

Wrecked on Wreckers' Slab
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The wreckers' hut is still there, on a shelf low down the tottery descent to this famous north Devon coast VS. A square of faded boards, the sad structure squats, hunched against the weather, looking north along the line of rocky projections that gave the wreckers their booty. This climb may evoke Daphne du Maurier's Cornish romantic novels, but there is no romance in the wreckers' grisly business on this unforgiving Devon coast. The Culm coast courts calamity: the start of the approach to Wreckers' Slab is a slippery path down through a graveyard. On the map the coastal cliff path looks seductively flat and the rock itself is a nerve-wracking flaky shale. Even the badger holes in the grass of the cliff path are so big that the National Trust has signs warning walkers against disappearing into them at the misty crepuscular hour. These days there's talk of creeping Lyme's disease from the unseen evil of the Black Tick lurking in the long grass. The first sight of the base of Wreckers' Slab reveals a pile of newly fallen orange rocks right at the spot where you take a first tentative step onto the slab. And why, exactly, does this hut hold a shovel and nothing else?

Devon Dave sat on the bench in the low hut and said, 'We should get the Photographer to take a picture of us in here'. But the Photographer was still way above us, taking great care not to unbalance on the steep wet grass, vertical shale and slippery loose rocks in the sharp sea of gorse and brambles that all too easily came to hand. And we had to catch that three hour window after low tide to get around the long groyne extension of the slab into the sea. But here was a blue nylon fisherman's rope by which to slither down rock and shale-earth onto the boulder bed. Towards the bottom it had been extended with a thinner bit of rope, but it clearly needed yet another extension as the shale gully had been worn away by the popularity of this classic climb of the Culm.

This was to be my 70th birthday climb. Although I'd had it bookmarked in my guidebook ever since I moved down to the Southwest four years ago, it was Devon Dave who suggested it and hosted the Photographer and me the night before so that we could catch the early morning tide. Originally I'd planned to do it the day after my 70th birthday, until my wife pointed out that this might result in my being wrecked on Wreckers' Slab, so I cunningly made it a day later. This however, did not take into account the quality of Devon Dave and Ma Moira's hosting skills, the Photographer's bringing a choice of exquisite gins, Iain Peters remembering, eventually, that he'd been invited for dinner and bringing a tatty bottle of gin obviously salvaged from some historic shipwreck, and Ma Moira, bless her, leaving a bottle of wine beside me as she left for bed!

The first pitch was mine. Could I get off the ground? Was it being seventy, or just in my foggy head that the first move was the hardest on the whole route? I bridged across two cracks and pulled on the teeniest of holds which quickly improved. I'd had the tip-off that the required technique was to press them into the slab to prevent pulling them out. This was useful. But crossing above the overlap on the left the terrific texture for the feet turned into a kind of friable gravel that was great if momentum was maintained. I maintained momentum across to the arête behind which was a grassy groove. The trick is not to step into this groove too early. But the end of the first pitch is announced by the sight of an old stub-ended flat peg in the left wall of the groove. I'd plenty of gear to belay with since I'd only found four placements in getting here. With a nut below it and a Friend low in the groove I settled into a comfortable stance. The sun came out, briefly. The Photographer had to shout three times 'Take in green!' I'd left my hearing aids in the car. With them in, the wind always gives climbs a soundtrack of rustling paper. Actually, he was shouting 'Take in blue!'

We were a foot ledge short of a perfect belay, so Devon Dave was encouraged to lead through. 'The next stance is a commodious ledge', he promised. He was gone a long time.

When the rope came tight on me it was clear that climbing was to begin. There were no discernible ‘strong pulls’, so faith in experience, at his end and mine, was the order of the day. This was a magnificent pitch that went on for ever. Moving left and right to select breaks in the slab brought an engagement with an overlap which was turned on its right by stepping back left to a small hold on its edge. This might have felt thin, but for wonderful incuts for the fingers, provided the correct ones were chosen – those that wanted to ‘Remain’, in current parlance, rather than those suicidally voting for Brexit. Actually, this choice was about to become crucial for my final pitch.

As Devon Dave brought up the Photographer, I had plenty of time to contemplate, on this commodious ledge, the start of the next controversial pitch. Dave was leaning back against a short pillar on top of which was a precariously balanced block big enough to cause a serious recession in his helmet should it be encouraged to ‘Leave’. As ever, I looked for a left alternative and found a series of blocks that formed a union with the crag enabling a crisis to be averted. Above, all appeared to be green, even sprouting a bit of Devon flower-power. But close up there were rocks resembling battle buses, which, provided one avoided the far left arête, needed careful judgement about their deceptions. One might be tempted to say that this final pitch, or indeed the whole climb, was one long referendum on its rock.

Being seventy in crazy times can send you a bit crazy. Although who the real wreckers are remains to be seen.