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The Evolution of Climbing Clubs in Britain

'The backbone of British mountaineering.' This is how Chris Bonington described the Club system in 1989 when he was President of the BMC and I had just become General Secretary. Chris still firmly believes this and so do I. When I began writing this feature it was intended, and still is, as an uncontroversial look at the emergence and development of climbing clubs in Britain. The first mountaineering club in the world, the Alpine Club was formed nearly 150 years ago and now there are some 370 clubs in membership of the BMC. How did this come about, how did the clubs evolve and what is their relevance today?

That was my brief. However, the Club system acquired a new topicality in 2003 when a disparate group of climbers took to the web demanding a change to BMC voting procedures – a demand backed by current BMC President Mark Vallance who, in a rather startling *Summit* editorial, declared that the 'block vote' of the clubs was 'so far past its sell-by date that it is beginning to stink'. It was strong stuff. Whatever one's point of view on this issue, I hope what follows will add a little enlightenment.

The period between 1850 and 1865 was traditionally known as the Golden Age of alpinism, when wealthy English climbers with their local guides were making first ascents of many of the major Alpine peaks. It was during the ascent of the Finsteraarhorn in the summer of 1857 that William Mathews broached with E S Kennedy the subject of forming a club. A few months later in December 1857 at Ashley's Hotel in Covent Garden the Alpine Club was born. There were initially 20 members, all dedicated alpinists and well-to-do members of 19th century upper-class society. From the start it was a serious, exclusive and men-only club, holding regular meetings to discuss papers on mountain exploration. In 1863 the *Alpine Journal* appeared for the first time. During the early years, the Club was the dominant force in the development of mountaineering, although from the 1860s other countries formed clubs of their own. However, unlike the Alpine Club, these were open to all who had an interest in the mountains and became huge organisations with thousands of members. They built mountain refuges (huts) for their members and were organised into local sections.

As early as 1854, C E Mathews, an early Alpine Club member and later president (1878-81), began to visit the Pen-y-Gwryd Hotel, and formed the 'Society of Welsh Rabbits' there in 1870. He and his friends regularly went winter climbing in Snowdonia, and rock-climbing in its own right developed

in the latter part of the century. By 1897 it was felt that a more formal structure was needed, so 40 members of the Society met at the Café Monico in London to discuss the formation of a new club. Within a year the Climbers' Club was born with Mathews as its first President. Of the 200 founder members, about one third were already members of the Alpine Club but there were still mild rebukes from some of the AC old guard who did not look favourably upon rock climbing:

*Why is it to the Alpine Club
Our C E M no longer keeps?
Why should he found – himself the hub,
A Climbers' Club for chimney sweeps?*

Like the Alpine Club, however, the Climbers' Club was, or appeared to be, an elitist organisation, and remained so for the next half-century or more. Indeed in his speech at the first Climbers' Club Annual General Meeting, Mathews stressed: 'Climbing is a sport that from some mysterious causes appeals mainly to the cultivated intellect. 'arry or 'arriet would never climb a hill.' It would take two world wars to change these attitudes. Little could Mathews have foreseen the dramatic changes in climbing and society in the next century. The Climbers' Club even had a Harry as its president in the 1970s, even though this 'arry was a barrister.

Meanwhile, in 1889, the Scots had formed their own national club, the Scottish Mountaineering Club, along much the same lines as the AC. The previous year also saw the founding of the Cairngorm Club. In 1892 the first English regional club, the Yorkshire Ramblers' was established, though its members were far from content with mere rambling. Its first president was Cecil Slingsby, a major figure in British climbing and a formidable pioneer in Norway. His daughter Eleanor later married one of the most influential figures in the mountaineering world, Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

The Manchester-based Rucksack Club was born in 1902. Like the other early clubs, it was staunchly men only. It also gained an enduring reputation for powerful climbers and outstanding fell walkers and runners. It was a Rucksack Club team led by Fred Pigott that made the first ascent of the East Buttress of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu in 1927. In 1922 another of their stalwarts, Eustace Thomas, broke the Lakeland Fell Record at the age of 53, then took up alpinism the following year and amazingly became the first Brit to climb all the Alpine 4000m peaks.

The Wayfarers' Club and the Fell and Rock Climbing Club of the English Lake District were founded in 1906 but were very different clubs. In the 1930s, the Liverpool-based Wayfarers' included many of the cream of English climbing – Kirkus, Hicks, Hargreaves and Edwards, who all trained at Helsby, my own local crag. The Wayfarers' has steadfastly maintained its men-only tradition (but for how much longer?). The Fell and Rock, by contrast, was from the start a mixed club, even if there were only eight women

out of 164 members in 1907. Its main object was 'to foster a love of mountaineering and the pastime of rock-climbing in the English Lake District'. Unlike the Alpine Club and Climbers', the Fell and Rock was not made up of the mainly Oxbridge and London types who had dominated the early climbing society. Its first president was the famous mountain photographer Ashley Abraham and membership was mainly made up of local businessmen and northern professional people. Another club to emerge in 1906 was the Sheffield-based Derbyshire Pennine Club and two years later the Kyndwr Club was born in Derby.

A number of tough and determined women like Lucy Walker and Katy Richardson had taken part in some of the major Alpine ascents of the 19th century. They had overcome the handicap of severe Victorian dress and moral codes, but nonetheless remained barred from membership of the early clubs. Then, in 1907, the Ladies' Alpine Club was formed with Mrs Aubrey Le Blond as its first president. However, the club was for 'Ladies' and some saw it as a junior affiliate of the senior male organisation. It was not until after the First World War that the first truly national women's club, the Pinnacle Club, was born in 1921.

It could be said that the Pinnacle Club was spawned by the Fell and Rock and the Climbers' Club, for the two women founders were Pat Kelly, wife of the great Fell and Rock climber H M Kelly, and Eleanor (Len) Winthrop Young, who had recently married Geoffrey, president of the Climbers' Club from 1913 to 1920. The story goes that a group of women climbers ventured on to the Milestone Buttress and one said 'Gosh, wouldn't it be jolly to have a women's climbing club with not a man in sight.' Pat Kelly had found the Fell and Rock still far too male dominated and Geoffrey encouraged his wife and Pat to press on with the idea of starting a women-only club. Virtually as soon as Winthrop Young relinquished the presidency of the Climbers' Club, his wife Len became president of the newly formed Pinnacle Club. The *Manchester Guardian* greeted the arrival of the women's club with an encouraging editorial, while the Rucksack Club composed a little ditty:

*In nineteen hundred and twenty one
The Pinnacle Club was first begun
We smiled – we even thought it fun
To chaff the Pinnacle ladies.*

All polite fun, but who uses the word 'chaff' nowadays? Sadly, Pat Kelly was to die the following year in a fall on Tryfan. The Pinnacle Club remains solidly women only and has always been full of outstanding women climbers – Dorothy Pilley, Nea Morin, Gwen Moffat, and more recently Jill Lawrence and Angela Soper. For many years the Club has participated in and organised the highly successful rendezvous meets with women climbers from overseas.

In 1922 the Midland Association of Mountaineers was started mainly as an association of climbers from other clubs who were away from their home area, and especially from the Rucksack Club. However the MAM was something of an *enfant terrible*. It quickly broke with Rucksack traditions by including in its initial membership a large number of women.

The old universities, Oxford and Cambridge, traditional breeding grounds for the Alpine Club and the Climbers' Club, had of course formed their own mountaineering clubs. Oxford had done so as early as 1875 for 'residents of the University interested in the aims of the Alpine Club'. After the First World War, the Climbers' Club went through a very bad phase following the loss of so many young men in the trenches. Morale was further sapped by the loss of their president, George Mallory, on Everest in 1924. To restore confidence and boost membership, it was decided to invite the presidents of the Oxford University Mountaineering Club and Cambridge University Mountaineering Club not only to become members of the Climbers' Club but also to become *ex officio* members of the committee. It was hoped this would encourage more members of the university clubs to join the CC. Amazingly, this practice survived until the late 1950s. Liverpool University was the first to break with tradition and form a rock-climbing club as distinct from a mountaineering club. This was established in 1930 by Menlove Edwards, his brother Hewlett and Bill Stallybrass who has only recently died, with Graham Macphee as the president. Many Liverpool students would automatically join the Wayfarers' after graduation, while it was traditional for Manchester graduates to join the Rucksack Club and the Birmingham 'Stoats' to join the MAM.

Alastair Borthwick wrote that in 1930 'fresh air was still the property of moneyed men, a luxury open to few... Hiking was the hobby of an enthusiastic handful, and climbing was a rich man's sport.' Things were soon to change, however, and by the early 1930s a new wave of working-class climbers began to emerge, helped partly by the youth hostel movement and also by widespread unemployment. New clubs such as the Sheffield Climbing Club began to explore the gritstone crags, and the Creagh Dhu lads from the Glasgow shipyards began to climb on the Cobbler and in Glencoe. The members of these new clubs had little in common with the more affluent members of the existing climbing clubs. A process of social change had begun that was to increase dramatically after the Second World War.

It was during the war that the British Mountaineering Council evolved, largely due to the vision of Geoffrey Winthrop Young. Hitherto, the Alpine Club had assumed the role of representing the interests of all British mountaineers. Winthrop Young (1878-1958) was not only one of the leading rock-climbers and alpinists of his age, but also a distinguished educationalist, writer and communicator. As early as 1907 he first raised the idea of a single organisation to represent all mountaineers in Britain; and then immediately after the First World War in 1919, when he was president of the Climbers' Club, he suggested an advisory body of British clubs. But



91. The SMC fêtes Geoffrey Winthrop Young, Glasgow 1951. *L to r seated* Ross Higgins, Norman Ledingham, Herbert Turnbull, GWY, Rob Anderson, Harry MacRobert and Bill Murray; *standing* Bill Warnock, Tom MacKinnon, Percy MacFarlane, George Roger and Russell Marshall. (*Douglas Scott*)

this idea was short-lived and it was not until the Second World War, when Young was president of the Alpine Club (1941-1943), that his vision became reality. In his valedictory address in December 1943 he persuaded the majority (but not all) of members that the AC was no longer the appropriate body to represent British mountaineers. His successor as AC president, the distinguished politician Leo Amery – whose other job was Secretary of State for India – continued Young's cause and within a year the BMC was born.

The Council initially consisted of 25 clubs of which the following 11 were entitled to nominate a member of the committee: Alpine Club, Alpine Ski Club, Climbers' Club, Fell and Rock Climbing Club, Ladies' Alpine Club, Midland Association of Mountaineers, Pinnacle Club, Rucksack Club, Scottish Mountaineering Club, Wayfarers' Club, Yorkshire Ramblers' Club.

Young became the first president (1945-47) and John Barford the first secretary. Within two years Barford had written a slim Pelican volume, *Climbing in Britain* which sold a remarkable 125,000 copies, reflecting the growing interest in climbing and the outdoors. A social revolution was underway, reflected in the formation of new clubs. By 1960 there were 100 clubs in membership of the BMC, a number that was to continue to grow. Among the most famous of the newcomers was the Rock and Ice. It had

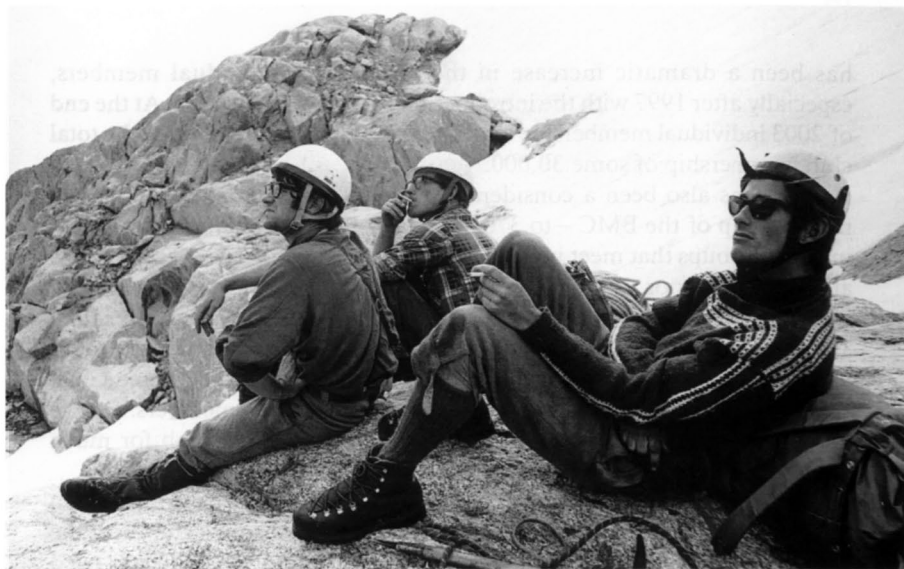
evolved from the Valkyrie Club and became the dominant force in Peak and Welsh rock climbing in the 1950s with occasional forays to pick plum routes in the Lake District and Scotland. Not a club in the previously accepted sense, the Rock and Ice had no hut, no rules and no subscription. Its undoubted stars were Joe Brown and Don Whillans. Meanwhile, the Creagh Dhu cemented their reputation in Scotland, operating from their infamous Jacksonville base below Buachaille Etive Mor.

By the early 1950s the Alpine Club too was beginning to feel the winds of change. Frustrated with the stuffiness, outdated rules and standards of the AC, in 1953 a group of the leading young activists formed a new organisation, the Alpine Climbing Group. This was a real landmark in the history of British climbing as the ACG broke down the class barriers that had existed previously and included in its membership the best young alpinists, no matter what social or financial background they came from. For example, although most of the original members were from among the best university climbers – the likes of Nicol, Band, Chorley, Blackshaw, and McNaught-Davis – the ACG also included 22-year-old Joe Brown and 19-year-old Don Whillans. Don was flabbergasted, not only at being asked to join, but also to be invited on to the first committee. Breaking down further barriers, the ACG also had women members, notably Gwen Moffat and Denise Evans.

Starting from the 1920s, some of the larger clubs had acquired huts for their members, a practice that has continued ever since and was followed by many other clubs. The Rucksack Club was the first to experiment with a hut, in remote Cwm Eigiau in 1913, but it did not survive the First World War. The first and lasting hut in Britain was Helyg in the Ogwen valley. Described by George Borrow in the 19th century as a 'miserable hovel', this one-room cottage was opened by the Climbers' Club in 1925. It was of vital importance in the development of Welsh climbing in that 'Golden Era' between 1925 and 1939, serving as the base for a close-knit group of climbers including Longland, Waller, Kirkus, Hicks, Hargreaves and Edwards. A few years later, in 1930, the Wayfarers', having appreciated the success of Helyg, opened the first hut in the Lake District – the Robertson Lamb Hut in Langdale. And in 1937 the Fell and Rock opened its first hut, Brackenclose, in a magnificent site at the head of Wasdale.

Now the Fell and Rock has five properties in the Lake District and two in Scotland available to its members. Apart from Helyg, the CC has two huts in the Llanberis Pass and other properties at Froggatt, Bosigran, Pembroke and Roy Bridge. According to the BMC Huts list, there are now over 60 huts owned by clubs and available to their members and bookable by BMC groups in England and Wales.

As well as providing hut accommodation for their own members, and in many cases for visiting groups, the 'senior' clubs have also provided an incalculable service to the climbing community by publishing definitive guidebooks to the major climbing areas in the country. The exception is



92. Members of the Alpine Climbing Group, 1967. Martin Boysen, Mike Kosterlitz and Mick Burke on the Dru glacier looking at the west face of Pic sans Nom. (Robert Keates/Bâton Wicks archive)

the Peak District, covered for 40 years by the BMC guidebook committee. Traditionally the Climbers' Club has carried out this voluntary work for Wales, the South West and South East while the Fell and Rock has covered the Lake District and the Scottish Mountaineering Club the whole of Scotland. The first Climbers' Club guidebook was published in 1909 to Lliwedd, the most popular cliff at the time and close to the Pen-y-Gwyrd and Pen-y-Pass hotels. A year later came *Climbing in the Ogwen Valley*. Nearly 100 years later, the Climbers' Club is still carrying out this work and presently there are 14 titles available, including the new Merionydd guide. The Fell and Rock began slightly later, in 1922, since when its volunteer team of members have produced a continuously updated series of guidebooks. At present there are six definitive area guides, a 'recent developments' guide, a walking guide, and, introduced at the end of 2003, the Club's first 'selected climbs' guide. Members of the Alpine Climbing Group and the Alpine Club began producing guidebooks to the Alps from 1957. Currently there are eight in print, including the new Bernese Oberland guide.

In 1968 the founder clubs of the BMC lost their automatic committee places (apart from the AC for a few more years) when a new constitution introduced an area committee structure. Individual membership was introduced in 1974 but was slow to catch on. When I became General Secretary in 1989 there were only 5000 individuals compared with some 260 clubs with about 22,000 members. In the last 15 years, however, there

has been a dramatic increase in the number of individual members, especially after 1997 with the introduction of *Summit* magazine. At the end of 2003 individual membership had reached 34,000, outnumbering the total club membership of some 30,000.

There has also been a considerable growth in the number of clubs in membership of the BMC – to 370 at present. The vast majority are small, informal groups that meet in the week at the local pub, have evening meets at the local crag or wall and get together at weekends. Nearly half of all clubs have fewer than 50 members and nearly another quarter fewer than 100. Despite dire warnings that membership of the larger clubs would decline, in fact most of them are growing steadily with the Alpine Club, Climbers' Club and Fell and Rock all having about 1200 members. People are joining clubs at a much later age but continuing to climb for much longer. Climbing has in fact become a sport for life.

When I joined the Climbers' Club in 1960 in my early 20s straight from university, it was usual for nearly all young climbers to join a club, be it the Climbers' Club, Rucksack or a local club. There was a much greater need to belong to a club then – for shared transport to the mountains, cheap hut accommodation, for information, meeting like-minded people and finding climbing partners. The Climbers' Club then had among its membership many of the best young rock climbers of the day, Banner and Bonington from the mid-50s, Crew, Ingle and Boysen in the early 60s, and the Holliwells a few years later. But a lot of climbers also gave up climbing early, particularly when the pressures of family life weighed against a sport then potentially so much more dangerous than it is today. Nowadays most people joining the larger clubs are in their 30s or 40s, generally committed climbers who have been around a long time, and often belong to another local club. The average age of new members to one major club is now 43 compared to the average age of 24 in the 1950s.

Over the last 30 to 40 years major clubs like the Alpine Club and the Climbers' Club have shed much of their former elitist image. The Alpine Club merged with the Alpine Climbing Group more than 30 years ago, while women were admitted to the AC in 1974 and into the CC the following year. Jancis Allison, who had taken part in the Gogarth exploration of the early 60s and had made the first female lead of *Vector*, became the first woman president of the Climbers' Club in 1990. Despite being a mixed club since 1906, the Fell and Rock did not have a woman president before Hilary Moffat in 1986. Denise Evans became the first woman president of the Alpine Club in 1986 but only for one year following the death of Anthony Rawlinson. The Rucksack Club began to admit women about 10 years ago and there are now hardly any men-only clubs. There is little difficulty in joining one of the major clubs, although in most cases a formal application with a proposer and a seconder is required and clubs will usually look for commitment and a proven track record.

It has been from these older clubs, and especially from the Alpine and

the Climbers' clubs that the major office holders of the BMC have come. A glance at the BMC history, *The First 50 Years* (1997), shows that of the 22 BMC presidents to date, 17 have been members of the Alpine Club and 14 of the Climbers' Club and most of these are members of both clubs. Members of other older clubs, like the Rucksack Club and the Fell and Rock, have also been pre-eminent in filling senior posts and it is the same story with many of the other committee posts. Some people may not like this, but the fact remains that many of those who have held positions within the BMC will also have had a track record of service within their own clubs. They will have the confidence of their peers and are of a 'known' calibre. The major clubs are proven institutions and part of the fabric of climbing society whether we like it or not. Their membership, which often includes leading establishment figures and a pool of people with exceptional expertise in the law or environment, has helped to protect our 'freedoms' over the years when officious government departments might otherwise have imposed rules and regulations on a dangerous sport like climbing.

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