

# The future of British Climbing in the 1970s

Dennis Gray<sup>1</sup>

At a glance British climbing has never been in such a healthy state, with the barometer of performance and achievement at unprecedented heights and the numbers of practitioners and newcomers to our sport a swiftly multiplying stream. But from within the crucible of such a situation arise problems, threats and new and vital interests which must be carefully considered, understood and in some cases rigorously opposed by all who have the best interest of mountaineering at heart.

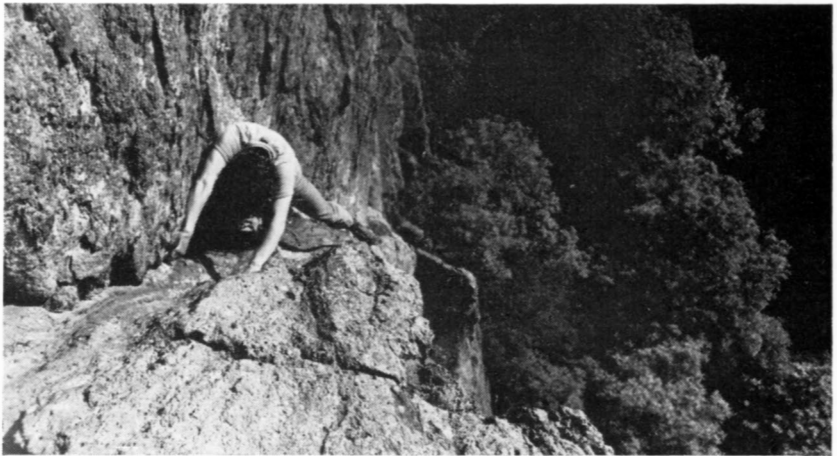
Overcrowding is now much in evidence at main climbing centres such as Llanberis, and though it is possible to find respite from this by visiting less-popular districts or Scotland and Ireland, this is only a temporary situation, for their turn will inevitably come. Large numbers of persons lead to litter problems, erosion, pollution and ecological change, and though no climber would surely wish to deny any other 'the freedom of the hills', it must be faced that unless leisure time is not soon staggered into mid-week periods away from the present frenzy of the week-end, then it will spell disaster for our homeland hills if one in ten of the population is a climber by the 1990s. I am not suggesting we should follow the advice proffered recently to myself by a well-known and senior climber, namely that the BMC should 'advertise for people not to climb!'. But we should be aware of the limitations of too many people in the same place at the same time, with its inevitable results.

Where are all the new climbers coming from? Well, some are coming into the sport via the traditional avenues, from the clubs and by finding out the mountain secrets for themselves, but an ever-increasing number now commence via the mountain centres (several dozens in North Wales alone). At the time of writing there is definitely a view held by the majority of clubs who, whatever anyone feels about them, do represent the mainstream, that mountain centres with their 'course' mentality are foreign to the traditions of British climbing and are either mere toys and ploys of educationalists or 'jobs for the boys'. This is unfair and untrue, but the centres do little to correct such impressions. Speaking as one who has run a centre, many such institutions tend to be morbidly insular; they are out of the mainstream, often by-passed by climbing standards of the day, and so far most of them have made little or no real effort to establish relationships with the main body of British climbers, represented by their clubs. These are, I concede, sweeping generalisations and not true of all centres, but a real effort must now be made by those concerned to bring all mountain centres into the mainstream, for they are, and will be in the years ahead, an ever increasing important point of entry into our sport. If

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Gray is National Officer of the British Mountaineering Council. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Alpine Club. The author was asked to be controversial. Ed.

we are not careful they will end up producing a whole generation and type of climber so removed in values as to change the whole basis of this country's climbing.

More and more climbers will inevitably lead to more and more calls upon, and thus the need for further development of, our Mountain Rescue services. Education, training and technique can only do so much and there is an idea current that given good equipment, good navigation, safe rope technique, and experienced leadership there will be no accidents. This is a fallacy. Mountaineering is a dangerous pastime and all those who take part to any degree should admit this fact to themselves. We try to guard against every possibility, but there is always the unforeseen and the human element, and this is at the very basis of what mountaineering is all about. Several dozens of my friends have died whilst climbing, and amongst them were men at the very apex of climbing standards in this country: Arthur Dolphin, Tom Patey, Ian Clough and others. They were neither foolhardy nor incompetent. Our voluntary rescue organisations have done a marvellous job over the years, but sooner or later they will need to be professionally led and organised. This may sound heresy, but I believe it will be inevitable.



39 *Overhanging Bastion, Castle Rock of Triermain* This and next photo: L. Dickinson

Growing numbers of persons wanting to get away to the hills will necessitate more and more effort directed to conservation and access problems. We have seen over conservation, the spectre of yesteryear's battles being fought over once more; in Snowdonia with the CEBG and mining interests, in the Lake District over the route for a main through motorway. Only unceasing vigilance is of any use here, but also there must be from climbers a spirit of compromise and a sensible weighing in the balance. Take Cheddar Gorge for instance. The owners wished to stop climbing taking place there altogether because of the real danger of climbers dislodging rocks on to persons or vehicles on the road below. At the height of the summer tourist season I feel it a real chance that a tourist could be killed in the Gorge by such climbing activity. After a meeting

with the Gorge owners, it was agreed that climbing could continue by permission in the winter months, but that real attempts would be made to appeal to all climbers not to go there in summer. The negotiations were skilfully handled by the SW committee of the BMC, and though they were not ideal from the climbers' standpoint, they did make the best of the situation. There is a myth as far as access goes, current in British climbing circles, that there is no law of trespass in Scotland. This is nonsense, though it has never been a point at issue before simply because there have never been the pressures over the border that there have been on the land in Wales and England. But the scene is changing fast, and the first cases are now in the courts, spotlighting two facts of concern to all outdoor men, that there are still no National Parks in Scotland and nearly all the main mountain lands are privately owned.

The SMC have recently proposed a very controversial move in the hope of conserving what is one of our finest of wilderness areas, NW Scotland, the proposal being that they will not publish any new guide-books to those districts. It is an imaginative and idealistic notion that climbers for all time to come should be able to have always the chance to enter an unknown (climbing-wise) wilderness area to sample the pristine delights of pioneering ascents. But sober and serious reflection intimates it will not work. If British climbers had now only the climbing grounds that were known, say, in the 1930s then stagnation and saturation would have been reached long ago. As it is, new cliffs and areas are being developed every year, and by publishing guide-books to them clubs are managing to spread the numbers of climbers ever wider over the ground. The mass of climbers are not pioneers, they follow where the guide-books lead. In Scotland once Glencoe is overrun, Nevis swamped, the Cairngorms snowed under then it will be seen that it is better to have persons widely dispersed than gathering in such masses as to ruin areas equally precious. There is a need for guide-books to be authoritative, and competently prepared. The SMC has always done this service for Scottish climbing, but let them persist with their policy of no guides to the NW, and others will step into the breach, editors who may produce a first-class job, but as we have seen elsewhere chances are that such works will be second rate, inaccurate and perhaps even expensive. Similar moves to those contemplated by the SMC have been tried by major clubs in England and Wales and always the guide-book agencies have been forced to act because of the threat of inaccurate or 'pirate' guide-books. Finally, guide-books do help the climber with limited time at his disposal (the majority) to make the most of his available holiday. In an area like NW Scotland, a week could be spent looking for something worthwhile to climb, it might be educational but not very enjoyable, though one must admit that many guide-books have gone too far in giving information and completely negate the most important requirement in mountaineering, 'route-finding ability'.

Mountains are the source of rivers, the holders of lakes, the posers of many challenges to man besides mountaineering, and more and more recreational activities are making their demands for *Lebensraum* where the climber once stood alone. Canoers, skiers, fishermen, fell-runners and sub-aqua clubs are all looking for accommodation and theatres within which they can extend their activities, driven onwards like so many climbers by the need to escape suburbia

and to find an antidote for twentieth-century city living. We hold no more right than they do, but we must point out that our sport needs in part space and solitude where activities like piste ski-ing, being gregarious and fashionable, do not. We must make our point strongly for the good of those yet to come, seek a *modus vivendi* and understand other sportsmen's needs as well as our own.

The interest in and presentation of climbing by the mass media should now be a concern for ourselves of the utmost importance. Mountaineering has always excited the layman's curiosity; rock-climbing, as we have all seen, makes 'good television', and the recent battles on Himalayan giants have captured and fired the imagination of everyone, with Everest, as it has always been, the keenest interest and thus the biggest money spinner of them all. Most climbers are not financial schemers, image builders nor publicity or advertising agents, but many media men are. Misrepresentation is often their business and all climbers have a duty to the well-being of our sport to take the most rigorous of steps to see that the truth is what is presented about their activities. The funding of expeditions has led to much that is bad in this respect with climbers being willing to see blatant untruths presented as long as they have received the necessary funds to carry out their plans, a very short-sighted policy. There is now obviously the need for further provision to be made for expedition funding than can at present be forthcoming from the Mount Everest Foundation. No body in British climbing history has ever done such good work as the Foundation. All those concerned with its inception and administration cannot be too highly praised for their imagination and achievement over the past twenty years. But the capital has now been run down, the grants are no longer realistic taking into account inflation and rising costs throughout the world. A real effort should now be made to build up the funds of the MEF once more into a body better endowed than ever before, and thus able to assist expeditions ever better financially and enable them to avoid the worst of media involvement. Sponsorship will shortly be rife within our sport, and whatever we feel about the products thus being advertised, it would be better if such financial resources be channelled into some body like the MEF and not left as easy pickings for some private entrepreneur.

It is not only here in the UK that climbing is in the process of transition from a minority sport, followed by odd eccentrics, to a suitable activity for the masses. International interest is giving mountaineering impetus at levels we have never hitherto associated with mountain activities. Competition climbing, speed rock-climbing performed on top ropes, is now firmly established in the Soviet Union as a mass sport for competitor and spectator alike. The winner is he who climbs up, then abseils back down to the ground again, the fastest over a prescribed route timed by stop watch. This is anathema to what British climbing has up to now been all about, but it is catching on and the Russians held the first world championships in the Crimea last year. We must understand what is involved, the way such competition is structured, the philosophy and historical background to this totally new sport . . . vertical running? I have little doubt it could spread to UK climbing grounds, and that some climbers would welcome the opportunity for such open competition, and even more so the recognition which would be accorded to top performers. Only by

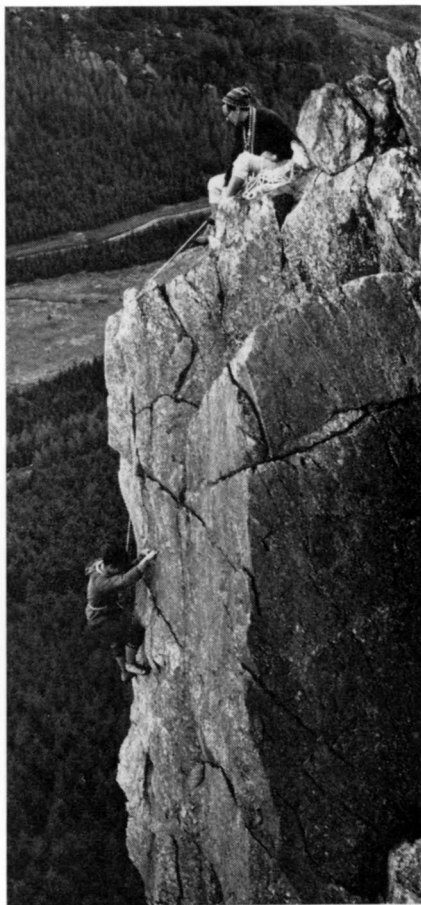
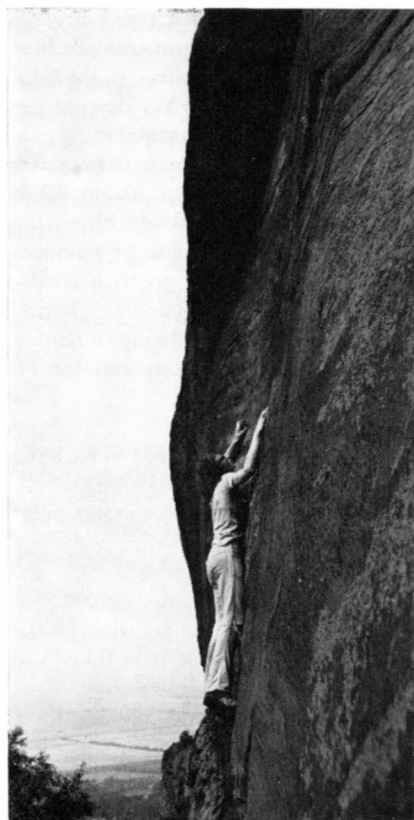
understanding what it is all about can one put up a case against such activities, and everyone will have to weigh in the balance for himself whether it is a good or bad thing and whether he wishes to take part.

The Russians have also asked the International Olympic Committee for mountaineering to be reinstated as an Olympic sport as it once was. The full history of this is too lengthy to describe here, but in 1924 the first Olympic gold medal for Alpinism was awarded to General Bruce (a member of the AC) for his part in the 1922 Mount Everest Expedition, in 1932 at Los Angeles Franz and Toni Schmid were awarded Olympic gold medals for their first ascent of the N face of the Matterhorn the year before, and in 1936 at Berlin gold medals were awarded to Professor Dyhrenfurth and his wife for their Himalayan explorations. The awards were then discontinued, but were based on the outstanding mountaineering feats performed between each Olympiad. Given the difficulty of assessing any mountaineering feat, whether it is the best of any period, for no two ascents can ever be the same because of weather and other variables, I feel we should not resist the Russian proposal on such grounds (for some means of assessment could be devised). I think our arguments are best based on aesthetic and ethical concepts, which are the more telling in the final analysis, and we should oppose this Olympic consideration. Yet despite the undesirability of climbing competitions, international mountaineering exchanges are capable of doing much good. The writer was fortunate to take part in a very enjoyable climbing meet organised by the German Alpine Club (DAV) at the time of the Munich Olympics, visiting the Kaisergerbirge, the Wetterstein and the Salzburg Alpen. The many planned visits by overseas mountaineers arranged by the BMC, over the next year or so with Swiss, Russian and French climbers coming here plus acting as hosts and promoting the UIAA Youth meet in North Wales in August 1973 should bring to British climbing new outlooks, ideas and friendships which in the long run can do nothing but good.

Present-day climbing standards in the UK are frighteningly high. On rock the average on a good summer's day, in PA type footwear, may be as high as Very Severe (Grade VI), with so many persons climbing at above this standard at their best, as not to arouse any form of comment. Scottish ice-climbing is more of an unknown quantity, but the new methods of using curved picks and front-point crampon techniques (described in *AJ* 77 75 by John Cunningham and Bill March) have brought the harder ice climbs more into the compass of the average climber. And here lies a part of the answer to the higher standards of performance—better equipment allied to more specialised techniques. Certainly on rock the new protection devices, nuts, wire slings, new-style pitons, have brought extreme rock climbs almost into the realm of everybody, but this is only a part of the answer. The average climber of today can climb more often, can practise techniques more regularly, often in the comparative safety of the local outcrop situation, and in the winter evenings he has indoor climbing walls to sport himself upon. The refinement and development of a regular and extensive climbing press—the magazines—keep him abreast of new developments and show him how to use technique and equipment to get the utmost out of himself. Yet I still firmly believe the great climbers of yesteryear would

be the leaders of today; Kirkus would have been as potent a force in 1972 as he was in 1932, and O. G. Jones the arrow's tip of 1975 as he was in 1895. Technique and equipment are naught without mental strength, for as Menlove Edwards declared 'The best climbing comes from dreams'. All the main pioneers of every generation always possess this attribute.

Solo climbing continues to increase in popularity, and we have even seen solo first ascents in the UK that begin to compare with other such great feats abroad, for example, Tom Patey's first ascent of the girdle traverse of Coire Ardair in winter. Solo climbing is not new to this country, Edwards for instance often climbed alone in the 1930s, but until recently there has always been an unreasonable prejudice against this form of climbing by the majority of our climbers. More and more persons have come to realise that solo climbing can be very enjoyable and not more dangerous than any other form of mountain-



40 *Helsby Crag*

41 *Lavaredo Wall, Carreg Alltrem* Photo: K. Wilson

eering, for as Tom Patey remarked the solo climber has traditionally been judged as foolhardy, reckless even, but nothing could be farther from the truth, for if he were he would soon be dead. Obviously soloing the hardest climbs will always be the activity of the few, just as pioneering the hardest climbs is, but everyone has a safe soloing standard which may vary from time to time taking into account form and conditions, but the activity, far from being decried, should be acknowledged for what it is, the ultimate in climbing experience.

A most important aspect of British climbing in recent years has been the ever-increasing development and popularity of sea cliffs. The sea can provide objective dangers as acute and serious as the mountainous regions, and though this form of climbing is not only to be found in the UK (one thinks of the Calanques, and of the cliffs in Normandy), the art seems to be more highly developed here than anywhere else hitherto, and has a long way to go yet before the cry of *finis*. Hardly an area of the country is devoid of sea cliffs, with the sw of England promising to be Mecca to the devotee of brine before the end of this decade. Such developments have led inevitably to further specialisations by some of our climbers, but this in my opinion is not to be deplored, for if a man wants to be solely an amphibious climber, a rock-hopper or a snow and ice gymnast that is his business. Always we are now led back to a question of numbers for how many climbers are there in Britain today. It all depends on what you call a climber. I would guess at 50,000 keenly committed climbers who are out regularly at week-ends and holidays, but the number may spin out to 250,000 if one counts all those who climb at least once a year, and by climb I mean the ascent of graded routes. Looking coldly at these figures one wonders why the Alpine Club of today can boast no more members than the club did just after the turn of the century, or why the ACG has no more full members than it had a decade ago. The Club is an attractive membership proposition now that it has reciprocal rights with some continental Alpine clubs, then there is the history of this club, standing for all that it does and linking closely past with present, so that joining should be the ambition of every serious British alpinist. I would hazard a guess that 2000 would be about the right size for membership if this club was to be truly representative of British Alpine climbing, and the ACG would stand at about a tenth of that figure. Gentlemen, we must put our house in order! And once again we must reconsider our function as laid down by the founders of our climbing heritage, and surely it is time women invaded the closed cloisters of South Audley Street.

Finally, the BMC has made some big strides in recent years. No one who studies the question for long will doubt the need for a truly strong and representative national body for mountaineering. Without the support of Alpine Club members little of what has been accomplished so far could have been done. It will be greatly to the credit of this club if the BMC fulfills the needs of British climbing in the years ahead. The next few years will be crucial, partly for reasons already enumerated, especially our own population explosion within the field of mountaineering, but also because of ever faster-changing attitudes and social structures. Commercialism, regimentation, lack of imagination and apathy are our enemies, constructive criticism and support our allies.