

Great Slab (VS) Alderman

Alderman conjures up one of my more vivid memories of youth as the very first place I stepped off the horizontal plane with intent. Climbing? You'll have to decide if dangling a plastic-coated washing line down the cliff then 'chicken soloing' (grabbing the line should difficulty arise) counts. That was the afternoon following a morning TV show featuring two chaps ascending Millstone's *Oxford Street*. My mates and I noted that a rope was used and thought it a good idea to try, yet none of us really picked up on a rope's true purpose. A gang of 12-year-olds then tackled a random patch of Alderman's summit and came away unscathed, hungry for more.

Fellow local practitioners later saw me, aged 13, showing up time and again with dodgy kit and strange practices (a tow rope replaced the washing line yet chicken soloing was still *de rigueur*) and had finally taken me aside for safety tips, plus belayed me up a few routes. This inspiration steered frequent visits to the Troll seconds' shop in Uppermill, initially emerging with a harness but returning with increasing frequency to acquire more wedge things with clips.

Armed with fresh trinkets I set off up Alderman's *Great Slab*, with sufficient Very Severs under the belt to trust my just-as-fresh PAs up the 20ft first pitch. I secured the now real climbing rope and belayed Paul Duddle onto the grassy terrace below a looming crack. Armed also with knowledge – the guidebook – we re-read the description: 'hands above the grassy terrace'. Did that mean the crack? What was 'hands' about? Being the obvious line, I cast up a fissure far wider than my 13-year-old hands, closely followed by a first ungracious lead fall, a minute yet very scary drop onto a large hex as said crack transitioned to fist size and beyond my strained grappling approach. Hanging, I planted both feet and pushed out to get a glimpse of what lay ahead; in doing so I initiated a rude mechanics lesson – as I pushed harder the hex was drawn outward and freed. During the following flight bounces from steep terracing did little to scrub speed but Paul's valiant rugby tackle saved me descending the first pitch. Incidentally he didn't stick with the rock but had an illustrious rugby career.

It is a hand crack, even that final wide-ish move below the finishing incut horizontal jug, yet it took a few seasons to muster sufficient courage to find out. I'd grown to fit by the next encounter.

Three Notch Slab (S) Den Lane Quarries.

Every venue has its day and Den Lane is no exception. I watched the likes of Dougie Hall, Paul Braithwaite, Chris Hardy, Ian Carr and Tim Stott traversing and bouldering (back then it was just playing without a rope) more evenings than not. This was the mainstay as a local evening crag and a perfect playground for local youths. The aforementioned crew are those responsible for curing desire over safety and showing the correct procedure for rope use. During our ascension to recognition as serious climbers, *Three Notch* served as one of our rites of passage.

Severe was always the old school guidebook quantification for this 20ft of unprotected grit; it gets VS in the *Rockfax* guide. During traversing and bouldering/scrambling sessions we'd stand on the big ledge 10ft aloft at the beginning of the slab and think through the moves. Upon receipt of climbing shoes (two of us got them for

STOMPING

G R O U N D S

Christmas) the slab was on. We swapped and shared shoes and each quaked beyond the ledge and found the pockets (notches) then scuttled into the heather above feeling like real climbers. Recently I've even heard E1 5a thrown at *Three Notch* but find it hard to compare due to so much youthful energy being absorbed by it. Grade creep? We only ended up soloing it due to lack of easy access to get the tow rope in place. Several of the usual suspects (Neil Beverly, Jason Henthorn, the Duddle brothers, Paul Taylor...) all fired *Three Notch* in varying sized footwear: Neil found my PAs too big but didn't let that stop him, Jasper (Jason) also added wear to my proud boots, and excepting Paul's grand boots, all were rotated.

There's not too much action at Den Lane these days, Hobson Moor or the Wimberry boulders are where you'll find the gatherings. I couldn't see them from the school window yet would frequently stare at Den Lane's traverses and boulder problems. It was the springboard venue and we knew about all its remaining routes, many deemed too scary to chicken solo. One evening Jasper and I were offered a top-rope on *Popple* and everything changed: we truly became obsessed with gear and the next level of adventure.

Waterfall Route (V Diff) Dovestone's Quarry.

The traditional local approach to Dovies Edge or three guidebook pitches up the cleanest system in the Quarry? At 150ft it felt as monumental as any Lakeland or Welsh outing. Comforting ledges removed enough of the real perspective to lift the blinkers of fear for a gang to troop up it *en route* to the Edge above. Winter granted the same 'mountain' feel as it frequently formed for a week or two each year, just long enough for all the usual suspects to scratch up the skinny ice before an equally quick disappearance.

On this usual tack up to amenable routes at Dovies Edge we'd stroll under the lower left or lower right quarries, most often the right and under the classic soaring finger crack that would become *Bob Hope* (E4 6a). Named (by OTE mag) the Peak's most Yank-style jamming crack (see *Calamity Crack*) it was then a project yet such an obvious one. We thought it the hardest on the planet and wondered if the superstars had even tried it.

Rock shoes weren't usually employed for the *Waterfall Route* as it had relinquished to very young aspirants, on-sight, with no washing line. The *Waterfall* probably had three ascents a weekend and that was just when it rained.



Kevin Thaw

CHEW VALLEY

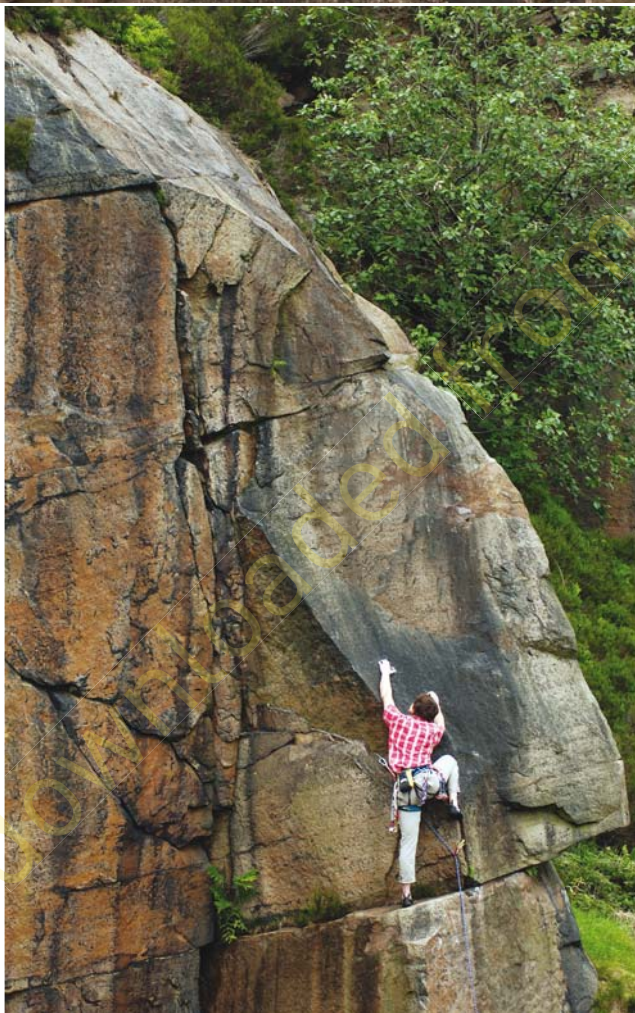
Born in Oldham and brought up in Uppermill, Kevin Thaw's stomping grounds are the rough grit edges and labyrinth of quarries that decorate the Chew Valley. Despite splitting his time between here and sunny California he still rates the likes of Wimberry above El Cap. Here he describes his most memorable routes from the moor. Pictures by Ian Parnell.



Kevin Thaw bridging above Dovestones Reservoir on *Waterfall Route* (V. Diff) Dovestones Quarry



Jon Winter on the exposed and windy Great Slab VS at Alderman, with Dovestones Quarry behind.



Not many grips for a Severe!
Jon Winter pulling on to Three Notch Slab (S) Den Lane Quarries.

Hanging Crack (E2 5b) Dovestones Edge

At the time this was one of the few regional routes bearing a solid Extremely Severe rating; many climbs now dubbed E1 and E2 used to fall under HVS in the ancient volume that lead us round the cliffs. With that said *Hanging Crack* was undoubtedly the steepest thing around. I did have genuine aspirations toward the crack but kept them under wraps until the time felt right and my hands had finished growing. The old red BMC publication *Chew Valley* was the oracle of this era.

At the right end of the cliff the triple-tiered roof is hard to miss, a steep slope below furthers the exposure with the initial traverse along a fine horizontal giving you a better chance to take it all in. The namesake crack hovers proudly at the lip of the final tier; the grade reflects the protection and seems to ignore any 'E-for-effort' aspect. The initial couple of tiers offer holds as magnificent as their position; then comes the crack. Youthful hands would be better on the first move around the lip but that's if you're a purist and avoid the fine jug. Jamming is mandatory if you're to haul your feet around the lip and get established for the comparatively relaxing final headwall. It was easily as monumental as El Cap at the time and too scary to even think about for years. Neil Beverley accompanied me on the day; as we scrambled up scree to the *Waterfall Route* he said: "Think I'm having *Hanging Crack* today," quite uncalculated and matter-of-fact. My mind raced: I really, *really* wanted to do it and without thinking blurted: "Aye, I was just thinking the same thing." Nothing more was said as we ascended, nor as we whittled away at routes on the left end, stepping up the grades. We drank the traditional lunch flask (tea) on the terrace beneath *Hanging Crack* and ate our cheese butties. Neil flaked the rope and held the sharp end between us, breaking a long pause with: "We can both lead it," then firmly handed over the end. Without digesting I was racked and railed into space. Somewhere between a rash dash and speed ascent, the thought that getting pumped would bring my demise had me gunning to the end of the first tier before pausing for pro. Perhaps the adrenaline cancelled any lactic acid build up but I felt fluttery even through the final mantel. Envisaged moves had worked perfectly and without pause for the view. I called down to Neil: "Do you want me to ab down and take the gear out?" He responded: "You're joking, I just wanted to see you do it."

Ocean Wall (E1 5b) Standing Stones

The Standing Stones are tucked deep below what could arguably be Britain's largest peat bog, yet remain safe from drainage on the moor adjacent to these black hills. South facing to boot, *Ocean Wall* shifts character on its shimmering sail across this smooth wall. Take care with rope work on this quest; I remember being keen with gear and skimpy on slings, resulting in the equivalent of strenuous power squats to desperately draw slack. A deceptive boulder problem opens and sets the tone, ledges then offer a respite while arranging pro for a leftward traverse to the token jamming crack. Atop it a second leftward traverse steers the *pièce de résistance* up the final arête on what I remember to be a thankful set of holds. Should you wish further adventure in the course of returning toward Dovestones/Binn Green I'd recommend (no, not recommend, just note its existence) a long tunnel through the moor. Disappearing under Ravenstones it pops out at a huge water slide (no comment) opposite Dovestones Edge. Obviously relative to rainfall it's essentially a 15ft-ish diameter stone pipe straight through a mile of moor. Schoolyard knowledge had given me the tip off and amongst older siblings the tunnel was folklore; I'd probably been through it a dozen or so times before taking any interest in cliffs.

Calamity Crack (E4 6a) Running Hill Pits.

Calamity is a contender for *Bob Hope's* crown of 'most American-style finger crack in the peak'. *Sodom* (HVS 5c), in Quarry 2 of Running Hill (there's a tally of eight pits with *Calamity* in Quarry 1) is also in contention for similarly forcing ring jamming technique and proves a good prelude to the steeper first quarry.

Ignore anything you may have read or remember about wooden wedges, their deterioration has forced a more direct approach and firms my argument that the crux isn't entering the top niche – unless one chooses a misleading sequence of course.

Calamity Crack reminds me of some of the bonsai gems on California's house-sized granite boulders – *Short Circuit* (5.11c) in Yosemite's lower Merced Canyon springs to mind. This far western fissure, unlike its UK counterpart, is traditionally top roped even though it eats cams, but just like *Calamity* it forces your hands into the rudest-sized crack to gain purchase from jams. The two also share a similar honest angle that affords shelter from impromptu downpours. If it is steep and requires size 1.5-2 Friends in Yosemite it will have a reputation as does *Calamity Crack*. My first attempt was sort of free but in a 'hold the move – place a piece – hang' kind of way. I basically frigged my way up it and was scared off for several seasons. *Calamity* finally relinquished to a headpoint approach after spitting me off again; this time I ran round and dropped a rope instead of aiding it again.

Running Hill or the top of the steep hill at Wimberry are understandably the places most likely visited by classics seekers, but in the Chew Valley even the esoteric venues provide a gem or three. Pots 'n' Pans quarry for instance hosts *Green Gilbert*, *Charlatan*, *Exfoliation*, *Deception...* for starters they'll straighten those with a quest for purity in jamming.

After a satisfying evening session pop up out of the Pits or Pots 'n' Pans and you'll be rewarded with a fine vista across Manchester and the Cheshire plain, all the way to Snowdonia when clear.



Ian Parnell arranging gear before the thrilling final moves of *Ocean Wall* (E1) Standing Stones.



Kevin on the skinny hand jams of the Brown classic *Hanging Crack* (E2 5b) Dovestones Edge.

Jason Pickles powering up the steep awkward jams of *Calamity Crack* [E4 6a] Running Hill Pits.



Double Take (E6 6b) Wimberry

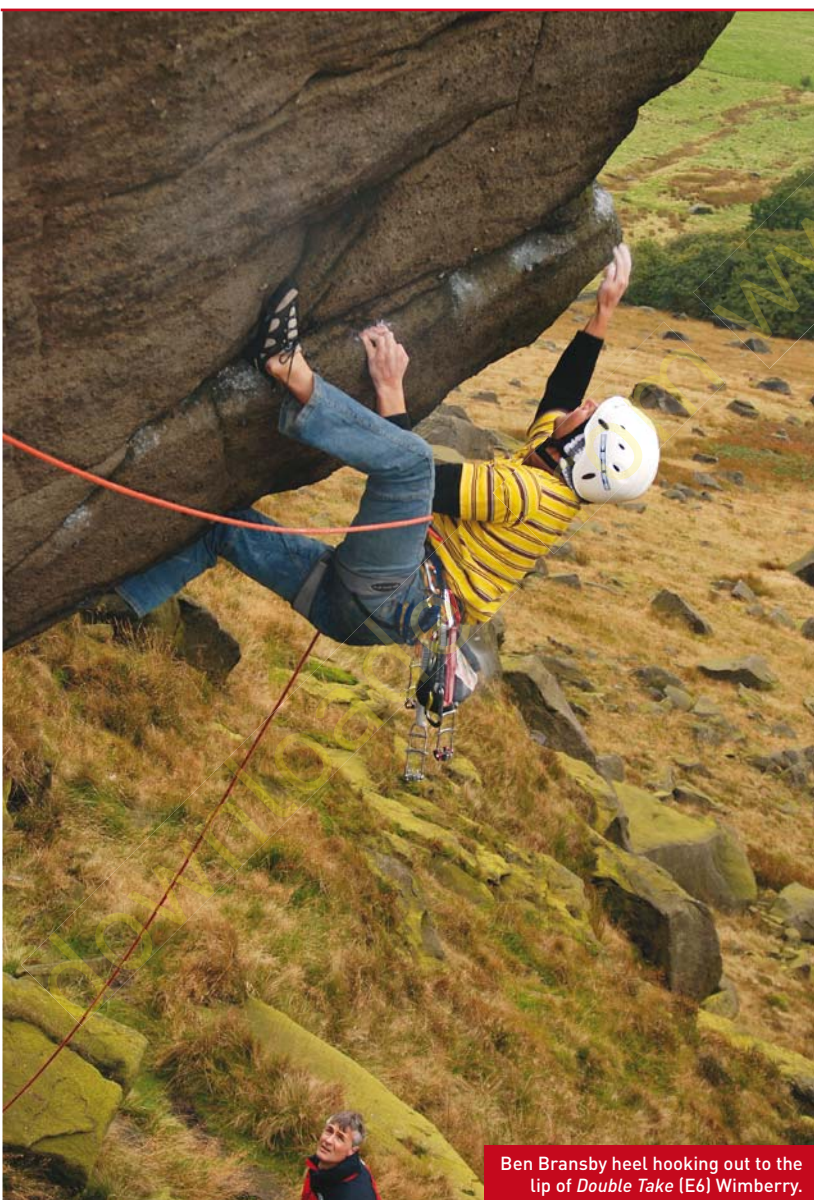
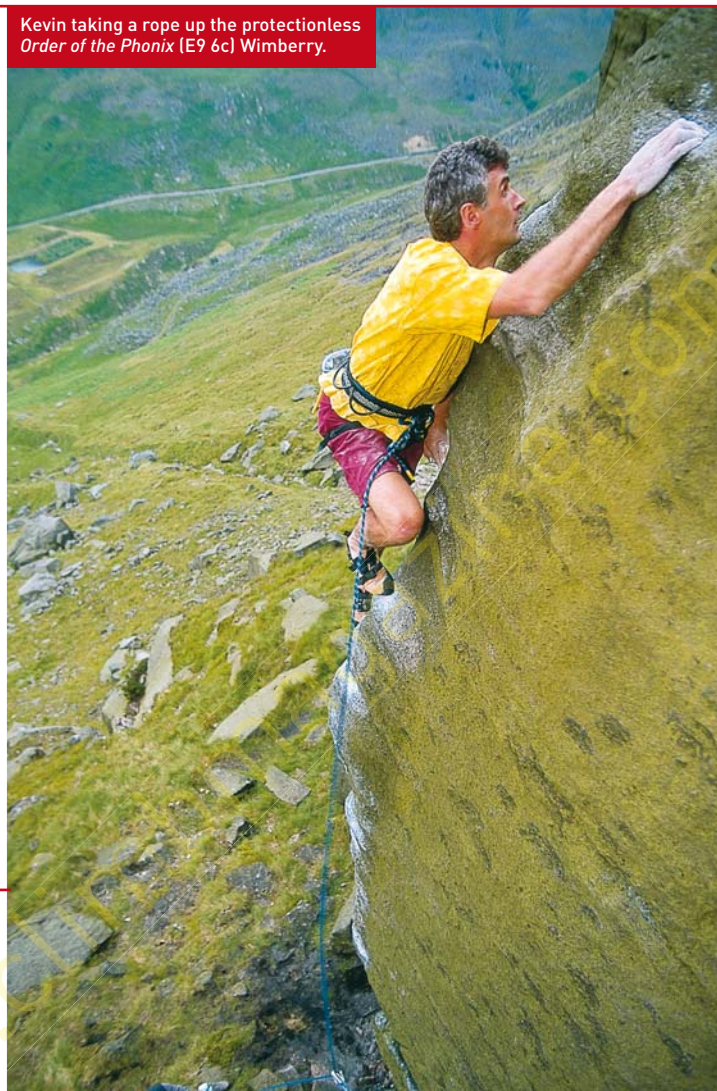
A crag that needs little introduction. Jutting prows and sizable overhangs look daunting while slogging up the steep approach. Perhaps pause *en route* to warm up on great boulders that once filled the cliff's recesses. Incidentally, the local moniker for this hilltop fortress is Indian's Head. Clue: he's wearing a feather while lying on his back looking straight up.

The boulders are worth more than a brief check and these days absorb the majority of the region's traffic. Between them and the main crag I've probably spent as many climbing days here as anywhere, including many young ones with a dodgy rope.

After finishing studies I commenced a quest around the Western US, spring-boarded by a stint in a classic North American institution – a summer camp. Six weeks as a camp counsellor began a long relationship with the US yet was time traded during Chew's 'Golden Era'. The soon-to-be-replaced *Moorland Gritstone Chew Valley* guide was published in 1988; the preceding summer of '87 saw the book team systematically pick off all the prized lines. I'd always been fascinated by Wimberry's main overhang and upon arrival back in the UK strolled to the line envisaged long ago, now called *Double Take* E5 6b (upped to E6 in the current book) by Dougie Hall.

A horizontal rail breaches the left side of the overhang following the initial few feet of *Freddie's Finale*. Undercut and doubly overhanging, the rightwards moves are spectacular and unusual for grit. *Au cheval* on the apex is the most comfortable position to thankfully place small cams. Moving up is the crux, an inevitable pebble encounter while heading for a knob then finishing via a hanging groove; truly a great prize.

Kevin taking a rope up the protectionless *Order of the Phoenix* (E9 6c) Wimberry.



Ben Bransby heel hooking out to the lip of *Double Take* (E6) Wimberry.

Order of the Phoenix (E9 6c) Wimberry.

This spicy number on the next buttress to the right of *Double Take* was a product of my Wimberry involvement through the years. A fine inverted staircase that I'd probed long ago yet without gleaning conviction. Whilst enjoying a particularly sticky agenda-free evening on the boulders it became apparent that it was the crag's only unclimbed buttress; I just had to hike further and check it out. Three weeks of obsessing about conditions ensued, many hikes and top-rope sessions, willing compadres stretched and rotated, until the day arrived. After popping into town for JK Rowling's new release that very day, the boulders again felt tacky and gravity was taking a wee evening break...

The first run felt really good, nerves began to bubble and all Tim had to say as I positioned a runner and sling in the base of *Coffin Crack* was: "Finally gonna do it eh?" The idea of a cam and sling at ground level was that if all should go horribly wrong a gentle tug would pull me onto the arête thus landing on the only non-boulder strewn flat-ish spot. An untested rig for steep palming and, once again, the inevitable pebble encounter at the crux. This particular crux typifies the harder end of grit for me, perhaps due to the limited number of times I executed it before 'really' doing it. There are many 6c moves but one outstanding in its lack of security. At the third overhang with feet on steep smears, heels pointed left, right hand on a palm/pebble cluster, the left hand goes high and left to a pebble – stack the fingers and crimp ("it hasn't snapped yet!" races through my consciousness). A big precise right hand slap allows you to bring your feet over the lip. The momentum and timing involved with the long slap are unique to grit, an added element that even when one is climbing well can seem elusive.

Escapism in the back garden is the beauty of Chew; those rare times when blinkers become affixed and existence is focused entirely in the moment. ✎