

Running the Mary Towneley Loop

Iggy Pop and the Happy Mondays join Colin for a day out on the Pennine Bridleway

One night I'd had a bit too much to drink (how come all my stories start like this?), and as we sat in a warm, post pack run haze at the Sportsman's bar, one conversation led to another and just as one lie leads to a bigger lie, one half thought through notion led to another. Before I knew it I seemed to have committed myself to running the Mary Towneley Loop of the Pennine Bridleway, in a day, for no other reason than it seemed too much trouble not to.

For those who don't know, the MTL is 47 miles, but it may be as long as 50. The distance is to some extent dependent on your propensity to exaggerate and/or get lost. As the name suggests it's circular, which makes the logistics simpler than a point-to-point thing when attempting it a single day outing. Also, the planners also had to good sense to arrange it so it comes right past my front door, so to ignore it would seem bad manners.

Before we go any further let's get one thing straight. During the course of these ramblings I might suggest that I'm not overly fond of the MTL, when actually the opposite is true. I'm a fan. It probably gives an accurate view of this area, my area. Big empty moors that have seen traffic for centuries, pack horses, quarrymen, and farmers, all making tracks and laying causeway stones across this boggy moonscape in order to be able to move through an environment not conducive to travelling for much of the year. And in-between the moors, crowded little industrial towns hiding in the steep valley bottoms, these conurbations also impacting on the uplands by demanding to be fed water to drink and to keep the mills spinning and weaving, causing the innumerable reservoirs to be built. Places like Watergrove, Widdop, and Cowpe, which would be on the itinerary as I trudged around. So the people have shaped the moors, and probably the moors have shaped the people.

So the challenge was set, I would go around in a day. From there I just sort of got on with it. If there was a planning stage to my little adventure it consisted of my dredging a Tupperware container from the back of the cupboard so I could carry a bit of food. I had decided that I was to be self supporting, carrying all my needs on my back. The reasons for a solo effort was that it seemed too much trouble to organise support, and I didn't really want to be tied to a schedule. In my opinion the only people who should be tied to timetables are bus drivers. Anyway, any list of my friends would show that the vast majority would at any given time, be unavailable to help due to them being either, a) injured b) drunk c) imaginary.

So there would be no support vehicles or crowds lining the streets offering provender to revive my weary bones. Just me and a small rucksack like a wandering peddler, but without pans. And with Tupperware. And with an ipod, which would become my friend and confessor over the course of the day as the shuffle mode continually picked the most poptastic delights at the most opportune moments.

Departure time was 6am on Saturday 28th July, and just like the man in the song I loved to go a-wandering with my k napsack on my back. Coming over all Swiss, I couldn't resist a quick yodel as I shut the garden gate. My Alpine style greeting to the dawn being answered by two dogs barking and three windows slamming shut in a bad tempered fashion. I'm very popular with my neighbours, and will be more so went I get an alpenhorn.

I crossed the Rochdale canal at Callis and started to go up through the woods. As I climbed up past the occasional farmhouse, the only audible sound was my feet crunching on a fragmented surface that had been laid to ease access for farm traffic, then almost immediately been lifted and crumbled by this year's battering rains and attendant mini floods. This left a surface that was for all the world like running on broken digestive biscuits. I put on my ipod.

Nearing the top of the woods I clocked a deer making a very poor show of hiding behind a spindly birch tree. It watched me until I was level with it, then it ran away and disappeared into the tangled little of trees, its' white bum being the last thing to disappear.

Iggy Pop sang in my ear *'I'm worth a million in prizes, I got a lust for life...'* and if that doesn't put a spring in your step nothing will.

It was 06.30 and before I'd woken up properly I had traversed the orange mud strip of London Road as it skirted Langfield Common in the shadow of Stoodley Pike. Then down to Mankinholes, which could be either a disease or a village, depending on how you say it. Imagine...
'Of course our Bill was always a martyr to his Mankinholes. Sometimes couldn't sit down for days'

A quick slurp from the horse trough in the village and then along the dull tarmac section past the Shepherd's Rest before the climb over the old pack horse track at Salter Rake where the causeway makes a ribbon across the bog grass. Then a steep descent on slippery cobbles into the valley at Bottomley.

After negotiating the A646 via a Pegasus crossing, I was climbing up Reddyshore Scout past banks of Bilberry plants. Nature's service station. I'd been out for an hour and a half and there was a slight temptation to hide out here for the rest of the day, gorging myself on the purple bounty before catching the bus home when it got dark. But I dragged myself onwards, I do have some ethics, just not many.

This brings me to an important point. One of my tactics for getting around the MTL seemed to be kidding myself that I was a lot more dishonest than I actually was. What I mean is that I'd tell myself I was going to take a couple of short cuts later in the route if the going got tough (and the tough didn't get going). As it turned out my Sunday school teachers did a good enough job to ensure that I could feel unseen eyes boring into me every time I contemplated such misdemeanours. It seems I'm intrinsically honest, which came as a bit of a shock. So I ended up doing the whole thing strictly by the book.

Shortly after the bilberries, the track once again became wider as I approached a golf club. It was here that a nice lady on a horse stopped for a chat. After opening pleasantries had been given and received she seemed curious about what I was up to. I told her my plans in an excited babble, I think the bilberries were causing some sort of momentary fructose hit. She looked at me like one might look at a stranger who has just told them that he was planning to taste human flesh before the day was out and she cantered off, hell for leather towards Rochdale.

I sighed, and looked around at the grey hills heaving themselves up from the swampy ground. Everything suddenly seemed a bit pale washed out, the colour of a white shirt that has been washed with a black sock. Still, best foot forward. Not sure I had one and fell over trying to decide.

The Ramones sang 'hey ho, let's go...' Far enough.

After coming off the moors there was a motivational and geographical dip into Whitworth, pronounced 'Whit'orth' by locals who seem to think more than one 'W' in a word is just decadent. After a little route finding problem, which saw me going in the entirely wrong direction in Healey Nature Reserve, I re orientated myself and eventually found the scruffy track that took me out of the valley past rows of renovated farm buildings.

Then, looming up in front of me like a leviathan rising out of the sea of post industrial East Lancashire was the infamous long climb up Rooley Moor Road. The track up is made up of a million broken stone sets that almost, but not quite, form a suitable running surface. You feel like you should be moving quickly but can't. I continually kept turning my ankles and cursing, much to the amusement of the jeering gangs of teenagers with illegal off road motorbikes who congregated in big lumps of sneering gormlessness at every turn. It was as if these broken moors with their Mordor like puddle pocked quarries were being used as a big open air detention centre for the socially challenged youth of the area. I had strayed into a Mad Max film. Now, I consider myself a bit of a liberal lefty, but at that moment I would have brought back National Service, the birch and capitol punishment, but only for people with off road bikes with knackered exhausts (after all I'm a fair minded bloke).

As I climbed higher onto the moor, to I left the young folk behind and was left with curlews for company in the tussocks that lined the shattered cobbles. But too soon I was dropping again.

High level long distance running is a bit like air travel. You suddenly find yourself in different towns and I soon found myself befuddled by the suburban streets of Waterfoot. As I looked for any clue as to how the MTL found its way through the jumble of health centres, gardens, and schools,



Colin at the top of Callis Wood

I was abruptly in the world of normal people who carried on doing their Saturday shopping and taking the kids to football. I was aware of them looking sideways at me like I was some sort of alien in ill fitting leggings and muddy shoes. The accent of the people had changed, from Yorkshire in the early part of the morning to Lancashire as lunchtime approached. Suddenly everyone sounded all Coronation Street rather than Emmerdale.

The Byrds sang 'Eight miles high, and then you touch down. You'll find it's stranger than you've known' Spooky.

I studied the pocket guide I was carrying and found that the route through the town was short lived. The section after this passed in a blur of gates to open and blisters to moan about. I'm going to mention blisters for just one paragraph, if you don't want to read it (and god knows no-one would blame you) just move on to the next bit that goes on about Mary Towneley.

I'm not a person who is prone to blisters but I'd managed to develop two. A brace. The first was on the standard blister spot on the ball of my foot. I decided to ignore it and hope it would go away. Like you would a drunken uncle at a wedding. The other one was more problematic, it had made its home right on the very end of my little toe. Consequently it hit the end of my shoe on even the gentlest of downhill gradients. I took to whimpering, and got quite accomplished at it.

Jimmy Cliff sang 'The harder they come, the harder they fall. One and all.' Yep.

I ate a peanut butter sandwich by Mary Towneley's monument on the edge of Deerplay Moor. Although her presence had loomed over me all day, I hadn't really thought about Mary Towneley until now. I wondered what she'd have made of me doing this? She was an old school gentlewoman from Burnley's nobility who campaigned tirelessly for bridleways and the rights of their users. The handful of people I know who met her all agree that she was a thoroughly good egg and a nice lady. Unhappily she died in 2001 before this loop was fully open, but I toasted her with a pink energy drink and a Mars Bar. Here's to you Mary. After a drop into the valley at Holme Chapel, a quick climb past the wind turbines to more reservoirs at Hurstwood. Idle thoughts popped out of my tired head 'if so much water was trapped in those big concrete bathtubs, how come I'd been paddling through puddles all day?'

I reached the highest point up at Gorpel Gate and it was here that my rucksack strap began to irritate my neck, causing a big red mark that looked somewhere in-between a love bite and impetigo. But there was nothing more for it than to keep going. The next section was memorable for the mud as thick as marmalade that sucked my feet into the ground, and a headwind wind that pinched my face and slowed in to walking pace. The ruined settlement of Gorpel with its series of small reservoirs was laid out in front of me, looking for the world like it belonged in Scotland, but with slightly less midges than one might expect up there.

The Talking Heads sang 'this aint no party, this aint no disco, this aint no fooling around' Thanks for that.

The last time I had run on this bit of the Bridleway was at the excellent relay race run on the MTL, organised by Rossendale Harriers. That was back in February. I couldn't help marking at the irony that on that day the ground was so hard I'd bruised my feet and berated myself for wearing fell shoes. Today, in the dog days of British Summer, the mud was deep enough for several young ladies to wrestle in. I could have sold tickets to passing motorbike kids, who had returned to the scene after I'd though I'd lost them at Waterfoot.

In the middle of the afternoon I'd reached the Colden Valley. I really felt like I was playing a home fixture as I run up here most weeks, and whilst I hadn't expected cheering crowds welcoming home their wandering hero, I didn't expect to be fed to a rotweiler either. But I nearly was...

I was passing through a yard, the exact location of which will remain nameless. I heard the clunk of an unseen door open on the other side of the building, followed by the thudding of big paws coming around the house. The unseen occupant did a passable Ming the Merciless cackle as he shut the door.

Normally I'd have been able to get through the five bar gate before the snarling canine could have got near enough to have sunk its teeth into me, but I was too tired to increase my speed by even a fraction and reconciled to whatever was coming. I stood, like a Christian in the amphitheatre and put myself in the care of whatever godly force was paying attention.

Luckily, it seems God didn't have that much on that day and got his act together. The sun came out from behind a cloud and celestial choirs sang. The mutt took a good sniff at me, turned its nose up and toddled off home, sneezing. Poor beast, but I had run forty miles by then and there's a limit to the effectiveness of even the most serious deodorant.

Soon I was hobbling down Marsh Lane, the hard track that leads to home. As the Calder Valley opened out below me, the late afternoon sun started to shine and rabbits played in the fields at the side of the track. I knew I had done what I set out to do.

The Happy Mondays sang 'Hallelujah' I joined in.

Colin Duffield

HADES HILL RACE

Thursday Sep 6th, Whitworth near Rochdale

Give your support to the race organiser and Toddie Clutterbuck. by running. Sweeper also needed.

FORTHCOMING GRAND PRIX RACES

Sunday Sep 2nd: Andy O'Sullivan trail race LOCAL! Entry form in last Torrier, or just turn up on the day. 11.15am from the Falcon Inn, Littleborough. It's about 5 miles, somewhere round the back of Hollingworth Lake.

Sunday Sep 16th: Langfield Half Marathon road race – all the details in the last Torrier, or ask someone who looks knowledgeable at a Weds pack run (NOT LOCAL... but very beautiful. Hilly, too)

Sat Sep 22nd: Good Shepherd fell race. LOCAL! 15miles, 2000 ft, up to Stoodley Pike twice, messing about on Turley Holes Moor, Robin Hood Rocks and much more. Just turn up, Good Shepherd church Mytholmroyd, for 10.30am start

Sat Sep 29th: Thieveley Pike fell race. LOCAL! 4.25 m, 1300 ft. From Holme, Cliviger (on road to Burnley beyond Cornholme). Just to turn up for 3pm start. Junior races 2.15pm.

All these races count towards the club 2007 championships.