

# Rebels ON PEBBLES

## Snap Shot

Strung out on pebbles: that's what you are. And highly strung too. That's a half-inch basalt pebble between the forefinger and thumb of your left hand. Your right foot's low on a pebbly smear, but you've got to leave its stability for a high step up left on to a tiny white quartz pebble. White against black, yet this pebble's a shy little sod — poking its nose out a mere quarter-inch from a wrinkled sandy face. So go on, commit yourself before the geometry of balance fails... Tip of the toe is on. Rock up... and up, the torque ever increasing on that pert little pimple. Will it hold? Think about it. Think about falling. You usually do. Toy with the rush of images as senses are thrown into chaos on the plummet to earth 25ft below when the pebble snaps.

Play-acting? Possibly, yet can you really languish in the dubious comfort that this or any of the pebbles won't rip just because they've been tested on a top-rope? As your right arm stretches for the next hold, the pebble seems to be taking your weight — got it. And it's one of those gnarly pebble-composites that feels like the inside of a piranha's mouth — it's not going to let its victim loose. Beneath; a pebble trail, weird and unreal, looking down; a game of chance and balance the solution to which is proved by its chalked-up stepping stones. And so the nimble-footed bid you welcome to the quartz conglomerate of the Forest of Dean. (And ultimately, perhaps, to its vagaries and beauties.)

## Bent People

No question, this is pebble-climbing country but pockets too. To make it, in Old Red Sandstone time, God took a liberal mix of sand and some worn-down mountains of pebbles and stirred it all together to make quartz conglomerate, named after its eponymous principal pebble. He didn't blend it very well though and in places the pebbles are missing — how thoughtful.

Next God made the sandwich. A mere sliv-

er of a stratum only 10m thick, our pebbly filling was spread on to sandstones, too soft to show their face now and topped with dolomitic limestones — hard and high profile. Eventually God covered the area in woodland to try to conceal our skinny, pebbly rock layer so tenacious that it actually shapes the whole of the northern escarpment of the Forest of Dean between Monmouth to Ross. Indeed there is thick forest up there but so too, often where the scarp's contours become compressed, are the quartz conglomerate crags. Miles of them, nestling frustrated in trees. So, God created curious modern man to stalk them, marking their trail with nature's tell-tale signs.

First came the geologists, to plot, and then the climbers, to snap. In the '60s the Gloucestershire Climbing Club got to know Wigpool Common, with their top-ropes, but thereafter came individuals — limestone strays — bent upon diversifying in the '80s and '90s. They reached above the first metre or two of humidity-crumbled aggregate and, progressively, up and out on to the open faces and arêtes where the sandstone mimics gritstone and holds its pebbles in as tight as its grain will allow. In the '80s Roger Lanchbury left his seminal *Featherlight Slab* (a heavy-weight solo at E3), Mike Lewis and members of the Niff Heim Club drew blood on the unthinkable cracks of Near-Hearkening Rock. The 'Peak Raiding Team' of Jeff Phillips and Des Marshall probed enthusiastically here and there and, of course, there were always the ever-dry Rainyday Buttress boulderers, ghost-like spirits, keeping their circuits mysteriously replete with chalk.

In the late '90s two others came. Both were and are fanatics. Time remaining after careers and families will have it perceived no other way. One is me. The other is Guy Percival, a man of the law, whose law is that time is precious rather than money. He is *the* dark horse of Bristol — with a climbing gift. Free of any unholy desire to have an ever-growing shoal of photo-journalists invading the privacy of his every headpoint, I am entrusted not to

flatter him here. I won't, but consider this a scoop. Both he and I have taken separate paths through the Forest over the last four years, yet both share an affection with this quiet leafy landscape where the climbing can be secondary and the wild deer the rulers.

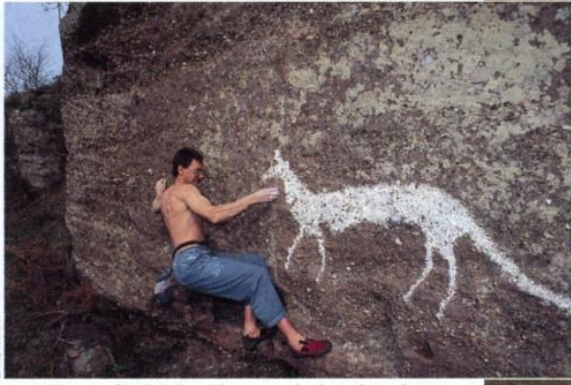
Only upon meeting fresh lines of chalk was the one reminded of the other's presence, together with — as I followed in Guy's footsteps in the latter years — finding the odd broom, brush, pager, rope, krab, belay-plate... all amounting to a utility room's worth of obscurata and a testament to my colleague's time-harassed finishes in the dark. (I've yet to come across his spectacles though, the loss of which proved only a minor impediment for Guy on that day's 'non-sighting'.)

## A Lot of Leaves to be Desired

There are now a thousand routes on quartz conglomerate (read 'sandstone' from now on). Here a soloing headpoint ethic applies and top-ropes, when used, are used only to achieve this end. The environment is simply too sensitive and the rock too delicate to cater for top-roping for the sake of top-roping en masse. Headpointing may have grounded out at the uncharismatic end of the fashion cycle, but in the Forest the unpredictability of the pebbles, the lack of gear and the need for regular soft-brushing of pre-cleaned routes, means that this ethic fits the medium there better than anywhere else I can think of.

Topping out of any route in the Forest is never a high probability, let alone a certainty. Thumping great crash-downs, the assailant pebble still in the pinch, and skin-flailing slips and slaps are in daily evidence. Yet here you can aid your survival, in a Ray Mears sort of way, by using the Forest's cast-aside natural resources. Build a big pile of leaves, for example. We do; in only minutes, in autumn or winter when the beech and birch have freshly shed their foliage, you can custom-build a mattress from fallen leaves and twigs. The height record so far is a two-metre high





CARL RYAN

- ▲ Martin Crocker bouldering with the white deer, Coppett Hill.
- ▶ Martin climbing 'Appointment with Beer' E5 6b, Huntsham.

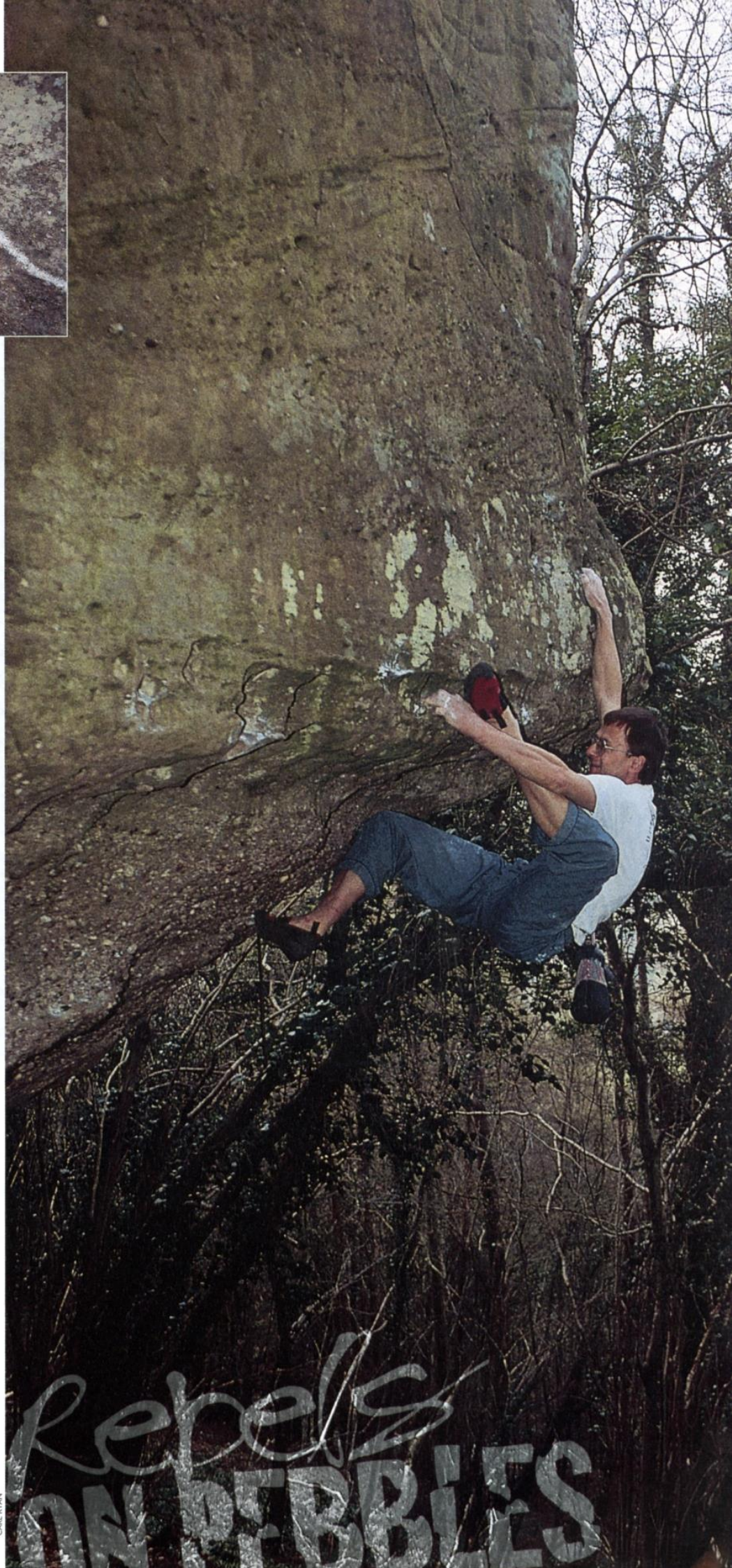
peak, if there were onlookers, it might look eccentric.

### The Parallels and the Puns

What follows is a sample of the climbing, the only criterion being that each climb mentioned is a three-star route. How else to start but on the pebbles and upon a classic that still stands out of the millennium? It has to be *Shadowlands* (E5 5c) at Huntsham, a nine-metre, 80° slab on a boulder, whose every hold — bar one — is a pebble. It's the art of Guy's vision. Start out in the springtime's morning sun when the light strikes the slab obliquely, irradiating the tramlines of pebbles and creating a light show with which you interact. Though the pebbles feel solid, no amount of preparation can remove the possibility that one of them might snap on the solo. God forbid. To date no one has taken a big slide down a pebble-peppered slab. Who'd want to, when a mere three-inch slip can cause lacerations that take weeks to heal? Alone up there, you quickly learn to stand on your own two feet.

Where the sandstone is not riddled with them, the odd pebble can still dictate a climb's character or provide a key hold. For example, there are two sticking out at you on the Huntsham test-piece *Godfather of Rock* (E6 6b/c) which provide the solution to a blank band and, on a Huntsham boulder beautifully located next to the River Wye, there is one on *Riverside Cruise* (E6 6c) which is the link in the chain of dynos necessary to grab an enormous pinch on the arête. One of my favourite pebbles, though, belongs to what must be one of the finest micro-routes in the south and as good as any sandstone route I can think of across the country. The pebble is egg-size, sloping and white, solidly embedded in the right wall of a perfect knife-edged arête. You jump for it, crimp it, pinch it and eventually high-step it; all essential components of the equation which makes laybacking a leaning seven-metre arête possible. The crag, a wooded affair with a High Rocks ambience close to Hope Mansell, was hunted down by Guy; as was the route which — for Guy — acquired a rather soapy title, *Who Do You Say I Am?* (E5 6c). One day I chanced upon Guy re-doing it and I remember thinking while photographing him on the crux snatch, that I

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▲ Martin bouldering on Umbrella Buttress, Coppett Hill.

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▲ Martin going for a pebble on 'Shadowlands' E5 5c, Huntsham.

really would not like to fall from that position. Well, when it came to my turn, I fell from that position. Trying to snatch statically didn't work and, by way of penalty, I swung out of balance around the wrong and higher side of the arête, the pile of leaves I had built to land on ending up in my face rather than under my feet. I had to laugh; there was no one around to hear.

Fancy something steeper and pebble-free? Then go for an *Appointment with Beer* (E5 6b) on Huntsham. I apologise for the pun... couldn't resist it... it's a fun route. While structurally a mirror image of its Wimberry namesake, its character is diametrically opposed. Launch out right from a pedestal on a line of superb pockets in the very lip of a huge roof. A complex hook/footless sequence, all just within jump-down range (for the young), leads to a crux move at the end, above and beyond the range of self-help.

It's breathtaking, especially in spring when you'll be surfing out over a sea of bluebells. Recently it was in-flight flashed by the local robin.

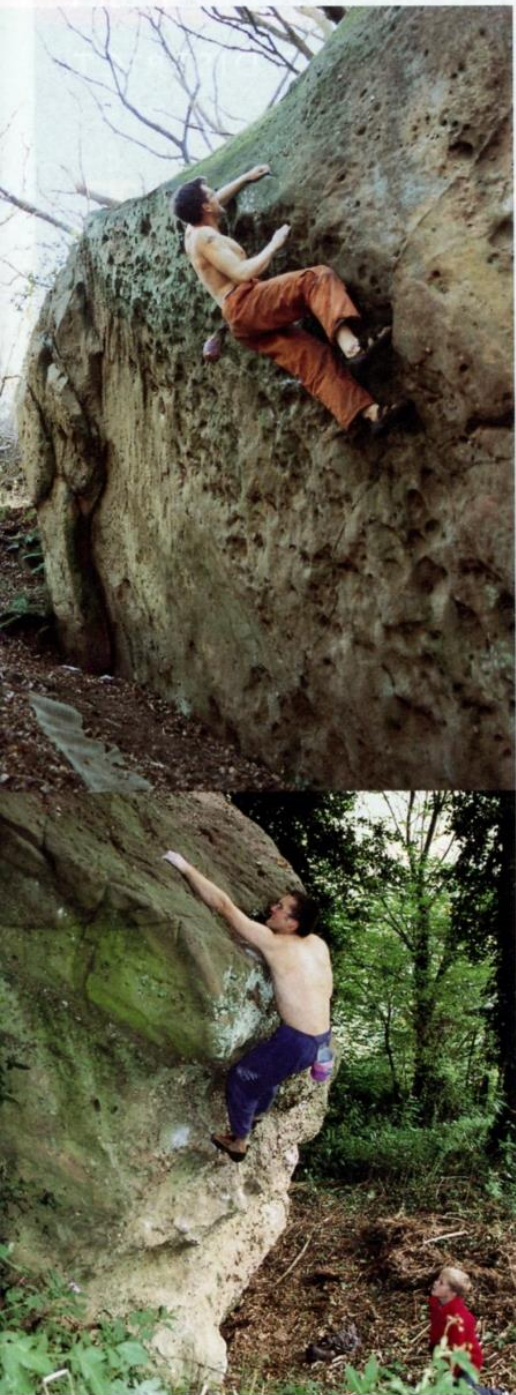
Taking a break from the high grades, and the trees, for a moment, peer over the river from Huntsham to the bracken-clad hill of Coppett Hill. Now you'll understand the geology as you trace the thin quartz conglomerate line of outcrops from Huntsham across the river and into the hillside opposite. There the climbing is more open, the sun a team-mate and there is a magnificent outlook towards the Black Mountains. Coppett Hill is one of the many completely unspoilt and, above all, peaceful places to climb in the Forest of Dean.

In addition to a wealth of desperates, there are also a large number of easier climbs there and some mid-Extreme secret classics. Embark, on sight if confident, on *My Comfy*

*Nook* (E3 5b), a deliciously delicate scoop, with some pebbles, the gentle orange and green lichens of which glow in the sun. Like that? If so, move on to *Raindance* (mild E4 6a), a brilliant face climb on pockets boasting Bowden Doors quality and character. En route is a fine E1 5b arête called *Cereal Killer* that I would have mentioned had it only boasted three stars.

Now if you've kept close to the crags you'll have noticed a white deer painted on the base of a leaning tower. This is unlikely to be the only deer you'll encounter; if you're quiet others will find you, perhaps mistaking your rustle for their fellows foraging amongst the ferns. It was there that Guy came across two stags whose horns had become entangled with twine. One was alive and dragging around the other which was dead. Guy acted swiftly, holding down the live stag in a half-nelson while cutting away the twine with





GUY PERCIVAL COLLECTION

◀ Guy Percival on the second ascent of 'Slug it Out' E3 6b, Huntsham.  
 ▶ Guy Percival bouldering on the Wye Knot Boulder, Riverside, Huntsham.

rion, *Proboscis* at Huntsham is one of those exposed and undercut arêtes, this time at a refreshing Hard Very Severe 5a grade and with the bonus of good cam protection. On the same crag the classic face route *Essence of Being* (E6 6b/c) has a peg at half-height reached by fierce pebble pulls. It's bold to get to it but bolder still if you trust to falling on to a big, hero-looped, cranium-cracker of a pebble. Exploiting the diversity of wild sandstone architecture is *Masters of the Punyverse* (E6 6c) a fantastic, hanging arête reached by a dynamic roof section. I led this with pre-placed gear on the lip way to the right, following a pathetic attempt to reach far enough to place it from a nearby tree. Uncharacteristically there are back-breaker blocks underneath this route but no doubt some stud wanting to stamp E9 into their CV will solo it in the future (sponsorship deals improbable, so why bother?).

Various leads are to be found on the crags surrounding Hope Mansell. *Howitzer* (E6 6c) has already hit the mags (see *High 211*), but close to this is a 12m buttress undercut by a roof which has one of the safest E5s in the Forest. Bombproof cams and wires will mean that any fall from *Exterior Designer* (E5 6b) will be into free air and not on to the deck. Two miles north, just to the south of Ross is the wooded hill of Penyard Park. Mouldering and sometimes starved of light, the crags there have the old Eridge Green atmosphere with some uncannily similar features. *It's All in the Vein* would make a good lead at about E2/3 5c and good wires or cams on *The Pillar* (E5 6a) and the fine 12m slab of *Rampart Wall* (E4 5c) also make taking a partner along worthwhile.

Of the future prospects for the Forest of Dean sandstone, I have mixed feelings. In terms of difficulty, Guy, especially, has shown with his privately conceived ascents of *Now or Never* at Penyard Park and *God the Rock* at Huntsham (both E8 6c), the potential of the area to hold its own and to hold down great challenges, without the hindrance of publicity and the knock-on tepid social intercourse found in virtual-land. Not so strangely enough, the opportunity of a free ascent of *Mean Machine*, at Near-Hearkening Rock — probably the most impressive unclimbed 'gritstone' line in the country — still lies waiting for a sado-masochist with a resistance to unimaginable levels of pain. This is a five-metre ceiling split by a widening crack defended by an inverted 6c move off the first joint of the big finger of the right hand. One broken finger; is that too much to ask? Maybe not. Trouble is, beyond lies the scalloped innards of the crack waiting to cut your wrists too. Attempt this only on the assumption that you will never be the same again.

Equally compelling, and nearby, is an immaculate sheer pebbled wall bristling with

tiny pebbles and still virgin. It looks a cinch until the arrogant pig is in your face, repeatedly pushing you over with its 20° lean. Best just to float up in your imagination the six metres of 6c/7a climbing to the handrail on my final three-star selected 'classic', *The Boob Tube* (E5 6a) which, as you may have guessed, involves a long rightward traverse beneath an overlap. It's a beautiful place to close. For to get to Near Hearkening Rock you will have walked a mile or two through some charming woodland, all the more glorious, rich and golden in autumn. Experiences of success or failure on rock that day quickly come into perspective. It's all simply about the joy of being out and being there. 🌿

## FACTFILE

### The rock

Rough-textured sandstone often with pebbles but sometimes without. Lots of nice pockets of all sizes. The starts can be crumbly, but, unlike many crags, the rock improves rapidly with height.

### The character

Quintessentially gritstone; lots of arêtes, slabs, juggy roofs and, of course, vertical pebble-laden faces. ('Don't forget us cracks!') Maximum height 12m, but most routes 7-10m. The conditions: many crags face between west and north, but there are a few sunshine crags too. Treat them like grit, but add a brisk or strong cool wind for optimal conditions. Lots of trees whose foliage can trap the humidity in mild moist weather. All-year round climbing viable, including (and perhaps especially) winter time.

### The style

60% soloing, 10% leading, 30% bouldering. Take a crash mat in case.

### Environment and ethics

Climb peacefully in this tranquil woodland environment, avoid group use, noise and any disturbance to wildlife save its chancing upon you because you're so quiet. Take out absolutely any rubbish, including mats. Use soft brushes only when repeating routes. Be very careful not to boot off critical pebbles that are strong enough for light-touch handling.

### Where are the crags?

Up there in the woods.

### Guidebooks

A guidebook is to be published by Martin Crocker in 2004. The current Symonds Yat guidebook (Climbers' Club 1999) will get you to two of the main crags and to the few pre-1999 routes.

### Information, especially historical

Please send anything which might illuminate historical, or any current, activity in this area to the author at 23 Ryecroft Rise, Long Ashton, Bristol, BS 41 9NQ. Thanks.

one of his implements. A chance to use life-saving skills with a difference, the experience seemed to bond him spiritually with Coppett Hill.

For those not into soloing at hospitalization height, there is a lot of bouldering. Boulders abound, as do sections of the crags or whole crags of bouldering height. All are tranquil places reproducing the essence of far away places like Kyloe in the Woods or even Callerhues. The other option is the good and varied selection of lead routes on offer, often in the VS to mild Extreme range. As a general rule, the cracks, though protectable, can be bloody and painful beasts, which occasionally lure their prey into lead roles in the goriest horror movies ever made. Trust me, if you want to lead you need to move out on to those faces and arêtes where the existence of gear placements makes soloing contrived.

Sticking with the three-star selection crite-