

How I conquered the Bob Graham Round

Tom Whittington, March 2020

Getting to no 2307

In June 2019 I completed the Bob Graham Round - a journey 8 years in the making. It needn't have taken so long, but sometimes you have to wait for the moons to align and in June 2019 they did just that. In fact, it felt like the whole galaxy was out to witness it such was the glorious night we were exposed to. So how did I get to being the 2,307th member of the BG Club?

(full details of the challenge and route here: <http://www.bobgrahamclub.org.uk/index.php?page=intro>)

I remember clearly the moment the BGR entered my blood stream. It was in the Wanted Inn, Sparrowpit in the late summer of 2011. I was sitting at a table of strangers having just completed my first outing with Macclesfield Harriers on a lovely evening circuit taking in Cave Dale and Mam Tor.

One of my new companions asked me what had prompted me to join a fell running club. I answered that I'd dabbled with a few trail races and taken myself into the high fells for the odd run before stumbling upon Feet In The Clouds; Richard Askwith's inspiring account of fell running and his personal battle to complete the Bob Graham. I asked if anyone there had done the BG. They had. All of them. I was sitting at a table with Steve Swallow, Digby Harris, Julie Gardner, Dave Tucker, Mandy Calvert and Julian Brown. All members of the infamous Bob Graham Club and apparently part of a much larger pool of Harriers that had also completed it (up to 62 by 2019). Two Harriers, Mark McDermott and Mark Hartell had even broken records for the number of peaks visited in 24 hours; the latter undefeated over 20 years later (until Kim Collison broke it in 2020 that is). Gulp. I felt a little out of place and if I am honest, entirely in awe.

It wasn't that I had any interest in having a go at the BGR, I just wanted to be more competent and confident in the hills. The challenge's 70ish miles and 8,200m climb of Everest proportions wasn't remotely in the realm of contention back then. But the company you keep will always be slightly infectious and over the next few years as my fitness and speed improved, the lure of longer events took hold. I supported several BG attempts and it gradually became apparent that at some point I would have to have a go myself. Eight years later, with the support of some awesome friends, I've only gone and done it!

So how did it happen and how me?

While this is no mean feat, I have no illusions of grandeur. Ten years ago, before I found this sport, I was pretty unfit and overweight with impending ACL reconstruction in 2010. However fast I have since become or how far I can now run there are always unworldly legends like Tierney, Paris and Spinks to remind me that I am a mere mortal in comparison. Yet I am also aware of how I viewed other BG club members in that fateful Peak District pub in 2011. My conviction now is this - if I can do it, anyone can do it. You just have to get out the door, put one foot in front of the other, really, really want it and perhaps most of all, have a bit of luck on your side. Sounds easy, but of course it isn't.

Luck failed me in 2016 when my first attempt was scuppered through illness and then injury before I'd even left the Moot Hall. It took me another three years to regroup such was the intensity that I had invested in both mental and physical stock for that DNS. 2017 was another big year for me with various running and cycling events and no room to slot in a BGR. Then following a successful CCC around Mont Blanc that year I knew that on a good day I could do the Bob, but needed a year off from 'long stuff'. So in 2018 I focussed on medium distance fell races to re-establish some speed and love for the sport and the year passed with barely two outings longer than 20-miles. Mentally though, I was preparing.

Gearing up

Early 2019 a knee injury thwarted training for several months and I may have abandoned the year for long distance running altogether had I not already committed to ultramarathon Transvulcania in the Canaries in May. The Trans had been scheduled partly to really boost my baseline fitness and see if a BGR was feasible. It was an awesome race and went really well and I came back fired up, with little excuse but to set a date for an attempt a month later.

Yet, training rarely goes to plan and with two weeks to go I was castigating myself for lack of quality training since the Trans, low with a cold and a resurging niggle in my knee. I grumpily talked of delaying until my pal Larry told me to give myself a break; it would either work out or it wouldn't, so just enjoy the day out with my friends and not to worry about what could or should have been. This proved possibly the best advice I've ever adhered to as in a remarkable and uncharacteristic change of attitude I instantly felt better and more relaxed. This ultimately set my spirit on a positive course for the whole Round. If you know me then you know this is not normal behaviour and that I tend to worry and faff right until the last moments.

Then with a few days to go I had yet another virus and the weather forecast looked like it would be grim for much of the day. All of this did play on my mind in the lead up and I even awoke a few hours before kick-off in a cold sweat and panic that the whole idea was utterly atrocious, impossible, a waste of everyone's time and there was absolutely no way I could finish within the required 24 hours, if at all.

In fact, what transpired was to be the best day out on the fells I've ever had with a great many friends there to enjoy it with me. Sometimes you've just got to learn to relax, take things as they come and see the whole experience as a series of mini adventures and not one mega challenge. You might fail, but it is the journey, not the destination that is important. There's a moral in there somewhere I could definitely learn from.

Leg 1: Sunrise over Mungrisedale Nav/Mule – Graham Brown



A 3am start was always going to prove controversial against the tried and tested formula of a 6pm start embraced by most Harriers. However, I was convinced it was going to work best for me as I am most effective when I have at least some sleep, but also because my 9 year old Daisy would be on each of the road supports and night time support would be far easier for her at the end of the Round than the beginning. It turns out that 3am works pretty well and I slept a few shallow moments in the hours leading up, which was enough to keep me lucid and delirium free throughout the experience, until the small hours of the following morning when I lurched back into Keswick a Bob Graham Round completer.

Rob picked me up at 2:40am and at the turn of the hour I set off up Skiddaw with Broon. Several revellers serenaded the night, as their journey home from some late night lock-in coincided with our departure from Keswick's Moot Hall. We barely needed our torches with clear skies this close to the longest day and the climb that I usually dread was over with quickly. The crossing to Great Calva was as wet under foot as I've known it and we slipped and slid through the emerging dawn, likely the only

souls on this entire mountain range. I'd never seen the Northern Fells in such a calm vista, or quite appreciated the lonely beauty of the rounded hills as the sun started to appear through a faint mist that made the air glow with pale orange and yellow hues as far as the Cumbrian Pennines.

The route off Calva is quick but surprisingly tough as it weaves down through tall tufts of course heather that snatch at the ankles and hide ruts, twists and bogs as you descend. Then the climb up Blencathra across bleak Mungrisedale Common, though the wind was light and the weather mild. I was climbing well and beginning to get into my stride on the fast, thrilling and technical descent down Doddick, which I took like this was the end of a race and not the beginning. Then into Threlkeld, where my girls were ready with breakfast and a banner: "Go Daddy Go". 13 miles and 1600m climbed; so far, so good.

Leg 2: Nature calls *Nav/Mule – Rob Gittins*



I was 14 minutes down but had always planned to ease my way into the Round. My enjoyment gradually increased over the second Leg of 13miles and 1700m. The weather was still being kind and my mantra of eat, eat, eat meant I had energy. Over the course of the series of 8 peaks that lead up the long ridge to Helvellyn summit, I was gradually making back the time lost on Leg 1. On a fine day the views along this ridge are some of the best in the country, but the good start was becoming more unsettled as the morning progressed. Then I started to have rumbles in my stomach and was soon having to make regular calls of nature. Anyone that suffers this affliction will know there is very little you can do other than squat where you are and hope that you are alone, have paper and get your shorts down in time.

Between the cramps I was still climbing well. I'd reccied a new route up Fairfield several times and was confident that it was quicker and more interesting to go in a direct line from Dollywagon rather than the usual anticlockwise route around Grizedale Tarn. Or at least it suited me, which is probably a good enough reason. Our good fortune with the weather had quickly declined since Helvellyn and by the time we reached Fairfield it was raining heavily, which made the very steep grassy ascent quite hairy, but more enjoyable than the alternative of the gravelly tourist path. Sure enough this route choice allowed me to snatch back another 5 minutes lost from regular bowel movements.

We knocked off Seat Sandal, the last summit of the leg now up on time, but my tummy troubles were back in force and I was out of paper. I sent Rob ahead and found a convenient puddle over a bed of moss on which I could drag my poor bare bum over. I know - but needs must! I suffered several more similar bouts on the long, fast descent to Dunmail and was very lucky that it didn't force a halt to the whole excursion. By the time I got to the road crossing it had stopped raining and there was a nice group of friends out to wish me well. Packing it in due to bad guts never crossed my mind, but I did make a rather lengthy point that on Leg 3 I would need access to a lot of toilet paper.

Leg 3: Beaufort and Prosper Nav – Steve Swallow; Mules – Emma Beveridge & Steph Wood



The untold volume of bog roll they were coerced to carry on Leg 3 did little to dampen the spirit of my support, who were like a pack of fell hounds waiting for the moment they'd be off the leash. The anticipation was tangible from the chitter chatter. This is good. Leg 3 is in many ways the leg that makes the Bob. Most people that fail do so here, but if you can get to Wasdale and at least start Leg 4 with time on your side you have a chance. Mentally then, how you feel and approach Leg 3 is key. On the earlier legs I just needed a reliable performance from my trusted mates Broon and Rob to keep me on track. On Leg 3 I needed more distraction from the task at hand, which I got in abundance through Steve's faultless nav, Emma's fun and heartfelt conversation and Steph's witty banter and homage to fromage. I also, fortunately, finally, dispelled of my stomach problems.

Steel Fell is a tough climb, but I love it on a BGR. Its steep gradient slows the pace and there is always excitement from the new support following the changeover at Dunmail. The longest leg of the round stretches over 16 miles and 2000m of climb and is one of contrasts; from the long undulating wet lumpy moorland that gradually rises towards the Langdale Pikes, onto the rocky Scafell range that crosses scree, crag and boulder fields. That first section can drag but on this day I really enjoyed it and felt unhurried. The conversation was lively with great company, the weather was gradually improving and I felt good. Three hours in I sat in the col after Rosset Pike for a pot of baked beans and thought how different the conditions were compared to six weeks previously when I'd climbed this route on Rob's Joss in gale force winds and snowy conditions. Then on to Bowfell via one of the best easy scrambles in the Lakes. Steph had been mithering me for ages to try some of her cheese. Eventually I relented and by the time I got to the top I was buzzing from the deliciousness and vigour it provided – Beaufort is mountain cheese after all. Possibly I was delirious from my exertions and was staggering across the rocky ground, but it felt like I was leaping and skipping as we traversed the Scafell range. At one point I exclaimed: "it isn't supposed to be this fun!"; it was absolutely exhilarating bouncing over the next series of fells that arrived in quick succession.

After Scafell Pike is a short drop down to Mickledore and then a hairy ascent up Lords Rake and the Northern traverse. This is the most technical part of the route, but with incredibly dramatic views across the crags down to the valley floor where the road support would be waiting. I was certainly glad that it was dry and less greasy than normal. To add to the drama a sheep caught at the top of a steep scree shoot decided to leap past us and nearly took us with it. From the top of the shoot it is a short hop to the summit of the last peak on Leg 3 – Scafell; a more solitary, crowd free fell than its slightly larger sister and quite lovely. The sun was warm and bright, the views stunning over Wastwater, the sea and towards Leg 4. We all paused to enjoy these moments as if reluctant to leave for the long descent to Wasdale Head and complete a third stunning section of the BGR. The short break wasn't part of the schedule, but why do these things if you cannot at times stand and contemplate the seemingly impossible and enjoy the landscape that you have crossed? It was without doubt the highlight of the round. I had felt great and almost as if it wasn't even part of a much larger journey; the fact that the challenge was far from over conveniently tucked away in my subconscious.

And yet, to imply it was all easy would be a fallacy. Coming off the Langdale Pikes my knee had started to hurt on descents and discomfort turned to pain with every downhill section. Long descents had been in short supply over much of the Leg, but coming off Scafell is a 900m drop straight down to Brackenclose car park. The run is usually a delightful trot over a grassy field studded with small boulders and then down a thrilling fine-stoned scree run that I had feared when I first tried it but is now a highlight of any BG attempt I'm on; 400m of pure glee, the first half reminiscent of bounding down sand dunes as a kid, followed by a grassy slope just as steep and almost as quick. Today the fun was wanting and the pain in my knee considerable. My progress slowed and I lost a lot of the time I'd gradually gained back since Dunmail, but fortuitously arrived into Wasdale bang on schedule.

Leg 4: In the Pink *Nav – Rob Gittins; Mule – Carl Hanaghan*



Several friends had made an effort to come to see me at Wasdale and added to the support from Leg 3 and 4 and my girls this made for a good crowd at the changeover. While my focus was on eating noodles and watermelon and drinking tea, their presence was humbling and filled me with encouragement and determination to complete the mission at hand.

They say if you leave Wasdale on time the BG is in the bag. I'm not so sure, but it sounds like a good thing to say to a tired contender. The reality is that if you lose time on each peak home you're in trouble as 12 peaks remain with 12 miles and 2000m on this penultimate leg alone. I lost 5 minutes on Yewbarrow and another on Red Pike and I could see this playing on Rob and Carl's minds. They tried not to show it and throughout the Leg they encouraged me with calm resolve. This is by far the hardest section on the Round for most people. Imagine having climbed 5500m only to drop almost to sea level at Wasdale and then have to start on a 90 minute hike back to the gods. At that point your body wants a bit of a rest having been on the go for 15 hours and knowing there is still another 8 hours to go. Your belly is full having stuffed your face in the valley and you know that your mates from Leg 3 are probably talking about beer if they've not already gone to the pub. Frankly your body needs sleep, to digest its meal and have a pint, but instead you force it onwards and upwards. For me that meant the high from Leg 3 was over and I was suffering.

However, on my side was that I know Leg 4 better than any other and felt familiar with every crease, knoll and trod. The body does remarkable things on ultra-distant challenges and a dark moment can quickly evaporate when a gel takes hold, or the terrain changes and quite often when a summit is reached. So it was having scaled the 32nd peak that I turned a corner; mentally, physically and geographically. The route from Red Pike continues briefly north to Steeple during which time I made my peace with the lord, reset my resolve and spirit and set a course east in the direction of Pillar, Kirk Fell and Great Gable. By now it was around 8pm and the midsummer sun was getting low in the sky and lit the three giant monoliths ahead an incredible shade of pink. The timing could not have been more perfect.

This was the moment I conquered the Round. This trio of mountains can be quite an intimidating sight after such a long outing as each stands apart with a not inconsiderable height gain between them.

Instead, I saw them as three older brothers, there to frustrate my progress, but with a somewhat comforting familiarity. In my mind I had already defeated the hardest section of the Leg and even the Round. My head was clear now, energy bountiful and I was climbing quickly and selecting trods with ease, if only to counter the dire speed in which I was able to descend. With each summit reached I became increasingly confident that I was going to finish this, which in turn spurred me on with renewed vigour. On another day it would have been dark by now and claggy, but tonight there was no need for torches until after the last big hulk of mountains on Leg 4 had been put to bed.

Carl and Rob stopped at Windy Gap to get our torches out and by the time they'd caught me I was over Green Gable with just two miles and two easy peaks to go to Honister. As we fell from Grey Knotts, Carl sped off at such speed with an unconventional meandering route down to the valley that to the guys waiting below looked like he was a mountain biker – an impressive sight to behold at night time from the quarry floor. I, on the other hand, limped in 22 minutes down from schedule having lost all of the time regained in the mid-section of the Leg on the descent in to the final road crossing.

Leg 5: Landing Lights Nav – Larry Day; Mule – Carl Hanaghan



I'd scheduled a 15 minute stop at Honister, but with just 10 miles and a 750m climb remaining and a little less time available to complete the BGR than planned, I was keen to knock off the last three peaks. I still felt fine when climbing and got into a good stride on the long trudge up Dale Head.

The sky was truly remarkable up in the highest of England's fells that night. The light breeze was warm, the air clear and the light from a billion celestial bodies a silent witness to my feat. These same stars helped navigate the first Norse settlers to Cumbria, who voyaged across the Solway Firth to name many of the *fjalls* I'd traversed in their own tongue. Back then the landscape would have been dark, with little disturbance from the impact of man, but now and from this vista the twinkling streetlights of settlements along the Scottish and Cumbrian coasts outlined the land from the sea they crossed. The Milky Way was out in all its glory with a clarity of neon pinks and blues that led a trail of stars between all of the tops of my journey, from Gable to Pillar, to Scafell Pike to Bowfell, to the Langdale Pikes and Helvellyn. All the way back in fact to the first peak of Skiddaw, below which the town of Keswick whose own streetlights provided a clear set of landing lights to direct me home. This was truly humbling and if ever I was going to be close to god this was it.

Heaven and hell, pleasure and pain, yin and yang. The more ethereal my body and spirit felt on this expedition, the more the torment in my knee grew and I was now in constant agony. Larry sought the best lines ahead of us on a Leg usually travelled in daylight when trods are more obvious. Thankfully he nailed several cunning routes that would bypass a craggy descent and save me from further pain. I was grateful too to Carl who distracted me from my discomfort by asking me to list my favourite films and songs and we reminisced on younger but less fit days. Then, finally, after a cruelly agonising and endless descent off the last peak Robinson, in a true show of friendship, my companions took a stinking and soggy foot each and changed my footwear to road shoes for a more comfortable last 6 miles along the undulating road through the Newlands Valley.

Barring some crisis there was no doubt of success now so we jogged unhurried back to Keswick and as we entered the town we reencountered people less certain on their feet than I as they staggered homeward bound from the pub. There were no cars to stop or crowds to clear in the market place at this time of night, but I sped up for the last few hundred meters anyway to celebrate my own homecoming. Zow, Rob and Ange had all left the comfort of their beds to see me finish, while Daisy was asleep in a blanket on the steps of the Moot Hall. I stood on the steps at 2:35am, finishing the Bob Graham Round within the 24hours required and with 25 minutes to spare. That's good value for money in my book.

After thoughts



A week later I'm flying from Manchester to Edinburgh for a meeting and wake up from a quick snooze as the captain announces we're cruising at 30,000ft above the Lake District. That's roughly the height gain in the BGR and as I gaze out of the window the mountains below come into view and I am able to retrace and relive the entire route from one Leg to another. How small it looks from this perspective, but grand too.

Another week later on an outing with Daisy we reach High Raise, which is almost midway on the BG route, and she's asking me to recount for the nth time how I dragged my poor bare bum over wet moss to relieve myself. She thinks it's hilarious. So do I.

Daisy is a big part of this story. She was there throughout on road support, and having endured her own 24hr journey around the Lake District she has some perspective of what it is her dad has done. If she'd been younger she'd not appreciate it or understand what a big deal it was for me. She does now. Fell and ultra-running is largely a selfish endeavour and when you can share it with your loved ones that makes it feel even more special. Having Zow there was equally important. This was a family outing even though it was my mates helping me out on the fells. Zow has supported my countless excursions over the years, which often displaces me from them for days at a time. When asked afterwards whether she thought I was done with big challenges, she didn't hesitate with her wry response: "Oh, it won't take him long to find something else to obsess over". Part resignation and part acknowledgement that this is ultimately what makes me tick.

Future challenges do have a certain inevitability as long as my body submits to endure. For now at least there is just huge satisfaction and pride in having conquered something that has absorbed my thoughts and ambitions for so long and provided memories to last a lifetime. It's also an addiction. Nine months later, significantly less fit than I was that June day and with a winter belly, I yearn to be back at that peak. Beyond the physical challenge I would encourage others to have a go or support others, because a special bond forms between those that experience the highs and lows of running the hills together. The Bob Graham Round is both a solo challenge and a team sport. For me, aided by Ange, Broom, Carl, Daisy, Emma, Jo, Larry, Sadge, Steph, Steve, Rob and Zow, this is a challenge conquered together.