

The Weardale Watershed – 75.4km/1550m – Saturday 05th June 2021 - Andrew Higgins

Throughout lockdown I'd been pouring over maps of our wonderful neighbouring remote and rugged places. Previous exploits in both the Cheviots and the local moors convinced me there are many more epic adventures to be had on our doorsteps and I was determined to plan a route that was equal in both interest and challenge for myself and hopefully for others to follow*. Having found too many excuses in recent years, my time spent enjoying and pushing myself in the fells has reduced and with it so too has a big part of my wellbeing, fitness, satisfaction and opportunity to socialise with many like-minded friends. With this challenge and a commitment to train and race the ITERA this summer things have certainly turned a corner.

Those who know me will confirm (with the occasional curse) that my preferred day out is akin to that found on mountain marathons; long days, varied and often unforgiving terrain, seeking out new places with plenty of navigation and a sense of self dependence and mountain skill. With these criteria in mind and suitable fells just 30mins drive from my house, the Weardale Watershed was conceived* and on the 5th June I found the time to give it a go. It was a cracker...

** I have subsequently discovered that Stu Fergusson completed a very similar round in August 2013, read his write up [here](#). While my round was subtly different (His going clockwise, starting and finishing in Wolsingham and taking a different route between Killhope Law and Collier Law over the fells south of Rookhope Burn, see map on last page) I would like to acknowledge Stu as the originator of the Weardale Watershed round. Stu has completed a number of other excellent rounds in the North Pennine area, many of which I understand will be subject of a new guidebook available soon. I look forward to getting my hands on a copy for more inspiration.*

The route and my account:

Starting from the phone box in the pretty village of Frosterley you climb briefly on roads, tracks and then single trail up to visit the first of 15 summits, Collier Law, with (weather permitting) spectacular views east to the coast, north to the Cheviots and west and south into the moors towards the awaiting fells.

Driving over to the start the car alarmed a <4C frost warning and it was certainly fresh as I set off just after 06:10 in shorts and my [Jonathon's Voice](#) T shirt. I'd left my heavily laden ultra-vest at the road crossing near Parkhead Café to collect as I went through, saving carrying the 5kg weight on the first section – the forecasted blue skies and limited cloud was spot on and the temperature began to soar into the 20's. I reminded myself to drink little and often, but only had 2L to get me through to Chapel Fell, where I'd driven to earlier in the morning and stashed a further 2L in anticipation of the heat.



1 Collier Law in the low morning sun



2 Horseshoe Hill – no clouds!



3 Bolts Law looking north east

The terrain as you head west from the third top of Bolts Law onwards becomes increasingly rough; predominantly heather, tussocks and peat hags with few established trails underfoot to follow except the shooting trods and quad tracks usually found by the helpful handrail of a boundary fence, which

is present for much of the route. I'd worked hard to make good time on these initial faster sections anticipating that worsening terrain, fatigue and the heat would wear me down later. Other than crushing my foot under a gate (that I hadn't noticed had no hinges!) the first few hours were uneventful on familiar ground, following sections of the [6 trigs](#) (recommended) and Saltwell Harriers fell race route (also recommended). I had splits for an evenly paced sub 11hr round on my home made strip map and found myself 1hr up after just 2hr30 but had figured that would be necessary to maintain sub 11hrs, with sub 12hrs being my bottom line target.

The grass of Redburn common gives way to deeper tussocks and heather as you move through Allenheads and head up to Killhope Law on a loose bearing, the reward increasing views out into the Pennines.



4 Shorngate Cross road crossing



5 Allendale Common road crossing



6 Killhope Law about to hit the hags!

Killhope Law to Killhope Cross starts promisingly with a good trod, before testing your sense of humour with nearly 2 km of continuous undulating and meandering peat hags, which were shimmering like a furnace in the high sun the heat trapped despite the small breeze that was otherwise spilling over the open moors. The bogs were largely dry, but still swallowed me up to my thigh on two occasions where the crust hid a particularly squelchy section and I'd certainly have been better off in a pair of fresh xTalons or Mudclaws than my TerraUltras.

Thankfully the going improves as you set off after you cross the head of the valley at Killhope Cross on the longest leg between road crossings with short grass and firmer ground as you swing round to head south to the half way and high point of Burnhope Seat.

Following the watershed ensures that you have no shortage of views and a sense of remoteness, but also no opportunity to access flowing water, save for the numerous energy sapping and in some cases hazardous marshes and bogs encountered on the route. I only found one semi-suspect tarn just below Burnhope Seat that I was confident (read desperate) enough to drink from. I was now only just meeting my splits, but with familiar and concerning niggles starting in my knees from ITBS and the unbearable heat, I was starting to lose momentum and motivation.



7 Good terrain to Dead Stones



8 The highpoint, Burnhope Seat



9 High Field Trig

Sending a quick update message to my [everymilematters](#) team mates was met with lots of encouraging replies, lifting my spirits and getting my head back in the game. I sat for less than 5 minutes, nearly cramping up, swapped my spent soft flasks for the two off my back and washed down a steak slice with 300 of my remaining 800ml of fluids – the water from my pack was actually hot to drink, but with 2L of water only an hours running away I drank without caution.

In better spirits, the next sections of undulating moorland and grazed fells were wonderful with carefree navigation following the boundary fence enjoying the challenge and the terrain and a sense of “heading downhill” with the views back down the Weardale valley enticing you home.

I had another low while cutting the corner off Causeway hill in deep heather at what was the hottest part of the day, but I had my first gell and squeezed the last electrolytes out of my soft flask and plodded up the gradual grassy climb to Harthope Head. I’ve never been so relieved to see a 2L camelback before – what a good call stashing that was.



10 Chapelfell Top



10 Looking across to Fendrith Hill



11 Fendrith Hill, finally some cloud

Chapelfell Top is to this round what Yewbarrow is to the BGR. Not in scale, nor challenge (it is a mere 100m climb albeit over a boggy pathless 1 mile climb) but in its situation. I needed to take stock, get my head back in the game. I convinced myself that once I’d dragged myself up to Chapelfell it was in the bag and it would then just up to me how hard to push on the run in home. I was right. The 5 minute stop decanting the water back into my flasks, a babybell, pork pie and another splattering of suncream saw me set off clumsily over the peat hags to Chapel fell but with my game face back on.

My earlier 1hr buffer had by this point reduced to less than 40minutes, making sub 10 hours unlikely but I was committed to giving it a go. Increasing cloud cover helped lift energy levels, a feeling encouraged by the good running from Fendrith Hill and a message from a friend and fellow fell / ultra runner Peter Storey saying he was going to join me for the final 10km run in. I was determined to move well over the final sections of rough ground over Outberry Plain and managed to pull back 5 minutes thanks to some unexpected quad track matting and a lovely gradual decent down off Harnisha Hill to an awaiting Pete and a soft flask of electrolytes.



12 Harnisha Hill - sub 10 back on



13 Pete heading over Pawlaw Pike



14 Five Pikes, the final trig

It was here that I saw my first other people on the hill (other than Pete) with three walkers just returning to the car park, otherwise I'd had the fells to myself all day. Pete restocked his water and caught me up by the cairn on top of Pawlaw Pike before we bashed through the heather in the direction of the final peak Five Pikes with his instructions to keep the tempo high and get me home sub 10hrs.

I was on the edge of cramp, on the edge of a sugar bonk and on the edge of the pain threshold with the ITBS pain on the descents but Pete kept me going brilliantly. The short, heathery diversion off the path to climb Five Pikes marked the end of the rough ground and hard packed trails led gradually off the hills to the Weardale Way. Now confident sub 10hrs was in the bag it was tempting to ease off but Pete encouraged me to keep the tempo up as we ran through the pretty grassy fields through West Biggins farm and picked up the last mile on tarmac returning to the phone box in [09h44m55s](#).

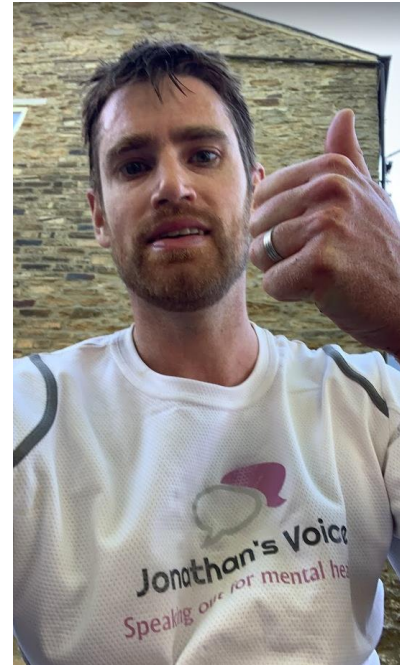
I had a great day on a route that I hope others have a go at this too. Please get in touch for any advice - fundamentally getting the right weather will be important. Being clagged in would have made this a completely different experience, as would have having wetter conditions underfoot. The heat certainly made this more of a challenge, but I got the reward of the views to make up for it!

Although not big hills there is a deceptive amount of climb due to the peat hags and lifting your knees through rough ground. These moors are extremely exposed, the weather can change quickly and the nature of the terrain can make navigation and maintaining progress challenging – some of the bogs are pretty epic too - so come prepared. I carried substantially more than I needed to w.r.t kit and food, but better to be safe than sorry! If you look at the map, you will see there are numerous escape routes and road crossings should the need to bail arise with a frequent bus service back to the start along the A689. These would also make good support points for a road crew.

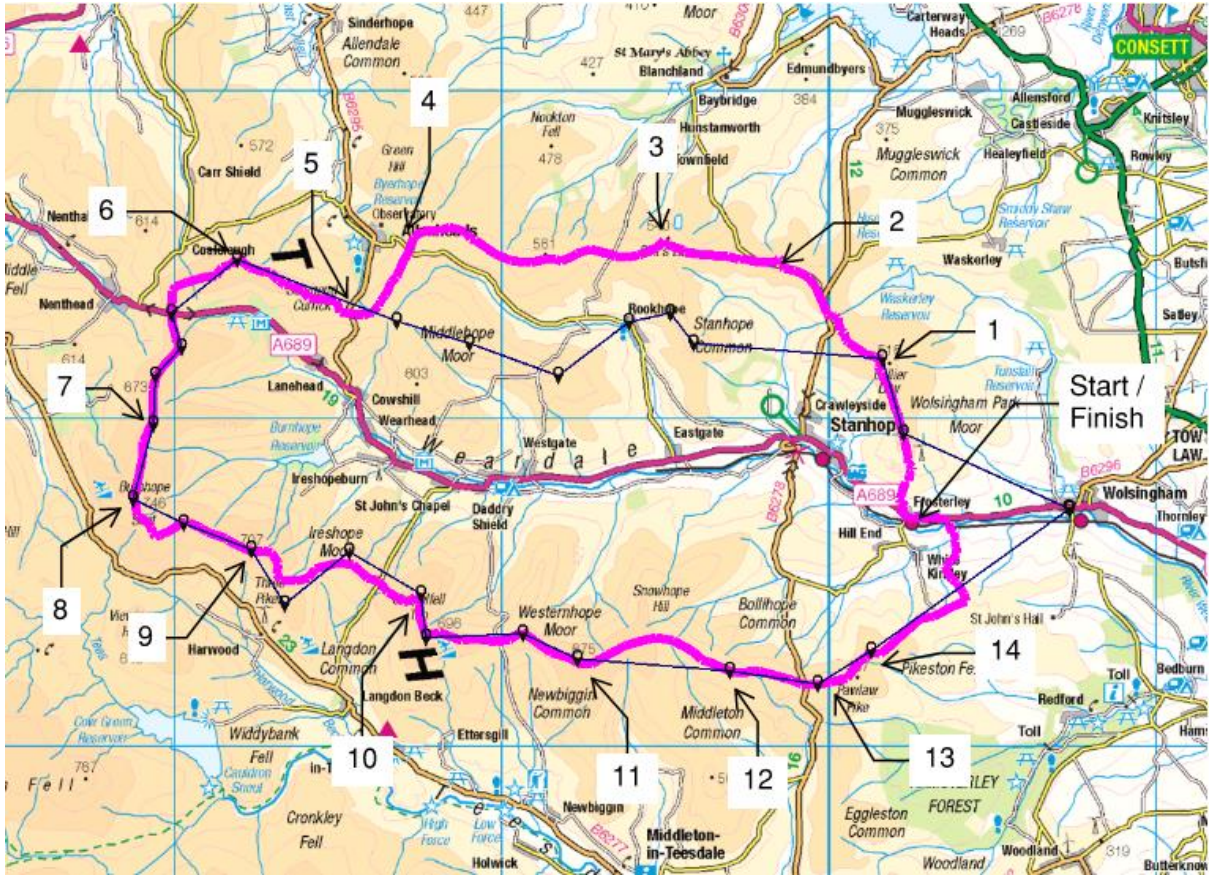
Thanks for reading, and hope to see you all on the hills again soon.

Andrew Higgins

<https://fastestknowntime.com/route/weardale-watershed>



At the finish, very satisfied and pretty wrecked!



My route in pink with numbers corresponding to photos, starting/finishing in Frosterley

The black pins and linking lines loosely show the points listed from Stu Fergusson's inaugural Weardale Watershed round starting/finishing in Wolsingham..