

## Castles & Islands Challenge - 29/30 June 2012



This is quite a unique challenge, which shows off the Northumbrian coast in an equally unique way. Teams of sailors and runners visiting the 5 main castles up the coast, using only sail and leg power, covering around 70 nautical miles of sailing and 30 miles (49km) of running, within a 24-hour deadline.

12 teams registered, but only 11 started. Runners came from near and far, with teams comprised of runners from Alnwick Harriers, NFR, Wetherby Runners and Leeds Harriers, to mention but a few.

The Challenge starts at 8.00 pm on Friday at castle number 1; Alnwick. We touched the castle gates for luck, and the starter set us off, a few minutes after 8, on a 10 mile (16k) 'multi-terrain' run, to Amble Marina. And multi-terrain it certainly was.

We started on road for 1½ miles; just enough for Ian Harding of Alnwick Harriers and his teammate, to disappear off into the distance as if it was a 5k time trial! Once we left the road we faced fields, mud, tracks, woodland, a bit more road, silage fields with grass a foot long, fields of oats, more road and then a castle moat, as we did the obligatory circuit of castle 2 at Warkworth, before the final mile or so to the marina. We rounded the castle in 3<sup>rd</sup> place, but were over-hauled by another team with ½ mile to go, and finished 4<sup>th</sup>, by about 200yds, in 66mins.

The wind was 'brisk' to put it mildly, as we jumped on the boat to hand over responsibility to James and the other sailors. Scott and I dived below deck to avoid hindering their efforts. The first task for them was to do a clockwise circumnavigation of Coquet Island. Given the brisk wind, this provided quite a serious challenge, involving a strong crosswind, a strong head wind, a strong crosswind from the opposite direction and culminating with a strong following wind. And all in a high sea swell. A very interesting experience, but not the most pleasurable one, bundled down below deck, being thrown around. No wonder Scott took a serious wobbly turn at this point! Little did he know what a recurring theme that would become!

This was my 6<sup>th</sup> yacht race, and so as a bit of a veteran of this type of event, I immediately took the chance to eat some pasta and take on some fluids to help recovery, knowing from previous experience, that once you start to feel sickly, you won't take on either, and it will inevitably catch up with you later. As a first time yacht racer, Scott declined my offer of a bowl of pasta, preferring instead to scrutinize very closely, the inside of a Tesco carrier bag, whilst making repeated "Uurrrggghhhh" sounds at very short intervals.

It was 10.00pm as we settled down to try to sleep. It wasn't easy, as we were pitched up and down and side to side as the boat lurched from 45 degrees in one direction to 45 degrees in the

opposite one, as the sailors tacked one way then another to deal with the 360 degree circuit of Coquet Island.

We both lay flat and tried to sleep, but nothing more than rest with eyes closed was possible. At 11.45pm, our sailing colleagues alerted us that we should start preparing for the next run, as we heard the dingy being inflated. Aidan had decided that tides, and the wind forecast for the later stages, meant we should do the most southerly and shortest, Newton by the Sea run, next. It felt chilly as we got changed, and Scott decided to warm up by having another examination of the inside of his Tesco carrier bag, and repeated his battle cry a few times.

We jumped into the dinghy with James, and rowed ashore to Newton. It was 12.25am, and pitch black. I was perched on the back of the dinghy, and as we reached the shore, a breaking wave did exactly that, right up my back, and soaked me from the shoulders down. So much for my nice dry running kit; I only had one pair of shorts with me!

Scott's head torch made mine look like a wimpy, 2-candlepower, as we headed off along the beach. After 10 minutes or so, we were very surprised to be greeted by cheers emerging from the blackness of the top of the dunes, as a group of presumably well-inebriated spectators, made their presence known.

The next obstacle, which will be familiar to many Coastal Run participants, was crossing the river that meets the sea halfway along Newton beach. Barely noticeable when the tide is low, but the tide was well up, and with a wall on the south side of the river, we had no option but to take to the sea and wade thigh deep through the waves at the river mouth. Or just below knee-depth for Scott! We encountered a couple of other lights on the way, as it became clear that other boats had made the same decision as us, to do the Dunstanburgh Castle run second.

It became a bit trickier as we hit the coastal path on leaving the beach. Scott made good progress with the floodlight he'd borrowed from St James' Park on his head, but my candle meant I had to work very hard with my dodgy eyes, to stumble along and try to keep somewhere near him. As I caught up, he asked if I'd seen the Sea Otter. Not a chance. Perhaps it was attracted by the smell of melting wax from my head torch?

We touched the castle gate on the south side to tick off castle number 3, and re-traced our steps to stumble back along the path, then on to the beach to wade back through the sea at the river, and on to meet James waiting at Newton. It took us 45 minutes, and we jumped back into the dinghy at 1.10am.

Scott ran remarkably well, given that he hadn't eaten or drunk anything since before we started the Alnwick run, and had left the remnants of any bodily nourishment or fluids in his Tesco carrier bag on the boat. This approach proved such a success that, as soon as we returned to the boat, he decided to repeat the process with his remaining Tesco carrier bag, and practise his "Uurrrggghhh" battle cry. I wasn't entirely convinced by the merits of this approach, so decided to scoff a ham & coleslaw bun and some jelly babies instead.

We got horizontal as quickly as we could, but again sleep proved rather elusive, with the continued bouncing of the boat in the brisk winds. Scott decided to put the time to good use by practising his battle cry, but in the absence of any more carrier bags, turned his skills to the water baler instead, which was a slightly sturdier receptacle, but with a somewhat lower capacity! Given that he couldn't fit in the toilet when vertical, and couldn't get near it when lying horizontal with his head in the water baler, it meant we could practise our teamwork by me emptying it for him at regular intervals. Lovely.

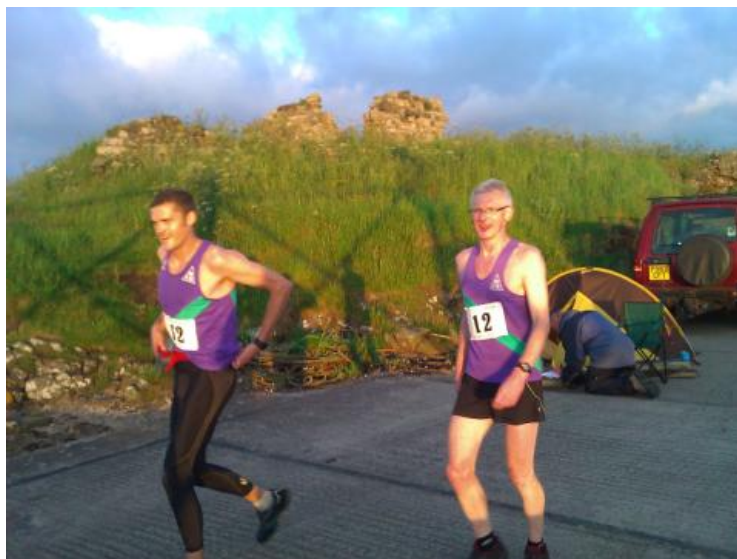


*That pillow looks a bit ropey, Scott!*

We were amazed to hear James tell us to get ready for the next run. We assumed it must be Seahouses, but it turned out to be Holy Island. We'd made tremendous time with a strong tail wind. Scott broke with tradition and managed a last-minute piece of mini flapjack, as I put on my soaking wet shorts and we both put on our soaking wet shoes and damp vests. We jumped back in the dinghy and headed for the landing ramp, with James again taking the lead as dinghy skipper. It was 3.55am and dawn was already breaking, so I left my candles in the boat.

Holy Island has a magical quality at the best of times, but even more so in the solitude of 3.55am, as the sun rises. As we ran along in the tranquility of the Holy Island dawn, we could suddenly hear a loud noise in the distance, like motorbikes racing. Surely it couldn't be, not at 4.00am? Scott decided it was probably cows on the mainland bellowing at milking time, and I suspect he was right, but it was somewhat surreal.

We largely followed the road to The Snook checkpoint at the northern point, and then headed for the beach down the eastern coast and the path through the dunes to Emmanuel Head. The final checkpoint was close to castle number 4, Lindisfarne Castle, and then we took the tourist road along past the upturned boat sheds, to the launching ramp, and James waiting to collect us. It was 5.00am, and glorious early morning sunshine for our 63-minute run. That was 3 runs and 23 miles behind us. And in Scott's case, all done on only a piece of mini flapjack and a swig of water in the previous 12 hours! Quite remarkable.



*The end of the Holy Island run at 5.00 am*

Despite how remarkable it was, I wasn't tempted to follow his routine as we returned to the boat. Scott seemed convinced by it, and very quickly began singing into the water baler with some gusto. Given that he was already well and truly running on empty, it wasn't long before the "Uurrrggghhh" chorus didn't actually require the water baler, but it was prudent for him to hug it closely just in case. I re-fuelled with some more cold pasta and jelly babies, as Scott resumed the horizontal position that proved to be the only way he could avoid turning completely green.

The southward journey was a little longer, given that the wind was now unfavourable, but nothing like enough to give us the rest we both needed. We had both commented about how our stomach muscles felt totally strained as we ran around Holy Island. I couldn't quite work out why in my case, but for Scott the cause was a bit more understandable. Our legs were seizing up now with no means of stretching out or loosening off, and we weren't relishing the 7 miles of beach running from Seahouses and round Bamburgh Castle that lay ahead rather too soon.

Too soon proved to be only two hours, and so after an hour or so of horizontal rest, we were summonsed by the management to get ready. Alan produced two pots of instant porridge, which even Scott managed to mostly eat, before we jumped back into the dinghy, because the yachts weren't allowed to enter the harbour, as the port is too busy, so rowing power was our only option. We headed for the stone steps and then jogged as briskly as our stiff legs would allow, along the harbour wall to the starting checkpoint.

I felt as though I'd been hit by a bus; my shoulder ached, my chest felt battered, my stomach muscles strained, my hip ached and my calf felt on the verge of breaking. Scott also felt battered and bruised, and our legs just couldn't manage more than a very modest trundle along the beach to Bamburgh. Fortunately our modest trundles were comparable in speed, so as a pair, we worked well together. Bamburgh Castle is a Northumbrian icon, and is a truly wonderful sight. But not when you can see it from three miles away, and know your very tired legs have to carry you there along a sandy beach.

We spotted a solitary early-morning female jogger up ahead, looking in no particular hurry. But it was all we could do to catch her up. Then we heard voices, and turned to see a team approaching from behind. It spurred us on for about 3 seconds, until we realised that, no matter what was behind us, speeding up just wasn't an option.

It turned out to be the juggernaut that was Ian Harding and his running mate, and they passed us as if we were standing still, with a cheery "Lovely morning isn't it". I think we replied, but I'm not quite sure what we mumbled, as by this time even talking was a bit too complicated to manage. And we couldn't quite believe we'd got ahead of them, after the speed at which they left Alnwick Castle all those hours earlier. Perhaps it was a mirage?

We watched ahead to see where they turned off for the castle, but they seemed to go on for an eternity. "How far is this bl\*\*dy castle?" we thought, and eventually saw them head left through the dunes. After running forever, we reached the same point, and circuited our 5<sup>th</sup> and final castle, by the path that runs below the cliffs, and adjacent to the cricket pitch.

We weren't sure how best to then return to the beach, but there were 2 or 3 options that were decidedly uphill in nature. We abandoned our natural fell-runners' tendency, without an ounce of guilt, and tried to find a flat option. Sadly there was none, and so we headed over the castle rise and on through the dunes to another 3 miles of sand running on totally shot legs.

I never thought Seahouses could look so welcoming as we hit the village, and turned down to the harbour to end the purgatory. We handed our card to the marshal at the harbour entrance, with the dinghy moored at the far end. He reminded us we could continue running along the harbour if we wanted. I'm not sure quite how we managed to avoid punching him, but somehow we did, and jogged very reluctantly along the harbour to meet James, who had again showed tremendous support by waiting for us to return. 66 minutes to complete this last run, and that was our 30 miles done. In exactly 12 hours, including the sailing in between.

We dived into the boat at 8.05am delighted to have our contribution behind us. At least I was, because the sun was shining, and I was looking forward to sitting on deck drinking coffee and

eating cakes. Scott wasn't looking forward to coffee and cakes quite as much, and very quickly cuddled his water baler in his usual horizontal position.

"Can I get you a coffee, Scott?"

"Uurrrggghhh"

"There are some lovely mini chocolate muffins here if you fancy one?"

"Uuurrggghhh"

"Is that a "No" then?"

"Uuurrggghhh"

And so it continued, for about 4 further hours, but for what must have felt like a lifetime for Scott. Anyone, like me, who has experienced seasickness in such circumstances, understands how bad it feels. If you haven't suffered from seasickness, you really cannot imagine how horrible it is. And being totally wiped out physically at the same time, just adds to the misery. We runners had done our bit, but I wasn't quite sure how Scott had managed to achieve it, with virtually no food or drink, and whilst throwing up for 16 hours to ensure he left no fuel or sustenance in his body at all. A remarkable effort, enduring what for much of the time, must have been a hellish experience.

At least I was able to help the sailors a little, mainly to lighten the load of the boat, by passing them cans of Carlsberg and McEwan's Export, which they duly emptied in a manner that didn't actually lighten the boat at all. In the style of a true athlete, James showed remarkable restraint, and took the helm for the homeward stretch, without as much as a shandy.



*The view Scott never saw!*

The headwind led to some challenging sailing, and somewhat gradual progress south. Other boats were faced with the same challenges, and eventually we made it back to Amble at 1.20pm. Altogether just over 17 hours.

The scoring system is a bit too complicated for us runners to understand, but essentially, large boats naturally travel faster than smaller boats, in the same way that cars with big engines go faster than those with small engines. This is done by a system involving allocating what is known as a "Portsmouth Yardstick Number" to each boat depending on size, and applying that to a formula. I guess it's a bit like the handicap system in golf, which I can understand because I have a big one! Our boat was one of the smallest, and when the scoring handicaps were applied to the sailing times, and those added to our running times, we'd won the race by an hour. Sadly the running sections have no similar handicaps to help us win the separate running trophy. But we managed 4<sup>th</sup>, which for a team comprising one old bloke, and one young bloke who threw up for the whole race, and ran on little more than determination, was a result we were quite happy with.

And the most important thing was the overall race victory, which was a tremendous achievement by Aidan, James and Alan, who remained cheerful and alert throughout, on no more sleep than we got ... which was none! Very well done, boys! We salute you.

Dexter