

Guidebooks Instant Inspiration

By Ian Wyatt

A guidebook is a documentary map to the vertical with some historical contextualisation. Whilst boxed in a warehouse or on the shelf of your local climbing shop it is a sequestered text with maps, diagrams, photo topos, action shots and icons. But when you buy a guide it becomes so much more, it is a book with which you can develop an emotional connection beyond its existence as an object of place. And yet there may be a deep paradox sitting at the heart of our relationship with guidebooks.

Adventure, exploration, wilderness, beauty, anarchy, risk are just a few of the terms that for many characterise climbing and climbers and, I think, we quite enjoy our association with such myth-making words. Guidebooks give us options about where to go, how to get there, what to expect on a given climb, what the perceived risk may be and possibly even what gear to take, all of which seems contrary to the image presented through the language of exploration and risk. In fact, one might argue that guidebooks turn us into sheep following known lines of pre-prepared

adventure, using route names and grades to measure ourselves against. And why not? Most activities come with bragging rights. Although this caricature carries some truth, I believe that our relationship with guidebooks is actually far more nuanced.

I recently bought the Wired guide to Pembroke, actually it could have been any new guide it just happened to be this one. Why did I need a new guidebook? There have been a great many developments in the 30 years since my existing guide was published. But no, that's not it; my need was for more than just an update. I have had a difficult relationship with Pembroke, my sporadic visits have been wonderful and awful in not quite equal measures and for a number of reasons. This time I wanted a fresh start with my bogey crag, I wanted to be inspired to really want to go and get on what many consider to be Britain's finest rock. With a brand new book that feels simultaneously solid and soft complete with that freshly picked guidebook smell, I bought instant inspiration and reassurance with its sunny topos, action shots and easily digested information. This was something to help me establish a new relationship with an old acquaintance. It worked, I felt inspired and positive about going before I left the house.

Whether you have been climbing for 18 months, 18 years or half a century you will have a first guidebook, a special volume that said to you and the world 'you are a climber'. The chances are this will also be the area where you first tasted the joys of movement on rock, this is where it all began for you and I'll bet that the area, rock type and book all still hold a special place in your heart. I may be being overly romantic, but that book is also very likely to have ticked/ noted climbs and partners, recorded dates, dog-eared pages. It is now a physical manifestation of memory, an artefact of your past that remains part

of your present, an aide memoire of past glories, epics and routes yet to be done. Unlike other non-fiction books, guidebooks are intimately intertwined with our personal histories, a relationship that is closer to an evocative song that recalls key moments in life than it is to an A to Z route planner. Your story becomes layered into the histories recalled in the guide, whether that is about a route, a crag or an area.

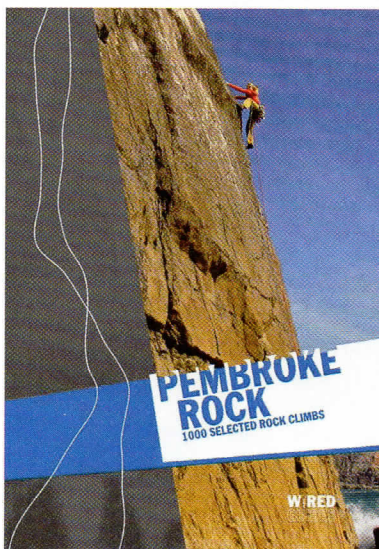
But guidebooks are not just about the past, we also plan our futures with them. Some are for crags or areas within our usual orbit and then other guides are for planning trips further afield. Having bought the guide to El Chorro, Chamonix or Yosemite to organise your trip it then becomes part of the record of all that you did whilst away. Then there are the guides to far flung areas, the places we hope to go to but maybe are not convinced we'll get there but the guide keeps the dream alive and sitting on our shelves reminds us and tells the world the breadth of our aspiration; a statement of who we are trying to be. Like the routes we aim for but that remain out of reach, we may never actually go to all the places to which we aspire but that dream pushes us on in the climbing we are doing.

The best guides are written with great clarity and wit, not necessarily relying on pictures to inspire or worry, such as:

*Start on the left side of the rib.
Follow it to moves on the right
near the top. Holds imaginary,
protection nil.*

Piece of Mind (E5 6b)¹

Piece of Mind is out of my price range but I have always loved, been amused and inspired by this witty, deft description. No prizes for guessing where I started climbing. These small books, are redolent with meaning and important to the climber but they are thrown into



The Wired guide to
Pembroke Rock.



Jim Daley climbing *Gazebo Direct* (HVS 5a) on the South Face of Castle Rock of Triermain, one of many inspirational routes featured in *Lake District Rock*.
Photo: David Simmonite

rucksacks, carried on harnesses and generally physically abused; part of their function is as an extension to your rack. And where do we go to read these inspirational texts? The toilet, that is where we think about routes we'd like to do, formulate plans whilst being inspired and scared with toilet reading that can inspire bowel movements. Or maybe this is just lads; do girls read guides in the loo too?

Ah, but what about apps? Surely, they are the future? There are plenty of folk that are ready to write the obituary of the printed word and maybe in 100 years time they will be shown to be right, but I don't believe the low tech convenience of a printed book is ready to die just yet. With online logbooks and the affection people hold for their iPhones and Galaxies maybe a similar sort of relationship will develop in the middle

and distant future. Somehow I think not, and before you dismiss this as the ramblings of an ageing Luddite, I have tried apps but they are never going to gather the patina of usage that a book can, there will be no tick marks, broken spines or dog-eared pages, no scent of the outdoors. In short, they cannot be an object that reflects a life in all its glories and tragedies in quite the same way as a guidebook. ■

Mike Browell, Steve & Brian Dale, Nick Longland (eds). BMC 1981. *Rock Climbs in the Peak Volume 6: Staffordshire Area* p 147.