

# The final trad climbing festival

by John Ewbank ©



In the far northwest corner of Wales,  
Where the flags always fly at half-mast,  
A gigantic do was about to begin  
As a touching salute to the past.  
The Final Trad Climbing Festival!  
At last it was ready to start  
In this picturesque valley, hidden away,  
In Snowdonia's sodden green heart.  
Where climbing in full scuba gear,  
According to legend at least, was invented,  
Where bitter winds wither the mountains and those  
Who survive are the drenched and demented.  
Where the locals are so in love with their crags  
Each outcrop precious as breath,  
That when a rock jock arrived and put in a bolt  
They took up and stoned him to death.

Nations all over the world had applied to be host,  
It was like the Olympic Games.  
Each of them wanted to be centre stage  
The story was sort of the same.  
There'd been several contenders from Europe alone,  
With each knowing, full well of course,  
The rewards, in euros and dollars and yen,  
For flogging this almost dead horse.  
Trad Climbing! Heavens to Betsy!  
What a quaint existential mystery!  
There could be some loot for the host of this  
Celebration of slippery history.

Prince Charles had agreed to be patron,  
He was after all Prince of Wales.  
And he'd promised to personally pay for a workshop  
On climbing in breeches and nails.  
Sweden had been in the running,  
With a long and a glorious past  
With genuine nutters and scary ascents  
Their credentials were truly world class.  
India had lodged a bid that had landed it  
(sketchily) on the short list,  
Claiming fifty foot-runouts, with monkeys for runners,  
Were common as taking a piss.  
The English insisted of course, that Wasdale  
Was Trad's one and only true home.  
While the Italians said it began with the Pope  
In a quarry just outside of Rome.

The Irish winked and whispered whist;  
The Cliffs of Moher are the slimiest.  
Poland got drunk, and swore that their crags  
Were truly the grimmest and grimiest.

Australia said some of their cliffs were so Trad  
Each party could take home the crux  
Thailand said nothing, except they were bankrupt  
And desperately needed the bucks.  
America wanted to host on the basis  
That they were the biggest and hairiest.  
Russia had countered by claiming that climbing  
The Soviet way was the scariest.  
Argentina had nearly been chosen  
With many a year of tradition, but when  
They said they'd climbed Fitzroy in nineteen-eleven  
They fell under heavy suspicion.  
New Zealand and Canada, Scotland and France  
They'd all been among the contenders.  
But the steering committee said Wales is the one  
The others are merely pretenders.

Such fierce international rivalry!  
For the sake of just being the host  
To celebrate something that soon would be nothing  
Or nothing much more than a ghost.  
Trad climbing had once been mainstream enough  
To sell vacuum cleaners and beer  
And even the climbers who hated the climbing  
Loved dressing up in the gear.  
For a while it had been all over You Tube  
For a while it was big on TV.  
Climbing had featured in Hollywood movies,  
As glamorous as it could be.  
Now, a victim of its own popularity  
Trad climbing was on the way out.  
Nothing could save it from fading away  
And that's what this do was about.

This is the way it had all come to pass  
In a, nutshell, so as to speak  
For to dot all the I's and to cross all the T's  
Would take a year and month and a week.  
The gist of it is that the number of climbers  
Had grown, from tiny to huge  
From only a handful back in the day

To what millions had started to do.  
From vertical therapy for the anorak brigade  
And muscular whippets with rabies,  
To a healthy pursuit for all of the family  
For even the pets and the babies.  
Going ape was an item on every agenda  
And doing the monkey as well,  
While some did the wanton gorilla in groups  
And some did it all by themselves.

Cliffs everywhere were so crowded it started  
To seem everybody was at it.  
As soon as a new bit of rock was discovered  
Thousands of men would attack it.  
There were climbers, climbing, heading on up, and  
Climbers, heading back down.  
There were millions of climbers, climbing about  
And millions more, hanging around.  
Take Romsdal, as just one example  
As a stereotypical case:  
Even the Trolls had had to vacate  
When the climbers had run out of space.  
The Matterhorn vanished, ironically, under a  
Mountain of bright polar fleeces.  
Everest was leveled by the millions who, lovingly,  
One by one kicked it to pieces.

But that was only the tip of the iceberg,  
A high profile case, if you'll pardon the pun.  
Climbing had gotten too popular and now  
It was high time that something be done.  
The biggest problem of all was the carnage,  
The accidents, things going wrong.  
World Health and Safety got on it and asked:  
Should this be allowed go on?  
There were more mountaineers than mountains,  
More rock climbers than there were rocks,  
And the numbers kept on increasing,  
With no telling where it would stop.  
World Health and Safety rolled up their sleeves  
Determined to sort it all out  
They looked at it closely and thought to themselves:  
"What the fuck is this all about?"

In the end they banned mountaineering completely  
But granted rock climbing a pardon;

Provided a day out on the crag  
Be safe as a day in the garden.  
Rock climbing would still be allowed  
But on the condition that only, and, if  
Bolts were installed, nine every metre,  
On every boulder and cliff.  
(World Health and Safety, the one's who'd forbidden  
Schoolchildren from playing conkers,  
World Health and Safety now proving themselves  
Indisputably stark raving bonkers):  
Nine every metre, or ten might be neater,  
In a grid pattern on every rock surface,  
With hangers and draws already attached  
For safer and easier service.

Ten every metre on everything steeper  
Than thirty degrees! What a shock!  
With that many hangers and 'biners in place  
It was desperate just finding the rock.  
Climbers were crazy with anger,  
Incensed and appalled and irate,  
But every objection was futile,  
A case of too little too late.  
The movable scaffolds were moving;  
The compressors were out of the truck.  
Bolt factories from Sydney to Glasgow  
Couldn't believe their good luck.  
The din in Verdon carried to Paris  
Mimes were driven insane.  
The noise of fixing the South Pyrenees  
Ruined bullfights all over Spain.

Wales was last on the list of the countries  
Where Trad would meet its demise,  
And this alphabetical stroke of good luck  
Gave them time to get well-organised.  
Every hotel and hostel, hovel and barn  
Was booked over twelve months ahead.  
Every campsite as well; people would just have  
To sleep up to ten in a bed.  
What a festival this was promised to be  
And not just from being the last.  
The program was truly a Who's Who of Trad  
A reminder of deeds of the past.  
There'd be lectures and movies and slide shows  
Twenty-four hours a day for a week.

Here's just a few of the many  
Who were due to appear and to speak:

It would start with a bang, and who would be better  
To kick the whole festival off  
Than the greatest Russian mountaineer of all time:  
The truly unique Freezie Zarsoff?  
Like his brothers Bernie and Workie  
Freezie lived for extreme mountaineering,  
And rumors were rife that his muscular wife  
Spanky, might be appearing.  
Jim Wiggins the shortsighted onlooker

Would give an inspiring speech  
On the value of visualizing success  
While sunbathing down on the beach.  
The always provocative Pat McGroin  
The wildest gal of them all  
She'd be talking about her scariest climbs  
And also her scariest falls.

Justin Case, the local Welsh hero  
Would present, with his partner, Gwen Grunt,  
His system for grading all climbs with a zero  
And climbing them all back to front.  
He was always a radical thinker  
God knows what went on in his head  
He was a druggie, a smoker, and a drinker  
It was a miracle he wasn't dead.  
Odd Sockson, the Nordic big-waller  
Who now lives on sirloin and beer,  
Would reveal how he once lived on nothing at all  
But albatross shit for a year.  
Odd Sockson! Murdering English and  
Mad as a monk at the libertine's ball,  
His basic advice about staying alive  
Was to never stop eating at all.

Top of the bill would be Austin Tayshus  
The most mystical climber of all time  
Austin, the truly audacious  
Who lived his life only to climb.  
Austin, always the purist  
Who followed the rules of the game  
Whenever testosterone was mentioned  
Climbers would whisper his name.

What a man! What a brick! What a thruster!  
What a tiger! What a stud! What a star!  
Only happy when hanging within inches of death  
Or when getting dead drunk in a bar.  
So tough that he flossed with barbed wire  
The hardest trad dad of them all  
Born, as they say, with the mythical planets  
In place of the usual balls.

Ninety-Thousand climbers from around the world  
Had gathered on opening night.  
Like arthritic hippies at Woodstock they came  
Each with a candle to light.  
The final death knell of trad climbing!  
Grown men were drowning in tears  
There was nothing to do but accept it,  
The laws had been changing for years.  
Tryfan and Cloggy and Idwal  
It was more than a bit heavy-handed.  
Every cliff in the world, made to conform  
To The New International Standard.  
Threats were uttered and muttered  
There was plenty of flexing of muscles.  
Sandy Bum screamed out: "Let's go and attack  
World Health and Safety in Brussels!"

We'll never know if Sandy was serious  
She died on The Grochan the very next day.  
And a week after that the festival ended  
And everyone went on their way.  
But a funny thing started to happen  
When every cliff had been fully grid-bolted;  
The rise in the numbers began to slow down  
And then one day it finally halted.  
Overnight the tide had started to turn  
Rock climbing was no longer hip.  
Stanage, one morning, saw daylight again  
As climbers abandoned the ship.  
In Yosemite, tourists fainted,  
Some were treated for shock,  
When the climbers departed, revealing  
The walls of the valley were made out of rock.

Hundreds of social historians  
Have used up an ocean of ink,

Examining all the conditions that led to  
Climbers becoming extinct.  
They checked it from various angles  
From some that you can't even see.  
Political, sexual, financial  
And they finally came to agree.  
They put out a paper and in it they stated  
The following sorry conclusion, that:  
"The bolts, heading off, in every direction  
Had put climbers in total confusion.  
Like golfers, trying to play on a course  
Containing a million holes,  
Climbers, confronted with infinite options  
No longer knew which way to go."

Some had gone downward, some had gone upward  
Some had only gone sideways.  
Some took Justin's advice and climbed back to front  
Jumping off, singing "I did it my way".  
Some threw it in and gave up in disgust  
Some became men of the cloth.  
But, however you cut it, climbers became  
Extinct as the poor giant sloth.  
Flames from bonfires of guidebooks  
Lit up the entire sky.  
A rack of gear could be bought for the price of a beer,  
But nobody wanted to buy.  
A few still got dressed up on Sundays  
But they never could get off the ground.  
They'd stagger their way to the base of a cliff  
Then sadly they'd stagger back down.

So the cliffs of the world were deserted,  
Climbing was finally over,  
Nobody cared about dogging or chipping  
Or chalk on the white cliffs of Dover.  
Kittiwakes, jackdaws and falcons  
Could nest on the ledges again,  
And climbing, with neither a bang or a whimper  
Simply came to an end.  
Ben Nevis became a museum  
Scafell may as well have burned down.  
Gear manufacturers waited for darkness  
Then they slipped out of town.  
Climbing gyms went out of business,  
Guides disappeared without warning.

Climbing mag editors had to shape up  
And get out of bed in the morning.

I'm writing these words in Llanberis  
In what was once 'Wendy's Cafe,'  
I'm writing them down for Al Harris,  
Day after miserable day.  
A few other lads, sport climbers and trades  
Are sitting about at the table  
Wanting to go into action,  
ready and willing but no longer able.  
All we can do is stare out the window  
Reminisce fondly and sigh,  
While the endless torrential Snowdonian rain  
Falls from the Snowdonian sky.  
Here I am in the northwestern corner of Wales  
(Where the flags always fly at half-mast)  
And where the vertical voodoo of climbing is now  
Just another small part of the past.