

# **A History of Climbing on the Cheviot**

**By Graeme Read**

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- Graeme Read – July 2011 -

Although there are early references with regards to climbing on Simonside and Great Wanney dating back as far back as 1902 by GW Young in the CC Journal of the time, the first known recorded rock climb in Northumberland was made many miles away from the celebrated sandstone edges of the county, on the wild and remote slopes of the highest hill in the area, the mighty Cheviot. It occurred on the dark northern edge of the mountain in a deep, steep sided ravine, sculptured millions of years ago during an ice age and known as "The Bizzle". The route ascended the deep cleft high in the ravine which, although originally called *North Eastern Chimney*, became known simply as *Bizzle Chimney*. It was scaled by two relatively unknown climbers of the time: Tarver and Glover on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1899, and graded VD. The climb was documented in the 1907 SMC Journal and described as "the only well defined climb on the range". Around the same time Tarver and Glover also described how to reach the "Cannonhole" in the Henhole, the other impressive ravine on the other side of Cheviot, which would later see much attention.

There then followed a period of 40 plus years where no new routes were recorded on Cheviot. In fact, in the period from the turn of the century up to the start of the Second World War, Northumberland on the whole was only sporadically developed. Even major venues, such as Bowden Doors and Kyloe, were not looked at in any great detail until at the least the late 1930s. The Cheviot did, however, gain more popularity during the 1940s thanks largely to the efforts of Basil Butcher and Keith Gregory. Their early pioneering efforts led to organised bus meets by the Northumbrian Mountaineering Club (NMC) to the Cheviot crags. Henhole, the largest crag in the area, proved to be the most popular and in the period from the end of the Second World War right up through the 1950s many of the classic routes of the crag were climbed. During this time Butcher and Gregory climbed *Zig Zag* and *Black Adams Corner*, and completed *Cannonhole Direct*, which had first been attempted almost half a century earlier by Tarver and Glover. Two other climbers on the scene at this time, Philip McGill and Harry Warmington, also left their calling card at Henhole with first ascents of: *Long John* (then known as *Rib and Wall*); the fine *Tombstone*; and the classic *College Grooves*, which at HS was, and still is, one of the best routes at that grade in Northumberland. Around this time Dunsdale crag, situated lower down the College Valley, also proved to be a popular venue. This, however, was to instantly change as a rockfall killed Philip McGill and injured his partner Harry Warmington while they attempted a new route. The crag never recovered from this accident. No new routes have since been recorded and those that did exist have become lost in the midst of time. This perhaps is no a bad thing as the crag, whilst impressive looking from a distance, is very loose and broken on closer inspection. Fortunately the neighbouring Henhole and Bizzle crags are of better quality.

Henhole, along with Great Wanney, Simonside and the county's southern whinsill crags of Crag Lough and Peel Crag, remained one of the most popular crags in the area and new routes at relatively modest grades continued to be added to Henhole (although the details, such as dates and by whom, of many first ascents were never fully documented). What, however, is known is that the crags of the Bizzle a short distance away, still saw only sporadic attention with some easy routes being added immediately to the right of the classic chimney. Again the exact details of these are unknown, although they were likely climbed during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

It wasn't until c1965 that significant new route activity returned to Henhole, in the shape of two strong local climbers Malcolm Lowerson and Jim Patchett. Along with Norman Haighton (the then NMC guidebook editor), this team with Patchett at the sharp end, created, amongst others, three hard new additions to the crag: *Misconception* HVS; *The Brute* HVS; and *Fingery Jim*, which at E1 was the first extreme in the range. Even today, all three routes demand respect with the latter two in particular being both fairly hard and bold. This team also added *Conception Corner* and *Steerpike* around the same time. Activity on Cheviot then fell away dramatically, largely owing to the ever growing popularity of the more easily accessible sandstone crags and

the abundance of quality unclimbed lines that they had to offer. The emergence of the powerful team of Bob Hutchinson and John Earl in the early 1970s, followed slightly later by the infamous(!) Smith brothers, Bob and Tommy, as well as other teams, ensured that the crags for which Northumberland is well known today were well and truly put on the map. During this period the county easily caught up with developments elsewhere in the country in terms of the ascent of hard new routes in good style. While all this was happening the Cheviot crags lay dormant, patiently waiting for the next wave of development.....

This new wave was not going to happen for the best part of 40 years, but all the while new routes were still occasionally added to Henhole. Somewhere in the period between the late 1960s and the early 1980s the evergreen Nev Hannaby (who first started climbing on the Cheviot crags in the 1950s) added *Forgotten Wall* at VS. This was followed in 1983 by Steve Crowe's ascent of *Funeral Pyre* also at VS. It, however, wasn't until 1987 that standards were pushed up a notch when Calum Henderson and Lee Clegg climbed *Zeus the Mighty Bull*, or the "*Cannonhole Superdirect*", which at E2 was the hardest route on the range and only the second extreme in 80 years of development. It is worth noting that in the same year Bob Smith climbed the awesome *On the Rocks* at Back Bowden Doors at E7: only 15 miles from Cheviot, but a sure sign of the pace of development elsewhere in the county. It is remarkable to think that in a 20 year period of development on the sandstone edges, standards rose from VS to E7, whereas on the high Cheviot crags they rose by only one grade during the same period. Development on Cheviot then ceased again for 15 years until the late summer of 2002 when Graeme Read visited Henhole with Richard Pow. The pair added *Hooly's Horror* HVS and the bold *Conclusion Super Direct* – at E3 raising the standard of the routes a notch. On the same day they climbed *Zeus the Mighty Bull* and suggested a grade of E1 rather than E2 but confirmed its quality at the same time.

Winter climbing in Northumberland is not a new activity (though it is strictly forbidden on the sandstone and whinsill crags) and for years climbers have been known to visit the Bizzle in the depths of winter to climb the frozen burn. When in condition this waterfall offers the finest expedition of its grade in the area at II/III, but it is not known who made the first ascent. Climbers had also been known to visit Henhole in winter but nothing was ever officially documented. In January 2003 Richard Pow and Rick Barnes found themselves at Henhole. Pow spotted a well iced line high on Henhole Wall and duly climbed *Cool Alligator* IV,5. This appeared to open the floodgates for a while, with around a dozen new winter lines being climbed at Henhole, courtesy in the main of Pow, Tim Catterill and Scottish climber Graeme Little. This short, intense period of activity drew to a close with Catterill and Pow climbing the hard *Dogs of War* on North Eastern Buttress in the Bizzle, which at VI,7 is the hardest winter route in the area. Catterill later returned to the Bizzle to make the first winter ascent of the chimney at V,6.

Following Read and Pow's summer routes in 2002 it was felt that new development in Henhole, and the Cheviot range as a whole, was exhausted. The crags were left alone in peace again. Five years later, in 2007, Read, whilst descending from Cheviot one afternoon, took to the edge of the Bizzle ravine for a full view of the crags high on the opposite side of the burn and was immediately struck by the potential for new routes on these high, lonely crags. He returned shortly afterwards with his brother-in-law, Stephen Kirkup, to make the first ascent of the crack and wall on the steep, clean cut buttress on the lower right of the ravine (Dunsdale / Bomber Buttress), which was named *Dunsdale Crack* HVS. This would have been the first recorded rock route in the Bizzle for 108 years but Read had noted an attractive steep unclimbed blank wall to the left of Dunsdale Crack. It was late in the season and the first snows of winter had already fallen on the Cheviot summit so Read kept his ascent to himself and vowed to return. Three years later in 2010 Read finally returned with Simon Litchfield, fresh from their development of Lower Tosson further south. Read finally psyched up to make the first ascent of the aforementioned blank wall to produce the serious *The Flying Fortress*. Named in honour of the aircraft crash site at the head of the West Hill, this route, which although low in the grade at E6 6a/b offers excellent climbing in a great position: falling before the upper overlap is reached would not be wise. Litchfield, eager to get in on the action, added the intricate *Devious Flightpath* at E4, and also a variation finish to *Dunsdale Crack* at E1. The Cheviot crags, and the Bizzle in particular, had been piloted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in

the space of one day. The pair had, however, barely started. The following year - 2011, after an exploratory mission where the loose looking *Biz Loss* was soloed by Litchfield, they were back at the Bizzle, this time on the obvious central buttresses. Here they climbed five new lines, the best of the bunch being *Back in Bizness* E4 by Litchfield and *Big Bizness* at the same grade by Read. In June of that year they visited the historic North Eastern Buttress, where no significant rock climb had been added since Tarver and Glover climbed the classic chimney 112 years earlier. Keen to climb the "unclimbed overhanging crack" mentioned in the 1989 NMC guide, Litchfield pulled out all the stops to lead it ground up and in the process create one of the finest crack climbs in Northumberland: *Where the Hills meet the Sky* E2 6a. Incidentally this stakes a claim to the highest finishing rock climb in the county and one of the highest finishing routes in England outside of Cumbria! This part of the buttress is so steep that it was actually raining during the first ascent. The pair hadn't finished yet either, for Read inspected and then ascended the steep, intimidating wall to the right of the crack to produce the serious and strenuous *The Lost World* at E6 6b, another very fine addition and the hardest route in the range - definitely not for the faint hearted. They completed developments when Litchfield climbed a traditional feeling HS line up the rib immediately to the left of the chimney.

This brings the development of the Cheviot crags fully up to date. Owing to their location the crags will never rival the great sandstone crags of the county in terms of accessibility and numbers, but those who do venture up into the wild windswept hills will certainly be guaranteed a full day out with unrivalled views and some excellent routes of all grades thrown in for good measure.

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