

THE MOST AMAZING MOVE IN THE WORLD

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Rock-climbing can provide many experiences and sensations, from utter terror to intense happiness, from miserable wet days to sun-baked rock. The one I have always found the most satisfying is the feeling of pure and intense joy which I have sometimes felt after a certain route, or even a particular pitch on a route. It is a rare feeling, more powerful by far than the feeling one gets after a good day's climbing; a feeling of sheer elation and exhilaration when the whole of one's body is filled with excitement and one feels completely alive.

I have had the same feeling on other occasions besides climbing: great acceleration and power in a car produces it — while being driven in the Porsche of a friend I just wanted to laugh all the time I felt so happy. But in a car the feeling is in existence only while there is motion. Stop, and the feeling disappears shortly. In climbing on the other hand the sensation only really starts on the completion of the pitch or route, when the nervous energy drains away and you can relax, and it can achieve an intensity greater than can be provided by a stimulus such as a car, although much less frequently.

There are three main criteria for enjoyment while climbing: good weather, interesting climbing, and competence.

There are no more satisfying conditions for climbing in than calm, sunny days, with not a cloud in the sky, and warm dry rock underfoot. As well as being the giver of life, the sun is also a giver of happiness, and immediately puts one in a more relaxed and cheerful frame of mind. I spent my Whitsun holidays in Wales four years ago climbing with Dave Midlane, when we did many of

the short classic hard routes such as Erosion Direct and Suicide Wall and throughout the holiday we had gorgeously sunny weather and dry rock and the whole atmosphere was one of calm and peace. We were able to just bask in the sun while the other was climbing and everything felt so relaxed. I still regard that time as the best climbing days I have had. The sun can make the difference between a climb feeling very serious and just being pure enjoyment. On a stance on Flying Buttress on Dinas Cromlech in poor weather I felt miserable and the whole situation seemed dangerous, and the belay unsafe, but suddenly the sun broke through the clouds and the danger disappeared, leaving only enjoyment, and the belay now appeared really solid, able to take any fall. Or soloing the easier routes at Tremadoc on such a day can be truly exhilarating.

The climbing itself is extremely important, and this covers the state and nature of the rock, the protection available, the type and style of climbing, and the position of the route or pitches. Loose or brittle rock such as one finds on, say, Red Wall has its place but I don't think anyone could honestly say that it makes a climb more enjoyable. More serious or more of an achievement, yes, but not more enjoyable. Similarly with wet or greasy rock. Good runners, but not too many of them, help, as a lack of runners can raise the level of nervous tension high enough to detract from the appreciation of a route, while too many placements and one starts feeling unhappy whenever there is a longer interval between them. And of course varied climbing and technically interesting moves, preferably many of them, draw concentration from the climber, with the result that having had to put more into the climb in the way of working out a complex series of moves, he gets more out of it.

This is why the Tremadoc cliffs are so popular; not just because the weather is generally good, but also because the rock, protection, and style of climbing is exactly that which does help to make the climbs very enjoyable. Routes like Stromboli, Tensor, Grasper or Vector are excellent examples of this. Many people dismiss Tremadoc as being of an outcrop nature and too short but, while

I agree that the routes are short and lack seriousness, I would also say that the actual climbing there is the best in Wales.

Nearly everyone experiences times when they cannot climb properly or lack the confidence to make the next move. Similarly there are times when everyone falls into place and nothing seems hard, and one just drifts up a climb with no real effort. The first experience can be very depressing while the second gives a superb feeling of confidence and competence. To climb fast and find no moves desperate is immensely satisfying and thus to do many routes in a day can be tremendously satisfying, whether it be soloing easy routes at Stanage or climbing three or four Extremes on Cloggy. Of course the way in which one's partner is climbing is very relevant too, there being few more infuriating times on a climb than when the partner cannot lead a pitch or make a sequence of moves, and you know that you could, or you want to do several more routes that day. But when both are climbing well and nothing takes long there's no stopping one's dreams.

The relationship one has with one's partner can make or break a climb, and there are some people who I enjoy climbing with far more than with most others, and from my point of view there exists a strong bond between us. At times such as these the climbing can take on a secondary rôle, and the day can be enjoyable, without doing any inspiring routes. The most powerful rapport I have experienced was with Hank Pasquill, one hot day in the summer on Anglesey. We did Transatlantic Crossing and Powerit, and while I took pleasure from the climbing, the routes themselves were unimportant compared with just being on the route and climbing with Hank. We shared everything that way, even down to a fall each, Hank's on the hard groove on Transatlantic Crossing (due to loose rock), which we eventually got up after several attempts between us, and mine while attempting a new route. But the fact that we did two routes, or that we failed on the third was meaningless because the enjoyment had come from just sharing the rope and rock with Hank.

But while all these factors produce very enjoyable climbing,

something extra is needed for the rare feeling of exhilaration which accompanies a very small number of routes. The above factors, in various combinations, can provide unforgettable days, the lazy, hazy days that one remembers with fondness, but will not give the ecstasy which is attained on some routes.

This extra spark nearly always comes from doing a pitch or a climb which one has dreamed of doing, and where there is a doubt about getting up although one hopes and feels that it should be possible, especially when it accompanies a rise in standard. The presence of several, or of all of the above factors is necessary as a basis upon which to build to achieve this feeling, and without the basis one rarely gets the elation.

The first time I did Cenotaph Corner I felt superb and deliriously happy, as I did after a free ascent of Tensor, or after the first pitch of Tyrannosaurus Rex, while Vector remains the best climb I have done. Every single factor was present, and sitting in the cave stance I felt completely alive. I felt like shouting and singing, I wanted to stay there for ever, I couldn't stop smiling, and it remains one of the great experiences of my life.

On the other hand though, Skull did not provide this feeling. The dream and the rise in standard were there, but too many of the basic factors were missing.

More recently a move on a new route I did with Steve Humphries gave me the same rare sensation. What follows is an attempt at a description of that move and of the events which led up to it.

The route, The Creeping Lemma, is situated on the Yellow Wall on Anglesey, and I will first say something about the area. The Anglesey cliffs are the most important major cliffs in Britain, in two ways. Firstly they are probably the most important cliffs in the history of rock climbing, because of the change in attitudes they represent. It was on Anglesey that people started to realise that it was possible to climb rock which was overhanging for long sections, and that loose and brittle rock was not so much of an obstacle as was previously thought. Climbs which used to be

thought steep or loose are now considered reasonable by Anglesey standards. The second way in which the cliffs are so important is in the matter of quality. The climbs there are almost invariably good and large numbers of them are in the top rank of quality. In Wales, Cloggy is the only cliff which can compete with Anglesey for the quality of the routes and even it drops behind.

Yellow Wall is one of the more impressive cliffs on Anglesey, which is saying something, and from below all you see is a bristling mass of overhangs. From above it is possible to make out lines but to imagine climbing there is mind-blowing. The first time I heard of Yellow Wall it was described as a crumbling horror but it is not nearly as bad as that — the rock is not as good as Gogarth main cliff, but is a lot better than that in Mousetrap Zawn or on Red Wall.

The first view I had of it was last summer when I did Drummond's route, The Moon, with Brian Hall. Previous to this route, all the existing ones had taken lines up the sides of the face proper, but Drummond met the challenge, and in a masterpiece of route-finding he produced a truly impressive climb. It was a very powerful first ascent concept, climbing into difficulties without knowing of a sure way out. On the second stance I looked to see how one could escape, and the only way I could see was to tie both ropes together and abseil, leaving the ropes behind! Drummond wrote the route up in a classic description, overblowing the difficulties a bit, but accurately describing the position — "The situations are strictly spacewalking". I took part in a rescue some time later of someone who had fallen off the second pitch — he was hanging at least twenty feet away from the rock!

There were obviously more possibilities for routes so I came back with Steve Humphries to do Sind, to become better acquainted with the cliff. The route turned out to be excellent climbing and while we were there I found THE line. From below it is the most obvious line on the face, taking a belt of red slabs diagonally from right to left, to finish up Castell Helen Girdle. Looking at it from Sind there were obviously two short hard sections and one of them looked simply incredible.

Anyway we came back one afternoon and climbed a long preliminary pitch, not hard but worrying in places, not least because of its length. It was 160 feet long, plus the stretch in a very taut rope! When Steve reached the stance the sun was going down so I decided to do likewise. Steve however wanted to finish up Pterodactyl so, ever ready to oblige, I started up it but after fifteen reluctant feet decided that it was impossible. Steve must have realised my heart wasn't in it as he let me come down. Steve is one of the keenest climbers I have ever met. No sooner is one route done than we're starting on the next. At least we get a lot of routes done!


So next weekend saw us back at our high point which we reached up an easy grass ramp, but the next section was where we had to commit ourselves to the main face. An easy angled ramp led up over a large loose slab of rock into a corner. The position here was the most impressive I have ever been in. On the left was a short slab, easy angled and about six feet across and two and a half wide. The staggering thing about it was that the wall above it overhung about thirty-five degrees, and it was undercut by a similar angle! Visions of the whole lot crumbling under my weight floated before my eyes and gingerly I moved left onto it and put in a peg for protection which reduced my state of trepidation somewhat. There was now a gap before the ramp continued again, parallel to the one I had just climbed, and looking down at the drop was mind-blowing. I discovered later that Ray Evans and Hank Pasquill had climbed the easy ramp to here but had been too impressed by the position to continue.

The only way I could visualise getting across was to reach a detached looking block and swing across on it. The only problem was, it was split in half and half of it was definitely loose. After some minutes getting into position I was able to just touch it with my peg hammer and after throwing the hammer at the block, and a few prods, the only thing left to do was to trust it. The crack had a slight wedge effect on the loose part so provided not too much weight was put on it, it should be alright. To get into a position from where I could touch the block took ages to work out — the only handhold was right beside the only useful foothold,

Alec Sharp probes on Creeping Lemma
Photo: Steve Humphries

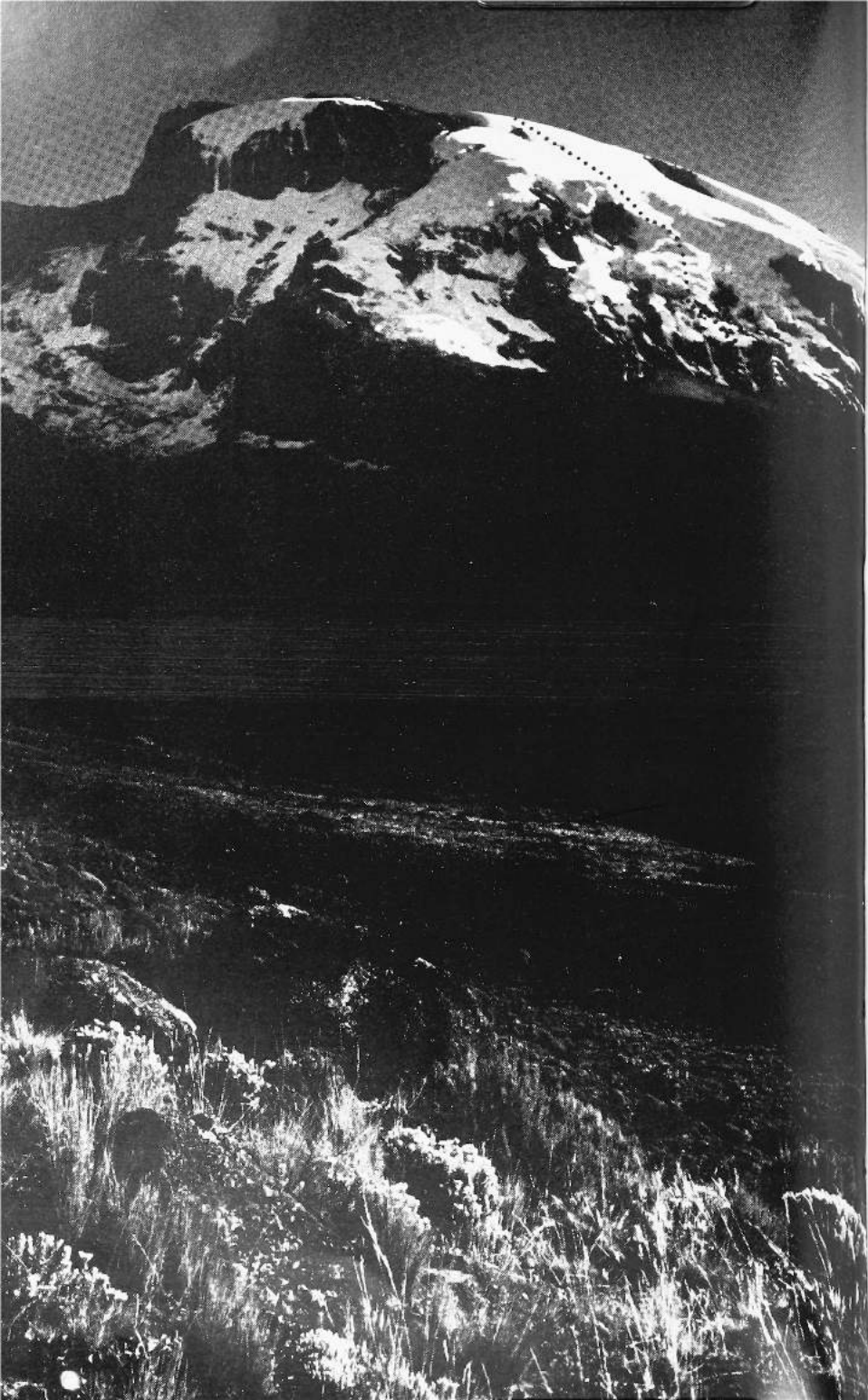






Rowland Edwards
tentative on Oceanside
(left) and assertive on
New Dimension, two
recent routes on Little
and Great Orme.

Photos: Nigel Metcalfe



which was on the very edge of the slab, and with that amount of exposure I do things very cautiously. Anyway, by leaning and stretching I could just curl my fingers over the loose part and with a gentle pull the solid (I hoped) part was in reach. A strenuous swing followed and fortunately it held. A few feet round the corner was the super-safe peg belay of the Moon. A beautiful feeling of elation followed and I felt superbly happy. What a move! Difficult, and in one of the most incredible positions you could hope to come across. I had been doubtful as to its possibility from looking at it but now I had done it. The most amazing move in the world.

Steve followed and kicked the loose slab off the ramp — Yellow Wall is in the shape of an amphitheatre and I was very impressed by the resonance of the boom we heard as the slab hit the bottom, but failed to consider it as any sort of omen. Unhappily Steve trusted the loose side of the block too implicitly, with the result that it is now lying on the bottom, and Steve got a sore knee and a nasty shock. Great, I thought, now no one will be able to repeat the route. From here I reversed the Moon along the slabs, which was slightly easier than doing it the normal way, as I could miss out the celebrated, but very awkward, traversing almost on hands and knees. From this point the slabs continued along to, and under, some small roofs, but I didn't. The next moves looked desperate, and the general situation suggested to me that I try again some other time, so back along the traverse to the stance. Unfortunately the only ways off were either abseil on 300 feet of rope or up the last pitch of the Moon. It seemed harder this time. A few days later an abseil provided the means to place two protection pegs under the roof and so another visit was called for.

The next Saturday we were again back at the start of the second pitch. This time some friends were doing the Sind and as I went up the ramp, the leader was directly below me. Suddenly another slab of rock started to move as I stood on it so I moved up, but the slab moved down, narrowly missing the ropes, and plummeted straight for the climber but fortunately the rock was so steep that

Kilimanjaro, with the Kersten Glacier route marked (article on page 23).
Photo: John Cleare

it passed about five feet outside him.

The short slab had lost none of its impressiveness in the meantime, and again it took a long while to get into a position from which I could progress. This time though, the block was well out of reach, even leaning as much as I dared, so I started rocking back and forth until a controlled lunge enabled fingers to hook over it and the stance to be attained. I was pleased at having done it but there was no elation or total joy this time. Just a desire to get across the next pitch before it started raining. The next pitch went without incident and the protection pegs gave confidence enough to make very hard moves under the roof to gain the Girdle. Here the rain started and continued until after Steve had arrived at the top.

At last it was over and we could climb somewhere else for a change! But what a route. Having done both Creeping Lemma and Moon I think that both are spoiled by the proximity of the other, but do only one and you have a superb route. The Moon is more sustained and a more powerful first ascent, but the Creeping Lemma has by far the better line. Apart from two hard but well-protected moves it is a fair bit easier and has even more magnificent positions, and could well become a modern classic. So if you want truly impressive situations and interesting climbing of a reasonable standard, go and climb The Creeping Lemma, a route with the most amazing move in the world.