

## ER Peak District trails weekend - August 2024

Clearly word of just how much fun can be had on the annual Ely (trail) Runners trips to the Peaks had spread as the 2024 staging saw the number of attendees jump YOY from 20 to 30 (plotted on a graph, the line of trajectory would almost be as steep as some of the runs planned) with a reassuring number of returnees too.

To set the scene, those keen on some hilly northern 'grass n tree' action were: **AJ** (Ellwood), **Alice** (Brear Clarkson), **Alex** (Levantis), **Andrew** (Berrill), **Andys** (Barber, Brown and Thompson), **Baz** (Woodward), **Bethan** (Everson), **Bethany** (Spalding), **Caroline** (Brown), **David** (Carnac), **Debbie** (Fisher), **Elaine** (Smith), **Fred** (Cheung), **Goska** (Leslie), **Graham** (Chapman), **James** (Fisher), **Janet's** (Noland and Smith), **Jon** (Shaw), **Kristian** (Skinner), **Lisa** (Redman), **Lizz** (McKiernan), **Mike** (Bradford), **Neil** (Krajewski), **Paul** (Brear Clarkson), **Peter** (Royle) and **Sam** (Russell), plus of course **McAuley** and **Mara**, our pair of Spaniel mascots for the weekend.

The keen-eyed will notice that hold on, that's only 29 names above, which is correct as **Janette** (Palmer) did sign up but got cold feet and/or a touch of the vertigo at the last minute and blamed a 'house move' or some other such excuse for her withdrawal - next year Janette!

Our basecamp for the weekend was once again St Michaels Environmental Education Centre (SMEEC), a study centre run by Notts County Council superbly located in the middle of pretty Hathersage village in the heart of the Peak District and ideal for our needs.

The weekend promised four different run options: a Friday evening six-miler along the Monsal Trail; a Saturday morning parkrun; a Saturday afternoon circular 9-mile route high up on Stanage Edge; and on Sunday morning the now traditional fell race (8 miles this year) that has become the staple of the ER trail running weekend away, looked forward to and feared by all in equal measure.

After a three-hour journey from Ely to Hathersage, everyone was champing at the bit and ready to run, so with the Ocado online shop (that took two hours to place but was stowed in about three minutes flat, many hands and all that) duly delivered on time, by 17.35 (and yes we did adhere to military timing all weekend as there was a LOT to pack in) we were saddling up and heading for the hills, destination Monsal Head!

### Friday evening - run 1 (of 4) - 'the Quadruple Monsal'

Run 1 was a 6-mile loop all things Monsal as it started off at the Monsal Head Hotel / lookout point, before dropping down some steep singletrack (with Janet N seeking out an even more direct downhill route straight off the edge and claiming 'first tumble' of the weekend) to cross the River Wye and on to the flat of the Monsal Dale. The gentle run back towards the Monsal trail (that's three Monsals so far, are you keeping up?) offered amazing views of the ~~Monsal~~ (oops! – Ed) 'Headstone' Viaduct, an impressive structure built by the Midland Railway comprising of five arches some 70 feet high in the centre that we would cross later on in the run.

Taking a rocky path up to the edge of the viaduct to join the Monsal Trail proper, we were lulled into a false sense of security with minimal gradient for several miles, past the formidable looking Cressbrook Mill off to the right, through two illuminated and lengthy tunnels (a cool 902 metres when put together) before spotting our left turn over a stile and up a very steep stepped path that would see us gain significant height. Through fields and across meadows we ran, down farm lanes and grassy tracks, pausing only to regroup and take a photograph or two, before taking a right turn off the path, over a stile and down into a beautiful steep-sided grassy valley, dodging cows on our charge down.

The human/canine pairing of McPauley were way out in front but luckily kept stopping at all key junctions to check they were still on track (no doubt having learnt from the additional mileage they incurred last year – it seems you can teach an old dog new tricks), and so we ducked through Middle Farm and crested the ridge

to spy the Monsal Head Hotel way off yonder, before a twisty technical descent down a rocky path that demanded full attention to avoid any mishap. Neil, new to trails of this magnitude, was taking it super-steady and very happy to admit that he wished to stay 'this' side of his comfort zone thank you very much until Peter (stuck in the single-file queue behind) politely suggested that as the chippy closed in half an hour we probably should push on a little bit faster, at which point Neil slowed up, stepped aside and let a bunch of us reckless types plough on through.



With everyone down safely and now falling seamlessly into line with the late-arriving B group of Caroline, Andy T, Lisa and Mike in that order, calmly doing their own out & back along the trail, there was just enough time for a quick group selfie atop the viaduct before climbing the path back to the carpark.

### < Ely Runners on Headstone Viaduct

Despite several attempts and Peter's best party-leader efforts, trying to take a headcount proved a fruitless task, and there was also another spinoff run/walk party of David, Debbie and Goska to account for too.

But suitably regrouped and pulling up at SMEEC, with perfect timing we were met with x25 pre-ordered fish & chip meals (or sausage / pie variations thereof) ably collected and hand-delivered by David 'Just Eat' Carnac.

Takeaway meals devoured and with minimal washing up to worry about (*good call, Graham!*), our party now numbered twenty-nine as latecomers Beth & AJ and Bethan & Sam had arrived, and so as a full-house we tucked into a delicious group effort of a fruit crumble, with freshly picked blackberries from Andy T's garden, plus custard and/or ice-cream (most chose 'and').

Glasses were charged and we then repaired from the dining area to the lounge for a fun round of the quirky fact-finding quiz 'Which Ely Runner said this...?' where among other things we now know which of our fellow club members: a) got arrested in Nairobi (*Jon*); b) sang 'I should be so lucky' dressed as Kylie for a school assembly (*Baz*); c) was once asked for a cigarette by Boy George in a London nightclub (*Janet S*) and d) is distantly related to Bruce Lee (*Fred*).

Debbie scored 8 (out of a possible 29) and so won an OS travel towel printed with a map of the Peak District, but top marks also to Andy Barber who played the tactical game and simply put 'Andy' for every answer and scored an impressive four points.

## Saturday morning - run 2 (of 4) - 'the parkrun takeover'

Having tackled Millhouses and Endcliffe on previous trips, Graves was our next parkrun takeover of choice and so we arrived en masse in good time to have a warmup and assess (*read: get slightly nervous about*) the undulating course. It was a cloudy and chilly morning although not a problem for Lizz as she readily admitted in the car journey over that she 'runs hot'. The course itself was two laps of Graves Park that took in sweeping descents and lakeside views, the cricket pitch and a fenced track through a cow field. The surface was hard path all the way so quite fast even though hilly - a delightful course and we all wondered what we were earlier panicking about.

McPaul and Auley were pipped to first place by just three seconds, with AJ not far behind in third. Sam (surprisingly, in a parkrun he'd not done before, with some 172 *different* parkruns to his name) was 5th and Baz 10th in 20.00, so four Ely Runners in the top ten home, and with James just 4 seconds behind Baz, that was 5x ER in the top eleven – *nice going, team!*

With Alice and Bethan first and second lady (A & B see, easy as 1,2 and, well 3 is surplus here...) it was a good start to the day for Ely so, as in previous years our parkrun takeover was considered as 'mission completed' (although the massed ranks of Fordy Runners, in town for the day from Leeds, did give us a good run for our money).



ER would then go on to get a favourable mention in dispatches on the Graves parkrun Facebook page (alongside a group photo taken by the RD) with the entry, '**Super busy at Graves parkrun this morning. 300 runners, walkers and joggers, many of them tourists... and great to see the Ely Runners, who loved our hills**' – which we did, they were great fun!

< **'The Ely Runners' - spot Day-glovid Carnac taking centre stage and Andy Barber's plaster cast**

With parkrun done, we headed back to SMEEC to don our swimmers for our pre-booked 11:00 slot at Hathersage Swimming Pool, a picturesque 30-metre heated outdoor pool with great Peak District views just a few minutes' walk away (past *Harringtons Butchers of Hathersage* that had a very tempting looking deli counter and was thus earmarked for lunch). Most chose to swim, but Andy Barber (aka Marty McFly, after a recent freak hoverboard accident saw his left arm in a cast) chose to jacket (sic) in and head 'Back To The Pie Shop' for a selection of sausage rolls.

### Saturday afternoon - run 3 (of 4) - the 'Stanage Loop'

Refreshed and refuelled after our swim and pie combo, the main run of the day was the 'Stanage Loop' which saw our already sizeable party of 29 swell by two more, as we were joined by Peter's recce-running buddy of two weeks ago, ex-Royston Runner Dr Lee Pretlove (he of the data talk from last November's PTSD) and girlfriend Katie (an accomplished ultra-runner) with Lee offering to back mark to ensure that no Ely Runner went astray or was, er, left behind.

Joined also by Mara, the B-C's second Spaniel, our chosen route to Stanage Edge left SMEEC and would wind its way up to the high gritstone escarpment via progressively smaller lanes, paths, trails and singletrack before finally petering out in a sea of bracken. Jon took quite some persuading that this was in fact the correct route, if a little overgrown, but James quickly offered reassurance to all that we should be ok by brandishing his special '*tick removing tool*', purchased several years ago but yet-to-be-used in anger.



Careful route planning had allowed for those perhaps not keen on the steep climb up to the High Neb trig point at 458 metres to take a more gradual approach for an easy re-group a bit further down the line, and so with full crew on deck it was now time to unfurl the **ELY RUNNERS** flag and pose for a group photo showcasing the majesty of the White Peaks.

Flag shot sorted, from here it was delightful few miles of simply picking your own path up across the rocks, going as steady (Neil) or as fast (McP) as you liked, keeping the sheer drop to your right and just

following your nose, with the next regroup point being the small car park at the base of Higger Tor, our next peak at a slightly lower 434 metres.

As Chaucer famously said, *'Time waits for no man'*, and nor did the Ely Runner front runners, the fleet-of-foot chancers catching a scent of a descent (or more likely the whiff of the beer garden at *The Scotsmans Pack*, our next logical regroup point) which meant that from Higger Tor the route back was quite straightforward as all paths pointed down.

While Kristian got the beers in for most, pub garden table talk was of the run and what a great route it was, while Graham showed off his Stanage Edge souvenir, a grazed elbow. Andy McFly could be seen hovering near the bar buying a second round and proceeded to carry the drinks back to the garden across several trips – one glass at a time – with his good hand. Something as trivial as an arm in a plaster cast wasn't going to be getting in the way of Andy's running or après-run activities. We said goodbye to our local guest runners Lee and Katie and started heading back to base to get supper underway, although a separate (and very determined) splinter group led by Mike mentioned they were stopping in at *The George* on the way back to, erm, check out the refurbishment work that had recently been carried out.



Several hours later, and pausing only long enough to get a group shot of the cooks (< L-R: Goska, Jon, Kris, Andrew Berrill, Alex, Lizz, Janet N and Bethany) behind their mega-dishes (beef lasagna alongside a vegetarian Aubergine parmigiani). There was also a choice of two freshly made soups on offer, although by the time the pub party had responded to the *'Grubs up!'* message, that choice had whittled down to just the one option (Courgette) as the C&C (Carrot & Coriander, not Cambridge & Coleridge) was long gone.

Dessert was Tiramisu and pots of Mixed berry fool, followed up by several large cheeseboards with a selection of crackers – get us, how sophisticated were we? Not very, it transpired as the cheese barely got touched other than to get clingfilmed and popped back in the fridge at the end of the evening. With several tough runs, a swim, a huge meal, a few games of Giant Jenga and lots of red wine behind us, most were early to bed for some well-earned rest as tomorrow would see another big run and our most challenging outing of the weekend.

## Sunday morning - run 4 (of 4) – the 'Crowden Horseshoe'

Breakfast talk was all about this year's fell race and what could be expected, as nobody quite knew. The website gave little away, as did the Race Director, and FRA-member Lizz did her best to spook by quoting a few FRA handbook rules (p.15, 'Principle of self-navigation' section c.) about not being able to use GPS, and where even the briefest glance at a device would see an instant DQ. *'Well, I've got it on my watch, so I'll use that'* said Janet S quietly defiant, going her own way like Fleetwood Mac. *'Will we need to carry a jacket?'*, someone asked. *'Yes, and apparently it needs to be a "waterproof whole-body cover (with taped seams and integrated attached hood)" according to Peter'*, scare-mongered someone else. *'Hey, don't quote me on that'* said Peter *'I'm just relaying what was advised last year. I don't think we need to worry, I'm sure it will be fine'* he blagged (secretly wondering if maybe he should have put just a bit more planning into the weekend?)

At the other end of the kitchen island and wondering what to do with a still fairly full fridge, Goska came up with a brainwave of an idea as to how we could polish off all the leftover food - *'Cheeseboard sandwiches!'* – and promptly set about slapping everything that wasn't nailed down in between two slices of buttered mixed-seed granary.

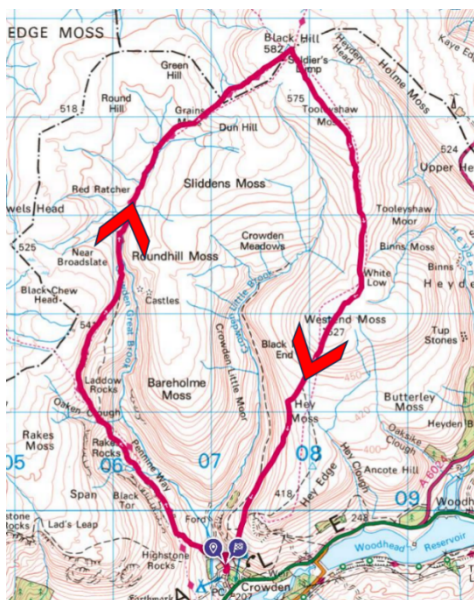
The remaining seven eggs were hard-boiled which David would then take charge of and issue to the first seven Ely Runners to return from the high moors intact, another magnificent idea. *'Edible medals...'* mused Fred with an imperceptible raise of an eyebrow that his great-uncle Bruce would have been proud of, *'Neat'*.

David could then be seen wondering how best to transport his clutch of still-warm medals without damaging them, so Peter retrieved the egg box that David had thrown into the recycling minutes before and suggested, *'Might this do the job?'*

Being nervous about an 8-mile (Category B medium) fell race was only natural as we were flatlanders in a hilly landscape, and so after stripping the beds, washing up and wiping down, we swept the floors and backed out of SMEEC. Swapping CB radios for FB Messenger, a dozen cars led by Sam and Bethan in a wheel-spinning Fiesta headed west, although surely Kris should have been leading this Convoy?

After a scenic 40-minute drive that would see us exit the Peak District National Park on the Manchester side, we pulled off the A628 down a lane to the campsite race HQ and were directed to park up in a fully functioning farmyard.

At the sight of mud ahead, Andy Brown driving this year's BBC team car 'Any Other Business' (comprising Brown, Barber & Chapman) nudged the Disco from Top Gear to low diff while James decided to fast-track it and took a short cut IN through the OUT gate to then meet Andy head on. The heavy 4wd won out but, after some hasty reversing, we were soon all parked up to then be promptly and squarely blocked-in with many more cars being directed to pile in behind us.



Directions-wise, the website for the race helpfully stated, *'Take the scenic Pennine way via Laddow Rocks and to the summit of Black Hill to Soldier's Lump trig point before ascending the old Pennine way via Toolyshaw...'* and that was it, eight miles of backcountry navigation summed up in one sentence – *ulp!*

With lots of pay-on-the-day tenners flying around, the starting pack of c.150 soon assembled, and without much fanfare we were off! But only very briefly as about 300 metres later all but the front-runners backed up to a standstill because of a stile that everyone had to cross. Paul and Alice had seen what was coming and so sped ahead and snuck through early but Baz, normally at the sharp end of most races, was in among the stationary crowd and could be heard casually chatting with his northern counterparts about shoe choice and so on.

It took 5-10 minutes for all runners to cross and get going again, and even then it was single-file without much opportunity to pass. Alex and Janet N, clearly wanting to be moving faster, could be seen creating their own overtaking opportunities and using the edge of the path to pick a way up both the hill and the pack.

After a mile or two, the Pennine Way path opened up a bit and allow for legs to stretch. The drop to the right wasn't sheer but not insignificant and you wouldn't have wanted to stumble or trip here. The higher we climbed, the wetter the ground got and the naturally rocky path gave way to flagstones in places, some submerged in puddles of dark water.

Nearing the summit of Black Hill, the checkpoint came into view where you were encouraged by the marshals to touch the trig before turning back out on to open moorland. With no signage at all up till now, luckily the route across the remote landscape we were now rushing on to did have small yellow flags positioned every 50-100 metres so the direction we needed to take was quote obvious (and hopefully Janet S hadn't yet had to steal a glance at her watch to then promptly hand herself in to the race authorities). Despite the bottleneck at the start of the race, runners were by now quite strung out across the moor. The ground was a mixture of springy / soft / damp depending on the placement of your feet, although some bigger boggy areas were starting to appear – you wouldn't want to stray too far away from the racing line suggested by the flags.

Fred however, had other ideas. Not noticing that this part of the moor was called 'Black End' (and for good reason) one minute he was running along and the next he found himself floundering waist-deep and submerged in thick black bog. Thankfully Sam & Bethan were not too far behind so rushed over although not to help pull Fred out but to rubberneck and take photos as Fred did his best superhero impression (of 'Swamp Thing') and on all fours dragged himself out of the quagmire back on to terra firma to carry on running, albeit with a certain squelch.

Having earlier spoken about hitting the mythical 'wall' during a race, it seems that Lizz also encountered the same mid-race sinking feeling as Fred as she too hit the same boggy patch but properly, going in up to her chest and getting firmly stuck, needing to be hauled out by Kris. Safely exhumed, and with no damage done and nothing that a good hosing down couldn't sort out, Lizz and Kris carried on.

Moving steadily on across the moors, at Hey Moss the wide rocky path started to narrow and descend as the valley with the campsite came into view. Dropping steeply off the hillside now, it looked like just several stiles and a field to cross and then it was back in to the campsite and the FINISH line.

The massed ranks of Ely Runners that had spectated or had already finished could be seen on the narrow lane that formed the last downhill straight before the finish turn. The big box of packed lunch had been hauled out and everybody was tucking in (including a guy in a Glossopdale Harriers vest) to the fridge-clearance picnic. It was all then a blur as in quick order lots of black and yellow vests flashed past, with Bethan, Sam, Fred, Graham, Mike, Andy Brown and Alex all finishing less than two minutes apart.



All runners, but especially those from Ely, were cheered on as they flew past until it was just Janet S from Ely to go. As Janet approached, a call of 'tunnel up' went out and Janet gamely ducked and ran through the arch of arms and on down to the finish line proper.

*What a race!* What an absolute blast! Although the jury was maybe out for Alex who, looking a little dazed, decided that he might 'need a couple of days to process what had just happened up there'. Paul's efforts did Ely Runners proud as he finished in an incredible third place overall, despite being somehow – bizarrely – beaten by a guy with only one shoe. Janet N also triumphed, coming 1st in her age category ('Did I?') and winning two bottles of beer.

With most of us now having paid a visit to the campsite standpipe to wash the bog off (an offer that Paul's hopping nemesis might have wanted to make use of), there was nothing more left to do except thank Des Gibbons the race organiser for a brilliant morning and then head south, until the same time next year...

In summary - a fantastic weekend of varied running that was great fun, a real team effort and a huge success, and plans are already being hatched for what may lay in store for 2025, way out West.

(Peter Royle, ER SocSec)



# Ely Runners