

A Tribute to the Round

A tour of the route and fells of the
Bob Graham Round

Peter McDonald

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Bob Graham Round

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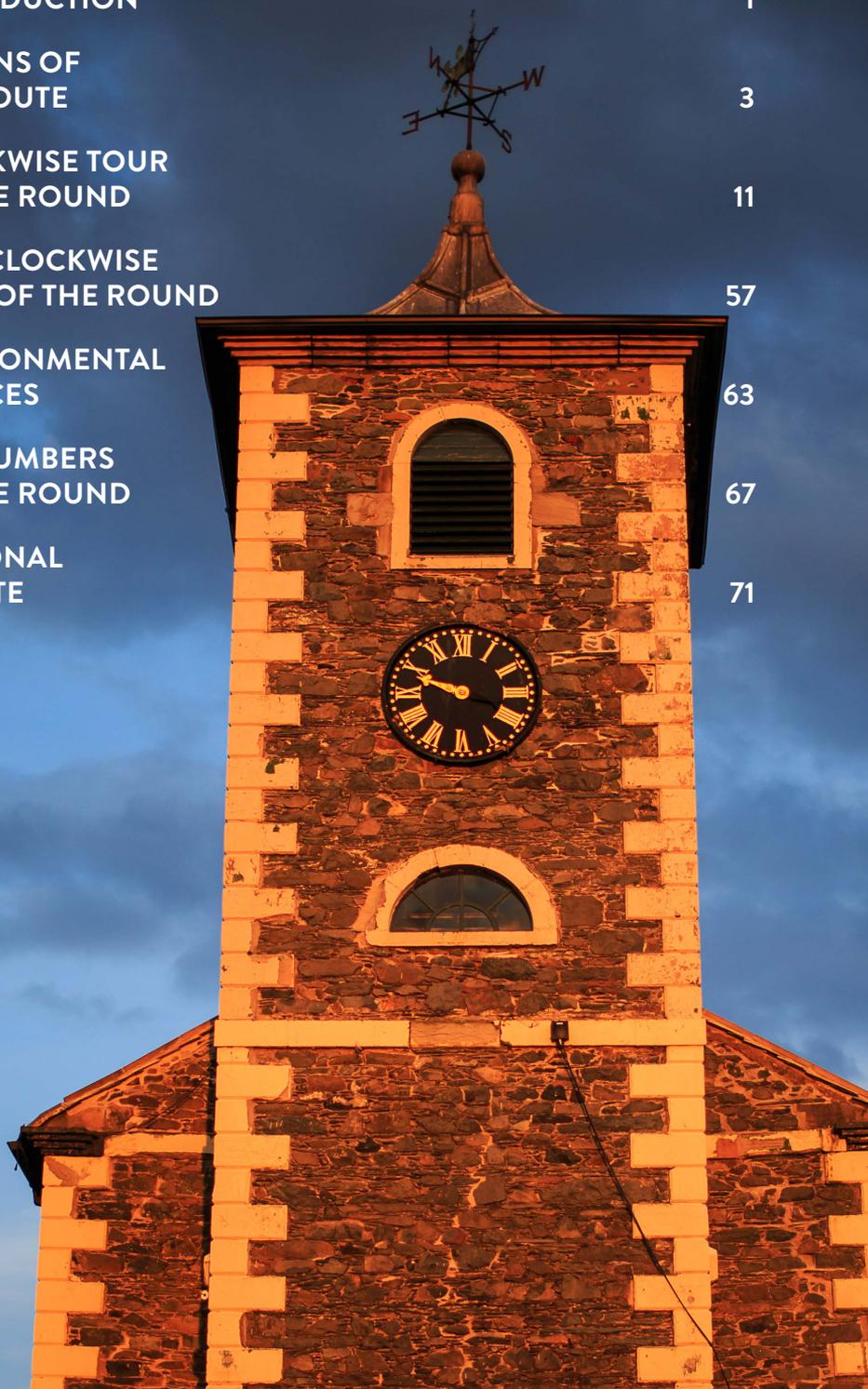
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Front and back cover: Skiddaw massif and Derwent Water from Walla Crag (James Appleton)

Opposite: Moot Hall, Keswick (James Appleton)

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Langdale Pikes from Blea Tarn (James Appleton)

INTRODUCTION

42 fells

in 24 hours is more than a palindrome; it is a day-long tour through some of the finest fells in Lakeland.

The traditions of the Bob Graham Round are wonderfully relaxed on the manner in which a round is completed: all that matters is visiting the peaks within the prescribed period. They can be gained in any order and by any route.

The purpose of this short book is to provide a tour over the route and fells of the round.

While much is written about the records and people of the round, there is far less reported on the route itself.

This account therefore describes the ways of threading together a round: what are the choices available, what are the implications and what is the history of the ground being travelled over? In keeping with the spirit of the Bob Graham Club, this is not a walkthrough guide. **The best way to learn the fells is to spend time on them, ideally in support of others.** That said, some of the route options have different environmental implications and I hope the descriptions can play a very small part in helping prospective contenders come to a personal decision on how best to

tread the fells. **With that in mind, this is but a humble tribute to the route of the Bob Graham Round and its Lakeland home.**



Thirlmere and the Helvellyn range (James Appleton)

ORIGINS OF THE ROUTE

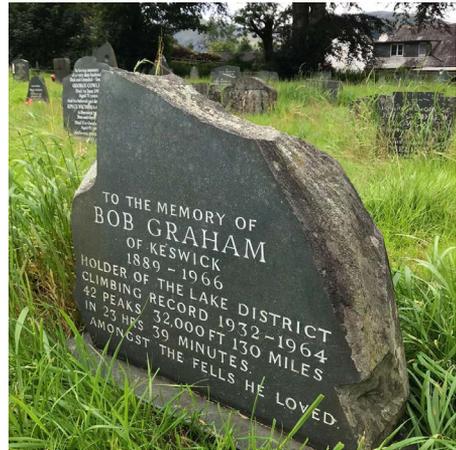
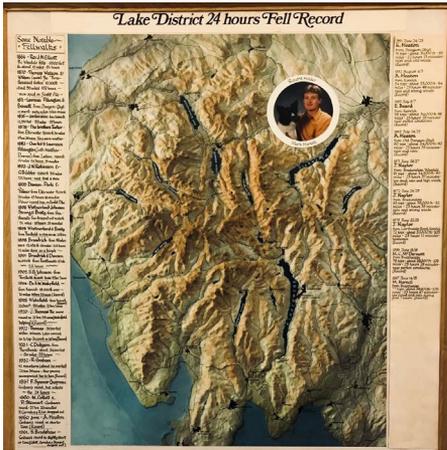
Bob Graham was far from the first person to complete long rounds of Lakeland fells. When he set out from Moot Hall in 1932, he was embarking on a challenge which had existed in some fashion for 100 years. He did not invent the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record; he was trying to beat it.

The first account of a long round in the Lake District dates back to 1832, when two Keswick men succeeded in gaining Skiddaw, Helvellyn and Scafell in 18 hours. The Carlisle Journal reflected that *“considering the difficulty of ascending and descending these stupendous mountains, it may be considered a most arduous task.”*¹ Nearly two centuries later, most would still agree. But this was the start of the story, not the end: over the remainder of the nineteenth century, a large number of ever more impressive ‘pedestrian feats’ were undertaken. With each, some of Lakeland’s foremost mountains were added to the record, including Scafell Pike, Bowfell, Blencathra and Great Gable. The successive challengers were a combination of local hands and early tourists, often drawn from the emerging sport of rock climbing.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the record had developed into a serious accolade, although it was never entirely clear whether the primary object was distance, ascent or sheer number of fells. Peaks only became the clear currency when the then record-holder, Dr Arthur Wakefield, codified the record with admirable pith. Writing in 1906, he said: *“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.”*²

Wakefield was a local physician and strong climber; indeed he would later participate in the 1922 Everest expedition with Mallory. He set an initial record in 1904 but went on to raise his own bar the year after with an anti-clockwise round of 21 fells, consisting of Robinson, Hindscarth, Dale Head, Brandreth, Green Gable, Great Gable, Kirk Fell, Pillar, Steeple, Red Pike, Yewbarrow, Scafell, Scafell Pike, Great End, Esk Pike, Bowfell, Fairfield (via Langdale and Grasmere), Dollywaggon Pike, Helvellyn, Blencathra and Skiddaw.

His achievement marked the end of the amateur era. By this point, attempts on the record required the professionalism and systematic preparation which is evident



Left: The Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record trophy, on display at Brockhole on Windermere

Right: Bob Graham's gravestone in St Andrew's Church, Stonethwaite

in so many of today's endurance challenges. Wakefield took all of these elements – rotating pacers, specific training, a five-week taper, tested nutrition, lightweight gear, a detailed schedule and countless recces – to culminate in his 1905 record.

Wakefield's round was beaten by Cecil Dawson in 1916, but the improvement was never accepted by the Lakeland community, perhaps because of the controversy of having undertaken the endeavour during war time and questions over whether he was witnessed on every summit. It was not until 1920 that a further record was set, on this occasion by Eustace Thomas, who knocked 42 minutes off the time for Wakefield's 1905 circuit. After a period of meticulous training and a series of abortive attempts, he went on to raise the record to 29 peaks in 1922, adding Great Calva and the fells of the Helvellyn ridge. Amazingly, after a short rest in Keswick, Thomas went on to take in a further seven peaks in the Grasmoor group so that he could claim 30,000 feet of ascent in a single walk.

And so to Graham. In 1931, he made his first attempt at the record, but poor weather and navigation stymied success. The next year and just one month before his eventual record, he supported Freddie Spencer Chapman in an attempt over a route identical to what would become the Bob Graham Round. Graham met Chapman at the summit of Bowfell to pace him to Dunmail Raise, but at this point their fates parted: Chapman failed to return to the Moot Hall within 24 hours; Graham went on to make history.

On 13 June 1932, Graham took the record to 42 peaks in 23 hours and 39 minutes. This was no marginal gain on Thomas's round; by raising the bar to 42 peaks, Graham had put clear blue Windermere-length water between him and the previous mark.

When asked what had helped keep him going over the final stretch of fells, he grinned and said: “willpower”.³

Graham made two main innovations to the route. The first was to go clockwise; hitherto, most rounds had travelled from Moot Hall, to Robinson and onward. The second was to radically expand Leg Three. Since the turn of the twentieth century, all previous records had included Scafell, Scafell Pike and a full traverse of the ridge-line to Bowfell. But until Graham, contenders would usually descend The Band into Langdale valley before walking to Grasmere for a long ascent of Fairfield. Instead, he stayed on high ground to add Rossett Pike, the Langdale Pikes, Thunacar Knott, Sergeant Man, High Raise, Calf Crag, Steel Fell and Seat Sandal to the round. It was a major advance on the number of peaks, if little different in terms of overall distance.

Just like Wakefield and Thomas, Graham was not satisfied with his achievement and sought to better his own record in 1933. Newspaper accounts suggest his aim was to take the scale of ascent to 30,000 feet of climbing, the mark set by Thomas but not within the 24 hours. Graham’s plan was to add “two or three” fells from the Grasmoor massif to his original 42, perhaps by heading down to Newlands Hause after Robinson, up Knott Rigg and on to Sail and Causey Pike.⁴ Frustratingly, he was beaten by the weather on two occasions. His second abortive attempt ended after Pike o’ Stickle, 22 fells and 12 hours into the round. Remarking to a local reporter, he reflected: “*I enjoyed what I did do and I feel fine.*”⁵

Graham’s unfulfilled desire to go further did nothing to detract from his 1932 endeavour. It was a prominent achievement, not least as he was a well-connected Keswickian (being a fruiterer and later hotelier by trade). But the following three decades were a quiet time for the Fell Record. It was not until 1960 that the record was broken, on this occasion by Alan Heaton, who improved Graham’s time over the same round of fells.

But not precisely the same. One peculiar feature of the route is that the fells originally registered as the Bob Graham Round are slightly different from the list of 42 which are today etched in every contender’s mind. No record is kept for how or why this happened, but two possible reasons are that the one-inch Ordnance Survey map from Graham’s time did not allow for precise peak marking and the fell running community’s attitude to the route was far more art than science. No contemporaneous accounts list Ill Crag, Broad Crag or Grey Knotts as Bob Graham fells, despite the fact he would have passed tantalisingly close to their summits. Similarly, Hanging Knotts, Looking Stead and High Snab were often originally listed; today, contenders would pass within spitting distance. It all comes out in the wash.

Over the next decade, the Fell Record was advanced on five further occasions by combinations of Alan Heaton, Ken Heaton, Eric Beard and Joss Naylor. During this

time, Bob Graham's round had no greater significance than Wakefield's round or Thomas's round: they were all just past records.

But as the 24-Hour Fell Record was pushed ever farther, a small number of people also chose to replicate 'just' the 42 fells of Bob Graham's round. In 1971, Peter Walkington became the first person to achieve membership of the Bob Graham Club in this manner, with a time of 20 hours and 43 minutes, slashing Alan Heaton's record by over an hour. In doing so, Walkington gained the niche honour of being the first person to hold the title for the Bob Graham Round but not the 24-Hour Fell Record.

From this point, the histories of the two records diverged. The Bob Graham Round went on to become the UK's most famous mountain endurance challenge, with over 2,000 successful completions. In contrast, the 24-Hour Fell Record has been advanced on only a handful more occasions and received relatively little attention. The fact that it is now so difficult to improve means it is reserved for truly gifted athletes. Two such people are Kim Collison and Nicky Spinks, the current men's and women's Fell Record holders, respectively. In July 2020, Kim beat Mark Hartell's long-standing 1997 record to complete a round of 78 peaks. In August 2021, Nicky reclaimed her record (which she had first taken a decade earlier) from Carol Morgan by completing a 65-peak round in a quicker time. Can these records be improved upon? Of course. But each will take something very special indeed.

The obvious question arises: why did Bob Graham's round become immortalised over any other? There is no one simple explanation, but there are a number of contributing factors.

WOMEN'S FELL RECORD

Name	Year	Peaks	Start	Time
Jean Dawes	1977	42	Keswick	23h 27m
Anne-Marie Grindley	1978	42	Keswick	21h 05m
Anne-Marie Grindley	1979	58	Keswick	23h 20m
Anne Stentiford	1994	62	Keswick	23h 17m
Nicky Spinks	2011	64	Stair	23h 15m
Carol Morgan	2020	65	Braithwaite	23h 57m
Nicky Spinks	2021	65	Braithwaite	23h 46m

MEN'S FELL RECORD

Name	Year	Peaks	Start	Time
Joseph Clark & Harrison Walker	1832	3	Keswick	18h --m
Thomas Watson & Wilson	1870	4	Keswick	18h 40m
Edward Pilkington & John Bennett	1871	7	Langdale	21h 10m
Ned Westmorland & Ernest Beatty	1898	9	Threlkeld	23h 46m
Richard Broadrick & Cecil Dawson	1901	10	Rosthwaite	23h 30m
S. B. Johnston	1903	10	Threlkeld	22h 07m
Arthur Wakefield	1904	11	Keswick	19h 53m
Arthur Wakefield	1905	21	Keswick	22h 07m
Cecil Dawson	1916	23	Keswick	22h 17m
Eustace Thomas	1922	29	Keswick	21h 54m
Bob Graham	1932	42	Keswick	23h 39m
Alan Heaton	1960	42	Keswick	22h 18m
Ken Heaton	1961	51	Langdale	22h 13m
Alan Heaton	1962	54	Keswick	23h 48m
Eric Beard	1963	56	Keswick	23h 35m
Alan Heaton	1965	60	Langdale	23h 34m
Joss Naylor	1971	61	Wasdale	23h 37m
Joss Naylor	1972	63	Wasdale	23h 35m
Joss Naylor	1975	72	Keswick	23h 11m
Mark McDermott	1988	76	Braithwaite	23h 26m
Mark Hartell	1997	77	Braithwaite	23h 47m
Kim Collison	2020	78	Braithwaite	23h 45m

The first of these was the untiring commitment of Fred Rogerson, master-builder from Windermere and inaugural Chairman of the Bob Graham Club. Rogerson established the Club in the same year that Walkington took Heaton's Bob Graham Round record and Joss Naylor set a new 24-Hour Fell Record (which he would go on to improve in 1972 and 1975). Without Rogerson's energies, the round would surely not have endured in the way it has.

Second, the length of time that Graham held the record would have embedded its prominence. His round was a significant advance on Thomas's and so it was always likely to stand for some time. This drought of competition was undoubtedly lengthened by the Second World War, which stalled the development of many sports. All told, Graham was – and is still – the person who has held the Fell Record for the longest number of years. Remarking on the formation of the Club, Rogerson explained: “Some motivation was needed to keep the achievements of [Graham and his pacers] alive, otherwise it might well have been another 28 years before any new attempts were made.”⁶

Finally, but most conjecturally, there is perhaps a natural limit for what the ‘average’ endurance fell runner can achieve. Does it correspond to 42 peaks in 24 hours? As noted above, by the 1960s, the 24-Hour Fell Record was out of reach of the vast majority of fell runners. In comparison, while Graham's round was tough, it was also just about manageable. Graham himself once teasingly remarked: “Anybody should be able to get round in the day – providing he's fit enough.”⁷

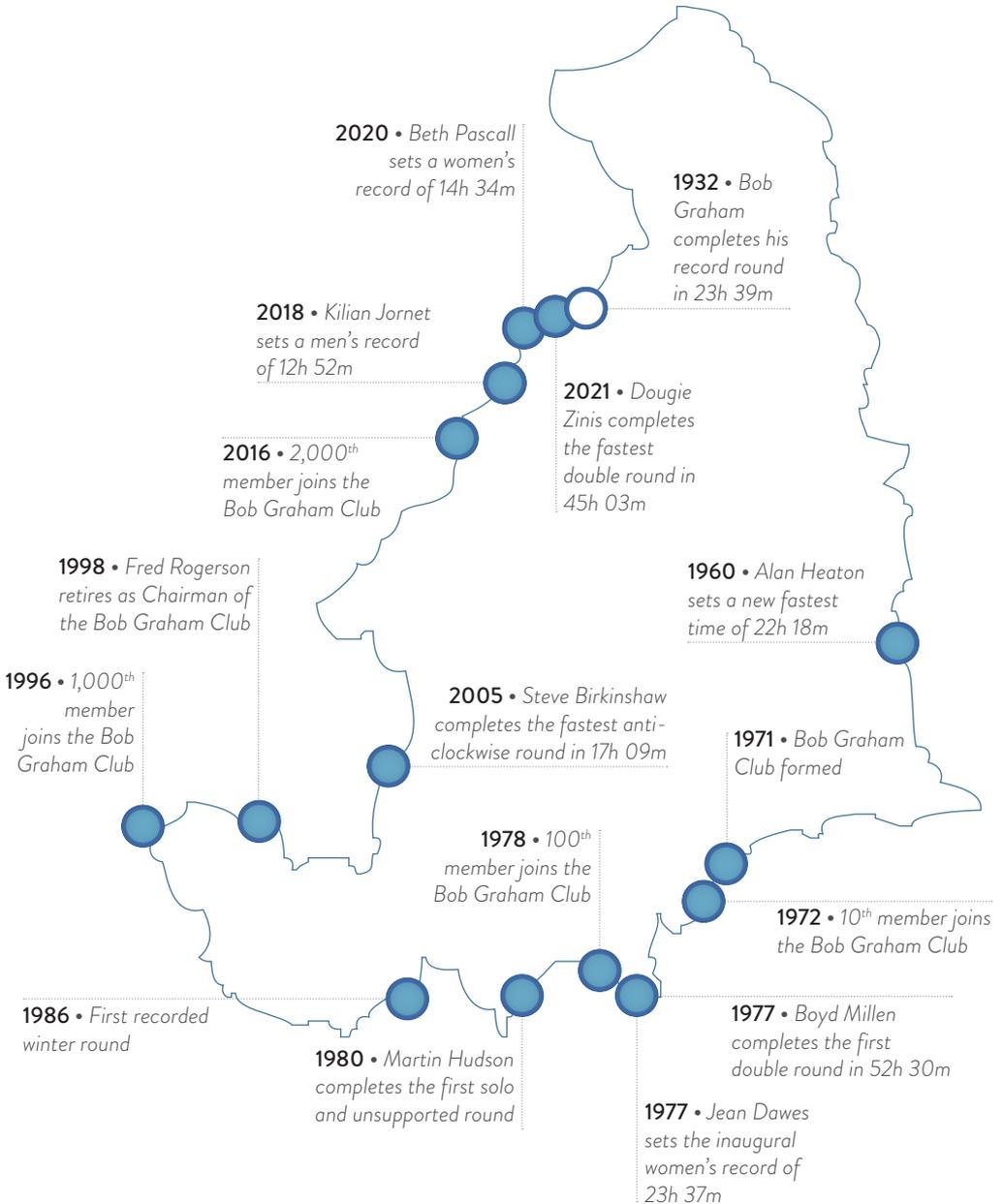
Overall, Rogerson's nurturing of the Bob Graham Round was a way to help maintain, promote and celebrate the challenge of 24-hour rounds, even if the actual 24-Hour Fell Record could not be furthered by mainstream contenders. The round fitted the bill for what the fell running community needed at the time and has laid down stronger roots with every completion.

Nearly 100 years on, I suspect Bob Graham would be more than a little amused that his, rather than any other, round has been granted such iconic status. It is here to stay.

Chapter endnotes

1. ‘Pedestrianism’, *Morning Advertiser* (24 August 1832)
2. Dr Arthur W. Wakefield, ‘Fell-Walking’, *Climbers' Club Journal*, Vol. 9 (1906)
3. Dudley Hoys, *English Lake Country* (1969)
4. ‘Peak Climbing’, *Lancashire Evening Post* (24 June 1933)
5. ‘22 Peaks in 12 Hours’, *Daily Herald* (26 June 1933)
6. Fred Rogerson, ‘In Quest of the Ultimate’, *Alpine Journal*, Vol. 81 (1976)
7. Harry Griffin, *Long Days in the Hills* (1974)

NOTABLE YEARS OF THE ROUND





Langdale Pikes (James Appleton)

CLOCKWISE TOUR OF THE ROUND

The vast majority of modern-day contenders choose to follow Bob Graham's lead in heading clockwise, placing the grind of Skiddaw first. This chapter describes each peak and transition of the route. The simple maps at the beginning of each leg illustrate the main route (black) and alternatives (grey) described in the text.

LEG ONE

..... Around 14 miles
5,350 feet of ascent

The Northern Fells are geologically and geographically severed from the rest of Lakeland. But while there are no supportive ridgelines to connect them to other massifs, these peaks have been included in Lake District rounds since the origin of the 24-Hour Fell Record. It would be impossible to have a credible round without them.

It is a leg of long transitions, big ascents and multiple options. Starting at 1am, Bob Graham chose to complete it during dark hours. Today, many now opt for an early evening egress, which makes for magnificent southern views of Lakeland as the sun sets on 'the day the round began'.

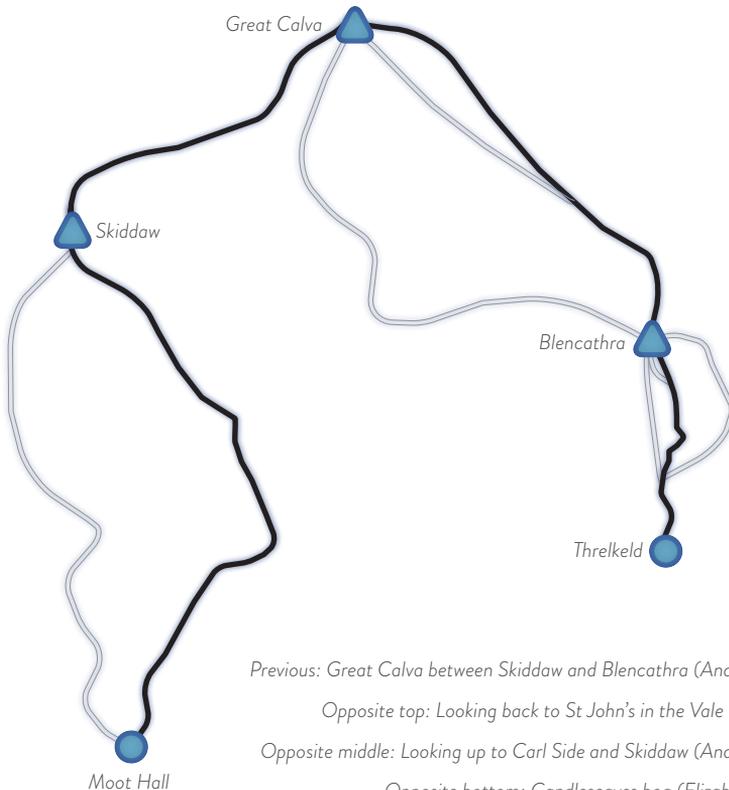


Skiddaw

To describe Skiddaw as a constant is to risk suggesting that all other mountains are changeable masses, presenting a different shape and experience depending on the season. This is clearly not the case, but there is nevertheless something particularly fixed about Skiddaw, not just the fact it is one of the oldest mountains in Lakeland, formed nearly five hundred million years ago and well before Borrowdale arose from volcanic eruption.

Skiddaw has been described as the easiest 3,000-foot climb in Britain. It was certainly deemed the least frightening for the early fell walkers and the route by Jenkin Hill was one of the first tourist routes up a Lake District mountain. The path is the most readable face of any peak and the hour or so of ascent is likely to be the most predictable part of a round; there is scant opportunity for man or plan to go awry.

The vast majority of contenders head from the steps of Moot Hall to Skiddaw via the well-trodden path to Latrigg, affectionately known as Skiddaw's 'cub', past the Hawell Monument (dedicated to three local shepherds) and through the 'Halfway House'





gate up Jenkin Hill. The conclusion is Skiddaw summit, technically Skiddaw High Man, the highest of several mounds along the undulating ridge.

For the curious, a more novel approach exists: gaining Skiddaw by way of one of its younger brothers, Carl Side. Standing at nearly 2,500 feet, it would be a serious fell in its own right were it not under the complete shadow of its older sibling. But the feature which most compromises its credibility – the complete lack of prominence from Skiddaw – means it is no more ascent to reach the older brother by means of the younger.

For the purposes of the round, Carl Side has one main feature: it is steep. If Hall's Fell on Blencathra is the Leg One knee-wrecker, Carl Side is the calf-buster. Moot Hall to Millbeck can be travelled on a combination of relatively flat roads or paths. From the hamlet, there are two ways to the summit. The most amiable is the path up the north-western shoulder via the gleaming quartz White Stones. Once atop Carl Side summit, a less-than-stable slate-ridden path awaits to Skiddaw.

An alternative is to head up the enclosed hollow carved by Slades Beck. Wainwright notes that in the 1960s it was "*the second most-used route to the top of Skiddaw*". Now it is a much less-trodden way, a path for the first half and scree-torn for the second half. Even for Carl Side aficionados, there is little positive to say, save for it being the only sheltered way up Skiddaw.

While few would recommend Carl Side as a sustainable start to a long-distance round, it can be noted objectively that many Bob Graham ascents are just as steep or steeper. With the potential to save half a mile, it is a credible choice. But the fact is stark: to my knowledge, no round has ever gone this way.

Great Calva

Most people first notice Great Calva from the car: driving up from Grasmere, there is a clear and intriguing gap between Skiddaw and Blencathra. Calva sits at the head of the Great Central Fault, which runs straight as an arrow to Dunmail Raise and Windermere. Through it, we are afforded an insight into the Back o' Skiddaw and directly upon the highly conical shape of Great Calva. Formed like a volcano, its lava is deep heather, erupting in the late summer to frustrate passage on all but the most developed routes on its slopes.

The man to thank for introducing Great Calva to Lakeland rounds is Eustace Thomas, who added it and the fells of the Helvellyn ridge in his 1922 record. Before Thomas, all previous 24-hour rounds passed directly from Skiddaw to Blencathra,

Opposite top: Blencathra from Great Calva (Joe Jackson)

Opposite middle: Looking south from Great Calva (Andrew Locking)

Opposite bottom: Bridge over Dead Beck, looking back to Hare Crag and Blake Hill (Andrew Locking)



usually via Skiddaw House. Great Calva is now firmly embedded in the round, allowing contenders to enjoy a period of isolation before embarking on more popular climbs. Of all the fells on the round, its slopes are probably those with the highest proportion of round-specific footfall. This may be the fell's main – only? – noteworthy quality. Poor Great Calva. Still, it could be worse: it could be Little Calva.

The transition from Skiddaw takes you into the misnomer of Skiddaw Forest. Beginning just north of Gibraltar Crag, the trod to Hare Crag is now well developed. Rightly or wrongly, it owes its existence to the round. Contenders take it into Candleseaves Bog and wend their way to the tiny bridge and tree which marks where the Cumbria Way crosses Dead Beck. The only good thing about Candleseaves is the fact it leads and contributes to the striking falls of Whitewater Dash – but this is of no consolation on the round.

From there, the Calva trudge awaits. This begins along the beck and then branches off to a trod. It is technically possible to stay with the stream, follow it until it disappears and then take the ridgeline to the summit. But this is not recommended: there is hardly the semblance of a way.

A longer alternative is to retrace steps along Skiddaw ridge and then trot down the simple, slightly drier and grassy descent of Sale How to Skiddaw House. While the hostel affords a perfect vantage point for watching poor navigators flounder in the bog, no proficient contender would be swifter going this way. That said, it is a conscientious route for a practice leg as it alleviates pressure on the eroding trods to Hare Crag and past Dead Beck. To see it through, take the path up Great Calva's south-western shoulder from the Caldew footbridge.

History does not record which way Graham took on his round in 1932. Given it was around 3am and this would have been a rare fell-to-fell transition for the time, we might call it even odds.

Regardless of route, do make sure to take in Great Calva's northern and true summit. Not to do so might be the single most tragic way of not completing an otherwise successful round. What could be worse than unwittingly persisting with the remaining 40 fells in vain?

Blencathra

Few approach Blencathra from the back. It is surely a breach of Lakeland protocol, perhaps even desecration of holy ground, to summit without using one of the eight available ridges. Wainwright dedicated more space in his pictorial guides to Blencathra than any other fell and yet none of the 36 pages describe the ascent that nearly all contenders make.

Ignoring Skiddaw and Moot Hall, this is the longest transition of the round. You have the short distance between Great Calva's north and south top to decide which



Top: Hall's Fell descent (Paul Sharkey)

Bottom: The ridges of Blencathra from the slopes of Great Dodd (Joe Jackson)

of three routes to take. The first and most popular option is to descend Calva by the 'eastern fence'. Generally considered the cautious choice, wayfinding should not be difficult and you reach an impressively round sheepfold alongside Wiley Gill.

There is then the matter of the River Caldew, far from an insignificant watercourse, especially after prolonged rain. The Caldew virgin will look around for an easy place to ford, but there is none; those who have been there at least once before know to head straight in. The route would be much wetter had the aspiring engineers of the 1950s had their way and dammed the valley of Mosedale.

Once the river is conquered, it is simply a matter of taking a straight bearing over Mungrisdale Common, which has *"no more pretension to elegance than a pudding that*

has been sat on” (according to Wainwright). Then on to Foule Crag and Blencathra’s summit (although some with a close knowledge of the ground prefer to take a more direct attack from Mungrisdale to the top).

The second involves trods through heather down Great Calva’s less frequented south-eastern flank. There are broadly two sub-options. The first heads toward a sharp bend in the Caldew; the second to another round sheepfold. If you do not hit either of these lines, the descent is unlikely to be gratifying amidst the sea of heather, especially when in bloom. Beware sudden drops along the bumpy ground.

The third, final and probably never chosen option is to go via Skiddaw House. From the false Calva summit, take the well-formed and runnable south-west path, cross the footbridge to Skiddaw House, follow the Cumbria Way for half a mile until it turns southward and then strike out to Blencathra.

Again, there is a sub-choice. The first option is to follow the faint trod to the Cloven Stone, perhaps the only notable feature of Mungrisdale and doubling up as the parish boundary, and then take a line to Foule Crag. The second is a more direct attack, taking in Sinew Gill (translation: silent waters) and then Roughten Gill (translation: roaring waters). Either way, there are no barriers to simply striding out. Sheepfolds can be used for wayfinding, but the awkward, diagonal and tussocky ascent only favours those with one leg longer than the other.

Experience suggests there is little material time difference between the fence line and heather trods. They are the same distance, too. So it comes down to preferred ground. If aiming for speed over idiosyncrasy, the Skiddaw House option does not enter the equation and is over half a mile longer.

But all get you to Hall’s Fell Top, the summit of Blencathra. As you near the unusual OS ‘trig detector ring’, you will happen upon a large white cross of quartz stones, undoubtedly the largest memorial on any fell. Fittingly, it was laid by a fell runner, Harold Robinson, in memory of his friend, Mr Straughan, a gamekeeper at Skiddaw House, who died in the Second World War.

Threlkeld

Thankfully, the round pays due respect to Blencathra on the downhill to Threlkeld. With four descent options, it is the joint leader for the round’s greatest range of choice (the other being the transition from Scafell Pike to Scafell) and much of Blencathra’s mountain beauty is on display in the variety. All options are credible for different contenders in different situations.

Hall’s Fell is the classic way down. After an initial sharp drop, the path leads to the magnificent ridge which requires some handiwork to navigate for the first portion. The arête then unfolds into a swift descent down to the village; the Blencathra Foxhounds at Gategill kennels often ensure you hear Threlkeld before you reach it.

This has always been a quick part of the round. Even before the turn of the century, descents of 22 minutes were logged (by Ned Westmorland in 1898 – all the more remarkable for the fact it was at the end of a round finishing in Threlkeld), not far off the astonishing 15 minutes clocked by current record-holder Kilian Jornet. Overall, Hall's is a joy in the summer, but some mountaineering is needed to negotiate it in winter conditions.

Usually considered the bad weather option, Doddick Fell offers a cautious end to Leg One. Indeed, after bog-trotting over Skiddaw Forest, the initial well-pathed gravel descent will refresh legs on the way to the ridge. From there, it is less exposed than Hall's ridge and can be negotiated without hands.

What is potentially even quicker is to fly down Middle Tongue, a route so akin to falling that it has earned the fell running epithet of the 'parachute descent'. Said to have been pioneered by the likes of Billy Bland and, more recently, Yiannis Tridimas, this is even less trodden ground than the Back o' Skiddaw. Steep grass at the top leads to rock and scrub in the middle, which gives way to old mine workings at the base (there is still evidence of a walled tramway).

Middle Tongue also offers a middle road: a hybrid of the parachute and Hall's Fell descent. In essence, the objective is to use the initial grassy descent into Middle Tongue to avoid the fiddliest parts of the Hall's scramble and lose height quickly. Depending on the line taken, it is possible to rejoin the ridge after a few hundred feet of descent. The line is not always obvious and any more detailed guidance must be gained through experience. Depending on confidence, this route may negate the need for Doddick in bad weather.

Many of the fastest contenders opt for the parachute descent, but it requires downhill mastery of continually steep slopes over poor ground. For those with less dexterity, there is much merit in using the hybrid option. While Doddick Fell has its devotees, it is over half a mile longer than Hall's ridge, so conditions will need to be pretty bleak to make it faster.

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