



Just a Day in North Cleave Gut
Exmoor coast

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I lay on the South West Coast Path, counting the stars of The Plough in the serene night sky. Two days earlier I'd been gazing from Ogmore at this very point in the mysterious rolling black strip that is the Exmoor coast.

A blind, torchless battle up 200metres of head-high bracken had proved fifty times worse than expected. Just when I thought the bracken was thinning, it would rear up from the gloom, wave after wave of it – pushing me back, wrestling me to the ground – anyway but up. And as soon as I got into any semblance of pattern, clawing, skin-ripping brambles latent within the bracken would curl around my ankles tripping me face down into Exmoor's smell. Three wet ropes around my shoulders, strangling air from lungs, hadn't helped.

Back across the Bristol Channel someone was holding a fireworks party; maybe in Barry. Pinpoints of exploding colour, but bangs without sound: it had been dark for four hours.

I listened for any tell-tale sign of rustling below, but there was nothing.

'Terry?' I eventually shouted, shamefully disturbing a perfectly still night. A plaintive reply, more distant than expected whimpered: 'It's alright, I'm halfway up.'

Lights bobbed around on the Channel, calmly tracking seawards – a fishing boat heading for deeper waters perhaps.

Retirement can make you feel relaxed and even drop your guard, or so it had appeared to me twelve hours earlier. First, Terry forgot his rope. Fortunately its luminescent green caught my eye before committing to the 70-metre abseil to join him at the base of the Gut. Second he forgot both jumper and coat. 'It was nice and warm up there, I didn't think I'd need them' was his excuse. That's all very well I thought, selfishly predicting I'd soon be peeling off my layers to share with him. Still, this is the Exmoor coast and who am I to argue with its most experienced climber?!

Soon we began to have a great day. Opportunities to climb in North Cleave Gut are precious, yet today a window of elusive co-conditions appeared to be opening for us. A gentle northerly breeze – a welcome friend in the wake of a cold front – had nudged away yesterday's moist air and plucked any trace of sea-damp from the Gut's towering sandstone walls. And one of the highest spring tides of the year was coaxing the sea away from our climbs; with good fortune we would have sufficient time to climb the three new lines we had been saving up for four years.

For starters, an overhanging groove was dispatched in a flash of grunts and yelps at E5, as did an easier two-pitch extreme on-sighted near the mouth of the Gut. It was pleasing to find the rock in perfect nick: rough, juggy; and the afternoon sunshine was beginning to bounce off the east wall, almost within reach. Today North Cleave Gut scarcely felt like one of Exmoor's most intimidating cliffs.

Terry's watch chimed 3.30p.m. as we geared up for our third route – a huge diagonal line of juggy breaks that cut 30metres across a sheer wall to the top of our E5 groove. High tide wasn't expected until 6.30p.m.

'How much time have we got down here – an hour do you think?'
'About that', Terry confirmed.

Now I used to reckon I could sense the point at which the tide turns. It is a wave, a little more boisterous than its contemporaries, that rolls from the sea and teases into the consciousness – a subliminal warning that the clock had started ticking. Used to.

‘Don’t you think you ought to uncoil the ropes on that boulder?’ I proposed to the guru, having observed how the sea was stealing our floor space minute-by-minute. ‘Nah we’ll be alright’ came the nonchalant reply. ‘Are you sure?’ I insisted, hoping more for the air of an executive decision.

Nod.

Without further ado I set off along the breaks strategically fixing runners for me and for him. Twenty metres along I was surprised to note that all I could see under my feet was sea: the boulder-bed of the Gut was flooding – spring-tide style! I leant out from jugs, craning my neck; Terry was only just in view beyond my left foot, the ropes having been hastily thrown into a heap on the boulder. ‘Shall I take a belay?’ I asked. ‘Nah, you’re almost there’, he directed. So I was, and so I accelerated to the stance, fleeting evaluations like...*three-star E4 5c...one of the finest on Exmoor* ... barely taking form in these circumstances.

‘Taking in!’ I bellowed. ‘Wait a minute’, he reacted, sounding flustered for the first time that day. I peered over the capping roof and down along the break to see what was up. The sea appeared to be everywhere, the boulder submerged, and Terry was fighting with the mother of all knots on the few remaining pebbles at the back of the Gut. ‘Told you so’ might have been a deserved knuckle rap, but I kept quiet; after all he was the ranking officer here.

‘Take in, take in!’ Terry shouted with a new-found sense of urgency as he started splashing back to the base of the route. Ten valuable minutes had been lost in unravelling the ropes; I hope this turns out alright I thought.

Now climbing smooth sea-washed sandstone with dry shoes is one thing but doing so from wading in the sea is quite another. Hats off, Terry somehow climbed up to the first decent hold – a little spike just before the break where it yielded good jams and its first runner at five metres. A remarkable effort.

Then suddenly: ‘Hold!’

I did, but nothing registered as Terry’s bodyweight was absorbed pound by pound along the torturous line of the ropes. Looking down I was flabbergasted to discover that he was once more in the sea, but up to his knees this time. It wasn’t easy disguising my chuckles as I marvelled at how legends got their kicks on the crags.

Ten minutes later the sea had risen to his waist. ‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, I’m alright....’ reassuring me also that he’d rigged up a prussiking system with two thin tapes.

Twenty minutes later after a lot of huffing and puffing Terry managed to gain the cam runner again. Problem solved? More like wishful thinking – this sea was intent on outwitting us.

‘Hold!’ he shouted once more.

Concluding that this might be a long show I carefully extended my belay and moved to a ringside seat on the lip of the roof. That was just as well otherwise I’d have missed Terry flipping upside down and diving head first like bait cast into the sea. What great theatre! How did he do that? He didn’t seem to know either but quickly wriggled around into a more conventional posture on the rock. After a quick breather he climbed to the cam runner for the third time and then onto the next, managing to ease himself beyond the immediate reach of the hungry sea. But this sea was voracious today: in the last hour it had risen by 3 metres.

A further hour passed and then another, but the distance Terry had ascended could be measured by three loops of rope at my feet. The sea was at his again, snapping, the light was beginning to fade...could an epic be brewing?

'Where are your jumars?' was a flippant question from me, so I tried better with: 'Can't you just yank from runner to runner?'

'They're too spaced, and I'm exhausted. Can you do anything?'

Now it is all too easy to underestimate the difficulty in jumaring overhanging ground while keeping in contact with the rock. You have to learn the art on the job, not wait forty years to start practising when it was the only option to get out.

'I'll reverse-jumar the abseil rope and get it to you' was my offer of assistance.

It really was the *only* solution since at this rate he'd be underwater in 30 minutes. And the thicker rope would be easier for him to jumar with his Cloggers he'd left on my stance when abseiling in. However reverse-jumaring a 30-metre overhanging diagonal crack comes with its own challenges and today was a good day to apply all the short-cutting tricks of the trade that are a middle finger for health and safety. But I got to him in five, having clipped some of the runners into the jumar rope so he wouldn't catapult out into the middle of the Gut when he weighted it. So back to the stance for me, and Terry transferred his sodden self onto the jumar rope.

'What's happening!?' But it was too late by the time circumstances had caused us to remember that the rope was not a static line. It stretched magnificently and – with the vaguest expression of dissatisfaction – Terry was dunked into the sea again with a 'sploosh'. Nothing less than a full immersion this time, he bobbed up with a float of knotted ropes like entrails around him. Once more I shouted to see if he was alright. 'I'm alright', he said 'I'll get out.'

At least there was sufficient tension from the jumar rope now to keep Terry's head above water. But the minutes passed and I grew worried as I wasn't able to take in any more slack. Again: 'Are you alright?' ...and, persisting, 'Are you sure?'

Jumaring underwater can't be easy. Then came the crunch:

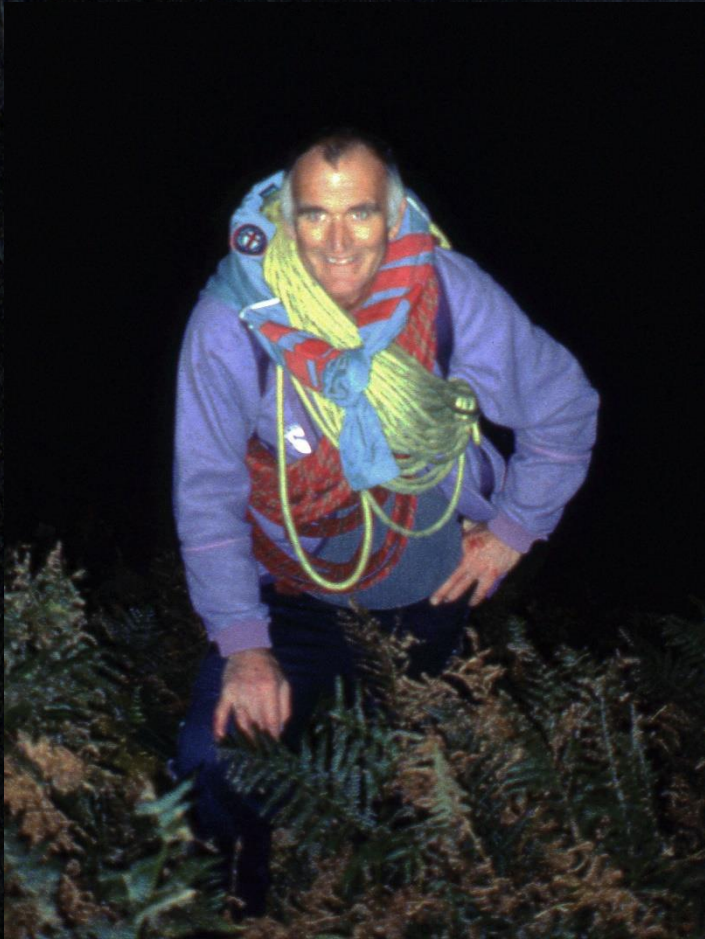
'I've had it.'

The mood in the Gut and my gut changed instantly, the blow delivered by an unsettling calm and resignation in his voice. A chill swept through my soul and, physiologically, I was adrenalinised-up for a big effort in a second. I decide what to do, or maybe it's instinct. I can't get down on the abseil rope again because Terry's on it, so I secure him, untie from the lead ropes and re-belay them. Reverse-jumaring on the lead ropes I'm quickly by his side and discover he has managed to haul himself out of the water. Perhaps I over-reacted: we all yearn to be heroes if given half the chance. But progress halts; he's trying to use a pair of shunts that belong to the Iron Age and there's gear everywhere – slings, nuts, and karabiners cocooning him. Together we sort out the chaos and I loan him one of my jumars in place of one of his shunts. He's fixed up real neat now and starts to jumar towards the stance on the remaining reserves of his strength. It's painfully slow work. It's pitch black. It's a long haul to the top – this is Exmoor.

Half-awake on the coast path, at long last I can make out the rustling in the bracken below. I pick up my camera and take a picture of the dark shape that could be Terry as it swaggers drunkenly onto the path, yet still smiling. At times like these you might wait for a punchline; sometimes they come, sometimes they don't. Today one did and I say it to him before he can say it to me:

'Don't call me, I'll call you.'

But I called him the next day, and we start out all over again: that's because Terry's a king of Exmoor and the cliffs are his throne.



Summary: a contemporaneous account of the first ascent of *Fish or Man?* Martin Crocker, Terry Cheek
28 September 2003