

LAKE DISTRICT WINTER CLIMBING

AND THE AVOIDANCE OF DAMAGE

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THE GENERAL SITUATION

The development of winter climbing in the Lake District has evolved along similar lines to other areas of the UK, from the original snow and ice gullies, icefalls and easy ridges, to mixed climbing of buttresses and more recently dry tooling.



A typical Lake District Gully climb.



Steep mixed climbing.

Snow and Ice: The most traditional style of winter climbing and the one most associated with “winter climbing.” Since the earliest days of climbing, snow filled gullies have offered ways up mountains. As equipment and techniques improved, so did the steepness of the snow and then ice that could be climbed, leading to the vertical water ice routes of today.

Mixed Climbing: The humid maritime air of UK winters can cause the formation of rime or hoar frost on the mountain cliffs, along with a covering of snow and the occasional dribble of ice or patch of frozen turf. Buttress climbs date from the Victorian era. It took the developing technique of torquing axe blades in cracks to gain upward progress together with improved axe design to allow ascents of steeper buttresses.

Since then a seemingly endless ethical debate has ensued as to what constitutes suitable winter conditions for buttress climbing. A quick rule of thumb is to consider if your ascent would be feasible without axes and crampons. If you could brush the snow off the rock and rock climb the route then you’re doing a rock route, however white it looks. In recent years such ethical considerations have become even more complex due to the advent of dry tooling.

Dry Tooling: The drier colder conditions generated by high pressure during a continental winter result in the formation of extensive icefalls. As some of these icefalls hang from steep rock and fail to reach the ground, the impending protectionless rock walls have been bolted. This allows access to the ice by hooking axes on small rock holds. Once it was realised that climbing the rock was more challenging than the ice itself the sport of dry tooling was born. Climbers started developing routes in other areas, often without the need for snow, ice or even cold temperatures. UK conditions are not continental. We fail to get sufficiently cold dry winters and lack a plentiful supply of overhanging rock faces. Nevertheless this has not stopped dry tooling venues being developed. Where these are in areas of poor rock which no one wishes to use for rock climbing, usually disused quarries, there is no conflict of interest. Where climbers have carried dry tooling techniques on to popular rock climbs the ensuing arguments have been prolonged and acrimonious. Dry tooling, as practiced in the USA and Europe, and as defined above should not be undertaken on any rock climbs, established or future. It should be restricted entirely to recognised and established venues such as "The Works".



Dry tooling at a dry tooling venue.

Dry Tooling Venues: The following venues give somewhere to train without causing damage to existing climbs; they have been dismissed as unsuitable for rock climbing. Provided that dry tooling is confined to such locations it can be done in the warmth of summer without angering other sections of the climbing community. The existence of these venues does not give license to dry tool on established crags and routes.

Any development of new dry tooling venues must only take place in consultation with the area BMC Committee and other relevant bodies.

Wales - White Goods

www.whitegood.blogspot.co.uk

The Lake District - The Works

www.mountaincircles.com/resources

Scotland - Newtyle Quarry

www.scottishclimbs.com/wiki/Newtyle_Quarry

THE AVOIDANCE OF DAMAGE

Despite the large number of excellent winter routes in the Lake District, all climbers participating in winter climbing here should be aware that the Lakes is predominantly a rock climbing area.

This is evidenced by the far greater number of rock climbs, people participating in rock climbing and days of the year where rock climbing is feasible compared to the number of winter routes, participants and climbing days on which winter conditions occur. Of course, there exist a number of excellent winter climbs which take the same line as high quality rock routes. Their first ascents form a valued part of the rich history of winter climbing in the Lake District. However, high quality rock climbs (predominantly, but not exclusively, those with two or three stars) are a finite resource which once damaged cannot be replaced.

Inevitably climbing a quality rock pitch with ice axes and crampons will considerably accelerate damage to the rock. A slight covering of snow or hoar frost is not going to stop this. In the case of harder rock routes, a relatively small number of winter ascents may render them unclimbable in both summer and winter through loss of crucial holds or gear placements.

There are many crags and buttresses in Cumbria which give superb winter climbing. However the ones listed below should not be climbed on with axes and crampons because of the quality of the rock climbing to be found on them. To do so should be viewed as irresponsible.



Crampon damage to a rock climb.

Therefore, please keep off these crags when climbing with winter equipment:

Langdale

Raven Crag, Walthwaite.

Scout Crags - Lower, Middle and Upper.

Raven, East Raven and Far East Raven Crags.

Gimmer Crag – the South-East Face to the North-West Face inclusive.

Flat Crag – from Conditionalist to BB Corner (excluding those routes).

Black Crag.

Lightning Crag.

Long Crag.

Dow, Coppermines & Slate

Dow Crag – A and B Buttresses not including the gullies.

Duddon & Eskdale

All the low lying crags in both valleys unless via obvious ice lines.

Esk Buttress – from Gargoyle Groove to Trespasser Groove (including those routes).

Scafell & Wasdale

East Buttress, except the obvious ice and turf lines.

Scafell – from Moss Ghyll to Botterill's Slab (excluding those routes).

Buttermere & St Bees

Grey Crag.

St Bees.

Gable & Pillar

Kern Knotts – from Cat Wall to the Cracks Area (including those routes).

The Napes – Tophet Wall and all the major buttresses excepting the gullies.

Gable Crag – from Engineer's Chimney to Engineer's Slabs (excluding those routes).

Borrowdale

Reecastle.

Shepherd's Crag.

Black Crag.

Quayfoot Buttress.

Woden's Face.

Bowderstone Crag.

Sergeant Crag Slabs.

Eastern Crags

Castle Rock of Triermain.

Raven Crag, Thirlmere.

Raven Crag, Threshthwaite Cove.

Dove Crag – North Buttress.

Eden Valley & South Lakes Limestone

Everything except High Cup Nick and various waterfalls.

New and existing winter routes climbed on the above crags may no longer receive official recognition.

In addition to the above list, there will also be a general presumption against recording future first winter ascents of any existing high quality rock climbs (** and *** for instance) unless they are natural ice lines. Such climbs may no longer receive official recognition.

GOOD WINTER CLIMBING CONDITIONS & CONSERVING THE ENVIRONMENT

The pressure to make the most of a precious winter day can drive some to climb routes when not in condition. Apart from the ethical view that this is cheating, there are other more serious considerations. Of concern is the damage to the rock and turf that can lead to an alteration in the nature of the winter route or of a summer one that shares the same ground. Of equal concern is damage to plants that live on the crag.



A pure ice pitch in good condition.

Many of the best winter climbing venues in the Lake District are north and east-facing cliffs. These can hold considerable amounts of vegetation, including protected arctic-alpine flowers which are very rare in the UK and unknown elsewhere in England. The crags and coves of the Helvellyn escarpment have the strongest populations of these plants but other Lake District venues are also important. The arctic-alpine plants require the cold conditions to thrive and are mostly restricted to cliffs as they need shelter from grazing sheep. It is therefore absolutely essential that all turf and vegetation is well frozen and/or snow covered as climbing on unfrozen ground will cause serious damage, both to climbs and to flora. It should be considered completely unacceptable to attempt winter routes when they are not fully frozen. However, a neatly-placed pick in well-frozen turf is likely to cause minimal impact on plants and vegetation.

Of course the majority of climbers will wish to safeguard the environment they respect and already follow the above guidelines. However it is worth noting that most of the best winter venues are within SSSIs and are protected by law. Climbing in these locations may be legally restricted if rare plants are damaged by the actions of irresponsible climbers.

When deciding whether a climb is in condition or not, the following factors should be considered.

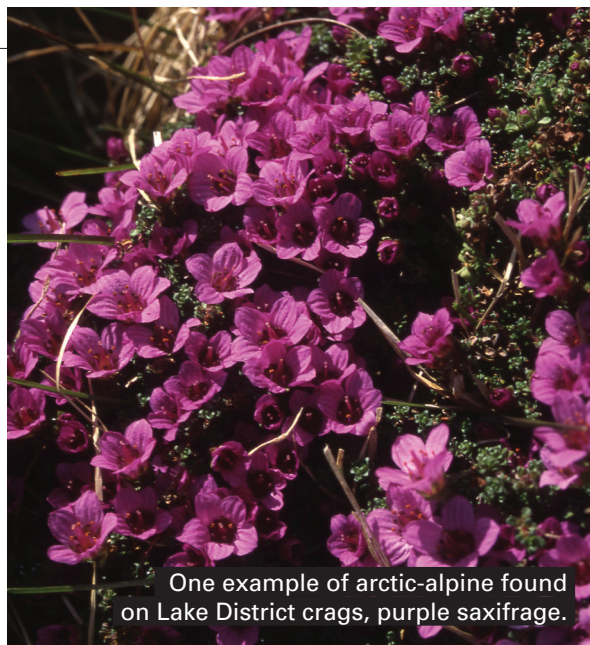
Snow Climbs: For snow routes there should be enough snow to allow upward progress. Gullies should be full and firm enough to ensure that underlying plants are not damaged.

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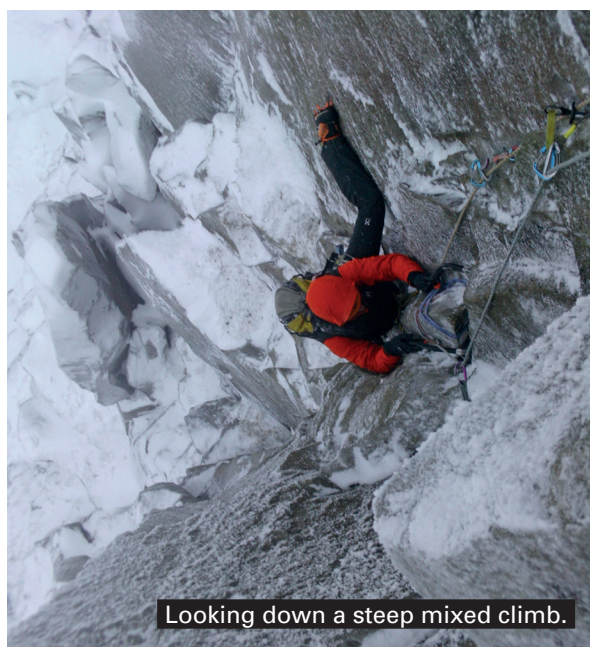
Ice Routes: Climbing a pure ice climb in good condition should cause no damage to the immediate environment as there will be little interaction with the surrounding rock and vegetation. In fact, as protection will consist mainly of ice screws, you have a strong vested interest in the condition of the ice you're climbing!

Mixed Climbs: In general the steeper the route the less snow it will hold. Snow lies on ledges and edges and so, looking up, a route often gives the appearance of not being in condition, while a view down the same route may show acceptable quantities of snow and ice.

While steeper rock may not hold much snow, there should nevertheless be sufficient to give a white appearance and not so little that it can be easily cleaned off. Rock may also look white due to a covering of rime. This is seldom structurally strong enough to be climbed but does add to the challenge of the climb by hiding pick and protection placements. Finally, rock may also be covered by a layer of verglas which will inhibit rime and so may have a dark appearance, though axes and crampons will still be necessary to climb the face. While too thin to take a conventional pick placement, this verglas can give delicate pick and crampon placements. An iced crack may mean protection is more difficult to place, but can help secure marginal pick placements. As detailed above, all turf and vegetation on mixed or buttress climbs should be fully frozen.



One example of arctic-alpine found on Lake District crags, purple saxifrage.



Looking down a steep mixed climb.



Looking up the same climb on the same day.

WHEN AND WHERE TO FIND GOOD WINTER CONDITIONS

The lower hills and proximity to the coast means winter conditions in the Lake District are more fickle than in Scotland. The climbing season can lie anywhere between October to April; usually the coldest point of the winter occurring in late January. In fact, good conditions are unlikely before New Year. Until then rarely will there have been enough cold days to freeze the ground thoroughly and any snow which does fall soon melts.

While the presence of snow is a must for winter climbing, its presence alone is not enough. A dump of fresh snow on unfrozen ground merely insulates the soil below and slows down the freezing process. Several days of cold temperatures prior to snowfall are the best indicator that conditions may be suitable on the fells. The hills may often be covered with a coating of fresh snow and take a few days to consolidate through a freeze-thaw cycle to become suitable for climbing. It takes a prolonged period of snowy wintery weather to fill gullies with the snow necessary to build up really good conditions. During this period crags exposed to the wind are likely to be better frozen.

Water ice and turf can freeze giving good climbing after only a few days of hard frosts or a longer period of sub-zero temperatures. It is important that it should have been regularly freezing at night. A limited thawing during the day is desirable, as long as it freezes again the next night. This process builds up the ice thickness more quickly. Buttress and mixed routes usually come into condition more readily than snow gullies and the more reliable nature of this style of climbing has helped to increase its popularity.

When choosing a venue, altitude and aspect are crucial. North or east facing crags tend to receive limited sunshine allowing snow cover to build. Hence north-east-facing Great End is one of the most reliable crags for collecting snow and tends to retain it for longer than most other areas in the Lakes. The Helvellyn coves, while slightly less reliable, can be better if the wind has recently been from the east. In winter a prevailing easterly



A frozen gill.

usually heralds cold air that help freeze turf and form water ice, but it often does not bring much chance of snow. Thus areas such as Blea Water near Haweswater, which readily form water ice, can be a good choice if it has been cold and dry. In general, if the wind has been from the east then it is often better to choose a cliff on the east side of the district with an easterly aspect to it.

Winds from the west or south-west are more likely to carry snow and bring buttresses and gullies into condition. Scafell is high enough for it to often rime up with a westerly wind even if snow has not fallen. Gable Crag is another reliable venue in such conditions. Areas close to the sea, such as Dow Crag, are greatly affected by milder coastal winds, and are seldom worth considering unless circumstances are exceptional.

Finally, there are many waterfalls and gills that will freeze given a sufficiently prolonged cold period. Some high falls such as Newland's Hause and Low Water Beck come into condition reasonably quickly. Even these take about a week of sub-zero night-time temperatures to form, others will take longer. Strangely enough, for the weepier sort of ice climbs, periods of intense cold aren't necessarily ideal as the water may freeze in the ground; better to have a slight thaw during the day and a refreeze at night allowing a build-up and thickening of the ice.

Therefore, keeping an eye on what the weather has been doing for a week or so before you venture out should help you choose somewhere in condition and allow you to make the most of short winter days. Flexibility in your choice of venue and route is essential. If the climb you have picked isn't in condition, please don't force your way up it. Choose another route on the crag or even another crag and so save the day. The Lakes is compact enough to allow this.

As well as the regular television and radio weather forecasts, there are a host of other forecasts available by phone and on the web. A useful forecast for the Lake District National Park, which gives information about snow conditions on the fells, is available at **www.lakedistrictweatherline.co.uk** or 0844 846 2444. Also worth consulting is the Mountain Weather Information Service (MWIS) at **www.mwis.org.uk**

A CODE FOR WINTER CLIMBERS IN THE LAKE DISTRICT

The following voluntary code is a guide to allow for an accepted ethical ascent that has minimum impact on rock climbs, the natural cliff environment and the future of the sport:

- 1** Winter climbing should only be undertaken under frozen and snow-covered conditions.
- 2** The cliff should have a 'wintery' appearance with snow, rime or verglas covering most of the rock, not just snow covering ledges.
- 3** Consider if your ascent would be feasible without axes and crampons; if you could brush the snow off the rock and rock climb the route then you're doing a rock route.
- 4** Turf can be an excellent winter climbing medium but should only be climbed on when it is solidly frozen or deeply covered in snow/neve and so unlikely to be dislodged.

5 In winter many routes normally climbed in summer have little vegetation or even ice. They are vulnerable to damage even in perfect/ideal winter conditions. This could involve loss of small holds, loss of flakes, modification of pockets and loss of protection placements. To prevent damage to summer routes please consider whether your proposed ascent is likely to cause such damage; if so, choose another objective.

6 During any winter ascent there should be a presumption against the use of pegs if at all possible. Placement of bolts on mountain routes, as in summer, is unacceptable and counter to the area's traditional ethic.

7 Routes should be climbed from the bottom to the top of the crag in a single push, with no abseil pre-inspection. If a bivouac en route is required so be it, however abseiling off and resuming from your high point the next day is not a valid ascent.

This paper was compiled by a group of Lake District climbers representing both winter and rock climbing interests. The project was supported by the BMC, FRCC, National Trust, Lake District National Park Authority and Natural England.

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