Northern Fells – First Attempt (1 Feb 2019)



Skiddaw summit

After the Central Fells the next easiest book is the Northern Fells and on the 1st February I made an attempt. The hills were covered in snow and the temperature low. Difficulties began as my wife drove us up to Latrigg car park. Fortunately for us a sunrise photographer was first up the road and unfortunately for him his car had slid backwards, turned 180 degrees and slid into the fence. His car blocked the road and prevented us from suffering the same fate. After I'd gingerly reversed the car back down to bare tarmac, I said goodbye to my wife and set off. The snow covering the ground was in the form of calf-deep soft powder, some grippier patches and some of the dreaded soft snow topped with a weak crust. The writing was on the wall on the ascent of Lonscale Fell – it was simply too exhausting, not helped by a 5.5kg rucksack containing spare clothes, lots of food, ice axe and spikes. Ten metres from the cairn on Jenkin Hill, I hit knee-deep snow and it took me two minutes to travel what should have taken ten seconds; what should have been an easy 8 minute jog down to Bakestall was a 16 minute struggle through deep snow – not a good ratio. I decided to call it a day while ascending the flank of Little Calva – I was never going to complete the round and if I'd continued I would have moved further away from my car and required rescuing later on. The 5 miles back to my car were not without incident – at one point my foot broke through a crust of snow spanning a small gill and my whole leg disappeared – I thought I was falling into a crevasse!



The beautiful Skiddaw range

Northern Fells – Second Attempt (14 Feb 2019)

I decided to have another attempt at the Northern Fells two weeks later, circumventing the problems of doing the route in winter by waiting for spring to arrive. This time I would follow my circular route – an extra 9km of distance and 400m of ascent. I got up at 3:45am – I hate mornings, even 9 o'clock ones, so this was purgatory, but at least my wife wouldn't have to suffer. I parked below Binsey and set off into the darkness at 5:05am, only 5 minutes later than my target. It was windier than I'd expected but I was warm enough in my usual base layer top and thin leggings with shorts over. I made fast progress although my trainers felt rather loose. Strava told me I'd run more than 500km in them and recently I'd worn them with waterproof socks. When new they were too tight, they'd stretched enough to become comfortable, now they'd gone too far and were becoming loose. The path was boggy and although the temperature of the air had risen the temperature of the water in the bogs had not. My big toe immediately went numb, sensation never having completely returned after doing the Central Fells. I purposefully stepped in a foot-sized patch of snow – although it was my nemesis two weeks previously, I was sad to see it go. Snow adds an elegant form to the mountains and adds interest to features where in summer there's none.

Out the gloom appeared Lingy Hut, a small bothy which I had no recollection of seeing before. I've been on these hills many times but often use them for navigation practice picking off sheepfolds, stream junctions, and so on, along their flanks. I peeped inside the bothy – it looked cosy and a shovel had thoughtfully been provided for number twos. Could I make use of it? Not yet. I was pleased to be able to turn my torch off, but in the dim light the hills looked a long way off. This seemed to be the case all day, whether it was quality of the air or my brain, I don't know. The path firmed up and I was covering ground quickly. On the downside my usual niggles had started, my right Achilles tendon and knee were hurting, and a new one had started – the inner thigh muscle of my left leg. The former hurt going downhill and the latter uphill so I was rarely pain free.

My first stop was at the River Caldew in Mosedale. The river was quite high and fast flowing and there was no easy way across. I pulled my leggings up as high as they would go and stepped in. As the cold hit, every ounce of my being wanted to sprint across, but the slippery rocks could've resulted in total immersion or worse a twisted ankle. The slope up Bowscale was good and I took the opportunity to eat. Going uphill seems the right time but I always struggle to eat and breathe at the same time. It was fast to Bannerdale Crags and along Souther Fell. My plan was working – I wanted to get to the other side of the range as fast as possible to limit my ability to bail out! From Souther Fell I retraced my steps (it is the scourge of the Wainwright books, but there's not too much retracing of steps on this route) and passed the first person I'd seen since starting four and a half hours previously. Ascending Scales Fell the wind increased substantially and I entered cloud. I stubbornly refused to put my windproof on. "I'll be descending soon," is my usual refrain. I get obsessed with not stopping, not to take my rucksack off; I have everything to hand in the side pockets. I don't know why, I'm not trying to break any records. At Mungrisedale Common it was the last obvious place to bail and head for the car. I quickly turned left – the Rubicon was crossed, the die cast, I'm not stopping this time. On the valley track I attempted to eat a chocolate bar – my forearms were so cold I hardly had enough grip strength to open the wrapper – I really should've put that windproof on.


Where's the snow gone?

It was a very pleasant, sunny, ascent of Latrigg. I passed a guy and said "Hello." Nothing. Don't you just hate that? I always mumble, "Miserable ba*tard." I'm not after a big conversation, a single word would suffice. One big climb down, two to go – the downside of knowing the route so well is it's hard to stop my mind galloping ahead! I've now just got to do what I did two weeks before. The snowless ascent of Lonscale was much easier; another world. I passed a large group of elderly folk wrapped up as if in the Arctic. I descended to Dodd and parked myself on the bench overlooking Keswick and removed my trainers and socks. I felt sorry for the young couple already on the bench enjoying their Valentine's Day walk. I'd been pretending it wasn't happening but I had to face that fact that my trainers were rubbing and prospects weren't good if I continued. I was surprised to discover that I already had a blister on one of my heels. I carried a cut-down first aid kit and unfortunately had no pin with which to burst the blister. Fortunately, the bench was surrounded by small flakes of slate, so I found one with a sharp corner and used that. I took the opportunity to ring my wife to update her on progress. I was ahead of schedule, despite being stationary for 20 minutes (agh!). I began the difficult

pull up Long Side. I caught up and overtook some elderly folk out for a walk. The racer in me always makes me feel inappropriately smug. Running towards Ullock Pike I passed a man flying a drone to one side of the ridge, his partner having left him behind as he played with his new toy. I'm in two minds about these devices – their noise is deeply irritating and out of place but the geek and photographer in me would really like one! On reaching the windy summit of Skiddaw I knew I'd cracked it. Descending Bakestall I could wait no longer and had to have a chat with the bears in the wood. Now where's that shovel? I was annoyed with being stationary yet again. I tried to run along the track towards Skiddaw House but my leg muscle made it painful. I took the BG line up Great Calva which was much more distinct than the last time I ascended it ten years ago and has become a boggy mess for the bottom two-thirds. I forced myself to eat – Mini Cheddars (something savoury rather than chocolate) but they just sucked the water out of my mouth. The ascent is not steep but as a consequence goes on for a long time and I stubbornly looked down all the way, not wanting to see how far there was to go. Descending the path from Great Calva I started singing a song I often do near the end of a long day: "You Gave Me a Mountain" by Elvis Presley (yeah, I was really cool kid at school). Then something unusual happened – I started crying, well it was more like uncontrollable sobbing. Now it's a sad song (as many of Elvis' later songs are) but it doesn't usually have that effect on me. Obviously, as I was ascending Great Calva my mental state was descending. I continued sobbing through a few more songs including "Cool Water" by Marty Robbins a song about two cowboys crossing a parched desert – always good for when I'm dehydrated. Perhaps it was because I knew I was going to finish and it was an emotional release from the effort or maybe because I'd been running with painful legs for so long. Fortunately, it didn't seem to slow me down and the feelings passed. The torch had to come back out at Trusmadoor and then it was across the fields and roads to the foot of Binsey. I passed my car, studiously ignoring thoughts of the bottle of coke that was waiting inside. I thought I'd be on my own in the darkness on my ascent of Binsey and was surprised by three torches ahead of me. I caught up and passed the three elderly gentleman attached to them – inappropriate smug face. A quick photo at the top, no time to dawdle, it's a circular route. As I ran past the elderly gentlemen on the way down, one asked what I'd been doing. "I've done forty five miles," I said, but by his reply I realised he'd misheard and thought I'd said, "Four to five miles." I didn't bother stopping to correct the forty mile discrepancy. I thought I wouldn't be back till midnight but I was home in time for a bath, a curry and Death in Paradise at 9pm.

The following day whilst shopping in Morrison's I was saddened to see an elderly lady obviously in pain while struggling to take a few steps with a walker. It will come to us all one day, so although it might hurt a little, let's get out there while we can.

(78km, 4125m of ascent. Time taken – 14:31; stationary 0:35; 3:19 in the dark.)