

The Cayman (E2 5b), The Napes, Wasdale

Location and Setting

The Napes, on the southern flank of Great Gable, is considered by many to be the birthplace of British rock climbing. This being despite the fact that numerous routes had already been climbed over the hill and down the valley at Pillar Rock by the time Walter Parry Haskett Smith made his historic solo ascent of Napes Needle in 1886.

This atmospheric, rocky playground faces south-west thus catching the sun for most of the day and into the evening. It provides a stunning vista, perched high above Wasdale Head, looking down the length of the forbidding Wast Water and out to the coast and the Irish Sea. Looking up from the valley the crags perch high on the steep hillside below the summit of Great Gable. No wonder the Victorian climbers were drawn there from their regular base at the Wasdale Head Inn.

The Napes now provides a wide range of routes with easier mountaineering classics alongside harder, modern test pieces. Round the corner to the east lies the impressive Tophet Wall whilst on the north side of the hill, overlooking the head of Ennerdale sits the imposing Gable Crag.

The Route

In the Napes central area, between Eagle Nest ridge to the left and Needle ridge to the right, sits an expanse of rock with walls, cracks and grooves that sport a wide range of mid-grade routes from VS to E2. The best of these is The Cayman, a tremendous route up the slender face right of Crocodile Crack. It ascends remarkably good rock up walls, split by a series of small overhangs and overlaps using thin cracks and perfect finger edges. The route starts from the aptly named 'Dress Circle' – a roomy grassy ledge from where you can imagine those tweed-clad Victorians watching their fellow climbers performing on the stage of Napes Needle. Consider a moment also, the Abraham brothers setting up their large plate camera on this same grass ledge to capture the action as it unfolded in front of them. The Cayman takes a direct line up the slabby wall above the comfortable picnic spot. An initial overhang is easily overcome before a diagonal crack leads us to a second overlap, which provides the 5b crux moves. The wall above has an ample supply of good edges that lead to another overlap. Over this then up and right to a ledge on the arete, which is followed in a fine, airy position to a good ledge and solid belay. An easy pitch up grassy chimneys leads to the top ridge if you are looking for the summit experience, however the belay is helpfully supplied with a secure abseil point, which most people will use to return to the Dress Circle ready for more fun and games. The route is adequately protected throughout – providing just enough good placements to keep the leader safe, whilst still requiring a satisfactory degree of commitment to ensure upward progression and success.

History

The first ascent of this excellent route was made in 1977 by the strong Carlisle-based team of Pete Whillance and Dave Armstrong. It was one of a trio of this team's top-class routes on Gable that year. The month before, this impressive partnership had established the hard,

committing Supernatural (E5) up the centre of Tophet Wall and the technically absorbing, poorly protected Sarcophagus (E3) on Gable Crag. A combined ascent of all three of these routes would make for an impressive day's climbing – now there's an idea!

My Experience

I have enjoyed The Cayman on numerous occasions. It is a route I will come back to often. My latest ascent of the route followed a chilly morning on Gable Crag with a cool northerly wind blowing onto the crag. We finally gave in and scuttled round the hill in search of the warm sunshine and shelter that the Napes often provides. On that occasion we had parked at the top of Honister for the long-ish but easy walk-in to Gable. There are other approaches available. The easiest and most common is to walk up to Styhead Tarn from Seathwaite in Borrowdale. That way, your approach takes you underneath Kern Knotts Crag. An ascent of the Innominate Crack/Sepulchre combination at E1 would be a great warm-up in the morning sunshine. The other approach option is from Wasdale. It is shorter but steeper. This would have been the normal approach for those early Victorian pioneers.

Alternatives

If you are looking to make the most of your day at the crag there are plenty of other alternatives to add to your ascent of The Cayman. Next to it is Crocodile Crack (HVS), which featured in a recent article on Lakeland crack climbs. Further to the right, Amos Moses at E1 climbs in a similar style but at a slightly easier grade to The Cayman whilst to the left Aquiline Slab, also similar but feels decidedly harder at E2 6a (probably E3). If visiting the area for the first time it would be rude not to immerse yourself in some of the history by climbing a few of the old classics. They might be old but are no pushover. Eagle's Nest Ridge Direct (MVS) was climbed in 1892. It was a route years ahead of its time, requiring combined tactics in an incredible situation without the security of protection. There is also the Needle itself. Originally soloed via The Wasdale Crack (HS) but now offering a whole range of options at HS, MVS, E1, E2 and E3 – take your pick! Behind it is the other Classic Rock route of Needle Ridge (VD). It is easy to combine a visit to The Napes with routes on Tophet Wall or Kern Knotts to make a truly memorable day out.