

The Choices of the Bob Graham Round



Successful completions of the Bob Graham Round – so I am told – are not the same. A far-reaching but often under-reported element is the chosen route.

The Club rules are wonderfully silent: the only constraints imposed on a round are its start point, the peaks to gain and the end point. Contenders may travel between these points in any fashion and in any order. In practice, topography and its implications for speed narrows the set of options significantly. But that still leaves a panoply of interesting and credible choices.

Every round is therefore a recipe of decisions, some made far in advance following extensive reconnoitre, some weather-induced on the day, and some only revealed by retrospective analysis of the omniscient tracker trace. I have learnt this through scree-filled shoes, rain-soaked lycra and clag-induced confusion. For reasons unknown, I have been involved in “attempts” over ever decreasing time periods: first 3 days, then 2 days, strangely 30 hours and, naturally, 24 hours. Each was attempted with varying degrees of success and failure; I have not yet made it into the Club.

This lived experience has developed into a fascination with the round. The arrival of a newborn has compelled a focus on lowland activities and so my latest “attempt” has been to document all the different route choices available.

This is about substantively distinct routes, not recording the best line. It does not negate the need for a serious recce, although if it leads to fewer recces of certain trods then that would be a good thing given the increasing footfall on the round. It is a homage to the round, not a walkthrough guide.

This article presents the top 10 choices a contender must make on a clockwise round.

1. MOOT HALL TO SKIDDAW – WHETHER TO USE CARL SIDE

The choice is whether to maintain tradition via Jenkin Hill or take the novel approach of an ascent over Carl Side. The latter involves a flat stint to Millbeck followed by a steep ascent of the shoulder. Overall, it saves half a mile and could work well for those who wish to segment



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their flats and slopes into distinct chunks. But a calf-busting climb may not be the most sustainable start to the round and I am aware of no successful completion that has made use of this alternative way.

2. GREAT CALVA TO BLENCATHRA – GENUINE TRILEMMA

Blencathra summit is a nexus of BGR choices and there are three ways to approach it.

The two most common involve either a south-easterly or easterly descent from Great Calva. The former is the most direct attack, with a heather-shrouded trod leading to the well-known trudge up Mungrisdale Common. The latter is to follow the eastern fence. Empirically, there is no material time difference, so it comes down to preferred ground. The fence line avoids ankle risk, particularly relevant at times of high heather or darkness, but most swift contenders tend to prefer the direct line.

There is a third way: taking in Skiddaw House. Rarely chosen but perhaps unfairly so. From the false Calva summit, take the southern

Back of Blencathra from Great Calva.



PHOTO © JOE JACKSON

shoulder in descent, crossing the footbridge to the seasonal hostel and briefly follow the Cumbria Way until it turns due south. At that point, a sub-choice is required: some argue for a dead-reckon to Blencathra (there are no barriers to simply striding out), others take in the Cloven Stone first. This way is not without a cost and the price is two thirds of a mile. But the descent from Calva is relatively swift and any climb up Mungrisdale is just as unenticing as another.

3. BLENCATHRA TO THRELKELD – SEVERITY OF DESCENT

The four ways down to Threlkeld mean this decision point holds the joint record for choice (alongside Scafell Pike to Scafell). Each way is credible for different contenders in different situations.

Hall's Fell is the classic way down in good weather with Doddick Fell as the insurance. But hardened mountain goats should consider the so-called "parachute" descent. It begins with a very steep grass descent, heading towards Gate Gill and then trickier ground on the valley floor. A hybrid option is to use the initial grassy descent into Middle Tongue to avoid the most fiddly parts of the Hall's Fell scramble – depending on the line taken, it is possible to be reacquainted with the Hall's line as far down as the 750m contour.

Many of the fastest contenders opt for the parachute descent but it requires mastery of continually steep slopes over poor ground. For those willing to countenance the latter but not possessing the former, there is merit in the hybrid option, particularly in bad weather. While Doddick has its aficionados, conditions will need to be pretty bleak to make it faster (it adds half a mile and a small amount of climbing at the end).

4. DOLLYWAGGON PIKE TO FAIRFIELD – CIRCUMNAVIGATING THE GRISEDALE TARN

Heading to Fairfield via the tarn outlet and Cofa Pike is the most direct attack. But an equally popular alternative is to take the steep, southerly descent, head the other way around the tarn and then up the tourist path. The decision comes down to terrain and mindset. On the one hand, a tussocky descent and no-nonsense, unforgiving

Dollywaggon Pike descends from Deepdale Hause.



PHOTO © JOHN LENNOX

Langdale Combe from Martcrag Moor.



ascent that offers the opportunity to deposit packs at Grisedale Hause for those seeking small psychological boosts. On the other, a mainstream descent and an off-track climb which obviates the need to retrace steps.

5. HIGH RAISE OR SERGEANT MAN FIRST – THE OLDEST DILEMMA

The original Bob Graham dilemma and only example of a genuine choice on the order of two summits. The beauty of the decision is there is no difference in distance or gross ascent. While Bob Graham went to High Raise first, most modern-day contenders head to Sergeant Man (for what it's worth, this is also the author's [strong] preference). The choice is all in the terrain.

6. PIKE O' STICKLE TO ROSSETT PIKE – DISTANCE VERSUS ASCENT

Half a mile or 150 feet of ascent – which would you prefer to save? That is the choice. The traditional course is to head deep into Martcrag Moor (connoisseurs of the Langdale fell race will know a line), leading to Black Craggs and then the summit. The alternative is to swing with the path around Langdale Combe and approach Rossett from the back.

Midway through the round, different contenders will want different things. A small majority prefer the shorter way and the vast majority of swift rounds do so too. There are also more features to catch if visibility is poor and navigation is much easier in the dark (which it will be for an evening start). But there is no shame in going the long way for those desiring a relatively flat trot.

7. SCAFELL PIKE TO SCAFELL – CHOICE OF SCRAMBLES

A layman might naively assume that getting from England's highest peak to its closest relation is a minor matter. Nothing could be further from the truth; in the words of Wainwright, "medals have been won for lesser deeds".

Scafell buttress in snow.



All routes first require navigating to Mickledore col. The mass of Broad Stand awaits. Option one is to head straight for it, but that requires all parties involved to be competent with rock and advance planning. For the those not, there are three alternatives.

The first is Lord's Rake, either with or without the West Wall Traverse. The second is Foxes Tarn (the insurance route, the Doddick of the Scafell massif). This requires the greatest expenditure of distance and ascent. The third is the climber's traverse, a scrambling alternative to Foxes Tarn. At the base of Broad Stand, head left and descend scree. But scramble into and onto the – now partly grassy – mass of rock as soon as is safe. From that point, pick a line diagonally upwards. The greater the scramble, the greater the height gained above Foxes Tarn.

Lord's Rake and the climber's traverse have the dual advantage of a more direct way and the opportunity to rest legs with greater emphasis on arms. If variety of effort helps pass the miles, this is no small advantage. The fastest rounds tend to take Broad Stand or Lord's Rake.

8. SCAFELL TO WASDALE – FLEET OF FOOT OR GENTLE TO FEET

For mortals, Lord's Rake is not a credible option except in perfect winter conditions when filled with neve snow. That leaves a choice between steep scree or rolling grass. Most contenders will take the eastern Rakehead gully (the western is rocky and unsuited to a swift way down); the best descenders will navigate this at great speed, leading to steep grassy slopes (bum-sliding has been known) to Brackenclose.

The slightly more pedestrian alternative is to continue down Green How. To minimise distance, stay north of Hollow Gill and Groove Gill until the old coffin route is reached. These slopes may be more pleasant and kinder to tired legs.

Scafell descent from Brackenclose.



9. YEWBARROW TO RED PIKE – ROCKY CAMBER OR VALLEY DROP

An interesting but oft-ignored choice. Tradition dictates finding a rocky, uneven, downward traverse towards Dore Head and then up the tourist path to Red Pike. But many will have looked longingly at the grass of Gosforth Crag Moss and wondered if there is a better way across.

It is possible but not obvious to take a more direct way off Yewbarrow's summit, searching for narrow grassy "lanes" to the valley floor. Contenders can then find their own line back to the Red Pike path. While this will entail more ascent, it may raise spirits to avoid awkward rocks (and even the best need a pick-me-up at this stage of the round; after all, it was Yewbarrow that prompted the infamous "Naylor shake").

10. ROBINSON TO MOOT HALL – WHATEVER WORKS

There are three ways down Robinson fell. The first and most popular is to follow the shoulder and accept the steep descent from Blea Craggs

to the reservoir. The second is to stay on the shoulder, enjoying High Snab Bank and postponing the inevitable until the very last moment. The third and least discussed is to invest in descent immediately and take an easterly line into Little Dale (sub-options abound) before travelling over boggy ground to the entrance of the hanging valley to pick up the path. At this stage in the round, the choice will be dictated by whatever feels the ground of least resistance.

From Little Town, it is road or paths. Nearly all contenders opt for the former and it will surely be swifter. But a round is a round and it is no lesser achievement to make the final transition on softer and more varied ground (the prospect of a tarmac 10k will be anathema to the sorest of feet). The road is a shade shorter with a shade more ascent.

BONUS 11 – WHETHER TO GO CLOCKWISE AT ALL

The single biggest choice of them all is whether to go clockwise or anti-clockwise. *Fellrunner* readers will be wholly familiar with this debate and I do not seek to rehearse it here. But it is worth reflecting afresh through the prism of the route choices.

To start, do not discount a steadier trudge up through Little Dale as a measured way to wake up calves en route to Robinson. The remainder of legs 4 and 5 is largely the same in reverse, save that those preferring steps will favour the path to Grey Knotts and those preferring scree will choose the red gully to come off Kirk Fell.

Scafell is the single biggest climb on the round and will be a test under any circumstances. Lord's Rake is now a credible option for the transition; the alternative being various routes onto Green How (but not via Rakehead Crag's scree-filled gully). The vast majority will choose Foxes Tarn to transition to Scafell Pike. The two remaining dilemmas – 6 and 5 above – are similarly balanced in reverse.

For the start of leg 2, do not discount a counter-cultural ascent up Raise Beck, turning south at the appropriate moment for Seat Sandal's summit. Else, follow the usual trod. There is no debate on gaining Fairfield but the transition to Dollywaggon may feel easiest via Cofa

Pike. For coming off Clough Head, some will prefer to take in White Pike ridge to relieve tired calves on the way to Threlkeld.

Hall's Fell must then surely be the means for starting the dreaded final three peaks, not least because a scramble at the top may offer some distraction. The nature of the ground in descent suggests taking the shortest possible line – this is the heather-covered trod that heads north west up Great Calva (far less ankle risk in ascent). From Calva, the shortest line is to retrace the traditional route, but some may prefer the surety of (dry!) Sale How even though it is longer. Descending Skiddaw via Carl Side will only be an option for those with the strongest of quads.

SOME PERSONAL NOTES IN CONCLUSION

There is much variation but it is typically accepted that the Bob Graham Round is around 66 miles long with 27,000 feet of ascent. If one could travel direct between summits, across any form of terrain, the shortest BGR possible is around 58 miles and 30,800 feet of ascent (allowing for public access and bodies of water).

So route finding is adding nearly 10 miles of distance and saving around 4,000 feet of ascent. This tells us that corners can be cut, but probably not much. The table shows the "shortest" and "longest" credible rounds based on the route options. There is around 5 miles difference, but little variation in gross ascent once all is aggregated.

All that said, the only sensible conclusion to draw is there is nothing about the Bob Graham that can be reduced to bare numbers save for 24 and 42. Lines on maps feel very different on the ground and aspiring fell analysts should remember no contender has yet completed the round from their armchair.

With that in mind, these descriptions are but a humble tribute to the diversity of the Bob Graham Round and its Lake District home.

A longer description is available at:
www.anewfoundcompendium.com/bgr

SUMMARY TABLE

LEG	TRANSITION	CHOICES
1	Moot Hall to Skiddaw	1 – Jenkin Hill; 2 – Carl Side
	Skiddaw to Great Calva	1 – Hare Crag; 2 – Sale How (a/c only)
	Great Calva to Blencathra	1 – fence line; 2 – heather trod; 3 – Skiddaw House
	Blencathra to Threlkeld	1 – Hall's Fell; 2 – Doddick Fell; 3 – parachute; 4 – parachute-cum-Hall's
	Distance range	12.9 – 14.9 miles
2	Threlkeld to Clough Head	1 – straight up; 2 – via White Pike
	Clough Head to Great Dodd	1 – via Calfhow Pike; 2 – direct line
	Dollywaggon Pike to Fairfield	1 – Hause Gap; 2 – Cofa Pike
	Seat Sandal to Dunmail Raise	1 – classic trod; 2 – Raise Beck (a/c only)
	Distance range	13.5 – 14.6 miles
3	Dunmail Raise to Steel Fell	1 – footholds; 2 – direct line
	Calf Crag to Sergeant Man or High Raise	1 – High Raise first; 2 – Sergeant Man first
	Pike O' Stickle to Rossett Pike	1 – through Langdale Combe; 2 – around Langdale Combe
	Rossett Pike to Bowfell	1 – shelves; 2 – Ore Gap (a/c only)
	Scafell Pike to Scafell	1 – Broad Stand; 2 – Lord's Rake; 3 – Foxes Tarn; 4 – climber's traverse
	Scafell to Wasdale	1 – Rakehead gully; 2 – Green How
Distance range	16.0 – 17.4 miles	
4	Yewbarrow to Red Pike	1 – Dore Head; 2 – Gosforth Crag
	Pillar to Kirk Fell	1 – fence posts line; 2 – red gully
	Grey Knotts to Honister	1 – grass trod; 2 – fence line
	Distance range	11.4 miles
5	Robinson to Little Town	1 – High Snab Bank; 2 – Blea Crag; 3 – Little Dale
	Little Town to Moot Hall	1 – road; 2 – paths
	Distance range	10.8 – 11.0 miles
TOTAL DISTANCE RANGE		64.6 – 69.3 MILES