

Here we explore some of the remarkable achievements of founder member Graham Balcombe. He had an un-prepossessing start in climbing. Jerry Wright usually discoursed at some length about the abilities of his proteges, but when he wrote his assessments of the C.H.A. M.C., (aka Tricouni Club), 1930 Eskdale Meet, all Jerry could find to say about Graham was, “A bad climber” !!! Either Jerry got it comprehensively wrong, which seems unlikely, or Graham made huge progress in the space of a mere 4 years, for in a two week holiday in June 1934 Graham led a very impressive list of new routes and variations.

These included, among others, the Buttonhook Route on Kern Knotts, which was quickly recognised as the most technical climb in the Lake District at that time, and a very impressive new route on the North face of Gable, now called Engineers Slabs. It's not really slabs at all but a very steep face about 200 feet high. It took 6 hours of climbing, much of it spent 'gardening' loose rock, soil and vegetation, and as Graham could find no belays with the basic gear of the period available to him, he really soloed it with a tail rope! Significantly, it seems that the route was only repeated a couple of times in the following 20 years.

Perhaps even more impressive was his lead of Central Buttress on Scafell Crag, which was possibly then the hardest route in the country. Not satisfied with that, he took it head-on and created a new Direct Finish, which even with modern protection is still awarded Hard Very Severe. With the equipment available in that era he could scarcely protect much of the route, and they more or less HAD to finish it. There were no sideways escape routes, reversing would have been highly problematical in view of the wet rock, and abseiling-off not an option in view of the length of the route and scarcity of belay spikes. Scary stuff, and as if that was not enough, from start to finish they climbed it in mist and rain. In fact the route was so wet in places they had recourse to removing their 'rubbers', (plimsoles), and climbed some pitches in stockings feet. The other 2 members of the team included fellow club members Bobby Files, and a, by now, enthusiastic supporter, Jerry Wright, who'd had his eye on the route for some time, but was quite happy to tag along as No. 3.

Sadly for the Club, and for British climbing generally, the routes put up by Graham that June mark the zenith of his climbing career. He'd already become involved in the caving scene in 1933 and from now on this is where his main interests lay. In fact it is mainly for his caving exploits for which he is remembered, including pioneering the very dangerous sport of cave diving with his own improvised diving apparatus. However, it is likely that at the time of his 'retirement' from climbing he was the boldest and most accomplished climber in the Club and also probably one of the best in the Country at that time. It is a measure of the seriousness of his approach to climbing that he undertook a regime of fitness training prior to embarking on this June expedition. Not unheard of at that point in time, but very, very rare.

On the following pages is a list of those 1<sup>st</sup> ascents, followed by 2 contemporaneous accounts from the Club Journal of that ascent of Central Buttress, Scafell Crag. One was written by Jerry Wright, the other by Graham Balcombe himself. This time of writing, Jerry is all compliments about Graham's climbing abilities. Enjoy!

## FIRST ASCENTS BY F.G. BALCOMBE, JUNE 1934

Rainbow Ridge (direct), 4/6/34. Severe F. G. Balcombe, C. J. A. Cooper. (Some say 2<sup>nd</sup> was Sheppard)

Lucifer Ridge, 5/6/34. Severe Two ropes : F. G. Balcombe, J. A. Sheppard

Hell Gate Ridge, 5/6/34. Severe F. G. Balcombe, C. J. A. Cooper, Dr. Mabel Barker.

Kern Knotts Buttonhook Route, 7/6/34. Hard Very Severe F. G. Balcombe, C. J. A. Cooper.

Engineer's Slabs, 8/6/34. Very Severe F. G. Balcombe, J. A. Sheppard, C.J.A. Cooper.

The Unfinished Arete, 12/6/34. Very Severe F. G. Balcombe, J. A. Sheppard, C.J.A. Cooper.

Central Buttress (Scafell Crag) Direct Finish, 17/6/34. HVS F. G. Balcombe, J. R. Files, J. E. B. Wright.

### Account of the ascent of Central Buttress, Scafell Crag, via the Direct Finish, by the rope Leader, F.G. Balcombe:-

#### C.B.

Within the rather narrow confines of our Lakeland treasure store are gems indeed of every kind. The delicacy of early mornings, when the hills are still asleep and the lakes are just stirring, the severity of a stormy sundown, or the flash of snow-slope and windlashed tarn, are for all; the fisher, artist, each and everyone possessing a soul can look and enjoy.

To the solitary fellwalkers, to cragsmen, and some portion of the dalesmen, there is another range of gems. Hailstones can become pearls instead of missiles, those who have had their faces to the wall while the rain beats down have learnt, like those who have weathered the seasons in tents, that rain can have a unique charm.

Far above all these, however, is another and finer; a "feel" a jewel whose lustre is enhanced with solitude.

These are the ones enjoyed by the fraternity of the hills; still another series is the property of the cragsman only, that is the personal appeal of the individuality of a crag. It is strange how this appeal varies. Just as a young girl stands before the sparkling array in a jeweller's window, her choice flitting rapidly from one exhibit to another, so, but with a different scale of time, the cragsman senses a continual motion in the strength of his crag's appeal. One year maybe Pillar is in the foreground, Gimmer is drawing up to it, while Dow is receding just as surely, Scafell may keep a steady place in the background as awesome and forbidding. A year or so later Pillar may be on the run, Gimmer may be held in check by the concrete apprehension of his west side routes, Dow is now well forward for intimate acquaintance and has shown a finer character to his broken front, Scafell creeps meantime almost appealingly out of the mists for consideration. Another year they have changed again, and so they circle.

Thus it has also been in my acquaintance with them. Inspired by Owen Glyn Jones' famous book, enthusiasm sent me searching to emulate the more humble of their deeds, but, alas, no encouragement was forthcoming from the circle of friends, and the first few climbs were solo; up the North Climb and down the Broad Stand on Scafell were the first proud "classified routes" and even now, a dozen years later, the sensation of disappointment and fear as the first attempt failed is still a potent memory. That day the crag looked black and fearsome, and instilled a fixed dread of its forbidding appearance which only of recent years has been eradicated. With each visit since, Scafell Crag had scowled less blackly, until at last he forbore to terrorise, his head just reared expressionless and implacable above Hollow Stones. While the other crags became firm friends he remained aloof and defiant.

Then gradually, almost imperceptibly, he seemed to unbend ; he seemed to look downwards with a tolerant kindly challenge which could not be ignored; he offered the Pinnacle Face as a practice ground, and seemed to lean back so as to be less steep ; and so it was decided that the challenge must be accepted. It was not long after that the first attack was arranged for June 1934.

Winter of 1933 crept on, and the New Year opened. It was to have been a red letter year. Ambition had three strings to its bow; the first was soon snapped when our best efforts, with diving gear and explosives, to wrest the secrets of the waterway from Swildon's Hole had been repulsed as easily as rifle-fire off a battleship's side.

With that snapped the second also; the exploration of Wookey Hole needs must be abandoned for our method of attack had failed. Scafell crag could now almost be heard chuckling to himself ---- "My turn next to show these puny mortals -----."

Now the arrival of March turned thoughts to training for the great fight. Gradually the morning run was lengthened and stiffened and the "sundry exercises" increased while the weeks flew by, until at last the steady burble of the exhaust note marked off the miles on the journey northwards to Wasdale Head.

Oh! What joy to be back among the hills, and with what satisfaction one sensed the "feel of Wasdale Head" while lying awake in bed with nothing more for outlook than the inky blackness of Lingmell's shoulder! If time stood still, here would be an eternity of happiness.

But to business. With Cooper, himself a worthy leader of our own objective, and the redoubtable Sheppard we were hardly a novices party, so we set to work with a will to justify the fortuitous combination, and pardon our pride if we claim to have done it!

At the end of the first joyous week we lost Cooper. It was also deemed due time just to have a look at C.B. So off we went, slowly rising up the Piers Ghyll route. We had been told that the climb was quite feasible for a two-man party. Well, granted, it is no harder for three than two but take our tip—don't try it. The difficulty in making the "top of the Flake" is such that the principles of good climbing demand that the leader be safeguarded in his passage. A second lashed to the chockstone is not in a position to assist other than as his master's footstool, the task, therefore, falls to the third man.

As it was we had not much choice other than to turn back, but decided to try the "through route," since from below it looked possible.

From the chockstone, however, it looked hopeless, and for us it was hopeless. The man who measured the angle of the top block as only 16° overhang must have had a very inexperienced clinometer, I fear. Still, to cut a long story short, there was a gasping and a grunting, a shout "Ten seconds to go," a hat floating through space, then Hiatus, awaking to find the view of Mickledore (as seen by an observer swinging on a line from the Great Flake) very entrancing.

A long rest followed, after which a pukka Bavarian "rope traverse" on to the Flake was made, followed by a rising traverse 15ft. left, then back right up to the edge at chockstone level, where progress ended on a finger nick for the hands and wall-roughness for the feet. The passage had been desperately severe throughout, but a good hold was now apparent higher up. Alas! Strength was nearly out and a hand could not be released to reach it. "Five seconds, Jack!" Hat again floats down to the Oval (does one's hair rise, when in extremis, and push it off?). Again that birds'-eye view of Mickledore. Had my hat been retained I would have raised it to that stalwart working the rope. He was good.

Incidentally, the good hold mentioned above proved later to be only two by a quarter and sloping out at about thirty degrees. 'Twas better far, after all, to have fallen off nearer the belay!

Having thus failed, we retired, the trusty second having now assumed the role of leader. Scafell smiled, and seemed to say, "Try again, lads, I'm not so easily beaten as that."

June 17th now became the appointed day. Luck, however, seemed to be leaving us. The weather, hitherto gloriously fine, was closing in, and mists were the order of the day. To cap it an unfortunate slip on the screes put Sheppard hors-de-combat. That was a savage blow.

It was with a rather heavy heart that I plodded my way through the thick mists up the Sty. Jerry was sure to be there, but Bob Files might not be able to come. At Styhead the mists turned deadly wet. Then, blow of blow, it rained. Just a sharp shower driven strongly from the south-west. That must indeed be the final straw.

A faint ray of hope sprung up on finding both Files and Wright by the tarn. We wended upwards, each hoping against hope that it might be better higher up, but scarcely daring to express that hope. At least we had the crew.

No time was lost in making for the start, and rubbers donned, we went up to see the Oval, if nothing else. The grass was dripping wet, but the rock itself was scarcely damp. Fortunately, not much grass grows up yon. Once at the Great Flake the pitch was rigged in first class pot-holing style, then the lunch halt called. The mists seemed to be getting wetter.

Apprehensions grew, but, having redonned rubbers, up went Bob on the first "pulley" and lashed on, then up went Graham on the second "pulley," and after a struggle got one hand on the top of the Flake and pulled out.

"We're over!" Then the German folk songs uttered rather hesitatingly at the start were repeated now more encouragingly. Over came Jerry, then up came Bob to join the rejoicing pair on the top of the Flake, hard pressed but smiling after a magnificent three-quarters of an hour's work lashed to the chockstone. The time was by the watch, otherwise it might easily have been set at a quarter of an hour.

It is usual to have a long rest here, but the mists were more threatening than ever, although they obligingly cleared below us, momentarily, to give us a chance to appreciate the magnificent situation, so we pressed on. I leave the reader to imagine for himself the sensation as, the hardest section now passed, "good holds come to hand and continue straight up." Soon the second was up too, but then came a setback. Rubbers were here out of the question, inspection showed the ordinary route to the Bayonet Crack was very bad, so, not being aware that the direct route up was held to be impossible, and moreover finding as a purist any deviation from the direct line to be distasteful, I proceeded up the wall above the belay.

Now being accustomed to the vertical and overhanging seemed to upset the judgement, for the wall which looked as if it ought to go objected very definitely to the attentions paid it. At least in stocking feet it would not go. It might go on a winch and hawser.

Wandering somewhat left to a most delightful situation beyond the end of the V-ledge, the wall again objected. It may be added that the situation ought to have been more delightful, and would have been, were not the prospect of defeat imminent. You see Rake's Progress is some 400ft. directly below with not a spike or a ledge on the face, and the way up looked hard. However, after a lengthy delay considering the problem, the first step went, with a movement resembling that necessary when mounting on to the top of a pole – that is hands, knees, feet, and everything else all on the one hold. Then, with a miserable bit of friction for the left fingers on the face, and a tiny crack for the right, the upright position was attained, when the going became easier. The whole motion felt awkward and clumsy, and I have not the slightest doubt that its negotiation must have been an exceedingly severe test of the watchers' nerves ; the second's belay would have been better designed by a climber than by hazard of nature, and while the third's was good, it was nearly 50ft. below.

My admiration for those two men is unbounded. One word of discouragement would have been sufficient cause to abandon the attempt and to descend ; but no, they held fast and said not a word.

The way ahead seemed to have one hard spot – hard for C.B. that is – a corner like Amen approached by a sloping slab. But over it stood a double spike – belay?

The corner went; the spikes proved to be a belay, and just at the right moment for the rope had run right out.

The next problem then presented itself. About ten feet of wall was left between us and the easier rocks of the summit. A corner formed an overhanging lay-back, but the crack was wet, mossy, and treacherous; the face looked easier, but again familiarity had warped the judgment and the wall was victorious. There was nothing to do but to put all available skill into choosing holds for the lay-back. Fortunately to take a shoulder was never thought of, otherwise it is quite likely that a grand finish would have been spoiled by this means. As it was, by punctilious choice of movement, inch by inch was gained until the top could be reached, but, oh shame! It sloped down and was of no use, the hands had to follow the crack through the top while the feet still proceeded upwards until a sitting sprawl was attained on the ledge and a hold came to hand which ended all difficulty. Eighty feet of steep scrambling and the summit block was reached.

The deed was done! The whole of the crags seemed to shake as we then gave voice again to "Mein Allgaeuer Land." No doubt now about the lung power! Furthermore, as if to accord approval, the mists swept up and out of the Mickledore and the sun shone. Oh, glorious moment!

The others followed in quick succession, then, with a last loving look down the face, we unroped, returned, and wended down the broad stand, reaching our boots four and a half hours after leaving them.

And so to Hollow Stones, where ways divide. Surely the finest day in each of our lives?

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The exhaust burred again with now and again a louder roar to show that it, too, had an interest in life; the wheels rolled on eastwards and southwards taking in Eskdale and Duddon to take one parting glimpse of their majesties the higher fells and to breathe as long as possible the upland air. Then on and on and into the night.

**F. G. Balcombe.**

**An account of the Central Ruttress Climb, Direct Finish, Scafell Crag, June 17th, 1934. — by J. E. B. W.**

My ambition to climb it dates from 1924, J. R. Files and F. G. Balcombe were then at school. The attempt was suggested through the media of picture postcards, letters and telegrams between Wasdale, Brampton and Glen Brittle. Files and I were really deputising for Downham and Shepherd in order to act as "deep-slip" and "mid-on" for Balcombe, but F.G.B. decided that it was not a climb for careless strokes. We arranged to meet Balcombe at Hollow Stones, 12 noon, 17/6/34, and after having re-read the Fell and Rock Guidebook we decided to take the necessary equipment for a continental retreat from the climb.

J.R.F. and J.E.B.W. were an hour late in starting for the rendezvous, but young legs of great length led the expedition and we were there on time.

Thick wet mist was down to Taylor Ghyll on the Styne, and a heavy shower damped the ardour of the two fielders before the tarn was sighted (indistinctly). Here F.G.B. hailed his team, having walked up the pass from Wasdale to join in a chorus of cursing about the weather.

All three decided to go for a fell walk. The Piers Ghyll route to Scafell was chosen, because it is a good fell walk.

Only seventeen remarks were made between Styne (10.45 a.m.) and Hollow Stones (12 noon). Wright said, "I think this mist will clear." Files and Balcombe said seven times to each other, "I think he's right." Balcombe said, twice, "We might climb up to The Oval and have a look at The Flake Crack." Received with no enthusiasm. At 1 p.m. we were near Moss Ghyll at the foot of the "new and superior start" to Central Buttress. F.G.B. ropes up on a 100 with ominous loops attached to his belt. Chooses J.E.B.W. as his second but J.E.B.W. resigns on the spot and points to J.R.F., "Why pick on me? He's a big lad." J.R.F. ropes up on F.G.B.'s tail and J.E.B.W. takes third place, quickly, in case J.R.F. changes his mind. J.R.F. carries 100 coil of line and J.E.B.W. carries 100 coil of rope.

The "lets have a look at it" attitude is adopted by the team. The mist is thicker. We shall come down after the first pitch, The rock is glazed with a film of wet. Even the Oval is out of the question. The first step looks severe. It is. The first 90 feet are climbed. F.G.B. goes up in glove-fitting rubbers while J.R.F. and J.E.B.W. are thinking of long, lovely abseilings on their spare ropes.

Another 80 feet, not quite so severe, and we go through the turnstiles into the Oval. No Hobbs. No Jardine. Only a more determined F.G.B. with a lot of rope. A wet Oval. We are ordered to remove rubbers. Above is the sinuous Flake Crack, topped by an overhang, about the aspect of which J.R.F. and J.E.B.W. have an altercation. "Doesn't look very terrible," says J.R.F. "Looks damnably difficult," says J.E.B.W. "The back of the Crack is slimy," says F.G.B., and we all stop talking and two of us gasp.

J.E.B.W. is lashed to an artificial belay made by a loose chockstone in a crack — there is a spare in case of souvenir hunters. F.G.B. ascends — he floated — a perfect bit of work — to the foot of the overhang. What we did during the next hour of God's good time is all set down in the "Note on Roping." F.G.B. worked it all without a hitch, I mean the wrong kind of hitch. It was a magnificent and clever piece of leadership and engineering. J.R.F. gave him loyal, strenuous and glorious support. (My part was easy). At one time the Great Flake Crack looked like a maypole. It was funny to see J.R.F. going up to the overhang via Waygood Otis, but he climbed the crack-beautifully. He had a grim struggle to make his belay — grunt, grunt, grunt. J.R.F. is extended at last and J.E.B.W. chuckles at this spectacle. Attaboy! "Good old Bobby," this from below as he makes a perfect belay. J.R.F. now winds two loops from his own rope under each buttock, and there he sits like a Cave and Cavern Clubman dangling over Gaping Ghyll. F.G.B. now goes up, Waygood Otis fashion too, through J.R.F.'s legs, feet on J.R.F.'s thighs, on his shoulders, his head, his hand and, hoopla, there he sits beaming like a mischievous imp at the top of the Great Flake. (J.E.B.W. thinks, "We are going through with this climb." J.R.F. thinks, "We are going through with this climb." Subdued excitement, and little did we suspect what F.G.B. had in store for us). J.E.B.W. goes up the crack and through J.R.F., up the overhang and does a hand traverse round F.G.B., and belays. More rope manipulation with J.R.F., still G.G.-ing. Slight, very slight, haulage job and up comes J.R.F., tired but triumphant. On this awful perch he is complimented by his leader, but for obvious reasons he is not slapped on the back.

Here we are at the top of the Flake, where the Fell and Rock experts recommend, "A long rest before the upper half is taken in hand."

A slight shower of rain must fall at this moment. But nobody seemed very worried about it. F.G.B. said, "We must go on immediately."

For the next three pitches, which are all traversing, J.R.F. goes into the middle of the rope to take a well-deserved rest ( ?) and all the safeguards we can give him. F.G.B. quietly ropes "him into this position, lifting his own face to feel the rain, and calls him "a chockstone hero."

The horizontal Great Flake is traversed in two pitches. A groove is ascended near the top of Keswick Brothers and a right traverse is made for ten feet to a pinnacle.

The mist clears and we see it all. J.R.F. swallows deeply and gasps. J.E.B.W. says, "Oh, my! Oh, my!"—other unmentionable words, and then yodels to cover up the effect of the shock. The Rakes's Progress was sheer below, and such a long, long way below.

F.G.B. now traverses across "technically the most difficult part of the climb" and belays at the top of a curving, slimy crack. Once more rubbers were ordered to be removed. J.R.F. follows, and two sets of feet have gone through skating gyrations. Damn the wet!

J.R.F. is now belayed (a poor belay) and F.G.B. looks at the Bayonet Shaped Crack, 20 feet to the right. On the left is an overhang topped by a 200 feet buttress. F.G.B. examines it and decides it won't go. He traverses off, blows his nose, and traverses back again, having decided that it will go. How? Don't ask me—I don't know. Five minutes of breathless suspense for second and third. The only time they have felt uneasy for their leader. 90 feet of rope out and an assurance from above that there is a good belay. Thank the Lord for small mercies !

J.R.F. follows for five feet, but he is tired—and no wonder. J.E.B.W. goes into second place and fiddles with hope and without progress. Finally takes the rope for the overhanging step and joins his leader. J.R.F. is now rested and climbs it clean.

Another 90 feet of high severity and F.G.B. sits quietly at the top of the climb. J.E.B.W. joins him and shakes hands.

J.R.F. comes up and shakes F.G.B.'s hand again. Ropes are coiled, and we make for Broad Stand. We put on our rubber shoes.

The mist is clearing and the threat of rain no longer looms overhead.

At the top of Broad Stand J.R.F. asks F.G.B. if he would like the rope. "Careful how you go down, Jerry," says J.R.F. He is happy; I know the signs.

The mist has cleared. We lie in Hollow Stones and look up at C.B. It is 5.30 p.m.

The clouds have risen from the hills and they have uncovered this great facade of Scafell. Behind us there is blue sky above Pillar and Red Pike.

It is difficult to keep human emotion from bubbling up into some kind of expression. A ten years' old ambition has been realised. Lying at my side are two young men who were children when this ambition was born. I was their leader on their first climbs.

Goodbyes are said to F.G.B. —he is going down to Wasdale.

While we are traversing under Pike's Crag J.R.F. says,. "Well, Jerry, I think we may consider ourselves as having passed the novice stage."