

A while ago Lucas Payne asked for a partner to run the "Old County Tops", I put my name forward but time went by without any plan being devised.

After a few years doing all sorts of races of varying distances, the longest being the "Haworth Hobble" on a couple of occasions, I had decided I wanted to take part in some longer races this year for a change, so I decided to enter the "Hardmoors 55" which I was inspired to do by Gary Bradley. He did this race in 2017 and I remember thinking, 55 miles, how do you run that far? Well if I give it a go, I would find the answer!

When I told Lucas what I was doing he said, "I will do that, we'll have a great laugh"??

Lots of browsing over maps and route description, kit planning, hotel booked, coach to the start etc etc we were sort of prepared, Oh, I forgot about training and reccies. Training went badly initially after Christmas due to a persistent cough, but eventually with that finally gone I did get some longer miles in (more than Lucas did) but time for reccies seemed to disappear. Lucas managed to reccie all the route, which follows the Cleveland way from Helmsley up to Guisborough. I just did manage to reccie the last 18 km section, Kildale to Guisborough on the Sunday, the week before the race. This I thought important as it would be dark before I completed this section. The rest I would rely on maps, signposts and my Suunto. Worried I would get lost and my Suunto battery wouldn't last the distance, I borrowed a spare from Gary Bradley, over cautious to say the least!

Race weekend, I picked Lucas up at 3.30 on the Friday afternoon and after another verbal kit check away we went, checked in at our hotel and after a quick reccie of the area ready for our 6 AM coach departure next morning we had our last supper and off to bed, waste of time that was as we didn't sleep. 4.30 AM, shower, porridge and off for the coach, freezing cold we wondered if we were sane? A huddle of people behind a small building, sheltering from the freezing wind waiting for the coaches, reassured us lot of other mad people besides us.

After the coach dropped us at the start area in Helmsley, registration and kit check, tracker attached, a brew and tactic review, race briefing and we were ready for off 9 AM.

Weather forecast was for strong winds and 25% snow showers with sunny intervals.

Around 343 runners lined up and away we jogged, steady away I kept telling myself, long way to go. Lucas was off in front of me and we soon came to a gate causing a bottle neck, that would be the last time I saw Lucas until Kildale, albeit he was only about a mile in front most of the way.

The running was good going and pace was perfect, slightly faster than what my average pace needed to be, but I would be slower when I got to the climbs so needed to average out. Soon we were battered by a horizontal blizzard but as we entered a wood it gave us good shelter for a while. We seemed to alternate between sun and blizards for quite a while but progress was good, first 10km taking just over the hour & everyone was jovial.

I soon reached the A170 road at the top of Sutton bank, crossed over and ran along the path and descended to the bottom to checkpoint 1, White Horse, 14.5 km, 1 hour 36. After taking onboard Jaffa cakes it was up the steps back to the top of Sutton bank where we back tracked along the same path and it was good to see so many runners still heading the other way. Back across the A170 and traversing along a path with amazing views to my left. About the only time I got to see any views due to the deteriorating weather.

Checkpoint 2 was Sneck Yate , 22 km ,2 hours 20 , more food and salted peanuts on board. By now we were thinning out a little and finding our own group of similar abilities.

Next target was checkpoint 3, Osmotherley village hall, some 36 km from the start and where we had our first drop bag with any supplies we had pre-prepared and chance for a toilet stop and a brew.

Weather was still not to bad, one minute it was warm and glorious sunshine, the next minute it was blizzarding hailstones, hood up gloves on then hood down and sweating! I dropped down to

Osmotherley in about 3 hours 46 , the time being around 12.45 , the cut off being 15.00 so happily inside that. Inside I was met by a cheery group of helpers, a massive buffet worthy of any party with tea, coffee, etc, a quick top up of my pockets, a cup of tea, several sandwiches, sausage roll, my own scotch egg, piece of cake, visit to the loo, total stop about 10 mins and back off up the road out of the village. Next target was Scugdale, checkpoint 4 just before the climb up Carlton bank. By the time I got to the road and checkpoint I was now about 4 hours 54 into the run & 44 km, half way!

Although the terrain for the second half would be tougher. More food in pockets, constantly nibbling whilst walking up the hills, then jogging and running the flat and down hills although some steep downhills I took very steady trying to save my legs from my usual nemesis, CRAMP! Keep eating, drinking and don't push too hard I kept telling myself, then someone would run past me and I would instinctively speed up.

A young lady kept passing me, (number 236) then I would pass her, we exchanged our thoughts on the ever-deteriorating weather, she had travelled from Leeds and had a support runner who appeared from the other direction to run with her for a while.

After passing the pinnacle at Wainstones and negotiating a rather narrow rocky path I was soon approaching checkpoint 5, Clay bank 33 miles, 54 km (road crossing) I was paying close attention not to fall down some steep snow-covered steps when I could hear familiar voices shouting and cheering me down. Unbeknown to me, Angela had planned a surprise family support crew. I was so pleased to see her with Jenna & Chloe (they were freezing and seemed surprised how good I looked!). 6 hours 34, Another fuel up and a cup of coffee from Angela, a hug from the girls, an update on Lucas who they said was about a mile ahead and I was off up the next hill to a trig point then Bloworth crossing which is the highest point, 1489 feet. From there it was a long exposed jog with hail blasting into my face and my water now frozen it was getting rather inhospitable. Eventually a left turn brings me on to a road which would drop me down to Kildale village hall, check point 6, 42 miles , 68 km, The lady runner, number 236 passed me and at this point I couldn't keep up.

As I reached the main road into Kildale, a right turn and 200 mtrs. To the village hall , 8 hours 35 I was greeted by shouts from my family support crew, who had just arrived. Chloe, on seeing my frozen eyebrows and face requested I got in the car!! I'm still smiling I replied and trotted off for my last pit stop where I had number 2 drop bag with all sorts of kit, spare battery for headtorch (it would be dark before I finished) power bank for charging phone and Suunto, spare socks, gloves, scotch egg, porridge etc.

Lucas, who I hadn't seen since the start was sat on a chair in the village hall looking very dejected and purple faced & declared he was done.

Angela organised the water de-frost and I concentrated on fuelling up (another feast on display) and drinking. Then I was going to apply some ibuprofen gel to my legs, Lucas said he needed some as well so to the shock and amusement of one lady helper we both dropped our tights and began applying the said gel, Lucas reassuring her that it was ok as he usually doesn't wear underpants but had some on today.

He then said we could run the last 18 km together but as he was "done" I may have to wait for him? 'I'm waiting for no one' I declared with a straight face. Poor Lucas looked quite hurt & said, I'll go then and you will catch me up. He left, followed by lady runner 236, I said my farewells and left about 5 mins after Lucas. My stop time around 20 mins) A steep climb out of Kildale walking, followed by a jog to Captain Cookes memorial, headtorch time now as light was fading. A jog/walk from here to the gate where an out and back to the top of Roseberry topping, two marshalls at that gate in gale force winds, "you've got a tough job I declared, "It's not so bad", was the reply!

A line of head torches could be seen up the topping which looked impressive. As I started my ascent I met Lucas on his way back, my threat of not waiting must have spurred him on, I didn't see him again until the end.

Relentless wind and snow making progress slow I battled to the top and carefully back down the very slippery steps and back up to the gate where the tough marshalls were. That way they said & pointed, off I trotted thinking not far now, just keep going. Still the relentless hail and wind making visibility

difficult I battled on but after passing the rocky Highcliff nab, my water again frozen, I seemed to suddenly run out of everything. I needed a drink (frozen) couldn't see, needed food, dare not take off my gloves for fear of not being able to get them on again. So close but all I could do was walk. I managed to drag out some of my home-made flapjack, tear open the bag with my teeth and force some down without water. After about a mile of walking I looked back to see about 6 headtorches catching me up. All this way and I was going to get passed by all these! Must Jog and I was off again, along the exposed edge looking down on Guisborough where the finish was, wind so strong it stopped me in my tracks a few times. The route playing with your mind and resolve as it takes you way past the finish through Guisborough woods before back tracking along the disused railway to the finish, keeping a close eye on the following head torches I pushed on keeping them all bar one behind me. The one guy who did pass me went so quickly I couldn't believe how he was doing it but later it transpired he was a relay runner! I knew the end was close and gave everything I had along that railway, thinking they aint passing me now. Down the steps off the railway bridge and 200 mtrs. To the Sea cadets, the bell rang as I entered the hall and shouts of "Runner in"

The runners behind me it seems were not so hot on my tail, first one of them coming in a few minutes after me. Lucas had a stronger last leg, finishing 31st (provisional) Over 30 minutes ahead as did the lady runner 236, but my aim was firstly to finish, secondly under 12 hours was a bonus. In absolutely awful conditions I was well pleased to finish in 11:37:39 and I think 40th place. (provisional)

My vision was severely blurred due to the battering from hailstones and after a check up by the medic I had a brew and tried a bacon butty but that wouldn't go down.

The organisers decided to close Kildale and Rosberry topping checkpoints soon after my finish and all remaining runners were ferried back in the interest of safety as the weather was getting ever worse.

A measure of how tough the conditions were is over half the starters did not finish, (although I am sure some would have been more than capable of finishing had the race not had to be stopped for safety reasons)

I was thankful I managed to finish before the closure and also that everyone was safe.

Lucas was hobbling around like a scene from Steptoe which made me laugh, although I had run out of steam for a while I was in surprisingly good shape. We walked to my van about 500 mtrs down the road and went to our hotel for a bath and bed, the earlier talk of beer not that appealing now.

Adrenaline still high we both didn't sleep well and were up at 6, another laughable scene as Lucas couldn't hardly get out of bed, hardly surprising as he hadn't done much distance training prior to the race, Top effort from him, 11.14:54 and 27th male & 31st overall.

I must add my thanks to Lucas for great company and he was right, we had a great laugh.

What a great day out for us both, get yourselves entered next year you lot.

