



# A Bowline History: the First 25 years

Dave Unwin

(2023 with new materials)

## Foreword

This account of the first few decades of the Leicester *Bowline Climbing Club* (BCC) is not the product of any deep historical scholarship. As a sometime academic in a different discipline, I would be the last to claim qualification as a serious historian. Rather, it is the result of around 40 years membership of the club together with 60 years of rock climbing, general mountaineering, skiing, fell running and hill walking (more or less in that order), the greater part in the company of BCC members, and over 60 years immersion in the uncommonly rich literature of these sports in what might be described as the '*promiscuous pursuit of reading for pleasure*'.

I do, however, also confess to a not very well hidden agenda, which is to record the *ordinary* exploits of some *ordinary* people who just happened to enjoy each other's company doing essentially *ordinary* things on the *ordinary* crags and hills of the UK. Historians often observe that until recently almost all history was biased by the simple fact of being '*written by the winners*' about the exploits of the great movers and shakers of our species. With some exceptions, sports history is much the same, accounts by or about those at the so-called *cutting edge* of performance. From the literature of climbing, I know a great deal about the exploits of the great and the good of our sport, endlessly reported in biography, autobiography and summary but have only my own experiences of the ordinary. When I started to explore what materials remain from the early years of the BCC, I could find very little recorded about *ordinary* climbing in Britain. To take a random example, I still know more about the 1953 first ascent of Everest, or even the detail of individual pitches on the 1938 route on the *Eigerwand*, than about what in the same year it was like to access and then climb on the *East Face of Tryfan*.

There are exceptions. Simon Thompson's 2010 book *Unjustifiable Risk? The Story of British Climbing* is about as good an academic summary of the development of British climbing as could be assembled using the easily accessible literature. It has the great and unusual merit of attempting to put climbing history into its social and economic context but it says very little that could not be gleaned from the pages of the old *Mountain* magazine. Likewise, there is a short article by Derek Walker on *The evolution of climbing clubs in Britain* (*Alpine Journal*, 2004, 187-195), but this concentrates rather more on the main national 'senior' clubs such as the *Alpine, Climbers* and *Fell and Rock*.

Symptomatic of this neglect of the ordinary in our sport's history, many of the most useful accounts come from books that were published privately, without the help or hindrance (?) of the great commercial publishers and without the expectation of monetary gain. Two detail the exploits of the *Oread* club that was founded in and around Nottingham and Derby in 1949. In 1974, *Climb If You Will* was published to celebrate the life of Geoff Hayes, a stalwart of the club who died in an accident on Dow Crag Coniston in 1971 but, as Jack Longland says in his foreword, it is really about 'a book about a man and his Club, and also about that Club and its members and the common thread that binds them together'. In 1999 the same club published a collection of accounts edited by Howard Petty (*Oread Mountaineering Club 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Journal*) in celebration of its first fifty years. Similarly fascinating to the historian of British climbing is Beeston's *Rock and Heather* Club history from its foundation in 1953 to its fiftieth anniversary in 2003. More recently, Alan Parker has put the activities of Manchester's 1960s ginger group the *Alpha* on record in his *Alpha-Males* and several of the national clubs have their own histories, such as Shirley Angell's 1988 account of the *Pinnacle Club: A History of Women Climbing*. In addition, Pete McDonald's massive history of Derbyshire's *White Hall* outdoor pursuits centre published privately in 2018 contains a great deal of useful contextual materials about the increase in rock climbing in Britain after the Second World War.

In a few places where Bowline and my own experiences cross, I have inserted some personal memories. These are based on the period from 1957, when I first started to climb, until 1976 when I joined Bowline, by co-incidence in its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year. My first rock climb was on Stanage at Whitsun 1957 when I was 13, with instruction provided by two or three older friends from my north Derbyshire grammar school. I was instantly and totally smitten, such that from then until I went to college in London in 1962 I climbed virtually every single weekend. In those days on the grit you knew just about everyone who was 'out' at weekends, but I do not recall any contact with anyone, be they BCC or *Leicester Association of Mountaineers* (LAM) from Leicester, so for much of the

detail in this history I am reliant on the archives. The personal asides are there sometimes to expand, sometimes to explain, and I make no apology for them.

So here it is, my attempt at a history of the first twenty-five years of the BCC. Any history is moulded by its sources, so somewhat deliberately this account is called *A Bowline History*, and not *The Bowline History*, but it is probably as complete as we are likely to get. There are a lot of gaps in the archive, especially at the end of the 1950s and during the early 1960s, that have forced me to speculate a little about the state of the club. If my 'evidence-free' interpretation of events during these periods falls short of the mark, I can only apologise. The *Annex* contains some formal references, a list of the available records and a short account of the development of the club's hut.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to several people for their help in drafting this history. First, Pete Thompson realized the value of the Kestell archive and passed it on to me. Peter McDonald, a former instructor at *White Hall* now resident in New Zealand, helped with some of the detail about it and kindly proof read the entire manuscript with great care. John Hayto, Pam Cottle, Bob Cosby and Charlie Abelthorpe all gave permission to reprint their accounts. Pete Meads gave permission to duplicate his Yosemite photographs. Pete Bottrill dug out materials from the late 60s and Peter Riordan shared his experiences as a visitor from Australia to Leicester in 1956/7. The Leicester Public Records Office found the materials from the *Chronicle* and *Mercury* and the Editor of that splendid newspaper gave permission for me to duplicate them. Undoubtedly there are errors, for which responsibility is entirely mine.

## **Prices**

Throughout I have quoted prices in the original, pre-decimal, currency but in parenthesis added the equivalent at 2016 values found using the Bank of England's *Inflation Calculator* website. I find these comparisons useful and a warning to us all about the stupidity of hiding cash under the mattress for long periods. More seriously, they are there to warn the BCC about the declining value of cash kept in reserve that could be used for its greater present good.

## Foundation: the 1950s

The *Bowline Climbing Club* (BCC) was formed over the weekend of 3-5<sup>th</sup> November 1951. Although it is likely that the founding members were not fully aware of it, they were part of a major social change taking place over the country as it finally started to emerge from the aftermath of the Second World War whose effects lasted well into the 1950s. Even in 1951 rationing was still around, most people worked five and a half or even six days a week, cars were a rarity, and there were far fewer opportunities to climb, or learn to climb, than nowadays. Most people taught themselves, maybe from one or other of the few available but very dated instruction books. In those days, guidebooks were few and far between and almost all completely out of date. Travel horizons were necessarily limited, which meant that experience was hard to win and by modern standards the available equipment was absurdly primitive.

In this environment, if you were at all serious about climbing then you simply had to join a club. Nationally, the middle class had its *Alpine, Scottish Mountaineering, Climber's* and *Fell and Rock*, but most ordinary working people would have joined the mushrooming network of small locality-based clubs. These provided some experienced climbers for advice and training, some equipment, transport, and sometimes a hut to stay in. Almost all sprung up in the early 1950s, with a large number in the wake of the successful Everest expedition of 1953. Between 1948 and 1965 the British Mountaineering Council grew from 36 to 128 affiliated clubs with around 70% of the new clubs described as being 'Town/District' based.

In his *The Story of White Hall Centre: Outdoor Education across the Decades* (Pete McDonald) puts it this way:

*Before World War II, rock climbing had been mainly a middle- and upper middle-class activity characterised by protracted apprenticeships and insular old clubs. After the war, what had been the preserve of the middle class became far more egalitarian. New provincial and regional groups were formed: 'From about 1944, pre-dating the Sound of Music by 15 years, the Derbyshire hills were full of the sound of climbing clubs being formed. This phenomenon was due in part to the vast post-war increase in the number of active climbers and the difficulty they had in gaining membership of one of the senior clubs.'*

But what if in Leicester in 1951 there was nobody around to show you the ropes and no local club to join? If you had the initiative the obvious things to do were to teach yourself to climb and to start your own club.

That is exactly what a small group of *Rover* (male) and *Ranger* (female) Scouts did in 1951. According to a feature in the *Leicester Mercury* dated early in 1953 (see illustration) the idea arose to 21-year old Mike Kestell during a Rover-

Ranger rally in Ullesthorpe when he spotted a Kibworth Rover scout wearing a shoulder flash proclaiming him to be a member of the *Snowdon Group*, a mountaineering organization. The result was the setting up of the ambitiously named *Bardon Rover/Ranger Alpine Society* (BRRAS). This never amounted to much, with just nine members each paying a 2/6 (£3.50) subscription and it quickly evolved into the BCC.



© Leicester Mercury 1953  
[www.leicestermercury.co.uk](http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk)

The same *Mercury* feature tells us that BRRAS had a few meets but the only two for which any documentation survives are a meeting with *Operation Mole*, a *Rover Scout* venture involving caving at Jug Holes near Matlock, and a June camping and rock climbing meet based at Bardon Hill. For this second meet Mike Kestell's letter to the BRRAS tellingly suggests that

*'with regard to equipment it would be advisable to bring along a pair of plimsolls as a certain amount of friction work is expected' and notes that 'any rope, slings and karabiners which you can bring along will of course be very welcome'.*

A reply from Dave (aka *Squib*) Barrett promises to bring along

*'one 75 foot rope, one snaplink and one sling'*

and, perhaps more usefully,

*'my friend from Stafford'*

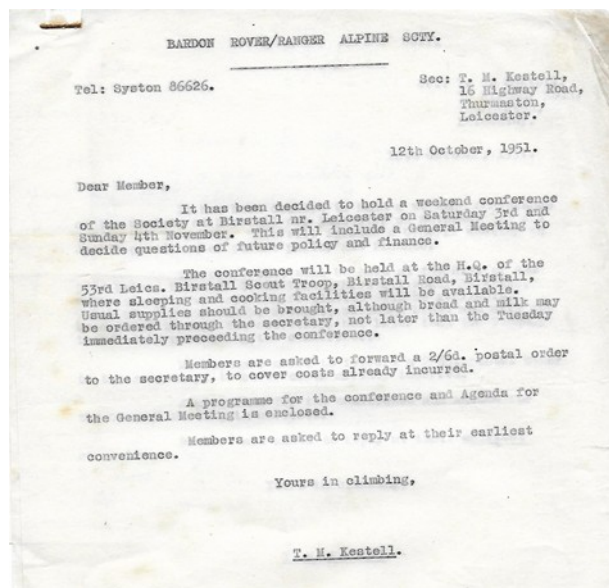
who I assume to be R.E. 'Larry' Lambe. It seems clear from this and from Charlie Abelthorpe's account (see below) that, with help from Larry Lambe, Kestell and BRRAS had already done some local rock climbing.



*Mike Kestell*

It would have become apparent very quickly that there was insufficient interest or knowledge within the Scouting community to form the basis of a club devoted solely to climbing and so it was that in October 1951 Mike Kestell wrote to BRRAS members to the effect that

*'it has been decided to hold a weekend conference ... to decide questions of future policy and finances'*.



*The invitation to form a club, October 1951*

This was held at the headquarters of the Birstall Scout Troup at a cost per head of 2/6d (£3.50). Unfortunately, the agenda for this meeting doesn't survive but what does is a letter from 'Larry' Lambe dated 26<sup>th</sup> October 1951 in which he refers to the needs in any new society

*'membership ... to be available to non-members of the movement' (i.e non-Scouts)*

and for a new name for the fledgling organization. He also suggests that those present



*'might gravitate towards Charnwood for some scrambling'*

after the business of the meeting. *Gravitate* they did and so came about the first meet of the *Bowline Climbing Club*. With the exception of Charlie Abelthorpe, who took the photo, all twelve of the first BCC meet members are on a rather grainy picture taken at the bus stop in Quorn on the day of the very first BCC meet:



*Bowline's first meet. Left to right, top row: Unknown (but did not stay in the club), Arthur Farrant, 'Podge' Fryer, Nancy Phillips, Tony 'Colonel' Jennet, Dorothy Enderby (now Gleeson), Mavis Boulter, 'Larry' Lambe, Dave 'Squib' Barrett. Front row: Dave Boulter (no relation to Mavis) and Mike 'Squire' Kestell.*

In a letter to the club Charlie provides a first-hand account of these events:

## **THE BOWLINE CLIMBING CLUB - THE START**

(From *Bowlines*, Spring 2000)

The Bowline Climbing Club grew out of the Scout and Guide Movements. Weekend gatherings were held under canvas, where various Scouting and Guiding activities took place. One such 'Rover - Ranger Moot' was held at the Scout Camp Site, at Ullesthorpe during the Easter of 1951, where we met a Rover from the Stafford area, whom we got to know as Larry. Larry revealed to us that he had done some rock climbing. This was something new to us and it sounded great. We were complete novices, until Larry had enlightened us. Some of us had never realized that people actually climbed rock faces for recreation. So our first task was to obtain suitable gear. We had no real idea about gear, although we did have a copy of a pre-war Penguin edition of J.E.Q. Barford's *Climbing in Britain* to help us decide. So for example we knew we would need some rope. It so happened at this time, *Bilson and Grant* was selling ex-barrage balloon cable (large dia. Hemp) at 100ft (c.30m) for five shillings (25p). Karabiners or snap-links as we then called them posed quite a different problem: they were not sold locally. The problem was overcome by the use of, what can best be described as over-sized dog-lead clips. In the absence of suitable boots, we decided to wear tennis shoes.

Thus it was that on a Saturday morning a week or so later, I found myself, along with several others from that Ullesthorpe weekend, at the top of Bardon Quarry. Larry, who had come all the way down from Stafford to help and advise, taught us some basic climbing techniques. It goes without saying that we possessed no such thing as a climbing guide. Every route tried was a first ascent, although the significance of that was lost to us. Needless-to-say by the end of this weekend we were well and truly bitten by the rock climbing. During that summer we had numerous expeditions to other rocky areas of Leicestershire including "Hangingstone Rocks" and a number of abandoned granite quarries. During this pioneering period, we came together on an 'ad hoc' basis and we rather pretentiously, referred to ourselves as BRRAS (*Bardon Rover - Ranger Alpine Society*). However, by the autumn of 1951 it was patently obvious that our organization needed to be put on a firmer footing, further it was felt that we should be open to a wider membership. On Saturday afternoon November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1951 the twelve members of BRRAS met in the Scout Hut of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Leicester (Birstall St. James) Scout Group. By the end of that afternoon the *Bowline Climbing Club* had come into being. I cannot recall who first conjured up the name Bowline, but it seemed to be quite appropriate, since this was the knot used to fasten the rope around our waist. The next day we held the first meet of the Bowline at Hangingstone Rocks. The rest as they say is history.

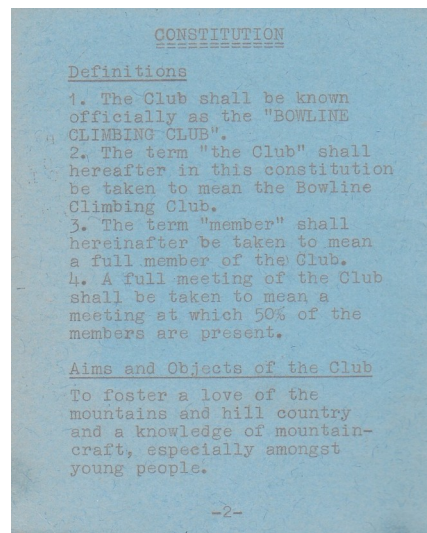
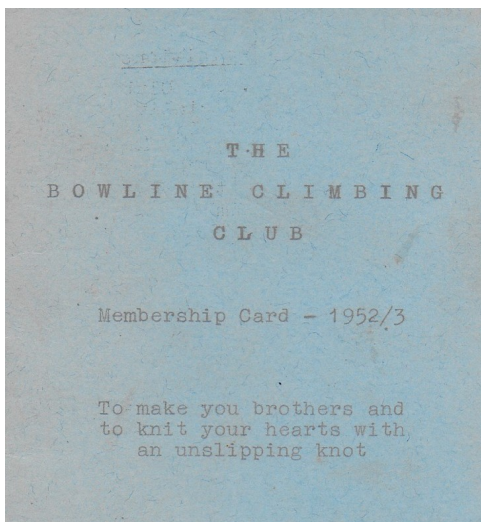
I am indebted to Tony (Colonel) Jennett, who kept a climbing log, without which I would have been much less positive about the dates and the names of the daring dozen.

*Charlie Abelthorpe*

As Abelthorpe says, it isn't clear who suggested the name *Bowline* for the club, but within a year the first club membership card justified the name as designed:

*'to make you brothers (sic) and to knit your hearts with an unslipping knot'.*

The club was quick to produce a membership card and draft a constitution:





Composition and Conduct

1. The Club shall consist of members and a committee.
2. The committee shall be elected at the Annual General Meeting in April each year.
3. The committee shall comprise secretary/treasurer and two committee members.
4. The committee's duties shall be:-
  - (a) the arranging of Club meets.
  - (b) the responsibility for minor and emergency matters of policy
  - (c) generally assisting the secretary.
5. The committee of the Club or a written application to the Committee signed by 25% of the members may call an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Club. One

month's notice of such a meeting to be circularized to all members.

6. The chairman of any G. M., shall be elected under the existing secretary.

Full Membership

1. Membership shall be open to all provided that they fulfil the following qualifications:-
  - (a) Applicants must have sufficient knowledge of camping to ensure that they do not become a drag on the rest of the party at a club meet.
  - (b) Applicants may be introduced by any member but must attend two climbing meets of the club before being proposed.

- (c) Having attended the required meets, applicants must be proposed by two members of at least six months' standing.
- (d) The committee shall admit a new member, or refuse admission, according to the opinions of most of the members concerning the applicant.
- (e) Any two members having, in the opinion of the committee, legitimate reasons for the non-acceptance of an application, may prevent that application.

N.B. It is the duty of the members to make their objections known to the committee before the committee's meeting to consider the application.

Subscriptions

1. An annual subscription of 3/- shall be payed each year by March the 30th.
2. New members shall be required to pay full subscription on attaining membership, but, if they join in January, February or March, their subscription shall cover their membership until March of the year following that in which they obtained membership.

Termination of Membership

1. A full meeting of the Club is empowered to ask any member or members to terminate their membership.

2. No member shall be asked to terminate membership solely by reason of non-attendance at meets
3. In an emergency, the committee is empowered to suspend a member until such time as a full meeting of the Club can be called.
4. Failure to pay subscriptions by the required date shall be taken: after the secretary has sent a reminder and after one calendar month has elapsed since the subscription fell due: to mean that the member wishes to terminate his membership.

THE CONSTITUTION SHALL ONLY BE CHANGED BY A FULL CLUB MEETING

**THE FIRST MEMBERSHIP CARD**

*This is the first Membership Card and formal Constitution of the Bowline Climbing Club. The Club was established on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1951 and the card covers 1952/3*

*The annual subscription was set at 3/- (£3.96)*

Although the current Constitution is both longer and more formally written, the aims and objectives remain precisely the same

*'To foster a love of the mountains and hill country and a knowledge of mountain craft, especially among young people'.*

It is worth recording the names of the founding members, listed as Charlie Abelthorpe, Peter, Barry and Miss W. Biven, David Boulter, Mavis Boulter (no relation), Dorothy Enderby, Arthur Farrant, F. 'Podge' Fryer, Tony 'Colonel' Jennett, Mike 'Squire' Kestell, A Kettell, R.E. 'Larry' Lambe, G Moore, R Neubauer, N Phillips, and B. Roberts.

To any student of British climbing history, and for different reasons, three names stand out. First, as might be inferred from his presence on the very first Bowline meet and help offered to Mike Kestell, R.E. 'Larry' Lambe is one of the great, largely unsung, heroes of post-war climbing in Britain. Not only did he help kick-start the BCC, together with others from the *English Electric Company*, he formed the *Mountain Club of Stafford* and in the same year almost single-handedly discovered and developed Craig Cywarch in Mid-Wales. Only three years later he was instrumental in his club taking on the lease of *Tyn-y-Twll* under the crag, which they held for many years before developing their current hut called *Bryn Hafod*. A photograph from the *Mountain Club's* website shows him alongside (Sir) Jack Longland at the opening of Bryn Hafod in 1965:



*Bearded Larry Lambe in exalted company 1965*

(See also: <http://www.themountainclub.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/History-of-The-Mountain-Club1.pdf>)

The second name is that of *Peter Biven* (1935-1976) who went on to become one of the country's best known pioneers on rock, climbing with Trevor Peck (owner of *Pex Hosiery*, which at the time was a major Leicester Company) on gritstone. Their list of first ascents combines difficulty with great quality. Check out the not often climbed *Biven- Peck Connection*, *Hearse Arete* and *Eye of Faith* (all at Gardoms) and the truly magnificent classic of *Congo Corner* (Stanage). In West Penwith they contributed *Little Brown Jug*, *Suicide Wall*, *Beowolf*, *Anvil Chorus*, and *Thin Wall Special*. Climbing historians will be familiar with the story of Peter Biven, then in his own words a 'scruffy teenager', hitchhiking to the Peak District being picked up by Trevor Peck in his 'vast Rolls Royce' as the beginning



of their partnership but it was perhaps also the end of Biven's association with BCC. This must have been around 1953/4, since the two Leicestershire rock climbing guides published by the *Leicester Association of Mountaineers* (1966) and the *Leicester Mountaineering Club* (1977) record the first ascent of an HVS called *Christ* by the Biven and Peck in 1954.



*Harding's Superdirect Finish to Cave Innonimate Stange. Biven and Peck on the left, two modern Bowliners on the right*

Peter Biven was killed in a fall in the Avon Gorge in 1976. According to the *Climber's Club Journal* obituary (vol. 98, 1976) written by his brother and fellow ex-BCC member Barrie, Peter started climbing buildings in Leicester before he moved on to outcrops and quarries in Charnwood. Together the brothers Biven were active locally, with first ascents of climbs such as *ZigZag* (Very Severe) and *Black Cleft* (Severe) at Bardon Hill in 1955. By 1961 Biven had left the area, but when listed as a club member he would have been only 16 or 17. What is clear is that quite early on he fell out with the club. A letter dated 20<sup>th</sup> July 1953 from club secretary Tony Jennett to him in response to a letter dissenting from a proposed system of meet leaders is distinctly frosty in tone.

Third, *Tony 'the Colonel' Jennett* was a very famous climber, but not for reasons of his pioneering or BCC membership. Fame for him was all because of an exploit that would have earned him the club's coveted club *Wings* award. If you've ever sat at the top of the Idwal slabs and wondered why the wall above is called *Holly Tree Wall* but has no such tree on it, then Tony's exploit provides the answer. Well before the nut revolution, the route used to be protected by a sling

round a superficially stout holly that grew at the base of the crack/chimney above the ledge at the top of the Slabs. That was until August Bank Holiday 1961 when Tony tested the long-suffering tree to destruction. He fell rather further than expected, broke a bone or two, and was lucky to survive. If you are lucky enough to have a rare copy of the book, read all about it on page 49 of *Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia*. Entirely accidentally, in July 1979 during a weekend based at Ynys Ettws a bunch of Bowliners met up with Tony. A year or so later he was a guest at our annual dinner and it was he who gave us the First Annual Dinner photograph that hangs in the club hut.

## First Meets

The new club fairly rapidly started to organize meets. The first outside of Charnwood was a camping meet at the Roaches on 23-25<sup>th</sup> November 1951, followed by a Christmas gathering staying in a barn at Upper Booth Farm, Edale. Thanks again to Charlie Abelthorpe we have faded and grainy photograph from this meet:



*From top to bottom we have Tony Jennet, Mike Kestell, Charlie Abelthorpe, Nancy Phillips, Dorothy Enderby, Geoff Moore and Arthur Farrant. Geoff Moore emigrated to New Zealand some 40 years ago but Charlie was in contact with him when in 1993 he sent us this photograph.*

In the first months of 1952 there were meets at Baslow (*Cave and Crag Club* hut, Jan 23/24), the Roaches (barn, Feb 13/14), Cratcliffe (camping, March 13/15), Wasdale (barn, April 3-7), Hangingstone (April 12), Burbage (camping, May 8-10), Berwyns (camping, May 22-26), Cromford (camping, June 12-14), Edale (barn, June 26-28), and Windgather (joint with the *Mountain Club of Stafford*, camping July 17-19), with a suggested long distance trip in August to either the French or Austrian Alps and, at the time just as exotic, the Scottish Highlands.



The programmes for 1953, 1954 and 1955 were much the same, a mixture of short weekend meets to the Peak District, at least one walking meet most often on Kinderscout, a return to where it all started (Hangingstone) on the day after the AGM, and Christmas/New Year/ Whitsun long trips to North Wales or the Lake District. What is very apparent is that the locations of these early meets were very much constrained by availability of holiday time, transport, and suitable accommodation.

What was it like to go on a club meet in those early days? One of the best documented was the Christmas 1952 '*expedition*' to North Wales. Eleven members attended, a substantial proportion of the membership at the time which was 17. Transport, accommodation and shared food cost each of them 19/- (£25). They got to *William's Farm Barn* in Ogwen using a coach organised by the Loughborough based *Inominate Club*, leaving Charles Street Leicester at 6:45pm on Christmas Eve, and returning on the 30<sup>th</sup> December at an expected arrival time of 10.00pm. Groceries for the entire party were ordered in bulk from *Hughes and Jones* of Bettws y Coed and were delivered to the barn. Club members were advised that

*'all the food and paraffin has been ordered and will be at the farm when we arrive',*

except for some items that '*should be taken*' such as cheese

*('rationed or otherwise for 'bonk grub' (three times)')*

with

*'as much as can be spared of butter, margarine, cooking fat, and sugar, bacon, sweets and chocolate'*

together with

*'any luxuries such as cake, biscuits and mince pies'.*

It might have been Christmas, but the only meat on the groceries list is 4lbs of sausages, six tins of luncheon meat and the same of something called '*meat soup*'. Note that in 1952 most people would have worked until lunch time on 24<sup>th</sup> December and that food rationing of many commodities was still in force.

At no point do the archives say what was done on any of these meets, but almost by accident this Ogwen meet was recorded for posterity by the *Leicester Mercury's 'Old John'* in *Turning their eyes to the hills* ( see above):

*'The weather was fine when the club arrived in the Ogwen Valley, Snowdonia – a disappointment. The hardy young climbers hoped to experience conditions during a snowfall. Then mountain weather showed its treacherous hand. Next day they were climbing on the precipitous face of Tryfan, a 3,000ft mountain above the farm where they stayed, when a blizzard suddenly spring up. One party had a hard time getting down,*

*taking several hours to descend by a normally easy route. For most it was their first use of ice axes.'*

There is also a clue as to standards in a copy of a letter dated 24<sup>th</sup> April 1953, from then club secretary Tony Jennett to a prospective member in which he describes a weekend at Black Rocks where

*'... we had a wonderful time. We polished off thirteen climbs altogether including 5 V Diffs, 4 Severes, 2 Hard Severes and one Very Severe',*

in the course of which he had

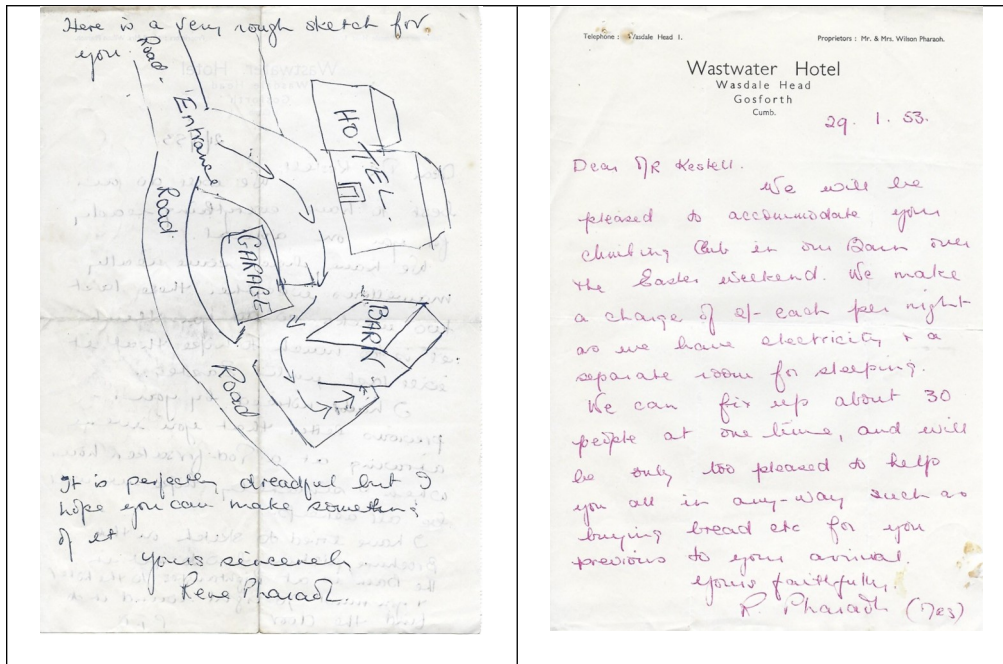
*'worn all the skin off the backs of (his) hands through jamming".*

Easter of 1953 was similar, except that the expedition was to the Lake District. Use was again made of a shared bus but the accommodation was the notorious barn belonging to the *Wastwater Hotel, Wasdale*.



*Wasdale Head and the barn to the right*

This meet was attended by ten members with a total cost of £10.70 (£287). The club stayed for four nights in the barn at a cost of 2/- (£2.64) per person per night, with instruction on how to access the barn when they arrived in the middle of the night from Rene, wife of the legendary owner Wilson Pharoah:



*Instructions for arrival at the Wastwater Hotel*

Honesty was obviously a virtue at the hotel and in the Pharoah family: seldom can any accommodation provider refer to their offering as 'perfectly dreadful'!

Provisions for all ten were ordered in advance from *Albert Jackson Ltd.* of Gosforth and delivered to the hotel/barn.

Telephone: GOSFORTH 32

54

GOSFORTH CUMBERLAND

M. The Bowliners Climbing Club  
Wastwater Hotel

**Albert Jackson, Ltd. and Kenneth J. Jackson**  
HIGH-CLASS GROCERS  
TEA AND COFFEE SPECIALISTS

CHEMIST AND DRUGGIST  
DISPENSING DEPT. CHEMICALS

✓ 4 lb. Sugar	10 6
✓ 5 lb. Quick Potatoes	2 11
✓ 5 lb. Spaghetti	5 -
✓ 1 lb. marmalade	1 5
✓ 1 lb. instant Coffee	2 5
✓ 1 lb. Beans	5 0
✓ 5 - Tomatoes	7 11
✓ 9 pilsn O.P.	6 4 1/2
✓ 9 cans Sardines	10 6
✓ 1 lb. Jam	1 7
✓ 1 lb. Luncheon Meat	18 0
✓ 1 - Plums	6 0
✓ 1 - Meat Soup	7 6
✓ 5 - Herrings	5 8
✓ 1 lb. Bacon	5 7 1/2
✓ 8 @ 2 oranges	2 0 0
✓ 2 - Eating apples	3 0 0
✓ 1 doz Eggs	5 0 0
✓ 100 Sachetines	5 6
✓ 3 lb Tea	3 9
✓ 1 Packet Soap powder	1 1
✓ 1 Egg tin Golden Syrup	1 1
✓ 1 Packet white wheat flour	9

*Shopping list 1953 for ten Bowliners and four days stay*

In my mid to late teens, 1960-1962, when most of my climbing friends and I had small motor bikes and/or scooters, we dossed fairly frequently in the same barn. At Easter and Whitsuntide it was almost always full with an eclectic collection of

climbers from all over the country. It was there that I first met members of the infamous *Creag Ddu* and there that I first met anyone who belonged to the famous *Rock and Ice* club. We youngsters did not dare converse with these *hard men*, but we aspired to emulate them. We did not have the pleasure of having our provisions delivered but by then frequent use by climbers had '*made something*' of the barn. Rats aside, it was preferable to a usually wet, heavy canvas tent, under-age drinking was allowed, and, by a fairly wide definition of the word 'resident', booze was available as late and in whatever quantity you wanted.

In his *Guardian Country Diary* for January 29<sup>th</sup> 2012, climbing journalist Tony Greenbank gives some idea of the atmosphere of those times:

*'It brings back memories of pre-1977 times when generators were the only power source for the small community nestling in the dalehead below Kirkfell, Great Gable, Lingmell and the Scafells. Only at weekends did the noise from the climbers' bar drown the generators' drone. One night the racket was increased by shouts and thudding of a rugby ball coming from an adjacent barn. The uproar prompted legendary landlord Wilson Pharaoh to drag open the barn doors and stand swaying as he took in the motley groups – members of the Alpha Mountaineering Club and their rival Manchester Gritstone Club, and girlfriends with dishevelled beehive hair-dos calling for blood. Wilson had previously quelled trouble in his pub by throwing big men out. Now the biggest man himself was spent. Instead, he appealed to one of his own, a Cumbrian Pete Turnbull. "Stop them, Peter," he said. The climber so requested lifted a 100lb bale of straw above his head and strode around the barn, ready to take on all-comers like Kirk Douglas in the film *The Vikings* (also the name of a test-piece on Tophet Wall, pioneered by Richard McHardy who, too, was in the barn that night). Only one sound broke the resulting silence: the droning of the Petter diesel generator producing the power for the hotel.'*

Closer to home, BCC attention turned to the small crags and deep granite quarries of Charnwood Forest, guides to which appeared a decade or so later. In the original '*Red Guide*' Dave Draper, I suspect in error over the date, tells us that 1949-1950 (?) saw Ray Dring, Pete Biven, Barry Biven and Trevor Peck attack Leicestershire rock

*'with some degree of ferocity'*

but that

*'past members of the Old Bowliner Club (sic) with notable characters as the late Mike Kestell and Jennett climbed in the area during this period'.*



## Rock Climbing in the 1950s

There is nothing original in the statement that rock climbing in the 1950s bears very little relationship to today's sport. The safe and quick way to get a sense of what it was like to climb back then is to find a copy of either JEQ Barford's little BMC approved 1946 paperback *Climbing in Britain*, or Colin Kirkus's 1941 classic *Let's Go Climbing*. To get some flavour of what it was like at the sharp end, I strongly recommend folk who skip across the entry 4C starting traverse and up the clean groove that follows on Cloggy's *Great Slab* should read Kirkus's utterly compelling account of his first ascent. There are many reasons why things were so different, to do with instruction, information, transport and equipment.

First, instruction wasn't easy to come by. If you could afford it, one of the main sources of was the *Mountaineering Association* (MA). Internet searches suggest that this organisation has disappeared without trace, but from 1955 to around 1966 it was a significant force in British climbing. The MA had its own hut above Llanberis, ran courses in both Britain and the European Alps, and published books such as J.E.B Wright's *Rock Climbing in Britain* (1958: he is not the 'Jeb Wright' of *Classic Rock Revisited*). Its regular magazine, the *Journal of the Mountaineering Association*, became *Mountain Craft*, which in turn morphed into Ken 'Wilson's Weekly' the glossy in-your-face magazine that from 1968 onwards was *Mountain*. Lots of folk were taught to climb or taught climbing with the MA. Ken Wilson was himself a graduate of one of the MA courses and from Bowline Ken Vickers was one of their instructors, working in the Alps in summer, along with Doug Scott, Breda Boyle (Arkless), Mike James, Ian Clough, Hamish McInnes, and many other great names in British climbing. One of the more interesting things about the MA and J.E.B. Wright that is worth further research is its social and political context. The organisation had a distinctly left wing, egalitarian view of the world emphasised by the fact that its Patron was Earl (Bertrand) Russell (Order of Merit, FRS etc.) and Wright himself was an ardent socialist.

Almost immediately after BCC was formed, it affiliated to the MA and, tellingly, also to the *Ramblers Association*. It seems this was a significant step. In a letter to Kestell (10<sup>th</sup> April 1952) Lambe supports the affiliation but notes that

*'the £1 (£26.40) fee will make a hole in the funds'.*

Although founded in 1944, the *British Mountaineering Council* (BMC) throughout the 1950s and 1960s it remained an association of climbing clubs run entirely by volunteer labour with no individual members or commercial activity. BCC

waited until 1958 to affiliate, at which time the club had 46 members. The cost of affiliation was just £1 (£21.44), around 2d (46p) for each BCC member at a time when the BCC subscription was 12/6d (£13.40). The 2017 BMC per-member rate was £14.25, a much greater proportion (62%) of the club's annual subscription.

There were other places you could go. The *Central Council for Physical Recreation* ran spring and summer courses at *Plas y Brenin* (Capel Curig) that has developed into the numerous offerings of the *National Mountain Centre*, but it is not clear if any early members took advantage of them. More likely was that some found their way to *White Hall*. This was established by (Sir) Jack Longland (1925-1993) as a pioneering local education authority run outdoor pursuits centre. Longland at the time was Director of Education for Derbyshire and the centre provided very low cost weekend and other courses in climbing and caving. I was one of the many Derbyshire kids who learned to climb there. This was long before the days of serious health and safety concerns, so in retrospect it seems obvious that Longland and his Education Authority must have been taking quite a risk. In the late fifties instruction was provided by a small team of resident instructors, such as Bob Downes and Geoff Sutton recruited from *Cambridge University Mountaineering Club*, together with others with far less prestigious backgrounds such as the artist Gordon Mansell, *Bradford Lad* Harold Drasdo, and, a few years later, Joe Brown. Local climbing clubs provided the rest of the by today's standards 'unqualified' instruction. There is a letter from Longland to Kestell dated 10<sup>th</sup> June 1952 in which it is suggested that club members could book in as students with more experienced club members possibly volunteering to instruct, together with reference to their meeting at White Hall in February 1953, but whether or not any club members had further contact is impossible to tell. In addition there is a very informal post card from the first warden of White Hall, Peter Mosedale, to Mike Kestell that implies that Kestell was very familiar with the work of the centre. Peter McDonald, who instructed there in the 1970s and is author of a very thorough history of the *White Hall* experiment (*The Story of White Hall Centre: outdoor education across the decades*, published privately in 2018) recalls that both Larry Lambe and Charlie Abelthorpe worked there as volunteer instructors.

*White Hall* may well have been Jack Longland's major lasting contribution to the rise of rock climbing in Britain in the 1950s but it was by no means his only one. The archive contains numerous letters making it obvious that he used his authority to encourage the establishment not just of BCC but just about every other climbing club in the area. BCC made him the club's first Honorary Member, and regularly invited him to club dinners and club meets. Other than a letter relating to a meet at Black Rocks Cromford, 5-7<sup>th</sup> Dec 1952, in which

Longland says he will 'try to attend', I can find no evidence that he ever attended any meets. However, I would like to think that one of the country's most distinguished climbers, the first to lead any route on the west buttress of Cloggy, who led possibly the hardest rock climb in Britain before the Second World War (*Javelin Blade* from 1930, still E1), and who went very high on Everest in 1933, attended at least one of the early club meets. He certainly was Guest of Honour at the 1958 Club Dinner held in the *George Hotel* Leicester, followed a year later by the warden of *White Hall* Eric Langmuir to a dinner in the *Empire Hotel*, Fosse Road.

Second, knowing how to climb rock is one thing, knowing where to climb and how to get there is another. Underlying much of all this is simply the lack of information about the world of climbing into which the newly formed club was entering. For example, there is a record of letters from Mike Kestell to *Clarke & Satchell Ltd*, booksellers of Hotel Street Leicester about obtaining copies of Barford's *Climbing in Britain*. Another letter that remains is one to Mike Kestell from the late Ron Townsend, himself a legend in Sheffield climbing history, who at the time was Secretary of the *Peak Climbing Club*, that is obviously in response to a request for information about camping close to Stanage. The archive is full of letters to officers of other clubs in the area such as the *Cave & Crag* (Birmingham), *Mountain Club* (Stafford), *Summit* (Nottingham), *Innominate* (Loughborough), *Oread* (Derby/Nottingham) and *Coventry Mountaineering Club*. It was standard practice for each of these clubs to share lists of up-coming meets, and to collaborate on accommodation and transport. As to the alps, there is even a letter to Winchester school master R.L. Irving, author of a book on *The Alps*, asking for guidance on where to go for a first alpine season.

Third, even if you knew how to climb and a bit about where, you still had to get there. As those of us who know every twist and turn of the A5 are well aware, getting to the crags can be as much fun and even more dangerous than the crags themselves. Lack of mobility played a very important part in the development of climbing in Britain during the 1950s. Although petrol rationing ended in May 1950, very few people in the early 1950s had access to private transport. Public transport could get you only so far and its use rapidly ate up the time available for climbing. From Leicester the train could take you to parts of the Peak District and even to North Wales, but it would only get you to the start of a long walk to your hut or barn. Before I got a motor bike in 1961, almost every trip I made to North Wales, Cornwall and the Lakes in the late 1950s involved long walks with a heavy rucksack and many hours by the road side hitch-hiking. The choice of crag was often made more for its ease of access and/or comfortable dry bivouac than what the rock had to offer.

An early response from the climbing clubs was to charter coaches. For the club, the main option was to take places on coaches hired at Bank Holidays by the *Innominate Club* either to Ogwen in North Wales or Wasdale in the Lakes. In 1953 one such club bus to North Wales, picking up in Leicester, Loughborough

and Derby and dropping off in Ogwen, would have cost you a not inconsiderable 25/- (£32) and must have been moderately profitable for the bus companies to the extent that at least one hire company, *Tahsinia Coaches* of Derby (no I don't know either) advertised '*weekend rambling excursions to the Lake District, North Wales, South Wales and Derbyshire*'. The idea of clubs banding together to share transport seems to have caught on. In 1953 the *Cave and Crag Club* even suggested sharing a chartered aeroplane from London to Basle for alpinists going to Zermatt. Pre-*EasyJet* and *Ryan Air*, this *SwissAir* flight would have cost you £14-£15 (£358).

Towards the end of the 1950s vans and motor bikes became affordable (and in the case of bikes possibly also reliable enough) to become the preferred transport, but if you didn't have 'wheels', from 1957 or so through to well into the 1960s the new club transport of choice was the self-drive, rented *Bedford Dormobile*. This was the *Ford Minibus* of its day, a conversion of a standard *Vauxhall* van with side windows, sliding doors and bench seating for maybe eight or nine people. The 1.5 litre petrol engine wasn't up to much with a three speed box operated through a column change and, since almost always you had a roof rack loaded with rucksacks, it wasn't the fastest or the most comfortable way to get to the hills, but it was fairly cheap. Receipts from 1959/60 show a three day hire from *Chard Paul Ltd* in which the club did 319 miles to and from North Wales cost £8-15-11d (£187.98) to be shared maybe eight ways. I don't know how the Bowline got on, but in 1962 for the students from the *University College London Climbing Club* hiring from a company called *Adventure Unlimited* our major problem was finding someone old enough and daft enough to volunteer to drive. Would you drive a party of eight or nine students to North Wales leaving London at 6.0pm on a Friday night, returning late on Sunday after a day's climbing and with an almost compulsory beer and food stop at the first 'wet' pub near Chirk? I note with interest that, at the 1959 Bowline AGM, it was noted that

*'Dormobiles have been hired with considerable success but that 'drivers were needed'.*

The enforced tradition of shared transport to the hills may well have been part of the cement that held the club together throughout the 1950s, but by 1960 the spread of personal transport of one sort or another meant that it became used only for special events, such as the annual Chair's Walk.

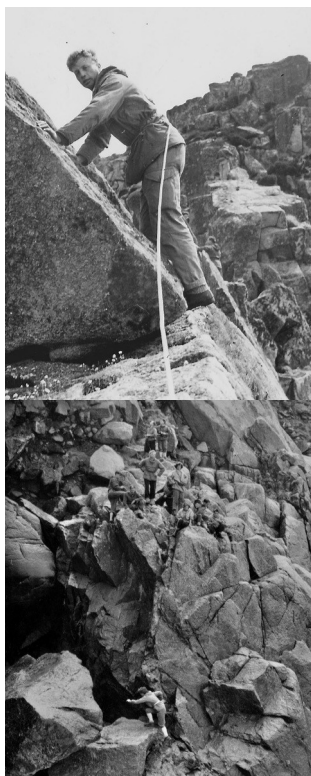
Finally, to climb you needed some equipment. In 1952 heavy, weak hemp rope was only just on the way out. A direct tie onto the waist using a bowline knot would have been usual, although the hard men of the time might well have used multiple loops of hemp cord and a large, heavy (and now we are told very low breaking strain!) *Stubai* screw-gate karabiner. Hawser laid nylon rope was on the way in but not in general use. On your feet, nailed boots were still used, but the new-fangled alleged-to-be-slippery-in-the-wet moulded rubber soles were catching on fast. On dry days on difficult rock ordinary cheap black plimsolls



were used. On wet days, you didn't go to the non-existent climbing walls. Instead you dropped your grade and climbed on, perhaps putting heavy woollen socks over your plimsolls to handle the more delicate stuff. As to the belays, a party of three would probably carry two or three extra snap-links with hemp or nylon spliced slings. Although we hear a lot about boots, ropes and the like, kit not often considered is clothing, which has also changed out of all recognition. Chances are that the founding members dressed in heavy ex war-department clothes or even made their own hill clothes by modifying old raincoats and trousers. Either way, the level of comfort would have been many times lower than that provided by today's carefully tailored lightweight breathable fabrics.

Although the kit was primitive by today's standards, prices were comparable with today's. An early *Ellis Brigham* catalogue in the archive has his *Scaffell* boots retailing for 110/- (£126). Most of the time you'd climb in these but if you had aspirations to do harder things some lighter weight *Klettershuhe* (aka *klets*) at 57/6d (£65.86) might well have been your foot wear of choice. A 120 foot (37m) full-weight hawser laid nylon rope with a diameter of about 33mm and an advertised, if seldom tested, breaking strain of 1360kg would have cost you 118/9d (£137.44). Snap-links retailed at about 10/- (£11.45), about the same price as any one of the early *Climbers Club* guides. Similar prices from *Robert Laurie of Marble Arch*, London were boots (£8), kelts (3 guineas), full-weight nylon rope (about £6) and so on. Two developments of consequence from the late 1960s were kermantel, sheathed ropes that enabled the development of simple belay devices such as the original Sticht plate followed by stitched webbing slings and the first climbing harnesses. Lots of commentators note that the original Whillans harness wasn't the best thing to wear for a fall, but I can assure you that it was preferable to slow strangulation as your waist tie on or band gradually ran up over your chest. Finally, even if you had the cash, finding a shop that sold specialist climbing gear might have been tricky. I recall as a 17 year old in 1960 buying my first pair of state of the art rock boots (the old blue PAs) for which I paid about £5 (£106!) but to get them I had to get the train from Sheffield to Manchester to visit the *Ellis Brigham* shop simply because *Jackson and Warrs*, the outdoor shop in Sheffield, didn't stock them.

Viewed from the perspective of 2017, or even for that matter the 1970s and 80s when competition in the club was hot and the *Bullshit Book* was the first port of call after a good weekend on the rocks, one of the surprising things about the BCC archive is how little there is about the standards of routes climbed. My guess is that the average was probably around today's *Very Difficult*, with the occasional *Severe* thrown in. *Very Severe* at around 4B or 4C would have what was aspired to, with anything harder simply not even considered. It is easy to reach the conclusion that climbers in the 1950s weren't very good, but historical comparison is tricky if only because we are not comparing like with like either in respect of both the rock and those who climbed it.



## ***On the Rocks, 1959***

*In 2019 by accident the club had contact with Alan Kettle, possibly the only founding member still alive. This photograph, taken by Bernard Adams, another early club member, shows Alan leading a route at Sennen in 1959. Note the hawser laid rope, direct tie in and big bendy boots, pretty much standard at the time*

*Taken at more or less the same, this photograph shows the rest of the club watching. As an aside, my first Cornish trip was in the same year, hitch hiking from Sheffield aged 16 and camping at Bosigran and then Sennen. I can't really remember the detail, but by then we used a hemp waist line/karabiner tie in and almost certainly climbed rock in klettersshue.*

The past 70 or so years of use has cleaned most of the regular routes and we have excellent pictorial guides and other sources that describe each route in minute detail, not to mention the inevitable and unnecessary chalk marks that have appeared on even the simplest of climbs. Whatever you do to emulate the 1950s experience it is unlikely that you will ever start up a rock face without some knowledge of what to expect, but this was common in the 1950s. You can make some progress if you throw away your stone hat (introduced to Britain *circa* 1966), harness (around 1970), and all your nuts. Fettle out machine nuts were first used, controversially, around 1960/61, but the purpose built MOAC dates from 1962 (check out [www.needlesports.com/content/nut-s-story-2001-a-nut-odyssey.aspx](http://www.needlesports.com/content/nut-s-story-2001-a-nut-odyssey.aspx)). At the same time, throw away your quick draws (? 2000), cams (*Friends* from 1978), skyhooks (? 1980s), belay device (?1970s) and your lightweight sheathed high breaking strain rope (mid 1960s). Wear big heavy boots, tie in using either a waist line or a bowline around your waist, and carry maybe two additional slings each with a heavy steel karabiner. You might even have a second using a shoulder belay, taking the active rope around their neck rather than waist. This will not be *trad* as it has become to be called but an all-together different experience that in discussions on British climbing history I have taken to calling *double trad*. I suspect that your top *double-trad* grade will be a lot lower than you might have imagined. You should also forget the simple notion often suggested in current magazines that *double-trad* was much the same as soloing a route today. The knowledge, training, gear, and circumstances are totally different and make any such comparisons almost totally irrelevant. For what it's worth, I'd equate the 'VS/HVS' experience back in the late 1950s to maybe E3 or 4 in today's grades.

## Socialising

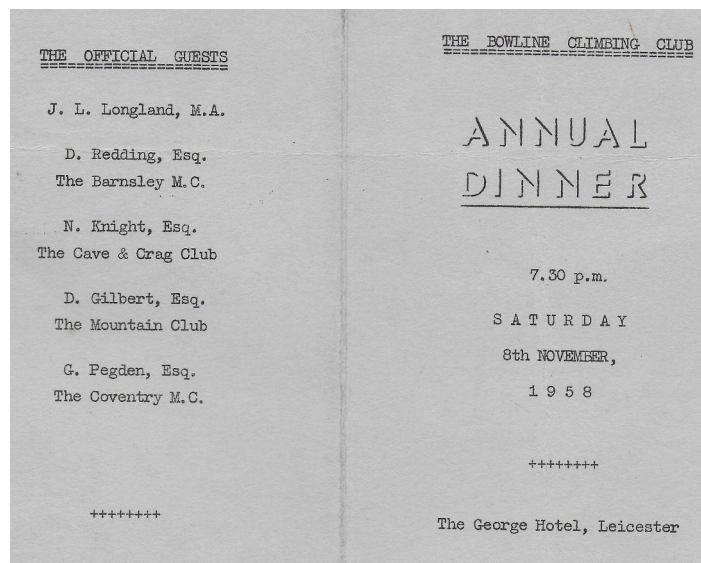
As several 'in club' marriages and partnerships over the years have shown, there is more to a local climbing club than just climbing and, as the Burden, Jennett and Abelthorpe families show, the early BCC was no exception. The first social event seems to have been, of all things, a *whist drive* held in June 1952 at Birstall Church Hall and Reading Room. I suspect might well have been intended as a fund raiser. Throughout almost all the first 25 years of the club's existence, the social highlight of the year was the *Annual Dinner and Dance*, then first of which was held in Leicester on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1952. Thanks to Tony Jennett we have a lovely photograph from that day and now from Mike Kestell's record keeping we know that that this first annual dinner cost the club the grand total of £21-10-6d (£620).



*A group at the first annual dinner held at the Marquis of Granby, Leicester in November 1952. From right to left are Dorothy Enderby, Mike Kestell, Peter Burden, Mavis Boulter (married Peter Burden), Charlie Abelthorpe, Tony Jennet, Peter Barrett, Sheila Pearn (married Tony Jennet, 1959), Malcom Rees,, Barbara Kalkowska (married Charley Abelthorpe), Bob Kirchen and ano. Presented to the club by Tony Jennet.*

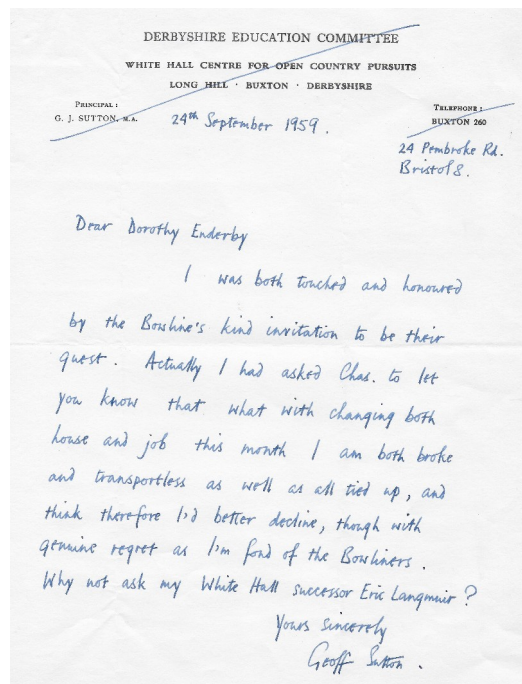
The second annual dinner in 1953 was at the *Victoria Hotel* the total bill for which came to £19-6-3d (£477) for the 29 diners, including their drink. For the rest of the 1950s annual dinners followed much the same pattern: a date in late November, a local hotel many of which have since disappeared (1954 the *Victoria*, 1958 the *George*, 1959 the *Empire*, 1956 the *Old Mill*, 1960 the *Angel*), around 30-40 diners, club members with their partners, a loyal toast followed by a toasts to the Guests and the club, the latter delivered by a name in the climbing world. It was standard practice for each of these clubs to invite representatives of all the other clubs to their annual dinners and the archive is full of letters from and to other local clubs setting up these contacts.

The diners for 1958 and 1959 are particularly interesting. In 1958, and after what seems to be an attempt every single year of the club's existence, Honorary Member Jack Longland finally appears as the guest speaker:



*The menu cover, 1958 diner*

A year later in 1959 at the *Empire Hotel* the guest speaker was the newly-appointed warden of *White Hall* Eric Langmuir who went on to head operations for the *Scottish Sports Council* as Principal of *Glenmore Lodge*. Langmuir was second choice. There is a charming letter from Geoff Sutton, the previous *White Hall* warden, then resident in his home town of Bristol, turning down an invitation to attend because he is both '*broke and transportless*':



*Letter from G. Sutton September 1959*

Note that his refusal is



'with genuine regret as I'm fond of Bowliners'.

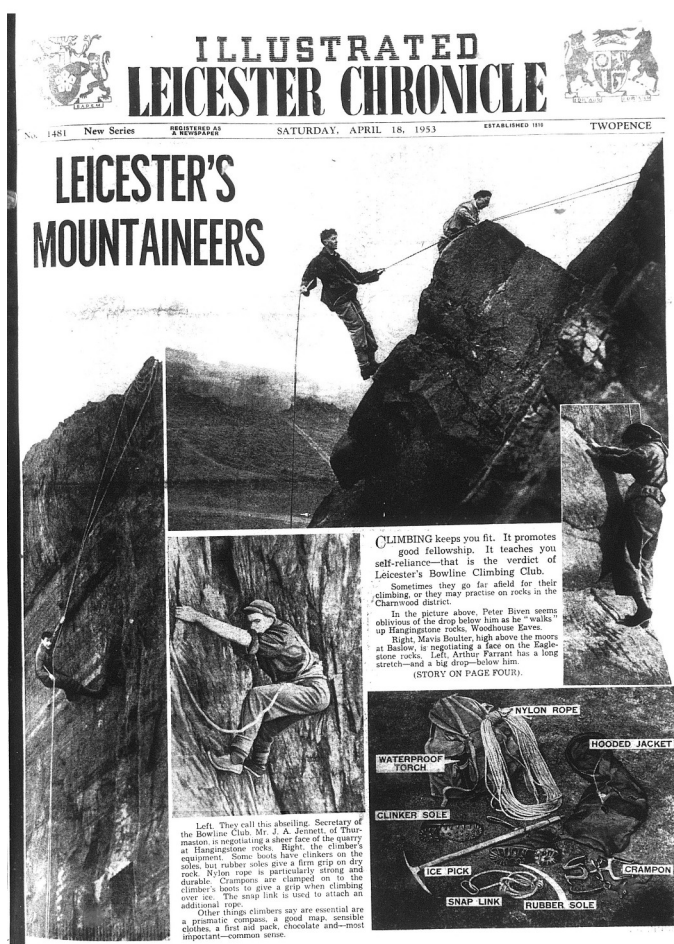
Sutton went on to teach in Geneva but in his time at *White Hall* he did a great deal to promote climbing, including working in 1957 with a BBC documentary producer to create an early climbing TV programme that was screened as part of a series called *Eye to Eye*. Part shows Joe Brown in his prime leading *Suicide Wall* at Idwal and scoring with the quote

'climbs don't 'av t'be 'ard to be enjoyed'.

The BMC website has more detail at [www.thebmc.co.uk/rediscovered-tv-film-of-climbing-history](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/rediscovered-tv-film-of-climbing-history). In 1966 Sutton also collaborated with another sometime guest of the early BCC, Eric Byne, to produce the now much sought after history of walking and climbing in the Peak District, a book titled *High Peak*.

## Expansion in the 1950s

The new club obviously caught on locally. By the end of March 1952 in a letter to the *Mountaineering Association* Mike Kestell reported a membership of 15, with ages ranging from 17 to 28. In 1953 the club succeeded in getting a major feature in the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* called *Leicester's Mountaineers* that had photographs of Tony Jennett, Mavis Boulter and Peter Biven at Hangingstone. According to the text, membership at that time was 20 with an average age also 20.



## THEIR HEARTS ARE IN THE HILLS



A group of club climbers stop for a breather on a rocky edge.

**A**LMOST every week end some 20 members of the Bowline Climbing Club—Leicester's only climbing club—head for the hills in the north-west of the county, or for the peaks of Derbyshire.

### A Serious Hobby

To those whose week end is a horizontal affair of naps and television, climbing may seem amusing. Their outfits are voluminous jackets, woollen hats and enormous boots, which mark the wearer's progress by sparks. And to the office workers, factory workers and students who make up the club the hobby is serious and fascinating.

The members are by no means novices. The badges and photographs they have are the souvenirs of holidays in the Swiss Alps, in the Chamonix valley, of the Lake District, of Wales and the Peak District. But the object of the club is not just to climb mountains.

Secretary of the club, Mr. J. A. Jennett, known as "Colonel" to the members, explains—"We aim to foster a love of mountains and the countryside. Our club motto is 'To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts with an unslipped knot.'"

### Alpine Holiday

Although the club has only been in existence some 18 months the 22 members have been able to organise climbs in almost every recognised climbing centre in Britain. There is a group in the club who graduate from rock climbing to mountaineering in the summer by spending their holidays in the Swiss Alps.

As yet the club has no headquarters of its own, but meets in a Scout hut. But that does not worry

the members—they say their headquarters are in the hills they climb and the dales they tramp.

The fellowship in this club is real, as is their love of the sport. The members—their average age is 20—clamber up rock faces as you would walk up a flight of stairs; they wriggle up between slabs of rock known as "chimneys" undismayed by the dizzy drop beneath them.

And what do the members get out of it, besides cuts and scratches? "You can't explain it," said one member. "It just gets you inside."



Nothing like having a nice safe rope to keep you steady. Especially when there's hundreds of feet between you and the road level.

Whether or not this increased the membership is moot, but in the table below I have used officer's reports from the period to track the growth in membership and income/expenditure through the 1950s.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>
1953/4	14	£27-16-10	£27-11-10
1954/5	20	£24- 7-10	£22- 7- 3
1955/6	26	£26- 5- 7	£17-15- 9
1956/7	25<n<50	£34- 0-10	£28- 2- 2
1957/8	45	£40- 9- 8	£34-11- 3
1958/9	44	£54- 8- 5	£55-13- 2
1959/0	39	£50-12- 3	£36-14- 6

#### BCC Membership and finances, 1953-1959

To give the financial data contemporary relevance, you need to know that £30 in, say, 1956, is equivalent to around £680 in today's money. As can be seen, the club expanded steadily such that in 1959 it was decided to institute an *Associate Member* status as a sort of half-way house to full membership.

The archives have what may well be a complete set of 19 applications forms for Associate status from 1960/61 that give an insight into the nature of the new members. The majority were over 21, but 8 were under that age, and almost all recorded that they had done some hill walking with about half claiming sufficient competence to lead such walks. Significantly, very few were able to claim experience in rock climbing: 7 had 'none' and the remainder claimed that they had 'a little' but none felt able to tick the boxes for 'Fair amount' or 'Considerable'. Of the 19 only one had experience leading on rock and that only to *Difficult* standard. Almost all these Associates had some camping experience but looked to the club to provide instruction in rock climbing. Comparison with the much larger club today shows it to be much older (my guess at the current average age is 40-45) and with new members almost always now (or at least prior to the indoor climbing that now forms the start for many) being experienced in virtually all the mountain sports. These data support the assertion made by Simon Thompson in *Unjustifiable Risk?* (page 271-2) that

*'During the 1950s, most climbing club members were in their early twenties. Today, outside of the university clubs, the average is probably around 40'.*

Thompson goes on to argue that in some sense this indicates the gradual demise of the traditional club, but, despite the best efforts of the BMC to get rid of the clubs, I am not so sure. Perhaps what was seen in the 1950s was a one off uptake into the sport that could not and never will be repeated.

Recently, the club has heard from Roger Riordan, an Australian who climbed with the club for a short while in the mid 1950s.





*Roger Riordan in 1964, eight years after his club membership*

An edited version of his letter is as follows:

*I went to England in 1955 with the intention of becoming an expert in atomic power to take up a graduate apprenticeship with English Electric in Rugby. I arrived in February, and very quickly realized that English Electric was virtually incompetent, medieval in its outlook, & was never going to get anywhere, and I managed to transfer to their Mechanical Engineering Laboratory in Whetstone (in the building where Whittle did his work on jet engines). I had been a member of the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club as a student, and in Rugby I joined the Coventry Climbing Club, with whom I did a few trips. I arrived in Leicester in August 1955 & fairly soon discovered the Bowline Climbing Club. I don't remember when I did my first trip with them, or where I went, though I do remember the miserable Australian rock wallabies huddling among the rocks somewhere in the Millstone Grit.*

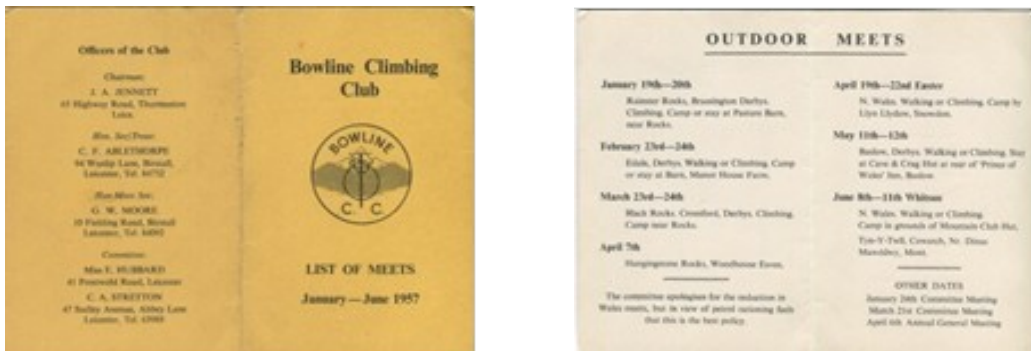


*The BCC at rest in Cwm Idwal, most probably June 1956. Roger tells us that Dot (Enderby) is the girl in the sleeveless white top, dead centre looking away, Barbara (Kalkowska) is next to her in the flat hat on*

her left, and Charles (Abelthorpe) is sitting on a lower rock on her left facing the camera and looking down. Photograph from Roger Riordan

I don't remember any other names, though one member of the club came to Melbourne about the time I returned in 1957, and joined relatives who had a commercial chook farm in the eastern suburbs, and we remained in contact for a while. ... A number of club members fare-welled me at a pub near Leicester on the weekend before I left to return home. I had sold my car, so I went on the back of a motorbike on a freezing foggy night in Feb 1957.

Roger maintains a personal website at [www.corybas.com](http://www.corybas.com) that contains other memories of his time in UK. He has also found a copy of the 1957 meets card:



This is of interest in that the committee felt it necessary to apologize for the lack of meets to Wales due to the reintroduction of petrol rationing which was a consequence of the disastrous Suez adventure of 1956.

Some significant names that appear in the papers from this period include Ken Vickers (1956/7), Frank Galbraith (1959), Peter Thompson (?1957) and “Dinger” Bell (1958). As we will see, in various ways these were enormously influential as the club progressed through the 1960s.



Local rock stars in 1957 at Hangingstone  
(Left to right) Ken Vickers, Janet Winterton, Peter Cooper, John Greave and Martin Riley

The 1950s ended with an *annus mirabilis*, the long hot and dry summer of 1959 that has been chronicled endlessly as the year of the great break through, when

the great *Rock and Ice* extremes started to be repeated. As Don Whillans so prophetically noted

*'they will all be doing them when the sun comes out',*

but I suspect that for most of the climbing community it was more likely working up the grades from *VDiff* to *VS* and that the surge in standard was as much to do with the introduction of rock boots, nylon rope, and more systematic use of running belays as it was to the weather.

## **The 60s: a club in transition?**

Little seems to have changed in the BCC at the end of the 1950s. Recalling the notion that the ability to share instruction, information, transport, equipment and accommodation was central in motivating the formation of clubs in the 1950s, in the 1960s you could access all of these without the need to be in any formal club. It may well be that this was a factor in the relative lack of development of the club at the end of the 1950s, but I suspect that a coincidence of three additional factors meant that this was a period of mixed fortunes.

First, as the founding members went into their thirties or left the city, internally the club seems to have got stale, with the same meets featuring the same activities repeated year after year. This is something that happens to all associations if there is no input of fresh ideas and talent. In 1960 the Chair talked about a

*'lack of variety in club meets, with the exception of a Whit meet in Cornwall'.*

These were years during which technology started to change rock climbing out of all recognition and in which the numbers of climbers increased enormously, average standards on rock rose, and numerous new crags were developed, but I can find little evidence that this made much difference to BCC.

Second, it seems that the club had run into some financial difficulties towards the end of 1958 necessitating an Extraordinary General Meeting to make good the deficit by imposition of a 5/- (£5) levy on all members. In itself this might be seen as of no great consequence but it may also point towards a lack of drive and/or care from the committee.

Third, very significantly, around 1960 a rebellion in the club led to the founding of a local rival, the *Leicester Association of Mountaineers* (LAM) by the late Ken Vickers and Dave Draper.





*The late Ken Vickers climbing in the late 1950s  
– but what is the route?*



*A young Dave Draper in action*

It is clear that at the time they and their friends were very much the ginger group in Leicester climbing. In his introduction to the *Red Guide (Rock Climbs in Leicestershire, 1966)* Dave Draper, who was the founding secretary of the LAM, notes that during 1956-1959:

*'a group emerged that met in a Woodhouse Eaves pub on Wednesday nights in 'La sale des guides des roches de Charnwood' after scouring the area for rock on which to climb'*

and that

*about half past nine when it was getting dark the room would fill with a new kind of trouble for the landlord ... a noisy gaggle of dirty, bedraggled bedouins ... The times were good, weather normally fine, and the outcrops and quarries provided some interesting problems*

We are also told that this was *'later to become the LAM'*. In fact, 1959-60 saw Dave Draper, Ken Vickers, Martin Riley, and others explore the deepest recesses of Charnwood, developing the *Brand* as its best crag, and producing climbs up to today's *Hard VS/5A* there and at the magnificent old *Huncote Quarry*. Had this huge, loose venue been easier of access and then not almost completely obliterated by later work, with modern gear and attitudes it could have provided some of the best climbing in lowland England. Ken Vickers (1941-2007) was one of the city's most experienced mountaineers with numerous alpine seasons and who was on a 1967 expedition to the Hindu Kush led by Doug Scott (For the record there are obituaries of him by Miles Hillmann in the *Climber's Club* and *Alpine Club Journals* for 2008). Dave Draper left Leicester to study out of town, later becoming one of the permanent instructors at *White Hall*. Pete McDonald, one of his colleagues there at the time tells me that Dave was:

*'the most charismatic and entertaining instructor(he) ever worked with, especially down caves' .*

In his book *Climbing Lessons*, Pete describes Dave Draper thus:

Draper was a six-foot-two rawboned clown in his late thirties, with a body already like a middle-aged Land-Rover – tough, worn, and slightly buckled, knocked about and moulded by years of mountaineering and caving and by a hard social life. He was outlandish and larger-than-life, with a gigantic appetite for self-destructive fun, wild blue eyes in a craggy face, a straggle of untidy fair hair and two untidy collies, Mrs and Black Dog. Mrs was a shaggy old grizzled thing, like a worn-out caving suit. Black Dog was a young and scrawny schizophrenic creature.

In correspondence, Dave Draper explains how the LAM came into existence:

*I became involved with the group that were the loosely known at that time as the T club. This was the group that Graham was part of and who were I guess the break away group that you talk about. They used to meet at that time, (I think on a Wednesday) at the Capital T Club which was a temperance club - bit like a cafe from what I recall. Whether one or two of them were teetotal or not I've no idea but we'd sit there and decide what we could do next weekend then go over the road to the pub for a pint or two. It all seemed quite normal to me at the time*

This was in 1959 when Dave was an apprentice at the old British United Shoe Machine Company (BUSM) in Leicester, sent by his employer to Plas-y-Brenin on an industrial leadership course that included some rock climbing. Like similar introductions to climbing experienced by so many of us, at the time this changed his life totally, but perhaps not in the ways that BUSM would have preferred:

*From then onwards I climbed most weekends, usually hitching to Wales, occasionally someone had a vehicle with a spare seat or later, as you mention, we began hiring minibuses. As an apprentice I was attending the Leicester College of Technology and once or twice a year the 'outdoor group' would hire a bus for trips to the hills which I would also go on. Mike Cousins was one of the 'tech lads'. I suppose it's sort of accidental that you meet certain folk with the same interest and become part of that group, so it was that I became part of the 'T club' as they were then known.*

The LAM seems to have grown out of this “Tech club”, but not initially at least, as a rival to the BCC. Dave reports:

*the original idea as I recall was that the clubs would keep their identity and the LAM would be an association of the various 'mountaineering' groups based in Leicester - including the Bowline CC*

Extracts from his Climbing diary show how this evolved out of BCC:

*Sunday 30th October 1960*

*Dinger drove Bowline Dormobile to Stanage where the Tech club had conglomerated. We moved about at the 'Gentleman's' end of Stanage and did one or two interesting routes. Gave Dinger a top rope on Goliath's Groove, nearly losing my own in the process - it got stuck in the groove, I had to give him another top rope whilst he got mine out of the groove. Pulled in at the Kings Arms on the way back and had big chat with Tech Crowd, Terry was there, about the forming of a Leicester Association of Mountaineers.*

Reading this, you need to know that even in 1960 Goliath's was graded *Exceptionally Severe* and had quite a reputation. Top-roping such routes was an accepted part of the ethics of the time and, for the record, getting the rope stuck in the layback crack at the top was an example of what the motor trade calls '*a known fault*' suffered by many.

*Sunday 1st December 1960*

*- another weekend - this time in the Kinder area - a Dormobile again unsure of who was there but mention of Kit Grayram, Carbide, Ken again - back to the café for a nosh then off home stopping at the Kings Arms on the way. Had chat with Gus and Terry who were there about the forming of the LAM which it has been decided to form.*

*Tuesday 19th December 1960*

*Tony Self and Julian met in Spread Eagle to discuss forming of the LAM ref. notes as for preliminary notes to LAM Decided to meet with representatives of all clubs at Fish and Quart in Committee Room on 4th January, new year.*

*Wednesday 4th January 1961*

*The Leicester Association of Mountaineers was formed on this night in the committee room of the Fish and Quart Hotel by those present - Johnny Briers and Julie, Bernard, Chris, Martin, Ken, Self, Roger, Grant, Tony, Mike Cousins, Julian.*



*Dave Draper, many years on, in the Cares Gorge, Picos De Europa, 2011*

*(author photo)*

We have a second fascinating account of some of those times from the late John Hayto who joined the club as an Associate member in December 1960, proceeding to full membership in 1961 after attending his three qualifying meets at Ogwen, Froggatt and Bosigran:

**MEMORIES OF BOWLINE CLIMBING CLUB**

*Letter from John Hayto, 2011*

*My name is John Hayto and in my misspent youth I was a member of the Bowline Club. I was enticed into climbing through the 'Battle of Bosworth Mark II'. Before I joined the Bowline I was a walker and was a member of both the Ramblers' Association and the*

*Footpaths Association. The Battle of Bosworth Mark II was about a public footpath dispute at Market Bosworth. The footpath ran through the estate of Sir Woolstan Dixie and could be seen from Dixie Hall, so Sir Woolstan, not wishing to look at such lesser mortals, turned walkers off the path, and there might have been a shotgun involved. The response from walkers was a mass walk of the path, with hundreds of walkers processing by the Hall all day long. There was a heavy police presence and Sir Woolstan was conspicuous by his absence and we won. Whilst on the walk, I fell in with two 'neerdownells' who were climbers and Bowline members and I was persuaded to go along and give climbing a try. I quite enjoyed the climbing and joined the club. The club members I met and who I still recall were 'Dinger' Bell, Pete Thompson (or was it Tomlin?), a rather brash chap named Galbraith, a nattily dressed chap called The Squire, someone called Carbide, plus others, whose names I can't recall, for this was over fifty years ago. My brother Ted and my sister Helen also joined the club.*

*There was at the time a breakaway group of younger former Bowline members who formed a new club called the Leicester Association of Mountaineers. The reason given for the breakaway was that they felt the leaders of the Bowline were 'a bunch of old women'. I think it was about safety issues amongst the older members, but must admit that the young bloods were the better climbers. I was invited to join LAMs but declined as I was quite happy with Bowline. Some of the LAMS members were Tony Clayton, Eddie Baldwin, Ken Vickers, Julian (Wright?), a rather mad chap called Riley and several others. My sister Helen joined LAMS and went out with mad Riley for a while, but eventually married Tony Clayton, the recognized leader of the pack. They emigrated to Canada in about 1960. They had two children, but later separated. Helen lives at Lac le Jeune in British Columbia, where she took up cross country skiing and snow shoeing in winter, hiking and mountain biking in summer. It is a very rural, mountainous place and they have about six months of snow there.*

*I haven't climbed since the 1960s, due to other interests. My brother Ted died quite young. The Squire was killed in a mountain accident in Wales in the late 1950s. I hadn't been in contact with any climbers from either club in about 50 years until I discovered that Bob (Crosby) was a Bowliner.*

*(The Battle of Bosworth took place on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1960. John Hayto died in 2018)*

Hayto's letter revived memories from the late Pam Cottle:

### **A comment**

*To add a few bits to John Hayto's piece, Carbide was John Ball, so named because he used a carbide lamp on his bike! Julien was surnamed Hubbard, and died about 3 years ago. The "mad" Riley. is Martyn, still a good friend and living in Capel Garmon, who was my first climbing partner. He put up lots of new routes in the Pass, climbing with the "Rock and Ice" and getting his Mountain Guides badge while working at Plas y Brenin and Plas Menia. John's ex brother in law Tony Clayton is living near Vancouver, and is coming for a visit this May (2011). I will try to get him down the club-room. What of John Prentiss?*

*(Pam Cottle 18<sup>th</sup> April 2011)*

The second paragraph of John Hayto's letter gives his perception of what the *young turks* thought of the BCC, which may or may not have been correct and suggests some rivalry between the two clubs. This was not to be the first time that disaffected BCC members have attempted to set up a rival club in the city, but the loss of the energy and experience must have had an impact on the club.

In the archive there is nothing to suggest that any rivalry was other than good humored. A letter from Ken Vickers to BCC declining an invitation to the 1961 BCC Annual Dinner, ends with a polite

*'Looking forward to working together in future'.*

Similarly, a BCC *Newsletter* from June 1966 has a review by Frank Galbraith of the *Red Guide* that starts

*'although it grieves me (should any member of the 'other club' read this I hope they won't take this too seriously) to say so, congratulations are due to Ken Vickers and the LAM for having the tenacity to concentrate for a long enough period to produce this guide'.*

Relationships can't have been all that bad, since in its 1962 edition the BMC house journal of the time, *Mountaineering*, talks of

*'The rather well presented magazine of the Leicester Association of Mountaineers has reached us which contains amongst climbing matters a report of a Rugby match between the club and The Bowline CC'.*

Bowliners will be pleased to note that the club won the match. The LAM magazine describes the event as follows:

*'An accurate account of the game and the tactics employed is quite impossible except to say that after only a few minutes it was obvious that our opponents played more Rugby than climbing; several well-known 'guests' also appeared in their ranks. The LAM.'s however played with great spirit although obviously outclassed in the finer arts'.*

Third, the club suffered its first fatality on the hills. It is impossible to read through the archive of materials dating from the early 1950s without conceiving enormous respect for the energy and commitment to the club shown by Mike Kestell who was very much its founding spirit. Sadly, a decade later, on Saturday January 13<sup>th</sup> 1962 on a club meet Mike was killed in a freak accident on the ridge of Carnedd Dafydd. His companions at the time reported that they had abandoned any idea of climbing and were walking on the usually safe ridge when a sudden gust of wind blew him over the edge to a 500 foot fall that left him unconscious. Conditions seem to have been unpleasant, and, after a long three hour wait for a rescue, he was taken to Bangor Hospital where he later died. The accident was front page news in the *Leicester Mercury*. Even as late as 1962, mountain accidents had a much greater impact on the small close climbing community than perhaps they do nowadays. For the BCC this must have been a traumatic time and the loss of one of its most energetic and active members must have had an impact on the club as a whole.



\* CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

# DEAD MOUNTAINEER WAS EXPERIENCED

Friday night, but their son, an only child, was dead when they arrived at Caernarvon and Anglesey General Hospital, Bangor.

Mr. Kestell, a founder-member of Leicester's Bowling Climbing Club, was described by friends today as a "fine, experienced mountaineer who lived for the sport".

He had climbed in the Alps and spent nearly every weekend climbing somewhere in Great Britain.

At Christmas he was climbing in Scotland and the Lake District. He also taught climbing to young people.

## TERRIBLE SHOCK

The wife of Mr. J. A. Jennett, a former secretary of the Bowling Club and a climbing companion of Mr. Kestell, said today that his death had come as a "terrible shock".

She said that they were with Mr. Kestell only last week.

"I shall always remember him for the role he played in helping to rescue my husband, who was injured in a climbing accident in Wales last August."

Mr. K. F. Vickers, another climbing companion of Mr. Kestell, said the spot where the accident happened wasn't normally dangerous.

Mr. Kestell had worked as a draughtsman in iron fireman department at Ashwell and Nesbit, the Leicester engineering company, in Barkby Lane.

## WEATHER TOO BAD

Mrs. Dorothy Geeson, secretary of the Bowling Club, said it appeared that Michael, Roger and John had abandoned the idea of climbing because the weather was too bad.

"They were just walking along in the snow," she said, "when it happened."

"This is the first accident we have had at the club. They usually happen through inexperience, but he wasn't even climbing."

Mr. Kestell's father is a...

research engineer in the B.U.'s design department.

He is a former president of the Leicester Society of Engineers, and once worked with Sir Frank Whittle on research on the jet engine during the war.

# Leicester Mercury

★ LARGEST CERTIFIED NET SALE ★

Only Son Of Thurmaston Couple Falls 500 ft.

## CLIMBER BLOWN TO DEATH ON MOUNTAIN

THE ONLY child of a Thurmaston couple was blown to his death in a gale from an ice-bound ridge on a Snowdonian mountain in North Wales on Saturday.

Mr. E. Lloyd-Jones, coroner for North Caernarvonshire, presided at Bangor today on Michael Kestell (30), draughtsman, 16 Highway Road, Thurmaston, who was killed when he fell 500 ft. while climbing on Saturday. John Christie (35), engineer, Grosfield Drive, Worsley, Manchester, said that he, Kestell and Roger Miles (32), Winterton Drive, Aylebury, Bucks, were walking along a snow-covered ridge above a mountain lake on 2,500 ft. High Ceirid-ddud.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew them to the ground. "For some time everything was covered in a great flurry of snow," said Christie. "When we got up there was no sign of Michael anywhere." The two men found Kestell lying unconscious 500 feet below.

Miles, a surveyor, then took off his old clothes and wrapped them around Kestell to keep him warm while Christie went to look for help.

About three and a half hours later a stretcher party led by Chief Instructor Michael Kestell Ron James of the Ogwen Cottage Mountain School found Miles in his shirt sleeves beside his dying companion.

Kestell was carried down the mountain on a stretcher but died in hospital.

Miles told the Coroner: "Snow



was continually falling on top of us in the gully and I had to dig away at it all the time".

Mr. James agreed with the Coroner that Miles had made a sacrifice, but added it was the normal procedure for a climber to do all he could to help an injured companion irrespective of the weather conditions.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Aubrey Kestell made a dash by car from their Leicester home late on Sat-

\* Continued on Page Nine

Leicester Mercury, Monday Jan 15<sup>th</sup> 1964

© Leicester Mercury,

www.leicestermercury.co.uk



## The Revival of the 1960s

So, I sense that in the late 1950s and early 60s the club did not develop a great deal. However, although records of club activities in the early 1960s are scarce, it is clear that from around 1963/4 the club had new officers and was in some sort of recovery involving new blood on the committee and a series of innovations. In March 1963 one such was to organise the showing of a series of mountaineering films:



*The 1963 film show. Entry today would have been £2.40*

This was many years before the highly successful and profitable lectures held in the late 1970s and 1980s when the club organized lectures from such famous names as Doug Scott, Mick Fowler, Kurt Diemberger, Peter Habeler and Reinhold Messner.

The *Newsletter* for 1964 talks of '*a new batch of officers*' with the telling comment that the club was '*virtually starting again*'. The new Chair, elected at a badly attended AGM, was Frank Galbraith, with Harry Richter as Secretary and Treasurer, and Dick Tindall as Meet Secretary. Frank Galbraith was to serve the club as its Chair from 1964 to 1969. In 1964 the basic subscription was 25/- (£23) with club members who travelled '*by their own transport rather than club bus*' on a programme of meets that included Tremadoc, Brassington, Cornwall, Stanage, Llydaw, the Roaches, Laddow, Ennerdale, Gower, Froggatt and, at the time a very forward looking 'Limestone Meet'.

The injection of energy from the new committee seems to have been slow to work. *Newsletter* 48 from 1965 reports '*better attendance*' on club meets to Cywarch, Cratcliffe Tor, Wasdale, and Brassington with January and February trips to Nant Peris for winter climbing, including a record of a party doing *Trinity Gully*. *Newsletter* 49 from May of the same year reports a wet weekend camping at Wasdale Head and a long walk over the Borrowdale to climb *Little Chamonix* on Shepherd's Crag.

At the 1965 AGM someone asked

*“why are there no VS leaders in the club?”*

extracting the replies from the Chair that

*“they don’t grow on trees”, “you can’t buy them”*

and, tellingly perhaps

*“no member of the club has the time, ability or inclination to bring his/her standard up to such dizzy heights”.*

Today’s climber, for whom VS is very much the base standard might well wonder! A further complaint, reported in Newsletter 50 for September 1965 was that :

*“meets are arranged at various venues because of the good camp sites and not because of the climbing”.*

In the middle and late 1960s some names that are currently still associated with the club start to appear, notably Honorary Member Peter Thompson, and later on Paul Barrett (circa 1965) and Pete Bottrill (1965 or 6). *Newsletter 51* from February 1966 records a mass ascent at Cwm Silyn: ‘

*For Peter Bottrill it was his first rock climb, which he made with great equanimity although he had the misfortune of having it rain just before he tackled the most difficult pitch’.*

The man himself denies that this was his first climb and is clear that he had been associated with the club for about a year before this meet. Further research reveals that the route in question was a 300 foot VDiff, which I think must have been arguably the best route in Britain at that standard, Edward’s magnificent *Outside Edge*. Just a year later and with Peter Thompson as Chair, Peter Bottrill finds himself as the Meets Secretary a job he promised to fill

*“with great vigour and energy”.*

The ‘club cards’ from those days provide further insight into the club’s activities:

OFFICERS OF THE CLUB


Chairman :  
F. GALBRAITH,  
43 Brookside Drive, Oadby,  
LEICESTER.

Hon. Sec./Treas. :  
H. A. RICHTER,  
84 Roehampton Drive, Wigston Fields  
LEICESTER.

Hon. Meet Sec. :  
R. TINDALL,  
36 Holmfist Avenue,  
LEICESTER.  
Telephone 75901

Committee :  
Miss S. DRINKALL  
M. DAVIDSON  
J. BREARS  
W. STEWARD

**BOWLINE  
CLIMBING**



**CLUB**

LIST OF MEETS  
OCT 1964 - APRIL 1965

OUTDOOR MEETS

OCT. 16th - 18th  
STANAGE EDGE, Derbyshire  
Climbing and Camping  
G.R. S.K. 229843 (Area)

NOV. 7th  
ANNUAL DINNER Star Hotel, Thrusington,  
Leics. G.R. S.K. 648160

NOV. 8th  
BIRCHENS EDGE, Derbyshire  
Climbing and Resting  
G.R. S.K. 280722

NOV. 20th - 22nd  
TAN-Y-WYDDFA, RHYDO-DU, North Wales  
Climbing and Walking  
G.R. S.H. 570528

DEC. 6th  
CHATSWORTH EDGE, Derbyshire  
Climbing G.R. S.U. 266717 (v. approx.)

DEC. 24th - 27th  
CHRISTMAS MEET. Wastdale Head,  
Lake District. G.R. N.Y. 186088

JAN. 16th  
STONEY MIDDLETON, Derbyshire  
Climbing. G.R. S.K. 218758

JAN. 29th - 31st  
ANABASIS CLUB HUT. Garth, Nth. Wales  
G.R. S.H. 700569 Climbing and Walking

FEB. 14th  
GARDONS EDGE, Derbyshire  
Climbing. G.R. S.K. 270737

FEB. 26th - 28th  
CEUNANT CLUB HUT. Nant Peris,  
North Wales. Climbing and Walking  
G.R. S.H. 608583

MAR. 14th  
EDALE - SKYLINE WALK, Derbyshire  
Start at G.R. S.U. 124858

MAR. 26th - 28th  
TYNYFFORD, COWARCH,  
DINAS MAWDDY, North Wales

APRIL 10th  
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

APRIL 11th  
CRATCLIFFE, Derbyshire  
G.R. S.K. 208542 (v. approx.)

Club Transport will be run on all Meets as far as possible. Please make all enquiries regarding transport etc. to the Meet Secretary. Indoor Meets every Wednesday 8.30 p.m. at the "Darkum Ox," Bowling Green Street.

OFFICERS OF THE CLUB

Chairman:  
P. L. THOMPSON  
67 Croft Road  
COSBY  
Telephone NARBOROUGH 3141


Hon. Secretary/Treasurer:  
J. H. DAVIS  
7 Copeland Road  
BIRSTALL  
Telephone LEICESTER 813833

Hon. Meet Secretary:  
P. J. BOTTRILL  
68 Belvoir Drive  
LEICESTER  
Telephone LEICESTER 32323

Committee:  
Miss S. DRINKALL, D. T. BELL  
F. GALBRAITH, R. WILTSHIRE

Club Transport will be run on all Meets as far as possible. Please make all enquiries regarding transport, etc., to the Meet Secretary. Indoor Meets every Wednesday, 9 p.m. at 'The Railway', Campbell Street, Leicester.

**BOWLINE  
CLIMBING**



**CLUB**

LIST OF MEETS  
NOVEMBER 1968 - APRIL 1969

OUTDOOR MEETS

February 21st-23rd  
CEUNANT CLUB HUT, TYN-LON, NANT PERIS, NORTH WALES. G.R. 608583

March 8th-9th  
BOB SCOTT MEMORIAL HUT, FROGGATTS EDGE, DERBYSHIRE  
G.R. 249770 (approx.)

March 23rd  
CRATCLIFFE, DERBYSHIRE

April 4th  
LANGDALE, LAKE DISTRICT  
Exact spot to be decided

April 12th  
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

April 13th  
BRASSINGTON, DERBYSHIRE  
G.R. SK 220549  
Usually a fine weather meet

November 24th  
BLACK ROCKS, CROMFORD,  
NEAR MATLOCK. G.R. SK 285659

December 6th-8th  
TYN-Y-MAES, OGWEN VALLEY, NORTH WALES. G.R. 635639  
Popular meet at C.H.A. hut

December 24th-28th  
CHRISTMAS MEET. Wastdale suggested.  
See meet secretary

January 6th  
DOVEDALE, DERBYSHIRE  
G.R. SK 146508. Good walking with chance of limestone climbing.

January 24th-26th  
ANABASIS CLUB HUT, GARTH, NORTH WALES. G.R. 701570

February 9th  
BIRCHENS EDGE, DERBYSHIRE  
G.R. 279731  
Good variety of climbing.

### The 1964 and 1968 Club Cards

What is striking about these cards is that in the listed official meets there is a clear pattern of activity, with almost half (48%) of meets being to the nearby Peak District and a further 32% to a mixture of huts in North Wales (notably *Tyn y Maes* and the *Ceunant* and *Anabasis* club huts). A few longer holiday meets were held in the Lake District but there is no Scottish meet and nothing at all overseas. As it was in the late 1960s, so it is now, this pretty much defines the club's core geography. Over the years as all society has become more mobile we have added a few overseas trips but the club remains as it has always been, predominantly Charnwood/North Wales/Peak District based. The meets cards also make the point that the club engaged in almost any activity associated with mountains. As Frank Galbraith said in his report to the 1965 AGM

*'we are not solely a rock climbing club'.*

In this he was merely stating the obvious. Like almost all the 300 or so '*climbing*' clubs in Britain, Bowline is not entirely, and never has been, composed solely of rock jocks. Walking meets in the hills have always played a large part in its activity. In the early days for which we have records, favourites were the *Edale Skyline* (formal meets in 1965, 1966, 1968 and 1974), the *Lyke Wake* (1968, and an 11 hour crossing in May 1975) and the Yorkshire *Three Peaks*. In the early 1970s the club's ultra-distance specialist was past Chair Graham Richmond who

worked his way through impressive often solo and unsupported repeats of some of the great *Rucksack Club* 'bog trotter' challenges such as the *Marsden-Edale*, *Colne-Rowsley* and *Tan Hill-Cat and Fiddle* (get a map and check them out). In a couple of months in 1970 in training for a very early success on the *Scottish Fours*, Graham ticked off solos of the *Welsh* and *Lakes 3000s*, the *Peak Horseshoe*, a '*Double Marsden*', and the *Four Inns*. Competition first reared its head with a club entry into a very early *High Peak Marathon* round the *Derwent Watershed* held in November 1974. In those days the race attracted 33 teams of 4, started at *Yorkshire Bridge*, and went clockwise round the proper full watershed. This pioneering team (Mick Meehan, Ralph Oliver, Phil Tyler and Paul?) got lost on *Bleaklow* (sounds familiar) and retired via *Alport*.

A meet at *Wasdale* sets the tone of the times:

*"A party of ten had a very pleasant weekend camping at Wasdale Head. The camp site at the top of the lake was very good .... Saturday saw some activity on Great Gable, Kern Knotts Chimney in particular. Conditions were not too good, a cold wind and drizzle though there was a fair amount of snow in the gullies. Everyone enjoyed a good scree run on the way back and the evening was finished in fine style with a good session in the pub (62 pints)"*

The rest of the 1960s were times of change but in late 1960s the pace seemed to accelerate with an influx of new and younger members such as Phil Tyler, Graham Richmond, and the late John Dybdahl, many of whom remained in the club throughout the 1970s and 1980s. It might have taken a few years, but slowly the club seems to have recovered, such that *Newsletter 53* from October 1966 was able to report that

*"things are on the up".*

Frank Galbraith passed on the Chair to Pete Thompson, who served until 1973 when first Pete Bottrill (1974-5) and then Phil Davies (1976-80) took over. The *Newsletter* tell us where meets were held (*Cwm Silyn*, *Tremadoc*, *Ogwen*, *Seathwaite*, '*Cromlech Boulders*' (!), *Wasdale*, and even *Harrison's Rocks*) but virtually no routes are mentioned.

In the early 1970s a source of several new members was the *British United Shoe Machine* company that, by way of its apprenticeship scheme, helped numerous young lads in the city get out onto the hills. Mike Lambell has dug up this photograph of a party of BU apprentices setting out on one such trip in the late 1960s:





*Mike Lambell is 4<sup>th</sup> left and in addition to a younger Paul Parker the group included two Bowliners no longer with us, Richard 'Knack' Lewis and John 'Dibs' Dybdahl, both of whom were active throughout the 70s.*

## **Acquiring a 'Club Hut'**

By the early 1960s, in addition to camping and barns, the club continued to use huts belonging to other climbing clubs. The idea of BCC owning its own hut first appears the *Newsletter* for March 1965 in a report of a meet based on *Tyn Lon*, the *Ceunant Club* hut in Nant Peris, on 29-31<sup>st</sup> January of that year:

*'(some) walked around Llyn Padarn admiring all kinds of antique wonders and cottages in various stages of dilapidation. They returned with great enthusiasm for the idea of buying a club hut'*

Despite this, discussion at the AGM, reported in the May 1965 *Newsletter* left this idea *'in a negative state'*.

Acquiring property obviously requires confidence in the club's future and some cash in the bank. By 1968 both conditions seem to have been met. An energetic committee chaired by Peter Thompson with John Davies, Sue Drinkall, David "Dinger" Bell, Frank Galbraith and Roger Wiltshire was able to report in *Newsletter 58* for May of that year that:

*"we now have enough cash in hand to start thinking about some serious ventures, which as far as the Bowline is concerned can only mean one thing, The Hut. Not just a hut any longer but The Hut"*.

The 1968 AGM passed a motion proposed by Sue Drinkall mandating the incoming committee to raise funds to obtain a hut and setting up a small sub-committee, initially herself and Roger Wiltshire, to explore options.



Interestingly, I can find no evidence of discussion about where to look for a hut. It seems to have been assumed that any hut had to be in Snowdonia, rather than, say, the Peak District, which in view of the organised meets would have been just as logical. Perhaps the availability of affordable property in the then-depressed former slate quarrying area around Llanberis and Bethesda played a part in this, but, even so, the *Newsletter* reported somewhat discouragingly that:

*“A start has already been made in looking at property. At first sight the prospect is discouraging with derelict sites at £300 (£4775) and places with half a roof and two walls in the region of £450 (£7162). However, even if these could be feasible if (a) nothing else is available and (b) a lot of money and labour is available”.*

Fortune favoured the club in the form of a huge *fire sale* of assets and property by the old *Vaynol* Estate that belonged to the Assheton Smith family and which at its height consisted of some 150km<sup>2</sup> of land and over 1500 tenancies in Eryri. In 1968 I was living near Aberystwyth in Mid-Wales, visiting Eryri fairly frequently and can remember the excitement that this sale generated in the climbing community. Several clubs and individuals bought property in the sale at seemingly knock down prices, injecting a great deal of capital and energy into what until then had simply been a run-down, depressed area.

With both the confidence and the cash, in October 1968 at the auction the club purchased a ruined garage in Brynrefail for all of £300 (£4775). The circumstances surrounding this remain moderately controversial, but the fact is that a purchase of land for his own use was made by Frank Galbraith. The lot included the building, at the time a ruined garage, together with land to the west between it and the terrace of houses. In a deal with the club supported by club Chair Pete Thompson, Frank kept this land and built the bungalow that now stands on the site, but sold back the ruin to the club. At the time it did not include the camp site on the eastern side. The location down a quiet lane accessible by car close to Llanberis, then the social centre of Eryri climbing was' as it remains, absolutely ideal. As my short vignette (below) about Llanberis in the 1960s shows, the timing was also almost perfect, early enough to be affordable but late enough to benefit from the tourism based revival of the town in the 1970s:

### **Llanberis in the 60s**

*Llanberis in the 60s wasn't the bustling tourist trap that it is now. Although the Snowdon rack railway ran and the huge Dinorwig slate quarry still operated, the latter was winding down and there was very little other employment in the town. There was no slate museum, no Electric Mountain, and no Pete's Eats. Although still running for the occasional tourist special, the railway from Caernarfon closed completely in 1964 (see [www.disused-stations.org/llanberis](http://www.disused-stations.org/llanberis)). Up until around 1963 or so there was a small cinema (the last film I can recall seeing there was Elvis Presley's *GI Blues* screened one August Saturday in 1961 mostly to a raucous audience of climbers from the Sheffield Peak and Manchester Alpha*

*Climbing Clubs), but, other than the pubs, the only other amenity for the relatively few climbers was Wendy's Café (now a small grocery store next to the garage on the main street). Of the pubs, the least said the better, but the social centres were the Castle (now the Spar shop) and the Dolbadarn or perhaps the Vaynol up the valley in Nant Peris. Things started to look up towards the end of the decade. Joe Brown's shop opened in 1966, and in 1972 the town was by-passed along the line of the old railway, but most development dates from the late 1970s and 1980s. Pete's Eats dates from 1978. Although construction started in 1974 the pumped storage scheme (Electric Mountain) didn't get going until 1984. Ginger Cain's Mountain Art, the Indian, the fish and chip shops, the Heights, the Snowdonia Marathon, the Snowdon Race, slate museum, narrow gauge railway, etc., etc., have all followed. Accommodation in the area was limited to the club huts, a barn on the road out of Nant Peris, and fly camping usually in one or other of the fields below the Grochan and the Cromlech. Most Friday evenings a small tent village would appear overnight in one or other and then disappear sometime during Sunday. The Grochan field tended to be favourite, with many an evening spent lazing over a cup of tea or two watching aspirant hard men try their luck on Kaisergebirge Wall (now HVS, 5b) or, at the time everyone's first extreme, Brant Direct (then just "E", now HVS and correctly technically easier at 5a).*



*Early days at Dinorwic Mill Cottage. The club is justifiably proud of converting an earth-floored wreck of a garage into one of the most comfortable club huts in Snowdonia. The gentleman leaning on the 'door' is Tony Gowland who thinks that the photograph was taken at Easter 1971*

The December 1969 *Newsletter* to the club reported this purchase with a note that

*'The dawn of 1970 brings a new era for the club, ..., we hope to be well on the way to getting our own hut well and truly sorted out'.*

Planning permission to convert it into a club hut was obtained in 1970, but it took another decade and a half to convert it into a comfortable base for climbing in North Wales. Curiously, at least to an outsider, is that no officially recorded meets seem to have been based on the hut. Perhaps then it was just too squalid to entertain as base or perhaps meets there were common enough as not to merit official status? Although lots of people dossed in the hut in those early days, for example the *Newsletter* for 1972 notes that

*'some members are arranging to spend Christmas at the hut'*

the first formal club hut meet I can find took place in March 1976.

There is a clue in a 1970 entry that after a wet weekend in North Wales the author writes

*'suggest campsite and to make hut useable'.*

Work to make it *useable* started in the early 1970s with a lot of the drive coming from Alan Swindale, Geoff Hine, Bob Crosby and John Dybdahl. In 1972 the double doors seen in the photograph were replaced by a bricked wall and single door, water was piped in to a single sink, a roof put on a small outhouse in preparation for its being used as a toilet, and, after a fire, the burnt out roof shown on the photograph was replaced. A concrete floor replaced the earth floor of the sleeping area in the same year. Although individuals worked hard throughout the 1970s to improve the hut, it was apparent that a major investment of time and money was required.

In the pre-internet age the club met in the hills but also weekly at a nominated pub in the city. In 1973 this was a place called *The Tavern* and raised funds by a weekly Wednesday night collection that was additional to the annual subscription in of £1.50 (£17). Further cash was obtained by persuading Doug Scott to give a very high profile talk in the De Montfort Hall that raised a great deal of money for the club and provided some security for the club to enable work on the hut to be commissioned. As we will see, it took a few more years and the influx of new members before anything major could be started.

## Success in the 1970s

By 1970 climbing in Britain had been utterly transformed with greatly increased personal mobility, increasingly effective equipment, and a glut of information provided as almost essential reading in magazines such as *Mountain, Climber and Rambler, Crags* and *RockSport*. The inevitable result was a massive leap in average standard on the rock. Bob Crosby kept a climbing diary and speaks of the early 1970s:

### Bob Crosby and the Bowline



*I joined the BCC in 1970, when we used to meet in the pub next to the police station, in Charles Street. My first climbing experience was with Pete Bottrill, on Christmas Curry, on Tremadoc. The first evening we stayed in the barn, opposite the café. There was just one straw covered floor to sleep on. I think it cost about 50p? Others turned up about 2am and sat chatting and making a brew for about an hour. We then moved up to the club hut on the Saturday night. It was just as the photo, with the sleeping section burnt down and the big double doors. There was an O/S toilet in a shed, (where the kitchen is now) and a small lean to kitchen at the back, but its entrance from the main room was bricked up. It was a soil floor still in the main lounge. Terry Vaughan laid a tarmac waterproof floor, a few years later. About that time I drove down from Leicester, with a door on the roof rack, and replaced the double doors. I'm not sure if the present front door is the one I fitted?*

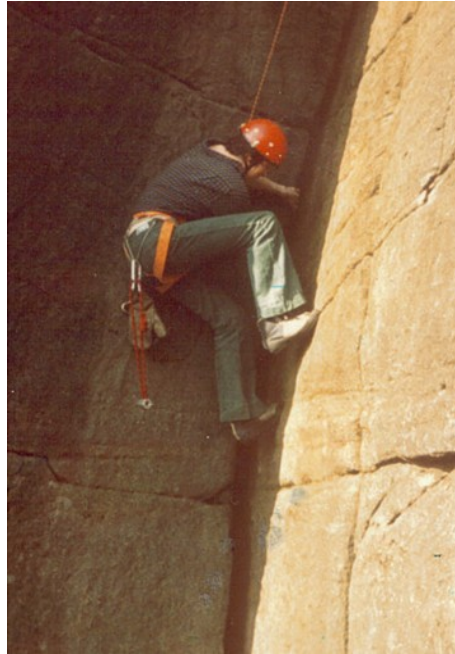
*Soon after I joined PP asked me to be his climbing partner. We did team up for some time. We were both also climbing instructors at the OPC Loughborough Rd, for a few years. Taking youths out for W/E, we used to take two weeks a year off work, to take them climbing in Derbyshire. We introduced them to hard climbing (PP leading harder climbs than me), and hard drinking.*

*We were all Crag Rats in the 1970's. I remember Pete Bottrill belaying someone, while sitting in his car, with the rope going out of the window. We tended to climb more boldly in the afternoon, after quaffing beer in the pub. We did a lot of pegging in the winters about this time. No one seemed to have much in the way of technique to start with, climbing with about 40 pegs, as we hadn't thought of using a trail rope. Climbing together became the fastest way of pegging, with the gap between climbers varying, depending on how confident we were in the peg placements. Later the use of a*



*prussic clamp allowed us to climb at different speeds, and vary the gap if required, while limiting the slack rope between us.*

For equipment we now had kermantel ropes, nut protection, stone hats, Whillans harnesses and EB rock boots pretty much as standard. The photograph below shows Phil Tyler modelling a full set whilst seconding *Green Crack* (Stanage). The flared jeans were optional.



*Green Crack, Stanage. Phil Tyler in full 1970s kit*

As Bob Crosby observes, there was a fashion for pegging and club members worked their way up most of the (then) Peak and even North Wales classic aid routes all of which are of course now passed off as 'free'. Some notable successes, such as the second ascent of *Detritus* on Great Orme (Paul Parker, Mick Brady), all three big Yorkshire overhangs in a day (Paul Parker, Phil Davies), were recorded but also failures were noted (Easter 1975 the *Nose of Strone Ulladale*: Paul Parker, Mick Brady and Paul Temple). Particular favourites with numerous ascents were Raven Tor's *Prow*, *Mecca* and, of course, Cheedale's *Big Plum*.



*BCC On the Matterhorn*



*Camping by Cloggy*



*Winter camping in Scotland*

*On the Etive Slabs*

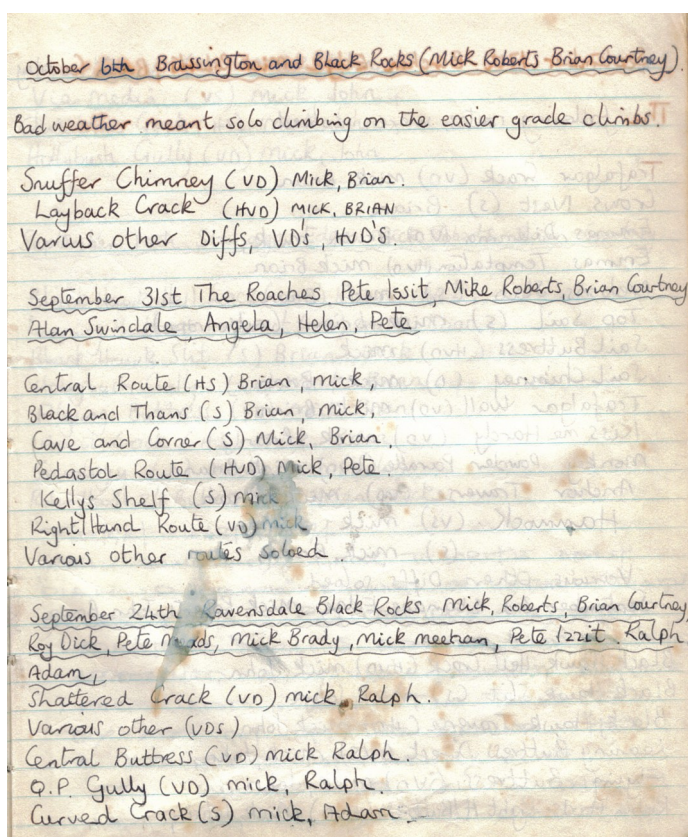


*Some scenes from the early 1970s*

*Photos: Chris Hardwick collection*



At some point in the 1970s the club started to maintain a record of climbs done, by whom, and when. As the decade progressed, so the climbs reported in these notorious *Bullshit Books* get harder and harder as standards rose and both explicit and more usually implicit competition raised its head. The club had several teams competing for attention and the books are dominated by entries from Paul Parker, Mike Brady, Simon Pollard, Pete Meads, Nigel Riddington, Mick Roberts, Brian Courtney, Ken Church and Pete Gutteridge. Every Sunday night, the active members assembled in a Leicester pub to debrief/boast about their exploits on the day, and every Friday night saw much the same people planning their weekends in some other local hostelry. A typical page from one such book is shown below and consists of just a list of rock routes done, though as will be seen, not at very high standard:



A page from a *Bullshit Book*, date uncertain

Of the listed climbers Mike Roberts dropped out later in the 1970s, Brian Courtney emigrated to California where in the years through to a 2005 meeting there with a fellow Bowliner he has ticked his way through almost all the serious Yosemite big walls, Pete Issit left for Thailand and Ken Church for Canada, but until recently Alan Swindale remained an 'out of town' club member.

Not all the club members were rock jocks. Sooner or later it was inevitable that some in the club would take the road to the isles to try their hand at winter climbing in Scotland. Climatologists will recognize that in the pre-global warming days, the 1970s saw a series of decent winters, until global warming

made it a fairly futile exercise and the delights of the Spanish Pyrenees and warm Mediterranean rock were discovered as alternatives. The new men took their winters seriously, starting the tradition that lasted for many years of an annual and usually 'interesting' winter in Scotland meet. That to Glencoe in February 1975 led to an ascent of *Crowberry Gully* and a famous event when Mike Brady managed to fall into an icy stream. The team finished in a white out with an epic 3 hours descent in the dark.



*Paul Parker on the crux of Crowberry Gully, assumed to be  
21<sup>st</sup> February 1975*

As if that wasn't enough, the 1976 meet to the same place was even more exciting, seeing Rip Roth and partner Amanda benighted on Stob Coire Nan Lochan, spending what must have been a very cold night before hitching a ride back down the hill in the rescue helicopter. Global warming might well have altered winters since the 1970s giving many fewer opportunities for winter climbing, but the impression gained is of members such as Ken Church, Steve Harrison and Andy Russell out in all winter weathers in pursuit of the icy Holy Grail.

A notable event of the mid-decade was the re-discovery of the 'crag' at *Slawston Bridge* that did a lot to keep up the club's collective finger strength. Johnny Dawes, now around 50 but in the 1980s arguably the world's finest rock climber, who was at school in Uppingham has recently written:

*Climbing made me ecstatically happy. I used to climb at Slawston Bridge, an old railway bridge near to my parents' home in Leicestershire. I'd cycle there and spend a couple of hours on it. On the cycle home I had that clear physical fizz to my body, almost like I was made of air ... There was no philosophy to it – it was just riding down the road having exercised my whole body. The dog had been walked" (Summit, Spring 2011, pages 26-27)*

I doubt that the original railway engineers who built the bridge or those who decapitated it when the line closed realized that both acts led to the creation of what to local climbers is now a major recreational resource.



## The Demise of the Leicester Association of Mountaineers

All clubs have good times and bad times. As BCC prospered in the 1970s, so the LAM fell into what proved to be terminal decline. These events are related. When I moved to Leicester in October 1973, the only local climber I had heard of was Ken Vickers, so I duly showed up one Wednesday evening for drinks with the LAM in the *King Richard* pub and managed to get out on a few meets. Attending LAM meets was a bit odd, because it turned out that almost all were also *Climbers Club* (CC) meets or were held in association with the *Rugby Mountaineering Club* (RMC) with which LAM shared the Cwm Eigiau hut. I have no problem with either the CC or the RMC, but I hardly felt at home and in truth the LAM was both stale and unwelcoming. Although it took another five years before it was formally wound up, and it might well have happened anyway, its demise, or at least the start of its demise, can be dated exactly to an almost random chance meeting.

There is an entry in my climbing diary for 17<sup>th</sup> March 1974 about an afternoon at *Yarncliffe Quarry* when I was climbing with Pete Meads, and we both at the time were LAM members. It reads

*'... and finally a race against a guy called Paul from the Bowline Club of Leicester.'*

In fact, the afternoon was spent in what all parties now realize was a childish competition, soloing about on the big slab in the quarry at increasingly higher and higher technical level but with this *'guy called Paul'* leading the way. At the time Pete and I were with LAM and climbing at HVS/5A standard. Little did we know what we were up against and, almost inevitably, the competition ended in the inevitable victory for *'Paul'* with both Pete and I marooned on small holds politely requesting top ropes. The very same day is noted in Paul Parker's diary:

March 17th  
 YARNCLIFFE + SNEY MABLETON  
 Weather: Windy but fine  
 with Kuth, Alan Swindale, Chris Hurdwick  
 A good day from a ego point of view  
 (none that is)

ANTS ARETE	55'	S	Solo
LATECOMER	55'	VS	Solo
ANTS WALL	55'	VS	Solo
ANGULAR CLIMB	55'	VD	Solo
CARDINALS ARETE	65'	HS	Solo
TWO ROUTES AT	65'	VS	LED
VS STANARD	65'	VS	Solo
CARDINALS CRACK	65'	VS	LED
WALL CLIMB	65'	VS	TOP ROPE
GRIFFINS WALL	65'	S	Solo
INTERPILLAR CORNER	65'	S	Solo
PEDESTAL ARETE	60'	HS	LED
PEDESTAL DIRECT	65'	HVS	LED
PEDESTAL CRACK	75'	HS	Solo
SNEY MABLETON			
MORRA ARETE FIRST PITCH	180'	VS	LED
TIGER TRAVERSE	30'	VD	LED

Note the comment about it being

*'a good day from an ego point of view'*

which I take to be a reference to the competition. This was the first time I knew anything about the BCC and my first meeting with Paul Parker who shortly afterwards moved to a house in Countesthorpe almost exactly the same distance west of the *Axe and Square* as mine was to its east. Thus was born the nucleus of a group resident in the south of Leicester that was to become known in the club throughout the 1980s as the *Countesthorpe mafia*.

This accidental meeting led to a gradual exit from the LAM, from the *King Richard* (LAM) down the road to the *Pineapple* (BCC), led by Pete Meads who took up climbing with BCC member Mike 'Strangler' Brady. Wednesday nights were never the same. For a while I'd go to the *King Richard* for a dose of LAM, then drift down the road to the *Pineapple*, which was a much more interesting, even exciting, place to be. Others preceded and/or followed. By the next summer (1975) the migration was complete, a notable entry in the book being simply a record that Paul Parker shared a rope with two of the principals of the LAM, Ray Dring and Ken Vickers, on High Tor's *Debauchery*.

It took a few more years for the LAM to be formally wound up, by which time I was serving as BCC Secretary. On 21<sup>st</sup> May 1980 at an Extraordinary General Meeting, the 18 former LAM members who could be contacted wound that club up, with the remaining traceable assets being transferred to BCC. By that time, a number of former LAM members were serving the club as committee members and somewhat later as club chairs (Ray Dring, 1980-81; Ken Vickers 1999-2000). The migration from LAM into Bowline brought with it new members (Pete Meads, Alan and Jan Griffiths, the Merrick and the Gutteridge brothers, Bert Henry, Ray Dring and his 'babies' Neil and Craig, Malcolm Emery, Ken Vickers, John and Ann Cleaver, etc) and climbing experience that has had a considerable effect, most of it I think positive, on the club. It is to BCC's credit that we were welcomed into the BCC family and that our various abilities were recognized and deployed to the benefit of all. In 1976 the Chair of the club was Phil Davies and the first issues of a regular newsletter called *Bowlines* emerged. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> issue for the Silver Anniversary year of 1976 he noted the migration as follows:

*'Who would have thought that 1975 would see a pair of Bowliners in Yosemite? Admittedly, it was a small party and 50% of it was recovering from a bad dose of LAM, but their performance was impressive. Talking about the LAM (one is allowed to do this these days) there seems to be a general drift towards us. The milk following the cream? We're pleased to see you lads.'*

There is a moral in the demise of the LAM about openness to change that the BCC has subsequently not forgotten, or been allowed to forget, by those involved.



*Mike Brady on Outer Limits,  
Yosemite*



*Mike Brady on the Nose of El Cap headwall, 1975*

The Yosemite Bowliners were Mike Brady and Pete Meads and their impressive performance included a lot of hard free climbs such as *Outer Limits* (5.10) plus an early ascent of *Triple Direct* on *El Capitan*, the first club ascent of any big wall, described in his UKC log by Pete Meads as:

*'Our first Big Wall (and our last together, coincidentally) - Four and a half days climbing in perfect conditions after a prolonged wet spell (lucky or what?) - takes in 1/3 Salathe, 1/3 Muir, 1/3 Nose with lots of aid climbing. We actually still had to carry pegs & use a hammer to place them! Still, we had lots of practice in aid climbing from Malham, Kilnsey etc. (which modern climbers have to manage without, I suppose). Actual grade about 5.9 & A2.*

At this point in the narrative I hesitated. Is the success on a Yosemite big wall by two club members an appropriate point on which to sign off the club's first 25 years? On reflection I think it is. Three thoughts led me to decide this. First, their 1975 climb was at the time probably the most serious and committing yet by anyone in the club. Second, the contrast with the world of climbing that the late Mike Kestell and his friends knew and that experienced by Pete Meads and Mike Brady might be miles apart in technology and geography but I am certain that they would have approved of the underlying spirit. Third, more practically, who in BCC or LAM would have predicted that a *team* of BCC and ex-LAM would make such an ascent?

## **Some Concluding Remarks**

This history leaves the club in 1976 when it had around 65 members with a substantial number rock climbing at around today's E1 to E3 standard, and was beginning to turn to Scottish winter mountaineering, but, with one or two exceptions, it had very little Alpine or Greater Ranges experience. It owned a

ruined Welsh garage with planning permission to become a club hut, some architect plans, and some applications out for grant aid, that together had the potential turn to this into a comfortable hut. The next 25 years realized this potential, doubled the club membership, and saw a great many classic climbs ticked off by club members.

It is worth concluding with some comparative remarks and bringing the record, if not the full story, closer to today. I suspect that a very large proportion of the local clubs affiliated to the *British Mountaineering Council* (BMC) will have similar stories to tell about their origins although few will have as long a history. Sadly, if the number of enrolled members is taken as an index, not all clubs have fared as well as Bowline. The general trend has been one of decline. In 2011, I was a BMC volunteer on a *Clubs Working Group*, looking into its relationship with the affiliated clubs, a job that gave me access to the extant clubs data. In 2011, when Bowline was in its 60<sup>th</sup> year we had some 125 members, a little down on a peak of 136, but still placing the club in the largest 15% of all clubs in England and Wales, including those, such as *FRCC*, *Climbers Club*, and *Pinnacle* that recruit nationally. In the same year over half of all the regional clubs had a membership less than 50 and some clubs active in the 1950s and 1960s had disappeared.

So, why, relatively speaking did the BCC prosper in the late 70s and beyond? What lessons can we learn from this history? I suspect that there are three main reasons for the relative success of the club. First, from these early days, thanks to the foresight of a Frank Galbraith, we have our own hut in Eryri to act as a central focus and benefit. Second, from the late 1980s we have the popular *Charnwood Hills Race* initiated by Ken Vickers, that has made the club financially viable, able to meet the demands of the BMC club member taxation regime, yet at the same time able to keep the annual subscription at a reasonable level. Third, thanks to any number of people who decided that that the club should continue with its very open and non-elitist membership policy, we have always welcomed new members with open arms. As Frank Galbraith noted many years ago

*'we are not solely a rock climbing club'*

and have never been such. Indeed it may be that clubs that concentrated on hard rock climbing, such as the *Rock and Ice* and *Alpha* so prominent in the 1960s, are precisely the ones that, as their membership aged and was no longer able to climb hard, found survival impossible. In its next 25 years, from 1976 to the fiftieth anniversary in 2001, Bowline members took up road and fell running, sailing, sailing and fell running together, and cycling (road and MTB) but also continued to walk very long distances and climb difficult rock and ice in Britain as well as on some of the great alpine faces and mountains in the Greater Ranges.



It should be apparent that, although the form of words has changed a bit since 1951, constitutionally, the *Objectives of the Club* have remained as:

- (a) to foster a love of mountains and hill country and a knowledge of mountaineering especially amongst young people;*
- (b) to encourage the sport of mountaineering in all its forms; and*
- (c) to facilitate its practice by encouraging meets in suitable areas.*

This more-or-less is what the club did in its first quarter century and has continued to do ever since. I like to think that Mike Kestell and his scouting mates would have approved.

## Annex: Sources

In assembling the history use has been made of a variety of sources. All those that can be contacted have given the permission for the materials to be used. The illustrations from the *Leicester Mercury* and the *Leicester Illustrated Chronicle* remain © of the Leicester Public Records Office. Permission to duplicate has been granted.

Until very recently the origins of the club in the 1950s did not seem to be well documented, but this changed dramatically in July 2017 when former secretary and Chair Peter Thompson discovered a treasure trove of records in an old suitcase in his attic relating to the foundation of the club in 1951 and its early years through to around 1960. Quite apart from their local importance, to anyone interested in the development of mountaineering in Britain during this period they constitute a fascinating time capsule and much of this history is based on them. Unfortunately, and with only a few exceptions, we do not have agendas and minutes of any early meetings, both of the committee and of general meetings.

From the late 1960s onwards BCC's history is moderately well documented. First, we have the occasional *Newsletters* to members which eventually matured (if that be the right word) into *Bowlines* for which copies exist for some of the 1960s and 1970s, and most of the 1980s and 1990s, together with a series of club records including AGM and committee minutes back to around 1968. Copies of most, if not all, of *Bowlines* from 1972 to 2000 or thereabouts have been scanned to PDF files by John Brown and are available as a CD.

Second we have the *Bullshit Books*. From the late 1960s to around 2000, these provided excellent potential for boasting and at times some rather ill-tempered competitive activities particularly, but not entirely, on rock. Some years ago these books were lost, but, like the materials from the 1950s noted above, in 2010 they almost miraculously resurfaced in the attic of a former club Chair. There are four such books, all in a poor state of repair and the oldest of these covers the period March 1969 to April 1977 but helpfully has an annex (presumably written from memory) back to September 1967 and a selection of 'club cards' for the period 1964 – 1968. Somewhat annoyingly we are told that '*This replaces the previous log book which disappeared at the end of August 1974*'. We also have a few personal climbing diaries that form an even more fascinating insight in what it was like to be a club member and to climb at that time.

At some point these materials could and should form the basis of a continuation of this history into the 1980s and beyond, but this would be a substantial task made more difficult still by the increasing use of the club website to disseminate information and record activities. The author records a personal view that the

Club should develop some better means of recording and preserving its activities for the benefit (or otherwise) of posterity.

## **Internal Sources**

Abelthorpe, Charlie (1993) letter to the late Ken Vickers dated 9 October 1993 published in *Bowlines*

*Bowlines*: copies of most, if not all, those from 1972 to 2000 or thereabouts.

These have been scanned to PDF files by John Brown and are available on CD

*Bullshit Books* as listed in the Annex

Crosby, Bob: extracts from climbing diary

Cottle, Pam: folio of early LAM photographs, website comments

Hayto, John: letter to Bob Crosby, 2011

Meads, Peter: photographs from 1975

*Minutes of Annual and Extraordinary General Meetings*, from 1973

Parker, Paul: extracts from climbing diaries, 1976 – 1998

Riordan, Roger: emails to Andy Potter and David Unwin 2018

Thompson, Pete: various memorabilia from the BCC in the 1960s

Unwin, Dave: extracts from climbing diaries, 1957-2011

## **External References**

Angell, S. (1988) *Pinnacle Club: A History of Women Climbing*. (Published privately)

*Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, Saturday April 18, 1953 and *Leicester Mercury*, &

*Leicester Evening Mail*, Monday January 15<sup>th</sup> 1962 from the Public Record Office, Wigston)

McDonald, Pete (2018) *The Story of White Hall: Outdoor Education across the Decades*, (Published privately)

Pete McDonald (1995) *Climbing Lessons: Inside Outdoor Education* (Published privately)

Newman, P. (Editor, 2003) *The Rock and Heather Years, 1953-2003*. (Published privately)

Parker, A (2011) *Alpha Males* (Peterborough: FastPrint)

Russell, Jean (Editor, 1974) *Climb if you Will* (Rocksport)

Smythe, J and J Cleare (1966) *Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia* (London: Secker and Warburg)

Thompson, S (2010) *Unjustifiable Risk? The Story of British Climbing* (Cicerone)

Reading Chapter 6 *1939-1970: The Hard Men in an Affluent Society* will reinforce my point about how sporting histories are almost always about the so-called 'cutting edge', but it also contains some perceptive analyses of the societal changes that in part drove the development of local climbing clubs such as the BCC.

Vickers, K (1966) *Rock Climbs in Leicestershire*, Leicester Association of Mountaineers, 48pp (The 'Red Guide')

Vickers, K. (1977) *Climbs in Leicestershire*, Leicester Mountaineering Club, 48pp (The 'Yellow Guide')

Walker, D. (2004) The evolution of climbing clubs in Britain, *Alpine Journal*, 2004, 187-195