To Bolt or Not to Bolt

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The ethics involved in the sport of rock-climbing have long been a major source of debate in the letters pages of the climbing press.

Pitons, hold chipping, top-rope inspections . . . all have been generally recognized as undesirable and have raised passionate feelings at some time or another. None, though, have succeeded in provoking as much heated debate as the ubiquitous expansion bolt.

Why, then, does the use of the bolt cause such a problem?

To those in favour of using bolts for protection (or even – God forbid – the occasional aid point) they would seem to offer the best of all worlds. Safety margins are increased, less gear has to be carried, standards can be raised and more routes are made available to the masses.

The anti-bolt lobby, though, does not see things this way. It strives to retain the traditional flirtation with excitement and danger which has always been an integral part of British rock-climbing. Their view is that, as bolts can be placed absolutely anywhere, their use means that even the most intimidating and featureless lines can be degraded to mere gymnastic exercises. Bolts in the eyes of the anti-bolt lobby are alien pieces of ironmongery which simply reduce the degree of boldness in a climb to the level that the first ascensionist can cope with.

In Britain at present we are at a curious halfway stage compared with the freely bolted French and Belgian crags just across the Channel. Some crags (Malham, slate etc) have bolts as the norm, whereas on others (gritstone, mountain crags etc) the odd bolt may exist, but bolting in general is very much frowned upon.

Regardless of their personal feelings about bolts, I think that very few anti-bolt climbers would seriously suggest removing all bolts from crags where such protection is now well-established. Pro-boltists, though, do see the possibilities for bolt-protected free climbing in currently bolt-free areas. A clash of interests is therefore unavoidable, and the subject is ripe for heartfelt debate and more.

In considering the best way forward, it is perhaps logical to look first towards France and Belgium and see what effect widespread bolting has had there.

Many crags in these countries now have a bolt every six feet or so (or less!), regardless of the amount of natural protection available. Bolts are expensive, and in an effort to maximize safety local clubs often take on the

responsibility of making routes safe. A deal will often be struck with the bolt manufacturers, climbers being employed to place bolts where they are felt to be necessary. On a recent visit to the Continent it was explained to me that the policy often extends beyond just making hard new routes completely safe. Routes which have been established without bolts for many years are now hearing the hum of the cordless drill as novices and enthusiasts alike are encouraged to practise the sport in safety and without the additional worry of having to place their own protection. The whole bolt-protected ethic is one with which many Continentals feel far from comfortable, and one which raises justifiable concern that bolt-bred climbers are more likely to injure themselves when they visit areas without fixed protection. Many Continentals are also uncomfortably aware that they are turning their magnificent natural crags into giant replicas of man-made climbing walls.

It is reasonable to assume that, if the spread of the bolt is allowed to continue unchecked, then British climbers will soon see them appearing on classic crags and classic climbs. Cloggy, Gogarth, Cornish granite and Glencoe have already seen their first bolt placements. In the often inconsiderate and egotistical race for new climbs many leading activists feel that, if no other protection is available, bolts are justified – regardless of location. As we have seen on the Continent, the next step will be the bolting of routes already climbed without bolts. I believe the number of bolts on Tequila Mockingbird (Chee Tor) has already increased since the first ascent, and rumblings have been heard that Johnny Dawes's Indian Face would benefit (?!) from a bolt, in that more people would be able to enjoy its technical climbing. Beyond that, experience on the Continent shows that it is only a matter of time before Longlands and the Idwal Slabs hear the hum of the drill.

The time has clearly come to take stock of the situation, and to try to lay down some guidelines which will keep the majority of climbers happy in the future.

In Britain, areas now fall into three categories of bolt protection, and it is logical to consider each in turn:

1. *Well-established bolt-protected areas (mainly slate and limestone)*

One only has to spend a day at Malham or in the Llanberis slate quarries to see that these are popular areas where many climbers enjoy being able to stretch themselves to their limit in bolt-protected safety. Also the blank slate and limestone walls are often devoid of cracks and there are no possibilities for natural protection. It follows that, if the bolts were removed, the routes would not be climbed and many keen climbers would be understandably upset at being deprived of so many fine quality climbs. A few years ago, when there were very few bolt-protected routes, my attitude would have been unsympathetic and very much in the 'if you can't do it without bolts, leave it for someone who can' mould. Now, debolting the popular bolted crags would be akin to debolting Verdon. It would upset too many people and be a virtual physical impossibility. Bearing in mind that the overall aim must be to keep as many people happy as possible, the anti-bolt lobby must accept that debolting in these areas is not now an option. They must also accept that many future routes will be bolt-protected.

2. *Bolted routes in generally bolt-free areas (eg the Tunnel Wall routes in Glencoe, Atlantic Ocean Wall, Lands End etc)*

Here we are not looking at blank featureless crags offering no natural protection, but are considering routes forged up sparsely protected lines adjacent to traditional climbs. We have to stand back and ask ourselves whether we really want our traditional crags turned into bolt-protected gymnasiums. In researching this article I became convinced that the groundswell of feeling is against such routes, and my personal view is that all such bolts should be removed. If we allow such acts of bolting vandalism to continue, no new bold climbs will be established in Britain, and our climbing will lose much of its unique and rewarding flavour.

Having stated my own opinion, I have to concede that it is not up to any one individual to dictate what future policy should be. After all, it is a (nearly) free world, and anyone is legally entitled to place (or remove) a bolt wherever he/she likes. Local clubs clearly have their ears closest to the ground as regards local opinion and should therefore do their best to enforce the wishes of the majority of climbers in their area. However, on such a vital issue it would seem important for the British Mountaineering Council to test national feeling and to be represented in popular or contentious areas. This is imperative in our major climbing areas such as Cloggy, Scafell, Ben Nevis etc which are enjoyed by climbers from all over the country and not just by local activists. Before sanctioning bolting on such crags, we would need to be as certain as we could be that the action was in line with the wishes of the majority of British climbers.

If it ever happens, it will be a sad day for British climbing.

3. *Non-bolted crags*

Here the policy for the future would seem best handled by local clubs in exactly the same way as detailed in the preceding paragraph. If any activists step outside 'no-bolt' policy guidelines, they can be ridiculed in the press and the offending bolts removed.

Such measures do seem rather drastic and bureaucratic, but we must make sure that we learn from the experience of Continental countries before it is too late. We must act now to preserve the sense of adventure and excitement in British climbing, and yet at the same time embrace the bolt-protected gymnastic side of the sport.

If we just ignore the problem, then five years from now we could see the BMC sponsoring bolt protection on Stanage.

Think about it. It differs little from the sponsorship by the Belgian Alpine Club of the bolting of the magnificent limestone crags at Freyr.