

Climbing for All

David Guiterman discovers something for everyone at the Dart Rock Centre.

I have thought for many years about all the outdoor activities that I could engage in without the use of the fingers on my right hand. I have enjoyed many of them personally; running, rowing, cycling and even the odd bit of horse riding. Never did I think the challenge of rock climbing would be a remote possibility. A visit to the Dart Rock Climbing Centre opened my eyes for the first time to the possibilities. Rock climbing on Dartmoor, I discovered, combines excitement, challenge, satisfaction and the opportunity to get to grips with



some of the best rocks in the South West.

The Dart Rock Centre has been developed by expert climbers to help everyone realise their rock climbing

potential. There are climbing walls for every ability. From the low bouldering wall you can just drop off with no fear of injury to an impossible-looking overhang and everything in between. There is even a section devoted to developing caving skills.

My instructor for the morning was Wendy Sampson who had recently guided me through the tortuous passages of Pridhamsleigh Cave. See issue 9 of *Active Dartmoor*.

As Wendy explained, everyone is treated as an individual. Lessons are tailored to suit all abilities. The Centre has tutored many who have limbs missing, including some with no legs. "You would be astounded what people can do," Wendy said. "Modern artificial legs are amazing these days." There are even artificial legs being developed specially for mountaineers. They will provide all the flexibility, articulation and small footprint required for rock climbing. Prosthetics for rock climbers can sometimes be provided by the National Health Service.

You don't need to take any equipment as everything is provided. I was asked what I thought a pair of climbing shoes would look like. Were the soles smooth or studded? I learned

that smooth soles gain maximum grip and that fitting is all important. They must fit precisely to get the greatest benefit from what seemed to me at first to be inadequate footholds.

Whatever their ability, Wendy's job is to encourage beginners to get to the top. She explained that many beginners are terrified of heights. "They will climb halfway up and then start freaking out." She reassures them. "If you can go part way up then you're perfectly capable of getting right to the top."

It's all about building confidence no matter what your ability. Once a week Wendy tutors schoolchildren with special needs. She told me of a girl who has been coming to the Centre for two years. It took six months of practice before she finally made it to the top. It was an emotional experience for both Wendy and the girl. She now shins up the indoor climbs regularly.

The time had finally come for me to try a bit of serious indoor rock climbing. Wendy explained that feet and legs do all the work; hands and arms are used to stop you falling off backwards. The first instruction was how to use footholds. Beginners sometimes feel they have to use their whole feet but this entails turning the foot sideways making it difficult to move and climb. Although, at first, it seemed to be somewhat precarious, the trick is to use the toes. Once I was firmly strapped into a harness, attached to a rope running over the top of the climbing wall, I was ready to go. At the other end of the rope was Ben who had threaded the rope through a karabiner friction device. As I climbed he took up the slack. It was reassuring to be told that were I to fall I wouldn't drop far. Yes, I did reach the top. Climbing without right hand fingers didn't seem to be too much of a problem.

Back at the bottom, Wendy explained the three-point principle; two feet and a hand or two hands and a foot should always be in contact with the rock. Would it be possible to climb using only one arm? Applying the three-point principle was out of the question. I just had to try it. Off I set. Changing a foothold wasn't too bad but taking a fresh handgrip ... whoops nearly fell backwards. It just seemed impossible to make progress.

It wasn't until I was advised to try climbing in a corner that I began to gain height. That was better; I was able to brace my body with my feet planted on two walls at right angles to each other.

Safely back down again, I asked how it was possible to climb a single wall face with one arm.

"It's all a matter of balance," Wendy said. "Perfect this technique and it's not too difficult." Using body balance to take the strain off arms and legs is just as valid for able-bodied climbers as it is for me.

It was now time to put my newly-acquired skills into practice on real Dartmoor rock. So it was off to Leigh Tor just off the Ashburton - Two Bridges Road. We arrived in a snowstorm. Conditions seemed impossible for climbing. However after five minutes the sky cleared and the sun came out. The weather was now just right. Ben had already attached the safety rope to the top of the Tor. Everything was ready for me to have a go.

Leigh Tor is not like most tors on Dartmoor. Although made of granite, its joints are angular rather than rounded. There are numerous hand and foot holds to choose from. Granite, being coarsely crystalline, provides a reassuringly secure grip in almost all weathers. Each rock type has its own characteristic set of holds. Those who climb a lot on one rock type come to understand where to look for the holds. Leigh Tor is ideal for beginners having both an easy and a more challenging face.

Under the expert guidance of Wendy and the safety provided by Ben at the other end of the rope, climbing this rock face one-handed was surprisingly simple. It seemed that I had hardly left base before I was up at the top enjoying that wonderful sense of achievement that makes rock climbing so satisfying.

The good news is, given the right instruction, rock climbing can be for almost everyone. So go along to the Dart Rock Climbing Centre and give it a go. If you're not sure whether rock climbing is for you, take the opportunity see others practising on the climbing walls. At the same time chill out in their lounge while enjoying delicious cake and sipping coffee. ■



FURTHER INFORMATION

Robbie Warke **Dart Rock Climbing Centre**

Dart Mills Old Totnes Road Buckfastleigh TQ11 0NF Tel: 01364 644499
www.dartrock.co.uk

Jim Bonney **Adventure Rehab**

Provides lead amputee recovery coaching
Newton Abbott Telephone: 01626 836580
www.adventurerehab.co.uk

The following two private providers will design and make bespoke rock climbing prosthetics:-

Pace Rehabilitation Ltd

Chesham, Buckinghamshire HP5 2QA Telephone: 0845 4507357 www.pacerehab.com

Proactive Prosthetics

Elstead Surrey GU8 6LB Telephone: 01252 702 500 www.proactiveprosthetics.co.uk