

# The Fellsman 2009-Duff's journey into the black heart of Yorkshire

## Introduction-what happened before

The motivations of superficial people tend to be, almost by definition, simple.

Years ago, when climbing bumpy lumps of rock dominated my life, I would always prefer to fall off routes with evocative names that suggested a frisson of danger and dashing pleasure, rather than their more prosaically named counterparts. Far, far better pub story could be told about a swollen ankle after failing on 'New Jerusalem', 'The Villain', or 'Wall of Horrors\*' than a pleasant day on 'Birch Tree Corner', 'Holly Bush Arete', or 'Curving Crack'.

After taking up running, this style before substance approach was difficult to maintain, (although Aggie's Staircase, Paddy's Pole, and Beefy's Nab, all had a certain attraction). However, happy inspiration came one day when Rhys Watkins mentioned a 62 mile, jolly through the wildest bits of the Dales, much of it off paths, much of it in the dark. It was called the 'Fellsman'. There was a name to savour. It sounded so macho and brought visions of gnarly men and sinewy women wandering through sleet, past jutting crags, probably reciting Ted Hughes, perhaps with a stark Joy Division soundtrack playing softly on the biting wind.

That was three years ago, and it took that long for the seed Rhys had planted to mature into something tangible. But this year I worked up the courage to commit to the madness and back in February sent my entry to the organisers, Keighley Scouts. Jeff Walker is a simple soul who had gone along with the idea and entered along with me. He seemed to be labouring under them impression this was a leisure activity and wore a wan smile whenever the event was discussed in the weeks leading up to the day(s), it would be good to have familiar faces around when the going got tough and I didn't get going.

Plainly in retrospect it was OK, but I can confess to a few moments of doubt on the days leading up to the race. The strangest thing about the whole event was the way that the actual day flew by, leaving me with a memory made up of only fifteen second snapshots.

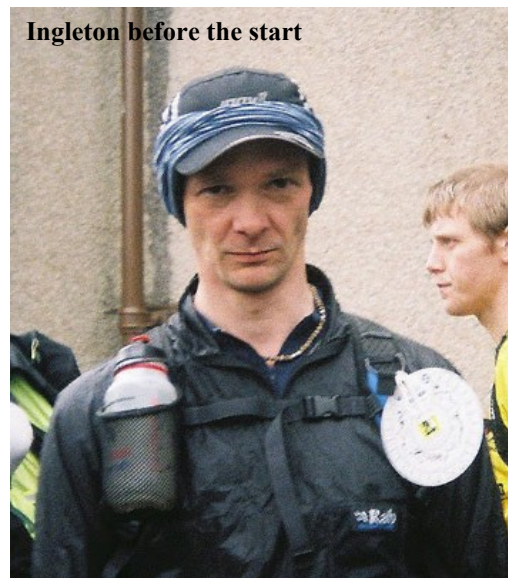
So here's my abridged account.

## Saturday 9th May

**03:55-** Arriving at Jeff's at an hour when only postmen and burglars should be about. Disturbing the delicate peace of Hebden Bridge in a frenzy of loading gear and slamming car doors.

**04:45-**Arrival at Threshfield. Too early. Registration didn't open until 5am. After a few shivery moments peering through windows and trying the handles of locked doors, we are greeted by a ridiculously chatty girl with the stout legs and unbending cheerfulness that marked her as a representative of the scouting movement. We're quickly registered and shepherded onto a charabanc that will take us to the start at Ingleton. Although the atmosphere is very much 'school trip to Alton Towers', I think we all know that it will be a hard journey back to Threshfield. No going back now.

**06:00-**A kit check of industrial scale by more of the stout legged and cheerful. We wait by the row of kit checkers, like queuing in a bank when you start to wonder which teller you'll get. I don't want the lad closet to us as he seems to be taking it all very seriously indeed, right down to making one bloke open his first aid kit and show that his map indeed covers the whole area. Instead I get the young girl next to him. I smile at her and try to engage her in conversation. This unnerves her and she fails in her duty to count my safety pins (you need a minimum of four to pass muster). After this examination I pass into the inner temple of the event centre and chat to my fellow prospective Fellsmen and Fellchicks, Rhys and his mate Jane are there, another of Rhys'mates, a insanely cheerful Bill, along with Fell Ponies, Gerry and Steve, and several other familiar veterans of other outbreaks of collective madness I have been party to. There's much (frankly socially inappropriate) rubbing of Vaseline into personal areas, followed by the taking of enough Ibuprofen to erode even the most robust of stomach linings as zero hour creeps up. People keep glancing at their watches. The suspense is so great that the toilets can't cope and start to smell.



*\* Of course, anyone who knows me knows I've never done Wall of Horrors. Far too scary. I'm talking about the boulder problem start.*

**09:00-** The starter stands above us on a little concrete platform and reads a message from Fellsman guru, Mark Hartell, the crowd are silent and attentive. It reminds me of nothing more than a vicar reading a lesson from St John the divine, but I suppose that's how they think of Mark around here. Then, at the stroke of nine, we're off, running down the road into the black heart of Yorkshire.

**014:00-** So we're 18 miles and several summits in. Not much has happened except limestone, hills, fields, and chat. The first two tops were Ingleborough and Whernside, familiar to all, but after that we've had the less familiar Gargareth and Great Cowm, both of which sound like something out of Tolkien. Luckily there were no orcs around today, just the fab Fellsman folk in little tents at each summit, clipping tallies and remaining smiley and chatty despite a cold wind. This same wind recently ripped my hat from my head and sent it towards Bridlington. A slight mistake coming off Great Cowm sends us via some very pretty crags, not ideal but interesting. The road less travelled and all that.



Jeff going up Gargareth

**14:30-** Dent. A real village complete with scouts in big tents handing out lovely beans and cheese pasties in polystyrene cups. It a gastronomic delight and I'm a convert. Can we have these at the next Harriers xmas do please? Surely this is the stuff that builds empires and in comparison Tapas is a bourgeois southern fancy!

**15:00-** Blea Moor is the most exposed and boggy bit of creation I've ever been on. It's also the worst place I can think of to be caught in an hour-long hailstorm. So it's heads down and push on. It's at this point that two young ladies, Nicky from Ilkley, and Fliss from Dark Peak, ask if they could tag along with us on the cock-eyed assumption that we know where we're going. They'll have another twelve hours to regret their foolishness.

**16:00-** Stonehouse Checkpoint, pasta and proper toilets. Thought this was supposed to be a hard man's event? Energy gels and carbo drinks are playing havoc with Jeff's bowels. I find this hilarious. For some reason he can't see the funny side. Never mind.

**21:00-** When god made Middle Tongue he wasn't sure whether to make to land or water, so he sat on the fence and made it a expanse of mud and holes. A bit like the Somme, but without the charm. My legs are starting to hurt. I need some food. And now, one of my legs has disappeared up to the thigh in a bog and I can't get it out without pulling off my shoe. The Fellsman is hard, but doing the Fellsman with one shoe for the last twenty miles would be an even more impressive feat, and not one I would like to attempt. I lay down on my front, sort of roll over. Happily my leg, foot, and shoe all pop out. I stagger to my feet to see my little team disappearing into the distance in the gloom. We were grouped at the last check point so should stick together, but the wind is making communication difficult. I race after them, squelching mud out of my shoe as I go.

**22:00-** It's now dark and I'm sitting on a hay bale in a smelly cattle transporter at Cray (their tent has blown away, last seen passing over Rotterdam and causing a hazard to air travel). I'm trying to drink hot coffee to warm me up. A sudden drop in temperature and wet clothes has caught me out and I realise if I don't get myself warm this could be the point I drop out. Trouble is I'm shivering so much that every time I try drinking I just spill the coffee and burn my chin. Eventually though I do get warmer, change my clothes, and we set off for normally picturesque and inviting Buckden Pike, but tonight it's cold and claggy Buckden Pike.



Team going towards Fleet Moss

**22:30-** Here we are, the four of us are all pointing at a map in the glow of headtorches trying to persuade ourselves that all our compasses and maps must be wrong because nothing adds up. Of course, compasses and maps are much more reliable than people, particularly people who have been running for hours and hours. The stomach sinking truth is that we've made a pretty serious navigational mistake and come the wrong way off Buckden Pike. Thick clag, horrible wind, cold, not being able to see the war memorial that should have been the point of taking a bearing, etc etc Truth is we're getting tired and not paying attention. So back up Buckden Pike.

**24:00-** Coming off Gt Whernside following a fence. More bog and clag. Even more tired. All of a sudden the handrail fence had gone and we realise that we've got ourselves a bit befuddled again, in the same shit weather and in an even

stickier bog. I'm coming close to redistributing my toys from the perambulator when Jeff and Nicky take charge and sort it out. Cheers lads.

### **Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May**

**04:00-**About 6 miles to the finish. I've been tired for the last twenty miles or so, but basically ok. I'm trying to work out how to pat myself on the back with my achy shoulders (running with a heavy sack for 17 hours), when it happens. All of a sudden and within about a minute I've bonked big style ('bonked' in a tired sense rather than anything sexual, which would plainly have been out of the question in the circumstances). I'd stopped paying attention to the need to keep eating and my body was teaching me a lesson. Queue, retching, slight dizziness and a strange hallucination that we were next to a road with loads of diggers lined up with orange flashing lights, like a rave organised by Bob the Builder (sounds good. I'd go). All of a sudden I'm the weak link in the team and they have to wait. Jeff feeds me two gels, one of the girls feeds me two ibuprofen and milky way. I feel better straight away. Lesson learned.

**05:00-** The last checkpoint at Yarnbury, just three miles down the road to the finish. The checkpoint commandant (is this they're called?) offers to ungroup us but we decide to stick together. We laugh and joke all the way to Threshfield, the grumpy phase we have all passed through during the night is behind.

**06:00-** Finished. The relief of taking off my shoes and socks and getting dry clothes on is the best feeling of the whole event. However the memory of standing naked in the toilets trying to formulate a plan to enable me to put some pants on will live with me for a while. I certainly couldn't lift a leg off the floor without falling over, and sitting down wasn't an option because that would have involved standing up again at some point. It was a slightly hysterical moment, in a slightly hysterical weekend but eventually I managed without requiring assistance. On reflection, if I had really needed help, the organisation of the event is such that I'm sure I could have summoned a cheery scout in no time, who would have been only too happy to help, and probably offer me a cooked breakfast whilst doing so.



**Looking Rough**

### **The Fellsman-A cost-benefit analysis compiled the day after the event.**

#### Cost

- £25 entry
- Two swollen ankles
- One swollen knee
- One shoulder that won't move
- One blister

#### The Benefit

Priceless memories of a day and night in the beautiful black heart of Yorkshire

No contest really....

## **GP Bloggist!**

So far - Success!, Get in to a long Fell GP race, with few of the really fast boys either there, healthy or willing to run more than 12 miles... they know who they are, and finish high positions of toddlers and this happily ups your position in a long fell race! Some of the competition is being left behind now as I struggle to get faster, fitter and do some really long hill racing to up the results opportunities for Wasdale. Now to plan to increase the injury rate of those fast competitors or perhaps turn my sharp cunning mind to psychological warfare on fellow Fell GP attempters, subtle drubbing, mis-diagnose a mental issue... when some of the many runners who come to me for the wide worldly advice I have to offer (that or gossip). The other option would be to play fair, run harder and make sure I get faster than Dave Collins...