

Rock and Ice-March 2016

By Will Fulton

Having picked Steve up from Ashford, we headed off down the motorway leaving a trail of black diesel fumes in our wake, (I now have a new car). Special apologies should go to the lady at the M6 toll barriers who was briefly enveloped in a particularly dense cloud, much to our amusement!

We made our way to the Borrowdale YHA in the Lakes to break the journey and so we could indulge our obsession in buying all things shiny at Needle sports. A couple of pints were sunk at the Langstrath Country Inn close to the YHA that eve and discussions had over route selection.

Arriving the next day in Fort William, we got settled in to the “Alpine Loft” at Alan Kimber’s place. We found it to be most comfortable, plenty of room for two for a week. The essentials were all there: amazing drying rooms x2, shower and, errr, a bouldering wall which I told Steve I’d be smashing every night...I didn’t pull on a single hold!

Up bright and early the next day meant 0430, giving us plenty of time for the slog up to the climbs on the North Face. We’d decided upon Green Gully (IV 3 ***) as our objective, a Cold Climbs classic on the North Face of the Ben for those who don’t know it. First day is always a bit of a shock to the system, getting packs weighing about 10kg each up to the routes! The walk in had been awesome (as awesome as three hour slogs can be!), the weather better than expected, blue skies...it looked like the Alps. Oh how things would change! We were first to the route, although we did have one of those conversations with another party of two where the relief is palpable, knowing there’s not going to be a final race to the route. They were heading for The White Line. Phew!

I led the route, with Steve happy to second, up relatively steep ice and bomber névé. Romping up the first two or three pitches soon had us belayed under the crux: an awesome steep, but short, piece of blue ice. As suggested on the UKC forum the previous day, it WAS in rude condition and I couldn’t wait to get on it. Taking the steepest line it was over a little too quickly, but enjoyable none the less. I brought Steve up before he took us over the top into thick fog! We shook hands at about 1400hrs, not too bad for the first day. Choosing to ab down no.4 gully from an in situ snow bollard had us back to the CIC Hut quickly.

We got back exhausted as is the norm for these long winter days on the Ben. Oh how I wished we were in the CIC! Anyway I’d had the foresight to make enough stew the day before so tea was soon on the table.

Next day, the 21st, was my birthday so I got to choose the route again! I decided on The White Line, a well known grade III sandbag more like a top end IV apparently. Funny how by the second day Steve’s alarm clock had already begun to grate! It was discussed, and apparently he felt the same about mine. Oh well, I quite like my beating drum alarm waking me up! That morning it was much milder, no frost on the car, and the walk in from the north face felt decidedly sweaty! The route is up the back of Coire na Ciste and over steep snow fields.

Underfoot the snow was soft and hard going, frequently knee-deep. We agreed that rather than risk getting to a route which was out of nick, we'd rather get something done. Decision made, we cut across rough ground, under imposing cliffs, to the base of Castle Ridge (III **), which obviously goes in any weather including wind and rain as per the current situation. We dispatched the route quickly, moving together but pitching two sections which required a little more care in the wet. It was a good route and new for us both. After messing around in the fog at the top for half an hour or so we eventually sorted ourselves out, found a rough track to take us to the half way Lochan and back to the NF car park. Day two done, Tea was haggis and the usual with a side of black pudding. What was unusual was that Steve was doing the cooking that night!!

Next day due to another iffy forecast and us both feeling it after two long days, we headed over to Glencoe with Buachaille Etive Mor and Curved Ridge (III ***) in our sights. Again we'd both had this on our lists for some time but never got round to it and as the weather wasn't brilliant it looked a good option. It was rock all the way with a brief snow-filled gully to get up behind the back of the Crowberry Tower. A lovely easy scramble, good exposure, maybe one short crux of a corner two thirds of the way up. Finding the start of it, was fairly cruxy however! As you approach from below it's very difficult to distinguish the route from the Rannoch Wall which sits behind it. Anyway find it we did, moving together the whole way we were on the top by one-ish. A brief stop for lunch on the top then on down to the col at the top of Coire na Tulaich. It was apparent that it would be a descent on very steep snow down the gully before the angle eased further down. Whilst donning crampons and unbuckling axes for the descent, we were watched by a couple of wide eyed tourists who'd somehow managed to slip and slide up the gully and were now considering their options for the descent. As Steve was about to ask their intentions, a guide who'd been instructing, wandered over and offered to help get them down. An ideal opportunity for his students he said! We headed off and were sitting in the Boot Bar of the Clachaig Inn discussing the day an hour or so later.

Day four dawned early for us, we were headed for The Cascade (IV 5 **) right up the top of Coire na Ciste and knew it would be a long day. The temperature was mild again and although it wasn't yet raining, the clouds swirling over the Mountain looked ominous. We made quick progress to the gearing up spot we had used earlier in the week for our ascent of Green Gully. Another two-man team looked as though they were headed elsewhere but were soon underneath us and moving quickly. We stopped for a guide book check just under the entrance to number two gully where we realised the couple under us were guides. They pointed us in the direction of the climb which was a help in the thick clag...after they'd overtaken us. They were headed for the same route!

The climb itself is a 45m pitch of sustained grade IV ice with a slopping ledge running left to right about two thirds height. In the guide book it looked doable, now standing underneath it looked imposing. I told myself I'd climbed steeper in Norway this year so it would be ok, although in Norway the ice swallows 22cm screws with ease and generally isn't falling down and melting. Anyway we were here now, job to do and all that.

I swung my axes into the ice and moved up a couple of steps. Taking my right hand off my axe I reached down for the first screw, the left axe popped out half way...."Steve I'm not sure about

this one”, I said, “I’ve got you mate!” came the encouraging reply. Looking up, there were several ice bulges to negotiate and the ice didn’t look particularly encouraging. It wasn’t going to be easy I thought. After a brief chat to myself I moved up. Tackling the bulges wasn’t as difficult as I’d first thought; as is often the case if you move your feet, the holds or placements will come (Malcolm’s words I think!).

After 20 mins or so I could see the ledge and a rest for my calves. An awkward step had me on it, placing an ice screw as I did so. Feeling good after managing to get this far without getting pumped and avoiding the cruddy sections of ice, I checked the route upwards: Traversing up and right along the ledge, I would then need to get up and over a steep section of maybe three or four metres. No worries I thought. I glanced down at my harness to check the ice screw situation, I had only one screw left! Things suddenly didn’t feel quite so good. I looked down, the clag cleared allowing me to see through my legs almost to the CIC at the bottom of the Coire, urgh!

I threaded a fat looking icicle with a sling as I traversed the ledge and placed my last screw at the bottom of the steep wall and started up. It was dispatched easily enough, two tricky moves left, and I was on easy ice to the top. Just the right amount of screws taken then!

The belay at the top was seriously difficult to arrange. Anyway Steve was soon on the move. Unfortunately, he wasn’t feeling it and ran out of gas shortly before the ledge, he climbed down and I abbed off...the day was done. Although I was disappointed we’d not been able to congratulate each other on the top, I’d ticked my hardest Scottish winter route to date. It had definitely felt more serious than anything I’d done so far in Norway!

Back at the accommodation, it was round two of an excellent chilli cooked the previous night, washed down with beer. Weather the next day looked awful, too bad to climb, the avalanche forecast was also looking a bit iffy. We decided a lie in was in order followed by a fry up, a leisurely drive down to Glencoe, and a walk up Buachaille Etive Beag. We parked up opposite the beehive cairn and started walking in strong winds and rain. Reaching the bealach between the two Munros we headed first left towards Stob Coire Raineach which overlooking the Glencoe valley. There was nothing to see but the white of cloud: lovely! We returned to the bealach and up to the second Munro of Stob Dubh. The guide book said, “the first cairn is the summit and there is a lovely view further on down the ridge“, which we dismissed for a second visit to the Clachaig, being as the cloud was right down. We made it back to the car very quickly, too quickly. Steve re read the guide book which confirmed we’d only ticked one Munro, the second was much further on! I think we’d both had enough that day, however, and just wanted to get off the hill. We shrugged our shoulders and headed back to Fort William for some retail therapy.

Arranging an extra night with Alan, we would do one more climb before heading home to Sandwich and Paris. We’d intended staying another week but the weather was threatening to be awful on the back of one of those named storms whose name escapes me. It would be a tight weather window however, as 65mph plus winds were forecast to arrive on the top of the Ben just after lunch.

As we had only limited time due to the weather we headed for Tower Scoop (III **). As before we were treated to amazing blue skies and light winds on the walk in from the NF car park. At

the CIC Hut we were joined by a group of three climbers who said they were headed elsewhere but changed their minds and directions towards Tower Scoop. The race to the route was on. We lost, and spent at least an hour waiting for the group to climb what is a straightforward route.

Anyway as their calls got quieter and the ice bombs despatched by them grew less frequent we decided it was time. Rounding the corner of rock to get to the route, it looked awesome, particularly the top section which was one long streak of obese blue ice! I got to the 'Scoop' quickly and built an ice screw belay, Steve followed, all was good, I thought. A noise from above saw me glance upward just at the wrong time, wack!! I was treated to a golf ball size chunk of ice hitting me just below my right eye! Blood dripped on the surrounding snow, "Jesus!" said Steve, arriving at the belay, "you look like one of those Mick Fowler types!". Anyway my fault, I thought - don't climb below muppets when on ice, even if you have given them plenty of room!

Due to this we opted for the right hand finish, which was good, but missed the main streak of ice. Better than another lump of ice to the face, however. After topping out I jumped in the previous parties bucket seat and brought Steve on up.

Time was ticking and looking up Tower Gully above us and the spindrift being blown off the top in the strengthening wind we needed to move. As the snow was nice and firm, and no sign of wind slab, we opted to solo up the gully for speed. We rounded a right hand jink in the gully and saw an absolutely disgusting cornice.

Reaching the lip of the thing, I could see it was what I think is termed a double cornice, though correct me if I'm wrong. We looked at each other, not a word was said. Steve flopped over the top of the first lip so he was sitting in between the two and started unfurling the rope, I surveyed my options. I tied on and gingerly made my way round to the right hand side, the snow was extremely soft, so I could finally top out on to the plateau. I moved back from the edge until it felt safe, sat down, and body belayed Steve up.

Unfortunately my brain had stopped working, possibly due to having to negotiate the cornice, which felt substantially harder than the other climbs that week(!). I had forgotten to place an ice screw on the right hand edge of the cornice as a guide for the rope. The result of which was the stream of obscenities I could hear being blown over the edge on the now uncomfortably strong wind, as he battled with the tight rope going straight up and over the cornice rather than to the right and over! We were virtually blown down the tourist track on our way off the Hill.

Two amusing things happened whilst I was at that particular belay. The first: a tap on the shoulder from a Frenchman, wearing trainers, asking the whereabouts of the top (bearing in mind the conditions) before I could answer, he'd gone! The second: a well known local guide, with two clients, peering over the edge and pondering the suitability of Tower Gully as a descent...to my surprise he then wandered over to congratulate us on managing to get over it! He took a different route down!

Holiday over, we finished on a high...pizza from our usual take out washed down with lots of beer.