

Red Rope: Some historical / political reminiscences and reflections

Many thanks to Dave for including those fascinating extracts from early bulletins in the recent *Lockdown Bulletin*. They have prompted me, as an active member during those early years, to get round to doing a couple of things relating to Red Rope's history.

The first is to give a fuller account of the RR archive, which was housed in the Working Class Movement Library in 2016.

The second arises from that. In 2016 I promised Dave something for the Bulletin on the club's history. The reminiscences and reflections on the political dimensions of the origins and early years of RR are a belated start at honouring that promise. They are a first pass, almost forty years on, at elaborating and exploring what lay behind the document about the politics of the club in 1983 which was attributed to me in the Lockdown Bulletin.

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1. The Red Rope Archive

In their capacity as RR Archivists, two stalwarts of the club - Colin Knowles and Andy Bateman - had collected and stored a carload of large boxes of papers from the time before RR went digital, roughly 1980 – 2005. I caught wind of Andy's wish to be shut of this archive. As a sometime historian, I offered to help get it suitably organised, and then to hand it over to an appropriate repository.

A few things ensued.

- a) A general request was issued to all members and regions to send in anything they could find relating to their activities over the years. This yielded yet more boxes of papers.
- b) There was some discussion about what would count as 'an appropriate repository'. There were basically two candidates. One was Warwick University library, which houses such documents as the SWP has chosen to archive. The other was a bit more niche in the archival world, namely the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. WCML started life as a collection of Labour Movement documents built up by Ruth and Eddie Frow – lifelong long CP members in Manchester of the same generation as Benny Rothman. On their death, the WCML became a recognised repository for historical documents and archives of broadly-defined socialist individuals and organisations. It houses, *inter alia*, the archive of the Clarion Movement (a forerunner of Red Rope in the world of 'outdoor / leisure-time socialism') and the papers of the late Benny Rothman, whose work in Manchester as a trade unionist and CP member from the mid-1930s to late-1960s was probably of greater significance and social impact than his moment of wider notoriety as the organiser of the 1932 Kinder Mass Trespass.

It was decided that WCML would be a fitting repository for the RR archive, given its affinity with other WCML collections. For those fond of irony, the archive of an organisation with political and organisational roots in SWP has ended up in a repository with origins in the CPGB!

- c) When Andy finally handed me everything he had, I organised it on the basis of some rough-and-ready categories. I am an obsessive hoarder and still had in the attic my own boxes of papers and memorabilia relating to the early years of Red Rope. I added all that to the collection, along with the papers received from other national secretaries and office-holders of the club. The archive was formally housed with WCML in early 2016.
- d) An idea of the scope of the RR archive can be seen by accessing the online catalogue of the Working Class Movement Library. <https://www.wcml.org.uk/> Go to catalogue search -> archives and enter Red Rope in the box. [Alternatively, go straight to <http://146.87.210.2/brief.aspx> , check Archives and enter Red Rope in the box.]

For the period 1980 – 2005ish, there are:

- Complete run of bulletins and MIS
- Complete set of AGM minutes and papers
- Complete set of National Committee meetings minutes and papers
- All RR “internal publications”

For roughly the same period, but slightly more ‘sporadic’ depending on who kept what and when, there are:

- Correspondence and admin papers of National Secretaries and others, including papers associated with key debates / issues at various times (Childcare, Reform etc)
- Papers of some working groups (Environment, Hut, etc)
- Financial documents
- Documents of all sorts from several regions at various times (London, Merseyside, East Midlands)
- Papers and documents relating to affiliations (BMC, Ramblers, MCS, OSS etc) and allies (SCAM)
- Papers relating to political discussions and actions
- Papers relating to major interventions (Kinder Mass Trespass 50th Anniversary 1982; Hope Valley Conference 1985)

When the archive was handed to WCML in 2016, I rather rashly promised to spend some time going through everything more closely and producing a basic ‘narrative’ to accompany each of the various groups of documents in the archive. I also promised Dave that I would produce something on the club’s history for the Bulletin.

Four years later, I am finally getting round to making good on those promises. Once WCML leaves the current lockdown, I will go down there again and have a first pass at a more substantive historical narrative. What follows here are some personal reminiscences and reflections on the political dimensions of the origins and early years of Red Rope.

2. The politics of Red Rope: origins and early years

a. Origins

1. *The long hinterland*

Tony Benn was fond of promoting a rosy history of British (largely English) radicalism. In that history, RR's origins lie in the struggles of 'the people' for rights of access to and/or the common ownership of land. This is Red Rope as a direct descendant of the Peasants' Revolt, the Levellers, those who opposed enclosures (and highland clearances and landlordism in Ireland), those who marched to Peterloo in a still rural Manchester, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Chartists, trade unionists struggling for healthy leisure-time and that strangely ruralist vision of a post-capitalist future held by most 19th-century socialists¹.

Moving into the 20th century, that people's history, as elaborated in Howard Hill's *Freedom to Roam*², marched through Clarion clubs, trespassing by ramblers in general (not just the British Workers Sports Federation's iconic 1932 Kinder Scout Mass Trespass), ramblers associating and rallying, footpath and rights of way preservation groups, political lobbying. The glorious culmination of these long struggles was the 1945 Labour Government's establishment of the National Parks, though they assiduously chose not to take open and uncultivated land into public ownership. One could add to this conventional left history, the arrival of Cumbrian miners on the crags in Wasdale and Ennerdale, initially training playgrounds for largely upper-class mountaineers and, of course, in the 1950s the bursting open of the UK's climbing / mountaineering world by the late Joe Brown and his fellow northern working-class climbers.

In many respects, that is the sort of left historical narrative which RR appropriated for itself and within which it shaped its role and identity across the wider left and the outdoor movement. This standard left history does not, however, provide an adequate political account of why RR emerged when it did and in the way it did. When I first encountered Red Rope in 1980 and attended my first AGM in 1981 (Chamois Hut), and proposed that RR should take a lead in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1932 Kinder Scout Mass Trespass, a significant number of the members there had not heard of the Mass Trespass, let alone considered it something RR should be associated with. The majority were members of SWP and, though my motion was passed, celebrating something organised almost fifty years earlier by a CPGB front organisation was not high on their political agenda.

Moreover, although I was familiar with the history³, it was not that history and its associated politics which led me to Red Rope. For me and, I suspect, for the overwhelming majority of early members of RR, the political context within which we were formed was much more immediate; we found ourselves in RR by virtue of a combination of the personal life-styles

¹ Think William Morris, Walter Crane's imagery, Marx's view of communism as freedom to go hunting, shooting, and fishing during the day, as well as being a social critic in the evening . . . (*German Ideology*)

² Hill, Howard (1980) *Freedom to Roam: The Struggle for Access to Britain's Moors and Mountains*. Moorland Publishing.

³ *En passant*. That conventional long history of outdoor socialism is in urgent need of review, particularly if one takes a less insular English / UK perspective and brings a more internationalist perspective to bear on the social and political significance of walking and climbing. How people of a progressive persuasion in industrial / capitalist societies have related to outdoor activities is much richer, more diverse and more contested than the accepted Howard Hill / Tony Benn narratives suggest.

and political choices and commitments we made during the 1960s and 1970s. It is our political experience of those decades that pointed us in the direction of Red Rope.

2. The immediate context – 1960s and 1970s

Before revisiting aspects of those two decades which led some of us to put our energies into building a socialist climbing and walking club, there are a couple of bits of more recent conventional history which need debunking.

The first is that the 1960s, with their student rebellions, were essentially a time in which baby boomers and other beneficiaries of the post-war welfare and educational settlement hedonistically indulged in sex 'n drugs 'n rock and roll before settling down into secure professional jobs with final-salary pensions and large mortgages. (This is the historical narrative in which the elderly homeowners of the 2010s and 2020s are blamed for screwing things up for their children and grandchildren who are burdened with debt, zero-hours contracts and the gig economy.)

The second historical myth is that the 1970s were a time of all-pervasive gloom, despair, discontent and collapse which could only be relieved by the new politics of Thatcherism and the forty years of globalising neo-liberalism that ensued. (This has remained an ideologically dominant historical narrative from Thatcher, via Blair, to Johnson.)

For many of us in our late-teens, 20s and early-30s and politically, socially and culturally active 1965 - 1980, it simply wasn't like that. There was, for sure, much that was deeply disheartening as the 1970s ground on: extended economic mismanagement on the part of the state; Bloody Sunday and the first full decade of 'The Troubles' in Ulster; the start of a sustained undermining of the welfare state at a time when poverty was still rife⁴; the continued global disruption of the later stages of the Cold War – including the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union's military defeat of the 1967 – 68 Prague Spring; an upsurge in racism and neo-fascism (Enoch Powell, NF, BM) in the UK.

Notwithstanding that dispiriting macro environment, many of us felt we were living through a time of turbulent optimism, our own version of the young Wordsworth's exhilaration in France during the early years of the Revolution: "*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven.*" We were, of course, deeply disputatious, but we shared a sense of actively building a new and better future.

In 1967, the Roundhouse hosted a galaxy of radical thinkers and activists (*inter alia*, Herbert Marcuse, RD Laing, Stokely Carmichael) at the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation⁵. It very explicitly explored the linkages between political and personal liberation and new ways of theorising and enacting transformational politics. In 1968, the student uprisings in France and across Europe and USA, began to give concrete expression to options and ideas for a New Left. In the UK, for instance, the 1968 May Day Manifesto⁶ offered ways of moving

⁴ Coates K and Silburn R (1970) *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen* (sic)

⁵ Cooper, David (ed) (1968) *The Dialectics of Liberation*. Republished by Verso in 2015. [NB All contributors were men.]

⁶ Williams, Raymond (ed) (1968) *The May Day Manifesto*

beyond the obdurate limits of left Labourism⁷, the ostensibly scientific socialism still espoused by the CPGB, and the doctrinal tenets of the various parties claiming the mantle of the Fourth International.

Out of that late-60s excitement, the 1970s saw a huge flourishing in the scope and depth of radical / progressive politics beyond the confines of the dominant parties. It was the decade of a resurgent feminist movement with its journals, campaigns, magazines and women's centres. That took place alongside the growth in the cultural – political arena of a newly confident and open lesbian and gay activism. In 1972, the staff and members of the establishment oriented Institute of Race Relations took it over and turned it into a more campaigning body across issues of class, race and liberation struggles. There was a flourishing of radical / community bookshops and publishing (Pluto Press, Virago, Centreprise). Radical theatre companies emerged (Red Ladder, Belt and Braces, Gay Sweatshop). Even the mainstream media presented radical and challenging stuff - Ken Loach's *Days of Hope* and Dennis Potter's *Pennies from Heaven*. It was a great decade for agitprop generally.

Nor was this solely London-based. In Nottingham, the Institute for Workers Control and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation were created by Ken Coates and like-minded radical academics. A more self-confident left / Marxist / critical orientation emerged across many of the arenas of higher education (OU, Adult Colleges, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the new universities.) Radical creativity emerged in the trade union movement with such initiatives as the Lucas Aerospace Shop Stewards Combine plan for turning the production of military hardware into the building of more socially useful products – an early green initiative. There were even strong strands of radicalism in the religious world – liberation theology, campaigns for women's ordination, re-discovery of peace and justice.

More generally the '70s were a decade of intense trade union activity, both at the level of national actions and strikes – e.g. the (successful) 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes – and in the strengthening of the shop stewards movement across the piece (think Jimmy Reid). Worth noting that by 1980, 53% of the entire workforce in the UK was unionised and the incomes and working conditions of 70% of the workforce were determined by collective bargaining. It was the decade of growing shop stewards training – TUC and WEA – and the emergence on the scene of a flourishing 'white-collar' unionism (ASTMS). Trades Councils thrived as 'rank-and-file' memberships increased their engagement in union and related political activities. All of which was dramatically on show in the 1976 – 1978 Grunwick strike. It was probably one of the last occasions in which a campaign by a small group of low-paid Asian women workers for union recognition, initially supported by Brent Trades Council (remember Jack Dromey?), dramatised by NUM flying pickets organised by Arthur Scargill, and enhanced by a succession of demonstrations eventually received endorsement in a march led by members of the TUC's General Council and several Labour Party cabinet ministers (Shirley Williams, Dennis Howell and Fred Mulley).

It is also worth noting that Tony Benn endorsed workers' co-operatives, planning agreements and what came to be known as the 'alternative economic strategy'. Although it never made much progress, industrial democracy (Bullock Report) was mooted as a possible way of reining in corporate power.

Threaded through all this trade union activism and burgeoning cultural politics were, of course, the activities of the various left political parties. All had complex histories and I make

⁷ Miliband, Ralph (1961) *Parliamentary Socialism: The Politics of Labour*. 2nd ed 1972. To this day, the best analysis of the inherent problems of Labourism as a vehicle for political transformation.

no attempt here to trace or analyse the minutiae of their activities, theories, strategies and inter-relationships. Save to say that there was a lot of not-insignificant left politics going on into which many of us were drawn. To be socially, culturally and politically active, whether in very specific local community campaigns or in wider, more broad-based organisational endeavours entailed at least being aware of and negotiating one's way round the activities of a core network of left political parties⁸. An active engagement in a left political party in one form or another in the 1970s was much more routine for those in their 20s and 30s than it has become 40 years later. If your bag in the 1970s, however loosely and broadly defined, was creating the conditions for socialism and growing and supporting the agents / class(es) for effecting the transition from capitalism to socialism, then you would have to beaver your way in and/or round the various left political parties.

It was, therefore, not at all unusual for those of us who were politically engaged to get to know friends / comrades / allies / antagonists both within our own chosen party, but also across the other parties. Both the CP and SWP ran large summer conferences where we could all argue out our theoretical differences. We bumped into one another on marches and demos; we knew our respective banners, slogans and badges. With a focus round a few MPs such as Tony Benn, Eric Heffer, Dennis Skinner, Jo Richardson, Audrey Wise there was a new energy in some areas of the LP to engage in extra-parliamentary, non-electoral, politics. The CP did its best to protect its base in the shop stewards movement and attempt, through such journals as *Marxism Today*, to explore new strands of Marxist thinking to sit alongside its historic popular frontism – which was rebranded in the 1970s as a 'broad democratic alliance'.

What characterised IS / SWP, apart from its noisy tenacity and the endless production of placards for marches, was a certain political imagination. It identified the threats of the rising tide of racism and the importance of confronting the neo-nazi / neo-fascist groups and organizations like the NF and BM which were gaining wider public prominence – and dismissed as peripheral by most of the orthodox left. Two of the largest and most eye-catching political 'initiatives' of the left in the later '70s were the *Anti-Nazi League* and *Rock Against Racism*. Both attracted wide support from across the left generally and from local communities directly affected. That ANL and RAR were both SWP front organisations did not detract from their significance or their reach; a key figure in the ANL, for instance, was Peter Hain, who was a leading anti-apartheid campaigner and, at that time, still a Young Liberal. The ANL and RAR drew a rich array of actors, musicians, writers into their marches and events. The scale of the political dangers of neo-nazism were demonstrated by the

⁸ I should, perhaps, declare my own position. I worked in adult education – as a WEA tutor-organiser during much of this period – and had defined myself as a Marxist of some sort ever since university days in late-60s (still do, as it happens). Much of my political commitment fed directly into my teaching and organisational work and the focus of much of my energy as an activist was channelled into work with ASTMS (which happened to organise WEA Tutor-Organisers) at branch, division and national level. I went through a bohemian phase of non-alignment until 1976 when I opted to join the Labour Party and duly occupied key local officer roles. Not because I believed that the LP was the best vehicle for creating socialism, but more pragmatically because I had theoretical reservations about the positions of both the CPGB and IS (SWP from 1977) and couldn't face having to flog the *Morning Star* or *Socialist Worker* every weekend and at every demonstration. If the CPGB had shown more readiness to move towards Gramscian Eurocommunism along the lines of the Italian Communist Party I would probably have joined them. Although IS/SWP had lots of political imagination and political energy, I was uncomfortable with its form of line politics and the front tactics it employed to create a rank-and-file movement; nor was I entirely convinced of their analysis of the Soviet Union as 'state capitalist'. Similarly, I also disagreed strongly with that line of argument / strategy employed by Militant Tendency (and others) around the ostensibly Trotskyist approach to LP entryism and Transitional Demands. This also ruled out for me the bulk of the 4th Internationalist tribe. Perhaps I should have given the IMG a bit more attention! But, truth to tell, I enjoyed the freedom one had within the structural flabbiness of the LP to make pragmatic common cause with comrades across the left in specific circumstances / times / campaigns.

circumstances of the death of Blair Peach at an ANL demonstration in Southall in 1979 and the New Cross Fire two years later.

The upshot of this intense and somewhat frantic decade of left activism is that, although the Labour Government finally ran out of road in 1979 and was replaced by Margaret Thatcher's re-vamped Conservative government, there endured a real sense of optimism that the tide was on the turn and things were finally moving leftwards⁹. The Labour Party by 1979 was on the cusp of moving into its brief 'loony left' councils era¹⁰, with the GLC blazing a trail for a 1980s version of municipal socialism which was reflected in the new left councils of some of the larger cities / boroughs – Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Lambeth – where such figures as David Blunkett and Graham Stringer achieved a certain notoriety as dangerous far-left ideologues! Indeed, by 1980 the Labour Party was led by Michael Foot, the veteran Tribune Labour MP who wore the mantle of Nye Bevan, supported CND, was accused of wearing a donkey jacket at the Cenotaph – and whose nephew was, of course, Paul Foot, a tireless investigative journalist and author (Red Shelley), and probably the most widely known member of the SWP.

. . . . And it is into this rich and complex left milieu of the late-1970s that the SWP chose to launch another of its imaginative front organisations: *Red Rope - The Socialist Walking and Climbing Club*

b. Red Rope 1980 – 1985¹¹

1. Very early days

. . . . well, probably more of a 'frontlet' than a full-blooded, ANL-style political front. Even the SWP could not expect the massed ranks of working-class rock-climbers and ramblers to make a defining contribution to the growth of a revolutionary rank-and-file!

A more cogent account of the founding of RR is that a couple of SWP members (Andy Bateman, John Gillman?) on a Troops Out demo discovered that they shared an enthusiasm for mountains and climbing and thought it would be a good idea to set up a club / network to meet up with other comrades who shared their leisure-time enjoyment of getting away to wild uplands on the weekends when there were no mandatory demos. Presumably some cyclists in SWP had similar ideas about sharing their passions and activities, because in 1980 small

⁹ There were, of course, some serious warning notes that the left was not exactly on the crest of a wave. Quite the opposite, in fact. Eric Hobsbawm's *The Forward March of Labour Halted* appeared in *Marxism Today* in 1978, highlighting underlying weaknesses in the historic class foundations of the labour movement. It was followed in 1979 by Stuart Hall's *The Great Moving Right Show* which began to sketch out the dangers (and the novelty) of Thatcherism as a neo-liberal programme (though we didn't call it that in those days). Sheila Rowbotham et al (1979) *Beyond the Fragments* highlighted the extent to which the socialist vision and its pre-figurative practice still needed to be much more fully informed by feminism. In the same vein, I recently re-discovered Andre Gorz's 1980 classic: *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*. Startlingly prescient in its analysis of core problems in the 1970s which still bedevil the left forty years on.

¹⁰ *In and Against the State* (1979) was an intriguing book exploring how those of us working 'in the belly of the beast' should contribute to the overthrow / transformation of the state, both local and national.

¹¹ As it stands, this section draws heavily on memory. It will need checking against the archive and revising accordingly.

ads appeared in Time Out¹² for Red Rope – The Socialist Climbing and Walking Club, and Red Spoke – The Socialist Cycling Club.

What I found fascinating was that only SWP amongst the left political parties at that time had the political imagination to have a go at re-creating the left political culture of the Clarion Movement's 'outdoor socialism' in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. In the midst of all the conventional demands of political activism, Red Rope captured the value, even for dedicated and driven socialists, of recreational enjoyment in the company of like-minded people. Worth noting, perhaps, that about the same time, the Gay Outdoor Club, drawing on its own movement's history in similar ways, also placed small ads in Time Out. Both Red Rope and the Gay Outdoor Club are still going and have current websites and memberships – though both are noticeably in their forties and having problems engaging the younger generation¹³.

What is not in question is that Red Rope as an organisation was launched, and initially managed, from within SWP. Its original contact address was the SWP's well-known PO Box in East London; two key founding members worked in the SWP's printshop; its original constitution was a classic piece of democratic centralism through which the SWP could, at any time, retain control and legally prevent the WRP or the RCG from worming their way in and seizing the club and its organisational, financial and political assets! The bulk of its initial membership was in SWP; in the early days, it had the feel of an extended friendship network within SWP who did not object to the company of a few fellow-travellers who liked climbing and fell- walking. It made for interesting weekend trips and conversations. Indeed, it was predominantly London SWP to start with; most involved in setting the initial character and scope of the club came from within London or the London-commuting area. It was their experience of living the politics and culture of the left of the 1970s which gave form and shape to the fledgling Red Rope.

A detailed account of its growth and development over the first five years is not feasible here. What I aim to do in the next two sections is to capture aspects of the 'political mood' of Red Rope, rather than presenting a chronological narrative of specific political moments. I have organised these reminiscences and reflections under two broad headings: *Socialism in One Club*, which explores ways in which various socialist and other political positions informed the routine practice of the club, and *Red Rope and its wider environment*, which explores ways in which RR engaged, in its founding years, in wider campaigns, initiatives and movements between the election of the first Thatcher government in 1979 and, by 1985, the defeat of the Miners' Strike and the abolition of the GLC and Met County Councils.

2. Socialism in One Club

What's in a name? Red Rope was modelled as a mountaineering club rather than a ramblers association. But the term 'mountaineering' had a certain elitist ring to it¹⁴; 'climbing and walking' is more inclusive; 'Red Boot' would have suggested we

¹² This is before Time Out's owners abolished its collective working and equal pay practices; after 1981, City Limits took over Time Out's mantle as the source of information on agitprop and things alternative.

¹³ I am not sure what happened to Red Spoke. Google gives me <https://www.redspokes.co.uk/about/> which may be able to trace its origins further back.

¹⁴ Also, it would be somewhat misleading as hardly any early member had substantial all-round mountaineering experience in the UK, let alone further afield. The late Gerry Hedley was the only one I can remember who had serious Alpine climbing experience. Gerry was a renowned art restorer and possibly the only RR member from IMG, where he wrote pamphlets on Chile with Tariq Ali. He died in a climbing accident in the Alps in 1990.

were a bunch of neo-Luddite, industrial saboteurs. So *Red Rope: The Socialist Climbing and Walking Club* we became. There was an implied sense, nevertheless, that the walking and climbing of Red Rope took place mainly in mountainous regions. The early affiliation to the BMC gave access to huts in those parts of the UK and the general arrangements for trips were arguably much more directly beneficial to the rock climbers in the club. Walking was overwhelmingly fell- and mountain-walking. The first three AGMs were held in the Llanberis area and it became 'a tradition' that almost all those attending, whether climbers or walkers, did the Snowden Horseshoe on the Saturday, which gave rise to some memorable early stories out of which we built our identity – not least the rescue of the stranded airman in 1980.

For climbers, Red Rope was particularly attractive to those who felt socially, culturally and politically out of place in their local mountaineering / climbing clubs. RR's trip programme provided an effective way of pursuing one's enthusiasms and finding climbing partners with whom one felt confident and comfortable – a crucial ingredient in the inherently risky business of pushing one's limits on rock faces. That may account for the extent to which, at the outset, climbing tended to be perceived and practised in RR as the dominant partner in the "climbing and walking" duality.

Who's a socialist? My memory of those early years is that the unstated criterion for whether one was or was not a socialist was more a matter of the form and level of one's political engagement / activism than one's line on Kronstadt or theoretical analysis of false consciousness. On my early trips, when I had scanned the papers on display on the minibus, I found we tended to talk about what we were doing in our unions, our parties, our campaigns. There was a palpable sense that most early members were politically active outside RR in one way or another. At times, real tensions and conflicts erupted, (see later) but unlike most outfits which originated within left politics, the club never had major splits and divisions. In many ways, it was a cohesive and effective 'prefigurative broad democratic alliance' – though I never described it as such at the time, as I would have been seen to reflect the CP's political language much too closely for comfort!

Whilst we were attentive and assiduous in developing suitably socialist / collectivist practices for the club's activities and behaviours (see below), RR was perhaps primarily a leisure-time pursuit for individual socialists, space and time for intense enjoyment away from the customary demands and constraints of political activism. This was a not wholly unreasonable position, though it did give rise later to some tensions over the extent to which members were obliged to be actively involved in broadly defined 'political' initiatives undertaken by Red Rope as an organisation. This has probably resonated throughout the club's subsequent history. What is the appropriate balance between advancing a sort of prefigurative life-style socialism through / within the club and grappling with all that stuff to do with organising the overthrow of capitalism and the state? How are the two to be articulated within a single club?

Feminists? Feminist politics were not always so readily incorporated in the mix. Most huts did not lend themselves readily to women-only space within the rather bohemian living and sleeping arrangements that were the norm. SWP were not exactly trailblazers in the shaping of socialist-feminism. Its closure of *Women's Voice* in 1982 and the quite appalling stance taken at that time by *Socialist Worker* on the Greenham Common women's actions stirred up some turbulent cross-currents around the issue of women-only activities within the Club. Red Rope never managed to position itself as the 'go to club' for

women climbers who saw themselves, alongside Brede Arkless and Alison Hargreaves, as taking forward the legacy of Dorothea Pilley, Gwen Moffatt and the Pinnacle Club.

Ecologists? Although RR's early engagement with access issues did touch on some environmental issues, and we tried to encourage the Ramblers Association to adopt our maximalist positions on anti-nuclear issues (see later), an 'absence' in those early years was a distinct 'Green' voice. One or two members aligned themselves with the Ecology Party, a forerunner of today's Green Party whose most prominent member was Jonathan Porritt and we mostly opposed nuclear power. But Red-Green debates were not central.

A fair economic base If the political and ideological superstructure of the club was a slightly laissez-faire left-activist socialism, its economic base has, from the outset, been a sustained application of Marx's classic redistributive dictum: "*From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs*"¹⁵ The care and attention given to working out the bands for determining subs and a measure of equity in apportioning trip and travel costs has been a model which, to this day, many other small organisations and community group should adopt. It originated in RR specifically, not just as an abstract principle of funding collective organisation / activity, but from the commitment to ensure that RR's activities were open to those who were unemployed. It was then extended to deal with a much broader set of issues in relation to individual members' financial circumstances and commitments. It has been transparent and underpinned by some quite astute financial management of RR's income and expenditure generally. It has, inevitably, led to occasional sense of inequity – both from those who have found it hard to engage even on the lowest bands and from those with cars on higher bands who could organise a trip to North Wales with four mates more cheaply. But the fact that it has endured has been a distinctive feature of the practice of socialism in Red Rope.

A small financial quirk Initially RR banked with Barclays. Some of us pointed out that there was a recognised Anti-Apartheid Movement campaign against banking with Barclays; we were given a lesson on the malign nature of all banks under capitalism and how to combat the bourgeois fastidiousness of gesture politics! After a couple of years or so, a majority was eventually built for a touch of bourgeois fastidiousness.

Individual & collective development As the club moved beyond being an extended friendship network, we had to find appropriate ways of balancing out members' inevitably diverse abilities and their expectations of what we would all get up to during our weekends together in some mountainous corner of the UK. Lots of subtle negotiating had to take place on the minibus on Friday evening and over breakfast on Saturday about who would walk and/or climb where and with whom? Who was competent to lead a group walk safely? Would the climbers always be happy to spend at least half a day to give newcomers a taste of rock-climbing (yet again) up Spiral Staircase or Direct Route on Milestone Buttress? How could we develop and extend the outdoor skills and experience base of both individual members and the club collectively? Given the unavoidable element of risk associated with rock climbing and mountain walking, how could we ensure that those who wanted to try and push things a bit were adequately supported? And how did we deal with the choices if some of us felt that an enthusiastic member offering to introduce new

¹⁵ Critique of Gotha Programme (1875)

members to the hills might not have the necessary personal skills or self-awareness to do so safely? Who would look after children? . . . And how could we make these choices and judgements in ways which were open and transparent? How could we draw on other relevant skills we had from our work and experiences in other contexts?

In a very real sense, the fact that we handled this as well as we did as the club grew is a further testament to the strength of our disposition to act co-operatively together as a bunch of socialists. We never had great conflicts over such matters; we never needed to hire group consultants to help us with such negotiations. From the outset we established a political culture within which such collective decision-making took place; and those who were overly individualistic and unwilling to abide by the outcomes of such processes simply cleared off after a trip or two.

Clearly these balances shift over time as membership changes. From my own experience as a rock-climber over the first five years, my sense is that when we started out, very few RR climbers had sustained experience of climbing routinely above the *Classic Rock* grades. By the mid-1980s, there had been a collective and shared skill development across that cohort, such that most of us were beginning to feel comfortable pushing ourselves into the wider and wilder world of VS grades and upwards. We did that as a cohort – though not always wholly in the course of RR trips; we met up to climb together on other occasions and sometimes hired a guide to extend us safely. But we were always able to make the appropriate shifts when climbing within the necessarily collectivist environment of club activities.

SWP calls on the LP! By the middle of 1982, membership had grown beyond 200. Importantly, clusters of members were emerging across the country – Manchester, Liverpool, West Midlands and not just London. Hitherto, RR had been managed on the basis of a single officer [National Treasurer, Colin Knowles], a London-based committee which divvied up such tasks as were necessary on a largely *ad hoc* basis, an occasional bulletin and lots of informal communication arising from the initial extended friendship network model. It was becoming clear that to sustain itself and continue to grow, Red Rope needed a bit more structure to enable full membership participation and a wider knowledge base on how to do things like organising a trip. Suitable motions were put to the 1982 AGM in Llanberis – which had to be moved from the Chamois Hut to the parish hall to accommodate everyone – along with a proposal that yours truly be elected as the first National Secretary of Red Rope. Building a functioning bureaucracy was not exactly part of the SWP's core skill set; that needed the input of a reliable bureaucratically-minded Labour Party and trade union hack!¹⁶

By 1984, the re-vamped club which was proposed in 1982 had been comfortably established – and in essence it is the club which persists to the present day, with its regions and their own committees and trip organising responsibilities, its national committee and officers with their responsibilities for Bulletin, MIS, its national trips, and overall supervision of financial matters and the general integrity of the club within the framework of policies agreed at AGMs. It has required the production of trip organiser's handbooks and general guidelines on how RR should disport itself. Importantly, for the most part it has enabled all the broadly-

¹⁶ There is a bit of a back story here. By 1982, Tony Cliff and the SWP leadership reached the position which the CP's Eric Hobsbawm had reached in 1978 (see note 10 above), namely that the Labour Movement militancy of the 1970s was not going to be extended generally into the 1980s. The upshot was a quite dramatic about-turn in SWP's overall strategy and tactics. Not only was *Women's Voice* closed (see above), but so were all forms of rank-and-file movement building; the SWP ditched ANL and RAR and, if it ever was a recognised SWP front organisation, Red Rope! The club would have to fend for itself in the future.

defined socialist behaviours and approaches discussed earlier in this section to develop and evolve as the wider political environment from which members come changes and evolves¹⁷.

A place of our own? An initial explicit aim of RR was to own its own hut; and to that end a Hut Fund was established in the very early days. Other than transferring a bit of money to the Fund now and then, not much was done in practice about progressing the aim, though it never faded away. For some it was a real aspiration; some opposed it in principle – especially if it was in North Wales; others just couldn't see how a small unincorporated association could take on the ownership – or even the long-term renting – of a significant property. I was in the agnostic camp, though I entertained private worries that some wealthy member of SWP could end up as the effective owner and the building would serve a dual purpose as a club hut for RR and a country retreat / group training venue for SWP, along the lines of the Redgraves' cottage for the WRP on the edge of the southern Peak District!

I am now obliged to acknowledge the long-term socialist commitment and vision of those who stuck with the Hut Fund and finally sealed the recent hut sharing deal with LMC.

3. Red Rope and its wider environment

In the previous section, I reminisced about some of the ways in which a politics of socialism informed the organisation and culture of the club and its core activities of climbing and walking during its first five years. This section turns the focus round and explores some of the ways in which RR as an avowedly socialist organisation engaged politically in its wider environment.

Rattle the bucket & raise the banner We did the usual sorts of things left groups do. At trips and meetings we raised funds to support the latest strike. To demonstrate our internationalism, we supported Janus Onyskiewicz, an imprisoned mountaineer who was a member of Solidarnosc in Poland. We went on sponsored walks for good causes – the most ambitious of which was our attempt at a mass sponsored Welsh 3000s in early-April 1982, to raise funds for the Kinder Mass Trespass anniversary (see later). A couple of members spent a long time working out the most likely route for success in such a venture, though a splinter group of half a dozen felt the plan was unworkable and opted to start by first bivouacking on the summit of Snowden. It was bitterly cold; there was still snow around. Of the 25 – 30 or so comrades who embarked on this ambitious (foolhardy?) exercise in collective mountain walking, most opted out either in Nant Peris or Ogwen. Only four or five made it all the way; my memory is that Maz Simon, Gerry Hedley and Mike Wedderburn were amongst that hardy band who head-torched their way across the Carneddau and down into Aber.

¹⁷ In the late-80s and early-90s, I did a lot of work on the management of not-for-profit / social economy organisations. For lots of small, informal community groups, clubs, campaigns etc, standard structures are not relevant. Nor in the case of Red Rope, were the standard organisational models and practices adopted by left political organisations and trade unions or those from the world of co-operatives and collectives operating commercially. Red Rope had all the hallmarks of the sorts of flexibility and value-driven engagement which was explored in a lovely book by Jeff Bishop and Paul Hoggett (1986) *Organizing Around Enthusiasms: Mutual Aid in Leisure*.

We also carried our various banners at the usual demos, as well as up and down mountains to rally the masses to our cause.



Brian Muir and John Lockwood in 1982, re-enacting the working class's iconic 1932 victory on Kinder Scout (NB Red-ish boots and red laces!)

Friends and allies As RR sought to establish itself and its socialist identity within the political left generally it also had to decide whether and how to engage with the politically radical end of the outdoor world. Initially that was largely a matter of making connections with a few well-known climbers who were also known for their socialist politics and / or working class origins. We found our way quite quickly to Jim Perrin, for instance, who had at one time been a member of the CP. To my mind, Jim was always more of an anarchist than a socialist; I doubt he ever had the discipline to be a loyal, card-carrying party member for long. He nevertheless wafted in and out of Red Rope during the early-1980s and was a useful contact in helping us find our way around the politics of the climbing world at that time.

We also made contact with Dave Cook, a member of the Climbers Club who used to put up new routes in the 60s and 70s with climbers like Ken Wilson and Paul Nunn with whom he had campaigned for women to become members of the Climbers Club. Dave was also a major figure (i.e. sometime National Organiser) and key player in the CPGB during its final two decades. Whilst generally supportive and helpful, Dave never became closely involved with RR; he had no desire to be identified with a club that had such strong SWP links. (By the same token, I have to say, several quite vocal SWP members of RR were not prepared to let what they regarded as his Stalinism go unchallenged whenever they met him; Dave's Teddy Boy demeanour even made him look a bit like a stereotypical CP Tanky!)

It took us a bit longer to find allies and friends with whom we could make common cause in the walking / rambling world. Chris Smith, the gay Labour MP for Islington South was an avid Munro-bagger and found his way to Red Rope in the early years. Alan Mattingly, the then Director / General Secretary of the Ramblers' Association, was active in the Labour Party in East London, but rather held us at arms length. On the other hand, his predecessor, Chris Hall, who was then the editor of *The Countryman* and a long-time campaigner for access,

gave us lots of support. As did Kate Ashbrook of OSS, who is a RR member to this day and has been one of the most persistent campaigners for access ever since those early days. For a few years, we also had a fairly close working relationship with Peter (Fourth Baron) Melchett – a genuine member of the Labour Aristocracy! – as he transitioned from his life as a minister in the Wilson and Callaghan governments, through his time as the President of the RA (and an enlightened landowner) into his prominent environmental and campaigning work for organisations such as Greenpeace and the Soil Association.

Other close personal friends and allies included Jon Cowley and Dick Williams, a couple of climbers from Sheffield who took the lead in 1981/82 in setting up SCAM, the Sheffield Campaign for Access to Moorland. SCAM revived the practice of mass trespassing on moors and crags still closed to the public in the eastern Peak District. RR worked closely with SCAM both in building support for the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Kinder Mass Trespass in 1982 and in strengthening and extending the political dimensions of that event.

*“Kinder” 1982*¹⁸ Following The 1981 AGM resolution that RR should celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the 1932 Kinder Scout Mass Trespass, the club set up an *ad hoc* “London Kinder Committee”¹⁹. Within a few weeks of the resolution, the CP network put us in touch with Benny Rothman, who had already set up a local committee to plan an anniversary celebration in Hayfield. That led to two RR members, Kieran Loftus and Julian Batsleer, joining Benny’s Committee, along with our two allies from SCAM. What ensued was a huge amount of work for six months, in the course of which The London Kinder Committee found themselves, along with SCAM allies, doing the bulk of the heavy duty work to shape and publicise the entire event. In effect, we developed what was initially envisaged as a celebratory event bringing together ramblers and representatives of the Peak District National Park into a more extensive political memorial with a strong emphasis on ‘unfinished business’ and the need to resume the direct action agenda and its associated politics.

As a model of effective political organising, Red Rope played a blinder. To all intents and purposes, RR wrote, designed and produced most of the national publicity providing the dominant images and messages of the event, as well as the badges and posters. We did a lot of fund-raising and ran an extensive press and publicity campaign throughout the trade union, left and socialist movements. Crucially, we linked our efforts with those of SCAM. SCAM tapped into Sheffield’s history of access struggles in the Peak District in the 1930s; they identified moors still forbidding access and set out on a programme of mass trespasses.

¹⁸ A full account and analysis of this intervention and its associated historical and political ramifications is beyond the scope of these reminiscences and reflections. I am in the process of putting together such an account and analysis with a view to it being published either on the website of a group in Hayfield which keeps the flame burning: <http://kindertrespass.org.uk/>, and/or as a supplement to the RR archive in the WCML. This involves revisiting the original history and the complex political controversies surrounding the trespass in the 1930s. Those controversies have reverberated throughout the access movement ever since; they were present in 1982 and were a persistent undercurrent to all Red Rope’s political interventions in the early years.

¹⁹ As most readers will know, Kinder Scout, as the highest point in the Peak District, is not exactly a classic mountain summit. It is a large, bleak plateau, consisting largely of a blanket of peat bog. As I intimated earlier, many members of Red Rope had never been there so, to give them a sense of what all the fuss was about, then and now, RR’s London-based committee went up to Kinder Scout for a day in late-1981. I took them across the plateau from Edale to Hayfield (and the starting-point of the trespass at the Bowden Bridge Quarry.) As we toiled our way from one peat grough to another on our way from the Crowden drainage system to the Kinder drainage system, one committee member was moved to ask, with some exasperation, “Why on earth was the working-class so obsessed with coming up here?!”

The first was on Bamford Moor and Edge (involving both ramblers and climbers) and took place as a headline-grabbing curtain-raiser a few weeks before the Hayfield event.²⁰

Red Rope ran prior public meetings and events in London with Dave Cook and an elderly Tona Gillett (one of the five 1932 trespassers who were jailed²¹) and combined them into an additional event in the Hayfield weekend programme. In these ways, a celebration of 1932 and subsequent achievements – the unveiling of a memorial plaque, speeches by Benny Rothman and Alan Mattingly, anniversary walk up Kinder, a Folk Concert in New Mills (Mike Harding and Manchester Rambler of course) – was located within a range of *Lotta Continua* activities – RR's Meeting on reviving direct action campaigns; an 'access walk' led by Don Lee, the then access officer of the Peak and Northern Footpath Society²² and a large panel discussion on *Access and National Parks* chaired by Chris Brasher and including speakers such as Chris Hall, and Marion Shoard (Theft of the Countryside).



Mass Trespassers 1932
(Tona Gillett is the tall man on the left)

²⁰ Given the historic tensions in the 1930s between the Manchester originators of the Mass Trespass and the Sheffield access campaigners, this was a fascinating broadening of the reach of the celebration. It further re-enacted the original event as a group of Sheffield walkers in 1932 walked up Kinder from Edale on the same day.

²¹ Tona was a lovely man. He was the son of a banker and an engineering student at Manchester University in 1932. His barrister at the trial had expected him to apologise and to be cautioned. But when asked by the Judge whether he was ashamed of his behaviour, Tona replied "No Sir, I would do it again." – so he was found guilty of "riotous assembly" and jailed for two months.

²² Don Lee, was utterly dedicated to seeking out and exercising rights of way: "You need three things when you go for a walk in the countryside: your boots, your map and your wire-cutters". I once went on a day's hike with him in which we walked right across someone's lawn because that was where the definitive right of way went. His legacy includes a veritable maze of urban rights of way in Manchester – many of which are now being directly threatened by urban developments which turn once open public space into privately policed property.

The energy and effort we put into the 1982 Mass Trespass Anniversary brought the club wider recognition and a certain standing in the world of outdoor politics. It brought us a lot of new members and a basis on which to build an external political strategy during 1983. We were affiliated to both the BMC and the RA and we decided to push the boat out and intervene directly in their respective annual conferences / meetings. We knew how to do that sort of thing; submit a maximalist resolution, respond in the light of how it is received and keep on digging. We duly submitted a couple of such policy resolutions to both bodies.

BMC 1983 The BMC's 1983 annual meeting and dinner was at The Royal Victoria Hotel in Llanberis. Colin Knowles and I went as RR reps and our policy motions proposed a) that the BMC urge its clubs to give priority to attracting more unemployed people into climbing and b) that the BMC should stop using *Climber and Rambler* as its official magazine²³, on account of its inherent sexism and elitism (or something along those lines).

It was clear that receiving motions for the AGM from an affiliated club was a novel experience for the BMC. Colin and I had not bothered to check the rule book, for when it came to the point on the agenda for resolutions, the president fished out an ancient copy of the BMC's Standing Orders and ruled our motions out of order on the grounds that any motion from a club required the prior assent of at least five other clubs before it could be accepted for debate and decision! . . . However, since these two young chaps had gone to the trouble of sending in their ideas, he was going to allow them to have their say, and those present would have the chance to discuss them. There was some noisy dissent from the president's proposal, not least from Walt Unsworth of *Climber and Rambler*, who became so annoyed that he got up and left the meeting. The ensuing discussions were actually quite sensible and we received some support for our ideas on involving unemployed people more fully. After the meeting, in informal discussions in the bar, it became clear that we had, somewhat inadvertently, surfaced issues already being hotly debated and contested within the BMC. There were already moves afoot within the BMC to update itself and to move out of *Climber and Rambler*²⁴. . . . The Winter Palace had not exactly fallen, but somewhat to our surprise we had begun to open up a way into the BMC, which could be (and indeed has been) built on subsequently²⁵.

RA 1983 We also put two resolutions to the RA's 1983 annual conference at UEA (Norwich) – one on initiating a campaign of mass trespasses and another calling on the RA to support the winding down of the nuclear industry, both for power generation and for the production of armaments. The RA has the same sort of democratic structure as most trade unions, charities etc and is used to organising its annual conference and policy decision-making around resolutions and votes from its member groups. Its internal dynamics were also somewhat different from the BMC's; in broad terms, the RA's

²³ *Climber and Rambler* was published by Cicerone Press and edited by Walt Unsworth. Colin Knowles had already had a correspondence with him about the sexism of its advertising.

²⁴ Jim Perrin had already hinted as much to us from the perspective of a journalist keen to advance the cause of *High* within the world of outdoor publishing.

²⁵ Another couple of memories of that occasion. a) A.B.Hargreaves (a Lake District climbing pioneer from the golden age of the 30s and 40s) was honoured for his lifetime achievements. b) The guidebook writer W.A. Poucher was the guest of honour and speaker at the annual dinner. We did not stay for the dinner, but I spotted him in the hotel. I knew he had been a chemist working in the cosmetics industry; it was nice to see a slightly bulky, elderly man wearing a bit of make-up.

leadership – both full-time officials and elected officers – tended to be more radical than the membership from local associations. (The platform in 1983 included President Peter Melchett, Gen Sec Alan Mattingly, Vice-President David Rubinstein all solid and active Labour Party members.)

Whilst both our maximalist motions were duly debated and defeated, it effectively allowed the leadership to adopt a political approach along the lines (I paraphrase): “We share Conference’s opposition to these extreme loony left proposals from Red Rope, but we do commend to you our own proposals to take these particular important steps forward.” So, a regular programme of mass trespasses was not endorsed but plans to strengthen and extend the general access campaigning by RA (alongside its standard footpath-related work) were agreed. Our interventions did have a more general impact; the two RR reps – Chris Smith (Birmingham, not Islington) and me – were approached by lots of reps from local groups, either to support our socialism or to criticise us for trying to politicise a charity.

By virtue of its national standing, RR was affiliated to the RA as a national not a local group. One consequence of this, unbeknownst to us when we affiliated, was that we became eligible to attend something called the Joint Committee of Rambling and Mountaineering Associations (JOCARAMA!) which brought together all the RA’s national affiliates in regular information exchange meetings – BMC, YHA, Scout Association, Long Distance Walkers Association, Country Holidays Association etc. A measure of RR’s impact was that at the first two of these meetings we attended, the nature and role of RR and our ‘political involvement’ came under heavy scrutiny and some questioning of whether we were a *bona fide* national organisation within the outdoor world. . . . As at the BMC, clearly the Winter Palace had not fallen; our noisy presence at the gateway was noted, though we still had hard work to do if we really wanted to get through.

At this juncture, it is worth considering some of the political cross-currents of the club’s 1983 experience at the annual meetings of its two major affiliations. The character of RR in its early days – i.e. primarily a mountaineering and serious hill-walking club rather than a group of ramblers – probably made it easier to establish synergies with the BMC than the RA. Unlike the RA, the BMC was not formally a democratic charity whose overall policy and direction were determined by its member clubs. Its procedural informality / looseness and the equally fluid relationship with its area committees, meant that it was, paradoxically, relatively easy to become involved and make one’s mark. RR did not pose much of a political threat to the BMC – quite a lot of local mountaineering clubs were probably led by opinionated head-bangers and they were quite used to dealing with them. Indeed, most climbers, particularly the young ones who really push the boundaries, don’t really give a toss about clubs and the BMC²⁶. It was probably nice for the BMC to see keen young climbers from ‘the grassroots’ willing to make a contribution!

By contrast, the RA, with its origins in the campaigns for access in the 1920s and 1930s, had a history and self-identified role as the leading democratic membership-led organisation working for radical and progressive reform in the world of outdoor activities. It was not wholly surprising, therefore, that the RA in the early 1980s was a bit wary of RR. We probably appeared to the Labour-oriented leadership of the RA as some sort of entryist ‘militant tendency’ in the world of outdoor politics. There was an echo of the tensions and conflicts

²⁶ Do read the super novel by M John Harrison (1989) *Climbers*. And Robert Macfarlane’s praise for it: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/10/robert-macfarlane-rereading-climbers>

which existed in the 1930s between the RA's first general secretary Tom Stephenson (imprisoned pacifist in First World War and ILP background) and Benny Rothman (CPGB organiser of the Kinder Mass Trespass). They came from different traditions of political activism: reform -v- revolution. rights of Way -v- access to all open land.

Exciting as it was to continue the political momentum of 1982 into the BMC and RA, there were emerging signs that the club's growing external standing and involvement in outdoor politics was raising the same sorts of problems and dilemmas for RR as the 1932 trespass did for Benny Rothman and the British Workers Sports Federation.

The BWSF was the CPGB's front organisation through which Benny organised the 1932 trespass. Although the trespass achieved huge prominence for the cause of access, it also gave rise to much controversy within and across the various bodies campaigning more broadly for access in the 1930s. There were plenty of other trespasses and mass access rallies in the Peak District in the following years – during which the BWSF was conspicuous by its absence. Access to moors and mountains was not exactly the central issue which faced the CPGB. There was fascism to be fought in Spain, the AEU needed strengthening during the years of the depression; there were antisemitic Mosleyite black shirts to be confronted on the streets of major cities. As a loyal and disciplined member of the CPGB and AEU shop steward, that is where Benny Rothman, a working class, Jewish communist in Manchester, turned his political energies on his release from jail. Benny and his wife Lilian absolutely loved walking on the moors, but fighting landlords and gamekeepers over access to land for leisure pursuits was not their central political priority in the 1930s.

Fifty years later, many members of Red Rope faced similar underlying issues and political choices. Was Red Rope a club where socialist activists could enjoy time away from the struggle? Or was it yet another radical campaigning outfit requiring energy and political commitment? It did not surface initially in such stark terms; but in retrospect there was a sense that many members who had been happy to turn out in Hayfield in 1982 did not see that their Red Rope membership card necessarily obliged them to attend yet more campaign meetings and actions indefinitely²⁷ These issues were to become more acute after the third of Red Rope's 1983 political interventions.

SCAM – RR Campaign Conference SCAM and RR joined forces to organise a one-day 'campaigning conference' in July 1983 on *Strategy for Free Access*. It took place at the Bow community centre in Sheffield and was followed by a mass trespass on Midhope Moor the following day. It was attended by around 60 people, including such outdoor politics luminaries as Peter Melchett (the first ever Lord to visit the Bow centre) and Chris Hall for RA; Don Lee; Benny Rothman and Tona Gillett; Kate Ashbrook (OSS); Jim Perrin; Mark Hutchinson (BMC national officer) and about 50 members / associates of RR, SCAM and other local groups. It was a lively event and, in its choice of workshops, made a serious attempt to identify complex strategic and tactical issues involved in creating a direct action access campaign in the mid-1980s. Indeed, given Benny and Tona were both there, there was a feeling that the mantle of the BWSF was being handed on to a new generation. As one of the speakers (Jim Perrin?) observed, if a radical, direct action,

²⁷ That tension was also present in SCAM. It's two leading figures were both ardent rock climbers; indeed, they hardly ever went walking on moors. But they found they were, by 1983, expected / obliged to move SCAM forwards and trespass their way across lots of moorland rather than pushing the grades on 50 ft routes on gritstone crags.

access campaign were to emerge in the UK in the 1980s, then those at the conference were probably the only people who could make it happen.

But, however high Leninist aspirations may have been amongst those at the Bow Centre in Sheffield, Chris Hall unequivocally drew attention to the brutal reality that we were meeting just one month after the 1983 General Election; there was no real evidence of a groundswell of popular demand for access to open countryside, let alone support for direct action. The only feasible way forward would be through political education and propaganda²⁸. A sense of the possible scale of impending problems, not just for the left, but for progressive forces / movements generally from the mid-1980s onwards, was beginning to be articulated.

It is worth noting, therefore, that after the 1981/2 year of Kinder and the 1982/3 year of BMC and RA Resolutions and the SCAM-RR conference and trespass programme, the club's 1983 AGM²⁹ called for a bit of a pause in external activities during 1983/84. The relevant resolution began with the following words:

“The AGM recognises that Red Rope’s political initiatives in the coming year depend on the active participation of the membership, and therefore recommends that the NC adopt a modest approach when organising initiatives”

With the BMC, work was to go into following up on the resolutions already submitted and encouraging RR members to attend BMC area meetings. With the RA, RR basically offered full support for any RR members who wanted to be active in local RA groups and a holding presence on the RA’s national council / conference. A proposal from one member for RR to set up its own ‘access committee’ was heavily voted down.

Into this year of easing the club’s external politics erupted the 1984/85 Miners’ Strike, with all its attendant conflicts across the entire left. It also became increasingly clear that the second Thatcher government was embarking on a programme of far-reaching destruction to pave the way for a globalising financial neo-liberalism: the abolition of the GLC and Met County Councils, the sale of council houses, the privatisation of public utilities, the de-regulation of financial markets, rate-capping of local authorities and so on and so forth. Notwithstanding this backdrop, RR’s 1984 AGM took due note of Chris Hall and Tony Cliff, and passed a proposal:

“to organise an educational symposium on problems and strategies in access, conservation and planning” to take place in Spring or Autumn 1985.

A year of incredibly hard work on the part of a small team of dedicated club members resulted in what became known as *The Hope Valley Conference: Strategy on Access, Conservation and Planning for the Countryside* which took place at the Hope Valley College in the Peak District 26 – 27 October 1985. It was a residential event (Edale and Castleton YHs) with full professional creche facilities and attracted about 150 people.

Largely forgotten now, not particularly well supported by members of the club and with no immediate output or follow-up action, the HVC was arguably the most remarkable and ambitious of the external political initiatives undertaken by Red Rope in those early years. It was Red Rope, by itself, inviting all those who saw themselves as making up the socialist / radical end of the outdoor access movement to come together to shape the agenda for the

²⁸ Worth observing, perhaps, that Chris’s analysis of the task facing the access movement was much the same as Tony Cliff’s analysis of the tasks facing whatever then constituted the revolutionary socialist movement.

²⁹ Historic note. This was the first RR AGM not held in Llanberis. We all went to Gradbach Mill Youth Hostel near the Roaches in the Peak District in September 1983, where we returned in 1984.

coming period. HVC was not a bit of agitprop with immediate actions and pay-off; it was a serious piece of political education aimed at movement building and getting ahead of the curve in terms of the range and inter-relationships of the issues involved in any next stage of 'countryside politics'.

In a mix of plenary sessions, workshops and strategy forums, those there worked away on the environmental issues (river and coastal pollution, acid rain, nuclear waste, the wear and tear on mountains and fells, pesticides); employment and rural political economy issues (agribusiness; lakeland hill farming; rural transport; employment -v- recreational land use) institutions and agencies (national parks; military and water boards; forestry commission) alongside customary issues of lowland and mountain access.

As well as those from the usual organisations and backgrounds, we had specialist inputs from presenters and participants from a much wider range of backgrounds than was usual at access gatherings – Friends of the Earth, trade unionists; national trust rangers, a Wasdale hill farmer (though not Joss Naylor!), Socialist Countryside Group, National Parks Council.

As it happens, HVC also brought together a network of several people who, over the following decades, would play prominent roles in aspects of the countryside / access politics: Peter Melchett (Greenpeace, Soil Association); Kate Ashbrook ('CampaignerKate in RA and OSS); Chris Smith (sometime Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and head of the Environment Agency) Fiona Reynolds (sometime Director of the National Trust) and RR's Colin Knowles (sometime BMC Board member and recently elected Secretary General of the International Federation of Sport Climbing's European Council Board)

We had the blessing and guidance of those who had blazed access trails in earlier years (Benny Rothman, Don Lee, Chris Hall). And over a hundred participants co-created a more grounded and integrated sense of the wider political economy of access campaigning. For RR, it brought environmental issues into much greater prominence in our thinking and our debates about socialism and our aims and identity. . .

. . . but nothing tangible arose in the short term, either for RR or the wider access movement. There were eager plans to produce and publish HVC papers and summaries of discussions and recommendations for strategy; indeed, a set of chapter headings were agreed with Pluto Press by early-1986. But it never got further than that. The conference papers and workshop reports are now housed with the Red Rope archive in the Working Class Movement Library, a sepia snapshot of the outdoor left's thinking and aspirations in the mid-1980s and RR's role in facilitating the development of that thinking and those aspirations.

Over the following years, the scale and reach of the mid-1980's Defeat of the Left re-shaped the terrain and many of the political assumptions which had informed RR's existence hitherto. It has taken a very long time for the Left to come to terms with the warnings of Eric Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall in the late-1970s (note 9 above), the analysis and decisions of Tony Cliff in 1982 (note 16 above) and the observations of Chris Hall (page 20). The Miners' Strike and the manner and brutality of its defeat gave rise to a plethora of tensions and conflicts – social, political, economic, relational, cultural, emotional – which have still not been resolved.

That Red Rope came through all that and still exists is a testament to the strength of the simple thought which occurred to Andy Bateman and John Gillman, namely that it would be a good idea to set up a club / network to meet with other comrades who shared their passion

for getting away to wild uplands on the weekends when there were no mandatory demos. It was, and remains, a really good idea.

For personal reasons, I stepped down from the National Secretary role at the end of 1984 and have, alas, drifted away from the club. My last trip, I think, was the winter trip to Glencoe in 1987, shortly before my professional life moved into a 24-year stint with the Open University³⁰. I have almost always renewed my membership not least because, for me, the comradeship and the politics of those early years of the club were a real high point and culmination of the long left struggles and the hope of the late-60s and 1970s. Red Rope in its early years was one of the few sites of political contestation / exploration where left activism was overwhelmingly enjoyable and uncomplicatedly worthwhile. If Red Rope could offer so much enjoyment, then there must be real hope for socialism.

A final thought on *The Politics of Red Rope* document attributed to me in the recent lockdown bulletin. It certainly appeared during my time as National Secretary, when I produced reams of text for and about the club. I did have a snappy agitprop voice as well as a discursive analytic / reflective voice and I don't demur from the content and tenor of the document. I am not sure, however, that I wrote the whole thing. It contains various turns of phrase I would have been unlikely to use; tropes like "workers in struggle", for instance, always signalled SWP, just as "broad left / democratic alliance" signalled CP. Similarly, the very last sentence reflects quite accurately SWP's 1983 line and phraseology on the then state of trade union militancy ". . . we must be alert to the workers movement, for any upturn in struggle needs all the support it can get." It is also worth noting that the document makes strong statements about RR's support for Greenham Common women and women-only trips, which is interesting given SWP's positions at that time on feminist politics. . . . All of which suggests to me that several people may have had a hand in putting the document together. I need to check more closely when I can eventually get to the archive and locate the document more exactly within its context alongside other documents generated at the same time. My best guess at the moment is that it was a 1983 revamping of an earlier SWP-originated document on RR's politics, edited and amended to include a some newer dimensions of the club's politics by 1983. . . . It was certainly a lot more succinct and to the point than the 22 pages of reminiscences and reflections you have just ploughed through!

In solidarity and with many thanks,

JB³¹

³⁰ Several WEA tutor-organisers ended up as the token leftie in various UK Business Schools. I occupied that role in the OU's Business School. I often drew on Red Rope as the inspiration for teaching sessions on how to handle political conflicts and value tensions within an organisation!

³¹ I occasionally see my old climbing gear in the attic and am seized by quite visceral desires to climb rock for one last time. I fantasize about climbing the routes I led on my first ever RR trip: Hope and Lazarus. So if any of you know how a 72-year old man with increasingly arthritic limbs and a slightly erratic heart condition could realise such a fantasy (socially distanced, of course) and then get back down to Llyn Idwal, do please let me know. The crux of Lazarus would require at least one and probably two very tight ropes.