



BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL

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Minutes of the SW Interim Area Meeting

Meeting held at the Nova Scotia Inn, Nova Scotia Place, Bristol, BS1 6XJ on Thursday the 9th May 2013 at 7.00 pm.

Present:

Matthew Goater (MG) - Chair	Philip Wilson (PW) - Sec
Simon Fletcher (SF) – Avon Access Rep	Dan Donovan (DD)
Nick Eaton (NE)	Mark Stevenson (MS)
Mark Davies (MD)	Jon Bentley (JB)
Martin Crocker (MC)	

Visitors Present For The Cheddar Cable Car Proposal Agenda Item Only: Hugh Cornwall (HC) - Cheddar Caves & Gorge & Andrew Simpson (AS) - NVB Architects (for the project).

1. Welcome & Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Colin Knowles (NC). (MG) welcomed everyone to the meeting. Everyone present was reminded to sign in and give their email addresses. (MG) reminded everyone (for the data protection act purposes) that the meeting was being recorded (to aid the minute taker) and no objection was raised.

2. Ringing Of Peregrine Chicks In Avon Gorge

This activity is not taking place this year. This is due to the late nesting this year because to the late winter and the team carrying out this task being on booked holiday (as this task is usually complete by now).

3. The Cheddar Cable Car Proposal

(MC) was asked to summarise the position by (MG). (MC) informed the meeting that the BMC had asked this forum and (MC) to be the link between the BMC (representing climbing interests in Cheddar Gorge) and the Cheddar Caves & Gorge, who are submitting this proposal. (MC) had been chosen due to his good past relations as paid BMC warden for Cheddar and his frequent liaison with Cheddar Caves & Gorge.

(MC) started by asking the meeting whether there was a potential conflict of interest, due to his past dealings with Cheddar Caves & Gorge. Nobody at the meeting raised any objections to him representing the BMC in this matter.

(MC) explained that the prompt for this discussion was via a formal request made by the Longleat estate for them to present their proposal to the BMC.

He re-iterated that the BMC had agreed that this forum was the correct place for our climbing view on the cable car proposal to be formulated e.g. what if any will be the

impact on any of the climbs? (MC) also re-iterated that maintaining good climbing relations with Cheddar Caves & Gorge was important for preserving, maintaining and expanding future climbing access (bearing in mind the past and fruitful co-operation between the two parties).

History Of Climbing In Cheddar Gorge:

(MC) then outlined the access history of Cheddar Gorge climbing as follows:

- There had been dark days in the 60s & 70s where Cheddar climbing had been banned by the Parish Council following a string of accidents (with the police actively interfering with climbing activities).
- The Marquis of Bath arranged for Coronation Street to be climbed by Chris Bonnington in a television spectacular in 1965.
- The Longleat estate had resisted the Parish Councils call to ban climbing in the 1970's and had not gone along with the National Trust rangers distain for climbing on their side of the gorge in the 1980's.
- Through this period a consensus gradually emerged with the Longleat Estate. This was that as long as climbers were avoiding busy periods (1980's winter climbing only), carried insurance, did not harm rare plants and looked after conservation interests and made provisions to rescue themselves (this prompted the formation of the cliff rescue team) they were welcome to climb in the gorge.
- That understanding and hospitality towards climbers grew via the £2m rock removal, conservation and safety project. This culminated in the current 2003 Cheddar Gorge Climbing project agreement that exists today. As a result many climbers could now climb in Cheddar Gorge. (MC) also mentioned that Cheddar Caves & Gorge had sponsored the Crag Attack festival (twice).

The Cable Car Cheddar Caves & Gorge Presentation:

(AS) from NVB (Architects for project) then presented their proposal. Their points were as follows:

- The cable car would give everyone the opportunity to get to the top of Cheddar Gorge, where they would enjoy the dramatic geology and spectacular views all the way down from the Mendip plateau to the Somerset Levels.
- The business case is that with the appointment of a new Chief Executive (due to the impending retirement of Lord Bath in favour of his son) and show cave visitor numbers halving (with the dramatic drop in profitability that this is causing), it was clear that something drastic would need to be done to re-invigorate this business. The solution to reverse the low visitor numbers was the Cable Car Proposal. The alternative would be the Longleat estate scaling back activity in the area altogether, which could mean the loss of all current agreements (including climbing).

The proposal was outlined utilising the [Cheddar Caves & Gorge PDF Proposal Document](#) (Google Earth map on page 2), showing how the cable car would:

- Start from the Cox's Mill area (rearmost area A nearest Jacobs Ladder and the town). It would then fly over the pond, up over the buttress at Gough's Cave, over Slow Worm Gully and land just the other side of the bridle way at the top of High Rock (area B) at a visitors centre.

- Existing routes on the top tier of the un-named buttress on High Rock would not be affected.
- There would be 2 walkways (one wheel chair accessible) to the top of this small un-named buttress. A second walkway would then take visitors across Slow Worm Gully to the top of High Rock and a viewing platform (area C).
- The route would follow near the rear-most red dotted line, furthest away from the cliff edge.
- The sky bridge (viewing platform) would then project out 2-10m over the top of high rock and would have a glass floor (the exact projection has not yet been finalised).
- A consultation will be held for 3 or 4 days prior to planning submission, where members of the public can discuss aspects of the plan. There will also be an open planning process where, discussion and modifications can take place.

Impact On Climbers & Climbing:

The Sky Bridge: A second page was shown (from the current guidebook outlining that the Sky Bridge would project out over the top of High Rock and be open to the elements e.g. not enclosed but would have some measure of rain protection to allow it to be used in wet weather.

No visuals of the Sky Bridge were available (as this part of the plan is still evolving). Only an engineering and topographic site survey drawing, showing where the structure could sit in relation to the top of the cliff was available. Climbs affected during construction would be the top outs for the Crow, Osiris & Coronation Street.

No structural contact points would be close to the edge. There is to be a proposed 1.8m gap between the top of the crag and the affected routes (enough to enable climbers to sit and belay). Current tree belays would be unaffected. Additional concrete support posts could also be used to belay on. This would mean that the public would be located above climbers on the glass floor sky bridge when belaying. It is proposed at present that the sky bridge would project out over the top of this buttress somewhere above Coronation Street.

(HC) stated that it is proposed to move the bund out from under the foot print of Coronation Street. He alluded that this could lead to allowing year round ascents of Coronation Street. (AS) said that although the Sky Bridge is to be supervised, there is still debate on how much of the car park will need closing.

(AS) the architect then answered questions as follows:

The Visitors Centre: What visual impact this would have from the surrounding areas?

(AS) answered that as the whole project has been evaluated for environmental impact (cultural heritage, archaeology, wild life, ecology, visual impact, water quality, flooding, etc), it was stated that the Visitors Centre would have a low visual impact and foot print.

The Cable Car Run: Materials would be pre-fabricated and flown in by French helicopter pilots!

Sky Bridge: This will probably be flown in by helicopter in parts, assembled and slid out into position anchored well back from the edge (with the structure being cantilevered). (MC) asked whether climbing access would be limited during the sky bridge and pylon erection phase. (AS) replied yes it would, but added that as 5 pylons can be erected in 2 days, this time would be short.

Helicopter Flights: (DD) asked where helicopter loads would fly. (AS) said that no slung loads are allowed to fly over built up areas. Therefore all access for this will be via the Longleat side of the gorge at Cheddar Head, with no flying allowed over the road. Flights would be marshalled. Cables for the cable car would be slung in 1 week, with light weight cable being strung-out by helicopter then progressively thicker cables pulled through and spliced into position.

Closing Of The Bottom Gorge Road To Return It To More True Wilderness: (AS) said that relatively little traffic to the gorge attractions came in from the north and that the National Trust would love to see it returned to wilderness. It was agreed that this would turn it into a fantastic resource for everyone to use. It was felt that there may be local opposition to this.

Road Closure & Bus: (HC) thought that this scheme would render the open top bus redundant and added that using the buses had seriously reduced car numbers in the gorge when introduced. (AS) said that they were looking at using a park and ride facility and bus from there to reduce car numbers in the gorge still further (using the cable car as a driver for this). He stated that a park and ride would not work without a major attraction (such as the cable car). (HC agreed however that the ultimate goal of Cheddar Caves & Gorge would be to close the road.

Lower Visitor Level Attractions: (HC) said that over 40 independent businesses were located here and that more money could be spent on these if the cable car is a successful income generator.

Timescales: (DD) asked about scheme timings. (HC) said that if planning could be submitted by August 2013 and quickly approved, contracts would then be submitted by November 2013 and construction could take place in the summer of 2014, with the attraction opening in the spring of 2015. (AS) added that until planning was approved no firm dates could be given.

(HC) and (AS) then left the meeting so that the proposal could be debated.

Debate:

- Coronation Street would become a viable year round wet weather venue with the sky bridge (nervous laughter around the room).
- This proposal is definitely a step away from returning this area into wilderness, which would be an ideal BMC goal.
- The dilemma is that if we oppose this proposal successfully, but cannot stop it, we do not further climbing in the gorge. Such opposition by us could mean the end of climbing in Cheddar Gorge North side (especially with their more hard-nosed business approach).
- It therefore might be better to support it in order to get the most out of it for the climbing community.

- We should minimise its impact as much as possible while getting the most out for climbing.
- Although climbers really appreciate what Longleat have done for us over the years, we should not link this scheme with previous good works, but only look at it on its own merits.
- This forum should limit itself to focusing on the impact on climbing directly and leave it to other to argue the wider points of the scheme.
- Closing car parking spaces would be a positive impact if the park and ride scheme and cable car were a success. This may make the cable car scheme more palatable.
- If the cable car was a success, this would ensure safety for climbers in the gorge in the future. (MC) stated that Cheddar Caves & Gorge had spent £2m on this already. If we (at least) did not oppose the scheme then there is a good chance of expanding climbing in the gorge still further.
- We would have to think very carefully before we opposed this scheme, but that doesn't mean that we should support it.
- We could remain neutral for the time being until the planning application is submitted.
- A formal statement should be agreed at this meeting.
- As Cheddar Caves & Gorge had gone out on a limb in the past in supporting us, then this should be reflected formally in our statement.
- Cheddar Caves and Gorge have never wanted to charge us for climbing. Their attitude has been more sympathetic over the years than the National Trust (the south side owners).
- Cheddar Caves & Gorge are adventurers (a bit like climbers), they therefore welcome climbing and want to see it continue in Cheddar Gorge.
- Could the viewing platform over Coronation Street be opposed without jeopardising the scheme? The feeling was that the viewing platform was an essential visitor component in the scheme as High Rock offers the best view of this spectacular geology and scale of the place e.g. the experience climbers get but safely! It was also accepted that the cable car route does not have such views and had been sensitively thought out (it could have gone straight up the middle of the gorge).
- A debate then ensued about whether we were expected to support this proposal.
- The feeling that support at this stage would be going too far as we do not know the final details.
- Outright opposition to this scheme would be a disaster for climbing.
- Is it fair for climbers to have the view from high rock and not the general public? This was countered by the "should we not be trying to preserve wilderness areas argument". The forum considered whether we would support a train route up Ben Nevis, although we accept it up Snowdon? It was noted that the Grand Canyon has a Sky Bridge, but not a cable car (which the forum felt would not be supported in the US). The point was made that this is not a pure wilderness but a tourist hot spot, with a busy road at the bottom full of motor cycle traffic on weekends. It was also pointed out that the top of the gorge is more of a wilderness.
- Although it allows non able bodied members of the public to experience this view and although the BMC is sympathetic to disabled access this would not be a big enough reason enough to support this proposal.

- Wilderness aside, this project is an intrusion into an area of outstanding natural beauty.
- (MC) stated that it was agreed that wider (year-round) access to climbing in this side of Cheddar Gorge is definitely something which we should pursue as this has always been our long term strategy.
- (MG) re-iterated that we are setting BMC policy in this meeting towards this proposal, although any decision would be ratified at National Council. It was debated as to whether we limit our response and view to the climbing issues alone (leaving such matters to others such as individuals or the National Trust) or consider these aspects in our view and response? (MC) stated that we had been asked by the BMC to provide a steer and that proposals would be ratified by the National Council.
- Although we may have personal views on the whole scheme, the purpose of this meeting is to limit views to climbing issues only.
- (DD) made the point that on topping out on Coronation Street you would bump your head on the glass floor of the viewing area, which would spoil this unique climbing experience! He also stated that climbing the High Rock area routes was a journey from the hustle and bustle of the bottom road to wilderness and solitude at the top. (MC) agreed that this experience would be different following installation of the sky bridge.
- It was agreed that the benefits for climbers may outweigh this issue e.g. improved year round access to these cliffs and bottom road closure. The point was also made that having climbers on the cliff would enhance the visitor experience to the cable car attraction. It was pointed out that climbers have accepted the Suspension Bridge in Avon Gorge, so in time climbers may accept this.
- It was asked whether the Sky Bridge could be sited more sensitively (or be made retractable) e.g. moved from the top of Coronation Street more to the side.

The following statements were then debated and approved:

Statement 1:

(MG) & (MC) felt that it was important that the BMC should recognise all the good work done by the Longleat estate in allowing climbing access to Cheddar Gorge. The following prepared statement was then read out by (MG) and debated. It was pointed out that any such statement would be used by Cheddar Caves & Gorge to support their planning application (if good news). The following statement was then agreed:

‘BMC Southwest recognises and wishes to record its gratitude to the extensive efforts made by the Longleat estate that has enabled climbing to take place on the north face of the cliffs in Cheddar Gorge. In particular BMC South West appreciates the support of the Longleat estate in supporting the Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project, to provide opportunities for many more visitors than ever before to experience the world class climbing experience that Cheddar Gorge has to offer.’

This first statement was then unanimously approved by all present at the meeting.

Statement 2:

A second statement was then tabled and debated as follows:

- It was felt that the BMC as a whole had the expertise to comment on the wider ecological, environmental, planning and upland hill walking impact of the cable car scheme. Our comments should therefore be limited to the climbing access only at this time.
- The Sky Bridge proposal is the part of the scheme which for climbing is the most contentious issue in this scheme, as it compromises the Coronation street climbing experience (for all the reasons given above). Although we also recognise the opportunity to gain year-round access to these routes and close the road.
- The meeting did not think it was appropriate to include wording saying that the 'BMC Southwest would not raise any objection to the cable car proposal', as the full details have not yet been provided and this aspect of the proposal will make it harder for BMC Southwest to accept this part of the proposal.

Following major modification the second statement was agreed as follows:

'The BMC South West understands that the cable car proposal (as currently presented) will have no adverse effect on access for climbing. We await the full proposals in order for the BMC to comment further.'

This second statement was then unanimously approved by all present at the meeting.

4. SW Bolt Debate Draft (prior to National Council discussion on the 15th June 2013)

(MG) brought the meeting to order and summarised the position, stating that this draft followed on from the draft reviewed at the Bovey Tracey meeting (6th October 2012). He also explained that this draft was due to be debated at the Wareham meeting (February 21013), but was cancelled due to member non-attendance. As this policy was not scheduled for debate at the Bristol AGM (6th October 2012), it had therefore been motioned for discussion at this interim meeting, ready for feedback to National Council for their 15th June 2013 meeting. Copies of the latest draft from Dave Turnbull (BMC CEO) and the 1992 policy were circulated to those attending the meeting for comparison.

(MG) started proceedings by reading a relevant email he had received from Professor John Harvard (who has 49 years climbing in the area). John made the following points:

- The BMC statement is a good start.
- It recognised the importance to climbing that first ascensionists make.
- It recognises the historical context of routes.
- It recognises the need to preserve these routes for the future long term.
- It however allows local areas taking over the policing of this BMC policy.
- This is dangerous if their views are extreme and in conflict with broader national views.
- As a warning regarding what could happen in the future if this policy remains the same (and doesn't contain clearer safeguards), he cited the South East Wales area as being an extreme example, whilst contrasting the management

of the Wye Valley, Avon and Cheddar areas, which he considers to be presently operating in a reasonable way.

- In South East Wales, there is wholesale retro bolting, often without consulting the first ascensionists (or retro bolting against the strong opposing opinions of the first ascensionist).
- New crags are wholesale retro-bolted even on routes where good natural protection exists e.g. crack lines.
- This is ruining traditional climbing in South East Wales.

(MC) then outlined the current position in South East Wales, where the local BMC area committee members (made up solely of 25 sports climbers) have gained control of that areas bolt policy and want to make every climb in their area “sports climbs only”. This includes not just new climbs, but also all existing ones (by extensive retro bolting without first ascensionists consultation, let alone approval). Recently this group voted themselves the authority to discount the views of the first ascensionists. As this is an officially BMC sanctioned group, their radical policy becomes officially sanctioned by the BMC. This is dangerous as it could spread elsewhere and become a precedent for other areas.

The meeting then debated how the decision making process in the policy would apply to new routes or crags to determine whether they became bolted sports climbs, or become traditionally protected climbs. Participants concluded that this decision making process in the South West would be something like:

- Local policy would be set by the Southwest BMC Area Committee (who would decide which crags or routes fell into either category). This may be retrospectively. A statement to the accepted style of routes would be stated in the front of the guide e.g. the recent Wye valley guidebook.
- New routes/crags could be established and bolted that did not yet have a policy, but it was acknowledged that this type of new route development ran the risk of these bolts being subsequently removed (but this was a risk that the first ascensionist knowingly accepted – (MC)).
- It was acknowledged that first ascensionists did not always get this judgment right.
- Use of judgement in factors such as no natural protection versus abundant natural protection, hollow rock not accepting drilled protection, loose rock and style of ascent on that crag (trad, sport or mixed) would also determine the first ascensionists approach.
- It was up to BMC South West area committee to set and police this policy in consultation with the first ascensionists and act accordingly on such routes / crags.

The debate then moved on to discuss areas where they felt the suggested guidelines were not adequate regarding climbing in the Bristol area, specifically:

The wording says that it ‘strongly supports’ traditional climbing but does not go far enough in spelling out how this will work in practice in areas of mixed routes e.g. where both bolted and protectable traditional lines stood side by side, both being equally respected (DD).

Referral is made to climbs being safeguarded by 'local policy', but does not go into details about what that local policy / best practice should look like. Anybody reading this document to determine best practice guidelines will be unable to do so. Without such a framework, local areas are free to form their own views, which may be radical e.g. South East Wales.

Presently it is technically possible to vote through a local agreement and establish a radical policy and present this as the official BMC view of that local area in a couple of meetings. The mechanism for reversing such decisions should be spelt out in this policy if passed at local level (DD).

The Head Office of the BMC is trying to push the policing of this solely to the local areas, without its involvement / policing / monitoring of that policy. This is not a good idea as it is open to abuse in such instances where local areas cannot police themselves adequately (DD).

The guidelines need some method of BMC control to safeguard / referee contentious radical local decisions, if such areas get this wrong.

Refer / Appeal contentious decisions to National Council (or some form of committee made up of all local areas was one suggestion to negate this) (PW). Referring local policy to national debate may be putting power into the hands of those that have no knowledge of the local issues (or care about them) (JB).

The sentence 'views of the first ascensionists' is vague. It should be replaced by the wording 'no retro bolting or drilled pegs should be placed on a route where the first ascensionists consent has not been obtained'. How do you avoid this consultation being just tokenism (MC). Routes are presently not retro bolted if the first ascensionist is no longer contactable e.g. left sport, moved or died, until a consensus emerges about what to do with that route over time. This approach should be preserved (MC).

The BMC need a statement that it values the historic value of climbs, to stop a climb of historic national importance e.g. Crowman, the first E6 put up in South East Wales by Pat Littlejohn being retro bolted against his wishes. This needs to be stronger than that currently expressed wording in the first and second paragraph of this draft (which only refers to Snowdonia, Gritstone and the sea cliffs of Cornwall). Historic climbs can occur anywhere (MC).

When a route has become established in one style, then that style should be respected and the route not changed. When such a consensus emerges, the first ascensionists views become less important as the route then belongs to the climbing community. These views should then be taken into account. Essentially the route then becomes not the property of the first ascensionist, but the whole climbing community to police and safeguard for future generations. Such a statement should be reflected in this policy (MC).

Consult the first ascensionists as route stakeholders, until a route consensus emerges (MC).

Correct the definition of retro bolting that 'refers to the quipping of naturally protected routes with drilled equipment' located in End notes 1, as retro bolting is more than that. This could be better defined as: "the placing of a bolt where previously there was not a bolt in that specific position". This is different to replacing a worn out bolt with a new one, which is acceptable practice (MC). The meeting attendees all agreed that this wording should be amended.

The BMC officers should take a more active role in guiding people in meetings to come to a sensible decision, pointing out the drawbacks in that position of controversial decisions. The policy should state that 'The BMC should make provision for trained, knowledgeable and competent BMC officers (guidance with teeth (DD)) to facilitate local meetings where controversial issues are being debated or voted on, to ensure due process'. (JB) agreed stating that the current policy of votes not being made at the same meeting as they are proposed in, should make this mechanism / approach manageable by BMC Head Office staff.

Include the following: 'In the event of a lack of attention to the laid out criteria or any other matter that may bring climbing into disrepute then the matter should be referred back to the BMC Head Office and brought to the attention of the National Council for their action' (MC).

Consider measures to uphold the integrity of local decision making (MC). **Note:** We have already said and included this in the above (PW).

This policy should expand briefly on its statement as to why British climbing history is 'rich', saying why it is rich (and varied) and explain what has contributed to that richness (MC).

A BMC history statement could be included, saying that 'the BMC acknowledges the value of our climbing heritage and recognises how precious it is. Furthermore that it will do all it can to encourage the protection of climbs, climbing opportunities, which make up our history and heritage' (MC).

Add to the policy the caveat that the BMC will not endorse extreme local area policy e.g. where a route has been retro bolted against the wishes of the first ascensionist who has in response removed these bolts. (JB) made the valid point that this clause is only needed as a last resort, because the rest of the policy wording is not tight enough and once tightened up should not be needed. (MC) argued that it would still be needed. (JB) still disagreed and refused to endorse this point as this catch all was worrying and open to abuse by the first ascensionist and was just as bad as unilaterally retro bolting routes in South East Wales.

(JB) said that in his position that we should avoid feeding back too detailed wording changes e.g. we should not be "word-smithing by committee" to finalise this document.

(MC) said that he would be making his personal feelings known direct to Dave Turnbull (BMC CEO) regarding this meeting.

(DD) said he was sure that (CK) our (NC) rep would be taking these views on board and vigorously representing us at the next meeting.

5. **Next Meeting Date:** Saturday the 1st June 2013 7pm @ The Radjeel Inn, Pendeen, Penzance, Cornwall. TR19 7DS @ 7pm on Saturday 1st June 2013