

On the shoulders of giants - Jim Birkett

I have just finished writing the latest edition of the very popular Lake District Rock guidebook. This is a selection of the 1300-ish best routes around the Lake District. The brief was to cover all the grades, with a bias towards the lower-mid range grades. If I had been asked to provide a much shorter list of the best routes around VS-HVS, I could have saved myself a great deal of time and effort on research and simply listed all of Jim Birkett's contributions to Lakeland climbing during the 1930s and 1940s. It is remarkable to look at a list of his first ascents and see how many stars guidebook writers have consistently applied to them. He clearly had an uncanny knack of finding plumb lines on crags all over the district.

The Lake District is well known for its place in the history of British rock climbing and many characters have emerged since the birth of our sport 150 years ago: Haskett Smith, OG Jones, The Abraham brothers, Fred Botterill, HM Kelly and many others. What makes Jim Birkett stand out at this time was his working-class background. Most of his predecessors were of a different upbringing. Jim, however, was a quarryman from Little Langdale so a true local also. Don Whillans and Joe Brown who would take the climbing world by storm years later were known for their working roots, but Jim had already shown that this emerging sport of pure rock-climbing was for everyone. Jim worked in the slate quarries at Honister and also at Hodge Close Quarry, where it is alleged that he once traversed, hand-over-hand on a cable suspended over the huge drop! He ended his career as Quarry Manager at Moss Rigg, the scene of some fantastic recent developments by Pete Whillance and Keith Phizacklea.

A lifetime working in quarries, handling lumps of slate day in day out presumably helped develop his phenomenal strength. Nowadays we have climbing walls, fingerboards and training routines but I suspect Jim Birkett was stronger than most dedicated climbers of today. There was probably some genetic propensity to that strength, which has clearly been passed on to his offspring. His son, the well-known climber and writer Bill Birkett was similarly a very strong climber as are his grandsons – Dave, Bill's nephew and Will, Bill's son. Alongside his immense strength was an athleticism and suppleness that will have stood him in good stead. Having been told of someone doing a back somersault, Jim is said to have repeated the feat – in his heavy, nailed boots.

Jim Birkett was renowned for climbing almost exclusively in nailed boots, or indeed his work boots – a pair of clogs with a thick rim of iron. He developed a remarkable technique for getting the best out of these, which nowadays we would find unthinkable. In actual fact, they will have provided tremendous purchase on the small rugosities, often found on Lakeland rock. However, there are also smoother sections on some of his harder routes where, if you take a moment to consider what he was wearing, the mind boggles at how he managed. It is also worth taking a moment to consider what was available for protection. This would have been very limited, relying on slings and the

very occasional peg. He did however also pioneer the use of a pebbles wedged into cracks with a loop of cord threaded behind. Given the right crack and appropriate pebble, this might sound ideal, although of the cord, he is said to have commented “I wouldn’t trust my mother’s washing on it”. The general rule at the time was that: *the leader doesn’t fall*. Whilst this might sound like a reasonable approach, it also means that the leader will be climbing well within their capability, most of the time.

He wasn’t someone who was particularly driven to climb new routes, but naturally, they started to appear. And thank goodness they did as he has left behind some magnificent routes for us to enjoy today. His first addition was Tarsus on Dove crag in 1937. Named after the shin bone of the pigeon – favoured prey of the mighty peregrine falcon. Nature and ornithology was another of his passions. Over the years Jim Birkett would go on to produce over 50 new routes all around the Lakes, many of them classics. A summary of the best is below:

Crag	Route	Stars	Grade	Year
Gimmer	North West Arete	***	VS	1940
	F Route	***	VS	1941
White Ghyll	Hollin Groove	*	HS	1945
	White Ghyll Wall	***	VS	1946
	Slip Knot	***	VS	1947
	Haste Not	***	VS	1948
	Perhaps Not	**	HVS	1949
Scafell	May Day Climb	*	HVS	1938
	East Buttress Girdle	**	HVS	1938
	Slab and Groove	**	HVS	1948
Esk Buttress	Girdle Traverse	**	VS	1944
	Great Central Climb	*	VS	1945
	Square Chimney (combines with Medusa Wall)	* (***)	VS	1947
Napes	Tophet Grooves	*	HVS	1940
Dow	Cinderella (Blind Tarn Crag)	*	VS	1944
	Leopard’s Crawl	***	HVS	1947
Castle Rock	Overhanging Bastion	***	HVS	1939
	Zig Zag	**	VS	1939
	May Day Cracks	**	HVS	1947
	Harlot Face	**	E1	1949
Eagle Crag	Kestrel Wall	***	S	1954

Many of the routes listed were considered at the time to represent significant breakthroughs, not only setting new standards for the time but also pointing towards the possibilities of new lines to come.

Castle Rock of Triermain, Thirlmere

Overhanging Bastion HVS 5a 75m Apr 1939

One of the most significant ascents and one that attracted a lot of attention in the local press at the time was the route of Overhanging Bastion on Castle Rock of Triermain in

the Thirlmere Valley. The route traces a line up the steep, intimidating North face of the crag, with its crux being a narrow gangway, which is sandwiched between very steep terrain in a very exposed position. Even today it gives leaders pause for thought, partly due to its daunting nature but also it is not over-endowed with protection. On April Fool's Day, 1939, Jim Birkett and friends Charlie Wilson and Len Muscroft would be relying on slings and Jim's pebbles inserted into cracks. To this day it remains a great challenge at its grade and a true rite of passage for any aspiring leader. The very top was affected when a huge section of rock at the left end of the crag crashed to the ground in 2019 but a minor variation means this is still a magnificent climb. Along with Zig Zag (VS), first climbed by the same team a few weeks later in 1939, and May Day Cracks (HVS), climbed by Birkett and Muscroft in 1947, there is a fantastic day out to be had at a similar grade on this very accessible crag.

Harlot Face E1 5b 50m Jun 1949

Nearby, and only one grade harder but feeling much more of a challenge is the impressive Harlot Face. This was first climbed by Birkett and Muscroft in 1949. At the time this was the hardest climbing in the Lakes, and the first route that is now graded E1. The crux involves climbing an overhanging groove then swinging wildly round an undercut rib which allows better holds to be reached on the steep wall. All of this is quite committing, moving with blind faith for what might appear next. It is on sections like this that the thought of doing it in nailed boots is mind-boggling.

Scafell Crag, Wasdale

May Day Climb HVS 5b 78m May 1938

Charlie Wilson and Jim Birkett had been in action on Scafell East Buttress in 1938 albeit courting some controversy. They produced the tough May Day Climb, still regarded as a significant undertaking at HVS 5b. During the first ascent they placed 3 pegs and indeed Charlie Wilson used one for aid when seconding the second pitch, although Jim had led it free on tiny holds. Bentley Beetham wrote scathing comments about the use of "*continental ironmongery*" which were said to have "... *mutilated and defiled...*" the rock. He went on to state that "...*on the gentleman's side of Scafell (Scafell Crag), you will not see one piton...*" These snobbish comments were probably aimed at Birkett's humble background. Remember that up to this point, climbing was the preserve of the educated middle and upper classes, and the climbing establishment were probably none-too-happy to be shown up by the common, working man. The same year he created the East Buttress Girdle, also HVS and covering some amazing territory.

Slab and Groove HVS 4c 72m Aug 1948

10 years later, his final new route on Scafell, Slab and Groove (HVS) is another brilliant addition. This is round on Scafell Crag, climbing out of Moss Gill on a tremendous face

of perfect, smooth rock. These days we can protect the main pitch with plenty of small wires. In the past this was unprotected.

In the summer of 1947, down on Esk Butress, which often has much better conditions than the higher Scafell, Arthur Dolphin produced Medusa Wall, a long exposed VS. the following week Birkett added Square Chimney in the same area. The preferred option these days is to do a combination of the two – Square Chimney/Medusa Wall, an absolute classic VS on one of the finest crags in the district. At the time Birkett was also probing the central part of the crag, where it was clear for everyone to see that there was tremendous potential for the right team. They had already had a foray out there but here recognised that the overhanging upper section would need pitons and after the episode of May Day Climb, he had chosen not to use them. This meant they had to keep traversing right rather than head upwards. This still produced the impressive 400ft Great Central Climb at a modest VS, whereas Central Pillar would not be climbed until 1962 when it was ‘stolen’ from under the noses of the locals by visiting Pete Crew. It goes at E2 5b and is arguably one of the best routes of its grade in the Lakes. It is interesting to see that Birkett and friends were already eyeing up routes of this standard. If only they had used the kit available to them.

Dow Crag, Coniston

Leopard’s Crawl HVS 5a 48m Sep 1947

It is no surprise that Jim Birkett turned his attention to Dow Crag. It was relatively close for him, being just over the hill from Little Langdale and was already home to some great climbing. In 1947, with his regular climbing partner Len Muscroft he produced the magnificent Leopard’s Crawl. It is superb, open climbing on perfect rock; described in the current guide as: “A masterpiece of its generation and one of Jim Birkett’s best routes”. The climbing is very delicate in places and not much better protected today than it would have been when first climbed.

Cinderella VS 4b 36m 1944

Perhaps more surprising was their ascent of a route on Blind Tarn Crag in 1944. Lovely as this crag is, it is something of a sideshow to the mighty Dow round the corner. The line they climbed, however provides some delightful climbing up the side of the crag, which is situated in an idyllic location above the enigmatic Blind Tarn – so named for its lack of any obvious inlet or outlet. While there you can also climb the partner route Snitch at HVS 4c, climbed 29 years later by Jim’s son Bill.

Gimmer Crag, Langdale

North-West Arete VS 4b 42m Sep 1940

Back in Langdale, closer to home for Birkett, Gimmer provided him with some of his finest routes. North-West Arete is a magnificent VS on the perfect rock of the Lower

North-West Face. The holds are great and the position spectacular. I remember seeing a photo of this route on the front cover of Climber & Rambler magazine many, many years ago when I had just started climbing. It was a real inspiration that left me with a desire to go and climb it as soon as I was good enough. When I finally got to climb it, I was not disappointed. On the next section of crag above the top of NW Arete is a tough looking corner.

F Route VS 4c 40m May 1941

In 1941 it had already been named F Route to fit in with the other alphabet routes on the crag. Many had tried but been repulsed until Jim Birkett and his superior strength managed to overcome the strenuous layback moves required.

White Ghyll, Langdale

Further down the valley, White Ghyll was to provide Birkett with many great routes over the years. Jim Haggas had made the first foray with Gordian Knot, which Birkett repeated before going on to add many other impressive lines of his own. The first of which was White Ghyll Wall

White Ghyll Wall VS 4c 68m May 1946

This is a magnificent outing, weaving its way around the right-hand side of the mighty array of overhangs in very impressive territory. It is an excellent introduction to the buttress and to climbing on classic Lakeland VSs.

Slip Not VS 4b 41m May 1947

A justifiably popular route taking an excellent and varied line up the big slab and left round the large triangular roof above. The first section climbs up an off-vertical wall following one crack before a balancy step right into a second crack that leads to the right side of the roof. The second pitch is an intimidating undertaking at the grade but on huge holds that keep appearing where you need them. It is possible to climb the whole route in one magnificent, uninterrupted, huge pitch with the use of long slings underneath the roof.

The above two are excellent routes at VS climbing in terrain that one might expect to be harder. Perhaps even more impressive, due to its imposing position beneath the big roof is Haste Not.

Haste Not VS 4c 59m May 1948

Described in the current guidebook as: *“An impertinent excursion for its grade which probes the monumental barrier of overhangs.”* This really was pushing into challenging terrain at the time with excellent climbing, featuring an exposed and enthralling traverse. For the full experience leave most of your rack behind and see what it feels

like! Or take it all with you, use it liberally and be grateful that modern gear is available to you, unlike when Jim Birkett led his way through this tremendous terrain.

Jim Birkett, the original hard man of Langdale, broke many barriers with his climbing exploits in the 1930s and 40s. He used his immense strength and athleticism to push the limits of the day, paving the way for others to see what could be achieved. His legacy is a very fine list of routes all round the Lake District that can still act as the optimum VS/HVS tick list for the up and coming climber of today.