

May Cottage

A 'hut' of convenience following a few desperate moves

by Ian Wall, Dave Viggers and Keith Sanders

During the early 1900s A W Andrews, explorer of the Cornish cliffs and pioneer of many new routes in the South West, and O K Williamson had shown an interest in the St David's cliffs but had apparently never set foot on rock. Photographic evidence exists to prove that Menlove Edwards visited South Pembrokeshire in the 1929/30s but it has been impossible to locate the exact site from which the photographs had been taken and no written records have ever been uncovered to help clarify the situation.

John Cleare completed a number of exploratory traverses at various points along the Pembrokeshire coastline in the early 60s but it wasn't until Colin Mortlock moved to South Wales and discovered all the major cliffs in the St David's Head area by canoe in 1966 that the potential of the North Pembrokeshire coastline was realised.

Mortlock along with a variety of climbing partners, Jim Perrin, Lyn Noble, Sam Cooke and others made steady progress in developing several cliffs during the 1966-69 period but the real major breakthrough came during a 10-day spell in the summer of 1968 when Martin Boysen and Nick Escourt added five important routes to Mur Cenhinen, *Slab Route*, *Cordelia*, *Ogof*, *Goneril* and *Grendel*.

Pat Littlejohn arrived on the scene and in April 1974 completed *Terranova*. Later Littlejohn and Keith Darbyshire climbed *Shipwreck Wall*.

Although there appeared to be a lull in development in the 70s this was not the case. In 1970 Nat Allen arrived in Pembrokeshire together with other climbers from the Midlands. This little group quietly plugged away at opening up many cliffs with new routes but in general they kept this information to themselves and a restricted group of associates. Mortlock produced a guide to the southern cliffs in 1974 and this provided the major activists of the time with accurate location and reference points. The floodgates for new routes were open.

A tidal wave of activity overtook the area during the late 70s and by March 1981 the potential for future development and the quality of existing routes was a well-known secret and as happens in most areas the slight 'whiff' of a guide spurs on major activity. In 1981 Pat Littlejohn and Mike Harber edited the first CC guidebook that was quickly followed in 1982 by a new routes supplement. By now a 'traditional' meet was held in Pembroke at Easter and May Bank Holiday times. This general activity and the popularity of the Pembrokeshire cliffs had not gone un-

noticed, not only by the activists but also by the CC Guidebook Committee and the Huts Committee.

In the *CC Journal* of 1979-80 Geoff Milburn commented in his Editorial 'With an increase of new routes on the Pembrokeshire cliffs and the potential of much more to come there has been talk of a new hut in this area which can offer so much to climbers of all grades. In addition it is another Cornwall in that the family can enjoy a holiday whatever the weather. Such a hut would be very strategically positioned as it would nicely bridge the gap between the Club's huts in North Wales and Cornwall'.

The *CCJ* 1982 reports that in 1980 some extremely 'High Pressure' was put on the committee by a group of activists. The Future Policy Sub-Committee voiced their opinion and after a much informed debate the matter was put to the Club by way of a referendum. Some 78 members chose to vote and an overwhelming majority selected South Pembrokeshire as the next place for a CC hut. Mike Browell stated 'How a simple wish for more property could cause so much pressure, anxiety, harsh words, ill feeling, aggression, soul searching and plain old fashioned hassle is a story in itself'. I bet Bob Allen can relate to some, if not all, of those sentiments.

Easter 1980: Pembrokeshire members of the traditional meet 'Waiting for a new hut'. CCJ 1979/80. Photo Tony Riley



'During the period November 1980-June 1981 members of the Committee searched, located, pounced, missed, pounced again and missed again. Were bitten, growled at, hassled and counter hassled from without and within the Club. Heroic deeds were done, mild mannered members of society were transformed into cunning property wheeler-dealers, and only the tenacity of the Club's Officers prevailed over a rising sense of doubt that we would ever acquire a suitable property'. The quest for a property started in earnest and by the time the 1981 *CCJ* appeared it could be reported that 'during the year Officers of the Club had spent a great deal of time and effort trying to organise the buying of a

Pembrokeshire hut. Several factors... it was reported were critical '... the size, condition, cost and the distance from the crags, habitation and above all a good pub. So far a deal has not been settled but we are hopeful of success in the not too distant future'.

Although the club funds were sound a potential Sports Council Grant of £10,000 greatly enhanced the purchasing power. The initial target was for a 'detached property in the Bosherton area, preferably within walking distance of the crags'. The price had to be all-inclusive and below £25,000, the property, capable of providing 20 bunk spaces with an occasional overspill camping area. Hours were spent searching, telephoning, driving, inspecting and negotiating. Ad hoc meetings were held with various local personalities and a clear message came through... so the potential search area was widened. An ideal property was found 'Cold Comfort Cottage' however the local newspaper came up with a horror story of climbing, pot-smoking hippies. Trevor Jones refuted the allegations defending the CC and saying that neither he, nor Bonington, Hunt, Longland and Vaughan-Thomas were hippies.

By 1981 despondency was setting in, 15 properties had been inspected and as if to add to the pressure if contracts had not been exchanged by March 1982 the Club might lose the potential offer of £10,000 from the Sports Council. Then as if by the Hand of God, May Cottage came on the market and within a couple of weeks an offer was made and accepted. And so it came to pass and the new Pembrokeshire hut, May Cottage, was opened on the 5th June 1982. The ceremony was presided over by the Club's dignitaries, a representative of the Welsh Sports Council, Mrs Margaret Thomas from the 'St Govan's Inn', Mr Bertrand Russell, neighbours and members of the local press. Trevor Jones gave a few chosen words that included 'national climbing club... one of our many huts... contributed to the local community...' and 'responsibility'. Wynford Vaughan Thomas concluded the ceremony.

At this point, in keeping with CC tradition and upholding its reputation, those club members present consumed vast quantities of alcohol and saw off the local hardened drinking journalists. A tradition maintained by our current President who at the recent opening of the new FRCC hut in Aviemore was the first to the drinks table and the last to leave (allegedly and on good authority).



Trevor Jones handing over the keys to Mike Harber. Photo Mike Browell CCJ 1982.



The opening of May Cottage John Longland, Bert Russell, Trevor Jones and Derek Walker CCJ 1982. Photo Gareth Davies.

In the early days the Committee was apprehensive about opening a hut in an area that, up to that time, had not been accustomed to an influx of climbers. Consequently it was decided to introduce special booking conditions for the early stages of the hut's existence. However, it is reported in the CCJ 1982 that those fears were unfounded, in part due to the 'distance from the main climbing focal points, and the clean and somewhat luxurious nature of the furniture and fittings of the cottage'.

Trevor Jones, President at the time, confirmed that he became converted to the area after a whirlwind indoctrination weekend during the cold November of 1980. Ken Wilson, Pat Littlejohn and Trevor looked at six properties, seven cliffs, walked eight miles and climbed one new route at E1. It was upon seeing the ELEGUG Stacks and looking down the awe inspiring Cauldron for the first time that Trevor realised that this is a great rock-climbing area and a wonderful area for the CC's sixth hut.

May Cottage went through two stages of development initially from a cautious beginning with accommodation for 12 members. The peak demand times created by the 'traditional' pre May Cottage meets resulted in 50 members of the CC attending during the Easter and May Bank holidays in 1981 and '82, this created a tremendous strain on

the facilities especially on the septic tank.

It was at this time that Mike Burt, the Hut Bookings Secretary, who is still in position today and is one of the Club's longest-serving officials, introduced controlled bookings and a special security key would be issued to those pre-booked members. Internal re-arranging was required to provide the 12 sleeping spaces in the two front rooms. The second phase was to increase the bunk spaces to 20 after a trial two-year period and depending on demand and continued good relationship with the neighbours. Mike Harber co-author of the first CC guide to Pembrokeshire and Steve Lewis agreed to take up a joint custodian role.

Is it such a wonder that with a new hut and some of the best sea cliff climbing in the country that for the few years after May Cottage was opened the pages of the CCJ were adorned with excellent action photographs extolling the virtues of Pembroke climbing? Needless to say many ascents were not accomplished without the odd epic or two.

In late 80s Dennis Ibbotson set out for a meet of Barnsley's Arête MC that happened to coincide with a CC meet in Pembrokeshire. Being of sound mind and physique Dennis wisely chose to stay at May Cottage as opposed to camping with the Arête. On the Saturday morning he climbed on Crystal Slabs and Bow Slab. Then on Sunday Dennis and John Gaukroger chose to climb at Lydstep which, in hindsight, maybe wasn't a good choice due to the high spring tide.

Sea Groove, the chosen route, was inaccessible due to the high water but they spied an 'easy crack' and believed it to be unclimbed. The line looked fairly straightforward so on a single rope John launched his assault. All was going well and he had run out about 90 feet when he stepped up and lifted off his last two runners. At this point Dennis thought 'if he comes off now...' then just at that moment the critical hold snapped and John was collecting air miles. Hastily Dennis tried to take in the ropes but a falling climber descends very quickly. With a loud and soggy thump John hit the ledge and was then immediately washed off and out to sea. Seeing John laying face down in the water Dennis believed the worst but, with ripped and bleeding hands from trying to hold the rope, he locked off the Stitch plate and jumped down to a lower

ledge. With the help of a passing climber and using a runner pulley system Dennis and the 'stranger' began to drag John back to the ledge, this operation had to be repeated several times due to the amount of spare rope that was out. To his amazement Dennis watched as John slowly rolled over and started to tread water. As he was reeled in like a prize salmon the climbers saw 'tragedy' turn to 'farce'.

Amazingly John reached the crag unhurt and climbed about eight feet up to a ledge only to be scooped up by the next incoming wave and washed back out to sea. In a split second emotion raced from one end of the spectrum to the other but then without warning the 'roller' returned John, slithering back whence he came. Without waiting for an action replay John scrambled up to the higher ledge and sat down with a confused expression on his face "Who am I? Where am I? Why am I all wet?" The hospital discharged John with bumps and bruises but kept Dennis in to dress his hands requesting him to reappear the following day to have the dressings changed. (Arête Journal). This could have been the end of the story but as with so many 'good epics' there is a postscript.

Later that evening Dennis met the 'Good Samaritan' in the pub and bought him a few beers. During the course of conversation the stranger recalled an incident that happened to him a few years earlier when he had been climbing *The Plum* in Chee Dale. "The leader had just reached the horizontal ledge at the top of the first pitch when he fell off and decked it. I started shouting for help and within a few minutes," he said, "another climber turned up and carried out First Aid before going for an ambulance. You know how it is? With everything going on around you, you forget to thank the guy that really saved the day." A wry smile spread across Dennis's face: "Well buy him a pint now" said Dennis "and we'll call it quits." Dennis was, in fact, the climber that had gone to the assistance of the stranger those years before. Now the favour had been returned but to this day Dennis doesn't know who the guy was.

**May Cottage
The Custodians**

Mike Harber	1982 – 1985
S Lewis	1982 – 1991
G Evans	1985 – 1993
R Thomas	1991 – 1994
R D Neath	1993 – 1998
Bill Dark stepped in to fill the breach when Robin left	
Dee DeMengel	1997 -

A PEMBROKE EPIC

Epic (adj.) a long story relating heroic events in an elevated style (apologies to *Chambers English Dictionary*).

Can you really have an epic on a short English rock-climb? Is it long enough, are there sufficiently adverse weathers, truly heroic deeds? Does the average climber have the ability to elevate an anecdote to epic proportions? Personally, I doubt it, but you be the judge...

Big hair — that's the first thing I saw — Emma waving and shouting in the distance, interrupting a perfect day doing-not-a-lot in Pembroke. Slight distress, but more a factual: "Bob has dislocated his shoulder 120 feet inside the cave of *Preposterous Tales*."

We rush across, rig up and I abseil in, intending 'heroic events'... 'I'll land on top of him, thump him manfully on the shoulder whilst distracting him with a gender specific joke, thus re-setting his shoulder blade and up we'll go...' However, there's a snag to this scenario. I'm 40 feet horizontally away, separated by some truly greasy chimneying and 'Boisterous' Bob is in real pain, groaning that low, mournful seal moaning. I bridge, thrutch and shudder my way across, fearing the slip, the pendulum and the brutal contact with the far wall. Made it — but more self preservation than heroics.

At this point, the plan really falls apart, because I'm too scared of not getting the shoulder back into place to risk inflicting more pain. So what to do? Think! What would you do?

Wait for the professionals — but they know less than me about difficult and obscure rescues. Lower him into the sea — there's no boat and a one-armed swimmer doesn't bob. Climb him out — he's only got one arm, he's in agony, it's nearly dark and it's not easy. Get the boys on top to haul him out — what about

the 40-foot pendulum at the start? No, these aren't going to work. I busy myself with belays and making Bob more comfortable, more pretence than need, whilst I think again.

Aha! Now the plan comes. I untie the abseil rope and tie it into the belay — if I can lower Bob down the loop into the centre of the cave with his climbing ropes and then let go, the surface crew can pull the slack, and then him, up. I explain this to Bob, he groans, maybe pain, maybe fear, but maybe it's just his reaction to a crackpot idea. We do it anyway. Amazingly, it goes without a hitch and he's up. We chuck him in the



'Boisterous' Bob Allen in action on 'Jolly Sensible Arête' E1 BucksPool Down, from the *Centenary Journal*. Photo Ian Smith.

ambulance, sleight of hand removing his wallet — well-chuffed. It's still light, but the day is done and we retire to the pub to spend his money.

Well, was it an epic? Less than one and a half hours from shout to ambulance, so hardly lengthy. I'm not a writer, so no elevated style, but did you spot the heroics? They're all there in the second paragraph; a solo ascent of a difficult final pitch to get help. The rest was just fear and muscle power. Respect to Emma.
Dave Viggers