

BACK TO THE BLACK:

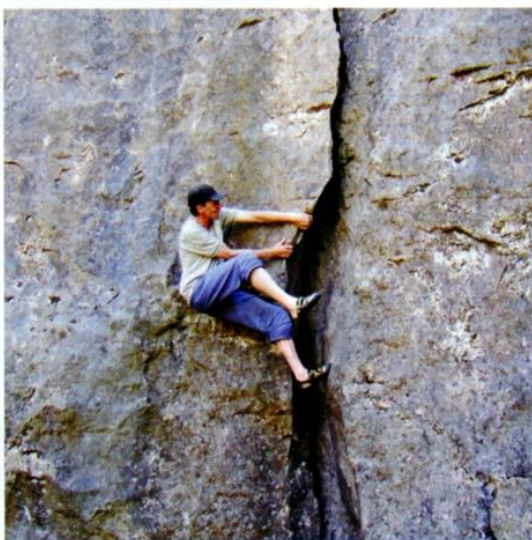
FLOWSTONE AND FLUTINGS ABOVE ABERGAVENNY

For our purposes let's invent the feature the 'Abergavenny Escarpment'. Admittedly the bulk of it is made up of the Llangattock cliffs (they're almost 5km long), but there are some 'new' climbing areas now that offer a fresh means to enjoy this spectacularly positioned edge without all-consuming terror. It is an area both with a rich industrial heritage and caving history, its climbs playing second fiddle to some of the most labyrinthine and arduous cave systems in Britain. Keeping strictly to the stalactites and stalagmites above-ground, however, our journey runs from south to north-west.

A communications mast marks the top of Gilwern Hill west of Abergavenny. Beneath it a quarried scarp contours the hill. Near the northern end of the scarp, a fine flowstone sheet gave Pontypool man Paul Bowen a new past-time when he besieged the wall, and with help from mates Paul Tucker and Bill Gregory, added 25 stylish routes to it and a small out-lier just to the north. That this crag was separated from the 'strictly no bolts' zone of Llangattock by the Clydach Gorge was indeed fortunate, enabling him the freedom to bolt the routes and gift a sport-climbing site with a magical outlook towards the Sugar Loaf mountain. 'I'm just happy to have been able to develop a new area for people to enjoy', says Paul.

The flowstone wall offers an engaging day's clipping, with most of the routes located in the F5+ to F6b range, and – being west-facing – it is quick-to-dry. Should you feel untested at this grade, sterner tufa comes in the form of *Tea Leaves*, a troublesome 6c right of the corner of *Destination Brynmawr* (6a) on the left, and *Fuelled by Pipes*, a fingery central line at 7a up the slim face 250m further north. But spare a thought for Paul, as – quite apart from the effort of initially developing the place – he had to do the job a second time when many of his bolt hangers were stolen by dastardly hands.

By far the best approach to this crag is from the 'lost village' of Pwll-du to the south: taking a stroll along the old tram road around Gilwern Hill gives you time to soak up the view. A quicker route is possible from a hair-raising Corsican-style road to the north, but then you risk returning to



The author going for the layback option on the first ascent of *En Garde*, [E1 5b]. JONATHAN CROCKER

discover your car has joined the other wrecks at the bottom of the hill! Paul has lodged details of his Gilwern work on the UKClimbing web-site.

The southern approach to Gilwern Quarry takes you above a set of superb 20m walls. These have been climbed on *ad hoc* by Paul and before him by the John James team, all in sensitively traditional style. Other climbs have been put up here more recently, some of which merit a detour and a quick chat with the owner. For, anybody wishing to climb on this cliff needs to call into the adjacent Pen-y-galchen farm; the owner says he has no objection to climbers using the crag provided they *first* ask his permission and can show in-date evidence of insurance (e.g. BMC membership card). The star attraction here is *Wall of Balls* a line up the centre of the compact grey wall on the right that has 'just enough' gear to keep it the friendly side of E5. The left-hand wall has many lines, which provide solid climbing with sparse protection.

The quarried limestone band re-emerges on the north side of the Clydach – a cavernous incision into the escarpment that funnels traffic on the Heads of the Valleys road Merthyr-bound. Contouring at around 400m, hesitatingly small and unstable quarries eventually assert themselves to create the magnificent escarpment of Llangattock to the north-west. The symbolic pinnacle of the Lonely Shepherd stoically watches over these southern approaches to Llangattock, striking a chord perhaps, with farmers and solo climbers alike. You can join its vigil, bouldering to the top of the Shepherd in splendid isolation – your back to the Black Mountains.

Very close by, and tucked out of view behind the jumble of Darren Disgwlf a is a quarried pit. Equipped with *in-situ* mats (rolls of long-discarded wire fencing), its noirish six to seven metre walls provide a few hours fun soloing. Far from instantly forgettable, the strong lines might be mini-classics elsewhere: take the off-width of *En Garde* [E1 5b], or the arête of *Defensive* [E1 5a], for example. The former relents to gung-ho laybacking, ignominious squeezing, or not at all. And, yes, they may well have all been climbed a long time ago. On a similar theme the road-side quarry near the hairpin to Llanely has come under mat-attack. Here six to eight metre arêtes provide the solo-entertainment, the best of the series being the first arête of *Green Mind*, *Atomic Heart* at E2 6b (V5) and the second arête of *Agoraphobia* [E5 5c, V2!].

Which brings us to Llangattock, SE Wales's most misunderstood crag. High on damp moors, raked by harsh winter winds, yet luxuriating in more unclimbed rock that anywhere else within an 80 miles radius, if it were human it would laugh off any scepticism, neglect or allegorical calls for it to be bolted and state: 'this is how I am and this is how I'll stay'. That will remain the case so long as guidebook author and local guarantor of '60s values, John Harwood stalks the earth, patrolling beloved Llangattock and his 'memories to treasure'.

Sentimentality aside, sure there's loads of tot; yet bomb-solid routes up blank walls, clean grooves, and some of Britain's finest flowstone outweigh those murderous 'tot routes' by a big margin – especially now. Market forces mean that a 'new routes' update' is absent, but the following should help any punter pass the time of day here.

A warm initiation can be had on the oft-overlooked Far Eastern crags since they lack the shale bands and gripping exits of the bigger cliffs. Here several bare eight metre walls have offered rich pickings, head-point style. *Bid the Return* was climbed without its (long-departed) bolt runner at E5 6a (Ian Parsons going for the second ascent in this form), while to the right an ownerless bolt stub in a square wall provided a cause for *Celeb Factor*, E4, 6b/c (but V6 might be more appropriate given its first ascent was matted, bouldering style). Above *School's Out Forever* – itself a fine E3 5c – a calcited headwall also got the solo treatment, this time a deep-moss landing providing the comfort for the ground-up *No More Teachers* E4 6b (or V5).



- Chwar Pany-y-Rhiw: Black Wall
1. *Look Up – To See What's Coming Down* [E1 5b]
 2. **Funky Flowstone Route* [E4 6b]
 3. ***Blue Cascade* [E5 6a]
 4. **The Black Adder* [E3 6a]
 5. *Skin-tight* [E4 5c]

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Martin Crocker enjoying *Flow Job* (F6b) on Gilwern Quarry's flowstone wall. JONATHAN CROCKER

Right of this cliff is a discrete circular bay, the modest back-wall of which yielded one of Llangattock's most technical climbs. *Ming on a Spring* (E5 6c) proved an up-and-down campaign, the runners contrived six metres horizontally apart working like a baby-bouncer each time the hard-to hang crimp sequence became too hard-to-hang.

Little of substance has been added to the Eastern Edge. However, Tony Penning renewed his Llangattock vows with *Darker Angel* (E3 5c), a variation to *Angel in my Pocket*. John and I teased him by taking an independent line straight above cavers' heads, bisecting Tone's route for a totally pumping fluting. Starting at the cave entrance just aim for the two small threads, pinch like merry-hell, and top out at the *Hard Rock Café: al fresco*, (E5 6a).

Most climbing visits to Llangattock seem accounted for by group use of its central crag, Pinnacle Bay, adding to the growing list of esoteric British crags where business use seemingly exceeds personal climbing use. Eighties regulars Chris Court, Lee Davies and friends had swept up most of the possibilities here, though they did leave space for *Courting Danger* (E4 5c) right of Chris's own *Julia Andrea*, itself a big lead at about the standard of *Right Wall*!

Unsurprisingly the 'biggest' finds of recent years derive from Llangattock's high-adventure crag of doom, Chwar Pant-y-Rhiw just to the north. Getting worked up about 'lines to die for' is soon tempered by death being a real possibility – considering the overlying land-slip, the bristling and detached overhangs, and that exfoliating band of shale that insists on making progress spicier 12 metres up. In trying to promote the routes I must draw attention to the sublime flowstone sheets either end that escape these foibles so dear to the Llangattock stereotype. Penetrating the impressive right arete of the southern sheet is a set of grooves, just left of *Hangman*. Well-protected, and with pegs to entice the on-sight from Bristol, *Goddamn Sexual Tyrannosaurus* (E6 6b) is one of the crag's key hard routes, implicitly escaping three stars because 'well, it is Llangattock!'

Similarly hitting the target is *All Dumbed Down* (E6 6b), left of *IQ Test*, which has the resemblance, if not the patronage, of a Huntsman's West Wall route. A powerful lower bulge on side-pulls leads to a stressless hop over the shale band, before a sensational tapering groove – biting through those bristling overhangs – can be entered, heavy breathing and all. Mind you'd best avoid the land-slip by fixing a belay rope first.

Right again Tony returned to one of his favourite '80s retreats, adding



Box Jelly Fish and *Box Jelly Fish 2*. Ian Parsons turning to jelly (fish) on *Box Jelly Fish* (E3 5b), Llangattock Road-side MARTIN CROCKER

Colorado Dreaming to the compelling shallow groove let of *Hundred Years War* at E4 6b. To John and me the blunt arête right of *Average Hand* fell at E6 6b/c as *Natural Born Coward*. Any danger is imagined rather than real after top-roping; just stick tight to the arête above the twin pegs for a super-committing crux above howling long-drop potential.

And so to the northern flowstone sheet (The Black Wall), home to the calcite cordon bleu of *Funky Flowstone Route* and *The Black Adder*. Dead centre between the two, your eyes meet with an alluring cascade of frozen blue tufa ripples all scrimmed solid on the bedrock. *Blue Cascade* (hard-E5) involves endless 6a moves and a big effort, the ornate placing of small wires between tufa bubbles cranking up both quality and tendon-bending pump.

The story doesn't quite end there as the guidebook might suggest it should. Beyond run 300 metres of buttresses and walls of eye-popping flowstone before a ridge that unmistakably delineates the eastern boundary of the Craig-y-Cilau National Nature Reserve is reached. Odd pegs and tat suggest forays here and there by ghost climbers, but there seem to be no records. We concluded that successive generations of guidebook had mistakenly assumed these walls to lie within the Reserve where climbing is banned except by permit. The Countryside Council for Wales' web-site show the exact extent of the Reserve and maps on site



Chwar Pany-y-Rhiw, West

1. *Le Dejuener sur l'Herbe* (E2 5c)
2. **Mercaptans* (E5 6a)
3. **Naturism* (E4 5c)

4. *Wait 'til the Dinosaurs Die* (E1 5a/b)

5. **Plied Piper* (E1 5a/b)
6. **Threads ad nauseam* (VS 4c)



Chwar Pany-y-Rhiw: Passage of Time Area

1. *Stal of Wonder* (E4 5c)
2. **Bridelvale Wall* (E2 5b)
3. **Stal of Light* (E3 5c)
4. **Wild Touch* (E4 5c)

5. ***Cry Havoc* (E2 5c)

6. ***Passage of Time* (E1 5b)
7. ***Goddamn Sexual Tyrannoaurus* (E6 6b, 5b)
8. **Hangman* (E4 6a)
9. *More Fool You* (E5 6a)

mean that you simply cannot go wrong as to where you can and cannot climb now. So, take a walk under these walls and just pick a line, a new one if you like. The climbs here offer some of the grandest flowstone features on native limestone: take, for example the towering white organ pipes of *Bach* (E2 5b), or the curtains of *Plied Piper* (E15a/b) and *Stalwalker* (E2 5b). And while not teetering up flowstone, there are many compact walls, grooves and arêtes, and highballs up to V9 on which to explore the peace and quiet, all comfortably backed by the Black Mountains.

Please note that there are conditions of access laid down by the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority who manage climbing on this land and regulate group use. These are set out on signage at the car-park and no-

one should find them too onerous to meet. If you need to place stakes for belays, please remove them afterwards as local farmers hold grazing rights to this land. Similarly the sheep don't take too kindly to fixed equipment in these parts.

Left: The Lonely Shepherd

Right: John Harwood, following, on the first ascent of **Wall of Balls** (E4/5 6a), Gilwern East, many years before the bolts arrived.

