Cumbrian Traverse (Broughton Mills to Keswick): 48km, ascent 3600m, 13h46m

(This report has grown rather larger than expected! Only read the first two and the final paragraphs if you wish.)

Having been rather lazy of late I decided to remedy the situation by attempting a big route. The Cumbrian Traverse is a really nice line beginning in Broughton Mills, on the southern edge of the Lake District, and finishing in Keswick, crossing only two roads (at their highest point) and taking in some fine high-level walking. The forecast was for a day of sunshine with snow falling from about 9pm; if I went fast enough I would only be in the inclement weather for the final couple of hours. I awoke at 5:30am coughing and since a CFR member recently been diagnosed with Covid with whom I had contact with a few days prior, I performed a lateral flow test. After gagging and sneezing it came up negative so couldn't use that as an excuse to go back to bed. I took a bus from Cockermouth to Workington and then caught a train to Foxfield. It is a beautiful journey down the west coast of Cumbria – sea to the right and mountains to the left, both were looking particularly attractive in the early morning light. The train was cold and I had to put on my duvet jacket and hat – I've had this trouble before when taking public transport resulting in being freezing cold even before setting off.

After alighting at the tiny station of Foxfield, I began the almost 5 mile walk to the start of the route. It took rather a longer than expected, partly because I didn't want to use up too much energy by running and also because there were interesting things to see along the way. I'd forgotten to buy snacks on the way to the station and by great fortune I came across a 'hut' full of goodies – jams and tray bakes. Fortunately, the cash honesty box was replaced by the modern equivalent of PayPal, so I selected three items, took a photograph of the payment address and continued. It reminded me of a surreal Monty Python sketch in which a chap is cycling through the countryside and suffers a puncture. He repairs it but when pumping up the tyre his pump breaks. He walks his bike into the next village in which the only shop is a 'Bicycle Pump Repair Shop'. The hut felt like my 'Bicycle Pump Repair Shop'.

I set off from Broughton Mills at 10:50. I'd intended to take in summits additional to those specified in the definition of the Cumbrian Traverse but with such a late start I quickly decided that was a bad idea (I did take in a few but only if they required little deviation). A consequence of this was I did not always follow the route gpx I had prepared which lead to a few interesting excursions, especially once in the dark. It was a gloriously sunny day and the views spectacular, especially with the golden brown bracken. After passing through the mini-Lake District of Great Stickle and Stickle Pike the route rose to a fine traverse of the Coniston fells. Upon on ascending from the Three Shires Stone I stopped to treat a blister. I loathe stopping but thought it better than risking it getting worse and having to do it later in the dark and snow. I rarely get blisters on my heels since I started using gel pad sleeves and discovered the pad had swung round to the side of my foot (perhaps on the walk to the start before I tightened the laces of my shoes). I attached some Compeed, repositioned the pad and continued. It took quite a while to warm up again, but the steep slope of Cold Fell did the trick.

On reaching the Bad Step on the ascent of Crinkle Crags I got out my head torch in the shelter of the cleft. Light was essential to see the ice on the rocks which made the ascent more exciting, although it was move higher up that proved the trickiest. I'd intended to take in every crinkle, but reversed

the Langdale Fell Race route instead. I followed my nose by the shape of the land and was pleased that whilst I may not have taken the optimum line I couldn't have been far away. The ascent of Bow Fell starts up an obvious path and then veers to the left up rocky ground, so I just followed my nose again to the summit. I set off from the summit intending to follow the Langdale Fell Race, but I soon lost the path. I stopped at the top of steep crags disappearing into the abyss and consulted my GPS – I had veered to the right and was heading off Bowfell Buttress. I concluded that it's not always possible to follow even a familiar route in the pitch black without navigational aids.

Descending Bow Fell, I met a group of 3 coming the other way and asked what they were up to. It was Tom Hollins and support on his attempt to do all 214 Wainwrights in a continuous journey during winter. I hadn't realised he'd be so far along his route. After a quick word I continued up and over Esk Pike and on to Great End. Nearing the top I could hear voices which turned out to be those of James Gibson and his support, also attempting a round of the Wainwrights. One of his support kindly warned me that the rocks at the beginning of descent of The Band could be particularly slippy. I thought, "I'll be ok, I've got spikes with me," but it was not layers of water ice, rather it was ice forming directly onto the rocks, and it did indeed make them very slippy. I didn't come across this anywhere else. Descending The Band is slow and requires a lot of concentration. It is a steep, broad ridge with small crags and gullies which make for a tortuous line and the constant worry of dropping off its side rather than progressing down it.

After passing Sty Head the climb of Great Gable began. It's the last big climb on the route so I knew if I could make the summit I would probably make it to the finish. Shortly after starting the climb it began to snow. Fearing it was the start of a heavy fall I stopped to swap my wind proof for my more robust water proof. I set off again only for the snow to stop and me overheating. The summits were always bitterly cold, with a swirling, gusty wind making finding shelter difficult. As I continued it began to snow more and more. It didn't settle to a great depth but it was enough to cover the patches of ice which resulted in several slips, fortunately by bum reaching the ground on only one occasion. I reached Honister and struggled to find the exit from the slate mine's car park! I began the climb of Dale Head, very glad that I only needed to go half way to the top. It must be purgatory for those nearing the end of a Bob Graham Round, the only consolation being it's the last major climb.

I took in the minor summit above Launchy Tarn but regretted it on the descent. The fence line went through the very edge of the tarn and I tried to walk across but the ice wasn't thick enough and I broke through into the cold water. On the ascent of High Spy I managed to lose the path again, although by now the snow was deeper. At the summit I changed my head torch's battery for a fresh one, finding meagre shelter behind the large cairn. I set off, concerned that my hands were unusually cold despite wearing gloves. I was carrying a pair of full-on winter gloves in my sack but thought I'd soon be descending once beyond Maiden Moor so didn't relay want to stop. But my hands were not warming up and I realised it was probably caused my core temperature dropping. So I started running, even uphill, and after about 20 minutes it did the trick and my hands warmed up.

After struggling to find the tiny cairn at the summit of Maiden Moor I took a slippy and awkward decent to the col and then began the final climb up Cat Bells. My plan had been to catch the last bus from Keswick to Cockermouth which left at 10:15pm: I reached the summit of Cat Bells at 11:25pm. I thought about contacting a friend who lives in Keswick but decided it would be too late to be landing at his door. Walking home was never going to happen but I had another option. My SWAT friends

were on an adventure of their own – having parked at Seathwaite in Borrowdale their plan was to run to the Wasdale Head Inn for a beer, possibly taking in Great Gable on the way and returning via Sty Head. This could mean they would be passing through Keswick at a similar time to my arrival. But if they'd skipped Gable they may have already returned. I fired up my phone and sent them a message. I ran onward, checking my phone regularly but there was no response. I concluded this was a good sign because it probably meant they were either still on the hill or in Borrowdale without a signal. I always find the run from Portinscale to Keswick rather hard work (probably because it's level) so to make myself run at least some of it, I ran a hundred double-paces followed by walking fifty. I arrived at the Moot Hall at 12:36am just as several loud and inebriated fellas were being kicked out at closing time. There was still no response from my friends and I began to consider sleeping in Keswick and getting the first bus home the following day. I had with me a duvet jacket, three hats, winter gloves, dry socks, full waterproofs, an emergency bivi bag, a small piece of Karrimat and an even smaller piece that I'd found on the hill. In search of a possible site, I began waking down the road leading to the Theatre by the Lake to assess the wood behind it. I noticed I was losing the 4G signal which would prevent me receiving a message, so I turned around and headed back towards the centre of Keswick. I'd not gone far when I heard a car on the main road. I couldn't see it but thought as it was 12:50am there was a good chance it was a car returning from the SWAT adventure and another might be close behind. So I began to run and upon hearing the sound of another car approaching it became a sprint – could I make it to the T-junction before it passed? Just as I arrived, the car of Chris Draper appeared and came to a stop, the back door opened and I could have stepped in without breaking stride. Les Barker even produced a cup of tea from his flask. I was extremely fortunate that the SWAT adventure began in Borrowdale and their return was even later than mine. I really enjoyed doing the Cumbrian Traverse but my overriding memory is of my good fortune at either end of the day and the kindness of friends and strangers alike.

(I didn't take any photos once darkness fell so I've included one from the SWAT guys.)




















Threlkeld
Buttermere
Grasmere
Ambleside
Windermere
Coniston
Ravenglass
Cartmel Fell