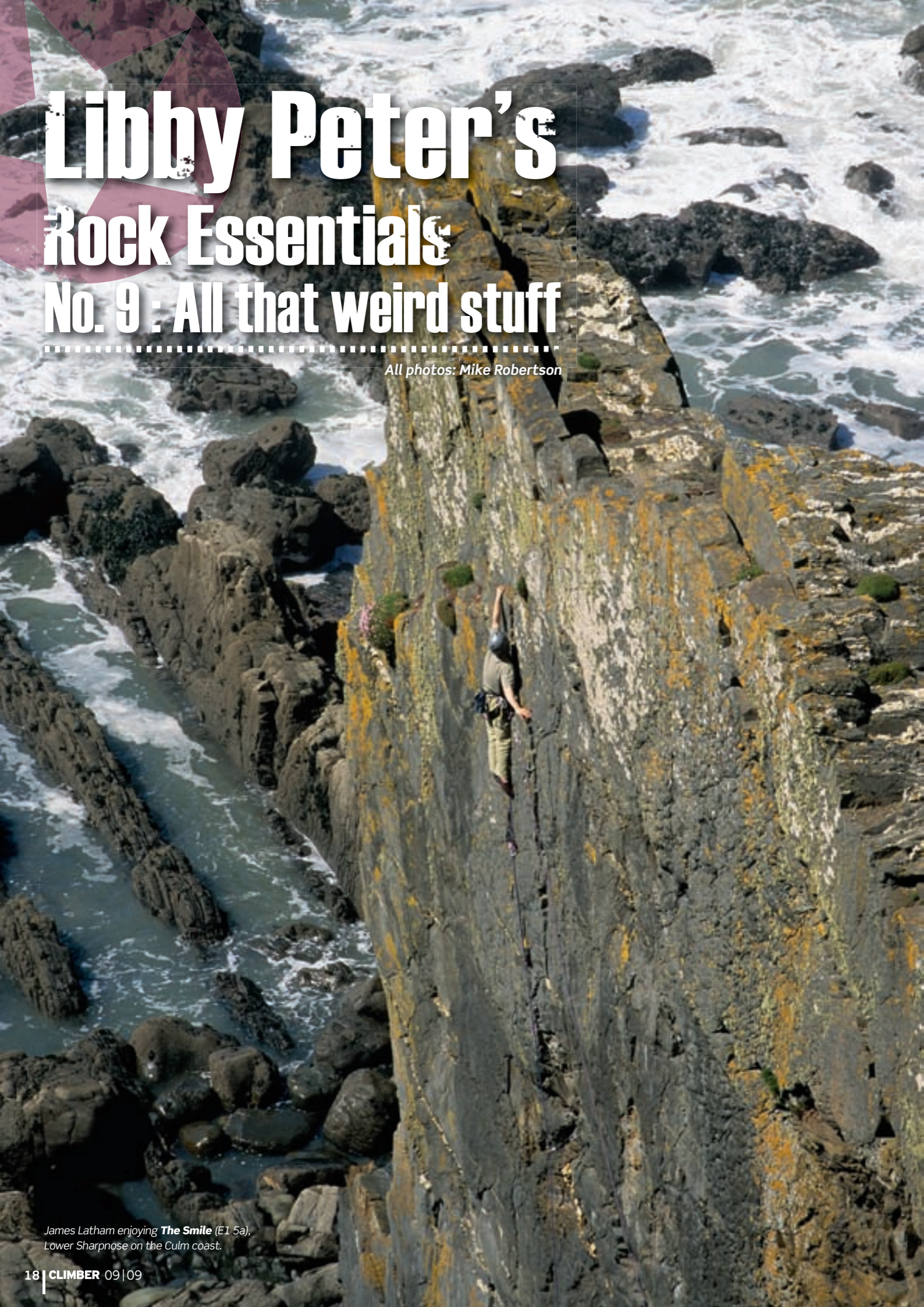


# Libby Peter's Rock Essentials No. 9: All that weird stuff

All photos: Mike Robertson



James Latham enjoying **The Smile** (E1 5a), Lower Sharpnose on the Culm coast.

To wind up this rock type tour we're taking a peek at some of that weird stuff that falls into the category of strange, rare or peculiar. I'm sure, like me, you've been to plenty of crags where the nature of the rock has left you confused about its origins and you've come away wanting to know more.

One of the great appeals of UK climbing is the sheer variety of rock types but this adds to the geological complexity, especially when you find yourself climbing on different rocks in adjacent valleys. This is best witnessed when you venture onto our sea-cliffs – just read the geological notes for the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall or the LLyn peninsula in North Wales and you'll realise you're in for a geological treat. So here goes for a tour of some of the stranger rocks we find ourselves clinging to.

## Conglomerate

### Where to find it

Though we have a few conglomerate crags in the UK you won't be particularly impressed until you visit Montserrat or Riglos in Spain or Meteora in Greece and then you'll be baffled and perhaps humbled but inspired.

### How to climb it

More climbing wall-ish than any other rock type the technique is straightforward but it takes a while to acquire the faith that the pebbles are going to stay put.

### How to get gear in it

Gear is tricky if there aren't any bolts and even then you have to believe the bolts are going to stay in the ready-mix.

### How it is formed

Conglomerate is a sedimentary rock type with rounded fragments (clasts) embedded within a finer matrix. The clasts have to be larger than 2mm in size and the rock type can be further sub-categorised according to the clast size – pebble conglomerate has 4–64mm clasts, while cobble conglomerate has whopping 64-256mm chunks. Montserrat is pebble territory but Riglos is moving into juggy cobbles.

### Special features and particular hazards

The rock tends to form crenulated ridges and towers, so getting off can be exciting if not equipped. Luckily most are. The vertical (and overhanging) 'potato' fields of Riglos are quite breathtaking.

## Best loved crags and routes

If you can escape the attractions of Barcelona for a few hours then Montserrat awaits. First visits are often disappointing because you can spend ages navigating the maze of options. Get some local advice and you'll have a great time. But leave time for a visit to Riglos – it's superb. *Moskitos* (F6b) is the gentle option on the big steep tower of La Visera. You get a great view of *Fiesta de los Biceps* the wild and ultra-classic F7a and you'll definitely be back for more.

The conglomerate towers of Los Mallos de Riglos.





Sarah Garnett making the most of **The Goldrush** (HVS 5a), Coastguard Cliffs, one of the Lizard's mica schist crags.

## Schist

### Where to find it

It's dotted all over the UK but predominates in Scotland and the South West.

### How to climb it

Good footwork and confidence pay dividends on the varied moves that have a habit of being sneakily technical in nature.

### How to get gear in it

Gear tends to be spaced but good when you get it. Don't pass a placement and make sure nuts are well seated.

### How it is formed

Schist is a metamorphic rock whose mineral grains have been drawn out by heat and pressure into flaky scales easily seen by the naked eye if you look closely. There are many types of schist depending on the mineral content; the one we commonly climb on is mica schist, which has a characteristic shimmery appearance.

### Special features and particular hazards

Bold routes abound and this, coupled with the low friction, can make for the occasional terrifying experience.

### Best loved crags and routes

Scotland has a host of schist crags, the best being found in Glen Nevis like the Polldubh crags Secretaries Buttress and Pandora's Buttress with three star routes from S to E3. Creag Dubh at Newtonmore is a roadside gem with technical wall climbing and classics such as *TreeHee S*, *KingBee*. (VS 5a) and *Inbred* (HVS 5a).

## Culm

### Where to find it

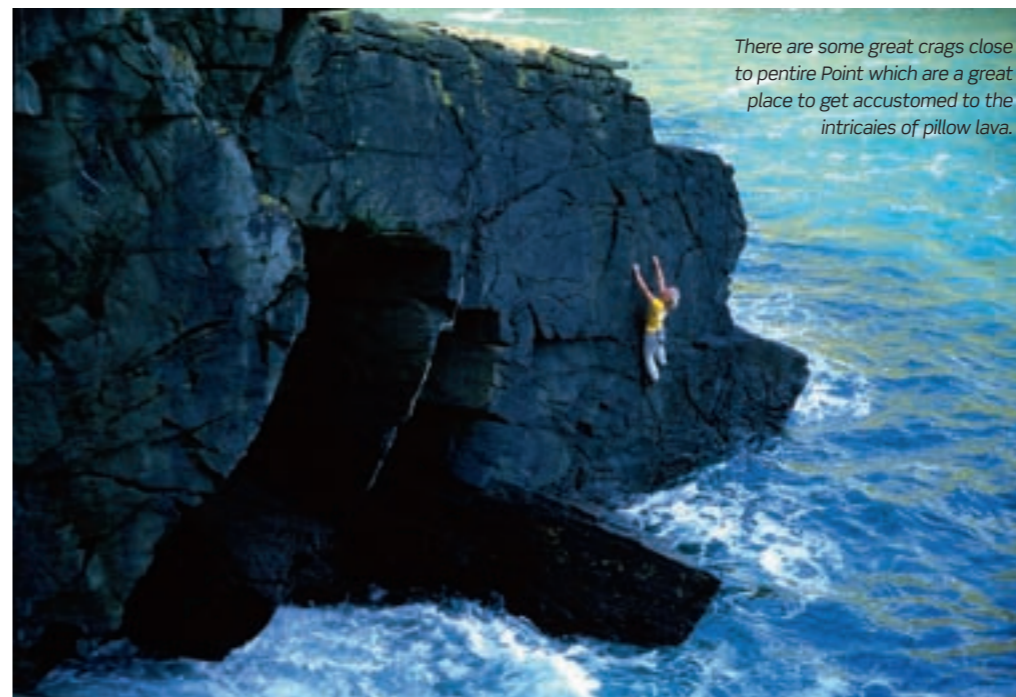
Culm is found on a stretch of coast on the North Devon/Cornwall border. Though not strictly a rock type in the truest sense the unique formation combined with a density of routes makes it worthy of inclusion here.

### How to climb it

Incut holds on slabs or steep walls is the essence of Culm climbing. Finger strength and nimble footwork are top of the list.

### How to get gear in it

Not too many surprises here, a normal rack will suffice but the cracks can be quite crinkly and uneven making nuts stubborn to seat, so be patient.



There are some great crags close to Pentire Point which are a great place to get accustomed to the intricacies of pillow lava.

### How it is formed

It comprises alternating bands of shale and sandstone that have resulted in a pattern of erosion that has left the harder sandstone bands jutting out seaward in a series of narrow fins.

### Special features and particular hazards

Alpine traverses to exit the fins can be extraordinarily terrifying, not to mention serious. These days in-situ abseil stations are abundant but obviously limited on the tidal sections of the fins. Do your research!

### Best loved crags and routes

Vicarage Cliff is a delightful introduction to the Culm coast but of course it's Lower Sharpnose that pulls the HVS and above crowds. *Sacre Coeur* (E2 5b) at Blackchurch is also worth unearthing.

## Pillow lava

### Where to find it

Trek to North Cornwall and find this intriguing volcanic rock type dotted in amongst the many others.

### How to climb it

Though the name implies something soft and yielding the opposite is in fact the case. The rock, though crumbly at the edges, is solid and hard with incut holds. An alarming black sheen in places indicates that friction isn't always as good as you'd like and adds to the generally intimidating feel of places like The Great Wall at Pentire point.

### How to get gear in it

Don't expect too much and you won't be disappointed. Small and medium gear is more useful than the big stuff and be cautious of the in-situ pegs.

### How it is formed

Created when volcanoes spew forth under the sea cooling the molten lava rapidly to create a brittle crust prone to cracking and through which the characteristic pillowy blobs ooze.

### Special features and particular hazards

Even when the lines seem obvious from a distance, once on the climbs it can be easy to get off-route. □

### Best loved crags and routes

Seek out *Passchendaele* (E2 5c) at Kellan Head and visit The Great Wall at Pentire Point and amongst others treat yourself to, *Eroica* (E2 5c) and if you're feeling brave take on *Darkinbad the Brightdayler* (E5 6a)

Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and British Mountain Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK and recently produced *Get Out On Rock – the definitive instructional DVD*. Her base is NorthWales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides ([info@llanberisguides.com](mailto:info@llanberisguides.com)).



Libby sampling the delights of Culm on Vicarage Cliff.

