

Rock-climbing on the North-East coastline

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Autumn 1969 saw the production of a booklet which many Aberdeen climbers had awaited for several years – a revised and extended edition of the Etchachan Club rock-climbing guide to the North-East coastline of Scotland originally produced in 1961. In this article I should like to comment on the new guide, and at the same time give my own impressions of some of the climbs mentioned in it.

The guide includes a comprehensive account of the climbs in the Longhaven area, about 30 miles up the coast from Aberdeen. A few descriptions and gradings seem to me misleading. 'Shelf Route', leading to the top of the Plateau, is described as a 'Moderate' grassy shelf, providing 'the pedestrian way to the top in the nesting season', but it looked to me very loose, earthy and dangerous. In the main quarry, the route I enjoyed most was certainly the traverse of Scimitar Ridge from north to south, which provides a good variety of climbing and an exhilarating walk along its knife-edge crest, where, however, protection is difficult to arrange. For this reason, the best way to take a complete novice up to the top is probably via the connecting ridge which runs up from the saddle between Scimitar Ridge and the main coastline further back. Lochan Buttress also gives a good climb, in a series of steps, though it is awkward to reach the notch from which the climb starts unless one is descending the north end of Scimitar Ridge. Because of its relative shortness – 40 feet or so – it is similar in character to many of the good Souter Head climbs, though in general the rock in this quarry is not as clean or reliable as elsewhere at Longhaven, and certainly not as good as that at Souter Head. The Longhaven Circuit gives a marvellous expedition of about 700 feet, and because of its diversity I found it one of the most satisfying routes in the area, though it does not have any great technical interest.

One of the places where a description in the guide-book seems most misleading is in the next climbing area to the south – Red Wall and Quarry. On two occasions I have attempted to find Slab Wall, following the description and diagram in the guide, but I have yet to find the huge boulder referred to. There is a huge rock which protrudes from the bottom of a slabby face just to the north of the artificial platform in the middle of the quarry, but to get launched from here on to the face itself would certainly be more than 'Difficult'. Of the other climbs in the quarry, McLeod's climb is probably worth doing – the smooth wall

referred to in the guide can be climbed directly, or passed on the right – but the line of the climb is rather artificial and it certainly does not merit recommendation.

Stepped Ridge provides an excellent introduction to the climbs on Red Wall. Most of the difficulties before the last pitch, however, are avoidable – the short penultimate pitch, described as the crux in the guide, can easily be turned on the right. A little loose rock on the direct finish thereafter can be avoided by taking the variation to the left, though this does not provide such an elegant or satisfying finish to the climb. By far the best of the Red Wall routes which I have done, however, is Diagonal Crack. This is a superb line, following a crack high above the sea, and although the climb is technically fairly easy, the seriousness of the route is certainly sufficient to justify its ‘Very Difficult’ grading. The description in the guide-book is, I think, unnecessarily complicated – it is much easier for the second to belay from the Dais than from 15 feet above it, and the leader can bring the second up to a point just above the mantelshelf, using a piton belay if necessary.

A little south of this is the Alligator, where some of the best rock anywhere on the North-East coastline is to be found. Of the main climbs, Alligator Crawl and Viper’s Drag provide definitely the best routes to the crest of the ridge; of these, Viper’s Drag seemed to me to be the harder. The Parted Jaws provides an interesting problem at the start, where a small climber is at a distinct disadvantage, but it is easy after the initial overhang and so lacks the perilousness of a bona fide ‘Very Severe’. The last move of the V-climb is very awkward and, I think, merited the climb’s ‘Mild Severe’ rating in the old guide, though it has now been downgraded to ‘Very Difficult’. An alternative finish to this route is to climb the steep step on the left about 8 feet below the notch, thus gaining a slab leading easily to the crest of the Alligator ridge.

The most natural way to gain the cliff-top from the ridge is to climb out the last pitch of Alligator Crawl. In the old guide-book, this was graded ‘Very Severe’ due to a confusion about the exact line of the pitch, and although it has now been downgraded to ‘Severe’, the confusion has not been cleared up. The guide refers to ‘two slightly converging cracks’ but the easiest route is to follow the obvious fault to the left, leading to a steep finish. It is unnecessary to use the fixed peg for direct aid, and it is probably unwise to use it for belaying at the neck; there is a good place for a metal chockstone instead. Seller’s Sortie provides a very sensational alternative to the last pitch of Alligator Crawl; the situation of this route rivals that of Diagonal Crack, for

after the horizontal traverse the climber is directly above the sea. In many ways, it would be a much more serious lead even than Diagonal Crack, for it is certainly much harder technically, and there seems to be little choice of protection. There is a slight ambiguity in the guide as to the exact line – it is difficult to say whether ‘climb corner to top’ means that the climber should keep to the crack beyond the edge leading upwards, or whether he should climb the edge itself. It is probably much more satisfying to keep to the edge, which is cleaner and more photogenic, but there is one loose rock which should be treated with due respect. Lovat’s Escape involves an interesting move at the start, but is more an academic than a natural line, joining Alligator Crawl and Oboe.

Apart from Lovat’s Escape, the three climbs on the Back Wall mentioned in the guide are all graded ‘Difficult’: Rhino, Piccolo and Oboe. A better and more enjoyable route, not described in the guide, is a variation which we named ‘Cello’ (to fit in with the general musical nature of the cliff). This route, also about ‘Difficult’ in standard, starts as for Rhino by climbing the initial 15-foot rampart, but instead of following the slabby ledges into the recess in the middle of the wall, it ascends the prominent crack sloping up to the left. This leads through a narrow entrance into a large sentry-box just short of the top of the cliff, which provides an excellent stance with a grand situation. As a variation on this, the sentry-box can be entered from the seaward side; a direct start to this, from the foot of the Gangway, is an attractive proposition and looks feasible, but the first few moves would be very awkward.

One of the big additions in the new guide-book is the section on the Grey Mare Slabs about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile south of the Bullers of Buchan – described as providing ‘the finest slab climbing in the Longhaven area’. Unfortunately the description in the guide of how to find the slabs is rather misleading, and I spent quite a while one afternoon looking for them without success. They are described in the guide as below the coastguard station, but in fact they lie on the seaward side of a fairly large promontory just to the north of it. The slabs certainly looked as though they would provide some really good routes, of a longer and more varied nature than the Scimitar slabs.

The other part of the coast on which I have enjoyed some good climbs is the area around Souter Head; what the climbs here lack in length, many of them make up for in character and situation. There is quite a significant difference, however, to be noted in the grading of these climbs in the guide-book. A climb at Souter Head will in general

be much harder technically than a route of the same grade at Longhaven. While it is understandable that a grading should attempt to take into account the length and seriousness of a climb, it is a little discouraging for the average climber, who may be tackling 'Very Difficult' routes at Longhaven without too much trouble, to have to struggle with a 'Moderate' or 'Difficult' route at Souter Head. Typical examples of climbs here which seem much harder than their grade would suggest are Slab Top Chimney ('Moderate'), the Left Wall of Long Step Crack ('Moderate') and the Arête ('Very Difficult'). This latter climb is probably challenged only by Puffin's Overhang for being the finest and most elegant route at Souter Head. It is difficult to see, however, why this climb, harder now than a handhold at the start has disappeared, is still graded, as in the old guide-book, 'Very Difficult'. I think the awkwardness of the first moves would have justified up-grading the climb to 'Mild Severe', whereas as it stands it carries the same grade as Rainbow Crack, a much easier and less serious route.

Further up the coast, some very enjoyable routes may be had at the Black Rock Gulch, where is to be found what is probably the easiest worthwhile climb anywhere in this area, namely the chimney mentioned in the guide to the right of Astra. This is a perfect route for introducing complete novices to rock-climbing, for the rock is first-class, and although there are no technical problems, the situation of the climb is sufficient to give it character, with steep walls to the left and right. The route up the extreme left edge of Red Slab is also to be recommended – in the old guide it was 'Moderate', but there is a very awkward move half-way up, so it has now rightly been up-graded to 'Very Difficult'. One possible route here which does not appear to be mentioned starts just to the right of Red Slab and goes straight up past an awkward long step to finish in a right-angle corner. The best climbs, however, are probably Windy Ledge and Yellow Edge. Windy Ledge is possibly the more varied route, but the rock is definitely inferior to that of Yellow Edge, the situation and steepness of this latter climb being particularly impressive.

Starting near the Black Rock Gulch and running southwards along the coast is a fine traverse – the Purple Way. Although this is an enjoyable, open route there is only one awkward move, and it is difficult to see why it should have been up-graded from 'Difficult' to 'Very Difficult' in the new guide. The traverse leads to the foot of one of the best climbs in the area – the Plumbline ('Difficult'). This open route goes straight up a fine, steep wall above the sea and receives a lot of sun as it faces south. Though not technically difficult, the climb is

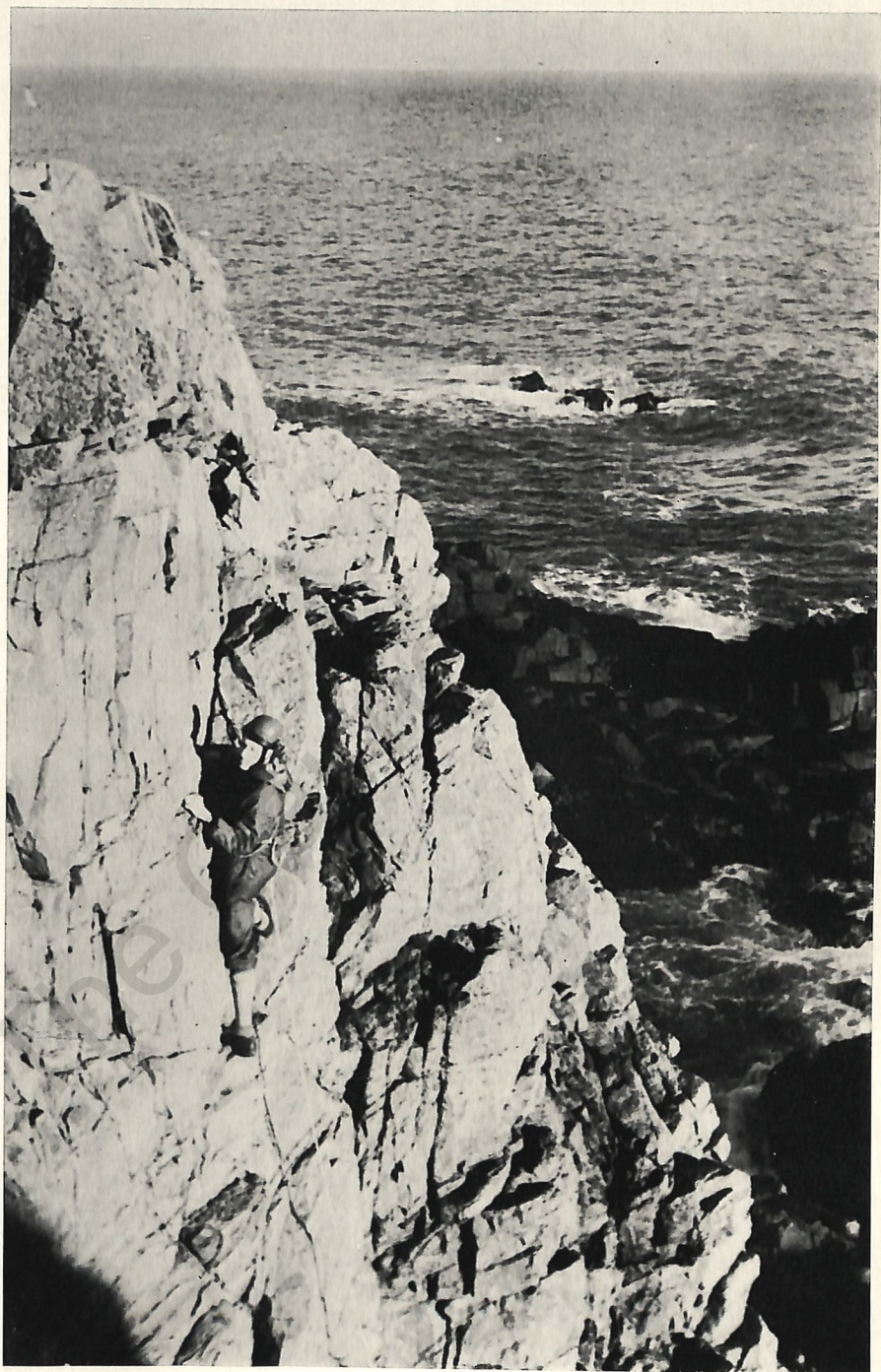
steep and satisfying, and for its grade probably enjoys the best situations of any route on this part of the coastline. The rock is excellent, and the holds, especially in the upper part of the climb, are like doorsteps. The only thing which worried me was the large detached block near the top over which the climber must pass, but so far this has shown no signs of moving!

Between the Plumblin and Souter Head itself the rock tends to be of poorer quality, but good rock is found again at Aitken's Pinnacle. This is an interesting climb, though often the pinnacle is cut off by the tide. Even when the neck connecting the pinnacle to the mainland is above water, the first few moves can be extremely slippery, so appropriate care should be taken. Further along, Nigg Wall and Nog Crack are pleasant, though rather short routes – the rock is particularly good on Nog Crack, but Nigg Wall has a fine finish up a slab straight above the sea. Milestone Direct is worth doing, though it has been spoiled by red and white paint on the holds, and the character of the route, I think, suffers from the fact that it is in a very narrow cleft and so the climb is often in shadow. Just behind the cleft is a pool, with the two traverses – these are short but good fun, the penalty for falling off being wet feet!

Just nearby is Rainbow Wall, a short but elegant route up a smooth, steep slab. Puffin's Perch, Rainbow Crack and Jimmy's Crack, all near the back of the cove, are also worth exploring. The Swing Seam, though shorter than the Arête, is of the same quality in rock and situation, but although it is graded 'Mild Severe' it did not seem as hard to me as the big routes of the cove.

Slightly further down the coast is another climb well worth doing – Overhanging Crack. This is a deceptively difficult route – the initial overhang is very awkward and it is a fallacy to assume that all the difficulty is over when this is passed. It certainly deserves its up-grading from 'Difficult' in the old guide to 'Very Difficult' in the new one. At the back of the large mass of rock which Overhanging Crack scales is Overhang Gully. At this point of the coast the rock has begun to deteriorate, but it is still fairly reliable here, and these climbs are worth exploring. Similar in character are the routes in the 'Chamonix Crack' area still further down the coast – these are situated on a fairly high, steep wall and give exhilarating climbs, but the wall faces north and so tends to be rather cold and sunless.

The areas on the coast which I have mentioned probably represent the most popular locations for climbing, but there are several other regions worth exploring – notably South Cove and Clashrodney,



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[photo by Donald Hawksworth]

which are fully described in the guide. In general, although there is not a great deal of difference between the old and new guides, those of us who rely on such a book to help us find the best climbs are very grateful to the Etchachan Club for this new edition. My only regret is that, having ascertained that the old guide was no longer obtainable, I had just finished copying out a friend's copy when the new guide was printed!

