

## TRAVERSE OF SCOTLAND RELAY – JUNE 2010

A team of 15 runners from Rolls-Royce Harriers in Derby and Congleton Harriers has completed a non-stop relay run from Cape Wrath, at the north-west tip of Scotland, to the English border near Berwick-on-Tweed, following long-distance trails and footpaths, a distance of 443 miles in less than 100 hours. We believe this is the first time a team has attempted this arduous route, and so we are claiming an inaugural world record! The purpose of the adventure was to set ourselves a challenge and meet it, to enjoy the experience, and to raise money through sponsorship for our chosen charity, Cancer Research UK, currently estimated at £6,000.

Also on the trip was another experienced long distance runner, the constant companion of Congleton's Bryan Carr, Hollie the collie. And as a baton, the runners carried a compass belonging to the late Seaton Kennerley, whose funeral the Congleton team had attended on the morning of departure.

Just getting to Cape Wrath was an adventure in itself. There are no public roads, and to reach it involves a ferry crossing of the Kyle of Durness and a 12 mile minibus trip to the cape. Don't imagine one of those cross-channel roll-on roll-off jobs, this ferry is a dinghy with an outboard motor and a maximum capacity of 10. The two minibuses have seen better days, and they grind over the narrow and precipitous track in second or third gear. Our driver was the lighthouse keeper, one of only about 4 people who live at the cape. Once there, the lead off group of Bryan Carr and Hollie, Bryan Lomas and Steve Leach set off across the trackless moorland on the first 12 mile leg, and the rest of us returned to our vehicles via the minibus and the ferry, hoping to beat the runners to the first changeover. Happily we did, even though the runners gained nearly an hour on the schedule. One stage down, 74 to go!

The first two days proved to be tougher than expected, as the Cape Wrath Trail can be best described as imaginary at times, crossed by an 8 foot high deer fence topped with barbed wire in one place, obliterated by a felled forest in another, overgrown with waist-high heather in others, and we slipped a little behind schedule. But the scenery in that north western corner is stunning, with few trees and great rounded mountains rising out of the plateau.

We were hoping for some sightings of Scottish wildlife, and had encountered seals on the Kyle and red deer on the moors before a ferocious and very unwelcome species made its presence felt. The Scottish midge was to prove a constant companion until we reached the outskirts of Edinburgh three days later, and defied all attempts to deter it with insect repellent, gauze masks, full body cover and foul and abusive language.

The going improved when we reached the Caledonian Canal at Invergarry, and several stages along the towpath to the spectacular series of locks at Neptune's Staircase and the bustle of Fort William were a delight. Here we joined the West Highland Way, and the next stage was a wonderful early evening 7 mile climb through the woods of Glen Nevis, with the mass of the big Ben across the valley to the left, its summit enclosed in a helmet of cloud in an otherwise clear sky. As Steve and Bill finished this leg, the two Bryans and Hollie set off on yet another massive stage. The Bryans are tough customers, and undertook many of the harder sections of the team A allocation, racking up over 98 miles each in total, all shared with the intrepid Hollie.

Mention of team A leads me to a brief explanation of the logistics. The squad was divided into two teams, A and B (no pecking order implied!), each team being responsible for a series of stages totalling 8-10 hours before clocking off. Meanwhile the other team drove to the start of their next stage to grab a meal and some sleep before resuming duty. Team A

had two cars, and team B had a people carrier, while the van with most of the supplies always accompanied the off-watch team.

During the third night there was nearly a disaster as the B team changed stages at Bridge of Orchy. Congleton's John Bushby and Anna Reeves set off, and in John's words "navigation along the West Highland Way is simple, a well defined track with signposts clearly visible by head torch. An hour later the sun was just below the horizon and we arrived at the checkpoint to find it deserted. A few minutes of confusion were followed by a first glance at the compass, until then not deemed necessary over such easily navigable terrain. About then we became aware that either the sun was rising in the west for the first time ever, or we had just run the entire leg in reverse and ended where the previous runners had started." To cut a long story short, some hasty reorganising resulted in Tim Claughton running the missing leg on his own while the errant runners were picked up by the car, and then Andy Swift took the subsequent 14 mile leg by the bonny banks of Loch Lomond as another solo.

By Tuesday afternoon we were in the lowlands running along the towpath of the Union Canal between Glasgow and Edinburgh in the steaming heat, and shortly before the A team handed over to the B team at the Falkirk Wheel, Steve Leach was violently sick. He continued to be very ill for several hours, most of which he spent in a tent at Aberlady Bay on the Firth of Forth. Meanwhile the B team were undertaking some tricky navigation through the wynds of Edinburgh. By the time the A team took over again in the early hours of Wednesday, Steve, our chief organiser, was well enough to move, though not to run. We knew he was on the mend when our navigational skills and misuse of the GPS came in for some heavy criticism at North Berwick!

The final morning consisted of some pleasant though weary running along the coast to the border. However, fate had one last throw of the dice. At Burnmouth, the last changeover point three miles north of the border, attached to the footpath sign was a notice saying the coast path was closed at Lamberton due to a landslip, there was no alternative and walkers were advised to take the bus! Fortunately there was time to assess the options as we waited for the incoming runners. One group explored an inland route to the border, while another drove to the English side and walked back to look at the landslip, which proved to be passable with care. So we were able to finish en masse in the appointed place, running side by side along the cliff top to greet the waiting crowd (= Steve and Kevin) and pose for enough team photos to put the average wedding in the shade!

Some stats: Route distance 443 miles, target time 100 hours, actual time 98 hours 18 minutes, average distance per runner 58 miles.

The A team: Bryan Lomas, Bryan Carr, Hollie the collie (Congleton), Steve Leach, Alan Eccleston, Bill Southgate, Kevin Berry, Dave Chisholm, Ken Northard (R-R).

The B team: Tim Claughton, John Bushby, Anna Reeves, Derek Lucas (Congleton), Andy Swift, Andy Ward, Bob Bond (R-R)

A huge vote of thanks is due to Steve Leach for the immense amount of work that went into planning and organising the expedition, and to the other chief instigator, Rolls-Royce's ultra distance specialist Jon Kinder, who was prevented by illness from taking part.

**Bill Southgate**