

## Draft

### The Very First Wall.

Martin Berzins .

The Leeds University climbing wall was the first , and for a long time the only, purpose-built climbing wall in this country and as such has played an important role in shaping the sport of rock-climbing. This article will show why the wall , built in the Physical Education Department in 1964 by Don Robinson , has been and still is influential with regard to the way that people climb today.

Yorkshire has always been important in British rock climbing and indeed some of the earliest outcrop climbing was recorded by Cecil Slingsby on the moors above Skipton in the 1860's. There are two main types of climbed-upon rock in Yorkshire: the rough brown gritstone of outcrops such as Almscliffe near Harrogate or the Cow and Calf rocks near Ilkley contrasting with the smooth white limestone of Malham Cove and Gordale Scar. Until the 1960s limestone was regarded as too loose and steep for climbing without artificial aids but from then onwards the emphasis has been on free climbing in which the climber uses only hands and feet to make progress and mechanical devices solely for protection. One of the legendary climbers of the 1960s was the Bradford wool merchant Allan Austin who with his contemporaries dominated Yorkshire and Lake District rock climbing. Austin's fiercest climb is the Wall of Horrors at Almscliffe Crag which he climbed unroped in 1961 and which no-one else was able to climb for the next nine years.

On a dismal November day in 1970 a Leeds undergraduate , John Syrett , climbed Wall of Horrors. The astonishment of the climbing world was compounded by the fact that Syrett had only been climbing for one year and that this year had been largely spent on the Leeds University climbing wall developing the strength , stamina and technique needed to establish a new generation of gritstone climbs. Coupled with this skill was a boldness of mind that allowed twenty or thirty foot falls onto the ground to be acceptable. The next three years saw a series of important climbs, from Syrett and his talented friends.

It is natural to ask what was so special about the way these people used the climbing wall , for it is not difficult for anyone to reach the top of the wall. The art in using the wall for training is to allow only certain combinations of holds. Ordinary free - climbing is mimicked by using a specified sequence of holds in any way. Strenuous climbing is practised by not allowing the feet to stray onto the holds and dis-

## Draft

tance added by traversing the wall. The most difficult climbs on the wall use only minute brick-edges for the hands and holds for the feet. Such climbs are the speciality of Allan Manson , a Leeds teacher, who has been able to apply the same technique to pulling on tiny gritstone pebbles on his new climbs. There is an parallel here with research in the man days of effort expended to climb a particular hold sequence on the wall. As research becomes more advanced the problems tend to become more difficult and time-consuming to solve and so it is with new problems on the wall. The difference perhaps is that failure on a difficult research problem will not have quite the same 'down to earth' consequences .

The next phase of rock climbing development was forced by Peter Livesey , now a lecturer at Bradford and Bingley College , who was responsible for combining athletic training on the climbing wall with a ruthless professional approach to pioneering new climbs. Livesey took the technical standards initiated by Syrett and applied them in Britain , France and the U.S.A. to establish himself as one of the world's leading rock climbers. The publicity brought by Livesey and Syrett to the climbing wall encouraged visitors from afar to visit what was then the only good wall in the country. Lake District experts would drive from Carlisle on the chance of finding the wall open on wet Sundays and on winter Tuesday evenings visiting climbers from Derbyshire and Lancashire come to measure themselves against the wall and the local climbers. Alan Rouse , a leading Himalayan climber who died on K2 this year, even hitch-hiked from Cambridge for an evening on the climbing wall. Another famous alpinist and himalayan climber Alex MacIntyre , who later lost his life on Annapurna in 1983, studied at the University, like many others, because of the climbing wall. A Punch cartoon tour of the Universities in 1978 rightly acclaimed Leeds as having the best climbing wall in the country.

In the 1980s Rob Gawthorpe , a postgraduate in the Earth Sciences Department and an exceptional climber has used intense training on the climbing wall to produce outstandingly difficult climbs. In an era when most of the best climbers in Britain concentrate on climbing in Derbyshire and Yorkshire and new climbs are usually repeated within a week some of Gawthorpe's new climbs on both the gritstone and limestone crags have remained unrepeated for a number of years and have forced even other 'expert' climbers to re-examine their their notions of what is possible.

Recently the climbing wall has also seen international attention. Dennis Gray the general secretary of the British Mountaineering Council is a regular visitor to the climbing wall and so many visiting foreign

## Draft

mountaineering delegations have been exposed to its charms. A French Ministry of Sport working party containing leading French climbing and media celebrity Patrick Edlinger visited the wall to learn how such walls should be built in France. Edlinger, in the best traditions of a non-competitive sport, spent the whole of the evening trying (unsuccessfully) to establish his authority by climbing an as yet unclimbed problem.

The last three years have seen new advances in British rock-climbing standards on the limestone cliffs of the Yorkshire and Derbyshire Dales. It is perhaps significant that many of the major ascents were made by climbers who were trained on the University climbing wall. Graham Desroy who edited the new guidebook that chronicled these achievements has used his knowledge of the climbing wall to work with Don Robinson in building a new generation of climbing walls. As a result of their efforts many sports centres and educational establishments now have climbing walls. There are however those who firmly believe that the very first wall is still one of the best.