

SOUTER HEAD

STUART STRONACH

The following article has been unearthed from C.C.J Vol XV No. 84 (1945). I have reproduced it here verbatim, but with the addition of the current climbing guide descriptions for the routes noted (Northeast Outcrops, NEO). Any additional text, including the up-to-date route descriptions, is given in italics. The original article, written by R.R. MacDonald, R.O. Scott and W.T. Hendry, was the first appearance of a climbing guide to the North East coastline, and most of the routes listed were pioneered by Club members. Some of the new descriptions have been paraphrased in order that they make sense in the context of the rest of the descriptions. Altered words are shown in [], and words omitted are indicated by The text of the current North East Outcrops guidebook has been reproduced by kind permission of the Scottish Mountaineering Club.

'On the Kincardineshire coast at Souter Head,¹ about two miles south of the Bay of Nigg, some excellent climbing may be had any summer evening or Saturday afternoon. Although Souter Head has been mentioned in previous numbers of the Journal, any description of climbs is usually brief and vague. In the following notes an attempt has been made to describe the main climbs in such a way that their position can be easily identified. The climbs do not exceed 60 or 70 feet, but there is a surprising variety both as regards type and degree of difficulty. The rock is excellent, and it is seldom that one comes upon a loose hold. The climbs are described below going from north to south.



(A).- This is a small pinnacle north of Souter Head, surrounded by water except at low tide. An ascent by Aitken is described in Vol. XIII, p.274. By doing a very difficult hand traverse round the south side he managed to ascend the front of the pinnacle. A brief survey last summer in a bathing costume persuaded us that the south side was the most feasible route,² but the cold wind and absence of a rope prevented a serious attempt at climbing it. Perhaps someone who has the benefit of an army training in amphibious operations may manage the ascent at high tide.

NEO: Southern Diagonal Traverse 8m Very Difficult

Start from the neck and traverse right and up to a ledge on the edge. Continue easily to the top. This is the easiest descent route, but there is also a metal ring on the summit from which to abseil.

¹ Reached by crossing bridge over railway at Burnbanks and proceed east through field.

² Other comments appear later in the article.

GRASSY PINACLE (B).- This is the first promontory in the accompanying diagram and is much frequented by sea-gulls. The approach is along a neck of rock to a pitch of 14 feet which is not quite so easy as it looks. A descent can be made from the neck on either side and the pinnacle traversed at sea level without difficulty.³

THROUGH ROUTE CHIMNEY (C).- The south side of the second promontory is approached along the edge of a small pool by means of a fine handhold about seven feet from the ground. Here will be seen a hole in the rock giving access to a V-shaped chimney. Anyone of more than average girth will find this hole difficult to negotiate, and even a reasonably slim person will discover that there is only one position in which his body will pass through. The walls of the chimney are rough with few good holds and the descent is made by keeping the body wedged into the narrow part. Although the chimney is short, the ascent is slow and laborious, and anyone who goes down and up without losing any buttons may consider himself lucky.

NEO: At the back of the inlet is a through route (Moderate), which gives an enjoyable squirm.

A few feet out from the chimney the south wall of the second promontory may be climbed on good holds.

MILESTONE CLIMB (D).- Farther along the south wall will be seen a very prominent milestone. The route a few feet to the right of this is one of the more interesting climbs on Souter Head. It proceeds vertically upwards on small holds to above the level of the milestone and then bears to the right over the edge of the wall and up an easy slope to the top.

*NEO: Milestone Direct 10m Very Difficult **

The slabby north wall can be climbed at any point. The best route starts directly below the milestone. Climb up to and directly over the milestone, then continue straight up to a slight overhang. Step left and finish on good holds. The overhang may be climbed direct (Severe).

SLAB TOP CHIMNEY (E).- On the north side of the fourth promontory is a well defined chimney. The first part is climbed by back and knee with the body well in to the chimney until the slab is reached. It is now necessary to step out into a rather exposed position and a good handhold at the top of the slab is found with a feeling of relief.

*NEO: Slab Top Chimney 10m Difficult ***

Climb the obvious chimney with a constricted top.

LONG STEP CHIMNEY (F).- A few feet to the left of the Slab-top Chimney is another and narrower one commencing about 15 feet above the rocks at the foot. Half-way up there is an overhang which can be avoided by a long step out of the chimney to the left.⁴ The climb is then finished up easy rocks.

³ There is a possible route (V.D.) on the seaward corner of the N. face.

⁴ There is an alternative route on the steep slabs on the right of the overhang.

NEO: Long Step Crack 10m Mild Severe

Climb the crack left of [the] arete.

There are three pools at Souter Head, but the one mentioned as 'The Pool' in Vol. XIII, p. 184, is probably that between the fourth and fifth promontory. There are several moderate routes up the rocks on the landward side of the Pool. The neck joining the fifth promontory to the mainland can be reached either by a wide chimney or an easy scramble up the rocks on the right of it.

BIRD'S NEST CRACK (G).- This rises at a moderate angle on the north wall of the fifth promontory a few feet to the left of the Pool. On feeling for a handhold near the top, a climber was startled by a frantic chirping and he found he had nearly taken hold of a nest of fledglings.

NEO: Bird's Nest Crack 6m Easy

The easy-angled narrow crack above the pool provides a useful descent, and E-points for beginners.

OVERHANG CRACK (H).- A few feet to the left of the above, a vertical crack rises above a small overhanging slab. After surmounting this overhang with difficulty the climber obtains a firm lodgement in the foot of the crack. For the next few feet there is a great dearth of handholds till the crack slants to the right, when it becomes easier. From the top of the crack a short easy scramble leads to the summit. This climb should be thoroughly investigated with a rope from above before an attempt is made to lead it.

*NEO: Overhang Crack 10m Mild Severe **

The obvious corner on the north wall starts with an overhang and finishes on a shelf slanting off to the right. Swing up over the overhang into the corner with the help of an excellent time-honoured flake (crux) and continue up the corner.

CHIMNEY AND WALL CLIMB (I).- Farther to the left, near the front of the promontory, is a short chimney which looks feasible. A traverse to the left above this takes one to a vertical wall 10 feet high leading to the summit. The wall may be avoided by continuing the traverse round a corner on to easy rocks.

The location of this climb is open to question, but it is likely to be St. Andrews Crack, followed by either The Rat Trap or The Catwalk

NEO: St. Andrew's Crack 4m Moderate

The crack line left of Overhang Crack leads to a big shelf below [a 4m wall]. The climb is named after a characteristic white quartzite cross on the finishing ledge.

NEO: The Rat Trap 4m Very Difficult

Climb the wall 3 metres left of [the top of St. Andrew's Crack], finishing at the top of a small sloping shelf.

NEO: The Catwalk 4m Difficult

Climb the sloping shelf up right. A paltry offering.

R. R. Macdonald.

R. O. Scott.

AITKEN'S TOWER (A).- W.T. Hendry, G. Lumsden (Etchachan Club), and Dr Cruickshank traversed round the north side of the pinnacle on barnacle-covered rock and completed the climb on the seaward side, a scramble of some 25 feet. The ascent, starting by a traverse on the south face, was found to be harder than the previous one. The landward face (A.P.) was also climbed, in stocking soles, and was found very hard, especially at the start.

NEO: *Direct Route* 6m *Severe*

Climb straight up the centre of the landward face. The initial moves are the hardest.

PARALLEL CRACKS (P).- David Thomas, of Wrexham, first climbed this route solo, in boots. Rubbers are to be preferred. Two parallel cracks on smooth slabby rock set at a steep angle will be found on the face opposite Grassy Pinnacle, providing an exposed climb of about 50 feet.

The cracks are now climbed from sea level by a route called Bootlace crack.

NEO: *Bootlace Crack* 10m *HVS 5a*

Near the landward end of the wall an obvious crack splits a black overlap. Climb this teasing bulge and.....finish up the easier corner. The upper corner was originally called Parallel Cracks.

PUFFIN PERCH (Q).- This lies in the next bay to the south, on the face opposite to the Slab-top Chimney but not so far out. Starting up a slanting crack from the water's edge, a very narrow ledge is reached in about 30 feet. The ledge is traversed to the left for 10 feet, when it peters out. The climb then goes straight up. Dry day climb.

NEO: *Puffin's Perch* 10m *Moderate*

.....climb a steep left-slanting shelf, then traverse the ledge across [the] wall to finish just right of [a] crack.

VARIATION EXIT (V).- An interesting variant to the usual route out of this bay will be found at the back of the bay to the left of the previous climb. It is a short climb on small holds, steep and interesting. Rubbers.

NEO: *Rainbow Wall* 6m *Difficult*

At the back of the inlet is a smooth slab. Climb its centre, much more easily than it looks.

(S) There is a climb on the left wall of the wide chimney leading to the neck joining the fifth promontory to the mainland. A sickle-shaped crack, overhanging in mid-section, leads to the neck. Footholds are exiguous or absent and the climb is hard on the arms - in fact, the hardest climb at Souter Head.

NEO: *The Sickle* 10m *HVS 5b*

Start a few metres up the gully above the pool. Work right across the face to a small recessed overhang. Continue round and finish up a right-slanting crack. Very strenuous. The rock is less sound than elsewhere at Souter Head.

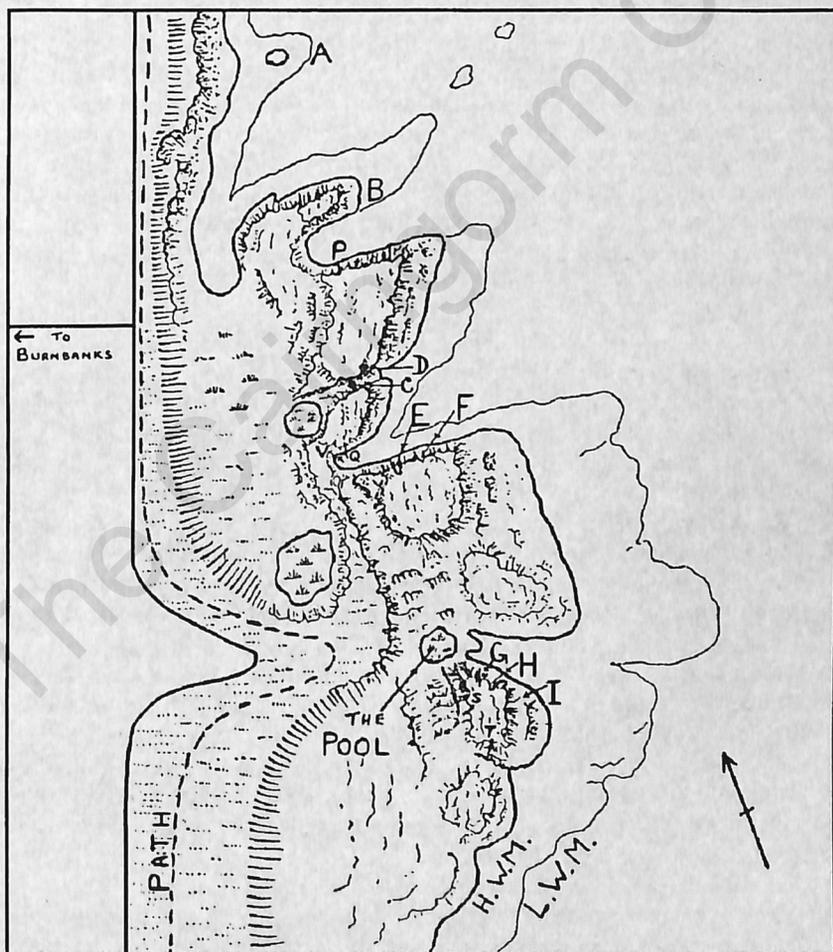
(T) On the south side of this same promontory a good climb starts from a shallow recess, out over the outhang above, and then up a small crack.

About 40 feet. This may be done in boots, but as a general rule the face climbs will be found more enjoyable in rubbers.

NEO: Scylla 8m Very Difficult

Go straight up on good holds over the bulge at the back of the recess.

W.T.H.



SKETCH MAP OF SOUTER HEAD