

# High

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# THE HIDDEN EDGE OF

words by Martin Crocker  
photos by Carl Ryan

# EXMOOR

'We asked 100 climbers to recite four things about Exmoor, our survey said: deer/fox hunting; Exmoor ponies; Lorna Doone and... awkward silence... and... too late... uu-uugh' goes the buzzer as the clock runs out. Inevitably, a few wider-travelled climbers tuned in to *Family Fortunes* will have got a fourth answer. What about some of Exmoor's more celebrated features? For example, how about the bizarre pinnacles of The Valley of the Rocks or the dramatic coastal incision of Heddon's Mouth or Exmoor's highest point, Dunkery Beacon (519m high, presumably excluding what must be one of the world's biggest cairns?).

Older climbers will recall the devastating floods of 1952 in which 34 people in Lynmouth lost their lives, while the more cultured may know that these parts were a favoured retreat of Coleridge and Wordsworth and that the coast was a haven for 17th century and 18th century smugglers. And — best of all — maybe one or two will even have heard tales of the dastardly and enigmatic Beast of Exmoor that likes to maul sheep in its spare time?

Idiosyncrasies aside, the chances are that for many visitors, the enduring impression of Exmoor will be one of rustic colour and light, of sparkling streams and the warm autumnal richness of its rolling heather moors, all invigorated by Exmoor's moody history and mysterious folklore. You might think that there would be little scope amongst its gentleness for the climber. And you would be right. Instead you have to think laterally, and take an outrageous trip down to where this mountain of sandstone meets the sea — to 'The Hidden Edge Of Exmoor'.

"What took you so long?" a bemused Kes Webb had enquired of me during my first trip to Hurlstone Point, a mere three years ago. I struggled for an answer and, even now, I can only reason that I had not read sufficiently between the glib lines of the guidebook, or that I had got too preoccupied to picture what might happen when 1,000ft of Old Red Sandstone does battle with the sea. My ignorance was not so much a measure of how well the few local climbers could keep a secret, but more one of how marginalized the mainstream had become from their maverick, hard core activities that represents the essence of the mountaineering spirit.

The proof is that Exmoor is one of the few areas regionally to have escaped the South West classics megalomania of the '70s. I was on the scent and eager to find out more. But only by probing into the very guts of the place, alone, would the locals consider me worthy enough to be taken into their confidence. Talk about getting blood out of a stone.

**Left:** Martin Crocker breaking out from the strenuous series of lower overhangs whilst making the first ascent of 'Locked and Loaded' E6, Valley of the Rocks.

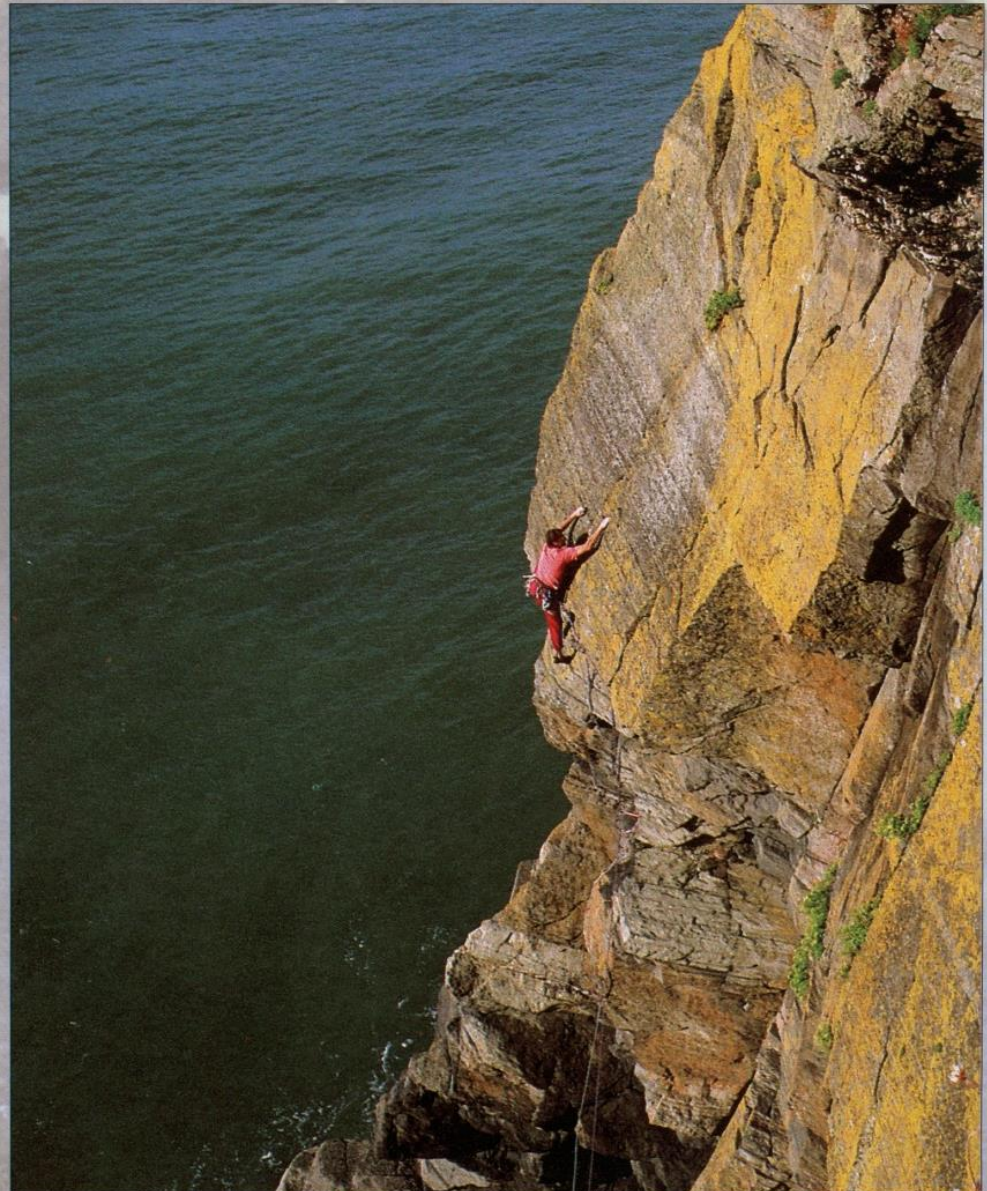
Ostensibly, climbing on Exmoor started in the '50s when two companions, Clement Archer and Cecil Agar, became fixated with the idea of a sea-level traverse between Foreland Point and Combe Martin. Anybody who has rambled the wonderful Somerset and North Devon Coast Path will realize what a formidable prospect that must have been — and still is.

Huge stomach-churningly steep slopes with dense scrub and gorse plummet an unfathomable distance to God-only-knows

what sort of crumbling crud overhanging the sea. And with the ferocious tide and swell of the Bristol Channel, the sea seems so rarely satisfied or restful, baring only slim crescents of boulders or pebbles for a few precarious hours, minutes, or sometimes never at all. The pioneers from that Golden Era called their breakneck lateral pursuit 'Coasteering', a sort of bucket-and-spade rival to mountaineering and every bit as exacting.

Eventually, by 1963, Archer and Agar had opened up a route which relied on a number

**Below:** Martin Crocker adding a new Direct Start to his own route, 'Seagull Salad' E1, Valley of the Rocks.





**Above:** Martin Crocker on the first ascent of 'Blindman's Buff' E4, Little Hangman.

of short swim sections. They transcribed their adventures into a personal journal from which they were careful to ensure the public were protected. By chance, the same year they met up with Cyril 'The Squirrel' Manning who, largely for ornithological reasons, had been exploring the coast and establishing some hard swim-free variants to Archer and Agar's marathon. While achieving their goal, Archer and Manning tutored and inspired two protégés who were to become key second generation players right up to this date: Kes Webb and Terry Cheek. Today, their combined knowledge is unassailable — and they are proud of it.

Webb now whets the appetites of local groups with his awesome slide-show 'The Hidden Edge Of Exmoor' and runs a boat to give tourists a hands-off flavour of the real thing. Of the pair, however, it is Terry Cheek, a Community Bobby, who bridges the time warp between the wild and wacky days of Cyril Manning — whom he idolizes still — and modernistic climbing. In the delightful narrative of Cheek's guidebook, neither style is in disharmony, as he unlocks the imagination of the reader to a wonderland of geomorphology, local history and of daredevilving the tide. You'll journey with him along the Exmoor Traverse, upon which — still to this day — he seems to spend every free moment, refining his route, testing his tidal science, surveying, guiding, all 20 years after leading the first continuous unsupported traverse in 1978. It took them four and a half days.

Today The Exmoor Traverse represents the blood of Exmoor climbing and it is the thread that links and feeds access to the very many promontories, buttresses and slabs that occasion its route. The story of the traverse is Terry's alone to tell, should you ever ask him, but here, let me at least offer my impression of a small sample of The Exmoor Collection.

### Hurlstone Point

This, the 'St Govan's of Exmoor', is its most popular crag, and often, rather than always,

deserted. If on your first visit you arrive at high tide, take a walk down the ridge beneath the obsolete coastguard station until, after a short scramble, you end up perched on the camber of a broad, convex black slab (which offers a clutch of superb easier routes). If it's a spring tide, the ocean should be rushing through the subway beneath your feet. You'll now realize that you are standing on the apex of a magnificent anticlinal fold, whose core has been blasted out by the power of the sea.

To the east there is a series of brooding, north-facing climbs, opened up in the '60s by Keith Vickery and friends of the Taunton-based Red Slab Climbing Club and topped-up in the '90s by local devotees Simon Mooney and Norman (the farmer) Barnes. There are slabs galore, from the perfect, modest climbs of Fledgling Slab, to the bigger fare of Coastguard Wall, including routes which long to be classics, like Mooney's *Coastguard Slab* (Hard Severe). But make no mistake, at any grade your nerve will be tested.

At lower tides you can walk through the fold (Gull Hole) and engage one of a joint of hard face routes. Their names: *Hashish*, *Bhang* and *Feel The Full Effect* speak of the trip in store. To the west of the fold you pass beneath unappetizing (or compelling, depending on your perception) overhanging walls, grid-locked by a party of E3/4s. Then the crags get swallowed up by the immense pebblyness of Porlock Beach, but not before regurgitating a classic (tongue-in-) Cheek boulder problem, *Acid Rain*. While trying this, especially without the crack into which Terry inserted a tiny pebble to make life more challenging, you develop a respect for a modest man who tries to pretend that he can't climb hard.

Before sloping off for cream teas, take an atmospheric walk into the bleak bowl of Coney Combe to the east of the Point, but not in the gale force winds; the path is narrow and the drop beneath consumes the unwary. These barren slabs have emerged from the Mooney saga of 1995 replete with

many E1-E4s, *Voyage* (E1) and *Cosmic Mariner* (E3) are especially good — if you can keep your head together. East again is the fine 20m face of Minehead Bluff, possibly the best hardman's crag in the area, with lots of very new additions and top calibre bouldering in a sunnier and non-tidal setting.

### Sir Robert's Chair

On the way to Foreland Point, below a farm called Desolate, is Desolation Point. And below that, through hobgoblin oak, next to a 30m waterfall, is the stack of Sir Robert's Chair, the marker for one of the coast's most precious secrets. Few could suspect from above that this is the home of a tremendous 60x60m slab of excellent sandstone. Predictably, Cheek exorcised the crag in 1995 with *The Phantom* (E1 5b) but then along came Mooney and Barnes two years later to well and truly wake up the ghosts.

They added three superb two-pitch routes, the outstanding left-to-right overlap, *Strange Days*, going at E2 5b, 5a and the tough vertical crack of *Lamina Flow* at E3 5c, 5b. But they left two 45m cracklines on the right unclimbed, so Cheek eventually enlisted my help in order to deliver *Ghost Job* E4 6a, 5c and *Desolate* E5 6a. There are other routes in many grades and the crag should be cool news for enterprising slab climbers seeking a moodier and gull-free alternative to the crowded and far-too-sunny-for-your-skin, Baggy Point. They say the place is haunted; I can well believe it.

A little to the west is the Amphitheatre, an arena of contorted red sandstone strata punctuated by arêtes and corners and backed by a massive steamroller of a fold. It is an up-and-coming hot spot with a mix of intriguing lines in a very exclusive setting. A new guidebook will prove helpful.

### Foreland Point

One wild winter's day I backstepped Archer and Agar's route, from Lynmouth to Foreland Point. After some anguish (and a customary wetting) I emerged at the lighthouse on the Point in the dark. Behind lay a surreal landscape of foreshore pinnacles, glass-smooth slabs and massive sandstone walls, all rising from a remote pebble beach which is inaccessible beyond mid-tide and without some adventurous scrambling.

The biggest climbing crag is the Wall of the Sleeping Dead, a 60m leaning thing, diagonally slashed with variegated species of orange, red and green sandstones that becomes kaleidoscopic in the sun. I named it that because while I was on an abseil rope, my companion, Jim Woolmington, fell into a deep sleep prostrate on a slab of rock just above the sea. A passing fishing boat must have mistaken him for dead since an RNLI chopper was called out and made all of four fly-pasts before Jim awoke and convinced his rescuers by means of body language that he was not, in fact, dead. The crag now harbours three eye-bulging beasts of E5 or E6 standard set to test the mettle and stamina of those endeavouring to solve their complex geometry.

**Right:** Martin Crocker making the first ascent of 'Archer' E6, at Heddon's Mouth with Terry Cheek.

# THE HIDDEN EDGE OF EXMOOR

Just to the west, a hole through a wafer, gives access to the pebble beach and to the three foreshore pinnacles. Of the last two pinnacles, the Inshore Stack comprises a sheet of perfect sandstone, compact and bereft of protection, notwithstanding its series of five incipient cracks. These are the 'First to Fifth Parallels', all elegant slab routes whose adrenaline demands are out of proportion to their technical difficulty. Beyond the second fin is (another) landslip of car-sized blocks, piled up behind a third pinnacle which has a sunny and steep south-western face where the arms can be worked out for a change on a choice of five routes.

On one of our first visits we got trapped by the tide but managed to claw our way out up a mixed 250m slope of 50° grass and rubble. We dubbed it *The Kamikaze Sheep Escape Route* after the sketchy slip and slide marks of many a poor sheep who had made the one-way descent to the beach.

I rate Foreland, but there again I would. Overall, it is perhaps Exmoor's most serious venue, but it is also one of its brightest and most colourful. It's nice sometimes to go there alone to sample some extreme wilderness bouldering.

## Valley of the Rocks

In the midst of the Devonian sandstones, outcropping between Sillery Sands and Trentishoe, is a massive filling of very thinly interbedded slates and sandstones. It is the sort of stuff craved by certain completely loopy BMC officials. I recall the welling excitement of Ian Parnell, then BMC South West Development Officer when, during 1994, I would quiz him about what he described as one of the most awesome lines he had ever encountered.

Now if you were to walk where Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge once walked — along the 1830s Lynmouth to Valley of Rocks path — and allow your imagination to be drawn down, and dizzily down, seaward into the dark and forbidding gullies and guts, then you too will begin to understand how this coast can fever the minds of rational people like Ian. With partners, Jim Cheshire and Derek Ryden, his obsession became *Glad To Be Trad* (E5, with one pitch for aid), a diagonal adventure across the towering back wall of The West Inlet, which he nicknamed Mother Meldrum's Gut (read *Lorna Doone*).

The same team were also active on The Yellowstone, a superb 40m buttress with strong lines, the best of which are *Seagull Salad* (E1 5a/b), the elegant yellow hanging slab, *Book of Birds* (E3 6a), the magnificent undercut corner and *Locked and Loaded* (E6 6a, 6c), an inspirational line through impossible-looking terrain above Dog Hole, care of me and John Harwood. A little to the east, the concealed walls and buttresses were explored and an array of atmospheric climbs in the mid-E grades delivered. On one or two of these routes experience on snow is useful since steps must be kicked up 50° slopes of lush soft grass in order to escape.

From the Valley, it is an impressive walk down into Wingcliffe Bay. Enter our second man from the BMC, Dave Turnbull, who took that stroll with John Tidmarsh and smuggled in *The Chimney Sweep* (E5), an off width on a splendid pink face beneath the private grounds of the spiritual retreat of Lee Abbey. Thereabouts, a colossal wealth of exploration bides its time.

## Wringapeak to Great Hangman

This five-mile stretch of spectacular coastline really belongs to The Exmoor Traverse and to the pens of its originators. The first kilometre is as demanding a piece of coasteering as any, since its character and one's chances of success are so closely intertwined with the synergy of sea and weather. It is complex, thrilling and spookily overshadowed by mountainous slopes of choss and often impenetrable gorse or scrub.

A display of amazing features are passed or climbed through en route, like the A-cave, whose elegant struts form a giant letter A, or the Double Bluff, a forked tongue of a promontory that deceives the unwary into

*Even hotter off the press are the explorations of North Cleave Gut, Exmoor's most particular crag requiring the correct complement of tide and climatic conditions.*

all manner of route finding difficulties, and the Well at World's End, an enormous cavern with a mysterious turquoise pool in its base. And then there are the fantastic hanging waterfalls of Hollow Brook, Neck Woods and Sherrycombe, which thread and cascade or thunder down the hillside on to the beach. It would be nice to linger for hours but a rising tide says not.

Of the scarce vertical routes to either side of Heddon's Mouth, most are climb-down routes or 'escape' routes to and from the traverse, but many were conceived by Archer, Agar, Manning and Webb also as mountaineering challenges in their own right. Any degree of accident thereabouts doesn't bear thinking about, it's wise to keep your eyes on your feet, especially on wet or green boulders, since even a sprained ankle can have an epic outcome. This became all too apparent to Archer who had the misfortune of sustaining a 20ft fall while prospecting there in 1964. Unfortunately, this took place below a 1,000ft slope which necessitated 1,100 ft of fireman's hose and a rally of helpers. The press loved it.

A recent expedition thereabouts resulted in a fantastic route, *Archer* (E6 6b) through the apex of the A-Cave. The photographer, Carl Ryan, was with us that day, feverish for yet more artistic 'coconuts'. I think he discovered what I meant by 'Everest in reverse', after repeatedly collapsing exhausted under the weight of his camera gear on the customary 250m slog out from the crag. Time and time again he would disappear into the chest-high heather for what seemed an age,

only his cursing indicating that he was still more-or-less alive.

Even hotter off the press are the explorations of North Cleave Gut, Exmoor's most particular crag requiring the correct complement of tide and climatic conditions. Scatologically dismissed by the 1987 guidebook, its 70m west wall contains climbs to compare in atmosphere with most in the South West. The three-pitch *The D Tract* (E2 5b, 5a, 4c) strains itself from the very guts of the zawn and is perhaps the most amenable of the offerings, which were generally climbed on sight. The rock is superbly compact up to half-height; above, death awaits.

## Little Hangman

This is the easternmost of Exmoor's climbing crags, excluding the fleshpot of Baggy Point. They were investigated in 1985 by Dave Thomas (of *Caveman* solo fame) who left a slab-full of pleasant climbs on a fine, solid crag which he called The Griststone Wall. I arrived to take a look, at the insistence of my colleagues who were desperate to throw me off the scent of their discovery at Sir Robert's Chair.

My partners from Combe Martin were Jim Woolmington and his uncle — whom I had not met before. When Jim told me his uncle was a slaughterman I was not surprised. I had met many slaughtermen while training for my job and the steely glint in his eyes, like the flash of the slaughterman's knife, was instantly recognizable. Our first encounter was a memorable day and, amazingly, we all survived. I even managed to survive subsequent visits after getting woefully committed on a number of solo ventures. It is a fine place to breed anxiety. The thing that you feel of Little Hangman is its darkness; yet it is not dank, nor is it wet or even loose, just black and intimidating. And the names don't help either... *The Execution, The Noose*. Most are slab climbs on really very good quality Hangman Grit, but all are underprotected. The recurring grades of E4 5c and E5 5c prescribing the deal on offer. The most striking feature there is the 75m arête of *Little Hangman Arête*, an adventure in its own right despite the modest E1 5b, 4c grade.

Topping out on this one you will be greeted by the ironic smile of an *in situ* garden gnome. The story is that this guy is mysteriously making his way around the South West peninsula. Where will he turn up next? Finally, one notable exception to the serious climbs is *Jim's Climb* (E4 5c), an excellent and very safe twin crackline, marketed as the 'Arms Race of Exmoor'. It was the craving of Jim Woolmington who made a valiant attempt. Unfortunately, some time later Jim sustained a very serious accident in the company of Cheek and the slaughterman, smashing up both his ankles when an abseil point failed on a less trustworthy part of the cliff. I hope that this article helps inspire him to a full recovery. We need a new generation of Archers, Mannings, Webbs and Cheeks, all unassuming individuals with a love of their land, to keep this thing alive; the very private passion to explore.