
 Nick Bullock. Photo: Ray Wood

# Nick Bullock

## Breaking Out

Lots of people have thought at some point of jacking-in the day job and following their passion. Nick Bullock did just that, walking away from a secure job in the Prison Service to become a full-time climber and, 18 expeditions to the Greater Ranges and numerous impressive ascents on rock and ice later, it is still 'comfort and routine' that scares him the most. **Ray Wood** finds out more about the man who describes himself as "having strong opinions rather than being opinionated".

From the moment you meet Nick you know he is one of those people that can't sit still for long. Vivacious with a big grin factor, his head of tight black curls sits atop a wiry frame struggling to contain its kinetic energy. But his bubbly demeanour will quickly fade if you get him on the subject of mountaineering ethics. Talking to him it's hard to reconcile the idea of Nick as a former Prison Officer when so much of his life is now dictated on his terms. The contrast is stark. Was it a case of not knowing there are other options, until someone lets you look over the wall into the secret garden and afterwards nothing looks the same again?

For Nick, that eye-opening moment came at 27 years of age, on a three-week course at Plas y Brenin as part of his training to be a Physical Education Officer for the Prison Service. "I'd done a bit of climbing at The Roaches with school once but it was my final week at the Brenin doing classic ridges and easy rock climbs that really got me into it. I particularly recall a Nick Banks lecture called *The North Faces* and thinking it was amazing people put themselves in those kind of positions."

### Gamekeeper turned Prison Officer

By this time Nick had already been in the Prison Service around five years. He'd grown up near Cheadle in Staffordshire with "ferrets and shotguns, a working class upbringing", spending a lot of time at his best mate's smallholding. Leaving school at 16 he turned to gamekeeping as a career and a week on a Youth Opportunity Scheme in Wales, at the Wern Estate near Porthmadog, led to a full-time job with the Head Gamekeeper.

However, the experience turned sour and ironically, considering that Nick now bases himself a great deal in

north Wales, he left hating the place, associating it with a hard time in his life and never wanting to return. After being made redundant from his next job, as a dairy farm worker and "a victim of the Thatcher era", he joined the Prison Service at his dad's suggestion. "My Dad had applied once and was accepted but never took it up. He told me to join as it was a job for life, in a growth industry with good benefits. Looking back I went for it on a whim and the Prison Service was just a job. I can't imagine why anyone would grow up wanting to become a Prison Officer."

It was at work running to answer an alarm bell and dealing with a disturbance in Gartree Prison (Leicestershire) that made Nick realise how unfit he'd become. "Walking back afterwards I virtually collapsed and thought I was going to throw up. I'd done gymnastics when I was young and realised I needed

to get back in the gym and start training again. It took two years to get on the 12-month course necessary to qualify as a PE Officer." Nick hasn't stopped training since and today he's well known for his strict regime of circuits, weights and running when he isn't climbing.

### Making up for lost time

Bitten by the climbing bug following his time at the Brenin, it was ironic to be posted to Suffolk after completing his PE course in 1992 and a return to Gartree couldn't come soon enough. Attending a Big Wall Course back at Plas y Brenin a few years later, he met Owain Jones working at the outdoor centre and the pair teamed up for Nick's first "proper climbing trip" to the Alps in '96. Here he was introduced to a 21-year-old Jules Cartwright and Jamie Fisher – both who later tragically lost their lives in those mountains. 

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Nick served none of the usual alpine apprenticeship but with Scottish route experience (mostly solo) up to grade VI behind him, his first route was the *Swiss Route* on the North Face of Les Courtes, followed by the North Spur of the Chardonnet, then the Croz on the Jorasses, finishing up with a simul-solo of *The Shroud* – not a bad first season by anyone's standards.

The next year was a quantum leap in terms of ambition, joining Jones, Cartwright and Fisher for an attempt on Meru Central's (6,310m) Shark's Fin, a stunning blade of granite in the Garhwal Himalaya. Although unsuccessful and with hindsight perhaps a sign of naivety, it was another turning point in Nick's life. "It was my first time in Asia and absolutely mind-blowing. I'd previously only been on a few package holidays with my parents. But from that point on I knew I wanted to get into expedition climbing. I'd never been through such a range of emotions

before. It was wild!" The difficulty of the Shark's Fin is highlighted by the fact that it rebuffed numerous expeditions, until finally being climbed this year by Conrad Anker (on his third attempt), Jimmy Chin and Renan Ozturk.

By now Nick was climbing E6, but by his own admission he isn't a naturally talented rock climber and it "requires hard work". This hasn't stopped him on-sighting several E7s and this summer he pulled off probably his hardest lead to date, repeating Stevie Haston's *Melody* (HXS/E9) on Craig Dorys. North Stack Wall is another favoured venue for Nick and *The Angle Man* is the only route there without a tick beside it in his Gogarth guidebook.

## Expeditions and head games

Nick clearly relishes the 'head games' and it's in winter running it out on hard mixed terrain that he really excels, with precise first-time movements and a calm style, often belying the degree of difficulty involved. He's climbed plenty of big ice routes in Canada such as *Sea of Vapours* (WI 6+) and the classic *Riptide* (WI 6/7). In January 2009, combining forces with 'mad for-it' Tim Emmett, the pair repeated the legendary French ice-route, *La Lyre* (VI WI 7, 550 metres). Considered by many to be the hardest ice-route in the world at the time of its first ascent in 1992 by Thierry Renault, Denis Condevaux and Wilfred Colonna, Nick commented afterwards: "I'm not surprised Thierry gave up climbing and found religion at the end of that winter! There is no technical ice grade harder than seven."

Having discovered climbing relatively late in life, Nick felt the pressure of having to put a lot of time and effort into doing the routes he wanted. "I'd always been conscious of the need to make up for lost time. It became apparent to me that if I was going to leave the Prison Service 'to live to climb', I needed to pay the mortgage off on my house, so I stayed-in and saved like crazy."

The frequency of expeditions, particularly to South America, grew and it was in October 2003, two months after handing in his resignation, that Nick walked out of the prison a free man. "It was liberating but scary. I went home and emptied my house, giving all my stuff to friends to look after. Then a week later I jumped on a plane to Nepal with Jules and Al Powell to try a new route on Teng Kangpoche (6,487m). I set out to climb with just enough savings for two years and thought that afterwards I might join the British Antarctic Survey. Those two years have turned into eight."

## The climbing 'bum'

Nick now survives on a little bit of sponsorship, rent from his house in Leicestershire and living frugally. "Basically I'm homeless. I'm a regular visitor to the Climbers' Club hut in the Llanberis Pass and do a lot of house sitting for friends when they are away. I'm a full-time climber with no aspiration to be the best but simply to climb the routes that motivate me."


Nick's friend and writer, Mark Goodwin, having listened to Nick's accounts of his many trips, bullied him into start writing down his experiences. "Mark collaborated with me on the first piece I had published, about the *Dru Couloir* for the Climbers' Club Journal in 2000. I enjoy the writing process and find it cathartic." You'll find plenty of Nick's writing on his popular and forthright blog.

"Yes, I've got strong opinions but I'd say I'm open minded. That's why I found the Prison Service so difficult, because I tried to give everybody a chance. You try to be fair but in a lot of cases you're dealing with people in prison who aren't really concerned about the consequences of their actions. Some of them would try and take advantage of what they saw as weakness."

Nick and Andy Houseman's first ascent of Chang Himal's (6,750m) fluted north face (ED+/M6) alpine-style over five days in 2009 was nominated for a Piolet d'Or award. The route had appeared in an inspiring 2003 Alpinist article, entitled *Unclimbed*, aimed at drawing attention to objectives in keeping with the spirit of exploratory alpinism. Two attempts in the spring and autumn of 2010 at another route from that article, Annapurna III's south-east ridge, were less successful, as the start threatened by ice and rockfall, was judged to be suicidal.

## Ethics

A strong proponent of climbing mountains alpine style, Nick's outspoken comments on other styles of ascent and fixed ropes in the Himalayas have drawn accusations of elitism. "I feel people don't read what I say properly, they skim the text and then accuse me of being an elitist. I am not. Climbing a mountain should be taken to its simplest form, one or two friends, a packed bag and the skill and experience of the team to attempt the objective. I don't believe in using technology to beat the mountain into submission. Anyone can do that. And someone at some point will come along and climb the hill in good style, so why, with technology hanging off your harness, rob better climbers of their dream just for the glory of been the first or promoting your brand, film or profile."

"Personally, I don't care where on a mountain someone chooses to stop and call it the top, mountaineering should not have any rules apart from one, which is, we should all endeavour to improve on style. To attempt to climb a new route should be done, first and foremost, for experience and personal growth, but what really pisses me off is when the reporting and the spin outweighs what actually was or was not climbed because a result is deemed necessary for whatever reason. We should be open and honest in our reporting and say, yes we failed, but Christ we had a great time trying." 

Nick Bullock is sponsored by DMM, Mountain Equipment, Samsung and Boreal

## NICK BULLOCK'S FAVOURITE FIRSTS

### 1. Lost in the Dark/Right Hand pillar of Frêne (ED1/2 or Scottish VI/6)

Enchainment on the Grand Piller d'Angle/Frêne Pillar on Mont Blanc with Jules Cartwright (October 1998). Starting up the Cecchinel-Nominè and finishing with Boivin-Vallençant climbing new ground in-between. Then after a bivvy we abseiled to the Frêne Gaiçier and climbed the 1,000m Right Hand Pillar. Descent via Mont Blanc summit and the best beer ever with one of my best mates while waiting for the tram.

### 2. Cracking Up (IX 9) and Travesty VIII 8)

Two routes on Clogwyn Du below Glyder Fawr from 2006. *Cracking Up* because it's the only route I've climbed with James McHaffie and watched him struggle. That's got to be worth something and *Travesty* because Libby Peter and I just went up there and had it: no falls, no beta, great fun - perfect day out.

### 3. Chang Himal North Face (ED+/M6, 1,800m)

A perfect trip in 2009 with a good friend (Andy Houseman) and a perfect route climbed in perfect style.

### 4. Central Buttress Direct (ED2 VII/7) on Quitaraju (6,100m)

A great Peruvian adventure with Al Powell in 2001. Went for a single one day push and when it all went pear-shaped we continued for three days. A brilliant adventure with a great mate, a fine summit and brilliant climbing.

### 5. The Frumious Bandersnatch (E7 6c), Rhoscolyn

Still can't believe I got strong enough to climb this route back in August this year. Wild climbing in a sensational position at one of Wales' best crags Streaky a.k.a. 'The Hippy'.

### 6. Cities of the Plain (E6 6b), Equestrian Wall, North Anglesey

The culmination of some brilliant and adventurous days out with 'The Hippy' through 2009. Loved the atmosphere, situation and the relationship with this beautifully secluded crag.

### 7. Encore une fois (M6, VIII/8), Argentièrre Rive Gauche

The last of the six new mixed routes I climbed with various partners above the Argentièrre Glacier in early 2010. The climbing increases in difficulty with each pitch. Once again it was the relationship with the place and the time with friends that made these routes special.

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