

Pillar Rock and all Lakeland Fell Tops

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On Thursday 13th August 2015 Lucas Payne and I set off to Wasdale Head our intention to climb Pillar rock, by the Slab and Notch route a Moderate rock climb/Grade 3 scramble.

Sorting and sharing out the climbing gear which Lucas had brought along, we set off with loaded rucksacks up Mosedale to ascend Black Sail. In the heat and not used to all the extra weight, it seemed a long slog up the pass, but eventually we made it to the summit, and headed northwest on the runners trod towards Pillar. Just past Looking Steads at the cairn marking the start of the High Level Climbers Traverse, we dropped off steeply into Green Cove, this takes you into stunning mountain scenery, high above the isolated upper reaches of Ennerdale, the Black Sail Youth hostel just a small spec below. Eventually crossing Hind Cove, we soon reached Robinsons Cairn, a memorial to John Wilson Robinson the founder of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club and a pioneer of rock climbing. From this vantage point magnificent views of the Eastern face of our objective Pillar Rock (High Man) could be seen. After working out our projected route, we continued upwards on a scree path to reach Shamrock Terrace a rising shelf above steep crags which takes you to a narrow ridge behind Pillar rock, connecting the lesser summit of Pisgah to the Northern slopes of the main fell. The path from here leads steeply up to the summit of Pillar. At this point though, we needed to drop down slightly below the crags of Pisgah picking our way on ever exposed ground with Walkers Gully dropping steeply away below. We safely reached the cleft of Jordan Gap, which separates High Man from Pisgah and reached the start of the climb proper. Without pausing for breath and full of enthusiasm, Lucas sprang up a rock step round a corner and out of sight, shouting back words of encouragement, something on the lines of "we shouldn't need a rope come on it looks easy". Not wanting to get left behind and not having much chance to assess the situation, I gallantly followed finding myself on a smooth sloping ledge (Slab) with a sheer 500ft drop and steep ground below it falling into the bowels of Ennerdale far below. While I clung on, Lucas skipped about and started to attack the next section which was a vertical climb to the Notch, a small Arête (the crux of the ascent). Having last climbed around 35 years ago in the innocence and foolhardiness of youth, I started to question my sense of judgment. What possessed me to be put in this position, and at what point was the rope and gear we had hauled up going to see the light of day (or even get used), at this point I seriously questioned my choice of partner.

Lucas looked down from his perch with even greater enthusiasm, stating "it looks great, plenty of space up here, how you feeling"? "Great" was my trembling reply, "but I would feel even better if I had a bloody rope on." "No problem if it makes you feel better" he said cheerily descending onto the ledge, rummaging about in the sacks he thankfully produced a coil of rope two harnesses and a load of ironmongery, and soon had me kitted out and both of us fastened onto the rope, where upon he said "probably best if we leave the sacks here" shot effortlessly straight back up the pitch, with me feeding the rope out, telling me to hang on there until till he had made himself secure, don't worry I thought I'm going nowhere unless you fall off.

Once I got the shout from Lucas that he was tied in and ready, I started climbing the pitch, and with the added protection of the rope and the good holds I must admit I felt much more confident. Once at the top off the pitch, although it was even more exposed, there was a reasonable ledge, and I soon got secure and I was starting to enjoy it. Lucas made short work of the second and final pitch, which at first glance looked more difficult than the last, disappearing out of site, but soon shouted down telling me he had reached the top, and it was ok to climb. As I tentatively made my first moves, it soon transpired that the initial first section of the second pitch which looked difficult and exposed at first glance had good holds, and with Lucas encouragement and advice I soon climbed up bearing right into the final chimney section and joined Lucas on the top.

After the summit photos and congratulatory handshakes, we admired the stunning views from what I suppose could be called a quite exclusive perch. Eventually we abseiled off, (or in my case lowered) into Jordan Gap, where we scrambled down to the start of the climb, Lucas retrieving the sacks off the Slab, we packed our gear away and retraced our steps to the safety of the Main path, ascended up to the summit of Pillar itself, descending via Wind gap and Mosedale to Wasdale Head Hotel and a well earned pint and meal. There was supposed to be exhilarating photos to accompany this article but unfortunately I mislaid/lost my (or should I say Shirley's) camera somewhere between Pillar Rock and Wasdale Head, This I felt warranted a return to Pillar two days later to see if I could find it. A bit of a tall ask I know, and as you can gather I didn't find it, well it was an excuse for another good day out. (If by any chance anyone reading this article happened to find it you can keep the camera, just send me the memory card thanks.)

Summiting Pillar Rock was the end of a quest for me which started in 2011 when I decided I would run in one year all the 214 Wainwright summits which are named in his seven famous Lakeland guide books. At this time I also acquired a book by Bill Birkett called the Complete Lakeland Fells. These consist of 541 tops over 1000ft within the National Park Boundary, 212 of these being Wainwrights, the two omitted being, Castle Crag not meeting the height criteria at 951ft and Mungrisdale Common which isn't a fell at all, and to quote Wainwrights own damning judgment "no more pretension to elegance than a pudding that has been sat on, and its natural attractions of a type that appeal only to sheep." He didn't even bother with a diagram of ascent saying "only shepherds are likely to wander across its top." (Its inclusion in his Northern Fells guide was in my opinion not one of his better ideas.

I eventually managed to complete all the Wainwrights in 308 days starting on January 20th on Tarn Crag (Longsleddale) and finishing on 24th November on Castle Crag Borrowdale. Also managing to complete 144 of the Birkett tops on the way.

I intended to complete the other 397 Birketts in the following year but work commitments etc started to get in the way. Eventually, I managed to complete my penultimate Fell top Looking Stead on 27 May 2015. This only left Pillar Rock, which I had always intended to leave as my final top as a grand finale. I had first discussed this with Lucas over a year ago while ascending Helvelyn on the Old County Tops Fell Race, awaited my completion and a time which fitted in with us both, and most importantly a weather window as it's not the most ideal place to climb when the rocks wet. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lucas for helping me complete my goal.

Other the last few years of completing this challenge there's been a few cock ups, for instance going up to complete the remaining Northern Fells at the back of Skiddaw and Blencathra and missing Little Lingy Hill which meant a special trip back to the Caldew road end, and a trudge up to what is a non descript hill in the middle of nowhere. Also when I thought I had been to Wythburn Fell top near Thirlmere, which overlooks Steel End Farm and the Wythburn valley, and realised when I got home and studied the map I had been to the wrong top.

Also there have been some lows. On only my second trip, venturing onto the High fells was out of the question, due to high winds and a freezing mist causing the rocks to verglas, I decided to keep low and managed to get lost on Binsey spending an hour trying to find the summit, although later I did risk a quick there and back up Red Screes from Kirkstone, just to try and make the trip worthwhile.

Another which springs to mind being Frozen Fell which is situated behind Skiddaw overlooking the unusually named Trusmadoor, this isn't a top but a ridge of the Knott and hasn't even a stone marking the top.

Luckily there's been lots of Highs, Pillar Rock obviously, my favorite top of all, Penn with its pyramid like summit with its unusual rock formations, and its remote lofty position surrounded by some of the most stunning rock scenery in the Lakes.

Standing on the slopes of Latterbarrow, watching a lone fox cunningly make its way up the Valley.

Also Herds of Deer rutting in Riggindale near Hawes Water.

While doing the challenge I have been to parts of the Lakes I probably would never have ventured, some I will definitely go back to and some I will never frequent again (i.e. Swainson Knott and Ponsonby Fell among other things Sellafield being a disturbing back drop). One thing I have found, that away from the Helvellyns, Bow Fells, Gables and Scafell Pikes etc there are tracts of unspoilt Lakeland where you can wander all day without seeing a soul.

Quite a number of Fells I have ascended more than once in this time, Scafell Pike 7 Helvellyn 6 being examples.

For any statisticians among you it took 67 trips to the Lakes, 755 running miles with 269676ft of ascent.

To keep a record of my progress I used Memory Map OS 1:25,000 Lake District map software and Microsoft Excel.

I didn't meticulously plan which was the most optimum routes to complete the challenge but made my decisions on the day, depending on weather conditions, and what took my fancy.

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