

PIONEERS: THE MEN WHO FORGED THE LAKE DISTRICT 24-HOUR FELL RECORD

“The aim of these walks is to ascend the greatest possible number of peaks above 2,000 feet, and to return to the starting point within 24 hours” – so wrote Arthur W. Wakefield. While he could not have known it at the time, Wakefield had thus codified the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record. He was perfectly entitled to do so: he was the record holder.

Wakefield would go on to serve in World War One in France and then act as medical officer for the second Mount Everest expedition in 1922. But his role in Lakeland’s classic record was cemented in 1905 when he bagged 22 summits in 22 hours and 7 minutes.

While this marked the start of the 20th-century charge, which peaked with Mark Hartell’s incredible tally of 77 fells, the story began over 70 years before Wakefield had even taken a step from Keswick’s Moot Hall. This article tells that tale. It is a brief and selective summary, drawing from a broader research project on the history of the record (please contact peterwmcDonald@gmail.com for further information).

Feats of pedestrianism

What is a Fell Record and what is simply an impressive walk? In the early nineteenth century, it was far from clear. The Lakeland poets were known for their long excursions involving multiple peaks and early tourists such as Captain Joseph Budworth climbed fells for no practical purpose other than the experience itself. These were certainly notable, but were they records?

The earliest evidence I can source of a walk specifically and solely undertaken to demonstrate pure endurance is from 1832. Victoria had not yet ascended the throne, the ink had not yet dried on the Great Reform Act, and the first Grasmere Guides races were yet to be held – these were early days!

In the summer of that year, Harrison Walker and Joseph Clark, both Keswick residents, took it upon themselves to summit Skiddaw, Helvellyn and Scafell – the three highest peaks in Lakeland, excluding Scafell Pike. The assessment of the *Carlisle Journal* was that “considering the difficulty of ascending and descending these stupendous mountains, it may be considered a most arduous task.” Indeed, we might go further and call this inaugural achievement the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record – three peaks, around 46 miles and 12,500 feet of ascent in 18 hours.

Elliott’s rise and fall

I am sure important walks occurred in the Lake District over the next 30 years. However, sources run dry until 1864, when the Reverend Julius Marshall Elliott completed a round of 9 peaks from Wasdale. Plotting an anti-clockwise course, he started with Scafell and ended with Stirrup Crag on Yewbarrow.

In terms of peaks gained, the walk would not be surpassed until the late 1890s. This is surely why Elliott's round is commonly referenced as the 'first' Fell Record. But this raises the question: how should a record be measured?

We would all agree that a round of Skiddaw and Scafell is a harder enterprise than the Fairfield Horseshoe, despite the latter taking in four times as many summits. Since the Victorians fully appreciated this, I suspect Elliott's round would not have been considered sensational. The contemporary commentary demonstrates that distance and ascent were the critical measures; on these metrics, Elliott's round registered only 16 miles and 8,250 feet of ascent. Moreover, many other walkers could have dramatically increased their peak count with only small detours; the fact they did not demonstrates it was not their goal.

To be fair to the Reverend, he probably never intended to set a record, much less seek recognition for it. His sights were instead on new Alpine climbs: when in Switzerland, he transformed from an "overworked clergyman" to an "unwearied mountaineer".

Unwearied but not infallible: at the age of 30 he was killed on the Schreckhorn. After completing the hardest part of the climb, Elliott and his party prematurely congratulated themselves on their approaching achievement. While Elliott's regular guide went to cut steps in the glacier for the final push, Elliott pressed on. He slipped, unroped, holding no axe to arrest a fall. For a heart-stopping moment, a companion was able to catch his arm. Alas, the momentum was too great and he tumbled into an abyss. As his father's biographer poignantly reflected: the same Alps which brought him such life were ultimately to cause him death.

Pushing the envelope

In 1865, three Langdale locals set out from the Dungeon Ghyll Hotel at 3am. Between then and 7.30pm, they took in 3 peaks and just as many inns: Lodore Hotel after Scafell, the King's Head after Skiddaw and the Red Lion after Helvellyn. Either because or in spite of this civilised schedule, they improved on the time set by Walker and Clark in 1832. For the first time, thoughts were given to verification: in a model to be replicated for at least three more decades, 'proof notes' were left on the top of each summit, asking their finders to return them by post to the hotel.

Five years later, Thomas Watson of Darlington – an accomplished sportsman – added Blencathra to the long round. In 1871, Henry Irwin Jenkinson took it to six mountains.

Jenkinson was the Wainwright of his day, making his name as the author of a tirelessly researched guidebook on the Lake District. In 1887, decades before the Kinder Scout protest, he led a 2,000-strong crowd on an organised trespass of Latrigg in pursuit of open access. We should all doff our caps to his memorial in Fitz Park as we start leg 1 of the Bob Graham Round: without the bridleway, we'd be tramping up Carl Side first.

Jenkinson's write-up would have outshone even the most rivetting of Bob Graham reports. The attempt went seriously awry after Scafell Pike, when his companion decided to retire. The pair had become lost in mist at Esk Hause for three (!) hours. Thus abandoned,

Jenkinson miraculously came across two Langdale shepherds who agreed to guide him to Bowfell summit “for a liberal pecuniary consideration”. At Wythburn, he understandably stopped for an hour’s sleep before taking on the final three summits, only later to be “overcome by sleepiness at the back of Skiddaw, having to rest for a while at a gamekeeper’s cottage”. The local press were at pains to point out that “the whole of this remarkable journey... was accomplished without the use of wine or spirits.” For all of these reasons, we can perhaps forgive him for coming in just under 25 hours.

Racing over the fells

While these feats were under way, the Lakeland mountain-climbing scene was flourishing, fuelled by names such as Haskett Smith, Hopkinson, Bowring and Slingsby. The Lakes provided neutral and accessible ground, where Cumbrian locals could test themselves on the same climbs as educated Alpinists, northern industrialists and any enterprising offcomer.

The Pilkingtons were active and respected members of this community. In 1871, Edward – a later president of the Alpine Club – raised Jenkinson’s record to seven fells, adding Fairfield for the first time. This was matched by Charles and Lawrence in 1883, albeit in a slower time. Lawrence has been loosely credited with inaugurating “the masochistic sport of fell running”, although I suspect he walked briskly rather than ran for the majority of his round.

John Wilson Robinson – a luminary of the Lakeland climbing scene, climbing Pillar Rock over 100 times – was next to try. He would have known of Elliott’s round but his stated target was Jenkinson’s, confirming the contemporary view that distance and ascent mattered more than peaks. He gave the modest, if perhaps insincere, assessment, “I am slow and should never dream of cutting or attempting a record.” Still, he felt his intimate knowledge of the Scafell massif might give an advantage over his predecessors. Come the day, conditions were prematurely wintry, with ice on Broad Stand; the full round was abandoned unfinished owing to snow on Skiddaw.

By this time, questions were arising over what was appropriate to do on the fells. Robinson’s attempt is particularly interesting because he himself had looked down on those seeking to “bag fells”. This is a theme that endures until at least the 1920s, with the Fell and Rock Climbing Club refusing any role in policing “racing over the fells”. Indeed Eustace Thomas – a future record holder – was to say the term ‘Fell Record’ might best be “dropped out of use altogether”, so as to avoid undesirable controversy.

The end of the golden age

Nevertheless, the entwining of the Lakeland climbing world and the Fell Record continued with the Broadrick family. Of particular note was Richard W. Broadrick’s ‘Four Fells Record’.

The summits were Skiddaw, Helvellyn, Bowfell and Scafell Pike – the four highest mountains, assuming the Scafell massif contributes only one peak. It was inaugurated in the 1870s, when the first proper record was set by four brothers from the Tucker family, one of whom went on to become a celebrated Bishop of Eastern Africa. When Broadrick turned to

the challenge in April 1899, he was able to reduce the time to 15 hours and 26 minutes, despite having to backtrack on the lower slopes of Skiddaw after leaving his purse next to a beck.

Accounts from the time suggest the Four Fells was just as notable a feat as the 24-Hour Record. Indeed, one trio of contenders was “enthusiastically welcomed by a large crowd” on their return to Elterwater. But it is now a long-forgotten endeavour and there is no modern-day record. While an imperfect comparison, Joss Naylor’s Lake District 3,000s record of 8 hours 20 minutes gives a sense of what today’s top fellrunners might make of the course.

Broadrick claimed he could find no companion for his Four Fells and would later complain about his contemporaries dismissing his accounts as “euphemistically termed exaggerations”. Accordingly, he sought out an associate for his next exploit and found one in Cecil Dawson, the celebrated ‘bog-trotter’ from Manchester.

Broadrick and Dawson set out in September 1901, despite having never set eyes on each other until the actual day of the attempt. In an innovation for the time, they arranged for four Manchester men to be deployed along the route to organise supplies and serve as pacers. The pair had a good outing; indeed Dawson could be said to have completed a proto-Frog Graham Round, as he bathed in a number of tarns during the walk.

Based on effort rather than peaks, it was certainly a record. But there was no happy ending. Dawson would go on to set a new record in 1916, only for his peers to disown it, perhaps because it was made while Wakefield was serving in the trenches. He was lucky enough to survive, but Broadrick’s future was more tragic by far: two years later, he and three other men died in a climbing accident on Scafell Pinnacle. It was an epoch-ending disaster, which marked the close of the golden age of climbing. It remained the worst accident in British mountaineering history until five deaths on Ben Nevis in 1954.

Carlisle Young Men’s Cycling Club

The final pre-Wakefield chapter is dedicated to four working men from Carlisle YMCA – Westmorland, Beatty, Strong and Johnston. They were said to have two sources of inspiration. First, to “prove cycling does not... incapacitate its notaries for pedestrian exercises.” Second, to show that the last well-known feat was “not in fact such an impressive record at all.”

Their initial endeavour was the first to take in the full range of summits on the Helvellyn ridge. It appears that they did this for sheer preference of route rather than a desire to claim peaks. Nevertheless, in doing so they set themselves up for a new peaks record. However, we cannot honourably record it as such, since they chose to stop at the Skiddaw Hotel rather than their starting point of Seathwaite, reportedly because “they determined to take that bit of the journey for granted.” To be clear: when it comes to the Fell Record, this is as far from cricket as it gets. That said, I am sure many of us have grappled with the specious fell-logic of ‘I could, ergo, I need not’.

Following various attempts with different permutations of the four men, the ultimate outcome was a record for Johnston, completing Broadrick and Dawson's ten peaks nearly ninety minutes faster.

The new era

The turn of the century marked the end of the amateur. By this point, attempts on the record required a professionalism and systematic preparation which is evident in so many of today's endurance fell runs. Wakefield took all of these elements – rotating pacers, specific training, a five-week taper, tested nutrition, lightweight gear, a detailed schedule and countless reccies – to culminate in his 1905 record.

Between then and now, the history of the record is littered with great names such as Thomas, Graham, Heaton, Beard, Naylor, McDermott and Hartell. With the kind permission of the editor, a future *Fellrunner* may pick up the story from here to the eponymous Bob Graham Round.

Detailed endnotes and further explanation is available at:

www.anewfoundcompendium.com/winterfellrunner

Summary table of notable endeavours

| Name | Year | Time | Distance (mi) | Elevation (ft) | Peaks |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Walker & Clark | 1832 | 18h | 46 | 12,500 | 3 |
| Elliott | 1864 | 8h 30m | 16 | 8,250 | 9 |
| Langdale three | 1865 | 17h 30m | 47 | 12,750 | 3 |
| Watson | 1870 | 18h 40m | 43 | 11,500 | 4 |
| Jenkinson | 1871 | 24h 55m | 47 | 14,000 | 6 |
| Pilkington (Edward) | 1871 | 21h 10m | 48 | 15,250 | 7 |
| Robinson | 1893 | 23h 25m | 48 | 13,750 | 6 |
| Carlisle four | 1898 | 19h 35m | 40 | 15,500 | 15 |
| Broadrick & Dawson | 1901 | 23h 30m | 56 | 18,000 | 10 |
| Johnston | 1903 | 22h 7m | 56 | 18,000 | 10 |
| Wakefield | 1905 | 22h 7m | 61 | 22,250 | 22 |
| Graham | 1932 | 23h 39m | 66 | 27,000 | 42 |
| Hartell | 1997 | 23h 47m | 92 | 40,000 | 77 |