Kilnsey Crag in the morning light. Facing due east, it is sheltered from the worst weather, and overhangs so much that it will often stay dry in torrential rain. Photo: Graham Desroy.

The problem with taking your favourite crag and telling all the world about its secrets (Kilnsey - Yorkshire's Dark Horse, Mountain 93) is that once it's done there is no going back. Everybody knows where the routes are, which lines are left to be done and so on. I could try telling you that Kilnsey is just a loose tottering mass of limestone barely 50m high, doing its best to fall onto the main road up the valley of Wharfe Dale. I doubt that you'd believe me though - it can't be that bad a crag when a pretentious magazine like this one devotes two articles to it in the space of two years. Now bigheaded I may be, but even I realise that it was not Mountain 93 that made Kilnsey popular. The real reason is that the whole of Yorkshire Limestone became popular firstly because of work on the new guidebook and then more so when the new guide appeared. Such is the intensity of effort that the number of new free climbs put up on Kilnsey during the last two years is more than double the number of routes put up in the previous twenty-two!

On the basis of that boring article I wrote in Mountain, my crag for the guidebook was Kilnsey. Now it's my belief that a guidebook writer's real task is to fill in as many of the gaps as he can. The business of grading existing routes is done by committee and consensus these days and offers little scope for amusement. The first rule of exploring a crag with plenty of unclimbed spaces is, in the true way of a non-competitive pastime, to climb all the lines that you know other people have seen. There were obvious possibilities of this type at Kilnsey.

Either side of the very overhanging North Buttress are two superb bits of rock. To the left is the smooth Central Wall and to the right is a series of very steep grooves. Rumour suggested that Ron Fawcett had abseiled down the line of an obvious white streak on the Central Wall, while everyone who had walked under the superb rising leftward line of the Overlap (A3) must have wondered whether or not it could be free climbed. Andy Pollitt was even said to have suggested bolting it until Bernard Newman threatened to break his arms!

Early in 1984 Chris Sowden and I managed to climb both these lines. The Overlap was surprisingly easy - the crux was a short 6b traverse leaving Crank Stroke Groove, and the imposing upper groove was covered in holds. While I was cleaning this Chris led an unclimbed E1 hand jam crack just right of Trauma Traverse. This was named Birds Nest Crack out of reverence to the original route of that name at Almscliff. The White Stripe was more of a shambles. I had abseiled down the wrong line, and so after boldly lurching up the crux bulge found myself in the unheard of situation of leading on sight. Desperately I shouted for instructions on where to climb until runners appeared. Above that it wasn't any easier but at least I knew where to go - White Rushin (E5 6b).

After these routes we were foolish enough to go on holiday. Rule No. 2 of crag development is - once you've started don't stop until you've done everything you possibly can. We returned to find that the rules had been changed. In the middle of a superb ramp line to the left of the Central Wall was a new bolt and above it a chipped slot. "Who the hell put that in?" asked Chris. The answer appeared in the shape of an unrepentant Pete Gomersall who explained that the route was unfinished because he kept taking forty foot falls onto the bolt. This was soon to become Zero Option (E6 6c). We felt cheated - all the hard work we'd put in to somehow find means of protecting
routes using only pegs and nuts seemed to be in ruin. The route was obviously magnificent and, sadly, it was a sign of things to come.

Our immediate consolation was the arete right of The Diedre. Alan Clarke had led the bottom part with two pegs and a nut placed prior to his ascent. The easier section above was part of Worlds in Collision but only an ageing bolt marked the top part. One of the pegs and the wire were taken away by Alan’s second and the bottom arete was unrepeted. The climbing was both steep and serious without these runnels and, forty feet above the ground I only just joined Worlds in Collision and not the nearest Orthopaedic Ward. The bolt above was reached by a stiff pull but above was an obvious layback flake which turned out to be detacahed . . . Rule number three of new routings is—don’t do them on sight especially if they are loose and difficult. I sat on the bolt and cleaned as much as I could.

“First free ascent this,” I shouted to a visiting southern climber as I casually threw another hold down at him. After a retreat I tried again and almost reached the stance. I pulled on an obviously good hold. It creaked and somehow I stayed in contact with quite a sizeable block held in by my nose. By now I didn’t care and with a left hand tossed it over my shoulder. Fortunately it didn’t even come close to the long suffering Chris. Darkness and the stance arrived quite soon. The top pitch was no easier but later and after I’d cleaned the bottom pitch from abseil - Ice Sport Special (E6 6b) was finished. It is now both difficult and on solid rock.

The depressing thing about writing a sequel is the repetition - history has an irksome way of repeating itself. Remember the story I told you about Bob Bradley finishing Picnic on Hanging Rock after I’d led the crux? Well it happened again in almost the same place. To the left of Zero Option there is a line that I spent the best part of the day cleaning. A bit devious it eventually traversed left (the crux) to the thread of Picnic. Lo and behold I ran out of steam again and Chris finished the pitch by climbing up directly where Picnic moves out left - Mantissa (E5 6b). As to if to emphasize that this part of the crag was not for me on about the only midsummer Sunday this year when we were not at Kilnsey, Pete Gomersall cleaned the obvious direct groove line above where Mantissa moves left. Exponential Exhaustion (E5 6b) is a superb pitch - though it grieves me to say so.

The next route on Gomersall’s list in 1984 was the very overhanging Little Ermie (E6 6c). A bolt runner was used and holds blantly manufactured at the bottom. People began to complain about the tactics used to subdue what are obviously very hard climbs. Pete’s answer was not long in coming. To the right of the large open groove of Balas is a rounded arete of less than perfect rock. The start is very overhanging but leads to a ledge and a peg runner. Above this the arete is steep, soon becomes unprotected and has its fair share of doubtful rock before the bolt belay is reached. There have been no takers for a repeat of Relax (E6 6b) which is by far the most serious route on the crag. Two other shorter but more popular aretes were also climbed by Gomersall in the shape of Ground Effect and Waiting for the Sun - both E5 6b.

The obvious lines were getting fewer, yet there was one possibility for which it seemed presumptuous even to abseil down. Yet it was a possibility which according to rule number 4 of new-routing - abseil down everything - could not be neglected. Most of the North Buttress of Kilnsey is blank and leans at 135°. On its left side a large groove leads up to a roof, above which a slimmer groove which in turn leads to a second large roof above. This is the belay of Worlds in Collision. Despite the large number of holds there were a couple of minor problems like the two roofs - both of which had blank walls above - and the fact that the pitch overhangs about 1 in 3. The first asent involved jumping for a 20 year old bolt and resting on a pathetic peg on the lip of the top overhang. Given that bolts were appearing all over Yorkshire that autumn I had no problem in justifying replacing an old one with a better one. Rob Gawthorpe and I used it to learn about this sacrilegious new technique. Using only this point of the wall the top roof went free by a horrendous climbing-wall type lurch. Later I managed to climb past the bolt but winter came before I could free climb the whole route. The name that I gave
- Dominatrix (a woman in a sadomasochistic relationship who administers punishment) - began to seem appropriate.

This year I tried to finish the job but failed just above the aid point. In between holding my ropes Tony Burnett cleared a good but short wall at the right end of the crag. Alas Prying Eyes (E1 6b) were watching from a passing car in the shape of Pete Gomersall and Bonny Masson who proceeded to pick off the lines while we worked. The best was Smooth Torquor (E4 6b) which climbs directly to the abseil bolt. New Horizons (E2 5c) is a rising traverse to the same point while Downright Theft (E2 6a) is the line just left of Prying Eyes.

As it to add insult to the next Saturday saw Ron Fawcett stealing onto Dominatrix. I didn't associate Ron with such tactics, but was even soft enough to try and break the stony silence he was trying to impose on me. Chris Oswald and Tony Burnett added to the tension by cleaning a line in the Central Gully which became No Man's Land (E4 6b). The craggy blocks almost wiped out Ron's dog and some very unlikable language was used. I watched Ron's attempts in a silent rage - I felt like cutting his ropes. Time after time he climbed to the top overhang only to fall on the lurch above it. After each attempt he marched back to his car followed dutifully by wife and dog. Our only consolation that day was to transform the direct start to the Overlap from an old A4 into a reasonable E5 6b. Guess. Thankfully Ron failed, and next day I was back. Second attempt I climbed to the top roof but later the route started to seep and a small hold broke. Chris went up to drip it off but couldn't make the reach above the aid point. I knew I only had one go left but it was enough. The top roof came into being up the rib to the left of Deja Vu. The last few feet were soaking wet but an excellent peg runner just below eliminated any worries.

Chris and Tony were also starting to pick off the remaining lines. The surprising thing was that quite unobvious parts of the crag began to produce good but short climbs which often went only as far as abseil points. Gary Gibson is expert at finding such routes and the pleasant Achilles Heel (E4 6a) just to the left of the gully was his contribution. A little left again Chris led Arch Rival (E5 6a) and Tony led No Through Road (E2 5c). Further left still the obvious curving overlap of Dihedral Wall (A3) had been dismissed as too loose or too hard to clean. It was neither, and a superb pitch (E5 6b) was led by Chris. A bonus is that it finishes at the bolt belay of Relax and you can have a look on the way down.

Pete Gomersall and Bonny Masson applied the same methodical approach around Perverted Geranium. The arete to the left is Abracadaver (E3 5c) while around to the right is Butcher's Dog (E4 6a). Not to be left out I climbed the rock in between Perverted Geranium and Butcher's Dog with Jumping to Conclusions (E5 6b) and Optional Extra (E4 6b) both of which finish at the same abseil point.

Tony and Chris picked off yet more spaces with White Feather (E5 6b) up the wall left of Diedre. Tony led the serious bit but once he'd clipped the bolt refused to commit himself on the crux! Chris finished the pitch and also led two more routes on the wall of Central Gully - Hazard Course (E4 6b) and Mystique (E3 5c) a direct line to the abseil of Abracadaver. Chris also free climbed the first corner of the Bulp - Bulget (E3 5c) to an abseil point. The same day I managed to climb the desperately strenuous thin crack which leads up to it. Nerve Ending (E5 6b) was just what happened.

One of the more curious features of Klinsey is that not many climbs bother to go to the top. When they do the second pitches are often climbed much later than the first. Chris led the top pitch of Peripathetic (E4 5c) last year and this year the obvious scoop above Birdmen and Bird Brain provided me with exposed and intricate bridging on per-
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E6 is probably more correct. Despite the fact that about twenty people saw me do the route, someone - I wonder who? - spread the rumour that I'd sent Chris up to clip the top runners - I wish that he could have. The whole area left a bad taste in my mouth.

Ron's consolation was the inspiring named Metal Guru (E6 6c) which takes a bold and difficult line up the very left-most wall on the crag.

While this soap opera was unfolding, Pete Gomersall was quietly at work on a superb eliminate line through Claws. The bottom pitch of High Octane (E5 6b, 6b) is probably the hardest and most fingery on that section of the wall and the top pitch is a bolt-protected overhanging horizon. As Pete was now getting perilously close to investigating one of my best lines I suggested we join forces to climb the obvious two pitch route. He being the fingers and toes expert looked at the wall to the right of the Diedre while I was soothing my bruises at the leaming wall and arete just to the right of its start. My pitch was damp and difficult and time consuming. Pete's pitch was totally dominated by a ridiculous series of moves by a bolt runner - how he managed to flash this I don't know but Steaky Bacon Desroy who was photographing said that he was pulling all the stops. For the contrast in styles and pitches Division of Labour (E6 6b, 6c) seemed an apt description.

The pace of development was by now even getting a little hot for me. We drove past the craig one day to see Gary Gibson doing Deja Vu AGAIN. Now in our rule book you didn't do routes twice within such a short space of time unless you were after something new close by. He wasn't but we were and the next day Visitacion (E5 6b) came into being up the rib to the left of Deja Vu. The last few feet were soaking wet but an excellent peg runner just below eliminated any worries.

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feet rock - Scoup de Grace (E4 6b). Even more exciting was the top pitch of White Rushin which provided an intricate series of moves protected only by a bolt (E5 6c).

Slowly but surely the crag was being transformed into a good place to free climb. The transition seemed a little too easy to me and also to others. In the winter of 1984 the Yorkshire aid climbers (there are only about 3 left) removed the bolts out of all the old peg routes which had bolts put in solely for free climbing protection. They also then provocatively pegged Frankie Comes to Kilnsey (A5) up one of the best remaining lines on the crag - the left wall of Balas. Pete Gomersall rose to the challenge and placed three bolts to climb Frankie Comes All Over (E5 6b). The bolts were quickly removed by the pegmen and there didn't seem much point in replacing them.

From an abseil rope it was clear that pegs could be used instead of the second and third bolts. Not that they were that good. A nut in a hole protected(?) the moves past the first bolt placement. It had to go - a deliberate test of the nut resulted in my head brushing the grass when it stripped. A more subtle placement seemed to work and the pitch was completed. I even took short falls onto both the pegs before being bonighted on the resting place of Balas. The point was made - the wall didn't need bolts - Frankie Came Too Soon (E6). I can't help feeling though that this was a pointless gesture on my part and that the big blank walls that remain on limestone will be climbed with just enough bolts or pegs to stop you hitting the ground from a long way up.

Summary: A review of the exceptional state of hard free-climbing at Kilnsey Crag, Yorkshire.