



Working for climbers, hill walkers & mountaineers in England and Wales



HOME INDOOR CLIMBING ROCK CLIMBING WALKING MOUNTAINEERING THE BMC MEMBERSHIP TRAVEL INSURANCE SHOP

NEWS EVENTS LOCAL AREAS CONTACT US NEWSLETTERS PRESS ROOM

Home » General »

Inside out - climbing hazards

Posted by Ian Hey on 07/11/2002



Debbie Birch. Photo: Messenger.

Sexy images of scantily clad sun bronzed rock gods and goddesses. Epic tales of suffering and endurance in far flung corners of the world. Jaw dropping photos of huge cliffs and improbable lines. These beam out of every climbing magazine around like a siren call, seducing new and old climbers alike, feeding adventure and planting the seeds of new dreams.

But there's a flip side to the game we play, one sometimes forgotten or relegated to the back of minds in the quest for stronger fingers. Climbing and mountaineering are dangerous pastimes and, rather unusually for this pre-packaged and no-quibble-guaranteed world, take place in an uncontrolled environment where hazards lurk around every corner. This doesn't mean we should all wrap ourselves up in cotton wool and take up knitting - the chances are you'll have a long and safe climbing career - but that by understanding and evaluating just what can go wrong out there the odds can be stacked in your favour.

Building up the knowledge and the ability to assess these hazards is part of learning to become a climber, but as a rising number of climbers acquire their early skills indoors and then seek to move outside, this "crag sense" can be lagging behind forearm development. And it's not just beginning climbers that are at risk. Even if you've been climbing for years and have a vast repository of knowledge, it's all too easy to get a little blasé occasionally. Perhaps you've been cranking for so long that you've stopped questioning everything quite as much as you used to? Maybe now is the time to nudge yourself gently and start reminding yourself of the possible consequences of various actions. Just because something was OK last month doesn't mean it will be today.

So what are the hazards? Well, that's an infinite list - anything from tripping over a hex to getting hit by the Roaches Ice Cream van, it could all happen to you, tomorrow. The key things are awareness, observation, and knowledge. Be aware of what's going on around you, know why it's happening and keep an eye on it - don't just switch off and hope it goes away. Some of the main causes of accidents are mentioned below to start

RELATED ARTICLES

Bureaucrats attacked on Health and Safety misuse 0
05/07/2011

HSE Chair Judith Hackitt is on the warpath to stop Health and Safety being used by killjoys as a shield to hide behind.
[Read more »](#)

A parent's guide to climbing, walking and mountaineering 1
08/02/2011

If your child is interested in climbing, walking or mountaineering, then read this free BMC booklet which explains about the benefits, and risks, of these activities.
[Read more »](#)

Support your BMC 0
04/11/2010

People join the BMC for all sorts of reasons. Many join quite simply to support the vital work that the BMC does on behalf of climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers.
[Read more »](#)

[Post a comment](#)

[Print this article](#)

[Like](#)

[Tweet](#)

This article has been read 105 times

TAGS

liability

risk

Click on the tags to explore more

MOST VIEWS MOST COMMENTS

- [1. Need a hill walking break?](#)
- [2. Ed Douglas on: the future of media](#)
- [3. ShAFF climb programme announced](#)
- [4. BMC Winter International Meet dates 2012](#)
- [5. That's me: Rab Carrington](#)

 **BMC MEMBERSHIP**
Join 70,000 BMC members and support British climbing, walking and mountaineering. Membership only £14.97.
[Read more »](#)

 **BMC SHOP**
Great range of guidebooks, DVDs, books, calendars and maps. All with discounts for members.
[Read more »](#)

 **TRAVEL INSURANCE**
Get covered with BMC Insurance. Our five policies take you from the beach to Everest.

you off, but why not take a moment next time you're out to look around, question your actions and those of others, and absorb all the sights, smells and sounds of the outdoor world – it might make it more enjoyable, and it'll definitely make it safer.



[Read more »](#)

Loose Rock

A lot of recent incidents have one thing in common; loose rock. Unless you're very unlucky loose rock doesn't crop up indoors, but is pretty much guaranteed outside. Mountains and cliffs are there to be eroded, that's their job. And they like eroding by falling down, one small bit at a time, whether assisted by other factors or not. Look at the route and ground below to see what's fallen off recently. Are there scars from recent impacts and shattered presents from above? Is the rock shelf above your head held on by anything? Is there another party above? What's on top of the crag? Start to think about these things before you get stuck into your lunch just below a tettering pile of blocks. And that's before you've even got the sack open - once you've uncoiled 50m rope perfectly designed for dislodging rocks, things get even more interesting. Whenever using ropes pay close attention to where they're running, especially if there's anybody below. Avoidance is always better than protection but there is no question about it – helmets can save lives. Some people wear them on sports routes, others won't even take them to the Alps. But be responsible for your own head, no one else will. Make a decision based on your judgement. But equally realise their limitations, they don't make you invincible!

Route Choice

Selecting a climb outside requires more judgement than leaping on the blue route in the corner, so take a moment to scope out the route before getting stuck in. Don't blindly trust the guidebook, it may be out of date or even incorrect to start with. Routes change with time, crucial flakes disappear, gear placements vanish, and in extreme cases like Wraith, an E2 5b at Mother Carey's down in Pembroke, crack lines can turn into arêtes! Look out for wet or vegetated rock, if the route looks dirty and unclimbed there may be a good reason.

Descent

Indoors and on sport routes descent is usually just a matter of shouting "down", but on multi pitch trad lines backing off becomes more complicated. Be aware of the various different options for descent. Sometimes discretion is the better part of valour and it could be worth turning back before, for example, a committing traverse, if you're moving too slowly or bad weather's coming in. And don't forget that even when the top is finally reached you've still got to get back down. Try to locate the descent route before racing up the first pitch. It may seem irrelevant just then, but when you're stuck on top in fading light knowing which gully to head down will help everything end well. On some routes the descent can prove more taxing than the climb, so don't be afraid to abseil sections if required. It can only take a few smears of ice or a quick rainstorm to make an already polished step a dangerous trap. But if a rope is required take extra care to prevent loose rock raining down on you, or others.

Abseiling

Even for experienced climbers stepping off the edge of a perfectly good cliff edge to descend into the unknown can be a nervous affair. It's one of the fairly rare moments in climbing when all your eggs are truly in one basket, with no back up and no undo command to save the day. A moments lapse of concentration here can end even the most illustrious climbing career within seconds. But there are three main things you can do to reduce the risks; Firstly choose good anchors and fully understand the mechanics of the system, secondly concentrate and triple check everything before you go, and finally always, always abseil with an autobloc. The few seconds it takes to fit one will be repaid if you ever lose control of your descent due to

rockfall, a sudden gust of wind or a sudden shock down the rope. The many handbooks show a variety of ways to protect yourself; various prussiks above and below the belay plate, a jammer etc. All have their benefits and limitations, so just find the method that suits you.

The BMC produce a very useful Abseiling poster that can be purchased from the BMC publications section of the [BMC online shop](#).

Fixed Equipment

Somebody at the climbing wall has the responsibility to ensure the bolts there are safe but what about that bolt you clip at the local quarry or the rusty peg at Gogarth? Never blindly trust fixed gear of any type, even bolts, and if in any doubt back it up, or back off. There is no way of telling how long it's been there or what's going on out of sight. Take extra care on sea cliffs, here pegs can look superficially OK whilst being extremely corroded and very likely to fail.

Your Equipment

Whilst you've got no control over fixed equipment, it's up to you place good gear. Practicing on ground level will give you a better understanding of the various types of placements. Try it on the next rainy day – put in some marginal gear, attach a foot loop, then “bounce test” it. It may be a surprise to see just what does come out! Placements will also vary between rock types – a bomber small nut on the grit could be a very marginal piece in the slate quarries. And when you're leading take the time to ensure your gear is as good as it could be. We've all done it, slammed in a piece thinking “that'll do”, headed up and immediately regretted it! Better to spend the extra few seconds making sure you're happy with it before carrying on.

Other People

Visit a high Lakeland crag and you could well be the only team there, but a trip to Stanage on a sunny Sunday won't be quite such a solitary experience. Watch out for other people, both for your own safety and theirs. Even the most well meaning of teams can accidentally drop some gear or knock off a rock with their ab ropes, so don't loiter around below people. Likewise when you're abbing or pulling ropes always check below first and alert anybody on the ground. This is all linked to general “crag etiquette”. This is a tricky thing to define, since people tend to get quite emotive about, say, top roping on gritstone. But the main thing is to be considerate of others, and don't do anything that might damage them or the rock. If you've only just started heading outside, then don't be afraid to ask for advice from other climbers, especially locals. They'll usually only be too please to help you, recommend a great first route in the area, or perhaps explain why certain routes aren't ideal for a top roping session.

Skills

If you believe your personal skills are lacking in any department, don't worry. It's easier than ever to get good advice and instruction whether you want an intensive week long course at Plas y Brenin, or a half-day refresher with a local qualified instructor. The BMC also produces a range of skills publications on climbing, hill walking and mountaineering to start you off, but remember that sitting in your arm chair is no substitute for hands-on experience, so get out there and practice. A day of indifferent or inclement weather at the crag can easily be salvaged by turning it into a training and practical day.

Access & Conservation

Not usually a hazard unless you count shotgun toting farmers and fundamentalist bird watchers, but access arrangements to climbing areas do change over time, so don't purely rely on your guidebook. Keep an eye out for signs and notices in the climbing press, and visit the Regional Access database (RAD) on www.thebmc.co.uk. It's important to respect any

arrangements, whether they be bird restrictions or a new approach route, because ignoring them could jepordise future access to the area. Equally important is to treasure the crag environment. Remember that cigarette butts, banana skins, chalk wrappers and finger tape are still litter, and take a moment to clear up after you before you move on. Plus why not pick up somebody elses litter too? OK, the rewards may not be in this life, but it'll do your karma a whole lot of good.

[« Back](#)

[Post a comment](#)

[Tweet](#)

[Like](#)

Posting as Anonymous

3000 characters remaining

[submit](#)

Comments are currently **on** | [Turn off comments](#)

0

There are currently no comments, why not add your own?

LATEST IN EACH SECTION

ACCESS



[Beauty spot of cleaning at Wintour's Leap](#)

CLUBS



[Club funding for equipment - deadline reminder](#)

COMPETITIONS



[GB Junior Climbing Team 2012](#)

GEAR



[Tech skills: how to choose a sleeping bag](#)

GENERAL



[Need a hill walking break?](#)

GUIDEBOOKS



[Are you a Fanatical Guidebook Collector?](#)

[Contact Us](#) [Feedback & Errors](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Jobs at the BMC](#)

The British Mountaineering Council (BMC) is the representative body that exists to protect the freedoms and promote the interests of climbers, hill walkers and mountaineers, including ski-mountaineers. The BMC recognises that climbing, hill walking and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions.



© 2012 The British Mountaineering Council

