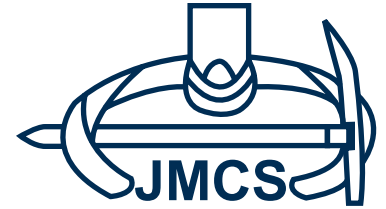


JMCS

Winter Newsletter **2025**

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2025

JMCS 2024 Contents



The day I was on American daytime TV

Thomas Beutenmuller

This is a story of two parts: The first part is an account of Stewart B and me climbing Crowberry Gully on Buachaille Etive Mor in 2018, and then there is a bit more...

To start with I have to say that I haven't climbed much in winter for the last few years and that my last 'productive' winter season was that of 2017/18. Incidentally, the conditions were pretty good then (do you remember the Beast from the East?) and the forecast looked settled for the Easter weekend. Stewart and I had checked the conditions report on UKC and read that Crowberry Gully had been climbed several times that week and was in very good nick.

We decided to go for this classic route, as all indicators spoke for it: It was only a couple of hours to get to Glencoe from Fife, good conditions and a settled weather forecast. However, our experiences of climbing North Buttress on the same mountain the previous year could have given us cause for concern: We had to queue for hours and the way other teams acted around us spoiled

the fun quite a bit: One guy got his boot stuck in a crack (more queuing for us), somebody dropped an axe, but fortunately this sailed down the East Face, and to top it all one team overtook us and clipped our runners on the way up. Not good memories, but we decided to give the Bookle another go.

It was the 31st March 2018. In order to beat the queues this time we set off at 4am. The roads were very quiet and by the time we were parked up at Lagangarbh and ready to set off in first daylight it was 6:30am. We crossed the bridge and no one stirred in the cottage when we walked past there. Above the Waterslide slab there was continuous snow cover and we soon put the crampons on and got a rope out. We moved together and made fast progress towards the lower reaches of the gully. Stewart knew the way and I was excited that today I could 'tick' this Classic Scottish winter climb that had its first ascent by none other than Harold Raeburn in 1909.

The conditions were very good indeed and the gully was not very steep so far. We



On the summit

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“Here we go again”, one of us said, anticipating another heated discussion about why we don’t want to be overtaken

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carried on by moving together and made good progress by doing this. When the gully became steeper, we set up a belay and got ready to climb the next section of the climb in pitches. As we got ready another pair of climbers came up towards us.

“Here we go again”, one of us said, anticipating another heated discussion about why we don’t want to be overtaken. However, the guys were very friendly and relaxed and said that they would have a bite to eat and wait until we would both be

at the top of the next pitch. That was much better etiquette.

Stewart set off and ran out the 60 metres and soon I followed him. Whilst we busied ourselves on the belay, we could see a solo climber coming up the gully. He did not stop behind the last team and climbed towards us. I could tell that Stewart was not impressed by this as he set off on the first ice pitch of the route.

Soon after Stewart left the guy was at

level with me and said, “Good morning”.

I could tell straight away that he was American. I replied to his greeting and asked him whether he was not scared soloing a route like this? He said that he is not, as he has a lot of experience.

He also asked me whether I was new to winter climbing? “Cheek”, I thought, and replied that I have three children and therefore choose to climb in this more traditional fashion and more of a safety

margin. He carried on and soon was out of sight. This encounter did change my mood quite a bit though: There was somebody above me who was not roped up. Hopefully he would not get his boot stuck in a crack, drop an axe or do anything else that would impact on our adventure.

Soon my rope went tight and I followed up the pitch. The belay was situated in a cave to the left of the crux, which not surprisingly is called The Cave Pitch. Whilst we swapped gear I was yapping away about the guy, his accent, how he climbed this route solo and then we heard something whirring through the air. As it flew past us, we saw that it was the solo climber. The good news is that he wore a parachute! Ah, a base jumper. I've seen those guys on youtube doing their crazy stunts.

With this distraction gone we could focus on the crux pitch: Great Grade IV climbing in great conditions. I even managed to take a picture of Stewart climbing out of the cave. Once on top of this there was another short difficult step to overcome and then we were on the summit ridge and the cairn was a mere ten minutes away. It had just gone midday and the route was in the bag. It was a fast and uneventful ascent, apart from the flyover by the cramponed Icarus. The views were

great in all directions and if I hadn't taken pictures I would've remembered this day as being very sunny, whereas in reality there was quite a bit of cloud about.

We decided to carry our lunch down the hill again, so we would be home sooner. At the point where the path goes down into Coire na Tulaich somebody had hacked out an ice bollard and we decided to use this to abseil into the coire. This added some spice, but went fine once you had bellyflopped over the lip. I had some worries that the snow conditions on the descent would be a bit treacherous in these late season conditions, for example with melted out holes under the rocks, but as there was loads of compacted snow we made fast progress down the hillside and before long I sat on a dry boulder from where I could see the white cottage in the not so far distance and we were back at the car at about 3:30pm. It was a great last route of this season in a fast time and an adventure worth writing up as a little essay.

Fast forward one year: On the drive to another hill Stewart told me that I was on youtube!

What? How?? Apparently, the name of the solo climber was Scott Becker, an American who works for Tiso's. He had put

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Whilst we swapped gear I was yapping away about the guy, his accent, how he climbed this route solo and then we heard something whirring through the air

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the clip called Crowberry Speedfly on the channel. When I watched this clip, I could make out my orange trousers for a good five seconds. It gave me great pleasure to show this clip to my children over and over and over again...

A further few years later I found a clip of an American TV show called Right This Minute.com.

In this a panel of American TV presenters



Abseiling off a bollard into the corrie

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I wanted to highlight that there is a change in how climbers tell their adventures these days: Away from the classic written account to focussing more on action packed short clips on social media

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discuss Scott's stunt in very colourful language.

To quote: "There were other guys up ahead (Zoom in to Big T), but not for long, because this guy knows what he is doing" (Cheek!).

So, I can claim that I have been on American daytime TV, albeit without having had a say in the matter...

What do I try to say with this article, what is the message? That nowadays I spend more time on youtube looking at others doing routes than climbing myself? This is a fact unfortunately. I wanted to highlight that there is a change in how climbers tell their adventures these days: Away from the classic written account to focussing more on action packed short clips on social media, and I wanted to try to combine the two forms into one and

suggest that one is not better than the other.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLjXHYUI-9k>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtkJ87LW1xk>

The White Wall

Denise Hesketh

Clinging to the wall. Gripped out of my mind.
Terror engulfs me. I cannot move.

The child that was me stands pinned up
against the white pebble dash wall at the foot
of the playground. Paralysed by fear I dare
not step away from it. To step out there. Such
a threatening and menacing place. I lack the
courage to make the moves.

Children are screaming. They are playing. I
am afraid to play with the others. The terror of
getting hurt, scraping my knees. The fear of
falling onto the hard concrete.

A boy runs towards me. He is coming straight
at me but still I am unable to move. The wall
protects me. I open my mouth to scream but
only a whimper comes out. I long to be like the
others but I don't know how to overcome the
fear. It's like a wall: a thick unsurmountable
barrier which I cannot penetrate. An impossible
place.

And there was the basement. The other
children would eagerly run down the steep
slope which led down to the basement. I
cannot bring myself to play down there. I sit on

the benches watching. My brand new kit in a
plastic bag never used.

They would run up steeply angled benches,
courageously dropping off the edge to the
dizzying drop below. There were climbs down
there. Wooden holds in frames as big as
mountains to my five year old mind.

I could not understand their enthusiasm for th
type of play but deep down there had been a
longing.

Often I wonder why I had been so afraid.
Imagine if I had known that one day I would
find myself on a blank wall, featureless but for
tiny holds, a finger jam here, a tiny RP there.
Crimp on the tiny edges, then a rock over to
complete the crux. I fell on this the first time.
The RP held.

Now it's the first route of the season. I always
like to begin the year with an E1. I have been
trying to remember my first E1. Could it have
been the Plum in north Wales?

I had been attempting to lead a classic severe
with David who had been my partner. The

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*It's like a wall: a thick
unsurmountable barrier
which I cannot penetrate.
An impossible place*

”

moves had seemed quite hard. As I was
trying to piece together the crux I could hear
someone shouting in the distance informing
me I was on the Plum: an E1. I knew I was
off route but I couldn't really go back. It was
easier to continue.

And continue I did. David had been my partner
and my lover. At Pembroke we had played
like mad children that day, lost in a romance.
The summer had been so hot. We had been
splashing about in small pools to keep cool as
we waited for our route: an E1 called the Arrow

to become free. It was taking too long. Too many people for one rope. We waited and watched for a while. Girls dangling from ropes and swinging across the pale face of the arrow. Like pendulums.

We decided to look for something else for me to lead. I don't know why I decided on the Tactician . Jamming has never been my thing and I really don't like to lay back. On the two occasions I had been up it I had to be hauled up on a very tight rope.

But here I am out there high above the roaring crashing waves. Such a hot day. I'm wearing shorts and a skimpy pink bikini. The breeze refreshing, the moves exhilarating. My body tires at the crux. I place a friend. There's more gear higher but I need to keep moving. Need to hurry. I lay back the crack, swinging out towards the sea, my bare skin exposed to the elements. Must hurry. I lean out. The friend seems a long way away as I look down and catch a glimpse of the crashing waves. Death sits on the ledge watching.

That summer was the best ever. I don't think I have ever been happier.

Today it is winter. I am no longer a child. 60 years old I have a lot to be grateful for. My body is still fairly athletic.

At my local climbing wall yellow and black wasp coloured holds have recently been reset. The gym always has such a happy atmosphere. A lively and friendly vibe. So many projects. So little time. The latest project of mine is very scary because the crux is high up: right at the top. The white wall bare but for the tiny wasp holds needed to complete the problem.

The holds are plentiful on the bottom of the slab leading up to the crux. I have been up here often. It's a rock over move with your right foot high on the opposite slab. The left hand very low. A push up move. So far I have been unable to make these committing moves.

But this time something is different. A good friend is shouting encouragement to me from below and before I know it I'm pushing away at the hold that is low down. Next thing I know I'm at the finishing hold at the top. I'm buzzing to have finally done this.

But it had been easy after all. Had there ever been a barrier? That elusive, invisible wall that can freeze you to the spot. Sometimes doing a scary move quickly can make it appear as if it never existed at all. One has no recollection of it having been there.

But I have seen it often in the hills. On long bold trad climbs with scary run outs. Moments

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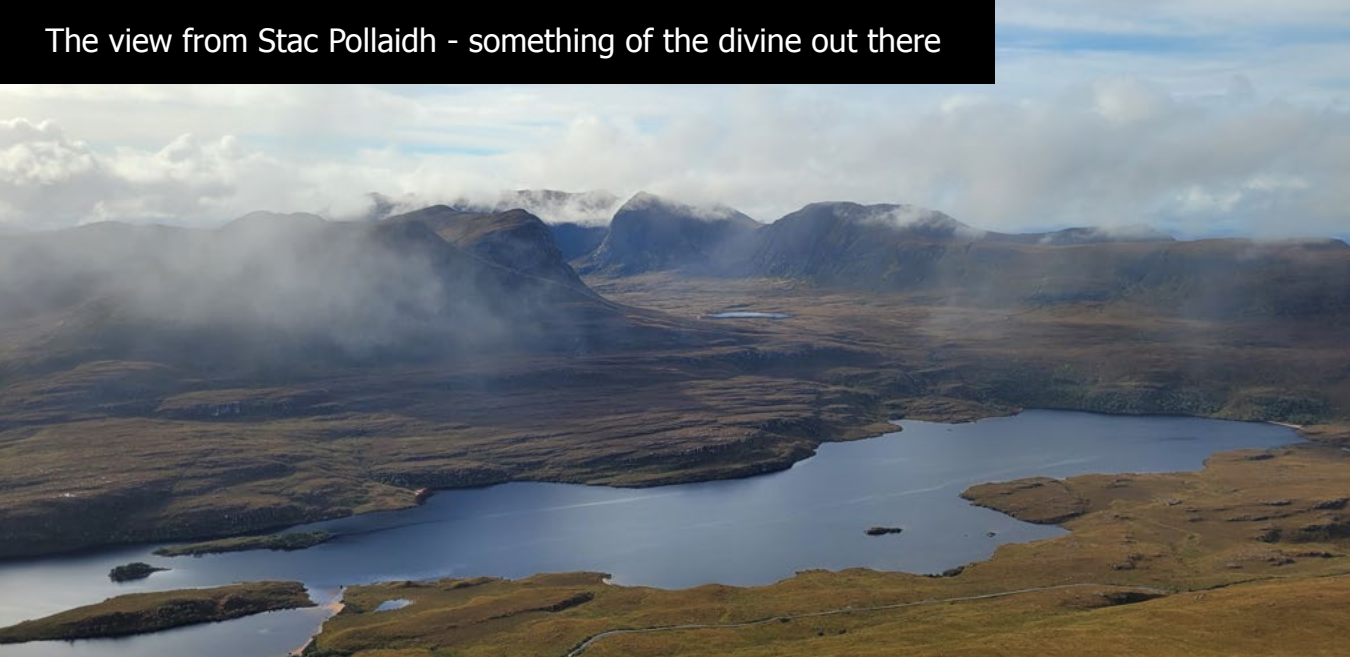
But this time something is different. A good friend is shouting encouragement to me from below...

”

spent pinned to the wall, frozen with terror.

But it's not just at the crag. It can be found here at the wall. In the gym. Many times I have wandered in, gazing into the distance at my favourite project as it beckons to me. Needs to be done soon. In my heart a feeling of both trepidation and relief that it's still there and hasn't been taken down yet.

I spend a lot of time at the indoor gym now. But still I long for the outdoors. It's been a while since I touched real rock. There is so little time left. So much of it slipping through my fingers. So much I still want to do. So many places I want to see. I can't allow it to pass me by. I fear there isn't enough time left to make up for my lost childhood.



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Transcendentalism is an American 19th Century philosophical, religious and cultural movement that has its roots in European Romanticism

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Are we all Transcendentalists?

Andy Crowe

I'm going to make the argument that British mountaineers are all transcendentalists at heart. Some reading this might take offense. Not only have I branded you as a person of religious disposition, I've done something far worse; I've inferred you are culturally American. But hear me out.

Philosophy is often thought of as an apart from our everyday life, as the pursuit of intellectuals in dusty rooms and offering

little to anyone that modern science can't provide. But the great ideas of eras past continue to influence our perceptions, choices and beliefs more than we would think. From Aristotle's questioning of "what is the good life" through to Camus' thoughts on the absurd and meaning in life; we are shaped by these ideas, and the fabric of our society shifts with them. It would seem to me an argument can be made that the ideas of the American Transcendentalists made their

way across the ocean and firmly embedded themselves in the ethics and attitudes of the first ascensionists. Ethics and attitudes that we still hold dearly to today.

Transcendentalism is an American 19th Century philosophical, religious and cultural movement that has its roots in European Romanticism. Famous intellectuals of the movement include Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Its influences can still be seen in American culture today from the writings of Gretel Ehrlich to the care with which the American National parks are managed. At the heart of the movement was the idea of the purity of the individual, their place in the natural world, and their relation to God.

"If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars." - Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson, born in 1803, was the leading voice in transcendentalism. A writer, poet, and Unitarian minister, Emerson's writings spearheaded the movement, inspiring writers and essayists for generations and instilling in American culture fierce values of individualism and a romanticisation of the American landscape. It is the ideas of Emerson and his countrymen that I believe have inspired the ethics of the British mountaineer, ethics that today are still hotly defended in the name of adventure, self-reliance, and a reverence for the mountains.

Nature

Nature was published in 1836. Emerson, in the essay, put forth the case that God, the divine, could be experienced by the individual through connection with nature. In

doing so he broke with the long held Platonic tradition that understood the divine to be otherworldly, separate from the dismal reality of Earth and which the individual could only faintly connect to through the human faculty of reason. For Plato, the Soul was pure, and everything around it in the natural world was flawed. Whilst Emerson agreed that the Soul and Nature were separate, Emerson viewed Nature as a manifestation of beauty, of art, of order and creation. For him, God.

"In the woods we return to reason and faith... I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." - Emerson

With man made in the image of God, and with Nature an extension of the heavenly realm, the natural world no longer becomes ours to exploit as we will. Nature became divine, to be experienced as such. To pollute and defile it, an affront to God. To remain in our homes and cities, a rejection of not just beauty and the sublime, but the very state of being human. It was the human created world that he saw as flawed.

"In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds

“

"If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars."

Emerson

”

somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." – Emerson

Self-Reliance

In 1841 Self-Reliance was published. The essay explores the ideas of non-conformity, self-expression, and individuality as the highest state of being for a human. For Emerson, the soul was so close to God that anything other than authenticity from an individual was a tragedy.

"We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents." - Emerson

Much like Plato, Emerson viewed the chains of societal conditioning and the notion of

‘property as the highest goal’ with disdain, arguing that which a person is, is the far higher cause to which we should aspire to.

“The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.” - Emerson

Looking to the external for approbation, conforming to expectation, and shying from accountability was not how humans should live. A person could only truly live by embracing self-reliance and Emerson wished to see a cultural movement spread throughout society.

“It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the office and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living...” – Emerson

Are we Transcendentalists?

It is these ideas that I believe have found their way into the heart of British mountaineering ethics, by way of the first ascensionists. That the mountains, often seen as the last areas to yet be completely ruined by humans, are worth preserving in their natural state. For many of us there is this sense that when we enter their realm,

we move beyond our human world and into a place more sacred. A materialist would struggle to make the argument against bolting rock, and when Messner wrote “The Murder of the Impossible” in 1971 it was this notion of violating the sacred that he was invoking. It is the idea that these mountains are an extension of God, themselves divine, and therefore worthy of respect of their natural state that stops us defiling them with indiscernible pieces of metal and reducing them to our own level.

It is true also, that the British mountaineer mirrors the virtue of self-reliance.

Exemplified through the first ascensionists and filtered down to the rest of us. A climb is only possible when two skilled individuals come together, working towards the common goal of the summit, and taking absolute responsibility for themselves. The rest of the day follows with a series of self-reliant actions: route finding through hundreds of meters of rock or ice, assessing the weather and environmental conditions for developing risks, protecting ourselves and our partners using our own judgement and creative use of equipment, and ultimately judging if our own physical capabilities are enough to get us through. For many of us the satisfaction we experience after a long day climbing is

Traversing under the cathedral like roof of Gob, Carnmore





in part built upon our relative freedom and sense of responsibility that goes hand in hand with adventure in the mountains.

One only needs to read the works of W.H.Murray to see how the transcendentalist movement might have found its way into his writing, and thus into the fabric of British mountaineering. His accounts of his adventures in Scotland inspired generations of climbers and detail in beautiful prose, the Scottish landscape, the bonds of fellowship between mountaineers, and his

own connection to God in moments of the sublime.

“Yet in that same instant our climb on the granite crags, the bare summit and the lands below, were with ourselves idealized as though in a point out of time and exalted in oneness. We began to understand, a little less darkly, what it may mean to inherit the earth.” – W.H.Murray

So, are we all unknowingly Transcendentalists? Do we believe that on

the mountains, we connect not just with true expressions of ourselves, but with God? Well, probably not, who am I to impose this label on others. Mountaineering is, after all, a deeply personal experience. But for a heathen like myself, it can be hard to describe exactly what makes climbing these mountains so special, so I’ll leave it to Murray.

“Corrie and mountain are the natural altars of the earth to be used as such before one goes.” – W.H.Murray



Walking up to the Vajolet Hut

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This was our first time taking the kids. Andy had previously stayed at some mountain huts on a climbing trip and thought this would be a great adventure to have with the kids

”

“Are we there yet?” – Dolomites edition Freya Marks

‘Is it ok to take toddlers to mountain huts?’; ‘Can 2-year-olds sleep at 2500m altitude?’; ‘How far can a 4-year-old walk?’: some of the questions going through my head and entered into Google searches whilst planning our trip to the Dolomites. We went through a similar process when our eldest was a baby and we were planning our first trip away in our van to Glencoe: ‘Is it ok for a 6-week-old baby to sleep at 5C?’; ‘What advice is there for taking

a baby camping?’. As you can imagine, we’ve had a lot of ‘firsts’ with the kids; quite small things can seem like a big adventure but it really is amazing to see the world through their eyes. Sometimes we’ve found it hard to find people that have had similar experiences so have had to figure it out as we go. Luckily my husband Andy (also a JMCS member) and I are up for a challenge and the kids so far have loved being in the outdoors.

The Dolomites are somewhere we are both very fond of, winter or summer, we could go back every year and never get bored. This was our first time taking the kids. Andy had previously stayed at some mountain huts on a climbing trip and thought this would be a great adventure to have with the kids. We got out some maps and settled on three hut trips, with camping in between, during our two-week holiday in June 2025:

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*It felt quite 'luxurious'
for a mountain hut so if
you like your comforts
this is a good one!*

”

1) Rifugio Malga Andalo (1350m), Brenta Dolomites near Molveno

2) Rifugio Vajolet (2243m) & Rifugio Passo Principle (2601m), Rosengarten Group near Vigo di Fasso

3) Rifugio Croda da Lago (2046 m), Ampezzo Dolomites near Cortina

1. Brenta Dolomites

The first was a great introduction, not too far from civilisation and an incredibly family friendly hut - we ended up having the whole hut to ourselves. It felt quite 'luxurious' for a mountain hut so if you





like your comforts this is a good one! It's also a quieter area but just as beautiful as more famous parts of the Dolomites. We took the direct, steep path up to the hut as we thought our son would enjoy this more than a gentle but longer slog. This seemed to be a good decision and our first hike was a success.

2. Rosengarten Group

This excursion was a step up: further distances, more elevation, higher altitude,

multi day... and therefore, of course a little more whining (from the toddlers but also husband carrying 2-year-old)! The distances we walked were modest for any adult but for a 4-year-old it was a huge achievement and something we'll remember forever. There were lots of big boulders which both adults and kids enjoyed climbing and the scenery was spectacular! Both huts also had excellent food - it's common to get a three-course meal and breakfast included in the nightly

rate and the Italian's take their food (& wine) seriously. We reached the huts quite early in the day. I was initially hesitant the kids would be bored, but they surprised me by happily entertaining themselves (away from screens & toys), playing with stones and in the snow patches.

3. Ampezzo Dolomites

The last hut we stayed in was situated next to a beautiful lake which we all had a refreshing swim in after a 6km trudge.



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We'd recommend it to all ages and mountaineering abilities. My advice to any parents of young kids is to get out there and try it

”

This side of the Dolomites was much busier though, as well as being located on walking Route 1, we met many more Brits and Americans so would advise booking well in advance. We were lucky to get our own private room - probably best for everyone!

As well as finding the hiking/hut trips a great way to have adventures with the kids, Andy and I both did some activities individually: running, cycling

and most excitingly via ferratas. Me, some very easy ones as a nice primer back into mountaineering as well as using them to visit some of the Italian WW1 infrastructure (Ferrata Fusetti); Andy, some much harder ones which sounded a bit sketchy in some places - difficult route finding and snow patches (Ferrata Catinaccia d'Antermoia & Cesco Tomaselli) but rewarding I hear! We'd love in the future to link up some of the via

ferratas with a multi-day hut hike.

In summary, we all had a great trip to the Dolomites, any worries about taking the kids to the huts were quickly quashed. We'd recommend it to all ages and mountaineering abilities. My advice to any parents of young kids is to get out there and try it - but make sure you have lots of snacks/bribes!



The Trad Dad Strikes Back

Doug Pender

I started climbing in 2009. For the first ten years, I never felt the need to have even the shortest break. Even when our first daughter, Eva, was born in 2015 I slowed down but managed to keep ticking over as a solid VS climber. Impressive, I know. However, given this was only six years after I started, I didn't really feel like an established climber.

Between 2015 and 2019 I improved. Managed some quality routes in the mountains (Hammer on the Etive Slabs, Butterknife on Garbh Bheinn and South Ridge Direct on Cir Mhor being examples) established myself as solid HVS (the odd E1 struggle) climber on the local central belt honeypots. Getting better.

The birth of our second daughter, Alexandra, at the end of 2019 coincided with COVID, the lockdowns and all the fun rules around socialising, exercise and travel. I've never really enjoyed indoor climbing. I don't mind bouldering walls, but prefer 20m of grotty quarry over 20 plastic problems, if I have a couple hours to spare.

I didn't really think about climbing until

June 2021.

5 June 2021: Me and fellow JMCS member Alasdair Yarrington headed in to Lochnagar one Saturday evening with a plan of climbing Eagle Ridge. I wanted a Munro bagging trip with a camp but Alasdair was keen to climb, so off we went. Despite flying up the route in no time, my climbing technique was as precise as a bag of spanners falling down a staircase. On the long walk out and drive home I found some solitude reminding myself it was a (Hard) Severe. Poor.

17 June 2021: Another go. This time Crowberry Ridge Direct with Alasdair. Another (Hard) Severe dispatched with more effort and bruised pride than was appreciated.

29 June 2021: Creag Dubh with an old friend James who had moved to Inverness. Not the place if you're not feeling it. After a slightly feeble lead on the (Hard) Severe, Tree Hee, James wanted a crack at a project of his, Wet Dreams (E2 5c***). A horrifically steep route, Wet Dreams, goes up over a series of roofs and was an impressive lead from James.

“Your shot” he shouted from the slightly dodgy looking belay about 25-30m up. I lost the fiery debate in my head and came to just below the first roof. Some Ondra style grunting later and I arrived, alive, at the belay. “Was this it? Am I back?”

No.

Between summer 2021 and the end of 2022 I spent quite a bit of time enjoying the hills camping, walking, running, but little climbing. I got out a bit in winter but nothing to write home about. I did however manage to take a family trip to Chamonix. Time in the Alps is always a catalyst for inspiration and this time was no different. I found myself desperate to be able to get into the shape and mindset needed to not just get back rock, but to improve and aim for bigger routes.

I’ve never really been one to set goals but I needed one, or at least a plan. Alasdair was two kids into fatherhood as well at this stage, so a plan was hatched to manage opportunity as best as possible.

Climb all the starred E2s in the central belt (as verified by UKC). Not to chase grades, but because E2 always seemed to mark a shift to me. At E2, routes stop giving you options. You typically just have to commit. To onset, with

my level of fitness, I need to read them well. I can’t just climb my way out of mistakes at this grade. Consolidating this will also make big serious mountain HVS/E1s actually enjoyable, in theory.

7 June 2023: Sedge Warbler Direct (E2 6a**) in Ratho Quarry. It didn’t go. But multiple lobs from the last move filled me with a renewed confidence. I put it to bed two weeks later.

The majority of summer 2023 was spent slowly ticking my way through the E2s in Ratho Quarry and at Cambusbarron. Some esoteric classics, and even some new lines thanks to COVID travel bans had appeared. For those central belt quarry connoisseurs among you, some lesser known beauties include:

Pete’s Wall (E2 5c**), Lockdown Corner (E2 5c**) and Welcome to the Cruise (E2 5c**) - Ratho

Arse on Stumps (E2 5b*) and Trailblazer (E2 5c**) - Cambusbarron

At the end of 2023 I had a new found love of gritty, quarried, dolerite.

In 2024 I continued on my quest across central Scotland. Not making huge progress, but ticking off routes at my old stomping ground



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The awful lack of snow this winter past meant that the dry spring and early summer lent itself to fantastic rock conditions in the mountains

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of Auchinstarry and expanding my horizons to the exotic kingdom of Fife. With family, work and general life busyness I also found myself going back over favoured routes from the year before. Getting on hard but familiar ground was invaluable to improve. Again, for the connoisseurs, have a look at:

Colours Fly (E2 5c*) and New Gold Dream (E2 5b*) - Limekilns

Return of the King (E2 5c***) - Auchinstarry

It was on one of the trips to Limekilns that a slightly harder line caught my eye. Hidden in a slightly dank looking corner beside Cruel Summer (E2 5c***) is The Struggler (E3 6a**).

The Struggler became the project. Steep, very pumpy, with an old peg but oodles of gear placements above. I tried on tope rope a couple of times at the end of 2024 (shameful I know) and found it pretty desperate. The feet were hard to get right and the crux move for me kept changing. There was no way I could see myself placing gear on it. The finger locks are good but moving off them, above gear, on slimy and polished foot holds felt too marginal. Next year.

The awful lack of snow this winter past meant that the dry spring and early summer lent itself to fantastic rock conditions in the mountains. I was lucky to get out a lot. Ticking off fantastic routes in Glencoe (Engineer's Crack - E1 5b**

and Pontoon - E1 5b***) and the Cairngorms (The Magic Crack - HVS 5a*** and The Needle - E1 5b***) with very little problem. I felt like I was going well.

19 June 2025: Alasdair and I headed over the bridge on another pilgrimage to Limekilns. It was a Thursday evening and, as always, difficult to find the psyche after a day at work. We didn't mess about and Alasdair jumped on The Struggler straight away and topped out with minimal issues. I was confident. The climbing on the route is in two parts. The start is quite delicate with only a couple of small wires to protect the move out to the peg. Once you clip the peg there are two options, for me.

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It wasn't really about having a definitive goal, more something to focus on to help progress in my climbing.

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1. Use precise footwork and delicate bridging to make placing gear on the steep crack possible.

2. Climb straight through the hard moves into the upper crack system, find a bomber finger lock and place gear below you.

The third option is to use your well honed power endurance to place gear wherever you choose. Not for me.

I committed to Option 1 and reached the bomber finger lock pumped out of my mind. There is one hard move off this, then it eases. With that in mind I continued and found myself back down at eye level with the peg a few seconds later. Disappointed, I pulled back on, finished the route, lowered and stripped the gear.

I'm not a delicate or efficient climber so I knew Option 1 was wrong for me and, to do the route, I had to just commit to climbing right through the initial steep crack.

After Alasdair had a valiant attempt on the Velvet Glove (E4 6a***) around the corner, I was ready for another shot. With the strategy set I just kept climbing and before I knew it was at the solid finger lock feeling fresh. You could probably place two full sets of wires between the peg and the lock so while climbing straight through with no gear is definitely unnecessary, it was the only way for me. The climbing is steady, and locks good, so it didn't feel run out. I soon found myself at the gritty loose top out, lowered and stripped the route.

Progress.

So, how am I doing in my plan for all the starred E2s in the central belt? I'm not actually

sure. It wasn't really about having a definitive goal, more something to focus on to help progress in my climbing. It's definitely done that, enabled me to become more confident on steep ground (or bold easier ground) and opened up some big routes at harder grades that can actually be enjoyed.

For anyone else in a similar position, looking for similar progression, here's what I've learned.

1. There is no substitute for trad climbing. If you want to climb harder trad, climb trad. A lot.
2. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Find safe steep routes and don't be afraid to hang on gear (or fall in the right place).
3. Repetition is valuable. It was definitely better for me to repeat the same hard, steep, routes multiple times than to do new, easier, ones.
4. Ratho quarry is a much better facility than EICA.

Sedge Warbler Direct at Ratho is my favourite route in the area at this grade. So next time you are in EICA and look out and see someone taking a lob from the last move, its probably me on my 15th ascent trying desperately to maintain my new found trad climbing mediocrity.



A Return to Knoydart and Barrisdale Bay

Davy Moore

Leaving Kinloch Hourn to travel to Barrisdale Bay reminds me of my April 1974 trip into Knoydart with the Edinburgh JMCS. Starting at 13:30 is certainly a better time than 23:30!

I was still at school and was totally reliant on club members offering me a lift to attend meets. Knoydart was a 3-day long-weekend meet. Living in Currie I knew of two other members nearby who had wheels; Ali Borthwick and Gus Grosset. Ali and I were to be passengers in Gus's car. We set off from Balerno early evening after Gus had finished work. Shortly after leaving the Saab did not sound right and Gus decided we must go back home. When we got there, he simply opened another Saab and we moved into this one, luckily, they were a two-car family! Off again.

I really had no idea how long the drive was and, more importantly, how long the walk in was -someone had told me it was just a walk along the coast. Up the A9, across to Spean Bridge, through Invergarry, then the

The author afloat, coastal path rising behind



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If our heavy head torches did work, the light shone was very dim, but at least the night was mainly clear so we could make out our way along the coastal path with the sounds of the sea just below

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headlights showed we were trundling along a single-track road that seemed to go on forever. Finally, we stopped at the end of the tarmac and I guessed this was Kinloch Hourn. I shouldered my heavy sack – Primus stove, tins of haggis, beans, corned beef, and chocolate biscuits & cornflakes and at 23:30 the walk started. If our heavy head torches did work, the light shone was very dim, but at

least the night was mainly clear so we could make out our way along the coastal path with the sounds of the sea just below.

This summer my sea kayak would take the weight – MSR Pocket Rocket, freeze dried food plus a 2023 Malbec, and my arms would do most of the work. Setting off at 13:30 meant I was leaving Kinloch Hourn

in daylight at high tide, which would carry me west and out along the loch. I was able to study the path as I paddled along, it was only a few feet above me at this point. There are four “narrows” in Loch Hourn which the yachtsman’s pilot book numbers from the sea approach to land travelling up the loch.

After I came through the 4th narrows in the

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The path was so close to the sea I was sure this was going to be a flat walk; how wrong I was! Up it went steeply

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kayak I noticed a short rise in the path - but I don't remember that slowing me down on the night's walk in.

The path was so close to the sea I was sure this was going to be a flat walk; how wrong I was! Up it went steeply, me last, poor me! Down it went back to sea level, along, then up again, now I was more than last but thankfully the others waited for me in the gloom at the

high point. Back down to sea level again and I hoped there was no more uphill. Of course, being a coastal path, there was to be one more rise just before the bay. As time went on, I began to notice I was not the only one who was tired; I guess by now all of us had been awake for at least 20 hours.

Looking from the sea at either side of the 3rd narrows, I could see both steepenings of the

coastal path, each rise returning to sea level. The tide was still in my favour so the paddling was not too demanding and the scenery stunning. I spotted sea eagles on the north shore where there is more tree cover. Quickly through the 2nd narrows with the help of a 2-knot tidal stream running I could see the last rise of the coastal path before the bay.

The walk became a trudge for me but we

finally came across a Landrover track at the mouth of Barrisdale Bay. We were walking three abreast by now to keep each other going and thought the bothy must be getting close.

Cruising through the 1st narrows with the ebb tide still flowing, I could now easily look into Barrisdale.

My will to keep on walking was retreating fast, so I just followed the others. They stopped, peered into the shadows and announced "This is the bothy!"

The door was not locked; in they went and I naively followed into the building. Unfortunately, this was not the bothy, it was the lodge but we were too tired to care. We walked around in our boots trying to find somewhere to lay our heads, as we didn't wake anybody it became evident that thankfully the lodge was empty. Finding some old iron bedsteads upstairs we crashed out for a few hours' sleep. Dawn came too quickly, then we could see the whole of the bay, revealing we were less than a half mile from the bothy. A short flat walk took us to the empty bothy, where we had breakfast.

There are acres of flat grassy shoreline to land my kayak and pitch the tent. Nature offered a log bench and an upright stone to rest against. I could spend the next few days quietly exploring the south shore of Loch Hourn finding some interesting abodes.

As we finished eating more of the club members arrived at the bothy. Over the next few days, the Knoydart Munro's were ticked off and routes on An Caisteal were climbed by Ali and Pete Myles.

As I paddled along the loch returning to Kinloch Hourn I spoke to "Peter the Boatman" from Arnisdale, out fishing in his boat named "Carpe Diem". He had spotted my tent and asked if I had slept well? I said I had. He went on to explain that I had been camping on the grave of an unknown sailor who was buried there two centuries ago. That accounts for the large upright stone then!

I don't remember much of the day time walk back to the cars at Kinloch Hourn, except for my underage beers at the Tomdoun Hotel with the other club members and a day light journey home. Back to school on Tuesday morning!

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*Dawn came too quickly,
then we could see
the whole of the bay,
revealing we were less
than a half mile from
the bothy*

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Joie de Vivre en Val Cenis

Stuart Buchanan

Nanjika, Isla, Fergus and I have visited the relatively unknown valley of Val Cenis the last two summers, on the initial recommendation of David and Pat Buchanan who had been there previously. This report covers both visits.

So, where is Val Cenis, one might reasonably ask? It lies in the southern French alps on the southern edge of the Vanois National Park, north-east of Briancon and the Ecrins. It is at the end of the Maurienne valley, past the French end of the Frejus tunnel, and just on the border with Italy. Still confused? - France.

The attraction of the area is the relative quiet and variety of mountainous activities, with enough infrastructure to make for a very pleasant holiday. There are glaciated peaks (more for ambience than actual ascents), multi-pitched mountain rock routes, scrambles, sports crags, excellent walking trails at all altitudes, mountain biking trails and high alpine passes for cycling.

One of the significant pieces of tourist infrastructure is a wide variety of via ferrata that had been created. The most impressive development is around a gorge overlooked

by 19th century fortifications of the Fort Victor Emmanuel built by the Duke of Sardinia to control access to Italy. Unlike the historic via ferratas of the Dolomites, these are much more akin to sports climbing, with gradings, signposting, impressive exposure and excellent equipment. On the day we arrived on our first visit we spent the afternoon doing a couple of these, the second of which finished by assaulting the fort itself and climbing through a cannon embrasure, providing an opportunity to explore the extensive fortification before returning to the car.

Our campsite was at the village of Termignon, at a nice shaded location by the river. Unfortunately the village telecommunications mast had fallen down, so there was no Wifi. This forced Isla to trek to the tourist information in the village center each evening to stay in touch with her friends.

Over the next couple of days we explored the local area, doing some sports climbing and walking in the valley while dodging the occasional showers. Most of the valley climbing is single pitch, but one of the nice features was the variety of rock types, from

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We eventually reached the path after one of the worst descents I can remember

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Above Val Cenis, Dent Parachee in the background

limestone to volcanic gneiss and even some conglomerate available for sport.

I was keen to climb a peak, and the Cicerone guide suggested a scramble up to the Cime de Larro (2881m) as a good warm-up for more significant ascents. The first part of this was very enjoyable - a nice path from the Col to a border fort which we explored before heading up a lovely ridge overlooking Italy. The steepness of the ridge increased and the exposure was such that a rope was

a good idea for the kids. The summit itself was suitably exciting with a couple of moves of proper climbing to get to the fine exposed summit just as some clouds rolled in below us to make for a suitably atmospheric experience.

The guidebook descent was via a gully and then some slopes to regain a more substantial path. Unfortunately the gully turned out to be an awful mix of small patches of snow and choss and the slope consisted of unstable moving scree enlivened by the occasional

short cliffs with no discernable path. In the end I had to rope the rest of the team down a short step as there was no other way to go. We eventually reached the path after one of the worst descents I can remember. In retrospect, reversing the ridge would have been a more pleasant and possibly easier choice. Fortunately children's memories are short, and by the time we'd returned to the valley and picked up a roast chicken for supper they were considering it a character building adventure!



On the Cime de Larro

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On the summit, I recognized the view and realized I had been here before more than 25 years ago

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Much more successful was a day walking above the valley taking advantage of a cable car on Fergus' birthday, and a cycle up the Col d'Iseran for me while the kids tried biathlon at a national training centre in the valley. Unfortunately the weather then deteriorated again and we cut short our trip and headed to Provence. Where it was too hot just to spite us.

Feeling that we'd not managed to do as much as we'd like, we decided to return this year, but this time stayed in an apartment at Lanselbourg, the largest village in the valley.

As we were going slightly later in the year and during the main summer season, there were more events in the valley to take part in.

On our first day we did a walk high above Termignon to the Pointe de Lanserlia (2,909m). Unfortunately Nanjika and Isla were feeling the altitude and decided to take advantage of the GR5 trail which would take them back to Lanselbourg directly, while Fergus and I continued up. The summit had great views across to the Grande Casse, which at 3,885m is the highest peak in the

Vanoise National Park, and the Glacier de Vanoise, sadly much reduced due to climate change. On the summit, I recognized the view and realized I had been here before more than 25 years ago on a ski touring trip with David Buchanan and the Lancashire Mountaineering Club, and had also passed below it with Alasdair on our Grande Traverse des Alpes long distance trek.

We enjoyed a couple of days of sports climbing and returned to the via ferrata at Fort Victor Emmanuel to do some more



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A truly excellent route with superb views down the classic u-shaped glaciated valley

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challenging routes. The Descent d'Enfers (Descent to Hell) and Monte du Purgatoire (Climb to Purgatory) combined some very strenuous overhangs and quite magnificent exposure, descending right to the bottom of the gorge and then climbing back out next to a huge waterfall.

Of a less difficult but more mountainous nature was the via ferrata d'Andagne further up the valley which was about 600m long, and provided a full day out. A truly excellent route with superb views down the classic u-shaped glaciated valley.

Now acclimatized we had a day walking to the Col d'Aussois and Point de l'Observatoire (3015m). This walk started at a pair of huge reservoirs of deep blue water high on the north side of the valley and climbed up to one of the main passes leading to the north side of the Vanoise massif. We had been here back in 2019 when we had stayed at the Refuge du Font d'Aussois which had been a day's walking for the children's little legs. This time they were striding ahead of us and passed the refuge before 11am, before continuing up to the pass. We appear to have already reached the point where

their increasing stamina and leg length has exceeded my plateaued fitness!

The Point de l'Observatoire was only slightly higher than the Col itself, but was an entertaining scramble to a point perched on the edge of the valley with impressive drops to the North and views towards Mont Blanc.

Interestingly, the Vanoise National Park has tightened up its regulations over the years to maintain the mountain environment. During our Traverse des Alpes back in 1999 Alasdair and I had bivouaced in the national park,

Bouquetin (alpine ibex) posing for a photo



which was allowed provided your tent was only pitched at night. Bivouacging is now completely interdit along with dogs, mountain bikes and parapenting. As it was, on the descent we encountered some bouquetin that were completely oblivious/tame to the people around them.

We did more sports climbing, with both Isla and Fergus learning to lead and abseil, and did some more walking with old friends from Belgium who had independently decided to holiday in the same valley.

We also took advantage of the various scheduled events - Nanjika enjoyed a well-organized trail race, I got suitably knackered doing a hundred mile ride that included the Col du Telegraph and Col de Galibier which closed to cars for a morning, and we enjoyed watching the riders of the Tour de France get just as tired but in much less time racing up the Col de Madeleine.

All too soon it was time to leave after a very varied and enjoyable two weeks. While I probably won't return any time soon, feeling that we've now done most of the via ferratas in particular, I would like to come back to do some of the multi-pitch climbs and more high level walking and peaks, and would recommend it for a varied mountain holiday.

Learning to Rope Solo

Andy Bladon

As someone who's become progressively time-limited, my opportunities for long (>3 hrs) climbing trips have declined. This has meant I've often found alternative activities to fill a short window of opportunity, for example hill running. However, this year I decided to learn to top-rope solo to allow me to get out climbing, even when time was limited.

This meant I've climbed more, spent time on harder routes, and improved my rope-skills. In this article I'll give an overview of the equipment and process I used and highlight some things I've found out along the way.

Legal Stuff: This article should not be seen as instruction or guidance on how to top-rope solo. It's a purely personal perspective. Climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.

While researching how to top-rope solo, I



found a useful article from Petzl USA titled Self-belay: solo climbing with one or two fixed ropes. Using this and a few other sources, I identified that the following equipment was required for my preferred setup:

- 40m static rope.
- Rope protector(s).
- 2x progress-capture devices (Petzl Mini Traxion and Petzl Nano Traxion).
- Shoulder strap (keeps progress-capture devices separated when using a single strand of rope).
- GriGri (leashed to screwgate to prevent it being dropped).
- Belay plate.
- Slings and screwgates for setting-up anchors and using as a foot-loop (120cm sling, 240cm sling, 4x screwgates).
- Harness, cows-tail, shoes, and helmet.

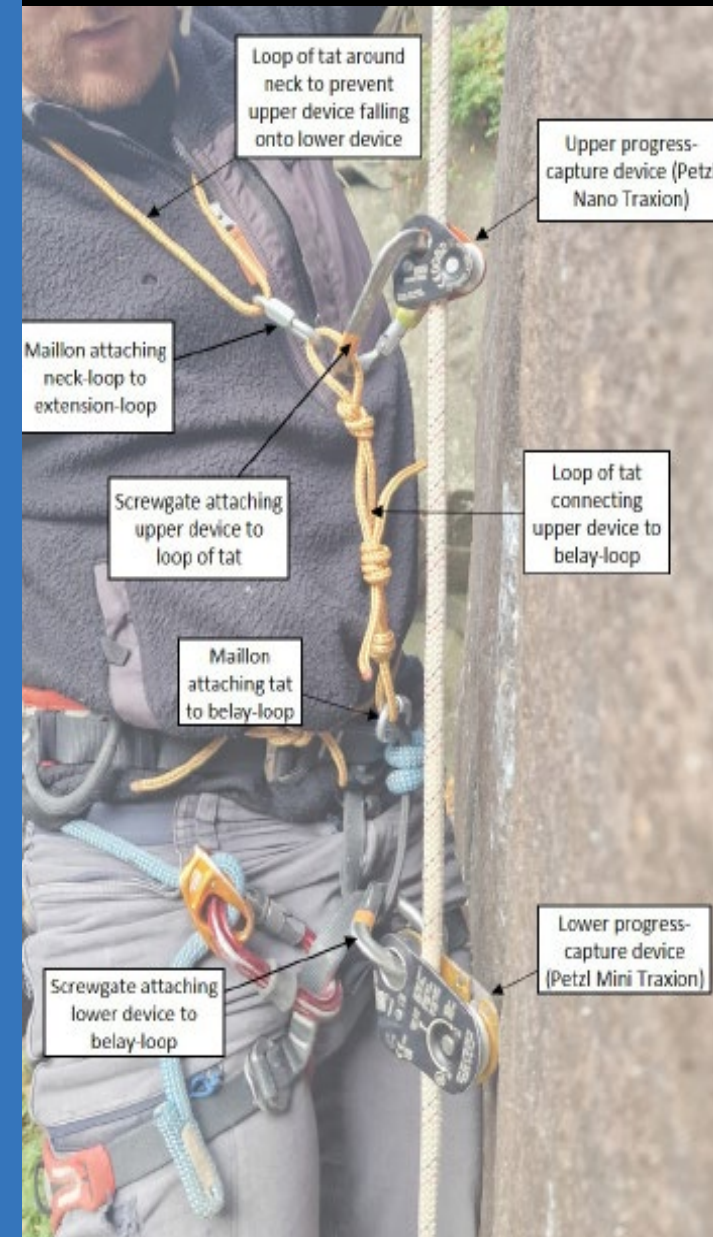
Once I had the necessary equipment, and after a quick test drive using a ladder and a tree in the garden, I headed down to Ratho quarry for my first session. Ratho is a great place for top-rope soloing. With easy access and plenty of anchor points at the top of the crag, such as trees, fence-posts, the climbing centre's roof-struts, and even some bolted anchors, it's easy to setup an

appropriate anchor system.

The system that I used comprised a single line of static rope, both for the anchoring system and the climbing line. To achieve this, a centralised load-point that was equalised between two solid anchor-points was created. The remaining rope was then connected into the load-point, with some slack separating the loaded rope from the anchor (see diagram). The slack rope ensured all the load was transferred to the anchor point, and that the second anchor was not loaded directly.

Once the anchor and climbing rope were installed, the next step was to abseil down the line. This allowed the anchor system to be checked and adjusted, enabled rope protectors to be installed, and meant any deflections in the line of the rope (e.g. for circuitous routes) could be established. A GriGri was primarily used for abseiling because it was quick to setup, which was especially useful when transitioning between climbing and abseiling. However, in some cases a doubled-up rope was used to abseil, for example abseiling into the top of a sport-climb to access the bolted anchors, so a belay plate was also required.

Device set up



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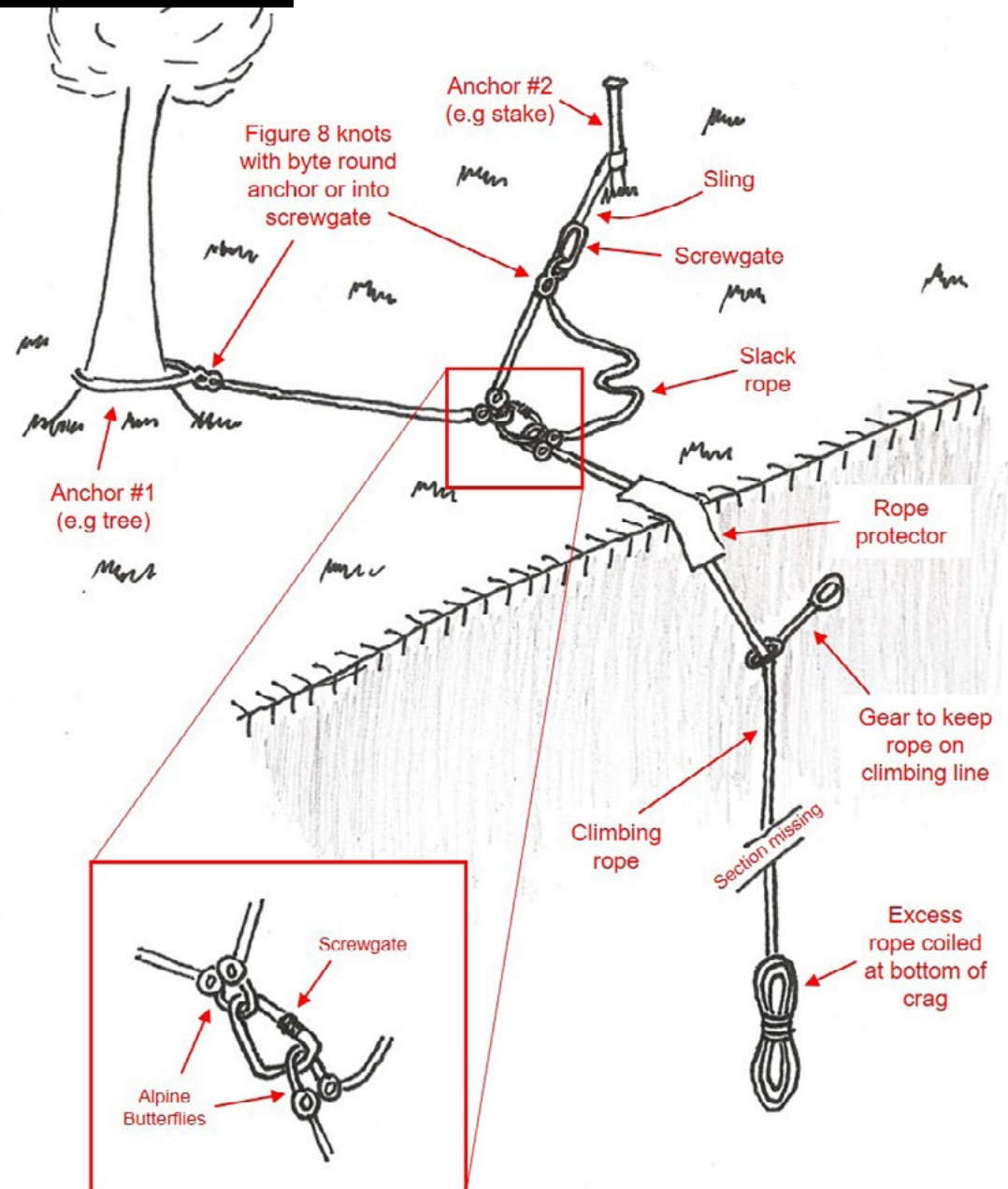
Finally, the progress-capture devices were attached to the harness and the rope

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Once at the base of the climb after the abseil, the bottom of the climbing line needed to be weighted. This ensured the rope moved through the progress-capture devices and prevented the devices pulling the rope upwards, creating slack. This was done by hanging a bag on the rope at the bottom of the climb or by coiling any excess rope and leaving this hanging.

Finally, the progress-capture devices were attached to the harness and the rope. Two progress-capture devices were used to have a backup in the case that one of the devices failed. In situations where two

Rope set up



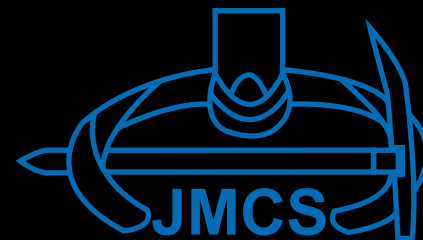
strands of rope were used, each progress-capture device was connected to one of the ropes and attached to the belay loop of the harness on an independent screwgate. More commonly, a single strand of rope was used, so the progress-capture devices were connected to the rope one above the other. To achieve this, one device was connected to the belay loop of the harness and the other device was connected at chest-height using a shoulder-strap, which was easy to create using tat and maillons, but it took a little while to configure with the correct lengths.

After completing the setup, the climbing could start! Typically, I would do a test fall at the base of the climb to verify that everything was setup correctly. Once I'd verified that I was properly connected, the route was climbed, often with several falls. After getting to the top, I would either top-out or transition to the Gri-Gri and abseil back down the route. Transitioning was easy, so I would often do two or more laps of a route to maximise the time spent climbing.

One thing to highlight is that while climbing and falling, the rope was repeatedly

weighted and unweighted, which caused movement. The movement meant the rope rubbed on the top of the crag and on any edges down the route. I found this rubbing to be the most concerning thing about top-rope soloing. My concerns were alleviated by investing in a couple of rope-protectors. The investment was a significant quality-of-life improvement and meant I was able to fall off without anxiously looking up towards the top of the crag.

Throughout the year I've had many successful and enjoyable sessions that lasted 3 hours door-to-door. The equipment is easily transported, so can be carried on a bicycle and taken away on holidays. This meant it was easy to cycle to Ratho for short sessions, where on a good day I could do 2 or 3 routes in 2 hours. While camping in the summer, I was even able to cycle to a local sport crag for a few climbs and get back just after the kids had breakfasted. Having learned to top-rope solo, I was able to utilise short (<3 hours) opportunities for climbing rather than doing other activities. This has meant I've climbed more, climbed on harder routes, and improved my rope skills.



2025