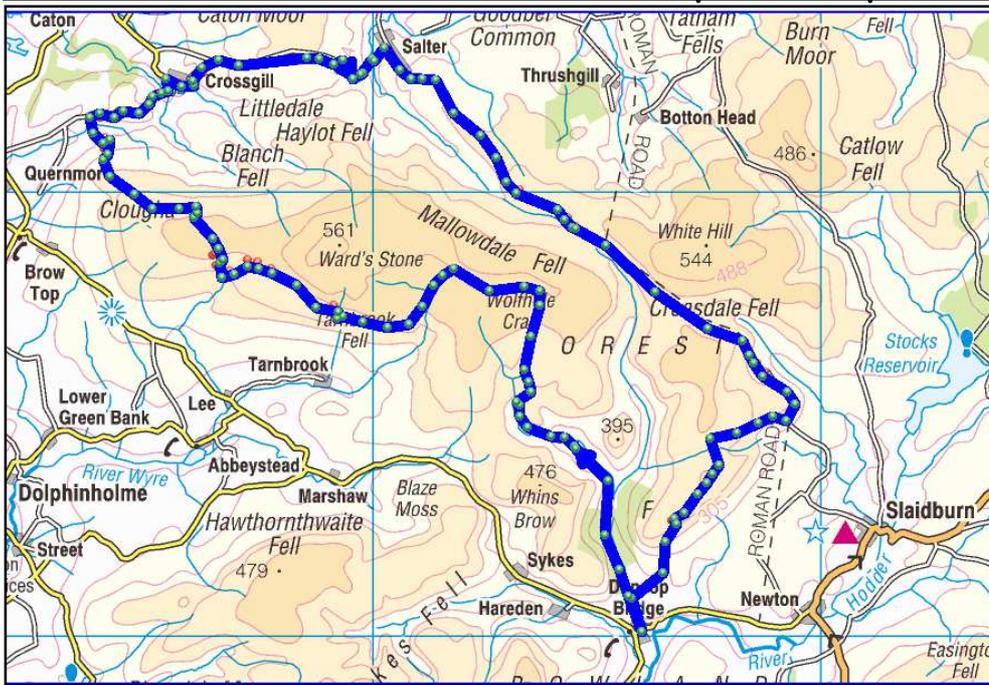


The Bowland Tracker: Saturday 13th April 2013



I set off from behind Puddleducks cafe up a mist smudged valley dappled with lambs. The forest smouldered with the mist of a cool morning. The trees that had curtailed the track are now gone in the east replaced by a sylvan battlefield, the casualties lying dismembered with arms flailing on the hillside.

I reach the waterworks and expect to see a sign and tape barring access to Whitendale due to the dangerous eagle owl that nested there a few years ago, but its tape free and I head up the umbilical cord of a track to Brennand Farm nestling in the womb of the hills.

Up over the rise and descending into the Brennand valley oyster catchers fly panicking along the river. A quad bike stutters behind me and turns into the farmyard for breakfast.

I head on through the lichen freckled walls and cross the Brennand. And leave behind the last vestiges of civilisation. The wilderness and ocean of tranquillity of Bowland stretches

out to the horizon. Ahead the grey stoned shooting track abseils down from Brennand Fell.

Besides the path at the base of the climb an incongruous pigeon loft cowers. A rooftop protest of white doves takes flight as I approach. Off into oblivion, if they are to fulfil their purpose. I had once met the gamekeeper here and asked their purpose. 'Raptors' was his reply before driving off.

Obviously a redundancy from a chat line service!

The track ascends past truculent patches of snow tucked in beneath the peat hags and the Brennand recedes below. If it was warmer I would have expected to see the pinafore bibs of Ring Ouzels bobbing below on the boulders where I had watched them before. Mountain blackbirds bobbing deference to the fells. Today winters cold vice of a grip has ebbed but the tide is yet to turn and allow summers vanguard of migrants to repopulate the valley.

Up east is the geographical Centre of Britain adjacent to Whitendale Hanging Stones. I know because I have marked it several times using a *GPS*, normally a piece of superfluous kit. It lies in an emerald green sphagnum bog below a gritstone paved gully. A fitting geographical heart of remoteness that so typifies the cardiacal core of Bowland.

Once past the shooting cabin a faint quad track continues. Today it is relatively dry and easy going up to the gate on Brown Syke Hill. On it trundles meandering west and northwards through the peat and today it is guarded. The gulls eddy above me cacophonous. Another Hitchcock moment but they seem more disturbed than angry and I soon leave them wailing behind me.

By now the quad track has morphed into the peat and I handrail a gully that leads me to the wall between Wolfhole and White Crag. Today it is banked with snow drifts, the faint trod invisible until the final ascent to the crenulated summit of Wolfhole Crag - a grey tombstoned sentinel guarding the heart of the kingdom and marinating in isolation.



At Wolfhole Crag

I stop for a snack here basking in a cool spring sun. My last visit had been on the full moon of November. The day after Ian Roberts had had his cerebral encounter with the rocks of Sheepfold and I had been wary of emulating his near final excursion. As the batteries on my torch flashed a warning I had run under the light of the moon. As I returned to the Tarnbrook track I had followed my now frozen footprints back to the shooting track. Relieved I had then run under a floodlit winter sky to the glow wormed cottages of Tarnbrook cupped in the palm of its clock stopped valley.

Today I head west to meet the track and bobbing on a boulder is a harbinger of summer. A white rumped Wheatear undulates off amidst the boulders and I am elated. At last a sign that winter is loosening its tourniquet. As I head down to Tarnbrook I tell a couple of walkers the breaking news. I am not sure that they know a wheatear from a walrus but I have

tried! It's warm now and I run on in shorts and Helly between the deep drifts that still necklace the track.

This is a route on Bowlands tracks so I ignore the route ahead through the peat hags to Ward's Stone and take the shooting track left. As the track descends to Tarnbrook I turn right and follow it below Wards Stone. It undulates below the pachydermal boulders of Hell Crag and Thorn Crag. The aroma of burnt heather drifts in on the breeze and I soon see the charred stalks beside the path like the twisted antennae of convulsing stag beetles. It's another harbinger of the demise of winter. This is a lovely undulating run with all the time the sea beckoning from the west.

At Luncheon Huts West I ascend over Cabin Flat and looking east see where Andy Walmsley and I ran out of torchlight on his winter attempt at the Bowland 1500's. I must be around where Ian Roberts was when we spotted the light shining in the wilderness that was our salvation!

On over past Pony Huts I meet the gamekeeper as I descend to the Baines Crag road. But there is no sign of the psychotic grouse that attacked me here a year ago. Only to be dissuaded by a rather impressive volley!

As I climb the lane to Baines Crag I chat to a cyclist slowed by the ascent and the east wind that now arrows in from Littledale. I descend below the metronomic revolutions of Caton Moors gargantuan windmills.

Once over Artle Beck I fill up with water at the deserted scout camp and trundle on up through Crossgill and reach the Littledale Road. There has been a lot of road on this section but the valley footpaths through Littledale Hall to Deep Clough have been boggy quagmires in the past and a dog

usually attacks me in the farmyard. I had planned this route so that it could be completed in winter. A 30 mile route using as many tracks as possible that would take you through the heart of Bowland. So far it seems to be working. I am on roads but I have yet to meet a vehicle.

It's harder work now into the teeth of an east wind but besides the path I think I spot a spring bubbling up in a roadside pool. I stop and realise it's a pool of frogs frantic to spawn after the long demise of winter.

Above Haylots the almost volcanic cone of Mallowdale Pike looms. Its flood etched gullies like lava flows radiating out from its conical summit.

Finally I reach the apparent road end and turn down to the Haylots track. In fact despite its appearance it is possible to drive through and reach Roeburndale. As I once found out when the Haylots farmer redirected me out of his sheepfold in the farmyard that I had driven into!

Now I hear his quad bike but it is beyond the rise and I go left over a farm stile and cut the corner. A good Bowland route should always include a trespass!

I sprint through the fields above Bladder Stone Beck running stooped below the skyline!



The ford over the Roeburn

As I emerge at the ford on the Roeburn I notice one hand is bloodied. The tree I had gripped on the slippery descent had managed to inflict a puncture wound. I check my water stash here. Today I don't need it and I sit and eat besides the chattering river. Today it is clear and not peat stained with the blood of the fells. Unbloodied now I set off and ascend to the Cold Comfort farm of Middle Salter. Then on to High Salter with its accumulated flotsam of dead tractors. Now it's 7.6 miles to the end above Slaidburn and I will run into a southerly wind all the way. But's its wild and remote. Landmarks pass. Alderstone Bank and the track down over the Roeburn to Tarnbrook. Another one of my winter moonlit excursions into this heart of remoteness.



The Salter Fell track above Whitendale

Then the Old County Gate. Here my water stash is buried in a snow drift refrigerated to extend the sell by date of the can of ring pull rice pudding buried here!

Rain is forecast later and a lone shower momentarily has me considering the descent to Whitendale.



But the shower passes and through the next gate I glance right to the desolation of Baxton Fell. It's leached of colour and trods and is an ordeal not chosen even by an intrepid Bowlandologist.

A dubious looking gamekeeper is parked across the track at the old quarries on Croasdale Fell and I head on and down over Hind Slack. Here an old Roman culvert lies hidden beneath the road easily located by the lone tree stood sentry by it.

At the track end I exhume a bottle of water from the wall. Why do sheep choose to die in the most inconsiderate places? Then it's up to Dunsop Head. I want a swooping finish from Beatrix rather than another long section of road. The original plan had been to leave my car here and bike to Dunsop and then run. But my car with its bike rack has been requisitioned to take a daughter back to Aberystwyth University and I have a voluminous Micra!

So it's a weary ascent to the bogs of Dunsop Head. And just on cue the rain starts. Despite the lack of rain since the snows of 22nd March the bogs of Dunsop Head are as resplendent as ever. A porridge skin allows me across and as I cross the southerly one using the meagre tufts of sedge I

spot a party of walkers huddled besides the wall. I ask them whether bog immersion spotting is a spectator sport and head off into the rain. I am cold now and try to speed up as I pass the memorial to the crashed B24 Bomber on Burn Fell.

I climb the hurdle in the wall above Beatrix and descend quickly. The farmer is out on his quad but I still cut across the fields on an obvious trespass to intercept the footpath that descends through the woods to the Dunsop. I glance at the watch. 7 hours 45 is possible and I sprint along the track and home. It's wet now and I am soon in the car drying off. Today I have bathed in the wildness and tranquillity that is Bowland. Even if it has been mostly on tracks it's taken me through the wild heart of an area of true wilderness and solitude in this quiet corner of England.

Route details

Head north from Dunsop Bridge on the waterworks road. Follow this into Brennand Farm and then continue on the track to the shooting cabin at 634 557. Then take a faint quad track up to a gate and continue to follow the quad track until it disappears. Head north for the wall between Wolfhole Crag and White Crag.

Then follow the wall and fence to the Tarnbrook shooting track. Turn left and follow this under Ward's Stone and up over Cabin Flat and down to meet the Littledale Road at 537 616. Turn right and follow the road up past Baines Cragg and down to cross Artle Beck. At the Scout camp on the left you can usually fill up with water in the toilets at the far end of the site. Then keep on the road through Crossgill and up to the Roeburndale Road. Continue along here to where it ends at a gate and turn right heading for Haylot Farm. After you

descend to the stream and start up the hill you can use a farm stile to cut across the corner to the ford over the Roeburn at 601 629. Then cut up right to Middle Salter farm and take the road and then track all the way over to where it ends at 693 548. Then take the track up to Dunsop Head and follow the wall and fence to descend over the fields above Beatrix farm to meet the lane you used at the start.

Distance: 33 miles Height gain: 5800 feet