



The entire South loop in 40 hours - NON-STOP



June 5th-7th 2020

Following the launch of the new Shropshire Way in 2019, I had decided that I wanted to work with the Shropshire Way Association and my team at the Discovery Centre, on a project that would help promote the route, raise some money for our charity and inspire others to get outdoors and do some walking. As a lover of walking and running in the hills, it was decided that an ultra-distance challenge was the way to go, and so I volunteered myself to complete the whole southern loop of the Way. It was almost 200km (123 miles) in length and with nearly 5000m of ascent. I was to do it non-stop, solo in under 40 hours in a challenge that would involve two consecutive nights without sleep. Was this even possible? There was only one way to find out!

Equipped with a tracker to encourage interaction with my challenge, and a huge push of press releases, social media campaigns and a live link with BBC Shropshire, the event would get a lot of exposure- all essential if I was to inspire many others to follow my lead and also to raise that much-needed sponsorship money. After being forced to postpone the first date due to restrictions on movement following the Coronavirus pandemic, a second date was fixed and so finally, at 5pm on June 5th, I was ready for the off, hoping to complete by 9am on Sunday.

Leg1. Discovery Centre –Clun 11 miles



With calves of steel and a rucksack full of hope, I was sent on my way by a small crowd of well-wishers from the mammoth tusks outside the Discovery Centre. The sun shone but there was something portentous in the clouds and the weather forecast was wild. Normally I am mentally tough, but this evening I had an intangible sense from the very start that something didn't feel quite right. I hoped I would have enough strength to carry me all the way to the finish. As I left the Discovery Centre, the skies quickly darkened and the raincoat was pressed into service before I had completed the first mile. A drop of rain was no problem though and soon I was climbing Hopesay Hill and then Walcot wood, accompanied by the evensong of a blackcap on my way up to Bury Ditches Iron-Age fort. Here one can

imagine life 3000 years ago, when people would have lived and worked in this mystical place, but this evening it was just me and the ravens, cronking to the brewing storm.

The long descent through the forest brought me into Clun, its medieval castle silhouetted against the sinking sun. Some of the Shropshire Way Association members came out to cheers me on. "Well done" they said. "You're doing great". But I wasn't sure I was. Only 10 miles in and I didn't feel right. Months of preparation seemed to have vanished and I felt weak, tired and sluggish. Nothing I could put my finger on, but at this early stage I expected to have felt just fine.

Leg2.Clun-Bishop's Castle 12miles.Totaldistance 23miles



I love the climb out of Clun up Cefns ridge. It's a little-used path and I had it to myself this evening. I took in some food, listened to a skylark and, cocooned in my Paramo against the heavy showers, I was immune to the weather. I began to feel better and enjoyed letting the night gather round me. I soon picked up Offa's Dyke. King Offa of Mercia constructed his eponymous Saxon earthwork in the 8th Century to keep out the Welsh invaders. I couldn't help but chuckle at the irony of how today, it is Welsh government decree which keeps the diseased English from crossing the border the other way! After leaving the Dyke at Churchtown, I was met by Suzanne and her parents who had come out to wish me luck and then by James, a farmer who rears Highland Cattle hereabouts. He came out on his quad bike and chatted with me through Mainstone. Soon I was in Bishop's Castle, lockdown leaving the town devoid of its usual nightlife, where I was meeting Pete in his garden for coffee. We chatted for a while, ate some cake and I took a flask of soup for later on that night. I began to feel sick, but my pace was right so all would be fine I told myself.

Leg 3. Bishop's Castle- Bridges 12 miles. Total distance 35 miles



This was night-time, but on the open hill of Linley, the searchlight strength of the strawberry moon cast shadows as strong as the sun. Only in the wooded areas did I need a torch. As I climbed through the iconic avenue of beech trees, the wind freshened as the tempest gathered energy and the trees, in full leaf, threatened to relinquish to its power, their venerable branches straining in the storm. I took the precaution of walking outside the avenue, as a crashing bough could easily have brought my challenge, and indeed my life, to an ignominious end. The wind howled and the moon flashed as its light was in turn obscured and revealed by the speeding clouds. Squalls of rain attempted to permeate the Paramo, but I was safe. I was in my element up here amidst such beauty, the raw power of which few of us are privileged to experience.

Pushing North along Stiperstones ridge, the sun had long vanished but it was nearly mid-summer and no sooner had the vermilion glow vanished under the north-west horizon, did it reappear in the north-east. The first of my two dawns was nigh. As the storm began to abate, I descended to Bridges, where the day before, I had dropped myself a bottle of water and a banana.

Leg 4 Bridges- Shrewsbury 15 miles. Total distance 50 miles



I snarfed my banana and a cereal bar and began to climb the Golden Valley, another of my special places. Here one can encounter curlew, this bird's iconic status sadly offering no protection from Man's incessant need to dominate the nature that sustains him. They are severely threatened now

and in some years no chicks fledge at all. But today some good news. The male was on patrol, defending his territory and young from intruders. I wished him well and carried on my way. Pied Flycatchers thrive here too and chiffchaff, garden warbler and willow warbler trilled a dawn chorus on my ascent.

Soon to Lyth Hill, a manor controlled today by the Bayston Hill Salad Dodgers, a group of vigilantes who take a dim view of strangers coming on to their patch. Still, it was barely 7.00 AM- the mob wouldn't be out yet would it? How wrong I was- no sooner did I begin the climb, I was intercepted by one of their scouts. Would I be allowed to pass? Luckily, they came in peace and I was offered coffee, had a sit down and then Felix, Dave and Duncan escorted me through the Badlands of Bayston Hill to the safety of Shrewsbury's city limits.

As I approached town, I was dazzled by paparazzi flashes from behind trees, under bridges, round corners. The PR machine had obviously been working overnight and small crowds had gathered, apparently fascinated by the sight of a bedraggled middle-aged man hauling his sorry carcass around an implausibly long course. People I didn't even know were calling my name, willing me along. I took a call from BBC Shropshire and told the whole county what was going on. I sat by the river and turned on social media. 200 Facebook notifications over night! I could sense that people were becoming invested in this challenge and I was to be their inspiration. News was spreading but I felt increasingly rough. I couldn't get food down me and my body was in dire need of calories. I had completed 50 miles already and with over 70 still to go, I needed to find a way out. I couldn't continue feeling like this. I would simply run out of fuel.

Leg 5- Shrewsbury –Haughmond Hill. 5 miles. Total distance 55 miles.



I was on unfamiliar ground now, so I needed to watch my navigation. But for now at least I had Jane and Ian from the LDWA accompanying me as I set off through town. I took comfort from having somebody alongside me who knew how I felt. Jane is a veteran of many ultra-distance challenges and had suffered in the past as I was suffering now. She provided a welcome distraction from my woes until at the edge of town, she and Ian peeled off and I was alone again. On the flat farmland to the west of Shrewsbury, I dwelt on my worsening condition. It was becoming hard even to take on water now as the nausea took over. I was suffering from blisters, a head-ache and my back hurt. I was knackered, dehydrated and worried. I am renowned for my mental resilience and my ability to keep on through the bad patches which inevitably accompany these challenges, but what I was experiencing now was above anything I had known before and doubt was creeping in, and there was still a long way to go. I dug deep, trying to find something inside me that would give me some extra strength. My

condition fluctuated wildly and in between feelings of nausea and despair, came moments of calm. I would need to muster unprecedented levels of resilience if I was to prevail.

On the approach to Haughmond Hill, I was met by Amanda from the Shropshire Way Association, with whom I had been working to help promote the challenge. This was her home patch and she accompanied me on a tour of the hill, showing me the quarry, the viewpoints and the café, which amazingly was open for takeaways. I managed to stomach a cup of tea and slice of rocky road, and started to feel better. It's beautiful here and I look forward to returning when I am in better shape to enjoy it.

Leg 6- Haughmond Hill- Wellington. 12 miles. Total distance 67 miles.



Amanda peeled off and the sugar hit from the rocky road kicked in. I was still keeping to my schedule and as I traversed the bucolic landscape of villages, copses and fields, I went on to auto pilot. I shut my mind to the pain I was in. Tried to focus on just ticking off the miles. Keeping it moving. I was aware that I was getting closer to Wellington when my reverie was broken. "Are you Grant" I heard in clipped tones. "The route on your tracker into town is not the correct Shropshire Way route, so I'm here to guide you in". I thought this was supposed to be solo challenge, but I had company again. This was Naomi, one of the trustees of the Shropshire Way and she was my new guide. A sprightly septuagenarian, I realised how tired I was becoming as I struggled to match her pace through the byways of Wellington. I expected her to peel off when we reached town, until the announcement that she was to continue as my escort to the top of the Wrekin. "I've nothing else to do this afternoon" she announced as we pulled in for a can of pop.

Leg 7 Wellington- Ironbridge. 11 miles. Total distance 78 miles



Tucked in behind the whirlwind Naomi, I began my ascent of the Wrekin. Perhaps Shropshire's most iconic hill, its name is immortalised in the local saying "all around the Wrekin" meaning to procrastinate, or dither over something. There was to be none of that with Naomi leading the way! Of global geological interest, the Wrekin is made of volcanic rock from Precambrian times, and today is a popular spot for walkers from nearby Telford. Luckily, we were in time to catch the Halfway House Café and Naomi bought me a cup of tea and we sat watching more people than I had seen all day.

After the summit, I was alone again with time to reflect where I was. The nausea ebbed and flowed in severity, but never went away. More than anything, I was annoyed that it was spoiling my enjoyment of the challenge. Here I was doing what I love and supporting a great cause, but I couldn't relish the moment due to the near constant sickness. Blisters were causing trouble and I knew that I would need to stop at Ironbridge to carry out some self-surgery. My pace was slowing and I still had over 50 miles to go. To get through this, I was going to have to dig into my reserves of energy, using all my experience to manage my body so that it would get me to the end. I was disappointed that my pace was beginning to fall away and I didn't have the strength to pick it up. Forty hours was not going to happen. It was time to re-set my goals. The only thing that mattered now was that I finished. If I was a bit late, no-one would mind I told myself. Also, I had not always been solo- well if anyone felt I'd cheated, they could have their donation back. I'd done this off my own back and I was going to finish it that way. My only goal now was completion.

I rolled in to an eerily quiet Ironbridge on Saturday tea time and resolved to take stock. Sort out and prepare for the second night without sleep. I was being met by Frank and his wife Ali, two friends who were bringing me coffee and moral support. I would be very pleased to see them.

I stopped on a bench. Ali got me fish and chips and I set to work with the scalpel, crafting some new feet out of moleskin and sticking on strips of it where my own skin had once been. At this point the challenge is purely mental. For the world, I could have stopped here. Gone home and had a good night's sleep and said "well, at least I tried". But I know the gut-wrenching feeling that follows a failed challenge and the pain I felt now was as nothing compared to the months of disappointment I would feel if I threw the towel in here. With surgery completed, some calories inside me and a change of socks came a change of perspective and I was ready to go. "I'm coming with you" announced Frank out of the blue. "Just through the night" This is supposed to be solo, and I felt compromised, but Frank was right, He's experienced in these things and he could see I would be a risk to myself and others venturing onto open hill when I was so tired. I capitulated and accepted Frank's company.

Leg 8 Ironbridge- Wilderhope 13 miles. Total distance 91 miles

And off we went. Up Benthall Edge and through Much Wenlock, where Steph and Ian came out to offer a cheer. Out along Wenlock Edge which I find oppressive in summer when the dense foliage gives a sense of claustrophobia. Still, it was dark now, so head down. Auto pilot. Tuck in behind Frank, listen to the owls and tick off some more miles. In what seemed like no time, but in fact was an eternity, we reached Wilderhope, where I had also laid a drop bag the previous day. A quick re-fill of water and off.

Leg 9 Wilderhope- Wheathill. 11 miles. Total distance 102 miles



Into the second night and I entered a parallel reality. Tiredness brought a sense a calm and elation. I had hit rock bottom and was coming out the other side. I was starting to realise that I was in the business end of things- the end was in sight and I started to relax. With this came the hallucinations, a side effect from the powerful analgesics my brain was pumping into my bloodstream in its attempt to negate the effects of sleep deprivation and physical hardship. I saw woodland creatures- hares and deer- around me in the grass, swarms of mice leaped from the corn at my every step, fairies sitting on logs and two people carrying shopping baskets. Frank didn't know whether to laugh, or just ignore me when I became frustrated that he couldn't see these amazing things around him. We summited Brown Clee, Shropshire's highest point, at dawn and saw all the ground I had covered and all there still to do. From here, re-invigorated by the new day, I knew I could finish. I only had one more climb and 25 miles to go. I was starting to enjoy myself as the hitherto omnipresent nausea began finally to subside. As we descended to Wheathill, I felt better than I had for hours. Then, out of nowhere, another hallucination- a car and a blonde lady in a layby. It was starting again. But this was different- Frank could see it too. As my eyes adjusted, I realised it was Ali, Frank's wife who brought us coffee and sweets. A welcome sight.

Leg 10 Wheathill-Ludlow. 11 miles Total distance 113 miles



Alone again and on familiar territory, I knew it was only the ascent of Titterstone Clee Hill that stood between me and the finish. Twenty miles to the end and a mere 10 to my breakfast stop at my home in Ludlow. I climbed steadily and strongly through the bilberries, or whinberries as they are known around here. Another month and they would be in fruit and we could pick the purple berries and make whinberry pie. I could have eaten some right now. The loneliness and suffering started to feel they were in the past and as I approached the summit, Charles, the Chair of our charity's board of trustees was there to greet me with Toots, his faithful Springerpoo. We strolled off the summit and discussed the success of the project. As Charles got into his car for a nice, comfy drive down to Ludlow, I stopped, turned on my phone data and for only the third time in two days, connected to the outside world to see how the challenge was achieving its goals

I sent out a progress report to my army of followers via Facebook live, and saw that my previous post had been seen over 3000 times. Jade and Stephanie who had been managing the social media all weekend, had been busy. My timeline was full and I realised that half of Shropshire had become obsessed with watching the dot from my tracker move increasingly slowly around the map. One of my goals at least had been achieved- I had inspired others to take an interest in walking. Now to look at the donations. Had all this interest led to any financial support? Wow! I had raised over £7000.00. Such welcome news when our very future had been threatened by the global pandemic. The Centre would be safe. I just needed to get to the finish.

As I reached Knowbury, Iain from Ludlow runners appeared. "I've come to run down to Ludlow with you" he announced cheerfully. "There's not a lot of running going on" I said, "but come along". From here, the Pied Piper of Ludlow picked up Nick, Kerry, Peta and Phil, all of whom had supported the project from the start. Our merry band soon completed its descent into Ludlow and I entered my house for breakfast and a change of socks for the final push.

Leg 11 Ludlow- The Discovery Centre 10 miles Total distance 123 miles



The last leg was always going to have been a procession. It had been decided that Chrissy, my wife, would do this section with me to support me on the way to the finish. As last legs go, it was pretty near perfect. No stiles for my creaking limbs to negotiate and the short ascent through Aldon Gutter, the only vaguely significant climb in an otherwise straightforward 10 miles to the finish. Chrissy was my pacemaker, finding a pace just beyond what I was comfortable with and forcing a little more speed from my knackered legs. The weather had calmed and it felt like a regular Sunday afternoon stroll, as we met some of the Mercia Fellrunners who had decided to go off patch for the day. As I crossed a road, I was met by Kat and Kim who informed me there was a growing welcoming party at the Centre. My pace quickened at this news and the aches and pains melted away. Adrenaline fuelled by body now and I thought of the end. As we approached Craven Arms, the entourage grew with Audrey, the Chair of the SWA coming out to thank me for promoting the way. It was great to see her, her husband and Amanda again and as the welcome party grew, with Ian from LDWA, Dave and his family coming out too.

This was a solo challenge, and although I had had people with me for some of the time, I wanted to finish as I had started- on my own, so as the Mammoth Tusks approached, I peeled off from the group, suddenly finding the speed and strength that had eluded me almost the entire way, accelerating



And so, to bed!

Life lessons-

- When faced with a seemingly insurmountable task, break it down into manageable pieces
- Aim high, but if your goals become out of reach, re-set them, don't abandon them
- What we can achieve is limited only by the power of our imaginations
- Have self-belief. It will take you far.

I hope this has inspired you to take on a challenge of your own.

I know of others who will take on this challenge. There are many who will give it a go. There are a few who could destroy my time. I may even try to beat it myself. If you think you have what it takes, I challenge you to beat the FKT of 46 hours 10 minutes.

Grant.