

Sea stacks

John Cleare

The last virgin summits in Britain are sea-stacks, and for that matter they are probably Europe's last virgin summits too. Our island has thousands of miles of unique and varied coastline, and round many stretches of it sea-stacks are scattered in profusion. Some, like the famous Old Man of Hoy, nowadays climbed several times each year, are high and well known; others, like Pyatt's Steeple, off the South Hams of Devon—so called by sw sea-cliff climbers after the current editor of the *Alpine Journal* who first drew attention to it, thus differentiating it from another Steeple a mile further E—are known only to a handful of specialist stack-explorers, and at the time of writing are still virgin. The coasts of Devon and Cornwall are well charted and populated, and yet if the frequency of discovery of new stacks on this coast is anything to go by, then there must be hundreds more awaiting discovery hidden off the more remote coasts of Scotland and the Northern Isles.

For several years I have been working on a guide-book to British sea-stacks, incidentally a project which seems never ending thanks to the new material which it continuously generates, and I was forced early on to consider a suitable definition of the feature. One progresses easily into a deep and philosophical argument on the lines: 'When is a sea-stack not a sea-stack?' 'When it's a skerry, say, or a clett'. But eventually I came up with four points to be satisfied.

Firstly—shape. A stack should be higher than it is wide in at least one of its planes. This covers 'shark-fin-type' stacks such as the highest stack in the British Isles, the 627 ft high Stack an Armin in the St Kilda archipelago, which in one direction is pyramidal but seen end-on is a slender needle, and of

17 *St Kilda group; left to right—Stac Lee, Bororay, Stac an Armin* This and next three photos: John Cleare





18 *Great Picket Rock, Ladram Bay, Devon*

course, further afield, Ball's Pyramid, 1750 ft high, of the Lord Howe group in the Pacific Ocean.

Secondly—height. Within reason there is no minimum height, except that if it is high enough to be worth climbing, then it's a stack. This might preclude a shapeless, easy-angled skerry, perhaps 100 ft high, but include a steep and interesting 40-ft needle.

Thirdly, a stack should have been formed by the action of the sea. This rules out certain land pinnacles that happen to be near the coast, but embraces all manner of interesting back-shore pinnacles which may—at the present geological time—be sea-washed only at spring-tide gales. The Old Man of Hoy, after all, is not an island but stands on a large, slabby plinth linked to the base of the mainland cliffs by a huge causeway of massive blocks.

The last qualification is really an amplification of the third, that a climber falling from a sea-stack in at least one direction should land on sea-territory, either the water, or the beach if he is unlucky. This effectively rules out the products of ancient seas miles inland, but ensures that features of great interest, such as Aleister Crowley's Etheldreda's Pinnacle, high on the chalky face of Beachy Head in Sussex, are included. It is possible that Etheldreda's has not been climbed since Crowley's original ascent in 1894, at least Tom Patey and I couldn't climb it in 1969. Perhaps it was climbed using occult aid? If so, then that alone makes it worthy of inclusion in any list of British stacks!

To illustrate the potential, I've chosen three varied and entertaining stacks from my collection. Two of them have had no more than two or three ascents although their existence is now fairly well known, at least in the circles of sea-cliff habitués.

The Great Picket Rock is the highest of seven stacks near Ladram Bay on the SE coast of Devon between the little watering-places of Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth. It lies at the base of the 500-ft wall of High Peak, the highest hill hereabouts, and like it is composed of 50 ft of horizontally bedded sandstones, mudstones and marls. So poor is the rock that access along the narrow beach at low tide is threatened by continuous avalanche from the cliffs above, and occasionally by 'rock-fall' in the shape of a hapless cow. Apart from swimming, it is necessary to abseil into the beach, and so ropes must be left for the return journey. But although this terrible wall of High Peak offers an incredible challenge to some suicidally bold climber armed probably with axe and crampons, the Great Picket is surprisingly sound, as, upon reflection as to its origins, it is bound to be!

The Great Picket is only 120 ft high, but we have graded it as 'very serious', a system, which, like the Vallot adjectival system, takes into account the overall nature of the expedition including the escape potential. At low tide a fingery scramble is made just above the sea around the base of the stack on to the big ledge at the bottom of the seaward arête. On all stacks this is where the rock is at its best. Above, everything appears overhanging—narrow, horizontal flutings jut out barring the way upwards, and the soft sandstone is dusty to the hand and brittle to the finger-tips. The climb seems most unlikely. But on the s face there is a slight chimney about 60 ft up, below large overhangs, and a steep and wandering pitch, winding between the flutings, leads into it. The belay, a foot of angle-iron hammered into a sandy fissure, is poor, if the stance, bridged tightly across the chimney, is fair.

The next pitch is the crux. Bridging widely up to the fluted roofs and using purely psychological protection from a 6-in nail hammered direct into the sandstone, a swing is made on to the smooth and overhanging right wall. An airy position. Sand must now be cleared from a row of small, carved holds before they are hand-traversed out across the wall to the prow, where a leg can be swung up and an awkward mantelshelf made. A belly crawl beneath some flutings leads to a small ledge where a nest of 6-in nails gives an illusion of security. Rope drag has been a serious problem.

The third pitch continues the line of the traverse outwards towards the seaward arête, every few feet, where a gap in the flutings above allows, mantelshelving into a higher level. This very exposed line ends right on the arête where a final mantelshelf leads to the flat and muddy top. Scores of gulls and a few stunted sea-cabbages offer little in aesthetic pleasure, but the climb has been full of character and the route finding far from easy. The whole enterprise has seemed perhaps harder than it is; perhaps, technically, only a stout VS. But every hold is suspect, and testing it beforehand means nothing here—the rock snaps under pressure like stale biscuit.

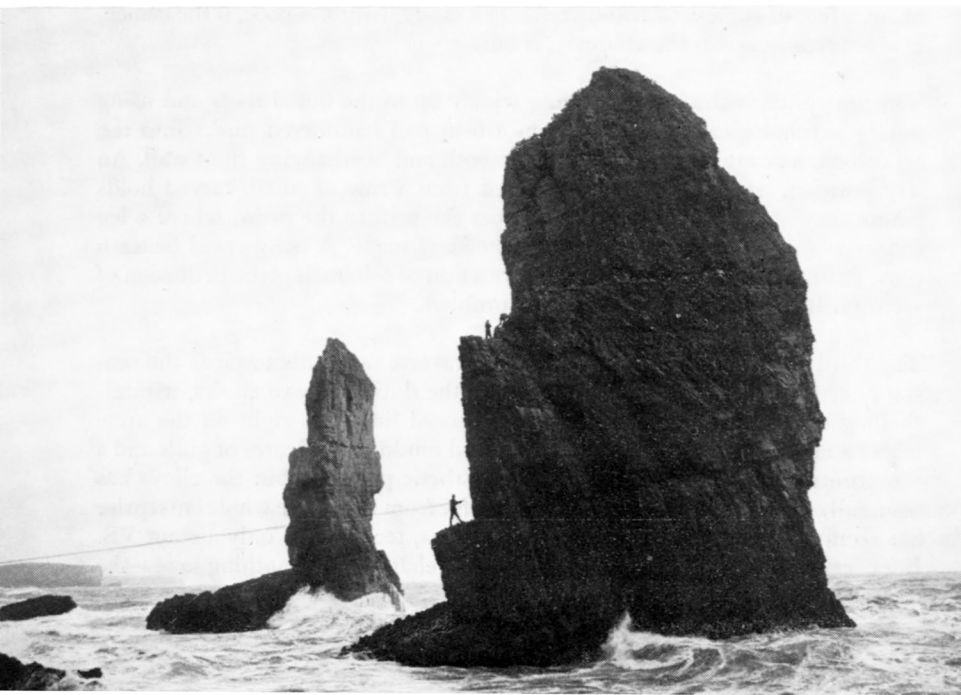
Like certain mountains, sea-stacks always offer descent problems, especially as on the Great Picket Rock, where it is impossible to place adequate pitons in the summit mud. This has led to the development of the 'see-saw' abseil. With each end of a long rope thrown down opposite faces, two climbers abseil simultaneously to the bottom. A third climber can always descend held by the first two from the far side.

The Castlemartin peninsula in Pembrokeshire, SW Wales, is an area of limestone downland forming the southern-bounding arm of Milford Haven. It drops into the sea in a long line of excellent s-facing cliffs dotted with skerries and small stacks, the most impressive of which are the two at Elegug, the Tower and the Spire.

Unfortunately, the whole area is in the hands of the military and is given over to the training of tanks; it is here that the German Panzers, whose now welcome visits were at one time the subject of much controversy, undertake their battle training. Thus access is restricted, and usually *verboten*, although a certain amount of unofficial exploration has been done by inquisitive climbers.

The two Elegug Stacks rise from a shallow cove ringed by 150-ft cliffs, and it would seem that only the Tower, the larger and more massive of the pair, is accessible dry-shod, and then only at low spring tides. This necessitates another fairly standard stack-baggers technique. Once reached, and before any attempt is made to ascend the pinnacle, retreat is assured by rigging a tyrolean rope

19 *The Elegug Stacks*



above the high-tide line. Stacks are usually best approached at low tide, but retreat at higher water is often hazardous and problematical without adequate safeguards. When we made the first ascents of the Elegug Stacks it was November, there were spring tides and a force 8 gale was blowing. The sea was cold and wild, and the equipment we needed was reminiscent more of rounding the Horn in a tall ship than climbing, say, the Cima Piccolissima.

The first day we abseiled into the cove in the storm and managed to gain the base of both stacks, where we rigged tyrolean ropes and made a detailed reconnaissance before, soaked to the skin, we beat a cold and damp retreat back up our abseil ropes and into the nearest warm pub. By next morning the gale had died, and despite a still heavy sea the sky was blue and the general atmosphere more conducive to exploratory climbing. The tyrolean ropes were mostly still intact so we were able to start work right away.

We had gained the Tower at the base of the landward arête, and it looked as if the best route was above us. An 80-ft pitch up a plumb-vertical wall on small holds reached a shoulder where there were sea-cabbages and large boulders. There were plenty of good belays, and pegs were unnecessary. A scramble up debris and easy rock led to the base of the final wall which was split by a deep, double crack-line. We climbed this until the way was barred by a couple of large, unstable-looking chockstones where a thin traverse left out over the sea and an earthy pull-up on small loose blocks led to the summit slopes, green with sea-cabbages blowing in the wind. We reckoned the climb as 175 ft and easy VS. By the time we got to the top the cliff-top behind us was lined by off-duty Panzer soldiers who raised a loud cheer; there were also a couple of glowering 'Red-caps'.

We were able to look down to where two of our friends were working on the Spire. This is really shaped like a knife, with two vertical and smooth blade-like faces separated by narrow arêtes, and the lads were half-way up the face towards us. They had climbed up to a cracked line of weakness running across the wall, above which a line of overhangs looked very difficult. They traversed the weakness on to the seaward arête where they managed to make a good stance in a small sentry-box. Above them the arête was split by a wide crack which was difficult to get into but which led to the narrow summit. They reckoned the climb to be 150 ft and HVS.

We were able to abseil off the Tower with little difficulty, apart from fixing the initial anchor, which consisted of linked *coins de bois* and the stoutest sea-cabbages. In those days we had not developed the 'see-saw' abseil and the boys on the Spire made a rather difficult descent from their own summit cairn and a dubious piton.

Apart from someone getting a direct hit by loose rock which put him out of the climbing, it was an excellent expedition. As it turned out the 'Red-caps' were not waiting to march us off to the guard house, for we did have official army permission to attempt the Stacks, but it would be wise for any future parties to check out with the Army before climbing these very exciting pinnacles.

SOUTH FACE

EAST FACE

HAVEN

MOUTH

virgin wall

GALLERY

PIER

causeway

S.E. arete

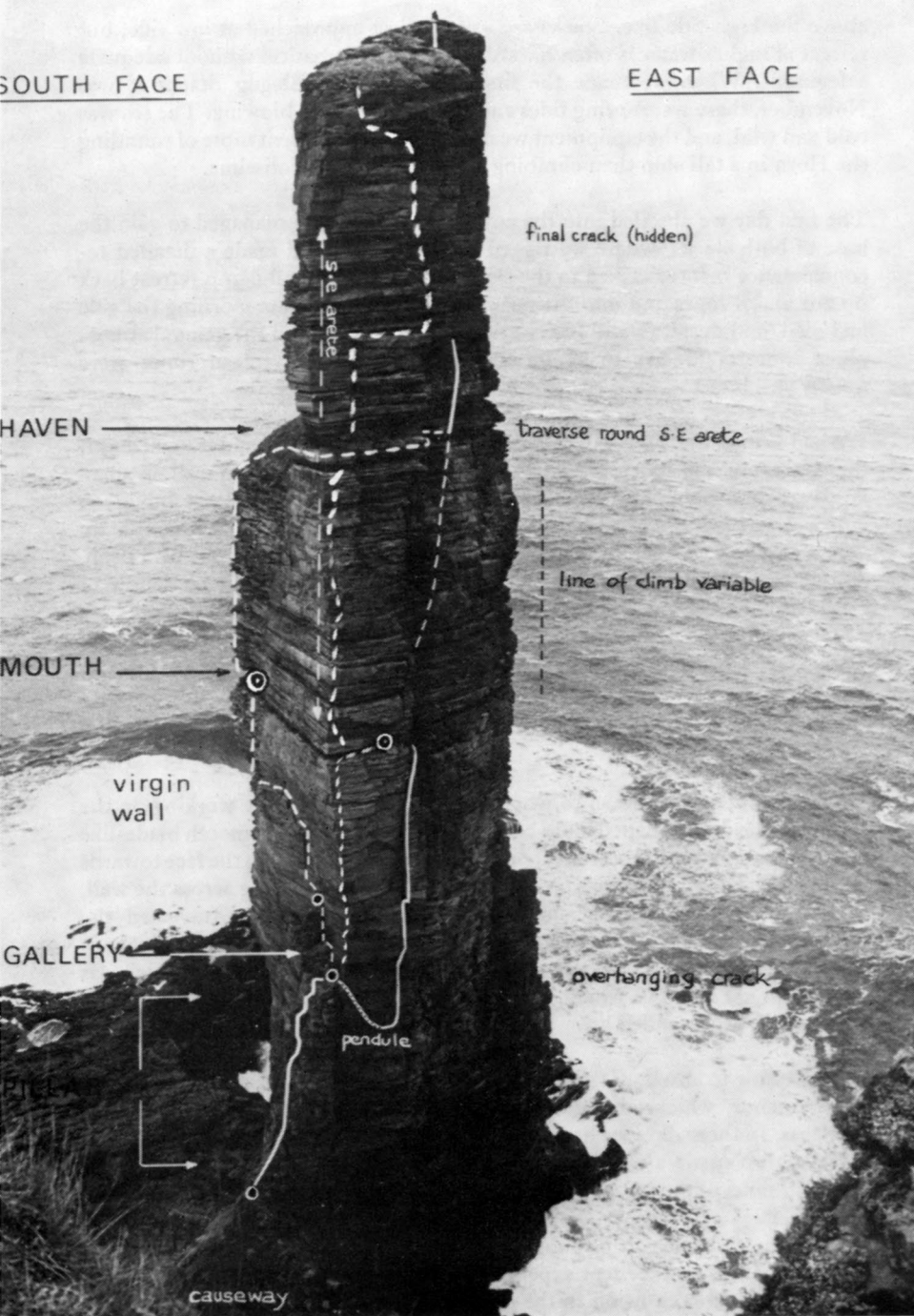
final crack (hidden)

traverse round S.E. arete

line of climb variable

overhanging crack

pendule



Off the NE corner of Scotland, ten miles across the wild water of the Pentland Firth from Dunnet Head and John O' Groats, lies the archipelago of Orkney. Altogether some fourteen major islands cover an area of ocean some 50 miles by 35, and most of the islands are well described as '... small green isles across the shining sea . . .' to quote a well-known Orcadian folk song. One of the islands, however, the second largest, Hoy, is hardly that. It rises in steep heathery hills to 1565 ft and then drops abruptly as a massive line of iron-toothed cliffs into the open sea, facing direct to Greenland and Cape Farewell some 1500 miles away.

Orkney has a fine collection of stacks, at least seven major ones up to 250 ft high have been climbed, but the king of them all is the Old Man of Hoy. From Thurso on the Scottish mainland 25 miles away his 450-ft head can be seen towering over the surrounding cliffs.

The Old Man is made of Old Red Sandstone bedded horizontally, and is an almost perfect rectangular column with four faces about 90 ft wide. It seems that 400 years ago he did not exist. An Orcadian friend of mine has an old map of the Northern Isles on which there is no reference to such an obvious and well-known landmark, instead only a small headland marked '... pictish forte . . . ye beste fortifiede syte in all ye northern islandes . . .'—or words to that effect. However, reference to the Old Man suddenly appears in 1774—perhaps soon after a winter of ferocious storms, and a drawing of 1821 by a William Daniell depicts the Old Man with two legs, a rather different shape than he has today. It is thought that he lost the leg in a storm about 100 years ago, and one can only wonder how much longer he will remain with us.

Tom Patey led the first ascent with Rusty Baillie and Chris Bonington in July 1966, although there is a local legend than an elderly, but athletic, islander scaled the pinnacle for a wager many years ago, climbing it again to recover the pipe he left on the summit (shades of Mallory!). That first ascent, on extremely loose rock and with the issue in doubt the whole way, took three days of reconnaissance and probing to complete. The second and subsequent dozen ascents were made the following summer by a team of climbers, including the first ascent party, working for BBC TV and producing a live telecast of three separate routes on the stack—perhaps the most ambitious and exciting television spectacular ever, and a huge success. After this, of course, the Old Man was world famous.

For the programme the *voie normale*—HVS—was repeated, and Joe Brown with Ian McNaught Davis climbed the S face while Dougal Haston and Peter Crew forced the SE arête. It is improbable that either of these two routes have been repeated. The rock is brittle and sandy, and the cracks are usually wide and blind, and protection is thus not easy to arrange without subtle techniques and bolts, but nowadays much of the loose rock has gone, there are a few BBC bongs and bolts still in place and the only serious danger would seem to be direct dive-bomb attacks by fulmars and the huge Great Skuas, whose most southerly nesting place is on the cliffs opposite.

The *voie normale* lies up the landward side, where the rock is not at its best but where a convenient crack/chimney line provides a natural route through the incipient overhangs. A first pitch of about 80 ft, a series of steep mantelshelves, leads to a small ledge on the SE arête. All three routes diverge from here. A diagonal rappel out and down on to the E face follows, reaching the bottom of the crack-line. Quite soon this leads into a series of large, square-cut roofs, which it breaks through in fine style as a bottomless chimney. This pitch is quite long and not easy, and on the first ascent it took all day and was graded A₃, but it now goes free and it can be quite well protected. The chimney-line now fades into a sort of open corner and the route follows sometimes this and sometimes the face to the right, climbing a series of typical short walls linking mantelshelves, often slimy and coated in guano. Eventually the corner becomes a well-pronounced *dièdre*, rather similar to Cenotaph Corner but with a better crack at the back. The rock here is excellent, but high up it is possible to see daylight on the far side of the pillar through the crack! A loose landing is made on the grassy summit, which is split in two by the *dièdre* and the opposite chimney. An awkward leap lands on the higher top, where the cairn is surrounded by wild flowers and clumps of heather. On the lower top there are several fissures offering good bivouacs and brew-sites, but, like a serious Alpine top, it is difficult to relax until descent is safely accomplished.

The best descent is obviously back down the line of ascent, if only because one has noted the possible abseil points on the way up. They are few and widely separated and the abseil over the overhanging chimney ends way out in space and 200 ft above the sea. Unless a back-rope has been left here it would be difficult to get back over the diagonal rappel. To descend safely from the Old Man does require a certain amount of care and organisation; during the BBC project we descended the pillar several times in the dark, and this did prove something of an epic, but we were well prepared and we did not have to bring our ropes down with us.

Although, without doubt, the Old Man is one of the classic climbs of Britain, there are many stacks which, though much smaller, have a similar ambience and offer as exciting a climbing experience. I find that stacks provide something which mere cliffs do not—a feeling which is only achieved on a true summit—a feeling which is only shared by stack-climbers and mountaineers. Not for nothing have stacks sometimes been dubbed ‘sea-mounts’.