

Someone with credibility once said anyone who claims a guidebook to be definitive deserves knuckle-rap. With a further 600 routes in the forthcoming *Avon and Cheddar* guidebook since the 1992 edition, I couldn't agree more. Knuckle-rap can be hurtful and if you're doing a book like this voluntarily, that translates to masochism.

*Avon and Cheddar 2004* shows how the emergence of new evidence tests our entitlement to make assumptions about history. In the new edition you'll find a photo of Graham Balcombe cranking out a sandstone outcrop at Redcliffe Bay in the 1930s. That Graham should have located this four-metre craglet so far off the beaten track and gone about bouldering in *that* day and age makes you wonder... the tip of an iceberg of unrecorded action across the

crag perhaps? Maybe. After all, new evidence seems to confirm that it was he who first conquered Main Wall and not Sir Chris. There will be others with secrets. Amongst them must surely be the 'wiry technician', Fred Bennett, his untold legacy at Avon Gorge shrouded by his neglect of vanity, forever teasing the wits of guidebook writers to come.

The test-bed for the area's history, Avon Gorge, still remains at the heart of the guidebook, pumping traffic, if not climbers, in and out of Bristol every day. Unashamedly sentimental

about this place, I spent my childhood on its scary faces believing that this was the way to grow up. How can climbing memories be any stronger? Three months ago I teamed up with my partner from the early '70s, John Barnett. We hadn't seen each other for 30 years but our ascent of *The Lich* and *Suspense*, two of the best Hard

# After Balcombe

by **Martin Crocker**

Very Severs in the Gorge bridged the gap seamlessly.

Avon is the sort of crag where the experience seems every bit as nervy, raw and sincere whether it's 30 years ago or five. And from Very Difficult to E7, it's exactly the same feeling whatever grade you climb. There on Main Wall, Morning Slab or Central Buttress you can rediscover the Avon essence and slip back three generations in a shake of the leg: sloping holds, intricate balance work and always with distant manky protection that forces you to take your time, work it out and get it right. With rock to slow you down and shut you up, it's quiet up there for sure.

It's strange how progress can recycle itself. Motivated by the age-old ethic of spaced fixed pegs and the odd bolt at Avon, new generations apply ancient method to push the limits. Building on the work of Mike Weekes, a man 'with a taste for the precarious' and the ever-focused Guy Percival, young guys like Ally Smith and Adam Mulholland complement enviable bouldering abilities with cool heads, setting themselves ambitious targets to climb past any remaining protection bolt on the Sea Walls. As older hands increasingly go redpoint meanwhile, their activity marks the capacity of the sport to play host to superficially disparate ideals, on the one hand a ruthless drive to achieve exceptional personal goals and on the other populist ideals of getting more people out on the



◀ Terry Cheek climbing Brean Down's classic VS, 'Pandora's Box'.



# After Balcombe

craggs having fun. People get worked up only to find that common sense and rational thinking greet cynicism from both sides of the argument.

Take the development of the Holcombe Quarries, for instance. That these desolate craters have become a hit with most people is down to a noble effort on the part of two individuals in particular: Francis Haden and Gordon Jenkin. There, bolts on HVS to E2 slabs confer an immunity from death which is why some climb elsewhere. But crappy trad routes in these quarries create an irritant; it is a notion of those in the driving seat that you can't fault when considering how tolerant local climbers are of too few mid-grade sport routes. Seasoned traditionalists agree by giving their blessing to retro-bolting climbs that may have been out of place in the first place. Yet a salvation's cry away, for the bolt-wary and bolt-weary, is the area's latest major find: Fairy Cave Quarry.

Fairy Cave was already known to those climbers who mixed their interest with the squalor of Mendipian caving. For there, and surpassing the quality of the climbing, are the best-decorated caves on Mendip and little in the way of squalor. No mean assertion because the climbing is truly good and, as you might expect from the crag's main protagonist, Mike Raine, completely free of fixed gear — save a few existing stakes at the top. By billing the place to contain the best slab climbs of any outcrop, pristine 40m slabs of finest lime, Mike drew allegiance with the ranks of the fanatical. It was masterful spin that got the repeats and accolades flowing as fast as the emails conspiring others to join in. Climbs like the classic VS, *Rob's Slab*, care of Cerberus Speleological Society, and *Four Steps to Heaven* (E3) take some beating locally, but I'll let you to be the arbiter, guidebook to hand. Paralleling Mike's efforts were those of Richard Broomhead, a climber as durable as the hills themselves, who took to the most friction-free slab, *The Glacis*, like Five Ten rubber. A wealth of traditional slab routes of all grades is now available in the quarry; only do park with care.

◁ *Dave Pickford pulling hard on The Shield of 'Coronation Street' E1 5b, High Rock, Cheddar Gorge. It fell off the following year.*

▷ *No, it isn't Dovedale, this is the Trym Valley Gorge and 'The Conformist' E6 6b; Martin Crocker climbing.*



DON SARGENT



△ Pete Thompson pondering the traverse on one of Drummond's Main Wall masterpieces, 'The Preter' E2, 5b, Avon Gorge.

It's easy to forget that climbing is bigger than any preoccupation about ethics and at key sites like Fairy Cave and Holcombe, access — a coming together of bigger issues — is by no means guaranteed in the long term. Technically, climbing in quarries is rarely permitted (even at Avon Gorge) and cocksure claims to right of access and freedom to do what we want is best transmuted to gratitude for being left alone to do just that. Take Black Rock Quarry, near Portishead, for example. There 50 or so slab routes, bolted in the late-90s by perfectionists, Haden and Ed Haslem, and at grades people want (F5 to F6b+), now gather dust. Blessed the climbers were not, for their goodwill was soon grounded by a ban on access. You have to admire their courage though, climbing with backs to a Police firing range.

It is small reward that the details of their routes are preserved in the guidebook but a huge relief that the *artistes* themselves did not end their days as targets for the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Now the site is up for sale (and the Police have lowered their guns), perhaps an entrepreneur might like to step in and bring about the south's answer to Ratho. Or perhaps the newly reformed BMC South West Area Committee might care to unleash its formidable officials with muscle and, above all, a good case.

The area has lots of other quarries, each with its own sub-culture and each with its own classic — even North Quarry and Sandford Quarry. Don't dismiss Sandford outright; it helped during foot-and-mouth

in 2001 and hosts three times as many routes now than it did 10 years ago. Bar one mysterious line of eco-bolts, the style, once more, is dangerous slab-padding or edging with falls that could even land you in a discarded fridge — if you lose your cool.

Hunters of the obscure will find new esoteria deep within the limestone innards of the Mendip Hills. Most sites are minor in nature, but all are worth searching out for a piece of quiet in wooded surroundings. Curious Holes is a cute face with big dimples, Croscombe is natural lime perforated with finger pockets and Horrington Hill will have cattle licking your extremities while hanging that heinous crimp; rodeo with a BIG smile. Remarkably they all make the area's premier sea cliff, Brean Down, look a little less offbeat than it did in the '70s and '80s. There the seminal '90s E6 *Cove Arête* yearns to become a South West classic, but few will notice on their way to the freshly re-bolted Boulder Cove sport climbs. Catch the Cove on a sunny day, blow back to Wales the dead seagulls and condoms floating on the tide and you've got Somerset's very own take on Cala Malgraner!

Further northeast along the coast lies a land of bouldering and narrow cliffs that suddenly takes on a new order of magnitude as climbers' vision improves across time. Hundreds of boulder problems along the Toll Road crags at Weston-Super-Mare and a few eight to 10m routes, provide an alternative to those not convinced by strange theatre in neighbouring Woodlane Quarry or cranking the stucco to the per-

cussion of the local boat yard at Uphill Quarry. On the latter, climbs like *Jimi Hendrix Experience* (E6) and *Living Dead* (E5) enlist fans from across the country. Further along, Sand Point remains a charming and wild headland well clear of any major towns. Pick up some gear and go there to explore. Short routes admittedly, some previously without descriptions and names, but nice Severe-like grades, strong lines and you get the impression of being the first to climb them.

It's full circle back to Bristol. No need to stop at popular Goblin Combe for long. Under its new ownership and management, by North Somerset Council, you can now walk past the 'Climbing Forbidden' sign without fear of a shotgun being held to your head. This will lead you to a reliable haunt of Hobbits, wild garlic and an enduring choice of climbs in the VS to E2 grade. Correspondence makes it plain that climbers had been getting rankled by the gradings there, so you'll find, possibly to your relief, that VS climbs like *Brandybuck*, *Pippin* and *Gandalf* have gone up a grade or so, reflecting the effort many have expended on them.

Of a similar character to Goblin is the Trym Valley Gorge, another crag within the city limits, but there the folklore is more to do with the well-hard Lawrence Weston kids than Latin encrypted ad nauseam on the crags. In 2002/3 woodland management by the Council, which removed all the ivy that shrouded the cliffs for a decade, was complemented by some restorative work to the climbs. Lover's Leap is once more worth

a visit for *With Eyebrows* (HVS), *Shaft* (E1) and *Longbow* (E1), though the real line there is *Lover's Groove* (E3), the hanging corner which is off-balance, off-hand and possibly 'off' altogether.

For the sport climber, the Armistice Wall begs remembrance since its routes from the '80s have been re-bolted and several new

Chapman in 1984, repeated only very recently after burnt fingers.

Replicating Trym, but in the north of the city, is a series of reclusive sandstone bluffs alongside the River Frome. Starved of light behind dense knittings of ivy and rhododendron, their climbs are not to be taken in winter. So, choose a summer's evening and

book is dedicated.

But hang on a minute, what about Cheddar Gorge? 'The biggest, the shortest, the loosest, the soundest, the grimmest, the brightest...' the late Arnis Strapcans somehow forgot to mention the 'coldest' too when regaling the stuff of Cheddar in 1976. Rest assured, the gentle limestone giant

*...choose a summer's evening and arm out above dogwalkers and the river to the feel of grit under your hands and the laughter of the kids in the park.*

lines added. There lie four nimble F7b+/F7cs in a row, where fingers probe for hidden rugosities and feet stick in marginal scallops. Not all is as it seems though, between the bolts a sharp intake of breath is still necessary for *Burnt Offerings* (E6), an unbolted and advanced lead by Julian


arm out above dogwalkers and the river to the feel of grit under your hands and the laughter of the kids in the park. A place to potter and for individuals to draw meaning from the darkness, as did 'Kangy' King and his friends in the '60s and as did Peter Hughes in the '80s — to whom the guide-

may yet have its day. Confirming that routes like *The Empire*, *Warlord*, *Ahimsa*, or *Bird of Paradise* are as great limestone climbs as can be found in Britain, provides the hard facts. But can its

cold, sheer, and reputedly loose and vegetated walls represent a key to the future of outdoor climbing in the area? Ask the locals as they resist the old grounds for denial, salivating from climbing walls at the prospect of new gear in place of old and unclimbed F8b bulges.

As I write, the Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project, which is supported by the BMC and The Climbers' Club (and salivating local climbers) seeks a better deal on access. The owners of the main cliffs, Cheddar Caves, endorse the project and, moreover, are providing vital help in managing road closures as any remaining loose rock is cleared from selected routes.

With the need to ensure public safety brought right to the fore, a selection of the best cliffs boasting climbs like *Thor*, *Caesar*, *Brainbiter* and *Paradise Lost*, have been restored. Now, or very soon, climbers can enjoy these routes free of the stress of dislodging rock that might land in the road or in a car park open to the public. And as far as ye olde green extremism is concerned, take it with a slice of Cheddar Cheese: several roadside crags (Horseshoe Bend Buttress, Ginsberg Wall and Sunnyside Terrace) which contain existing sport routes have been bolted to provide a range of accessible, well-gearred climbs across the grades.

With essential public safety and conservation work carried out by the owners well advanced, Cheddar Gorge now has the capacity to serve a wider menu to climbers. Yet no significant adventure routes or bold leads are to be lost to bolts, and first ascensionists' blessings or otherwise are key. The Gorge is and will remain a unique adventure climbing environment where all who seek it will have little problem in continuing 'to frighten themselves'. Those who want to climb there in warmer weather can only support the quest to secure an extended access arrangement. Keep yourself informed on this one. Personally I have high hopes — 100m high. 



CARL RYAN

◁ A quarry classic: Martin Crocker on 'Journeyman's Wall' E3 5c, North Quarry.