

Portland Camping Meet

May 3rd - 9th 2014

Great climbing beckoned with bright sunshine and warm weather forecast, as a compact DMC group met in Dorset for the early May Bank holiday meet.



6 members in all attended – Jon Shields, Ed James, Paul Trethaway, John Harrison, Greg Jennings and me.

Unfortunately, due to late planning we were on 3 separate campsites and ended up arriving at Blacknor North on Portland Bill at different times.

I arrived late on the Saturday and joined Jon, Ed and Paul for an enjoyable romp up Monsoon Malabar, a two-

starred 6a arête. The others had been climbing for some time, and Jon, Ed and Paul notched up 10 climbs that day, a mix of mainly 6 a's and b's, all starred routes. Meanwhile further along Greg and John had been happily swanning up the Jurassic fossil-studded Limestone rock on another section of the crag.



Sunday dawned and we headed out to the fantastic bolted rock at Blacknor again.

Following a fantastic 9 days rock climbing road trip to France with Mike Dowsett and Ed James, from which we had returned only a week before, I was feeling on top of my game. Out there I had led one pitch of French 6a (albeit accidentally by going off route) and had followed Ed up another longer 6a climb, and so felt sure I could take my climbing to another level.

Fortified by the 6a arête I had seemingly swanned up the day before, I agreed to pair up with Paul for the day's climbing my first mistake

Now let me just qualify this: Paul is an exceedingly competent and able climber, who climbs at a very



high level (7+). I, on the other hand, am a VS trad leader, and am comfortable at French 5c sport – max.

So when Paul suggested we warm up on a two-star 6a route, Gaze of the Gorgon, I should have listened to the faint alarm bells ringing at the back of my skull

Paul flew up the route effortlessly, disarming me even more by making it look so easy. He stopped at the penultimate bolt due to a Fulmar nest, and at the perfect time he turned to me down below advising me of this just as the bird unleashed a stream of foul-smelling vomit at him. Because he had turned at that precise moment it completely missed him, and by some deft footwork I managed to avoid it as it landed barely inches away from my belay stance at the foot of the crag.

Paul returned to earth leaving the quick-draws in so I could lead it, and off I set. Hmm, not so easy once you're on the rock now is it David I thought to myself, as the route steepened.

As I climbed higher I was aware of getting more and more pumped. Clipping the draw before Paul's high point I paused for a breather, and could see the next bolt ahead – vertically above me. Summoning all my dwindling strength I headed off towards it. All arms and pump now, forgetting just about everything Jon had told me in the past about climbing with my feet. The closer and closer I got, the wearier and wearier my arms became. I finally got level with the bolt and tried to clip it, but just couldn't get the rope in. "Slack!" I shouted down to Paul, desperately trying to get enough rope in my hand so I had a chance of getting it into the clip and safety. The fingers of my other hand, white now as they gripped a flake, started to peel off

"Do not let go!" I shouted to my fingers – unfortunately they weren't listening (or just decided to ignore my plea) – and I felt myself airborne

"I've never seen anyone fall so far," Greg cheerfully told me later.

As I reached the natural end of the slack rope Paul held the fall, and I swung into the cliff face, banging my leg and (I later found out) twisting my pelvis. 20 feet was the conservative estimate for the distance I had fallen, and my confidence was now severely dented. (Back to 4's and 5's for me was my thought ☹).

Dusted down and seemingly none the worse for wear, we wandered further along the cliff to another starred route that Paul wanted to do, concerned for my well-being, but satisfied by my assurances that I was fine.

Paul again made the route look easy; an awkward traverse in on delicate flutings, then off up to finish above wet rock. My turn. "Why don't you second this one, and if you find it comfortable then you can lead it?" suggested Paul, eminently sensibly. I can climb 6a's I told myself. "I'll lead it," I told Paul, eminently foolishly.

Once again I felt reasonably confident on this route having just watched Paul's easy flowing ability. Once again I came unstuck and only a few feet into the traverse I came off the rock and slammed into the face. Nothing major this time, but once again I banged my leg.

"I think I'll sit this out for a bit Paul," I decided, common sense at last cutting in.

Lesson learned: Confidence does not trump experience and ability.



The other lads meanwhile had been having a tick-fest, with Jon and Eddie adding 11 climbs, up to 6a+ and VS, all of them starred routes. Greg and Jon had also been knocking off multiple routes, all whilst baked in glorious sunshine under clear blue skies.

The weekend over, Jon, Ed and Paul headed off back to Derbyshire, work inconveniently getting in the way of more climbing.

This had originally been diaried as a week-long climbing trip but work and family commitments meant that not everyone could manage that.

I had a day off for a walk with my other half, Lisa, on the Monday, as Greg and Jon set off to Swanage for some more adventurous climbing above the breaking sea, and we met up on the Tuesday for a final day's climbing at The Cuttings, a well-known and as a result

fairly polished area of climbing routes further south on Portland Bill.

A great day's climbing was had by all, 7 routes being climbed up to 5c, while again being bathed in glorious sunshine all day.

I managed to bag three low grade routes on a pleasantly-angled slab with Greg and John, followed by a solo VS on the same slab which was no different from the previous 3 climbs, it just had no gear!

My confidence was slowly starting to return, but the ache in my leg was giving me some gip.

The following day John and Greg headed back home, while I remained as the sole member of the DMC for the week's trip. ☹

The good weather broke eventually by the Thursday and Lisa and I broke camp and returned home.

The sting in the tail though was that in my fall I had damaged my sciatic nerve, and I ended up in casualty at Derby A&E a couple of days later, in desperate need of pain killers and anti-

inflammatories. I was off sick from work for a week and was unable to climb for 6 weeks after that, missing the Torridon week I had booked onto.

Lesson (hopefully!) learned. 😊

Dave Bankart

