

EXTREME ROCK



**Compiled by
Grant Farquhar**





EXTREME ROCK

**Great
British
rock
climbs
from E1
to E7**

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Grant Farquhar**



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com





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BACK COVER Mark Leach on Beau Geste at Froggatt Edge. © *Neil Foster*

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PREVIOUS PAGES *Eroica* at Pentire Head. CLIMBERS *Clare Reading and Neil Foster* © *James Mann*

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Preface to the 1987 Edition

BY KEN WILSON & BERNARD NEWMAN, NOVEMBER 1986

This is an edited version of Ken and Bernard's preface from the 1987 first edition of Extreme Rock.

Extreme Rock, the third in a series of books on British rock climbing, was first mooted in the mid-1970s after the discovery of new routes superior in quality to those in *Hard Rock*. Such was the speed of advance in climbing in the following years that the book's preparation soon resembled the celebrated painting of the Forth Bridge – as each final list of climbs was established, harder and better routes were made that it would have been foolish to omit.

Many leading climbers contributed essays to the book. These were written over an eight-year period and the older ones had a historical character which seemed valuable to preserve. Although the writers were asked to concentrate mainly on describing their climbs (a rather prosaic task), they produced some encouragingly varied work. A fair number of the essays could claim literary merit, and all should either inform or entertain.

With additional climbs, the book's size increased, and words began to gobble up space, prompting the addition of more pages for photographs. These factors added to the cost of a book already uncompromisingly specialist in nature and not a contender for the bestseller charts.

It is worth making a special mention of the incredible generosity and altruism of climbers. Throughout the production of the book, we were humbled by the unstinting support for the project from every quarter. The sheer number of climbers directly involved, together with those giving background advice and assistance, made it a truly national expression of the nature of our sport. We feel privileged to have played an organising role in this and were acutely aware of the responsibility placed on us to produce a faithful reflection of such a dynamic period in climbing history.

Climbing presently faces a major dilemma about its future: should it move away from the adventurous, erratically protected approach of the past to a more predictable, bolt-protected, technically orientated future? The first edition celebrates both types of climb with a full range of conventional routes in between. The options reflected in the introductory photos of Malham, *Master's Wall* and *The Cad* typify three discernible styles now used on major routes with little natural protection: totally safe but extremely demanding; harrowingly unprotected requiring flawless skill and judgement; sparingly protected to preserve a high level of challenge. The choice between these styles is now of critical importance, with long-term repercussions for the whole sport. Building constructively on its hard-won traditions, characteristics and freedoms should remain the credo for all genuine climbers.

Preface to the 2025 Edition

BY GRANT FARQUHAR

One evening after a hard day's climbing in the Peak, Calum Muskett's and Rob Greenwood's eyes met over a pint of beer in The Scotsman's Pack. The resulting love child was this long-awaited second edition of *Extreme Rock* which owes its gestation to them.

There have been some fairly radical changes to route selection from the first book. Some routes have suffered rockfall or proven not to be popular, so they have been omitted and replaced with others that are more representative of the best trad climbing that the UK has to offer. Some routes that were candidates for inclusion have been extensively covered in other similar books already and so have also been skipped.

This edition covers routes in the grade range from E1 to E7 which is mostly consistent with the original book and overlaps in the lower grades with *Hard Rock*. The original edition squeezed in *Indian Face* at the last moment, but this has been bumped to the next book in the series, *Ultimate Rock*, which will cover cutting-edge trad routes from E6 to E11.

If you are wondering where the sport climbs are, the original book was published at a time when the current trad/sport dichotomy was in its infancy, and so those routes have also been bumped – potentially to yet another book dedicated to UK sport climbing.

Ken Wilson's books have always been inspirational, and when the first edition of *Extreme Rock* was published in 1987 it was no exception, with a bewildering amount of writing and photographs about the best routes that the UK had to offer at the time. The cult status of the book was enhanced by the loss of the printing plates, and copies are valued at around £200 at the time of writing.

This book in no way attempts to replace the original, which remains a seminal work. What it does try to do is present an updated version showcasing the best trad routes that the UK currently has to offer in that E1 to E7 range.

LEFT Above the old bolt on the thin moves of the 6a crux of *The Cad*, North Stack Wall. In 1986 the climb was led without the bolt which was subsequently removed making the route an even more serious proposition.

CLIMBER Chris Plant © Bernard Newman



2 Titan's Wall, The Banana Groove & Agrippa

BY KEN JOHNSTONE, ANDY NELSON & JOHN 'SPIDER' MCKENZIE

TITAN'S WALL BY KEN JOHNSTONE

The sudden downpour was torrential and unexpected. Our convectional deluge was surrounded by excellent weather. There was no alternative but to abseil back down that dripping first pitch of *Titan's Wall*. I'd only just reached the belay when the rainstorm struck. Still, I was fortunate not to have been caught halfway up the pitch ...

The previous afternoon we'd left Glasgow on my motorbike, and en route had snatched *Freak-Out* in Glen Coe. We were climbing well, the weather was great and *Titan's Wall* was the obvious challenge. We resolved to camp near the CIC Hut after taking the bike to the dam to save time. But it was the following morning before we found the correct forest road, and the surface was extremely rough and more trouble than it was worth.

Approaching by the Allt a' Mhuilinn, the sheer bulk of the Carn Dearg Buttress is impressive. The striking chimney of *Sassenach* only emphasises the scale. Just left of it is the infamous corner of *The Bat* and left again the long conspicuous groove of *Centurion*. *Torro* takes a more intricate line up the grooves and slabs left of *Centurion*. Far above, a curving barrier of bristling overlaps caps this section. To the right of the buttress right of *Sassenach*, the most obvious feature is the slender, bulging wall between the prominent bastion right of *Sassenach* and the flake chimney of *The Shield*.

This steep, sunless flank was first breached on its right side in 1956, when Don Whillans and Bob Downes, fresh from their success on *Centurion*, climbed *The Shield*, to which Jimmy Marshall added the *Direct Start* up the obvious enormous flake in 1962. In the interim, the wall proper, impressive and smooth, was ascended by Ian Clough and Hamish MacInnes, in a manner 'dependent on peg climbing over the greater part of the ascent', to quote Marshall's 1969 guide. They named the route *Titan's Wall*.

It was not climbed free until 1977, at a time when many Scottish classics lost their aid points. Even then, it proved harder than most. After their free ascent, Dave Cuthbertson and Murray Hamilton renamed the route *The Laughing Pig*. However, it soon transpired that Mick Fowler, accompanied by Phill Thomas, in one of his plum-picking trips to far-flung regions, had made the first free ascent only days earlier, much to the chagrin of the Scottish team, but to the general relief of others that one of the Ben's modern classics would retain its original name.

You could hardly call the line obvious: the long first pitch offers a number of variations, though the equally long second pitch effectively offers little choice – the slender, bulging cracks provide the only protection. The first pitch keeps close to the arête and follows cracks to a belay on the left. From here, a traverse back right rejoins the crack system, which is now more defined and provides the elegant, curving line of the crux pitch to a poor belay below the short, wider final crack (capable leaders may prefer to avoid this belay).

As we approached, the wall looked alarmingly smooth and tall, ashen-grey and sombre, even at midday. An abandoned, fraying rope dangling high above us hinted of some past epic and added to the austere atmosphere. However, the first pitch proved a delight in itself, more than just a good warm-up for the crux. Runners kept popping out as Alan stood back to avoid the wet ground at the base, but it didn't seem to matter because the rock was clean, rough andesite, reliable apart from clearly unsound blocks. The climbing was steep, exhilarating wall climbing with technical moves between good sharp-edged holds, following irregular,

CLIFF

Carn Dearg Buttress, Ben Nevis.

ROUTES

Titan's Wall (E3 5c, 80m); *The Banana Groove* (E4 6a, 90m); *Agrippa* (E6 6b, 80m).

FIRST ASCENTS

Titan's Wall: Ian Clough and Hamish MacInnes (A2), 1959; first free ascent by Mick Fowler and Phill Thomas, 1977; *The Banana Groove*: Murray Hamilton and Rab Anderson, 1983; *Agrippa*: Pete Whillance and Rab Anderson, 1983.

MAP/APPROACH

OS Explorer 392 Ben Nevis & Fort William; turn off the A82 at Torlundy to reach the large car park, then follow the path up the Allt a' Mhuilinn to reach the crag (NN 163 723) in 2–2.5 hours.

GOOD CONDITIONS

All the routes are well drained and dry quickly in summer – allow two days after heavy rain.

CAMPsites/BUNKHOUSES

CIC Hut (SMC) below the cliff (prior booking essential); Riasg (CC) Roybridge; youth hostel in Glen Nevis; camping in Glen Nevis and in the Allt a' Mhuilinn.

GUIDEBOOKS/BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ben Nevis by Simon Richardson (Scottish Mountaineering Club, 2002); *Scottish Rock Climbs* compiled by Kevin Howett (SMC Wired Guides, 2022); *Scottish Rock Volume 1 South* third edition by Gary Latter (Pesda Press Ltd, 2024); *Ben Nevis* second edition by Ken Crocket and Simon Richardson (Scottish Mountaineering Press, 2009); *The Great Mountain Crags of Scotland* by Guy Robertson and Adrian Crofton (Vertebrate Publishing, 2014).

OTHER CLIMBS

Torro (E2 5c), *King Kong* (E2 5c), *Caligula* (E3 5c), *The Wicked* (E6 6b) and *Trajan's Column* (E6 6b).



White: *The Banana Groove*; yellow: *Agrippa*; pink: *Titan's Wall*. © Alan Leary

LEFT *Titan's Wall*.

CLIMBER Will Hempstead © Will Rupp

disjointed cracks, searching hard for the best line. A step left to a ledge leading to the then-unclimbed Banana Groove of *Caligula* completed a super pitch in inspiring surroundings. Then the rain started ...

So now it's the following day, and inevitably later than planned, at the start of the second pitch – gear racked, EBs tight, nerves taut. An easy traverse right, but the wall above is strikingly smooth and steep, initially vertical, later bulging. Appearances were not deceptive. The climbing was relentlessly sustained, strenuous and fingery – the narrow crack providing some of the holds and all of the runners. After making a few moves I missed a crucial fingerhold and had to reverse. This strenuous exercise was repeated several times, a wearing-down process that would later tell. All became obvious on finding the hold, but there wasn't time to dwell on this as the unforgiving line led steeply on past an old peg runner, then higher still to a tiny, sloping niche at the steepest part of the wall. But the niche was wet, the moves above it tiringly awkward, and with protection troublesome to arrange, the situation was becoming rapidly critical. The knowledge that both the previous free ascents had involved leader falls surged through my head. Unaware of yo-yos in those days, there was nothing to do but clip into a runner. The relief was tremendous, but the momentum was broken, and the final moves seemed no easier. Alan dutifully followed to join me at the exposed stance. The last pitch was short but deceptively strenuous, a wide crack vacated on small holds in a worrying position to a slabby finish.

Two exciting abseils took us quickly to the foot of the crag, and as it was only 6 p.m. and the adrenaline was still flowing, we devoured a couple of Mars Bars and sped up *Torro* to relax. We reached the tent in darkness, of course.

THE BANANA GROOVE BY ANDY NELSON

The Banana Groove: a route name adopted from a whisper about one of Nevis's last problems. Incongruous with the Roman and Greek mythological theme, the name suggests a playful interlude in an arena of serious combat.

Climbing in Scotland is a lifelong campaign. Longlist routes are put off in the hope of better form, better weather, and, not least ... a climbing partner.

In August 2021 there was a stifling, Tuscan heat

in the Highlands. Seeking out shade and cool air I was bereft of excuses when Ollie Skeoch heard me throw my hat in the ring: 'How about *Banana Groove*?' The Carn Dearg Buttress was beckoning.

Nagging doubt suggested that if wounded, *Caligula* – 'the original and most natural line of weakness' – could be a consolation prize. However, the uncompromising swagger of the entire groove was the trophy I desired ... ambition can be a dangerous mistress.

Stage fright gripped our approach, attempts at light-hearted chat stammering into the peat hags. Carn Dearg initially appeared shy in the shade but grew vast, silverback strong, as we inched up the Allt a' Mhuilinn. Not so much squaring up to this volcanic colossus, we were stuttering into the ring – challengers unsure of our opponent.

A pantheon of the finest climbers pioneered routes on this buttress. Some raiders, some defenders, all gladiators – renegade and possessed with the cunning and determination to fight day and night to the conclusion. Did we have that in us? Entering the stadium with necks craning, we look for Achilles' heel but only see formidable defences. In my internal dialogue, doubt speaks again: 'There's always *Caligula* isn't there?' Madness! I want the prize.

Some have suggested entering the fray via the 5c first pitch of *Agrippa*, but I want to be fresh for the fight. I make my excuses: 'Apparently, it's a bit contrived.'

Adopting stealth, we cower out of sight, sneaking up the first pitch of *Titan's*. Ollie, boxing clever, shakes out whenever in balance. This opening act is a fine warm-up, but the careless will find it unnecessarily strenuous. Climbing is a team endeavour, and I'm delighted when Ollie offers to follow Patey around the arête. I am putting off coming face to face with the main event.

Embracing the arête and its gusty exposure, I nervously slab-shuffle over to the belay. Our element of surprise deflated; the impending fold in Carn Dearg's magma tunic intimidates, frowning down at our challenge. There is no more hiding; we are in the limelight.

The wind hushes to a whisper of anticipation as if from a bloodthirsty audience. I look around but only feel the murmur of ghosts and imagine Roman swords drawn in the spikes and fins of this colosseum buttress.

The doubt returns, a temptress breath hissing: '*Caligula* ... ?' So, eyes closed, I breathe, I listen and feel the breeze, the oxygen, the calm ... we have crossed the Rubicon – it's *Banana Groove*, and it is time.

A nod to Ollie, we nervously laugh out the words: 'Strength and Honour!'

His smile helps, and I'm in. Moves up instantly steepening rock, shock ... but incuts are positive, crisp and there is grip. In the focus of the moment, I hear the crackle of dried lichen beneath my fingertips; toes feel the sharp pressure of minute edges. I smell the mineral in the rock intimately close.

There's gear, strenuous to place, but bomber. Inch warfare on this long pitch. Yogic stretches to share weight between distant perches; bridging, pinching, laybacking, reaching, crunching; knees to chest. Then I see *Caligula* ... coaxing me rightwards. However, still in the fight and encouraged that I must be halfway up the pitch, I decline the offer.

But that was only the entrée ...

Progress – the corner now fading, but fatigue and angle rising. The route description serves several more courses of rock features to work through before the belay ledge. Punching up a cracked wall, sidepulls and flatties appear, but no sign of a perched block. Elbows winging through an overlap, I'm deeply in the amber zone now and eye to eye with smirking, winking red. This is where the game is won or lost, this is the fight. Pub banter echoes in my head: 'The climbing doesn't start until you're pumped, youth!'

Then directly above, I see tat ... and the ledge.

Skipping toreador, I'm left and right, urgent but tactical, finding the better holds. A last sapping sidepull, and I'm growling with effort on to the ledge. The round is won. Relief and



ABOVE The first ascent of *The Banana Groove*.
CLIMBER Murray Hamilton © Rab Anderson

elation emerge with me from the confined folds of the groove and, pulling up the ropes, there is resistance at the middle marker. The pitch was only twenty-five metres! It felt longer; the variety of moves, the physicality. In some ways I feel cheated, but as I turn to eye the last pitch, I suspect we're not out of this fight yet.

Ollie comes up enthusiastic, then fighting, stress showing on the final approach. At the belay, declaring he feels sick with effort, tiring eyes look past me to that last pitch. Pre-emptively, I point out, 'Sc but only fifteen metres ... you OK?'

'Mmm ... I'll give it a go ...' We faff the gear swap, buying time despite the ringing of the bell. If I was a bigger man, I would offer ... but I'm punch drunk too, and not convinced I have another round in me.

'It's grubby, so, if need be, use a bit of aid?'

Ollie battles with the scorpion pitch – brutal, so close to the finish, but sometimes you just want it over with, and though not unscathed, he wins through. The route is ours; we are almost free.

In the volcanic amphitheatre of Ben Nevis, *The Banana Groove* challenges defiantly, not a light-hearted interlude; more a good old-fashioned fight. Battle weary, we limp our way to *Titan's* abseils.

AGRIPPA BY JOHN 'SPIDER' MCKENZIE

To most people, rock climbing on Carn Dearg brings to mind routes like *Centurion* or *The Bat*, both immortalised in *Hard Rock*. *Agrippa*, less well known, was snatched by Pete Whillance in typical style. The route is unsurpassed for position and exposure and is typical of the 1980s' mountain rock climbs in Scotland, mainly the work of Hamilton and Whillance. Sometimes, two or three days are spent gardening these routes, leaving brilliant climbs with no loose or grassy sections, as in days of old. At the time of our ascent, the route was unrepeated and retained the usual aura accorded to a Whillance route – hard and necky.

The meat of the climb is in the second pitch, which takes the striking arête defining the left-hand side of *Titan's Wall*. The first pitch follows *Titan's* for a while up a pleasant wall, then where that route veers rightwards, *Agrippa* continues directly by an awkward crack-cum-groove to the belay. The main pitch starts with a puzzling pull rightwards on to the arête, where I proceeded to lace every crack in sight, expecting the worst. After a few tentative attempts, a stiff lock-off leads to more nuts, then steep and unprotected climbing on good holds for six metres. At this point, a large loose block looms in front of your face, and sense dictates that you avoid it. However, the scarcity of nearby holds soon changes your mind, and you grab it gratefully and hope it's keyed in. A poor RP above your head gives little protection for the awkward move to stand on the block and reach a good nut slot. Wedged in a short groove here it is possible to totally relax one arm and pump out the other one. A tricky traverse left on to an eighty-degree wall, then up directly for five metres to a ledge, constitutes the crux. Glancing round the corner is not encouraging, but once established on the wall two good RPs materialise, leaving a piece of straightforward thuggery on small holds to the belay.

The final pitch feels harder than it should, perhaps due to the angle of the rock and the two meagre runners which protect it. The route has a thoroughly modern finish – two abseils to the ground, thereby avoiding the 150 metres of *Hard Severe* 'mountain-eering' that leads to the summit. One last point: make sure your ropes don't jam on the first abseil as ours did – the ensuing free prusik on tape knots certainly warrants the name, '*Agrippa*'! ■



16 Fear and Fascination & Bucket City

BY KARIN MAGOG & STEVE CROWE

FEAR AND FASCINATION BY KARIN MAGOG

2003 was a very dry year, perfect for getting plenty of climbing done. By June, I'd already onsighted numerous E5s and a couple of E6s and was well into trad mode. Steve and I were climbing some of the more obscure trad routes in Gordale when we bumped into Alan Wilson and Chris Hope, who were ticking some of the harder sport routes at the time. Although we didn't know them very well at this point, Al must have recognised some kindred spirits, and he persuaded us to meet them at Dove Crag in the Lakes the next morning. He'd started cleaning up some of the routes on the steep North Buttress and was very keen for other climbers to enjoy his efforts.

I was less keen as I had a bit of history with this crag. I first visited it with Steve back in 1994 as a relative novice. I was pointed at the stern E2 *Extol* as our warm-up – certainly not a pushover at the grade – before Steve led *Fear and Fascination* and I was dragged up on second. At the time, I was completely out of my depth. I wasn't a fan of steep routes and just remember being rather gripped and pumped stupid all the way. We revisited the crag a few years later as Steve was keen to try *Bucket City* and I thought I would now be capable of leading *Fear and Fascination*. As it happened, we were both totally intimidated by our respective routes and neither of us got past the initial few metres before we backed off and headed back into the sunshine and the sanctuary of the pub.

I was, therefore, rather nervous at this rematch. The crag faces north-east, so an early start is needed to catch it in its best light. Unfortunately, with the drive over from home and then the long hour-plus walk-in, the sun had already left the crag when we arrived, and we stepped out of the warmth into the dark gloom of the crag. It was just as steep and intimidating as I remembered. I immediately felt apprehensive and out of my comfort zone. Al and Chris, being more local, were already there and greeted us enthusiastically. I was pointed first at the crag warm-up: *Fast and Furious* with the *Flying Fissure Finish* (E5 6b). More technical and bold lower down but steep and well-protected to finish, it provided a good warm-up, and I felt fit and confident. I was then persuaded to try *Fear and Fascination*, which at E5 6a I naively assumed would feel easier. I set off full of confidence.

This casual approach didn't last long. After climbing the initial flake-crack to the good ledge, I quickly stalled. Being on the short side, the next good hold was out of reach and I would have preferred some higher gear before committing. After a few half-hearted attempts to make progress, I spied a loose piece of rock lying at the back of the ledge. I carefully stood on this, and the hold I'd been eye-balling just about came into reach. However, I still didn't feel confident to pull on it, knowing I would just hit the ledge if I came off. There appeared to be a bit of a wire placement up above the hold, so after some shenanigans of threading one wire through another wire to extend its reach, I precariously balanced up on the rock and managed to place this wire at full stretch. A bit of a tug, and it seemed good enough to encourage upward progress.

After a bit more psyching up, I went for it. It was a bit of a scramble to get off the ledge and up to some better holds and gear, but I was away and now properly established on the route. The next few moves weren't too bad, but the holds started to get smaller. My next point to aim for was the crozzly crack and the possibility of some gear, although I'd been warned that the holds and gear weren't as good as they used to be due to rock breakage in the recent

LEFT *Fear and Fascination*.
CLIMBER Dave Birkett © Steve Crowe

CLIFF
Dove Crag, Dovedale

ROUTES
Fear and Fascination (E5 6a, 48m); *Bucket City* (E6 6b, 45m).

FIRST ASCENTS
Fear and Fascination: Rick Graham and Bill Birkett, 1980;
Bucket City: Martin Berzins and Neil Foster, 1988.

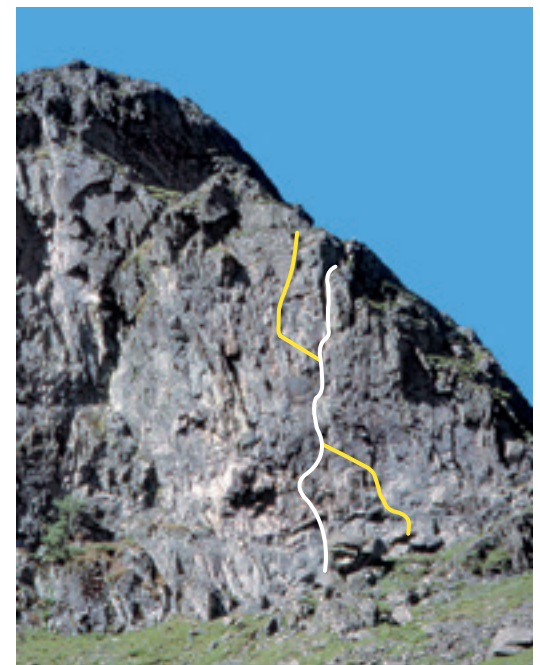
MAP/APPROACH
OS Explorer OL5 English Lakes - North-eastern area; the crag (NY 376 109) is approached in about 80 minutes from the Brotherswater Inn (NY 403 118).

GOOD CONDITIONS
The crag needs some time to dry out, but once it is dry in summer, it stays dry in the rain.

CAMPSITES/BUNKHOUSE
Campsite at the Brotherswater Inn.

GUIDEBOOKS/BIBLIOGRAPHY
Eastern Crags by Al Davis and Nick Wharton (Fell & Rock Climbing Club, 2011); *Lake District Rock* compiled by Nick Wharton (FRCC Wired Guides, 2024); *Lake District Climbs* by Mark Glaister (Rockfax, 2019); *Cumbrian Rock* by Trevor Jones and Geoff Milburn (Pic, 1988).

OTHER CLIMBS
Fast and Furious (E5 6a), *Pail Face* (E6 6b) and *Bucket Dynasty* (E7 6b).



White: *Fear and Fascination*; yellow: *Bucket City*.
© FRCC/Wired Guides

past. I did get something in and managed a brief shake-out before committing to the fingery traverse right to join *Bucket City*. This section is certainly intimidating with the gear being some ancient, drilled pegs down and to the right – not very inspiring and tricky to clip. I made it across to the niche and a brief shake-out before more big moves up, eventually reaching a ledge and a good rest.

At this point, I was feeling mentally exhausted and wanted the climb to be over; surely I'd done enough and it would start relenting? Sadly, no; the groove system above was still testing and pushed my nerves to the limit. 'When's it going to be over?' I shouted.

'Keep going, you're nearly there,' was the response.

I quested up the groove, but the holds seemed to disappear, and I felt a flutter of panic. Fortunately, I spied something out right and moved across before finishing up the more amenable deeper groove above. I pulled over the top on to the grassy ledge and took a moment to compose myself before looking around and setting up a belay. This route had really pushed me to the limit of my physical and mental endurance – it had felt unrelenting, bold, steep and pumpy. I found it intimidating all the way, and it remains one of my most memorable leads and one of those I'm most proud of. It also kick-started our Dove Crag campaign and was the start of many more memorable days out at this impressive crag.

BUCKET CITY BY STEVE CROWE

It was the first Saturday in August, and we were getting into a groove. Despite the fact that the previous night's rain was still rushing off the hillsides, we were confident the steepness would keep Dove Crag's North Buttress dry. Unfortunately, the crag was seeping in a few places, but I seized the opportunity to abseil down to clean Neil Foster's sensational *Outside Edge*, which provides a spectacular alternative finish to Pete Botterill's *Explosion*. I also had my eye on a rising girdle traverse line that could finish up *Outside Edge*. That line would become *The Brasov Incident*, but I'm getting ahead of myself. With the cleaning job completed, I set off up *Fast and Furious* with the intention of linking our usual warm-up into this impressive finish, but conditions were against me that day.

Undaunted, we were back up the next day with the crag guardian Al Wilson and much better conditions on the crag. I set off up *Fast and Furious*, but after clipping the peg on the *Flying Fissure Finish* I continued traversing and finished up the clean and dry *Outside Edge*. Al also led *Inside Out*, and Karin seconded it to strip our gear. After taking photos of Al on his new route *Dusk till Dawn* from abseil, it was time for me to tackle one of the crag classics, *Bucket City*. I started confidently as the start is shared with *Fast and Furious*. Soon, I was stepping leftwards on to independent climbing, where some tricky moves gained the start of a steep, diagonal rising traverse. I powered into the crimp sequence, then suddenly I felt wrong-handed, a flash pump and I was falling. It wasn't meant to go like this.

Undeterred, we returned on the Monday morning, and I made sure to warm up my fingers properly but tried not to overdo it. I was quickly back at the start of the rising diagonal traverse and eager to try a slightly different sequence. I climbed decisively and soon reached the – mostly psychological – protection of the pegs that are shared with *Fear and Fascination* and then some respite in the niche. I continued boldly, carefully passing a spike to eventually reach a better rest. After gathering some composure, I continued upwards to gain a line of small holds above the overlap that led leftwards and downwards to a good slot. Here I had to relinquish my handhold for very welcome protection, a pretty solid-looking small cam. The top of the crag looked near, and a sequence of improving holds led encouragingly upwards – but don't rush because another tricky move back right tests your ability to control the rising forearm pump. At last, my hands reached the very top of North Buttress. A thankfully straightforward mantelshelf move and I sat smiling, slightly shaking, but very pleased with my successful ascent. ■

RIGHT *Bucket City*.

CLIMBER *Pete Whittaker* © *Mike Hutton*





28 Face Route, Deliverance & Mossdale Trip

BY JOHN SHEARD & MARK RADTKE

FACE ROUTE & DELIVERANCE BY JOHN SHEARD

Whichever way Gordale is approached – scrambling down the ever-deepening gorge, or walking easily in from the road at Gordale Bridge to the south – a scene of grandeur out of all proportion to the actual size of the crag is suddenly revealed. Seen from below, two huge walls converge overhead to compete for sky, and into this gloomy and chill chasm waterfalls cascade, adding to the cave-like atmosphere. Initial disorientation passes as the enthusiastic climbing eye discovers a huge potential for routes of a uniquely savage nature.

Approaching from the south, the left-hand wall initially presents an often black-streaked face of obviously climbable limestone, but moving further into the gorge reveals shattered walls and overhangs capped by an upper band of compact grey rock and bounded on the right by a leaning prow. *Face Route* takes the most obvious line, and only a careful search of a guidebook will reveal the devious secrets of those to the right. Above the lower cascade and closer to the back of the gorge hangs the impending arête of *Deliverance* and the start of the right-hand wall – perhaps the showpiece of Gordale. It draws the eyes and minds of climbers and tourists alike, craning their necks to take in forty-five metres of overhanging rock, split by the converging cracks of the Cave Routes.

In this impressive setting, the limestone super-routes of the 1970s were born from the efforts of a generation of rock climbers who dragged standards through a puritanical cleansing so that the final form was unrecognisable from the aided original. The arrival of training and technical protection were to advance standards still further, but the later advent of retro-bolted sport climbing was accompanied by a degree of unease that perhaps the unique Gordale experience was being eroded.

Face Route was first climbed in 1956 as an aid route and remained in various degrees thus until, fifteen years later, Pete Livesey led the first free ascent with cautious haste, leaving little impression to casual bystanders of the apparent difficulties. ‘Perhaps he used the pegs,’ was the whispered complaint, but closer inspection would have revealed a route ripe for picking and comparable to, but not harder than, its Derbyshire equivalents. It was never denied that prior inspection had taken place, but what the pundits had failed to realise was that Pete was relatively new to the game and, despite appearances, was unsure as to whether a free ascent was even possible. I remember rushing up to join him there for the attempt only to spot him, from a distance, already high on the wall. Getting closer, I saw the abseil rope and relaxed a little, knowing this was simply a final inspection by a man to whom failure was not an option.

At the narrows, where the stream cascades down yellow tufa beds, rears the great battleship prow of *Deliverance*. In this wild setting, the climber immediately feels vulnerable. Within seconds of starting the first pitch, a glance rightwards reveals the exposed position above the rocky streambed, while the lifeless stone bursts above to seal out the day.

The first few moves around the arête were comforting, then, all too quickly, the prow reared up and a committing move was needed to reach the obvious crack above. Protection and quick positive moves brought a small roof within reach and an impasse. The rock was shaky and the move strenuous; we weighed the compatibility of the two but found none, and vanishing strength became the arbiter.

Stretched arms brought the loose wall above within reach just as undergrips crumbled, and the pull through to a grinning bolt was accompanied by the metallic rattle of falling

LEFT *Face Route*.

CLIMBER Naomi Buys © Mike Hutton

CLIFF

Gordale Scar, North Yorkshire.

ROUTES

Face Route (E3 6a, 41m); *Deliverance* (E5 6b, 45m); *Mossdale Trip* (E6 6b, 45m).

FIRST ASCENTS

Face Route: Ron Moseley and Joe Smith (aid), 1956; Ken Wood and Allan Austin (3pts), circa 1965; first free ascent by Pete Livesey and John Sheard, 1971; *Deliverance*: originally climbed as the aid route *Big Nig* by Mike White and Bob Dearman, 1964; Pete Livesey and John Sheard (1pt) 1973; first free ascent by Dougie Hall, 1982; *Mossdale Trip*: Pete Livesey and Jill Lawrence 1977.

MAP/APPROACH

OS Explorer OL2 Yorkshire Dales – Southern & Western areas; from limited parking at Gordale Bridge on the dead-end minor road from Malham; 10 minutes to the crag (SD 915 642).

GOOD CONDITIONS

All routes are affected by seepage and need a dry spell to come into condition.

CAMPsites/BUNKHOUSE

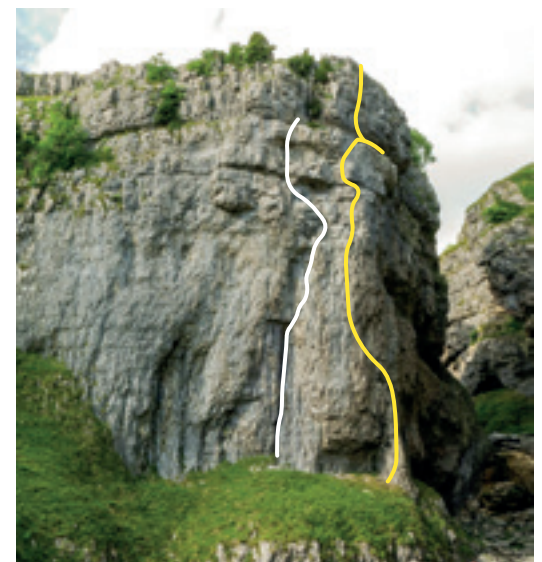
Camping at Malham and Gordale Farm; youth hostel in Malham.

GUIDEBOOKS/BIBLIOGRAPHY

Yorkshire Limestone (Yorkshire Mountaineering Club, 2005); *Northern Rock* (Wired Guides, 2022); *Northern Limestone* by Mark Glaister (Rockfax, 2015); *A Canvas of Rock* by Mark Radtke (2QT, 2011); *Pete Livesey – Fast and Free* by John Sheard and Mark Radtke (2QT, 2014).

OTHER CLIMBS

Jenny Wren (E5 6a) and *Rebel* (E5 6b).



White: *Face Route*; yellow: *Mossdale Trip*. © Rockfax

limestone. The rusty relic from the aided past provided sparse security, but once clipped, eyes gratefully veiled its fragility and only filtered through the yellow sling and shimmering karabiner – sufficient psychological support for progress to the waiting groove above. Sweet relief came as the climbing eased; or was it the nearness of the easy traverse to the stance which added wings, allowing escape from the restrained anxiety of the last half-hour?

Above the stance, the wall shrugged us out, forcing a lean backwards, exploring equilibrium as hands wandered up to large holds. The wall still pushed, and here, as a final defence, presented one of its rare patches of smooth mirror finish, against which Pete's fingernails clawed in useless search. The jugs below barely allowed a reach to a second bolt, and rage hid the wall's call of 'foul' as a short nylon sling provided a foothold to reach the flake crack above. Wild laybacks allowed a lurch to a small hole containing a superb jug, and once grasped only then did the rage pass and niggardly self-reproach settle on our shoulders. But this was no place for such criticism, and the next moves to gain a resting place in a short corner wiped the slate clean as new problems confronted our overtaxed minds. Another leftward-sloping crack, this time of a more gentle nature, edged and protectable, led to the second stance. The last pitch had been free-climbed before, so its wild mantel would not stop us, and prevarications were now those of relief rather than apprehension.

Wet, steep grass on the slopes above demanded caution, but Pete danced here and there, sure-footed in an elated display of goat-like confidence. I edged cautiously after him, suddenly vulnerable without the rope, the weightlessness of the wall dance already a fading memory.

MOSSDALE TRIP BY MARK RADTKE

Back in the day, the ocean of shattered rock between *Face Route* and *Rebel* would easily have been dismissed as a viable climbing objective. Devoid of distinctive features, it rises out of the rubble-strewn floor, soaring skywards with no discernible line, a face composed of friable rock and lacking obvious placements for gear. This didn't deter Livesey; his propensity for pre-inspection would have given him the inside track, and while the aforesaid assessment was in part accurate, he concluded that it was 'game on'. In 1977, Pete produced his Gordale swansong, *Mossdale Trip*, thereby completing his left-wall trilogy and bowing out of high-end climbing.

The route failed to capture the imagination

of the climbing elite at the time, probably for the reasons stated above. It remained largely unsung until 1986, when Gordale pioneer Greg Rimmer made a rare repeat. The date is significant because it was a period of change in the UK climbing scene. The sport climbing revolution was in full flow, and Yorkshire limestone became a crucible for new development. Some of the country's leading activists were intent on pushing standards of their own on Yorkshire's big three. Following his ascent, Greg lauded the unique qualities of the route, and word quickly spread on the climbing grapevine.

This new acclaim prompted a steady stream of ascents by some talented connoisseurs, eager to show that despite the new sport climbing trend they could still cut it on hard trad. Its reputation as an adventurous testpiece was thus established. My turn came a year or so later.

When seen in the afternoon sunlight, this vast expanse of shattered limestone provides an intriguing temptation for those in search of adventure. There's no point festooning your harness with loads of gear for *Mossdale*; you don't need it. A stripped-down rack consisting of a good selection of small wires, a few medium nuts, a few medium cams, a couple of short slings and quickdraws should suffice for the fifty metres of climbing ahead. The route consists of two pitches, but pitch one is where all the action is. The pitch is a route of two halves, and the nature of the rock dictates the state of play. The route starts up *Jenny Wren* easily enough to a peg. From here, a traverse left lands you in a sea of small edges, sidepulls and undercuts, the only connection between you and the ground now being the peg on *Jenny Wren* receding into the mist way over to the right.

The way ahead requires intuitive route finding as holds are studied in intimate detail, tested carefully and gently weighted. Progress is slow. No savage pulls, no random slaps or snatches, no room for error, just cautious, calculated movement, mind and body in total symbiosis. A couple of rusted pegs come and go, providing reassurance that you're on the right line. Thankfully, the ageing pegs can be backed up with small wires, a boost to morale as the mind concentrates, the body obeys and all doubt is suppressed. This is no place for doubt – this is the *Mossdale Trip*.

Twenty metres of the shattered stuff eventually leads to fused solid limestone with good runners, a temporary respite from the mind games below. Then, it's up to a small roof protected by a natural thread. There's a temptation to tarry here, but it's best not to let the adrenaline fix subside too much. The climbing above is the physical crux. A strenuous pull around the roof is eased by the comfort of the thread, but there are no obvious jugs to urge you on. If you've got the forearm stamina, you can hang in here and get some gear in, but it's a fight. If you manage to get a good piece in first go, you'll confidently make the final arm-pumping fingertip layback to the comfort of the ledge. If you fumble the gear placements, it might be a case of up or off. If it's off, don't worry – you won't die. If it's up, don't hesitate – a plunge into the abyss would be most unwelcome at this stage.

An easy traverse rightwards lands you in a neat little cave and belay where you can savour the fix. Pitch two takes an obvious line of weakness above the ledge a few metres left of the belay. This short boulder problem proves a bit baffling initially, but when you find the 'unusual' hold, it falls into place, thankfully.

Set in the context of the twenty-first century, does *Mossdale Trip* hold its own as a challenge worthy of the modern Extreme rock climber? I think it does, in spades. The advent of modern gear has made little difference to the way the passage is protected. Its upper crux section should easily be within the capabilities of the seasoned, honed athlete of today. This said, it still requires mental commitment. The subtle character of the lower wall can change year on year by the effects of freeze and thaw, which throws uncertainty spice into the mix. This section does have gear, but only just enough, so caution is the word. If all these factors are weighed up before an attempt, then the odds of a successful outcome should be in your favour. Whatever the outcome, the experience is sure to live long in the memory.

Mossdale Trip is not just another route. It is also a poignant and fitting memorial left by Livesey to commemorate his six fellow cavers and friends who tragically lost their lives in an unexpected flood while exploring Mossdale Caverns on 24 June 1967. Livesey should have been on that trip, but fortunately fate dealt him a different hand that day. ■



ABOVE *Jenny Wren.*
CLIMBER *Pete Livesey* © *John Cleare*
LEFT *Mossdale Trip.*
CLIMBER *Jordan Buys* © *Mike Hutton*



Deliverance. © *Rockfax*