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Scottish Winter 2001-2002

The 2002 winter season had a very slow start. There were no snowfalls during October and the first real blast of winter did not occur until the second week of November. A pattern of short cold snaps followed by thaws continued through the month until high pressure centred over Scotland in early December. The weather was calm and the glens were below freezing, but a temperature inversion meant the tops were sunny and warm. Winter weather finally arrived in earnest just before Christmas when a series of northerly winds brought copious amounts of snow to Northern and Western Highlands.

Despite the variable conditions there was a high level of enthusiastic activity, especially over the New Year period. A noticeable trend was the number of second ascents and early repeats of high-standard routes by a large number of teams. Fewer new routes were climbed than in previous years, a recognition perhaps of the huge resource of existing quality climbs throughout the Highlands.

Two of the finest new routes of the early winter took place in the West. Andy Nisbet and Jonathan Preston visited **Ben Nevis** straight after the first November snows and made the first winter ascent of *The Slab Climb* (VI,7) on South Trident Buttress. This gave a superb and well protected mixed climb through some impressive ground. Across on **Aonach Mor**, Mike Pescod added a fierce route to *Homo Buttress* with the first ascent of *Piranha* (VII,8) with Jonny Baird and Tim Riley. This takes the right facing corner right of *Homo Robusticus* and was described as 'quite nippy' with a long technical crux section climbed on adze torques.

The weather steadily got colder over the Christmas period and strong northerly winds brought copious amounts of snow to the Northern Highlands. Climbing in the Torridon area was almost impossible without drowning in powder, but further north the lower peaks in **Coigach** provided some good climbing. Chris Cartwright and Simon Richardson visited Cul Beag and added the first winter climb to the cliffs on the West Face with *Cul of the Wild*, a six pitch V,6 mixed route based on the icy grooves right of *Lurgainn Edge*. The neighbouring **Cul Mor** also saw some activity with a bold solo ascent of *The Cul* (V,5) with a new variation finish by Iain Small.

The Applecross hills did not catch as much snow as their bigger neighbours. This allowed Blair Fyffe and Es Tresidder to visit the awesome Giant's Wall in Coire nan Fhamhair on **Beinn Bhan** and make the second ascent of *Divine Retribution* (VII,6). This major route starts right of *Die Riesenwand*, and then joins it for the exposed traverse right, before moving up and left to gain a groove system that leads directly up the cliff. Fyffe and Tresidder thought they were on new ground, but the route had previously been climbed by Robin Clothier and Chris Cartwright in 1991 and was never recorded. This only added to their adventure, and Tresidder later commented that the uncertainty of not knowing

what lay above them and whether the route would go, meant it was one of the best days he had ever had in the mountains.

Central Highlands

One of the most significant events of the winter was the development of Coire an Laoigh in the **Grey Corries** by Andy Nisbet and Dave McGimpsey. This quartzite cliff which is clearly visible from Spean Bridge had been probed by several parties over the years, but Andy and Dave started developing it in earnest during 2001. Pride of place went to *Centrepoint* (VI,7) that tackles the imposing tower block shaped buttress in the centre of the crag. During the 2002 season, they added a new *Direct Start* (V,5) before adding four more routes. Pride of place went to the three star *Taliballan* (V,6), an improbable chimney blocked by a huge roof and the very imposing line of *Serve Chilled* (VII,6) that takes the icy vertical groove to the left. Always keen for some exploration, Erik Brunskill and Dafydd Morris also visited the crag and added *The Chaf* (IV,5), a mixed route on the left wall of *Central Gully*. Nisbet and McGimpsey continued their development of the cliff with four more routes in February. The highlight was *Blue Rinse* (VI,7) a sensational line up the big roofed corner on the right side of Centrepoint Buttress. Eric Brunskill and Dafydd Morris got in on the action with *Popped at the Piste* (V,6), a direct line up the steep slabby wall on the left side of Centrepoint Buttress, and Blair Fyffe and Andy Lole made the second ascent of the superb *Taliballan* (V,7).

The good ice extended to the North Face of **Aonach Beag**, where the modern classic *Royal Pardon* (VI,5) saw many ascents, and Stewart Anderson and Stuart MacFarlane climbed the very steep icefall to its right resulting in *Monarch's Crown* (VI,6).

Cairngorms

Conditions in the **Northern Corries** were not as reliable as usual. The finest individual performances came from Scott Muir. Taking advantage of a welcome Saturday night snowfall he made the first ascent of *Wedgewood* (VII,7) with Gordon Lennox. This is a winter version of the summer E2 *Edgewood* on Aladdin's Buttress in Sneachda, taking a more direct line than the line climbed by John Wiggins and Kathy Grindrod the previous season. Muir commented afterwards that the route is made for winter climbing with good torquing cracks. A week later Muir visited the neighbouring Coire an Lochain with Kevin Kelly and made the second ascent of *The Millennium Line* (VII,7). It was a wild day with rime galore and the ropes blowing horizontally in the wind.

In the Northern Cairngorms, Mark Garthwaite and Graeme Ertle made two significant ascents on the Upper Tier of **Carn Etchachan**. First they repeated *Snake Charmer* (VI,6) before returning the following weekend to make the first winter ascent of the summer line of *Poison Dwarf*. This technical VII,8 mixed climb was climbed on an atrocious day of high wind and spindrift and ranks as one of the finest performances of the winter.

The steep faces on **Lochnagar** came into good icy condition in February. Capitalising on a rare ascent of *Tough Guy* earlier in the season, Guy Robertson and Jason Currie returned to make the second ascent of *Rolling Thunder* on the

Tough-Brown Face. This summer E1 was first climbed in winter by Alan Mullin. Climbing solo in powder snow conditions in December 1999, he took several falls onto a back rope before succeeding on the route with a variation he called *Death by Misadventure* (VIII,8). Robertson and Currie made a more measured ascent, taking advantage of the icy nature of the right side of the face, describing the route afterwards as 'Lochnagar mixed climbing at its best'.

Further left, Blair Fyffe and Es Tresidder made the third ascent of *Trail of Tears* (VII,8). This was their third visit to climb this outstanding line that has become the most sought-after route on the Tough-Brown Face. Fyffe and Tresidder made it a fine three days in the corrie, by climbing *Shadow Buttress B* and then making an early repeat of *Pinnacle Grooves* (VII,7) on The Pinnacle. This latter route requires particularly icy conditions and Robertson and Tim Rankin teamed up to take advantage of the welcome ice when they made an early repeat of the nearby *Epitome* (VII,7). At the crux, they swung left round the arête, then went immediately back up right to join the original route.

Deeper in the Cairngorms, Chris Cartwright and Simon Richardson visited Dividing Buttress on **Beinn a'Bhuird**. This steep buttress separates Coire an Dubh Lochain from Coire nan Clach, but it is more exposed to sun and thaw than the deep corries on the mountain so it rarely holds snow for long. Conditions in mid-February were perfect for the rib and over-hanging flared slot to the right of *Sentinel Gully* on the right edge of the buttress. As expected, the slot of *Big Bertha* (VII,7) proved the crux, with a bold exit on thinly-iced slabs leading to easier but still intricate ground above.

Northern Highlands

In February, Martin Moran and Paul Tattersall climbed a major new line on the huge Giant's Wall of Coire nan Fhamhair on **Beinn Bhan**. Their ascent of *The Godfather* (VIII,8), which takes the face between *Gully of the Gods* and *Great Overhanging Gully*, caused great excitement amongst NW regulars and was immediately recognised as the most significant new route climbed last season.

Another fine ascent in the Northern Highlands was the first ascent of *The Big Chill* (VII,7) on **Beinn Dearg** by Guy and Pete Robinson. The route takes the first obvious line right of *Ice Bomb* on the Upper Cliff of Coire Ghranda and involves some hard mixed climbing to gain a striking ice plume flowing from a groove at the top of the crag. This route was a long time coming and was only climbed after three previous visits to the crag. Guy Robertson had another great day on the imposing Mainreachan Buttress of Fuar Tholl when he made the first ascent of *Supersleuth* (VII,8) with Pete Benson and Jason Currie. This begins with the first two pitches of *Sleuth Start*, and then takes a direct and unlikely line through two barrier walls to give a steep and very direct version of *Sleuth*. Robertson also scored a notable coup with the second ascent of the famed *West Central Gully* on Beinn Eighe with Es Tresidder.

Andy Nisbet was delighted to finally make the first winter ascent of *Rampart Wall* (VII,8) in Coire Mhic Fhearchair on **Beinn Eighe** in early March with Brian Davison and Dave McGimpsey. It took five visits to the cliff before the route was climbed, but it was clearly worthwhile as it was described as a superb three star mixed climb.

Southern Highlands

The Southern Highlands witnessed some important repeats. An on-form Tim Rankin made the third ascent of *The Screaming* (VIII,8) in the North-East Coire of **Beinn an Dothaidh** with Gordon Lennox. Rankin described the overhanging crux pitch as being as pumpy as an E5 rock climb. On the **Cobbler**, James Baillie and Ben Wilkinson made the third ascent of *Punster's Crack* (VII,8), and high upon **Beinn Ime**, Andy Clarke and Frank Yeoman scooped up the second ascent of *Headfault* (VII,7) with a variation on the crux headwall. The same pair also made a major addition to **The Brack** by climbing the well-named *Hogwart's Express* (VI,7), a very steep line up the right edge of the *Resolution* wall finishing via the top fault of the summer route *Mainline*.

It is a measure of the difficulty of the conditions that the first new Grade VIII of the winter was not climbed until the end of February. Cold northerly winds brought The **Cobbler** briefly into condition at the end of February and there were ascents of *Chimney Route*, *Maclay's Crack*, *Ramshead Gully*, *Ramshead Ridge*, *Recess Route* and *Deadman's Groove*. The outstanding performance came from Dave MacLeod and Gareth Hughes who made the first winter ascent of *McLean's Folly* (VIII,8), the spectacular hanging arête left of *North Wall Groove* on The South Peak.

The finest new route of the New Year period fell to Scott Muir and Graham Little with their ascent of *Planet Fear* (VII,7) on Arrow Buttress on **Meall nan Tarmachan**. This very serious route takes the fragile free-hanging icicle well right of the diagonal gully of *The Dambusters* and can be clearly seen from the dam at the head of the **Ben Lawers** road. In many respects the route is more Continental than Scottish in nature and involved a skilful combination of delicacy and pure strength to pull through the impending headwall above. It was an outstanding lead by Muir, and Little was just as delighted. He had been watching this route for the past twelve winters, and the long wait was finally over.

Ben Nevis

For many winter climbers, the 2002 season will be remembered for the extraordinary ice climbing on Ben Nevis in March and early April. Extraordinary is no exaggeration, because the consistently poor weather earlier in the winter laid the foundation for the finest thin face climbing on the mountain in living memory.

Thin face routes rely on a build-up of snow-ice on steep slabs and are normally climbed when the covering is only two or three inches thick. Rarely does the pattern of freeze-thaws allow the snow-ice to form thicker than this, and once committed to the route the climbing is a delicate game of mind control whilst balancing on tip-toe up thinly iced slabs far above protection. The transitory nature of the climbs adds to their attraction, for it only takes one quick thaw to strip the routes entirely.

But 2002 was different. The combination of wind direction, snowfall, and short thaws during February built up a layer of thick water ice on the high north-west facing crags that had never been seen before. *Galactic Hitchhiker* (VI,5), the Mick Geddes and Con Higgins masterpiece up the thinly-iced slabs and grooves right of *Hadrian's Wall*, saw probably more ascents this season

than it had during its entire 24-year history. The *Great Slab* to its right, long lusted after by Nevis winter aficionados, was climbed by Mick Nunwick and Stephen Reid thinking it was the original route and the most obvious way to go. And so did Nick Bullock who soloed past them and Alastair Robertson and Luke Arnott who followed on behind later that day. It was only days afterwards they all discovered that they had just climbed a last great problem.

This is only one example. There was so much ice on Observatory Buttress, that routes like *Match Point* (VI,5) dropped two full grades, and big much-feared routes such as *Pointless* (VII,6) had almost too many ascents to count. Indicator Wall, high up below the very summit of the mountain, has probably the highest concentration of thin face routes in Scotland. These routes have big reputations, or at least they did have until March 2002. *Albatross* (VI,5), *Riders in the Storm* (VI,5), and *Psychedelic Wall* (VI,5) had so many ascents that they dropped out of the aspirational category to classics that should be on every winter climber's tick list.

As word got around that the Ben was the place to be, Observatory Gully was packed with teams queuing for the test-pieces of old. It was a delight to see so many climbers enjoying themselves on these great routes, but there was just a hint of sadness that the Ben had let its defences down so totally. Not only was the ice thick enough to take screws almost on demand, grooves and corners were so well delineated with ice that it was immediately clear from the foot of a climb whether it was in condition or not. Typical Ben Nevis horror scenarios, such as discovering the good-looking icy groove you started climbing has deteriorated into centimetre-thick sugar 20 metres above your last runner, were few and far between. The predictable conditions were a soloist's dream. Several climbers had marathon days soloing multiple Grade V's and VI's demonstrating impressive levels of fitness by climbing well over a thousand metres of steep ice in just a few hours.

Although many climbers rushed to fill their bag with long sought-after climbs, there were some good new additions. Conditions were particularly good on Number Three Gully Buttress, which saw four new routes. Andy Nisbet teamed up with Dave McGimpsey and Mark Edwards to fill a prominent gap with the first ascent of *Vulture* (V,5), which climbs the huge icy slab between *Diana* and *Quickstep*. They followed this ascent with the outstanding *Boston Two Step* (VI,5), a snaking line of ice left of *Two Step Corner*, but they were beaten to *Artemis* (V,5), the parallel line of icy grooves to the right of *Diana*, by Ed Horne and Graeme Gordon who had climbed the route two weeks before.

Over on the Little Brenva Face, Dave McGimpsey and Hannah Burrows-Smith solved a long-standing problem with the first ascent of *Super G* (VI,6), the long admired icefall hanging down the headwall above *Slalom*. Although this route forms consistently each season around mid March, its existence is often short-lived as it faces the sun and can become rotten and detached. Careful timing was the key to success with Burrows-Smith making a fine lead of the steep undercut crux pitch. On the West Face of Observatory Ridge, Simon Richardson and Chris Cartwright took advantage of the exceptional ice build-up in March to climb *Maelstrom* (VI,6), the prominent groove to the left of *Antonine Wall*, and Robin Clothier and Paul Thorburn climbed the left rib of *Point Five Gully* to give *Bombing the Pilgrims* (VI,5).

The finest ascent of the season however was Blair Fyffe's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (VII,7) on Indicator Wall. His first attempt with James Edwards climbed the rib right of *Albatross* to escape up the rising traverse of *Flight of the Condor*, but two weeks later he re-climbed the route with Es Tresidder and forced a way through the imposing headwall above to create a compelling and futuristic looking line. Along with 1986, the 2002 season will be long remembered as one of the great winters on the Ben. But it was also the end of an era when the reputations of the big 1970s routes were finally put to bed. No doubt other climbers will soon be following Fyffe's vision to create the next series of test-pieces for future generations.