



**GO: Lake District**  
**DO: Napes Needle**

Celebrating on top of Napes Needle,  
with Wasdale stretching into the distance.

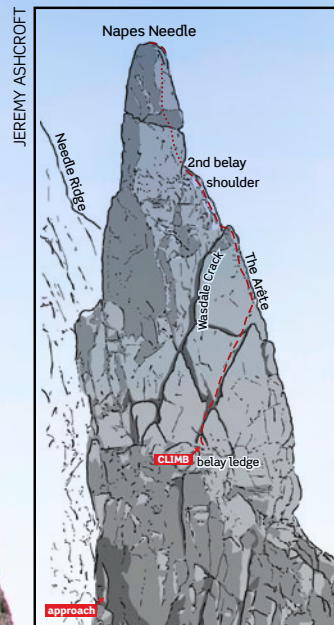
# GREAT GABLE THE HARD WAY

An inaccessible valley, an isolated hostel,  
a top-secret ridgeline and an icon of British  
rock-climbing. **Trail** goes extreme in the Lakes...

WORDS **OLIVER REED** PHOTOGRAPHS **BEN WINSTON**



# GREAT GABLE



Inching up The Arête, with the Scafell range as a backdrop. The word 'exposed' was created for moments like this.

'FRESH AIR SURROUNDS THE NEEDLE FROM EVERY ANGLE, WITH **SHEER 60-70FT DROPS** FALLING AWAY ON ALL FOUR SIDES. BASICALLY, IT'S **ABSOLUTELY TERRIFYING.**'

**T**he problem with the Lake District, people tell me, is that it's too easy. Apparently the fells are too small, the slopes are too crowded, the routes are too short and the paths are too obvious. They say the terrain isn't technical enough, the peaks aren't jagged enough and if you crave mountainous adventure in the UK, you need to head to Scotland. My response is always the same: they're looking in the wrong places.

If you open a guidebook and follow the first route, the chances are you'll land on a simple path. It's only when you delve deeper and start peeling back the layers of each peak that its hidden treasures reveal themselves. As a self-confessed Lake District addict I've trodden the majority of the National Park's 'easy' routes, but instead of roaming further afield in search of more testing challenges, this month I launched a personal crusade to prove there's more to it than overpriced gift shops and excellent pub grub.

The key to the project was location, so Team **Trail** headed to the secluded Ennerdale valley – quarantined deep in Lakeland's wild west – and set our sights on a true Cumbrian icon: Great Gable. Scafell Pike might be the highest, Blencathra the grandest and Helvellyn the ridgiest, but there's something about Gable. Rarely has anything been more deserving of its name than this ancient pile of lava and volcanic ash, which practically smoulders at the head of the Wasdale valley. From most vantage points it takes the appearance of a mighty dome, with its bulging crown of rock powering skywards from the tranquillity of its grassy approach slopes. Its boulder-strewn summit offers the ultimate mountain panorama and although it can be reached by pleasant plods from every surrounding valley, the mountain has so much more to offer.

The real appeal of Gable can only be grasped from its southern perspective. From here the mountain crackles with intrigue and mystery, a devilish pyramid of red scree and shattered crags. An attack from this angle brings you face to face with a fractured blockade of rock – known as The Great Napes – that guards the route to the summit and showcases the peak's most infamous features: the likes of Sphinx Rock, Eagle's Nest Gully, Great Hell Gate and, of course, Napes Needle.

Every fellwalker knows the legend of Napes Needle – the teetering 20m spike of rock widely reported as the birthplace of British rock-climbing. Many of us have walked past it, some of us have even climbed it, and pretty much all of us are in awe of it. Ever since its fabled first ascent by WP Haskett Smith in 1886 – who swaggered up sporting a tweed



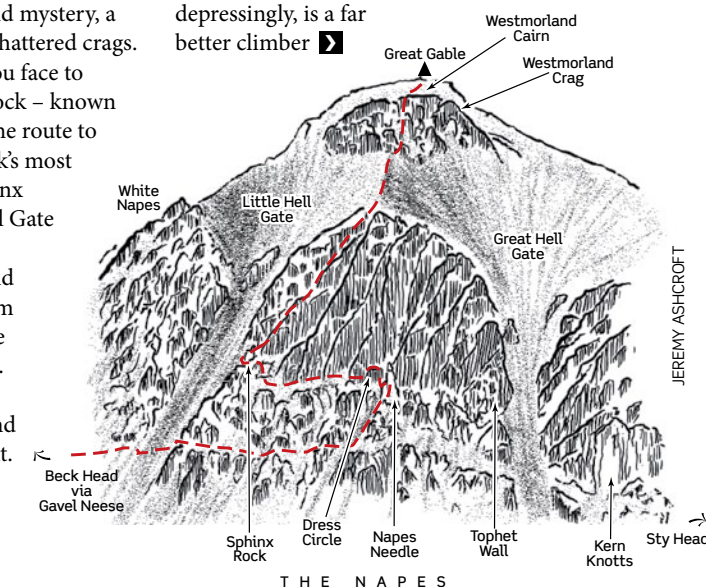
## COULD I CLIMB THE NEEDLE?

**Trail** doesn't usually do rock-climbing – but the iconic Napes Needle is the one to do if you're only going to do one! Anyone with good fitness, a head for heights and confidence could pull it off. However, if you aren't already an experienced rock-climber, Napes Needle should never be attempted without a qualified instructor.

**Trail** received expert instruction from MIC-qualified Paddy Cave (above) who runs Mountain Circles, a Lake District-based company that offers courses in all aspects of mountaineering. To find a course for you, visit [www.mountaincircles.com](http://www.mountaincircles.com)

suit and hobnail boots before performing an outrageous headstand on the top – people have been queuing up to have a crack at it. Many of the world's top mountaineers have scaled its polished walls, but this isn't just the realm of superman climbers. Aspirational amateurs have also inched their way to its apex, including, bizarrely, AA Milne of *Winnie-the-Pooh* fame, who had this to say in his autobiography: "It was delightful to sit on top, dangle our legs and think 'We've done it'. About once every ten years it comes back to me that, in addition to all the things I can't do and haven't done, I have climbed the Napes Needle."

With those inspirational words ringing around my head the night before our own big adventure, I settled my nerves with a few bottles of Cumbrian Ale in Ennerdale's Black Sail Hut and braced myself for the challenge ahead. I've always been good with heights but couldn't know less about rock-climbing, so I surrounded myself with a posse of people who do. First I recruited adventure photographer Ben, who makes a living hanging from exposed ledges by his fingertips; then my sister Sophie, who, depressingly, is a far better climber **▶**





than I'll ever be; and finally local mountain instructor Paddy, one of those annoyingly cool guys who's been everywhere and done everything you dream of doing.

Despite the security of my experienced crew, my stomach was still twisting as we began the long pull up Gable's northern flank the following morning. I trudged along in anxious silence as my companions excitedly discussed the Needle using technical waffle like "hard severe" and "V diff". I certainly didn't like the sound of that, but I liked it a lot more than Paddy's next comment. "Gable has some of England's toughest climbs," he said with a glint in his eye. "Look at that route. It's called The Angel of Mercy." Oh shit, I thought.

From the wide col at Beckhead Tarn, a narrow scree path led us past the chunky boulders of the White Napes and over the shifting stones of Little Hell Gate – before the Needle loomed into view. I'd seen the villainous monolith many times in photographs, but viewing it up close and personal was still a shock. At first glance it appeared to jut from the mountainside like an unstable, gravity-defying toothpick – and the word exposed doesn't do it justice. Fresh air surrounds the Needle from every angle, with sheer 60-70ft drops falling away on all four sides. Basically, it's absolutely terrifying.

As we switched from walking boots to rock shoes, we had time to assess the challenge ahead. To my untrained eye, our line to the top – known as The Arête Route – was broken into three parts. It started with a near-vertical wall of smooth rock, which we would ascend by jamming our fingers and toes into a thin crack and edging upwards. From here



## GABLE BASE CAMP

**Trail** stayed at the YHA's legendary Black Sail Hut. This walker-friendly hostel can only be reached on foot and provides great access to peaks such as Great Gable, Pillar and Haystacks. Black Sail offers cooked breakfasts, packed lunches and fantastic home-cooked evening meals – plus a surprisingly well-stocked bar! For full details and booking info, visit [www.yha.org.uk/hostel/black-sail](http://www.yha.org.uk/hostel/black-sail)



Getting to grips with Sphinx Ridge: a forgotten Lakes classic.

we would swing onto a horrifically narrow shoulder, then scramble towards a ledge just below the summit block. The final section was what really bothered me, though, because it involved committing to some serious *Cliffhanger* stuff before hoisting ourselves onto a so-called 'summit' the size of a beach towel.

I watched Paddy effortlessly scamper up the wall and disappear out of sight while he fixed ropes along the route, then before I knew it I was clipped in and moving upwards. To my surprise, two things hit me immediately. One: the grips were good. Two: I felt miles better as soon as I was off the ground and on the move. In fact, with a rope around my waist and calm weather steadying my hands, I moved through the first two sections with something approaching confidence.

From here, probably through a mixture of adrenaline and a mild state of delusion at being so incomprehensibly out of my comfort zone, the rest flashed by in a blur. I vaguely remember swinging out over a yawning precipice that fell away some vertical 60ft below me; then I can picture myself madly clambering back around the summit block before crawling amateurishly onto the top. The next thing I knew my sister was bounding up behind me with enviable ease and we were posing on the summit – with extremely shaky legs – for photographs. And that was it: Napes Needle was nailed. Minutes later we'd been

lowered back down and were high fiving each other on regular-shaped ground.

But this was no time to overdo the celebrations, because we were still 200m below Gable's true summit. So after a brief lunch stop, we retraced our steps towards the sculptured outline of Sphinx Rock. Despite being one of Lakeland's most photographed features, the Sphinx still guards a few secrets of its own: directly above it lies a classic, yet largely ignored, scramble.

The route onto Sphinx Ridge isn't immediately obvious, but after shuffling up a loose scree gully we soon arrived in a spectacular playground of rock. The route is classed as Grade 2 and the terrain is quite daunting in places, but the trickier sections were

easily avoidable and our reward was one of Lakeland's longest and most thrilling scrambles. Technically it was far simpler than the Needle, but in many ways it was more exciting. Released from the shackles of ropes and rigid ascent routes, we were free to explore the exposed pinnacles and narrow gullies that weaved upwards and deposited us on the smooth, grassy neck that separates the Sphinx Ridge from Westmorland Crag.

From here we had the option of taking the easy way out and following the placid path that bimbles around Gable's south-west shoulder to the summit, but this wasn't a day for easy options. Instead we powered straight up the front of the crag, each of us picking our own route through its splintered ribs, before finally spilling out between dark fangs of rock onto the summit plateau.

We'd finally made it. Despite only travelling around 3km from our base at Black Sail to the top of the mountain, we'd completed a hard-hitting challenge that revealed skills I didn't even know I had; comprehensively proved the Lake District is very much alive with true mountain adventure; and firmly installed Great Gable as my all-time favourite mountain.

Has it turned me into an aspiring climber? No chance; but I'll never take the easy way up a mountain again. **T**



**WATCH IT!** Visit [www.livefortheoutdoors.com/needle](http://www.livefortheoutdoors.com/needle) to watch Leo Houlding give a step-by-step guide to climbing Napes Needle.

Great Gable's famous Sphinx Rock, which should probably have been named 'Big Creepy Man's Face Rock'.

## 'THE MOUNTAIN CRACKLES WITH INTRIGUE AND MYSTERY, A DEVILISH PYRAMID OF RED SCREE AND SHATTERED CRAGS.'

