

**Which is the best V.Diff in Britain?
The Cioch Nose of Sgurr a' Chaorachain?
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Looking back on our six-thirty start from the Applecross campsite that first weekend in May we should have taken the hint from the crow. A huge Hooded Crow was standing on the windscreen wiper of a yellow truck, turning his head this way and that. In the windscreen he could plainly see that a huge Hooded Crow was extracting the Michael, turning his head this way and that like some kind of Aberdonian joker.

Tom Patey had called this climb, ‘the Diff to end all Diffs!’

Or perhaps the clue to this climb had been there in *As You Like It* at the Bristol Tobacco Factory the night before the eleven hour drive from Somerset. Perhaps the Forest of Arden held the secret with its ‘books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones’. Rosalind was a girl, disguised as a boy, pretending to be Rosalind. Things were not what they seemed.

Recruiting Chris Bonington for a hard climb up vertical Torridonian Sandstone, Patey was apparently delighted when ‘it was only Difficult’.

Nothing about this *Classic Rock* route was as it seemed. For a start it had never ever been a V.Diff, especially in the vegetated state that pertained for years after its first ascent. Patey was famed for the wit of his songs and his gradings. SMC guidebooks, and *Classic Rock*, maintained the tradition. Only in the SMC’s 2005 selected *Scottish Rock Climbs* did the grade go up to Severe. For any short person even this would not be elevation enough.

Twenty years ago I’d driven up with the Lake District painter Julian Cooper to do this climb. Our Whit weekend arrangement at this time was always to target a single classic route in Scotland for a day of climbing in exchange for a day of Julian’s painting it. Thus it was that we came to climb the V.Diff Wisdom Buttress on Beinn Lair which was, without doubt, the best route of that grade in Britain that I’d done. But I’d not done Patey’s ‘Diff to end all Diffs!’ Beware of exclamation marks. On the Wisdom Buttress trip we’d climbed it first and on the painting day, late in the afternoon, Julian’s huge canvas of a complex oil crag portrait was washed out by a heavy downpour. So for The Cioch Nose of Applecross Julian painted on the first day and on the second day the climb was rained off. In the late May sunshine whilst Julian got into the rhythm of the rock architecture with his long brushes I brewed up and watched through binoculars Mark Vallance and Roger Briggs climb the Cioch Corner via the Superdirect start.

Then three years ago, for my sixty-fifth birthday, my son Tom agreed to climb the Cioch Nose with me. We put three weekends aside in our diaries and the forecast was for rain on every one. This year Tom considerably suggested that, ‘You’d better do it before you’re seventy, Dad’. And this May Day weekend was the first of three in this year’s diary, with one clear day forecast for the Saturday.

With my having come from just above the famous (in the Southwest) Fairy Cave Quarry in the Mendips and Tom having driven from Lincoln to pick me up in Penrith, we were not going to let anyone get on the route ahead of us. Hence our standing on the corrie rim at 7.30am looking at a possible descent path from the radio mast at Bealach na Ba that resembled a sea-cliff descent in vagueness and steepness. It was necessary for the knees to adjust to the Scottish scale of things again. An hour later we were finding bucket steps leading up, right of a boulder field, onto the Middle Ledge and CN scratched faintly at the start of the route. We’d passed a violet on the way.

Immediately the Patey wit kicked in. I could not make the first move. Off balance on an off-width with rounded footholds at its base, I found a hold so high inside the crack that I couldn’t move my feet. A Friend 4 was the first of two points of aid at cruxes of this ‘Diff! I blame the exclamation mark. Already puffing somewhat, I took a pinnacle on the left that led into a corner where a small jammed Friend offered its tape. But the high step into this crack

was confounding, so, with a long sling on the decaying tape, I traversed right into the next corner, left of an overhang, the correct corner at something approximating more to the grade and my obviously depleted ability. Thread belays on grand ledges with views beyond loch, road and snow-streaked peaks characterise this climb.

At the right end of the ledge lay the awkward chimney waiting to trap Tom with its deceptively big footholds. (All chimneys are open grooves on this climb and all lay-backs short-lived.) A first engagement with the thrutch dictated sack-hauling. A technical use of a knee solved the no-handholds-above mantleshelf. Then it started raining quick-draws on me. Tom's old harness was experiencing a gear-loop failure. A finger-lock solved the next steep section of the groove and strenuous pulls out right led to a little rock ledge on the edge of all things. On this mantleshelf I admit to my second transgression. As Shakespeare said, in the Deer Forest of Arden 'Sweet are the uses of a Friend in adversity'.

It was now my turn to step out onto the undercut wall of rounded footholds. Surprisingly, a Moac protected the first commitment to the wall and more surprises kept coming. The handholds were incuts and a peg appeared before a traverse left. Cracks for gear also kept coming. This was, indeed, the best pitch of the route, a steep 4a of unfolding worn footholds unseen from below. I was stopped at a big ledge by another high step, so I brought Tom up.

He solved this easily and headed for another 'chimney' which turned out to be an open groove leading to another large soft ledge. I found a hidden excavated hold I'd missed at the first attempt and led through to the right end of Tom's belay ledge where CN was again scratched on the rock.

So Tom led what looked to be a long layback on a sharp edge which somehow soon turned back to in-balance climbing. Then I got the last pitch, still strenuous, still giant steps, still pulling on big boulders with care, to belay below the false summit of the buttress.

A timer shot was called for. We still did not appreciate just what an epic lay ahead. We did not realise that the top of this long sought-after route was still three and a half hours away from the car. Nor that false summits here are false separate tops with six vertical necks to be down-climbed. But the first shock on standing on the top of the Cioch buttress is to face another crag rearing up into the sky, with bands of lightly vegetated rock capped by a final wall. Tom had been on the net and knew that a descent into South Gully was now fully equipped with three abseils. A knotted tape complete with karabiner was waiting at the base of the neck.

But thank you 'Si Lynch 2009' for encouraging us to broach 'the formidable-looking continuation' by 'taking the surprisingly easy to follow path up huge blocks towards the well-defined crack in the steepest section of the ridge'. It was with some surprise that we soon found ourselves at the base of this widest and deepest crack in the top wall. A worn open groove well left of it offered a pitch of true V.Diff, exiting right, and I led through to scramble onto an open grassy top, backed by another neck.

Two of the steepest necks had a path alternative to the left, but I was glad to keep rock shoes on for the serious down-climbs with gaping gullies waiting each side of the necks. The very last down-climb is undercut. I attempted it, but had to wait for Tom to come round on the path to point out an unseen hold down left, facing inwards to reach the neck itself. Only then did I transfer to boots and a final ascent to a view of the mast and a pair of ptarmigan, reward enough for screaming thighs.

So which is the best V.Diff in Britain? Well, don't believe the 'books in the running brooks'. 'The sermons in stones' speak for themselves. Since the Cioch Nose, for all its demanding seriousness and exposed south-facing aspect, was never V.Diff in the first place, my award goes to Wisdom Buttress which weaves a way through a series of overhangs by always looking around the corner to find the best kind of surprises. But sometimes, before it's

too late in life, you have to look the crow in the eye and wear the motley of the Fool in the deer forest.