Southern Fells (7-8 September 2019)

The region covered by the Southern Fells contains many of the hills many people would consider to be in the heart of the Lake District and pushes a surprisingly long way north towards Derwent Water. The Scafells, the triplet of Esk Pike, Bowfell and Crinkle Crags and the Coniston fells are all included. Fortunately, Wainwright halted at Green Crag rather than continuing to Black Combe! Motivation for doing this book should be easy to muster for it was the final one. It was only a few kilometres longer than the route over the Far Eastern Fells, but with about a 1000m more ascent. I'd managed the Far Eastern Fells reasonably well so thought I'd complete the Southern Fells in the same manner, at least until nearing the end, but I found them much harder.



The rucksack had been packed and ready to go for a week whilst I waited for a 24 hour window without rain. It was indicative of the poor weather recently that one took so long to arrive. Since it was going to take me at least 24 hours I could start anytime of day, I didn't have to get up at some hideous time to maximise daylight hours. So I aimed to start at 9am but this slipped to 9:45am. I parked in the pleasantly situated Trough House Bridge car park in Eskdale – free, of course. After 300m I passed a war memorial and I paused for a moment to spare a thought for those poor chaps who didn't get the chance to spend all day doing daft things in the hills.

I got off to a stuttering start crossing boggy ground past the picturesque Blea Tarn, then up bracken and gorse on the lower slopes of Whin Rigg. By the time I reached its summit I was already a quarter of an hour down on my schedule. From the summit of Scafell I descended Deep Gill, for the third time in as many months. At the base of Lord's Rake the crowds began – this was something I hadn't experienced when doing the other books. As it was the first sunny day for a while and a Saturday it wasn't surprising. After Lingmell, I girded my loins and braved the crowds, and the annoying clickety-clack of walking poles, on the ascent of Scafell Pike. On the one hand I like that people are enjoying the hills as I do but on the other it destroys the quiet solitude. The summit of Scafell Pike was overflowing with people. Atop the summit cairn, a family asked me to take their photograph, I pondered for a second, "Don't they know what I'm doing?" Of course they didn't and I decided it would be rather churlish to refuse. I met two friends I hadn't seen for a while on the Great End plateau and for them I could spare the time. They too were enjoying doing the Wainwrights, in their own way. At the NW cairn two ladies, who were hesitating at the sight of The Band, asked about the route down and if there was another option when doing the Joss Naylor challenge. I might have seemed a little curt, but I didn't have the time or mental capacity to contemplate options for their route. After Great End the hills were much quieter.



After circling the head of Ruddy Gill it was 5km to Bessyboot – it's a long way round to avoid loss of height. I took the Borrowdale fell race trod but it was remarkable tricky to follow in reverse. I suspect when doing the race I'm far enough down the field that the trod has become more obvious! Along the way I disturbed a pair of dragonflies in a loving embrace. They are wonderful looking insects but not the easiest to photograph. That I could easily do so showed they are quite vulnerable to predators when mating. I'd intended to reach Eskdale Hause before stopping to eat, but since I'd gone slower than expected and it was such a glorious view towards Skiddaw from Bessyboot, I decided to stop there and get my stove out. There was only the slightest of breezes but it was enough to make me put on more clothes and a balaclava; eventually I had to move behind the cairn. Descending from Ore Gap to Rossett Pike I followed a route devised by what I call a "Google Earth recce". It was perfectly manageable, but I should have realised the rocks covering the ramp line would slow me down. I was considerably behind schedule – my sack weighed more than 3kg, dampening any spring in







my step I might have been able to muster; it also affected my balance, so I had to be more careful when crossing rocky ground (and there was an awful lot of that across the Scafells and beyond). Rossett Pike was the last time I bothered checking my schedule.

I ascended the Bob Graham line up Bowfell. The night sky was clear, and despite a half-moon I could just make out the Milky Way; reluctantly, I had to start using my head torch. The temperature was dropping fast. I'd not been looking forward to the descent from Pike o' Blisco – it's normally a quagfest and with so much rain recently I'd imagined I'd be wallowing in mud, but in fact it was no worse than usual. The descent from the fence to the wood before Blea Tarn is on treacherous mud and rock through bracken. During the Three Shires Race I usually descend this in a quite reckless manner taking only 4 minutes. This time it took me 14 minutes – my feet were sore, my legs weren't strong enough, my reaction time not fast enough, sack heavy and it was dark. I'd been going for 14 hours and I was beginning to struggle. The temperature had now dropped so much I was shivering and couldn't move fast enough to keep warm. Stopping to put on more clothes would make me even colder, so I kept putting it off, and the temperature dropped some more. Eventually, I had to bite the bullet and stopped on the descent of Lingmoor Fell. I sat on a rock on the path and put on every item of clothing I had bar waterproof leggings and gloves. After setting off again, I warmed up to just the cool side of comfortable which was good enough. There was still 4 hours to go till sunrise and the promise of warmth.

I reached Black Fell, a milestone because it was the furthest point east on the route and of significance to me because it was the final fell on my first completion of the Wainwrights in 2017. The path down from Black Fell was good and became a track. The route to reach the A593 from the track was a bit vague and when I got to the point I'd planned to turn off there was a high wall topped with a fence. Over the other side were widely spaced trees with dense bracken between. I had to rethink the route. I walked along the track a little more and the wall became a fence and there was no bracken on the other side. I took the chance to cross the rusty and rickety fence and immediately discovered why there was no bracken – it was a watery swamp. Once I'd crossed this the bracken returned. I tried to push through but it was over 2m tall, densely packed and a heavy dew was soaking my leggings and shorts. I tried another direction but couldn't get more than 10m. It was an, "What on earth am I doing here moment?" – in the dark, at nearly 4am, and surrounded by gargantuan bracken! Bracken rarely defeats me but I had to abort, re-crossing the watery swamp and rusty fence. Sometimes real recces are a good idea! The whole episode only lasted 10 minutes but it felt much longer! Fortunately, there's always part of me that's amused by the predicaments I end up in, even at 4 in the morning. A little further on, there was a gate into the next field, and, whilst not straightforward, I was able to reach the road. I only ran down the road for 500m and despite the early hour I was passed by two vehicles. The first came as a bit of a surprise as I was running down the central white line at the time!



For a few hours I'd been considering eating again, but it was so cold I couldn't bear the thought of stopping. This did enable me to reach the point where I'd planned to stop – Low Tilberthwaite. The Coniston range was beyond and I knew that once I'd ascended Wetherlam there was nothing large enough to prevent me finishing the route, so it was a good place to refuel. I stopped in a small copse, perched on my mat like a pixie. I heated some water, added some to my freeze-dried food pouch and with the remainder of the water made up a hot chocolate. I had to wait for 10 minutes for the food to rehydrate and hit upon the idea of putting it inside my jacket against my stomach as a hot water bottle – bliss! Whilst I was eating the day began to dawn and I could put my torch away – I'd been in the dark for over eight hours.



I set off on an easy track in daylight and yet I made a mistake – I should have turned right but I went left. That's what comes of walking whilst falling asleep! My eyes were rolling and I became so sleepy I had to sit down and close my eyes. I immediately started dreaming, but then awoke with a start. "I'm still here," I thought. Perhaps I'd hoped I would have dreamt my way to the finish, but I looked around and thought what a

lovely place to be. I wondered if I'd been asleep for long; it was about 30 seconds. Surprisingly, I felt much more awake and I never felt that tired again. I realised I could ascend Wetherlam directly which would be slightly shorter than the route I'd planned. The only drawback was it was steeper. I soon had to strip off to base layers – what a contrast to only an hour before when I was sat shivering in the woods. I found a nice, but rather damp, ramp line through the crags and on to the summit. With the Prison Band completed I had the Coniston fells cracked. I met the first person of the day on Swirl How. The wind was quite strong and bitterly cold, but out of the wind and in the sun it was warm, so the fleece and windproof were taken on and off several times during the rest of the day. The Old Man, Dow Crag, Great Carrs, Grey Friars and the long descent to Cockley Beck all successfully completed.



During the trip I'd been trying not to think about the ascent of Hardknott Fell, which of course meant I'd thought about it quite a lot! I couldn't find a particular nice way up using GE but fortunately boulder-filled gills provided a useful way to cut through the bracken. Once through, it was an easy, damp plod directly to the summit. Bog followed on the long ascent of Harter Fell, reversing the Duddon Fell race route. A very friendly dog greeted me on the summit tor of Harter Fell, but it was so large I was a little worried it might push me off. Watery bog began the ascent of the final hill – Green Crag. From its summit I could see much of my route – a panorama from Whin Rigg to Dow Crag. I'd simply drawn a straight line from Green Crag back to my car. It crossed Foxbield Moss, an almost level watery hell. Don't ever follow my track – you'll be cursing me all the way! I jogged the last 300m to the car and it was done. It had taken a little under 31 hours.





Since this was the final book it seemed an appropriate time to consider the whole adventure of doing the Wainwright books, so here are some random thoughts. I'd completed all the hills on the lists of Wainwright, Birkett and Synge in 2017. I enjoyed devising long days linking many hills together from the three lists and it had taken me to parts of the Lakes that I may not have visited otherwise. Afterwards, I became a little devoid of inspiration – I love being out in the hills but do struggle with getting off my back side and out the door. So when certificates were handed out at the CFR Presentation Evening in November 2018 to those who'd completed all the fells in a Wainwright book in a single outing, I went home and began planning! Soon all routes were planned and it was simply a matter of getting out that door! I was in the fortunate position of being able to choose the day of my attempts so could wait for the right weather conditions. I completed the first few books solo and unsupported and whilst doing the whole of a Wainwright book in one go isn't a new idea I thought perhaps doing them in this manner might be. Sometimes when doing subsequent books I did think I'd made a rod for my own back!

Having done 21 KIMMS/OMMS I knew I was quite good at suffering and am happy crossing wet, tussocky and pathless terrain, but one question initially was would my body fall apart in some catastrophic manner when doing such long outings. Fortunately it didn't – although it doesn't work quite as well after several hours! Feeling sick was an unexpected problem. It had occasionally occurred at the end of the second day of the OMM but I hadn't thought it was a general problem. Stopping to eat a meal prevented the worst of the nausea, but it didn't eliminate it completely. Despite a stomach empty of food, 10ml of water would result in a burp and few hiccup-like spasms. Since acid is mainly water, how could the addition of such a small volume of water result in such a reaction? Another interesting effect was on taste. After going 20 hours or so I popped an extra strong mint in my mouth and it took a fair while before the faintest of mint flavours came through. Clearly my taste buds were numbed, which probably explains why I often like a strong tasting meal, such as chilli, when I get home. The first three books were completed in winter and these together with training for and competing in the Marmot Dark Mountains MM at the end of January has resulted in me losing some sensation in my big toes. Who needs to go to the Himalayas to get frost-bite!

What did I think about for all those hours? Not much really! Occasionally, I'd think about things that have happened in my life, sometimes I'd sing a song and I would also 'write' this report, but mostly I thought where I was heading

and my next foot placement. A large amount of mental energy was expended on simply keeping going. Interestingly, I found thinking about writing this report made me step (just a little) outside my current situation and view it more objectively, which helped.

Nature provided several memorable moments – being mobbed by a buzzard, being able to observe and photograph a field vole out in the open, and seeing two dragonflies mating. Sunrise is a magical time; I dislike getting up early so much, I rarely see them for much of the year. My lowest points were feeling sick whilst doing the Western Fells and when my phone died whilst attempting the Far Eastern Fells (after having earlier dropped my map) meaning I would need to repeat 70km.

I've always found peace in the hills and pleasure in movement. There's nothing quite like the feeling of being surrounded by mountains, for their beauty and for giving scale to one's own life and existence. The Lake District fells have a special appeal – they are steep but climbable, remote yet accessible, rugged yet inviting, natural though man-made. The gentle curves of the hills, the green and brown colour palette, the rock and water. There's nothing that can't be outflanked. I'm sure many mountain ranges have more but the Lakes has them all in just the right proportions. It's the Goldilocks landscape! People of all ages and abilities can succeed in their own adventures; but not so easily that they lack challenge or interest.

My first completion of the Wainwrights took 34 years; my second completion 250 days (with a total time on the hill of 6 days and 40 minutes). I wonder what the next project will be…? I'm constantly amazed by the feats of endurance and the colossal amounts of ascent many people achieve; perhaps I'll try to emulate some of these. I'm sure many could complete what I've done, after all, it's just putting one foot in front of the other, but you've got to want to do it; ultimately the only person to whom it really matters is yourself.

"Past the first hill on the desert
Is another hill I can't see
And the hill that keeps hiding
Is the hill that keeps calling to me."

The Bend in the River, Marty Robbins

(105km, 6205m of ascent. Time taken – 30:50; stationary 2:16; 8:24 in the dark.)

