



**Black Rock quarry, Somerset**

by Martin Crocker

# Black Rock quarry

A guide to the climbs of Black Rock quarry, Somerset

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Front cover: *Mohammed Yasser* (E2) Pic: Crocker coll. (Mark Courtiour)

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### **Acknowledgements**


Many thanks to Mark Courtiour and John Harwood.

## Ethics and fixed gear

The quarry is a trad crag, and there are no bolts (apart from some cavers' vintage bolt stubs). There are peg runners on various routes, and – like any *in-situ* gear – they should be treated with the utmost caution: if in any doubt, back up the pegs or do not proceed. Several routes were climbed only after top-roping, and this is noted in the text.

## Abbreviations Used

SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest	Grades	
BMC	British Mountaineering Council	D	Difficult
RoW	right of way	VD	Very Difficult
m	metre	S	Severe
km	kilometre	HS	Hard Severe
FA	first ascent	VS	Very Severe
		HVS	Hard Very Severe
Soloist	A self-belay device that enables ground-up lead-climbing without a partner	E1 – E7	Extreme



**CRAG CODE**  
[www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)

<b>Access</b>	Check the Regional Access Database (RAD) on <a href="http://www.thebmc.co.uk">www.thebmc.co.uk</a> for the latest access information
<b>Parking</b>	Park carefully – avoid gateways and driveways
<b>Footpaths</b>	Keep to established paths – leave gates as you find them
<b>Risk</b>	Climbing can be dangerous – accept the risks and be aware of other people around you
<b>Respect</b>	Groups and individuals – respect the rock, local climbing ethics and other people
<b>Wildlife</b>	Do not disturb livestock, wildlife or cliff vegetation; respect seasonal bird nesting restrictions
<b>Dogs</b>	Keep dogs under control at all times; don't let your dog chase sheep or disturb wildlife
<b>Litter</b>	'Leave no trace' – take all litter home with you
<b>Toilets</b>	Don't make a mess – bury your waste
<b>Economy</b>	Do everything you can to support the rural economy – shop locally

**BMC Participation Statement** — Climbing, hill walking 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.

## Guidebook Disclaimer

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## History

The history can be worked out from the available first ascent records. There is evidence that the cliff entertained some early use by climbing and caving groups. No doubt the records of the oldest climbs will be incomplete, and further information would be welcome.

## **Black Rock quarry** OS ref 486 546

This is a small limestone quarry situated in a picturesque and popular dry valley (Velvet Bottom) just to the east of Cheddar Gorge. Historically 'blacklisted' for its instability, these days it is in better shape – now that it is subject to regular specialist scaling operations. Nonetheless it remains a serious place to climb: see 'Rockfall Risk' below.

The quarry provides a range of trad routes, mostly of a high standard. Some of them are pretty good. Facing south-southeast, the quarry is a suntrap and a warming place to climb in the winter when the morning sun is out.

Black Rock quarry is located in the Black Rock Nature Reserve and is part of the Cheddar Complex SSSI. There is an access arrangement in place, agreed in 2012: see 'Access' below.

### **Approach**

Park in laybys at Blackrock Gate either side of the B3135, where a gated track veers leftwards into the wooded valley (OS Ref 482 545). This parking area is approx. one km beyond Shoot Gully and the covered reservoir in Cheddar Gorge (when driving eastwards through the gorge). In peak holiday times and most fine weekends the laybys fill up very quickly. Follow the track for 600m to a limekiln on the left and the quarry immediately beyond.

### **Rockfall Risk**

Several fatal accidents here have caused great concern about public access to this quarry. One was a tragic climbing incident in the 90s, associated with unstable rock. Even an uneducated eye can see that the quarry is riven with fractures and evidence of a history of rockfalls. Some of the failures have been spontaneous but most rockfalls will have been initiated by contractors who regularly survey, maintain, and scale the face to the extent that its geomorphology allows.

While stating the obvious, care is required as some of the holds are fractured and hollow-feeling, and in places you have to climb up blocks that are intermeshed or dubiously supported. On the other hand, in places the rock is solid and well cleaned.

Do note that routes have the potential to change as a result of contractors' operations and there is also a risk that peg runners could be compromised by rockfall. If in doubt carry out a hard-hatted abseil inspection before committing to the lead.

### **Access**

A climbing access arrangement was agreed in 2012 between representatives of the BMC, The National Trust (who own the site) and Somerset Wildlife Trust (who then managed the site). It is understood that the management of the site will be handed back to the National Trust early in 2022. The corresponding implications, if any, for climbing access are unknown.

Given that Black Rock quarry lies on Access Land, The National Trust and Somerset Wildlife Trust stated in 2012 that – while they do not encourage climbing here – they nonetheless do not object to climbers using the quarry, subject to the following conditions.

1. Because of the risk of climbers dislodging rock, particular care and vigilance must be exercised in relation to the safety of other persons since the area is a popular walking and picnicking site. Climbing should strictly not take place above any third party who could be affected by stonefall/dislodged rock.



2. Anyone climbing on Black Rock quarry does so entirely at their own risk, in line with the Participation Statement of the British Mountaineering Council.
3. Climbers must be in possession of valid civil liability insurance with cover up to £10million. (This can be obtained through membership of the BMC or Mountaineering Council of Scotland.)
4. Both The National Trust and Somerset Wildlife Trust are comfortable with traditional routes at the quarry but they do not agree to the development of bolted sport routes here. (Bolt lower-offs can be added to help protect cliff-top vegetation, as necessary.)
5. Group use is not permitted.

### **The Routes**

The quarry comprises two tiers separated by a large sloping platform which you can scramble up and down. There are plentiful stake and tree belays on the slope above the upper tier. For the lower tier routes, belay on the platform and then scramble down.

#### **UPPER TIER**

Near the left-hand end of the crag is a short right-angled arête (right of a dusty yellow corner).

#### **1 Miss Prism 8m E3 6a (5.6.2013)**

Rather exquisite, and the holds keep you above a relatively flat landing area. Possibly a highball with a mat. Take the arête and, using a weak-looking undercut, make a long move to fingerholds. Another stretch gains a sloping ledge. Abseil off a pre-placed rope here or at the larger ledge above. Don't be tempted to exit: it is very, very loose.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping, without a mat)

#### **2 \*Age Shall not Weary Them 12m E5 6b (11.11.2012)**

A stamina treat up the leaning wall; harder and steeper than it looks! Start 2m left of the arête on a sloping boulder. Carefully pull up right to clip the first of three pegs, and get established on the narrow ledge. Sustained moves on layaways and pinches (peg) leads to a vertical crack (peg). One last difficult move and the crack deepens: romp home to ledges and an exit to the left.

FA Martin Crocker, John Harwood

#### **3 \*Saturday, in the Park 12m E2 5c (27.10.2012)**

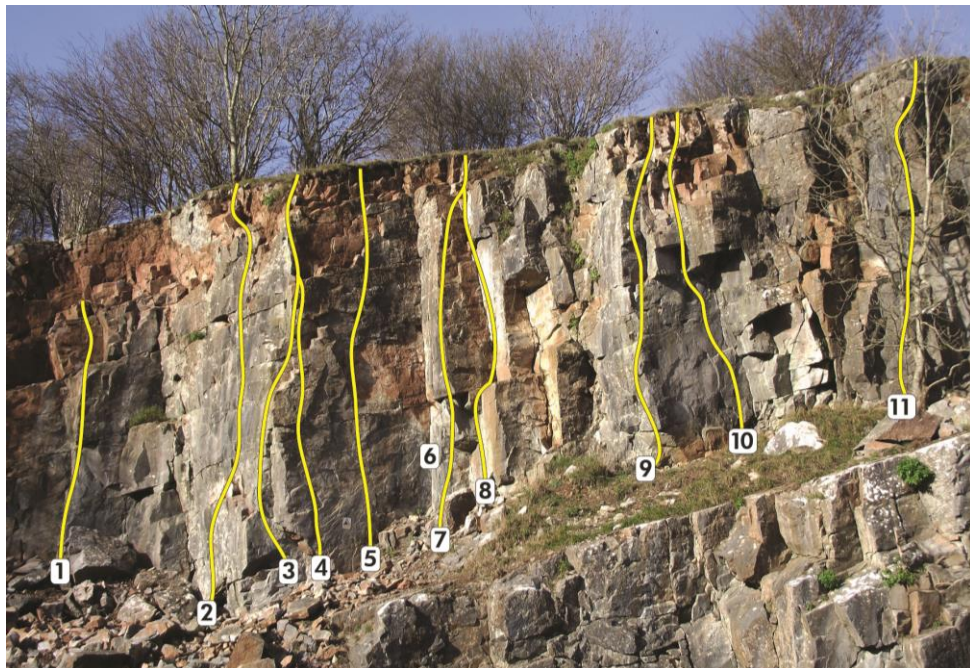
A rather fine line; this is the impressive square-cut arête near the left-hand end of the upper tier. Pull into a slight groove in the arête using creaky flakes to its left (good small wire in groove). Make steep difficult moves onto sloping hand-ledges (peg above). Take the arête stepping around on a ledge to its right-hand side just below the top.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

#### **4 Hobnobbing with the Earl and Countess of Wessex 12m E4 6b (8.6.2014)**

The right-hand side of the arête, replete with tech moves: sequency. Using layaways in the groove, step onto the obvious angular foothold right of the arête. Span a long way right for a long layaway, and clip that peg. Off-balance moves using the arête gain ledges. Finish up the right-hand side of the easier arête.

FA Martin Crocker, John Harwood



**5 \*Flat to the Wall** 12m E3 6b (27.10.2012)

Flooring moves, but plentiful protection to help get you going. Start under the sheer right-hand wall of the arête. Step up from a blocky ledge while nose-grazing a hairline crack (microwires). Reach a good pocket high left, and then follow a hand-ramp leftwards (peg) to a jug right of the arête. Take a crack back right into the centre of the wall, and climb up and left to the exit of *Saturday, in the Park*.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

**6 \*Plum Tuckered** 12m E2 6a (29.9.2013)

A fine line; strenuous to place gear. Climb into the sheer corner with difficulty until standing on a flat hold on the right wall. Continue up the corner to the top.

FA Mark Courtiour, Tom Courtiour

**7 \*Lifer's Edge** 12m E7 6b (5.6.2013)

The superb gritstonesque arête which takes you out, solo, above an awful rocky landing (one mat protects the start). Gain a sloping jug under a little overhang. A very powerful sequence gains layaways on the arête whereupon a long reach will see a jug at the end of the difficulties grasped. Pull up and either finish up or down *Tuckered Out*.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping, with one mat under initial arête)

**8 Tuckered Out** 12m HS 4b (27.10.2012)

The second and narrower of the two corners: amenable after a damn good thrutch. Climb a vertical crack and flop onto a square ledge under the corner. Climb the corner on improving holds to a loose exit.

FA Mark Courtiour, Martin Crocker

To the right is a prominent arête that starts (oh so) steeply.

**9 Scherzo** 9m E4 6b (27.10.2012)

A scary intro above an uncomfortably sloping and rocky landing; get your belayer to take a stance to the right to curtail any tumble. Pull strongly up the very edge of the arête to sloping handholds and a quick clip of the peg just right (first gear). Move up and continue much more easily to an exit on the right.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

**10 Older People's Forum** 9m E3 6a (27.10.2012)

More like E2 5c for 6-foot plus people (and under 55-year olds). Climb the wide corner until it bulges. Step left and make a hard long reach for crimps above a block overhang. Before core strength collapses, pull up to easier ground.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

**11 Cow Pat Score** 9m E1 5a (3.6.2013)

The blunt rib behind a large ash tree; unfortunately escapable on ledges to the right. Pull onto a large sloping ledge. Pull steeply up the rib and, using the hand-ledge on the right, climb to a good wire placement in a slight break – the only gear. Climb the arête to finish on clints and grikes.

FA Martin Crocker (solo, with sling clipped into the wire runner)

There are two short routes further up the tier.

**12 Daylight Craving** 7m E2 5b (11.11.2012)

Fifteen metres left of the end of the tier is a narrow leaning wall that faces southwest. Take the ragged crack up the wall, using various sloping ledges on the arête just right. At the top of the crack, mantel to the right onto a large sloping ledge. Scramble out.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping)

**13 For the Fallen** 6m E1 5c (11.11.2012)

Not to be underestimated. Start 10m from the end of the tier and immediately right of a triangular niche. Gain a jug 3m up the short steep wall; then make a hard lock on small finger-edges above to gain large holds. Finish easily on shaky holds.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping)

**MAIN (LOWER) TIER**

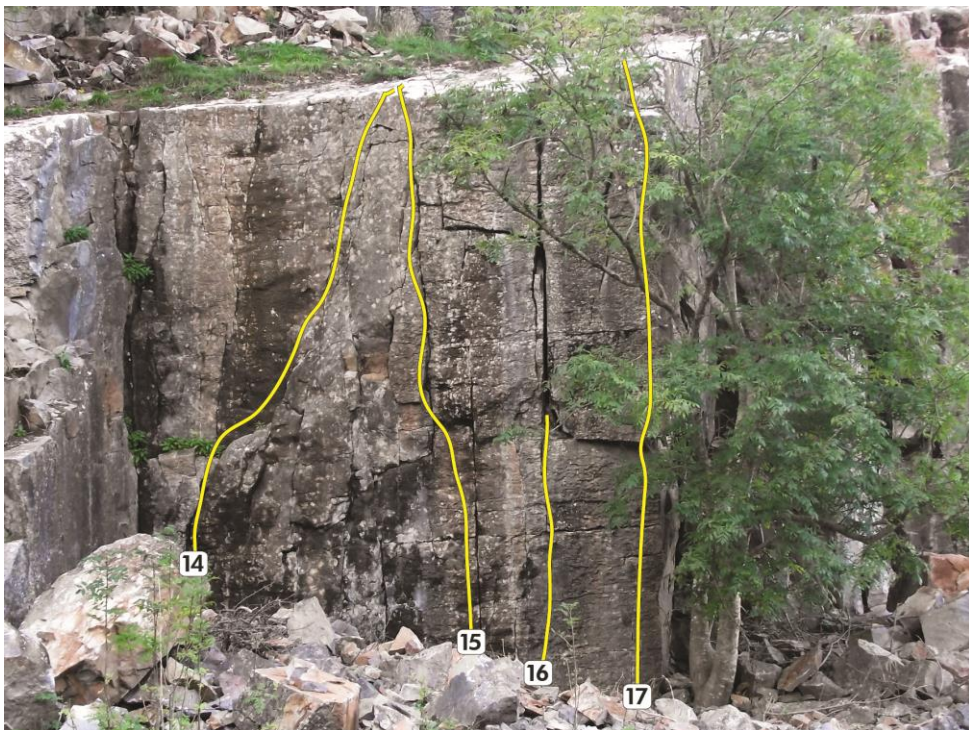
The first routes are located on the south-southwest-facing, crack-seamed wall left of the large ash tree and arête.

**14 Usher in the Dark** 9m E1 5c (27.10.2012)

Climbs the shallow groove and ramp just right of the left-bounding corner of the wall. Mantel up onto a ledge (good wire in slot above). Step up right along the ramp into the groove. A tiptoe move using small holds gains the lip; then pull out right on good fingerholds on the slab. Very protectable, but deceptively steep.

FA Martin Crocker (led with Soloist)





### 15 **Tough Luck Two Jags!** 9m E3 6a (18.11.2012)

A bit of a dirty scoundrel. The overhanging cracks 4m left of the arête: a tough start. Make a powerful move up the thin vertical crack to gain the deeper crack. Battle up to an almighty jug just below the top. Loads of gear.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour, John Harwood



### 16 **\*Beast** 9m E3 6a (18.11.2012)

Never has so short a route inflicted so great a pain; this is the unmistakable (and unforgiveable) off-width. A technical move (the only one); then you're into the hand/fist/leg/body jamming. Grunt wincingly to the top. See pic to left by John Harwood (who wimped out).

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

### 17 **\*\*Die-back** 9m E3 5c (11.11.2012)

One of the best routes in the quarry; and low in the grade. This is the striking overhanging arête, taken mostly on its left-hand side. Make a hard move up the left-hand side of the arête to a finger-jug, and continue (peg, thread) using the crack to its left (cams) to a straightforward exit.

FA Martin Crocker, John Harwood



### 18 **5.10 Bragger-Man** 9m E2 5c (11.11.2012)

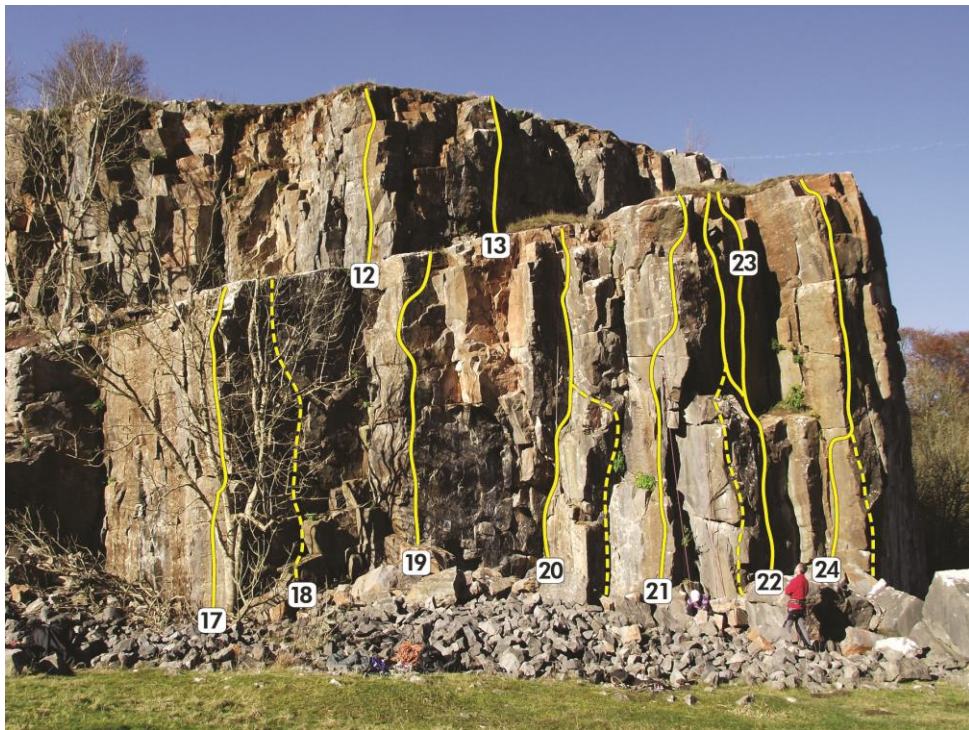
The wall right of the arête; take care with the hollow rock at the start. Climb a thin layback flake to a hand-ledge: good wire placements in the cracks above. Move up a thin crack and trend leftwards across the wall with a long reach for the top. Mantel out.

FA Martin Crocker, John Harwood

### 19 **Pick up the Pieces** 10m E2 5c (20.10.2012)

Excellent rock and mostly good holds after a tricky start; 5b if you step off the boulder. Climb the clean arête 4m right of the large ash tree directly to a sloping top: here, step right to exit up the adjacent corner. Unprotected, and the rocky ground beneath is unforgiving.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping)



There are two narrow corners approx. 6-7m right of the *Die-back* arête. The next route takes the left-hand of the pair.

### 20 **Blockfall** 10m E2 5c (18.11.2012/17.2.2013)

Looks quite easy – think otherwise. Bridge directly up the lower corner passing a bulge with difficulty. The upper corner is less steep, but still demands respect. An alternative entry (at E1 5a/b), taken by the first ascensionists, is to climb the right-hand corner for 4m and then step left.

FA Mark Courtiour, John Harwood/Martin Crocker, John Harwood.

### 21 **Mohammed Yasser** 12m E2 5c (18.11.2012)

The flying arête, from which a good flight is indeed possible. Take the lower arête immediately left of a V-groove and fix cams in a crack on the left wall. Inch up right onto the edge, and follow it to a sloping ledge and an exit on the right.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour, John Harwood



*Blockfall (E1) Mark Coutiour*  
Pic: Martin Crocker

### 22 **The Importance of Being Earnest**

12m VS 4c (4.11.2013)

The crack just right of the arête of *Mohammed Yasser*. Starting 2m right of the lower arête, climb cracks on unreliable rock to the ledge under the headwall. Now better protected, follow the deep crack in the headwall to the top.

Variation: **Direct Start** E2 5b Climb the lower arête to the ledge; no gear. FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping)

### 23 **Based on a True Tory** 12m E3 6a (18.11.2012)

The sheer headwall left of the large left-facing (unclimbed) corner; a fierce, fun finish. Climb cracks on unreliable rock to the ledge under the headwall. Move up to breaks (peg above), and make a long stretch straight up for small fingerholds. Exit steeply direct.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour, John Harwood

### 24 **\*Call it a Hunch** 15m E4 6a (20.10.2012)

A testing series of technical moves with bombproof gear between (assuming the crag stays in place). This takes the leaning left arête of the main face. Climb a narrow corner to a break; then swing around onto the right-hand side of the arête. Make a delicate move direct up the arête to a second break. Repeat the process to a third break, and mantel onto the sloping ledge. Launch up the hanging final arête, but swing around right to exit.

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour

Variation: **Direct Start:** E5 6a (3.6.2013) An unprotected entry; falling off would be more serious than jumping off. Climb the right-hand side of the arête on side-pulls; then its edge very delicately to the first break.

FA Martin Crocker (solo after top-roping, no mats)

25 **E=MC2** 18m E2 5c (20.10.2012)

A difficult crux, but which can be protected well. Climb the flakes of *Blockheads* for 3m; then pull hard over a small overhang using twin thin cracks. Enter a blocky niche having due regard to the quality of the rock, and follow the easier crack above to the top.

FA Mark Courtiour, Martin Crocker

26 **Blockheads** 18m HVS 5a (20.10.2012)

A compelling line: this is the central crack high in the face, which is reached from the left. Many of the flakes rattle, but they seem to be interlocked if co-dependent. Start under a line of flakes near the left-hand end of the main face. Climb up flake cracks for 3m; then swing diagonally rightwards between more flakes to the crack. Jam up this to the top; then look down to see what you've been climbing up!

FA Mark Courtiour, Martin Crocker. It is just conceivable that this was the line for *Rachel's Crack*, climbed by Steve Briggs and Greg Forward, 28.8.84.



27 **Facelift** 18m E2 5b (20.10.2012)

Interesting climbing that starts in the centre of the main face. From a block on the ground take a sketchy crack (small wires) using well-spaced good holds to its right. Move into a rightward-leaning groove and follow this onto small ledges up right. Take the leftward-slanting groove to the exit of *Blockheads* or – better but harder and bolder (E3 6a) – step up right onto a narrow arête. Take the very edge of the arête without using the crack of *Black Rock Corner* just right (contrived but challenging).

FA Martin Crocker, Mark Courtiour



**28 Mid-March Morning/ Reward for Neglect** 18m E2 5b (16.3.1993/17.2.2013)

The right-hand arête of the main face. Note that the peg appears to have gone missing. Balance moves straight up the arête, and above the usual rocky terrain, land you on good jugs and a chance to clip a peg (first gear). Continue on somewhat shaky holds to the upper corner of *Black Rock Corner*, up which the climb finishes.

FA: Martin Burke, Ruth Burke/Martin Crocker, John Harwood

It seems like the original – graded HVS 5a – climbed ‘diagonally right to the arête, reaching it at 3m (triangular pocket)’.

**29 \*Black Rock Corner** 18m E1 5c (1960s)

The crag’s most prominent line; excellent solid climbing that can be protected to the hilt. Make a hard move up the slick corner, and then swing left on slightly hollow-feeling jugs into a higher corner. Follow the corner, which hosts a problematic off-width, to the top.

Variation: **Direct Finish** E2 5c (17.2.2013) Instead of swinging left at 8m, span right and tackle the wobbling hanging flake crack to small ledges. Continue up a difficult slim groove, step left and exit up the short grey headwall.

FA Martin Crocker (unseconded)

**30 \*Killing Time** 18m E5 6a (28.8.84)

Superb, if rather escapable, face climbing up the bare wall right of the corner. The grade is just warranted for the on-sight. Small wires and RPs offer better protection than expected. Use holds on the right for the first 3m before moving diagonally left from a finger-pocket into the centre of the wall. Finger-edges lead up the wall (peg) to better holds. Carry on direct on opposing layaways to hand-ledges and a swing up left. Move back right and climb the headwall, immediately left of a small ash tree, to the top.

FA Dave Viggers, Pete Sykes, Greg Forward, Steve Briggs. Reclimbed without the old bolt stubs and after contractors’ scaling operations by Martin Crocker, John Harwood, 17.2.2013.

**31 A Friend Indeed** 18m HVS 5a (28.7.92)

Climb the flakes and arête of the *Killing Time* wall, and finish up a crack in a groove.  
Dillon Hughes, Simon Mooney

**32 Big Band Sound** 9m E1 5b (8.6.2014)

Little wall, big impact. Climb cracks in the short steep wall at the right end of the crag.  
FA Martin Crocker, John Harwood