

Sandstone Virtual Open Meeting 11th May 2021 – Minutes

Attendance: Adrian Paisey (co-chair), Graham Adcock, Malcolm McPherson, Chris Stone, James Bouchard, Emma Harrington, Tim Daniells, Paul Norris, Michael Phelan, Ben Read, Mike Perks, Reuben May, Rya Tibawi, Stephen Waters, Bob Moulton (co –chair)

Apologies: Sarah Cullen, Sue Hazeltine

1. AP introduced the meeting and explained the format of the meeting and the protocol.

2. **Overview Report**

BM gave the report as follows:

a. **Covid-19**

Further to the 1/9/20 Open Meeting when the problems caused by the relaxation of lockdown last summer, which had been discussed at that meeting; similar problems had reoccurred when lockdowns had been relaxed.

b. **General**

The restrictions introduced last summer/autumn had in the main been observed and little further damage to the rocks had been reported and there were few incidents of the bad practice and overcrowding that had occurred during the summer months. However parking issues at some of the outcrops had reoccurred and in some cases there were access details still to be resolved. The BMC's Regional Access Database (the RAD) and the Southern Sandstone Climbs website were being updated regularly and it is important that all climbers are aware of and followed this advice.

c. **The Sandstone Code of Practice**

As a result of the damage caused by climbing on wet rock last summer, HRMG were proposing that the wording in the Code for wet rock be changed from: 'Sandstone is softer when wet and climbers must exercise caution by avoiding sharp or fragile holds and ensuring good footwork. if it is wet, why not embrace the opportunity to explore the wonderful cracks on chimneys on offers.' to: 'Avoid climbing on wet rock, it can cause irreversible damage.'

It was planned to reprint the Code of Practice to include this change. Suggestions and comments were welcome as if agreed these would be included in the reprint.

d. **Harrison's Rocks** (Harrison's Rocks Management Group's next meeting was on 18th May)

- i. Access to the Isolated Buttress. As reported at the last meeting. the Planning Application for the bridge had been rejected by Wealden District Council, HRMG and the BMC's Land Management Group were still considering what action to take next.
- ii. Tree Felling of the next phase of the Woodland Management Plan, below the area from the Isolated Buttress and Hell Wall, had taken place in January. Due to lockdown restrictions HRMG had been unable to run the usual BMC event to clear up after this but in fact the amount of work that needed to be done was considerably less than in previous years but there were a number of site jobs that needed to be done. HRMG would be considering this at their meeting. However, 21 young trees, including Rowan, various Cherry, and Hornbeam, had already been planted below the Rocks in late March in individual areas where the bracken had been cleared and these would be monitored to ensure that they were not overwhelmed by bracken. There were now only three areas left to be cut as part of the 13-year Woodland Management Plan.

- iii. Resin/Shellac work: Graham Adcock, assisted by Cess Dolding and Bryan Stevens continued to do this work at the Rocks. Eight full days had been carried out last year and two days to date this year. Significant wear/damage on the bottom of climbs in the Rift area from bouldering with at least two chipped/improved holds had been identified. Many climbs along the length of the crag have been inspected and treated, including *Niblick*, *Elementary*, *Bow Window*, *Isolated Buttress Climb* and *Boulder Bridge Route*. There remained much to be done. Alternative treatments were under consideration for larger areas.
 - iv. Anchors. There had been no progress recently due to COVID but work on this would restart soon.
 - v. Access from Forge Farm: there had been an exchange of letters between the BMC and the owners of the public footpath, and although a reply to the BMC's latest letter was still awaited from the owners, progress is being made in that the owners had stated that they did not want to restrict access by foot and the BMC had confirmed that it was not asking for vehicular access. Meanwhile, climbers were being asked to please avoid parking in Forge Road.
- e. **Stone Farm**
- i. The work programme approved by Natural England had been fully completed during the 2-year period specified as part of their agreement, although due to lockdown not as much resin work had been done in the second year as had been hoped for but this work would continue.
 - ii. A burnt-out motorbike had been discovered at the foot of the Rocks in early September; after contact with the various authorities, this had been moved up to the bridleway by Michael Phelan and members of the East Grinstead CC, and then removed by a salvage company. In March fly-tipped material including asbestos in the parking area had reported, and Michael Phelan had been and was continuing to phone the authorities to get this removed.
 - iii. It was hoped that it would be possible to put in two sets of bolts above the *Stone Farm Crack* area in the near future.
 - iv. A repair that needed to be made to the revetments below the yew tree was planned to be done in the Autumn by a small working party, possibly involving the EGCC.
- f. **Bowles**
- Loz Reading had reported: "Bowles has done for minor resin work over the last year and is currently making plans for bringing the ground level back up in popular areas such as *Fandango*. Any thoughts and advice on this would be appreciated. Currently the access to Bowles is restricted. Our school bookings require a closed site due to Covid so (at the time of writing this email), we are only open when we don't have school groups in. We update our website of the dates of when we are open." One of Bowles's neighbours is applying for a alcohol license and currently has a temporary license which is causing them issues with people coming onto the Bowles site. This could lead to fencing in whole site and tighter access restrictions than at present.
- g. **Eridge Green**
- A site meeting had been held in October with the new Sussex Wildlife Trust Reserves Manager to discuss the extensive damage was done to the Rocks last summer. He agreed to look into to our request for us to apply surface-hardening treatment only on the worn holds despite the SWT's known concerns of the effect that it could have on the growth of mosses and lichens on the rock. The SWT officer has expressed an interest in looking at the work that has been done at Harrison's and now that this work has restarted this year we hope that this can be arranged in the near future. We hope to arrange a site meeting at Harrison's to show SWT the use of resin in early

May and then to discuss the matter further. Meanwhile the BMC's agreed voluntary suspension of climbing at the Rocks will remain in place. Graham Adcock and Bob Moulton had met with the Reserves Manager for the Rocks and an SWT Ecologist colleague at Harrison's on 4th May for GA to demonstrate what was involved in the application of resin and to show them it being applied. The SWT officers had taken a close interest and undertook to look into our request seriously, to consult with a lichenologist and to come back to us in the near future.

h. High Rocks

Limited climbing was now permitted at High Rocks. However, to avoid further problems it was important that all climbers should be aware of and follow the advice now on the BMC RAD and Southern Sandstone Climbs.

i. Under Rocks

Due to problems with parking and to complaints made by the owner of the private land over which the approach is made, it had been decided to suspend climbing until 12/4/21. We now understood that were three land owners of the approach path and the rocks themselves. Contact had been made with the owners of the initial approach path and following these discussions the current strong advice was: "do not park your car on the land in front of or opposite Twitts Ghyll and not within 200m of the house. There is room for a few cars 250m south of Twitts Ghyll at the junction with Dennis Lane. If this is full, please park elsewhere and walk in or consider climbing elsewhere. The situation is very sensitive". Full details, which may be updated further, were on the BMC RAD and Southern Sandstone Climbs.

j. Other Outcrops where climbing was suspended up to 12/1/21, excluding Eridge – see above. These include High Rocks Annexe, Bulls Hollow and the outcrops on the land owned by the Tunbridge Wells Conservators, and Bassett's Farm; all climbers are asked to be aware of and follow the advice now on the BMC RAD and Southern Sandstone Climbs.

3. General Discussion

a. AP opened the discussion on HRMG's proposed change to the Code of Practice (CoP) by reading out a view expressed by SC:

"I have a strong preference for leaving the code of practice wording as it is in relation to the proposed changes re wet rock. The wording as it is suffices and in fact the problems we are predicting are 'indoors-to-out' climbers pulling on saturated small holds, not those climbing chimneys and in other appropriate areas. Using the term 'wet' rock is subjective and there are plenty of climbs that can be done in damp conditions that do not damage the rock. Making hard and fast rules that cannot be adhered to is not a pragmatic approach".

Strong views were expressed against the HRMG proposal on the grounds that:

- i. Insufficient time had been given for the wider climbing community to consider the proposal. In this context it was explained that there had been a problem with the minutes of the last HRMG meeting not being on the BMC website, which CS was committed to getting sorted out.
- ii. it was a response to one particular, very uncharacteristic weekend at Harrison's when the holds that were broken were deemed by some to be insignificant. Maybe the wording needed to be changed but not to the extent proposed.
- iii. that the problem of actual damage was mainly at Eridge Green,
- iv. that many local climbers did not agree with the propose change, would ignore the proposed wording and would continue to climb responsibly on wet or damp rock.

- v. that there were problems with some of the grades, which lead to people trying climbs that were too hard for them.
- vi. that the answer was continued and persistent education (see below)

Other views were expressed in favour of a simple, short message, and the distinction between local and the inside-to-out climbers was stressed. AP suggested doing a survey the views of climbers on the wording over the next month or so.

Some expressed a view that while much of the work done by HRMG was widely appreciated by all, there was a perception that local climbers were being dictated to by HRMG on matters such as this; as HRMG Chair, AP expressed his concern at this perception and said that he wanted to encourage input to what HRMG's were doing from all Sandstone climbers.

GA thought that the responsibility for the CoP had been taken on by HRMG by default but the CoP had originally been agreed by the Open Meeting in the early 2000s, and he proposed that the responsibility for the CoP and making changes to it should lie with a group of 4 to 5 climbers set up for this. This was generally agreed on the understanding that some HRMG members would be on the group. There was some discussion on the size of the group with a suggestion that it should be open to whoever wanted to be involved, although it was agreed that there should be some limit on its size, and BM said that it was important that whoever was on the group should be committed it to it to maintain continuity.

- b. Arising from the above, ways of getting the message across to new climbers on Sandstone were discussed:
 - i. BR offered to take the lead in coordinating the local climbing walls in doing this.
 - ii. TD saw that the Steve Durkin Sandstone Trust as being able to help, and that although the SDST hadn't been very active recently, he hoped that it could restart issuing its bulletins using social media as well as the original primarily hard copy format. Also that the Trust would consider paying for mats to be handed out to people not using them.
 - iii. JB thought we should take into account the numbers of climbers who were speakers of other languages than English visiting Sandstone and if the Code of Practice was available in HTML (i.e. as a webpage not a PDF), this would allow easy translation via browser into European languages and increase readership. Separately, during his discussions with Rockfax about embedding a CoP link to their mobile app last summer, their developer mentioned that if the CoP was a responsive HTML page it would make it easier and more likely to be read on mobile devices.
- c. The role of local clubs both in expressing the views of the members and in encouraging good practice was mentioned and CS said that he would discuss the matter with the London & South East Area clubs coordinator.
- d. The problem with BBQs at Harrison, mainly if not entirely by non-climbers, was discussed. It was agreed that HRMG should be asked put up large temporary signs in the popular places for BBQs at the right time of year. GA offered to do the necessary signage.
- e. TD asked about the ownership situation at Under Rockes. AP explained that he had made contact with the owner of Twitts Ghyll, who had explained they owned the first part of the path and that two other owners, who they were in contact with, were involved.

- f. TD said that he saw the owner of Birchden Forge, who also owned the Forge Farm public footpath, and next time he saw him he would mention that he was now a member of the BMC Land Management Group and would him out on the access to Harrison's
- g. TD also emphasized the importance of following the agreement that had been reached for climbing at High Rocks. BM proposed a vote of thanks to GA and TD in the work that they done to get the agreement

BM – 14/5/21 corrected 20/5/21