

Some memories of John Willson by Martin Crocker

It was from an early *Cheddar Gorge Climbs* draft that I discovered the rub. There I'd made the case that volunteer extraordinaire, Wintour's nonpareil, and friend John Willson was far more deserving of an honour than most. But John's editorial red pen would have none of it. He was only defending his right not to be eulogised. So, this ~~ain't~~ that.



'I hope I don't black out', John warned one beautiful spring day in 2019 when we were taking our time approaching the summit ridge of Skirrid Fawr. Diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease a few years earlier, John chose this moment of all moments to tell me how he had to be carried down from the summit of Moel Siabod after a funny episode turned his legs to jelly. Fearing a repeat, our combined wisdom persuaded us to stop for a good breather. At least my phone was fully charged, I thought.

By this stage John had given up driving, and he missed walking and cycling further afield in the Forest of Dean particularly with his long-departed dogs. It was also becoming increasingly difficult for him to manage his lovingly tended terraced garden, of which he was justifiably proud.

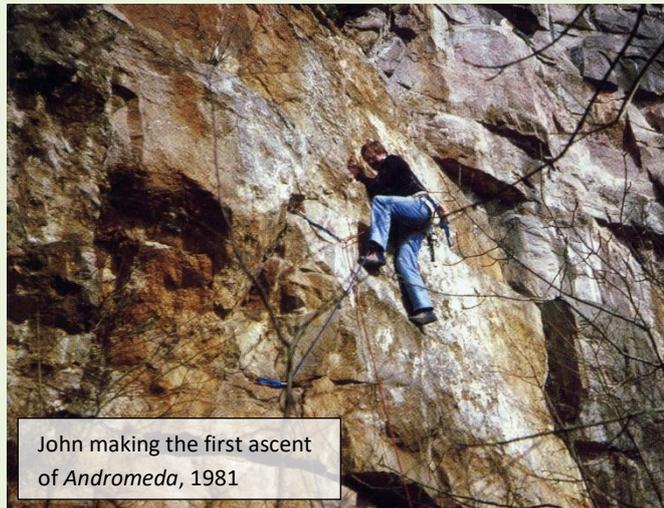
Thus the latter shades of our friendship had segued into a local walk together four times a year; yet my contribution in John's final years was modest compared with that of the group of local climbers and his former pupil John Shaw who ensured his domestic and medical needs were being met. That people wanted to rally behind John perplexed him. Staunchly independent, he would prefer not to strike up what he may have seen as a debt – and got flustered when he did. To him, depending on other people was a sign of weakness; self-sufficiency was all. Yet this quiet 'formally informal' man grew to **outstandingly** fulfil interactive roles pivotal in a society defined by climbers and their networks, ultimately making a real difference to countless people's lives.

WYE VALLEY CLIMBING	
	
<p><i>Rock Climbing and Abseiling in the Wye Valley</i> <i>Guided Walks and Expeditions in the Forest of Dean</i> <i>and the mountains of South Wales</i> <i>Map and Compass Navigation</i></p> <p><i>Instruction and experience at all levels for groups,</i> <i>families, and individuals</i></p>	

Upon retiring from his teacher’s post in Rendcomb College in the late-80s, John held high hopes of starting a freelance rock-climbing instruction business, a fitting goal soon frustrated by a regulatory framework that rewarded quick-fire tickets over long-haul experience and wisdom. What a loss it must have been to all those he could have inspired and educated on Wintour’s Leap, the massive limestone cliff only a stone’s throw from where he settled in Woodcroft. He would have been amongst those solons who could have handed down a feel for history and context, instilling traditions, thus helping to safeguard adventure climbing for the future.

So, instead, he immersed himself not only in his climbing but also in guidebook production. That’s how I first encountered his name – as author of the Wye Valley guidebook of 1976, the first authoritative guide to this ‘powerful limestone

canyon’. Inevitably the synergy between author and activist came into play and John started investigating Wintour’s Leap for new climbs, characteristically presenting them with Wagnerian persona in honour of his favourite composer: *Tarnhelm*, *Rheingold*, and of course *The Ring*. He was especially productive on North Wall, its off-vertical nature and sparse protection suiting his style – I remember watching him bound up *Swansong* in the early 80s – super-fast, athletic, and confident on his home turf.



John making the first ascent of *Andromeda*, 1981



For Wintour’s his partners were drawn either from ‘Rendcombians’ he had mentored, some becoming lifelong companions, or from the Bristol set who strayed from Avon and Cheddar on the trail of unclimbed rock and aid routes to free climb. You could be forgiven for thinking that naming his first new climb *John’s Route*, established in 1974, reflected the same all-consuming self-belief of many a first ascensionist, but John was only following the convention of nearby *Joe’s Climb*. Traditions were important to him. While strong and bold, John had no pretensions as to his ability; his cumulative role was as a great enabler – with his Wye Valley new-routing flock the likes of Tony Penning, Matt Ward, Gordon Jenkin, and most prolific of all, Gary Gibson. True to form he hated having ‘the camera’ pointed at him, which is why action shots of John are gold dust: ‘No thank you’ he would instruct – expecting complete obedience. Nonetheless sometimes his friends pushed their luck, got the shot, but he would invariably dodge the spotlight.

John's knowledge of Wintour's Leap became second to none. His efforts facilitated a buzz in 80s development which brought the status of the cliff on a par with Avon and Cheddar gorges. If anything it came to surpass them for lower grade classics, as it does now. That pleased John; he used to get irritated by my repeated claims of the 'greatest' or 'longest' new British classic at Avon and Cheddar. To reinforce Wintour's Leap new found popularity, John took his voluntary stewardship to a new level when he re-pegged much of it single-handedly. Strengthening many peg placements with high grade cement his effort was truly superhuman, and the job he did was meticulous and professional – just like anything he set his mind to. That included guidebooks.

John became infinitely more than a cog in The Climbers' Club guidebook machine. His was an enduring role across three decades, taking a long stint as Secretary of the Publications sub Committee, editing and type-setting scores of books with his beloved Ventura software, and co-authoring some of the guidebooks himself. Belying the age stereotype he was brilliant with tech. For the reader a job well done was guaranteed in all of form, clarity, consistency, and accuracy – especially in the grammar department (which many of us authors were woefully lacking in).

Producing any climbing guidebook is challenging and rewarding, the difference in skillsets between author and editor adding to the joy (and occasionally the frustration). Our first collaboration was *Avon & Cheddar* 1992; it was something of a blind date for us both – but a springboard for a long lasting rapport and tit-for-tat repartee. In a matter of days my hand-written drafts became spattered with so much red pen I thought the paper might be bleeding, yet it was only weeping my errors, my slang, and my ignorance of the use of the English language. From that day forward split infinitives and superfluous commas became **toast**.



Wye Valley Guidebook launch party 2007

Occasionally we authors would try to tease away John's scholarly dogmatism, but rarely with success. One such was when he finally conceded to insert an 'awesome' or two in my Avon 2017 script. More mischievous were my 'hyphen phases', 'brackets' phases', and even a phase of scandalous Americanism **snuck** in to provoke the red pen. A more creditable plan was to climb an important new route just as the script had been made ready for typesetting knowing that perfectionist John would feel duty-bound to fit it in: 'Guidebook production set back yet one more week – Ed'. But it wasn't always a case of getting a telling-off. By contrast, one time he even thanked me, of all people, for teaching him a new word – 'catalepsy' which was used in the description of *Conquistador* in my *Cheddar* guide. That chuffed me to bits, like receiving a gold star from Agatha Trunchball. However, many years later in relation to my *Cheddar Gorge Climbs* series which John generously word-processed and produced, he took exception to the tenor of some of the access instructions: 'yes sir, please sir, three bags full sir!' he mocked in **angry red pen**, describing it as 'not your finest moment'. Justifiably I toned down the militarisation of the script and all was forgiven and calmed. But there is no doubt that, ultimately, authors learned far more from John than he from us, successively picking up at least some of the correct etiquette without understanding or knowing why – these 'rules' surfacing in our writing from time to time to this day.

Indeed John's safe place was to be found in the perfection of the rules of the English language, an organised mindset he exported with great effect to successive Wye Valley drilled gear policies and to his term as BMCSW Secretary, and to coordinator of the Wintour's Leap Climbing Restoration Project in 2005-7. With Wintour's Leap and other Wye Valley cliffs hosting some serious disputes about bolting, he ensured that bolt policy drafts were crisp and unambiguous yet also inclusive. Fully watertight, no one else was left with much to say about them. More importantly they worked well on the crag – John's counsel for clarity and consistency finding a well-informed audience and relative harmony – fairness delivered with a firm hand no less.

Just occasionally, when interpretation rather than the letter of the law was required, he and I didn't always agree. We'd had more than a few tiffs at BMCSW meetings, the most entertaining being when I called the meeting a bureaucracy. To my surprise John pounced on me saying I'd 'got the wrong word' and that it was a democracy. But I knew what I was saying, and so did he: perhaps we were both right, they're not mutually exclusive terms.

Curiously John and I didn't climb together that often; most of our times together were guidebook-or access-related in front of a computer or at a local meeting. He was kind enough to act as anchor-man for various Wintour's routes I was pushing in the early-90s, on one occasion surviving an 'explosion' of blocks I ripped off above his head while free-climbing *Parasol*: 'I warned you it was loose up there!' he shouted up indifferently. Sometimes I'd pop in to his house after soloing in the Forest of Dean, still pumped with adrenalin and eager to share the day's adventures. I would often find him at his Bechstein baby grand piano – quite possibly playing one of those fiendishly complex Bach fugues which in later years he would play until he could no longer. Classical and choral music was his other great passion, founded partly on his capacity to decipher and transform complex written notation and scores into things of excellence and beauty. He taught many a college pupil the piano, and they are still grateful for it. Such talents also came to the fore as a church organist in Chepstow.

For all his altruistic access work the BMC awarded John Honorary Membership, so joining an A-list of less than 20 of the country's hardest-working climbing volunteers. That surprised John given his reputation for calling BMC officers to account, but inwardly it pleased him immensely. After all, guidebook editors often miss the praise lavished on authors and other contributors – he was always the guy thanking others and not being thanked himself. Once when I asked John why he dedicated so much of his time freely to guidebook and access work, he said: 'Because I enjoy it'. For a man with an IQ off the scale it was a beautifully simple and honest reply. Nothing more needed to be said. Except: 'Thank you John'.

John Willson (1937 – 2023)

