

ON ROCK

In spite of the original advert in the Liverpool Echo, which talked of forming a mountain-walking club, climbing soon figured in the Club's activities, even involving a certain founder member who had sworn he would never climb again.

In fact, enquiries about the use of Liverpool University Climbing Wall were first made as early as May 1967, and for the next few years the wall (followed by a swim and a couple of pints) was an important training ground, along with the Breck in Wallasey, Irby Quarry, and the outcrops at Helsby and Frodsham. The exposure on the wall was in fact quite considerable as it was vertical and set above a multi-use sports floor on the lower level.

With the surge in membership during 1968 and the acquisition of the Llanrwst hut in December of that year, the stage was set for an explosion of activity on all fronts. Nowhere was this more true than in the creation of a proper rock scene to complement the strong hill-walking landscape. The atmosphere of that early period is well captured in. Fred Heywood's 1977 article, somewhat ponderously entitled "THE EARLY YEARS ROCK CLIMBING WITH THE GMC: by an observer of change and a climber of long years and creaky joints":

"Fred and Nick Parry decided to climb up the left-hand edge of the Idwal Slabs, wearing ex-army flip-flops and using a brand-new rope. One old chap sitting at the second belay on Charity questioned their ability and state of mind as Fred ran out the full 120' without bothering to put in a runner. A few blunt retorts quickly shut the older climber up and for the rest of the day he was seen slowly shaking his head and being careful not to climb anywhere near the GMC pair. The day finished with Tennis Shoe and the seeds of a climbing section had been sown .

A few weeks later Alan Rouse brought along two fellows (John Beamer and Maurice Ewing) whom he had met while climbing at the Breck. The Breck is a small sandstone outcrop in Wallasey behind Alan's house. Alan spent all his spare time climbing on the sheer 20' walls. He was already developing the finger strength and balance which would make him one of the finest rock-climbers in Britain."

And later that year, discussing suitable routes for the morrow in the Golden Fleece at Tremadoc:

"The Fang was still on Alan's menu but Fred, having discovered that Alan's climbs to date only went as far as Monolith Crack. decided that One Step in the Clouds was more appropriate. Fred led the first pitch, Alan the second and Fred the final pitch. That was the last Fred was to see of the sharp end of the rope for many months but the GMC climbing section had chalked up its first VS. Shadrach followed, Rouse following Huxley's instructions and climbing pitch one inside the block. Fred preferred the open air and climbed the outside. Huxley gave advice from the top of the Milestone having found Christmas Curry and climbed it with Nick. Maurice and John also climbed the Curry. Rouse had the bit between his teeth and with Fred climbed Merlin. The Heywood-Rouse partnership began that day and continued for two years."

Another very early rock-climbing partnership was that of Ross Larsen and John Huxley, who specialised mainly in multiple soloing (on the Gribin Facet) and trips to Tremadoc to repeat routes that Huxley knew he could lead such as Creagh Du Wall, One Step in the Clouds and

Shadrach. (Later, Huxley and John Hall had a partnership that saw some success with ascents such as Soapgut on the Milestone, but the duo had difficulty shaking off a reputation for retreating, and the abseil off Main Wall, Cymr Las, was kept secret for years).

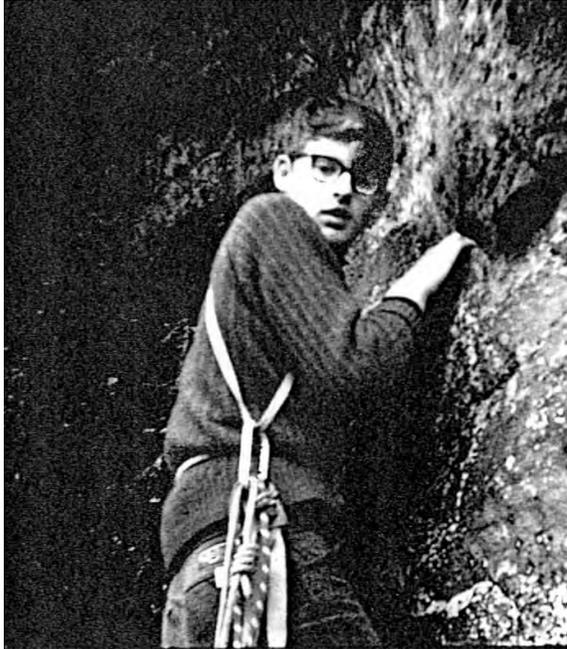
Fred Heywood again:

At about this time, Mal Kaye and Ken Clowes honoured us with their presence. They set up in competition to Heywood and Rouse, but always seemed to be half a grade behind. I recall one day Maurice and Mal leaving Fred, Beamer and Alan at the Cromlech car park and heading off to Dinas Mot. Alan was convinced that this was to be the greatest day of competition between the two teams and was, as ever, determined to rise to the challenge. He considered the climbs available to the opposition and decided that nothing less than Extreme would win the day for him. With Fred in tow he set off for the Grochan. Kaizergeberge quickly fell to his ability and there was still no sign of Mal. They must be on a very difficult route, he thought.

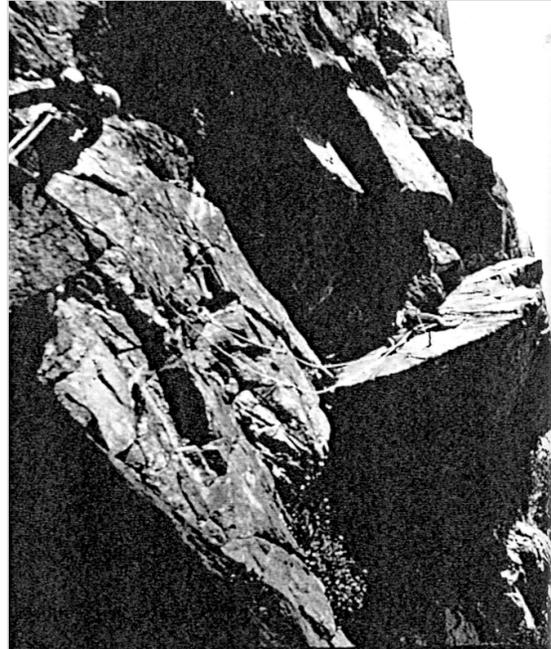
Brant Direct stood beckoning. Alan swiftly put it in the bag. Shortly afterwards Mal and Maurice appeared. Mal was very sheepish and under Rouse's third degree admitted failing on Crosstie. He even admitted leaving a sling! Rouse was on him in seconds, ribbing him mercilessly and gloating over his two routes so far that day. To rub in this superiority Alan and Fred returned with Mal to the base of Dinas Mot and claimed the sling after climbing the route. Mal had to content himself with the Direct route. Maurice climbed Brant Direct by using his fantastic technique of bridging across onto the easier routes either side. He did this quite a lot and his breeches often felt the strain."

The Llanberis Pass (always known as "the Pass") and Tremadoc Cliffs were the main centres of the new wave, although Clogwyn D'ur Arddu (Cloggy) and Craig Gogarth on Anglesey also figured. A whole host of climbers emerged at Llanrwst during our three and a half years there (December 1968 to May 1972). Alan Rouse, Nick Parry, Fred Heywood, John Beamer and Maurice Ewing were already members but many more came along, among them Wally Davies, who fell off Grim Wall at Tremadoc (Huxley having surrendered the lead) and fractured a couple of ribs. At Portmadoc Cottage Hospital he was offered a bath to ease the pain and advised to go and see his G.P. There was John Hall, Pete Eley, Dave Parry; Alan Cowderoy, who ate daffodils, drove a Robin Reliant and climbed hard, with an early ascent of The Old Man of Hoy and the seconding of Rouse on his lead of Suicide Wall (first on sight lead of that route); Ross Larsen, who was a fearsome drinker but quite a decent climber when sober; then Chris Hall, brother of John, Darrel Swift, Paul Carney and Terry Clare. There were Frank Bennett and Dave Kingham, who were renowned for the brightness of their gear and the laborious nature of their ascents; Dennis Hay, of whom more elsewhere; and Mal Kay and Ken Clowes, who formed a flamboyant partnership to compete against Rouse and Heywood. Of their many routes the one Ken seemed obsessed with was Lavaredo Wall on Carreg Alltrem.

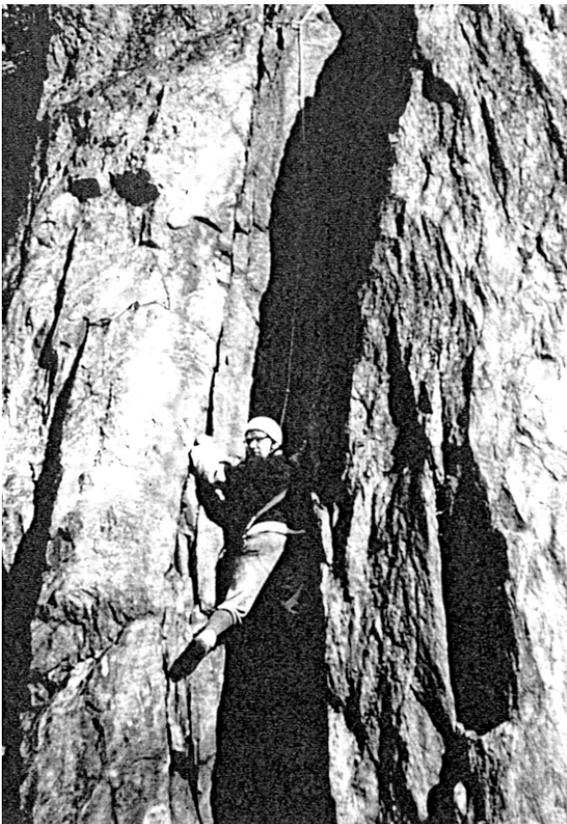
There was the cerebral Pete Halling (see below) and Joe Ronayne, a hard sort of climber who could not get into Monolith Crack and pronounced himself, somewhat harshly, "a fat failure". Alan Parker and Wendy Burrows were famous for the overnight debacle on Great Gully which resulted in one of the Club's few mountain rescue incidents. Then there was Adrian Snowball, now a mountaineering instructor and Tony McGowan, a teacher from Ellesmere Port who broke his leg on Spectre. It seemed almost everyone climbed then and certainly there were many good all-rounders.



Al Rouse at the Breck



Al on Ochre Slab, Vector,
Belayed by Fred Heywood



Maurice Ewing on Brant Direct



"Bunty" Hughes and Leigh McGinley
At the Chapel

(Photos: Fred Heywood)

To return to the Heywood article:

"Alan Cowderoy (Cowboy) came to the Club that year (1968) and with Nick spent a week climbing at Holyhead. The sea cliffs beckoned everyone that winter and many fine routes were climbed. It was the spirit of competition and adventure that drove us on. Rouse was always pushing the standards up and up. Fred and Alan spent several weekends at the Vagabonds' hut and learned from the masters, Pete Minx and Brian Molyneux, about the Alps and Cloggy. Fairly soon it became clear that Al was doing some pretty hard stuff and the masters took him on as an apprentice. but Al's sharp wit and sense of fun soon had Pete on the defensive. Nick Parry and Cowboy got on with the climbing and bagged the first big routes on Cloggy. The Corner was only one of many."

Writing in chapter two of "A Mountaineer's Life" Nick Parry captured Rouse's early enthusiasm superbly:

"This was the life for us. Alan went out and acquired his first guidebook, Llanberis North, and I encountered for the first time his lifelong habit of compiling the 'list of things to do' This first list included Cemetery Gates, the Corner, and the Thing - quite impressive for a lad who had done two V.Diffs."

and about the GMC:

"By now we were established members of the Gwydyr Club, drinking illegally on Club nights and acting as Club librarians; that way, we could take the guidebooks home."

But eventually, although he kept in touch, Rouse's outstanding ability meant that he inevitably "outgrew" the Club and his old partners, Nick Parry and Fred Heywood. Nick comments again from "A Mountaineer's Life":

"As Alan's standards at both rock and ice grew harder and more exacting and my interests turned more to parties and rock music, we climbed together less often but remained close friends. The last climb we did together was at Easter 1971 when on a beautiful day we climbed White Slab on Cloggy. Alan was in his element on the technical, delicate climbing of the upper slabs and we climbed slowly, taking in the atmosphere of the cliff and the exposure. We climbed out into the sun at the top to end what he always remembered as one of the best days".

Huxley had a long term understanding with Al Rouse, namely that the latter would one day drag him up a couple of routes on Cloggy. One day in the early autumn, sometime in the seventies, the phone rang at the Huxley residence in Hoylelake. It was Al - apparently he was preparing for an expedition to South America and was tired of the hassle of it all. What he needed was a nice relaxing day's climbing with JH. This was it, this was really going to be Cloggy!

"I picked him up from his folks' place in Wallasey. We had breakfast at Wendy's. We stopped for refreshment at the Halfway House and you could see all these hard men thinking 'Hmm, well that's Al Rouse, but who's this slightly older guy with him?'. I felt like some enigmatic gunfighter in a western. At the foot of the cliff, which had already begun to impress me deeply, the same effect occurred. Trying to look nonchalant and brave (the hell I was!) I paid out the rope as Al floated up the first pitch of Longlands. In no time at all it was my turn. The first awkward section had me shouting 'tight rope, Al!'. For those on the ground, the mystery was

over. Al was obviously earning a few extra bob by taking a client out for the day. Nothing wrong with that. I could picture them nodding in satisfaction before starting their routes."

They next did Curving Crack, after which Rouse proposed abseiling down the Pinnacle:

" 'Well, actually, Al, if you don't mind I'm just about mindblown,' I babbled pathetically. 'No problem at all' said the genial Rouse, truly one of the nicest guys you could meet, as he led me down a nice easy descent. 'I'll just do a quick solo' said the maestro amiably. Heart in mouth, I watched from the bottom of the cliff as he soloed a hard VS called Sunset Crack. He appeared shortly afterwards. 'That was great! Just what I wanted, a nice relaxing day on some straightforward routes. Let's get a beer.' That sounded good, but as we were walking off this guy came bombing down the cliff. 'Can you help' he asked breathlessly. 'My leader's stuck on the traverse of Aries, his hands are cold and he can't move. 'O.K' said Al 'But when I get to him I'm just going to lead him straight off, no heroics, O.K?'"

'Fine, fine, whatever you think.'

The second and I stood on the path as Al zoomed up the cliff towards the stranded leader. 'Tell me ' said the second, 'is that Al Rouse?'

' Oh yes,' I said nonchalantly, 'That's Al.'

Down in the Padarn I hung about on the fringe of a rather distinguished company of drinkers, all talking about desperate deeds in distant lands. Back at the Park Hotel someone said 'I believe you've been doing great things on Cloggy.'

'Well, we just did Longlands and Curving Crack and then Al soloed Sunset and rescued someone off Aries,' I replied nonchalantly."

Alan Rouse died on K2 in 1986 at the age of thirty-four. The book, "A Mountaineer's Life" is dedicated to his memory and all royalties from the book have been donated to the Alan Rouse Memorial Trust Fund to set up a major mountaineering library in Sheffield, his adopted home town. The library, the Alan Rouse Memorial Library, now contains two thousand books and an extensive journal collection. It is also the northern repository for Mount Everest Foundation Expedition Reports. There is also an Alan Rouse Climbing Wall in Sheffield.

Pete Halling, a great Club all-rounder and winner of the 14 Peaks in 1971, 1972 and 1977, was based in Bristol for a while in the seventies when he belonged to that august organisation known as the Avon Gorge Sunshine Club: what follows is extracted from his article in the January 1974 magazine (No.2) :

"The climber in Bristol has the great advantage of having a notable climbing area within a five-minute drive or a fifteen-minute walk: on the other hand, there is the disadvantage that lack of recent climbing to match the flow of verbal diarrhoea cannot be excused on the grounds of impoverishment, lack of transport etc. The general atmosphere is not unlike Tremadoc, with plentiful trees and jackdaws and some equally treacherous descent routes.

At the end nearest the sea, and out of sight of the rest of the climbing area, lies the steep and impressive Unknown Wall. Among a number of desperate extremes lies the excellent route of the same name (VS). Apart from the approach scramble, technical difficulty is not great but the exposure and seriousness combine to give an exciting/terrifying route, perhaps even more so for the second who is left at one stage on a small stance below a 10ft roof, 200ft above the

ground and with the prospect of swinging clear of the rock if he loses contact! The ice-cream van near the top of the route provides some consolation."

In 1974 the excellently-named Chris Craggs (who never actually got round to joining the Club) and his partner, Steve Grub, also climbed White Slab on Cloggy. Chris describes the ascent in "A Whiter Shade of Pale" (Magazine no.3)

"Suddenly the slab appears, a three-hundred foot ramp cleaving the crag and soaring skyward, a truly memorable moment. Steve wobbles up, complaining about having no runners to follow and giving a long low whistle as the slab heaves into his field of view".

and later:

"Slab, pitch two.....almost too much: thin, oddly connecting moves and worrying protection, the prospect of disappearing off the edge of the slab is not a very prepossessing one. A thin 'thin' crack, keep on trucking, increasing tension, then a nut to end all nuts - the air almost sighs with relief - whoopee, up and over on to a man-sized ledge. It's all over bar the shouting....away to greater places and greater days." (Chris Craggs is now on the BMC Guidebook Committee)

The years 1974 and 1975 saw yet more climbers coming along, among them Roger Hughes Jr (known as "Bunty"), Phil Moore, Ian Hosker, Les Guise, Dave Williams, Tim Carruthers, Tom Jones (the "Stick Insect"), Leigh McGinley and Andy Jones. Among these, "Bunty" and Leigh McGinley were the most renowned and both went on to fame if not fortune.

1974 also saw an ascent of the Old Man of Stoer in Northwest Scotland by "Bunty" Hughes, Ian Hosker, Phil Moore and Leigh McGinley:

"Having descended the cliff opposite the Old Man, the guide book said 'Start from the large ledge below the mainland face.' The ledge in question was four feet under water at the time, with the tide still coming in. The guide then said baldly 'swimming for one and a traverse for the rest, or two 15 ft ladders. Sadly, we realised we had left all our 15 ft ladders in the car. Ian volunteered first but dipping a toe in the water was enough for him. Cometh the hour, cometh the man! I bared my manly chest to the icy north wind and plunged into the foaming Atlantic Ocean, emerging from under the waves to climb to a ledge 10 ft up the south-west corner.

Ian and Phil then Tyrolean-traversed across to join me with some difficulty, mainly because it was uphill. The first pitch was steep but pleasant and relatively easy, lulling us into a false sense of security. Of the next pitch the guidebook said: 'Climb the slab (crux) to the overhang'. The slab in question was an overhanging wall and repulsed attempts by all members of the party. Faced with the choice of staying to fight it out or of defeat, we decided to go to the pub, leaving enough gear to ensure our return. Two days and a lot of ale later the touring circus again arrived under the slab. This time we all made it to a cave about halfway up but not before being puked over by a baby seagull and attacked by its mother."

The intrepid group finally reached the top at 5.30 and saluted the route's creator, Tom Patey. Some desperate abseiling/traversing/swimming was then followed by staggering about in peat bogs until arriving at the campsite at 1.a.m. The inquest was held in Fort William the following afternoon and conclusions drawn in Bunty's inimitable fashion:

- (1) *"Sea stacks is 'ard.*
- (2) *Swimmin' is silly.*
- (3) *White wine & Pukie Brown are GOOD.*
- (4) *McInnes can't write like what I can.*
- (5) *Peat bogs should be confined to Ireland.*
- (6) *There should be a pub in Stoer.*
- (7) *Seagulls should be extinct."*

Bunty, the consummate climber and serious drinker, constantly sought out the unusual, especially if it had a coastal flavour: this time Lundy, off Ilfracombe on the north coast of Devon, had caught his eye; it was known to have some excellent sea-cliff climbing, Nick Steen (that year's 14 Peaks Winner), Dave McGowan (brother of Tony) and Bunty himself took a train to Bristol Temple Meads, intending to bivvy or camp in the Avon Gorge:

"It was an eerie experience wheeling my borrowed shopping trolley (80 lb sack attached) down the silent road with only the lights of the suspension bridge, three hundred feet above, to guide us on our way. We pitched a tent and next morning met Chris King, the fourth member of our party and also a member of the A.G.S.C (Avon Gorge Sunshine Club). Chris and I ascended Central Rib (VS), then nipped off to John's for a cup of coffee.'

Later, on the boat from Ilfracombe :

"We were banned from the dining room by a woman of huge dimensions but on landing set about sampling the pleasures of the Marisco Tavern."

A reconnaissance of the west coast of the island left the group highly impressed by the amount of rock available and they returned to the pub full of enthusiasm for the following day.

On the first day Bunty and Chris climbed Albion (VS 4c) *"one of the best routes of its grade on Lundy "* while Dave and Nick were on Devil's Spine (Severe). Chris then led Shark (MXS 5a), which had the normally unflappable Bunty *"thoroughly spaced out"*. After lunch they fixed a rope down into Squires View Zawn and descended hand-over-hand down steep grass to examine the Forgotten Pinnacle, which was separated from the mainland by a short gap. After some good crack-jamming they emerged on the summit (123 ft) as a rope of four and then *"a quick leap brought us back to the mainland"*

That night Bunty and Dave got seriously drunk on a potent mixture of ale, brandy and malt whisky; one assumes Nick and Chris to be *relatively* abstemious! The following day, which was wet, saw the two dipso's in the pub again while Nick and Chris went prospecting. They returned about four o'clock to report that they had found another tunnel into the Devil's Limekiln: they had followed it and come across a large belt of good pink granite which gave a worthwhile new route along an obvious diagonal fault line (Zossimer, 270ft MS).

In 1976 "Bunty", Tom Jones and Leigh McGinley ascended another sea stack, the famous Old Man of Hoy on the Orkneys (previously climbed by Alan Cowderoy and Terry Clare):

"We were astonished to hear that the nearest pub was at least twenty miles away. Cursing our lack of foresight, we set up camp by the hostel and trotted off up the track that led along the top of the 900' cliffs and on towards the Old Man. What we saw was a truly magnificent sea-stack rising sheer out of the Pentland Firth. On that evening, though, it inspired nothing but fear."

Later the following day, after some difficult climbing on sometimes dodgy rock:

"Three short pitches on smelly, cheese-like rock eventually brought us to the superb final corner, a technical romp on solid jugs and deep gratifying jams which led us to what must be Britain's most impressive summit. On reaching the horizontal we were amazed to hear clapping and cheering emanating from the mainland: a large party of foreign tourists were congratulating us on our ascent. Nice!"

Apart from this excellent ascent, many other exciting routes were climbed:

"This year has seen by far the most dramatic increase in rock-climbing activities. At least one hundred ascents of over seventy routes in the HVS-XS category were made, plus many other equally fine routes of a lower standard too numerous to mention. Of particular note were ascents of Cenotaph Corner, Cemetery Gates, Nexus and Hangover. At Tremadoc, Yogi and two free ascents of both Wasp and Vector are worthy of note. On the latter route both seconds had what could be described as an interesting time! At Gogarth on Anglesey Park Lane, Red Wall and Winking Crack were all climbed at the close of the season" (Bunty Hughes, writing in the Tenth Anniversary magazine, no.4)

The late seventies and early eighties were relatively quiet on the climbing scene as most new members tended to be walkers rather than climbers and most of the leading lights had left or moved away; however, Mike and Bryan Gilbert joined in 1979, Dave Clement in 1981 (forming a climbing partnership with Les Guise) and Mark Mitchell in 1984. The following year saw the arrival of "Big" John Exley and his climbing partner, Chris Farrell.

September 1984 saw the formal opening of the climbing wall at the EPIC centre in Ellesmere Port, with Al Rouse and the mayor doing the honours. The wall, masterminded by the Gilberts, and with routes by Fred Heywood, consisted of natural rocks, collected by Club members from Snowdonia, the Clwyds, The Roaches, and the Lakes, with one rock even coming from India. The rocks were cast into concrete blocks which were then set into the existing concrete block wall. The Club benefitted from publicity in "Climber & Rambler" and "High" magazines. Advice and encouragement was received from Ian Dunn, Ken Wilson and Dave Pearce. Obviously, members of the Gwydyr used the wall, the first indoor climbing since the days of the Liverpool University wall.

Climbers continued to arrive in the eighties, with Andy Chapman, Mal Lamb, Nuala Mulholland and that great all-rounder, Mal Bonner, all contributing.

A major resurgence occurred in 1993 with the arrival of Greg Leasor, Chris Schiller, Bryn Roberts, Helen Beddows and Chris Harvey followed two years later by Richard Kinsman, Mike Dagley and Pete Mann. Finally, Boo Stone arrived to complete the present healthy rock-climbing section, although unfortunately Chris Schiller and Bryn Roberts have been lost to Wiltshire and the Northeast respectively.



Pete Mann on Will '0' the Wisp
Craig Cowach



Bryn Roberts in the Mascarat Gorge
Costa Blanca

(Photos: Richard Kinsman)

The arrival of the "new wave" magazines from spring 1995, provided more documentation about climbing activities than was available in previous years. 1994 saw some excellent winter routes on the north face of Ben Nevis climbed by Bryn Roberts and Andy Williams, including Nordwand, Northeast Buttress, and Green Gully. Chris Schiller and a partner also did Point Five Gully. The summer saw climbing on Gogarth (Red Wall, Quartz Icicle, Concrete Chimney) and in the Lakes and Southwest, while in Scotland the serious action was on Shelter Stone Crag and Creag an Dubh Loch in the Cairngorms (The Needle, Steeple, King Rat, Goliath and Blue Max, all in the HVS to E2 range).

1995 was a big sea-cliff climbing year with Cornwall, Pembrokeshire, Skye, The Gower, Lundy and Craig Gogarth on Anglesey all receiving attention. In August Bryn, Rob, Mal Bonner and Andy Williams installed themselves at the C.I.C. hut below the north face of Ben Nevis. Between them they did Bullroar (960ft, HVS), Route Two (780ft, Severe), Left Hand Route (789ft, VS) and Minus 1 Direct (860ft, HVS) before going down to the Etive Slabs for The Pause (630ft, HVS) and Spartan Slab (624ft, VS). South of Grenoble in France the Harveys climbed a huge tally of routes, ranging from 3b to 6a in grade, while in the autumn Bryn Roberts and Chris Schiller climbed some epic routes on the two-thousand foot walls of Wadi Rum in Jordan (see "Further Afield")

1996 began with some ice-climbing, in Wales of all places. Bryn Roberts and Richard Kinsman did Sargeant's Gully and Shallow Gully, grade two's in Cwm Glas, and the next day Bryn, Richard and Christine did Bryant's Gully, another grade two by Carreg Wastad. In March Andy Chapman, Richard and Helen Beddows did Right Hand Gully Direct (Grade three) on Clogwyn Du (Glyders). Finally, the next day saw Andy and Richard on Cave Gully, a grade three on the main face of Snowdon. During the year, which had a more inland flavour than 1995, there was climbing at Stanage and Frogatt Edges in the Peak District; Pavey Ark and Ravens Crag in the Lakes; various crags in Northumberland (Kyloe, Crag Lough); and Skye. There were also numerous trips to the limestone of Pot Hole and Maeshafn quarries and of course Snowdonia received plenty of attention on Club weekends. In the autumn there was a successful trip to Spain (Calpe) with many routes climbed in brilliant sunshine.

The 1997 climbing season started with injury when Richard Kinsman fell off the Bootle climbing wall and broke his left elbow. Richard's comeback was at Tremadoc when he climbed Poor Man's Peuterey (Severe) with Pete Mann, while Nuala and Chris Harvey did the adjacent Great Western (VS). Later there were trips to Cornwall, the Lakes and the Northeast.

So to 1998, which started with Tremadoc on the day of the Dinner with Bryn and Richard doing the Fang (HVS 5a 5a) and Meshach (VS 4c 5a) on Craig Bwlch y Moch. The year, though, was by no means been restricted to hard routes: on the May-day weekend of 1998 Richard Kinsman and Pete Mann climbed the classic hard V.Diff Will-o'-the-Wisp on Craig Cowarch in the Arans and a week later Boo, Mark and Richard did Hope (V.Diff), Lazarus (Severe) and Creagh Dhu Wall (Hard Severe), three other classics. Later there were trips to the Peak District, Skye, the Lakes, Pembrokeshire and the Gower, where there was a GMC link-up with Pete Mann's old club, The Castle Climbing Club from Sheffield.

Today the rock-climbers represent some of the Club's most active members and they are also all-rounders who enjoy a good day on the hill.

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