

Transcending in Devon and Cornwall

Harry Sales

A truly Alpine meet. The Alpine Club at its traditional best. New transcents. Eight or nine on a rope. The mixture of enthusiasms and skills. The old barn to sleep in. Even the rope left on the rocks. It might all have been a hundred years ago in Switzerland. But it was this year in North Cornwall and South Devon and it was an official AC meet.

About twenty of us met in the upper floor of Keith Derbyshire's father's barn. The odd bales of straw which, late at night, we took to be provided for our comfort, were really meant to mark the holes in the floor, but we survived for the climbing. This, on the Saturday, was at Lower Sharpnose Point, five miles N of Bude, North Cornwall; real wrecker country. It is all exciting, being basically on the walls of three giant 'laminations', which run at right angles to the line of the shore out into the sea. All three are high, with smooth, vertical or overhanging walls, and very narrow indeed, the central lamination being the longest, the highest and the most impressive. The rock is probably a metamorphic shale of some kind akin to sandstone.

Some of us contented ourselves with routes that had been climbed before, although even here one had the feeling that no route was ever the same twice. I can remember Wilf Noyce explaining a slight fall in Wales by saying that the handhold came out like a book from a shelf: here the climbing is in places like the edge of parallel stacks of books without the shelving so that one is free to pick out or kick away as much as one does not want. In general it is better to press downwards on what is there.

But enough of the ordinary: it is the extraordinary that makes news. So for the central lamination already mentioned. It is a narrow (5 ft in thickness from top to bottom) castellated ridge in its upper part but with access to this barred by an overhanging bulge on the actual nose where the arête steepens and drops to the sea. John Cleare (whose notes on the climbs I have used extensively: they are available in full) had had his eye on this ridge for some time. Keith Derbyshire had tried the southern edge of the arête last year in heavy rain but found the rock too brittle for his pegs. This time Ian Howell pegged his way mostly up the northern edge (i.e. 5 ft to the left). The peg cracks were poor and he ran out of them just below the nose, about 45 ft above low-tide beach. Before de-pegging he gave John Cleare a chance to look: John got one more peg in to make himself safer and then decided 'in true Alpine Club and Sea Cliff Climbing Group tradition that here was a case for "lancer une corde"'. There then followed interminable hours in which all of us were encouraging spectators and even at some stages minor participants. Eventually the rope lodged on what John still thinks to be 'a little flat place' on the arête some 10 ft above: those of us who could see it in profile knew that it sloped and sloped



58 *Lower Sharpnose* Photo: Edward Pyatt

the wrong way. We offered the comfort of an anchoring rope on each side of the arête and with the help of this, a jummar, a slipping bachman knot and a great deal of trepidation John clawed his way upwards over the overhang and on to a stance with a poor belay.

Having got there most of the rest of the meet, with both sexes represented, managed to follow. Those of us climbing on the next lamination could follow their progress as they picked their precarious way along the arête. The whole effect of all these figures moving along our skyline was somewhat comic from our point of view, but from their's it must be remembered that they were some 100 ft up on a ridge about 450 ft long and 5 ft wide at the most, both walls



59 *Climbing on the central lamination* Photo: John Cleare

being smooth and plumb vertical. To complete the description, after the bulge the arête remained steep and thin (in both senses) for another few moves, then became almost horizontal in a switchback sort of way, and the climbing relented to a probable mild severe. John refers to the 'fantastically narrow' arête, the 'delightfully exposed' ridge crest and the 'always slightly suspect' rock. All perfect ingredients for excitement. The ridge dropped to a gap before meeting the main cliff and here the thickness reduced to a mere 6 in and the rock got even looser. Little wonder that some proceeded 'à cheval'. The route has been christened *Alpine Groyne*.

For the record, the other routes mostly take crack and chimney lines on the sides of the laminations. Some, to use John's words again, are 'narrow, mean and overhanging' and some 'approximate to the left wall of Cenotaph Corner' but others are more reasonable. One of the easiest routes is, surprisingly enough, on the arête of the next lamination to the s, on which the only hazard is the temptation to push outwards between the two narrowly separated sheets of rock: to do so would be to precipitate the complete destruction of the whole rock mass.

But one is getting back to uphill stuff, and the emphasis of the weekend was not on the up but on the along and the sideways. So on to Sunday and to Berry Head, Brixham. Some of us arriving there cast covetous eyes on some pleasant looking slabby cliffs basking in the sun and reputed to have clean climbs at all standards. But it was not to be: the master spirits drove us on and we, about twelve in number, all made our way down to the start of the Magical Mystery

Tour; 1100 ft of sideways climbing, below the Old Redoubt, with just the occasional slight upwards movement up steep rock (most of the cliff above is overhanging) or slight downwards movement, which brings one into the sea. We were all in the sea about three times: my own score was four. And never a touch of the sun.

Rustie Baillie and John Cleare made the first transcent in 1967, and all credit to them. The route has everything. One descends from the car park on steep convex grass slopes, then steep but good rock on to an exposed traverse into The Great Cave. If the tide is right (it wasn't, but a Tyrolean helped) this can be traversed until it is possible to relax below The Goddess of Gloom. Then scrambling, albeit overhanging at times but the holds are good, to the first crux, The Sump. This is a jutting-out overhang, just above water level, with one hard move in the narrow gap between the overhang and the clutching sea beneath. Communication is also a problem if help from a rope is needed, and it sometimes is.

Next comes the real crux, The Overhanging Buttress, a full pitch of strenuous HVS. This is one of the rare uphill bits. Runners are superfluous, because if one peels off one's only escape is into the sea some 30 ft below. The climbing goes over the prow by a descending hand traverse on well-spaced finger holds, completely overhanging. Peter Biven, having led this out of consideration for the size and variety of the party, fixed a pendule. Keith Derbyshire tried it first but it fouled the prow. John describes the results as hilarious but Keith's expletives still ring in my ears as, with most of his body underwater, various helpers tried to give him momentum either backwards or forwards or both at the same time. The sight of him inspired the rest of us to dive in, in full gear, and swim for it.

And so on by more scrambling to The Green Grotto (a deep cave of what is thought to be fresh water of pot-hole origin) and more bathing. Then more scrambling to small stances by the mouth of The Blue Grotto. This is untraversable at any time. A spike had been fixed at the other side but our lassoers were not on form so Keith swam to fix a tyrolean. Fixed means fixed, because it jammed and is still there. Some at least of us were relieved to get across to the other side, which is fairly steep and leads to the arête of the promontory.

We were met there by Frank Cannings and Pat Littlejohn, who had completed a new and vertical route from the M.M.T. just before The Sump. Back via steep limestone ledges and wild thyme into the ruins of the Old Redoubt, an anti-Napoleonic fortress. At least that's how John describes it: personally I was not bothering about botany or history. My needs were dry clothes, hot drinks, food and beer, in that order, and thankfully all was provided by ministering angels!

A hint of hardship may have crept into this account. To offset this I must record that we fed splendidly, both in the barn and at the King's Arms for dinner, at which the Derbyshires joined us. We are very grateful to them for putting us all up. The overall impression which is left is that an English Alpine meet may be vigorous, but we know how to relax!