

Martin Rands - Bob Graham Round 20/21 June 2003

Before the off

The fine weather forecast of earlier in the week had not quite lived up to expectations, Skiddaw was looking misty as we arrived in Keswick and rain was expected. After a last short rest in the B&B it was off to the Moot Hall, leaving a rather perplexed landlady unsure she had heard us right when we told her of our return time. There was a big crowd waiting, not only Kath and her supporters but several contenders from Dark Peak too. After a minutes silence in memory of Mike Rose (late FRA secretary), it was time for a deep breath and at last we're off.

Leg 1: Keswick – Threlkeld (3 hr 27 min)

Navigator: Trevor Longman

Supporters: Mandy Calvert, Barry Blyth

Kath and her team were also starting at 6:30, and luckily John had checked the first ½ mile earlier. Having found that the footbridge into Fitz Park was closed, he led us out of town on an alternative route. The excited chatter helped as we tackled the biggest climb of the route. The tops were clearing as we climbed Skiddaw and looking behind I could see across Derwent Water to Great Gable and what awaited me much, much later. We reached the first top a few minutes ahead of schedule and put on windproofs in the stiff breeze.

Great Calver was knocked off efficiently and the descent began. There had been much debate on Wednesday nights on the advantages of left-of-the fence or right-of-the-fence options, but in the end Trev went for a direct nowhere-near-the-fence line down to the River Caldew. Mandy got separated from us here but finished the leg with Kath. As we climbed over Mungrisdale Common the sun was starting to set behind Skiddaw giving a beautiful orange light.

The rock on Halls Fell Ridge was dry, which was a big relief; it wasn't a descent I was looking forward to. "This is where Brian fell off the other week" Trev pointed out helpfully, followed a while later by "This is where he stopped". Thanks to Barry and Trev's efforts I arrived at the first checkpoint comfortably ahead of schedule.

Raph, who was supporting Kath, had a major collapsing Walsh scenario and an epic descent off Blencathra – all of which I was blissfully unaware.

Leg 2: Threlkeld – Dunmail Raise (4 hr 46 min)

Navigator: Chris Rhodes

Supporters: Richard Calder, Julie Gardner, Roger Teagle

Entertainment on this leg was provided by the Rhodes and Calder show, while Julie and Roger were most diligent providers of food and drink. I had forgotten to pick up my headtorch during my brief stop at Threlkeld but it didn't matter as it turned out to be a fine night. Clear and breezy we could see all the way. As we climbed Clough Head the lights of Keswick started to appear, and the sky turned a spectacular colour above Blencathra.

As night fell we could see the lights of others teams along the route as we picked off the summits steadily. Towards the end of the leg I began to suffer from excess Lucozade consumption – the effect on my stomach leading to serious gas emissions and probable damage to the ozone layer over Cumbria.

Kath was going well, we passed near the top of Fairfield just as I started down. As we descended off Seat Sandal the road at Dunmail was a blaze of lights from all the support cars for the various attempts out. I was guided into where Bob Lock had set up shop and had a mug of tea thrust into my hand. Thanks to Chris and Richard's faultless navigation I had picked up a few more minutes on the schedule. I was encouraged not to stay too long as the midges were out in force and biting hard!

Leg 3: Dunmail Raise – Wasdale (6 hr 42 min)

Navigator: Mark Hartell

Supporters: Mandy Calvert, Craig Harwood

With Steel Fell there's no easy route, but the banter eased the way – Craig was most concerned at the lack of dancing girls, this was the recurring theme to Wasdale (we did spot some later in Keswick, but he'd gone home by then). As the sky began to lighten again my stomach calmed down too, and the discussion turned to food. After a long debate on the amazing restorative powers of rice pudding, it was discovered that there was none to be had which was a trifle disappointing. However Mark had an endless supply of fruit pastilles – a 'reward' for each top – and surplus crumpled food packages from his efforts at the LAMM the week before.

As we passed the Langdales the sun began to rise, casting a spectacular pink light onto the rocks of Crinkle Crag and Bowfell. At Angle Tarn was the more spectacular sight of itinerant orange supplier Phil Cheek. Despite breaking his wrist and with his arm in a sling he was determined to turn out and support – thanks also to Annette who had to drive him to Wasdale at some ridiculous hour so he could walk up.

With the sun fully up and clear views it was brilliant to be up on the high fells. I had lost all track of time, just enjoying the day. There were several groups of walkers around Esk Hause and Scafell Pike – could it really be 6 a.m? We had intended to try Broad Stand up to Scafell but there was a group ahead of us who appeared to be struggling. Craig went ahead to try to sort them out, but Mark decided not to wait. Instead we whizzed up Lord's Rake – not looking too hard at the dodgy boulder above us. From the top it was a steady descent to the campsite and a welcome bowl of Weetabix for breakfast.

Leg 4: Wasdale – Honister Pass (5 hr 11 min)

Navigator: Mark Hartell

Supporters: Geoff Pettingell, Graeme McCallum

The weather was now looking good, with plenty of sunshine around. Climbing up Yewbarrow Mark and Geoff had plenty of breath as they caught up with their news, leaving me trailing in their wake. At the top we had the only rain shower of the entire round, a 5 minute cool-down before we tackled Red Pike.

The food finds of this leg were the Tang Fantastic's that Geoff brought along. However, my tastebuds were blunted by too many pastilles and so I didn't get the same buzz from them as the others. Going up Pillar I was starting to flag, but this was where the rice pudding was finally put into play.

There were plenty of people around, supporters of the other attempts. There was one supporter in search of a contender - "Are you Dark Peak?" she asked. "No, we know where we're going". Another typical exchange: Geoff - "I know that girl, I'm sure she's x from club y" Mark - "Who was the bloke with her then?" Geoff - "What bloke, I didn't see any bloke."

Feeling revitalised I stomped up Kirk Fell and then onto Great Gable – where there was another big crowd enjoying the sun, some with a tempting bottle of wine. Then along the new fence right along the

ridge and down to Honister, where I finally escaped Mark and his sweets. The car park was packed, but Bob was there again, with a mug of tea at the ready.

Leg 5: Honister Pass – Keswick (3 hrs)

Navigator: Trevor Longman

Supporters: Mandy Calvert, Barry Blyth, Roger Teagle, Julie Gardner with Dolly & Flash

With success in sight, there was a real party atmosphere on the last leg. Even Julie's dogs joined in, charging around the fellside with more energy than I could dream of. From the top of Dale Head the view extended over Keswick and back to Skiddaw, which seemed a long time ago. All too soon we arrived at Robinson, the final top and photo opportunity.

Arriving at Snab Farm, I had the luxury of two foot washers to cool my toes before changing to road shoes. Whatever else had happened to my feet over the previous 22 hours, it hadn't stopped them feeling ticklish under Barry and Roger's attentions.

The road section was enlivened by more photo opportunities, as I was encouraged not to exceed the 20 mph speed limit imposed after the road had been resurfaced. This did not prove to be too much of a problem, even without Barry waving one of the signs over his head. Over the bridge and the Moot Hall was in sight. Also in sight was another contender bearing down on us along the track, so I somehow upped the pace a bit to ensure getting prime position at the finish. Barry and Roger did a fine job stopping the traffic and clearing a way through the crowds in the town centre.

Finally, after 23 hours and 6 minutes, I touched the Moot Hall again – I had done it!

Afterwards

Thanks to everyone who advised, encouraged and supported me, in particular on the day itself but also over the preceding months and years it took for the idea of me doing the Bob Graham Round to go from 'an utterly inconceivable concept' to 'I think I can do this'.

Special thanks to our neighbour, Bob Lock, for his excellent road support throughout the day, to Dave Tucker for his efficient organisation of the support teams, and of course to Mandy – chief coach and best supporter.

One final thought to all those who told me 'you're looking as fresh as a daisy' – I wouldn't give up the day job for one on the Gardeners Question Time panel – appearances can be deceptive!

Martin Rands