



British Mountaineering Council SOUTHWEST AREA

Zoom Meeting held On Wednesday 6th September 2023 @ 7pm

Chair: Mark Kemball, Secretary: Philip Wilson

ORDINARY MEETING

If anything discussed at this meeting gives rise to a conflict of interest for anyone, please declare it at the start of the meeting.

Attendees: Mark Kemball (Chair), Philip Wilson (Sec), Paul Davies (BMC CEO), Colin Knowles, Iain Peters (Atlantic Coast & West Penwith BMC Access Rep), Dan Donovan, Ben Darby, Thomas Reeve, Julio Franco (Wye Valley & Forest of Dean Access Rep), Matt Ward, Tony Bird (Wye Valley Re-Equip Rep), Adam Bird, Adam Lowe, Tom Leydon, Edd Thomsett & Anzama Sharapova

- 1) **Welcome Introductions & Apologies for Absence:** Mark welcomed members including Paul Davies (BMC CEO). Apologies for absence were received from Trevor Smith (Members Council Rep), Mark Courtiour (Cheddar & Mendips Rep), Ian Butterworth, Peter Salenieks (BMC Board) & Daniel Mathews.
- 2) **Previous Meetings Minutes:** The minutes for the 9th May 2023 were agreed & signed off.
- 3) **Actions:** There were no actions from the previous meeting (held on the 9th May 2023).
- 4) **Avon Gorge Fixed Equipment Review (last reviewed in 2012):** Colin Knowles outlined this paper contained in Appendix A which had been put together following several meetings in Bristol. He stressed that this was only a review which would not be voted on in this meeting. Voting would take place to adopt this policy at the next AGM / Area meeting to be held in Bristol. Colin Also asked for questions. Matt ward raised some worries about how we would deal with extreme cases e.g. Piton Route where the debate centred around rotten pegs (replaced in 2012) which would have to be replaced with a more sustainable alternative if this route was to maintained as a popular classic. No objections to the project were raised at the meeting, so it will be voted on at the next meeting. Mark Courtiour also expressed his support prior to the meeting by email.
- 5) **New Avon Access Rep:** Ben Darby who has been prominent in re-equipping the Wye Valley was unanimously appointed to this post to replace Simon Fletcher (Fletch) who is standing down. Simon was formally thanked by all in the meeting for all his great efforts over a long tenure. **Action Point:** The Secretary agreed to formally write to Fletch to thank him for all his efforts.
- 6) **Local Area Access (incl Dartmoor legal position & Wye Valley Symonds Yat Rockfall):**
 - a) **Dartmoor:** The latest legal position given by Cath Flitcroft (BMC Access & Conservation) by email was read out by Mark Kemball. See Appendix B for this transcript. The latest position is that the Darwell family are to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court and the Dartmoor National Park is going to try to block this

appeal from being heard again. See <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/landowners-appeal-against-dartmoor-wild-8721571>.

- b) **Somerset & Cheddar:** Mark Courtiour (Somerset & Cheddar Rep) reported by email that there were no issues that he is aware of in this area.
- c) **Wye Valley:** Tony Bird outlined the work done by the Wintours Leap & Shorncliff Re-Gear Project which is now nearing completion. His report is listed in Appendix 3. He thanked everyone who contributed to the £4k crowd funding to allow this to happen, adding that the bulk of donations were small in the £10 to £20 range. He especially wanted to thank Gloucester Mountaineering Club and Rockfax Guides who both contributed £500 each.
- d) **Woodcroft Quarry:** Julio Franco Damaged was again reported to the quarry gate and incidents of subsequent anti-social behaviour. This is to be repaired. Damage is very likely to be repeated in the future.
- e) **Symonds Yat:** Julio Franco (Wye Valley & Forest of Dean Access Rep) reported on the recent rockfall on the 8th August 2023 which has shut the public right of way below the crag to the river Wye and closed the crag completely for climbing. The rockfall released up to 20 tonnes of rock from the cliff face in one area which badly damaged a rock catch fence near the village area, away from the climbing areas. Julio added that Forestry England (FE) position is that they don't know whether another rockfall will happen somewhere else on the cliff (in areas where climbers operate) and feel that they therefore can't take this risk to allow any climbing. He added that following the rock fall, the site was inspected by a private consultancy firm, which gave professional ground engineering and geotechnical advice. They advised that the closures should remain in place for the foreseeable future. A full survey and assessment of the whole cliff face is now being undertaken, along with repairing or replacing the damaged fence. FE remain worried about the safety of climbers and any further manmade climbing related disturbance to the rockface. They have therefore banned climbing from taking place anywhere on the cliff until the survey is completed.
- f) **Carn Gowla:** Iain Peters again outlined his real worries regarding a recurring non-proportional blanket bird ban during the 2024 nesting season to mirror what happened in 2023 to this important sea cliff. He also outlined the inadequate support of the BMC towards this and their required role in engaging with the National Trust, Natural England & the RSPB where a co-operative approach at both national and local level was required to help them police these remote and serious sea cliffs. He ended by stating that the sensible way forward was for there to be a proportional ban to only disallow climbing where birds were nesting (proved and backed up by the BMC Volunteer 2023 seaward cliff bird survey undertaken by boat) . He concluded that BMC Volunteers as frequent visitors to the area have a real role to play to help the National Trust survey and police areas inaccessible from view by their rangers e.g. Carn Gowla vertical crag faces. His report is listed in Appendix 4.
- g) **Tintagel:** Iain Peters reported that the access agreement between the BMC and English Heritage (EH) for climbing to be allowed was not being adhered to by EH. Problems had occurred when Climbers Club members had been turned away after emails asking permission to climb had been unanswered and the individuals

concerned had been turned away by local staff who had no knowledge of the agreement. He added that he would try to facilitate a more liberal access in the future.

- h) **Portland Path Rescue:** Daniel Mathews contacted Mark Kemball via Facebook regarding a 20th August 2023 incident at Blacknor North where a person broke their ankle and had to be air lifted out. The coastguard requested that we ask if it would be possible to the repair and maintenance of the footpath as it would be much easier to extract someone if they were in better condition. Mark replied to the individual saying that path maintenance was not the BMC's responsibility; but said that we would try to organise a local working party of volunteers if enough people were keen to help. Mark to speak to Marti Hallet the climbing rep for the area and publicise this appeal on Facebook.

7. **Board Feedback: Funding Shortfall, Competition Working Group (CPCG) Report & Access & Conservation:** Paul Davies (BMC CEO) gave a brief regarding, followed by questions and answers from those present at the meeting as follows:

- a) **Funding Shortfall:** Paul apologising for the funding shortfall due to over ambitious financial management and projections in challenging economic conditions such as COVID, The War in Ukraine & Economic Downturn as factors for this.
- b) **Competition Working Group (CPCG) Report:** He added that the reported mistakes with the indoor climbing competition structures had just been addressed via the CPCG report published today, which implemented a far better athlete centric structure. He added that the previous level of structure and control initially implemented had been inadequate.
- c) **Access & Conservation:** Paul Davies also apologised for the BMC losing focus with regards to (a BMC & member core value) and that efforts would be made to focus more on access and conservation (a BMC core value). He added that due to the funding shortfall & competition problems not enough attention and resources from the BMC Office had been made to support this. He added that this will change moving forward.

He then asked for any questions. These were as follows:

- i. **Area Meeting Funding:** Colin Knowles asked what the situation was now with this. He added that the Southwest Area had economised by agreeing to hold all meetings apart from the annual Area AGM via zoom, but really felt that an annual physical meeting was required for the Area AGM as it brought people together and galvanised people in a way that the virtual one cannot do. He added that we would like to make this a hybrid meeting but were currently struggling to obtain and use the equipment for this for which we need BMC support and the BMC needs a policy! Paul Davies added that Suzanne Jones (BMC Office) was working with area chairs to find solutions to bring people together physically.
- ii. **Sound Finances & Management:** Thomas Reeve asked whether the BMC Finances & CPCG Report will now stop more mistakes from occurring moving

forward. Paul Davies said that CPCG report detailed a total overhaul of the group overseeing GB Climbing (renamed the GB Performance Group) and this together with better financial control would provide the required better oversight moving forward.

- iii. **Volunteer Support:** Iain Peters asked what the BMC's position was on support for volunteers, regarding Access & Conservation. He added that there had been an emphasis on GB Climbing not outdoor climbing and that he had received inadequate support in performing his access volunteer role covering a large area of Cornwall covering the Atlantic Coast & West Penwith. He added that indoor climbing is a commercial activity, always available with no prospect of it being banned for members to undertake, but that outdoor climbing although free, faced a real danger of this happening which was not acceptable. Paul Davies stated that Access & Conservation was an important BMC issue, which frequently topped members polls and apologised for being pre-occupied with GB Climbing. He said that the BMC would now work hard to expand their offer in this area. Both Paul and Iain agreed to communicate further on this issue following on from this meeting by email.
- iv. **Access & Conservation Dartmoor Wild Camping Ban:** All members present expressed their appreciation of the superb efforts made by BMC staff with regards to Access & Conservation, especially regarding the recent events opposing the ban on Dartmoor wild camping led by Dr Catherine Flitcroft.

8. **Matters Arising Not Covered Elsewhere:** None.

9. **Any Other Business:** Mark Kemball confirmed that he was standing down as SW Area Chair at the next SW Area AGM. He added that this was for personal reasons and not due to present BMC controversies.

10. **Date Of Next Meeting:** A physical or hybrid meeting (if we can obtain fast wifi at the venue and the use the BMC Zoom Login & Equipment & Adequate Support) to be held at The Robins Pub, Ashton Drive, Bristol BS3 2PW for 2nd December 2023 between 1900 – 2100. Further details are:

- The meeting room is the back (pool) bar. Up to 45 seats will be provided and there is ample room for additional standing. The bar has its own access door.
- There is plentiful parking, and the approach to the pub is outside the Bristol Clean Air Zone. It is close to the Long Ashton Park and Ride and is on the 24 hours bus route. Other buses stop nearby.
- The room is equipped with an ultra-large flat screen TV that will take input from laptops. There is wi-fi on site.
- There is no charge for the room, but drinks are paid for! The pub can provide food - they have several catering packages and can quote on request.

APPENDIX 1 Area Bolt (Drilled Gear) Policy

This version 20 November 2023 Avonareafixedequipmentpolicy2023_Draft_V1.2.Docx Colin Knowles

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 protection¹.

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. ¹ 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. ¹ The manufacture of pitons is almost certain to decline and their cost rise.
- iii. ¹ A list of current Access Team members will be submitted to the Area AGM.
- iv. ¹ The Buttress is unquarried rock; the National Trust, who own Q4 & Q5, have expressly forbidden bolts.
- v. ¹ For procedural guidance please see [BMC Drilled Equipment Policy 2013](#).
- vi. ¹ This summary can be used on mobile phone apps where the full policy would take too long to read.

APPENDIX 2 Dartmoor Latest Legal Position

'Dartmoor – from Dr Catherine Flitcroft

Hi Everyone

I spoke at length with Richard Drysdale of the National Park on Friday and you may also have picked up the news that Mr Darwall is going to challenge the High Court ruling and take it to the Supreme Court.

<https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/landowners-appeal-against-dartmoor-wild-8721571>

Members of the Authority were discussing this on Friday to decide whether or not to challenge this. Of course, the Supreme Court may also decide it is not of national significance and therefore it won't go any further. If it is taken on, it may take between 2-3 years to be heard.

Regardless of this new development, the Park agreed that the camping map would remain as it is currently until after the summer. They are aware of the pressure to update the map / refresh it, but it remains a delicate political situation. As it stands today, there is a right to access all commons (not by permission) but the Park are meeting with the Common owners on 22nd Sept after which time the camping map will be officially updated – there will still be a few areas that remain out of bounds for ecological / fly camping reasons / pressures.

Obviously the bye law review remains on hold until the Park have decided what to do.

That's the update currently, not great I'm afraid but I have said we are supportive of the Park. I think if folk want to wild camp then no one can challenge that but it still remains quite a delicate situation.

Richard has said that he would be happy to answer any questions before of after the area meeting (unfortunately he is unable to attend in person).

Best wishes
Cath'

APPENDIX 3 Wintours Leap & Shorncliff Re-Gear Project

'It seems a long time ago that the Wintours Leap re-gearing project started in the heady days of the Covid lockdown. Since then, close to £4000 has been raised from 'crowdfunding' mainly from individuals in the climbing community, but also climbing clubs and RockFax. Around 250 pegs have been replaced, led by the UKC popularity ratings and specific requests. In a few places bolts have been placed, predominantly for belays & lower offs. In addition to the focus at Wintours Leap, over a dozen strops have been placed at Shorncliff replacing the aging tat thus better protecting the trees and improving safety.

This year we are closing the project in terms of fundraising and major works but will continue providing pegs and materials until the current stocks & the small amount of funds are exhausted for volunteers who come forward and when routes are identified as needing re-gearing.

The WLG teams pay thanks to the climbing community for the donations and particularly the volunteers who have selflessly put in a great amount of time and effort.

Tony Bird, Adam Bird & Ben Derby.'

APPENDIX 4: Carn Gowla Report

'All restrictions have now been lifted at Carn Gowla. However, this does not mean that we have successfully negotiated an agreement with the NT over future bird bans. I am intending to challenge the total seasonal ban due to be imposed again in March 2024 due to possible peregrine and other seabird nests. James Mann and I chartered a boat in May 2023 and we now have a comprehensive series of photographs clearly showing where the birds were nesting. Next season we are hoping to repeat this trip but with the NT Ranger and RSPB reps on board.

I would like SW Area to send a clear message to the BMC Management that they must support us, and other areas where there are seasonal bird bans at the highest level. We acknowledge that the threat to breeding populations of sea and upland birds including raptors are real, but that the climbing and hillwalking community should be part of the solution to conservation not seen as the problem. What is required is proportionality, and that is the case we are making at Carn Gowla. Opening up areas at the crags where impact of climbing is minimal will create goodwill and be to the advantage of all concerned. The opposite can only result in resentment and climbers taking matters into their own hands.

The simple fact is that stakeholders such as the NT, NE and RSPB etc. cannot possibly police these remote and serious seacliffs. We can as climbers and co-operation will only help future conservation strategies.

Watch this space. Am on it at Carn Gowla and anywhere else on the Cornish coastline.

Iain Peters.

Atlantic Coast & West Penwith BMC Access Rep.'

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.

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