

Bullock Smithy Hike 6th September 2008: 'The eye of the storm'

The weather forecast was wind and rain for the afternoon. At 12 noon at the start in Devonshire Park it was mild, calm and dry and the starter suggested we might be in the 'eye of the storm'. 251 runners and walkers had entered – 50 up on last year. The starter said "Go" and we went, leaving the sound of hammer + anvil behind.

For a mile it was Paul Rushworth (16 starts, 12 finishes) Mark Ollerensha (his second start) and myself jogging in the lead but soon overtaken by Tony Okell (11 starts, 8 firsts!), with Mark McDermott close by. Soon we have to leap over a torrent of rain water whooshing down one side of the road – a foretaste of conditions under foot. Mark M coasts by, explaining that a couple of 20 mile runs this month is not enough for this long distance event but as its his local race he always tries to have a go (and won it twice!). He stops to inspect the bushes and I glide past.

No sign of the storm – instead its cap on in the blue sky and sun. The morning pasta, banana, chocolate bar, porridge etc. takes a while to settle down. Tony Okell is last seen ahead climbing out of the valley around Whatley Moor – no doubt he'll record another win – he's phenomenal and really superb over this course. The going is good as Paul, Mark O and I travel through a quiet Furness Vale and up towards Chinley Churn cp. Mark goes ahead on the climb and gradually ekes out a lead which becomes sufficient to make him not visible after Edale Cross. Plummet down Jacob's ladder, make a wrong turn and correct by going left down steep grass bank - then gentle jog to Upper Booth, over damp (not too boggy) fields then along warm road hugging the shady side to Edale. The cp is indoors this year – expecting dodgy weather? Paul catches me here and is met by his smiling girl friend Tracy and it's a quick pose for photos, rice pud & fruit and salt then off again.

I like this section – the climb over Hollin's Cross and descent to Castleton. A stream uses the path meaning wet feet descending, some care needed; more of this to look forward to later too. A few walkers stand aside as I descend – good job as stopping is tricky. After the quiet of the hills its hustle and bustle and warm in a busy Castleton car park. I locate the cp at the far side (as usual) and find Paul just behind me. Up through Cave Dale and wondering whether I should have tried the alternative direct steep grassy ascent – Paul says he's consider it but never gone that way. The Cave Dale valley is both a path and a stream; day walkers going up the 'gorge' in trainers find a dry route impossible. My feet are soaked so the extra water doesn't matter. Paul catches up and is soon setting the pace. I'm now in 4th place and wondering whether I can hold on – only 36m to go!

Peak Forest cp: well organised with banana and orange fruits plus crisps and salt. I take a banana and leave Paul sitting at the cp taking on supplies supported by Tracy. I jog holding my banana, along the A623, and eat it on the ascent to the Limestone Way. Paul is a few minutes behind and I'm 3rd. Arriving at Wheston the farmer has just moved his heard of cows for milking off the road so I get by OK. A few years ago the cows blocked the road and the farmer advised hopping over the wall! The path to Miller's Dale is yucky – mud, parallel ruts, vegetation, water and tricky to stay upright whilst jogging. It'll churn up worse for those following. Paul comes by and I'm enjoying the closeness of this 3rd/4th position interchange. The cp marshals offer us "Soup?". "err – no thanks". "Bread?". "err – no thanks". No time to sip soup and not really much quick energy from bread.

As last year there's an opportunity to learn a new route from fellow competitors and Paul takes the road near Blackwell rather than Priestcliffe Ditch. I struggle to run up the road and wince as cars whizz past and screech round the bends just avoiding us. Maybe it'll be the 'Ditch again next year. Paul says that Tony Okell has retired with sciatica – meaning that we are now in 2nd/3rd place. This is exciting. Soon we're at the Chelmorton cosy tented cp which must be welcoming in the night but right now a bit too warm. I give the donuts a miss and concentrate on lightening my own rations. Tracy is there again to encourage Paul and there is some debate as to whether the kiss he receives is 'offering outside assistance'.

Its level along the track and then comes another of my favourite sections - the quarry track – the going is easy, it feels remote and quiet. Across the grass to Earl Sterndale there are more cows, this time frisky and excitable. I see Paul has tentatively negotiated them despite his earlier nervousness with the small dogs so I follow unconcerned and perhaps now tired enough not to worry. They run around and block my path to the stile until the last moment when they clear off. I arrive at the cp as Paul is leaving. Soon in and out though and Paul remains in my sights all the way to Brand top. The hill top shapes are really interesting here and with no one around its quite isolated. Once past High Edge its soon down to Booth farm and a grassy jog by the stream until the peace is broken by the mad dogs in the distance and I know that Paul has passed the

caravan and kennels. I'm soon up there too and thankful again the dogs are well shut away – surely the owner must get constantly disturbed in the night as the Bullock Smithyiers come through?

At Brand Top cp Paul and Tracy are there again, with Paul tucking into a hot dog. This time I'm away first and take the road option up to Flash, whilst Paul follows later with the cross-country option. So I'm in 2nd place – wow. Eventually Paul catches me at the Sparbent A54 road crossing – and Tracy is there again! Tremendous support. The gloom has descended, enhanced by dark ominous clouds making the wet-stoned tracks tricky, especially so in the last strains of light to Cumberland Cottage cp. We find out its 2-0 (England), Mark O is 54 minutes ahead (i.e. uncatchable) and once the goal-scorers are established we're off gain – head torch in action, banana in hand. My jog is now plod/walk and Paul's extra pace soon takes him away into the night leaving me in 3rd.

The clouds descend, spots of rain – but it is still pleasantly mild with little wind. I guess we're still in the eye of the storm, and thankful for it. However, it's a relief to be leaving the night hills and arriving at Walkers Barn. Tent outside, bright lights, young lad demanding my number [he's just keen], refreshments inside: "Water please". I feel I need to keep pushing, well aware of the likes of Mark McDermott's fast finish (and my slow one). 10m to go.

A morning reece in the car of the Bollington roads is helpful so I can autopilot down to the canal; bridge 26; bridge 25 and the last cp at Whiteley Green. Thankfully the canal path is reasonable underfoot given the dryish day. The solo cp man is quiet in his campervan so I make a noise as I approach and he's in action – I dissuade him from giving me a premature finish by punching 14 on my tally card instead of 13, gulp some water (special water bottle here) and off for the last section. Well done to him as its no fun marshalling on your own.

More bridge counting down Middlewood Way: 9, 10, 11, and 12 allowing myself a walk at each bridge before shifting into plod mode. This year my family will be waiting at the finish and I feel them sucking me home through Poynton and along Tower's Road. its the last bit along the A523 and with anxious glances behind and no one in site I enjoy the last 1/2 m. Into the Scout hut – my family in the backroom miss the arrival and are therefore greatly surprised to see me step in – 3rd. 30min behind Paul I must have really slowed. 10mins later and three come in together 4=; phew the extra pushing was necessary. How lucky to have travelled the whole route in the 'eye of the storm'.



I soon slip off quietly to the car for a brief wash and sleep and unfortunately sick. Next morning and it's a chance to indulge in a 'full English' – the continuous cooking through the night by the ladies is very welcome. Its great to attend the presentations at 10am. Hero Tony Okell is the 'honoured guest' to present trophies which is a really nice touch by him after retiring yesterday. I get a firm handshake from him and realise his core strength that is responsible for carrying him to his previous 8 victories. A voucher courtesy of Vasque really made it extra special for me – normally I'm grateful just to receive a spot prize! I chat with Karen M. afterwards – she looks fit and fresh which is just as well as this was her 9th event and she now has 3 more in 4 weeks – tough or what?

Nigel Aston