

The Manx Mountain Marathon

Mark Harris had finally managed to persuade me that spending the Easter holidays on the Isle of Man was a good idea. Beautiful scenery, lots of child friendly beaches, steam railways, oh and a 31 mile race with 8,000ft of ascent on Easter Saturday. Surely that would involve running around the island three times at least? When I dug out the map, I was surprised to find that the course is not as contrived as one might think. The route follows the wild, rugged backbone of the Isle of Man, from Ramsey, in the North East, over Snaefell (the highest point at 2,038ft) to Port Erin, at the southern tip. Not bad for an island 30 miles long and only 15 miles across. The race was first run in 1970 and ever since has attracted competitors from across the British Isles. This year there were also a good number from Clayton and Calder Valley.

We rented a cottage in Foxdale with the Harris family and spent the week walking around some of the stunning coastline, building sandcastles on unspoilt beaches and getting out for the odd run. We had all sorts of weather and one day awoke to find three inches of snow in the back garden. Helen and Ali took the opportunity to run up South Barrule that morning and from the summit could see Scotland, the Lake District, Snowdonia and the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland.

Mark ("I used to be a climber") had badgered me into doing the race with his usual energy and enthusiasm. I think he is in danger of becoming a serious nutter as he has even been muttering about Bob Graham rounds. This is what having two young children does to you – anything to get out of the house.

Before leaving home, I sought the advice of the oracle that is Jim Smith. He knows a thing or two, having done the race 20 times. Jim recommended that I familiarise myself with the middle section of the course which can involve some difficult route finding in bad weather. So on a wet and windy Wednesday we set off to recce the section from Colden to St John's. All went well until the final descent from Greeba Mountain. We only had grid references for check points so didn't really know where the route went. We took a bearing and in thick mist descended straight into a waist-deep sea of gorse bushes. Tracksters are not very thick. We spent all evening removing small thorns from our legs – a very painful process, much to the amusement of Helen and Ali. Mark and I could not walk past a gorse bush after that without wincing. To make it worse on race day the route was flagged all the way from the summit down a gorse-free grassy trod. The descent recce had been pointless.

Race day arrived and conditions were perfect, sunny with a slight breeze. We found our way to the market square in Ramsey where there was assembled the scruffiest bunch of fellrunners I had ever seen, and you have seen the people I hang around with! It was a low key start and at 9.15 the race set off with 86 runners. The slower runners and walkers had set off an hour earlier and it was heartening to know that this was a race where I was guaranteed to overtake at least somebody. Mark shot off and I did not see him until the finish as usual. I took it steady – it's a long way.

I hoped that there might be some support at the first road crossing and sure enough, as I was descending the tussocks off Clagh Ouyr, a small crowd stood by the roadside cheering on the racers as they came through. Just before the road, a short flagged section led the runners through a deep bog, and one poor woman had to be dragged out by fellow competitors. I think Mandy would have gone in up to her neck. Was this to provide entertainment for the spectators I wondered?

Thankfully, route finding wasn't a problem and I didn't get the map out once all day. It would be a very different story in mist, a lot of the ground was featureless even though you are never far from a road. The terrain is similar to the moorland of the South Pennines – lots of tussocks and heather bashing.

We had great support from Helen and Ali, who appeared at every road crossing with plentiful supplies of food drink, though I think Mark had set off with enough food for a two-day event judging by the weight of his rucksack. My steady start paid off and I was starting to pass knackered-looking people who had set off too quickly. I knew how they felt having done the same thing in the Wuthering Hike the month before.

I was now getting reports that Mark was suffering with cramp and slowing down but he was too far ahead to even think I might catch him.

The last part of the race running down the coastal path to Fleshwick Bay was very enjoyable even with tired legs, but there was a sting in the tail, a nasty climb up to Bradda Hill. There always seems to be one in every race and this one is a killer. Just when I thought the climbing was over, the route descended all the way to sea level then required a 600ft scabble up a steep grass bank to the summit cairn. Then the end was in sight as I approached the final checkpoint, Bradda Tower, which overlooks Port Erin and the finish!

I ran onto the promenade to see Helen waving me into the finish area, clearly relieved to see me as we were due to catch the ferry home in a couple of hours and she had told me she was catching the ferry no matter what. It was a good job I hadn't got lost. I was fairly pleased with my time, 6 hrs 31, which placed me 33rd. Mark finished 22nd in 6 hrs 6. The winner was Paul Thompson from Clayton who finished in a time of 4hrs 54.

The Manx Mountain Marathon is classic race, one I think anyone who enjoys long races would love. It's got a very laid back feel about it even though it was extremely well-organised. It would be great to get a Harriers meet there one Easter. The only slight downside is a lack of good pubs, but then again, I was unable to carry out much detailed research. Anyway, when did that ever prove a problem for Toddlies?

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