

I squelch through the undergrowth, the beam of light from my LED head torch casting a blurred glow on the ground in front. Anything further away than a few metres fades rapidly into the darkness beyond, leaving me guessing as to where to turn next. In the mirk a tall silhouette looms as Simon beats a hasty advance. "Much too keen" I think, words echo in the empty darkness as I speak my mind.

The foot of the crag stands in front of us. We contour under it and locate the foot of Queen Parlour Chimney. "Madness really, still better get on with it"

Simon sets off up the first pitch, progress slowing within a few feet. Protection is toyed with, some goes in, out weaves the rope and the game continues. The pool of leading light fades into a corner, and then flickers back into life somewhere higher. No movement for an eternity then "Safe Steve".

"Gee-sus", the rock slips underneath hands and feet like warm butter from a china plate. The only thing promoting upward direction is the worn nature of the rock in the scalloped holds. Lichen glistens in the headlight, tempting fate. One touch of it confirms the waiting nightmare and fingers seek incut purchase in cracks and fissures to instil confidence in movement. I flick out the first wire placement with a gentle brush, "psycho gear, worse than I thought, good lead." I look at the next few moves as the rope loops obliquely rightwards. There is one piece of gear between me and a swing into the black void. I give it a tug, it is firm, and move past it grease palming on flat holds, removing it as far across the traverse as possible. Easy climbing leads to the belay and I dutifully take my turn at the front.

Immediately I am thrust into the bowels of the crag and the dryness beyond. A positive delight to climb dry rock, I thrutch and squirm upwards, savouring the feeling. "My god, I am enjoying this", my sanity wavers in the cool night air. Emerging from the depths forty feet higher, the stars wink overhead, while below the lights of Cromford flicker through the trees, the neon view stretching down the Derwent Valley. I resist the temptation to tell Simon that I can see his house from here and take in the slack. As I reflect on the fulfilment, I realise that in a world driven by targets, deadlines and stress, this momentary freedom helps the motivation of life.

Cuckoo

Steve Christian