
Welsh Winter Climbing

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In the 'Good Olde Days' climbing was climbing – whatever the season. Winter was merely a colder version of summer; the snow, a bit of an inconvenience; and the ice-axe still a tool and not a handhold. And so it was until the coming of the second ice age – around 1971. During these early years, the great snow gullies (not to mention some of the more difficult 'modern' buttresses) of Snowdonia were visited by the likes of Eckenstein, Archer Thomson, Owen Glynn Jones, Winthrop Young, Mallory, the 1953 Everest Men, and the Rock and Ice. But, in contrast to the case of rock climbing, there has been no tradition of recording or cataloguing climbs done under winter conditions – hardly surprising, given the marginal nature of the average Welsh winter. For who is to say when an 'ascent' becomes a 'winter ascent' – in the Alps, it's the date that decides it; in Scotland they have a 'proper' winter; in Wales, it's just climbing!

However, it's still worth remembering that Archer Thomson climbed out of the Devil's Kitchen in March 1895, and ascended Ladies' Gully and Cave Gully on Snowdon in the winter of 1898; O G Jones and the Abraham brothers climbed Central Gully on Glyder Fawr in 1899, and the right-hand branch of Clogwyn Ddu Gully in the same winter; Joe Brown plucked Western Gully on the Black Ladders and the classic South Gully in Idwal, in 1952 or thereabouts, and Slanting Gully on Lliwedd in 1964; Martin Boysen teetered up Cloggy's Black Cleft in 1963; and Dave Alcock assaulted Central Gully on Lliwedd and Ypres on the battle-scarred Black Ladders in 1968, while Jack Street and Paul Nunn attacked Ice-fall Gully on the same crag. And all this before the advent of the irremovable ice-axe, the irreplaceable Snarg, and the iridescent Koflach boot.

But, following the Chouinard/Cunningham revolution, everyone was at it! Climbing steep ice not only became possible, but it actually became *easy*! The masses moved in, and in 1974 Rick Newcombe produced the first edition of his excellent *Winter Climbs in North Wales* in response to this upsurge of interest. This book made no attempt to be 'definitive', consisting mainly of climbs undertaken by Rick and his friends from Bangor University Mountaineering Club, together with the well-known classics.

In the excellent winter of 1969, Newcombe was involved in early, if not first, ascents of Central Gully on Lliwedd, Snowdrop on the Clogwyn y Garnedd face of Snowdon, and Central Route on Clogwyn y Geifr in Cwm Idwal. But, as Rick himself says, '... first ascents on snow and ice occur every time someone makes an ascent – it's never the same twice, and I always like to think that some quiet, anonymous climber who climbs for his own personal enjoyment did the routes years ago . . .'

Following the publication of the guide, the winter weather went into retreat for a number of years (no suggestion at this time of the 'greenhouse gases' getting out of hand, although a fair amount of methane and hot air could

be detected escaping from the Padarn on a Saturday night), but it returned with a vengeance in the two great winters of 1978 and 1979.

While the Scots were busy bemoaning the 'too cold' conditions, Welsh ice took a quantum leap forward under the guidance of Martin Boysen, Tut Braithwaite and London raider Mick Fowler. But in 1978 Idwal's jewel, The Appendix, fell to local lad Mick Poynton, who just outdistanced some thoroughbred opposition in the race to embrace this fragile entrail. Mick has since shown that this was no flash in the pan, with stylish ascents of the best of Welsh ice. More recently, he starred in Alan Hughes's *Affinity with Ice*, an exciting video featuring some classic Welsh ice and some classic horseplay by Paul Williams. But back to the great freezes of the seventies!

In 1978, Fowler opened his account modestly enough with Cascade on Craig y Rhaeadr in the Pass, but the following year it was a one-horse race: Skid Row on Llech Ddu (the first winter breach of this imposing crag), Jubilee Climb, Brwynog Chimney, The Arête, Camus and Silver Machine on Cloggy, East Peak Direct and Central Gully Direct on Lliwedd, Central Ice-fall Direct, Chequered Wall and Grooved Slab on Craig y Rhaeadr – all succumbed to the mighty Fowler axe. And, with the exception of Jubilee Climb, none of the other routes on Cloggy have seen second ascents, unlike Cascade and Central Ice-fall Direct, which have tended to become stepped highways whenever they have formed. Indeed, both have suffered the ultimate ignominy – of being soloed by John Barry (as indeed has The Devil's Appendix, although not without recourse to a mind-gathering rest, clipped to both tools!).

Fowler apart, the remaining crumbs were fairly evenly distributed: Tut Braithwaite managed to steal Bloody Slab on Cloggy; Roger Baxter-Jones, in a less well-publicized effort, forced a winter ascent of neighbouring Great Slab, while Martin Boysen had to make do with The Somme (formerly known as Lost Gully) on the Ladders, and Maria, a little gem on Gallt yr Ogof, the crag behind Helyg. Meanwhile, down in deepest, darkest mid-Wales, local guru John Sumner, aided and abetted by John Codling, was busy proving that ice-climbing was not solely a phenomenon of the frozen north. Trojan on Cadair Idris, Sloose on Gist Ddu and the brilliant Maesglasau Falls near Dinas Mawddwy are three-star routes to rank with the best in Britain.

With all this frantic activity going on, Rick Newcombe rushed out a revised version of the guide to incorporate the new wave – and, predictably, the mild winters resumed. Winter climbing continued, but it wasn't until January/February 1985 that the ice age returned, and once again Mick Fowler was very much to the fore, this time treading on the toes of John Sumner in his mid-Wales backyard. The big line to the left of Trojan became Colonial Virgin, after Fowler's Kiwi partner had completed his first British winter climb in some style. The obscure Craig Bodlyn in the Rhinogs was the next target, with Crag Jones and 'Slippery Vic' Saunders getting in on the Fowler act to record a quartet of 'modern Vs' in the form of Chain Gang, Cryogenics, The Screaming and Riskophilia. Meanwhile, Slippery Vic slipped off quietly to grab some action on Gist Ddu, where the groove next to Sloose became Magic Moss after the style of climbing on the crux!

Meanwhile, closer to the hub, the locals were stirring from their winter-

long hibernation in Pete's Eats. Someone discovered that Aber Falls had gone and frozen, so Rock Godfather Paul Williams donned his hard hat and dragged Martin Crook off in search of fame. Together with the Poynton brothers, they were responsible for three of the four superb water-ice lines which resulted from these apparently freak conditions. In more traditional surroundings, Martin Crook added Y Chimney to Lech Ddu, Arcturus to the wet streak above the Grochan descent gully, and the very fine Aquarian Wall to the largely ignored but potentially superb Cwm Silyn crags. This last route was climbed with the irrepressible John Redhead, whose first venture into winter left a lasting impression – he seems not to have returned! Cwm Silyn also saw the rediscovery of the three-star Bedrock Gully, and Martin Crook gave it an equally fine and slightly harder finish up the steep, hanging left-hand branch. The Mask of Death typifies modern steep ice-climbing in Wales, and illustrates the new wave of winter route names from the twisted mind of Martin Crook – Deffing out the Ben, Fear of the Wagg and Broadmoor, to mention just a few more!

Malcolm Campbell dragged John Barry off to the remote Cwm Dulyn in the Carneddau to discover Quicksilver, while John Sylvester, thinking along similar lines, found Fairy Falls. This wet, slimy area has a number of other obvious winter lines for which there appear to be no recorded ascents, although it seems unlikely that others have not been there before. Meanwhile, Wil Hurford and Paul Williams whizzed off to the far west where a number of steep frozen streams in another Cwm Dulyn, just beyond Cwm Silyn, gave some excellent sport in the middle grades.

If 1985 was good, 1986 was outstanding. Aber Falls froze again and stayed frozen for most of February, as did Craig y Rhaeadr and every stream above sea level; but this time there was more snow on the mountain crags, and the emphasis shifted away from low-level water ice. The Black Ladders was where it was at, and with rumours of a new guide flying around, everyone was keen to get their name on the scoresheet – and, fortunately for the rest of us, Fowler was busy in the NW Highlands. Ian Sherrington with George Smith produced the fine Post War, a hard variation on The Somme and Chris Parkin with Dave O'Dowd fought their way up Flanders, the summer HVS rib to the left of Western Gully. Although this is a classic mixed arête in its upper reaches, the lower pitches involve hard wall-climbing on ground which doesn't ice, and this was probably a turning-point for Welsh winter climbing, along the lines of the Cairngorm experience. Also on The Ladders, O'Dowd followed the summer line of Cannon Rib to give another winter desperate, after Tut Braithwaite and Ian Carr had climbed The Polar Bear, a line of turfy grooves in the same area. Along similar lines, during the one good freeze of 1987, Manx Wall on The Nameless Cwm's Clogwyn Ddu received an ascent in partial winter conditions, just to confirm the direction in which things were moving.

Subsequent less severe winters have seen a remarkable number of hard ascents on crags whose condition would not be classified as 'winter' by the traditional yardstick. Ian Carr climbed Church Buttress on Clogwyn y Ddysgyl, and Arctic Fox, a variation on Ypres on the Black Ladders, whilst Tut Braithwaite – the old master of hard, mixed climbing – returned to the West Buttress of Cloggy with Ian Carr to force a winter ascent of Longland's Climb.

Ian reports: 'The route was climbed under optimum conditions of névé, heavy powder and verglas. In these conditions, together with good weather, the route took seven hours to climb . . . PLEASE NOTE THAT NO PEGS WERE USED (*sic*). The overall grade of the route is considered to be VI.'

And so, with the eventual appearance of the new guide signalling, perhaps, the end of the old order, the future 'development' of hard winter climbing is now clear. Most ice, and snow capable of consolidation, has been climbed, so the trend is bound to be towards more and more 'summery' ascents of harder and harder climbs. It may grind to a halt before axe and crampons skitter their way up a verglassed Cenotaph Corner but then again, it may not! In any case, there will always be plenty of fuel for argument and speculation in this curiously masochistic branch of our sport.