

Secret Words

by Dominic Oughton

In a previous life I had an IT manager who was a stickler for security, insisting on a change of password every month. After working my way through the usual suspects (kids' nicknames and childhood family pets etc.) I struggled for ideas; often resulting in an embarrassing call to the IT team: 'OK we've reset your password. Again! Have you got a pen? It's I... D... I... O... T... Got that? Now please change it for something less obvious.'

After one such episode I hit upon the idea of using the names of memorable routes I'd recently done. This worked well in the summer but inspiration dried up as winter took its toll on my climbing activity; 'Green 6c in the corner' providing neither a very memorable experience nor password. This prompted a further stroke of genius: I'd set my new password as the name of a route I *wanted* to do, thus providing an aide-mémoire *and*, through a process of daily reinforcement, the psychological conditioning required to focus my efforts for the coming season. The first part of the plan worked brilliantly (there's an inexhaustible supply of routes I'd like to do but haven't!) but translating this into action the following year yielded disappointing results. I managed to do Resurrection (a cause of much re-typing as even today I can't remember how to spell it) but most of my projects remained un-ticked. There was always a shortage of #####. (Fill in the missing word from: weather; courage; motivation; partners; time; commitment...)

Fast-forward almost ten years to 2010 and a glorious summer in which I finally managed to settle three of these old scores. Looking back, I've been wondering what stopped me before now (if anything I'm less strong than I was then, and have been struggling with a dodgy elbow all year) and what made the difference; and coming to the conclusion that it's largely in the mind – secret words indeed!

Prana, Black Crag, Borrowdale, E3 6a.

A showery forecast for the Lakes coincides with a rare free day for Paul O'Reilly so I dash up the M6, despite the weather, fuelled by his infectious enthusiasm. We decide on Sergeant Crag Slabs in Borrowdale, being accessible and with a variety of grades, but arrive to find that others have come to the same conclusion. Despite the crowds (it's a small crag and the four other teams give a claustrophobic feel) we manage to jump onto Aphasia; surely one of the best E2s in Cumbria. We enjoy a couple more

three-star routes in quick succession before gentle drizzle forces a retreat to the car, but we've climbed too quickly and it's too early for the pub. What to do?

'Does Black Crag dry quickly?' I enquire, not yet revealing my intentions (perhaps even to myself).

'Let's go and have a look', responds Paul. 'What do you fancy?'

'I've always wanted to do Prana.' Who said that? Oh, that's me committed then...

The drizzle stops and the sun makes an appearance but we arrive at the crag to find it streaked in water. My emotions are caught between relief and disappointment until closer examination reveals that the crux of the route looks largely dry. No time for second thoughts and we gear up, with Paul leading the green, oozing, entry 'scramble' which is anything but inviting. I start up the main pitch, unsure of the line in the absence of the usual chalk trail, washed away by recent rains. Happily this is fairly straightforward until steepness intrudes and holds disappear, forcing a leftwards tack onto the headwall.

Looking further left and upwards it is clear that the crux is approaching. A small wire nestles snugly in a long tapering crack – bomb-proof, and encourages me up another ten feet or so to a small foothold and a decent jug. Options for progress have now crystallised, literally, to tiny finger and toe holds which lead up and out of sight over a bulge. The solitary wire looks smaller from here and will be a long way beneath my feet when I'm pulling over the bulge. Half of my brain is already in the bar at the Eagle & Child, nursing a bruised ego over a pint and recalling that it had been a bit damp, and we'd done three great routes already, so it hadn't really been a failure...

Luckily the other half, or perhaps 51% on this occasion, knows the secret words: 'That wire is good. You'd go a long way if you fell, but into fresh air. If it was a bolt you'd make the move. If you go down now how long will it be before you come back? What will have changed?'

With unusual calm I utter the other half of the spell: 'OK, Paul, watch me here!' and move up. The good jug that I'd rationalised doesn't materialise but I'm committed now. Another couple of moves on discomfiting holds finally yield easier ground and I speed to the top. Clip in, sit down, and relax gazing out over Derwent Water under skidding clouds. One part of the Codex is broken.

Star Wars, Bosherton Head, Pembroke, E4 5c.

I'm a sucker for a good photo, and if it happens to be on the front of a book then I'm hooked. 'Limestone' by Chris Craggs features a great picture of Star Wars on its front cover, which is how it ended up on my passwords list. Reassured by the beta: 'There is more gear than the grade suggests, and although there are hardly any easy moves, there are no desperate ones either' I make plans for the May half-term. Andy Stewart is recruited to the team and I break my usual golden rule and declare my hand: 'I fancy a crack at Star Wars.' Having cast the spell I'm committed, and we duly find ourselves on a ledge a few feet above the sea, with me tied to the sharp end.

The route starts benignly, following a corner for about fifteen feet to a decent runner, before traversing rightwards towards a distant arête. No difficulties are encountered, but neither is any gear, and a creeping sense of commitment sneaks up on you, as you move further away from the protection. The first hard moves arrive just as the exposure kicks in, along with the realisation that you've now traversed further than the height you gained up the corner. A fall here would result in a major pendulum and a sickening crunch into the wall beneath your belayer.



Unknown climber on Star Wars.

Photo Jon Fullwood

Looking up at the sun-kissed upper arête I remind myself that I knew the score before I started the route. That's '2010 me' talking, with more secret words: 'Nothing has changed. You're quite comfortable with the climbing. How long have you wanted to do this route for?' Some layback trickery and fancy footwork leave me catching my breath on a decent hold and fiddling a tiny bit of brass in. The climbing continues, complex rather than desperate, and the focus required to find the right sequence and tease out the subtle gear-placements is totally absorbing. Before I know it I can feel the sun on my back, and a few more pulls bring the horizontal world of closely-cropped grass into reach. The Atlantic swells below and all is well with the world. Another piece of the puzzle is solved.

The Axe, The Pinnacle, Clogwyn Du'r Arddu, E4 6a.

The cover of the Cloggy guide is compelling, with its stunning photo of Jim Jewell's landmark solo ascent of The Axe. If the route falls anywhere near within your compass you just have to do it; it's simply a matter of when...

Sunday dawns surprisingly sunny after a boozy Beudy meet. My climbing partner of Saturday heads home and I circle amongst the remaining inhabitants of the hut, seeking a victim for my undeclared mission. 'Hi John, fancy heading up to see if Cloggy is dry?' Warby is keen and we're soon marching up the Llanberis path into that hallowed arena. As we near the crag I see that there is already a team about to do The Axe; again the mix of respite and frustration ferments in my mind. 'How about Shrike? I ask.

John readily agrees to climb this brilliant route, which take the steep wall immediately to the left of The Axe. I should be exalting in the joy of being on Cloggy, but half my mind is on the leader just a few tens of feet to my right. He emerges from the darkness around the towering arête and into the light. Level with us on the half way belay on Shrike, the climber moves up to enjoy the extraordinary hands-off rest à cheval a convenient lump on the arête. He shouts down enthusiastically to his mate, telling him what a fantastic climb it is.

We top-out and my mind is made up: 'How about The Axe next?' John is in an indulgent mood so we sort gear and set up the abseil, as the psyche starts to build. What have I let myself in for? We throw the ab ropes down just as The Axe leader reaches the top. 'Good effort! How was it?'

'Awesome!'

Just then the first drops of rain arrive, followed by more. Ten minutes later the crag is drenched. We coil the ropes and head down the path. A let-off or a missed opportunity? Who's to know?

Early summer 2010 and it has been really dry for a few weeks. Reports from a few teams suggest Cloggy is in great nick; all I need now is a free day and a partner before the inevitable monsoon season puts the crag out of condition for another year. I call Dave Booth who immediately agrees to the plan. I even own up to my objective; I don't think I'd have been able to hide the mounting buzz, and anyway, crossing the Rubicon of saying those secret words seems like an important step along the journey.

We arrive at the crag late; traffic and poor planning putting paid to my hoped-for ascent in the early morning sunshine (being east-facing The Pinnacle is one of the few parts of the cliff to catch any real sun). Not that there's much chance of that as the Black Cliff drifts in and out of the low cloud.

We decide to warm up on Jelly Roll, only to arrive at the foot of the route to find an in-situ party who are not moving quickly. The Gods have spoken so it's on to the main event. We ascend the Western Terraces; walk over to the top of The Pinnacle and ab into the ledge system at the bottom of The Axe, pulling the ropes down behind us.

The Axe is a route of two halves. The start is on the sombre north-facing wall of The Pinnacle. Steep moves lead to a small roof guarded by some shattered flakes where gear can be arranged before pulling over and onto the wall. Steep and fingery climbing then leads through the crux of the route (at least psychologically) with no further gear for another fifteen feet or so. If you haven't hired Usain Bolt as a belayer a fall from the crux would be likely to end up on the ground. Strangely at ease I move quickly through these moves. I know I am going to do the route and I know I am not going to fall, because you just can't. Clipping the first available runner the equation shifts from 'I really don't want to hurt myself' to 'I don't want to stuff this up now and have to do that again.'

The climbing for the next 50ft leads up and left towards the arête via a series of stiff but enjoyable moves – surprising holds have been engineered just where you need them and the gear is sound throughout. As I reach the arête I recoil in amazement as the sun breaks through and I cast a shadow down into the cwm below; perfect timing after all. I rush upwards, convinced it's 'in the bag' only to be stopped short by a brief sequence back on the north face which avoids a bulge on the arête proper. There are two possibilities here and I procrastinate, angry with myself for allowing a lack of concentration to potentially ruin my lead. Up then left; or left then up? I need to commit urgently as the pump is building; roll the dice and I make the move. Re-established on the arête I can now gain the à cheval rest that I'd admired the year before. Aching arms dangling and bathed in the warming sun, I really cannot think of a better position on any route in the

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world. There's plenty more climbing, but the difficulties are easing; just as well as energy levels are falling at about the same rate!

As I reach the top the final piece of the puzzle falls into place and I can finally consign those secret words to the trash can: 'Are you sure you want to permanently delete these passwords?' 'Yes!'

So what makes the difference? I'm still not sure I have any answers, and certainly not all of them. Having clear targets is important; but committing to them (both to oneself and perhaps others) is key. There's a huge difference between a 'wish list' and a 'hit list' and no way of knowing which one you've assembled until push comes to shove. Knowing when it would be safe to fall and knowing when you can't is an important skill, though one best left untested; and having a climbing partner in whom you have complete trust is essential, though I've always been blessed in that respect. Perhaps the most important secret words can be summed up as 'seize the day' and 'be lucky!'



Nico Favresse cruising The Axe, on the BMC International Meet. Photo Alex Messenger / www.alexmessenger.co.uk