

KILNSEY - Yorkshire's Dark Horse

by Martin Berzins

Certain crags capture your imagination and force you to return time and again. Kilnsey is one such crag for me, a huge bulging mass of limestone totally dominating the upper reaches of Wharfedale.

Approaching from the south, the climber is at once impressed and intimidated by the enormous main overhang and, beyond it, the continuous 45° overhanging wall of the North Buttress. Between the two is a series of vertical and overhanging walls and grooves. The only sop to easy climbing here is a couple of vegetated gullies. The whole place has an air of seriousness. Stood at the foot of the crag, craning your neck to study the lines, the eye tends to lay things back. Pete Livesey summed the place up;

"The trouble with Kilnsey is that the reasonably angled slabs turn out to be overhanging."

Once of my regular climbing partners said "I don't like Kilnsey it psyches me out." For me this is the whole point of going there, the very attraction of the place. You tend to have to "go for it."

Everything about Kilnsey is difficult, even actually managing to climb on it is problematic. Climbers on the crag form a natural sideshow for the tourists on the road below, which becomes blocked and people complain, so climbing is banned at week-ends. (The notion of double yellow lines seems to have escaped the local council.)

The farmer who owns the crag lives opposite the northern end so it is wise to ask permission. The alternative is amusing only in retrospect. Ever been halfway up an A3 when the police arrive to take you away?

"Sorry officer, we're stuck, love to come down but can't." "Be down by 3 p.m. or we'll sort you out at the station." At five to three the boys in blue returned as we stood on the ground covered in ropes, pegs and slings.

"Are you the climbers?"

We looked around in vain for others, but there were none, so we assumed that we must be they.

"Names and addresses."

To be fair this bobby didn't mind too much and left after telling us not to do it again. I was foolish enough to tell my parents.

"What next? You'll soon be robbing banks!"

Pre-history

Access wasn't always such a problem and most people still associate the crag with the aid extravaganzas of the fifties and sixties. I won't bore you with the engineering details and instead will concentrate on free climbing. The legendary Arthur Dolphin had tried to free climb here in the forties and after the peg brigade had mostly finished Alan Austin climbed *Central Wall* which at least had more than a token measure of free climbing on it.

The Barley brothers left the crag with two predominantly free climbs - *Brainstorm* and *Warlord*; fine lines, but some of the worst free climbing on the crag; vegetated, grotty corners and traverses. The older routes also suffer from one drawback in actually

reaching the vertical grass at the top of the crag. Today's climber, fortunately, does not suffer from such misconceptions with regard to his climbing!

The Livesey-Fawcett Era

The boom time for free climbing on the crag came with Pete Livesey in the seventies. *Brainstorm* was first to be free climbed in 1972 or so. The massive corner of *Diedre* was next. This superb natural line divides the North Buttress from the easier central section of the crag. The first pitch is both steeper and harder than its grassy appearance belies. The real meat of the climb is the superb second pitch. An overhanging corner leads to moves out onto the left wall to escape the worst bulges. The climbing is a reasonable E1 unless you happen to start the route in gathering gloom and find yourself bridging up the top pitch aided only by the car headlights on the road below.

Left of *Diedre* is a smooth grey wall of perfect limestone which ends in the broken groove of *Warlord*. Up the middle of the wall is the intimidating line of *Central Wall*. Pete Livesey's classic account in *Rocksport* of the first free ascent in 1972 snatched from John Sytrett and Roger Baxter Jones, was entitled *Arms like a Fly* because of Pete's supposedly withered appendages and the steepness of the climb. In fact this superb wall climb is all fingers and toes. The traditional grade is E3 but those used to sensible grades will mutter complaints as they power away from sparse protection. The crux move is low down, swinging right by a peg on sloping finger holds, but the upper wall is sustained and tiring. In particular there is quite a run out at the top before the delicate dimply break of *Trauma Traverse* is used to traverse left to the belay. More than one budding hero has reached this break too pumped to use it! The resulting fall seems like about fifty feet. Time to wonder if, how and when you're going to stop. Fortunately it's free. The top pitch doesn't compete with the abseil from the tree.

Livesey's campaign continued with Ron Fawcett and a free ascent of the fiercely overhanging *Perverved Geranium* E4.6a on the central section of the crag. The poor stance at the top of the first pitch and the vertical pasture that follows have discouraged many repeats.

The next routes to be free climbed on the crag in 1975 were on the left hand, south side of the crag. The main overhang provides a convenient umbrella for the steep clean wall beneath. Ron Fawcett and Al Evans free climbed the first pitches of *Direttissima* and *Original Route* as far as the main overhang. In keeping with Yorkshire's ridiculous grading system both were given Hard VS! The *Direttissima*'s pitch is perfect and probably the most popular free climb on the crag, steep groove climbing on mostly good holds at about E2.5c with masses of in situ protection. Above a resting niche spectacular bulges are covered in jugs. At the top you swing out right and look 100 ft. down and 20 ft. in to your second. The first pitch of the

original route is different having a short steep crux at E3.6a on slightly inferior rock. At about the same time Pete Gomersall and Jill Lawrence free climbed the direct start to the *Dodger* at HVS5a to give one of the few good easy free pitches on the crag.

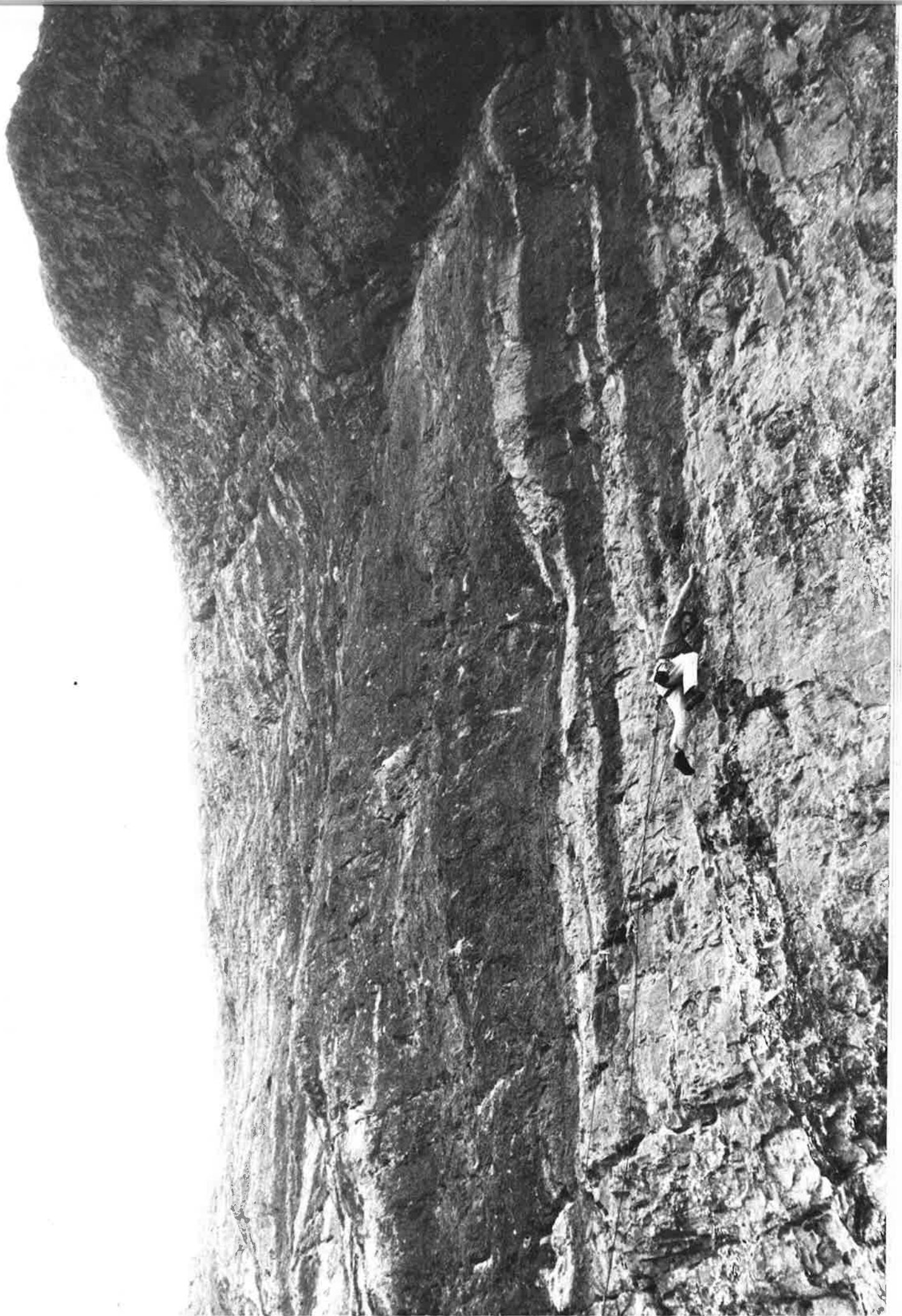
About thirty feet to the right of *Brainstorm/Original Route* is the start of another very impressive Livesey-Fawcett route: *Birdmen* (E4 6b.5c). The initial ridiculously overhanging crack puts many roof climbs to shame, even worse is that the crux is still to come in the form of an easier angled crack above. The route was written up with a mysterious sling for aid to leave the ground which no-one ever mentioned again. The top pitch traverses right along *Brainstorm* before breaking out over three sets of roofs to the top. It has been compared with *Sirplum* in Cheedale for quality. Imagine *Sirplum* but make most of the holds loose; throw in a couple of six foot roofs, fill up the odd crack with loose rock and take away all the best runners. Yes it's not dissimilar. Thinking that I was invincible I led this pitch on my 21st birthday and sat at the top, tied onto steep grass with manky belays and with both feet firmly dug in, whilst Pete Botterill followed. Watching the huge blocks that he trundled crash into the stream I suddenly realised that life could be very short.

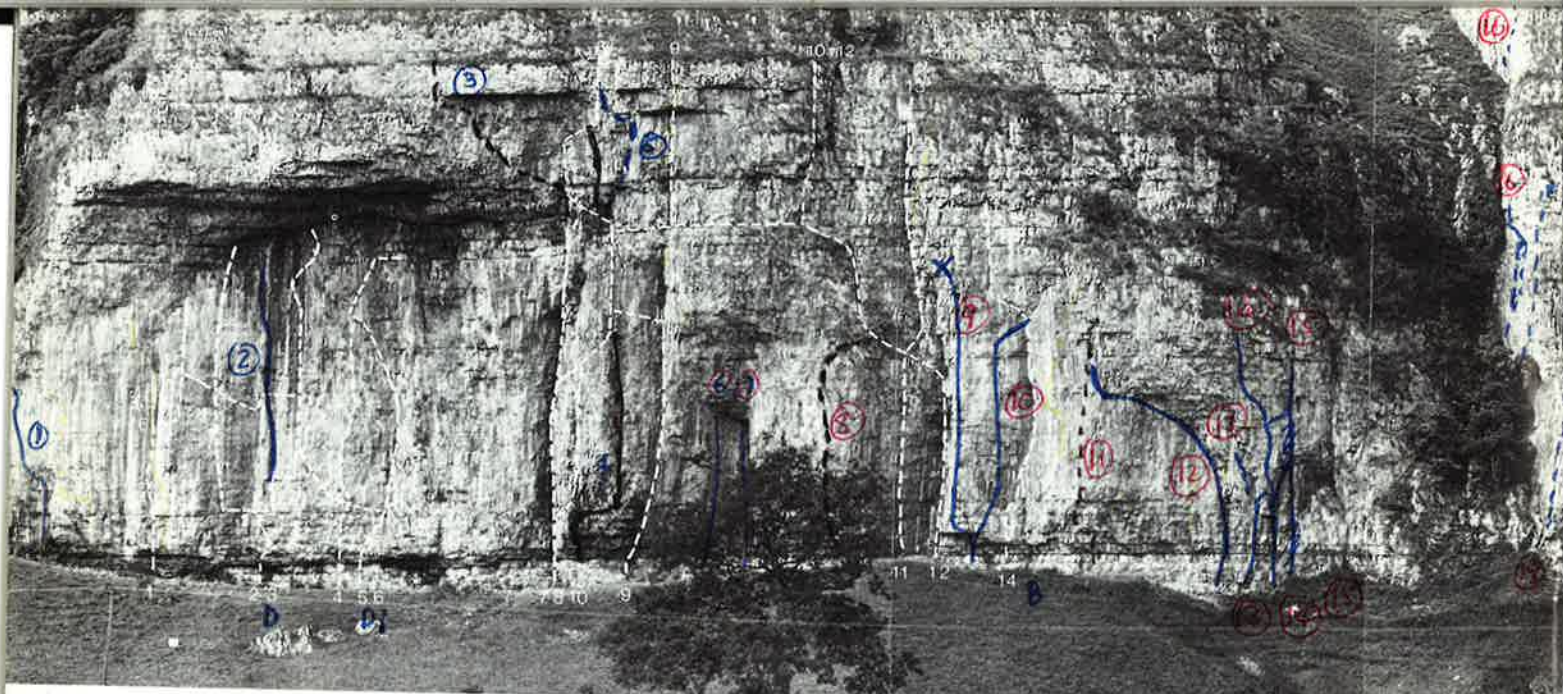
The main event on Kilnsey during the seventies was Pete Livesey's final offering *Claws* (E5.6a.6a), a route that is firmly engraved on Yorkshire climbing history in more ways than one. The route takes the blank looking rock between *Diedre* and *Central Wall*. The first pitch has a very serious air with difficult route finding. A vague groove is climbed to flakes and bold moves up and across left lead to better holds and runners followed by an obvious groove and belay on *Trauma Traverse*. The myth of this route's invincibility was finally broken by Andy Brown and Ashley Cowell. Once they had illuminated the first pitch with chalk a host of repeat ascents followed. The top pitch provides a surprise. A steep wall leads to a tree below a prominent blank looking scoop. Brother Bob led up into the groove and yelled down.

"It's covered in chipped holds."

As the groove was wet at the top we abseiled off full of righteous indignation, wondering where we could buy some readymix. To Pete's accurate statement that *Claws* is "the hardest, most sustained and one of the best routes on limestone" one can only add that it is also one of the most chipped.

Right: Neil Foster on *Deja-vu*, E4 6a, a thankfully short-lived aid route subsequently free-climbed by Fawcett. Photo: Ian Smith.





Kilnsey Crag, Yorkshire. This full on view gives no impression of the fiercely overhanging nature of the crag. Only the Central Wall area is vertical. Value E4 6a, 5 Directissima E3 5c, 6 Contraflow E4 6a, 7 Original Route HVS 5b, 8 Captain Tripps E4 5c, 6a, 9 Birdmen E4 6b, 5c, 10 Brainstorm E1 5b, 17 Picnic at Hanging Rock E4 6b, 18 Mistaken Identity E4 6c, 19 Warlord E4 6c, 20 Peripathetic E4 6b, 21 Central Wall E3 5c, E3 5c, 27 Crank Stroke Groove E5 6b, 28 Rictus E5 6c. Photomontage: Bernard Newman.

The Eighties

One of Yorkshire's bouldering experts, Rob Gawthorpe, was next to make his mark on Kilnsey. Fortunately for the rest of us his devotion to more academic pursuits has restricted his climbing activities to a handful of new routes; all remarkable for their sheer technical difficulty. The first pitch of the *Super Direct*, a slim groove with a bulging problem start, was his first contribution at E4.6b. It provides intricate and technical climbing, especially on the last section to the abseil bolts. Worse was to come. The start of *Warlord* used to involve lassoeing a sling twelve feet off the ground and prussicking up to it. Gawthorpe started to the left and free climbed this at an impressive 6c. Thinking that *Warlord* couldn't possibly follow the grotty groove above he moved out left onto a clean wall and followed the obvious groove at an easier 6a to the break of *Trauma Traverse*. (*Mistaken Identity* E4.6c).

The same line caught the attention of Lancashire climber Dave Knighton. Not knowing of Gawthorpe's ascent, he traversed across from *Central Wall*, pre-placed a sling and then led the groove and added an easier pitch above. This non-event was written up as *Talons*. Knighton's other contributions were more impressive however. *Worlds in Collison* (E3/4.5c, 5c) gains the wall right of *Diedre* from thirty feet up that route. Route finding is awkward as the first pitch weaves its way up the wall to provide sustained and finery climbing. The top pitch is equally difficult technically but is shorter and in a more exposed position. The route as a whole feels a little undergraded at E3. Only this year Alan Clarke from Lancaster added a bold looking direct start at E5.6a to improve the route, if that's possible.

Captain Tripps (E4.5c, 6a/b) was the last route that Dave Knighton put up on Kilnsey, and bold in conception. The first pitch follows the photogenic but technically reasonable hanging arete right of *Brain-*

storm. From the belay at the top of Pitch One of the *Original Route* the climber takes a bulging crack above the belay before breaking rightwards to avoid the very top overhangs. Rumours abound regarding the style of the first ascent, sections aided then free climbed later and several days taken. On the final free ascent of the top pitch, the bottom section was wet so aid had to be used on the easy bit so that the crux could be free climbed, etc., etc. Despite this circus, the climbing is reasonable, given the situation, and the crux has a peg and sling thoughtfully placed right by it. No pitch on the crag is more sensational and 'out there'.

Inevitably Ron Fawcett made an overdue re-appearance to pick a plum line. Beneath the main overhang between *Directissima* and *Super Direct* lay the first pitch of Gomersall's difficult aid climb *Deja Vu*. This pitch now provides 100 feet or so of superb climbing on good flat holds. The protection is a little sparse in places but the climbing is mostly reasonable with perhaps the hardest section at the very top to gain the break under the main overhang. The pitch probably deserves E4.6a, but towards the top end of that grade, and is of the finest quality.

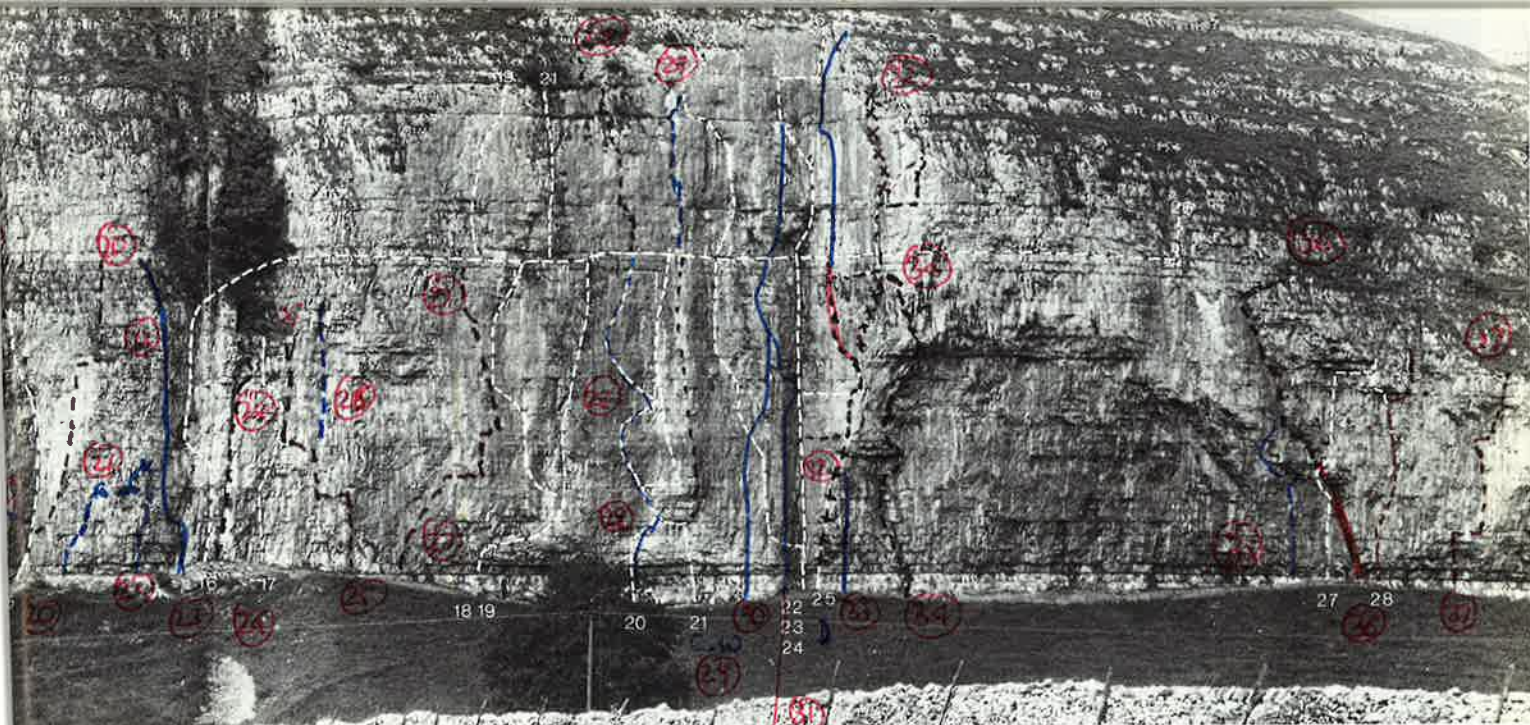
(In case you hadn't noticed, the point of these crag reviews seems to be for the author to bitch over the history of a crag and then to indulge in glorious self-advertisement. Well, you've had the former so here comes the latter).

In the centre of Kilnsey is truly impressive wide, open groove, about seventy feet high with an easier groove above and left of the top. This is *Balas*, the sort of route that most people had looked at and said "yest that will go" but no-one would ever try it. All credit then to Ashley Cowell and Andy Brown for cleaning it up and reducing the aid to just one of the three bolts that are in place on the traverse left of the top of the main groove. Bob and I free climbed it but only after a joint effort. Bob

went up and jumped out in the morning sun so I pulled the ropes through and eventually did it after a siege and after cleaning off some of the loose flakes on the upper traverse. I stayed low on the crux, stretched between two breaks, slapping on "tinies". At the very end just as I was about to fall, my hand landed on a hidden jug low down which proved the key. Above is easier so its best to abseil down to the bolts and retreat from there - or if your name is Moffat just jump straight off!

The next most obvious line to go free had to be *Crank Stroke Groove* - I'd been eyeing it up for years. The route is the easiest looking line to the right of *Diedre*. A curving overlap leads up to an obvious roof and a traverse right to a groove which leads to the top. The crucial section is the overhang, though the overlap absorbed a lot of effort from both Bob and myself. The overhang had a weird hand jam move but above it was still strenuous and quite gripping with the only protection being *in situ* pegs. During Bob's lead of the final groove, that David Bailey of the climbing world Bernard Newman was prussicking up the abseil rope slightly to one side and way out in space. Bob was tired from his previous efforts and was bridging out onto rock which hadn't been cleaned. Bernard, unable to move out of the line of fire, squealed with terror as rock rained all around. Bob was really going for it and wouldn't stop, I sat safely at the bottom giggling and wondered if this was the price that had to be paid for art. Surprisingly this is one of our routes that people have actually bothered to repeat. Martin 'Basher' Atkinson thought that it compared with *Cave Route Right Hand* in difficulty. Understandably upset by this conclusion, he did the route again and decided that he must have been having an off day.

To the right of *Crank Stroke Groove* is the more solid but even steeper line of *Rictus*. This was free climbed by Mr. & Mrs. Fawcett at E5.6c, the crux being a



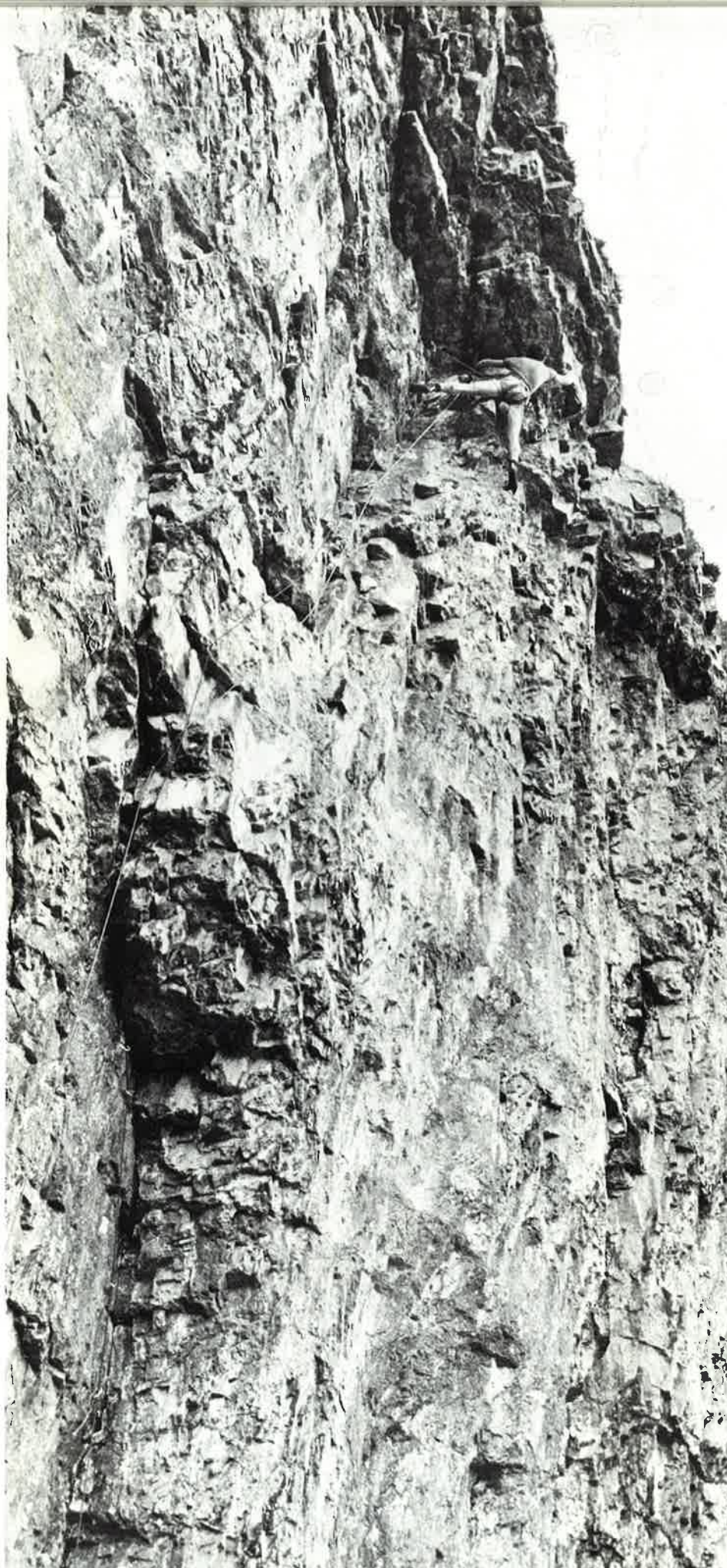
the Berzins brothers below Warlord do not give scale! The Climbs: 1 Superdirect E4 6b, 2 Wise Blood E5 6b, 3 Deja-vu E4 6a, 4 Face VS 5a, 5a, 4c, 11 Dodger Direct HVS 5a, 12 Dodger VS, 13 Camelot VS, 14 Balas E4 6b, 15 Perverted Geranium E4 6a, 16 Trauma Claws E5 6a, 6a, 23 Diedre E1 5b, 24 Worlds in Collision E4 5c, 5c, 25 Worlds in Collision Direct Start E5 6a, 26 Friends in High Places
Low Right: A typical Kilnsey situation, a brutal bouldering start to get established on a leaning wall. Neil Foster starting Face Value, E4 6a. Behind is the curving groove of the excellent Original Route HVS 5b, and the bulging wall of Captain Tripps, E4 5c, 6a. Photo: Ian Smith.

desperately holdless scoop, fifteen feet up. This looks to be a superb pitch but unfortunately the crucial peg runner has been removed by one of that acquisitive minority of peg climbers, the gear grabber. This mentally deficient creature denies routes with crucial peg protection to free climbers and by smashing in pegs where nuts or skyhooks would do destroys existing climbs. The old argument that these routes wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for him just doesn't apply here. Most of the aid routes on Kilnsey have seen relatively few ascents - many have good cracks which have not yet been destroyed by pegs. This situation will not last if Wilbur Pegwanker has his way. This 'species' has removed pegs from *Rictus*, *Crank Stroke Groove* and *Face Value* (see below).

Next summer I was back on North Buttress climbing with Graham 'Streaky Bacon' Desroy. Halfway up *Worlds in Collision* we noticed the obvious horizontal break girdling the North Buttress. On a mad impulse we set off to do it on sight. Easy traversing led to the arete. After that there was a section to rush across. Twenty feet out from my last runner, hanging onto a muddy break with disintegrating foot holds, trying in vain to persuade a Friend to work on two cams I suddenly remembered why I didn't lead new routes on sight. Being a wise old frigger I had a skyhook with me for just such an eventuality. I cleaned the break, left one sling *in situ* and after a sideways retreat it seemed reasonable, apart from a horrible sloping hand traverse move to gain the bolt belay. Streaky cruised across and the other two pitches were much easier, if still a trifle airy. *Friends in High Places* (E3,5c,5b) seemed an appropriate name for such an adventurous day out.

We returned a week later to climb the obvious wall between *Central Wall* and *Warlord*. Unfortunately a good direct line was lacking and although the climbing compares in difficulty with *Claws* there are more resting places and escapes. There is





also more protection. I was afraid to climb the last bit to *Trauma Traverse* at first and came back with Bob to finish the pitch off later.

I'm not really too proud of the next route we climbed that summer *Picnic on Hanging Rock*. Fortunately Bob Bradley led it just before I did and so absolved me from some of the guilt. It's typical of what happens when you try to rush a new route. In the centre of the crag to the right of the first pitch to *Trauma Traverse* is a thin crack in an overhanging wall. Bob abseiled first but didn't put any nuts in, so after I cleaned it there were three slings holding the abseil rope in. We didn't have time to prussick up because Bob had to rush off back to Sheffield so I set off to lead it like that. One of the nuts was low down, one sling was to be left in and the third would have been trivial to place. We were fortunate on two counts: firstly the route was so hard that it needed a thousand yo yos in frantic succession, secondly the crux was in between the runners that I had to keep unclipping and rope down from. Why am I telling you all this? Well firstly it's history now and secondly because Neil Foster and Allan Clarke caught and photographed us in mid-frig!

Winter and the rainy season was coming when I persuaded Ashley to pamper my obsession and take me out to Kilnsey. It was pouring with rain but the line we did was the last one on the whole crag to get wet. A little to the left of *Direttissima*, the steep wall is covered in flat holds but has few runners. The result was a short but superb little climb - *Face Value* E4.6a. A hard bouldery move rightwards led to two poor peg runners at 25 feet or so, then easier climbing to another point fifteen feet higher. Above there there was nut protection and better holds. The pitch seemed very easy after I'd cleaned it off because I knew where the holds were. The pegs, which were more to show the way and for retreat than protection, were removed by another brainless aid climber; a stupid act of vandalism.

Even a vaguely logical mind like mine could work out that if there was room for a route to the right of *Deja Vu* then there was also room to the left. Two visits later the line was clean and its bottom wall had two peg runners quite sportingly positioned. It looked impossible. I decided that I needed moral support so I recruited Neil Foster. We both climbed up to the top peg and fell off. After a fair bit of this we bouldered out the crux and a little later I managed to put it all together in one horrendous push. I only just made the halfway resting ledge. The wall above was still difficult right to the very top and the pitch as a whole was superb. (*Wise Blood* E5.6b)

Neil and I had both independently spotted the second line of the day. A rising traverse from twenty feet up the *Direttissima* to the top of the *Super Direct*. On my abseil I cleaned off the last link and then replaced the pegs in *Face Value*. Neil strolled up the route and I was only too pleased to be seconding in my exhausted state. (*Contraflow* E4.6a)

The crucial sections were the five progressively harder links between the four existing routes. It completed a perfect day.

The Future

As we turned to go Neil said "You've had the run of this place too much to yourself of late haven't you?" I said nothing.



Top: Robert Kieske high on Diedre, E1 5b, with the wall of Worlds in Collision (E4 5c) in the background.

Above: Andy Pollitt powering across the crux traverse of Balas, E4 6b.

Right: Pollitt nearing the finishing jugs of Directissima, E3 5c. Photos: Ian Smith.

Left: Martin Berzins initiating the traverse below the final roof during the first ascent of Crank-Stroke Groove (E5 6b) a fiercely overhanging pitch on doubtful rock. Photo: Bernard Newman.

