

# STACK ROCK

*An illustrated guide to sea stack climbing in the  
UK & Ireland.*

Old Harry -

Old Man of Stoer -

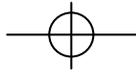
The Herdsman - The Maiden -

The Old Man of Hoy -

& over a 100 more.

Editor & Compiler: Chris Mellor





*Stack Rock*

## INTRODUCTION

### What Is A Stack?

A stack is an isolated pinnacle of rock entirely surrounded by the sea at high tide. The term comes, I think, from an old Norse (Viking) word - *stac* - meaning a steep rock or conical hill. It is still used in Scottish Gaelic with places such as *Stac Pollaidh* which is a very conical inland peak.

A stack is not an island. How can you tell the difference? A rough and ready definition is: if its top is further across than the height then it is an island - or a low rock. I think a stack should be at least 30 feet high. Below that it is a rock.

A stack need not be a perpendicular tower. Blackchurch Rock is a stack even though its main face is a triangular-shaped slab. However a stack should be rocky on all sides and involve scrambling at the very least to get to the top. Gannet Rock on Lundy scrapes in by the skin of its teeth on this count.

### Why do stacks happen?

The answer is water solubility. Stacks are created by water - sea, rain - dissolving the rock along lines of weakness such as bedding planes and vertical joints. The rock has to have these weaknesses for the water to do its work but to be otherwise



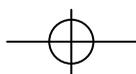
## Definitions

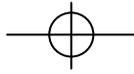


**stacca'to** (-ah'to) a. , adv., & n. (p1. s). 1. (Mus.) a. & adv. (to be played in abrupt sharply detached manner (cf. LEGATO. TENUTO) br>;-mark, dot or stroke above or below staccato note in score. 2. a. & n. (uttered etc. with) delivery or presentation in separate short bursts. [It., p.p of staccare = distaccare DETACH]

**stack** n. , &v. t. 1. n. circular or rectangular pile of grain in sheaf or of hay, straw, etc. , usu. with sloping thatched top, rick; -yard, enclosure for these. 2. 11 (As measure of wood) pile of 108 cu. ft. 3. pile or heap of anything, esp. in orderly arrangement; (colloq.) large quantity, (has stacks of money, a whole stack of work to get through); stacked group of aircraft; pyramidal group of rifles, pile; ~(-room), part of library where books are compactly stored and to which public does not have direct access. 4. (chimney-); number of chimneys standing together. 5. isolated tall factory chimney; (smoke-); chimney or funnel to discharge smoke of locomotive or steamer; \*BLOW one's stack 6. 11 high detached rock esp. off coast of Scotland and Orkneys. 7. v. L pile in stacks(s); arrange (cards, or fig. circumstances etc.) secretly for cheating; aircraft to fly round same point at different levels (aircraft waiting to land at airport); (= PILE) arms. [ME, f, ON stakkr haystack, f. Gmc \*stakkaz]

[The Concise Oxford Dictionary]

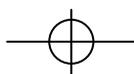


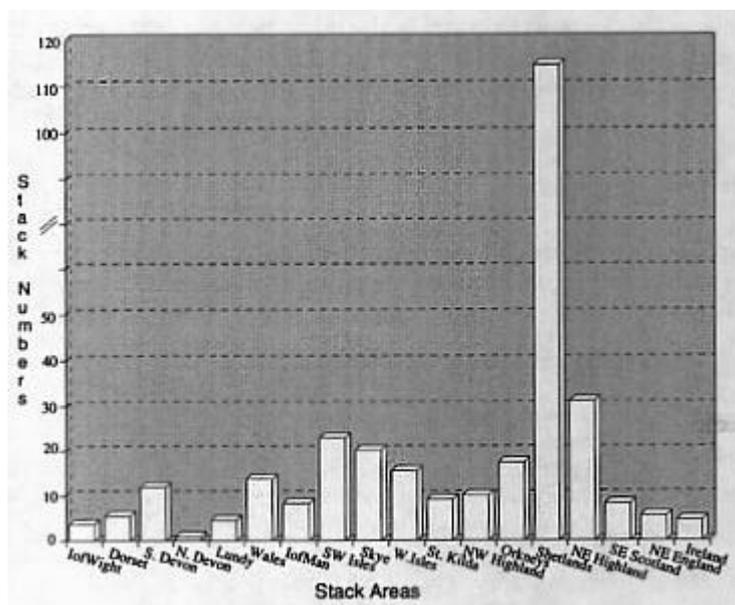
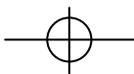


strong enough to withstand wind and storm after it is created as a sentinel standing in advance, as it were, of the cliffs and thus attracting the full force of storm waves. An appendix describes the stack formation process in more detail.

### Stack Distribution

If we look at the distribution of stacks around the coast of the British Isles it is apparent that there are far more in the north. The chart illustrates this.





### Stack Areas Around The UK

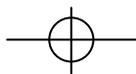
There are about 300 stacks listed in this catalogue with 40 in England, 10 in Wales, 5 in Ireland and 245 in Scotland. Of these about a 110 are located around the coasts of Shetland and of these about 80 are around the coast of Mainland. Stacks tend to occur in the north because that's where the stack-producing rocks are. The distribution may also be a function of the stormy weather of the northern seas around the UK which may erode rocks faster.

### No Cornish Stacks?

There are stacks in Cornwall, e.g.; Bedruthan Steps, Kynance Cove and the north Cornwall coast, but they are of little interest to climbers being low in height and generally more like conical rocks than pinnacles.

### Stacks & Birds

*'The bird's neck had swollen hugely; its eyes glared.  
It looked as if it had something urgent to communicate.  
It had. Its beak shot forward, opened, and drenched us  
in foul smelling slime. I recalled the fulmar's peculiarity.'*  
Tom Patey, *The Old Man Of Stoer*, SMC Journal, 1967



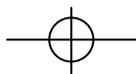
In accounts of stack climbing, such as Tom Patey's story of climbing the Old Man of Stoer, birds are seen as just another hazard to be negotiated. No consideration is given to them. However stacks are choice nesting sites for birds because they are, or have been up until recently, safe places. In these days of access agreements and agreed climbing restrictions to safeguard nesting sites, e.g.; Swanage, it can't be long before 'twitchers' - bird lovers - call for the bird populations on stacks to be protected too. This will probably happen first on stacks which are off or on coasts administered by organisations such as the Nature Conservancy or the National Trust. It already is in places like Bass Rock.

In anticipation of this it is best not to climb on stacks with birds nesting on them from the beginning of March to the end of June. For details of individual birds see the appendices.

### Special Notes:

1. If the stack height is not listed it is not known.
2. Right and left are used in the sense of facing the cliff unless stated otherwise.
3. If the first ascent details are not known and no climb is listed then the presumption is that you have a virgin stack on your hands. All stacks which have had no recorded ascent or visit by a contributor have their names printed in italics. The stack notes in this are not to be taken as gospel, more as suggestions for exploration.
4. Map References: The Ordnance Survey reveal that six figure map references are not unique in that one such reference could refer to more than one place in the British Isles. To make them unique they are adding a two-letter code prefix to them. E.g.; 370287 becomes HU 370267. Irritatingly these two-letter prefixes identify, uniquely identify, large grid squares which do not coincide with Ordnance Survey Landranger map sheets. Thus a map could have the top two thirds in, say, the HU square, and the bottom third in a different square.

I think that the Ordnance Survey have made a mistake, insofar as ordinary map users are concerned, in that the map reference alone does not tell you which Landranger map to use. Consequently I have used the six-digit map reference prefixed by the Landranger sheet number so that you know which actual map to refer to. E.g.; Instead of HU 350116 as a reference for Broad Stack on Shetland's Mainland I use Sheet 4 350116 instead.
5. The t symbol by a climb indicates that it has not received very many ascents and so the grade and other details have not been verified. Gradings in general are far more variable and changeable than for standard climbs because of the effects of weather, erosion and fewer climbers to agree them.
6. The editor has not climbed all the stacks. Neither has any one else. Therefore do not look for consistency in either the grades or the descriptions. Regard this directory cum guide as a compilation from many different sources.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I wish to thank Denis Crampton for enduring several discussions in which the concept of this book was developed. Also Duncan Hornby for information on Dorset's Old Harry stacks and Mick Fowler for much help with some of his southern and northern stack attacks. Mike Vetterlein contributed indirectly as have Rick Cummins of Rock Addiction, Rab Anderson and Bruce Kerr. Andy Long from Lerwick, Shetland has contributed directly with a lot of the hard information about Shetland. Thanks are also due to Margaret of the Alpine Club library for assistance in looking up old journals. All mistakes and omissions are the editor's.

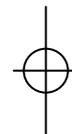
In late 1996 Ben Linton, Ed Lynch-Bell and Ian Brodrick undertook the mammoth scanning and OCR exercise needed to transfer the paper text back into computer form after the original electronic version was lost in a disk crash. This was done in order to create a world-wide web version of the guide. Mike Caine of the Manx Fell and Rock Club then helped with route information from his Manx climbing web site. Other contributors include Andrew Donson and Richard Jones. Duncan Irving contributed information about a new stack and climb at Ru Idrigill, Trotternish, Skye in March, 1997.

Edition 1 - version 0. 74 - 13th March 1994

Web Edition - version 1 - December 1996

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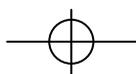
Edition 2 - version 3 - January 2002.



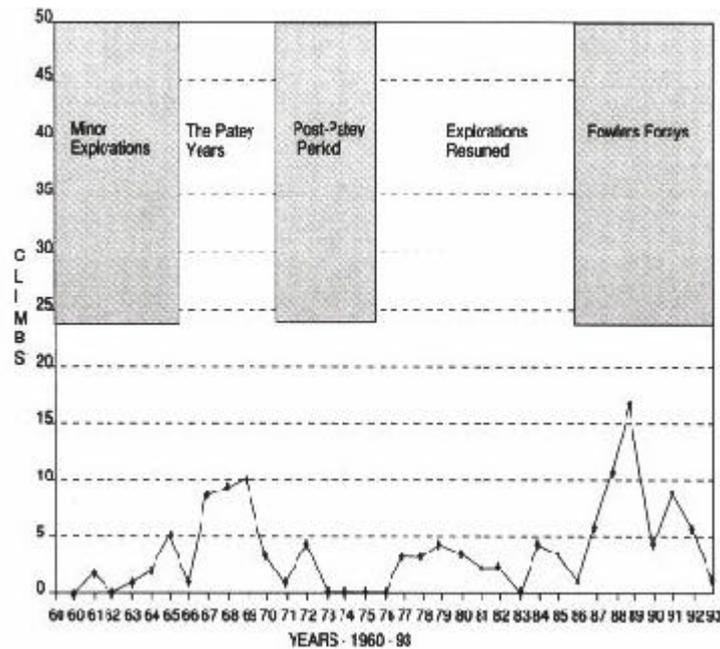
## HISTORY

Sea stacks are such spectacular challenging affairs that they attract strong climbers of a very adventurous disposition. The overall pattern is of such climbers concentrating on their area and playing a lead role in its development. When such climbers are not present then stack bagging activity falls away.

There are two climbers who have inspired others and dominated stack attacks. The twin peaks in the chart below graphically show the effects of Tom Patey and Mick Fowler. The history of stack climbing falls quite naturally into six periods:



- |                                      |                         |                    |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Beginnings                        | 2. Minor explorations   | 3. Doctor          |
| Stack - Tom Patey and the Hoy circus |                         |                    |
| 4. Post- Patey years                 | 5. Explorations resumed | 6. Fowler's forays |



### Beginnings

In the beginning there were the St. Kilda egg hunters. No one knows for sure when they started climbing stacks to harvest the birds but it may be as early as the twelfth century. They stopped in the nineteenth with their way of life harried to death by Victorian fundamentalist missionaries, tyrants in the practise of their religious bigotry. One St. Kilda native, Donald MacDonald, did climb onto the Great Stack of Handa, hand over hand on a rope, copied 89 years later by Tom Patey. Other Victorians built a lighthouse on one of the Needles and their steps survive.

However, the first recorded instance of what may have been recreational stack climbing occurred in 1883 when a C. Barrington ascended Stac Biorach on St. Kilda. It was described in the Alpine Club journal and must have seemed very curious at the time, being so far removed from normal mountaineering experiences.



## Minor Explorations

Recreational climbing of stacks started between the wars with an ascent of the Sugarloaf in the Isle Of Man by Doctor A. W. Kelly of whom we hear no more. Twenty one years later D. S. Byrne climbed the Crack Of Dhoon on a slabby stack in Dhoon Bay also on the Isle.

Seven years after that three stack climbs were put up on Lundy associated with Admiral Lawder's south west England coastal explorations. E. C. Pyatt was also involved. By 1965 two more climbs had been put up on Lundy stacks.

The theme of this period was incidental stack climbing in pleasant and accessible locations. Tom Patey changed this utterly. Perhaps the main precursor was provided by another forceful Scottish climber in the shape of Ian Clough. He climbed the first of Macleod's Maidens on Skye in 1959 and climbed with Patey on The Herdsman in 1967.

## Doctor Stack

Tom Patey or Doctor Stack as he became known put up many brilliant lines in the Scottish Highlands. The stack scene was dominated by him between 1966 and 1970. He became associated with stacks because he popularised them so effectively and fell to his death from one in 1970.

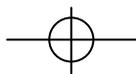
His career on stacks commenced with The Old Man of Stoer climbed in 1966 with Paul Nunn who was sadly and ironically in the party that went for The Maiden in 1970. Next Patey hit the big time with his involvement in the first BBC broadcast of ascents of The Old Man of Hoy also in 1966. Stacks became indelibly imprinted in the climbing scene. A second TV extravaganza followed in 1967. Patey followed up Hoy with The Herdsman and then The Maiden in 1970. He also replicated Donald McDonald's Handa feat with jumars.

Patey provides a couple of characteristics that apply to most stack climbing. He dominated his geography and stack climbing, although important, was not the main event for him. Stacks are the spectacular excursions outside the mainstream.

In the Patey period a J. Fowler, no relation to Mick, began exploring South Devon stacks and was subsequently involved with the ascent of every one of them but he didn't climb elsewhere. Hamish McInnes put up ascents of the Great Stack of Handa and an R. Balharry took a party to St. Kilda and did the two big ones - Stac Lee and Stac an Armin. Ten stack climbs were recorded in 1969, three in 1970 and thereafter activity tailed off. When Patey fell whilst abseiling from The Maiden most Scottish stack explorations abruptly ceased.

## Post-Patey Years

Between 1971 and 1987 there were 16 years of incidental explorations which culminated in the arrival of Mick Fowler. But first stack explorations became refocused on safer stacks such as those of the Isle Of Man where G. Gartrell dominated his back yard so to speak with a steady flow of pleasant routes. J. Fowler with Peter Biven and others were active in South Devon and importuned



Keith Darbyshire to help with the harder ones such as the E3 Parson in 1971. The pace of events slowly picked up.

### **Explorations Resumed**

It was as if the climbing world, the mainstream climbers, had to regain confidence in climbing hard lines on remote stacks. And they did it by putting up harder and harder lines on comfortable stacks until they felt strong enough to venture north again.

The south west climbing stalwarts such as Littlejohn and Pete O'Sullivan put up steadily harder routes on the Blackchurch Rock slab culminating in some 6a climbs. A few bits and pieces were picked off in Skye. Jim Perrin hit the Pen-y-Holt stack in 1980 with his South Wales explorations but the real trigger for the next period was Arnis Strapcans, a forceful individualist who put up an HVS on the chalk Old Harry stack in Dorset in 1979. This was bad rock indeed.

In 1982 he traveled north to Hoy and did the Ancient Mariner at E2 5b/c. This was the first major route on a Scottish sea stack for 12 years. The immediate reaction to this was no reaction. There were no stack climbs done in 1983. But next year things were different. Messrs Whillance and Hamilton put up two more big and hard lines on Hoy - A Few Dollars More at E3 5c and A Fistful Of Dollars at E5 6a.

### **Following Ground**

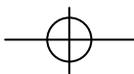
It is noticeable that stacks are not forcing grounds for climbing. They are a following ground. When standards have risen in the main climbing areas then climbers visit the stacks and overlay a pattern of new, harder climbs on top of the existing ones. The progressive increase in standards on the Old Man Of Hoy exemplifies this very well. From E1 5b to E5 6a in eighteen years.

Skye stacks were now explored. Jerry Moffat and C. Dale put up a forgettable severe, The Mitre, and the stacks/pinnacles of Kilt Rock were breached. But things didn't really start to move until a committed stack climber appeared and that Mick Fowler did with Pressgang Pinnacle on Dorset chalk in 1985.

### **Fowler's Forays**

Mick has a tremendous eye for a empty niches in the climbing world and his ability to single-handedly inspire a group was shown to great effect in southern chalk cliff climbing. It was repeated with a smaller cast of characters on the Scottish sea stacks.

He followed Patey by twenty one years and set foot on the Old Man Of Stoer's North West Corner in 1988. Thus emboldened, as it were, he behaved like a latter-day weekend Viking raider over the next two years as he and friends such as Nikki Dugan, Steve Sustad, Guy Muhlemann, Simon Richardson, Jon Lincoln and Chris Watts laid siege to stacks all around the northern Scottish coast.



*Stack Rock*

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They were helped by Deflowerer - an inflatable boat with an outboard which enabled them to reach the offshore stacks. In 1988 a Fowler party put up four climbs on the Maiden. They went to Dunnet Head and Holborn Head. They also put up more stack climbs in Dorset and the Isle Of Wight. Next year saw the Duncansby Head stacks visited and very impressive ascents of Cape Wrath stacks

Mick contributed a memorable pair of articles to Mountain magazine, entitled Stacks To Go At, which spread the word about these adventurous outings far removed from the developing ethos of sports climbing.

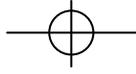
Although his rate of stack attacking dropped in 1990 the year saw perhaps his most outrageous adventure with the ascent of The Needle on Hoy. In 1991 his attention moved to Irish stacks. Two friends, Guy Muhlemann and Simon Richardson, revisited Skye and attacked the remaining Maidens amongst others.

The early 90's also saw a lot of stack climbs done in eastern Scotland at Covesea and Cummington. Mick returned to the Isle of Wight in 1992 and also put up ten stack ascents in Shetland on a ten day trip in May. Not a bad average. Lastly Gary Gibson put up an E6 6b on Needle Rock during his annual Lundy trip in late 1993.

### **Where Are We Now?**

This 'stacklopaedia' or 'stackalogue' records over 300 stacks. It is likely that over 100 of them have never been climbed or had a recorded ascent. These are virgin summits awaiting their first human foot. Other stacks like Hoy, The Herdsman, and the Old Man of Stoer form a group of classic approachable stacks that should be on everyone's hit list.

The third group of offshore stacks, the ones which need a boat, will see fewer visits. The increased difficulty of access and commitment needed will see to that. But the rewards of climbing them are great. You will get no greater mountaineering high this side of the Alps.



*First Part*

