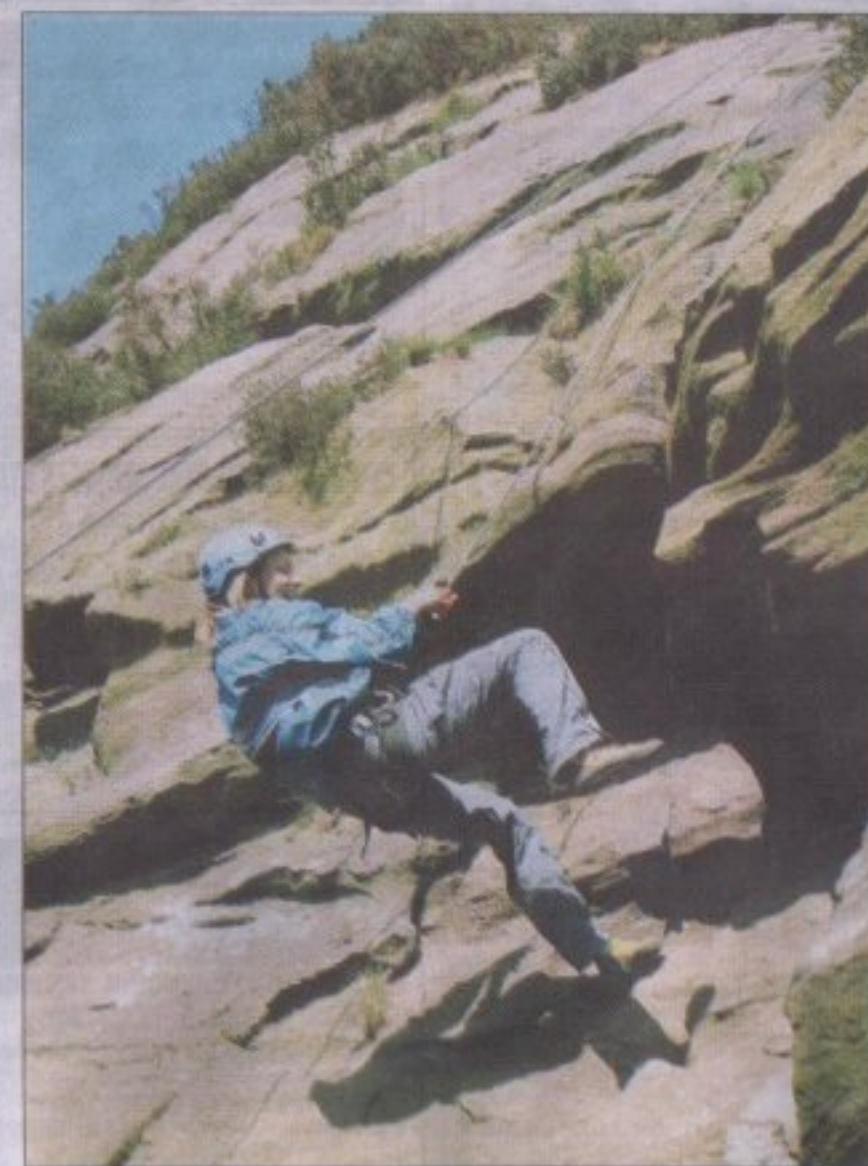


GRIPPING STUFF . . . Danielle looks for the next hand-hold on the rock face. Coming down is a lot easier (below) after the strenuous climb to the top (below right)



Pushing your fear and willpower to the edge

I'M SHAKING with eager anticipation. My heart is pounding and my knees wobbling — will this knife-edge rock feature support my weight?

My hands are throbbing with pain from clutching the gritstone, and my knuckles are beginning to bleed.

Towering above me is the Staffordshire rock-climbing Mecca, The Roaches, and my destination is the top.

Climbing involves an odd combination of brute strength and delicate balance and what better way to find out if I'm capable than throwing myself in at the deep end.

The Roaches, near Leek, is an imposing rock feature set in the picturesque Staffordshire countryside and boasts impressive views which includes Tittesworth Reservoir.

Company owner of Rock and Ice, Richard Hogan, is a self-employed rock-climbing instructor who operates from his home, in Sides Lane, Clifton, and has more than 12 years' teaching expertise.

His advice and guidance put me at ease on the rock face, with his tailor-made course that pushed me to the limits of my endurance.

Firstly Rich assesses my movement and technique on the rock and evaluates my ability to balance and cope with pressure situations before leaving me to my own devices on the rock face.

The first task is 'bouldering', its free movement on a rock without any paraphernalia of ropes and harnesses. It's just you and the gritstone.

I'm squeezed into rock boots that would barely fit a five-year-old and before I know it I'm attempting a 5A grade boulder — grade one is simple and grade six is ridiculously difficult. To my astonishment I mastered it.

Rich demonstrates the technique. I have to pinch two pebbles the size of peas embedded in the rock and use these points to somehow launch myself on the route to the top.

Don't ask me how I did it, it's amazing what you can achieve when you're put to the test.

On the course I joined Rock and Ice client Stephen Barney, who had travelled from Loughborough to gain some rock-climbing experience before his trip to the Isle of Skye, in Scotland.

He plans to attempt the infamous "Inaccessible Pinnacle", one of Britain's most challenging and exposed rock features.

Rich took us on to another five grade boulder which Stephen found simple because of his stature. He towered above me and I felt like a dwarf in comparison.

He reaches to grab the handholds, whereas I am forced to perform acrobatic tricks to propel me to the same destination.

I monkey-swing out from the rock platform and cling desperately to a crack I manage to grasp.

News Telegraph reporter Danielle Harrison and photographer Mark Dudley escaped the nine-to-five office environment and headed for the hills on a rock-climbing tuition course

Below me, a drop opens. My stomach closes.

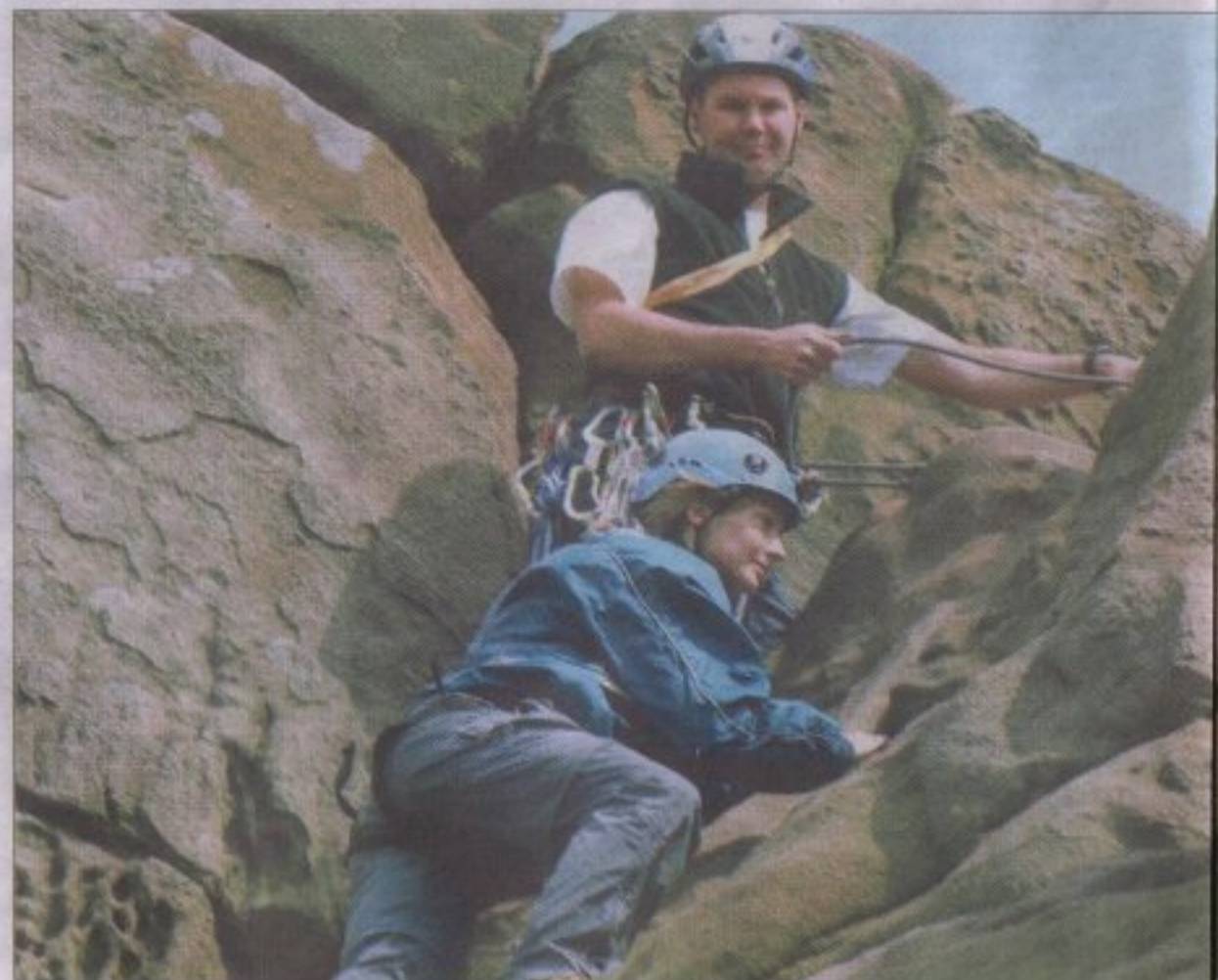
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I keep the momentum going, step-by-step the trembling subsides and calm returns as I near the top. Phew.

After bouldering we bound up towards the upper tier of the Roaches, unsure about what else is in store.

We run through some basic commands, and I attach the belay my harness. Rich spiders up the section of rock known as the 'right route'. With breathtaking ease he attaches an assortment of protect gadgets into cracks and ledges as goes along.

I watch with saucer-eyes secrete thinking: how on earth will I make up there?



The sun is beating down but the wind is howling and banding me around from side to side on the ground, never mind being suspended hundreds of feet in the air, teetering on a ledge.

Rich disappears behind a rock. For a few minutes he busies himself with attaching slings and ropes while I quietly hyperventilate . . . and then comes the dreaded call: "Climb when ready".

I shout my tremulous response: "Climbing."

Deep breath. Here goes — I place a tentative foot at the bottom of the rock and in one heave I'm off the ground and away from security.

To my surprise I don't slip, the grooves and ledges, cracks and crevices are plentiful.

I shimmy along the knife-edge ledge thinking to myself: I can't believe I'm doing this.

Stephen knows I'm struggling and shouts up: "You're doing great" as I ferret around panicking for a decent handhold to get me out of trouble.

The moment is tense. I know a steady handhold is within stretching distance, but it's taking that leap of faith because any indecision can unbalance even the most experienced of climbers.

For a split second I wobble and it's that horrible moment between friction and falling.

I'm there . . . Easy.

I pull myself straight for a split second, breathe, and find another smooth handhold.

Now I go for broke and suddenly Rich's dangling foot is in sight, one more move, and I've cracked it.

Stephen and I sit proudly on the rock face, tied in securely to the sling, that is, before Rich's revelation: "Now we're going to tackle this bit" and he points to an exposed final climb to the very top.

"It's a great photo opportunity", he explains. I turn and look at Mark, our photographer, and he replies with a classic good luck/mice-knowing you wave as I strap on my helmet tightly.

My leg is shaking when Rich shouts: "It's ok if you do fall, you will take a bit of a swing that's all" and in that knowledge I take a big gulp and begin.

I climb to the top and on the way back down Rich has an epiphany. He decides it will be boring to simply walk down — why not abseil off a sheer rock face on a "Very Severe" graded route called "Aqua" instead.

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'There is nothing worse than to feel your whole body freeze'

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At the bottom Rich says: "Now let's see if you can climb this route, I think you're capable."

I begin to shake with exertion and adrenaline. There is an overhanging rock feature which I have no choice but to tackle head on. It's an unbalancing thought and the drop to ground is distracting me.

Despite the rope and well-placed protection, all my instincts are telling me to be afraid.

I feel like the energy has been zapped from my arms, I feel weak clinging to the rock, like my life depends on it.

Psychologically I have given up and once that happens it's time to go home.

I jam my fingers into the crack, my knuckles bleeding and fingers throbbing from the rough textured gritstone.

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More information is available by calling Richard Hogan on 01335 344982 or visit the website www.rockandice.net



GOING DOWN . . . Look Mum, no hands. Don't try this at home — Danielle got a reprimand for letting go of the line. Below: Stephen Barney and Danielle receive some extra advice from Richard Hogan



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