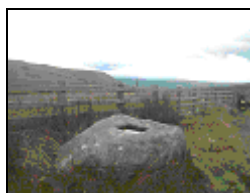


HODDER VALLEY WAY 22nd AUGUST 2006



Cross of Greet

Steve Cox had suggested that we might have a go at running the Hodder Valley Way. I knew that there was a booklet being prepared by the ramblers that had been mentioned in the LDWA magazine but I had not recently seen any copies. On a trip to Clitheroe I managed to pick up a copy at Tourist information. The problem was then to decipher the complicated mixture of the linear route from circular walks based on it. We decided that we wanted to have as little road and tarmac in our version as possible as well as sticking as closely to the river as possible. To satisfy the current philosophy of BEGs it had to include some trespassing! There were a few places where no hardened Bowland trespasser could resist the temptation to cut the odd corner or avoid some road. A lot of the route we knew or had recced on other expeditions. The problem was going to be the lowland farmland that we had never run across and as we found out later neither did anyone else!

We decided on a date for Tuesday 22nd August. I left my car near the end of the route at Hurst Green and then Steve drove back to his home in Newton dropping off food bags on the way. Sarah then drove us in that requisite method of Bowland Fell Runners transport, a van, to the start at Cross of Greet.

We walked up to the source by the fenceline and were really looking for a spot where there was the first sign of open flowing water. What we found was that the source of the Hodder was from the bodily secretions of two marinating dead sheep! In fact given the plague proportions of ovine dead we were to encounter during the day the route would be better named 'The Dead Sheep Way'. What comprises local entertainment up here I dread to think, but drinking from the Hodder was definitely off the menu.

We set off at 9.30 am and once out of the killing grounds were running down the road towards Cross of Greet Bridge. There might well be trod on the western side of the valley and down stream from Jumbles Quarry (where they got the stone from the dam at Stocks from) but with the bracken up it was invisible today. Off the road and along the river bank we had to stop a few times to navigate as we neared the metropolis of Catlow Farm. Here we were away from the river and looking across at the chessboard of verdant fields on the well drained limestone. Down past the derelict New House we walked through a field of inquisitive cows perhaps concerned that we were the blokes responsible for the disappearance of their ovine mates!

Stocks Reservoir was particularly low and we were now running on good quality tracks through to Vicarage picnic site. Steve told me about a friend of his who had arranged a rave here to annoy the birdwatchers he also does séances and meditations! Once past the causeway, given our pavlovian response to tarmac, we took the forest path besides the road – it brought us out at Dalehead Church with its new bustling wind turbine. This put us on the path to Black House so that we were able to cut up the eastern side of the wood and intercept the path coming up from the courtesy path around Stocks Reservoir. Down past Hammerton Hall, festooned with scaffolding, we

ignored the route in the booklet which detoured away from the river and across to Bell Sykes we crossed Holmehead Bridge and headed across the fields to emerge in a bustling Slainburn. It was getting warm now and after an easy meander down besides the river we stopped by the bridge at Newton where Steve had dropped our first food cache. Bananas rice pudding and plenty of water and then we were off. This is a stretch I had not done before but is one of Steve's local runs and is a lovely section. It is only spoilt by its brevity - soon we were heading away from the river and across to Foulscates. Here besides a newly refurbished barn was a faded 'closed due to foot and mouth' sign a reminder of the overreaction of 2001 that had condemned us to a lot more tarmac than we would see today.

Past Foulscates the official route goes north over the Hodder and along the road, perhaps for those who enjoy a bite of road kill. We carried on along the south bank and past the deserted Knowlmore Manor which looks like it should be occupied by the local laird.

Through the grounds of Thorneyholme Steve did well to avoid the trundling geriatric coming along the track intent on using his car as runners scoop. By now it was a warm sunny day and runnable without a shirt. After a pause for a photo by the river we were soon puzzling on which of the aqueducts, that wove their way across the valley, was which. Take your pick from Stocks to Blackpool, Haweswater to Manchester, Langden and Hareden to Preston or Whitendale and Brennan to Blackburn!



Still running at Dunsop Bridge



Our next feed we had left by the bridge at Burholme where we filled up again with rice pudding malt loaf and bananas. It was warm in the valley and we were using up a lot of water and only really had enough for each section.

Up past the Inn at Whitewell we plodded through the graveyard –an idyllic setting if you fancy a serious bonk! The route here contours across the limestone well away from the river which is out of bounds. A few weeks ago I had managed to find Fairy Hole Caves above the river on the opposite bank. Descending to it involved the inevitable trespass, but once in the woods was well worth it to discover a cave that has yielded Bronze Age remains and goes 20 metres back onto the hillside.

Below us on the road LCC workmen were busy finished off the 30m bit of tarmac they had closed the road for and were trundling off to their tea van -another day well misspent.

Back over the road and besides the river again we could see the crowds of cars at Bowland Wild Boar Park where Steve had held his wedding reception – handy for the more feral club members to eat 'pick your own'! This next section was going to have to deviate a lot from the booklet as it goes to Doeford Bridge and then back along the road for one and a half miles, before heading east along the north bank of the river. Once out of view of Lower Lees farm we cut across the fields to emerge on the Whitewell road south of spot height 117.

The next section was to be the trickiest. Steve had done some of it but I had a feeling that it was not well used as it did not really link anywhere together. In Limes Wood

we crossed a footbridge across the ravine that must have cost a small fortune (or enough to buy a beach hut in Bournemouth) judging from the amount of stonework. We had to stop frequently now to spot the route as it was not well walked and even less well run -by now there was a distinct plod about us! At Buck Thorn we decided to have a debate about which was the real route, hoping it was not the one straight on through the nettles. It was and Steve willingly volunteered to trailblaze. I then managed to lose the way in turning over to the back of our well fondled map and we ran round the next field, useful if you are training for cabbaged runner coursing but not conducive to a time under 6 hours, as we mistakenly thought we could still achieve.

Finally we emerged on the road from Bashall Eaves and ran at a brisk pace down to Higher Hodder Bridge. On the map it did not look too far but all along this section are wooded ravines which cut the route and slow you down especially after nearly 6 hours and if you are still carrying the quad damage from the Sedbergh Hills race of two days earlier. At higher Hodder Bridge a retarded Alsatian gave us a cacophonous welcome before we hustled on along the riverbank.

Steve had now picked up the pace and I knew it was not far to the finish once we got to where the Tolkien trail from Stoneyhurt College cuts in. What we hadn't anticipated was that the path meandered so much. By the time we got to Hodder Place, and its wizard hatted turrets, it was obvious that sub 6 hours was not possible. It could be done with a clear run along the river but the route detours up the road to Hurst Green for half mile, before cutting down across the fields to Winkley Hall and the confluence with the Ribble.

We arrived at the confluence in 6 hours 8 minutes and paddled before taking pictures of a really enjoyable, but far from record shattering attempt. At least such a modest time means that the next one should be sub 6 hours and with a good run possibly even sub 5 hours!

Just as we were about to leave an angler came walking up from where he had been fruitlessly fishing. Instead of sharing in our euphoria he informed us that we were 'not supposed to be down here' 'I've just run from the source of the Hodder to here and you are not going to stop me coming down here' was my far from subdued reaction. Rather eloquent considering he had already ignored my cheerful greeting. Steve thanked him for telling us, and there were a few other comments that were far from muttered as we walked back to the track and a short walk back to the cars. Welcome back to lowland plebdom!

We were chuffed as we sat outside the Shireburn Arms and toasted our success -a good day well spent, and another first for Bowland. Hopefully in years to come we might be able to run along the riverbank a bit more than our arrogant angler would like us to.



The finish - 'trespassers on the riverbank'!