

## ODD DAYS IN BUTTERMERE

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It all started at the Whitsun Meet in Buttermere in 1963, when Roger Wallis told Mike Railton and myself about an account he had read of a climb called Cleopatra. Apparently this climb, which is on Buckstone How, is supposed to be rather hard and Roger thought it would be a good thing if someone in the M.A.M. party did it during the weekend. Mike and I treated his suggestion with caution as we had been lured on to desperate routes and had met near disaster before by acting on recommendations of this sort. However, on Whit Monday, Roger, that great organiser, decided we would all go to Buckstone How. As the day was bright and sunny we felt that we had little alternative but to agree, especially as we had our "hard men" reputations to uphold. Nevertheless we managed to linger in our beds sufficiently long for the impatient Roger to stamp out up the hillside accompanied by his intrepid team of Alan Rainford and Bob Robinson. When eventually Mike and I were ready to leave the hut we were faced by the difficult problem of not knowing how to locate Buckstone How. Fortunately Guy Flint, a respected F. and R.C.C. member, was in residence and we explained our problem to him. Guy was only too glad to be of assistance and we drove forth towards the Honister Pass. Now Guy is a very nice chap but either he also did not know where Buckstone How was to be found or his sense of humour that day was a little warped; for after persuading us to leave our car at the bottom of the pass, he struck straight up the hillside. After ascending for about 500 feet he then started to traverse horizontally across steep loose scree. By this time my legs, trained on gentle walks to the Wastad, were on the verge of collapse but then I suddenly saw Roger struggling on a crag no more than half a mile away. What was more he was obviously not enjoying himself. My spirits rose and my legs started to work again; we might have some entertainment yet. As we approached closer we came to the conclusion he must be attempting Cleopatra as he looked so unhappy. When we came within earshot Roger asked us what it looked like above the over-hang he was attacking. As with one voice Mike and I replied "desperate". On hearing this comforting message Roger promptly abandoned his position and scuttled crabwise to the left on to easier ground. Consultation of our guide book revealed that he was now moving up Honister Wall, a mere severe. Hastily we pointed out to Roger that he was escaping up an easy route but unfortunately he did not appear to hear us. Loyal Alan and Bob followed in their leader's trail and so it was left to either Mike or I to lead the way through the overhang. At this point I made full use of the cunning that nature has endowed me with and persuaded Mike that the overhang pitch was just the thing for a big strong lad like him.

Starting from the first shattered rib to the right of Honister Wall, which Roger assured us was the place to start, I led off up to the base

of the overhang, passing such a large number of loose holds on the way that I was convinced the whole cliff was about to fall down. I eventually managed to attach myself with doubtful security to various loose-looking blocks and settled down to await Mike's commencement of the assault. Following the description of the route on a scrap of paper, Mike traversed a few feet to the left to the bottom of an overhanging groove. After a few minutes contemplation and tentative stretching of his arms, he shot off upwards in his own inimitable manner. At the top of the groove one is supposed to step right, and after some muttering and hesitation Mike began to move across, showering down pebbles, shale, heather and the odd hold to mark his progress. Fortunately I was sheltered by the overhang from this assorted loose material so it did no physical damage although it had a very serious effect on my morale. Eventually Mike announced that he had found a sloping shaly ledge which fitted the description of the stance, so it was now my turn. I got to the bottom of the groove without too much trouble but found upward progress from then on rather difficult. By performing a thin bridging movement I was able to reach a loose-looking flake and thrutched up to the top of the groove. At this point I realised why Mike had hesitated, for what holds that were not under heather were loose. However, I had faith and managed to join Mike, suffering no worse harm than badly shattered nerves.

Anxiously I consulted our description of the route and looked around for the next pitch. Unfortunately nothing seemed to fit, for according to our notes we should have just begun to get to grips with the hard pitches of the climb, whereas in fact the rest of the way to the top of the crag looked fairly straightforward. Suspicions began to develop fast in our minds about the accuracy of our route-finding. However, we could not see where we had gone wrong so we were forced to make our way up the rest of the cliff as best we could.

Some twenty minutes later, after having watched Alan, Roger and Bob do Groove II, we assembled at the foot of the crag and tried to work out where the mistake had been made. It was then that Alan brought his razor-keen mind to bear and pointed out that if Cleopatra went up midway between Honister Wall and Groove II we ought to have forced the overhangs some 20 yards right of where we actually tried. It was immediately apparent that Alan was right, whereupon we heaped abuse on poor Roger's head for pointing us in the wrong direction. Of course we ignored the fact that we should have had more sense than to believe him.

Some four months later Mike and I were again at Birkness, and having a Sunday afternoon to spare decided to have another look at Cleopatra. This time we learnt from our earlier lesson and drove to the top of the Honister Pass and walked back to Buckstone How along the track. Mike, having led through the overhangs on the previous occasion, forestalled any attempts of mine to persuade him

to repeat the performance by racing up the first pitch. Naturally this time he started from the correct place. I followed him up and then traversed a few feet leftwards to a groove overhung by two large flakes. After fixing a runner I moved up nervously, for the rock did not seem to have improved at all since our last visit. I stepped up until I could reach the flakes and decided that their security was in considerable doubt. I communicated my fears to Mike, but with the typical attitude of a second safely belayed round a corner, he told me to pull up gently. I pulled up gently and rapidly transferred my weight on to holds on the right bounding wall of the groove. After a few moves up I was able to take stock of the situation.

I was now at the bottom of a shallow crack in the middle of a very impressive wall, undercut by the line of overhangs I had just come through. The crack appeared to be the obvious line of advance, so I moved up for about twenty feet where I was able to fix another runner. From the description of the route, I was now faced with the problem of traversing rightwards to a shaly ledge. Since I could not see the ledge or even a traverse line my problem was considerable. Eventually after circling the face for twenty minutes looking for a way of escape, holds began to look more reasonable and with the eye of faith I detected a traverse line leading right on a level with my runner. After plucking up courage I set off and, to my surprise, soon found myself round a corner, belaying on the aforementioned ledge. From my secure position, tied to a large tree, I shouted down to Mike, "Easy really, just a bit exposed".

Mike made short work of coming up and was soon concentrating on the next pitch. The first moves up a rib were obviously awkward but without much hesitation he mastered them and disappeared leftwards round the rib. It was only a short pitch, and it was not long before I had rejoined him, belayed in the middle of the face, above the second line of overhangs that can be seen from the ground. The first moves upwards from this stance were supposed to be the crux of the climb and I was just in the process of studying the problem when Janet appeared on the scree below and asked how much longer we would be. I replied that we wouldn't be a minute, adding the silent rider that I hoped reunion with my wife would be accomplished by a descent of the path and not by a vertical plunge from the face. By leaning out from the belay ledge I was able to detect a very commodious jug a few feet above, and so with a quick rush and a semi-layback move I was able to seize it, pull up and mantleshef. On pausing to see what lay ahead, I suddenly realised that the angle had now relented and holds could be said to be numerous. In a few more minutes Mike and I found ourselves safely on top of the crag, coiling ropes and sorting slings.