

Swanage and Portland: Historical

IN THE BEGINNING

On the 6th of January 1786 two men scaled the cliff near Seacombe. Unlike climbers today this pair were not driven by challenge but by necessity. They were crew of the Dutch East Indiaman *Halsewell*, which had been blown onto the rocks by a violent gale. They raised help and, although the captain's daughters perished, being too terrified to leave their cabin, another eighty of the ship's complement of 240 were saved from the sea. One of their number was coloured and therefore a rare sight for the insular locals. Unfortunately, he was not to survive the short journey to shelter up at Worth Matravers; the stile where he died is still known as Black Man's Gate.

Interest in the considerable extent of limestone along the Dorset coastline near Swanage can be traced back to the obscure origins of the cliffstone trade in medieval times. Serious quarrying activity dates from about 1700 and continued up to the mid-nineteenth century. It was during this period that the platforms at Tilly Whim, Dancing Ledge, Winspit, etc. were cut, a legacy later to be enjoyed by the climbing fraternity and in those days put to extensive use by the smugglers whose affairs were rife all along the Dorset coast. Quarrying of the cliffs themselves finally ceased with the closing of Seacombe in the 1920s and of Winspit in the 1950s.

For the first documented ascent of any part of the Swanage cliffs other than for commercial gain, we have to go back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the time of the Empire and the great Victorian pioneers, when famous alpinists such as Mummery, Tyndall, Whymper, and the notorious Aleister Crowley were practising their alpine climbing on the chalk precipices of Beachy Head and at St Margaret's Bay. The reference comes from John Tyndall in 1869. A physicist, an early member of the Alpine Club and 'a contender for the first ascent of the Matterhorn', he writes of Swanage, 'These cliffs provided me with sensational risks – there are bits on these places as dangerous as anything in the Alps.' The activities of Tyndall and his friends were to set the pattern for climbing in Dorset for the next eighty years or so: personal exploration away from the mainstream of British climbing and viewed by the practitioners solely as practice for better and more worthwhile things. It was not until the late 1950s that climbing at Swanage was to take shape and to be recorded as an activity in its own right.

During the Second World War and with the preparations for D-Day under way, Swanage was forced upon the attentions of an American Ranger Battalion who were practising for the assault on Pte du Hoc, Omaha Beach. They were the first to venture into the Boulder Ruckle with any serious thoughts of ascending, and, loaded down as they were with rifles and equipment, their experience must have been a memorable one. The manner of their ascent is unknown but was undoubtedly dangerous; a sobering

thought for any present-day climber feeling 'gripped' at the bottom of the Ruckle yet 'armed' with a full rack of protection devices.

FIRST PROBINGS

The year 1957 saw the first serious rock climbs at Swanage. A nationwide change of attitude had taken place and climbers were starting to seek out new climbing grounds away from the traditional mountain areas. The greater acceptance of peg protection and the reappraisal of limestone as an acceptable medium for climbing greatly expanded the horizons open to climbers in southern England. Rapid development of the Avon Gorge had begun and it followed that such a large area as Swanage, being relatively close to London, should also become subject to investigation. The preliminary forays onto the cliffs came from two separate groups, at first independent of each other but soon to join forces and combine their efforts. The first group from London and Surrey consisted of Gunn Clarke, Peter Bell, Tony Smythe, John Cleare, and several of their friends. The second, from Southampton University, was led by a talented climber, Barrie Annette. Annette's explorations at Swanage (often solo) gave him valuable experience when a few years later he turned his attentions to Main Wall and the Unknown Buttress in the Avon Gorge.

Initial developments understandably centred around those areas where access was straightforward. Subluminal and Cattle Troughs quickly became worked out and a number of the easier lines were climbed at Tilly Whim, The Promenade, Fisherman's Ledge, and Blackers Hole. *Rendezvous Manqué* by Clarke and Smythe and *Serendip* on the Tilly Whim Sea Walls (the cliff immediately east of the caves) were two important climbs from this period, but it was the routes on and around the *Marmolata* buttress in the Boulder Ruckle which were to prove the more significant. At first, the higher and more serious cliffs had been studiously avoided, the climbers being fearful of the loose and dangerous finishes to most of the apparent lines and the lack of natural belays at the top. The *Marmolata* buttress, with its Dolomitic flavour, was the obvious place to start exploration of the Ruckle; easy to locate and with safe exits, it soon had three classic climbs: *Ashes and Diamonds* fell to Clarke and Bell, *Tatra* to Annette, and the big corner of *Marmolata* to Clarke and Histed. *Marmolata* was first attempted by Clarke who, in the company of John Cleare, aided the difficulties on the first pitch and then had to escape rain and imminent benightment by prusiking out on a top-rope. The route was completed by ascent of the right wall of the top corner, the true finish being climbed some 10 years later by Gordon 'Speedy' Smith and Don Whillans. The fact that these early Ruckle routes all employed some form of aid (*Tatra* was originally climbed with seven points) reflects less the technical difficulties encountered, since the first ascensionists had all climbed much harder things elsewhere, than the considerable psychological barrier that the Ruckle presented at that time. This was to be a feature of many future Swanage climbs – the intimidating nature of the climbing and the loose condition of the rock often proving more of a problem to the on-sight leader of a new route than the difficulty of any single move.

THE LITTLE GREEN BOOK

The year 1961 saw the publication of Barrie Annette's 'Little Green Book', a climbing guide to Dorset that covered developments at Swanage and the preliminary investigations of Durdle Door, Lulworth Cove, and Portland. It was published by Southampton University Mountaineering Club, and several up-dated editions were to appear in the next few years. Although slim in content, the guide was to have a big impact, bringing to the attention of the climbing world the vast potential for new routes that existed on the south coast.

Climbing standards at Swanage took a major leap in the summer of 1963 when Peter Bell forced *Thunderball* in the Ruckle and on the very next day J Mustoe, T Goodfellow, and Bell climbed the serious *Apex Corner*, then given HVS, though now considered to be the Ruckle's first extreme. Routes such as *Apex Corner*, with low technical difficulties yet a fairly dangerous aspect, hinted at later grading anomalies which were to endow the ubiquitous Swanage HVS with a fearsome reputation. Another important climb was Rusty Baillie's and John Cleare's lateral exploration of the cliffs between Tilly Whim and Subluminal. As they were fresh from success on the Eigerwand they had a fitting name on the tips of their tongues, and *Traverse of the Gods* became the first and perhaps the most famous modern-style sea-cliff traverse in Britain.

Attention shifted temporarily to the Tilly Whim Sea Walls and to the Durlston Castle Cliff where a number of good routes established were sadly lost to climbers when the area was later declared a bird sanctuary. Fleeting visits from activists outside the region produced further new climbs in the Ruckle; Pete Crew added the superb *Aventura*, Geoff Cram climbed what is now the upper part of *Windy City*, while Derek Burgess and 'Nat' Allen put up *Black Crack*. Next to leave his mark was the enigmatic and colourful Tony Willmott, soon to become a prominent figure in South-West climbing. A brilliant technician, he quickly freed the old A2 pitch *Philatus* and filled other gaps at Subluminal with a series of hard routes. The hairline crack of *Stroof* was the first undisputed 5c pitch at Swanage and it soon became a mandatory test-piece for aspiring Extreme leaders. The next year, 1966, Willmott contributed *Strophanthin* and several other routes as well as a 5c direct start to *Tatra* before turning to focus his ambitions on the Avon Gorge.

That year also saw the creation of two new climbs in the Boulder Ruckle by the resourceful Speedy Smith which fast became associated with the very best in Swanage climbing. *Lightning Wall* and *Finale Groove*, typical of Smith's eye for a line, are justifiably famous and probably the most popular HVSs in the area. Speedy Smith was to feature prominently in Swanage climbing for a number of years, contributing many fine lines culminating with the difficult and strenuous *Marmolata Buttress*.

While inroads were being made into the Ruckle the large expanse of cliff at Guillemot had, surprisingly, been ignored except for a lone exploratory

route, *Mañana*, by Cleare in 1963. However, in April 1966 three new climbs were all done on a single day, Des Hadlum climbing *Valkyrie*, R Leeming climbing *Summit Route*, and Burgess adding *Ledgend*. These matters rested for a complete year until the area's rich pickings became more widely recognized. Eleven climbs were added the following year, mostly on the eastern part of the cliff below the Whiteware Quarry where the finishes are reasonably sound. 'Chas' White's *Valkyrie Buttress Direct* was the most notable ascent amidst this activity. However, apart from Brian Metcalfe's *Razor's Edge* and *Cascara*, little further was to be done until Speedy Smith's ascent of *Sapphire* rekindled interest some five years later.

THE GENIAL GIANT

August 1967 saw the advent of a climber from Winchester who was to have a dramatic influence on the course of events and whose name became inextricably linked with Swanage through a long campaign of exploration. A graduate of the Rock and Ice school, 'the genial giant' Richard Crewe made an immediate impact that year by launching into the midst of the enormous roofs that are a prominent feature of Fisherman's Ledge. Although *Squid* was first climbed with some aid, it demonstrated the confidence and verve with which Crewe was to tackle many of Swanage's great problems.

One such problem that had been widely acknowledged amongst Ruckle climbers was the steep and featureless yellow wall that could be seen clearly from the *Marmolata* abseil. Undeterred by its apparent blankness, Crewe attacked this wall with vigour and produced three excellent routes, *Thunder Groove*, *Gypsy*, and *Elysium*. Willmott's hard direct start to *Tatra*, climbed the previous year, needed an independent finish and Crewe was quick to supply one. The completed climb now known as *Tatra Direct* was a difficult lead, and a worrying one until the top pitch fell down many years later and left solid rock. Another obvious challenge was the fantastic groove-line in the central part of the Ruckle that runs the full height of the cliff. *Rattler*, a strenuous climb, succumbed to the joint efforts of Mick Nunn and Crewe in July 1968, while, on the very next day, the adjacent roof enabled Crewe to make the stop-press pages of the forthcoming Dorset guide with yet another route, *Billy Pigg*.

THE LITTLE WHITE BOOK?

The new guide, written by Chas White, appeared in the shops in the early months of 1969 to mixed reviews. For most climbers it was a welcome and much needed publication, and, as White himself predicted, was soon to be rendered out of date as the fast pace of development continued. Full details of what had been done at Portland and Lulworth Cove were now available, though this stimulus failed to draw the activists away from what was happening on the bigger cliffs at Swanage. Sporadic visits did occur from time to time but little was added. Portland was to remain in isolation for the next 10 years or so, the sole preserve of the Revd Bob Shepton and his friends, who were left in peace to explore the island at their leisure. Some of these ascents were serious affairs, on which steepness and the suspect

nature of the rock were given added bite by a lack of adequate protection. As has happened at Swanage, a number of the Portland climbs of this period, such as *The Prow*, *Reunion*, *Scoup*, *Wallsend Wall*, and the aptly-named *The Oh-No Variant*, have been up-graded from HVS into the Extreme category.

At Swanage, attention continued to be focused on the Boulder Ruckle and in particular its omnipresent feature, the faultline. *The Boulder Ruckle Girdle Traverse* was an enthusiastic effort from Richard Crewe and Kenny Winkworth, the first ascent requiring an effort spread over several weekends. Totalling some fifty-two pitches altogether, it was without doubt a strong contender for the longest continuous rock-climb in Britain. In May 1969 Speedy Smith added a further classic in the Ruckle, when with Nat Allen he climbed *Blinking Crack* with the assistance of a large chockstone placed by hand in the initial roof-crack. Sadly this once fine route is now gone, obliterated by a massive rockfall that destroyed two further routes as well as interrupting the girdle traverse.

Crewe maintained the pace of activity throughout that summer with several notable ascents: the big tapering groove to the right of *Rattler* was forced with seven points of aid to give the tremendous *Buccaneer*; next to it *Sinbad* proved to be a high-calibre wall-climb; and over by the *Thunderball* bay *Mongoose* gave some hard climbing up the side of a large, partially detached flake.

NEW CLIFFS, NEW CLIMBS

In the late autumn of 1969 Crewe, Jeff Yaldren and Pete Charman abseiled into the eastern extension of Guillemot Ledge, an area now known as Cormorant Ledge. Faced with a completely virgin cliff they quickly set about assaulting it in the easiest possible way. The result was three climbs on and around the Cormorant Buttress. Crewe was back a week later with Kenny Winkworth, this time to add *Serpent*, *Middle Buttress*, and the serious *Sea Cow*. Further developments became completely dominated by Crewe as he began systematically to investigate the place. By the end of 1974 he had been associated with twenty-two of the twenty-five climbs recorded at that time and could count routes such as *Quality Street*, *Ambler Gambler*, *Dead Red*, and the now deceased *Zimbalist* as particular prizes.

Throughout the 1960s and for most of the 1970s, aid had been used fairly indiscriminately on many first ascents when the pressures of leading virgin Swanage rock proved too great. Although the occasional aid point on a route had become quite common, there were no full-scale artificial climbs. However, one area at Blackers Hole was undoubtedly the aid man's preserve, the gigantic cave to the west of the main ledge. Over three days in August 1970, Malcolm Boater and Paul Deketelaere worked their way up to and across the cave's 80-foot roof to emerge with the finest and most demanding aid climb in the south-west, *Laughing Arthur*. Four years later the

Blackers Hole cave became the scene for a second aid extravaganza when this time Duncan Fell and friends sieged *The Procrastinating Giant*.

Crewe continued his ceaseless campaign throughout Swanage, seemingly intent on investigating every piece of cliff that remained unclimbed. Ed Grindley put in an appearance in the summer of 1971 to help him with *Canned Heat* while in the Autumn, Crewe teamed up with Speedy Smith, to be rewarded for their efforts together in the eastern part of the Ruckle with three exceptionally good routes, *Ximenes*, *White Horse*, and *Behemoth*. This year and the next saw two pairs of brothers climbing at Swanage. The first, P and T Cripps, concentrated their activities solely upon a recent discovery, Hedbury Quarry, climbing most of the lines available there; while the second, Jim and Scott Titt, directed their energies over a much wider area. Jim Titt started his own explorations, displaying a penchant for loose rock with his leads of *Thunder Wall* on Unknown Ledge and the aptly-named *Talus* at Blackers Hole. However, in 1972 he was to establish himself at the forefront of development when, in the Ruckle, he breached the witheringly steep wall to the left of The Ramp with the colourful *Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde*. Towards the end of 1972 the competition hotted up even further when Pat Littlejohn stepped in and left the impressive *Oceanid* as his calling card. The sheer white wall at the western extremity of Guillemot is perhaps the finest piece of cliff at Swanage, and *Oceanid* took an uncompromising line straight up its centre. The route soon acquired a fierce reputation after repeat ascents from Crewe and Smith, and from Falko Rech and Howard Lancashire.

In 1973 Brian Snell arrived upon the scene. An able climber with a sharp appetite for Swanage rock, he was quick to spot what everybody else had overlooked. Guillemot was an obvious place to review and *August Angie*, *Tensor II*, *Yo-Yo*, and *The Heat* were the outcome. *The Heat* was a serious lead even with its original aid, while *Tensor II* quickly became established as a classic of the area. Snell then attempted the prominent but intimidating line to the left of the big pillar next to *Valkyrie*; however, it had to be left to the talents of Rech and Lancashire to achieve success on its second pitch: *Electric Sheep* became renowned as a difficult and serious lead with more than its fair share of suspect rock.

Crewe was back amongst the action when, in the spring of 1974, after warming up with *The Spook* (a companion line to *August Angie*) he laid siege to the impressive ground above the big cave on Guillemot's western reaches. A brilliant piece of route-finding traced a sweeping arc over the cave and became *Tudor Rose*, considered by many to be Richard Crewe's finest contribution to Swanage. Three months later Crewe explored further new territory when, partnered by Tim Dunsby, he ventured into the Black Zawn, the sombre and atmospheric cleft below the lighthouse. *Astrid* was an excellent discovery at its grade but *Mars*, the hidden corner next to it, proved to be a really exceptional find.

Developments continued throughout 1975, mostly in the Boulder Ruckle. Brian Snell combined forces with Crewe to establish *Mickey Mouse*, an unlikely line through the overhangs to the left of *Buccaneer*. Snell then continued his efforts, adding a further nine routes to the Ruckle that year of which *Thor* in the *Thunderball* bay area was perhaps his best contribution. Also in that area were two fine additions from the partnership of Lancashire and Pete Holden; *Snowdrop* was a particularly intimidating exercise and *Jo* took a beautiful line up similarly steep ground. At the other end of the Ruckle, next to *Behemoth*, Crewe's *The Golden Fleece* was a line tipped for popularity. However, the most significant event of 1975 was undoubtedly Rech's and Lancashire's fine free ascent of the intimidating, large roof on *Squid* at Fisherman's Ledge. Not only did this put Swanage back in touch with free-climbing attitudes elsewhere in the country, it also proved that the pervasive Swanage roof was no longer inviolate.

The following year, 1976, saw various additions to the middle section of the Ruckle, the best being Snell's *Cloud Nine*. Jim Titt slotted in a few problems at Subluminal while Scott made an unusual discovery when he disappeared into the depths of a concealed zawn on the Promenade. The resulting mini-expedition, *Benny* (a sea-cliff version of Lockwood's *Chimney*), became an instant favourite.

White's guidebook was by now hopelessly out of date, some 200 new routes having been added to the Swanage cliffs alone, and the whole of Dorset was in need of a major update. The task of masterminding (and financing) a new guide was taken up by Richard Crewe, who had been quietly compiling the information for nearly five years.

FAST AND FREE

Crewe finally retired from new-routing shortly after the publication of his guide and left the impetus for further explorations in the hands of George Hounsome, a powerful and energetic climber with a particular flair for Dorset limestone. Hounsome had already illustrated his abilities in 1976 with a typically bold and impressive free ascent of *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde* (which he regarded as being E1, not E3). In the next few years leading up to 1980 he was to put up over 30 new climbs as well as making an extensive campaign of aid eliminations and repeat ascents. Hounsome combined the strong local ethic of leading new routes on sight with a much more rigorous approach to free-climbing, resulting in a series of difficult and serious routes which quickly gained a reputation, if only for their imaginative undergrading.

The enormous scope of the Ruckle still remained the major attraction and Hounsome began plugging its many gaps with routes like *Corollary*, *Tiger Moth*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Ulysses*, as well as ticking off free ascents of such notables as *Marmolata Buttress*, *The Tool*, and *Billy Pigg*. Earlier, in 1976, while ascending *The Peccary* and cleansing the noxious *Triton* of its six points, he had a chance to size up any further possibilities that remained in

the Black Zawn. He was back in 1978, this time to investigate the very steep ground that lay between *Triton* and *Mars*. *Melpomene*, an aggressive yet fine piece of climbing, was marred by two resting-slings; however, these were quick to disappear thanks to a jackal in the guise of Pat Littlejohn.

AVON CALLING

Other South-West climbers also started to take an interest in what was happening in Dorset during this period, and two closely-linked groups, one from Bristol and the other from Portsmouth, began to explore possibilities. In 1977 Gordon Jenkin added *The Orange-Throated Gronk* to the western end of the Ruckle and dispensed with all the aid on *Buccaneer*, while Portsmouth climber Kevin Turner continued the emphasis on free-climbing by ridding *Ximenes* of its aid as well. The following year was to be pivotal at Swanage. Standards had lagged behind what had been achieved on sea-cliffs elsewhere; and they now received that much-needed push. Jenkin and Frank Farrell had already tried to venture into the hostile environment to the west of the Blackers Hole cave but, having failed, they co-opted the forceful talents of Arnis Strapcans for another attempt. Strapcans was on top form and made a flawless lead of the crux traverse and the big groove that was the main feature of the route. Called *Polaris*, it featured Swanage's first 6a pitch and immediately joined the 'big league' of South-West routes. The action gathered pace when another Bristolian, Richard 'Nipper' Harrison, put in a good effort at Guillemot, climbing Brian Snell's aid route *Warlord* with only one point of aid; and Turner, Nick Buckley, and Paul Dawson climbed *Teenage Wasteland*, a hard and serious line up the front of the *Marmolata* buttress.

The years 1979 and 1980 saw yet more hard routes. In the Ruckle Strapcans maintained the pressure with the steep and strenuous *Barracuda* as well as completely free-climbing *Mickey Mouse*, while the coveted line of *Marmolata Arête* was grabbed by Hounsome. The partnership of Buckley and Turner paid dividends that year: Turner was out in front for the superb *Ocean Boulevard* but it was Buckley who produced the big lead when he finally succeeded on *Freeborn Man*, a brilliant pitch up the wall next to *The Conger* at Fisherman's Ledge. Buckley and Turner were amazed at the untapped potential of Fisherman's and were quick to rectify the situation with *Crackers* and *The Ritz*, lines which attacked the roofs either side of *Squid*. *The Ritz* was an especially surprising discovery and made classic status overnight. Jenkin uncovered yet more high-quality climbing with *Limited Edition*, a bold and difficult wall-climb, while Buckley went on to ascend the arête of *Decayed* and the perfect crackline of *The Law*. Cormorant Ledge had a temporary revival when Hounsome explored the cliff below the Reform Quarry and Jenkin upped the grades there further with his unfriendly *Cruel Passions*. However, Hounsome's final mark was to be left in the Ruckle, where amongst other things he made an on-sight lead of *Scythe*, the huge raw groove carved out of the side of Pillar Bay by the earlier collapse of *Blinking Crack*.

Although Swanage had by now an abundance of strenuous and bold climbing as well as an ample selection of routes in the 'adventure' category, it could boast few climbs that were technically exhausting. Indeed many climbers still considered that the area's steep and loose nature precluded such developments. For some, however, the multitude of roof-cracks in the Ruckle became the prime objective. In 1980 Nick Buckley showed the way when after a determined effort he managed to free-climb the guarding roof of *Dog Watch*. A year later Steve Monks, taking a short break from his activities in the Avon Gorge, grabbed two prizes in one weekend when he eliminated the remaining rest-point on *Warlord* and crossed the magnificent ceiling of *Cima Petite* to create yet another test-piece roof-problem.

THE LEAN MACHINE STRIKES

Interest in Dorset now ground suddenly to a halt as the main activists turned their attention elsewhere. Although the potential for top-standard routes had been recognized it was to be over a year before someone new to the scene, Martin Crocker, took a fresh look at the possibilities. An inspired and highly determined climber, he was quick to realize that many of the best and most problematic unclimbed lines were also on better-quality rock. Taking a more professional attitude to cleaning his routes than others, he was soon rewarded for his work with a series of brilliant and difficult climbs. In 1983 the steep, bare wall between *Behemoth* and *White Horse* gave unlikely pocket-climbing for *Soul Sacrifice*, while the central part of the clean face next to *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde* offered up the superb *Mother Africa* and the harder *Wall of the Worlds*. An even steeper wall, also in the Ruckle but at its western end, became the scene for Swanage's first E5 when Crocker finally dragged Dorset into the '80s with the awesome *The Lean Machine*.

Crocker had the cliffs virtually to himself as he continued his onslaught throughout 1983 with a host of desperate routes. *Relax and Swing's* 20-foot 6a roof was a substantial undertaking, as was his totally free ascent of the A3 aid route *Procrastinating Giant* up the right-hand side of the Blackers Hole cave. Over at Guillemot, he had previously penetrated the cave roof left of *Tudor Rose* with the challenging *Race for the Oasis*. Turning to the showpiece of Swanage, the sweeping white wall split by Littlejohn's *Oceanid*, Crocker then set about filling every remaining space with yet more quality hard routes: *Facedancin'*, *Vikings*, and the fingery *Fly Crazy but Free* continued the process of placing Swanage firmly amongst the best and hardest crags in the South-West. The general rise in standards during the late 1970s and early '80s, along with the breakdown of some of the myths surrounding climbing at Swanage, brought a steady rise in the number of repeat ascents of the harder lines. As elsewhere, Ed Hart and Dave Ivory were particularly active in this field, with second ascents of routes such as *Polaris*, *Facedancin'*, *Vikings*, and *Cruel Passions*, as well as contributing the impressive *Nuke* to Blackers Hole along the way. Crocker's deep inroads finally spurred the competition after a noticeable absence. Ivory beat him to a completely free ascent of *Barracuda* and to *Len's Rule of the Sea*, a hidden gem down at The

Promenade, while Buckley's continued interest in Fisherman's Ledge produced *The Impending Gleam*. Buckley resumed his efforts in the Ruckle in 1984 when after a lengthy battle he rid an old aid climb, *Sardine Special*, of all but two points to produce an exacting pitch through the roofs to the right of *Relax and Swing*. *Conan the Vegetarian* and *Promotion to Glory* were further Buckley routes, this time filling the gaps that remained on the *Marmolata* buttress while the steep walls of The Black Zawn received their long-awaited girdle traverse in the form of Buckley's and Phil Jarvis's atmospheric *Deaf Boy Hug*.

Late in 1982, a schoolboy introduced himself to Nigel Coe at a Wessex Mountaineering Club dinner. Although he had not climbed a great deal, the youth, Pete Oxley, gave an indication of his ambition by confiding that he wanted to climb *Cima Petite*, which at that time was one of the ten hardest routes at Swanage. Two weeks after his introduction to new-routing on Dunsby's and Coe's *High Tide and Green Grass* (VS), Oxley was back for the first of his own new climbs, *Poetry in Motion* (E3). A few lines later he had sufficient cool to win through on the sparsely-protected *Boatpusher's Arête*. Oxley's drive, ability, and dedication were soon to make him the foremost first ascensionist in Dorset, as well as the climber most responsible for the rise in standards in the county.

The cliffs were reaching maturity for the older Swanage hands and it required younger climbers Oxley and Crispin Waddy to take a fresh look at the possibilities. Along with Dunsby's and Coe's *Fish Supper*, Pete Finklaire's *Vortices* stirred new interest in the western half of the Ruckle, but it was Waddy's activities which paid the greater dividend. *Symplegades*, *Dragon's Teeth*, the serious *Apache*, and the superb looking *Planet* enabled Waddy to demonstrate that potential in the Ruckle was there for those who looked. Between *Sweet and Sour* and *RIP*, the cracks and headwall brought him into close proximity with Oxley; Waddy added *Headstone*, but Oxley found a better solution with *Wide Awake in America*. While Waddy opened up the previously neglected Topmast Quarry and Smokey Hole area, Oxley gave The Promenade a rigorous work-out with a series of athletic problems of which *Howling Stone* is a particularly worthwhile contribution. However, it was the *Lean Machine* wall where Oxley showed he was a force to be reckoned with: *Surge Control* and *Punks in Power* were both long sustained pitches.

GORDIE'S GUIDE

A broken neck has meant the end for some but, fortunately, for Gordon Jenkin it meant only a spell as an armchair climber. This period of enforced inaction allowed him to sublimate his yearning for the crags into the authorship of the 1986 Swanage guidebook. Labelled 'the Leonard Sachs of guidebook writers' by one reviewer, Jenkin rarely used one adjective where two would suffice. But then Swanage is that sort of place – the climbs and the experiences on them deserve it, and the resulting guidebook was a great success in both informing and enthusing. Also, importantly, Jenkin's wide

experience in the Avon Gorge and elsewhere, coupled with other climbers' comments, brought Swanage grades more into line with those of other areas. Partly as a result of its unusual rock characteristics, and partly because it was an isolated climbing area, Swanage climbs had tended to be undergraded. Jenkin identified and corrected the worst excesses.

Whilst Swanage is normally favoured with sunshine, the winter of 1986 was something quite different. In February, Martin Crocker sped up *Absence Makes the Heart* while icicles graced the cliffs, and Crispin Waddy topped out on the *Moose's Tooth* in a snowstorm. The only nocturnal first ascent recorded in Dorset would also have been a cold experience, had not Simon Ballentine and Jon Henderson worn wetsuits for the wading, climbing, and swimming needed to negotiate the chalk sea-stack of Old Harry and produce *The Witch's Tit*.

Waddy had a productive spell in Conner Cove that year, climbing *On the Third Day* on his third day and, more significantly, on-sight soloing *Fathoms*. Reports of Waddy's solo first ascents together with the new guidebook's cover shot of Nick Buckley soloing *Conger* were inspirational, and within a few years deep-water solos were to be commonplace. These included the E4 *Freeborn Man*, while *Conger*, itself E2, suffered the indignity of mass ascents, descents, and two new finishes, all solo.

During 1986, Oxley continued to plug the gaps in the Ruckle with climbs such as *Indian Pacific*, the girdle of the *Ocean Boulevard* wall. Attracted back to The Promenade's short hard problems, he climbed *Tessellations*, the superb *Tensile Groove Test*, and, breaking into the E6 grade, *Birth Pains of New Nations*. It was on the first of these three that he placed the first protection bolt in Dorset. He was also responsible for Swanage's second 6c, *German New Order*, less than a fortnight after Crocker achieved that technical level on *Centrepiece* at Blackers Hole.

The next year saw renewed interest in Fisherman's Ledge, with Tim Dunsby and Nigel Coe working shifts on the nine varied pitches of *Mayhem on the Terraces*, and Waddy with partner Andy Ford creating a big splash with *Swordfish Trombones*. Matt Saunders forsook his beloved sandstone for *Younger Days* at Guillemot, where Oxley took advantage of acts of god; *Exit Chimney II The Sequel* was seven grades harder than the original, which had been destroyed when the abseil ledge fell earlier in the year. Nearby at Dancing Ledge he established the first documented route on the quarried back wall: *Rambling Moses Weetabix and the Secona Park Seven*. A more substantial climb (but with a shorter name) was his *Roaring Boys* on *The Lean Machine* wall. *The Lean Machine* itself gained a variation, *Green Machine*, from Martin Atkinson, who was down south to make a climbing video with Oxley. Further afield, Oxley left the *Mark of the Beast* when he breached a large slanting roof above a through-cave at Lulworth. Even further away from the mainstream, Mick Fowler braved the currents off Ballard Down to make impressive free ascents of *The Tusk* and *Old Harry East Face*. Only

when he reached the summit of Old Harry did he discover evidence of Ballentine's aided ascent from the year before.

THE PORTLAND RENAISSANCE

With the departure of Bob Shepton, activity on Portland had reached a low ebb in the early 1980s, despite some probings by both Dave Jones and Pat Littlejohn. Then in 1987, Waddy visited hitherto untouched cliffs on the west coast of the Isle and made two bold ascents: *Inchworm* was an on-sight solo and *Medusa Falls* took a line up a very thin veneer of flowstone. These ascents lit a slow fuse, and a year to the day later new-route activity exploded. In marked contrast to the earlier ascents, Oxley, seconded by Jon Williams, climbed the first lines on Portland to use bolt and drilled-peg protection. Pegs in drilled placements, as opposed to bolts, were thought necessary on account of the softness of some bands of Portland limestone. Oxley helped himself to several slices of Portland's geological gateau: at Coastguard Cliff, *Superfly Guy* and the impeccably minimal *Nothing but the Groove*; in Wallsend Cove, *Colors*; and then on Battleship Edge, where he climbed *Keyboard Wall* and *Monoculture*, albeit with a rest point on the latter.

Back at Swanage, Oxley had things spiritual on his mind as he tackled the vaulted arches of the cave at Fisherman's to give *The Mind Cathedral* and, close to the Buddhist carvings at Blackers Hole, the bright white light of both *Sunyata* and *The Energy, the Faith, the Devotion*. Dunsby was also seeing stars when he put up *Red Rain* at Winspit, the name referring to a head injury incurred whilst cleaning the route. Dunsby, along with others, was to see red several years later when this fine climb was needlessly bolted, both its character and its impact being thereby diminished.

Having tackled *Skeleton Ridge*, the arête leading up from the Needles, several years before, Fowler went 'peak bagging' on the Isle of Wight; he climbed the many stacks there and took tea with the lighthouse keepers. Fowler also found a way up the highest of the Scratchell's Bay cliffs. Poor protection, some tense climbing on flints, and a roof-crack put *Learning to Fly* in the Hard Extreme category.

Three-quarters of the Dorset new routes in 1989 were on Portland. Scott Titt and Coe discovered The Cuttings New Cliff, Harry Venables found both the bottle and the right sequence on *Pining for Glossop*, and Brian Tilley burned up *Midnight Oil* at Coastguard Cliff, where a fine soaring crackline was climbed by Ross White to give *Explorator Motivator*. The tops of many of the climbs on Portland's west coast gave cause for concern. This was keenly felt on Titt's *Skateboard to Oblivion*; the possible 40-foot 'skateboard' back down the steep crumbly earth slope to the top runner and the ground beyond vindicated the use of fixed-rope belays on other ascents. Dunsby felt the new route tremors too, and, starting up *San Andreas*, climbed *High on the Richter Scale* at Blacknor North. But the epicentre of the action was Wallsend Cove with its long bulging wall climbs such as Oxley's *Face the*

Truth and Realm of Chaos. The Bristol contingent also grabbed a slice of the action. Crocker was drawn to Blacknor Far South to create *Ryme Intrinsic* and *Sparkling Bone Chamber*, to Battleship Edge for *Choco Loni*, and to Wallsend Cove for the E6 *ZumZeaux*. On Battleship Edge, Jenkin quickly led *Dripping with Blood* before the crag struck back and a visit to Weymouth General was necessary. For Jenkin this made a change from the Bristol Royal Infirmary!

Whilst Oxley was attracted to leaning walls on Portland, he was hanging out under roofs at Swanage, such as the area's first E7, *Street Fighting Years*. At the same grade but even more impressive was his free ascent of *Laughing Arthur*. This climb, originally A3, crosses the roof of a cave which would swallow up Kilnsey's Main Overhang. With 110 feet of overhang it must have required quite some resolve to clean, let alone to climb, yet it was barely mentioned in the climbing press. Oxley also established a diminutive but powerful roof-problem in the Ruckle: *Razor Blade Smile* is probably the only E5 6c on which heavy beer-drinkers stand a chance! Waddy was also in the Ruckle, to climb *Joe 90* with Dave Thomas and *William McGonagall* with Andy Popp, as well as an E4 6a, *Down In Ruckly Ruckly Land* on-sight solo. One surprise in the Ruckle was a spate of repeat ascents after nine years of Hounsome's intimidating *Scythe*; amazingly this was found to be correctly graded at 'Hounsome E2', that is, E3!

Scott Titt continued to investigate the more esoteric spots along the coast and after twenty years of new-routing pulled his first declared E2 out of the bag: *Graduation Day* involved a full body-bridge across the *Avernus* cleft. Strange gymnastic tricks were also employed when Waddy 'Leavittated' across the off-width roof-crack of *Bloodlust*. (This manoeuvre, reputedly invented by American Randy Leavitt, overcomes wide roof-cracks by alternating calf-jams with double fist-jams!)

Oxley returned to the huge cave at Blackers Hole in 1990 for another E7, *Naked and Savage*, the long overhanging groove which carries on where *Procrastinating Giant* is deflected right. He found *Mariner's Graveyard* in another sea-cave, this time beneath the main platform at Dancing Ledge. In the more genteel environs of the main quarry Steve Taylor's *Daylight Robbery* proved a popular addition to the large number of sport climbs springing up there. Further east two E3s were established in close proximity within the same week when Dunsby, Jenkin, and Coe cultivated *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and Jon Cook on-sight soloed ...*And Captain Blood's Cavern* above a deep-water landing that had already been tested in earnest by his brother.

SPORT CLIMBS AT SWANAGE

Dorset climbing had lacked any kind of social scene since the demise of an active Swanage club in the late 1970s. However, the new climbs at Dancing Ledge and the deep-water solos at Fisherman's brought together a band of young climbers – Taylor, the Cook brothers, and Mike Robertson – who were

united in their love of hard technical climbing unfettered by all but a few quickdraws. Although it was still Oxley who was responsible for the largest number of sport climbs in the following years, these new enthusiasts also made a significant contribution.

Across the water on Portland, Gareth Jefferies made a bold ascent of *Oscourt* at Wallsend Far North. Oxley was enjoying himself here too, on the likes of *Sweet Smell of Success* and *Ecstasy*. Crocker made an *Infernal Din* at The Cuttings, founded *The Wax Museum* at Coastguard Cliff, and won the 'heavy route-name' prize with *Saskatchewan Uranium Miner* in Wallsend Central.

Whilst Oxley resorted to bolts on *Palace of the Brine* in *The Mind Cathedral* cave and *Solid State Logic* at The Promenade, both E7, ethical purity was the order of the day on the wild-looking roof-crack of *Godfodder*. In this period he also climbed four hard, bold routes beneath Smokey Hole. It was after these fine additions that he forsook his rack and concentrated, apart from a few soloed lines, on sport climbing. On the southern end of Coastguard Cliff he braved the tides with varying degrees of success (and wetness) to establish a group of climbs such as *Full Fathom Five*. Inland at The Cuttings New Cliff technique reached a new high on his *Pastoral* at (English) 7a.

The wall right of *Scythe* in Boulder Ruckle was an obvious gap, to be filled by Dunsby with *Talking to the Angel*. On his sixth visit to the 10-foot roof-crack by *Blockbuster* he managed to *Tape and Ape* his way to success. Near St Aldhelm's Head a similar-sized roof-crack, *Gold Mother*, was crossed by another of the Cook brothers, Dominic this time. Jon Biddle returned from college at Ilkley and visited Stair Hole at Lulworth, where he landed *Herbert the Turbot* with an on-sight solo after many an on-sight plunge.

New-route activity in 1992 was concentrated on Portland, although there was a resurgence of interest in Lulworth. There, the *Mark of the Beast* roof was criss-crossed by Oxley's bolted lines such as the E7 *Adrenochrome*, while a 25-foot rail across a nearby roof went on natural gear to Dunsby: *The Safety Rail*. The E4 traverse of *Horny Lil' Devil*, another bolted line by Oxley, proved popular and had several solo crossings.

In traversing mode again, Oxley negotiated *Hell's Darker Chambers* to create Dancing Ledge's first E7. Steve Taylor raised the grades at Subluminal when he acted on a tip from Coe; after one long fall the result was *Dead Good*. Another free gift from Coe was an extra 10 feet of slack, allowing Dunsby a 30-foot flight from just above a runner high on *Wild at Heart*. Not to be outdone, Titt just brushed the ground on the arête of *Seriously Short*, which despite being at St Aldhelm's Head is as solid as solid can be.

THE EIGHTH GRADE

Over a two-year period, Pete Oxley's ambitions had been focused on the prow to the right of *Laughing Arthur*, a full rope-length of rock which

overhangs at forty-five degrees. On his sixth day he managed the redpoint; at E8 *Infinite Gravity* is the hardest route at Swanage. He was also busy on Portland: Blacknor North enjoyed a renaissance at the hands of virtually all the Dorset activists after Oxley had set the ball rolling with *England's Dreaming* taking flowstone next to *Slings Shot*. He climbed another fine line close by, *Reptile Smile*, a three star E1 which, unusually for Portland at that time, became very popular. Also on Portland, Jon Cook climbed *Old Painless* in Wallsend North, where his brother Damian became only the third person to make the E6 grade on a Dorset new route when he savoured *Breakfast of Champions*.

First ascensionists were not alone in hitting the headlines on Portland; local climber Paul Norman was soloing *Persistence* at Blacknor South, protected by a jumarc on a fixed rope, when the rope was cut so that his belay karabiners could be stolen! He made it up to the cliff-top and informed the police, but the culprit was never found.

The next year, 1993, saw fewer additions to the cliffs, but several of these routes provided compensation by virtue of their difficulty, their line, or their length. *Imbolc* was a pumpy addition to the Blacknor cliffs and, unusually, was not put up by the locals, by 'honorary local' Robertson, or by Crocker, but by Nick White from neighbouring Devon. Oxley's *Eternal Spider* featured hard, dynamic climbing, and was a beautiful-looking line to boot. Uncharacteristically, Oxley left an aid section on *The Schwarzechild Radius*, an 'adventure' sport climb at Blackers Hole; he had been 'working' the 20-foot roof on the middle pitch but attempts were temporarily curtailed out of his respect for the nesting-season restrictions.

The cliffs east of Lulworth Cove had been traversed at sea-level in the early days of Dorset climbing, but there were more possibilities than *The Mupe Bay Traverse* alone. Starting beneath the top roofs, facing right, and following their noses, Dunsby and Coe alternated leads on two routes which were the longest in the county since *The Boulder Ruckle Girdle Traverse* was climbed back in 1969. Unfortunately, the Army then informed the author that these cliffs were out-of-bounds to climbers!

The quarries received attention too; Robertson extended the repertoire at Winspit with the likes of the excellent, varied *Chrissy* and the aptly-named *Gorilla Tactics*. Typically, Oxley had the last word here with *Lunacy Booth*, the hardest route on the crag.

The next year brought the highest number of new routes on Portland since the boom year of 1989. Some were very good, such as *El Podor de un Coño* by Robertson, and some were unacceptable; while it was a challenging line with a well-positioned crux, Oxley's *Modern Nightmare* shared climbing – and bolts – with the once committing *Bad Dream*, climbed thirteen years earlier by Littlejohn. Another absurd act by the same hand was the retro-

bolting of *Slings Shot*, a memorable route, full of character, reduced to yet another clip-up; an HVS turned into a VS by an E8 leader.

In spring The Amphitheatre was 'rediscovered' by Coe and Titt. The obvious line was left for later because of the wet rock and Titt's distaste for traverses. A couple of vertical nut-protected lines were climbed. But 'later' proved to be too late, as a month afterwards Robertson added the traverse of *The Great Escape* and the nearby flowstone wall was covered with sport climbs.

Cheyne Cliff had been relegated to the minor league after a huge buttress collapsed in the 1980s. A decade later it had settled down somewhat, and although some friable rock remained, half a dozen sport climbs were established by Oxley and Robertson on the flowstone-encrusted faces. Better rock, indeed almost flawless rock, was to be found a stone's throw away from Portland Bill. There, at White Hole, most of the local sport-climbing activists contributed a finger-wrecker or two. In contrast, on the other side of the Bill, Robertson took advantage of the watery landings, forsaking the drill in search of a thrill, to carry off a series of on-sight solos.

Oxley was busy with two projects during this period, one a bulging wall on Coastguard Cliff and the other a topo-guide for the sport climbs in the region. *Vespasian*, the hardest climb on Portland, required six days of effort, but success came in the nick of time for inclusion in the guide. The *Rockfax* guide had an aggressive production schedule, and although it appeared several months after its advertised date, it appeared before the book you hold in your hands – much to the chagrin of *this* author!

The other noteworthy ascents of 1994 were all nut-protected endeavours. At the eastern end of Boulder Ruckle, Waddy and Noel Craine were climbing on sight at a high standard: one of their single-pitch contributions, *Skulduggery*, may warrant E6 – Swanage's sole 'ground-up' ascent at this grade. Although Crocker also found new climbs in the Ruckle, his major achievements were at Guillemot Ledge and Blackers Hole. On the latter he made three variation top pitches to *Polaris*, with the steep, E6, pocket-climbing of *Enter the Void* having pride of place.

In 1986 Gordon Jenkin hazarded a guess that Swanage would remain the focal point of Dorset climbing. However, he could not have foreseen two factors: the use of bolts, mainly on Portland, and the lack, for the last few years, of a comprehensive guidebook in the shops. The bulk of the magazine reports and articles in that period focused on bolt routes and were instrumental in drawing large numbers to the sport climbs on Portland. Today, activity is spread evenly between the two areas, and sport climbing is being sampled by increasing numbers. On the other hand, the recent hard ascents by Crocker and Waddy, as well as Robertson's solos, are evidence of a counter-trend. Even Oxley is talking of turning his attention back to nut-protected routes. It remains to be seen whether, with the publication of information on all the climbs, other climbers will do likewise.