

Southern Sandstone

by Dave Turner

Climbers' Club

The sandstone outcrops of South-East England have a very special place in the affections of all those climbers who are fated to live in London and the 'Home Counties'. I use that curious term deliberately in order to highlight the fundamental separateness of this climbing from all the other climbing in Britain, and also its supreme incongruity with its surroundings. We southerners must feel forever grateful for the existence of these superb geological freaks (not entirely coherently accounted for by the scientists, I may say) which pop up with such wonderful unexpectedness in the most beautiful woodland settings. As this is, in a very real sense, the 'home' of climbing for one of the major capital cities of the world, it is heartening to at last have a guidebook that does full justice to the area. In every respect, it is a vast improvement on its predecessor, and most attractively presented.

My only quibble really is the title 'Southern Sandstone', which seems rather misleading for a guidebook that includes the major new chalk routes on the south coast. It would surely have been better to have reverted to the original, admittedly less appealing, title of 'South East England'.

But this is a minor point compared with the improvements. Most of the quaint idiosyncracies of the previous editions have at last disappeared. For example, Dave Turner has managed, where all previous writers have failed, to perform the extraordinary feat of arranging the routes at Harrisons so that they now run from left to right as you face the crag. And, as is also common practice elsewhere, crag diagrams have been introduced for the first time — yes, real drawings that bear some relation to the way the crag actually looks, though it must be said that these are not really as well used as they might have been. There is a definite paucity of route lines on the Unclimbed Wall, Wellington's Block, and Funnel Wall diagrams, for example. No worry, traditionalists who were enamoured of those twee little plan views of old will be glad to find that these have all been retained, and that there is still plenty of scope for getting lost trying to find such obscure gems as 'Bell Rock Transverse Chimney Route 2' in the labyrinthine corridors of High Rocks. Again, as elsewhere, the better routes are now blessed with asterisks; it is good to see, for example, the Bowles Girdle at last getting the three-star accolade

it deserves – for, with well over 400 feet of continually interesting climbing on excellent rock, this is the finest inland climb in south-east England. Another good idea is the inclusion, for the first time, of a list of all the climbing walls in the area. And finally, there are several excellent new maps. There is now a very real chance of being able to find the elusive Under Rockes at the first attempt.

But it is in the meat of the guidebook – the text – that the greatest improvements are to be found. Apart from some truly ghastly puns, which I won't bore you with, Dave Turner's descriptions are clear, concise, and frequently entertaining. There is much more detail regarding variations than hitherto, and there are even some fun? suggestions, like jumping across from Sandman to finish up Hate (or less enjoyably up the adjacent Love, which is in turn described quite justifiably as a hateful route!) And then, of course, there is a wealth of new routes – mainly for those mortals who can climb at 6b and above. It is surprising just how many superb new discoveries have been made since the last guide; climbs such as Krait Arete, Salad Days, Nemesis, and Temptation are already well on their way to achieving classic status.

As for the grades, I will confidently stick my neck out and say that these are the most accurate we have ever seen in a south-east England guidebook. I can find almost nothing to disagree with, except perhaps Simian Progress, which seems overgraded at 5a, and the well-named Boa-Constrictor Chimney, "4b", which I insist is at least 5b! (A time-honoured misprint perhaps, or is it just my lack of chimneying?) Most of the grading changes seem entirely judicious; and it is particularly heartwarming to see The Flakes just scraping in at 6a now, as I can't do it. The graded list at the back is more controversial – as it's bound to be: in particular, I find a lot of the harder 5c's like Mulligan's Wall, Celebration and Bonanza given too lowly a position ... but one could go on boringly and trivially like this for hours, so I'll stop.

Above all, this is a very caring guide, full of concern to protect the rock for posterity. For example, we are continually reminded, in capital letters, at the beginning of each section, to ensure that the belay sling hangs over the edge of the crag to minimize rope damage; and abseiling practice, which can so easily damage small finger holds, is given the short shrift that it deserves (though Dave is kind enough to suggest a few sites at High Rocks where it can be indulged in harmlessly.) On the question of chalk he is sensibly undogmatic; he suggests simply that it should be

“used conservatively, with respect for the views of others.” (Incidentally, wouldn't it be a great step forward if one day some enlightened equipment manufacturer were to produce coloured chalk, tinted to match different rock types?)

On the subject of chalk, I move on now to consider an altogether different variety – the calcium carbonate of the chalk sea cliffs, which, in turn, is as different from the homely sandstone as, well, chalk and cheese. Personally I wouldn't go near the stuff even if I was paid big money, but what is quite obvious from the photos, and from other climbers' reports, is that here (for the competent, at least) is some unique and stupendous climbing, quite unlike anything else in the country – though it's obviously most like ice-climbing. The stunning Monster Crack at Beachy Head and The Great White Fright at Dover are clearly major routes by any standards. Mick Fowler's picture of the latter speaks for itself – as does the name of the 4,100 foot girdle on the sandstone cliffs at Hastings: 'Reasons to be Fearful'. (After chalk and cheese, there is always solidified mud.) The most useful protection here, we are told, is “the warthog type drive-in ice-screws, but great care should be taken not to test them ...”

Having mentioned the photography, I suppose I should really say something about the other pictures, but, as three of them are mine, I will restrict myself merely to saying that they are a varied collection; and, anyway, attractive as pictures in a guide may be, I always regard them as entirely secondary. Here, they are really no more than colourful icing on an already very rich cake. But I will say that Dave Jones's front cover picture of Guy McLelland bouldering at High Rocks is something exceptional in managing to convey, in one closeup image, the very essence of southern sandstone climbing. You can almost feel the texture of the fingerholds, and smell the rock and the leaves. In other words, you are brought right into the heart of the matter, which is all to do with the intricacy and subtlety of the moves. I am sure I will not be alone in claiming that the best routes here pack as much interest and character into their short height as many pitches three times their length elsewhere. And just to be controversial, I'll even go so far as to say that our sandstone is altogether more interesting than its French counterpart at Fontainebleau. The only pity is that we have so little of it; and doubly regrettable, therefore, that Eridge and Penns Rocks remain inaccessible. (Penns has always sounded particularly tempting ... nice route names too!)

With the pressure on the available climbs becoming ever greater, we can only hope that, if the code of practice urged by Dave Turner is adhered to, these sandstone treasures will survive the onslaught of ropes and limbs for many years to come, and that future generations will be able to enjoy such classics as Slimfinger Crack, Fandango and Hate. For these are climbs one can never tire of – even if one can get very tired on them!

All in all, then, this is a splendid guidebook, the work of a true connoisseur.

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