

# 4th on the Dartmoor Round

New year's eve 1999 may seem like a long time ago now. It was one of those very hyped up occasions - it had a once in a century moniker to big it up - millenium eve! I drank and danced the night away at a fancy dress party suitably attired in a cardboard box with holes for my legs and arms with the adornment of stuffed tights as extra legs... I was a millennium bug. I was not alone that night.

Far in the South West corner of England a reveller of a different kind had decided on a differerent kind of celebration for his millennium eve. Nigel Jenkins, aka Zippy, was running in the dark around the outermost tops that surround Dartmoor. He was on a mission to complete the first sub-24 hour "Dartmoor Round". Clearly inspired by the other great "ultra" rounds of the UK and himself a member of the Bob Graham 24 hour club [member 874], Nigel planned a local excursion to celebrate the passing of the twentieth century. There is no Moot Hall on Dartmoor, so he decided to start from his local pub. Oh, and ascend Sheepstor twice - once at the start and once at the end! Nobody had done it before, so I guess it was his prerogative? However, his round did then piece together 26 selected tops that surround the "high moor" of Dartmoor making a total of 27 separate tops. These are known locally as tors and often have an outcrop of granite at their summit - the result of weathering and erosion.

## The 28 tors of the Dartmoor Round ...

*Sheepstor, Sharpitor, Ingra Tor, Pew Tor, Cox Tor, Standon Hill, Ger Tor, Brat Tor, Branscombe's Loaf, High Willhays, Oke Tor, Cosdon Beacon, Rippator, Thornworthy Tor, Hameldown Tor, Hameldown Beacon, Wind Tor, Rowden Ball, Sharp Tor, Pupers Hill, Corringdon Ball, Butterdown Hill, Western Beacon, Hillson's House, Penn Beacon, Trowlesworthy Tor, Gutter Tor and Sheepstor.*

Nigel's elapsed time for his run was an impressive 18 hours and 3 minutes and he got back to the Royal Oak in time to enjoy the New Year Celebrations in his local pub as planned. I don't know, but I suspect I may have out partied him that night.

My own fell running career commenced in about 2002 when I moved to Devon as a road and trail runner and unwittingly became acquainted with the strong off road



PHOTOS © JON CROOME



running clubs and hashers of East Devon and Dartmoor. The local terrain in East Devon is generally low by the standards of serious fell running areas further north, but offers some great running on the tops and in the green valleys of the "East Devon Alps" and of course the wilds of Dartmoor, which does protrude above the 2000 ft contour in a few places. The South West Coast Path and Exmoor also offer some great hill training and our local FRA listed Sidmouth Four Trigs Challenge is a 26 km/914m BL southern classic that uses the topography of the coast and inland hills to great effect.

Richard Askwith has a lot to answer for and some time in about 2004/5 his classic book, Feet in the Clouds found its way to the top of

my reading list. I read it. It was good. I wanted to do the Bob Graham Round. Eventually, after learning the ropes pacing for other local Devon-based runners I completed it in 2008. At the time, I still had in the back of my mind an attempt on what could become a more local classic - the Dartmoor Round. But I then forgot about it for quite a long time.

The Dartmoor Round is 75 miles with 12,000 ft of ascent and as described above - a circumnavigation of the high moor. Attempts to complete the route in one go are not commonplace and in the 18 years since the original round, as far as we know it has been completed just twice more by two members of the local Hash House Harriers - Plodder in July 2008 and Ian Bowles (Spiderman) in June

2009. Early in 2017, I decided this needed to change and so planned an attempt to become fourth on the Dartmoor Round for later in the year. In the end, it was only about a month before the attempt that everything fell into place with pacers and helpers busily prepared for the first weekend of September.

I planned to start at midnight on Friday 1st September - like Nigel from the Royal Oak Inn, Meavy - a village in the south west corner of the moor - an appropriately located start for what is also one of South West England's foremost running challenges. The logistics of the Dartmoor round are actually a bit more difficult than its Lake District cousin's - well, if you exclude the inevitable traffic jams of the M6 at least! The BGR has its five neatly partitioned legs with easily accessible road crossing points. Parts of the Dartmoor Round are a bit more remote and when I tried to split the round into 5 roughly equal "legs" changeover points were not very obvious or near roads, so often entailed a short trek onto a peak, or other valley feature - this makes life for the pacers and helpers more difficult, especially in poor weather.

I wanted to get the night section out of the way first, while mentally and physically fresh and since I had a target time of 20 hours, this meant a midnight start looked sensible for early Autumn - I should arrive at about dusk if all went to plan (it didn't). I'd also decided that it made sense to cover the night section (the first two legs) with one set of pacers - mainly because I knew of two candidates who would be up for it and would also spare others from the horrors of a 3 am changeover. So, this now meant a 4 leg plan with a 28 mile first leg in the dark. Even then the first pacer changeover point was at a ford on the river Taw over a mile from the nearest road access at Belstone. In fact, apart from a couple of road crossings and some road sections in the first few miles of the round it is 38 lonely miles of open moor running before you reach the first road crossing point - where the route intersects the main "Trans-Dartmoor highway" - the B3212 Moretonhampstead to Princetown road.

Dartmoor is blessed with a fine temperate

climate and while a bit drier than the Lakes, the nature of the route means that it spends more time in the wet boggy bits between hills than the BGR, making the running soggy at times... it's not called the Great Swamp for nothing. The vegetation is also a bit less kind than the BGR - with more bogs, head high bracken and some boulder fields which when all added up means it's probably a less "runnable" route - except perhaps after a prolonged dry period. The Dartmoor Round also has five river crossings, so should not to be attempted after heavy rain when rivers are in spate. During Nigel's inaugural round on millennium eve he had to setup ropes with helpers to aid his crossing of the raging river Dart and tells a good story about how close to death he came - and he is an ex Marine!

So to summarise my comparison, while the BGR's substantial extra climb and the steepness of the ground clearly tips the balance in terms of the severity of this Lakeland challenge, the Dartmoor Round is still a pretty serious day out and will provide ample challenge to any prospective "victim". It will also provide plenty of navigational problems in poor visibility conditions for those pacing.

After much last minute preparation and organising of pacers and other logistics (including checking the range firing times - another hazard that should be avoided) the day came for my attempt at the Dartmoor round. Luckily the weather was fine as we set out at midnight from Meavy and headed around Burrator reservoir on the road to the village of Sheepstor, before climbing it's

namesake peak - the first and last of the round. From the summit I noticed that the stars were out and the half moon was low in the sky as James and Garry, both BGR veterans, scanned the map to find a route off the top. We followed a bearing through bracken and large boulders which was slow going, before hitting an earth bank and into some woodland before picking up a path. At this point I was beginning to think my choice of not receiving the route was a mistake! We hit the road and made up some time before the next tricky section through more woods and bracken and boulders by Leeden Tor - probably the worst bit of the round. Then after about half an hour one of those moments you dread on a 20 plus hour run happened. I let out a big yelp as I turned an ankle when placing my foot into a bracken obscured hole. My first thought was that it was game over, but I could keep going and it did ease up. Phew. Maybe not a showstopper after all? We continued in the dark through open moorland of various quality, crossing some deep valleys, running on old railway lines and slowly ticking off the list of tors... Sharpitor, Ingra, Cox. James and Garry kept to the best lines and slowly we edged northwards up the western edge of the moor.

The nice thing about night time running with a couple of old mates who know what they're doing is that you just have to worry about the basics - one foot in front of the other - repeat. We punctuated the cool night air with occasional chats on motivational subjects, to take our minds off the task - but then we'd have to concentrate on route



PHOTOS © JON CROOME



**Left hand page, top:** Photo Caption

**Left hand page, bottom right:** Photo Caption

**Left hand page, bottom left:** Photo Caption

**This page, clockwise from top left:** Photo Caption

Photo Caption

Photo Caption

finding, or crossing a river, or bashing our way through head height bracken and boulders climbing the steep bank to Ger Tor. Soon enough the North East sky became noticeably lighter and by the time we got to Brat Tor with it's famous stone cross erected by William Widgey to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, dawn was well on the way.

The end of the Leg 2 night section has a bit of a sting in the tail with a big descent into a lovely valley to cross the West Okement river followed by the biggest climb of the round to the summit of High Willhays - this is the high point of the round at 2,039 feet and peak number 10 of the total 28 - progress. From there a quick down and up over Oke Tor and we then descended to the first pacer changeover point - Lorraine was there with some food and hot drinks, we quickly strapped my left ankle and then saying bye to James and Lorraine off we set on another big climb (by Dartmoor standards) up Cosdon Beacon. I was now with fresh pacers, it was daylight and we were in jolly mood with Jim, Adam and Robin leading the way. This part of the route has some good high ridge running which made for good progress as we avoided most of the wetter patches. Rippator is more of a rock on a plateau than a summit, but I didn't care too much as we ticked it off the list, disrupting some Dartmoor ponies basking in the Autumn sunshine. My mind was now wandering dangerously to the halfway point at Bennett's Cross - now only a few miles away where vehicles awaited with food and drinks - wow - a mid leg break and we're not talking cricket. You don't often get that on the BGR! Shortly after Bennett's Cross we reach the well preserved prehistoric remains of Grimspound, with a short sharp climb to hit the most runnable section of the round - the fast, low cropped grass of the Hamelldown ridge - 3 miles of Dartmoor running heaven - ticking off two more summits on the way while admiring the distant views over Plymouth Sound. We'd been joined by Widgey, Jim's lurcher and she seemed to be enjoying the day out as much as the human contingent in the pleasant mid day sunshine.

At the Leg 3/4 changeover point, while stuffing a yoghurt I did a quick mental check of progress, time elapsed and what was left to do. I did not like the result of my calculation. I had covered 47 miles, it was now and I had 28 miles to go. I now realised my 20 hour plan was not going to happen and I'd be running into the night again for at least a couple of hours. I'd done 18 peaks, with 10 to go and this was over a part of the moor I did not know well, although what I could remember was quite rough going. Sometimes you can overthink things. Let's just get going again. So off I set with Graham, Paul and Richard up Sharpitor and then descended into the oak wooded cleave of the river Dart and the biggest river crossing of the round, which for us was in tame mood. On the way we had

some difficult route finding through woods before we headed past some climbers on Luckey Tor and crossed the river. Then a steep ascent through head high bracken (deja vu?) before crossing the road and heading off across the featureless heights of the southern moor to Puper's Hill and beyond to then descend to the river Avon and its reservoir. We then headed down a pleasant narrow valley with the river Avon cascading alongside, before reaching another of those leg halfway stops at Shipley Bridge which this time had an ice cream van as well! A quick feed and off we went with two new pacers who had decided to do a bit extra - Patrick and Duncan. We had a climb through an ancient track through woodlands to get back onto the open moor and then after some further climbing we had got on to some fast running on old railway tracks for a few miles to get to the end of Leg 4 and the changeover point at Western Beacon (23 down, 5 to go). Here we were joined by Corinna, while Graham and Richard headed off with the helpers - Lorraine and Stewart to the waiting cars. I think it was at this point that Stewart admitted he'd lost a sock through the holes in his sandal that had then been consumed by a nearby pony? Or did I dream that?

So, the last leg - Leg 5 - the least known part of the round for me and at a stage when I was getting pretty slow. By now running was not really an option and I tried to keep up as much as possible as we headed north back-tracking along the railway line before peeling off to head down and cross the river Erme to tick off the last 5 peaks of the round. I was now trying to mentally compute my finish ETA on an almost constant basis and realised there was going to be a fair bit of night work. I had omitted at this point to account for exactly how slow I would get, how boggy some of the terrain would be and how difficult it was to pick a good route in the darkness. I now wished I had paid more attention to working out a realistic target time and had left at 9pm not midnight.

We climbed Hillson's House from the Erme and thanks to Strava I now know that this was the slowest kilometer of the entire round. The next peak was Penn Beacon across less steep ground, but by the time we'd reached it's pile of stones it was nearly dark - head torches on. The next section of moor to Trowlesworthy Tor was across really rough ground. We could see a light coming from the top, so had something to aim for, but hit the boggiest bit of ground of the round just before and it seemed to take an age to get there. When we did we saw Jim and Jeneatte who had kindly headed out there with food and drink, to revive us. I then had to climb to the top to ensure a successful bagging which in the dark and my state of tiredness was not that easy - this was one of the largest of the granite outcrops on the route. That peak bagged and off we headed for the penultimate peak - Gutter Tor after first crossing the river Plym.

Again there was a flashing light on the top and this time Robin and James were waiting for us. Robin joined us for the final few miles and used her navigational skills to head us towards Sheepstor and back from whence we came.

By now the weather had taken a minor turn for the worse with fine drizzle in the air but I didn't care - I was too close to the finish. I was a bit annoyed as it was now gone 11 and I was most disappointed that I wouldn't be able to buy my team of helpers a pint for their efforts. Robin led us off Sheepstor on a fast path descent and before we knew it we were back on the road for the final mile. The drizzle was now getting heavier and we were getting damp as we sped down the road on a stony track to the finish - I first spotted the welcoming lights of the pub as we rounded a corner on a typical high hedged, narrow, Devon lane - we'd done it!

And so after 23 hours and 25 minutes we arrived - back where we'd started at the Royal Oak. The best bit was that the barmaid was really helpful and decided our efforts warranted a last late round of beers - which made a perfect end to a perfect day of fell running on Dartmoor with great company.

I later checked Strava and noticed the final kilometre of the round was also the fastest - admittedly it was downhill. I also realised my time was precisely the same as that I'd done for the BGR 9+ years earlier, which seemed like a nice coincidence. It also very much confirmed what I already knew in that Nigel's mid-winter time of 18 hours 3 minutes was way out of my league and fittingly he's still number 1 on the round.

**For more information on the Dartmoor Round see [www.gofar.org.uk](http://www.gofar.org.uk)**



Many thanks to the helpers and pacers who made this round possible ...

- Leg 1** James Jackson [BGR 1550], Garry Perratt [BGR 1120]
- Leg 2** James Jackson, Garry Perratt
- Leg 3** Jim Pyne, Robin Carter [BGR 26 Hour Club], Adam Forrest
- Leg 4** Graham Harbor [BGR 30 Hour Club], Richard Punchard, Paul Calderbank [BGR 1971]
- Leg 5** Patrick Devine Wright, Duncan Taylor, Corinna Stephens, Robin Carter, Paul Calderbank

Plus: Lorraine Croome, Stewart Bondi [BGR 971], Jeanette Pyne, Widgey & camper van, Paul Champion, Sue Wilkin, The Royal Oak Meavy.