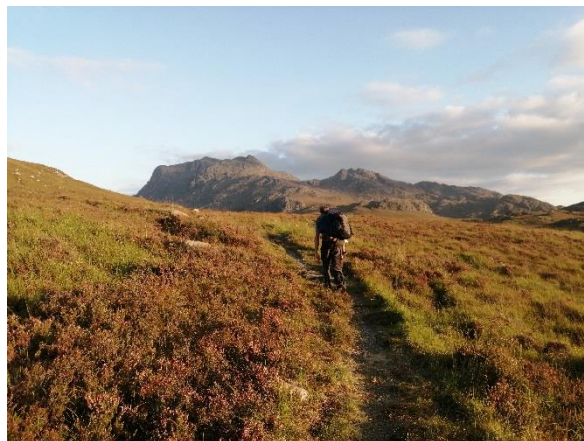


## Carnmore trip report

The plan was initially hatched for a long weekend at Carnmore whilst reading Hard Rock on a wet winter's day. The most remote crag in Britain, rarely climbed classic routes like Dragon and Gob, a 13 mile walk in with a causeway approach and a rat-infested bothy sounded like the adventure we were looking for. Owing to the amount of travel, 4 hours walk in once you get there and less than predictable weather in north west Scotland it was never going to be a popular trip, but luckily Rob was as keen as me. Over a pint in the Neville, we decided on Easter. The weather should be getting warmer, and the midges should still be hiding in the grass. Easter came and went. No leaving the house, let alone travelling to Scotland. Eventually September came around, the perfect month. Dry settled weather, no midges, and NO LOCKDOWN! After delaying another week for a better forecast, we were on Friday afternoon flight to Inverness, into the hire car and bombing across the highlands into the evening sun, set for Poolewe. We parked up in the little village at the spout of Loch Maree, hastily overloading our ailing rucksacks with only the essentials for the next three days and set off on the 12 mile walk to the bothy with 2 hours of daylight remaining. The long slog was countered by excitement of what was to come and the majesty of the evening sun lighting up the heather and highlighting our destination. The little white shooting lodge next to the camouflaged stone bothy, all sat right beneath the overbearing mass of black Gneiss of Carnmore. As the sun set, the headtorches came on and after eventually finding the elusive causeway, we finally arrived at the bothy. Finding it already occupied and needing to justify carrying the tent all this way, we pitched up and tucked in for the night.



Saturday dawned and Rob was up at first light, I was a little slower of my sleeping bag as usual. Peeking my head of the tent, there it was! After arriving long after nightfall the previous evening, we hadn't appreciated just how close the crag was. It was all I could see from the mouth of Rob's cosy little tunnel tent, and it was magnificent. After forcing down a bowl of porridge, we packed the small rucksack with water and sandwiches and set off up the boulder strewn approach. After an hour of steep scrambling we concluded that the crag wasn't quite as close as it appeared from the

tent. After an eternity we reached the bottom of the first route feeling like we'd already had a full-on workout. After waiting not quite long enough to recover and necking most of my water for the day, I tied in and headed on up the first steep groove pitch on Balaton (E1), supposedly the best route on the lower tier. Thuggy moves and plenty of bridging, with big, if occasionally wet jugs led up to the first belay, and the first of the ever increasingly spectacular views out west over Fionn Loch all the way to the sea and Skye beyond. Up came Rob and Led on through the 2<sup>nd</sup> pitch. Only a short

traverse, but a distinct lack of holds, with the only protection being a dodgy nut and a micro cam at foot height made for a delicate bit of climbing. Another groove and some tricky route finding led up to a good ledge followed by a 60 metre pitch of 50 degree grass and unprotected rock (which Rob seemed to enjoy much more than me) brought us to the steep bay that divides the crag and half height, a good spot for an early lunch. We sat and ate in awe of the views and the wall to wall blue sky, with the temperature at almost 30 degrees and no wind, it was hard to believe we were in the highlands in autumn.



Next up was Dragon (E1), one of the two 'Hard Rock' routes that had inspired the trip. Getting to the start of the route involved more steep unprotected grass shuffling, the novelty of which was beginning to wear thin, so we opted to take a shortcut up a steep little corner and join the route on the slab above. It was my lead, so I racked up and teetered up the delicate corner and onto the slab, and after a few ups and downs to find the line avoiding most of the ever-sandier holds, made it up the first belay. From here the view was sensational. Any hint of a cloud had now burned off, with more and more of Ben Lair was appearing from behind the rise on the opposite side of the loch with its dark fluted north face, and a perfect reverse mirrored in the glassy water. At the moment Rob arrived at the belay, we were greeted by a pair of Golden Eagles, silently soaring around the east buttress towards us. As we watched, they passed us, gliding effortlessly for just long enough for them to deem that we were neither food or threat, and with no more than a couple of beats of their giant wings, disappeared over the cliff which would take us the rest of the day and a good deal of effort to scale.

After the scrittly slab, and grassy ledge shuffling below, the next pitch looked more like what we had come for. Rob led up the initial steep corner before tentatively traversing right across a blank looking slab beneath a roof to a sensational position at the arete on the skyline. From here, another ten metres of steep face



climbing concluded with the usually reserved Bob letting out a shriek of delight reminiscent of a teenage girl. Joining the intrepid leader at a belay ledge barely big enough to adhere to current social distancing guidelines, I was a little nervous. The last pitch had felt pretty full on, and the next was supposedly the crux of the route. Fortunately, despite the sizeable rack that we had; I was feeling particularly light due to not having drunk anything for the last 3 hours of climbing in the blistering heat. Bob tried his best to handicap me by weighing me down with his last mouthful of water (an unexpected act of kindness which I am truly grateful for), and sent me off up a wide and awkward crack line leading to a







protruding flake the size of a small table, sticking out horizontally like a giants tongue situated beneath on overwhelming mass of humongous roofs. An exhilarating dangle from the flake, with the full height of the cliff below my feet was followed by a stiff pull onto the hanging slab to the left with a thankfully simple traverse led to a cosy belay, all the while trying to simultaneously take in and block out the wild exposure. The fourth and final pitch was a short sharp affair, with a couple of hard pulls around a corner into a

bottomless groove which Rob quickly bridged up with 300m of air beneath him, with all the gusto of a man as desperate as I was to find a drink. A Long scramble back down to the tent via a waterfall for some much-needed hydration was followed by an idyllic evening of swimming in the loch, eating copious amounts of chilli with our meagre ration of wine under the cloudless starry sky.

Sunday began with a visit from the ponies from the stalking lodge, more accustomed to gents in tweed jackets and plus fours than a pair of scruffy climbers. After another involuntary bowl of porridge and a visit to the bog with the shovel and a handful of moss, we set off up the slope to the base of Black Magic (VS), which we'd imagined would be a pleasant warm up. A steep juggy first pitch, which didn't have the feel of a well-travelled route, led up to Rob's lead of a tricky (for the short) traverse out to a blank looking arete and up for a wide comfortable ledge.



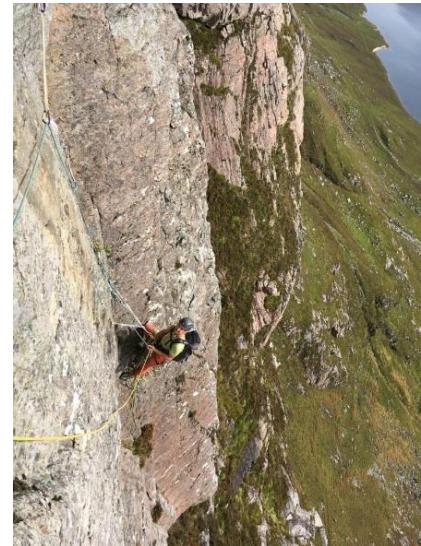
It was another cloudless morning with the temperature now at a more comfortable sub 20, and with our water bottles full to the brim, it was looking like another day. I left Rob's ledge, leaving him sitting in his Gneiss armchair below, and headed up a lovely little thin crack to pull over a solid looking fridge sized block and up on to easier ground above. As Pikey followed me up, he found that the large block wasn't as solid as it had first appeared. After removing my cam from behind it, he gave it a gentle tug and found that the whole thing rocked around alarmingly. After a brief discussion about where the other two climbers we'd seen had disappeared to, rob shouted 'Rock below' and set if off on its rapid descent. It initially only made it as far as the exact spot on which rob had been sitting five minutes previously, where

with it exploded and continued down as a cluster bomb. With the smell of cordite in the air, we continued upwards.

We were now back at the bottom of the grass terrace. Rob led on up carefully until he ran out the full length of rope, and called down "You'll have to start climbing, there's no gear". I followed up the harrowing vegetated slope, chuckling at the occasional tied off heather runner of which Brian would be proud. We carried on like this for three rope lengths before collapsing on the solid rock below the upper tier. I was feeling pretty worn out after the near miss with loose rock, and steep runout garden walk above a vertical cliff, whereas Bob seemed completely unfazed.

After lunch it was my turn to lead, so off I shuffled left along the overhanging ledge of Gob (HVS) and out into space. As I rounded the corner, I found myself on a steep slab, capped with the biggest roof that I'd ever seen, and knew that I had to work my way back to the right-hand side of the slab. I moved up carefully, with my last piece of gear was now below me and out of sight and my focus narrowed down to the rusty old peg a few feet above me. Just as I neared the peg, the rope went tight. I assumed it must be rope drag from the traverse or the rope caught on one of the flakes in the roof. Unable to move up, and unwilling to try and downclimb, I shouted down to Rob, "Can you see why the rope is stuck?" No reply. "ROB, THE ROPE'S STUCK"

A faint reply came back "No it's not, I was just busy watching the Eagle underneath you". The rope came free and with my calves burning I moved up to a hanging belay beneath the worlds biggest roof and brought my attentive belayer up to join me. Rob didn't hang around long on the rusty peg belay, and set off to tackle what is surely one of the most



spectacularly positioned pitches of climbing anywhere in Britain. A tricky few moves up the roof was followed by a 25 metre traverse holds big enough to wrap your arm around, yet hollow enough to force you onwards. At the end of the traverse was a rib of protruding nose sticking out from the giant rock face. A few grovelling moves around this and wide step across the yawning precipice below, and Bob was safely tucked into the belay niche below the roof.

A final short pitch, sneakily breaking through rooves, and up into an awkward offwidth, and we'd made it to the top. As we collapsed in a heap of ropes a Tunnocks Caramel Wafer wrappers, we reflected on the past two days climbing. A perfect balance of majestic scenery, remote adventure and superb climbing. All we had to do now was get home. We Scrambled down the opposite side of the mountain from the previous day, slipping down the wet rock and loose scree, before arriving



back at the tent for a celebratory meal of super noodles and rice pudding, washed down with the dregs of whisky we could eek from our flasks, before collapsing into bed.

Monday morning came and we packed our bags, thankfully lighter of food (and wine) than on the way in and trudged off under a moody sky. It seemed we had snatched the best two days of the year. The long drag back to Poolewe went by in a haze of daydreaming of the previous days and dreading the return of mobile signal and hundreds of whatsapp messages.

Eventually we reached the car and dumped our bags down with a sigh of relief, where we discovered that Rob, despite the apparent lack of meat on him, is a tastier dish than me. He had somehow



managed to acquire three or four ticks of various sizes across the bits of flesh I was willing to examine, and apparently several more on the parts he could only check in the privacy of his own home. Once we had removed the wee beasties, we set off for the airport and a pint, where we just about managed to stay awake, at least until we made it onto

the plane home. The obligatory Magnums were eaten on the drive home from Gatwick, and the weekend that we had spent so many months dreaming of was over. People often ask why you would go to Scotland when the Alps are closer, but when you manage to get to somewhere like Carnmore in perfect conditions, with a good partner, just enough wine and whisky and not quite enough loo roll, it really can't be beaten.

