

Colin Russell's Bob Graham Round – 26/27th May 2012

The Seed is Sown

What is the Bob Graham Round? Simply put, it's a mountain journey over 42 peaks in the Lake District that starts and ends in Moot Hall, Keswick. It is named after the route's originator, who completed it in 1932. The rough stats are 105km (65 miles) of distance and 8000m (27,000 feet) of ascent, though describing it only in numbers somehow doesn't do it justice. The objective is simple: complete the round in under 24 hours and you can become a member of the Bob Graham club. At the start of 2012 the membership numbered some 1700 people since the club's creation in 1962. You can choose to do it whenever you want (and even in which direction); though for obvious reasons summer attempts are most common. The 5 road crossings split the route into 5 legs of varying length and terrain.



The Round (courtesy of the Harvey Map)

The history of the round is well documented in the book *Feet In The Clouds*. One unfortunate side effect of reading it is a tendency to develop wistful thoughts about one day making an attempt. For me, the gestation period was about 4 years before I committed to having a go. As any attempter will testify, one of the most significant milestones is not deciding to do it, but

telling other people of your plans. I started to make public my plans around November 2011; the fruition of them is recounted here.

Most Importantly

Before I detail the events of my Bob Graham round, it is essential that I first give a heartfelt thanks to those without whom it wouldn't have happened. This is a common theme of Bob Graham accounts but their assistance cannot go unacknowledged.

Steve H and Rob have to take a lot of responsibility for me ever attempting it with their guidance on my first reces, which ultimately set the anti-clockwise direction in which I went. Steve B, Simon and Harry provided phenomenal leg support during the second half, which proved much more vital than I had anticipated.

Margaret gave up a weekend to prove an experienced hand at road support, as did Steve H after he had to stop early on in our attempt, much to everyone's disappointment.

It was made significantly more memorable by running every step of the way with Kev - even if we barely shared a word during the final 10 hours. Adrian, thanks for joining me on route reces and making an appearance on the day despite being in convalescence - hopefully I'll be supporting you at one point. Nik, I'm sure you have a taste for it now after doing the first leg with us. Finally I have to thank Jen for being there throughout the day as well her support and understanding over the preceding months - it meant a lot to me you were there each time we finished a leg.

Six Years Old Again

The night before the attempt I barely slept, not because of nerves or worry but because of excitement. I was really looking forward to it and I felt like a child waiting for Santa as I tried to concentrate on something else, anything, which would allow me to drop off to sleep. In hindsight, my excitement looks exceptionally naive because although I completed the challenge, enjoyment was not high on the agenda for



Myself, Kev and Steve Outside Moot Hall

most of it. Had I known instead how much I would have to suffer I may never have even started. I didn't expect it to be easy, but I did expect it to be a good day out.

The main reason for the excitement was because I was ready, or at least as ready as I could have hoped to be. This attempt had been a full 6 months in the planning, with reces and training all focused to give me, I hoped, the best chance of getting round. I had the route knowledge, the support team and the confidence boost of a great performance at the GL3D with Kev three weeks previously. What wasn't there to be excited about? I'm not sure Kev and Steve, fellow members of The Cosmic Hillbashers who would also be having a go along with me, shared my enthusiasm.

The only factor I couldn't control was the weather. Steve and Rob had tried an attempt in a heatwave some years ago and I'd often stated that I wouldn't have fancied those conditions as I'm not known for my tolerance of heat. As the day loomed it became apparent it was going to be hot, but the overall forecast was too good to even consider delaying it. Aberdeen basked in a week of warmth leading up to it, but I acclimatised to the heat on a work trip to southern



Approaching Honister

France - where I was met with 12 degrees and torrential rain. After all the anticipation and build-up I set off from Moot Hall with Kev and Steve at 8am on a cloudless day when it had already reached a sweat-inducing 18 degrees. Navigation would certainly be as straightforward as it could be throughout the attempt, the challenges would lie elsewhere.

Strong Beginnings

I enjoyed the first leg over to Honister, which we completed efficiently 10 minutes up on our 23 hour schedule. I also enjoyed the first couple of hours of leg 2. Despite a strong breeze at times, it was when we were 4 hours in that I started to wilt a bit under the heat of the midday sun with stomach cramps making themselves felt. This was not how it was supposed to be. As we neared the end of leg 2 it became apparent Steve's old knee injury was restricting him on the downhills and he decided to call it a day at Wasdale. I know that was the right decision but Kev and I were saddened to lose him from the attempt.



Wet Towels At The Ready

Reaching Wasdale 20 minutes up on our schedule after a particularly unpleasant descent off Yewbarrow I already had bloodshot eyes, though the stomach cramps had gone by that point. My appetite had also all but disappeared, another victim of the heat, which was not part of my plan after only 6 hours on the go. The 20 minute break in the shade with a wet towel over my head flew by and before we knew it Kev and I were setting off up Scafell with the temperature around 27 degrees.



Heading for Scafell

The 900m grind up the grassy then rocky slope was one of the real low points of the round and we were happy to lose only 6 minutes on our schedule. The water and shade that we got from Foxes Tarn and the traverse to Mickledore seemed to revive us both and I felt as good as I had all day for the next few hours. From there to Bowfell the terrain is largely rocky and so you can stay on schedule without moving too quickly. We found the good lines where they exist and chatted away as we ticked off the peaks. Finding the good line down to Rosset Pike we then hit the runnable terrain that takes



Scafell Massif on the Right

the longer, but flatter, route round to the Langdales. There we would meet our first support of the day, Simon and Steve, which was a real morale boost as we began the second half of the round. The last part of the long central section went more or less to plan and we got to Dunmail Raise around 30 minutes up on schedule. Although tired, the day had cooled as dusk approached and it felt good to be out of that insufferable heat. At Dunmail I felt the round was in the bag and it was a matter of how fast we'd go rather than if it would go. It wouldn't prove to be that straightforward.

Bob Bites Back

The main reason for enlisting the support of Steve B and Simon was to give us options if the contenders had split up - since having a witness at each summit is a requirement to join the club. With Kev and I still moving well together though there was never any danger of us separating at that point. Steve B and Simon would however prove to be an essential part of the success in the end, which as I've said wasn't how I had seen their role prior to the day.



Descent off Steel Fell – Fresh Support at the Front



Refuelling at Dunmail – Relaxed & Unaware of What is to Come

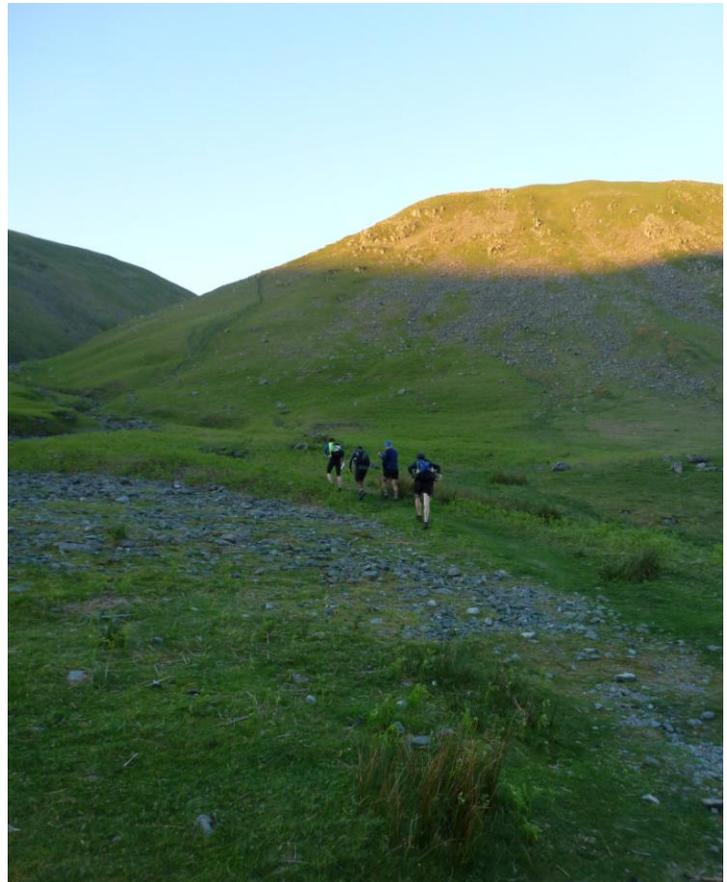
After another lacklustre attempt at refuelling we set off up Seat Sandal. It was here that I felt the first fingers of cramp in my legs but we pushed on to the top more or less in line with the schedule, which by this time was allowing for some slow down. Then on the descent the cramp was replaced by a throbbing ache at the back of my left knee that made every downward step painful. So it would be for almost the rest of the round: on the ups my legs would be threatening to cramp up while on the downs every second step would result in a throb of pain. Although my legs never did cramp up enough to force a stop, the two ailments ensured there would be no more enjoyment for the final 8 hours.

The main advantage of being up on schedule was that we got most of the tricky Fairfield descent done with the aid of natural light. We opted to take the stepped path up Dollywagon Pike as although not the quickest it made for very easy going, which at that point was much appreciated. By then it was fully dark and actual navigation was required, which our support gladly took responsibility for. The Helvellyn ridge was selected as the night leg due to the generally good terrain, but careful navigation is required to get all the numerous tops. By that point I was physically tired and so being able to concentrate only on following someone else was a relief. As well as the navigation, Simon and Steve provided some great

banter (and some terrible jokes) to keep our morale up through the night section. I didn't have much to say by that point but it was a welcome distraction to the task in hand.

We made steady progress over the night section, but it was obvious we were dropping a bit of time here and there, rather than picking up time as we had been doing all day up to that point. I wasn't really able to comprehend what the result of that might be, but Simon suggested we consider cutting short our final rest at Threlkeld to give ourselves the best chance of getting round. It seemed like a good idea, especially as I predictably struggled quite a bit

on the 600m descent of Clough Head which cost us 10 minutes alone. That time doesn't look too bad when you consider that I opted to slide down some of the steepest grassy sections on my behind in order to give my left leg some respite from the pain.



Leaving for Seat Sandal into a Setting Sun

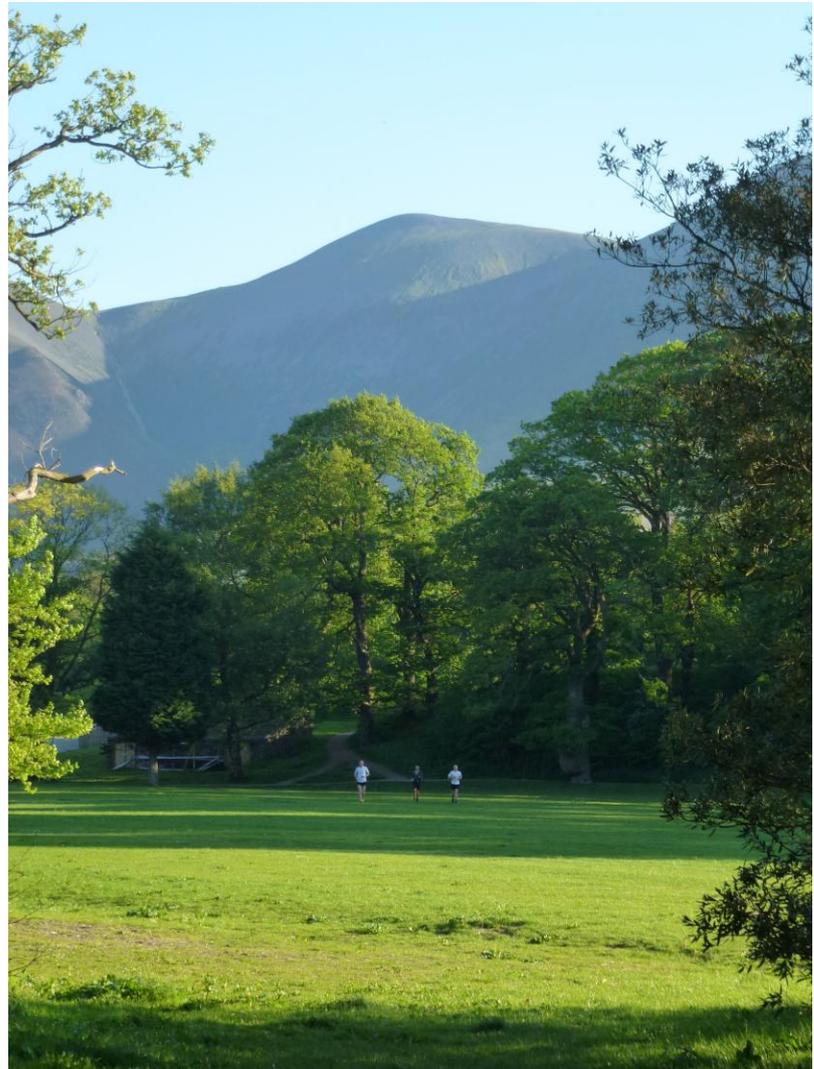
I think Kev was feeling a bit stronger at that point, I did jealously note that he at least had a better appetite. We only took a 9 minute rest instead of the 20 before we set off. This meant we left Threlkeld marginally ahead of the 23 hour schedule, giving us 5 and half hours to get round, which certainly allowed for a lot of slowing down. I'm not quite sure how confident I was feeling at that time but looking back I get the impression our support crew feared for us as we probably looked pretty spent.

How Badly Do You Want It?

Steve and Simon stopped at Threlkeld, as planned, after a fantastic support effort. For the last leg we had support from Harry, my SIPR partner from a few years back. Going up Blencathra on the Hall's Fell ridge I remember a sudden moment of clarity in amongst the mental haze: if I just stopped moving the self-inflicted suffering would end. For whatever reason I never actually considered doing that, but I was under no illusions there was an easy opt-out available. Kev and I had long since stopped saying much to each other and when we did it was at best business like. I snapped at him at least twice on that climb, first about whether I'd eaten anything at the stop (I had - one small tin of pineapple chunks) and then when he queried whether we were moving quickly enough (we were - we topped out slightly ahead of the schedule!). Even nearing the top in a brightening sky I remained unmoved as I knew there still remained a good amount of descending and climbing to be done.

From the summit I stumbled zombie-like down to Mungrisdale common and then to the familiar river bend. From here I started to feel more confident we would get round but at no point did my spirits lift at this thought as I just wanted it to be over. Harry was another fine example of what you need from your support at this stage as he talked at us and encouraged us on. We lost some time to Great Calva, likely from the slow descending to the river, but gained a bit on the trudge up to Skiddaw so were actually slightly ahead of schedule at that point.

With 2 hours to get down from Skiddaw it was obvious we would do it, but it was also obvious an hour of suffering remained. Thankfully my mind had decided to ignore the dull throb of pain from my left leg by this point (or was that the painkillers taking effect?) so the final descent was easily the most enjoyable part of the preceding 8 hours, though still some way off being fun. Seeing Jen and Steve at Latrigg got my emotions going as I began to realise the previous 6 months of investment was not going to be in vain. I'd never been



Running Across Fitz Park – With Skiddaw in the Background

on the pathed section from here to Fitz Park before and it was longer than I had anticipated, but we were in good spirits until the arrival back at Moot Hall 23 hours and 5 minutes after we had left it.

Evolving Reflection

	Schedule		Actual Time	
	Min	Time	Min	Time
Moot Hall	N/A	8:00	N/A	8:00
Robinson	103	9:43	89	9:29
Hindscarth	14	9:57	17	9:46
Dale Head	13	10:10	13	9:59
Honister (Arr)	15	10:25	11	10:10
Leg Time (H:M)	2:25		2:10	
Honister (Rest)	5	10:30	10	10:20
Grey Knotts	25	10:55	24	10:44
Brandreth	8	11:03	7	10:51
Green Gable	14	11:17	15	11:06
Great Gable	14	11:31	12	11:18
Kirk Fell	36	12:07	30	11:48
Pillar	43	12:50	46	12:34
Steeple	28	13:18	24	12:58
Red Pike	13	13:31	16	13:14
Yewbarrow	40	14:11	35	13:49
Wasdale (Arr)	29	14:40	24	14:13
Leg Time (H:M)	4:15		4:03	
Wasdale (Rest)	20	15:00	22	14:35
Scafell	72	16:12	78	15:53
Scafell Pike	39	16:51	38	16:31
Broad Crag	15	17:06	10	16:41
Ill Crag	11	17:17	10	16:51
Great End	16	17:33	14	17:05
Esk Pike	23	17:56	22	17:27
Bowfell	23	18:19	22	17:49
Rosset Pike	24	18:43	24	18:13
Pike O'stickle	44	19:27	46	18:59
Harrison Stickle	17	19:44	15	19:14
Thunacar Knott	10	19:54	7	19:21
High Raise	13	20:07	16	19:37
Sergeant Man	7	20:14	9	19:46
Calf Crag	23	20:37	21	20:07
Steel Fell	22	20:59	22	20:29
Dunmail (Arr)	11	21:10	13	20:42
Leg Time (H:M)	6:30		6:29	
Dunmail (Rest)	20	21:30	21	21:03
Seat Sandal	44	22:14	41	21:44
Fairfield	36	22:50	37	22:21
Dollywagon Pike	51	23:41	51	23:12
Nethermost Pike	11	23:52	20	23:32
Helvellyn	17	0:09	12	23:44
Helvellyn Low Man	6	0:15	8	23:52
White Side	12	0:27	15	0:07
Raise	12	0:39	12	0:19
Stybarrow Dodd	22	1:01	21	0:40
Watson's Dodd	11	1:12	11	0:51
Great Dodd	14	1:26	14	1:05
Clough Head	26	1:52	37	1:42
Threlkeld (Arr)	33	2:25	44	2:26
Leg Time (H:M)	4:15		4:44	
Threlkeld (Rest)	20	2:45	9	2:35
Blencathra	67	3:52	62	3:37
Great Calva	65	4:57	76	4:53
Skiddaw	72	6:09	71	6:04
Moot Hall	51	7:00	61	7:05
Leg Time (H:M)	4:35		4:39	
Total Time (H:M)	23:00		23:05	

The only emotion I had as we finished was relief that I could finally listen to my body and just stop. Of those previous 23 hours I have tallied about 6 or 7 in total that I enjoyed, substantially less than I thought possible. Although I believe the high temperatures have to take at least some responsibility for that, my innocence of this type of challenge has been comprehensively stripped. If I do attempt anything like this again in the future, I don't expect the excitement to be keeping me awake in the days before.

Post-script: This account was written while the memories and suffering were still very fresh. Two weeks on and the relief at the finish has morphed into a sense of satisfaction, but there is none of the elation that I was expecting. I'm not entirely sure why that is, but it's probably linked to the fact that although I completed the Bob Graham I certainly didn't conquer it.

Post-script No. 2: I didn't want to need a second one of these, but it feels necessary and possibly slightly cathartic. In the weeks afterward I was mentally ready to enjoy a summer of running and putting my fitness to good use. I planned to race Arrochar Alps, perhaps have a go at the Tranter's round and definitely do Ben Nevis, one of my favourite races.

Unfortunately, three months on from it and I haven't been able to do a single run since because the knee pain that hampered me for the last third has proved to be more than a minor ailment. Apart from being highly frustrating, it means the Bob Graham remains looming over me in a way I hadn't expected. Ben Nevis is this coming weekend and so the injury means I'm even missing that. But I take much solace in that as frustrated as I feel now, I did complete it – how much worse would I feel had I not got round *and* lost the summer?

The actual injury has been recently diagnosed with the help of a MRI scan as being 'soft-tissue' related, which is disturbingly vague but at least no invasive treatments are required. Hopefully a month or so of physio and (more) rest will be enough to get me running again.

The one positive to come out of the injury is that the sheer stubbornness of it allows me to play mind games with myself about how much *extra* suffering I went through during the round because of it. The only logical conclusion is that any future ultra challenge would *have*

to be easier, wouldn't it? Possibly even enjoyable?! The sharp contrast between these thoughts and those in the immediate aftermath of the round are not missed by me.

Now, with all this spare time I need to decide what to do with all those UTMB qualification points I seem to have accumulated....

Hills, Hills and More Hills

If for no other benefit than as a record for myself, I thought I should briefly note the training I did in the lead up to this. For those of you who've read Feet In The Clouds it might also provide a reference point for your own attempt ☺.

I started my 'BG Training' on Christmas day (with 5 reps of Brimmond Hill on an unseasonably warm day), at which point I was already fairly fit from a decent autumn of training. From that point on all I cared about and targeted was height climbed. Distance was irrelevant to me and although I recorded the duration of each run, if I had climbed enough it was long enough. During January my regime got me as fit as I have done for hill running, which showed in the couple of races I did early on in the year. I was prepared to forfeit my speed for the endurance required though and that is

exactly what had happened by March!

Over the 22 weeks up to and including my attempt I averaged 12 hours of running and a very round 4,000m of climbing a week. Before my taper, the preceding 11 weeks averaged 15 hours and 5,100m, with a biggest week of 29 hours and 10,000m (which included 5 days on the route in stunning conditions).

My longest day was a 14-hour solo effort (which included 23 101's for you Cosmic's reading), with one 10 hour run and about 4 other days of 7 hours or longer. One of those was a dusk-to-dawn type run (again solo) just to get a night run under the belt.

During that time I spent a total of 11 days recce-ing the course – in addition to about 6 days from previous trips. It meant I had seen ~95% of the route twice, with some of the trickier navigation points up to five times. A couple of days in atrocious weather hammered home how critical navigation could be, while doing my first trips there as the 'experienced' hand showed how much more you took in when not following someone else.

We went anti-clockwise, which was the direction of choice in much of the 70's and 80's. Over the past 10 years though the clockwise direction has been much more predominant: around 90% of people choose this way. The proliferation of information, route choices and schedules on the ever-useful internet has therefore reflected this preference – so I personally find it difficult to see a scenario where the anti-clockwise direction will come into fashion again. I do take a little pride in doing it the 'awkward' way though.

Would I change anything knowing what I know now? Not really I suppose as it would be deceitful to assume that it could have been easier had I done something differently. The one consideration I would give to any future challenges of the same ilk is the start time. Becoming exhausted late on is inevitable to some extent and doing complex navigation at night after 14+ hours was beyond me, though the support did that for us. Starting later in the day would be one way to mitigate against that particular issue – but always be aware of the unintended consequences of change!



Back at Moot Hall – Relief!