

BMC SOUTHERN SANDSTONE OPEN MEETING 2004

Minutes of the BMC Southern Sandston Open Meeting held at the Junction Inn, Groombridge, on Sunday 16th May 2004 at 19:30 hours.

Present: Bob Moulton* (Chair/ HRMG/CC); Graham West* (BMC Access & Conservation); Geoff Pearson* (HRMG); Chris Tullis (HRMG/CC), Graham Adcock* (CC); Nick Alcock*; Jon Bibby; Chris Boylan* (TWMC/CC); Mike Eden* (CC); Rob Foster (TWMC Chairman); John Galloway* (TWMC/CC); Sallyanne Hall; Oliver Hill* (TWMC/CC); Steve Jackson* (TWMC); Robin Mazinke* (CC); Alari Naylor; Rob Naylor* (TWMC); Matt Pitts; Tim Skinner* (HRMG/CC/Maistone CC); Rebekah Smith*; Tim Daniells (CC)

*	Indicates individual BMC member
CC	Indicates Climbers' Club member
TWMC	Indicates Tunbridge Wells Mountaineering Club Member
HRMG	Indicates Harrison's Rocks Management Group

1. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record.

1.1 Matters Arising

John Galloway (JG) followed up on his 2003 action of writing to Lord Gibson, the owner of Penns Rocks, inquiring as to whether permission might be granted to climb at Penns Rocks/ Jockey's Wood. Lord Gibson's initial response was that he might allow climbing at Jockey's Wood only, subject to a positive report from English Nature. Given this response it was felt that the proposal to commission a report that might recommend that climbing be allowed on the SSSI should not be pursued. In addition, since the last meeting Lord Gibson, sadly, had passed away. Accordingly it was felt that the matter should not be pursued further for the moment.

It was reported that the new Sandstone Code of Practice has now been finalised and that it is now just a question of designing and printing the leaflets, which Geoff Pearson (GP) was overseeing. Steve Jackson (SJ) volunteered to help produce the leaflets. The Imaging Centre in Tonbridge was mentioned as a possible contact for the bulk printing.

2. *Harrison's Rocks*

2.1 *Spa Valley Railway*

Bob Moulton (BM) reported that the Planning Application by Spa Valley Railway for a halt at Harrison's Rocks had been turned down by Wealden District Council. The Application went to appeal and, following representations by HRMG and other interested parties, the appeal was also turned down. It was thought unlikely that Spa Valley Railway will seek to take things further.

2.2 *Sport England*

BM reported that Sport England (SE) is undergoing a major reorganisation. Staffing levels are being cut and funding is being concentrated on Olympic events, with other sports losing out. SE is reporting to its board in respect of Harrison's Rocks. SE will not inform HRMG in advance of the contents or conclusions of this report.

BM outlined the current ownership situation:

- The rocks themselves are owned by the Sports Council Trust (SCT), who own land on behalf of SE.
- The car park and toilet block are leased from the Forestry Commission (FC).
- The SCT *may* be talking about letting the FC take over the ownership of the rocks.

BM has asked Dave Turnbull (DT) to write to the CEO of the SE reminding them of the history of Harrison's Rocks, ownership changes, the fact that the rocks were originally purchased from the FC by climbers to secure continuity of access, and to ask that the BMC be given first refusal on the Rocks if SE were planning to divest itself of the ownership. (**Action: DT**)

DT had made it clear to SE 2 years ago that the BMC would be interested in taking over the Rocks, *as a last resort*, but would not be interested in taking over the lease of the car park/WC block.

JG pointed out that the management of Birchden Wood has recently been taken over by Steve McCarthy, a climber and former TWMC member. The FC remit is to "encourage access" so there is the possibility of seeing signed walking trails and picnic areas proliferating. The car park charges are likely to be changed from the current "honesty" system to Pay & Display.

Graham Adcock (GA) asked where the car park income goes at present. BM confirmed that it goes to the BMC Harrison's fund and that the

revenue will be lost if the FC takes back direct management of the car park. The income is currently mainly earmarked for rock repairs and maintenance, and finances would be impacted if it was lost.

Rebekah Smith (RS) inquired as to whether the BMC could negotiate with the FC for a percentage of any income from an FC-managed car park. JG felt that this was very unlikely as rock repairs would not be part of the FC's remit. RS protested that climbing was a recreational activity and thus should fall within the FC's remit, but JG responded that he had already discussed this with Steve McCarthy and it had been made clear that maintenance of the rocks themselves would be a BMC responsibility.

Chris Boylan (CB) requested further clarification on the history of the ownership of Harrison's. GP explained that a group of climbers bought Harrison's from the FC in the late 1950s. The climbers did not want to own the rocks themselves, however, and offered them to the BMC. At that time the BMC was unable to own property so the original conveyance was to the Countryside Council for Physical Recreation (CCPR), which was asked to hold the rocks for climbers in posterity (no covenants were attached however). In a government reorganisation in the 1970s the assets of the CCPR were transferred to the Sports Council Trust (SCT), the SC's land-owning legal entity.

Several people expressed concern that if the ownership of the rocks reverted to the FC then the FC, which had sold the rocks for value, could regain them at no cost which would be contrary to the original spirit in which they were acquired. There was a feeling in the meeting that a case could be argued that climbers should still own the rocks, and if SCT wishes to divest itself of them, they should be revert to the heirs and successors of the climbers who originally bought them. BM stated that he had recently met Bill Pettigrew (CCPR), who also felt that there was a case to be made for viewing the situation in this way.

GA pointed out that a large element of Harrison's costs was in the wardening. It was recognised that the Tullis family put a great deal of effort into the wardening, for relatively little return. If the BMC took ownership of the rocks, would it pay a grant for wardening in the same way as SCT does at present? BM stated that a case would have to be made for such a payment, and that DT has made the point to HRMG that there is currently no other crag in the UK with a paid warden, though it might be argued that Stanage is "effectively" wardened by the National Parks wardens.

BM pointed out, however, that at present there was nothing concrete to fight against. Making contacts and documenting salient facts is all that can be done until the SCT makes public what its plans are. There is nothing in the property-related documents regarding the original purchase

of the rocks that protects the above understanding, and HRMG has not seen a copy of the legal document transferring the rocks from CCPR to SCT. BM commented that the whole situation would be reviewed at the forthcoming HRMG meeting; that heavy lobbying may be required; that the BMC can now own property. The meeting agreed that the preferred option was for the BMC to acquire ownership of Harrison's. Although Stone Farm Rocks are run without a formal budget, Harrison's could not be run in this way, and it's imperative that the BMC commit to a budget for the rocks if it does obtain agreement to take ownership.

2.3 *General*

Some new graffiti had been noted, but this was not felt to be as bad as that seen at Stone Farm and Under Rockes. Note was made of chipping in places, particularly on the North Boulder, where 2 large slots had been cut into the top, as well as other "hold improvements". It had already been agreed that the 2 large slots would be filled (*Action: Chris Tullis, CT*)

Mike Vetterlein (MV) has surveyed the rocks with a view to identifying forthcoming resin requirements (at Harrison's, High Rocks, Stone Farm and Under Rockes) and has applied for funding to carry out the work.

Tim Skinner and Sarah Cullen were nominated by the meeting to continue as HRMG members.

3. *Stone Farm Rocks*

3.1 *Erosion Work and Management*

The management plan for the rocks is completed but needs circulating to Parish and District Councils and to English Nature. CT and Graham West (GW) had a site visit to look at woodland management, and GW is preparing a proposal (*Action: GW*). Revetment work is looking good. Wood chippings are required.

Some chipping has occurred in the last year, plus some over-cleaning of boulder problems. A notice about chipping and cleaning is required to be displayed at the First Pinnacle area.

The existing notice board will be replaced by a board similar to those at Harrison's.

3.2 *Car Park*

JG reported that Tony Hobbs (landowner) had recently stated that the car park would reopen at some stage. It was shut only because of fly-tipping. No date for reopening has been fixed yet: the owner is holding out for the council to sort out the fly tipping problem before actually reopening the car park.

4. ***High Rocks***

4.1 ***Access and Payment***

The access situation predicted last year came to fruition with Mr Cappellazzi (Mr C, owner of High Rocks) imposing a pre-booking requirement for climbers following vandalism to the restored fencing, abuse of his staff by climbers and other problems. Things seem to have simmered down now, though the threat of complete closure is still there if vandalism or climbing without payment resumes. It was noted that people “known” to the hotel staff do not always have to pre-book.

4.2 ***Management***

Oliver Hill (OH) has produced a management plan for the restoration of the rocks. Clare Bond had taken a decision not to progress it last autumn due to the delicate access situation. It was suggested that MV might be the most appropriate person to approach Mr C with a view to progressing the plan (***Action BM***).

TS pointed out that some of the proposed tree clearance and pruning might be good for climbing, but why should we expect it to be welcomed by other users? Non-climbing visitors, wedding parties etc might prefer the aspect of High Rocks to be more “wild”.

Alari Naylor (AN) pointed out that Mr C had been *very* annoyed last year by the unilateral removal of a tree above *Pilgrim's Progress*.

4.3 ***Hut Boulder***

GW stated that nothing has been done re the replacement of the existing rusty bolt due to the present access situation. TS suggested that the bolting proposal should be bundled with OH's managements plan. CB pointed out that refusal of one item in the combined plan might endanger the whole of it. BM concurred that the two proposals should be kept separate. JG stated that Mr C had already been sent a letter about the bolt proposal, which he had agreed to, (before the current access difficulties arose) and that perhaps Mr C could be contacted again and the matter pursued independently

Bolts on the “mainland” were raised. JG said that these had not been included in the original proposal and that a further approach to Mr C would be necessary. TS thought that these would be more contentious than placing a single bolt on Hut Boulder. BM suggested that someone agree to take the Hut Boulder bolt forward as an action point, and that the current difficulties should not be an excuse for inaction. GW agreed to do this. JG commented that he would need to send GW the specification for the Hut Boulder bolt (***Action: JG & GW***).

5 *Bull's Hollow*

5.1 *Restoration Project*

BM thanked GA for his hard work in getting the project off the ground. GA in turn thanked the individual volunteers who had put in the effort “on the ground”, with particular thanks to “Down to Earth” tree management (owned by TWMC member Glenn Morris) without whom the tree surgery aspects of the work could not have been completed.

The situation now is that the undergrowth has been cleared and trees have been felled, pruned or crown-lifted according to an agreed plan. The site is still boggy. GA stated that the Conservators' Warden, Steve Budden (Mr B), had confirmed his intention to (eventually) get a digger in to move some of the larger logs to create a “habitat”, to repair the damage done by BMX bikers and to dig drainage channels. If the work takes too long to organise, Mr B would give permission for climbers to arrange drainage via volunteer work-parties. Annual maintenance will probably be required to keep the level of the undergrowth down.

The meeting adjourned for a short AV/ slideshow presentation by GA and SJ showing the progress of the clearance work over several weekends on late 2003.

6 *Eridge*

6.1 *Access and Management*

Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) has not so far gone to the extent of banning climbing at Eridge, but continues to express reservations, particularly about people climbing in the restricted areas, and about use of chalk. It was suggested that, as at High Rocks, the upsurge in popularity of the venue to boulderers may mean that there is now a lot more chalk visible on the lower part of the crag.

A concession by SWT allowing climbing in the *Sandstorm* area was contingent upon absolutely no use of chalk in this area, but use of chalk there has been noted on several occasions, some of it certainly by “regular sandstoners” who “should know better”, although it was clear that many of those present weren't aware of this restriction. BM suggested the need for a specific notice at the car park regarding the use of chalk. Possibly even a notice at the bottom of the *Sandstorm* area. Rare lichens and mosses grow in the crevices of this buttress and chalk affects the PH of the soil when it washes off, possibly compromising the habitat of these flora. Installation of notices will be pursued further- BM undertook to make the initial contact with SWT. (**Action: GW & BM**).

GA pointed out that *Portcullis* is becoming very worn, and asked about the possibility of resin repairs. GW commented that MV had already been informed by SWT that resin repairs of climbs at Eridge were unacceptable, although BM undertook to discuss the matter further with MV.

7 *Bowles Rocks*

CB brought up the fact that abseiling was still being observed at Bowles, by people other than parties under instruction from Bowles staff. It is accepted that Bowles has to offer abseiling (in designated areas) as part of its commercial operation, but the meeting agreed to take the stance that abseiling by anyone other than official Bowles groups, even at the designated areas, should be discouraged.

BM said that along with the new BMC signs for Stone Farm and Bulls Hollow, he would be including a new sign for Bowles. He would suggest that this point be covered in the wording.

8 *L & SE Area Committee Structure*

It has been suggested at Area level that the L & SE Region is too large and contains too many diverse areas of interest for the L & SE Area committee to operate effectively. Possibility of breaking the region into smaller section has been mooted. One possible solution is to form a separate Kent & Sussex or Sandstone area which would concentrate on the particular areas of interest to the enhancement and preservation of sandstone climbing, which are not always regarded as a priority at Area level at present.

JG pointed out that the location of meetings was a problem if increased involvement of clubs and individuals outside easy evening commuting distance of London was required. Moving venues around did not work for the SW Area, however.

BM pointed out that the BMC is in the process of allowing more flexibility in the operations of Area committees, but that linking a new Area Committee directly to HRMG might not be a good idea given the current state of uncertainty about the future ownership and management of Harrison's.

A suggestion was made that a divide along the lines of Hampshire/Dorset, Kent/ Sussex and London/ rest of the area might work. GA asked whether a more identifiably "local" Kent & Sussex area might help with funding. BM felt that it might, in that approaching TWBC and Wealden Council would be easier wearing a "Kent & Sussex" hat than if wearing a "London & SE" one.

JG asked if a fully independent region was feasible: how would it handle all the administration, input to national issues, running the BRYCS competition, etc? Might it not be better to run it at a sub-region of L & SE? L & SE is a large and quite vocal committee which is invaluable in holding the BMC Management Committee to account and it might be inadvisable to lose this level of leverage. Would a tiny local Committee have the resources and required numbers of interested people to send representatives to Manchester for national issues?

The meeting felt that whatever the outcome, HRMG should remain as a separate entity, pending clarification of ownership issues, and, hopefully, afterwards.

BM suggested that the way forward might be a sub-committee of the Access Committee, with members looking after the interests of sandstone climbing in general being appointed by this Open Meeting annually.

It was felt that a group could be set up *now* which would have the specific remit of looking after sandstone climbing affairs in general, but meeting more frequently than once per year. It would not even strictly be necessary to have BMC approval, though this would be a good idea as some level of BMC support would be required in order to run it (in particular by having a BMC Access Officer in attendance) .

It was agreed by the meeting that a group would be set up to look after "sandstone issues". Its structure would take the form of 5 or 6 people (maybe more), who would meet say 3 times a year and assist GW in progressing matters between Open Meetings. Rob Foster (RF: TWMC Chairman) commented that TWMC, as the largest club in the immediate area, would be prepared to take on some of the workload. It was agreed that RF would discuss the issue with the TWMC committee and that, subject to Committee approval, TWMC would organise a further meeting in September to formalise this new group (**Action: RF**).

9 *New Sandstone Guide*

MV and Robin Mazinke (RM) are among those working on the new CC guide. Some format options were circulated for comment, and opinions canvassed on whether it should be CC or Rockfax size, and whether hard or soft cover. Route topos would be in photographic form where possible.

RM made an appeal for pictures: good quality colour shots, in slide, digital or print negative formats. A preference would be for bright clothing, and impeccable rope work. Shots of soloists and people climbing using "traditional" ropes around the waist and waist belays would be particularly welcome. Photos to be sent to RM asap for consideration.

RM requested that anyone who has repeated an unrepeated route or soloed an "NS" climb should contact him.

10 *Any Other Business*

It was noted that the Junction Inn would become a no-smoking venue from 1st June 2004. No other business being brought forward from the floor, the meeting was closed.
