

HARD CHEDDAR

by Martin Crocker

Cheddar Gorge is disappearing. Since 1931 and the ascent of *Knight's Climb* the gorge, one of Britain's most fantastic natural features, has become increasingly subject to the threat of total obliteration - and few of us, least of all the tourists and local landowners, seem to know or care. For all its past glory, Cheddar Gorge is in a state of decline, of distressing ivy blight. And every summer the tourists and hooligans to whom Cheddar is forced to play host just look on. (Thank God for winter when most will go and sanity returns.) But beware . . . for behind them a faceless and deadly dark green force spreads, in assertion of its dominion, inexorably, like some terminal disease, oblivious of season or the frustratingly sporadic efforts of part-time gardeners. We hang there, spider-like from long silken threads - hacking - bruised - but in love.

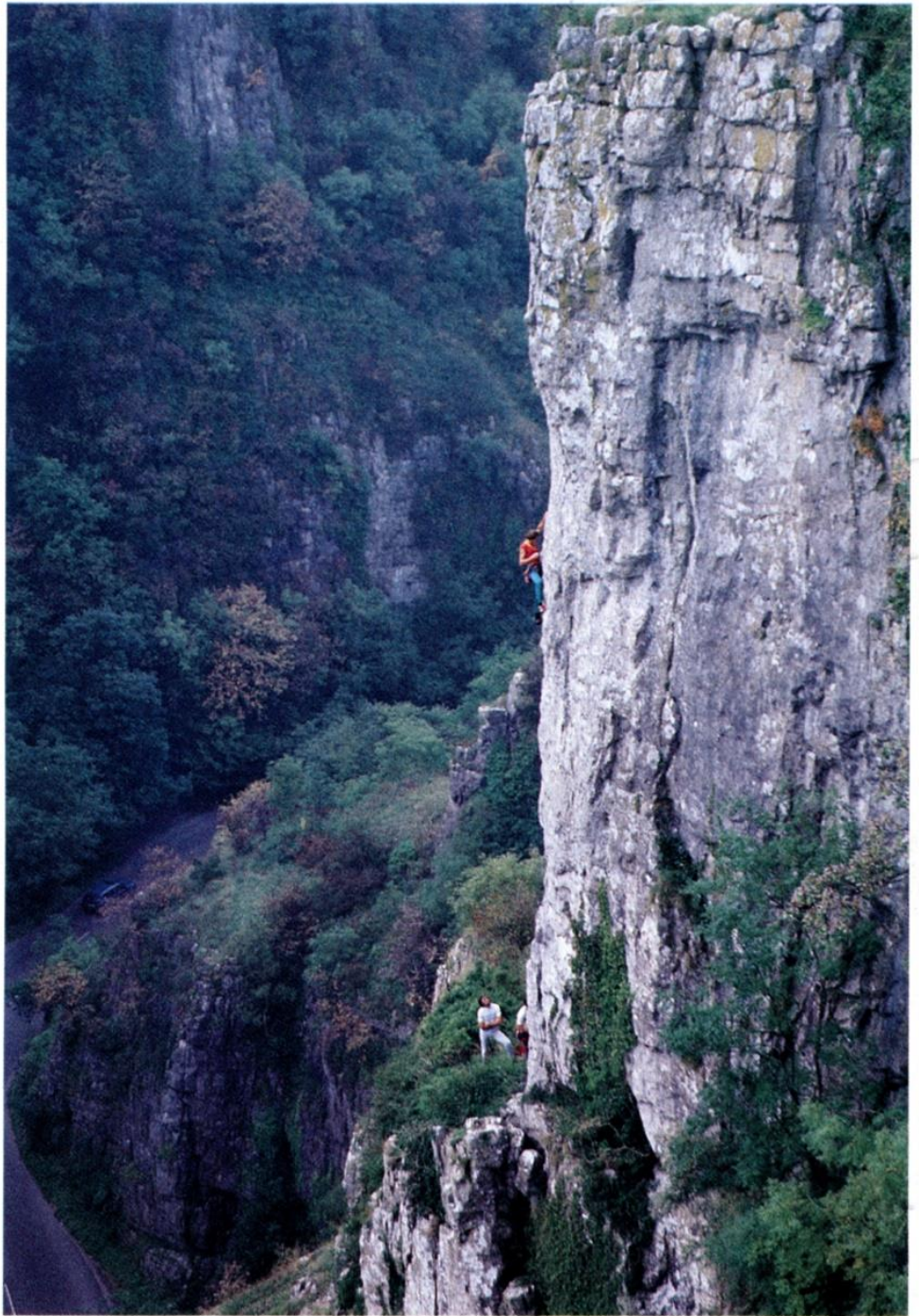
Thankfully the position is not untenable and with the best season ever just past, the balance is being redressed. We - the climbers - are preserving this natural phenomenon for Everybody!

Recent developments have taken a decisive turn for the better. For me at least, the future popularity of Cheddar (bearing in mind typically adverse conditions) lies with the innumerable distinct crags or tiers which are easier to clean as separate entities and less likely to become overgrown. It's not difficult to ignore the massive wealth of rambling rubbish, hanging gardens, vertical grassfields and general vegetative chaos with which Cheddar, admittedly, abounds. Some of my predecessors had different ideas, for, doubtlessly inspired by the "Dolomitic flavour" cliché, they went for the big ones - the British outcrop 400 footers! Improvidently, many examples of this genre were left to degenerate into impenetrable, precipitous jungles, and to blight the enthusiasm of many visiting and local climbers naïve enough to hack through their depths in the hope of finding just a little bit of rock. Routes such as *Rear Entry*, *Madrugada*, *Siberia*, *Hallowed Ground*, *Big Tower* and *Stone the Crows* have accordingly become lost. How long will *Lionheart* survive?

A lot of the credit for the fact that Cheddar is climbed on at all must lie with Dick Broomhead, who even now, after 15 years' "marriage", continues his passive campaign of rock restoration and the development of the smaller crags. His guidebooks are now desperately out of date, but fortunately a new one is promised for next year.

During the seventies more ambitious climbers in the form of Pat Littlejohn, Arnis Strapcans, Richard Harrison and Steve Monks got to grips with the crag to produce a string of superb hard routes. From this era, *Warlord*, *Visionary*, *Crow*, *Caesar* and *Ahimsa* have become classic three-star climbs. Thereafter, development proceeded only intermittently with the Pembroke boom proving too hard to resist. In 1983 I returned to Bristol and that December I took off with *Spacehunter* on perhaps the most challenging piece of virgin rock around. I haven't looked back since.

Today, Cheddar boasts a unique collection



Above: Martin Crocker on *Mescalito* (E5 6c), the most exposed and striking line on the North side of Cheddar Gorge. The crack on the right is taken by *Sentinel* (E3 6a). Photo: Matt Ward.

Opposite Page: Gordon Jenkin miles above the road on *West Route* (E5 6a), *High Rock*. Photo: Martin Crocker.

of hard climbs far surpassing that of its comparatively bland neighbour at Bristol and rivalling, in my opinion, that of any crag in Britain. I'm not going to preach the point - you either make the effort to find out for yourselves or you don't. There are so many good routes and so much unclimbed rock to go for at Cheddar, but if after reading the following you still remain unconvinced, well

. . . what the hell, I can only guess that future generations of computerised climbers will look back and thank us for the opportunity to explore this incredible and mysterious environment for themselves.

The Top End and Reservoir Walls

These crags, though relatively small, enjoy the distinction of being legally accessible





Martin Crocker on the first ascent of *Madonna* (E5 6b) the Zawn, Cheddar Gorge. Photo: Gordon Jenkin.

throughout the year. Recently I took a nervous look at the elegant long groove rising from the bowels of the Pig's Hole. A compulsion to continue my life insisted on two bolts; however, on this occasion conscience prevailed over common sense and, with Gordy positioned at the top of a clear run down to the road, the uncompromising beauty of *Sorceress* (E6 6b) remained untainted. Contrastingly, there is plenty of gear on *Chrome Nun* (E4 6b) which is now free and excellent. My enjoyment of this route was tempered somewhat by an enormous block that detached itself, roared off down the slope and (typically) shot straight across the road between two oncoming cars. Thereafter, the quiet was punctuated by an incongruous "scrunching" noise. Be warned!

By far the hardest route here is *The Harder They Fall* (E6 6b). I couldn't envisage at the time how a pitch could be harder, or perhaps I had just reached my limit. Either way, the groove left of *Eden Crack* provided an interminable sequence of 6b moves as well as couple of hefty "flyers" before it could be pieced together.

Pinnacle Bay and Castle Rocks

West of *The Shoot*, Cheddar asserts itself with characteristic awe. The skyline here forms an incredible serrated arc, completely overbearing in its elevation and impalpable to the eye.

Activity has been intense. Broomhead frantically attacked the Long Wall - like a human weedkiller - converting it in a matter of weeks from just another shade of green to a long, horizontal strip of white. By all accounts, the wall is a middle grade treasure-trove but with some harder routes as well, the best being *Misty Morning* (E2 5c),

Pure Joy (E3 6a) and *Brusque* (E5 6b).

Ginsberg (E4 6a), a popular desperate, was indicative of the lower - roadside - tiers' early promise, but a decade passed before the next major addition, when Nipper Harrison fought the *Barbarian* (E5 6b). I stripped the ivy between *Blitz* and *Barbarian* to reveal two unsuspected grooves. *Heaven-Sent* (E5 6b) is the left hand groove which, after a nasty start, soon evolves into an absorbing climb on good rock. The right hand groove proved to be the antithesis of its neighbour - a perverse problem of exceptional difficulty, and hence graded E6 6c and called *Hell-Bent*. I defy nearly anybody to climb this statically!

1985 saw the celebrated return of Steve (Spiderman) Monks who, despite having subjected himself to the rigours of climatic extremes, put in an impressive performance on the wall and roofs right of *Ginsberg*. The result was *Ginseng* (E5 6c) which has some reputedly finger-wrecking moves over the roofs and in its present state the intrinsic deterrent of a long run-out on the lower wall.

The magnificent upper tier wall between *Brainbiter* and *Warlord* supported in 1984 a rather feeble attempt at what should have constituted a breakthrough in the history of Cheddar free-climbing. A disjointed groove provided the only conceivable weakness, but did it lean! The line, which would not have looked out of place on Raven Tor (but had not been pegged) was obviously totally radical. I climbed it, but sank to the ignominy of using two rest points for which I was to receive some understandable but ill-conceived criticism. Since that day I'd been obsessed with the route and perpetually dogged by my own personal failure. So six

months later I returned, a stiffer pair of boots helping me past the first rest point in the niche but not preventing me from running out of steam on the final bulge - one step up from the resting ledge at the end of the difficulties. Two more feet! After one year's rest I was back yet again, with the ever-uncomplaining Matt Ward, and, as well as adding a much finer first pitch, finally climbed the route in one push, removing that most obdurate of indiscretions. *Every Step of the Way* must now be E7 6b; there is nothing else quite like it, and maybe one day it might even become famous.

The climbs of Castle Rocks epitomise to me the unique flavour of the Cheddar experience: pinnacle and gully wall climbing high above the road in a remote and tranquil setting. This is where it started for me, in 1972, hammering my way up *Fornicator Simulator* - but noting even at the time the futuristic mega-line soaring through the bulges to its left. *Spacehunter* is now free at E6 6b, the grade being more of a reflection of the experience of the senses than of pure difficulty. No gentle introduction - an unprotected, leaning wall requires conviction; then the route swings out over the void, weaving between and over roofs and linking holds and subtle lines of weakness in one enormous, rightward-tending arc. On two occasions now I've been glued to that wall, transfixed with incredulity at my right-hand rope trailing behind me, not touching rock but hanging limply, seemingly useless. 350 feet of space below my feet; John, and one year later Matt, merely points of colour amidst a turmoil of white ocean. This must be loneliness . . . As a single pitch, the *Spacehunter* expedition remains unparalleled, though *Forbidden Zones* (E5 6a), its

companion, must come pretty close.

In 1979 Monks added the daring *Stone Warrior* (E4 6a) to the superbly exposed roof-capped groove in the arete of the right hand "pinnacle". More recently I provided some long overdue daylight to the stark wall to its left and drew a "ruler" line up its centre which, after numerous aerial retreats, became *Siouxie* (E5 6b).

Partly obstructed by the arboreal manifestations of the huge "Great Unwashed" gully is a remarkably clean and attractive 180ft rectangular wall sporting one of the finest subtle natural lines at Cheddar. This is (get ready for more superlatives) . . . *Kephalonia* (E5 6a), THE classic gully-wall climb and an absolute must for visitors. Both pitches are equally long and hard. The initial smooth wall proves bewilderingly intricate but an intellectual approach should lead one to the main flake and groove line which goes at a pleasant but sustained 5b until it closes, spits you out and forces a committing move into an overhanging niche. Don't despair now - I didn't, because I knew there was a jug over the lip of the big roof and besides, the gear is always good. Immediately left of *Kephalonia* is a long, even smoother groove, which forms the basis of *Fountain of Arethusa* (E5 6b), a charismatic route!

Sunset Buttress

The imposing, metallic dome of Sunset Buttress is unique. Apparently against the laws of nature, the crag overhangs 1 in 3 in a pregnant profusion of roofs and bulges. Unbalanced by its sheer upper mass it hangs, leering in a fantastic caricature of the impossible.

Livesey showed the way when in 1976 he boldly went where only the aidman went before - the magnificent central groove of *Paradise Lost* - and left only one aid point, which did not capitulate until 1984. Despite being E5 with two 6b pitches, the route had been something of an anachronism as testified by its long history of undergrading and the failure of many respected climbers who were repelled by the initial "5c" (?) pitch. Ironically, this is the technical crux, whilst the top pitch is a more sustained affair with escalating exposure. *Paradise Regained* (E5 6a) was the next of Dearman's aid routes to fall, this time to Arnis Strapcans but with two rest points. These were eliminated by the precise use of a pair of long legs; if you too have a pair then bridging up the broad, overhanging scoop should prove quite comfortable, and if you haven't? . . . *Gates of Eden*, which used to go at E5 6b with four aid points, is now overshadowed by *Edge of Eternity*, which is the best route on the crag and, at E6 6b 6c 6a, one of the most substantial undertakings in the known galaxy. The first pitch takes the smooth wall and bulge right of *Gates* whilst the second free-climbs the bolted-up ramp. This must be attacked, preferably in a rampant blitz of enthusiasm and energy, to ensure success - there's a 6c move to pull over the roof and the ramp above with its precarious succession of edges and sidepulls is barely easier.

Not finished yet. The whole memorable event is topped by a leaning hard-6a crackline finishing with breathtaking moves over a roof to gain the grassy summit plateau and an obligatory convalescence in the therapeutic orange glow of a setting sun.

Sunset is well on its way to becoming one of THE crags of the eighties!

The Zawn

October 1985 saw a prolonged retreat of the summer rain and the concomitant development of The Zawn, so named because of the remarkable resemblance to

its sea-cliff counterparts. The superb, smooth walls in the gully between Sunset Buttress and Great Rock now provide nine hard routes on excellent rock. There is of course the added attraction of a non-tidal approach!

Our first line tackled the most improbable part of the crag. Imagine a beautifully smooth wall, 100 feet high, throw in a couple of philanthropic bolts, climb straight up its centre on perfect finger pockets, edges and jugs - always on immaculate rock - and that's *Madonna* (E5 6b), the best new pitch to emerge here for some time. To the left of Strapcans' *Nice Crack, Shame About the Face* (which no longer has a shameful bit), three cracklines give quality finger-jamming all at around 6a. Right of the soaring arete of *Don't Make Waves* (E4 6b) is a finely structured wall characterised by two parallel grooves across which the top two pitches of *Siberia* wandered before falling victim to the undergrowth.

Following a not inconsiderable gardening effort some pride has been restored to Great Rock, and in keeping with modern rationale both grooves are climbed direct. The lefthand, deeper groove is called *A New Siberia* (E3 6a) and is outstanding.

The East Wall overrides its subordination with one major pitch, *Alaska* (E5 6a): blind, technical climbing up the smoothest of smooth grooves render it probably the most exacting route in the Zawn.

Also worthy of note on Great Rock are a couple of isolated pitches: Monks' *Black Spitfire* (E5 6a), which climbs the big wall right of *What a Bringdown*, and Harrison's aptly named *Hidden Beauty* (E3 6a), the long crack in the upper tower of Deep Gully.

The Amphitheatre

The remote, one-time trendy Amphitheatre walls boast a remarkable cone-shaped wall which stayed proud of the advancing jungle and featured a fine crackline rising up its centre, which both *Hadrian's Wall* and *Caesar* had gone to great lateral lengths to avoid. This is *The Empire* (E5 6a), a fantastic pitch, the grade reflecting the unremitting technical difficulties rather than the seriousness. The *Caesar* wall continues its quality leftwards to *Satori* and offers two more excellent routes in *Dressed to Thrill* (E3 6a) and the all-out desperation of *Oingo B,B,B...Boingo!* (E5 6b/c).

High Rock

The Sovereign crag. For its suitors, first prize goes (begrudgingly) to Steve Monks for his concerted effort in unearthing the mindlessly-mega line of *Lion Heart* (E5 6b). If Steve's press agent, Steve Berry, hasn't told you already, this "monster" takes the smooth walls and compelling crack system between *Coronation Street* and *West Route* and offers pitches of 5c, 6a, 6a and 6b as well as a particularly hard move at 350 feet! *West Route* itself is now restored to grace, having been climbed in one pitch. Sadly, the route had been denigrated by unnecessary and spurious controversy propagated through rumour and guttural mutterings amongst the clique. Why the route or its associated "perpetrators" should have attracted so much attention is a complete mystery. The history of the route is now common knowledge, and hardly unique for these times, so let it suffice here to say that *West Route* has been flashed at a standard, but lonely, E5 6a. *Hallucinations* (E5 6b) was the net effect of a "trip" I took up the headwall between *Crow* and *West Route*; an exciting pitch which, though not as sustained as *West Route*, has two harder moves. My second,

Gordy, really suffered on this one. Not only did I drag his protesting torso from a cosy Sunday morning yoga-for-all session but I then had the audacity to deposit him 300 feet up High Rock in freezing mists, whilst I failed miserably to skate up a recalcitrant streak of ice five feet above his worried little head!

The uncompromising lower-left wall of High Rock had unaccountably remained dormant since Littlejohn's *Bad Dog* of 1974. Eleven years later, after thrashing through a forest of ten-foot nettles residing in the depths of *The Amphitheatre*, I ab'd down the wall and cleaned three lines. The plum proved to be the central line; from below it had hardly looked hopeful . . . but after one big wish and just one small fall, it soon became *The Wishing Wall* (E5 6b). The big roof is easy but the wall above isn't - if you crack it you'll soon be cruising on incredible finger flakes and pockets, perhaps even in awe and wonder at yet another three-star Cheddar surprise. To its left was another obvious weakness, but on this occasion the roof proved to be the crux, pushing *Desert Rat* well into the E4 category. The third line was a free version of *Shangri La* at E5 6b. Gibson eventually cashed in on the boom and added a bolt protected route of similar quality and difficulty over the roof left of *Bad Dog*. All four pitches are equipped with in situ-ab' points . . . so get to it!

For the rock aesthete, the most enchanting line on High Rock has to be the true arete of *Sceptre* - the "fairy tale" spire taken frontally by *Crown of Creation. The In Spire* (E4 6b) lives up to its name. I shall always recall the final arete - spotlighted on a knife blade, laybacking in a 300 foot void, suffused by the pure energy of movement and the freedom of it all.

Acid Rock

The attractions of *Acid Rock* now extend beyond its sunny aspect to include several modern desperates. *Schizoid* (E4 6a) is now free of its remaining aid point and, incidentally, also of a loose block which, judging by a snapped RP2 I discovered en route, must have ended up in the hands of somebody going a long way, the wrong way! To the right, a severely overhanging groove would look futuristic if it hadn't already been climbed. *Speed Freak* (E6 6b) hints at the requisite operational factor needed for success, that is assuming one can become committed to long stretches up the initial leaning wall. Even harder is *Shock of the New* (E6 6b), a fingery pitch up the stunning white wall right of *Paranoid*. This route may not (in practice) lead conveniently to the prominent, open white groove in the upper tier which Monks appropriately christened *State of Mind* (E5 6b). Whilst bridging tenuously up that groove way above the solitary peg runner and with the prospect of hard, blind moves to follow, any ambiguity associated with the name is soon quashed by an overwhelming mental directive to make it or else!

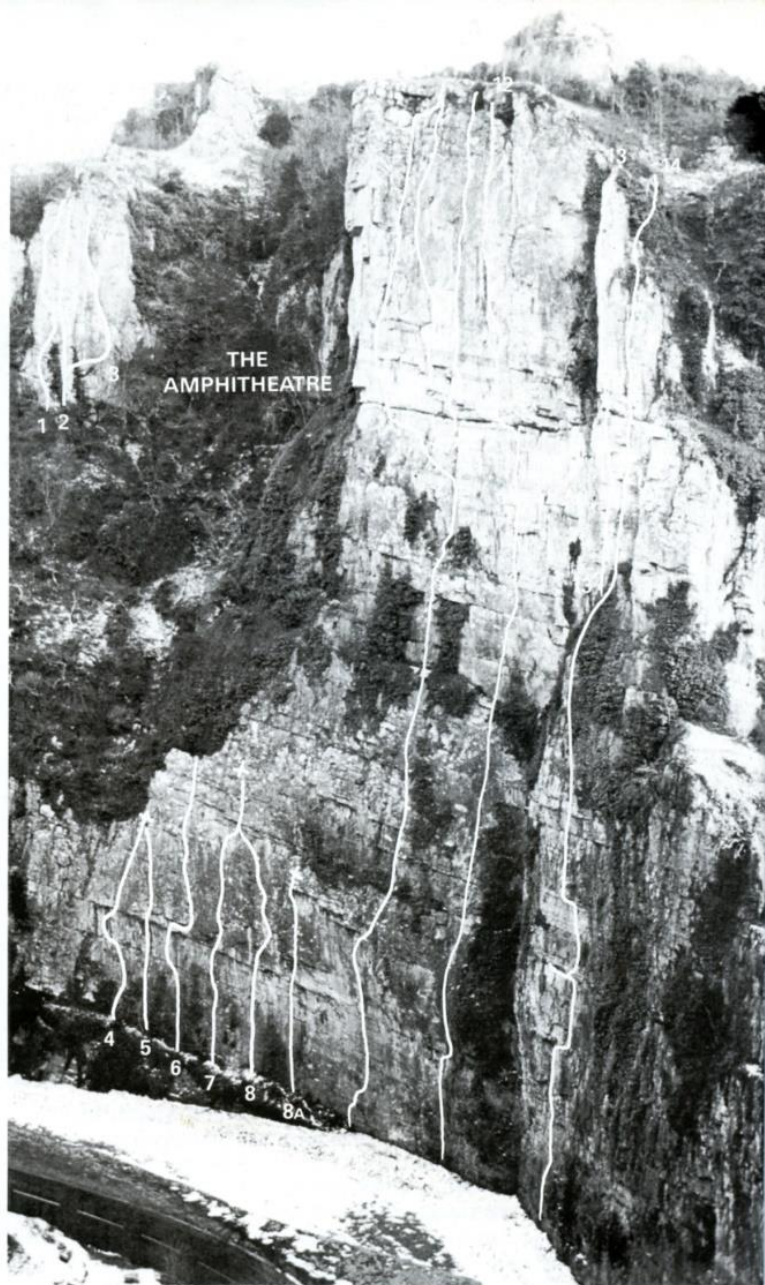
The Northern Tiers

The most imposing feature here is the rounded arete of *Mescalito* (E4 6c), the highly technical and airy top pitch of which forces several devilish reaches centred upon a two-finger pocket. Lots of sunshine and bombproof situ-gear, including a new bolt, should make it popular. To its left, a smooth white wall and black streak provide a beautiful pitch - *Le Tour Noir* (E4 6a).

Prospect Tier has proved equally auriferous. Harrison and Broomhead's *Maker's Nameplate* (E5 6a/b) has a fierce start from which a fall means a crater and thereafter it's all very, very steep - definitely one to



Above Left: Crag Above Horseshoe Bend: 1 *Siouxie E5 6b*. 2 *Stone Warrior E4 6a*. 3 *It Must Be The Russians E2 5c*. 4 *Kephalonia E5 6a*. 5 *Keystone Cop-Out E4 5c*. 6 *All Hands to the Pump E4 6b*. 7 *Afterglow E4 6b*. 8 *Strangler in Paradise E5 6b*. 9 *Bird of Paradise E6 6b*. 10 *Paradise Lost E5 6b*. 11 *Edge of Eternity E6 6c*. 12 *Utopia VS*. 13 *The Perishers E3 6a*. 14 *Madonna E5 6b*. 15 *A New Siberia E3 6a*. 16 *The Insidious Green E5 6b*.



Above Right: High Rock: 1 *Hadrian's Wall E3 6a*. 2 *The Empire E5 6a*. 3 *Caesar E4 6a*. 4 *Unnamed E4 6a*. 5 *No Slings Attached E4 6b*. 6 *Bad Dog E4 6a*. 7 *Desert Rat E4 6a*. 8 *The Wishing Wall E5 6b*. 8A *Shangri-La E5 6b*. 9 *Crow E3 5c*. 10 *Hallucinations E5 6b*. 11 *West Route E5 6a*. 12 *Lionheart E5 6b*. 13 *The In Spire E4 6b*. 14 *Crown of Creation E3 5c*.



Pinnacle Bay: 1 *Blurred Vision E1 5b*. 2 *Floater E3 5c*. 3 *Creeping Weakness E3 5c*. 4 *Brusque E5 6b*. 5 *White Lady E2 5b*. 6 *Demon Trundler HVS*. 7 *Exiled E3 6a*. 8 *Warlord E3 6a*. 9 *Every Step of the Way E7 6b*. 10 *Brainbiter E2 5c*. 11 *Medusa E3 6a*. 12 *Dianthus E2 5b*. 13 *Cool Hand Luke E2 5c*. 14 *Perfect Game E3 5c*. 15 *Babylon E3 5c*. 16 *Megalomania HVS*. 17 *Tremorgans E2 5b*. 18 *Spacehunter E6 6b*. 19 *Forbidden Zones E5 6a*. 20 *Little Wing E4 6b*.



Ginsberg Wall: 1 Donner und Blitzen E4 6b. 2 Ripe Old Age E5 6b. 3 Heaven Sent E6 6b. 4 Hell Bent E6 6c. 5 Barbarian E5 6b. 6 Ginseng E5 6c. 7 Ginsberg E4 6b. 8 Engineers E1 5b.

throw your unsuspecting apprentice at (sorry Ian). Also worthy of mention is *Digit Arete* (E4 6a) by Paul Smith, the unique *Wild Frontier* (E5 6b) - an improbable wall climb on infinitesimal holds - and the fine white groove between *Burp* and *Fart* named *Vic Bond* (E3 6b) - the reason for the name quickly becomes apparent upon meeting the guy!

Low down in the gorge is Pride Evans Cliff which, despite its accessibility, remained neglected until last season when two major pitches were added. *Jewel in the Sun* (E4 6a) is the wildly overhanging crackline up the centre, whilst *House Burning Down* (E6 6b) is an electrifying line through the lip of the large cave followed by its immaculate white headwall. I wonder what good old Pride Evans, the tramp who reputedly resided in this cave, would have made of our neanderthal antics on this one. No doubt he would have assimilated such peculiar behaviour in the broadest philosophical terms.

Tucked away in the trees, the long-forgotten Remnant looks scrappy from the road - this appearance belies its true character, as there are some powerful natural lines here. The central bulges are cleaved by a preposterous crack which overhangs a good 20 feet. Plenty of blood and sweat and just a little bit of handdogging proved necessary before *Try to Remember* (E5 6c) could emerge as the hardest crack climb in the gorge.

Standing sentinel at the mouth of the

gorge is the imposing profile of Lion Rock which, after two uncoordinated gardening sprees by the National Trust and then myself, is now as important to climbers as it is to the intrinsic character of the commercial end of the gorge. Our stone Lion is the best crag on the North side, having some brilliant natural lines and good rock. I must stress, however, that climbers who propose to use the crag do so with the utmost discretion and respect for neighbouring concerns. The National Trust positively discourage climbing on their side, and an enforceable prohibition would be intolerable.

Since 1965, when Fred Bennett climbed the classic *Simba*, the crag had lain dormant, presumably because of its sheer improbability. It had been left for me, twenty years later, to investigate . . .

First to fall were two lines centred upon the corner of *Simba*. The towering, hanging groove in the left arete was enterable only by means of a desperate layback - *The Snarl* (E4 6b), whilst the more genteel right wall offered a sustained pitch on surprising holds and perfect rock - *Lion in Winter* (E3 6a). The Lion's backside was, far from being ugly, one of the finest backsides I've encountered, and coveted what else but a perfect groove in its centre. This became *English Cheddar Gorgeous* which at E5 6b/c provides superb, microscopically thin bridging rounded off by an all-out power move. Regardless of these wonders, my real ambitions were never far removed from the 80-foot high, leaning front face of the Lion.

"This could be E7," I muttered to Gordy with a nervous but irrepressible excitement. He nods impassively. "Then show some aggression," he instructs. Maybe I will, so I cut loose up the initial groove . . . snarling, mean and downright aggressive. Hard 5c but smooth 5c, long reaches between jugs - my sort of climbing, good thread and then everything blanks out. Look hard. Tiny, carefully gardened calcite edges, an untimely precarious move - teetering in doubt until I will myself into the niche. Now the show really begins. The pockets are wet but I've got it pretty well wired from yesterday and feel like new. Relax. Big bulge above, 6b; suddenly I'm above it, fighting for, but not needing, a rest. The ludicrous headwall. You can't fail. Me, I'm not even considering failure. I handdogged the move yesterday, but only just. This is it . . . and with my right arm only very slightly rested I undercut to the edge. Some edge! . . . pull, pull, pull! - ignore the pain, the searing pain burning my fat fingers - I pull all right and what's more, I get the jug. Rock 1 in. I am relaxing now, even enjoying the curious anticipation of success. That final surge . . . until, hanging egotistically from the glorious finishing jugs, I sense that I'm somewhere I'll never be again . . . it's so warm, the Lion basking in the Sun. I too lie soaking in the warmth until from that calm, inner euphoria dawns, almost imperceptibly, the material conception that *Taming of the Lion* is now the hardest route in the region, and its first, but by no means last, E7 6c. Look South.