CFR Abrahams Tea Round Winter Solstice Run 2019

by Mike Harrison



The last time I did the Abrahams Tea Round, Duncan Potts stole my thunder. The last time I did a winter CFR Winter Solstice run, Glaramara stole my sanity. I still get flashbacks about aimless wanderings over all the wrong rocky tops in the dark wind and rain back in 2018.

Fast forward to October 2019 and up popped an invite to a Facebook Event for what now appears to be becoming a club traditional of daft overnight challenges on the Winter Solstice. 2019 would be an attempt at the Abraham's Tea Round – a relatively simple concept starting and finishing at the doors of George Fisher's in Keswick and taking in all the fells visible from the café window (and painted underneath for those frequent days when they can't be seen – see above). This seemed to be the favoured option on the basis it was a mere ~30 miles long with ~12,000' ascent, so apparently much easier than the No Cure Always Hope Ultra of 2018. Of course… makes perfect sense! And, I had a reputation to protect so with as much hesitation as a fell runner in front of the beer tent, I clicked the 'going' button.



The Abraham's Tea Round (ATR) is a relatively new challenge, gaining popularity thanks mainly to the promise of free tea and cake in the café, which means the best lines, routes and even which actual fells need to be visited are still being debated about.[1] And what debate there was! The early completers (myself included) generally took a vaguely clockwise route starting off up Catbells and coming down from Barrow, with most adding in Red Pike coming off High Stile and Hopegill Head (in a slight confusion over what 'Hobcarton' was) for good measure. However, a forensic examination of the options by the combined might of the club's foremost route finding experts plus a couple of stealthy reconnoitres under the cover of darkness decided that we'd be going anticlockwise, saving the massive steep climbs up High Stile and Robinson from Buttermere until the 2nd half of the run. Not an ideal choice, but I was happy enough with anticlockwise as it was the opposite way to my previous ATR and it avoided coming down the awkward, potentially lethal in winter conditions, slippy stone staircase from Bleaberry Tarn. So, the route was decided. We would be doing (in order):

Barrow, Rowling End, Causey Pike, Sail, Eel Crag, Hobcarton Crag, Grisedale Pike, High Stile, Robinson and Catbells.

[1] The ATR has no time limit, you can take as long as you want, go any route, any time, as a team, a relay, supported or unsupported.

Then we had to decide a start time, which is usually determined by a combination of when people finish for Christmas, Carol Concerts and what time we can get breakfast in Keswick (and maybe meet up with the Grisedale Pike Pagan Breakfasters). Little Chamonix was the breakfast venue, opening at 9 am, so aiming for an overnight run time of 11 - 11½ hours[2], it would be a 9.30 pm start on Friday December 20th. Known locally as Mad Friday. How apt!! Also known as Black Eye Friday. Hopefully not!! And the final roll call of CFR members also clicking 'going' and taking part numbered 9; myself, Paul Jennings, Paul Johnson, Darren Barker, Les Barker, Mick Allen, Peter Walmsley, Sam Holding and Daryl Tacon. Some with a point to prove after the events of 2018…



After all of that organisation and we were finally ready for the off. And I haven't even mentioned everyone's favourite past time in the lead up…weather watching! Desperately trying to find a forecast somewhere, anywhere that predicts a dry, cloud-free (stars or moon will do), and still evening. Not to be this year, as with all Winter Solstices since for ever. So, it was a bit of cloud, a bit of rain and a bit of wind expected… no surprise there then. Full Paramo Quito jacket weather (mandatory kit). Parked up in Keswick at just after 9 pm, and who should rock up next to me but Squadron Leader Johnson. We were early! And the Fellpack café was open. "Do you fancy a coffee, Mike?" "Well, I don't normally drink coffee this late as it keeps me awake all night". Ah, right, yeah, OK. So, to the bemusement of the diners enjoying their bistro desserts, we entered (in full kit) "Two double espressos please!!" After explaining what on earth
we were doing to the bar staff (who were slightly less bemused, Fellpack does have a fell running theme promoting the BGR and its own 'Walla Dash' challenge), we were served some deliciously strong coffee, a welcome pick-me-up at a time on a Friday night when I'd normally be settling down with a nice single malt to enjoy 'Have I Got News For You'. Suddenly it was time to go. The team were assembling outside George Fishers. Pictures taken, GPS devices started, it was 9.30 pm, we're off.



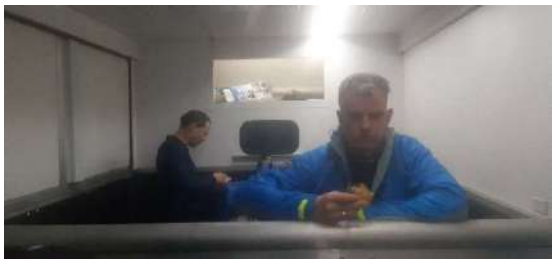
There's quite a long run-out to Braithwaite via the main road before the first climb up Barrow that's mostly spent engaged in a bit of bants and trying not to run too fast along the flat tarmac. Finally we're on the main path up Barrow, familiar as the descent on the Coledale Horseshoe. We soon reached the top, touched the cairn and carried on down the other side. The next short section is a little awkward, pathless through the heather, which meant we split up into a couple of groups as people took slightly different lines up the hillside. Some were better than others but we all met up at Sleet Hause ready for the out-and-back path that goes to Rowling End. Well, we thought we'd all met up! A quick head count when we reached Rowling End revealed only 8 of us. Les was missing! How on earth had we misplaced Les? We were only on the 2nd top!! I'm still not entirely sure what happened, possibly got carried away and was

[2] Brennan Townsend holds the male record of 5.30 hrs and Joasia Zakrzewski the female record of 7.45 hrs.

heading straight up Causey Pike… so, we called him back and after a little wait were on our way again…

Back along to Sleet Hause, up Causey Pike and all the way along the ridge to the cairn on Crag Hill (Eel Crag) via Sail. So far so good! We'd already decided to avoid the crags on the direct line to Coledale Hause used in reverse on the race route, but we did cut the corner following Mr Parker's expert line. Having been illuminated by the lights of Keswick up until that point, heading off-path into the blackness of the small valley between Crag Hill and Grasmoor punctuated by small banks of snow was a reminder that we were on a bit of an adventure.

Another out and back, up to Grisedale Pike taking in Hobcarton Crag, then all the way back to drop into Buttermere on the fantastic descent from Whiteless Pike. And what was waiting for us? Les' mobile red horse box café! What a great spot to have a break, some food and drink. And with a definite festive theme. I couldn't manage the mulled wine (thanks Sam!!), but a mince pie went down well with some finest chocolates. We were basically just putting off the biggest challenge on the whole route – up and down High Stile…



Easy enough to begin with, up the steps to Bleaberry Tarn, but then the chosen line was to aim directly up to the summit. Never having taken this route before it was odd that I seemed to be leading everyone else up! At this point, the weather turned a bit for the worse and the cloud closed in and the ground got decidedly rougher, so we faffed about on the top actually finding the correct (807 m) summit cairn (thanks ViewRanger!). Almost bang on. But, the next challenge was to find our way off along the rocky NE ridge. I'd only been this way once before, but in the opposite direction and in good, clear daylight conditions. After a couple of false starts down some wrong 'uns, I gave up being the leader happy to follow until we were on easier ground. I remembered it being not too bad in ascent! I'm sure the tiny trod should have been a bit more obvious. We were led down on a good line below Low Crags by someone who'd actually reccy'd the route and then it was over. Gatesgarth ahoy!



There was a good degree of relief about getting up and over High Stile unscathed, so much so that I think we'd put the climb out of Buttermere up Robinson out of our minds. We'd been going for 8 hours and about 19 miles by this stage so fatigue had definitely started to creep in, but we were all still going! A massive improvement on 2018. A full complement of finishers was definitely on. A quick change of clothes at the bottom as folk were now overheating in the valley, we girded our loins, and headed up by Hassnesshow Beck through the little stand of trees. It was like hitting a wall and felt just as vertical. And it went on and on. And on. And on. And on…. And on. Needless to say there was a bit of flagging up this bit and the group splintered. No talking, just head down, one foot in front of the other… But, we made it up eventually re-grouping on the summit of Robinson.



We were now back in the clag, but everyone knows the route off Robinson, right? You just head off along the path in a vaguely NE direction… Classic rookie error was to follow, that is not following a compass. So, a bit of aimless wandering in a general westerly direction followed for a short while until there was a gradual realisation of wrongness, compasses were produced from various pockets and pouches and we got ourselves back on track. Only one peak left now, but still quite a lot of running, down off Robinson and through Little Town towards Catbells. But wait, what's that? In the skies above Newlands Church? A bit of brightness! Can it really be dawn already? What a relief to see some light in the sky after being in the dark for over 10 hours. Right, let's get this thing done. Up the 'River of Stones' on the path up to Catbells and finally we're there. All of us by the unusually quiet trig point on the final summit





There was definitely a range of paces now. Many of us (myself included) were reduced to a minimal shuffle, barely able to lift our feet off the ground. And it's a long, long run back to Keswick from the top of Catbells. Of course, the younger members of the group were (annoyingly) spritely. There was still time for a few shenanigans finding our way round Lingholm and Nichol End Marina, with the usual suspects going missing. But, once we'd found each other (again) we were back on track through Portinscale. It was like some bizarre slow race seeing who 'run' with the minimal shuffle. Les was particularly good at this with an amazing rolling technique that just got his feet off the ground with enough momentum to still go forward. Finally we were heading up through town, this time past the Moot Hall back to George Fishers. All of us!

Quick check of the watches, and it was 9:46 am. The time wasn't important, but the 12.16 hrs it took us, whilst not in any danger of challenging Brennan's and Joasia's amazing records, was still the record for the "biggest group to complete the round overnight". And in winter!! I'll take that, even if we are the only ones to date... All that remained was for us to head off to Little Chamonix for a well-earned breakfast. Nothing was going to stop me doing that despite the legs no longer appearing to work! Best. Cup. Of. Tea. Ever.



Thanks to everyone for their fantastic encouragement on another grand CFR night out. I wonder what this year's Winter Solstice Challenge will be…