

UKA British Fell & Hill Relays 2026

Todmorden | Saturday 17th October

Arriving within the same calendar year as the event itself this time, I'm writing this UKA Relays report while the event is still fresh in my memory. Joe Stringer's excellent Hodgson Brothers write-up provided the motivation, and this time I'm pleased to be getting mine in before Christmas.

The entry ballot was a key feature of planning once again and, as per 2024, NFR came away again with just one place offered, again in the MV40 category. That unfortunately ruled out some of our promising younger runners who'd stepped forwards, including Chris Larkin, Emma Burke and Ben Wilkinson – a great shame, particularly given the strong showing we'd made at the recent Hodgson Brothers Relay. Chris did at least join us for the day and even got some airtime courtesy of the event announcer, broadcasting from the very impressive bandstand in Centre Vale Park. With the obligatory Pete Bland van parked alongside, it provided the centre point for the day's racing action.

Team selection was not entirely free of late injury scares. In the days before the event, a 20-kilo gym weight came to land on our leg 4 runner's foot, while a garden table inflicted a separate assault on our reserve runner. Fortunately, Ross's foot proved remarkably resilient, allowing him not only to run but also to drive one of our two cars down to Todmorden. With these minor domestic calamities behind us, that meant our team proceeded as planned:

Leg 1	John Rippon
Leg 2 (pairs)	John Tollitt & Paul Appleby
Leg 3 (nav)	Roger Sillito & Dave Fielden
Leg 4	Ross Robertson

It was an early start for everyone. Ross collected Dave and John R along the south bank of the Tyne, while I met John T and Paul at Watergate Park. The day's first navigational incident occurred before we had even left Tyneside: Paul, making an especially early departure from Rothbury, had been guided by his sat-nav to Team Valley Retail World. With the shops disappointingly closed at 7am, he redirected himself to the intended rendezvous and we were on our way with minimal delay.

After a sizeable helping of motorway driving to route around the Pennines, we dropped into the Calder Valley – a part of the country I'd never previously had the pleasure of visiting. The steep hillsides of 'Happy Valley' country looked spectacular in the early morning sun. Our arrival at the Weir Minerals car park was rather less picturesque: about as industrial-estate as a car park could reasonably aspire to be. A brisk walk towards the race venue brought my first encounter with frost in 2026, along with the



Above: Commentary HQ at Centre Vale Park's bandstand

revelation that Dave Fielden's relatives had played a significant part in the town's history, with streets bearing the family name.

The cricket pavilion served as race HQ, where we collected the event memento – this time a handy Todmorden Harriers-branded water flask. Centre Vale Park itself was playing host to 199 teams, with tents neatly arranged along both sides of the run-in. This was a great arrangement, ensuring runners would get a suitably noisy reception on their return. As usual, NFR travelled light, which is another way of saying we had no tent. Fortunately, our North East neighbours at North Shields Poly were generous enough to let us squat in theirs, giving us somewhere reasonably secure to stash our bags for the day. Their party included former NFR stalwart Johnny Malley, so it made for a welcome reunion.

The second navigational drama emerged when I mentioned that the previous evening I'd discovered my compass had lost about half its fluid and developed a worryingly large air bubble. No matter: navigation legs are more about feel anyway...

Leg 1 – John Rippon ([leg 1 map](#))

John took his place in the first mass start of the day, with the route wasting little time introducing everyone to the steep sides of the Calder Valley overlooking Todmorden. The organisers had put together a splendid fell-running sampler: mud, bog, genuinely runnable sections, great descents and plenty of variety in between. It set a high standard for the legs to follow.



Above: The mass start (John R pictured centre-ish)

Coming into the race on the back of a highly commendable recent marathon, John produced a strong run and recorded our best leg placing relative to other teams. A fine opening effort, especially considering he'd only recently chosen to subject his legs to 26.2 miles of rather less vertical punishment.



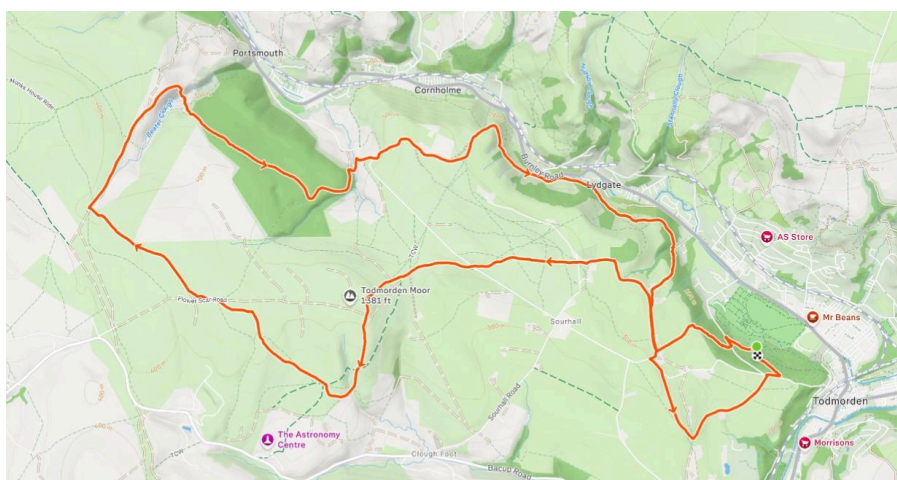
Above: John battles under blue skies (captured by Pete Jobes), and then dueling on the leg1 finish

Leg 2 – John Tollitt & Paul Appleby ([Leg 2 map](#))



Above: John T battles the bogs, photo of the day by Chris Larkin: galloping through the Wild West (of Yorkshire)

Leg 2 was one of the two longer routes, reaching much further onto Todmorden Moor. Having climbed out of the valley, John and Paul headed towards Flower Scar Hill before the course dropped downhill, south towards Bacup Road. The far section was unflagged, and the pair made good use of a section of track to skirt the highest ground. Eventually their route returned to the familiar steep valley sides, sharing the closing section of Leg 1 before returning to the flatter profile of the changeover area.



Above: Leg 2 plot, with some canny route choices to the west



Above: Paul & John on the finish straight

The pairing worked very well, and given they share an age category in NFR's championship, they were not racing each other for a change. John set the pace earlier on, while Paul's longer race stamina kicked in as the miles clocked by – an effective bit of teamwork.

Leg 3 (navigation) – Roger Sillito & Dave Fielden

By the time Dave and I were waiting for the navigation leg to start, the holding pen was developing a worryingly large population awaiting a likely mass start. This was delayed by 15 minutes, giving us ample opportunity to wonder whether everyone else had fully-functioning compasses. On the outward climb along the same valley-side route, we could hear the announcer calling in John and Paul – an encouraging reminder that at least our team's previous leg had made it safely back, but a shame we'd



Left: A surprisingly hard to uncrease Leg 3 map, presented this year in glorious A3

just missed the thrill & satisfaction of an actual relay handover.



Above: Map collection, before a first “nav choice” of the day - [captured for posterity on YouTube](#)



Above: Happy faces on the climb to checkpoint 3B

Once the proper navigation began, things went reasonably well aside from control 3C. Having made a fairly pacey descent escaping traffic, we managed to miss a carefully concealed control box down Tower Clough. It was frustrating that we fell for a blatant course-setters' trap, although it was

nonetheless nice to get lost in that lovely long grassy descent! A little unplanned searching later - and with particular thanks to another pair who tipped us off that we were past the control's location - we were back in business, zig-zagging back across the map through forestry, the next control at the route's highest point above Todmorden Moor got us back in gear.

We navigated remaining controls without further issue, but they treated us to a relentless supply of climbing & descent, culminating in the steepest of grassy descents towards Bacup Road, before an inevitable climb back northwards to rejoin the same run in as the other legs.

It transpired that ours was, by a touch, the longest leg of the day and also had the most ascent – reassuring to know that it wasn't entirely our nav technique making it feel that way. I generally led the way on the earlier climbs, before Dave took on the role of chief motivator as I flagged near the end and persuaded me into something resembling a sprint for the finish itself, just beating a Rossendale ladies pair who we'd been neck & neck with for the second half of the leg.

Leg 4 – Ross Robertson

([Leg 4 map](#))

For the second time in successive NFR relays, after Appletreewick in 2024, we had failed to spare Ross from the final-leg mass start. His course was a variation on Leg 1, this time taking in the summit of Flower Scar Hill before descending back over the lower moor. Happily, he had fully recovered from the gym-weight vs foot incident and dispatched his leg in typical fashion.



Above: Ross brings us home with an almost smile

More importantly following a morning of banterous interchange, Ross emerged with a useful statistical advantage over John Rippon: the official routes gave Leg 4 a whole metre less climbing than Leg 1. John's 492 metres against Ross's mere 491 meant that, whatever else happened, Ross could take comfort from having been given the easier job on the day.



Above: Dave reunites with family. Despite mentioning less savoury associations of some distant relatives, [Wikipedia suggests John Fielden M.P. was definitely a force for good!](#)

Unfortunately, I managed to miss Ross's finish as I'd been getting myself tidied up for the drive back, so can't describe our glorious finish further. This was compounded by Dave & I having arrived to cash in our meal token and finding the hog-roast queue had reached biblical proportions. After long deliberations we made the tough call to become temporary vegetarians rather than see it through for what we later heard was a spectacular offering. Not quite the sort of tactical decision that wins a relay, but it seemed the pragmatic choice in the interests of getting away before dark.

A final word

Todmorden made a really excellent venue for the relays this year. With everything focused on Centre Vale Park and wilder countryside rising immediately beyond it, the setup felt rather like a cross-country event fed on powerful fell-running steroids. The weather held for the whole day too, with near-perfect racing conditions and some beautiful windows of autumn sunshine showing off the landscape at its best.



Above: Team NFR pose after a memorable day out

Alas, we couldn't reproduce the recent heroics of our Hodgson Brothers team, and we were some way off troubling the top of the MV40 standings. On the other hand, half of our six runners were eligible for V60, so perhaps there are limits to what we could have expected. We didn't however claim the distinction of being the last-placed North East team – assuming we're allowed to claim bragging rights by just edging it over North Shields Poly's ladies team.

A thoroughly enjoyable day was had by all, with good company, a cracking set of courses and excellent organisation thanks to Todmorden Harriers. Even the veggie burger was above average. Here's hoping the ballot is kinder to us next time, allowing some of our younger talent to get involved and perhaps giving our veteran contingent a chance to take a supporting role once again (my sources tell me the relays will return to **The Lake District** in 2027).

Roger Sillito
October 2026