

THE SUMMER CLIMBING PROPOSAL:

a personal insight by Martin Crocker

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The majestic limestone cliffs of the south side of Cheddar Gorge have a lure unlike any other inland British outcrop. But since they overhang a busy road and the car-parks that cater for Britain's car-dependent tourist industry, it is an appeal that has frustrated generation upon generation of climbers eager to explore its vast walls. In the past, the combination of loose rock, ivy, and the vulnerability of visitors and people at work have added an unsettling, and certainly unwanted, edge to climbing here. Consequently a cruel winter-only climbing arrangement evolved that required the ability to negotiate E5 with numb fingers. It wasn't to everyone's taste.

As luck would have it one cold mid-winter's day, a jaded soul was hanging a loose crimp 100m up Castle Rocks trying to fiddle in an RP behind some ivy when he thought whimsically

to himself: 'wouldn't it be nicer to climb here in summer?' And so the Cheddar summer climbing dream was born.

It was almost a decade ago I suppose when I started a big drive to climb in Cheddar Gorge outside winter. Gathering interest from potential supporters was no easy matter: formidable obstacles lay ahead. And of course Cheddar lay outside the infamous Manchester-Sheffield-Leeds Triangle that contained everyone who is anyone in climbing. Eventually help arrived in October 2003 when the BMC decided to support my formal plan to seek an improved access regime and – moreover – stop me nagging. We called it the Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project. A true optimist would have stuck 'summer' in the title.

As most will know now, the Project set about 'restoring' some of Cheddar Gorge's finest

climbs that are relatively safely located behind rock-catch fences or above parts where members of the public and people at work would not normally resort. In such a hot-spot of tourism, the consideration of public safety standards has been the heart-beat of the Project.

Supported by grants from the BMC and The Climbers' Club, but always reliant on a hefty voluntary effort, the Project kept upbeat across the winters 2003/04 and 2004/05 as loose rock was removed in tons and classic climbs re-gearred and reborn. The Project ended May 2005 and, following fruitful consultations with English Nature, written proposals were lodged with the owners, Longleat Estate (T/A Cheddar Caves & Gorge).

Based on risk-assessments, the proposal asked that access for climbing on selected restored climbs be granted for 'most of the year', while excluding the main holiday periods outside winter (when in any case it's so chaotic most climbers might prefer to climb elsewhere).

Now the Director of Cheddar Caves & Gorge, Hugh Cornwell, is a very busy man. After all, he has to manage a thriving business based upon Cheddar's magnificent caves, and fire-fight the perennial influx of 500,000 visitors per year. His

Chris Snell on Heart Leaf Bluff's classic sport route *Fettered Trajectory* (F7b+).



Above: Safely caged, John Harwood climbing behind a rock-catch fence on Heart Leaf Bluff. The erection of the fence has made climbing all year round possible.

Below: Negotiating the gate in Shoot Gully – close it behind you!





Above: Ian Parsons and Nigel Elliott climbing the French Pinnacle, backed by Sunset Buttress and Pinnacle Bay on the far side of the road.

“TODAY (25 JULY 2006)
CHEDDAR CAVES &
GORGE TOLD ME
THEY HAVE
APPROVED THE NEW
'SUMMER' CLIMBING
ACCESS REGIME. SO
CAST ASIDE YOUR
THERMALS AND
CLIMB ON...”



Above: Prolific West Country new router Gordon Jenkin on the first ascent of *No! No! No!* [F6c] Castle Rocks.
Below: Pete Shepherd on *Playboys* (F7b+), Arch Rock.

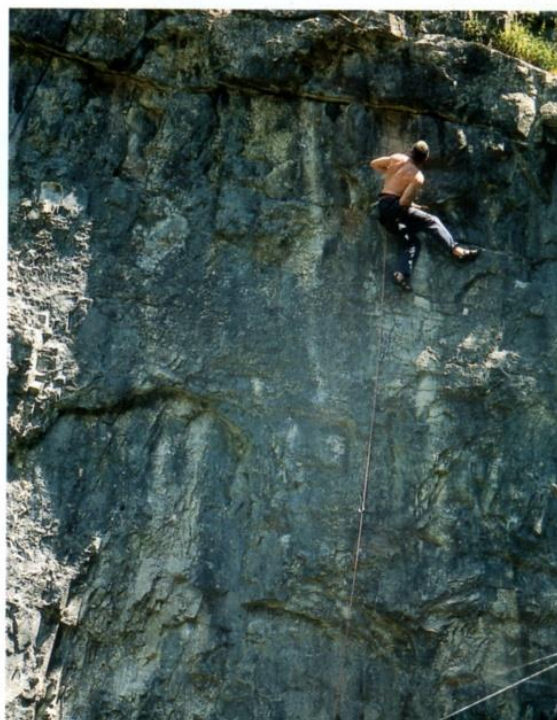
time is as pressurised as the car-parking space in the Gorge on a summer's Bank Holiday. Over the past 10 years Longleat's Cheddar business has spent £1million on conservation work in the Gorge thereby removing much of the loose rock and many of the trees that were de-stabilising the main cliffs. Vitally, for the climber, Cheddar Caves' erected a network of fences to catch any rock as it naturally weathers from the cliffs. The fences also serve as a compound for the recently introduced British Primitive Goat, a genius of an idea since this striking beast has a ferocious appetite for ash and ivy – the very miscreant foliage that disfigures and shatters the cliffs.

'Who is Saving Cheddar Gorge?' is the message on the huge placard fixed to a roadside cliff that will hit you as you drive into the Gorge. The image of Rock-safety Team Leader Nigel Elliott setting off on a 100m abseil to remove loose rock reminds the

public that money they spend on visiting Gough's stalactite wonderland is being reinvested in conserving the Gorge and keeping it safe for visitors. No praise is high enough for Nigel and his colleagues, who allied their organisation's land management resources to that of my work over a two-year period. So, what hope the 'summer' climbing proposals?

Over the last few years I'd become accustomed to second guessing; at times expecting a favourable announcement about summer climbing and at others thinking that the latest climbing misdemeanour had blown our chances. I'd got used to thinking that if it arrived in my lifetime, I'd be content.

But - Stop Press - Cheddar Caves & Gorge have today (25 July 2006) told me that they have approved the new 'summer' climbing access regime on an initial pilot year basis. So, cast aside your thermals and climb on! 🙌



SOME ALTERNATIVE CHEDDAR MOMENTS

Picnic on French Pinnacle

Any climb to the top of the quaint French Pinnacle will do. When there, strap yourself in and enjoy one of the Gorge's best vantage points to the taste of Cheddar cheese and crisp salad butties – and a chocolate muffin or two. Afterwards, scamper across to Heart Leaf Bluff to climb the vintage *Humerus* (Severe), now over 50 years old.

The Insatiable One

It's a paradox that a 10m F7b+ in 'Landslip Quarry' can hold such appeal. The first ascent of *Insatiable* involved a jump for a lower-level abseil station – today you must fight through a series of barn-door layaways and clip the higher-level rings while hanging the lip of *The Wave*. Don't assume visitors watching the action won't know the difference.

Local Climbing Workshops

Expert coaching is available daily above Pinnacle Bay – book early to avoid disappointment. Check out your trainer's unsurpassed climbing ability as the British Primitive Goat on-sight-solos F6c above a 150m drop without bothering to read up on positive visualisation and engrams.

Climbing on The Narrows to 'Easy Rider'

Inspirational new-router Gordon Jenkin opened up The Narrows above the Horseshoe Bend, much to the delight of anyone into clipping grade F5-F6b bolts for free. Not memorable in themselves, the routes only start rocking as cavalcades of 20, 30, or even up to 100 Harley's power through the Bend punching out noise at the threshold of pain. Classic FM listeners may yearn once more for the peace of a winter-only regime.

Cheddar Pink in flower

Climbing in early summer may see you chance upon that spiky little cliff-edge dweller in elegant pink flower. Enchanted, you will understand why it is so carefully protected.

Goats R Us in one pitch

Dress yourself up in 21 long quickdraws and get cruising up this 45m F6b+ sport route of sheer pleasure. Immediately after the first ascent a runner was despatched to acquire its name from the Director of Cheddar Caves & Gorge. *Goats R Us* is situated on the Scary Monsters Wall of Castle Rocks – don't miss it.

Sunset on Sunset

When the rock-catch fence is in place, claw out from the pull of the void onto Sunset Buttress' grassy summit plateau and soak up the sunset. Upon reflection how you got there hazes to irrelevance: from *Utopia* (HVS) to *Bird of Paradise* (F7b+) stars are in abundance, but *Space Tourist*, a 100m sport route at F6b+, F6b+, F6c has become the people's choice. Bristol climbers have recently set about climbing the sport routes in big single pitches; fine, but a tactic that sweeps aside the team adventurism commensurate with such a magnificent crag.

Shake Hands with that friendly guide on top of the 'Scenic Gorge Tour' Bus

It's that crazy moment again when Cheddar Caves & Gorge open-top bus hands its controls over to gravity and charges down the Gorge on its madcap return journey, passengers whooping with delight and fear. Position yourself correctly – six metres up *Ambiguously Straightforward* (F6b) on Yew Tree Wall is a good place – and you'll be within eye contact of anyone on the top floor of the bus you'd like to get to know better. Many unknown hands will be in your chalk bag.

Solitude in The Amphitheatre

Here you can experience the real Cheddar thing: hard trad face routes of E4 to E6 and the crowds 100m below won't even know you're there. *Caesar*, the classic E4, will get the blood flowing and the summer's sweat dripping as you run it out with intricate body positioning. When exiting, tiptoe out nimbly through superb clusters of

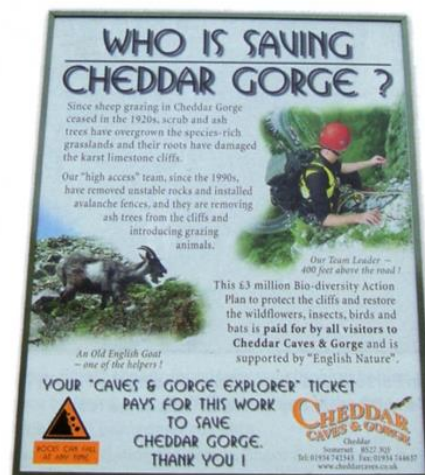
ferns, Cheddar Pink, and Rock Stonecrop, and relish the view.

Beating biting easterlies

Easterly gales and there's nowhere else for the wind to blow as, compressed between the Gorge's narrow walls, it rakes uninitiated climbers from exposed roadside crags – even in spring. There is no escape; or is there? At these times, head west around on to Acid Rock, Freaky Wall or Sunnyside Terrace and bask in the afternoon sunshine on the two-pitch trad classics of *Thor* (HVS) and *Ahimsa* (E3) or the cream of the single-pitch sport routes: *Opt-Out* (F6b) and *Shock of the New* (F7b+).

Of Cannibals and Caves

Finally, when the heat gets too much, buy an Explorer ticket from Cheddar Caves & Gorge and cool off in their caves. Here you'll uncover locals' morbid fascination with cannibalism; the skull in the museum is that of a climber caught cranking out of misbehaving. That's what happens to anyone found misbehaving in these parts...



Further Information and the Code of Good Conduct

The BMC's Regional Access Database (RAD) is the first place to look (www.thebmc.co.uk). This covers the Project's activities, and should refer you to the Code of Good Conduct – an agreed common-sense list of what is expected of you. Most of the Code's requirements aim to minimise any effects that climbing might have upon other parties, especially threats to public safety. Of special note is that you will need to be able to show that you hold public liability insurance (as a BMC Member or a member of a BMC-affiliated Club, you will). Due to the complexity of the Gorge environment and specifically how well its many cliffs are safeguarded by rock-catch fences, taking time to understand the constraints before visiting is a

sensible strategy for the responsible climber. As a volunteer I'm happy to advise anyone keen enough to make the effort to telephone (tel: 01275 394064).

Guidebooks

The Climbers' Club *Avon and Cheddar* guidebook 2004 contains details of most of the routes, albeit in their condition prior to the Project. An up-to-date colour photo-topo guidebook to the routes restored during the Project, and ancillary new climbs, is now available. After a sponsor pulled out last minute, it emerged with assistance from Cheddar Caves & Gorge and The Climbers' Club regional guidebook editor John Willson; apologies to those who've been waiting. Copies cost £10.00 in Cheddar at Cheddar Caves' office

and The Gorge Outdoors. Alternatively send a cheque for £10 (made out to Martin Crocker) with an SAE (2x 1st class stamps) to me at: 23 Rycroft Rise, Long Ashton, Bristol, BS41 9NQ. Proceeds will help towards filling a big black hole, since the Project was seriously under-funded.

The 'Summer Climbing' Consent

Most-of-the-year-round climbing has been approved for a trial year on selected parts of the Main Cliffs (South Side; Longleat Estate-owned). These are climbs that have been cleaned, re-equipped, and are located off the road-side or behind substantial rock-catch fences, thus protecting road-users from any climber-induced rockfall threat – assuming responsible behaviour.

On Two Final Notes

1. It is strongly recommended that helmets are worn especially while at the base of the crag. The Gorge is a natural feature subject to weathering and scree movement, and rockfall will occur from time to time whether there is anyone climbing above you or not.

2. I'd like to thank the following sponsors/supporters who helped enable me to carry out the Project: The BMC, Cheddar Caves & Gorge (especially Hugh Cornwell and Nigel Elliott), The Climbers' Club, Bristol Climbing Centre, Snow and Rock, T&T Adventure, CAN Geotechnical Ltd, Taunton Leisure, Sedgemoor District Council and the host of individual contributors who've made donations to the bolt fund including Gordon Jenkin and Ian Parsons who also made outstanding personal efforts at the crag. Thanks too for the time given up by members of the Cheddar Gorge Working Group: Ian Parsons, Haggis Harris, Ian Butterworth, Richard Nadin, Steve Findlay and Matt Ward.

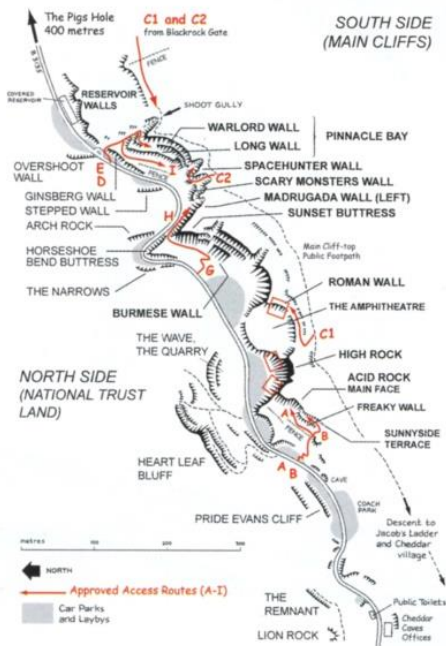


Top: *Matanuska* [VS] Stepped Wall with the pinnacles in the background.

Above: Sunset Buttress with Great Rock to its right, home to Britain's most exposed 2/3 pitch sport routes.

CHEDDAR GORGE

Main crags where climbing is permitted outside winter



The extension granted excludes peak holiday periods: i.e. Easter, May and Spring Bank Holidays and the July and August holiday period, and is additional to the current winter-only climbing arrangements (i.e. a lot of the routes would still only be available in the winter period October 1-15 March e.g. *Coronation Street*).

The extension will be subject to a year's pilot and subsequent review. Over the year I'll be available as a 'climbing warden' one day a week. This is a temporary post generously funded by the BMC. I'll be available to advise climbers and the public, liaise with the owners, and see that anything going awry gets fixed.

Autumn 2006's climbing season for the restored

routes will begin Monday 11 September.

Cheddar Gorge's 'Summer-climbing' Cliffs South Side (Longleat Estate)

The following are cliffs where most-of-the-year-round climbing is permitted on specified climbs: the main holiday periods outside winter are excluded, as explained above.

The Pigs' Hole; Ginsberg Wall (part); Yew Tree Wall; Long Wall (part); Warlord Wall; Castle Rocks lower tier (including *Castles Made of Sand*); Spacehunter Wall; Madrugada Wall (part); Horseshoe Bend Buttress (parts); Sunset Buttress (part); Burmese Wall; High Rock lower left and right wings (parts); Freaky Wall; Acid Rock Main Face; Sunnyside Terrace.

Note: Access outside the normal winter period to Madrugada Wall, Sunset Buttress, and Burmese Wall is not permitted until the construction of a fence under Sunset Buttress (planned for 2006)

North Side (The National Trust)

The north side of the Gorge is designated Open Access Land under the CRoW Act 2000. However, for public safety reasons, voluntary agreements limit climbing on some of the crags to winter-only. Those available all-year-round are:

Pride Evans Cliff; Heart Leaf Bluff; The Wave (the lower tier of The Quarry a.k.a. Landslip Quarry); The Narrows; Arch Rock; Stepped Wall; Overshoot Wall.