

SWANAGE

CLASSIC HARD CLIMBS

by Martin Crocker

I first encountered Swanage in the winter of 1973 as a member of The Exploration Group of North Somerset, for whom it was club tradition to embark on Traverse of the Gods at the beginning of the new year. The route, a nearly 2,000ft sea level traverse, was meant to be fun, but being a mere lad I was far too sensitive to appreciate the innane pleasures of grovelling along ledges covered in bird droppings, falling haplessly across gaping yawns or inadvertently splashing about in ice-cold seas. I couldn't get back to Avon fast enough.

If Swanage as we know it today is regarded as loose and serious, in those days its accepted notoriety was such that climbers who dared venture into the 'Ruckle' were viewed as a breed apart. In other words they were loonies. Like the fear of snakes amongst human beings, the fear of Swanage amongst climbers seemed innate and inbred; few people dared consider the place seriously yet the paradox was that neither could they totally ignore it.

Swanage was renowned for its loose, overhanging walls and steep and inescapable climbing above the sea. It was even more revered for an adversity blatantly more menacing than the rest – the Swanage Loose Block (SLB). At that time comparisons were few – after all, what could possibly have compared to the exhilaration and perhaps sheer finality of grappling with a mentally deranged SLB?

In the late 60s and 70s there existed however, a handful of climbers, often locals, who far from being deterred by the grim idiosyncracies of Swanage, positively thrived upon them. In an insular and self-styled environment, their efforts and self-motivation were to transcend conservative dogma and lead to a vast collection of fine climbs, the quality and difficulty of which are only now just beginning to be realised.

The modern approach was not in a desperate hurry to get to Swanage. When it finally meandered in this direction, at about the time Richard Crewe's superb guidebook was published, its exponents directed their attention to the more inaccessible areas, the blanker walls, the bigger roofs and the elimination of the numerous aid points which existed. The routes so established were, needless to say, of a hitherto unknown difficulty and strenuousness, providing quality climbing experiences comparable with the best on offer at more popular sea cliffs.

This article provides a personalised account of what I have found to be the very best of the harder routes at Swanage. Along the way, I hope to convince the sceptical of the credibility of Swanage as not only a dramatic medium for the forcing of new routes, but also simply as a great place in which to relax in sunny and uniquely tranquil settings and enjoy paramount routes of stature and excellence.

Please note that many routes at Swanage, including some of those mentioned below, are affected by seasonal restrictions due to nesting birds. Please consult the guidebook.

The Black Zawn

Concealed beneath the lighthouse, The Black Zawn is the first notable lump of rock to be encountered from Durlston Head.

The classic ascent of the zawn is Mars (HVS,5a), the insanely overhanging and inescapable corner dividing the west and north faces. Following an early, if impolite, introduction to a three-foot roof, the climber is faced with a distinct abundance of overhangs through which he must boldly lurch further and further out into space. Strenuous and demanding, Mars hints at the somewhat warped humour of the Swanage habitués who, until more recently, seemed intent on grading every route HVS.

Right of Mars is a narrow facet of smooth, overhanging rock set high up in the zawn and drastically undercut at its base by a sea cave. Melpomene (E3,5c), climbed originally with a few resting points by George Hounsom and later free-climbed and straightened out by Pat Littlejohn, has the pleasure of climbing this wall, whilst Triton (E3,5c) looks a similarly impressive and worthwhile route up the undercut groove immediately to the right.

Subliminal Wall

Sound rock, safe exits and ease of access makes this area traditionally the most popular at Swanage, particularly with lower grade climbers. However, Stroof (E1,5c) and Philatus (E2,5b), put up by Tony Wilmott in the late 60s, are both excellent Subliminal test-pieces. The former provides Millstone Edge crack climbing above the sea and the latter a sustained exercise in technical wall climb-

ing. Unfortunately they are more often top-roped than led, despite good protection with small wires.

First impressions of the Ruckle are more often than not gleaned from a nervous glance down Marmolata Buttress, from which a hair-raising free abseil enables several fine routes in the HVS/E1 category to be easily reached. Gypsy (E1,5b), Strongbow (E1,5b) and Elysium (E1,5b) are yet more Richard Crewe 'works of art' and epitomise perhaps the best the Ruckle has to offer, with sustained difficulties of a both technical and strenuous nature on perfectly sound rock.

Marmolata Buttress itself has seen some more recent activity; particularly impressive is Marmolata Arete (E3,5c), the striking, stepped arete and Teenage Wasteland (E2,5c) a line up the long seaward face.

A little further westwards, a towering groove line, very steep but furnished with good holds where it counts (all the way up!), provides the line of Finale Groove (HVS,4c), Swanage's best known classic. It is a good route to start on as it introduces the sensitive to the steepness and strenuousness of Swanage routes without undue seriousness.

Perhaps the most omnipotent and pervasive characteristic of the Ruckle, and indeed many parts of Swanage, is the horizontal roof. In fact the scope for roof climbing – big, small or 'ginormous' – is probably unsurpassed by any other British crag. Billy Pigg (E2,5b), with its pleasing four-foot roof offers an excellent and well-protected introduction to the exhilaration of horizontal roof climbing in the sun. Of a rather more exacting nature, but this time brandishing a six-foot roof, is Cima Petite (E3,6a). Climbed originally with some five points of aid, the roof finally succumbed to the efforts of Steve Monks. Superb jams take one's reluctant body out under the roof after which a monstrous reach gains a good finger jug over the lip. A swift, atavistic one arm pull-up with feet flying all over the place completes a problem both formidable in appearance and exquisite in execution – or is it the other way around? The roof boasts total stability and being eminently protectable its future status as a test-piece of its genre must be assured.

Also worthy of attention in this part of the Ruckle are routes such as Sinbad (E1,5b), Bosun's Wall (HVS,5a), Kookoo (HVS,5b), Snowdrop (HVS,5a) and Aventura (HVS,4c) as well as countless others which space restriction prevents me from crediting.

Boulder Ruckle

For over half-a-mile, Boulder Ruckle presents the sea and climber alike with a 120ft high barrier of inexorably steep rock. Little is left to the imagination, the problems are obvious. The steepness of the crag is awesome, the rock above the ubiquitous half-height bedding plane not normally above suspicion, the exits are precarious and access is gained only by a choice of varying harrowing, but spectacular abseils. In spite, or because of these, the Ruckle offers a wealth of atmospheric climbs, often brilliant, always serious.

Crack and groove lines and a myriad of overhangs predominate; if anything the place suffers from a monotonous abundance, rather than lack, of good natural lines.

For the visitor, making a choice from the plethora of mainly VSs and HVSs on offer can prove trying. Many routes have still seen relatively little traffic and it is a wise move, particularly if you're not too well acquainted with the crag, to start off with the more popular climbs.

Just west of Subliminal are two classic crack and groove lines running the full height of the cliff. White Horse (E1,5b) and Behemoth (HVS,5a) are characteristically intimidating lines, providing exciting and strenuous climbing in grossly overhanging situations. Between the two is a very steep wall which tapers towards the top, where it becomes especially smooth. I was very fortunate to find that earlier this year the wall remained unclimbed and even more surprised to discover the climbing not to be as difficult as appearances might have suggested. Soul Sacrifice (E2,5b) is nonetheless a bold route with superb, dynamic climbing, particularly in its upper section where the wall is festooned with an incredible series of in-cut pocket holds.

Nearby, another gem is found in The Golden Fleece (HVS,5a), despite its unsettling appearance from below. A quite technical first pitch on the roughest of rock leads to a stance on a jutting prow. Above is a typical post fault-line Swanage bulge, where all roads of reasonableness seem to end. Bold laybacking up a short overhanging groove is called for, as well as a little self-composure on the unnervingly exposed wall above. Brilliant, and not an SLB in sight! The most convenient means of access to the above routes, even in moderate seas, is by abseiling down Old Faithful.

At the extreme western end lurks the showpiece of the Ruckle — a huge, impending wall of crystal-glazed limestone, leaning tormentingly the wrong side of vertical throughout its 120ft height. The challenge of the wall was taken up in 1972 by Jim Titt. His colourfully named creation — The Last Hurrah of The Golden Horde (E3,5a/b) — represented a very brave undertaking for the time as well as casting doubts on the sanity of the man himself. 'Unfortunately many holds are loose, making this a very serious undertaking indeed. Reliable protection is lacking in the upper section', states the guidebook.

It was not so much the state of the rock that proved alarming rather than the condition of the in-situ pegs — in fact what appeared from below to be a series of good Leepers promptly crumbled to rust with the merest provocation. The Last Hurrah is a compelling but nerve-racking line and although not the most difficult route on the wall it is unequivocally the most serious. After doing the route I suffered an intense migraine, which lasted the rest of the weekend.

Just left of The Last Hurrah, a pair of sharply overhanging cracks soaring up the lower half of the wall provided local talents Nick Buckley and Kevin Turner with a tremendous route — perhaps the finest in the Ruckle. If climbed in one pitch, their Ocean Boulevard (E3,5b) offers 120ft of inspired wall climbing, assisted for the most part by good jugs. Being strenuous from start to finish, it's the sort of route where the ability to conserve energy is crucial. In a similar vein, although slightly more strenuous and less generous with the jugs, is Arnis Strapcans' Barracuda (E3,5c), which takes a parallel crackline up the lefthand end of the wall.

The Promenade

Apart from some futuristic 20ft overhangs which await times not so distant, The Promenade gives an exciting and problematic climb in Crystal Voyager (E3,5c). The psychological crux of the route involves hand traversing the lip of a suspiciously detached block-overhang of cosmic dimensions (leave your friends behind!).

Fisherman's Ledge

Refreshingly devoid of the uniformity common to other parts, what this unique crag lacks in girth it makes up for in steepness and quality of rock. Squid (E2,5b), free climbed by Falko Rech and Howard Lancashire in 1975, forces a magnificent line through the huge capping overhangs and indicated at the time the feasibility of the Swanage roof. Although now of classic status, its five-foot jamming roof still presents a quite considerable challenge, particularly to the non-thugs amongst us.

Squid has now been joined by several modern counterparts, products of the effective Turner-Buckley partnership. The Ritz (E2,5b) in particular offers incredible climbing and weaves intricately through enormous overhangs on unbelievable holds. Just right of the overhangs, Gordon Jenkin made a significant contribution with his Limited Edition (E3,5c) up the stark wall left of Aquascrotum.

In complete contrast, Fisherman's Ledge provides Swanage's best and coincidentally only slab climb. Rising above the tranquil depths of a sinister sea cave, Conger (E2,5b) wends its surreal and incredible way across the smoothest of slabs. The slab proves technical and delicate, but once mastered refrain from congratulating yourself too hastily, for the sting-in-the-tail lurks insidiously beyond. Suddenly, without warning, the route simply disappears into a gaping, bottomless zawn. One might be forgiven for

thinking that a chunk of the route has fallen into the sea. But that's not the case; Richard Crewe didn't succumb to such excuses when, in 1969, he proceeded to cross the zawn and with some imagination graded the route HVS. Unearthly and atmospheric, Conger is a sea cliff experience and a half!

Blacker's Hole

In 1978 Frank's Little Secret (HVS,5a) was shared by Arnis Strapcans. With stylish imperiousness Arnis ventured into horrendous terrain, and emerged with Swanage's most substantial and committing climb under his belt. Polaris (E4,6a) has many of the ingredients that combine to make a climb great and, as such, presents the connoisseur of the great sea cliff classics with a daunting and remarkable challenge.

Flanking an enormous sea cave a striking groove line, hopelessly undercut, sears through an impending wall of tiered overhangs somewhat reminiscent of a sea-washed Kilnsey. The only possible line of weakness, but how to gain it . . . ?

A gloomy winter's day, cold fingers and lifeless arms — this was my third attempt at negotiating the crucial link pitch. A line of holds decorated by birds' excrement traverses an obscenely overhanging wall. The sea thunders and crashes below, a rusty peg lies just beyond reach — overdrive territory. A moment's forgetfulness and I find myself engaged in an erratic, gasping surge of effort to reach and clip the peg. I get it, but with decaying arms an inspired struggle ensues and it is only by resorting to a Harrison's Move (or one leg pull-up) that I manage to secrete my quaking mass on to the stance. A 'stance' isn't a terribly glamorous way of describing what is in fact a precarious and totally inescapable footledge right smack on the lip of a monstrous roof. Frightening! . . . Jim's face turns white as he turns the corner.

The top pitch looked a comparative doddle. Half-an-hour later I was still five feet above the belay, grappling with an awkwardly leaning wall guarding entry into the main line of the corner. No sun, and the holds, although reasonable, proved disconcertingly greasy. A resting place above was just as well because the top corner never gave an inch. Exhausted, I pull over the top into an incongruous drizzle, my abstracted brain following somewhere behind. Jim comes up, still white as a sheet.

Guillemot Ledge

This section of Swanage offers a variety of climbing in all grades and, being fairly easily accessible in all but the most violent seas, is understandably very popular.

To the east of the abseil point someone had the smart idea of quarrying the cliff-top and in consequence the exits are delightfully straightforward. There are many worthwhile routes here, although Tensor II (VS,4c), The Spook (HVS,5a) and Sapphire (HVS,5a) stand out for excellence of climbing.

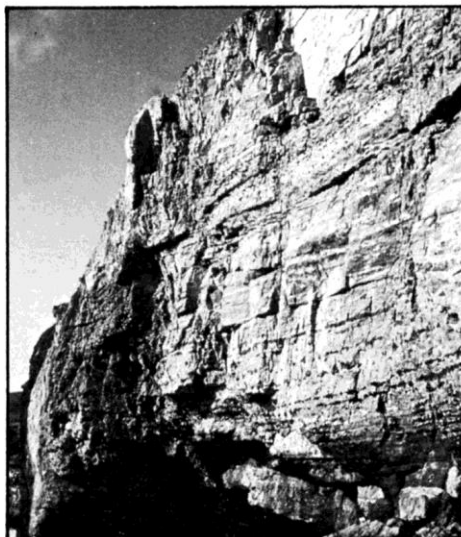
The map on the right is taken from the Dorset guidebook, edited by Richard Crewe.

To the west of the abseil point the two-mile stretch of continuous cliffline terminates in a climactic 150ft high wall of gleaming white limestone. This vertical wasteland of chequered white walls is afforded protection from the sea by an abstract jungle of colossal boulders, behind which the wall extends westwards to a final impressive sea cave. Beyond this the rock deteriorates to an amorphous rubble, giving questionable support to huge tottering pillars above.

The wall must rank as the greatest at Swanage in terms of both visual impact and its unbettered collection of fine, hard climbs.

In 1972 Pat Littlejohn stepped in to breach the wall with his classic Oceanid (E2,5b), the second pitch of which takes the elegant and alluring slim groove-line in the upper face. Steep, invigorating climbing on good holds amidst impressive surroundings provides for a classic outing, tempered to some degree by a couple of nerve-racking moves needed to bypass some ominously poised blocks at the top of the groove.

The next major addition came in 1974 when none other than Richard Crewe, presumably still inspired after many years and countless new routes, created Tudor Rose (E2,5b), arguably the finest route on the wall. The route gives enjoyable, technically intricate climbing at a reasonable standard, although it could be said that its deviously wandering line offered little defence against quality attack by more recent, direct routes. Nevertheless, what Tudor Rose obviously lacks in line it makes up for in absorbing moves and exciting positions.



Above: The west end of Guillmot Ledge, scene of such routes as Oceanid and Tudor Rose.

In 1978/79 the wall began to shape up to modern expectations. Richard Harrison, no longer a nipper, free climbed Warlord (E3,5c) and George Hounsom contributed further with Calaphas (E3,5c), a bold and fingery face climb overhung by a veritable 'shield of Damocles'. Warlord is simply stupendous. Starting up Oceanid, it veers off rightwards on to the upper wall at its tallest and steepest part. A crackline soaring upwards (and outwards) provides the basis for an immaculate pitch of strenuous and sustained wall climbing, with the crux situated in a decidedly airy situation right at the top.

Continuing the trend towards steep wall climbing, I recently added Face-dancin (E3,6a) up the hanging groove and clean white wall between Oceanid and Tudor Rose. The second pitch is superb

with a very fingery but also delicate move to start the wall, after which it's just a question of going for it!

For some years I had contemplated the challenge of a free route out of the sea cave at the left end of the crag (the roof had succumbed to an A3 route in 1977). The cave roof is actually comprised of a series of three stepped overhangs, between which two narrow walls slant up to the lip from the base of Tudor Rose. By traversing the upper wall on jams beneath the roof, I managed to gain a spectacular position above the centre of the cave and in doing so neatly avoided wrecking my arms in climbing the initial overhangs direct. The race was on . . . wild moves through the lip of the cave and I arrived at a contorted resting position, offering little chance of respite before the crux and its unexpected demands upon fingerpower. A stiff pull on a small finger flake, a long reach and Oasis (E4, 6a) was completed.

Swanage has without doubt much to offer the climber besides the climbing. First encounters do prove, more often than not, unsettling but with a little perseverance you may find that the very things that first frightened you take on a new perspective.

When the popular crags of today finally dry up and the queues stretch on through the hinterland and into the dust of our cities, maybe then we'll be free to rekindle the desire to search for some of the long forgotten values insidiously swallowed up in the frantic pace of the crowds. Maybe then, places like Swanage will receive more than just a demeaning thumbs down.

