

Pioneers of the Wainwrights Round

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“One should always have a definite objective, in a walk as in life – it is so much more satisfying to reach a target by personal effort than to wander aimlessly.” So said Alfred Wainwright – and what could be a greater objective than combining all the Lakeland fells that gave him such purpose into a single journey? This is the story of those who did just that, taking the infamous pictorial guides and setting out to complete the Lake District’s longest endurance challenge.

The Wainwrights as a set of 214 Lakeland fells crystallised when the seventh and final book was published in 1966. But while widely read, the guides did not land in the lap of the same long-distance community we are part of today. At that point, even 24-hour rounds were exceptionally rare, let alone multi-day efforts.

During the 1970s, Wainwright’s work started to provide inspiration for fell runners looking to push the boundaries, but the source was his Pennine Way and Coast to Coast books rather than the pictorial guides. These point-to-point journeys were the prologue to the Wainwrights. Among the records they fostered, Alan Heaton’s Pennine record of 4 days, 5 hours and 10 minutes (jointly with Mick Meath) is as good a point as any to mark the birth of northern English ultra-distance fell running.

It is impossible to confirm, but research suggests Alan was also the first fell runner to seriously consider assembling the 214 fells into a single round. According to Bill Smith, his interest stemmed from preparatory work undertaken by John Beech, a fell walker and Liverpoolian school teacher. Inspired by Joss Naylor’s 72-peak 24-Hour Fell Record in 1975, John produced a plan and schedule for how all of the Wainwright fells might be traversed in one continuous route.

For a long while, all this was purely hypothetical and the idea of ‘doing the Wainwrights’ incubated in Alan’s mind for a decade. But before he could hatch a plan, St Andrew’s Church in Borrowdale found need of a new roof...

My great hope is that the idea catches on

Chris Bland, cousin of Billy, had had similar thoughts to Alan. In 1981, he decided to inaugurate the Wainwrights challenge as a means to raise money for repairs to his local church in Borrowdale valley, for which he was a warden. Sited on the outskirts of the hamlet of Stonethwaite, it is the same church where Bob Graham lies buried.

Circumstances meant Chris had only a short preparation period so there were only limited opportunities to recce the route. Or seven routes, for Chris’s plan was to take each of the pictorial guides over consecutive days, thus completing seven books in seven days. To this he added a further constraint: each day must start and finish at a valley church, reflecting his cause.

He started out at Matterdale Church at 4am on 27 June, embarking first upon the Eastern fells. It would have suited him perfectly to fix the roof while the sun was shining, but he was instead met by a June week that was *“colder than Christmas”*, so he spent most of it in a tracksuit.

Chris completed the first day without incident, but he fell behind schedule on the second, choosing to cut the day short rather than run late (bagging only 27 of the 36 Far Eastern fells).

He was concerned about the knock-on impact so early in the week and – in his own words – “*got into the wrong state of mind*”. Spirits began low on day three, but Chris persevered with a full completion of the Central fells, a helpfully timed shorter book. This in combination with “*enormous amounts of food*” lifted the mood and brought the challenge back on track.

While the Southern fells of day four brought another partial completion (17 out of 30 peaks bagged over tricky ground), this time Chris was buoyed by how much had been achieved in spite of the wind and poor visibility. It set him up for a full house over the three remaining days: the Northern, North Western and Western fells, respectively. The last of those, a beast of a pictorial guide, took nearly 20 hours to complete. At 3.42am, and with 18 minutes to spare on the 7 days, Chris and his pacers trotted into Lorton Church, bringing an end to his ground-breaking week.

There is one striking reflection from reading Chris’s account: the almost complete lack of bodily complaint. Fell runners are a hardy bunch, but we are used to stories of contenders taken to the darkest of places. Either Chris did not feel it or he chose not record it – “*descents getting a bit painful*” is the furthest he would venture. If anything, he seemed to get stronger as the week went on; he might not have been the fastest of the Bland clan, but his physical stamina was unquestionable.

Overall, Chris estimated that he covered 308 miles and 102,000 feet of ascent over the 192 fells, statistics not far off the modern-day route devised by Steve Birkinshaw. Even if it was not a full completion, it was probably a record for the most fell miles covered in the space of a week. Having set a target, he welcomed the prospect of others stepping up and beating it: “*My great hope is that the idea catches on.*”

The end of an era

Four years later, Alan Heaton was ready. At 57 years old (Chris had been 40), he wanted “*to mark the end of an era of long-distance fell attempts which began when I completed Bob Graham’s round of fells.*” It was a career that included making ten attempts on the 24-Hour Lake District Fell Record, setting the Pennine Way record in 1972, inaugurating the Lakes, Meres and Waters run in 1982 and, naturally, embarking on the first full continuous traverse of the Wainwrights Round (as he christened it).

He worked on his route with Fred Rogerson, well known for Bob Graham schedules, making several variations to the original plan put forward by John Beech. Alan was a bus schedule clerk, so the task may have come naturally, but it still would have been a huge undertaking without the aid of electronic mapping. He measured his route at around 390 miles (perhaps an overestimate) with 120,000 feet of ascent, some 20% longer than today’s route but with a similar amount of climbing. Gone was the concept of a book a day; instead the plan was for a continuous route that criss-crossed Wainwright’s hand-drawn borders, balancing the most efficient course with the logistical necessity of regular support points.

Starting at the traditional Moot Hall on 29 June, Alan began with the low-lying Whinlatter fells before turning to complete the whole of the Skiddaw massif. The day was broadly equivalent to a 19-hour Bob Graham, albeit with less ascent; this was the pace he needed to meet his seven-day schedule.

Days two, three and four focused on the Eastern and Far Eastern fells, all of which went largely to plan, although at times he suffered from stomach trouble. However, by the half-way point he was badly suffering from a greater ailment – feet that “*felt like they were on fire*”, which would

plague him for the rest of the round. He began to fear he might have reached "*the beginning of the end*". The only relative respite was cold, wet ground; luckily, the day ended with some of the boggiest territory in Lakeland, the infamous Pewits of the Central fells.

Sadly, bog trotting could not see him through the rest of the week and by morning he was compelled to head to hospital to treat a septic toe. Departing the infirmary, there can hardly have been a worse convalescence plan than a further 190 miles of running, but that is precisely what was on the cards. Alan's only nod to reality was to focus on completion rather than hitting his seven-day target.

A shortened day five completed the Central fells and day six took him over the Coniston and Langdale ranges. The Southern fells came next, bringing tough terrain that is now traversed at a much earlier stage of the round. The Westerns then sandwiched an overnight stop at Joss Naylor's farm. Despite experiencing his lowest ebb over these fells, Alan soldiered on, most of time only slightly slower than his pre-hospital pace. Just like today, the Coledale and Newlands fells were reserved for the finale, but even with only three to go his tormented feet gave "*so much pain that [he] flopped down into the wet grass for a few minutes to regain [his] composure.*"

Alan returned to Keswick 9 days, 16 hours and 42 minutes after he set out, completing both a full course of Wainwrights and prescribed antibiotics. His time on the fells (including stops on the route but not overnights) was just over 6 days.

I just do not have the words

Perhaps it should not have been a surprise to see Joss Naylor line up at the Moot Hall some twelve months later. By this point, a clear pattern had emerged: Alan would inaugurate a challenge and set a mark; Joss would come along and break it – usually by a healthy margin. It began in 1971 when Joss beat Alan's 24-Hour Lake District Fell Record; then repeated in 1973 with the Pennine Way; then again in 1983 with the Lakes, Meres and Waters. But while the scoreboard may appear one-sided, there is an extra challenge in being the 'first' and a clear advantage from having a yardstick to chase.

Like Alan, 50-year-old Joss felt the Wainwrights was an apt way to mark a 25-year fell running career. The route was based on Alan's but with a good number of variations, often reflecting the fact that Joss had no problem with steep, direct lines.

Joss started at Moot Hall on 28 June 1986. Heatwave conditions were the single biggest theme. Averaging 25 degrees on the tops, "*it was like breathing in from an open oven, the heat burned the inside of the mouth.*" But he seemed to acclimatise to the temperature and made good progress.

By day four, he was past the point of his previous longest run (the Pennine Way) but still opted to make it a long day, going into the night with multiple head torches lighting the best lines around the Coniston fells. The late finish meant the team needed to hastily make new overnight arrangements; somehow, a guest cottage was found and its front room turned into a bunkhouse for twelve.

The next day, Chris Bland met him on the Central fells at the summit of High Raise with a tin of macaroni pudding – "*there should be more it on the summits*", said Joss. Beyond pasta, the day brought two things that had not been seen since the start: clouds and Joss's own bed. Both were welcomed but neither proved transformational as by now his body had significantly deteriorated. The following sections were in his backyard and, on paper, an opportunity to gain over familiar ground, but he could get "*nowhere near*" his usual times.

Joss was no stranger to pushing through the pain threshold, indeed the sheer act of becoming a fell runner had been mind over body given the medical problems of his youth. He was neither a man of complaint nor emotions. The rawness of his Wainwrights account is therefore all the more striking. There is no better way to describe it than by quoting directly:

“It was a pain that bit into me all day... even when I stopped, it was sore like red-hot needles shoved into my ankles... I was drained to a point I had never been to before... It was as though someone had got hold of me and squeezed all the energy out... We had to drag from ourselves not only our accumulated fitness and basic strength, we had to reach even deeper into ourselves... I just do not have the words to describe the discomfort, the physical pain, the frustration, and the worry we all had to suffer.”

To manage the ordeal, Joss preferred to drive to a house at the end of each day for a proper rest (and Guinness – “*a couple, or was it a few?*”). But when it became clear the round would stretch into a seventh day, he elected for an unplanned fell-side bivvy. Assembled at the Kirkstile Inn, his pacers for the evening leg were asked if they might kindly carry Joss’s sleeping bag and bunk down in a sheepfold with no equipment for themselves. Naturally, this was no trouble at all. Once the sun came up, Billy Bland paced a leg, but by this point even highly runnable ground was travelled at a walk.

Joss ultimately finished in 7 days, 1 hour and 25 minutes – a huge advance on Alan’s time. Three-quarters of the gain came from stopped time; the remainder from moving slightly faster. He initially suggested he might have made it in under seven days were it not for his feet, but in later years he concluded, “*I put down a time that was the best I could do.*”

Some personal notes in conclusion

While the 214 Wainwright tops are timeless, the manner in which Chris, Alan and Joss completed them was of a different generation. After three incredible performances between 1981 and 1986, it was not until 2014 that the round saw its next success.

Steve Birkinshaw was the man to do it, in doing so lifting the Wainwrights Round from the history books and bringing it into the twenty-first century. Steve wrote the playbook for the round, in particular the route, which is now something to be tweaked rather than reinvented.

Steve reduced Joss’s record by twelve hours (nine hours of moving time; three hours of resting time) and was the first person to go under seven days and hit the target originally set by Chris. Five years later, Paul Tierney took a further seven hours off the record, largely through resting time. In 2021, Sabrina Verjee was the first person to go under six days, on her fourth attempt and to great acclaim. While she was fourteen hours slower than Paul on the move, she completed the round with twenty – yes, twenty – fewer hours of rest. John Kelly reduced the record by a further eleven and a half hours earlier this year.

Just like the Bob Graham Round, the full array of variants has now emerged, including winter, solo, self-supported and unsupported. As of today, more than 20 people have made attempts in one form or another and the past two years have seen more supported completions than in the preceding four decades.

Regardless of what comes next, it all began with Chris, Alan and Joss – the pioneers. Long may they inspire us.