

Some pioneers of coasteering

Edward Pyatt

The last decade has seen a rise in interest in rock-climbing on Britain's sea-cliffs and the standards of the routes on Anglesey and at certain locations in the West Country are as high now as anywhere inland. However it is of considerable interest to find that there is a historical thread running back for three-quarters of a century and more, during which time the work of a few outstanding individuals has passed almost unnoticed. Sea-cliff-climbing is not, therefore, just an extension of mountain rock-climbing into non-mountain areas, but rather an independent entity having had its own innovators and having developed its own traditions and methods.

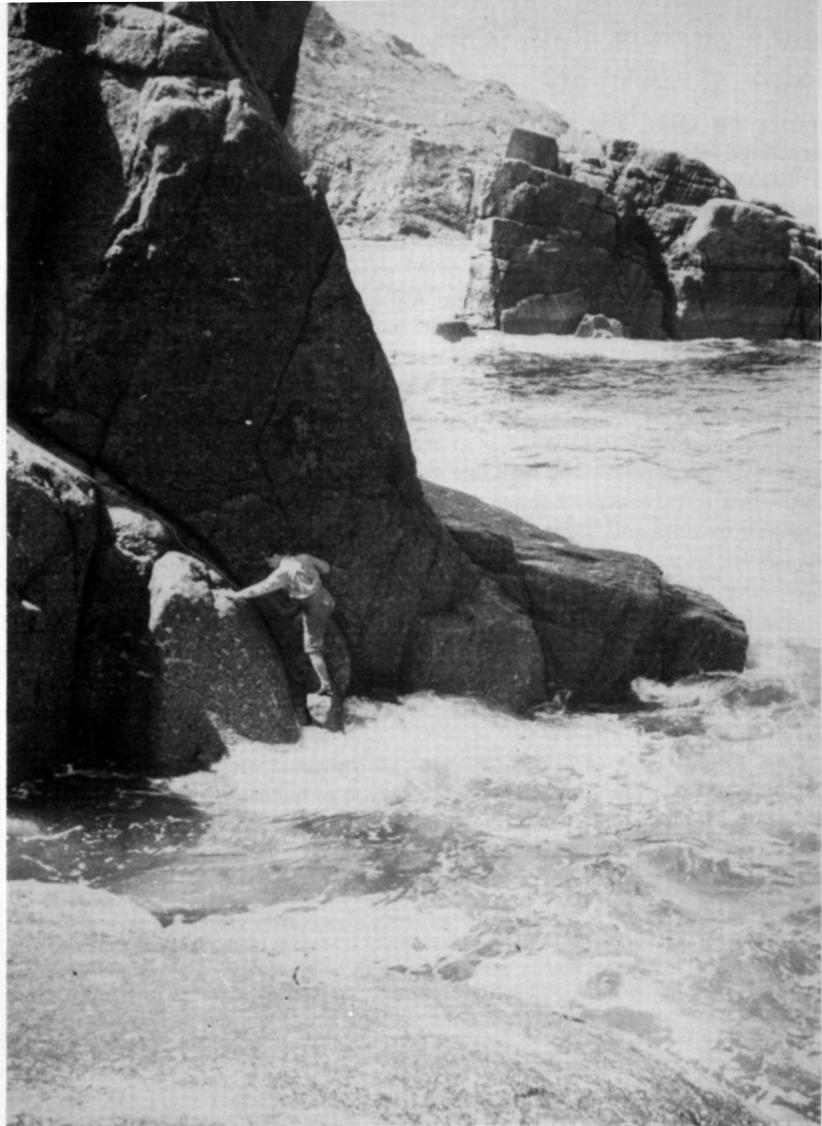
Features of a shore-line are defined by the positions thereon of the high and low-water marks. These are not fixed absolutely rigidly but depend at any particular time on the relative effects of the principal tide makers—the moon and the sun—and on the ellipticity of the orbit of the earth. Above high-water mark is known as backshore, between the marks is foreshore, below low-water mark is offshore. The cliff line marks the boundary between land and sea, the point currently reached in the erosion process; it can vary from a low bank in soft rocks to a steep crag, perhaps as much as 300m high, in hard. The craggier sea-cliffs obviously offer conventional climbing sport to mountaineers either on the rock-faces or on residual features left behind by erosion in the form of stacks, pinnacles and so on. There are problems of approach. If a feature rises above the backshore it can be reached by walking, on the foreshore its foot is only accessible at some lower states of the tide, offshore the approach has to be by boat, by swimming or by a traverse from an adjacent foreshore.

There is, however, one other climbing activity available on sea-cliffs which is unique to this particular terrain. This is to traverse the cliff foot below steep and unclimbable cliff sections from one easy-way-down to the next; the quality of the rocks matters little since that portion within reach of the sea will always be sound. The cliff has of course to include substantial sections of the foreshore type; too much backshore cliff and the expedition is merely an arduous walk; too much offshore cliff and a traverse can only be carried out by conventional rock-climbing. Most lengthy routes will involve a mixture of all 3, but it is the foreshore sections which provide the widest variety of problem.

The bigger the tidal range, the vertical distance between high and low-water marks, the more sporting becomes the traverse. Sometimes the climber faces a problem which can only be passed at a particularly low tide, so that he is forced to time the whole expedition to arrive precisely at that moment. The nature of the foreshore may vary from tide to tide—sometimes, for example, small beaches of sand are scoured away completely to be replaced when the conditions revert to normal. Route finding may be intricate through boulder fields, over and round ribs and buttresses, and broken up by pools and arms of the sea. Often there is a treacherous slime or seaweed coating on many boulders, calling for a technique which one of the pioneers dubbed 'touch and pass'. Above all, the climber must know exactly the position of the 'easy-way' for which he is aiming and be sure that he can reach it in the time at his disposal.

Some years ago I suggested the term 'coasteering' to cover the climber's





78 *Traverse near Wicca, Cornwall (Photo: E. Pyatt collection)*

77 *Torbay traverse, S Devon (Photo: John Cleare)*

activities on the coastline, defining it as 'the application of the principles of mountaineering and rock climbing to the scenic features of the coastline'. Coaststeering has much in common with mountaineering. It uses similar techniques and equipment and leads into similar situations. It has similar objectives—the ascents of summits, the climbing of rocks for their own sakes, the exploration of relatively inaccessible and relatively unattainable terrain. It is carried out on the borders of the familiar world and an alien world so that the more violent moods of nature can be observed and admired without actual need to be involved with them; the mountaineer on the other hand has actually to enter an alien world in order to

practise his sport. The cliff foot traverse and the problems of access in this specialized terrain are peculiar to sea-cliffs.

The cliff foot traverse will be linked for ever with the names of certain pioneers, whose precise roles in the development may tend to be overlooked in the flurry of the recent advances.

Arthur Westlake Andrews (1868–1959) was a notable member of the AC. His mountain experience included several Alpine regions and Norway; he was co-author with J. M. Archer Thomson of the famous *Climbs on Lliwedd* and was one of the first men to climb British rocks in tennis shoes. He first went to Cornwall as a child in the 1870s, but only much later after travelling and climbing elsewhere did he realize the rock-climbing potentialities of the local sea-cliffs. He later claimed that 'one of his early ambitions was to make a complete traverse of the shore of the British Isles between low and high tide marks'—the birth of an idea, the basis of the coasteering traverse as we know it today. He began on the N coast of the W tip of Cornwall in 1902 and 3 years later described his discoveries in the *Climbers Club Journal*. He eventually retired in 1922 to Tregetheren near Zennor, extended his explorations of various cliffs and became established as the sole, and therefore the leading sea-cliff climber. A climber's guide-book to Cornish climbing appeared in 1950. He lived to see ever increasing numbers of climbers turning to the W, but missed unfortunately the great upsurge of the 60s which established the West Country as a major climbing area. He had never doubted that one day it would become just that.

E. A. Newell Arber of Trinity College, Cambridge—University demonstrator in paleobotany—was not a mountaineer. His claim to inclusion among the pioneers rests on his highly entertaining book *The Coast Scenery of North Devon* (Dent, 1911; recent reprint) and the remarkable suggestions for cliff foot traverses outlined therein.

'To those who are interested and active no better advice can be given than to combine with the cliff walks the more difficult and much more laborious method of progressing along the beach . . . It is true that in many districts, in order to make any progress thereon, energy, strength and determination are necessary, and an element of danger is not altogether absent . . . Rock climbers, and those fond of scrambling in unfrequented places, will find in the beaches of the roughest portion of this coast a new paradise, which is certain to meet with their approval.'

The problems of a lengthy traverse would require, he added—

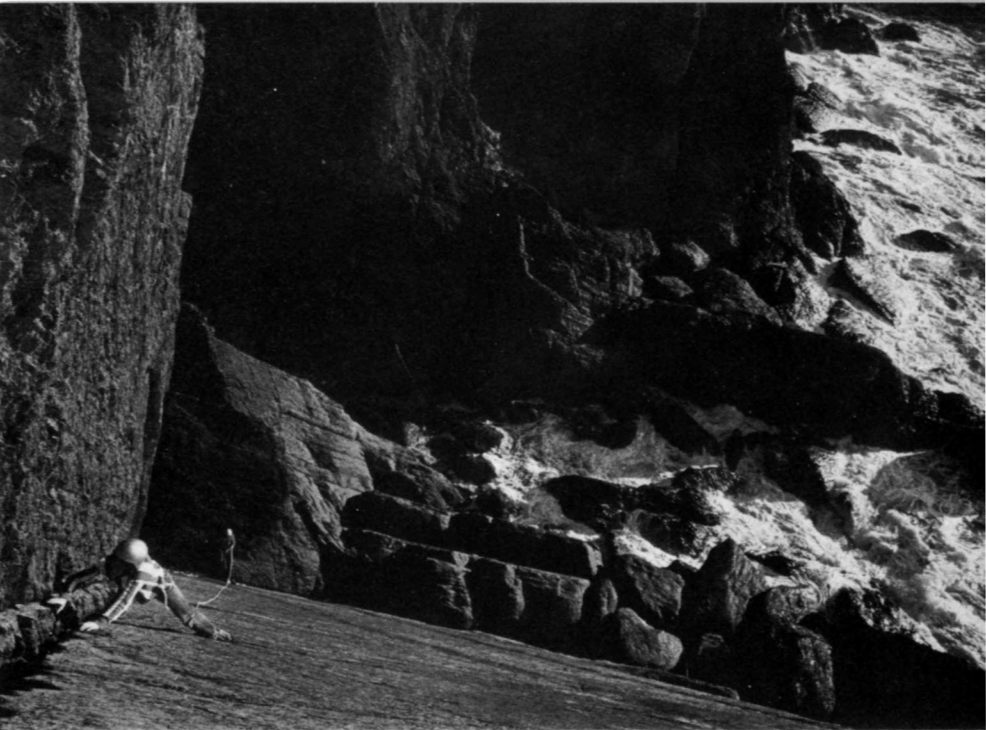
'... studies as serious as those which were necessary when, in former days, some untrodden Alpine peak was to be attacked'.

He recommended the carrying of an alpenstock! Arber, who died just after the 1914–18 War, never had the necessary climbing skills, and so for the next 30 years the situation awaited the man.

Clement Hugh Archer, a member of HM Diplomatic Service in the Far East, joined the AC in December 1927, with a list of Japanese and Korean peaks, some Lake District walking and a little Alpine experience. His name is still revered in Korean climbing circles. Early in the 1950s he retired to the West Country and began almost immediately to carry out Arber's great design of a cliff foot traverse from Porlock to Boscastle (close on 100 miles). It is not clear if his inspiration came from Arber's book; more probably he was an innovator, who only heard afterwards about the earlier work. Certainly he knew nothing of Andrews and the



79 Tyrolean traverse, near Dawlish, S Devon (This and next photo: John Cleare)



80 Scratling Crack, Baggy Point, N Devon

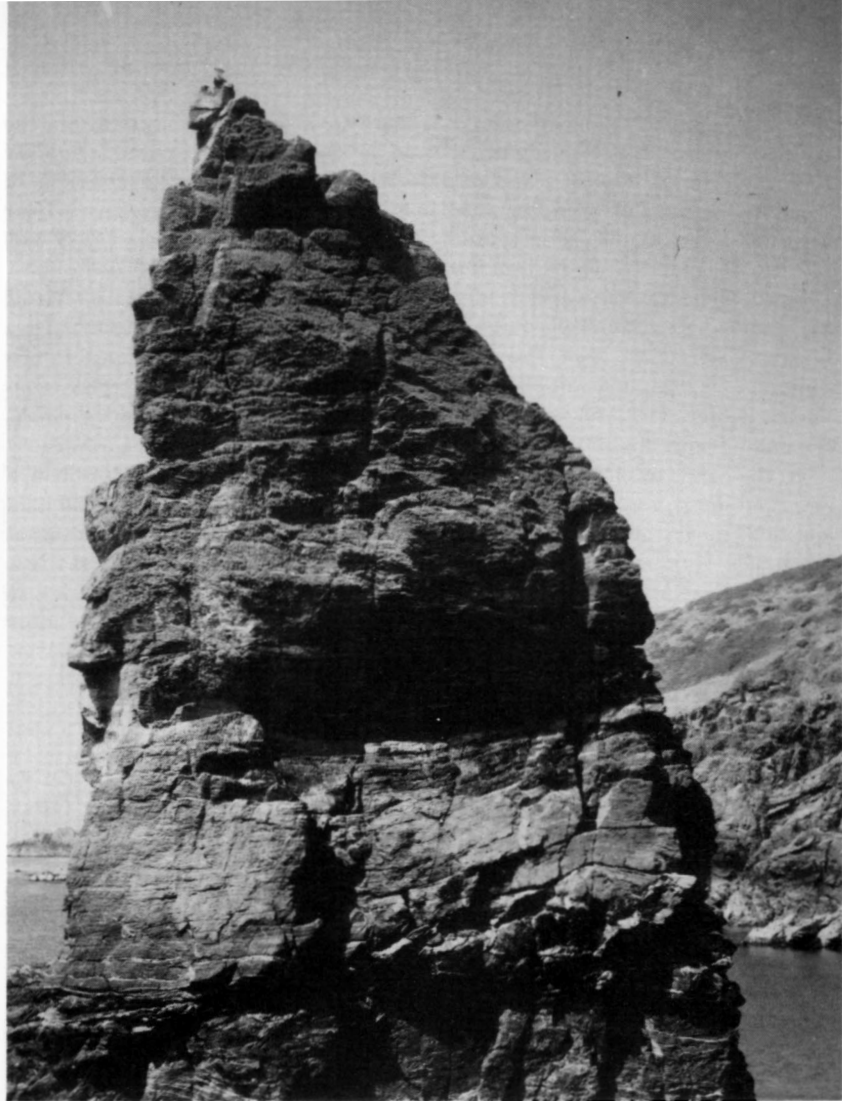
activities in W Cornwall.

Archer was not a particularly neat or skilful climber, but he made up for this by his drive and enthusiasm. The tidal range on this coast is tremendous, in places well over 20ft, accentuating the necessity of reaching points of difficulty exactly at low tide. During the following years Archer, with his close friend Cecil Agar, beavered away at the search for easy-ways-down, for traversing lines on cliff faces and for routes over and round the ends of ribs and promontories, finally completing every inch of the traverse that Arber had proposed. This was a quite remarkable feat of exploration and a tribute to Archer's single-minded persistence. The details are set out in his *Coastal Climbs in North Devon* (Privately 1961, with supplements in 1963 and 1965). The author did not live to realize the outstanding nature of his contribution, for he died shortly afterwards following an accident while making meteorological observations.

Tom George Longstaff (1875–1964) and Albert Frederick Mummery (1856–95) need no introduction in these pages. Both had a fleeting connection with coasteering, yet neither made any lasting contribution to it, even though their efforts ante-date the more substantial developments outlined above. The former in his autobiography—*This My Voyage* (1950)—revealed only late in life some details of his climbing on the coast of N Devon in the 1880s.

'The climbs were nearly all horizontal traverses. The rules were to get round the headlands between the top of the cliffs and the sea below, keeping above high-water mark if possible.'

He also pioneered climbs at Baggy Point and on Lundy, both now areas of considerable development.



81 *The Needle, Sark (This and next photo: E. Pyatt)*

Mummery contributed the notes on 'Chalk' to W. P. Haskett Smith's *Climbing in the British Isles—England* (1894) and it is just possible that it was this writing which influenced the young Andrews.

'... traverses of great interest and no slight difficulty are frequently possible for considerable distances (on the cliffs between Dover and St Margaret's). A good *objectif* may be found in the endeavour to work out a route to the various small beaches that are cut off from the outer world by the high tide and cliffs.'

The poor quality of the chalk forced Mummery to explore horizontally rather than vertically and thus to produce the sort of traverse which is now an important part of coasteering.

Leslie Garnet Shadbolt (1883–1973) was always associated with one particular cliff area—the Channel Island of Sark, after he described the Autelets stacks in the *Climbers' Club Journal* in 1912. Certain of our traditional coasteering stories arose

therefrom—the use of limpets as holds (a sharp tap makes them cling tight) and the failure of limpets as portable holds (they do not cling tight if placed on unfamiliar rock, but drop off into the sea). Except for one or two places, said Shadbolt, Sark could be traversed between low-water mark and 50ft above high-water mark for the whole 20 to 30 miles of its coastline. Porter in Shadbolt's obituary (*AJ* 79 284) refers to one of the harder parts of this climb completed together in 1926.

Much of the traverse, which is mere walking and scrambling, cannot be classed as climbing. It is however of considerable interest to note that it is all described in a booklet *Guide to the Coast, Caves and Bays of Sark* by G. and L. Latrobe, first published in 1914, and still on sale in a 5th Edition in 1976. The interplay of influence between Shadbolt and the Latrobes is difficult to determine at this distance, but undoubtedly this book has done much to perpetuate the legend of a traverse.¹

At the hands of these stalwarts, and more particularly of the first 3 of them, a new climbing art form was evolved, peculiar one might feel to the varied cliff lines and tidal ranges of these islands. Recent years have seen similar expeditions at other parts of the coast—in N Cornwall, S. Devon and Dorset to name but a few. Maybe one day Andrews's ambition will come to be worked out everywhere; it is an exciting prospect for the future and one very much within the capabilities of more moderate climbers.

Mountain landscape – erosion landforms

Charles Mont

The geologist's definition of a mountain, quoted by Basil Booth in 'Continents in collision' (*AJ* 80 56) is very restricted:

'... a mountain is not just an elevated area, it is also underlain by strongly folded and faulted rocks, or indeed by large igneous masses such as granite batholiths or piles of ancient volcano tuffs and lavas. If on the other hand the area is underlain by sedimentary rocks which are more or less horizontal or gently dipping, they should not be called mountains.'

The geographer's definition (*A Dictionary of Geography*, W. G. Moore, Penguin Books, 1960) suggests a much wider scope:

'A mass of land considerably higher than its surroundings ... the summit area of a mountain is small in proportion to the area of its base. Mountains may be formed by earth movements, by erosion (the more resistant rocks being left while the softer rocks surrounding them are worn away) or by volcanic action.'

The mountaineer, who can if he wishes eschew all science, will be satisfied with Geoffrey Winthrop Young's:

'earth set a little higher above the face of earth. ...'

¹ *Climber and Rambler* (July 1977) reports a complete traverse of the Island coast during April 1977 by C. Kemp and C. Rhodes—'a 4-day marathon' of climbing, scrambling and walking.