The Northern Fells
Tim Cook

I originally wrote this article for a work blog during a health and wellbeing challenge in the summer, where I wrote about my round of the Northern Fells in a day. So I've stripped out a lot of the stuff that fell runners will know (and probably pick me up on for errors 😉) and kept it focussed on the stuff I think you'll be more interested in!

I moved to West Cumbria 9 years ago, I'd done a bit of fell running before having lived adjacent to Ilkley Moor, including an OMM or three (my first was the ill-fated one in Borrowdale in 2008…). I didn't start properly tracking my progress through the Wainwright books until 3 or 4 years ago, when I also started logging how my two boys were getting on too. As of today I've recorded 166 and most of the ones 'yet to do' are in the Southern, Central and Eastern books. The total hides some big variances and if you follow me on Strava you'll see that like many CFR members I've been to our local favourites like Blake, Gavel, Burnbank from pretty much every conceivable angle and in every weather condition.

I knew I'd reached the point that I knew Blake better than the back of my hand when I abandoned a summer wild camping trip in 2021 on the summit with Felix (10 at the time), at around 11.30pm when the wind had got up and the cloud had come in. I navigated him off the summit and back to the car in the dark, with visibility at about 2 metres, without once having to refer to a map. A sharp contrast to getting lost in the clag on Burnbank with Toby Woodhead during the Blakes Heaven race in 2018…

I joined CFR when Rebecca Crellin who I work with, signed me up. Within the club there is an elite group of 'Book Club' members. To join the CFR book club you need to complete all the peaks in a single book, in a single continuous run/activity. Only one CFR club member (Darren Parker) has completed all seven books in this way.

I had previously completed all 36 of the Far Eastern Fells (FEF) in 2021 in one go with my good friend Andy whom I've climbed and run mountain marathons with since 2005. Because there are so many of the FEF, so well spread out, we did it 'mountain marathon style', carrying our tents, sleeping stuff and food, started on a Friday evening and finishing on Sunday afternoon. The overnight stops, camping wild on the fells, meant my circuit of the FEF didn't count for membership of the CFR Book Club - damn!

Andy and I had been eyeing up the Northern Fells as our next 'book' for a while, and being more compact than most other books, they definitely leant themselves to doing in one day, with no plans to stop other than to fill up with water on route. I normally like to plan such outings well in advance, I have a deep aversion to being physically 'unprepared'! We were both in the Pyrenees in late May with another friend, off the back of climbing the highest peak (Aneto, 3,404m) Andy talked me into attempting the Northern Fells with just three weeks' notice... gulp!

So, I definitely didn't have time to physically prepare, albeit I was feeling generally good, having been training for the Lakes Traverse ultra in April which I had to withdraw my entry for after finally contracting COVID a week or so before. I had done all of the Northern Fells before, so I was able to do some detailed route planning using some of the brilliant tools available these days without time to go and do specific recces.

The issue I find with plotting a good single route for many of the books, isn't so much the large fells that tend to be grouped with other subsidiaries, as more the small outlying ones that require 'out and back' routes and lose lots of height. In the Northern Fells this includes Binsey, Souther, Dodd and Latrigg. In the end I picked a route that started at Binsey and finished at Latrigg. Little did I know that I'd chosen the one used by other CFR members before, just in reverse. Using previous runs as a benchmark I estimated a twelve hour total time, from leaving the first car at the start (Binsey), to getting to the car at the end (Latrigg). This was just a guide, to help us monitor our progress and hopefully mean we could meet up with Harry Yarrow later in the day.



Andy on the summit of Binsey at 0617hrs. We'd left our bags in the car for the first summit, to collect on the way back down, hence not carrying anything!

We had an early start up Binsey, setting off at 0602hrs on the morning of Saturday 18 June. Whilst my picture makes it *look* like an amazing day, and most of England was basking in a heat wave, all day it was mostly overcast, often blowing a strong westerly and well below 10C on the tops. That at least meant we weren't going to be needing to drink huge amounts of water!

All morning we were well ahead of our estimated time, as our route took us over the mainly grassy, easier running of the northern half of the book, and we were fresh. This next photo shows the terrain quite well. You can also see my two 500ml soft water bottles, that's all I carried for water all day - the bottle on the right has an in-built filter, which takes out all the nasties and means you can fill up at any stream with total confidence. I would always use the filter to decant into the other bottle first and then refill the filter bottle. I do consider myself a big drinker (when it comes to running or cycling...) and this day was typical in that I probably drank over 5 litres but was never carrying more than 1litre at any time.



The grassy slopes of Great Sca Fell (summit no. 6).

As the day wore on and our bodies started to feel the effects of the cumulative miles, and the climbing ramped up and terrain got rockier, we started to edge back to more like our original estimate. I have a general weakness in my left hip, helped a lot by strength and conditioning work, but I never do as much of that as I should. So by about half way round I was starting to use my running poles quite regularly, these do a good job of alleviating pressure on my hips on the ascents and knees on the descents. I was starting to see why some people prefer doing this route the other way round...

About 3/4 of the way round we met up with Harry Yarrow on the peculiarly named Bakestall, as planned. It was great to have some company for the final push, and he did an amazing job of steering us on the best lines (our weary brains weren't capable of this anymore) and generally cheering us along. He also got some excellent pictures, like this one of me on Longside Edge!



Heading towards Ullock Pike (summit no.19) on Longside Edge, with just 6 summits to go. Top right you can see Binsey (summit no.1!).

We finally reached the summit of Latrigg at 1934hrs. It was a huge relief not to have to go up or down any more... I was clearly far more relieved than Andy!

Our total time from car to car was 13 hours and 43 mins, we covered 39 miles, 4,200m of ascent and 24 summits. This time my application for Book Club membership was accepted, I even got a certificate!

I know there are few people in the club thinking about completing a book, and I'd thoroughly recommend it, particularly the Northern Fells. I expected more club members to have done books so was surprised when I saw the list of successful completions was relatively modest (but nonetheless very impressive!). For me, it's something significant but feels more achievable than a Bob Graham Round. I also have even greater admiration of the achievements of those who've done all 214 in one go, it really is quite something.

Andy and I are currently considering which book to complete next, and I now know that Darren keeps a great set of maps and guides about the optimum routes to help with planning - the Central or North Western books are vying for our attention… watch this space next summer!

