

The Charnley Way - A Grand Day Out

By Ben Abdelnoor



I first came across the Charnley Way whilst staying at Eskdale Youth Hostel in the Lake District. A special edition map, produced by mapmakers Harvey, highlighted the route. And as I stood in the Hostel corridor gazing at this wall-mounted map, tracing my finger along the route an idea came into my head and the romance of this little adventure was born. I decided that this was what I had been looking for.

The Charnley Way, a long distance route in the Lake District, was devised by friends of the late Gerry Charnley. Gerry was killed in a tragic accident on the Helvellyn range on 14th December 1982 at the age of 53. Gerry was a keen outdoor enthusiast: a member of South Ribble Orienteering Club, representing England in the sport; secretary of the English Orienteering Association; third person to join the Fell Runners Association and organiser of the first mountain marathon in 1968. This Mountain Marathon grew into what is now known as the Original Mountain Marathon (formerly the KIMM). The area chosen for the route of the Charnley Way was the scene of the 1981 KIMM.

The Charnley Way was something different. I wanted a long day out on the hills, a challenge without the pressure of a race, to run but not through darkness and certainly nothing so draining as a Bob Graham Round. At around 35 miles and with 11,000 feet of ascent, the Charnley Way approximated to a half BG. Asking around I found only a handful of folk who'd ever heard of the route. An internet search of the Charnley Way brought up nothing. For some reason the less people knew of the route the more I wanted to do it.

My alarm went off at 6am and for a brief moment, as I lay in the first light of day, I thought of turning off the alarm and returning to sleep. By only telling two people of my plans I realised there was little pressure, and no expectation, to get up and go! I set off from Elterwater Youth Hostel just before 7am, dressed in shorts and t-shirt, with a rolled-up balaclava and a pair of gloves to keep off the early morning chill. Although I carried a long-sleeve top and windproof jacket I wore only the t-shirt for the entire day, testament to the day's good weather. For the first two hours, as I toiled up Lingmoor and Pike O'Blisco, I was tired and sleepy, running laboriously and struggling to find any enjoyment. From experience I knew that once I'd got a few miles behind me I'd perk up; this duly came as I clambered up the Bad Step of Crinkle Crag and traversed beneath the remaining Crinkles to Three Tarns.



At Eskdale Youth Hostel the manager, Mick, apologised; the power was down so a cup of tea wasn't possible. Instead I stuffed two cold croissants into my rucksack and another into my mouth before setting off again. Checking my watch I was pleased to note that I'd only stopped for seven minutes. From Eskdale the route follows an energy-sapping drag up to Slight Side, a wide and gradual shoulder that climbs to a craggy summit. Without much else to think about I tried to calculate whether it was feasible that I might be able to manage the entire route, or instead drop down at Angle Tarn and head for home. I wasn't convinced either way.

So far I had managed comfortably without carrying water, relying instead on a plastic freezer bag for scooping up water from streams. What I hadn't thought out in advance were the sections of the route where there may be little chance of water. I was fortunate to have been favoured with perfect weather conditions; dry and clear with a mix of cloud and sunshine. Midway up Slight Side I came across the last source of flowing water for what would be almost two hours, until just before Esk Hause. As I brought the water to my lips I double-checked that the water was good for drinking, perhaps my olfactory nerves were tingled, for not 20 yards away lay a dead sheep. I moved further up stream and

drank cautiously, before continuing up Slight Side. A rocky traverse from Slight Side to the summit of Scafell rewarded me with some magnificent panoramic views; to the west I recognised Illgill Head with Burnmoor Tarn nestled at its foot, whilst to the north I admired the majesty of Scafell Pike, leading round to Esk Pike, Bowfell and the Crinkles. I descended Scafell to Foxes Tarn and back up onto the rocky summit capital. Coming off Scafell Pike, as I soaked up the warmth of the midday sun, I drank in the sumptuous skyline of the Mosedale valley; Yewbarrow, Red Pike, Pillar and Kirk Fell, perfectly outlined and bathed in splendour. How I wished I'd brought a camera or even had the time just to sit and gaze.

By Esk Hause I was back in familiar surroundings, heading not quite for the summit of Esk Pike, for herein lies one of the quirks of the Charnley Way. The actual route takes in only ten Wainwrights and one is not required to tick off Esk Pike, merely navigate to a cairn, namely the Charnley Crag Cairn, which lies 500m to the south. As it happened I found it without trouble but I had been concerned as it was described in the route guide as, "located off the beaten track... not too obvious to locate". I had visions of embarrassingly admitting to admiring folk, "Oh yes, I did the Charnley Way. What's that you say? The Charnley Cairn - kingpin of the route? Actually I couldn't find it!"

Another of the Charnley Way's idiosyncrasies involved taking a route from the Charnley Cairn on Esk Pike down to Angle Tarn, via Ore Gap, only to return to Esk Hause. I don't know where or when on the route I decided that I was going to make it all the way round, but in heading west from Angle Tarn up towards Esk Hause, and not east, back down into the Langdale valley, I'd literally reached the turning point of the day. An unconscious decision had been made and I was going for it. In fact, on leaving Scafell Pike I had passed the halfway point not just in terms of distance, but also the number of hours I would take and the amount of ascent I had covered.

I can vaguely recollect walking over Glaramara and Alien Crag at the end of a tiring days walk with my Father. But that was many years ago and so it was refreshing to cover some relatively new ground, complete with stunning views of the Borrowdale Valley stretching away towards Derwentwater and Keswick. Down to Borrowdale Youth Hostel I ran, still feeling strong and comfortable. I thought it a good sign that I still felt like eating and drinking. At the Hostel I downed a can of Coca-Cola, diluted with water, and a Snickers bar. As at Eskdale I purposefully kept the stop short, eight minutes this time, before setting off on the final leg of my little adventure.

I've walked up the Langstrath Valley a number of times and can vouch for it being a spectacular place to be on a sunny afternoon; a wide, gently sweeping, verdant valley, with a sparkling and beautiful Beck meandering smoothly down the valley floor. I had envisioned by this time that I might be suffering in the afternoon heat, shuffling exhaustedly up a seemingly never-ending valley. But my pessimism was unfounded as I found myself happily trotting up towards Stake Pass. With a smile on my face and the waters of Langstrath chuckling merrily along by my side I felt as if I could run for days through scenery such as this.

Crossing the narrow footbridge at Tray Dub I stopped to drink. I was mesmerised by the sight and sound of the stream gliding over the smooth rock, gracefully flowing beneath the bridge before plunging into crystal clear depths, bubbling and splashing through a miniature gorge cut through the volcanic rock. Much as I wanted I couldn't stop for long; ahead of me loomed a stiff climb out of the valley, up to Stake Pass. Stuffing a Mars bar down I made steady progress up the zig-zagging pathway and duly arrived at the small tarn that signifies ones arrival back into the Langdales. I turned eastwards and began the long drag that would take me up to Thunacar Knott. I hadn't gone a hundred yards before I stopped in my tracks. There, just up ahead were two beautiful deer. Watching them with their heads down and nibbling the grass together I was suddenly in no rush, letting them slowly edge off the footpath onto the slopes of High Raise and go their way. And so on to Thunacar Knott I ran, via a narrow trod, well-worn no doubt by the competitors of the Langdale Horseshoe over the years.

From Thunacar Knott I had to head for Blea Rigg, which brought with it a dilemma. Having previously looked at the map I'd decided to take a less direct route, skirting Sergeant Man, but without losing much height. But now as I stood looking across to Blea Rigg I felt that descending to the inflowing becks of Stickle Tarn might be the quickest route. As it was I set off for Sergeant Man, stopped after

50 yards, changed my mind, double-backed on myself and headed down the gully to Stickle Tarn. I think I must have been getting tired.

All that was left now was a familiar run along the northern ridge of Great Langdale. The sun was hanging in the sky, reluctant to draw the day to a close. Its steady warmth had kept me in good spirits throughout my run and as I bathed in the beauty of my surroundings, feeling like the last to leave the hills at the end of a wonderful day, I realised I didn't want it to end. I could see across the valley to Crinkle Crag and Pike O'Blisco; summits I'd traversed over seven hours ago. I had gone through a cycle: first onto the fells, I'd watched the sun begin its ascent above the valleys, heralding the arrival of the day's walkers. And now, having seen those walkers depart for the valleys, I'd watched as the sun began its downward slope. I felt like a custodian of the fells, ensuring all was well before I departed for home.

I finished back in Elterwater some 10 hours and 47 minutes after I had begun, wading straight into the refreshingly cold waters of Great Langdale Beck. And as I soothed the various aching and tired limbs, splashed water on my face and reflected happily on my achievements I concluded that today had been, for me, a grand day out.

Of the little information I have on this route I'm told that Billy Bland set the record in the mid-1980s in a time of around seven or eight hours. For further information on the Charnley Way see the South Ribble Orienteering Club website (www.sroc.org or email Ben_Abdelnoor@yahoo.com).