

"YOU HAVE TO HAVE A DEEP-ROOTED BELIEF IN YOUR ABILITIES TO GET ON HARD THINGS AND PUSH YOURSELF TO THE TOP."

— Lucy Creamer



Lucy Creamer showing the strain of onsighting Pearl Powder (E6 6b), Pembroke. Photo: Tim Glasby.

Role Models

More women are climbing than ever before. But just who are the really inspirational British female climbers of today? Katherine Schirmacher has some ideas.

A few years ago I found myself in Yosemite and picked up a special edition of Rock and Ice magazine - the Women's Issue. It was packed full of interviews and pictures of women I'd never heard of. Some living out of their trucks, some holding down high-flying jobs, others raising families. Crack specialists, boulderers and mountaineers, the lot. And all living for this strange shared passion of ours.

It made me think of our country and considering our diminutive size, the wide diversity of climbing and climbers that we can boast. Just who would be on our list, who would feature in our Women's Issue? And now, finally, it's led me to put together something similar, a collection of those whom I consider to be some of the most inspiring women climbers out there in Britain right now.

I wanted to profile those British women living here, those who are active right now, doing their thing on the crag, mountains or plastic. Almost every aspect of our sport and corner of the country is covered. Those not included are our resident foreign "wads" (Jude Spancken, Audrey Seguy and Mary Jenner to name but a few) and those talented ex-pats who have long flown our shores (such as Clare Murphy and Naomi Guy).

This is no ranked list, this is a collection. You may feel that deserving people have been missed out, and they probably have, as the number of women out there pushing themselves is large. But that is just all the more encouraging; female participation in the UK has grown, is still growing, and standards are increasing. Last year the BMC equity survey showed that female membership had grown to 25% - from just 16% in 2000. The women profiled here talk about themselves, their lives, lifestyles, challenges, motivations and of course their climbing. It's interesting.

"What is the image of the woman climber?" asked Eliza Moran, Director of the American Alpine Club, in her report of the 1998 BMC International Women's Meet. "She is anything and everything, she is always the same, and she is never the same," concluded the group discussion that took place on the meet that May. I was there that evening and the threads of discussion were far reaching, from motherhood to mountaineering and the media. Far

gone are the days of the "Thwarted Maiden Lady" written about in 1938, where the very definition of a woman climber was someone with something lacking in their lives, such as a man! At the time of the BMC International Meet, many of the issues being discussed went straight over my head, all I wanted to do was climb. But one thing I did know is that meet was brilliant, I enjoyed every minute and found being amongst that group of women inspiring in itself.

In her interview Angela Soper talks about another, earlier, BMC women's meet - one that she herself organised in the early 1980's. And she proposes that it is perhaps time for another. I can't help but agree, but the big question is, is it up to "us women", the BMC, or both? I guess it's like organising a girls' night out - you can never get round to doing it, but when you do, you wonder why it's been so long since the last one.

Last year in Summit 44, Naomi Buys took a detailed look at the women currently on the British Female Bouldering Team. That article dealt

"SOMETIMES THE MOST INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE ARE NOT THE TOP PERFORMERS BUT THE ADVENTURERS, THE JUGGLERS, THE ONES WHO ARE JUST OUT THERE DOING IT DAY AFTER DAY."

R O L E M O D E L S



Katherine Schirmacher becoming the fourth woman to climb a gritstone E7 with her ascent of Balance It Is (E7 6c), Burbage South. Photo: Alex Messenger.

predominantly with grades and sponsorship. However the majority of women don't climb with those things in mind and I wanted to illustrate a different angle. Sometimes the most inspirational people are not the top performers but the adventurers, the jugglers, the ones who are just out there doing it day after day. Hopefully you'll enjoy reading not only about your favourite "superheroes", but also some of the lesser known - but no less interesting - women of our wide sport.

Some would actually propose that there is no need for a women's article or women's climbing meets or indeed a women's anything. But from where I, and many of my peers, sit, why shouldn't women get a separate voice sometimes? We read about the top men and women all the time, but here is a rare chance to hear from a broad range. Many of the women profiled here would never begin to tell the world about their achievements - because that's just not what British women do.

Everyone trips over themselves to be politically correct these days, but in any area where there is a minority, issues will occur. It's as simple as that, from the world of business to climbing. Last year I wrote a series of articles for the website planetFear.com highlighting issues of lack of representation within the British climbing media (the magazines, internet, guidebooks, films, calendars etc). This included surveying the balance of female climbing imagery in the magazines (incidentally Summit was the only magazine to get its representation right with about 25% of its images featuring women). This sparked some serious online debate - some agreed with the findings, others wholeheartedly didn't.

A small part of the story concerns the reporting of top-end British female climbing ascents. This can be a tricky one for news editors. Is the ascent of an E8 or an 8b newsworthy when trails of men have already achieved that level years ago? Is it even actually sexist, as some claim, to make such a separate case for women? Perhaps it theoretically is, but there's no denying that women do climb at a different level, and applying such a rigid philosophy would mean that we'd never get to hear about female achievements. And one thing's for sure - women like reading about other women whatever they're doing.

As I interviewed the selection of women it became clear that the British

climbing women quietly go about their passion, fit it in around jobs, and sponsorship is often the last thing on their mind. These women do it for themselves and no one else. They are not necessarily after the big golden grades, but after truly enjoying this sport in all its facets.

Interestingly, many of the women at the higher end of the sport are in their 30's, often mid-to-late, and some over 40. Children feature, either in reality or as questions in heads. Some admit to frustration when realising that it is only now - when they know how to reach their maximum performance - that they must take steps to motherhood instead. Others have already made a decision and sacrificed this altogether in pursuit of their climbing dreams. The younger generation is here too, poking its head in the thriving competition scene. Only time will tell if they will break on through into other realms of the sport.

Many defied simple categorisation as a boulderer, an ice climber, a trad climber. They do all this and more, and this to my mind is what makes our female climbers so different from other countries. Few of our top women specialise, possibly answering the eternal question of why our female climbers aren't up there with the world's best. You may have heard about Josune Bereziartu from Spain, a sport climbing specialist biting at the men's heels with ascents of up to F9a+ on bolts, or the American Lisa Rands, a top boulderer with ascents up to Font 8a+. Disparaging comparisons are often made but remember - the climbing in Britain is different.

On our small island we have such

"BRITISH CLIMBING WOMEN QUIETLY GO ABOUT THEIR PASSION, FIT IT IN AROUND JOBS, AND SPONSORSHIP IS OFTEN THE LAST THING ON THEIR MIND."

diversity, from sea cliff climbing on remote islands to bold, rounded grit and short, powerful, bolted limestone routes. As a climber here it's almost impossible to ignore this range and the women on these pages are taking full advantage of everything on offer. Let's face it, with our unpredictable weather if you didn't do everything, you'd struggle to climb outside at all for many months of the year.

How do you place the onus of a sea cliff E7, or a bold grit head point on a world stage? It's always going to be difficult, these styles of climbing are peculiar to Britain. But one thing is for certain, we are approaching a critical mass; there are more women than ever before in Britain leading E5 and climbing F8a, and for the first time in this country many women are actually "training", like the men. Some women are also finally beginning to specialise more, particularly in bouldering. Our standards are certainly on the up, and I'm confident that in a few years we'll see a real leap in British women's climbing.

Some people may pontificate over whether enough women are "proper climbers", i.e. trad climbing right now. But does it actually matter? Why should we be climbing one certain

style more than another anyway? It's all down to individual choice. But one thing is for sure, and that's that the women's climbing scene in Britain is now the healthiest it's ever been - something that is very clear to me after 15 years of climbing.

It's a great time to be a female climber in Britain. Heck, it's a great time to be a British climber right now, full stop. OK, our weather's not up to scratch but to be a climber here means that you climb what's on your doorstep, you deal with the weather and you enjoy it. And if I've learnt anything from these interviews it's that our British women share one thing - a real sense of adventure.

They continue to inspire me. I hope they do the same for you. ■

Katherine lives in Sheffield with her husband Nic and is on the eternal search for that elusive work/life (climbing) balance. In between climbing she is a climbing instructor, coach and sometimes writer. Having dabbled in almost every area of the sport her favourite recent discovery is gritstone headpointing, which she hopes to do more of if it ever stops raining.

BMC AND WOMEN: THE FACTS

- The BMC employs **11** female staff out of a total of 27 (including 3 female and 2 male part time).
- Results from the BMC equity survey in 2006 show an increase in the proportion of females (to **25%** from 16% in 2000) indicating that women now account for a quarter of BMC membership. Interestingly, when looking at the new membership database, there are only twice as many male BMC club members as women, whereas women make up approximately **16%** of BMC individual members.
- On average **25%** of people in photographs in Summit magazine are female.
- **2** out of 9 Area Youth Coordinators are women, as are **5** out of 9 Area Meeting Reps. The Access Reps are all male, although Cath Flitcroft keeps them in line. The Chairs of Committees are all male.
- In the British Bouldering Championships 2007, **22** females entered the senior competition and 59 males entered the senior event.
- In 2007 the BMC has set up an Equity Steering Group with 5 men and **5** women. It has just achieved the foundation level of the Sport England Equality Standard.

Lisa Rands (US) - a regular visitor to the gritstone.
Photo: Alex Messenger.



DEBBIE BIRCH

Full-time Mum and recently qualified Design and Technology teacher

AGE: 39

LIVES: Curbar, Peak District

CLIMBING: 13 years

Luckily for Debbie, she wakes up every morning to see Curbar Edge, a matter of minutes from her house in the Peak, and just a few miles over the Pennines from her original home in Manchester. She started climbing by chance as a mature student in Leeds when she moved into a household of climbers. The rest is history but many of her most notable ascents have happened since becoming a mother, with a string of E5 onsights and climbing F8a. As a mother she admits she is all too aware of her vulnerability and responsibility as a parent. One thing she doesn't do any more is solo.

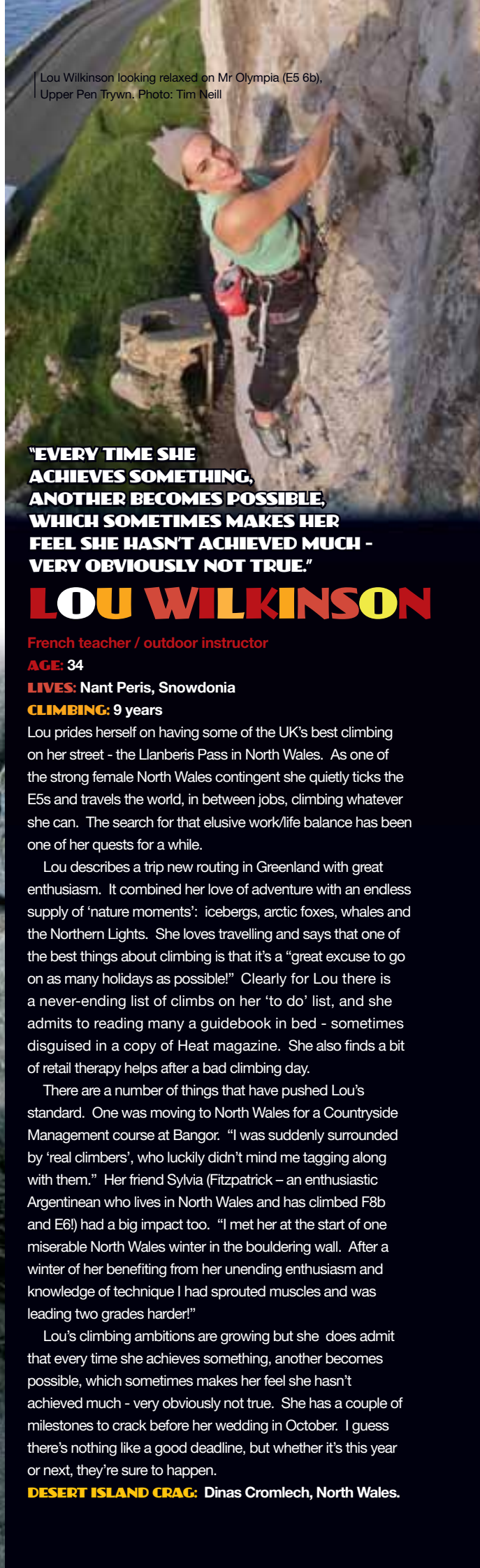
When pushed to talk about her achievements it's clear that she is passionate simply about the experience. The classic book 'Extreme Rock' (a compilation of the UK's most famous climbs) and friends are what really motivate her: "I remember many years ago leading a VS, Crack of Doom at Almscliff in Yorkshire, then going to the pub and meeting up with Julian (Wood) Mat (Dickinson) and Rich (Cross). They were so impressed with what I'd done. The route was committing, that ascent was where I became a 'proper climber' - it was a real rite of passage."

She relates a trip to the Lakes where she and a mate decided to make the most of it and climb between showers: "we set off up Overhanging Bastion (HVS) with water streaming down my arms. By the time we reached the upper section, the sun was shining and the light was amazing. Sounds corny doesn't it? But often it's the external stuff that makes the climbing great or not."

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Curbar, Peak District.

"AS A MOTHER SHE ADMITS SHE IS ALL TOO AWARE OF HER VULNERABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY AS A PARENT - ONE THING SHE DOESN'T DO ANY MORE IS SOLO."

Debbie Birch climbing Western Front (E3 5c), Almscliff - where she started climbing. Photo: Alex Messenger.



Lou Wilkinson looking relaxed on Mr Olympia (E5 6b), Upper Pen Trywn. Photo: Tim Neill

"EVERY TIME SHE ACHIEVES SOMETHING, ANOTHER BECOMES POSSIBLE, WHICH SOMETIMES MAKES HER FEEL SHE HASN'T ACHIEVED MUCH - VERY OBVIOUSLY NOT TRUE."

LOU WILKINSON

French teacher / outdoor instructor

AGE: 34

LIVES: Nant Peris, Snowdonia

CLIMBING: 9 years

Lou prides herself on having some of the UK's best climbing on her street - the Llanberis Pass in North Wales. As one of the strong female North Wales contingent she quietly ticks the E5s and travels the world, in between jobs, climbing whatever she can. The search for that elusive work/life balance has been one of her quests for a while.

Lou describes a trip new routing in Greenland with great enthusiasm. It combined her love of adventure with an endless supply of 'nature moments': icebergs, arctic foxes, whales and the Northern Lights. She loves travelling and says that one of the best things about climbing is that it's a "great excuse to go on as many holidays as possible!" Clearly for Lou there is a never-ending list of climbs on her 'to do' list, and she admits to reading many a guidebook in bed - sometimes disguised in a copy of Heat magazine. She also finds a bit of retail therapy helps after a bad climbing day.

There are a number of things that have pushed Lou's standard. One was moving to North Wales for a Countryside Management course at Bangor. "I was suddenly surrounded by 'real climbers', who luckily didn't mind me tagging along with them." Her friend Sylvia (Fitzpatrick - an enthusiastic Argentinean who lives in North Wales and has climbed F8b and E6!) had a big impact too. "I met her at the start of one miserable North Wales winter in the bouldering wall. After a winter of her benefiting from her unending enthusiasm and knowledge of technique I had sprouted muscles and was leading two grades harder!"

Lou's climbing ambitions are growing but she does admit that every time she achieves something, another becomes possible, which sometimes makes her feel she hasn't achieved much - very obviously not true. She has a couple of milestones to crack before her wedding in October. I guess there's nothing like a good deadline, but whether it's this year or next, they're sure to happen.

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Dinas Cromlech, North Wales.

Leah Crane pulling down in the recent British Bouldering Championships. Photo: Alex Messenger.



"IF I CAN'T TECHNIQUE IT OUT, I CAN FIRE UP MY GUNS. AND IF I STILL CAN'T DO IT, WELL... I NEED TO TRAIN MORE!"

LEAH CRANE

Student and gymnastics coach

AGE: 18

LIVES: Nottingham

CLIMBING: 11 years

Leah is a well known, up and coming climber. Despite being aged just 18 she seems to have been around for years, and has already achieved a great deal both in competitions and on the rocks. Her personal highlights include the deep water solo Freeborn Man (E4), particularly as she hates the sea. Above all though was severely overhanging Orion (originally 8a, now 7c+) on the Greek island of Kalymnos: "I only ever saw myself doing this when my eyes were shut and I was in bed, dreaming!" Despite a background in competition gymnastics she says she has never been so emotionally and physically drained.

She also has an interesting cure for those with a fear of falling: jump on the ride Oblivion at Alton Towers! It worked for her.

Leah is infectiously ambitious and puts her successes down to climbing a lot with men and her gymnastics background. "This means that if I can't technique it out, I can fire up my guns. And if I still can't do it, well... I need to train more!" She goes on: "My three role models are Lisa Rands, Liv Sansov and Lynn Hill. These girls are amazing and every time I see them in a film or magazine it must makes me want to go and get better. It almost annoys me that I'm not good enough but in a good way because it makes me want to climb as hard as them and train harder."

This determination and her naturally strong physique should see her through her current competition aspirations. Alongside this her dream destination is a road trip around America.

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Magic Wood, Switzerland.

LUCINDA HUGHES

Professional climber and climbing coach / instructor

AGE: 28

LIVES: Sheffield

CLIMBING: 10 years

Lucinda has settled in Sheffield and recently made the step to leave her teaching career to give more time to climbing and the newly established Climbing Works, where her partner Sam Whittaker is a founder member. Lucinda's background in competition climbing (British Champion in both leading and bouldering in 2003) has blossomed into some notable ascents outdoors.

She made a decision one day to climb a big wall, a hard grit route and a F8a sport route. This produced an ascent of the remote Lotus Flower Tower, a huge, granite pillar in the Cirque of the Unclimbables in Canada. Despite this being well within her ability, she described it as "the hardest mental challenge I had faced and the sheer exhaustion was like no other." In addition she ticked Kalusa Klein (E7) at Robin Hoods Stride in the Peak and made an ascent of Out of my Tree (F8a) at Ravens Tor, a limestone power route also in the Peak District.

"I like routes and problems with an interesting history and that have stories to tell. When you do the route you feel like a part of that route's special history." Her first gritstone solo on Hen Cloud in the Western Peak sticks in her mind. "One of the first times I went out climbing with Sam (Whittaker) and Hary (Penne) they said 'right let's warm up on this VS – a three pitch classic right up the middle of Hen Cloud! I thought to myself if I'm going to climb hard on gritstone I should be able to solo a VS. So off I followed and got to the top gasping and really chuffed with myself. They were both a little surprised to see my exhilaration – until I explained it was the first time I had ever done anything like that."

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Ceuse, France - as then I would have no excuse to get super fit! I would love it to be Stanage as there is a lifetime of climbing there but I think it would probably be too hot on a desert island crag to climb gritstone.

"SHE MADE A DECISION ONE DAY TO CLIMB A BIG WALL, A HARD GRIT ROUTE AND A F8a SPORT ROUTE."



Lucinda Hughes ticking Out Of My Tree (F8a), Raven Tor. Photo: Dave Simmonite.

SIOBHAN COUGHLAN

Stuntwoman

AGE: 35

LIVES: Sheffield

CLIMBING: 15 years

Originally from Ireland, Siobhan has lived in many places around the world, but has made Sheffield her home. She describes her profession as a stuntwoman, but this girl is multi-talented: she's also a dog trainer and qualified radiographer. Anyway, whatever she does and wherever she goes, her best friend and sidekick Fin the dog tends to join her.

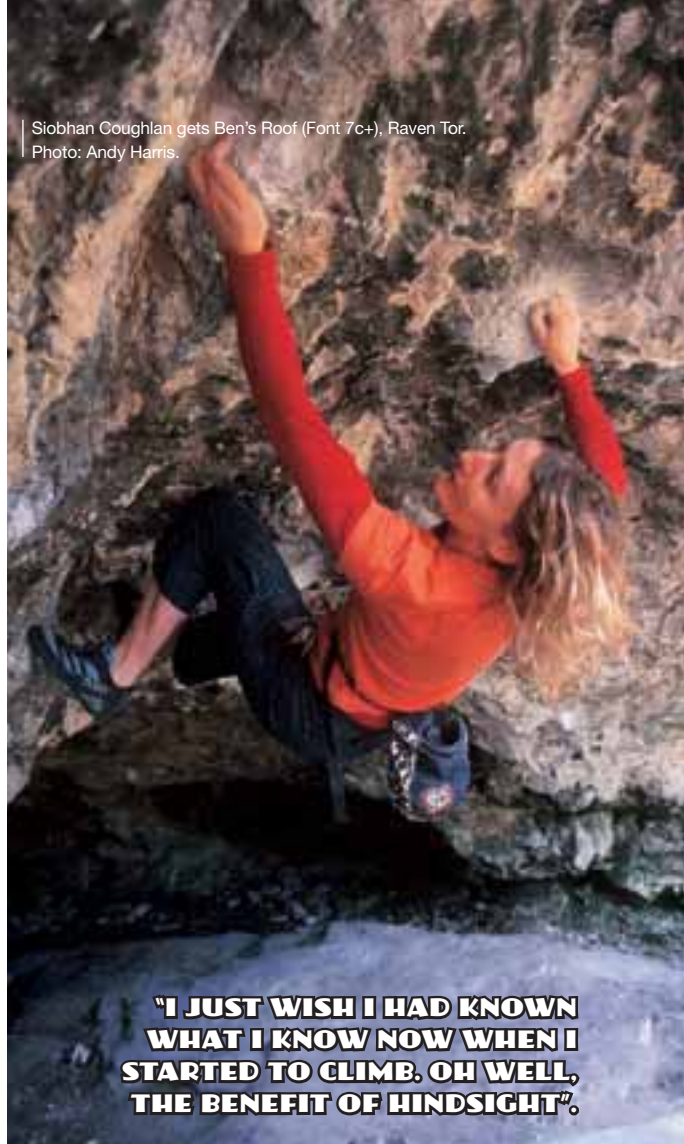
Siobhan's surge in climbing happened when she allowed trad to drift into a distant memory and focussed on bouldering and sport climbing, where danger was no longer a niggling worry in the back of her mind. An experience trad climbing in the Burren, Ireland stands in her mind as her most memorable climbing experience, but for all the wrong reasons. She describes how she rapidly got pumped on a crack climb called 'The Promised Land' (E1). It should have been easy to protect but she couldn't stop to put anything in and it wasn't until she found a niche at the top that she could get a breather, but she was facing a groundfall. "I clearly remember the mental pep talk I had with myself in extremis: 'hold it together, don't panic, there is no panic option, just get it together and go, breathe... breathe... there you go, you're ok.'" The crux was the top out. "Howard, my extremely experienced and highly respected climbing partner was not impressed!"

Now bouldering is her main love and training is probably her second! Having a systematic approach to training with key goals led her to climbing sport F8a and font 7c+ (Ben's Roof, at Raven Tor). She is now one of Britain's most accomplished female boulderers.

For Siobhan now her biggest challenge is when to take the step to having children. Only relatively recently did she discover how to train properly and see her standard soar. "I just wish I had known what I know now when I started to climb. Oh well, the benefit of hindsight". Now in her mid 30s she feels she may have to let it all go as she's all too aware that there's more to life than climbing.

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Fontainebleau, France.

Siobhan Coughlan gets Ben's Roof (Font 7c+), Raven Tor.
Photo: Andy Harris.



"I JUST WISH I HAD KNOWN WHAT I KNOW NOW WHEN I STARTED TO CLIMB. OH WELL, THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT".

LUCY CREAMER

Professional climber

AGE: 36

LIVES: Sheffield

CLIMBING: 17 years

Lucy barely needs any introduction – her climbing goes before her. However she sees her three biggest achievements as onsighting her first E3 – Sunlover Direct at Pembroke on her 21st birthday, onsighting Planete Groove F8a (Gorge de Tarn, France) her first F8a onsight – "that was a massive milestone which for years seemed impossible" - and putting up Mighty Aphrodite (M9) a mixed ice route in Colorado. Whilst Lucy did this on natural gear, it has subsequently been bolted, perceived as too dangerous. "I had to dig very deep for this route and screamed my way up it. The feeling I had at the top was of indescribable relief."

Lucy is a true all round climber, however onsighting gives her the biggest buzz. "You really have to be on the ball. Your mind is planning, working out tricky sections while the body is hanging on trying to be as economical as possible. I love the fact that you never know what's coming, and the challenge of getting to a seemingly impossible move, only to work it out with a bit of fiddling around and a go for it attitude."

Lucy's ascents may flow freely but that doesn't mean the road has always been easy. "My family are big achievers in sport so I haven't had much problem on that front. I think my Dad worries about the financial side but my Mum has always given me moral support and comes and watches me in competitions when she can. My biggest challenge has been keeping my head above water. I've never aspired to earn lots of money, so consequently I haven't. I am more switched on to the business side of things these days... but I don't have any material possessions that most people my age have. But I never doubt that I made the right decision to become a climber. I can't imagine doing anything else and although I've had hard times, I've also had the best times of my life."

Lucy's self-belief runs deep. "There's no point in having false modesty in climbing. You have to have a deep-rooted belief in your abilities to get on hard things and push yourself to the top. If I didn't have this I wouldn't get on half the things I do."

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Pembroke, South Wales.



Lucy Creamer flashing Arachnid (M8).
Photo: Tim Glasby



Karin Magog climbs Stolen (F8b), Kilnsey - the hardest new route established by a British female climber.
Photo: Steve Crowe.

"WHILST EVERYONE ELSE WAS GETTING DRUNK AND MUCKING ABOUT AT UNI, KARIN DILIGENTLY QUALIFIED AS A PHARMACIST AND TOOK HER CLIMBING SERIOUSLY RIGHT FROM THE START."

KARIN MAGOG

Pharmacist

AGE: 33

LIVES: Sunderland

CLIMBING: 16 years

Karin is one of those people who seems to have it sorted. Whilst everyone else was getting drunk and mucking about at uni, Karin diligently qualified as a pharmacist and took her climbing seriously right from the start. This means she now only works three days a week and is surely on of Britain's most accomplished climbers.

She is very quiet and very small, but under the exterior is a determined woman. The fact that 'Misplaced Childhood' by Marillion is her favourite album makes you realise there is more to her than meets the eye. Based in Sunderland she manages to continuously travel across Britain and Europe in search of rock. This girl never shouts about what she has done. With a string of E7s (one flashed and one ground up) and E6 first ascents along with font 7c bouldering and F8b sport, Karin is a force to be reckoned with.

Karin has many good climbing memories and describes a first ascent that she made with her partner Steve. "We climbed K 'n' S Special (E6), a new route climbed onsight on Mingulay last year." The ethic on this outer Hebridian island is to climb from the ground up and not practice the route on a rope first. "It was a truly joint effort and a line that Steve had wanted to climb since he first spied it in 2000. An awesomely sustained line up the steep red cliff, never desperate and with just enough protection (if you can hang on long enough)."

She even describes lack of self-belief as her biggest weakness. She says her best achievements have been when she's spent time in a particular place working through the grades and getting familiar with the climbing.

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Pabbay, Outer Hebrides.

"FOR EVEN LOUISE CONFIDENCE CAN BE AN ISSUE, BUT THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLE - GO CLIMBING, GET FIT AND HAVE A HAIRCUT. THAT COMBO SEEMS TO GET YOU UP E6, BECOME A MOUNTAIN GUIDE AND PUT UP NEW ROUTES".

LOUISE THOMAS

Mountain guide and instructor

AGE: 44

LIVES: Snowdonia and St Gervais

CLIMBING: 26 years

Louise describes being alive as her number one achievement. This sits somewhere between surviving giving birth and her host of impressive, challenging and committing ascents. Wow. Louise is surely Britain's best all round female as no other has excelled in so many areas, notably at altitude. She says she's just good at walking high up, but Louise is also the queen of modesty and taking everything in her stride.


She notes one of her best achievements as climbing Beatrice and Sotulpa peaks in Pakistan. "Great climbing with Glenda (Huxter), Kath (Pyke) and Libby (Peter). Both routes were harder than any new route I had led in the UK and only 20 times bigger, more complex and serious. In retrospect I have no idea why I though we could do it." The search for climbs is all about location, location, location. "I like climbing in beautiful places, winter, summer, mountains or crags." She scours the many books lining their shelves.

For even Louise confidence can be an issue, but the solution is simple – go climbing, get fit and have a haircut. That combo seems to get you up E6, become a mountain guide and put up new routes in inhospitable places.

Louise's most memorable experiences seem to converge to create a crazy climbing life: seeing her husband Twid disappear under an enormous avalanche on Trango, being above a lightning storm in Lowe's Gully Kinabalu and Gogarth sea cliff climbing on Anglesey as the sun goes down.

Life's taken on a new adventure now: parenthood – this gives her all the excuses she needs to do more singing and dancing and of course mow the lawn. Apparently she's very good at the latter.

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Dinas Cromlech, North Wales.



Louise Thomas hanging out on Great Trango Tower.
Photo: Steve Long.

JENNY WOODWARD

Public Health Researcher

Jenny Woodward cruises San Jon's Picos (F7b+), Ceuse. Photo: Alex Messenger.



"JENNY'S MOTIVATION TO GET BETTER COMES FROM THE WEALTH OF AMAZING CLIMBS AT HIGHER GRADES."

AGE: 35

LIVES: Bingley, West Yorkshire

CLIMBING: 16 years

"Luckily I don't seem to have much ambition work-wise. From a full-time career job I went part-time, then had a career break, then became a student again and now work at a university in public health." Jenny is probably quite modest about her work achievements, but certainly managing a work/life balance has helped her achieve some impressive ascents.

Jenny must have climbed most of Malham, Kilnsey and Gordale by now. Personal favourite achievements include Zoolook (F8a) and Urgent Action (F8a+), "both classic Yorkshire lines that I'd eyed up for years without thinking I'd ever be able to do them."

It's well known that many of the Yorkshire routes such as Zoolook would

probably be a grade higher on the continent – they are technical and unrelenting and these two are just the tip of the her iceberg. Jenny puts the boost in her climbing down to three reasons. Letting go of trad (i.e. natural gear protected climbs) was a 'big liberation' - "It never did suit me".

A four-day week helped, and ironically her partner getting injured forced Jenny into being more self-reliant at the crag and spurred her into many personal ambitions.

Jenny's motivation to get better comes from the wealth of amazing climbs at higher grades. She is now expecting a baby, a decision she had been deliberating over for a while. Her flow of hard routes may be curtailed in the short term, but this will give her more time to spend with her most treasured possession, her piano: "It looks gorgeous and gives you hours of entertainment."

DESERT ISLAND CRAG: Bowden Doors, Northumberland.

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NATALIE BERRY

School student

AGE: 15

LIVES: Glasgow

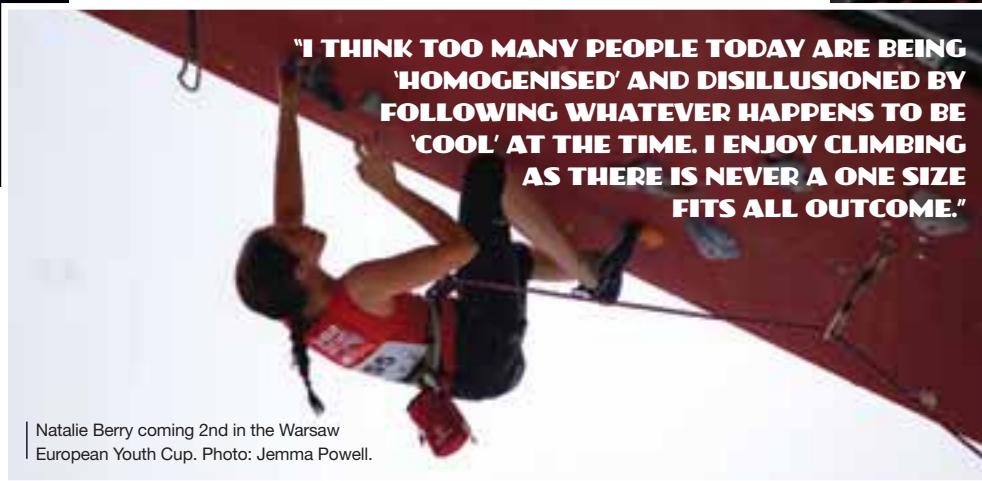
CLIMBING: 6 years

If you take any interest in competitions you won't have failed to notice the rising star that is Natalie Berry. 2006 saw Natalie on the podium three times, finishing third overall in Europe and fourth in the World Youth Championships in Austria last year. I have never met Natalie, we have simply exchanged emails. But from these exchanges I have discovered a young woman with a clear ambition and a focus and determination beyond her years. Her words give not just an insight into the world of competitions but what it takes to be successful.

Her most memorable climbing moment was the day she started on a mobile wall in a shopping centre in Glasgow. The instructor told her 'You're a natural'. She was nine at the time. That was also the year that she found out that there was a British Team and international competitions. It was at that point she decided her aim was to become World Champion and European Champion. You might feel already she must be some pretentious teenager full of her own ego. This could not be further from the truth; it's just rare to see such confidence and belief in someone so young. She does admit that she loves school, especially languages and sciences – that is probably rarer. She isn't loud; she is, as she describes herself, quietly confident and a self-believer.

Your best result was second at the Kranji round of the European Cup in 2006. What was that like?

I felt immense pride in coming second. I vividly remember sitting in the dark, serpentine corridor that lead from the isolation zone to the arena and acknowledging that no matter how I felt physically, the only way I would be in with a chance of winning was with mental fortitude. With Kranj being the final round, the pressure was mounting, which was highlighted amidst the silence that fell in isolation – normally a hive of bustling noise and activity. The multiple paths along the corridor mirrored my conflicting conscience – nerves versus resolve. The sun was shining through a window opposite, radiating its warmth and power into my body. I reflected on past successes and felt fired up and ready to compete. I walked out amidst the noise and heat and focused on the



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Natalie Berry coming 2nd in the Warsaw European Youth Cup. Photo: Jemma Powell.

task ahead – 15 metres of ruthless red. I had the sequence engraved in my mind as I started, and the first sections were verbatim to what I had worked out previously; the moves twisting and flowing fluently with a poetic rhythm. Further up my body began to succumb to the intensity of the route, now came the "mind over matter" phase. I climbed with sheer stubborn tenacity; determined to overcome the gradient of the wall.

Did you feel annoyed that you didn't win?

I am rarely annoyed at not winning, I prefer to analyse the situation and consider what prevented greater success on my part as well as admiring and learning from the qualities that enabled other competitors to attain the top positions. I would only be annoyed if I knew that I hadn't applied sufficient effort to my performance.

Your competition results got better as 2006 went on. What do you put that down to?

I think I became more adept mentally – after each round I became more and more determined to get on the podium. With this mental drive I also pushed myself harder physically and felt more prepared than ever for the last two rounds.

You seem to have good mental strength and you mention techniques you use before competitions. Is this a natural skill that you possess or did you develop it?

I am a self-believer. Positive thinking has had a great impact on my performances. I tell myself that I will succeed. I am naturally very determined and a bit of a perfectionist, but I am not openly competitive or exuberant; I prefer to keep my thoughts and feelings before competing to myself and attempt to climb for my own reasons rather than use it as a means of 'beating' someone else. I have been told that I am "quietly confident" and

I believe that this trait has been the key to my previous successes. It can sometimes take a bit of effort to summon this confidence, but it is always used to good effect. I find it fascinating studying how I, and fellow competitors, react to pressure and other external stimuli.

Describe your character in three words

Determined. Introspective. Individual.

You mention that you get inspired by watching other people achieving their own personal ambitions?

I am inspired by anyone who is pushing their limits be it physically, mentally, or both. That could be top-level competition climbers, athletes in other sports, or just those who possess individuality and prefer to be their own person rather than follow the crowd. I think too many people today – particularly young people – are being 'homogenised' and disillusioned by following whatever happens to be 'cool' at the time. I enjoy climbing as there is never a one size fits all outcome. There are always multiple solutions to a problem that can only be revealed after analysing the situation from a personal perspective.

When and where are you happiest?

When travelling to new places. I would like to do more travelling but at the moment, because of school, it is restricted to internationals, indoor training abroad and holidays. I would love to live and work abroad when I am older and possibly do some sport climbing, but for now I am busy with my training for competitions. Australia is somewhere that has always appealed to me, so I'm looking forward to the Worlds next year.

What is your most treasured possession?

My Yorkshire Terrier, Tilly, or Spud as we call her! ■

NATALIE BERRY – School student

FIONA MURRAY – Civil servant

FOCUS ON

FIONA MURRAY
Civil servant
AGE: 41
LIVES: Edinburgh
CLIMBING: 16 years

When Fiona described her desert island crag as the North Face of Ben Nevis in Winter I was intrigued. That place was my first ever winter climbing experience and I couldn't wait to get out of there. What drives the woman who relishes such harsh climbing environments? Fiona is one of the few women out there winter climbing in Scotland full stop, let alone excelling. She is certainly driven and has been quietly torquing her way up some horrors for a while and recently took a career break to focus on mixed climbing abroad achieving the lofty heights of M10+.

What are your personal top three climbing achievements?

Climbing Stirling Bridge on Aonach Mor. It was my first grade VI lead, which was a big psychological step. I'd felt really quite nervous about tackling it but found it pretty straightforward due to the fitness I'd gained from dry tooling. Second would be Tooltime M10+ at Ueshenen Switzerland, spurless. I completely surprised myself by doing this so quickly (two days of work) I'm still buzzing about it now. It felt really hard and pretty impossible for me but something just clicked. Finally, Caveman M10- in Canada. It was the first time I'd tried such a hard route and I had a rollercoaster of emotions over a four-week period. I found it really quite scary and had to battle with my fears. Then I began to enjoy the route and felt a little deflated when I actually did it, it was an anti-climax.

What is your most memorable climbing experience?

There's too many to choose from. The first ever winter gully I did on Ben Lui, getting to the summit of Mont Blanc as a complete alpine novice, climbing Skye's Inaccessible Pinnacle for the first time, doing Tower ridge in Winter, traversing the three Sella towers in the Dolomites. The list goes on.

What elements attract you to a climb?

For Scottish winter it's the completely 'mad' experience of a full on Scottish winter day; I enjoy the harshness of the elements, the snow, wind and spindrift. At the time it can feel totally miserable and you really wonder why you do it but there's something addictive. For the continental mixed routes it's the athletic, crazy nature of the moves.

What two single things have made the biggest difference to your climbing?

Training with axes on my home dry tooling wall and having a career break which allowed time to explore my limits - it gave me time to train and try harder routes.

What challenges do you face in your climbing?

Never having enough time! I took a career break from June 04 to Sept 06. It was the best thing I ever did but also the worst, as now when I sit at my desk I'm constantly yearning for freedom.

Do you ever doubt yourself?

All the time, I think it's part of my approach to redpointing hard routes, I'm never very positive, that's just my personality. I only gain confidence by actually doing the moves and gaining linkage and gradually get to believe that I just may succeed.

Do you map out your climbing ambitions or goals or do you go with the flow?

With Scottish winter the weather is so unpredictable that it's not easy to map anything out, it's just a case of being grateful to get a route done sometimes.

As for continental mixed I do have goals but they don't tend to extend beyond the next trip.

Where do you get your climbing inspiration?

I'm just completely hooked on climbing and rarely need inspiration to go out and climb. I just love being out and doing things whether its bouldering, sport, trad or winter.

Do you have any particular climbing ambitions?

Yes, I'd like to continue to see how hard I can climb in both Scottish winter and mixed climbing. Plus I'd like to test my limits on summer trad. I've never headpointed and would be interested to see what I could achieve.

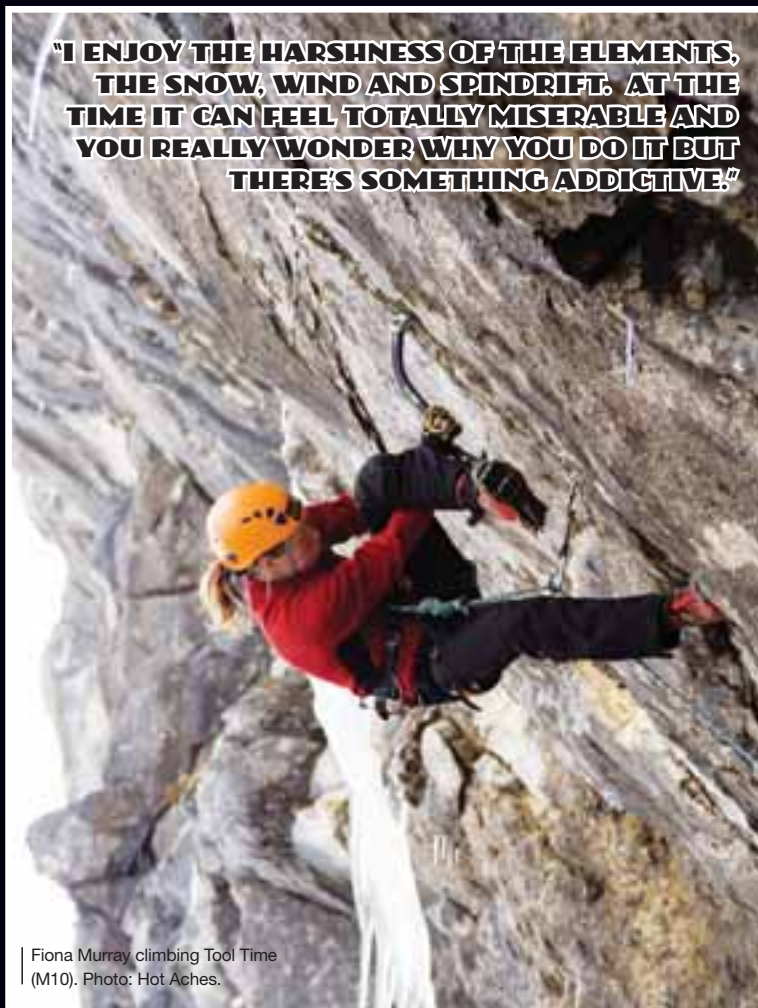
When and where are you happiest?

Any climbing venue or training wall. Specifically, though probably when I'm working the moves on a hard mixed route somewhere in the world.

What's your most treasured possession?

I'm not really a possessions person but I do love my pair of Petzl Nomic axes. ■

"I ENJOY THE HARSHNESS OF THE ELEMENTS, THE SNOW, WIND AND SPINDRIFT. AT THE TIME IT CAN FEEL TOTALLY MISERABLE AND YOU REALLY WONDER WHY YOU DO IT BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ADDICTIVE!"



Fiona Murray climbing Tool Time (M10). Photo: Hot Aches.

FOCUS ON...

ANGELA SOPER

Retired

AGE: 66

LIVES: Near Grassington,
North Yorkshire

CLIMBING: 44 years

I can't remember the first time I met Angela. I know it was at some point during my time at Leeds University. It could have been when Leeds Wall first opened - I spent all winter psyching up to doing the easiest F6a up the big, main, overhanging wall, whilst Angela seemingly floated up all the surrounding routes. Her bright and sparkling personality was instantly noticeable. The big deal for me was that not only had she done Right Wall (E5), a huge far off dream for me, but at the age of 50. I meanwhile was scraping around on E2s.

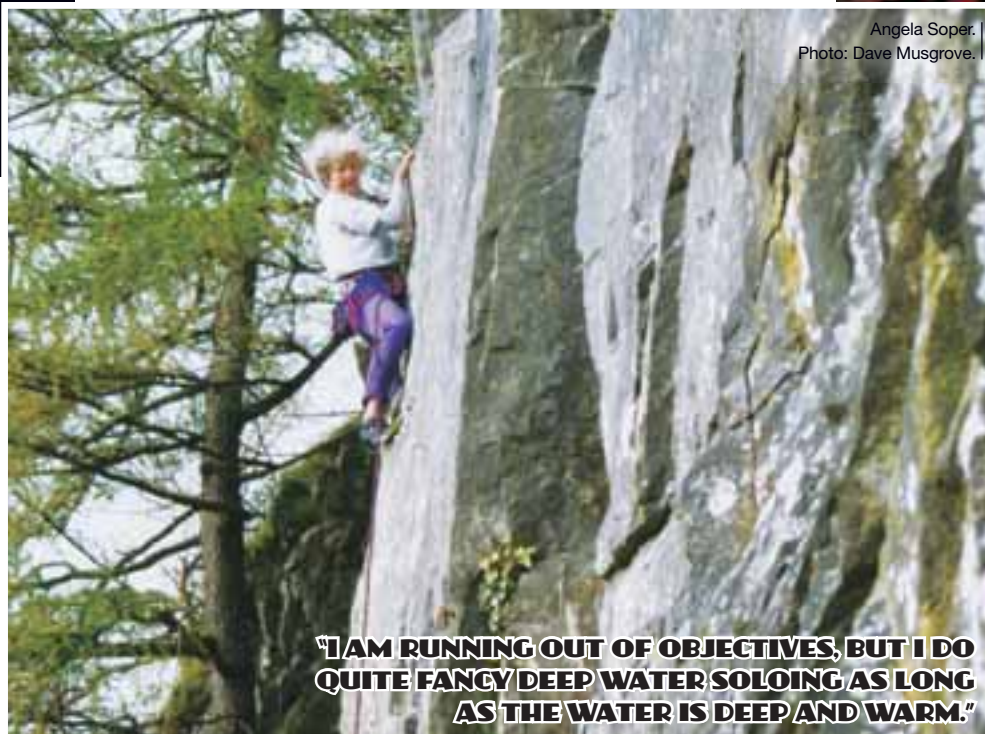
Angela is an inspiration. Climbing truly is a joy for her – that much is clear and her sense of adventure never ceases. "Two summers ago, I had a great time in the Lofoten Islands with Jo Kilner. We disembarked at Kristiansand one morning at 9am and completed the 1000-mile drive in time to climb there the following evening! We were climbing the West Pillar of Presten the next day (a 12 pitch classic E2)." Whether it's the winter competition league at her local wall, big wall trad or sport climbing Angela's done it all. Now she climbs in her 'comfort zone' of E2/3.

How did you start climbing?

By chance. In 1963 I was a post-grad student and a bit bored! I did many sports at the time, ice skating being one. I felt like I needed to broaden my horizons and one of the ice skating group mentioned an outdoor activities group. I found myself at this crag, where between us all there was only one person who knew what they were doing. When he asked if anyone else wanted to be a 'leader' I found myself saying yes and before I knew it I was kitted out with a rope round my waist and I was climbing upwards. Instantly I enjoyed the feeling of hanging off a rock.

What are some of your more memorable climbing experiences?

Climbing the Old Man of Hoy with Cynthia Grindley 20 years ago. The weather was really rough, the wind strong enough to knock us over, but the route was on the sheltered side of the stack. We'd come such a long way, we thought we better try, and it was good. Also there was a bouldering competition for women



Angela Soper.
Photo: Dave Musgrove.

"I AM RUNNING OUT OF OBJECTIVES, BUT I DO QUITE FANCY DEEP WATER SOLOING AS LONG AS THE WATER IS DEEP AND WARM."

at Huddersfield wall in 1992. It was extremely well attended. Lots of better climbers than me took part, so I was amazed to find myself in the final and win the veteran's prize.

Tell me about your ascent of Right Wall (E5 6a Dinas Cromlech). Was it something you'd built up to for ages?

No, I just hadn't found the right time, partners and weather. When I did it, it was such a hot day. I was wearing my lightest running shorts and vest, with my hands in the pothole, waiting for a breath of wind so that I could do the crux without slipping off. I just made it.

You say indoor leading walls made a difference to your climbing.

The day I retired from full-time work, colleagues gave me a good send-off and the same evening I took part in the official opening of the Foundry. I was vice-president of the BMC at the time. It was a great party and we were still climbing at midnight. Since we've had walls, many 'senior' climbers have climbed much harder than they did before - to their great satisfaction.

Tell me about the famous 'Women's Meet' you organised.

I became President of the Pinnacle Club in 1981. I wanted to encourage women climbers to raise their grades, so I thought I'd better try to be an example. With the support of the BMC I organised the (now historic) 'Women's Meet' with an International

Flavour', when Jill (Lawrence) led Right Wall and so became the first British woman to lead E5 and many others achieved personal bests. I remember an amazing feeling of mutual support and enthusiasm.

What's the longest break you've had off climbing?

Oh, just the same as everyone else.

So a year?

No.

Six months?

No. The last three weeks since it's been raining.

If you could have your time again would you have done anything differently?

No. I've done everything I wanted to. Although I would have liked to start climbing at a younger age.

There must be something you would still like to do?

I am running out of objectives, but I do quite fancy deep water soloing as long as the water is deep and warm.

So, what is your desert island crag?

You can't go wrong with Almscliff.

And your desert island book?

Something to keep my mind active, maybe an OU course on genetics! I think that keeping my mind busy will limit the damage later on. ■

ANGELA SOPER - Retired