

THE FIRST ASCENT OF NAPES NEEDLE

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The task of finding anything either new or interesting to say on the subject of the Napes Needle is one which is vastly easier for a light-hearted editor to set than for an unhappy contributor to perform.



Walter Parry Haskett Smith in 1936, at the time of his 50th anniversary ascent of Napes Needle

(FRCC Collection)

Ever since its bold outlines began to stare at us on every railway platform and the newspapers realised that however poorly reproduced its form could never be mistaken for anything else, the British public has been open to listen to the little that can be said about it, and consequently that little has been said over and over again.

However, as was observed by some philosopher whose system made no allowance for trifles like radium and marconigrams: "There is nothing New except the Very Old" - and my only chance will be to dive back into the dark ages, the dim and distant days when the Needle had never been climbed, or even noticed.

One day in the early eighties the weather was beginning to clear after two or three days of southerly gale. Masses of cloud surged up the valley, but after a forenoon of heavy rain were driven from the centre of the dale and clung tightly to the sides of the hills. After luncheon we ventured on a walk to the neighbourhood of Piers Gill, believing that the shelter of Lingmell would give us less wind and less cloud there.

Above Burnthwaite we lingered awhile, watching a curious cloud-eddy at the entrance of Mosedale causing that valley, though sheltered from the wind, to become tightly packed with the backwash at the very time when the main valley was gradually clearing.

As we mounted into the great recess of Greta Force we were almost free from the drift and even got an occasional gleam of sunshine, but across the path to Sty Head only the lower screes were visible and Great Gable was completely concealed. Suddenly, however, the mist grew thinner, and it became just possible to locate the Napes. Then they were swallowed up again, but a moment later the outermost curtain of mist seemed to be drawn aside and one of the fitful gleams of sunshine fell on a slender pinnacle of rock, standing out against the background of cloud without a sign of any other rock near it and appearing to shoot up for 200-300 feet.

The vision did not last more than a minute or two and we all thought that our eyes had been tricked, as indeed to a certain extent they had been, but resolved to take an early opportunity of hunting down the mysterious rock.

In those days climbers had never really looked at the Napes. The vast slopes of cruel scree below them not only kept explorers away, but gave the impression that the whole mass was dangerously rotten.

The fine cairn built by the brothers Westmoreland to mark a point of view led people to imagine that they had put it up to mark a climb of great severity and it was further supposed that the cliff below that cairn was the only piece of sound rock on that side of the mountain.

We made one attempt a few days later to find our rock and did in fact get to it, but it was a dreadfully thick, dark day, and we were by no means sure of its identity or of its precise position.

I did not return to Wastdale till 1884, and one of my pleasantest memories of the Needle hangs on the fact that my next sight of it was enjoyed in the company of John Robinson and during the very first climb that he and I ever had together.

Petty had made a remarkable recovery from his terrible accident on Mickledore a fortnight before and was considered well enough to be taken home. It was no easy job, however, to get him down from Burnthwaite to the road where the carriage was waiting for him below the inn.

Robinson, good fellow that he was, walked over from Lorton to help and, by means of a rough handbarrow, he and I carried the invalid the whole way. To me it seemed terribly hard work, but the sturdy dalesman's hornier hands stood the strain very much better than mine and, as soon as our farewells had been said and Petty started down the valley, the next question was: where should we go for a climb?

Mr. Bowring, who had been the means of bringing us together, wanted for some reason to take the direction of Sty Head and it was arranged that we should all three go together as far as the great scree funnel at the east end of the Napes known as Hell Gate, though I believe that the maps call it Deep Gill. Here there was at that time a curiosity in the way of climbs. From the stream of scree rises a small island of rock forming a very narrow ridge. The actual crest of this ridge then consisted of a line of sharp triangular blocks all severed from the mother rock but resting pretty firmly on it, owing to their bases being flat though extremely narrow. The problem of passing along them from end to end (which could only be done astride) was delicate enough, but when it came to crossing the gap left by the only block which had fallen, without

pulling over either the block you were leaving or that to which you were seeking to transfer your weight, it made all ordinary conjuring tricks seem clumsy by comparison.

After many struggles Robinson had to confess defeat by stepping into the gap; but the next man I brought there did far worse, for he pulled two of the tallest blocks over and at my last visit nothing remained of that once exciting problem.

Our next business was to hunt for my elusive pinnacle and make an examination of the Napes as we went. With this object we climbed up at once and then began a traverse across the face, keeping a rough level of perhaps 100 feet above the foot of the rocks. It was a jolly climb and before long we came rather suddenly into full view of the rock which we were seeking. Robinson's delight was unbounded, and he eagerly inquired whether any Swiss guide would be ready to tackle such a thing.

We did not go down to it, but continued our course to the gap between it and the main rock, turned up the Needle Ridge for a few yards, and crossed it into the Needle Gully, which we followed to the top.

Two years later some friends who had been climbing with me were to leave by way of Drigg and we arranged to start a couple of hours earlier than would otherwise have been needful in order that I might help them along with their sacks, have a farewell climb with them on Buckbarrow, and then return to Tyson's. We rose very early, but some of the party were slow in getting off and we had to hurry. The result was that the long walk in a hot sun left me with a headache by the time I got back to the Inn. The afternoon was cooler, and it occurred to me to stroll over into the head of Ennerdale and have a look at the cliffs on that face of Gable. These had never been climbed at any point, though Cookson and I had made a horizontal route across them about half-way up.

The marks of a recent stonefall drew my attention to a part of the cliff where I found a very fine gully and climbed it, not without difficulty, being impeded by a long fell-pole. Coming out on the top of the mountain I thought of the ridge beside which Robinson and I had come up two years before and made for it, intending to follow the edge down as strictly as might be. This proved to be quite feasible, though at one point my pole gave me a lot of trouble by dropping down a deep and narrow crevice. However, the ridge was so steep at that spot that some 20 feet below, on peering into the crack, I espied my stick stuck upright, and by thrusting my arm in was at length able to reach it with my fingertips and finally to draw it out.

Continuing down into the gap and now warmed by exertion, I forgot my headache and began to examine the Needle itself. A deep crack offered a very obvious route for the first stage, but the middle portion of this crack was decidedly difficult, being at that time blocked with stones and turf, all of which has since been cleared away. Many capable climbers were afterwards turned back when trying to make the second ascent not by the sensational upper part but by this lower and (under present conditions) very simple piece. From the top of the crack there is no trouble to reach the shoulder, whence the final stage may be studied at ease. The summit is near, being as they say in Transatlantic cities "only two blocks away," but those same blocks are set one upon the other and the stability of the top one looks very doubtful. My first care was to get two or three stones and test the flatness of the summit by seeing whether anything thrown-up could be induced to lodge. If it did, that would be an indication of a moderately flat top, and would hold out hopes of the edge being found not too much rounded to afford a good grip for the fingers. Out of three



An early photograph of Napes Needle

(Abraham Collection)

missiles one consented to stay, and thereby encouraged me to start, feeling as small as a mouse climbing a milestone.

Between the upper and lower blocks, about five feet up, there is a ragged horizontal chink large enough to admit the toes, but the trouble is to raise the body without intermediate footholds. It seemed best to work up at the extreme right, where the corner projects a little, though the fact that you are hanging over the deep gap makes it rather a "nervy" proceeding. For anyone in a standing position at the corner it is easy to shuffle the feet sideways to the other end of the chink, where it is found that the side of the top block facing outwards is decidedly less vertical. Moreover, at the foot of this side there appeared to my great joy a protuberance which, being covered with a lichenous growth, looked as if it might prove slippery, but was placed in the precise spot where it would be most useful in shortening the formidable stretch up to the top edge. Gently and cautiously transferring my weight, I reached up with my right hand and at last was able to feel the edge and prove it to be, not smooth and rounded as it might have been, but a flat and satisfactory grip. My first thought on reaching the top was one of regret that my friends should have missed by a few hours such a day's climbing, three new things, and all good; my next was one of wonder whether getting down again would not prove far more awkward than getting up!

Hanging by the hands and feeling with the toes for the protuberance provided an anxious moment, but the rest went easily enough, though it must be confessed that it was an undoubted satisfaction to stand once more on solid ground below and look up at my handkerchief fluttering in the breeze.

Note: This remarkable solo first ascent of Napes Needle took place on either the 27th or 30th June 1886 and is generally reckoned to mark the foundation of rock-climbing as a sport in its own right, ie distinct from mountaineering. The route is graded Hard Severe today.