

Bullock Smithy Hike, 3rd September 2016 – Wet (41st running of the event)

Photo: John Corfield



2016: First lady and man and some of the joint seconds: Jayne Lawton, Julian Brown, Rob Cawley, Stephen Jones

The forecast was for the rain to start around midday and carry on until late afternoon, perhaps heavy. Well it decided not to hang around and got going around 10:30am on Saturday. I put in a bit of extra gear and even thought about starting with two shirts on or maybe a cag. But although quite wet at least it was mild, even a bit warm so I wore just a Raidlight long sleeved top. Many had cags on at the start – and kept them on for the whole race. The race briefing at 11:55am mentioned that the new forecast was for the rain to stop around lunch time – on Sunday!

A few minutes past 12 noon, the anvil is hammered to signal the start of another epic, beginning with a quick jog along the A523. Now I like the idea of picking the best route around the course and have managed to find new lines each time I've done it. I was expecting just one new line, a tiny shaving towards the end of the race. However, with the potential wet going Gino from the Stockport Harriers group picked a deviation early on along Towers Road. A long cut rather than a short cut with the intention of avoiding the slightly boggy fields. Quite happy to tag along and see what came of it and actually it probably worked. I still took the (dangerous) golf course route, following Julian Brown, and then dropping behind Matthew Hulley and the Harriers. Stephen from the Harriers had already picked out Matthew as a quick guy and he was certainly 'on a mission' to break 10 hours and began pulling ahead across Lyme Park. Some of the Stockport Harriers had previous quick completions under their belt (Stephen Jones 9:59 in 2015) and others are making their first foray into Ultra running. Their intention being to get around as a group in whatever time it takes, ideally less than 11 hours.

Normally I would have Steve Jackson or Paul Rushworth for company for the first part of the race. Neither were around at the moment. I knew that Paul is taking it easier this year having had to take time off from training but Steve is always a fast starter. No need to stop at CP1 Bowstones apart from tally clipping so soon on to the descending road. My watch indicates I am 4 minutes down on last year which is dispiriting as I thought the pace was good. Julian does stop for liquid but is soon jogging up and then past me. Ahead are the Harriers, Matthew and now Julian.

The Harriers take the potential short cut around the side of Whaley Moor whereas Julian and I take the more obvious gentle path which I have always enjoyed. As the Harriers run together in a bunch (6 of them?) at each gate or stile there is a small delay whilst they all get over/through so with a few gates on the approach down to the Furness Vale Julian and I catch up with them. At the footpath turn off for Beardwood Farm Julian makes his normal short cut, which I think I will call "Julian's Cut" since I have not seen anyone else do it. He does admit that it only works when the grass has been cut. We are talking around 10 seconds saving.

The rain continues to fall, nothing too serious though. I wear my sun cap to keep the rain from my eyes and it does help. Julian alternates between cag on and cag off. When off he has a Paris-Brest-Paris cycle shirt on which may confuse some members of the public trying to work out what race we are on. There is road (Laneside Rd) and then path up the moor to Chinley Churn. As I expect the Harriers and Julian are all quicker than me on the road (we are talking sub 3h marathoners) but I keep going at my pace, splashing up the steam pouring down the footpath to New Allotments. It is a gingerly descent on the steep wet grass to CP2 Chinley Churn which appears out of the low cloud on top.

Julian has a stop for a wee before the drop down the track to Peep-O-Day refreshments. The Harriers ahead fly straight through but I stop for a partial fill of a water bottle – and I must apologise for being a bit abrupt with one of the helpful marshals as I was trying to remain in touch with the others. A few more gates to slow the bunch and I've caught them again with Julian now behind.

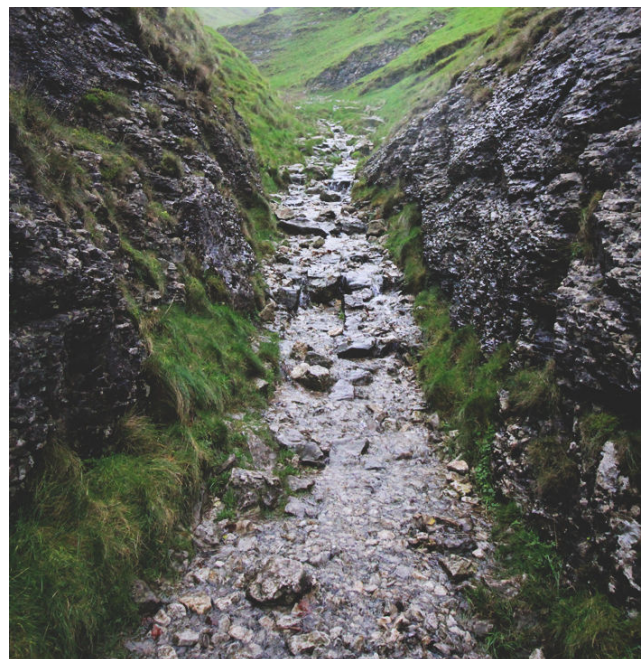
I know the Harriers have a few alternative routes so when they jog down the descent past the sometimes flagged route to Coldwell Clough I decide to go the normal way. No flags out today. A minute later they realise their mistake and have to back track and lose a little time. Stephen says he should not have followed someone who doesn't know the way! Slightly further ahead the 'leader' Matthew appears from a different direction having gone wrong – it is his first BS attempt. So for 10 seconds I was leading! Stephen joking says to me "We'll catch you by Edale", and even more jokingly says "You could win it".

The Harriers regroup behind me and Matthew puts in an effort to get in front of me and soon pulls ahead; after a few map checks he ploughs on up to CP3, Edale Cross. I make good progress up the track with some jogging and I am pleasantly surprised that the track is not entirely swamped in rain water. The highest point on the course yet the weather is not too bad and my single shirt although soaked is not in need of the company of a cag. I am in second place and now on the descent I'm ready for the Harriers to come piling past at any moment. Care now down a streaming Jacob's ladder using a mixture of the path and the grass by the side. And then track/road/field/road to Edale Car Park. No Harriers though? No problem locating the revised CP position. My request for "just rice pudding" means fruit is scraped out of one of the cups and I enjoy the mini tasty snack of 1/3 cup of rice which slips down easily. Tracy (Paul's wife) is there – fully waterproofed to cope with conditions, as usual providing great support and for me it is good to see a familiar friendly face. I mentioned that Paul is taken it easy and she says he'd better be otherwise he's got her to answer too.

Up to Hollins Cross and carefully down the rain affected path to meet the road. The cooler temperatures mean I am not suffering from the usual cramp which gets me on this bit of road after the downhill. Into Castleton car park for CP5 with a double gazebo arrangement to keep out the wet. The 'welcome' at the CP is the same for me in second place as it has been in any other position which is interesting as I thought there might be a bit more excitement about. The jam sandwiches (blackberry jam?) are uncovered and I take one and eat it while walking/jogging through the village and up to Cave Dale.



Path down from Hollins Cross
www.gandjdean.co.uk



Wet path up through Cave Dale
www.thepeppermintpencil.com

There is so much water around in Cave Dale that the rocks appear to be less slippery than normal. I walk then jog then walk until the track levels out after the gate (nice pool to try and avoid here). No favours from the wind as I cross the fields and turn right for the track to Peak Forest. At the end of the track the two fields to cross have short grass and no cows – both a bonus and I feel good arriving at CP7 still in second place. Still no excitement from the various marshals and ladies handling the food. A few crisps and a banana and I'm out of the CP. As I leave Julian is just coming in so I guess he's 'warmed up' and will be catching me soon.

The rain has gone now, just a few showery bits. The cap isn't really doing much so that's removed and consigned to the rucksack. In the breeze and mild air my top begins to dry out too. A gradual uphill along the road to the sharp bend and then over the wall and onto the grass – walking. Now it's time to eat the banana which I manage to do. The multiple grass fields are not too bad but at least one of the stiles is on its last legs and very dodgy. Julian catches me on the minor road as we descend into Wheston. Just up the other side at Wheston Hall is a real treat for cow lovers. A whole herd of milking cows is being herded along the Miller's Dale track we need to take into the field on the left as we approach. It has just started. The farmer, leaning casually next to the ropes which temporarily shut off the track says to us "Up to you, you can take your chance". We do. We walk slowly through the whole herd. Some jump up out the way, others move off in various directions; it is a bit chaotic. Eventually the end of the throng is reached and a jog can be partaken. Later when speaking to Stephen (Harriers) he says that he found this bit very frightening.



Photo: Peter Dean

Miller's Dale track was narrower and more chaotic than this

Julian says that he thinks one or more of the Harriers got injured in a fall near the Edale Cross CP. I am unsure whether they carried on or not. The final group of Harriers that finish – 5 – is smaller than I expected. Julian goes ahead and is first at Millers Dale CP7, but we leave together and jog along the road under the Monsal Trail bridge. Now, so far in the event I have been good uphill. I settle into a sustainable jog thinking Julian will probably walk as he had on other hills. But no. He not only jogs, he jogs really quickly and is soon out of sight. Wow! What has he just eaten? I do catch sight of him once more, way ahead on the footpath in the top field after the road crossing. I try out a 'gel' to give me a bit of energy and once up the rise can then jog to Chelmorton CP8. Later Julian explains that he likes to get the hill over and done with, hence the speed. I guess we all like to get the hill over with quickly – just that it is not possible to go any quicker.

At the CP Tracy this time is waiting in the car for Paul as presumably he is now quite a bit further back. Water top up and then the marshal lifts the metal container lid to reveal half donuts. Phew, I thought it might be whole ones. I take one and soon have it all in my mouth. However, I chew and chew and cannot swallow. I now have a deconstructed donut in my mouth back to the batter state. Eventually I do swallow. Along the track, zigzagging around the water pools. Then solid road. Here is a point when the Harries have come past me before – unexpectedly, on that occasion I got really dispirited, as I dropped from third to 11th. No Harriers at the moment.

Yellow track past the quarry, a few fields and a few cows, then road to Earl Sterndale, CP9. There is a jam sandwich on offer but I decline this time, knowing that I have struggled to eat it on previous occasions and just had a battle with

half a donut which I only just got the better of. The marshal who was outside rushes in to tell everyone that they are about to receive a large bunch. Sure enough when I step outside the Harriers are coming. Well I knew my position wouldn't last and I'd succumb to the inevitable. There looks to be 8 or 10 people on my quick glance so this is going to be quite a setback.

Anyway, I leave the CP, and am off down/up the road, across the fields and back on the road through Dowel Dale. I feel OK as I trundle down to Booth farm and the recommended footpath route. At this point the Harriers who are still behind but catching employ one of their reseed shortcuts going to the right of the lake. We end up on the path after the lake together. They are welcoming and Stephen is soon chatting away to me. Now; my first go at the diversion path to the right of barking dogs farm. We still hear a few barks. The path works OK although I go slightly wrong whilst the Harriers get it spot on. We end up at Brand Top CP 10 together and a lady jogging 'spectator' for the Harriers is also in the party, and another jogging lady (Jackie) plus sheepdog joins in. I'm first out of Brand Top as I don't require a hot dog (perhaps I should have as it has the potential to slip down easily). I get to the stile for the direct path across the fields to Hill Top and contemplate it. The grass is wet, there is no obvious well-trodden route so I go for the road option.

I manage a chocolate flapjack bar going up the road and still feel like I'm going well. The Harriers go the road route and catch me. As we descend out of Hill Top they convince me to follow them along a short cut which they have previously used to cut out the dog leg (?) around Knotbury by taking the first road to the farm at Readyleech Green and then straight down to Three Shires Head. Too many dogs. Hard to know whether that really helped, I felt it was a similar distance and time. Anyway it is good to be moving with company even if I do have to push harder to keep up. Jayne insists that I stay with them as it is not safe to be traveling on your own. I am not used to being looked after so I am grateful for their concern. However, I could not keep up with their speed on the flat. The gloom descends as we go up the fields to the tall ladders, and then down the track to Cumberland Cottage. We all get to the cottage without the aid of torch even though it means our pace is a bit slower as it really was dark now. I'm 10 minutes behind last years' time and 10 minutes, overhead gloom makes quite a difference to the dark levels as dusk settles.

The welcoming Cumberland Cottage, CP 11. A few cow bells sound, there is a fire outside, the CP marshals are also outside which I much prefer as it is so warm inside. Flat coke is offered which I partake of as a change from tableted water. Stephen had said that we'll get to Cumberland Cottage and then everyone can get into their night gear. I'm sure he wasn't talking about pyjamas as everyone remains in the same clothes with the addition of a head torch. Again I am away first down the track, over the bridge and onto the road. I can switch off the torch now and use the available light to jog on the road. It is peaceful and harder to know that I'm going slowly as the reference points are hidden in the darkness.

Soon the Harriers with a few torches switched on do catch me. I am not talkative at all now, just focussed on keeping the movement going. They move on by and away into the distance. When the road starts the incline after the pub, I try to keep jogging and do make up a bit of ground. Last year I went the Macclesfield Forest Track and have only done this road a few times so I'd forgotten how long it feels and the vulnerability once on to the A537. I put my torch on when a car comes and if possible try to be on the opposite side of the road to it, or just step up onto the verge.

The Harriers are leaving Walkers Barn, CP 12, when I get there. So I check my water bottle – enough in it, and get my chitty stamped outside and do a straight turn around to be just behind the Harries again. But there is no speed in my legs so again they are soon gone and that is the last I see of them. On the right of the A537 is the recommended route via footpaths – but this is only sensible in the light or if you know it. But there is a moving torch light over in that direction – I wonder if that is a runner? The Kerridge road comes and Manchester shows itself. I can keep jogging and do so, most of the way to the canal. At this point there is Matthew, Julian and 5 Harriers ahead of me. Along the canal two BS chaps suddenly approach from behind and overtake me showing how slowly I must be going as in no time they are way in the distance. The last CP, Whitley Green. In and out quickly here with a small water top up and onto Middlewood Way. After a few minutes another chap comes past – then I realise it is one who passed me along the canal. "Took the wrong turn" he says.

I jog all the way to Bridge 12. But it must have been slow. Then Wood Lane, and streets to Trafalgar Road with my planned minor short cut down a jitty to Coppice. The home straight, Towers Road. Not until I get to the end do I take a glance behind to see if there are any lights from competitors about to catch me. There aren't. I walk up to the traffic lights and jog to the scout HQ and finish with a smile inside as it is always an achievement to finish no matter what the time or position.

Most or all of those who have finished are still in the refreshments area, some have changed out of running gear so I don't really know who's who. So I shake everyone's hand to be sure, especially the Harriers that I recognise and thank them for their support. Stephen did well to marshal his group of Harriers around the course, encouraging and motivating each and every one (and me at times) and all of them looking out for each other (and me at times). Julian is also there and I congratulate him in his super speed up the hill after Miller's Dale. Just then Matthew who we all thought was the winner comes in. He had got a bit lost. So Julian is the winner!

Mathew had been following the recommended route at all times. So he had taken the footpath rather than the simpler road option at Walker Barn (hence the torch light I'd seen) and this had delayed him a fair bit in the dark. I think he was happy to finish but not so happy in his time which was somewhat longer than the sub-10 he was apparently going for.

One chap seems to be in a poor way, lying on a mat with a knee injury and being attended to. By the time I leave he appears to be a little better. This is hard event to complete and getting an injury part way makes it extremely difficult – I assumed he had retired and been transported by scout vehicle back to the finish.

Now for a bit of sleep before the drive home. At least I don't feel sick – the much cooler weather must have helped.

Perhaps more than usual a big thanks to all the organisers, marshals etc. who came out in the grotty weather at times (particularly Chinley Churn and Edale Cross) to make the event a success and support the participants.

My time is one of my slowest. I guess I need to work on my flat speed. Maybe I should join the Stockport Harriers club – although that would mean a round trip of 4 hours to get to each training session – so perhaps not.

Nigel Aston (13 finishes)