

Lake District Classic Rock Challenge

Both fell running and climbing have a long tradition of linking individual summits or routes to create a memorable challenge in the pursuit of pain and exhaustion. In addition to this is the ever more apparent fact that there are many activists that enjoy both climbing and running on the fells and you may start to see where the idea of a combined climbing/running challenge had its origins. The Lake District, whilst not claiming a monopoly, does have a long and proud tradition of both climbing and running, so what better place to provide a fun-filled day out for the climber that also runs, or the runner that also climbs.

What follows here is a description of a tremendous example of such a challenge. A traverse of the 15 rock climbs in the Lake District to be found in Ken Wilson's Classic Rock, on foot, unsupported in under 24 hours. The aim of this article is to provide a description that will hopefully encourage others to attempt a repeat. I also hope to give some explanation for undertaking this sufferfest and some of the questions we tackled before setting out.

Route Grade Crag

Murray's Route S Dow, Coniston

Ash Tree Slabs VD Gimmer, Langdale

C Route S

Bracket & Slab S

Bowfell Buttress VD Bowfell, Langdale

Jones' Route Direct HS Scafell, Wasdale

Moss Ghyll Grooves MVS

Tophet Wall HS Napes, Wasdale

Needle Ridge VD

Napes Needle HS

Rib & Slab HS Pillar, Ennerdale

New West Climb VD

Gillercombe Buttress S Gillercombe, Borrowdale

Troutdale Pinnacle S Black Crag, Borrowdale

Little Chamonix VD Shepherds, Borrowdale

The route chosen to link all of these was just less than 40 miles going from south to north. It included approximately 16,000 feet of ascent on the fell and approx. 4000 feet on the rock. The team was simply myself and Brian Davison. Now Brian is barking mad! He is a remarkable climbing all-rounder who relishes a challenge more than most. Brian's winter and summer climbing achievements are extensive, yet to me it is his chalk, shale and his attraction for very long girdle traverses that are most impressive. Our last joint mis-adventure was to mountain bike 100 miles round the Lake District, starting and finishing in Kendal and visiting each of the Fell & Rock Climbing Club huts. This was a longer push and carry of a bike than anyone should have to endure. Brian subsequently went on to repeat this madness around the Scottish Mountaineering Club huts; first on a mountain bike, then on foot and then on a road bike.

The current list of Classic Rock routes had been linked in 24 hours in 1994 by Dave Willis, Tim Gould and Mike van Gullick, but with the inclusion of a car for two sections. Our challenge was to do this entirely on foot and without assistance. In doing this we shifted the emphasis of the challenge further in the direction of running and climbing, rather than just climbing.

In addition to running kit we took rock shoes, about 20 metres of 9mm rope, 5 wires, 4 slings and 4 karabiners (a normal Wharton/Davison rack some might say!) We also carried all food for the day – consisting of Wilf's flapjack and chocolate biscuits.

There were a lot of questions to settle beforehand. Route choice was of course central to success or failure. More taxing questions arose around the use of support, though it was always going to be on foot. Why not have someone meet us with food and drink? What about someone with a rope for an abseil? Would it count if we down-climbed a route? How much equipment should we take? We chose to “go-it-alone” and be entirely self-sufficient. Mainly because it was easier than trying to persuade someone else to spoil their day at our expense but it also seemed the right thing to do. This precluded any assistance with an abseil rope which would have been very handy on Gimmer in particular. We could have taken a full rope to abseil, but of course would have had to carry the extra weight along with harnesses, descender and more belay kit. The kit we did take was bare minimum yet still important. We did not want to fail for want of a little reassurance if we came across a patch of damp rock. With hindsight and particularly if we had done a more thorough recce, the rope was not necessary but I would still take what we did – just in case. The final decision was whether or not to down-climb some of the routes. In the end we considered it fair game as we will have still climbed all the routes. Just because all the first ascensionists were blinkered into starting at the bottom on each occasion did not mean we should be!

Having left a car in Borrowdale overnight, the fun started at the foot of Murray’s Route on Dow at 0400 on 9th July 2005, a day that was later to become very hot indeed. However in the emerging daylight with the crag not surprisingly all to ourselves we set off. Because of the dim light, and because we are both very careful, sensible chaps, we tied the 9mm rope round our waists and moved off together. Reaching the end of our first route part way up B Buttress we scrambled the rest of the way to the summit then ran down to Goat’s Hause and up to join the last section of the Old County Tops race route to Wrynose pass and on to Langdale. The descent down to the Three Shires Stone was spectacular as the sun rose over the Eastern Fells and illuminated the pools of mist that sat over Little Langdale. The climb up to Gimmer was remarkably easy in the cool of the early morning and without the burden of a normal climbing rucksack. We linked Ash Tree Slabs with C Route before a time consuming descent down the South East Gully to then return to the top via Bracket and Slab. A reverse solo of B&S would have saved a considerable amount time.

Next on the agenda was Bowfell. This is so close as the crow flies, unfortunately not having the flying ability of a crow there was a major route choice to be made. Would you choose to retain as much height as possible and traverse round the head of the valley beneath Rossett Pike, or take the much shorter direct line? We chose the latter so had to contend with the long drop into the valley and up the other side. It was now getting warmer. Bowfell Buttress, once we were there passed without incident, bathed in glorious morning sunshine. A traverse underneath Esk Pike to Esk Hause, reversing the Langdale race route, lined us up for the approach to Scafell. It must have been getting hot because I remember thinking (for the first and possibly last time in my life) how good it was to see Scafell Crag in the shade. In fact we had chosen the day of the Wasdale fell race, a championship race this year, which saw an unprecedented number of runners drop out or be timed-out at checkpoints largely due to the debilitating heat. Jones’ Route Direct From Lord’s Rake has one tricky move for its grade but this soon yielded and a quick descent of Steep Ghyll with the assistance of our bit of rope saw us racing some other parties to the foot of Moss Ghyll Grooves. On the face of it, this was supposed to be the hardest route of the day. The guide certainly describes it so. In addition, I had not done it before and Brian had only done it in full winter conditions twenty years previously! Not knowing quite what to expect we tied on for the main pitch with the move out to the arête. Of course it was fine, and anyway I’m not altogether sure what use a 9mm rope tied round the waist would be.

We luckily escaped a cloud that suddenly engulfed Scafell by running down the corridor route to Styhead and on to the Napes for the finest route of the day – Tophet Wall. The exposure and big wall feel of the route combined with great climbing makes this one of the best outings in the

District, especially at a grade that anyone can manage. We reversed down Needle Ridge then quickly up and down The Needle. Meanwhile a large family group were having a great time "Threading the Needle" – up one side of the gap and down the other.

Next came the nightmare section - the long slog out to Pillar passing some sorry looking runners on the Wasdale race. Apart from Stephen Reid and a few other committed devotees, Pillar doesn't see as many visitors as other, more local crags. Those who do make the effort will normally get a really early start and cram as much into the day as possible to make the long trek worthwhile. We had to run all the way out there in the middle of the day, do two routes and leave immediately. On arrival an energy gel did its magic and I was fired-up once more. We reversed New West Climb – very exciting at the start of the chimney pitch. At the bottom we met Steve Reid and Chris King climbing a new route Rib and Rib (E1). We made our apologies as we scrambled over Chris on a common section at the start of Rib and Slab. Once back on top we had the tedious return of the outward trip. We chose the obvious route past Black Sail Pass and along the north side of Kirk Fell and Gable to traverse underneath Green Gable and so on up to eventually reach the top of Gillercombe. The route Gillercombe Buttress does have some good climbing sections, but a lot between them. The crag also has quite a long descent route. Once again, a recce of the route beforehand could have resulted in us choosing to down-climb and save more time. As it was, neither of us had even been near the crag before.

From Seathwaite of course it is just along the road, down Borrowdale. Let me say that again: "...it is just along the road..." You cannot imagine how far along that road it is, especially at the end of a very long day, wearing fell shoes, with swollen feet in agony from having been repeatedly squashed into hot, sweaty rock shoes. I have no problem in admitting that I felt completely wasted on the approach up through the woods to Black Crag. But a remarkable thing happened on arrival at the crag, which might give some indication of the balance of the challenge between the running and climbing, for me at least. Having once more squeezed sore feet into rock shoes, as soon as I gingerly stepped onto the rock and started climbing I once again felt as fresh as if it were the first route of the day. The climb went easily enough despite the gathering gloom of dusk. By the time we had made the last, short dash along the valley and reached Little Chamonix it was completely dark and so the last route of the day was done by head torch. We topped-out at 2338 – a total of 19 hours and 38 minutes. Maybe it was the time of day or the dehydration, or maybe it was the lack of other supporters around, but at the end I felt considerably more exhausted than at the end of the Bob Graham round. It is also worth pointing out that Brian did an unsupported Bob Graham three weeks later and reported that he felt fresher at the end of that than after the Classic Rock challenge. With a degree of satisfaction, but lacking any great elation we just needed some relief from the still warm evening. We simply drove along to the lake shore and waded out into Derwentwater which was disappointingly shallow and not as cold as I had hoped.

It had been a tremendous day out with a great combination of the things I like doing best. The weather was always going to be challenging. If you want a clear day with maximum light it has to be the middle of summer and so will be hot. The alternative is an overcast, claggy day with risk of damp greasy rock – and anyway it is never like that in the Lakes.

There now appears to be many climbers who are also fell running, so here is a challenge for all of them. There is clearly scope to reduce the time between the crags and with more prior knowledge of the routes some time could be saved there too. It is well worth the effort, certainly a challenge that will stick in my mind for some time – at least until Brian comes up with some new way of making us suffer!