

## **Climbing with Jeff Knowles**

### *James Hirst*

Jeff Knowles, Cairngorm Club member and enthusiastic climber, tragically died on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2005, whilst out running. He was just a few weeks short of his 40th birthday. Jeff is survived by his wife Lynnette, his son Jamie, father Andy and sister Claire.

Jeff was a local Aberdeenshire lad and was employed in the oil and gas industry. He had been a member of the Cairngorm Club since 2001, and was a regular face at the Tuesday night climbing sessions as well as climbing at weekends, when time and family commitments allowed. In 2002 Jeff married Lynnette, his teenage sweetheart, and in 2004 he became a proud father when his son Jamie was born. In addition to climbing, Jeff was also a keen runner, cyclist, skier, snowboarder and hill walker. In general, Jeff loved outdoor pursuits.

My lasting memories of Jeff will be the friendship and banter that he, Andy and I shared whilst climbing and also Jeff's 'can do' attitude. This did result in some epic encounters, but also in many fantastic and enjoyable routes. Please excuse me the indulgence of recounting some of my memories of climbing with Jeff.

### **2001**

Jeff and I joined the Cairngorm Club around the same time (April 2001). On the evening I first met Jeff, we were both trying to find the meet on the regular Club Tuesday night. After about thirty minutes of searching in vain at Souter Head, I saw Jeff coming in the other direction and wondered if he knew where the meet was. To be honest, he looked a bit of a poser as he was wearing wrap-around shades at the time. He too was looking for the Club and similarly could not find them. So instead of wasting any more time we decided to climb together and thus our climbing partnership began.

I quickly realised that my first impressions of Jeff were completely wrong. Far from being a poser, Jeff was a down-to-earth guy who was really easy to get on with. The first few times we climbed together were interesting, to say the least. Some of Jeff's belay techniques were unconventional, although my biggest worry was his rope, which was particularly worn about five metres from one end. Jeff repeatedly assured me that seeing the core through the sheath was not a problem. Eventually Duncan and Dave Shaw confirmed my concerns. A pair of scissors later and Jeff became the proud owner of a slightly shorter (42m instead of the conventional 50m) but slightly safer rope. (Jeff's 'dodgy rope' remained

an in-joke between us and Andy, even up to the last conversation I had with him).

The only records I have of climbs completed in 2001 are: Quartz Deviant at Long Slough (10m S, with 'lead – scary' written against it in my guidebook!) and Scylla at Overhanging Gulley, Souter Head (8m, V Diff, 'Jeff's bogey climb #1').

## 2002

2002 saw us try our first multi-pitch climbs, but not before an epic or two on the Aberdeenshire sea cliffs. Those that knew Jeff will be fully aware of his positive approach to life in general and climbing in particular. Thus egged on by each other, we quite often ended up climbing, even when common sense (and our lack of ability) said go home. One such time was at Fulmar Wall. It had been raining all day, and Jeff and I were the only two to turn up to the Club meet that night. Buoyed on by clearing skies we did a few V Diffs and probably should have left it at that. Instead we decided to get in the infamous 'one last climb'. Over an hour later with the night drawing in and the drizzle making Fulmar Wall resemble an ice rink, we were still trying to get up Oh Well (20m, HS). It was the first of the many abseil retreats and gear retrievals that make climbing so much fun.

Jeff married Lynnette in the summer of 2002. The build-up to the big event being recorded by three climbs we nicknamed at Dry Covie – the one by Jeff was Usher's Anger (6m, V Diff, JK Lead 28/05/02), so named because of the hassle Jeff was experiencing at that time with one of his wedding ushers.

Our first multi-pitch of the year was on Skye. We had hired a guide and turned up early on Saturday morning, raring to go. Little did we know that our guide (Jerry) was also in the Cuillin mountain rescue team and as we arrived a rescue was just under way. We seemed to wait for ages, Jeff getting distinctly peeved by the inaction of the mountain rescue team, who seemed to be putting more effort into brewing up than finding the missing walker. Fortunately for us, the missing walker did turn up (or did they just run out of tea?) and an afternoon's climbing ensued. Cioch West (215m, S), Arrow route (60m, V Diff) and then onto the Cioch for butties and cakes. A great day out, even after the morning's tea-drinking delays.

We also climbed Eagle Ridge (250m, S) on Lochnagar that year, after at least one unsuccessful attempt (when we only got as far as the bealach at the Meikle Pap before being beaten back by heavy rain). However, we finally made it on the first of September. We had a slight route finding problem at first (I still blame Dave Shaw who soloed the climb and chaperoned us that day), but once we had found our bearings we were away. The crux lead for me was the Sentry Box pitch. A magnificent climb with excellent position and exposure. I still remember

the look of disbelief on Jeff's face as he pulled into the sentry box. From memory he said something like "how did you get here?". A tough, very long but enjoyable day out.

### **2003**

2003 passed in a similar vein to 2002, with both of us steadily progressing through the grades (my favourite of the year being the Pobble at Souter Head, 10m, VS). We still had the odd epic here and there. Waves (8m, HS) at Deceptive Wall provided our main psychological challenge, following Fred Belcher's previous fall and medi-vac by the air sea rescue. Probably the best weather of the year was in late July at Greymare Slabs, where we were blessed with sunshine all day long. JK led Ornithology (30m, D), Ginhouse (35m, S) and Groovin' High (35m, S).

### **2004**

2004 saw the addition of Jeff's son Jamie to the Knowles clan. This year Andy (Guthrie) also began climbing with us too. The addition of someone who knew what they were doing, and had done it all before, was a real bonus. And so 2004 saw Jeff and me progress into VS / HVS territory with growing confidence and surprisingly – for us – very few epics.

The big climbing event for the year was to be our attempt to complete the Cuillin Ridge, over two days with a bivouac half way along. We arrived on Skye to heavy rain and things did not look good. A couple of pints of Busty Jugs beer later, buoyed up by the Sligachan bar man who claimed that the weather was about to break, we decided to get a head start by walking in and camping in Coir a' Ghrunnda. And so started my first wild-camping experience. We did not really sleep at all that night, due to the torrential rain and gale-force winds. At about 5.00 a.m., cold and soaked to the skin (by that time there was a small stream flowing through the tent) we finally admitted that our Cuillin attempt was over.

All was not lost though, as a short drive later we were at Logie Head climbing in sunshine. JK led Poacher (10m, VS), and identified the Cullen caravan park as a future family holiday venue, with the added bonus of bouldering at Logie Head thrown in.

### **2005**

The summer of 2005 was Jeff's best climbing season to date. The year started where 2004 had left off, with each of us leading a VS on the first day of outdoor climbing: Giant Flake Route (30m), Convoy (25m), and Strawberry Ripple (8m).

The mid-June meet at Clachnaben was one of the best Tuesday evening meets. Here Jeff's appetite for barbequed food was only matched by the quality of routes climbed. JK's longest-day lead was Solus's na h-Uamhan (20m, S), mine the Cairngorm Club Crack (12m, S) and Crack o'



*Jeff Knowles on Black Guillemot*

the Mearns (25m, VS). I'm sure all who were there would agree that it was an outstanding evening's climbing, with a sunset to match.

In August, Jeff, Lynnette, Jamie, Emma and I attended our first Club weekend away. Reiff delivered what Dave Ogden had promised – with excellent weather on the Friday evening and all day Saturday. The climbing was exceptional too. JK leads: Black Pig (20m, VS), Black Guillemot (20m, VS), Hy Basil (10m, VS), and Mac's Route (8m HVS) amongst others. Even Jamie had a go, 'bouldering' on the rocks near the chalets – a natural climber at 11-months old. On the Sunday night we went for a celebration dinner at the Summer Isles Hotel, but only after Jeff had confirmed with the baby sitter that she was not a mad, axe-wielding murderer (well he had to ask as it was the first time that Jamie had been left with a non-family member). Good food and company – a fitting end to the weekend. Jeff vowed to return to Reiff after being wowed by the quantity and quality of routes.

My last conversations with Jeff were about unfinished business: Insect Groove (30m, HVS at South Cove), Little Cenotaph (10m, HVS at the Pass) and Sip from the Wine of Youth Again (10m, HVS at Reiff). The multi-pitch routes we wanted to climb in 2006: Agag's Groove (Glen Coe), Square Face / Mitre Ridge (Beinn a' Bhuidr) and Centurion (Carn Dearg). And Jeff's plans to buy ice climbing gear off eBay. As ever, the

conversation turned to Jeff's dodgy rope – one rope for sale, slightly worn but very useful for short routes. There are many more stories, too many to tell succinctly here, but thanks for allowing me to re-tell those that I have. I hope I have conveyed the attitude and humour with which Jeff approached climbing. It was a privilege to have been Jeff's climbing partner and friend.

### A Light on the Hill

*I often look for manmade things in remote places. There is something about coming across an old building, a kiln, a cairn, or drovers' meeting point. There is a world of adventure in thinking of those who went before us on a hillside, and the reasons for the great wall they built to nowhere. Hills were used to send important signals of impending danger, attack by strangers, even a first sighting of invasion. Some overlook valleys and villages and some burned a light, visible from a vantage point far down below. People come and go.*

A hill with a beacon, a skyline, a sunrise  
a place on a map with a name that you know,  
that old signal station that worked for a moment  
the last time, a long time ago.

A hill the same colour and still the same shape  
and still our own people come here,  
a new head of party, a new type of worry  
new ideas of what's fair.

They change and I change, or we think that we do  
and the beacon doesn't shine anymore,  
but the rock and the hill that the men put it on  
still look down on the valley below.

**Robbie Middleton**  
October 2006