

10. THE BOB GRAHAM ROUND

'Don't confront me with my failures; I have not forgotten them.'

(Jackson Browne)

Bob Graham

The name Bob Graham is hallowed in fell-running circles. The 'Round' with which he is indelibly associated was completed in 1932. There had already been records of 'rounds' of the Lake District fells since the 1860s, with steadily more impressive distances and times, and it was the existing record of Eustace Thomas that Bob Graham set out to better at 1am on Sunday 13th June 1932. He was 42 at the time, so chose 42 fells (*listed at the end of this chapter) to tally with his age. At the time, he was running a guest house in Keswick. He was a teetotaler and during his epic 'walk' he was sustained by bread and butter, fruit and a lightly boiled egg. Almost 24 hours after he started he was padding back through the quiet, dark streets of Keswick in his plimsolls, accompanied by his four pacers. He reached Keswick Town Hall, now known as the Moot Hall, at 12.39am, having climbed his 42 mountains inside the cut-off time. There was no fanfare. Graham shook hands with his supporters and they all went to the guest house that he ran in Lake Road, where he had a few hours sleep and then got up at 6am to cook a 'thank you' breakfast for his pacers.

His remarkable record stood for 28 years until Alan Heaton, in June 1960, clipped over an hour off Graham's time for the circuit. After that the record was broken on a number of occasions, with the time being reduced, or extra peaks added, or both. (**see the end of this chapter for further details.)

You aren't a member of Dark Peak Fell Runners for long before you become aware of the Dark Peak Bob Graham 'machine'. By the time I was involved with the club, in the late 1980s, members had been helping each other for years in their attempts on the BG. The support offered includes a careful schedule, timed to the minute for a round of about 23 hours, food and drink at the road crossings, and willing supporters/navigators for each leg of the route. There's an understanding that BG contenders will put something back or, preferably, will have served an apprenticeship as supporters before making their own attempt.

For many fell-runners the BG is the Holy Grail. On the face of it, about three mph with an ascent of just over 1,000 feet per hour doesn't sound too demanding. But stack it up for 23 hours and it's a lot to ask: 66 miles and 27,000 feet over the mixed terrain of 42 mountains, with a fair chunk of it during the night.

The Dark Peak club attempt generally takes place on the weekend closest to the summer solstice, to maximise daylight. Everything is done to give contenders the highest possible chance of success. Ultimately though, it's down to the contender. You need to have prepared as best you can for 24 hours of physical and mental effort and you need to have recce'd the route. These things fill your thoughts for a long time before an attempt. You get some big days out under your belt, including as much as possible of the actual BG route. You owe it to your mates who will be helping you to be as ready as possible and anyway, this means

everything, doesn't it, this attempt? Some of your supporters may fall ill at the last minute or their car may break down en route to the Lakes, or the weather -quite likely might be unfavourable, so you must be as prepared as possible. Whatever happens, this is your chance and ultimately, only you will determine whether or not you will get round.

I knew a number of the guys in Dark Peak who'd done the Round. There was even Roger Baumeister, who in July 1979 had completed two Bob Grahams back-to-back. He did part of a clockwise round, as far as the top of Yewbarrow, then promptly turned and did a full anti-clockwise circuit to the point reached earlier, then turned and completed the initial clockwise round: 132 miles, 54,000ft of ascent and 84 summits in 46 hours and 34 minutes. An eye-watering achievement. For me Roger was up there with the Gods. ***

By 1989 I was fired up for a try at the BG. I pored over maps of the Lake District, registered my wish to be part of the Dark Peak attempt, and put in plenty of long runs. In truth the BG had become an obsession for me. In early March I did the High Peak Marathon (40 miles) in just over 13 hours, then a week later 15 miles around Eyam and Longshaw and Froggatt Edge in two and a half hours. A week after that came the Edale Skyline, one of the major Dark Peak races. That was 22 miles completed inside four hours. One of the scalps | claimed that day was that of my hero Roger Baumeister. Roger must have been ill.

In mid-April I did a 33 mile solo run in 8 hours 30 mins in the Cross Fell area of the North Pennines, then a week later a 17 mile/7,000 feet recce of the Great Gable-Steeple-Yewbarrow section of the BG. A week later I had a 31-mile outing in County Durham, then a week after that, 26 miles in the Derwent Valley in under five hours. Then came The Fellsman.

Race report: The Fellsman Hike 13th-14th May 1989

The pre-race arrangements all went very smoothly and reflected the fact that this event is now in its 28th year: the sleep on the gym floor at Upper Wharfedale County Secondary School in Threshfield, the full English heart attack breakfast at 5am, and the coach transport to the start at Ingleton, all had a balance of friendly atmosphere and efficient organisation.

The Keighley Scouts organise this event and like para-military groups everywhere, they are very fond of rigid regulations. So it was that the cagoule which had seen me safely round the Derwent Watershed one winter's night was deemed insufficiently waterproof for May weather in the Dales. The soles of our footwear were scrutinised too.

In his fine book *Wild Trails to Far Horizons*, Mike Cudahy, one of the greatest of long-distance runners, describes the kit check before the 1986 Fellsman: 'As usual, at the kit check I had to undergo the ritual sarcasm and bumptious cheek from a pimply-faced youth who stared aghast at a small hole in my trainers. He implied that it was most likely that he, personally, would have to turn out and rescue me when I succumbed to the hazardous effects of wet feet. I resisted the very strong temptation to shake him warmly by the throat and instead thrust a stout pair of breeches forward for inspection. As I expected, he was duly impressed. Once outside, I threw the breeches into the back of the car and substituted two pairs of thermal tights.'

I knew that several Dark Peak stalwarts such as Colin Henson and Jeff Harrison were not taking part but among the 367 people on the start field at 9am, the sartorial idiosyncrasies of one competitor did seem familiar. At that moment there was a laid-back announcement: "You might as well get going then!" As in many long events there was an entirely unnecessary sprint at the start as pentup energy was released and I didn't see Mike Hayes's sartorially challenged figure again during the next 61 miles.

On Ingleborough and Whernside the weather pattern was set. Clear sun with a sharp wind after a long dry spell made for good conditions. The afternoon showers that had been forecast didn't materialise and late in the day even the dreaded Fleet Moss, about which people talk in hushed tones, was merely a brief moist interlude.

Long before dusk at Cray, I was grouped with three people I'd been running with for the previous 15 miles, plus several others who were keen to join us, a total of eight. This grouping is a safety precaution laid down by the organisers so that no runners are alone during the night. Of our eight two, it turned out, were to attempt the Bob Graham on the same day as the Dark Peak Roadshow, at the same time and in the same direction. Coincidences continued when I discovered that one of them, a Quantock Orienteer called Arthur Vince, went to school many moons ago with Mike Hayes. Mike achieved a certain notoriety for being the only person in the school to cut his own hair. I believe he still has the same scissors and uses them on his running kit now.

As we climbed Great Whernside the dusk thickened and clusters of lights could be seen coming off Buckden Pike. The combination of a clear night, easy going, entertaining conversation and a growing weariness was wonderful. The drawback of having to move at the speed of the group's slowest member was balanced by the familiarity with the route of others amongst us. At about 1am, at Yarnbury, we were 'de-grouped', which allowed a fast two mile run to the finish at Threshfield; 61 miles and 11,000 feet and my legs had something left. I obviously hadn't tried hard enough.

The plastic chairs in the hot showers were a stroke of genius and the 2am fried breakfast before a few hours' kip just set me up nicely for the Sunday morning drive back to Sheffield. It had been a brilliant day out and if, like me, you are secretly ticking off Bridge's Tables of the 2,000ft Mountains of England & Wales (I was then, I'm not really bothering these days), this route takes you over ten of them.

I still have the round plastic competitor disc, clipped around the circumference at the 22 controls on the route and with my competitor number stuck in the centre of it. I have a completion certificate too, recording that I finished in 16 hrs 15 mins and saying 'Twas a gradely walk - well done!' It felt like a bit more than a gradely walk. Anyway, I was hugely encouraged to have completed it and in a respectable time too. There were 367 starters and though I don't know how many finished, I was in about 70th position at the end. This seemed to augur well for the BG a month later.

More preparations

A week after The Fellsman I was in Galloway, competing in the Rock + Run Mountain Marathon, a two-day orienteering event. That was 24 miles and about 6,000 feet of climb.

Then between 27th May and 3rd June, I was in Scotland climbing Munros every day, with a cumulative total of 77 miles and 31,000 feet for the week, including a fairly fast ascent (1 hr 47 min up, 56 min down, say my notes) of Ben Nevis on 31st May. I list these outings not to impress - they are pretty ordinary for many fell-runners who like big days out or have the BG in their sights but to show that I really was making an effort to be in shape for my BG attempt.

They were tough runners, those who'd achieved a BG round but, with this lot under my belt surely, if the fates were favourable, I could do it, I could be up there with them. I'd already had the heady experience on long runs of feeling as if I was cruising on automatic, looking on from outside the body as it flows almost effortlessly for mile after mile over rough terrain; taking it easy up the hills but going inexorably on to the boundary of what the body seems capable of doing and then further.

After the end of May I eased off on the long runs, as the Dark Peak club attempt was set for June 17th. My preparation had been thorough: I'd even read *The Round* by Peter Travis, only a moderately competent novel but, because an attempt on the BG lies at the heart of the story, I felt sure I would glean some tips from it. Maybe I even subconsciously felt that having read it would give me some magical edge.

The BG consists of five sections which, if taken anti-Wasdale, clockwise, are: Keswick Moot Hall Honister, Honister Wasdale Dunmail, Dunmail Threlkeld, and Threlkeld Keswick Moot Hall. I had researched the route in great detail, recce'd it all at various times. These hills were imprinted in my brain. I was as ready as I could be.

Finally, the Dark Peak BG weekend arrived and contenders and supporters gathered at the traditional base, the campsite at Threlkeld. Contenders tried to get their heads down early, though with swirling thoughts of what lay ahead, in my case at least, sleep did not come easily.

17th June 1989

Fast forward to Keswick Moot Hall, just before the appointed start time. There were seven contenders: Ged Desforges, Ed Hutt, Barry Needle, John Firth, Roy Varo, my regular running partner Tim Mackey, and me. We were to embark on a counter-clockwise attempt, which means a longish road section at the beginning. In a subsequent piece in *Dark Peak News*, entitled 'Fun In The Sun', John Firth wrote: 'Not a single cloud could be seen in the sky and the ominous warmth could be felt as 8am approached. [The contenders] trotted out of the shade in that usual happy, chatty Dark Peak fashion. Most of the road section was spent catching up with news, chatting to pacers and getting to know companions on the day's outing.'

The first section included just three hills: Robinson, Hindscarth and Dale Head. We dropped down to Honister bang on schedule. A big support party left there for the second section, over Grey Knotts, Brandreth, Green Gable, Great Gable, Kirk Fell, Pillar, Steeple, Red Pike and Yewbarrow. With considerable understatement, John's report said that during this stage: 'the mid day sun was becoming a nuisance', going on to add: 'The welcome sight of Wasdale lifted spirits, only to have them dashed by a tortuous scree descent. The heat had taken its

toll in the latter part of that section.' Sad to report (for me at least), my attempt ended with a whimper, as John described: 'Kev struggled in behind us; exhausted with the heat he retired at Wasdale.' I was already 35 minutes off the pace. That in itself was not a major issue but although I was drinking a lot, I was finding eating difficult in the heat and I was already too slow on the uphills. It was 80°F and that was just too hot.

John Firth went on to add: 'Tim [Mackey] was unable to eat and left [Wasdale] after the remaining five. A now famous tale tell how Tim carried a stick of celery and a tomato up Scafell and never ate them. He bravely carried on to Esk Hause before retiring.' Later, Ged, Ed and Roy also found it too much, leaving just Barry and John to succeed, an enormously impressive achievement in such hot conditions.

Having been moderately confident, this was a salutary lesson for me. I had genuinely thought I was in with a good chance but I had failed spectacularly. So the attempt on which I'd staked so much foundered after less than seven hours. I'd done only 20 miles and 7,900 feet. I felt I'd given a pathetic account of myself and I was deeply embarrassed that, with all the time and effort being Contributed by so many selfless supporters, this was all I could do. Equally, I knew then, at Wasdale, that I was totally shot. There would have been no point going on. And, what was worse, I didn't know what I could have done to prepare any better than I had, so the painful conclusion was that, on this occasion at least, I just wasn't up to the task.

What next?

During the rest of 1989 there were some compensations. In August I did my fastest ever Half Marathon, on Islay, managing 1 hr 33 mins 35 secs. The tot of single malt given out to all finishers at Bowmore Distillery was not quite the first drink you'd seek out after a 13 mile run, but at least I was happy with my time.

Then in September, I ran the Otter 40 with Tim Mackey. This undulating 40-mile route through the Peak District did us both good. Im was fit again, finishing in 7 hrs 16 mins and I came in three minutes later. In late October we had a 40-mile weekend together in wild, stormy weather for the two-day Karrimor International Mountain Marathon in the Howgills.

In early March 1990 there was another 40 miler, the High Peak Marathon again, followed a fortnight later by the 33-mile Haworth Hobble. A week later came the 22 mile Edale Skyline in a good time (for me), then a week after that, a sub two hour time (just) on the Kentmere Horseshoe.

This was all very well but I was still feeling scarred by the scale of the previous summer's BG debacle. I went up to the Lakes for The June DPFRR weekend as a supporter for Frank Galbraith and Colin Henson's BG attempt. Running the Wasdale Dunmail section with them, then later going up to bivvy at the summit of Skiddaw at midnight with Paul Sanderson and Dave Holmes, to intercept the contenders as they approached their final run in, I calculated that I'd actually done more as a supporter than I had managed on my own attempt as a contender 12 months earlier. In September I completed the Dark Peak 15 Trigs, 55 miles in under 15 hours. A little confidence gradually began to return.

In February 1991 I had a hernia operation which meant, among other things, no High Peak Marathon for me that year. I was running again a few weeks later and began having some long days out, but I was still raw from the BG scars. In June I ran the Wasdale -Dunmail section again, supporting the BG attempt of Matt Simms, Dave Lockwood and Frank Galbraith. I did 35 miles that weekend, almost double my abysmal total of two years before, and felt good. Maybe there was a BG future for me after all. By early 1992 I was coming round to the notion of having another go. I did some of the big events in preparation: the High Peak Marathon, the Haworth Hobble, the Fellsman, then decided to try the BG again.

Saturday 20th June 1992 loomed. This time there were four contenders: Maggie Gallagher, Roy Small, Andy Sheehan and me.

Again, we were going anti-clockwise. It was another warm day but I was feeling good. There were hordes of supporters. Honister came and went without incident. On Pillar I felt the first twinges of cramp, not something I had ever had a problem with. Down in Wasdale I massaged the leg muscles but on Scafell the cramp returned with a vengeance. Both my legs locked. What was going on? I had energy in my legs and my head was okay, but as soon as I tried to run, the cramp seared through and I couldn't move. I hobbled on, losing time, as far as 'The Hoist', a support point high on the fells near Harrison Stickle, before finally accepting, nine hills beyond Wasdale, that the cramp wasn't going to go away and I was too far adrift now to have any chance of completing within 24 hours. This time I'd done 36 miles. Maggie battled on until Threlkeld where, realising she was too far down on the schedule, she also called it a day. Roy and Andy both performed well and got round. In my running log, the few lines describing this attempt end with the cryptic phrase: 'More experience in the bank.'

Maggie might have been speaking for me too when she subsequently wrote in Dark Peak News: 'I left Keswick Moot Hall in a state of excitement and anticipation. The route was wonderful inspirational! The views were fantastic! The descents were exhilarating! The company was excellent! It was a wonderful day out with wonderful people.'

Attempt No. 3

I didn't feel so downhearted after my second BG failure, more bemused to have been hit by such prolonged attacks of cramp, something that had never previously troubled me. There was still an Impetus there though. Both Maggie and I felt that on the right day we could crack it. Another attempt was set for five weekends later, Saturday 25th July 1992. Meanwhile, I kept ticking over with two consecutive weekends in the Lakes: on the Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon (4th/5th July) and then with a 20 mile support stint for Roger Baumeister and Jeff Harrison on their 50 Lakes Summits attempt (11th July).

I did a couple of short fell races in the Peak District and then nothing for a few days before driving up to the Lakes again. As well as Maggie Gallagher and me, there were two more contenders, Pete Gorvett and Hugh Matheson. This time we had decided to try a different approach. We would start at 12.30am and go clockwise. The theory behind this is that the second leg, the long and generally easy stretch over the Dodds and Helvellyn, will be done in the dark.

I had copies of the schedule for a 23 hr 20 min round. For the first section, it went like this, with the time in minutes to the summit of each hill and the cumulative time in brackets: Moot Hall (0-00), Skiddaw 82 (1-22), Great Calva 50 (2-12), Blencathra 70 (3-22), Threlkeld In 30 (3-52). There's a ten minute rest at Threlkeld, then on it goes: Threlkeld Out 10 (4-02), Clough Head 59 (5-01) and so on.

In addition, this being long before the days of the GPS, I had slips of paper with bearings and distances for each bit of the route. After recceing, much of it was familiar, and many of the supporters knew the route inside out, but it would be dark at times, it might be foggy, there was no point risking going wrong. Even a small error might be crucial, so those slips of paper were important. The first one had this:

Keswick - 47" behind Latrigg to road end

51° for 200m, then 329° to summit ridge (3.7km)

5° to summit trig.

Skiddaw-21° for 400m

69° for 1.8km to col

61° for 1.5km to Gt Calva summit...

And so it went on, pages of it, all cut into bite-size chunks.

Fortunately, I didn't need the slips of paper. Mike Pedley did a brilliant job, on bearings, guiding us over Skiddaw and Great Calva to Blencathra but conditions were not good. Everything was shrouded in mist and the steep descent down Hall's Fell was not as straightforward as it should have been. We were nearly 30 minutes behind schedule, so our supporters decided we should dispense with the ten minute break at Threlkeld and ushered us straight up Clough Head.

It was misty and windy on the long next stretch but we made up some time. Mike Pedley later wrote this: 'For once the much cooler conditions meant that Kev Borman was running strongly. Peter and Kevin were on schedule at Dunmail.' The weather, though, held a surprise in store for us. On the third leg it worsened until, by Bowfell, our 19th peak, we were battling low cloud, driving winds, relentless rain and even hail. Pete and I were ahead of Maggie and Hugh at this point but ultimately we couldn't fight the storm. Mike Pedley again: 'That afternoon the weather was simply dreadful. Waiting in Wasdale, we retreated to the comfort of the nearby Fell and Rock Club hut as the rain and driving wind lashed the valley. The conditions at 3,000ft were almost unimaginable. Hugh Matheson, guided by Howard Swindells, came down the valley from Esk Hause and Sty Head and it was with much relief that we spotted Kevin and then Maggie coming down from Mickledore. Peter had continued over Scafell and was about an hour and a half down on a 23:20 schedule. With slack built into the later stages, he spent a few minutes considering what to do before deciding, wisely, to retire.'

So yet again the weather had the last laugh. At least this time I had got further than on my previous attempts, 29 peaks and 50 miles done. It's always very difficult to convey the depth of thanks you owe supporters on any attempt, and especially so when they help you in conditions like those. Maggie Gallagher gave it a good shot: 'I feel that thanks are very inadequate to offer everyone who contributed to the weekend. I do not know how to thank people enough; Colin (Henson) for organising it and all the supporters for their encouragement and good wishes. I am very sorry for your sakes that I didn't get round but thank you anyway for another weekend to remember. Maggie managed those simple and heartfelt words; I concur with every one of them.

In my running log, my entry for this attempt ends: Disappointing, but now felt confident that I can crack it in good conditions.' But, simply, those conditions never came. The rest of that summer passed, life moved on, and I never made another attempt. Now, many years on, those are hallowed memories some of the strongest and most valued memories of my life but actually, in retrospect, the fact that I never managed to complete the BG, although it was once an obsession, doesn't matter at all. What remains most powerfully is simply the depth of the friendship and support, those magical days with like-minded people 'on the hill'.

The 42 fells on the Bob Graham Round, taken anti-clockwise, are Robinson, Hindscarth, Dale Head, Grey Knotts, Brandreth, Green Gable, Great Gable, Kirk Fell, Pillar, Steeple, Red Pike, Yewbarrow, Scafell, Scafell Pike, Broad Crag, Ill Crag, Great End, Esk Pike, Bowfell, Rossett Pike, Pike O'Stickle, Harrison Stickle, Thunacar Knott, High Raise, Sergeant Man, Calf Crag, Steel Fell, Seat Sandal, Fairfield, Dollywaggon Pike, Nethermost Pike, Helvellyn, Helvellyn Low Man, White Side, Raise, Stybarrow Dodd, Watson Dodd, Great Dodd, Clough Head, Blencathra, Great Calva and Skiddaw.

** At the time of writing (August 2018) Mark Hartell holds the record for the most peaks ascended, 77, in under 24 hours. His record has stood since 1997. More recently, in 2011, Nicky Spinks (of DPFR) raised the women's record to 64 peaks. The fastest men's round of the original 42 peaks was achieved by the Swiss ultra-runner Kilian Jornet in July 2018. His time was 12 hours 52 minutes. The fastest women's round was by Jasmin Paris in 2016 (15 hours 24 minutes). By the end of 2017 membership of the Bob Graham 24 Hour Club (those who have completed the round of the original 42 peaks in under 24 hours) had risen to a total of 2,170 people. Two or three years ago Dark Peak member Willy Kitchen calculated that, at that stage, at least 169 of these were DPFR members.

*** A 'Double Bob Graham' is something else. Since Roger Baumeister's 1979 epic, only three more runners have completed a double. One of them, Nicky Spinks, also mentioned in the previous paragraph, became the first woman to do a double. Over the weekend of 14th/15th May 2016, she finished in 45 hours 30 minutes, taking more than an hour off Roger's record time in the process. Roger Baumeister was one of many there to support her.