

Vertical Diary

Bat Out Of Hell

By IAN WYATT

C'mon, pull harder, don't fall again. Got it, the sweet spot on the break... in goes the cam, but I have to place it blind and at full stretch - but I know it's good from my headpoint attempts. Keep breathing, relax, keep moving up and right. The edges on the break are positive and dry. Another big pull and I'm in the niche. I'm up, chest heaving like I've run a mile uphill in diving boots, hands locked in grip position. With congratulations from the guys at the top, I'm welling up, I can't believe it: this average Joe has cracked E5.

What is it about birthdays with a nought in them that makes us want to do something special? In 2011, some friends and I had zero-rounded birthdays: Brian [Rodgers] decided he would do forty routes, on forty crags, in forty days - which he did and suggested I do something similar, but I didn't think I could count on the British weather for fifty days (that's my convenient fiction anyway). But the idea of a challenge did appeal, and somehow I thought that E5 at 50 had a nice ring to it. The last time I had climbed at this level Maggie Thatcher was Prime Minister and Brian was still at school. I hadn't climbed much over E2 for years, so it was going to be a tough call. Still, I liked the idea, and Brian and the other guys were keen to help me make it happen.

But which route? It had to be gritstone, and well protected, and that made the guidebook selection easy. Hours of dedicated research led me to *Bat out of Hell* at Higgarr Tor. My non-toilet reading was an extensive diet of books, articles and online fora of the 'how to be a better climber' variety. There's lots of good advice out there on how to improve your climbing and I mined it for anything that seemed to strike a chord with me. Most importantly, perhaps, I actually tried it out.

Autumn arrived and my climbing partner Mike Todd was getting a bit twitchy about me actually doing something instead of just talking, so we went to Higgarr to do a couple of routes and drop a rope down *Bat Out Of Hell*. I had done *The Rasp* (E2) many years ago so was quite prepared for the angle of the infamous leaning block. It's in-your-face the second your feet leave the ground, and *Bat Out Of Hell* does not have what you might call a welcoming start. Working out the moves wasn't too bad, not that I could have many goes, but linking them all together felt like it would need the physique of a certain Mr. Schwarzenegger. I've got no chance, I thought...

And yet the idea stuck in my head like something to a blanket, aided and abetted by Brian and Mike for not allowing me to squirm out of what now seemed a very rash challenge.



THIS PAGE: Golden gritstone on an autumn evening: could there be a better arena for pushing your climbing limit at any age? DAVID PICKFORD

So much so, in fact, it drove me to the gym, the wall and out to the crag as often as the weather and injuries allowed. By spring 2012, I was beginning to believe this might be possible. As the clock ticked ever louder, I went back to Higgarr with Mike and Brian. The plan was simple: warm up on *The File* and headpoint *Bat Out Of Hell*, so we each managed a couple of goes and between us got the moves and most of the gear wired. Only

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Mike managed it clean on the headpoint, but it felt like it would go.

It's the 364th day of my fiftieth year and I'm back at Higgarr with Brian. As I lay in bed the night before, I realised that because of the way the top rope was set up we didn't check out the gear in the top break nor the final moves. When we arrive at the crag the top break looks wet, so an abseil inspection with a couple of bits of gear to check is fine according to my exceedingly thin volume of personal ethics. The break is a bit wet, yet amazingly is dry where it counts, and I check the cam for what I think will be a blind placement. Then I pull the ropes. A couple of pals set off up *The Rasp* giving me time to wander

about and gather my thoughts, I'm nervous about the start. I keep warm by running under the crag and do a few star jumps and press ups to get the blood flowing. As I tie in, Brian reminds me not to over-think the route and psyche myself out, but to stay relaxed. We're ready, and I set off.

Almost a year later I can still tell you every hold, move and gear placement, but then you'd lose the on-sight. Despite having been climbing since Noah was in shorts, I learnt an enormous amount from the experience of climbing this route about myself, my climbing, and what is possible. The single most important thing? Vision: what you see yourself doing, want to do, aspire to do, have the imagination to dream for, feel the love for. You have to change your view of yourself before you can change your climbing; or to paraphrase Robert Browning 'your reach should exceed your grasp'.

Anyone can improve their climbing, but to do so you have to risk failure and develop your self-belief. But be warned, it's a project that never ends.

Getting up *Bat out of Hell* has changed my outlook, and this prize cherry became a flavour I liked. I have since been on a couple more E5s, ground-up, and failed on them. But I plan to go back. I know I can do these routes, they were successful failures in that I learnt something about the route or my approach. I owe a great debt of gratitude to everyone I have climbed with because I couldn't have done it without them.

So where will your vision take you? Whatever your climbing dream is, just remember to follow Captain Picard's orders and 'make it so'.