The Rat Race pieces together an excellent series of pitches on the edge of the steepest section of the Main Cliff and was so-named because of the competition between a number of teams for a piece of the cheese.

On July 8, 1966, Joe Brown cracked the hard, traversing second pitch and succeeded in reaching a belay beneath an intimidating, overhanging chimney. Malcolm Howells and Barry Whybrow were also trying the line and conquered the chimney two weeks later, but due to impending darkness they had to finish up *Cordon Bleu*. Brown and Crew added the upper pitches the following day, incorporating a pitch previously climbed by Martin Boysen and Chris Bonington.

> Joe Brown: My second could not follow, so I abseiled off leaving the crux pitch fully geared up. When Malcom climbed this, with all the gear in place, we felt that it was not a fair first ascent. Hence the controversy.

The Wrong Groove by Alec Sharp

I've never been really scared on climbs. Whenever I get into a dangerous situation, something in my mind takes over, clamps down on my fear, and says, 'OK you dumbshit, now what are you going to do?' And, of course, I'm then too busy trying to do something to worry about little things like death and disfigurement, but *before* climbs there's plenty of time to worry about the ways I could die.

Wales, 1974. I knew I was going to die on *Rat Race*, a powerful, atmospheric route on Gogarth, one of the powerful, atmospheric cliffs of this world. On a good day, the sea laps gently against the huge main wall below you. On a bad day, it crashes high onto the overhanging rock, intimidating all but the bravest. I loved the atmosphere, the intimidation, the sea... and I knew I had to climb *Rat Race* if I was ever to be a real climber.

Its main pitch is a rising traverse across a big overhanging wall, finishing up a groove to belay below a rotten, overhanging chimney. So off I went, climbing up and out, until I reached the groove. It looked steep, and hard, but I climbed until my forearms started flaming out and my little voice said: 'No, no. You can't do it. It's too strenuous.' So, down I went. I no longer remember how I got down, or what else we did that day, but the very next weekend I was back at the same place, crossing the big overhanging rock until I reached the groove. Again, the forearms wore out and the little voice said: 'No, no. It's still too hard. You'll never do it.' Again, down I went.

This was now getting ridiculous. People whom I judged as lesser climbers than I had climbed this route – but I was incapable of it. And so, *Rat Race* became an obsession. I had to climb it, yet I knew I couldn't. It was simply too hard. I had no idea how to do it. I'd have to keep going back to it until one day I pushed past my limit and either climbed it – or died. It's funny how we perceive things in our youth: to a young man, a single climb can become more important than life itself.

So I was becoming accustomed to the idea of dying in my attempt to do *Rat Race* when, out of the blue, I met a climber with whom I'd once had a fierce rivalry. He'd done the route and told me how easy it was. No, I thought, I can't accept this. There's something wrong with this picture. So I asked him to describe how he'd done the section that was stopping me. He proceeded to explain a completely different climb; one that bore no resemblance to my route. Suddenly my spirits soared, and I knew I wouldn't die. I'd been trying to climb the wrong groove.

The next day I was back on the rock, this time continuing the rising traverse past the groove I'd been trying. Another 10ft on, hidden behind a bulge, was the correct groove: one with big holds and protection; one that led easily to the belay. I was alive, no longer obsessed, and ready to continue my quest to be a real climber.

Postscript: 'the wrong groove' was later climbed by Alec Sharp as part of *Ordinary Route*.





Malcolm Howells and Barry Whybrow on *Rat Race*.
Photo Ken Wilson.

After an uneventful childhood in North London, **Alec Sharp** discovered rock climbing. Moving to Bangor to climb – and go to college – he spent many happy days on those two most fabulous cliffs, Cloggy and Gogarth, to which he wrote guidebooks for the Climbers' Club.

In between words, he managed to do a few first ascents on these and other cliffs. Sharp graduated *summa cum laude* with a First Class Honours degree in Pure and Applied Mathematics, after which he proceeded to ignore these skills, having done nothing more advanced than basic arithmetic ever since.

After three successive rainy weekends at Tremadog, Sharp moved to Boulder, Colorado in 1977 hoping to climb rocks in the sun. He embarked on a career as a computer programmer while also doing a few, very scary, first ascents. Finding himself still alive but on the wrong side of history, with its relentless move towards bolt-protected sports climbs, Sharp took up bicycle riding.

These days he prefers to ascend mountains on a bicycle rather than on rocks. Sharp came close to greatness when he did a sea-level traverse on Anglesey with Joe Brown, climbed a long 5.9 slab in Yosemite with Pete Livesey, and ate paella with Alan Rouse.

Left: Alec Sharp.
Photo Sharp collection.



Alec Sharp and John Zangwill climbed the stubborn line of *The Camel* in 1974. Sharp was back the following year with Chris Dale to climb *Horse above Water,* a new line in the wall left of *Heroin*.

Horse above Water by Alec Sharp

I worked out an eliminate line through the overhangs between *Hypodermic* and *Syringe* involving some very strenuous and technical jamming. Because of the closeness of the routes here and because Evans's route *The Needle* was very near, we called the climb *The Camel* as the Bible says, 'you can't get a camel through the eye of a needle.'

Horse above Water is a bottomless chimney, gained by an overhanging groove. During an earlier attempt I had fallen off it, when a finger jam came out, and had torn some ligaments in my foot when I landed. This time I managed to reach the chimney and climb it, although it extracted its toll from our knees as we were climbing in shorts.

The extra-Ordinary Route

Sharp and Dale went on to complete *Ordinary Route* in November of 1975. This multi-pitch E5, taking a sweeping line across the central section of the Main Cliff, is anything but ordinary. Incorporating the crux pitch of *Positron*, they made the first free ascent of that pitch during their ascent.

Ordinary Route by Alec Sharp

While in Yosemite I found myself dreaming of a line taking a rising traverse across the big central wall of the Main Cliff.

When we got back to Bangor in the autumn, Chris and I trained on farm walls several times a week. After five weeks we felt strong enough for the test.

I actually went out first with John Whittle, to climb the opening pitch, but we failed. The crux was a ferocious move across a short overhanging wall, and it shook John up so much that he wouldn't return the next day.

Chris joined me the following afternoon; we just had time to complete the next two pitches, including the big pitch of *Positron* free. We finished the route later that month, taking a line across to *Mammoth*, and then up to join *Citadel*. The last pitch was much harder than expected. It took a very steep groove, and at one point I was seriously considering jumping off but decided to try and get in a nut and lower off. Once the nut was in, calm was restored, and I continued.

The name for the route was a problem. At first we thought of 'The Ascent of Man', but flicking through an Ogwen guide we saw the name *Ordinary Route* and that solved the problem as well as representing a belated return to traditional modes.

Geoff Birtles describes the probable second ascent:

> My last climb at Gogarth was with Ron Fawcett. We had read about *Ordinary Route*. When we went it was winter, and, to our knowledge, the route had not been repeated. The climbing took a slightly wandering line but was excellent with, largely, a lot of space beneath your feet. This was exhilarating, especially as it was raining at the bottom and snowing at the top.

Sharp had one final big line left to climb on the Main Cliff in 1976.

Graduation Ceremony by Alec Sharp

I had just finished my finals at Bangor, hence the name. The first pitch had been climbed by Al Rouse and Mick Geddes. At the time Rouse proclaimed it to be one of the hardest and most serious pitches he had done.

However, time mellowed his memory until he was declaring it to be no more than HVS. Needless to say, it is hard and fairly serious. The second pitch follows a parallel crack, which is slightly harder, but not as long, to the left of *Citadel*.

Mick Fowler and John Stevenson took on the hard and superb *Trunk Line* (E4), succeeding in 1976 on their third attempt over a two-year period.

Trunk Line by Mick Fowler

We had originally tried *Trunk Line* in October 1975 as a rope of three but couldn't get into *Dinosaur* at the level of the spike on *Positron*, so we escaped up *Gogarth*. At this point we gave up the route for several months, but while doing *Dinosaur* I noticed a possible traversing line, level with the stance on that route.

Our next attempt was in April, when John and I reached the stance on *Rat Race*, but having braved the cold on the stance for an hour and a half, we failed once more and did *Gogarth* again instead.

After a summer in the Alps, we finally got to Gogarth in late September. This time things were better, and we managed to traverse into *Dinosaur* with only slight traces of frostbite (prevented mainly because of the warming effect of being gripped), but it started raining as we approached *Mammoth*. When we got to *Citadel*, the crack was streaming with water; rather than use loads of aid, we lowered off, then abseiled.

No one in the Padarn that evening seemed to care that we hadn't finished up *Citadel* since we had done all the new climbing involved.

The Clean Hand Gang

1978 in the UK – John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John dominated the charts with the *Grease* numbers: 'You're the One that I Want' and 'Summer Nights'. Meanwhile, 78 new routes were climbed that year on Gogarth. The major catalyst for this was the publication of Alec Sharp's 1977 guidebook. Another was the revolution in climbing protection caused by Ray Jardine's invention of camming devices which Mark Vallance founded Wild Country to produce.

> Mark Vallance: I prepared to jump... The camera team was in position and waiting, the radio-mike turned on and recording. I climbed past the top Friend, my feet above it, climbed a little higher – hell, I'll give them a real show, and I climbed a little higher still. Then I jumped.
>
> As the rope tightened, my belayer was jerked upwards onto his Friend and the breath was knocked out of me. I was lowered to the ground – no need for a retake. The five-minute episode on BBC's *Tomorrow's World* programme went out at the end of January 1978, and a six-year secret was out.

Two years after reducing the aid on *Citadel* to only one point on the crux of the first pitch, Pat Littlejohn returned in 1978 with Chris King to make the first ascent, ground up, of the neighbouring and superb line of *Hunger*.

Littlejohn was a member of the predominantly South West based 'Clean Hand Gang' who rejected the use of Magnesium Carbonate. This gymnastic chalk had first been introduced to climbing in the 50s by the godfather of bouldering: John Gill. However, chalk wasn't widely adopted in the UK until the mid-70s. Initially there was resistance; some climbers felt it was an unfair use of aid. For instance in 1975 John Allen made the first free ascent of *Great Wall* on Cloggy. This was reported in *Mountain* magazine with the highly provocative Ken Wilson-inspired headline: 'John Allen free-climbs *Great Wall* but uses chalk.' Geoff Milburn was also taken aback by this development:

> On the 2 November 1975 having just bumped into Tut Braithwaite, I recorded in my diary with some shock: 'Saw Chris Addy complete with CHALK BAG coming down from *Strand*.' Chalk! In Wales! What was the world coming to?

Chris Addy had seconded John Allen on his free ascent of *Great Wall* and may have picked up some 'bad habits' en route. By 1975, chalk was becoming accepted by the cognoscenti and was another factor in the rise in standards at the time. A more contemporary example of similar neophobia in climbing is the controversy around the use of bouldering mats to convert gritstone headpoints to high-ball boulder problems.

Facing page: Alec Sharp on the first ascent of the first pitch of *Ordinary Route*.

Below: Chris Dale follows the main pitch of *Positron* during the first ascent of *Ordinary Route*. Photos Alec Sharp.



GOGARTH. 20-21.12

"THE CREEPING LEMMA"

L. STEVE. H.XS. 5a/b. 360'

BEGAN WITH A BREEZY, BROWN-TROUSERED HUNDRED FOOT FREE ABSEIL TO PTERODACTYL'S RAMP - MOST SENSATIONAL TO DATE! THE FIRST PITCH (160') IS REAL COSMIC CREEPING THROUGH A VAST KOLIDESCOPIC WALL OF QUARTZ THUNDERBOLTS AND SUSPENDED SAND PITS. A BIT OF A STRETCH WITH MY 140' ROPE. BOLD AND STRATOSPHERICALLY EXPOSED, THOUGH TECHNICALLY LOW.

THE NEXT PITCH IS ALMOST WALKING, EXCEPT FOR AN INTELLECTUALLY STIMULATING MOVE ROUND AN ARETE BETWEEN RAMPS.

THE MAIN PITCH HAS ABOUT 5' OF INDEPENDENT CLIMBING IN 130! THE MAIN PART IS MADE OF 'THE MOON' IN REVERSE - "STRICTLY SPACE WALKING" HXS: WITHOUT CARRYING PRUSSICKERS. AS A FALL FROM ANYWHERE ON THE 60' TRAVERSE WOULD LAND YOU UNREACHABLY IN SPACE, WELL OUT FROM THE COLOSSAL CONCAVE WALL AND ABOUT 200'+ ABOVE THE SEA. PROTECTION IS ALMOST NON EXISTENT AND THE CLIMBING CONSISTS OF SMALL CRUMBLE-CRISP, FINGER FLAKES IN A GALLAXY OF SOUL IMPLODING SPACE.

THE CRUX IS A REPPELANT LOOKING SECTION WHERE THE ROOF SINKS RIGHT DOWN ON TOP OF YOU AND THE WALL FALLS AWAY ALL AT ONCE. TWO PRO PEGS LEER AT YOU FROM A FAR TOO STRENUOUS POSITION. I LEANED ON A HORRIBLE LITTLE CRACKLING NUT WHILE I PREPARED DOUBLE CRABBED SLINGS. ONCE THEY WERE ON IT DIDNT SEEM HALFAS BAD, A STUD-IOUS BRIDGING MOVE, AND WITH A SHOULDER HOOKED UNDER THE ROOF, I COULD ACTUALLY STAY THERE NO HANDS!

STEVE DID IT LIKE TOM JONES ~~SEE~~ SPEEDED UP 40 TIMES! JIBBERING, QUAKING AND SHAKING AS HE TRIED HIS BEST TO PULL THE PRO PEGS OUT!

Right: Arnis Strapcans on *The Creeping Lemma*. Photo Steve Berry.
Above: his diary entry for that day. Courtesy Gordon Jenkin.



Alec Sharp returned to create a counter-diagonal to *The Moon*. *The Creeping Lemma* is as good as *The Moon* and, although slightly easier, is less popular. The first pitch must be one of the most outrageous 4c pitches in existence.

The Creeping Lemma by Alec Sharp

Like me, Steve Humphries was studying Maths at Bangor, and we were able to work through a large number of routes together. While climbing *Sind*, we noticed a beautiful band of slabs cutting through the overhangs in the centre of Yellow Wall.

A week later we climbed an initial 160ft pitch across a large grey wall to reach the start of the slabs. This pitch was easy but terrifying; at one point the only reason I went on was because I was too scared to go back. We went down as the sun was setting. The second pitch started with a ramp, and at one point while I was climbing this the whole slab on which I was standing started to move. I hastily climbed off it and watched it fall to the boulders below, landing with a resounding crash.

The crux move on that pitch involved a long stretch for a loose hold, which Steve pulled off while seconding. We failed on the next pitch, so we 'escaped' up the final pitch of *The Moon*. A week later we returned, and, after I had placed two protection pegs from an abseil, we were able to finish the route without further incident. The top pitches gave us some fun, with huge loose blocks which moved when I stood on them and also gave some of the most exposed positions I had been in. We called it *The Creeping Lemma*.