

Access notes for BMC Peak Area April 2013

An arctic wind sliced through us as we wandered across the frozen wastes of **Bleaklow** on Easter Monday, surveying the long line of cornices high above the Snake Pass. Time to reflect what the same landscape looked like ten years or more ago after the huge Yellowslacks fire devastated a vast area of moorland, or seven or eight years ago when the early stages of restoration revealed acres of geojute on bare peat.

Whilst there is much more to be done, work by the **National Trust and Moors for the Future** really has done sterling work on overgrazed and industrially polluted uplands. We should pay tribute to all those who put so much effort into making it all happen.

The National Trust got an abundant response to its consultation on future management of the **High Peak Moors**, and it is taking a little while to sort through some very different perspectives. But at least the aspirations of recreational users were well represented amongst those responses – so thanks to all those BMC members who contributed to the consultation. It may be towards the autumn before any final document is produced.

The vision for appropriate future management of the **Sheffield Moors** was well received when the Masterplan was published in March – and again BMC members had taken part in that consultation. Indeed, at the launch a BMC speaker joined the CEO of Sheffield City Council, The National Trust, Professor Sir John Lawton and Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries Richard Benyon in giving a short formal presentation – and that must reflect the extent to which note is taken of the views expressed at our Peak Area Meeting.

One key aspiration for the autumn is the removal of the conifer plantation in the **Burbage Valley** – known as the Great Britain Plantation – with funding via the **Dark Peak NIA**, which again has BMC Access Volunteer representation on its Steering Group. There will be some temporary impact at the southern end of the valley, which for a while may look like a timber yard, but please bear with any temporary inconvenience. An alternative access route will be maintained at all times. The aim will be to seek to re-establish something of the character of Padley Gorge lower down Burbage Brook in the upper part of the valley, with scattered native woodland along the brook, to the benefit of wildlife and landscape.

Interestingly on of the more contentious proposals in the **National Trust's High Peak Moors consultation** has proven to be a very similar proposal for increasing natural woodland species in some cloughs, mainly on the north side of Kinder. For some this is anathema because it potentially could reduce grazing, or because it may make a familiar landscape look again like it used to. Landscape is never static. It is living. And living things will naturally grow if sheep don't eat them first.

Indeed there is a view that large scale rewilding is the right approach, and one should do nothing beyond letting nature take its course. It may have a place, perhaps on parts of Blacka Moor, but if it does that place is not everywhere if one is concerned to maintain biodiversity, and variety in landscape, through a mosaic of different habitats. Thus, again through NIA funding, some management of birch thicket around the **Secret Garden** is planned. The secluded nature of that venue will, after discussion

with the BMC, be retained, but some thinning of the birch will allow introduction of selected native species too.

Another place where the birch has become the whole of the view is on the **Eastern Moors** along Curbar and Burbage. Last year the **Peak Climbing Club**, working with staff from the Eastern Moors Partnership, did splendid work all along Curbar. In March they got well along Froggatt, so once again the gritstone edges will become visible in the landscape, a greater variety of habitat will emerge and all sorts of things from lichens to climbers will benefit.

So what's happening on that other bit of the High Peak Moors that is **Stanage North Lees**?

A meeting of the National Park Authority's Audit Resources and Personnel (ARP) Committee that was due to take a paper on the future of the **North Lees Estate** and scheduled for 22 March was postponed due to bad weather and has been rearranged for 3 May. Basically the NPA is still seeking to maximise commercial opportunity and economic returns to itself from North Lees, and an Invitation to Tender, "for review and making both strategic and detailed recommendations for the revision of the Asset Management Plan" has recently been issued. It may be possible to give some update on the BMC's reaction to this at the Area Meeting.

The Steering Group of the **Stanage Forum** has however met and reported its own views to the NPA. In a nutshell the Steering Group believes the Farm House at North Lees Hall should be retained and that the cruck and threshing barn complex should be developed as a rural enterprise offering a range of accommodation and facilities for functions to provide a commercial return to underpin the economic viability of the estate. Rigid retention of the principles on the NIA is seen as prerequisite since HLS funding will be dependent thereupon. The future of the North Lees camp site is a particular concern for BMC representatives on the Steering Group. The current farm tenancy expires in September and either a new tenant or some other arrangement to safeguard the hefted flock will be necessary to meet that deadline.

It will be **ring ouzel** time of year again any time now. Last year was a good year for the Stanage birds we look after, and this bucked the national trend where, even after recent severe UK population declines, a further decrease of a staggering 28% was recorded in 2012. Thus the little bit climbers do to help is even more critically important. Any restrictions will be notified on site by signage where birds are nesting. The on site signage at Stanage is the most reliable and up to date indicator and is always removed as soon as it becomes unnecessary. We do put word about on web sites and in climbing walls in Sheffield, and main Hope Valley retail outlets, but the position can change several times in a week as birds select their territories and start nest building. Between first and second broods a restriction can be lifted one day and reintroduced a few routes down the crag a couple of days later as another nest is built: the same nest never gets used twice.

Dogs are an ever present problem for the birds, especially perhaps when recently fledged young you do not normally see are hiding in the bracken beds. Dogs are a big problem too for lambs. This sheep / dog problem is very real. In 2012 some £5000 worth of ewes were killed by dogs in the Burbage Valley. And dog owners will always tell you their own dog is well behaved and never chases a sheep.

Remember too that dogs are banned all year round on Bamford and Moscar grouse moors, whether or not they are on a lead. Legally a dog under control may be on a

public right of way, but that is all – and that right does not extend to concessionary paths like those along the tops of the edges.

The usual restrictions have been announced for **Hallam, Moscar, Bamford and Derwent Moors**. The dates this year are 13 to 26 May, 28 to 31 May, 3 to 7 June and 10 to 14 June. Thanks to Moscar Estates for permitting a relaxation of this general access restriction for climbers climbing on Stanage between Stanage End and Secret Stanage – but please keep to the edge itself.

The inaugural **Spirit of Kinder Day** lectures and events is from **1.30pm to 5.30pm at New Mills Town Hall on Saturday April 27**. Keith Warrender will cover latest research into the actual – as opposed to the mythical – history of the Mass Trespass 81 years ago. Then Jon Stewart will speak on 30 years of National Trust ownership before Kate Ashbrook of the Open Spaces Society (and current President of the Ramblers) will give the keynote address. There will be a BMC stand there, along with several others, and if anyone can volunteer to give a hand in manning (or womaning) it that would be much welcomed. We may be struggling to get full time officers as the date unfortunately clashes with the BMC's AGM.

The landowner, ie the Thornhill Settlement, wants to erect some signs at **Rowtor**, and the BMC has agreed to pay for these. Agreeing wording has not however been straightforward. The patience of the National Park Ranger who is trying to get consensus on this must have been sorely tried. There is, or hopefully has been, a gulf between those who want a sign to say 'Keep out you can't go here' but then qualify that overstatement to concede you can, and those who want it to convey a simple and accurate message, along the lines that access is by concession, and not by public right. So don't be surprised to see a sign or two if you go there. Note the phrase 'a sign or two'. There were to have been 12.

A final point on gritstone areas: there was a bit on the BMC website recently about **ticks**. There are more of them about in the Peak than there were, and getting one burrowing into a fold in your skin can potentially (but not inevitably) have unpleasant consequences. No bad thing to check up on them, especially perhaps if you have young kids in tow.

On the limestone we have loose rock / rock fall problems at both Horseshoe and Aldery. We are grateful to geotechnicians who have given us their professional opinions. At **Horseshoe** the major fall is self evident across the entrance path as you come out of the trees. We have deliberately left the debris in situ so it is in your face and abundantly apparent that the bank above is unstable and that further collapse is inevitable. The Land Management Group (LMG) is meeting in a few days time, and the probability is that it will deem it necessary to have some scaling work undertaken.

At **Aldery** there is a particularly worrisome area above the cave entrance. There is little climbing just there, and we have been in touch with Derbyshire Caving Association to warn them of the problem. Some discrete signage will be in place before long. The problem with this area is that it is all so intrinsically and self evidently unstable that it is perfectly possible scaling would result in a making matters worse, or at least major. At the right hand end of the crag, where there is already signage in place, a column has collapse high up placing additional stress on the already shattered rock above. This is a particularly difficult and potentially dangerous area and it is best to avoid it altogether. LMG will be taking a view on the best course of action, but recommended work on tree removal, where roots will increase inherent instability both here and elsewhere on the crag, has already begun.

We sought a meeting with the Arkwright Society on **Willersley**, but their chief officer is much pressured by a major event (for them) later in the year and wanted to postpone any meeting till after it had happened. The issue here seems to us to be that their insurance agent has a particular take on Occupiers' Liability which is significantly more extreme than that of the Forestry Commission at Black Rocks or Derbyshire Dales at Wild Cat nearby, to name but two venues. The BMC has offered various meetings or expert opinions from its own insurers, but the Arkwright's agent is not disposed to talk. Therefore we would say, just carry on climbing there, quietly.

So to the sorry state of **Ravensdale**: draconian and wholly extreme reaction on the part of Natural England because some ravens are nesting on Via Vita has resulted in total closure of the whole crag. BMC Access Officer Rob Dyer and local access volunteers have tried in vain to bring a little reason to the position, but beyond making our feelings clear and refusing to agree any total, as opposed to limited, restriction there is nothing more we can do. The reserve manager seemed to us to be very firmly of the view that conservation was about keeping people out and that he would do everything he humanly could to resist any move to declare that Nature Reserve open access in the future – which is of course the stated policy of the organisation for which he works. Actions speak louder than words.

Outside climbing there is, as ever, lots going on in the Peak, and if you want to test access volunteers' knowledge at the meeting, please do. If we do not know the answer we can always find it out. Suffice it here to mention just three things.

PASA – that's Peak Adventure Sports Activities – is a newly formed group to speak up with a combined voice for adventure activity. The BMC is a member. It has a meeting with the NPA's CEO in mid April, and hopefully you will hear more of it. Its stance is very much pro National Parks, but, whilst urging that they are supported by adequate funding, PASA will suggest appropriate ways of securing this. It will also draw attention to the undervalued contribution representative user groups make to promotion, information and ethic for adventure activity and outdoor education.

A major demonstration by off roaders at the ARP Committee meeting of 22 March fell foul of the weather, but will no doubt be rescheduled for the reconvened meeting on 3 May. The officer recommendation for the 22 March meeting was, in respect of **Chapelgate**, that the NPA proceed to consultation on a permanent TRO for that route. That means what it says – that there will be a consultation. It is a fair bet that off roaders will regard the outcome of any consultation as a foregone conclusion, and that they and NPA will in due course see each other again in the High Court. There is already a temporary TRO in place on Chapelgate imposed by Derbyshire County Council to facilitate more repairs on the lower part of the route, but not yet, so far as one can gather, to similarly facilitate much needed repairs to a particularly boggy section at the high point of the route.

On **Long Causeway** expect no change for some months. The revetment is not capable of repair so to facilitate the passage of MPVs of over 1.5m width a complete rebuild will be necessary, and likely involve something like sinking concrete piles and facing them. This will be hugely expensive and whilst DCC have a duty to keep the way in repair, it is difficult to imagine they will have the resource. Many would take the view that even if they did there would be better things to spend it on. They have reportedly allocated £375k to their 'green lanes' budget for the new financial year.

The position on s56 orders has been clarified. Contrary to earlier reports none has in fact been served on DCC, though it was intimated that anyhow some would be.

Following on from a successful Peak District Cycle Summit 'Moving Up a Gear' on 27 February a **Cycle Festival 2013 'Making it Work for You'** is to be held, based at Thornbridge Outdoors from 7 to 15 September.

And that's enough for now. Let's hope the snow has gone and Burbage can be seen again from under the cornices before we meet up at the next Peak Area Meeting.

Henry Folkard
2 April 2013