

Could Climbers be the downfall of the Bride?

By John Billingsley

Todmorden may lose its most spectacular natural landmark and an important folklore site unless steps are taken now to preserve it. That's the opinion of environmentalists and antiquarians who have been watching the swift deterioration of the bottle-shaped 'Bridestone' on the edge of Stansfield Moor.



Over hundreds, even thousands, of years, the distinctive hourglass figure of the 'Bride' has been a feature of the moorland skyline. Standing out alone from the weirdly-shaped outcrop known as the Great Bridestones, it is the focus of a place that echoes with folkloric and even religious associations. The wind and weather have worked upon the sandstone bedrock as it breaks through the topsoil, first isolating a pillar and then stripping away its softest bands of stone until it created the impressive natural monument we see today. It is a beautiful shape, its slender waist and massive rounded top making it one of the area's most loved places. The Bridestones at weekends and holidays are a popular spot for walkers, picnickers and climbers.

Unfortunately, some of those who admire it are also contributing to what seems likely to be its imminent downfall. What the centuries have been doing gradually, modern leisure activities have accelerated. The Bride's waist is getting more and more slender, scabbled away by the feet of a few irresponsible climbers who have ignored - even removed - signs and the pleas of climbing clubs and magazines not to attempt the ascent of this particular stone. If this goes on, one day, perhaps when someone is straddling it, the stone will fall.

Why should it matter? Sooner or later the stone will fall as the wind continues to beat at the rock. Another, smaller, pillar lies next to it, an earlier victim of such natural erosion. So, given the inevitability of its downfall, why shouldn't climbers enjoy it while it's there?

Readers, including the vast majority of climbers, can probably think of any number of reasons why not! The fact is that the Bride would probably have stood for hundreds more years without this damage; now its future is less secure. And what would we lose?

This particular stone is responsible for the name and the eerie atmosphere of the Bridestones. Other stones with this 'inverted-bottle' shape are also known as Bride Stones, and it is generally thought that Bride place-names derive from the old Celtic goddess, Bride, also known as Brigit. She is probably the same deity as Brigantia, the matron goddess of the Brigantes tribe, who

occupied the whole of northern England from the Iron Age into the Roman Occupation period. Her name means 'of the high places', and the Bridestones we can see in West and North Yorkshire are all appropriate places to worship such a goddess.

In later years, Bride/Brigit became Christianised and found a place in Christian worship as St Bride/Brigit; again, we find churches dedicated to this saint all over northern England, Scotland and other strongly Celtic areas of Britain.

The likelihood is, then, that the Bridestones were a sacred site in Celtic times; and they still are today. There are many people today who revere Bride herself or other manifestations of the Earth Goddess and go to the Bridestones to make contact with Her. One of these, the artist Monica Sjo, later wrote "It is as if the goddess Bride, herself of the moors, as a supreme artist, shaped these rocks in her hands. It is something entirely eerie and otherworldly about not only the forms of the rocks but also their darkness, intermingling with streaks of golden ochre... I felt that the Bridestones have a special and uncanny power, and they have since come back in my dreams". The loss of the Bride, to those who honour the Bridestones as a sacred site, would be akin to the loss of a well-loved church, as happened at Heptonstall in the last century; but we can rebuild a church, as the Heptonstall parishioners did. We can't rebuild a natural stone that has been shaped by thousands of years of natural forces.

Local folklore also marks the Bride out as a special place. The fallen pillar beside it is known as the Groom, and both were standing when the first marriage in the area took place. Two people, with the likely names of Nan Moor and Jack Stone, became lovers and decided to get married. The Bride and Groom stones were their chosen site for the blessing of this marriage, and they then set up home in a rude shack built among the stones - the marks where the wooden beams were can still be seen among the rocks nearby. The happiness of the couple did not last, however; argument followed argument and Jack stormed out at last and went back to his mates. Soon after, he swore that these stones would never again trick anybody into marriage as he felt he had been, and with some sympathetic friends and a collection of tools he returned to the Bridestones. They laid into the smaller Groom, and soon it fell, to the accompaniment of their loud cheers. They turned their attention to the Bride; Jack swung his pick and let fly, but as soon as the iron touched the stone there was an unearthly piercing scream which echoed amongst the rocks. Not surprisingly, the gang of vandals fled, and Jack would never be persuaded back there again. Though some suggested it was probably Nan who screamed, from some hiding place in the rocks, Jack and his friends were not convinced. For them, it was the Bride Stone herself that warned them off.

Tales such as this reinforce people's impressions that this is a powerful and magical site, where the Earth itself seems unusually present. In the 1980s, someone chipped out a small likeness of a Horned God on the side of the Bride; did she scream then, we wonder? Does she scream now, as climbers picks and feet dig into her? Would we still be able to hear it anyway?

The Bride is a local wonder of nature, and that on its own should be enough reason to try and ensure its survival in an upright position for as long as possible. Yet for many it is also a sacred site, and that is an equally compelling reason to protect it. But some people, in an all too familiar modern regard for their own pleasure, apparently cannot see it this way.

Two years ago, when the accelerated damage to the Bride became obvious, Calderdale's Countryside Services and the Northern Earth Mysteries Group campaigned to make people aware of the danger. The Countryside Services erected signs (unfortunately all too easy to

remove), and climbing clubs and magazines passed on the information, but it seems the problems remain, from a small minority of climbers whose macho desire for conquest overrides other considerations.

Footholds have been chipped into the stone, and tell-tale daubs of white chalk reveal continuing efforts at what is acknowledged to be a very difficult climb. Most don't manage it; and in trying to get a leg up, their shoes scrape away at the surface of the stone, destroying the natural patina that is its only protection against the wind. When the only eroding factor is wind, the patina has a chance to recover and curb the rate of damage. Not so when the damage factor is human; erosion of the grainy sandstone beneath proceeds apace. Climbers' shoes scrape off ever more of the surface, while their weight destabilises and cracks the softer rock in the narrow waist.

The deterioration of the Bride in the last five years has been rapid and considerable; a friend of mine who climbed it five years ago said that even then it rocked as he stood on it, and he would not climb it again. The base is cracked, and the crack is getting wider. Further climbing will wear away the surface and put greater strain on its pedestal. Some estimates suggest that given the current rate of damage, the Bride may have no more than two years left to stand; and once 'she' falls, everybody loses. If she falls while someone's on it, that person and anyone close by may well lose their lives. No one will bother to climb it again, at least; but the walkers, the people of the Goddess, the folklorists, all those who cherish the forms of nature, will be able to visit only the toppled memory of a remarkable stone. The magical atmosphere will be mixed with the awareness of yet another place irreparably damaged through human insensitivity and selfishness.

Maybe we should put railings up around it; maybe we should set a notice in concrete and lay it into the ground nearby. These are ugly measures, but are they justified in the face of the apparent failure of the 1995 protection campaign? I hope not; it is sad to see the self-centredness of the few diminish the pleasure of the many. Perhaps all those who love the Bride Stones, especially responsible climbers, should make it their personal business to look after their interests. Or say their goodbyes now.