

NORTHUMBERLAND SANDSTONE

Too hard for southern softies?

by Martin Crocker



My first trip to Northumberland sandstone brought me thundering down to earth from five metres up *The Poseidon Adventure* at Bowden Doors. “God, these northerners are hard” I cussed as I lifted my feet up for another go. My second trip left me vengeful and counting the clock until the next. Five trips to Northumberland later and I keep my feet firmly on the ground. Broken, bruised and humbled I take a good look around. Today I can see from Lindisfarne to The Cheviot to Simonside; it’s magnificent country.

Northumberland’s climbing was, and maybe still is, Britain’s ‘best kept secret’. But it must surely harbour *many* secrets. Checking out past climbing articles and guidebooks it isn’t difficult to sense the relish of local climbers as they paraded their stout ethics with hardened local pride. Beneath a thin veil of mischief, a lurking desire for recognition saw morals pitted against those of southern adversaries. But who, if led by their heart, needs goading when the essence of Northumberland — the place and its climbing culture — is strong enough incentive itself to strike north?

So where are the climbers to bolster this viewpoint? Year after year my experience is of not a soul to be seen on Northumberland’s wildest crags let alone any fellow southerners. Story-makers might suggest swingeing changes in British rock-climbing attitudes are under way. Looking back I can’t see that. More likely is that climbing here is settling at a natural level of demand once waves of exploration by enthusiastic individuals go sweeping on through. And it’s all because there is no known cure for the new routeing bug.

Not so long ago ‘Nipper’ Harrison asked what my favourite crag in Britain was. “Callerhues” I heard myself say. Oddly he wasn’t surprised and we went on to talk about the reasons for my choice. “Space,” I told him “Callerhues has space all around it.” Above, behind, to left, to right; space filled with nothing but air. And anchoring that space is a thin strip of sandstone, scarcely 10m high; a perfect stage for a private performance just beyond the sights of The Pennine Way. Appearing half-forgotten, it is a place where physics interacts with culture.

Take, for example, a route called *Crouching the Mahogany*. Now there’s a name and description to knock you out, courtesy of Bob Smith: “A short bastard but it’s at ya right away.” Do it, or routes like it, and you’ll begin to sense something of the people who put them up. Action not words. And Callerhues is full of action. Or not as the case may be. Cower for a moment beneath Bob’s *Second Born* and then find the

words to excuse yourself from testing southern mettle — that pathological desorter — no companion of yours today.

To ‘invaders’ with pretensions, Bob’s routes have made Northumberland’s crags the great demoraliser. Try as we may to find a contrived southern trick to circumnavigate a hard move, rarely is there any easy fix, more often than not only sheer ability and a clear focus will see the top reached. Take *Thunder Thighs* on another great wilderness crag of Northumberland, Great Wanney. Its crux is a slap from a finger-edge at nine metres with no gear and a rocky landing. Me? I’ve seen many less dangerous E7s. That day I dangled next to it on an ab rope and ate humble pie.

Bob Smith’s was not a solitary voice in this sandstone wilderness, the area’s steely ethic had already been moulded by Bob Hutchinson and his partner John Earl in the

’70s. Next to *Thunder Thighs* lies *Idiot Wind*, a fabulous arête climbed by Bob Hutchinson in 1974. When I soloed this a few years back I couldn’t believe that it wasn’t as worn-a-looking classic as *Archangel* on Stanage. Instead, it was covered in lichen, forlorn and lacking the tell-tale bleach marks of feet on grit. That people could allow themselves to miss such a great route seemed odd, I thought, at least at the time. For me it was an opportunity to flash back to the condition in which it must surely have been when Bob entertained climbing it almost 30 years ago. History in the rock, just step on the route, switch on the time machine and feel the anticipation of those who climbed it first.

There are many truly inspirational crags in Northumberland whose character is, if anything, interwoven with their inhibition. Yet most have amazing lines that leave you



searching your soul, double-taking the description and grade in disbelief as you stare limply at eight or nine metres of protectionless sand. At South Yardhope, for example, is a boulder with two arêtes: *The Camel's Back* and *The Reaper*, climbed by John Earl and Bob Hutchinson. Fortunately, at the time of visiting, my excuses had to be no more delusional than 'they're filthy' and 'it's raining' but it was clear that long ago these guys were 'out there' on great routes possibly far harder than suggested by their

him. But to climb in Northumberland is to make that photo ever more compelling. Whether fiddling that awkward gear into *Childhood's End* at Ravensheugh, fighting opening hands while laybacking *Australia Crack* at Kyloe, or resisting the pump on the traverse of *The Wave* at Bowden Doors, Bob's presence becomes almost palpable. And, at the point of committing yourself, if you need reassurance, he'll be there to tap you on the shoulder and say that's the way he did it too.

In the '70s, Hutchinson and Earl ushered in the Extreme era to Northumberland and Bob Smith and his brother, Tommy, together with obviously talented individuals like Steve Blake, advanced that style in a later, harder wave of exploration. These names are to be encountered at most Northumberland crags and when you turn up at a crag you come equipped with a second sense about who would have climbed which line, without having to know. Across the crags history repeats itself and you get a feel for how the sheer energy and enthusiasm of a minority can drive climbing in a vast area and skew perceptions of how popular climbing really is or can ever be in these far-flung places.

Take my second favourite crag in the county: Ravensheugh.

Strong lines, a spectacular landscape and a raw away-from-it-all atmosphere, all the essential elements of a compelling climbing place are there. Yet you have to be very fortunate to turn up to find *Octopus* re-brushed one year, or maybe *Bonneville* the next. However, to arrive any time to solo *The Trouser Legs* (E1) as a warm-up, expecting it to be clean and a breeze is stretching faith in your perceptions. But, you know, it is not beyond the compassion of our Northern colleagues and their crags to be welcoming too. So isn't it nice to find routes on which

you don't have to fight for every inch and to control every ounce of sanity.

Reassuringly each crag, including Ravensheugh, has its quota. Forget allegations of inconsistency about the use of grades, warmly graded routes are there to give mortal southern softies hope — or so I'd like to think. Amongst them is *Ravensheugh Crack*, a classic HVS jamming crack with gear, as well as Ravensheugh's best route, *The Judas Hole*, a Bob Smith E5 6a (... next to a run-out Bob Hutchinson E4... opposite a dangerous Tommy Smith E5... around the corner from a barren Steve Blake E4). It has typically intense climbing — and a runner. But even there the runner deceives and your appreciation of the name comes too late as your big toe kicks out the cams of a 'wobbly' Friend 2.5 that shares the conspiring hole. But at least there is a runner and with it the hope that grounding-out is not a certainty. If jumping from 25ft is alien to you, it may be all the hope you need to get you to the top.

It's easy to be wrong-footed by Northumberland climbing. Recently a poster of a guy on an awe-inspiring arête caught my eye while I was musing in a Bristol climbing shop. I felt a subconscious recognition of the place... of the line, but resisted the lazy assumption that here was another Peak grit arête headpoint. Its identity didn't quite surface though, so I took a look at the caption. It was a picture of Andy Earl, John Earl's son, climbing *Master Blaster Direct* on Rothley Crag in Northumberland.

Obscure-sounding crag is Rothley Crag, but when you get there and gaze up at that impending arête, you might agree that not all that is great is well-known. This is no more true than of the original *Master Blaster* (E5), a masterful piece of climbing by Don Barr in the '80s, that side-stepped the initial bald arête via an encouraging Friend 2 placement on the right. Balancing up a 6a move on the arête, the cam tries to keep you the safe side of the reckless zone and possibly off the underlying boulder before hands wrap around those wonderful dynamic flutes. It might be your last day on your way home south, but there's a very good chance that this crag and *Master Blaster* have got you all fired up again. Too late to do anything about this trip perhaps, you are left to wonder at the remaining wealth of climbing to be rediscovered out there in these rolling moorlands of Bobs and Johns and Andys. Perhaps too you will find out a lot about people you've never met. Or will ever have chance to meet.

SUMMARY

A resume of the reflections and experiences of a regular visiting southerner on some of Northumberland's wild sandstone crags.



catch-all E3 tag. Moreover, in doing so they were key players in creating a rich and robust local culture, so irresistibly distinctive that it might have grown up on a different continent or on an island.

Talking of Bob Hutchinson, any thought of Northumberland has me opening a *Mountain* magazine and being drawn to a small black and white photograph of him published after he died while prospecting for new climbs in the Lake District in 1978. With a brief obituary little was given away to those, like me, who didn't know