

PEMBROKE FASCINATION

1st ascent of the North Ridge of Mt Pembroke, Fiordland, New Zealand, 2016

by Grant Dixon



The wild, steep valleys and ranges of Fiordland are amongst my favourite places, and hidden within this country lies potential for many new routes—if one can just get to the chosen mountain in good weather.

Mt Pembroke (2015m), with its distinctive glacier, rears enticingly from across Milford Sound—but is isolated by the fiord's waters and precipitous surrounding terrain. The range of which it is the highest point encloses the Harrison valley (with the Darran Mountains to the east) and this valley provides the usual access on the rare occasions Pembroke is climbed. The mountain's spectacular northern and western aspects are hidden from most views, with the west a steep sweep of forest, snowgrass and rock rising 2000 metres directly from the Tasman Sea.

Both my friend Ian Brown and I had traversed through the Harrison country on previous occasions—one of my trips even had an ascent of Pembroke as a serious objective, but heavy packs associated with the longer trip and poor weather at the relevant time ruled out an attempt. However, I did investigate access to Pembroke's unclimbed north ridge from the north and, while rebuffed by steep ground, saw enough to hint at promise for a western approach. This provided the germ of an idea—a west to east traverse of the mountain, climbing the north ridge en route, and with the long east ridge the most elegant descent route.

I had previously accessed the Milford coast by boat, but that option was no longer available. Hence, we came to be flying low down Milford Sound, with remnant cloud from the previous days' rain clearing from the fiord walls. The helicopter soon dropped us on the bouldery beach at the mouth of Thurso River, but sand-flies and thoughts of the long climb ahead precluded lingering in this spot.



We rock-hopped upstream a few hundred metres, then commenced the ascent, initially a steep but steady climb north through ferny rainforest. This provided access to the east-trending ridge that eventually abuts Pembroke's west face about 800 metres above the coast. Traversing this narrow and well-defined ridge, through mossy and sun-dappled open rainforest, was a delight.

Our arrival at a ridgetop opening—its existence due to an outcrop of ultramafic bedrock—coincided with a lifting of the cloud curtain that had been hiding Pembroke's upper west face towering above us. We made time for a munchie break amidst the ensuing session of camera frenzy resulting from this first glimpse of our objective.

This forest opening had obviously provided helicopter access for a hunting party some years previously, and the abandoned rubbish and other evidence of that visit was disappointing to encounter in this designated wilderness area.

The terrain steepened suddenly after our undulating ridge ended. Initially, we were still in open forest but this soon gave way to wiry sub-alpine scrub and small bluffs. The subsequent 400 metre ascent was the most strenuous part of the trip, fighting the downward-growing woody stems to both maintain purchase and make upward progress.

We eventually emerged atop a rocky knoll, parched and sweaty, with a spectacular view along the western escarpment of the Fiordland coast. Our weary bodies managed a final stagger to a comfortable snowgrass shelf at about 1400 metres, scenically located directly beneath Pembroke's north ridge. From here, we watched the sun sink into the Tasman Sea and paint the ridge above orange, but our eyes were closed soon after.





Not long after dawn the next day we were scrambling up a scree gully towards the col at the foot of Pembroke's north ridge. We gained the crest after outflanking a large fissure—probably formed due to slumping after the disappearance of glacial ice thousands of years ago—and soon after reached the first pitch of the climb proper. Ian led a short, awkward and loose gully, then

a scramble bought us to the flat top of a ridge-crest bluff, and the first of many magnificent situations. The north ridge soared over 500 metres above us to Pembroke's summit, from our viewpoint appearing as a series of arêtes and bluffs. Vertical-to-overhanging cliffs fell towards the Harrison valley far below, with barely less-steep ground to the west. Steep slopes rose even higher across the opposite side of the U-shaped Harrison valley, with Tutoko overtopping all beyond.

We only used our minimal rock gear once more on the entire climb, when I led a ten metre corner, graded perhaps 13, about halfway up the ridge. The remainder of the north ridge was an often-exhilarating scramble up exposed ribs, small bluffs, and along airy arêtes—all on beautiful rough gneiss—high above the sea on one side and the shadowed depths of the Harrison valley on the other. The major step in the north ridge, a distinctive feature when seen from afar, proved a straightforward scramble.



We trudged through softening snow at the head of the Pembroke Glacier to the rocky summit for lunch—with a grand view. The toy-sized boats on Milford Sound, now visible far below, seemed a world away. The remnant footings of a DOC communications installation that once blighted the summit were near at hand, and an unfortunate scar in this wilderness area.

After lunch, a quick glissade bought us down to the rocky shoulder overlooking the top of the east ridge—our chosen descent route—but the snow-free route down to it looked somewhat intimidating from above. We first cramponed down the steepening edge of the Pembroke Glacier, then delicately down steep and loose rock and scree to the head of the Lippe Couloir. From there it was an easy sidle across to good rock on the upper east ridge. We had descended 700 metres from the summit when we reached a level bouldery area, with likely bivouac sites and meltwater nearby, and energy levels flagging, we called an end to another long and hot day.



I slept soundly after moving early in the night from our flat-topped boulder, which was exposed to a night breeze, to a more sheltered crevice and then dozed right through the sunrise. In any case, a dawn start was unnecessary for our final day. Despite our later start, the forested Harrison valley floor remained in shade long after we were underway. We followed the

curving yellow snowgrass crest of the steep-sided east ridge downwards towards the gloom. As in much of this intensely-glaciated country, the ridge steepened significantly towards its base, and also became forested. Continuing our descent here required care to avoid dropping off the even more precipitous sides of the ridge, but the final section still involved some tree-climbing manoeuvres.

From the base of the ridge it was a short descent beside a cascade in Pembroke Creek, then river boulders and more forest to the confluence with the Harrison River. Both Ian and I had been here before but, despite familiarity, the three kms to Harrison Cove still seemed long—boulder-hopping in the riverbed alternating with forest excursions where the moss carpet often hid unexpected holes.



We arrived at Harrison Cove late in the morning but didn't have to commune with the sand-flies for long. Some spirited hailing attracted the attention of staff at the Underwater Observatory, and we were soon wading out to a welcome dinghy. Then, a little later, we were delivered back to Milford Sound on a tourist cruise boat, all a rather sudden end to our traverse through some truly wild country.

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