

PONTESFORD ROCKS

OS Ref: 409047 Sheet 126 (1:50,000 Landranger Series)

"Although the crag, which lies on the south side of Pontesford Hill, cannot compete in severity with some of the well known gritstone outcrops, it nevertheless offers some fifty routes for the climbers' delight, some of which are two hundred feet long. Furthermore, it is the most important crag for many miles around, and certainly the nearest to the industrial centres of the West Midlands."

W. Unsworth 1962.

Please note that the current text has been edited considerably since this guidebook appeared in 1962.

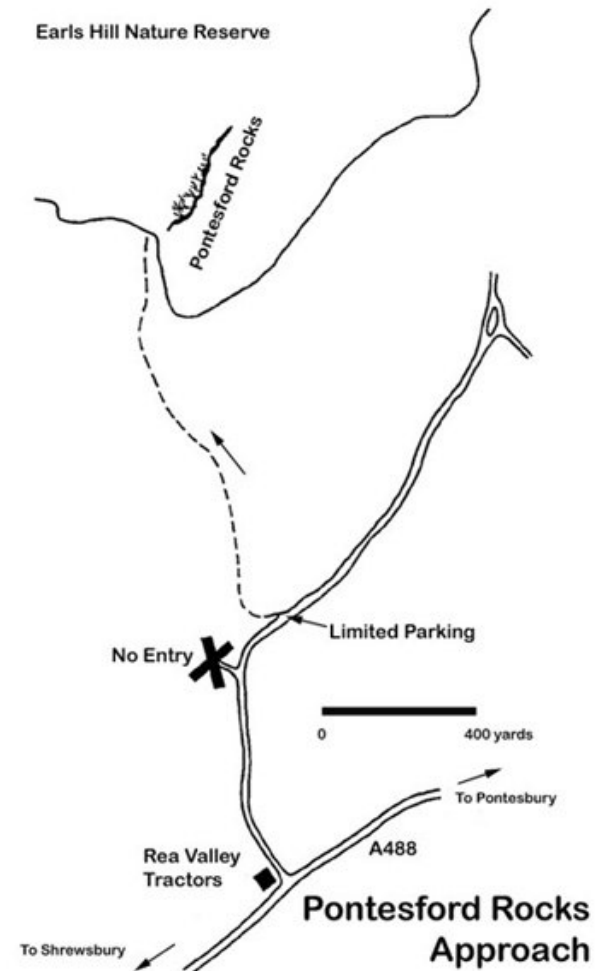
SITUATION AND CHARACTER

Pontesford Rocks are delightfully situated some eight miles to the south-west of Shrewsbury on the south side of Earls Hill. The summit of Earls Hill provides superb views of the Shropshire Hills and is the site of an Iron Age fort.

The rock at Pontesford is pre-Cambrian Welsh igneous and is generally sound, although care should be exercised on some of the more obscure routes. Pontesford Rocks have been popular for over sixty years as a beginners' playground with a number of good quality low grade rock climbs with plentiful belays.

APPROACH

Pontesford Rocks are best approached from Shrewsbury via the A488, the Shrewsbury to Bishop's Castle road. When approaching from Shrewsbury, Earls Hill is seen as a very distinctive 'hump-backed' hill. On reaching the village of Pontesbury, turn left just after Rea Valley Tractors. Follow this lane for a quarter of a mile to reach a fenced off Forestry clearing marked 'Pontesford Hill' with some limited roadside parking just beyond.



Follow the **lower** footpath, through the clearing, and around the base of the woods to cross a large field reaching a gate at the entrance to Earls Hill Nature Reserve. Pass through the gate and turn right to follow a path up the scree slope. The path rises quickly to pass through trees at **Fifty Foot Wall** and continues upwards passing behind **Pontesbury Needle** to gain a col beneath **The West Buttress**. The col provides a convenient base-camp and an opportunity to recover from the tortuous fifteen minute walk!

ACCESS

Pontesford Rocks form part of the Earls Hill Nature Reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, managed by the Shropshire Trust for Nature Conservation. Whilst not wishing to prohibit climbing, the Trust is concerned that this should be properly regulated in order to preserve the reserve status of the rocks. CLIMBERS USING THE ROCKS SHOULD PAY DUE REGARD TO THE ECOLOGICAL INTERESTS OF THE SITE. CAMPING IS NOT PERMITTED.

HISTORY

Birmingham University M.C. visited the crag as early as 1932 and accounted for the majority of the easier routes. The popular *Varsity Buttress* dates from this period and this route was The Stoats finest achievement. Unfortunately, further details of their activities have not been forthcoming.

In 1949, Peter Harding, while teaching at Shrewsbury Technical College, visited Pontesford Rocks with Tony Moulam, who was then a student. Their activities included ascents of established routes such as *West Wall*, *Varsity Buttress*, *Hawthorn Crack* along with repeats of several other climbs which were then known by different names; *Easy Pinnacle Route*, *Fungus Chimney* and *Fungus Slab*. At the same time they accounted for the first ascent of what is now known as *Finale Groove*.

During the 1950's and 1960's, climbers from Wolverhampton began to visit the crag on a regular basis. Most active was Walt Unsworth who climbed many new routes, although it is possible that a number of these had been climbed previously. Stuart Thomas and Charlie Shaw also added routes

of their own in this period. All of this activity was incorporated into Walt Unsworth's excellent little green guide which first appeared in 1962.

A number of short problems and eliminates have since been added. Most notably Malc Baxter led *The Superdirect* in 1962. This route still remains a bold proposition and many climbers have subsequently failed to record a true on-sight ascent. Ed Drummond has given, through his performance poetry, a very harrowing account of his ground fall whilst attempting to solo the route!

In 1986, the blank wall to the left of the upper pitch of *Varsity Buttress* was first climbed by Steve Boyden. This was also something of a "last great problem" as the route had first been top-roped by R. Tait in 1964. During the course of guidebook work for Rock Climbs in the West Midlands, Doug Kerr found and led *Trachea* in 1988.

More recently, in 1993, local climber Sion Roberts slotted in *Possum*, a worthwhile and independent pitch, just to the left of *The Superdirect*. Also of note, the flake forming Taylor's Crack on *Varsity Buttress* has now parted company with the crag to leave a slightly harder pitch.

For climbers of modest ambitions or limited experience, Pontesford Rocks have traditionally been a climbing ground of unsurpassed charm and beauty; long may this tradition continue.

THE CLIMBS

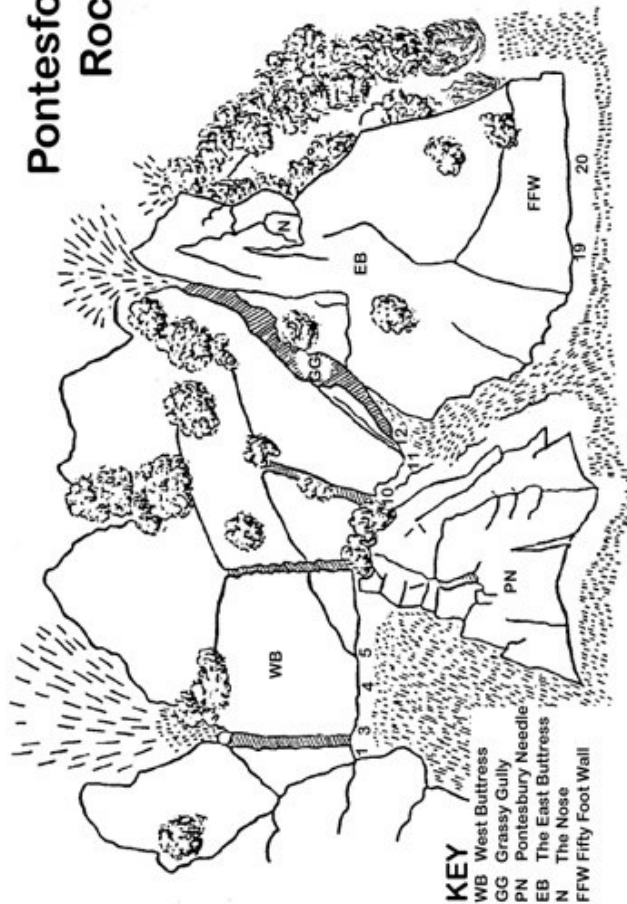
In keeping with tradition, the climbs are described from LEFT to RIGHT.

THE WEST BUTTRESS

From the col, **The West Buttress** is seen as a collection of broken slabby walls bounded by grassy terraces to the left and terminated steeply by **Grassy Gully** on the right. A narrow terrace runs across the buttress at 60ft and a fault at the left-hand end provides a difficult and sometimes arduous means of descent.

The first route lies just to the left of the obvious wide chimney crack of *West Crack*.

Pontesford Rocks



1. **West Wall** 160ft Moderate *
An ideal route for beginners. Popular and enjoyable.
 1. 60ft. Climb the slab keeping just to the left of the wide crack and move left after 15ft to a small ledge. Continue on large holds passing to the right of a tree to reach a large grassy ledge and belays.
 2. 100ft. Small outcrops lie above. Scramble up these passing frequent belay possibilities.
- 1A. **Direct Start** 4C
Climb the thin polished slab to join the original route after 15ft.
2. **West Crack** 160ft Moderate
This is the obvious wide chimney crack.
 1. 40ft. Follow the crack to a capstone which can be passed either on the left or climbed directly to gain a belay in the gully.
 2. 120 ft. Finish pleasantly up the broken arête on the right.
3. **Moonlight Variation** 40ft Difficult
The edge of the right wall provides a harder alternative first pitch to *West Crack*.
4. **Eliminate G** 60ft Hard Severe 4A
Start directly beneath the oak tree. Pull through the overlap with some difficulty and continue in a direct line on small holds to the terrace.
5. **Oak Tree Wall Direct** 120ft Very Difficult * (photo on page 5)
A good route. Start at an obvious weakness in the overlap at the foot of a slanting rake.
 1. 60ft. Pull through the overlap at the weakness and climb for 20ft until a delicate leftwards traverse gains good holds leading up to the oak tree. Belay on the terrace.
 2. 60ft. Walk rightwards along the terrace and climb a short slab and the bulge above to gain the top.
6. **Lower Traverse** 30ft Severe
Start as for *Oak Tree Wall Direct* but traverse leftwards above the overlap to gain *West Crack*. This is a fun solo, slightly harder in reverse.

7. **Right-Hand Route** 95ft Very Difficult
Start 10ft right of *Oak Tree Wall Direct* at a small slab beneath the rake. Climb the slab to pull over the overlap on good holds. Step right before climbing directly to the upper ledge.

8. **Stoats Chimney** 160ft Moderate
This follows the broken chimney to the right. The climbing is relatively straightforward with numerous belay possibilities.

To the right, a smooth narrow slab descends to meet the path at the col.

9. **Last Post** 140ft Very Difficult
This route supersedes *Magpies Nest* and *Slab Start*.
1. 90ft. Climb the narrow slab directly up its centre, stepping left to climb a mossy wall to the bulge. Pull over, step right and then go up to a large tree and belay.
2. 50ft. Move down and right to the arête and finish pleasantly up this.

10. **Wall End Climb** 175ft Very Difficult *
Interesting and very enjoyable climbing up the large slab just to the left of the gully.
1. 70ft. Follow the right edge of the slab until a short steep wall is reached. Avoid this on the left and move up to belay on the huge oak tree.
2. 45ft. The corner. Climb the overlapping slab behind the belay until a long stride to the left can be made. Move up and left to a tree belay on the terrace.
2A. 30ft. Alternatively, the tricky little corner on the right can be climbed at Severe. This variation is known as *The Notch*.
3. 60ft. Walk down and left for 20ft to reach a clean slab. Finish up the centre of this.

11. **Finale Groove** 170ft VS **
The narrow subsidiary slab to the right of *Wall End Climb* provides some very good climbing.
1. 70ft 4A. Climb the narrow slab to its end and make a tricky move left onto the main slab. Climb this to a short wall which leads directly to the large tree.

2. 40ft. 4B. Above is a fine hanging groove. Boldly enter this from the right, or direct (harder, 4C), and follow it to a leftwards exit at the top. Tree belay.

3. 60ft. As for the final pitch of *Wall End Climb*.

GRASSY GULLY

This is the large vegetated gully separating **The West Buttress** from **The East Buttress**. At the bottom of the gully is,

12. **Awaken** 70ft VS 5A *
Start just right of *Finale Groove* and follow the narrow slab rightwards to gain a short steep flake. Pull up and make a difficult leftwards 'rockover' to gain the slab above. Follow the right edge of this to finish at the large tree. High in the technical grade.

Three more routes have been recorded further up **Grassy Gully**. These are **Waltz Groove**, Very Difficult, **Subterranean**, Difficult, and **Stewball**, Severe. Unfortunately these routes are now extremely dirty and vegetated and cannot be recommended. The opposite wall of the gully is slabby in appearance but is also heavily vegetated and dirty. Several climbs have been recorded but descriptions of these routes are not included here.

PONTESBURY NEEDLE

This lies directly in front of the col. The routes are described in an anti-clockwise direction, i.e. from RIGHT to LEFT;

13. **Right-Hand Wall** 30ft Moderate
A slight route. Start in the middle of the right-hand wall and follow the large holds rightwards.

14. **Direct Route** 60ft Severe 4A *
Climb the rib formed at the junction of the right-hand wall and the front face until imposing bulges force a rightwards traverse to the foot of a small groove. Follow the groove to the top. A more difficult alternative finish is to climb the smooth slab to the left of the final groove at VS 4C.



Pete Stacey on Oak Tree Wall Direct, route 5, page 3

15. **The Superdirect** 50ft E1 5A *
For many years this was the 'last great problem' at Pontesford. Start as for *Direct Route* but climb directly up through the bulges above on small sloping holds. Awkward and committing climbing which, due to very poor protection, is a bold lead.
16. **Possum** 50ft E2 5B *
A serious lead. Start just to the right of *Hawthorn Crack*. Climb directly over two overlaps and pull over the third using small finger holds. Finish leftwards through a small 'V' notch.
17. **Hawthorn Crack** 50ft Severe 4A *
To the left there is a wide, broken groove. Follow the groove to the base of an undercut crack which is climbed with some difficulty to the top.
18. **Indirect Route** 60ft Moderate
Pick the easiest line up broken rock to gain the base of *Hawthorn Crack*. Traverse leftwards over blocks and follow large holds to the top. Alternatively, the obvious narrow crack on the right is both a better and harder finish than the original.

Pontesbury Needle has also been girdled, **Needle Girdle**, 120ft, Difficult. This provides an amusing route which starts and finishes on the summit block, the rest is left for you to discover and enjoy!

THE EAST BUTTRESS

The rambling buttress lying to the right of **Grassy Gully**. The top of the buttress is crowned by a large prominent block, *The Nose*, whilst the base is surrounded in trees and protected by the rather generously named *Fifty Foot Wall*. The approach path passes directly underneath *Fifty Foot Wall* and provides initial pitches for three of the routes on the buttress. The climbing here is deceptively steep and awkward; there is also some low level bouldering for the enthusiast.

Believe it or not, the *Fifty Foot Wall* has been girdled in two pitches from left to right, **Girdle Traverse of Fifty Foot Wall**, 120ft HVS.

From LEFT to RIGHT are;

19. **Varsity Buttress** 200ft VS *
A popular route with some interesting climbing and delightful positions on the final pitch. Start at a small clearing at the left-hand side of Fifty Foot Wall.
1. 60ft. 4B. From the left-hand end of the wall, climb on good but polished holds moving first rightwards and then back left to an arête. Follow this to a belay on a small tree.
 2. 70ft. A scrappy pitch. Follow the arête above to a ledge beneath The Nose. Move left to belay in a small gully.
 3. 70ft. 4B. Gain the obvious scarred scoop in the left wall of The Nose, either directly or from the left, and move awkwardly right onto the arête. Finish up this in a fine position. A harder variation climbs the short steep groove just to the right, pulling over the bulge to join the original finish on the arête, VS 4C.
20. **Epiglottis** 180ft VS *
A steep and direct line up the centre of the buttress. Start in the middle of Fifty Foot Wall beneath short twin cracks.
1. 40ft. 5A. Forceful climbing up the steep wall via the cracks gains a belay.
 2. 60ft. Continue more easily up the short walls above to reach a belay on the ledge beneath the overhanging section of The Nose.
 3. 80ft. 4C. *The Nose Direct*. The thin overhanging crack provides strenuous climbing onto the slab above. Follow this to a ledge and then easier climbing up the clean rib leads to the top.
21. **East Climb** 195ft Severe
Some poor initial climbing leads to a very pleasant finish in a good position. Start at the right-hand side of Fifty Foot Wall beneath a tree.
1. 35ft. Climb the broken wall via a groove to a sloping ledge. Move right along this until a slab can be climbed to a tree belay.
 2. 60ft. Follow the short walls above to reach The Nose and belay on a tree which overlooks the vegetated gully.
 3. 110ft. Make an exposed and delicate leftwards rising traverse across the slab to gain the rib. Finish up this.

The following two routes take direct lines on The Nose. Approach can be made via the initial pitches of *Varsity Buttress* or *Epiglottis*. Alternatively, approach by scrambling up **Grassy Gully** before traversing rightwards to the base of The Nose.

22. **Varsity Left-Hand** 25ft E2 5B *
A reachy pitch up the short blank wall to the left of *Varsity Buttress*. Unprotected and slightly harder since a small hold has broken off.
23. **Trachea** 80ft E1 5A *
Start left of The Nose Direct. The obvious overhanging arête leads steeply, with huge reaches between good jugs, onto the slab above. Follow the left edge of this to finish. The difficult initial section of this route is unprotected.

To the right of Fifty Foot Wall and at a higher level lies the rather revolting **East Gully**. To the right of this, a number of short pitches have been climbed. These include **Crow's Nest Chimney**, Difficult, **Innominate Crack**, Very Difficult, **Innominate Wall**, and **Innominate Rib**, Very Difficult. These routes are now completely overgrown and descriptions are not included. **Box Climb**, Very Difficult, lies above these routes on a small wall of clean rock, but this may prove difficult to find.

24. **Girdle Traverse** 680ft Severe
A girdle traverse has been recorded but this is now extremely overgrown in several places. It is not therefore described in full and is left for the individual to re-discover.

ISOLATED ROCKS

Level with the foot of **Pontesbury Needle**, but some distance to the left, lies a broken arête which provides **Hidden Ridge**, 60ft, Moderate. To the left of the base of *West Wall* there is a further arête with a hawthorn at its base, this is **Jackdaw Ridge**, 50ft, Very Difficult.

FAR WEST ROCKS

A group of rocks above Jackdaw Ridge which extend to the left. These are of a rather shattered nature but a few problems may be found. The summit

of Earls Hill lies just above these rocks.

PONTESFORD ROCK: FIRST ASCENTS

Details of the following routes are unknown; *West Wall, West Crack, Oak Tree Wall Direct, Lower Traverse, Stoats Chimney, Right-Hand Wall, Direct Route, Hawthorn Crack, Varsity Buttress, Crows Nest Chimney, Innominate Crack, Box Climb, Girdle Traverse.*

1940's: Activity by Birmingham University Mountaineering Club. The Stoats were certainly responsible for *Varsity Buttress, Stoats Chimney* and other routes but unfortunately further details have proved to be elusive.

Finale Groove	A.J.J.Moulam and P.J.Harding in 1949, (alternate leads). Originally known as Ken's Groove.
Wall End Climb	W.Unsworth and J.Fullard, as presently described, in 1950's. The Notch Variation; traditional.
Indirect Route, Needle Girdle	W.Unsworth, who also climbed the variation finish to Indirect Route. Both 1950's.
Epiglottis	The lower two pitches are traditional. The Nose Direct was probably first climbed by C.Shaw with members of Wolverhampton M.C.
Moonlight Variation	W.Unsworth, S.Thomas and others by full moon and at about midnight, 1961
Right-Hand Route	W.Unsworth and E.Adamson in 1961
Subterranean	W.Unsworth in 1961
Stewball	S.Thomas and W.Unsworth in 1961 "Stewart made a slight mistake".
Waltz Groove	W.Unsworth and S.Thomas in 1961
East Climb	W.Unsworth and S.Thomas in 1961 Almost certainly climbed before.

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© D.Kerr. Please note that the information provided in this guide has not been checked for accuracy or for any changes since it was first published in *West Midlands Rock in 1995*. Climbers should therefore use their own skills and judgement when undertaking climbing at Pontesford Rocks. Please also note that climbing is a dangerous activity and no reliance should be placed on the accuracy (or otherwise) of the information contained within this guide.

Innominate Rib	W.Unsworth and E.Adamson in 1961
Hidden Ridge, Jackdaw Ridge	W.Unsworth, 1961 <i>The publication of W. Unsworth's guidebook in 1962</i>
The Superdirect	M.Baxter, 1962. The first lead of a 'last great problem'.
Girdle Traverse of Fifty Foot Wall	S.Wintrip and C.Shaw, 14/4/63
Eliminate G	R.Tait, 1964
Last Post	R.Tait, 1964. Other variations had previously, and subsequently, been climbed.
Innominate Wall	D.J.Haythorn. 1966. A complete mystery as this route has never received a full description or even a grade!
Sciaticus	R.Tait and D.Fryer, 23/3/67. This line contained very little new climbing and has now been incorporated into an alternative finish to Varsity Buttress.
Awaken	P.Harrison and N.Harrison, 1/3/79
Varsity Left-Hand	S.Boyden and P.Harrison, 16/7/86. This had previously been top roped by R.Tait in 1964 and tentatively named Oesophagus; "The sheer blank wall on the left of The Nose is climbed using three small incut holds to reach for a 'jug' which will take one finger. Pull on this and mantelshelf onto the narrow ledge above."
Trachea	D.Kerr, P.Stacey and S.Grove, 5/6/88. <i>Publication of Rock Climbs in the West Midlands. 1988</i>
Possum	S.Roberts (unseeded), 15/7/93. After top rope practice.

PONTESFORD ROCKS: GRADED LIST

Possum	E2 5B	Hawthorn Crack	Severe 4A
Varsity Left-Hand	E2 5B	Last Post	Very Difficult
The Superdirect	E1 5A	Oak Tree Wall Direct	Very Difficult
Trachea	E1 5A	Right-Hand Route	Very Difficult
Awaken	VS 5A	Wall End Climb	Very Difficult
Epiglottis	VS 5A 4C	Moonlight Variation	Difficult
Varsity Buttress	VS 4B, 4B	West Wall	Moderate
Finale Groove	VS 4A, 4B	Stoats Chimney	Moderate
Eliminate G	Hard Severe 4A		
Direct Route	Severe 4A		