Bob Graham Round

Mike Harrison

14th July 2012

August 2011 and a discussion in the pub after an evenings orienteering somehow culminated in me standing outside Keswick Moot Hall 10 months later, headtorch lit, nervously waiting for the seconds to count down to midnight.

It's amazing how often these things start off as discussions in the pub.

In fact, I don't really have a definite memory of ever really agreeing to do my BG, it just seemed to happen without a conscious decision. Everyone assumed I was doing it, and reccys were being organised and advice on training plans given. Well, why not, I thought eventually, I am 42 next year, which would be quite apt, and how hard can it be?

Fortunate enough to live in Cockermouth I was able to spend a lot of time on the fells, despite some poor weather conditions in the initial stages of training in December that made it seem as if I wasn't ever going to get going properly. But the miles, the ascent, and the time out on the different legs ramped upwards aiming for an attempt as close as possible to my birthday, which happened also to be the Friday closest to the summer solstice.

Unfortunately, the massive storm that blew through on the 22nd June initially forced a 24 hour postponement, followed very closely by a complete cancellation. It's supposed to be a run after all, and not a swim! All my pacers agreed it had been the right thing to do (whilst breathing a huge sigh of relief). So, a new date was required. However, there was the small matter of a holiday in Mallorca (supposed to be successful post-BGR treat) and the Saunders Mountain Marathon before anything could happen, as well as the impending school holidays leaving only a small window of opportunity in terms of mine and potential pacers availability.

Going the weekend after the Saunders was perhaps a bit foolhardy, but a very respectable 17th place on the Kirkfell course as a mixed team with my partner Ange, and going really well up the climbs was really confidence building.

So, for the attempt on the 14th July I had to tweak the team slightly, but the West Cumberland Orienteers rallied round and I had plenty of support from some very experienced BG'ers (ranging from 3 to 31 years' worth). The weather forecast had been getting better all week, so no more excuses. I had decided to move to a midnight start to make it a 'calendar day' and maximise the daylight hours, which proved to be a really good choice. The schedule was 23 hours, and the direction was clockwise...

Midnight. Off we go. A lovely clear night, cool for July. Chris and Nick leading me up towards Skiddaw. Nick completed his round in 2009 and is a bit of a legend as he decided it would be exciting for everyone to get as close to 24 hours as possible. His advice was not to go off too fast; "every minute gained on leg 1 is two lost later on". I decided to heed his wise words as we strolled up past Latrigg. Well, truth be told, I didn't have much choice as I had promised faithfully not to go haring off. After what seemed like an age we reached the first summit. Hmmm... 4 minutes down already. Are there any wise words concerning minutes lost on Leg 1? But, I needn't have worried. We hit the descending trod off Skiddaw bang on with Nick leading us at a rapid pace, and despite it being very boggy across Hare Crag and up Great Calva we made up those lost 4 minutes.

We went down the fence line towards Wiley Gill, soon crossing the Caldew. Easy this evening – a contrast to what it would have been like 3 weeks ago. I was suddenly aware that there was a bit of discussion going on behind me. Nick had been struggling on the climbs a bit, so gave his blessing for me and Chris to crack on up Mungrisdale Common without him. This was a good plan until we realised that Nick had my full water bottles, so Chris had an extra shuttle run to retrieve these. The crescent moon then made a brief appearance as the silhouetted outline of Blencathra loomed ahead of us, never seemingly getting any nearer. But, eventually we were on the summit having taken a good line to the top. But, we were 6 minutes down again – I guess Chris and I had been doing a bit too much chatting and not enough running...

I had decided quite early not to even attempt Hall's Fell Ridge even if the conditions were good. Steep rocky descents are not one of my strengths, and after trying several routes had plumbed for Doddick Fell. It may be further, but for me it was so much quicker and easier, especially in the dark – one less thing to stress about... And 28 mins later we were down at Threlkeld Cricket Club, enjoying a hot cup of tea with Leg 1 in the bag pretty much bang on schedule.

It was good to see Ange at the changeover. She'd managed to get a bit of sleep since Keswick, which given she'd be driving 180 miles round the twisty roads of Cumbria in the next 24 hours was probably a good thing. Ange has been my constant companion in my BG endeavours, having been out on the majority of the training runs and reccys with me come rain or shine. She was now taking on her main duties in charge of ground support, which is such an essential and often overlooked part of a successful round. Perhaps they deserve a certificate to!

Cup of tea finished, it was time for two new pacers (Mike and John) and Leg 2. Mike is an old hand and a bit of a Leg 2 aficionado but is now “too old for this sort of thing”, at least, that's what he kept saying most of the way round... John is WCOC's safety officer, so very useful support, but I prayed he wasn't going to ask to see my risk assessment!

I was amazed at how quickly it got light at about 04:30, just on the steepest bit of the climb up to Clough Head. Good to get that climb out of the way, and we were just about on schedule. It was getting lighter by the minute, and soon we were treated to an impressive sunrise as it cut between the horizon and the low cloud on the Pennines. Boded well for some nice weather later on.

I was doing quite well at eating and drink, small amounts of home-made energy bars that Cath from work had baked for me, salted peanuts, chocolate raisins and the ubiquitous jelly babies. But through the Dodds I slowly start to feel nauseous. This was a bit surprising as during most of my long training runs I had been nothing but ravenous. Possibly something to do with it being 05:30 and having no sleep!! But, the importance of eating early on in a BGR attempt had been drummed into me, so I kept at it, a little at time. Seemed to work OK, and that's how it went for the rest of the round food-wise. Little and often.

Raise, Whiteside, Lower Man and Helvellyn, Nethermost and Dollywagon Pike all came and went in rapid succession. I was about 15 mins ahead by this stage. Now came a bit of dithering as I couldn't decide on my route to Fairfield. The 'normal' out and back, or the more direct Cofa Pi ke line. Swings and roundabouts in the end, but I decided the latter would be more interesting. Unfortunately I'd forgotten how steep it is and was in danger of dropping pacers off the back again! I had to wait for Mike as I've never been sure of the correct cairn on the summit amid the plethora of stones and shelters. Mike assured me it was furthest one, but I think this was a ploy for him to get his breath back!

One more peak to go now – just the small matter of the stony descent from Fairfield. Mike showed all his experience and found a great grassy line down. Unfortunately I didn't, but we were all

together again for the Seat Sandal climb, where we met another BG group. If thought I was going well, then the Calder Valley chap was going like a train – already well ahead of his 21 hour schedule. Oh well, let him get on with it.

So, crossing the A591, there was a smiling Ange waiting for me with Jenny on taxi duty and my next two pacers. Two down, now for the make-or-break leg. But before that there was the small matter of breakfast and another very welcome cup of tea. Oats-So-Simple and mini sausages. Couldn't quite manage the egg though!

The clock told us that I was now 18 minutes ahead, but it was time to get going up Steel Fell. Pete and Paul were to be my companions to Wasdale. I think Pete was as excited as I was to finally get going as we set a fierce pace up the steep grass. My fastest ascent on fresh legs from Dunmail with fresh legs was 19 mins. Schedule allowed for 25. We did it in 21. At one stage, Paul asked if I was OK with the pace, but later admitted that this was purely for his benefit and not mine!

Good speed to Calf Crag, and then a slight change of plan as I allowed Pete to take us up High Raise first, and then Sergeant Man. It was a bit of a trudge to High Raise, and a little low cloud made the flat summit quite confusing. No major problems, but I definitely prefer doing Sergeant Man first – don't tell Pete though!

It was now getting to the time where certain bodily functions needed tending to. Probably a good idea to go before we got any closer to Langdale where it might not be so private. Thunacar Knott seemed as good a place as any, but no sooner had I found an out-of-the-way spot than two ramblers appeared from nowhere with a cheery hello. Anyway, needs must and all that. It certainly lightened the load!

Now with a renewed spring in my step it was quickly to the Langdale Pikes. Harrison on Harrison Stickle for a photo opportunity, and then Pike O Stickle. Now for the long run over Martcrag Moor to Rossett Pike. Pete thought the usual route would be a bit damp given the recent monsoon conditions, so we went round on the new path. From Rossett Pike we could see that the high level section from Bowfell to Scafell Pike was in the cloud, but Pete had his GPS, so no worries.

We found the trod round Hanging Knotts up to the Bowfell summit plateau no problem. Hard work, but soon done and then on to the rocky stuff in the mist. It was quite greasy by now due to the light drizzle and so we had to take it quite carefully. On the way down, however, I went over on my ankle (not seriously, thank goodness) and Pete did the most amazing save, arms flapping, when he skidded down a slippy rock slab. How he stayed on his feet I'll never know. I was so impressed that I did exactly the same thing, but fortunately also managed to keep upright!

This was where we lost the GPS, and we forced to rely on good old maps and compasses. Esk Pike and Great End are pretty easy to find though. The cloud was actually quite atmospheric, swirling in the cols, coming and going, lightening and then getting denser. Howard and Kim were going to meet us on Great End, but no sign of them at the cairn. Well, we were about 45 mins ahead of schedule by then, so perhaps no surprise, but then there they were, coming out of the mist. Quick hello, a piece of Kim's lemon cake, and some Gatorade before we were off again.

I was a bit worried about how slippy the boulders were going to be on the next section, but actually they were OK and we actually made up time on Ill Crag and Broad Crag. A quick run up to the top of the cairn on Scafell Pike past the hordes (and there were hundreds of folk up there), and then on towards Broad Stand.

It was now that I started to wonder whether Simon would have got up to Broad Stand in time with

me being ahead of schedule. Well, too late to do anything now, he was either going be there or not. Fortunately, there was an immediate response from Pete's cry of “Simon”, and as we emerged from the mist, there he was waiting for us, resplendent in orange. Ange and I had done just one reccy of Broad Stand with Simon, and with the rocks being a bit greasy, I was a little nervous. First of all, though, we had to wait a few minutes as some climbers abseiled down with a relieved-looking crag-fast walker in tow. As impromptu rescues go, it was pretty good, but the wait was not doing my nerves any good.

Finally, the Stand was clear and I could scramble up. No harness, just a bowline round the waste, but Simon had rigged up a knotted rope with loops, so it was actually quite easy. A short wait for Paul and then we were off towards the summit. The next scrambly bit was a little tricky in the damp mist, but we soon got to the level ground and onto Scafell. Leg 3 nearly over, just the jelly-leg descent all the way from >3000 feet down to the valley.

Now for my favourite part of the whole round. The scree run from Rakehead Crag. Pete had re-appeared as if by magic by this stage (not sure where he'd been!) and we were soon leaping down the scree – a fantastic relief for tired legs. Running into Wasdale we first saw all the cars parked up for the fell race, and then Kate waiting at the gate to direct us to the team in the NT car park.

Bit of a crowd to greet me at Wasdale – little Jamie Apps (with his proud parents Pete and Kate), plus Ange (as ever), Kate, and John and David who were to be my companions on Leg 4. So, another cup of tea (fantastic!), cheese sandwich, fresh pair of socks. Couldn't manage the pesto pasta though! It was a bit weird having two men tend to my mangy feet – Ange had made her excuses and was filling water bottles at this point and I don't blame her!

Slightly stiff-legged after taking the full 15 mins rest, I was 50 mins ahead, so could afford to take it easy, but the steep climb up Yewbarrow went remarkably quickly. A good line round Stirrup Crag courtesy of John, and then rapidly up Red Pike. We gained another 15 mins just on these two climbs! Once again, I think my pacers had been raring to go and I just went with them. The weather had cleared out now and the next 4 hours were going to provide fantastic views in the crystal clear air.

David was taking his sherpa duties very seriously, and he was constantly at my side offering me food and water. A bit too close at times and we were almost falling over each other! I was still managing jelly babies and jaffa cakes, and to get David off my back for a bit I promised to eat a sandwich going up Pillar. But, there was the small matter of Steeple first, and then following the race trods, now very obvious after the passing of ~150 pairs of feet a couple of hours earlier, to Wind Gap. Now time for that sandwich I'd promised... well, I got it down, eventually, and then we were on Pillar.

The long run down to Black Sail Pass seemed to take ages, but again the race trods took us nicely away from some of the rocky descents. My feet were beginning to hurt a bit now. No blisters, just sore from all the pounding on hard rock, and where the laces were pressing. The downhills were quite painful, and the uphills actually a relief at this stage. Two big climbs and rocky descents came next, Kirkfell and Great Gable. The sun was still shining giving some early evening warmth as we came up to summit number 37, Green Gable. Only five more to go, and no more steep climbs.

But, still a bit of work to do on Leg 4. John and David led me over Brandreth and Grey Knotts and then the grassy line into Honister. There was a bit of a welcome party consisting of Pete and Lou (on a lead, which was quite a relief as an excited dog would have easily knocked me off my tired legs!). Then we were there. Leg 4 done. Ange was there waiting along with Margaret, Chris and Kate who were to get me round the final Leg. Roger was also there giving moral support.

Yet another cup of tea, and cheese and pickle sandwich, plus a banana. Still in pretty high spirits. I had not had any really bad lows during the run so far – a few small ones, but these had quickly passed. The smile on my face, and the one I'd had most of the way round, was genuine. I was enjoying getting this thing done at last after such a long time preparing. The clock said I was now 1 hr 17 min ahead leaving Honister, and I was still feeling pretty strong.

The great thing about having different pacers on each leg is a new set of folk to talk to every few hours. In fact, you can have the same BG-related conversation 5 times! The good news was that the climb up to Dale Head was bang on schedule at 30 mins, but the weather had really closed in and it was beginning to rain, and the waterproofs went on as we left Dale Head. Chris and Margaret were forging ahead setting a good pace, whilst Kate stayed at my side offering me encouragement and drinks. Both very useful at this stage!

Only two more peaks to go, and on the short climb up to Hindscarth, it finally came home to me that I was nearly there, I'd done it, it had gone as well as it possibly could. I was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of both enormous relief and euphoria, and started welling up with the emotion. I had to gather my thoughts as there was still a bit of running to do, and I had to make sure there were no last minute disasters. So, I managed to focus again, and through the cloud, wind and rain we got to the summit and then across to Robinson.

The descent off Robinson down the rock steps had the potential to be a bit tricky in the wet with tired legs. Margaret and Kate led us down some good lines, but eventually Chris and I found what looked like a little grassy trod to the right that looked better than the crags we had been peering over. This time, the lads had it right and we got to the col before the ladies before we dropped steeply down towards the little tarn on Scope Beck. The weather was not nice at this stage, so the run along the valley bottom to Low High Snab Farm seemed the best option.

With the final descent over, we ran past Newlands Church on the tarmac and then over Chapel Bridge, where a small party were waiting for us so we could swap footwear for something more appropriate for the last few miles along the roads to Keswick. My new road shoes felt like slippers and were so bouncy compared to the fell shoes I'd had on for the last 20-odd hours! Again, this seemed to give me some extra energy, and I set off again running up the first little climb.

Well, that didn't last too long, but by this stage in the wet I just wanted to get finished as quickly as possible, so I tried to keep the tempo quite high. Chris and Margaret were out front setting the pace and warning the traffic of my approach on the narrow Newlands roads, and Kate still doing a fantastic job of encouraging me over the last few miles. It seemed to take an age, and after the initial new lease of life in the trainers, the soles of my feet were hurting quite a lot now. But, all of a sudden we were through Portinscale and over the suspension bridge. Then a small problem – the path over the fields was close due to sewer works, so I had to go the 'long way' round on the road. Good job I wasn't short of time!

In fact, I was way ahead of time. I'd done the run in from Chapel Bridge in ~40 mins rather than the expected hour, and so no-one was expecting me! I'd got a jump on my own welcome party! A final sprint up the hill, and slapping both hands on the door in triumph, I'd done it. A big grin formed on my face. Slowly, many of the people who'd helped during the day appeared from various ginnels and shop fronts where they'd been sheltering from the rain. And there was Ange, with a bottle of Champagne. She seemed as excited, happy and relieved as I did. A quick look at the watch confirmed the time – it was 9.15 pm, and I'd got round in an amazing 21 hrs 15 min, well ahead of schedule.

Ange popped the cork on the Champagne, and I managed a few sips before passing it round the team. We were sheltering from the rain, and I had tried to put a waterproof on, but somehow it only got as far as round my neck! I wasn't cold though, with the enormous sense of satisfaction flooding round my body.

It was great to see so many of the pacers at the finish as it had really been a team effort, and a definite triumph for WCOC. The success of the round was largely due to the experience and friendliness of everyone who helped out. It made so much difference, and really helped keep my spirits high. The other reason for the round going like clockwork was down to preparation, both in terms of doing my homework on the routes, and spending many hours running up and down the fells. This took the last 7 months of both mine and Ange's lives, but it was time well spent because, at the end of the day, there's nowhere else on Earth we'd rather be than out on the Lakeland Fells.

Ange had a couple more duties to perform that evening; to drive me home, get me in a bath (and out of it again after I fell asleep as my body relaxed in the hot water), and, finally, get me to bed. What an amazing day it had been.