

6. Fell Running at TRC

Be running up that hill with no problem (Kate Bush)

How did a jogging club in the Home Counties come to excel in one of the more extreme ends of running – fell running? Well, here we can explain. You will also learn how one of TRC's greatest traditions came into being and we will review TRC's own fell runs around Wendover Woods and Coombe Hill.

As early as 1984, the Tring Jogging Club newsletter included the first mention of running on the hills. Ian Robinson and Dave Perrett were planning to run the 'Three Peaks' in the Lake District. They also ventured that the Bob Graham Round may come later (of which, more later). And then in 1988, Dave Fryer reported on his exploits in the Box Hill Fell Race. While not in the Lakes, Peak District or other mountainous area, Box Hill in Surrey qualifies as a BM fell race (middle distance and medium ascent). Dave hoped that in future years TJC might be able to enter a team. The race has since become a favourite early-season race for TRC's off-road championship.

Nonetheless, it was only in the 1990s that Tring Jogging Club started fully to embrace its more adventurous side. (Thanks to Rick Ansell for much of the content in this chapter.)

Hill on the hill

Fell running proper in Tring arguably started when Kevin Harding oversaw Rob Hill doing hill reps on Incombe Hole near Ivinghoe Beacon. Rob had joined Tring in 1992 after running for Luton for many years. At Luton he had been a 'proper' runner, training with the likes of Olympic athlete Tony Simmons and posting sub-26-minute 5-mile times. Rob would regularly place in major road races. As his youth matured, he found he was no longer able to win the races he had once won and started to look for a new challenge. At Tring he met Kevin who was a notable orienteer and mountain marathoner. With his brother Quentin, Kevin ran the Elite class at the annual Karrimor International Mountain Marathon (KIMM) and also competed in the Lake District Mountain Trial.

Kevin had completed the Bob Graham Round (colloquially known as 'the BG') in the Lake District in 1988. He suggested a BG might be a suitable challenge for Rob. To convert a high-class road and track specialist to someone capable of travelling 66 miles over the Lakeland fells in under 24 hours was going to need a little work. While Tring is situated in the hills, the Chilterns are not quite the Cumbrian mountains. With both Rob and Kevin working full time, regular visits to the Lakes were not very practical so Incombe Hole near Ivinghoe Beacon was chosen as the steepest local hill and reps both up and down the steep face were what Kevin prescribed.

The training worked and, in the summer of 1993, Rob duly completed his BG paced by Kevin and Quentin with road support from Alison Harding. It was a picture of Rob with a

write-up of his round in the local paper that attracted another fell runner to Tring Jogging Club as it was then. Rick Ansell had moved to Northchurch in 1992. He had completed the BG in 1982 and was racing regularly on the fells but representing Dark Peak Fell Runners, the club he had joined initially in his student days. Recognising the Harding name and discovering a local interest in fell running, Rick came along to the club one autumn Wednesday in 1993.

Let's off-road!

In those days, Wednesday nights at TRC consisted of either running round the perimeter of Tring or running down the (old) A41 to the Bell at Aston Clinton, round the Loop and back up the hill to Tring (see Chapter 10 on the legendary Bell Loop). Occasionally a lap of Tring was followed by the Bell Loop.

It was believed that running in the dark could only be done on lit roads. As the Wednesdays went by and training didn't vary, a suggestion was made to explore the unlit lanes up through Wigginton and out to Cholesbury. There was considerable resistance to this; it was thought that running to Cholesbury would result in certain death but eventually the tedium of the Bell Loop won over the doubters, on condition that every member carry a torch.

Petzl headtorches were becoming widely available and those who didn't have them soon got one. Each Wednesday there would be a mini-adventure as we ran out to Dancers End and up the Crong or out through Wigginton. Soon, though, these adventures began to become repetitive too. One night the group was feeling jaded as we approached Cholesbury and someone suggested that by taking a track to the left we could reduce the run by a couple of miles. And so it was that Tring Running Club's greatest tradition – running off road, all year round – started.

The experience was positive and people started to look for other off-road possibilities sticking mainly to big tracks and footpaths. Marshcroft Lane became a possibility and the towpath opened up options.

During the following summer Rob Hill could be heard tinkering away in his shed and once the clocks changed, he appeared with a super bright homemade rechargeable head torch, a quantum leap beyond anything commercially available. Suddenly running at night was as easy as running in daylight. Runs now went cross country to Cholesbury Fort or up Aston Hill and into Wendover Woods lit up by the 'Rob Hill Special'. Explorations were made out the other side of Tring too, to Ashridge and the Bridgewater Monument and to Pitstone Hill and Ivinghoe Beacon, destinations familiar from the summer runs. Winter Wednesdays would never be the same as people took it in turn to devise and lead runs. Everyone admired Rob's torch and he began to take orders and more and more battery packs appeared in the changing rooms.

Meanwhile, back on the fells ...

Rick would come back from weekends in the Lakes and share tales of epic runs at Wasdale or Ennerdale and Kevin would discuss his preparations for the next KIMM. Interest in runs beyond Hertfordshire and not involving road running grew. People started entering the Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon, a less austere and more sociable version of the autumn KIMM. More tales were added to the club canon of evenings sitting round at the overnight camp drinking beer after fine days out running the hills in glorious sunshine. Notable among these were Dave Fryer and Richard Collison who started to run regularly as a team in these types of events. Dave and Richard were primarily rafters, paddling for the very successful Wonder Y Club at Bulbourne and one year were selected to represent Britain in the Dragon Boat World Championships.

With this increased interest in more exotic running, one evening Kevin suggested that the club should enter a team for the British Hill and Fell Running Relays, aka the FRA Relays, so in 1997 an entry was sent off and a place gained to compete on Pendle Hill. At this time Rick was still running first claim for Dark Peak, a fact that had not escaped the FRA Secretary, Mike Rose. Mike had warned Rick that only first claim runners could be selected for a team at the Relays. Rick persisted in running and the team was duly disqualified, not appearing in the results. However, the flag had been flown. A southern club had appeared at the FRA Relays and Tring was starting to get onto the fell running map.

Following this, Rick changed allegiance to make Tring his first claim club and Dark Peak second with the result that the Tring vest came to be seen increasingly at some of the bigger fell races much to the bemusement of Northern runners. 'Where the hell's Tring?' became a much-asked question. To which the answer, when possible, was 'In front of you.'

Dave and Richard became more involved in running and the club, seeing running fitness as complementary to the fitness needed for paddling. They started to look for other endurance challenges and in 1997 another Bob Graham attempt was scheduled. Richard trained specifically for the run but Dave did nothing other than his usual paddling and Wednesday runs relying on his bloody-mindedness and base fitness from his work to get him round. The pair were joined by another club member, Rob Hickling, and paced by Kevin and Rick. Richard and Rob pulled away from Dave climbing out of Wasdale on an anti-clockwise attempt and went on to finish with half an hour to spare but there was a nervous wait outside the Moot Hall for Dave who came steaming in with just seven minutes left on the clock. So 1997 saw the addition of three more Tringers to the 24-hour Bob Graham club.

In 2002, just as he was really getting into fell running, Richard developed a heart problem and was told not to run or raft. Unable to resist at least being present at the annual 100-mile River Wye raft race he followed the Wonder Y team on the bank and on the second day of the race suffered a massive heart attack. Richard left a young son,

Kim. Linda, his wife, eventually sold the smallholding they had at Tringford and moved the family to the Lake District where she continued to pair with Dave's wife, Cherry, in mountain marathons. Kim, growing up in this new environment and obviously influenced by his early experiences of the fell running world, embraced the sport and went on to become a top-flight fell and trail runner and represent Great Britain, winning, among other things, the Lakeland 50. Nowadays he might wear a Borrowdale vest but he'll tell you that there is still a big part of him that is forever Tring.

The new century

As the old millennium fizzled out and the new one dawned, fell running went through an inexplicable dip. Race numbers shrank. In 2003 the classic Ennerdale Horseshoe race was cancelled as there were going to be more marshals out than runners. This meant that those who did turn out stood a much better chance of getting a prize. Rick, who was still spending most Friday nights on the M6, won two AL races in 2002 – the Welsh 1,000ms and Brecon Beacons (now a BL race) and took 5th at Wasdale.

Equally impressive was Kevin's third place in the World Masters event held from Fitz Park in Keswick in 2005. Kevin, now his daughters were older, was training with real commitment and targeted this event from a year out, even missing the Lakes Mountain Trial in order to remain fresh for it. Despite the many successes he has had including running for England at orienteering, he maintains that this result is his most satisfying.

Kevin and his brother Quentin continued to target the Karrimor Mountain Marathon with a stated aim of winning the Elite Class. This was the period when Mark Seddon was a dominant force in mountain marathoning, winning ten Karrimors in a row. The Harding brothers were also up against another pair of siblings, Alan and Ifor Powell. Alan was one of Britain's finest extreme alpinists and Ifor an outstanding orienteer. Kevin and Quentin managed a string of third places but could never quite break Mark's dominance.

As interest in fell running increased within the club, Tony Ruberry started to organise Easter trips to the Lakes, staying at St John's in the Vale. These long weekends of running and walking helped introduce more people to the fells and the dark arts of navigation. More club members put themselves forward for events, the club started to enter more relay races, notably the Calderdale Way Relay, a 12-person, six-stage event, originally held in mid-December (for more on the CWR see Chapter 8 on TRC Teams).

Another relay event that the club took on was the prestigious Ian Hodgson Relay (now the Hodgson Brothers Relay), an event for teams of eight with four legs each run in pairs based on Brotherswater in the Lake District. With entries to this restricted, it was a real coup and recognition of Tring as a bona fide fell running club when in 2007 Tring's application was accepted and a team went north to take on the major fell running clubs of the Lakes. Since then, Tring has had a team at every Hodgson Relay.

Participation in these events drew in another big name in mountain running: Nigel Bunn. Nigel had had wins in the solo Klets Class at the Saunders and was a strong orienteer. He lived in Abingdon but was looking for a club that would enable him to run in these types of relay events and share lifts to races in the north and he added real strength to our relay teams, giving us another competent navigator who could be paired with strong runners lacking map and compass skills.

Doing the rounds

With no Bob Graham attempts since 1997, the time was ripe for new blood to give it a go. Relatively new club member, Simon Barnett duly took up the challenge in 2008. With meticulous planning and recceing, Simon completed the 42 peaks, and the equivalent of climbing Everest from sea level, in a remarkable club record time of 19 hours and 51 minutes.

This established something of a tradition and over the next few years there were several rounds by club members. Two other runners who strengthened the fell running of the club were Alan Whelan, who had run for Horwich RMI, a traditional northern club well known at fell races, and Henry Keighley-Elstub who had completed the Marathon de Sables so brought a good pedigree of adventure running. Henry took on the West Highland Way race, 95 miles from near Glasgow to Fort William and Alan, after initially struggling with longer events, found the secrets of nutrition on the go. Inspired by Simon's success, they started to eye up a Bob Graham attempt. In 2009 they completed a successful round, supported by a joyful group of Tring runners both on the hill and at road crossings.

Michael Burgess made an attempt in 2010 and then came back to finish it off in 2012. The following year, Ross Langley and Luke Delderfield succeeded on a day of continuous rain and strong wind. Ross, Luke and Simon represented a new generation of fell runners within the club as the old guard moved up the Veteran categories.

The poet William Blake wrote: 'Great things are done when men and mountains meet.' But it was the women from TRC who achieved great things in 2013. An intrepid ladies' team attempted the Billy Bland Challenge. This is the same as the Bob Graham Round with the target to finish within 24 hours but done as a team relay, involving two runners on each of the 5 legs. A baton is passed at each handover and TRC carried the Tring Acorn which has also seen service on the 84-mile Ridgeway Relay. Setting out at midnight on 1 June, the team made up time against target on each leg. On leg 2, Sophie Green and Sophie Delderfield set a new leg record (which was unfortunately broken only a couple of weeks later). The TRC machine was once more in support and the ladies finished in 20 hours and 36 minutes (only a few minutes behind the times for Simon's and Kevin's solo successes!).

In 2014 TRC was back in the Lakes to support John Millen. John ran with Tring for a few years before moving to the Lakes and he had actually left Tring at the time of his round

but the club needed an excuse for a weekend on the hills and he was able to draw on plenty of support from his erstwhile home.



L to R: Bryony Harding, Sophie Delderfield, Sophie Green, Alison Harding, Mandy Bon throne, Alice Ely, Kirsty Barnett Verna Burgess, Jane Porteous (Isla Craft also in team)

Simon came back for more punishment in 2017 when he completed the Paddy Buckley round in North Wales, generally considered to be harder than the BG and the club support machine swung into action again in a new location, though Simon did need to recruit a few non-club members to help him. Training for his attempt involved following ultra-runner Steve Birkinshaw's footsteps for 300 miles round all 214 Wainwright fells in the Lake District, albeit in a two-week run. Having completed the Northern Ireland Denis Rankin Round in 2018, Simon now has his sights set on the third big Great British round, the Ramsay in Scotland, with a view to joining a club that numbers fewer than 100 members.

There were team successes for the Tring vest on the fells when in 2009 Simon, Henry and Rick won a major AL Category race, the Welsh 1,000m, supported on the road by Kirsty Barnett. In 2010 Tring had four runners in the 100km Fellsman event with Peter Hamson, one of an emerging group of ultra-runners in the club, taking part along with Rick, Simon and Michael (see Chapter 7 for more ultra achievements).

As people have got older and injuries have increased there have been fewer mass club weekends and it has been some time since the club supported a BG. However, a date has been set in 2021 for Tom Sawyer and Matt Wade to make an attempt. Watch this space.

Bob Graham Round completions by club members

1982	Rick Ansell	23.50
1988	Kevin Harding	20.26
1993	Rob Hill	23.46
1997	Dave Fryer	23.53
1997	Richard Collison	23.30
1997	Rob Hickling	23.30
2008	Simon Barnett	19.51
2009	Alan Whelan	22.31
2009	Henry Keighley-Elstub	22.31
2012	Michael Burgess	22.50
2013	TRC Women relay team	20.36
2013	Ross Langley	21.30
2013	Luke Delderfield	21.30
2014	John Millen	21.41
2019	Rich Bedlow	22.07

There are other challenges for ageing fell runners, though, the most obvious of which is the Joss Naylor Challenge, a traverse of the Lakes from its northeast corner at Pooley Bridge to Joss's home in Wasdale in the southeast (30 summits, 48 miles and 17,000ft ascent). The time available depends on your age and so far two members of the club have completed runs: Brian Layton in 2012 as a vet 60 and Michael Burgess in 2017 as a vet 55, both supported by club members.

Brian's exploits in long distance events and two-day mountain marathons are legendary. He has competed on the mountains in seven different countries and is now approaching his 150th mountain marathon. In 2013 he went one step further and was appointed route planner for the Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon. Over several months of visits to the Lakes and under a cloak of great secrecy, Brian planned the eight different categories of route for the Saunders.

Spiny Dragons

The Spine Race is a classic multi-day event that attracts the highest-quality field. It follows the Pennine Way National Trail on a 268-mile (429km) route from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm, Scotland, tracing the backbone of England. It crosses some of the finest upland landscapes in the country, from the Peak District, through the Yorkshire Dales, across the North Pennines and over Hadrian's Wall, on to the remote Cheviot Hills and, finally, that elusive village of Kirk Yetholm.

In 2019, club member Jerome McCallister joined 160 runners on the start line for the multi-day event. Only 63 finished, including Jerome in a fantastic 30th place. In total, his time was 142 hours 33 minutes and 6 seconds.

Also in 2019, Simon Barnett added to his endurance exploits by taking part in

what is described as the 'the toughest mountain race in the world' – the Dragon's Back. Over five days, competitors cross Wales from north to south taking the high route. Of the 400 who started, only 250 finished. In total, it is 315km with 15,500m of climb often on wild, trackless and remote routes.

Not only did Simon finish but he was competing at the front end of the international field. He finished in 48 hours 12 minutes and in 26th position, a truly stunning performance.

What next?

Over the years, Rick Ansell has been an inspiration for many club members, encouraging them to venture out onto the fells. In advance, many have read the book *Feet in the Clouds* by Richard Askwith (the first line of which reads, 'This is how death must feel'). But with his vast experience, Rick is always very reassuring to newcomers to the hills, telling how they will love the beauty and challenge of the mountain terrain.

John Manning was encouraged by Rick to try out the fells and recalls one of his first fell races, the notorious 2007 Edale Skyline:

The conditions were quite simply atrocious. Wind chill of minus 18 degrees. You had to run at a 45-degree angle into the wind to have a chance of staying on your feet. The hail was agonising as you ran straight into it. Mountain rescue took several runners off the hill.

Nonetheless, with Rick's infectious enthusiasm, club members who have tasted the fells tend to come back for more.

And so what of the future? TRC has consistently entered strong teams in the Hodgson and FRA Relays but, compared to the heyday of fell running at TRC, fewer members are seen out on the fells regularly. Nevertheless, club members continue to take part in the hilly events closer to home and a small but merry band still make the trek up north and to Snowdonia and the Brecons to fly the TRC flag. With encouragement from Rick, a new breed of fell runners will surely emerge from Tring to race the zebra stripes around the hills. And hopefully no one will need to ask that question, 'Where the hell's Tring?', because they will know.

The TRC Wendover Woods Hill Run

One of TRC's more recent traditions is the annual TRC-members-only race in Wendover Woods. Clive Cohen and Brian Layton have been the guiding lights of the race. Here Clive explains its origins and development.

Some things are clear about the origin of TRC's annual Wendover Woods Hill Run. Picture the scene, 2010, we were on a high – John Manning at the wheel, Brian Layton and me – and we're making the journey home from my one and only venture to the Beachy Head Marathon.

The post-match chat turned to some of our favourite runs. One of mine was the discontinued Wendover Woods Fell Race, which had come a cropper several years before. The run was staged as part of a weekend of activity in the woods organised by SMOC (South Midlands Orienteering Club), usually on the last Sunday before Christmas.

The Wendover Woods route qualifies as a Category C fell run (under 10k and over 20m of climb per km – it has about 35m climb per km) and was one of the few hill races in SE England registered with the Fell Running Association.

Memories of the run bring back weather scenes we rarely experience now in late December – snow, heavy ice, one year the internal woods roads were frozen up and vehicles were not allowed in. It was a smashing but very challenging event attracting off-road running enthusiasts to complement the orienteers, some of whom were doing the fell run as a ‘warm-up’ for the orienteering race later in the day!

Since the run was last staged by SMOC in 2005 (it started in 1989) enough time had passed such that many TRC members had no knowledge of what had been an iconic event on our doorstep. So the three wise men concluded it would be great to recreate the race, which, given the disposition of many in TRC to off-road running, we thought would be an event ‘made in heaven’!

The wisest of the three men, John, perhaps focussed on his chauffeuring responsibilities, left it to Brian and me to pull it together. Our aim was to recreate the course as close as possible to the original route. Works in the woods meant we had to make one major route change. When it reached the lowest point of the woods (near to The Hale road) the original route climbed directly up one of the steepest gradients in the woods – the path known as the Ski Slope. This was unrunnable. The growing popularity of mountain biking had made this path a magnet descent for thrill-seeking MTBers but sadly one or two took a tumble and the Forestry Commission closed off the path by dumping some big tree trunks across it. Today the path is overgrown and unrecognisable as a once-significant track.

With Brian’s route-laying skills and experience of the event and Steve Long’s mapping we resurrected the run for TRC in 2011. In year one the finish was at the gate that marks the entry to the Teardrop (opposite the start of the fitness trail). However, succumbing to popular demand, we moved the finish nearer to the start (and our parked cars!).

Given that hill running is not everyone’s ‘cuppa’, the event has been incredibly well supported, becoming an established event in the TRC calendar and part of our tradition. Now run on an evening in the summer, there are usually 40+ club members taking part. 2020’s virtual event marked our 10th anniversary. Long may it continue.

Wendover Woods Hill Run winners

	FEMALE	TIME	MALE	TIME
2011	Rebecca Harding	38.07	Ross Langley	32.49
2012	Sophie Green	42.24	John Millen	34.57
2013	Becky Kingdom	41.12	Ross Langley	34.58
2014	Verna Burgess	43.29	Ross Langley	34.38
2015	Becky Raftery	38.28	Ross Langley	33.51
2016	Liz O'Keefe	41.59	Ross Langley	32.57
2017	Lynda Hembury	41.30	Ross Langley	33.24
2018	Lynda Hembury	42.24	Tom Sawyer	34.21
2019	Mary Ward	42.29	Matt Wade	35.30
2020	Liz O'Keefe	47.24	Matt Wade	34.13

The Coombe Hill Fell Race

The Coombe Hill Fell Race is a fun, hilly 7km fell run, classified in the BS Category (no, not that BS – it means ‘middling amount of climb and short distance’) by the Fell Running Association.

There had been a Coombe Hill Race for several years, organised by the Vale of Aylesbury. Somewhat perilously, it started in the middle of the road outside the Shoulder of Mutton pub without a road closure. In the late 2010s the Vale stopped organising the race. Rick Ansell was keen to re-invigorate the run and so in 2019 he inaugurated the first TRC Coombe Hill Fell Race. In true FRA style, the entry fee was kept to a minimum of £3 which included a free pint of beer back at the pub afterwards. This being the first race, we deliberately adopted a low-key promotion but nevertheless attracted 82 entries.

We still used the Shoulder of Mutton for registration but started the race in Bacombe Lane and finished in the old quarry, avoiding any car congestion. (This is written as the HS2 rail line has started to be built beside Wendover. Who knows where the race route will go in future years?) The total climb is 220m (720ft) and includes the famous slog up the steepest slope to the monument. Of course, 2020 was the year of the pandemic so we couldn't put on the second Coombe Hill Fell Race.

