

Triennial Report 1970–2 British Isles

Derek Ellis

Once again the prophets of doom have been proved wrong. The much-climbed rocks of the British Isles continue to produce such a plethora of routes that this correspondent finds himself in great difficulties, since a list of the new routes alone would take more than the allotted space, and brief descriptions of line and quality would fill the whole *Journal*. Even in North and Mid Wales, large crags await intensive exploration, and hidden gorges have vast scope for the future. In many intensively explored areas the usual trend of reducing aid on artificial or mixed free and artificial climbs has continued, and brought with it the usual controversy. A rather novel feature of this activity has been the renaming of some of the routes to 'distinguish their new status from their ancient artificial concept'. In one case at least, this has led to the renaming of a renamed route.

Solo climbing has increased all over the country at an ever increasingly high standard, and many of its protagonists have extended their activities to the big Alpine routes. Inevitably, there have been accidents and a few have died in Britain, often on routes well within their capabilities.

At a technically lower level, there have been several mountain tragedies, many of them to school or youth parties, and these now receive wide coverage in the national press. It has been said in America that 'one death is a tragedy, a hundred deaths are a statistic'. It would appear that if present trends continue, the statisticians will be overworked in our mountains.

And now the area notes:

SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Many of the main climbing areas in this region are subject to, or threatened by, access restrictions and the area subcommittee of the BMC appears to be overworked with negotiations, so much so that there is some discontent with what they have achieved and conceded (for example, this situation exists at Harrison's Rocks in Kent).

Swanage still has large areas where a total ban is rigidly enforced, but such is the scope that most of the new developments take place on totally unexplored pieces of cliff.

Portland Bill has no such access problems and is in fact served by very good paths below the cliffs. The Bill has always had a few habitués ever since the early Alpinists practiced there. Recently several new routes of excellent quality have been recorded. It is interesting to note that ice-axes are still not ruled out for the final 'rather loose' sections.



91 *Avon Gorge, an early picture* Photo: K. Wilson

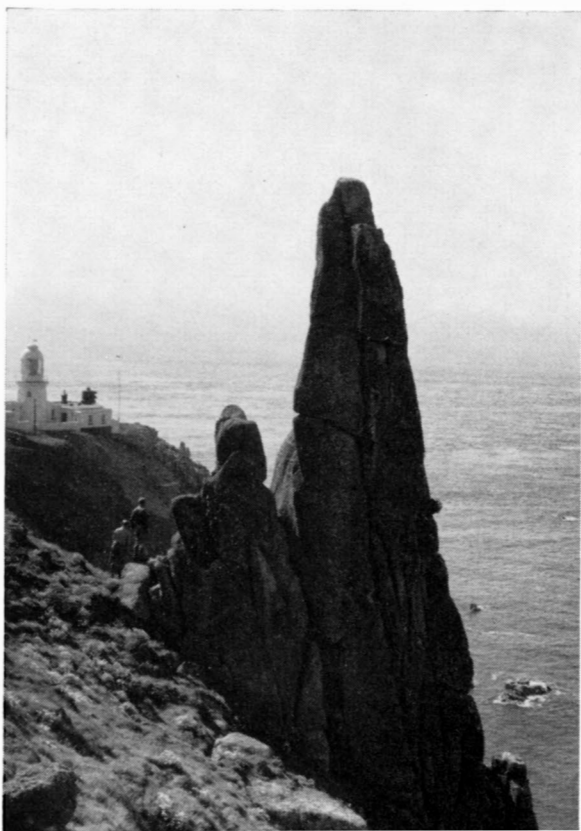
In Cornwall most of the plums were picked off in the early 60s, but the area is still producing fine routes, particularly in Bosigran's Great Zawn, where Littlejohn and others are climbing free on the old artificial routes.

Devon still produces the odd gem, but following the intensive development of Baggy Point things have settled down somewhat. The main problems are concerned with access at Torbay where, following legislation, a would-be climber has to prove himself a *bona fide* article before he can get a permit. Access to Old Redoubt, Berry Head is now restricted in the bird breeding season.

At Cheddar the problems of climbers dropping stones on passing cars has been well publicised, and the voluntary ban on climbing in the tourist season is well observed. However, it has recently been suggested that the gorge be made a pedestrian precinct, which might alter the situation. In spite of the huge expanses of clean rock present, the best lines have been climbed, many by marauding Northerners. Two of these, Dearman and Riley, have produced a model in interim guides. Aid elimination, often a sign that an area is nearing maturity, continues apace, the best effort so far being Littlejohn's free ascent of the wall to the left of Coronation Street.

The Avon Gorge continues to provide excellent new routes, and prior to the death of Tony Wilmott the climbing showed a healthy open, competitive

92 *The Constable*,
Lundy Photo: Edward
Pyatt



spirit. Two guide-books have recently been produced, and some would claim that between them they have caused more confusion than they have cleared up. On Lundy the amount of VS+ climbing has more than trebled over the period as strong teams continue to get away from it all. The result is a series of excellent climbs in exciting surroundings. Frank Cannings, one of the island's leading pioneers, was involved in a rather bizarre incident when the rescue helicopter that was taking him from the island crashed into the sea.

The Wye Valley still awaits a full guide-book, though Perrin has produced an interim guide to Wintours Leap. The most important feature has been the discovery and development of Wyndcliffe. Although there is sufficient rock here for many more routes, the cliff's must be considered nearly fully developed, due to the Nature Conservancy's concern that further gardening should not take place.

SOUTH WALES

In the past 3 years, the eastern part has gone through a most intensive period of exploration, so much so that guide-book delays are due to finding new crags rather than new routes on popular crags. The system is that the main pioneers, Horsefield, Kerry and Watkin, pick off most of the best lines then declare 'open house' for the others to fill in, while another group deals mostly in minor crags. The best discoveries to date are Craig Cefn Coed near Merthyr, a gritstone crag near Caerphilly, and, best of all, a large sea-cliff between Ogmore and Southerndown.

Further to the w, the Gower Peninsula is very popular but rather worked out. Little of significance has been added since the publication of the guide which, unfortunately, did little to clear up the mystery of the ironmongery on many of the climbs.

Pembrokeshire still awaits the promised guide, though most of the best routes have been published in various journals. Development has slackened over the past year or so as the main explorers, Perrin and Mortlock, have moved out of the area. Many of the best climbs are in the Castlemartin tank range, and thus access is restricted. However, the Elugug Stacks received their first ascents, by strong parties on the same day, as part of John Cleare's research for a book on Sea Stacks.

MID WALES

The coast s of Aberystwyth has provided many short, rather loose, routes, with the common crucial feature of near vertical grass above them, and several crags and quarries inland have been investigated, not always with success.

Craig Cowarch and the Arans continue to provide excellent routes, though not so many as in previous years. Reports suggest that much gardening is required on most of the newer routes but that, underneath, the rock is excellent. Pandy Quarry near Chirk has recently produced a crop of big, serious and often hard and/or dangerous routes.

NORTH WALES

In spite of warnings that the area is worked out, developments continue, and some really first-class climbs have emerged. At the moment a sense of foreboding hangs over the area as the prospect of the CEGB pump storage scheme looms large.

Following the publication of Crew, Wilson and Soper's, *The Black Cliff*, Clogwyn du'r Arddu has had new lines put up virtually every buttress, and many outstanding problems have been repeated. Dinas Cromlech has a new route which appears to get away from biblical names to the new religion of drugs, which are alluded to now in many routes all over Britain, while the disused quarries above Llyn Peris have been explored by Brown and others. Three routes have appeared so far which look impressive. Ogwen has also come under the eagle eye of many, and fine routes have appeared on the Devil's Kitchen Cliffs which, according to their innovators, belie the crag's reputation for loose rock. Suicide Wall had 4 routes all XS added in one day by Boysen and Alcock, while the much-tried Pocket Wall fell to Peers. The Carnedd and Lliwedd have new routes as the result of guide-book exploration by Les Holliwell, Trevor Jones and Drasdo, while the Moelwyns have suffered a post-guide-book attack by Perrin and others, the result being that many of the discredited MacCullum 'climbs' have succumbed (in rather different form to their original descriptions).

The number of new routes appearing on the Anglesey sea-cliffs appears at long last to be tailing off, though odd gems still appear.

The outside broadcast in 1971 by the BBC received few plaudits from the climbing press, but the routes 'used' have become popular with those who can do them. The Big Overhang has been repeated many times and gets easier as more metal is left on it. The best effort to date is a solo ascent in 3 hours by Paul Denny. The area has established a reputation for pretentious, long-winded route names. As a measure of the area's popularity it is as well to look at just one of the classics, Central Park, which often gets as many ascents in a weekend as its counterpart in Llanberis Pass, Cemetery Gates, gets in 6 months.

On Anglesey and on the Llyn Peninsula there is a growing fear that climbing may be banned in the nesting season. On Anglesey a voluntary ban on certain areas is, fortunately, being well observed. Further E on the N coast there has been intensive and exciting development of the large limestone cliffs, particularly Little Orme.

THE LAKE DISTRICT

Probably the most important feature has been the discovery of St Bees sandstone sea-cliffs, which offer a bad weather alternative to the higher crags. The crags are not producing many new lines, but significant reductions of aid have been made on many existing routes.

Apart from this, Langdale and Borrowdale have produced the most routes, with Allan Austin making forays to climb his secret lines and in the process producing some great routes, mainly in Langdale. McHaffie continues to have a stranglehold on Borrowdale and has produced literally dozens of routes, though apparently some are wanting in quality.

Burbage and Young have climbed several new routes in the course of guide-book work, and Read and Adams with their big girdles on East Buttress, Scafell and Dove Crag, and Bonington and Thompson on Scafell's Central Buttress have taken girdling to new frontiers.

Such is the competitive element and consequent secrecy in Lakeland climbing, that a crag high on the Honister face of Heetwith Pike discovered and climbed by Burbage and Oliver was 'rediscovered' by Soper and Roper 3 years later and their 2 lines reclaimed as new.

THE PEAK DISTRICT

As ever, controversy rages as aid routes are improved, and it would seem necessary for anyone wishing to improve a route to employ a commissioner of oaths and live with him for at least 3 months before the attempt! It would appear that A2 means HVS now, and few A3s are safe from determined locals. At Stoney Middleton, the spiritual (in more ways than one) home of the area's hardest climbers, the standards are improving rapidly, and at Matlock most of the High Tor routes have been done with much less aid. In the same period reversals of the trend have resulted in bolts appearing in Sardine (Raventor) and The Bat (Dovedale).

The same reversal appears on gritstone, with new routes on Stanage which required pegs for their ascent. Some of the Edges appear to be far from worked out, the Black and Tans Club having found several routes on Bamford, and very hard routes eliminating aid have been climbed on the Staffordshire Roches.

In limestone some of the remoter valleys, such as Cheedale, known only for a few classic climbs, are showing vast potential.

Drummond's renaming of old artificial climbs as he does them free has roused antagonism, and a route that he free climbed but used skyhooks on was renamed Bulldog Wall, an obvious reference.

YORKSHIRE

Again an area of controversy as guide-book editors doubt the methods used by reducers of aid on free routes previously climbed artificially; a route appears on Malham using drilled holes for the threading of tapes.

On gritstone, Allan Austin's Wall of Horrors at Almscliffe succumbed to a determined assault by John Syrett after inspection on a top rope. Syrett found that the crux could be protected with a small nut. The result was 3 subsequent

ascents. The accent on cutting aid has not prevented many new routes from being found, particularly at Gordale, but the traditional Yorkshire insularity has ensured that details do not get out until the pioneers have finished with each new crag they find. Perhaps the most interesting feature to the outsider is the way free climbing, both at Kilsney and Malham, is gradually encroaching upon the major overhanging sections.

SCOTLAND

The period has been a sad one, the country having lost some of its finest native and adopted climbers in accidents. In spite of this, an enormous amount has been done both by resident and visiting climbers, though the poor winter seasons slowed down the developments expected from improved equipment and techniques.

In spite of the scope available, much attention has been paid to aid reduction on existing routes and soloing both in summer and winter has become the vogue. Yet another interesting feature is the proposal for a guide-book-free area in the NW Highlands, 'The Last Wilderness'. Sea-cliff climbing has continued to develop with routes on a cliff just S of Kirkcudbright and new possibilities on the E coast, near Aberdeen. On Ben Nevis, Centurion now rivals Castle Ridge in popularity as a summer route, while many of the big winter routes have been repeated and other new routes on the main buttresses have appeared. Gardyloo Buttress suffered a severe loss of reputation when Spence found it 'a good course route' on the third ascent. The importance of front pointing was emphasised by Cunningham and March, who raced up Point Five Gully in 2½ hours. The same trends have been reported in the Cairngorms and Craig Meaghaidh.



93 *Sgurr nan Gilleann, Skye* Photo: A.C Collection

There has been controversy over the CIC hut custodian's ban on several named climbers.

On the islands, activity has centred on St John's Head (Hoy) and Strone Ulladale (Harris), with invading English climbers taking the laurels.

IRELAND

The troubles have recently retarded exploration to a great extent, even though most of the important areas lie in the Republic. Northern Ireland's main crag, Fair Head, has mainly been developed by Dublin climbers in the past, but they have rarely visited the area in the last 2 years. Similarly, the big granite mountain crags in Donegal are generally reached through the N by Dubliners and are 'across the border' to Northerners. On the credit side, there has been increasing co-operation and drawing together of climbers throughout Ireland. English climbers have mostly kept away since 1971, when several strong parties visited the Poisoned Glen in Donegal and put up several fine routes.

Interest in Luggala has been renewed after many quiet years, and several good routes from Hard Severe to Extreme have been put up, Rice and Milnes and Young and Mulhall being the most active. Dalkey Quarry is proving popular as a Dubliner's evening crag.

In the Mourne, activity has been mainly gap filling, but big routes are expected to appear on Eagle Mountain and Slieve Beg. Other minor sea-cliffs and stacks are getting attention in Kerry and County Clare, but the activity is nowhere great. Ethics and aid are mostly left to the individual and there is little of the backbiting found elsewhere in Britain, but then the footage of available unclimbed rock per head is infinitely greater.

My thanks are due to all those people, unfortunately too numerous to mention, who have spent so much time preparing notes for this review, and I must apologise for the way I have cut them to fit within the format enforced by the amount of space available.