

LABYRINTH DIRECT

GRAHAM WYLLIE

Back in early March 2020 I enjoyed fantastic ice climbing conditions throughout Scotland, the highlight of this being an ascent of Creag an Dubh Loch's Labyrinth Direct. The guidebook proclaims it to be one of the most sought-after ice routes in the Cairngorms and it has its place in the history of Scottish climbing. The line was first attempted by Tom Patey and Alan Will in 1955 but they were stopped by the crux. It wasn't until 1972 that Jim Bolton and Paul Arnold made the first ascent in the early days of front pointing – an incredible feat, and very bold considering the standard of equipment they would have been using at the time. Alongside rudimentary front points and axes they had no axe leashes or meaningful protection. It waited seven years for a second ascent, and it remains one of the hardest gully climbs in Scotland. It was my dream winter route: too hard to be on my short-term radar, and yet all the pieces fell into place to give us a shot.

For those who haven't done any ice climbing then here's a basic introduction. The climbers will be equipped with a pair of technical ice axes and crampons with one or two front points. A route will be divided into pitches based on length and practicability, with progress made in the normal climbing fashion of a leader moving off from stances (belays). After the leader has completed a pitch of climbing, he creates a new belay stance and then the second climber follows, cleaning the pitch of any protection that the leader has placed. Specific winter protection tends to be more marginal than rock protection. Ice Screws are tubular screws that are threaded into the ice and their reliability depends completely on the quality of the ice in which they are placed. Bulldogs are serrated blades that can be hammered into cracks, ice, and frozen turf, and tend to be pretty marginal. While falls in rock climbing are fairly common and often a part of improving as a climber, it's generally accepted that falling in winter – especially when ice climbing – is to be completely avoided.

There had been a thaw before the weekend and the weather was coming in from the west. Doug and I were trying to figure out what our options were. Good conditions had been reported on Creag an Dubh Loch the previous week, but we couldn't be sure what had survived the thaw. On Sunday I took a reconnaissance run in to see if it was going to

be worth Doug driving down from Torrison. When I reached the lochside, I was pleased to find that the cliff was still holding onto plentiful volumes of ice. I reported my findings to Doug, we hatched a plan and I headed home to catch an early night. My alarm woke me at 03:00 the next day and by 05:00 I had met Doug at Glen Muick and we were marching along the track towards Glas Alt-Sheil. The moon was bright enough for us to shun our head torches and soon the night passed into a fine morning. By the time we arrived at the lochside, the red dawn sun was illuminating the great cliff (photograph 1 below). Crossing the verglassed rocks over the outlet of the Dubh loch, we closed the final distance with the face.



1 Dawn on the Dubh Loch

Graham Wyllie

Looking upwards we assessed our options. We had initially penciled in Hanging Garden route. I had missed out on it a couple of winters ago due to work and had been keen to get a proper shot at it however our eyes were drawn to the far more impressive Labyrinth Direct. Its famous crux pitch appeared to have formed brilliantly. Doug and I were both climbing well with a lot of mileage on Torrisonian ice in the previous couple of weeks. Neither of us had ever climbed a grade VII –

in fact, I had never even climbed a VI. Both routes start up the Labyrinth Couloir so we thought we could just get started and make our route choice where Hanging Garden route breaks off.

I took the first pitch which was delicate to say the least. I would probably have backed off had that been practical but continuing boldly up the thin melting ice was the best option in any case. The temperature seemed to be warmer than forecast and we assumed this was due to the sun shining on the cliff. Doug led another pitch up into where the route breaks off into the Hanging Garden. There was little decision to be made and I led up towards Labyrinth Direct, belaying a pitch (photograph 2 below) before the crux.



2 Doug, Pitch 3

Graham Wyllie

The route to this point had been pretty variable with thin ice, hard névé, sugary snow and even some frozen turf. Protection was sparse but we managed to get good rock belays.

On the next pitch the route began to steepen.



3 Doug, Pitch 4

Graham Wyllie

It was Doug's lead (photograph 3 above), and it was some time before he led out the 40m to a belay in a rock wall to the right of the crux.



4 Graham, Pitch 4

Doug Bartholomew

I followed up some very bold, steep, and insecure climbing (photograph 4 above), brilliant lead by Doug. I was doubtful I would have got up it

on lead although retreat options were few and far between so I guess the choice wouldn't have been mine to make. By now, given how much thawing was going on, we had worked out that it was not the sun that was to blame and there had to be a higher freezing level than forecast. It was still cold enough though, and ice can often be perfect to climb when slightly above the freezing level.

From Doug's belay the crux looked wild. Steep ice on a high angled slab had merged with a vertical ice pillar cascading down from an overhang. I was apprehensive as it was my lead. While I had been climbing well these last couple of weeks, the previous insecure pitches had left me feeling a bit strung out and this was harder than anything I had ever climbed before. It was, however, my turn – and the ice looked like it was in good condition. Furthermore, switching out the precarious belay to let Doug lead again would have amounted to no end of hassle, so I got my act together and started collecting all the remaining



5 Graham traversing into the corner, Pitch 5.

D Bartholomew

climbing gear off Doug. The initial part of the pitch was a descending traverse across some of the steep crud I had just seconded up. I managed to get in a marginal Bulldog and found enough good axe placements to eventually get me over onto better ice where I could make faster progress.



6 Graham placing an ice screw, Pitch 5

Doug Bartholomew

I realized the ice I was now on was hollow underneath but provided I didn't kick it to shreds, it held my weight without complaint. Traversing under a row of dripping icicles I also ended up getting saturated. Eventually I reached good ice and got a good screw in. I traversed further left into the bottom of the steep corner that forms the crux (photograph 5 page 189) The exposure and position were incredible. 250m of gully dropped impressively below me to the entry fan and frozen loch below.

Inching up the corner and taking rests where I could I was soon forced out fully onto the near vertical slab. Axe and crampon placements were good however and I managed my feet as best I could to avoid exhausting my arms. I edged up the wall, placing screws as I went – which was exhausting (photograph 6 previous page). Placing ice screws involves getting a good high axe placement then ‘hanging’ off it with one arm while trying to keep as much of your weight as possible on your feet but this gets harder and harder as the ice gets steeper. The angle finally eased slightly, and I could give my arms more of a break. As I moved higher the angle relented more and more and I led out another 30m of rope over what would probably constitute a grade V pitch. Just as the angle eased both Doug and I heard a strange high-pitched noise. Initially I thought disconcertingly that it was the ice, but it turned out to be my camera. It had got wet through my Gore-Tex jacket and was having a bit of a wobbler. The camera never fully recovered but this is preferable to the ice collapsing beneath me! The pitch provided a final hurdle when I had to excavate a rock step out of bottomless powder snow. I then found a belay at the edge of the bay below the cornice. An astounding pitch.

Doug made it up to me in fine spirits just as the weather was closing in. It had begun to snow, and the upper part of the route was getting blasted by occasional squalls loaded with spindrift. Doug led through the cornice direct, cutting though it to make a suitably aesthetic, if a tad unnecessary finish to an incredible route. Once on the plateau the weather was not so bad, so we sorted the gear out before heading towards Central Gully to inspect it as a descent route. There was a small cornice which we broke and then down climbed. We then headed down the gully (photograph 7 next page), taking in its incredible ice draped rock architecture.



7 Descending Central Gully

Graham Wyllie

We retraced our approach over the river and down the path to Glas Allt-Sheil, the thawing precipitation around us failing to dampen the elation of our success. We got back into the car park at around 19:15 making for a glorious 14-hour day. Completing a route on the Dubh Loch never disappoints.

For anyone interested in reading more about the route there is a good account of the first ascent starting on page 234 of Greg Strange's '100 years of Cairngorm Mountaineering' as well as an entry in Ken Wilson's 'Cold Climbs'. For more of my writing visit grahamwyllie.blogspot.com