



▲ *Martin Crocker on the first ascent of 'Three-Minute Slater' F8a, Charlcombe Cornice.*

◀ *Martin Crocker on the first ascent of 'Orange Order' F7a, Charlcombe Cornice.*

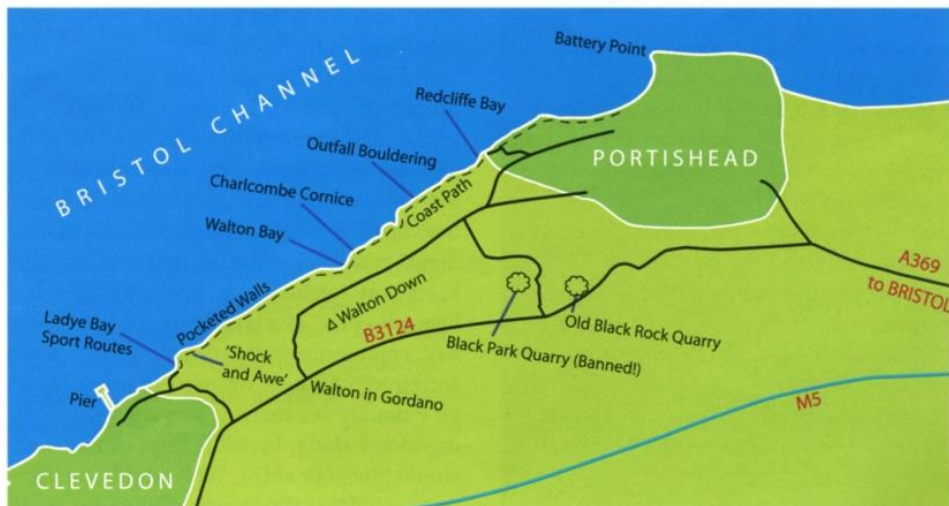
Weird, climbing the wrong end of the Bristol Channel

by Martin Crocker

In the 1980s the first of the huge chimneys of Portishead power station fell. The station put Portishead on the map long before the chimes of its eponymous pop group. My dad lost his job there in 1982 along with hundreds of others as the red-brick walls of an uneconomic coal-fired power station crumbled. Just a year ago I came across an old hessian-backed OS map of his priced six shillings. On it he had identified the pollution monitoring sites he managed as a CEEB chemist working at the station.

It was a double take for me, since alongside his notes were carefully pencilled descriptions of all the sandstone conglomerate crags outcropping between Portishead and Clevedon — in my hand-writing. Their heights; their locations and their character; it was all there, though I couldn't remember how or why.

Now it's my turn for time on my hands and I set to work checking out the potential of the area for a bouldering guidebook. Old haunts to revisit, new places to work at. Not just bouldering, but sport climbing too on irresistible esoteria, well perhaps, if I can face all the 'engineering' that produces sport climbs these days.





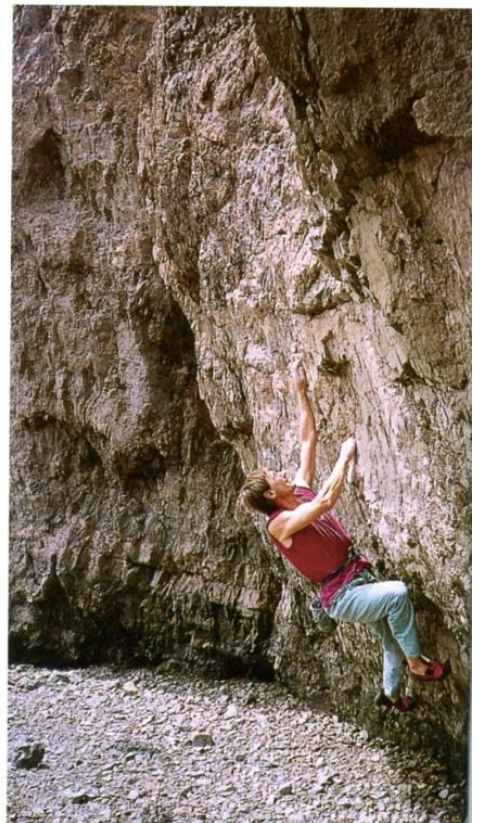
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teasing oversized marine woodlice from pockets and creating alternatives for rock addicts trusting in a Climbers' Club guidebook to be. What anyone would make of it all, God only knew.

But Charcombe Bay Cornice was different. Its climbs justified the hassle. Ten metres of cliff overhanging by the same dimension at one point... 'awesome!' (for this coast). Even the bolting was fun. On my first visit the tide came a third of the way up the cliff and, skipping waves with bare feet, it was only by lying horizontally above the surface of the sea that I could glue in the first 'bolt'. My 11-year old son observed operations that day. A role model, he concluded, I was not.

Pockets swallow arms on this crag, as well as fingers and the sandstone is superb, not weird. The four routes there between F7a and F7c+ cower before their master; a bulging prow of pockets spaced perfectly to oblige footless locks and the re-tearing of tendons damaged by equipping overhanging cliffs like these. *Three-Minute Slater* might be F8a, though I might be past knowing. And then there's the French F5+ rock to the right and it will only take a request to borrow my kit and money to burn.

Almost within view from the Cornice is a great bouldering crag. In the bleak company of a concrete outfall that left-hooks the Bristol Channel, this Hueco-pocketed crag with its capping overhang doesn't disappoint. In summer it's dry. In winter the drainage can freeze to mammoth icicles with M10 prospects, but you can climb anywhere between them over the roof at 5c/6a. The plum there is *The Elastic Band*, a traverse sandwiched between roof and seaweed that tickles the butts of tall guys. V8 or V28, how should I know? It's certainly F7c+ and one of the finest pieces of bouldering 'around' — if you'll forgive a commercial guidebook cliché.



▲ Martin Crocker on his own route 'Pier Pressure' F7c, Ladye Bay, Clevedon.
▶ Martin on 'Cycle of Despair' V9, Brean Down.

Sport routes. First there's the drill, repaired now, but with batteries spluttering for early retirement. Then there's the stainless-steel technology and mind-bending resin to weather the sea air. No it doesn't help when you learn from the manufacturer that the resin used extensively 12 years ago was *not* resin but really only 'mastic'. Nor the news that — typically — there's a high-tech dispenser to succeed the two models I already own. Forty five quid apiece yet my dispensers come to an early grave in a garage of extricated fixed-gear memorabilia once trusted by thousands. Now comes the choice of bolts... through-bolts, expansion bolts, ring bolts... too many versions of everything as usual. Organized now? So you load the dead weight into your 'sack and parade your

eccentricity to rubbernecking motorists, skyscraper of a 'sack rocking high above your head in the wind.

Bad dream? On occasions you can wake up *just* in time, stick a few mats under the crag and solo the routes instead. And all in minutes rather than days. That was the case for the pocketed walls northeast of Ladye Bay; brilliant bouldering there and with six-metre routes on finger-eating pockets that keep you latched safe from the boulders beneath. Just around the corner in Ladye Bay community-spirited bolt routes weep secretively. As kids we used to swim in the grey muddy sea there; it was a kind of coming-of-age thing. Invisible bugs in the water would bite your shins. With adulthood came responsibilities like power-drilling the cliffs,



▲ Martin on 'The Elastic Band' V8, Redcliffe Bay, Portishead.

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The absence of systemized bouldering with crash mats explains why this weird medium was left untouched for 30 years. Pushing the limits of physical capability is passé; pushing the limits of social acceptability is far more challenging. Soloing *Shock and Awe*, the F7a+ sandstone roof under fishermen's feet 300m northeast of Ladye Bay, might test how liberal the establishment actually is. Yes, of course, it would be nice if this supremely pocketed roof were poised above daisy-laden meadow land and one could glide lovingly into caring spotters' arms. But alas, this is the Bristol Channel and our landing is a lagoon of the murkiest mud and slurry of unknown depth. 'Mud, mud, glorious mud, nothing quite like it for healing the blood', the words have been handed down from generation to generation, even luring holidaymakers to Clevedon or Weston to experience the healing qualities of local bathing waters... and mud. Best not to test them and, while spending two hours building your landing site of driftwood across the lagoon, don't for a moment feel you have to justify what you're doing anymore than the fishing guys catching only their death of cold above you. Unless you want to.

It's cosy not to have to think about oddities from good guys who climb weird things — people like Frank Ramsey who traversed the sea cave near Ladye Bay to produce *Kings of New England*. Reputations can wither as weird rock conspires to create a most curious climb from a simple, laudable objective, in this case to traverse from left-to-right across

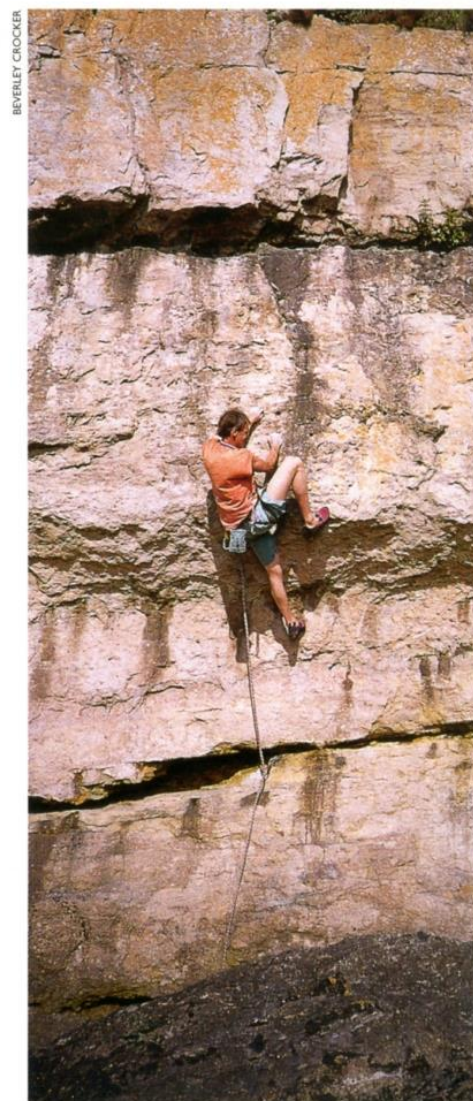
the cave roof. To advance researching this hypothesis, the cracks beneath were pushed ground up, on sight. *Weapons of Mass Distraction* (E6) is the most bizarre of all; two screw-in bolts (my rarely used Salewa ice screws from 1972) protect 6b moves on siltstone before you're back in the ordinary world, jamming and camming a *Dangler*-like roof crack. Unquestionably the line churns out a great piece of climbing, but that's not the point. Any new route is about art and weird art can get you thinking.

This isn't conventional fare. I apologize. If you prefer it normal, go to Brean Down and try extending *Cycle of Despair*, a F8a+ bouldering traverse. Before it ends on a high ledge, eight metres right of *Bones Chimney*, you need to power round low from a circular finger-pocket. Every move is British 6c, or more. Don't forget to take your own 30ft long mat; mine's got holes in. 🏔️

Summary

A resume of recent bouldering, sport and traditional climbing developments along the Bristol Channel coast, south west of Portishead. The author would appreciate any contributions on activity in the area; please send them to: martin.crocker@tesco.net In particular the guy who is leaving chalk-lines from lie-down positions in holes should consider how this might appear to innocent bystanders.

▶ Martin on 'Ladye Day' F7a, Ladye Bay, Clevedon.



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