

Taking it to the Edge

Alex Langfield takes expert advice before tackling Helvellyn's famous ridge in winter

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Above: panorama of Catstycam, Red Tarn, Striding Edge and Helvellyn, taken from Swirral Edge

In February 2016, I signed up for a winter skills course with the Lake District Weatherline's fell top assessor. The mountain on which we were to learn our skills was the famous Helvellyn.

It was the first time I had handled an ice axe, the first time that I had donned a pair of crampons and valuable skills were learnt. However, on that day, Helvellyn repelled us with ferocious volleys of spindrift and hail blown in on thunderous winds. Despite wearing four layers, I discovered what cold was that day: it was a bone-deep, juddering cold that froze the water in my hydration pack and left two of my fingers numb for weeks to come. Needless to say, we did not make the summit, never mind tread on Helvellyn's famous edges. It was a reminder of the awesome power of nature. However, I promised myself that I would return to Helvellyn's stark winter arena another time.

FAST-FORWARD ONE year. It's 4.30am and my alarm is going off. The temptation to rest my head back on the pillow and sleep as if it were a normal Sunday morning is almost overwhelming and it takes a good fifteen minutes to properly commit to rising from the bed. I'm not a morning person, so I don't get up this early lightly. Today, however, I have an objective in mind: Striding Edge, in full winter conditions, all to myself and an un-spoilt Helvellyn summit. The early bird catches the worm, so they say.

But the early worm also gets eaten by the

bird. Striding Edge is serious business. Although deservedly popular, people fall from the ridge and there are fatalities every year. I had traversed the ridge three times before. On the first traverse, one of our trio became crag-fast, unused to such exposure. It took a fair amount of cajoling to get along the ridge.

On the third traverse, I took a stag party to the arête but we were under-resourced and under-prepared. It was Easter, snow was still lying and conditions were damp and windy. We turned back. It was the correct decision. So it's fair to say that Striding Edge is not for everyone.

THE SKY IS A dull steel grey as I pull into Patterdale. Almost as soon as I exit the car, cold Lakeland drizzle sweeps horizontally across the village. I rummage through my pack and pull on my waterproof and sigh. Was this just a taste of the inclemency that I knew Helvellyn could throw at me? It's still early and I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy, so I set off, sure that the weather will improve.

The climb up the flank of Birkhouse Moor to the Hole-in-the-Wall has commenced and it's further than I remember. Conditions are fickle: driving rain one moment, blue skies the next. The waterproof is in and out like a cuckoo clock.

Despite these distractions, this section of the walk is all about St Sunday Crag. With every upward step, the mountain opposite seems to grow in stature and grandeur, as drifting clouds float in

front of its fearsome crags. Gaining the ridge, passing over the famous The Hole in the Wall is like going through a portal to a different world: a world of ice and rock. Imposing, brilliantly white and towering, Catstycam takes my breath away across Red Tarn Beck. The snow-clad path ahead leads up into the clouds and I feel a certain amount of apprehension at the thought of what awaits me there. I am going to learn something about myself today. I will either embrace the challenge ahead or shrink from it. I consider whether or not it is a good thing that I cannot see the ridge.

It's getting colder now and there is serious snow underfoot. I strap on my crampons, pull on my hat and gloves and grasp my ice axe. Now I am ready and I take my first steps on to the ridge. My first steps as a solo winter mountaineer.

As I haul myself up on to the arête, it's hard to believe I am in England, only an hour's drive from where I grew up in Carlisle. It feels positively Alpine, an outlook that is aided by virtue of the equipment I am using. I concentrate on making sure I am firmly planting my crampons, using my ice axe as leverage to get over any awkward steps. The first part of the ridge is not particularly narrow, but it is rocky, undulating and care has to be taken in route picking.

Visibility isn't great. The arête ahead is an ethereal walkway into the clouds and as yet there is no sight of Helvellyn. I can, however, occasionally make out Red Tarn to the right and the drops on



Above: author Alex among the Lakeland fells, each in winter raiment

either side are ever present in my mind. But as I progress I realise that I am enjoying the frisson. I am within my comfort zone.

Now I'm getting to the meat of the ridge: the narrowing walkway that leads to the final rock tower. On a windy day, this section can be a tad ropery but today all is calm and I revel in the traverse. Things seem to be clearing slightly as, ahead, the wispy clouds part to reveal a wall of ice and rock. It's the east face of Helvellyn and it looks mightily impressive. I know that a steep climb to the summit is yet to come.

There is a tricky rock gully to descend towards the end of Striding Edge. I remember this as being difficult and awkward in summer, never mind in full winter conditions. Breaking the three points of contact rule at one point, I manage to lower myself to the bottom. Striding Edge done: now for the

climb up the east face. It is a steep pull and I have to employ my crampons fully and plant my axe like a trekking pole to progress.

I pass a cairn and realise I am on the summit plateau. I continue to the true summit cairn and plant my ice axe in the snow. It's totally unspoilt snow and I take a certain degree of satisfaction in knowing that I am first to the summit that day.



Above: potentially treacherous conditions on Striding Edge, on the day of Alex's adventure

There is no view to be had, the cloud is lying too low for that, but nevertheless the summit is a dramatic place. The cornices hanging off the east face are impressive and for the second time in the day, the whole thing feels more Alpine than Cumbrian.

The summit plateau of Helvellyn is notoriously broad and flat, a profound contrast to the narrow,

spiky edges that splay off it to the east. In 1926, John Leeming and Burt Hinkler landed a plane on the plateau, a unique achievement among Britain's mountains. Now my attention is focused on the second ridge of the day: Swirral Edge. Not as long or narrow as Striding Edge, Swirral Edge still commands respect and demands caution. Nevertheless, it is a gorgeous route in these conditions and the spectacular mountain form of Catstycam at the end of the ridge spurs me onwards.

Catstycam is a mountain of simple beauty. Soaring lines meet at a shapely summit in the classic pyramidal form. Were it more isolated from its parent mountain it would surely be considered with higher esteem among the mountains of Cumbria. Halfway along the ridge, I turn to see Helvellyn's east face scowling back. The clouds have parted and there are blue skies overhead for the first time today. On Striding Edge, tiny shadows can be seen against the deep blue of the afternoon, slowly making their way along the arête.

As chance would have it, I cross paths with the instructor from my winter skills course the previous year. He's leading a group up Swirral Edge, which is further than I got last time around. We have a brief chat and he points me out as an example to his students: "Here you are, you are doing it!" he says.

The Catstycam climb is straightforward and faster than expected. I'm delighted to be alone on one of the most dramatic summits in the entire Lake District. The view back to Helvellyn, Red Tarn and the Edges is majestic and I take a few moments to imbibe it all. To the north, White Side and Raise look enticing, while east is the southern tip of Ullswater and Place Fell. It's a grand viewpoint and a fitting end to an incredible day.

A winter ascent of Striding Edge is simply magnificent and something I cannot recommend highly enough. It is an obvious benchmark in terms of low-grade mountaineering. This was more than just a winter walk. There is no doubt that Helvellyn is among the elite of the Lake District's mountains. If you are looking for an adventure on one of the highest mountains in England, there are few better than this. 🏔️

• Among Lakeland's finest outings, Striding Edge and Swirral Edge are serious undertakings in winter conditions and have been the scene of many accidents, including fatalities. They should only be attempted by those with appropriate winter mountaineering skills. The Helvellyn massif is also renowned for cornices, which form along its edges and coves, and demands extra care in winter. Lakeland Walker strongly recommends that anyone contemplating such an adventure seeks out qualified instruction from one of the numerous expert providers in the Lake District.

• The Lake District National Park's own fell top assessors host winter skills courses through winter, until April. For details visit www.lakedistrictweatherline.co.uk/winter-skills-courses.

• Follow Cumbria-born Alex's adventures on his YouTube channel, Alex Rambles, at alexrambles.com and on Instagram at @alexrambles.

Tales from the trails

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