

Events and trends 1978-1981. Rock climbing in Britain

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The following article does not claim to be a complete appraisal of recent developments; as indicated in the text this is becoming an almost impossible task. In particular it does not aim to cover the very important recent developments in Pembrokeshire.

In the last 4 years there has been a major revolution in British climbing and, despite all the controversial debates which have merely accentuated a healthy self-critical attitude to ethical issues, the general approach has been highly progressive, ever striving towards a free-climbing ideal.

Many factors have contributed to this: rigorous training programmes, indoor climbing walls, chalk, lightweight clothing and equipment, and improved protection devices such as 'rocks' and the revolutionary camming devices, 'Friends', have all played a vital role. The most important factor however has been one of attitude and we now have a generation of young climbers—many of whom are out of work and able to go out to the crags daily—who are totally dedicated to their climbing. For the pace setters climbing has become a full-time commitment rather than a leisure-time activity to be pursued as and when one is so inclined.

Before considering some of the more important new routes 2 problems merit consideration. Firstly there is the question of 'first ascent style' and here there are two conflicting viewpoints. A minority of climbers still firmly believe in making 'on-sight' first ascents. Here the climber is faced with the unknown, except for what he can see from the foot of the prospective route. All loose rock and vegetation must be dealt with while leading and clearly on the current hardest routes this is not feasible, unless one is prepared for many falls, failures and the risk of losing a partially completed route to another party. Gardening a route by abseil unfortunately reveals all and takes away much of the uncertainty and mystique which is what climbing is all about. It also encourages dubious practices such as: trying out runners to cut down weight while leading, pre-placing pitons and sometimes runners, and even trying out moves while on the abseil rope. All these factors often tip the balance and ensure success but pity the poor climber who tries to lead the second ascent on-sight, especially as more often than not the style of the first ascent has not been declared. Perhaps it is time to assume on-sight leads unless otherwise declared, unless of course opinion dictates that pre-gardening is now the norm, in which case one must then declare an on-sight lead. Only honesty by a responsible generation of individuals who are respected by their peers will lead to a change for the better.

The second problem which has led to much confusion has been that of grading. Numerical grades are now universally accepted and are well understood from 4a up to 5c but there is still a reluctance amongst top climbers to grade the hardest routes realistically. A move to downgrade

many of the hardest routes in 1977 only caused confusion. Another factor which made leaders reticent about grading their own routes was 'magazine sensationalism' which led to such headlines as: 'Fawcett climbs 6c in Borrowdale', 'Can this be Britain's first 6c?', and 'Grade 7 barrier crashed by Fawcett'. Many such statements have led to ridicule and criticism after subsequent ascents, and it has been left to guidebook writers to sort out the mess (first Welsh 6b in a guide, 1978; 6c and 7a did not appear until 1981).

If technical grades brought confusion then the 'E' grading system (which replaced Extremely Severe) brought chaos although it was well accepted by 1981, but not in Scottish or Yorkshire guidebooks. Thankfully the problems were in the dizzy region of Hard Extremely Severe and it is somewhat academic as to whether routes are given E5, E6 or even E7 (the latter was first used in 1981). A commonsense approach is gradually emerging and ought to pave the way for the future.

A few years ago it would have been a simple exercise to pick out the best and hardest of the new routes, but now it is almost impossible owing to the accelerated pace of development in every area of Britain. Compare the 78 new routes at Gogarth in 1978 with the staggering 350 plus routes done in South Pembroke, in a mere 3 year period between 1978 and 1980.

On Cloggy 10 different leading climbers have produced major new routes; of these, *The Axe* by Pat Littlejohn, *The Purr-Spire* by Pete Livesey and *Pistolero* by Ed Cleasby deserve a mention, as does Ron Fawcett's *Psycho Killer* which turned the bogus *Final Judgement* into reality. The main event however, was the freeing and completion of *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Pete Whillance. This has now set the stage for the completion of the blank section of Master's Wall.

Intensive Gogarth development solved nearly all the great problems and brought a noticeable increase in climbing standards. Jim Moran did no fewer than 40 new routes: *Barbarossa* and *The Horrorshow* were the hardest of the first batch but other good lines are *Tet Offensive*, *Sebastopol*, *Main Kampf*, *Manor Park*, *The Assassin*, *South Sea Bubble*, and *The Wastelands* as well as a free ascent of *Television Route* and a shared lead on *Wall of Fossil*. *Freebird*, *Aardvark* and *North West Passage* were the work of Al Evans, while Littlejohn's *Hunger* and *Alien*, Wintringham's *Fantasia*, Knighton's *True Moments* and *Run Fast Run Free*, Whillance's *Blue Peter* and *The Long Run* and Fowler's *Ludwig* and *Heart of Gold* are all of high quality. Even Joe Brown joined in the new route free-for-all and found a gem in *The Flytrap*. Fawcett however forced the pace with *Blackleg*, *The Cad* (with its controversial 2 bolt runners) and *The Big Sleep*, but it was left to John Redhead to wind his neck out one stage further with *The Bells! The Bells!*, a route of the utmost seriousness which he has claimed as the first E7.

In Llanberis Pass, which saw the first guidebook amalgamation in 1978, Fawcett's blitz of the Cromlech captured the headlines and *Lord of the Flies*, *Precious* and *Hall of Warriors* all received an E6 grading after some debate. The test piece is undoubtedly *Atomic Hot Rod*—one of Fawcett's two Welsh 7a pitches. Another milestone was passed when Haston and McGinley freed *The Grinder*, the last of the artificial routes.

Elsewhere in Wales Fawcett's *Crimson Cruiser* on Craig y Clipiau, and his

freeing of *Erg* on Castell Cidwm were impressive ascents, but Moran's *Hang 'em High*, a harder companion route to *Tramgo* is also a big undertaking. In the Crafnant valley Livesey and Gomersall have sorted out some of the old aid moves to give good free routes, but it was Cathcart's *Crash Landing*, billed as possibly the first Welsh 6c, which caused a minor sensation. Suicide Wall, Idwal, has yielded two more hard lines, *Wall of the Dead* to Fawcett and *Zero* to Livesey. A heated argument blew up after the felling of the once proud oak on the Milestone Buttress, and Redhead, who was not guilty of the crime, finished off *The Wrinkled Retainer*—a dubious memorial.

On the coast the Ormes have given many high quality limestone routes including Edwards's *Psychic Threshold*, *New Dimensions* and *Appian Way*, as well as Redhead's *Plas Berw* and *The Bittersweet Connection*. Also on the limestone Craig y Forwyn has developed into a major crag despite acute access problems.

After the 1978 Tremadog guidebook many minor variations were claimed but the main action was on Vector Buttress where Fawcett finally got up *Strawberries*, the line shown on the cover of the current guidebook. This pitch which received the new super-grade of 7a was only completed after many falls spread out over 3 days, and in retrospect this type of ascent is still being debated. Another siege pitch done over 2 days was Redhead's *Bananas*—now thought to be a grade easier than Fawcett's 2 hardest pitches. On the same buttress Redhead's *Sultans of Swing* and *The Weaver* by Shorter and Williams, are both fine new additions. Recently there has been a spate of desperate new routes; Gerry Moffatt even got up the wall to the left of *Vulcan*.

In 1978 grading problems were sorted out in Wales and other areas. In the Lake District the pre-1978 routes: *Footless Crow*, *Nagasaki Groove*, *The Last Laugh* and *Peels of Laughter* were all graded 6b and this provided a yardstick for the hardest new routes and freeings. Much of the development has been the product of about four prolific teams. Jeff Lamb and Pete Botterill dominated Scafell with excellent routes such as *Equinox*, *Burning Bridges*, *Midnight Express*, *Caradhras* and *Talisman*, but the Berzins also joined in with *Cullinen* and *Roaring Silence*. Birkett and Graham another talented duo added *Fall Out* and *Strontium Dog* to Esk Buttress, as well as *Broken Arrow* and *Fear and Fascination* to the N Buttress of Dove Crag. Also on Dove *Ommadawn* is a Lamb/Botterill creation. Raven Crag, Thirlmere is now one of the best hard crags and *Politruck* by Cleasby and Mattheson and *Das Kapital* by Livesey and Gomersall add to its reputation.

Deer Bield Crag has emerged as a hard man's testing ground. Whillance and Dave Armstrong scooped most of the lines to give: *Stiletto*, *The New Girdle*, *Limbo*, *Dynamo*(6c), *Bravado* and the serious *Take It To The Limit*. The same pair also grabbed *Trouble Shooter* on Great End, Borrowdale, where Livesey added *Hiroshima*. On the Boulderstone Fawcett freed *Hell's Wall* to give the first Lakes 6c. On Gable, *Golden Calf* and *Sacrificial Crack* were the work of Botterill and Lamb.

1980 brought the rapid development of Hodge Close Quarry newly discovered near Ambleside. Whillance climbed most of the big routes such

as: *Life in the Fast Lane*, *The Main Event*, *Malice in Wonderland* and *Stiff Little Fingers* but *Ten Years After* was a Mattheson creation.

In addition to his successes S of the Border Whillance also made forays into Scotland to set new standards with top routes such as *The Edge of Extinction* on The Brack and another 6b on Creag a Bhancair. Willie Todd's *Caligula* on the Ben sounds impressive but Murray Hamilton and Dave Cuthbertson have put up countless good routes—Cuthbertson's *Wild Country* on The Cobbler being particularly fierce.

If Scotland still remains under a cloak of doubt and uncertainty (as far as the Sassenachs are concerned) it is not alone in that Yorkshire is tarred with the same brush. Recently however it was finally confirmed that Al Manson was in fact climbing 6c (*Fred Zimmerman*) and 7a (*Adrenalin Rush*) on the gritstone at Caley as long ago as 1977, but more recent horrors are Fawcett's *Desperate Dan* at Ilkley, Andy Brown's *Bald Pate Super Direct* on the same crag and Gawthorpe's *China Syndrome* at Almscliffe. Of the better limestone routes which have appeared Fawcett's *Tarzan* at Malham sounds a fine proposition and Dave Knighton's lines at Kilnsey are pointers to the future.

Development in the Peak District has been particularly intense with long standing problems being solved on many crags. The production of 3 new guidebooks has accelerated the action and on Stanage alone there are over 100 new routes. Bancroft's *Perfect Day* at Gardoms is a major achievement and Steve also managed to complete his line of *Narcissus* on Froggatt. Next door at Curbar Fawcett's *Rigid Digit* (a harder twin to *Profit of Doom*) and *One Step Beyond* and Phil Burke's *Shape of Things to Come* are all fierce. In the Roaches area new routes have fallen thick and fast. Johnny Woodward's *Piece of Mind* has stopped most leaders in their tracks and of the many classics mention must be made of Dave Jones's *Apalloosa Sunset*, Phil Gibson's *Gyppfast*, Moran's *Borstal Breakout* and Burke's airy *Gilted*.

On the limestone at Stoney Middleton Tom Proctor has continued to set standards with horrors such as: *Racial Harmony*, *Scarab*, *Cardiac Arrest*, *Cabbage Crack*, free ascents of both *Kink* and *Circe* and the extremely mean *Four Minute Tiler*. He has not had it all his own way though as Chris Hamper freed the much tried *Menopause* and Gerry Moffatt has recently completed *Hysterectomy* and *Helmudt Schmidt*. Water-cum-Jolly has remained quiet apart from Fawcett's freeings of aid routes such as *Sardine*, which now paves the way for an attack on the big aid routes such as *Mecca* and *Prow*. Central Buttress has been popular; first Moran and Milburn picked off *The Alien*, *War*, *Timewarp* and *Yankee Dollar*, then Fawcett stepped in for *Cool Hand Luke* and the savage line of *La Chute*. Cheedale yielded many fine routes and Chris Jackson's *Rue Morgue* and *Fey* are both excellent. On Chee Tor Livesey raced in for *The Golden Mile* while Fawcett burnt up *Autobahn*. Proctor astounded the climbing world with his colossal roof pitch of *Santiano* but Burke's ascent of *The Big Plum* with only one point of aid really made climbers think.

In Dovedale Codling's *Wild Country* and *The Umpire* are good, but over in the Derwent Valley High Tor has been constantly under attack. Since *Supersonic* several 6b pitches have been forced—Livesey's free version of *The*

Girdle is brilliant but *Tales of Yankee Power* and *A6* by Burke are both big leads. Ed Cleasby's *Tumbril* and Arnis Strapcans's last fine offering, *Decadence*, are both packed in on the main face. Mike Graham finally freed *Bastille* at 6c to provide a new target but Fawcett's *Road Runner* is now one of the hardest routes in Britain.

Moving south via Codling's superb route *The Messiah* on Cader Idris we by-pass Littlejohn's territory at Pembroke to reach Avon, 'home' of Nipper Harrison and his *Changeling*, *Ladder of Desire* and *Mirage*, as well as many aid freeings including the newly completed *Pinkginsane*. Harrison has also been very active at Cheddar where his *Stone the Crows* is the latest super route. Lundy is now a major climbing ground with most of the best routes being pre-1978 from Littlejohn's early visits. Back on the mainland Fowler has climbed some outrageously loose and serious routes such as *Breakaway* on Henna Cliff. His *Depth Charge* on Berry Head is another audacious line but *False Alarms* by Pete O'Sullivan is clearly another spectacular solution. Edwards has explored much of the Cornish coast adding many excellent new routes and opening up several important cliffs. *Ziggurat* on Carn Vellan, *The Immaculate Crack* on Carn Boel, *Atlantic Ocean Wall* at Land's End and *Astral Stroll* and *Dangerous Visions* on Carn Glouce are all of high quality.

What of the future? It is now clear that we are rapidly running out of new rock in both England and Wales and this has certain implications. Firstly we are going to see a greater exodus to other countries; France has already become a highly popular short stay area and it is commonplace for British teams to pay an annual visit to the States. Nearer home Scotland and Ireland in particular have plenty of possibilities but the poor climate is likely to provide a deterrent to those who prefer a guarantee of good weather. For those who stay on home ground the problem is more serious and apart from freeing some of the few remaining old aid routes and possibilities on loose or minor new crags, we are already seeing signs of a future trend. Once the more blank walls have been overcome the explorer is restricted to variations on existing lines and it is becoming harder to decide just what does constitute a new route. The closer to the highly populated areas then the more acute the problem. One can only speculate as to whether or not the next generation will find merit in reaching and naming specific holds, but after that the home prospect looks somewhat bleak.