

Light in the Dark from John Fleetwood

The origins of my deliberations with the Paddy Buckley go back to 2000, a year in which I first set foot on the classic Welsh 24 hour round. Seven hours of solitary squelching through the mirk and mires of Cerrig Cochion and Moel yr Hydd disabused me of this particular ambition and I turned my attention elsewhere.

Four years later, after a successful second attempt on the Ramsay, I was naturally drawn to reconsider the Paddy Buckley. However, my earlier feelings were confirmed by a further examination of the route. The diversion through the quarries to Moel yr Hydd seemed to disturb the symmetry of the round and I didn't relish the prospect of the Elidir Fach quarries. Also I really wanted to include the ridges of Crib Goch and felt that I would rather sacrifice other tops for this most dramatic of mountains.

Thus it was that I decided to attempt my own round, largely based on the Paddy Buckley, but with significant differences. After a few recces I settled on a route which omitted the Moelwyns and Moel yr Hydd in the interests of taking a direct line from Cnicht to Moel Siabod. The route also included the 3000 foot peaks of the Northern Carneddau and the classic scrambles of the North Ridges of Tryfan and Crib Goch. The latter dictated an anticlockwise direction and permitted the replacement of the slate quarries of Elidir Fach with the steep grass of Elidir Fawr, and swapping Yr Aran for Mynydd Mawr, thus allowing a logical round to be completed.

So it was on 2 May 2004, that I found myself at Aberglaslyn, ready to test my self made challenge. Having overslept I began 25 minutes later than scheduled, but made very rapid progress to Capel Curig, which I maintained to Carnedd Llewellyn where the mist descended. Despite getting lost on the traverse out to Yr Elen, I was still 30 minutes up at Glan Dena and aggressive descending saw me increase this margin by Nant Peris. Now for the real action – Crib Goch in the dark. A third of the way up, rain began to be driven along by a fresh wind and I called to Simon, my support, for leggings and a cagoule. Disaster! These had not been transferred and nor had my spare batteries for my main torch, which immediately proceeded to fade to a dim gleam. The gloom of the surroundings began to reflect my mood with my Tikka torch casting very little light. By the summit it was fully dark, but the rain mercifully relented and I enjoyed traversing the pinnacles, more by feel than by sight. The enjoyment was short lived, however, as the rain became persistent on Crib y Ddysgl, exposing the inadequacy of my shorts and pertex top. I could barely see my feet and 'running' became a hesitant shuffle in truly dispiriting conditions. Simon used his GPS to great effect however, and we maintained our course even if I could manage no more than a slow trudge. I felt as agile as a sack of potatoes, and my lack of progress seemed to reflect this on the easy ridge out to Moel Eilio. The final brutal descent to Betws Garmon only served to compound my misery, sending shooting pains searing through my knees. I no longer seemed to care and time had drifted away to the extent that I was now more than 10 minutes behind my rough schedule. A change of clothing seemed to do little to dispel the chill that had gripped my body and the life force seemed to have been sucked from my body as I slowly ambled up towards Mynydd Mawr. In the continuing dark we lost the small track through the heather and I took the opportunity to stop and try to ease the thumping in my head. I immediately regurgitated two paracetamol resulting in me feeling even worse. I did a quick calculation on my rate of progress, considered my guesstimated schedule and decided that the five hours remaining was just not long enough for me to complete my round in 24 hours. The only way for me was down.

Six weeks later, the memory had faded sufficiently for me to repeat the experience, this time without support. Summer gales led to a sleepless night, but by the Carneddau I had regained my stride and this time made no route finding errors. Yet the wind was all pervasive and as mile followed mile, it sapped my strength, so that by Glyder Fach I had few reserves. These were soon to be severely tested, since a violent rain storm swept Glyder Fawr and cut through my inadequate cagoule, literally soaking me to the skin. The storm showed no signs of relenting by Llyn y Cwn and I reckoned that I was on the point of risking hypothermia. Without support I had no option. For a second time, the only way was down.

Three more weeks and my growing obsession with this challenge requires another attempt. However, I know most of the route too well by now to want to repeat it in exactly the same fashion. I therefore elect to start from my tent at Betws Garmon at the somewhat earlier hour of 4.30 am. Typically, I actually begin ten minutes later than intended, and disturbingly, it is a struggle from the start. I am having to push myself hard to keep to schedule, rather than gaining time without effort as is the norm for me to begin with. Nevertheless I start to pick up time despite the thick mist, that is until I lose my way on the confusing col to Bryn Banog which proves the value of a thorough recce, since this is the only section that I have not traversed. This is followed by a pathless descent through thick bracken and reeds, but I am prepared for this and that makes all the difference. I recover my hidden bags at Bwlch Gwernog and sweat it out up Cnicht where my troubles begin. Despite running as much as I can on the gentle uphill I lose time. My legs are leaden, my head starts to spin and the sweet energy drink fails to refresh. In such poor form, the bogs, heather and rocks of Ysgafell Wen, Cerrig Cochion and Y Cribiau are at their most trying. Near the top of Moel Siabod I bonk and collapse by the summit cairn to refuel for the descent. I am now half an hour down on my schedule, having lost time on

every lap since Bwlch Gwernog. I fail to recover on the slog up Pen Llithrig y Wrach and effectively abandon any hope of success by dozing flat on my back for over half an hour. What an antidote to time-pressured running this is – absorbing the mountains, the tickle of the grass, the freshness of the breeze, simply being. Whilst dozing I resolve to descend to Capel, and trot downwards for a few minutes. And then everything changes ... but nothing changes: I change my mind.

Faced with the prospect of complex bus rides, collecting pre-placed bags and a depressingly early conclusion to my challenge, I resolve to walk back to Betws Garmon and retrace my steps to the summit. By Craig yr Ysfa I am regaining energy and the thought occurs to me that I might just complete the round but omit the ‘out and backs’ to Foel Fras and Yr Elen, extensions that in any case detract from the logic of the round except for their inclusion as 3000 foot peaks. My recovery continues and I am soon picking up time on my original schedule. A beautiful evening spurs me on as I scramble up the North Ridge of Tryfan and pass over the boulders of the Glyders. The sun dips below the horizon on Mynedd Perfedd but I reach Nant Peris by nightfall feeling fresher than when I started. I munch a sandwich from my hidden stash by the river at Blaen y Nant, change in to my night garb and set out once more up Crib Goch. This time it feels truly Alpine in the absolute darkness. The feeling of solitude is strangely heightened by the occasional car headlamp in the Llanberis pass, but I am soon engrossed in awkward scrambling by the Dinas Mot waterfall. The rocks are wet and slimy to the touch, so I move precisely, lost in my very personal world of the few metres illuminated by my torch.

Flash ! Fireworks, flares or someone signalling for help ? The sky is clear, I can hear no thunder. Flash ! I turn my head to try to catch the next one, but it doesn't come. I move on. Flash ! There it is again. My mind wrestles with the unsolved mystery but in the absence of any further clues I scramble upwards. Then above the waterfall a deep rumble is quickly followed by a brilliant flash which rents the darkness to the West. Hmm, the experience is becoming more Alpine by the minute, but having been exposed to several violent electric storms in the Alps, I reason that until my hair stands on end or things start buzzing, I will continue. Yet it feels somewhat unreal to be clambering up the sharp ridge, quite alone in the dark with an approaching thunderstorm. As I near the summit of Crib Goch, the flashes almost dazzle me. There is little thunder but sheet lightning completely fills the sky to the West, and it is near enough to make me distinctly apprehensive. I feel exceedingly exposed on the pinnacles and I almost sense that I am trespassing on forbidden ground. This lends a tension to proceedings and provides a welcome relief from the effort of the round. I am lifted out of the ordinary in to a quite extraordinary situation which persists all the way to Crib y Ddysgl. A vole scuttles across the stony desert of the summit, and this unlikely life seems to emphasise the surreal nature of the experience.

It is then that teeming rain breaks the spell, returning me to the ordinary of the ascent of that most desecrated of summits; Snowdon. It is a cheerless place and I waste no time before descending. Once more the ridge to Moel Eilio proves tedious in the dark and drumming rain. I shuffle onwards knowing that the end is near, and ease my creaking knees down the steep slopes to Betws Garmon. As I approach the tent, day breaks the mystery of the night, and a remarkable night comes to a close.

The completed round of 63 miles and 26,700 feet of ascent was completed in 23 hours and 20 minutes solo unsupported on 7/8 July 2004. The inclusion of the Northern Carneddau 3000 foot peaks adds a further 7 miles and 1300 feet and about 2 hours.