Gerry Charnley Round – 63.5km, 4140m ascent, 7th Dec 2022, 17h13m, solo and unsupported

Gerry Charnley helped introduce orienteering to England and was a founder member of South Ribble Orienteering Club (SROC). Gerry, together with Mike Parsons, conceived of and organised the KIMM/OMM in 1968. Gerry died on Helvellyn in December 1982 and SROC held a memorial service and placed a plaque on a cairn in the Lakes, chosen for the KIMM event Gerry organised in 1981. They then set up the Gerry Charnley Way in his memory and a special Harvey map was produced.

Having competed in 23 KIMM/OMMs I owe much thanks to Gerry, Mike and all the folk that have organised the KIMM/OMMs over the years enabling me to have such memorable days in the hills. It seemed appropriate to have a go at the Gerry Charnley Round – I would have done so whatever its origin, but it prompted me to think of the chap who has had such a large impact on my life.

The route is in 3 legs:

Borrowdale YH over the Scafells to Eskdale YH (21.3km, 1650m ascent, 5:24)

Eskdale YH to Langdale YH (High Close) via Crinkle Crags (21.8km, 1525m ascent, 5:38)

Langdale YH to Borrowdale YH via Blea Rigg and Thunacar Knott (17.5, 815m ascent. 3:58)

The times shown are my predicted times for each leg allowing for slowing down and giving a total time of 15 hours. By starting at Borrowdale YH and going anticlockwise I would do the hardest leg first and the easiest last and I would also be following fell race routes in the correct direction for almost 30% of the distance, so things should look familiar. The route visits a random collection of summits and mountain marathon-like checkpoints such as boulders and tarn outlets. I carried quite a lot of kit; my starting rucksack weight was 3.6kg plus water. I ummed and aahed about taking ice-axe and/or spikes and drove to the start with both. I plumped for spikes only, although didn't really expect them to be required.

Driving to Borrowdale, I saw a head torch descending Sale Fell and another descending Barrow; I really should've been able to get up earlier. I'd intended to leave Borrowdale YH at 7am but it slipped to 7:40, meaning I wasted a half-an-hour of daylight. Four weeks ago I followed the same route to Glaramara whilst doing the Great Gift Peaks Round, but on that occasion it was in the dark so it was much easier this time around. It was a glorious day – low temperature, ice on the ground, little wind, blue sky and sunshine. I'd decided to wear waterproof socks because I'd often be at lower altitudes where I wasn't sure if the ground would be frozen and didn't fancy the continual dunkings in freezing water. However, on the ascent, sweating lifted off the tape I use over the Compeed that protect my big toe bones. So, at the summit of Glaramara I tightened my shoes as much as possible to prevent my feet sliding forward when descending. Even so for the rest of the trip my bones were sore and I regularly pondered whether to retape my feet, but that would have been a long and very cold process, so I applied the principle of letting sleeping dogs lie. After the checkpoint at High House Tarn I followed a traverse on the flanks of Allen Crags to join the path leading to Angle Tarn. It was not difficult, but with scree and grass covered in snow-like ice it was slow and I wondered if gaining a little height after High House Tarn would result in more runnable terrain. It's a common dilemma but my default is not to gain unnecessary height. After visiting the tarn, I ascended via Ore Gap to Gerry's memorial cairn which is sited on a knoll on the broad ridge dropping south from the summit of Esk Pike. It is gloriously situated, overlooking the head of Eskdale with views of the south-east flanks of Scafell and its pikes. I've visited twice before, the first time was, appropriately, as a checkpoint on the 2008 OMM.

I rounded Esk Pike and picked up the Great Lakes/Wasdale Horseshoe route to Scafell Pike. The rocks across Broad Crag and beyond were covered in what looked like snow but I think was actually a build-up of rime ice, or maybe it was a bit of both. Surprisingly, it was as grippy or perhaps even grippier than the rocks usually are. I reached the summit of Scafell Pike only 7 minutes behind schedule. The Met Office had over-egged the pudding as usual by forecasting a temperature of 5degC and a wind chill temperature of 12degC, but I was wearing only a base-layer top and no gloves and it was very pleasant in the sunshine. I was also wearing a hat; well, sort of. When packing, I couldn't locate my normal beanie so took a buff from which a beanie can be fashioned. Unfortunately, my attempt was rather pathetic and I certainly wouldn't want to be attempting buff-origami whilst in extremis.

I descended from the summit contemplating a choice of route – to get to Scafell, should I go via Foxes Tarn or the West Wall Traverse and Deep Gill? The gill leading to Foxes Tarn might be icy but hazards would be avoidable whereas the WWT and DG would be more life-threatening and if it became impassable, I would have to reverse and continue via Lord's Rake, thus negating the saving in height loss. Also, the Foxes Tarn route was in the sunshine whereas Lord's Rake was in the shade and just looking at it made me shiver. But I do love the rock scenery of Deep Gill so I decided to go that way. The loose scree on the short descent from Mickledore and the rocks of Lord's Rake were not quite as loose as usual, ice binding them together a little. There was some snow on the WWT and I took my time choosing foot and hand placements. I only used my hands occasionally which was fortunate as I still wasn't wearing gloves; the rock was very cold and every ledge bore a crown of snow. The bed of Deep Gill was similarly not quite as loose as usual and was not as steep as I remembered. But I'd also forgotten that it does rear up a little where if forks into two 5m long gullies leading to the summit plateau. I plumped for the left one which looked slightly less steep but, even so, it was the first time I thought that of if I slip here, I wouldn't stop for several metres. The gully contained solid ice in its bed for a few metres which was just about avoidable, but required using hand-holds for more than just balance. I now regretted not having put my gloves on before entering, as my hands rapidly became colder and colder and on one occasion, as I pulled up, my forearm weakened considerably. But I was committed and pushed on, popping out into the sunshine with what felt like two stumps for hands.

Up and over the summit of Scafell, then a long descent via Slight Side to Eskdale YH – nice running under blue skies and sunshine. Upon arriving at the YH, I was 23 minutes behind schedule, having taken 7% longer on the first leg than planned. I was beginning to feel a little weary but my schedule included a factor for slowing down so this was ok.

The next leg began with a road and track section followed by an easy path. However, it was quite hard psychologically – I could see Long Top of Crinkle Crags which not only looked a long way away but to get to the summit I would have to go beyond it to Three Tarns then turn 270 degrees to reach it. After passing Three Tarns, the sun was going down and the wind was picking up so I decided it was time to put on a fleece and windproof. I didn't even attempt a beanie, I just wore my buff as a headband to keep my ears warm. The rock of the Bad Step was cold but there was no ice or snow. Easy running followed, the choice was between the hard path or softer grass to the side, but ice covering the latter made my feet chilly so I often moved from one to the other. As I began to follow the slabbed path it eventually became too dark to distinguish which rocks were covered in ice, so I had to stop and get out my headtorch. I was following the Great Lakes/Langdale fell race route so knew what was coming – the pull up Pike o'Blisco. I approached it in the same way as when racing – don't stop! The somewhat indistinct descent to Blea Tarn then followed. I usually throw myself down the final part after the fence but it seemed far steeper than I remembered. I thought following fell race routes would make things appear familiar, but it was never quite as much as I expected. It was similar to when you recognise somebody's face but can't quite bring to mind who they are no matter how much you look, the memory is just out of reach. At the forest's edge, after apologising to the pigeons for frightening them away, I removed my windproof and fleece. Another 'just keep going' ascent of Lingmoor Fell followed and the singing started. As usual, it was "You Gave Me A Mountain" by Elvis Presley, one of the few songs I can remember all the words to, and whilst the mountain of the song is metaphorical, it always seems appropriate when struggling uphill. Fortunately, I was alone – I'm always in tune in my own head but never in anyone else's. Tracks and road made for a quick final approach to Langdale YH but upon arrival I was 50 minutes behind schedule having taken 8% longer than planned on the second leg.

I began the final leg by eating a sandwich, which I just about succeeded in doing, but then had to try desperately to fill my bottle from a trickle in an attempt to dislodge the final piece of bread which had taken up residence in my oesophagus. The ascent of Blea Rigg has the advantage of being very gradual and the corresponding disadvantage of going on for ever. I was beginning to slow down and become impatient. The temperature was dropping and the wind increasing, so I stopped and put on my fleece and windproof. A buff-beanie would no longer cut it and I went straight for my balaclava. I also put on mittens and had more warm gear if necessary. It was a glorious evening, I could clearly see the lights of Morecambe and Blackpool and its tower. At one point, I dropped onto a straight leg which sent a shock wave up my spine and set off my lower back pain, which also causes some sciatica. I started to

become more and more despondent. Perhaps the cold was taking its toll; I tend to keep myself on the cold side to avoid overheating and sweating and maybe I'd overdone it. Everything seemed to be aching; my back, shoulders, ankles. Maybe it was the walking on such hard ground all day or the balancing across rocks. Perhaps, it was the endless concentration required to avoid injury. Most probably, it was the mental and physical effort already expended and subconsciously knowing how much effort was still required. And by slowing down, my subconscious extended the process so much it seemed like it would take forever. Things came to a head on the steep ascent up the path behind Pavey Ark – not only was the gradient so steep I had to keep resting (something I usually never do) but I also started to retch periodically. This often happens on long outings but I was little disappointed as I'd eaten and drunk more than I usually do. It's not particularly debilitating but it's not very pleasant. My mind was in such a state that I sat down and tried to force myself to cry to flush away the despair, but it didn't work. I tried singing the apt lyrics of part of a Queen song (with a few word changes) – "What a beautiful day (night); the sun (moon) is shining; and no-one's gonna stop me now, oh yeah," (I missed out the 'I feel good' line!) but that didn't help either. So, what did I do? I just kept moving, which I could quite easily have done without all the fuss. I didn't become much happier and the retching continued, but descending helped. Running became a shuffle. I reached the final checkpoint of Black Moss Pot, a beautiful, deep pool of turquoise water backed by a vertical crag and sat down for a few minutes to take it in. It was a mere 4.5km to the finish – why was it so far away! I finished just before 1am having taken 35% longer than planned on the final leg.

Maybe I should stop forcing myself to do such long outings in such conditions, but I find them hard to resist! I'm reminded of the tale from an old climbing book of a chap who had become scared and was having a bit of a wobble. He recounts how delighted he was that a companion gave him a few slaps across the face to snap him out of it and save his embarrassment. If the same thing happens to me again as on this trip, I'll give myself a metaphorical slap across the face.

https://www.strava.com/activities/8224403262











































