

Pete Livesey: Innovation and Provocation in the Lakes and Yorkshire by Martin Berzins .

Pete Livesey provided me with an introduction to climbing on big cliffs that was a small but significant step in my miss-spent youth and adulthood. The date was May 1972 and the Leeds Canoe Club was having its annual canoe surfing meet at Abersoch on the Llyn Peninsula alas without any surf. I think that there was some idea that Jeff Slater (of the canoe expeditions fame) and I would climb. There were many connections between Yorkshire canoeists and somehow Pete showed up with a crew of climbers. The idea was that we should all do Dream of White Horses in Wen Zawn on the Gogarth Cliffs of Anglesey. As the novice tag-along I hid at the back awed by lightheartedness and the serious surroundings and all the real climbers. At one point I asked Pete if I would be ok, given that I had only done some Malham Cove climbs graded Very Severe. “Oh yes you will be fine –these routes are much easier. “ he said. For someone inexperienced the grassy scramble above a void and the abseil down towards the sea that followed were both gripping and atmospheric. Once down it was cold, shady and Jeff and I were at the back of a long line of climbers. The climbing was just a little bit scary but it was fine, even though we only did the top two pitches of Wen and it was indeed easier than the notorious Malham Very Severe’s.

Indeed it was at Malham one weekend in September 1972 Mick Hillas and I (both long-haired youths) repeated Alan Austin’s the test piece Sundance Wall watched by Pete. Mick then cleaned and led a new route – Junkyard Angel on the Right Wing. We asked Pete if anyone had done the line. “Oh yes he said the Heyes brothers did it I think.” At that time the mysterious Heyes brothers were supposed to have climbed every blank bit of rock in Yorkshire. Incredulous, we couldn’t square this with the loose rock that came off the crux only to understand much later that this was, perhaps, a typical Pete wind-up. Anyway we chose to ignore the comment and do the climb and never heard any more about the Heyes brothers. We couldn’t really walk away from it as, in the “free-for- all atmosphere” of the times Pete or someone else would have quickly climbed it. The next day we saw Pete on Sundance Wall, looking lost, so we gave him directions and then watched him later fail on John Syrett’s bold Midnight Cowboy. It was reassuring to see Pete climb like the rest of us on existing routes. What was interesting was that it would take me a while and a further conversation with Pete to understand that there was not necessarily any discrepancy between Pete’s audacious new routes and more normal days like this.

A year later we saw Pete do two first ascents. The first was Arnold Freerouter on the left wing of Gordale Scar. The climb wasn’t a great one and probably does not get done these days. My logbook only says that John Sheard had some problems, but if I recall the ascent was done really quickly. Much more impressive was the first ascent (or what we saw of it) of the very impressive Lime Hill on the exposed continuation of the Terrace at Malham. We saw him at the start in the initial corner and walked around hoping to see the ascent. To our astonishment he had finished the hard climbing was almost at the top on easy ground. Later still we asked him about the ascent. “If I know I can do it I don’t worry too much about protection.” he said.

Thinking back, this was a good example of the kind of bold approach on mostly natural gear that transformed Yorkshire and Derbyshire limestone. While there was a strong free climbing tradition on cliffs like Malham, the difficulty, boldness and sheer elan of ascents like Jenny Wren and Mossdale trip at Gordale set the stage for many very bold traditional ascents on peak and pennine limestone often on cliffs on which there is now a mixture of sport (all-bolted) climbs and bolder more traditional climbs. As, Paul Clarke, an avid Yorkshire new router, noted in 2013, such traditional climbs on limestone are not that popular now. This is not perhaps surprising as

the everyday athleticism of climbing provides no training for the kind of mind-games needed to obtain the almost intoxicating rush from the combination of long-runouts, doubtful rock and thought-provoking difficulty. As Nicolo Machiavelli puts it in a somewhat different context “Never was anything great achieved without danger.” As if to show that the activity is not quite dead in Yorkshire, Nik Jennings did climb a notable E8 on Kilnsey in May 2013.

This boldness of Pete’s did not appear to be a sudden thing. As a penance for something or other I was asked to check Pete’s climbs at the mighty Langcliffe Quarry near Settle for one of the limestone guides. This large but not particularly compelling cliff towers above what was then the municipal rubbish tip. The rock does not run to cracks for protection and in its 1960s and 70s heyday bolts were not used on free climbs there. An early article in *Rocksport* magazine showed Pete in canoeing crash hat climbing there if I remember. It was hard not to be impressed by the boldness of routes like Sickler at E3 and to (sensibly) stay off leading them if they were not an overriding obsession. Suffice to say that the combination of rubbish-dump ambiance and lack of protection did not make these routes popular, but their boldness was a pointer towards the future. There was boldness too on his ascents of routes like Central Wall at Kilnsey (climbed with John Sheard) with its intricate and forearm pumping climbing and well-spaced protection particularly at the top. Repeat ascents were few and tentative. In my case, incompetence led to a very long fall on an early attempt with the realization that small wires can hold very long falls if placed properly and gave me a healthy respect for Pete’s ability to climb above protection.

Pete’s ascents both stirred the guardians of Yorkshire and Lake District climbing – the Yorkshire Mountaineering Club (YMC) and the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, (FRCC). The reporting of these routes in magazines like Ken Wilson’s *Mountain* also passed the news more quickly than the sometimes tightly controlled guidebooks from the YMC and FRCC. Both clubs were populated by a 1960s generation that was starting to age and in some instances was resistant to change and only partially aware of the change in standards that came about through training. At the time decisions were made to leave routes out of these guides if the routes were too “poor” and/or climbed in a way that the guide writers did not approve of (or also perhaps of a difficulty that they could not conceive of).

At the time, the Yorkshire Mountaineering Club clung to the idea that nothing could be much harder than Hard Very Severe on Yorkshire Limestone and failed, at first, to see how training was changing what could be done. Pete’s routes were left out of the guides or half-heartedly included sparking a very critical review of the 1974 guide by Pete in *Mountain Magazine* 40. These omissions were even stranger given that Pete brought out a supplement in 1973 that described recent developments on Limestone. By 1980 however, Pete was one of the YMC guidebook writers and in some ways part of the climbing establishment. Pete’s efforts to supply more accurate information continued with the *Lime Crime* guide book that he wrote with Graham Desroy in 1982. The combination of this and Desroy’s 1980 *New Grit Supplement* started the revitalization of the Yorkshire Guidebooks which Desroy then led with typical flair and imagination through the 1980s.

To be fair to the YMC and FRCC, they did eventually start to acknowledge the changing standards and bring in new blood but not always in a way always that made them comfortable. As one of the FRCC stalwarts blurted out it after seeing me and my brother climbing on a cliff with our long hair and youthful looks – “There’s two women climbing really hard routes down there. They are really ugly but they can’t half climb.” Pete probably had no real need of those clubs, as he had his own active group of climbers.

The confused and fast-changing nature of climbing at the time was seen by a debate in Mountain Magazine in 1976. "John Allen free climbs Great Wall but uses chalk" was one headline. After I wrote a letter to Mountain praising chalk over aid, Ken Wilson brought together the good and the great to pontificate about how they would never use chalk or only in the smallest amounts. Pete's response was pretty clear "Chalk? - sure it leaves marks but so does making little yellow holes in the snow up Zero Gully." Needless to say chalk is ubiquitous today, as perhaps are little yellow holes in the snow of Zero Gully.

The first local Yorkshire climbing walls gave Pete and other local climbers, me included, a critical advantage in climbing new routes. In the early to mid-seventies the crucible for this was perhaps the Leeds University climbing wall which was also a stopping off point for climbers from far and wide. In "The Grade of Things to Come" Pete predicted that "6b and 6c moves are being strung together on the Leeds Wall when this form is reproduced on the outcrops standards will rise two grades." They did too and by the late seventies some hard gritstone, limestone and even mountain routes were sometimes climbed in a way that resembles the tactics used today – head-pointing, abseil inspections, multiday ascents and preplaced protection. At that time aid was still used, however, infrequently. Many years after Pete's groundbreaking ascent of Wellington Crack in Ilkley Quarry with a sling for resting, he watched Paul Clarke, a local Yorkshire climber, fail to free climb Wellington Crack at the end of a long climbing evening. Pete shouted up to Paul "I hope that you are not going to claim that ascent!" "No Pete, I am just trying to recreate your first ascent" replied Paul as Pete exited Ilkley Quarry.

Of course this new professionalism did not go down too well in the Lake District where the Fell and Rock Climbing Club was still lined up with Allan Austin's admirable but sometimes not consistent view that "I do not see crags as impressive backcloths where ruthless men can construct their climbs." [Mountain 29 September 73]. Abseil inspection and the placing of pegs from them was not yet accepted. Of course this did not always apply to their own and the ascent of the Cumbrian on Esk Buttress, one of the finest unclimbed lines in the Lake District by Paul Braithwaite and Rod Valentine with two aid points came in for justified criticism by Pete and others. Pete's ascent with Al Manson appeared to have cleaned up that issue, as he stated in Mountain 39, until rumours began to circulate.

Sometime later my brother Bob and I were climbing on Shepherds Crag in Borrowdale when Pete showed up looking for someone to climb with to do a new route. The line he chose was an eliminate in the Chamonix area of the cliff. Bob and I were more than willing accomplices. The ascent was uneventful and indeed the only memorable thing about the route was the monstrous fart that he let loose on the crux. Of course we wanted to name the route after this but he settled on Bob Martins – a dog food brand- to which we could only growl and or whine in response once we found out that we had been the victims of Pete's provocative sense of humour.

After this ascent Pete's competitive nature led him to solo up MGC (E2) behind our roped ascent. "Livesey tried to burn us off by soloing it, but had a desperate time, basically he is crap and so are we." reads the somewhat harsh judgement in my log book. My log book also records a couple of classic quotes by Pete. Regarding his ascent of the Cumbrian he said "I didn't mean to use aid but someone saw me hanging on a sling." On new routes in general he said that "Yes you can climb a full grade harder on new routes than on repeats". So this was the key. The fact that detailed and careful inspections coupled with a passionate desire to succeed made it possible to do new routes that are somewhat harder than ones everyday climbing. I took that comment to heart for about the next 40 years of climbing new routes and did also climb the Cumbrian free, without ever really knowing what happened on his ascent. I recollect not stopping to place any protection in the main

groove for fear of having to rest and only finding it at the top break. Maybe Pete had taught me something about boldness too.

My brother, Bob, and I and others also took it upon ourselves to repeat his routes and were amazed by the quality of the climbing. What was consistent was the imagination employed and the mostly classic choices of lines. Routes like the magnificent Footless Crow (climbed with Robin Witham) caused would-be early ascensionists to have to improve their game or to spend multiple days in order to succeed on its tricky and unobvious crux. The boldness of his solo back-roped ascents of Dry Gasp and Nagasaki Grooves was extraordinary, although entirely typical given some of his solo ascents of existing routes such as Capital Punishment on Cwm Idwal's Suicide Wall. Amazing new climb followed amazing new climb and provoked the rest of us to look at unclimbed rock just as carefully as Pete obviously did. The boldness and speed of ascents that typified Pete's routes were important as the anarchic attitudes of the time meant that you had to climb new routes quickly or expect someone else to. This was a far cry from the multi-day, week or year "projects" that sometimes linger today, mine included.

Amidst this extraordinary set of ascents there were some curious incidents in which Pete very successfully stirred the pot with the FRCC. For reasons that now don't entirely make sense today, Allan Austin was very protective over a very average route called the Ragman's Trumpet on the left side of Pavay Ark. Pete did a route at about the same time that climbed the same main pitch and then climbed up to a prominent groove, Sally Free and Easy. In the debate that followed, Allan Austin was convinced that the FRCC team had climbed the first pitch before Pete and in his counterblast Pete disagreed and described the upper groove (tongue in cheek perhaps as eminently sound and holdless). Encouraged by this description in 1974 my brother and I went into the groove and found it to be of poor quality to the point where we had clearly been victims of another Pete wind-up. Recourse came when I said in print that "only a mind lobotomized by some of the more tottering attractions of Langcliffe and Gordale would describe it as sound and holdless." The anarchic cut and thrust of those times seems far removed from today.

One of the best of Pete's new climbs in the Lake District was Lost Horizons on Scafell East Buttress (which he climbed with Jill Lawrence) with again some controversy about the style of the ascent, with pegs being placed from abseil and the top one being used for a handhold. Regardless of this indiscretion, it was the sheer audacity of this ascent and the quality of the resulting route that left people stunned. The peg for aid lasted for a while until it was eliminated by my brother Bob. The peak of Pete's achievements in the Lake District was probably Das Kapital (climbed with Pete Gomersall) in 1977 on Raven Thirlemere with its high degree of difficulty (E6) on the crux and swooping falls if (when?) one failed, as this one did many times. This climb seemed to be an order of magnitude harder than anything else he did in the Lakes. Pete's routes raised standards in the lakes and his ability to stir up debate made the whole climbing scene there much more dynamic and helped make the Fell and Rock climbing club change its mindset.

This ability to find outstanding lines was also translated into Pete's later limestone routes. One of the better examples was Claws at Kilnsey Crag in Wharfedale. The first pitch of this is a piece of superb limestone wall climbing with just enough protection in the shape of small wires. The top pitch is in spectacular position but really not as good as the first as it featured a struggle with a bush and then a controversial series of chipped holds. One of my complaints was that these holds were on the small side and rather hard to see. The climb overall is magnificent and while the tactics used were rightly condemned, in the grand scheme of things it is less significant than it might be, especially when glue now holds together many, many routes. There were some more

mysterious ascents such as the Gorgon at Malham, again climbed with Jill Lawrence. The first pitch of this is very loose indeed and the crux bulge above a peculiar tufa pillar has a particularly hard move that is now part of Gorgon Direct. This route must have been an adventure comparable with the Gordale routes and one that never gained the recognition it deserved for a very bold ascent.

It was a shock to hear that Pete had stopped climbing and moved to Malham. I, and others too I suppose, somehow expected that he would continue to innovate and to stir things up for years to come. Often we would see him running up Gordale Scar as part of the training for fell running. He would stop to chat but seemed to have a disinterest in what was happening. It was even more shocking to hear of his illness and its tragic end. In my mind I still see him, frozen in time, running up that gorge, fit athletic and graceful, still curious about the activity he had done so much to shape but looking dispassionately at what he had moved on from.