

'LOOKS ALRIGHT, DUNNIT?'

Martin Berzins

Two of the essentials for ice climbing are having the urge and having the equipment. It's difficult to explain why (and don't get the wrong idea) but it was not until I married that I really felt able to take up ice climbing. The equipment came via a telephone call telling me that Ron had fallen while rock climbing and was recovering in hospital. Later he told me that he fell eighty feet. I made an obvious assumption. 'Eighty feet – that gives you time to think before the rope comes tight.' 'No rope,' he said. 'I was soloing – I kept wondering when the bouncing was going to stop; but I did get up and walk to the helicopter.' After this Ron went to work in a country renowned for its climbing – Holland – and as a parting gesture sold me his ice hammer.

The third essential is having someone to climb with. For some reason, Tony Burnell had no-one to climb with and signed me up as his apprentice on ice. Almost the first day out was a pointer as to how things would go.

After a quick ascent of Black Crag Icefall we stood at the bottom of the normally trivial South Gully on Dove Crag. There was not enough ice to climb Inaccessible Gully, and Tony's ginger beard bristled with impatience. 'Looks alright dunnit? We'll solo it.' Most of the Turkeys that come out only when the snow falls had already climbed the gully, but the last pair were still on the crux. The leader was doing his best to destroy what was left of the route, and lumps of ice bounced all around us. I hurled abuse at him for his generosity, as we waited for him to get out of the way. Suddenly – crack – the ice that contained both Tony's crampons and one of his axes broke off and fell to the bottom. Desperate scrabbling ensued until he managed to get back onto the ice. After watching this nightmare I blew a fuse on the crux, nearly ran out of strength, and clipped into the decrepit rope the bumbles were climbing on. Of course, the leader was perched without a belay in a little snow cave with his trusty alpenstock by his side.

Despite this experience we climbed solo whenever possible – the catch-phrase was always 'It looks alright dunnit?' – and off we went. Confidence on ice came gradually, and with it the realisation that if you soloed together it was best to be in front. Alternate 'leads' and increasing competition became the norm.

One crisp morning we found ourselves swimming up powder snow to the bottom of the Grey Mare's Tail in the Moffat Hills. Although we couldn't really tell – because of the powder snow lying on top of the waterfall – 'It looks alright dunnit?' It was my 'lead' and so I shovelled the snow onto a hapless Tony below. One long pitch led to the crux – a traverse right across the middle of the waterfall. This was like a brittle shower

curtain through which the psycho had already hacked huge holes. Tony followed me across with 'Easy, that, wasn't it? All I did was hook my axes in the holes.' The rest was a stroll in comparison, but a thin smear of ice to the left of the Tail looked to be interesting. After about fifty metres, Tony stopped below where the ice steepened and became much harder, and told me to belay. I settled for a couple of slings around small icicles and a large amount of confidence in Tony's ability not to fall off. Naturally, it was my turn to find it 'easy' before we sped south to the Lakes to fit another climb into the day.

It was quite late by the time we had walked up Coledale to the superb ice ribbon of The Force. The last few Turkeys were still on the crux pitch, which had an ice-axe *in situ* and a man being lowered to the ground. As a concession to the hour I was allowed the rope, and thus equipped gained height

Opposite: Steve Wade, ex 'El presidente' on the first pitch of Wasdales Great Gully, right hand finish. Photo: Paddy Gibson.

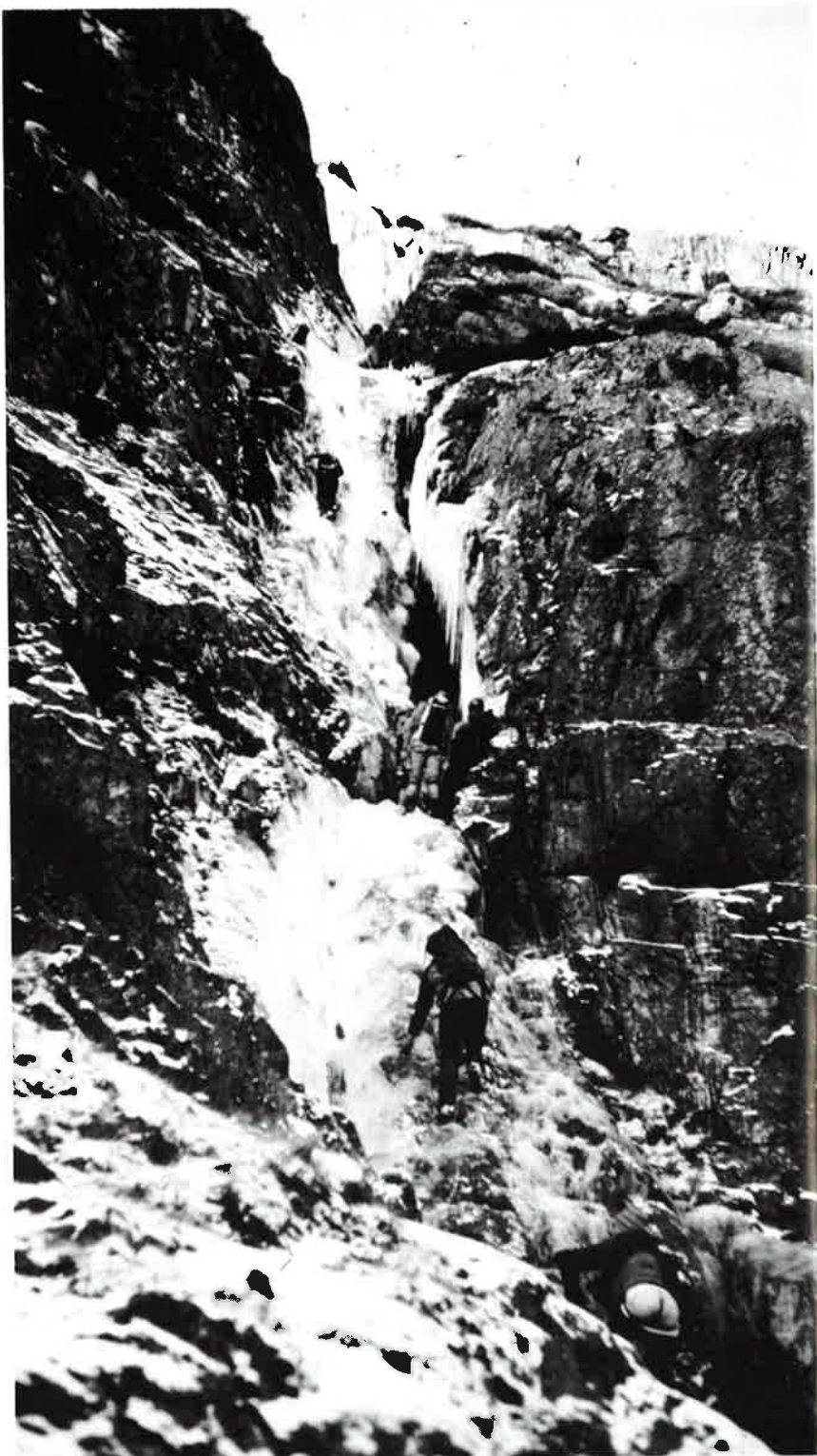
Below: Wasdale's Great Gully, right hand finish. Photo: Paddy Gibson



rapidly on the vertical ice until the angle eased and I could see the belay and the Turkey on the next pitch who . . . I ducked, prayed and then cursed him as large lumps of ice thundered past me. Tony had the pleasure of a powdery, heathery pitch before we reached the top and raced around to Wasdale.

Two friends were in the hut, and told us that the Wasdale Screes Crag was in good condition, but that Great Gully with the much vaunted right-hand branch was an easy grade two solo with short pitches. The next morning we were late – the horde were there before us. 'If the lads can solo it, so can we,' said Tony, leaving the rope in the car. The lower, easy part of the gully was full of queueing roped parties. We climbed over and around them, to shouts of 'Worse than Italians!' and 'What the fuck do you think you're doin?'. We reached the half-way amphitheatre, only to see the superb seventy-metre ice pillar of the right-hand branch. Sandbagged! The lads had never soloed this! We tried to convince ourselves – 'Looks alright dunnit?' Tony soloed first, and made steady progress. The ice was hard and brittle, but the climbing wasn't too taxing, provided you ignored the drop and concentrated on the next placement. There was a ledge at the top of the first steep bit where I stopped to let Tony get clear. From the ledge I traversed right, to where the ice steepened, and paused on front-points with both axes in to collect . . . Smash! – a lump of ice hit me in the face. I went numb, a little dizzy, and then blood poured out of my nose or lip – I couldn't tell which. Once I realised what had happened, I screamed and swore as loudly as I could at the Turkey who had knocked it off. After five minutes of shouting abuse, enough of the shock had worn off to let me assess the situation. There was no-one close by, and a rescue would have been embarrassing, so, slowly and carefully, I carried on to where the angle eased off near the top. There was brittle, hard, chopped-up ice on the left, where people had climbed, and lovely, perfect, unclimbed green ice on the right! I caught up with a roped team near the top. The belayer looked me over cautiously – 'Wasn't me, mate. Now that's it, take it nice and steady. Just keep going, you'll be OK, it's not far to the top.' 'Patronising bastard!' I thought, without realising how deathly and bloody I looked. Further up I met a subdued Tony, who said that he had accidentally knocked the ice off. Quietly he took me to Whitehaven Hospital, where they stitched me up.

The next year I climbed with some-one who showed me that ice screws could be placed while resting on an ice-axe. I was a little disappointed at this minor triumph of technology over adventure, because I'm sure Tony would simply have said 'Looks alright dunnit?'



Above: A typical lakes ice route, complete with Rus MacCraith's opinion.