

This Life

by Mike Hartley

My mate Fritz once said ‘chap, if there’s one climb you’ve got to do before you hang up your boots it’s The Strand at Gogarth, it’s great, you’ll love it’.

At E2 it’s a bit above my normal grade, definitely on the edge of my comfort zone, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I read and re-read the guide book, trying to imagine what it would be like. I knew Fritz was right; I had to do it.

One sunny morning after a winter of trying to keep our hands in on Peak limestone Jon Haswell and I stood looking up at that soaring crack line. It has to be said, I felt a bit apprehensive. It looked massive and it must have been foreshortened from such a close vantage point. The guide book said 140ft and the crux at the top. ‘Wow, what a line’; it looked awesome. I know many who would find it a fairly easy climb, but if I got up this it would be my first E2 in a long time and I would be ecstatic.

The gear placements didn’t seem too good on the first 20ft (by my cowardly standards). In an attempt to calm my nerves I was putting too much in. Jon shouted up ‘if you keep putting gear in at that rate, you’ll run



The joy of Gogarth Climbing – Bill Deakin and Ros Murray. Photo Rae Pritchard

out by halfway'. Things weren't going too well, then I came across a jammed alloy nut and managed to fiddle a sling round it; what a difference that made; soon I relaxed, felt safer and started to climb better. OK, now I'm in business, finger-jams then laying-away to the right, another good runner; nice footwork. Pull up on the right, more layaways and a good spike runner and so it went on and on, absorbing technical climbing. Fantastic!

The expected stopper move; the one that I just 'couldn't quite do', never materialised and I was soon below the final steepening. Looking down at the ropes snaking through the runners Jon seemed a long way down. The last 15ft looked strenuous but I knew I could do it. I slotted in a Friend and said 'Fritz, this is for you.' A few powerful moves on good holds and I was on the belay.

It had been the perfect climb for me, overcoming some early doubts, never really pressed to the limit, and a bit left in the tank at the top.

I knew Jon would climb it well; it was his sort of climbing, open thoughtful technical moves. As usual he made it look easy. But he did complain about having to lug about half a ton of gear up the last steep bit.

The ab down brought home just how steep it was; hardly touching the rock. In our euphoria we forgot to retrieve the No 2 wire we'd left in; a small price to pay for such a great pitch.

As we walked back over the moor I was so excited I was jabbering away like a beginner. Reliving the climb, going through all the moves, you would never have thought I'd been climbing for over forty years.

Then I noticed two people; a guy in a wheelchair and his female companion. He must have had some sort of mental or nervous disability. He was waving his arms, shouting and pushing away the lady who was trying to feed him with a spoon. Christ!! It hit me like an emotional sledge hammer; here was I exultant in my achievement, revelling in the joy of total physical and mental control, and this guy couldn't even feed himself. I turned away from Jon so he couldn't see the tears welling up in my eyes. I turned to look back and could see his wild gesticulations and his patient, caring partner holding out the spoon. The tears rolled down my cheeks.

By the time we'd walked back to the van I'd pulled myself together a bit. I'd resolved that next time I was patting myself on the back after a good lead; next time I was celebrating the co-ordination, the balance and the strength; I'd think of that guy in the wheelchair.

If my world should fall apart tomorrow, I hope I will be grateful for what I've had so far, and I'll never, ever take this life for granted.