

BRISTOL FASHION

FORTY YEARS AGO, WHEN **MARTIN CROCKER** LED HIS FIRST ROUTES ON THE COMPACT GREY LIMESTONE OF THE AVON GORGE, HE HAD LITTLE IDEA THAT THIS UNIQUE CITY CRAG WOULD KICK-START HIS CAREER AS ONE OF THE LEADING PIONEERS IN LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH ROCK CLIMBING. HERE HE LOOKS BACK ON HIS EARLY DAYS AT AVON, DISCOVERING THAT THE URBAN CHARISMA AND OLD-SCHOOL VERVE OF ITS BEST CLIMBS IS ONLY ENHANCED BY TIME

It was a hippy idea, and it suited the times. The year was 1974, the era of prog-rock and flares, and Kevin Mallin and I had cycled in early to beat the high summer sun for a blast at *Central Wall*. This was legend-making Tony Willmott's masterpiece, and there was no more illustrious route on which to make your name - or fly into space trying.

I had four years of Avon behind me, but I suspected it would not be enough to get me up, a state-of-the-art route opened by a genius. So, to improve the odds I took to the belay a ghetto blaster with a strange brew of Hendrix, Al Green, Prince Buster, and Pink Floyd. The strategy was to float weightlessly up on cosmic chords, Willmott style.

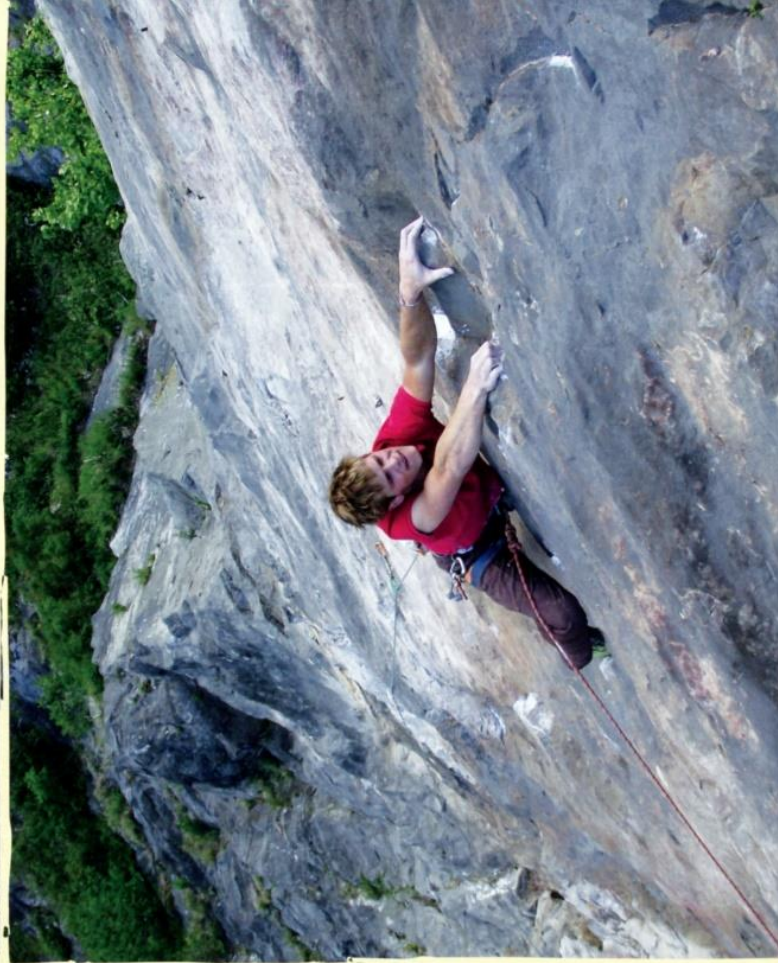
It didn't work. Hanging the crimp above the little roof, I would not commit to the mantel. The peg wasn't there then, either, but if anything, the bloody music kept getting in the way: Al Green kept chortling out of sync with the moves, and Kevin seemed unable to fast forward to *Careful With That Axe Eugene* just when I needed to feel really far out. The shebang must have appeared absurd, and the sun eventually cooked us.

That was the thing with Avon: sometimes you could commit; sometimes not. And somewhere in that balance between boldness and fear is the heartbeat of the Avon experience. Once, at Easter 1972, I watched Ed Drummond belayed by the late Tom Proctor on their first ascent of *The Haystack* (E3). Drummond was glued to the tricky little mantelshelf move on Pitch 2 for an hour; it was the most tense of psychological dramas. To some it may have looked like pussyfooting, attempting not to stray from perfect mind control and into the

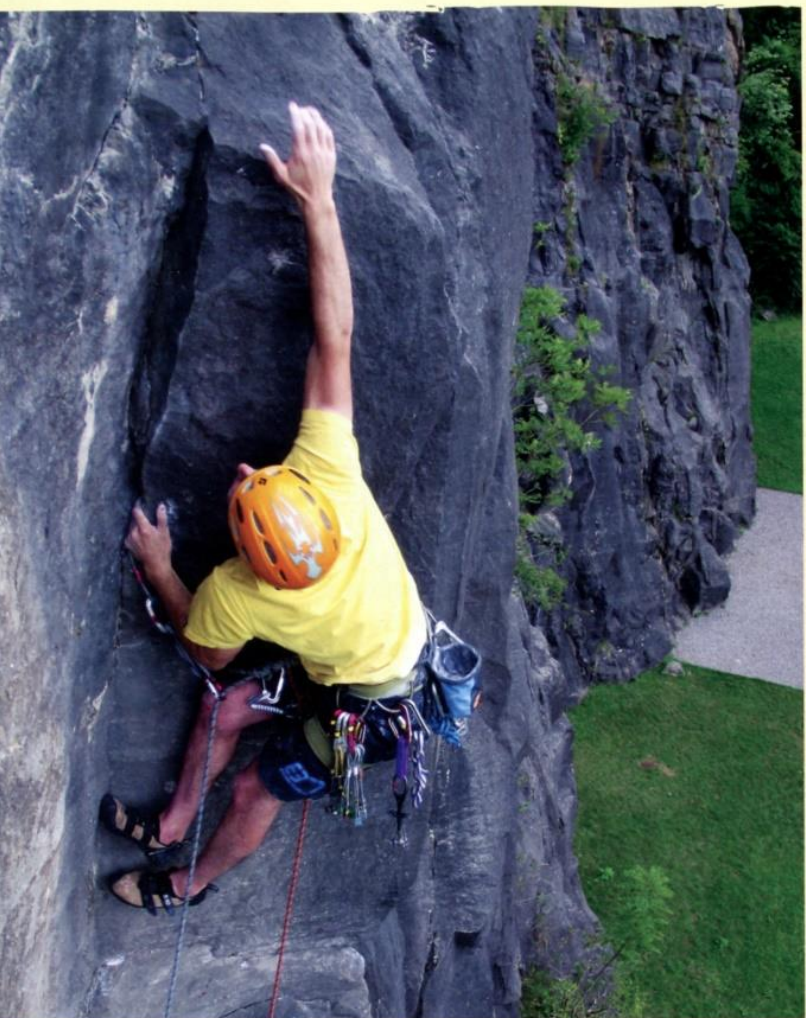
rocky ground of emotion. But anybody who climbs too fast at Avon isn't doing it properly, and Ed's tactics proved sound. On these cliffs, balance-and-mind control are king. Fifties guys like Griffiths, Banner, and Ward - who left fright-fests like *Central Buttress* and *Desperation* - were masters of it. At Avon, you can't see how sloping the hold above you is, or how you might have to adjust yourself as you bring other, equally invisible holds into play - all without tipping out of balance of course and clattering down the cliff to your doom. Falling was the impostor in Avon's secret formula: if you had any protection at all it was often only dubious pegs far below.

The industry-grey Avon cliffs and the freedom to clamber over them was all the space I needed as a lacklustre Ashton Park schoolkid searching for a horizon beyond. It was my city, and this was my city crag; I was allowed to make up climbing all for myself. Mock O-level climbing inroads ultimately became permeated by adult pub and club folklore, car park Chinese whispers, and stolen glimpses of 'fifties and 'sixties figureheads: Banner, Thompson, Bonington, Drummond, Willmott and Wyvil, they all breezed through from time to time. In that era, the Main Area car park was the pulse of the Bristol's climbing scene, blustering with the energy of conversation and the noise of traffic, one weaving in and out of the other like a concerto for two lead instruments. Here, new partnerships were forged, plans were hatched, and reputations dismantled. Talk of psychedelic routes harmonized with the heady music of the times, driving homespun adventures in impressionable years. All this was powerful fuel for the mystery-craving of youth. ▶

THIS PAGE: Stephen Venables fully engrossed in the maze of diagonally-structured rock architecture typical of Avon climbing on the penultimate pitch of *The Equator* (E3 5c, 300m). This remarkable climb, the current speed-record for which stands at almost twice that of *The Nose* on El Capitan (I), is the longest route at Avon, crossing the entire length of Main Wall, and was established back in 1966 by Ed Drummond and Oliver Hill. This route and its slightly harder next-door neighbour, *Crossing The Dateline*, are probably the only climbs in the world with a distinct mountaineering atmosphere that lie less than two miles from the centre of a major city. DAVID PICKFORD



ANYBODY WHO CLIMBS TOO FAST AT AVON IS NOT DOING IT PROPERLY



On the rock, it began for me by random assaults on the north side of the gorge where no-one had climbed before; in the nuanced dustiness of The Amphitheatre; by traversing *Harvey's Wall* and top-roping *Hodge's Pin* using dishevelled Tarbuck Knots; by soloing *Stranded* in plimsolls full of holes; and by seeing how far I could tilt a new pair of 1970s 'Masters' rock boots on *Inferior Rubbers* before I slid to the ground. I had watched Drummond's televised crossing of *The Equator* in 1966, and I was amongst the thousands cheering at the river-banks as the SS Great Britain returned to Bristol, my home city, in July 1970, but neither event had shone a light into this future.

Little Red Rodney was the route my imagination had scored for me, and it was 1972. But once on the rust wall, which foot to place on the small foothold in the scoop? Up down, up down – back and forth in perfect time to the stuck-on ledge with Ed Drummond's Charlet Moser peg, the only protection, prising into the back of it. (It's still rusted in place there today, of course). An under-aged gatecrasher I was for sure, but I manage to commit to the wall – driven by a hunger to satisfy my blurry-edged dream. It was my first Extremely Severe, thanks to Drummond's brilliant new guidebook and his reconciled use of the Extreme grade, and I was exploding inside. Older, wiser guys downing pints afraid to realise themselves outside their VS comfort zone scarcely uttered a word. That implied I was out - but at least *Pick up the Pieces* was playing on the Juke Box in The Pineapple - and the night was a haze of joy.

In early years I was prone to dysfunctional behaviour that caused my neighbours to light bonfires so their smoke would blow over our house: perhaps eight o'clock every Sunday morning was a less than civilised time to thump hell out of a set of drums. In mitigation, it seemed a necessary defence to a day at Avon, where my kit was crammed in school rucksack, my Viking hawser-laid rope perched on my shoulder, as I saddled up my bicycle to pedal for the Gorge.

My kit was crap, but probably better than it is now. Chunky nuts on cable too square and too big to go in at Avon were available when I started late in 1970, but I preferred to improvise my own. I read about machine nuts being used by hard climbers, so I nicked some and filed down their threads. I would spend hours sculpting elegant wooden wedges, these too joining a workshop hammer and two new Cassin pegs at my waist hemp-line. Managing to coerce a naive fellow 14 year-old from school, I launched the percussion up *The Arete* only to be rejected by its notorious mantelshelf, a trap set to give novices the slip - their hardware jingle-jangling as Doc Martins three-point turned on glassy slopers.

In those days, many climbers in the Avon Gorge still carried pegs to place on lead before gear got better and the practice died. But pegs were used sparingly, their use kept in check by four-letter words from the car park - the street equivalent of a BMC gear policy. A harness was beyond the reach of my paper-round wages so, seeking a more comfortable alternative to tying the rope around my waist, I salvaged a 6-inch drive belt from a washing-machine my mum had left out for the Council. It did not have a buckle, of course, so it took me 20 minutes to squeeze it down over my chest, exhaling close to the point of death each time before climbing. Before I could test it out with a fall I replaced it with a stocky Troll waist belt thanks to disparaging looks from gangly Avon experts thinking 'what's he doing with a piece of washing-machine around his waist?' My parents were laissez-faire about it all, but my Grandfather frog-marched me to the EGONS West Country climbing club before, as he feared, the art of improvising equipment had the Coroner record me as a 'Clifton Suspension Bridge suicide'.

One day while I was soloing on the Fir Tree Slab, a group abseiled in army-style from Clifton, all snotty toffs by the sound of it. So I showed them who was boss by articulating an impeccable reverse-solo of *Fingerip*. One chap, Clifton College student John Barnett, proposed that he 'liked my style', and

thus we became good friends in a 'country gent seeks gardener' kind of way.

The partnership catapulted us onto big routes, which we embraced with success and epic in equal measure - all seemingly dictated by the length of our rope. Having outgrown my hawser, we acquired a kernmantel rope 120 feet long. Evening forays after school were short on time, so - with our rope not being long enough to abseil off most routes - we became specialists in benightment. The finest occurred on *Lich Gates* after I froze at the crux groove on pitch 2. Our mood tumbled further with the descent of darkness; back at the stance, our little rope when wrapped around the hawthorn tree fluttered uselessly in the spooky void below.

A series of leftward-descending-tension-traverses in pitch blackness followed; fingers feeling for holds and probing for cracks to place gear. Eventually, I placed a peg blind, and with hearts beating like drums, we abseiled and just made it to the foot of *Depravity*. That epic accounted for why we spent so much time on the *Suspension Bridge Buttress*. *Limbo* was divine; then we got benighted. *Hell Gates* was divine too; then, again, we got benighted. But each time, as if by magic, the life-saving Bridge Trustees would switch on the Clifton Suspension Bridge lights so illuminating the runway up the *Pandemonium Wall* and our landing on the bridge parapet. Ah, those halcyon final mantelshelves onto the sandstone abutments of the bridge; a more noble and exhilarating climax to finishing your climb on the Buttress could not be imagined. It seemed your right as a Bristol climber, time-travelling between the geology of rock and landscape to the physical architecture of a city at its most famous.

On one occasion while sitting on the parapet belaying John in the dark I noticed a suspicious figure eyeing up my bike that I'd propped up against the river-side railings. Unaware that law-abiding citizens might be climbing above him in blackness, he sure enough grabbed my beloved silver machine and started to wheel it away. Fuming, I bellowed 'leave the bike alone', and he dropped it looking this way and that for the invisible voice. Perplexed, the villain tried his luck a second time only to be met with a roar from me so loud it drowned out the traffic and sent him packing and preying for forgiveness. The warning could only have come from *Hell Gates*, the best HVS at Avon.

The EGONS club provided a safehouse, and a relatively adult framework in which to explore local crags. Some of the guys there were heroes without realising it. Take Geoff Dimery, a Hoover salesman with a laugh like Basil Brush. Cautious in the extreme, he one day fell off 25 feet up *Stretcher*, off that tenuous unprotected mantel onto a shallow scalloped finger-ledge. Today we'd squeeze the soul out of the route, assessing its technical grade against height until the answer equalled E2. But in 1971, it was just another VS without any gear. Uncharacteristically, Geoff lost his balance on the mantel, corkscrewed down the rock, and ended up on an ash tree that gave him a wedgy. He laughed all the way. Back on *Suspension Bridge Buttress*, John and I noticed some unclimbed lines. He discovered a charming little arête he christened *Hideaway*, which today is once again on view and climbable, and I removed a great sheet of ivy eager to leave a Hendrix title on the cliff with a line that became *Purple Haze*. All was not well: priggish Club officials were less than amused. 'We don't think you should have removed the ivy, Martin.' I couldn't argue. They were adults, I was a kid, and it was a salutary lesson.

There were some large characters to climb with in the early 1970s, not that there aren't now. Pete O'Sullivan was one of them. Pete lived under a pavement in Hotwells with a big picture of High Rock at Cheddar and the moody music of John Martyn. When you walked by you could sometimes see him disturb the shadows through a grille, the odd flash of white from his restless eyes. He sang John Martyn even more moodily than John Martyn. On the cliffs - like half way across the Girdle of Unknown Wall - he would suddenly be taken by ▶

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TOP LEFT: Peter Ross leading pitch 3 of the bold and impressive *Piton Route* (VS 4c) on the lefthand side of Main Area Slabs. MARTIN CROCKER
TOP RIGHT: Dick Hall fully engrossed in the legendary crux runout of *Pink Ginsane* (E6 6b) on Main Wall. This route must have clocked up more airtime than virtually any other hard trad route in the UK, partly because it is more like a 7b+ sport route with half the bolts removed! MARTIN CROCKER
LOWER LEFT: Ross Davidson leading the crux second pitch of the classic corner *Floeg's Folly* (E2 5c) at Sea Walls. MARTIN CROCKER
LOWER RIGHT: Dan Jenkin on the modern power-endurance testpiece *Academic* (8a) hidden among the trees on the upper part of Sea Walls. MARTIN CROCKER



IF THE STREET SPIRIT OF AVON ISN'T OBVIOUS BY THIS TIME, I LEAVE YOU WITH AN UNPRETENTIOUS BARRIE ANNETTE ROUTE, *SLURP*. IT WAS A SCARY VS IN MY DAY, AND I ADMIT THAT ITS BALD FIRST PITCH STILL FRIGHTENS ME EVERY TIME I CLIMB IT. ALL THE KEY ELEMENTS ARE THERE: SLOPING HOLDS, DELICATE BALANCE MOVES, DISTANT GEAR. LIKE MANY THINGS HERE, IT AIN'T SHIP-SHAPE, BUT IT IS BRISTOL FASHION. WHO COULD POSSIBLY WANT IT ANY OTHER WAY?

an urge to break out into persuasively emphatic song, possibly some Frank Sinatra, with the whole of the Portway below his audience. His trademark, however, was to drop my gear into bramble thickets - especially my pegs. He seemed unable to drop his own. After we battled up *Kampf* in a heavy snowstorm, I thought it noteworthy to record in my diary that 'the thing I remember most about this route is that Pete did not drop any of my gear.'

It was Pete's fellow art student John Grice with whom I first met *The Bilk* on Exploding Galaxy Wall in 1974. That it made an impression is certain, judging by the expletives I scribbled in my guidebook: 'bloody fabulous... knacker... loose... desperate!' While finger-traversing hysterically around the arête from the colossal flake, it hit me that namby-pamby Avon footwork was actually my Achilles heel; this route was about wrought-arm strength and stamina. What few footholds I could see through my billowing flares were wholly insufficient and I was forced to rest on an in-situ peg above the little cave. Each time I tried to move away from the peg my hands would open up, and I only got to the top on an updraught of John's encouragement. *The Bilk* was unlike anything I had encountered at Avon before.

A decade later, while researching the 1992 edition of the Avon & Cheddar Guidebook, I learned that Pat Littlejohn experienced a similarly bumpy ride when he made the first ascent in 1969. However, it was rather more traumatic for him than for me; after pumping out, Pat took a monster fall on a single 9mm rope, a fall he will never forget since it was his first. Some years earlier, though Pat might not remember it, he had watched me fail to commit to the gripping mantel on *Indecent Exposure* - the presence of a Southwest overlord impeding my ability to relax.

Luckily for me it was *Pink Wall Traverse* that exacted my first proper fall on lead; I was just 15, and dressed smartly in a pink Ben Sherman shirt that melted into the rock that sunset-evening after school. What muscle I had in those days was situated in my legs rather than in my arms, thanks to endless rock-ups and hours and hours spent prevaricating on footholds psyching up for the next move. Pitifully, I ran out of steam at the end of the hand-traverse, the jugs turning to big rounded crumbling things. No amount of acceleration in the rate of frantically pedalling feet could pull me free of gravity and I fell executing the best part of a full revolution around the peg runner. There are not

many easy routes in Avon where you can fall safely. That's what kept you on your toes.

Fast forward forty years; and I find myself full circle, spending three days a week climbing the routes that kickstarted my climbing life as I research the new Avon Gorge guidebook. From 1970, Bristol hosted a run of three Avon-dedicated guidebooks culminating in Steve Monks's guide of 1980. Culturally it was fair cop to allow Avon guidebook authors to indulge themselves a little, in their own way: Steve, innocently, showed he could pull out *Mirage* no problem on the front of his book, and my historicals were over-the-top and over-personalised. It was all establishment-rocking mischief, serving only to tease out those with an axe to grind who failed to see the sardonic side of it all.

If the street spirit of Avon isn't obvious by this time, I leave you with an unpretentious Barrie Annette route, *Slurp*. It was a scary VS in my day, and I am happy to admit that its bald first pitch still frightens me every time I climb it, right up to the present day. All the key elements are there: sloping holds, delicate balance moves, distant gear. Like many things here, it ain't ship-shape, but it is Bristol Fashion.

Who could possibly want it any other way? ■

TEN PILLARS OF ALTERNATIVE WISDOM

The Arete, Morning Slab, Severe 4a

The public vote with their feet: this is still possibly Avon's most popular and hence polished climb. What fresh-faced novice could forget that mantelshelf? It's a 'real' line too.

Piton Route, Central Buttress, Hard Severe 4b

It's not my favourite; nor that of many others. But you can't fail to immerse yourself in Graham Balcombe's first ascent of 1936. Portway had only been open 10 years; there were still buildings under Central Buttress; huge crowds stopped to watch – and it introduced the city of Bristol to climbing.

Unknown Buttress, Unknown Buttress Original, Hard Very Severe 5a

Pure nostalgia: a one-time 60-metre arête cleaved by a groove that was blasted by rock stabilisation work 1974 - 1976. Stepping aside for Upper Wall, it mostly still stands in the form of New Horizons.

Suspension Bridge Arete, Suspension Bridge Buttress Hard Very Severe 5a

Hats off to the revolutionary Mike Harvey who took to his arms in 1956. The routes on the Buttress are a counterpoint to Main Area: all steep pocket-pulling, threads, and jackdaws – framed by Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge.

Little Red Rodney, The Amphitheatre, E2 5a/b

The essential Avon personality: nervy footwork above a big run-out – a route that can never dumb down with time.

Ffoeg's Folly Sea Walls, E2 5c

A safe-enough-to-enjoy insight into those otherwise serious Sea Walls grooves that seeded head-pointing in the mid-60s; this one has protection, but a capricious set of moves that leave some floundering.

Passchendaele The Upper Amphitheatre, E3 5c

Even on a City Crag there are secret, poignant places. With its deep pockets and calcite ribbons, Passchendaele exploits the wonders of Avon geology where the urban fringe meets famed gorge architecture, and people dressed for work pass on by.

The White Elephant, Main Wall, E4 5c

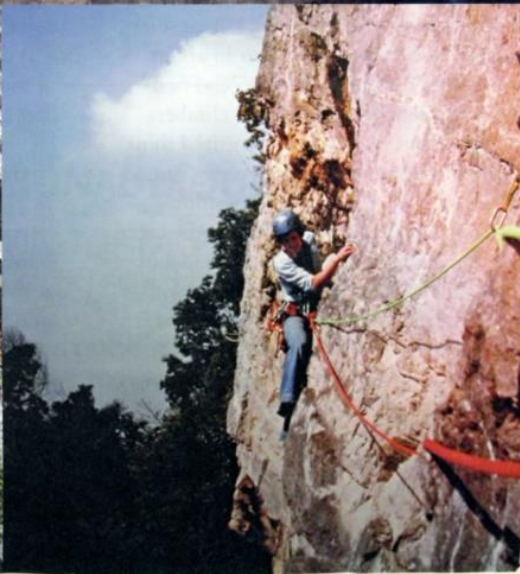
An apt name then, even more so now. An uncelebrated Avon fix: the best natural line on this section of Main Wall, and a real tour de force when combined with free-climbing past the iron spikes on Pink Wall Traverse and the Direct Finish. It broke the mould of circuitous 60s Main Wall routes and ploughed up the centre of the concave wall. This one is spiced-up by the revelation that Barrie Annette made the first ascent of Pink Wall Direct well to the left of that described in guidebooks since 1964 ('The Pink Wall Direct in your guidebook is not the one I climbed')!

Low Profile, Upper Wall, E5 6b

A personal favourite; 'Upper Wall E5' demands more than just good footwork. Useful too are finger-stamina and the cool to run between spaced pegs, no more so than on this route.

Pink Ginsane, Main Wall, E6 6b

A sublime shock in pink. This uniquely beautiful face climb attracts a steady stream of all-sorts to this day, many of whom take the renowned free-fall. Ethically pivotal: free-climbing past first ascent aid bolts inadvertently left sport climbs or minimally bolt-protected routes on traditional cliffs.



TOP: Tom Rogers leading through the quarryman's jungle gym on the second pitch (4b) of *Pink Wall Traverse* (HVS 5a). MARTIN CROCKER

CENTRE: Andy Holden leading the spectacular and unlikely final pitch of *Pink Wall Traverse* (HVS 5a) on Main Wall, as Tom Rogers looks on from the quarryman's spike belay. This iconic Avon route, first climbed with some aid in 1956 and freed the following year by Mike Harvey, is amongst the most impressive climbs of its grade in the UK. MARTIN CROCKER

LOWER LEFT: Martin Crocker leading the Main Wall classic *Steppenwolf* (E3 5c) in 1974. MARTIN CROCKER COLLECTION

LOWER RIGHT: Forty years on a foothold - the author seconding *The Trip* in 1973. MARTIN CROCKER COLLECTION