

Vertigo

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James Hobson makes his way across a steep traverse on the Bealey side of Rome Ridge at about 1,850m. [More here](#)

Trip Reports

“It’s not cold is it James. I don’t like our chances of any freeze up higher.” Between breaths, as we slogged up through bush on the Coral Track in the hour before dawn, James Hobson agreed. Soon we breached the bush line and encountered our first snow around 1,200 metres. And to our surprise, it was frozen. Alpenglow revealed a line of well-trodden steps stretching in to the distance up Rome Ridge. Weekend climbers had reported very soft, arduous snow, demanding too much time to get beyond Low Peak. But the weather had been settled now for four or more days and their still well formed steps provided us a staircase. The windless sky gradually brightened clear. Perfect!

Just over three years before, another climbing buddy Steve Henderson and I, had set off before dawn up Otira Valley, plugging our own energy sapping steps. By the time we’d reached the big boulder near the top of Otira River, under a crystal clear blue sky, we’d reluctantly realised that our efforts were futile and to venture any further would be inviting burial beneath an avalanche. So now, as I climbed Rome Ridge, I said silent thankyou’s to the owners of the steps making it so much easier for us.

In such nice conditions Rome Ridge looked comfortably free-climb-able as we steadily ascended. On the steep, knife-edged sections though, I reflected on how much scarier and slower progress would be when iced up or in strong winds.

Our first little serving of gnarl came in a notch at 1,800 metres. A load of steps dropped left (south) off the ridge to avoid a steep narrow buttress. One set of steps carried on up along the edge of the buttress. “What do you reckon Pete – up or down?” “In these conditions up I reckon James. Is it ok on the far side of this thing?” James had climbed Rome Ridge as far as Low Peak the previous year. “Yeah, no problem from memory. Want to rope up or anything?” “Nah, I think it looks okay.” I led up. In hindsight James’ suggestion to rope up was the right one. There was just a small vertical rocky section where the snow and ice were thin that justified it, but those few steps were very exposed. I tentatively climbed up okay but, in so doing, disturbed the already tenuous snow. And the rope was in James’ pack. “Err... Hmmm ... my axe just went right through there... Hmmm...” I held my breath while James picked his way up to join me.

“Whew, at least the ground ahead should be fine... or not!” As we levelled out on top of the buttress the crux notch of Rome Ridge came into view. And between us and it was a void. Buggar. Until this point our progress had been swift, but now it looked like things were going to get technical. That single set of tantalising steps did still carry on down steep snow on the Bealey Valley side though, disappearing on the convex slope. I tentatively followed to see if there was a way down to the notch.

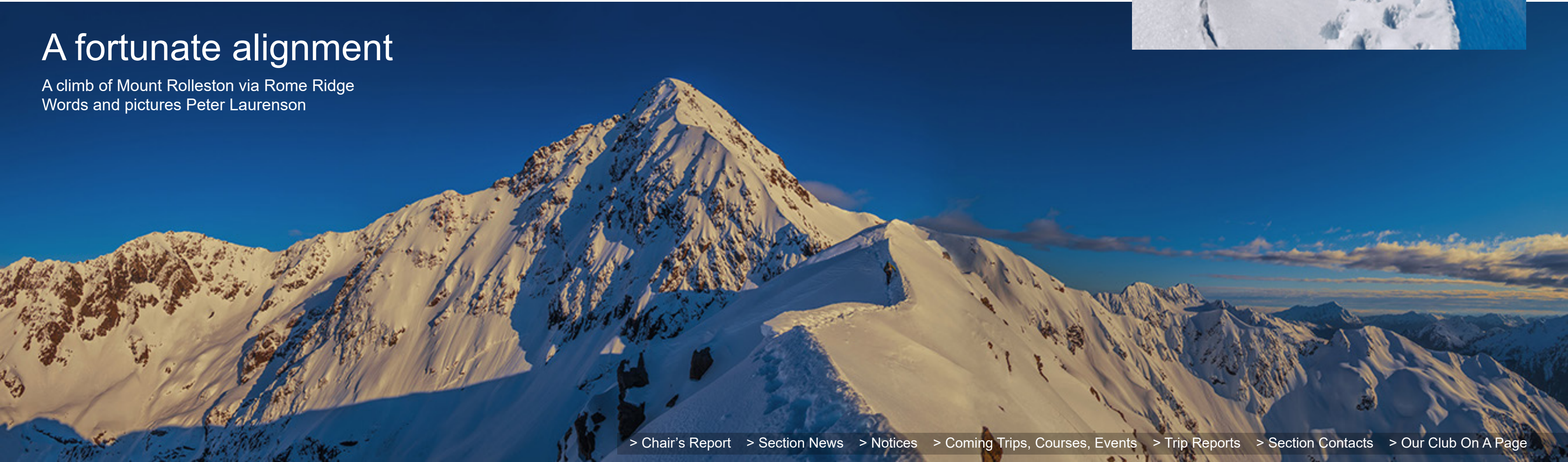
Right - On Rome Ridge at about 1,850m, just above and east of the notch

Below - At about 1,800m, on the narrow section before the notch



A fortunate alignment

A climb of Mount Rolleston via Rome Ridge
Words and pictures Peter Laurenson



Just as I confirmed that down climbing was going to be fine, James also located a fixed sling up above me. We didn't need it, but now we turned our attention to the next section, climbing out of the notch towards Low Peak – the crux. Steps again led both ways – left and right. “Which way James?” “Last time we definitely went right.” And off he went. As we struggled up through some exposed downward sloping, snow splattered rock, then a precarious little ice cheval, the advice the Arthurs Pass Oracle Graeme Kates had given me the evening before came flooding back. “My mate mentioned an unpleasant patchy rock and snow section just on the Bealey side of the ridge. Sounds like that is best to avoid if you can.” “Yes, I see what you mean now Graeme” I thought to myself as we carefully plugged up a steep, exposed snow face back on to the crest of the ridge – where, at 1,950 metres all the other steps reappeared.

From there the going was straight forward and we arrived at 2,212 metres on top of Low Peak about 11am, six hours after having set off. “Well, it took us a bit longer than I'd first thought, but at least we can claim a pretty unbroken ascent of Rome Ridge James.” A cold breeze now blew but the weather remained clear, affording 360 degree panoramas that could not fail to pump joy into the heart of any photographer. I was certainly having a good time and our view northwest to the main summit looked eminently doable. But first, time for a spot of lunch.

The route on to the summit dropped off low Peak to the upper edge of Crow Glacier, skirting beneath a steep rocky buttress, before climbing again into another notch. Climbing out of the notch gave us another small helping of gnarl, very similar to the first in terms of thin snow and ice on a small steep section of rock. We managed to free climb it but I was definitely not keen on down climbing it. In fact, the cumulative effect of quite a lot of exposure during the morning encouraged me to suggest we pitch from there on.

James put in three not totally bullet-proof cams but, as the final section below the summit came into view from behind the rocky outcrop where he stood, we could see that a fall was going to be unlikely. The rope still had a calming influence though as I climbed through and set up a T slot just below the summit for James to follow up on.

“It's still sinking in that I'm actually on top James. I've been looking at this peak for three years. Life is good!” The summit of Mount Rolleston is just the 2,275 metre high point on a long narrow ridge. There wasn't a huge amount of room up there and the wind was up so, after I'd covered, to my satisfaction, all angles photographically, I carefully followed James back to our packs back at my T slot point. An easy pitch and a reassuring 30 metre abseil later saw us back down in the notch, comfortable in the knowledge that the rest of our day should be quite straight forward.



Above - Crotch-eye view on Rome Ridge at about 2,000m

Below - On Low Peak (2,212m), with the main summit (2,275m) left skyline



Our round trip from Low Peak to the summit and back had taken about two and half hours, so we set off on our descent to Goldney Ridge about 2pm. The going was steep, mostly facing in to the slope, but straight forward. By now any freeze had well and truly become a distant memory in the bright sunlight. Any thought of climbing it made me wince, but the snow was actually quite pleasant for descending – soft but predictable. Looking below at the Otira Valley I could see one or two avalanche sites, but generally everything appeared pretty stable – in line with the “moderate” rating given by avalanche.net.nz.

Although steps led off along Goldney Ridge, we decided to drop off down the Slide almost immediately after reaching the ridge. Being wary of afternoon avalanche danger, we kept close to the edge of the snow slope until it broadened out and the gradient relented at about 1,600 metres. “This takes me back three years James” I remarked as we crashed thigh deep into soft wet snow. While there was still some gradient to work with the best way forward was on our bums. Thankfully the snow improved a bit once we reached the shade of the Philistine Ridge and then it ran out altogether at about 1,200 metres.

James is less than half my age and mountain fit by any climber’s standards. While I plodded, nursing my ailing knee joints, he disappeared at speed. The gesture was both kindly and logical – his Ute was parked back at the base of the Coral Track three kms down Highway 73 from the Otira Valley carpark. He figured he’d save me having to cover that ground and also save himself from having to wait for me. Smart!

I trudged into the carpark at the end of Otira Valley at 5.30pm, twelve and half hours after we started. James was already back, airing his feet in a reclining position. He’d run the 3kms in his climbing boots, claiming that having enjoyed a summit day, he’d felt extra perky. We had certainly enjoyed a fortunate alignment of conditions for our climb, the only disappointment that wonderful day being that the Pub at Arthurs Pass Village is closed on Tuesdays.



Above - On the descent at about 1,950m, with Goldney Ridge below centre

Below - From the summit, with Otira Valley left, Crow Glacier on the right and Low Peak right of centre



For more captioned images and a route map
www.occasionalclimber.co.nz