

“No...no I didn't actually MEAN it, not SERIOUSLY”

May 2011, Bank Holiday Monday. All of England rained off, so in a grump I decided to walk halfway (it was heavy rain!) along Curbar and look at wet routes, with the BMC's "Froggatt to Black Rocks" guide in hand. And a lot of the amenable-looking lines turned out to be VS, which is, for want of a better phrase "my grade" – and also a grade that people seem to think almost doesn't exist at Curbar, a crag with a reputation for being rather more Extreme than that.

Home to study the book in the dry, and count them up. There are 46. And just for a laugh I rang up Steve and asked "how insane would it be to try to lead all these in a single weekend?" It was meant as rhetorical banter, as it really *would* be an insane idea for two people, neither of whom would be up for soloing many of these, meaning "proper leading" at a grade that was non-trivial for either of us (as opposed to those multi-route solo marathons that people do at 5 or 6 grades below their top end).

Steve missed the point, or the joke, however.....and said "Yeah, sounds like a great idea". D'oh! So it is on.

Team Tactics

Confident that the actual climbing would be the least of our issues^{*}, we decided that logistics would be the important thing to tackle. Strategies for saving time and conserving energy:

- Set aside two consecutive summer weekends in case the first gets rained off
- Pared-down rack, travelling light with just a small pack with water and a cagoule if necessary, and a larger bag stashed with more drink and lunch etc, mid-crag.
- Quick belays – set the anchors and belay direct with a Munter hitch
- Stay tied in, just take coils at the top and move briskly together down the descent paths and to the next route
- “Block leading”, maybe each climber leads 3 in a row or so, to save too much swapping over of gear (neither of us are keen on bandoliers)
- To quote the title of a Fripp/Eno album, “No Pussyfooting”. Maraud through the crag, unashamed to politely-but-firmly queue-jump (again, confident that we’d skate up routes relatively quickly)
- Related to the above, keep an eye on the time. We have on average 37 minutes per route, based upon 4 hours of climbing on Friday, and 12 hours on Saturday and Sunday.
- Take full advantage of Steve’s mum’s hospitality, no faffing around camping
- Crag reconnaissance to sort out a sensible order of routes, getting some tricky potential show-stoppers out of the way early so the thought of them wouldn’t be hanging over us

* Pride comes before a fall – literally

A county east of London...aka "Ethics"

Whilst onsighting everything both on lead and on second would be ideal (and I had never touched a Curbar VS, which took some restraint on my last visit there!), we were aware that this might be tricky. My feeling was that, given time constraints, a fall or a rest has blown the onsight and you just dog it from there on in; Steve preferred to lower off, pull rope through and re-lead IF we were ahead of schedule, so we agreed on that compromise i.e. I do it my way, he does it his way.

We also went for a loosening-up of rules regarding side runners and holds that might be on other routes – if you can reach it without blatantly leaving the prescribed line, it's in (the phrase "oh it would be contrived NOT to..." was uttered a fair few times).

A weekend starts at 5pm on a Friday, no cheating and taking the afternoon off...

The Main Event.

Mostly positive weather forecast, light showers possible but we decide to chance it on the weekend Aug 5-7.

On schedule, Friday 5.30pm, **route 1 – Baron's Wall!** In at the deep end or what. HVS 5b in the majority of books but the BMC give it VS 5b so it's got to be done. Steve scoots up it pretty neatly, I struggle gamely a few times on the crux start move, eventually actually weighting the rope in a fall. Bang goes "onsight all leads and seconds", within 8 inches of the ground on the first route. This actually takes the pressure off. Finally I get there.

Route 2 – Ling Crack. Steve to lead again, this one's a 5c! See final point under "Team Tactics". This went better.

3 – Argosy Crack. Kenny to lead, and already we're starting to unravel. After some prevarication I back off and make poor old Steve finish it. At least it's not raining.

And so it goes – no merit in post-morteming every route but I'll list them in the Appendix. There was certainly an "HVS" feel to a number of these first six though...a sign of things to come? Hope not!

In brief, we do 6 routes as planned on Friday night, but got behind schedule by an hour, finishing the last 1.5 routes by headtorch. We didn't feel too bad about this as they WERE mostly the "tricky" routes

Saturday, a fresh start! The lunch bag stashed at the halfway point, and we amble along to Curbar Woods at the "Froggatt" end - the unloved untouched unknown Curbar routes - fully expecting unpleasant greenery and manky short unsatisfying routes.

Angular Crack – actually a nice surprise, Short but a couple of nice moves, not too green, not too brutal or awkward. Same for the next ones, **Amethyst** and **Campion Wall**. Maybe we've got our rhythm going by now? Happily ticking these, way ahead of schedule though mindful that there may be some tricky ones that we can lose time on, later.

But more and more I find myself either retreating and making Steve take over, resting on gear or even falling (hey, got a first – a proper fall onto my tiniest wire, without whimpering - oh I was so proud of myself!).

It gets to a point where I'm too embarrassed to back off yet again and opt instead to doggedly battle – inelegantly and thuggishly - up the delightfully undergraded **Beech Layback** (fair at VS, but 4c? REALLY? Did I mention that I can't jam....?) and a bit later, **Deadbay Corner**.

Steve starts to show signs of weakness on **Rumble Wall**, and when I can't even get off the ground on the 14th route of the day, **Cioch Crack**, I suggest that we cancel the project before either of us makes a mistake we can't walk away from. Some of these routes are getting a bit run out, and with the number of rests I'm taking on gear, the odds of a crucial placement popping are increasing.

Steve does not object or try to urge me to keep going – neither of us relishes another 6 routes today and another 20 tomorrow!

We chalk this up as a noble failure and take solace in the fact that at the time we knocked it on the head, we were bang on schedule – we hadn't slipped behind like on the Friday night. And we walk away in one piece (two pieces, really, as there are two of us. You know).

At least it didn't rain.

Reflections

We learned a lot from this project, and it was really good fun trying.

I for one have never done anything like this (either in climbing or in any other sport), being more of a lazybones crag rat doing at most 7 short grit routes in a whole day, including easier ones. I never thought we'd get all 46 done, which in a way took the pressure off - a lower number or a softer grade might have seen us feeling worse for giving up, and perhaps pushing on further in a foolhardy way. Getting 13 Curbar VS routes done (regardless of dogging etc.) in a day, after doing 6 the night before, was record-smashing for me personally.

I know there are plenty of people who could come and solo all 46 in a few hours, but - as implied in the introduction - that wasn't the point. We did gain a whole new level of respect for such people though! And indeed for anyone that can just keep going all day, climbing at a sustained level of difficulty - whatever their definition of "difficult" may be.

The unexpected lessons were:

1) how quickly my ethical standards dropped due to being "on a mission". A rest or a fall on gear, and I just carried on if possible rather than lowering, pulling rope through and trying for the ground-up. I had no compunction about occasionally weighting the rope on second to help with getting stuck gear out either;

2) by going systematically along the routes rather than cherry-picking what we want to do, as one might normally do on a day out, we did loads of routes that we would otherwise never have touched - and some were pretty good.

I enjoyed it and might try a similar project, maybe at a crag less fierce than Curbar (of the 19-20 routes we did, only 2 or 3 were soft-touch at the grade, I think!) and at a softer grade.

Appendix – The Routes

Friday:

Barons' Wall Area

1. Baron's Wall, 5b, 9m **Steve OS**

Quarry Face

2. Ling Wall, 5c, 10m **Steve OS**

Avalanche Wall area

3. Argosy, 4c, 14m **Kenny backed off, Steve led through**

L'Horla Buttress

4. Grey Face, 5a, 9m **Steve OS, Kenny maybe frigged on second**

Eliminates Wall

5. Tantalus, 4b, 30m **Kenny P1, P3. Steve P2**

Little Quarry

6. Rock and Roll, 4c, 7m **Kenny backed off, Steve ground-up after**

Saturday

Curbar Woods

7. Angular Crack , 4c, 7m **Steve OS**

Beech Buttress.

8. Amethyst, 4c, 9m **Kenny OS**

9. Champion Wall, 4c, 16m **Kenny OS**

10. Groans, 5a, 9m **Steve OS**

Pillar Slab

11. Port Wine, 4c, **Kenny backed off, Steve led through**

12. Mad Era, 4c, 12m **Steve OS**

Short Buttress

13. Short Buttress, 5a, 6m **Kenny backed off, Steve led through**

14. Beech Layback, 4c, 6m **Kenny dogged**

15. Hanging Crack, 4b, 7m **Steve OS**

16. Thin, 4c, 7m **Kenny dogged**

Deadbay Area

17. Twilight Crack, 4c, 6m **Steve OS, Kenny dogged on second**

18. Deadbay Corner, 4b, 11m **Kenny dogged**

19. Rumble Wall, 4c, 6m **Steve OS**

Cioch Buttress

20. Cioch Crack, 4c, 11m **Steve OS, Kenny failed to leave the ground.
End of attempt.**

Credits:

Concept: Kenny "Dogger Bay" Watson

Stooge: Steve "Overcam" Robinson

Music: Jane Birkin and Transvision Vamp

Pampering: Edna Robinson

Flapjack Recipe: Elizabeth Gomm