

The Book

Most climbers will be familiar with *Classic Rock (CR)*, a large format, lavishly illustrated anthology compiled by Ken Wilson and first published in October 1978. It comprises a personal essay about each climb supported by a series of photographs by some of the great figures of the climbing world, including some from our own neck of the mountains, such as Bill Brooker and Brian Lawrie. Other writers of note in the book include W.H. Murray, Tom Weir, Jim Perrin, Lord Hunt, Dennis Gray, Donald Bennet, Ken Crocket and Malcolm Slessor. It is one of the most popular and iconic works of climbing literature ever written. Published as a companion volume to *Hard Rock* and followed by *Extreme Rock*, *Cold Climbs* and several walking books in a similar style, it has acquired a legendary status. The price of these books caused "AF" in a review of *Hard Rock* (first in the series) in the Aberdeen Evening Express to write "*the price will rob this excellent book of the success it deserves and make it end up on the coffee table instead of in the well-thumbed category*" (Aberdeen Evening Express, 18.12.74). Of all the books *Classic Rock* was perhaps the "*most inspirational for it encompassed not only climbs that were do-able by the majority but also the wealth of history and anecdote that came with them. It was also about accessible climbing as most of the routes were done prior to "modern protection" so with wires, cams, harnesses they are now a safe introduction to leading*". (Newman, 2008) Sneeringly called *Geriatric Rock* by some, it is not about technical difficulty, it is about the history, character and feel of the climbs.

It was a complete departure from the guidebook format of most climbing guides. The 80 climbs covered are from the whole of the UK and the preface to the book states that it was to be limited to climbs of up to Hard Severe grade (many of these have since been upgraded to Very Severe) as "*these can be tackled by any climber regardless of age, experience or fitness*". Later editions contain additional routes on Hen Cloud in Staffordshire and colour photographs. More than a pitch by pitch, hold by hold description it is a celebration of the climbs and the people who climbed them. The book pays homage to the pioneers who started it all - Shadbolt, Abraham, Collie, O.G. Jones, Kirkus and Bell.

The driving force behind the series was the disputatious, opinionated, highly talented, sadly deceased Ken Wilson. As Walt Unsworth said when presenting

him with an award “*when Ken pours oil on troubled waters it is simply so he can set light to it*”. Wilson had been trained as an architectural photographer and his publications set new standards in mountaineering journalism, particularly in illustration and layout. (Unsworth, 2002).

The Routes

Most of the routes were discovered in the first half of the twentieth century but some were more recent discoveries and often by climbers whose normal level was a far higher standard. Adverikie Wall (1967) was once described by Patey as the finest route he had ever walked past. The Cioch Nose in Applecross (1960) and the elegant Squareface (1953) in the Cairngorms are “*climbs of distinction free from undue difficulty*” (Wilson, 1978). There were also latecomers in the South West of England – Devil’s Slide, Lundy (1961), Demo Route and Doorpost, Cornwall (1955).

Few would contest the choice of routes. It is a consensus that has not been substantially challenged. The 26 in Scotland include the Cuillin Ridge, Cioch Direct, Arrowroot, Integrity, Cioch Nose of Applecross, Long Climb, Tower Ridge, North Face and Agag’s Groove, Chasm of Buachaille Etive Mor, Mitre Ridge, Squareface, Talisman, Clean Sweep, Savage Slit, Eagle Ridge, Ardverikie Wall, Punster’s Crack, Recess Route and Ardgarten Arete on the Cobbler, Sou’Wester Slabs and Labyrinth on Arran and the Glencoe routes of Long Crack, Archer Ridge, Crypt Route and Clachaig Gully. This latter route is the only one that is not included in the modern selected routes guides to Scotland although it is still in the later editions of CR. Better climbers than I assure me that the route is now not considered worthy of inclusion in selected guides due to loose rock, rock fall and vegetation. Perhaps a classic route does not need to be a quality route in the modern sense. Part of what makes a classic is the history and mystique attached to it. Maybe what puts people off the route is the hilarious write up by Allan Austin in CR which includes a brilliant description of a Sassenach (himself) climbing the route in horrendous conditions with a cast of unsympathetic companions (Haston, Marshall, Moriarty and Smith). Rachel Crolla who has completed all the CR routes says: “*However, having re-read Allan Austin’s excellent Classic Rock account of his falls and near drownings in the Clachaig, I felt newly invigorated for attempt number two.*” ([UKC Articles - ARTICLE: Collecting the Classics - Tales from a Classic Rock Completionist - ukclimbing.com](http://ukclimbing.com))

My Attempts

As to my own involvement with Classic Rock. Being rather a trepidatious, feeble climber (the old term was “a Bumbly”) some of the routes I did in CR

were for me a matter of heroic endeavour. But I enjoyed them and that surely gives an idea of the essence of the book.

Completing most of CR probably means little to friends and family. Ken Wilson scornfully labelled those who aimed to complete “*puerile tickers*” so I must confess to being a failed puerile tucker. However, I must let you know that I soloed some of them! This was quite inadvertent as for a period in the late seventies and early eighties I was climbing in Wales before the widespread introduction in this country of harnesses and belay devices with a schoolboy of slight build who used just a waist belay! He would never have been able to hold me on a leader fall. These routes included Nea and Crackstone Rib – no easy touches. I still shudder at the thought. These days things are a little easier because gear is not only more effective and safer, but it is lighter.

The first Classic Rock routes I climbed were in the Peak District and Wales. I failed to record the exact dates of my ascents and I cannot always remember who I climbed them with. Oldham Mountaineering Club figured largely in many of the Welsh ascents and a distinctive memory is setting out on a dark November morning from a club meet at the Crafnant Hut in Snowdonia to climb Amphitheatre Gully on Craig YrYsfa. CR just gives a hint of what to expect on the finish: “*The solution to the final problem is complicated and demanding*”. The reality was a delicate traverse inside a cave to emerge through a hole in an exposed position at the top of the buttress. Done in plastic boots!

Another memory is from sometime in the early 90s on Sron Na Ciche on Skye. We were attempting the Cioch Direct/Arrowroot/Integrity routes. I had previously done the first two but for some reason Integrity (now graded VS) remained to be climbed and the first pitch was my lead. I failed to reach the crucial hold on the bulge and had to retreat to the belay. My companion being an ex-Cambridge blue hurdler was well tall enough to reach the crucial hold and we soon topped out. I climbed Agag’s Groove with the same person around the same time (see photo, Rod Campbell, Agag’s Groove, Buchaille Etive Mor on the following page).

Main Wall of Cryn Las sticks in the mind with its tremendous exposure, air of seriousness, gloomy aspect, lack of escape routes and committing moves.



Agag's Groove

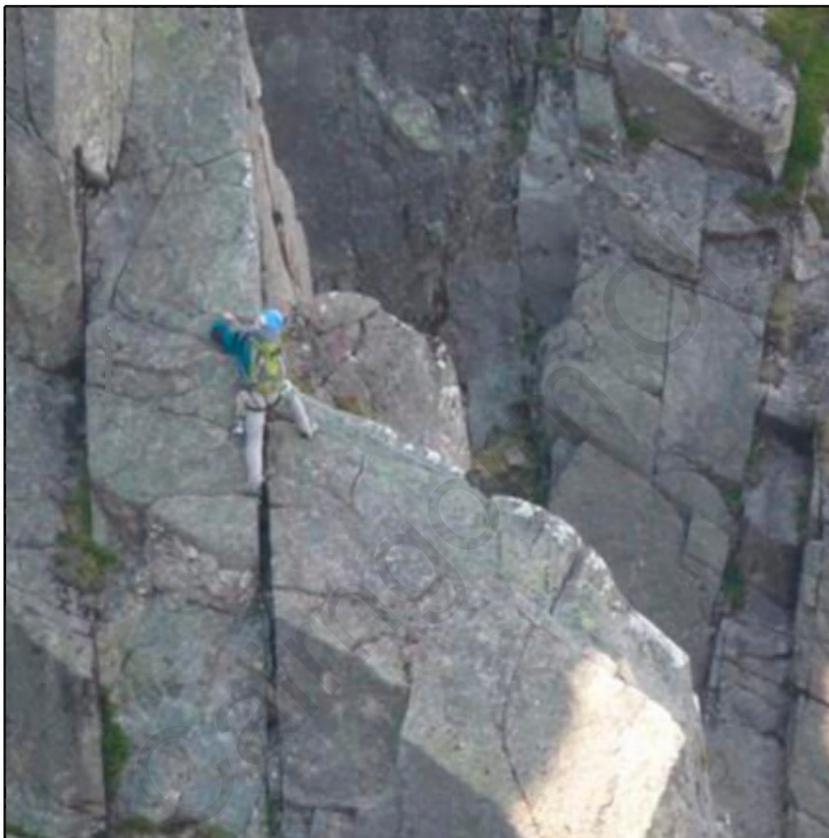
Photo credit John Crossman

Again, fortunately I had a good climber to get me up it but there were sometimes problems with that arrangement. I remember climbing Flying Buttress with an E grade climber who simply straightened out the line converting a Diff into a hard to follow HVS!

I did the Cuillin Ridge in June 1983 with someone who told me that it was his seventh attempt, so he was desperately keen to succeed especially as conditions were near perfect. This was my first time on the Cuillin, and without him we would not have finished it. We were so tired and thirsty by the time we reached Naismith's Route (another route to come back to) that we by-passed it and went on to Am Basteir, chancing upon a snowfield on the way from which we were able to make snowballs.

They lasted almost to the Gendarme on the West Ridge of Sgurr Nan Gillean that still existed in 1983. The Gendarme collapsed into Harta Corrie shortly afterwards. We took about 19 hours to complete the traverse from Gars Bheinn to Sgurr nan Gillean. We started in the late afternoon from Glenbrittle campsite, went up through Coire a' Ghrunnda, jogged out to Gars Bheinn, returned via the Thearlaich-Dubh gap where even in those days there was a queue and bivvied for a few hours below Sgurr Alasdair before progressing along the ridge.

Recent climbs



Eagle Ridge

Photo credit John Crossman

Around forty years later the Cumming-Crofton route of Mitre Ridge and Eagle Ridge of Lochnagar were climbed courtesy of my “carers” in the Cairngorm Club.(See above: Rod on Eagle Ridge and “carers” in the photographs on the following pages)

I found that the main difficulty of these routes was getting to them and back in one day. Mitre Ridge was 12.5 hours Keiloch to Keiloch with the use of bikes as far as Clach a’ Cleirich. Last year I did Savage Slit on Coire An Lochan and The Cioch Nose of Applecross with Mark Peel, senior citizen and born again climber of this club; a combined age on the rope of nearly 150 years.

Confessions I have not completed all the routes, nor have I lead all the pitches. I have climbed 67 of the routes to date and one or two of those we didn’t strictly finish and at my advanced age I can have only a faint hope of

becoming a “Compleator”. “Not finished” routes include the Chasm of Buchaille Etive Mor when we bailed out before the converging walls pitch due to sheer volume of water or perhaps exhaustion. We had started up a perfectly dry stream bed and all went well until the point when it dawned on us that the ever-increasing volume of water was caused by the melting of the massive snow field above us.

Another route we had to abandon after a couple of pitches was the poorly protected Avalanche/Red Wall/Longland’s Continuation route of Y Lliwedd in Snowdonia when strong cross winds threatened to blow us off our precarious perches. My companion of the day still remembers it as a wise decision.

“To do” routes are mainly Scottish as for most of my life I lived “down south” and most of those remaining now require a long day and a good forecast. These include the Cairngorm classics - Clean Sweep and Talisman, Long Climb on the Ben, the Cobbler routes and the Aonach Dubh routes in Glencoe. Medical advances may make them a possibility, but I am not counting on it.



Cairngorm Club Climbing Carers Photo credit Stuart Message



Lunchtime below Yellow Slab, First Pinnacle Rib, Tryfan.

Credit Steve Hoyle

Record Attempts

My pedestrian and long-drawn-out saga is in complete contrast to the amazing records for CR completions that have become common in recent years.

The UK Round. The most recent record for the complete round of the UK is by Anna Taylor which she finished in September 2021. The 23-year-old climbed more than 10,000m ticking off all 83 routes She soloed most of the climbs. Anna also cycled 2400km and carried her kit on the journey that lasted 62 days.

(UKC Articles - INTERVIEW: Anna Taylor on her Classic Rock by Bike Tour - ukclimbing.com)

The Lakes Classic Rock Round is 34 miles of Lakeland terrain with 4,300 metres of ascent, scaling 15 rock routes totalling 70 pitches. On Wednesday 17th August 2022, former professional climber and mountain runner Shane Ohly broke the record on the route, clocking a time of 9 hours and 22 minutes. (Lake District Classic Rock record smashed - UKC News - INTERVIEW: Shane Ohly Smashes the Lakes Classic Rock Challenge Record - ukclimbing.com)
Lake District Classic Rock record smashed - BASE Magazine (base-mag.com)

The Welsh Classic Rock Round current record is held by Will Birkett who finished an unassisted solo round of the Classic Rock routes in Wales on 28th May 2022. He completed all 21 Welsh routes in 21 hours 45 minutes. The round involved around 60 miles of running with 135 pitches (2,335m) of climbing. UKC Articles - INTERVIEW: Will Birkett on his North Wales Classic Rock Record (ukclimbing.com)

The Peak District Classic Rock record is now held by Tom Newberry with a truly astounding time of 3:10:08 set in 2022. The challenge involves climbing 17 pitches across 12 routes and cycling the 55km between three crags. (Peak Classic Rock Round Record Broken by Montane Athlete Tom Newberry - myoutdoors.co.uk)

The Glencoe Classic Rock Round current record is held by Ali Rose and Mark Chambers. Seven routes, fifty-three pitches, 3,000 metres of elevation, and twenty-three kilometres on foot in 12 hours 56 minutes on 12th June 2023. (UKC News - Glencoe 'Classic Rock' Link-up for Ali Rose and Matt Rowbottom - ukclimbing.com)

The Cairngorm Classic Rock Link Up. In the Cairngorms we have a somewhat bigger challenge. Massive distances and hard climbs mean that records are fewer. Mark Chambers and Ali Rose hold the fastest known time of 17 hours 28 minutes on 12th July 2020. The route was from Loch Muick to Cairngorm ski car park. They commented that "it would be possible to do it a fair bit faster ... We weren't quite comfortable with soloing some of the routes ... (I don't think I'd solo Talisman or Clean Sweep anyway) and we certainly weren't running the whole time".

(In a Day the Cairngorm Classic Rock link up - YouTube)

By the time of publication of this article some more records may have been broken. Keep up to date on the UK Climbing website.

Acknowledgements

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