

Bob Graham Round report

Paul Williams

28-29th July 2017

Completing the iconic Bob Graham Round had been on my mind for many years but the logistics of organising pacers and support for an attempt had always seemed an insurmountable obstacle and the training required felt incompatible with my antisocial job and busy family life. Work then took me to Australia for a few years which meant that any plans regarding the BGR were placed on the backburner. However, on returning to the UK, we moved to the small village of Carlton-in-Cleveland and my interest was rejuvenated. The Cleveland hills rose from the door of our new house, maximising potential hill training time, and joining Esk Valley Fell Club provided a new bunch of like-minded friends. Martin Perry's BGR success in 2016, a first for the club, demonstrated that the goal was achievable. Mike Quinn was the next club member to throw his hat in the ring with the date of 29th July 2017, this being Mike's 42nd birthday: the same age that Bob himself was when he completed his eponymous round. Informal discussions at club training nights, and crucially support for the venture from my wife Claire and my three daughters Elsa (who's 9th birthday fell on the proposed date), Bee and Josie, resulted in Mike agreeing that I could 'piggyback' onto his BGR attempt as a joint effort.

Training was squeezed in between night-shifts and children's activities. Mike introduced me to the dubious pleasure of Roseberry Hill Reps, repeated climbs of Teesside's Matterhorn. Although these were scheduled rain-or-shine every Tuesday evening, I always seemed to have other commitments which meant I managed to join Mike on only one occasion. We did manage however to get two long days together in the Lakes during which we recced all five legs and worked out that our paces were roughly compatible – the challenge no longer seemed insurmountable.

Pacers and road support were put into place. I had assumed I would share support with Mike but I was touched how many good friends old and new were prepared to come and spend a weekend in the Lakes to watch me go round. It only later became apparent that that for several their primary (and perhaps only) motive was to watch me suffer! I certainly did not have to worry that they were taking their support roles too seriously: the week beforehand it was decided that we all should have a CB radio "handle" to aid communication. My handle was to be 'Coyote' given my dislike of road running. Calum 'Space Hopper' (a long story) Pallister, Patrick 'Two Packs' Wallis and Claire 'Armadillo' Williams would provide pacing support for legs 3-5. Nick 'Grey Bobham' McLean, Claire and my long suffering parents would provide the crucial road support. Mike and I would share pacers for the first two legs, with Dave Gibson, Clive Thornton and Mark Bown from EVFC kindly giving up a good night's sleep to support us.

Before we knew it Mike and I found ourselves outside the Moot Hall on the evening of Friday 28th July. A 9pm start had been chosen for a variety of reasons, most importantly that our young families could be there at both the start and finish which we knew would greatly improve morale of both runners and supporters. We were unperturbed by Bob Wightman's advice on his website that our choice of start time was "sort of the worst of both worlds"....



Paul, Clive, Mike and Dave in front of Moot Hall waiting to start

The weather forecast had been unpredictable all week as a low rolled in over the West of Scotland. However things seemed to be settling as we gathered in Keswick centre and the sun was shining as we headed off. The forecast for Saturday was now to be clear and cool – perfect conditions for running, which sadly failed to materialise until rather too late in the day. We of course were oblivious to this and, heartened by what we felt to be a fine forecast, set a reasonably quick pace up Skiddaw which saw us summit before night fell, head torches only being needed once we had attained the summit ridge. The night was beautifully clear with starlight guiding our steps although the moon was only a few days from new.

Coming down the North ridge of Skiddaw we hit the fence stile dead on, but had a momentary heartsink moment on the long grassy descent to Hare Crag when we convinced ourselves we were heading the wrong way. Some quick compass work by Dave put us right and our line to Great Calva from then on was perfect. Dave and Clive were struggling slightly with the pace through the wet boggy heather and Mike and I witnessed each other for the summit of Great Calva as the pacers headed down the back from the initial cairn. During the long haul up Mungrisdale Common however a gap started up opening up again. The hasty decision was made that Dave would wait for Clive so they could descend safely together, and Mike and I would push on. I collected my drybag of wet weather kit from Dave, but Clive was too far back for Mike to retrieve his bag. Although the wind was picking up, it was still clear and dry and Mike had a spare jacket waiting at Threlkeld so it didn't seem a particularly risky plan. The descent down Hall's Fell Ridge was uneventful despite the wet rock, and carrying a bag in one hand, and we arrived to the welcome site of our support teams at Threlkeld up on schedule at 3hrs 34 and feeling strong.

A ten minute break and we were off. Dave had originally intended to be a pacer for leg 2 but was still high up on Hall's Fell so Mark Bown was now required to provide sole support for the two of us until Dunmail Raise, a task which he performed admirably. As we plodded inexorably up Clough Head the weather started to deteriorate and, by the time we were on the summit ridge, there was a strong blustery wind and clag had dropped the visibility down to 10 metres. Jackets were donned and, heads down against the rain and wind, we pushed on through the night tucked in behind Mark's beacon and glad that we had a former national night navigation champion at the helm. The summits were dropping like flies now and after the knee straining descent to Grisedale Tarn the first hint of pale light finally appeared on the horizon, lifting our spirits with it. Fairfield and Seat Sandal, the double sting in the tail of leg 2, were quickly vanquished and we slid down to Dunmail Raise though the wet bracken in the grey dawn.

Nick (Grey Bobham)'s campervan, a 5-star hotel after a night on the fells in challenging Lakeland weather, provided welcome shelter from the drizzle. Nick and Patrick had spent the night in the van on the verge of Durnmail Raise and had got almost as little sleep as we had due to the van shaking and rattling every time a car sped past. Despite this they were in good spirits and provided a splendid breakfast of pot noodle and porridge washed down with strong tea, an inedible combination in normal circumstances but the best food imaginable at the time. Mark stepped down for a well earned rest after his sterling work on the previous leg and we set off up Steel Fell with a full contingent of fresh pacers. Nick's role was far from over as he provided brews and chat to our support team before heading back to Keswick to transform the van into the 'party bus', ready for Elsa to celebrate her 9th birthday in style en route to Wasdale.



Nick with Bee, Elsa and Josie celebrating Elsa's 9th birthday on the party bus

As we summited Steel Fell it became apparent that Mike was suffering with bad cramps and his pace had slowed substantially. I was still feeling reasonably fresh at this point and both Mike's and my support team expressed the strong view that we should separate and continue at our own paces. Reluctantly I set off ahead with Patrick Wallis and Joe Johnson for company. Calf Crag passed quickly but trudging up Sergeant Man the potential flaws in our plan became manifestly apparent. My best friend Patrick, although in excellent shape and in possession of undisputed mountaineering, had just returned from a 3-year stint in China and had absolutely no idea of the route. Joe also had never reced this stage and was also planning on heading down after Bowfell. Most crucially we realised we had no map between us and my phone, which had been carefully loaded with OS maps and a

GPS track of the route, had been left in the support vehicle waiting for us at Wasdale. To make matters worse I had no idea about timings or schedules having left this aspect of planning to Mike. A small saving grace: we were at least in possession of a compass! What we lacked in credentials on paper (Mike's support team at this point had completed a total of 5 Rounds between them) we aimed to make up for in blind determination.

A bad line off Sergeant Man hinted at the weakness of our plan but at least was quickly corrected. However as we turned about on High Raise, glances across Langdale to Bowfell showed the whole Scafell ridge to be in thick clag. I had major concerns about my ability to navigate from memory in poor visibility without a map and my confidence in the whole venture fell to the lowest point so far. Were we foolish to be pushing on? Perhaps we should stop and wait for the others, but we were not sure how far back they were and this would lose valuable time and risk me getting cold. We decided to continue, but with a degree of trepidation...

As we headed up the gentle incline towards Thunacar Knott, an apparition appeared. This gradually coalesced into the form of Kevin Barron, who was recceing the leg for his own future attempt at the BGR. Unexpectedly meeting Kevin proved to be a minor miracle. Kevin kindly agreed to accompany us as far as Esk Pike and knew the leg well. Not only that, but he had in his possession a map of the BGR route marked up with compass bearings! My spirits were revived and the Langdale Pikes and the improbable line up to Rossett Pike passed in no time. As expected the conditions on the top of Bowfell were awful and I made the rare decision to put on my overtrousers as I was feeling the cold. At the top of Esk Pike we bade farewell to Kevin and Joe who were going to wait for Mike and then head down. Kevin was kind enough to leave his map with us, a crucially important gesture.

Patrick and I continued together into the gloom along the ridge towards Scafell Pike, battered by the wind and drizzle. Patrick realised he had left his overtrousers in the support vehicle but what did cold legs matter when we had a map! We summited Scafell Pike to find the summit plateau deserted – the fact that we were the only people there on a July weekend morning spoke volumes about the weather conditions. We then descended to Mickledore, contoured round to Lord's Rake, clambered up and over the fallen chockstone and continued up the West Wall Traverse. As we climbed out of the gulley we had a navigational blip. The clag was thick and I foolishly didn't check the compass and set off blindly West, rather than South. We circled around aimlessly for what seemed like ages. Spying a group of walkers in the mist we thought we were saved but were disappointed to realise they too were lost. Eventually, more through luck than navigational prowess, we stumbled upon the summit path. The GPS track afterwards revealed our error with a young child's aimless scribble drawn around Scafell. A brief touch of the summit cairn and we were off on the long descent to Wasdale, rocks morphing into grass then into scree before racing down the tourist track to Scafell Pike past hordes of bemused walkers.



Paul and Calum (L) and Patrick (R) at Wasdale Head in front of the party bus.

Patrick and I trotted into the National Trust carpark, said 'hello' to my Dad who was peering intently up at Scafell through his binoculars trying to spot us, and collapsed into the deckchairs put out for us. The 'party bus' was in full swing and Nick, Claire, my parents and my three daughters put on a grand job of feeding and watering us: another pot noodle, more porridge, my Mum's homemade flapjacks. I had time to wish Elsa a happy 9th birthday and, after a too short break, we loped off again now joined by Calum 'Spacehopper' Pallister, morale boosted by a hand-drawn sign from my girls exhorting me to 'Run Daddy Run'. We clambered over the gate and begun the infamous Yewbarrow ascent.

I had hoped that Calum would provide newfound navigational input into leg 4 as he had recently completed a recce of the route and the clag remained impenetrable on the high summits. As we made our way slowly up the hillside it became apparent that this confidence was rather misplaced. Calum announced that a direct route up Yewbarrow bashing through the bracken was our best option, and then expressed considerable surprise when we found the small but distinct trod up the side of the stream. Calum subsequently admitted that his recce of the leg had taken several other rather unusual variations to the conventional BGR route, including a detour off Scoat Fell to Haycock (perhaps he was heading towards 'the lake?'). Fortunately I had recced this leg well so, despite this worrying revelation, navigation proved to not be a major issue.

The steady pace up Yewbarrow meant plenty of time for chatting and I finally found out why Chesney Hawkes had been stalking me on Strava – Calum was in fact the one-and-only. After tagging the summit we begun the singletrack contour round Stirrup Crag. I had now been on the go for more than 14hrs and was entering uncharted territory having never run for this duration of time before. My knees, having been fine during training, were now beginning to protest at the cumulative insult and all descents from now on were agonisingly slow. The insidious climb up Red Pike was broken by a brief toilet stop. Calum, like Lot's wife, couldn't resist peeking and was rewarded with a brief glimpse of my buttocks. I understand he is still recovering from this traumatic experience.

Despite these challenges we continued at a reasonable pace finding most of the good lines around the ridge and being rewarded by occasional breaks in the clag revealing the glory of Wasdale below. At Steeple we realised that we had not packed any water between us but fortunately the day remained cool and Mike had showed me on a recce the spring below Black Sail Pass from which

bottles could be filled. Although Great Gable represented the last of the 'proper' mountains on the round, a bigger challenge me was the drop from Grey Knotts to Honister with every stride resulting in needles piercing my kneecaps. Descending, usually my favourite aspect of fell running, had become purgatory.

We arrived in Honister to find that Nick's party bus had yet to arrive - an accident on the Buttermere road had forced a lengthy detour via Keswick. I could not face another pot noodle and my parents provided us with real food: fresh coffee and toasties from the café which went down a treat. Pacing support for leg 5 had looked marginal. My wife Claire was supposed to be joining us but was stuck in the campervan and it was unclear to my other road support what condition Patrick and Calum would be in and whether they would be able to continue on leg 5. Fortunately Hanne very kindly allowed me to borrow her husband Mark again, who had by now caught a few hours kip after pacing our nocturnal leg 2. As it happens I needn't have worried about Patrick, who was still on strong form and keen to continue, so Mark, Patrick and I set off on the final leg together.

As we started climbing Dale Head we saw the campervan career into Honister behind us. Claire had realised timings were tight and had been hurriedly getting changed into her running gear and packing her bag in the passenger seat as Nick put his foot to the pedal. On reaching the carpark, Claire darted out of the van and started chasing up Dale Head after us; I was moving so slowly at this point that she caught us in no time. Claire and I have rarely had the opportunity to run together since the kids arrived and her presence made the final leg very special. As I knew that the round was in the bag at this point, I was very glad that the pace did not need to be pushed and I could just enjoy the views down to Keswick and my pacers' company. The final descent down from High Snab Bank seemed to go on forever on account of my aching knees, with Claire literally providing me with support. It was therefore a lovely surprise to be greeted at the bottom by the cheering of our girls, who had been unexpectedly driven to Little Town my parents, which provided a welcome morale boost before the final road section.



The final push to the finish. Bee, Paul, Josie, Claire, Elsa and Patrick.

I dislike road running at the best of times and the interminable last few miles passed very slowly. I was not very chatty at this late stage but a continuous injection of jelly babies kept me moving. The final run into Keswick town centre felt triumphant however with our girls joining us for the final approach to Moot Hall. A quick touch of the steps (scaffolding prevented standing on them) and I slumped onto a bench glad to finally not be moving after nearly 23 hours on the go.

All that remained was for Mike to finish his round. We didn't have to wait long for him to arrive with a relieved grin on his face, well within the 24-hour limit, to make it a successful double. Shortly afterwards I was tucked up in bed in our rental cottage in Grange for a well deserved lie down.



Job done! Paul & Mike outside Moot Hall with Bee, Elsa, Lucy, Josie and Sophie

Completing an undertaking like the Bob Graham Round is most definitely not a solo effort. I am indebted to all those who made my round successful: Mike, for his inspiration, planning expertise and company during training and on the day; those who ended up pacing me: Clive, Dave, Mark, Patrick, Calum, Joe, Kevin and Claire; my road support: Nick, Claire and the girls, and my parents; Martin Perry for sharing invaluable tips and advice in the build-up to our attempt and providing pacing support on the day; the other EVFC members who came along to support. Most importantly of all my gratitude goes to Claire and my daughters Elsa, Bee and Josie, who not only supported on the day (and in Elsa's case shared a birthday with my attempt) but also put up with me disappearing off for long training sessions during the preceding months. In the end, despite a few minor mishaps, the day ran very smoothly and I had a thoroughly enjoyable day in the mountains with close friends and family, the memory of which will stay with me forever.



Road support team. Josie, Bee, Elsa, Lucy and Sophie

