URBAN CLIMBING
FROM WELLS TO WALLS
by Elsia Utterwijk

I open a small hatch in the floor, the dark smell of 150 years and no daylight smacking me in the face as I look down into 12m of darkness. I can hear the sound of water trickling between the grinding impact drill of the setters removing holds and the heavy techno playing on the stereo. This is a place with atmosphere. Feeling as if I were in an art house film, trying not to lose my footing on the rusting metal stairs that are barely lit by my head torch, I step down into the area underneath the main lead walls at The Castle, where I am Centre Manager. This area was a collection of 12m deep wells used when The Castle was a water pumping station and decommissioned in the middle of the 20th century, more than 100 years after they were built. The reason I am going down now is we are looking at how we can fit our new tall walls around the existing beams and if a metre-wide chimney set into one of the walls would make a good climb.

One of the walls is full of water and provides an easy, seemingly bottomless lake. Some underground deep water soling opportunities? The others are dry and the possibilities here seem endless. As you make your way around under the existing climbing areas of The Castle you discover a myriad of secret chambers, tunnels and pipes. Many of them have high, vaulted ceilings in beautiful Victorian brick, which glows a pale yellow in the dim light. This is a magical and eerie place. Part of our goal is to keep some of that magic when we develop these areas. Of course, they need to be clean and comfortable and will house climbing walls designed and built by a top national writer and a British climbing team member. These are going to be built by climbers for climbers. But we want to respect the building and to be sensitive both to the historical legacy and to the environment.

In 1971 The Castle was close to being closed, the Metropolitan Water Board applied to the local planning department for permission to demolish the now redundant building and develop the site. A letter written in 1972 to the Department of the Environment by Harry Pitchforth, Clerk to the Board, describes The Castle as "completely useless for any purpose connected with the water industry" and as "a very expensive liability for the local people". Luckily, it was saved from being torn to rubble by strong local opposition and gained listed status in 1974. We took it over in 1983 and since 1985 we have been a climbing wall with a unique and very special ambiance. A grade II listed pumping station built in 1954 looks left spaces to the adventurist nature of climbers. It also forces us to get creative with our walls. We have just received planning permission to develop the unused areas of the building and, in addition to converting the walls to tall walls, we also have planned a whole new 400m² bouldering above the Castle Car Park. We have planned a room and a new outdoor bouldering park.

In the main new bouldering area we will create a free-standing boulder on a new floor above the openings where the beams of the pumping engines below used to pass. On a quiet morning you can imagine an echo of the cast iron roller bearings thundering a huge snip through the floor. There were 16 engines of various size that the engine house had to be constructed around them and they had to be cut up to be removed (long before our time). The first 2 engines were known as the 'iron' and the 'locomotive' and pumped water directly to the pumping site at Spadeworth Square in Islington. Each pair of engines was coupled into one pair and driven by a single belt. A pump shaft with a common flywheel assembled from ten cast iron segments, these flywheels were 7.5m (25ft) in diameter and weighed 8200 lbs. If you look outside, in the outside gallery, you can see some false buttress which are hollow to accommodate the wheels. Those wheels were mounted on large beams, one of which runs to the front of the cafe (have a look next time you are there).

This feels like a responsibility. How can we protect this historical landmark, keep the space for creating exciting new climbing facilities and, at the same time, ensure that we keep the climbing activity as green and environmentally friendly as possible? For the letter we have planned a major overhaul to the roof (amongst other measures), insulating it and installing solar panels, all without affecting the architectural character of this important landmark. We are going to embark on this project in such a way that as well as new climbing facilities, we will respect this piece of London's industrial heritage and retain some of the mysterious atmosphere that provides the site with its unique atmosphere. We will be creating exciting new climbing facilities and, at the same time, ensuring that we keep the climbing activity as green and environmentally friendly as possible. The first 2 engines were known as the 'iron' and the 'locomotive' and pumped water directly to the pumping site at Spadeworth Square in Islington. Each pair of engines was coupled into one pair and driven by a single belt.

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My intention, as far as I can, is to help steward this project in such a way that as well as new climbing facilities, we will respect this piece of London's industrial heritage and retain some of the mysterious atmosphere that provides the site with its unique atmosphere. We will be creating exciting new climbing facilities and, at the same time, ensuring that we keep the climbing activity as green and environmentally friendly as possible. The first 2 engines were known as the 'iron' and the 'locomotive' and pumped water directly to the pumping site at Spadeworth Square in Islington. Each pair of engines was coupled into one pair and driven by a single belt.

An artist's impression of the new upper bouldering area from the south side.

An artist's impression of the new upper bouldering area from the north east side.