

Aberdeen Sea Cliffs – a big day out

By default, Nick has always been a fast climber. His philosophy is that there is no need to dither on a route. If the gear you placed several feet below you and several moves ago means that safety is assured for a few more moves, then press on. This makes him a bold climber and makes for a bold watch too on occasion. It is a philosophy that has several applications. If you are going well why bother to stop and place gear? If you are a little bit off your best form, then stopping to place gear will be futile. Save energy for moving rather than stopping to fiddle and faff. Failing will surely follow fiddling and faffing whereas moving gets the route done.

This is important because there are more routes to do today. Nick's air of confidence in his ability and preference for action is evenly matched with his assessment of current form. Thus, a good tally of routes in a day, measured by accumulated E Points, is normally assured. It is only when there is a satisfactory tally that the day is done, the belayer can stand down and value for money has been achieved.

It helps of course if you have a sparse rack of gear. This eliminates faffing, necessitates economy of placements, and reduces failure. Those who climbed with him, in the early days particularly, will tell you about a minimal collection of kit which Nick was mischievously happy with. A luxury item like a camming unit was appreciated for the speed that it could be placed but that was never enough to merit ownership. Having a full set of cams on the harness, three Friends in those days, would have been a special occasion for a particular route and was usually a collective contribution by the team at the crag.

So, when protection needed to be placed sparingly and the confident self-supporting mantra of "how hard can it be?" was applied to either current fitness or cunningly applied to induce fitness, a high tariff day was often assured. This successful approach has endured over the years.

The day on the North East Outcrops in 1994 is a case in point. I knew Nick was in a run of form so Earnsheugh was a good choice for a day of memorable mileage. It is a big cliff with a foreboding atmosphere, a committing feeling, and a place that commands respect. The routes all have a well-deserved reputation for not giving up their prize easily. They respond especially well to the positive approach of a confident climber, so my own battling performances at the cliff often resulted in a flawed ascent.

There is a grassy ledge at about one third height that I reached from the boulder beach by the E2 first pitch of Prehistoric Monster. This served as a warm-up for the day ahead, a rare thing for Nick. From the ledge many of the much sought-after prizes of the main wall are in play and usually climbed via beefy crux pitches topped off with a short exit pitch to the top of the cliff.

Or you can cut the faff, head for the sky, and run it out. If you minimise your gear and your belays you will get the miles in if you have got what it takes. This was a perfect venue for us and the odds were stacked heavily in favour of a day that would leave a lasting memory.

By mid-morning Necromancer E5 6a, Prehistoric Monster E5 6b and Thugosaurus E5 6b were all felled by the deadly combination of merciless efficiency, a hand full of runners and a convenient abseil back to the grassy ledge.

Knowing that we would probably be looking for a good return on the day I had a vague plan that the accessible collection of high quality E5's at Craig Stirling could be needed once the Earnsheugh visit had gone well. I also knew that the cliff's notoriously fickle conditions were favourable.

Yahoochie, Yerteezoot and Running Wild are steep, single pitch routes with quick access and a perfect belay platform just above the sea. Yahoochie was the only route of the day that I had not done before, and it justified its bold reputation which has now been recognised with an uplift to E6 6a. It was in my mind to lead it after Nick, but the morning mileage was nagging in my mind. The bold nature of the route meant that, for me it would be a new milestone on the sharp end, one that I would need to be fresh and focussed for to succeed.

Yerteezoot E5 6b was quickly despatched as the afternoon warm up followed by Yahoochie which I declined to follow so that I could have my moment on the sharp end. Twice I got through bold moves to a good hold only to reverse to the ground lacking the commitment and confidence to press on that seemed effortless to Nick. Given what had gone before I must have had the physical fitness to do the route had I approached it fresh but in truth I did not have the head for it. We finished the day with the photogenic bold arete of Running Wild E5 6b which after a technical start gave a thrilling finish to an outstanding day.

Each one of the routes that day might have been a season maker at the time for many local climbers. Indeed, they are the kind of routes that carry a reputation that draws climbers to these cliffs from further afield. Certainly, working through two or three over a summer would have confirmed your progression through the grades and marked the year out as a successful one. To cruise up six of the gems of the North East Coast in one day of on sight climbing was an outstanding effort that to this day is still talked about. In fact, there was a twenty-six year wait for a repeat performance – and that by Scottish hot-shot Robbie Phillips.

John Wilson