

profile



Not JUST FOR CLIMBERS

Emily Rodway meets BMC Chief Executive Dave Turnbull to ask the question: "What does the BMC do for hillwalkers?"

THE offices of the BMC are housed in a converted church in the Manchester suburb of West Didsbury. Inside, things feel refreshingly uncorporate. Members of staff are spread across an informal open-plan main room, while the library in which I sit down to chat with CEO Dave Turnbull is dominated by a large, brightly coloured painting depicting a climber, a hillwalker and a mountaineer. It's there to illustrate the BMC's remit – to represent climbers, hillwalkers and mountaineers across England and Wales.

Climbing, hillwalking, mountaineering... the three connected activities clearly have much in common and the lines between them are sometimes fuzzy: arguably mountaineering is an activity that brings together elements of both climbing and hillwalking. But if you didn't know otherwise, nobody could blame you for assuming – if you only took a cursory glance at the BMC website or a copy of their members' publication, *Summit* – that the BMC focuses largely on the first and last in the list. I'm here today to find out what it does for hillwalkers.

I'm not the first person to ask the question this week. Last night, Dave Turnbull was at a meeting of the organisation's Yorkshire area committee. "The issue of hillwalking came up there," he admits. "A guy who is a keen walker and a member of one of the clubs asked 'What does the BMC do for hillwalkers?' The answer is quite a lot, but the profile that walkers get within the BMC is limited. That's for a range of reasons – it's partly to do with sourcing hillwalking

articles and imagery for *Summit* magazine. We don't pay for *Summit* articles and while we get offered quite a lot of climbing articles, we get very few hillwalking related articles and images. And the volunteers who gravitate towards the BMC by and large have got climbing and mountaineering interests. Probably 95 percent of our volunteers would think of themselves as climbers."

Although the BMC's articles of association state that they're a representative body for climbing, hillwalking and mountaineering (in England and Wales – in Scotland the sports are represented by the MCofS) it's clear that the members who are motivated to volunteer their time or contribute to the members' magazine are largely climbers rather than walkers. What's unclear is which is the chicken and which is the egg. Are more climbers volunteering their services simply because more of them are members? Are the climbers who are committing their time and contributing to the magazine affecting the profile of climbing within the organisation? Is the fact that climbing gains a higher profile putting hillwalkers off becoming members? And does it matter?

It evidently matters to Dave Turnbull. Living on the edge of Kinder, the BMC's CEO enjoys hillwalking and fellrunning as well as climbing in his spare time, but he is aware of the perception of the BMC as climb-centric. "It's a constant balancing act, trying to get the right balance in everything we do – in *Summit* magazine, in our work programmes and in our area

structure," he comments. "We know that about 20 percent of our members are purely hillwalkers who don't go climbing – they don't own a rope. The bulk are mountaineers/climbers but there is a percentage (and it's probably a growing percentage) who just go hillwalking."

So, to get back to the question asked by me this morning and by the hillwalking Yorkshireman last night: what does the BMC do for hillwalkers?

More than you might think. The organisation lobbies on access issues; promotes safety and good practice through talks, literature and other outlets; provides civil liability and personal disability insurance as part of its membership package; sells highly regarded specialist travel and activity insurance; and produces instructional DVDs (in collaboration with the MCofS and other relevant organisations) as well as the excellent British Mountain Maps (working with Harvey Maps; again with input from the MCofS on Scottish titles). It's true that work they do relating to climbing walls and competitions is not really relevant to those without ropes, but there's plenty of other stuff that is.

Of course, much of the work of the BMC is not activity-specific. Indoor climbing aside, climbers' interests are often similar to those that concern their non-rope-carrying cousins, and many of the BMC's projects are relevant to everyone who uses hilly environments for recreation. That's particularly true when it comes to one of the most important parts of the organisation's activity – access – which is grouped together with conservation



The BMC office near Manchester

and is the responsibility of two full-time members of staff: Cath Flitcroft handles the BMC's relationship with government and other recreational organisations on national issues, while Guy Keating focuses on regional projects. Later on this year, they will be joined by a third access and conservation officer, Elfyn Jones, based in, and focusing on, Wales.

"As far as our members are concerned, the main priority is access and conservation work: the upland environment and keeping the crags and mountains open, accessible and restriction-free," comments Dave, adding: "Cath Flitcroft operates at a high level within DEFRA, within Natural England, within CCW [the Countryside Council for Wales]."

In that respect, the BMC covers similar territory to the Ramblers. The two also work collaboratively where appropriate, for instance on the recent campaign to secure public access to Vixen Tor in

Dartmoor – the BMC and the Ramblers jointly produced a postcard that went out to all their members, encouraging them to write to the Chief Executive of Dartmoor National Park Authority. But Dave believes that there are differences between the Ramblers' approach to lobbying and that of his own team. Commenting on the Vixen Tor campaign, he says: "We definitely got further with the Ramblers than we would have done individually because they're more of a campaigning body than we are – that's their background, their *raison d'être*."

"They can mobilise large amounts of people quite quickly, which generates photographs and newsworthy articles, and they've got people who are prepared to stand up and say controversial things at times and be difficult. I'm not saying we don't as well but they're more developed in terms of their PR and media-related work because that's what they've done historically – raising the profile of access to land. We tend to work more quietly in the background, with national parks, the RSPB and landowners. I think the combination of the two has worked very well in this particular case."

Before being promoted to the top job seven years ago, Dave himself worked in access and conservation for the BMC. I put it to him that perhaps one reason why the BMC might be thought of as a climbing-orientated organisation is that hillwalking in England and Wales falls into an area of overlap between the responsibilities of the BMC and the Ramblers. (Indeed, some would argue that neither fully represents hillwalkers' interests to the extent they could.) Does

he feel that his organisation sometimes leaves campaigning on hillwalking-related topics to the walking charity? "We generally don't get involved with rights of way issues because it's technical and legal, it's quite specialised, and we know that the Ramblers are very good at it," he admits. But that doesn't mean that the BMC concentrates solely on access to climbing crags. Dave believes that their current coastal access campaigning is "almost more directly applicable to walkers than our work on CROW was."

The British Mountaineering Council was set up in the 1940s by the leading mountaineering clubs of the day, who decided they needed a national body to represent the sport. At the time, the organisation was run by representatives of those clubs. Today, the BMC is run via quite a complex structure of committees, with area representatives and panels of experts on specialist areas feeding into a National Council which formulates the BMC's policies on major issues. The Executive Committee, on which Dave Turnbull sits – along with the other Directors and representatives of the National Council – manages the BMC in accordance to these policies, and the work itself is undertaken by the 27 staff, mostly based in the Manchester office. "The BMC is a partnership of staff and volunteers and it works well, generally," says Dave.

But things haven't always been so positive. Soon after he was promoted into the hotseat in 2002, major financial and organisational problems emerged within the BMC, and it became clear that large amounts of money had been spent unwisely over previous years.



This led to dangerous mistrust between volunteers and the office, and meant that subscription rates were frozen and the staff downsized. Dave estimates that it took two and a half years to get things back on an even keel: "I think the 2004 AGM was the turning point. It just felt like the organisation was happier with the way it was, and they gradually started to trust the office more." Coming back to the present day, he adds: "There's a great deal of trust now, it's a very good relationship. If there's no trust there between the staff and the volunteers, it doesn't work."

One of the other important accomplishments of the past few years has been the raising of the BMC's profile and indeed that of mountain sports in general, within government and relevant government agencies. Through the Parliamentary Sports Fellowship – whereby MPs and peers are paired with sporting organisations to encourage better understanding between the two – the BMC forged a relationship with John Mann, MP for Bassetlaw in Nottinghamshire, who was instrumental in setting up a parliamentary mountaineering group as well as organising a Downing Street reception for the BMC last October.

Originally planned as a meeting between key figures in the mountaineering world and Gordon Brown, in the event the reception was hosted by sports minister Gerry Sutcliffe, as it took place on the day on which the PM announced the emergency bank bail-out. But prime minister or no prime minister, the day was deemed a great success, attended by numerous well-known mountaineers – including Chris Bonington, Alan Hinkes and Stephen Venables – and putting the BMC "on the map" with central government at a time when their application for grant money was sitting on desks as Sport England. "All of a sudden you're a serious player," says Dave. "There are invites arriving on the Chief Executive of Sport England's doorstep saying you're invited to this BMC reception with the Prime Minister at Downing Street. I knew about the prospect of it for a couple of years because John Mann had said when Gordon Brown comes in he's quite quite a keen hillwalker and there's a chance we can get a reception for the BMC. I encouraged him to fix it up – assuming it would be for half a dozen people for half an hour. It turned out to be 140 people for three hours, in the best entertaining rooms. It was amazing."

The reception obviously had an impact; despite speculation that non-competitive sports would suffer from budget being pulled away to spend on the 2012 Olympics, the BMC's grant from Sport England increased substantially – around 60 percent on a like-for-like basis over a four-year period. That figure needs to be taken in context, bearing in mind that the BMC used to receive funding from

UK Sport as well as Sport England, and that UK Sport funding (including grants for overseas expeditions) has been withdrawn due to the Olympics. Nevertheless, Dave says it still means substantially more income overall from government sources (the majority of the BMC's income comes from subscriptions and insurance). The additional funds will be spent in membership development and in support of climbing competitions, Mountain Leader training and clubs.

Overall, Dave Turnbull believes that 2008 was the BMC's most successful year so far since his appointment as Chief Executive – along with the grant success, there's good news on the membership front, with a half-price direct debit offer for new members leading to a 15 percent increase in individual membership over the last 18 months. Now Dave is looking to the future. The BMC recently elected a new President, Rab Carrington, a previous Vice President and the founder

of the Rab gear brand. Together with the rest of the Executive Committee, they will work on implementing new BMC policies over the next three years. Will there be some good news there for hillwalkers? We'll just have to wait and see. Either way, Dave will be seeking to ensure that climbers, mountaineers and walkers throughout England and Wales are aware of his organisation's full range of roles and responsibilities. A couple of years ago a new slogan, "Climb it, walk it, protect it", was brought in, to counteract the erroneous image of the organisation as just "some sort of an insurance company" among many outdoor folk. But there's still work to be done. "It's a long game that," says Dave. "It's changing minds over a period of years that the BMC is an organisation that's worth being a member of, fundamentally because they're doing the right thing out there in the hills, for enthusiasts. I think we are getting there; I think it's having an effect." ■



The BMC Executive Committee



Sports Minister Gerry Sutcliffe speaking to representatives of the mountaineering community at Downing Street