

The Gneiss Channel Island

With the local guidebook dating back to 1987 and little reportage since, Guernsey climbing has happily marooned itself outside the grip of the UK information network — no gossip-thirsty pack demanding to know the latest. Lundy this isn't. Guernsey is a laid-back piece of sea-locked suburbia, constrained and culturally independent, it has yet to wake up to the wonders of the gneiss under its foundations. But one day, I suspect, climbing will steal the headlines, with flotillas of mainland climbers tacking across the Channel to play their role in the island's tourism industry.

Meanwhile, gear down when you visit; there is no distance to cover, no tick-crazy enclaves of climbers with whom to compete and strictly no driving above 35mph. Guernsey climbing is in the safe and serene hands of a few locals, an enigmatic Club, a cliff rescue team and the odd visitor who bolts-on a little climbing to a family holiday or business trip. As main man, Christian Harvey, once put it: "As far as climbers go there are two of us, me and the Guernsey Climbing Club."

An invisible climbing profile means that the potential on the island is still vast, helped by the fact the quantity of climbable rock on its complex south coast is enhanced fourfold by the many headlands, promontories, stacks, bays and gullies. Like the beaches — so ably promoted in every tourist brochure you pick up — the crags are equally diverse, though the overall southerly aspect plays a good starting hand for sun-seekers. Excepting some granite in the north, the rock is gneiss — literally and phonetically. There is pink gneiss and grey gneiss: it's hard to develop a robust preference... pink is pretty and slabby; grey is moody and weird, but both have texture that's a dream.

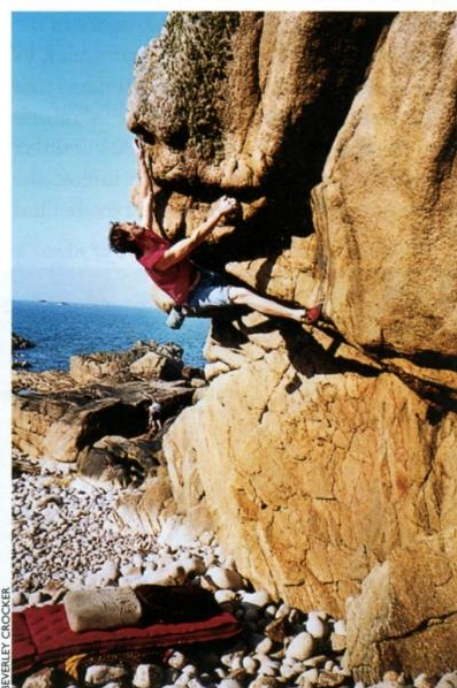
Thinking pink first let's start in the east, and with Icart Point, southwest of St Peter Port, home of one of Guernsey's best-loved

views. From there, you get an instant feel for the coast and the tucked-away places you can make your own for a while. Making the Point is Icart Chateau, a promontory soon to become an island in geological time when its narrow connecting ridge finally abandons its Sharp Edge looks and collapses into the sea. Christian and I tiptoed across to the lower crag and *The Wild Web*, an E5 6a arête with some space-walking jugs after a sticky introduction. The upper crag likewise held some obvious challenges, noted in the guidebook. Two of these, which became *Demon Star* and *Alpheratz*, proved akin to the Gogarth experience at pumpy E4 5c.

We were accompanied by Haydar Koyupinar, a German then resident on the island whose drive made us feel like we belonged in armchairs. As if pre-programmed, Haydar would power straight up everything we'd been timidly weaving around in search of better holds; only his lack of experience in using trad gear was holding him back (which was just as well). Sitting by the side of the Chateau is Dog Island. On its west face a bald wall overhangs a pebble inlet; this succumbed to *Kid You Not* E4 5c and *Wait for a High* E5 6a, both poky affairs that would be safer and more fun as deep water solos.

On the way to the Point you pass above a rugged, sea ivory-laden buttress; this one has a politically incorrect name care of Guernsey synonym, guidebook writer, esteemed practical joker and, no doubt, climber *extraordinaire*, Alan Hill; more about him later. Christian risked its remaining line with *Damocles Sword* E2 5c, which mantels past a chop block balancing at the cliff edge. It's one of the few crags where walkers on the island's beautiful coast path get close; we are a rarer species so expect a double take and a wave or two.

To the west of Icart, a broad bay sweeps around to the next headland, Point de la Moye, holding promise of hidden treasures.



▲ Martin Crocker bouldering out 'Lilo Island' E4, Les Grandes Rocques.
▲ Martin Crocker climbing the sharp arête of 'Salt n'Wound' E5, Port Soif.

One such, for the whole family ideally, is the castaways' beach of La Jaonnet, accessible only by a steep path and ladders. It is a peaceful place where beach frolics and bare bodies compete favourably with a choice of short climbs on immaculate rock. In 2001, a series of walls below the ladders was reinvestigated by Christian who, with Haydar and Simon Humphries, laid down the classic *Tromp d'Oeil* E4 5c, on a leaning grey wall plastered with creaking finger-flakes. Sky hooks on the flakes protected the first ascent but not the second.

His other chief find came when he, and Swedish climbing friend Stefan Eriksson, contorted themselves *Into the Groove* E3 6a, the hanging V-groove around to the right. Separating the two an impending arête above appalling boulders distracts your descent of the steps; alas no gear in sight on

the blessed thing so I soloed it the same year at E6 6b — *Le God*. To the left is the lighter-hearted rib of Christian's *Punch Drunk* E2 5c, while the adjacent pocket-line I led as *Take a Chance*, a lively E4 6a which links up with Christian's and Nick Padfield's E2 5b finish to *Nadir's Big Chance*.

Across the beach a pyramidal stack relinquished its first route to our local potterer with *The Philosopher's Stone* E3 5c, which takes a heady central line up its north face. After some artistic direction from my son, this was joined by *Lockheart* E5 6a, to its left and *Grifindor* E1 5b, the right-hand arête. This stack, and a smaller neighbour, is tidal enough to be able to jettison hardware and revert to nature for a while. Thus deep water soloed were *Slyverin* E1 5b, the west-facing arête and, on the smaller stack, the perfect little groove of *Up to You* E3 6a. Both are safe enough — only get the timing right.

If you coasteer westwards, you arrive at the beach of *Le Petit Bot*, a favourite with my kids. Almost out of sight to the west are the *Portelet Pinnacles*, the seaward of which as late as 2001 held an unclimbed face that Christian rated the finest on the island. It was the last day of our April 2001 holiday when I took a recce in rain. The lure of the face was one of the main incentives behind

returning for a second trip that May. The other was the refreshing news that the Channel Islands States had made a pragmatic response to the foot-and-mouth epidemic, deciding that the cliff-top paths should remain open. There seemed at the time no better place in Britain any holidaymaker could visit — together with Jersey, of course.

Strictly speaking the west face of the pinnacle was not unclimbed; naturally Alan Hill had visited — where *hadn't* he been on Guernsey? Alan taught at the local grammar school across the mid to late '80s and (as I recall from proof reading *BMC New Climbs* in 1988) he was a prolific new router. He attacked the face by its only line of weakness before 'escaping' on to the arête on the right at a challenging E3 6a (*Penial Servitude*, 1987).

First off, Christian and I took on the full arête, its buxom start proving hard to woo, *Mistress in a Port*, E5 6a. Haydar joined us for the incipient cracks and a flake on the left at E5 and offered the name *Schlusselfstelle* to reflect a crucial 6b crux. The plum lay up the bare centre of the face though. This took some work and we only just scraped through a slappy bulge which guarded entry to a groove near the top: *Portuguese Man o' War* E6 6b, is now the hardest route on the

island — but only by a jellyfish's tentacle.

More quality routes, at E2/3, were added as the tide swallowed us up, the three of us jumping from boulder to boulder in an attempt to optimize climbing time. For me it was wet feet and gear so I didn't return, but the other two did the next month to sew up the west face with a superb crack, the subject of their *Desire* E3 6a.

We turn a headland now for another Guernsey treasure, the fantastic amphitheatre of *Les Someilleuses*, the island's highest cliff. April 2003 and Christian was curious that I should take a look. "There's an unclimbed groove there," he said drolly, giving little away. I wanted to know more, of course, but it took a dusk-time reconnoitre and a harrowing approach on some fisherman's hand-line that mischievously ran out halfway down in the gloom and sea-noise, to confirm that the dark shadows above me could be something big. The day after the day after, we were geared up below the line, storm clouds brewing to the south. Christian could not recall an obvious entry, but I had found a corner to the right, which led to a serious traverse into the groove and a belay. Then it rained. And rained. Christian joined me on the stance. Anyone else might have dampened the mood, as

▼ Christian Harvey starting the groove of 'Renoir in Chalk' E5, Les Someilleuses, during the first ascent. MARTIN CROCKER



sheets of water drained from the clouds. But at least the roof at the top of the groove was keeping us dry, if not warm. We stuck it out, drawing inspiration from a chalk sketch of a British pioneer we applied gneissly to the rock. An hour and a few thunderclaps later a seed of hope that we were not certifiable materialized in the form of a white line on the

horizon. In 15 minutes we were bathed in sun and the rock was dry. E3 5c bridging to the roof, careful but steady, warming up now. There were signs of Alan's ambitions and dichotomy; two pegs to the left, two to the right. The left-hand route was the true line, and, even with a couple of 6b moves, it went smoothly. An awesome stance on an oversized fragile cornflake on the lip of the roof was our reward. Two 5a pitches to the top completed *Renoir in Chalk* E5 6a, 6b, 5a, 5a named after the artist who favoured a nearby cove. With apologies we hope his spirit will survive the dubious company of our artless effigy before it is washed from the wall.

A foray on to the west-facing walls of nearby Pointe de la Moye in 2002 revealed the scope for deep water soloing on some of Guernsey's most tidal cliffs. Among the occasional lead, best of which is Christian's *Out of the Sinking* E4 6a, the Pointe offered up a clutch of great solos up to E5 all above good if cold (in April) water. Far more impressive though was a find on Corbiere Stack at Guernsey's principal crag, La Corbiere.

A stunning pink wall there, rather Chair Ladder-esque, looked unprotectable at first sight. Despite this and the high sea cleaning between Christian's toes, we pulled off *Corbomight* E6 6b, after top-roping, on the last day of my 2002 trip. Behind, the superb slabs of the main, 45m cliff lay heavily developed. But to the left in Sunset Cove Haydar and I were able to chafe our fingernails on *Rat out of Hell* E4 6b, a technical terror on micro-edges right of *Drainpipe Crack* and at the right end of La Corbiere I survived a very tiring new E3 5b, *Mortally Wounded*, while cursing the E1 grade of what I thought to be *Martello Wall* (now in the sea).

Heading westwards the gneiss loses its pinkness and starts to turn grey. Les Ecrilleurs has an inhospitable feel, set to turn your hair grey too, a view no doubt shared by Alan who had to psyche himself up big-time for what was the island's most serious lead in 1986: *Hall of Worriers* E4 5c. With Haydar I repeated this using a direct finish up the tourmaline-stained headwall E5 6a and climbed a bouldery E5, *Fingerburn*, to its right. We also repeated *Stratasfears* E3 one of Alan's best routes, which holds a Cornish atmos-

phere and some serious space beneath your feet.

The coast beneath the so-called haunted house at Mont Herault provides a complex of fine walls and a deep zawn. In the Main Area Haydar and I repeated Pat Littlejohn's absorbing *Lighten our Darkness* and just right of neighbour *Snakk Attack* (a three star E2) we found a brilliant, if committing, face route starting from a jammed boulder in the gully — *Absolutely Flawless* E5 6a. In Detritus Zawn, easing ourselves out of the line of fire of the clay-pigeon shooters (but not beyond their showering plastic) we grabbed three E4/5 routes on a tasty piece of rock left of *Paradise Lost*, the best of which, *Guernsey Gosh* pays homage to a sumptuous local cake... or is it bread?

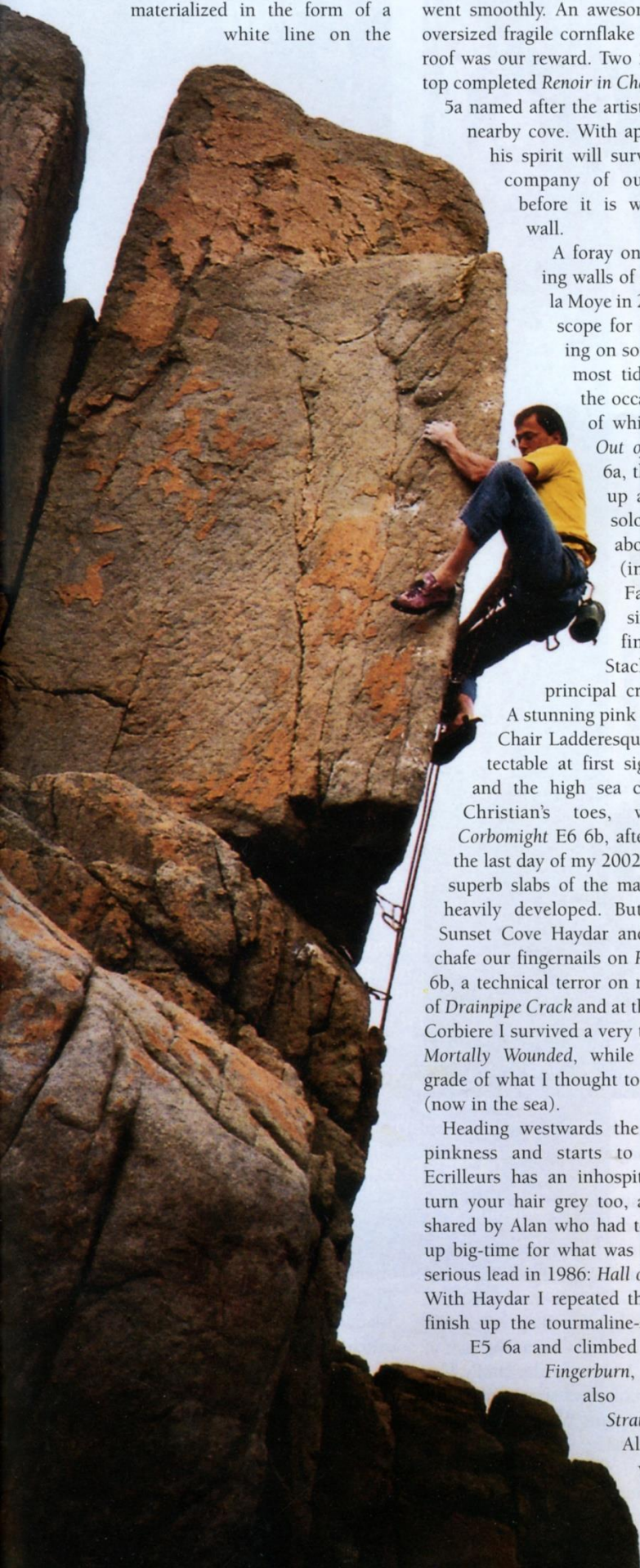
Nearby is Guernsey's most atmospheric cliff: La Congrelle. Take away the stark concrete observation tower above (a legacy of the German Occupation during 1940-45) and a few car wrecks within and this zawn becomes a rougher, bigger-bottomed sister to Huntsman's Leap. In 1996 and 1997 we worked out many of the obvious lines on its stark west face, but in 2002 and 2003 respectively we added a two-pitch E5, *Les Miserables* with its blood-letting roof crack and *Hugo's Here* E4 6a, a companion to *Toiler on the Sea*, as well as three pitches up the back wall beneath the tower, the best of which is Christian's *MP4* at E2 5c.

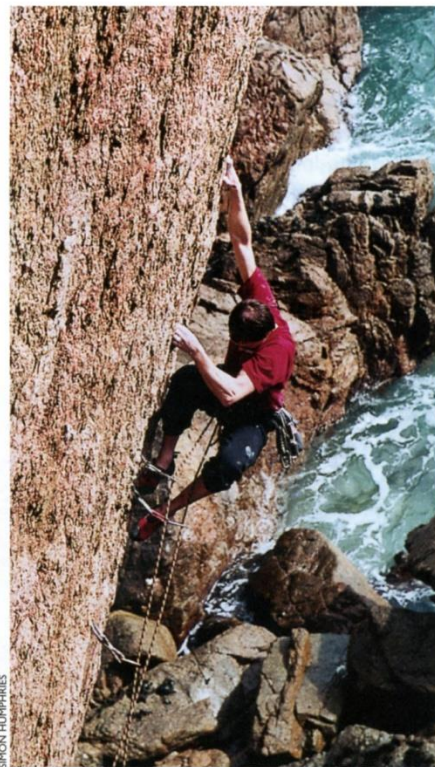
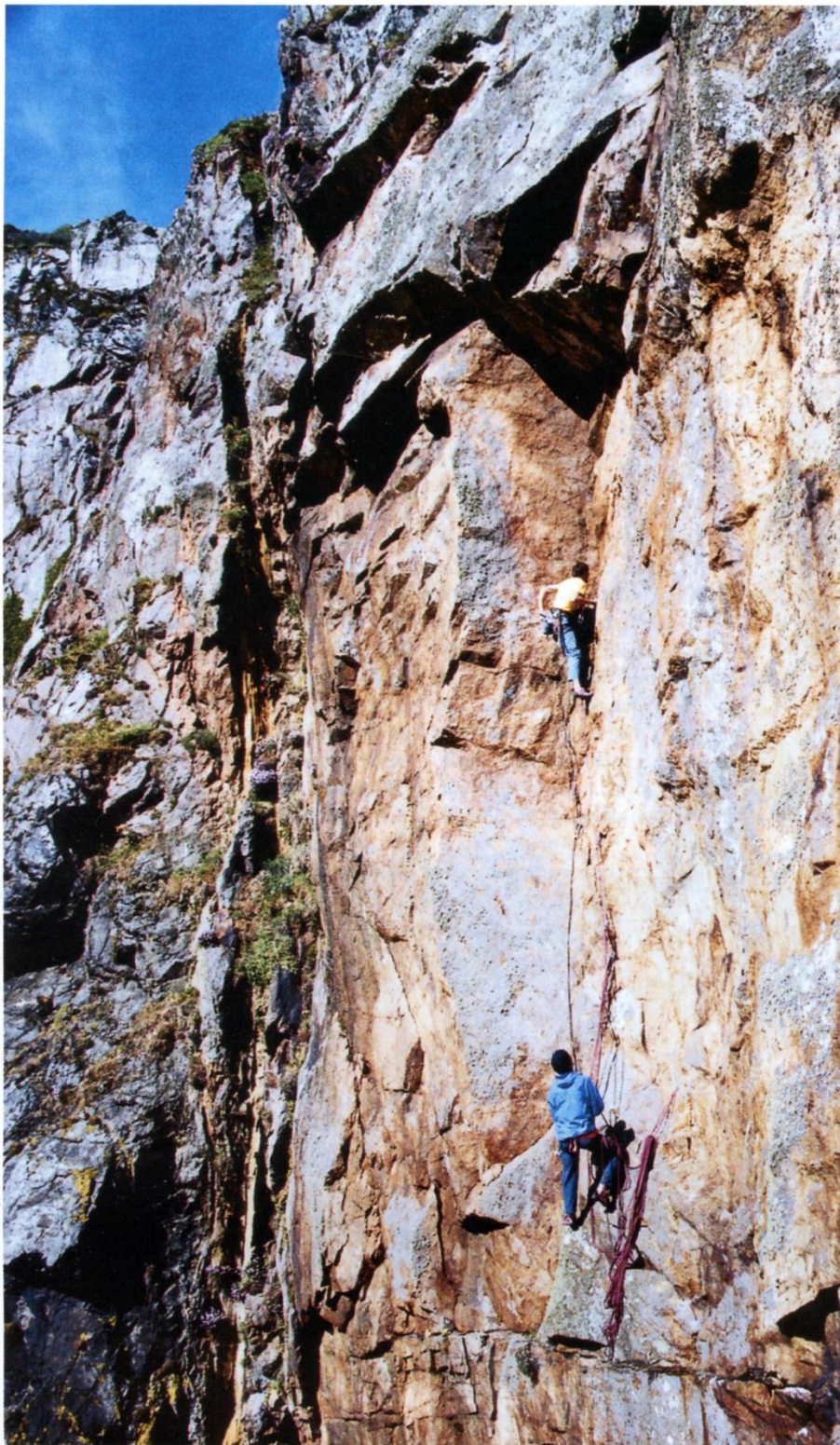
On the outer west wall, home of *The Stinker*, I made a testing back-roped ascent of an ace leaning face at E4 6a, the unexpected *High Seas* ricocheting off a side wall and grasping at my feet. Any fall would have meant a pulping in the breakers.

Below the next German-built tower the classic 30m corner of *Excalibur* slashes between two offset walls; one overhanging, the other more overhanging. The latter became *Prospector* E6 6b the '*Lean Machine* of Guernsey', while the former yielded *Sword in the Stone* E5 6a/b, care of its magical fixed blade below the upper shield which no amount of tugging, I suspect, could remove.

Our cruise westwards moors at Pleinmont Point, a narrow promontory, whose staunch independence always seems able to wind up the seas into a broiling, swirling broth. Its sheer south east face is most impressive, a fact recognized by another occasional visitor, Bruce Woodley, who in 1987 left a humungous E5, *Les Houligans* up its centre. This route had a metal 'thing' runner at seven metres as quirky as the hand that placed it, together with a crafty sideways start from *Dead Man's Finger*. Well the 'thing' sprinkled to rust-dust with the merest of a tease and was replaced by something more conventional, a necessary prelude to our direct ascent of what is now a forearm-burning E6 6b sensation — all credit to Bruce though.

Thereabouts, Alan's routes are truly
▶ *Martin Crocker climbing the sharp arête of 'Salt n' Wound' E5, Port Soif.*





SIMON HUMPHRIES

▲ Martin Crocker on the first ascent of the ferociously steep 'Animals Break Out' E3 6a, on Pointe de la Moye.
 ◆ Martin Crocker and Christian Harvey in the overhung groove of 'Renoir in Chalk' E5, on Les Someilleuses, during the first ascent.

superb and on a wild day we added to their ranks *Heavy Petting* E4 5c/6a, the don't-fall slab right of *Neck n' Neck*, and *Sucks You In* E5 6a, the bold arête right of *Suspended Sentence*. On a parallel, but lower promontory opposite called The Sphinx I free-climbed a crack done originally with some aid by recently repatriated Alex Franklin and worked pensively up a twisting pink vein to its right with *Vain in Pink* E5 6a.

The west coast of the island is Britain's own 'pink granite coast' and if it were not for the Guernesiais dialect and the young Guerns burning up the coast road at 36mph you'd think you were in Brittany. The gneiss has been pushed aside by granite, though

the crags only reach as high as 10m. You can't help but imagine in years to come all those cars queueing for the Condor ferry with crash-mats strapped to their roofs — the bouldering potential there looks *that* good. I experimented this year with a row of highball solos on an undeveloped crag at Les Grandes Rocques. Twelve-inch diameter pebbles are not ideal if falling repeatedly from three or four metres so, at the risk of sinking my kids, I blew up the family lilo, added a few cushions and started dropping off. After seven falls the lilo began to complain, exhaling hissingly after holding its breath so long for *Lilo Island* E4 6b, the flightiest of the bunch. Others fell and will

be fallen off, but you don't see too many lilos around these days — maybe they're set for a comeback now.

From Les Grand Rocques a striking arête is visible to the north at Port Soif, the island's main bouldering hangout. It's only nine metres high, but the rock is so rough and the arête so acute that you could almost pull yourself up on pinches alone — well almost. Well actually not at all, so I did something completely different to leave *Salt n' Wound* E5 6b, which reflects upon a disabling bag of fish and chips. Not telling you where they came from though; the Board of Administration might not let me back in. See you in the queue for the ferry.

A Few More Facts Guidebook

Jersey and Guernsey; Guernsey section by Alan Hill. Published by Cordee 1987. Supplemented by *BMC New Climbs* 1988. (Alan Hill left the island in 1990 and now lives in New Zealand.) A Guernsey routes' log is maintained by local activist, Christian Harvey. Send any information to him at: Apple Tree Cottage, La Route des Farras, Forest, Guernsey, GY8 0DY. He and fellow islander Simon Humphries helped with this article.

Future Guidebook

A guidebook to Guernsey rock-climbs is likely to be published 2005, a collaboration between Christian Harvey and Martin Crocker. ▲▲▲