



**Top Ten
New Routes
2023 Mix**

***Jehovah Kill* (S2, F7b), London Bridge, Torquay; 1997**

Agreed, it's not 'my' route. But when first ascensionist Robbie Warke used a couple of bolts for protection on *Jehovah Kill* he must have suspected it wouldn't last long like that. Robbie appeared to be one of the South Devon/Cornwall clan of prospectors like Chris Nicholson, Pete Bull, and Andy Grieve who had the habit of climbing really well. I'd been on the receiving end of many of their routes in the 80s and 90s, and the going was often mischievous, finery, and bold – sometimes even frightening.

As well as occasional bolts, Robbie would entertain unconventional protection methods like soloing next to a hanging rope, as he did on some of his solos on London Bridge. But in mitigation he had been open about his tactics – this being critical information for anyone who tried to follow. As far as I was concerned, the guy who on-sighted the first ascent of *Harvestman* at Chudleigh did not need a trip to the confession box.



On a family break in 1996 an urge to make a free, solo attempt of *The Watchtower* saw me rained off, ignominiously. It served me right, but at least the trip provided my first close-up look at London Bridge – a robust, strutted structure at sea level that captures the imagination as you walk east from the Imperial Hotel. At the time there were only three recorded routes on the London Bridge arch and a clutch of climbs on the landward side, all trad leads or solos next to a hanging rope. By then I'd become ensconced in deep water soloing at Portland and Swanage and reckoned it could be the best style, the best ethic, for London Bridge. A much better swimmer then, my safeguards against cold water shock were a pair of Freddie the Frog waterwings nicked from my daughter and sporadic prior top-roping when soloing early in the season above winter-chilled seas.

I loathed cold water – still do – a pathological hatred inbred when my father took up sailing and used any means to coerce his family to be the crew – including bribery. I say 'family' but more often than not that would mean me. A talented and practical man, dad built an Enterprise racing dinghy and stowed it with Portishead sailing club at Sugar Loaf Bay. For the unaccustomed, sailing in the Bristol Channel in winter wasn't always a lot of fun, especially when competing in a race. And dad's boat was designed for speed, a

key driver being the spinnaker, which I was tasked to manage – somehow. One wild day with our sails billowing we got into choppy waters, a gust of wind causing the inevitable stomach-churning heave as the boat upturned throwing 13-year old me into the water. Disoriented, chaos ensued as the freezing cold sea hit me with an all-body shock sending systems out of kilter and leaving me gasping for air while trying to regurgitate the mucky water I'd just inhaled. In only a minute of bobbing around I'd become numb with cold, losing all sense of functionality as my efforts to hang onto the hull floundered. Fortunately our capsized had been spotted from the beach and the club's rescue boat was quick to race alongside and haul me in. It should have been a salutary lesson. But despite dad's evisceration by the rescue team, he remained a purist – life jackets were for sissies, not for us. It was the same for climbing – risk was immaterial, he just let me get on with it – even when starting out at the age of 14 using his frayed caving kit or no kit at all. Upon reflection I didn't think unkindly of his ethics – until I had kids of my own. The zeitgeist of the state regulating individuals' right to risk was still far away.

The first free ascent of *The Watchtower* had to wait a further year – until March 1997, when the sun shone. Finding time afterwards I light-heartedly left Freddie's business card as the arch's first recorded ropeless solo, now a popular F6b. The remaining lines looked exceptional, irresistible even; so within three weeks I returned, conveniently on the back of a business meeting in Newton Abbott. Those midweek car journeys from Bristol to Torbay were probably more dangerous than the climbing – lifting the mood with dance music, forgetting I was already in my 40s; my strategy being to fuel up on sounds and then transform the energy pulse into movement on the rock. The date was 18 April 1997, a fresh sparkling day. Everything glowed, and the rock was crisp to the touch. That was just as well: the back wall of the arch is frequently damp with condensation, which must cause many a grockle to turn away disheartened. First to be soloed was the groove of *Atheist*, a mood-setter high enough to test self-belief, on-sight. *Luv-Groove-Dance-Party* and *Pumping Dancefloor Energy* followed in a flourish, post top-roping, but it was the north side of the arch that gripped me most, and in particular the prospect of deep water soloing *Jehovah Kill*. After all, who could not surrender themselves to a name like that?

The seaward cliff of London Bridge is connected to the mainland by a jagged neck or bridge comprising what looks like a tilted pack of selected biscuits: if one were to slip out, the whole lot could go. One of the challenges of soloing *Jehovah Kill* was the menace of a large shaky flake, the joker of the pack, which connected the hard climbing up the wall with easy but loose climbing up a groove leading onto the neck of the arch. Another was that while climbing up the overhanging wall the soloist is drawn out and above a submerged reef and into jeopardy.

Pacing like manic Freddie Starr this way and that across the arch I agonise over what to do, even hurling the odd rock down to see where and how it lands. I know I can't leave the decision too long because the tide is already turning. Quickly rigging an abseil rope, I descend to give the flake some jiff – bracing my feet against the wall and levering it as hard as I can, imposing what I reckon would be five times the force I'd have to use on the solo. The flake didn't budge but neither would it stop feeling hollow, temporary, and deeply worrying. I initiate a 'big psyche-up' when suddenly my heart makes its mind up that it's a 'go!' And so – with frogs inflated and dangling – comes the descent to the waterline to re-warm on a traverse back and forth to the little groove and rib where *Jehovah Kill* rises into heaven – or perhaps hell. Thankfully the impetus to commit fully arrives: starting those sprinting layaway moves, always on arms, past the first bolt stub, leaning out to embrace the moment and fusing with the Eifelian geology at every opportunity. A shake before the flake, but the pump's kicking-in – you can never be completely sure it's under control. The crucial section follows – an awkward and visceral transfer onto and undercutting the flake, praying that it stays in place – shaking now in anticipation of success as with yelps and 'yeaghs!' I bridge into the groove, one foot to seaward, the other to landward, grandstanding in the Devonian.

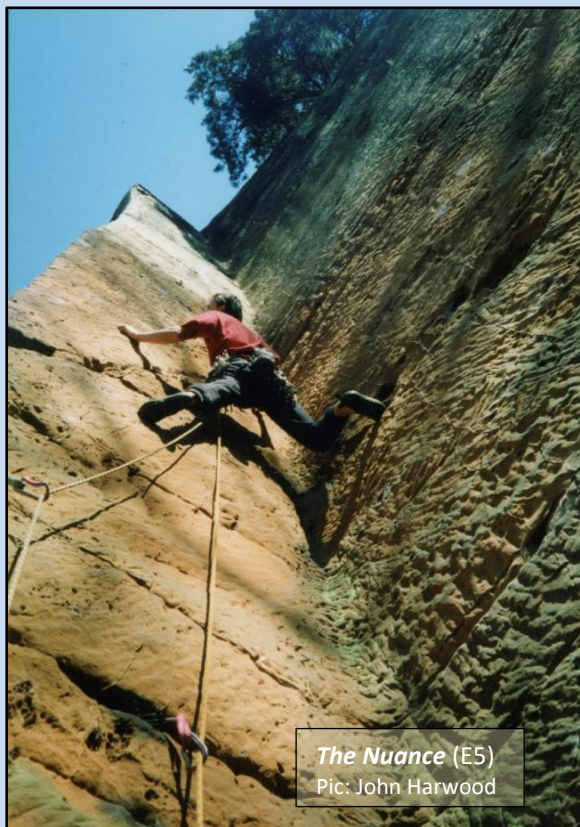
Emerging onto the neck of London Bridge I felt as Earth's pioneering amphibians must have done, but there was no one around with whom to share the elation – no family, no friends, no tombstoners, no paddleboarders, no tourists, not even the existentialist living amongst the holm oak. To any voyeur on the coast path it may have appeared that I was shaking off a horde of bees, but I was only 'shaking with adrenalin'. My diary also tells me how the 'fabulous adrenalin flood' of *Jehovah Kill* made me a wave-walking convert from that day forward. The flake didn't survive, but the feeling does.

Sunburst (E7 6c), Nesscliffe; 2000

Arêtes are the key to life. They're your ticket to out-wit physics. No other rock structure engages as they do – their geometry projecting the climber into space, into isolation, and multiplying the sensations of movement over and over. A vertical edge the common denominator, whole-person improvisation and trickery are required, not just pull-like-hell arm power. *Edge Lane, Endless Flight, Who Do You Say I Am?, The Great Arête(s)* are all memorable British arêtes, but none compare with those of Nesscliffe.

When in April 2000 stalwart climbing partner John Harwood and I entered the place for the first time, we couldn't believe what an incredible crag Nesscliffe was. Stumbling around below unclimbed lines, eyes on stalks, our year 2000 was mapped out in an instant. For here huge sandstone arêtes and corners some 35-metres high were lines you'd travel the world to climb – yet the crag had somehow been given the elbow.

By the New Millennium Nesscliffe should have boasted a rich history of superhumans from London, the midlands, the southwest, and even the north on their way to Snowdonia or Pembroke, dropping in to take on some of the country's most shapely lines. It could have been a 'tea at the Ritz' or 'coffee at New York café' phenomenon, yet most just drove on through. John had bought a copy of West Midlands Rock, which teased us sufficiently to imbue a dedicated visit. In it we read that Nick Dixon, an innovative climber and star of the 80s and 90s, had added some impressive-sounding routes; and even Johnny Dawes and Crispin Waddy had left their calling cards...a few heroes then.



The Nuance (E5)
Pic: John Harwood

Sheltering in the back of the quarry was a beautiful 45-metre high arête called *Full Sun*, one of Nick's earliest Nesscliffe routes. It was amongst those praised by second ascensionist Andy Popp as offering 'unique climbing experiences, the like of which I do not know in England'. That accolade was influential; I had always respected Andy's calm and rational views and I was left eager to get stuck in too.

With all the quality on offer it was difficult to know where to begin. For many first-time callers it is *Red Square, The Nuance, or Marlene*, as it was for us. I adored the rock: it reminded me of 'American' desert sandstone, pocketed, rippled and red, which offered lots of crimping, bridging, hooking, laybacking, smearing, and body tension tests. After experiencing *My Piano* I popped around into the Main Quarry for a proper look.



Nick Dixon in action at Nesscliffe
Pic: Carl Ryan

The local ethic (or maybe it was a philosophy) was to headpoint the routes after placing the odd protection peg for the first ascents. That was understandable since Nick had become a master of headpointing and a celebrity in the mags for a host of top-grade new climbs in North Wales and the Peak climbed in this style. He appeared the epitome of cool climbing and self-discipline: 'Climbing at one's limit on a headpoint involves absolute movement skill, memory, Zen-levels of concentration...' he'd said in High magazine 215, 2000. At the Meirionnydd guidebook launch in 2002 introductions were superfluous – the laser focus in Nick's eyes and his gaunt contours of wisdom were instantly recognisable as those of someone driven, yet of someone so fit that he looked ill. I'd seen that look before – in Arnis Strapcans in the 70s and many years later in Steve McClure.

It soon became apparent to me that headpointing here was justified in order to soft-brush the dust and cobwebs from the holds and to check out the pegs especially in the days when repeats were infrequent or rare. Moreover Nick cautioned me that he didn't fully trust peg placements at Nesscliffe because of the soft rock. That gave me all the excuses I needed to check out *Full Sun* on an abseil rope.



Working *Sunburst*, just
before the heavens opened
Pic: John Harwood

On the 2nd July I abbed *Full Sun* in the sunshine only to discover to my amazement that Nick had not climbed the blank section of the arête near the top. It was hard to understand why: if I could top-roped it four times out of five without falling then how could it be a problem for someone who had repeated *Indian Face*? My 80% success rate seemed encouraging, so I tapped in a pair of short OK knife blades on the crux, one for each rope, and descended into the quarry, super-psyched and raring to go but oblivious to the rustle of the trees as the wind picked up. Then all of a sudden while tying-in the skies darkened, the full sun turned to full rain, and it rained, and it rained, and it rained – ‘torrentially’. And that was that. We felt gutted.

When back home I noted my disappointment in my diary with a simple descriptive: ‘dismal’. It was worse for John as he had taken his car and – as usual – had been content to do what I wanted to do. He loved being part of important new lines like this.

Imagined threat or not, I couldn’t leave the arête undone; it was too big a prize, and I’d got myself worked up, energised, braced at the starting line. Waiting weeks or even only a week was out of the question, so I phoned around and discovered a willing participant for a weekday raid in my occasional Rhinogau partner Dr Terry Taylor of Twywn. Terry had form, and as a GP was able to take time off in the week. That flexibility accounted for how prolific he’d been in mid-Wales, quite apart from his zest for quick hits on the region’s smaller cliffs. He was also the grand master of the non-pc pun, his capricious ways plying local climbing culture with route names like *Lock, Stock, and Smoking Bollock*. I’d worked with him on the Meirionnydd guidebook and could well imagine the indecipherable prescriptions faced by his patients.... ‘What does that squiggle say?’ they might ask. Experienced and fun to be with, he could be the best of company on the crag (while offering the contingency of having a Doc on tap if something went wrong!).

The long starting crack of *Full Sun* was no pushover; at the resting place where it ended and the unclimbed blank section of the arête began, I abandoned remaining gear – useless excess weight. The only remaining protection were the two pegs above, right next to each other before a run-out to the top. (On the abseil I noticed a crack out right above the pegs, but the additional manoeuvring to place wires there was awkward and disrupted the flow.) Despite Nick’s worry about the holding power of the rock I was happy with the situation – it was only a 5-metre run-out and any fall looked clean.

In an instant, by levering on the arête, tiptoe moves had the pegs clipped. Even if the pegs were to pull, I concluded there should not be any risk of hitting the deck from 30 metres up. So I climbed back down to the resting place for a final deep-breathing calming session. (But, hey, deep breathing can be exhausting; overdo it and you can tire yourself out before getting started.)

The moves up the arête proved blissfully elegant, always an exact equilibrium between fingers and toes, hooking and laybacking – while counterbalancing with the occasional crimp out right. At times the holds seemed insufficient, only momentum carrying you to the next. A final taut move, distant from the pegs, brought me to a mantel onto a rounded ledge created in ‘1869’, or so implied the carving in the rock to the right. The quarries were full of such inscriptions and initials, marking dates of quarrying operations and the faceless workers to thank for sculpting such wonders. Terry followed, gritting his teeth and snarling at the moves inimitably. Had he clawed any harder he’d have left his own initials. ‘This must be E7!’ he insisted.

It was always a pleasure climbing at Nesscliffe because the locals – including Nick – were unconditionally welcoming and gracious. They embraced the contributions of visitors, sometimes even promoting them into the nation’s top league: ‘*Sunburst* stands out as one of the finest climbs at Nesscliffe and possibly one of the best routes in the UK...’ As for that claim, I couldn’t possibly comment. All I know is that these are lines to turn heads and skewer souls.



***Every Step of the Way* (E6 6c)
Cheddar Gorge; 1984 – 1986**

Sure, it is a lavish Santana instrumental and a proverb, but *Every Step of the Way* seemed to say it all about the epic line I'd embarked upon, became fixated with, and run myself and my friends through torture to try to climb: 'If at first you don't succeed.....Give up?' Forgive the obstinacy but: 'No'.

While only brief, the partnership I'd enjoyed with Nipper Harrison in the mid-80s saw ne'er a dull moment. It arose from a chance encounter in Pembroke on August Bank Holiday 1984, although we knew each other well from Avon interactions across many years. Chalk and cheese perhaps – he was still Bristol's biggest cheese with a reputation for speed and decisiveness whereas my label was only ever delivered by Dick Broomhead in the *Port of Call* on a Wednesday night. 'It's God' he would announce with more than a hint of sarcasm. Yet at least in those days I was making an effort to mingle despite my aversion to noisy pubs and all the obligatory willy-waving. Having returned to Bristol only a year earlier the myth of 'the bloke who only climbed on the other side of the gorge' had to be debunked. Sucking up was desirable.

So far as prospecting was concerned, Avon was immediate and reliable, but Cheddar held skyscraping unclimbed walls that made you ask how so? Early encounters had not been promising, but provided a possible answer. A crisis with *Brainbiter* in 1976 saw a 1.5 m square block disappearing from under my feet and thundering 300 feet down the side of the gorge, felling trees. My screams of 'Stop the cars!' were unheard and futile. Fortunately it came to rest on the other side of the road without hitting anyone. Later exploits, at the dawn of the 80s, were mostly alongside habitué and guidebook author Broomhead who'd often fail at a loose hold leaving me to be catapulted into the void as soon as I'd pull on it. And while on-sighting a first free ascent of *Chrome Nun* in 1984 I ripped off a 1-metre tall block that careered down the hillside before rolling across the road between cars. Curiously the drivers carried on as if it was a routine day out. Yet once again providence stuck with us, and the parallel universe of bans was not to be.

No question, Cheddar could be one hell of a nerve-racking place to climb, especially before the scaling operations and rock-catch fences were implemented by landowner Longleat Estate in the late 90s. On top of that it could be hell – hellishly cold – to have to climb here in winter. That's probably why climbers of the day held a rather biased interpretation of 'winter', with more and more of their first ascents leaching into the warmer months of April and September. The problem was that while the collective 'we' were exploiting the management's generously blind eye, access was becoming ever more tenuous. I had been a culprit too, no more antisocial than in 1972 when scratty rookies me and John Barnett decided to climb *Sceptre* on a sunny Easter Bank Holiday of all days. We'd started early but within an hour the car-park beneath our feet was heaving, its livid attendants shouting 'Come down from there!' We felt like criminals, skulking in the ivy, hardly daring to move, pretending we hadn't been seen. It was our first visit, but it could well have been our last. We'd been naughty schoolkids, unwittingly toying with a fragile access arrangement.

My experiences of bagging new climbs in Cheddar soon taught me that no amount of care was too great while peeling ivy from the high crags in the gorge. Sometimes a sheet of ivy could under its own weight uncurl from the cliff into a great roll, thundering down like a green tsunami and jettisoning any loose rock held in its midst. Surprise was no defence. These were times when activists questioned our right to intervene in this uniquely precarious environment; to be the trigger to a chain of events that could quickly spiral out of control and potentially put other parties at risk. The prospect was simply terrifying: it kept you on edge all day, poisoning any hope of emptying your mind for the rigours of the climb above. But I guess all the close shaves, mishaps, and learning on-the-job fuelled an understanding of the pressures upon the gorge, culminating, one day, in a state of preparedness to canvas and work with the landowners to secure a new vision for Cheddar Gorge climbing.

In 1982 while reclaiming *Brainbiter* I noticed the prospects for a line of weakness under a tongue of ivy that stretched from the principal bedding plane almost to the cliff-top. I tucked the idea away until it fell prey to the catalyst of the 1984 'Nipperocker' partnership. One quiet, mid-September Saturday I gingerly abseiled down the line to find with relief that the ivy was well-rooted. Thus I could remove it piece by piece, placing any unshackled loose rocks into a sack that could be lowered to the ground and emptied safely on the terrace. And sure enough, as the line undressed, a set of disjointed grooves soaring up and out into the bulges almost 400 feet above the base of the gorge became visible. It was by far the hardest-looking new line I had ever entertained. Optimistically I placed five spaced protection pegs between occasional good wire placements. Each protection point was vital; this was no clip-up.

Naturally I was back the very next day, with Nipper. Anybody who knows Nipper will remember he doesn't like to hang around. So the pressure is on as soon as I enter the hanging groove. Long powerful moves between the spaced gear are necessary, but everything is so hard that it needs working from the hang. A couple of yo-yos and I'm back up on lead fingering into an overhung niche where I thought there would be a rest but there was none – not the way I feel today anyway: 'not climbing well at all; no confidence, no power' (diary entry). But I press on to work out a heinous move which involves pirouetting on a 5mm-square toehold, although once I do my arms give up and I slump back to rest on the peg: 1 pt. aid. Bugger!



Steve Monks and Pat Littlejohn
fully absorbed; late-80s

Neither of us are in the mood for more yo-yoing so, rested, I make it to the capping bulge and final peg runner. But where are the bloody holds? Frantically trying to find anything decent to pull on, my fingers unfold, and it's a second slump onto a peg: 2pts. aid now. A brave new world this was not.

Success flawed, I was left ambivalent, a gnawing irritation upsetting me where it counted most – deep inside. On the one hand I'd only got to the top by using two rest points, but on the other I'd worked the route on lead without resorting to any of this surgical top-rope malarkey with which a new element were skewing Bristol ethics. I wrote up the route, sent the description to the mags, and – though I reckoned I still had a good chance of freeing the route – I took my chances with someone else making a better effort. My diary plaintively recorded the route as 'Ron territory', likening it to *The Prow* as showcased in Sid Perou's film *Rock Athlete* which had gripped the nation a few years earlier.

Talking of megaRon, forgive the classical non-sequitur, but just a month later in a dream week in Pembroke with Nipper, I made an early and quick repeat of *Boss Hogg*, another top Ron Fawcett route – which gave me hope. By then I'd only met Ron once. That was while I was hanging on *Scarab* for an hour fighting the pump, and fiddling in wires while he was dancing reps on tinies below. 'Got any spare strength Ron?' I asked. 'Looks like you don't need any', he replied sweetly. I took that as a thumbs-up and a 'go for it!'

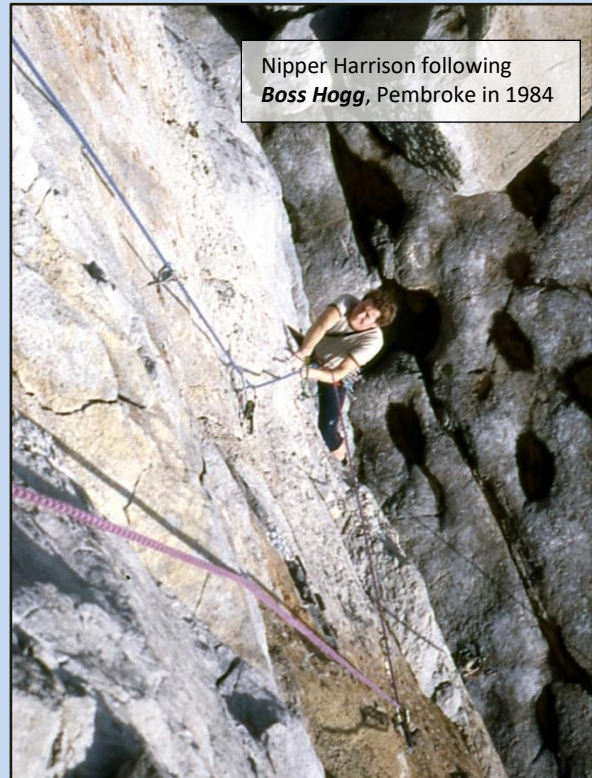
It was sad. When hard Cheddar was on the menu prospective seconds would mysteriously disappear and conversations be cut short. 'But I hate Cheddar', Bristol climber Dave Viggers boasted – a sucker punch for his agreeing to partner me for a second step of the way, though we had to wait until April 1985 when the infuriating winter drainage streaks had dried up.

Its sequences drilled into my brain, I was hoping, if not expecting, to clinch the route this time. That's an advantage of being marooned with an obsession. Climbing better, I persevered through the crux right to the bulge, but try as I might I could not shake off the looming shadow of failure. I wanted the route too much; I was bound to fall. It isn't the case now, but when I started visiting the Peak in the late-70s, I'd treat any fall as a failure – I wasn't used to having to fall to 'succeed' and every time I did the experience felt blemished. Other people thought so too, even when sport climbing had arrived: 'To fall is to fail', Glenda Huxter said in *On the Edge* 31, 1992; and 'I hate to fall off; I'll do anything not to fall off', commented Felicity Butler in *On the Edge* 37, 1993.

I lowered down to Dave, and promised him I'd have just one more go (remembering how much he liked it here!). After a good rest I made it to the final bulge again, but couldn't pull through on the pitiful excuses for holds – they sent me packing, again. Yet at least the route only had only one rest point now.

I don't know about others, but I struggle to sleep the night before something big or scary is going to happen – whether work or play. Lying there, uselessly in bed, I just want to get it done and out of the way. But it's dark and there is no choice but to wait it out. So off you step onto the roundabout of visualisations – linking the moves time and time again in dizzying circles like a vinyl on auto replay – the images becoming distorted in funfair crazy mirrors to the point of nausea. But I did manage '3.5hours sleep' before my next attempt at *Every Step*, whereas on the night before *Spacehunter* I had none. Thankfully with experience you learn that the way to sleep is to trick your subconscious by introducing so many variables that it calculates it to be improbable you'll climb the next day. Thus the pressure to sleep is off. But it's an old wives' tale that you can't function without a night's sleep – some of my better leads evidence the theory that the absence of sleep makes you sharper, if only in the short term.

So, the best part of a year later, after a sunny February day in Cheddar with my then regular gorge buddy Matt Ward, I set pen to diary and recorded '*Every Step* free: Yes Matt! Pulling free over the top bulge – YES'. As for comparisons, *Every Step of the Way* seemed harder than *The Prow*, and probably E7. That third visit I did it straight, placing all the gear on the first attempt – a dash of redemption for my previous failings perhaps. It evidenced that just occasionally anyone can surprise themselves by rising beyond mediocrity so long as...'There's a wind from the east, better lean to the right. He crouches when he shoots, better aim to the west. He draws from his toes, so lean toward the wind.' (Painless Potter, *The Paleface*, 1948). Oh, and I almost forget to mention the burden of those pesky biorhythms – though fortunately I'd grown out of that particular neurosis by the 90s!



**Free World (HVS 5b, 1975), Penallta/Encore Magnifique (F7b+, 1990), The Gap;
South East Wales**

While living in Wales in the mid-70s it was deferential to make an effort to tackle those double IIs, even if my pronunciation sounded like I was clearing my throat as landlady Mrs Lavender burned her Welsh Cakes. To achieve an authentic sound, I found the best approach was to constrict one's vocal chords, get a bit of spittle going, and then exhale via the base of one's nasal passages in a kind of cat's hiss. This tribute was due my Welsh climbing mates and of course Penallta – a rambling sandstone mound above Ystrad Mynach that had become my local crag while studying at Cardiff Uni.

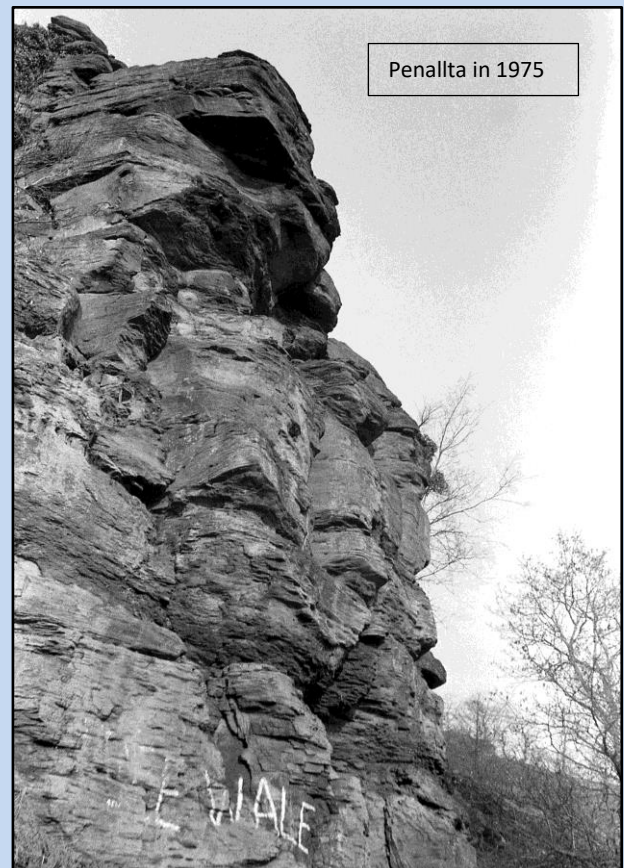


Uni club members on top of Pen-y-Fan after enjoying some rare favourable snow and ice; winter 1975/76

Penallta was my first taste of sandstone and the scene for my inaugural outing with the UCCC. We were an odd lot in the university climbing club, a bit like a travelling circus – a mix of hairy mountaineers, hammer-wielding geologists, and sundry subversive strays with nowhere else to go. Yet everyone needed a home, a community – and of course friendships that lasted lifetimes. Amongst them was Nigel Watts, a jet-black-haired guy from the Cynon Valley, who looked like a member of Steely Dan. Brimming with a warm Welsh valleys accent and a mad grin he would talk on and on about his beloved mountain rescue team. God that was boring. The good news was that he was also a font of knowledge when it came to his local crags – both developed and undeveloped.

In an instant I gelled with Penallta and therefore with South East Wales sandstone. It is one of the few worthwhile unquarried sandstone crags in the region, only being trumped by Cilffriw in the late 2010s. That first visit I led its two HVSs finding the grades amenable and the rock invitingly rough. 'Free Wales' dominated the graffiti within paintbrush reach, an enigmatic welcome. Above it a series of cracks, including *The Pusher*, cut through bulges only to be closed down by a high prow jutting out spectacularly towards the warehouses below. All climbers who made it to the prow were forced to sidle off from a ledge or onto *Free Wall* to exit with a querulous, exposed step.

Looking up from the ledge some alloy bolts in the overhangs under the prow were visible, reminding me of those sprinkled across Avon Gorge – mostly aid or former aid bolts. No one seemed to know their origin, so we assumed they were gizmos in an unpublished aid route. And of course sport climbing was still over ten years distant. Perhaps the bolt-placers preferred anonymity – after all this was unquarried sandstone and, even then, no place for bolts.



Penallta in 1975

A year's worth of Penallta visits followed, mostly conducted on free Wednesday afternoons by train from Queen Street station in Cardiff. By this stage I was soloing all its routes, including the wonderfully exposed *Free Wall Direct* which pulls out onto the platform above the prow. But to do so nowadays would mean gate-crashing the partying chavs – the very same jokers who'd have been jeering and chucking lager cans at you earlier in the day. Fortunately they were generations removed from my first experience of being filmed, on this occasion at Penallta by the Uni's media studies group. It was a good deal: while I did the climbing, Nigel did the talking – eventually segueing the commentary to his favourite subject – mountain rescue. The film premiered in the Students' Union TV-room a few weeks later, though most of the audience let it be known that they had come to watch the latest episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* – not us.

It may sound absurd but in those days I wasn't sure South East Wales sandstone qualified as 'proper rock'. Or maybe that uncertainty was a function of the dubious quality of the routes we were doing. Some were pretty silly and random, or dishevelled dust bunnies, right out on the fringe. Case in point was Mountain Ash Quarry, which according to Nigel's recce held a sizable potential for new climbs. Yet at the time no one seemed interested in climbing in cheerless sandstone quarries, or so we thought.



Sennapod Corner, Mountain Ash Quarry; 1975

A repeat of *Sennapod Corner* (thinking it might be unclimbed) was nice as pie but less so was an assault on the wall to the right which conked out at half-height due to a combination of dirt, lichen, and clogged-up eyes. Recognizing we were out of our comfort zone we reverted to the unquarried buttresses to either side, some of which were hidden in the woods – clean and solid enough to climb ground up. Upon each visit, when arriving in Nigel's car in the estate below, we'd be intercepted by the same lady resident. She must have been on the lookout at her window. Yet rather than scolding us for parking outside her house, she'd insist on making us a cup of tea and having a thoroughly good natter. Her greeting seemed to sum up the warmth and family values of traditional hard-working people in their two-up, two-down sandstone terraced houses of The Valleys. That you arrived carrying an English accent let alone a 'brizzle' vernacular didn't seem to matter. The locals made everyone feel at home.

By the early to mid-70s I had caught the new climbs' bug from schoolboy probing in Avon Gorge and wider explorations with Keith

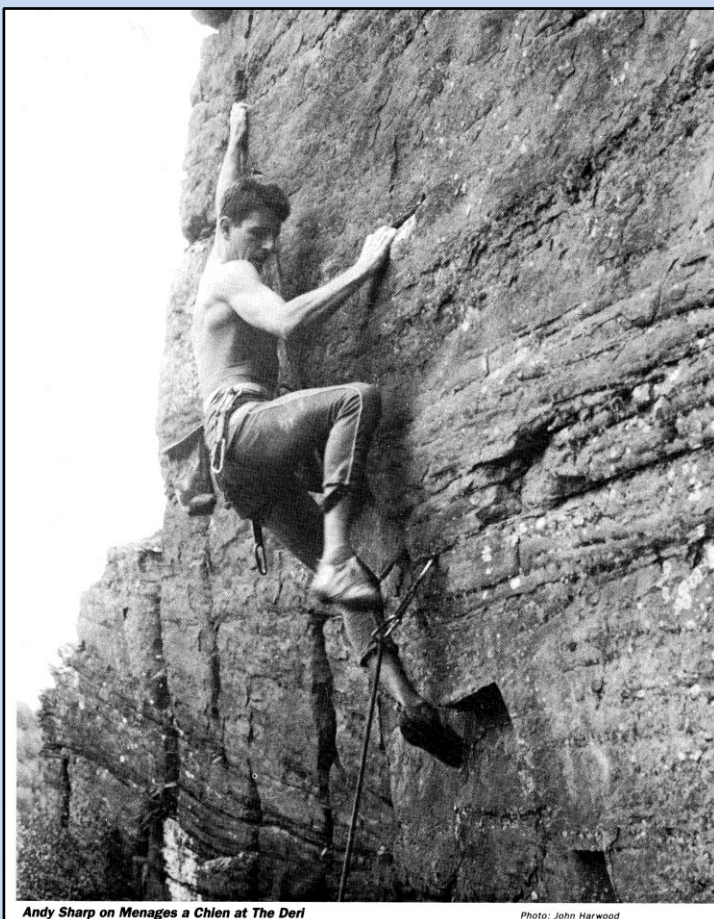
Williams and Dave Ford (fittingly of The Exploration Group of North Somerset – though the acronym sounds snappier). Yet another visit to Penallta in 1975 reminded me of the prow – alluringly still unclimbed. Craning my neck skywards again I thought it about time I gave it a go. So one glorious evening I summon the troops and we three – the bara brith team of the UCCC bumblebees – assemble on the ledge for some larking around. Eventually, with my party brought to order, I set off steeply up the standard creaky jugs and over the initial bulge to a cramped position head-banging the next. Here the bolts veer right, but I want to go straight up. Unhelpfully the rock smooths out, but above the lip a vertical slot offers the key to a few stern pulls and a playful tussle to the top. Rob follows, partly in mid-air; while Nigel shoots the pics. With that success, South East Wales sandstone at last felt like 'proper rock' and I felt chuffed to bits; this 'new' world holding an ineffable, liberating feel about it. That may sound soggy by today's tastes, but I'd learned to expect to be moved.



Free World, first ascent. Pic: Crocker coll/Nigel Watts

Much ado about South East Wales sandstone climbing is binary: quarried versus unquarried; bolting versus no-bolting; and immaculate faces versus flaky crumbling horrors. The region is shaped by Coal Measures geology, not only its topography but also its built environment. Here the valleys are pitted with Pennant Sandstone quarries, excavated for the building blocks of terrace upon terrace of houses for miners who dug deep for coal. The mines are long redundant but the quarries are not. Since the late-70s, climbers have been creating a worthy after-use for them – recreation. Some of the product didn't come easily, especially the eczematous horrors where activists had to be prepared to scrape, scratch and scour, sometimes peeling off layers of exfoliating crust to find bedrock. And if tweaking off a skim didn't leave an adequate hold they could always take it a few inches lower until it did! If their luck was in they'd occasionally strike a thin lens of coal and flick it out – not quite of sufficient purity to fuel an open fire, but good enough to leave a break or a pocket for a hold or a cam placement. Dirt and all, it could sometimes feel like open cast mining. Yet now and then the sandstone could prove impeccable, golden, even more so than Millstone or Bowden Doors – except this rock wasn't God's, it was ours. Years before bolt policies arrived we the active climbers were 'the ones out there doing it' (as Crag's editor Geoff Birtles once put it) – defining ethics, yet not always agreeing on them.

My relationship with quarried sandstone was also binary: unbolted trad where the rock allowed, and bolted sport where it did not. That's why I can't settle for just one route; so *Encore Magnifique* must partner *Free World* as sandstone's alter ego. Situated at the quarry of The Gap, *Encore Magnifique* is a classic of the formula, its holds set in a rectangular grid with long lock-downs between horizontal fingernail edges. You just stretch past the bolts, crimp like hell while rocking up, and do it again, and again, and again... a veritable forearm stamina trip no less. I called it 'flat-to-the wall' climbing, a style that suited my height and splayed, Donald Duck feet. With footholds always present, you could take the strain off a weak core – the nemesis of a lank like me. This style of climbing also agreed with 'the man with magic fingers', local technophile Andy Sharp who showed the way at The Gap with the likes of *One Track Mind*. He didn't have it all his own way; yet with the grace of the *Welsh way* he happily welcomed visitors and competition – being only too pleased that the effort and expense of climbing new routes should be shared. That meant a lot, even when 'outsiders' (including those married into Wales) plundered the best routes on the crag!



Andy Sharp on Menages a Chien at The Derl

Photo: John Harwood

Culturally, South East Wales has become a mercurial place climbing-wise – always trying to find itself, reinvent itself – sadly now sometimes through the selective cancellation of some traditional elements of its heritage. Who or what's IN one decade can be OUT the next. It has become a curate's egg where climbers have to manage a rock resource that is so variable, so eclectic, that *any* polarized viewpoint on ethics can't crack it. Yet the visitor could be forgiven for bypassing the political hurly-burly and the crumbling dross, esoteric even for locals, and simply head for the best. One of the best is indeed *Encore Magnifique* – a splendid sport route that could be led no other way except with bolts. (Well apart from by using ten pre-placed, tied-down, sky hooks following top-rope rehearsals.) Anyway, when you flash or redpoint to the top, you must take a bow. The wider community might consider it a nod to the miners and quarrymen who paved the way for us recreationalists.

Rhyme Intrinseca/ZumZeaux (F7b (originally E5 6b)/F7b+ (originally E6 6b)),
Portland; 1989

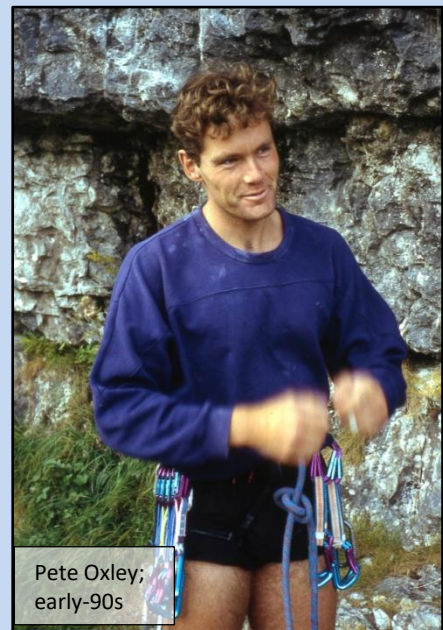
A pea-soup fog had crept from the sea, and visibility was down to 10 feet. We didn't have a clue where we were. It was dark; we'd had a trying journey; we just wanted somewhere to sleep. Out of the murk a stony track emerged so I drove along it a little way, pulled in and parked. A nearby foghorn started to bay as I scrambled down a pile of dressed stone blocks, delighting in finding a nice flat grassy area where we could pitch our tent.

About 6 hours later – at 5.30am – I was awakened by voices chattering above us, and behind us, in fact everywhere around us. I poked my head out of the tent: 'Good morning' exclaimed a cheery chap in a khaki jacket who was wielding a pair of binoculars in the early morning light. 'Morning' I replied croakily, only to discover that a ring of twitchers had encircled our quarried pit. At first I thought it was an ambush, yet with their binoculars pointed skywards we were clearly not their targets. 'I think we'd better strike camp', I said to Beverley – 'we've been surrounded by bird-watchers!' Trying in vain to conceal our embarrassment, we packed up fast: unknowingly we had spent the night in the grounds of Portland Bird Observatory – our very first trip to Portland, March 1989.



Dorset climbing before the late-80s equalled Swanage. Between 1979 and 1983, while living in London, I had enjoyed something of a repatriation wrestling with its towering grooves, cherty overhangs, interlocking blocks – and then trailblazing ways up its blindingly-white walls. A few years later Pete Oxley arrived at Swanage and we became pen-pals in the mid-80s, after we climbed together there a few times. Always exploding with ideas he'd write to update me that he'd been vanquishing mind-boggling routes, keen to point me up the likes of *The Mind Cathedral* and *The Roaring Boys*.

Solid, powerful, and with no real weaknesses, Pete revelled in three-dimensional rock architecture found nowhere else – roofs, sea-caves, and abstract fusions of multifaceted overhangs that should have fallen into the sea long ago. They suited his temperament too. One day Pete let slip that he had started exploring the Portland coast for sport routes. I knew nothing of Portland but noticed that he'd begun to take an interest in sport climbing, possibly because he felt that 'restrictive' trad ethics were holding him back. It appeared that he had arrived at a watershed. (A few bolts of his were appearing on the trad cliffs of Swanage too, much to the consternation of many.) Pete believed that only bolt protection could unleash the potential of Dorset not just for routes of outright difficulty but also for routes that would hold sway with the nation's climbers – and boot the north off its high horse.



Pete Oxley;
early-90s

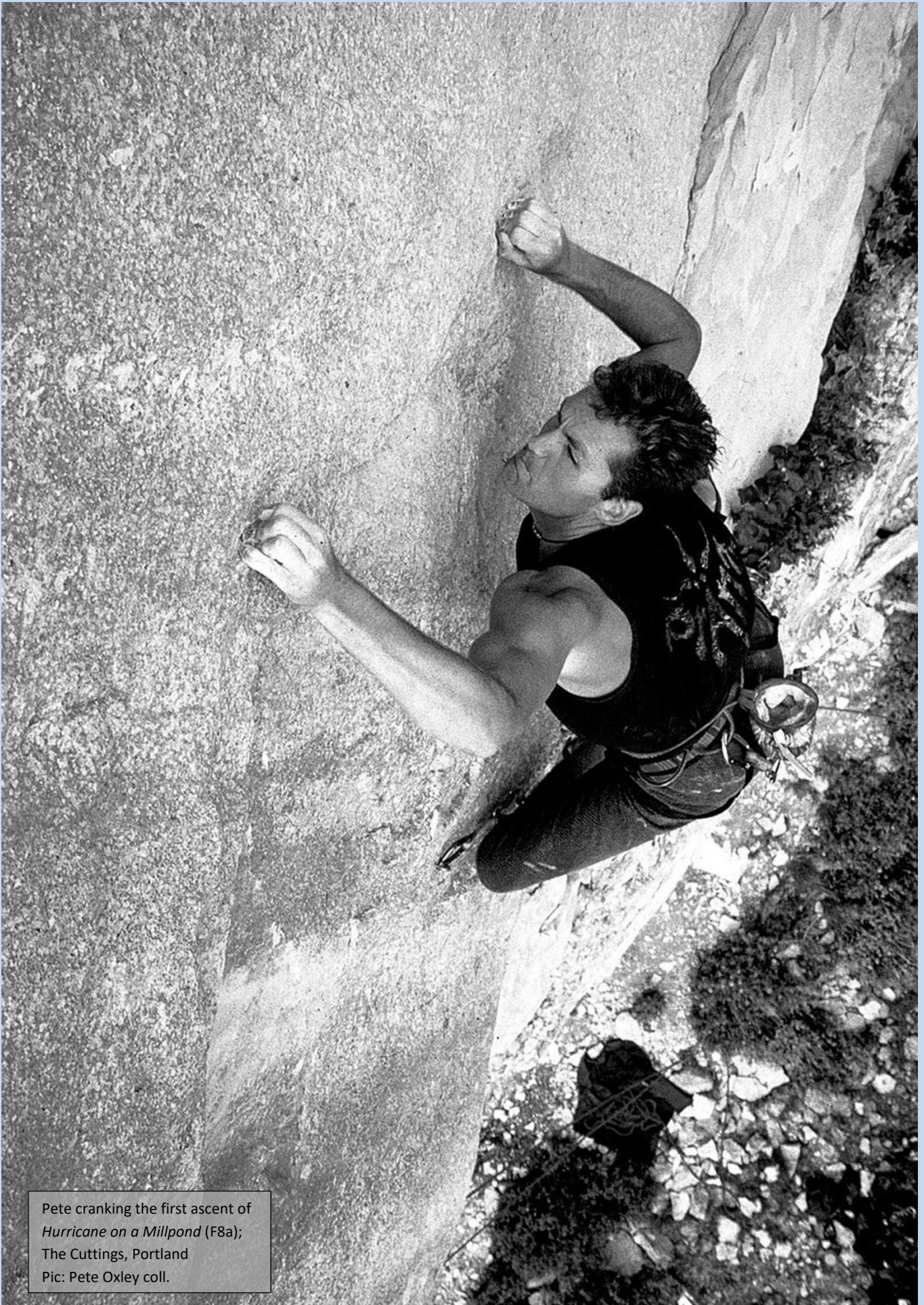
Most of Pete's earliest, 1988, Portland finds were on Battleship Edge, complementing others nearby climbed strictly in trad form by Dorset activists Nigel Coe and Scott Titt and by the inscrutable magician Crispin Waddy. To get to Battleship you had to drop down a grassy gully and, facing the sea, turn left. On that first visit I could just make out in the crepuscular light a tantalizing strip of vertical whiteness extending towards Blacknor South, to the right. As far as I could tell it was completely unclimbed. So, what the hell I thought, and turned right. 'Left' could wait until the next day when family Coe would arrive.

It was hard to know where best to make inroads on what prosaically became known as Blacknor Far South. I'd come armed with a bolt driver and a star drill – luddite methodologies to hand-place bolts – in order that blank walls didn't rule themselves out because of the absence of protection. Edging northwards while gazing up at flowstone smears, tufa drips, jet-black stains, breccia spreads, and white sheets – all having potential – I eventually zoned in to a couple of promising looking lines on the far left. A stake was hammered into the grassy slope above, a static line fixed, and then it was down the abseil rope with tools and brushes to inspect and clean. Structurally the crag had gravitas: a sheer cherty wall (technical and a bit snappy back then) led to a half-height break above which pristine grooves and ribs overhung by a roof and bulging headwall provided muscular fayre on dwindling arm power. *Rhyme Intrinseca* was the best of the pair, and it was pleasing to see it become one of the crag's top pitches (despite the 'h' being dropped). Using double-ropes and just a single bolt each I engaged them as bold trad routes, just as Pete was doing on his early climbs. After a lot of huffing and puffing and dogging and falling I settled for yo-yoed ethics because I was 'climbing crap'. The rope-holding couldn't have been a lot of fun for non-climber wife Beverley, though as some compensation there was lots of book-reading time – and 'the views are great'!

In the early days the random gearing of new routes prompted a different solution. Pete had a belief that Portland could be big in Britain, which meant that short, alloy, or mixed-metal bolts in the soft sea-sprayed rock were clearly no long-term answer. Then he had the idea of drilling deeper holes and plugging them with hammered-in long stainless steel pegs. In theory at least it sounded a good plan, and one which would allow for the full use of available natural protection. So that's what he did, and – despite the extra manual drilling required – I followed. The new drilled peg solution found its home on Portland's finest venue: Wallsend Central. Here the cliff plummeted a full 25 to 30 metres straight down to sea-washed boulders, and it had all the attributes of a regular sea-cliff: it required effort to get to and – certainly in those days and perhaps even from time to time now – it felt tranquil and 'away from it all'. Pete loved it, later claiming it to be 'Dorset's best crag' (High 187, 1998);... 'a dramatic arena and geological gateau [with] Buoux-like climbing on pockets of all shapes and sizes, in wildly exposed positions.' (*On the Edge* 13, 1989)



First ascent of *Topsy Turvy Land*, Wallsend Cove in 1989
Pic: Beverley Crocker



Pete cranking the first ascent of *Hurricane on a Millpond* (F8a);
The Cuttings, Portland
Pic: Pete Oxley coll.

A month after my first Portland visit I followed Pete up *Halfway to Heaven*, a signpost to the wealth of stunning climbing here. We returned again on one of our weekend get-togethers, Pete having climbed *Troll Team Special* just a few days earlier on the right edge of a huge unclimbed wall. I couldn't resist taking a look at the wall, finding a superb face climb at just about F7b+ up its centre: *ZumZeaux*. (If I recall correctly I borrowed the name from an Irish fiddle band at Glastonbury Festival where I would work as part of the environmental health team of the licensing authority.) My diary records that it was a weekend of blazing sunshine but when the sun hit the face the heat became blistering causing us to 'fail on everything' and then 'jump into the sea' to cool off.

That weekend we'd dossed next to the jib cranes on the east coast, reachable only by a stony track ten times worse than that up to Stoney. Grounding out was obligatory, but distressing. However, despite the company of night-fishermen and the odd hippy van, peaceful nights were guaranteed. Progressively, as the months slipped by, the track became impassable so, in the absence of any campsites on the Isle, Beverley and I would slip down late at night over an adjacent field and tuck the car and tent out of view behind the habitual tower of straw bales. When the wind blew strong the whole tower would rock above us threatening to flatten the car and tent beneath. Although we'd always pack away early, eventually the farmer wised up and blocked the entrance to the field. Climbing here was in its infancy and largely unknown to residents. We must have been seen as 'bums'. But at least we were bums on a mission.

'No one ever climbs here except me and Martin Crocker, period.' That's what Pete stated, somewhat provocatively, in a letter to *On the Edge* in 1989, warning of the unsustainability of the costs of equipping befalling first ascensionists, and raising the issue that 'funding provision should be available.' Fair point. Yet he, we, carried on adding routes because we loved the climbing here so much. For Pete: 'Overnight, Portland has become a top crag in the Southwest....perhaps the only problem is that it is 250 miles south of Raven's, Malham, and Pen Trwyn – but that's good as who wants crowds anyway!' (*On the Edge* 13, 1989).

For me the west coast of Portland ladled up the halcyon days of 1989 and 1992. As far as the eye could see above shimmering seas tapered a glorious cliff-line hosting countless unexplored lines, a fountain for Pete's ceaseless output of scorching routes. It seemed profligate to repeat something in 15 minutes that had taken a whole day to prepare, but sheer pleasure took us on to the next, and then the next. Climbers were still thin on the ground, and so you got to know them all: Harry Venables, Brian Tilley, and Titt and Coe still holding the trad fort; and then in 1992 enter the Cook brothers with their influx of smiles, badinage, and competitiveness which on occasions made Blacknor North look like a No. 10 party in lockdown. Eventually with Mike Robertson on board too, everybody tried to out-cool each other with talk of 'lats' and 'babes' – style was all, and nobody dressed in rags like me. Nonetheless I was proud of my dress code especially since 'the perfect man' Mick Lovatt gave me or rather my trousers the snub one day at Malham. Mind you I got him back with a route on Wallsend Central (though who knows what he did with my trousers). Being thin-skinned made you a target for the frat house. Best just to chill in the knowledge that the excoriating digs, the teasing and the play-acting were all part of the fun..... the endless puns on *Lord Stublock Deepvoid Breaks the Chain of Causation*, the competition for who could out-cliché the king of climbing clichés, and the smug reactions to the denial of the rest of the country that something significant was going on down here. Even if we didn't crow about it, there was deep satisfaction in knowing it was real. It was evolution.

'Here's to future creativity and fun with friends... If it all falls down tomorrow it does not matter. The process of exploration and dreams formed does.' Pete Oxley, 2014

I'll never forget a weekend Pete and I had in the Peak at Easter 1992. It only took a few days of rain and grubby routes before Pete was pining for Portland, forcing our about-turn lest his mood plunge irretrievably into a dark hole. Beverley couldn't believe it when unannounced I called back home declaring a change in plan and a journey south. Next day Pete and I were once again embroiled in Wallsend Central. It felt good to leave behind the mindset of *Moan, Moan, Moan*, Pete his old self, super-motivated – all guns blazing in the Dorset sunshine.

It's hardly a surprise that Pete was the stronger climber, but I was faster. You might think the big softy I would label the *Master of Ape Science* would just climb big holds on overhanging ground, yet he could be equally mean on searing crimps in the tame vertical. Portland provided a huge resource for both styles. That Easter weekend I flashed *Downhill Spiral*, *Mr Natural*, *My Love of this Land*, and *Useless Generation* – sublime face routes of Pete's fresh from the Bosch that suited my face-climbing predilections. It was also the first time I used a drill and the staple bolts that Pete had developed specifically for the Isle. That year he initiated a campaign to replace all the duff *in-situ* gear with stainless steel glue-in staples, though in the process unfortunately retrobolting some bolt-free routes without consent. He considered the staple bolt to be an economic, reliable, and pragmatic spec and – with his free time available right there and then – one that enabled urgent action to replace the so-called 'stainless' steel pegs that proved not to be marine grade stainless and which had already started rusting and snapping at serious risk to life and limb. Even to this day if you look around while dogging comfortably on the staples you'll be able to see the rust stains on the rock where the pegs once were.

In 2014 I was invited to the BMC's annual get-together which took place on Portland. It was a characteristically well-organised event, but I couldn't find Pete. 'Where was Pete?' I asked, and the answer seemed to be that it had something to do with disagreements about bolt specs. Why any differences could not be put to one side and the red carpet rolled out for him I could not understand. I still can't. At least the Portland Phenomenon prevailed that weekend – the Isle poking out exclusively into the sunshine all three days while leaden skies dampened the spirits of the uninvited inland.

'Dorset and Portland in particular has been pushed to the fore as the biggest sport climbing venue in the country. Pete Oxley's tireless work, promotion, and financial sacrifice have made Portland a regular venue for French, German, Belgian climbers....' Paul Twomey : 'Hard South West', *High 162*, 1996

The current climbing on Portland essentially amounts to one person's vision to establish a perfect sport climbing area for Britain. Pete Oxley the pied piper and part-time rebel from Poole instigated this cultural revolution which created opportunities for all those that followed – the guidebooks and their beneficiaries trading on his work, the delighted clipping sunbathing masses, the dreams of the 'new-router', and the rise of the Dorset boulderer. A quick gander at Googlemaps shows that there are now climbing businesses and camp sites installed on the Isle too. The effect in broader terms will have been subtle yet measureable positive impacts on the local economy. You might say that if wasn't Pete, then it would have been someone else. But I'm not so sure. I used to listen to and share in Pete's hopes for Portland. They were unforgettable years; and the tensions here and there were only to be expected as the jewel of sport rolled out into a trad' world. It has long been clear to me that lily-white communitarianism, almost always cynically influenced by corporates and their vested interests and roles, doesn't like to give too much away to self-motivated, impassioned individuals; yet the facts speak for themselves. Nice one Pete. Award yourself the freedom of the Isle – for when you return home.

Currently listening to An ending from Reflection Nebulae by Brian Eno at max volume – lie with lights out, and picture working solo across a 10,000m wide cave roof with the stars as the sea.
Pete Oxley, 2014



***Ocean Colour Dream* E6 6b, 6a (and all the rest on...) Tintagel Head, Cornwall; 1992**

‘Engrossing climbing; two of the three very serious, above shite gear. Pete took some persuasion at times and he left my gear in place.’

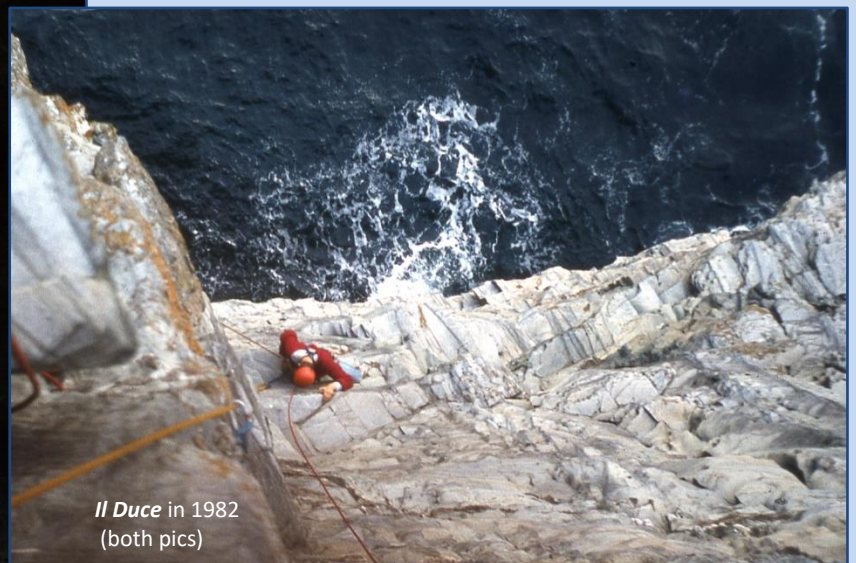
The scene was set by Pat Littlejohn in his article *North Coastal Crag Developments in North Devon and North Cornwall* in *Mountain* 34, 1974 – an exposé of his collection of sea-cliff greats with haughty names and haunting atmosphere. It became the starting pistol for many a southwest road trip – and a perfect foil to the magazines’ lap-dogging of northern crags and their celebs. Pat’s necessarily hyperbolic idiolect captured the temperament of the region irresistibly: ‘A rib thrust out defiantly, crowned by a dome-shaped bastion of merciless verticality. *America.*’ ‘Beneath, hyper-tense and committed....the arête soars dramatically over an abyss filled with sea-noise.’

Publicizing a revolutionary new breed of southwest super-routes, the article popped with quotes that stuck like a fishbone in your gullet. Lasting a lifetime they emblemised mankind’s emotional response to stern adventure. It was amongst the ten or so key climbing articles that inspired a path for me to take. Another was *Sandstorm* by Mick Fowler – for times of suburban exile in London.

On Tintagel Head, one of the headlined cliffs, it’s hard to imagine every subsequent visitor failing to experience the same gut reaction as Pat did when he turned an arête to be confronted with a towering corner. ‘We stared pop-eyed at one of the most awe-inspiring lines we had ever seen.’

For me – 12 years into climbing – I too came to grovel if not kneel beneath the line that visiting 80s Lakes activist Ed Cleasby described as ‘the great dictator’: *Il Duce*.

Guided by Pat’s 1979 *South West Climbs*, my team of partisans in 1982 must have made history for the slowest ever ascent of *Il Duce* – 9 hours and even then scarcely making it out before nightfall. But we were a team of three, it was dank and early in the year, and the supreme leader’s incontinence had caused a siege on a wet pitch 2. Here Pat’s evocative words could well have been mine..... ‘hanging from this [an aid peg] I prepared for a big climbing effort’. Escaping execution by a whisker, it was liberating to pull through the oppressive overhangs and out into the freedom of a great silver face of immaculate compact shale. What a relief to be in a kinder place. I could breathe again.



Il Duce in 1982
(both pics)

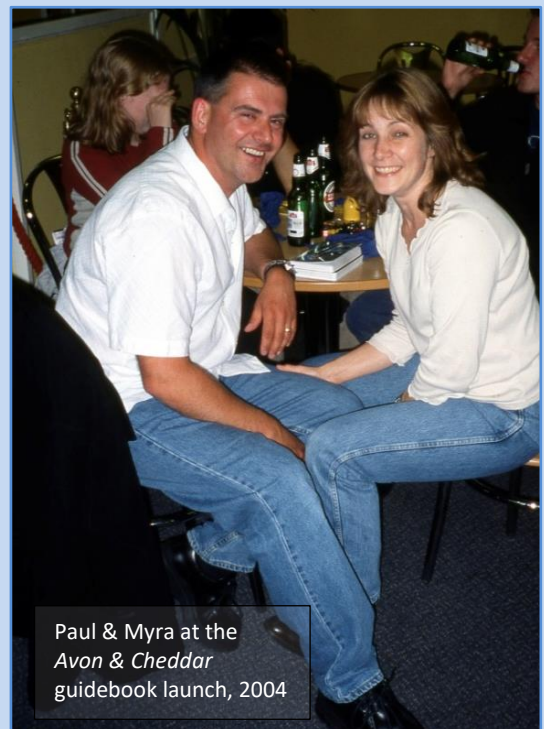


Coronary Country (E6), in
1990 Pic: Beverley Crocker

As did many in the 80s and 90s, I made the pilgrimage to the Southwest's hard classics, having affairs with Pentire Head and Carn Gowla, and clambering with neat feet all over Culm on new rock and old. On-sight flashing *Coronary Country* in 1990 with my wife holding the rope was a highpoint. Another was *Kalahari Black*, two years later, possibly the coast's first E7. But I was no buccaneering shale-head and had no real affinity with its fissile derivative though I admired those who did. Swapping leads on *Bird Brain* with Ian Parnell was the closest encounter I had with what became known as 'Mick Fowler territory'; I much preferred the compressed hard stuff, metamorphosed into sanity on Tintagel Head. Sure, with an access agreement negotiated, it was a minor inconvenience to seek consent from owners English Heritage, but the outstanding quality of the climbing – if not the legend of King Arthur itself – was to draw me back time and time again to pay homage to the sovereign of sea cliffs.

The next occasion was for *Vagabond*, proselytized by first ascensionist Mick in 'The Battle of Tintagel', a tale which left me and other readers shaking like a Martini in our armchairs. To our surprise, when Gordon Jenkin and I climbed it in 1991, we found a solid and safe venture free of any dirty tricks or malice – 'relaxing' I'd recorded. Or maybe that platitude was made in deference to the well-deserved skinnies we smoked in the sunset afterwards. Most of all, our ascent illuminated the potential of the great silver face – ideas to be stashed away to simmer. 'New lines abound' I'd noted in my diary.

1992 was a hectic year, a 'North Cornwall year' – seesawing between Carn Gowla and culm with the odd swing at Dorset and mid-Wales. Yet climbing was far from everything. For work I'd started a management diploma in my own time – the feared 'DMS', a necessary penance for accepting promotion. And for the climbing community I'd instigated a rebolting programme in the Avon & Cheddar area. Both were draining, not only of time but also of a little Hitachi drill gifted by Paul and Myra of *Quip-U for Leisure*. Out on a mission, at my expense I would repeatedly drive miles and miles to a crag, only to be left with enough battery power to drill one or two holes for the stainless steel Eco-bolts recommended by the BMC. Those chilling sounds of the death throes of the battery as it stuttered to a stop with just a centimetre of drilling to go became commonplace and infuriating. But the stark reality was that there was no way round it but to come back and complete the job another day. *Gggrrrh!!!*



Paul & Myra at the
Avon & Cheddar
guidebook launch, 2004

fallen for it. The trick must have been to temper my honesty by the selective exclusion of any recollections that any new route on offer would be hard, or very hard, or devilishly hard. Yet it was all rather speculative until – breaking with the tradition of the Nobles (if not to a treasonable degree) – I made a few abseils on the free Saturday while taking care not to slice my rope on the razor sharp slates at the cliff-top that stuck out like Camelot’s swords. Hanging there in isolation in the sunshine was immensely soothing; and the more I looked around the more animated I got. Before me there appeared to be two lines on the open face and a purer version of King’s Arête, and they all looked, shall we say, ‘interesting’. But how was I going to sell three new E5s in a day to Pete? Best be economic with the truth, I connived.

Sleep rarely comes easily while away, and on this occasion the ‘gales that flattened the tent’ didn’t help. Beverley had to take refuge in the car, while I jammed in a couple of ear plugs. Yet the next day the sun was in full bloom again and the humidity remained low – perfect! I wasn’t convinced Pete would turn up, but there he was waiting at the gate and bang on time at 9.00am too. I felt a little guilty that I’d doubted him, especially when I learned he was still recovering from a spinal injury caused by a car accident four months earlier. ‘I’d like to know who gave you my number!’ was his greeting. It would have been nice to catch up there and then, but we had more urgent business. So we presented our signed disclaimers to a serf, I accepted a drubbing for being late at the exit gate the previous day, and then we were ushered into the court of King Arthur – two minstrels without portfolio.

Eager to engage the enemy we hastened across ghost walls to my abseil rope waiting at the edge of the precipice, a futuristic escape-route for King Arthur but the way to the sea-level ledges for us. Pete looked relieved and explained: ‘I’m glad you have a sound belay – a great improvement upon 1978 when I reached the top of *Il Duce* to find Nipper had no belay at all and was pulling in the rope hand over hand!’

‘So, the route goes straight up the right-hand arête of *Il Duce* – it looks about E3. OK, Pete?’ I asked, in my most trustworthily voice. The grade estimate was of course unrealistic, a shameless obfuscation but nonetheless a perfectly acceptable one between friends.

Pete’s penetrating eyes sealed the deal, in effect his signature to our reciprocal duty of care. ‘I’m not sure I’ll be up to it; but anyway I’ve got a pair of jumars so how bad can it be?’

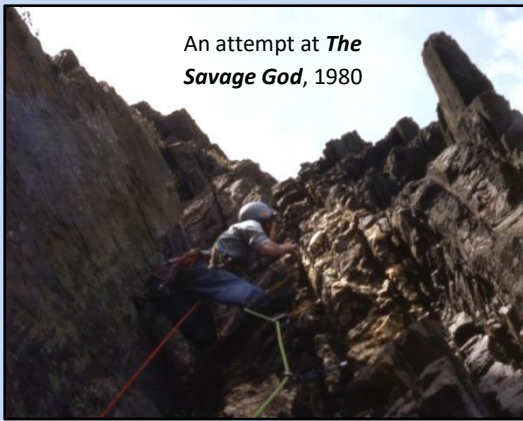
Hoping we would be able to get back up, we made the 60-metre abseil and gathered our wits under the very edge of the right arête of *Il Duce*. Pete recalls: ‘From the pulpit after the first crack the line looked astonishing: the big groove of *Il Duce* was wild but this arête was an altogether different beast.’

An hour and a half later, and with only one piece of my kit left behind, we were back at the top, a stylish E5 6b later named *Fascisti* by Pete behind us.

‘That was monstrous!’ exclaimed Pete: ‘I’ll be off now then.’ ‘Well actually there’s another route to do up the face left of *Il Duce*, I insisted; ‘It will be E4 at most.’ ‘No, it’s too much for me; I’m content’, Pete replied. A 15-minute discussion ensued, and by some feat of hypnosis or fawning I succeeded in breaking his will or perhaps boring him into submission – and off we went again, down to the sea.

Pete could be a bit of a scally-wag and could play me as well as I could play him. We had enjoyed some Pythonesque times in Avon Gorge in 1974 when I was in my last year of school and he was attending art college near where I lived. While feeling in a very silly mood one day, we perpetrated (as the 1992 guidebook put it) *The Onset of Dehydration*, a spoof route, the description of which we fired off to a magazine to illustrate that climbing is best not taken too seriously, well, not absolutely all the time. The editor of *Rocksport* must have got our drift since it was juxtaposed next to that of *The Savage God*, a new cutting edge adventure route on the Culm Coast.





For my insolence *The Savage God* got me back in 1980 and 1981 with two hair-raising failures, but in our defence may I say we were not carrying pegs (there being no other protection in the lichenous crux corner): dying did not appeal. Coincidence it may have been but around that time Pat wrote a letter of complaint to the mags pillorying people for being 'out of their depth' and sullyng the route with bale-out gear. Whoops; I surrender. You got me!

Back to Tintagel and I'd armed myself with extra arsenal for the menacing initial roofs of the second route, placing two pegs from the abseil rope. That turned out to be a sensible move since I hastened to fall off what proved to be a quarrelsome pitch at solid French 7b – my first and only fall of the day. Pete recalls: 'When I saw how hard the second route was I refused to follow to avoid a complete epic. This could have been a subconscious response to evade another abseil down the face or a justifiable desire not to fall off under the roof with the sea crashing in below'.

So, at the prospective belay 15 metres up I had no choice but to pull the ropes through in order to lead the route in one pitch. Above the vacant stance an intermittent crack shot straight up the sliver face, not too far left of *Il Duce*. A sobering 6-metre run out for the first gear had Pete applauding his wisdom in staying safely on the deck. A good piece of kit was placed and then for me it was pump-fighting, long-stretching, and tweaking-in the odd 'derisory' wire or cam up the sheer face all the way to the top. Phew! Incredible! That was *Ocean Colour Dream*.

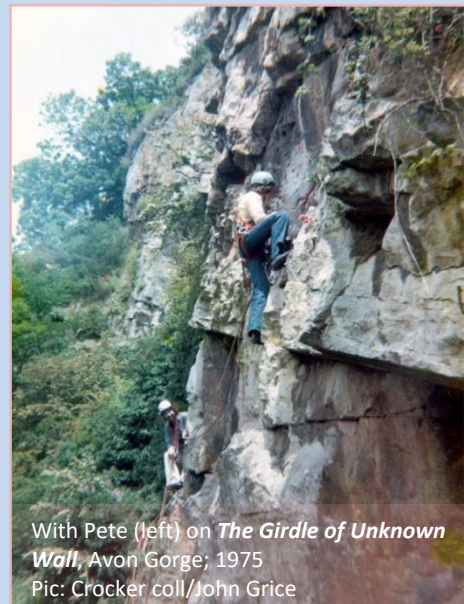
Given Pete was now a littoral fixture, I abbed down to strip the route, the implication being there remained a discussion about what should be done to get us out of here. Yet curiously Pete had by now wised up, admitting with a wry smile: 'I had a good idea it would be an exciting day out.' Well I'll be buggered, I thought; all my insincerity had been wasted. Pete had been pretending all along, no doubt secretly enjoying the repartee, the haggling – and watching me squirm obsequiously. And why not? He had his reasons to be here too.

Our third route was a fitting climax, a beautiful two-pitch E5 we called *Isle of Avalon*. To start there was a nervy moment or two when Pete came close to, as he put it, 'losing the plot', and having to 'improvise' a tough crack to get to the *Vagabond* belay. But, above, pure technical indulgencies beckoned: 'Strangely I enjoyed the second pitch as it was merely vertical most of the way and I could climb it without too much trouble.'

We summited at 5.20pm still hounded by the clock since I owed it to English Heritage to improve my punctuality ratings amongst the castle staff. No such luck. It was a just punishment that I should be left to worry I might be black-listed from returning. After all, I was already planning a siege of 'Lots of unclimbed lines on the cliff to the north' (diary entry).

Many years later Pete told me that when he asked Pat if he had repeated *Il Duce* since his first ascent, Pat said that he had not because he didn't want to spoil the memory of a perfect experience with his great climbing mate Keith Darbyshire. That rang true to me. A unique day is not only defined by the climbs but by companionship too – the two becoming inextricable, synergistic. In terrain like the North Cornwall coast, climbing is always a joint effort and stresses are shared, as should the rewards and sense of satisfaction. It is dismissive for anyone to underestimate the role and contribution of a climbing mate – your 'second' – even if your partnership lasts only a day.

'I wouldn't have missed the experience because at the end of the day it's the reason we all climb – the sheer buzz of it.' Pete O'Sullivan



Toiler on the Sea (E4 5c), La Congrelle, Guernsey; 1997

'Thank you for your letter of 14 November to the Prime Minister, about British Summer Time....a review of the potential costs and benefits of advancing time in this way would be required....' Dept of Business Innovation & Skills

The concrete-grey canyon of La Congrelle is a strange place: if it isn't haunted, it ought to be. Any choice of a first ascent here, like *Eels on Wheels* or *King Conger*, would do the job as well as *Toiler on the Sea*. After all the purpose of a tourist's climbing visit is to enjoy time, if not exile, *anywhere* on the gneiss walls of backwater Guernsey.

My version of Victor Hugo's story tells of a canny ship that toiled and tacked in a sea of E5s and E6s *away* from difficulties, eventually finding a thoroughfare up the bleak bastion of the sheer west wall of the zawn. Its centre was where the best holds were to be found so why should they not be followed? That is the climbing instinct – adapting pathways, even by canny chicanery, as the rock allows.

You can never predict where climbing will take you. In the mid-to-late 90s, November half-term holidays on Guernsey became an unexpected thing for my family. With one then two young children this containable Channel Island was perfect for play both in and above rock pools. Yet once again I had shamelessly ensured that there were crags not too far from our holiday destination, the argument being one of practical and economic opportunism, and – yes – sticking together as a family, more or less. So it was with good fortune that I was able to track down Christian Harvey a climber on the island via Kevin Eloury, his counterpart on Jersey with whom I had climbed several years earlier. I immediately got the impression from Chris that time had stood still on Guernsey, at least from a climbing perspective. He didn't exactly speak ill of the climbing scene, but when he said 'Well there's me and there's the Guernsey Climbing Club' it sounded like he'd welcome the stimulus of a visit from a keen mainlander. He got it.



Islander Chris Harvey

I did my first routes in La Congrelle in 1996, with Chris. At first sight 'the eel' reminded me of a fat version of Huntsman's Leap, but with the inestimable benefit of a path down the back. How the Guernsey administration had ever contemplated filling it with rubbish and using it as a tip was beyond me. Its west wall was unclimbed and when I asked Chris why that was the case he sniggered with embarrassment and said 'it's too hard for us'. At that time Chris was studying to be an accountant and

doing bar work to help ends meet. Getting together was always precarious and we'd often end up battling against time in darkness. *Nightshift* celebrated an especially exacting evening in Gull Zawn when in failing light we became immersed in a sea of foam churned up by an incoming high spring tide. Chris followed the route in the pitch black, a babbling bubble bath on a rope, eventually performing a miracle of escapology.



Autumn's holiday plans in the English Channel could buckle at the mercy of the Atlantic. It is true that in a Guernsey storm 'Reality in strong doses frightens.' (Victor Hugo). Normally a westerly gale would be blowing, the whipped-up breakers smashing into the entrance of La Congrelle and flooding the zawn with a thunderous roar. By no stretch of the imagination was it a beautiful place. A monolithic concrete observation tower and gun emplacement overshadows its west wall, a stark reminder of Germany's occupation during World War 2, adding to the mood of desolation, the sense of raw grainy functionality.

While much of our 1996 holiday was grisly and damp, our 1997 holiday enjoyed wall-to-wall sunshine, and I applied my traditional ruse of keeping the clocks on British Summer Time. I failed to see why governments were obsessed with plunging us in to darkness every October, especially when public polls had revealed majorities in favour of ditching GMT. So far as I and many others were concerned light was of infinitely more value at the end of the day, not at the beginning. Light equals time equals life. Unfortunately my letters to three successive Prime Ministers didn't seem to be having the desired effect. I must have been considered one of those oddballs, like the one who used to write to Woodspring Environmental Health claiming that the world's woes were due to giant worms in the Bristol Channel. But I digress, whatever time it was, by some good fortune our week was stunning beach weather, stunning sight-seeing weather, and stunning climbing weather. My routine was to get up at 8.00am BST, do a few routes with my Soloist, and be back at the holiday flat by 2.00pm Unfortunately it didn't always work out, particularly when I forgot which time zone I was using. Apologies followed; I'd long been spoiled by Beverley's obliging nature.

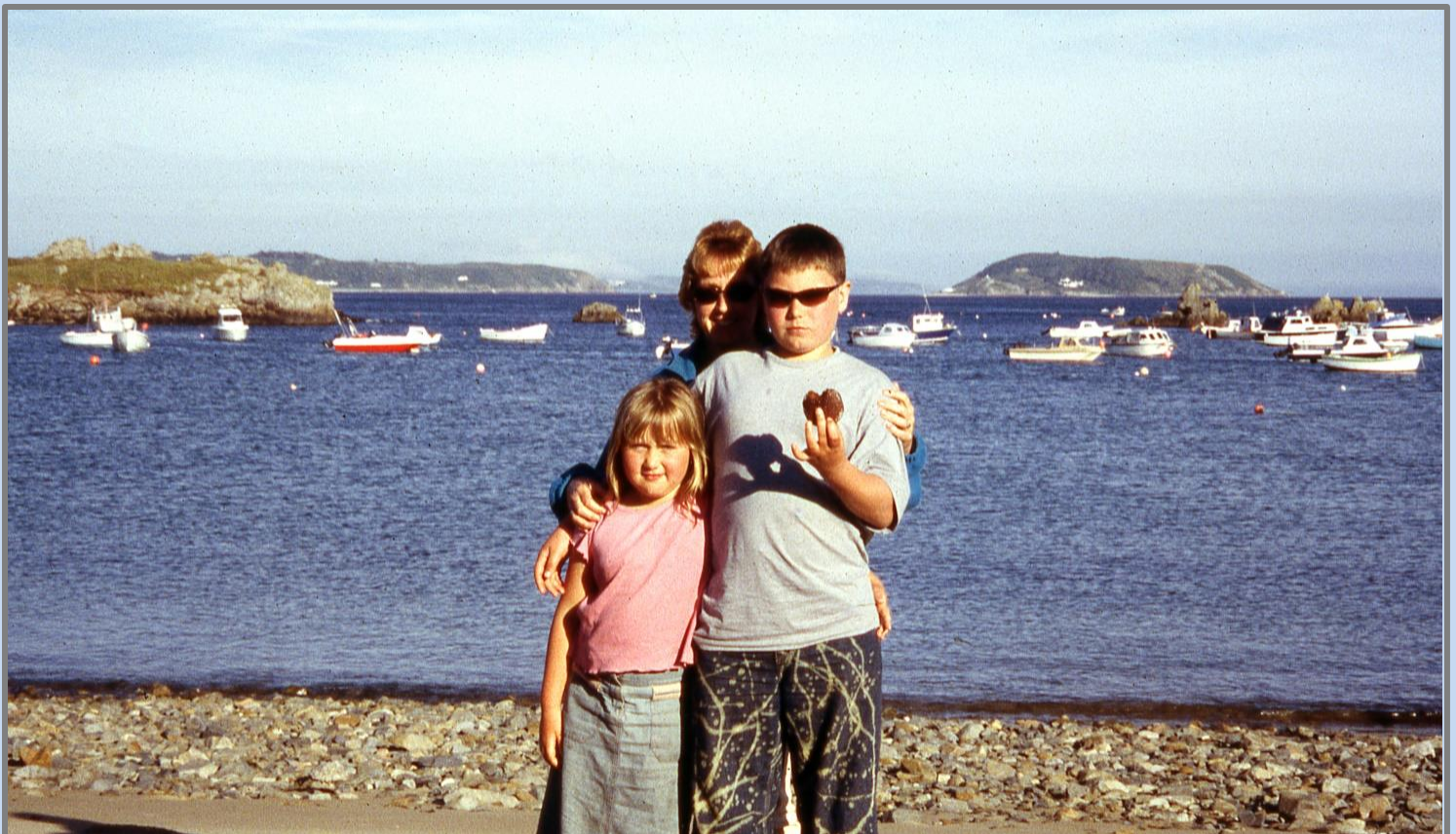
In 1996 I made inroads into the west wall of La Congrelle but now I had returned for more, particularly to check a line that weaved up its very centre. After *Born a Believer* and *The Christian*, an E5 and an E6 above the mouth of the zawn, the oceanic roar subsided enabling Chris and I to boulder hop to:

*****Toiler on the Sea** 45m E4 5c (1.11.97) Stupendous! A varied classic that weaves up the highest part of the west face in its centre. One of the best routes on Guernsey. Start 6m left of the big round boulder. Climb up and right over smooth rock to jugs and then up to a roof. Traverse left for 3m and pull over left of a projecting ledge. Move up the flake on the right to a thin horizontal break. Traverse left for 4m (high Rock 5), and step up to a flake-line. Follow the flake rightwards until it steepens dramatically and some bold and rather spectacular moves must be made over the lip. Belay on nuts (not that good: best back them up with a pre-placed rope). Scramble out right. FA: MJC, CH
(from *Not-so-new Guernsey Climbs*)



Chris following *Eels on Wheels* (E5) during the first ascent in 1996

The next day my family departed home on the Condor. Guernsey served us well for many years to come including during the nonsense Foot and Mouth criminalisation of the outdoors in 2001. More letters to the Government ensued. And La Congrelle held its grip.



***Blood of an Englishman* (E4 6b), Gist Ddu, Meirionnydd; 1990**

After a restless night on The Common, our tent besieged by midges, we met John Sumner at 8.00am and committed ourselves to the long plod up Gist Ddu. Within 30 minutes, John had pulled away like an old Jag leaving Beverley and I to marvel at this superhuman mountain man as he dissolved into the thick mists above. We were no slouches, this was not a competition; like the swooping of the hawk high overhead, John knew no other way but to be fleet of foot in the mountains. It was in his gift to get to the crag faster than the remainder of mankind, his fitness evidence of a deeper affinity: ‘the walk-in keeps the crag-rats away, which is not altogether a bad thing for a high crag of outstanding climbing and beauty.’ (John Sumner, *High 33*; 1985). His philosophy that climbing was a vehicle to experience beautiful places will have resonated with many who’d become smitten with mid-Wales.

How we found the crag on our own I’ll never know, but at some lucky point we dropped down to the east just as the pungent mists cleared to reveal a soaring columnar cliff with powerful lines and John already gearing up below. We’d only met John by chance a few months earlier. He seemed delighted on Tap y Gigfran that I’d taken an interest in the area, but not as delighted as me that I should finally meet the guru. His guidebook was the reason that I’d become infatuated with mid-Wales. After that chance encounter I kept in touch and he told me about a ‘last great problem’ – a blank corner – on Gist Ddu. And just as Phil Gibson’s drawing had promised, here it was – angling above me, a companion of tremendous lines like *Voie Suisse* and *Hungry Hearts*, both of which had John’s name attached as a first ascensionist.

Like many a Meirionnydd route, a bit of brushing and grass-and-heather pulling proved necessary – especially as the holds were so small or no holds at all. John waited patiently; he knew the score. Taking pride in his own new climbs, he would sometimes take days or even weeks to prepare them, in the process unearthing vast amounts of vegetation, loose rock, and earth. It’s curious to look back and recall the prodigious efforts that went into ‘gardening’ in those days. Notwithstanding how temporary the effects were, it would be impossible to justify such intervention now – the optics are that bad. Yet in a relatively recent trip back to Craig Cau on Cadair Idris, I could see absolutely no trace of all the effort I myself had made cleaning scores of great routes in the early to mid-90s. Poignantly, as I scrambled in eerie silence along the high terraces, it was as if I had never been there, that a portion of my life had been erased. Curiously I found comfort rather than distress in this realisation; me a mere pixel in the geological history of a glacial cwm, its steely black cliffs the greater commander of time.



Craig Cau, Cadair Idris

* BLOOD OF AN ENGLISHMAN 100 FT E-4. † (25.8.90)
 The fully-structural square-cut corner which under the Mori Man
 rib on its left provides a clean, highly technical but
 very safe problem - reputedly a "last Great Line"!
 A comparison with *Stranger's* Nectar is not entirely inappropriate.
 The best approach to the base of the corner is to solo
 up the first pitch of Mori Man and step left to a short
 slab; No. 12 & 2 fixed belays.
 100 feet 65. Surrounded and very thin, including back part
 a few metres to some good finger plate. Here the corner
 seem open out a little. Continue more easily to a
 roof, somewhat thin and climb the groove above for
 another ledge and a gear ledge on the left ten feet
 higher. Work up easy cracks to ledge and a two-
 peg belay. A 50m aerial from in situ rings enables
 the rock to be reached.

FA: Martin Proden & John Sumner
 "flashed"

August Havers. Rerouted and rerecorded, supping
 right into the wall at 1100. Ledges - 10-15 feet lower
 (I believe) than the original. Maybe with **; ES 6a-
 first ramp completely inhospitable - recommended approach from
 Vase Fulle. Belay with short traverse right.

I loved to watch John climb; all the analysis and concentration implicit in a serious face that you might think was sometimes an apprehensive one. Reliably his deliberations would come alive in facial flickers and voice box glissandos as he'd ponder and solve the problem in front of him. Now and again he'd stop while seconding the corner, bemused; then - with words of encouragement from above - break out into a piano-key smile, his wiry arms flexing and rippling as his fingers clawed for purchase in the seam in the back of the corner. It was the first time we'd climbed together. 'This is bloody hard', he'd exclaimed. Indeed it was - like a volcanic version of *Nectar*, sky-high.

Afterwards, between other routes, we talked about the sometimes uneasy access background in mid-Wales, including the political sensitivities with local farmers and their antipathy towards climbers. Yet it appeared that John with his wife Jill and friends were winning the battle by showing respect, and gaining trust - through their own hard work, including establishing the courtesy path along the Aran ridge. 'A big breakthrough in negotiations' John had proclaimed with great pride. It seemed the locals were no longer after his blood.

That night Beverley and I escaped the midges for the clear air of the pass of Bwlch y Groes and slept soundly to the bleats of sleepless sheep. Next day it was back in action with John for a free ascent of *Alecto*. That suited John; Craig Cywarch was his spiritual home. I'm sure you will find him there now.



John Sumner, 1990



Lady of Satan

(E3 5b); Quarry 5

Leigh Woods

Avon Gorge; 1976



*Remember the thrills of Avon's iconic walls,
a beguiling line opposite, for me, a child, if
not at all.*

*It appears no Malbogies, Limbo, or Gronk,
but a rebel's pursuit, whether miffed, mad,
or drunk.*

*A climb of wounds, crimsons weep from tot,
sometimes reconciling with mustards, and
sometimes not.*

*They perfume their brew for a tip-toe step
into a den of pockets, like cavernous eye-
sockets, a Moac alone.*

*Must stay calm on shaky holds cackling,
furtive hands gripping; the flesh of red
valerian snapping.*

*I loathe this putrid funnel of anxiety, to
be left swimming in frenzy, from a
sinkholing gust of gravity.*

*Ignore pucker-smile artist, painting
blooded graffiti, on the very same Slide
of many a ghost-donkey.*

*Now stretching past crumble like an
elastic band, fingers crooked, toes
clawed, apoplectic in Bristoland.*

*In requiem arrives the final bulge, a
raven aloft breaks the deafening hush,
time to hitch a lift - and welcome the
rush.*

*Safely perched, breathing the past hour deeply, Mr Anonymous melds into
maternal woodland, meekly.*

*An obscure life on rock was meant not to be a heresy, but a hunger fuelled by the
sorcery of Circe.*

*She will ask for your hand, so remember to reach low, as she sinks in the slab all
Bristol will know.*





BRISTOL
REBEL
CITY
AGAINST
ALL
AUTHORITY

Entering the 'funnel of anxiety' on a return encounter in 2014 Pic: Crocker coll/Simon Fletcher

My Canoe E6 6c/V7/f7a+, Huntsham, Wye Valley; 2003

I'd just fallen from *that* 'big pinch' mantel-hold for the third time, and I was livid...cursing... red with rage. Unfortunately at that very moment I came face to face with an older couple who had walked beneath me from the nearby footpath. God knows what they must have thought. They may have even feared for their lives. I didn't blame them for backing away into the undergrowth; I could have been a wanted man – but not by this piece of rock.

The year was 2003, I'd just parted ways with my 25-year local government career, and things were in flux. I was desperate to calm the pace of life down, especially to end the mad-dash driving 26 miles back and forth over the Mendips to work and the 150 miles either way on weekends to Wales or the southwest. That situation had become manic, squeezing time like in the foreground to my Bosigran accident in the early 90s. Yet only if you knew when your last day was coming could 'live every day as if it were your last' be a laudable *raison d'être*. I didn't, so for me it was an unsustainable and unhealthy work/life equation where the answer was exponentially wretched, sometimes even hysterical. So, finally, a breather!

Well that was until I started planning a project to liberate Cheddar Gorge climbing from its cold, dark days and at the same time began working with South Wales's Carl Ryan and Peter Hall to film the best of Pembrokeshire climbing. Nonetheless I was still able to reduce massively my time away from home, compensating by focussing on bouldering locally including in the Forest of Dean.



Guy Percival; Wye Valley guidebook launch, 2007

Recent developments on the Forest's quirky quartz conglomerate crags had pretty much been a two-man show. At Huntsham Riverside, forest firebrand Guy Percival had forged an impressive solo up the hanging crack in a 6-metre high boulder which finished with a balancy mantel on *that* hold – the 'big pinch'. Normally this boulder, which acted like a sponge, would be oozing sprout-green goo like a bad cold. Time and time again I would visit only to find it rancid, dripping. But by August a fine spell had scorched The Sponge as dry as a huge walnut. A fantastic unclimbed *arête*, right of the scoop, beckoned. 'Was I up to it' I wondered as I immediately shot off the first hold? Yet to work on a project, perhaps too hard a project, excited me – so long as the lingering lawman didn't sniff out my trail. 'This is going to be tough' – 'let's hope Guy doesn't come back!'

Round 1 spawned the realisation that the 25-degree lean of the *arête* made it too steep to soft-brush or shunt from above. I found that out in April 2003 when with John Harwood I led the adjacent new line of *Fallguy*, which had the benefit of bomber cams at 5 metres – well tested when a pebble snapped off the sloping exit mantel. On the lower-down I leant over leftwards, fondled a few sloping sidepulls on the *arête*, and concluded it would have to be worked ground-up as a boulder problem. But I liked contriving solutions in a Michael Crawford sort of way, and remembered that I'd impounded an old metal ladder from work, probably because it had the Machiavellian capacity to guillotine fingers at any moment. Now, carrying a metal ladder and two great rolls of foam along a popular bridleway towards the River Wye must have looked rather cranky. Fortunately passers-by were quizzical but gracious; perhaps they thought I lived up a tree. And it must have looked no sillier than carrying the same rolls of foam along The Pennine Way all the way to Callerhues in 2000. 'About time I bought a crash pad', I'd thought!

Round 2 in mid-August came just days after filming Hazel Findlay on *Blue Sky* and my making a deep water solo first ascent of *A Rainbow for Rory* at Ogmere. But now it was time to unleash the ladder which I'd stashed in a nearby thicket. By extending it rung by rung up the *arête*, brush in hand, at least I could decide how best to position my digits on the holds, or – rather – those pretend-holds. The 'big pinch' had been already checked out from a rope, and that final, exposed move seemed – at least in isolation – reasonable. Time for a blast, I thought.



Fallguy (E6); first ascent, 2003
Pic: Jonathan Crocker

Today I'd brought my 11-year old son Jonathan with me. He loved the Forest and on this occasion he had the luxury of being able to throw himself in the adjacent River Wye too like a frisky otter. But from the outset I was struggling. It took me 'ten attempts just to get off the ground' all the while trying to ensure Jonathan didn't float down-river to Chepstow. The father/son thing wasn't working so well today and Jonathan was getting bored. Understandably he wanted some play-time, I couldn't concentrate, and my 'fingers were too sore'. So I retired home, spending the next three days working up my Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project proposal for the BMC and meeting with Dave Turnbull and Cheddar Caves's director Hugh Cornwell. Mind you paperwork packs its own punch even for a lifelong pen-pusher, so completely 'on instinct' on the third day I took a break at 2.00pm for an unscheduled fresh assault on the arête.

Round 3 instantly felt more promising, especially as I was expecting nothing in return. Arêtes tend to suit me. While my Giraffe's legs often get in the way on overhangs and rock-ups, on arêtes they can apply all manner of semi-erotic clamp manoeuvres and hooks to get weight off a weak gut. My core had always proved an Achilles Heel. What was needed was a pioneering redistribution of muscle around my body. Nonetheless progress was good up to 4 metres where a few army moves saw me flat on the ground onto my 'Bosigran back' – repeatedly. I'd already cushioned the landing somewhat with the forest's natural resources, but it needed more. I became like one of those cranes in an amusement arcade – this time scooping dead branches, scrub, and leaf litter – piles of it, until I'd constructed what Dave Pickford later described as a 'raft'. However, due to an unkind riverside camber, my platform couldn't be extended sufficiently to protect the top-out, keeping the fall and route in the E grades danger zone. That worried me.

Pumped up from all those lifting operations, without warning at 6pm I found myself on the big pinch, but I fell, and fell again, and again – the third time missing the raft and causing the imprisonable hissy fit. 'Not quite time to give up' I resolved, since traditionally under fading light I would often try a what-the-hell-last-go. Teasingly four more deck-outs followed but at 6.40pm my fifth 'last go' got me again to the big pinch, hanging it and the slopers above, and –*Allez!* – mantelling out above the scary drop to succeed on 'my hardest Forest route ever'.

Perhaps the moral of the ascent was who needs genius when just occasionally 'Victory belongs to the most persevering'? Ironic because Bonaparte had to eat those gratifying words. Confucius was closer with 'our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.' Fine words, but maybe it is best to stop listening to other people and just do our own thing.

The next day I was sunbathing on the Quiberon, with my family. Committing to the need to take back control of my life seemed to be working out nicely. Nice bouldering too.....

