Desert Island Climbs by Phil Blanshard Dec 24

Blanco Castell Helen Gogarth with ? (Anyone remember doing this with me)

There is a framed photograph in our garden room of a climber clinging onto a near vertical wall. When I look at it my hands start to perspire. There is white rock above and white horses below, and in the distance is South Stack lighthouse. It was taken by Steve Prior, and is of a much younger version of myself, who I hardly recognise. This is Blanco on Castell Helen, Gogarth, in pre friend days, and I am way too far above a wobbly Hex for comfort, but about to place a descent piece of gear. I am concentrating hard, and feeling exhilaration and fear at the same time. In short, I feel alive. Why do we climb? There's my answer. Thanks Steve.

Kipling Groove Gimmer Crag with Robin Illingworth

I had been to Gimmer half a dozen times, to climb the classics up to VS. Gimmer Crack, F route etc. immaculate climbs on perfect rock. KG? Not today, maybe next time. Then the 'next time' arrives. Robin has led it before, leads the undercling pitch, and offers encouragement and advice. I make moves rightwards into a vague groove on the arête, and climb up to the crux. I think of the photograph in Hard Rock of Mick Burke completing the crux swing right. Hang on, there is a finger slot which will take a friend. Fingers or friend? The friend wins. Always does.

Pull right on poor handholds and scrabbling feet, and reach up for a jug. Got it!. Push down hard and mantelshelf, gear in, relax and saviour the exposure.

Kipling Groove has everything a great climb should have. History, an improbable line at the grade, and a thought-provoking crux sequence. Brilliant.

Gogarth on the main cliff at Gogarth with Al Davis

It's calm, very warm and sunny, and I have a tight knot in the pit of my stomach, and a feeling that something dreadful is going to happen. But Al and I are about to scramble down to the bottom of the main cliff, and it's Gogarth so that's normal. Al romps up the first pitch to the top of a pinnacle, and it's my turn. Traverse right on lines of handholds and footholds leading to a bottomless groove, and I am tall enough to use both. Al however finds it hard, and swings across, feet, well, redundant.

Pitch 3 and 4 are VS and all is well.

Al sets off up the last pitch following a couple of young rock jocks. Unknowingly to us they have done the much harder direct finish. Ask Dave Hellier how hard it is, and he will tell you. Al grinds to a halt, and eventually retreats. Momentum and energy evaporating. He traverses rightwards into a well protected crack line, climbs up 30 feet. "Phil take in tight, need a rest on this runner". Rope goes tight, and every other runner below it, and back to me pulls out, and he is resting on a single nut, miles from the belay.

At 3pm we top out, physically and emotionally drained, and Al says " If you want to do another one, I'll hold your rope".

This is Al Davis talking. Need I say more.

Nirvana Wall Far East Buttress Aonach Dubh with Jonny Wilson

Some climbs disappoint and others surpass all expectations. I have had some fine days on high mountain crags with Jonny, doing classic climbs. Mur y Newl, Eagle Front, Punster's Crack spring to mind. Jonny is great company, with a wry sense of humour, and he doesn't prattle on all day long.

We went to Aonach Dubh to do the Classic Rock route The Long Crack. Well it was neither long nor much of a crack.

Anyway job done, but Jonny had heard of a route on a crag further up the valley, not in our guide, but he had a bit of paper with details. Ukclimbing describes Nirvana Wall as "One of the great unsung classics of all Scotland". A steep not well protected entry (a sling around a small embedded flake that you have to pull up on and then stand on is not my idea of bomb proof ok), leads to a single crack in a wall that just goes on and on.

Great place, great climb. Thanks Jonny.

Aonach Eagach By winter moonlight with Alex Heron, Chris Lloynes, Soo Redshaw, Paul Goulding

I think that I must be part weir wolf. Every full moon, and I am itching to get out on the hill. On retiring colleagues, presented me with a lunar globe and a Haynes manual to the Apollo 11 lunar lander. I kid you not.

We left a bicycle at the top end of the pass, drove down and left the old Glencoe road at 10pm. A long pull up and we are on the ridge. The views were stunning. Moonlight illuminating far mountains, and lighting up Loch Leven. We set off along the ridge. Sometimes the way was lit, and at other times we dropped into the inky blackness of the moons shadow. All you can hear is crampons crunching on firm snow.

We got to the road at about 6 am, and Paul volunteered to roll down the pass to collect the car. An all you can eat breakfast in Tyndrum rounded off a fabulous winter experience.

Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr Nan Gillean with Rosie, Phil Bartlett and Jane?

Rosie has a lot to put up with. Just ask her about the club dinner in the December after we were married. Oh the shame! Anyway, enough of the guilt trip.

We did the classic Pinnacle Ridge on Skye with Phil, and his latest girlfriend, on a beautiful summers day. Lots of great scrambling in majestic surroundings, with an abseil thrown in for good measure.

Rosie asked me the other day "which was the summit on Skye, where you left me to go and check out the final ridge to the top, and when you returned, you wouldn't go back up with me. So I never got to the top. I'm still annoyed about that."

Well Rosie, it was the East Ridge of Am Basteir, and although you were quite capable of doing it, I just didn't want to watch you. Let it go. Please.

Helvellyn with Steve Goodwin

Yes, yes I know Helvellyn is heaving on good weekends either summer or winter, but when I am there, as the sun sets, or under moonlight it's a wonderful, proper mountain with its craggy East Face, and classic edges encircling a tarn.

The grade 1 and 2 gullies under a full moon are magical. I have done them with pals, but also solo.

Climbing alone, accompanied by the deafening silence of a perfectly still winters night and to emerge by the shelter to see the snow capped Pennines and Central Fells bathed in moonlight, and I have the mountain to myself.

I feel very lucky to know, and enjoy great days out on the hills with Steve and Dave Hellier. They have a wealth of experience far exceeding my own. They have also known each other long before we became friends, and on days out I listen to them recalling past climbing and ski touring adventures, and I am envious. I wish I had been there.

A few winter seasons ago, Steve and I went to do Nethermost Gully on Helvellyn, researching for his winter scrambles guidebook. It's an easy gully, but this year a massive overhanging cornice blocked the exit from the gully. Steve sets forth and with axe swinging starts tunnelling. Slowly bit by bit he disappears to reappear some time later, appears mole like on the plateau, covered in white stuff. To cap it off Steve took a photograph of yours truly emerging from said hole, and it's in his guide. How good is that.

The Great Ridge of Garbh Bheinn with Heather Guy and Dave Hellier.

Many decades ago Ron Kenyon, myself and others went to do the Great Ridge. It was dry but the cloud was down. We climbed something, and got to the top of a mountain, but it may not have been the right mountain. Who knows?

Fast forward to summer 24 and the club meet to Ballachulish. Dave, Heather and myself crossed the ferry and set of up a glen under a glorious azure blue sky. After an hours bogtrotting we rounded a bend and there it is. An extraordinary sight. A perfect cone of rock stretching skywards to the mountains summit.

However to get to its base, one has to negotiate a number of horizontal rock bands separated by steep grass ledges, and as we found out, it's very easy to get lost in these bands, and use up a lot of time and effort.

Once on the true ridge however the climbing is straightforward, on perfect pocketed rock and in a divine position.

It's been a long day, but in true fashion on reaching the car a very weary Dave grins. "Felt nowt" he utters. Class!

Arcturus Pavey Ark with Robin Illingworth

I would never have attempted this climb if I had time travelled 20 years into the future, to read the new guide which gives Arcturus E2. Me an E2 leader! You are joking! I guess the crappy peg must have rusted through in the intervening years.

Anyway you climb steeply, clip the peg, give yourself a good talking to, and in my case wobble gingerly leftwards, until you reach a crack and gear. The rest of this pitch and the next 2 are excellent 5a/4c

It's a brilliant route, and I don't care if it was HVS when I led it. It's my only E2 lead, and I'm claiming it.

Ring of Steall with Paul Goulding

Damn global warming. Where have all the classic 6 winter days gone, when ice and neve formed and stayed for weeks. Frequent Atlantic fronts would come barreling in to aid the freeze thaw cycle. Now they just come in and strip the mountains bare.

On the EVMC website there is a picture of Paul on the Ring of Steall, on a perfect winters day. Paul had one Munro to do on the ring, and he was not sure about his fitness to cope with a long Day, so we never planned to do the Ring. However when we got to his target Munro, we just had to carry on round the whole thing. It was crystal clear, with views to far off snow capped peaks. A bit of easy scrambling adding to the experience. A wonderful day unencumbered by a sack full of metalwork.

As for global warming. I'm not optimistic. Seems to me that we are the new lemmings charging headlong towards the cliffs. With grandchildren, I write this with sadness in my heart.

Britomartis Gogarth with Penny Excel

I walk down the promontory to the abseil, and get great views of the whole of Wen Zawn, and recall doing Dream 25 years in the past. It looks very improbable. Anyway, ab down with Penny to a good ledge above a calm sea. I traverse out over the sea to a crack. Ok this is supposed to be a jug fest, so where the hell are they. Looking down between me legs, and there's a seal looking up at me! Scouts honour there is. Anyway the jugs are there, just a bit of climbing to get to them.

Penny follows, climbing easily, arrives at the belay and is not impressed. Neither am I to be honest, but you do what you can with the gear that you have left, which was not a lot.

The second pitch is a rising traverse leading into a groove, and it's all over. I belay, and bring Penny up whilst watching the various antics taking place on the slab.