

Free Gŵyr!

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It was three days before Christmas. On the motorway cars kicked up a fine spray that did not raise much hope of dry rock. Four great white pinnacles rose out of the morning mist like majestic Egyptian obelisks. Actually, Isambard Kingdom Brunel had wanted Egyptian carvings on the pillars of his bridge over the Avon Gorge, but his design was abandoned when early work was stopped by the Bristol Riots of 1831. They're great like that in Bristol – regularly rioting over injustices, from limited voting rights in 1831 to Extinction Rebellion. It was the Bristol Alpinist who introduced me to the intricate climbing in the Gorge soon after I moved to Somerset and I had just picked him up for a mad plan to celebrate free Gŵyr in a pre-Christmas break-out from days of rain and Brexit gloom. It was six days after the entry to Wales was toll-free and the first dry day between Atlantic lows. As we drove under the four soaring white pinnacles of the Second Severn Crossing into Wales we came across the new signs saying 'NO TOLLS' with an extra Christmas cheer. After fifty-two years the project's required revenue had been collected and the ownership of the bridge had returned to the UK government from the British, French and American consortium that financed and built it. Regular commuters between Wales and England are expected to save more than £1400 a year. On our crossing we saved £5.60. Free Gŵyr climbing! And no riots necessary.

We were planning to climb the Gower's longest route, the East Ridge of Great Tor (71m) which I'd last climbed thirty-two years ago with my present wife in the very first spring after I'd moved in with her. Obviously a riotous honeymoon climb. And now the sun was out as we walked down the wet path towards the beach to emerge at a cliff-top bench to see that the tide was also out. My plan had been to gear up here, hide sacks and walk across the inviting empty sands and around the seaward toe of the Tor to the east side. But I'd forgotten that the Alpinist, being an alpinist, doesn't like things too easy, a characteristic that was to come in useful later. So we walked out along the headland to dump our sacks at the top of a greasy, muddy gully where I tried to cheer myself up by remarking that at least my old 5.10 rock shoes had cleats in the heels for just such adventurous sea-cliff descents.

It was one of those gullies that was narrow enough at the top to allow out-facing bum-sliding bridging above the slot, before turning you around to in-facing down-climbing on little rocky blocks to wet grass and mud ledges, where turning again to face the incoming sea brought the heels into play at the price of a wet bum-brake. I thought of Ken Wilson in his full blue Helly Hensen suit saying that it was worth at least a grade in extra friction when you needed it. This was the man who, at first, thought chalk was cheating. There was never a dull moment, climbing with Ken, who had challenging

opinions on everything and could cause a riot at any CC AGM, often needing the intervention of the old Dragoon Guards.

At last, rough rock blocks could be diagonally down-climbed rightwards towards a platform and a storm-filled pool below the undercut twin finger cracks that could be 'climbed with interest' at 4b. Gleaming black with damp dark bile, their interest was not high enough to tempt the Alpinist's investment today, thank goodness. I had started to feel the pain of arthritis in my left hip and my back needed stretching out after my visiting all five primary school classrooms of my two granddaughters as a hunched-over old Father Christmas, heavily disguised so that I would not be recognised in the two crux classrooms. They claimed to have recognised my glasses! The glued on eyebrows and moustache, and the bad back, did not now seem worth the pain.

Now, it was positively hot. The sun sparkled on the sea to our left and, as the Alpinist had said, being on the east side gave us shelter from the December wind. The first inviting dry flat steps brought into the Alpinist's reach the line of an incut break leading rightwards and inching the left foot up the slope of a ledge enabled a swing of the right foot into a crack where a low right sidepull enabled him to crank into an upright position. Runner, more crack, runner, steep wall, runner and step left across a corner onto the front of the buttress and then a big ledge. The short pitches make this feel a friendly route.

But I could not get off the ground. It was less to do with arthritis or back pain and more to do with a lack of leanness, cultivated over many months for my Father Christmas role. Anyway, my hands were too low to enable a crank rightwards once my foot was braced out into that crack. These days, in the winter season and with incoming tides, I find that it's best not to test the patience of my leader, or the rope, too much, so I backed off and invited the Alpinist to abseil down for the four runners. Before you could say, 'Just whip a rope around this block' the Alpinist was in his familiar abseil mode as I climbed round the easy rock to the right to gain the big ledge.

To rebalance the courtesies I offered him the next lead which stepped around the seaward arête and into a groove in a very scenic position. In the steep upper part of the groove the Alpinist opted to step right up a wall, although the move onto the smooth ledge and back to the arête offered a moment for thought, before he romped away up the sunlit arête to another commodious belay ledge. At the steepening of the groove I found an almost hidden little triangular foothold that enabled a long reach for a jug from which foot friction is always easier, if a little more frequent these days due to my painfully restricted hip movement. With the sea still just enabling surprised dog walkers to pass round the Tor below us, the second half of this pitch was a blocky delight.

It was my lead, up the juggy arête and all too quickly to a final ledge below the uprearing summit wall. The Alpinist dispatched this wall with smooth reaches and long loping steps to belay with his head poking up into the blue sky. This was the longest pitch on the route and would have been unalloyed pleasure but for the creaking of my anatomy and the odd shooting pain asking me if this had been a good idea. Smiles all round at the spacious summit bowl between pinnacles seemed to answer that question. This was, indeed, a rather special place to be as the wide expanse of sand made the few people walking out there seem midgets covering miles of the horrible horizontal. It certainly felt more than 71 meters above the rippling incoming sea. Perhaps the only giant out there was the man who emerged improbably from the waves only to revolt at the sight of sand, turn around and dive through the breaking waves again. Swimming, in Wales, in December! Even up here you could feel the waves of his smugness when he strode out of the water across the sands to revert to his regular costume of unassuming normality.

I, however, was inclined to take the opposite strategy. First, we had to find the down-climb. The Alpinist was in his element again, elegantly descending damp limestone, wet grass and rare lichens. I don't mind admitting that I really appreciated him waiting for me and pointing out the undercut hidden footholds. I remember traversing the Bernia Ridge on the Spanish Costa Blanca with another alpinist, Jim Fotheringham, and staring at the ring bolt at the start on the east summit as Jim blithely down climbed ahead of me. Too late, I clocked that we were going to down-climb the abseils, alpine style. Jim was carrying the rope. After the second surprising discovery - that route-finding through the pinnacles on the ridge was a challenge - I arrived at a ledge to find Jim dozing in the sun. But at least I climbed with that rare sub-species of alpinist who will wait for their partner, if occasionally failing to stifle a yawn.

Back at our sacks, the cutting wind required another layer and here my alternative strategy came into play – my Father Christmas suit – cunningly designed for low temperatures. Getting in a long route three days before Christmas in my fifty-fifth year of climbing certainly trumped winter sea swimming and deserved a celebratory costume for the walk back along the cliff top. At the bench again we sat to eat the sandwiches which the current guidebook recommends for the wind-blasted summit. ('If you're British, now's the time to eat your sandwiches.') The coffee was now cold, but the low sun still bounced off sea and sand. An amazed man popped up from the beach path.

'I've believed in you all my life,' he said, 'and now here you are!'

He left, shouting over his shoulder as an afterthought, 'Did you get my message?'

An eccentric woman came striding past a while later, traversing the clifftop path. 'You seem to have lost your reindeers,' she admonished me.

'I think you'll find they are grazing over there,' I said, pointing to the way she was going.

Driving back past the eerily deserted toll booths and onto the bridge a huge full moon arose over England. The next evening, at the end of the carol service in Wells cathedral, the Bishop of Bath and Wells (of *Blackadder* fame) wished the congregation, 'The joy of the shepherds and the perseverance of the wise men'. We had already fulfilled his blessing as Dave Wynne-Jones and I had driven over that bridge towards the full moon after a day of Free Gŵyr in an inner riot of joy and perseverance.

Photo caption: Father Christmas emerging from Great Tor, Gower. Photo: Dave Wynne-Jones.