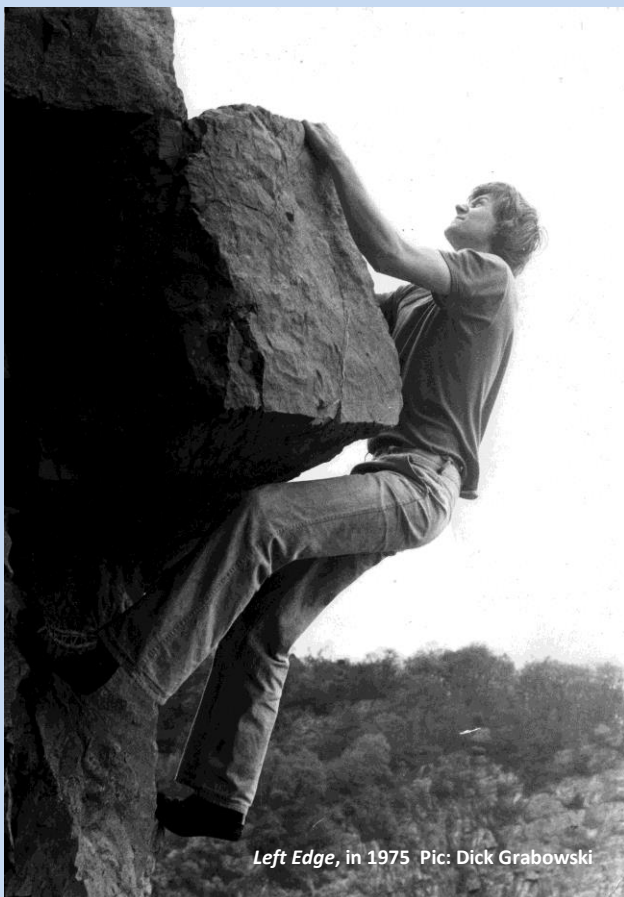
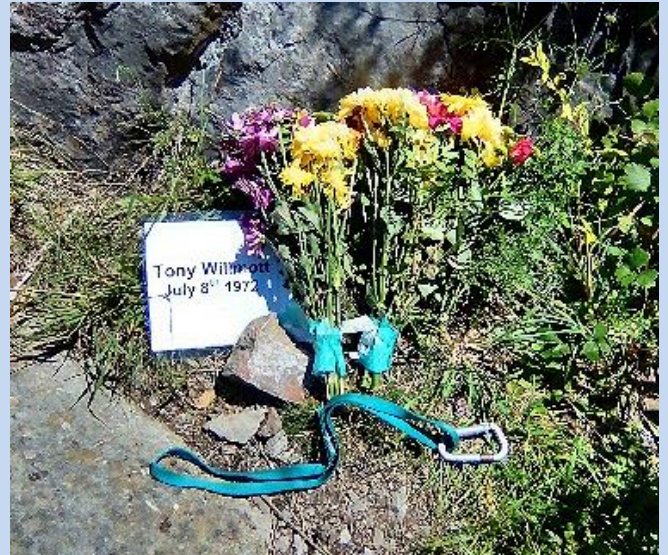


Invincible

No one is invincible. You might feel your experience will always look after you. You might believe you have earned oneness with the rock, or a cliff, or a route – an immunity to dance around in the vertical in complete safety. It's not true. Loyalty doesn't earn discounts. It doesn't passport you around danger. It doesn't cancel gravity.

November 2023 and a sunny day ushers me onto and into my lifelong Fir Tree Slabs routine: 20 reps up and down all over the slab and then onto the suite of sweet solos in the *Left Edge* area and under *Central Buttress*. I must have done them thousands of times. Every dimple smear crystal crimp and pocket is as familiar as the scars on the back of my hand. Avon visionary Tony Willmott may have felt the same. A nearby memorial to Tony at his July 1972 resting-place presents a heartfelt prompt to younger generations. Each time I pass it on the way to the slabs I recall how unwelcome and solemn a place the gorge felt the day after; no one was in the mood to contemplate being able to climb.



Left Edge, in 1975 Pic: Dick Grabowski

A 5a variant that emerges onto the slab of the *Left Edge* traverse feels delicate and exposed 50 feet up. To pass the overhang I lever down hard on a sound horizontal crimp and watch the crimp shear straight off. As I am cast to the air a dark-stained scar reveals its treachery beneath the crimp. My heart sinks. 'Oh No', I exclaim. Not again, I think.

It's remarkable how much time you have to think things through as you fall to who knows what. Arch-enemy time, normally in such a rush, decelerates to allow you that grace.

Is this finally it, I wonder? But I don't want any media reports; nor the indignity of rescue teams. No more hassle for my family. And by the way, when am I going to stop?

Anaesthetized by guilt I freefall 5 metres through a small ash tree, bounce from a brambly ledge, hit another ledge 5 metres below, and then another – rolling, twisting, grabbing, tumbling – the three dimensions and the rules of the game scattered by unmanageable chaos. In an instant the sum of the parts of a life are disassembled only to be reassembled in some new form on the ground.

Will it fool the laws of probability, should there be a next time around?



Morbidly I would often wonder how nasty it might prove to fall from there. Now I know. The rock, this Avon toy, doesn't owe me anything. Like any degrading inanimate thing it holds tricks, traps and trips up its sleeve, invisible hazards. Naturally it will have the last laugh; probability ensures it. But sometimes, like now, probability gets it wrong – so unjustly.

Tony's legacy towers in repose, above and beyond. His ground-breaking routes with far out names – *The Electric Orgasm*, *Magic Theatre*, *Think Pink* – bring him to life on Bristol's cliff, where he found himself.

Martin Crocker