WORDS FRAN AND ANDY BLACKETT,
CO-ORGANISERS

DURHAM FELL RUNNERS' *WAINWRIGHT RELAY*

The Wainwrights Relay – How 27 members of Durham Fell Runners came to run 528 km over all 214 of the Wainwright Fells of the Lake District in a little over four days.

At the start of 2020, there was a discussion on the DFR Facebook page about a suitable challenge for our club to take on. The Billy Bland Challenge or a relay of Wainwright's Coast to Coast path appeared to be gaining some traction until a misread of the second suggestion led to a discussion of a relay of the Wainwrights. We agreed this would indeed be brilliant but would need a lot of planning. The date for early summer 2021 was put in the diary and 20 or so members vouched to keep the allotted 5 days free.

Andy built a schedule based on the distance and ascent figures from Steve Birkinshaw's book, *There is No Map in Hell*, his account of his staggering solo round of the Wainwrights in 2014. The schedule suggested that 4 days, 12 hours was achievable with no stops for sleep. This seemed suitably eye catching when compared to the current solo record held by Sabrina Verjee of just under 6 days. No one in the club is either Steve or Sabrina – could we collectively take 36 hours off the record?

We are a small club with around 50 members. As this was a club event we wanted all legs to be run as pairs to make it sociable and collaborative as well as safer, given we would be running through the night. Some simple maths meant that running all 24 legs as pairs would either need everyone involved, or people would have to run multiple legs. We sat down one evening during late March 2020 (our diaries were pretty clear back then if I recall correctly) and we allocated legs to runners, starting with our long distance specialists who we knew would be happy with the 30 km+ legs and working backwards from there, making sure to give those running multiple legs sufficient rest in between. Our first draft allocation was completed and people went out, as restrictions allowed, to reccy their legs and start learning the best lines, dutifully recording their notes in what became known as The Spreadsheet.

Due to Covid restrictions in early 2021, we postponed the start date back to late August. This led to some reshuffling of runners as others became available and others were forced to drop out due to other commitments. The allocations were changing right up until the day before we started, with one injury and one positive Covid case. New members were slotted in where others were unable to run. It was inspiring to see how much members were willing to give in order to make sure that the project remained on track. People were prepared to travel over to the Lakes, run their legs overnight and then drive home to complete a day's work or take over child care duties. It was humbling.

As we started at 08:00 on Thursday 26th August the allocations were all in place, the tracker was attached and all we had to do was hope that we could get a pair of runners to each of the 214 summits in a continuous relay – it wasn't too much to hope for, was it?

Being a small club, all knowing each other and sharing a focus on making this possibly overambitious project happen was a real advantage. Every transition was flawless, nobody was late, everyone was in the right place, not a single top was missed and there was only one Great Cockup (Wainwright 176/214). Bogs were fallen into, boulders took chunks out of shins, head high bracken provided many amusing photo opportunities and slips and tumbles were aplenty, but everyone continued with a smile. The WhatsApp group became a great source of camaraderie, encouragement and support



with regular updates and photographs throughout the day and night, alongside the expected banter and occasional logistical query. It also ended up playing a significant role in tracking progress…

As the only major glitch was technological. On leg 17 the tracker shut itself down when reading 8% battery life, and when rebooted appeared to reset to factory settings, only recording its position every six hours or so. The WhatsApp kept on pinging so all members were kept up to date with the current position and the ever shifting schedule.

The opportunity to chat with, and run with club mates at all hours of the day through four and a bit days of the most perfect Lakeland weather was incredible. The only drops of rain fell as we approached the Moot Hall to finish our continuous relay 4 days, 6 hours, 50 minutes and 15 seconds after we set off.

We aren't a club of elite athletes, everyone who wanted to be involved was welcomed and played an important role. We would be thrilled for other clubs to attempt this challenge, share the sense of adventure and camaraderie that it has given us and let us, at Durham Fell Runners, know how you get on.

Members involved: Max Wilkinson, Paul Hodgson, Duncan Archer, Martin Wilson, Andrew Stimson, Rory Woods, Dan Hoyle, Andy Blackett, Adam Bridges, James Osborn, Graham Thomas, Meghan McCarthy, Martyn Farnsworth, Alan Hunt, Dougie Nisbet, Dan Rhodes, Patrick Bonnet, Tom Carter, Fran Blackett, Dawn Hosking, Tom Dobbing, Andrew Foster, Stanton Gibson, Steve Lumb, Roslyn Kelsey, Chris Bird, Jon West.

CONVICTS OF KESWICK (LEG 1, PAUL AND MAX)

-MAX WILKINSON

Paul and I arrive at the Moot Hall at 07:45, dressed in our stripy club vests like a pair of escaped convicts. We have a few minutes before the start and we each choose to mark this special occasion in our own personal way – Paul heads off to the loo (a reassuringly expensive experience at 40p, if you don't choose to jump the turnstile) while I grab a vegan sausage roll from Greggs. We check the tracker is warmed up and see the minutes count down on the watch. Then set off bang on 08:00.

I can sum leg 1 up as follows: Weather – warm, light breeze, excellent visibility. Latrigg – the first of many, found the top, confidence is restored. High Rigg – easy top with a bit of bushwacking through the bracken on the descent to the A591. Walla Crag – a mini plateau by the lake. Bleaberry – it does look a bit like that. High Seat – quite comfortable. Raven Crag – there were no ravens. High Tove – a bit of a slog, no idea what a tove is. Armboth – kinda just sitting there like it got stuck in the bog. Great Crag – quite craggy and moderately great (at least when viewed from the east). A nice complex of tops. Grange fell – some nice folding in the bedrock at the summit. Another bracken descent. Castle Crag – there was no castle, a quarry instead and a nice little climb. Borrowdale school changeover – we hand over to Martin & Duncan a whole 15 seconds early on our 6h30m schedule.

OLD MEN ON CONISTON (LEG 7, ALAN AND DOUGIE)

- ALAN HUNT

Our leg started on a beautiful summer evening from the Duddon valley, taking over from Meghan and Martyn. Our pre-run preparation had started a few hours earlier with customary tea, scones and chat in Coniston. The discussion soon led to airing our fears of letting people down (we are both old, get breathless on minimal exertion and I hurt all over after a few minutes running).

All cares and worries had evaporated soon after setting off. This was the stuff that memories are made of. The weather had been kind all weekend but for our leg it was absolutely sublime. Running along the ridge from Coniston Old Man towards Grey Friar in good company with the setting sun bathing us in evening sunlight with NO wind was truly memorable. As was being enveloped in an orange glow as some mist rolled in for a time as we summitted Grey Friar. Thoughts of trying to keep to our time schedule slowly disappeared into the recesses of our minds as we stood taking photos of the scenes unfolding before us.

As dusk arrived, we headed toward Wetherlam passing several wild campers who seemed slightly put out to hear, then see, two old men wearing vests panting and wheezing towards them. The sun finally gave up on us on Wetherlam leaving us to pick our way off the summit in the dark (a different memory, but memory just the same) to meet Dan and Patrick waiting patiently in Tilberthwaite for us. We were only 30 mins behind schedule!

This project, organised by a small club, reminded me why I joined a fell running club. To run in the hills with like-minded people who only take things seriously enough to make fell running an enjoyable experience.

CONTOUR DE FAIRFIELD (LEG 10, FRAN AND DAWN)

- FRAN BLACKETT

Dawn and I had reccied this leg several times together. As we sat in the car in Rydal watching Rory and Tom make their way to the handover point we knew exactly what was coming! We could also see it was going to be another scorching day. As we made our final preparations I tried to savour the feeling of being cold as I tried to apply suncream to legs covered in goosebumps! Soon enough we were on our way. The hills around Great Rigg, Fairfield and Seat Sandal were unusually busy with runners and it turned out we were overlapping with the Lakeland 3 Day mountain marathon on this section. Although none of the participants seemed to have chosen the steep contour around Fairfield in their route planning; we had that particular line to ourselves. On the first part of the climb of Seat Sandal a group of three guys flew past us. We recognised Ricky Lightfoot but had no idea until later that he'd been supporting Finlay Wild on his BGR run! The rest of the route went pretty smoothly. There were no surprises; plentiful contouring, some endless climbs and THOSE out and backs!

THE FINAL LEG (LEG 24, STANTON AND STEVE)

- STEVE LUMB

It was a leisurely start for the final leg, waiting at Newlands Hause with 2 dogs who couldn't work out why we had driven there and were just standing around and were not running. The absence of a signal meant we had no idea of what time to expect Rory and Andy. There was a sudden panic as they appeared off the summit of Knott Rigg 30 mins early. Just enough time to get final preparations ready, strap on the tracker and set off up the very steep climb to the side of Moss Force.

The small sheep trod that leads directly to the summit of Robinson was found and a steady climb saw us at summit number 209 in just over 20 minutes. From there it was great running to Hindscarth and Dale Head. We found a good direct line down to Dalehead tarn and then the lovely descent from High Spy. It was quiet until we hit Catbells, summit number 214, where we met the hordes and dodged through them until we reached the road. In Portinscale we were met by a large contingent of DFR members and families with dogs, children, pushchairs and even cowbells which was a great boost to morale and put a bit of a spring back into tired legs.

The cowbells proved very effective in clearing a route along the narrow path into Keswick, helpful on a bank holiday Monday and the Moot Hall was reached at 14:50. 4 days, 6 hours, 50 mins and 15 seconds; 214 summits, 27 runners and 2 dogs. A fantastic weekend.

Full leg reports are available at *https://www.durhamfellrunners.org/the-wainwrights-relay/*

Previous page: Graham descending Lords Rake on Leg 5. Above top to bottom: Duncan and Martin W set off on Leg 2 from Rosthwaite; Fran and Dawn at Stone Arthur on Leg 10; Meghan and Dougie at Grisedale Pike on Leg 22.





