

An occasional series highlighting some of the best rock-climbs in the country

# BRAINBITER A CLASSIC E2 OF CHEDDAR GORGE

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It's a question I had come to dread while climbing in Cheddar Gorge: "Can you recommend a classic E1 or E2 apart from Coronation Street?" 'Ummm... well... er... ummm'. Then silence; I'd been brain-bitten again.

Cheddar Gorge is certainly a spectacle and the towering serrated arc of Pinnacle Bay is arguably its most impressive sweep of rock. Unfortunately, climbing on that part was banned in 1993 and it had to wait 10 years before rock safety, cleaning, and restoration work could enable the lifting of the ban and the resurrection of long-forgotten climbs. Foremost amongst them is Brainbiter.

When there is a lot to say about good climbs but little space to say it, 'superlative abuse' can be a necessary evil. One exception might be the accolade of 'classic' which, for me, can only be earned by climbs that have made history, or have the capacity to make history. They cause climbers to work to achieve their goal, as does... Brainbiter.

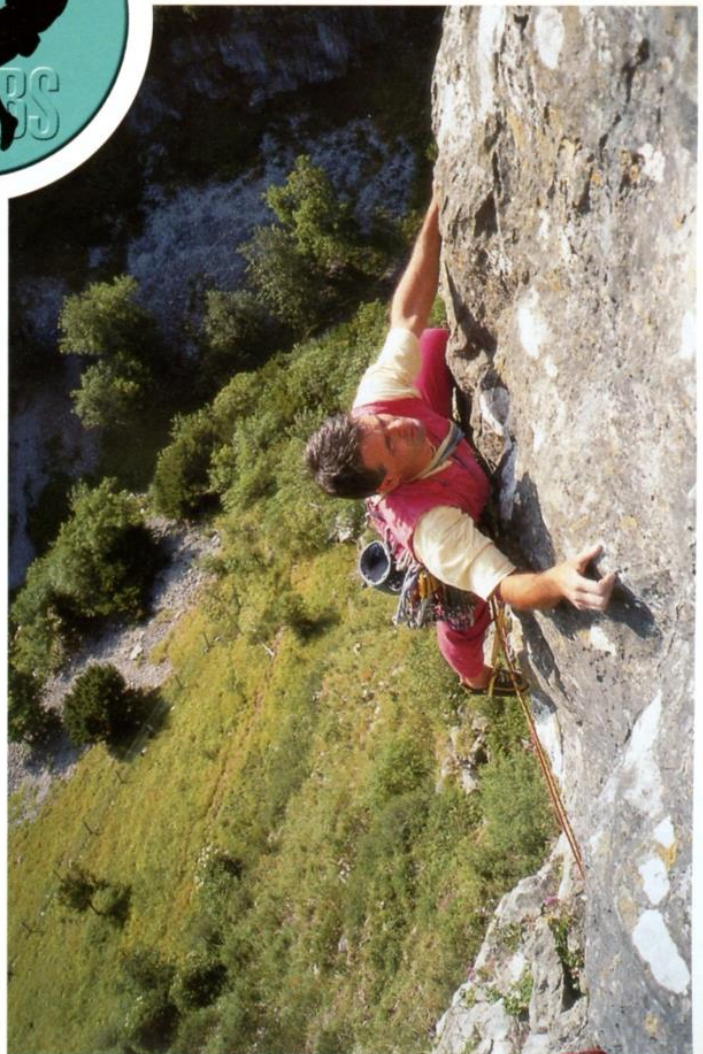
From the road in the base of the Gorge it takes a canny eye to isolate its line. Too much rock for the brain to assimilate; you know the feeling? You normally get it while cowering in some huge Spanish or American canyon. When ace south west team Frank Cannings and Pat Littlejohn visited the Gorge in 1969, these great cliffs were strewn with vast hanging mantles of ivy and trees and the clean wall at the far left-hand end of the arc, sparkling in any afternoon sun, might have stood out as an obvious challenge for a free route. At the time, many of the steepest Cheddar lines had succumbed only to aid, yet here was a line suitable for an attempt at on-sight free ascent, a style for which the pair were becoming renowned.

Getting to the start of Brainbiter is no stroll. A 500ft scramble up Shoot Gully, with its mud and stonefall is far more hazardous than the ballet of its sure-footed soay sheep might suggest. But it's a great way to earn a shot at a classic. Arriving at the terrace beneath the wall, leg-pumped and wheezing, all the effort is rewarded by the fantastic position in which you suddenly find yourself. Westwards the view is magnificent, from the white sails lapping round Axbridge Reservoir, across the patchwork of the Somerset Levels and out to Exmoor that almost hovers on the shimmer of the Bristol Channel.

The first pitch starts 50m along the terrace below and slightly right of a long, shallow groove that packs up before meeting a half-height break and (presumably) a ledge. Curiously the wall doesn't look quite as small as it did from the road. Your partner takes a belay, quite understandably, since the terrace is very narrow. Far below, in the mesmerizing depths of the Gorge pedestrians have become pinpricks. Nerves set in on the few steep opening moves to gain an overhung ledge. A cam placement offers comfort before a series of good holds see you pasted into the base of the groove, bolstered by the adjectives of those who've gone before. The bridging begins... allowing Brainbiter to take its scalps.

Without warning, when I first did the route 25 years ago, a huge flake that was jammed across the groove took exception to my mea-

gre weight. I'd assumed it was solid, because the climb was featured in South West Climbs and it was reasonable to infer that it was a well-trodden 'classic'. Fortunately, the block seemed under the control of friends in high places as it weaved expertly between passing motorists, coming harmlessly to rest on the far side of the road. I just about kept my hair on. Equally traumatic is the tale of Steve Findlay who became so hopelessly knotted up by the technicalities in the groove that he fell. And fell. And kept on falling. Startled, his second was catapulted skywards from 50ft below to fuse with the boot of 13 falling stones of brain-dead solid muscle that normally ate 6a for breakfast. But many who climbed the route in that era will shiver their toupees off when recalling what lay above the groove. On first acquaintance a crack that widened into a narrow chimney felt welcoming until, nearing its close, came the sickening realization that the cliff to your right and which you were squeezing carelessly out against comprised a colossal detached flake. Many a nimble exit on to the half-height ledge, with heart pounding out a fresh truce with God, was made before the flake was laid to rest by the landowner in the late '90s and posthumously given a name, the 'Seahorse Flake'. It was levered off



◀ Paul Donnithorne engrossed in the long, technical groove of pitch 1 of 'Brainbiter'; Matt Ward belaying.

▶ Ian Parsons at the aid point which starts pitch 2.





▲ Ian Parsons in the finishing groove, high on pitch 2.

metre tall blocks — a disaster waiting to happen — that I jettisoned in 1989 during one of the Gorge's earliest road closures.

Above, Brainbiter climaxes in an extraordinary position as it nears its summit. Any hope for a cool performance is threatened frigid by the exposure, 600ft above the road. Thankfully regular protection and solid jams in a sinuous groove keep vertigo at bay and your body free to move and progress to a final pull virtually on to the walkers' path. Only your dignity before onlookers will have been at stake.

Brainbiter deserves first-class honours in adventure tourism. In only 180ft its clever natural line has taken you for a trip into one of the most exposed positions in the Gorge and, therefore, on British rock. All that remains is for you to reverse Shoot Gully and show those soay sheep what for. ▲▲

## FACTFILE

### Climb

Brainbiter

### Grade

E2 5b, 5b (2pts aid) free at E5 6b

### Length

180ft/55m

### First Ascent

Frank Cannings, Pat Littlejohn (AL) 1969

### Guidebook

Avon and Cheddar by Martin Crocker, published by The Climbers' Club

### Access

Currently October 1st to March 15th. Brainbiter is amongst a number of routes restored through the work of the Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project for which near-all-year-round access is being sought.

### Notes

A rock-catch fence lower down the slope, beneath Long Wall, has been erected by the landowner to protect the road from rockfall off Pinnacle Bay.

▼ The Warlord Wall, Pinnacle Bay, showing the line of 'Brainbiter'.

with disturbing ease, according to reports.

Fear not, today's climber who has mastered the easier groove can now mantel on to a small ledge that single-handedly bore the weight of the flake and then scramble up broken rock on the right to a double-ring bolt belay at the left end of a narrow terrace. Overhanging the belay, a small roof with an old peg and two threads flutter up to the left. It's time to make a clear decision about how you are going to deal with this pitch. Free or with two points of aid? Whichever way, if you're swapping leads, be considerate enough to allow your mate a good rest on the ledge — or face the consequences.

The second pitch creates a quandary. In 1988, on a flying visit to Cheddar, Dougie Hall free-climbed past the first ascensionists' two aid points at an intense E5 6b. The aid had even got the better of Arnis Strapcans and Steve Monks who bypassed it to the right 10 years earlier to create an unpopular E3 variation. That there can be good reason to dismiss a re-grading convention and go with what is good for the majority seems true for *Brainbiter*. It is no slight to Dougie Hall, one of Britain's most talented climbers of the last century, that its E2 grade has been retained in the area guidebook. Conveying the free interpretation as a matter of choice keeps the route where it belongs and people not feeling robbed of a classic E2.

So, ignoring the squealer with the telephoto on the hillside opposite, use the in situ peg to place a Rock 4 in a pocket where a first ascent ring-peg used to be and step into a sling to reach a rounded pocket up to the left. If shrewd on aid, at the same time as pivoting up for a finger-jug, you can also place a second good wire and all the while standing in the sling: magic. As you swing out free, the exposure bites deep. Reluctant you may be, but *Brainbiter* insists upon pulling you leftwards out above *that* void. The reward is a good pocket which provides a rest, an ancient peg runner, but also a home for jackdaws that will try to squawk you open-eyed from their domain. An awkward groove above supplies the hardest moves on the whole route and it is a cherished moment when you step left on to a narrow ledge for a second rest. This ledge used to contain a stack of one-

