

Mournes August 2010

(Jim Sheehan)

It was the new edition of the Mournes Climbing Guide that reminded me that I still had not tackled The Devil's Rib on Slieve Beg since it was first recommended to me several years ago. As the summer was passing quickly, I decided to scratch that itch for once and for all.

On Saturday 14th, I met with Gavin at the Walkinstown roundabout and headed up to Newcastle where James was waiting in the Slieve Donard carpark. We sorted our gear and set out up through the forest tracks until we eventually came upon the track beside the Glen River that brought us to the Donard-Commedagh Col and the Mourne Wall. This took us a bit longer than the guidebook time of 90 minutes for the whole trip to Slieve Beg. We had our lunch below the style before following the Brandy Pad across the head of the Annalong Valley and then branching off to the summit of Slieve Beg. We dropped down between Slieve Beg and Cove and crossed some steep ground before reaching the foot of the Devil's Rib.

There were two climbers just starting up the route, so we kitted up at our leisure and noted the line of their ascent. We would have tackled another short route but for the fact that it was not easy to identify the routes with certainty from close quarters and the difficulty of moving around on the steep ground.

Eventually the first belay stance was clear and I led up the first pitch with Gavin belaying, secured on a wire lodged at the foot of the route. The friction was superb, but the rock seemed hollow and tenuously attached in places and the protection was sparse enough – two medium nuts and a large hex.

The belay stance at 20 metres was spacious and a sling and a nut provided secure anchorage. James seconded, trailing the second rope and Gavin followed in due course.

When the lead rope was re-flaked and the retrieved gear was returned to my rack, I started up the second pitch on the crest of the arête. Again the friction was excellent and the rock was more sound. Unlike many Mournes routes, there was ample protection for a number of medium to large nuts and a selection of hexes, though friends might have been used as well if required. I finished up through the notch at the top of the arête and carried on to a belay stance a few metres back. A thread belay and a nut provided secure anchors.

I was able to appreciate the view from my high perch. Below lay the Annalong Valley with the Irish Sea beyond and Donard and Chimney Rock Mountain to the left and Cove Mountain to the right, all bathed in the glorious sunlight.

As before, James seconded pausing only to remove the gear and again trailing the second rope which was required as this pitch was over 30 metres high. Gavin soon followed to complete his first multipitch route, and what a route it was too. As the book says, it is a superb route giving fine exposed climbing in a fantastic setting at a very amenable VDiff grade.

With hindsight, we might have left our bags at the top at the beginning, but being new to the crag we hadn't reckoned on the steepness of the ground at the base of the crag. We made our way down a steep, loose gully to retrieve our bags and change into our walking boots, before making our way back up to the summit and so back to the Brandy Pad, over the Wall and down to Newcastle, this time in about 100 minutes.

James headed back to the comforts of home while Gavin and I drove down the coast road to Kilkeel and up to Attical to our B&B, the Cnocnafeola Hostel being booked for the night.

Next morning we joined Sean, Mark and Cecil at the Silent Valley carpark for the Sunday walk. We set out across the footbridge and headed for the Mourne Wall. Our route took us up to the summit of Slivevnaglogh overlooking the Silent Valley and the Ben Crom Reservoir to the north. From there we dropped down to the Banns road that led to Lough Shannagh where we had lunch. Mark made his way up Doan while the rest of us traversed below it and descended into the valley to cross the Ben Crom Dam.

Gavin and I opted to return to our car by the road as we were somewhat exhausted from our toils in the heat over two days. Sean and Cecil took a track towards the col between Lamagan and Binnian with the intention of traversing Binnian from north to south.

Gavin and I reached the crowded carpark about 3.30 and headed back to Dublin while the others finished up about 2 hours later.

All in all it was a rewarding weekend, and it left me with a desire to return to tackle a few more routes on Slieve Beg, this time with the benefits of experience.

We could have an Indian summer, and the possibilities are endless....