

A Climbing Year

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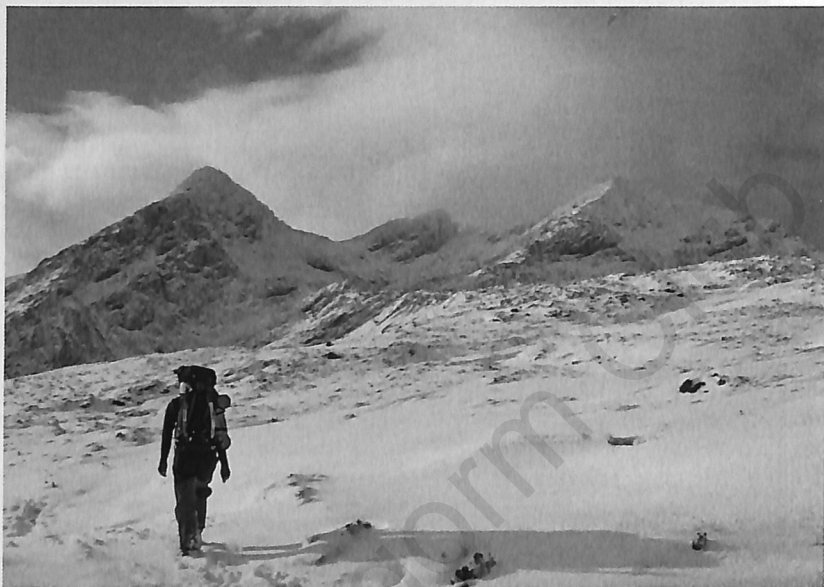
Whilst trying to think of something worth writing about for this edition of the *Journal*, it occurred to me that I'd had a pretty varied year's climbing, getting out in summer and winter conditions, taking in trad climbing, sport climbing and bouldering, on outcrops and in the mountains, at home and abroad, and including a few first ascents. The following days all stand out for one reason or another, and take in some of the lows and highs of 2006.

7th January – Central Buttress, Lochnagar

The first outing of the 2006 was a trip to Lochnagar. I first climbed there in 1986, but hadn't been back since the late 1990s, so the trudge up the approach tracks was strangely pleasant. With us were Dave and Lara, new friends who had recently moved to the area, and who were new to the Scottish winter experience. We opted for Central Buttress as an ideal introductory route, Amanda and I doing the route-finding, and Dave and Lara following on behind. This was the fifth time I'd done the route, and conditions were the toughest I'd encountered, with four pitches of surprisingly technical climbing. By the time we'd got to the end of the difficulties, Dave and Lara were out of sight below us, so Amanda and I spent an hour huddled together on a ledge waiting for them, playing I-spy and singing Monty Python songs. This was also my first opportunity to appreciate the warmth of the new Montane smock I'd been given for Christmas.

11th March – Attempt on Sgurr nan Gillean

Amanda has a bit of a thing about Skye. She visibly lights up as you drive across the bridge from Kyle, and as soon as you get onto the hill – *whoosh* – she's away and you're trailing in her wake. So it was with our attempt to climb Sgurr nan Gillean in full-on winter conditions (this was the tail end of the week of snow that brought Aberdeen to a standstill). We set off from the Sligachan Hotel in a blizzard which slowly cleared and teased us with glimpses of our target through the mists. We ploughed onwards and upwards, but by the time we were round into the upper corrie, the snow was waist-deep over loose scree and the weather had closed in again, so the decision was made to turn back. It was amazing to see the Cuillin in full winter garb – definitely worth going back for another attempt next winter.



Walking in to Sgurr nan Gillean

18th March – Perseverance Groove, Lochnagar

The final winter outing of the year saw us back on Lochnagar, this time in the company of Helen and John, friends from London. John was an experienced climber, but Helen had only been out in winter a couple of times before. The plan was to do one of the shorter climbs on the southern sector of the cliffs. I'd been given a draft copy of the new guidebook write-up for Lochnagar to proof-read, and from it we had identified a pair of grade III lines close together that looked ideal. John set off with Helen towards his chosen groove system, while Amanda led me upwards to the base of a route called Perseverance Rib. The write-up told us to start up the gully to the left of the crest, which we duly did. However, from here on, nothing made sense when compared to the description, and Amanda ended up following her nose as she led on up a groove, slab and chimney to the top of the crag. Subsequent discussion with Simon Richardson revealed that we'd just done a first ascent (which we named Perseverance Groove, grade II), and that the guide text should have told us to climb a groove in the nose of the rib, rather than the gully to the left. The text has now been altered! John, meanwhile, found his grade III line was in hard grade IV conditions, with unconsolidated snow and psychological belays.

11th April & 14th April – Portlethen and Muchalls bouldering

The first outings of the year on rock, and a chance to see if a winter of training on our home climbing wall had made any difference. First impressions were good as I manage to succeed on a problem at Muchalls which required a very strenuous undercut start – last year, I'd been unable to pull off the ground. I then went on to add a new problem from the same start, but making a long reach to a distant hold – very satisfying.

15th April – Logie Head

I'd set out this year intending to make a determined effort to be more focussed in my climbing, and to climb an increased number of harder routes. An attempt at Sunnyside Direct, a pokey E1 5c I'd done a couple of times before, turned into a real battle of nerves as I struggled and shook my way up. I really do need to improve my mental approach.

27th April – 2nd May – Bouldering trip to Fontainebleau, France

A long weekend bouldering in Fontainebleau got off to the worst possible start when British Airways managed to lose our luggage at Paris. However, the weather this year was a lot cooler than the sticky conditions experienced on a trip the year before, which helped us be a bit more productive in terms of climbing harder problems. This year, I'd actually gone armed with a tick list, inspired in part by photos of Tom Kirkpatrick on fine-looking problems from his UKClimbing.com album. One of these was a problem called Le Tiroir, at Roche aux Sabots. A confusing collection of holds saw us struggling to get anywhere, and it took the intervention of a local 'Bleusard' with the right sequence before we were successful. Our final day was spent at Bas Cuvier, probably the most famous of the bouldering areas at Fontainebleau, where I was particularly pleased with an on-sight ascent of La Marie-Rose, the first Font 6a in the forest and a real classic. Compensation from British Airways in the form of flight vouchers has been used to fund next year's trip – to Sardinia.

10th May – Legaston

Our first sport climbing of the year saw us with a friend, Ben, at Legaston Quarry. Gorgeous weather proved that even grotty quarries can be pleasant places to climb given the right conditions, even though I fluffed the sequence on Death is the Hunter, needing two attempts to get past the crux. Amanda managed to redpoint her first F6b, the reachy Flight of the Mad Magician.

6th June – Souter Head

An evening visit to Souter Head found me belaying Amanda as she led her first HVS, a very technical little route called Jaded, which she had previously top-roped. With the route safely in the bag, success was

celebrated by moving round to the girdle traverse wall and making an on-sight ascent of her second HVS, Bootlace Crack.

9th June – Arbroath

Poor conditions with coastal haar meant that Lara and I headed to Arbroath in an attempt to find some rock in climbable conditions. Things weren't great here either, and I took an unexpected fall off an F5+ arête on greasy rock. I don't fall off very often (cowardice means I rarely get that committed on a route), and this was the first one in several years. I'm sure I could climb a lot better if I could get over my fear of falling – maybe something to practise?

17th June – Choire Etchachan

After an early start and a bike ride up Glen Derry, Amanda and I arrived at the Hutchison Hut in Choire Etchachan just as the heavens opened. We sat out the downpour at the hut for a couple of hours in the hope that we could still get onto our objective, Talisman, but in the end, we had to give up and made a very sodden journey back to the car at the Linn of Dee. This is why I can rarely be bothered trying mountain routes.

1st July – Pass of Ballater

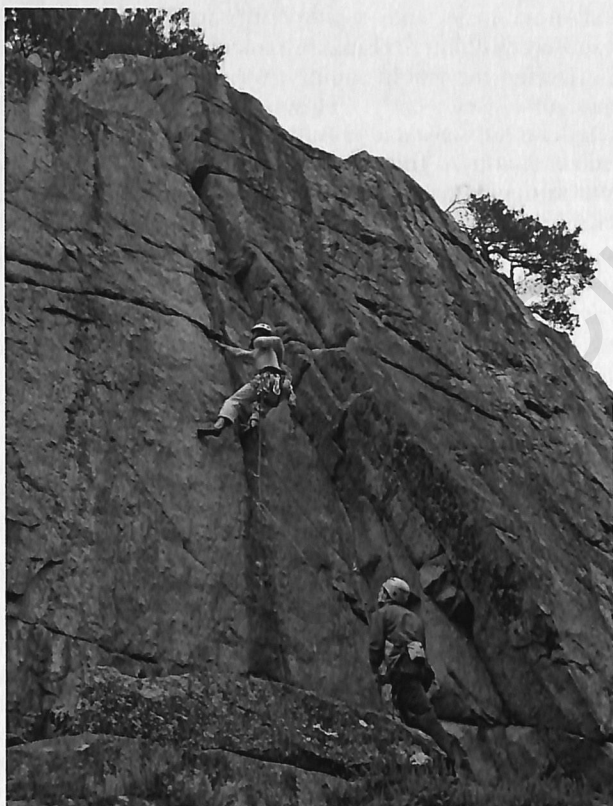
We bumped into Neil and Tim while Amanda and I were climbing at the Pass of Ballater. Tim had his eye on Bluter Crack, an E4 6c line that had only had three previous ascents since it was first climbed over 20 years ago. I offered my services (i.e. my long reach) to help clean out a crucial nut placement, and then Amanda and I took up photographer's positions to watch as Tim made a very smooth ascent of what is a desperately hard route.

12th July – Hidden Inlet

Amanda, Chris, Rowie and I visited Hidden Inlet, just south of the Long Slough, a spot on the coast where we'd done a collection of new routes/first recorded ascents last summer. We repeated each other's climbs from last year, before I managed to squeeze in a final new route, a bold but escapable E1. This is a lovely spot and deserves to become popular, providing similar climbing to Deceptive Wall, though in a more pleasant and less tidal setting.

23rd July – Clashrodney

Amanda made short work of Johnny's Dangler as her first E1 lead. She seconded me up it the previous week, but that was still her second jump in lead grade this year. I'd better get my finger out or she'll be leaving me behind.



Tim Rankin leading Bluter Crack

28th July – 12th August – UK Tour

Our summer holiday was intended to be two weeks of driving round the country, climbing classic routes. Naturally, we timed it for the weekend the summer heatwave broke. Still, we managed to climb at the Hawkcraig in Fife, Bowden Doors in Northumberland and the Slipstones in Yorkshire before the rain set in as we arrived in the Peak district. Three days of solid rain is not much fun when you're camping and supposed to be climbing, but we tracked down a cinema in Sheffield to while away the wet afternoons. Eventually it did stop raining and we got to Froggatt, the Roaches, Burbage North and South, but it was very humid and our climbing suffered as a result. Eventually we headed back northwards into Scotland, pitching the tent at the top of Glen Etive and being eaten alive by midges in the process. Next morning, we packed up and headed down to the bottom of the glen, with plans to get up onto the Etive slabs, but the

midges had other ideas and, whimpering and itching, we retreated to Nevisport in Fort William for breakfast and a look at the weather forecast. With rain affecting the whole country, we grumped our way back home, the best part of a week early. However, things improved and after a couple of days on the coast and at Ballater, we packed up the car again and headed over to Reiff. A great day on the crags saw Amanda on-sight her first E1 (Westering Home), while I manage to on-sight my first E2 in years (Flying Pig), immediately followed by my biggest battle of the year, leading another E2 called Huffin Puffin (I'd been on it previously but had to rest on gear mid-route). This route gets E2 6a in the guide, but it's really a very pumpy E2 5b perched on top of a V3 boulder problem. I climbed up and down this boulder problem three times, fixing gear and sussing out the top section before finally committing, and it was with relief that I hauled my wheezing body onto the cliff top (the climb is well-named!). The day was finished off with a meal of fresh seafood at the Am Fuaran bar, followed by a ceilidh and folk evening at Coigach village hall.

26th August – DWS Festival

I forgot to take my Jeremy Clarkson 'brave pill', so I restricted myself to spectating at the first Aberdeen Deep Water Soloing Festival at Craig Stirling. A large turnout of climbers from all across Scotland came to climb and watch the likes of Wilson Moir and Julian Lines soloing routes up to E3 with ease. Unfortunately, one climber misjudged a jump into the sea from half way up Depth Charge, and fractured a vertebra on hitting the water. This necessitated a coastguard callout, with lifeboats and helicopter in attendance. Typically, Julian waited till after I'd gone home before making the first solo ascent of a new route up a steeply overhanging prow.

29th August – Clashrodney

Despite a sprained ankle, Matthew offered to belay me as I tried Streetwise, an E2 5c I'd done a few years previously. I climbed steadily to below the upper break, placed bomber gear and then failed completely to work out how to climb the crux headwall. Defeated, I slunk off onto a neighbouring HS, only to watch Matthew, seconding, cruise straight up through the crux, making it look a breeze. Now armed with the correct sequence, I tried again and found it straightforward, but went home very frustrated that I couldn't have worked that out for myself.

6th September – Portlethen

A bouldering and sport climbing session at Portlethen with Dan turned into something of an eye-opener. First of all, he demonstrated with ease a Font 7a boulder problem I'd been trying and failing on all summer. It really brought it home how much stronger I need to get to be able to do these things. Then we headed up to the sport wall and while Dan and Pete

worked the Dogs of War (F7c), I sneaked on for an attempt at The Lurcher, an F6c+ arête that Dogs starts up before the routes diverge after the Lurcher crux. My first attempt saw me drop off at the crux, but sitting on the bolt, I worked out a sequence, pulled back on and finished the route to the top. After Pete and Dan had a turn each on Dogs, I got my redpoint attempt and climbed Lurcher without fuss to the top. This was the hardest sport climb I'd done in years, and my good mood was further enhanced by Pete and Dan telling me that I ought to try Dogs of War next, as although the route is longer, it doesn't get any harder than the crux of the Lurcher. F7c is a grade I always thought was way beyond me, but suddenly, I'm interested...

16th September – Spartan Slab

Having failed to do Spartan Slab during our summer trip, I'd promised Amanda that we'd go back. The opportunity came in mid-September, when a fine forecast coincided with a free weekend. This time, we camped down at the loch-side, and woke next morning to a beautiful clear dawn, with the Etive hills reflected in a mirror-calm loch. The early start saw us as second party to the base of the slabs, and with the other team established on Hammer, we had Spartan Slab to ourselves. We swapped leads on perfect granite, with the climbing hard enough to be interesting without being desperate enough to worry. A damp streak on the second last pitch was overcome and the route was ours. Back at the base of the route, we performed a quick inspection of each other's nether regions to ensure that no ticks had stopped for a bite. It was only after we were fully clothed again that we realised that a party high up on the slabs must have had a bird's eye view of Amanda's behind! This was a perfect day's climbing – a classic route in ideal weather with a great partner. Days out in Scotland don't come much better – this is why, when I *can* be bothered trying mountain routes and I get a day like this, I find that all the rainy days help accentuate the feeling of accomplishment, making it that much more satisfying.

23rd September – Buckstone How

The following weekend saw us in the Lake District at a birthday get-together for a friend of ours, Jenny, along with her boyfriend Mike, and Helen and John from London. The plan was for me to take Jenny up her first multi-pitch route as a birthday present, while Amanda climbed with Mike. We had hoped to climb on Shepherd's Crag, but due to a late start, we were unable to find anywhere to park the cars within a sensible distance of the crag and so eventually made our way up to the summit of the Honister Pass, followed by a short trek up to the crag of Buckstone How. This was my first experience of climbing on natural slate, and hopefully, it will also be my last. Fortunately, our climb, Honister Wall, a

6-pitch HS, was reasonably straightforward, as there was an unnerving amount of loose rock, and limited protection. Still, Jenny seemed to enjoy herself.

30th September – 1st October – coaching session with Dave MacLeod

Keen to have a productive winter season and to maximise our chances of improving next year, Amanda and I booked a coaching session with Dave MacLeod. Unable to climb outside due to the weather, Dave worked us hard on our home climbing wall, setting problems to stretch our abilities and expand our repertoire of techniques. A comprehensive written report followed, identifying strengths, weaknesses and suggesting training regimes for us to follow. As well as being an excellent climber, Dave is a very positive and motivational coach, and has left us with ambitious targets and high hopes for next year's climbing.

29th October – Weem

The final outdoor climbing trip of the year was to the sport climbing crags above the village of Weem, near Aberfeldy. After struggling to find the various crags hidden amongst the rhododendrons, wild roses and woodland on the hillside, we eventually ended up below The End of Silence, an F7b route which takes a very steep, crimped lower wall before finishing up a vertical headwall above. There was no pretence of being able to climb the whole route that visit, but after a bit of work, I managed to link from the ground to the lip of the overhanging lower section. Unfortunately for Amanda, the only tick she came away with was the kind that drinks blood. However, with a bit more work, and an improvement in stamina, we felt that the route might well be do-able by us. This will provide further motivation to train hard over the winter and then we'll see what next year brings.