

Blyth Running Club – Race report

The Race: Pilgrims ultra
The Distance: 50km
The Date: 18th September 2021
The Route: Holy Island – Craster

The Blyth participants :

Michael Ashby, Richard Daly, Steve Dobby, Julie Lemin, Adele and Davina Lonsdale

Friend of Blyth: Graeme Hare

Support by: Peter Holmback



Pre-race

Apart from the obligatory training needed to consider getting on the start line the next most important thing is your kit for the race. We all pulled together everything we needed on the days leading up to the race, in my case the night before as I had been away with work for a number of days.

There was an obligatory kit list that we needed to ensure we carried on our persons, including waterproof trousers,(which seemed rather overkill considering the forecast the next day), which I simply couldn't fit into my bag without removing something more critical, like water. So they stayed in my drop bag. I also squeezed many snacks, sweets, gels, more snacks and salt tablets into my running backpack.

I finally got myself sorted by 9pm had a relaxing beer then got myself to bed at 9:45 as we had quite an early start the next morning...

My alarm went off at 3:45am, set to give me time to sort myself out for Tricky picking me up at 4:20. I managed to get dressed, applied some sun cream, had some porridge, a quick visit to the loo, then right on time Tricky pulled up, I dumped my bags in his car and we headed off to get Michael.

Michael was ready and waiting for us at his allocated pick up point then it was time to pick up Julie, who was also ready and waiting outside her house.

Then we were on our way to Craster, to catch the coach to take us up to Holy Island. Tricky's Sat Nav took us an interesting way to Craster but we arrived in good time. The next challenge was parking, there is zero phone signal in Craster and no lights in the carpark, thankfully Julie had her card and we were able to pay for the parking.

We then loitered around waiting for the coach and bumped into an old running buddy Graeme Hare, who was also joining us for the race. Graeme is no stranger to Ultras and is particularly fond of trail/fell running and has his own youtube channel where he showcases numerous events. Check out his channel as he does some pretty good content/videos :

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIYTR_kLVdTrJfP8nN9JDrw

The coach arrived just after the allocated time of 6am and we all piled onto it for the journey up to Holy Island. The journey took next to no time and we arrived at Holy Island about 7am, giving us plenty of time to register and get to the start line for 8am, and have a few toilet visits before then too.

Registration was a well-organised affair but my tracker didn't want to turn on properly, it did eventually but I found out after the race it was Donald ducked and didn't track me one little bit. Just as well I had managed to load the GPX file into my Garmin which then became my guide throughout the race. Whilst the course was pretty straightforward in most places it was a godsend and very much needed to have the course loaded and guiding us through the course.

After getting ourselves sorted and kitted up, we dropped our bags at the bag drop and made our way to the start.

The Race

Even though the race had a slightly delayed Start at 8:15 we were all in good spirits and raring to go.



The weather was also a lot different to that what had been forecasted. This was a blessing in disguise as instead of being rather warm it was nice and cool with a misty drizzle for the first hour or two.

With a quick and relaxed start instruction, we were off, up a little rise off the beach and back into holy island village. My plan was to stick between 9 and 9:30min pace for the first half then see how I felt after that to whether I picked up the pace, this turned out to be rather optimistic.

We were soon out of the village onto the causeway, thankfully we were staying on the road as there had been reports of quicksand, which would have been a tad unpleasant. It is rather difficult to slow down from your usual pace but I just about managed to keep it above 9 min pace for the first few miles.

I found myself running next to Julie with Michael and Tricky just a little bit behind us and we made our way off holy Island. Just before the 4-mile mark we left the causeway and turned left onto a trail beside a field, the first of many. Soon after we crossed the main north-south east coast rail line, thankfully in one piece. Not long after completing 4.5 miles, we started climbing, and we kept climbing for 5 miles gaining 500ft to the highest point of the day before 10 miles of undulating descent. During this climb, Michael caught and passed us at about the 7-mile mark and we didn't see him again until a couple of miles from the finish, more of that later. Tricky also caught us up and we enjoyed a little chat for a while then all of a sudden he wasn't with us, unfortunately, we didn't notice straight away, we just thought he was being very sensible on the hills and had fallen back a bit, this, we found out later was unfortunately not the case, but we didn't find out until much later what had befallen him.

The conditions underfoot were pretty testing, a mixture of pavement, mud, gravel, narrow trails and forest tracks, and many field tracks, and near the end a field of Kale, which was surreal, but thankfully very little sand. There were some tarmac sections and 2 rather dicey crossings of the A1 that were also navigated, but most of the route was off-road, I was glad I had decided to wear my trails as suggested by the organisers.

The first major town we went through (and first water station) was Belford at the 20km (12.5mile) point, Julie and I grabbed half a banana each and headed straight off back onto another field track.

Even at this stage, earlyish in the run I was starting to feel fatigued, the ever undulating trail was taking its toll but, with 33km still to go we plodded on towards Bamburgh and the first proper feed station.

On the way to Bamburgh we bumped into Pete Holmback, what a lovely surprise it was to see him, he then dotted around the course to give us some very well appreciated encouragement.

There was another cheeky little uphill section at mile 16 then the trail ran through a golf course. Thankfully the next section was a 2 mile downhill into Bamburgh, and at this point, we finally saw the sea again since leaving the causeway.

I made a slight mistake on the run into Bamburgh and we had to double back to the feed station at the cricket pavilion like we needed to run another 300m, not. After some food and refilling of water bottles (and a change of socks for Julie) we were off again out of Bamburgh towards Seahouses. At least by this point we were well past halfway and “only” had a ½ marathon distance to go, I did joke to Julie that we had done a long warm-up and this was the start of the race but I think this joke was wearing a bit thin.

We arrived in Seahouse at the 24-mile point and it wasn't obvious which way to go, but thankfully a combination of the route on my watch and Julie's eagle eyes enabled us to keep on the right route. At this point Julie's foot was starting to give her trouble, it was tough to see her in pain, but she was a right trooper, quickly slipping her shoe off, a minute of kneading the ball of her foot and then trainer back on and off we went again.

We were then on the route toward Beadnell, and we arrived at Marathon mile point, with 7 miles still to go. These last 7 miles went on forever, with our pace slowing we resorted to run-walking as the fatigue was really setting in, we began to really dislike the many styles we had to climb over, each one getting more and more difficult and tiring to get over. Each mile seemed to drag on for an eternity. We passed by High newton at the 29-mile mark and were now desperate to see the castle of Dunstonburgh which would mark only a mile or so to the finish at Craster.

Eventually, the castle hove into view, what a welcome sight it was. As we neared the castle we spotted Michael Ashby about 300m ahead, walking and running, this gave us the impetus to keep moving and we slowly started to gain on him as we traversed the side of the castle. The path was very rocky at this point and we could barely lift our knackered legs over them.

Eventually, we got around and onto the home straight, thankfully on the grass with a clear run to the finish just over a mile away. At this point Julie told me to push on, and whilst I wanted to stay and finish the race with her my competitive side raised its head and I bade her a quick see you soon and I was off, accelerating towards Michael, wanting to catch him before the end.

Ultra's aren't really a competition against others, more a battle with yourself but I am a competitive little bugger and so off I went. With about ½ mile to the finish, I caught Michael and kept the pace going, just wanting to finish as soon as possible so I could stop. The last sting in the tail is the sharp rise to the finish at the Jolly fisherman but I powered up it, turned left and down the final 20m to the finish, thank the lord.

What a relief it was to finish, I grabbed my T-shirt and medal, a packet of crisps and some flapjack and tried to find a place to sit down. As I was doing so I saw Michael come through the finish with Julie following him shortly after.

I called over to Michael and he made his way over to me. Thankfully the main guy from Cold brew grabbed my drop bag for me and I started

trying to change out of my wet clothes. I tried to keep moving a little bit so I didn't cramp up and managed a few little stretches also.

We were tired, hungry, but mostly just happy to be finished. We were now waiting for the arrival of Tricky, thinking he was just behind us. Unfortunately, this was not the case, we watched the minutes tick by and we were starting to get a little worried when 45 mins later he came over the line, he was not in a good way, he looked absolutely shattered and could barely stand up.

We rushed over to him to see how he was doing as he was limping quite badly. We got him over to where we had found a seat and he told us what had happened. At mile 8 whilst coming up the hill he felt something go in his hamstring, I repeat, mile 8, now, most people would have tried to run on it for a bit, maybe a mile and realise with so many miles to go that this would be a good time to stop. Not Tricky. He found he could do a shuffling run for about ½ mile before the pain got a bit too much, so he then walked for ½ mile, then repeated this all the way to the end. I cannot comprehend how he did this, to say he is made of strong stuff would be a massive understatement.

We simply couldn't believe how he had managed to finish. Julie very kindly nipped back into the pub to grab him a drink (she had already got one for me and Michael, thank you😊) after we had finished our drinks it was time to get back to the car and travel home, but not before seeing Davina and Adele cross the line.

Before we got started back to the car we were simply in awe of the guys and gals coming in that were continuing onwards to either 100km or 100mile, I simply couldn't comprehend how they were managing it, considering how knackered I felt after a mere 53km. Much respect. We hobbled slowly back to the carpark we had departed from roughly 9 hours earlier and Tricky drove us home.

What a day, what a fantastic experience. The route was fantastic, tough, but not too tough, almost enjoyable in parts. The sense of satisfaction at completing it was simply brilliant. I will be doing another one, or maybe two...

If you have done a marathon or two and fancy something different then I could heartily recommend this race. Thanks for reading,

Steve