

BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL

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BMC SOUTHERN SANDSTONE OPEN MEETING 2003

Minutes of the BMC Southern Sandstone Open Meeting held at the Junction, Groombridge on Sunday 18 May 2003 at 19:30 hrs.

Present: John Galloway (Chair), Bob Moulton (HRMG Chair), Clare Bond (BMC), Graham Adcock, Jon Bibby, Chris Boylan, Ian Butler, Sarah Cullen, Tim Daniells, Mike Eden, Edith Fox, Joe Griffiths, Oliver Hill, Paula Mallenzi, Chris Murray, S. McCahill, Paul Norris, Adrian Paisley, Geoff Pearson, Tim Skinner, Rebekah Smith, Des Standbridge, Peter Thomas, Peter Thompson, Graham West.

Actions

1. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Apologies were accepted from Mike Vetterlein and Robin Mazinke.

It was noted that Mike Vetterlein was looking for good sandstone action photographs (preferably slides) to go in the new Climbers' Club guidebook.

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record, with the amendment that Chris Boylan was not in attendance.

2. Harrison's Rocks

2.1 General work

Bob Moulton gave a report on Harrison's Rocks. He indicated that the cement and resin work that had taken place this year was mainly maintenance.

2.2 Health and Safety

BM reported that there had been recent discussions about Health and Safety issues following an accident at the site involving a young person under instruction, which Wealden DC had investigated. Sport England had also commissioned a Health and Safety report. From both reports several recommendations had been made which were being implemented. BM made it clear that he thought the resultant actions taken by HRMG were good practice. Probably the only noticeable action was to place a bolt on the land ward side of the isolated boulder, so groups (and individuals) could safe guard the step from the boulder.

2.3 Ownership of the Rocks

BM explained the background to Harrison's Rocks ownership for those who weren't aware that it was owned by Sport England, with the toilet block and car park leased from Forest Enterprise. The BMC has a contract with Sport England to manage the site.

BM told the meeting that Sport England had approached the BMC to take over ownership of the crag. Although this seemed like a nice idea, the cost implications needed to be considered and discussions are slow.

2.4 Spa Valley Railway

BM explained that Spa Valley Railway has applied for planning permission for a halt below Harrison's Rocks. The Harrison's Rocks Management Group (HRMG) has objected on two grounds. The blot on the landscape of the halt, and the potential for day trippers to easily access the rocks and cause increased management problems.

TD explained that SVR are planning to use the halt as a waiting and picnic area. There was no provision for toilets in the plans, and it was understood that SVR were thinking that the toilets on the trains would suffice. TD said that objection to the planning had been made with reference to the AONB, but the planning officer was currently minded to approve the proposal by recommendation. The committee meeting is to be held on June 5/6th.

BM

BM was planning to write to local councillors to express the concerns of the HRMG. He also asked others to write, feeling that local addresses were likely to have a more powerful effect.

JG asked if there would be access to the rocks from the halt. BM clarified that access would not be permitted by the current landowner, but that she is keen to sell the land. BM added that it was not realistic for the BMC/Sport England to buy the land.

It was pointed out that the steam trains often have a diesel engine running all the time, which are noisy. The feeling of the locals in the meeting, was that the knowledge of the proposal within Groombridge was not high and there was possibility for some local publicity. Possibly through the Parish Council news letter.

2.5 General

SC said that she felt the bricks that had been dumped in the woods, posed a safety risk. Someone else noted that the matting under 2-toed Sloth had broken up. BM was aware of these problems and would draw them to the attention of the site meeting planned for the following day.

3. Stone Farm Rocks

3.1 Erosion Work and Woodland Management

JG explained that Stone Farm Rocks was owned by the BMC and managed through the HRMG.

The third phase of ground erosion work had taken place in the early Spring with Access and Conservation Trust (ACT) funding. It involved stabilising trees on the crag top by adding soil covered with matting and planting a small hedge. This had been successful and despite a lack of rain, many of the hedge plants had taken.

3.2 English Nature

A meeting had been held with English Nature to discuss Stone Farm and other climbing crags, which are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the area. As a result of that meeting Graham West had written a management plan for the rocks.

3.3 Car Park

JG explained that the car park above Stone Farm had been closed since February, for unknown reasons although there was a lot of litter. JG agreed to phone the owners.

JG

A discussion followed about two alternative parking spots in the area. One is down the lane opposite where the bridle path joins the road, and the other is at the bottom of the hill by the lake.

4 Eridge

CB had received a phone call from Mark Pearson, the new Reserves Manager of Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT), who had said that SWT had “decided” to ban climbing at Eridge.

It appeared that one of the SWT trustees had seen the Jingo Wobbly guidebook and some rock damage and was not pleased.

JG, BM, GW and CB attended a site meeting to discuss the issues, it was clear at this stage that Mark Pearson was not in a position to reverse any decision. The main areas of concern were the area above the car park, where a rhododendron had been removed from the crag top leaving a very sandy area (it is advisable to use a carpet in this area to avoid damaging the sandy rock), and the climb ‘Portcullis’ where a hold has snapped off. It was noted that the area above the car park had modern graffiti scratched into the rock. There was no evidence of climbing in restricted areas.

The BMC had written to the trustees asking them to reconsider and pointing out that banning climbing was unlikely to result in the solution they were looking for. Bill Jenman, the previous SWT Reserves Manager, had also written to the trustees pointing out that the choice was between managed climbing or unmanaged climbing – not between climbing or no climbing. Bill has also made the BMC aware that climbing access was a condition of the Heritage Lottery Fund grant which SWT used to buy the site. JG said he would check this out.

JG

It was understood that SWT were reconsidering their “decision” and in the meantime nothing had been done to enforce the “decision”.

TD suggested writing to David Atchinson-Jones, so that the BMC could tell the trustees that they had written to the author of the Jingo Wobbly guide. CB undertook to do this. BM asked for the letter also to cover the fact that he had also got the details of the restrictions wrong.

CB

CB said she would also place a note in Summit, highlighting the sensitive nature of Eridge and its SSSI status.

CB

It was agreed that CB would follow up her original letter to the trustees.

CB

5 High Rocks

5.1 Payment for access to the Rocks

TD was concerned that climbers who did not pay to enter the Rocks, could encourage the owner to ban access for all climbers.

It was suggested that a note went in Summit about this. The current prices are £2/£1 for U18’s

CB

5.2 Rhododendron Project

RS asked to discuss the rhododendron project which had been discussed at last years open meeting. The idea was that the project would form part of the Kent High Weald project, but nothing has happened despite the original strong interest from climbers. RS had been approached by a climber who was keen to take a lead with the project a year ago but she had not heard from him since and she did not know his name.

RS said that careful consideration needed to be given to removing rhododendrons, the north facing walls seem to be the ones most affected. Small grants would be likely to be available to help fund the project up to about £500. What it really needed was an ecologically-knowledgeable climber to put together a plan so that funding may be sought from the CC Colin Kirkus Fund and the Access and Conservation Trust (ACT), and also to approach the owner with.

It was decided that a volunteer was needed to take the project forward. TD said he would be keen to take the project forward, but currently had no time to put into it. There were no volunteers from the meeting.

5.3 Hut boulder

JG went through the specification for a mushroom shaped bolt on the top of hut boulder, which has been approved by English Nature. JG said that the idea was not to replace the current iron hoop, but to put 'the mushroom' into a fresh piece of rock close to the hoop.

TD asked about the possibility of a conventional bolt at the top of Rufus, although concerns were expressed about splitting the boulder in half. JG explained that a mushroom had originally been adopted rather than a bolt due to the turning motion if ropes were set up in different directions. There was also the thought that one mushroom would be aesthetically preferable to lots of bolts.

TS has some concerns over the wearing of the rock under the mushroom and this would need to be monitored.

There is also the potential to put 2 bolts on the main land to ease the setting up of a top rope. English Nature had not been asked if it would be OK to place these bolts, and there were concerns that they should be placed in areas where the public could not trip over them.

A vote was taken on promoting the way of accessing the hut boulder described in the Code of Practice which is to take an extra rope and use a tree far back from the crag top. – the majority voted in favour of this proposal.

With regard to protection in the Rufus area. SC suggested that the central mushroom only was placed and the situation monitored, this was agreed.

6 Other Craggs

6.1 Penns Rocks

JG reported that at the meeting with English Nature the BMC had broached the subject of Penns Rocks and Jockey's Wood. EN had advised that a botanical survey would need to be undertaken, prior to English Nature 'allowing' climbing at the site. English Nature said they were not in a position to fund such a survey. JG said he had written to Lord Gibson (the landowner) to ask if he would allow climbing if English Nature agreed that it was OK to climb on the site.

JG

6.2 Bulls Hollow

GA suggested that he approached Steve Budden of Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators about a crag clean-up and he volunteered to organize this. It was agreed that this was a good idea.

GA

7 Code of Practice

JG said that it had been hoped that the Code of Practice would be strongly promoted this year. However there had been problems with the section of the code which referred to abseiling.

JG had updated the code to make it more user friendly, but there had been some confusion between the voluntary nature of the sandstone code as referring to all Southern Sandstone crags, and its use by the BMC as a set of rules which users of Harrison's Rocks and Stone Farm must respect. JG suggested that because of the confusion a clause was inserted into the code allowing abseiling from the isolated boulder down the niche in the green crack area 'between the fingers' for those who for reasons of disability were unable to make the step across to the main land .

JG suggested that the following wording was inserted into the part of the code that is specific to Harrison's:

33. If you cannot step across from the top of the Isolated Butress, there are other ways of getting off after finishing a climb:

Reverse the top traverse of Boulder Bridge Route starting at the top of Crowborough Corner, and scramble across the jammed boulder and up the tree on the other side. This can be protected from the bolt on the north-east corner of the butress above Boysen's Arete.

Or, fix a tight rope from the bolt above Edwards's Effort to the tree in line with the step across. Clip the rope to your harness and use it as a handrail to protect the step. Take a spare 25 metre static rope for this.

Or, and this is the only exception to the 'no abseiling' rule, if you have a disability you may use the bolt at the top of Wailing Wall to abseil into the gully at the back of the butress between Powder Finger and Bloody Fingers, then ask someone to throw the rope down. Do not pull it down.

Thereafter there followed a discussion of disability and equity issues and the problems any change to the code may cause. JG explained that the main code points would not change and that 'no abseiling' would form part of these.

The majority voted in favour of following JG's recommendations although the mood of the meeting was one of unhappiness about the outcome and the whole discussion.

8. AOB

The over-use of chalk at High Rocks was brought up and it was decided that this and brushing should be mentioned in Summit with other Southern Sandstone issues.

CB

Clare Bond
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