

Robbie rocks the Great Arch in historic climbing feat

Edinburgh rock climber, Robbie Phillips, 34, has made the first repeat of the notorious 'Great Arch' on the island of Pabbay in the Outer Hebrides.

The steep and imposing rock face is 100m high and finishes in a dramatic horizontal roof.

The rock was only successfully free-climbed in 2013 by Glasgow climber, Dave MacLeod, and hasn't seen a successful attempt since.

Robbie, a former pupil of George Watson's College whose conquests include the infamous North Face of the Eiger, described his latest accomplishment saying: "The Great Arch lies on the edge of possibility for climbers. The striking feature is the focal point of the island. It's also just improbable as a climb (but) there's just enough holds and the easiest way up is directly through the roof of the arch.

"When you climb through it, you're upside down looking out at the Atlantic towards North America."



Robbie Phillips pulling over the lip of the Great Arch. He was to slip five metres from the summit but succeeded anyway. Photo credit; Ryan Balharry

Most famously the climb was first attempted in 1996 by Scottish climbing pioneer Dave "Cubby" Cuthbertson, a former pupil of Edinburgh's Firrhill HS, and the climbing legend Lynn Hill, who only a couple of years prior had made history with her ascent of "The Nose" in Yosemite National Park.

Cuthbertson, 46, who now lives in Ballachulish, was the first person to map the route for the climb, which every team since follows.

The pair attempted the climb as part of a BBC documentary called 'Extreme Climbs', however the series ended on a cliffhanger as the pair had fallen during their attempt leaving their free ascent incomplete.

Robbie Phillips had initially planned his expedition in June, when all previous attempts had taken place, but was forced to reschedule on account of bad weather.

Due to its location the rock suffers from poor conditions from condensation and sea spray, which can make the already difficult

climb exceptionally slippery for a climber. This change of timing dramatically threatened the potential success of the team.

Robbie said: "You need the long days in the height of summer to give you the biggest window of daylight to attempt the climb. You also need the warm weather and sun to burn off any moisture on the rock. Due to the timing of our trip we weren't able to start climbing until 2pm, leaving us only 6 hours to climb the entire wall before we lost the light".

With only his relay partner, 21-year-old Jamie Lowther, for support during his attempt, it was a race against time to summit before it got dark. Despite the challenging conditions Robbie managed to

successfully summit with the last remaining sunlight. This makes him the second person ever to successfully free the 'Great Arch'.

He captured his incredible ascent on camera, including the heart-stopping moment when his foot slips, leaving him dangling high above the sea by just his fingertips. Describing the moments before he succeeded, Robbie said: "It's moments like this that can

make or break a climber. By this point I was only 5m from the top but the moves to get there were going to be exceptionally challenging. I was hanging off a colossal hollow flake of rock, that if it fell could cut my rope and take me with it. But if I was going to get to the top, I needed to give it my all without worrying about that."

Following his successful ascent, Phillips will be sharing the story of the climb in a film, as well as in his upcoming

speaking tour.

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