

THE PIONEER OF CLIMBING ON LUNDY

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‘... climbing on sea cliffs does not grant us that freedom of spirit which we find on mountain tops. The surf confines us with elemental restraint: thus far and no farther. Yet it is this very intimacy with the sea’s infinite variety of mood which gives to cliff climbing its unique fascination.’

is how our pioneer Dr. Tom Longstaff (1950) expresses in his autobiography the unique atmosphere of sea cliff climbing.

He started climbing on the North Devon cliffs with his cousins in 1887 at the age of twelve. Within five years they were using a rope and had completed a number of long coastering traverses, climbing round the headlands between the top of the cliffs and high water mark. The cliffs are of slate, and the finest climbing they found was at Baggy Point. From the North Devon cliffs in fine weather they must often have looked at the distant outline of Lundy, and it is probably only natural that at about this time in the 1890’s they should visit the island, sailing to it from Morte.

Only the briefest outlines of their climbs on Lundy are known, and apart from mention in his autobiography only a few further details have come to light (1961, 1963). During the visit they climbed Gannet Rock, though the sources differ as to whether they rowed out themselves or were rowed to the rock by an islander. Nevertheless this was a first ascent or so they were told at that time. The surroundings to the ascent and the atmosphere of sea cliff climbing is again recorded:

‘Guillemots and puffins eyed us curiously and staring seals poised themselves upright in the water.’

Attempts were made to climb the Constable on several occasions but these were not successful even on subsequent visits to the island. Like many more recent climbers they had been told by the lighthouse keepers of the North Light that the rock had once been climbed by a sailor. At the S.W. corner of the island they had inspected the Devil’s Limekiln and funkied it because of loose rock, but had gone on to visit Shutter Rock. It is not known whether they succeeded in climbing this but it brought forth the comment that it was a problem dependent on the great tides of the Atlantic.

Longstaff later visited Lundy in 1903 and 1927. From his ‘day-book’ we learn that on 28th June 1903 he had climbed St. James’s Stone and repeated this on 31st August 1927. It is thought that the modern climbs known as Wycliffe and probably Bow Chimney (1966) were climbed by Longstaff at this time. Correspondence has revealed that he found St. James’s better climbing than the Curtain of Gannet Combe or the Battery Arch (obviously what is now known as the Flying Buttress), thus indicating that he had climbed on these also. The Curtain of Gannet Combe is a climb he had apparently completed on Gannet Buttress, the cliff face opposite Gannet Rock.

Although he climbed on St. James’s Stone it is apparent that by some mischance he never noticed the Devil’s Slide, although this can be plainly seen from the N. side of the Stone. Thus an opportunity to attempt or even climb the now classic route of the island was missed. However the achievements of our pioneer were more than half a century ahead of his time, as the rock-climbing potential of the island was not re-discovered until 1960.

That then is all that is at present known of Longstaff’s climbing on Lundy where he had been breaking new ground around our coasts at the start of a lifetime of mountain climbing and exploration. On a visit to the Caucasus in 1904 he made five first ascents, and in the following year he wandered among the Himalayas and Tibet for a thousand miles, a journey which put him in the front rank of mountain explorers. During this journey he attempted Gurla Mandhata where he reached about 7250 m, which stood for two years as the highest height attained. In mountaineering his greatest triumph was the ascent of Trisul (23,360 ft) in 1907—the first mountain above 7000 m to be climbed. The ascent was all the more notable as the final 6000 ft were climbed in one day from the highest camp, a performance which at this sort of altitude would be difficult to

match even today. Also in the Himalayas he explored the Nanda Devi area, discovered the Teram Kangri group, and in 1909 discovered the Siachen glacier in the Karakorum. His travels also covered the Alps and Rockies, and he accompanied the expedition to Everest in 1922. Longstaff's last expedition was to Greenland in 1934 where he investigated the geology and general form of Western Greenland, and with Baird climbed the superb obelisk of the Devil's Thumb in Melville Bay. During his life he was president of the Alpine Club, hon. secretary and vice-president of the Royal Geographical Society, whose Founder's Medal he was awarded in 1928.

His autobiography was written in retirement in Wester Ross, where he died on 26th June 1964 at the age of 89, thus closing the earliest chapter of both Lundy climbing and Himalayan exploration in both of which he was acknowledged as a principal pioneer.

REFERENCES

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VEGETATION SURVEY—LUNDY 1971

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We visited Lundy from 12th to 19th September 1971 with the aim of helping Colin Taylor complete the mapping of the island vegetation as a record for the Field Society. We did this by dividing the island into regions and dealing with each in turn. We used Colin Taylor's five inches/mile map of the island as a basis, plotting on to it the distinguished areas of vegetation, using walls, telegraph poles, etc., as vantage points and referring to the 25-inches/mile map for the location of some areas of a species. Limitations introduced by cartographical representation necessitated our only dealing with areas of a species of ten square yards, plus, in area, noting the dominant species, and where necessary, qualifying with annotations. In some areas we marked smaller patches of a species where such was conspicuous in the general flora of the area.

The divisions we used for plotting were bracken, heather, rough grassland, rush, scrub and bare ground. As the south end of the island had already been surveyed by Mr. Taylor, we started on Ackland's Moor and worked northwards. Some areas proved less difficult than others, Gannets Combe being the most complex, and for the scale of our map considerable simplification of the detail was required. We were fortunate enough to be taken around the island in a boat which enabled us to survey the vegetation on the more inaccessible parts of the sidelands with greater ease.

In brief, our findings were as follows:

1. Ackland's Moor

Mainly rough grassland with patches of heather, bracken and rush in damper patches.

We omitted the cultivated fields to the east, as this part of the survey had been completed previously.

2. Ponsbury section

(a) East of main road

This area proved very varied, above the quarries vegetation was mainly bracken and heather, whilst in and below the quarries bracken was still the dominant vegetation but there were a number of various shrubs and scrubby trees including large areas of rhododendrons.