

Classic Climbs



Central Gully IV 5 (4) 300m

Area: Carneddau

Crag: Ysgolion Duon/Black Ladders

Style: Ice/snow/mixed

Rock type: Dolerite

Approach: 100 minutes

Altitude: 700m

OS grid ref: 670 630

First Ascent: unknown

The Black Ladders is the biggest, baddest and best of the Welsh winter cliffs. It is currently undergoing an intense phase of development with numerous impressive new lines appearing in the last few seasons. The old 1988 Welsh Winter Climbs guide only lists around twenty routes, yet now there are over sixty documented lines, and given the obvious potential, the prospect of many more over the coming years. Famed for its turfy mixed climbing, it also has several classic gully lines and striking ice features. On a first visit to the crag it is probably best to pick off one of the main gully lines, if only to solve the problem of locating the start of any of the mixed buttress routes. The lower part of the cliff is not well defined and in poor visibility you are likely to hit a dead end if you don't already know where you are going.

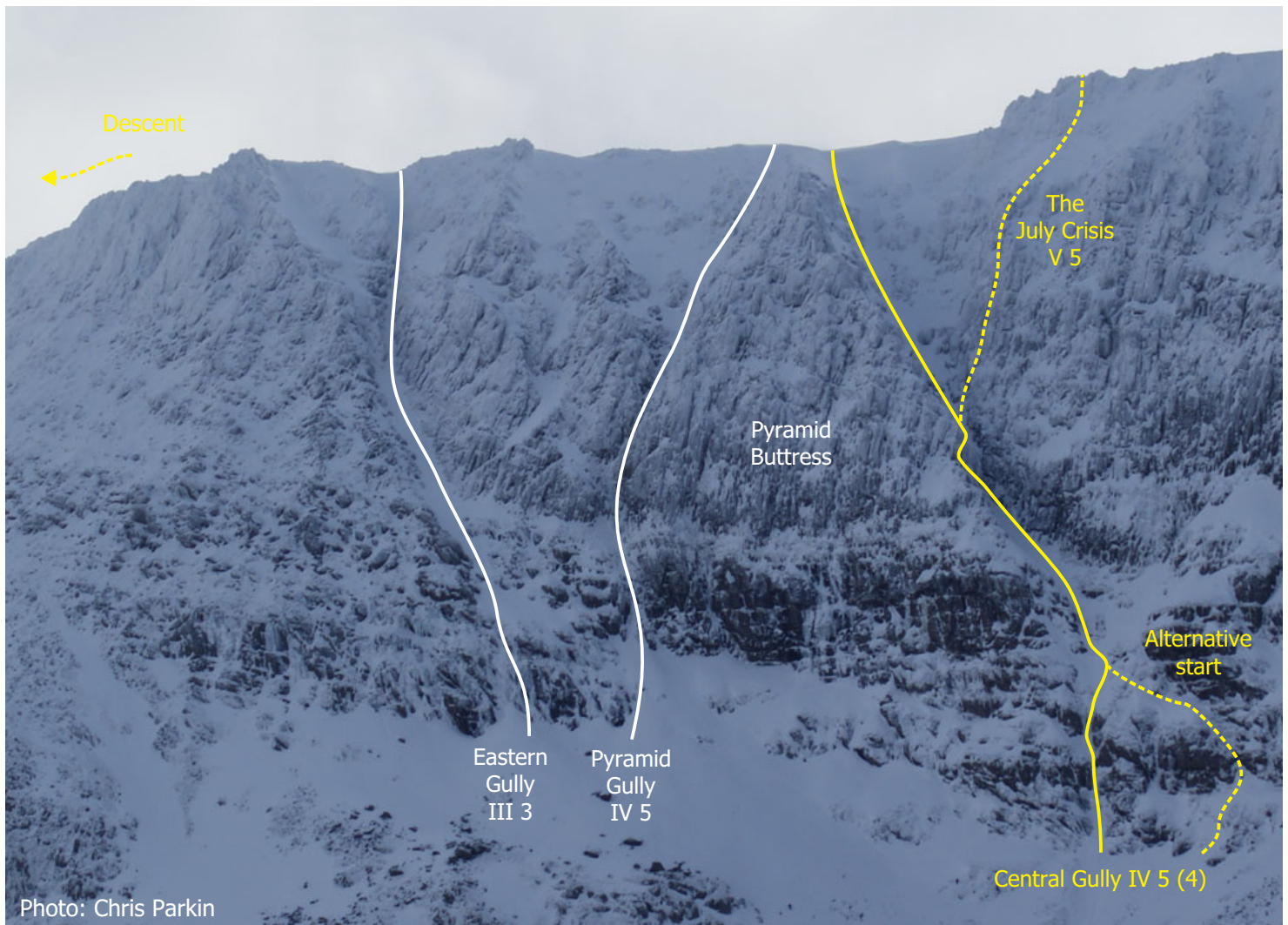
Central Gully is easy enough to spot; its lower reaches being guarded by an eye catching icefall. This can be quite feisty and is nearly always a good solid tech 4. Above a second, easier icefall takes you up right to a belay. This can be done in one 55m run out or split if that suits more. If it looks too thin then a handy alternative exists about 30m to the right up the second obvious line of weakness; a snowy ramp leads to a short rock squeeze. Wriggle up the squeeze and then head back over turfy/snowy ground to the basin in the gully proper.

A stomp up easy angled snow leads, past a series of enticing lines leading off right from the gully bed (Scimitar Ridge V 5, for example, takes the obvious icefall 20m below the cave) to an impasse; the infamous cave pitch. In anything but fully banked out state this gives a fierce challenge way beyond what might be expected at grade IV. Local activist Lee Roberts described it as the hardest piece of climbing he had done on the Ladders!

If overhanging turf is not your thing then a leftward escape can be made via an awkward step to a ramp system leading out left to the edge of the Pyramid Buttress. There are a number of groove lines here; the easiest lies out past the arete and is the traditional route, followed by a traverse back into the gully.

The best climbing, albeit at a harder tech 5 standard, will be found in the central of the three grooves above the first section of the traverse ramp. Those climbers heading for an ascent of The July Crisis which breaks out of the upper gully should definitely go for this if the cave pitch is not in reasonable nick.

Once back in the gully the main difficulties have passed and you are free to enjoy an atmospheric stomp to the summit which sits two or three rope lengths above.



Top Tip: If you do fancy some more spice than The July Crisis (the obvious groove line in the right wall 20m above the cave pitch) is worth considering; it is no pushover at the V 5 book grade, but it does give a superb pair of absorbing and continuously interesting pitches with enough gear to calm the nerves.

Rack: 5 ice screws, pegs, warthog, bulldog, wires, hexes, cams, 2 x 120cm slings, 2 x 60cm slings, 10 quickdraws, a few spare krabs, 2 x 60m ropes

Approach: From the kinked Mynydd Llandegai crossroads at the Capel Curig end of Bethesda turn up the Braichmelyn road towards Gerlan. Follow the road over the river and up a steep hill to a junction; turn right onto the Gerlan road. Parking spaces here are extremely limited and a series of new parking restrictions are due to be imposed soon, so please park further down in Bethesda and walk back up. It will only add 10 minutes to the walk.

(NB. This is a serious issue; there have been problems with climber's cars blocking entrances, gates and even the road itself. Also, do remember that in event of an accident the Mountain Rescue team will need unimpeded access .)

Continue along the road by foot crossing Afon Caseg; then taking a right fork to cross a bridge over Afon Llafar. Turn up left immediately on the track by a house. After 30m cross the stile on the right and follow the path up through the field, to another stile at the top left hand corner. Hop over this, turn right and follow the path that trends rightwards past some old ruined buildings that have a couple of big trees growing out of them. Cross a small stone bridge, turn immediately right onto another path, which soon leads to a drystone wall and stile. Continue along the now boggy path (some footpath marker posts) until you reach a fence line and the final stile. After a



Si Pantan heading up to the cave pitch, with the escape traverse line and three grooves visible to the left.
Photo: Streaky Desroy



Tim Badcock moving up easy ground above the cave pitch on an atmospheric day
Photo: Si Pantan

further marshy area, a better-defined track running parallel to Afon Llafar rises gently into Cwm Pen Llafar. Walk leftwards around the left side of the ominous-looking Llech Ddu and contour round into the bowl below the cliff. There is a convenient gearing up spot just below the steeper snow slopes leading up to the base of the routes. There are also alternative approach starts from Ogwen which avoid the parking issues in Gerlan and allow a faster descent at the end of the day.

1. Walk up into Cwm Lloer then head NE from Ffynnon Lloer to reach the top of the cliff. 2. Walk up to the Ffynnon Llugwy reservoir and then head NW up the spur of Craig Llugwy; this also takes you to the top of the cliff. This takes approximately 100 minutes, then a further 30 minutes to descend and traverse in.

Descent: It is possible to drop back down snow slopes approximately 400m left (facing in) of the cliff. Head down WNW from a narrow section of the Carneddau ridge, just north of where the Craig Llugwy spur joins it from the south west.

Conditions: Optimum conditions come after a hard freeze, followed by a prolonged freeze thaw cycle. This gives frozen turf, neve and abundant ice features a winter climbing heaven!

Guidebooks, further reading and maps

North Wales Winter Climbing (Simon Pantan, Mark Richards, Ground Up, 2011), Welsh Winter Climbs (Malcom Campbell, Andy Newton, Cicerone 1988), Cold Climbs (Ken Wilson, Dave Alcock, John Barry, Diadem, 1983), Explorer OL17 (1:25000 OS map).