

Welsh Grit Selected Area Guides

Rhinog Fach and Cwm Hywel

An Interim Guide to Climbing
By Dave Williams

"An idyllic, rarely visited area, situated above one of the loveliest mountain lakes in Snowdonia."



Rhinog Fach, Cwm Hywel and Llyn Hywel panorama
© TIM MORLEY



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The Rhinogydd

The **Rhinogydd** are a range of mountains located in Central Snowdonia, south of the Afon Dwyryd, east of Harlech, west of the A470 and north of the Afon Mawddach. *Rhinogydd* is the Welsh plural form of *Rhinog*, which means 'threshold'. It is thought that the use of Rhinogydd derives from the names of two of the higher peaks in the range, namely **Rhinog Fawr** and **Rhinog Fach**.

The Rhinogydd are notably rocky towards the central and northern end of the range, especially around Rhinog Fawr, Rhinog Fach and Moel Ysgyfarnogod. This area is littered with boulders, outcrops and large cliffs, all composed of perfect gritstone. The southern end of the range around Y Llethr and Diffwys has a softer, more rounded character, but this does not mean that there is an absence of climbable rock.

Steep Stone's Rhinogydd series of Interim Climbing and Bouldering Guides

For the rock climber, the Rhinogydd is arguably one of Wales' greatest yet least-known treasures.

Work is ongoing on **Steep Stone's** new **Welsh Grit** guidebook, which will detail the very best of over 1800 single and multi-pitch climbs and boulder problems. The Climbers' Club *Meirionnydd* 2002 guidebook did the area no favours. Poorly written and edited, totally lacking in inspiration, its overly complex and consequently confusing description of the area and its climbing has done little to motivate any real interest. As a result, a whole generation of climbers may now be unaware, or at least unsure, of the Rhinogydd's climbing potential.

Steep Stone's *Welsh Grit* aims to right this wrong. While work on the new guide steadily progresses, Steep Stone will also produce a short series of definitive interim guidebooks with the aim of encouraging climbers to take a serious look at what the Rhinogydd has to offer. Building on the success of **Steep Stone's** 2018 **Central Wales - Elenydd** guidebook, these well-researched, free-to-download PDF interim guides will provide easy to follow access notes, together with accurate route descriptions and photo-topos.

The Welsh Grit Selected Area Interim Guide Series

Cefn Cam
Craig y Beudy
Carreg yr Ogof
Cwm Mynach
Craig y Fotty
Craig y Ffridd
Cwm Nantcol Lower Craggs
Rhinog Fach and Cwm Hywel

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A note on the use of Approach Grades **AG**

The Rhinogydd are different and here you'll rarely find the close-cropped grass of the rest of Snowdonia. This is predominantly a rough, scruffy terrain with boulders and heather. As a result, a Rhinogydd mile is about as long as a Scottish one. Covering ground can sometimes take ages due to the Rhinogydd's "Three Amigos" of heather, bilberry bushes and boulders - with an added soupçon of bracken when in season. Rhinogydd devotees will know exactly what to expect, but the first time or occasional visitor may be caught unawares.

As a guide, the approaches to crags have been very subjectively 'graded' from 0-3 according to the ease of walking, or indeed, the lack thereof....

AG0 'A walk in the park'

AG1 Relatively easy going, reasonable paths

AG2 Hard going on mostly pathless terrain

AG3 Extremely difficult, pathless terrain

Rhinog Fach *Lesser Threshold*

OS Ref SH 665 268 and SH 665 266

Overview:	A delightful, relatively remote high mountain climbing area in an idyllic setting above Llyn Hywel in the south-central Rhinogydd. This is an ideal venue for those who like long mountain days, a place where an absence of crowds is virtually guaranteed
Altitude:	550 - 650 metres
Approach:	AG1: Straightforward walking, by Rhinogydd standards, on reasonable and generally easy-to-follow mountain paths
Approach time:	90-120 minutes depending on approach route
Aspect:	Variously south west and south east facing
Drying:	Very quick to dry in good conditions
Winter sun:	Yes (but not an ideal winter venue due to exposure and altitude)
Summer sun:	Yes
Access Land:	Yes
Grade Range:	VD – VS

There is a lot of exposed rock on Rhinog Fach, so it is surprising that there are only a handful of recorded climbs here. However, perhaps this is not unexpected as Rhinog Fach is, by Welsh standards, quite a remote mountain. However, as a scenic climbing venue, the small yet atmospheric Cwm Hywel, which underlies the south slope of Rhinog Fach, is certainly unequalled in the whole of the Rhinogydd, while Llyn Hywel is, arguably, one of Wales' finest mountain lakes. This is an ideal location for those who like long mountain days and a place where an absence of crowds is virtually guaranteed; resulting in a combination which is tantamount to perfection for some climbers.

Rhinog Fach's *The South Ridge* has the accolade of being the very first climb in the Rhinogydd. It is also one of its longest and was, for many years, the highest as well. The far more recent, modern climbs on the mountain's **South East Face** have now, rather impertinently, robbed it of the latter accolade. In complete contrast, climbing of quite a unique nature is located on the nearby **Hywel Slab**, a large west-facing slab that dips

directly into Llyn Hywel's deep waters. Finally, the **Llechau'r Llyn** slabs provide pleasant, low grade slabby climbing on good, clean rock. A fine day's mountaineering can be had by climbing *The South Ridge*, followed by a route on the Patent Examiner's Wall and one on Llechau'r Llyn. An ascent of *The South Ridge* could also be incorporated into a very demanding circuit of Cwm Nantcol.



Dave Williams enjoying "an absence of crowds" on Llechau'r Llyn, Cwm Hywel.
© TIM MORLEY

Approach: There are four possible approaches to Rhinog Fach's climbing areas.

From the West

[1] Despite not being the easiest approach, the quickest, most direct and most popular is from the Cwm Nantcol roadhead. Cars may be left at the pay-at-the-farm pull-off at Maes y Garnedd, (OS Ref. 642 269). Follow the undulating Bwlch Drws Ardudwy footpath (a former drovers' route) for 1½ kilometres towards the col. Where the path descends slightly to Llawr y Bwlch, a wider, marshy area, turn right onto a far less distinct path which leads down to a stream and ladder stile over a wall (OS Ref SH 657 278). The narrow, initially steep and continuously awkward path is followed up through heather and boulders to a faint spur on the right-hand side of the small hanging valley of Cwm Hosan. (Llyn Cwm Hosan is below and left at this point.) There are a plethora of criss-crossing small paths here, so follow the one that runs up the centre of the cwm as this leads to Cwm Hywel and the north-west shore of Llyn Hywel after about a kilometre. Note that long before the cwm is reached, the distinct stepped profile of *The South Ridge* comes into view high on the left skyline.

[2] An alternative route of some merit starts at Cilcychwyn, a short distance down-valley from the Cwm Nantcol roadhead. While this is longer, less obvious and less well-travelled, it is both interesting and very scenic and has the advantage of gaining height gradually on a well-engineered mine track for a good distance. Park at a small parking area on the left

some 200 metres before Cilcychwyn (OS Ref. SH 632 258). **Do not park at Cilcychwyn, nor on the side of the Graig Isaf farm track.** Walk along the road to Cilcychwyn and take the farm track on the right (public footpath) up to Graig Isaf farm and continue along the former Rhinog Manganese Mine track. The going is good all the way to the old mine where the track traverses diagonally across the base of a manganese spoil heap. Just beyond, at OS Ref. SH 6525 2675, a faint but discernible path now leaves the main track just before a loading platform at the foot of a short incline. Follow this path uphill to join a former horse tramway at the incline head and briefly follow this around a rocky knoll to reach a gap in a wall. Now take a less obvious path uphill along the left side of the wall for about 800 metres until it bears left across boggy ground (OS Ref. SH 6557 2649), crossing a stream and traversing past Llyn Perfeddau, before making a final little zig-zag up to Cwm Hywel.

From the East

[3] The longest and possibly the least interesting approach is from the small forestry car park near Graigddu Isaf (OS Ref SH 680 300), easily reached from the A470 just south of Bronaber on the eastern side of the Rhinogydd. However, this approach is a much easier one to access by car, especially if travelling from the north or east. From the car park (**strictly no vehicles beyond this point**), walk along the forestry road to the south west until a path branches off to the right just short of the diminutive Afon Gau (OS Ref SH 673 286). Follow this to a gate where it emerges onto the open hillside (OS Ref. SH 670 285). The path now leads up to Bwlch Drws Ardudwy between Rhinog Fach and Rhinog Fawr, reaching its highest point at a large cairn (OS Ref. SH 684 281). From here descend to Cwm yr Haul, a bowl-like area with a ladder stile over a wall on the left (OS Ref. SH 659 280). Cross the stile and follow the narrow path up to Llyn Cwmhosan. Continue ascending beyond the lake and the path soon merges with the Cwm Nantcol roadhead approach path [1] which is then followed to Cwm Hywel.

Upon reaching Cwm Hywel, the less defined ridge of *Prikljuchenie* on Rhinog Fach's more broken **West Face** is well to the left of *The South Ridge* which projects from the boulder-strewn southern slopes of Rhinog Fach. **The Patent Examiner's Wall** is hidden to the right of *The South Ridge* on Rhinog Fach's **South East Face** while the **Hywel Slabs** and **Llechau'r Llyn** are straight ahead, defining the eastern shore of Llyn Hywel. The final approach to both ridges is over tedious heather and scree although, as a subtle nod to its popularity, a faint but discernible path leads to the base of *The South Ridge* from Llyn Hywel's north shore.

From the South

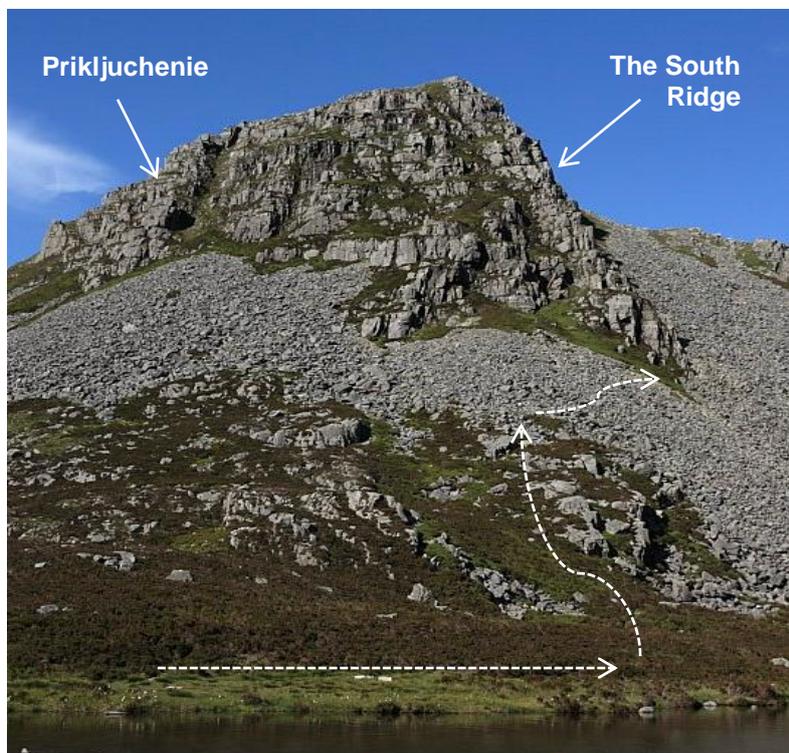
[4] The most left-field approach is via Cwm Mynach to the south east which, nevertheless, has some merit as it traverses the seldom visited and little-known Cefn Cam area. This approach is accessed from the A496 Dolgellau to Barmouth road by turning off onto a narrow, minor road opposite the Penmaenpool toll bridge road at Pont Borthwnog. After a steep climb, continue for just over 4 kilometres to the end of the narrow, gated, tarmac road where it forks into two stone tracks (OS Ref SH 683 218). The left hand track is a very rough, unsurfaced council road which is best suited to 4x4 vehicles or those with good ground clearance such as larger vans or SUVs. At the time of writing it is also just about passable by most other vehicles with extreme care, with the first 300 metres being by far the worst; beyond which it progressively improves. Those with unsuitable vehicles will need to park in the small car park at the end of the tarmac road and walk-in from there (+45 minutes). Follow the track uphill for about 2½ kilometres to a staggered cross-roads and widening (OS Ref SH 680 242). **Park at the side of the track here, taking care not to impede access, as there is no parking space beyond this point. (There is no parking available for climbers' vehicles further along the track at Hafod y Brenin, a former shooting lodge).**

On foot, follow the gated track northwards towards Hafod y Brenin. Where the track to the hafod bears left, continue for about $\frac{3}{4}$ kilometre along the rutted, wet main track to the long-disused Cefn Cam slate quarry (OS Ref SH 678 257). Once at the quarry barrack ruins, bear left and follow a path which traverses boggy, heathery ground to reach a stile over a high stone boundary wall (OS Ref. SH 675 264). From here, a fainter path leads up to Llyn y Bi. Once at the lake, continue following the path to the right of the lake which gradually ascends to the col between Llethr and Rhinog Fach. (OS Ref. SH 665 265). Once at the col, do not climb over the stone wall; instead, follow the wall rightwards to quickly find a stone stile which gives access to Cwm Hywel. **Llechau'r Llyn** and **Hywel Slab** are now located approximately below while a short walk uphill and a final scramble traverse across scree leads to the **South Ridge** and the **South East Face of Rhinog Fach**.

Rhinog Fach: West Face (*Prikljuchenie*) and *The South Ridge*

Multi-pitch gritstone climbing is a very rare and unusual occurrence, but the Rhinogydd has more than its fair share of such climbs, two of which – *Prikljuchenie* and *The South Ridge* -

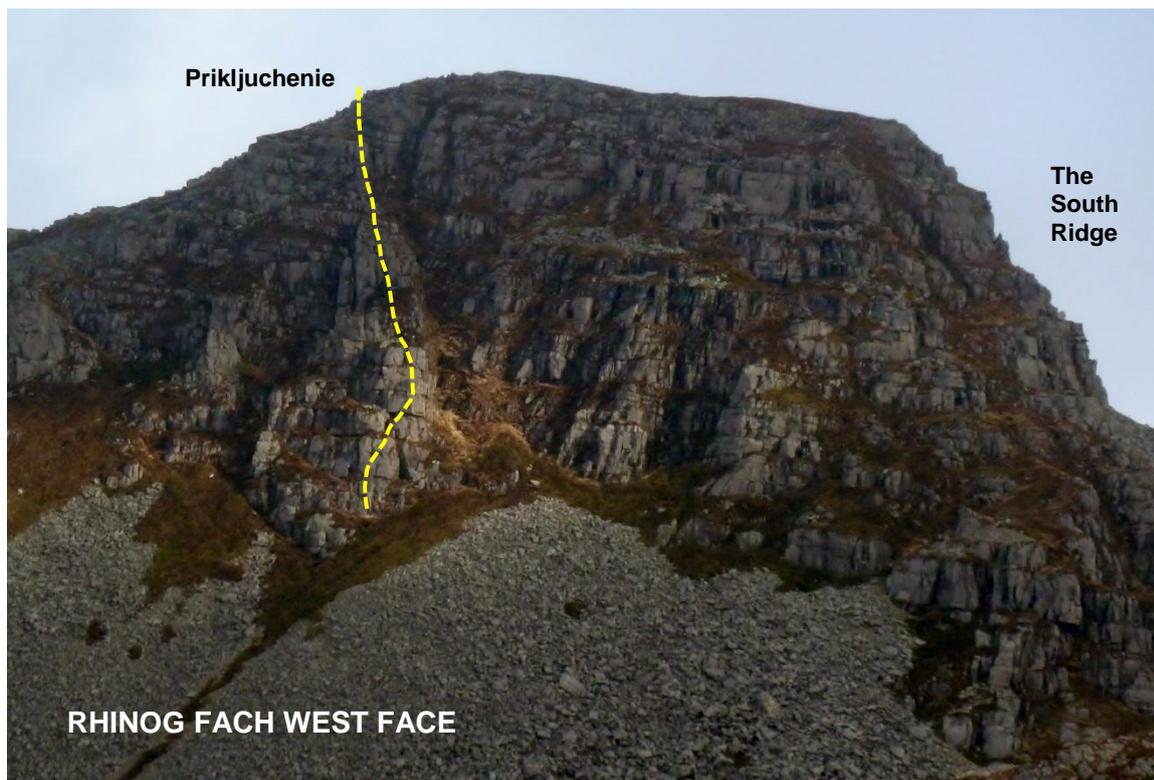
are found on Rhinog Fach. The broken ground between the two climbs offers opportunities for some potentially exciting and adventurous scrambling.



Prikljuchenie 110m HS 4b

This route climbs the tongue of more continuous rock a couple of hundred metres left of *The South Ridge* on Rhinog Fach's west face. It is harder than its more senior neighbour but is also quite inferior. It begins well, but the good first pitch quickly leads to much easier climbing, followed by a disappointing arête above.

1. 30m 4b. Start just right of the centre of the rock tongue by a small rib. Follow the rib delicately to a ledge and gear at 5 metres. Head upwards past large flakes to an overhang, step right and continue up to belay on a big grassy ledge.
 2. 20m. From the belay climb large blocks, then the wall above before continuing upwards to the flat top of the rock tongue and belay.
 3. 60m. Scramble easily over short walls up the vague arête to the summit plateau.
- FA T Green, M Green 20.6.12



The South Ridge 170m VD 4a

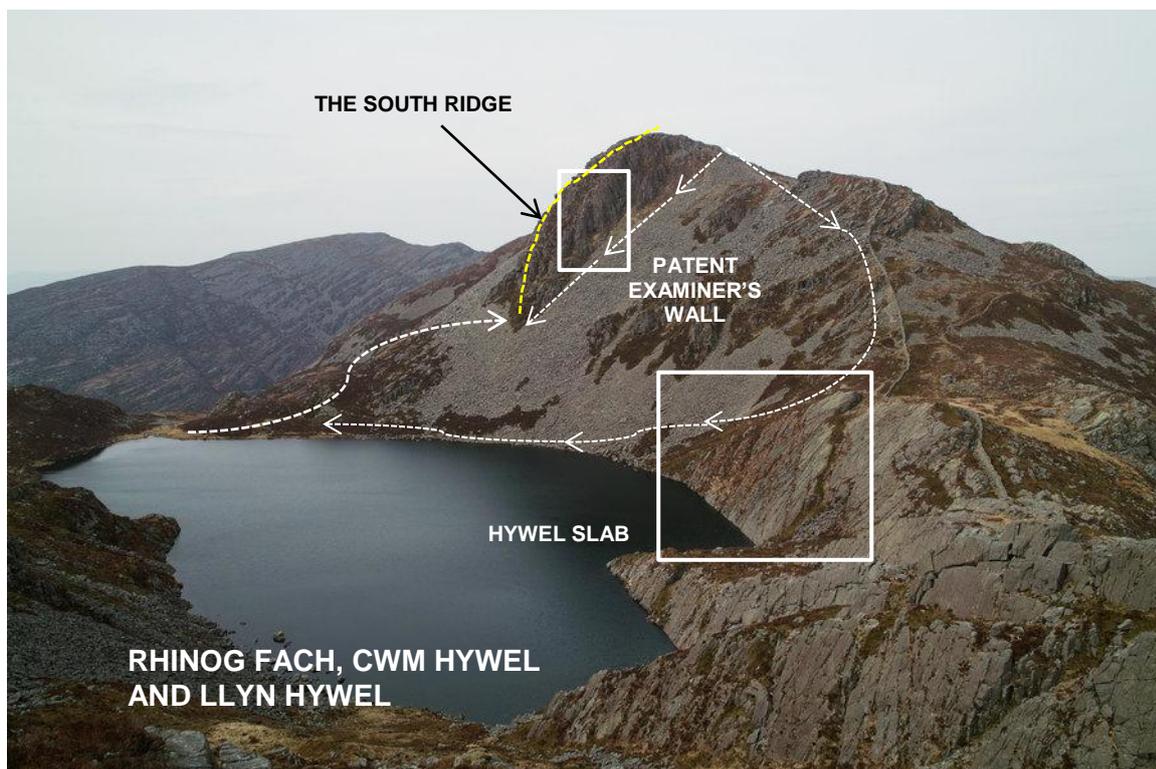
Once described as *'the most interesting mountaineering route between Snowdon and Cadair Idris'*, this is the great stepped ridge which rises towards the summit of Rhinog Fach; a climb which is likely to be Wales' most underrated classic mountain route. It is also all about location, as the climb is superbly positioned high above Llyn Hywel, affording spectacular views. In pure climbing terms it is somewhat contrived, seeking out difficulty yet being both escapable and lacking in technical continuity. But at least the described line provides a very interesting alpine-style climb with various harder and more direct options. The 4a technical sections, if climbed as described, ensure that the climb is high in the grade, but difficulties are both short and sweet and also well-protected. Note also that the effects of frost action at this altitude may result in the odd some suspect flake or block, so care is advised.

An ascent with sacks will be the preferred choice of many, but these can also be left at the base of the route as it is possible to return to the start by initially descending the main ridge path southwards before veering off rightwards across heather to descend steeper grass and scree directly beneath the South East Face.

1. 14m Start at the foot of the ridge and climb the right-hand side of the arête, avoiding some suspect blockwork and bear left and up to a ledge.
 2. 13m Scramble to the obvious cracked block. Go up the block and short wall to another ledge.
 3. 8m 4a Tackle the steep rib to the left of a corner-crack to reach a good stance on the left.
 4. 45m Scramble up the ridge to a level area which below a rock wall.
 5. 30m 4a Climb up a short overhang-capped groove and move right to a grassy gully. Carefully continue up and right again to gain the top of a large block on a broad ledge above the South East Face. (Possible belay). Cross the ledge and take the steep, right-hand side of the next rib to easier ground and belays.
 6. 50m Scramble easily to walk-off territory. The summit is now within spitting distance, together with its vast tapestry of fine views in all directions.
- FA S Styles, G Garrard 1935



Steve Culverhouse
high on *The South
Ridge*, VD.
© DAVE WILLIAMS



RHINO FACH, CWM HYWEL
AND LLYN HYWEL

Rhinog Fach South East Face: The Patent Examiner's Wall

OS Ref. SH 664 269

The south-eastern side of Rhinog Fach's South Ridge features some steep, blocky and mainly clean walls, collectively known as **The Patent Examiner's Wall**. The routes recorded here have the distinction of being the very highest climbs in the Rhinogydd and they offer an entirely different climbing experience to *The South Ridge*, but share an equally scenic outlook. All routes are worthwhile; the rock is quick-drying and generally of good quality, but the effects of frost action at this altitude are seen in some suspect flakes and blocks – test before you pull!

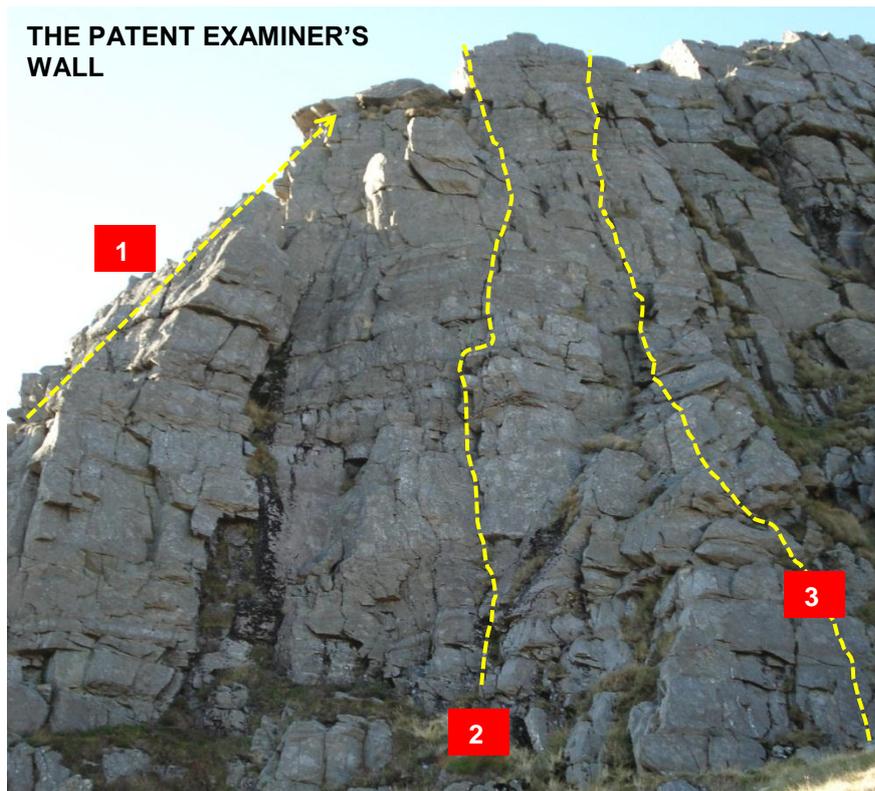
Approach: As for *The South Ridge*, then continue rightwards up the scree for about 150 metres until directly beneath a steep, well-featured, continuous wall of rock. Descend as for *The South Ridge* to the foot of the wall. Climbs are described from left to right.



1. Wilf Lunn 26m HS 4b

This worthwhile and well-positioned route takes a direct and well-protected line up the front face of the obvious leaning pillar on the left-hand side of the Wall. Start at the very toe of the pillar. Scramble up over blocky ledges to the foot of the shallow, intimidating-looking groove. Climb this (crux) to a good ledge. Step right and continue, not without interest, up the face above to the arête, which is then climbed to a junction with *The South Ridge*. Easy scrambling (pitch 6 of *The South Ridge*) leads up to the summit.

FA S Culverhouse, D Williams 26.8.19



2. No Prior Art 30m VS 4c ★

This strong natural line provides good, well-protected climbing. Climb steeply up to the base of the layback crack. Move awkwardly up the crack and follow it through a bulge and rightwards to the wider continuation crack. From the ledge above, climb a short crack and head up leftwards to a nicely positioned finish up the stepped left arête of the headwall. Scramble off as for the previous route.

FA R Swards, D Williams 22.9.14

3. Yma o Hyd 30m HS 4b ★

Another good climb with a well-positioned finish on the steep upper headwall. Start 10 metres right of *No Prior Art* at the right-hand side of a narrow, stepped, slabby rib. Climb the pleasant rib to pass a large freestanding block on its left. Move up to the steeper groove above and climb it, not without interest, to the base of a most unappealing crack. Avoid this by a steep pull up and left onto an airy ledge and finish directly up the short wall above.

Belay and scramble off as for the previous routes.

FA D Williams, R Swards 22.9.14

Hywel Slab

OS Ref. 665 265

This is the obvious west-facing vegetated slab that dips directly into the deep waters of Llyn Hywel, giving a very unusual (if not unique) mountain crag climbing experience.

The slab takes a lot of seepage and is now far mossier than when it was first climbed in the mid-1990s. To date, all the climbing is concentrated on the cleanest right-hand section. Three of the climbs here share a common start, reached by scrambling down to the right-hand (southern) end of the slab where a poor, single nut belay may be found up and right, not far above the water's edge.

Hywel Slab climbs are described from right to left as the slab can only be accessed from the right.

1. Sugar and Spikes 35m VD

Start at the right hand base of the slab and take a leftwards-slanting crack system past a prominent spike, to reach the heather ramp up and left. Cross rightwards to a higher slab and finish up this. Rather vegetated.

FA J Bull 24.7.12

**2. Walking on Water** 50m S 4a

The original route above the deep, dark waters of Llyn Hywel is still the best and cleanest climb on the slab, but is not as clean as it once was. Bold in parts, but at least protection improves with height. Start as for *Sugar and Spikes* and make a committing traverse left just above the water to the centre of the slab (DWS – Rhinogydd style!). Climb the centre of the slab, past the diagonal heather ramp, as directly as possible to the top. Ending up with a wet rope is virtually a given.

FA D Williams, N Parry 1995

**3. Stroll Across the Sea** 60m HS 4b †

Beneath all the vegetation, this may be a good climb but, as things stand, it is impossible to say.

1. 20m 4a. Start as for *Walking on Water*, but keep traversing past the large central caterpillar to a crack and possible belay.

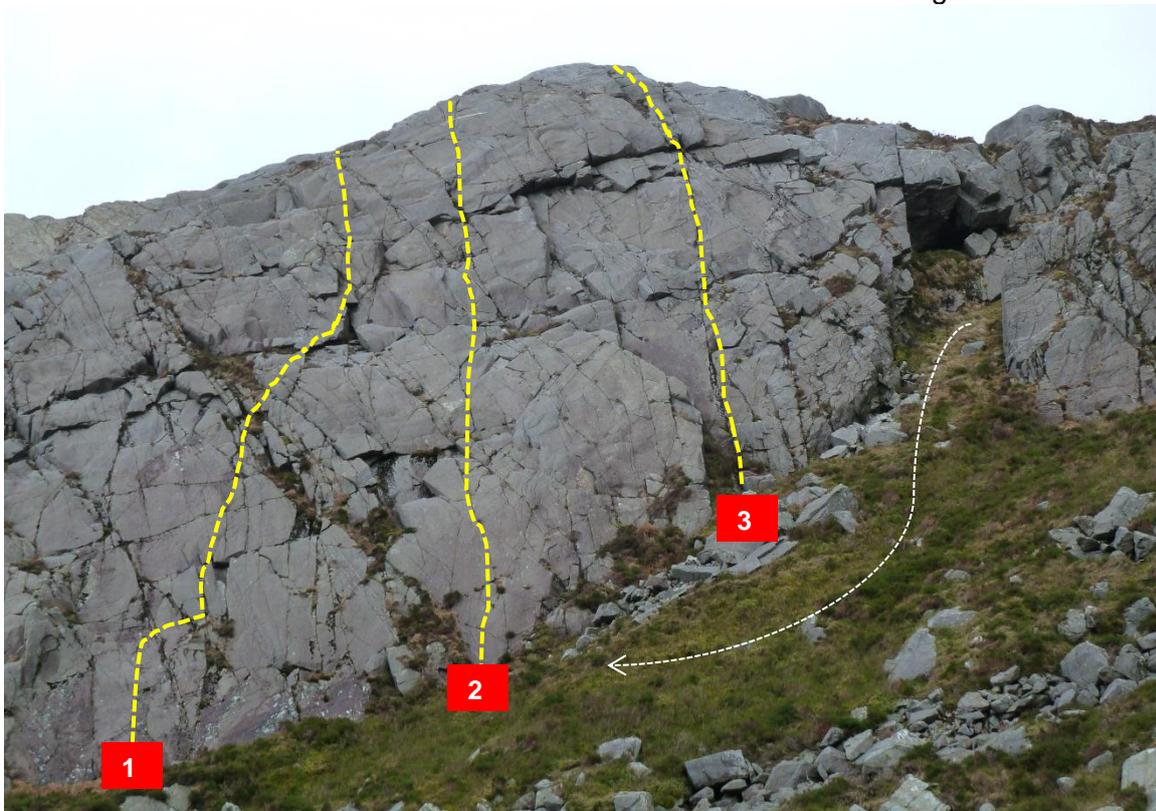
2. 40m 4b. Climb the narrowing slab moving slightly right, tricky at first, to a higher slab with poorer protection. Move left to reach the big heather ramp, then straight up to the top.
FA J Bull 24.7.12

Dry Red (18m VD † FA J Bull 24.7.12) is seemingly a very poor route which climbs the small red slab up and right of the previous routes.

Llechau'r Llyn *The Lake's Slabs*

OS Ref 665 264

Rising out of the lake to the right of the Hywel Slab and worthy of a visit, is a smaller line of west-facing slabs which run up the Llethr hillside. In contrast to their much larger neighbour, the rock here is clean, dries quickly and provides excellent friction. A short narrow grassy gully, the top of which is easily accessed by ascending the Llethr path for a short distance, leads down to the base of the slabs. Climbs are described from left to right.



1. Kill the Boot 25m VD

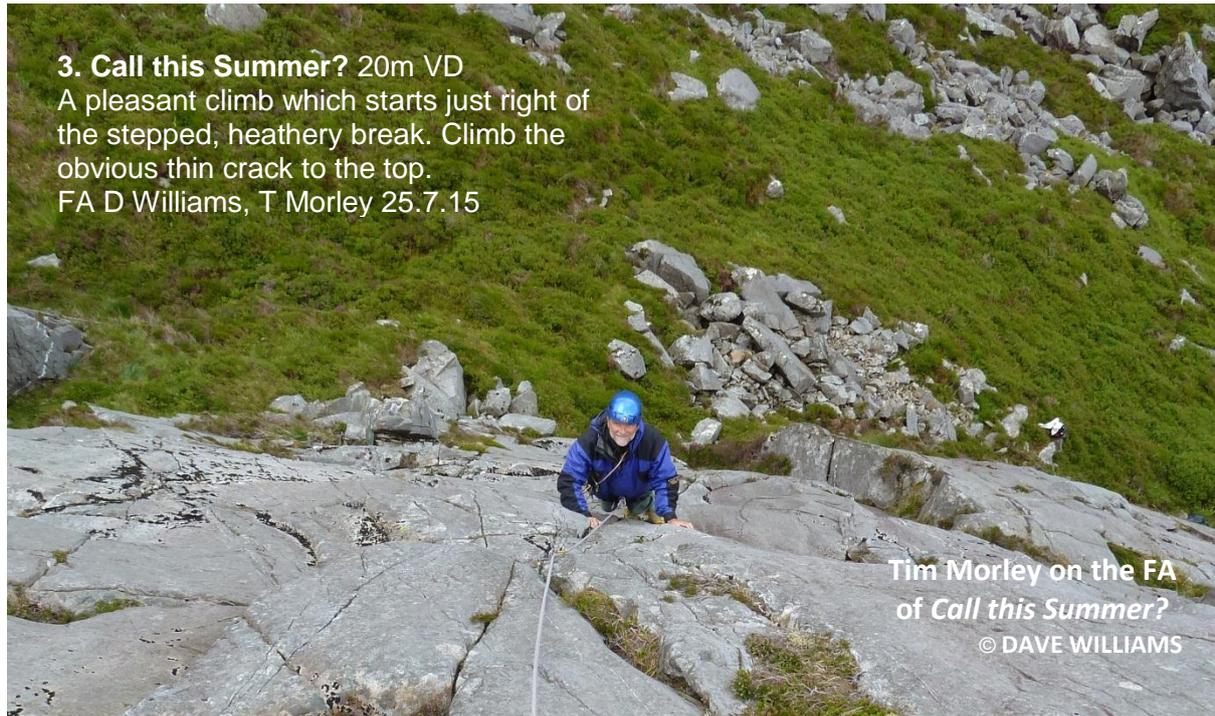
A worthwhile little excursion that makes the best of the rock on the left side of the slabs. Start directly below some dubious-looking spikes. Climb up to the spikes, step right and move up to a smaller spike. Move right again and go up to a steepening and climb this directly to the top.

FA D Williams, T Morley 25.7.15

2. Landlubber 25m S 4b ★

Towards the upper end of these slabs, where they are at their highest, there is a prominent overhang high up on the slab. Where this fades at its left side there is a vague line of cracks which reach the ground in the form of a very thin crack. Climb the slab via the thin, delicate crack to better holds and protection. Continue pleasantly in the same line, passing the overhang on the left and finish slightly rightwards.

FA S Needham, D Forster, T Noonan 7.9.14



A line of smaller slabs located up and right of Llechau'r Llyn may provide some further passing interest for the soloist climber.

ADDENDUM

Two routes have been claimed on an un-named crag on Rhinog Fach's North East flank. The crag is located at OS Ref. SH 668 276

Remote Supervision 10m. Grade t.b.c. †

Start at the obvious blocky groove just right of above which leads to a ledge at 2/3rds height. An easy start gains the groove which is followed past a loose block to a ledge to a finish up the crack above.

FA M Rees 14.7.05

Public Services 9m S 4a †

Start at the groove 2 metres right and below a prominent ledge. Climb delicately to the ledge (care with blocks on ledge), step up and right and finish up the corner.

FA M Rees 14.7.05

In addition to the above, there is a great deal of, as yet, unclimbed rock on Rhinog Fach's northern and eastern flanks. To date, the crags here have largely been ignored because of the existence of far richer and more accessible pickings on the opposite side of Bwlch Drws Ardudwy on Rhinog Fawr's western slopes.