

CHEVIOT ROUND – 52 miles, 9,550 ft of ascent

If at first you don't succeed.....

INTRODUCTION

In early September an email dropped into my inbox from [Shepherds Walks](#), a Rothbury based outdoors company, whose name is linked to the fact that its founder had, at the time of the company's creation in 1999, was working as a... (you've guessed it) a shepherd.

It announced the creation of a new 52 mile ultra route taking in all the major peaks in the local area and was appropriately entitled the [Cheviot Round](#) (contains full route details and much other useful information). Starting and finishing in Alwinton it makes use of well established paths and tracks, with clockwise and anti-clockwise versions to suit all tastes and ambitions.

The clockwise version heads up and down to Shillmoor and then likewise over Shillhope Law to Barrowburn before heading up The Street to join the Pennine Way and onward to Windy Gyle (11 miles) then over to Cheviot (16 miles) and back down to the Harthope Valley to Carey Burn Bridge (22 miles). It then turns back on itself, pretty much adopting the reverse of the Chevy Chase route up to Hedgehope summit (27 miles) before bearing left over Dunmoor Hill and down to Ingram (33 miles). The route then continues south down to Prendwick and along to Northfieldhead before picking up Salter's Road to Ewartly Shank (40 miles) and then onward until you veer off left up the nose of Cushat Law to its summit and then along to Bloodybush Edge (44 miles), down to Uswayford before the final climb up to Kidland Forest and the last 5 miles down Clennell Street to the finish in Alwinton.

In mid September Paul Appleby and myself went out and reccied the first 12 miles and last 10 miles of the course or should I say Paul ran and I reccied as this being his backyard he, unlike me, knew the route with his eyes closed. Having had a wonderful day out, the die was cast and I decided to make a clockwise attempt early the following week. However, a lady by the name of Agnes (of the storm variety rather than my 97 year old aunt of similar name) intervened necessitating a swift change of plan, delaying us for a couple of days.

FIRST ATTEMPT – Friday September 29, 2023

4.40am and I met up with Rich Kirby and Bertie (Border Collie) in the car park at Alwinton in what seemed like perfect conditions given the howling gales which had presided over the earlier in the week. In an act of kindness going well beyond the call of duty but never one to miss out on an excuse to be out in the hills he was there to pick up my drop bags.

The first 40 miles went pretty much to plan, with Rich and Bertie running with me between Barrowburn and Windy Gyle before dropping down to drive round to Carey Burn where we met up with Paul for the section round to Ingram. From Ingram I was flying solo and all seemed to be going according to plan although tiredness (and nascent stupidity) was beginning to make itself known.

This led to a monstrous and round ending navigational mistake around the 42 mile mark, which seems incredible considering I had the route GPX on my phone. Somehow, in my weary and brain befuddled state, I had convinced myself that Hogdon Law was Cushat Law, despite, and I can't stress this enough, the GPS telling me otherwise. By the time I had realised the enormity of my mistake I was a mile off course, an hour and a half behind schedule, tramping through hideous tussocky and boggy ground and had suffered the final indignity of losing a running pole.

With my metaphorical tail between my legs I beat a retreat through Kidland Forest and was most grateful to be met by Paul, acting as a one man Mountain Rescue Service halfway down to convey me back to Alwinton to lick my wounds.

Cheviot Round 1 – 0 John Telfer

SECOND ATTEMPT – Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Having spent a couple of days mulling over matters I did the only logical thing available to man and headed back down on the Monday to the head of the Ingram Valley and across to Salter's Roads to find the proper way up the real Cushat Law. The sheer simplicity of doing so only made my navigational horlicks of 72 hours earlier even more incomprehensible.

Taking the positives, learning the lessons, checking the weather forecast, I decided to give it another go the following week.

Having enlisted the help of Rich and Paul for my first attempt I deemed it beyond selfish, even by my high standards of what constitutes selfishness, I planned to go solo making use of stash bags at Carey Burn Bridge and Ingram. However, when word got out regarding my plans both of them would countenance nothing other a similar involvement second time. In fact, my company was to be swelled by the presence of Kevin Bray and Bob Sewell. So, with combined ages of 300 and at least 500 years of hill, fell and mountain experience between us, surely this attempt was destined to succeed?

4.30am and I'm back in the car park at Alwinton, arriving earlier than planned due to the A1 not being closed for overnight roadworks this time. There were two distinct differences from the previous attempt. The thermometer in the car was registering 15 degrees but there was a pretty stiff breeze which suggested it could be "interesting" higher up.

Rich arrived shortly after without Bertie, who was nursing a sore paw and probably enjoying a night of uninterrupted sleep, and with food and clothes bags handed over I was off slightly before 5am (4.48am if anyone is that interested) with fingers crossed that I could keep both my legs and brain ticking over for the next 16 hours or so, something I had spectacularly failed to do ten days earlier.

The first mile of the clockwise round goes along the valley road before bearing right up Pass Peth and a gentle climb, where, even at this early stage, I managed to go slightly off line although happily quickly corrected before descending back down and along to Shillmoor startling a few sheep along the way. From here the first real climb of the day commences up

and over Shillhope Law. This was pretty much a case of following the fence line with the most noticeable feature being the force of the wind picking up with every foot climbed. The descent to Barrowburn continued on mainly good heather and grassy tracks although prone to slips given the heavy rains of the previous weekend.

Re-joining the road, it was reassuring when Rich's headtorch came into view. The first six miles had been covered in just over an hour and half. Meeting up with Rich just before 6.30am the first thing we noticed that compared with the first attempt we still needed our headtorches on and continued to do so until 7am. The nights may be drawing in but the dawns are also drawing out!

Rich was not hanging about as we headed up The Street power marching the uphill and running everything else. Our chit chat was interspersed by just taking in the magnificent views of the rolling Cheviots in every direction as the gloomy dawn broke. Just before 7.40am we reached the summit of Windy Gyle in pretty much the same time as on our previous visit to these parts. This again was the first parting of our ways as Rich was going back down to Barrowburn to meet up with Paul and head round to Carey Burn. I took a few minutes in the stone shelter added an extra layer as I would be staying high for a while, managed to eat something and composed myself my next solo section.

After the camaraderie and chit chat of the previous hour everything felt a little more downbeat under the grey skies. Despite this the well laid out paving stones and generally flat terrain of the first four miles across to the Cheviot on the Pennine Way meant I was able to strike up a reasonable rhythm although the aforementioned recent heavy rains meant that there were quite a few puddles and boggy patches to negotiate. Although still dry above the clouds were rolling in and the wind continued to flex its muscles by now side on rather than head on so, head down and push on. Finally, the distinctive raised trigpoint of Cheviot summit appeared out of the mist just after 9am, after four and a quarter hours in the saddle and 16 miles, nearly a third of the distance, completed.



The murky path to Cheviot summit

I texted Rich and Paul to give them my Carey Burn ETA and set off in the mist with the strong wind now happily on my back. Within a 100 yards of crossing the ladder stile at the Eastern end of the summit, the cloud miraculously dissipated and almost all of the final 35+ miles of my route unfolded in front of me. There was even some blue sky to further lift my spirits.

Despite the soft going underfoot Scald Hall and Broadhope Hill summits were attained without mishap before turning sharp right to follow the track firstly down to bisect the Broadstruther / Langleeford path before the ascent up Cold Law. From there it is an easy downhill down to Carey Burn Bridge, the last mile or so being done in the company of Rich and Paul who had come out to meet me. 22 miles completed in just over five and a half hours, 30 miles to go.

Whilst there is always the temptation to have a good break at such transition points, experience has demonstrated that what benefits are gained to my legs and lungs are usually outdone by loss of heat and flexibility in the joints. Hence I always “put myself on the clock”, ten minutes maximum for wardrobe adjustments, refill bottles replenish food stocks and then eat on my way out of the checkpoint.



22 miles down, 30+ to go. With Paul and Rich at Carey Burn Bridge

From here to the summit of Hedgehope it is a case of following the Chevy Chase route in reverse whilst being permitted the luxury of not having to visit Brands Corner. Whilst that may sound simple, it is not necessarily so as the direction of travel is predominantly uphill with the final ascent up Hedgehope being the steepest of all encountered that day. The wind was back in our faces and with a never ending maze of trods and paths from which to choose “happiness” was an understatement that I had Paul and Rich leading the way just leaving me to concentrate on keeping moving forward. About three miles out from Carey Burn Rich

turned around in order to drive round to Ingram leaving Paul and I to enjoy the wet ground and ever steepening ground.

The one advantage of the final steep climb up Hedgehope was that it provided some protection from the wind and the sun out it made for the most pleasant part of the day. By the time we reached the summit I was just over halfway at around 26.5 miles covered in seven and a half hours.

The descent down and over Dunmoor Hill and Cunyan Craggs was typified by the return of the high winds, now side on, some pretty soggy & slippery ground and an encounter with the only two walkers we were to come across all day. The descent down towards Reaveleyhill resulted in some abatement of the wind but fair to say we were pleased to make Ingram just after 1.30pm, 33 miles down in not far off eight and three quarter hours since I had started.

Rich had come out to run the last half mile into Ingram with us where Kevin Bray and Bob Sewell were waiting to take delivery of their less than precious cargo for the next section. It also marked my farewell to Rich who had been in my company on and off for the best part of the past ten hours. Having done so, sacrificing a decent night's sleep in the process, his reward was starting a nightshift at 6pm, and people say I have stamina!

Kevin and Bob join the fray at Ingram



Although I had stuck to my plan of only spending 10 minutes at Ingram I was soon left pondering the wisdom of this decision as even on, what by all accounts, is a modest climb out of Ingram over the flanks of Wether Hill down to Prendwick I was struggling to get out of second gear which Kevin diplomatically referred to as "looking tired". The tedious trudge on a hardcore road up the gentle gradient to Northfieldhead again head on into the wind stuck behind a herd of bullocks did little to lighten my mood. When Kevin turned around to head

back to his camper van with the aim of picking Bob up in the vicinity of Ewartly Shank Bob must have been wondering what he had done to deserve an afternoon out with Mr Happy.



Bob running, JT shuffling – descent into Prendwick

However, despite the soggy sections of Salter's Road doing little to raise my spirits, Bob's calm encouragement helped pass the time until we were afforded something to run down on our approach to the farm at Ewartly Shank which heralded close to the 40 mile mark in just under 10 and three quarter hours.

With another two hours of head on wind to look forward to and with the "warm" (relative turn) part of the day having passed I was back to donning a third layer along with warm hat and gloves. A mile further on Bob turned around to meet back up with Kevin leaving me to sort out the next 10 or so miles on my own before hopefully meeting up with Paul who was intending to meet me on the final descent on Clennell Street to Alwinton.

The trudge up Cushat Law was not pleasant although made slightly more so by the fact that it was actually Cushat Law and not Hogdon Law that I was ascending. In the gathering gloom, in just under 12 hours since starting out the desired summit was reached with 10 of the 52 miles left to cover. The next two miles was just a case of following the fence line down, skirting around Kidland Forest, and then up to Bloodybush Edge under ever more darkening clouds and yes, the omnipresent wind. It was then downhill to the isolated farm at Uswayford where I was greeted by a sign which read "Beware of the Geese" and a volley of barking. Would you believe it, barking geese?

The farm road takes you under the lower reaches of Yarnspath Law before veering left over Peat Sike and the final short climb of the day onto Clennell Street and entering the western extremities of Kidland Forest now just a morass of tree stumps. At this point, and with 47.5

miles on the lock by 6.30pm I stopped to don my headtorch and set out to complete the final 5 miles with about 70 minutes to break the 15 hour barrier.

By now the gloom laden skies had given way to a steady drizzle, the first precipitation of the day. Annoying as it but so close to home this was more of an irritation than anything that was going to have a serious impact on proceedings. As it turned out after about twenty minutes it had had enough and disappeared off to wherever rain showers go when not falling. Forward momentum along these dreary bark strewn forest roads running in my little bubble of light was proving difficult and so it was no small amount of joy that I spotted Paul's headtorch in the distance before I came to my senses and realised it was actually a light from some distant farmhouse way off in a distant valley. Legs out of juice and cognitive functions not far behind!

Happily within the next 10 minutes another light homed into view and this one was coming towards me at speed. Before I could tell Paul what a great boost it was to see him I realised it was actually Kevin who I had assumed would be somewhere nice and dry and windproof back in Morpeth. Apparently the lure of a trot up Clennell Street in the wind, rain and dark had proved to be too much of a temptation to resist and within a couple of minutes we met up with Paul and Bob. Suffice to say, the final few miles were a bit of a blur as further chit chat about nothing I can remember took away all sense of tiredness and pain as the Over 60's club made their way steadily down to the finish at Alwinton.



Final descent down Clennell Street by torchlight and drizzle

And at last it was all over in exactly 15 hours and 10 minutes with a recorded a distance of 52.7miles, a smidgen under 3.5 miles an hour.

EPILOGUE

As with every single expedition of this nature be it an ultra race or challenge I am only capable of only one emotion at such moments of conclusion; joy, elation, supreme satisfaction, sense of achievement or pride? No, just pure and simple relief. Relief that I can now stop moving, relief that I didn't get lost (this time), relief that neither I nor anyone who joined me along the way had incurred any misfortune or injury. Maybe one day a really good psychologist will explain to me why I so frequently and willingly put myself through this, running (or trudging) into the jaws of pain, weariness, nausea and mental adversity, not to mention wet feet in all conditions and at all hours. Probably because deep down I enjoy it so much.



The smiles say it all – it's over !!!

Joking aside (am I really joking?) this is a great day out and I look forward to having a crack at the anticlockwise version and even possibly, if I can summon up the courage, a Winter Round and I encourage you to do the same and, if available, I would be delighted to help you out (unless you are too fast for me to keep up with (i.e. 95% of you reading this)).

Despite my cohorts on the day lauding me for my achievement the real “win” on the day and memories of the day were the hours spent in company of great people enjoying being out in the great outdoors. Their contribution cannot be overstated, giving so generously of their time and (in Rich's case) sleep to come out and help keep me turning the heels and wheels so to speak. So, heartfelt thanks to Rich, Paul, Kevin, Bob and Paul on that score. Lest we forget the real stars of the show were the Cheviot Hills, whatever the time of day, whatever the overhead and underfoot conditions provided the most inspiring and fulfilling office I have ever had the pleasure of working in.

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