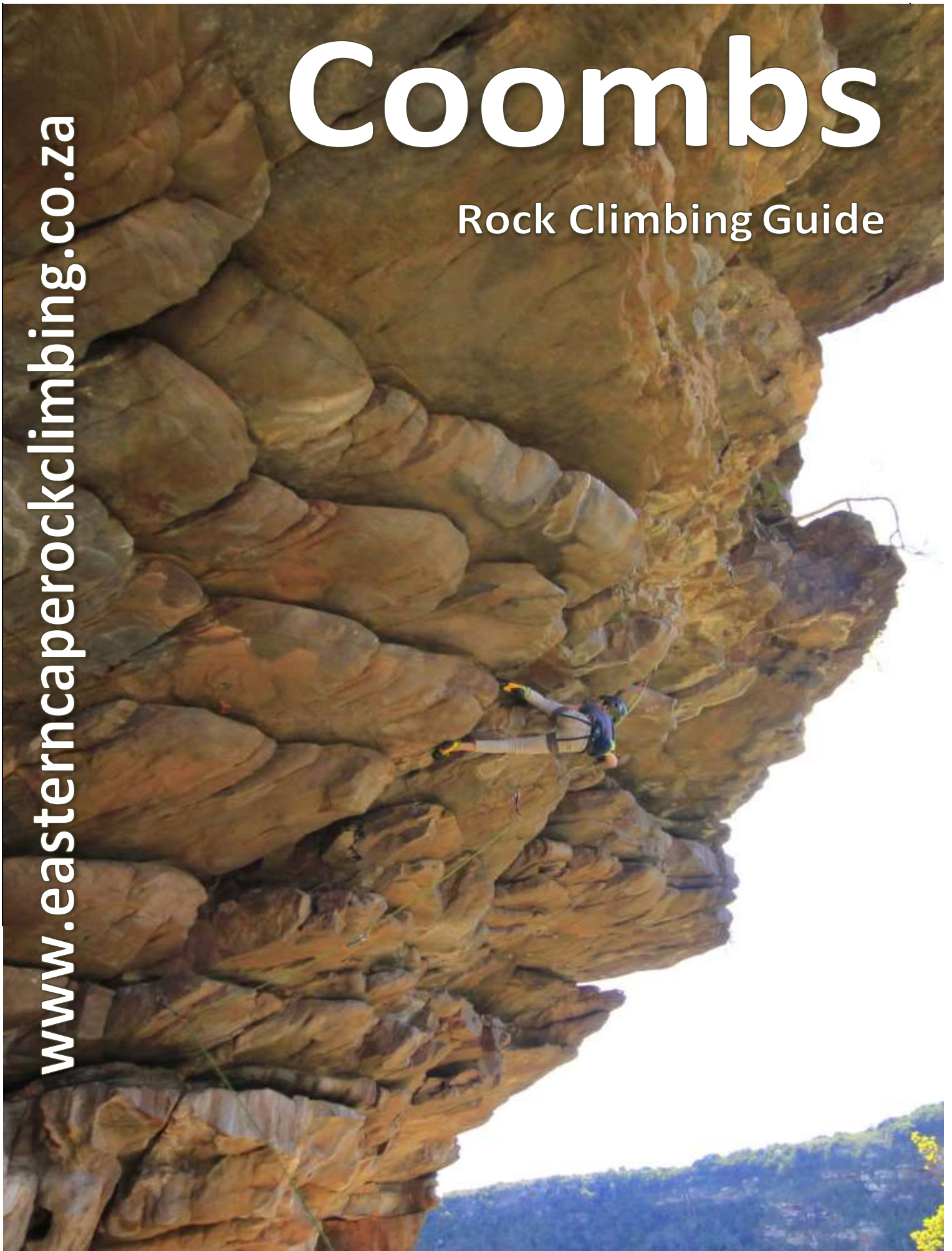


[www.easterncaperockclimbing.co.za](http://www.easterncaperockclimbing.co.za)

# Coombs

Rock Climbing Guide





**Legal Note:** All climbing is very dangerous & always at your own risk. Nobody is forcing you to climb. You choose to climb, so choose to go home before the risks become too high. Remember even small injuries can take 6 weeks to heal. No responsibility for inaccurate or incomplete information will be accepted by the scribe or climb.co.za. The landowners accept no liability what so ever. Climbers take full responsibility for themselves at all times. Fixed protection will become unreliable, loose rock is common, solid rock becomes loose & RD writers make up most of the information anyway. This RD is only a guide & is no substitute for experience, training, common sense & a touch of caution. So, you are on your own...take care!

**Note from the scribe:** Please note that this is a web-based guide, easy to change, so send corrections, additions & adjustments to [info@easterncaperockclimbing.co.za](mailto:info@easterncaperockclimbing.co.za). You are welcome to print this out or use the info for a better guide. But please don't distribute in anyway other way. I look forward to first ascents being claimed, old pictures, forgotten notes...please send it all to me.

**Directions:** Coombs is about 48km from Grahamstown. Follow the N2 from Grahamstown towards Peddie for 30km. Turn R at the road sign for Coombs. Follow the dirt road for 10km. Turn L at a boulder marked L+G Dixon School. Follow this road, taking the L at the fork & a sign saying L+G Dixon. Continue over numerous cattle grids for another 9km till you reach a farmhouse. Go through the gate, then immediately through the gate on the L. Drive 100m to an old wire enclosure & park.

**Access:** At this stage there are no access arrangements. Please contact [info@easterncaperockclimbing.co.za](mailto:info@easterncaperockclimbing.co.za) if you arrange access.

**Walk-in:** About 20 minutes on a steep scramble.

**History:** The area around Coombs is steeped in history. The handprints in *Cave of Hands* & a number of other shelters indicate that Bushman visited Coombs gorge before us. There are a number of European settler forts to the north. The Frasers Camp Signal Tower is a three-story stone signal tower & fort built by British settlers. This was part of a signal tower & early warning system that connected the settlements at Fort Peddie, Fort Beaufort & Grahamstown. The signals were communicated via semaphore (flags). The clay pits on the farm Claypits were/are important to Xhosa people. Apparently, in the 1800s there was a treaty that allowed them access to collect clay that was used for cultural purposes, perhaps smearing on their bodies during various ceremonies. At the Claypits farm house there is the remains of a stone walled fort behind the garage.

When Don Maclennan's old climbing mate Geoffrey Hutchings moved to Grahamstown, they decided to start climbing again. Geoffrey had brought with him a few slings & an old climbing rope. They did not know of any other climbers in Grahamstown or any established climbing venues, so they spent a lot of time driving around the countryside looking for cliffs to climb. On one of these trips Don & Geoff discovered Coombs. Shortly afterwards, they took Joe & Dave Maclennan (high school age sons of Don) to Coombs for one of their first climbs. They hiked down the road into Coombs gorge & followed the stream to a big flat rock, where they had a picnic & studied the cliffs. What became the *Picnic Rock* route, started with some tricky maneuvers on rock overgrown with robust East Cape bush & ended at the prominent prow of rock Don & Geoff had spied from the plateau on their first visit. Credit goes to them for leading the first route at Coombs & for spearheading the initial development of climbing at Coombs, figuring out how to approach the different crags & opening lots of new lines <sup>12</sup>.

At some stage before 1980 Ben & Joe Maclennan made the first ascent of *Heartbeat* at Coombs. It was Ben's idea & he led all the pitches. A couple of weeks later, Ben & Joe went back & re-climbed *Heartbeat* so Ben could take pictures, which he used to illustrate his dramatic account of the climb in the EP Herald. *The scribe is endeavoring find & read this!*

A few months after discovering Coombs, the Hutchings & Maclennan families visited Nieu Bethesda for a week or so. After a few days of family holiday, Don & Geoffrey decided to climb Compassberg. At that stage Compassberg had only one published rock-climbing route, *Declination*, which was opened by Mike Streeter some years before. In the Trollip's (Compassberg farmer) visitors' book, they noted that there was another climber in Grahamstown, John Moss, who just a few weeks before had put up a route on the Compassberg south face.



Like Don & Geoffrey, John was on the staff at Rhodes University & it turned out that he lived just a couple of blocks away from the Maclennan's house.

Sometime after that the Maclennans made contact with John Moss in Grahamstown. Don told John about Coombs. John then went to check out the potential & made the first ascent of *Moss Wall (16)*. John & company (maybe Goonie Marsh) managed to get some nylon cord stuck about halfway up & this remained there for many years <sup>12</sup>. John Moss & Goonie Marsh told the Maclennans that Coombs has "good potential" <sup>11</sup>.

The first recorded routes at Coombs were two routes recorded by Joe Maclennan in his booklet *a pocket guide to rock climbing near Grahamstown 1980*. Joe speaks of "several popular routes" <sup>1</sup> on a wall that is somewhere above & left of what is now *Dans Macabre Wall*. Dave Maclennan remembers on an early trip bumping into John Moss climbing somewhere near *Mama Cave & Dans Macabre Wall* <sup>11</sup>. In the '70 & '80s climbers camped in a cave in a side kloof of the mail Coombs gorge in a large cave called *Cave of Hands*, because of the Bushman hand prints on the wall at the back of the shelter <sup>11</sup>. Near to *Cave of Hands*, *Brown Duchess* was opened by Gavin Stewart & Don Maclennan in 1983 <sup>2</sup>.

A number of routes were added in the late '80s & early '90s by Keith James & Paul Schlottfeldt <sup>3</sup>. Keith James bolted some of the routes in the early '90s. Jeff Stevens' *Crag Fax Grahamstown Crag Guide*, published 1994, records *Parataxis* as grade 30 & the hardest route in the Eastern Cape at that time <sup>4</sup>. Jeremy Colenso remembers doing training laps on *Parataxis* during his years at Rhodes University, but thought it only grade 28 & possibly opened by Paul Schlottfeldt or perhaps Jeff Stevens <sup>8</sup>. Kevan Watkins during his time at Rhodes added two sport lines at Coombs. One was a trad line that Kevan felt would serve better as a sport line <sup>6</sup>. There were a host of traditional routes opened over the years <sup>1 4</sup>, but the details of most of these remain unknown.

There was a warning posted in *SA Climbing Magazine October 2001 Edition*, warning that climbers needed to contact the owner of Coombs before going there or access to Coombs would close to climbers <sup>5</sup>. In about 2003 unknown climbers from Rhodes University were bust by the owner, climbing without contacting the owner. The owner then closed access to Coombs via his farm <sup>5</sup>.

**Thanks & Appreciation:**

1. Much appreciation goes to the land owners who graciously allowed climbers access into Coombs over the generations. Huge thanks!
2. The Maclennan family for seeing the potential & making the initial adventure. Also did thanks for all the information, details, photos & the patience to answer many questions, from this scribe.
3. Keith James for keeping Coombs alive in our hearts, all the bolting & all the information supplied for this guide. Your memory for route detail is unparalleled.
4. Jeff Stevens for his *Crag Fax Grahamstown Crag Guide*. Thanks for some the crucial details. Some names would have been lost & maybe the crag forgotten if it was not for your 1994 guide.

**Time & Weather:** Most of the known sectors are north facing & suffer from direct sun. Coombs is basically a winter crag. There are lovely looking south facing crags on the other side of the river, but there are no known routes on these crags.

**Star Ratings**

- ★★★ Classic route in this province
- ★★ Good route in the area
- ★ Good route at this crag
- No star Reasonable to bollocks

**Abbreviations & Symbols**

- (T) Trad route (natural gear) & grade
- Sport route (bolted) & grade
- Open Project / in-progress & ± grade
- Closed Project & ± grade
- (S) FA was solo & grade
- Potential
- Abseil point
- (11B&C) Number of bolts & top chains
- P / RB Piton / Removable bolt
- Afternoon Shade
- Morning Shade
- Shade all day
- Sun all day
- Dappled shade all day
- Can be climbed in wet weather

**Potential:** Plenty! Plenty!

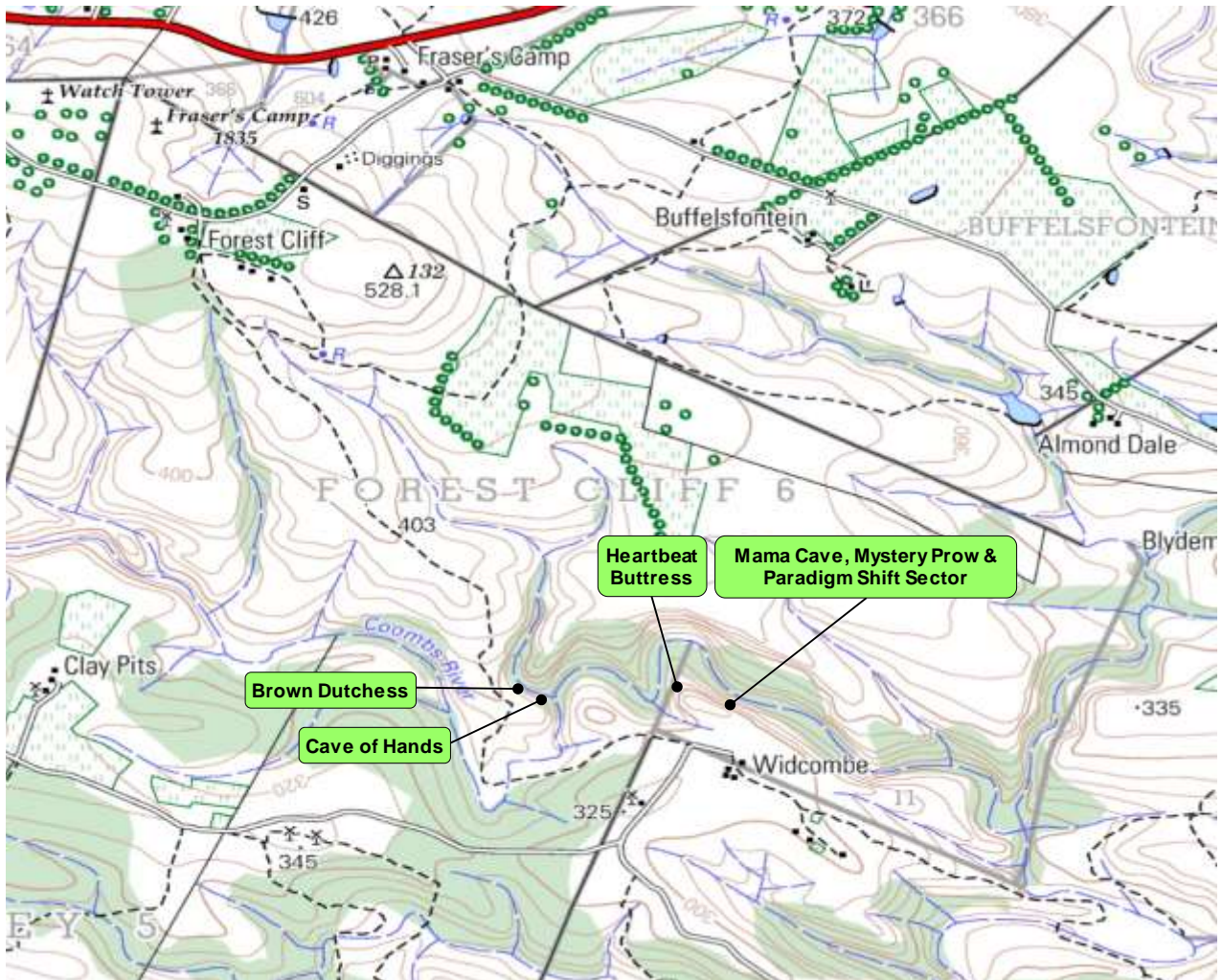
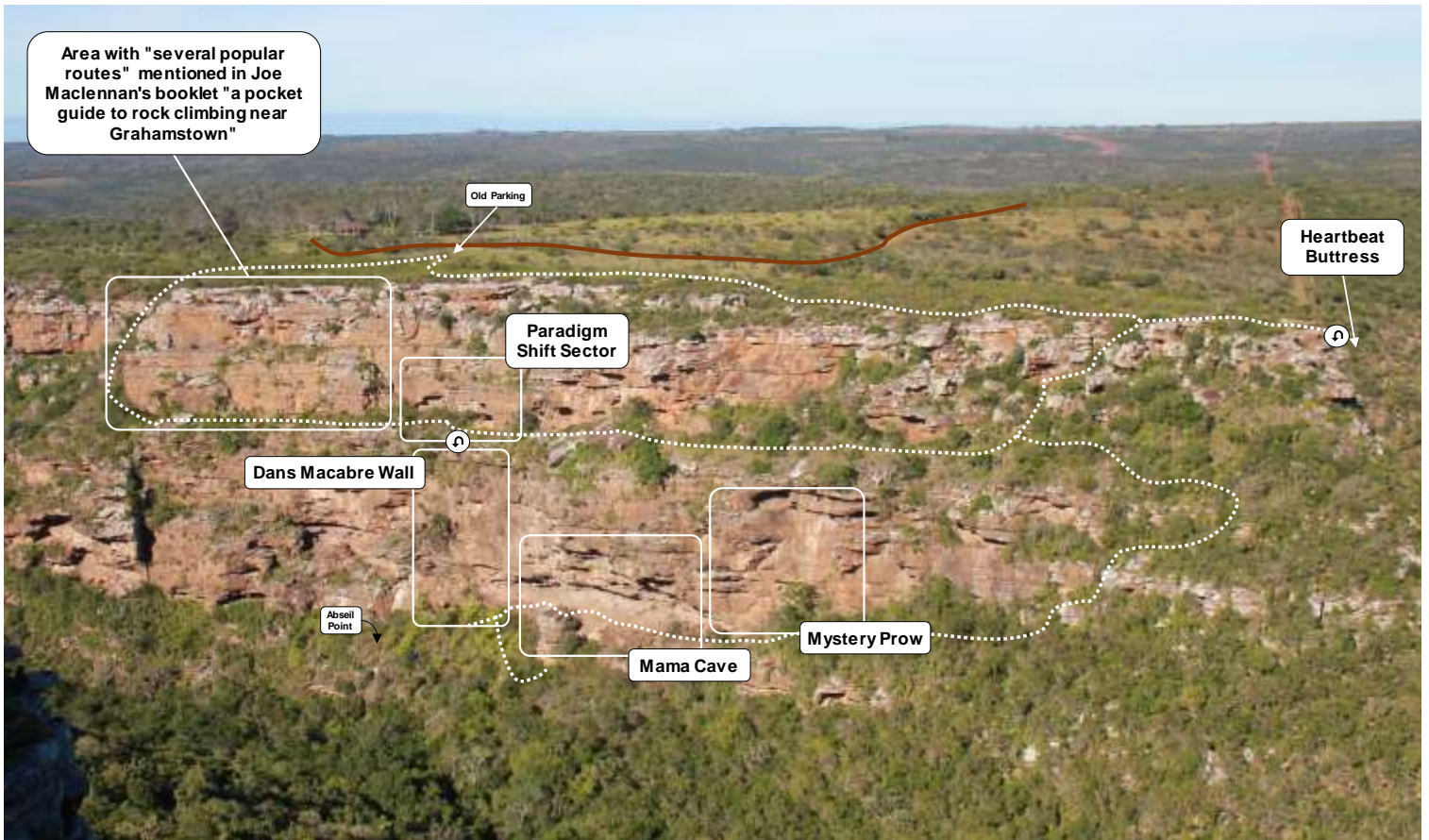
**Rock Type:** Witterberg quartzite.



**Hazards:**

1. Baboons & snakes could be a hazard.
2. The top anchors & bolts are old & rusted. Try to back them up.

**Environmental:** Eish! No littering, especially stompies. The locals will become mightily pissed off. This is going to be ugly!

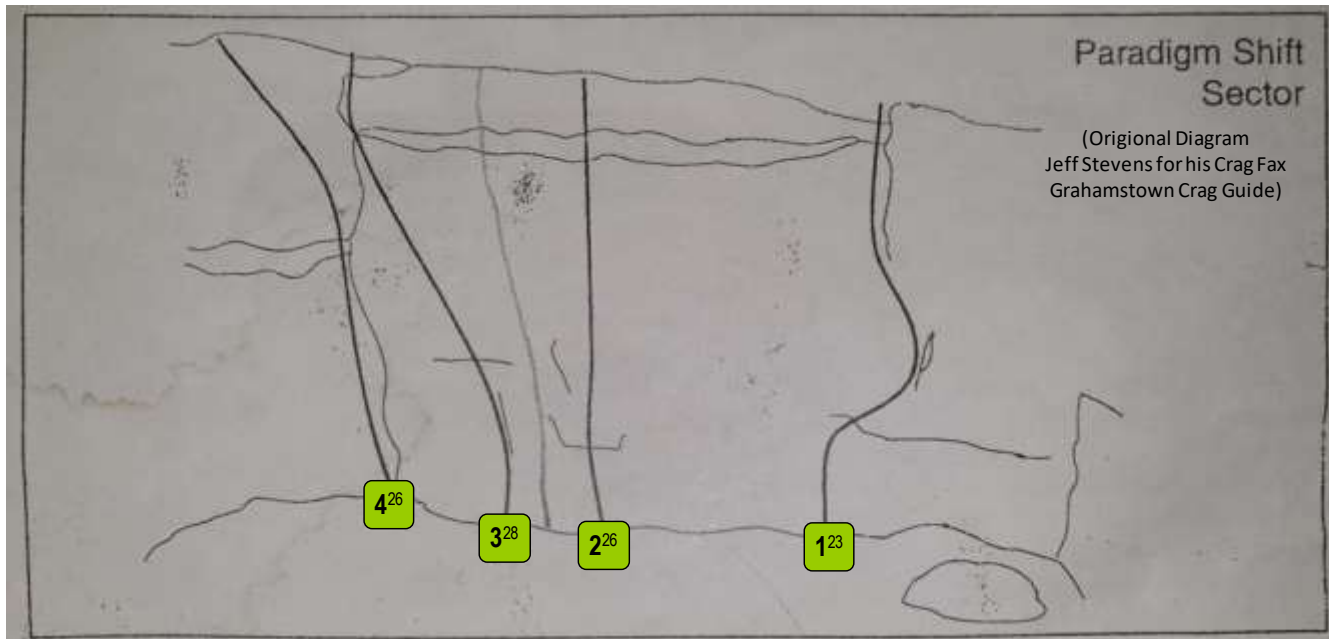
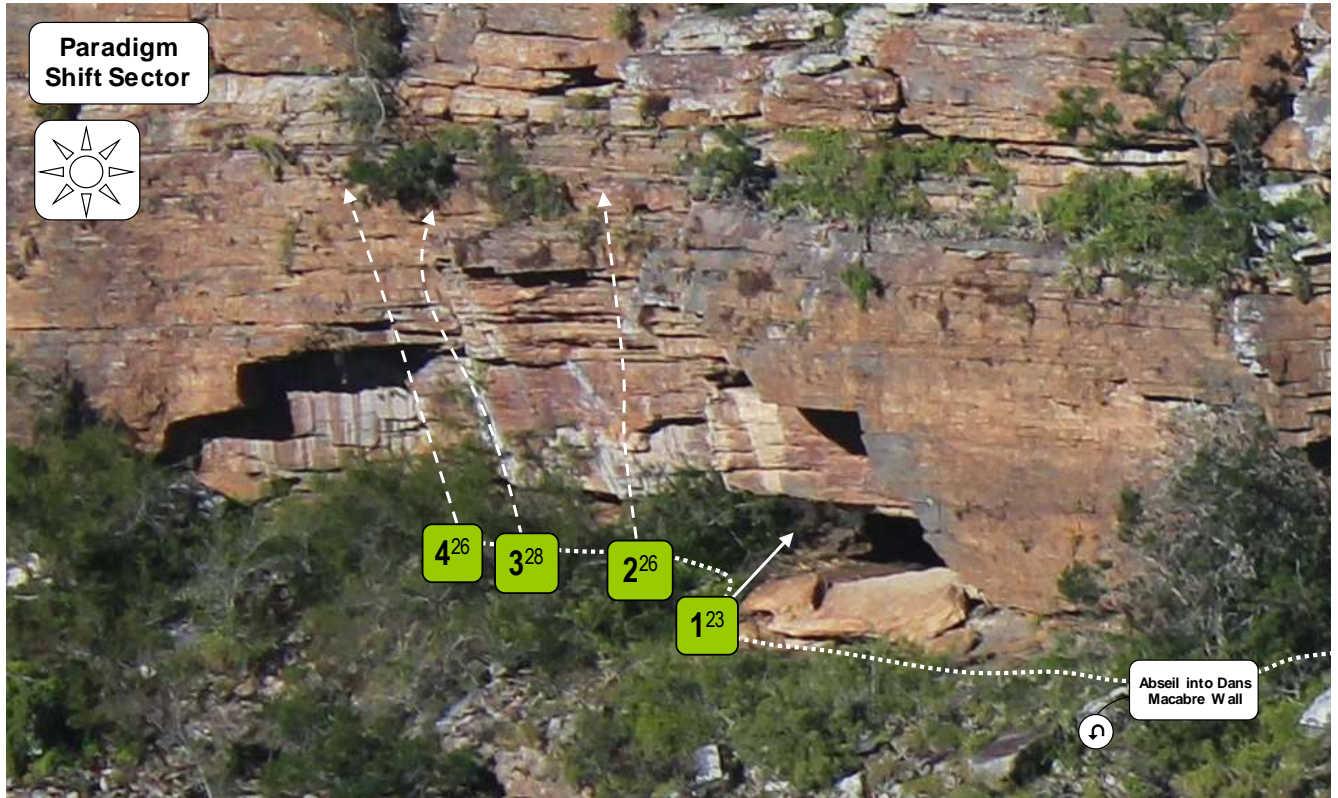


# Paradigm Shift Sector



- 1. Paradigm Shift – 23 ★★★<sup>4</sup>
- 2. Recon Artist – 26 ★★★<sup>4</sup>
- 3. Parataxis – 28 ★★★<sup>8,9</sup>
- 4. Cosmic Turbulence – 26<sup>4</sup>

Keith James 1993<sup>10</sup> (3B&C)  
 Paul Schlotveldt & Keith James 1993<sup>10</sup> (4B&C)  
 Paul Schlotveldt & Keith James<sup>8</sup> 1993 (5B&C)  
 Paul Schlotveldt & Keith James 1993<sup>10</sup> (4B&C)



On the walls L & R of the *Paradigm Shift Sector* Keith James opened several thinly protected trad routes of between 15 & 17. Apparently, these would be worth retro-bolting<sup>10</sup>. *The scribe will try to work this out in due course.*

# Mystery Prow



This crag & prow is just west of *Mama Cave*. The bolted routes appear to start on a ledge 7m up. Scribe is unsure as to how these were climbed, but it is assumed that the first 7m was trad climbed.

## 1. Gavin's Goolies - 15

Gavin Stewart 1984 <sup>10</sup> (T&C)

L trending overhang steps to abseil chains.

## 2. Moss Wall – 16

John Moss 1985 <sup>10</sup> (T&C)

R trending diagonal to abseil chains.

## 3. Moss Wall Direct - 18

Paul Schlotveldt & Keith James 1988 <sup>10</sup> (T, 3B&C)

## 4. Dans Diabolique - 22 ★★★

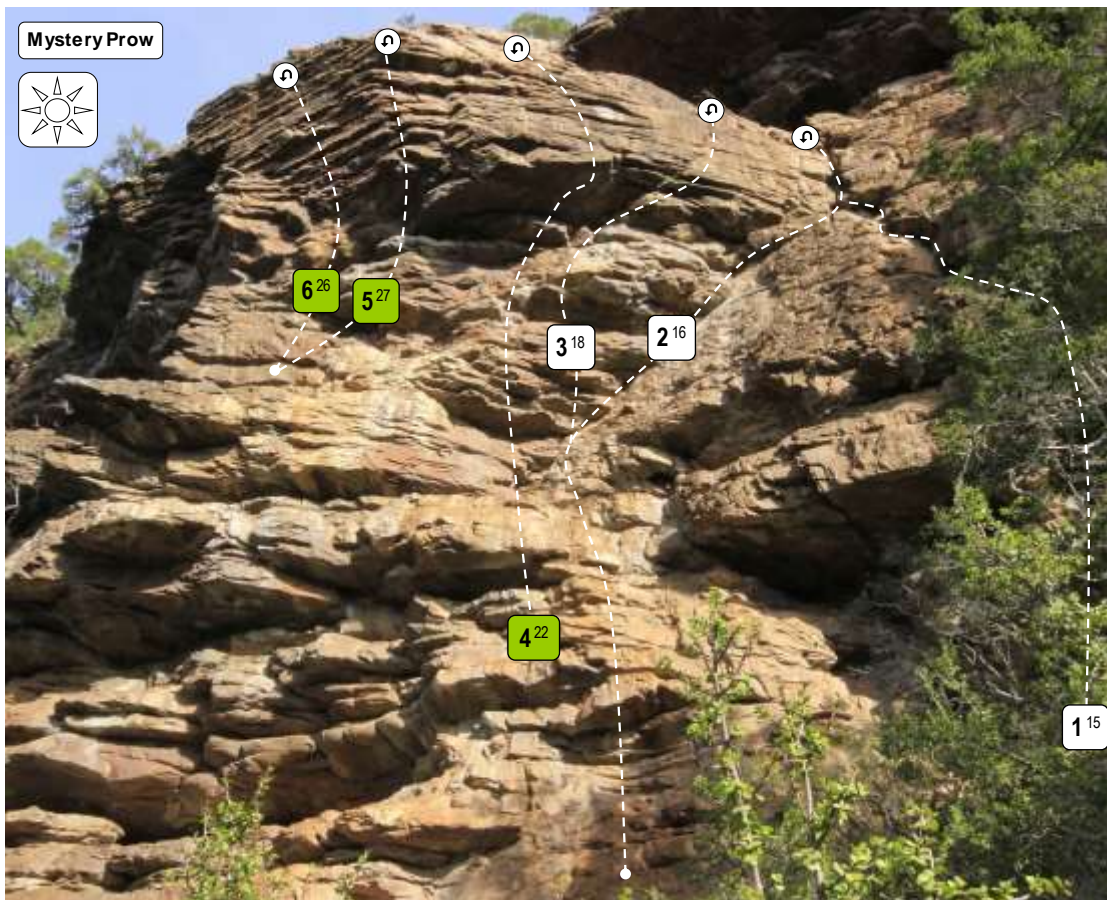
Keith James 1995 <sup>10</sup> (8B&C)

## 5. Dance with the Devil – 27 ★★★

Jeremy Colenso & Shannon Law 1996 <sup>10</sup> (6B&C)

## 6. Permutations - 26

Shannon Law & Jeremy Colenso 1996 <sup>10</sup> (6B&C)

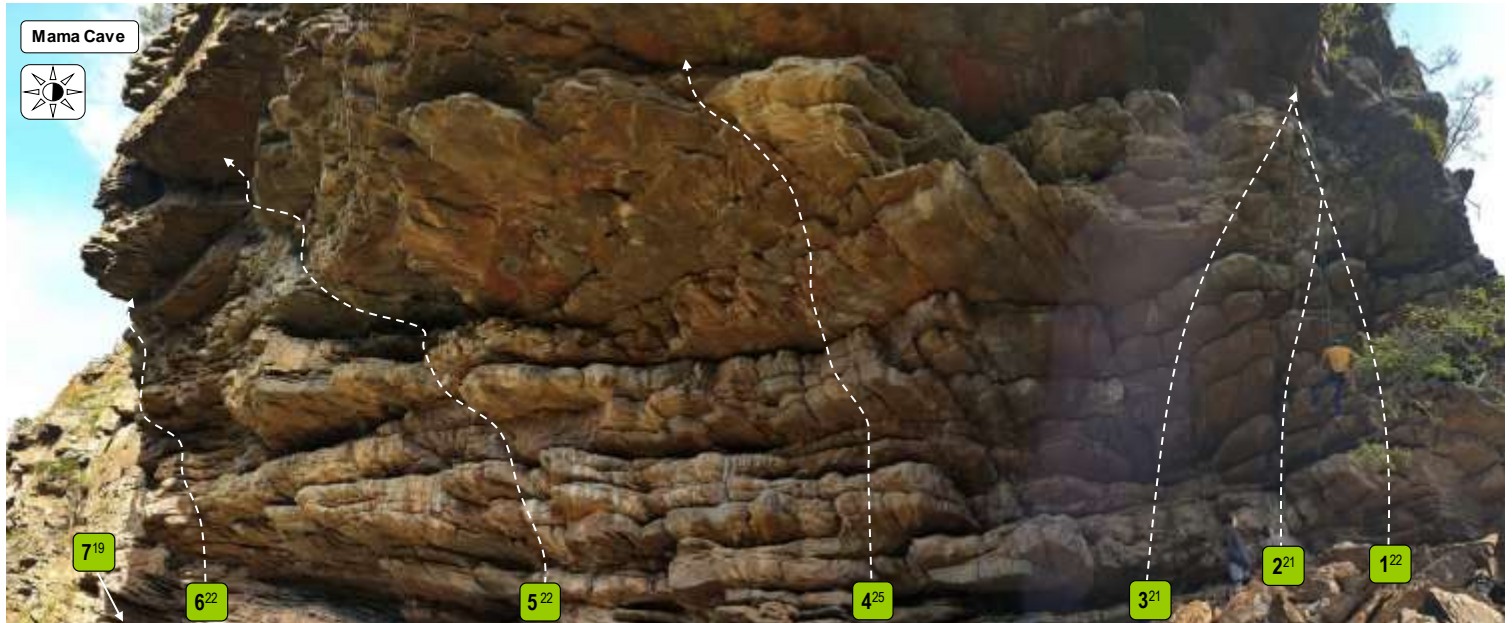


# Mama Cave



- 1. Cosmic Grunge – 22 ★★
- 2. Mama-Mut – 21 ★★<sup>4</sup>
- 3. Testing the Waters – 21
- 4. Submerged - 25
- Bolted by Keith James.
- 5. Stuttering - 22
- 6. Full Throated Roar - 22
- 7. Coti - 19

Keith James 1994 (6B&C)  
Keith James 1994<sup>10</sup> (6B&C)  
Keith James 1994<sup>10</sup> (6B&C)  
Edmund February & Keith James 1997<sup>10</sup> (7B&C)  
  
Keith James 1995<sup>10</sup> (7B&C)  
Keith James 1996<sup>10</sup> (6B&C)  
Derek Marshall & Allen Luck ~2002 (?B&C)





# Dans Macabre Wall



● 1. Dans Macabre – 19 ★★★<sup>4</sup>

Keith James 1991<sup>10</sup> (11B&C)

Originally opened on natural gear. Bolted by Keith James in 1994<sup>6 10</sup>.



Keith James opened two trad lines to L of *Dans Macabre*. "Both are 17 & going up to roofs, one exiting R & the other one L..."<sup>10</sup>.  
*The scribe will try to work this out in due course.*

# Heartbeat Buttress



This is the west facing buttress that can be seen from the road as you come in towards Widcombe farm. Walk along the top of the cliffs from the parking near Widcombe farmhouse. A very large beacon on a block indicates where the abseil bolts & the tops of routes are.

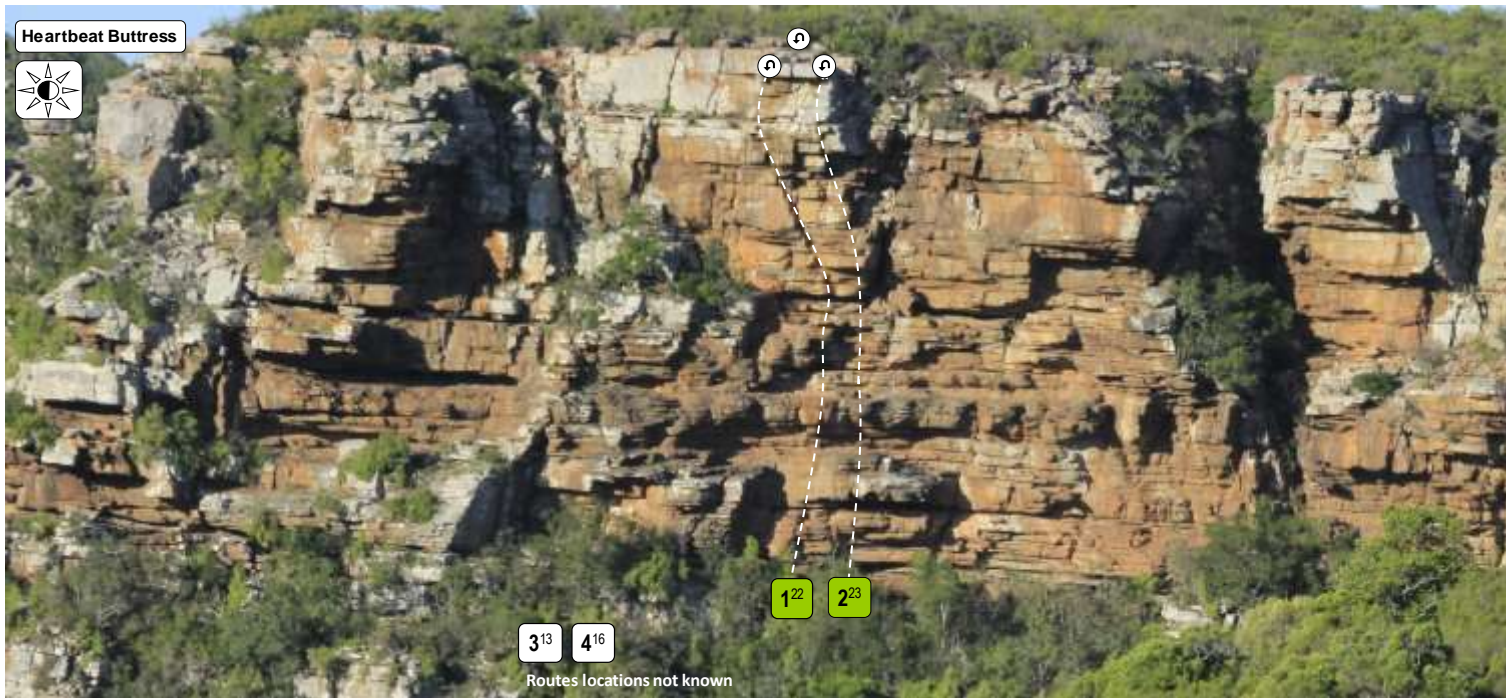
● **1. Cardiac Arrest – 22** <sup>4</sup>

Keith James 1996 <sup>10</sup> (8B&C)

● **2. Triple Bypass – 23** <sup>4</sup>

Keith James 1997 <sup>10</sup> (T,4B&C)

*Keith James is not sure if he ever fully bolted this route <sup>10</sup>.*



**3. Picnic Rock – 13** <sup>1</sup>

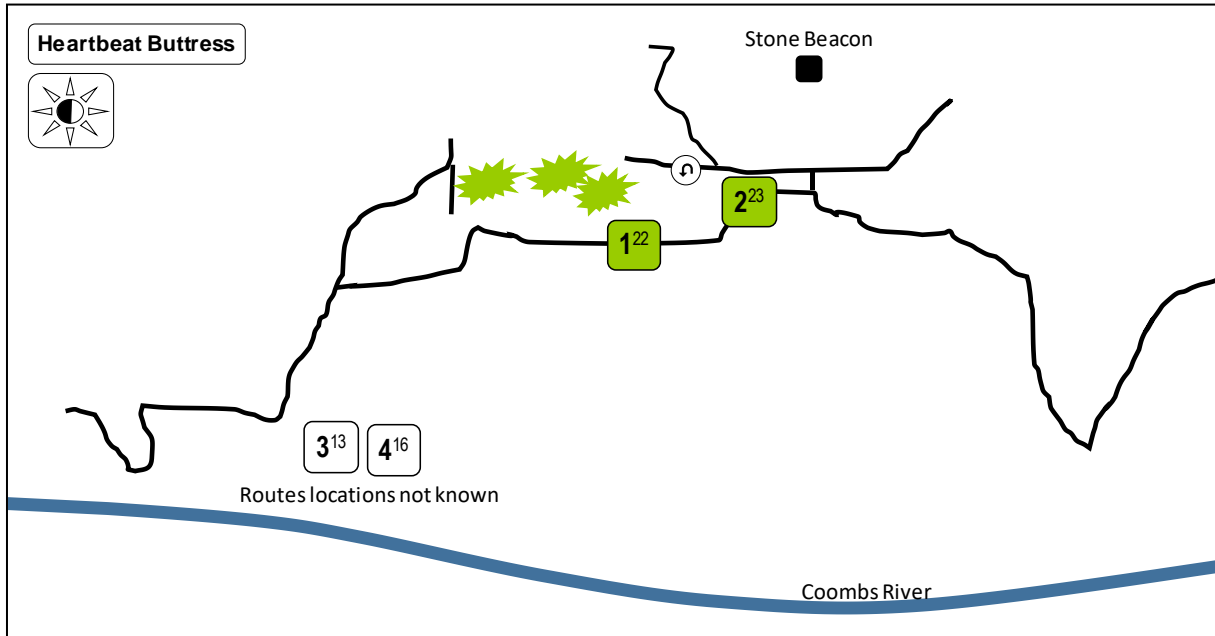
Don MacLennan & Geoffrey Hutchings pre-1980 (T)

Long but scrappy route which takes a line on the outcrops above a big flat rock, under a tall tree next to the river. Best approach is from the river. Route starts with some tricky maneuvers on rock overgrown with robust Eastern Cape bush & ends at the prominent prow of rock.

**4. Heartbeat – 16** <sup>1</sup>

Ben & Joe MacLennan pre-1980 (T)

This is an exhilarating climb on the overhangs to the R. A couple of pitches up overhanging cracks to a fissure in the final wall. Up this fissure till you are forced out. About 5m from the top, traverse R along the lip of the overhang. Move down & around a nose & pullup a break immediately beyond. The nose is visible in the profile seen from the road leading to the farmhouse.



## Brown Duchess

These routes are in a side gorge to Coombs River gorge. Access into this will be an adventure. *The scribe found Cave of Hands, but could not identify any of the routes.*

### 1. Brown Duchess – 17<sup>2</sup>

Gavin Stewart & Don MacLennan 07/05/1983 (T)

In the side gorge at Coombs is *Cave of Hands* a large dry rock shelter. This is used for camping. About 70m R of the shelter is a buttress consisting of partly overhanging blocks near ground level. The most prominent block, about 7m up, has a distinct spout shape. Gaining the top of this block is key to this route.

P1 – 17 – 20m From the ledge to L of buttress, gain the top of the first block. Several strenuous moves are needed to gain to gain the spout. From the spout easy moves to a ledge. Move L to a face. Up the face moving R at a dassie cave to a larger, higher cave with a very large thread belay over a block.

P2 – 10 – 10m Climb under or past the block, then walk L to a wall.

P3 – 13 – 18m Climb the wall or the corner to the R which has a large chockstone. Join the top pitch of *Breakfast Surprise*, which ends in an exposed traverse.

### 2. Breakfast Surprise<sup>2</sup>

*Details unknown to scribe.*

### 3. Unseparated<sup>10</sup> AKA Manic Monitor<sup>3</sup> – 22 ★★★

Paul Schlottfeldt & Mike Roberts 1988 (T)<sup>10</sup>

The wideboys-isch crack is a stand-alone route on a hidden buttress which is downstream & up the slope, from *Cave of Hands*. Technical inverted jamming<sup>10</sup>. Apparently, a plum line, body tweaking<sup>3</sup>.

### 4. Fifth Dimension – 23★★

Paul Schlottfeldt & Mike Roberts<sup>10</sup> 1988 (T)<sup>3</sup>

Downstream from *Unseparated* “Microb flailed over the lip & past the crux” “mega roofed buttress”<sup>3</sup>.



Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> Joe MacLennan a pocket guide to rock climbing near Grahamstown 1980  
Rhodes University Mountain Club
- <sup>2</sup> Gavin Stewart RD given to Derek Marshall
- <sup>3</sup> Keith James SA Climbers Club, July - Sept 1988 Newsletter
- <sup>4</sup> Jeff Stevens Crag Fax Grahamstown Crag Guide
- <sup>5</sup> Keith James SA Climbing Magazine October 2001 edition
- <sup>6</sup> Kevan Watkins E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021
- <sup>7</sup> Keith James Verbal to Derek Marshall, early 2000s
- <sup>8</sup> Jeremy Colenso E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Holness E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021
- <sup>10</sup> Keith James E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021
- <sup>11</sup> Dave Joe MacLennan E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021
- <sup>12</sup> Joe MacLennan E mail to Derek Marshall, May 2021