DISCLAIMER

Climbing is dangerous. A big aspect of climbing, especially trad climbing, is about managing that risk. The below represents my thoughts and experiences as a climbing enthusiast (not a professional) and should not been seen as instruction. Climbing Wreakers Slab on Cornakey Cliff is especially risky in places. I hope this guide helps inform you about some of the risks, but ultimately my experiences are my own and I take no responsibility for your actions. You must make your own choices and if you are in any doubt, seek professional advice or simply don't climb the route.

OVERVIEW

Wreakers slab is a fantastic adventure and one of the longest vertical multi-pitch climbs in the South of the UK.  With around 120m of cliff to scale, it makes for a great day out. The climbing is easy, but the rock is loose in places, especially on the first pitch. Protection on the first pitch can also be a challenge, but it gets better the higher you go.

It's fair to say everyone has a slightly different experience, partly because the cliff is loose and the holds likely change regularly, even between the leader and the second! This makes helmets an absolute must. Due to its scale it's likely a lot of people also take slightly different lines, especially at the bottom and top pitches where the route is less clear. I think it justifies the grade of VS 4b. With the low technical grade it's an easy route to underestimate. A lot of the protection early on is marginal and some placements could actually make the climb more dangerous. For instance a cam behind a large loose block could put the seconds life in danger,  More info on this in the gear section below. In short, it's not an ideal choice for those new to traditional multi-pitch climbing, but offers stunning views and a wonderful lengthy adventure if you have the experience lead it.

GEAR

So the first thing to note is that the top two pitches are 45m. So if your sticking to the broad rule of a piece of gear per body length then you're looking for over 20 placements. The good / bad news is you are unlikely to find gear that regularly and some sections are easy enough to go a little further with confidence, but you will still need a lot of gear.

A Helmet

A helmet is essential. There are loose sections and a helmet will reduce the risk of being brained by a handhold the leader above thought looked solid.

A nut tool.

A key piece of gear for all trad climbing but especially important for the leader to carry on wreakers slab because some of the placements might need to be cleared of mud and loose shale. This is especially true at the belays where you will Likely want a 5 or 6 piece anchor to feel safe.

Wires.

Much of the route can be protected with wires. You can get by with one set assuming you have some cams and hex's, but two sets would be better.

RPs and micro wires

These are essential on the route. There are plenty of great placements for RPs or micro wires (see the difference). I believe in clean climbing so the idea of people bringing pegs and a hammer to the cliff make me sad. The route has enough to contend with from wind, sea and rain, it doesn't need climbers hammering pegs in when micro wires will work.

Cams

There are some great cam placements, especially at the  second belay and on the top pitch. However be wary when placing cams! Cams are great because they use leverage to exert huge pressure on the rocks to hold and catch a fall. However if the rock has fractures, cracks, weaknesses or is loose, then loading the cam could be enough to blast it down the cliff which could kill the belayer or second even with a helmet. To give an example I placed a big totem cam behind a pretty big and solid looking spike near the 1st belay.  I gave it a quick pull test and almost levered the whole block off the cliff as it had a horizontal crack I couldn't see until cam lobe pushed on it. The block was the size of a large rucksack and at 30m up, it would kill anyone it hit, helmet and all.

Micro Cams

I placed a few of these, they felt pretty solid in most placements. I would recommend racking 2-5 in the same style as wires.

Sky hooks

So I will start by saying I got lost on the first pitch. I left the guide book in my rucksack at the top (who wants to carry a book up a cliff right?)  so I basically attacked the first belay more or less directly from the right side of the base and therefore went off route. At around 10m I still hadn't found a single placement and was coming down from the "this will be amazing and easy" high I was on. I placed one of my 2 petzl sky hooks at around 10m before finding better gear a few more meters up. Whilst sky hooks won't hold much of a fall they gave me psychological protection and the hook was still in place when the second arrived to "clean" it, in part thanks to it being extended on a 60cm sling draw. In short, sky hooks won't increase your chance of survival by much, but you may feel better for placing them and you don't loose much by bringing them. I'd recommend them on this climb, but then again I'm not renowned for good life choices.

THE APROACH

The BMC regional access database has the wrong coordinates for parking and the guide book (cite) underestimates the approach time considerably! Allow an hour for the approach and be happy if you get to the crag in less than 50 mins. It's 30 mins to the top of the cliff if you know the way. To scramble down and descend the fixed rope and boulder hop to the crag in less than 20 mins is fast or possibly also slightly reckless.

Park in Morwenstow tea room car park. Go into the morwenstow graveyard and pass out the bottom (north east) down a path past some private housing into a small wooded area. Go over the stream and turn left out of the woods. Cross two fields and turn right at the cliff edge. Follow the coastal path until you see Cornakey Cliff. When above it, pass behind it to a sketchy and thorny scramble down the slope. Reach the loose rib and work your way down to the makeshift hut. Pass that to the (hopefully) in-situ rope. Descend to sea level when the tide is out and make your way around to the base of the climb. This may require some rock hopping or down climbing. Don't forget to enjoy the descent, it's part of the experience.

THE ROUTE

Use the super zoom of the topography to get to grips with the route. Below is my experience of the climb...

My experience here is reasonably worthless except to say if you leave the guidebook at the top of the cliff (because who wants to climb with a guide book in their bag), then the chances are you won’t actually know exactly which way to go and may attack the first belay head on. This takes you over loose ground with little or no gear and possibly makes the route a harder grade. Instead I’d recommend you use the super zoom image to the right to plan a better approach. Don’t start too far right, climb up to where the cliff eases off then traverse all the way left and head up to the belay.

There are 2 pegs that you can use to form part of your belay. I’d highly recommend a 3 or 4 point anchor in addition to them. I placed my gear below the pegs giving a reasonably comfy ledge to belay from. Jump to the gear section for more advice here, but needless to say your nut tool comes in handy when you lead that pitch!

Pitch 2: Head up and around the overhanging block just above the belay. Whilst this is probably the steepest part of the climb it’s not fully vertical making gear placements easier than they look. Be careful not to throw too many handholds at the belay below and follow the reasonably obvious crack up to a big grassy ledge with a pillar of rock on it. There are lots of options for a multi-point belay here. You can use the front of the pillar, side or even the nearby crack.

Pitch 3: This is where the rock climbing becomes utterly enjoyable. For the most part the rock is solid and there are plenty of placements for gear in the first 20m of this pitch at least. The odd section might be run-out but there is so much bomber gear below it didn’t bother me. I went up the left hand ridge with its stunning if a little intense views. The guide book says the pitch is 45m, but I went the full 50 to get over the top and right a little. You can set up a good belay on the other side of the top ridge. I’d recommend also belaying your partner off the top 10m walk just in case. Whilst it would be a stretch to call it a 4th pitch, we still placed 2 pieces of gear, would be a shame to slip off the back of the cliff after such a beautiful climb.

THE RATING

The main guidebook (cite) gives it just two stars but I think it deserves 3, as do most people who log it on UKC. The views are beautiful, the climb is huge, the crag is reasonably accessible and the climb is not overly challenging. The only reason it's not 4 stats is the looseness of rock.  But you can think of that as simply an additional challenge to master.

THE ROCK

There is a lot going on at Cornakey Cliff geologically. It's on the so called Culm Coast, therefore the cliff is made up of the rock supergroup culm.  For the most part it is a sedimentary formation from the Carboniferous period comprising of hard sandstone and soft shale. This was then flipped from flat to vertical some time after formation. Parts of the rock also appear to have undergone metamorphic transformation which has turned the softer shale into slate, either in part or completely.

The end result is wonderfully varied climbing. Parts of the first pitch are thin and crimpy slate like sheets, giving good if slightly delicate hand and foot placements. The larger layers formed in the sedimentary process offer cracks and jugs throughout and as the climb rises it give way to more sandstone which offers ledges, jugs, cracks and the occasional slopping hold. However you get to choose what you want to use for much of the route, and are not really forced to adopt any particular style of rock climbing.

THE AREA

Within walking distance is Morwenstow which has the tea rooms where you probably parked and the Bush Inn pub which offers Food, accommodation and of course beers. I would recommend the pub food, drink and reasonably priced accommodation (for Cornwall).