

BMC Eastern Moors Advisory Group

Management Plan for the Climbing Edges

Introduction

This paper meets a request to the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and National Trust (NT) for a management plan for the climbing edges on the Eastern Moors Estate. RSBP and NT are signatories to a 15 year contract (plus 30 year extension option) with the Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA) for the future custodianship of that Estate.

The background to the BMC group and its membership is at Annex 1.

The climbing edges in question are Birchen, Baslow, Curbar, Froggatt and White Edge. It is however intended that the plan may also be seen as relevant to the neighbouring edges of Chatsworth, Gardoms and Dobb Edge which are independently owned and managed by Chatsworth Estates. It may facilitate dialogue on common land management issues across the same Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The paper considers six key areas: Cultural Heritage and Landscape; Conservation Priorities; Access, Recreation and Community; both Ethical and Physical Management for the Climbing Edges; Resource Implications.

Cultural Heritage and Landscape

The heritage of the Eastern Moors is extensive. It embraces ancient and industrial archaeology; the social context of the access movement nationally; a moorland landscape featuring dramatic gritstone edges and wooded valleys; land management which has given a mosaic of ericaceous moorland; associated wetland areas, riparian corridors, and grassland meadows. All this confers iconic status. It commands a special place in the hearts and psyche of Peakland village communities to the west and Sheffield and Chesterfield to the east for quiet enjoyment and adventure.

It is an absolute prerequisite that any management plan is contextualised by understanding, preservation and appreciation of all these features. Nor is this fundamental simply retrospective: it must be sufficiently robust to embrace the impacts of global warming, possible pressures for alternative future land use plus the imperatives of carbon and water retention.

An associated essential is retention of favourable SSSI status and meeting of Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets. Indeed, maintaining and increasing species diversity in a way which is compatible with public benefit, enhanced awareness, understanding and appreciation² of the Estate, and fuller use of its unique facilities, extends the vision which underpins the BMC's approach.

Conservation Priorities

It is outside the remit of this paper to determine Conservation Priorities: this is the function of the RSPB and NT with their partners the PDNPA, Sheffield Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Natural England (NE). Suffice it to say here that any approach to crag management must be wholly consistent with their overarching priorities.

The climbing edges are however unique in the landscape both in terms of their special character and the abrupt barrier they provide between two habitat types, namely moorland and woodland. There is essentially no gradation between the two, though this effect is less pronounced with White Edge. Again a unique habitat within the Estate is found upon the rock faces themselves. A management plan for the edges specifically must therefore address three very different habitats.

Our understanding is that the intention of RSPB and NT is, as part of a wider woodland management strategy, to create a more pronounced gradation from woodland to scrub below the edges to increase habitat diversity and reveal the special landscape feature of the edges within the wider landscape. This defining characteristic has only been lost in recent years. It is missed by residents and visitors alike along the Derwent valley. A complementary aim is to deter the spread of birch seed, borne on prevailing westerly winds, from mixed woodland below the crag to open ericaceous moorland above. The BMC wholeheartedly endorses such an approach.

Management of the edges must also embrace very different pressures on top of and below the edges. Major pedestrian paths run along the tops of all the edges whilst, in the main, access to the faces themselves and to the foot of the edges sees little use by members of the public who are not rock climbers.

Access, Recreation and Community

Broadly speaking the BMC considers there to be reasonable access on foot to all parts of the Estate. That suggests that major change is neither indicated nor necessary, and given the adverse impact of any infrastructure development upon the landscape should be resisted.

However, we believe better use could be made of existing and under used access points, such as lay-bys on the Baslow to Owlbar road (also a public transport route). These tend to lack convenient access furniture. We also think consideration should be given to establishing a circular route by creating a better link between White Edge and the main path along the top of the Edges, perhaps in the area of the Froggatt stone circle.

We think it better to continue to tolerate some roadside parking at busy times at Curbar Gap than to increase man made intrusion by any car park extension. We accept there may be an alternative view from the local community. Nonetheless we believe the status quo to have fewer disadvantages.

Here, as elsewhere, ease of parking will direct preferred access routes. Policy on, and siting of, pay and display machines will be a major determinant of where people park. At North Lees conservation priorities over-ride other concerns, and are thus protected.

We regard car parking provision at the northern end of the Froggatt path to be adequate, and also at Silitoe Wood. We think however there is a case for making some hard standing / grasscrete beside the minor road from which Gardoms Edge is accessed. At Robin Hood we think making fuller use of existing facilities is a better option than extending them.

It is outside the remit of this paper to argue for enhanced concessionary routes for other recreational users, principally mountain bikers and horse riders. Extending rights on footpaths to mountain bikers can be contentious for walkers and will not be appropriate everywhere. Where it may be appropriate it should be considered carefully. However, we have no objection in principle to any such enhancement – rather we would encourage it with these provisos: that both existing and new surfaces are sufficiently robust to take extra traffic; that conservation priorities are not compromised; that archaeological remains (which may not be recorded) are not disturbed; that establishment of new concessionary arrangements are not abused by unsustainable extension onto open moorland by user.

We strongly oppose any provision for motor propelled vehicles anywhere on the Estate. However we favour the establishment of a concessionary route for motorised vehicles – particularly invalid conveyances – along the Barbrook track at least as far as the lake.

A special feature of Froggatt and Curbar Edges has been the ability to retain access to them via the public right of way along the top when other venues may be closed because of fire risk. The BMC urges that this arrangement is continued. We further urge that, in the unhappy event of another outbreak of foot and mouth disease, the option of keeping these two edges open is revived.

There has been no history of community involvement in the genesis of any management plan for the Estate, nor of dialogue between different recreational users. The climbing interest has been relatively discrete, tucked away below the edges and there has been no conflict of interest with other recreation users, with land managers or with the local community. The number of ‘other recreational users’ is significant and includes

Climbing	Bouldering	Abseiling
Scrambling	Weaselling	Group Use
Outdoor Education	Orienteering	Fell Running
Walking	Mountain Biking	Horse riding
Paragliding	Photography	Painting
Archaeology	Natural History	Family enjoyment
Dog Walking	Dog Sleds	Camping

A raft of issues is common to many of these, including climbing. These relate to group use, educational use, instructional use, sponsored events, organised events – that is to say where the activity is not an informal ad hoc event involving one or two individuals. We suggest that where group use is concerned key stakeholders should include a representative a body like the Institute of Outdoor Learning. Consideration of these common issues may extend to whether there should be distinction between

charitable, educational and commercial activity, and if there should how that distinction might be defined. Similarly it raises the issue of ownership of the landscape if an image of it is sold or used commercially eg in an advertisement.

Access on foot is underwritten by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and permitted activity defined within it. Difficulties can arise where this is extended, perhaps by the urban fringe community, into activity like rough camping. The consideration of how this is done, and by how many, is perhaps as important as whether it is done. Thus on its own land the BMC approach is to tolerate low key discrete and responsible activity where it is essentially unseen. Within the Eastern Moors Estate an appropriate facility does exist at the Eric Byrne Camp Site but until the management of that facility can be reviewed it is difficult to promote it.

Management for the Climbing Edges

In proposing a management plan for the climbing edges the approach is pragmatic rather than aspirational. Thus it is not our policy to propose anything we feel we are unlikely to be able to deliver over the next fifteen years and beyond. Nationally the BMC has one Officer in England who is responsible for access and land management issues, one who is responsible for volunteer co-ordination, and one in Wales who covers both functions. We are otherwise wholly reliant on BMC volunteers and on local climbing clubs.

Two distinct aspects of the proposed management plan are the ethical / informational / promotional (ie where the climbs are, how to get to them, how to conduct oneself and good practice for both individuals and groups) and the physical (ie what happens on the ground).

Ethic, Information, Good Practice

Whilst not specific to the Eastern Edges this element of the BMC's work is integral to sound management of that Estate. This paper documents it, but does not attempt to explore it in detail.

At a general level the BMC provides, and communicates to its Members (and more widely the whole climbing community) through its web site, Summit magazine and Area Meetings a range of publications on care of and responsibility for the natural environment. Examples include BMC Crag and Habitat Management Plan, BMC Green Guide to the Uplands, Crag Code, National Guidelines for Bouldering. Many climbing venues are in specially designated environmentally sensitive areas, be they SSSIs or Nature Reserves, and the Eastern Moors is no exception. We believe the value of these in influencing behaviour and inculcating a wider responsibility towards the care of the environment to have been significant.

Similarly a very strong ethic exists, effectively promulgated by common consent peer grouping, on technical aspects relating to climbing upon natural gritstone edges. It is all too easy to take this ethic for granted, and to understate it. It relates to clean climbing practice and is probably the strongest climbing ethic anywhere worldwide. It encompasses rope technique and practice, gear placement, fixed point protection, rock

care, cleaning and brushing, vegetation removal – besides matters of general conduct at the crag. There is a very strong sense of what you do and what you do not do.

This extends to ethic regarding Group Use, where the environmental impact can be significant. At Birchen and Froggatt this effect is more pronounced than at other venues on the Estate. There is room to review this area of activity with RSPB / NT staff to determine whether we need to revisit it. Our current experience is that Peak based educational centres generally act very responsibly, and that where problems have occurred they have been with groups visiting from further afield.

The relatively new activity of bouldering – climbing technically difficult features at relatively low level without ropes but with large absorbent mats – is progressively evolving its own codes of conduct eg regarding brushing of holds and ground erosion.

Provision of essential information is critical. The key and indispensable publication is the guidebook. This contains descriptions and grading of all climbing routes, and traditionally includes access and good practice advice, general information, history, conservation, geology and ecology. Guidebooks are a testimony to the concerted and demanding efforts of many volunteers over the years, and to the quality of their commitment and output. They are supplemented by quick reference information on access on the BMC's Regional Access Database (RAD).

Definitive guidebook information in the Peak has traditionally been supplied by the BMC. The most recent such publication covering the Eastern Edges is *Eastern Gritstone: Froggatt to Black Rocks* (2010). *Rockfax's Eastern Grit* (2006) is a selective guidebook whilst *Vertebrate* publish the *Peak District Bouldering Guide* (2011). All include information on access, conservation and good practice.

All these publications are effective in promoting the area to visitors, who will come specifically for the climbing literally from all over the world – and in turn make significant contribution to the local economy. An additional form of promotion is through climbing, walking and outdoor magazines with illustrated articles both on specific areas, climbs, walks, aspect of history as well as on environmental, conservation and ethical issues. It is important such publications continue to flourish. Where specific messages need to be got across to the wider public the BMC offers an effective communication channel through such publications and its own and a number of other web sites to which it has direct links. Indeed the web site approach offers near immediate penetration of user groups for important messages: fire severity index information is one example.

During its management of the Eastern Moors Estate the PDNPA, with whom the BMC worked closely, had no need to supplement any of this input in respect of the climbing – and walking – fraternity. The BMC's is the principle provider of most of this input to the effective management of the Estate. Whilst guidebooks and magazines inevitably are not free, information and guidance (whether provided by the BMC or through private web sites) is equally and openly available to members and non members alike, and can be accessed free of charge.

Physical – Below the Edge

At a relatively mundane level the BMC will arrange, from time to time, litter picks around the climbing edges where ad hoc public spirited action by individuals is not sufficient to keep the place completely litter free.

The major concern for climbers is exuberant tree growth in recent years below the climbing edges which has shaded out significant areas and had adverse impact on landscape characteristic. This implies a need for selective, but not wholesale, management of the tree growth beneath the edges that is consistent with the general approach to habitat management in this area set out above, and to the wider management of important woodlands that have received no care for over 60 years.

The scale of this challenge is such that it requires a strategic approach by RSPB / NT, with NE, but in furtherance of this the BMC would wish to make a detailed on site survey this year of affected areas (White Edge may be excepted) with Estate staff to pinpoint those places of most concern. This is particularly desirable on some of the minor buttresses which have all but disappeared from view and may be otherwise overlooked. These include Hairpin Boulder, Hidden Buttress, Barrel Buttress, Boat Buttress, Krypton Factor Buttress, Downs Crack Buttress, Vomer Buttress, Brookside Buttress, Ladies Buttress, Screaming Dream Buttress, Short Buttress, Deadbay Buttress and Cioch Buttress, besides the main edges themselves.

This site survey should extend to trees growing on the rock faces themselves (and treatment of resultant brash) since access to these may present less of a problem for climbers than for others.

It should also determine what work RSPB / NT want to be undertaken by contractors, where volunteers and local climbing clubs should play a part and where it would be helpful to have volunteers on site to guide felling work.

The same site visit should establish baseline data and identify points where informal paths below the edges are badly eroded and remedial action is indicated. The most apparent such site is at Curbar below L'Horla, and would likely require a specialist team.

A second such 'below the edge' site is Trackside Boulder where the BMC would prefer a more durable surface than woodchip. Locally acquired stone was used to good effect at Stanage Plantation for similar work. This work was undertaken by volunteers and funded by the BMC.

Physical – Rock Faces

Established climbs are essentially vegetation free, for one reason or another, and should be so maintained.

Where vegetation persists in isolated bedding planes it is proposed we formalise, as part of any agreement, an understanding that it should not be disturbed.

Established ethic ensures that features on rock faces are not disturbed, though it can happen that flakes break loose from time to time either through natural process or unintentional damage. There may be a very few sites where regular insertion and removal of protection devices has resulted in breach of hard surface patina. Top Sail on Birchen may in fact be the only example. The BMC has some experience in the application of certain resins in such atypical circumstance and where this prevents worse damage it may be an option.

Ethic again guards against the permanent placement of any extraneous matter in the rock faces. Established good practice guidance prevents significant, if not complete, damage from rope friction in top roping and abseiling.

There has never been any call for restrictions in respect of breeding birds on Eastern Moors Edges, though it is always possible consideration may need to be given to such in the future. The BMC will agree and promote such restrictions where there is prior consultation, and where it is satisfied these are evidentially based and represent the least restrictive option. The BMC does not agree precautionary restrictions because experience has shown these to have no positive effect. Voluntary arrangements elsewhere in the SSSI, at Stanage, work very well.

Physical – Above the Edges

This is common ground with other recreational users. A presumption against any spread of woodland habitat onto moorland apart, sustainability of the surface of major rights of way and concessionary paths is the issue here for recreational users, along with spread of foot (or wheel) caused erosion onto open areas of moorland.

The most severely eroded section of path is on White Edge Lodge, above the Lodge, but the whole of this path has become significantly more eroded over the last 30 years – due to footfall and the nature of much of the surface which is essentially bare peat.

Excellent work was carried out on the main path above Curbar and Froggatt but did not extend to a central area. This should receive attention before it deteriorates further, and before it is subjected to any additional use by bicycles or horses.

It is the BMC's view that substantial work on paths of this nature is a matter for professional contractors rather than volunteers. The Upland Paths Trust (UPT) has from time to time produced publications on good practice, though both NT and PDNPA teams also have extensive and exemplary experience in this area of work.

Establishment of new desire lines by other recreational user groups, and the possible circular route mentioned above, should be discussed in a wider user group forum.

Resource Implications

The proposed site visit with Estate staff should be scheduled later this year and identify which tasks are suitable for volunteers, which should be scheduled by RSPB / NT, indicate potential funding sources and, where appropriate, be mapped.

The BMC will be pleased to continue to contribute its full range of input through ethic, information, good practice, promotion and to explore with RSPB / NT ways in which any of this can be specially adapted for the Eastern Moors. Associated costs will be met by the BMC and its volunteers.

For tasks identified with and agreed by RSPB / NT we, with local climbing clubs, can offer unskilled but willing manpower. It is perhaps inappropriate to use the word 'unskilled' because various levels of expertise do exist where these may not be formally recognised. Depending upon the task suitable tools may or may not be available to volunteers. The BMC currently has no in house stock – what we did have is pretty unserviceable and has been trashed. BMC volunteers will be covered by BMC Insurance but will not be professionally supervised.

Professional expertise is available informally and through goodwill in matters involving rope access.

In terms of financial resource the BMC has a limited Crag Care Fund and the BMC's Access and Conservation Trust (ACT) may have additional fairly modest sums subject to approval of any application by its Trustees. ACT funding may be used to part fund projects, and this can be particularly helpful if it triggers matching funding from another source. It is not generally available for repeat projects.

Conclusion

This paper provides an outline for the BMC's approach to management of the Eastern Moors climbing edges. It is a document for discussion, and indeed for adaptation if changed or evolving circumstances so direct. It should translate on completion of site visits into a mapped, timetabled and costed document for action that has been agreed with RSPB and NT. The text should be kept up to date as an agreed policy statement.

Simon Jacques
Henry Folkard
22 June 2010

ANNEX 1

BMC Peak Area Eastern Moors Advisory Group

Current Members

Adam Long	Access Representative: Gritstone plus
Simon Jacques	Access Representative: Guidebooks
Clare Reading	Instructor: Group Use: Camp Sites
Phil Robins	Local Activist
Neil Foster	Peak Area Chair + National Council
Chris Moor	Local Activist
Henry Folkard	Access Representative: ACEG: LMG

This core group was appointed by the Peak Area Meeting. The intention is to keep it at the current size. Depending upon the outcome of the PDNPA's Asset Review the Group may extend its remit to North Lees. It is also available to NT / RSPB as a sounding board on matters relevant to Burbage, Millstone, Houndkirk and the wider SSSI area.

Paper members of the Group, and occasional attendees, include

Dave Bishop	Access Representative: Roaches and the West
Rick Gibbon	Access Representative: North Peak + National Council
Dave Brown	Peak Climbing Club
Lynn Robinson	Peak Area Secretary