

What did the Romans ever do for us ? from Allan Greenwood

Each weekend, events take place up and down the country specifically aimed at walkers. They have to be of at least twenty miles in length, so with a few hills thrown in for good measure, coupled with typical English weather, many are a pretty tough challenge. Most, though not all, allow runners to take part, usually with a later start so as to allow reasonable shifts for checkpoint marshals.

Each year, a different branch of the Long Distance Walkers Association (LDWA) organises a walk of one hundred miles in length. In 2002 it was held in the Lake District and the first I'd ever heard of it was when a member of our club, Mike Bell, who had been our Secretary for a few years, told me all about his experience of it. Mike had read about my continuous traverse of the 50 miles Calderdale Way route in the club newsletter and seemed to think that 'double-the-distance' might be the obvious next challenge for me ! Coupled with this, Mike recognised the fact that in 2003, it would be more or less on our doorstep, as it was the turn of West Yorkshire LDWA to organise the walk.

"The Hundred is a fantastic event, you really should do it", he said. "Well laid out routes, all the camaraderie you might expect from the marshals and from other competitors, and a great achievement to finish it".

I didn't see Mike after that but the seed had been planted in my brain, albeit pushed to the back in a dark, quiet corner of my mind. Two weeks later I heard the sad news that Mike had lost his long fight against cancer.

Months later, I was out on a long training run with Stuart Thompson, my workmate, an LDWA member and regular long-distance competitor, when I brought the subject of The Hundred into the conversation. He had certainly heard of the event, having completed one 25 years earlier ! We talked about the possibility of getting hold of the route description with a view to looking around parts of the course. "Leave it with me", he said, "I'll make some enquiries".

As good as his word, Stuart made some calls and managed to get hold of the preliminary route. Every free weekend from then on was spent on part of the route in glorious weather. It wasn't exactly the most hilly, with only 12,000 feet of climbing in total, but this was part of the course designer's plan to enable as many competitors as possible to finish.

I learned a lot in a short space of time from Stuart. Not only about pacing for long events, but *when* and *what* to eat and drink - jam butties, bananas and rice pudding go down dead easily !

After around eight weeks of focused training, much of it on the route of the event, and loads of sleep, the week finally arrived when I would make my first attempt at a "Hundred". The word had got around at work and although we were encouraged by some of the sportsmen in the factory, I reckon everyone, without exception, genuinely though we were bloody crackers !

In the days up to the spring Bank Holiday I had been eating like a horse. Extra sandwiches for work, with cakes, buns and biscuits to nibble on through the day. Andy came round frequently with his latest food bulletin. "Stuart's just had a pile of sandwiches, half a dozen Jaffa cakes and two packets of biscuits; What are *you* having ?"

I arrived at Ripon school at nine o'clock and the sun was beating down. The place was heaving with walkers, making last minute adjustments to their rucksack contents, applying suntan cream or simply laughing and talking with friends.

I went across to check in, labelling and handing over my bag for the breakfast stop, which would be in the Dales village of Hawes - home of the famous Wensleydale cheese - at 55 miles. I had packed a full change of clothes, spare shoes and some emergency food, in case I'd had cause to eat the extra rations I would be carrying.

In Ripon there is a 500 year old tradition with horn blowing. At 9 p.m. each night, a horn is still blown at each corner of the town square by a man in traditional costume, to 'set the watch' and signal that all is well. The organisers had therefore arranged for the walk to be started by a horn blower on the stroke of 10 a.m.

9-45 a.m. soon came and it was time way made our way to the start. Across the school playing fields, down the road, over a bridge and queuing up a short flight of steps took longer than many of us anticipated and as we reached the start area, the horn had been blown and the throng had gone. Never mind, I thought, we'd have all day to catch up. And, come to think of it, all night, and the next day !

Steady away for the first few miles, everyone seemed in very high spirits chatting and laughing as we went merrily along. I caught Val and Jan on a woodland section and was introduced to their respective friends, Dave and Mick. We passed through the first few checkpoints in the villages of Markington, Hampsthwaite and Dacre Banks without problems. Apart from from a couple of light showers around Ripley Castle, the sun had continued to beat down but so far, no hot spots or blisters. We reached the first big stopping point at Pateley Bridge, after 21 miles and made sure we had plenty to drink. Jan's leg looked a bit sore at the front of the shin. It was swollen and shiny and, I remarked, looked a bit like the cellulitis I'd witnessed in someone else a few years back. We carried on, alongside Gouthwate reservoir and up to Lofthouse, before the long haul to Scar House and over to Thorlby in Bishoptdale.

Jan's leg was clearly giving her trouble though she bashed on without complaint. Meanwhile, I'd felt a bit of a niggle in my own shin, though at first I shrugged it off, thinking it was a bit of shin soreness. I put it down to the trail-running shoes I was wearing, as they were fairly new and I had probably covered the longest distance so far while wearing them today. However by Thorlby (44 miles), I was asking for ice. This was a bit of a tall order so a cold tea towel was brought by one of the willing volunteers.

At this point I have to pay tribute to the checkpoint officials. After clipping our cards to prove we'd checked in, we were waited on hand and foot. On these ultra distance events, you simply have to eat whatever you can get down, so they made sure there was *something* for everyone. I was managing well on rice pudding and peaches with biscuits to go. At Carlton, jam butties piled high covered every table. Then we were offered soup, buttered bread, biscuits, cakes and, would you believe, slices of pizza - and even a choice of toppings !

At Thorlby, we were gently ushered to sit and offered waiter (and waitress) service. There were even printed and laminated menu cards in wooden stands upon each table, offering chicken soup, sandwiches and, (get this) apple pie and custard - at almost midnight... Heaven !

As we left Thoraby, it had become dark and the night reccie-ing would now be tested fully. Stuart had been 'bang on' in his calculation of where my night section would begin. As we climbed across the moor, Dave told me to look behind. The night was clear and still and across the valley, beyond the village lights, way off in the distance was a string of torchlights descending Carlton Moor into Bishopdale.

All the frivolity and badinage which was going on tended to take my mind from the pain in the shin that was beginning to become a real hassle. Going uphill wasn't a problem as I was on my toes. As we jogged along on the level ground I was tending to flick my right foot downward on each lift in order to stretch the shin. It seemed to ease the pain for a while, maybe half a minute, before I started the action again. On the downhill however, it got much, much worse. Descending the steep and rough stony bridleway to Stalling Busk I was reduced to limping pitifully so the others went on, offering to have a cuppa ready at the next stop. Soup, jam butties and cakes were also offered up, again with a cheerful smile and lots of encouragement. As we turned to leave, a great wave of excitement hit me as one of the ladies serving the tea told me, "You are now over halfway, 51 miles" and she added, "Only four miles to breakfast!"

The next section was going to be the hardest to navigate as we were going over featureless moorland on a compass bearing. However, I had reccied this piece only a fortnight before so I took the lead and managed to pick out the sheep trods, made easier as they had been trampled by those in front of us.

Soon we found the bridleway that would take us to Cam High Road, after the crossing of which, we would descend to Hawes, the breakfast stop and, for me, a change of socks! Skirting around Wether Fell, faint veils of mist swirled around us, then voices could be heard above and to the left. Soon a procession of lights appeared out of the gloom, as a stream of walkers, descended the extra peak they had bagged. Our paths converged and the steep descent to Gayle began, and for me this was to be the turning point.

I'm going to apologise here and now for wittering on about it but the sensation in my lower right shin was now a searing, burning pain, sending shooting spasms up the leg. There are six fields, steep and grassy on this descent, each with a small sprung-gated wall stile. I limped pathetically downwards, and at one point found the only way to make progress was to turn round and walk down backwards. This way there was no pressure on either of the front leg muscles.

Soon I gained the road and I could relax along the pavement, past the Wensleydale Creamery, and limp steadily towards the well-lit school buildings. I allowed myself a glance at the watch. It was almost 3-30 a.m.

I had covered 55 miles and had been on my feet for seventeen and a half hours.

As the checkpoint drew nearer, I looked up to the millions of stars in the cloudless sky. "Come on now Mike". *I had actually spoken out loud*, "You're going to have to give me something now". It seems funny thinking back, but my spirits actually dropped a little as the silence continued and nothing happened.

Into the school and there was a lot going on. A small and rather cramped corridor with two sinks and toilet cubicles were being used for changing by half a dozen people. To the right, a large classroom was filled with breakfast stop bags and holdalls. Just inside the door, stewards at a table clipped my card and logged another arrival. I was told to be sure to 'clock out' before leaving the checkpoint as I collected my bag and went to get changed. Badly blistered feet now washed, I sat outside in the cool air and stripped off. People were walking by but I was past caring. The searing, burning pain was so severe. Two St. John's men stood nearby and so as soon as I was decent, I asked their advice about my leg. An instant chemical ice pack was produced and I was able to sit with it strapped to the offending area.

Jan sat nearby in the corner, looking quite fresh and very clean. She had changed into non-walking shoes and trousers and sadly, announced that she had decided to pack in. Her shins were both very sore so she'd decided to call it a day. Well, night. Or rather, morning.

Shortly, a lift to Ripon was announced so together with two other retirees Jan stood up and made her way out with a cheery wave and so I was left alone in the corner. Val and Dave sat at the far end. Having finished eating breakfast and redressing their feet they were almost ready to go.

Now we come to the crux of my story. I'm not religious at all but what happened next really makes me think.

A young girl of around ten or eleven years old came across with a pad and pencil and cheerfully took my food order. Now remember, it is ten minutes to four *in the morning!* "Cornflakes, toast with marmalade, sausages, bacon..." I settled for tea and toast and it arrived in a flash.

As I ate, foot up on a stool, a chap in a black sweater and casual walking trousers came across and sat next to me. He was cheerful and mild mannered, instantly easy to get along with. He asked how I felt, then we began to talk as if we were old friends continuing a previous conversation. He pointed out the very well built man with a quiet and kindly manner who had just a few minutes before, asked if I was being looked after and whether I needed anything specific.

He told me that 'the man in charge' was a doctor and that he had travelled widely and spent much of his time in Sri Lanka. He had returned to England with a Sri Lankan woman he had met, who at the moment was busy preparing all this food in the kitchen at the back of the school room. "The little girl is his adopted daughter".

Then he continued to tell me of the work the doctor had done out in the field. He had treated young wayward boys who had been caught stealing or otherwise breaking the law and arrested. "They have no prisons or borstals so they cut off the boys' feet so they cannot run away. The doctor helps them during rehabilitation, teaching them to walk without feet, on their bandaged stumps. They walk everywhere. Sometimes for miles and miles."

"Right", I said quietly. "Thank you very much, you have just given me the inspiration to finish this walk".

At least, I mused, I have feet.

As I left Hawes it was getting light. I set off down the main street and, on turning left to join the Pennine Way past a row of cottages, caught a group of four walkers who laughed, chatted loudly and allowed gates to slam shut at 4-30 a.m. Though this disgusted me I said nowt. Along the beautiful dale of Wensleydale the light began to spread across the horizon. An explosion of pinks and oranges soon burst across the hill tops and, though the sheep in the meadows we crossed had been up and working their shift of munching grass for hours, another day dawned.

My pace was painfully slow but I mugged on. "I have to do it now", I told myself. I had come too far not to finish this. I simply *had* to do it.

Val and Dave were at the Askrigg checkpoint as planned and the friendly staff offered us tea cornflakes and bananas. I urged the two of them to go on, but I was amazed when they told me I had literally followed them in by only a couple of minutes as they had felt incredibly tired over the previous section. Soon we left for the next checkpoint at Redmire, passing the remains of the 14th century Bolton Castle. It was built in 1399 by Richard le Scrope, Lord Chancellor of England. It has never been sold, and so remains the property of Lord Bolton, le Scropes' descendant and has been used for filming *Ivanhoe*, *Elizabeth*, *Heartbeat* and *All Creatures Great And Small*.

Along the next six miles stretch, through the grounds of Bolton Hall to Wensley and along the riverbank to Middleham, Val strode out at the front. She was walking and jogging strongly so we told her to go as she felt. Dave and I were bound by our pain and suffering. We were both struggling with blisters and my leg was burning again. However we stuck together and complained, consoled and swore to pass the time away. Soon I saw Dave's Partner Denise coming along the riverbank toward us, then they greeted each other and then hung back a little, probably sneaking a snog.

It was such a relief to know we were approaching the threequarter distance checkpoint. Suddenly, I was overcome with emotion. I saw a woman ahead on the banking skipping our way. It was Linda. She was quite a way off so I suddenly steeled myself. I remembered a report I'd heard on the radio during the recent Iraq war when the American troops had finally liberated Baghdad. A soldier was asked how he had felt when all the common people had come out into the street cheering and laughing, the children singing and hugging the soldiers legs as they walked through the town. "It sure makes you feel proud, but we have to remember that we still have a job to do and we must keep our emotions in check".

She smiled and asked how it was going. All the pain and suffering was gone. I felt so strong, so full of energy. Right now, I reckoned I could run the rest of the way to Ripon. "I'm alright, just fine", I lied, "Only a bit of soreness in my leg". Suddenly Linda was clearly very shocked and concerned. My shin was inflated like a marrow and extremely red. "You could do with that looking at", she said. "Well, just look and I'll be off then," I laughed. I felt so much better.

Dave and Denise caught up and we all entered the checkpoint together.

Middleham is famous for its links with horse racing. As we set off up the gallops alongside the road we managed a steady canter for a while. Well, I thought, I can eat as well as any nag ! Leaving the road we dropped painfully over fields to a river then climbed up the heather covered moor. Soon it levelled out and for the next ten miles or so we made good progress. We were heading for The Drovers Inn at Belford, the 90 miles point. I had taken some painkillers as every time we came to a descent, I was having to walk down backwards, the shin sending shooting pains to my knee. I would have given anything for a bike or kid's scooter right now, but made do with soft grass verge. "We will get there", I told myself. It had become colder over the last few hours and soon began to rain. Dave was getting cold so he bashed on ahead. I reached the wood at the bottom of a hill and crossed a bridge. Though the trees and soon up a steep farm track, there was no problem, it felt easy. I felt fresh and pain free – the pills had kicked in. The route followed a series of stony bridleways waymarked every so often with small mosaics, about the size of a ceramic wall tile. If these were on our estate, I thought, they'd have been vandalised. Up the long steady climb on tarmac to the pub and I was able to stride out quickly. Now I was feeling much better and picking up the pace. At a road junction, 200 yards before the main road I could see a crowd waiting. There was a woman with a large black dog. I got my head down now and dug in, preparing myself mentally for the last ten miles. "Only ten miles to go !"

"Go on, find him!" I looked up and the black labrador was bounding down the road toward me. It was Linda, and she had arranged to meet my parents, who were clapping and shouting at me, as another man took my photo. Imagine how I felt. Imagine how I must have looked. Limping pathetically, my right shin swollen like a marrow and shining blood red. No Mother wants to see her lad in this state. "Remember !" I shook myself into shape, "We must keep our emotions in check".

I drew close and the man lowered his camera from his face revealing a warm smile and offering a hand to shake. My Dad said, "This is uncle Tom from Australia."

"You've come a long way to see me", I said, to which he countered, "Well, you've come a long way to see us !"

Smiling faces and tables of food greeted arrivals at the checkpoint, in a garage to the rear of the pub

Dave and I set off together again and almost immediately we were hit by a monsoon. It bucketed down, and just as we were crossing an exposed section of moorland. At least it was taking our minds off everything else.

About a half mile before the final checkpoint we crossed the muddiest farmyard I've ever seen. Shin deep slurry, even the driveway from the main road to the farm was rutted and waterlogged. This made for a slow and painful trudge to the road, then once across, we had to climb a couple of rather high, cramp inducing stiles, then a swamp of a field. I floundered around in the marshy ground, as I glanced up I saw Linda waiting at the next gate and I swore, telling her how pathetic I felt.

"Allan", she said sternly, "You have covered ninety five miles on foot."

The enormity of what I was doing was creeping into my mind, though I was constantly telling myself about the *emotions* thing.

"We're not there yet."

It was bouncing down with rain and she offered me her brolly, though I declined as the rules of a Hundred preclude any outside assistance of any kind.

I was approaching Sawley, where my old Haworth Hobble partner Maggie Dunn would be checkpointing.

Sure enough she was and she waved me off with, "You can do it now me darlin', and you won't need your torch !". Through Fountains Abbey and the deer park at Studley Royal was a fitting end to a great weekend out. It was getting dark as I travelled down the long driveway, and as I looked around, my headtorch picked out hundreds of small red lights on either side, the eyes of some of five hundred deer. Along the road to Ripon College, over the fields and around the edge of a building. The lights of the classroom exploded over the sports field and I found the door into the finish. Suddenly it was all over. Linda and Denise were there, but where was Dave ? He came in seventeen minutes later, having taken a wrong turning in the grounds of Fountains Abbey !

On Monday we went over to see my parents and our visitors from Oz. My uncle asked how I was, then passed me his Sunday newspaper. "Now you are a Centurion, here's another challenge for you," he said, as he showed me an article about the opening of the full length of Hadrian's Wall, a distance of around eighty miles. Hmm, now there's a thought.

What did the Roman's ever do for us ? They gave us Centurions !