

The Lake District Twenty Five Hundreds

By JOHN RICHARDSON

Since about 1970 Don Talbot and I had spoken intermittently of an attempt on the Lakeland 2500 foot tops walk. To the best of our knowledge the walk has only once been completed previously — in 1968, by three Rucksackers, Stan Bradshaw, Ted Dance and John Eastwood. The idea of the walk did not at first fire me with enthusiasm, partly because I find the Lakes Three's walk both artificial and boring. As far as we know, the walk had been Ted's brain-child, but the ever-modest Dance is quick to shift the blame to Eustace Thomas.

In 1975 Don and I had tackled the Scottish Fours together. Despite the awful impressions left by a study of past RCJs we set ourselves a 44 hour schedule, and actually managed to improve on it. Impressed by the psychological advantages of a two-day rather than a three-day schedule we resolved — though it might be nearer the truth to say that I resolved and Don reluctantly acquiesced — to follow a similar strategy for the Lake District walk. This resolve was strengthened by the fact that Jim Loxham and Pat Dawes, a couple of lads whose interests and abilities roughly paralleled our own, had, also in 1975, completed a round of all the 2500 foot peaks featured in Wainwright's Lakeland Guidebooks within two days. Their tops numbered only a few less than the Thomas/Dance list and the distance they covered was but a handful of miles shorter.

Geoff Bell had shown interest in the venture and we were happy to include him in the party which at 2.15 a.m. on 4th June set out from Kentmere for Harter Fell. The High Street and Stony Cove fells were traversed without incident and after a 5.40 breakfast we were off over Red Screes towards Fairfield, St. Sunday Crag and Grisedale Tarn.

The day warmed considerably as we approached Helvellyn. Unfortunately something naughty happened to Geoff's knee in the descent to Striding Edge and by the time we crossed the outlet of Red Tarn en route for Catstycam he was limping painfully, but hoping the walk would do his knee good. Ted Dance had offered us his help, saying there was a chance that he would be in the Lakes in time to meet us at Sticks Pass and sure enough, from the summit of Whiteside we spotted a lone figure making rapid progress up the pass from the Stanah side. I waved Ted an enthusiastic greeting as we approached the pass and saw him turn right and stride purposefully towards us. 'Boy are we glad to see you!' I shouted as we reached hailing distance. 'I hope you've got plenty of liquid'. Fifty more paces revealed not Ted but one puzzled looking walker and another embarrassed and still thirsty one — myself.

Having wasted a little time looking for Ted we set off for Greenside, the Dods and Threlkeld where we finally found him. Poor Geoff was in quite a bad way by this time. He could manage, he said, the uphill and level bits but downhill was painful and steep downhill worse. Still, he's a spunky guy and he set off ahead of Don and I for Blencathra; we had quite a struggle catching him. On Skiddaw he finally accepted the inevitable, opting for the more gentle descent off Jackson's ridge while Don and I sped down the short way from Little Man. Ted met us again at Braithwaite and we used the last of the fading day to find our way up Grisedale Pike.

Despite a minor route-planning error we were in Buttermere ahead of schedule by 1.30 a.m. We had come a long way and though the weather was deteriorating and the publican of the Fish shouted obscenities at us from his bathroom window our hopes ran high.

Cloudbase was very low as we prepared to leave Buttermere some two and a half hours later though the first rain had not yet fallen. I asked if Ted had my Helly Hansen but probably he did not hear the mumbled request and I did not bother, in the 4 a.m. gloom, to repeat the

question. 'Anyway, I thought, 'I've got that new nylon jacket and that worked really well on the Grassington-Langdale a couple of weeks ago.'

Twenty minutes up High Stile the rain started, fine and hard-driven into our faces from somewhere north of west. We knew a good route across Ennerdale from Red Pike to Steeple but the evidence, on my new set of 1:25,000 maps, of a direct line starting near the summit of High Stile and linking fence with forest ride, with bridge over the Liza, another ride and a short rough ascent to the ridge which led to our next objective was irresistible. There was even a fence post on the ridge to start us off on a steep, wet and treacherously loose descent, with no trace of a fence, to a forest ride composed of loose boulders hidden by bracken to a bridge no longer in existence and no ride. When at last we emerged on the flank of Steeple I was beginning to regret my fuzzy thinking back at Buttermere. The weather had not improved.

The concentration needed to locate the peaks around Scoat Fell diverted one's attention from the creeping advance of wet and cold toward the bare marrow but as we turned dejected from a streaming Pillar Rock I knew that decision time was at hand. Had there been a wall around the writing would surely have been on it for me. But support was waiting (we hoped) at Black Sail and more of the same by Sty Head Tarn, so for the time being . . . shelve it, defer the decision a little longer.

Emerging from the Robinson's Cairn path at Looking Stead we met an equally sodden-looking party who told us that our friend at the pass had decided to wait no longer than 12.00 noon. My watch read 11.55. Don's winged heels clinched our first bit of good luck since leaving Buttermere. His friend had been waiting since before 9.00 a.m., he had decided to come early after learning of our excellent day one progress. His hand as I shook it felt even colder than mine. Thirty minutes rest was as much as could be endured and our attack on Kirk Fell was strenuous in an attempt to drive out some of the chill, but the weather had attained a new peak of nastiness; both wetter and windier. Strange, then, that as we approached the first of the two summits we should meet a middle-aged couple clad in stout brogues and raincoats, he with a flat cap, she with a silk head-square. They were groping their way towards Black Sail and asked directions for Wasdale. Though we directed them to Black Sail we encountered them again on the second summit of Kirk Fell. They were, by now, engaged in a row. We took them in tow as far as Beck Head and aimed them down Gable Beck. Five minutes after parting it was difficult to believe that such an extraordinary meeting had taken place. Was the whole affair, perhaps, one of those hallucinating encounters that Stan Bradshaw knows so well?

At Sty Head we rested thankfully in a rain-lashed tent, our thoughts on the Scafell peaks. Progress in such mist would inevitably be slow, we had already been out for thirty-six hours and I doubted our ability to retain any dregs of body heat. There was not a scrap of dry clothing to be had. A moment of woolly thinking at Buttermere had cost me, cost us for my depression transmitted to Don, the walk. But we still had things to do; Ted had promised to meet us in Langstrath and since he had talked of approaching our rendezvous from both the Borrowdale and the Langdale sides the only course of action for us was to walk over into that interminable dale. Thither we trudged and of course the valley weather seemed positively balmy. Before each went his separate way we had decided to try again over the August Bank Holiday weekend.

Wounds had been well licked, new schedules drawn up, but had the right lessons been learned? It was time to find out. There were two major changes in our strategy one in timing and the other in support planning.

It had become clear that to complete the walk in forty-eight hours was beyond our capabilities and our new deliberations varied between fifty-five and sixty hours. Secondly, although the walk lies entirely within the populous Lake District it crosses very few public roads (five, in fact) and for one period of twenty-six hours none at all. If one is hoping for occasional support this fact poses problems: we did not want to send some poor soul to Black Sail or Sty Head to wait four hours for our arrival, nor did we relish the thought, should we be ahead of schedule, of having to wait at some appointed spot for support to turn up. We tried to work out a system of centralised control for support based on Borrowdale and run by our three helpful wives who would, we hoped, have all the kit and information to hand when and where needed.

The extraordinarily hot dry summer had led each of us to make careful plans to stay cool on the fells — mine included swimming trunks and an Indian silk handkerchief. But the Friday before the Bank Holiday weekend the beginning of the end of the good weather. Chill wisps of mist clung to the tops until after 11.00 a.m., by which time we were crossing Fairfield, and a cool breeze for the rest of the day made for ideal walking weather. Stupid, then, to feel cheated out of a near-naked bit of exhibitionism.

The night was something else. We had set out into a mild sunny evening from Threlkeld only to be chilled by hard-driven rain on Skiddaw in the first hour of darkness. But Marjory Talbot was at Braithwaite with succour and though the night was moonless, first light, somewhere on Crag Hill brought a burgeoning of new hope in us. Well, in some of us. Dawn only helped Don to see more clearly that he was knackered. Geoff and I were astonished. Don had had a really strenuous summer. 'Perhaps', he said despondently, 'there is a limit to how many of these things you can do in one year. And perhaps I've just gone beyond it.' Perhaps he's right.

Dennis and Flash Weir waited at Buttermere to walk with us as far as the Gables and more particularly to show the way up Pillar Rock. So engrossed were we in talk of moths, caterpillars and Olympics that we managed to miss the path up Haycock. Pillar Rock made a most welcome contrast to the slog of the walk so far. Geoff decided to spectate but may have had the tougher time of it, trying to restrain Flash from hurling himself after his master.

Another friend, Pete Bland, had generously offered to walk with us over the Scafell peaks and as far as Langstrath. We left Sty Head at 6.00 p.m., two hours ahead of schedule. The thought of finding Rough Crag in the dark had niggled (Geoff might choose obsessed as a more appropriate word) from the very earliest stages of the walk. Now it looked as though we were in with a chance of finding it before dark. Not so. Lord's Rake, Deep Gill, the stony going on the summit of Scafell, mist and cold delayed our arrival at England's highest point until just too late to make use of any light. Here was one of the very few stretches of the walk I had never previously trodden and conditions were not good: very rough, very steep, very loose, very dark and misty. After an hour of frustrated effort we agreed to give up the search and attempt a traverse into Little Narrowcove, which we managed with some difficulty.

We had little time for regret; navigation of Broad Crag, Ill Crag and Great End was fiendishly difficult on a night of inky blackness enhanced by heavy wet mist to reflect the torchlight and grease the rocks. Allen Crag was around cloudbase level and the walk to Glaramara brought drowsiness rather than route-finding problems, but the descent into Langstrath, so easy in daylight, involved bracken fields of quite alarming depth and density. We had lost all of our hard-won two hours and more when we finally sighted Geoff's tent.

Rain drumming on the tent did not invite an enthusiastic rush onto the fells, nor did the prospect of more darkness. Nevertheless, before 4 a.m. we dutifully started getting ready to

leave but cramped space and muscles helped delay the start until 5.15. It was light and had stopped raining. We reached High Raise summit in about fifty-two minutes but the waxing warmth of the day and the comfortable going of the descent to Snake Pass brought an irresistible wave of drowsiness. Geoff was kind enough to sit for twenty minutes or so while I snoozed, after which we very gradually clawed back a little of the time we had lost.

The scene as we descended the Walna Scar track held all the essentials for such a moment. The afternoon was calm, warm and sunny. We were met and greeted like heroes half a mile short of High Moss where food and rest were at hand. Success smelt all the sweeter for that initial failure.

One final irony: in the Vaux Mountain Trial, held a fortnight later, Rough Crag, no less, featured as a check point. And it was so easy to locate — even if I did manage to fracture a toe in reaching it.