

24 hour Cotswold Way traverse
24 / 25 May 2008
Martin Beale, Kevin Stroud

The Cotswold Way is a National Trail that stretches 105 miles through quintessentially English countryside from Chipping Campden in the north to Bath in the south. As it snakes its way south westwards across the Jurassic spine of England, the Cotswold Way passes through beautiful ancient yellow stone walled villages, across open common land, and through ancient woodlands. The Cotswold Way is seldom flat and on average a full ascent and descent of the Cotswold escarpment is necessary every 5 miles.

Frank Thomas, of Cheltenham, was the first person to run the Cotswold Way in under 24 hours. Frank's south to north traverse in 22 hours and 23 minutes was done in 1994 at the very inception of the trail. His record still stands despite several other successful traversals, most of which have been completed just minutes inside the magical 24 hour barrier.

One of the great annual events of the West Country running calendar is the Cotswold Way relay race. This event runs from north to south and splits the Way into 10 legs and has created a natural supply of navigators and supporters, each one an expert in their own leg. There is some cachet in a team having had a runner complete the whole route in under 24 hours.

I had several motivations for running the Cotswold Way. Firstly, I wanted to get a better idea of how to tackle 100 mile challenges with the Tour du Mont Blanc race looming this August. Secondly, I'd talked about this for years with my running mates and there comes a time for action rather than words. However a big motivation for the run was to help Stroud AC (of which I'm a member) raise money for the Meningitis Trust and Jonathon Brough (a member of the running club who was paralysed after contracting meningitis).

The three runners who were to attempt the Cotswold Way 24 hour challenge were Dave Burton (a Stroud runner now living in The Lakes), Kevin Stroud (who had come over from Illinois / USA for the challenge) and myself (Martin Beale). We had a large support crew arranged from Stroud AC and a few other local clubs, a support minibus and willing support runners for the 10 legs.



The start of the Cotswold Way at Chipping Campden church (L to R: Martin Beale, Kevin Stroud, Dave Burton, Rich)



Running towards Broadway Tower having just crossed the A44 on leg 1 (L to R: Dave, Martin, Kevin, Rich)

We set off at 8:07pm from Chipping Campden in perfect conditions: sunny and with a strong tailwind. It is quite easy to get lulled into thinking things will be easy as you run across open fields with the sun setting in the west, a good tailwind and only 10 miles in your legs. We arrived at Stanway House (end of leg 1) ahead of our support runners just as the sun was setting. We relaxed on the dry ground in the warmth of the late evening, taking our time and getting prepared for the first night section.

The second leg of the Cotswold Way is the hardest: both hilly and long. Despite these tribulations, we continued to make good progress as we got used to running in the dark. After 2 hours we could see headtorches on top of Cleeve Common and as we approached the torches we were met by our leg 3 support crew: Martin Humphreys and Mike Duxbury. We were told we were about 45 minutes ahead of schedule.

Martin and Mike are great fell runners and they did a sterling job of seeing us across the tricky navigational sections of Cleeve Common (where Martin had lost 15 minutes on his successful traverse in 2007). Mike seemed to know how to open every single gate on this leg off by heart: now there is a man who takes his recce-ing seriously! Mike even seemed to have the diplomatic skills to handle the police who were wondering what 5 people were up to wearing shorts, in the back of beyond, at 2am. We arrived at Seven Springs (end of leg 3) an hour up on schedule. This was going to cause problems with the logistics that had been planned and we were asked to slow down. I took a leisurely break while Dave crashed out in the van: he'd had stomach problems and this was the end for him. This was a real shame as Dave had seemed to be running really well up until then.

We walked and jogged leg 4 to kill some time in order to not mess up on the logistics. It was a time to recuperate and consolidate what we'd already achieved. It was part way through leg 4 that the promised rain started: gently at first and then more persistent. Cooper's Hill (the famous cheese rolling hill) looked especially treacherous after an hour of rain: we were there the day before the eyes of the world turned to Gloucestershire for its own unique contribution to the sport of hill running.

Kevin and I both felt the cold while recovering at the minibus at Cranham Corner (the end of leg 4) and were keen to get on, to try to get warm again in the rain. The group split up here a bit as we both tried to run at our own appropriate pace to keep warm. By Haresfield Beacon it was properly light although conditions were poor: the visibility was less than a mile in the mist and it was still raining, more or less heavily. It helped me to see some familiar faces as we approached Stroud and Jim was good company as my supporter.

Fifth Dimension (a fitness centre at Ebley Mill in Stroud) had opened early for us and plied us with smoothies and anything else we wanted. It was great to get out of the rain and wind and to try to recover. We spent about 25 minutes at Ebley Mill sorting ourselves out and enjoying the creature comforts of Fifth Dimension. I was aware that time was ticking by though: from being an hour ahead of schedule at the end of leg 3, we were now only 40 minutes ahead. It seemed to me that we were losing time and needed to pull our fingers out to make sure of success.



Martin trying to relax and recover at Fifth Dimension / Ebley Mill



Kevin (L) looks cold and wet outside Ebley Mill

I set off with Alan Jones, a fellow Nextwave Harrier, on leg 6. This started with a mammoth 200m climb onto the top of the Cotswolds, followed by running through woods (which allowed us to escape the worst of the, now heavy, rain). There are numerous sharp climbs of between 50 and 100m on this leg which start to take their toll on tired legs. I ran this leg pretty much to schedule, but was just glad that I'd got the "mountain stage" over and done with when I arrived in Dursley.

I'd thought that I'd be running from Dursley to Wooton under Edge on my own. Just as I was about to set off, Rich suddenly volunteered to run with me which lifted my spirits. We set off up the steep hill to Stinchicombe golf course into the clouds. Rich guided me round the perimeter of the golf course, carefully escorting me to the very end of what seemed like 100 viewpoints (for views of clouds). At last the golf course was over and we were running up and down hills on our way to Wooton. We trotted along really well and picked up 12 minutes on a very short leg.



Kevin (blue jacket) arrives in Dursley in good spirits



Kevin (seated) recovers at Wooton while Martin (blue buff to left) discusses support for leg 8

There was a major change of supporters at Wotton under Edge. I set off with Phil Manning who had already run legs 6 and 7 with Kevin. We pulled nicely up the dreaded long hill out of Wotton and were soon running down to the Alderley valley. We were met there by Danny to form a partnership of 3 people who would then run all the way to Bath Abbey. Jo met us at Alderley and we had a really good little group formed that seemed to really give me some momentum across what I thought was the final hard (long) leg.

The rain finally stopped at about 4pm in Old Sodbury (end of leg 8). This should have seen me running better, but I could feel myself getting tired with 90 miles in my legs. By this stage I was breaking the run up into short little sections: "we'll run to that hawthorn", "we'll run to that fence" and this divide and conquer approach seemed to eventually finish the leg off. There were several uplifting moments on leg 9, including being joined by Chris, one of Dave's friends, and meeting my friends Pete, Rosie and David at the end of the leg.

Once I was on the final leg, there wasn't really going to be anything to stop me reaching Bath Abbey. I was however feeling desperately sleepy as well as being both physically and mentally tired. I knew I just had to find some inner reserves and divide and conquer the final 10 miles. At Bath race course, we passed though the 100 miles mark at a

topograph overlooking Bath. It was great to see Bath and I felt that I could almost see the Abbey in the valley below. As we ran (and walked, I have to admit) down the Weston ridge, the houses in Bath started to look bigger and bigger. We were finally on the outskirts of Bath. A lady in a car who had seen us on TV on Thursday shouted out excitedly to us "I saw you on telly". Others were quite amazed and astounded when they found out we'd run 100 miles.

After two final cruel hills, we were running along in front of the Royal Crescent, then through the Circus and down to the Roman Baths. After a final turn, we could see our supporters outside the roman baths. With one final turn, we passed between the ancient columns and there in front of me were the gates of Bath Abbey. I ran up to the gates and kissed the door: it was all over 22 hours and 44 minutes after I'd started out.

I felt really tired and sleepy and my feet hurt (from being wet for 12 hours), but overall I felt elated. I was just happy to sit down on one of the benches, get some warm dry clothes on and relax at last. It was great to see Kevin arrive in good spirits to finish in 23 hours and 7 minutes. Somehow he managed a sprint finish!



Phil (L), me and Danny (glowing on the right) at the start of leg 10



relaxing on a bench outside Bath Abbey after 22h44m of running

The schedule for my run is given in the table below. The arrival and departure times are the times after that start of the run (which started at 8:07pm on 24 May 2008).

| End point | Arrive | depart | Time for leg |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------------|
| 1: Stanway House | 1:56 | 2:07 | 1:56 |
| 2: Cleeve Golf Course | 4:28 | 4:37 | 2:20 |
| 3: Seven Springs | 6:18 | 6:34 | 1:41 |
| 4: Royal William | 9:18 | 9:33 | 2:44 |
| 5: Ebley Mill, Stroud | 11:54 | 12:20 | 2:21 |
| 6: Old Spot, Dursley | 14:12 | 14:17 | 1:52 |
| 7: Wooton church | 15:50 | 15:55 | 1:33 |
| 8: Dog Inn, Old Sodbury | 18:24 | 18:30 | 2:29 |
| 9: Cold Ashton | 20:28 | 20:33 | 1:58 |
| 10: Bath Abbey | 22:44 | - | 2:11 |

I owe a great deal of thanks to all my supporters and everyone who sponsored me on this run. It was great to see so many people enjoy the event, despite the trying conditions. It was really uplifting. Stroud AC did a great job.

Some of the supporters I had are listed below. If I've missed anyone, it's because I got really tired!

| Leg | Supporter | supporter | supporter |
|-----|------------------|---------------|-----------|
| 1 | Rich | Kenny Roberts | |
| 2 | Rich | Kenny Roberts | |
| 3 | Martin Humphreys | Mike Duxbury | |
| 4 | Martin Humphreys | Jim | Simon |
| 5 | Jim | | |
| 6 | Alan Jones | | |
| 7 | Rich | | |
| 8 | Phil Manning | Danny | Jo |
| 9 | Phil Manning | Danny | Chris |
| 10 | Phil Manning | Danny | |

Additional links:

www.105miles.co.uk

www.cotswoldwayrelay.co.uk

www.justgiving.com/cotswoldwayultra

Martin Beale / 29 May 2008