

Andy Verden's Story

Bowland one contour 1500ft top challenge
Andy Verden & John Rodgers. Bowland Fellrunners.
Saturday 21st February 2004.

Saturday morning. 5am . The alarm clock rings and brings me out of a rather fitful sleep. I don't want to drag myself from beneath the warm duvet and force myself to eat soggy Wheatabix and drink plenty of warm tea.

Today is the day on which myself and John have decided to give the Bowland one contour 1500's another shot. The weather has been exceptionally cold for the past week and we've been getting out and doing long runs every weekend since Christmas. We've hidden almost 8 litres of water at various places around the proposed route so that we have something safe to drink, en route. The water around here is too dodgy to trust.

The original route was conceived by three of Bowlands top long-distance runners, Les Orr, Alan Heaton and Terry Houston, who ran their route in a little over 10 hours. They started from the more traditional Bowland Fellrunners starting point of Fell Foot near Chipping and took in every 1500ft top in the Forest of Bowland, using 2 map contours as the criteria for determining a "top". A few years later, Les, together with Duncan Elliot, Andy Walmsley and Ian Roberts, revised the criteria to include all tops of one contour and also decided that the optimal place to start and finish would be Stoops Bridge at Abbeystead. So the present challenge of the "integral" Bowland 1500's was born.

Over the next two years, a number of attempts were made by Andy Walmsley, one of them with support and another completely solo.

The route takes in some of the roughest country to be found anywhere in the area. Knee deep heather, ankle breaking tussocks and deep peat bogs which can leave even the strongest runner floundering from the effort. The Forest of Bowland can also attract some very wild weather, being exposed to the Irish Sea with no high ground on its seaward side to catch the worst of the weather thrown at the West coast. All attempts were foiled by a combination of factors. Not least by the amount of physical effort required, but also by the depth of the bogs and the mental concentration required to keep in high enough spirits to drag yourself around the 42 miles and over 6200ft of ascent.

Myself and John made our first attempt in the winter of 2002 on 7th December. We had spent weeks looking at the various route choice options between the 19 separate tops; had been using a schedule devised by Andy Walmsley and were feeling fairly confident that we could give it a decent shot and hopefully, keep pretty much to the schedule. On the day, appalling weather of strong, freezing cold Easterly winds and unbelievably deep bogs on the first section, proved to be too much and we decided to call it a day, before committing ourselves to section two. Another problem with a round of this size, is the fact that if you do decide to call it a day, you still have a very long way to go, in order to get back to Stoops Bridge and your transport. A few weeks before our first attempt, Andy Walmsley called it a day at the Hornby Road, miles away from the start. By the time he got back to Stoops Bridge, he had very nearly completed the same mileage as if he'd continued on the round.

This time, our second attempt, we had made a pledge that we would not give up

unless there was very real danger to our wellbeing or illness/injury prevented us from carrying on. This decision proved to be a major factor in our success.

SECTION ONE

Stoops Bridge to Smelt Mill Cottage via Hawthornthwaite Fell Top, White Moss, Holme House fell, Fairsnape Fell, Paddy's Pole and Totridge Fell.

The car temperature gauge reads minus 5C. I bet our cached water supplies are frozen solid. Tight knot in the stomach, as always, but we've said that this time "we will" get round. Hopefully, being positive will help. We thank Caroline and Richard for bringing us out to Stoops Bridge on such a cold morning and at such an unsociable hour. 6am.

"We'll phone you if we can, when we need you to come back for us. "

Hope we've made the right decision in relying on the mobile working out here to get a lift home. We'd thought about it long and hard, whether or not to drive ourselves. The decision of not to drive was based on a number of factors. a) If we didn't have the car. We didn't have to get back to Stoops Bridge. b) If we had to abort the attempt, due to something unforeseen, we only had to get ourselves to a road head/crossing in order to be picked up!! c) We would be less likely to "wuss out" if the prospect of a long, cold wait for a lift back was what we had to look forward to. d) Not having the car at Stoops Bridge all day would stop us worrying about it still being there when we got back and, being the middle of winter, the locals would not have a car left on the car park, from before sunrise until after sunset, wondering who it belonged to and whether there was someone out on the hills in need of assistance.

There were too many good reasons to get a lift.

John shook my hand and we wished each other "good luck."

6.36am.

We were setting out on the biggest run that we had ever done together. It had been beckoning us for almost two years.

The sky was just starting to lighten as we shuffled and walked up the road. Trying not to draw attention to ourselves as we approached the "private" side of Hawthornthwaite Fell, we were thankful that no head torches were needed. Last year, we were acutely aware of our detectability out on the hillside, by the lights of our Petzl's.

The tussocky grass was pretty long but the boggy ground seemed to be fairly well frozen even down at this level. Up on the tops, the bogs would be frozen as hard as a metalled road, or so we hoped.

We chatted as we ascended the easy lower slopes of the fell. In a shallow gully, just West of the trig point, we almost stood on a gin trap all ready to capture any unsuspecting creature which happened to be unlucky enough to tread on it. I thought those things had been illegal for years, but there it was, large as life. We pounded the sadistic piece of ironmongery into the hillside with a boulder. Our line took us to within 10 metres of the trig point, sitting high on its pedestal of concrete and stones, the surrounding peat having been eroded away by the years of harsh weather on this top which is completely open to the blast from the sea. A check of the time to write down on our record sheet. Quick photo, and we're off down the fence for the next top. The sun had risen and the sight of it in the Eastern sky is something which I can never quite put into words. The start of a new daywhat magic.

White Moss is fairly indistinct, but we'd been over this section enough times in the

past to know which is the highest point. Time again for the record sheet. Photo. Off again. We try both sides of the fence, but there's nothing in it. Its all very frozen, very ankle twisting, and very, very cold. I try to take a drink from the tube of my hydration system.....The whole thing is solid with ice. John's is the same. Luckily we manage to get them working. That could really have put the stoppers on any chance of getting round if we couldn't drink.

We decide to take a slightly different line out to Holme House Fell. Cutting to the right of the ridge and picking up the landrover track, until we see the wreckage of the Blenheim Bomber. The two guys on board were on a training flight from RAF Woodvale, on 9th August 1944, when darkness fell and they missed clearing the ridge by feet. Bursting into flames on impact, they were both killed. Parts of the undercarriage, wings and fuel tanks are still visible today. The top is easy on this one as someone has 'planted' a small square post right on the highest point. Record sheet. Photo. Off we go.

The heather and ditches make it slow going, but we feel good to be almost half way round the first section. This is the one we've been dreading. Les Orr says that if he has a go at the 1500's, he's going to do it the other way round. I can't imagine doing this section with all those miles already in your legs. Maybe it's all psychological, but we will both be glad to be finished with section one.

Follow the fence line, it's the easiest running so far, and we're making good time up onto Fairsnape Fell. Record the time. Over the stile. Shoot out to Paddy's Pole. The wind is behind us and it's nice to be blown along a bit. There's a guy at the trig point. He's in shorts...he must be tough It looks a bit like Lee Dowthwaite, but we're coming at him from out of the sun and he doesn't see us. We give him a shout. He waves back then scuttles off down the ridge towards Parlick. He turns out to be the only person we see on the tops, for the whole of the day. What a bleak place these hills are in winter. Bleak, but at the same time, quite magical.

Back over the stile. Steady running down to Totridge. Last time, we followed the fence line too closely and couldn't work out why we were descending very steeply, when we should have been on the level. We weren't going to make the same mistake this time. Visibility was perfect.

Totridge Fell ...The last top on section one. What a relief.

Steep descent off the front and through the fields. It feels very warm out of the wind so Pertex tops come off.

Over the stile to the farm. Dogs barking as we run past. Out onto the road and Smelt Mill Cottage.

I've managed to drink 1 ½ litres of water on that section. I hope we've put enough spare out.

SECTION TWO

Smelt Mill Cottage to Cross of Greet via Whins Brow, Baxton Fell and White Hill.

We strike up the hillside right in front of the cottage. Not another soul around and it feels very strange to be the only people out at almost 10am. John takes a line up a stream bed and I traverse over to the wall. John's line proves to be easier but at least we're at the top of the steep bit. Trotting as much as we can, we find our first water dump, hidden beneath a pile of old fence posts. We've only left a litre and it's frozen to a mush. John's still got more than half a litre left, so I pour the mushy liquid into my hydration bladder. Cut the corner and we're trudging the fence up to the trig point

on Whins Brow. The wind is pretty strong so we wrap up in windproof tops again. It seems to take a long time to get to the top, but the return trip down the fence seems to be over too quickly. Its biting cold running back down the fence. We hope that we'll get a break from it in the valley bottom. We drop steeply down to the road which goes out to Whitendale Farm and cross the river. John's back is giving him some jip so we stop for him to give it a stretch. "Its with lifting children out of prams and baths" I joke. I bet the two people we've just passed, out for a stroll, wonder what the heck he's doing laid on his back with his legs in the air. It's a brilliant run out to Whitendale on the riverside track. Almost level all the way. There's some quite wet patches so we end up with wet shoes. My waterproof socks and Johns freezer bags will hopefully do the trick and keep the worst of the wetness out.

We take the stream bed from the back of the farm and enter a nice, wide bottomed valley. The wind is very fresh but the sun is shining on our backs and it feels great to be out on such a fantastic day. Picking our way out of the valley bottom and up into knee deep heather, the wind seems to ease and we're about half a kilometre from the top of Baxton Fell. More food and drink. We drift a little too far to the right as we cross the open moorland and confuse ourselves when the fence appears, going in the wrong direction. I quick think to get it sorted from memory and we're fine. We've not been concentrating hard enough that's all. Baxton Fell has never greeted us with anything other than wind, cold, mist or a combination of all three. It's a bleak place to be in winter. Running is pretty hard but if you concentrate, you can manage to move fairly fast considering the roughness of the ground. We can hear motorbike engines in the distance and wonder if today will be the day when we get "caught in the act" by the game keepers or the Countryside Ranger and told that we shouldn't be where we are. It turns out to be just two lads out for some fun, one on a bike and the other on a Quad. I don't even know whether they saw us.

The Hornby Road.

Our next water dump is just up onto White Hill. We stop to fill up. Have a bite to eat. The views are fantastic. We look over to Wolfhole Crag and wonder when we'll be on its summit and how we'll feel. I phone Caroline to let her know that we are feeling good and so that she can check our progress against the schedule which I've left her. We feel that we're moving really well considering the weight we're carrying and the roughness of the ground.

Up the fence and then we can run again as the ground starts to level off. We were here only two weeks ago and we were surprised at how easy the ascent felt. We've usually come up from the other end, where the path from Whitendale joins the Hornby Road or from Wolfhole Crag and along the ridge. It's certainly easier this way.

The trig comes in and out of view as we follow the undulations.

White Hill, with those three strange towers in a perfectly straight line. They're supposed to be sighting towers left from when the pipeline was put in from Haweswater, but no-one I've spoken to can say for sure.

The run off White Hill down to the Cross of Greet is normally a very enjoyable one, but with the miles in our legs and the cold it seems like a real chore. Never ending down to the road. It's never seemed this far before and we've got to come back up the same way.....Bes t not to think about that one. We'll deal with it when we've got the next section under our belts.

SECTION THREE

Cross of Greet .Ravens Castle (South).Great Harlow and Thistley Hill.

Quick stop to check the map. We haven't been up these three tops before today and Andy Walmsley told us that it's hard deciding which is the highest bit on each one, so we want to at least know where we're supposed to be going.

We spot some quad bike tracks going diagonally up the moorland towards Ravens Castle. It seems the logical thing to do to make good use of them, so, heads down and shuffle. What a God forsaken place this is. Tussocky grass all the way, and nothing in the way of features. It's a big lump of horrible nothingness. We'll be glad to get this over but it's strangely satisfying to be on totally new ground. We top out onto what we recon to be Great Harlow. Get the map out and survey the ridge. It's easy to see where Ravens Castle is, so we trog out to the end of the ridge and jot down the time at the top. From here, it's obvious where the next top is, so its back for Great Harlow, then carry on down the fence for Thistley Hill. The views down to Keasden are new for us. It's a lonely place to be, especially in winter.

We look at the climb to get back towards Great Harlow and decide to take the direct line back to the Cross of Greet. The miles are showing now and it's hard to lift feet high enough to stop us from tripping up over the horrible ground. We pick up the fence. Cross it and manage to run all the way back to the road. What a relief it is to get that out of the way.

SECTION FOUR

Cross of Greet to Stoops Bridge via Wolfhole Crag, Brennand Great Hill. Long Crag, Grey Crag, Wards Stone East Trig, Wards Stone West Trig and Grit Fell.

There's nothing for it but to trog back up the fence line the same way that we came down, to get back over White Hill. We've looked at other routes to get us back over, but the ground over to the right of the fence which would give a slightly straighter line, is too rough to make it worth the effort. At least on the fence, we can shuffle pretty much all the way back to the gate on the ridge top. There are a few bits where it's easier to walk, but surprisingly, we run a fair amount of the ascent. Johns foot, which has been giving him trouble since the Grisedale race back in September, isn't as painful running as walking, so that's what we try to do. He's also doing his usual trick... the more miles we get under our feet, the stronger he seems to get. The contrast in our running styles and abilities is actually very good. It's worked for us numerous times in the Old County Tops race. John's a heck of a better descender than me. I tend to go up faster, and we are about equal on the flat. But one of the biggest strengths we seem to have as a pair, is the ability to know what the other is feeling and we both know that if one of us is running, the other is doing his best to do the same. There's nothing worse than having a partner who you aren't tuned into.

The top of the fence comes quicker than we were expecting, but we're both suffering from the miles over the tough terrain. We drop down right and follow the fence until we can see a rocky outcrop over on the left. We take a bad line at first and flounder in unrunnable tussocks. Drop down towards the fence which skirts the top of Long Clough and we pick up the faint trod which we were looking for. Up to the fence which comes from the top of White Hill and cross it (yet another fence), preferring to drop direct to the Hornby Road and give our legs a short respite from the grass. We take a short break and I almost topple over backwards into a ditch while retrieving food from my rucksack. Off again and drop down just short of the fence. Bad move. We should have gone all the way to the fence. Back onto the fence line and John says he can't believe how well we're running at this stage of the day. I must admit that I'm

feeling pretty strong. The weekend miles we've been doing must have done the trick. We're feeling on top form as the top of Wolfhole Crag comes into view. We look back over what we've just come over and it looks a long, long way. Trouble is, there's still a long way to go to get back, but this next bit is "bur" training ground. We know this next section like the back of our hands, which may or may not be a good thing. Just short of the fence top, John stops and gets out his massive bag of Jelly babies. "I've bonked" he shouts. "You carry on. I'll catch you." I wait till he's set off again and shuffle to the trig point just in front. If we can stick together and pull each other through the bad patches, we're there. There's no way we're giving in to anything now. Jot down the time. Photo, and then it's a really good run down to the stile. Left turn and run all the way to Brennand Great Hill "Oh. —t" we've sailed straight past our hidden water. I'd been out one grim Saturday afternoon just after Christmas in deep snow and thick mist and left two litres of water under some rocks just after the stile. We're tired and just not thinking enough, but we're not going back to collect it. At Brennand, we have a quick check on our water situation. I've got about half a litre, plus a Lucosade Sports pouch and John's got about the same. We've actually got some water just off the top of Brennand from our first attempt, but that's been out for over 12 months. We checked it two weeks ago and it appeared "drinkable", but we decided that we would only use it if we were desperate. We weren't that desperate.

Which way now? Back on ourselves a bit and take the high ground just below Woodyards or drop off below. We go for the drop off and decide half way across that we should have kept high. There doesn't seem to be much in it either way when you come out here with fresh legs, but right now, we could do without the extra descent. It's pretty heathery if you don't get a good line and you've got to "get those knees up." Not easy when you're this tired.

Drop down to cross Tarnbrook Wyre and it's a steep climb to gain the landrover track. It's beginning to look like we're going to make it and unless we break a leg, we're not giving up. We checked this bit the other week Pick up the trod which takes you out to Thorn Crag. 2-3 minutes running and a very prominent boulder takes your eye. This is our cue to make up the hillside I'm whacked. I really want this to be over now. John's off. I don't think I can keep up. Talk about second wind. Second pair of legs as well by the look of things. Heather again. There's the very neat cairn which someone has very carefully built on the top. Long Crag. Who decided to include this one? Cold. I can't believe how cold it is now. The wind has picked up since we were on Wolfhole and Brennand. My mouth starts to feel frozen round the edges. I join John behind some rocks and we put our Pertex tops back on again. We'd taken them off earlier because it felt quite warm. Now it was definitely a wintry blast. John's off again. Off slightly to the right of the direct line to Grey Crag, but he assures me it's much better running than the direct Running. He'll be lucky. I feel crap, but running is what he's doing so I have to do my best to follow. He's right. We run a lot of the way and there we are. Grey Crag. Record sheet out this is getting to be a real pain. Jot down the time. Keep going. Three tops to go. The suns sinking and the temperature is going Arctic. We joke about how many times we've run this section before and the things which have happened. Headfirst into bog. Sliding on ice. Being stopped in our tracks by icy headwinds. We've seen a lot of different conditions out here. Today. we just want to go home. Wards Stone East Trig. "Don't stop" says John. "Keep going." Blow that. I'm writing the time down. Out comes the record sheet, again. I write with frozen fingers as we walk, then it's all stops out. Back to running. We're shifting quite fast across the flat

top towards the next trig point. Wards Stone West trig. I write down the time. Hide behind a rock just off the summit and get the mobile out. We'd better ring Caroline and tell her to set off to meet us. "Can you ask her to ring Zed and let her know we're almost back?" asks John. "We should be back in around an hour or so." I remember the schedule time from here to Grit Fell38 minutes. Then it's just short of 4 miles back down the landrover track, across the fields and we're back to Stoops. "Be there for about twenty past/ half past six. We're knackered but well make it."

I mention to John about the cold. He doesn't think it's too bad. I feel grotty. I'll be glad when this is all over.

Down the rocks and it's a reasonably good track all the way to Grit Fell. As long as the light doesn't go completely and we lose the track, we'll be fine. This bit in the dark wouldn't be much fun.

We're flying...how can we be moving like this after such a hard day?thenI want to diein fact, I think I am doing. Drink some water... It's freezing cold. My legs have gone. I'm staggering around like a drunk. Retching....bloody hell. John's still running. I try to run. Not a chance. Retching again. Try again to run a bit. No way. I joke with John that I must look like a "Kelly Man" or one of those kids toys with elastic in their legs. You press a button and they flop. That's just how I feel.

At last.....the landrover track on Cabin Flats. Not far to the top of Grit Fell now.

John's wanting to finish this in under 12 hours!! Sorry mate. I'm gone.

There's the CairnLast top. Drop to me knees. Get out the record sheet and laugh at the pathetic state I'm in and it's all self inflicted. "Get something down you. Where's those Dextrosol tablets you had earlier." John's wanting me to eat "Yeh, Yeh ... They'll only come back up."

"Don't care. Get them down. You need some energy."

"I'll try one and suck it "....."

"Shove the lot in. Later's no good.."

"Alright ,alright.. Who are you .My mother?....."

"Can you run "

"Not yet, but I'll do my best when we hit the track."

Once we reach the track and drop out of the wind, it becomes obvious that I'm not only knackered but probably going hypothermic. No wonder I've been feeling so rough.

"Are you going to be able to get yourself back?" asks John....

"How the ... else am I going to get back," I almost say, but I'm feeling better than I did a while back and my brains starting to switch back in. He's concerned and I appreciate it. I take off my sac and root around for spare gloves and my waterproof jacket. Put the jacket on while trotting. Sac back on. Gloves on, well, eventually when John manages to get the twisted fingers sorted out for me. I'm frozen.....

We chat as we run steadily down the track. The light has almost gone but we can see well enough to run without headtorches.

Past some sheep....Cars driving down the road from Jubilee towerHow long is this track ?We're almost down...Past the house at Higher Lee. We decide to get our torches out. Don't want to get killed in the last mile, running down the road, not after the day we've had. We should be feeling great, but we're wrecked.

Over the stile and run down the trackthere 's the houses in Abbeystead and there's Caroline and Richard in the car at Stoops Bridge.

18.41 ...12 hours and 5 minutes

She's brought us a flask of hot tea. What a Star. We're ready for that. The dogs going ape to see us, and tries to lick us to death.

The whole thing is a fog. We can't believe that we've done it. Our dream for the past two yearswe've done it

Acknowledgements

The swollen, frost nipped feet.
Not being able to eat for hours afterwards.
Shivering for what seemed like an eternity once we stopped.
The feelings of being absolutely out of fuel

It was a while before the pleasure of the run started to sink in.
The joy of running over trackless terrain on a stunningly frosty day, mile after mile.
with a brilliant friend.
That's what it's all about. And what a beautiful area the Forest of Bowland is for
those who take the time and make the effort to explore its hidden treasures.
It wouldn't have been possible for either of us without the support of John's partner
,Zed and my wife, Caroline. We thank them for the many hours that we've been
allowed away from home to run the miles needed to train for such a long distance
round.
Without Andy Walmsley's schedule we wouldn't have had anything to work from and
without Les Orr, Alan Heaton and Terry Houston we wouldn't have had a 1500's
round to try for at all.
John is the perfect partner on such events. We've spent a lot of time running together
and know each other inside out. We've had good times and bad and never once have
we had a cross word. He deserves a medal for suffering my constant gobbledygook,
which is probably why he tries to disappear into the distance as the miles increase.
I hope we can find other such runs to do together in the future.
Andy Verden
1/03/04