

ENGLAND'S EVEREST: FROM THE TURN OF THE CENTURY TO BOB GRAHAM'S RECORD

This article is the second in a series on the history of the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record. Fellrunner 125 (Winter 2019) told the story of the pioneers of the record, from the early Victorians to the turn of the twentieth century. This piece goes on to describe the history up to the Bob Graham Round, concluding with how the BGR became distinct from the Fell Record. Future articles will chart a course to the modern era, a story recently and magnificently extended by Kim Collison's round of 78 fells in July this year.

From Helvellyn to the Himalayas

Our last story ended with Dr Arthur Wakefield's inaugural and pithy codification of the 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, or as much less as is possible." By the point these words were written, the age of the spontaneous amateur was over: the record had been pushed to a league requiring both proper preparation and excellent fitness. Wakefield was a strong climber and local physician, well placed to apply the necessary professionalism.

After an initial round of 11 fells in 1904 (adding Kirk Fell to the previous record), Wakefield pushed himself further in 1905 with an anti-clockwise round of 21 fells, consisting of half the peaks that would go on to make the Bob Graham Round. While he benefited from perfect August weather, his success came despite a series of minor calamities: a gammy knee gave way while descending Yewbarrow; he lavishly refreshed himself at a local inn before realising he had no means of payment; he ran short of the verification slips which he was leaving on each summit; and a farmer had cut open his shoes to relieve pressure on his toes. But he made it round.

Wakefield went on to serve his country in many ways, most notably in the Royal Army Medical Corps during the First World War. Following the war, and partly on the basis of his Fell Record performance, he was selected as the Medical Officer for Mallory's second Everest expedition in 1922. It started with the explicit aim of reaching the summit but tragically ended with the death of seven Sherpas in an avalanche. Wakefield was the first to attend the fallen, but all were lost.

On his return, he was instrumental within the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (FRCC) to organising the memorial plaque atop Great Gable, leading a 'service in the clouds' on the summit in 1924. The impact of the war had taken an inner toll and, while he rarely showed emotions, his "voice was shaken by sobs of grief" during his speech commemorating fallen comrades. Although no one would ever hear him speak of the war again, his letters home from the battlefields of France provide an apt conclusion: "May every one of [our fellow serving FRCC members]... [know] that he has done the biggest bit in his power, and has strained every ounce with the grit, determination and patience bred in our northern hills."

Racing over the fells

Despite the achievement, the concept of a 'Fell Record' was not warmly endorsed in all quarters of the Lakeland community. An FRCC President remarked that Wakefield's peak-bagging was a case of "doing the right thing in the wrong way" and he was practically apologetic when he wrote an account of his round for the Club's journal.

This came to a head in 1916 when Cecil Dawson went out and beat Wakefield's record – or so he claimed. Dawson was a Manchester cotton merchant who specialised in Peak District 'bog-trotting'. His legally-dubious walks over private land became so well known that he acquired a group of followers who christened themselves as "Dawson's Crowd".

Dawson added at least two extra fells from the Helvellyn ridge to Wakefield's record. He returned to Keswick in under 24 hours and though he took ten minutes longer than Wakefield, this should not have mattered. However, the community took against him and the prevailing mood was not to endorse it as a record.

It is unclear who led this disqualification or for what reasons. Some evidence suggests George and Ashley Abraham assumed officiating duties, claiming that Dawson was not witnessed on every peak (where was his crowd?). But in all likelihood, this was technical cover for a deeper wound: the fact he completed his round during war time. Wakefield would have been preparing for the Somme offensive just as Dawson set out on his walk in June. By the standards of the time, this would have been considered a highly improper act.

Rightly or wrongly, Dawson developed a "pathological grievance" against this repudiation. For their part, the FRCC were unequivocal that they intended to play no part in refereeing so-called "racing over the fells".

A system of mountain endurance

By the time most fellwalkers have reached their physical peaks, Eustace Thomas had not even begun to climb the fells. In his late thirties, he was an unathletic Manchester businessman; by his mid fifties, he would be one of the most prodigious walkers of the interwar period.

He was only introduced to the Lakeland fells after the war. But some inner, ready-kindled fire must have been lit as within a year he decided to take on the Fell Record. In 1919, he made it round Wakefield's course but not within the 24 hours. This led him on a personal mission to define a "system of mountain endurance", to train body and mind for another attempt. He left no stone unturned – from training, to breathing, to nutrition, to sleep, to pacing: his method was the original marginal gains. (He would go on to apply these skills in other fields, most notably working with Roger Bannister to design lightweight shoes for the four-minute mile.)

Digestion was core to his approach, which led him to adopt a vegetarian diet and heavily restrict food intake in the weeks before the challenge, the intention being to cleanse the body of what he termed "fatigue products". During the round, he favoured "liquid food" and the mountain gel of the time appears to have been a concoction of hot milk, egg and soda.

In 1920, he succeeded in completing Wakefield's round in a quicker time, thus taking the record. In what has since become a treasured tradition, Wakefield paced Thomas to break his own record. Unsatisfied with his achievement, he made a number of further attempts to add more peaks, acquiring a large support team who turned crewing into a regular summer holiday. But when the big day came it was all work and no play, as evidenced by an extract from the timetable (starting from the prior evening): "5pm, try [motor] car; 5.30pm, meal; 6pm, bed; 11.35pm get up; 11.45pm meal, as per separate sheet, and rest; 12.30am, [travel to] Keswick, compare watches; 1am, Thomas starts, car keeps within call in case Thomas wants to decrease or increase clothing; 2.10am, leave road for Robinson summit, milk, one minute's rest." I need not go on...!

Thankfully, for man, team and plan, it all came good eventually. The 1922 season saw Thomas take the Fell Record to 29 peaks. In addition to Wakefield's 21, he added Great Calva and the full set of fells along the Helvellyn ridge. As he returned to Moot Hall, Thomas decided to carry straight on after only the briefest of rests, heading up to the north-western fells to gain five further peaks. While this would not be achieved within the 24 hours, his object was to complete a continuous walk with a total climb in excess of 30,000 feet. This was far more than just a neat number; it was an intentional act to ascend by more than the height of Everest, perhaps even to subtly demonstrate that he could have performed similarly in the Himalayas. As it happens, Ken Heaton was the first man to reach this altitudinal mark within 24 hours, which he did when he extended the Fell Record to 51 peaks in 1961.

Chapman's 42 fells

A small number of unsuccessful attempts were made to beat Thomas's record in the subsequent years, including by Bob Graham in 1931 (who failed owing to poor weather). The next notable assailant was Freddie Spencer Chapman, a man whose later career would involve the professions of explorer, mountaineer, soldier, schoolmaster and author. He was led to the Fell Record by Wakefield, who was keen to coax – and then coach – a hardy protégé from his alma mater so that a 'Sedburghian' could hold the record.

In May 1932, one month before Graham's eponymous round, Chapman set off from Keswick for a circuit of 42 fells. This was a huge leap on Thomas's 29 and – I surmise – based on a route developed by Graham for his abortive attempt the previous year. The additional peaks came largely in leg 3 after Bowfell; instead of heading down the Langdale valley, to Grasmere and then Fairfield, the plan was to stay on the tops and only descend at Dunmail Raise.

Going anti-clockwise, he was met on Bowfell by none other than Bob Graham, hot cocoa in hand and primed to pace him for the remainder of the leg. Sadly, Chapman flagged on the final leg, ultimately becoming enmeshed in bracken while attempting a shortcut down Skiddaw. He made it back to Moot Hall, just not within the time. But he was the first person to complete the Bob Graham Round of fells, albeit in 25 hours. Having come so close, newspaper accounts tell us "Mr. Chapman hope[s] to make another attempt on the record in June." In the end, he did not. Graham, on the other hand...

Bob Graham and the Fell Record

On 13 June 1932, Graham finished what Chapman could not manage and the Fell Record was taken to 42 peaks. The tale of his round is told splendidly in books such as '42 Peaks', 'The Round' and 'Stud Marks on the Summits'. However, a little-known epilogue is that, just like others before him, Graham was not satisfied with his achievement and sought to better his own record in 1933. His aim was to reach the landmark 30,000 feet by adding "two or three" fells from the Grasmoor massif. Frustratingly, he was beaten by weather on two occasions. His second thwarted attempt ended on 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."

For our purposes, what is most interesting is how the histories of the Bob Graham Round and the Fell Record diverge at this point. Why did Bob Graham's round become immortalised over any other?

There are, perhaps, three reasons. The first is the untiring commitment of Fred Rogerson, inaugural Chairman of the Bob Graham Club. The second is the prominence of Graham in Keswick society and the fact he was – and still is – the person who has held the record for the longest period. Finally, by the early 1970s, competition between the Heatons, Eric Beard and Joss Naylor had pushed the 24-Hour Fell Record out of reach from all but a handful of gifted athletes.

In establishing the Club, Rogerson's aim was 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." His nurturing of the BGR was a way to help maintain, promote and celebrate the challenge of 24-hour rounds, even if the actual Fell Record could not be furthered by mainstream contenders. With every successful completion, the round laid down stronger roots.

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. Happily, so too is the Fell Record, reinvigorated by Kim Collison's latest achievement.

This article is a brief and selective summary, drawing from a broader research project on the history of the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record. Please contact peterwmcdonald@gmail.com for further information.

Full references are available at: www.anewfoundcompendium.com/autumnfellrunner2020