

## **If At First You Don't Succeed ... A Winter Bob Graham Round**

*7 December 2003*

The streets of Keswick are deserted and not for the first time, I begin to wonder what on earth I am doing alone at 4.25 am on an icy December morning with the prospect of 24 cold hours before me. I start hesitantly, protecting the knee which has been giving me so much pain over the preceding months. I feel twinges as I trot down the High Street which does not bode well for the day ahead – 300 metres down, only 65 miles to go!

Fortunately the pain in the knee eases as I leave the town and I enter a different world. A full moon is casting its spell, seemingly sending everything to sleep. Nothing moves, all is still. The crunch of my shoes on the hard frost and my steaming breath are all that disturb the perfect calm. The world is asleep and I am in a different place.

The sack slows me down as I jog up the lane, and the first rocks of Robinson are verglassed and time-consuming. The six weeks of 'flu have taken their toll and I am slow, but it seems not to matter on a night like this. This moonlit world is mine for a night and I have such an overwhelming feeling of privilege to have it to myself. The wind allows no idle sauntering, however, and stings me in to action over Hindscarth, Dale Head and Grey Knotts. Copious ice drools down the rocks and verglas glazes the bald head of Gable, but as Pillar lights up pink, glorious day banishes the dark of the night. The rocky ridges are a delight in the frigid morning air and it feels good to be alive. I skitter down the screes of Yewbarrow in a joyous controlled tumble and join my support feeling elated and also somewhat sweaty.

Christmas pudding powers me up Scafell, at last free of the sack, and enjoying the company on that most dreary of slopes. Scafell – what a mountain of contrasts: The fierce cliffs of the Crag and the grassy slopes of the moor that stretch, seemingly unending from the lake to the summit. They do end but today this signals the start of a searing pain in my knee. I am forced to walk down the stones to Foxes Tarn, but thankfully the pain eases and I can enjoy the day once more. Scafell Pike, Broad Crag, Ill Crag, Great End, Esk Pike, Bowfell ... the summits slip by. Even Martcrag Moor fails to dim my enthusiasm and a deep red glow lights up the Langdale Pikes. Only as we descend High Raise does the light fade and with it my spirits. The icy path seems to drag on endlessly over the bog to Steel Fell and I am glad to finally drop down what looks like a precipice in the dark to the welcoming lights of the support party at Dunmail.

The cold of the night starts to grip me and the steep slopes of Seat Sandal are a brutal reminder of the labour ahead. Yet once we are established on the Helvellyn ridge, the beauty of the moonlight is not lost on me. It weaves its magic once more, revealing the proud buttresses and dark gullies that flank the windswept plateau. On and on, slowly now, but with purpose. Blencathra rears ahead, a blunt reminder of the work still to be done. We stop only for a few minutes at Threlkeld and push on, my head swimming, my legs buckling. Gary's light eases ahead but I can do no more than sway my way up the rocky crest. I hold on to the rocks, fearful of falling off the ridge in my spaced-out state. The experience seems quite surreal now – its as if I can do nothing else but keep moving, my head a jumbled mess dominated by the desire to finish this. Only this desire overcomes the overwhelming instinct to sit down and go to sleep, or at least it would be if Gary weren't there to cajole me on.

I feel as though I'm running down Blencathra, but in reality I'm not: I'm walking. As we hit the tussocks of Mungrisedale Common I slow even further until the heather reduces my pace to a slow thrash. I'm cold, I'm fed up of the dark, I feel sick, I want this to end. Gary gets further and further away as I pull my way through the heather. I feel angry, tearful and weak all in the same moment. The heather just seems to get thicker, I get slower and the summit gets no nearer whilst my time is slipping away, slowly at first, but then more and more, until I realise that I am not going to make this. I cry out in frustration, yank my way through the heather and once on the path, 'charge' as best I can up to the summit. I know that I'm beaten but I won't believe it yet. I take a swig of coffee and trot after Gary. He leads expertly down the trod and on to the grass of Skiddaw and I force myself on, driven only by the thought of failure. Gary drops behind but I wheeze my way upwards. Soon I am on the top where the wind cuts right through me. I look at my watch – 53 minutes – should be just about possible, even in my feeble state. I lean in to the wind and soon Gary overtakes me to lead me down the long and winding road that leads to Keswick. On and on we go – I can go no faster, but

surely we have time? I can only try my hardest, but at Latrigg Car Park I know the game is up. We run on as fast as I can manage but as we reach the park, the time is up: nothing is said. We just walk quietly back to the Moot Hall. It is 4.30 – five minutes too late.

*20 January 2004*

I fail to sleep, worrying over what equipment to take as the conditions are looking challenging. Should I take an ice-axe and crampons – will I have any chance with the extra weight or will it be too dangerous without? I toss and turn and eventually decide to leave out the crampons but take the ice axe which proves to be a good decision.

As I drive over to Keswick, snow sweeps across the road mesmerising me in the darkness. My sack is too heavy and even the road up to Newlands is icy and slow. Above 450m I enter the cloud with next to no visibility in the impenetrable dark with no moon to light the way and mist to reflect back the feeble rays of my torch. The snow is crusty and 15cm deep with 30cm drifts, and the only footsteps are intermittent and partially snow filled. Running is quite impossible even on the level sections in the mist, snow and dark. The whole experience takes on a hostile quality, which only deepens when the wind rises to whip away a glove in to the night. As I approach Honister I am already half an hour down on schedule, but having missed a night's sleep I am not going to stop now, notwithstanding the greyness of the dawn and the impending slog up Grey Knotts which proves to be tortuous with no tracks in deep snow. On Gable the wind has turned the snow to neve and I am glad of my ice-axe, a feeling which grows on the slow descent to Beck Head where 30cm of powder overlies frozen scree and neve. By Jos' Gully I am chuntering thanks to God as the chockstone requires definite climbing moves to overcome it and the axe proves indispensable. By Pillar the wind has picked up to almost gale force with spindrift blowing across the ridge and filling any steps in the snow, whilst the traverse out to Steeple proves to be a teetering affair in my Walshes, with 20cm of powder overlying rock hard neve. My Walshes don't even dent the snow and I only make progress by whacking my axe in and shuffling my feet across tentatively. This nervy traverse is followed by waves of snow being whipped up by the wind over Red Pike, hurling the spindrift in to my face in a stinging assault and by Yewbarrow I have had enough.

However, my support has driven for two and a half hours to get to Wasdale so I feel obliged to carry on, despite being an hour and a half over schedule. The impetus has gone from the day and my mood is as downcast as the cloud hanging over Scafell. Fortunately the snow has blown off the Western slopes of the mountain, but this has only been deposited on the descent to Foxes Tarn where knee deep powder predominates. With no prospect of the cloud lifting and the wind still strong I give up at Scafell Pike and descend to the comforts of Langdale.

*8 February 2004*

Back again at the Moot Hall. This time I don't rate my chances at all, feeling jaded and without support. However, the night is superb with almost a full moon and snow above 550m. By way of variation I go clockwise starting at 8.50 p.m. and up to the summit of Skiddaw everything goes smoothly despite snow and a stiff breeze. It isn't long, however, before I realise the enormity of my challenge. The slopes leading to Calva are covered in crusty windblown snow in which I make big holes as I lunge down. The snow trapped in the heather below Hare Crag is truly exasperating and whilst the moon lends an austere beauty to the white slopes, it doesn't make them any easier to climb. The Caldew is icy cold and reaches above the knees, after which the never ending slopes of Mungrisedale Common reduce my shins to a bloody mass by way of the icy crust cutting my legs as surely as a rasp. The Alpine Ridge of Halls Fell rejuvenates my soul, but progress is slow as I pick my way down the icy rocks in the moonlight. I can't undo my laces at Threlkeld as they have frozen in to an icy mass, but eventually I manage to pull them off and feel life again in my feet which have lost all feeling over the last two hours.

Things go better over the Helvellyn Ridge where the snow appears to have been blown away and I start to get back on schedule, but Dollywagon sinks me as surely as an anchor tied to my waist, except that I am sunk not in deep water but snow. By Seat Sandal I'm drowning in self pity, utterly drained and lacking in

inspiration to continue. I retire for breakfast and a quick exit.

*19 December 2004*

Another year, another cold, another BG attempt. This time I have a driver (hooray) who takes me to the Moot Hall and waves me on my way. Not quite the start of the London Marathon, but infinitely better than those lonely starts of last year. Despite my sore throat I seem to progress easily up the road and my progress is equally rapid on the fell, notwithstanding the snow which graces the slopes. It is a delight to skip over the crunchy white blanket in the moonlight, particularly as I bound down the slopes from Dale Head, the snow lighting up my way and cushioning my footsteps as I go.

However my joy turns to alarm as I fail to see any lights at Honister. I run from one car park to the next like a tadpole darting to and fro, but all in vain. Gary is nowhere to be found, so with just my fleecy buffalo jacket, under gloves, 3 chocolate bars and no crampons or ice-axe, I set forth. I skitter about in the wind on Green Gable where the snow has been blasted in to an ice rink, but fortune favours me on Great Gable where the snow just lies deep. This makes for a whooping, exhilarating tumble through the powder snow where gravity does its work and the snow stops gravity from taking me rather further down the hill than I intend. The hills are positively plastered in snow and on Kirkfell I realise the enormity of the day ahead as drifted, crusty snow starts to make the going very laborious and tiring. At times the wind is gusty and whips up spindrift, which has blown over the tracks, but the physical ardour is more than recompensed by a sublime pink sunrise on Pillar, which gradually turns in to the full brilliance of a sparkling winter's day. I can not believe that I am here on this day in these conditions. It feels such a privilege to scamper over virgin snows on the roof of England. All around is thick snow, white and unblemished, whilst above is the deep blue of the sky, untroubled by the slightest hint of a cloud. Only as I descend below the snowline to Yewbarrow is the perfect symmetry disturbed by the rocks beneath.

Falling down the screes of Yewbarrow, I begin to dwell on the pleasures of the rest stop, but on arrival all is quiet. Cars line the road but of Gary there is no sign. Dejectedly I pull off my shoes and remove the grit before replacing them and my wet socks. I have a swig of water, eat my remaining chocolate bar and reluctantly drag myself toward Scafell. I can not think what has happened to him (It later transpires that Gary missed me at Honister because he became stuck on the ice at Newlands Pass, not being able to go nor down. After that he did get to Wasdale but went to sleep in the car with his head out of sight, so that I didn't see him and not knowing his car had no reason to suppose that he was there), but I have no choice but to continue, once more alone and this time without any food until I meet Simon at Esk Hause. The climb up Scafell doesn't get any better with repetition but the traverse below Scafell East Buttress from Foxes Tarn is magnificent. Deep snow and ice bury the traverse near the rock wall, untraveled and perfect. Above the sun's rays carve the deep blue sky, whilst I carefully pick my way through this Alpine scene of ice bosses and drifted snow. Its as if I'm trespassing in a virgin snow garden, forbidden to spoil this pristine beauty, but the lack of an axe makes me touch the ice, feel the snow, rub my chin in it, kick, scrabble and heave up it. Away from the crowds, I'm not in England, I'm part of it, part of this ancient landscape which today shows no sign of man. Its quite simple – rock, snow and sky – and thats the beauty of it.

On Scafell Pike I am rudely awakened from my reverie, so I hurry on to meet Simon, keen to escape from the crowds. Its good to have company, but I'm alarmed to find that I can't eat: my body needs fuel but I can't take it in. Over Bowfell and on to Pike O Stickle this seems to have little impact but then I run out of gas and my engine stops running. Simon descends to Langdale and I continue, once more alone, but this time I feel alone; I feel cold and I feel exhausted. My batteries need recharging but I have nothing to charge them with. The drifts which I was previously forcing myself through seem to swallow my legs. By Calf Crag it is dark and my spirits sink further. Below the snowline much ice has formed, so much hop, skipping and jumping ensues on the path out to Steel Fell. I slither slowly down to Dunmail, hoping to recover from a rest and hot food. It doesn't happen.

I'm unable to digest any food, I'm chilled and the tongue on my Inov8s has slipped to one side cutting in to my foot. In the dark, Simon and I slip-slide our way up Fairfield, and then down it. I'm losing time on each section, Simon has to return to his car and I face a night on my own in poor condition, with the prospect of drifted, trackless snow on the back of Skiddaw and Blencathra. The chances of completing within 24 hours

look increasingly slim and hazardous. Reluctantly I descend after one of the most magnificent day's I could ever hope to enjoy in England's hills.

*23 January 2005*

Full moon + snow + reasonable weather forecast = Winter Bob Graham Attempt. After the debacle with support in December I opt for a solo unsupported attempt, this time going clockwise. There's not a lot of snow but enough to make it look like winter. Unfortunately the cloud descends on Jenkin Hill and remains with me for much of the first part of the night. It even starts to snow on Calva, which only adds to the sombre mood. After the perfection of December, thrashing through heather strewn slopes in the dark in a blizzard and alone doesn't seem a lot of fun. Nevertheless I continue well enough considering the fresh snow, past Threlkeld, over the Dodds and on to Helvellyn. The wind has risen to a gale from the North East so I can't stop even if I had wanted to – the screaming wind cuts across the plateau and through my jacket. By Fairfield the wind is a strong gale, thudding in to me with every gust and threatening to take me off my feet. I reason that it is funneling up Grisedale, but am sorely disappointed when it only strengthens on Seat Sandal. It is the middle of the night, very dark, very, very cold and I am reduced to a crawl. I can't stand up let alone walk, so on I crawl through the snow with nothing more than my Buffalo jacket on. The wind chill must easily be below -20 C and I'm crawling on my hands and knees alone at 4.30am in the dark. I can't hear anything above the battering of the wind on my hood and I can't see anything in the darkness – all that I can do is feel – feel the power of the wind, the friendless rocks and the ice crust. Only the effort of pulling myself onwards keeps me from succumbing to the cold and anyway, once the wind becomes this strong, it actually feels warmer from the sheer effort required to fight it.

Finally I win the battle and the wind yields on the far side of the hill. Dunmail still seems a pretty hostile place with the wind whistling up the pass, and only a flask of tea provides any comfort. The soggy cold sandwich that passes for breakfast certainly doesn't, nor does the prospect of re-ascending in to the tempest once more. However, I am on my own, I don't fancy hanging around for a lift and I can't think of anything else to do at 5am on a cold winter's morning, so I just carry on. Although windy, its not as severe as on Seat Sandal and I can walk, albeit not in a straight line. I am bounced like a toy from Steel Fell to Calf Crag to Sergeant Man and there I stop. Tiredness hits me in a wave and I am powerless to prevent it: my eyelids close, my body curls up like a fetus and I doze in the shelter of the cairn. Day is about to dawn, but my day is finished. I dodge the ice for a breakfast in Grasmere.

*17 December 2005*

What feels like an annual pilgrimage to Bob Graham Land is about to begin, and as has been the case for my previous pilgrimages, I feel poorly prepared. I have had a cold for two weeks and have been prevented from racing since August by overwhelming tiredness, but I conclude that deep reserves are what count for the BG and that may be enough. This time I engage the support of an able team of pacers and of my wife, Alison, for the road stops. I warn them all that I may pass out and give them instructions on what to do should this happen, since I blacked out only a month previously whilst on a run and feel prone to faintness. I hope that my pacers aren't unduly alarmed! In my weakened state I'll need all the help that I can get.

The first excitement of the day is provided by Jonny driving at 85 mph by means of his knees holding the steering wheel whilst drinking a cup of coffee. I am reminded of the Mr. Bean sketch in which he changes from his pyjamas in to his work clothes whilst driving his mini – except he was not charging up the motorway. Anyway we arrive at the Moot Hall safe and sound and the late revelers laugh as we jog down the High Street. I have a distinct sense of *deja vu*, as my knee is hurting slightly, its crisp and I'm not feeling at my best – two years on and little seems to have changed.

One thing has changed, however, and that is the company. This provides a psychological boost as we jog along the lanes and up the first hill. The moon is amazingly bright – the brightest for many years I subsequently learn – and torches are dispensed with until we reach Robinson. Jonny's enthusiasm is infectious and we soon arrive at Honister where Bob is waiting having spent the night in his car. Jonny seems quite concerned that Bob will be cold until I tell him that Bob has climbed the North Face of the Eiger

and Honister Car Park shouldn't present him with too many problems.

I determine to push on to the extent that Bob and Jonny struggle to keep up and I am glad that I know the route so well. The rocks are mercifully dry until Gable where we are forced to pick our way carefully down the slippery rocks, still very much in the dark. When day dawns, it is very good rather than exceptional, and I can't help but compare it with the previous December of unblemished snow. The snowless and dry conditions make for fast going however, and the only mishap is the churning in my bowels, which demands frequent stops all the way to Dunmail where Simon provides a pill which bungs me up at last.

The summits seem to fly by in fairly effortless succession until before I know it, I am once more battling the screes down Yewbarrow. The warmth of the sun begins to make itself felt and I strip off at Wasdale. Deja vu once more as I consume Christmas pudding and custard and plod up that familiar grassy slope to Scafell. Ali has gone on ahead to rig a rope on Broad Stand, but his efforts are repelled by sheets of ice on the slabs and he greets us near Scafell before leading off down a sneaky short cut to the Mickledore traverse. Even this is surprisingly icy but Ali leads on expertly and chatters away in his genial manner. It feels comforting to have two good pacers and we make good time until Hanging Knotts where we miss the track and take a poor, time-consuming route down the stones. I don't have to think – I just follow like a sheep, responding occasionally to the conversation. Unlike the sheep, I struggle to munch on the move and feel a bit sick, so I stop on Harrison Stickle to force a piece of Christmas cake down. It seems fitting to consume seasonal fare in the festive season, and fires me on. We reach Dunmail before dark and have gained so much time that I have 11 and a half hours for the last two sections.

Keith has failed to arrive, but fortunately Simon and Andy are there ready to take me over Helvellyn and I begin to think that I will have to struggle very badly not to finish this time. The dark descends and with it my spirits. The darkness seems to draw my energy, and it draws out time, elongating minutes to hours, hours to days. It also distorts perspective: what seems near is far, and far is near. In this environment I can only plod ahead focused on nothing in particular, wishing for the end. But the end is still a long way off and I feel sick, a little at first, but as the slope steepens it gets worse until I am forced to hold back to curb my sickness. I resolve to plod slowly until the end to manage the sickness.

Simon chatters away, but I can do no more than grunt the occasional reply. My head can't focus on anything apart from the sickness, but the company is a welcome relief from the darkness all around and the boredom of the night. In my tired state, the night is boring, so boring, as I can do no more than shuffle along focusing on the path ahead, trying not to think too much and keeping focused on the goal. Each step is much like the last and the next and the next and the next .... There's a small pool of light just ahead, a bit of gravel in between and then there's me, a gently lumbering body eking out the miles, top after top after top. After Dollywagon it's just a case of shuffling forward at a pace that accommodates my sickness whilst not losing the light in front. The moon casts little useful light but rises as an orange orb in the direction of High Street. We do not stop, but gently traverse the night's highway of Helvellyn and the Dodds. I am wrapped in a world of my own, where fatigue, nausea and darkness immerse my head in a fug, from which Simon tries to extract me by his chatter. It is fortunate that Andy is there to converse as I can do no more than mutter an unintelligible response.

From our night's highway, we descend deliciously springy grass to the Newsham road, and meander up to the waiting party of Alison and Dave. Alison tends to my every need, which aren't many if the truth be known, as I am in a bit of a stupor. I try the ubiquitous Christmas pudding but spit it out at the first mouthful. Its dextrosol and water from now on: not quite as seasonal but then again if they made mincemeat flavoured tablets ... Dave looks anxious to be off, so it's a last goodbye and the beginning of the end. This is the section that I've tried to forget about, where the going gets tough and the tough get ... slower. If slowness is a measure of toughness then I must be very tough. The pace seems quite relaxed but I can't raise my speed without increasing my nausea, so I stick to slow plodding in the knowledge that I have more than five and a half hours to complete. Dave has listened carefully to my request to stick close to me whilst setting the pace, and he leads up Halls Fell like an Alpine Guide with a clueless client, telling me which route to take and berating me when I say that I just want to go to sleep. I feel severely woozy and begin to sway from side to side to the extent that I hold on to the rocks to save myself from falling from the ridge. It is uncanny how history is repeating itself from two years ago. I am determined, however, that history will not repeat itself in the final moments, and shuffle off the summit without stopping. I am eating and drinking very little, but the

end is near now. I can feel it with a sense of mounting anticipation.

Not that you would know it on the broad slopes of Mungrisedale Common. The shuffle downwards degrades to a walk in the deep tussocks near the bottom and then its the river. By now I couldn't care less and just splash through the water above my ankles. Dave is more circumspect but nevertheless I suspect that he has wet feet as we grope our way through the knee high heather and tussocks. In the dark, we fail to locate the trod and struggle in the boggy jungle, pulling our way forward until we finally reach the sheepfold and the sanity of a reasonable path. It seems that the Back of Skiddaw is reaping a revenge on me once more.

This time, however, I know the way, and it is no more than an arduous pull up the fence to the cairn on Calva. I heave myself up, arm over arm, all dignity long since departed. Forty one down one to go. It has taken us almost one hour and forty minutes, and time is getting a bit tight, so we don't hang around and shuffle off down the trod towards the stream. By now, the hard frozen ground causes each step to send a shock up my leg and in to my knee, so I shuffle hesitantly through the heather following the light in front. I am divorced from my surroundings, save for the immediate environs of the path, my feet and the torchlight.

We inch forward to the stream, then find the trod through the heather to Hare Crag and on to the open slopes of Skiddaw. Without the time pressure of two years ago, we just plod steadily upwards and before I know it I am on Skiddaw's summit. Like two year's ago it is a breezy and cold spot, so we set off directly for Keswick. The pace is raised a fraction but we should have enough time, and I settle in to a rhythmic shuffle downwards. On Jenkin Hill, Dave becomes anxious about the time. He says that it takes him 18 minutes from the summit to the Latrigg Car Park in training, but I'll be lucky to manage it in double that time today. He urges me on to the car park where we pick up the pace slightly and I follow him silently through the trees. There is an urgency to the night now: Dave's anxiety is infectious and I begin to wonder whether I will do it after all. I look again at my watch – less than 20 minutes to go, but its only a mile and a half. It really shouldn't be a problem. Over the bridge, along the road and in to the park. Its only a short way now. Up the alley, in to the car park, through the ginnel and we're there: Alison cries out at the Moot Hall. A last run up to the steps and check the watch: 23 hours and 54 minutes. Dave breathes a big sigh of relief and Alison hugs me. My pilgrimage is over.

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