

John Dunne keeps it well cool on the barely there arête of *Loaded* (E9 7a), Ilkley, England.

RAY WOOD

LEGENDS OF THE FALL

Inside the Heads of Gritstone's Top Gamers

By Kevin Thaw

If you weren't introduced to the boltless gritstone crags of Northern England through the excellent available videos (*Hard Grit* and *Committed*, chiefly), in brief: it's about short-ish —70 feet max; usually 30 to 40 feet —compact-sandstone cliffs without any fixed gear, and for the sake of adventure it's a project until led ground-up. Headpointing is the game in the high E grades, currently E8 to E10 (5.12+ to 5.14—all R, R/X, or X). You wire a route on toprope, and then fire it with good conditions on a low-gravity day.

E grades are tricky. "E" reflects both difficulty and danger, but you have to look at the route to know whether the "E" reflects extremely, extremely dangerous, or extremely sustained but somewhat protectable. Confused? Let's take E8, which starts at 5.12c. Johnny Dawes' mid-1980s *End of the Affair* (E8 6c), at Curbar Edge, is a 5.12c with the crux—an insecure barndoor—right at the top. The gear won't even slow you before the ground. Now take Sean Myles' *Captain Invincible* (E8 6c), at Burbage Quarry; it weighs in at protectable 5.13c/d. Either death from the top floor or super sustained but protectable...got it? (The second portion of the grade dictates the crux move, but is also rather broad; 6c, for example, covers everything from V6 to V10.)

Britons don't question the gritstone ethic—each generation simply accepts the no-fixed-protection mandate and fills in the gaps. Perhaps the underlying reason is that the forefathers left a very high benchmark. Or perhaps, more simply, a lack of fixed-anchor technology in the early days and a glut of jam cracks gave little reason to equip the blank faces and arêtes.

Since the gritstone rush, which began in earnest in the 1940s, there has been only a subtle shift in style: pre-placed gear crept in via the yo-yo approach of the mid-1980s (lower from a fall, leaving rope and gear in place). But players soon realized that safely stepping up a level was much more feasible with a quick, "Let's check if there's holds" preview, which soon became a full-bore series of toprope dry runs. This all birthed the term "headpointing," coined in 1989 by Nick Dixon after his repeat of *Face Mecca* (E9 6c, or 5.12+ X), at Clogwyn Du'r Arddu. It's a movement that's since taken on big momentum.

So, what's the deal here? Do hard-grit climbers cash out for the sake of their projects, not even bothering to fill the car with petrol for the drive home? Or is this a calculated game, in which extensive rehearsal substitutes for adequate protection? I caught up with grit's top players to pry into their twisted psyches.



Promise Keeper

James Pearson — *The Groove* (E10 7b), Cratcliffe Tor; *The Promise* (E10 7a), Burbage North

Why would a perfectly normal lad spend the crisp, short days of winter finding out how many desperate moves he can string together whilst facing a crippling airborne retreat? James Pearson, who grew up below the gritstone outcrops of Northern England's Peak District, has it in his blood. Until the winter of 2001/02, he'd not thought the cliffs more than a pleasant backdrop, but then he exploded onto the scene, initially drawn by bouldering. It only took a season for his interest to swing toward routes, and on January 14, 2007, Pearson put up *The Promise* (E10 7a), one of the neckiest leads on the grit. Pearson followed up a year later (February 12) with *The Groove*, resolving one of grit's "last great problems," at Cratcliffe. The lower crux is V12 on slopers—with miserable gear over a crap landing—and an easier crux higher.

Five years ago, wearing a pair of handed-down, very generously sized boots (with socks) and a skateboard helmet, Pearson climbed his "first route": *Kaluza Klein* (E7 6c). Duly inspired, he purchased a pair of tight new shoes and jumped grade brackets from *Smoked Salmon* (E7 7a) to *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (E9 6c).

"[Grit's] a challenge much broader than just physical," Pearson says, himself proof that perilous challenges in a realm of extreme difficulty are not overlooked by rising stars. *The Promise*, a sharp, 30-foot arête at Burbage North, offers slopy, insecure moves, including a slap for a one-finger "bullethole" and a tenuous match above a very shoddy landing. Pearson apparently contemplated soloing the line, V11 to link, but opted for the lead with a single piece of ratty psychological pro (a Slider) and a spotter but no pads. *The Groove* went pad-less, as well. The technical grit, says Pearson, like many a self-deprecating Briton, "suits me as a weak climber!" How weak? Well, Pearson's flashed three V13s...the only person on Earth to do so.

A Serious Appointment

Sam Whittaker—*Appointment with Death* (E9 6c), Wimberry

This 5.13-takes a direct up the imposing wall above the establishing move of *Appointment with Fear*, a classic E7. You probably wouldn't hit the ground from the crux of either, but ledges wouldn't prove kind, and the routes reach 80 feet.

On *Appointment with Death*, Whittaker could do all the moves but hadn't climbed the line in one push before tying into the sharp end. His process revolved around three pebbles at the crux. Thinking they might suffer (read: snap) from time on the route, he trained instead by climbing and bouldering intensely and exclusively on grit, using the idea that freshly gleaned, intimate understanding of the stone would provide the necessary mental edge. Whittaker has no qualms about the toprope/headpoint process; in fact, he would have spent more time on *Appointment with Death* if it weren't for the three pebbles.

Whittaker first encountered the prow as a 17-year-old making an ascent of *Appointment with Fear*. His initial impetus for the project a decade later, in 2003, came from knowledge of others checking out the austere wall. As often happens in the UK, swarms of talent, scant dry days, and limited rock make it very hard to keep a project secret. So when you find the right line, you obsess. "Amazing how I was so focused on pebbles sticking out of the same prow more than 10 years apart," says Whittaker.

Big John Dunne

John Dunne — *Widdop Wall* (E10 7a), Widdop; *Loaded* (E9 7a), Ilkley (see opener, p.52); *Parthian Shot* (E9 6c), Burbage South

Like Pearson, John Dunne also grew up beneath the grit-capped moors, a bit farther north in Lancashire, with quick access to the limestone valleys and dark, stony hilltops upon which he left a spate of testpieces. Dunne's routes were far from rash, adrenalized ascents. One example is the timeframe between his first foray onto *Loaded*, in 1987, and the FA, 10 years later. These days, Dunne runs the Manchester Climbing Centre, in the deconsecrated Saint Benedict's church of east Manchester.

"I remember fun days at the crag with friends being the start of an obsession with a bit of rock, as we'd try the lines and slowly piece sequences together," he says. Grit is incredibly intricate—direction of pull, finger placement, foot contact, and angle thereof. Every movement must be controlled, and you rarely find a hold large



enough to bear down on. A millimeter difference in finger placement, a degree in pull angle, another degree for one's foot, and it feels solid.

Two of Dunne's best are *Widdop Wall* and *Parthian Shot*. *Widdop*, the direct start to *Savage Earth*, combines very hard and technical wall climbing, serious ground-fall potential, and "unusual" protection (small Slider and filed-down Tricam). Dunne placed the gear on lead and pegs the line at E8 6c up to the gear, with harder moves to a very sloping finish beyond. *Parthian*, meanwhile, thanks to *Hard Grit*, might be the UK's most famous headpoint. This phenomenal 5.13c (5.13d placing gear) climbs the 50-foot prow right of one of the original E7s, *Braille Trail*, a Dawes route.

On *Parthian*, a side runner protects the first traversing moves up and left to gain the hanging flake (big dyno for the short). Several RPs behind this "shipwreck" have held falls from Seb Grieve, and several more from Neil Bentley and Nick Sellars. Dunne, meanwhile, placed all gear (three wires) on lead during the 1989 FA.



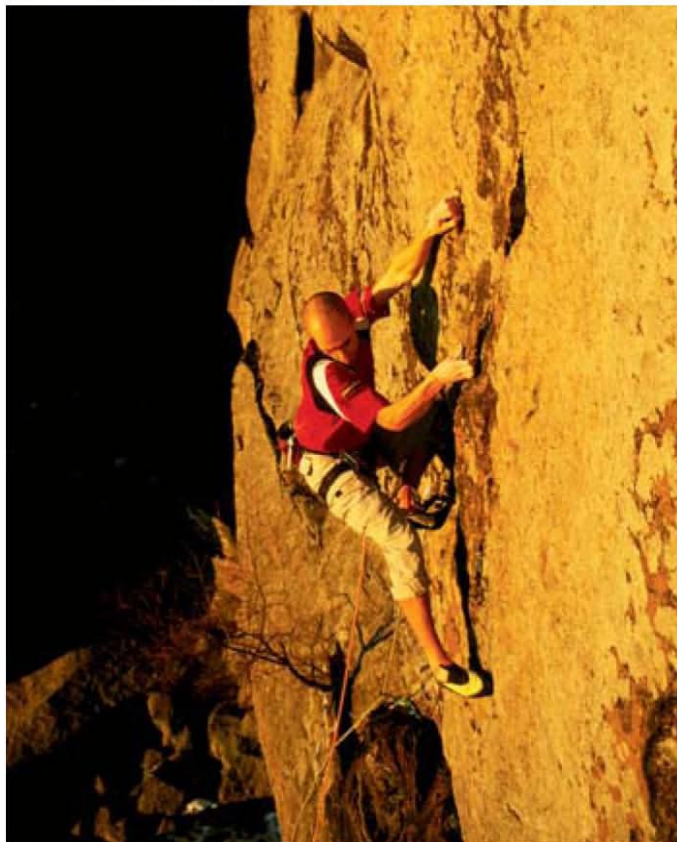
Balancing Act

Neil Bentley—*Equilibrium* (E10 7a), Burbage South

In 2000, Neil Bentley took the toprope-practiced head-point firmly into the 5.14 category with *Equilibrium*. Dabbling on the line for a couple years, he undoubtedly enjoyed the process, which he's called his favorite style. However, he says he's never felt deliberately drawn to the bold—he even drew a personal rule not to lead onsite above the “gamble” level, E6.

Bentley checked out *Equilibrium* over three winters, but it didn't really come together until a friend, Richard Heap, conjured a more efficient crux sequence. This 45-foot line was originally called *Ben's Toprope*, given F8c (5.14b) by Ben Moon. It long held the proverbial “Last Great Problem on Grit” label. You face V11 firmly in the danger zone 35 feet up and runout E7/5.13 to finish. And a rest ledge lets you contemplate all this before casting off (see inset photo of Neil Gresham on the second ascent, below).

“Sometimes when working a line... a sequence that works, but barely, becomes the mode,” says Bentley. “It can take an outside view. Rich [Heap] made sense of *Equilibrium*—my way would have been too bold.” Bentley originally spotted the line while making the third ascent of *Parthian Shot*. In fact, during those visits, *Equilibrium* leered at him, but he didn't return until 2000. A notorious *Meshuga* (E9 6c) ended quickly on the unprotected arête and a 15-plus feet, landing shaken but united.



Blind Visionary

Adrian Berry—*Blind Vision* (E10 7b), Froggat Edge

Adrian Berry takes a very methodical approach, to the point where he feels absolutely certain of the outcome before engaging the sharp end. So certain, in fact, that he now makes a point of never topropeing a line in one push before the lead. With the moves well-learned and climbed in overlapping sections, Berry then trains specifically and devotedly. Take his two months of jumping to a hangboard above his kitchen door for a one-handed catch of a half-pad edge in order to make *Slingshot*, the first half of *Blind Vision*, feel like a path. Berry also works his routes in the heat of summer, rationalizing that if they're possible in such conditions, they'll feel magnificent with autumn's crispness.

Berry's *Blind Vision* quest began in summer 2003; five months later, he linked the 1988 Jerry Moffat toprope *Slingshot* (given 8a+, or V12, at the time of the FA) into the 5.13a climbing above, a technical seam and wall protected only by a small cam in a high seam. (Dave MacLeod made *Blind Vision's* second ascent in January 2007, proposing a downgrade to E9.)

While chatting, Berry wasn't reticent about a currently active project—a 5.13d without a stitch of gear—no doubt waiting for ideal temps.

Dr. Do-A lot

John Arran—*Doctor Doolittle* (E10 7a) and *The Zone* (E9 6c), Curbar Edge

When hewn by man, gritstone is angular and sheer, offering steep crack lines, crimpy faces, and impressive arêtes: take *Master's Edge*, the perfect, 60-foot square-cut arête at the quarry of Millstone. Quarried stone displays the same subtlety to each hold and forces the same intricate, delicate movement as natural grit. *Doctor Doolittle*, with its series of hard, smeary, technical undercut moves up the once-quarried Avalanche Wall, at Curbar, is no exception.

In 1998, all-around animal John Arran made a big entry into hard grit with *The Zone*, a crimpy, 60-foot E9 6b face protected by two equalized skyhooks, at Curbar. He used stacks of mattresses and many spotters for the FA, and then set his sights on *Doctor Doolittle*. This latter, 50-foot line breaches a delicate, unprotected slab; a marginal, hand-placed knifeblade (see photo below) is the only real protection, but Arran also engineered another knifeblade and small offset nut, designed to blow and take initial impact from the decent-ish pin. Arran tested the matrix with a toprope before again testing with a real aerial retreat. His cluster caught four lobs before his nervous belayer was released on November 10, 2001.

Arran is known for ruthlessly wiring a line prior to the lead. Yet he says he took the sharp end too quickly on *Doctor Doolittle*—in hindsight, 20 days of prep work spread over three winters felt skinny. Arran confesses to digging that “small bite” of adrenaline and, most recently, has been onsite climbing on South America's tepuis: in 2005, he and six partners put up the 30pitch *Rainbow Jambaia* (E7 6b, or 5.13), next to Angel Falls, Venezuela.

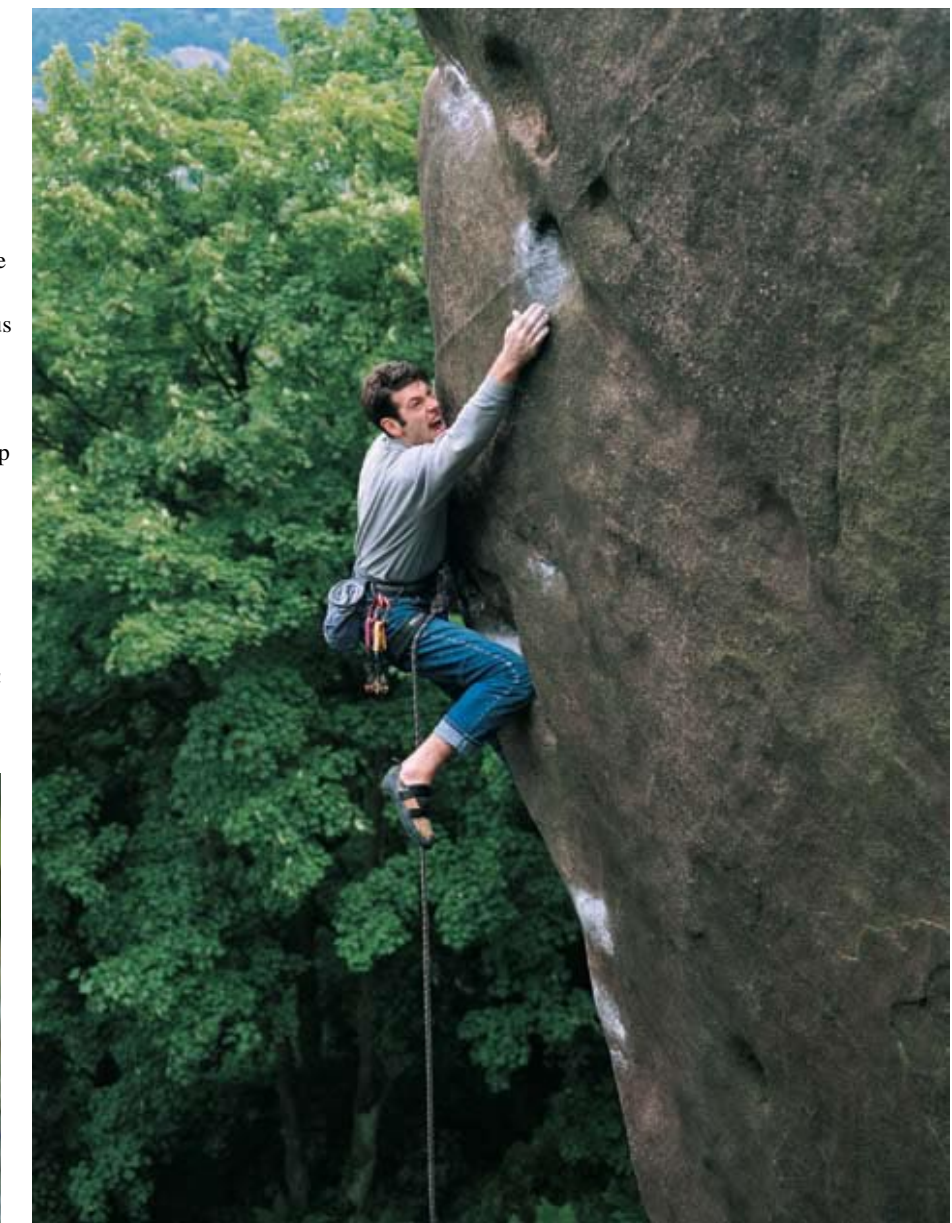


Mr. Meshuga

David “Seb” Grieve — *Meshuga* (E9 6c), Black Rocks

Grieve is a scholar, gentleman, and self-confessed wedding addict who finds that positive reinforcement coupled with a methodical approach ensures his big days go right. “I'm Jerry Moffatt, I'm on toprope!” he cried while casting off, in 1997, essentially to solo the overhanging, unprotected 50-foot prow of *Meshuga* (Yiddish for “crazy”). This famous route climbs the Promontory, a historic suicide spot at Black Rocks, in Derbyshire. Toprope grades of 5.12c to 5.13b have been suggested, with consensus around 5.13a. The route has not a stitch of gear until 40 feet—after the hard moves.

Grieve's process with *Meshuga*, as with prior headpoints, was not just to have the sequence ingrained, but to toprope the climb three times in a row, rest, and then make three more consecutive ascents, sometimes getting in 10 laps per day. This played into the mental aspect when the right day landed, as did rigorous bouldering. “[*Meshuga*] felt really sticky that day,” says Grieve. “I knew after sending it twice with the safety line that it was on.” Armed with fresh route knowledge and the rationale that *Meshuga* could be done three times consecutively, Grieve took a good rest, and then sent. Protection for the ascent took the form of Frenchmen, leashed to prevent them running away, spotting below similarly lashed-down mattresses laid over what has been called one of the worst landings on grit.





A “Normal Guy”

Ben Heason — *Ozbound* (E9 6c) and *Lonely Heart* (E9 6c), Froggat Edge

Living in Sheffield, the Snowdonian (North Wales) Ben Heason has a taste for the grit that goes back to his youth: mum and dad were climbers, and brought Heason and brother, Matt, into the vertical loop. Heason’s first grit route was *Mantelpiece Buttress Direct* (VS 4c), at Stanage, in 1995, and he’s since spun off into a career unparaleled: E9 FAs, E7 onsights, and free solos of Curbar’s *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door* (E9 6c) and *End of the Affair* (E8 6c).

But it’s *Ozbound* that took Heason farthest “into the zone.” Still unrepeated six years after the FA, the line opens with a V10/11 slab with “shocking holds.” “It would be a guaranteed bone-cruncher to fall off any move, even the start,” says Heason. “There’s a rock behind you, and it forms a funnel-like feature with the face.” After this, you get a rest, and then a 5.12c roof high over a non-landing. To train for the crux, Heason built a campus board — for the feet!—with rungs made of thin crimps and half-dowels. Heason, while watching TV, would do one-legged squats, plyometrics,

and other exercises.

Heason, who made another Froggat E9 FA, *Lonely Heart*, says he’s a pretty-much normal guy. His process is mental: “When the forecast is good and you know you’ll be going for the route, that’s a very stressful time,” says Heason. “Not very pleasant and not something to go through with the same route that many times, if possible.”




Kevin Thaw — *Order of the Phoenix* (E9 6c), Wimberry

Addicts tend not to give up just because the dose was wrong. I learned this in 2002 on *Obsession Fatale*, an E8 at the Roaches I tried to onsight solo. Forty feet above a flat, hard summer evening, I found myself trapped, stuck in the air—not falling, yet without sufficient grip to reclaim potential energy from kinetic. I slapped off the cliff, did a forward roll, and came to rest in a V-slot with boulders as arm rests; my heel cracked upon impact.

I came out of the hospital feeling that mysterious draw of gritstone undwindled. *Obsession* was an onsight attempt. Head-pointing is calculated—safe—right? A year later I was back at it, toppling the 50-foot bulging arête to finishing scoop left of *Coffin Crack*, at Wimberry. It presented a 5.13b with tiny pebbles at the crux and no real gear. Each day, I’d grow a little more obsessed, climbing the line as many times as possible. I found it very hard to head elsewhere for an evening without thinking of Wimberry.

On that granted evening, in summer 2003, the first top rope ascent felt marvelous. I placed an illusion of protection in the base of *Coffin Crack*, taking solace in the façade that a falling leader could be steered, with a perfectly timed tug on the rope, to the only flat spot amid the boulders.

Above the premier overhang, one engages the first of three distinct cruxes; each felt duly imprinted, flowing without contemplation. Pebbles felt concretely adhered, and the subtle scoops gathered and held each foot placement. Standing tall for the final pebble, I slapped the arête with glee—it was “in the bag,” but I had to stay on guard for the final 15 feet of 5.11-. My belayer, Tim, meanwhile, claimed to have been his most nervous ever—I’m sure we both felt equally

relieved upon my reaching the top. 

Kevin Thaw grew up beneath the grit-capped moorland of the Chew Valley region. The pull of the gritstone, he says, was responsible for his first uphill steps.

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