

The Bowland Top Six. John Rodgers .

Date: 29th.December 2005.

Time: 1600hrs.

Location: Tower Lodge, Trough of Bowland road , between Marshaw and the Grey Stone of Trough.

It was freezing . In fact it was many degrees below freezing and had been all day. I'd hoped to have a hot drink in the campervan but the drinking water foot pump was frozen solid. Although there's a wood-burner in the van I didn't light a fire as I wanted to set off home without much delay. Andy helped me defrost my laces so that I could get my shoes off. He'd met me on the Tarnbrook bound land-rover track not long after I'd visited the last of the `Bowland Top Six ` trig. points.

I'd set off exactly seven and a half hours ago at 0830. It would have been earlier but I was shocked by the cold on my first exit from the van and retreated back inside reappearing a little later having cut the legs off my best pair of tracksters in order to afford me a pair of overshorts warmer than those first worn . I was concerned about perishing private parts !.

My chosen route for today was a `circuit`, starting and finishing at Tower Lodge. Distance approximately 32 miles, with in excess of 5000ft of ascent. The route would visit the six Bowland trig. points over 1600ft. These being in journey order of Fairsnape Fell, Totridge, White Hill, Wolf Hole Crag, Ward's Stone East and Ward's Stone West .By virtue of visiting the tops within a circular route there was a fair bit of distance to cover prior to Fairsnape, the first top, and also when returning after visiting Ward's Stone West the final top Something of a 'warm-up and cool-down period' !

The day went fairly much as I'd hoped. It was bitterly cold, well below freezing with a very heavy frost on the ground, almost as if it had snowed. A sneaky easterly wind stopped the sun from having any real warming effect. Later in the day, from lunchtime onwards, the clear blue skies gave way to increasing grey cloud cover and the wind whipped up more from the south.

Due to the several days and nights of sub -zero temps. beforehand the ground was rock hard in most places which meant good progress over the

miles of usually boggy terrain but caused some discomfort later in the day as it was frequently totally unyielding.

I kept a steady pace going through the course of the journey, not pushing too hard, but enjoying running as much as possible, trying to generate heat and attempting to keep food and drink going in. This was a problem. I had 2litres of Isotonic drink onboard but it was so cold that I found it hard to stomach. Similarly with snack foods of jelly-babies and yoghurt coated raisins. As the day progressed I developed a terrible thirst and resorted to eating ice scooped off the ground and drinking straight from icy streams, something I wouldn't usually do in the Bowland area.

The light and views were far reaching and stunning, particularly in the first half of the day as the sun climbed and the sky stayed blue .The route was mostly straightforward with only a couple of navigational issues and a short section on the road at the outset from Tower Lodge to the Grey Stone of Trough.

I've shown heights and or actual times in brackets at significant points.

Depart Tower Lodge [190m 0830]...On the Trough road , It was possible to run slightly off road for much of this short section. I encountered huge patches of ice on the road near the brow. I hadn't warmed up by the time I left the road and was on the fell climbing up to the Top of Blaze Moss before I had relaxed in any shape or form.

A red deer bounded effortlessly away from me and leapt the fence fifty metres ahead whilst I with rather more effort familiarised myself with the ground conditions and enjoyed the light show from the early sun.

I continued on the fence line from the Top of Blaze Moss down to Mere Clough Head then took a southerly line initially in heavily frosted deep heather before picking up a helpful dry gully which I descended into the Langden valley, emerging at a high point on the Sykes to Langden Castle path. Good running to Langden Castle [0916hrs].

Langden Castle to Fairsnape Fell trig.....Good progress on frozen ground, none of the bog to contend with at Fiendsdale Head or en-route to Fairsnape. Although from Fiendsdale Head I was out in the sunlight it was still bitterly cold Just stopping to record the time or to have a mouthful of food made me uncomfortably chill. Fairsnape Fell trig. [510m 1002 hrs]. Stunning views all round. Clear and far ranging.

I was looking forward to the run across to Totridge Fell, knowing that it would be frozen hard, unlike my very wet, bog crawling experience of five days earlier on Christmas Eve. I focussed hard on not going at too brisk a pace; enjoying a slow jog and pleased at the relative ease of progress. Totridge Fell [496m 10.44hrs]. Rested for three minutes. Food and drink. Sheltering behind the trig. stone. Some hazy cloud had appeared whilst on this last section.

Totridge to Smelt Mill Cottage.

A straightforward descent with beautiful views all around. Looking back to the top from Hareden Farm I decided that an anti clockwise circuit with the descent off Totridge was most likely preferable to an ascent of same hill later in the day if travelling clockwise. Maybe I'll try the other way next time. The usual clamouring of sheepdogs at the farm greeted my passage through. Very short section on the road past Smelt Mill Cottage [11.10 hrs].

Just past Smelt Mill I took a sharp right straight up the wall and fence on Staple Oak Fell. I climbed steadily and felt much healthier than when here last time. Because of the ice/snow/thick grass it was difficult to start running as the gradient eased but eventually with a shuffling jog I linked up with the top of the Ousterake Path. Down to Brennand Farm in the bottom of the valley. I took particular care on the descent; it was very hard underfoot and a fall would have been painful. Through the farmyard and then straight up the other side following the path over to Whitendale with Middle Knoll sunning itself over to the right.

Taking down liquid was becoming difficult now. My body was craving fluid but simultaneously appeared to be rejecting it. My stomach and chest felt numb. I found that eating handfuls of scooped ice helped a little. This aside I enjoyed the run out to Whitendale. It was good to be out in in this beautiful area with the whole place, it seemed, to myself. The weather though had deteriorated with a stronger wind now more from the south and misty cloud which had put the sun firmly away for the day .My spirits were high when I reached the Salter Fell Track [12.50hrs]. It was here on Christmas Eve that I had decided to abort the full round because of being so wet, cold and exhausted. Not today !

Right turn on the track, I had to avoid plate glass sheets of ice on the run down to the first gate where I struck off left up the fence line through the now customary ice/snow/grass in search of the White Hill trig.

White Hill was aptly named. Covered by the heavy frost which might have been embellished with an inch or two of snow made for laborious progress to the trig-point as the tussocky grass, heather and boggy pools were sufficiently covered in the white blanket to hide the best lines and footings. For the first time in the day I ended up in icy cold water. Fortunately not a major setback as my Sealskinz Ultra Lites were making their maiden voyage and doing a good job of keeping feet dry though not warm.

Visibility was poor on the summit plateau with an eerie, cold, misty white out. Whilst not unduly troubled it was still with a sense of relief that I reached the trig-point [544m. 13.24hrs]before blundering downhill to the Salter Fell Track following my ascent footprints though watching out for the aforementioned icy water trap.

My thirst was acute at this stage of the proceedings to such an extent that I was eating handfuls of ice and drank at length from the stream just prior to the start of the climb up Wolf Hole Crag. I shuffled and ran comfortably on the ascent, in good spirits until finally the top came into view.

Not just the top but also a lone figure in blue. Arms waving , either to keep warm or maybe practising semaphore. I'd only mentioned yesterday to Andy that I was planning today's excursion and here he was, out in support! After a lengthy hesitation of approximately one second I accepted the offered mug of hot tea but ungraciously complained about the lack of sugar. Check of the summit time [527m 14.22hrs] then off on my way.

The increasing wind was numbingly cold and encouraged a heightened "don't stop, keep generating heat" mentality. I thought that I was further along the ridge nearer to Ward's Stone East than was actually the case and struggled to eat a rock like Mars bar to ease my disappointment and a slight sense of fatigue which had crept in. Eventually Ward's Stone East was reached [561m 15.02hrs]and quickly across the plateau to the last of the six tops, Ward's Stone West [560m 15.06hrs].

Two quick phone calls to confirm my progress before leaving the summit area. There was a return call but I was so cold and the wind so bitter that I ignored the opportunity for further delay and hypothermia. I took a less than clever line from the top, heading SSE through acres of well frosted rough heather and boulders before eventually the land-rover track was reached. My various blasphemies at route choice were carried away on

the wind.[Due S. is a better line off the top , taking you into a large bowl-like depression which is reasonable underfoot and speeds you on to the track].

Andy met up with me again on the track near the junction for Thorn Crag and accompanied me on what was a straightforward run back to Tower Lodge. Straightforward in respect of terrain and slightly raised temperature, but still another forty five minutes of effort with a bit of a gentle pull up from Gilberton past Harry Wood before the last charge down the track to Tower Lodge and the finish.[190m.16.00hrs].

I heartily recommend the route , it provides for an excellent day out, dips in and out of a number of valleys and takes you to remote and less frequented areas. There's some good climbing, descents and running. But, the terrain is very rough at times without path or track. I would suggest that it's best undertaken either after a spell of very dry weather or when the ground is frozen hard. That is of course unless you are very fit and enjoy hauling yourself through miles and miles of very wet and boggy ground!.

J.Rodgers 16.01.2006