

GO GARDENING AT CABBAGE HEAD AND SPOOGY TOWN

An 8 week road trip in the U.K

INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

How would I describe my eight weeks in the UK? Too cold, too hot, too wet, too windy, too greasy, too vegetated, too chossy, too small, too dangerous, too traditional, too many midges, the peas are too mushy and the beer is too warm. In summary, it's all too British. It's no wonder the Brits are known as the whinging Poms because they have plenty to complain about. Apart from that, I had a great time, did some fabulous climbing, and I must say that British climbers, on the whole, are the friendliest and most hospitable climbers I've ever met.

In part one of this article, entitled 'Finding community at the choss piles of Europe', I wrote a bit of a piss-take of some of the superb crags in Kalymnos and France, highlighting their negative aspects and describing the sense of community I felt with some of the wonderful people I met, who provided me help on the way. This was deliberate to highlight the fact that it's the people you climb with are more important than the climbs themselves. Climbing is the medium by which we 'do life', and we meet some great people on the journey. The theme continues in part two.



Approaching Skellig Michael



IRELAND: The main reason for going to Ireland was the climbing festival at Fairhead. Prior to this I did some sightseeing, the highlight of which was a visit to Skellig Michael, a 200m high rock which is 11km out to sea, with a 1400 year old monastery on top. It was also a real pilgrimage for me to visit Ballyshannon, the oldest town in Ireland, the name of which is associated with the most memorable new route I did on Ben Lomond in Tasmania, with my old mate Bob McMahon. In late 1984, Bob and I were doing new routes at Pavement Bluff. We'd already done a couple of first ascents that day, and at 5.pm decided to go for one more. It was the golden era of route development where you had entire crags to yourself, and as we walked on the scree we noticed a glorious thin corner and finger crack spearing 80m to the summit. We launched ground-up, trundling the loose rock as we went in three difficult pitches. After a nerve wracking lead up a loose corner with spaced and marginal gear, I'll never forget reaching over the roof and sinking the first of many fingerlocks in a marathon jamming pitch. Totally exhausted and with cramped bloodied hands, we felt as if we'd gone 15 rounds with a dolerite punching bag, but walking back to camp with the plateau on fire by the setting sun, was one of my most satisfying moments in 37 years of climbing. Bob named the climb 'The Road to Ballyshannon' after a book he was reading about the Irish civil war in the 1920's. To visit Ballyshannon in Ireland, brought back vivid and emotional memories of that great climb that Bob and I did together.



CABBAGE HEAD: Fairhead in Northern Ireland, is reputed to be the best cliff in the U.K. It would be if they cleaned the cabbages and other greenery off the routes. The mud in the back of the cracks, plus the incessant rain, provide the perfect growing conditions for cabbage like plants which sprout from many of the routes. Some climbs had all the ingredients for an Irish stew; gravy-like mud, cabbage and sheep grazing on top of the crag. I call it 'Cabbage Head.'

To be fair, it certainly is the most impressive crag I've seen in the UK, with several kilometres of 100m high, perfect dolerite by the sea, with over 500 routes. I call it 'Africa by the sea', almost identical in appearance to that great crag we call Africa on Ben Lomond, dominant crack and corner lines with blank faces in between. The faces are the stage for escape artists like guidebook author Ricky Bell who I met on the first day, who has put up some of the most dangerous routes in the world on those dark brooding walls, many E7's, 8's and 9's.

The Road To Ballyshannon (22) on Ben Lomond.



Fairhead, possibly the best crag in the UK.

The cabbages on the cliff, and the lack of a defined path at the base, is probably due to the short climbing season, lack of traffic, abseil access and the terrible weather. Apart from the 300 climbers at the annual festival, Fairhead is the realm of Ricky and his mates and the occasional Brit on a road trip.

The festival was a hoot with hundreds camped in the paddock, the grog was flowing, Irish songs from guitars by the campfire, and a slideshow by Tom Randall of Wide Boyz fame, held in the farmers cow shed. Tom was inspirational in describing his dream to climb the hardest new crack routes in the world, and the dedication and punishing training regime required. Tom and his buddy Pete Whittaker weren't gifted athletes, and it was inspiring to see what is achievable to any ordinary climber, prepared to commit themselves to training.



Festival camp at Sean's farm



The Bristol crew at Fairhead



Rathlin Wall, Fairhead

The spirit of community was well and truly alive. I was welcomed by some British climbers, partied and climbed with them all week, and even organized a rendezvous at Pembroke in a few weeks time. Thanks to Ben Healey, Bobby and the Bristol crew of Kel, Rob and Erica, for the fun times. Another example of community is how the farmer, Sean McBride, has generously made his farm accessible to climbers. He is the most accommodating landowner I've ever met. Far from being afraid of litigation, he lets climbers wander all over his land, provides camping for 5 quid a night, stiles over his fences, hosts an annual festival and his wife even offers to wash clothes for dirtbag climbers.

THE IRISH SOLUTION TO THE BEN LOMOND PROBLEM

During that whole week I only managed two days of climbing because of the rain. The climbs were fantastic splitter cracks similar to Ben Lomond. What impressed me was the strict adherence to traditional ethics, even to the method of descent. There are no bolts on any crag in Ireland, apart from some crappy quarry, and that includes no rap stations. Standard kit accepted by all, is to bring a 100m static rope to access the climbs. There are only two descent gullies at the crag, and both are wet, inconvenient and miles



Anchors for accessing routes at Fairhead.

Tom Randall

apart. Anchors are built by looping boulders well back from the cliff edge backed up by a nut or cam. Climbers are more than happy to share abseil ropes I believe the traditional climbing experience should be a self-sufficient one, leaving the cliff as you found it with no trace, and embracing both the climb, access and descent. It was refreshing to see this policy willingly accepted by all climbers. I would like to see this same attitude adopted by the Tasmanian climbing community at Ben Lomond.

For many years Ben Lomond was bolt free until some rap stations were installed by a well-meaning friend of mine, to facilitate a safe and speedy descent allowing more time for climbing, and also to save environmental damage in the gully. I removed the bolts in 2008 in the interests of keeping the mountain bolt free, to preserve one last bastion of pure traditional climbing in Australia. Begrudgingly accepted, the bolts have not returned but have been replaced by heaps of tat and recently chains have appeared to replace the ugly tat. Climbers are unwilling to summit the crag due to some loose rock, and to avoid the gully descent.

At Fairhead, I saw the solution to the Ben Lomond problem; that is to walk to the top via the summit track and the plateau, then abseil from natural anchors to access the climbs. It just means carrying a 100m static to the top, something Fairhead climbers are conditioned to doing on the 20 minute approach to their crag.

There is something marvelous and rewarding about being totally self-reliant in the mountains, accepting nature's challenge and leaving the cliff as you found it. I'll now go buy shares in manufacturers of static rope, in anticipation of everybody adopting the Irish solution.

GRIT SHIT

The grit was not really shit, it just rhymes for the sake of this article. Climbing on Gritstone in the Peak District was the most enjoyable experience of the trip so far. Tiny routes averaging between 10-20m high, on beautiful grippy rock, alternating between burly jamming and delicate rockovers, mantles and friction dependent slab moves. You can't fudge it on gritstone; every climbing technique, and more, is required for these routes and you pack in a lot of climbing in 10m. The only thing that was shit was the weather. In the eight weeks I've been in the UK, I've had no more than ten days of fine weather and the rest has been either unclimbable, or icy hurricane winds and grabbing a climb between showers of rain.



Flying Buttress Direct (20)

My tick list consisted of world famous classics like The Rasp at Higgat Tor, Right and left Unconquerable, Quietus and Flying Buttress Direct at Stanage, Suicide Wall at Cratcliffe Tor, Valkyrie and Chequers Buttress at Froggat, Peapod Groove at Curbar, Regent Street and Great North Road at Millstone Edge, and the Sloth at the Roaches. How can such small climbs be so famous? They have their fair share of cabbages and some of the belays, particularly at Millstone, are appalling. After topping out on a gravelly slope and nearly sliding off the cliff to your doom, you have to go 20m back and anchor to an ancient wobbly

concrete fence post. Pitch for pitch, many of the routes in the Cataract Gorge in Launceston would stack up against the three star routes on grit; Double Dozen, Lingham, Loose Money Juice Money, Westham and dozens more. But much of their fame comes from the history and the first ascensionists, people like Joe Brown and Don Whillans who put many of them up in the 1950's with primitive gear. They are hard enough with modern equipment and sticky rubber shoes, so utmost respect to the pioneers. And then in the 70's and 80's, people like Ron Fawcett and Johnny Dawes took it to the next level by climbing the aretes and faces at the cutting edge of difficulty with atrocious gear, and the phenomenon of Hard Grit was born. But for me, Hard Grit was born well and truly before the 70's, when I was about to fall off Kelly's Overhang, a desperate struggle soloed by some loony in 1920.



Chequers Buttress at Froggat (17)



Kelly's Overhang (17) at Stanage



Quietus (22) at Stanage, brutal roof crack.



Right Unconquerable (17), but conquered easily by me

It's amazing how climbing community works. My host for a week was Graham Hoey, a Peak District legend and guidebook author. He is engaged to Helen Gibson, who climbed with me in Tassie three years ago. So through that connection, I was generously hosted in his beautiful gritstone cottage and guided to all the best climbs. For another week I stayed with Chris Boulton, a cutting edge climber in the 60's, who I met in Kalymnos. E2 5c on the Isle of Skye in 1967? Chris, you are a legend. And when I ventured to North Yorkshire to climb at Almscliff, I was hosted by local legend Pete Brown who I also met in Kalymnos. One of the more remarkable examples of community happened at Cratcliffe Tor. I heard Australian voices in the gully next door, and sticking my head over the cliff top I yelled, "Are You Aussies.?" "Yea," they said. "Are You Gerry?" They had recently climbed in Tasmania and recognized me from my guidebook. They also had mutual friends in Bob Bull and Pat Butler from Ballarat, great blokes who I've climbed with. I ended up climbing with them for the next two weeks at Pembroke...Brad and Lisa, the two happiest climbers on the planet.



Brad and Lisa, the happiest climbers on the planet



Brad seconding Rock Idol, classic 19



Hunstmans Leap where the easiest way out is grade 19



Me leading Sunsmoke (E2), about grade 20 at Mother Careys

SPOOGY TOWN

Won't you take me to, Funky Town? So the 70's disco song says, but if you want to go to Spooky Town, go to Pembroke in South Wales, where you will find handholds as greasy as the proverbial butchers donger. The spooge, or coastal slime, affects the first few metres of most climbs, unless you get some morning sun and a breeze. The rock looks like total choss, and along with the spooge, you've got to abseil from wobbly stakes in the turf, and spend ages each night working out which crag to climb on depending on bird restrictions and military firing at the range nearby. But the rock was surprisingly solid, the climbing was superb, and the atmosphere in the zawns was exhilarating. Cheap camping was had at Bosherton near the pub for 3 quid a night. It rightly deserves its reputation as the best sea cliff in Britain. Of all the areas in Britain which I visited, Pembroke is the one which lends itself to an extended stay of several weeks. Freycinet in Tasmania has better rock with more interesting scenery and variety of climbing, though Pembroke is way more extensive, and being strictly trad, makes for more dramatic and adventurous climbing. It's an unforgettable and committing experience to abseil into Huntsmans leap, knowing the only way out is a solid E1 (about 19).



Abseil stakes at Pembroke- bomber!



Heart of Darkness (17), classic traverse

The sanity of the strict trad ethic is questionable when topping out at Mother Careys and trying to manufacture a belay on a steep hillside of grass, gravel and loose boulders. But I met British legend Steve Findlay, father of Hazel (who is one of the top female climbers in the world), who has enforced the 'no bolt' policy in Pembroke with some bolt chopping in the past. His attitude is that if it was good enough for the first ascensionists, then it should be good enough for us. Steve reckons that if you lack the skills to make a belay on a dodgy cliff top, then you shouldn't be climbing there in the first place. This flies in the face of the current trend in Australia of making everything safe and convenient.

It was at Pembroke that I met Johnny Dawes, one of the most famous climbers in the world. Johnny put up the Indian Face at Cloggy in 1986, the first E9 in Britain and probably the hardest traditional climb in the world at the time. It was a privilege to have a few beers over a couple of hours and hear his stories. He has lost his fitness now, but still climbs very well and has taken up a new hobby, that of climbing without his hands, extreme walking he calls it. Look it up on youtube, and it is a mindboggling feat of balance for him to climb such difficult routes hands free.



GO GARDENING

It may be a bit harsh to label Gogarth as 'Go Gardening', but that was my experience on the only route I did at Gogarth, a cliff which every British climber recommended as a 'must visit' place. Adventurous sea cliff climbing with some dubious rock characterizes Gogarth and the route we did was awesome, a climb called North West Passage (E1, about 19).

Three stars for adventure, atmosphere and some exciting climbing. The gardening came on the last 10m of unprotected, extremely chossy loose rock and vertical grass, a terrifying conclusion to this brilliant route. And whatever you do, don't go to Rhoscolyn which should be renamed as Choss-colyn, definitely the worst cliff I've been to in the last 3 months, but enthusiastically endorsed by the guidebook author who showed me

round the crag. Getting to the base of the E1 was an E9 scramble of loose rock and grass, and then the first 10m was poorly protected. As I was about to bail from a loose spike before even attempting the climb, the guidebook author said, 'I thought you

Aussies were bold climbers. 'I am bold', I replied, but I'm not a bloody idiot!' Gogarth is definitely worthy of several days of your trip, and camping in a van is easily done at the carpark above South Stack lighthouse.

BROWN SHOWERS IN WALES

While the gritstone of the Peak District was my favorite climbing area, the most memorable and best quality routes I did in the UK were the classics of North Wales. The Left Wall of Dinas Cromlech is not only an awesome line, but a brilliant climb; solid grade 21 if you can manage the pump. To its right, I was struggling on Centotaph Corner, the most famous trad route in Britain. Amidst the moss and slime seeping from the route, I plucked a huge clump of daisies off the cliff. I was going to march round to Joe Brown's house and tell him to plant them in his garden instead of on his bloody climb. If you are going to climb Joe Brown routes, you are bound to get a Brown shower..you will get shat on and sandbagged. Climbed over 50 years ago with primitive gear, routes like Centotaph Corner and Vector at Tremadog were world class standard at the time, and tested me to my limit with modern gear.



Centotaph Corner (20)



Come the Dervish (22) in the slate quarries



Dinas Cromlech, with Centotaph Corner obvious and climbers camped in vans

Climbing in the slate quarries is highly recommended. I did Come the Dervish (22), Last Tango in Paris (20) and Pull My Daisy (21) with its scary 10m run-out from a sling around a steel pipe! This ugly industrial wasteland hosts some marvelous climbs, but is as far removed from the wilderness experience as you can get, and yet the slate museum details a very interesting history worthy of a rest day afternoon. Tremadog is worth a couple of days on a trip, with Vector and the Plum being the best of the 'extremes'. For the week I was there, I dosed in my van at the Cromlech boulders in Llanberis pass, and also at Eric's campsite at Tremadog.

CORNISH PASTIES

The last leg of the UK trip was a few days in Cornwall, visiting the two best crags recommended in the guidebook, Sharpnose Point and Bosigran. Sharpnose Point is worthy of a day's attention because of the unique geological features which the climbs are on. Three fins of rock, only two metres wide, jut fifty metres out to sea, and there are climbs on both faces of the fins. A pleasant camp can be made at Duckpool Beach at the start of the 40 minute walk to the crag.



Bosigran is Cornwall's finest granite crag, but I renamed it Chossy-Gran, a bit like your crusty old Gran who has lost her marbles and dribbles everywhere. Honestly, if it was at Freycinet in Tasmania, it would rank well down the line behind White Water Wall, Mt Amos, Hazards Main Wall, Sow Spur, and Flowstone Wall..not to mention the Star Factory which doesn't count in this comparison because it's a sport climbing area.

There were enough vegetables on this cliff to supply all the bakeries in Cornwall making Cornish pasties. We did the two best extremes recommended in the guidebook, namely Suicide Wall and Bow Street Wall. Suicide Wall gets a 'top 50' rating, and I would rate it in the 'top 50 worst climbs' I've ever done. The first two pitches immediately demote it to two stars. I copped another Brown shower on Bow St, supposedly a grade easier than Vector at Tremadog, but I couldn't do it and practiced my aid climbing skills. Very greasy conditions didn't help, and the climb needs some afternoon sun to dry it out. To be fair, I only spent two days here and did four '3 star' routes, but visually and vegetabally, the quality of climbing was disappointing.

CONCLUSION

So after 3 months in Europe I've driven 9500km, and done 143 routes at 45 different crags in places such as Kalymnos, Southern France, Ireland and the U.K. Surprisingly, the best fun I've had has been at the two tiniest venues, namely the gritstone crags in the Peak District and bouldering at Fontainebleau. I have teamed up

with Chris Andrews, a solid dependable climbing partner who I met in Pete's eats in Llanberis, and we are off to alpine multi-pitch routes in Chamonix, Switzerland and the Dolomites. Cheers and thanks for reading.

