

Peter Biven (1935-1976)

'Biven & Peck'. I first heard the names in Cornwall, in '57 or '58 I suppose. We had just made the acquaintance of that beautiful granite face at Bosigran and discovered that it was laced with their fine and formidable lines. We supposed them to be a pair of mystery 'hard-men', southern counterparts of 'Brown & Whillans' perhaps—but who were they? and where were they from? Two or 3 years later I learnt. Already, knowledgeable gritstone climbers had written off 'Biven & Peck' into an early retirement. I discovered they were not 2 but 3: the Biven Brothers, Peter and Barrie, were in their early twenties, while Trevor Peck was already a dynamic 50-year-old. Indeed, they had been—and still were—one of the most prolific partnerships in British rock-climbing history.

Peter, the elder brother, was perhaps the dominant member of the trio. He was 41 when he died in June 1976 on an easy climb in the Avon Gorge—an accident on a belay ledge caused by knot failure. He had been creating new climbs, hundreds of them, for 25 years. He was a particularly versatile climber. His first important new climb when he was 18, was Original Route on High Tor at Matlock, then over the next 3 years he established himself as one of the great gritstone pioneers with a superb series of now-classic routes. *Congo Corner* and *Ferryboat Highway* on Stanage are among Peter's

climbs as also are that brilliant trilogy at Gardoms Edge—*Eye of Faith*, *Hearse Arête* and *Moyers Buttress*. His on-sight lead of the last named inspired Eric Byne to write '... one of the boldest feats of cragmanship that this era has seen ...'. The trio became excellent aid-climbers too: they were experimenters and developed—under Peck's guidance—an innovative range of specialist hardware. Peter led a fine series of aid routes on High Tor and on Millstone Edge. One of the motives for this form of exercise was preparation for major Alpine rock routes.

But Peter's name will for ever be linked with West-Country sea-cliffs. 'Biven & Peck' first came to Cornwall in 1955 and for the next decade they dominated Cornish climbing, where the surroundings exactly suited his style and temperament. In those 10 years Peter put up more than 30 of the finest climbs around Bosigran. *Suicide Wall* was the first with its bold hand-traverse—and there was *Anvil Chorus*, *Paragon*, *Tbin-Wall Special*, *Ghost*, *Phantom*, *Beowulf*, *The West Face*, *Diamond Tiara* ... you have only to name a classic and Peter created it. Typical of his exploratory zeal was Peter's second Cornish visit in the autumn of '55. Doing his national service in Northumberland, he secured a 48 hour leave-pass and hitch-hiked 200 miles to his home at Leicester. Barrie was waiting with his motor-bike and they rode 300 miles through the night into the W. By dawn and in a semi-trance they were already working upwards on a major virgin section of the Bosigran Face. The crux, at over 200ft, seemed impossible until Peter's questing hand slotted into a hidden hold. *Little Brown Jug* is a superb climb by any standard. Even after 1965 Peter remained the presiding genius at Bosigran. He was then 30 and he continued to make new climbs, often in the company of the new hard-men of a younger generation, for another decade.

Meanwhile, in 1961, he had moved to the SW and from a base in Exeter he roved the 500 mile coast-line of Devon and Cornwall discovering new cliffs and revelling in—as he wrote—'... the rising and falling of the tides and the ever-changing background of the sea ... the myriad distractions of the shore—the caverns, creeks and crystals, the flotsam and the strangely-formed, sea and time-worn rocks ...'. Peter was instrumental in the development of the Torbay limestone as a climbing area and he made some of the best climbs on Lundy. Notable is the Devil's Lime Kiln, an improbable 450 foot upward journey from darkness into the sun through a gigantic blowhole in the cliffs. He was especially delighted by the concept of the 'sea-cliff traverse'—the linking of one easy descent to the sea with another via a section of inescapable cliff—and where the apparent easy escape, a swim, may well leave the climber in deeper water than he bargained for! He developed new techniques for the game, traversed virtually the complete S coast of Devon in weekend instalments and considered its potential seriousness closely akin to that of a major Alpine traverse. 'Escape is either onward or backward. ...' he would point out. Even cliffs of the most horrible consistency yielded superb expeditions with Peter in the lead.

Peter made a fair success of his Alpine climbing but he always found it a bit of an effort and he was slow to acclimatize. Trevor Peck had a specially built motor-car and from this mobile base the Biven Brothers and Peck concentrated on Alpine rock in the mid and late fifties. In the Kaisergebirge they made 6 important first-British ascents and a new route—a Bivenweg—on the Predigstuhl Westwand. They managed much in the Dolomites while in the Vanoise, a favourite area, they made the first ascent of the Valette N face. Peter was elected to the ACG in '58. But his delight was in effortless unencumbered movement and, although their aesthetic charms appealed to him, he was never quite at home on the bigger mountains. I think he resented the touch of masochism which is unavoidably linked to big climbs on snowy peaks. In recent years nevertheless he climbed such routes as the Bumilergrat on Palu's N face, the Blumlisalp traverse, Disgrazia by the Corda Molla and the Badile Nordkante, often leading less-experienced parties. Typically they are all routes whose aesthetic appeal made the gruelling slogs seem worthwhile. Perhaps his best Alpine climb was in the autumn of 1970 when, with Ian Howell, he made the first British ascent of the virtually unknown NW Face of Piz Ligoncio in the Italian Bergell. It is a route comparable to, if harder and longer than, the famous Cassin Route on the Badile a few miles to the N. He was very excited by it, the empty granite, the deserted valleys and the autumn sunsets.

Peter lectured to clubs and ran beginners climbing courses for the local authority. In later years he was an Educational Adviser for Devon County. His charm and his particularly understanding and tolerant attitude to people's problems made him a wise magistrate—

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he sat on the Exeter Bench. He served on the Climbers' Club Committee and, briefly, on that of the Alpine Club. He wrote widely too. It was a medium in which he was especially fluent and in which he was well able to express his romantic feelings. His guide-book work is among the best and his historical introduction to the CC '68 Cornwall Guide is a masterpiece. Peter was no believer in terse and 'computerized' guide-books, they made no contribution to the mountain literature that he loved and collected. He gathered too some fine mountain and sea-cliff paintings: there were some stunning Fishwicks in his living room, a room which echoed to Beethoven and Bob Dylan. Music was important to him and this apparent dichotomy betrayed his romantic nature.

But rock was his medium. On it he was superb. He was tall and slim with powerful arms and steel fingers and he moved over it with the ease and grace of an elongated leopard—never have I seen him awkward or harassed on even the most uncompromising climb. Whatever move he made it was photogenic. Bubbling with enthusiasm and assurance one could want no better companion on the rope and he was the safest climber with whom I have shared it. His death is such an ironic tragedy.

John Cleare