

# Libby Peter's Climbing Essentials

## No. 11: Route finding essentials

*A Dream of White Horses (HVS 5a), Gogarth*

The elegant middle pitch of *A Dream of White Horses*.  
Libby is belayed in the unmistakable Concrete Chimney and  
Heather is about to cross the striking pink patch that aids  
navigation once on the climb.  
All photography: Mike Robertson.



◀ **PHOTO 1:** *Seconding Dream* feels as committing as leading it! Here, Heather is following the obvious ledges at the bottom of the V notch on the first pitch. Once these ledges run out you simply keep on moving sideways. (To see where this is on the climb see (B) on topo)

climb if you let a seed of doubt grow it erodes confidence at an alarming speed, especially on multi-pitch routes where the error can be compounded the higher you go.

I'm sure every climber has gone off-route at some point and had to sort it out, or stubbornly willed the route description to fit what's ahead – even when it's totally implausible. It's all part of the adventure... up to a point!

So how do you find the right way on a route like *Dream*? This month we take that magical trip across one of the most beautiful and sought after, but intimidating climbs in the country to find out.

### Research

You just can't spend enough time devouring all the guidebooks you can get your hands on. Reading and re-reading descriptions the night before and memorising the photos or diagrams so you build a picture in your head before you even step out the door. Then do it all again at the crag, ideally with a view so you can match the picture with the real thing. Try and get in the exact position the crag photo was taken from so it's an accurate match and identify the start, finish, the belays and key navigational features for each pitch.

The promontory opposite the sweep of pale rock known as Wen Slab is the perfect viewing gallery. When gazing across, it takes a long time to work out where the climb goes because it's an intricately woven masterpiece of subtle route finding rather than an obvious line.

So first pick out the more striking features, in this case your eye is drawn to the chimney/crack line of *Wen* and the rubble filled *Concrete Chimney*, both also excellent HVSSs. See topo overpage. *Dream* crosses and belays on both these routes so knowing when to stop is easy but gauging at what height you cross is less obvious. On the far right hand edge of the slab the lower of two V notches (see V notch on topo) is a crucial marker, as the base of this is pretty much the height you maintain for the first traverse pitch.

Midway between *Concrete Chimney* and *Wen* is a distinct pink patch of rock (see topo). This is a key navigational aid, both to help you judge at what height to belay at the end of one pitch and where you'll be heading on the next. The exit groove that marks the finish is hidden from the

**PHOTO 3:** The high tide access pitch down the very obvious V notch. Heather has positioned herself where she can see Libby climb down and then across the first pitch. (To see where this is on the climb see (A) on topo)



**PHOTO 2:** Scrambling carefully down the loose approach gully to the obvious ledge where you abseil from. Abseil 1 (A1 - not normally in-situ) takes you down loose ground to the high-tide start of *Dream*. Abseil 2 (A2 - normally in-situ) takes you down Wen slab to the low-tide start of *Dream* and all other routes.

Just the other day, perched airily in the middle of the expansive Wen Slab at Gogarth in North Wales, I had an amusing exchange with a team 30ft below me. "What route are you on?" they asked me. "*Dream*," I replied "how about you?" "*Dream!*" they announced. We all laughed.

We couldn't both be right but having the advantage of local knowledge I was more confident than they. "So what are we on then?" they asked. "*Quartz Icicle*" I replied. They were annoyed but also relieved – at least that explained why they'd found a 4c pitch so hard – *Quartz Icicle* is E2 5b!

With the other team now back on-route we converged at the unmistakably lumpy *Concrete Chimney* belay and relaxed in the warm afternoon sun as we watched a cool-headed 16 year old make a very steady job of leading the final pitch. Even on this pitch the route finding is far from obvious and the occasional helpful hint from his Uncle kept him on track and his confidence buoyed. As we lingered and waited I spent time thinking about how route finding is one of the essential ingredients of a truly adventurous climb. Stepping onto a climb when you can't see the whole route is a voyage into the unknown.

Every climber worries about getting off-route and for some climbers it's their biggest fear. It can certainly hold you back to the extent that you can put off certain routes for years (*A Dream of White Horses* being a good example). Once on a



▼ **PHOTO 4:** Libby absorbed in the confusing rock of the final pitch. Slings or long extenders on all runners and keeping the ropes separated eases the inevitable rope-drag and prevents the runners lifting out. (To see where this is on the climb see (D) on topo)

promontory viewpoint so you'll have to wait until you're on the climb and can get a different perspective (see photo 6).

But remember, having such a perfect view of nearly the whole climb is a luxury you won't often be allowed.

### Getting to the right start

As with so many sea-cliff climbs, getting to the start of *Dream* is serious and a little

complicated. For one thing there are two possible starts depending on tide and sea-state and these have two different abseils (see A1 and A2 on photo 2 and topo), so it's important to decide which one you're opting for and get the correct abseil point. (We took the traditional high-tide start so the pitches and belays are numbered accordingly, but if you're lucky enough to do the whole route you add an extra pitch from sea level and a belay at the start of the traverse below the V notch).

*In-situ* abseil tat or other teams ropes don't necessarily lead where you want to go. *Dream* is a good example of this as the obvious *in-situ* abseil (A2) takes you down the slab itself to the true first pitch of *Dream* and the big ledges that link many of the climbs on Wen Slab. But this won't get you to the high-tide *Dream* start, for this you need to rig your own abseil to get safely down the loose vegetated right flank (see A1 on photo 2 and topo).

### Staying on route

Before you set off on each pitch have one final read of the guide and keep the key directions and distances in your head. Note, and then look out for, the routes to either side and any potential waymarkers on-route such as pegs or unusual rock features. Leaning right away from the rock to get a better view now and again helps

enormously. Keep your eyes peeled for tell-tale clues such as dabs of chalk, stuck gear, polished holds and worn runner placements. If the rock type is less prone to becoming polished, the traffic light and the rock a little vegetated you may have to look very closely to see signs of wear. At Gogarth, for example, the absence of the soft green lichen in a particular spot is as much of a clue that it's been used as a foothold as you may get. Your belayer can play their part in keeping you right by calling out halfway on the rope etc and reading out the description if needs be.

The first traverse pitch of *Dream* has the most difficult route finding as it crosses a section of compact uniform rock. It sets out along a line of ledges, which soon peter out (see photos 1 and 3 on previous page) but if you stick at this height you'll be spot on. The tricky bit is being sure you're on the correct ledges and then having the faith to commit to a rather blank and somewhat trickier section of climbing. Two thirds of the way across a hard-to-spot peg runner (see photo 7) gives welcome reassurance that you're on-track.

### Belaying in the right place

It's a case of 'chicken and the egg', but I believe if you get the belay right everything else falls into place so take

▼ **PHOTO 6:** The semi-hanging belay at the end of pitch one. The third pitch and exit groove is clearly visible from here. (To see where this is on the climb see belay 1 on topo).



time to make sure you've got it spot on. Look above and below to make sure you've not missed anything and check the distance you've climbed. Have in your head the description for the start of the next pitch and check it fits. Look for signs that others have belayed here before such as *in-situ* gear, even if it's old and unusable now, worn gear placements and even (but less common these days) cigarette butts stuffed into cracks!

On *Dream* the guide tells you to take a hanging belay in the chimney/crack of *Wen* (see photo 6) and this is really obvious when you reach it but to confirm you're at the correct height look out for the line of flakes on the next pitch (see photo 5).

Similarly the next belay, in *Concrete Chimney*, is also easy to identify by the rubbly looking rock but to get the right spot compare your level with the overhangs on the left under which you'll need to climb on the final pitch.

### Confidence

If you've taken time to get all the practical elements of route finding right the rest is all about being confident to press on even when you're not 100% sure. This takes experience and judgement of course and even the most experienced climbers still have moments of doubt. But over time you can build a repertoire of coping strategies. Here's what I do when the doubt creeps in:

- \* Ask my belayer to read out the description again.
- \* Mentally tick off the sections I've already climbed that I know fit to establish

whereabouts in the description I am.

- \* If it still doesn't seem right look back down – is there somewhere I could have gone wrong? Would the description match better if I'd taken that course?
- \* Look left and right to try and establish any key waymarkers, even on other routes, and compare my progress with these.
- \* Crunch time – am I still on-route or not?
- \* No – Can I correct from here or do I need to climb back down, get onto another route or back-off?
- \* Yes – OK, time to tell myself to get on with it. Check the runners are good; check you're still on previously climbed rock and move carefully onward and upwards looking for clues that you're getting back on-track. With this approach nine times out of ten it all comes good! □

▼ **PHOTO 7:** The rusty peg – more of a waymarker than a runner. The reddish rock discolouration is more often than not how you'll spot the placement.



Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and IFMGA Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK. Her base is North Wales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides ([info@llanberisguides.com](mailto:info@llanberisguides.com))

### STOP PRESS!

For some close up action on *Dream* take a look at Libby and Neil Gresham's, brand new release - *Get Out On Rock* - the definitive instructional rock-climbing DVD. Get your copy @ [climber.co.uk/store](http://climber.co.uk/store) for a 10% discount



▼ **PHOTO 5:** The climbers eye view of pitch 2 from the belay in the chimney of *Wen*. The flake line is really obvious from here, as is the pink patch that you cross. (To see where this is on the climb see (C) on topo)



*Dream* as viewed from the promontory.