

GET OUT THERE

# cli

# mbing

**Nik Cook** tests his head for heights when he gets a hand-on introduction to real rock with a weekends climbing in the Peak District.

## Moving to the Peak District

from London, where my climbing had largely been limited to the sanitised environment of an indoor climbing wall, a whole new craggy world suddenly surrounded me. In haste I rushed out to buy a guidebook with plans in my head to formulate a classics tick list and to soon be working my way through it. On opening the guide, "On Peak Rock: 1500 of the finest gritstone and limestone climbs in the Peak District", it suddenly dawned on me just how much climbing was available and how little I knew about how to go about tackling it. Most of the climbing in the Peak District falls into the category of "Traditional" or "Trad" climbing. As the leading climber moves up a route they must place small metal nuts and other devices, known as gear, into available cracks in order to provide protection in the event of a fall. Lacking this essential, and life extending skill, I decided it would be a good idea to seek out some instruction before commencing my campaign.

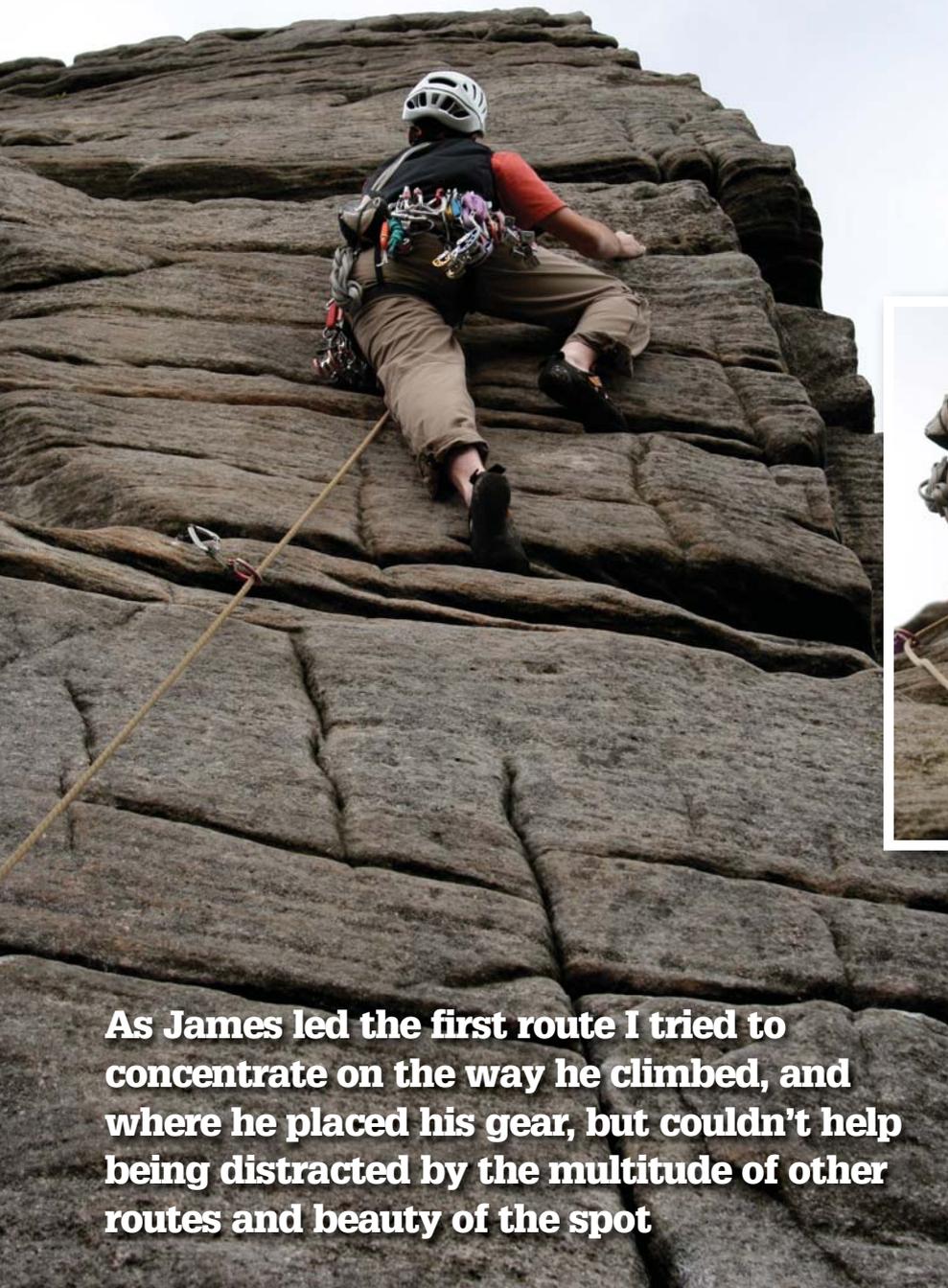
I contacted James Thacker of James Thacker Mountaineering and arranged, along with my London climbing partner Dave, for two days of instruction that would hopefully leave us competent and safe to climb. Meeting for a gargantuan breakfast at Hathersage Lido café James arrived with a stack of guidebooks and, before long, we were heading off for Stanage Edge, one of the Mecca's of Peak Climbing. Parking up we shouldered our packs and headed up towards the crag picking our way through long discarded millstones from which the Millstone Grit takes its name. Being a

weekday, we had the crag to ourselves and the remoteness of the spot combined with a clear spring sky contrasting the solemn tones of the rock made for a truly inspirational location. James explained that we'd spend the morning getting a feel for the gritstone leaving the more technical aspects of leading and gear placement for the afternoon. As he led the first route I tried to concentrate on the way he climbed, and where he placed his gear, but couldn't help being distracted by the multitude of other routes and beauty of the spot.

Reaching the top James set up a secure location known as a belay from which he'd be able to protect me as I climbed and, on his word, I began my ascent. Wishing I'd paid closer attention to his climb I lurched upwards in a series of ungainly and inelegant moves. With every handhold I could feel the coarse rock sloughing off layers of my skin but it did provide excellent footholds for my sticky rubber soled climbing shoes. Trusting your feet is essential to success on gritstone and means you at least finish the day with some skin left on your fingertips. As I climbed my confidence grew and my technique became smoother. Reaching James at the top, I was no longer a "Gritstone Virgin", and felt elated and keen to tackle more routes. It was only then that James informed me that the route I had just climbed was first ascended in 1913 by a certain Ivar Berg and not only had he done it un-roped but also in



Stanage Edge in the Peak District



hob-nailed boots. I knew I was in for a humbling couple of days.

After lunch and with a few routes under our belts we moved onto the dark art of gear placement. Rather than trusting us on a climb James gave us each a handful of gear and told us to place it in various cracks at the foot of the crag. He then went round and graded our efforts from “bombproof” to “I wouldn’t hang my car



*James leading the first route of the day*

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keys on it”. Although most of our placements were good some worryingly did fall into the latter category. We then moved on to climbing a route placing gear but still with the re-assurance of James belaying from the top. Trying to fiddle a little piece of metal securely into a crack is hard enough on the ground but reaches a new level of difficulty when precariously balanced on a tiny nubbin of rock. With more than a few dodgy placements between us, the chance of leading a route for real tomorrow seemed remote but James, at least, seemed confident.

### Equipment

All of the technical equipment you need to give climbing a go should be provided by your guide/instructor. Clothing wise, you’ll be outside all day and often in exposed and remote locations so good weatherproof gear is essential. Wear similar layers as you would for a days hill walking but make sure that your movement isn’t restricted at all. A pair of stout walking boots are also a good idea as there is often a walk-in to the actual crag. If you do decide to take the sport further your first purchases should be:

**Climbing Shoes £40-£80:** You can get a taste of climbing and manage easier

grade routes in training shoes but, as the difficulty increases, specialised footwear becomes obligatory. Rock boots or “stickies” are characterised by a stiff rigid sole and an adhesive rubber base. They allow you to balance on almost invisible holds and get purchase on apparently featureless surfaces. Climbing shoes are typically bought a size smaller than usual and are often very uncomfortable to walk in. The reason for this is that any foot movement in the shoe could cause you to slip off a precarious foothold.

**Helmet £40- £70:** Not so much designed to protect you in a fall but from rocks and debris from above.

**Harness £30-£70:** The more padded harnesses are designed for longer outdoors routes where long periods can be spent hanging. Check the waist band and leg loops are the right size.

**Chalk Bag £10-£20:** Climbers use gymnast’s chalk to aid grip and a chalk bag that attaches around your waist means you always have a supply for whenever you feel you need a quick dip.

**Belay Device £10-£15:** A clever little gizmo that, by using friction, allows the belayer to control the rope to the climber, arrest falls and lower off.

**Screw-Gate Carabiner £10-£15:** Used to attach the belay device to the rope and harness.



Meeting again at the Lido James announced that today we'd head for Froggatt Edge. We arrived at the foot of the crag and were soon going through the now familiar procedure of preparing to climb. More "dummy leads" followed and, safe in the knowledge of the rope attached to James above, our placements improved and we were soon contemplating the real thing. Dave went first leading one of the routes we had previously climbed. Placing immaculate gear he moved steadily upwards and without any difficulty had his first lead under his belt. While Dave had been climbing I'd been eyeing up a likely looking crack and fancied attempting it as my first lead. Asking James he said it was a few grades harder than anything we'd done but it had good protection points and I could give it a go. Tying into what James referred to as "the sharp end of the rope" for the first time my stomach gave a few flutters of nerves. As I set off the first few moves, although tricky, went fairly easily and I soon reached a comfortable stance where I could place my first piece of gear. I judged the size of the crack well and the nut I chose went in easily, lodging into what I was sure was a bombproof placement. Confident in the gear I climbed smoothly enjoying the moves and relishing the exposure above the ground below. I settled into a natural rhythm alternating between climbing and placing my protection. Reaching the top and shaking hands with James I felt exhilarated and was rewarded with views of Calver below and the fountain at Chatsworth House in the distance. By the end of the two days James was happy that we were safe to climb as a pair, Dave was planning his next trip up and I dug out my list of classic climbs ready now to start ticking them off.

## Tying into what James referred to as "the sharp end of the rope" for the first time my stomach gave a few flutters of nerves

### Other types of climbing

As well as the "Trad" climbing that is so prevalent in the Peak District there are other types of climbing. In Sport Climbing, rather than having to place your own protection, you simply clip into pre-placed bolts as you ascend the route. Once at the top your partner simply lowers you back down. Without the worry of placing, and the weight of carrying, all of the gear associated with Trad climbing the technical difficulty of Sport climbs tends to be much higher. In recent years, the level of climbing has reached such a level that the top Sport Climbers really can be described as "rock gymnasts". Bouldering involves climbing short routes known as "problems" on rocks or small crags. Because you always stay fairly low to the ground no ropes are used with protection from falls afforded by spotting from climbing partners or crash mats. Once Bouldering was simply a method of training for "real" climbing but now it is a sport in its own right and in a later instalment of Get Out There I'll be giving it a go. Soloing is at the most extreme end of sport and involves climbing full-blown routes without ropes or protection. It is the preserve of elite climbers who crave a way to test their skills to the limit and to climb in

a free and pure manner. Marginally more sane than pure soloing is the off-shoot Deep Water Soloing or DWS. High routes on sea cliffs are climbed without ropes with the water, often far below, offering protection from a fall. Even if you complete the route, more often than not, a plunge to the sea below is the only way off the cliff. **UF**

*In the next issue Nik takes on a 12 hour mountain bike enduro.*



### Getting into it

The Peak District is an ideal area to learn to climb with numerous crags offering a variety of routes for all abilities. James Thacker offers number of courses for groups as well as more personalised tuition. For information on pricing and availability go to [www.jamesthacker.co.uk](http://www.jamesthacker.co.uk) or contact [enquires@jamesthacker.co.uk](mailto:enquires@jamesthacker.co.uk) tel: **0114 2659722** mob: **07887 992745**

For more general information on other climbing areas and learning to climb go to the British Mountaineering Council [www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)

Indoor climbing walls offer a great way to learn the basics of climbing including becoming familiar with rope work, knots and safety techniques. An indoor wall finder is available on the BMC site.