

Running Like a Climber

by Dominic Oughton

It's around 2:38pm on the second Saturday in July, sometime in the late 90s. I'm plodding up the western ridge of the coomb above Charlesworth, somewhere near the front of the pack in the Charlesworth & Chisworth Carnival Challenge fell race; but not for long. I've deployed my usual tactics; head off fast to avoid the congestion at the early stiles and then recover on the steep up-hill section before powering along the top and down to the finish. So much for the theory... A cheery voice behind me says: 'Nice one Dom; keep it going.' The trademark bare torso of Andy Howie surges into view, and he strides past. Energised, I determine to stay on his tail; the mind is willing but soggy leg muscles decline the challenge. Try as I might Andy disappears and a stream of other runners gradually demotes me. I finally catch up in the queue for the orange squash and wheeze: 'Hi Andy, thanks for the encouragement. How did you know it was me?' 'That's easy; you were running like a climber.'

Over the intervening years I've become more serious about my running. It makes for a good fill-in when the crags are too wet, the bike's got a puncture and there's only an hour or two to spare. I've even completed half a dozen mountain marathons (including the infamous 'unaccounted-for' OMM in 2008), though this has been largely by way of debt repayment to Jim Trueman for his many years of forbearance on the other end of my rope. Jim is one of those climbers who have drifted away to 'the Dark Side' that is fell running. Paul O'Reilly is another. Hopefully this is coincidence, rather than the direct result of climbing with me over the years. This article describes three 'grand days' at the intersection between these two activities, perhaps best described as 'cragging whilst covering a lot of ground'. Jim and Paul each accompanied me on one of these and Andy Stewart (definitely a climber first and foremost but such a talented all-rounder you'd be hard pressed to tell) was my partner in crime on the other.

A Hard Day in the Peak – July 2005 with Andy Stewart

I confess; I've always been a bit of a 'ticker'. From early days with Classic Rock I've allowed the random selections of various authors and the accompanying pictures and tall stories to influence the goals for my days in the hills. The idea of completing all the Hard Rock routes in the Peak District in a day had been taking shape for a number of years, partly prompted by a half-overheard conversation in a pub. The final piece of

preparation fell into place when Helen and I made a trip to Curbar and I led Elder Crack; the only one of the eight routes concerned that I hadn't done, which had been a bit of a mental obstacle. All I needed was a partner who was fast, keen and just about as daft as me – enter Mr Stewart.

Andy signed up for the trip without too much heavy persuasion and the day was booked. He was even heroic enough to stick to the deal when he later realised he had a party the night before and would be out on the town until the wee small hours.

Sure enough the party animal arrived not long after the allotted 4:30am and we were on our way to Matlock by 4:45. The gentle sound of slumber accompanied me as I drove but the power-nap obviously did the trick as Andy was raring to go as we parked up and headed for High Tor and Debauchery. I'd had a whirlwind affair with this crag in the late 90s and more or less climbed it out at my grade; since then we'd become almost strangers. What a magnificent piece of rock and what a privilege to have the whole place to ourselves and be geared up and climbing before 6:00am. The town slept and the A6 for once was empty and silent, just the dawn chorus to accompany us.

Off to Cratcliffe next and the grit classic Suicide Wall. I ran the two pitches together for 100ft of pure enjoyment and topped out before 8:00am.

We parked at Topley Pike to drop down into Chee Dale, but not before satisfying Andy's attack of the munchies with an egg and mushroom bap from the butty van. Sirplum was next on the hit list, after which we made our most serious error of the day, 'saving time' by sticking to the same bank of the river for the walk to Chee Tor. An hour of bushwhacking followed which would also be a fair description for the subsequent ascent of Chee Tor Girdle. We bumped into Brian Roberts and Paul Dyson for an unexpected but welcome natter and cup of tea before heading to Stoney for Alcasan. This really is an underrated climb in a stunning situation; traversing improbably across the huge expanse of Windy Butress. By 3:45pm we were an hour ahead of schedule and had it in the bag so we treated ourselves to a cream tea at the Lover's Leap café. The perfect cragging fodder.

The final lap was back on the grit; jogging along Curbar to tick Elder Crack (a doddle for Andy, especially with Big Bertha in tow) and then onto Froggatt Pinnacle to storm up Valkyrie before racing on to Stanage for the finale of Right Unconquerable. I vividly recall striding up through the plantation at about half past seven, as the day trippers were heading down, and finding the Unconquerables blazing red in the setting sun, and happily unoccupied. A final dash for the car and we were done. Just gone eight and the Scotsman's Pack was still doing food. What a day!

Eastern Edges Challenge – September 2006 with Jim Trueman

Jim's a member of the Mynnedd Club, being a Hayfield resident, and I've had the privilege of joining a number of their meets over the years. A particularly fine tradition is the Eastern Edges Challenge which is a fairly light-hearted (oh really?) competition; a hybrid combining climbing with a score-event fell race. Points are gained for each crag climbed on, and each route done (according to difficulty, but 'topping out' at HVS so as not disadvantage the runners too much). Routes must be led on gear (no soloing). Penalties are deducted for missing the finishing deadline and extra points awarded for visiting all ten nominated crags and for taking in specific 'bonus routes'. These latter are a manifestation of the organiser's sadistic streak; being a collection of known horrors (e.g. Tody's Wall at Froggatt) and unknown nightmares.

Jim had persuaded me to enter my first OMM and I was well into my training regime with about two weeks to go before the event. However, Jim and I have different views on training (mine focuses on the oft-neglected rest-phase, which for me had started sometime in May) and he was keen to get me running under any pretence. The idea of a day's cragging was an easy sell and the score element was the final clincher (I can't help being a competitive bugger), so we assembled at Grindleford Caff on a drizzly Saturday. Sadly the inclement conditions had put off many of the potential participants and the field was made up of only three teams. However one of these comprised organiser Steve Bowker and his climbing/running partner Tim, so the competition had the inside track.

Jim and I strategised over pints of tea and bacon butties and came to the conclusion that doing a fairly easy route at every crag and bagging as many of the bonus routes as possible along the way would be the winning formula.

Eleven o'clock and we were off, speeding (OK, jogging) up the hill to Yarncliff (my first ever visit) and arrived at the foot of Ant's Crack just as the heavens opened. A solitary big cam protected the lead up the resulting waterfall, which soaked us and our gear. Stomping up the hill to Tegness Quarry (another first) I congratulated myself on choosing to carry the (minimalist) rack rather than the now saturated and heavy rope. Then it was on to the more familiar ground of Froggatt (Silver Crack) and thence to Curbar. This was the most easterly venue so it made sense to grab a route at the start of the crag before backtracking towards the Burbage valley. Luckily the organisers had been thoughtful enough to nominate a bonus route a hundred yards along the crag – only a V Diff; just the job. Oak Tree Grove 7m VD 'To the right is a grassy corner which gives a poor route.' The route didn't fail to live down to its billing – I had a new entry at the top of my 'worst routes I've ever done' list, but not for long!

Burbage is a venue of two halves. The (by now) sunny and friendly Burbage North beckoned only a mile up the path, but first we had to bag a route on the forbidding South. Again our guide (tormentor?) had identified a convenient route: Gob Severe (now HS 4c). Bright green, hideously overhanging and largely devoid of gear, this rocketed into a clear and (I hope) unassailable lead at the top (bottom?) of my Hit (Miss?) Parade. Despite these last two unpleasant encounters we were well on schedule. To shake off the horrors we decided to bag a couple of extra routes on Burbage North (short as well as friendly), being careful to place the prescribed token piece of gear to make the feats respectable, before speeding over to Stanage.

Apparent North is one of the crag's many hidden gems that I hadn't previously explored and I'd recommend it to any seasoned aficionado of the Queen of Grit; it warrants longer than the fleeting minutes we spent there before taking a bearing back towards the café via Higgarr Tor (The File), Millstone (Eartha) and Lawrencefield (Meringue and Cordite Crack – two intended sandbags but both very enjoyable routes, as well as Limpopo Groove for good measure).

Shortly after five and we were first back to Grindleford; well ahead of the designated finish time and the rest of the teams, but too late for a brew (the only organisational cock-up on an otherwise excellently conceived and executed meet). The anxious wait for our chief rivals (were they blasting up their twentieth route before a final sprint to the finish line?) ended when they rolled in late and limping. A pyrrhic victory but a tremendous day out: fourteen routes on ten crags, three of which I'd never visited before, not to mention a useful day's training with a sack for the OMM.

Cuillin Ridge – July 2007 with Paul O'Reilly

My first experience of Skye was a sun-blessed May bank holiday in my youth. Helen and I cragged and scrambled for four glorious days; got burnt to a frazzle and departed completely enchanted by this magical place. On one of these precious days we'd eschewed climbing to walk the central section of the Ridge and were rewarded with breath-taking views stretching all the way from Gars-bheinn to Sgurr nan Gilleann. This was clearly an objective that I'd have to come back for. However, the weather gods had different ideas. Our next trip was for a week and on the appointed day we left the campsite pre-dawn in heavy rain and never even made it on to the Ridge. A foray a few years later with Paul was even less successful; we never even saw the Ridge, or much beyond the edge of the campsite.

Everything comes to he who waits, or so they say. If you are looking for enthusiasm, persistence and untamed optimism then you'd be hard-pressed to find a better climbing partner than Paul. He also has the uncanny knack

of doing nothing (in terms of climbing) for months and then pulling a remarkable performance out of the bag. Mister Motivator and I managed to find a free weekend with an acceptable forecast and blasted northwards. We nipped up to bag a route on Kilt Rock before heading over for a pint at Carbost then settling down for an early night.

An early start saw me puffing along in Paul's wake as he strode along the shore-side on the way up to Gars-bheinn. The guidebook time of three hours was well and truly put to the sword (fit bugger!) and we started on the Ridge proper. The cloud was at or around the 3,000ft level but with enough breaks to make navigation reasonably straightforward. We were also equipped with Andy Hyslop's RockFax Mini-Guide which I would strongly recommend to anyone – much more useful than the map.

We were travelling fairly light, with a perfectly-sized 32m rope (a relic salvaged from a previous adventure) and a few nuts and slings. The climbing is never too challenging, but damp rock and the exposure make the rope a worthwhile precaution. Some of the down-climbing avoided by abseiling would also be interesting if approached unseen from above.

We took a fairly purist approach and visited all the significant tops along the way (rather than the 'running line' described by Mr Hyslop); not taking any chances on having to find another weather slot to fill any gaps! Progress between scrambling sections was made at an O'Reilly pace, which gradually slowed as his willing but less able partner started to flag. We only made one significant navigational error, failing to head up left onto the Ridge for the three tops of Mhadaidh, where a good looking path lured us down a long way to one side. By this stage, recovery of the lost height took a huge effort of willpower on my part; as the guide observes: 'The 'mind numbing' central section of the Ridge can feel endless and is a likely psychological failure point.' My mood didn't improve as we stepped back over the cairn/dry-stone wall that someone had erected across our 'path' to prevent exactly this mistake. However, 'failure' isn't a word in the O'Reilly vocabulary and we made it to the top of Sgurr nan Gillean just 8½ hours after leaving the top of Gars-bheinn.

Paul kindly allowed me a few moments rest and we contemplated the feats of Andy Hyslop (3hrs 32mins) and more latterly Es Tressider (3hrs 17mins and 28secs to be exact) in making the same trip. The solo speed-climbing is impressive enough but the rate that these guys must have moved over the 'running' sections of the Ridge would have left no margin for error in avoiding a monstrous plummet.

With the Ridge traversed, but a long way from the road, my energy levels sagged until a distant memory of a cheery welcome and refreshing beers at the Sligachan spurred me on. Lured on by the carrot of beer and

prodded by the stick of Hyslop's exploits and Paul's (still fresh as a daisy) harrying, we made it to the pub just twelve hours after leaving Glen Brittle. Beers were ordered and consumed, then more followed, and the world was looking a rosier place. We wandered outside with alcohol-fuelled confidence and stuck out our thumbs for immediate transportation back to the van in Glen Brittle.

Time passed, midges gathered, a chill descended and so did our spirits. Half an hour later and we hadn't even seen a car, let alone a driver who'd stop to pick up two sweaty climbers...

Four guys approached the pub, chatting in broad local accents. The last of these paused and greeted us. 'Hey there lads, will you be just down from running the Ridge by any chance?' Our running tights, light sacks and my knackered countenance must have given us away, and we nodded. 'So you'll be wanting a lift back to Glen Brittle then? Hang on a tick and I'll go and get my Land Rover.' We couldn't believe our luck. It turned out that 'Heavy'* was a retired RAF type who had been involved in running the local mountain rescue for many years. He has a deep affinity for the Cuillins and delighted in regaling us with non-stop banter all the way along the twenty minute drive down to where the van was parked. I could hardly describe a happier end to a brilliant day, the highlight of which was this unprovoked act of human generosity.

True to form it rained the next day, scotching our plans for a route in Coire Lagan. Undeterred (and with Mister Motivator on board you are never deterred!) we headed for Glen Coe. The short walk in to the East Wall of Aonach Dubh was the most my jaded legs could manage, but as soon as we hit the rock all thoughts of weariness evaporated and we capped a memorable weekend with an ascent of Crocodile (E3 6a). I even managed to show Paul a clean pair of heels for the first time in three days!

Postscript

Some years later... I'm leading a Club meet on Kinder Downfall, just walking down for butties having climbed the third route of the day. My eyes are drawn to a figure on the crag opposite. It's Andy Howie. 'Nice one Andy; keep it going', I shouted. I could tell it was him; he was climbing like a runner!

*Actually David 'Heavy' Whalley MBE BEM, according to my Google search, though he was far too modest to mention it at the time. He's also completed the Munros seven times and was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Bravery for his service in the aftermath of the Lockerbie Air Disaster – What a guy!

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*OMM 2009 – The Author ‘running like a climber’ followed by Jim Trueman running like a runner.
Photo Sleepmonsters.com*