

On the north Anglesey coast a large clean sweep of rock springs out of the hillside like a lichen-camouflaged World War Two bunker. The sea laps the far undercut end of the cliff and a blue-bell entwined grass slope gives a steep but easy approach. Fishermen use this corrugated slice of Quartzite as a navigation aid and call it Cathedral Rock...

...THE GOGARTH GUIDEBOOK CALLS IT EQUESTRIAN WALL

Brushing the rock with his hand, Tim Neill calls Equestrian Wall specialist. Shimmering cobwebs weave together sabre sharp edges. Fat brown spiders scuttle. Tim's large cleaning hand sweeps for holds while pulling lumps of grass and raining ramalina lichen. Umbrella-shaped pennywort plants gush sticky fluid that smears over rock shoe rubber. Rotten rock, resembling decaying wood, crumbles. This will be the second ascent of *Crazy Horse*, an E3 5b Graham Desroy and I had climbed the previous summer.

Tim didn't look amused. I'd told him the start was easy climbing. Tim thought otherwise... he moved up and down, up and down, placing more gear with each foray. "How you doing?" Tim stuffed another cam into a dark, jagged crack and shuffled up again, prodding and pulling, pulling and testing, testing and reversing ... "Yeah, loving it ... it's easy of course!" >>

Nick Bullock looking at the last of the gear before climbing the crux on the 1st ascent of *All The Pretty Horses* (E6 6b). This was the successful ascent as on the first attempt of the climb a hold broke and Bullock took a 25ft fall.

no country for ★ OLD MEN ★

WORDS NICK BULLOCK
PHOTOS RAY WOOD UNLESS CREDITED



Above: The Equestrian wall.

Graham Desroy is also known as Streaky, but I call him the Old Hippy which is actually a misnomer as he is an old rocker – red bandana, tie-dye shirt, white trousers and long (getting a tad thin) hair – he reminds me of the lead singer of Status Quo, but I would never tell him this, he would take it as a compliment! *Captain Mark Phillips* is also quite old and getting thin upstairs but unlike the Old Hippy he was once married to royalty... (the Old Hippy never in a million years could pull royalty.) *Captain Mark Phillips* is also an attractive sabre E5 slash running the length of the Equestrian Wall.

I could hardly move with the weight of several monster cams hanging from my harness. Holds creaked. "I don't think anyone has climbed *Captain Mark Phillips* in years?" "Really?" The Old hippy replied in a 'are you really surprised' tone; then he lit a cigarette anticipating a long belay session. Smoke from his a cigarette floated and wrapped around pennywort stalks in the back of the dark cleft. The smoke drifted through spiders' webs spanning the dyke, fluttering and glistening in the breeze. I pushed myself into the confines of the crack. It smelled of earth and copper and damp insect life and Embassy.

The climbing was physical but the crux came near the top and I was shocked – I was shocked after so much climbing to find myself laybacking strenuously, my feet smearing outside the crack. I was also shocked to be so pumped – it looks like a slab from the side but Equestrian Wall is an enigma and my arms were telling me this was no slab. A long ten minutes later I pulled onto the grassy crag top, hot and sweating, exhilarated but relieved and as I pulled in the ropes I knew I would have to come back...

A limpet trip

My imagination had been fired by that first visit and later in the summer I was fortunate enough to squeeze in another Equestrian day. A lone cormorant skimmed the sea, a porpoise jumped in the turning tide, the daylight was shortening and a damp chill penetrated my fleece. I had brought along Dan McManus, young and talented with the skills to get out of trouble on the rare occasion his talent bolted.

Dan 'warmed up' on a George Smith climb called *A Limpet Trip*. This route is an oddity of the wall, in fact an oddity for George as for once it doesn't involve heel-hooking, knee-barring, grunting, swinging, slapping and jamming. It had no upside down and didn't follow one of the distinct features of the wall which are striations running from left to right. *Limpet Trip* climbed the wall like a wall and because of three pegs it felt safe-ish!

Even the name was an oddity without a horse connection. I asked George where it originated; he told me it was from belaying a local who isn't the quickest of climbers and as he had belayed, he had watched a limpet move from one side of a boulder to the other. I seconded Dan, who climbs much quicker than a limpet, knowing my plan had worked: which was to warm up and check out the finishing moves of George's climb.

The planned new line followed a crack and three distinct pods and would continue direct or the same as *Limpet Trip*. Dan considered it safe so I wasn't allowed pre-practice; an abseil and a quick brush would have to do. The direct finish from the top pod followed a small crease of friable rock. It looked like it would involve strenuous and blind laybacking while smearing feet. The protection was sparse. Bigger that, I thought (I was soon going away on an expensive expedition) but the pods on the first half looked too good to be ignored.

Wedge into the long, narrow pod, the last in the line of three, the smell and feel was once again of damp rotten wood, earth and elements. I buried my head amongst sand and guano and placed a monster cam. Several failed attempts to escape the pod followed as I tried to reach a large round hole to the right until a positive piece of driftwood gave me an idea. Laybacking the driftwood, running my feet high, pushing toes onto dusty smears I crossed a left arm over the right and squeezed a sloping hold that looked like a bite out of a lump of four-by-two. Wafting blindly right I scratched the inside of the round pod and pulled myself into yet another fusty hole.

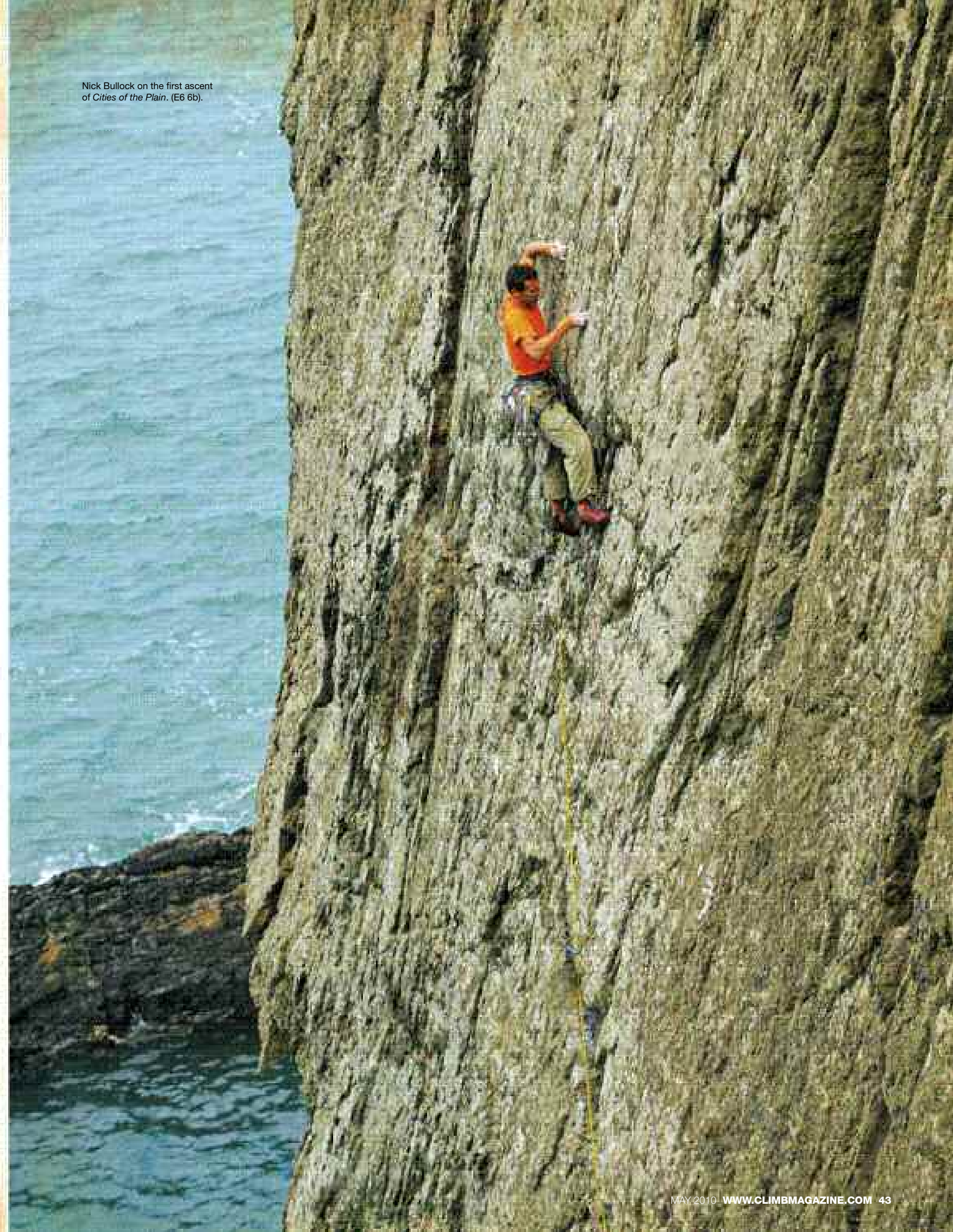
The top peg on *Limpet Trip* was still a way up and with no more monster cams I hoped the climbing would be easy... it wasn't. A long reach for a crimp... 'Don't break, don't break'... then a step right and the peg had me back on the familiar ground of *A Limpet Trip*. Struggling, sweating, cursing... the finish of *Limpet Trip* was the crux of that route and this one also. Two moves from the top a hold that I had used previously ripped. Thrown from the cliff, my clean first ascent attempt ending in refusal, I was slapped hard back into the crag. Success came with the second, slightly soured attempt. >>

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★ I WAS SHOCKED ★

Below: Graham Desroy beneath the brilliant E5 5c *Captain Mark Phillips*, the first route on their first visit climbed by Bullock and Desroy. NICK BULLOCK



Nick Bullock on the first ascent of *Cities of the Plain*. (E6 6b).



Three Day Event

Through the winter in the French Alps the thought of returning to this quirky crag on the North Anglesey coast and exploring the direct finish to the pod climb, which I called *The Crossing*, kept me wrapped in a warm blanket of imagination. Returning to Wales in May it wasn't long before I found myself walking the rutted North Anglesey coastal path in the company of the Old Hippy and Big Tim.

Warm ups done – although after *Crazy Horse* and *Captain Mark Phillips* Big Tim looked more than warm – I checked out the direct finish to *The Crossing* with fresh eyes. The gear still looked poor and the holds looked non-existent. I brushed and cleaned a line but it was impossible to see how I was going to join it all together. The Hippy lowered me on a top-rope and I stopped in the long, narrow pod. Immediately I climbed a different section of the wall than what I had expected to. I really would have preferred to have attempted this climb with just an abseil and clean but the blind and insecure rock was convincing me that I had made the right decision. After a rest I set off again... and smeared-puzzled-rested-pulled-pushed-underclinged-crimped-brushed-slapped-rested and finally... finally laid one on for the top of the crag...

The Hippy sat content, a cigarette drooped from his mouth.

"How was that then?"

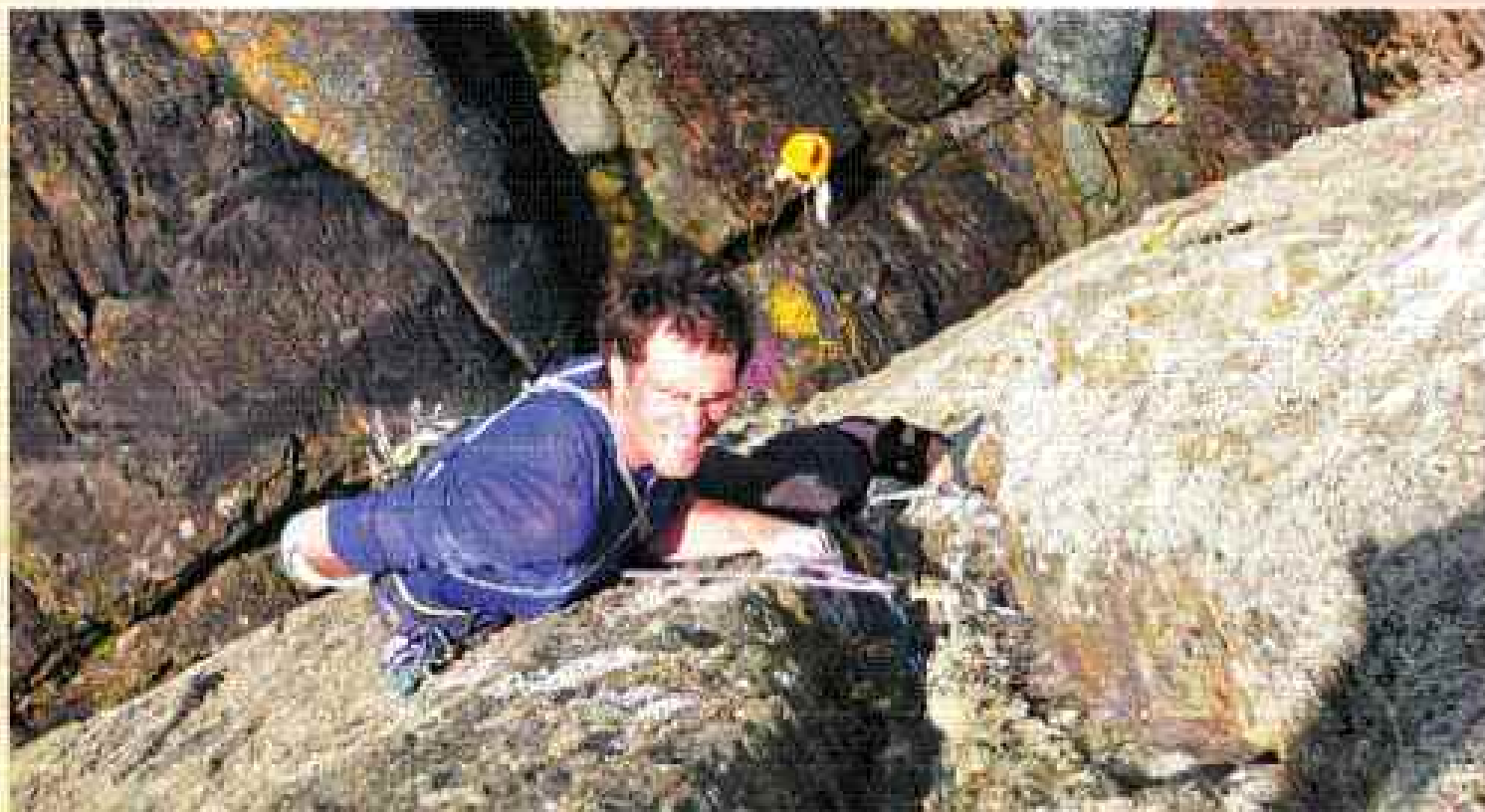
"Desperate mate!"

Two more practice runs followed and I was now discovering the problem – or was it the beauty? – of this wall: there were several ways to do something as long as the feet could be trusted. My friend James McHaffie's words rang through my mind: "A weighted foot never slips." But it wasn't just a case of hoping the feet didn't slip, it was having faith that the thin quartz veins wouldn't disintegrate. I decided the lead would have to wait for another day.

The Old Hippy ended the day with a new direct start to an Ed Stone E4 called *Three Day Event*. The new start was not intended, he just climbed where he thought the route began, which quite clearly was not where the route began. Big Tim and I shook our heads as the Old Hippy, the person who had written the description for this climb in the new Gogarth guidebook, skittered like a foal: "watch-me-watch-me-argh-the-foothold's-crumbling-watch me." Slapping, breaking holds, slapping, eventually he lunged for the top in a reverse stage dive and white jeans slithered out of sight.

Half submerged, the blazing sun lit the lapping sea with fiery reflections. In the diminishing glow we packed the ropes, listened to the forlorn call of the oyster catchers and revelled in the day.

Below: Tim Neill loving the fine delights of the crux of *Captain Mark Phillips*. "At about this point he called for a gear re-supply as he had used everything he had started with. I lowered several more cams and extenders. After completing the climb, we counted the gear he had placed – it was 40 pieces!" NICK BULLOCK



All The Pretty Horses

The type of climbing on Equestrian Wall was my favourite: run-out and technical, uncertain, but with time to plan between moves. I knew I could climb this route but because of the nature of the rock success was never going to be certain. I liked this; it reminded me of a John Redhead quote from one of his North Stack routes called *Birth Trauma*. "Those attempting this climb should give themselves to Karma." I had long passed the stage in climbing where getting to the top is the be all and end all. The journey was far more important...

... I stood in the final pod, half way up the wall and attempted to open myself to Karma. One second I could see fingers wrapped tight around the finishing holds, but just as quick, a second image of me cart-wheeling down the face pushed out the positive.

I pulled out of the pod; the Old Hippy, cigarette drooping, looked up. A long strenuous pull and then another to the base of a crozzled crack... Laybacking with force the rock creaked. A long reach for a painful finger lock, the sharp rock cutting into my soft finger flesh, a twist of the body and a strenuous pull gave way to a semi-rest and gear. This was the last gear on the route even though the top was still a cattle drive away. I love this feeling: the nervous tension as I battle with my brain until eventually... eventually I push on even though the outcome is far from certain.

Farther from the gear with every move, my mind detached... undercling, smear one foot, reach and pull, smear the second foot, reach and pull. A weighted foot never slips. Flag and pull. I focus on the thin quartz vein and press my toe against it...

...suddenly a sharp dry-bone cracking sound. The quarts ripple breaks and I'm thrown. My neck snaps backward, twisting, cart-wheeling, bumping, jarring... crispy Ramaliner floats in a cloud... Slapped into the rock 30ft from my original position I stop but I'm hanging upside down and shocked. The Hippy lowers me into the soft, grassy slope.

Chemically numbed, the second attempt finishes with a new direct finish to *The Crossing* and a swollen elbow. I called the climb *All The Pretty Horses* after the first book in the Cormac McCarthy Border trilogy; this was the true line and what I thought was the end of my Equestrian affair.

James McHaffie's words rang through my mind:

★ **A WEIGHTED FOOT NEVER SLIPS.** ★



Above: Graham Desroy climbing *The Burghley Start*, a new direct start (by mistake!) before galloping (and slapping and breaking holds and screaming...) to the top of the brilliantly pumpy Ed Stone E4 6a *Three Day Event*. NICK BULLOCK **Below:** Graham on gear-retrieving duty on the warm-up route *Crazy Horse* (E3 5b). NICK BULLOCK

Cities of the Plain

The Old Hippy had been on two fact finding missions looking at a space we knew about between *Captain Mark Phillips* and *Three Day Event* but after cleaning a line he considered the climbing a tad too 'out-there'. The talk was of loose flakes, big run-outs and suspect gear.

Technical move after technical move. The crux, a strenuous pull over a roof with the feet on smears, was beneath me but this line was so much more sustained than *All The Pretty Horses* and there were still several difficult and technical sections to come.

Grabbing a small creaking flake with both hands and then rocking over until I stood on it before stretching and grasping a large expanding flake, my mind gushed with what-ifs then I pulled myself up, stood on the flake and moved off it again while thinking light thoughts. The final moves were difficult but familiar – I'd already worked them – and I climbed smoothly with knowing caution to give my fourth new route on the wall, *Cities Of The Plain*. The final book of the Border trilogy, it was certainly the best climb yet and surely my final new climb of the Equestrian Wall?

Yet here I was, forcing myself sideways into a final unclimbed area which I had cleaned but not practised. Forcing myself on into moves that were fresh and unknown and uncertain, moves that were like life, moves that gave and enhanced my life, moves that were leading me on into an old man, no-man's land, into *No Country For Old Men*.

