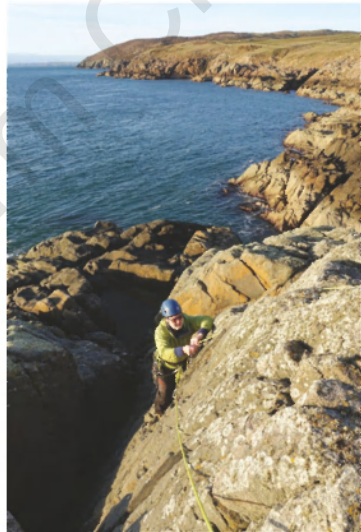


A Galloway Renaissance

by Andrew Fraser

Your esteemed Editor, a native of Wigtown, asked for an article on recent developments in Galloway. At least I think that is what he wanted; one can never be sure? I am hoping the book town's sudden interest in ropes and the sea isn't to do with its history, maybe a re-enactment of the days when they tied unbelievers to stakes to await the incoming tide? Either way, I wasn't brave enough to decline your editor's invitation, although this is very much a personal, strictly without prejudice article.

Galloway climbing has been going through a bit of a renaissance in the last three years. If you have only climbed at Meikle Ross, Dungeon Hill and Clifton Craigs you may have concluded that Galloway hill crags are remote and guarded by floating bogs and immense tussocks, the sea-cliffs are greywacke of dubious quality and Clifton is the small but enticing exception which proves the rule. But this is no longer true and, with the publication of the first guidebook exclusively devoted to climbing in Dumfries and Galloway, we now have the damn lies and statistics to prove it. From a historical perspective, climbing in Galloway is very much a latecomer.



It reads like this: -

1970- 8 recorded climbs

1986 Central and Southern Scotland Guide - 176 climbs

1994 Lowland Outcrops Guide - 450 climbs

2004 Lowland Outcrops Guide - 770 climbs

2026 Dumfries and Galloway Guide – 1700 climbs plus 400 online

The breakdown between different areas is: -

Galloway Hills - 652 climbs on 31 cliffs

Moffat and Clifton – 123 climbs on 7 crags

Galloway sea-cliffs - 1360 climbs on 28 crags

Some 55% of all routes are now on granite, or its nicer sibling diorite, granite without the blank bits, giving face holds and better gear. 45% of all climbs are now on the Stranraer peninsula facing towards Ireland, known as The Rhins. As late as 1985 there were only two recorded climbs on the Rhins, but Crammag Head alone now boasts more climbs than Dungeon Hill, Meikle Ross and Clifton combined. And importantly for the purposes of this article, 30%, or more than 600, of the climbs date from 2022-2025.

So, what has been going on and why? The simple answer is that the Rhins sea-cliffs were re-discovered, particularly the small Portencorkrie granite and diorite intrusion north of Scotland's southernmost point at the Mull of Galloway. A real or paranoid imagined rivalry between the new guide's two authors, Stephen Reid and myself, also plays a part. I have been climbing in Galloway for 50 years, Stephen for 35 and over that period we have each done about 10 new routes a year, adding up to about half the area's climbs. Stephen has been a great fan of the Galloway hills and its granite, does not care for greywacke sea-cliffs and, importantly, is based in Cumbria, making the Rhins granite out of his day trip range, at least in theory. Left to his own devices Stephen would Hoover up all the unclimbed rock in the Galloway hills. Worse, he could rely on the technical proficiency of Chris King for the harder stuff. From my perspective this meant the sea-cliffs were safe from his depredations as he was allergic to any greywacke cliff within his range, and the Rhins granite was safely out of range. As the immediate threat was therefore in the hills, for 20 years Ian Magill and I devoted our time to safeguarding the remaining unclimbed Galloway hill rock from him. Stephen's perspective was identical, he correctly spotted that left to my own devices I would Hoover up all the remaining unclimbed rock in the hills. And so, like ships in the night, in successive waves of development we each climbed in secret on cliffs in close proximity to each other, sometimes on the same hill: Dungeon Hill v Tauchers, Corwar v Craigdews, Memorial Crag v Point of the Snibe and at opposite ends of the Craignelder escarpment. By 2021 we had run out of road, there was nothing new in the hills which we could climb, a mutual opinion as we were now climbing together. A new guide was also in the offing which would require photo-diagrams. Stephen, as editor of the Frock Club's climbing guides, had the foresight to realise this was the future and for 20 years had been patiently collecting photos for his inland sections of the guide. I had not. Interesting challenges resulted, such as perching on offshore rocks to get wide-angle sea-cliff photos, all the time

juggling light conditions, the time of day and the state of the tide. But as a recidivist new router my eye was continually drawn to the gaps, of which there were many.

In particular, it appeared Crammag Head, arguably the nicest and most developed of the Portencorkrie igneous crags, had no less than 15 unclimbed sectors. How could we have missed so much when we developed the crag in 1992? Well, in retrospect, the original development was against a deadline of 'last orders' for the forthcoming guidebook. I also think we dismissed certain crags as too easy which, with the benefit of increasing age and decrepitude, proved better and harder. It was now obvious that at my normal rate of 10 routes per annum I could easily see out the rest of climbing days. Unfortunately, in April 2022 the Fell and Rock Club organised a meet to the Rhins, Stephen repeatedly asking me the question of 'is there anything on that wall'. Well-honed lawyer evasion skills could only take me so far. That year Stephen developed the south side of Crammag's Kittiwake Zawn, while Ian and I recorded 20 routes elsewhere on the crag, the highlights of which were Forked Lightning Wall (HVS), one of those lines which you can't quite believe remained hidden in plain sight, plus Alpine Dunman, a four-pitch severe on Dunman, the hill overlooking Crammag and a pun on Alpine Binmen.

2023 saw development starting in earnest at Crammag. Whenever we dropped down to sea-level a new unclimbed wall appeared, always of impeccable diorite and climbable on sight. We were joined by Max Twomey, who, with the perpetually young Stuart Lampard, had just developed the northernmost granite hill crag of Craigmasheenie. Max was charitably, and to our eyes, dangerously, welcoming of others to his developments and in turn he pulled in others from the Kilmarnock Climbing Wall, particularly Rachel and George. Stuart the Postie even returned to rock. Development started in Crammag South, then to the north wall of Viking Zawn which went from an existing 4 routes to 26. Hourglass Walls south, Gabarunning north and south, The Headland, Point of the Barb and Sloucheen Slunk followed in quick succession. Stephen, with military efficiency (his father was a colonel), had now organised a billet with the Kinnairds in Dalbeattie. This brought the crag into his daily orbit, albeit with some very late drives back to Cumbria.

Crammag is exposed to south-westerlies and in September 2023 there was a run of such winds. On a coast walk the previous year I had spotted Salt Pans Bay, on the northern Rhins. I was keeping it for my old age until John Biggar posted a photo of an interesting geological feature near Salt Pans Bay. John had checked the Salt Pans Bay north of Portobello and found nothing. He enquired if anyone knew anything? As I hadn't seen the actual cliff in his post I feigned ignorance, while knowing the crag would lie in the other Salt Pans Bay south of Portobello. Stephen then pointed John to the existence of the other Salt Pans Bay, and I sheepishly recanted. Luckily, John and Linda got the first climbs, until 'the usual suspects' (as Roger Everett's monthly SMC new route blog likes to refer to us ageing prima-donnas) moved in. It now has 31 climbs on prime quality greywacke, giving the typical off-vertical small edge climbing so typical of that rock.

As winter set in, we discovered that not only does the sun always shine at Crammag, on a cold day of easterly winds the west coast can be a sun-trap. In December Max and I strolled north from Crammag lighthouse to waste time on a section of cliff I had previously overlooked. New eyes, armed with the knowledge that any rock would be perfect quality diorite duly found Norway Craig. That winter we found there were lots of smaller, easier crags perfect for shorter, colder days. Like Reiff but warmer. Point of the Cleugh, the central of the Portencorkrie crags and the only one which is genuine granite, saw a quick makeover early in the new year, and from having 4 routes in 2020, it now has 50.

If Crammag had proved so receptive to our charms, surely the largest diorite crag of Laggantalluch to the north would reward a visit? In 1991 I had done a couple of routes in the southernmost bays nearest the road and recent photos showed room for one or two more. Craigs of the Stone Dyke then provided another 38 climbs, courtesy of 'the usual suspects'. While Ian Magill and I were ticking our way through this crag, Max, George and Rachel were developing The Portal at Norway Craig. I arrived late to this show, only to unaccountably puncture a lung in an 8m fall. The honourable thing would have been for everyone to cease development at these crags, since I had both found the crag and reserved it by towel. Needless to say, by the time I got back it boasted 90 routes, only 5 of which involved me.



The Editor gets stuck into Bittersweet Nothings (HVS) at Point of the Cleugh

Nevertheless, I still had more topo photos and top of my list was the left wall of Laggantalluch's Foam Zawn, one of the crag's tallest cliffs but one guarded by a complex abseil. This gave Stephen, Ian and I five good routes, the best being Stephen's Huntingtower (HVS) and my Diorite Dreams (VS). Later, on a slowly drying day, after Stephen had manfully led Greenmantle (HVS), the two of us plus Linda Biggar checked out the coast between Craigs of the Stone Dyke and Small Bay.



Linda Biggar on Greenmantle (HVS) at Laggantalluch Head

This, now called the Stacs Area, was an ideal winter venue. It won't make the guide but is online with 62 smaller routes. On the odd day when strong south-westerlies closed these crags a number of climbs were also done at the Lookout near Dumfries and at Larbrax, the latter having one of the nicest beaches around. Mossyard near Gatehouse of Fleet, is another spot noted for its excellent beach. Al Halewood, on a canoeing trip, found a small crag to the west which is perfect for those starting a journey into trad climbing, both in terms of grades and gear.

March 2025 saw Ian and I climbing on Crammag's northernmost cliff. Temperatures were cold and I had reverted to my 20-year-old large Scarpa Marathons. The entire heel of a shoe fell off, and had to be held in place by a cable tie punched through a hole in the heel. Spookily, an old OS map then revealed the crag already had a name: Hole of the Heel.

As for the future, current developments show an interesting trend. Max, Stuart the Postie and Rachel have been exploring the hill of Dunman which overlooks Crammag, adding the seven pitch Alpine Burning (VS) amongst others. Ian and I have been developing the crags between Scarty Head and Dun Rock, to the north of Money Head, now with 32 routes. Both cliffs are of very compact, good quality greywacke, lie immediately adjacent to igneous intrusions and it appears the rock has been cooked by proximity to the volcanic activity. If this holds true, there are other bits of the coast which will fall into the same category.

So, exciting times and hopefully the new guide will make people realise what a wealth of fun climbing in the area can now provide. While it can seem far away from the main centres of population, if you factor in a 10-minute approach, your total time from house to crag starts to look more reasonable. And, as global warming threatens to impact on Scottish winter climbing, bear in mind it is possible to rock climb in Galloway all year round. Drummore has as many hours of sunshine as Tiree and is warmer and a lot less windy. Or for those who believe that winter only means ice, the new guide will also reveal that the Black Gairy of the Merrick is a giant Beinn Udlaidh, fed by springs.



*Stephen Reid and Linda Biggar on Nothing venture, Nothing Rhin (HVS),
Stacs Area, Laggantalluch*



*The cooked greywacke of Scarty Head- Andrew Fraser and Stephen Reid
on Molten Gold VS*



The usual suspects (John Biggar, Ian Magill, Max Twomey, Stephen Reid and Andrew Fraser) at Crammag.