

The Brick on Basteir

The B-F Route (or How Not to Climb the Basteir Tooth)

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This is the second of a trilogy by ‘the Brick of Skye’. The first article appeared in ‘The Herald’ in May 1997 and was called ‘The Brick on Bidean - it’s all behind you now’. Names have been changed to protect those concerned!!

Afflicted, filled with enthusiasm after our success on the Mhadaidh pinnacles and Bidein, announced: “Why not try the Tooth via Collie’s route? After today’s success, it’ll be no problem.” I have heard these soothing words before, I thought, usually before some epic!!!

Attempt 1

The next day we set off from the Sligachan Hotel. The Munroist and The Runner had said Collie’s route was easy, the Munroist even volunteering to take me up herself without a rope!!!???? I tried to be optimistic, but one look at the giant fang of rock that is the Basteir Tooth dissipates thoughts of a panic-free ascent. We reached Bealach nan Lice, descended a little as the guidebook suggested, and stopped at the bottom of a slight break in the line of cliffs where higher up an old sling was visible.

“This is it,” Afflicted confidently announced, and with great gusto launched himself upwards. A few seconds later he came to an abrupt halt. For the next few hours our positions on the mountain changed little. A Local Man and his friend appeared. The former looked upwards and without hesitation set off up the cliff, bypassed Afflicted with ease and efficiently disappeared from view. Stunned at this display of climbing prowess, we gave up and ascended the Munro, Am Basteir, Afflicted by the normal route, myself by a south traverse, avoiding the difficult step on the crest of the ridge. Whilst Afflicted waited for me on the summit, the Local Man’s friend appeared and asked if Afflicted had seen his companion. “He is completely mad and absolutely fearless of heights. I suspect his life expectancy is very short because of this,” he recounted. “By the way, where is your wife?” Oh dear me, ten years ago on this very summit, I was taken for Afflicted’s daughter, a fact I never let him forget. Age must be showing!!!

Attempt 2

Well not a real attempt, more just a ‘thought’. I was on my birthday walk (I will not tell you which one) carrying considerable provisions to cache



The Basteir Tooth (photo: Roderick Maclean)

on the ridge for our attempt on the whole Cuillin the next day. I had left most of my equipment hidden in Fionn Choire whilst I climbed Bruach na Frithe and Am Basteir alone, armed only with a ski stick and a small plastic shopping bag. I felt extremely under-dressed on meeting a fellow walker, as there was quite a bit of snow still lying in Coire a' Bhasteir. The Englishman had never been to Skye before and was anxiously intent on doing the Tooth-Gillean traverse despite his lack of local knowledge. A little time later, when he had reached the summit of the Tooth and I the adjoining Sgurr a Fionn Choire, we talked. Only on Skye can two hill walkers have a conversation easily from separate summits, the distances between the hills being so small.

"Collie's route is easy! A wide ledge with no exposure - come up!!" he enthused.

I hesitated but resisted, determined to see my next birthday. Later the Englishman and I met on the summit of Am Basteir, I having chopped my way down the snow with my ski stick, whilst clutching my Safeway (now of course Morrison's) Plastic Bag.

"What was the Tooth-Basteir connection like?" I asked.

“Oh, frightful,” he replied. “It was a ‘my God’ place - absolutely dreadful - steep, and very difficult. All I could do was to keep climbing and hope I didn’t fall off!”

Lower down on the summit ridge I watched as he approached the difficult step on the crest of Basteir. He hesitated, moved a few limbs, and then retreated.

“Is this it?” he asked.

“Yes,” I encouraged.

He tried again but stopped quickly.

“Are you sure??”

“Yes”, I reassured, “I can’t do it, it’s too far for me to reach. I’ll go off to the right using the loose traverse on the south side of the hill. After that, the rest is easy.” *(NB since this time the step has got longer and more difficult due to rock fall)*. He turned back to the awkward slab and with a little grunt was up.

“Difficult move for people with short legs,” was his parting comment. What a nice man!

Attempt 3: The B-F Route

A year later, Afflicted and I ascended the Bealach nan Lice via Sgurr a Bhasteir, I scrambling as much as possible, in an attempt to fine-tune my dubious rock-climbing ability. I then began the long wait in the now familiar place at the bottom of Collie’s route. After an hour or two of the usual inactivity, in the firing line of small stones falling from the direction of Afflicted’s boot, suddenly there was movement in the rope and he was up. He shouted down he had found it far more difficult than any Moderate he had ever climbed. I followed, soon to be bewildered by a small, slightly overhanging bulge, extremely awkward and unnerving. As I quite happily clambered up the next section, my feet reassuringly steady on the gully walls, I came to the following two conclusions: first, that the Munroist NEVER, even with a rope, went up this route for it was far too difficult and she was far too sensible, and second, that I was going to have to face the awful prospect of an abseil down this awkward wee gully. At the top of this chimney there was a short respite on a relatively safe ledge, from which the only way forward seemed to be even more vertically upward. Afflicted struggled on, with me watching anxiously from below. Apparently the holds were tiny and on very steep exposed ground. The hours were ticking by. Looking up I was rather concerned to see we were much nearer Naismith’s route than I thought the guidebook had implied.

Then I looked down. Obvious only from above, was a faint track following the edge of the cliffs. I knew this must be leading down to the start of Collie’s route proper. We now had the prospect of reversing our

way up, with me facing what I had been anticipating with dread all day - an abseil down a steep chimney with no room at the top to manoeuvre. And so it had to be. I stepped down from the ledge to the top of the chimney whimpering, burst into a controlled sob and against all sane instincts walked backwards off the edge into the abseil.

The following 45 minutes were a blur. After five hours of frustration, now glimpsing success, I abandoned everything at the bottom of our 'climb', and ran downward into Lota Corrie. Leaving nothing to chance I descended right to the bottom of the cliffs and looked up. THERE IT WAS!!! Just as the Englishman had described, a wide ledge with no exposure, with a route-confirming abandoned beer can at its base. I set off, like a bolting horse at the gallop, believing that somewhere along the route I would be abruptly stopped by some insurmountable obstacle. But this never came. Only a small chimney at the very top briefly interrupted my sprint for the top. I arrived at the summit gasping with effort, bewildered at the ease of the ascent.

Afflicted and I spent the descent discussing rock climbing grades. Our guidebook for the climb had poorly described the start of Collie's route and graded it as Moderate/Difficult. We had therefore looked for a climb of such difficulty and, in Afflicted's opinion, ended up on a VDiff/Severe!!! Sgurr Dubh Mor by its normal route is an ungraded climb and yet is far more difficult than anything we had met on Collie's route, once we had recognised it.

Later, back on the mainland, we related our tales of woe to the Engineer. We have a habit of calling our little climbs/scrambles by our surnames. If I lead, it is an F-B, if Afflicted, a B-F. The Engineer's Wife listened silently to our story. As the men chatted, our eyes met. Years of experience listening to stories of derring 'does', or in our case 'don'ts'. were betrayed in her knowing smile. "Well we all know what B..... F.... is short for, don't we??" she said wryly.