

Creation, Raven Crag, Thirlmere

"I don't know about this", says Nick as he tugs at the rather feeble wire. Time for a rethink, He climbs back down for a chat. This is not like him. Something's spooking him.

Nick's had this route on his list for a while. Trouble is, so have many others, but to most it's just "on the list" and never actually gets done. A photograph featured on the front of a guidebook a few years ago, it looked outrageous. We've all heard about it but no one that we know has done it. The feeling is that it's well under-graded at E4, everyone suspects it's good E5 - possibly harder?

I can see that Nick is trying to rationalise it. It's only 30 foot of hard climbing. It has some protection but its only one, maybe two thin wires low down at the start of the hard section. The best runner is a tiny Chouinard No. 1 stopper, maybe 2 mm thick. This is the runner that Nick had just placed and was testing. The crux headwall is clean, the holds and moves look obvious but there's no let-up. It's 80 foot up in the air, leaning out at an awkward angle and committing as hell. Once you set off up the hard section it's difficult to come back, the holds aren't good enough to reverse.

"OK so what if you do fall? will the wires hold?"

"They should do but not if you fall too far onto them. But I think the hard bit is just above that runner"

If they do pull its going to be a long fall, off the headwall and out into space. Not nice, really not nice. So, the runners under the headwall have to hold. These need to be improved, the old peg needs to be backed up. The belay can be moved further up the groove to reduce drag, improve runner alignment and give a better load angle.

That's it, Nick has his head round it now, he looks totally focussed as he optimises the lower runners. I try and reassure him that I will hold the fall no matter what. As long as the gear holds. I'm not sure he's listening.

He checks the thin wire at the start of the headwall and commits...

Like a machine, he reads all the holds in front of him, works out the sequence as he goes, this is all unseen. He storms up the wall in minutes. No more runners, no more thinking, just execution. Cold precision, impressive to watch. A joyful whoop from the belay ledge signals the successful outcome.

Now it's my turn to follow. I have a rope above me, and I'm still worried about the prospect.

Looking down from his belay ledge as I survey the crux section Nick is smiling. "Well, what do think?" It's a loaded question, he knows what's coming and he's seen the look of concern on my face. He knows what I'm thinking – bastard!

"It feels bloody hard, I really don't know how you led this, E4 my ass!" I'm on the headwall relaxed on the finishing holds, a lot of swearing and expletives come out with the relief and we laugh loudly and openly about it.

Nick's performance on this route clearly demonstrates the bold but calculated nature of his climbing more than almost anything I can think of. It was hard and it was dangerous, yet it was all thought through, made as safe as possible and executed perfectly.

The route was subsequently upgraded to E5 and thirty years later the current UKC consensus is pushing it up to hard E5 / E6.

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