CC Jan 20pp 2011:CC Jan 20pp 2011 16/1/11 18:47 Page 4



Rob Gibson on FA of Feathers M7 Wi5 📷 Lukasz Warzecha - LWimages.co.uk

TORQUE OF THE DEVIL OR SPORT OF THE GODS?

By Katy Dartford

To some it is a dark art that has no place in British climbing, to others it is yet another addition to our diverse sport. Katy Dartford looks at the arguments for and against dry tooling.

CC Jan 20pp 2011:CC Jan 20pp 2011 16/1/11 18:48 Page 6

It's been a long cold winter, which has felt miserable for many, but for winter ice climbers it's been a great season. When the snow and ice begin to melt, however, it's time for ice climbers to find other ways to get their arms and axes synchronised and to practise their figures of nine and double hand swaps. Dry tooling has grown in popularity over recent years and is now becoming much more than just a way to train all year round. There are fears though, that it could encroach on established rock climbing areas and damage classic routes.

A recent thread on a climbing forum suggested that dry tooling should be developed at spots like Symonds Yat, the Wye Valley and the Cotswold area, for which the CC publishes guides. Some of the crags proposed were mainstream venues, others, more obscure, but all are documented rock climbing venues. Meanwhile, in the mountains, the past few seasons have seen winter grades being pushed on classic and hard rock routes.

So there are two issues here: how the lower 'dry' crags are affected by the desire for summer dry tooling venues and how the mountain crags are affected when classic rock routes become winter targets.

The debate over suitable venues for dry tooling has been quietly bubbling away, but recently boiled over after an incident in Millstone recorded on UKC, where two climbers attempted to dry tool up the cracks of two 3 star grit routes.

Their antics brought howls of outrage from the climbing fraternity. But for practitioners of dry tooling, these miscreants were also tarnishing the image of the sport. They are well aware of the ethics of climbing and wouldn't encroach on these areas. One of the foremost exponents of dry tooling, Rob Gibson, says 'it's a common misconception that dry tooling is practiced by people who would sneak around the numerous unclimbed crags in the UK during September and scratch their way up the best crack lines. In reality the people I meet while dry tooling are experienced climbers who would much prefer to do a good E5 first ascent rather than a dry tooling route. When I find the next Stanage I certainly wont be reaching for my axes.'

He believes the incident at Millstone was probably a 'freak occurrence similar to drilling slots in Cornish granite or hammering holds in Fontainebleau and not the start of a trend.'

Tom Broadbent has also been dry tooling for several years and climbing for many more. He recently on sighted M7 and competes in dry tooling competitions, as well as climbing ice and mixed routes in Scotland, Wales and Europe.

He believes that the future of the dry tooling wouldn't have been such an issue if it weren't for the Millstone incident. 'It would have carried on developing slowly, gathering a following and with crags chosen along the way that are suitable for the development of the sport.' Places like Newtyle Quarry near Perth in Scotland, the intimidating chalk cliffs around Dover and the South East, Masson Lees, near Matlock in the Peak and various roadside cuttings and disused quarries.

Dry tooling first started on the continent where, in the summer, mountain guides wanted to use their axes and get stronger for the winter. This became known as mixed climbing as it linked sections of ice between the rock. It's always existed in Scotland, but in a slightly different guise. Nowadays it is likely that whatever kind of winter climbing you do, you are likely to be doing dry tooling at some point, such as hooking your axe in a crack on a route not that's not in such a good condition, and its likely that you will scratch the rock.

Rob started climbing in 1999 when he was 25, and now climbs Scottish grade 9. He believes he has achieved this by doing 'nothing but dry tooling' during the summer. His rock climbing, in comparison, is on a completely different level at 'just' E3.

He defines dry tooling as 'mixed climbing that can be done wearing a t-shirt.' Rob has climbed many mixed routes in North America and the Alps, frequently on routes that have bolted rock pitches between naturally protected steep, thin or free hanging ice.

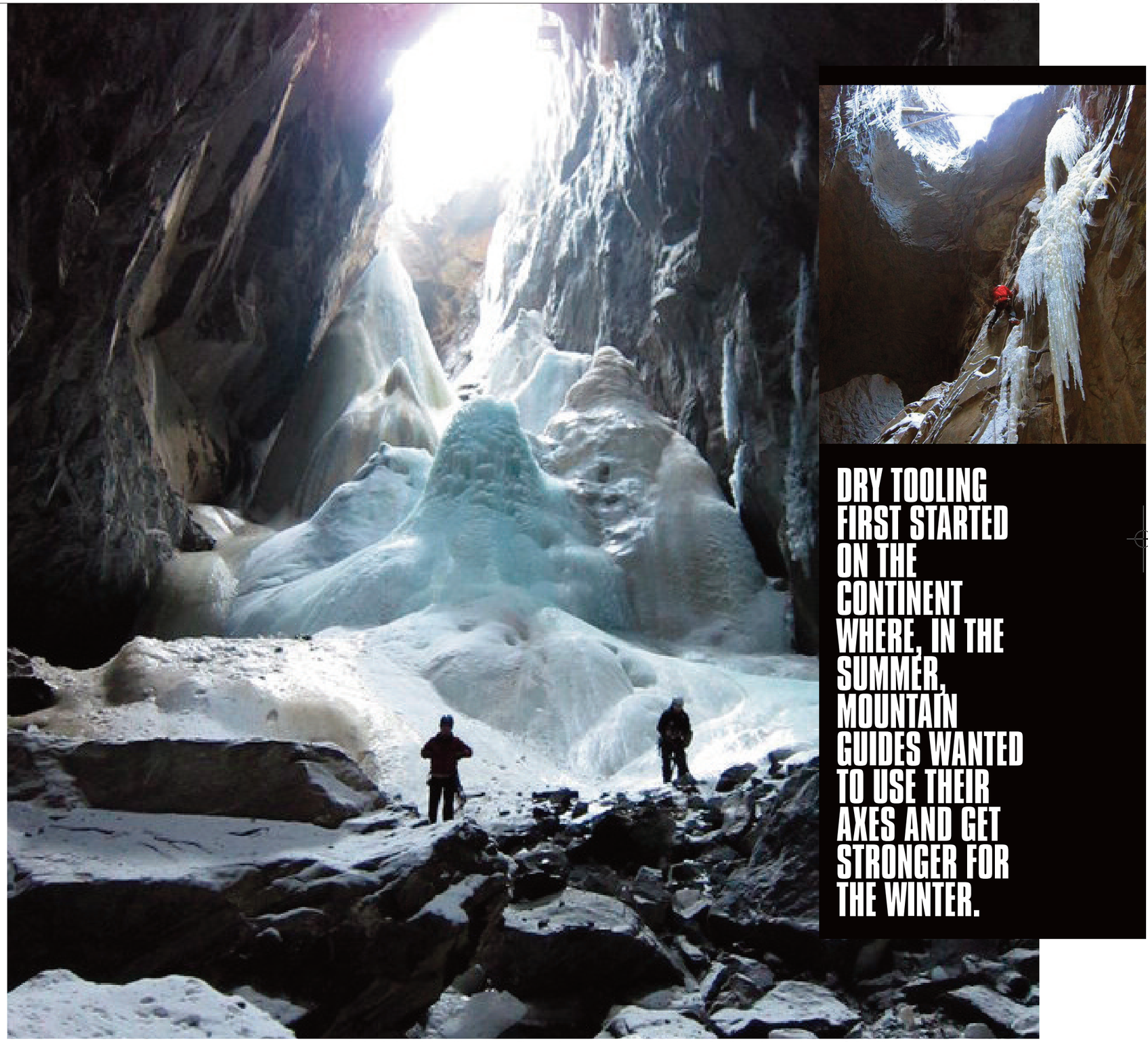
He says, 'despite being bolted these routes feel much more like trad routes than sport climbs .' He explains that 'while climbing every one of these mixed routes I have used moves and axe placements that I have practiced while dry tooling. Dry tooling is simply at one end of the spectrum of winter climbing.'

Tom Broadbent says 'it really teaches you to use the rock in ways that are completely different to climbing ice. Like rock climbing you've got to plan out the moves ahead of you, and then you realise what you can get way with your axes. You will never climb as hard in the mountains as at a dry tooling venue as they are bolted, so it actually makes 'real climbing' easier.'

On suitable locations for dry tooling, Tom says 'really, dry tooling only happens on crags that are of no interest to rock climbers. 99% of dry toolers only practise it in recognised venues and places completely unsuitable for free climbing.'

He also believes that even rock climbing venues that aren't popular these days and have become unused still shouldn't be touched as it will 'just upset more people and alienates the sport even more.'

Welsh winter specialist and mountain guide, Chris Parkin, agrees. He says we should not be critical of those who want to do this, but strive to protect existing rock climbs and potential rock climb areas. 'I think that if a local consensus is that a crag/area of a crag is not a particularly worth while rock climbing, because its dusty, damp, or for any other valid reason, we should encourage locals to discuss this at local BMC meetings, club level and ▶



DRY TOOLING FIRST STARTED ON THE CONTINENT WHERE, IN THE SUMMER, MOUNTAIN GUIDES WANTED TO USE THEIR AXES AND GET STRONGER FOR THE WINTER.

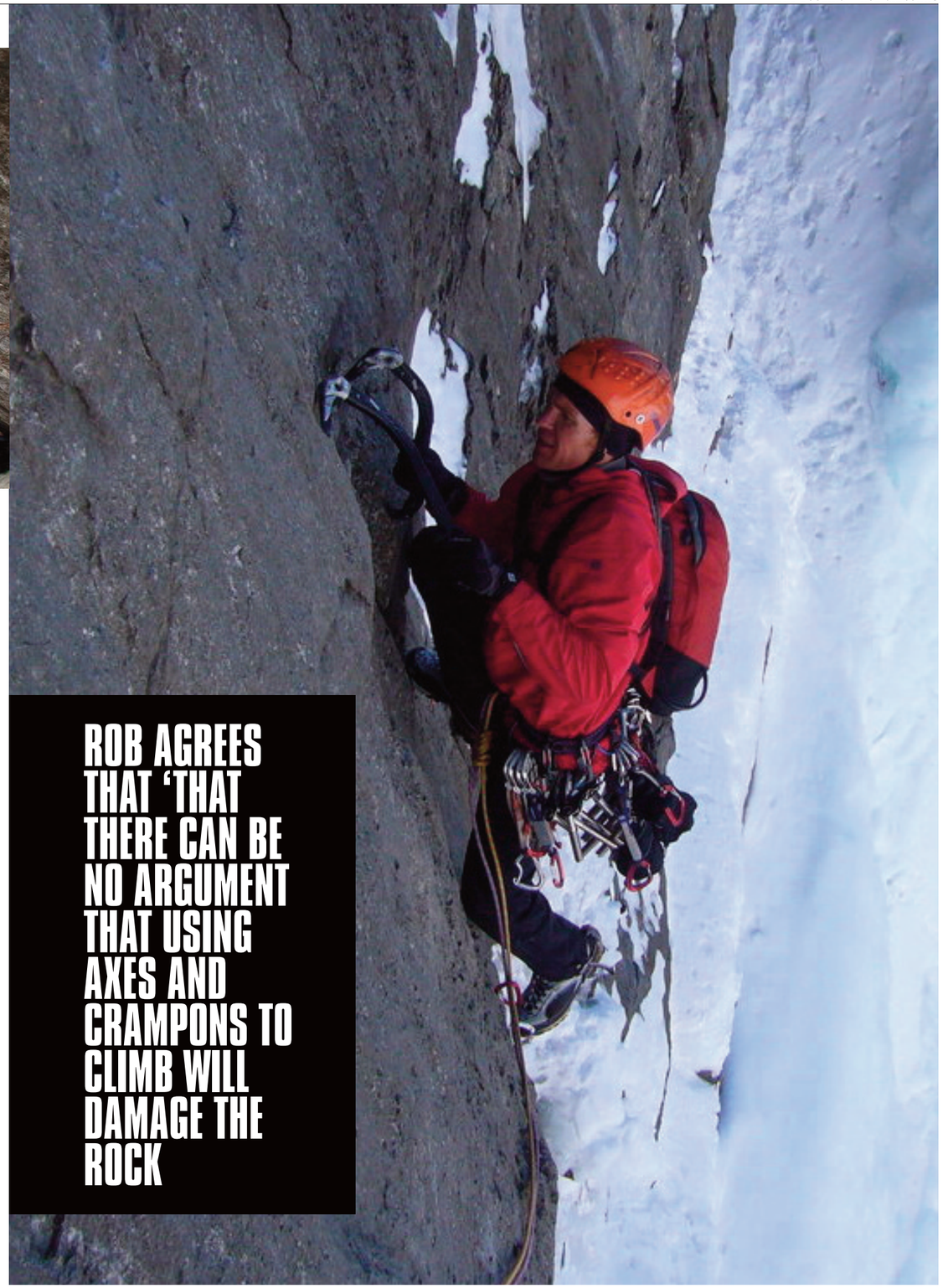
Seeing the light: Lukasz Warzecha and Thomas Mazur setting up on ancient ice in a Swedish underground cavern 📷 Rob Gibson

CC Jan 20pp 2011:CC Jan 20pp 2011 16/1/11 18:48 Page 8



Markus Stoffer on Kraftort 📷 Rob Gibson

with a range of local activists.'
Rob agrees that lowland outcrops, quarries or boulders with existing routes are 'obviously not to be climbed with axes and any re-discovered crags should be carefully evaluated as some amazing climbing can be found in unlikely locations, a Font 7c boulder problem doesn't have very big holds on it.'
But what about the mountain crags where classic summer rock routes are seeing 'cold' ascents using ice tools and crampons? Is the damage done to these routes any different than the scratches and scrapes caused by winter traffic?
Not really, says mountaineer and author Andy Cave: 'It is sad if a super classic route gets scratched but I guess there are lots of routes in Scotland that get damaged all the time, and lots of ridges that get scratched from walkers in crampons. Hopefully last winter was an exceptional one and lots of these classic routes don't become too wintry again, meaning folk don't damage them.'
Rob agrees that 'that there can be no argument that using axes and crampons to climb will damage the rock, so it boils down to a debate about where scratches will be tolerated.' He says that 'traditionally mountain ridges have been climbed during winter and the scratches caused by this were unsightly to me when I first saw them, but this appears acceptable to climbers and walkers. Also in the mountains, summer drainage lines and vegetated ledges make for good winter routes that are not controversial.'
As Andy Cave points out, the past few seasons have seen winter grades being pushed on classic and hard rock routes in all of our mountain areas. First climbed in the 2003 season and at VIII 9 one of the hardest winter routes in the Lakes, Snicker Snack has become a popular target for ambitious climbers.
A brilliant and sought after rock route at E3, it is now said to be suffering irreparable damage by an increasing number of winter ascents. Mountaineer, Alan Hinkes says there is a dilemma with routes like Snicker Snack, which are 'difficult and testing winter routes, with talented (brave) climbers torquing up them.' He points out that 'if there is only wet , thin snow then it's not much different to wet , 'rainy-day' rock, when an ascent in rock shoes would be 'traumatic,' so why not have fun and climb it with tools and crampons? That would make it possible on an otherwise impossible day.'
But, he cautions 'so would pegging it and that would not be accepted and also scar the rock. Perhaps if pegging/aid climbing became 'sexy' it could become a wet weather alternative to dry tooling - which is usually 'wet tooling'.
He agrees however that if dry tooling is seriously damaging fine rock routes and only a minority are climbing them it should be discouraged. And he warns that if we get more cold winters any rock route will become a target – even valley crags like Shepherds crag and Goat crag.
'We wouldn't damage a fine rock route by fixing cables up it as necessary for kletterstieg/via ferrata, so why damage one with a temporary 'toolway'? There's plenty of rock in Europe for kletterstieg/via ferrata and dry tooling,' says Alan, but 'it's limited here in the UK.'
Chris Parkin believes we should strive to preserve all rock climbs that are considered worth repeating and should not encourage the winter ascents of any quality route that is climbed as a rock climb each year. 'I would support a view that if summer routes are climbed regularly then winter activities should be resisted. For example, Camus on Cloggy is a wet vegetated sewer which probably sees no summer ascents (described as 'A poor route' in Cloggy guide) so its suitable as a winter option, but Great Wall has lots of summer activity, there is no natural seepage line or place where snow-ice forms, so it should never be used for dry tooling. Then there is Black Cleft – a route unlikely to be climbed in summer and even if it is the moss may cover the scratch marks, and ice forms in vast pillar some winters, so this is an option. Then there is Red Slab -(which joins the Bloody Slab summer line). This is rarely in condition, but if conditions suffice then it should be ok to climb.'
Like it or not, there is a growing market for dry tooling. With an increasing number of climbing walls offering facilities for dry tooling and training aids like the Figfour, it's likely that there will be more people taking up the sport.
Dry tooling is becoming increasingly popular in Scotland where the latest Scottish tooling series, consisting of five competitions saw, around 60 around people, of all ages compete. Internationally new crags are starting to be developed as people decide that there is no other use for smooth limestone waves or caves. This will probably stimulate dry tooling to become even more fashionable. But it's also likely that participants won't want to go as far as places like White Goods in North Wales and will look for venues closer to home.
Given this situation, Rob Gibson makes the case for reaching an official agreement about outdoor locations for dry tooling 'in a similar way to those in place for bolting? Like other climbing activities that rapidly alter the rock, for example using pitons or bolting, dry tooling will probably always be controversial, but there is no reason why dry tooling cannot be accepted at suitable locations.' ●



ROB AGREES THAT 'THAT THERE CAN BE NO ARGUMENT THAT USING AXES AND CRAMPONS TO CLIMB WILL DAMAGE THE ROCK

Rob Gibson on the top pitch of Elementarteilchen, M7 📷 Macc