

Fixed Gear Policies and what to do about Avon Gorge: A tale of a *Little Red Rodney*

'I disagree with retro-bolting; maybe that's because when a climb once done, has a soul of its own.

Karl Lingiah, letter to *On the Edge* 50, 1995

I first tried *Little Red Rodney* in 1971 when I was 15. That was after spending a lot of time acclimatizing to Avon by soloing around The Amphitheatre and bouldering on Harvey's Wall. Hereabouts are two of my first leads at Avon: *Toothpaste*, climbed when I was 14, and *Stranded*, which I soloed in plimsolls with holes. Between the two stands an off-vertical rust-coloured rectangular wall, bisected by *Little Red Rodney* which was established in 1965 by the rock-entrepreneur Ed Drummond. It attracted me from first sight: its geometry, its blankness, its singularity. Moreover it was graded 'Extreme'.

Boyhood dreams progressively built me up big-time for the lead, and – exhilarated to embark on my first ever Extreme – I waltzed up the friendly introductory corner and out onto the wall. In those days I owned a few small nuts on wire, and I probably placed one, or maybe two, before a long run-out saw me teetering onto the stuck-on ledge. I say 'stuck-on' because that's how it appeared: a lintel of grey limestone baked into the centre of the ironstone curtain. A peg hidden at the back of the ledge had been tapped in by Drummond, how deeply or securely no visitor could tell. The imperative was that you could only make the decision to take on whatever lay above in the knowledge that a fall might cause the peg to lever off the ledge and land you on the ground below. And in a manner of speaking that would be that.

The feelings imbued from facing that decision is the spell cast by *Little Red Rodney*.

Reluctantly you must ease away from the peg and commence a cautious probing of the bare open scoop above. Rocking up onto a tiptoe edge you reach small holds, but which hand should you use on which hold, and which direction to take? Up and back down to the ledge, repeatedly, you're focussing on not over-balancing and trying to summon the will to commit one way or another. But that day I didn't have it in me – whatever 'it' was. I was just a schoolkid, and an unconfident one at that, only then discovering who I was through climbing – not all the skills had arrived. But there was no disappointment; far from causing any disincentive or malaise, my retreat only served to deepen the mystery of the climb and my motivation to climb it. I was left prepared to change and to grow, to develop the necessary power of mind for another attempt, another day.

South West and Southern Area Committee

Minutes of the 97th Business Meeting held on Saturday 13 November 1993 at the Miner's Arms, St Werburgh's, Bristol.

In 1993 Bristol entertained its first British Mountaineering Council South West (BMCSW) committee fixed gear policy and debate. I remember the evening well: a broad circle of about 15 contributors (and as many empty seats) facing one another, unsure about it all. Bolts had been sprinkled across Britain, feuds were breaking out, and the BMC had said to climbers to sort it out amongst ourselves – within its official framework. By that stage, along with other people, I had placed bolts at Avon – adding to those that had been fixed in the 60s and 70s for the purpose of aid climbing and which later became legitimate bolts for free climbing. Gordon Jenkin sat alongside, in a similar position. We were nervous. We half expected a backlash. The policy I had tabled had been prioritised to preserve the traditional character of the site and its climbs, but we wanted our bolts to be accepted too – in effect seeking an approval of the status quo. As it happened there wasn't a great deal of debate and no objections so far as I can remember, the discussion being brought down to earth by one contributor's bleak warning: 'limestone's had it anyway'. The procedure was that the policy would be circulated for comment, and validated next meeting provided there had been no objections. And so it transpired; a few months later it felt like it had all proved too simple, yet my relief was tempered by discomfort and unease. The proceedings, and my role in them, illuminated a failing in local democracy – that it could be led whichever way the wind was blowing, depending on who turns up, who has got the energy to present their case, or who has rallied their troops to swing the vote. Yet an entire heritage, a segment of Bristol's culture, had been at stake. Politicians we were not.

The next substantive fixed gear policy review occurred in 2002 at Undercover Rock, but the perception this time was that a rebellion was brewing to propose that Avon's routes should be bolted. I suppose that was unsurprising; climbing culture in Britain had changed massively since the last review. Eight years on, sport climbing had become well embedded in Britain and the indoor walls were exporting a new breed of climbers ill-prepared or perhaps unwilling to take on Avon's run-out repertoire. It was no surprise therefore that the debate was well attended and lively. A range of views was expressed – considerably more expansively than before. Someone said that if the pegs were replaced with bolts the routes would become sport routes but frighteningly run-out ones. Someone said that the gorge was one of Britain's most historic climbing sites where limestone free climbing standards were at the forefront in the 1950s and 60s and should not have its character altered. Someone said the rock on Main Wall was too poor to house bolts anyway. And someone else said the written appeals from old-timers' Hugh Banner and Chris Bonington 'not to bolt the routes' were arrogant. But the rebellion didn't surface. Once more an overwhelming majority agreed that the status quo should prevail. Innocent plaything Avon had breathed another sigh of relief. Or maybe that was just us.

And 10 years later it happened all over again, instigated by a rejuvenation project proposal for Avon and the formation of *ClimbBristol* to run it. One of the project's objectives was an ambitious undertaking to renew all the pegs and bolts on the cliff. As a safeguard, this programme was to be managed through the authority delegated to the *ClimbBristol* steering group which would report to the BMCSW Area. So far as the routes were concerned decision rules were agreed that maintained the like-for-like renewal ethos of the parent 1993/4 policy, but with various exceptions incorporated accounting for environmental wear and tear. Ultimately it must have appeared quite complicated – requiring a serious read. In attendance were over 100 climbers, the vast majority of whom voted to support both the project and the policy objectives that would be in place to enable *ClimbBristol* to do its job in line with the substantive and enduring 1993/4 policy guidelines. (I'd only witnessed this size gathering at one other Area meeting and that was when I presented another project: the 2005 Cheddar Gorge access proposal.)

But – hang on a moment – no one at these meetings ever states how long any new policy would or should last. Who decides when a fixed gear policy should be reviewed? – punters may have been left wondering. And what are the defined criteria that would trigger a review, and who has the authority to define them?

During COVID, when outdoor users were periodically criminalised, Avon Gorge enjoyed another flourish across its cliffs. With rules precluding travel to other destinations, people from the city could rediscover their very own crag. It was a double take to witness multiple teams on many occasions engaging with the routes on Main Wall, so often neglected without good reason save their perceived seriousness. Clearly the ability to take on Avon climbing had not been lost after all, merely buried by a spoiling of choice from exponentially increasing sport climbing destinations in the West Country and south Wales. And the benefits of the *ClimbBristol* project were there to reap too (as an aside, it's hard to imagine that anyone will be inclined to 're-peg' the gorge again, if indeed it remains a practicable option).

'It would be good to see you at Area meetings' a BMC National Officer said to me many moons ago. My reply was that 'it would be good to see you or your officers at a meeting, after all it's your job.' The amiable exchange occurred not long after BMCSW was put on ice because of a reported lack of officer attendance. That changed when I proposed the Cheddar Gorge Project in 2003, the BMC wisely using its inaugural meeting to relaunch BMCSW. Thereafter officer attendance was consistent when needed. And the BMC went onto support the Cheddar Gorge Project and others in the region including *ClimbBristol*; access seemed to have risen in importance a few notches, pre-Olympic climbing.

So good on the BMC: a 100-strong turnout at both gorge's project meetings was great going. But these issues were box office, and – notwithstanding any BMC chip butty offensive – attendance at Area meetings has for the most part been problematic. You cannot help but sympathise with facilitator the BMC. When it comes to deciding policy, twenty or so climbers is hardly a representative quorum when so much is at stake. How can a decision be safe, let alone democratic, if it involves only 0.5% of a region's climbers? It only takes minutes to wipe away decades. Democracy is more than the popular vote. It is also about instituting protections to care for precious elements of social history, precedents and the planet which are made vulnerable because of change – like archaeological listing, or controlling anti-social behaviour, or limiting public access to wildlife. Why risk our heritage every time a fixed gear policy is reviewed or adapted merely to satisfy the loudest voices, or to submit to the flavour of the month – all the while embracing the creep of competition climbing and reality Headpoint TV into the collective climbing psyche?

The advocacy of the devil is a useful cop out. It enables anyone to say pretty much what they like, claiming immunity from the hell of persecution by do-gooders and the media. On this occasion the devil allows me to get to the point and ask whether BMC Fixed Gear Policy meetings have had their day? I mean no disrespect to the BMC, whom have given my project ideas a lot of support, but is it not time we found a different approach?

Area meetings can demonstrate the fine line between democracy and bureaucracy. All it takes to swing it the wrong way is a couple of well-meaning apparatchiks who thrive on officialdom. Attendees may then experience the irony of facing-off the regime-makers and rule-makers and the corporate inelasticity we thought we had escaped when we found climbing. Committees, minutes, consultations, delegated powers, meetings to set up meetings, governance – it feels like my old job in local government. It can be a turn-off. Surely we are meant to be outdoors projecting into free space, not indoors cramped by political etiquette and procedures. Did we not choose to discharge our own destinies when we first took to rock and the mountains?

Maybe there is a case now to be consensually ageist and trust the younger generation to decide these things for themselves. If meetings must take place and we must submit to regimentation why not exclude the insufferably opinionated over-50s– all of them and us, including the pathological first ascensionists, the bolt-weaponised ideologues and, the crotchety anti-bolt die-hards, as well as those who are in it only to stay relevant in retirement and govern others. If they so wish younger people can always access history, take the opportunity to speak with their predecessors; and work out how they will decide climbing's ethical conundrums. They can look at Areas that function well and Areas that do not, and work out why.



In 1996 the BMCSW voted in a policy stating 'There is no fixed gear replacement policy for Avon Gorge'. Attendees seemed to jump at the idea to save themselves agonising over the alternatives – much to the surprise of proposer Dave Viggers. In effect that meant climbers could do their own thing, just like in the good and bad old days. But is it a sustainable way forward to sanction the same libertarianism which oversaw bolts going in only to be chopped? While egos sabre-rattle it is mostly the crag that suffers, and threats to access can evolve as a result.

And what a waste and misuse of time and money for both sides; there must be a better way than this too!?

Even with a national representative body's processes in place things can go seriously awry. Take nearby South East Wales as a case study, an object lesson even. Out on the crags a laudable sport climbing ideology has become hijacked by a Machiavellian MO. Emboldened by the BMC banner, it skews the democratic process, dubiously causing repeated reviews and tweaks to a maturely negotiated bolt policy that some thought was fair and would last more than several years. 'The more bolts the merrier' – fun times indeed, implies the strapline – but it doesn't seem to matter where they are being placed. Obscured by the popular demand for sport climbs, great physical and cultural damage is being done by the latent xenophobia of a few. Sure, every activist makes mistakes on the crag, especially on the exfoliating sandstone quarries which require strenuous cleaning efforts and a firm hand. But more widely in SE Wales many bolt-free routes have been vandalized by ruthless retrobolting, and on some crags there is glaring evidence of systematic rock-smashing and drilling to create holds (even on published existing routes – here's an example: <https://martincrockerclimbingcom.squarespace.com/the-bridge>). And not only have some routes been retrobolted but there have been attempts to rename them too – including highpoints in SE Wales's history like *Crowman* and *Painted Bird*. It beggars belief, but almost all seem to turn a blind eye, presumably willing to accept this collateral damage as the region is flooded with sport climbing of a variable quality that keeps many contented. Yet not everyone keeps schtum. Some climbers, merely protecting what they thought had been agreed, are at times left with no choice but to seek reparations on the crag for the long-held values spat at, the vindictive erasure of adventure, and the loss of resource. And in its fence-sitting laissez faire default to local democracy – *whatever* this local democracy may choose to assert – the BMC is attached by name to this loss – which is unfortunate. That's mission creep.

The assumption now is that rock-climbing heritage will always be under threat. Why would anyone 'burn the books' because they don't like their contents or authors? Cancel culture is now the rage and is not limited to seeking redress for morally dubious past human behaviour. Here, quite the opposite; it's already impacting by stealth on adventure climbing, even via a populist process superimposed by the BMC long ago in its effort to help. So should we not now release the over-reaching BMC to pursue comps and the Olympics and to enjoy the NGB public profile that comes with it? And then let everyone else tumble into some echelon twixt order and chaos while hoping that *real* climbing (as Pete Livesey and his acolytes used to call it) does not become marginalised as an odd bod pursuit of yesteryear? The solution is unpretentious. It boils down to respect – a respect for people – whether they're followers of sport, minimalist, trad, bouldering, soloing, or headpointing. That's the freedom of choice every climber has earned in an enviably diverse British climbing paradise. And, you know, declinism can evaporate by simply caring for the *soul*.



I'm now 66 and cannot expect to have any real influence on anyone else or on what will transpire on the crags. Having established hundreds of bolt-protected climbs in the 80s and 90s, I am not against sport climbs; far from it so long as they are not created at the expense of existing bolt-free routes – especially without the agreement of their originators. No activist can do any more than they can do while alive; so – against any looming dystopia – that may include telling a sob story on an obscure website like this or taking restorative action on the crag if they know it is the right thing to do. Peace is a better option.

High magazine editor Geoff Birtles had got it right in 1983 when in a stroke of exemplary wisdom said: 'It is for the activists of the day to set their own standards. And if they are not good, then somebody else will do better. That's the way it has always been.' '.....the more credence given to bureaucracies and institutions, the worse climbing will be for it.'

Left: Alex Winter up and down, facing the decision, on *Little Red Rodney* (E2), Avon Gorge.

So do remember *Little Red Rodney*. He's infinitely more effective a motivator than a year on the wall, a subscription to *Summit*, a residency on *Love Island*, or even a caring parent. He'll show you who you really are if you allow him the grace to be himself too. After all, what sort of climber do you want to be? Dead – or Alive?

Karl nailed it in not so many words.

Martin Crocker 3.7.56.