CASTLES AND ISLANDS CHALLENGE

Northumberland, 15 & 16 June 2018 - By Anna Blackburn

Although not a genuine member of Northern Fells RC , I see myself as having a connection since I was a "member" before it was a proper running club, and I continue to take an interest even when competing against it for CFR. Thus I am on its mailing list and so received an interesting message from Natalie: runners wanted for the Castles & Islands Challenge. This is an annual event, although I had not previously heard of it. It is hosted by Coquet Yacht Club in Amble. It's a very different type of team race as it combines the disciplines of sailing and running. Now, I am not a sailor at all (think "Swallows & Amazons" level of knowledge). Teams can include up to six people, two of whom must be runners. Each stage has a series of checkpoints which can be visited in any order. With 30 miles of running, and an approximate sailing distance of 55 miles, depending on weather, winds, tides, and the chosen order of checkpoints, the challenge is for the teams to complete both running and sailing stages within 24 hours of the start at 6.30 pm. Runners must run in pairs and finish each stage together at all times. This sounded like a very interesting event, like no other I had tried.

There are various other rules, such as having to go through both Staple Sound and Inner Sound - which will mean little to those who do not know the area, and to whom I would say: go there as soon as you can! In my opinion Northumberland is the best of all counties including Cumbria (sorry).

The race takes in the five castles of Alnwick, Warkworth, Lindisfarne, Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh, and the islands of Coquet, Farne, and Holy Island (Lindisfarne) on the Northumberland coastline. Northumberland is very dear to me as I passed many of my childhood summers on its beaches, and even though I have since travelled the world I still believe them to be the best beaches on the planet. So the location of the event was a big attraction.



My team sailed on Lene Sono, a 45 year old yacht which belongs to the Ocean Youth Trust North, a charity which introduces kids to sailing: http://www.oytnorth.org.uk. Skipper John Williams had sailed Lene Sono up from North Shields the day before, otherwise both boat and race were new to all of the team: crew Tom Lowrie and Callum Doyle (a teenager who had learned to sail with OYTN); runners Liz Gray and me: as the only two runners we would both have to run all stages. Liz and I had never before met each other, or the sailors, until just before the event started, so there was a lot of trust on everybody's part. We had no expectations, just hoped to finish in the 24 hours which would expire at 18:30 on Saturday evening.

At the start: Alnwick castle gatehouse, with Liz Gray

At Amble marina Liz and I had a quick introduction to the boat, how to operate a modern lifejacket, and what to do should Man Overboard occur. I was a bit worried about (a) being seasick - they say

there is always a first time, and (b) my dodgy knee holding up - but my kit included plenty of Ibuprofen, a support bandage and even running poles.

Run 1: Alnwick to Amble. A motley crew of 13 pairs was transported to Alnwick. We assembled at the castle gatehouse on a sunny evening, and ran ten miles along footpaths and across fields to the coast. The views over the sea to Coquet Island, and to our first target of Warkworth castle, were stunning in the evening light, and the fields beautiful with healthy crops of green wheat and barley, wild flowers round the margins. The ground was dry to the point of cracking so the running was much easier than it often is on such terrain, no mud at all.

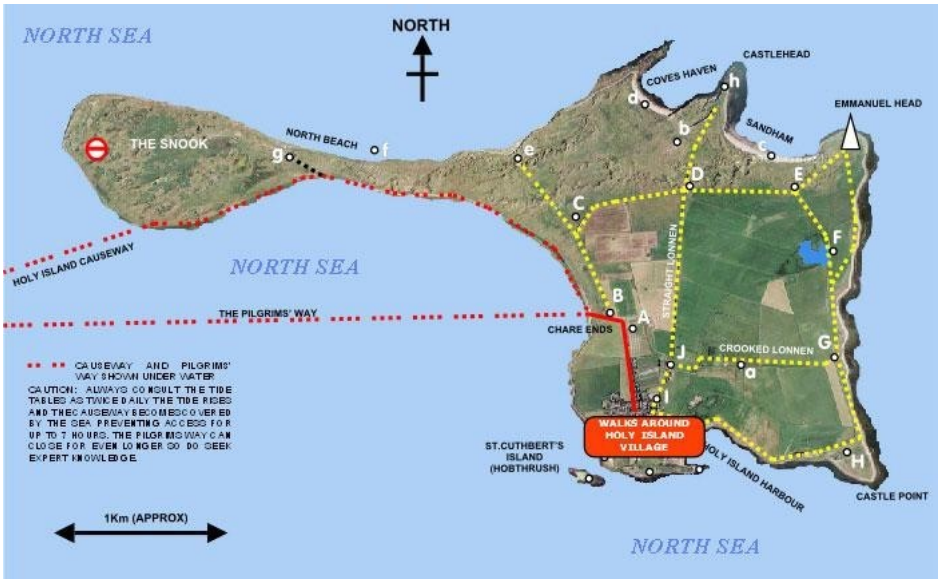
Disappointingly I was unable to take photos because Liz was running so fast I had to put all my efforts into trying to keep up.

Warkworth Castle



At Warkworth we had to do a complete circuit of th
continuing. Arriving at
Amble boatyard, through which we had to pass to reach
Club and then the marina, we saw a number of po
security guards, and police officers. Blue and
white tape cordoned off a murder scene! The security
to run through the
murder scene - an episode of "Vera" was being filmed so
compromised. Quite surreal.

We dashed along the pontoons to Lene Sono. There followed a wonderful trip around Coquet Island as the sun set. Added interest when the (I am told, old-fashioned) rainbow-coloured spinnaker failed to deploy correctly and everything got quite exciting. As I braced my feet on the gunwale, leaning out the other way just like real sailors do on the telly, I mused that this was not what I had been expecting, I'd rather had visions of a G&T on deck between runs. A replacement kite was soon hauled up and everything calmed down. I had time to spot seals and puffins. At about 10.30 pm the skipper served spaghetti bolognese, the first of a number of meals eaten at rather odd times. Liz and I tried to get some rest, although sleep was problematic with the unfamiliar noises of sails and sea. The noises following "Ready about" soon became familiar. From time to time various unintelligible orders were given. Then there were the seal noises - what a racket! We must have dozed though, because suddenly we got a two minute warning:



Run 2: Holy Island. First we had to get to the island by climbing off the boat into the world's smallest inflatable dinghy. I sat in the bows (if a round dinghy can be said to have such things) with my knees up to my ears, Callum practically in my lap, from which position he rowed us ashore, Liz acting as cox giving directions. I think it was about midnight; certainly all this was achieved in the dark. A marshal took our numbers, we ditched our lifejackets, and enthusiastically ran off into the blackness, only to end up in somebody's garden. Fortunately it did not take long to find the causeway along which we had to go to reach the old lighthouse on The Snook and another marshal. The seal colony's cries made a strange otherworldly sound; no wonder there are so many folk and fairy tales featuring these animals.

Then things got problematic. We were supposed to do what amounts to a circuit of the island, which sounds easy: keep the sea on your left and you can't go wrong. Well, yes, but what with inlets, impassable rocks, and so on, that would take hours, especially by head-torch. With hindsight I should have approached this section as an unknown fell race: work out a route beforehand and write the bearings on the map. Instead we took a likely route into the dunes and spent a while running up and down sandy and grassy banks in what felt like only approximately the right direction. Occasionally we saw other runners' torches but they were no help at all. Tiring of this, I pulled out my compass, but of course had no idea where I was starting from. Fortunately Liz got a GPS point on her phone (apologies to fell-running purists here, but we were obliged to carry a mobile). **Yacht Lene Sono**



Thus we were able to locate Emmanuel Point where there is a huge maritime navigation pyramid, phew, that helped. From here it seemed quite a distance to the castle but at least we were not required to run right round it due to major building works in progress.

After nine miles we were back at the dinghy. Later, I found out that another team had rowed off into the dark and got caught by the tide; their yacht had to sail off and pick them up. The benefit was that, in order to prevent this happening to us, Lene Sono came as close inshore as possible, reducing the damp and chilly dinghy ride. My tip for anyone trying this race: take more dry warm clothes to wear on the boat than you think you will need. By now Liz and I were pretty tired and managed to doze, although every now and then the boat's energetic tacking threw us around in our berths. Apparently we managed to overtake at least four boats on this night leg, which pleased the skipper as most of the other yachts were a lot more modern.



All too soon there was a ten-minute warning.

Run 3: Seahouses to Bamburgh castle. Relatively short, just under seven miles, but surprisingly difficult and tiring due to the soft sand. The tide had just turned and was going out, leaving a very narrow but slowly increasing gap between the sand cliffs and the sea, and we used this where possible, then picked up a narrow path through vegetation which took us to the castle rock. The situation of this fortress is dramatic and, running south back along the deserted beach, we saw it lit up by the sun shining from beyond the Farne Islands. The view was magical and will live long in my memory even without photos. It was a real privilege to be doing this at 4 am with no-one else about.

Callum was asleep in the dinghy when we got back to Seahouses but put in another heroic effort getting us back to Lene Sono. The senior crew were of course able to eat, drink and sit about whilst we were away; but they were ready to leap into action as soon as we were back on deck. It was too light to get any sleep by now and we were counting down to the last leg, so we had ham and cheese sandwiches for breakfast.

Run 4: Low Newton-by-the-Sea to Dunstanburgh castle. This has been my favourite castle since I was five, and remains so even though getting to it was a trial on this occasion. Our feet were damp already so it wasn't a big deal to wade ashore towing the dinghy, and there is a lot of water running across the sandy beach anyway. Then you scramble over the round black rocks of the Whin Sill to reach a path bordering the golf links. A few early-morning golfers looked at us oddly.



Dunstanburgh Castle

Up to the gatehouse, where I noted that it now costs £6 to get in, as opposed to the 6d I remember. Of course this was long before opening time, but there was no chance to climb the fence and look around. "Everybody's tired by the time they get here!" chortled the marshal.

"She isn't!" I said, indicating Liz who was itching to get away. She had been demonstrating great patience throughout as there was no way I could run at her pace (she admitted to being trained up for a triathlon next month). I more or less shuffled back to Low Newton; my bad knee caused no problems at all, just the general age of my joints was making itself felt, together with the lack of training - eight months since I had run this sort of distance. However, the final section was now a little shorter since the tide had turned and we could cut off part of the bay. On the other hand, we had to tow the dinghy out past some rocks before we got back in.



Having finished the land part of the race Liz and I could get rid of the wet running gear, and of most of the sand, and put on dry clothes.

"A bit of a squall coming!" I must admit to enjoying the next couple of hours as we whizzed along in "bumpy" conditions, the boat constantly at 40 degrees to the horizontal. I was very hungry - I had completely lost track of time, just knew it was a bit odd to be eating tuna rice with veg. I managed two helpings! Unfortunately Liz turned pale green and had to lie down for the rest of the voyage.

Wonderful views of Dunstanburgh were not spoiled by the rain showers or the need to hold on tight. I had a huge smile on my face.

It was impossible to know how we were doing in terms of the race - because various types of boat are involved there is a complex handicap system which might puzzle even Andy Bradley.
We crossed the finish line at 14.16, four hours in hand, then had to wait a bit for the tide to make it possible to get back into the marina, after which my first stop was the CYC shower, closely followed by the CYC bar.

"Awesome" is not normally a word that features in my vocabulary but it has to be applied to the Castles and Islands Challenge. It was an amazing experience. I felt very safe and confident in the crew, John in particular has decades of experience, and I thoroughly enjoyed the sailing sections; my running mate was supportive although she could have achieved much better times with a more evenly matched partner; the marshals were cheerful even in the wee small hours; the scenery was totally stunning; and the other runners were friendly and encouraging. It was also an exhausting experience, we all found it tough to stay awake in the bar long enough for the post-race barbecue to be prepared.

For those who are interested in the results, well, the "corrected" handicap times are incomprehensible. However, I am told that apparently our yacht was 8th in the sailing stakes.
Our running time was 5 hours 57 which was only 44 minutes longer than the winning team's time.
Our overall position was last but not by much, and less than three hours behind the winners :)
Anna Blackburn