

Against Guidebooks

Terry Gifford (published in *Climber*, Feb 2015)

Yesterday I led a climb I'd backed off last year. Previously I'd gone up the broken arête easily enough until it steepened holdlessly at half height and a delicate move out left onto the steep slab was required. This was to commit to the decidedly blank-looking wall above, a long stretch before the next bolt. Yes, this was a bolted route, too new to be in the Avon and Cheddar guidebook. But I had spotted two climbers below this wall as I had led a walk down through Holcombe Quarries for the Mendip Society Walking Group. It was July and we had found a patch of pink Marsh Orchids beside the path in these scruffy quarries. Looking up I saw a man and a woman moving their ropes to below the soaring arête right of a starkly unvegetated wall of black limestone at the back of the quarry and made a mental note. I asked Ian Butterworth, the tireless BMC access rep for the East Mendips area into which I'd just moved, and he said that he'd heard that there were two new grade 4s in this isolated branch of the quarries, but he'd not done them. So, soon afterwards I came to climb the left-hand route which turned out to be a sharp-edged straight grade 4 that was so interesting that I did it twice using different moves. But leading half way up the right-hand route I hesitated. Although I could clip the bolt out on the slab at a long reach, once out there the way ahead was just too intimidating, too much unknown, too likely to be nearer to grade 5, on which I struggle, too possible, in the back of my mind, that my wife, Gill, who was belaying me with a sling round a bush could, perhaps, not hold a fall. We walked back home to our house in Stoke St Michael above the quarries.

On a first return yesterday, this time with Martin, my climbing partner in Sella, Spain, for his first climbs in the UK, it turned out that the move left onto the slab was the crux, a delicate step through, first with the right foot, using improvised handholds for balance. This time I knew too much, having spotted an incut jug below the top bolt and been encouraged by Martin to traverse across from the top the left route to thread the ring bolts of the right route. Watching him top-rope the right hand route I knew I could lead it. Sure enough, it was a terrific route up steepening rock with hidden holds at grade 4.

So why had I not pushed on into unknown territory on the first occasion? Because I was addicted to guidebooks. Rumoured grades were unnerving. I could not trust my reading of the rock itself, even with the security of bolts. I needed to read a number, at least, in black and white on a page. In the redpoint, headpoint, ground-up scales I was a head-down person – headpointed down in a guidebook. So much for the adventure of climbing, let alone adventure climbing.

I got to thinking about this when I was reviewing the new guidebook to the *Inner Hebrides and Arran* (*Climber* September 2014) and asked whether every little bit of rock on these islands should be recorded and graded in a guidebook. Shouldn't some delightful nooks and crannies be left unrecorded for adventure climbing? Shouldn't some soaring cracklines above the sea on a remote island be available for the same sense of uplifted discovery every time they are climbed? Well, some are, I happen to know, because the recording machine that was the Colin Moody and Graham Little Scottish Mountaineering Club project, a labour of a certain kind of love in the Inner Hebrides, has missed some gems that are still available for you to discover for yourselves.

Decades ago I wrote for a climbing magazine about 'a single evening's climb of less than 200ft on the coast of an island that's a wilderness of eagles and adders'. I took my title from W. H. Murray's *Undiscovered Scotland* in which he described the island of Arran as 'bright as Paradise'. But I kept this particular island anonymous, even when I included this piece in *The Joy of Climbing*. Scotland is less undiscovered with the publication of the

guidebook to the *Inner Hebrides and Arran*, which now includes my island, but not the climb first discovered by the only local climber, an incomer who had stayed for almost a lifetime and persuaded other locals to accompany him in his explorations of the island's sea cliffs. They found a climb which they named Angel Edgeway and thought to be about Severe. When Pete, the local climber, introduced me to it I wrote of that first experience that

because it is such an exception, it was a shock to see the clean narrow ramp leaning easily angled across a compact face, pink with recent rockfall. Ribbed by horizontal lines as if a tyre had rolled down it, it looked white, but in the course of the evening, as the sun set it turned orange and finally pink. We climbed it slowly on fine friction at its seaward edge. A peregrine crossed the sky. A squadron of gannets patrolled the sea surface below.

And it's still there, waiting to be found by anyone curious enough to be rewarded with the sight of Pete's belay pegs rusting away to dust in Murray's light 'bright as Paradise', having escaped being hovered up by the SMC guidebook machine.

Of course, it was J. M. Archer Thomson and A. W. Andrews who really started the addiction with *The Climbs on Lliwedd* in 1909. This first guidebook included the amazing, but obviously essential, information, 'After the ceremony of burial, King Arthur's men ascended the ridge of Lliwedd'. You don't **get** history like this in Rockfax. Well a few years ago I had my own encounter with Merlin in Langdale. I had a meeting on a Monday morning in Penrith, so I drove up on the Sunday wanting a bivi and an early morning climb.

I was just back from Sella on the Costa Blanca after the wettest May anyone in the village could remember. Actually, this weather (hailstones fell on the annual paella cooking competition in the Plaza Major) had been predicted by the village elders who used the agricultural calendar brought by the blind man over the mountain from Alcoy years ago. In Sella an old man explained to me that the state of the moon on the fifth day of August last year had foretold the weather of the fifth month of this year. Now this is not irrelevant to my argument against what Archer Thomson and Andrews had started in 1909. You see, the blind man had to ask to have the state of the moon described to him. But would that have been really necessary for the rest of us? You've surely fine-tuned your natural judgement by now, building on what you've learned from the BMC guidebook elders, so that you know when to plant and when to prune, when to dig in and push onwards, and when to cut back and retreat, how to handle the earth's materials and features in front of you. How much description do you need?

Well I thought I'd take a tip from Langdale guidebook elder Max Biden and have a first-light meeting with Merlin at his slab high above Langdale, before going on to Penrith.

So Sunday evening I was passing the way of even older elders, past those boulders with the strange Neolithic circles, now edged with chalk. Changing out of sandals in the carpark of the cosiest cave in Langdale, the Robertson Lamb Hut, I hailed John and Stella Adams returning from their Sunday rituals on the vertiginous stuff. 'We've had seven weeks without rain,' said John, marvelling. I told them of my plan. 'Take care soloing,' said Stella. 'Pike o' Stickle's bound to have loose rock, you know.'

Against the flow of pilgrims draped with ropes and rucksacks I wandered up to the head of the valley and turned right up the steep bank of a dry streambed. I'd no idea where I was going to pass the night. But I hardly needed a book to tell me. Just below the top there was a little grass ledge under a wall out of the wind. In North Carolina, thirteen years before, I'd lashed out five dollars on a deluxe bivi meal that had waited for a really special bivi such as this. Pour in boiling water, reseal and wait ten minutes. Magic. Really creamy Caracoles a la Caza too hot to eat. (It's true what they say. The hunted snails do have the most flavour, even freeze-dried.)

Leaning back against the wall and taking in the Band, Flatt Crag and Cambridge Crag, yet to be assayed, I recognise from a crag diagram the improbable Ledge and Groove right of Bowfell Buttress waiting for another day, another dry spell. No people now in sight below. Is that an Andy Goldsworthy sheep pen down there? I catch myself out, thinking I can't tell culture from nature, art from farming. Then I chuckle at my thinking for a moment that farming is not nature. I've read too many books.

Anyway, this ledge is too sloping for a slippery Therm-a-rest so I wander around the dried up bog pools above and find a perfect bed under a peat bank. I don't see darkness. The sun strikes me at 6am. Coffee in bed, then over the summit of Pike o' Stickle to find the gully with a cave I've long wanted to visit. The scree down to the cave is steep, thin and horrendous. A certain guidebook advises taking 'care when descending this so as to avoid further damage to the scree slope'. How do you do that? Who writes this stuff? Who buys it?

The cave does not disappoint. It's an industrial works constructed for three full-time residential staff, plus fire, around 3000 years BC. Part-timers used the scree slope and their own insurance. From this stone-age factory specialised tools reached deep into Europe despite the tariffs and the old wives' tales. Apprentices are rumoured to have slept here once expecting to see the second coming of Merlin, just like King Arthur's men in that cave on Lliwedd. Looking out across the gully they will have seen his face and long hair in that white slab opposite, his pointed hat in that quartz-jewelled arête leaning back against the azure sky. How could they resist the sap in their veins, the natural invitation to their hearts and hands, the clear light of a June morning and a sunlit cushioned summit?

I had a Mars bar breakfast in their cave as I traced their line. It was 7.30am. I crossed the scree, changed into the familiar shoes, glad of sticky soles and Velcro as a thought crossed my mind that no-one knew where I was, except the Adams. And I stepped into Eden off a little pinnacle.

Actually the language of Archer Thomson and A. W. Andrews might be borrowed from 1909 to describe this very climb: it 'revealed its unequalled capacity for satisfying divers tastes'. 'We ascend easily at first, dodging the moss in the crack on the right.' 'The climber who has a taste for slabs can indulge it to her heart's content with perfect safety.'

The large white slab is traversed at its foot where 'the climber whose prejudice runs in favour of grass will find it most lush'. Above, 'it is inconceivable that anyone with a preference for heather will be disappointed' by the ledge thus arrived at. A little corner in a short wall now offers progress. 'Hard passages can be punctuated with periods of cushioned ease' until the undercut arête. 'Any specialist with a fancy for balancing on small holds in airy places can, with caution, obtain on the first step a foretaste of the delicacies that await him above.' Here 'a true mountaineer can rejoice in an environment of boldly sculptured crags, and inhale the influences of rare and beautiful mountain scenery'.

But now I've spoiled it for you. The seductive poison first concocted in 1909 has been used to guide your way. 'The subtle charm of true exploration' was lost in the very act of publishing those words. The well-meaning intention of those pioneering guidebook writers 'to enable many to participate in pleasures known to few' changed the nature of these pleasures for the many. The magic of the ascents by the acolytes of Merlin and King Arthur, instinctively feeling their way up the crags, has been lost. We've all read too many guidebooks. I've stopped buying them. I stopped buying 'the latest Stanage guide' when the Chinese version came out, reading the crag from right to left. There's now even a guidebook to *The Beyond* published by the BMC and winning international prizes. It starts, for some reason, at Burbage. I've just read in a climbing guidebook the correct posture for falling into water. What next? Every pebble in the Burbage Valley has been Rockfaced and every crimp in the Pass has been claimed in a first ascent list. The buildering BASE jumper's guide to Snowdon Summit Cafe is the Climbers' Club's next secret project. And (I really shouldn't be

telling you this) they don't want those all-seeing Rockfax cameras anywhere near the bouldering now being pioneered on the rocks *under* Llyn Llydaw. The ethics of mask-sharing on slate are apparently still under discussion, or rather in discussion under Llyn Peris.

So what happened to wilderness climbing? Where is the spirit of those tranquil unrecorded evenings in the quiet corners of Wales, the land that time and guidebooks forgot - those first ascents that were not articles for the club journals, those climbs that yearned to be immortalised with words like 'beautiful, searing and beyond' but actually stayed coyly beyond record? These are the routes without a first ascensionist's ego attached, that others could discover, as though for the first time - a route that would make you want to Get On Your Zimmer Frame to the Forest of Dean because it *didn't* have a name like that. Is there yet a Crag X that will stay in personal experience and never even need to be whispered as 'Crag X'? Is there another beautifully idiosyncratic Craig y Tonnau hidden in the forested folds of Meirionnydd, climbed, but left unrecorded for thirty years? Only the bits of Southern Sandstone that rear up as buildings remain unrecorded, and probably not for long.

And anyway, haven't deviations from the guidebook often provided the most intense climbing experiences? I remember that notorious deviant Jim Curran giving our ascent of Fionn Buttress a certain intensity by going straight up at the end of the long traverse pitch instead of cutting back left. Actually his deviancy had immediately been revealed at the start of this climb: in addition to camping and climbing gear, he had carried into Carnmore shorts! For a climb in Scotland! More traditionally, I had not, but since it promised to be, against all guidebook indications, a scorcher of a day, I chose to climb simply in underwear. Jim had cruised through the crux overhang and I had danced along the traverse, both of us seeping with superlatives all the while, but Jim came to a juddering stop up his chosen wall, declaring it well beyond guidebook grade. Cursing what Archer Thomson called the 'Book of Chronicles', he pushed onwards, thereby lending the day a certain unexpected charge. This he relieved with glee as I removed my harness at the top of the route and he said famously, 'Oh look, a sight of sore thighs.'

If you can't dispense with a Book of Chronicles altogether, a cursory glance at a guidebook can do something similar to enhance one's experience. When Norman Elliot and I were star-struck astrologers we thought the fates were with us on a fine day on the three-star Ardverikie Wall. It was so hot that afterwards we swam in the lake at the bottom. Having achieved our objective for our end-of-term race north, the next day we expected to be an anticlimax. It dawned dreadfully hot on our roadside tent in Glencoe. (I'm not making this up.) The shady cleft of The Chasm offered dripping walls of delightful cool waterfalls according to the *Classic Rock* photographs. We set off without further ado, no need for a guidebook in such an obvious line. As, indeed, proved to be the case. What we'd not noticed was that this south-facing gulley sucked in the breathless sun all day and we were at the end of a drought. At one point Norman recalls looking down at me licking a fly-blown puddle like a dog. It was a long day's unravelling adventure. Now, which of these two *Classic Rock* routes do you think stays in the mind the more memorably? If you live, the result of a cursory guidebook glance can live longer in the memory.

OK. I know what you're going to say. There's a lot of guidebook stuff in what I've written here. Of course I've been buying them, for half a century. And I'd been drawing attention to 'hidden gems' from the esoteric corners of guidebooks for years in *High* magazine. I've been a follower of the guidebook promise offered by a single star. I can't deny it. From a partying weekend at Helyg I even recorded a new Birthday Climb on the Red Slab of Carnedd y Filiast in a rush of blood on my fifty-seventh birthday. But you, you have choices. You don't have to follow my sad history of relishing the wit of the route names, Geoff Milburn's quips and quotes in the CC guidebook historical lists, the delicious advent of the ribbon in the spine.

And here is your chance. At this very moment. You don't have to rush to the guidebook to see if my Merlin climb exists. You don't have to check length, stars and grade. You still have the chance to just go there and read the rock. Give yourself a new climbing experience. With this approach the words of Thomson and Andrews from a century ago could be true for you this year: 'A few well-guarded secrets remain to be wrested'.

To tell you the truth, I arrived at my Mountain Heritage Trust meeting on Monday morning rather too exhilarated to sit down and talk. Having wrested something almost spiritual from a bit of rock, something impossible to record, from a secret sensual reality that was just hours fresh, I sat down to discuss the preservation of the rich written and visual heritage of British mountaineering - including all those over-detailed, unreliable, indispensable, historically inspirational, witty and teasing guidebooks.