

Jon Kinder's Bob Graham Round

What is a Bob Graham Round? First done way back in 1932 by Bob Graham, hotelier of Keswick, Cumberland, at the age of 42, the 42 Peak Round has become a testing ground for the supremely fit. Each summer around 100 of the most highly tuned ultra-distance fell runners will attempt the 27,000 ft of ascent within the allotted 24 hours. Only one in three will return to the Keswick Moot Hall before the clock runs down.

At 46 I'm slightly older than Bob was on his inaugural round, so I thought I'd better get on with it. We've had the sunniest April since records began, therefore choosing a date in May will guarantee super weather right? Wrong! Heavy rain was hammering down and forecast not to cease for the entire attempt, but due to the level of complexity and planning of a BGR attempt there was no backing out, as we drove towards the start The Moot Hall in Keswick town centre I felt like a prisoner being taken for ritual sacrifice to the Mountain Gods.

And so it was at 9:00pm on Friday night when most sane people were hunkered down in the pubs enjoying a beer or 2, we set off up Skiddaw into the mist and murk. The wind chill as we neared the summit was incredible, communication was impossible and the rain was stinging any exposed flesh, but at least we were all fresh and strong so able to keep moving and therefore generate a degree of body heat. Luckily for me Robin Carter and Jon Whilock (from Staffordshire Harriers) were with us who are both BGR veterans and excellent navigators so we just kept going despite visibility being down to just several metres. Having gained the first summit we paused briefly to put on everything that we were carrying as we were all seriously cold, this was perhaps a bad idea as the next barrier to progress was the fast flowing river Cladew, normally an ankle deep stream we all carefully shuffled through it, waist deep, clutching each other's hands, however as we reached the middle my feet slipped and I went in up to my neck, at least we couldn't get any wetter, but I seriously wondered how long we could hold out in these brutal conditions. Still we focused on the route ahead and summited Great Calva and Blencathra before Robin took us down the steep decent of Doddick Fell as the shorter, traditional route down Halls Fell would have been treacherous in the unforgiving conditions. At last the first checkpoint at Thelkeld, where the support team Amanda Carter, Jo Coates and Sarah Haynes were waiting with everything that we needed for a swift, efficient break. It was at this point that fellsman rookie Matt Tomlinson who set out earlier wearing shorts was told that he'd just completed the worst section of the event!

I'd only allocated myself a handful of vital minutes at each of 4 checkpoints to refuel, to save time I didn't bother changing as I thought it couldn't get any colder, I wondered whether this was the right decision as we began to climb again to Clough Head and I noticed Robin was wearing no fewer than 3 waterproofs! On this leg we benefitted from the experienced support of Mark Fowell and Keith Covell of Derby Fire Service so I had 4 BGR vets helping me on my way and it began to show as the summits materialised from out of the mist as if by magic. I knew that this was the last night-section so to survive it all I needed to do was focus on following the leader (a good plan as there were snow cornices still present up around Helvellyn) and remembering to eat and drink of course. We eventually reached the 15th summit

Seat Sandal and dropped into Dunmail Raise for a welcome meeting with the rest of the team.

As the daylight had now descended the rain began to abate and we knew the worst was behind us but the longest and highest leg lay ahead of us, again Robin and Keith led the way along with Bryan Carr and Hollie (his dog) from Congleton Harriers, for me this is where the event changed, gaining confidence, I really started to enjoy the experience, although every summit cairn seemed to be guarded by a field of sharp slippery rocks, immovable sentinels that can ruin your day just from one ill-judged step, here we truly appreciated the skill of the fell running heroes who have completed the round in less than 20 hours. Finally we had to negotiate the rocky gully of Lords Rake, even Hollie needed help at this stage, the steep corridor led to a huge bolder balanced perilously above us. Luckily it stayed put and we gained the final summit of the stage, Scafell before a massive slippery decent into Wasdale during which Keith overtook me sliding along on his back side!

Wasdale was the longest stop of the event all of 9 minutes where the team served up warm soup and tea, exactly what I needed as I'd been consuming the support runners own food supplies at an alarming rate prior to this (no change there then!). Robin & Keith finally took a rest and I was joined again by Mark, Matt, Bryan and Andy Swift also Adam Bleakman from Derby Fire Service joined the team at this point, his timing couldn't have been better because as we headed off up the seemingly endless ascent to Yewbarrow, the sun came out and the clouds cleared so all around was the glorious Lakes scenery, vying for your attention. However there was no time to stop for pictures as there's a lot of 'tough-ones' on leg 4, Red Pike, Pillar, Kirkfell to name but a few. The boulder fields were all the more difficult to negotiate by now as my quads were burning with every step, but as we summited Great Gable I knew that the worst was over, and with plenty of time in hand I began allowing myself to feel that emotional glow when success is imminent.



Approaching Great Gable the final high summit of the challenge

Another quick stop at Honister and nearly all the team were out to join me on the last stage, from Dale Head to the final peak Robinson, the team encouraged me to keep the pace up and at last we could see Keswick some 5 miles in the distance, when we hit the tarmac I needed no encouragement at all, head down and grind out the last few miles, knowing that the faster I go the shorter the time before I could collapse on the finish line. Then at last I caught sight of the Moot Hall clock tower marking the point of the start and finish, the feeling of arriving successfully to the applause of my friends (and some random strangers who must know of this ancient ritual) is one I will never forget.



The team descending the final summit with Keswick in the distance

I'd like to personally thank all of the team mentioned above, without whose help this achievement wouldn't have been possible.

I can now join Jon Leek, Mark Fowell, Robin and Amanda Carter as a fellow Rolls-Royce Harrier who has successfully completed this epic in recent times. If you think you might like to have a go or would like more information, the club has a strong team of fell and ultra-runners and a good network of like-minded friends who will be willing to help.