasta/chilli), 12 chocolate/muesli bars, some chocolate raisins and a handful of boiled sweets. On the Fowler scale this was judged 'more than adequate' so who was I to argue. The route began with a three-hour walk/scramble up a valley and moraine to boulder fields and an overnight bivvy at the base. At 6.30am on 16 October (my birthday) we set off under a pure blue sky with 500ft of easy angled soloing up a compacted avalanche/spindrift plume to the base of the impressive 1,000ft narrow ice couloir.

The conditions – both weather and ice – were just incredible. The pitches were steep and the ice sometimes thin over compact granite, but every axe placement seemed to squeak and lock in first go, there was no spindrift, little wind and what's more the sky remained blue. And so it continued for the two days it took us to get established on the first icefield. Day 3 dawned predictably clear and we headed up easier ground towards a rock barrier capping the icefield where we knew a potential stopper rightwards traverse would need to be made to reach the upper icefield. At this point the weather became noticeably colder, the wind began to blow but the sky remained clear. Up

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*Left: West Face of Gojung, the route takes the obvious couloir and twin icefields on the right; the descent route finishes down the hanging glacier in the left of picture.*

*Right: Gojung, Mick Fowler, setting off up the 1000ft ice couloirs.*

*Photographer: Dave Turnbull*







early on day 4 we set about the tricky looking rising traverse comprising three pitches of thin ice, patchy rock and limited protection.

There were no natural ledges on the face and the ice was so hard that cutting ledges was harder work than the climbing. We didn't sleep much and Mick had particular problems after his sleeping bag filled up with snow, melted and then got wet on the second night. He spent night 3 shivering uncontrollably with lumps of ice the size of cricket balls inside the down of his sleeping bag. But then Mick just loves this sort of thing (I always remember his Taweche 'torture tube' story with Pat Littlejohn) so it's hard to be sympathetic; grim bivvies are an essential part of the Fowler holiday experience so I had tried not to worry about him and pushed my earplugs as deeply into my ears as I could in order to drown out the sound of chattering teeth.

Anyway, back on the upper icefield the angle eased, the ice became softer and after three or four long straight pitches up amazing fluted formations we broke back left through mixed ground to the final summit snowfields. I'd been developing a nasty throat infection over the previous days and around this point my voice deteriorated to a hoarse whisper and sign language become our main way of communicating. By late afternoon Mick led up the last section of exhausting steep snow to the summit ridge and a perfect flat bivvy spot where we could finally pitch the tent. A ridge walk in blue sky and high cirrus cloud the next morning saw us on a beautiful pointed summit marking the border with Tibet. The plan then was going to be a simple case of heading down the back of the mountain to a col at c.6,150m then across to our descent route which, as the crow might have flown, wasn't far away. But the col proved harder to reach than we'd imagined (Google Earth can be misleading) and we arrived mid-afternoon in worsening weather with yours truly feeling ill and lifeless. So there we made our bivvy, just as the cloud crowded in and the first snowflakes began to fall. With 10-12 inches of fresh powder outside the tent we decided to eat our last dried meal at 5.00am prior to setting out to reach the descent. But again

things didn't go quite to plan. After struggling up the 6,260m subsidiary summit (literally on hands and knees at times) and traversing a short snowy ridge we were forced to bivvy again due to the poor visibility and the presence of some massive gaping crevasses. The wind blew and it snowed again that night; it seemed things were getting rather nasty. Fearing the worst I unzipped the tent at 5.30am the next morning to the wonderful sight of a perfect clear blue sky.

From the bivvy we descended a slope over a bergschrund (which I proceeded to fall into) and crossed a deep snowy plateau to top of our descent route which we knew would be more difficult due to the heavy snowfall. Ten hours later we bottomed-out. It'd been a hard day comprising six abseils over steep rock buttresses, an exhausting two hour solo traverse across a 45 degree avalanche threatened snow slope, further abseils, a roped section through a labyrinth of crevasses on a hanging glacier then two near vertical abseils down the hanging toe of the glacier.

Stumbling down the final moraine on day 8 after another cold and sleepless night we finally met up with Streaky and Hobbit. They had topped out on an unclimbed 5,800m peak in the same valley four to five days earlier but had been forced to re-locate base-camp 5 miles downstream when the first snow came and had been getting increasingly worried about us. Anyway, they did a great job looking out for us and the memory of Jon carefully tucking me up in a sleeping bag (he'd make someone a lovely wife) after I'd randomly crashed out in an exhausted state in the cooking tent and Graham's confident administration of his extensive medical kit to fix my various ailments on the ensuing three-day / 45+ mile walk-out still bring a warm smile to my face. It's a hard business this Himalayan mountaineering, don't let anyone tell you different, but no doubt the retrospective joy will kick-in soon.

*I'd like to thank the MEF, the Alpine Club, Berghaus, Lyon Equipment, First Ascent and Mountain Equipment, for their generous support, without which I doubt I'd have made it to Nepal in the first place.*

Left:  
*Day 5 Dave Turnbull  
at the summit bivvy.*

Photographer:  
*Mick Fowler*



# No BLENDS!

*When not out collecting his crab pots, biologist Dick Isherwood's long interest in rhododendrons has taken him to some of the more remote places in the world. In this tale his quest takes him to the less travelled eastern Himalayan region of Sikkim, where his outfitter is a descendant of royalty and his Highland accomplices have strict rules about the choice of alcoholic beverage.*

By Dick Isherwood

*'Whichever way you want to go, he will lead you up it.'*



I have been interested in Himalayan rhododendrons for a long time. I worked long ago in East Nepal, which has a much greater variety of them than areas of the Himalaya further west, but I knew that the real place to see them was Sikkim. Hence when Geoff Cohen floated the idea of a climbing trip there I signed on right away.

One of the problems with climbing in Sikkim is that permission for foreigners to go to the really exciting mountains is almost impossible to obtain. Unless you have some very good connections in Delhi you are practically limited to a little list of 'Alpine Peaks', only five in number and all climbed already. This didn't bother me too much, as I didn't really expect to get to the top of anything, but I did want to see the rhododendrons, and in May we were going at the right time.

Geoff put the team together; I hadn't met any of the other four though I had corresponded with Steve Kennedy about the hip problems we both had experienced. Steve, Bob Hamilton and Dave Ritchie are all Highland Scots, being respectively an Advocate (Scottish for lawyer), a prawn fisherman, and a fix-it-all welder/plumber/mechanic.

The other member of the team was Paul Swienton, an American engineer and one of Geoff's climbing mates from his time in the Washington DC area. I was slightly surprised to find that I was the only totally retired person in the group, though I was the oldest by a few years.

These days in the Himalaya you don't just go on the trains and buses as far as they go, then hire a bunch of unknown locals at the trailhead. You use an outfitter who quotes you an all-inclusive price, from meeting you at the airport to putting you back on the plane at the end. It is all very much simpler than it used to be, though sometimes more expensive. Geoff found us a good outfitter through Roger Payne, who has made Sikkim a bit of a speciality in recent years, and who was extremely helpful.

Barap Namgyal, who runs Sikkim Holidays, is I believe a distant relative of the former Sikkim royal family,

who hailed from Tibet long ago. The last Chogyal, or king, married a New York socialite, who doesn't seem to have been terribly popular with his subjects. The royals were booted out unceremoniously in 1975, when Sikkim ceased to be a semi-independent entity and became a state of India.

Barap, however, clearly knew his way around Gangtok, and permits were not a problem. We went for Jopuno (5,936m) which seemed to have had one or two previous ascents, but with plenty of scope left for new routes. It also seemed that you could do a few other things on the sly on neighbouring peaks.

Planning was quite simple as far as climbing gear went – the Scots had lots of it and Paul had as much as them all put together. Nobody wanted my 30 year-old rope or old ice screws. Food planning was more interesting however. Barap told us everything was available in Sikkim but that we might bring some 'highly protein chocolates' for which we searched the western world in vain. I did bring a load of good strong tea bags as I think Darjeeling tea is pretty feeble stuff. Steve felt the same way, so we were well supplied on that front.

We all met in Bagdogra, which is the airport for both Sikkim and Darjeeling. My plane from Delhi was late and I was a bit exhausted after coming straight through from Seattle, but Barap and his right hand man, Sanjeev, revived me with a couple of beers and we were on our way, across the Tista plain and then up, down and up again, mostly in the dark, to Gangtok. I was not looking forward to this journey but was impressed by the quality of the roads, at least compared to Nepal, or to Western China. We had filled out endless forms and sent passport copies and photos in advance, but when we reached the Sikkim frontier, or whatever they call it where you leave West Bengal, we had to do it all again anyway. Fortunately there was cold beer there too.

I had been struck by a repeated phrase in emails from Steve – 'No blends !' I hadn't been sure what this was about, but I soon caught up. These Scots were serious about whisky. They had made a fair attempt

Left:

*The snow and ice ridge below the upper rock section on Jopuno.*

Photographer:  
Paul Swienton



Above:  
*The West Face of  
Jopuno, showing the  
route attempted. The  
peak on the left is  
Tinchekang, another  
Alpine Peak*

Photographer:  
*Dick Isherwood*

to clean out the Glasgow Airport duty free shop. One whopping bottle of very good malt had already gone in a long night in Calcutta – ‘waiting for Paul’ – but there was a lot left. Personally I am less particular, and tend to judge my whisky on volume per unit of currency, so I was looking forward to sampling the local Scotch of Sikkim, which has extremely low duty and tax rates on most things.

After various temple tours and shopping excursions we got on the road to the real hills. The geography of Sikkim is not simple – a series of rivers come down from the Himalaya, sometimes north to south but quite often sideways, following geological weaknesses,

just like the rivers of Nepal next door. We were going west, to the ancient capital of Sikkim at Yoksum, and this involved crossing two major river gorges. With stops for a very good lunch in an unprepossessing roadside hut, and a few more temple tours, this took the whole day. The roads really were in very good shape compared to Nepal.

We found ourselves in a very attractive honeymoon-type hotel, with beautiful gardens, which seemed surprisingly luxurious until the electricity went off, the hot water ran cold, and the plumbing turned out to be leaky. Still, you can't have everything, and the beer was cold enough.

We still had to pay Barap and he wasn't even there. We had all sent him half payment in advance, by normal bank transfers, but he seemed to want the rest in hard currency on the spot, so we were carrying rather a lot of dollars and euros – more than I generally like to have in my pockets in new places.

We tried to give it all to him in Gangtok and he kept putting us off. Finally he showed up, just before we were due to set off with the yak train and rather reluctantly agreed to take payment. This was done over the open-air breakfast table in the garden, with a variety of strangers watching. Barap, being of royal lineage, found counting money to be a bit beneath him so he tossed the whole great wad to Sanjeev who did the necessities. Barap then stuck the whole lot in his back pocket and wandered off. This is not how I deal with large amounts of cash, but then he is a relative of royalty.

We got on the trail, with 10 porters, 10 horses and 10 yaks. There was no need to carry much ourselves. It was a rather wet trail, but it was good and wide. Steve was suffering from intestinal distress – either too much malt or not enough Sikkim blended. But we all made it to a decrepit forest lodge at 9,000 feet or so, where you had to position your sleeping bag out of the drips, and take care which floorboards you stepped on.

The next day we got up into the serious rhododendrons, and they were very fine. This, as much as anything, was what I had come for. Red, yellow, orange, white, in all sizes, with lots of other flowers under them too and with a great variety of birds – if you can spot them. We found the big pale green rosettes of the blue poppies, but you need to come in the monsoon, and brave the leeches to see them flowering.

On day two we got to 12,000 feet in a meadow from which there were said to be mountain views. It was, of course, socked in with cloud by the time we arrived, but we had a good camp. Barap had provided a very grand base camp tent, or really two tents within one outer skin. It was enormous and came from Norway. Putting it up was quite an operation –



Left:  
*Geoff Cohen  
climbing on Lama  
Lamani.*

Photographer:  
*Paul Swinton*

with the combined expertise of an advanced degree in engineering, much knowledge of statistics, a qualification from the Scottish Bar and 35 years of prawn fishing experience it still took most of the afternoon. I kept out of it and just took photos.

In the morning it was clear, so we were roused in the dark to climb a thousand feet or so to a viewpoint. At this point I realised how many other trekkers there were around here: friendly, and mostly young folks from Europe, the US and not least India. There were at least 40 of us up there. I'm not sure where they had all been hiding. The sunrise on Kangchenjunga was terrific and we could see, closer to hand, the peaks we had come for.

Jopuno (5,936m) was our stated objective. It had no obvious easy way up, and an interesting history. The first recorded ascent was by William Woodman Graham, a member of the Alpine Club, in September 1883. Graham has the great distinction, in my mind at least, of having been the first Westerner to go climbing in the Himalaya for fun. Everyone prior to him was there for diplomatic, military, religious or commercial reasons.

He was a man of some means, and took two Swiss guides with him on a year-long trip which included the Nanda Devi area as well as Sikkim. One of them was the redoubtable Ulrich Kauffmann, thought to be the fastest step cutter in the Alps at the time – a sort of 19th century Tom Patey.





Above:  
*Kabru (left) and  
 Kangchenjunga  
 (far right) from below  
 Lama Lamani*

Photographer:  
*Dick Isherwood*

Graham climbed Jopuno by its West Face, which was the side we were looking. His account doesn't seem to fit perfectly with the terrain we saw, and it is just possible that he actually climbed one of the other summits close by, but I personally am happy to give him the benefit of the doubt, since he was doing it for pleasure, not money or personal gain. Herr Kauffmann excelled himself and Graham described the climb as 'incomparably the hardest ascent we had in the Himalaya, owing to the great steepness of the glacier work.'

Graham became a controversial figure back at home, as he also claimed an ascent of the south summit of Kabru, at around 7,200m, which would have been an altitude record at the time. He was disbelieved by various pundits but supported by Tom Longstaff, who knew more about the Himalaya than most people at that time. He later lost his fortune and emigrated to the USA where he became a cowboy. As I now live in the Western US I keep meaning to track him down – he was, to say the least, a colourful individual.

Many other climbers visited Sikkim after this. Douglas Freshfield made a celebrated circuit of Kangchenjunga in 1899, which has seldom if ever been repeated. Many great names made ascents, or attempts, particularly in the 1930s and climbing especially on the eastern flanks of Kangchenjunga. After the independence of India in 1947, however, access for foreigners became very difficult.

Sikkim then retreated into the mists, as Roger Payne has put it, for rather a long time. Political upheaval and tensions between India and China kept it off-limits to foreign climbers for many years.

There was another reported ascent of Jopuno in 2002 by a pair of Sikkimese climbers, up its rather steep, long and gendarme studded South Ridge. There is some doubt about this, not least because one of them was a relative of Barap, who says they didn't get to the top. A confirmed ascent was made in 2008 by an American party, up the West Ridge at about an Alpine Difficile standard.

We were hoping to do something new and we realised

that the east side of the mountain, above the Talung Chu valley, had never been attempted. We thought we were really on to something here, but as tends to happen, when you think you have found your own little untouched corner of the Himalaya, we discovered that Bill Tilman had been there 70 years ago. His account of the Talung Chu was enough to put anyone off, and he had merely gone down it, after a failed attempt to cross the Zemu Gap.

*'The third day gave us a ten hour bush crawl along the right bank, with midges, tree ticks and leeches doing their best to enliven the proceedings. The tree ticks were in the minority but by far the most troublesome. They were strategists. When they dropped, one by one, instead of attaching themselves at once to the first handy bit of skin, they invariably sought out the soft underbelly before burying their heads deep in the flesh.'*

After reading this we decided to skip the Talung Chu and take the easy approach on the trekking route. Sanjeev, a witty and very engaging fellow who hailed from Assam via Darjeeling, was looking after us, together with a very good cook, several young lads, and an interesting and clearly strong Sherpa character called Karma. It was said that Karma had climbed Jopuno before, but conversations with him about it were far from clear. The quote at the head of this article is what Sanjeev had to say about him. Geoff had tried hard to tell Barap and Sanjeev that we wanted to do our own climbing and routefinding, so Karma was for a while relegated to digging the toilet holes with his high tech ice tool.

Base camp was established at about 4,000m in another large meadow known as Thansing. Several very decrepit huts didn't promise much but lo and behold, in one of them was a government servant – the Chowkidar, or caretaker. He proved to be a very amiable fellow from the Limbu tribe, which I knew well from my time in East Nepal. The Limbus are known, among other things, for their hospitality and their large-scale consumption of hot millet beer, drunk

through a bamboo tube and known as Tumba. Our host seemed to have an endless supply of this, at a very modest price.

The meadow was quite large, though not exactly flat, and a group of New Zealand trekkers organised a cricket match – Sikkim vs. the Rest of the World. Here Sanjeev showed the value of his Darjeeling education with some very stylish bowling. Sikkim won, after several improvised bats were broken.

After a bit of pottering, justified as acclimatisation, we set off up the hill. This was a rather steep 900m or so, initially on a grazing trail but later just up very steep grass. Sanjeev had not been up here before, but Karma had, so we looked to him to find the way in the cloud, fog and increasing snow. For a while we thought he was just as lost as us, but eventually he found the way to a little recess with flat ground and a bit of water drainage through it. 'A wee glen' as one of the Scots called it.

It had snowed quite a lot and we scraped out tent sites – then next day it thawed rather rapidly and there was suddenly a river in the glen. After re-pitching the tents we set off to see what lay above. We stumbled up a lot of glaciated rocks in the dark and met dawn at the snow line on a nice clear morning. The West Face of Jopuno was right above us and the views were great. At about 5,200m I decided that age was taking a sufficient toll and sat in the sunshine watching the others poking around the face of Lama Lamani (5,650m), just to the south, which Geoff had chosen as a good initial climb.

A route was found, probably new, and four set off up it the next morning. I had opted out and Dave was struggling with the altitude. I again sat in the sun and took photos. Steve and Bob soloed happily up the face while Geoff and Paul climbed in pitches. They reached the North Summit of the mountain in six hours or so, over steepish mixed ground followed by a fine snow arête, and descended with a couple of long abseils to get back just before dark. The route was maybe AD or D by traditional Alpine standards. Dave recovered enough to climb a wee peak with Bob,

at the very head of the glacier and on the watershed between Jopuno and Lama Lamani, from which they had some fine views.

After a bit of a rest the A team set out for Jopuno. Again I pleaded age and opted out – I would have slowed them down, at the very least – and Dave was again having altitude problems, so they were two ropes of two. Dave and I descended to Tansing, passing en route a torpid figure in the bushes who turned out to be Karma, distinctly drunk. Maybe we should have made him lead us up it, to keep him out of trouble – after all we were paying for him.

The others considered the unclimbed steep ridges on the West Face of Jopuno – pretty good objectives – but eventually settled for a repeat of the American route on the West Ridge. Geoff's account follows:

'At 2.45am on May 18th the four of us left camp to climb the West ridge. Bob was still not well, but decided to accompany us. Above the point reached the previous morning was a short icy section where a belay on ice screws was taken. We then climbed unroped up snow for several hours to a height of perhaps 5,450m. Here the ridge became quite icy and it was necessary to rope up again and belay on screws. After two quite time-consuming pitches, with a traverse right under the next rocks, we got established on the firm brown rock mentioned by the previous American party that first climbed this ridge in 2008. The rocks had a fair bit of snow on them and though broken up gave climbing of about Scottish grade III standard. Steve and Bob reached the foot of the looser black rock that forms the summit of the mountain at about 11am, with Geoff and Paul a pitch behind. The black rock section is easier angled than the brown section that we had climbed, but it is longer (maybe 300m) and likely to take quite a lot of time. The party was climbing quite slowly and it appeared unlikely that we could reach the summit and descend safely before evening. So it was decided to turn around. A succession of 60m abseils, including two from abalakov threads, got us down the rocks and the icy section.' It made for a 15-hour day. As their average age was

about 25 years older than the American team, this was a pretty good effort. At least I thought so as a spectator.

We took various walks before going home. One took us to the high altitude lake of Lam Pokhari (Long Pond) above which was a very fine Crag X, which has already featured in the CC Newsletter. It is like a large scale Esk Butress and is untouched by human hand or rock boot. It does, however, start around 4,500m so your breathing would need to be OK.

Our other outing was north toward the Goecha La, sometimes spelt Gotcha La, below one of the east ridges of Kangchenjunga. We had some great early morning views before the cloud came in, but the highlight of the day was an encounter with a very large male yak, who took offense at the two stray dogs following us, which had been pestering him no end, and charged us while we were sitting happily eating our sandwiches. Gotcha indeed. We abandoned lunch and ran in all directions, thus removing his objective. I could sympathise with him.

The rest of the trip was basically tourism, including a surfeit of interesting Buddhist temples, and ending in Darjeeling, where the Scottish contingent were delighted to find that the steam engines on the little railway were still the originals, made in Glasgow around 1910.

I would recommend Sikkim to anyone wanting an enjoyable and culturally interesting Himalayan trip, provided you are not hung up about virgin summits. It is in many ways like Nepal was 30 years ago. People are very friendly and costs are reasonable.

*The following references give more background:*

*Sublime Sikkim.* Roger Payne. AJ 2009, p 147

*Kabru, 1883 – a reassessment.* Willy Blaser and Glyn Hughes. AJ 2009, p 219

*Jopuno, West Ridge.* Jason Halladay. AAJ 2009 p 213

*When Men and Mountains Meet,* Bill Tilman. p 312 of the Seven Mountain Travel Books (Diadem 1983)

*Barap Namgyal can be found at barap14@hotmail.com*



Right:  
*Joe Brown on  
Creagh Dhu Wall,  
Craig y Castell.*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*



# PEOPLE

*Climbing with Brasher. By George Band*

*Mike O'Hara and The Dragon of Carnmore. By Dave Atkinson*

*Climbing With Strangers. By Brian Wilkinson*

*Climbing Influences and Characters. By James McHaffie*

*Joe Brown at Eighty. By John Cleare*



# CLIMBING WITH BRASHER

*This article was originally written to celebrate the centenary of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club (CUMC), but their Journal Editor disappeared after graduating and the promised volume never appeared. As Chris Brasher was also a worthy member of The Climbers' Club, Tim Oliver agreed to give the article a belated airing. Little did we know, however, that the author himself would not live to see his affectionate tribute to another remarkable man published in the Journal.*

By George Band

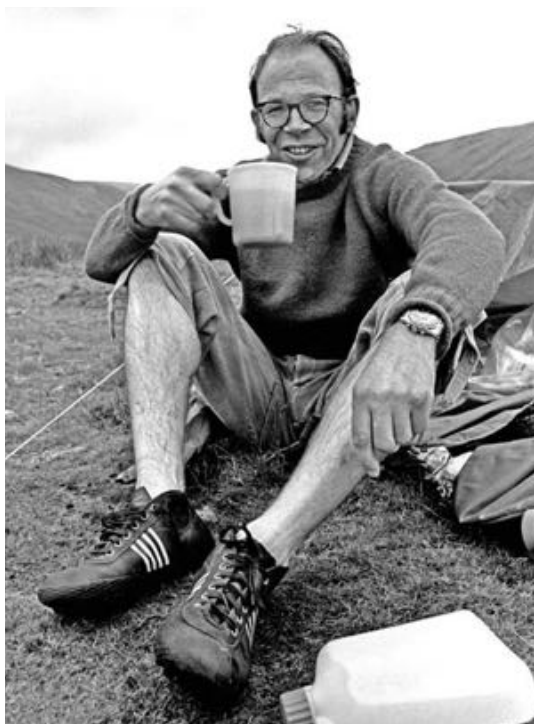
**I**n the 1940s, most of the undergraduates going up to university had done very little if any climbing with ropes. I was lucky, because during my National Service in the Royal Corps of Signals at Catterick, a predecessor at the Officer Cadet Training Unit, Tony Moulam, who later became President of The Climbers' Club, 1969-72, had started a small climbing club.

After drill parade on Saturday, we were allowed to borrow a three-ton truck with two drivers, pile into the back, and be driven to Langdale where we dosed down in Wall End Barn. We were virtually self-taught beginners, but a sergeant from one of the Training Regiments could actually lead 'V. Diffs' so we worshipped him and tied on to his heavy hemp rope. Actually, I found I was able to lead almost immediately, so in the course of a few months we worked gradually up to 'Severes' on Gimmer and felt very bold. On our demobilisation leave, Norman Haycock and I decided to hitchhike to Skye and there, at the end of the holiday, we plucked up courage to try leading through on the Crack of Doom, at the time the only Very Severe in the Cuillin Guidebook. It was our first VS! Encouraged by this success, we stopped off in Langdale on our way back south and had the temerity to go round to the 'gentleman's side' of Gimmer, as it was called in those days, and launch ourselves at The Crack. To our immense excitement and pride we succeeded! What a contrast to today, when the beginner generally makes his first moves on an indoor climbing wall under close supervision and then maybe graduates to E1 on his first contact with real rock.

So when I went up to Cambridge in 1949, the first Club I joined was naturally the CUMC.

The President then was Chris Brasher, possibly elected for his proven leadership as President of the Hare and Hounds, rather than for his actual prowess as a climber.

But we had some outstanding and unforgettable lectures – Bill Murray on the Scottish Himalayan Expedition; Tom Longstaff setting the altitude record



on Trisul and being avalanched on Gurla Mandhata; Bernard Pierre being led by Gaston Rebuffat up the NE Face of the Badile and the Ratti-Vitali on the West Face of the Noire de Peuterey.

Chris announced that in the summer he would be organising a CUMC Alpine Meet in the Dauphiné, and all we had to do to join was to give him a cheque for £34. Where would I find that sort of money, relying as I did on a none-too-generous government grant? Fortunately, I discovered that the aluminium plant in Fort William took on students to tend the red-hot furnaces when their regular manual workers took their summer holidays. So I signed on for six weeks at the then princely sum of £11 per week. As I knew which way to tighten up a nut, I was soon promoted to tearing down old furnaces and constructing new ones. I achieved a lifetime ambition by learning how to operate a pneumatic drill, and by the end I was able to throw away my working clothes, caked with powdered

Far Left:  
*The pipe and the OBOE: Brasher contemplating his next challenge which he would inevitably write on the back of an envelope.*

Left:  
*Marathon man: at the bivvy on the Karrimor International Mountain Marathon.*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*





cryolite and carbon dust, and send Brasher my cheque. There were ten or twelve of us on the meet. Chris hired a young guide, Guy Pene, known as Toti, who led the way and we followed on three or four separate ropes. On the first climb, the Tour Carrée, my rope was only two thirds up when Toti reached the summit and announced that we should all now descend by the way we had come. That night, one of the group was suffering somewhat from the altitude and alarmed us all by thrashing about on his bunk and initiating violent Cheyne-Stokes breathing. In between gasps he explained that his father was a professor of physiology and had told him that this was what he should do. The highlight was the Arête de Sialouze, a delightful and in places exposed ridge traverse on satisfyingly rough granite. Chris wrote it up in *Cambridge Mountaineering 1951*, 'A Red Letter Day': 'From the summit, Toti dropped a boulder from his outstretched hand. "Ecoutez." One, two, three, four—ten—twenty—thirty, and still silence. So that was exposure....' Time moved on. In 1954 Chris helped Roger Bannister run the first four-minute mile and in 1956 achieved fame on his own by winning an Olympic Gold for the steeplechase in Melbourne. I had been to Everest and Kangchenjunga. Now it was 1957, the Centenary Year of the Alpine Club. With unexpected generosity, the Swiss hoteliers were offering us a free raclette party in Zermatt. There was to be a special AC Dinner the previous evening. Chris and I determined to go. We drove across France in his green TR-3. I remember balancing a cardboard tray of fresh eggs across my knees in the cramped passenger seat. As usual we had been late starting. 'Christ, George, I had to go back for my dispatch case!' Chris was Sports Editor for *The Observer* and had promised to file an article about the Centenary while in the Alps. I had a theory that he only won his races because he was always trying to catch up – leaving others to tie up the loose ends.

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Left: *The prestigious rope of eight: on the final ice pitch of the Younggrat, Breithorn, AC Meet 1957*  
 Photographer: George Band



Left:  
*On the fells: Brasher  
 at his happiest moving  
 quickly over hilly  
 ground, shouting and  
 following a compass.*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*

Infuriating but endearing. We arrived in Chamonix to the father and mother of storms, so my diary relates. Frustrated, we linked up with Peter Nelson and Mike Harris in his Morris 1000 and drove east to St Moritz as if in a car rally with the storm clouds racing behind us.

It was finer in the Bregaglia, and we plumped for the North Ridge of the Badile. Mike and Peter shot ahead up the ridge. Chris and I could not move safely together so quickly. Even so, we soon passed an Italian with his attractive girlfriend whom we had met in the hut. Around 2pm we were close to the summit when the clouds closed in and it began snowing heavily. There were plenty of what Mike called 'corona discharges', so we avoided the final crest and summit capped by a curious aluminium 'dunce's cap'.

We beat it as fast as we could down the South Ridge, following traces in the snow of two Germans ahead of us. 'A dicey descent into the unknown. It is bloody miserable and I feel wet through', says my diary. Both Chris and I had trouble with our spectacles misting up, but Mike and Peter kindly waited for us. In gathering darkness we came to some glacially polished slabs. Chris – rather reluctant to come on the rope

earlier in the descent – no longer hesitated. 'Have you got me, George? I'm going to pendule.'

One of the hut staff saw our torches and came to meet us, so we avoided an uncomfortable bivouac but the Italians did not. We still had to cross back over the Passo di Bondo next day, so clearly we had missed the Alpine Club Dinner. Tom Peacock was 'white with anger' or so Anthony Rawlinson told us later over the phone. We didn't get to the raclette party either! A pity, but we were lucky to get off the Badile safely. The same storm accounted for five climbers on the South Face of the Marmolada, and the dramatic rescue of the Italian climber Corti on the North Face of the Eiger. Chris had plenty of material for his article.

We tried to make amends by following other AC members up to the Betemps Hut below Monte Rosa where the famous guide Alexander Graven was the custodian.

The plan was to try the North Face of the Breithorn by the classic 1906 Younggrat. Chris and I managed to get off first, as we had to drive back to London overnight for Chris to get to a meeting at The Observer office next morning.

Our climbing party was most prestigious: John Hunt



with Albert Egger, Fritz Luchsinger, another Swiss, John Tyson, John Hobhouse, Chris and myself. I committed an early faux pas by asking the leader of a Swiss pair, who had started earlier from the Gandegg hut, whether he knew the route and would he like me to take over to give him a rest from step cutting? He turned out to be a Zermatt guide and retaliated by cutting faster and most excellent steps.

I had expected the middle part of the ridge to be straightforward, but it proved quite challenging on mixed ground in crampons with scarce belays. We knew the real crux was where the ridge merged into the face shortly below the transverse summit ridge, where there was normally a sheer face of hard ice. This was where a caravan of four young Frenchmen fell while attempting only the second ascent in 1928: 'elle fut précipitée sur le glacier ou l'on ne releva que des cadavres', warned the Valais Guidebook.

To avoid the same fate (before the development of ice screws, of which I brought back an early example from the Russian Caucasus in 1958) we decided to link up into one large rope of eight which I had the privilege of leading. At 2pm Chris and I breasted the cornice and, after hurried farewells, began the long slog down. In Zermatt we drank a litre of milk between us, caught the train to Visp, retrieved the TR3, and took turns at the wheel across France, Chris chewing benzedrine tablets to keep himself awake. We breakfasted in Champagne country and reached his office only a few hours late! We were together again in the Russian Caucasus in 1958, a fantastic opportunity for a Climbers' Club group, initiated by one of our number, Dave Thomas, writing a personal letter to Bulganin! It took five years to get permission. We were the first group of foreign climbers to be admitted after World War II. Chris agreed to send back articles to the Daily Express to help finance the trip.

Bad weather foiled an attempt on Ushba, so we moved to the Bezingi area and were lucky to experience great climbs on Jangi-tau, Shkhara and Dykh-tau. By chance, Chris and I did not climb together; he was with John Hunt and Alan Blackshaw on



Jangi-tau. Snow conditions had deteriorated, and not very far from the summit on a dicey snow slope John disappeared into a concealed crevasse. He was successfully retrieved from the chasm, emerging like a snow-plastered Father Christmas. I don't know what Chris wrote, but the Express editors, tired of reporting depressing world news, decided to give it front page banner headlines: 'HOW I ESCAPED DEATH Sir John Hunt's own story...'

I still treasure the yellowed page of newsprint dated 30 July 1958. A more sober account appears in the expedition book 'The Red Snows' co-authored by Sir John Hunt and Christopher Brasher.

After these epic ascents, which remain cherished memories, I don't think Chris did much more roped climbing. He turned to orienteering and he and John Disley started the London Marathon, a lifetime achievement for any man. We kept in touch at mountaineering dinners and meetings, where he would give an account of his latest epic: 'Christ, George, it was a hell of an experience...!' Wrinkles gradually developed in his round cherubic bespectacled face, usually set off with a colourful neckerchief. He enrolled me as a member of OBOE, his personal creation following Tilman's famous dictum: 'In my experience all the worthwhile expeditions can be organised On the Back Of an Envelope!' Any member could organise an informal trip and invite other Oboeists: off-piste skiing; a cross-country walk; a boat trip to St Kilda. Unfortunately, by the time his invitation circular arrived, the first trip or two had often happened so I never actually took part in one during his lifetime. Meanwhile, I had become involved with 'Far Frontiers' a small travel company specialising in tailored tours and treks. My ambition in May 2002 was to repeat Douglas Freshfield's celebrated circuit of Kangchenjunga in 1899. Chris was keen to join the party. We secured permission from the Indians to enter northwest Sikkim, unvisited by Europeans since the 1930s, but were unable to surmount the political difficulties of crossing the frontiers between Sikkim and Nepal. It meant a return trip by the same route

instead of the circuit, so Chris withdrew. It was unlike him.

With hindsight, I wondered whether he was beginning to feel the first twinges of the cancer that led to his death in February 2003, aged 74. His wife Shirley said she did not want a Memorial Service. 'That is just as well', wrote one journalist, 'because there is not a stadium, let alone church, in the land that could have accommodated everyone who would have wished to attend.' Instead, a group of his Oboe friends, led by John Disley, took matters quietly in hand and on 7 June 2004 at Black Sail Youth Hostel, high up in the mountains of the Lake District, a plaque of Honister green slate was unveiled, engraved in his memory:

Chris Brasher CBE  
1928-2003

Olympic athlete, mountaineer, journalist,  
businessman and philanthropist

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
or what's a heaven for?"

Robert Browning

A lifetime of love and support for outdoor sport  
and for the world's wild places.

A benefactor to the YHA and outdoor activity  
in the Lakes.

Spent his last nights hostelling, with friends, at  
Black Sail on 29 June 2002 –

'a disgraceful episode at which we devoured 14  
different curries and consumed  
nine bottles of good Australian wine!'

This plaque erected by his friends in OBOE –  
'On the Back Of an Envelope'

– the way Chris believed any worthwhile  
expedition can be planned.

Left: Poles apart:  
Brasher takes a  
breather with the  
TransScotland ski  
team  
Photographer:  
John Cleare



# MIKE O'HARA AND THE DRAGON OF CARNMORE

*With all the tenacity of his chosen subject, Dave Atkinson's carefully researched portrait of Mike O'Hara, one of the most prolific new routers in North West Scotland, takes him from lunar exploration to a face-to-face interview with the man himself at his home. This essay is a dogged and inspired piece of detective work and a fitting tribute to a remarkable man.*

By Dave Atkinson

The distant location of Carnmore in North West Scotland, and a twelve-mile walk-in combine to deter all but the dedicated. There is room (if not permission) for camping in the area around Carnmore Lodge, and a small open barn. The site is dominated by Ben a' Chaisgein Mor, a hill that would merit little attention but for the towering buttresses of the 900 foot high Carnmore Crag, the centrepiece of an area described by Mike O'Hara as the 'most wonderful place in Britain'. See footnote 1. Over a few years in the 1950s, in an area where there had been virtually no recorded climbing at all, quality climbs at every grade from the easiest to the highest standards of the day appeared. In the early years of the decade, the crags of Ben Lair were explored by Glasgow University Mountaineering Club teams. But it was the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club who developed the great gneiss crags at the head of Fionn Loch in the late 1950s, with the name M. J. O'Hara particularly prominent in the first ascents. It was, perhaps, a last 'hurrah' for the public school/Oxbridge elite which had been pre-eminent in the development of mountaineering in Britain before the Second World War: the classless revolution was well under way elsewhere.

It is difficult to imagine what it must have been like to discover such vast untapped potential at a time when most other mountain crags in Britain were already covered with numerous lines, and I have long thought

how magical it must have been to have all that unclimbed rock to go at and in a wondrously beautiful place – and of course to be young!

I wondered whatever became of M. J. O'Hara? Even my friend and former Climbers' Club President, Derek Walker, who seems to be a personal friend of most of the top names in climbing was unable to help, though he did lend me a copy of the 1958 Climbers' Club Journal which had an account of the first ascent of Dragon, one of Mike's climbs and so called because it was fierce and the final section was solved by George (Fraser)!

A bit of Googling combining Mike's name with Carnmore and various route names did not get much more than I already knew – just walk on parts in the drama of other lives. But I did know that Mike went to Cambridge University and using that in my searches uncovered an eminent geologist who was a Cambridge graduate. The geology link proved to be fruitful and eventually I came across a 2007 prize acceptance speech given by a Mike O'Hara who also referred to being a member of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club – that was when I knew I had found my man.

An academic paper dated 2004 turned up: it was called 'New Moon From An Old Hand', and I discovered that Mike was a Principal Investigator in Experimental Petrology for all six Apollo missions which returned samples from the moon's surface

Left:  
*Peter Steele (left),  
Marjorie Langmuir,  
George Fraser  
and Mike O'Hara  
(behind).*

Photographer:  
*Mike O'Hara  
collection*



Right:  
*Dragon, Pitch 3,  
Drooping Flake to  
The Perch, Climber  
Mike Goad.*

Photographer:  
*Mike O'Hara*

between 1969 and 1974. Now I know that Petrology is a branch of geology studying rocks and the conditions in which rocks form. Evidently the moon rocks were formed in situ and not projected from earthly volcanoes!

A university email address was given – Mike was a Professor but I thought maybe he was retired and the email address dormant. I tried it without stating the nature of my interest and got a reply saying that the email address works well but Mike less so – he has Parkinson's disease. I told Mike why I wanted to contact him, and there followed three emails each with attachments about his climbs – riches beyond expectation!

It turned out that he lives not far from Chepstow, and as we were trekking there on family business the next weekend I thought 'carpe diem' and secured an invite to visit. That was how I came to shake the hand that in a youthful idyll slew the Dragon of Carnmore.

Mike lives with his wife Sue – herself a fine walker. He told me that at Carnmore once, Sue, on discovering she had left her toothbrush in the car (parked at Kernsary), walked there and back in a day, a 16 mile round trip for a toothbrush! Now aged 78, Mike's intellect and recollection remain sharp, and his interest in my quest was generous.

He speaks in the cultured tones of upper middle England, betraying neither the Irish ancestry of his name nor the fact that he was born in Australia. 'My father' said Mike 'was a lot of everything – illegitimate son of East End Irish via orphanage into trenches early in 1914-18 war, gold miner, crossword compiler, outback share salesman in Australia, Cherry Blossom boot polish travelling rep in mid 30s, labourer on cement mixer gang at outbreak of war, construction manager for building of Pwllheli, Ayr, Filey camps for Navy/Billy Butlin and an airfield, entrepreneur converting old buildings to caravan camp in Pwllheli, general manager of construction and operation of Festival Gardens 1948-53, director of Forte's mid-50s....he walked with me Ullapool-Sheneval-Carnmore-Poolewe in summer 1955 and was still

talking about it 25 years later'.

His mother, Mike says, thought that the boy would more readily better himself in Britain than in Australia, and at just six months he moved to England, but home from 1941 was Pwllheli, Wales. Each of the educational establishments that Mike attended turned out to be a significant stepping-stone on the road to Carnmore. He attended Dulwich College in south London, but during the Second World War the College evacuated to a large hotel in Betws-y-Coed. It was at this time that he became interested in mountains and the climbing of them (in common, he says, with others at the evacuated school).

Mike then won a scholarship in the Sciences to go to Cranleigh School in Surrey. At Cranleigh, he won a further scholarship in Divinity, but more significant was receiving J.H.B.Bell's A Progress in Mountaineering (1950) as a school prize, and being inspired to make the first of many visits to Carnmore through its comment '... the head of the Fionn Loch would be a veritable paradise for the enthusiastic rock-climber, for I do not know any other corner in the Scottish Highlands with so much opportunity for exploration in grand and imposing surroundings. It was the grandeur and beauty of the scene which held me spellbound.' *See footnote 2.*

Admitted to Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Mike studied geology and joined the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club (CUMC). His College roommate was Eric Langmuir, who through his later work for the Mountain Leadership Training Board and others was to contribute so much to making mountaineering a safe and accessible pastime, and who was a life-long friend (until Eric's death in 2005). Mike's obituary of Eric for the Royal Society of Edinburgh is both appreciative and moving, a testament of friendship indeed. *See footnote 3.*

The CUMC exploration adventure in Carnmore began with Wrangham and Clegg's Diagonal (Severe) on Carnmore Crag in 1952. Chris Bonington was there with an R.A.F. party in 1954 for Poacher's Route

(V. Diff). Mike did not let me get away with observing that these were mere skirmishes compared to what was to come: 'I bet it didn't seem like that to them at the time' he said. Mike remembers a New Year 1955 walk from Kinlochewe by Loch Fada to Poolewe with Peter Evans, Jo Scarr and Bob Downes, when they overnighted at the barn beneath Carnmore Crag. 'That's the line!' Bob said, staring up at that vaulting prow of rock that was to become Fionn Buttress – but Mike and Bob never had the chance to try it together. A return the following Easter marked the start of a prolific campaign of discovery that saw Mike on 39 recorded first ascents over the next three years. He began with a modest haul of seven in 1955, mainly focusing on Maiden Buttress, 300 feet of impeccable gneiss and with routes from V. Diff to VS. Bob Kendell enthused: 'no patches of moss or slime, or dirty cracks full of mud and bramble; none of that crawling through undergrowth and mantleshelfing onto wet grass ledges with your finger clawing anxiously for holds among the roots – nothing but clean, warm, grey rock'. See footnote 4.

In 1956, there were six more climbs, notably the first route on Fionn Buttress (with George Fraser), now unoriginally known as Original Route (VS). Kendell, and Langmuir's sister Marjorie featured on other first ascents, including, on Maiden Buttress, the three star Ecstasy (Severe) with Bob and the intriguingly named Dishonour (V.Diff) with Marjorie. In all there were 11 first ascents with Marjorie, and whether she and Mike were ever attached by more than a rope we can but wonder. But there is romance enough in Mike's description of the pair of them standing outside the Carnmore Barn in their duvets, 'shivering slightly' watching the northern lights – 'wide curtains of fluid greenish light writhing, striking across the sky' in the 'bitter cold wonder of that night.' See footnote 5.

Then to Easter 1957, and Mike's fears that Easter 1956 might have been 'more memorable than anything yet to come,' were proved unfounded. In the Climber's Club Journal of 1958 ('Highland Dragon', written jointly with George Fraser), he records that



Easter 1957 was even better than the one before. On April 7th, the improved line of Fionn Buttress was climbed. *See footnote 6.*

I, and others, who have found this to be quite bold for VS, can only imagine the challenge facing Mike and Bill Blackwood, climbing in plimsolls, and without nuts and Friends. On the crux pitch, 'excellent pocket holds and friction sustained progress up to the left, then back to the right to a pocket handkerchief of a ledge and a marked steepening of the slab...a line of diminishing pockets for fingers and toes beckoned towards an overhung ledge and one hoped a resting place. A runner would have been comforting.....'. *See footnote 7.* Higher up, they joined the line of the Original Route, giving a 750 foot climb widely regarded as one of the finest in Scotland.

After a trip south to Glasgow, towards the end of April, Mike was back at Carnmore again, and on the final day (April 22nd) 'George Fraser and I had a date. Sitting there on the grass, and craning our necks to stare up at the wall we had dated, I could not help thinking that it might well be an appointment with fear...'. *See footnote 8.* The first pitch of what was to become Dragon had been climbed, and the last section investigated from above, with Bob Kendell the previous year. On the crux, a traverse under the great roof that caps the crag here: 'the leaf piton had to be inserted diagonally upward into the overhang just above my forehead – I could not afford to lose it, I could not afford a hand to steady it because I was barely holding my position with forearm friction on a slanting narrow shelf, and the job had to be undertaken left-handed, and above all I could not afford to fall off. It took a long, long time'.

In response to George Fraser's very understandable enquiry 'If I come off, is there enough rope to lower me to rock?' Mike 'put in a second piton a few feet further out under the overhang...then rigged a stance from several line slings under thighs and round back so that I could vacate the postage stamp holds and belay George from a few feet above and no more than ten feet to the side of the crux move.....didn't need

anything more than the memory for laxative in the next decades'.

Finally, finding a way past the great capping roof, George writes: 'below was 800 feet of space, exhilarating and no longer terrifying. With a heave I was over the top... we embraced and shrieked with joy...we lay prone on soft, flat turf and worshipped horizontally.' At Hard VS and 5a many people have been impressed and I noted that three UK Climbing Log contributors thought E1, 5b the appropriate grade. Mike's pioneering activity was not limited to Carnmore. He was involved in early exploration of the Etive Slabs and was with the team led by roommate Eric Langmuir on the first ascent of Spartan Slab (VS), in 1954. But on Hammer's notorious Scoop, a three-person ladder (Langmuir on top, Downes in the middle and O'Hara at the bottom) was 'the wrong technique.'

Mike was active on Ben Nevis, completing the first route (North Eastern Grooves) that in its subsequent straightened-out version became Minus One Direct, said to be one of the finest routes in Britain. On Carn Dearg Buttress, with Bob Downes, he did the second ascent of Joe Brown's Sassenach in 1956 ('desperate' Mike told me) and, but for worthy dedication to his academic work, could well have been on the first ascent of Centurion: in late August of that year Downes and Don Whillans travelled to O'Hara's lodgings in Cambridge to try to persuade him to take up an empty place on Whillans' motorcycle combination.

When we met, Mike reflected a little ruefully on his decision not to go with them: Centurion was climbed on that trip. In June 1957, Mike and Dragon-partner George Fraser recorded a first ascent in North Wales, a VS on Crib y Ddysgl. Mike also made several early British ascents in the Alps, including in 1956 a first British ascent of the North West Ridge of the Piz Gimelli in the Bregaglia. *See footnote 9.*

As well as the climbing, there were other adventures including, in 1953, with Ted Wrangham, Roger Chorley (the two drivers of Ted's Jaguar), Dave Fisher,



Geoff Sutton, and Eric, the first inside 24 hour Three Peaks outing of Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike, and Snowdon (my friend Mavis Burden was a member of first all-female team to do it, in 1961 – on motorbikes!). But it was the Carnmore adventure that caught my imagination, and there is no doubt that this was wondrous beyond the mere statistics. In Mike's words, both written and spoken, what comes over is not just the excitement of the climbs, but also the wonder of adventure and companionship in stunningly beautiful surroundings – and the joys of being young. Mike's article about Easter 1956 in the 1957 CUMC Journal is lyrical to the equal of Bill Murray:

'Months of drought had burned the moors into a riot of golden browns interlaced with purple, an infinite variety of shades, from which rose crag upon crag of green flecked warm grey rock, sound as the proverbial bell. And the lochs: secret beaches of the finest sand, blue waters, sunlight rippling across scalloped surfaces in a crisp morning breeze; not least of many memories, that first evening when the sun set across the Fionn Loch, a dull red sun that sank slowly towards its own reflection in the great sheet of still black water, leaving us chilled in the enveloping silence of the cirque of Carnmore'. See footnote 10.

I can but hope that Mike was rewarded by the chance to talk about events chronologically a long time ago but so intense in experience as to seem like only yesterday. He has been in full support of my telling what is, after all, his story, not mine. There was a little melancholy in the background of our conversation: most of the people who shared his youthful adventures are now dead – some, such as Bob Downes and George Fraser, dying in the mountains whilst still young, and others of natural causes but nevertheless taken before their rightful time.

From his obituary of Eric Langmuir, I was left in no doubt that for Mike the measure of a person is not just their accomplishments (in whatever field), but in the quality of their relationships (of friends, of family) and their contribution to the betterment of their community, be that climbing, academic or

otherwise. It was sobering to be reminded that the trials of later life do not discriminate according to our achievements or the roads we have taken. For Mike, life is significantly restricted by Parkinson's Disease, but he is well served by friends and family, and by the personal qualities of tenacity, optimism and invention which once yielded so many magnificent climbs in a most beautiful part of our land.

The 2007 Prize Acceptance speech which helped me find Mike was upon receipt of the Hess Medal marking 'outstanding achievements in research in the constitution and evolution of Earth and other planets'. It is awarded annually by the American Geophysical Union. In climbing we don't do lifetime achievement awards, but if we did I think Mike O'Hara would be due one around now, don't you? In the absence of that, we can but say that he is one of us, and wish him well.

Dave Atkinson would like to thank Mike O'Hara for his generous help in the writing and researching of this article, a version of which will also be published in the SMC Journal.

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# CLIMBING WITH STRANGERS

*On the sun-soaked island of Kalymnos Brian Wilkinson strikes up a relationship with a visiting American climber. In this insightful essay he explores the blossoming of a friendship and the evanescence of an intimate climbing partnership.*

By Brian Wilkinson

IT was 2006 and I was halfway through my last week climbing on the Greek island of Kalymnos. I was with 'The Boys' from Group X and we were downing a few Mythos beers in the Bar Scorpio before attending a guidebook presentation laid on by Aris Theodoropoulos which began in a room across the road. After a day on the crags my brain had already switched over to 'snooze mode'. Suddenly, an attractive brunette clutching a litre jar of beer steps up to our particular group of zombies and says 'Hi, my name is Nicole, I'm from Los Angeles, d'you mind if I join you?'

Now, I have to admit, I've climbed with an awful lot of people but it is only because I've been climbing what seems like an awful long time. Climbing partners come and go. Some become instant friends and some remain strangers no matter how many times you tie on the rope with them. I'm afraid this 'fellowship of rope' crap, the idea that just because you tie on to the same length of nylon as someone else it has an almost spiritual significance, has never floated my boat. And weirdly, just because you're good mates with someone doesn't mean you'll make a good climbing partnership or that you'll climb well together. Years ago when I teamed up with one of my old mates we spent so much time hysterically laughing, wise-cracking and taking the piss that we could barely uncoil the rope, let alone put a few moves together on the rock; as a team we were utterly hopeless. I learnt early on, that when it comes to climbing, a bit of detachment is no bad thing. In the late 60s, when I was a quiet young man getting into Dylan, I did what was the vogue in those days and schemed with a friend to travel the world. At

the last minute my mate pulled out and I was forced to decide whether to cancel or go alone. Fate, it seems, had called my bluff. Impulsively, and with virtually no money, I decided to go on my own. Sporting long hair, a battered suitcase and a metal-stringed guitar I boarded a ferry at Newcastle for Oslo with a pathetic £34 in Norwegian Krone in my pocket. A year later I was back home having travelled around Scandinavia, USA, South America and Japan, ending up being deported from Germany as a vagrant when I finally ran out of work, money and luck. I later realised that going alone was the best thing I did as it forced me to overcome my shyness and make friends and use my social skills to get by in some tricky but exciting situations. I've never forgotten that lesson.

Back on Kalymnos the idea of spending a couple of weeks with a large crowd of relative strangers (Group X) did not faze me. I'd been to the island before on my own and managed to find partners and to climb with a great bunch of odd-ball strangers from all corners of the globe. One of my favourites was an Austrian named Dietmar who, contrary to the Teutonic stereotype, turned out to be a very quiet-spoken and unassuming climbing partner. A mathematician by trade, he worked for a company who made one-armed bandits and other gambling machines. His wife worked at the other end of the entertainment industry for the Vienna Opera House. It was only after our second day's climbing together that he introduced me to his wife and told me he was actually on his honeymoon!

The Group X crowd were a really decent bunch of mostly young people operating across the entire grade

Left:

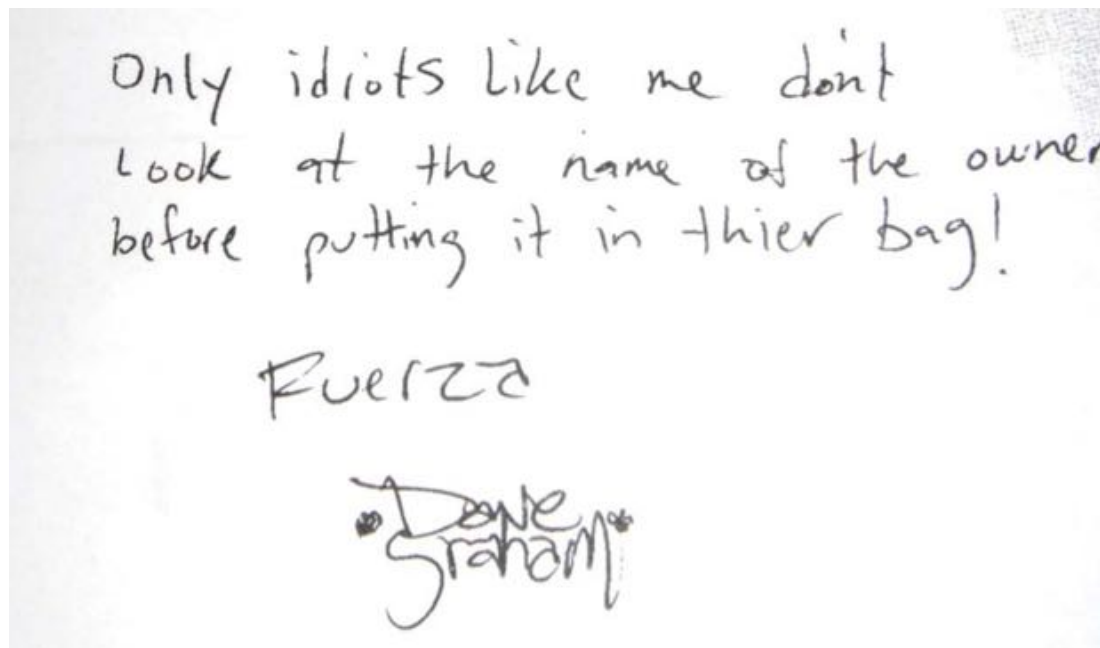
*Blue skies and seas:  
Brian Wilkinson and  
American climber  
Nicole on the hills  
above the Aegean.*

Photographer:  
*Wilkinson collection*



Above:  
Forgetful youth:  
a message from  
American climbing  
ace, Dave Graham,  
who inadvertently  
packed Brian's  
guidebook in his own  
'sack.

Photographer:  
Wilkinson collection



spectrum, and with a number of partners I clocked up some amazing climbs in the middle 6s. I spent an eventful day at an impressive Sector called Spartacus and, amongst other things, flashed a stunning 6b called Harakiri and wobbled up a nearby 6c called Les Amazonas. I got chatting with a friendly but skinny American guy climbing with his girlfriend on an adjacent route who was very enthusiastic about climbing on Kalymnos; we both agreed it was 'awesome'. Later that evening I realised I must have left my new and expensive guidebook at Spartacus and resolved to walk back up in the morning on my own to try and find it. But in the morning I drew a blank, there was no sign of it. As I stumbled back down and along the road, the sky to the north looked black and very heavy. I passed parties from Group X heading up to the Grande Grotta, one of the most famous tufa climbing areas in the world. "Might be a drop of rain on the way, you'd better get a move on", I say to a couple of them, but they smiled and carried on strolling up in their shorts and T shirts.

By the time I reached the climbers' bar called Glaros, the day had grown dark like the onset of a total eclipse and the storm arrived. Within minutes the deafening roar of torrential rain on the canvas awning made conversation impossible. I ordered a beer as the road began to fill up with water and started to impersonate a fairly deep river. The sound of ear-splitting thunder claps shook the bar and blue flashes of lightning lit up the darkness. The spectacle viewed from the Grande Grotta must have been amazing, and while I was slightly concerned about the scantily clad members of Group X huddling beneath the stalactites in the storm I thought 'What the hell', and ordered another Mythos. Five hours later the storm finally abated. I had good news too in the evening. My guidebook was returned by the skinny American, apparently he had picked it up by mistake and had thrown it into his 'sack. He wrote an apologetic message on the title page of the guide. Generally speaking, I didn't mind being the 'Old Man' of Group X, especially as I felt I could keep up with a

good percentage of the climbers except for the real hot shots (of which there were quite a number). However, I conceded defeat when it came to late night drinking and partying; their impressive endeavours in this field left my own efforts looking very entry level. And then, with three days of the trip left, Nicole arrived.

For some reason that puzzled me at the time, she sat down next to me in Bar Scorpio and started chatting about her solo trip travelling around Europe, and when the whole group moved en masse to the guidebook lecture across the road we sat together to listen to Aris's story about climbing on the Island. After the talk Nicole and I went back to the Bar for a final beer. 'D'you fancy climbing with me tomorrow?' I said. She smiled, 'Yeah, that would be good'. '10 o'clock outside my apartment?' 'Okay, I'll be there'. It was just like that.

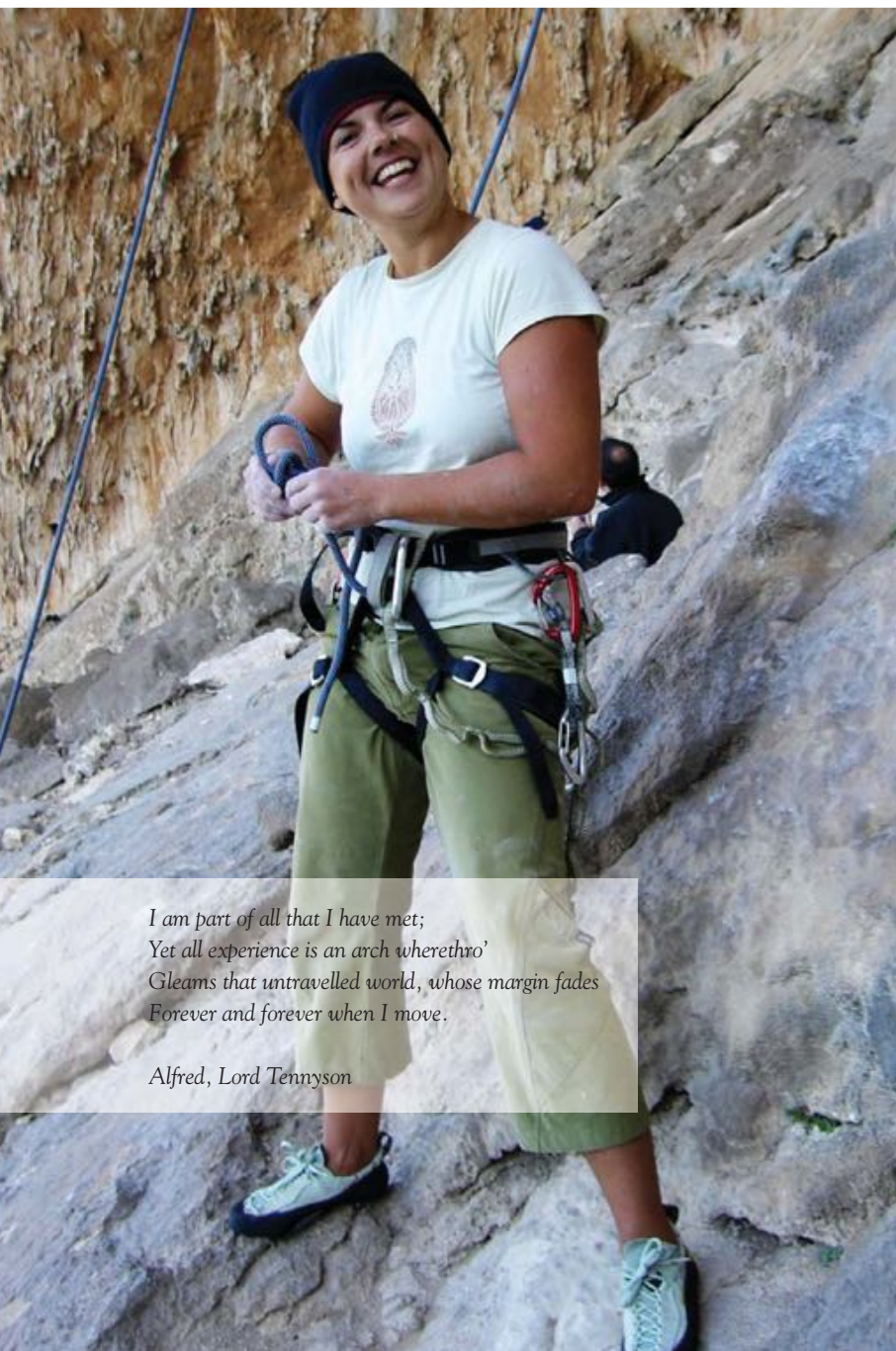
At 10 on the dot she pulled herself aboard my noisy scooter and clung on as we clattered off against the legal flow of traffic on the one way street through Masouri town (everybody did it). As a trial of our climbing compatibility I suggested we spent the day on Dolphin Bay and Kasteli, two adjacent mid-grade venues by the sea. She struggled a bit on some of the harder stuff but she never whimpered, never complained or gave excuses. I liked her determination and her cheerful optimism. In fact, I liked her a lot. At the evening meal with Group X at a local restaurant I kept fairly quiet about my day with Nicole but I inevitably received some ribbing, especially when I left abruptly to meet her, abandoning a freshly ordered beer on the table. Over another beer in Bar Scorpio Nicole and I agreed to meet up tomorrow and take on something a bit more substantial.

In the morning however, I noticed the bike was out of gas so I made the hair-raising ride alone up and down the greasy switchbacks to fill up at the nearest petrol station at Panormos with the petrol gauge reading empty. With the bike refuelled, I relaxed outside the apartment as Nicole came strolling towards me, grinning and eating her breakfast, a peanut butter roll. She jumped aboard still chomping while we roared

off to Glaros for my own breakfast and coffee. Half an hour later we were sweating and laughing our way up the dusty zigzags toward the impressive tufa draped cave of the Grande Grotta, already filling up with climbers. I'd not climbed here before but I knew that the 'warm-up' for this wonderland was a long and fantastic route in its own right called Monahiki Elia, but at a steep 6a+ it didn't seem much of an aperitif for cold muscles. There was a party of Norwegians girls already in situ and a pair from Group X were waiting in line. With little option we sat around and chatted with the others while we waited for our turn.

In the event it went quite well, good holds appeared when needed and while it was strenuous from halfway, at least the tufa holds were pretty good if you could hang on in there. When Nicole tied on I could see she was a bit pensive, this was absolute top whack for her and from the deck it looked intimidating. She did fine until it started to get steep but then she slowed down and started to get tentative. I could see failure begin to blossom as the climb began to overpower her determination. Up to this point we had been polite with each other and very respectful of each others' sensibilities but I decided an injection of urgency was required. Quiet until now, I shouted up 'Nicole, it's time to stop pussyfooting around, its getting strenuous so grab those fucking holds and start pulling on the buggers!' To her credit she really committed herself and pulled out all the stops. In the end she made a fine ascent and was absolutely over the moon about her first 5.10b. On returning to the ground she punched the air with satisfaction and said that she was 'stoked'. I think I knew what she meant.

We did another route further along the crag at Panorama sector before doubling back beneath the Grotta, now laced with upside down leaders, to Afternoon sector for a crop of enjoyable routes on the other side of vertical. Deciding to save some juice for our last half-day we stumbled back down in the heat to cool off with a beer in Glaros. Members of Group X were already there talking excitedly about their 'kills'. As it was to be our last evening on the island we



*I am part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades  
Forever and forever when I move.*

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

decided to have a meal out together and after strolling down the dark empty streets ended up at a terraced restaurant on the outskirts of town. Earlier in the week the place had been crowded and noisy but tonight it was quiet, almost deserted. But we were in a cheerful mood and were welcomed enthusiastically by the owner, a motherly woman, and to my surprise Nicole exchanged a few words of Greek with her as we sat at our candle-lit table. I was astounded. I'd been coming to Greece for years and never learnt a single word of the language. "Oh, I just have this knack of picking up words" she said as I ordered the wine, in English. Time swept by. There was much loud talking and laughing, confidences exchanged and secrets learnt about each other, about her life in California, climbing in the States and her Vietnam veteran father. We talked so loudly and excitedly that disapproving heads were turning in the dimly lit and sparsely occupied restaurant. But we just didn't give a damn. I suggested some options for our last half-day climbing together tomorrow and told her that next year I was hoping to get out to Yosemite and how we could meet up and climb together again. But even as we spoke I got this feeling that it just wouldn't happen. All too soon, it seemed, we had finished our wine and our meal and with the taste of five star Metaxa still on our lips we paid up and walked back out into the scented Aegean night. Beneath a field of stars Nicole pointed out the constellations as we walked slowly back along the road together.

It was 1.30 in the morning at Bar Scorpio and we were the only customers left, having our last drink together, but the long haired owner was still pumping out the classic tracks from the 60s at full volume. And while Dylan's tender bluesy It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry reverberated into the night Nicole smiled, and her dark eyes flashed back at me like black diamonds.

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Left: Scent of success: Nicole feeling 'stoked' after sending the steep and pumpy 6a+ Monahiki Elia.

Photographer: Wilkinson collection



A photograph of a man, James McHaffie, climbing a dark, textured rock face. He is shirtless, wearing tan trousers and a climbing harness. He is positioned vertically, with his body pressed against the rock. The background shows more of the rock face, which has some green moss or lichen. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the climber against the dark rock.

# CLIMBING INFLUENCES AND CHARACTERS

*As one of the leading lights of the modern generation, James McHaffie is not a man to blow his own trumpet. With a strong pedigree in the Lake District – his father, Ray, famously climbed Little Chamonix in boxing gloves and roller skates – James has stamped his mark with rapid ascents of some of the hardest routes in Britain. Here he lets fellow CC members know who has had the most influence on his remarkable career to date.*

By James McHaffie

Previous page:  
*Master at work*  
*- Caff makes*  
*quick work of Ron*  
*Fawcett's Millstone*  
*testpiece, Master's*  
*Edge (E7 6b).*

Photographer:  
*Jack Geldard*

Many people nowadays get their first taste of rock-climbing on an indoor climbing wall and for me it was much the same. My dad had taken me climbing outdoors when I was five or six but that ended in tears. It was nine years later at the Keswick climbing wall when I first learned to appreciate climbing and I was even luckier when dad dragged me up Troutdale Pinnacle in the rain. We started climbing together more regularly then, with an endless slew of mini-epics helping my education along. We didn't have a car so we often biked down Borrowdale or Thirlmere to get to the cliffs, with ripping yarns coming from dad all the way. Stories of Pete Livesey climbing cutting edge routes like Dry G(r)asp and Footless Crow and Pete Whillance taking huge falls off a wet slab on the top of Top Gear and Life in the Fast Lane. The rich history my dad imbued the mountains with helped to bring valleys and crags to life for me which until then I'd taken for granted. Three nights a week he would give slide shows at the Moot Hall in Keswick on walking and climbing in the Lakes. My job was to press the button on the projector. One of the key stories I remember from the slide show refers to a change in the mentality of climbers going from 'the leader never falls off' to 'the leader can fall off.' Dad: I was at Shepherd's Crag one day when a guy came up to me and said:  
Guy: 'do you fancy doing something hard?'  
Dad: He set off up Black Sheep and stopped for a while then said  
Guy: 'Is it alright if I fall off?'  
Dad: 'Pardon?'  
Guy: more urgently "Is it alright if I fall off?"  
Dad: He fell 20 feet and came up to me and said:  
Guy: 'I don't mind falling off.'  
Dad: He zoomed straight up it. I was in the pub a week later and a guy with long hair came up to me.  
Long haired guy: 'Aye-Aye, I hear you been climbing with Dougie?'  
Dad: 'Dougie? Dougie who?'  
Long haired guy: 'Dougie Hall.'

Dad: 'He fell 20 feet.'

Long haired guy: 'He is one of the best climbers in the UK – he falls off every week'.

Two years ago I was climbing in the Dinorwig Slate quarries of North Wales and taking repeated falls on a sport climb project, when Joe Brown appeared on the scene. We got chatting and he told me that he never made a move he didn't think he could down climb – think about that when you're on his routes.

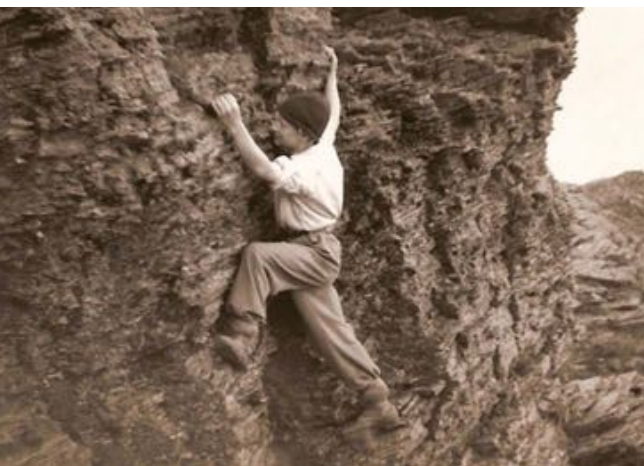
Starting out in my teens, the wisdom I learned from three memorable individuals rang through my head (after all it's pretty hollow). First, my dad saying, 'make sure you're doing what makes you happy'.

Second, Tony Benn's comment on some existentialist media broadcast, saying 'the best you can do with your life is to dedicate yourself to some cause or interest.'

Lastly, a friend Ken Thoms, who recently passed away, said the best feeling he ever had was the sensation of climbing well. I'll be the first to hold my hand up and say it's hedonistic to be 'all-consumed' in climbing. However, if your principle in life is that you could be dead next year from something or other and you're counting the minutes of the day going by, then hanging out on cliffs with friends doesn't seem the worst way in the world to while away life.

Many of the most serious climbs in the Lakes were put up by Dave Birkett, who achieved almost mythical status among the local climbing youths. His climbs looked truly incredible and this was before he'd taken over Scafell with some of the most impressive routes in the UK. Having got to know Dave a little you realise how driven he is. His enthusiasm, record of ascents and knowledge of the Lakes were always things I aspired to. I don't know if dedicated is a strong enough word to convey Dave's approach to climbing. But it has resulted in a concentration of great climbs in the Lake District and beyond.

In the mid-90s a new youth was getting up hard routes on traditional crags, doing climbs that seemed unlikely to have witnessed ascents before by anyone so young. Rumours spread from the Lakes into Wales



of such things as a nighttime ascent of Lord of the Flies, on-sight leads of famous E7s and the climber responsible was only 15. Leo Houlding was named 'The Prophet of Purism' in Heinz Zak's Yosemite book because of his strong ethical stance towards on-sight efforts. From some of Leo's exploits you might think he was crazy, but leaving home as a 15-year-old teenager and saying you're going to be a professional climber takes some nerve and dedication. Leo's near enough on-sight ascent of El Niño on El Capitan with Patrick Hammond in 1998 made magazine headlines, and it undoubtedly captured the imagination of many climbers. What Leo emphasised was the doubt necessary in the on-sight lead. This philosophy I agreed with. I see climbing as a game of chess. Why would you play if you knew you would definitely win? That wouldn't be sportsmanlike by my rules. Thus, Dave Birkett and Leo Holding became two of my early heroes in the climbing world. I initially reasoned that since Lake District routes were easier to on-sight than headpoint (practising moves on a top rope beforehand), it made sense to climb as many classics as possible, with Pete Whillance's routes being the ones to aspire to. I saw redpointing routes as a bit of a boring, science-based style of climbing, which didn't appeal to me at that time. One day at Lower Falcon Crag in Borrowdale when



a good friend failed to turn up, I had my first taste of soloing going up Spin Up and Funeral Way (very slowly) to pass the time while I waited. Soloing tricky climbs can be a terrifying prospect at first, but like smoking, it gets easier after the first few. Being young, many people tried to dissuade me from it, but the way I saw things it was way faster than roped climbing and the more you did the better technique you acquired. I honestly regarded soloing as walkers do scrambling, as just a more interesting way to get up a hill. Although soloing can get 'bad press' many regular climbers will go and solo something steady now and again and you wonder which is more dangerous, driving a car or soloing in nice weather? It always appears to me that more factors are out of your control when you are driving the car. In 1999 Ben Bransby and Pete Robbins (more about Pete later) came to the Lakes on a climbing holiday. At that time, the skill level at which Ben was climbing completely blew me away. He was going up Lakes E5s and E6s chatting to you while he did the crux moves, obviously well within his comfort zone. One of the greatest efforts I've heard of in hard trad was when Ben nearly on-sighted Impact Day on Pavey Arc. After getting to within a metre of the top, all the bold hard climbing was through, but unfortunately for Ben so were his arms. Birkett had given this climb E9,

Left:  
*Ray Mc Haffie*  
*soloing at Whiteside.*  
Right:  
*Ray on the right*  
*with climbing*  
*chums outside the*  
*Borrowdale Hotel*  
*1956*

Photographs:  
*James McHaffie*  
*collection*





7a and although it is now currently a full grade lower, at that time, Ben believed he was on an E9 and he obviously had the potential to get up these routes. Remember also that at that time there were probably only two other people in the UK with résumés appropriate for similar style routes, Ian Vickers and Nic Sellars. Ben Bransby showed in 1999 just how good you could become if you started climbing when you were just three years old. Ben may look like Penfold from Dangermouse and come across as an unlikely rock athlete, but he is one of the top climbers of his generation.

In 2002 I moved to Wales where one of my main climbing partners was oceanographer Pete Robbins. Despite our mutual perception of one another as peers in our respective climbing arenas, it was probably only with Pete that I felt a sense of competition. Pete is one of the fastest climbers you're likely to see. Will Perrin once proposed that in certain arenas of climbing, Pete was one of the best in the world. Having climbed on the gritstone edges with Pete I'd have to agree with Will.

Stories were circulated of Pete falling more than twenty feet off solo routes like Piece of Mind then getting back on and doing them. Apparently his partner on that particular route was so shocked he wouldn't climb afterward.

For longer trad routes you can have moments and words with yourself but on dynamic grit arêtes there just isn't time and a narrow focus is essential.

In the last two years Pete has brought his science-based background into climbing and made vast improvements to his already considerable talents. When your peers suddenly sky rocket it can give you a well needed kick up the arse to improve your game. We once tried a climb in Wen Zawn named The Mad Brown. On the crux second pitch I veered a bit too far left into a 'talcum groove' and a few splashes of rock went into the drink.

Just as the route slabbed off, a fluting I was holding onto snapped and I was suddenly in mid air. Pete had been belayed in a stream for an hour and after my



efforts he was keen for a go. When Pete had pulled ahead and out of sight from me I heard lots of splashes as rocks crashed into the water. I thought surely he's up, when suddenly he reappeared having made similar errors of judgment with line and rock. We eventually found where we were meant to go.

Will Perrin was relatively little known outside of the North Wales climbing fraternity but he was one of the best UK trad climbers, with a special affinity for slate climbing. The second time I went to do Conan the Librarian I was with Will who was keen to lead the crux bottom pitch. I'd told Will him it was really hard but I was eating my words when he walked up it easily without so much as a warm up. Seconding it in the sun wearing my fleece and nursing a hangover, it still felt desperate to me. I was ever aware that Will was likely to spring some great joke on me when we were together, as was normal when in his company.

When Pete, Will and I abseiled into Yellow Wall, I'd forgotten an extra rope and I said I'd go back up the Moon, which I'd soloed previously, to collect it. I was shocked to hear Will challenge me with, 'Don't pretend you're God's gift to climbing', so I scrambled up some awful ridge further round which seemed to me to be more dangerous!

Will's words still ring in my ears years later and they give me a real sense of mortality. This can be a distracting concept to dwell on when soloing. Spending time with Will epitomised the dark, dry wit that I associate with North Wales climbing and the many atmospheric venues you can find there.

In 2003 I was at Tremadog when I bumped into a young man I'd met at the local climbing wall affectionately known as Neil 'the Youth' Dickson. Together we decided to go and try Fingerlicker Direct. The Youth being young had compiled a list of great

Above:  
*Food for thought:*  
Pete Robins enjoying  
a bagette.

Left:  
Neil 'the Youth'  
Dickson in his  
element at Rhoscolyn  
Bay

Photographer:  
Jack Geldard





climbs he was keen on doing. Taking a closer look at the route he got about three quarters of the way up the first pitch before he took a rapid head first descent towards me. I began to wonder if he was overreaching. Neil seconded that route and for the next couple of years it was the same pattern. Three years later on a trip to Lundy I was shocked to

hear myself say 'take in Youth' while I was seconding the first pitch of Voyage of the Acolyte. Unfortunately for me it wasn't the last time those words left my lips that week. Whenever I thought the Youth was struggling to follow me I'd feed him a smidgeon of loose rope. Luckily for me Neil has a good sense of humour and he still climbs with me.



At the end of 2008 we had a road trip from Pembroke down into Devon and Cornwall, taking in many great sea cliffs. We explored some of the more esoteric ones and would frequently finish the day in the golden light of a sunset settling into nightfall. I've always thought that climbing by the sea felt 'good for the soul' so to speak, and I generally returned from these types of holiday feeling refreshed.

Climbing hard routes can sometimes seem a bit narcissistic but with Neil it was always a team effort and an adventure. One such occasion was the day we climbed Other Realms on the Llyn, a Littlejohn E6. From the beginning, Neil was confident it was going to be a rest day after his having climbed many E7s on sight that year. Neil swiftly dispensed with the steep direct start first pitch and I took over on the second pitch.

After climbing seven metres above the belay, I pushed a cam into an undercut tombstone flake, directly above the belay. From here I reached up for the most solid looking undercut I could find. To my surprise, it came off as soon as the pressure was applied, but I managed to recover and make a swift retreat.

Meanwhile Neil, who was feeling tired and was hoping for a ride out on my top rope, took the lead and set off above me. Much to my concern he pulled up without hesitation to the same undercut flake and though he tried to make the move, he was forced to retreat. When he joined me at the belay he pronounced the route very hard.

Despite this gloomy prognosis, I had another go and I finally managed to slither into the groove above the small overlap. In weighing things up I had been reassured by seeing the gear get thoroughly tested, but I also knew that if we failed it was going to be an epic to retreat. In the process of finishing the awkward moves that had thwarted us both, I accidentally kicked one of the key handholds off, thus further hindering Neill's progress behind me. The scary headwall succumbed to a fatalistic approach, and we both thought the climb worth E7, Littlejohn had given it E5!

Climbing on many of the UK sea cliffs over the years inevitably gives you a good deal of respect for some of the pioneers of the cliffs, especially Littlejohn, Crocker and Fowler. Many of their routes can shut down the 'young guns' of today even with their modern 'sport strength'.

In 2001 I acquired my first car, a gold coloured but rather rusty 1989 Nissan Cherry, in which I shared trips with two young Lancastrian climbers Ryan Pasquill and Pete Hurley. I would pick them up from the Reebok Stadium en route to the Peak or Wales. To kick-off the season on a March trip we headed straight for a two-pitch climb, the Rainbow of Recalcitrance on the Welsh slate.

The first pitch went smoothly. On the second pitch, however, Pete set off and after eight metres with no gear in sight he began to sketch a bit. Standing with a peg in front of him and having clipped a draw through the eye, Pete appeared unable to clip it with the rope. Not wanting another 12 stone added to our belay Ryan and I shouted 'grab it!' Ignoring us Pete managed to clip the peg before slipping off. The peg bent, but held and Pete went straight back up. After that, we left the slate for a 'Gogarth apprenticeship'.

Ryan and Pete are two of the most laid back characters you are ever likely to meet, but they both went on to climb E9. Pete survived an 80 foot ground fall, breaking his back, but was climbing well again a few months later. Ryan went on to on-sight/flash more E8s than anyone else I know in the UK. To watch (and sometimes climb) with the 'next generation' is both humbling and inspiring and anytime I need my can of 'drive' topping up these are some of the people I look to.

For my personal climbing I'd thank Wez Hunter for being my main climbing partner and best natured person in the world. Thanks to Adam Hocking for showing me the meaning of the word 'potential,' Adam Wilde for his wit and for saving my life, Al Wilson for skiving work to climb all through 1998 and finally to Stuart Wood for making me less unemployable.

Left:  
*James McHaffie  
powering his way  
ground-up on yet  
another big extreme  
- The Treacherous  
Underfoot (E7 6b)  
at Trearddur Bay,  
Anglesey*

Photographer:  
*Jack Geldard*

A black and white photograph of a man, Joe Brown, climbing a steep, craggy rock face. He is wearing a light-colored jacket, dark trousers, and a beanie. He is secured by ropes and gear. The background shows a vast, hilly landscape with a small town visible in the distance under a cloudy sky.

# JOE BROWN AT EIGHTY

*Joe Brown is the seminal influence in modern British rock-climbing. His routes raised the bar and laid down a challenge for future generations. One of those who climbed and worked with Joe on a number of those ground breaking routes was the photographer, John Cleare. Here he tells us in words and pictures what it was like to be with the mighty Baron Brown.*

By John Cleare

*Old Joe Brown is settling down  
To mediocrity.  
He even climbs with no-good types like Dennis Gray and me.  
He's lost the pace to stay the race  
And keep up with the van,  
And Baron Brown, that tragic clown  
Is now an also-ran*

So sang his close chum Tom Patey. But Tom died in 1970, the very year that Joe reached 40, and Tom's jolly verse proved somewhat premature.

In 1951, as schoolboys climbing in Wales, we heard rumours of an incredible pair of Manchester plumbers who were making first ascents on such daunting crags as Cloggy and the Three Cliffs\* in Llanberis, routes which had defeated the established tigers.

At 14 we frequented neither such crags nor the local pubs; our world was limited to Grooved Arête, the Idwal Slabs and cups of tea at Ogwen Cottage. But jokes were current about death-defying monkey-men with long arms and steel fingers.

Joe was already established as a world-class mountaineer in 1959 when first I encountered him. Actually I was just another climber at The Roaches where he was talking one of his apprentices up Sloth. Though already a serious alpinist, I was a photography student and I shot a picture sequence of the climb of which I'm still quite proud. But though I recognised Mr Brown in the background, I was far too polite to intrude. Who was I to introduce myself to such a famous character?

By 1965 my climbing chums were such folk as Patey, Hamish MacInnes, Chris Bonington, the Biven Brothers, Ian McNaught-Davis and Rusty Baillie, and though I'd managed several top class routes in Wales, my activities had been spread all over, from Foinaven to Bosigran.

My own induction into the serious Welsh climbing scene came about with a publisher's commission to produce *Rock Climbers in Action* in Snowdonia. Thus I came to work with Pete Crew and his inner circle and I became a voyeur of life in Deiniolen, Llanberis and *up the Pass*. For a while Wendy's Caff became my centre of action. For obvious reasons I'd wanted to feature Joe in the book, but he was still busy at White Hall in the Peak District and had yet to become a Llanberis tycoon.

When he was sports editor of *The Observer* back in the late 1950s, Chris Brasher had written a classic

personality interview with Joe. With ascents of Kangchenjunga and the Muztagh Tower behind him, Joe was already a household name, and whenever a climber was wanted, for instance, to reach the inaccessible cave at Petra:

*Young Joe Brown,  
He hurried down  
To answer to the call.*

To the tabloids Joe was The Human Fly, Wales. Indeed, merely addressed thus, a letter from Dennis Gray was correctly delivered. In 1963 Joe had climbed on Cloggy in thick mist for an uninspiring BBC live outside broadcast, a return match for an earlier RDF broadcast on the Midi which had been aborted in bad weather. The only memorable image had been of Joe standing with Paragot in the tunnel mouth, gazing out at the driving snow.

Nevertheless, youth, technology and computers were now all the rage, and when the new *Observer Magazine* wanted a fresh climbing hero, it was Pete Crew – '*his circuits whirring endlessly in highly tuned machinery*' – whom Alvarez and I featured. And it was Crew and Co. who starred in the BBC's innovative and highly successful live broadcast from Kilnsey in 1964.

By February 1966 Gogarth had been discovered and a handful of routes opened, but the crag was still something of a secret. After their successes on Kilnsey – where the weather is always perfect, and on the Matterhorn where it isn't – the BBC aspired to another live climbing broadcast and I suggested that a sea cliff was likely to be a safer bet than claggy Cloggy. Thus Brasher, now a BBC personality, Rusty Baillie and I embarked on a spirited reconnaissance at Gogarth, only to realise that none of the existing routes, or indeed their surrounding rock architecture, would work in real time on the small screen.

From out at the South Stack lighthouse however, we spied a natural amphitheatre in the cliffs. There were strategic natural camera positions, plenty of dramatic rock scenery and it seemed just made for television if only the virgin crag at its centre was climbable.

We abseiled down Red Wall, decided that it was, and

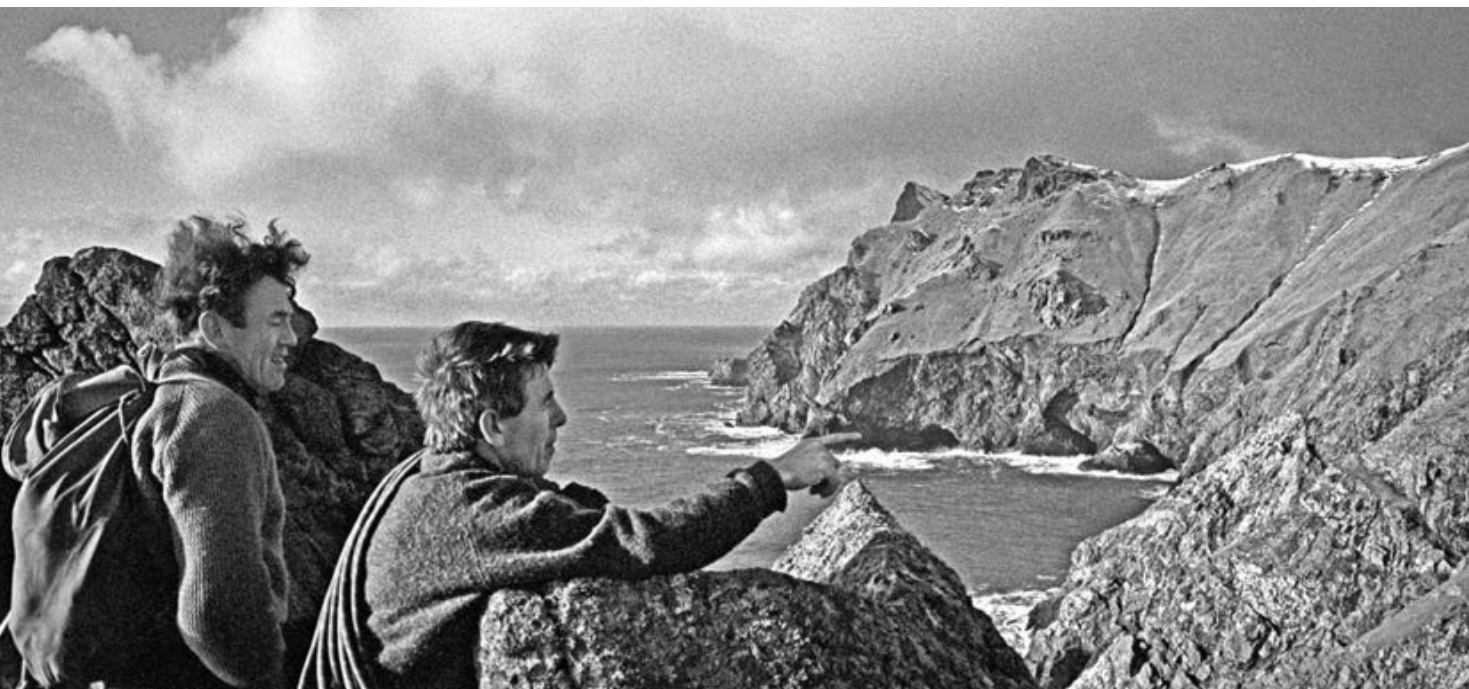
Left:  
*Joe Brown above the  
overlap on Tensor,  
Craig y Castell.*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*

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\* the title of the first CC guidebook to The Pass, then recently published – a very thin, green, soft cloth-bound publication about A5 in size. Doubtless now very valuable !





Above:  
*Joe Brown and  
Tom Patey on  
location, St Kilda.*  
Right:  
*Joe Brown on the  
first ascent of the  
Orkney's Yesnaby  
Castle (1967).*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*

The Cliff-Hangers programme was conceived – as a circus. Somehow word reached Llanberis that the Beeb were nosing around Castell Helen and apparently Joe drove out there, peered over the lip of the manky-looking wall, and pronounced that they must be ‘... bloody bonkers’. Then he was invited to lead the climb.

That was the first time I actually worked with Joe. The coverage of climbing, live, on television, called for each climber to be in the right place at any given moment and then to keep moving while exchanging continuous banter with his rope mate. At this Joe was a consummate professional, serious when it was necessary and with a wry laugh and pithy comment when it wasn't. We'd scheduled an abseil descent, a tyrolean traverse and spectacular aid moves and Joe baulked only at swimming the zawn to place the tyrolean rope. Teamed up with his foil, old buddy and seasoned performer Mac-the-Telly, Joe's rope was followed closely by a second rope of carefully matched

actors, Royal Robbins and Tom Patey. The White City mandarins were delighted with the programme and no sooner had we come off air than the DG phoned, demanding that we plan another circus performance for the following year. Tom, a wee Glenfiddich in hand, suggested that up in Orkney there was a huge virgin sea stack that might just...?

Gogarth was now out of the closet, and at New Year 1967 the Sunday Times sent staff writer Peter Gillman and me up to do a sports page exposé of the crag, with Joe climbing, of course, and Pete Crew on belay. It was cold and miserable, spray was flying, but ever pragmatic, Joe powered up Rat Race for me. In the spring an advertising assignment for an international paper manufacturer specified a graphic rock-climbing scenario and naturally I turned again to Joe and Pete. Joe knew exactly what was wanted and where to find it – Wen Slab. It was an early ascent and it proved the perfect location for the job. It was fascinating to compare their two climbing styles: Joe flowing up

the crag, arms and legs always visible and everything looking easy. Pete on the other hand, moving in bursts, coiling and uncoiling like a spring, made each move appear desperate.

That summer saw TWW, the predecessor of Harlech TV, stage a climbing broadcast with Joe leading Julie Collins, an unknown blonde PE student, up Vector. Only the Beeb was reckless enough to risk bad weather or an impasse on a televised climb. Thus Vector, though appearing 'live', would actually be recorded the previous day, as had been their 1965 Coronation Street broadcast. My task was to produce a series of publicity pictures beforehand, which I shot on Tensor and Creag Dhu Wall and the image of Joe working nonchalantly across under the Tensor overhang, stubby roll-up hanging from his mouth, became a classic. Julie, lithe, gorgeous, photogenic but inexperienced, was expertly talked up both routes and it was plain that had his life gone differently, Joe would have made a superb professional guide.

The Old Man of Hoy reared his head in July 1967 after Tom, with Rusty and Chris, had made the first ascent, at A3, in three days the previous summer. The broadcast was something of a military operation; there were naval landing craft for the BBC and a platoon of Scots Guards to minister to us at our Rackwick camp. We pondered whether this was a cushy posting or a punishment assignment for the squaddies, just back from the Malaysian jungle. Whatever, with folk like Patey, Mac and Joe around it was bound to be a laugh, especially the regular ceremony of emptying the Elsan, a task we took in turns. There were several ups and downs during the preparatory fortnight, the former when Joe made the first ascent of the formidable Castle of Yesnaby deep water stack, without even getting his feet wet, and the latter on an R & R evening when Hamish came crashing head over heels down the stairs at the Stromness Hotel, a jape which had something to do with Joe.

The producer had planned that the closing transmission on the final day of the climb would feature Joe making a free, 450 foot abseil from the summit. It



would be billed as the longest such descent ever made, anywhere. Unfortunately Joe was informed of this only on the summit after Hamish had already lowered his special non-stretch ropes and produced his secret weapon, a mighty descendeur, specially constructed from high-melting point materials. Joe was aghast. It was almost as big as he was and experimental into the bargain. Time was pressing, we were due on air in just a few moments. But then, his Sandhurst training clicking in, Chris stepped forward. With obvious trepidation he fitted the descendeur and slid off gingerly into the Orcadian sunset.

I was to work with Joe quite frequently thereafter. In those days there was something of a boom in innovative mountain clothing and climbing equipment, new firms were starting up and established ones were expanding, and who better to model the stuff than Baron Brown – the Master. Not just because of who he was, but because he knew how to do it. As a photographer, your task is so much easier if a model knows what you're trying to achieve.

One particular incident from that time stands out, a 1969 film assignment for London Weekend TV. I was to shoot a couple of inspirational yet educational films, one on rock-climbing with Joe and Mac, the other on ice climbing with Tom and Johnny Cunningham. Apart from being threatened by the film union that I'd '...never work again' (on principle I've always been strictly non-union) the unintended highlight of the rock-climbing film was the helmet sequence.

The script called for a demonstration of the qualities of a decent helmet. Joe produced an ancient, tatty Austrian helmet, and explaining to camera that such gear was actually dangerous, proceed to rap it with a peg hammer, expecting it to shatter immediately. But no, the hammer bounced off. We shot take after take, Joe thwacking the helmet harder and harder, each time the blow bouncing off.

Though humorous at first, the situation soon became frustrating and the invective rich. We stopped. The producer re-hung the script and we proceeded to the next shot, now to show that a decent helmet, a brand

new JB job, really does protect the head.

Ha! One tap and the thing shattered! Actually it was only the outer, coloured fibreglass layer that shattered, but on film the apparent disintegration was enough to suggest a total failure. We scrubbed the entire sequence and stalked off to the Padarn.

After Hoy, the Beeb was asking where next? Could anywhere be as televisually dramatic as the Old Man?

Both Hamish and Tom had been to St Kilda and thought that the virgin East Face of Conachair, at almost 1,400 feet the highest sea cliff in the British Isles, might be a possibility. Thus in January 1970 a four-man reconnaissance party sailed out to the island on a small army-operated coaster.

Joe and Pete Crew were to look at the crag, scout out a line and decide if they'd be prepared to climb it.

Tom Patey and I were to decide if such a climb was televisual. Would it make exciting images? Were there any camera positions? An axiom of live TV was that any move must be visible simultaneously from at least two cameras.

It was a raw winter midnight when we reached Village Bay. There was no jetty in those days and we went ashore by searchlight in an open Zodiac as the weather broke. Further unloading was aborted and the ship ran back to the Hebrides for shelter, leaving us to the hospitality of the tiny army garrison.

Despite worsening weather, we completed our task in a couple of days. On Conachair the exposed cliff top of sedge grass and broken rock sloped away into the void, a serious place, and all four of us moved around using the crampons and axes that Tom had assured us we'd need. Not unlike the Eigerwand, the huge triangular cliff is concave and flanked either side by steep arêtes.

Joe and Pete abseiled down the northern arête to a ledge almost at sea level while Tom and I descended the southern arête. It was intimidating ground, the most likely lines looked indistinct while of camera positions there were none. Neither rope was encouraged by what we saw.

The cliff bottom seemed to be basalt, lined with overhangs, riven with huge caves and continually





Left:  
*Joe Brown swinging  
free during the BBC  
shoot of Gogarth's  
Spider's Web.*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*

lashed by monster waves. Joe decided that an ascent was not practical and I decided that even if it was, it would not make live television, though conceivably a climb might prove filmable (I gather the upper part of the crag has since been climbed).

Then it snowed, the jeep track to the radar site on Conachair was cut while towering seas battered the island. Our four-day trip extended to a fortnight, for despite everything the Beeb could do, no boat was prepared to brave St Kilda waters in the continuous gales. Nevertheless we were comfortable, royally looked after by the lonely soldiers. There was plenty of beer with lashings of freshly baked bread, pickled onions and cheese always on hand.

Relishing the fierce conditions, Tom and I thoroughly explored Hirta but Joe and Pete preferred to play poker in the mess. One day the sun actually appeared and we all hiked round to the sheltered side of the island and made several straightforward routes on perfect gabbro. Eventually the seas relented and the BBC persuaded a lobsterman from Harris to make the voyage, tempted not only by the charter fee but also by the chance to fish overnight the rich, unfrequented waters off St Kilda.

Our return to Harris in a rolling, 28 foot fishing boat took some 14 hours, enjoying meanwhile the crewmen's Hebridean hospitality, continuous fresh-boiled lobster, good malt whisky and a laugh a minute. Joe was in his element.

Just three months later Tom died on the Maiden. He was to have been instrumental in the next BBC climbing extravaganza. The show had to go on. In March, Joe, Pete and I had been back on Gogarath with a bevy of BBC engineers investigating Spider's Web for a programme scheduled for the August bank holiday, 1970. Joe and Mac were to climb the great arch, the Holliwells and Janet Rogers were to climb T-Rex while Whillans and Crew were to trip lightly up Wen Slab. Action was guaranteed somewhere throughout the day. For the first time we were working in colour, the half dozen cameras larger and more sophisticated than we'd used before. Admiral Brown at the helm of

his own Zodiac transported one camera round from Holyhead harbour and it was rigged at sea-level below the Spider's Web arch. A Force 8 squall in the night put paid to that, camera, platform and all. The Zodiac was recovered next day but we were short one crucial camera.

The plan was for me to shoot Joe doing his rope tricks from the cramped stance high up in the roof of the arch which I would share with Mac, while my camera was to be one of the only two portable colour TV cameras then in Britain and thus extremely valuable. And we needed battery-operated lights. There was one rusty peg at the stance and we felt that under the circumstance a decent bolt was justified. But there was no time for rehearsals and on reaching the stance, Joe discovered that he'd brought the wrong size drill. We hauled up some chunks of driftwood, belted them into the blind crack and hung from them, first the lights, then the camera, then me – while Mac sat on my lap. We'd run out of decent rope too and the gear was suspended on corlene line from the Holyhead ship chandlers.

Action! All goes well. Swinging in space, Joe is about to grab the outside curtain of rock when Mac shouts in my ear 'You're on fire!' The wood has moved. The lights, almost red hot, have slipped. My fleece is smouldering. But worse, the corlene line is melting through. Pandemonium on the stance while Joe continues the climb, cool and unflappable – the inveterate showman, the ultimate mountaineer. And as our picture crashes, Hamish picks up transmission from his camera outside. We save our camera, we save ourselves and not one viewer ever notices.

That summer Pete Gillman and I arrived at Menai Hall to do a lead story for the Radio Times – 'Joe Brown is Forty'.

Now he's over eighty.

*He showed 'em once, he'll show 'em twice  
The Grand Old Man of the Rock and Ice  
He's marvellous, he's fabulous  
He's a wonder man is Joe  
Where does the time go?*

Right:  
*Charles Moreton  
and Paul Ross on  
top of new route  
Airborne to a New  
Time Zone - aka  
Climbers' Club Day  
Out at San Rafael  
Reef in Utah*

Photographer:  
*Ron Kenyon*



# FIRST ASCENTS

Summer Shale in Cornwall. *By Mick Fowler*

A Desert Nirvana. *By Paul Ross*

The First Ascent of Vector. *By Claude Davies*

Three Rescues and a Late Dinner. *By Tony Moulam*







# SUMMER SHALE IN CORNWALL

*Connoisseur of all things loose and steep, Mick Fowler ventures south to Cornwall in search of adventure with fellow shale-heads Dave Turnbull and Steve Sustad. They find it in the form of a first ascent up the centre of the bizarrely contorted Cam Beak Crag. They called the route The Cushion Man, after the number of cushions that DT surrounded himself with to make his driving position comfortable in his car and gave the route the modest grade of XS.*

By Mick Fowler

There is something very special about the North Cornwall shale coast. In the car driving down from the Midlands Dave Turnbull and I were bemoaning the fact that the forecast wasn't good enough for our intended visit to Cape Wrath. By the end of the weekend the coast had worked its magic. Dust blackened faces smiled and Cape Wrath was not being mentioned.

This rugged coastline is inspiring like that – climbing here gives you a sense of doing something different. Steep, serious sea cliffs drop uncompromisingly into deep Atlantic waters and other climbers are few and far between. Crashing waves invariably add to the ambience.

Steve Sustad met us as planned in the Boscastle car park where he and the Oswestry kayaking team of Rachel, Tess and Ally were just settling down for the night. On our arrival tins of beer miraculously appeared and we toasted our return. It had, we agreed, been far too long between visits.

Summer sun, excellent breakfast spots and a pervasive relaxed holiday atmosphere tend to lead to slow starts. And passing years probably don't help either. We hadn't met up for some time and there was catching up to be done. The sun was high in the June sky by the time the kayakers launched and the climbers sweated off northwards along the scenic coastal footpath. Bukator, the highest continuously steep sea cliff in

England, is a mile or two north of Boscastle and here was to be our first port of call. Both Dave and I had climbed here before and were keen to explore further possibilities. But our sudden change of plan from the north of Scotland to Cornwall had not gone as far as to involve anything detailed like checking the tides. It was while we were pondering the possibility of a long swim in choppy seas that a local farmer arrived to tell us that we ought to keep off the cliff as there were peregrines nesting. The kayakers were by now paddling in a purposeful and happy manner around the foot while the climbers were sweating badly with no particular reserve plan in mind. We wandered further northwards in a rather aimless manner. I can't remember who suggested it first but the headland of Cam Beak, just south of Crackington

Below:  
*Mick Fowler bags  
the first pitch of his  
latest Cornish shale  
adventure*

Photographer:  
*Dave Turnbull*



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Left: Steve Sustad on pitch two of *The Cushion Man*, XS  
Photographer: Dave Turnbull



Haven, beckoned. We had not bothered to bring a guidebook and neither of us could recall any climbs being recorded in this immediate area. Frankly though it didn't really matter. Neither of us had climbed here before and it looked a good spot to explore.

Close perusal was impossible without getting down to sea level but by crawling cautiously to the edge we could see enough to know that the cliff at the tip of the headland was very steep and, at least in its central section, dropped 200ft or so directly into the sea. This looked to be our sort of place and we scurried around with increased enthusiasm looking for the best way to get down to sea level.

A bolt on a convenient rock platform pointed towards enthusiastic fishermen (we later discovered) having come this way before. Studiously ignoring it we fixed a short abseil and scrambled to rock platforms exposed beneath the main cliff.

Above us was an outrageously stratified cliff with an eye catching central line through jutting roofs. Motivated, but consumed by mid summer sun, we lay relaxing and seal watching. It is just so easy to soak up the summer sun and get nothing done in Cornwall. It was Steve's comment about us potentially being late to meet the others in the Cobweb Inn at Boscastle that finally spurred us into action. Dave, being in full sun soaking mode, laid back to enjoy the relaxed ambience of the coast while Steve and I stepped forward to tackle the more memorable kind of activity on offer.

The line seemed pretty obvious; a steep wall leading to a niche followed by a right trending wall between overhangs, a left trending line of weakness and then a traversing line up and right to finish. My practiced eye noted that the first section was out of the sun and looked easiest. A good combination for a hot summer day. I duly stepped forward to take the lead.

One aspect of north Cornwall climbing that I find attractive is the huge variety and the fact that it is very difficult to judge what the rock will be like without actually getting stuck in and trying to climb it. Here my pitch proved steep but with surprisingly large, solid holds and led to a fine, shady niche with excellent nut



placements where, to disappointed looks from Steve, I chose to belay.

With Dave still enjoying the sun Steve duly came up and started probing the next pitch. It was indeed a good spot to have stopped. Ahead the traverse wall between the overhangs was damp and the protection dubious. Lots of going up and down ensued with the Sustad body gradually becoming more and more grubby. Soon his hands were completely black and bleeding from his efforts to clear out wet shale and get jams in an unhelpful crack in the underside of the overhang above.

I watched contentedly as his efforts began to pay dividends and then perked up considerably as he committed to a wild swing out right onto the lip of the upper overhang just where the lower one ran out. Below him now was a straight drop into the boiling water of a shallow sea cave. Any attempt to scuttle back from this position looked as if would be challenging. Even Dave had stirred and was stretching for his camera.

Meanwhile I peered at the belays and did my best to encourage our fearless leader to great things. And achieve great things he did. He seemed to be in a challenging position for some time but then, just when I was wondering about his next move, he clearly found holds that he judged secure and with a grunting noise of satisfaction he disappeared and moved quickly out of sight and earshot to what Dave assured me looked to be a comfortable ledge below the upper wall.

We had decided to climb with the leader using two ropes and the seconds each tied on one. This was fine where the climbing wasn't too bad or where the rope was directly above, but for a traverse out between big overhangs there was great potential for a huge swing with the rope sawing against the sharp edge of the overhang. Dave came up and pointed out that it would be easier, ropework wise, if I stayed belayed and he

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Left and opposite: *Dave Turnbull trusts his feet on the delicate traverse pitch.*

Photographer: Mick Fowler





continued to second the pitch Steve had just led. 'I'll just use the rope to you as a back rope,' he announced. 'Always best to be safe.'

I couldn't help but agree whilst at the same time contemplating my situation as the last man. For a fleeting moment it even struck me that I might have been better off persevering at trying to run the first two pitches into one.

Dave duly demonstrated his impressive strength and technique. With only a moderate amount of swearing he launched up into the overhangs, cursed quickly at the slippery dampness and insecure holds and was then up and out of sight. I was left to consider what suddenly looked to be a very thin single 9mm rope connecting me to Steve.

My lovely comfortable niche that had felt so welcoming when I arrived suddenly seemed a very lonely place to be. Dave had removed the runners on his rope and after I had thrashed against the horizontal roof of the upper overhang the rope stretched out across my shoulder for 10-15ft before disappearing round the sharp edge of the upper overhang.

With the wall sandwiched between the overhangs reducing to zero and Steve out of earshot the chances of making an initial foray and then getting enough slack to retreat looked to be slim. Uppermost in my mind was a wish for more strength and ability. Not having done this kind of thing for some time I found my mind focusing, not on the technical pleasures of the exposed position but on the single thin rope and the sharp edge it would rub against if it all went wrong. It seemed an incredibly long blind stretch for the hold that Steve had swung out on. And without having had the chance to look at it I could only judge by feel how secure it might be. But then Dave is heavier than me and he had swung on it. Anyway there was no going back now so, with no real alternative, I launched wildly out and scrabbled inelegantly round the lip to friendlier ground and grinning faces.

'Enjoy that?'

I grinned back. In retrospect it had been an excellent pitch. Hands had to be shaken.

But there was more to come. The wall above was overhanging and obviously not the way to go. Out to the right though an enticing line stretched up and rightwards on the lip of a large sharp-edged overhang. Above this another overhang loomed out to add to the ambience. The rock here was completely different to that lower down, much more shale-like and insecure. The strata were outward sloping, loose and covered with a talcum powder dust; very much the kind of ground where a slip or misplaced trust in a hold could have unfortunate consequences.

The temperature had cooled now and as Dave started off, with Steve belaying, I readily settled into afternoon sun soaking photographic mode. It immediately became clear that this was going to be a tough pitch. I had not climbed with Dave on this kind of ground before and it was interesting to see how he tackled it. Moving stealthily he tiptoed, trusting his judgement in friction on sloping, debris covered edges that I would have tended to try and clear. Progress was slow and very careful. This was not a pitch to make mistakes on. With poor protection and an overhang below, the rope cutting risks were real in the event of a fall.

In an impressive display of careful perseverance Dave made steady progress and after 70 feet or so was able to break through the upper overhang and disappear from sight. With the rope taken in I was pleased to be able to explain to Steve that it was easiest if he stayed belayed and I went second. Backropes can be so reassuring in such situations!

Unfortunately for me the rope soon went tight to Steve but, at least there was enough backrope to get me well established on the traverse. Thereafter it was delicate stuff but at least with a more modest swing as the penalty for incompetence.

It had been a fine lead by Dave and after some sound seconding from Steve (no backrope, plenty of jammed rope!) we were reunited at the top and down in good time for beers at the Cobweb Inn. When we started out that morning we had never heard of Cam Beak cliff. A toast to adventure climbing was in order. Possibilities, we agreed, are far from exhausted. Life is good.

Left:

*Dave Turnbull follows through the overhang on The Cushion Man leaving Fowler connected by a single rope.*

Photographer:  
Mick Fowler





# A DESERT NIRVANA

*For Lakeland pioneer Paul Ross the search for new rock and new routes has been the driving force of his climbing. Here he tells how his quest for first ascents led him to a seemingly arid landscape in the North American deserts in which he discovered a rich vein of new routes and experiences.*

By Paul Ross

**M**y addiction to first ascents began in 1954 at the age of 17 when offered the chance to climb Super Direct on Black Crag in Borrowdale. An older, local climber had just failed on the crux of the last pitch and had invited me to try. From that moment on I was hooked on the joys of finding and climbing new routes on virgin rock. Established rock climbs have never inspired in me the same drive or focus. New routes – on sight and from the ground up – whether good, bad, or indifferent, have an element of adventure that is uniquely addictive. If I saw an unclimbed line, I would obsess about it until I went back and climbed it. Rarely, if ever, did I go back to a first ascent more than twice before we finished the climb.

One such occasion was the first ascent of Route 1 at Falcon Crag with Peter Lockey. We had reached the final pitch at about five in the evening, which was much too close to Saturday night opening time for either of us. So we abseiled off, vowing to return early the following morning. True to our word we came back the next day with Peter leading the final pitch, but only after a long and spectacular fall.

Just after my 18th birthday, I was introduced to Pete Greenwood, who had a big reputation as one of the top climbers in the country. Pete not only took me under his wing, he and his mate Pete Whitwell also took liberties with my packed lunch. They would send me up the first pitch of a climb, and shout to me about how much they had enjoyed my sandwiches! This banter did not stop us becoming life-long friends and it was a great sadness for me when he passed away in 2010.

It was while climbing with Pete that I came to realise I could climb at the highest standards of the day. On our first day together, back in 1955, I made the fifth ascent of Do Not. He then led me up Kipling Groove (HVS), considered one of the test pieces of the era. I was so elated that I had climbed KG with ease that I ran back to climb it a second time, this time solo. Before I could do so, however, Pete had stopped me. Arthur Dolphin had been a close friend of Pete's, and this was perhaps his most memorable climb. Pete felt the reputation of the climb would suffer if I succeeded in a solo ascent. I respected his wishes and came back down from the first pitch.

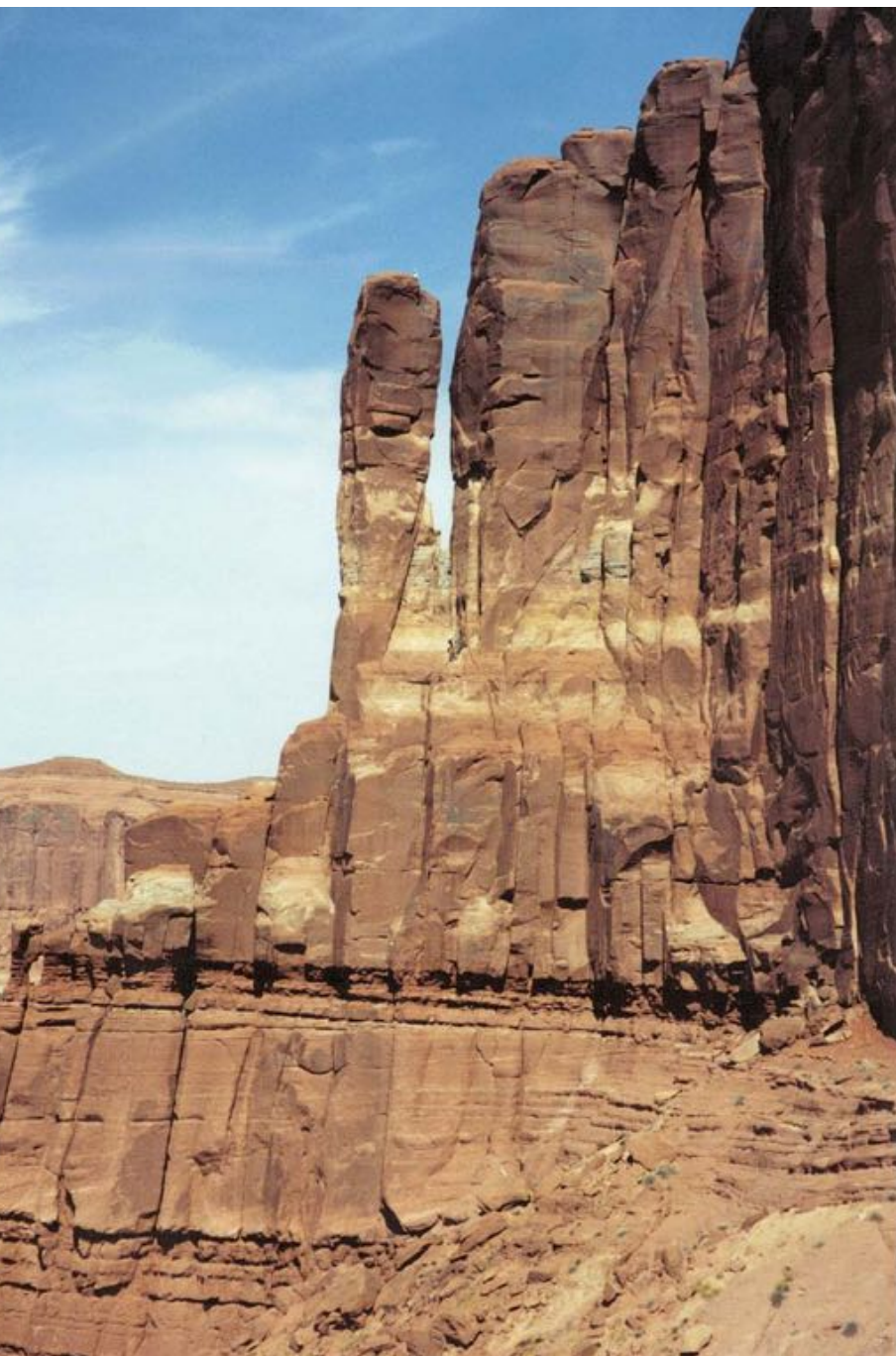
Kipling Groove quickly became a favourite of mine and I climbed it almost every time I visited Gimmer Crag. My appetite for new routes took off in the 1950s with a list that includes Thirlmere Eliminate (E1+) Post Mortem (E3), Bludgeon (E1+), Adam (VS+), and the opening up of climbs on Falcon Crag. These yielded plenty of good times, all on-sight ground up, and by 1967 I had about 80 first ascents in the Lake District. The next year, however, my life took a new direction, with a job offer from an American Outward Bound School in Maine.

My new life in America led to the discovery of an ample supply of spectacular unclimbed rock and in 1972 I moved to New Hampshire where I ran a climbing school and, for a few years, a climbing shop. This was a granite area with the 1,000 feet Cannon Mountain, 400 feet Cathedral Ledge, and 900 feet Whitehorse and many other smaller crags. Most had some climbs on them, but to a Brit's eye, they were hardly touched. My first new route on Cathedral,

Left:  
*Paul Ross hands aloft after making the first ascent of Napes Needle, San Rafael Swell, Utah.*

Photograph:  
*Paul Ross collection*





now named The Prow, we aided. Several years later, after many, many attempts, it was free climbed at 6b, and is now considered the classic climb of New Hampshire. My first route on Cannon Mountain was a two-day 1,000 foot route, The Labyrinth Wall. Others followed. Vertigo became a four star classic.

It was time to introduce the Girdle Traverse to America. With Hugh Thomson, I first girdled Whitehorse Ledge 2,000 feet at E1. Then, with a very young Henry Barber, a 3,200 foot E3 5c girdle of Cathedral that took two days, and a 6,000 foot E1 girdle of Cannon Mountain. Back then it was thought that to traverse the Cannon cliff would take at least two days. But Henry and I completed it within six hours by climbing together in key sections. I completed my girdle odyssey in New Hampshire with reverse traverses at different levels of both Cathedral and Whitehorse.

By 1984, I had run out of interesting projects, and for the next four years spent my time breeding, showing, and judging Parson Jack Russell Terriers. In 1988, I returned to the Lake District very unfit, but was soon at it again with Denis Peare. We opened the account with Prodigal Sons, a short E3 6a in Combe Ghyll, Borrowdale, 22 years after my last new route in the Lakes.

Over the next decade, I added another 60 first ascents to my Lakeland collection. Most memorable were the climbs on Honister Crag, Boat Howe Crag, and finally the discovery of Swan Song (E2 5c) on Scafell with my old friend Peter Lockey.

In 1995, Peter and I visited my son Andrew in Salt Lake City, Utah. We climbed some classic towers and the cracks of Indian Creek, but what caught my eye was the vast amount of unclimbed rock – not to mention over 240 days of sunshine per year. I was hooked, and after another visit in which I climbed many of the well-known towers such as Moses, Sister

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*Left: Paul Ross on the first ascent of Cenotaph Spire between the Tombstone and Lost World Butte, Utah. Photograph: Paul Ross collection*



Superior, and Castleton, I started to plan a permanent return to this part of the States, which materialised in 1998.

My wife and I flew with our Jack Russell Terrier to Salt Lake where we purchased a truck with a camper and set off on a year's journey around the Western States. We eventually settled in a small town in Western Colorado, about a two-hour drive from the major desert areas around Moab and Utah. My first new route on arrival was with my son in the canyons above Salt Lake. Then, later that year, I did several first ascents with Todd Swain at Red Rocks, near Las Vegas.

In 2001 I started in earnest on the desert sandstone towers. A notable climb that year was doing a 900 foot nine pitch C1 5c girdle of the best known tower in the SW desert, the famous Castleton Tower. This climb seemed to freak out the locals, and ten years later, is still unrepeatable. Hunting for unclimbed towers in the vast desert is a pastime in itself. By 2009, we had done first ascents of 36 virgin towers and put new routes on established towers such the North Face of Dreamspeaker and a grade IV up the East Face of the massive 800 foot Texas Tower.

As virgin towers were becoming more and more difficult to find I decided to look at part of a remote area in the San Rafael Swell called the Eastern Reef. This had over six miles of slabs and canyon walls, but was so close to a major interstate road I was sure that it must have been explored. To my great surprise, I found that not to be the case, and after doing a first ascent of a 1,600 foot 5b slab route, I knew this was the place I had been looking for. There was so much unclimbed rock on the Eastern Reef that I would never, in what's left of my lifetime, run out of projects.

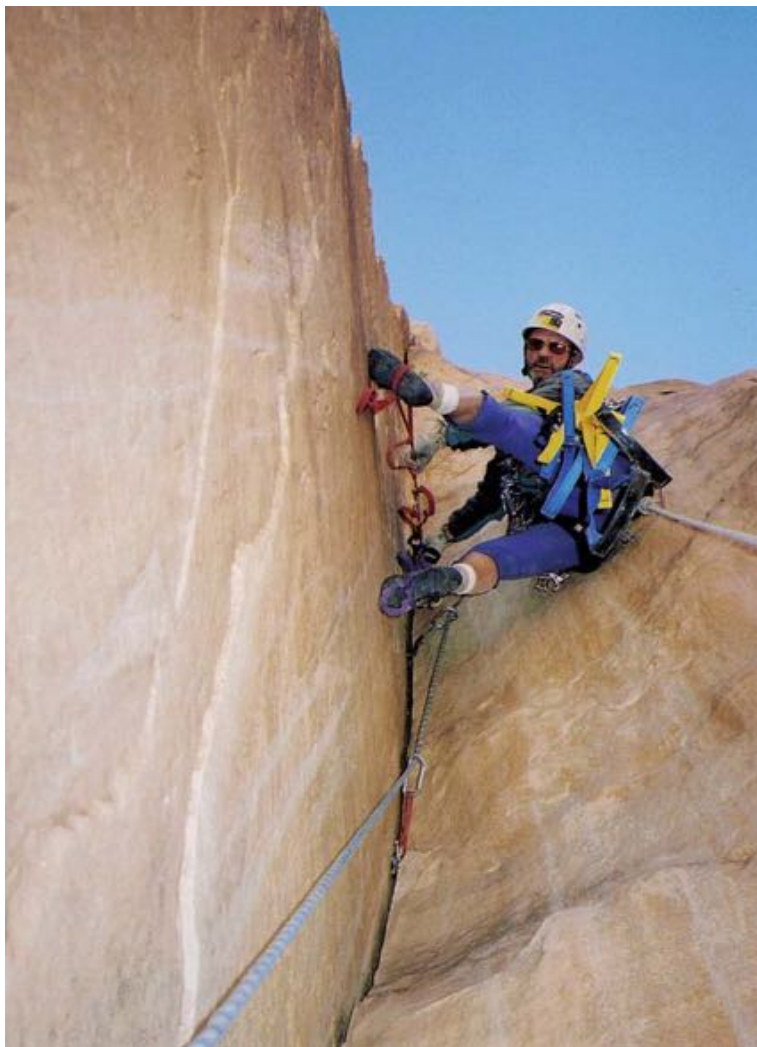
Two years later, after about 15 new climbs with my son, and various other partners, two other climbers, Lance Bateman, and Ben Folsom from Salt Lake City, arrived. Climbs up to 6a + appeared on the Reef slabs, and its steep canyon sides. Other than this team, which I joined from time to time, we had the place to ourselves. Great camp fires, good beer, and most of the

time perfect weather, though it did get a bit warm at times...it sure beat the rain of the Lake District! As of spring 2011, our first ascents on the Reef number over 190. These range from a few short one-pitch climbs of 150 feet, to 13-pitch climbs of 2,000 feet.

When in 2010 I staggered up my 500th first ascent, it had been a long journey since that first route on Black Crag in Borrowdale. But without a doubt, I have found my Nirvana.

Above:  
*Paul Ross on the  
first ascent of  
Resurrection Tower,  
San Rafael Swell,  
Utah.*

Photograph:  
*Paul Ross collection*



# THE FIRST ASCENT OF VECTOR

*Claude Davies recalls a remarkable first ascent by a climber who changed the face of rock-climbing in Britain. Joe Brown's routes are still coveted by the modern generation and none more so than the mighty Vector, a line of force. Although this article may be familiar to some CC members, it is included here alongside a piece by photographer John Cleare to celebrate Joe Brown's 80th birthday last year and to honour his achievements.*

By Claude Davies

Word had got out. Baron Brown was going to make another attempt on the big overhanging buttress on Craig Bwlch y Moch at Tremadoc. A rapt audience had gathered, some sitting on the roadside wall where they could take in the wider panorama, while others found a perch directly beneath the leafless trees to get closer to the action.

It was Saturday March 26th, 1960, and the weather was fair. The previous weekend Joe and Trevor Jones had attempted to breach the central challenge of the crag; the steep and intimidating buttress to the right

of One Step in the Clouds. Their efforts came to an abrupt halt, however, when Trevor lost contact with the rock and swung into space while attempting to follow the crux second pitch. Unable to regain his position, Trevor was lowered to the ground where he declared that he was unwilling to try again.

Joe couldn't wait to get to grips with the route once more, having no doubt been meditating all week on the possibilities that remained above his previous high point – a stance in a small cave. For my part, I had been sitting exams the previous week and couldn't picture just what was involved. It was soon

very obvious, however, and the tension in the air was heightened by the watching crowd and Trevor's marked trepidation.

Among the spectators was 'big' Dave Thomas who took a cine film of the ascent. Unfortunately the copy in Joe's possession is of an extremely poor quality and the original is presumably lost. Edgar Siddall and Doug Verity were also taking photographs; some of their black and white prints and colour slides still exist.

It was decided that I would second and Trevor would follow me. By this time we had all acquired 'state-of-the-art' Pierre Alain rock shoes, a very definite advance on the basketball shoes with the studs sawn off (which in turn had been an advance on black plimsolls). The double ropes were Viking nylon and classed as overweight, ie one above what was known then as full weight.

Between them they weighed 20 lbs for the 150 feet length, so the drag was significant. Today the climb would be done with 8 mm or 9 mm ropes, which are approximately half the weight of the Viking ropes and have far greater elasticity and flexibility with a sheath providing less friction than laid rope. Chalk had not arrived on the scene. We had no sticky rubber, no Friends, nuts, tapes, wires, or harnesses, only some rope slings with steel karabiners and an assortment of stones in the pocket for insertion into any suitable crack. Pitons and a hammer, tucked into the back pocket or left dangling, were to be used for aid only as a last resort with no hang-ups about their use as belays. Tying on the rope was done either with a bowline knot around the waist or with a Tarbuck knot tied via a karabiner to a length of line wrapped several times around the waist. As was standard at the time, abseil inspections were not undertaken and the line was determined strictly as revealed when climbing up. Joe set off up the now familiar first pitch and quickly reached a small ledge with a good spike belay some 60 feet above the ground. I soon followed, somewhat tense and intimidated, not by the difficulties of the pitch just climbed, but by what was looming up, and

Trevor's expressed pessimism. Trevor stayed on the ground while Joe ascended a steep deceptive crack that eventually formed the edge of a large spike and excellent runner. From here a steep slab led up to an impressive capping roof, above which an ochre coloured, undercut slab ran up and rightwards. The corner of the initial slab provided meagre purchase for the right hand but this was sufficient for Joe to lodge himself beneath the roof. This section turned out to be the crux of the climb.

The previous week Joe had fixed a piton in the ochre slab, this being the only protection since the good spike. It was an impressive position beneath the roof as any fall would result in the climber hanging free from the rock. Joe was quickly across and went out of sight placing another piton to protect the leftward traverse to reach the cave stance. I then brought Trevor up to the belay and gave my every attention to what lay ahead. The steep slab was delicate and technical and had to be climbed quickly. I was soon at the piton. 'Not too bad,' I thought, finding it possible to rest beneath the roof. The right hand edge of the ochre slab contained an attractive looking protuberance to brace against. I leaned across and was immediately suspended in space. The nice protuberance had broken off. There was no way I could reach the rock and prusiking was not contemplated. I was lowered to the ground providing the crowd with more entertainment than I had envisaged. I then had to repeat all the lower pitch and the crux once again. At least I knew how to do it.

It was now Trevor's turn. I had left the ropes running through the two pitons so that he was protected on both the crux and the traverse. He, of course, knew full well what was in store. He was obviously nervous and tense and I was careful to make sure that the single overweight rope was free from slack. On the crux he again lost contact with the rock and fell beneath the undercut slab, where he swung in space to the cheers of the watching crowd, which had grown in number and anticipation. I lowered him to the ground and he refused to try again.

Left:

*Pete Crew makes an early repeat of Joe Brown's über classic Vector.*

Photographer:

*John Cleare*





We, or rather Joe, then had the problem of retrieving the pitons and karabiners. He partly reversed and was partly lowered down to the ochre slab where all the gear was extracted before he rejoined me.

Above the cave stance the wall overhung. To the right and around an arête was an unpleasant looking ivy-covered wall with a gully beyond. Joe had no hesitation: 'We're going horizontally left and then over that overlap to reach the bottom of that overhanging corner.' The corner was undercut above an impressive void and there was no sign of protection on the traverse. It was all rather intimidating, and with no certainty that the corner would be climbable. Joe set off on the traverse and, indeed, no natural protection materialised. Immediately prior to the corner a small downward projecting rib provided cracks on both sides and approximately 12 inches apart. Joe placed two poor pitons, one in each crack which he then linked with a tied-off line sling, so the pitons would act in opposition in the event of being loaded with a fall. Not very convincing or encouraging, to say the least. The corner contained grass and other vegetation particularly in the upper section. This was obviously hiding a crack. It was also obvious that laybacking would be required to start and perhaps to continue. To layback and be faced with having to dig out vegetation in this exposed and poorly protected position was just not sensible. Joe placed another piton as high in the corner as possible and then proceeded to climb it, removing vegetation as he progressed. A masterful exhibition that drew the crowd's applause, and rightly so.

I followed, content in the knowledge that two thick ropes were in front of me, so only the unprotected traverse was a slight concern.

As my final exams the previous week had been in the Theory of Structures we decided to name the route Vector, a line of force.

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Left: *Claude Davies approaches the Ochre Slab on the first ascent of Vector, belayed by Trevor Jones.*

Photographer: *Doug Verity*





Left: Karen  
Whitehouse steps into  
the crux moves of  
Vector.

Photographer:  
Don Sargeant



# THREE RESCUES AND A LATE DINNER

*Two first ascents, one of historic proportions, form the centrepiece of Tony Moulam's warm tribute to three of climbing's most talented proponents – Peter Harding, Don Whillans and Hugh Banner. That Tony was late for a CC dinner is testimony to his tenacity on the rock, and not evidence of any shortcomings in his timekeeping.*

By Tony Moulam

ON Friday 13 May 1949 Peter Harding and I cycled from our digs in Shrewsbury to the Wyggeston Arms, his father's pub in Burton on Trent where we picked up the 'blue un' Peter's PB MG in which we drove to Black Rocks.

Neither of us realised that he was about to make history. We only intended to fill in a final blank before we sent our 'Black Rocks and Cratcliffe Tor' guidebook manuscript to Wilf Noyce and on to the Cloister Press.

An inspection on a top rope was called for so I dutifully belayed at the top of Lone Tree Groove and threw the rope end down to Peter. He tied on and I took his weight as he started up the exiguous crack. He made two or three moves and called 'all away' after he had moved up about ten feet, intending to jump off.

I heard this as 'haul away' and so pulled as hard as I could so that Peter levitated two or three feet like



a shaman before he explained to me politely but somewhat acerbically what he had meant, and I lowered him to the limestone scree below our route. I descended quickly and joined him as he addressed the route again. My hand in the small of his back pressed him into the leaning rock and he rapidly moved up with fingertip laybacks to the top of the flake. A delicate change of balance brought him to a foothold below the sloping mantelshelf onto Lone Tree Groove's upper reaches, and it was all over. With a pull from the rope I reached the layback and, having eyed carefully Peter's moves, followed them and joined him at the top.

We had not finished yet and we descended Fat Man's Chimney and ticked off our second new route, The Superstitious Start (it was Friday 13th) to Lean Man's Superdirect. As a finale I led out to the frog's mouth front of the Promontory, Peter joined me and led the Easy Exit, straight up over the roof.

We thought we had done enough for one afternoon so stopped off at The Greyhound in Cromford to refresh ourselves for the journey back to Burton, as we had a date next day with Alf Bridge and some Army cadets on Kinder, for a night exercise!

That night we wrote up the first route: 'Demon Rib. 60 feet. Very Severe. Harder technically than anything else at the Black Rocks. Start beneath the overhanging rib on the left of Lone Tree Groove. Swing onto a ledge, with aid from the second, and make a difficult pull up on very small holds until a finger crack can be reached. Layback up the crack and the flake above, then step with difficulty on to a narrow gangway leading steeply up to the left. An awkward mantelshelf at the top of the gangway leads to a break, which crosses Lone Tree Groove. Cross the groove here and finish straight up the wall ahead'. This bold lead was possibly Harding's finest and was not repeated for a long time. Seven years later on Friday night, 1 June 1956, I drove from Manchester to my parental home in Derby on the weekend before I sold my MG TC. On Saturday morning I took my father to Black Rocks where we met Don Roscoe,

Dennis Hassell and Ken Davidson and, to my father's amazement and delight, we disported ourselves on various climbs, the best of which was Lean Man's Superdirect.

Next day Don Whillans turned up and Don Roscoe led us up Lean Man's Eliminate, Birch Tree Wall and Birch Corner. Next up the 'Villain' decided to try Demon Rib, which I believed still lacked a second lead. In truly virile style he attacked the initial problem, but soon came to a halt standing on a weeping piece of grass in a little groove below the final mantelshelf. Here he declared himself 'b\*\*\*\*\*' and suggested that I might like to take a rope round to the top for him. His whim was my command so I soloed Lone Tree Groove (which I had not led before) and stood on top of the rocks whilst he quickly joined me, protected from above.

In his book, 'The Villain', Jim Perrin relates how Don soloed Demon Rib in high altitude boots in 1959 but this was not his first acquaintance with the climb, despite it being a demonstration of his ability.

Don was not best pleased with his performance so decided to transfer our attentions to High Tor, where Don led me up the Original Route, and as we topped out we were confronted by the Park Wardens, who had had reports of me stuck stationary on a ledge (the ground) for more than two hours.

We were asked for our names and I naively gave mine but Don said 'Joe Brown'. He was not believed but said 'well somebody has got to be called Joe Brown' before the forces of law and order took our 6d entrance fees and left us to ourselves.

That evening I gave Don Roscoe a lift home and frightened him more than the climbing by sliding the MG round the bends on Long Hill, as we came on down from Buxton.

After this experience, whenever I met Don Whillans, I could not prevent him from generously buying me beer and Malt Whisky until I was full, and thus ruined several climbing days on the days after.

Six years later I had joined Geoff Sutton in Geneva for an Alpine holiday. We spent the first day on

Left:

*Tony Moulam in the shallow pod of the first pitch of Plumbagin (E1 5a 5b) on Craig y Ysfa.*

Photograph:  
*Moulam collection*

The Saleve, a limestone cliff very different from the mountain limestone of the Peak District, which I had experienced beforehand. It was (is) much sounder than the cliffs in the Peak and we approached the Massif du Coin via the Arête Jaune, a route I found horrendously polished as we soloed it.

I wore ex army serge trousers, cut short and gathered at the knee by a tape, but in the direct heat of the sun they were too hot to bear so in the evening Geoff drove me to the main Geneva department store where I bought a pair of light blue jeans, and more impressively, a head torch! Anne modified the jeans that night and next day we attacked the Saleve again, this time accomplishing the Grande Arête and descending by Les Etiollets.

Back at the Sutton's flat Geoff received a phone call from Chris Brasher, at the time a sports editor for the Daily Express, who asked us to go to Grindelwald, at his paper's expense, to get the story of the accident on the Eiger North Face to Barry Brewster.

We drove through the night but stopped on a grass verge outside Thun for a nap, which I found particularly uncomfortable coiled up in the front seat of Geoff's Jaguar. Early in the morning we continued to Grindelwald where I had first been 11 years previously for my first Alpine season. Nea Morin had invited me to join her family and, after a long and time consuming journey by train, boat and coach, the post bus dropped me at the large hotel where the Morins (Nea and her brother Ossie Barnard, and daughter Denise) were staying with another lady climber, Miriam Underhill. The luxury was unfortunately not for impecunious camouflage trousered me and, reluctantly as the rain fell relentlessly I left the fleshpots for my tent pitched in a flowery meadow below the village.

The battleship grey cold clouds were still down in the morning and internal intermittent thunder simulated a distant naval battle as I amused myself trying to guess how high the mountains would be, when the mist eventually cleared. We sat out the next few wet days only venturing on to the Firstbahn, a chair

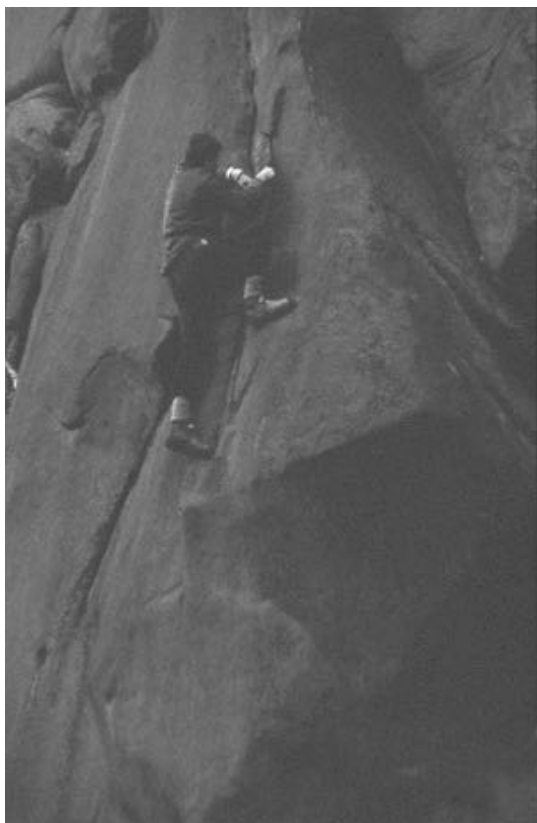
lift that deposited us in deep soft snow in which we trudged a little before becoming depressed and abandoning our projected ascent of the Schwartzhorn. Dawn broke clear and I marvelled at the panorama presented by the Wetterhorn, Eiger and Monch, the first real mountains I had ever seen, and far higher than I had earlier imagined. We took the early train to Kleine Scheidegg and on, up through the Eiger, to the Jungfrauoch from where we did the ordinary snow plodding routes on the Monch (through a well-marked rut in the soft snow) and Jungfrau.

This memory filled my mind as Geoff and I arrived in Grindelwald on Friday morning and again we took the first train to Kleine Scheidegg where we met Martin Page, a gifted journalist and the Paris correspondent of the Express. We spent the rest of the day with Chris Bonington and Don Whillans who had abandoned their attempt on the face to rescue the shocked Brian Nally who they had encountered on the second icefield after his partner Barry had been killed by stonefall.

We walked down to the flowery slopes of the Alpiglen, and on the way Don presented me with his rockfall scarred miner's helmet as he had already decided to return to the UK because he had run out of money and had a lecture date to keep. We had a pleasant lunch and then drove to Interlaken where we (or rather the Express) entertained Chris, Don, and their wives Wendy and Audrey to a magnificent dinner in the basement dining room of a plush hotel the same Friday night.

Early next day Geoff and I returned to Geneva, to continue our holiday. On Sunday we drove to Chamonix, and again utilising the first train, got up to Montanvers and did the NNE ridge of l'Aiguille de l'M where I led Anne and Geoff another friend, Peter Lowe.

I didn't climb with Don again but remember clearly one other encounter in the smoke room at Pen y Gwryd. It was after the Climbers' Club Helyg Diamond Jubilee Reunion Dinner on June 8th 1985. The room was crowded with many friends and Don



Far Left:  
*Demon soloing:*  
*Claude Davies*  
*soloing Demon Rib*  
*at Cromford Black*  
*Rocks in 1959.*

Left:  
*Don Whillans in*  
*classic pose with flat*  
*hat and cigarette*  
*cruising at Ramshaw*  
*Rocks.*

Photographer:  
*Claude Davies*  
*collection*

happened to be close to the fireplace where A B Hargreaves was just lighting a cigarette (there was no ban in those enlightened days). The match flared and, in a sudden silence, which occurred, he said loudly in his Lancashire accent 'You should give it up, AB. Otherwise it'll stunt yer growth' – but only two months later it was Don who was dead.

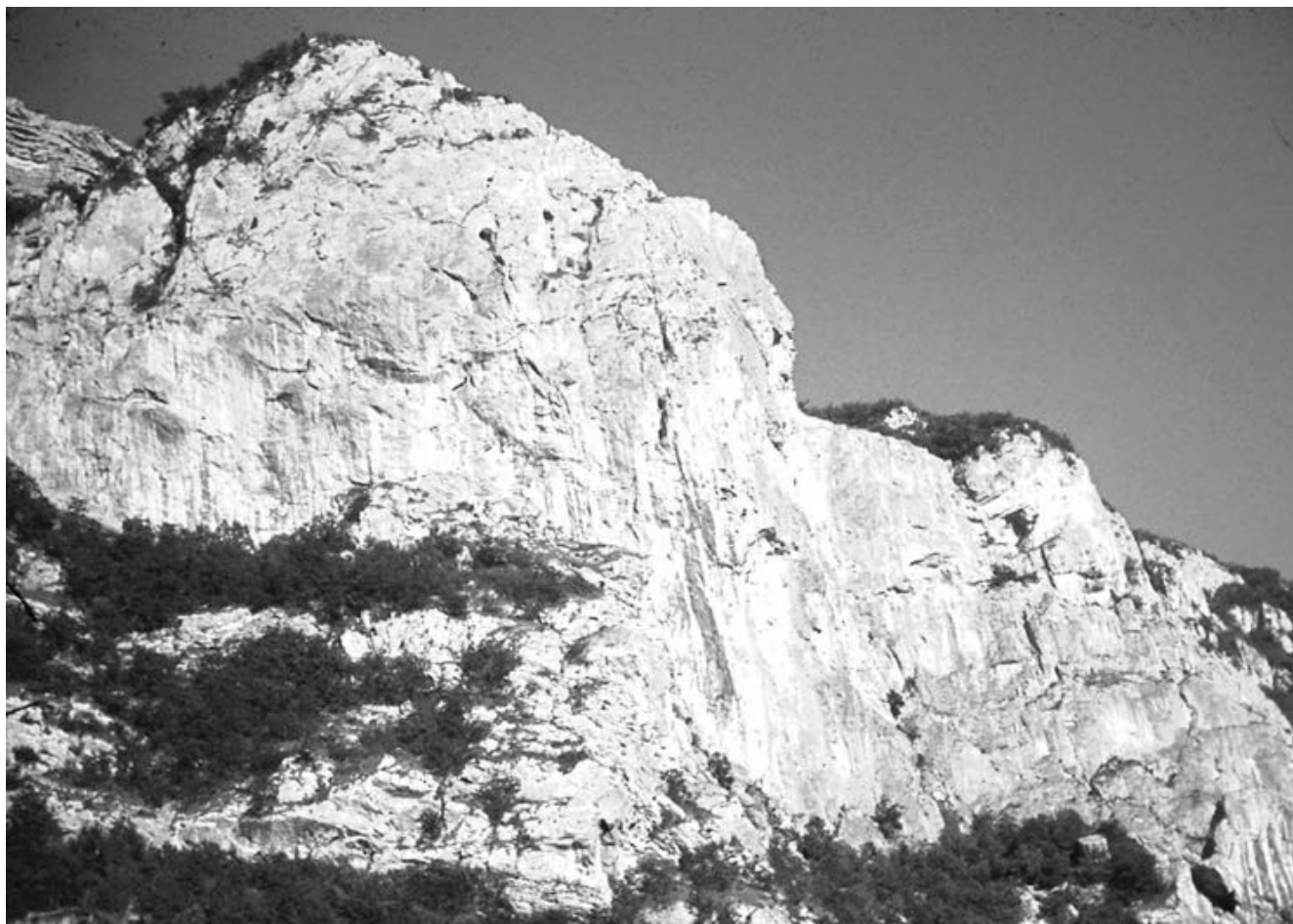
A few years earlier, driving out into the Peak District for a day's gritstone climbing with Hugh Banner I noticed, as I approached his house, what looked like an extra chimney on the roof. As I drove I saw it move and realised that the figure was Hugh wrestling with the cladding on his chimney pot. The house was built on the edge of a steep slope dropping down to New Mills, and this situation gave the horizontal arête of the roof ridge an excess of exposure.

Eventually he climbed back in through the window and, after showing me some of his beetle collection, we carried on to our chosen edge, Stanage where we started off on Valhalla and finished the day with Goliath's Groove.

In October we went to the CC dinner at the Belle Vue Hotel in Trefriw, and on the Sunday to Craig yr Ysfa where I had my eye on a new line, to add to my original Mur y Niwl. We had decided that a groove leading up to an overhang would be a good place to start. The problem was that it was running with water so we reluctantly gave up our plan and contented ourselves with a rapid ascent of The Grimmer, albeit with a new direct finish.

Now it was 12 October 1963 and it seemed a good idea at the time (but turned out not to be) that I got





Above:  
*The shimmering  
 Saleve where  
 Moulam and Geoff  
 Sutton climbed the  
 Grand Arête and  
 descended by Les  
 Etiollets in 1962.*

Photographer:  
*Tony Moulam*

a lift to Helyg, arriving by 1130 am, and rushed up the track on Pen Helgi Du to Craig yr Ysfa, where I had arranged to meet Hugh Banner and Pete Hatton. They were still on top of the crag and, after a little chat and a snack Hugh and I set off down D Gully, a horrendously slippery and damp affair in Desmaison rock boots and PAs respectively, to the foot of the Amphitheatre Wall, just to the left of the start to Mur y Niwl.

There was no excuse this time but we couldn't start our line, at least until I jammed a small nut into a little crack about five feet up the groove, stood in

a sling and moved up precariously into its base. I managed another foot or two but descended to let my young friend take the lead! He was not only younger but also better than me and the decision proved a good one, and he moved smoothly and confidently upwards until an overhanging triangular shaped block blocked the groove. A first foray up to the right proved fruitless but a change of tactic to the left-hand crack and a traverse back right to a good stance was rewarded with success.

I soon joined Hugh on the stance, a sort of bracket jutting rightward over another unclimbed groove. I

was dismayed to see that he was attached to a couple of tiny nuts, and quickly drove in a peg, which I thought was a much better belay.

It took a little time to sort ourselves out whilst I satisfied myself about our belays. Hugh meantime looked up at the wall above, which did not look too promising. However, when I was finally settled on the stance Hugh set off up the wall above, to the left of a small overhang.

The climbing was engrossing and I watched carefully as Hugh edged upwards, so that I would know what to do when my turn came. He was a silent, introspective, climber who worked out his moves like a chess problem, and I found his progress reassuringly silent rather than noisy with vituperation and exhortation such as I was used to hearing when climbing with Trevor Jones, another of my partners at this time.

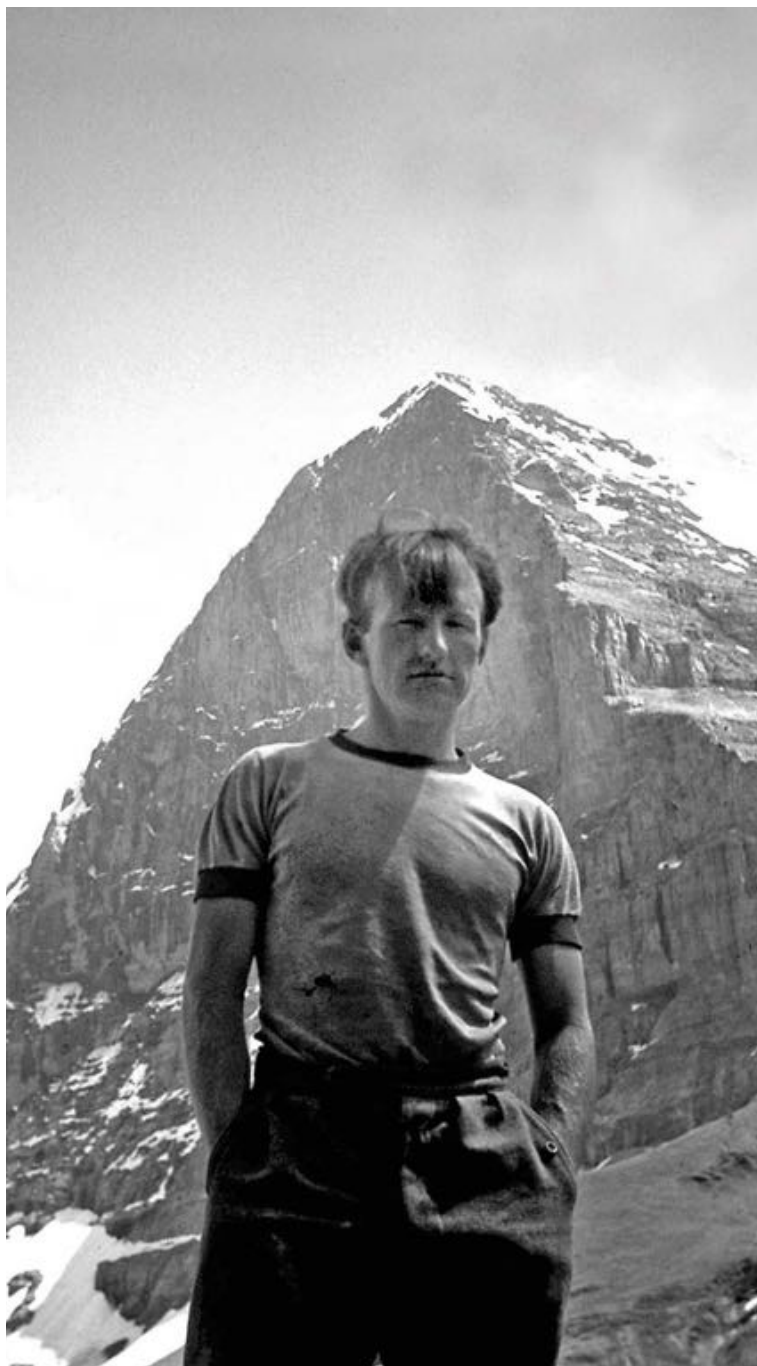
I assumed that the pitch was difficult as Hugh's movement upwards slowed, then stopped. I was not worried, as I knew that Hugh only fell off motorbikes, and not off rocks. However, he was now a long way from me, and had not yet succeeded in placing any protection. I suddenly realised that the mists of Mury Niwl had descended again embracing the cliff and us in its clammy coils. It was also becoming seriously dark and, as the mist changed to drizzle, and then to rain I was not much surprised when Hugh suggested that I abseil off and climb round to rescue him, as he could not make the last few feet go, in the prevailing conditions.

He managed to place a peg with some difficulty because of the compact nature of the rock. He clipped himself on, untied the rope, and dropped the end to me. I was stiff with standing still for so long but had sufficient sense to tap my belay peg once or twice to make sure it was sufficient to bear my weight as I descended. Eventually I was ready to drop over the edge of the ledge and slowly let myself down to the gully bed.

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Right: *Don Whillans below the Eiger*

Photographer: *Tony Moulam, (cleaned by Ian Smith)*





The wall was steep and I soon swung away from it and continued free to the ground.

Thankfully the rope ran freely as I retrieved it from the peg and I coiled it quickly before reascending D Gully. In now almost total gloom I scrambled on to the bilberry terrace and tied myself securely to a belay at the foot of the upper wall, directly above the place I thought Hugh to be. Cautiously I let myself down to the edge of the terrace, and found that I was in the right place. I could see my leader's face peering upwards, only about ten feet away. It lit up with a smile as I appeared but he did not choose to ask what had taken me so long, until he joined me on the ledge.

We now had to evacuate the bilberry terrace with care as it was becoming slippery and the bed of D Gully, with which we were becoming depressingly familiar, still demanded caution.

Our toes relaxed and celebrated their freedom with a comforting glow in our boots as we descended to the col and then down to the path along Cwm Ffynon. We didn't bother to call at Helyg as we knew everybody would be at the Belle Vue Hotel in Trefriw by now (8.00pm) for the annual dinner.

We had to continue to Capel Curig, where the public telephone had luckily not been vandalised and we found we had sufficient change to telephone the hotel. The receptionist called Pete Hatton to the phone and, true to his promise, he picked us up at (9.00pm). Now began the most terrifying part of the weekend as we swept along the luckily quiet roads to the hotel. We were found places (to derisive cheers) at an obscure table and were served our soup, just as John Hunt started his presidential speech!

We never got the opportunity to return and the first pitch we did was followed in 1965 by John Clements and Dave Potts to produce Plumbagin. However, their second pitch was not the same as Hugh's, which may have been the line taken later by Solid Air in 1980.

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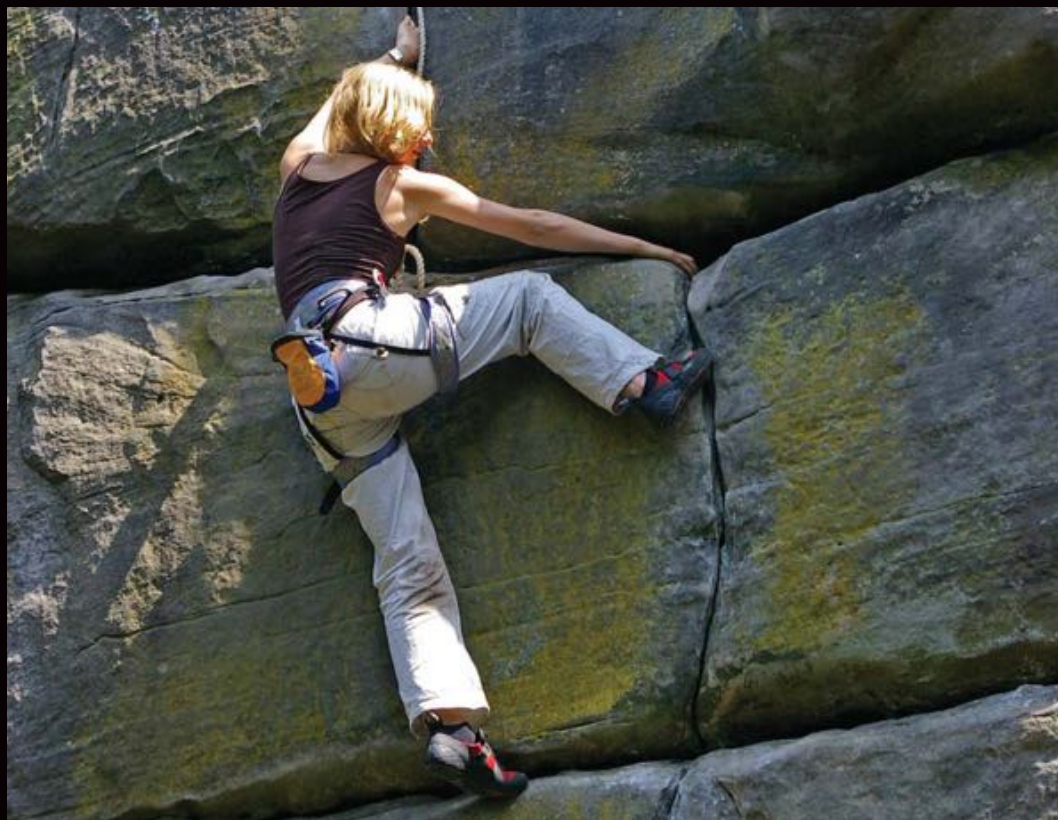
*Left: Hugh Banner on Plumbagin.*

*Photographer: Tony Moulam*



Right:  
*Macy Edwards  
throwing shapes  
on The Niblick,  
Harrison's Rocks*

Photographer:  
*Don Sargeant*



# THE HOME FRONT

*A Midwinter Night's Dream. By Geoff Bennett*

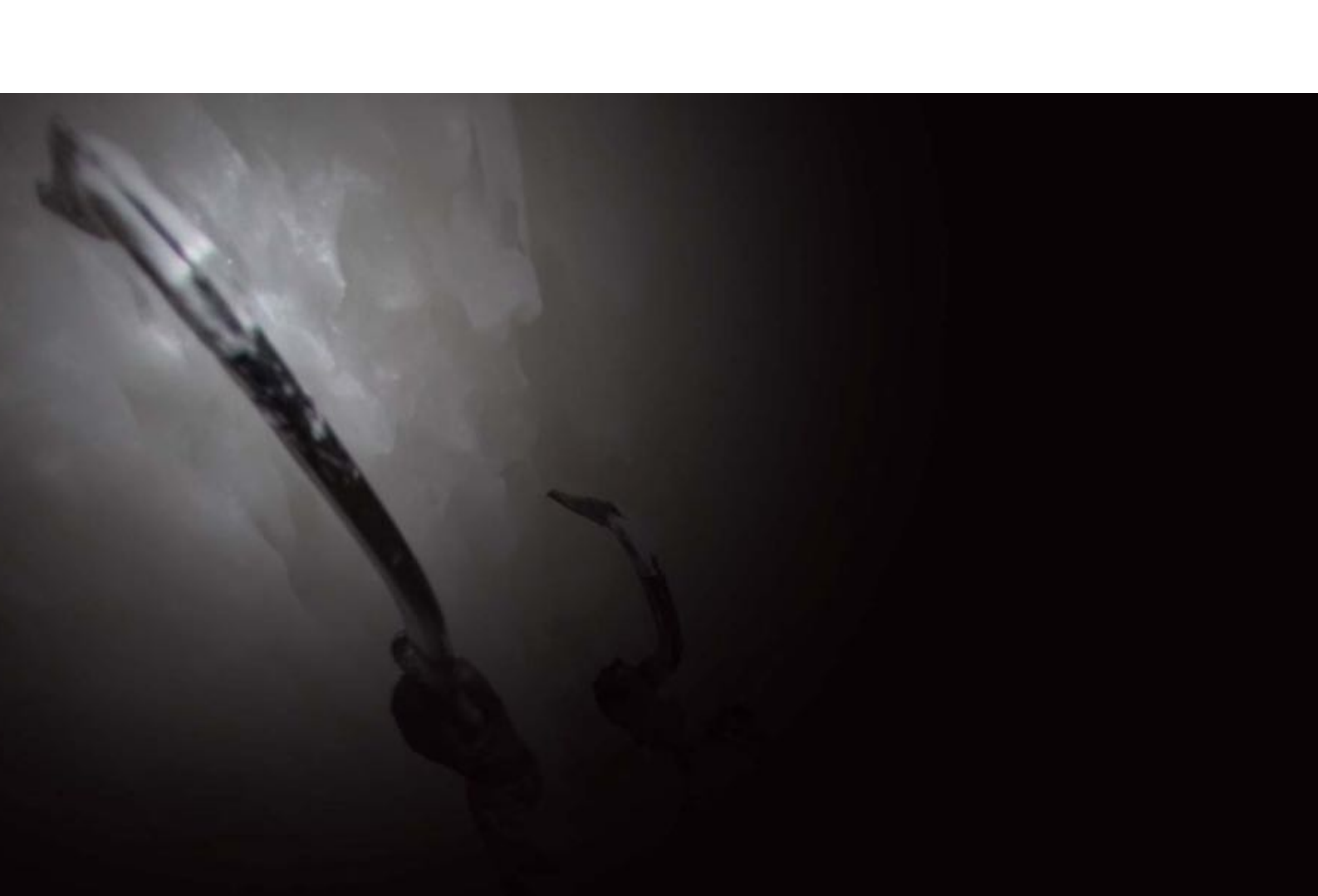
*Further Certification. By Nick Hinchliffe*

*Welsh Fix. By Sarah Clough*

*One Flew Over the Bilberry Ledge. By Martin Whitaker*

*Whatever Happened to? By Nick Bullock*

*A Winter Day at Harrison's. By Steve Dean*



# A MIDWINTER NIGHT'S DREAM

*Some climbers find the daylight hours just aren't long enough to fit in work, family and the more important things in life, like climbing. So when Welsh trad and ice activist Geoff Bennett heard that Central Icefall Direct was in condition but couldn't get time off, he found a radical solution – do it at night.*

*By Geoff Bennett*

‘Do you want to do a route after school sir?’ The lunchtime bell had gone and one of my Year 13 pupils had just entered the room, accompanied by one of my colleagues. ‘Hmmm.’ Meaning I might be interested, but was still to be convinced. ‘Mr. B said you’d be keen.’ That was why J was with him. ‘Isn’t he keen?’ I wanted to know why I was the preferred option. ‘He’s doing it tonight.’ That was my get out clause wrecked then. ‘He’s doing what tonight? What route did you have in mind?’ I was more intrigued now. ‘Central Icefall Direct.’ Said almost casually. ‘Ah!’ My interest was fully gained. I’d just heard a gauntlet land at my feet. ‘It’s going to thaw the day after tomorrow, so we’d have to do it in the next 48 hours.’ A good point well made. It wouldn’t be there by the time the weekend hauled into view and we couldn’t very well knock off work: teacher and pupil? My mates would have to cover and the Head and the Governors were bound to find out. No way. But when would it form again? Twice in one year was unheard of, especially as it hadn’t formed for over a decade, until this year. It would have to be done in the dark. He continued to rack up the arguments: ‘It’s in condition, it’s had loads of ascents over the last couple of days,’ which I’d heard. ‘It’ll be a ladder. Cascade and the Appendix were harder. Even Baggy’s mentioned it.’ That meant there’d be queues of outsiders! ‘We’re both going well, and DMM have given me new tools.’ I was nearly convinced. He’d done Cascade last winter after someone decked out from the top, right in front of him! He had led The Appendix with two screws, a pair of old, borrowed plastic boots and his dad’s axes. He’d spent the summer climbing with The Dawes, new routing in

the slate quarries. ‘How many winter routes have you done in the dark? Deliberately?’ ‘I did a couple with G last winter’ As he was my pupil I felt responsible for him, but he wasn’t going to be the weak link. I was. Could I do it? I’d done quite a few routes in the dark over the last couple of years as part of the local ‘nightshift’ who couldn’t get out on weekdays and were desperate to make the most of the fickle Welsh winter conditions. I’d just done a couple of new VIs on the Ladders and was going well at the wall, but I was recovering from a nasty cold and had recently been told I had a very rare leukaemia: chemo was to begin in the New Year. That was it: the clinching point. I may not get another chance. ‘You’re on,’ decision made. ‘But we have to do it tomorrow. I need to put new picks on my axes and we need to sort out the kit beforehand in order to make the most of the light.’ ‘Brilliant.’ Now he sounded really excited. ‘Plan to leave straight after school tomorrow? That should give us enough daylight to get up there and check out the route if nothing else. How many screws have you got? What length’s your rope?’ That evening I borrowed a 60m rope and five screws to complement my seven and his three. Fifteen would be more than enough for runners and belays, and way safer than two. Picks were changed, crampons checked, torches tested and batteries replaced. Clothes and ‘sack packed in the car. The day must have passed fast. I remember nothing about it, except that J turned up gutted. The previous evening had gone pear-shaped. He’d sharpened his picks to the wrong angle and as a result of the ensuing insecurity had sensibly retreated. If we’d been climbing in the light we’d have happily offered him a rope. As soon as school ended we were in the car and off along the back roads out of Bangor and up the Pass. A quick change of clothes at Ynys Ettws and off up the short, snowy walk in, chest heaving and lungs congested.

*The images for this piece have been modified from original photos by: Lukasz Warzecha, Paul Cubbins and Phillipa Watson.*





We'd timed it perfectly. The route had definitely seen traffic today but was empty now. We even got the benefit of some local beta, 'You've got 60m ropes and that many screws? Run pitches 2 and 3 together from the pedestal belay to a good flake on the right where

it lies back, around 55 metres. It's only W14 at the mo.' Thanks N, that'll be the lad's pitch then; a long sustained journey at 5/6, whilst I sat secured to the huge flake in the middle of the wall. All I had to do was lead the first pitch. I looked up again, as the light

began to fade. It looked long. And very steep. Our friends headed down, anxious not to be caught out in the dark without torches. The irony was not lost on me.

A gulp of water, a quick discussion, and an agreement; no other gear needed but slings and extenders. Spare torch and snacks in pockets. I'd never had so many ice screws hanging off me. A nod and I set off. There was no point in hanging around after all. Vertical ice, lots of sharp points and a pool of light in front of your face focuses concentration like nothing else.

I looked carefully for the signs of previous placements and made my way up. The line was pretty obvious but there was no sign of any previous screw placements. Were they hidden? Thawed and re-frozen? Did they not bother?! I placed a first screw around eight metres and continued up. The ice was brilliant. The picks were brand new and bit first time. Another screw. Up again, still steep but in awesome condition. Another screw. Always the same climbing quandary: press on and risk a big fall, or put gear in and get more tired? I looked down. I had no idea how far up I was, but it seemed a long way. This wasn't scary, so much as surreal. Attention re-focused on the route.

Another screw and up again. I was beginning to tire. I decided to rest by clipping the rope to the axe and then putting in a screw. Better safe than sorry I reasoned. The hospital would not be impressed to see me early and for the wrong reason. A short rest and up again. Before I knew it the angle had relaxed and I was romping up to the belay. Chuffed and relieved; it wasn't a perfect lead but it was safe, good enough for me and it gave C a chance.

The pinnacle belay was spacious, to the side of the icefall above and reassuringly secure. I hollered down, put on my down jacket and took in the slack. Total silence: not a breath of wind, not a car engine, not a voice, not a bird song. An eerie eyrie. I brought the lad up. He made quick and efficient progress, enjoying the weirdness of climbing in the dark and revelling in the perfect ice conditions.

'Good lead, that was steep. What an amazing route!'

His excitement was palpable and reminded me of myself at his age. By the age of 18 I'd spent two summers moving through the grades. Every spare moment had been spent traversing the bog-walls at Avon to build endurance and finger strength. Cycling everywhere. Climbing on local crags with school friends. There were some strange similarities.

'Aye, well you've got the tough bit now. Have you worked out your line? Screws racked okay? You could drop an elephant off the belay. If you need to take a stance under the icefall, that's fine; play it as you see fit. Remember you've got enough rope and screws so don't feel the need to skimp on protection!'

'I'm going to go over right to the faint groove and then up.'

'Good plan, I'll try and light the way as much as possible. Enjoy it.'

And off he went, carefully but purposefully. Three screws low down and he was heading up the steep, vague, groove line. He looked calm and in control, and the rope fed out steadily as he made quick work of the 'second' pitch. Where it began to lean back, more screws went in and he disappeared from sight, scampering up under the roof.

'Damn it, I dropped a screw on the steep bit. I'm just having a rest.'

'Fine C, take as long as you like, you cruised that bit. Don't worry about the screw, you should have more than enough. How does the pillar look?'

'Thanks. Steep, but good.'

I turned the head torch off. Pitch-black darkness enveloped me. The moon was hidden behind the Mot and the stars, though numerous, gave no useful light. Occasional cars in the Pass looked like slow-motion fireflies. Years ago this would have freaked me out but other night climbing adventures had demonstrated that this was a mind game par excellence. Ice climbing in the dark wasn't actually that difficult. Certainly not as awkward as rock-climbing at night, when holds and gear were more difficult to find and the cold made an appreciable difference. On ice, the cold was an advantage, whilst the route's line and holds were

usually obvious, as was the gear. Navigation off the tops became more of a challenge but that was all part of it, testing all your abilities and skills. The sense of achievement was certainly heightened, of that there was no doubt.

'I'll put a couple of screws in below the roof and then have a look.'

Reverie broken, I looked up, sweeping a beam up the icefall and picking out the crux of the route far above me. The lad's beam was ghostly behind the freestanding icefall; I couldn't see him but I could see what he was looking at. His beam disappeared and then reappeared looking up at the crux. A sweeping away of icicles and a few tentative blows out to the right.

'Looks a bit steep to get onto it here. I'm going to go back down a bit, see if it's easier to get on to the front of it.'

'Good idea.'

The rope slackened as he down climbed a short way. In sight again, he rested as he sized up the crux.

'Watch us here, it looks solid enough but you never know.' Confident swings of the axes and the rope snaked up again. 'Wow! Awesome! There's brilliant placements, oh man you'll love this.'

It seemed like only a moment later he was gone, out of sight, out of light, out of earshot; over the lip at the top. More rope slithered out quickly and then a halt. It was 55 metres, give or take. The lad must be there. Moments passed, the ropes went tight; it was time to leave my eyrie.

He was right: the climbing was awesome. Steep and sustained, but never awkward, the ice continued to provide excellent placements. Attention totally absorbed by what was in front of and just above me; I worked my way up, bit by bit. One rope had got caught under the icicles and needed constant attention to coil it around me and clove hitch it to a 'biner on my harness. It was frustrating but manageable.

As strength began to ebb from my arms I found I was over the difficulties and on to the ramp, leading to

the roof and the famous icicle. The snag disappeared and the coils were released. A quick rest, removal of all the screws and slings, and I descended slightly to the base of the icicle. There was actually a step to aim for at thigh height. This 'pitch' looked shorter and no steeper than the previous pitches.

On my way up the icicle C. Thwock, thwock, thwock; a few great moves and it was over.

High fives at the belay.

'Well led C; a brilliant effort. Let's get off the crag; I'll head up to the top.'

Swiftly up the last 50 metres to wrap the rope around the huge erratic and pull the rope in as he ran up behind.

'What an awesome route.'

'What a brilliant way to climb it.'

Grinning like we'd got away with the crime of the century, knowing the route would be gone within 24 hours. I'd recently read an article that came to mind at that moment,

'Archer Thompson would be proud of us you know.'

'Archer Thompson? The guy who put all those routes up a hundred years ago? Why's that?'

'He taught Latin at our school.'

'Really? Wow!'

The descent path was well trodden and led us quickly back to the sacks. It was only 8.30pm.

'Chequered Wall Mr. B.'

'I'm knackered, it's alright for you young folk! If you don't mind, I'll call it a night.'

Water glugged, phone calls made, bags packed, off down the hill back to the car.

'Need a lift home?'

'Na, dad's picking me up from Pete's, thanks.'

As we drove back it turned out that C's dad worked in the ward I was headed to; small world up here.

The lights of Llanberis hove into view; normality, reality, familiarity, certainty: the opposite of what had recently gone before.

'Thanks C, good idea that. Guess I'll see you for double History tomorrow morning then?'

'Yeah, thanks. See you tomorrow.'





# FURTHER CERTIFICATION

*The growth of climbing as a school sport and a new leisure activity has spawned a rash of paper qualifications. Here Nick Hinchliffe laments the passing of an age where competence was counted not by the number of certificates held but the routes climbed, and casts a withering eye on a new breed of professional certificate dispensers.*

By Nick Hinchliffe

Being possessed of an unusually low capacity to learn from my mistakes and a memory which, due to increasing age and alcohol intake, seems to be somewhat defective, I was recently persuaded by those who employ me (using that verb in the loosest possible manner you understand) to undergo further humiliation – sorry, certification. The looming appearance of a new school, courtesy of the Private Finance Initiative, not only exposed my delicate aesthetic to such nonsense as ‘the decant’ (moving from an old building to a new one) ‘legacy technology’ (old computers) and ‘managed move dedicated facilitators’ (clumsy blokes with crates), but it led me to point out that as we should have a climbing wall in the new building perhaps we could do some climbing with the inmates – sorry again, pupils.

In the hope of a good old skive and the need to keep mildly mobile over the winter without having to subject myself to the indignity of the indoor wall (all rippling muscles and shirts off, quite ghastly) I offered to do something along these lines.

My thinking was that this would be all that was needed, based on the fact that the management at my previous school were notoriously lax, allowing one to do pretty much as one wished. But I had reckoned without my recent change in schools which was about to expose me to that horror of horrors – efficient middle managers.

So, there I was, faced with man wearing a suit which did not look like it had been slept in (again, most unlike my previous place of employment) who said

he had been researching the matter and did I want to do a site specific validation, the full CWA or the SPA? I thought on my feet and asked instantly for a translation into English.

Now, it appears that in order to allow modern youth to disport themselves upon an indoor climbing wall, or besmirch the local quarry faces with their presence, a different scrap of paper was needed to that which I had previously finagled.

Not only that, but the seemingly routine matter of setting up a top rope and not dropping anybody too far has been detailed at great length and dissected into various modules, components, key skills and so forth. There is also a dedicated regime of training, a period of skill consolidation, and then an objective assessment process. If this makes any sense to you, get help quickly.

It was finally agreed that I would attempt to obtain the Single Pitch Award, which would allow me to supervise climbing on indoor walls and single pitch crags, but only some of them. As the school runs an annual camp in the Lake District I would also be fortunate enough to go to that and see how the experts did it. Oh good.

I duly registered with the appropriate awarding body, and comforted myself with the thought that my years of bumbling, pulling on gear and following better fellows up routes would stand me in good stead. After all, if there is one thing I do know about it is how to survive a climbing trip with the minimum of effort and discomfort, the very ethic I should wish to pass on to my charges.

When my log book and a handbook arrived I learned that alongside an ability to climb, I also needed to be versed in 'the history, traditions and ethics of UK rock-climbing', 'etiquette', 'setting and reviewing targets' and 'identifying and reacting to the needs of the group.' Having checked to ascertain that I was indeed reading a book about taking people climbing, I experienced that sickening feeling of here we go again...

So to school camp, and what could be better than a week of sun and fun with enthusiastic teenagers in the heart of Lakeland? Well, I am unable to comment, except to note that our band of grumpy, homesick, foul-mouthed juvenile emotional retards – the kids were not much better – experienced the full impact of a northern monsoon and the joys of primitive camping (no showers, no proper toilets, and no sleep).

It appears that people have obtained pieces of paper such as the one I was seeking, and they make a living (of sorts) by instructing climbing. But most of them are not climbers in their spare time: extraordinary. Several of these were provided, so that we took home the same number of children that we started with. It appears the modern parent is quite keen on that for some reason, a far cry from old Ransome and 'better drowned than duffers,' but there we are. I was duly attached to one of these Johnnies for the furtherance of my skills, and because he could not drive a minibus and I could. 'So where are we going climbing?' I asked cheerily, thinking to engage the Johnny in conversation, establish rapport and so on (as recommended in the Handbook, you see). 'Brown Howe' he replied. Brown Howe? Where the hell was that? I have been climbing around Conistone for decades, had read the guidebook from cover to cover, and had never heard of it. I was also pretty certain that no crag of that name existed in Duddon either. Clearly more to this than meets the eye, thought I. This steely eyed youth has a secret crag and intends to use these kids to clean the lines then claim 'em all. Clever.

Alas, it transpired that Brown Howe is an insignificant former quarry just off the main road, of such nugatory worth that not even members of the FRCC have deemed it worthy of attention. Having spent several days there I can only salute their judgement, for a sorrier, midge-infested pit of squalor I cannot imagine. This did not of course stop us forcing dozens of unwitting teenagers up and down it, propounding the fiction that 'this is real rockclimbing.' Some of them are so foolish as to believe it still.

There was, however, some instructional value for your correspondent in this folly, for the said steely eyed Johnny turned out to know an inordinate number of knots, hitches, splices and God knows what all else, which he took great pains to demonstrate at every opportunity. Some of these are so arcane as to not feature in the aforementioned manual, and I have certainly never seen the like before.

Best to show willing, thought I, and duly aped him in the way one does with a tiresome child building a tower of bricks. There was, of course, no need for such nonsense, I reasoned, after all a bowline and a double fisherman's are all one really needs, but play along and humour the lad. The week passed in a daze of sore thumbs, damp feet and insect repellent. So, onwards and upwards to the training course which must be attended so that a little sticker can be placed in one's logbook, allowing another jackal to take a chunk out of one's wallet. And naturally to acquire the relevant skills.

There were eight of us poor souls and two instructors and things started civilly enough in a café. Just like real climbing so far. As the day was foul, and forecast to remain so, I assumed that we should use sound mountaineering judgement, have a chat, possibly a lunchtime pint or two, and be given our stickers and sent away with some sage advice to allow each of us to prepare for assessment.

In my case, I rather thought this would be a pat on the arm, a wink, and 'keep up the good work old



boy, you clearly know what you're doing, all will be well.' Perhaps you can imagine my horror, therefore, when our Leader announced that we should go to Froggatt Edge, spend most of the day there, have an evening visit to a climbing wall, and agree a suitable programme for the morrow.

He clearly intended to push on with this farce, and I was not best pleased. Still, best to play along. So we went to Froggatt (amusingly, some of the participants did not know where it was, as they climb almost exclusively indoors), sat about whilst our leader explained that all my equipment was too old to be used as it did not come up to CE regulations and would not withstand the requisite number of kiloNewtons in a fall factor 2.43 situation. Or something along those lines.

We were encouraged to examine each other's gear so that we could 'share best practice' whatever that means. One of the indoor types shuffled up to me and I thought that at last someone had recognised my experience and was about to sit at my feet and learn.

'Is that your tradding rack?' he enquired

'Er, sorry, my what?'

'Is that what you use when you go tradding?'

Translation was clearly required, and sought.

No, it has nothing to do with jazz, more's the pity. It appears that the verb 'to trad' has now been subsumed into the language of Milton and Shakespeare. This is how you and I describe climbing and how we distinguish it from nancying about in baggy trousers above a mattress (bouldering) or cheating your way up a steep bit of scrofulous limestone (sport climbing). Once this had been explained the pimply youth muttered 'Wow, old school' and slid away. I sought no further enlightenment.

Things did improve markedly when we got on to the subject of gear placement. As I have cheated my way up many routes over the years I have acquired a degree of skill at chucking in runners. My savoir faire (a savoury flan, I believe) was almost recovered

when it became worryingly apparent that all the guff about different knots was to be taken seriously.

'What knot do we use here, to equalise these abseil anchors? And here? Why not a bowline? When must you not use an autoblock?' What? Our Leader seemed to have a knot for every occasion, and I suspect it was only the short interval between my midge infested week with steely eyed Johnny and the training weekend which allowed me to blunder through this section without being sent packing. I learned that I have been doing everything wrong for years, as has everyone I have ever climbed with. How we are all still alive (well, most of us) is something of a miracle, it seems.

Access was also covered in the Handbook, and the leader asked the group what they would do if they were climbing at a crag and the landowner turned up and asked them to move on? Now I have several good answers to this (tell him to sod off, let his tyres down, moon at him en masse, pretend to be Lithuanian) but it was just as well that one of the keen young climbing-wall types got his answer in first.

Seems that we have been doing that wrong for years too.

Eventually, but only when our Leader was blue from cold, we were allowed to go to a large indoor climbing wall for Phase Two. This consisted of carrying out a Risk Assessment, which as far as I was concerned was easy. The main risk I could see was that we were going to be at this until well into drinking time this evening. But, having learned by now the wisdom of silence, I kept mum and let the keen boys go at it, nodding wisely and saying 'good point' occasionally. This was the same method used in long-distant university tutorials when one had not done the work. i.e. all of them.

Clearly our Leader was not an educated man (or worse than that, he was a girly swot at university. Actually, now I think about it, that was the more likely explanation as he seemed well pleased and beamed at us before dismissing class. When we left,

the weather had improved markedly, and a sunny evening glowed pleasantly. One of the keen boys must have thought our Leader was still about, as he asked if anyone wanted to go climbing – at six o’ clock on a Saturday? Idiot.

The succour of licensed premises soon restored a modicum of dignity. Only the morrow to go, thought I. How hard can it be?

Well, pretty damn hard as it turns out. The next day started with a lengthy discussion about what constitutes a crag in the context of the relevant MLTE award. I rather thought it to be a big rocky thing with routes on it, ideally with nice grass ledges halfway up for snoozing and not too far from a suitably greasy café and a congenial pub.

Oh no. It seems that the SPA only permits of one going climbing on crags which are so near the road one can belay from the minibus, and are limited to one pitch only. Also no rough ground to be covered in the approach as the little dears might get their feet all damp and may tear their hoodies if they leave a hard surfaced path.

Gogarth? Out. Scaffell? Out. Cloggy? Forget it.

So, suitably warned, we were taken to Burbage and asked to set up belays, which we duly did, using the many large blocks and threads which abound. Our Leader then went about lifting blocks, wiggling them till ropes got free, and generally making a nuisance of himself. I was tempted to remind him of the dictum ‘Thou shalt not fall’ but something told me not to. Seemingly, the lesson of all this was that most belays are rubbish. Very reassuring. More of the same followed, with bottom roping (actually what we for years have called top-roping), top-roping (what we have called belaying) and various rescues being demonstrated.

If this sounds dull, forgive me, it did have its lighter moments. Oh how we laughed when someone confused a French prusik with a Klemheist. This is funnier than it sounds – just try saying it near a group of these qualified types and hear them roar with laughter. Go on!

So, as the sun sank in the West, we were finally awarded our little stickers and encouraged to go back for assessment with the same leader, rates very reasonable, every chance of success etc.

After much inconvenience, no little expense, and a good deal of wasted drinking time, there I was halfway to being qualified: halfway to bloody nowhere more like. It appears the form now is to spend time consolidating one’s skills, which seems to involve being an unpaid skivvy to some already qualified type who generously allows you to do all the hard work while he sits and investigates the contents of both his lunch box and yours.

This is the vital phase where, in working with groups, one is transformed into a steely eyed Johnny spouting all sorts of guff about knots and maximising the activity/experience mix. Oh, I can hardly wait. Furthermore I shall be required to falsify – sorry, I meant keep – a diary of all this and submit it to whichever thieving low-lifer I go to for assessment so that he can quiz me about said experience. And to cap it all, I have to get a qualified Johnny or whoever to sign a chit saying what an all round good egg I am, that my knots are a model of rectitude and that I can discourse at length on the merits of Spectra versus Nylon.

What an ignominy for a man of my stature and experience; a man who once wore a Whillans harness and first climbed Tennis Shoe before you could see your reflection in every polished hold. Looking ahead, I foresee a long and difficult winter looming as I stalk the climbing walls of the North offering to share best practice belaying while sneering at other chaps’ knots.

I rather suspect that the crux of this particular course will be finding a suitable type willing to simply write out whatever is needed for a few pints and a crisp tenner. Have no fear, reader, the dinner season is upon us and I am confident that the price of a pint or two at a suitable juncture will persuade some lost soul to perjure themselves. Then, onward to assessment!





# WELSH FIX

*The power of the mountains to revive and restore is perhaps a familiar experience for many climbers. Here Sarah Clough walks across the Carneddau and discovers how the Welsh landscape works its magic on those who are sufficiently open and receptive to its mysterious gifts.*

By Sarah Clough

**T**he path is boggy despite the blue sky. It tracks round the back of Llyn Ogwen, running westwards parallel to the road. The solitary walker is aware of the noise of vehicles passing, but only in an absent way, they're not really part of her world, her walk. She's distracted by her thoughts; a jumbled mess, not flowing as they should be but torpid and pitiful like the rainwater pools spread along her route.

There are plunge pools on the path and she has to stay alert, which focuses her thoughts a little, teases out the strands and untangles them.

At the end of the lake the path hooks right and heads steeply up the side of Pen yr Ole Wen and the walker dutifully follows its lead. Jagged footsteps and folded, cracked rock sometimes seemingly lead to nowhere, although the way on is always obvious. At one point there appears to be an impasse but it's a rock gate, the means of entrance a direct scramble up the central weakness.

The walker's overjoyed at the style of the path, it requires attention, momentum, application. Some of the threads of confused thought are pushed aside by this new driving force, tumbling over the precipice out of the domain of what matters. She glances back and is instantly bowled over by the emotionally breathtaking and unexpected view: 'How could I not know that view was there?' It's dazzling in its intensity and draws her in. She carries on walking but is driven now by a tangential desire to keep looking over her shoulder at the Idwal crags, almost tripping over her walking poles in distraction, until eventually the fundamental lure to power up the

hill takes over again. Every little while she's drawn to turn around again as she daren't forget the image, it must be committed to memory, and each time the view's changed, it's grown, bringing more of the familiar mountains and crags into view, until it's all encompassing and can't be taken in all at once. Suddenly it's all she's aware of, and the slowly unravelling tangled threads aren't just insignificant, teased so fine they break and vanish, they may as well never have been there.

At some unnoticeable point, the Idwal bowl becomes just part of the view, new things still appear like Llyn Bochlywd, the elevated lake on Tryfan's west

Left:

*Idwal Bowl viewed from the Carneddau.*

Below:

*Rock Gate*

Photographer:

*Sarah Clough*





flank, but they're eclipsed by the long wide Ogwen valley stretching southeast. The walker's stomach grumbles, reminding that there's still a personal reality to consider, but the jagged rocks at the summit are tantalisingly close and make the decision to press on and delay lunch seem indisputable. Hunger dulls the mind and she misjudges the steepness of the path and teeters backwards worryingly, so a compromise is taken and just below the plateau she takes a breather for some sustenance.

The summit of Pen Yr Ole Wen is then reached and surpassed, and yet that's far from the end. A stone seesaws and the tip of the walker's foot dips into damp ground, reminding of the plunge pools on the preamble round the lake – the attention is still demanded, new threads forming strong and resilient. Anglesey appears shimmering on the horizon. Nearby images draw the eyes too – rocks littering the path are dappled with spots of moss which give the impression of plump raindrops, although for once the rain is holding off – perhaps the views are necessary, giving a message.

The connecting ridge over to Carnedd Dafydd is strewn with scree and the walker concentrates on not sliding and not turning an ankle. She continues east and on top of Black Steps a cold wind grasps at her and she dons a pair of gloves, contemplating how this is an odd thing to have to do on the August bank holiday. The threads in her head reform into a full circle, linking the new found clarity right back to the cause, which is now no longer jumbled. The summers of late had been wet and miserable, and climbing motivation had been waning. The focus for fulfilling the year's aims that was built up in spring had been eroded by the weather, a new mood seeped in, one of languor, permeating through all the thoughts until all the good feeling was saturated and stifled. It was a veiled process though, not noticed until too late, until the despair set in and her soul reached out with a last

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Left: *Impressions of rain: Lichen on rock boulders.*  
Photographer: Sarah Clough





cry, and headed for the comfort of the Welsh hills. Wales has a distinctive feeling. It's strong yet unassuming, and it's beautiful: not beautiful in the same way as Scotland, or the Lakes, but there's an unmistakable aura. It's grand and yet basic, and if you spend more than a drive through in its presence you pick up those qualities too. You feel reassuringly back down to earth, it invades your consciousness perhaps because it forces you to stay alert, and things start to seem possible again. The Welsh hills are oblivious to you, of course, and they don't do you any favours nor try to trick you.

The summit mist doesn't come down maliciously, that's just what it does... but despite this indifference you can't help but feel that as long as no one's looking

it'll secretly lend you a helping hand and guide you on your way as long as you haven't asked for it.

Pensively the walker continues northeast, slowly gaining height towards the next summit. Chestnut horses appear out of nowhere on the meadow-like flank to the east, their manes glowing ethereal gold. She pauses a moment to watch them graze, picked out in the sunbeams, a focal point with fantastic views radiating in all directions, some still familiar and some foreign but all similarly captivating.

She pauses again on the summit, pinning down the map in the building wind and watching other walkers crossing westwards along the knife-edge to Yr Elen. Deciding that time won't allow her to take in that summit, she begins to descend southeast from

Above:  
*Traversing to the  
Black Ladders.*

Photographer:  
*Sarah Clough*





Above:  
*Spiritualists  
descending.*

Photographer:  
*Sarah Clough*

Carnedd Llewelyn across the top of Craig yr Ysfa, and is drawn by the humped ridge dominating the view ahead so decides to return that way. On the descent to the col she meets a spiritualist come to worship the mountain, who is momentarily detached from her walking group and is bounding down the rocks like an overexcited puppy. They have a brief chat about the importance of the hills in their respective faiths, then they part, the spiritualist dropping down southwards to the reservoir and the walker ascending one final time up the steep craggy scramble to Pen yr Helyg Du, stepping aside good-naturedly halfway up to allow a group of Scouts to pass.

The weather is now done with being amenable and it clags over, drizzle begins, clarity of vision no longer important now its secret message has been imparted. At the summit the walker turns south and starts to descend the ridge viewed from Carnedd Llewelyn, the soft undulations are easy on the knees so the usual pain never arrives, the rain just a steady patter never too heavy.

A party of four overtakes then is overtaken. The walker cannot escape them, but it doesn't really matter, she no longer needs to be solitary to clear her thoughts as the threads are woven into a solid fabric, a foundation of composure and serenity.



# ONE FLEW OVER THE BILBERRY LEDGE

*In an age obsessed with performance, training and the elite, Martin Whitaker discovers that there is still adventure to be had in the mountains, especially for those who are willing to wrestle with the vagaries of guidebook descriptions and vertical grass, and open minded enough to learn the ancient art of belly flopping on to bilberry ledges.*

By Martin Whitaker

I didn't like the look of it at all. The guidebook instruction was to climb the obvious weakness in the slab above, with a move left to a ledge at 15 metres, but the only apparent weakness around here was my lack of courage. A shallow groove sprouting tufts of grass and sprigs of heather might, I supposed, be construed as a weakness, and I was prepared to accept that what I was scrutinising could be described as a slab, though to my eyes it looked more like a wall. But there was no sign of a ledge at 15 metres,

only a fairly robust tree growing from a moustache of vegetation. I was a bit surprised that this tree didn't get a mention in the book, but perhaps I should not have been.

So far, nothing much had matched the description, but as Grass Pitch Gully was only a short way to our right, we must surely be on our intended route? Recommended as one of the best routes on the cliff, the one star Yellow Buttre 155m Severe, on Craig Cwm Du, was the target of my second visit to this cliff

Above:  
*Stepping over the  
Bilberry bush*

Photographer:  
*John Cleare*

in under a year, and I was now beginning to question my impetuosity in returning quite so soon. My previous visit had been in midsummer, with my old pal Pete. Over the years, we have shared some memorable mountain adventures, but we had done little climbing together in more recent times. So we thought that a spot of 'proper mountaineering' together would be a real treat. Apparently, a mere 30 minutes walk would get us to this temptingly accessible mountain crag on the northern flanks of Mynedd Mawr. We assumed this meant to the base of the crag, but I have since decided it probably meant to the first view of it, from the western edge of Cwm Du, because we got to this point in about 40 minutes! No worries though, as so far it had been a lovely walk on good paths, the sun was shining, and the hillsides were a riot of purple heather, buzzing bees, and the scent of honey.

Progress now became less straightforward. Any traces of a climbers' path into the cwm were completely obscured by heather and bilberry bushes. My previous visits to this crag had been in winter about 25 years ago, and I could recall absolutely no problem with the approach to the crag on those occasions. So it was a bit of a shock to be thrashing and floundering across a mixture of knee-high vegetation and collapsing scree to gain access to the cwm. Fortunately, traces of path eventually materialised, and we started to feel more confident. More importantly, a distraction from our difficulties arrived in the form of a host of fat, ripe bilberries.

Our chosen route on this first trip was the two star Adam Rib 121m Hard Severe, rated as one of the classic mountaineering routes in the whole of Snowdonia. It climbs the right arête of Eden Buttress, whose base is near the eastern edge of the cliff, and therefore just about as far away as possible from the western edge of the cwm. No crag diagram was available to aid identification, so we stayed orientated by identifying each gully and buttress as we stumbled past. Eventually, we reached a small grassy clearing in the bilberries, at the foot of Eden Buttress. It was not

exactly eroded with use, but it was a comforting sign that we were at the foot of our route. Nearly an hour and a half had passed since leaving the car, and we were a little disillusioned with our 30-minute, quick access, mountain crag.

'Easy climbing leads to a grassy ledge...' it said, but this did not tally with what we could see. In the hope that things would look better when we were ready to climb, we sat down facing away from the cliff, to eat lunch and enjoy the wild scenery. Despite it being the middle of summer, and presumably the best time for rock-climbing on north-facing cliffs, we had the cwm to ourselves.

Despite the fact that the crag had obstinately refused to change its appearance over lunch, we set off.

One of the early problems encountered on the route involved transferring from quite steep but easy rock to less steep, vegetated ledges. Cornices of heather and bilberry attempted to catapult us backwards, and I was forced to adopt a bellyflop and flounder manoeuvre to overcome such obstacles. Pete, being more streamlined, employed a torpedo technique. Heather and bilberry roots were found to be gratifyingly tenacious.

We made good progress despite these technical problems, which don't seem to be described in modern manuals on rock-climbing. The rock itself was reasonably clean and firm, positions were good, and the crag had a friendly habit of providing holds in the right places when needed. The only fly in the ointment was the disappearance of the blue sky and sunshine, which was replaced by curling tendrils of mist boiling over the rim of the cwm. Their threat introduced a degree of urgency to the proceedings. The fourth and final pitch turned out to be the *pièce de résistance* of the climb, up a steep knife-edge of rock. The narrowness of the rib gave unusual climbing, with just enough holds, and stunningly exposed positions – a truly grand finale. We finished off the day by walking up to the summit of Mynedd Mawr. The mist turned to rain before we got there, and deprived us of a view, but did little to detract



from what had been a memorable mountaineering day, with the outcome in doubt right to the end. Adam Rib had been such fun, in retrospect at least, that I soon forgot any minor problems with vegetation and the vagueness of guidebook descriptions, and found myself lured back for more. In early June I returned, this time with Pat, my regular partner. I had been hoping for an easier time of it, as I presumed the vegetation would be less lush this early in the year. On the approach to the crag, this was true, and the absence of bilberries on which to gorge speeded up progress to the start of the route.

On the first pitch, however, the old bellyflop and flounder skills had to be dusted off, and now here I was, metaphorically scratching my head, and trying to make sense of the route description for the second pitch. I have subsequently looked at a 1971 edition of the guidebook, and found it slightly more detailed than the latest edition, so maybe this is a covert CC attempt to wean us off spoon-fed information and get us to back to exercising our mountaineering judgement. If so, it's working! It seems that Archer Thomson suppressed information about his routes back in 1912, when the cliff was first climbed on, in deference to the opinion that written descriptions remove much of the charm of exploration. I wonder what he would have thought of photo-diagrams?

Faced with few options, I stepped left off the stance, and soon discovered a line of holds leading up towards the tree. They ran out some distance below it, however, necessitating a long step right into a vague groove. So far, protection had been abysmal, but then I don't suppose Mallory and Todhunter found much on the first ascent in 1912. Perhaps I was now in the 'obvious weakness', because I moved up and soon found myself diving left to get hold of the tree, to garland it with a welcome sling. Fortified by its security, I moved right on to the upper slab, where more holds materialised, leading me upwards to a deep crack, followed by a comfortable stance. The pitch had been unexpectedly enthralling and enjoyable.

The route now proceeded in classic idiosyncratic style. There were smatterings of loose rock, dirt, and much vegetation, interspersed with situations of fine exposure on excellent rock. An ancient sling was revealed, wrapped around a large but extremely suspect spike of rock. I presumed it was a relic of someone's retreat into Grass Pitch Gully, and removed it, to keep the place tidy. My initial smugness at not having to follow this dangerous option quickly vanished when I found it necessary to bridge up through an overhang of heather and bilberry bushes, using the spike as an essential foothold. Above, a ludicrous series of *à cheval* moves on a heather-covered *arête* led to the safety of a belay by some pinnacles. Another new technique!

All too soon, we had scrambled over the final serrated ridge and into the grassy haven that is the top few feet of Grass Pitch Gully. The whole route had turned out to be really entertaining. Needless to say, we had had the entire route, crag and cwm to ourselves, so the only noise to disturb the peace and quiet had been the occasional 'cronk' of a passing raven, or the whistle of a steam train on its way through Betws Garmon. This time our visit to the top of Mynedd Mawr was rewarded with the full blue-sky summit experience, with views in all directions, over mountains, lakes, sea, straits and islands.

The backwaters of the climbing scene, of which Craig Cwm Du is surely a fine example, are likely to remain so while the emphasis of climbing magazines remains on accomplishment, training, bouldering, and climbing competitions. Perhaps this is all to the good, as in such places it is possible to find the climbs in much the same condition as the pioneers found them nearly 100 years ago. Some aspects of adventure in the mountain environment may take a bit of getting used to, but to my mind it is certainly worth the effort. Even at this late stage in my climbing career, I am acquiring some new skills. Maybe I should consider obtaining some nailed boots and an alpenstock, but I think I'll keep the lightweight nylon ropes, harness and modern protection!







# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO?

*Indoor climbing walls and a cotton wool safety culture are conspiring to take the edge and adventure out of climbing. Here one of the leading proponents of taking a risk and running it out, Nick Bullock, strikes a blow for the on-sight, ground up, tradition.*

By Nick Bullock

Earlier in the year I met Steve McClure and after the usual banter – what have you been getting up to and what have you fallen off? (that's me not Steve) – it wasn't long before the topic of conversation turned to the different aspects of climbing. There was a familiar exchange exploring the nuances between sport climbing and what we now call trad climbing.

'Nick, it'll help your climbing no-end if you do some sport climbing.'

'That may be so Steve, but it won't feed my soul.'

The conversation then turned to how bouldering and training would improve my climbing: 'You should boulder and train more, and it will help your climbing.'

'That may be so Steve, but it will make me too strong and I'll rip the holds off most of the routes I aspire to climb!'

Where Steve and I did agree, however, was in that fact that climbing needs characters if it is to keep its soul. This led us to the big question: is climbing slipping down the icy slope to mainstream, conservative mediocrity and, in doing so, is climbing losing its characters?

I have been climbing now for nearly 20 years. From the start, my passion for the mountains has been fuelled by the likes of Tom Patey, John Barry, Chris Bonington, Alan Rouse, Hamish McInnes, Alex MacIntyre, Joe Brown and Paul Pritchard. Their writing is all about exploration and adventure, sacrifice, suffering, skin-of-the-teeth survival and total commitment.

Think of Chris Bonington and Doug Scott emaciated

and broken crawling from the Ogre; think of Tom Patey, snow blown and hypothermic; or Paul Pritchard creeping across a crumbling Red Wall, his deep dark eyes peering out from a duvet jacket. These iconic images cannot fail to quicken the pulse and to inspire. But what would be said today about Patey and Pritchard, neither of whom was wearing a helmet? Both look strung-out and at the limit as they push into territory unknown while being dressed for the wrong occasion. I suspect that in the climbing climate of today they would be castigated as reckless risk takers by those who set themselves up as opinion makers and market leaders.

I find myself laughing – and on occasion despairing – when I read threads with titles like 'Helmets' on the internet forums. Inevitably there will be someone preaching about how foolish it is not to wear a helmet, 'Oh, how foolish, they could injure themselves and cost the country thousands in medical costs.' Bloody hell, and I thought climbers were free spirits and you know ... wild? 'Oh, that Nick Bullock, what a fool, he doesn't wear a helmet when rock-climbing.' No I don't, and that's because I wear one for most of the winter – I've regularly slept wearing a helmet (I mean on a mountain, not in a bed... now that would be weird) and I hate them, and if I don't want to wear a helmet in the summer when I rock climb, I won't. Crazy I know, and yes, I appreciate I may be injured, but I don't cast judgement on anyone who wants to wear a helmet. When I last looked, rock-climbing was for free thinking people with a spirit of adventure: people who should be allowed to make their own decisions without fear of castigation from the health

Left:

*Steve McClure running it out on Ghost Train, E6/7 6b, Stennis Head, Pembrokeshire.*

Photographer:  
*Keith Sharples*





Above:  
*Jack Geldard onsight  
disciple winding up  
for a big move on  
The Promise, E9 6c,  
Burbage North.*

Photographer:  
*Keith Sharples*

and safety brigade.

Now I don't smoke, do wear a seat belt, eat healthy food, jog, and take vitamins. Is it going to be law soon to wear a helmet while climbing; to have your gear inspected once a year; or to fill out a risk assessment form before uncoiling your rope? How long before personal insurance becomes mandatory, and the failure to wear a helmet renders it invalid? Maybe it should be made illegal to climb loose rock, wet rock, or to attempt new routes that have not been properly tested by a suitably qualified person. Before we know it, it will be illegal to climb to the first bolt without stick clipping it, or heaven forbid, to boulder without a pad. This would be funny, if it weren't so serious. Modern climbers just don't appear to be questioning or dangerous or anti-authority any more. They have become politically correct and conform and join in with the castigation when someone doesn't toe the line. People like Don Whillans and Jim Perrin and Ed Drummond would surely be ostracised nowadays by the crowds who don't understand that climbing needs to be avant-garde.

Climbing has become too serious and too professional. I say this with trepidation because I am a sponsored climber myself and I know that my comments will be misinterpreted by the skim readers who will call

me a hypocrite. I suppose I would argue that actually I am sponsored more because of my lifestyle and the adventure aspect of my climbing than for my rather unimpressive list of numbers. But, as the standards in climbing have increased, it does appear that many of our top climbers have become dull. Whatever happened to the likes of John Redhead, Steve Bancroft, Pete Livesey, Paul Nunn or Joe Tasker, all very good climbers, but more than that, all big lively characters? We need them now.

To make a living out of climbing today you need to take it very seriously and be involved with an aspect that can be measured by a number or a stopwatch. As a result, far too many of our role models are chasing numbers, not seeking adventure. In today's high calibre, number chasing world it is deemed an advantage if you diet, train, diet, train, train, diet, train, not drink, not party, not go out and have a crack, not go on big trips, not climb in winter, not go more than a week away from the gym and certainly not go out and shuffle along ledges on adventure climbs. Not doing all of the above, in my opinion, makes Johnny and Jenny very dull boys and girls, which in turn makes climbing very uninteresting and stale.

Today life in Britain is making climbers and climbing

sensible. Britain is a nanny state, a cotton wool country. It's cheaper for the government if we are all squeaky clean and we all have mortgages. This makes us all live in fear and become beholden to the powers that be. Climbing is becoming mainstream, it's becoming too popular and trendy and it sucks, because then it becomes regulated and the masses, without much appreciation of what climbing should be, in my mind, start to make the decisions. I blame the advertisers and Hollywood, and anyone who beatifies, what is, after all, a dirty business.

Once again I know I will be called a hypocrite as I have accepted money from big business, but I would say that I have never made climbing out to be anything other than what it is which is, a dirty and sometimes serious game to be enjoyed by the participant. It is not a squeaky clean healthy option to be used to sell a product and that's why I will always struggle to fund my trips and my lifestyle.

Climbing walls are also a double-edged sword. I've spent hours in climbing walls and I love them, I think they are great for training on wet days, but that is what they are, they are training. Going outside for the first time after learning to climb purely in a wall must be terrifying. 'Must wear a helmet, must follow all of the safety precautions, must look for the blue hold, the red hold, the green hold, must make decisions for myself, move up to what may be a hold, but may not be a hold, must move up without clipping a bolt.'

It's no wonder people from this type of background cannot comprehend what it is like to go for it on a climb consisting of loose rock or wet rock and with poor protection. Being wall trained must have an effect on the person's attitude. And that, over time, will make an impact on climbing overall as more and more people from this background become the majority.

What ever happened to – let's get out and have it, let's explore and use our imagination; let's have a scare and a mini adventure? This 'proper' climbing experience, in my opinion, should be the first step in the learning curve not the last. Obviously, there are still many

climbers who do have adventures, who want to mentally test their mettle, but this type of climber is, I'm sure, a dying breed and the more climbing numbers increase and popularity turns climbing into a nice safe something to do to lose weight between the aerobics and yoga classes, we are doomed to have far fewer real climbing characters.

Climbing has many facets and we are told we have to unify and support all facets, but I believe competitions and being included in the Olympic Games is everything true climbing is not, it is rules and uniforms and numbers and scores and in the end it will be the death of adventure climbing and adventurous climbers.

Finally, the internet, God I love the internet, but how many times do you read, 'What are the conditions like on this crag, or that crag, or this hill, or this climb? Where has all the imagination gone? How about taking a chance, check it out for yourself? But then again, that could be a waste of valuable time and as everyone works so hard and time is so precious, we don't want to do that. Climbers of today need certainty and certainty in my mind spells the death of adventure and the death of adventure spells no character and no character spells the demise of climbing as we know it.

So, what's the solution? How about, let's make a law that will force folk to climb outside, on grit and without an instructor. Let them build their own belays and place their own wobbly gear and shake their way up a climb. And then, before they can be allowed into a climbing wall, they have to do the theory exam and answer questions like, is it compulsory to clip the first bolt on a sports route? And the final part of the theory would be compulsory viewing of Seb Grieve climbing Parthian Shot in the DVD, Hard Grit, or Ricky Bell in On-Sight, lobbing off his route at Fairhead. With that thought in mind, and Ricky's words at Fairhead ringing in my head – 'f\*#k, fu-k, fu#k, let me down' – I'll gingerly and safely get down off my high horse, taking care not to fall, and go climbing on something adventurous, maybe wet, or even loose heaven forbid!



# A WINTER DAY AT HARRISON'S

*Steve Dean takes time out from a trip to London to visit his old stomping ground in Kent and in doing so rediscovers the magic that makes climbing on sandstone such a special experience. His article is illustrated by fellow CC member Jim Curran, whose large canvasses capture the essence of this wonderfully textured rock.*

By Steve Dean

'The thing I remember most was the smell of the sandstone and the leaves on the ground, and of cigarette smoke, almost everyone there seemed to be smoking!'

*Gordon Stainforth describing an early visit to Harrison's in the mid 60s.*

'I can't tell you how much I'd like to be back at Harrison's, but you can't climb with a bloody Zimmer!'  
*Al Alvarez (recently).*

'Harrison's Rocks, a miserable outcrop for London picnickers!'

*The late Robin Smith.*

Although I'm fortunate enough to have lived in Derbyshire for most of my adult life, I am originally from that vast urban wasteland called South London. These days, by choice, my visits to the capital are rare but an invitation from my oldest friend to celebrate his 60th birthday had me driving



down the M1 in bitter cold February weather. Needless to say, the celebrations were highly enjoyable, as the pints and the stories flowed and next morning saw me more than a little hungover. To quote Nick Lowe, it was a case of the full metal trilby! However the morning had dawned bright and sunny and I was determined to stick to my original plan to pay a visit to Harrison's Rocks. I needed to get back to Derby that night, but the idea of visiting the outcrop came from an exchange of letters I'd recently had with Al Alvarez.

In his letter Al had made it clear how much he had come to miss his regular visits to Harrison's as he could no longer get around easily and he ruefully cursed the passing years:

'I can't tell you how much I'd like to be back at Harrison's, but you can't climb with a bloody Zimmer!' For myself, as of course for many others, Harrison's is where it all started; it is where as an awkward teenager I first tried (with minimal success, it has been said) to climb rocks. In no time, I was captivated by climbing and all that went with it and was making every effort to get out most weekends. Today the sandstone outcrops of East Sussex and Kent hold a wealth of treasured memories for me. It was here that I tried to make that often fraught transition from school kid to adulthood and on the way I had a lot of laughs and met some excellent characters. Nonetheless, it was more than 20 years since I'd visited Harrison's and this being a bitter cold midweek day, I was looking forward to having a quiet stroll around without many people being there. Now, I've long subscribed to the notion that if you climb for long enough, in my case well over 40 years, the intensive nature of the activity coupled with deep friendships you form cause your memories to be particularly vivid. Recollections of long ago can be triggered off by the most mundane things like a road sign or a trivial fragment of music on the radio. Today was to be something of a day of memories and of long forgotten recollections. Despite my hung-over state, I left my friend's house and pointed the car down the A21, heading for the M25. A sign came up for a place called Green Street Green, a small village near

Dartford. This was the home of 70s gritstone ace John Syrett before he went up to university at Leeds. I never actually met John, but I saw him climbing in Wales around 1970. My friends Tim James and the Stainforth twins Gordon and John climbed a great deal with John and had a very high opinion of him both as a climber and as a person. As I drove south I pondered on the great sadness of his early death in 1985, seemingly a victim of alcohol and deep depression. A prince among gritstoners, John's contribution to Yorkshire climbing was considerable and his memory is still cherished by many.

My favourite approach to Harrison's is to drive down to East Grinstead and Forest Row, our usual hitching route out of London in the early days, and then to head east along the quiet B2110. This allows you to appreciate the real beauty of this part of the Ashdown Forest. Here are pretty rolling hills dotted with areas of rich woodland and tiny villages with weatherboarding on the buildings, old Saxon churches and oast houses. It is a truly lovely part of England, and on this cold and sunny morning, I thought it had never looked better. Many years ago when I still lived in London, a climbing mate from Huddersfield came to stay. We envied him living in West Yorkshire with easy access to so many superb crags, but he was completely bowled over by the beauty of this part of East Sussex and Kent, something we at the time took for granted. On this bright morning his warm reaction to the place came back to me and I smiled at the memory. On this approach to Groombridge you pass through two particularly pretty villages, Upper Hartfield and Withyham. Upper Hartfield is where A.A. Milne the creator of Winnie the Pooh had a large house; the place where Rolling Stone Brian Jones died in the summer of 1969. Withyham is where you find the Dorset Arms, a wonderful country ale house of rare quality. With it being midweek Groombridge was very quiet and I drove up past the station and the cricket ground, lamenting the passing of the much loved Festerhaunt cafe. I drove down to the Harrison's car park, to find only two cars there. The leafless trees rustled in the

Left  
'Sossblitz' Buttress,  
Harrison's Rocks

Artist:  
Jim Curran

breeze and a light fall of snow lay on the ground; it was delightfully peaceful and I felt very glad to be back there after so many years. The walk up to the top of the crag is probably less than half a mile, yet I fondly remember as a youngster that it seemed never ending, so eager were we to get our hands on rock!

Living now as I do in very close proximity to the wonderful crags of the Peak District, it is easy to forget just how rock starved London based climbers are and how important these small sandstone outcrops are to them. One of the best overviews on visiting these places came from Jim Curran\* writing in 1991 about an earlier time:

‘The wonderful, heady smell of sandstone, leaf mould, hemp rope and sweat; a grim struggle, plimsolls flapping, up one of the two or three easy climbs we managed on a tight top rope; furtive skulkings down rhododendron-lined paths with the bulging rounded buttresses like big beer guts poking through the undergrowth.....a long dark walk to East Grinstead station to catch the last train back to Victoria. There, sitting looking out into the dark night and the lights of suburban Surrey as London drew closer, nursing aching arms and fingers, I felt the stirrings of a strange elation that 30 years on is as addictive as ever.’

Walking up towards the crag, I met a friendly couple out walking a lively Springer spaniel but otherwise there seemed to be nobody about. I reached the rocks and peered down Slab Direct, immediately noticing how the trees below the crag seemed to have been thinned out, giving quite a clear view over to the railway tracks. I scrambled down to the foot of the rocks and then had a wander up to the North Boulder. Despite the snow on the ground, many of the holds were chalked up and it was good to see that plenty of bouldering was getting done. The sun shone brightly through the leafless trees and I walked slowly along the foot of the rocks delighting in having the place to myself. I made my way to the foot of Blue Peter and Slab Direct – something of a pilgrimage this, these were the very first climbs I ever attempted. We had travelled down from Tooting in a minibus, with very little idea of what lay

ahead. It was May 1967, someone had a radio playing Purple Haze by Jimi Hendrix and Waterloo Sunset by The Kinks, and we were really just after having a good laugh and a pint afterwards. None of us showed much talent for climbing, least of all me, but walking back to Groombridge that night something clicked in my mind. I’d enjoyed the day hugely and with a like minded mate, Dave Heddon, I was back there a week later with a borrowed rope. The passion for climbing just grew from there, augmented by the brilliant music of that period, the discovery of alcohol and the adventure of hitching up to Wales, the Lakes and Scotland. Nothing unusual in this, many people have gone down a similar road, but they say that you never forget first loves and I cherish the memory of those early visits to Harrison’s. The place seemed so beautiful compared to where I grew up in London, the air never felt cleaner and the beer had never tasted better.

To the right of Slab Direct, next to the Hangover routes and Long Layback, is the fine wall that contains such classics as The Flakes, Coronation Crack and The Limpet. Over the years I watched some excellent climbers in action here and certainly sandstone with its own peculiar nature soon rewards those with the right combination of strength and technical ability, yet utterly confuses some climbers. I’ve seen the same thing happen at Helsby and particularly in Northumberland where many visitors are humbled by this rock type. In the late 60s and early 70s, I often saw people like the Holliwells with their mate Robin Harper, Trevor Panther who always seemed to climb barefoot, Ben and Marion Wintringham and perhaps the finest of them all, Martin Boysen, who always seemed to look relaxed even on the hardest of routes. Later I recall seeing a young Mick Fowler here and powerful climbers such as Guy McLelland and Dave Jones. Northern climbers are often scornful of the Sussex/Kent outcrops because of the general practice of top roping due to the soft nature of the rock, but a lot of bold soloing has gone on over the years and continues to this day. The Holliwells were notorious for not bothering to use a rope and would sometimes notch up 30 routes in a

session, though to quote Les, 'We did take a few tumbles on the way!' The Harrison's classic Slimfinger Crack (a fine strenuous 5c) was soloed as early as the late 1940s by the likes of Tony Moulam, Menlove Edwards and Johnny Lees and wide scope for considerable boldness on these rocks remains for future generations.

At the Kendal Mountain Festival in 2008, Jim Curran had an excellent exhibition of his paintings and drawings that included many images of the Sussex/Kent outcrops. I thought it very significant that Jim, who has travelled extensively amongst the great mountain ranges of the world, should find such inspiration for his work in a return to his own climbing roots. As I've already said we never forget first loves and Jim's work was of great charm and captured much of the essence of Harrison's and the nearby High Rocks. One of the paintings was a large work, about 20ft x 10ft, of the wall at Harrison's between Long Layback and The Limpet. It dominated the gallery and I joined other sad sandstone refugees who were picking out the lines of the various routes much to Jim's amusement! It seems that early sandstone addiction has this effect on many devotees. Gordon Stainforth started visiting Harrison's in the mid-60s with his brother John, cycling down regularly from boarding school at Tonbridge.

On one very funny occasion in a pub in Derby when we were, shall I say, somewhat well refreshed, Gordon stood up and commenced to enact every single move on the Harrison's classic Niblick. His attention to detail was astonishing and gave a clear indication not only of a healthy level of slight insanity, but a deep level of affection for the place just like my own. I'm pleased to report that no beer was spilt during Gordon's performance! People in the pub looked on bemused as all this took place, but I know that such behaviour is not unusual among southern sandstone addicts.

The Niblick was on my mind as I continued to walk along the foot of the rocks, past a very wet (as ever!) Sewer Wall area with the fallen tree still leaning on the rocks. I glanced up and thought back ruefully to my first ever abseil there, a most unnerving experience. Like many climbers, I only abseil when it is really necessary

and can't understand why people do it for fun! I glanced down through the trees as a train rattled past on its way into Eridge station and enjoyed the gentle bird song in the trees. I was aware of that distinctive sandstone smell and could hardly believe that it was 20 years since I'd been to this place. When we first started climbing here, the routes we aspired to were Slimfinger Crack, The Niblick and Unclimbed Wall and with good reason. All three are excellent and require not a little strength and plenty of technique.

As I'd mentioned, so far I had met no one else at the crag, but as I approached Isolated Buttress I was delighted to see that despite the snow on the ground, two people were climbing. Two greybeards (i.e. they were even older than me) were engrossed in the delights of the excellent Birchden Wall. One of them was halfway up the wall, top roped by his mate who was wearing an old overcoat. Frank and Chris turned out to be very friendly and were down for the day from somewhere near Croydon. They were keen sandstone regulars and enjoyed having the place to themselves midweek avoiding the weekend crowds. Frank had known Al Harris and Tony Willmott and we chatted awhile about times past and friends no longer with us. I was then offered the end of the rope, so I got my rock shoes on, tied on with a traditional bowline round the waist and turned my attention to Birchden Wall. It must have been 30 years since I'd done this lovely climb, but I moved steadily up the wall savouring the moves. The rock was bone dry, but very cold and I soon had numb fingers, but it was an unexpected treat to be climbing today and all too soon I was at the top. We chatted a little more and then while they moved on to climb elsewhere, I carried on walking down towards the Unclimbed Wall area. This was always one of my favourite parts of Harrison's with several excellent climbs to choose from. Talking to Frank and Chris caused me to think about Al Harris and Tony Willmott. I only met Al a couple of times but around 1969/72 I used to chat with Tony regularly, often in the YHA shop at Charing Cross where he worked. Tony came from Sutton and at that time was rapidly making a



name for himself, particularly in the Avon Gorge. I fondly remember one occasion at Harrison's late in the day when we were packing up, ready to head for the pub. Tony was in action, climbing that fine sandstone test piece Sossblitz. He was being heckled by his mates from the North London MC, but proceeded to cruise up the route (a particularly demanding 6b) giving a running commentary on how to execute each move amidst much general banter and laughter. Somehow that memory has always seemed to sum up just what Harrison's was all about.

In truth, I can never think about Tony without a pang of deep sadness, as his death at the age of only 23 was a tragic waste that deprived us of a charismatic and intelligent lad. He had just settled in Bristol and was getting established as an outstanding rock climber with some excellent first ascents throughout the South West. I was at Avon with my mate Sid when he had that fatal fall soloing home on wet rock and I've never forgotten the shock and dismay of everyone there on that awful afternoon.

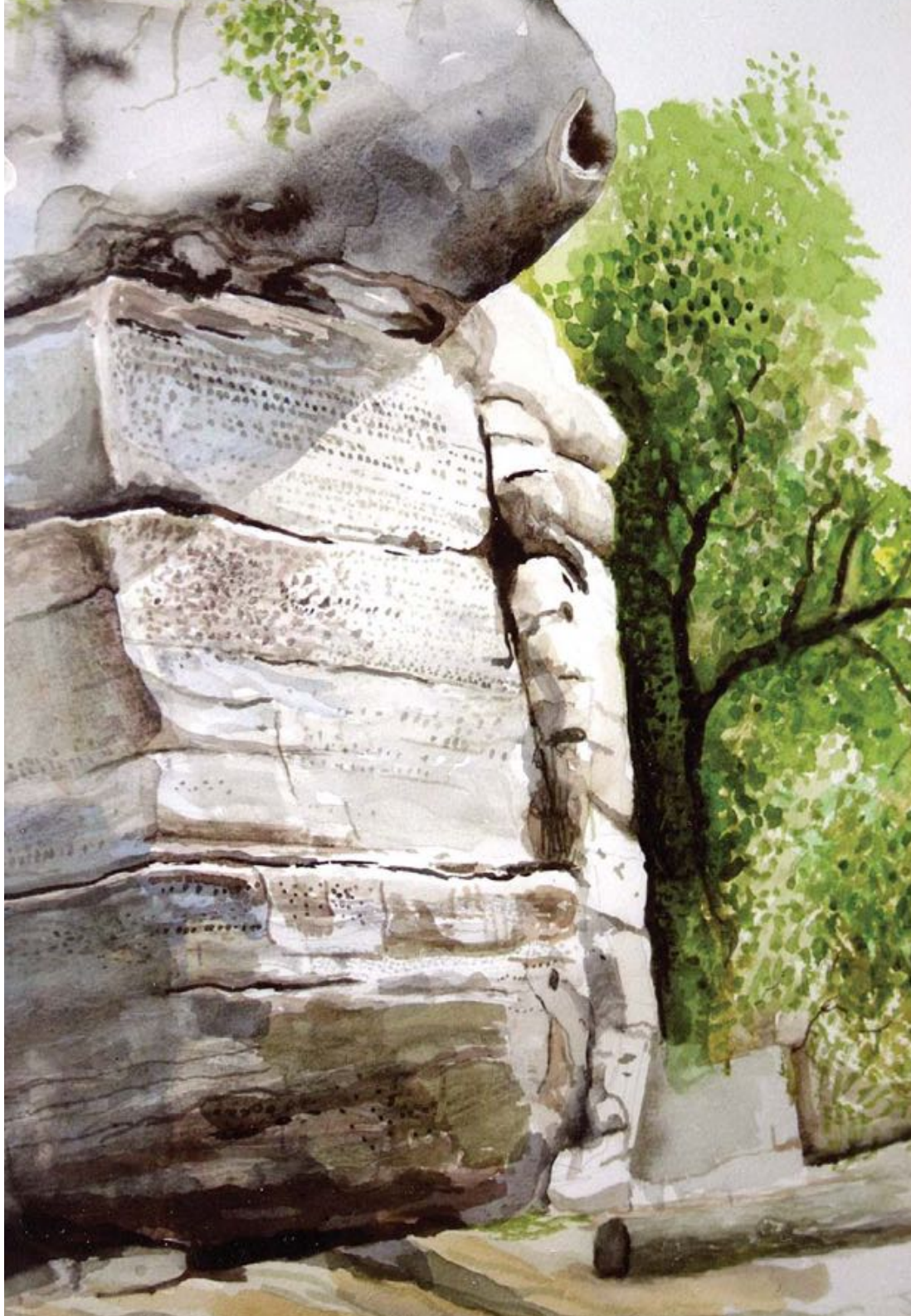
I sat on a tree stump below Unclimbed Wall and fondly remembered the old days when a short walk from Eridge station led to a crossing over the railway and a quick access onto the crag here. One delightful aspect of the Harrison's experience is the reopening of the railway line from Tunbridge Wells, past High Rocks and through Groombridge, to join the main line at Eridge and the use of steam locomotives on the line. A lovely touch of nostalgia, particularly for those of us who remember steam trains in this part of England from our childhood.

What had caught my eye in comparison to visits many years before, was the degree of tree removal and thinning that had been carried out giving the place a welcome, much more open feel. A notice on one of the trees indicated that this process is known as coppicing, a process of well thought out management by the Forestry Commission. The sandstone is at its best when tree cover is reduced (i.e. at Bowles Rocks and increasingly at High Rocks) and this work seems to bode well for much of Harrison's.

I walked back along the bottom of the crag and then dropped down to the lower footpath, which, with the thinning out of the tree cover, gives a good wider view of the place. The afternoon was getting on and the sun, though still quite bright, was low in the sky and bathing the rocks in a pleasing winter light. As I looked up through the trees a train rattled by en-route for Croydon and then Victoria, but as the noise of the train faded away all I could hear was lovely birdsong and occasionally the voices of Frank and Chris who had moved along to climb the mega classic Niblick. Chris was halfway up the climb, as Frank belayed him whilst enjoying a fag. They were the only people I saw there for the whole day, and as I walked on I reflected on what a lovely contrast this was to weekends, when the place is nearly always crowded. Walking along the lower path was very pleasant. Somewhere quite near I could hear a woodpecker drumming and despite the coolness of the afternoon, I sensed that the place would soon be covered in bluebells, always one of the great delights of much of the woodland in this part of England.

I started thinking about the history of the place, a crag that means so much to so many. In the late 1920s Nea and Jean Morin climbed here with companions such as Eric Shipton and Charles Marriot. The wonderful Unclimbed Wall dates from this period and in the early 30s Courtney Bryson produced the first guide to the rocks. How peaceful it must have been back then, long before the boom in popularity. The rocks are thought to be named after a local farmer William Harrison, who manufactured firearms there until around 1750. The Forestry Commission bought the land in the early 1950s and in 1958 the rocks were purchased by a group of climbers including Dennis Kemp.

The rocks are now owned by the BMC Land & Property Trust. Long may they provide pleasure for future generations, in this delightful rural setting. The relatively close proximity of London is always going to result in considerable pressure on this fragile environment but sterling work has been done over the years by a great many people and a huge debt is owed to



Above:  
*Isolated*  
*Buttress, Harrison's*  
*Rocks*

Artist:  
*Jim Curran*

Terry Tullis in particular.

I wandered back up to the crag, touched the sandstone fondly for the last time and then scrambled up to the main forest path back to the car park. It had turned very cold now and I was glad of a wool hat and gloves. It would be dark in half an hour and to the north over London the sky looked full of more snow. I walked quickly back to the car, aware that I had the delights of the evening rush hour on the M25 and a 200 mile drive ahead of me. It had been worth it though, my hangover was but a memory and today's visit to Harrison's had been a delight and a fond reminder of so much.

As I've grown older, and I hope a little wiser, I have learnt to be wary of nostalgia as memory can so often distort and give an unbalanced sense of significance. Life should always be focused on the present and the future, but just occasionally some places, smells or perhaps pieces of music can ambush us all and our lives are the richer for it.

My first few visits to Harrison's were followed only a few weeks later by the wonderful BBC Outside Broadcast from the Old Man of Hoy. Like millions of others, I watched spellbound as our heroes laconically made their way up that amazing sea stack. The place seemed so excitingly remote and as a boy still at school I never dreamt that 20 years later, I'd climb the Old Man myself. To this day, the sounds of Procol Harum's 'Whiter Shade of Pale' and Traffic's 'Paper Sun' transport me back to those gothic black and white images of the climbers and the reverential almost hushed commentary of Chris Brasher. Even to a total novice like I was, it was obvious what strange charisma was possessed by both Joe Brown and Dougal Haston. From the peace of the woods around Harrison's it was only about 20 minutes drive to the mayhem of the M25 and a reminder to me of how glad I am that I live in Derbyshire. The motorway became even more congested as I approached the Dartford Crossing. Whenever I pass this way, I'm always reminded of a conversation I had some years ago with Les Holliwell. Les described how sometimes on midweek evenings after work, he would meet brother Lawrie at the

crossing and then drive over to Harrison's or Bowles Rocks to try and knock off 15-20 routes before it got dark. In his words 'We used to crawl home absolutely exhausted!'

Now, from north of the Thames over to Groombridge or Eridge these days is not too bad a drive, but they were doing this long before the M25 was built, they must have been knackered next morning getting up for work. I drove through the Dartford Tunnel and on towards the north. It was dark and my mind wandered back to the kind letter I'd received from Al Alvarez, which had started me thinking of visiting Harrison's again. For many years Al was a regular weekend visitor to the rocks, part of a group that frequently included Ian McNaught-Davis. I remember sometimes seeing them there and the good natured banter that was a feature of that team.

Good natured banter and laughter; they are perhaps the things I remember best about those days down on the sandstone 40 years ago. I can still hear the voices of my mates Dave, Sid, Ray and Mick encouraging and mocking in equal measure as the occasion demanded and then the tired, dry mouthed walk to the pub and pints of wonderful Kentish bitter. Pretensions deflated, good honest efforts admired, all parts of learning to be a bloke and not a kid any more – laughter, joy and good friendship.

As I continued up the M1, the snow from the north got gradually heavier and I only just made it back to Derby before the motorway was closed. I was very tired when I got home, but it had been a precious day remembering long forgotten joys of a crag that has a place in the hearts of all London climbers. As I said before, I'm wary of nostalgia, but sometimes it can remind us of deep truths about our lives and of our depth of feeling for friends and special places. Good old Harrison's! That little crag put so many of us on the road to countless delights and exciting times, long may this continue, for climbers still to come.

\* Jim Curran "Suspended Sentences"  
(Hodder & Stoughton 1991)



Right:  
*Breathtaking views  
high in the Simien  
mountains.*

Photographer:  
*Peter Scott*



# FAR HORIZONS

Trekking in the Simien Mountains. *By Rya Tibawi*

Spitzkoppe - an Old Climber's Dream. *By Ian Howell*

Madagascar - an African Yosemite. *By Pete O'Donovan*

Rock Climbing around St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert. *By Malcolm Phelps*



# TREKKING IN THE SIMIEN MOUNTAINS

*An ascent of Africa's fourth highest summit was just one of the many delights experienced by Rya Tibawi and Peter Scott as they made their ten-day trek across northern Ethiopia, a deeply devout but welcoming region of the world that is steeped in history.*

By Rya Tibawi

‘And where are the Simien mountains?’ was a frequent question when we told friends of where we were heading. Simien means north and they lie in the north of Ethiopia. Amongst them is Ras Dashen (4,533m), the highest peak in Ethiopia and the fourth in the whole of Africa: one of our goals, accomplished on day six of a ten-day trek.

We were four friends, three women and a man (Peter Scott), exploring not only the Simien mountains but also spending another ten days visiting the famous rock hewn churches of Tigray and Lalibela, the palaces of Gondar, the stelae of Aksum, and much else.

Ethiopia is a fascinating country to experience, rich in historical significance. One of the three kings bearing gifts for Jesus came from here, but how he managed it in those days, I cannot imagine. The Queen of Sheba, an Ethiopian, and King Solomon had a child together, thereby founding an imperial dynasty of which Haile Selassie was the last.

Ethiopia has been devoutly Orthodox Christian since the fourth century but also has many Muslims, and used to have Jewish citizens until Israel airlifted the Falashas out of the country in 1985 and 1991. It is the only African country not to have been colonised, although the Italians occupied it from 1935 to 1941, and is home to over 70 languages, of which Amharic is the most commonly spoken and written.

‘Thank-you’ is such a simple word in most languages but proved for us the hardest of all as we tried to express gratitude in Amharic. A look of

incomprehension could be seen on the faces of others as we struggled with the pronunciation and emphasis. The volcanic landscape we trekked through was very varied with dramatic escarpments, deep gorges, a long waterfall (extraordinary in a land deprived of water and marked by dry river beds), rocky spires, jagged skylines, and high rounded rock humps rising out of plains.

The altitude affected us wherever we were, as most of our campsites were well over 3,000 metres, with one being at 3,900 metres. Regardless of the time we spent at altitude, we still huffed and puffed our way around. At one of our camps we needed to descend a steep hill for 150 metres to use the toilet, which was just two holes in the ground. Returning to the tent up the hill was always a major effort. Peter tried measuring his pulse with each ascent to see if it decreased with the frequency of trips. Strangely it did not seem to.

Agriculture is the main occupation with villages, animals and crops in evidence high above 3,000 metres. The Simien mountains appear to have many fertile areas with wheat, barley, sorghum and tef being grown. The latter crop is used to make injera a large flatbread which is the indispensable accompaniment to meals.

Villages comprise mostly small round huts built either with rocks fitted together without any binding material (Tigrayan style), or struts of eucalyptus trunks filled in with mud, and with thatched roofs. Some of the newer houses are shacks with corrugated iron roofs

Left:

*Priest standing on the traverse ledge by the rockhewn church Abuna Yemata Guh. His bare feet flew up the steep long scramble to reach the entrance.*

Photographer:  
Peter Scott





Above:  
*Children wrapped  
in blankets, their  
customary attire*

Photographer:  
*Peter Scott*

which glint in the sun from afar. Children seem to be the main herders of the cows, sheep and goats and are in the fields all day. They are mostly barefoot and their schools are organised in shifts. We passed one school which was nothing more than a collection of a few shacks made from wood with corrugated iron roofs. People were very friendly and keen to display their knowledge of English football teams and players, of which we were mostly ignorant. We often attracted a group, usually of children, who stood at a little distance from us, when we stopped for a rest, and stared. Now we know what it is like to be an exhibit. Often children would wave from afar or run up to us and want to shake our hands. We grew accustomed to saying 'salam' in answer to their greetings. Children said a word approximating to 'plastic', which we learnt in due course meant that they wanted any empty plastic bottles we might have. Such a gift was greeted with delight – they are used to store kerosene and collect water. As we lived on bottled water to

drink, all purchased in bulk before the trek, we were able to offer many such gifts.

As we walked past villages children came out to display home made wares in the hope that we might buy them. Only towards the end did we succumb as everything bought had to be carried. The items included a variety of basketry, gourd jugs, woollen hats, and stone slings (of the sort we imagined David used to slay Goliath). The children seemed able to pack everything up as soon as we had passed and then re-appear further along the path. Haggling was the way a price was agreed, both in the mountains and in the towns.

We observed how adult men greeted each other: a right handshake at the same time as the two turn their right shoulders towards each other so that they almost touch. Cheeks are held as though kissing were to take place but this is not part of the ritual and the cheeks remain at some distance from each other. However, if one of the two is a priest – and there are many priests in the rural areas – the non-priest bows several times,



kisses the priest's hand and the cross that he carries. The generosity of villagers was impressive. On our descent from Ras Dashen (4,533 metres), while still high up, we passed a large group of villagers near a col roasting an ox which they had just killed, as part of a celebration for the building of a road that would connect their village with others. We were invited to eat with them. The meat eaters amongst us found the meal chewy. Peter gave a short speech of thanks. The building of the road was a huge undertaking with a couple of bulldozers hurling boulders down the hill, such that we had to take evasive action and dive across rough country. We were told that a great deal of Ethiopia's road building projects are being financed and delivered by China. Often on our later travels by minibus as we jolted along rough tracks we saw evidence of these projects.

We were struck by how devout most Ethiopians are. If we passed a church, which might be yet another small round hut but with a cross on the roof, most Ethiopians

would bow several times, kiss the surrounding wall, the gate and then the entrance door. We were in Ethiopia for St Mary's Day and were told that many people walk for several days to reach St Mary's Church in Aksum where they would sleep outside in the compound, awaiting the services.

In the early days of the trek we saw many gelada baboons. Most took little notice of us watching them at quite close quarters, which provided us with a fascinating insight into the way they live, grazing continuously on grasses, mothers with babies on their backs, infants playing rough and tumble with each other, the dominant male in charge and the bachelor males on the fringes or alternatively in a separate group grooming one another. Squabbles, marked by raucous cries, could be heard from afar. At night the baboons retreat to caves or holes in the cliff walls where they are safe from predators such as hyenas and wolves. Although we may have heard the former at night, we saw neither by day or night.

Above clockwise:  
*Coffee pounding in preparation for the ceremony.*  
*Villager by escarpment.*  
*Children perched on a ridge listening to Mulat.*

Photographer:  
*Peter Scott*





Birds with vividly coloured feathers, vultures and buzzards soaring in the sky. Bushbuck and klipspringer (types of antelope) and ibex were all spotted far below us when we stood on the edges of steep drops. There were plants of all kinds including one yellow 'fruit' which we were warned was poisonous. We saw a long, pale green snake dying on the path in front of us after villagers had struck it on the head, apparently a type which is poisonous for human beings.

Camping was cold at night, or as soon as the sun set when temperatures dropped below freezing. Often there was a stiff breeze, which sent us hastening to the shelter of our tents. The first evening there was a terrific storm with claps of thunder and flashes of lightning simultaneously, and heavy downpours which our fragile hired tents could not handle.

In the morning we heard that a local lad had been burnt by lightning on his leg so a collection was made to help pay his medical costs in a distant town. We had one other heavy rainfall at night and one light one, but daytimes stayed dry and mostly warm. The places we camped varied from a high windswept plateau to a field of grazing animals outside a village and a farmyard with chickens and goats. Often the tents were on a slope so that nights were spent sliding downwards. The lack of water meant that washing of bodies or clothes was impossible until we reached a campsite with a pump at the end of the fourth day. What bliss! One of us operated the pump and another splashed about under the flow of very cold water. At the end of the sixth day, our highest summit day, there was the offer, for a price, of a 'shower' rigged up by an enterprising young villager, who heated water on an open fire and placed it in a bucket poised above a standing place for potential shower-takers. Privacy amounted to screening the area off with a plastic sheet. Halfway through the eighth day we reached the river Ansiya which had a large, relatively secluded, pool amongst its fast flowing waters. This was the perfect

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Left: Worshipper outside church with prayer stick in hand  
Photographer: Peter Scott





Left:  
*Woman in fields at  
about 3,000m*

Photographer:  
*Peter Scott*

spot for swimming and washing.

Our antics in the river drew a large crowd of children and women who watched us from afar. However, after we had dried off and moved to a shady tree they drew near. One woman performed 'the coffee ceremony'. She squatted by a small fire and roasted the green beans in a pan, then brought the pan to us so that we could sniff the aroma and show pleasure and satisfaction. She ground the beans with pestle and mortar, and then placed the ground beans in a blackened kettle of water and let it all boil together for a while, finally pouring out the coffee into small coffee cups. Coffee is always sweetened a great deal; those of us preferring it without sugar learnt to say so. There were the customary three servings together with popcorn.

Occasionally a man might come to our tents and ask for medical help by pointing to a wound. Regina became the unofficial nurse, producing her extensive first aid kit and tending to a variety of wounds. One

was particularly nasty, being an infected animal bite on a leg. The patient then limped around proudly showing off his dazzling white bandage, which contrasted greatly with his otherwise grimy appearance. One lesson learnt was that abundant protective gloves and antiseptic wipes are essential items.

The walking varied in length of day and quantity of ascents and descents. Three out of the ten days were demanding in terms of stamina and energy. It was disheartening to descend from a high point of 4,200 metres to 3,100 to camp when the next day we had to ascend to 4,533 for the highest peak, Ras Dashen. The ascent was unremarkable apart from 10 metres of scrambling to reach the summit. After the trek we had a much more interesting scramble up to a rock hewn church, Abuna Yemata Guh, in the Gheralta mountains. We felt put to shame for being so reliant on our sturdy boots when the locals scampered up steep rocks in bare feet.

As the trek went on, other groups of people diminished

Right:  
*Gelada baboons*

Photographer:  
*Peter Scott*

in number until we were the only group left. It seems that most people trek for three days at most and concentrate on those areas that are accessible by road, which enables them to depart easily. One group who we often saw in the earlier days on the narrow paths were German. As one of them went by he said to his companions that he had difficulty getting past 'the old people's home' (little did he know that we understood German). So that is how other people see us! And we had prided ourselves on our youthful appearances! Throughout our trek we had the mandatory services of a national park guide, Mulat, and a national park scout, Ayenew. Mulat was a very knowledgeable man who pointed out so many animals, birds and plants to us and who was able to answer all sorts of questions. He sought to educate villagers on the evils of deforestation, and declared himself to be in favour of the government's policy of removal of villages from within the national park in order to preserve trees and indigenous species of all kinds. This seemed to us a draconian measure.

Mulat used to talk to groups of children along the way and although we did not understand the conversations, Judy declared that Mulat had a talent for engaging children and should consider becoming a primary school teacher, just as she previously had been. Mulat never carried any belongings with him apart from a bottle of water in one hand, and there we were with our rucksacks and all sorts of things 'just in case'.

Our guide was very guarded about the challenges that lay ahead of us, so we knew that the less he said the harder it would be. When he finally told us that we were 'a strong group', that we 'did not flop down just anywhere at rest places' and we that we 'chatted to each other as we walked', we glowed with the praise. Even if the German group could not appreciate our achievements, at least Mulat could!

Ayenew spoke no English but carried out his duties as scout with great conscientiousness. He carried a gun at all times, apparently to shoot leopards (were there any?). If anyone dropped behind to attend a call of nature he stopped too and 'kept guard'. At night he

slept outside our tents at a discreet distance, wrapped only in the woollen blanket that he, and most rural Ethiopians, wore all day. On his feet were flimsy yellow plastic sandals which did not keep them warm when the temperature fell below zero, but during the day he scampered along rocky paths and boulder fields as though his sandals were the latest mountaineering footwear. When we passed one village along the way Ayenew disappeared to visit a relative and came back with home baked bread for us to try.

Our meals were prepared by a cook, Nuguse, who provided tasty dishes and soups, mostly vegetarian, but also catered for a gluten free diet. Eggs were obtained along the way from villages, and after the ascent of Ras Dashen, meat eaters were given chicken in celebration. Once the villages are removed, from where will these supplies come? Our background crew also included a cook's assistant, Zaman, and four porters with mules, who carried the pots and pans, food, bottled water, tents and much else. On the last night of us being together they lit a fire for us to sit round and performed traditional Ethiopian songs and dances with extraordinary vigour and enthusiasm. When we were invited to join them, we soon got exhausted from the effort – the altitude was still to blame, of course.

Our supremo, our main organiser, interpreter, sorter out of all problems and companion was Tesfa Alemayehu, for whom nothing was too much trouble and who was always smiling. The main reason for our trip being such a success was our incredible good fortune to have Tesfa with us. We had arranged the whole trip with Solomon Berhe, whom we met briefly on the first night, but thereafter it was Tesfa who dealt with everything. Tesfa is now setting up his own tourist business ([www.ethiopianlinktours.com](http://www.ethiopianlinktours.com) and email [info@ethiopianlinktours.com](mailto:info@ethiopianlinktours.com)) and we all recommend him very highly.

Overall our trek and our subsequent sightseeing were a great success. The Simien mountains are well worth a visit and the ten days allow trekkers to see the whole variety of stunning scenery, villages, people and wildlife as well as incorporating the highest peak.









# SPITZKOPPE - AN OLD CLIMBER'S DREAM

*Veteran of many an African campaign, Ian Howell had dreamt for some time of getting to the top of what has been called the Matterhorn of Namibia. In this account he tells of how his dream became a reality at the age of 74, and in the process proved that age is no barrier to ambition.*

By Ian Howell

There's nothing very difficult about climbing the Spitzkoppe. Just a few hundred feet of scrambling and four or five pitches of climbing at about VS and you're on the top. Four long abseils, which by-pass the worst of the scrambling as well as the climbing, and you're back down in camp in a six hours round trip. Or that's what the books say.

As a mountaineer long past his prime, and one who never really liked the wet or cold anyway, it seemed like a reasonable objective. The fact that the Spitzkoppe is situated in a country that is hardly known for being a climbing destination, or even for most people a destination for anything at all, added to its intrigue.

Two or three of my climbing friends from South Africa and one of my many climbing friends from Kenya had climbed it, and when they talked of rough granite slabs, chimneys and cracks, temperatures almost too hot to be comfortable and one day of rain in three years. It sounded too good to be true and something I might manage as long as I could find a partner to lead the hard bits.

So the Spitzkoppe became something to think about, and it didn't take long for that to turn into a definite goal and during the cold wet winters sitting at home in the UK it soon became a dream.

The Spitzkoppe (or more formally the Great Spitzkoppe, as there is a smaller one about 20 miles to the east) is a granite inselberg that rises 2,500ft steeply up out of the middle of the Namib desert, one

of the driest places on earth. It is situated in mid-west Namibia (once known as SW Africa) and is 200 km north of the Tropic of Capricorn, and some 2,400 km south of the equator.

It is a fine looking peak with a pointed summit – at least it has from two directions – and is sometimes referred to as the Matterhorn of Namibia.

It was first climbed in 1946 by Hans and Else Wongschofsky and J. de V. Graaf after several attempts by other parties. These earlier sorties had revealed a complicated and quite difficult approach scramble up chimneys and through a narrow slot deep inside the mountain, but had come to a halt at a blank slab only a few hundred feet from the summit. As all other approaches had proved impossible, holds were chipped in the smooth slab and a way forged to the top.

The earlier chipping party had to give up after four days of hard work trying to make any impression on the unyielding granite slab with their hammer and chisel. They retreated due to an oncoming storm but passed on their information to Hans Wongschofsky who, with the aid of what holds the others had managed to chip, made his way to the summit.

This involved line has become the Normal Route on the mountain and since its creation in 1946 has averaged no more than 10 ascents each year. However, with game park fencing and some access restrictions made in 2007/8 it has received only a handful of summiteers each year since then. It is still the easiest and most popular route to the top and is described as 'a

Left:

*The tall granite shape of the Spitzkoppe shimmers in the Namibian heat*

Photographer:  
*Ian Howell*





wonderful mountain day full of adventure and a must-do route'. That sounded like my sort of climb.

The Normal Route can be well divided into three sections: the walk up, the approach scramble and the climbing. The approach scramble and the climbing are very well documented, complete with topos, in a little guidebook available at bookshops in Windhoek called Spitzkoppe and Pontoks, Namibia – a climber's paradise. However the walk-up, which accounts for well over half of the total height gain from the desert, is described rather sketchily as 'Follow beacons up gullies and breaks for nearly an hour'.

This guidebook also contains descriptions and a few topos of some 160 other routes in the area. These include multi-pitch routes with mixed trad/bolted protection and one pitch bolted sport climbs. Probably the next most significant climb after the Normal Route is the South West Wall Route which follows a 1,500 foot line up the middle of the great slab that forms the huge SW Face of the Spitzkoppe. It was first climbed by South Africans Haber, Ward and Holding in a three day push in 1982.

It was the first route on this face and climbed with homemade bolts and other dubious protection in the off-width cracks as cams were not yet around. It was, however, considered to be a breakthrough into big wall climbing in Namibia. It is now climbed free at E3 5c. Early in 2010 I realised that my dream to climb the Spitzkoppe would have to materialise fairly soon or it never would. I made plans and several months later in September 2010 I left the UK with a very old climbing friend Colin Powell from Kenya days and our respective wives. We had decided to combine a climbing trip with a tour of Namibia. Our wives, and ourselves to a lesser extent, were keen on game watching and particularly birds and we were certainly not disappointed in what we saw. We visited the wonderful Etosha Game Park, viewed the Fish River Canyon from the rim, second only to the Grand Canyon in USA in size, and slithered around climbing one of the sand-dunes at Sossusvlei.

Next stop, the Spitzkoppe, and a big drop in



accommodation standards; from lodges and hotels to camping. We had arranged to meet up with a group of young climbers at a campsite beneath the Spitzkoppe. They were travelling on a truck which had started in Jordan and was working its way down Africa to Capetown, with climbers joining and leaving at various points, and who were climbing in each country en route. As the Spitzkoppe was a popular destination they would be there eight or nine days and we could join them.

Our transport standards had also dropped from a hired 4x4 to using local transport and after a very long and chaotic journey we arrived at the Spitzkoppe campsite after dark. We were very glad to be there and to meet our fellow travelling climbers. They made us very welcome. They gave us a seat, a large plastic mug of tea and a plateful of wholesome food, and having consumed that they helped us pitch our tents. Despite the huge age difference I felt at home. For the next eight or nine days we would be camping with a group of about 20 grubby (there was not enough water for washing, or that was their excuse) young, keen climbers from at least eight different countries. Rich, the driver of the great lumbering red truck, was Zambian, and mucked in helping anybody with any job requiring a hand.

I wasn't sure what I had let myself in for. I hadn't slept in a tent for a about 20 years, and that was one you could almost stand up in, while the one I was trying to make my home for over a week was so small I had to crawl into on my elbows and knees, something I wasn't very good at any more.

Sadly, the big red truck did not have a fridge, which meant that our drinks were decidedly warm and when the Cokes ran out (which they did shortly after we arrived) all I had to drink was very warm water or tea. I was determined to survive and not complain; it was not for long and I kept in mind the very large, very long gin and tonic, rattling with ice that I would have as soon as we got back to civilisation.

Our campsite was called Boulder Valley and was situated on the SW side of the peak and had not only

the vast SW Face leering down on us as a back drop, but also the highest concentration of bolted sport routes in the area next door to our tents. Yes, perhaps we were in a climber's paradise.

Sadly Colin and I found most of these routes were too hard for us to lead. But over the next few days we led what we could or asked one of the young climbers to put up a top rope for us and we'd try following something a bit harder. During the heat of the day most climbers found some shade and either snoozed or got out a book to read. Anxious to do something towards climbing the main peak I used this siesta time to slope off and check out the start of the Normal Route. This was on the opposite side of the mountain and took me just under an hour to walk there, which included squeezing between the gate and the gatepost of the fenced off area.

Later I found out the park authorities had left a key under a stone so we could approach our climb without feeling like trespassers. On my third attempt I got up to the start of the approach scramble but found the walk up more like a scramble itself; having to use my hands more often than not.

There were beacons going off in more directions than one, probably for showing approaches to other routes, and I had to choose which way to go. It took me two and a half hours rather than the guidebook time of nearly one hour. I'd have to do better than that, but at least I now knew the right set of beacons to follow! Some of the younger climbers did more than just the sport climbs. One American couple who were on their honeymoon climbed the SW Wall Route and sitting in our camp we could follow their progress with our bird watching binoculars. High up where the crack-line ran out it looked exposed and exciting. Twenty -years earlier and I would have been up there too. Others did a three pitch strenuous layback jam-crack up the same face and then abbed off, showing us their scars on returning to camp. Four of them attempted the Normal Route but followed the wrong set of beacons and after a few hours of trying to make their route fit the guidebook description, they gave up.

Left:  
*Canadian Rhonda Shippy delicately climbing one of the single pitch sports routes close to the camp.*

Photographer:  
*Ian Howell*



Above:  
Smiles all round:  
Australian Sam  
Margerison, Ian  
Howell and Rhonda  
Shippy, take in the  
view on the table-  
top summit of the  
Spitzkoppe.

Photographer:  
Shu from Australia

Most of us in the camp climbed a feature known as the Rhino Horn. This was an impressive finger of rock above the campsite with a one-pitch bolted route on it. Colin and I were given a little help on the harder bits, as at E2 it was well above our climbing ability. Time was passing and the main summit had not been reached. Colin was not able to embark on such a long outing so I spoke to some of the others. A Canadian and an Aussie had, by chance, both climbed East Gate earlier on their Africa trip. East Gate is a climb on Mount Kenya, which has become popular and was a good, harder alternative to the normal route. I had pioneered and first climbed it 30 years previously, and knowing I was the perpetrator of this route, which they had enjoyed, they almost jumped at the opportunity of climbing the Spitzkoppe with me, despite my advancing years and being slow. We made plans, which gave a whole day of rest before we set out. On the big day we set off an hour before daylight with torches, having had a good breakfast prepared for us by Rhonda, the Canadian. By now I knew the walk round the peak well and I found myself leading the way. It was just beginning to get light as we made our way up the gullies following the right set of beacons. It was much cooler now than when I had done it before and we made relatively good progress. We were joined by

two others, taking our number to five, but one of these, an Austrian, dropped out later on due to bad headaches while the Aussie stayed with us.

We arrived at the start of the approach scramble (my highest point during my recces) feeling quite fresh and set off soloing up the steeper gullies and chimneys which were well described in the guidebook, no chance of getting lost here. The scrambling often felt more like rock-climbing and had me wishing that I'd been attached to a rope.

As the gullies led deep into the mountain they became increasingly narrow with one final squeeze chimney that I struggled desperately for some time to get up; my body just wasn't agile anymore nor able to wriggle in the same way as I used to. Eventually I popped out of the top hoping I wouldn't have to go back down it again!

We were now back in daylight and had come out on the other side of a large buttress on the North Face of the mountain. A short scramble down and we arrived on a small ledge with steep slabs above us. From here the Normal Route abseiled down 20 metres to a much larger ledge and a little way along was the start of the climbing and the notorious chipped holds.

However, above us there was a line of three bolts. The guidebook indicated a comparatively new route. This was a variation to the first three pitches of the Normal Route, and ran up to the summit in four long pitches from our ledge. The route was called Prima Varianta and graded at 16/17 which translates to VS verging on HVS, not really any harder than the Normal Route. The others were keen to try it.

The bolted slab was led by Sam, the other Aussie, and I eventually followed up finding it quite difficult and was very glad for the rope above me, and to be out of their sight in case I had to pull or rest on a quickdraw. The next pitch was a beautiful curving crack sweeping up for 150ft. Rhonda, the Canadian, made it look easy and managed to put in some good gear in the crack. I enjoyed this pitch immensely and eight years ago I would have had a go at leading it. At the top of this pitch we re-joined the Normal Route. The next

pitch, Sam's lead again, was a corner crack leading up and onto a pleasant slab slanting across to the final chimney. The crack and slab were delightful and the final chimney was just the perfect size for me and I managed to follow it without too much puffing.

By 4.00pm we were on the summit, and what a great summit, a flattish top about the size of a sitting room dropping steeply on all sides for hundreds and thousands of feet. The views were amazing, just endless desert disappearing into haze in the distance. I couldn't believe I was there, my dream at last come true.

We shook hands, took photographs, had a drink of water and divided one orange into four. It was the best quarter of an orange I had ever tasted! We entered our names in the summit book and looked at other entries. One had enjoyed being there so much he waited to see the sunset and then sat on top all night to see the sunrise before descending. I felt like doing the same but we didn't have much water with us, and I think the others wanted to get down.

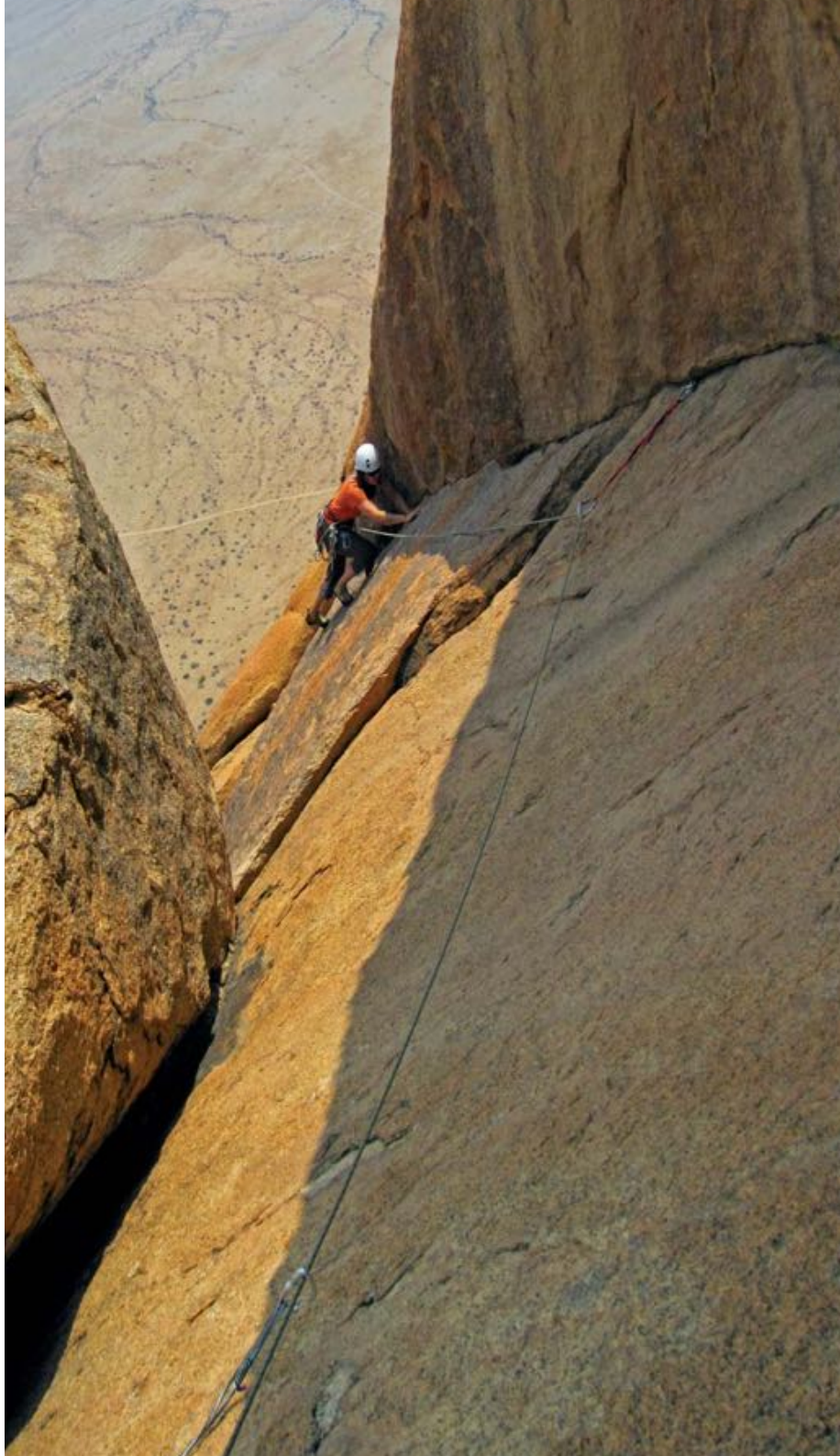
The abseils got us down beyond the climbing and most of the difficult sections of the approach scramble including the dreaded squeeze chimneys. The walk down was slow for me as there were lots of sizeable step-downs, not good on my knees; but the others were unconcerned and just waited for me. By the time we got to flat ground and the walk back across the desert it was dark.

We arrived back in camp after 14 hours of being on the go. Colin handed me a large warm beer, as he said they had run out of water. Beer is something I shouldn't really drink but I didn't care, I drank it anyway and it tasted 100 times better than that gin and tonic I had been dreaming about. They served me up with some supper and people came to shake my hand (they were probably relieved to see me back in one piece). I was tired, but that evening I was the happiest climber in the world: well let's say the happiest old climber.

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Right: *Almost there: Rhonda laybacking on the penultimate pitch of the Normal Route*

Photographer: Ian Howell









# MADAGASCAR: AN AFRICAN YOSEMITE

*Huge granite walls with a wide range of routes are making Madagascar a magnet for the more adventurous of sports climbers. Entrepreneur, climber, writer and photographer, Pete O'Donovan has recently returned from a seven-week trip to the region and gives us a glimpse of a magnificent destination.*

By Pete O'Donovan

**I**n the central highlands of Madagascar there is a range of granite walls almost without equal on this earth: the Tsaranoro Massif. Since I first saw pictures of the place I'd longed to go, and in the summer of 2011 I finally got my wish, boarding a plane in late July along with my frequent climbing partner Dave Hesleden, and our respective (non-climbing) wives, Angels and Nic.

Less than an hour after landing I was almost wishing we'd gone somewhere a little more 'first world' in search of our vertical adventures. The phrase 'who put the Mad in Madagascar?' which I'd jokingly repeated to friends back in Sheffield before leaving, now came back to haunt me.

The answer was, of course, everybody: from the gangs of hustling porters trying to grab our bags at the airport, to our taxi-driver, Duda (the Spanish word for doubt!) who took us to our hotel in the capital, Antananarivo, narrowly avoiding multiple collisions with vehicles, pedestrians and assorted beasts of burden along the way. They were all at it.

Several days, a rain forest trip, and a few upset tummies later, our tired team pulled into Camp Catta

Left:

*The impressive walls of Tsaranoro, home to some 50 magnificent climbs up to 800m in length and 8c in difficulty.*

Photographer:  
*Pete O'Donovan*





Left:  
*Early morning mist  
 burning off the walls  
 of Tsaranoro, with  
 the Bungalows and  
 'delivery' vehicles of  
 Camp Catta visible  
 in the foreground.*

Photographer:  
 Pete O'Donovan

in the Tsaranoro valley on the edge of the Andringitra National Park, staring open-mouthed at one of the most incredible granite landscapes we'd ever seen. We'd first planned to journey down from 'Tana' (as the locals refer to their capital) by 'Taxi Brousse', the favoured method of long distance travel for the Malagasy's themselves. But, having witnessed vehicles of dubious roadworthiness crammed with double or treble the number of passengers that would have been permitted in Europe, we elected instead to take the soft option, hiring a vehicle and driver all to ourselves. Even so, the state of the roads combined with constant nervous strain (our driver was more cautious than Duda, but not by much!) meant that as we trundled along the final 20km stretch of dirt track leading into camp, beer and sleep were the only things on our minds. A few bottles of 'Three Horses', the very acceptable local beer, followed by a good night's sleep worked wonders on mind and body, and the next morning,

under brilliantly blue African skies, saw Dave and I walking steeply uphill towards the cliffs. The first route in Tsaranoro was established as recently as 1995 by what must be one of the strongest teams ever to touch rock — the late, great Kurt Albert, and his friend and German compatriot Bernt Arnold. These two veteran adventurers climbed a magnificent line of cracks leading up to a blank-looking arête, on the rock formation known as 'Karambony'. Their route, Rain Boto (450m 7b+) revealed the stunning potential of the area, and opened the door to pioneering sorties by top climbers from all over the world. The list of first ascensionists over the years is long and impressive, containing such illustrious names as Michel Piola (Swiss), Rolando Larcher (Italian) and Lynn Hill (American), but Brits have also been active in the region. In 1999 Grant Farquhar, Steve Mayers, Louise Thomas and Mike 'Twid' Turner climbed the huge blank-looking face to the right of Rain Boto,



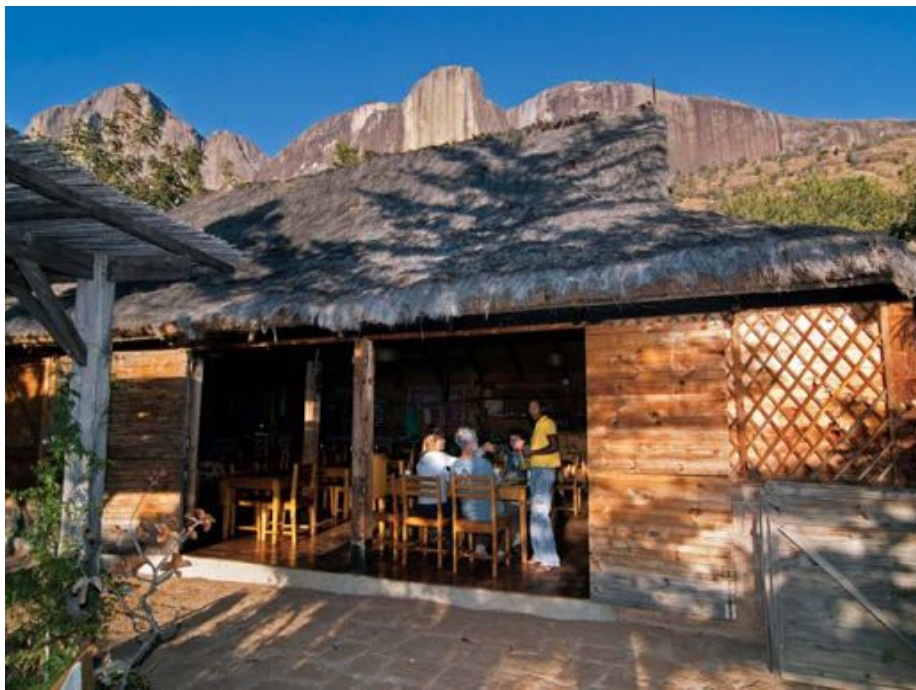


naming their creation Always the Sun (400m 7c+). It is apparently very hard and very bold.

Two years later another British pair, Dave Kenyon and Duncan Lee, equipped and climbed no less than four new routes over a period of just a few weeks, and then in 2007 a group of climbers including Dave Pickford, James McHaffie, Stephen Horne and Jack Geldard repeated many of the area's harder routes and made important inroads into what would later become its most difficult challenge: Tough Enough.

As of 2011 there are now close to 50 climbs in the Tsaranoro massif, ranging from 5b to 8c, with pride of place undoubtedly going to the aforementioned Tough Enough, an incredible 400m vertical wall with difficulties up to 8c. Imagine that: 8c and only vertical!

For team Hesleden-O'Donovan the objective for the first day was somewhat more modest — the excellent-looking Pectorine (350m 6b) on Lemur Wall. The topo in Camp Catta described the route as both



‘Classic’ and ‘Bien Équipée’: just the job.

As soon as we touched rock we knew we were going to love the place. The granite was the best either of us had ever climbed on, superbly rough and with far more features than one usually finds on this type of rock. Apart from a three-bolt-ladder to overcome a blank section at the start of the second pitch, Pectorine turned out to be everything we'd hoped for. We completed the seven pitches without mishap in a little over two hours, and were back with the ladies in Camp Catta in time for an early afternoon snack. Although Camp Catta is not the only choice of accommodation in the area, it's almost certainly the most comfortable, and definitely the most convenient for climbers in terms of its proximity to the routes. The camp was established in 1998 through cooperation between the Lézards de Tana, a walking and trekking club interested in providing guided tours in the area, and Saint Jérôme Partage et Développement, a French NGO (non-government organisation) from Marseille.

Above left:

*A Ring-tailed Lemur sunning itself on a bungalow roof in Camp Catta.*

Above right:

*Gooooood morning Madagascar!*

*Another perfect day in Tsaranoro, with the lovely Blandine serving breakfast.*

Photographer:

*Pete O'Donovan*



Above:  
*Lucas Binder and  
Toby Bauer starting  
pitch 4 of 'Black  
Magic Woman'  
(255m 6c+) an  
excellent route on  
Lemur Wall.*

Photographer:  
*Pete O'Donovan*

As well as providing employment for many local people in the camp, the organisation has worked ceaselessly at improving life in the nearby villages of what is (in common with much of Madagascar) an extremely impoverished area. These works include building a school (as well as paying for the teacher), which now educates more than 70 children from six surrounding villages, and establishing a medical dispensary to provide basic health care. They have also brought in outside expertise to help local farmers greatly increase their rice yield, something of huge importance in an area where this one food source provides around 60% of the daily diet. Flushed with our first success and emboldened by a few more bottles of Three Horses, Dave and I made

optimistic plans for the next day. Our chosen objective was Out of Africa (580m 7a), supposedly the grand classic of the area with no less than 14 pitches. 'Only' 7a and, once again, Bien Équipée. How hard could it be? Huddled over our coffees in 5am blackness the following morning our mood was rather more muted. One of the few drawbacks of Tsaranoro is that the best time to visit is between June and September — mid-winter south of the Equator — with blue-sky days and temperatures just cool enough so as not to fry. However, daylight hours are limited to just 11 hours in August and for the longer routes that invariably means a pre-dawn start and headlamps for both approach and descent. We'd packed a small stove and kettle into the luggage specifically for early morning brews, but



we needn't have bothered: the Camp Catta staff are well used to the needs of climbers and whatever time you wish to rise, providing you ask the night before, someone will always be up to provide breakfast. Out of Africa was as good as its reputation — pitch after pitch of technical and enjoyable climbing on magnificent rock. Dave began padding up the slabby introductory pitch at bang-on 7am, and as I joined him on the summit of Tsaranoro Kely after the final (crux) 7a pitch, the watch read 12.45. We reckoned nearly two thousand feet in under six hours was pretty good going, reinforcing our belief that 'we might not be very good but what we can do we don't hang around on'.

Then the fun started. The recommended descent for Out of Africa, in common with many other climbs in Tsaranoro, is by abseiling back down the route. However, 14 raps, many of them diagonal, with hundreds of flakes on which the ropes could get caught, if not jammed outright, was not in the least bit appealing. As we had plenty of daylight left we elected to go for the walking alternative. The fact that we had neglected to bring walking shoes should have dissuaded us, but it didn't.

We had enquired about the possibility of walking down the night before back in camp, and one of the local guides had told us that it was 'facile: from the back of the summit plateau you just go down into a gully then walk up towards the main summit of Tsaranoro itself, from where you will find a path leading back down to the valley. No more than 1½ hours'.

By the time we'd spent the best part of an hour wandering up and down that summit plateau looking for a way off, Dave and I were both wishing we'd paid

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Right: Martin Schindele (climbing) and Philip Hoffman, Lucas Binder and Tobi Bauer (on the portaledge below) working the 9th pitch (8c?) of 'Dreams of Youth', an 800m route on Tsaranoro Atsimo, established by this Bavarian team in July and August 2011.

Photograph: Pete O'Donovan







Above:  
*Chameleon hitching  
a ride.*

Photographer:  
*Dave Hesleden*

more attention during school French lessons. 'Just go down' (into the gully) was simply not enough information. Becoming increasingly concerned about the approaching 5.30pm 'lights out' we were just about to head back to the top of the route when Dave spotted a solitary bolt, and three rappels later we were in the gully. Thrashing up this, through pathless, dense African jungle, and in rock shoes, will stay with me as one of the most intensely unpleasant half-hours I have ever experienced. Good job I knew that there were no poisonous snakes in Madagascar! When we finally limped back into camp exhausted just before darkness descended, our feet absolutely wrecked, wild horses couldn't have kept me away from the Three Horses. The climbing had been sublime but the descent could so easily have turned from being merely uncomfortable into an absolute

epic. We learned later that many climbers do actually have epics here, getting benighted either on routes or descents. Tsaranoro is not a place to be taken lightly. Yes, the routes are mostly bolted, but the spacing of these bolts often gives climbing which is decidedly more 'sporting' than sport. This is the nature of lead-bolting: if it's not absolutely necessary then it doesn't go in.

To illustrate this, one of the best routes we did during our stay was Cucumber Flying Circus, a stunning 13-pitch climb with difficulties up to 7b+, established in 2000 by a very competent team from Kracow in Poland. The meat of the route consists of four consecutive, very sustained pitches, separated by hanging belays, and on these the protection was perfectly adequate. However, both before and after this section we encountered extremely bold 6b+ and

6c pitches, one of which (eight bolts in 60m) Dave reckoned was very likely E6 by UK standards i.e. 6a (British) moves with a 50-60ft fall potential.

Another element heightening the seriousness factor is the entire lack of rescue facilities. On the day we did Out of Africa (and several subsequent routes) we were the only team climbing in the entire range. If one of us had been injured in a fall, or on the descent, no one else would have been anywhere near enough to witness the event, and the only option would have been self-rescue. On top of that, the nearest proper medical facilities are in the town of Fianarantsoa, some 3½ hours' drive to the north.

I'm not trying to put people off, but the best advice I could offer to folks interested in visiting the Tsaranoro is to come as part of a team consisting of at least four climbers. That way, if one pair gets into difficulties, the other could be on hand to lend assistance should things turn nasty.

Following our big day out on Out of Africa our feet, if not our fingers, needed a few days rest, so we joined our wives in exploring the superb flora and fauna the area has to offer. The Andringitra Park is one of the best places in Madagascar to see Ring-tailed Lemurs (known locally as the 'Lemur Catta', hence the name of the camp) and it wasn't long before we had the first of many sightings. Initially they proved rather elusive, staying high in the trees, but as the weeks went by and fresh spring shoots appeared on the lower shrubs, barely a day passed without our being treated to their wonderfully acrobatic displays, even in the camp itself. Other attractions included Chameleons, various spectacular and exotic birds of prey, and some grasshoppers of such astonishingly vibrant colour that one wondered how they could possibly evade capture by all manner of hungry predator.

Of plants, there were some weird and wonderful varieties, but for me they fell into just two categories: those that drew blood and those that didn't.

Also of interest were the many stone tombs scattered around the area in which, in accordance with Betsileo beliefs and traditions, the deceased are temporarily

laid to rest before being exhumed, cleaned up and invited to their own parties as guests of honour.

Following the celebrations, which can last up to a week and virtually bankrupt the surviving family members, the bones are apparently re-interred somewhere far grander for the rest of eternity.

Feet recovered, Dave and I continued ticking routes, with La Croix de Sud (300m 6b), Black Magic Woman (255m 6c+) and Le Crabe aux Pince d'Or (320m 7b+) being particularly memorable.

Other climbers began to appear in camp, most notably a team of four young Germans (a great bunch of lads) who spent almost their entire trip establishing a new 800m route Dreams of Youth, which, when finally climbed entirely free may well surpass Tough Enough as Tsaranoro's hardest offering. Rab and Sue Carrington also 'popped in' for a week or so, with Rab joining Dave and I on the rock while Sue spent her time depicting the landscape in watercolours.

Because the majority of visitors to Camp Catta stay for just one or two nights as part of a wider tour of Madagascar, while we climbers were around for weeks on end, we made great friends with the staff and had some hugely enjoyable evenings, helped along with good old Three Horses and a little local Rum.

But all good things come to an end and in early September we pulled out of camp for the last time. Would I go back? Certainly. Madagascar is not an easy or cheap country to visit, but the rewards, especially for climbers, are tremendous.

Oh and by the way, my earlier derogatory remarks about the country's drivers are entirely unfounded: in the whole of our seven week trip, during which we not only stayed in Tsaranoro but travelled extensively throughout other parts of the country, often on appalling roads, we witnessed not a single accident — true testimony to the skill of those behind the wheel.

*More information about Camp Catta and route topos for Tsaranoro can be found at [www.campcatta.com](http://www.campcatta.com).*

*Many thanks to Rab, Podsacs, Sterling Ropes, Scarpa and Tenaya for supplying us with gear for the trip.*







# ROCK-CLIMBING AROUND ST CATHERINE'S MONASTERY IN THE SINAI DESERT

*Although they were following in the footsteps of Moses, the closest Malcolm Phelps and his mates came to a religious experience was a mistaken case of crucifixion stigmata. Nevertheless, they all emerged from the desert feeling they had been blessed with a very different kind of climbing experience.*

By Malcolm Phelps

Just like in Groundhog Day, each morning at six o'clock Jim's musical alarm sounded at Fox Camp in St Catherine's village in the Sinai Peninsula. The first few days of our week-long trip started with a ritual moan at the mozzies, another moan about not having slept well, and an apology from our cook about the late breakfast. Then we were off to the hills in search of adventure.

Steadily we eased our way into the ritual. Each day we coped better and, like Bill Murray, it is just possible that by the end of the week we had turned into nice people. We consisted of myself; my long-time climbing partner, Jim Unwin; and Scott Cramp. Sadly the instigator of the trip, Simon Sanders, couldn't make it, so we climbed as a rope of three.

Climbing in the Sinai Peninsula around St Catherine's monastery started when the Israelis controlled the area after the Six Day War. The only readily available information we could find was on the Israeli Alpine Club site which is not very up-to-date and not particularly easy to use.

Nevertheless, I printed the whole thing off before we went and we were relieved to find that the only other climbers we saw the whole week (one French couple) had no better information. There are vast quantities of rock in the mountains surrounding the monastery, all of which is granite but very variable in quality from

solid smooth slabs to massive crack lines and amazing (but less solid) rock features sculpted by the wind and weather over the millennia.

As the Arab Spring had yet to reach Egypt security overall seemed reassuring, perhaps the result of the terrorist attacks in places such as Sharm el-Sheikh. Our taxi from the airport at Sharm to Fox Camp passed through many checkpoints but without incident, and no passing of baksheesh as far as we could see.

Most visitors to the camp use it as a cheap alternative to the two large hotels in the main village and just stay one night to climb up Mount Sinai in the footsteps of Moses. We were allocated our room. Bijou would be one word to describe it. Cramped would be another. We had a wet room with a shower with interesting electrical arrangements. Jim was first to try the shower and emerged alive despite water playing over the light switch and socket.

For some reason, I hadn't brought any mosquito repellent. And while Jim seemed impervious to the buzzing monsters, Scott and I had bad nights. Scott covered himself in the net provided and bore more than a passing resemblance to Miss Havisham. I used my head net designed for Scottish Summer use. On the first morning we awoke to clear blue skies and had a look at what was around us. There were the

Left:  
Scott Cramp takes on  
the imposing line of  
Passover.

Photographer:  
Malcolm Phelps

Right:  
*Fox Camp with Jim  
Unwin and Scott  
Cramp.*

Photographer:  
*Malcolm Phelps*



big sculpted cliffs of the North Face of Jabel Safsafa right above us and more traditional looking cliffs with massive groove and crack lines on the East Face of Jabel Rabba.

Down the valley was another good looking cliff called Jabel Batta, although this was a bit of a walk away. The camp had no more information on climbing than we had brought with us. There was no route book despite some hints in e-mails that one existed. The brother of the manager was the nearest we had to a local expert. There is no real choice about having a guide. Apparently, there are also permits to be obtained. Our 'expert' attempted to explain to us that both the tourist and secret police needed to know where we were going. It appears that the local Sheikhs hold the land rights so it is wise to play along with local requirements. There are no formal mountain rescue arrangements even though the BMC insurance counts Sinai as part of Europe. But there would be little chance of getting any help in a crisis without the permit. There is no public tariff for either guides or permits and probably some haggling could be done.

However, it was so cheap that we just went along with the going rate to cover the guide and the permit (which we never saw).

By the time we had sorted out fees and met our guide the time was moving on. We settled for an imposing groove line on Jabel Fara rather than the closest cliffs. It was about a 40-minute walk into Wadi el Leja and the cliff faced mostly south. Our guide set off to walk to the top of the mountain as we pointed Scott at the imposing line of Passover – 11 pitches of V+.

An hour or so later, he was back on the ground. He did the first pitch but it was clearly pretty hard – the sort of holdless, rounded horror that was the reason Jim and I had nominated Scott to lead. Above this pitch it looked like tough chimneying and we had 'sacks! I'm sure we could have done it but given that it was now 1pm, there was no chance of finishing it in the light and we needed to rendezvous with our guide. So we had a long, entertaining scramble up the spine of the mountain and surprised our guide by coming from the 'wrong' direction.

Two advantages of having a guide are that first they

make you tea at the drop of a hat which is very welcome after either a climb or, as on this first day, a scramble. Secondly, descents from the crags can be quite complex and the printable guide is not very clear on the location of the many possible gullies that might get you down.

After avoiding electrocution in the shower, we had the first of a series of perfectly acceptable evening meals. These were mostly veggie but with occasional meat, pasta, rice and even chips. There was always soup of some sort, pitta bread and fruit – oranges and guava mainly. There were also tasty pastries. Breakfast settled down at around 7.30am and was pitta bread, an omelette, tomato and cucumber plus honey or jam if you wanted it.

None of us got the runs. The local tea was more refreshing than the instant coffee and we generally took it quite sweet. Soft drinks and bottled water (only use the bottled stuff and check the seals) were readily available but no alcohol. We had however brought bottles of rum and whisky acquired at Gatwick. We drank these discreetly with Coke or Sprite. Out of politeness and respect, it's best not to flaunt Western decadence.

On the second day we wanted to make sure we got a full route in and so we settled for a route directly above the camp called the Skull. Our guide was the delightful Salem. It was only 30 minutes to the foot of the climb which we dispatched without incident. It took a prominent left-to-right easy groove line before steepening up at the top with a chimney and a bit of a headwall going past the prominent skull like boulder. Salem was waiting for us and led us down the far side of the mountain to a little oasis where he made tea with water drawn from the well. Under the boughs of the healthy hawthorn tree was a bit of a lovers' meeting place. Western and Eastern cultures met in the form of hearts and names carved or painted on the tree.

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Right: *Malcolm Phelps in the chimney on the Skull.*  
Photograph: *Phelps collection*







Above:  
*Dawn view from  
Jebel Musa*

Photographer:  
*Malcolm Phelps*

After tea we set off round the mountain getting a view of the chapel on Mount Sinai (Jebel Musa or Moses' Mountain as it is known locally). Salem wanted to visit his father so we did a detour. His sprawling camp had camels and many children (Salem has 10 brothers and three sisters). It was located at a crossroads for routes up Jebel Musa and also Jebel Katherina (at 2,642 metres the high point of the area). It seemed that all guided parties passed through the camp giving the Bedouin the chance to show and inevitably try and sell their wares. We succumbed and our other halves were delighted with their elaborately beaded purses. The following day breakfast was again late. We thought this was down to carousing in the night judging by the constant tabla drums and the apparently slightly stoned look of our cook. The hubble-bubble water pipe was in use throughout the day as far as we could judge. Our goal was a route near the Monastery in Wadi el-Dier, about a 20 minute walk from the camp. We settled on the good-looking line of Hatchala

Meshulashet on Jabel Safsafa's North East Face. Two pitches up a strong groove line with interesting moves led (via an easily removed abandoned nut) to an obvious stance. At least it was obvious to Jim and I. However, Scott preferred to climb 20 feet up a crack and have a hanging stance rather than sitting comfortably on flat ground attached to a large spike. When we'd sorted that out, Scott finished off the pitch which led out under the overhangs on the start of a long traverse to the right. Jim led the second traverse pitch in a great position. Not difficult but great fun. This landed us below the obvious challenge of the direct finish of Kharitz Sheli, a route up the right hand side of the cliff. It was my turn to lead. It was a 6-metre high matchbox standing on a ledge with an obvious layback crack separating it from the cliff. The crack was far too wide for any gear but there was a bolt at the top. I set off and with much vocal encouragement clipped the bolt thinking it was all



over. The top was horrid. I flopped off onto the bolt somehow managing to pull a muscle. The second time I concentrated better and swam over the top. The others followed with gratifying amounts of effort. E1 5b was the verdict. Pleasant pitches followed until it was scrambling territory. Salem had gone right to the top of the mountain. Jim eventually got to within hailing distance of him and we all met at a well in the gully. As the light was fading, we skipped the tea ceremony. The next day was a rest day for me as I was nursing my sore muscle. The others did a good route – Diamond Depression near the Monastery at IV+. I kept an eye on them while I did the tourist bit in the Monastery with the Burning Bush, Moses' Well, some incredible historical texts and at last, a decent cup of coffee. As the pain in my leg had eased a bit the following day we decided to go back and try Kharitz Sheli (Monday Rush). An easy pitch for Scott was followed by a tough HVS 5a crack for Jim. Great climbing. There was a nice, slabby pitch to follow to the foot of the nasty

layback from two days before, but this time we sidled off to the right. Jim and Scott went on up to do a two-pitch route near the top of the gully, while Salem and I waited at the well, sipping tea on an idyllic and peaceful afternoon.

Fortified by real meat in the form of a decent sized chicken joint the night before, we settled on the Pillar Between Chimneys on Jabel Rabba the following day. This was a 45-minute walk through the village. Tricky groove climbing and then some easier rock led to the main feature – a steep chimney. Jim led up. He passed the first overhang with some wide chimney/bridging moves which landed him under the improbable looking top overhang. After a try to the left he cracked it on the right and it was my turn with my 'sack.

In the chimney of course the 'sack was a pain.

Scott had started to follow me up (two of our three man party generally climbed simultaneously when following). But a couple of small pieces of rock came down so Scott wisely retreated and hid out of the line

of fire. Just as well, because as I fought the chimney my 'sack dislodged a big flake that hurtled down in a cloud of dust. It narrowly missed both Scott and the ropes. I carried on. At the top overhang, Jim arranged to haul my 'sack and I felt it went at about 5a. There were still some long pitches to go including an improbable one for me past an enormous chockstone and a pitch for Scott on massive flutings. Eventually we reached easy ground and found a way into the col behind our subsidiary summit. It was getting a bit late now so we set off down the obvious descent route meeting Salem who had sensibly come down from the main summit. He found us a quick way off and we made the village just as darkness fell.

On our final full day, we went back to Jabel Safsafa for Klostersporn, an 11 pitch Grade V. The guidebook made little sense so we just picked a line. The pitches unfolded pleasantly taking some large sculpted features on one of my pitches and an impressive chimney for one of Jim's ('sack hauling again as the rock was not above suspicion). We reached the subsidiary summit, from which it was supposed to be two grade II pitches to the top. Ha!! Jim led down into the gully behind the pillar, up an easy chimney and onto the headwall. Here was some of the best rock of the week. A long easy pitch up led to a massive thread belay. We sent Scott out to find the way off. After a little while and some plaintive mumblings he announced that he was safe and that the way forward looked do-able. It turned out to be straightforward and after a scramble right, a bit of slab and corner climbing led us to easy ground and Salem making tea. The two pitches to the top turned out to be six plus a long scramble! A great outing though, and quite a route-finding adventure.

That evening we said a fond farewell to Salem. Our plan after eating was to walk up Jebel Musa (2,285m) and sleep out to see the dawn in. Our hosts said that we ought to have permits and a guide but suggested that if we were firm with the tourist police that we knew our way, we should be fine. And so it turned out. We had a short discussion with them at the entry to the monastery area and eventually they shrugged their

shoulders and let us through.

The main camel path was obvious. Earlier in the week we would have walked up under a full moon but we found we needed head torches. Although there were no other walkers, it would have been possible even late at night to get a drink at the various tea stops lit up on the way. At the final tea stop before the path rears up into a series of steep steps, we had quite an insistent offer of a guide. We had to refuse very firmly – the only unpleasantness in the whole week. Two hours after leaving Fox Camp we were on the top under a starlit sky watching shooting stars flash by. We settled down in our sleeping bags and I personally had the best night's sleep of the week. We were woken by others arriving for the dawn and by the moving sound of some ethereal and beautiful chanting from one of the many religious groups that make this pilgrimage. Scott claimed that he was developing signs of crucifixion stigmata on his hands but it was probably just granite rash. That was the closest he got to a religious experience all week. Slowly, the sky brightened and the red orb of the sun rose.

A recommended area for people with good general Alpine rock experience and a spirit of adventure. Take a full rack and some big stuff.

The climbing is apparently less dangerous than the main tourist attraction in the area – the diving in the Red Sea. On this visit all diving areas had been closed because three divers had been attacked by a White Tip shark and there had been death and lost limbs.

Visiting this region need not cost either an arm or a leg. Leaving aside the air fare (£250- £300 Easyjet from Gatwick) this trip cost £158 each all in.

Useful contacts:

Desertfoxcamp@gmail.com

www.desertfoxcamp.com

Tel 002693470344

Israeli Alpine Club guide:

www.israelalpine.org/sinai



Right:  
*Ted Wrangham  
descenting the  
Taschorn in  
flamboyant style*

Photographer:  
*Roger Chorley*



## OBITUARIES

George Band OBE. 1929 - 2011

Edward Addison Wrangham OBE. 1922 - 2010

Alan Blackshaw OBE. 1933 - 2011

John Brownsort. 1921 - 2011

Ben Wintringham. 1947 - 2011

Tim Oliver. 1956 - 2011

Chris Astill. 1956 - 2009

David Limbert. 1928 - 2009

Ed Grindley. 1948 - 2010

Don Brown. 1930 - 2009

# GEORGE BAND OBE 1929 - 2011

*George Band was one of the last surviving climbers of the 1953 British Everest expedition which put Hillary and Tenzing on the summit; two years later he made the first ascent of the more challenging Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain. He joined the Club in 1950. Here Ed Douglas, Dave Atchison and Bob Allen pay tribute to a gentleman of the mountains and a stalwart of The Climbers' Club.*

Of the fourteen peaks exceeding the magical threshold of 8,000 metres, British climbers were first to the top of just one, Kangchenjunga, third-highest peak in the world. On 25 May 1955, George Band and Joe Brown took the last breathless steps towards the summit but stopped with a few feet remaining, in deference to religious sentiment in Sikkim, where locals believed the mountain to be sacred. The ascent of Kangchenjunga was one of the very best achievements in British mountaineering history, in many ways surpassing the 1953 ascent of Everest, where Band was also involved. The public knew Everest, however, and the long struggle to climb it, whereas success on 'Kanch' was much lower key. As Band himself explained, the achievement's relative obscurity was partly down to its leader, Charles Evans, deeply admired but equally modest. 'He wasn't one to shout things from the rooftops,' Band observed. 'He just got on with the job in a quiet sort of way.'

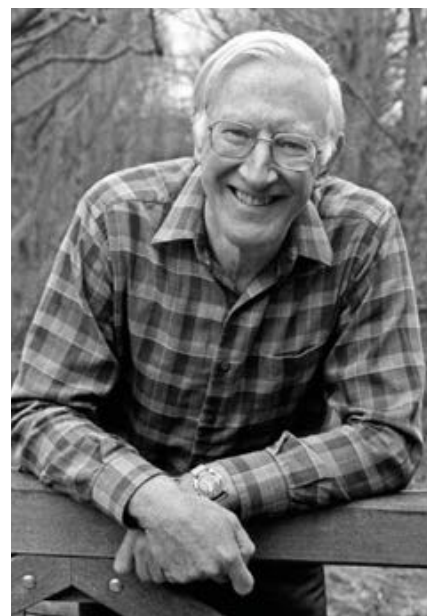
The 1955 team wasn't really expected to get to the summit at all. Long considered the highest mountain in the world, partly due to its proximity to Darjeeling, plenty of expeditions had attempted Kangchenjunga, including in 1905 an international team that included the diabolist Aleister Crowley. They made little progress up the South West Face, considered by some too dangerous to contemplate. But it was this

approach Band and his companions chose for what was conceived as a reconnaissance in force.

No one had been higher than 6,400 metres on this side of the peak. Kangchenjunga held far more secrets than Everest, which had come close to being climbed on several occasions before 1953. The thought of walking up to the bottom of such a huge and untested face and climbing it first go was almost too much to contemplate. The attitude among old hands at the Alpine Club, prior to Band's departure, was 'rather you than me'.

Kangchenjunga's huge bulk and proximity to the Bay of Bengal had worrying implications for the team. The monsoon arrives with full force and the peak gets more snow than mountains further west, in the Everest region. The avalanche risk was consequently greater. Band lay in his tent at base camp, following the toughest approach trek he ever experienced, marking off avalanches on his tent pole with a pencil. After 24 hours he had counted 48 thundering down the face. Allowing that he had slept for a third of that time, Band calculated avalanches were occurring every 20 minutes.

The expedition faced immediate difficulties. 'The lower icefall was horrific,' Band said, 'and we were absolutely extended. But then we saw this little gully up on the left that seemed to circumvent



Photograph: John Cleare

seven-eighths of it. Charles suggested Norman and I have a crack and hey presto!' Having cleverly bypassed the lower icefall and pitched Camp 2, the upper section proved much safer. 'That was thrilling, because we thought at last we're launched on the face.' Above it, the expedition reached what was dubbed the 'Great Shelf', the main objective for their reconnaissance. The team was working well and they could see a route ahead. Why not keep going?

Evans, with Hardie, established Camp 5 at over 7,600m, high enough to consider a push for the top. Back at base camp he appeared at lunch, mug of tea in hand, to announce Band and Brown would be the first summit team. He and Neil Mather, with help from the best Sherpas, would establish Camp 6 and then let them get on with it. The stage was set.

George Band was born in Taiwan, then under Japanese control, where his parents were Presbyterian educational missionaries. His father introduced football to the island. Leaving Taiwan a fortnight before Pearl Harbour, Band went to Eltham College, where he excelled at athletics breaking those school records not set by an earlier pupil and son of missionaries, Eric Liddell. At Cambridge, he also met Harold Abrahams who would come and time-keep at athletics meets. He also studied Petroleum Engineering at Imperial College, London.

At Cambridge, he also excelled at his greater passion for climbing becoming president of the university's mountaineering club. As an undergraduate he climbed the North Ridge of the Dent Blanche, which caught the attention of the previous generation, and his impressive alpine record in 1952 – assisted by his canny acquisition of a job digging a tunnel on Monte Rosa for a glaciologist – won him a place on the Everest team for 1953 as the youngest member, aged just 23 when selected, and despite some misgivings at his youth on the part of John Hunt.

Band himself described his fellow climbers as 'club players – like the London Irish – rather than internationals.' Having served in the Signals during national service, John Hunt put Band in charge of the team's radio equipment. This at least allowed Band to tune into a Hallé Orchestra concert broadcast from the Manchester Free Trade Hall while perched in the Western Cwm.

When he told Hunt that he had actually been in charge of the mess, Band was given the task of sorting out the food as well, with expedition doctor Griff Pugh. This

was a more welcome appointment. As he told Wilf Noyce: 'I'm very interested in food.' Noyce gave an elegant description of Band in the mountains: 'Tall, he had an immensely long reach; and bespectacled, with curved nose and smile that flashed suddenly upon the world, he had an air of benevolent learning which added tone to our expedition.'

On Everest, Band helped forge a route through the Khumbu Icefall to the Western Cwm, but then suffered a bout of flu and had to retreat to lower altitudes. He did however return later in the expedition to carry loads on the Lhotse Face, and tuned in his radio to hear news of the team's success broadcast alongside reports of the Coronation.

In 1954 Band came close to bagging the first ascent of Rakaposhi in the Karakoram and began to consider a full-time adventuring career, even though his parents regularly asked him when he would start 'a proper job'. By the end of the 1950s he was working for Shell in Texas when a millionaire offered to back him on his next big trip. At that point he was faced with a critical decision about which direction his life would move in.

When he asked his employers for more leave, he got a very similar letter to the one Chris Bonington opened during his spell at Unilever. Bonington, as he explained in his autobiography's title, *I Chose to Climb*, whereas Band would later quip: 'I chose to work.'

So Band headed for his next assignment with Shell, in the new oil fields of Venezuela and an encounter with the legendary mountaineer and diplomat Sir Douglas Busk, then ambassador in Caracas. Over the next 30 years, he worked in oil

exploration and climbed all over the world, from Borneo to Oman. There was plenty of time spent in the mountains, but his biggest challenges were now business ones. In 1983 he left his final overseas posting, Malaysia, to become director general of the UK Offshore Operators' Association. With his business experience and illustrious climbing record, Band inevitably became part of the mountaineering nomenclature, serving as president of both the Alpine Club and the British Mountaineering Council, and a board member of the Royal Geographical Society. He was a tireless worker in the engine room of British climbing, helping establish the National Mountaineering Exhibition at Rheged. He also chaired the Himalayan Trust in the UK. He was awarded the OBE in 2009. After retiring from the oil industry, he was also free to spend more time travelling and writing, publishing a history of Everest following an earlier book, *The Road to Rakaposhi* and his history of the Alpine Club, *Summit*. He returned to Kangchenjunga in 2005, 50 years after the mountain's first ascent.

By Ed Douglas

My friendship with George spanned more than 30 years. Our first encounter was in 1980 during an early Nicol/Band Scottish meet. These trips were usually held in late May to early June to mitigate exposure to the midges. If the weather was fine we climbed, usually on remote crags, camped or bivvied and took spinning rods for fishing. If it rained, the fishing would be better and or we might bag a few Munros. Either way, we invariably got through a few bottles of malt. Over the years these meets attracted some



accomplished CC personalities, Bob Allen, Robin Prager, Mike and Sally Westmacott, Bill Thomas, Mike Ward, Jim and Ann Simpson, Peter Newman, Terry Kenny, Derek Walker, John Slee-Smith, Roger Treglown, Mike Banks and Roger Salisbury, all ably directed, of course, by Hamish and George.

The fun very often began the moment I left my front door. On one occasion George arrived in an XJ6 and I was given the wheel and headed off up the M6. This was not my usual form of transport and given the reins I was soon romping up the outside lane. Up near Manchester, in the rear mirror I spotted a police Range Rover and quickly moved over, but was soon ushered onto the hard shoulder. My subsequent conversation with the officer took place across a snoozing George who coming round exclaimed 'Good afternoon officer, is there a problem?' I received a caution! We continued at a pace arriving at our hotel in Inverness in something like seven hours on the road, averaging 60mph. Next morning clad in smart suits we visited the Ardisaig yard building oil rigs and then on to the Cromarty Firth Port Authority offices followed by a conducted tour of the rigs in the Firth by boat. In the distant background were the Fannichs and very soon we had cast aside the smart clothes in favour of our mountain gear, pitched the tent and prepared to knock off a further five Munros.

We shared many excellent climbs down the years. Eagle Ridge on Lochnagar, Spartan Slab, Agag's and January Jigsaw, Wisdom, Savage Slit, the West Buttress of Coire Mhic Fhearchair and Fluted Buttress, with George always a good, steady and reliable partner to have on the rope.

George was a meticulous planner, and always had to hand notebook and pencil. The traverse of the Mamores comprising some seven Munros were completed within 15 minutes of George's predicted time and each top was reached within minutes of his schedule. Distance, pace, stops and terrain all included in the mix. Fascinating.

In 1994 Hamish and George decided to celebrate our annual trip by doing much the same in Corsica, albeit the fishing and whisky were less evident. The GR20 and climbing were to the fore. George had plans to do the Finch route on the Paglia Orba. We failed to find the correct start but succeeded in completing a fine parallel route to the summit. Next up was an excellent climb on the Tafañatu, an amazing fin-like peak with a large hole puncturing it at half height.

There were further adventures to come when the team tackled the Cinque Frati by the classic south ridge. Hamish mentioned this climb in the Club Journal of 1996. The approach was enlivened by a feral pig which took a fancy to Peter Newman's arm in the dead of night during our bivvy. George and I climbed some really good steep pitches to reach the summit of the first tower. By the time we all assembled at the summit of the final tower we were engulfed in a busy electric storm. Electrical discharges were continually passing down the abseil ropes. Exciting in pouring rain. George cut an imposing figure, being tall and with a military bearing derived in part having spent time at Catterick and Aldershot. This evidently came to the fore when our intentions were to do the Cape Wrath/Sandwood Bay walk.

At the time there were military manoeuvres taking place in the Pentland

Firth and using the Parph firing range. We first approached Mr Morrison, owner of the Durness ferry, who said he could take us across but warned that further progress would not be possible due to the military activities. Moreover, the bus to the Cape was subject to the same restrictions. George was undaunted by these diversions.

On a tip off, we visited the nearby hotel bar and although very busy we soon identified the likely officers in mufti. On introducing ourselves to Major Wright, George was soon on the same wavelength and sharing a few beers. The Major was sympathetic towards our plan and eventually gave way to George's diplomacy and agreed to ease our way through the restricted zone. Next morning our party comprising Mike and Sally, Peter, George and myself boarded Morrison's boat and then the Cape bus. At the sentry post, the armed guard checked the validity of Mr Band's party and instructed the driver to continue but on no account to stop until clear of the second sentry post. I was left pondering a CC party enjoying a day out crossing a NATO exercise war zone. George was so chuffed, the walk that followed was almost an anticlimax.

A couple of years ago, we set out as usual to do a few more Munros. By now we had each done about 200. From the hostel in Comrie, we did Chonzie and Vorlich but he was not feeling too good on the hill. Next day we climbed Meall Ghaordaidh (this would prove to be his last) and the symptoms were more evident, out of breath and going very slowly. We rested the following day exploring the fishing possibilities of Glen Orchy. At breakfast next morning after a troubled night I suggested we seek medical advice and

made our way to the Belford Hospital in Fort William. Blood tests and further checks concluded he had suffered a minor heart attack and would be kept for five days for further checks and to monitor his condition.

Fortunately I had Riasg to hand and so visited him daily, at times supplementing his diet with goodies from Morrisons over the road. He was in fine fettle and looking forward to being discharged. The day came but with strict instructions not to drive. The first stage saw us down to our new hut at Grange. At the Scafell Inn in Rosthwaite, we shared our table with Richard (son of AB) and Joan Hargreaves, a delightful and unexpected encounter. Next day we arrived at George's home much to the relief of his family and friends. George was always good company, armed with a vast experience and lots of stories, and not only in mountaineering and climbing adventures. In a very small way I feel proud to have been associated with some of them.

By Dave Atchison

I was invited to attend quite a few of what I always called the 'Old Codgers' meets in Scotland mentioned by Dave Atchison. One memorable one, in 1977, was based on the bothy at Carnmore. It is quite a tough walk in, with food and gear. However, one indispensable piece of equipment was a bottle of whisky, purely to deter those little tigers with wings, you understand. Quite apart from climbing and fell walking, the fishing was also taken very seriously, although rods often had to be of a collapsible type so that they could be smuggled in. I still have a mental picture of George striding into Fionn Loch,

trouserless, casting his spinner prodigious distances and reeling in supper.

The Isle of Arran received our attention, but the classic VS on Cir Mhor could not be located in mist and we climbed Sou'wester Slabs instead. On another meet we went to Knoydart, traversing Ladhar Bheinn as part of a long day. That meet ended up at Jim O'Neill's house in Upper Glen Dessary, where we had a wonderful roast beef supper, drank huge quantities of wine and walked out to Glenfinnan the following morning.

The Ben Alder meet was a bit special. George had friends in high places and one of them owned a half-million acre estate in Scotland, which happened to include Ben Alder. George had been invited to go deer stalking, but brilliantly exploited this invitation to enable our CC party to stay in the shooting lodge of the estate. The one drawback was that we had carefully to protect the tyres on our cars from rubber-eating ponies that grazed nearby. Wood for the log fire was awaiting us on arrival and this proved the start of a marvellous week which ended with a mass ascent of Ardverikie Wall.

In 1990, George invited me to join himself and Susan in the Pyrenees. He drove his big Volvo out there, collected me from Toulouse and off we went to camp at Lescun, not a great distance from Lourdes. Roger and Ann Chorley stayed at a nearby hostelry. The walking was excellent – lovely grassy alps with fine mountains popping up, rather like the Dolomites. Possibly the best of these is the splendid Pic du Midi d'Ossau, a granite spire amidst limestone. In his usual thorough way, George had been researching this before I had even heard of it and announced

that there was a north face route, rarely repeated, pioneered in about 1900. We first did a tour around the mountain, which was a reconnaissance by George, although I hadn't realised it at the time. At the first fine-weather opportunity, he popped the question and the following morning we were on our way. The possible reason why the route was not often repeated soon became clear by the time we had traversed into the middle of the north face and found this steep chimney was the only obvious way out. Very delicate climbing up, round and over tottery blocks, with very careful placing of the odd nut, led us eventually to easier ground, but it had been a very nerve-wracking outing. George was a big chap and I distinctly remember pleading with him to insinuate himself past some of the loosest blocks, but I shouldn't have worried. We were up.

The Scottish meets dwindled after Hamish's sad and very untimely death, but George produced a flourish worthy of him when I heard that he had been collected by a chauffeur-driven car in London, flown by private helicopter to the far north of Scotland and then driven again to a splendid dinner in a hotel somewhere near the Old Man of Hoy. Guided and accompanied by a couple of hot shot climbers, he had then climbed the Old Man of Hoy before flying back to the Home Counties in inimitable style. Especially during my own Presidency, I found him to be extremely supportive, helpful and generous in all respects. I know he was only a little taller than me, but I definitely looked up to him in many other respects and shall certainly miss his presence.

By Bob Allen

# ALAN BLACKSHAW OBE 1933 - 2011

*Few men have done more than Alan Blackshaw to champion the public's right of access to the mountains and moorlands of Britain. He joined the club in 1953. Here Doug Scott, Derek Walker, Mike Jones, John Peacock and Dennis Gray share their memories of a pillar of the climbing community and a vital force in The Climbers' Club.*

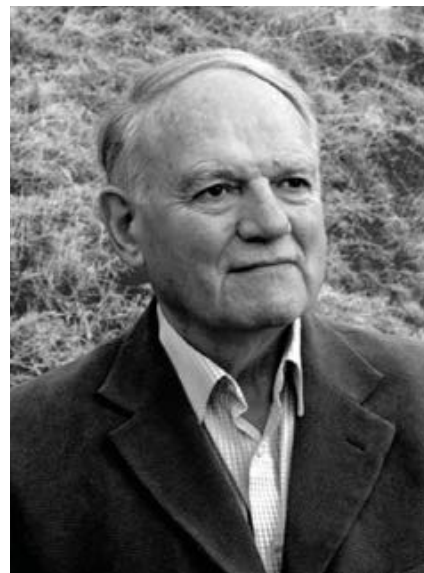
When the President and Immediate Past-President of the Japanese Mountaineering Association heard the news of Alan Blackshaw's death he sent a message that beautifully captured the essence of the man: 'Alan was a good friend to us and we acknowledge his great contribution to the UIAA and to the mountaineering community of the world. We shall never forget his gentle smile on the floor of UIAA meetings.'

The Japanese, as in a haiku brush stroke, evoke an impression in that one sentence of the Alan we all recall – a man with a gentle smile who survived all the extreme challenges he faced throughout his life, physical, intellectual and emotional. I first became aware of Alan 50 years ago when I was checking out climbs in the Alpine Climbing Group Bulletin that Alan had edited. In it were lists of routes British climbers were doing, including some by Alan and his fellow Alpinists – routes such as the Cassin Route on the Badile and the Dent de Géant South Face that might be possible for myself and friends in the Nottingham Climbing Club. It was an essential publication in the days before magazines and the internet.

He went on to edit the Alpine Journal (1966-70), introducing a modern format with integrated black and white photos and an index – most useful for those researching information. He persuaded younger climbers, including myself, to contribute, giving encouragement and

advice – advice about many things, such as when I was bemoaning National Park and council bureaucrats 'Don't write them off,' he replied, 'bureaucrats don't mind what they do, as long as they are doing something, so get in there first and program them to do what is really needed.'

Alan derived so much pleasure from the time he spent in wild places on rock, snow and on the oceans that he naturally wanted the same for everyone. He sought rights of access as a means not only to lift one's state of being, but also to conserve the remaining natural places. He pursued this quest all the way to the UN where he was a member of the UN Inter Agency Group on Mountains. Alan wanted it to be set in stone that there is a Fundamental Human Right to the Enjoyment of Nature. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom and, where newcomers on the scene such as myself faced governance issues with spluttering, righteous indignation, Alan approached problems in a balanced way, accepting that all parties will have different perspectives and interpretations, and yet he was always determined to get facts identified and properly understood. He was a lovely man who I came to admire more than any other for striving towards a better world. He was a true gentleman without any guile or cunning and never overbearing. He had tremendous humility and was always self-effacing. I believe that we need people like Alan more than ever. Men who just don't say NO and who can



Photograph: John Cleare

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take the heat; and better still can retain through it all a gentle smile.

By Doug Scott

I first became aware of Alan Blackshaw at Merchant Taylors' School in Liverpool in the late 1940s. He would not have known me as he was more than three years older and in the Sixth Form, but I remember him as a powerful member of the first XV and as a monitor. The monitors wore gowns and were expected to keep us in order!

Alan's background was very different to most pupils there. His father was a Liverpool docker and his mother ran a



small corner shop on the Dock road. When war broke out he was evacuated, aged six, to a Welsh speaking farm in the Black Mountains for over two years and learned to speak Welsh himself. He then lived with relatives in Bristol till the bombing stopped in Liverpool and he could come home. He won a scholarship to Merchants'. Exceptionally bright, he benefited from a good early education and in 1951 won a scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford. But it was not all academia. Alan was a prominent member of the school Scouts, and then, when he was 14, he rode his new bike to Land's End and back to Liverpool on his own. The following year he cycled to Glencoe and Lochaber, meeting some climbers there and catching the climbing bug. Back home, he started going to Helsby Crag, a forcing ground for Merseyside climbers such as Colin Kirkus and Menlove Edwards before him. He also began hitch-hiking to North Wales and the Lake District, so by 1951, when he arrived at Oxford, he was an accomplished rock-climber with many VS climbs under his belt. At 18 he had been to Chamonix where he met up with Geoff Sutton and did his first Alpine climb. This pattern of going to Chamonix continued over the next few years until, staying at the Ecole Nationale in 1955 with Sutton, Bob Downes and Eric Langmuir, he had his best Alpine season, doing a number of first British ascents including the North Face of the Triolet, the South Face of the Guglielmina and the North East Face of the Piz Badile. By now he was recognised as one of the best young British alpinists. Meanwhile, at the age of 20 in 1953, he joined The Climbers' Club and in 1956, on

Dick Viney's death, became secretary until 1961. He joined the Alpine Club in 1954 and was soon involved with a working party about recruitment of younger members into the club. He was also a founder member of the ACG in 1953 and was editor of the ACG bulletin from this time, so the pattern was already set for his service to the mountaineering community. The loss of two of his closest Alpine friends, Tom Bourdillon and Dick Viney, in 1956 made Alan and others re-think their own climbing activities, and after this he began to enjoy the mountains in different ways.

By Derek Walker

I met Alan in 1958 after being demobbed from the Royal Marines and being sent to join the Royal Marines Forces Volunteer Reserve (RMFVR) now RMR based in West London. We had both served in the RM for our National Service. Alan, being older, had left the RM earlier than me and was commanding the Cliff Assault Wing of the London RMFVR which he encouraged me to join. I had not had any climbing experience apart from recruit training on rocky landings by boat and roping up the cliffs on various parts of the coast. Alan had a commission and was a Lieutenant, having attended officer training at Eaton Hall in about 1954. Happily this made no difference to our relationship although I was but a lowly Marine. We trained at weekends and during the week and on longer stints in all the usual climbing, mountain and ski areas from the Cornish sea cliffs, a major area for RM climbing training, to Wales, the Peaks, Swanage, Lakes, Roaches, Harrisons, Cairngorms, Nevis, Glencoe and many

others. We climbed with some of the best of that era, Zeke Deacon, Viv Stevenson, Peter Biven and Doc Patey. As the OC of the RMR Climbing Wing, Alan had to maintain standards and discipline which he managed with little more than a look or a word, the strongest admonition I ever heard him give was to two Marines 'You two can consider yourselves seriously bollocked' – that was all. He led by example and by being extremely good at what he did in the mountains, on cliffs, on rocky landings and cliff assault drills, and by being very good at administration. He made a point of knowing the Queen's Regulations, particularly as applied to getting more training time and money plus expenses; this was a first. All achieved without confrontation: he was very good at getting his own way, softly softly. One result was that Alan managed to get the RMR to agree to a training stint in the area of Loch Laggan, paying us a subsistence allowance for accommodation and food – this he arranged at the Loch Laggan Inn. Unfortunately, when we arrived, the Inn had burnt down, except for the Bothy – which had a selection of some two hundred Malts, they said. We slept very well in the burnt out shell, did some tremendous climbing, and wasted the accommodation money in the bar. I still have the feeling that Alan knew about the fire. On the rock and in the hills he was totally reliable and unflappable and had a good Commando spirit competing with other branches. We took a group of SBS into the hills for mountain training and Alan challenged them to a swimming race across a high lochan, all us climbers stripped off

and plunged in only to find halfway across we were on our own, it was too cold for the swimming experts.

When training rock-climbers, I remember one of his remarks when someone seemed to be in difficulties 'he's got more sense than to fall off from there'. He never appeared to lose his cool, only twice in all the years did I see him annoyed and then only slightly. One was when we were climbing at Chair Ladder, Alan had an old car that wouldn't start – we took an old climbing rope, tied it to the car and to the towing hook of the three ton truck; what we didn't tell him was that the rope was only turned around the hook and as we progressed we gradually let the rope out. Soon he was way behind and some bends in the narrow road were causing him difficulty and a little damage on the stone hedges. Almost the full length of the rope was out before we gave up. A Cornish cream tea soon soothed him however.

He was a good friend for over 50 years on the cliffs. In the mountains his judgement, skill and leadership were the best possible, plus his company there and in the pub was the best possible. A few weeks before his death he was planning to join myself and some old Marine friends on a battlefield trip to Walcheren in the Netherlands; it would have been brilliant.

By Mike Jones

Like most CC members I knew something of Alan's earlier climbing exploits but it was not until the late 60s that I got to know him well. By that time he no longer entertained ambitions of tackling hard Alpine routes but had satisfied himself with expeditions further afield and increasingly ambitious ski mountaineering.

He was already an active member of both the Alpine Ski Club and the Eagle Ski Club and together we planned to try the Haute Route, east to west, hoping to learn much from the Valais guide Denis Bertholet. But the weather conspired against us so we had to content ourselves with increasingly hairy forays, following in Denis's tracks, down ever steepening slopes in the back country of the Valais somewhere above Mattmark. Under Denis's tutelage our confidence increased hugely with each exciting day, while hut-bound evenings were hardly less instructive as he reminisced about the difficulties encountered on the long traverse he and four other professional guides had completed, some years before, from one end of the Alpine chain to the other. Quite possibly it was Denis's recent talk to the Alpine Club that first sowed the seed in Alan's mind. But, if that was so, he didn't let on. Bonatti's party of four had made the first successful traverse in 1956; Denis's international party had been the second and an Austrian military team on langlauf skis had recently made a very fast third traverse. Undeterred by the 'professional' standing of these pioneers, Alan suggested that there was no good reason why we should not try something similar: a 'first British'.

Planning commenced as soon as we got back to London; for Alan was never one to let the grass grow under his feet. Bonatti had started from the Julian Alps but the other groups had started further west. We chose to start in the Austrian town of Kaprun, just north of the Gross Glockner. But exactly where our traverse was to end would depend on the late season snow; we hoped for somewhere

west and south of the Dauphine Alps and intended to climb as many of the 'landmark' peaks along the way as time and conditions allowed.

With his customary care and attention to detail Alan had thought it all through. Starting in early March, he hoped to minimise the avalanche risk yet still leave time before the spring thaw to find sufficient snow to complete the distance. With more than five hundred miles ahead, skiing from hut to hut, descending into valleys, skinning up onto high snow fields and tackling the occasional summit, we reckoned on perhaps eight weeks in all, climbing in total the equivalent of several Himalayan peaks.

Even with minimal weight packs we expected the venture to be tough enough, and the onset of warmer weather at the end of the season would brook no delay if we were to complete the journey before the snows disappeared.

In the event I was unable to join the team until they crossed into Switzerland near Klosters, thus missing some bad weather but, more importantly, the invaluable initial 'shake-down'. Alan earned my undying gratitude for his generous encouragement as I laboured endlessly uphill in my puny endeavours to keep up with the others, by now all fighting fit. But it did get better and we revelled in the satisfaction of making steady progress towards Andermatt and Easter. Thence into the Oberland where conditions conspired to deny us our hoped for summits; so we side-stepped by road to Zermatt, there to rendezvous with a BBC TV crew. They had a problem, it transpired: even with the combined effort of their team of 'porters', including Dougal

Haston and Mick Burke, they were unable to keep ahead of, let alone overtake, us to get the shots they had planned. A prolonged discussion with the producer one evening over mountains of spaghetti bolognese in the station restaurant revealed a new aspect of Alan's character: a courteous yet determined negotiator, he insisted repeatedly that we could not accept any delay and that the film-makers would simply have to face up to the expense of chartering a ski-equipped light aircraft if they were to secure the footage desired. In the end they did: and with good grace – meeting us as we descended from Monte Rosa – and, although we weren't to see it till many months later, the end result amply justified the means. Time and again Alan's determination and exemplary leadership provided the stiffening which any team needs and we, both individually and collectively, responded willingly. His navigation, in unfamiliar terrain and often in very trying conditions, was faultless and he had the happy knack of being able to resolve dissension with a friendly smile and logical argument. We admired his style and respected his all round competence; it inspired us, lent us confidence and endeared him to us all. Local advice, though not abundant, was the more welcome when it did materialise and never more valuable than when, after the overnight hospitality at the Grand St Bernard Hospice, the Prior, a mountain guide himself, showed us a hidden pass leading over into the Val Ferret; a real gem of a secret. Alas, the poor weather persisted, prohibiting any attempt on Mt Blanc; so we pressed on, over the Petit St Bernard pass, hoping

that things would improve. Nevertheless, the sheer magic of the transition from high barren monochrome wilderness to greener valleys with spring flowers peeping through the remaining snow is one of the most memorable delights to which we were treated in abundance through the approach to the Vanoise and eventually the Dauphine. Here, near the end of the traverse, intermittent storms forced us south onto lower ground until one last seven-hour ascent brought us to a real sting in the tail: an extremely exposed and icy traverse across a series of steep ridges and gullies which remains etched forever in my memory. The end of a very long day saw the eight of us trudging into the tiny village of Les Clots, just a few kilometres from Gap and the end of the snow. In a season characterised by unusually variable conditions we had completed the traverse without accident or injury, avoiding avalanches and still remaining on schedule. In fact, having 'rendezvoused' with the back-up team there was still just enough time to drive to Chamonix for an attempt on Mt Blanc. Two days later we all reached the Vallot refuge; but only Alan continued up the final ridge, leading his rope of three to the summit in what he was later to admit were pretty marginal conditions. It seemed a fitting climax to a successful venture begun just over seven long weeks earlier and reinforcing our universal respect and admiration for a complete mountain man.

By John Peacock

I first met Alan as a 15 year-old in 1951 below Cloggy. I guess I was precocious and engaged him in some Lancashire v Yorkshire banter. We quickly became

friends. When he became BMC President in 1973, it was a relief to me as the Council's beleaguered first ever Professional Officer. The next three years were a roller coaster of debate, policy development and re-organisation, all masterminded by Alan.

I never saw him lose his temper, for he was always in control; smiling and confident. An example of this was an occasion at a BMC gathering in Nidderdale when we had brought together the Chair and Secretaries of all the BMC Area and Specialist Committees. Also invited were representatives from the Sports Councils. The officer who turned up from Wales insisted on addressing the meeting. None of us had met him before and for some reason he seemed very agitated. He stood up and harangued the gathering, speaking in Welsh for about 15 minutes. It went over my head, for I only know (shame) two words of the language. Alan was in the Chair and after the man, still standing, had finished with his outburst, quietly but firmly replied to the guy's strictures, also in Welsh! At this Mr Angry sat down and was from then on a quiet participant!

That night at the bar (Alan did like a drop of our lunatic soup; Tetley's), I collared Blackshaw as to where he had learnt to speak Welsh? 'Well,' he responded with a smile, 'During the war I was evacuated to a hill farm in North Wales and they spoke nothing else, so I had to learn quick!' Alan was the outstanding servant of British climbing in my lifetime, his energy and abilities, to say nothing of his achievements, mark him out as a very special human being.

By Dennis Gray



# BEN WINTRINGHAM 1947 - 2011

*Everyone who knew him will have been touched by Ben Wintringham's irrepressible energy and good humour. As a pioneer of countless new routes in Britain and abroad, he approached climbing with an unyielding commitment to the ground-up ethic. He joined the club in 1976. Here Pembroke activist Emma Alsford pays tribute to a climbing legend.*

The news of Ben's tragic accident on Friday 21st October whilst abseiling in the Moroccan Anti Atlas came as a tremendous shock to all who knew him. That he died after an anchor failure from a sling, which his wife Marion and good friend Mike Mortimer had just used, was utterly heartbreaking.

Ben was a high achiever – keenly motivated towards both his climbing and his career, and very well-respected. He was also extremely kind and generous, with a happy demeanour that was a constant joy – a rare combination indeed.

He was born in 1947. While he grew up predominantly in London, it was his time spent at a boarding school in Wetherby that gave him the opportunity to cut his teeth on Yorkshire gritstone. At the age of 14 he would cycle most Sundays to Almscliff where he perfected his jamming techniques, climbing without the comfort of machined nuts and with only slings to protect the desperate, and often under-graded, Very Severs. By the early 1960s this apprenticeship had equipped him make some impressive early ascents of routes such as Brant Direct and Cenotaph Corner. At the age of 16 he joined the North London Mountaineering Club, facilitating many forays to Harrison's Rocks. Soon noticing 'the gaps', he realised his passion for new routing, making first ascents of such routes as The Flakes, The Limpet and West Wall Eliminate. During this time he met his soul mate, future wife and regular



Photograph: Carl Ryan

climbing partner Marion, from whom he became inseparable.

Ben began his career as an outdoor shop assistant at London's 'Blacks of Greenock', soon becoming assistant manager, and by the age of 18 he was able to afford a grey Mini van which enabled extended trips to Avon, the Wye Valley, Wales and the Peak District. At 21 he made the first ascent of the classic Surrealist at Wintour's Leap. Ben discovered the delights of Baggy Point in the autumn of 1969, beginning a blitz of the crag which resulted in over 30 new routes that winter, his most notable ones being Twinkletoes and Kinky Boots. He also loved sports cars and fast driving, obtaining many affectionate nick-names such as 'E-type Benjy' and 'Shekels

Wintringham' (because his mates were still on motorbikes or in vans) – and was renowned for having made it from London to Llanberis one time in two hours and ten minutes in his Porsche.

Ben was always able to reinvent himself whenever factors out of his control knocked him back, or when sheer dogged persistence and hard work were not enough – after a 25% purchase tax crippled their jewellery business in Sloane Street, he and Marion moved to North Wales in 1975, and started their own 'Wintergear' company, using the new Gore-Tex fabric to make bivvy sacks. They created the original Quasar (the definitive two-man mountain tent design), inspired by seeing geodesic designs during a trip to the states. Its many clones are still

virtually unchanged over 30 years on. During this time, Ben became acquainted with Gogarth, finding many new routes on the Upper Tier and Main Cliff, including Aardvark and Hyde Park. In the summer of 1978, being unemployed, he spent many happy climbing days with Joe Brown, cementing his affection for Gogarth and developing the aptly named Smurf Zawn. Around the same time he put up Infidel on Red Walls, and would proudly recall how Joe needed a tight rope on that rare occasion! Raptures of the Deep confirmed his ability for coping with the less stable (and sandier) parts of Red Wall, whilst Fantasia became one of the more popular of his routes in this area. Ben was also synonymous with Pembrokeshire climbing, having originally heard about it from a rather inebriated Pat Littlejohn, who gave the game away at the 1980 BMC Buxton conference. This led to the legendary Easter meet of the same year and over the next few years Ben and Marion put up over 70 new routes. Despite never quite receiving the same limelight as that shone upon some of his peers, Ben was always highly successful and a stalwart at anything he felt passionate about – not only did he make the first ascent of routes such as Bat Out of Hell (ironically now fallen down, yet movingly the song played at his funeral), the iconic Star Wars and Jabberwock (a route Ben originally gave E4 5c), but he also showed much determination and ‘true grit’ in conquering The Great Escape. He went back countless times through the ‘crawl’ inside The Cauldron to attempt the route, in the days before pre-inspection and headpoints, when the majority of routes were achieved ‘ground up’, a style he

continued with through his climbing life. Ben was also a major contributor to the 1996 Climbers’ Club Pembroke guidebook publication, checking and climbing many of the routes around the very esoteric Green Bridge to Mewsford section. He also took this as an opportunity to add a few routes of his own – including Witches Brew, Femme Fatal and On the Crest of a Wave, as well as attempting what has now become What Friends are For, on sight, though forced to retreat due to bad weather and an incoming tide. He even made it back to Pembroke in 2010, when visits by the Wintringhams were a rarity, to partake in some Geriatric Jiving at the age of 63, an impressive E2 (on sight) at Gun Cliff. After Ben sold the Quasar design to Wild Country, he moved on to a small mail order business, making and selling outdoor clothing (Marion’s dress making skills being a great asset) before this ended with the recession of the 1980s, when another career change became necessary. So next he ventured into computer software development, producing web applications. He had been programming since the early 1990s and understood the processes business needed. By 2000 it was obvious how important the web was going to be. He worked for various companies, including Channel 4, Jet2.com and the DTI. Ben was always a highly accomplished climber, and besides his forays to the Alps, Spain and Norway, he was also one of the key personalities in the development of rock climbing in Morocco’s Anti Atlas – a love affair that began in 2000. He was always the main driving force there, and had a knack for finding (and sharing) the best crags. His early training techniques stood him in good stead with routes such

as Moroccan Smoothie, a jamming E2 test piece at crag BX, which would leave strong climbing teams (a decade younger) like Paul Donnithorne and Steve Findlay fighting and cursing their way up. Ben’s eagerness and drive did not finish at last light either. Unlike most other climbers, who would be left exhausted from the day’s excursions, he would always be found busy writing up the new routes in Hotel les Amandier’s log book, and adding in maps and topos. He had even been working on a Silverlight application for an on-line climbing guide for the region over the last couple of years. Thanks to his passionate input, the Jebel el Kest climbing area is becoming ever more popular with those climbers who still relish adventuring into the unknown, and Ben’s ‘ground up’ ethic lives on here at one of the last great traditional climbing destinations. Ben did much pioneering over the last 40 years, certainly more than most, and covering a range of locations. He was also a regular face at the Climbers’ Club dinners and gatherings. But more than that, he was an excellent raconteur and a magnet for friendships with his infectious enthusiasm for absolutely everything. He went out on a limb for people, was forever smiling (having more laughter lines than anyone I’ve ever met), and he touched everyone with his boundless stream of positive energy. It was a privilege to have known him. He was ‘a winner’. Despite the unbelievable beauty of the autumnal colours blistering the landscape this year, there was a savage hole in my heart, and a vacuum in the heart of British climbing, where Ben used to be.

One cannot replace a legend.

By Emma Alsford

# CHRIS ASTILL 1956 - 2009

*Chris Astill was killed in an avalanche on Liathach in December 2009. A talented climber, Chris was equally at home on short, desperate gritstone problems, big Scottish routes in summer and winter, even bigger North American walls and the Alps in winter. He was a familiar face at the Downes Hut where he was custodian and volunteered much of his spare time to the Climbers' Club. He joined the club in 1978. Here four of his friends, Howard Lancashire, Steve Read, Dave Prior and Dennis May pay tribute to the man who many knew simply as 'Rabbit.'*

I first got to know Chris at the Nottingham Climbers Club Thursday night pub meet, which for years was at the Golden Fleece on Mansfield Road, in the early 1970s.

We climbed together throughout the 1970s mainly in the Peak with bank holiday forays to North Wales, Cornwall and later Pembroke with Dave Prior and the green van brigade.

We were both quite competitive and keen to progress through the grades and there was always quite a bit of friendly banter between us. We made a good team, each having complementary strengths.

Two of my most memorable climbing trips were to Scotland with Chris. The first, in 1978, was a Spring Bank trip with the aim of climbing the Old Man of Hoy. There were four of us, Chris, myself, Steve Punshon (who later married Liz Bonington) and Norman Tooley (who came along mainly for the ride and to take pictures).

After an eleven-hour drive on the Friday, we arrived in Scrabster where we slept on the quayside before catching the cargo boat to Stromness on the mainland of Orkney at 9am on the Saturday morning. The next day we set off for our objective, the Original Route on the Old Man and, by early afternoon, Chris, myself and Steve were all on top. Having achieved our objective and with the whole week ahead

of us, we embarked on a Hard Rock ticking spree. The weather was perfect. First we headed down to Poolewe and the long walk into Carnmore, where we had a great few days knocking off the classics. After this it was south to Skye and Glencoe for more Hard Rock ticking. A great week.

The other memorable Scottish trip was in 1982, also at Spring Bank, when we were accompanied by Dave and Pam Prior and Paul Blanks. This time our objective was The Scoop on Strone Ulladale, the stopper route in Hard Rock. We all knew people who had failed on this route but knew of no one, other than the first ascensionists, who had been successful.

We walked in on the Saturday, making two trips with all our gear in the rain. Fortunately, there were some great bivvy spots under the huge boulders at the base of the cliff. The weather gradually improved and by the evening of the second day it was set fine for the whole week. We all climbed the route and by the Wednesday we were heading back to Skye. Chris and I had a great day in Sron na Ciche finishing on King Cobra high on the Skye ridge.

The next day saw us heading up the Allt a'Mhuilín for the big three on the Ben. Sassenach, The Bat and Centurion were all ascended in the day. This was one of my most memorable days out with Chris. We alternated leads on all the routes, and

there was just no stopping us. Up to the top of Carn Dearg and down the snowy descent each time in our PAs. We rounded off our week's climbing in Glencoe with ascents of Yo-Yo and Carnivore in the day, before setting off home for Nottingham, very chuffed chappies indeed.

By Howard Lancashire

My big experience with Chris was in the North West Territories of Canada in 1978. This well-organised trip to the Lotus Flower Tower was put together by Guy Lee. Ten of us flew from Watson Lake to Glacier Lake below the Cirque of the Unclimbables. From there a tough day's hike took us up to base camp in a beautiful meadow below the Tower.

Chris was teamed up with Keith Brown and I joined Alun Hughes from Llanberis. Next day Chris led up the steep cracks and grooves, and after a brilliant day's free climbing, we all bivvied on a ledge halfway up the tower. Luckily we had hit on three days of perfect weather. I remember the first pitch from the ledge being one of the hardest. For the upper 'tram-lines' we used chocks for aid. Near the top Chris let Keith take the lead. We had run out of water by now and were gagging but there was much speculation about the possibility of a snow patch on top. As Alun and I were approaching the summit, Chris leaned over and said in a glum voice:





Photograph: *Gail Male*

'Sorry, lads, bone dry up here.' When we got on to the top we found Chris laid on his back with water from a snow bank running into his mouth.

After a beautiful sunset we slept on top before making the dangerous descent the next day. As the Cirque lies to the west of the upper section of the South Nahanni

River, five of us chose to navigate the river on inflatables, two of which Alun Hughes had bought in Calgary. He shared the larger one with Chris and Chalky White, whilst I was with Geoff Upton. Only Alun had been on a river before – we did not know that the South Nahanni was one of Canada's most spectacular rivers.

Our ten-day descent involved a portage around Virginia Falls, three huge canyons with walls up to 4,000 feet, running all the famous rapids, climbing to the top of Pulpit Rock at the Gate, cooking on open fires, battling with mosquitoes, and bathing in Klaus Hot Springs. This descent was to light a fire in Chris's imagination and he later took up canoeing with his wife in the hope of one day returning.

By Steve Read

Chris was renowned for his remarkable ability as a climber and his determination to achieve the tasks he set himself left many of his friends struggling to keep up. In the early years, as part of the green van team, we travelled all over the country in my VW van, climbing Hard Rock routes and enjoying life to the full. As young, fit and carefree lads, in the mid 70s, these were magical and memorable times. Chris was a man of many talents. I remember skiing in Chamonix when he misjudged his speed and took a huge flyer which ended up with his nose being broken. It didn't seem to make a lot of difference, because Chris's nose was not his best feature. Later we skied the Vallée Blanche, just after a storm, with no tracks and in near white-out conditions. Not the wisest thing to do, but what a memory. Like most climbers, Chris was a complex person. Prepared to take life threatening risks and yet still dedicated to supporting his family, he had many facets. Through sheer hard work he attained a mining engineering degree which allowed him to work his way up to be a pit deputy, a job of great responsibility. He also knew tragedy with the loss of his first wife in a car accident. He was faced with bringing

up their two daughters, Fiona and Rachel, on his own. This was never going to be easy, but with Chris's usual determination he did a wonderful job of caring for them, despite having to hold down a job. He enjoyed his children, particularly at the Climbers' Club family meets in Cornwall. In the last few years he was the mainstay of the Bregaglia and Dolomite team, leading me, and Axel, our German friend up huge north-facing walls. We had wonderful times, and a near escape in a storm involving a 600ft blind abseil. The warning in the guidebook, saying that in the Dolomites you can die of hypothermia in sight of the car park, rang in our ears. Chris had been criticising 60m ropes for being too long and heavy. He felt 30m was sufficient. After this abseil, the subject was never mentioned again.

On the Comici on the Cime Grande, we got to the ring band terrace after Chris had led the last 200ft in the dark. We decided to bivvy at over 10,000ft. A bitter wind blew up and soon we were freezing. Chris and Axel got into their bivvy bags, leaving me shivering and slightly envious of their bags. Chris gave me his wicked grin and said he knew of my reputation for bivvying and accordingly, had come prepared. Axel kindly shared his bivvy bag with me. Later in the night when things were getting very cold, Chris, with teeth chattering said 'I'm not gay lads, but do you mind if I cuddle you !' And so we did.

He and his wife Jo were planning a trip in the wilds of Canada and were learning how to canoe at Whatstandwell on the River Derwent. They were going to canoe down the Nahanni river which is one of the old trapper routes, and something Chris had done many years earlier

following a successful expedition to the Lotus Flower Tower. In later years, when he had more time, he volunteered to serve on the Climbers' Club Committee and was the hut custodian for the Downes Hut. Chris was a kind, thoughtful, generous and caring man, who would go out of his way to help or encourage you. He was a peaceful man with a huge circle of friends. In all the time I have known Chris, I cannot remember anybody saying anything bad about him. He was our strong leader, always willing to take on the challenge when we would hesitate. He would drop a rope down, after he had climbed some difficult route, so you could enjoy the day as well. He loved the banter and craic which accompanies climbers.

Some of my happiest memories are of the family days out on the gritstone edges where, with Chris and Jo and a large group of friends, we would climb, laugh and joke our way through a beautiful summer day. We were making plans for the next adventure, maybe Lofoten. He was thinking of going back to the Himalaya where he felt he had so much to do and so little time. He and Jo came to see us in Buxton the day before they went to Torridon and we said we would talk about in the New Year, when he had returned from Scotland. We never did. His sudden death shocked his family and friends and left a huge hole in my life too. I am so grateful for the time I had with him and the vivid memories by which I shall remember him. Lead on Chris.

By Dave Prior

On December 23rd 2009 Chris and I went for a play in the snow on Mam Tor. I had intended to go the previous

evening, but he had been out on Kinder that day and was feeling tired. 'Come over early tomorrow youth, and I'll cook you breakfast.' Pure bribery, but then he couldn't bear to miss out on an opportunity to climb. A tricky drive into Tideswell, was followed by breakfast and an even trickier drive out. Fortunately, Winnatt's was clear and we were soon at the foot of the gully, at which point Chris phoned the office, stating that the weather conditions were far too bad and he couldn't possibly get to work. The only variant he hadn't done was just to the right of Blue John Rib. He went up to have a look, but decided to give it a miss, the turf being only partially frozen and so we made the best of the steepest line just to the right of the main gully.

On the top we met Steve Burns, out for a sprint around the Edale skyline. Chris chatted about plans and ambitions for the winter, including his trip to Torridon over the New Year. Then, ever hungry, he suggested that we could get Back Tor Gully in and still make it home on time; he was on Christmas shopping duty and under strict orders to be back by 1300hrs. His ambition duly rewarded us with the best sport of the day as he deliberately sought out problems off the direct line.

On the way back to Tideswell he enquired about my van. He and Jo had plans for a climbing sabbatical and required a suitably kitted out vehicle. 'Mind you youth, I'd have to keep it tidier than this.' I admitted it was badly in need of a clear out. Laid up over Christmas, I finally applied myself to the task on New Year's Eve, in an attempt to keep occupied as I failed to hold back the tears.

By Dennis May

# ED GRINDLEY 1948 - 2010

*For those schooled in the lessons of hard Lakeland and Scottish Extremes, the name of Ed Grindley would inevitably be part part of the curriculum. From Fallen Angel to Edgehog and Going for Gold, his routes were always memorable and inspiring. Off the rock, this quietly spoken but engaging man was just as full of purpose and energy. Ed played a vital role in securing Riasg for The Climbers' Club and was the hut's custodian and a familiar face in Roybridge. He joined the club as a Honorary Member in 2000. Here a long-time friend, Gordon Higginson, recalls the essence of the man.*

It seems hard to believe but, in those days, they paid you to go to college. Hence, I met Ed at Exeter in October 1967 – he was reading Climbing and Physics, I was Engineering and Climbing. For their maximum grant of £320 a year the government got a (surprisingly) dedicated and inspirational teacher – Ed got four years climbing in the south-west and an escape from Port Sunlight.

Ed was already a competent climber; his first climbs were Easy Chimney and Greenteeth Gully at Helsby, done on 9th February 1963, and by the summer of 1967 he was regularly leading HVS, between shifts on the bar at the ODG, and led his first Extreme, Deer Bield Buttress that September.

He led another four the following week in Snowdonia. Two weeks later he found out that 'competent' was not enough; Exeter in the late 60s meant Pete Biven, Pat Littlejohn, Frank Cannings and John Hammond. Ed soon fitted in and was involved in his first new route, Acheron at Anstey's Cove, in January 1968. He acquired the taste: the first new route that was all his own work was Hermeda at Meadfoot Quarry. It was not one of his finest but they soon got better.

Although he later developed into an excellent Alpinist, it didn't start well. A

summary of our first trip would read: fit new clutch, set off, fix universal joint on French roadside, arrive at Snell's field, raining for three weeks, bivvy below the Blait – snowed, do the M – snowed, left Snell's field – been raining four weeks, days on Cloggy and then Brain Damage. Finished up a good trip.

Earlier that year Ed decided to do Boldest without the bolt. Typically, he'd just made up his mind – no fuss, no drama – climbed to the bolt, pressed on. Job done. However, I think it was the climbing artefact Ed was most proud of.

Ed rarely fell off except when clutching something. Not far along our first new sea traverse he dropped in the water still clutching a flake the size of a car door. Maybe I shouldn't have laughed because he then swam round all the hard bits. On another occasion he pulled on an obvious (to everyone else) loose block at Anstey's Cove. He was OK until it landed on his ankle and broke it. Undeterred, six weeks later his diary entry for 31st December 1969, his 21st birthday, read: 'Right-hand Crack, Left-hand Crack – Led, in plaster!'; both considerably easier than the walk from the ODG to Rawhead early the next morning.

Ed may have taken his climbing seriously but life was for fun such as a caving race



Photograph: Ian Wall

under the Llanberis road through two identical culverts. The pipes were identical although one was full of mud and fetid water. Ed took the other. Or 'feeding the seagulls' by throwing two pieces of bread, joined by string, and watching the results. Or 'killing' caravans by flashing your lights and frantically pointing at them out of the window – a 'kill' was a stop. Our record was three in one run down Glencoe. Or free-wheeling from the top of Dunmail Raise to see how far we could get. You're not popular, even in a bright yellow Ford Popular, crawling towards Grasmere at 5mph.

Sometimes I wonder if he even took his climbing seriously? When he arrived at the base of arguably his most significant Lake District first ascent, he had no rock boots (a result of a heavy training session the night before) and had to do it in Ian Roper's boots. His ashes lie below Pavey and a Fallen Angel looks out over him.

By Gordon Higginson





