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A man *at his* peak



Uppermill's Kevin Thaw



Kevin in action

Kevin Thaw has conquered Everest but his passion for climbing started on a Lancashire cliff with a borrowed washing line for support. Amanda Griffiths reports

It's typical, isn't it? In 30 years climbing in some of the world's most treacherous locations, Kevin Thaw broke his heel while climbing in the Peak District.

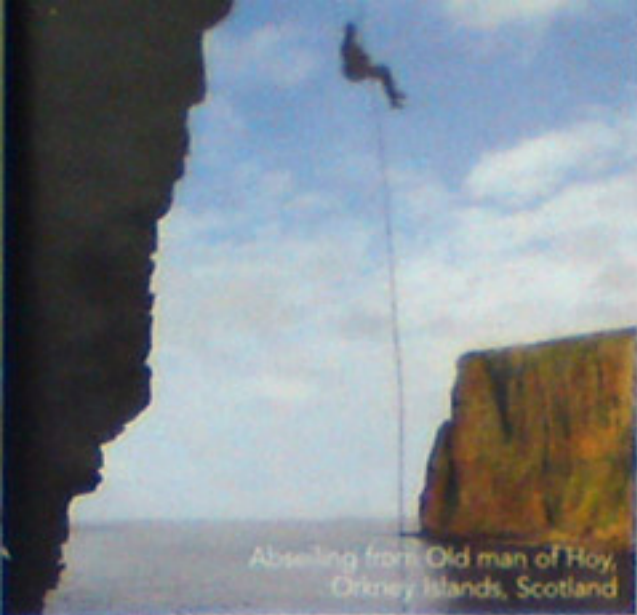
But it would take more than this mishap to dim the spirit of adventure possessed by a man originally from Uppermill, now living in California, who is regarded as one of Britain's finest climbers.

Kevin, who first became interested in climbing after watching a television programme as a boy, went to America after university with the idea of 'hanging out for a few years' before coming home to a 9-to-5 existence.

Thankfully, fate had different plans and as his climbing reputation grew Kevin was able to secure the necessary sponsorship and work permits to make a career out of his hobby.

Often, this involves him and the rest of the climbing team testing out new products made by sponsor North Face and he's used to being followed around by film crews both for marketing, TV documentaries and films.

The most recent of these is the film *Wildest Dreams*, due to be released by



Abseiling from Old man of Hoy, Orkney Islands, Scotland

“Local climbers realised we were really interested and told us there were better ways of getting to the top”

Imax Cinemas imminently (see www.ueverest.com for details) and which will be supported by a BBC series on the making of the film on Everest.

‘A good friend of mine, Conrad Anker, was one of the team who found George Mallory’s body on Everest in 1999,’ said Kevin on a recent visit to Uppermill.

Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay are credited as being the first climbers to successfully get to the summit of Mount Everest in 1953, but there has always been speculation that back in the 1920s Cheshire-born Mallory and climbing partner Irvine were first to reach the summit, but died on their way back down.

‘They found various artefacts he was known to have with him but there were some things missing like a photograph of his wife and child he was apparently going to leave on the summit. So the question was whether he might have left them at the top or lost them along the way,’ Kevin said.

In 2007, Kevin, Conrad and another climber went to Everest with a film director and production company to see if they could unearth anything find the answer. (We won’t spoil it for you - you’ll have to see the film or the BBC series.)

‘It was never a big goal of mine to climb Everest,’ he says. ‘For me there’s not enough actual climbing involved - its only climbing if you have to use your hands and feet, but as a professional climber it’s the question that everyone asks you so it’s nice to say you have climbed it.’

Rated as one of the UK’s best all round climbers, Kevin feels incredibly lucky to be able to make a living out of doing something he loves and has been able to travel the world. He’s been



19,600ft Camp on Cholatse Nepal



Kevin ascending the north buttress of Kaga Tondo, Hand of Fatima, Mali. Photograph courtesy of Cedar Wright

across Asia to India, Pakistan, Nepal, Tibet, as well as to both Americas and most recently this year, Borneo.

‘I’ve also been to Pitcairn Island, where the survivors of the Mutiny on the Bounty live,’ he said. ‘You have to be dropped off and picked up by ship. I’d say my favourite place is Patagonia which has some of the most elusive summits in the world.’

To think this all started in Saddleworth. ‘After watching a TV programme as a kid I tried climbing the cliff with a stretch of washing line,’ he laughs. ‘Some local climbers saw us doing that and when they kept seeing us return again and again they realised we were really interested rather than just playing the fool. They told us there were better ways of getting to the top.’

Since those early days Kevin has put up a number of first ascents - that’s finding a way to the top that no-one else has done - and loves nothing more than to revisit some of those early ones on trips back to Saddleworth.

‘Saddleworth is great,’ he said on a trip back home to visit his mother, who still lives in Uppermill. ‘It’s the perfect balance between an urban setting for socialising and the countryside.’ ●

Mountain magic

Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth, standing at 8,848 metres (29,029 feet) above sea level

Also known as Sargarmantha, Chomolungma or Qomolangma, the mountain is part of the Himalaya range on the boarder of Sagarmatha zone between Nepal and Tibet

The mountain has claimed 210 lives with many bodies in the ‘death zone’ being left where they are due to the dangerous conditions

There are three types of climbing: Big Wall which as the name suggests involves climbing a sheer wall, often camping on a portable ledge on the cliff face; Alpine climb, similar to big walls but in a glacial environment with lots of sharp rock peaks and rock climbing in all its various forms - bouldering, cragging or continuous cliff climbing



The ground is graded on how badly you’ll hurt yourself if you fall

A hero of Kevin’s is Ron Fawcett, the first manufacturer of climbing harnesses which happened to be produced in a factory in Uppermill