

THE BENDING GROOVE.

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(It is generally accepted that an Editor should not intrude his own scribblings into a Journal except under the heading of EDITORIAL. It is also generally accepted that it is the Editor's duty, if contributions prove insufficient, to find something with which to fill the gap; hence this article. If I make no further apology for it, it is because it deals with a thing almost unique in the history of Welsh climbing—a First Ascent which in ten years has not, so far as I know, been repeated.)

It was in July 1938 that H. T. Jackson, Phil Wareing, and myself stood at the foot of Moel Hebog's East Face on a wet and windy morning. We had slept in the hay of a barn belonging to Cwm Cloch farm and felt ready for anything. We carried 180 feet of rope and two ice-axes, the reason for which highly unseasonable weapons will appear in due course.

Jackson—"Jacko" to us—was not at this time a member of the M.A.M., though he has since joined the Association. He was the most experienced climber of the party, and had already made an unsuccessful attempt on this route with R. Woods, in Easter of the same year, when they had been forced to make a difficult traverse off the climb at the top of the fifth pitch. Jacko, then, was to lead. The massive and imperturbable Wareing was to be second. And I, whose main duties with the the expedition were those of cook and chauffeur, was to bring up the rear; or, more accurately, to be brought up in the rear. As we stood staring up at the face I felt more and more that plain as was my cooking and un-Coded as was my chauffing, I was better fitted for both than for First-Ascending. However, I had not the moral courage to tell my companions this.

Seen from Beddgelert, this East Face of Moel Hebog looks insignificant. Seen from its base, it looks monstrous and unclimbable. The cliffs are a good 500 feet in height, all of it very steep rock. They have a base of about 1,000 feet, with a shorter and easier section at their southern end. At the central and highest face of the crag there are ascending tiers of savage-looking overhangs; a conspicuous black groove about 200 feet up indicates the only breach in these defences. This, said Jacko, was the Bending Groove, and thither he would lead us forthwith. We roped up with 100 feet between leader and second and the assault commenced.

The rocks were streaming wet, but sheltered from the gale that was roaring over the crest of the mountain. Twenty feet left of the deepest-cut groove in the centre of the cliff is the short slab buttress which begins the climb.

Pitch 1. 25 feet. Up the slab buttress and traverse L. into grassy gully. Stance, with belay high above.

A short pitch, not very hard, and—yes, a good belay. I began to feel better. *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte*, I told myself. And Echo answered "Oh yeah?" The pitch was the easiest, and the belay one of the only two, on the whole climb.

Pitch 2: 45 feet. Leave gully by steep crack on R. Up ridge of buttress to stance on grass ledge. Doubtful running belay.

Doubtful indeed. The climbing was harder, but still not more than V.D. As for the grass ledge, I thought it insecure and was glad to leave it; at that time my ignorance of grass ledges was profound.

Pitch 3. 60 feet. Climb up to R. and traverse across the bottom of Central Slab by balance movements on good footholds. Into and across gully to rather insecure grass stance by ash sapling. No belay.

Good footholds there were, but not a handhold in reach. The Central Slab (the names on this climb are of Jacko's choosing, as are the words in italics) was as smooth as the proverbial infantine stern. But the stance—well, it supported an ash sapling and that was all it was fit for. How it was glued to the sheer black wall of the gully I cannot imagine. Under the weight of two of us it sagged horribly, and when we jabbed the pick of an ice-axe into it to make a belay (the purpose of the axes is now explained) it would only go in an inch or two. The term "psychological belay" was not known to me then, but the most rudimentary analysis of my psyche would have revealed an utter lack of confidence in this one.

Pitch 4. 75 feet. Up the gully to grass stance.

Just like that. The gully was narrow, steep, and lacking any decent holds. In place of holds it provided sloping ledges loaded with dirt. The only way to climb it was in "one smooth ascending rush." Jacko christened it "Kruschen Gully" and went up it with an energy typified by those optimistic advertisements. The grass stance—of course—had no belay. Once more,

feeling rather like men mending an iron girder with stamp-edge, we dug in the ice-axe pick and laid the rope round it.

Pitch 5. 35 feet. Move diagonally L. to another stance.

Nice to have a shorter run-out, particularly as the ice-axe was again our only belay. Jacko called our attention to a black cleft overhanging us close above. The Bending Groove itself, he said; and added that from this point it was possible to make a difficult traverse off the climb to the left—the only place where a traverse-off *was* possible, as he had discovered when retreating at Easter.

I glanced at my watch. We had been three hours on the climb, and the climbing was getting harder. It was also raining gently. We were approaching the crux. Beddgelert looked very, very far below.

Pitch 6. 60 feet. Up a grassy slab to a small ledge at the bottom of a V-groove.

It was small, but it was a ledge—none of your jelly-like grass tufts. There was naturally no belay. This was the point from which Woods (a climber reputed to waltz up Very Severs solo) had retreated the previous Easter. The V-groove continued straight ahead; straight overhead, in fact. It looked highly intimidating. I didn't see how, lacking wings, we were to get any further, and began to wonder if I would be held when—as was very likely—I came off in descending to the traverse-off. But the indomitable Jacko had spent months planning his solution of the problem. He moved up without hesitation and spreadeagled himself on a perpendicular wall.

Pitch 7. 30 feet. Climb up into the groove and traverse out L. on delicate holds and by an awkward balance-movement round an exposed corner. Two good belays on wide grass ledge above.

If that last sentence wasn't already in italics it would be in italics of the most ecstatic. I actually enjoyed this pitch—perhaps because of those “two good belays” of which the invisible Jacko informed us. The exposed corner projected right out to overhang the whole 250 feet we had climbed, and the holds on it were just adequate. The grass was spacious and based upon firm rock. The belay was taken by threading under a massive boulder on the ledge, and here I squatted shivering for the next half-hour while Jacko and Phil sought an exit.

The V-groove out of which we had escaped led up from the right-hand corner of the ledge; from its left-hand end another V-groove with a sheer and holdless wall at its bottom shot up into uncertainty. Jacko and Phil tramped backwards and forwards between the two until I was lashed in a cat's cradle of rope and had to be disentangled. At last they made a determined attack on the left-hand groove, Jacko standing on Phil's head for a take-off.

Pitch 8. Traverse 10 feet round the corner L. to foot of second V-groove. Up groove on very thin holds followed by step grass. Resting-place at 15 feet. Up again until it is possible to climb out on the rib on R. and so by slab to a good grass stance. No belay.

After giving of my cranial cuticle to Phil's nails it was my turn. Voices above assured me with unconvincing heartiness that I could be held and even pulled up. I assured them with convincing plaintiveness that as there were no holds at all for ten feet I would require pulling. Luckily I weigh less than 11 stone. I have never gone up a pitch so fast or so effortlessly.

Pitch 9. 80 feet. Traverse into groove on R.—the Bending Groove once more—and up its centre, passing an obstructing boulder on its L. side. Above this slab on L. provides foothold, and steepens into a wall with small but sound square-cut holds, which ends the climb. Stances and belays above.

It was the last pitch, and I think the hardest, though the knowledge that we were so near the top gave us all a kind of exaltation that would have got us up a brick wall. Jacko led up it like a man inspired, and even I didn't come off on the tiny holds of the final wall.

At the top, with mist driving round our wet and chilled bodies, we congratulated Jacko on a fine lead and the accomplishment of a long-planned project. The 480 feet of climbing had taken us just 7 hours.

"Severe, I think," opined Jacko as we turned to descend.

"Very," I agreed feelingly.

"No—just Severe," said Jacko.

It would be interesting and instructive to learn, from a second ascent, what standard should be applied to Bending Groove. And I may add without undue boasting that I am ready and willing to lead any ambitious party up * to this notable and neglected crag.

* Kindly note this little word; it is important.