

A SHORT HISTORY OF LAKELAND CLIMBING PART II (1935-1959)

John Wilkinson

An Earlier Review

The 50th anniversary of the first ascent of the Napes Needle in 1886 by Haskett Smith was commemorated by the publication of the Lakeland number of the Fell and Rock Journal (Vol XI, Nos. 30 and 31, 1936 and 1937), which contained a major contribution by H.M.Kelly and J.H.Doughty entitled 'A Short History of Lakeland Climbing'. The development of rock climbing in the Lakes was surveyed from the earliest recorded climb, a descent of Broad Stand on Scafell by the poet Samuel Coleridge in 1802, until the end of 1934. They showed how the sport of rock climbing, where ascents were made purely for the enjoyment of climbing and not merely as a means of getting to the top of something for a view, began with Haskett Smith's explorations of 1882 and was firmly established by his ascent of the Needle in 1886. In a masterly exposition they showed how the early climbers, who initially demanded the security of deep clefts in the hills, were, as the gullies ran out, gradually driven first into the narrower chimneys and cracks, and finally forced out on to the ridges and open faces. They also demonstrated how the rising standard of climbing paralleled the introduction of new techniques and equipment. This fascinating tale was told largely in terms of the climbers and routes they made mainly on the well-established major crags; Scafell, Pillar, Gable, Dow and Gimmer, although minor (and today highly unfashionable) crags such as Elliptical Crag in Mosedale, Black Crag in Wind Gap, Green Gable and Boat Howe were mentioned. However, lacking the gift of clairvoyance, Kelly and Doughty were not able to appreciate the impact which was to be made on Lakeland climbing by some ascents on other 'minor' crags during this period, and which were omitted from their account. I refer in particular to early ascents in White Ghyll (The Chimney and two Slab Routes), Deer Bield (Deer Bield Crack), Castle Rock of Triermain (The Direct Route, and Scoop and Crack), Raven Crag Langdale (The Original Route), Pavey Ark (Stoat's Crack, and Crescent Wall), Black Crag in Borrowdale (Troutdale Pinnacle), and various routes on Grey Crag and Eagle Crag in Birkness Combe. Kelly and Doughty were not to know of course that, purely in terms of popularity, the low-lying crags of Borrowdale, Langdale and the Eastern Fells were destined to surpass the old established crags on Gable, Pillar, Dow, and even the majestic Scafell. Kelly and Doughty drew up a chronological list of first ascents, and it is amazing to see how many routes were omitted. In addition to the routes on the 'minor' crags mentioned above, other important routes also went unrecorded; The Crack, Joas and Asterisk on Gimmer, Sinister Slabs on Bowfell, Eliminate 'A' on Dow, and many others. These omissions are quite inexplicable, as some of them constitute important milestones in the development of the sport of rock climbing in the Lakes. The list ended in 1934 with two brilliant routes by that meteor of the climbing world, F.G.Balcombe; Buttonhook on Kern Knotts, which was possibly the most technically hard climb at that time, and Engineer's Slab on Gable Crag, an uncompromising steep face lacking in belays, a route which went unrepeated for around twenty years. No mention was made of Balcombe's equally important Direct Finish to Central Buttress on Scafell however.

Thus Kelly and Doughty left the history of Lakeland climbing at a time when, to quote the prophetic words of C.F.Holland in the 1936 Scafell guide, 'the future is bright with the possibility of great developments, a time when there is no danger of the call of Ichabod, a time when we may feel that the best is yet to come'. Kelly and Doughty ended their masterly review with the hope that 'if the Fell and Rock Club decides to celebrate the centenary of the first ascent of the Needle by another special number of the Journal, there seems no reason why the historian chosen to record the doings of those intervening years should not have at least as rich and varied a story to relate as that which we have tried to tell'.

The rate of exploration in the Lakes has increased almost exponentially since 1934 with the result that whilst Kelly and Doughty could encompass the first one hundred and fifty years of climbing in a relatively short review, justice can only be done to the following half-century by splitting the history into three sections.

The 1930's: The Great Aid Debate Commences.

By the end of 1934, the foundations of modern rock climbing had already been laid. The hard-won technique of the gritstone-trained climbers Botterill, Herford, Kelly, Frankland, Piggott, Linnell and A.T.Hargreaves had resulted in a great advance in standards, and the renaissance of Welsh climbing, particularly the early development of Clogwyn du'r Arddu, had a pronounced effect on Lakeland climbing by encouraging the exploration of crags which had previously been declared unclimbable. The opening up of the East Buttress of Scafell was a direct result. The use of a piton to accomplish a difficult ascent (Overhanging Wall on Scafell, 1933), an event which was regarded with disfavour by many climbers at that time, triggered-off a debate on the use of aid which has continued unabated ever since. That superb climber Maurice Linnell must have had reservations about planting the piton when he threw out a challenge in the Rucksack Club Journal of 1934: 'those who prefer to climb the place unaided are cordially invited to remove the piton and do so'. Generations of climbers did not appear to have either the inclination or ability to take up this generous offer, and some forty years were to elapse before the second pitch was de-pegged and climbed unaided, thereby increasing the standard by a full grade to HVS. Kelly and Doughty referred to 'features which have distinguished British from Continental climbing, one of which is the refusal of our own climbers to resort to artificial aids, apart from the rope', and G.R.Speaker in the 1933 Fell and Rock Journal reflected the main body of opinion of the time when he wrote . . . 'At a time when rock and ice climbers abroad have adopted new engineering tactics and are climbing more and more with the aid of pitons, the admirable restraint shown by leaders on the more severe of our courses is as commendable as it is reassuring. To a great many of us the general introduction of mechanised climbing would rob this wonderful and noble pursuit of ours of a great deal of the force of its appeal and of its charm.' It is significant that the sentiments so ably expressed by Speaker have been heeded only comparatively recently, and the use of aid in any form is now condemned by most modern cragsmen. A somewhat more realistic approach to the use of aid was taken by Colin Kirkus, one of the best rock climbers of his time, in his article 'The Ethics of Ironmongery' (Wayfarers Journal, No 6, 1939) '....nobody has the right to climb with pitons a route which is conceivably possible without. If he does he will be depriving a more worthy contender of the honour of the first ascent. But

some day the human limit must be reached. Are men of that generation, then, to be deprived of all the thrills of pioneer exploration? Obviously this cannot be so; they will take the law into their own hands be it a matter of years or decades piton climbing will come to be a recognized practice in this country'. Indeed, as Kirkus foresaw, many first ascents in the quarter-century beginning in 1950 used pitons, or later, nuts and wedges, for direct aid.

In later years, the 1970's in particular, it was a point of contention in many climbing circles whether this route or that would still be unclimbed had it not first been climbed with aid, which in almost every case was eliminated later. There is no doubt, however, that had Kirkus's strictures been heeded, there would have been rich pickings for the highly trained rock athletes of later years.

By the mid 1930's, the great wave of exploration had almost completely died away both in the Lakes and Wales. The great innovators of the previous decade had either aged or given up exploration (Kelly and Kirkus); had been killed whilst climbing (Frankland on Gable, Linnell on Ben Nevis); or had turned their attention to other sports (Balcombe took up pot-holing where he made an outstanding contribution as one of the original pioneers of cave diving). The creative ability of top climbers rarely extends beyond a few years.

New men were slow in coming forward, but by the end of the decade great strides were being made once more, principally due to the efforts of a local quarryman, Jim Birkett, who subsequently became a legend in his own lifetime. Scafell was, yet again, the scene of the main action when, on May 1st 1938, Birkett, at the instigation of Charlie Wilson, turned his attention to the expanse of overhanging rock on the East Buttress between Mickledore Grooves and Overhanging Wall. Birkett must have had Linnell's example on the latter route very much in mind when he launched himself on to the steep, almost holdless and unprotected slab carrying a pocketful of pitons manufactured by Charlie's blacksmith uncle: two were used for protection together with a shoulder for aid, and a third constituted the belay at the top of the first pitch. This pitch, climbed without aid, is currently graded at 5b, the whole climb being HVS: it was without doubt the hardest climb in the Lakes at that time, and was to remain so for over a decade. Birkett's use of pitons on Mayday, as he aptly named the route, proved to be a unique event for him, for over the next twelve years during which he recorded forty-six new climbs in the Lakes, most of them VS or harder, pitons were never employed again. Birkett reinforced his grip on the East Buttress when, in the same year, he girdled a substantial section of the crag, incorporating some of the best bits of earlier routes, notably the White and Yellow Slabs. These splendid climbs were not long in receiving further ascents, and Alf Mullen set a precedent for aid removal when he made the third ascent of Mayday; this was made without the benefit of a shoulder, which was perhaps as well as he was wearing tricouni-nailed boots at the time! Mullen, like Birkett, was a superb nail climber, and the same year climbed Tricouni Slab, parallel to Botterill's Slab. His assessment that 'it is doubtful whether clinkers or rubbers would be any use on this climb' was subsequently proved to be faulty on both counts. Mullen also led a Direct Start to Central Buttress, thereby completing the work so ably begun by Herford in 1914, and extended by Balcombe's Direct Finish, thus providing what is still one of the most satisfying climbs in the District at a continuous HVS standard.

Other crags in the Lakes were also receiving attention; on Gimmer, Mullen linked

Asterisk and 'D' (Hyphen), and Sid Cross made the first of several excellent contributions by leading Citadel, VS, a pleasant route containing a fine crack up the centre of Pike's Crag. The old established crags of Dow and Gable received surprisingly little attention during this period, although a visit to Pillar by yet another gritstone expert, Arthur Birtwhistle, resulted in South-West-by-West, VS, a belated companion to Pope's South-West, made in 1912.

However, one of the most important developments of the decade, which was to influence progress for many years to come, took place in the Eastern Fells, an area largely neglected hitherto, when the previously unscathed North Crag of Castle Rock of Triermain and the impending Dove Crag were breached by Jim Birkett and Jim Haggas respectively. Birkett's efforts were rewarded by the ascents of the splendid Overhanging Bastion, VS, and Zig-Zag, VS, events well recorded by the press at that time. Overhanging Bastion, the crux of which took the line of a narrow gangway slanting across the main face and sandwiched between overhangs, was impressively exposed, sensational, and lacking in protection. Birkett showed how far ahead of the times he warn regarding the use of protection when, on one of the lower pitches, he inserted pebbles in a crack and threaded them with thin line to provide a running belay of sorts. (The line was Jones's Gold Seal, sold at threepence a foot. Birkett once remarked 'I wouldn't trust my mother's washing on it.') Haggas's route Hangover, VS, took the easiest line up one of the most impressive pieces of virgin rock in the whole of the Lakes. Indeed, Hangover made such an impression on later climbers that Arthur Dolphin, one of the greatest climbers of his day, wrote (Fell and Rock Journal, 1948) that 'Haggas's route, perhaps with minor variations, follows the only possible line of ascent, and must rank as one of the purest climbs in the country'. These routes were all destined to become classics.

Sadly, the climbing scene was shortly to be overtaken by more stirring events on an international scale and, as in 1914, the commencement of a world war effectively retarded the great wave of exploration that had just broken.

The 1940's - The Austere Years

The war years were a quiet time on the fells and climbers were rarely seen on the crags. During this period, leave from the forces was sparse and much of the exploration was in the hands of a few local men employed in essential industry.

1940 was notable in that it marked the opening up of important new climbing areas and resulted in a number of excellent routes. Bill Peascod began his comprehensive development of the Buttermere area, a task which continued without hindrance over a ten-year period, and which yielded many fine ascents. On Eagle Crag in Birkness Combe, five VS routes were climbed in 1940 alone including the classic Eagle Front, Fifth Avenue, and the Girdle Traverse. On Boat Howe, that rarely visited crag overlooking the head of Ennerdale and described by its original explorer, T. Graham Brown, as resembling the stern of a ship, Sid Cross climbed a remarkably hard and direct line up the centre of the crag, which was misnamed as the Prow of the Boat, HVS. In Borrowdale, the foundations of a great climbing area were being laid almost single-handedly by Beetham who, over the war years, meticulously surveyed the whole area and produced a veritable mountain of debris gardened from a score of crags. But undoubtedly one of the greatest feats of the period was the opening up of

the formidable area of rock on White Ghyll Crag, to the right of the Chimney. Not surprisingly, this major break-through was engineered by the man who had done the same for Dove Crag the previous year, Jim Haggas. A gripping account of his first ascent of Gordian Knot, VS, appeared in the 1941 Fell and Rock Journal, and the thoughtful choice of the climb's name set a precedent for the names of many climbs to be made in the Ghyll over several decades.

Some of the well-established crags still had secrets to divulge, and in 1940 Birkett discovered two excellent routes on the Napes: Eagle's Crack, VS, which split the wall above the Dress Circle and combined strenuous and delicate climbing, and the excellent Tophet Grooves, HVS, the hardest route on the Napes at that time on one of the steeper sections of the wall looming over the Great Hell Gate, a wall which, with its bulging overhangs, resembles a smaller version of Scafell's East Buttress. It was not repeated for seven years. Gimmer too was not forgotten as Birkett climbed North West Arête, MVS, the ridge to the right of Asterisk, and Sid Thompson, a powerful gritstone climber, led the technical Crow's Nest Direct, VS. Tragically, Sid, like that other great climber, Cohn Kirkus, was not to survive his service in the Royal Air Force.

As the war dragged on, steady progress continued to be made, particularly in Buttermere where Peascod took the whole area by the throat, and in Langdale where Birkett celebrated his imminent nuptials by climbing Bachelor's Crack and the tremendous classic crack of 'F' Route, VS, on Gimmer. Another notable milestone was the ascent of Bilberry Buttress, VS, on Raven Crag, an event which drew attention to the good climbing to be had on the long line of crags above the O.D.G.

It may well have been the scent of victory in the air which stimulated the great burst of activity in 1944 and 1945. The principal contender was again Jim Birkett, who first turned his attention to Esk Buttress, that lofty, lonely crag overlooking upper Eskdale, which had last seen action when Alf Bridge climbed his classic route a dozen years earlier. The result was nine new routes of which the best, Great Central Climb, VS, provided over 500 feet of good climbing and is a tribute to Birkett's unerring eye for a classic line. He then returned to the scene of his earlier triumphs on the East Buttress of Scafell to open up the previously undeveloped eastern wing of the crag: Gremlin's Groove, VS, and the hard, but seldom climbed South Chimney, HVS, where Tom Hill led the top pitch, was the result. For good measure, he crossed Mickledore and found Steep Ghyll Grooves, VS, on the Pisgah wall of the ghyll.

1944 was also marked by the emergence of a climber who, over the following decade, was destined to make a lasting impact on Lakeland climbing. Arthur Dolphin, Yorkshire born and bred, was a student of metallurgy at Leeds University and, since his early teens, had trained religiously on his local gritstone crags of Ilkley and Almscliffe, developing his technical skills and surprising strength. Much of his holidays was spent in the Lakes and, after a hesitant debut on Gable Crag (Windy Ridge, S, a route named after its location, not the condition of the leader), he crossed to the opposite side of the mountain where the climbing of Demon Wall, VS, pointed the way to the excellent Girdle of Tophet Wall, MVS.

The end of the war was celebrated in fine style by Arnold Carsten's ascent of Rake End Wall, VS, on Pavey Ark, which drew attention to one of the largest areas of

unclimbed rock in the whole District. The immediate post-war period was, despite the great increase in the number of climbers on the crags, a time when the exploration of Lakeland was almost exclusively in the hands of four men: Birkett, Peascod, Dolphin and Beetham. Beetham's largely solo efforts continued to yield routes on a large scale in Borrowdale, albeit of a relatively low standard, which had the effect of attracting other harder climbers on to the newly-gardened expanses of rock. This was also the time when H.M.Kelly began the process of up-dating the Rock Climbing Guides to the English Lake District, published by the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (FRCC Guides 1st Series 1922-26 - Red Guides; 2nd Series 1935-38; 3rd Series 1949-59. Kelly called the 49-59 Series the "2nd" presumably because it was his second series.). The previous four-volume Second Series had begun with Pillar in 1935, and ended with Dow Crag, Langdale and Outlying Climbs, a composite volume published in 1938. The proliferation of new routes, particularly in Borrowdale, Buttermere, the Eastern Fells and Langdale now necessitated separate guides for each of these areas, with the result that the Third Series of F.R.C.C. guides was expanded to eight volumes. In the course of guide-book writing operations, the writers invariably become so familiar with their areas that new routes are discovered, and it is no surprise to find the writers' names pre-eminent in the list of first ascents. Jim Birkett, who climbed all over the Lakes, was a notable exception to this rule, not being a member of the F.R.C.C., but Peascod (Buttermere), Beetham (Borrowdale), Drasdo (Eastern Fells), and Dolphin (Langdale and Scafell) all wrote guides to the areas where they themselves had made a great contribution. The format of the Third Series of guides was identical to that invented by Kelly for the earlier series, and climbs were listed in order of increasing difficulty (the sub-division of the grades did not take place until the Fourth Series in 1967, and the technical grading of pitches in 1979). So the only way in which it was possible to ascertain the difficulty of a route was to look at its position in the graded list, not always too reliable a method when the VS category was opened.

When guide books were not forthcoming at short and regular intervals, much information required by the young hard climber had to be gleaned from various hut books and logs located in certain pubs, or by word of mouth, a situation somewhat different from today when many guide supplements and climbing journals are readily available.

In Buttermere, Peascod's energies were unabated and many excellent climbs were recorded: Buckstone Howe, that steep chunk of slaty rock overlooking Honister Pass, was opened up by the ascent of the pleasant Honister Wall, S, and the more testing Sinister Grooves, VS, Groove II, VS, and the Girdle, VS, culminating in 1949 with the splendid Cleopatra, VS. On the other side of the hill, the ascent of Dale Head Pillar, MVS, opened up yet another new crag in Newlands, a valley well endowed with small crags, which were being investigated by G.Rushworth ably assisted by Peascod.

In Borrowdale too, exploration proceeded steadily. Some forty new routes were discovered, mainly by Beetham. Several proved to be excellent, particularly Monolith Crack, MVS, and Shepherd's Gully, MVS, both on Shepherd's Crag. However, the greatest contribution in the area was made by Peascod who opened up yet another new crag, Eagle Crag, the buttress prominent on the spur separating Langstrath from Greenup. Three excellent climbs resulted; Postern Gate, MVS, Great Stair, MVS, and the splendidly strenuous Falconer's Crack, VS.

Birkett was active all over the Lakes, and in 1947 paid a rare visit to Dow Crag to climb the bold Leopard's Crawl, HVS, a delicate route on 'B' Buttress, and the first new route on the crag since his own excursion up the exposed North Wall of 'A' Buttress, VS, in 1940. He also returned to Castle Rock and climbed the strenuous May Day Cracks, VS, on the North Crag, and by way of contrast the pleasant Chapel Cracks, MVS, on the South Crag. But undoubtedly his big effort came in 1949, when he put up what was probably one of the hardest routes in the Lakes at that time, the strenuous Harlot Face. This splendid climb was traditionally regarded as the first climb in the Lakes to warrant the grade of Extremely Severe, although in the current guidebook it has been downgraded to HVS. On Esk Buttress, Birkett was obliged to share the honours with Dolphin who climbed Gargoyle Groove, VS, and the excellent Medusa Wall, VS, leaving Square Chimney, VS, for Birkett. Birkett's last new route on Scafell was the beautifully delicate Slab and Groove, VS, a parallel though more difficult companion to Moss Ghyll Grooves.

It was in Langdale, however, where the principal action of the decade occurred, and from 1946 to 1949 over fifty new routes were discovered, many of them of excellent quality at a high standard. The main honours were shared more or less equally between Birkett, who was resident in Little Langdale, and Dolphin who, based on the new Fell and Rock hut, Raw Head, was engaged on the guide writing project. Birkett essentially made White Ghyll his own, and over the four-year period, he was on the first ascent of eleven new routes, nine of which he led. The best of these were White Ghyll Wall, MVS, the easiest line up the great central mass of the crag; Slip Knot, MVS, an equally popular climb; Haste Not, VS, a more difficult companion to Haggas's Gordian Knot; and the most exposed and impressive of all, Perhaps Not, HVS, the first route to break through the barrier of overhangs below White Ghyll Wall, a route which only yielded after several determined attempts. However, the hardest pitch in the ghyll, and arguably the first Extremely Severe route in the Lakes, was to fall in October 1949 to Ken Heaton, a frequent companion of Dolphin at that time. After previous inspection on a rope Dolphin failed to lead the pitch, and it was led without runners by Heaton at 5b to complete the superb climb Do Not, EI. Birkett had climbed the top pitch, 5a, a few months earlier as a variation finish to Slip Not. Several 5b pitches had been climbed even earlier, although with the exception of Maurice Linnell's bold lead of the Bayonet-shaped crack on C.B., 1932, aid in some form or other was employed: the Great Flake of C.B., 1914, (combined tactics); the Bandstand Wall of Great Central Route, 1919, (leader's feet held on); and Mayday, 1938, (shoulder used on the first pitch). By the mid 1950's Heaton, like that other superb technician before him, Balcombe, forsook rock climbing for another sport where he made an equally impressive contribution as a fell runner, becoming in 1961 the holder of the Lakeland 24-Hour Record (51 tops in 22 hours 13 minutes, covering 82 miles and 31,000 feet of ascent). Whilst Birkett was cleaning up White Ghyll, Dolphin was attempting to forestall other first ascensionists by scouring the whole area for new crags and new routes; Raven Crag Walthwaite, Side Pike, Raven Crag, and East Raven all yielded spoils of which the painfully-named Kneewrecker Chimney, HVS, was the best. However, it was on the high crags that Dolphin discovered the choicest routes. On Pavey Ark, the large expanse of rock to the right of Crescent Slabs attracted his attention: after a series of meanderings on the face, the pleasantly delicate Alph, VS, resulted, aptly named after the wandering sacred river. (Dolphin frequently spent almost as much time devising a suitable name for a

climb as he had spent climbing it). The previously untouched East Wall of Pavey Ark was also explored, and the most obvious line, Hobson's Choice climbed, an impressive route for its grade of Hard Severe following 'what appears to be the only route' (Fell and Rock Journal 1948).

But it was on Gimmer that, in 1948, Dolphin demonstrated his inventiveness by climbing his most famous, if not his hardest route. The previous season had seen him exploring the impressive and unclimbed section of the crag between the West and North-West Faces, an area which had also excited the interest of Birkett, who had spotted the same line. This culminated in his lead of Kipling Groove, HVS, (so named because it was Ruddy 'ard), a route which along with Birkett's Harlot Face was considered at the time to be harder than anything else in the Lakes. Lacking the protection which was available in later years, and unwilling to plant a piton, Dolphin elected to top-rope the crux twice before leading it. There were of course precedents for top-roping; new routes on grit were often top-roped at that time, and the adjacent Crack and Hiatus had both been top-roped before being led. Dolphin's last runner was in the crack well below the crux, and a fall on a single hemp rope was unthinkable. It was left to Joe Brown on the third ascent to render the climb safe for a generation of leaders by planting a piton just before the crux moves. The following year, the superb Gimmer Girdle, HVS, was worked out, and a very technical pitch, Grooves Superdirect, HVS, Sb, gave yet another finish to Hiatus.

The 1940's - A Technical Summary

It is significant to note that, despite the great increase in the number of climbers on the crags, the 1940's did not yield appreciably more very hard routes (Hard Very Severe and above) than earlier decades, although the overall number of routes, and routes in the Very Severe grade were considerably greater.

Up to the end of 1919 there were three routes currently graded at HVS; 1920-1929 five routes; 1930-1939 seven routes; 1940-1949 eleven routes. This is hardly surprising, when during the whole of this period, the only real development in climbing technology resulting in a marked increase in standards had been the replacement of the nailed boot by the rubber-soled gym shoe, an innovation attributed to H.M.Kelly and introduced about 1915. The introduction of the karabiner for the use of Alpine mountaineers made virtually no impact on the pre-World War II British climber, and running belays were seldom used despite the lead given by Herford in 1914 when he threaded his rope through a loop of rope tied round the chockstone in the Flake Crack of Central Buttress, and Birkett's use of jammed pebbles on Overhanging Bastion. During the second world war, climbing equipment of any kind was almost impossible to come by, and all manner of rubbish was in use on the crags; cotton or sisal ropes, window sash cord, and home-made tricounis, ice-axes, karabiners, and so on. Even the post-war introduction of the vibram-soled boot, invented in Italy and tested by that great mountaineer Gervasutti, did not affect standards of climbing in Britain since hard routes were invariably climbed in rubbers anyway. In the immediate post-war years, however, more climbers were beginning to realize the value of the running belay for protection, and karabiners were at last becoming available. The ex-War Department karabiners proved of doubtful value as they had a tendency to open up under strain, but karabiners of improved quality

imported from Europe were gradually becoming available. Even by the end of the decade, however, leaders were still carrying only a pitifully small number of slings and karabiners. Most climbers were reluctant to use pitons, and their single hemp ropes had inadequate strength, so it is scarcely surprising that the number of high standard routes climbed during this period did not rise appreciably: the leader simply could not afford a fall. Indeed it is a remarkable tribute to the ability and courage of climbers of the period up to 1950 that so many hard routes were made with such poor protection.

Until the 4th Series of F.R.C.C. guides (1967) all hard climbs were graded Very Severe, and the VS section of the graded list of climbs, in which routes were listed in order of difficulty, embraced the grades currently known as Mild VS, VS, Hard VS, and Extremely Severe; in 1978 the XS grade was sub-divided E1 to E5, and in 1979 pitches were given numerical gradings to indicate their technical difficulty, 4a, 4b, 4c, 5a, 5b, 5c, 6a, 6b. The grading of routes is not a precise science, and guide writers and other climbers frequently differ in their assessment of difficulty. (Currently climbs are graded for guidebook purposes only after canvassing the opinions of many climbers).

It is interesting to look at a typical graded list of this period, for example that in the 1950 edition of the Langdale guide by Dolphin and Cook, and to compare their gradings with those in the most recent guide, the 1980 edition by Mortimer. Most of the climbs near the bottom of the VS section of the 1950 guide are now down-graded to Hard Severe (Asterisk, Samaritan Corner, Diphthong, Bachelor Crack and Sinister Slabs), and those at the top of the list are now Hard Very Severe (Deer Bield Crack 4c, Kneewrecker Chimney 5a, Perhaps Not 5a, Gimmer Girdle 5a, Grooves Superdirect 5b), with Kipling Groove 5a, as the hardest climb: Do Not, the second hardest climb in the list, is now graded E1 5b. Do Not would appear to be the first E1 in the Lakes, since Harlot Face (1949), which was an Extreme in the 1969 edition of the Eastern Fells guide, has now been downgraded to HVS in the 1979 edition. It is clear, however, that by the end of the 1940's there were a number of routes on the borderline of HVS/E1, with pitches of 5a and 5b.

It is, perhaps, an overgeneralization to suggest that increased climbing standards were solely due to improvements in equipment and technique. Training and attitude of mind were also of great importance, and there have always been a few exceptional climbers around to whom lack of protection or the use of rudimentary equipment made little or no difference to their high standard of performance. Indeed, from the earliest days of the sport when Haskett Smith set a precedent with his solo first ascent of the Needle, there have always been a few bold individuals who were prepared to solo some of the hardest climbs of the day, although there is no record of a solo first ascent of a hard route during this period, and even today such solo ascents are uncommon. Ronnie Jackson on his fleeting trips to the Lakes in the late 1930's was soloing, in nails, routes such as Eliminate 'B', Great Central Route, and Black Wall, all currently graded HVS: and in the mid 1940's Joe Griffin began a programme of soloing hard routes which has continued virtually uninterrupted for (so far) forty years. Also many climbs were led virtually without protection, and to all intents and purposes constituted solo ascents: for example Ken Heaton's runnerless lead of the first pitch of Do Not.

Of the eleven hard (HVS and E1) climbs put up during this period, of which six were

in Langdale and were climbed in 1948 and 1949, nine were climbed by either Birkett or Dolphin, the honours being almost equally shared.

The 1950's - A Climbing Explosion

The austerity of the war years was fast becoming an unpleasant memory, and large numbers of people were taking to the hills at weekends and holidays mainly as a result of a more affluent and car-owning society. There were more climbers than ever before, and more of them were climbing hard routes. Whilst the exploration of the 1940's was mainly in the hands of four men, well over a dozen participated in the discovery of new routes in the following decade.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the 1950's was that whole areas of the Lakes were still neglected and even several of the major crags received scant attention. Whilst Langdale, Borrowdale, the Eastern Fells and Scafell were all extensively explored, in Buttermere and Newlands, the scene of such frantic activity in the 1940's, there appeared little enthusiasm for new routes after Peascod's departure for Australia: Dow was left severely alone, and it was the end of the decade before new climbs were to appear on Pillar and Gable. This neglect is quite inexplicable in view of the extensive developments which were to take place later.

The early years of the decade were essentially those of Arthur Dolphin, and it was in Langdale that the real action began. Having got the manuscript of the Langdale Guide off to the printers, Dolphin swiftly girdled Pavey Ark, HVS, then, in 1951, changed into a higher gear and solidly confirmed the new grade of climbing, which was subsequently named Extremely Severe. It is interesting to note that at the time Dolphin was consolidating the new standard in the Lakes, Joe Brown was doing precisely the same in Wales. After a determined siege, Deer Bield Buttress, E1, became the first of Dolphin's climbs in the new hard grade and the first route of consequence on that superb, steep little crag since A.T.Hargreaves led the magnificent Deer Bield Crack over twenty years earlier. Having made the breakthrough, equally difficult routes followed; Rubicon Groove, E1, another well-named climb, the first on Bowfell for almost a decade, and, the following year, the classic Sword of Damocles, E1, of which Dolphin led the crux and Peter Greenwood the remainder. Dolphin's exploratory interests were wide ranging and hard routes were put up in White Ghyll, where a flimsy holly guarded the entrance to a steep groove, Shivering Timber, VS; on Deer Bield, with Peter Greenwood, a companion crack to the famous Deer Bield Crack was climbed to its left (Dunmail Cracks, HVS); in the Eastern Fells, a visit to the repulsive Iron Crag produced the terrifying loose Ferrous Buttress, VS; and on Esk Buttress, the great groove line crossed by Birkett's Great Central Climb yielded the splendid Trespasser Groove, HVS. However, apart from Langdale, it was on Scafell that Dolphin made his greatest contribution. Having been asked to write the new Scafell guide, he set about it in the traditional fashion by trying to forestall others and make easy work of guide writing by climbing as many unclimbed lines as he could find. There was a big gap between Morning Wall and Gremlin's Groove on the imposing left wing of the East Buttress, and it was here, in May 1952, that Dolphin made two of his greatest contributions to Lakeland climbing, the ascents of Pegasus, HVS, and Hell's Groove, HVS. On the second pitch of Pegasus, a long diagonal line parallel to Morning Wall, Dolphin arranged a long sling from a piton to enable a delicate move into a groove to be made, thereby enabling a

generation of leaders to enjoy the route: almost thirty years later, aid was dispensed with. To the left of Pegasus, a short overhanging crack barred the way to a huge corner. Peter Greenwood, a short, tough gritstone climber and a frequent companion of Dolphin on new routes, was the first to solve this awkward problem, leaving the big corner to Dolphin; the superb Hell's Groove. These splendid climbs, together with his crop of new hard routes in Langdale, were sadly his last contribution to Lakeland climbing, as he was killed in July 1953 whilst descending solo from the Dent du Géant. Having raised the standard of climbing in the Lakes there is no doubt that Dolphin, then in his prime, would have radically transformed the climbing scene in the District. The death of a great innovator had a profound effect on many of his contemporaries, and the pace of exploration slowed, as indeed it had during an earlier decade after Linnell's death.

Rock climbing in Britain as a whole was, for the rest of the decade, dominated to a considerable degree by the members of the Rock and Ice Club, though their impact on Wales was immensely greater than on the Lakes. Nevertheless, the contributions made by Joe Brown, Don Whillans, and Ron Moseley in particular were formidable. In 1953 Moseley prepared his first route by abseiling down the steep wall left of Dunmail Cracks on Deer Bield Crag and planting a piton, which was subsequently lassoed to create Pendulum, first climbed free in 1977 at E2: and on Gimmer, he led the steep wall from the Bower on Gimmer Crack to produce Dight, E1. Whillans made a hard Girdle of Deer Bield, E2, and in White Ghyll, Brown led the magnificent corner-crack of Laugh Not, HVS, which involved a tension traverse under the overhang, and later, in 1957, returned to force a direct passage up to, and through the roof of Perhaps Not, giving Elimot, E2, using one point of aid.

On Scafell, the East Buttress was once more under attack, and in 1955 Whillans discovered the excellent crack line of Trinity, HVS, whilst Moseley, two years later, put up Phoenix, E1, an exposed and strenuous route climbed with one point of aid and one of the hardest climbs in the whole District at that time.

The potential of the Eastern Fells did not pass unnoticed either, once Harold Drasdo had pointed the way with his superb routes on the North Crag of Castle Rock of Triermain; Barbican, MVS, in 1951, and the very hard North Crag Eliminate, E1, in 1952. Whillans and Brown followed swiftly with the very strenuous Triermain Eliminate, E1, in 1953. The following year, having got himself into the right frame of mind by emerging triumphant from a punch-up in Keswick, Whillans made a brilliant lead up the great expanse of steep unclimbed rock to the left of Hangover on Dove Crag to produce the strenuous Dovedale Groove, E1, climbed with one point of aid, the first route on the crag for fourteen years. The Eastern Fells were well endowed with new crags ripe for exploitation, and the early 1950's saw the opening up of Hutapple Crag, a big grassy cliff, and the steep and compact Scrubby Crag, both in the remote Deepdale, and the steep and impressive Raven Crag, Thirlmere, where Drasdo, Greenwood and Dolphin had all made excellent contributions. Drasdo's Grendel, MVS, on Scrubby and Dolphin's Communist Convert, VS. on Raven, both made in 1953, subsequently achieved well-deserved popularity. In 1954 Birkett climbed his last new route, Kestrel Wall on Eagle Crag, Grisedale, a pleasant Severe, to end a brilliant climbing career.

As the familiar faces faded away, new ones were appearing on the crags. One in particular, the diminutive, boyish Paul Ross from Keswick, was just beginning to

make his mark. The Thirlmere area and Borrowdale were his backyard, and during the rest of the decade and well into the next, Ross's name was to feature prominently in the first ascent lists. The strenuous Thirlmere Eliminate, E1, climbed with Pete Greenwood in 1955, was to usher in a whole spate of new routes, particularly in Borrowdale where the crags laid bare by Bentley Beetham in earlier years were ripe for exploitation. Shepherd's Crag was a popular venue, although Pat Vaughan's Fool's Paradise, VS, on Gowder Crag was to prove to be one of the best climbs of its standard in the valley. 1954 saw Ross's debut on Black Crag, where the Super Direct, HVS, was a splendid addition to a fine crag. The big left wing of Black Crag proved an irresistible attraction, and several long and difficult climbs were made: Obituary Groove, VS, in 1955, the Shroud, VS, in 1958, together with an aid climb, Vertigo, not climbed free at E2 until 1977. Eagle Crag also yielded some hard routes; in 1956, Post Mortem, which had previously repulsed Don Whillans, was led by Ross using a sling for aid, and became the first E2 in the Lakes. In 1959, the crag was girdled at HVS, and the Cleft was climbed using five points of aid, a pitch which was clearly too hard for the time, and would have been better left for future development: sixteen years later, the Cleft was led without aid by Pete Botterill at E3. Perhaps the most notable feature of Ross's campaign was the brilliant development of the impressive crags overlooking Derwentwater, crags to which attention had been drawn by Dr. John Brown in a letter published in 1770 describing the vale and lake of Keswick. 'On the opposite shore (of Derwentwater) you will find rocks and cliffs of stupendous height, hanging broken over the lake in horrible grandeur, some of them a thousand feet high, the woods climbing up their steep shaggy sides, where mortal foot never yet approached'. The intrepid Ross was not overawed, and made a determined assault on Falcon Crags where the Lower Crag yielded seven very impressive hard climbs, although the Upper Crag required three pitons for aid on the top pitch of Route 1, a route which was not de-pegged and climbed free until 1975, at E2.

The year after Ross's debut, another remarkable climber appeared, the portly, bespectacled Allan (Tubby) Austin, a Yorkshireman whose appearance belied a determined and powerful climber. His training on gritstone had given him the essential equipment for the task ahead, that of making Langdale essentially his own.

Over the period 1956-1974, Austin discovered some thirty-eight new routes in Langdale alone, most of them of a high standard, and effectively transformed the area. Indeed, his contribution to Lakeland climbing was unequalled even by Birkett, Dolphin and Ross, and throughout his brilliant climbing career, he adopted a rigorously purist approach, eschewing aid in any form. Indeed, in his 1973 Langdale guide he refused to include some routes which others had climbed with aid, being convinced that in the not too distant future they would be climbed free, which they were. Crags such as Pavey Ark which had been somewhat neglected in the past were now to prove a treasure trove yielding, after considerable gardening, many superb long climbs of great technical interest. The assault began at the foot of Jack's Rake, where Stickle Grooves, HVS, took a line up the exposed edge of the crag where the East Buttress bends round to become the East Wall. The following year, he ventured on to the East Wall itself, where Dolphin's Hobson's Choice was the only route, to climb the superb steep slabs of Cascade, HVS.

1958 proved to be a vintage year for Lakeland climbing, with great developments all

over the District. In Langdale, Austin discovered five excellent routes on Pavey Ark, of which the delightfully delicate Golden Slipper, HVS, took pride of place; this incredibly rough slab above the upper part of Jack's Rake has, over the years, proved to be one of the best slab climbs in the District. Heron Crag, that steep face overlooking the Esk, was first climbed in 1955 as a result of the explorations of the Outward Bound Mountain School in Eskdale, but the true potential of the crag was not realized until three years later when the main face was breached by O.R.D. Pritchard, who climbed Bellerophon, VS, and laid the foundations for many notable ascents in the following decade. 1958 was also notable for a superb day's work by Robin Smith, one of Scotland's finest mountaineers: on one of his rare visits to the Lakes, he ventured on to the East Buttress of Scafell to discover two excellent new routes in the vicinity of Mickledore Grooves; Chartreuse, EI, a brilliant combination of delicate and strenuous climbing, and Leverage, HVS, (named for his second, Derek Lever), a strenuous line to its left. Sadly, these, together with pitch 3 of Whit's End on Gimmer, were to be his only contributions to Lakeland climbing, as he was killed in the Pamirs in 1962: however, his first ascents north of the border, including Shibboleth, E2, and July Crack, two of his best and hardest routes which were made only a few weeks after his visit to Scafell, remain a fitting memorial to one of Scotland's greatest climbers. The decade ended with a flurry of activity all over the District, and was marked by the appearance of several newcomers, all of whom were destined to play a major part in the future development of Lakeland climbing; Les Brown, who was well-placed by his work at Windscale, Geoff Oliver from the North East, and Jack Soper, a geologist from Sheffield University. In 1959, all made their first contributions, the forerunners of many. Although Ross and Austin were still very active in their respective areas, this did not deter the newcomers who picked excellent plums in the Eastern Fells and Langdale; Oliver led the superb wall climb Agony, HVS, on Castle Rock, Moss Wall, VS, in White Ghyll, and the short but serious Virgo, HVS, on the Neckband Crag of Bowfell; and on Gimmer, Brown found Inertia, HVS, an excursion up the steep ground to the left of the Crack.

It was away from the now-popular areas of Langdale, Borrowdale and the Eastern Fells that the most important developments took place, particularly on Scafell, on Pillar, which had last received a first ascent eighteen years previously, and in Buttermere, which had also been largely neglected since Peascod's departure. The summer of 1959 marked the beginning of a campaign of exploration by Les Brown which took him all over the District to climb many classic lines on the great crags, and also to discover new ones. On Buckstone Howe, his route Caesar, HVS, was an excellent companion to Cleopatra, climbed ten years earlier by Peascod; and on Scafell, the wall above the West Wall Traverse was breached by Xerxes, HVS. But it was on the East Buttress that the main action took place: 1959 was a phenomenally dry summer, and the central section of the crag, which often resembles a waterfall, was at last dry enough for Brown to climb Moonday, E2, a splendid climb which broke through the bulging wall to the left of Overhanging Wall. The exposed edge between Mickledore Chimney and Mickledore Grooves was also climbed by Geoff Oliver, and named Pernod, VS, to conform with the other aperitifs on the wall of the Chimney. Oliver also climbed the great corner above the second pitch of Mayday, which is normally a watercourse; Mayday Direct is now climbed free at E2, although a piton was used for aid on the first ascent. Hugh Banner discovered yet another slab parallel to Moss Ghyll Grooves, the well-named Narrow Stand, HVS, also a fine crack line up the front of Pisgah, Bos'n's Buttress,

VS, which had been inviting attention for years.

On an incredible June day, Pillar finally received its just deserts when the West Face of both Low Man and High Man yielded excellent climbs. To the left of Appian Way, climbed by Kelly in his hey-day, there is a very steep and exposed wall, and it was here that Maurice de St. Jarre climbed the exacting Goth, HVS. Between Kelly's classics Sodom and Gomorrah, Oliver turned the big overhang to climb the pleasant crack line of Vandal, HVS.

All in all, 1959 was a brilliant end to a superb decade's climbing, with new climbing grounds being well exploited by a number of highly competent leaders, who were clearly destined to make names for themselves in the succeeding years.

The 1950's - A Technical Summary

The 1950's were notable for a new breed of climber who had not, as Kelly and Doughty envisaged, 'taken advantage of the perspective and historical backgrounds of the older clubs the repositories of the great traditions of our craft'. Fortunately, the lack of enthusiasm shown by these new young climbers for the old well-established clubs did not result, as feared by Kelly and Doughty, in 'a tendency to the growth of slipshod methods, especially in rope management'. In fact, the situation was quite the reverse. The rock techniques and safety standards developed by these young men, mainly gritstone trained, transformed the sport as their predecessors from Herford to Linnell had done in previous decades.

Scores of small climbing clubs sprang up all over the country, and the contribution to rock climbing made by their members soon outstripped that being made by the older clubs, which were now having great difficulty in recruiting young active climbers. Prominent amongst the clubs formed at that time was the Rock and Ice Club whose members, particularly Joe Brown and Don Whillans, made a lasting and outstanding contribution to the development of the sport of rock climbing, and pushed up standards to heights previously unattained.

The great explosion of standards in the 1950's was due not only to the larger number of climbers, but more significantly to the introduction of new climbing techniques and equipment, which resulted in vastly improved safety measures. Nylon ropes, which during the war had been used for towing gliders, now began to make their appearance on the crags; they were much stronger than the manilla ropes used earlier and, more importantly, they stretched instead of snapping. Running belays were now used whenever possible, and manufactured where necessary, using first knotted slings, and later artificial chockstones inserted into cracks. (Joe Brown used to carry a selection of small stones tucked into his balaclava). Greater protection meant that climbers were now able to push themselves further without the risk of a catastrophic fall. Forgotten was the unwritten law that the leader must never fall, and many leaders now began to press themselves to the limit and even beyond it. There is no doubt that the increased use of protection in the post-war years has substantially reduced the death rate from climbing accidents (Fell and Rock Journal 1981, pp 135-148). One effect of the improved protection was the phasing-out of top roping of new climbs practised by some leaders, although it did encourage others to

be overindulgent in the use of pitons and slings on chockstones for aid. This was particularly noticeable in Borrowdale, where Ross and his contemporaries attacked many imposing lines previously regarded as unclimbable. They refused to be thwarted by technical difficulty, and if a climb did not yield, aid was used without qualm. This practice encouraged others, and the excessive use of aid was destined to continue for a number of years all over the District, despite the lead given by Allan Austin and other purists. However, aid removal was to provide considerable sport for the technically gifted climbers of later years.

One of the most important technical innovations, which had a profound effect on the whole future of hard rock climbing, occurred in 1958 when a new form of footwear became generally available. The introduction of the special lightweight rock boot known as the P.A. (after Pierre Allain, one of the best French rock climbers) made as big an impact on British climbing standards as did the replacement of the nailed boot by the soft-soled rubber gym shoe, first used by Kelly about 1915. Whilst the gym shoe had excellent adhesive properties on purely friction holds, it had the great disadvantage that, being flexible and softsoled, it was extremely difficult to use on very small sharp holds. The P.A. was originally designed for use on the difficult sandstone boulders at Fontainebleau, the practice crag for Parisian climbers. It had a much more rigid sole than the gym shoe, thereby enabling the climber to stand on small sharp holds with a far greater degree of comfort and security. The few British climbers who, in the mid-1950's found themselves at Fontainebleau were so impressed by the revolutionary rock boots that they took some home to try out on the British crags. The word soon spread that the new boots had magical qualities, and by 1958, climbing shops were importing them from France, although it was some time before they were universally adopted. Over the years, various manufacturers have produced their own versions of the P.A., and, a quarter of a century on, although many climbers still use the P.A. (now known as the E.B. after the manufacturer Edouard Bourdeneau, the name of Pierre Allain having been transferred to the climbing boot manufacturer Galibier in 1970), others, particularly the top performers, have switched their allegiance to similar but superior models such as Canyons, Hanwags, Contacts, Cragratz and so on.

The new techniques and equipment produced an immediate increase in both standards and the numbers of hard routes. Whilst the whole period up to 1949 had only yielded a total of twenty-six routes in the grade which we now call Hard Very Severe (eleven of them in the years 1940-1949), the 1950's produced a total of fifty routes of this standard, or above: of these, fifteen were subsequently graded Extremely Severe in the 4th Series of F.R.C.C. Guides, which commenced in 1967. It is interesting to note that, during the 1950's, no hard climbs (HVS or XS) were made on Dow or Gable: the new developments were principally in Langdale (20 routes), Borrowdale (8 routes), Eastern Fells (9 routes) and Scafell (10 routes), with only two on Pillar and one in Buttermere.

Summary (1935-1959)

During the quarter-century covered by this review, great advances were made in the sport of rock climbing. Despite the retardation of exploration caused by the war, the number of new climbs made in the Lakes in the period 1935-1959 (655) was almost

double the total number climbed from the beginning of the sport in 1882 up to 1934 (393). Furthermore, the number of hard routes (228 at VS and above) climbed during this later period amounted to over one third of all new climbs. Standards, which had remained more or less static since Central Buttress was climbed in 1914, began to rise dramatically with the increasing number of well-trained climbers on the crags, and with the introduction of new equipment and techniques. From 1949, when the first climb currently graded Extremely Severe was climbed unaided, the number of routes in this grade has increased steadily year by year. The other great feature of the period was the discovery and development of extensive new climbing grounds, particularly the low-lying, fast-drying and easily accessible crags of Langdale, Borrowdale and the Eastern Fells. Scores of new crags were rigorously explored during this period, contrasting with the sparse attention received by some of the majestic high crags, Dow and Pillar in particular, which had been in the forefront of development of the sport in earlier years.

With the opening up of the new crags, and the fact that there were now many good climbers armed with improved skills and equipment, the stage was set for future great developments.

Thanks are due to Pete Whillance for helpful suggestions