

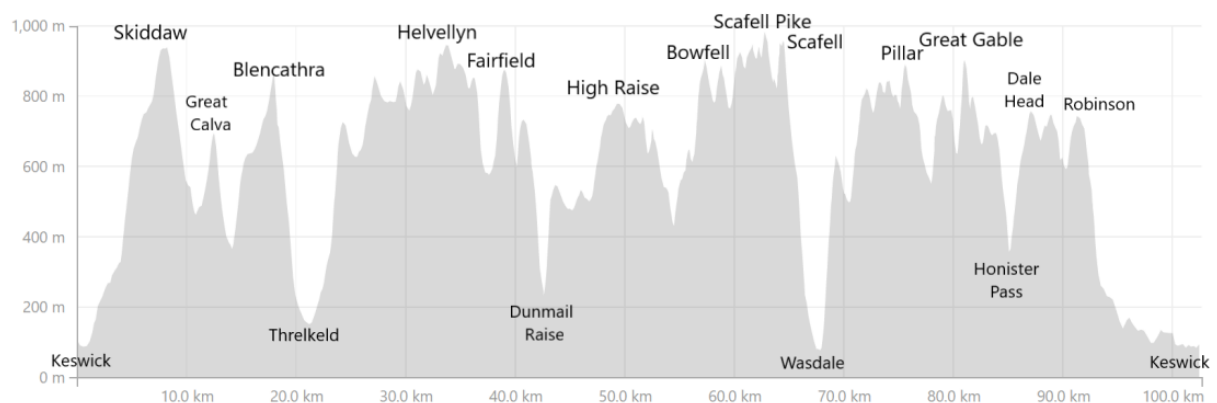
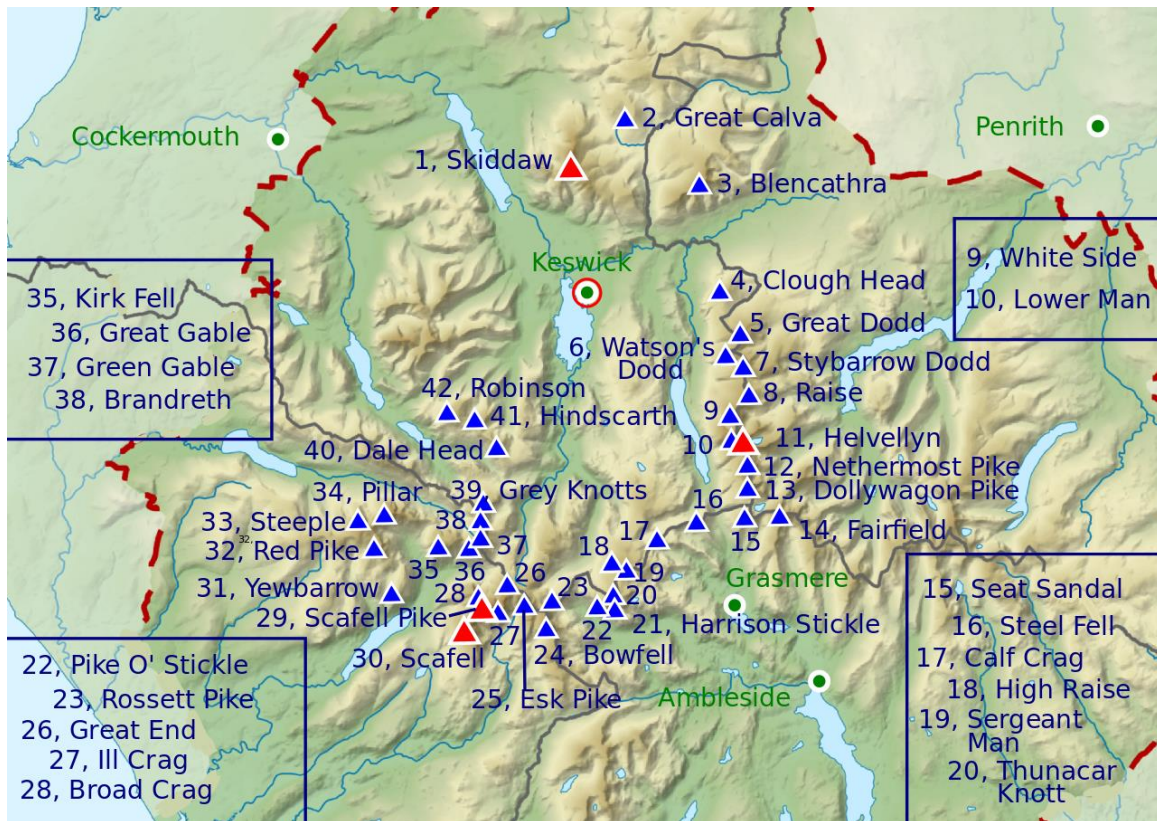
## Ben's BGR

### Why?

In general I think it's 'good' to do things that are 'hard'. In the absence of meaningful Masters competition in 2020 and 2021 and searching round for motivation, I decided there was no excuse not to get on with a bucket list item – the Bob Graham Round. It's certainly hard. It's also a young person's game – apparently only 13 people my age or over have done it so time was not on my side.

### What?

For those that don't know, the Bob Graham Round is a route in the Lake District that comprises 27,000ft ascent (and descent), 42 peaks and 66 miles to be completed in 24 hours starting and finishing at the Moot Hall in Keswick.



## Preparation

Conventional wisdom suggests that preparatory training should involve 10,000 ft climb per week. That's not straightforward in the Thames valley where I live. It's also pretty essential to 'recce' each of the 5 legs of the route at least once because navigation is just one of the many challenges of the BGR so numerous trips to the Lake District are required. I accompanied a couple of club mates on a recce 3 years ago and completely crumbled. I realised I needed to be a lot tougher physically and adopt a completely different mindset. My first few recce's this year trashed my quads but gradually I got stronger.

Rules dictate that you have to be witnessed at each peak so the endeavour normally involves pulling together a large support team (navigator and mule on each leg with drivers at each of the 4 road crossings). My team comprised 9 runners and 8 others who all dedicated a weekend to getting me round. It was humbling.

## Nowt but a walk?

66 miles is the easy bit in 24 hours (do the maths) but some of the other challenges include:

- Lake District weather – notoriously unreliable and frequently brutal
- Lake District terrain – at times boggy, pathless tussock marsh, at other times brutally rocky, scree. Much of the route is un-runnable
- Ascent/descent – some of the climbs are big (3,000 ft) and mostly excessively steep. The descents are generally the more destructive.
- Navigation – in the rain/mist it can be astonishingly hard to find the peaks or the right route off them
- Food/water – you have to fuel continuously (every 20 mins) and substantially otherwise you will inevitably fail. Many find it hard to keep food and water down when moving continuously and under stress.

## The attempt

**Leg 1: Keswick - Threlkeld** – Navigator: Rob Downs. Mule: Chris Daniels.



*Ready for the off - Rob, me and Chris*



*We're off!*

Starting at 11pm the weather was calm and warm. There were two other BGR attempt groups heading out at much the same time and we headed up Skiddaw with our headtorches in a long snake. The lights of Keswick twinkled below us. An orange moon

was low on the western horizon. Reaching the summit of Skiddaw was uneventful and we got there in 80 mins, 4 mins ahead of schedule. Sage advice is to take it easy on legs 1 and 2 and we tried to do so particularly on the descent from Blencathra. I had set my watch to bleep every 20 mins on which signal I had to eat something. The first 2 bleeps were for gels/jelly babies, the 3<sup>rd</sup> bleep was something from the mule's box and I repeated this pattern all day. Chris played his part saying "as



*Great Calva - 2 down, 40 to go*



*Our headtorches as pinpricks of light on the skyline descending from Blencathra*

an 'amuse bouche' what would Sir prefer?" His box contained flapjack, sausage roll, quiche and cheesy mashed potato. The latter two, in particular, were not great my greatest ideas. Conditions were ideal – unusually dry. We crossed the river Caldeu without even getting our shoes wet. Having topped Great Calva and Blencathra we arrived at the Threlkeld changeover at 03:45 am - 5 mins up on schedule. My sons were manning the changeover and had found a table and chair for me to use while I scoffed my porridge (with added goodies), changed my shoes/socks and they refilled my 2 litre water reservoir, replenished my stock of gels and jelly babies and gave my new mule the new food boxes. 11 mins later I was on the move again.



*Clough Head*

**Leg 2: Threlkeld - Dunmail** – Navigator: Rob Downs. Mule: Ed Catmur. There were the glimmerings of dawn in the east but it wasn't giving much light. It's an hour's slog up to Clough Head but we did it 8 mins faster than scheduled. Once up on Clough Head, leg 2 is mostly along the Helvellyn ridge and in ordinary circumstances is a joyous stretch because much of it is runnable. We moved steadily with Rob keeping me on track with no navigational delays. Dawn gradually broke as can be seen from the piccies that I insisted we took on each summit although the wisdom of the associated 30 sec delay is questionable. When multiplied by 42 peaks, the 21 mins could be the difference between success and failure. It was on the descent from Dollywagon Pike I first noticed a pain on the outside of my right knee which was a new complaint and immediately began to



worry me but I got to Dunmail in good spirits about 20 mins up on schedule. 5 mins later I was on the move again with a new team.

**Leg 3: Dunmail - Wasdale** – Navigator: Dave Harrison. Mule: Kevin Bonney.



*Pretty foul Heinz Minestrone*

At 6 hours, Leg 3 is the longest leg with some of the toughest terrain including the rocky Bowfell ascent and the difficult Scafell Pike to Scafell section via Lords Rake and the West Wall Traverse. It's often the key to the Round. I was very lucky to have Dave navigating because he is brilliant at it. He knows every line and his pace judgement is impeccable. Kevin



*My Rolls Royce of a navigator, Dave Harrison*

was bouncing with enthusiasm which was a delight and we collectively



gloried in the beauty of the scenery in the fabulous sunshine. I was conscious that I had neglected to put on suncream at Dunmail so I resolutely kept my sun cap on at all times despite the feeling that I was broiling my head. We met Neil and Steve at Rosset Pass who replenished our water supplies and gave us bananas and lots of encouragement. Despite my knee slowing my every descent we were gradually gaining time and by Esk Pike were 27 mins up but I knew I would lose time on the long descent from Scafell and before that we had to negotiate Lords Rake. Frankly the pitch from Mickledore to the entrance to Lords Rake is horrible – particularly when dry. Steep, slithery dirt with nothing to hold I cautiously edged my way down following Dave, occasionally dislodging rocks which bounced down the mountain fortunately missing Dave's head. It was a relief to get to Lord's Rake and the comparatively straightforward scramble up it and the West Wall Traverse. Then the long-dreaded descent to Wasdale. I enjoyed two pitches where I was able to slide some considerable distance on my bottom. I also enjoyed a pitch of reliable scree but the rest of the descent was painful and very slow and I lost 10 mins.





*Climbing 'Yewbastard'*



*A rare sit down and a surprisingly welcome chocolate yoghurt courtesy of star supporter, Andy Robinson who intersected my route 6 times*



*Great Gable in the background looking daunting*

**Leg 4: Wasdale - Honister** – Navigator: Matt Lynas. Mule: Edmond Jackson. This leg is also long at 5hrs 35mins but arguably has the best scenery with the glory of the fells laid out on all sides which is enough to intimidate if you foolishly try to work out where you still have to go. Great Gable in particular looks fearsome. The leg begins with an attritional climb out of Wasdale up Yewbarrow (or, as it is usually termed by BGR contestants, Yewbastard). Happily, my knee continued to be unaffected when climbing and I clawed back 8 mins on the ascent but I promptly lost that, and more, on the immediate descent and the knee was very painful throughout the leg on every descent. Matt and Edmond were very patient and vainly tried to encourage me into some sort of a trot on the flattish sections but I was now seriously haemorrhaging time. The bright spots on the leg were provided by Andy who popped up all over the place and provided invaluable encouragement and supplies and also by Neil and Steve who had lugged 10 litres of water up to Great Gable and replenished my reservoir just after I had exhausted it. Despite funereal progress, we eventually made it to the descent down to Honister where we were finally overtaken by another attempt who had started at the same time as us. Concerned at my distress they kindly dug out some Ibuprofen which turned out to be a pill the size of a horse tranquiliser but I didn't hesitate. I don't think it made a scrap of difference.



*A normally delightful descent into Honister was purgatory for my knee*



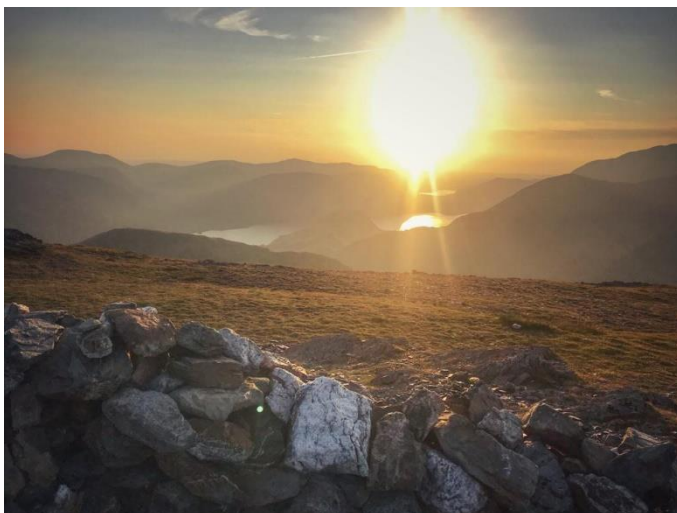
**Leg 5: Honister - Keswick** – Navigator: Alex Reynolds. Mule: Peregrine Rex. I fondly imagined I would leave Honister in shape to hammer the last leg (which is the easiest). I had supported a round which took 45 mins out of the scheduled 3 hours but alas this leg was all about damage limitation. We started the climb up Dale Head with two other BGR groups but once the climb was over and running was required they quickly disappeared into the distance. I decided I was being a wuss and



*Dale Head, almost there and the views were stunning*



*Downhill all the way now - damn it!*



*What a way to finish the day off*

by gritting teeth and blowing hard I tried to muster a lopsided jog. My son told me to pull my finger out and I did my best but it was a poor show. It was a pity because the surroundings were truly stunning. The sun was getting low on the horizon and the fells were bathed in glorious light and seemed to radiate an end-of-a-long-day contentment and peace. We topped the last peak at 8:50pm, 31 mins behind schedule but it still gave me 2hrs and 10 mins to get to Keswick. When supporting I had done it in 1hr 9 mins

so I knew it was still on but I had to keep moving. Could I still move at half my normal speed? Initially I couldn't and the descent was lamentable but I was encouraged by a long slide on my bottom followed by a full knee stretch which magically cleared my knee problem (temporarily). Would that I had discovered this earlier! The benefit wore off increasingly quickly after each subsequent stretch but at least it allowed me to make jerky progress. At Newlands Church we finally hit tarmac so I changed from fell running studs to road

running trainers and limped on. Daylight faded and Alex got out his head torch (I had none, not really expecting to be out so late) and so we gradually closed in. Alex's watch persisted in projecting a 25 hr finish but we concluded Garmin was wrong.

**The finish** – for BGR veterans the final stretch through the Market Square to the Moot Hall is an emotional experience. Well-wishers and supporters applaud you in. I still well up when thinking of it and others that I have seen. I summoned up my best style and stride but the result was pitiable. I clambered up the Moot Hall steps and touched the hallowed green door and finally stopped - with the clock showing 23hrs 37mins. Thank the Lord! I turned round to look down on my friends and was deeply moved.



*Stopping - at last!*



## **Conclusions**

- The BGR is a unique undertaking. Hard but profoundly rewarding.
- I was amazingly lucky with the weather
- People are extraordinarily willing to give up time and resources to support you (assuming you make the appropriate effort to do the requisite preparation). There is a humanity-affirming fount of goodwill out there.
- Food is a problem. My stomach is pretty robust but even it jibbed at 35 vanilla gels in one day. Food on the move tends to be sweet and revolting after a while. Finding savoury stuff that goes down easily and stays down is hard.
- Good navigators make a huge difference
- A good support team make the whole weekend
- Drinking and eating religiously every 20 mins is definitely a good thing.
- Running 17 hours with a bad knee is not a good thing
- The itch is scratched.



*Just a small subset of my fabulous support team - heartfelt thanks to all*

