



AAC Publications

Wonderland

England, Swanage, Boulder Ruckle

Tom Mullier on the mid-height break at Boulder Ruckle. The 67-pitch route Wonderland extends as far as the eye can see.

Scott didn't look happy. I think the damp and the gray skies must have got to him. He'd been silent since the foot ledge he was standing on collapsed, leaving him hanging from a couple of flints embedded in the soft limestone.

Scott Borden had arrived from his home in Yosemite into a wet English autumn, didn't know anyone, and hence was open to climb with anyone, on anything. I decided not to tell him about Swanage top-outs. Why spoil the rawness of the experience? I knew Californians lived for the Experience. I'd read Kerouac and of his parties in San Francisco. I reasoned that at home Scott probably downed a tab of LSD most mornings and soloed the Nose most afternoons.

He still wasn't moving. Must have been jet lag. Or maybe he couldn't swim and knew there was no way out but up. He inched slowly upward to a vertical bank of earth, took off his shoes, and clawed through the sticky mud and loose blocks to the top. Great! Another five pitches done.

The idea was simple. The cliffs in southern England are short—very short—so we would climb sideways. Swanage already had a long traverse: The Girdle Traverse (1,070m, given E1 but rumored to be XS) was climbed by Richard Crewe and Kenny Winkworth in 1969. It follows the mid-height horizontal fault line on Boulder Ruckle, with only the odd deviation when the climbing became too difficult. As far as we can ascertain this has only been repeated once, in 1978. It might seem strange that a route of this length, only two hours from London, has had only two ascents. However, as we quickly found out when we tried to make the third ascent, much of the fault line is no place for the sane. With the exception of the loose summit blocks, it provides the worst rock on the cliff, and although the Girdle Traverse provides a lot of adventure, the climbing is highly repetitive. Moreover, several parts of the route have fallen into the sea.

Having climbed in the Ruckle a reasonable amount, I was convinced there must be an alternative traverse on the solid limestone above or below the fault line. The Boulder Ruckle is around 40m high. Measured in a straight line, the cliff is 1km long. We guessed we were looking at 50 or so pitches for the full traverse. Where to start? Left end or right end? Pete Callaghan and I picked the left end, rapped in, and started climbing toward the east.

Scott Borden realizing that Swanage limestone is not Yosemite granite.

Knowing we weren't going to be able to do anything like 50 new pitches in a day, and that most people wouldn't want to try and repeat the route in a day, we decided to break it up into natural sections. This would create a series of routes that people could combine. Climbers could spread the experience over several winter days of fun above the sea, like Munro bagging (Scottish peakbagging) for rock climbers.

I planned to climb the whole thing, but breaking it into sections meant I could be joined by a series of partners. I found this community-based mission highly attractive—or maybe I just didn't want to make the long drive from Exeter to Swanage with the same person each Sunday.

One of the best sections we discovered was that from Heidelberg Creature to Tatra, which I climbed with Stuart Fox. As the normal start to Tatra had recently fallen down, this section of cliff needed another way in anyhow. This has proved one of the harder sections, but it follows a perfect crack line and would make a good spot for some aid practice. The next section, onto and then along the Adventures of Portland Bill, also gives solid, quality climbing.

One of the worst sections is that near the Asp. Given that the routes around here have names such as the Grim Reaper, Scythe, and Blow the House Down, Tim Reynolds and I expected difficulties, but it was still a little traumatic, with much rock needing to be gently removed and thrown into the sea.

On August 21, my son Theo and I climbed the final crack of Second Sight to finish the final section of the traverse. The full route covers 1,278m and 67 pitches. However, if you complete the route using the 12 suggested sections, starting from the base each time, much as the first ascensionists did, you will climb 1,625m in 84 pitches. We called the full traverse Wonderland (E1).

David Coley prepares for a reconnaissance from sea level, the only vantage point from which one key section of cliff was visible.

Considering its length, the route's difficulty is surprisingly consistent, with no killer pitches and no scrambling. The individual pitches weigh in at: 5a, 5a, 4c, 4c, 5a, 5a, 5a, 4a, 5a, 5a, 4c, 4a, 4a, 4a, 4b, 4b, 4c, 4b, 4b, 4c, 4c, 4b, 4b, 4b, 4b, 5a, 5a, 5a, 5a, 4c, 5a, 4a, 4c, 5a, 4b, 5a, 5a, 4c, 5a, 5a, 4c, 4b, 5a, 5b, 4b, 4a, 4c, 5b, 5b, 4c, 5a, 5b, 5b, 5b, 3a, 5c, 5a, 4a, 5b, 5a, 5a, 5b, 4a, 4a, 4b, 5a, 4a.

I was joined by a cast of characters on Wonderland, most of whom had never climbed at Swanage and never done a new route. The climbers were Scott Borden, Pete Callaghan, David, Theo, and Helen Coley, Stuart Fox, Tom Mullier, Darren Russell, Tim Reynolds, Derek Ryden, and Jamie Trump. Some of these people were on a sea cliff for the first time and climbing very close to their limit. The youngest was 12, the oldest nearly 70. The route is a testament to their strength of character.

Wonderland is a very British big wall: above the sea, never more than two miles from a tea shop, within walking distance of one of the world's best pubs, no need to haul, and there are several good bivy sites on the route (but if you end up spending the night, make sure someone tells the coast guard). Don't forget to bring your swimming trunks.

David Coley, U.K.

Editor's note: The author has prepared an extensive guide to this traverse that can be downloaded in PDF form.

Images



Scott Borden discovering that not all rock is like Yosemite granite.



Pete Callaghan enjoys a rest high above the sea.



Tom Mullier on the mid-height break at Boulder Ruckle. The route Wonderland extends as far as the eye can see.



David Coley prepares for a reconnaissance from sea level, the only vantage point where this section of cliff was visible.

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