

Avon Gorge Area Fixed Equipment Policy (The Policy)

Introduction

The current fixed equipment policy for the Avon Gorge was agreed at a BMC Area Meeting held in 25th January 2012 held at the Hen & Chicken, Bedminster, attended by ~100 persons.

The policy is under review for a number of reasons:

- Some feel that the existing policy lacks clarity;
- Whilst any changes to fixed equipment on specific routes should be agreed by the BMC Area Committee, it is by no means clear that how actions taking place contrary to the policy should be dealt with;
- There has been significant new development on minor outcrops, with a great deal of bolting taking place;
- There is a change in the balance of the active climbing population, with Sport and Bouldering becoming significantly more popular;
- Importantly, the issue of Sustainability must now be a factor in all decision-making.

The updates to The Policy will, after a sufficient period for discussion, will be put to an Area Meeting organised by the BMC, and chaired by the BMC Area Chair. This Introduction will not form a part of The Policy.

Avon Gorge Area Fixed Equipment Policy (The Policy) as revised in 2023

1. Scope

This policy encompasses the installation, replacement and maintenance of fixed equipment installed for the purposes of climbing on the cliffs and quarries on both sides of the Avon Gorge. The climbing areas are described in the Climbers Club Guide 'Avon Gorge' (2017), a definitive guide, which includes the historical record of the development of climbing in the Avon Gorge.

2. Land Ownership

On the western (Leigh Woods) side of the Avon Gorge, much of the land is owned by the National Trust (Quarries 5 & 4), the Wills Estate (Quarries 3, 2 & 1) and Network Rail (part of the Donkey Slide). On eastern (Bristol) side, almost all of the cliffs are managed by Bristol City Council on its own behalf or on behalf of the Merchant Venturer's charitable trust. The land underlying Unknown Wall is owned by a private individual. The Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust has a strong interest in the Suspension Bridge Buttress. There is a presumption that the Gorge's landowners will be tolerant of the installation, replacement and maintenance of fixed equipment.

All of the climbing areas fall within the Avon Gorge Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a designation which affords special protection to the wildlife, and restricts or prevents development. Natural England (NE) is responsible for monitoring and issuing permits to work in SSSIs. Climbers must recognise that NE is currently tolerant of climbing activities, but that climbers may face restrictions at any point in the future if NE deems such activity is incompatible with wildlife protection.

3. Historical development and Ethos

Fixed equipment is defined as pegs (pitons), bolts, ropes, threads, chains and strops and other items placed by climbers as permanent in-situ protectionⁱ.

The types and locations of the existing fixed equipment in the Avon Gorge is inextricably connected with the ethical choices made by the first ascensionists, who themselves were influenced by the debates of the time. In addition, there is often little scope for leader-placed protection on much of the Gorge's Carboniferous limestone. Consequently, the protection opportunities on routes can be:

- Entirely leader-placed protection;
- A mix of leader-placed protection and pegs;
- A mix with minimal bolts on blank sections;
- Entirely bolted.

Belays may consist of trees, clusters of pegs/removable protection or pairs of bolts.

Any climber developing a new route, or a significant variation on an existing route, should carefully consider the historical and ethical dimension local to that new route, before

installing any kind of fixed equipment or belay. In particular, no bolts may be placed on Suspension Bridge Buttress or in Quarries 4 & 5.

4. Principles

The fundamental principles underlying decisions made by the Access Team are:

- a. **Sustainability**, taking into account the human, financial and physical resources needed to maintain/replaceⁱⁱ fixed equipment and the level of climbing activity needed to keep routes in good condition;
- b. **Accountability**, ensuring that there is robust governance and a means of oversight on all decisions made;
- c. **Communication**, ensuring that a variety of methods are used to communicate with the climbing community;
- d. **Conservation**, ensuring that a full account is taken of the flora and fauna within the Gorge, including implementing temporary or permanent restrictions;
- e. **Heritage**, taking into account the historical development of routes, and noting the contemporary opinions of first ascensionists.

These principles categorically do not imply that there will be a comprehensive replacement of pegs with bolts. If any peg runner(s) are to be replaced by a bolt this will occur on a case-by-case basis, and only after the most searching investigation.

5. Accountability

The BMC Access Representative (the Access Rep) acts as the first point of contact between the climbing community on one hand, and landowners and Natural England on the other. The Access Rep has at their disposal a formal or informal network of local activists – the Access Teamⁱⁱⁱ - and is assisted by the BMC's Access Officer.

The Access Rep is elected annually at the BMC Area Meeting. The Access Rep is the person who, in consultation, advises where and whether changes in fixed equipment in each climbing area are acceptable or not. On occasion a change may be of such ethical significance, or so contentious, that the Access Rep will bring matter to the BMC Area Committee for decision. Ordinarily the Access Rep will provide a list of proposed changes to the Area Chair prior to the changes being implemented.

If fixed equipment is placed that falls outside The Policy, the Access Rep will authorise its removal. There is no appeal against this decision.

6. Communication

The Access Rep and the Access Team will use a variety of social media channels to communicate about matters in the Avon Gorge – such as rockfalls or rock scaling, seasonal nesting restrictions, conservation activities and changes to fixed equipment.

7. First Ascents

First ascents may be Trad, Mixed or Sport as the first ascensionists chose, subject to:

- No bolts may be placed:
 - on Suspension Bridge Buttress, Quarry 4 or Quarry 5^{iv};
 - on routes which can be protected using modern trad equipment;
 - where they can be readily clipped from existing Trad or Mixed routes;
- All bolts must be either stainless steel/titanium glue-ins, or 12mm stainless steel with electrochemically-compatible nuts and hangers (SS316L).

The Access Team are fully authorised to remove any non-compliant fixed equipment.

8. General Practices of the Access Team

- a. The Access Team has the full confidence of the BMC SW Area to deviate from 'Like for Like' when making changes to fixed equipment. If the Access Team's decision is likely to be highly controversial, the Team will submit a proposal for the change to the Area Meeting, and will only proceed if that proposal is adopted^v;
- b. Where change is contemplated every effort will be made to preserve the character and quality of the route, and of adjacent routes that may be affected;
- c. Those members of the Access Team who decide on any change of fixed equipment will not be the same members that implement the change;
- d. The Access Team will only use stainless steel/titanium glue-in bolts;
- e. The correct placement of pegs and glue-in bolts requires both skill and experience, which can be in short supply. The Access Team will actively involve volunteers with those skills;
- f. All changes to the fixed equipment will be recorded in the current Fixed Equipment database, whilst ensuring the anonymity of those making the changes;
- g. The Access Team will not be required to justify any change to the location or type (technology) of belay when a belay needs replacing;
- h. When the Access Team considers a change in the type of one or more items of fixed equipment on a Trad or Mixed route, no attempt will be made to gain the first ascensionists' views if the route was first climbed more than 25 years ago. First ascensionists' views are respected but do not determine the outcome.

A concise summary of Avon Gorge Area Fixed Equipment Policy^{vi}

The Access Team will replace existing fixed equipment according to the agreed guidelines, guided in decision-making by the principles of Sustainability, Accountability, Communication, Conservation and Heritage. New routers may not place bolts on Suspension Bridge Buttress or Quarries 4 & 5, nor adjacent to existing routes so as to impact them; any bolts placed must be 12mm SS316L or stainless/titanium glue-ins. Non-compliant fixed equipment will be summarily removed.

ⁱ It does not cover items which might be used opportunistically for protection purposes, but were placed by others i.e. quarry workers' ironwork, or structural rock bolts installed at the behest of Bristol City Council/Suspension Bridge Trust.

ⁱⁱ The manufacture of pitons is almost certain to decline and their cost rise.

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of current Access Team members will be submitted to the Area AGM.

^{iv} The Buttress is unquarried rock; the National Trust, who own Q4 & Q5, have expressly forbidden bolts.

^v For procedural guidance please see [BMC Drilled Equipment Policy 2013](#).

^{vi} This summary can be used on mobile phone apps where the full policy would take too long to read.