

INTERVIEW: Kevin Thaw

by Jack Geldard - UKC Chief Editor 20/Dec/2011

Kevin Thaw is one of the UK's most accomplished all around climbers. Originally from Uppermill in the Chew Valley, he has spent his life travelling the globe climbing and mountaineering.



(St Exupery Argentine Patagonia)

(his home crag of Wimberry - on Charm - E3)



He has climbed Everest, made first ascents of 8b/+ sport routes and Font 8A boulder problems in America, broken bones trying to onsight a protection-less gritstone E8, sped up Alpine north faces, pushed the limits in Patagonia and climbed some of El Capitan's most demanding aid routes.

Many British climbers will be familiar with Kevin's exploits at the gritstone crag of Wimberry where he made his mark with several bold new routes including the hard E8 *Order of the Phoenix*.

Kevin currently lives in Argentina, and after decades of global travel, is planning to move back to the Pennines soon. It seems the lure of Wimberry is too strong.

(climbing in Den Lane Quarry)

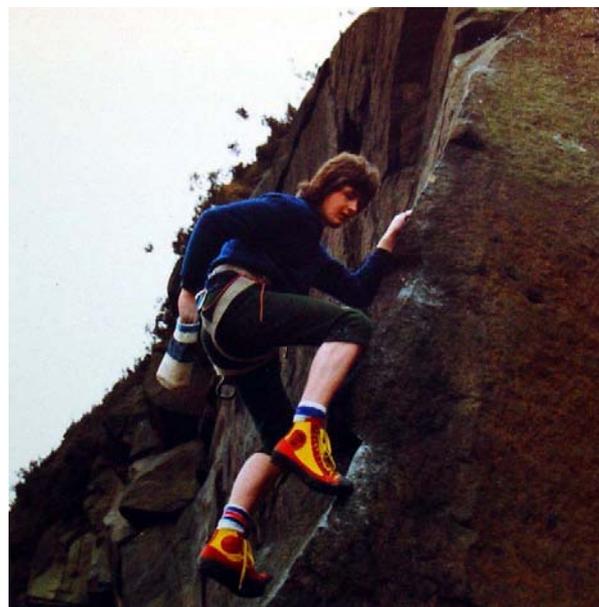
In this interview we find out a bit more about Kevin, his life as a professional climber, and why David Beckham's lawyer wasn't

too pleased with Kevin's 2007 Everest Expedition...

Jack: So Kevin, introduce yourself! Who is Kevin Thaw?

Kevin: My initial view on life, the universe and everything was forged from a perspective overlooking Manchester and enjoying an entire guidebook's worth of steep 'playing-out' within a short stroll of home in Uppermill, Chew Valley region.

Like many addicts my course was dictated by triggers along the journey. Young enthusiasm saw us at the crags even on rainy days, we'd do problems under overhangs in the only dry spots - but at least we were out! I was lucky to share the passion with equally keen schoolmates and also to have the company Troll based in my village, to whom I handed over my paper-round money in exchange for stoppers and other protection.





(early winter forays at Wilderness Rocks)

In reality I never thought I would be away from Blighty so long. I had a couple of years climbing around America in mind following the Bunac camp that I worked on immediately following my UK studies. Then time extended as one thing led to another especially upon discovering Yosemite and more precisely El Capitan. All told I've probably spent at least a year of my life attached to its overhanging granite, which I think led to involvement with [The North Face](#) team and further journeys to stunning places... I feel very lucky to have a first hand perspective on many of the places I read about as a Northern English youth.

Jack: *Where do you live now, and why the hell do you want to move back to the Pennines?*

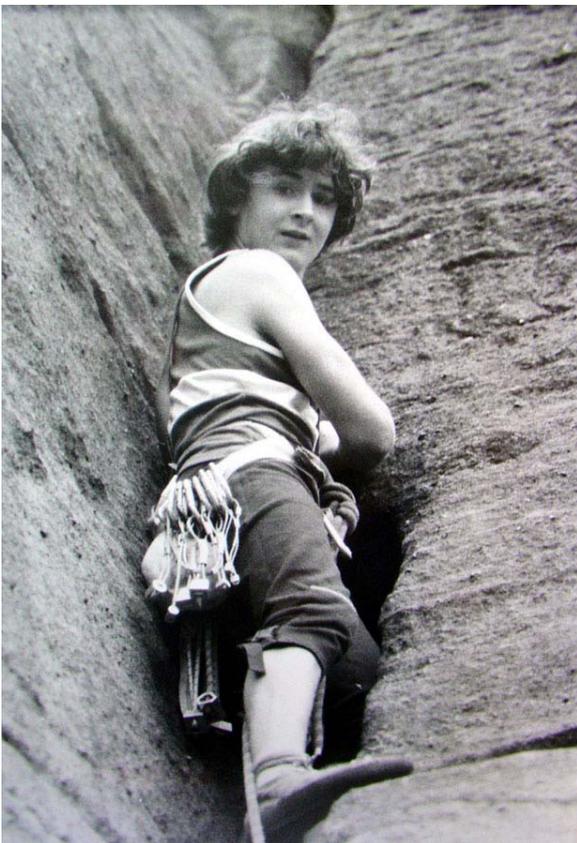
Kevin: I currently reside in Argentina and I'm looking forward to the upcoming summer season on the Southern spiky peaks.

I can't say I plotted being a resident in Latin America, but again one thing led to another... Infatuation with the Patagonian peaks steered my course through Buenos Aires due to having so many Argentine friends. I met my partner Flavia on my first night in Buenos Aires roughly eight years ago.

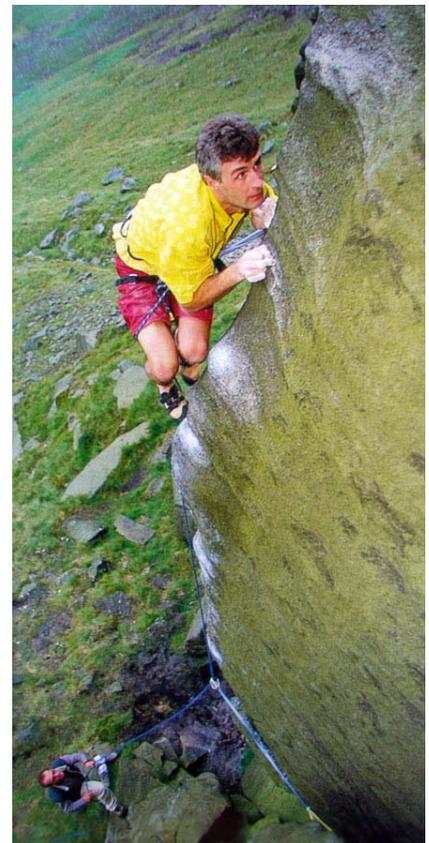
In reference to the afore mentioned point on never intending to be away from the UK so long, I still feel the Pennine flank to be home and deep down always thought (desired) I'd end up there.

Jack: *When and how did you start climbing? Any major influences/characters from back then?*

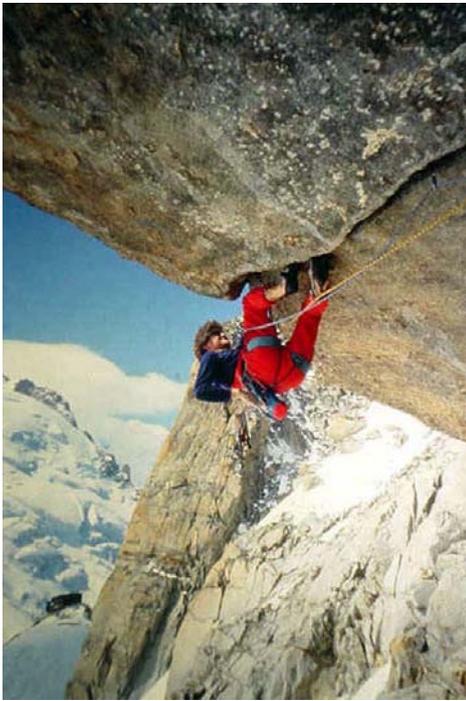
Kevin: My first ever climbing foray was triggered by a Saturday morning TV show. Several friends watched the same show with plan hatching phone calls rebounding immediately after, then armed with a plastic coated washing line a group of youths set out to find a suitable cliff. [Alderman's Summit](#) was said first venue, there were several closer but I think we all thought climbing should be done somewhere higher and the hilltop of Alderman's seemed perfect. We'd climb at several local venues and thanks to safety tips from fellow crag users our dodgy tactics and rope techniques progressed beyond grabbing for a dangling cord when difficulty arose.



(Wimberly's Coffin Crack VS 4c)



(first ascent of Order of the Phoenix E8)



(the classic roof crack of Ma Dalton, South Face Aiguille du Midi, Mont Blanc)

This was the era of UK climbing role models in the form of Ron Fawcett, Jerry Moffatt, locally Dougie Hall and Paul Braithwaite. Paul owned the local climbing store plus married one of my primary school teachers shortly after the '75 SW face of Everest expedition (Haston - Scott summited). Following an in-school talk we all wrote essays on their journey. He maintained a presence in my climbing simply by being at the crags and passing comments like "It's all well and good scratching round these local crags but you need to do some big routes". Back then Paul signed each essay and many years down the line I enjoyed producing said essay while the two of us enjoyed an evening's bouldering at Den Lane quarry. A few further years down the line, myself and schoolmate Richard Duddle were caught reading "Crag" magazine in a geography class, the teacher confiscated the magazine while Richard protested, "You can't take that, his names in it". She left the room and moments later the head of department Carl Dawson appeared at the door with a beckoning finger. My name was in the magazine for a couple of very recently added routes and instead of the expected reprimand Carl started to decipher the route's location and subsequently I was invited to the Peak District the following weekend.

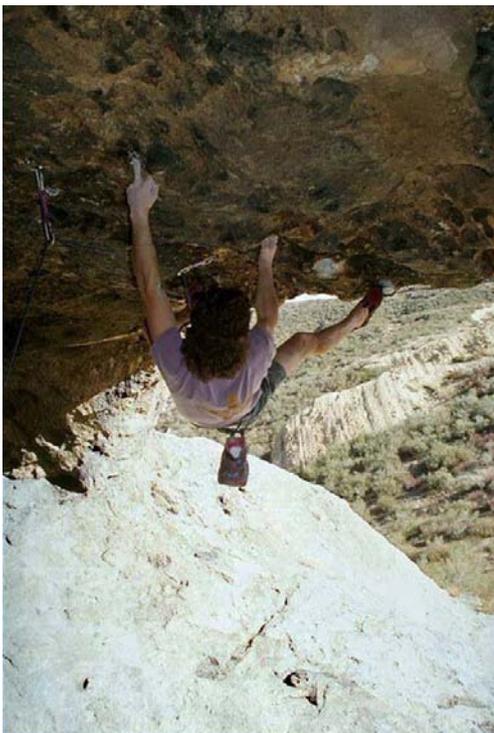
Jack: Can you tell us about your climbing career - Gritstone, Alps, then

USA?

Kevin: Wimberry is certainly a venue I hold quite dear even though it's gaining repute as one of the greenest venues anywhere. Perhaps this offers an example of the positive benefits of industrial pollution. As a wee youth the black gritstone of colloquially dubbed "Indian's Head" (lying on his back looking skyward wearing a long feather) was pelt free, one could have roamed anywhere upon its flank without having to strip any green fur. Although I must admit the paper mill just down valley did leave a bit of residual flavour on one's pallet following a day when the wind delivered it just right. It is certainly one of the finer Chew crags and back then boasted more XS routes than neighbouring crags: E grades had yet to arrive in the red book we carried to the crags back then.

Obviously Chew played a huge roll in my climbing development, Wimberry's gaps still motivate today and draw me back to the ancestral area but I was glad to discover a whole realm beyond the British scene via wanderings amid the European mountains which began during college years. Geoff Haigh was a lecturer at Oldham College and the captain of Wednesday afternoon Outdoor Pursuits elective. Burbage North was the first of such trips: I was reprimanded after topping out the third solo of the day while he'd been setting up a rope for everyone else. The following summer we travelled to the Dolomites and my relationship with longer routes began. This was the time of a super cheap [BMC](#) bus from London to Chamonix hence another portal to different terrain was opened. Scotland had been frequented over several winters but in the Alps one could 'enjoy' mixed terrain under the high summer sun, no stumbling approaches in the dark and without water running up one's arms, luxury!

(Brachiation Dance' first ascent (5.13c) - Southern California)



I'd done many of the Alpine trade routes upon bailing out to the US and continued to climb there as most summers were spent in Europe and the rest of the year stateside. Frequent trips to the Canadian Rockies also sufficed to refresh my visitor's visa in the pre-green card years. The Rockies are very similar to the Bernese Oberland (limestone) area of the Alps and time there fuelled motivation to pick through the many topos I'd photocopied in Chamonix info centres. Trade routes are fine for the learning curve but having an entire mountain to oneself only seemed to happen in Canada and was very motivating.

Time served on Yosemite's highly technical wall routes played into the arsenal of techniques when once again back in Chamonix. We didn't know the history of the routes beyond the topos, and the more recent additions simply seemed the next step. The ED ratings in the Alps are hard to equate to Yosemite, all the hard walls (A3+ - A4) would be around ED3 and when looking at individual pitch ratings on the European topos nothing in the Alps seemed that daunting.

Jack: But you didn't stop cragging in the pursuit of larger objectives?

Kevin: I found that the US offered seasonal intricacies that kept motivation ebbing year round, winter was the desert cragging season plus Canadian ice forays, spring was perfect for free climbing in Yosemite, summer's heat could be avoided on El Cap's steep SW face and autumn

was ideal for more walls or the commencement of sport climbing.

Jack: And the different types of climbing complimented each other?

Kevin: Having goals in each different arena kept the whole year driven as per more projects than time allowed. In hindsight, changing gears developed a skill set that would have been harder to glean had I stayed in the UK especially my time in Yosemite. Having access to such technical terrain without the nagging doubt of encroaching weather frees one's mind allowing just the task of climbing to be focused upon. I've never really broken it down as such before but I do feel the huge routes coupled with utopian weather allowed me to return to the European Alps with a fresh mindset.

Patagonia also became a staple part of a year's venturing, my first foray down there was for Cerro Torre's Compressor route, Mark Synnott and I also ventured part way up Fitzroy's West Face (later finished with Alan Mullin), one visit & I was immediately hooked. It is a locale where Yosemite, cragging & Alpine skills all come into play, like a natural extension of the learning curve.

Jack: And expeditions?

Kevin: In 2007 I managed to address another aspect of mountain venturing - standing atop Mt Everest with good friends Leo Houlding & Conrad Anker. As many of you will know on a prior expedition Conrad found the body of George Mallory high on the mountain, this triggered a production company's interest in deciphering the mystery and possibility of a 1924 summit. 'The Wildest Dream' was the resulting film and incidentally our foray up drew the attention of David Beckham. More accurately it drew his lawyer's attention. I was given a Beckham doll as a birthday gift while on the expedition and I think it was a photo of David placed next to one of the bottles specifically demonstrating their design for relieving oneself without having to leave the tent that drew attention. Something to the tune of "We're glad to see David mentioned by your expedition but please desist further use & good luck".

Jack: And, what's next?

Kevin: I still feel to have more projects than time allows: Perhaps another 8000m peak, more Patagonian spires and Wimberry is far from climbed out...

Jack: Thanks Kevin, all the best for 2012 and good luck with your move back to the UK.

PHOTO GALLERY: Kevin Thaw



(Kevin, Conrad Anker & Leo Houlding on Everest's Summit)



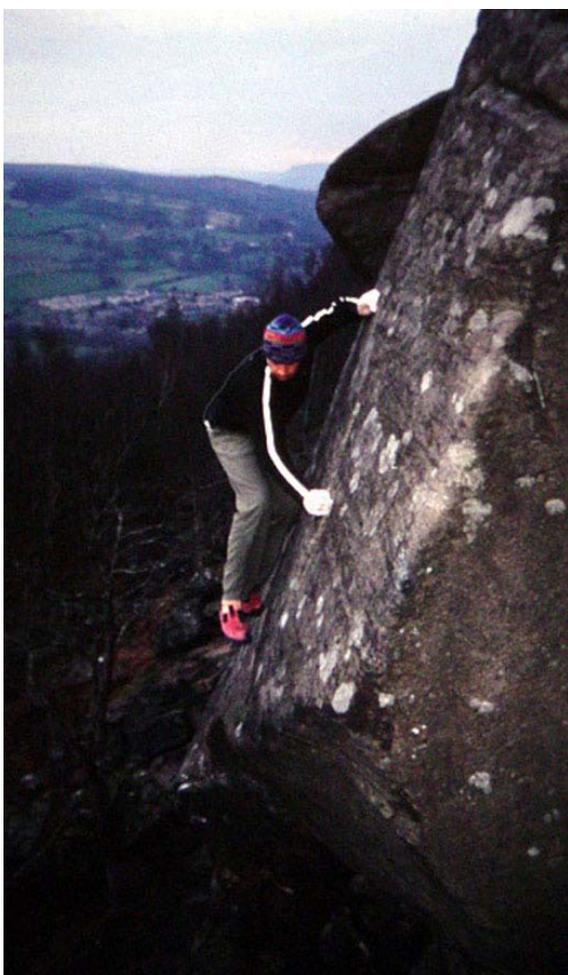
(The offending Beckham toy)



(Appointment With Fear E7, Wimberry)



(Arenales, Mendoza Argentina)



(Benign Lives E7, Froggatt Edge)



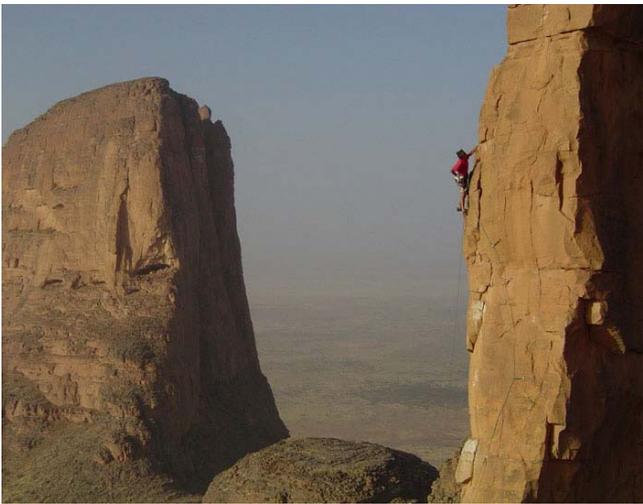
(Mt Kinabalu Massif, Borneo)



(Cholatse, Nepal)



(Cholatse summit)



(Hand of Fatima, Mail West Africa)



(Hand of Fatima)



(Obsession Fatale E8 onsight, Roaches)



(Benefits of shopmobility program following fall from Obsession Fatale)



(Early days of Malham catwalk, Kevin on Frankensteiner)



(North Pillar of Fitzroy, Argentine Patagonia)

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