

Striders of Croydon

MARCH 2026 MAGAZINE



**Ally Whitlock leading our women in the Surrey Cross-Country League at Lloyd Park
(photo by Steve Massey)**

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Competitive Highlights: December 2025 – February 2026

40 Years Ago – Local Athletics in February-June 1986

30 Years Ago – Local Athletics in January-March 1996

20 Years Ago – Local Athletics in Spring 2006

10 Years Ago – Local Athletics in Spring 2016

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Saturday 28 March – Kew 10K (Surrey Road League)

Thursday 16 April – East Surrey League Road Race – Ewell

Sunday 19 April – Sutton 10K – Nonsuch Park (Surrey Road League)

Wednesday 22 April – Striders AGM – Sandilands

Sunday 26 April – London Marathon (Striders marshalling)

Sunday 10 May – Ranelagh Half-Marathon – Richmond (Surrey Championship & Road League)

Monday 18 May – Southern Veterans League – Kingsmeadow

Saturday 30 May – Surrey Masters Track & Field Championships – Kingsmeadow

Sunday 7 June – Dorking 10 miles (Surrey Championship & Road League)

Sunday 21 June – Ranelagh 10K – Petersham (Surrey Championship & Road League)

Sunday 22 June – Southern Veterans League – Ewell

Friday 3 July – Ranelagh Sunset Sprint 3K – Petersham (Surrey Road League)

Monday 6 July – Southern Veterans League – Sutton Arena

Sunday 19 July – Elmbridge 10K (Surrey Road League)

Monday 27 July – Southern Veterans League – Wimbledon



Striders had a record turnout of 82 finishers at our annual 'mob match' on 31 January

EDITORIAL: MARCH 2026

Welcome to the March issue of our club magazine.

As many Striders will know, Ally Whitlock ran the Summer Spine race last year, on a 264-mile course from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm in Scotland. We begin this issue with her account of this race (there are more photos in her blog on <https://photogirlruns.blog/2026/02/22/summer-spine-2025>).

At the end of November, Debra Bourne ran the Stanza Stones 50-mile race, from Marsden to Ilkley. She gives us her account of this race. We follow this with a brief article from William Furney, who had the misfortune to fall on one of our Wednesday evening runs in February. We also include our usual “competitive highlights” and history articles.

We have had the wettest winter since 2014, making Lloyd Park even muddier than usual and requiring changes to the routes for some of our marathon training runs. I was very pleased to see a club record of 82 Striders competing in our annual ‘mob match’ against Croydon Harriers on 31 January. In the Surrey Cross-Country League, our women retained their Division Two status, finishing in eleventh place out of the 15 clubs in the division. Our men placed third in Division Three, missing promotion to Division Two by only one place.

The Surrey Road League has already begun, somewhat earlier than usual, with the first race having been the Valentines 10K at Chessington in February. We had three competitors in the men’s race, but none of our women competed. Last year our women did well to finish eighth in this league, so I hope that we will have some female competitors in the remaining races, the next of which is the Kew 10K on 28th March.

I hope that all Striders continue to enjoy their running.

Alan



THE SUMMER SPINE 2025 (by Ally Whitlock)

The Prologue

I tried to write this so many times.

Each attempt began the same way, pen to paper, fingers to keyboard, but the words just wouldn't come. Not because I didn't want to write them... I just couldn't. Nothing landed. Nothing felt big enough to capture the feelings, emotions, or intensity of that near-week spent on the Pennine Way.

For most of the race, I lived inside my own small bubble of self-sufficiency. Just me, myself and I.

Out there on the Pennine Way, the rest of the world faded away. No social media. No group chats. Phone on silent. Just the occasional, fleeting call home.

I revelled in the silence and the solitude. Completely alone on the hills and moors, I felt no fear, only peace. My only job was to keep moving and to look after myself. Nothing else mattered. In that simplicity, I found something unexpected: a sense of belonging. I was exactly where I was meant to be.

But when the race ended, the bubble burst.

Suddenly, I felt lost. Disorientated. The emotions hit hard and without warning. I couldn't make sense of them. I think I just needed time, time to sit with it all, to feel it fully, to understand what had happened out there.

And then, slowly, the words began to come. As they did, I started to smile. It's taken me many (many) months, but writing this became a kind of therapy, a way to pour it all out and realise just how much those 264 miles meant to me.

For over a year, the Summer Spine was my everything. Out on that trail, I found a part of myself I really like. Someone strong. Someone stubborn. Someone braver than I ever believed. And I want to remember that person.

Yet just a few short months later, I look back at this story, the one that's taken me so long to write and think... was that really me? Did I do that?

So this is my Summer Spine 2025 story.

Written for me so that I don't forget the journey.

Written for me so I don't forget the adventure.

Written for me so I don't forget just how bloody strong and capable I am.

It's long. It's raw. It's honest. It's mine.

Join me for the ride.

Summer Spine Part I | Edale to Hebden Hey

Sunday 15th June 2025, Edale, The Start

I arrive in Edale early on Sunday morning. Early enough to be one of the first in the queue to have my tracker fitted, the small device that will accompany me all the way up the Pennine Way.

I registered, collected my race number and passed kit check the previous afternoon, so there's very little to do this morning. Registration was smooth. Kit check too. I'd been meticulous in the days leading up to the race, checking and re-checking every single item on the list, multiple times, determined to meet the

extensive requirements. I sailed through with just one tiny blip when my compass briefly decided not to find north.



Late yesterday afternoon, I made my way over to the youth hostel a couple of miles outside Edale, where I had a bunk booked for the night.

The hostel was filled almost entirely with Spinners. I felt particularly sorry for the one woman in our eight-bed dorm who wasn't running the race, especially when a chorus of badly tuned alarms erupted around 4 am. Not that I'd slept much anyway. Despite feeling tired, nerves, excitement and apprehension won out. Instead of drifting into a peaceful sleep, I tossed and turned for hours, finally dropping into something fitful around 2 am. The experience wasn't helped by a very loud snorer in the dorm.

Note to self: if I ever do this again (spoiler alert), book a private room the night before the race!

Now, coffee from the café in the station in hand, I sit on the ground outside the village hall, aka Spine HQ, eating my pre-race breakfast from a Tupperware box. I watch the sky nervously as the heavens open. I was hoping the threatening grey clouds would blow over without delivering on their promise. Instead, I pull on my waterproof and dash for cover beneath the small marquee on the starting field.

Thankfully, with kick-off fast approaching, the downpour is short-lived and just before 8 am, I shrug my pack onto my shoulders and wander over to the start area.

I've been waiting for this moment for a year. Twelve whole months. Every mile run, every hill climbed, every weight lifted has led to this. This is it. It's time. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, trying to hold back tears and shut out the world around me. In the midst of the crowd, I need a quiet moment to myself.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

In. Out. In. Out.

I try to calm my pounding heart.

The race director offers a few final words of encouragement. I hear him, but the words don't stick, floating past on the wind.

Surrounded by people, I feel completely and utterly alone. Like an imposter. Around me, runners swap stories of previous Spines, Northern Traverses, Cape Wraths, Dragon's Backs. Names heavy with prestige. I listen, nod, smile. Inside, something tightens. What am I doing here?

In comparison, Winter Downs 200 suddenly feels small. Lightweight. Not enough. The voice in my head starts to list the reasons I don't belong. Not experienced enough. Not tough enough. Not worthy of this start line.

Then I catch myself.

This is not the moment to unravel. I know how much I've given to be here. The early mornings. The long miles. The sacrifices no one else sees. I didn't end up here by accident. I earned this place.

Still, doubt clings on, stubborn and insistent, pressing in during these final minutes. My heart races. My hands tremble slightly.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

In. Out. In. Out.

Lost inside my own head, I barely register the final countdown.

Five... four... three... Deep breath. Two... one... Go.



The field surges forward, a wave of bodies carried by cheers from friends and family. I step over the line quietly, almost unnoticed, slipping into the middle of the pack exactly where I want to be.

The noise fades.

The doubts fall away.

There is only the path ahead. With one last steadying breath, I begin my epic journey along the Pennine Way.

Edale

The moment I start moving, a sense of calm washes over me. This is exactly where I want to be. The flickers of doubt from the start line soften, then fade quietly into the background. I know I'm ready and I find myself genuinely looking forward to what the next few days might hold.

Edale is a tiny village tucked into the Hope Valley, home to fewer than 400 people, surrounded by rolling hills and wide, open views. Best known as the start, or end, of the Pennine Way, it's a familiar place for walkers and runners heading out into the Peak District.

This weekend, though, the village belongs to the Spine. Staff, volunteers, runners across all three races and their families spill across the green, doubling the population overnight. As the race starts, locals and supporters line the streets, cheering us out of the village; a gentle but deeply grounding show of support.

The opening miles ease us in. The trail undulates through lush, green fields, cradled between steep hillsides and winding cloughs in the Vale of Edale. To the right, the slopes of Grindslow Knoll rise sharply above us. To the left, the Great Ridge stretches across the skyline, familiar and reassuring. The ground is soft, forgiving, almost encouraging. It would be easy to let the excitement take over.

I rein myself in, quietly reminding myself that this is just the beginning. There is a long way to go. I glance at my heart rate, easing off slightly as it creeps upwards, trying to keep the early adrenaline in check.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to approach this race. Trying to shape a strategy for something this vast feels almost futile. My goal is simple enough: to finish. But beneath that sits something more important to me. I want to finish knowing I gave it everything I had. That I didn't coast. That I didn't leave anything in reserve. That second part matters more than I usually admit.

I don't doubt I can finish. Not for a second. Cocky? Maybe. I'd call it confident. But confidence doesn't mean charging in blindly. I want to walk away knowing I showed up fully, both physically and mentally.

Jacob's Ladder

A few miles in, just beyond the small hamlet of Upper Booth, the path funnels us towards Jacob's Ladder. A steep staircase of gritstone slabs etched into the hillside, climbing sharply onto the Kinder plateau. The climb begins with a narrow stone bridge over the River Noe and rises around 300 feet at a punishing gradient of 24%. It's the first real test of the Pennine Way.

As usual, it's wrapped in thick clag. I don't think I've ever seen the top from the bottom, or the bottom from the top. Some might find comfort in that. Personally, I'd quite like to see the view one day.

Normally, I'd push here. Today, I deliberately hold back. Without the familiar rhythm of effort, the climb feels harder than it should, dragging on as I count steps rather than settle into a flow. When I reach the cairn, I turn and look back, reminding myself early on to focus on how far I've come, not how far I still have to go.

Below, a ribbon of runners snakes down the hillside, dissolving into the mist. I turn and move on.

The trail threads its way across to Kinder Scout, the highest point in the Peak District at 2,087 feet. The path is narrow and busy and there's a constant negotiation for space. Someone passes me, I pass

someone else. Eventually, I push a little harder than planned, just to find clear ground and my own rhythm again.



Looking back towards Jacob's Ladder

From Kinder Low, the route heads east along the edge of the plateau towards Kinder Downfall. This stretch always reminds me of running along a coastal path, the land dropping away on one side. The trail becomes rougher here, scattered with gritstone boulders that demand constant attention. Foot placement matters. Sometimes hands too. It's more scramble than run in places, but I enjoy it. Perhaps a little too much. I rein myself in again.

We skirt around Kinder Downfall, the highest waterfall in the Peaks. On windy days, the water blows back on itself in a fine mist. They say on a clear day you can see the Welsh mountains from here.

Just past the waterfall, just as suddenly as it closed in, the cloud lifts. Grey gives way to blue. The moorland brightens, the landscape sharpening into colour. Below, Kinder Reservoir glints in the sunlight, as if someone's turned the saturation up on the whole world. With it comes a small but welcome lift in mood, a quiet spark of optimism.



Suddenly, the clouds lifted and the sun came out!

My feet dance along the flagstones, reclaimed from demolished cotton mills and laid across the worst of the bogs. I haven't run this section since the Sprint in 2023, but my feet remember it well. There's a gentle incline, dry and runnable. I feel strong.

Should I be running? I'm not sure.

Part of me wants to lean into it, to bank some easy miles while the terrain allows. Another part knows the danger of getting carried away too early. I move somewhere between the two, trying to balance patience with momentum.



The Kinder Plateau, ©Official Spine Photographer

Snake Pass

The stretch from Snake Pass to Torside, skirting Bleaklow, isn't one I know particularly well.

It starts gently enough, a runnable climb along a gravel path that briefly follows the line of an old Roman Road before veering off and winding alongside a stream bed. The trail hops from one bank to the other, changing underfoot from flagstones to stones to mud, sometimes all at once.

Away from the water, Bleaklow opens into a vast expanse of moorland. Wild, exposed and quietly beautiful in its bleakness. Heather and coarse grasses stretch across the landscape, broken only by the occasional wildflower. Deep peat channels cut through the terrain, forming narrow corridors with dark walls rising almost to shoulder height. The lines twist and overlap, and at times it takes real concentration to stay on the right one.

The gradients are kind, though and when the ground firms up, the running is actually pretty good.

Eventually, the path narrows into a single track high above Torside Clough, clinging to the hillside with a hint of coastal cliff-top drama. It should feel expansive and freeing, but it's busy, and I'm still finding my rhythm. I move cautiously, allowing space where I can. A few runners bound past confidently, only to be stopped abruptly by a slick, boggy patch. Smug in my waterproof socks, I splash through and carry on, reminding myself at the same time, not to get pulled into racing this early.

With the sun now blazing and the earlier cloud cover all but gone, the views across Torside Reservoir are spectacular. I slow, stop briefly and take a couple of photos.

Because of course I do.



Black Hill

Since my first Pennine Way outing in 2022, I've slowly pieced the trail together, section by section, until I've covered it all. I might not remember every mile, but the familiarity has become a quiet source of reassurance.

I know where the terrain bites and where it flows. I know the big climbs, the punishing descents and the sections that reward patience. I know where the shops, cafés and taps are, and which checkpoints offer the chance for a reset. That knowledge gives me confidence. It grounds me.

For some, the magic of the Spine lies in discovery. For me, it's in recognition. Landmarks become milestones, small goals that help pull me forward when the miles feel heavy.

By late morning, the temperature is climbing fast, a sharp contrast to the damp grey start in Edale. After the bleakness of Bleaklow and the monotony of the Torside tarmac, the trail pulls me towards Black Tor and the climb to Laddow Rocks. One of my favourite sections, ever since I first ran it in May 2023.

The path twists up beside a tumbling waterfall, narrow and rocky in places, runnable in others. Exactly the kind of climb I love. I'd flown up it during the Sprint and today I feel a flicker of that same spark.

Before the climb, I notice both front flasks are empty. I know I need to refill, but rather than stopping immediately, I wait until I find a rock with a panoramic view back towards Crowden. I sit, swing my legs over the edge, shrug off my pack and finally stop.

Until now, I'd been stubbornly eating and drinking on the move, unwilling to lose time. I know this isn't sustainable.

A peanut butter and jam sandwich. A few mouthfuls of water. Sitting still feels indulgent. I refill my front flasks, shifting a litre of water from the back of my pack to the front. The balance improves instantly.

Even after months of training with a full pack and three litres of water, it still feels uncomfortably heavy when full. The more I eat and drink, the lighter my pack becomes. Surely a good incentive to keep eating and drinking.

About ten runners pass me while I sit, including two women, one of them Anna Troup. The other, Catherine, is someone I'll cross paths with repeatedly over the coming days. My competitive instincts flare briefly, then settle. I'm only 20 miles in. Positions mean nothing yet, but skipping basics now will cost me far more later.

I sit for a minute longer, soaking in the view and taking a few photos. It really is glorious. And something clicks. Stopping costs less than pushing through. A few minutes of rest gives me more than it takes.



The view from my rock!

I set off again, climbing strongly, weaving around the rocks of Laddow. The path hugs the hillside, narrow, uneven, fringed with ferns and easy to trip over if I lose focus. Wild, beautiful, demanding. Everything I love about the Pennine Way.

Across Wessenden Head Moor, the flagstones offer a brief respite before the road crossing and the descent. Ahead, the first snack van of the race, a magnet for hungry Spinners. Burgers, chips, cold cans of Coke. Tempting, but I push on. Nikki's Food Bar is only eight miles away and right now, I'm craving quiet more than food.

As the chatter fades behind me, I finally get it. Silence. Just me, the trail and the sound of my breath.

Doubting

By mid-afternoon, though, the heat and lack of sleep begin to take their toll. My energy dips. My stomach turns. The shared dorm the night before was good for my budget, less so for rest. One snorer carried on well into the early hours, and when I finally drifted off, my alarm dragged me straight back out again.

I know, as my mood drops, that I should eat. Low mood, eat food. But tired and slightly nauseous, even my trusted peanut butter and jam turns my stomach. The miles start to feel heavier. My thoughts begin to spiral. If I'm struggling now, how will I cope with another 230 miles?



I spot a woman ahead and subconsciously match her pace, searching for rhythm, for distraction. She seems to want solitude just as I'm craving company. I sit in her shadow for a few miles until the unexpected oasis of Brun Clough Reservoir appears.

A local Mountain Rescue team has set up a not-quite-official aid station. Squash, Coke and hot salty potatoes. Heaven. I drink greedily, eat without thinking, refill my bottles.

Low mood, eat food. It really does work.

Crossing Brun Moor, I remind myself that just because I'm on a 268-mile journey, it doesn't change the fact that thirty miles is still a very long way. Fatigue is part of the ebb and flow. It will pass. It will return. Repeatedly. The real question is whether I'll keep finding the resolve to meet it.

Several hours later, as the light softens, I turn off the Pennine Way and descend into Hebden Hey, just beyond Hebden Bridge, Checkpoint One.

The final stretch has been steady rather than remarkable. A Coke and quick chat with a race photographer at Nikki's Food Bar. A rain shower over Blackstone Edge. Long, flat reservoir paths that seem to stretch on forever. I remind myself that running the flat is non-negotiable, even when it feels endless.

The woman I'd shadowed earlier pulls ahead again. I tell myself not to care.

Reader, I care.

I say the miles passed without incident, but the truth is the doubts never really left. They lingered quietly, waiting. The familiar waves of heat-induced nausea came and went, a sure sign I'd started too hard. I was weary, my energy ebbing and more than ready for a pause.

As Hebden Hey draws closer, one question loops steadily through my mind, growing louder with every step.

Can I really do this?

Hebden Hey | Checkpoint One

I'd aimed to arrive at Hebden Hey just before nightfall. Instead, I roll in at 19:20, two hours ahead of plan. I'm not quite sure whether to feel proud or uneasy. Have I paced this well, or gone out too hard?

For context, it's only two hours slower than my entire Spine Sprint finish in 2023, which ended in Hebden Bridge. Back then, I was broken. Today, I still have 220 miles to go.

Inside the checkpoint, I'm greeted by the warmest possible sight: Mel Sykes. Winter Spine finisher, Peak District running buddy, and now volunteer. She immediately takes me under her wing, helping with my drop bag, filling bottles, mixing Tailwind and appearing, almost magically, with drinks whenever I need them.

Each runner has a single 20kg drop bag that moves from checkpoint to checkpoint along the route. Certain items are mandatory, including a sleeping bag and towel, but the rest is up to us. It's a snapshot of what we think we'll need over the course of the race. Mine is mostly spare kit, warm layers and food.

Finding food on the trail had been one of my biggest pre-race concerns. There are honesty boxes, small shops and cafés along the Pennine Way, but not all cater for vegans. During recce runs, I'd realised my options could be limited, so I decided the safest plan was full self-sufficiency if needed. At each checkpoint, I'll restock my pack with snacks from my drop bag. Anything I find on the route will be a bonus.

I'm not planning to stop for long. It's early, busy and loud and the advice from seasoned Spinners was clear: don't linger at CP1. This is my first real test of checkpoint discipline.

Everything in my drop bag is labelled to minimise decision-making. I charge my watch, change my t-shirt and socks, refill my pack with snacks and add a couple of extra warm layers for the night ahead. Once I leave here, it's 63 miles (100km) to Checkpoint Two.

I take a few minutes to freshen up. Wash my face. Brush my teeth. Change my contact lenses. A medic tapes a small patch of chafing on my back. The tape will still be there at the finish, which tells you everything you need to know about the quality of their work.

Then comes food. Or more accurately, the battle with food.

My stomach, still unsettled, turns at the sight of pasta and crumble, but I know I have to eat. I start small with a plain baked potato and salt. It stays down, so I risk a little vegan pasta. I do my best. It's not much, but it's something.

Around me, seasoned Spinners pile plates high, fuelling up on big, stodgy, calorie-dense meals while chatting loudly about "the last time" or another big race they've done. I sit quietly in the middle of the chaos, picking at my food, acutely aware of how little I'm eating. That familiar pang of imposter syndrome creeps in, whispering that I don't quite belong here, that at some point someone will realise I'm out of my depth.

Before leaving, I pass my first kit check of the race; second, if you count the one at registration. You hand in your drop bag, then volunteers check that all the mandatory kit is in your pack. Each checkpoint checks different items, and without fail, they always seem to be the ones buried right at the very bottom.

Two hours after arriving, a little over my 90-minute target, I'm packed, checked and ready to leave.

It's still light outside.

My body feels tired, but my mind is steady. One day done. One checkpoint behind me. A very long way still to go.

- **Checkpoint 1:** Hebden Hay
- **Distance covered:** 46 miles
- **Arrival time:** 19:23:36, Sunday 15th June
- **Race time:** 11:23:21
- **Time in checkpoint:** 01:56:50



All ready to leave Checkpoint One and head out into the night! ©Mel Sykes

Summer Spine Part II | Hebden Hey to Hardraw

Night One

I leave checkpoint one knowing it's 63 miles to checkpoint two at Hardraw.

Sixty-three miles of self-sufficiency. Sixty-three miles of looking after myself across deserted moorlands, hills and fells.

It's the longest stretch between checkpoints in the entire race. There's a monitoring point roughly 36 miles in, at Malham Tarn, with water, safety and medical support, but nothing more. It isn't a place to rest. It isn't somewhere to linger. It exists simply to check in on us, to make sure we're still moving forward, still safe.

In a slightly strange way, I'm looking forward to it. This feels like the real test. Not just of fitness, but of competence.

Can I navigate 100km alone, through a remote landscape, through the night and into the following day, carrying everything I need and making good decisions when I'm tired, cold and on my own?

It's still light when I leave Hebden Hey, which feels like a gift. I'd expected to step straight into darkness, so this bonus daylight buys me a gentle start to leg two before the headtorch comes out. I'm a confident night runner. I've spent plenty of hours moving through the dark, but tonight I know the balance will shift. Once it gets properly dark, this will be more hiking than running.

The checkpoint sits a mile or so off the Pennine Way, reached by an out-and-back along a narrow country lane. We drop down into checkpoint one and climb straight back out again. Mildly annoying, but also oddly reassuring. Runners arriving as I leave, others leaving as I arrive. A brief brushing of lives before we scatter back into the hills.

Climbing towards Heptonstall Moor, I'm struck by how good I feel. I didn't eat much at the checkpoint, but the rest has done its job. I'd been lower than I wanted to admit going in, mentally frayed, but I leave feeling steadier. Re-anchored.

The early miles across the moor are runnable. Lumpy, but friendly. Wide, open, slightly featureless terrain. It's the section I remember least clearly from my run in March 2024. Back then, the Spine wasn't even on my radar, so I hadn't paid much attention to the details.

And yet, as I move through it now, I'm surprised by how much my body remembers. A bend in the track. A sharp turn. A road crossing. A small stone bridge. A tree I once stopped beside for a snack. Unimportant moments at the time, but fragments that surface quietly as the landscape reveals them.

At around 22:15, I finally concede defeat and switch on my headtorch. I've delayed as long as I can, but the darkness has thickened. A few miles later, just after Walshaw Dean Reservoir, I stop to add another layer. The temperature has dropped sharply with the night, the wind picking up too. Suddenly, it's cold.

There's a steady climb after the reservoir, nothing dramatic, but welcome after the earlier flatness. Part of me knows I should run the flats while I can, but hills offer a legitimate excuse to walk. I pull out my poles for the first time. I've carried them since the start, but avoided using them before Hebden Hay. Useful though they are, I find them awkward when eating, drinking or checking the map on my watch. Still, after a while, the rhythmic tap-tap-tap of the tips on the flagstones becomes soothing, a metronome in the quiet night.

Another layer goes on. I'm now wearing a t-shirt, arm sleeves, fleece and windproof.

Top Withens

I'd earmarked Top Withens as a break point. The ruined farmhouse sits high on the exposed edge of Haworth Moor, famously but incorrectly linked to Wuthering Heights. A small plaque gently corrects the

myth, explaining that while the location may have inspired Brontë, the building itself bears no resemblance to the fictional Earnshaw home.

Last March, I sat here with coffee and cake. Tonight, it's Tailwind and a peanut-butter-and-jam sandwich. Less romantic, but effective.

Before the race, I'd toyed with the idea of using Top Withens as a trail-nap spot, imagining myself tucked behind the ruined walls in my bivvy. Standing here now, exposed to the wind, the idea feels laughable. It's far too cold to linger. Sandwich eaten, I move on quickly.

Somewhere on Ickornshaw Moor, the wind sharpens further, the mist rolls in and the temperature drops again. I pull on my insulated jacket, sealing myself into warmth. Fog hangs thick and low. When I turn slowly in a circle, all I see is my headtorch beam bouncing back at me, visibility shrinking to just a few metres.

The trail becomes vague. Sometimes, no more than a suggestion in the soil, threading between shrubs or sinking into narrow peat channels. My eyes flick constantly between the ground and the map on my watch. I'm grateful that the summer has dried the bogs; most are small, easily skipped. Whilst any stretch of clear flagstones shining back through the mist feels like a blessing, a quiet reassurance that I'm still on track.

Progress is slow, but steady. And oddly, wrapped in fog and darkness, I feel calm. Content. I know I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. I put my headphones in, pop on a podcast, hunker down inside my layers and keep moving.

There's no drama out here. No big story. Just me, alone in the mist, trusting the thin line on my watch and taking the next step... then the next... then the next.

It's somewhere around 3 am when fatigue finally starts to press in. The first real waves of tiredness roll through me. And then, ahead on the hill, a warm golden glow appears. A small beacon of light in the dark.

Just like the Mountain Rescue team at Brun Clough, supporters from a local tri club have set up an unofficial aid station on the outskirts of Cowling. It's not a Spine checkpoint, but it's recognised, allowed and quietly brilliant.

Several runners are already inside when I duck into the tent. I shrug off my pack and sink into a chair. The warmth is instant. Blankets appear. Bacon sandwiches are offered. Mugs of steaming tea are pressed into cold hands. I decline the food, but ask for hot water to make up some oatmeal.

This becomes a ritual over the coming days, my reliable fallback whenever hot water appears. Lightweight to carry, easy to stomach even when nothing else appeals, a dependable hit of carbs and energy. My drop bag holds over twenty small bags of pre-mixed instant oats, pimped up with chia seeds, flaxseed, powdered peanut butter and raisins. Knowing I'd likely find ad-hoc hot water along the way, I always carry a couple of portions with me.

While the oats soak in my thermos mug, I sip a proper coffee. My one small luxury this week. A stash of Taylor's coffee bags, the closest thing to a decent brew this coffee snob is going to get.

We're allowed to stay for a maximum of thirty minutes. As time ticks away, I reorganise my pack, top up bottles, shuffle snacks around, trying not to get too comfortable. The temptation to stay is strong, but eventually I force myself back out into the cold.

The rest has worked. With sunrise not far off, I leave feeling more awake than I have in hours.

Gradually, the moorland softens into farmland. At one gate, a man stands offering a tin of biscuits and a few kind words. I blink hard, convinced I must be hallucinating. Who would be standing on a deserted farm track at this hour, handing out biscuits? It's only days later, when another runner mentions him, that I realise he was real.

The Pennine Way crosses a road and threads through the edges of Cowling. After hours of silence, tarmac and houses feel oddly intrusive. Dawn creeps in and the mist lifts. There's something quietly magical about watching a new day form, especially one you've travelled through the night to meet.



05:15. The joy of a new day!

I expect the light to wake me up. Instead, it does the opposite. As the world brightens, I grow sleepier. I make small navigational errors, nothing dramatic, but enough to irritate me. Missing the best line across a field. Hesitating at junctions. Struggling to reconcile the map on my wrist with the reality in front of me. Minor mistakes that feel huge when you're tired.

I know I need sleep. I just don't want to stop.

Just before Thornton-in-Craven, salvation appears in classic Spine fashion: a farmyard tuck shop. A small shed stocked with drinks, crisps, chocolate and pastries. A Pennine Way institution.



A sign welcomes Spine runners. Several are already inside, rummaging in fridges or dropping coins into the honesty box. I don't need food or drink, but off to the side is an old garden chair. I sit down, set a ten-minute alarm, pull my buff over my eyes and lean back against the wall.

The alarm detonates in the silence. I jolt awake, heart racing. The yard, busy moments earlier, is now completely empty.

My first trail nap.

Gargrave

I reach Gargrave just before 7 am. Perfect timing. The Co-Op opens at seven and I'd marked it as a key resupply point during this big stretch. Before heading to the shop, I duck into the public toilets, mostly to wash my hands and face to try to feel vaguely human again.

Parked outside is the Spine Safety Team (SST). They hand me a cup of ferociously strong black coffee and ask how I'm doing.

Surprisingly, I feel cheerful. I'm about 26 miles into this long section. I've made it through the first night and I'm genuinely looking forward to what comes next. After the dull fields leading into Gargrave, the trail ahead promises Malham Cove, Fountains Fell and Pen-y-Ghent. And with the mist of the night gone, a clear sky hints at actual views.

I sit in the bus shelter alongside a couple of sleeping runners, sipping coffee and sensibly decide to reapply sunscreen. It may be early, but the sun already feels warm. Better now than later.

Inside the supermarket, I spend far too long wandering the aisles in search of something both vegan and appealing. I emerge with bananas, a fruit smoothie and a box of chocolate flapjacks.

Just after seven, I drift back through town, a surprisingly confusing place to navigate compared to misty moorland in the dark, before rejoining the rough, stony paths I much prefer.

I ran this section from Gargrave to Horton-in-Ribblesdale last September, not long after signing up for the race. And as the trail pulls me gently onward, familiarity settles in again.

Malham, Fountains Fell and Pen Y Ghent

The road out of Gargrave climbs gently beneath tall trees before a stile, easy to miss in the hedgerow, drops me into a lush, grassy field. The view opens out, but it's a little underwhelming. Endless fields filled with endless sheep stretching off into the distance. Pretty, yes, just not especially energising at this point in the race. Still, the ground is smooth and runnable, so I jog steadily across it.



Four, five, six, seven fields later, with a few turns thrown in for variety, I cross the fast-flowing River Aire. For the next four miles, the path shadows its meandering channel towards Malham. It's obvious the river has flooded recently; the trail is cracked, rutted and strewn with exposed roots and old debris.



Today, my parents are driving north to Northumberland for their summer holiday, deliberately timed to coincide with me finishing the Spine just over the Scottish border. Their route from Diss in Norfolk includes dinner and a stay with friends in Otley, only a few miles from where I'm running this morning. A few weeks ago, my mum had casually asked where I thought I might be on Monday...

I never told them this, but all morning along the River Aire, I'm scanning for a blue car. Every road in the distance, every bridge, every crossing point. Each time one appears, my heart lifts for a second as I try to make out who's inside.

It's never them.

For the Pennine Way, bar a few minor lumps and bumps, this is a relatively flat stretch and I'm running surprisingly well. Better, if I'm honest, than several other Spinners I pass. Some are barely moving, grimacing with each step. Someone mentions blisters so bad their feet feel like they're on fire.

I always stop for a quick word, but I feel almost guilty for being so cheerful when they're clearly hurting.

That's the nature of this race. We all ride our own waves. I'm cresting one along the Aire while others are stuck somewhere in the troughs. I know, without question, that later today our roles may well reverse. The ebb and flow of the Spine. A rollercoaster in slow motion.

As Malham Village comes into view, I'm still scanning for that blue car, for the familiar shapes of my parents inside it. Malham, a busy tourist hotspot, looks almost pristine. Smooth paths, neatly cut grass, clear water running through the beck, public loos that are clean and fully stocked.

I take full advantage.

It's ridiculous how much joy clean hands can bring. Grimy, sticky fingers are one of my least favourite parts of long days on the trail. A splash of water and a squirt of soap does wonders for both my hygiene and my mood.

I arrive earlier than expected. The café is only just flickering into life. I sit on a bench, shrug off my pack and stretch out my shoulders, savouring the brief sensation of weightlessness. A flapjack, a refill of my soft flasks and a conscious decision not to hang around for coffee.

Large pack back on, I jog out of the village towards Malham Cove, passing groups of day hikers with enviably tiny backpacks.

Malham Cove is one of Yorkshire's greatest hits. A vast, curved limestone amphitheatre, seventy metres high, carved by glacial meltwater thousands of years ago. Today, the waterfall runs underground through a hidden cave system, leaving the cliff face dry, pale and imposing.

From the village, the Pennine Way tracks Malham Beck to the base of the Cove, then shoots straight up the steep, punishing staircase. Roughly 400 steps. About 250 feet of relentless ascent. On tired legs, it's tough.

I know from experience that the only way through this is to commit. Poles are useless here. I stash them, take a breath and go. I pass a few people on the way up, which makes me feel far more hardcore than I probably should, but I also know that if I stop, I won't start again.

At the top, I pause long enough to take in the panoramic view. The valley stretches wide behind me, green and generous. Worth every burning step.

But the next challenge is already waiting.

The limestone pavement sprawls ahead, a fractured mosaic of slabs and deep fissures carved by water over millennia. It looks beautiful until you try to cross it. Every step needs thought. The "path" is more suggestion than instruction.

I still don't know if there's a correct line across it. Last September, I wandered in confused circles for what felt like hours, convinced I must be missing something obvious. I wasn't. Today, at least, I have a vague sense of direction.

Once off the crazy pavement, the trail continues climbing through a rocky, uneven landscape that's impossible to run on. Irritation starts to simmer. I *could* move faster; my legs have the energy, but the terrain won't let me.

A sharp switchback, then the heat of the sun shifts from my back to my face. I squint in its brightness. The path slowly curves left and eventually, grass reappears beneath my feet and with it, my patience. The limestone fades behind me and movement starts to feel fluid again. My mood lifts with the terrain.

Walkers and dogs join the trail. The dogs bound around joyfully and for a moment, I wonder if Sammy, my own pup, is missing me.

Malham Tarn glints to my left, glacial and serene. Despite popular myth, it isn't England's highest lake, but it's still beautiful. The path here is a gift: wide, smooth, forgiving. But the sun is fierce now and the energy I had climbing the Cove begins to drain away.

With no shade, I overheat quickly. I know the Malham monitoring point is close, but I just can't go any further without stopping. I need a moment. I find a sliver of shelter by a fence, slump to the ground and let myself pause.

Just for a minute.

I'm strict with myself. Two minutes, no more. Even so, it takes a firm internal argument to get moving again. One version of me wants to lie down and sleep. The other knows that stopping too long will cost far more than it gives. Thankfully, the sensible voice wins.

Checkpoint 1.5, Malham Tarn, sits tucked into the outbuildings of an old Georgian manor house. It's a safety checkpoint only. Medics, volunteers, water. No drop bags, no food, no beds. A maximum of thirty minutes and then you're back out.

Runners lie sprawled in the shade outside, shoes off, looking as dishevelled as I feel. The heat is taking its toll on everyone.

Inside, the thick stone walls hold the cool. I collapse into a chair, gratefully. With hot water available, I make oatmeal. Odd in the heat, maybe, but exactly what I'm craving. The pimped-up oats and sugary coffee hit the spot.

I drink squash, refill bottles and do the mental maths. Eleven miles to Horton-in-Ribblesdale. "Only" eleven. But it's over Fountains Fell, then up Pen-y-Ghent. Exposed, slow, six-plus hours in the afternoon sun with no shade.

Thirty minutes vanish in a heartbeat. I'm ushered gently back outside, warned about "frisky cows" in the field below and sent on my way. But I feel refreshed. Fed, watered, mind clear again.

Next up: Fountains Fell.

A clearly defined track winds down from the Tarn, blessedly shaded by trees. Skirting Malham Moor, with Fountains Fell looming ahead, I fall into step with Ben. I've been running almost entirely solo, wrapped in my own bubble, but conversation arrives easily. We talk about feet, packs, heat and how we're feeling. I then discover he's a photographer too! Cue the inevitable shift in conversation to cameras, shoots, lenses and the fact that neither of us has taken many photos during the race!

We chat our way up the lower slopes and before I realise it, we're halfway up. The Pennine Way doesn't summit Fountains Fell, but it comes close, making this the highest point since Kinder Scout, nearly eighty miles back. The path is rugged, littered with limestone, exposed and steep in places.

Coal was once mined up here. Deep shafts still gape in the ground, unfenced relics of the past. Last September, in thick mist with visibility down to metres, they terrified me. Today, beneath blue skies, they feel benign.

The company helps. The sun helps. I feel light, almost joyful, as we climb.

Near the top, we spot two familiar figures. Mel and a friend. She waved me off at Hebden Bridge last night and now here she is again, out on the fells, cheering us on. Seeing someone who knows these miles intimately gives me a genuine lift.

We bypass the summit and begin the descent. It's far steeper than the climb, but I let gravity take over, flying down the rocky path in a way that feels borderline reckless but glorious. This is my kind of running: weaving between limestone edges, following the groove, feet tapping out their own rhythm. I hit the tarmac at the bottom feeling strong, so I push on while the momentum is there. Ben eases off behind me.

Pen-y-Ghent stands sharp against the sky ahead. Last September, I could barely see it through the clouds. Today, its profile cut cleanly against the sky, it looks almost inviting.

At 2,277 feet, it's the smallest of the Yorkshire Three Peaks, but it's the only one the Pennine Way climbs.

Back in September, in 40+ mph gusts with near-zero visibility, it was one of the most terrifying things I've done. For seasoned fell runners, it's nothing. For a South London girl clinging to wet rock with the wind sandblasting my face, unable to see the "path", the edge, or even the top, it was huge. And yet I did it and reaching the cairn at the summit gave me a surge of pride I still remember vividly.

Today, I can see exactly what I'm about to climb.

At the foot of the climb, I stash my poles; they'll only get in the way. There's a scattered line of Spinners, hikers and runners ahead. The scramble is chaotic, a jumble of rocks and boulders. I pick a line and haul myself upward, hands on stone, legs burning.

Two girls with an off-lead dog bound past, fresh and confident. They breeze by with big smiles and encouraging words, joking that they're only out for a quick jog. I envy their energy, their confidence and the ease with which they move.

Eventually, the scramble relents and the flagstones appear. I step onto them with relief, legs trembling slightly from the effort.

The summit is busy. I don't linger, instead crossing the wall to begin the descent. Part of me wishes I'd paused to mark the moment.

The first section is pure joy. I bounce down the steps with glee, already imagining myself running all the way to the bottom. Then the path dissolves into loose rock and reality bites. The girls with the dog vanish ahead while I gingerly tiptoe down, kicking protruding rocks and stumbling on tired feet. Frustrated, cautious, half-running, half-sliding, I worry far more about tripping and falling than I'd like to admit.

Horton-in-Ribblesdale greets me with what can only be described as a mini-Spine party outside the public loos. Safety team, runners sprawled on the grass, Catherine among them, feet up, shoes off. We're all clinging to scraps of comfort.

I remember laughter. Easy, delirious giggles. But I couldn't tell you now what any of it was about. What I do remember is the sheer bliss of washing my hands, splashing my face and brushing my teeth with my tiny travel toothbrush. After eighteen hours of sugar, clean teeth feel almost transcendent.

I sit for a while, letting the rest sink in, but that familiar itch to move returns. Late afternoon is creeping in and with fifteen miles to checkpoint two at Hardraw, I want to keep ahead of the night.

After about twenty-five minutes, I shoulder my pack, pop in my headphones and hit play on an audiobook. Poles in hand, I head out again.

Leaving Horton, the skyline is ruled by the Three Peaks. Pen-y-Ghent, Ingleborough, Whernside. Majestic silhouettes against the softening sky. My path is gentle by comparison. Dry stone walls guide the way. No navigation stress, no technical footing. Within minutes, I'm absorbed in the story in my ears, drifting along to the rhythm of the trail.

As the sun drops, the temperature finally eases. I pass Ling Gill, a narrow limestone gorge slicing through the landscape and when my feed alarm sounds, I drop my pack and fold myself into the grassy bank beside it. I've moved away from eating on the go; these hourly snack stops have become tiny rituals, mini rests that break up the miles.

The views are something out of a painting: rolling green fields stitched together with perfect stone walls, dark clusters of woodland in the folds of the hills and far in the distance, the Ribblesdale Viaduct standing proud against the horizon. Beyond that, the Lake District rises like a promise.

I should have taken photos.

As I'm sitting, Matt and Catherine wander past. We've been leapfrogging each other all afternoon. I watch them trot on, then a couple of miles later, I find Matt napping on the side of the path. The ebb and flow of the race... nobody moves in a straight line for long.

I turn right onto the Cam High Road, an impressively grand name for what is, in reality, a rough stony track clinging to the wall line for ten long miles. Once a Roman road linking distant camps, now it's the kind of path that earns a reputation: a steady, soul-stealing drag, shallow enough that you feel you *should* be running, steep enough after 100 miles that walking is all you've got.

It's relentless. There's nowhere to hide, nowhere to distract the mind. Just stone underfoot, stone wall to my side, sky above, mile after mile ticking past far too slowly. This is the sort of terrain that quietly wears you down, not with drama, but with monotony.

Eventually, the Pennine Way veers off the Roman line and back onto the wild moorland trails. But as I've climbed, so too has the wind. By the time I reach the top of Dodds Fell, with the sheer drop down into Snaizholme Beck Valley yawning to my left, the gusts are biting and cold.

I crouch in the shelter of a shallow gateway, rummaging through my pack for extra layers. Wrestling with my windproof is like trying to tame a sail, flapping wildly, threatening to escape my grip. A few minutes later, I stop again to add a fleece. The temperature has plummeted in minutes. One moment I was sweating in a T-shirt, the next I'm shivering in three layers. A sharp reminder of just how quickly the Pennines can change their mood.

The descent toward the small town of Gayle finally delivers a little relief from the wind and the landscape begins to soften. Hawes comes into view, still deceptively distant, but close enough now to stir a flicker of excitement in my chest.

The drop into the valley is gorgeous. Small fields stitched together with stiles and gates, each one home to sheep, tall grasses or little bursts of wildflowers. Handwritten signs nailed to scraps of wood politely ask walkers to stay on the path. It's gentle. Comforting. A tender contrast to the wild, exposed fells I've just crossed.

Golden-hour light spills across the fields, wrapping the whole scene in that warm, honeyed glow that makes England look almost impossibly idyllic. I should have taken a photo. Really, I should have. But instead, I pull out my phone with an inexplicable surge of emotion and call my husband.

I'd told him not to expect any contact until Kirk Yetholm. And yet here I am, wandering towards the heart of Hawes, needing to hear his voice and tell him that I'm okay.

That I'm more than okay, actually.

Thirty minutes later, at 21:13, I walk into Hardraw, checkpoint two. Almost exactly 24 hours after leaving checkpoint one.

In that time, I've travelled 63 miles (100km) and climbed nearly 10,000 feet. Mostly alone. Almost entirely self-sufficient.

This was the section that scared me. The one I thought might undo me. The stretch where I feared my weaknesses would catch up, expose me, swallow me whole.

But I'd done it.

I'd held my nerve, held my pace, held myself together and proved that I was capable. Relief doesn't even begin to cover it.

Hardraw | Checkpoint Two

CP2 is a marquee and a series of tents in a field just outside Hardraw. I walk in. My race number and arrival time are logged. I am allowed to stay for six hours; I must leave by 3:13 tomorrow morning.

I sit and my drop bag is brought over to me. Checkpoint one at Hebden was almost a half-stop; I never planned to stay for long there. Here, though, I intend to use my full six hours to get as much rest as possible.

I rummage in the bag and pull out a crumpled sheet of paper: my checkpoint plan. Put together on the advice of previous Spinners, it's designed to make sure nothing is missed and to prevent unnecessary time-wasting. At first glance, it feels overwhelming and despite the ordered list, I don't know where to start.

My dithering is interrupted by a steaming bowl of vegan chilli and rice. I hesitate, spicy food mid-race doesn't usually appeal, but the first mouthful confirms it's exactly the real food my body needs. I inhale the bowl and ask for seconds.

Behind the main marquee are rows and rows of identical two-person tents. I'm assigned one right in the middle and told it's mine for the next few hours. My drop bag is deposited at the door and I'm left to it. It's dark, so my headtorch goes on as I zip up the canvas door and empty my bag onto the floor.

I unroll my sleeping bag but resist the urge to curl up and sleep immediately. I know how my brain works: everything on the list has to be done first.

Contact lenses out, glasses on.

I plug my watch into a power bank to charge. It's paused to "resume later" while in the checkpoint to turn off GPS, but keep the timer running. I set an alarm on my phone so I don't oversleep and plug that into another power bank. A fresh battery goes into my headtorch. Electronics done.

In the privacy of my tent, I strip off. There's no running water in the field, so I make do with a wet-wipe wash, removing 37 hours' worth of sweat, dirt and grime before pulling on a full set of fresh running kit. A wet-wipe wash has never felt so good.

My dirty clothes are bundled into a bin bag at the bottom of my drop bag. I don't relish discovering those in a few days...

I empty the rubbish from my race pack and refill my snacks, ready for the next section. I pack my final round of peanut butter and jam wraps. A few weeks ago, I ran a small experiment: I made a batch of wraps and left them, foil-wrapped, on the kitchen counter to see how long they'd last. Three days was the answer. I made these in Edale on Saturday afternoon, so, based on my very scientific research, they should still be good until tomorrow night!

My bottles are set aside to refill on the way out. Everything else goes loosely back into my race pack; there's no point packing it properly as it will be checked when I leave.

I repack my drop bag, leaving out only a few basic toiletries for "morning". Only once everything on my list is ticked can my brain finally relax into sleep.

I sleep in my running kit. It feels unnecessary to keep changing. I pull on an extra fleece for warmth and snuggle down into my sleeping bag, pulling the hood right over my head so only my nose sticks out into the cold night air. I chose not to bring a sleeping mat to save weight and as I wriggle around trying to find a comfortable spot among the lumps and bumps beneath the tent, I wonder if I'll regret that decision.

Exhaustion outweighs discomfort and I drop quickly into a fitful sleep, only to be woken by a chorus of more than twenty flysheets flapping violently in the strong wind. The noise is so loud it sounds like thunder or distant artillery fire, and I briefly fear a storm is brewing right overhead.

I sleep, but it's neither deep nor restorative. I'd set my alarm for three hours, hoping for two 90-minute sleep cycles, but I barely make it to one. Once I'm awake and realise no more sleep is coming, I decide I may as well get up and get moving.

I ask for a small bowl of warm water to wash my hands so I can put in a fresh pair of contact lenses. With no mirror, I use the selfie mode on my phone. A slightly dishevelled face stares back at me, eyes tired and heavy.

Coffee and more oatmeal. I see the medic to get some extra tape applied to the hotspot on my back. Another coffee. I sit at the front of the marquee, watching the comings and goings, the quiet hustle and bustle around me.

The marquee is lively even in the early hours: runners arriving, runners leaving. Some are focused and composed; others stare vacantly into space. Volunteers flit around with drinks and food, helping with kit. Matt, who I crossed paths with on Cam High Road, gets shouted at as he leaves it late, with just one minute to exit the CP before his time runs out...

I savour my final coffee and signal to a volunteer that I'm ready for kit check.

It's time.

- **Checkpoint 2.** Harddraw.
- **Distance covered:** 109 miles.
- **Arrival time:** 21:13, Monday 16th June.
- **Race time:** 37:13:08
- **Time in the checkpoint:** 05:51:18

Summer Spine Part III | Harddraw to Middleton

Chasing Sunrise: Great Shunner Fell

Kit check passed, at 3:04 am, I step out of the marquee and back onto the trail. Daybreak is close. I can feel it.

I'm excited. The sleep, though short, has refreshed me and I'm looking forward to the climb up Great Shunner Fell. At 2,300 feet, it's the third-highest summit in the Yorkshire Dales.

I remember the sense of awe I felt here twelve months ago. Those views are etched into my memory, acting as both an incentive and a magnet drawing me upward. I want to watch the sun rise from the summit and I'm convinced I've timed my departure perfectly.

But the fell has other ideas.

Just like that first morning back in Edale, the cloud hangs heavy and the clag is thick. It becomes apparent very quickly that there will be no spectacular sunrise today.

Visibility along the rough farm track out of Harddraw is poor. The path, hemmed in by dry stone walls, is well trodden and relatively easy underfoot, climbing steadily on a gentle gradient. After a couple of miles of continuous ascent, it passes through a gate and leaves the cultivated land behind. Instantly, the landscape feels wilder, more remote.

Beyond the shelter of the walls, the wind hits hard, whipping from all directions. I battle to stay upright. In the early morning gloom, I can barely see the path ahead, let alone the beauty of the Wensleydale landscape I know lies around me.

The stony farm track gives way to a winding ribbon of Pennine Way flagstones, guiding me across boggy moorland. They're a welcome navigational aid when there's little else to orientate by, just the occasional fingerpost emerging from the mist.

When the slabs are plentiful, I move well. When they abruptly stop, progress slows. Rocks of every size litter the ground, faint grooves worn into the dirt offering the only indication of the path's course. There's no straight line. It zigzags and weaves around bogs: a slab here, a rock there, a small diversion to the right, then back again.

The wind never relents. It's almost five miles of continuous climbing from Harddraw to the summit and without the promise of a sunrise reward, the ascent begins to drag. And drag. I have no sense of how far I have left to go. I can't see the top. My earlier buoyancy is steadily stripped away, carried off on the wind.

Then, almost without warning, the summit appears. A large stone windbreak emerges from the clag, marking the highest point and offering some blessed shelter. It would also provide an excellent vantage point, if there were anything to see. Regardless, I sit for a few minutes on the stone bench, savouring the stillness and the sudden calm.

In clear conditions, this summit offers sweeping views across the North Pennines, the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales.

Today, I see nothing.

I don't linger. After the long drag up, there's a long way down, though it's far from straightforward. The path is rough and rutted, broken by missing slabs, small boggy patches and a couple of stream crossings. But as I descend, the cloud begins to thin and lift and slowly, the landscape reveals itself. Emerging views of classic English countryside unfold below.

The trail merges into a stony farm track, dropping between stone-walled fields into Thwaite, a tiny North Yorkshire village. Here, I'm greeted by two cheerful SST volunteers and an unexpected water top-up.

From here, it's just three miles to the next mental landmark on my list: Keld.

An initial steep climb across open fields offers a fabulous view back towards Thwaite, before merging into an undulating, narrow path. To my left, a sheer rock face; to my right, a steep drop down to the river. At times, it feels like I'm skirting the edge of a landslide. The trail is a narrow groove between lush green ferns, strewn with loose rocks and stones seemingly placed with the sole intention of tripping you up.

The name Keld comes from the Norse word for "spring" or "well", and the area is famous for its abundance of waterfalls. It's also the meeting point of the Pennine Way and the Coast to Coast Walk, now a National Trail.

The Pennine Way doesn't quite enter the village itself, although in the winter race, a diversion to the village hall to sleep is popular. Instead, it crosses the River Swale and climbs alongside one of the waterfalls before skirting past the settlement.

From here, it's back onto moorland and what feels like a long trudge towards Tan Hill, at 1,732 feet above sea level, the highest pub in Great Britain. I'm still running reasonably well. The section to Keld was my kind of trail; rocky, narrow, weaving singletrack, almost like a coastal path. On 120-mile legs, I perhaps didn't enjoy it quite as much as usual, but I still far prefer it to long, monotonous moorland stretches.

By comparison, the route from Keld to Tan Hill is very runnable. It rises gently with no major climbs or technical obstacles. On fresh, springy legs, I could cover the four miles quickly. My legs are neither fresh nor springy, but I still manage to run a fair amount, even the final small climb.

I suspect, even at eight in the morning, it's the draw of the pub.

Tan Hill's remoteness is striking. Perched high on the moor, almost on a county border, it's defined by its isolation. There has been an inn here since the 16th century serving packhorse routes. The current building dates back to the 17th century and was originally used by workers from the surrounding coal pits. At that time, it was encircled by miners' cottages, but when the mines closed in the 1920s, the cottages were demolished, leaving the pub the only building for miles in every direction.

The pub's function room is open for Spinners. Barrels of water line the bar; there's a kettle and a small selection of snacks for sale. The room, usually home to weddings, bands and the roar of comedians, is today entertaining tired and dishevelled runners. Runners sprawl around tables and shoes litter the floor whilst the safety team drifts through, quietly checking on us. Someone is snoring on the stage.

I stay just long enough for another bowl of oatmeal and a proper coffee.

On leaving, I'm warned about a dangerous sinkhole that's appeared in the moorland a few hundred metres beyond the pub. Unwilling to risk someone accidentally falling in, the safety team have marked a safe route around it with red flags. They also suggest keeping goggles close to hand; the wind, they say, is fierce.

I step back out onto the moor with slight apprehension, bracing myself for what's next.

Grey Clouds

Leaving Tan Hill, the foreboding grey clouds hanging low over the moorland look angry, threatening and ominous. The wind is fierce (though not quite goggle-wearing fierce...), amplifying the exposed ruggedness of the terrain. An untidy, wild mixture of heather, tussocky grass and cottongrass thrashes violently in the gale, offering no shelter at all from the elements gathering above.

I carefully follow the red flags marking a safe route around the sinkhole, then push on, eyes fixed on the white-topped marker posts that guide the way across the vast, open moor.

The Pennine Way traces the meandering line of Frumming Beck, its dark stream carving a deep groove through the peat. Navigation is easier than I remember from last summer, but I still have to choose my steps carefully. Despite the dry season, the path is prone to vanishing into small patches of bog. I can only imagine how utterly soul-destroying this stretch must be in wet, wintry conditions. Sections of boardwalk appear sporadically, seemingly at random. Sometimes it's there. Sometimes it isn't.

A brief, half-hearted rain shower, not worthy of the waterproof, breaks my stride as I pause to admire a spectacular rainbow stretching from one side of the moor to the other.

Beauty in the bleakness. Worthy of a photo and one of those quietly special Spine moments.



With wide-open vistas and unobstructed views across the desolately flat moorland, I'm suddenly more aware of the other runners around me than I have been for hours. As I cross paths with several, the trail begins to feel busy. It isn't, of course, but after so much solitude, even a handful of people feels like a crowd. There's comfort in knowing I'm not alone out here, but even after 120 miles, seeing other runners stirs my competitive instincts.

Feeling good and running well after the break at Tan Hill, I start overtaking a few people.

This will come back to bite me.

Just before Frumming Beck meets Sleightholme Beck, the indistinct moorland path gives way to a hardcore stony track, making the going marginally easier. I pause on the bridge to apply sunscreen to my face and arms, but for some reason, not my legs. The earlier menacing clouds have blown through, replaced by blue skies and a blazing sun.

The moorland had offered no shelter from wind and rain; now it provides no shade from the heat either. I left Tan Hill around 9 am. It's now late morning and just like yesterday, the temperature is climbing fast.

I keep moving, trying to capitalise on the residual Tan Hill energy, but the track soon begins to feel monotonous.

A farmyard offers a brief distraction. Running past small cottages, I peer nosily through open doorways, wondering what it would be like to live somewhere so remote, so isolated. The path drops gently towards the River Greta and crosses God's Bridge, a natural limestone formation and 'Site of Special Scientific Interest'. I'll admit, though, it doesn't hold much interest for me. I'm wilting in the heat and far more concerned with finding somewhere cool to sit.

Just beyond the subway beneath the A66, I find a patch of shade, the first I've seen for many, many miles. With traffic thundering overhead, it's far from idyllic, but I don't care. I throw my pack down, savouring the sudden weightlessness, strip off the last of my warm layers and reapply sunscreen, remembering my legs this time. I sit for ten minutes or so. (I didn't realise it at the time, but I stopped at almost the exact halfway point of the Pennine Way.)

While I'm resting, several of the runners I overtook earlier pass me back. I don't like this. I know it doesn't really matter; it's just the ebb and flow of the race, but the discomfort I feel at being overtaken is a stark reminder of my inner competitiveness. No matter how hard I try to suppress it, I **am** competitive. And being overtaken, even when it's unlikely to affect the outcome of the race, still stings.

I pick up my pack, but struggle to get going again. Somewhere over the past twelve hours, my lower back has become increasingly painful. I don't remember exactly when it started, maybe after Hardraw, maybe before. I'm prone to an anterior pelvic tilt, which can cause lower-back issues. I've worked hard on my strength over the last few years and it's been a long time since it's troubled me like this. Until now. At the worst possible moment. I take a couple of paracetamol, hoping to dull the pain, or at least distract myself from it.

(As an aside, if you look at photos from the latter stages of the race, you'll notice how rounded my back becomes and how poor my posture looks. I don't know whether that was the cause or the effect, but either way, it's something I need to address.)

Whilst ambling up the gentle climb to Cotherstone Moor, I realise I was a little too quick with the sunscreen.

Grey clouds are rolling back in at speed, the sky darkening ominously. My mood sinks with the light, disappearing along with the sunshine. I pull on my waterproof just as the heavens open. Big, fat raindrops, heavy with negativity, pelt down as I tumble headlong into a deep, dark hole.

I hurt. Splish, splash...

I'm tired. Splish, splash...

I feel sick. Splish, splash...

This is hard. Splish, splash...

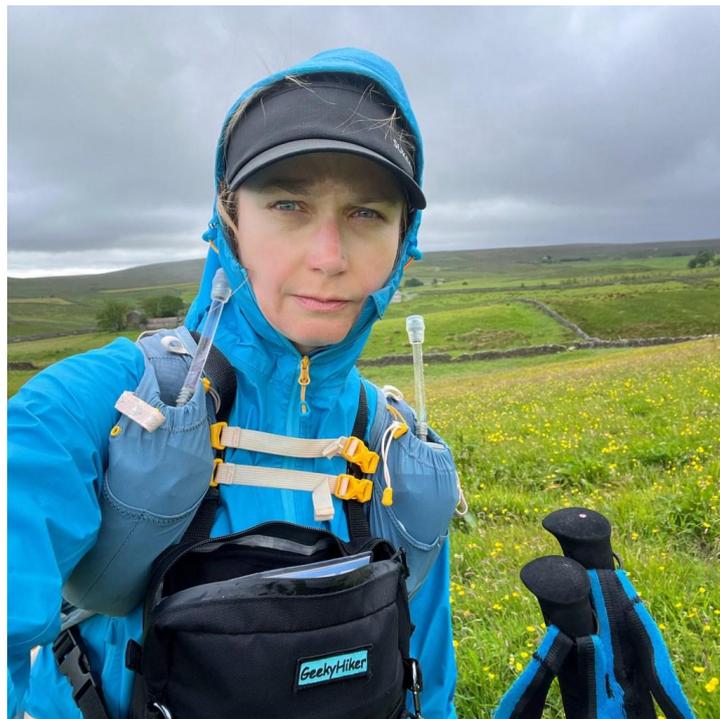
I can't do this. Splish, splash...

I have fallen into a pit of despair. I don't want to do this.

But I have no choice.

I can't stop. I have to keep moving.

I know Clove Lodge isn't far now and it becomes my next mental marker. Get to Clove Lodge. I can stop. Sit down. Have a coffee. Eat some oatmeal. Reset.



I decided to take a selfie of my mood... I guess I wanted to capture the bad as well as the good.

Clove Lodge is a farm sitting directly on the Pennine Way; the trail runs straight through the yard and past the front door. It's become an iconic haven for walkers and Spine runners alike. A few years ago, the owners converted one of their barns into an honesty café, stocked with snacks, drinks and basic comforts for those passing through.

There's a tap for refilling bottles, a kettle for hot drinks and even a couple of mattresses for weary travellers. As I arrive, a few Spinners are already making use of them. It's busy, seven or eight runners clearly had the same idea during the storm, along with a very talkative non-Spinner heading north to south, who seems rather fond of the sound of his own voice.

There are bananas on the table, so I grab one to go with my oatmeal, along with a can of Coke, dropping a few coins into the honesty box. There's plenty of food available, although sadly, very little of it is vegan.

I sit quietly for fifteen minutes or so, eating and drinking. My mood is still heavy, but nourishment lifts it slightly. It's eight miles from here to checkpoint three, just past Middleton-in-Teesdale. When I get there, I can rest properly. I can eat properly. And I can, hopefully, sleep.

I leave Clove Lodge still wearing my waterproof, even though the rain has eased. A gentle descent leads towards Blackton Reservoir and past Hannah's Meadow. Once belonging to Hannah Hauxwell, the Yorkshire shepherdess who became known in the 1970s for living here without running water or electricity.

The meadow has never been treated with fertilisers or pesticides; as a result, it's now a haven for rare species and protected by the Durham Wildlife Trust.

From Hannah's Meadow, the route dissolves into a series of nondescript, undulating miles. Moorland. Fields. Sheep. More fields. More sheep. Up. Down. Gradual climbs that are just slightly too steep to run. With no major landmarks, the miles drag. It becomes tedious. I'm fed up. I'm grumpy. I'm in a deeper, darker hole than I was before Clove Lodge.

Then my right knee starts to hurt.

My back has eased, but now it's my knee. It's genuinely painful and running becomes harder by the minute. I fixate on it, catastrophising. I replay the day, searching for a cause. I haven't fallen. I haven't twisted it. I haven't done anything.

And yet it hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It consumes everything.

I reach the outskirts of Middleton. I know the checkpoint lies a deceptive two and a half miles beyond the town. Passing the campsite where Rel and I stayed last summer briefly lifts my mood, but the pain drags it straight back down again.

The path skirts the town centre and follows the River Tees. It's relatively flat and I convince myself I'll reach the checkpoint faster if I run. So I do, despite the pain.

It's a beautiful stretch of trail. The river sparkles invitingly to my right; lush green fields and wildflowers sway to my left. But I barely notice any of the beauty. Head down. Blinkers on. Teeth clenched. I need the checkpoint. I need rest. I need my knee to stop hurting.

As I finally spot the Spine flags fluttering in the distance, I cross paths with Catherine again. We walk the final five hundred metres together, chatting as we go. She's the first person I've spoken to properly since Tan Hill, however many hours ago that was. Those few minutes of conversation lift me and I find myself walking into the checkpoint with a bounce I thought I'd left somewhere back on Sleightholme Moor.

I wonder what the past eight miles might have felt like if I hadn't been quite so stubbornly solo.



Caught by a Spine photographer walking with Catherine into the checkpoint.

Low Way Farm, Middleton | Checkpoint Three

Middleton checkpoint, housed at Low Way Farm, is once again a collection of tents pitched in a field, with the main dining area set up in one of the small farm buildings.

The room is cramped: four long tables with benches running along either side, runners slumped wearily into every available corner. Drop bags in varying states of disarray are strewn across the floor, while volunteers drift in and out carrying steaming plates of food and endless cups of tea.

Hungry, I scan the menu.

Vegan curry and rice.

My stomach turns. As hungry as I am, I honestly can't think of anything worse to eat in the middle of a very long run than curry. I ask if there's an alternative and am offered breakfast instead: beans on toast.

Much better.

As I work my way through the first of several portions, I speak to one of the medics about my knee. It's really worrying me. She can't see or feel anything obviously amiss, so she suggests that I rest, get some sleep and check back in with her before I leave.

With my appetite satisfied, I'm guided to a tent behind the farm building. There is the option of a proper bed in the shared bunk room upstairs, but you're not allowed to take your drop bag up with you.

And I want my drop bag.

I might sleep better in a bunk than in a tent, but there's a fine balance between physical rest and mental rest. For my mind to settle, I need my drop bag. I need to work through my task list. I need to tick things off. I need to know that I'm physically ready to head back out onto the trail, because if my mind is anxious, my body won't rest.

Just like at Hardraw, I methodically work through the list. Electronics on charge. Snacks refilled. Freshen up.

Only this time, there are proper toilets.

And running water.

They're not exactly luxurious, essentially a dusty brick shed around the back of the farm building with the smallest of hand basins and the dimmest of lights. In a trickle of tepid water, I manage my first proper wash since Sunday morning. I scrub away layers of grime, dust, mud, sweat and sticky sunscreen residue.

It feels glorious.

Clean again, I pull on a full set of fresh kit. Everything from underwear and socks to shorts and T-shirt. The simple joy of feeling clean(ish). I head back to my tent, repack my drop bag, check the charge on my electronics and tick off the last remaining tasks.

My mind finally settles.

Now I can rest.

It's late afternoon. The sun has warmed the tent and I don't need my sleeping bag. I unzip it to lie on and drowsily snuggle down, ready for sleep.

Only the sheep have other ideas.

I don't know whether they're protesting at the tents in their field or noisily reminding the farmer that it's dinnertime, but the buggers do not stop bleating. It's loud. It's disruptive. And bar (pun intended) an unsettled half-hour or so, it ruins any chance of proper sleep.

After about an hour of tossing and turning, I accept defeat. There's no point just lying here. I clear the tent, shoving my sleeping bag and last few bits back into my drop bag and wander back to the dining room.

I'm hungry again.

Over two more rounds of beans on toast, the medics reassess my knee. It still hurts. There's some inflammation, but little else to go on. They tape it for extra support and give me codeine, a stronger painkiller than the paracetamol I've been relying on. While my knee has now taken centre stage in the pain stakes, my back is still sore. I tried stretching it out in the tent, with little success.

One hundred and forty-three miles in, I start to worry that my body might be giving up on me.

Drop bag deposited, I sail through kit check and take a few minutes to phone the husband whilst I mentally prepare for the next section. What lies ahead is possibly my favourite part of the entire Pennine Way, but it's also one of the most technical and demanding. I'd hoped to tackle it in daylight.

It's just gone 9 pm. There are 90 minutes of daylight before I head into night three.

- **Checkpoint 3.** Low Way (Middleton).
- **Distance covered:** 143 miles
- **Arrival time:** 16:24:12, Tuesday 17th June
- **Race time:** 56:23:57
- **Time in checkpoint:** 04:50:09

Summer Spine Part IV | Middleton to Alston

Waterfalls

As I'm about to leave, Ben from Fountains Fell is being kit checked. We catch each other's eye and almost simultaneously ask if we fancy buddying up for the next section.

A weight quietly lifts.

As independent and self-sufficient as I am, I've been quietly worrying about tackling Falcon Clints and the scramble up Cauldron Snout alone, in the dark. Not wanting to sound weak, I hadn't voiced my worry to anyone, except on the phone to the husband just minutes earlier. I could tell the conversation unsettled him more than it did me, so as Ben finishes his kit check, I send him a quick message to share my revised plan.

Ben and I set off together, easily picking up the conversation from where we'd left it at the foot of Pen-y-Ghent. He hasn't been on this section of the Pennine Way before. I have and I know what lies ahead. It was the promise of this stretch that pulled me through those painful miles into Middleton.

The path meanders alongside the River Tees, just as it did before the checkpoint. We chat for the first mile or so, about photography, work, clients and the race. It's natural, unforced. Ben pauses a couple of times to update his Instagram Stories, something I've consciously chosen not to do.

Before the race, I made a deliberate decision to disengage completely from social media. No Instagram. No Facebook. No posts. No stories. No WhatsApp groups. Nothing. I picked up one or two messages during the race. Everything else was ignored. Cut off from the outside world, I found a quiet clarity I hadn't realised I needed.

The going is easy and we're running well. This stretch of the Pennine Way is unusually flat, following the River Tees as it forms part of the boundary between counties. To our left, verges are awash with lush grasses, wildflowers and sheep. Fields rise gently towards distant hills, broken only by the occasional stone farm building. To our right, the river rushes past, wide and fast, its surface dark and restless, flanked by pockets of woodland.

We pass a sculpture of two life-sized stone sheep perched on a dry stone wall. "The Sheep", by local artist Keith Alexander, stand sentinel over the path, as if quietly judging those who pass beneath them.

I hear Low Force before I see it. A low, constant thunder carried on the air. The first and perhaps least dramatic of the waterfalls along this stretch of the Tees, it still demands attention. We pause as the river spills over the Whin Sill, folding itself into white water and spray. At eighteen feet high, it's only a prelude.

A mile further on, the sound deepens, grows heavier, until it vibrates in my chest. High Force reveals itself suddenly, England's most powerful waterfall plunging over an unbroken seventy-foot drop. The volume is staggering. The water doesn't fall so much as hurl itself into the gorge below, relentless, unstoppable.

The force of it is mesmerising.

Over time, it's carved a narrow, dramatic chasm, the rock walls polished and gouged by centuries of erosion. It's three days before the longest day of the year and just after 10 pm, yet there's still enough light to see by. I guide Ben a few metres off the path to a small natural platform worn smooth by countless feet.

This is the spot.

We stand there in silence, watching the water crash into the pool below, mist rising into the cooling evening air. The noise fills everything, leaving no room for thought. I take out my phone, knowing full well it won't do the moment justice, but some things need capturing anyway.



High Force

Reluctantly, we move on.

Upstream, the river narrows and calms, its fury temporarily spent. The path pulls away from the water to climb the first proper hill of the section. Rough and rocky, it feels like a return to the Pennine Way I know, a reminder that this gentler interlude was always going to be brief.

By 10:30 pm, we concede it's time for head torches. I add another layer too, conscious that while the days are scorchingly hot, the nights cool quickly. I'm heading into night three on the Pennine Way.

After a few rises and dips across fields and meadows, the path crosses the river and follows Harwood Beck, crossing Windybank Pasture with its web of small springs. Boardwalks and flagstones guide us across streams as the path angles back towards the Tees, Falcon Clints looming ahead, dark and imposing.

Falcon Clints is a gorge carved deep into the landscape, towering rock faces rising sharply above the river. When I say path, I use the word loosely. Any trail that once existed has long since been swallowed by landslides, rockfall and scree.

This section was hard in daylight last summer. Now, at just past midnight, it's pitch black. And aside from our head torches, completely dark.

We move from boulder to boulder, each step deliberate, each foot placement considered. One mistake here would be serious. The river runs close, sometimes alarmingly so, its presence sensed more than seen. I stash my poles, preferring my hands free to haul myself over the boulders. This isn't running. It's barely walking. It's wild, exhilarating, heart-beatingly terrifying and exactly the kind of adventure I came here for.

I'm grateful for Ben's company. A fortuitous pairing. Away from running, he climbs and moves confidently across the rocks. He guides me through a particularly awkward section, calmly pointing out which rocks to trust.

It takes over an hour to cover barely a mile before we reach the foot of Cauldron Snout. I hear it first. A deep, thunderous roar tears through the stillness of the night.

Then the path turns and it's suddenly there. An avalanche of water cascading down the hillside, fed by Cow Green Reservoir, spilling over the dam and crashing into the river below. In daylight, it's impressive. In darkness, lit only by our head torches, it's hypnotic.

Cauldron Snout isn't about height. It's about scale and power. A relentless series of drops tumbling around two hundred feet over six hundred feet of rock. Not one waterfall, but many, stacked one upon another, the water never resting.

A heady mix of fear, excitement, trepidation and adrenaline surges through me. The Pennine Way doesn't skirt around Cauldron Snout.

It climbs it.

This is a four-point-of-contact scramble. Hands and feet, hauling myself up wet, slick rock as the water thunders just metres to my left. The noise is overwhelming, drowning out everything else. Spray coats the stone, making each move deliberate, cautious. I focus.

Right hand.

Left hand.

Right foot.

Left foot.

Pull.

Partway up, I stop and turn to look back. The sight stops me cold. A grainy photo doesn't come close to capturing it, but I take one anyway.

This is a Spine moment. One that will stay with me forever. Scrambling up the side of a roaring waterfall in the dead of night, guided only by the narrow beam of light ahead of me.



Beyond Cauldron Snout, the trail eases into a long gravel drag. Technically easy. Perfectly runnable. Just not now. Not after 150 miles.

The challenge shifts. Without technical ground to keep us alert, staying awake becomes the battle. Neither of us has slept more than a couple of hours since the start. Conversation fades. All energy is focused on forward motion and the only sound is the tap of poles on gravel. The night air bites and I add a fourth layer, double hoods, insulated gloves, still stubbornly in shorts.

At the Spine Starlink point, a temporary lifeline of connectivity, we pause, as instructed, to check messages. After several miles in the wilderness over Cauldron Snout, with no phone reception and no trackers, it's a quiet reminder that someone at Spine HQ is checking up on us. Even out here, in the dark, we're not entirely alone.

We push on. Keeping my eyes open is an effort now; I'm quite literally falling asleep on my feet. Without the intensity of the scramble to keep me alert, the tiredness creeps in, heavy and insistent. The gravel track eventually gives way once more to rough, rocky grassland as we begin the descent towards Maize Beck. We left the River Tees back at Cauldron Snout and its absence is felt, the landscape suddenly more open, less defined.

Underfoot, the ground is squelchy, not muddy, but unmistakably wet. Each step sinks just enough to demand attention, just enough to slow progress. I'm grateful for my waterproof socks, a small comfort that feels disproportionately important in this moment.

High Cup Nick, the next marker on my mental checklist, should be a highlight. Instead, it's a quiet anticlimax. As we approach, there's a faint wash of orange light smudged across the horizon behind us, the promise of dawn edging closer. But we're too early. It's still too dark to see anything properly.

Glacial in origin, High Cup Nick is a dramatic geological formation at the head of High Cup Gill, carved from the same Whin Sill as Low Force and High Force. An amphitheatre-shaped valley, vast and sculpted, the view is iconic.

In daylight.

Now, it's just an idea. A shape hinted at rather than revealed. I don't even bother attempting a photo.

The descent from High Cup Nick to Dufton is rough and unforgiving, a jumbled chaos of rocks of every size, remnants of the old quarry above, broken up by small streams tumbling towards the beck on the valley floor. There's no rhythm to it, no easy flow, just careful foot placement and tired legs doing their best to cooperate.

Markers instruct us to keep right, though even in the half-light of early dawn it's obvious why. To our left, the ground falls away sharply, dropping hundreds of feet. Cairns dot the route as reassurance more than necessity, the path so well worn that losing it would be difficult even in our sleep-deprived state.

Dropping down from Dod Hill, the sun finally lifts itself above the horizon behind us as the track merges onto tarmac. The sudden firmness underfoot offers brief relief to battered feet. After seeing no one since leaving CP3, we begin to cross paths with other Spinners, disoriented, dishevelled and equally hollow-eyed, all shuffling towards Dufton with the same singular purpose.

The night is finally behind us. It's time for a rest.

Dufton

There is *nothing* in Dufton. No obvious reason for the surge of elation I feel as I enter the village. It's somewhere around six in the morning. The café and pub won't open for hours. There are no shops, nowhere to stock up on supplies, no checkpoint, nothing.

Nothing, that is, apart from the 24-hour public toilets, a tap and a covered bus shelter.

The Safety Team are waiting outside the shelter. A couple of runners are already camped out on the bench inside, and the SST have managed to squeeze in a few extra camping chairs. Ben and I claim one each as someone phones HQ with our race numbers to let them know we're stopping for a rest.

I am so tired that I don't even bother getting my bivvy out. Instead, I unroll my bright orange emergency foil poncho, pull it over my head and curl up inside.

Sleep hits me immediately.

I say sleep hits me immediately. It does, but not for long. It's not comforting sleep, nor is it restorative. I drift in and out of consciousness, dropping off and then jolting awake, momentarily unsure where I am or what I'm doing. Again. And again. And again.

I lose all sense of time. It feels like I've been huddled in that bus shelter for hours (post-race data tells a different story: less than two hours in the Dufton area), and I become convinced it's time to move on. I ask Ben if he's coming with me. He is.

While he pulls his shoes back on and packs away his bivvy, I head to the public toilets to freshen up. I wash my hands, rinse my face and clean my teeth. It almost feels like waking up in the morning and getting ready for the day ahead!

Dufton, a pretty Cumbrian village with a population of only a couple of hundred, is still asleep as we wander through. It takes time to coax my legs back into motion. Thankfully, my knee seems to have held up over the technical ground; in fact, it didn't bother me at all. Without the tape, I might even have forgotten about it entirely.



Ben and I ready to leave Dufton

It's roughly 20 miles to the next checkpoint at Alston.

But first, we have to conquer Cross Fell.

Knock, Great Dun, Little Dun and Cross Fell

Leaving Dufton is essentially one long climb. Around eight continuous miles of ascent to reach the highest point on the Pennine Way: Cross Fell. Before that, there are three other summits to contend with: Knock Fell, Great Dun Fell and Little Dun Fell.

We turn onto a gravel track, dry stone walls hemming it in on both sides as it threads through hedge-lined fields. It's an old miners' route, once used by men heading up to the small workings on the fells ahead. The mines are long gone now, leaving only the line of the track and a quiet sense of history beneath our feet.

The ground is rough and while initially nothing is aggressively steep, the climb is relentless. The path rises steadily, never offering any real respite. No drama. No flat sections. Just up.

I find a rhythm, leaning into my poles and pushing forward. It's not fast, it certainly isn't running, but it feels controlled and sustainable. That matters more now. As the day begins to warm, I shed my jacket and warm layers. I've lost any real sense of time, but the light has shifted and the chill of the night is finally lifting.

We pass through a farmyard that feels like the last outpost of civilisation. A final doorway before the hills close in. Beyond here, the Pennine Way between Dufton and Garrigill is perhaps the most remote stretch of the entire route.

Knock Pike rises to our left, Dufton Pike to our right, both lifting sharply from the land like pyramids. We cross a ford and clamber over a stile, leaving the gravel track behind. From here on, it's classic Pennine terrain: rough, open grassland scattered with rocks, wild and untamed.

Streams and small rivers tumble down the hillside, carving steep little gorges into the earth. The gradient steepens and Knock Fell looms ahead. My eyes trace the path as it zigzags upwards, cairns marking the way. I watch the tiny figures of our fellow runners ahead inch their way skyward.

With his climbing and hill experience, Ben starts to pull away. Five metres. Ten. Twenty. A hundred.

At first, I try to stay with him. I've appreciated the company over the past twelve hours or so. It's easier to keep moving when someone else is there, sharing the silence. But it quickly becomes clear that I'm working too hard. My heart rate, low and steady for days, now spikes. My legs burn. My breathing turns heavy and laboured. I'm not just uncomfortable, I'm on the edge of tipping over.

My mind drifts back to advice I received from a previous winter Spine finisher: run your own race. Focus on yourself. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing.

It's simple advice, but it's surprisingly hard to follow.

I let Ben go. I watch him disappear up the hill until he becomes just another small figure moving steadily towards the skyline.

It's back to me, myself and I.

I dial the effort back to something more manageable. My heart rate settles. My legs begin to feel like they belong to me again. I acknowledge how hard this is. Really bloody hard. The climb feels endless and simply continuing to move forward takes everything I have. There's no spare capacity. No surplus strength. Just enough.

As I've done throughout the race, I set myself a mental marker. If I can just reach Knock Old Man, I'll allow myself a rest. Knock Old Man is a distinctive, man-shaped stone cairn just below the summit of Knock Fell, the first of the four major fells. He stands there like a silent sentinel, waiting.

But the wind at the top has other ideas.

I try to shelter behind the cairn, but it's bitterly cold and the wind cuts straight through me, slicing through sweat-damp layers. Stopping isn't an option. After only a couple of minutes, fingers stiffening and core temperature already dropping, I'm forced to keep moving.

The wind stays with me as I cross Knock Fell and continue to Great Dun Fell, Little Dun Fell and finally, Cross Fell. Wind is not unusual here; I should have expected it.

This area has a uniquely harsh microclimate, often described as subarctic due to its altitude and exposure. Cross Fell is home to England's only named wind: the Helm Wind, a powerful, cold north-easterly funnelled and amplified by the surrounding topography. It feels alive up here, as though the hill itself is pushing back.

After the struggle of Knock Fell, I start to move well again. Something clicks back into place. I make it a non-negotiable to run the flagstone paths linking the fells and for the most part, I do. It's a small act of defiance. Beyond the slabs, the moorland is exposed and saturated, boggy even in the height of summer. I dread to imagine what this place is like in the depths of winter.

Cross Fell is iconic and I understand the significance of this part of the Pennine Way. I consciously try to take it all in. To absorb the sights, the sounds, the atmosphere. To imprint it somewhere permanent. But there is no great revelation. No surge of emotion. No cinematic moment.

I simply keep moving.

Eventually, I reach the summit of Cross Fell, the highest point in the Pennines. At the top stands an elaborate stone wind shelter, divided into quadrants. Several other Spinners are already hunkered down in the one corner that offers protection from the gale. I join them.

The difference behind the wall is immediate and astonishing. Silence. Stillness. Calm. Quiet. Relief. For the first time in hours, I am not bracing against anything.

I allow myself a few precious minutes to sit, to breathe, to exist without forward motion, before beginning the long descent to Garrigill and towards Checkpoint Four in Alston.

Greg's (no, not that Gregg's...)

Greg's Hut, originally a cottage built to serve the local lead mines, now stands as a mountain bothy about a mile below the summit of Cross Fell. It's a simple stone shelter: a raised sleeping platform, a few chairs, a table and a fireplace that offers weary walkers a place to pause and regroup on the Pennine Way.

It hasn't been long since I sheltered behind the wall on Cross Fell itself, but that stop wasn't particularly restful. Crouching in the cold, bracing against the wind, barely counts as recovery. So when I reach Greg's Hut, I decide to stop again.

Someone is just leaving. Once he goes, I have the place to myself.

I slide my pack off and sit on the wooden platform. Inside, it's deliciously cool. The thick stone walls hold the heat of the day at bay; I imagine how welcome the iron stove must feel in winter. I set my alarm as a safety net, close my eyes and give myself permission to stop.

Not to plan. Not to calculate. Just to stop.

Ten minutes later, the alarm sounds. I surface slowly, heavy-limbed and reluctant. I gather my things, eat something small and step back outside. As I leave, Gilly comes in. I haven't seen another female runner for hours and my entirely irrational competitive streak sparks into life.

I head back onto the trail with purpose.

The descent to Garrigill isn't short; the village is still six miles away, but the path is easy to follow and in theory, perfectly runnable. As I leave the bothy, I'm looking forward to a couple of hours of simple movement. No navigation. No decisions. Just forward progress.

The track is another old miner's route: uneven in places, loose gravel and small stones underfoot. Rel and I ran much of this back in April, despite carrying heavier packs, and I expect to do something similar today. Especially as the north-eastern side of Cross Fell is far more sheltered than the southern; for once, the wind isn't fighting me.

I start well, perhaps too well, and have to rein myself in when I catch myself running uphill. That familiar voice appears, reminding me that feeling good now doesn't mean I can afford to be careless. Energy has to be managed. Something always needs to be held back.

The sky above is a deep, vivid blue, scattered with cartoon-like white clouds. Without the wind, it's hot.

Really hot.

Then, for some unknown reason, my watch loses navigation. When I'm tired, the smallest inconvenience feels dangerously close to a catastrophe.

I manage to reload the route without stopping; a small victory.

But then I need a wee.

Then I'm too hot, so I pause to take a layer off.

Then my alarm beeps to remind me to eat.

Then I decide I don't need my poles on a downhill and stop to put them away.

Then I need another wee.

Stop. Start. Stop. Start.

The rhythm I'd imagined never materialises. Every interruption feels disproportionate, like sand in already tired gears. I'm not just inconvenienced, I'm fraying. This is not the smooth, free-flowing descent into Garrigill I had pictured.

I pass two runners slumped by the side of the track in the afternoon sun. We exchange a few mumbled, half-formed words. No one has much to give.

I feel myself wobbling.

Trying to shift my headspace, to interrupt the slow spiral, I turn to look back towards Cross Fell. Where I have come from, not where I am going. The views are vast and beautiful, but I'm looking without really seeing. Appreciating without feeling.

In the same way, I'm running, but not really running. The ground is rock hard under exhausted feet. My stride has collapsed into an awkward shuffle and I keep clipping stones, yelping quietly with each jolt of pain. My knee is complaining loudly now, jarring with every step.

And it's still hot.

Finally, the village comes into sight. But the path, seemingly intent on avoiding it, refuses to take a direct line. My mood drops as quickly as the trail descends. I'm walking. Sweaty. Irrationally angry at the sun, the lack of shade, my knee. At the world.

Low mood, eat food. Easy advice to give. Much harder to follow when you're the one inside the mood.

Garrigill is a small, sleepy village in the North Pennines, sitting quietly on the banks of the South Tyne. In my head, it's just a marker: Garrigill, then Alston. Another chunk broken down. I expect nothing more than water before moving on.

What I don't expect is Annie.

Annie

Annie, a Spine legend, lives here. Every race, winter and summer, she opens her home to Spinners. There's even an official Spine sign outside her door and a safety team volunteer stretched out on the grass nearby.

She ushers me inside. I'm not sociable. I'm not at my best. She offers food, lots of it, including homemade soup bubbling away in a huge pan on the stove. The kitchen counters are covered in snacks and drinks. A man, I assume to be her husband, appears briefly, only to be sent straight back out with instructions to get more leeks.

It's generous. Warm. Exactly what most people would need. But all I want is water.

She looks faintly disappointed when I decline the food and for a flicker of a second, I wonder if I should stay. Sit. Eat properly. Reset. But my mind is fixed on Alston. I don't have the mental elasticity to change the plan now. Even kindness feels like something I have to process.

I thank her, refill my bottles and step back outside as another runner arrives and is welcomed in with the same warmth. I hope he accepts what I couldn't.

I sit in a small patch of shade near the safety team. It's the same guy who did my kit check in Edale, however many days ago that was. We chat briefly as I apply sun cream. Some of my foul mood on the descent was undoubtedly heat-related. Less than five miles remain to Alston, but that could still mean over an hour in full sun.

Be bothered.

(Ironically, the sun disappears not long after I leave Garrigill.)

I move through the village, past the tiny green, munching on dried fruit and salty peanuts. I'm still walking. There's no running in me right now. But after sitting down, talking, taking my pack off and eating something real, I feel marginally steadier.

I might be walking. But I'm walking with intent again.

Just beyond Garrigill, the Pennine Way diverts to avoid a damaged bridge. Rel and I took this diversion back in April, so it's familiar.

Back then, it felt endless. Tedious. A drag through sheep-filled fields and deserted farmyards. Nothing to look at. Nothing to distract you. Its only purpose is to avoid the damaged bridge.

Today, it still feels long, longer than its 4.5 miles, but it doesn't feel quite as bleak.

There are sections of the race I had mentally labelled as problematic. Miles I remembered as unpleasant or dull. Stretches I expected to endure rather than experience.

Almost without exception, during the race, they aren't as bad as I'd built them up to be.

There's something powerful about preconception. When we decide in advance that something is going to be difficult or miserable, it begins shaping the experience long before we arrive. On the Spine, my own memories had quietly exaggerated certain stretches, inflating them into something worse than reality.

By the time I reached them, I'd already braced for the impact. I'd lowered my expectations. Accepted the grind before it began. And in doing so, I'd taken away some of its power.

The miles were still hard. I was still tired. My knee still hurt. But they weren't monsters. They were just miles. And I could still move through them.

It made me realise how often the story we tell ourselves about what lies ahead is more influential than the thing itself. On the Spine, at least, the anticipation was frequently worse than the reality and once I stopped fighting the idea of what was coming, I found I could just get on with the job of moving forward.

Alston | Checkpoint Four

Checkpoint four is based in the youth hostel in Alston. A real building with solid walls and no tents anywhere.

I walk through the door and sit down on the first chair I see.

What do I want?

What do I need?

Do I want to sleep?

A shower?

Food?

"Oh, you're 257, I'll get the medic."

I love the volunteers' enthusiasm, but right now it's too much. Everything is too loud, too bright, too immediate. I need a minute just to sit and exist.

I can't even get my shoes off. Someone kneels in front of me and gently undoes my laces. My shoes are labelled and placed neatly on a shelf beside dozens of others.

I'm led into the main dining room. My drop bag is already waiting beside a chair. The room is busy with almost every seat taken. Bags have exploded across the floor. Runners slump in chairs, taping feet, eating, sorting kit, sleeping, leaving. Some arrive as others disappear back out the door.

After hours of solitude on the wide, empty Pennines, the room feels claustrophobic. There are more people here than I've seen in days.

I can't think.

I know what I **should** be doing, but my brain refuses to engage. I open my drop bag, then close it again. Pull something out. Put it back. Pick up another item and stare at it, unsure why I chose it in the first place.

My thoughts begin to spiral.

I don't cope well with chaos at the best of times. I'm in pain and I haven't slept properly for four days. This is very clearly not the best of times.

I'm close to breaking down, tears hovering just beneath the surface, but I can't let that happen here. Not in this room. Not in front of everyone. I turn inward instead. If I don't look at anyone, maybe no one will look at me. I need space.

I ask for a bed.

The dorms are upstairs. Proper beds with mattresses (no sheets), but we're not allowed to take our drop bags with us. Panic flares instantly. I need my system. My organisation. My bag. Without it, I feel strangely untethered.

A small part of me fractures as I try to decide what to take. Eventually, I scoop up my sleeping bag, clean clothes, electronics, toiletries, just the essentials, and carry them upstairs.

I'm shown into a six-bed dorm. It's empty. So is the women's shower room.

I can breathe again.

I spread my sleeping bag over a bottom bunk. Normally, I'd choose the top; I have an irrational fear of someone sleeping above me, but today, the thought of climbing a ladder feels impossible.

The shower is quick but transformative. Warm water. Soap. Steam. My first proper wash since Sunday morning in Edale, nearly four days ago.

I close my eyes and let the hot water run over my face. For a moment, everything softens. The noise in my head quiets. My shoulders drop. I feel almost human again.

Soon, I'm lying on the bunk and sleep comes instantly.

I set my alarm for three hours, hoping for two full sleep cycles. Instead, I wake after less than two hours. I fell asleep alone. Now two other women are in the room. Gilly sleeps soundly. Bev is settling into her bed. I didn't hear either of them arrive.

I lie still, wondering if I can drift back to sleep.

Almost immediately, my brain switches back on, loud, insistent, running through a checklist of everything I haven't done.

My checkpoint routine is always the same: eat, sort kit, prep pack, fill bottles, change clothes, freshen up, **then** sleep. I do it this way because I know myself. I can't rest with unfinished tasks.

But earlier, overwhelmed, I skipped all of it. Now panic creeps in. I know I won't sleep again, even though I still have nearly three hours before I need to leave.

Sometimes, I really hate my brain.

I gather my things and slip quietly downstairs. The rush has passed. The room is calmer now, quieter. Someone guides me to a different chair tucked slightly to one side, with space around it.

Relief washes through me.

I eat another plate of beans on toast. To my right, two members of the media team chat about photography. I half-listen, half-wanting to join in, drawn toward something familiar and normal.

Even with fewer people, the overwhelm lingers, just beneath the surface.

The medics examine my knee. It's badly swollen but structurally fine. They remove the K-tape from Middleton, apply anti-inflammatory gel and hand me two codeine tablets; one for now, one for later.

Then comes the difficult conversation. After talking it through, I agree to stop running and to walk the rest of the race.

The decision hurts almost as much as the knee.

One of my goals had been to run as much as possible, all the way to the finish. Irrationally, I feel like I've failed. Everything else feels strong enough. Capable enough. It's just this one bloody knee.

But finishing matters more. I know that. If walking the remaining eighty-odd miles to Kirk Yetholm is what it takes, then I will walk eighty miles to Kirk Yetholm.

Still, the change of plan unsettles me. Over-organisation has a downside: when the plan changes, I struggle to adapt. Aware I'll be slower, I decide to carry more food, but suddenly I can't decide what or how much. Soon, most of my drop bag is spread across the floor.

Exactly the checkpoint faff I'd worked so hard to avoid.

My system had been simple. Everything labelled. Everything pre-packed. Clean clothes per section. Measured food bags. No decisions required. Arrive. Change. Swap. Go. No thinking.

Except now I have to think.

A volunteer comes and sits beside me, a Spine old-timer who has finished the race multiple times. My imposter syndrome flares immediately. I feel exposed, slightly unravelled. I wonder if he can see how close I am to falling apart.

My bottles sit in front of me, filled, as always, with more than 2.5 litres of water.

He gently tells me I don't need that much for the next section. Evening is coming. It'll be cooler. There's a tap seven miles ahead, another at Greenhead ten miles after that.

"One litre will be plenty," he says quietly.

Reluctantly, I pour the rest away.

It feels like letting go of a safety net.

But when I shoulder my pack, now 1.5 kilos lighter, it settles easily against my back. Almost floating.

And for the first time in hours, it feels manageable again.

- **Checkpoint 4:** Alston.
- **Distance Covered:** 180 miles
- **Arrival time:** 14:39:02, Wednesday 18th June.
- **Race time:** 78:38:47
- **Time in checkpoint:** 05:30:30

Summer Spine Part V | Alston to Bellingham

Whilst the next section to Bellingham loads onto my watch, I phone the husband. After telling him not to expect to hear from me, I've fallen into the habit of calling briefly at each checkpoint.

This time, though, I deliberately wait until I've left.

He answers with a simple "hello" as I say, "Just to warn you, I'm about to burst into tears."

As I burst into tears.

I've done the one thing I've tried so hard not to do: I've looked at how far I still have to go instead of how far I've already come.

I've covered 180 miles. One hundred and eighty *freaking* miles. More than two-thirds of the race. But all I can see is the 88 miles that remain and right now they feel completely insurmountable.



Just after I had wiped the tears away. I took a selfie to remind me of my inner strength.

Between great big, breathless gulps that burn my throat, everything spills out at once: the overwhelm, the exhaustion, the frustration, the pain, the fear about my knee. Words tangle together. The tears come freely, unstoppable.

As I knew he would, he tells me I don't have to continue. That I can stop if I want.

And this is exactly why I waited until I'd left the checkpoint before calling him.

Through sobs, I tell him I'm not stopping. I'm not done.

There isn't much more to say after that. I don't quite hang up on him, but there's definitely no lingering goodbye either.

Still, the call does exactly what I needed it to do.

I'm stubborn. Being told I *can* stop is like striking a match to paper. Something catches. The spark takes hold. Determination rises, stronger than the overwhelm, stronger than the exhaustion, stronger than the frustration, stronger even than the pain.

I take a breath. Wipe my face. Keep walking.

There are *only* 88 miles left.

Let's f*cking go.

It's just gone 8 pm and I've timed my checkpoint stop well again. There are still several hours of daylight left. Moving is so much easier in the light and I want to make the most of it.

I pull my poles out and pop my headphones in. Head down, I go.

I tap out of Alston, the tip-tap of my poles echoing sharply on the tarmac. Over the river and onto the quietness of a dirt track. I remember this section vividly from April's recce with Rel. We stayed at Alston Youth Hostel at the end of our first day.

The first few miles are fairly nondescript, characterised by vast swathes of farmland. Nothing technical, nothing complicated and in the state I left the checkpoint in, that is a blessing.

The path, a worn groove through coarse grass, criss-crosses endless fields. The ground is dry and rutted underfoot. Rough stone walls divide herds of sheep, each wall another obstacle for a tired Spiner. The stiles, often nothing more than a couple of protruding stones, are becoming increasingly precarious.

More than once, I find myself lodged awkwardly on top of a wall, feet at odd angles, refusing to follow instructions from my brain.

There are a few gentle inclines, but nothing particularly taxing and I soon fall into a comfortable rhythm. The rhythm I lost in the miles before Alston. I am not running, but I am moving well again and with that comes contentment.

I cross the bridge over Gilderdale Burn and spot a wild camper at the water's edge. He shouts a few words of encouragement. I wave and call back a cheerful thank you before heading up towards Epiacum Fort.

This spot had piqued my interest back in April. At about 1,000 feet above sea level, Epiacum is the highest stone-built Roman fort in Britain. First constructed in the early second century AD, it was partly demolished and rebuilt around 200 AD. The Pennine Way passes alongside it, marked by an information board pointing out key features, though from ground level now there is little left to see.

One of the things I love about the Pennine Way is its rich history and heritage. Its wild landscapes stretch across two countries, numerous counties and three National Parks. Every section has a story to tell. One day, I would love to traverse the trail at leisure, discovering its past and listening properly to all its tales.

The path runs almost parallel to the River South Tyne for several miles. In bad weather, some walkers divert onto the slightly easier South Tyne Trail, perhaps even hopping on the South Tynedale Heritage Railway for a mile or two. Not an option for us!

Just before Slaggyford, a small Northumberland village whose name comes from the Old English for “muddy, dirty ford”, my feed alarm sounds. It has been two hours since I left Alston. Two hours of good, steady movement (bar 101 wild wees), so I reward myself with a small break on the village green.

As I sit and eat, I grab my headtorch from my pack. It is not quite dark enough yet, but putting it on now will save me from stopping again later. I quietly congratulate myself on still being able to forward-plan in my cognitively impaired state.

I pass the first tap, partially hidden behind a parked car, just as the volunteer in Alston said. He was right. And he was also right that I did not need 2.5 litres of water. I did not even need a litre.

I wish I had met that volunteer earlier in the race. Looking back, I have been carrying far too much water, paranoid about running out. I wonder how much the extra weight contributed to my back and knee pain and how much carrying less and feeling lighter has lifted my mood over the past few hours.

Mentally, I am in a completely different place from where I was running into Alston. Then, Kirk Yetholm felt impossibly far away. Now, it feels achievable again.

I move through a small woodland, tall trees blocking the last of the daylight. Flicking my headtorch on, I step carefully over tangled roots crossing the path. Moments later, I emerge back into open farmland. The sun is now a thin orange line on the horizon. There is something deeply peaceful about these final minutes before day slips into night.

Farmland becomes moorland. Moorland becomes farmland. I lose myself in my audiobook, focusing only on movement and the story in my ears. I have never listened to an audiobook before. I always thought I preferred reading, but right now, being carried along by a story is the perfect antidote to the monotony of the dark trail.

I just keep moving forward. That is all.

The ground is damp, with the occasional boggy patch, but nothing too problematic. Boardwalks cover the worst sections. For the most part, I am entirely alone, traversing isolated moorland in the middle of the night and I am not fazed by it at all.

If anything, I am thriving. I relish the magic of the silence and solitude.

Occasionally, I spot the faint red blink of another runner’s rear light far ahead. Sometimes I glance back and see a pinprick of headtorch behind me, both so distant there must be miles between us.

Somewhere along here, the Pennine Way cuts directly through a farmyard. Old cars, maybe a caravan, chickens. I remember it from the April recce. Rel and I were convinced we were trespassing in someone’s garden.

We were not. And I am not now.

Lost in my audiobook, eyes on the path, I suddenly hear a voice.

Startled, I turn. In the shadow of a house stands a man next to a barbecue, offering me a sausage. Or maybe a burger. Either way, barbecued meat.

I blink. Shake my head. Make sure he is real.

He is.

It is after midnight. Why is a man barbecuing in the middle of the moor?

Then he starts talking about the Spine. Asking how my race is going. With knowledge. With understanding. Instantly, my alarm dissolves. He is another trail angel, one of those extraordinary people who live or work along the Way and come out, unprompted, at all hours, to support us.

There was the man with the tin of biscuits before Cowling. Annie in Garrigill. And now this man, offering a midnight barbecue for exhausted runners.

I do not want to stop. And as a vegan, I do not want a sausage, burger or anything else from the grill. I slowly inch away, trying not to be rude but keen not to linger either.

Please tell me I did not hallucinate this.

(I later discovered he is fondly known in the Spine community as Rasta Ralph and that I absolutely did not imagine him.)

The early hours creep in and a hint of colour begins to brighten the sky. I cannot tell if it is the end of yesterday or the beginning of tomorrow, or where I fit within that equation. The thought feels far too complex.

I look up.

The sky is a kaleidoscope of pinks, purples and oranges, swirling and rushing towards me. I lower my head and the light noise quietens. I glance up again and I am drawn back into the psychedelic vortex.

For a moment, I marvel at it. This sure beats the hallucinogenic herds of wild animals that joined me during the Winter Downs 200.

But hallucinations are a sign of just how sleep-deprived I am. I keep my head down to steady my vision. I am exhausted. The temptation to nap is strong, but the path, while soft, is also wet and boggy. Even in my state, I know that would not be wise.

Instead, I aim for somewhere I know I can rest. One of the advantages of receiving the course is knowing what is coming and having a target keeps me moving.

In a few miles is Walltown Visitor Centre. The café will not be open, but there are 24-hour toilets, picnic tables and shelter. It feels like the right place to aim for.

Except it is much further than I remember.

The moorland drags on and on.

Eventually, it gives way to a rough, hedge-lined track. Solid, stony ground used by farm vehicles. Easier to navigate, harsher on tired feet. I do not remember this section at all from April. It puzzles me how some parts of the trail are etched into my memory while others have vanished completely.

My eyes are heavy. It takes almost as much effort to keep them open as it does to move forward. I start nodding off, literally falling asleep on my feet, my poles catching me as I jolt awake.

Again.

And again.

And again.

The ground looks inviting, but I force myself on. I know I am close.

Haltwhistle Golf Club is eerily empty in these early hours. I cross the main road and see the railway line ahead.

Just before the level crossing, someone has made their garden tap available to Pennine Way walkers. This is possibly the last water before checkpoint five at Bellingham, still 21 miles and many (many) hours away. Despite my earlier revelations, I don't want to risk running dry as I approach the heat of another day. I fill all my bottles.

Three litres. Three kilos. My pack feels brutally heavy again.

After hours alone, I'm suddenly aware of others, someone behind me, a couple of runners ahead. We drift together, unspoken, drawn towards the same sanctuary. Walltown.

Walltown

Nestled in the southwestern corner of Northumberland National Park, Walltown is a beautifully restored natural haven on the site of the former Walltown Quarry. By day, thriving parkland with trees, wildflowers and wildlife, by night, a Dark Skies Discovery Site offering some of the clearest views of the stars in England.

It's just after 4 am. The sky is getting lighter with every step. I turn my headtorch off, disappointed I missed the stars, but grateful for the return of daylight. And then I see it, Walltown Visitor Centre, pulling me in like a magnet.

A camper van is parked up and a man stands over a stove, food scattered across the picnic table in front of him. Spine Safety Team.

I've never been so pleased to see them, especially one making coffee. Another runner sits there taping his feet. Someone else is eating a rehydrated meal. I'm told the toilets are open and already full of sleeping runners. Clearly, we all had the same idea.

I phone race HQ to log my stop. If you stop for more than 30 minutes outside a checkpoint, you must let them know. I tell them I'm stopping for a couple of hours.

Coffee in one hand, poles in the other, I quietly open the door to the ladies'. Catherine is just waking and packing up her bivvy. We exchange a few words. Whilst we are rarely on the trail together, we seem to cross paths at most checkpoints and rest stops. She points out where she slept, legs propped on the toilet seat to reduce swelling.

I look around. For a 24-hour public toilet, it is surprisingly clean and warm.

I wouldn't normally go anywhere near, let alone lie on, the floor of a public loo, but then again, I wouldn't normally have run* (*hiked) 200 miles in a little under four days...

Right now, it looks perfect.

I throw my pack down and pull off my shoes. They are wet and as I take them off, I realise that my waterproof socks have leaked and my feet are also wet. I peel those off too and lay them on the floor, hoping that both will dry whilst I rest. I use my foil poncho again, rather than my bivvy bag. Mainly due to laziness, the bivvy is at the bottom of my pack, the poncho in the front pocket!

I pull the hood up, use my pack as a pillow, elevate my swollen knee on the toilet seat, not the most comfortable of positions, but I'm asleep almost instantly.

I wake with a start. I have *no* idea where I am and, groggily, wonder why I am lying on the toilet floor. Piece by piece, it all comes flooding back to me.

How long have I been asleep? Thirty minutes...? Forty...? An hour...? Less...? I have absolutely no idea. It could have been five minutes, or even just two. I have no concept of time, but I am certain of one thing: I need to get moving again.

My socks and shoes are still wet. I vainly try to dry them under the inefficient hand dryer, but to no avail. So, still wet, I pull them back on. Looking back, this was a mistake and I wish I'd been a little more clear-headed. I had a clean, dry pair of socks in my pack, but it doesn't even occur to me to put them on.

I don't know it now, but I will regret this later.

I emerge from the dimly lit toilet into the glare of the bright morning sun and make my way over to the SST. Several other runners are sitting around the picnic table and Gilly is about to take my place on the toilet floor. I sit down. It all feels rather civilised.

I make up a cup of instant oatmeal. I spot an abandoned banana on the table and am told to help myself. Craving something fresh, I've never known a simple piece of fruit to bring me as much joy as that banana does. Having had a "sleep" and with the sun rising behind me, oatmeal and a banana make it feel like breakfast time. I eat slowly, savouring both the food and the calmness around the table.

I'm learning that whilst I prefer being by myself on the trail, I need human interaction now and again. I seem to draw energy from those around me. Just a brief conversation and a few simple words are enough to give me the psychological boost I need to push on. There's perhaps a selfish undertone to these interactions, too; hearing about other people's struggles makes me feel less alone in mine.

Sitting around the table, sharing a few words, I feel myself recharging. We don't say a lot and nothing with deep meaning, but what is said lifts me. I'm reluctant to move; it's quite pleasant here. But I do. I finish eating, wash my mug and make one final coffee to take with me.

I crossed paths with the safety team many times during the race. They were out and about at various points on the course to keep us runners safe, essentially roving support teams. While stationed at specific locations, their primary role was exactly that: safety. If a runner got into trouble, HQ would send the nearest team out to help them. For this reason, we were told not to rely on them being at any particular point.

Different teams had different approaches. Some were simply there to monitor, checking we were okay and logging our race numbers as we passed. Most carried some water and would offer a top-up if needed. Others had camping stoves so we could heat our own food. And some had tea, coffee and a range of snacks, all supplied through their own generosity.

Two teams stand out for me.

The first was in Gargrave on Monday morning. It was just before 7 am. and I'd made it through my first night. I was sitting in the bus stop applying sun cream, waiting for the Co-Op to open, when they made me a cup of super-strong coffee that gave me wings.

And then there was this guy at Walltown. He had a tiny camping stove and endless patience, heating pan after pan of water, making tea, coffee and rehydrating meals. He also had a box of food, biscuits, cereal bars and fruit and told us to help ourselves to anything we wanted.

I gather my things together and hoist my pack back onto my back. After a decent break, it doesn't feel quite as heavy as it once did. I thank the safety volunteer for his generosity and head off once more, coffee in hand, towards Hadrian's Wall.

Hadrian's Wall

For nearly 300 years, Hadrian's Wall marked the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire. Built around Emperor Hadrian's visit to Britain in AD122, it was a symbolic statement of Rome's imperial power, stretching 73 miles from coast to coast across the width of the island.

At its peak, the wall stood around 12 feet tall and at least 8 feet wide, its primary purpose to slow the crossing of raiders. Very little of the original masonry remains; much of it was dismantled and reused as stone for new buildings.

Passing through some of the most beautiful parts of England, the site is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Trail in its own right. The Pennine Way joins the Hadrian's Wall Path for just under ten of its 84 miles.



Hadrian's Wall

In the slight chill of the early morning, I'm still wearing the leggings I slept in. I very quickly realise this is a mistake. Once moving, the cold is deceptive.

The first climb curves gently to the left and is mercifully short. At the top, I stand in the warming golden rays of the morning sun, finishing my coffee and gazing back along the trail towards the Visitor Centre, already just a small dot in the distance. Somewhere around here, I know I will cross the 200-mile mark. I pause, briefly reflecting on how far I have come, rather than how far I still have to go.

It feels almost serene. These are the moments I came here for. Standing alone, on top of Hadrian's Wall, looking out over the countryside in the soft morning light.

My regret is that I didn't capture it. The photographer neglected to take a photo. I suppose this is what people mean when they talk about living in the moment.

I make it sound idyllic. And maybe, for those few minutes, it was.

I push on.

Following the line of the historic Roman wall, now partially reconstructed, the trail becomes a tangled web of interwoven paths. Sometimes it's hard to find the right groove in the ground as they weave around rocks and long-forgotten turrets.

The climbs are mostly short and sharp, twisting up and around the crags. Poles become more of a hindrance than a help; it's easier to use my hands. This is my kind of trail: narrow, rugged, rocky and just a little technical.

As the sun creeps higher, the temperature climbs with it. The leggings and jacket are shed and stuffed back into my pack.

It's only 7am, but with very little shelter along the wall, I can already feel the sun burning my skin. I stop at Cawfields Quarry to put on suncream. I hadn't even thought about it earlier; I'd left Walltown layered up against the cold of the night.

Leaving the former quarry, the path climbs steeply around the crags to the remains of a turret. Below, a small reservoir glistens in the sunlight, looking cool and inviting.

Navigation here is simple: follow the snaking line of the wall. I cross fields, pass a few small houses and haul myself up and over stiles. The shade of the occasional tree brings only brief respite from the sun. Back in April, this path was busy, popular not just with Pennine Way walkers but with those tackling the Hadrian's Wall Path too.

Today, in these early hours, it's just me and a handful of other Spinners.

There's a small group of guys I keep crossing paths with. They've formed a little unit, working together, keeping each other going. One stops, they all stop. We exchange a few words as we pass. I take comfort in the fact that we're all walking. I think I'd feel quite disheartened if they were running while I was reduced to a shuffle.

I watch them and wonder whether I'm missing something by not buddying up. Aside from Fountain Fell and the section over Cauldron Snout with Ben, I've deliberately moved alone.

I like being alone.

This is my journey, my adventure and somewhat selfishly, I don't want to share it. Still, I wonder if some company might help pull me through the darker patches?

Moments like now, when every part of my body hurts. When my right knee is screaming, my skin feels as though it's on fire beneath the mid-morning sun and I'm so tired I just want to curl up at the side of the path and sleep.

At Sycamore Gap, still named despite the sad absence of the tree, the guys are sprawled on the grass. Shoes scattered around them, eyes closed, sore feet resting on packs. Once, there would have been a pool of cool shade here. Now, the heat trapped between the rolling hills is oppressive.

The warmth is wearing me down, but I don't want to stop in full sunlight.

A little further on, near Crag Lough, I find a small patch of woodland. Tall trees, species unknown, stand to attention on either side of the dirt track, blocking out the sun and throwing deep pools of shade onto the ground. I drop my pack and slide gratefully down onto the cool earth.

I eat a snack, refill my front bottles and sit for a moment, relishing the breeze brushing against my skin. The Sycamore Gap guys pass me again. This is how we keep leapfrogging each other.

The temptation is there to linger, but I don't. The trail calls me back. I know there isn't much wall left now. It continues for another mile or so before we leave the comfort of its guiding line behind.

Somehow, unintentionally, we're all together again; me and the guys. The path drops down through fields towards Wark Forest. In the distance, I trace the tree line with my eyes and spot where Rel and I stayed. How wonderful it would be to stop in the comfortable bunkhouse right now. I push the thought aside and fixate instead on the forest. It's close. I promise myself a rest in its shade.

But when has the Pennine Way ever taken the easiest route?

We criss-cross rough fields, turn sharply down a stony track, over a stile and into yet another field, seemingly moving away from the forest altogether.

Guarding the only stile out of the last field is a bull.

He is big. Very big. HUGE.

His companions – his bodyguards – stand watching him, watching us, a few steps to his right. Other than retracing our steps, I can see no other way out.

I am beyond caring. My need to escape the sun and reach the shade outweighs my fear of the bull. I'm about to walk towards him, poles in hand (in hindsight, perhaps not my most sensible idea), when one of the guys steps forward, waving his arms and shouting. Surprisingly, the bull moves aside. The guy climbs quickly over the stile. I follow, heart pounding, vaulting over with more speed and agility than I've managed for days.

Looking back, we were very lucky. Others behind us were forced to make significant detours.

Was there some unseen force looking out for me, making sure I wasn't alone at that moment? I wonder if I'd have been as brave on my own, or whether I too would have slunk away in search of another exit.

Again, the photographer failed to take a photo and words really cannot convey quite how enormous and intimidating that bull was.

The adrenaline carries me forward and soon I reach the edge of the forest. I stop at the first patch of shade large enough to sit in. The guys carry on.

Alone again.

I dump my pack, pull off my shoes and rub my toes into the cool grass. Tiny pinpricks of pain flare and I worry about hotspots forming on my feet. I sit.

It isn't a particularly enjoyable break. We're now firmly in midge territory and as soon as I stop moving, the swarms descend, in my face, on my arms, clinging to my legs. I spend as much time swatting (unsuccessfully) as I do resting.

So much for my idyllic forest pause.

I eat, swallow another paracetamol, hoping it might dull the pain, drink deeply and refill my flasks, grateful once again for the reduced pack weight. The midges force me to move sooner than I'd like. Grudgingly, I force my aching feet back into my shoes, hoist my slightly lighter pack and stand.

Looking back, I often wonder where the strength to keep going came from. Every part of me wanted to curl up on that forest floor and sleep. Perhaps the midges were a blessing in disguise.

A little further on, I find the guys again, lying together in the shade of a tree. I really should know their names. I'm sure we introduced ourselves days ago, but my tired brain has failed me. Therefore, they will forever be "the guys" in my Spine story.

I put my headphones in, cue up some music and start moving with intention. I know where I'm going now. About eight miles ahead lies the pit stop at Hornystead Farm. That's it. Just eight miles. No more, no less, though I know full well those eight miles could take three hours.

Hornystead Farm is home to another trail angel, like Clove Lodge, a Pennine Way institution. A small barn set up as a comfort stop for weary walkers. Inside, a bed piled high with blankets, chairs, a wash basin with soap and a table laden with food.

What I didn't realise was that for the Spine, the farmer's wife goes all out. Sandwiches, crisps, fruit, a fridge full of drinks, cakes and sweets.

Between Wark Forest and Hornystead, I somehow joined a group. Six or seven of us arrive together, joining a couple more already seated inside. Catherine is in the corner, shoes and socks off, eating a sandwich. Someone else lies stretched out in the shade of the yard.

There's a jovial, almost party-like atmosphere. The farmer flits about, refilling bottles, handing out drinks, offering sandwiches, cheese or ham (sadly, no vegan options). As another runner leaves, I claim their chair in the doorway and accept a can of Fanta.

I'm not sure cold fizzy orange has ever tasted so good.

I don't stay long. The number of people in such a small space makes me feel claustrophobic. I check the time and do some mental maths. The Co-op on the far side of Bellingham closes at 10 pm. I really want fresh food, fruit, maybe a smoothie. I want six hours at the checkpoint, which means arriving there by 3 pm and leaving before 9.

It's 12:45.

Can I cover the 5.5 miles to Bellingham in two and a bit hours?

I'm impressed by my sudden mathematical prowess. There must be something magical in the Fanta (aka sugar!).

Before leaving, I drop some coins into the honesty box and sign the visitors' book with my name and race number. Scanning the list of runners ahead, I spot a familiar name right at the top. Anna Troup.

As I leave the Hornystead party alone, I wonder, once again, if I'm missing out by keeping to myself. The companionship, the banter, the shared suffering.

But I want to move to my own rhythm, my own pace. And right now, that pace feels good. I'm not running, but the sugar, the atmosphere and the nearness of the next checkpoint have given me a second... third... fourth wind.

I feel like I'm flying to Bellingham.*

*(*I have since checked my mile splits. I was most definitely not flying — though I did manage a near 20-minute mile.)*

Bellingham | Checkpoint Five

I arrive at Bellingham at 15:12, pretty much bang on target from leaving Hornystead Farm and am met by the familiar, friendly team of volunteers. Among them is the indomitable Nicky Spinks, who insists on carrying my bag to the tent for me.

That feels very wrong.

I shower, actual heaven, see the medics about my knee and eat the first two of four baked potatoes with beans before settling into my tent to sleep.

I am so tired that I expect sleep to come easily.

Instead, the mid-afternoon sun turns the tent into a sauna. It is sweltering. The heat wraps around me like a thick winter blanket; the air is heavy and unmoving. I unzip the door, hoping to let some air in. None comes. Not even a hint of a breeze.

I lie back down, feet propped on top of my drop bag, raised as high as I can manage. Given the state my lower legs and knees are in, this feels like a fairly pointless exercise, but I'm willing to try anything. I reason that even if I can't sleep, at least I can rest.

But it isn't restful.

The ground is lumpy. My legs ache. My knee screams even while perfectly still. On top of the heat, it's noisy and I can't block out the sounds around me. Sleep refuses to come.

After less than thirty minutes, I decide that lying there getting increasingly frustrated is a waste of precious time. I get up and pack my bag for the very last time. This is my final chance to access my drop bag before the finish.

I swap out a couple of pieces of kit and leave behind anything non-essential, trying to reduce my pack weight for the final section. I then spend far too long staring at my food, attempting to decide which snacks appeal the most.

The answer, of course, is none of them.

I hand my drop bag back to the volunteers, eat two more baked potatoes with beans, and go through my final kit check.

Just after 7 pm, having used only 3 hours and 59 minutes of my allocated six hours, I head back out into the early evening.

The final leg.

Next stop: Kirk Yetholm.

- **Checkpoint 5:** Bellingham
- **Distance covered:** 218 miles
- **Arrival time:** 15:12:07, Thursday 19th June
- **Race time:** 103:11:52
- **Time in checkpoint:** 03:59:45

Summer Spine Part VI | Bellingham to Kirk Yetholm

The Final Leg

I tip-tap my way through Bellingham, passing the Co-op I'd been rushing to reach before closing time. After four baked potatoes with beans and a handful of satsumas at the checkpoint, I feel satiated, so I decide not to stop. Now that I'm moving again, I just want to keep going.

The road out of Bellingham feels far steeper than I remember, but I'm feeling good. The medics sent me off with another dose of codeine and even though I didn't sleep, the simple act of lying down gave my body some much-needed rest.

It's just gone 7pm and because I only took four of my six hours at the checkpoint, I have more daylight ahead of me than I was expecting. I know I can make good progress before sunset in three or so hours.

Through a large gate, the Pennine Way turns onto a stony farm track winding through a field. The grazing sheep seem particularly noisy this evening, bleating loudly as I approach before scattering in my wake.

The first six miles or so out of Bellingham are pretty much all uphill. It's a steady, continuous climb that, on a better day, would be perfectly runnable. Through a farmyard and back onto rough grasslands. I turn

briefly to look back at Bellingham sprawled below. The last large sign of civilisation before Kirk Yetholm, still some 38 miles away.

Rising on the horizon is another bleak stretch of moorland. In April, I found this section tedious. This evening, I move on autopilot. I don't think; I just move. Left foot, right foot, left pole, right pole. I'm listening to a second audiobook and already engrossed, paying attention to nothing else but the story unfolding in my ears. The moorland is nondescript, offering no noteworthy views to command my attention. Navigation is straightforward. I simply follow the path on the ground, checking my watch periodically, "just to make sure".

The ground is covered in browning heather, tufts of grass and the odd puddle. I cross a few small streams. In winter, I imagine these would be wide and deep, but in the dry summer, they're barely noticeable.

I pass over Whitley Pike with its small cairns and signposts. I'm feeling physically and mentally stronger than I have for many hours. I fly across Toughend Common, passing another runner in the process. We exchange a few words; he also has knee issues. But I'm on a mission and don't pause for long. My mission: get to the forest looming in the distance before dark.

The Safety Team are stationed at the road crossing just before Padon Hill. They tell me I'm looking good, comment on how well I moved across the moor towards them and then ask me to keep an eye out for a runner a little way ahead who's struggling with his feet and moving very slowly. I stop for only a few moments before rushing off. The light is fading, but I can now see the edge of the forest.

I switch the sound in my ears to music. Gorse that scratches at my ankles and tries to trip me up has taken over the path across Padon Hill. The Pennine Way doesn't cross the actual summit, but it's visible to the right, overlooking expansive views across the Otterburn Moors.

The light drops further. I just need to make it up to Brownd Rigg, then I'll turn my head torch on. The beat of old-school 90s dance keeps me moving and I sing along. A one-woman Thursday-night party on the Pennine Way.

The path rises steeply to meet the forest, becoming one with a stream. It's wet and slightly slippery underfoot as I pick my way around rare patches of mud. And then, all of a sudden, I'm here. Redesdale Forest, just as night falls.

My head torch goes on, the volume goes up and my head goes down.

I know I have about five miles until I reach the Blakehopeburnhaugh monitoring point, just before Byrness. I remember the route; navigation through the forest won't be challenging. I expect this to be a fairly straightforward and uneventful five miles...

From Brownrigg Head, the trail initially skirts the edge of the forest. Tall trees rise high into the darkening sky on my left; a fence line runs parallel on my right. Any notion that this section might be easy is quickly discarded. The path is stony and rocky underfoot, seemingly never-ending, twisting and turning with alarming regularity. Tired and heavy on my feet, I stumble several times and swear angrily at the rocks causing my poor feet such anguish.

Eventually, the path joins a Forestry Commission track through the indomitable Kielder Forest. After what feels like hours of negotiating poor terrain, it's a relief to move fractionally quicker on the smoother surface. The track is hemmed in by tall conifers, various species of spruce and pine, grown and managed for timber production. Kielder Forest is England's largest man-made woodland, planted largely from the 1920s onwards on previously treeless land and used as a major source of timber for the UK.

While I was chasing daylight across the moors, I ignored the waves of tiredness that periodically tumbled over me. I promised myself a rest in the forest. I imagined finding a soft patch of moss, unrolling my bivvy bag and snuggling down beneath the shelter of the trees for a few hours' sleep.

Only, in my idyllic dreaming, I hadn't accounted for the midges.

Once inside the forest, I can't pause for even a moment without swarms descending hungrily on me. I realise very quickly that I won't be sleeping in the trees. I have to get to Byrness before I can rest.

I stagger on, tired and increasingly emotional. The forest is vast, deep and dark. And I am completely alone. My senses are heightened in a way they weren't on the open moorland the night before. For the first time, tendrils of fear creep in. Every sound is magnified. The quiet rustle of leaves in the slight breeze feels amplified.

But neither fear nor the sounds of the forest is enough to keep me fully awake.

My eyes droop, heavier and heavier. I can't keep them open. I sway; my head drops. I catch myself on my poles. Startled, my eyes snap open. I weave across the track, unable to walk in a straight line. My eyes droop again. I sway. My head drops. I stumble... again, and again, and again. Waves of tiredness crash down and submerge me. I slow to a crawl, barely able to stand, let alone move.

Some subconscious instinct must have kicked in. My tiredness is so heavy, so all-encompassing, that I have no memory of how I made it through Kielder Forest to Blakehopeburnhaugh. But, suddenly, there's a beacon of light shining ahead of me.

John Bamber, iconic custodian of Greg's Hut during the Winter Spine and in summer, keeper of the tented monitoring point at Blakehopeburnhaugh.

He greets me warmly and tells me I can stop for 30 minutes. Then, in the same breath, he warns me I might not want to, the midges are out in full force. He's cleverly clad in a midge net, no patch of skin, except his hands, on offer to the hungry insects.

He makes me a cup of strong black coffee. I free-pour sugar into the dark liquid, hoping for a small, sweet, caffeinated miracle. While I drink the nectar, John fills my bottles, stressing the importance of carrying as much water as I can for the final leg to Kirk Yetholm, some 27 miles away. There's no water on the Cheviots. This is the last chance to top up.

A short while later, I leave with three litres and a very heavy pack. The trail into Byrness follows the river and is fairly flat, easy going. As I approach the small village, I pull out my phone and call Race HQ to tell them I'm going to stop for a couple of hours' sleep in Byrness Church.

St Francis of Assisi

St Francis of Assisi, a small 18th-century church nestled at the foot of the Cheviots, has become something of a legend within the Spine community.

Now under the care of the Right Revd Dr Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Newcastle (a keen runner herself; rumour has it she's lining up for the Spine Sprint North in summer 2026), the church sits 240 miles into the route and has offered a quiet sanctuary to weary runners for years.

A sign outside welcomes us in, with a reminder to call HQ if we're stopping. Call already made, I turn the iron handle and the heavy wooden door groans in protest as it swings open. In the early hours, it's darker inside than out. Even with my headtorch, it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust.

The nave is scattered with sleeping bodies. Running poles rest against stone walls, bags and shoes lie in haphazard piles. A few runners, cocooned in bivvy bags, are stretched out along the pews. Others are curled up on the floor. One lies fast asleep on the altar.

I spot an empty pew, no one in front, no one behind and hallelujah, it even has a cushion! After sleeping on a toilet floor, this feels positively luxurious.

As I settle in, I become hyper-aware of every sound I make. The clatter of my shoes on the wooden floor. The creak of the pew as I shuffle into position. The ear-splitting crinkle of my foil poncho as I unfold it and

pull it over my head. But any guilt fades as a roar of snoring erupts from somewhere a few rows back, loud enough to shake the stained glass.



The pew cushion is maybe 30 centimetres wide, but it's surely softer than the bare wood beneath. I lie back and lift my legs over the edge of the pew, hoping to ease some of the swelling and inflammation. It's not a position I'd ever choose to sleep in, but then again, nothing about this is normal.

Even with my awkward sleep position, not even the snores are enough to keep me awake.

It feels like I've only been asleep for moments when I'm jolted awake by the clatter of the door opening and closing. Another handful of runners file in, three, maybe four. One drops into the pew in front of me. I don't think he even takes his shoes off before falling asleep.

Looking around, there's a faint glow of daylight filtering through the window above the altar. I glance at my watch, it's just gone 3 am.

I weigh it up. I could stay here and *try* to sleep a little longer. Or... I could get up, get moving and aim to be on top of the Cheviots before the heat of the day kicks in.

I decide to move.

I'm no longer worried about making noise, not when the entire church is echoing with a symphony of snores. I eat a flapjack while I quietly repack my bag, giving my feet a quick once-over before shoving them, not entirely willingly, back into my shoes. A couple of hot spots have definitely started to brew. I pause, wondering whether I should deal with them. But I've never really had blisters before and I'm not sure what to do with them. Rightly or wrongly, I decide to leave them be.

I ease the heavy church door shut behind me and step out into the cool, still air of the churchyard. Dawn is breaking. I stop for a few seconds and just breathe it in; the quiet, the freshness, the promise of a new day.

This moment feels significant. The final morning.

Just 25 miles stand between me and the finish.

I look up at the sky. If I'm quick – relatively speaking – I might just make it onto the Cheviots in time for sunrise. I've got around 40 minutes. And a steep 600-foot climb ahead.

Let's go.

The Cheviots

With sunrise calling me, I move swiftly along the narrow woodland path. The tall conifers rise high into the rapidly brightening sky above me, their fallen needles softening the ground beneath my feet.

Higher up, the trees have been cut back, so it's quite desolate. I am so driven by the thought of sunrise that I barely notice the steepness of the climb. Halfway up, I turn my headtorch off and stash my poles before the final rocky ascent to the cairn. I need my hands to steady and pull me up and over some of the larger boulders.

Near the top of Byrness Hill, I pause briefly and look out over Catcleugh Reservoir before turning back to the sunrise prize. The view over the reservoir is impressive, but I know better is to come the deeper into the Cheviots I go.

The final 20-odd miles of the Pennine Way traverse across the Cheviots. Large, wild, swampy and at times isolated and bleak, the Cheviots are a range of rolling, often windswept, grassy hills straddling the Anglo-Scottish border between Northumberland and the Scottish Borders. On a very clear day with good visibility, you can see Cross Fell from the Cheviot summit, the highest point of the range.

It's wild that 65-odd miles and two days ago I was on Cross Fell.

Once past the first cairn, I continue to follow the flagstone path snaking across the moorland. It acts as a line guiding me towards the slow rising sun. Although with patches of low clouds muting the vibrancy of the colours, the sunrise is not quite as spectacular as I had hoped it would be.

But how can I be disappointed? Here I am, on the final day of this epic adventure, standing atop the Cheviots at sunrise. It's not yet 5 am, I raced up the climb from the church, and I truly feel as if I am on top of the world. Reflecting now, several months later, I may not have fully appreciated it at the time, but this was another of those special Spine moments that I will never, ever forget.

That feeling didn't last.

It was all going so well.

And then it wasn't.

Tiredness abruptly comes crashing down. I was awake, joyfully scampering across the rugged grassland plains and then I'm not. Suddenly, I am stumbling along, barely able to keep my eyes open. Sleepiness hits hard and I struggle to focus on where I am going.

At Raven's Pike, I throw my poles to the ground and collapse onto the cairn. With no energy to take my pack off, I rest it on the pile of stones and lean on it. The stones take the weight off my shoulders and support me quite well.

In the warmth of the early morning sun, I fall asleep on the cairn.

The sleep is fleeting, two, three minutes at the most, before I wake with a start. Disoriented and confused, it takes me several moments to remember where I am, what I am doing and why exactly I am lying on a pile of rocks on top of a hill...

I sit up, look out over the view and as we do at these times, I eat.

I do not want to eat, but even in my stupor, I know I have to. My mouth is dry with thirst, but I am so worried about running out of water that I am already rationing my drinking. Food is no longer an enjoyable treat, but an unpalatable necessity. If nothing else, I need the energy.

It takes all of the willpower I have to get up from the comforting pile of rocks and move. But surprisingly, after the first few faltering steps, those few minutes of fleeting sleep have given me the push I need. From barely moving, I have half an hour or so of pretty decent hiking.

One foot in front of the other, step by tiny step, just keep moving forward.

Until I crash again.

And again.

And again.

At times, quite literally. I crumple to the ground as I fall asleep on my feet. I learn to quickly set the alarm on my phone, just to be on the safe side.

Each cursory nap, only a minute or two at a time, gives me a little respite. Perhaps a mile of better movement. Before I crash again.

And again.

And again.

The Cheviots are vast. Miles and miles of open moorland land with not a scrap of shade. I am quite literally sleepwalking my way across the hills.

At around 8 am, I reach Hut 1. For the past two hours, it had become my all-encompassing focus. Like the visitor centre way back in Walltown, it is the place I have set my hopes on. Another tick on the landmark list. Another step closer to the finish.

The basic, wooden structure is a mountain refuge hut designed to offer protection from the elements and a place to rest for hikers on the Pennine Way. 10 miles from the Blakehopeburnhaugh monitoring point, the Spine has a Safety Team stationed here as a vital check-in point during one of the toughest sections of the race. We are permitted to stop here for a maximum of two hours; some take this time, but I don't.

Even at 8 am, the heat is already oppressive and the promise of some shade is what has kept me going over the last few miles. I gratefully step into the small room and sit on the narrow wooden bench. It's a joy to take the weight off my poor feet. A safety team member offers me a biscuit, which I politely refuse and asks how I am. I don't remember my answer. It was probably "hot".

I can feel my skin burning, so I take the shady opportunity to reapply sunscreen. Back in Bellingham, knowing that today was forecast to be hot, I put on a long-sleeve top to keep as much of my skin covered as possible. I am far too warm, but I know that protecting my skin was a sensible decision.

The mountain refuge is buzzing. There are already several runners there when I arrive, including a couple sleeping on the grass outside.

A few more runners arrive. The SST are flitting around, checking in with us, making sure that we are all okay. They have an (unexpected) emergency supply of water. It's only small and they can only offer us 500ml or so. There is no water source at the hut and so the team hiked for several hours up the hill carrying as much water as they could. They are stationed here for several days and so this is also their own personal water supply.

Although I could quite happily drink (a lot) more water, I still have 2.5 litres from Blakehopeburnhaugh and turn down their offer, knowing that the supply is very limited and later on in the day, there are going to be people in much greater need than I am.

After 15 minutes or so, I stand up and leave. I am finding the number of people in the small confines of the hut suffocating, a bit like at Horneystead Farm. I want to get moving whilst others are sitting there with their shoes off, feet up, eating and drinking. Not because I want to 'get ahead' but because I want to be alone.

I question many times during the course of the race my need for solitude. The occasional flirtation with another runner, volunteer or SST member momentarily refreshes me. Difficult at the best of times, the deeper into the race I go, the less mental capacity I have to deal with social interaction and the more I feel the need to withdraw from those around me.

As always, the brief rest gives me renewed vigour, enabling me to move well up the next hill. I push a little harder. Partly because I feel refreshed after a break and partly because I want to get space between myself and other people.

This is the epitome of the loneliness of the long-distance runner and I wonder where the antisocial streak has come from.

The renewed vigour is short-lived. My feet are in agony with blisters that I know are there but stubbornly don't want to acknowledge or see. Every single step feels like I am stepping onto sharp splinters of glass. My knee screams in pain on every downhill and my whole body is burning in the heat.

The bouncy post-Hut 1 optimism doesn't last very long.

As an aside, I am not exaggerating about the heat. This was not a passing warm spell but a true heatwave, the kind that settles over the country and refuses to move on. Temperatures climbed well into the 30s, the air thick and unmoving, the landscape bleached beneath an unforgiving sun.

Out on the wide, rolling emptiness of the Cheviots, there was nowhere to hide, no trees, no shade, no softening of the light, only an endless horizon shimmering in the distance.

And there we were, the Spinners, stubbornly and somewhat absurdly marching 26 miles across it with only three litres of water each, squinting into the glare, salt drying on our skin, quietly negotiating with our bodies one step at a time.

I become so worried about running out of water that I start to ration my drinking. The resulting dehydration does little to improve my mood. I left Blakehopeburnhaugh with three litres at around 1:30 on Friday morning. This is all I have to last me until the finish, 30 miles and however many hours it takes. In 30 degrees. With no shade.

Can you feel my misery tumbling off the page?

Somehow I keep moving, slower and slower. Up and down. Up and down. The path stretches endlessly ahead, refusing to change, refusing to end. Every step demands more focus and energy than I have left. I scan the horizon constantly, desperately, searching for anything that might offer relief, a wall, a tree, a dip in the ground, anything at all.

At Windy Gyle I crouch behind the stone windbreak, hoping for shelter, but the sun sits high and merciless in the sky. The shadows are short, useless. There is nowhere to hide.

The hole I have fallen into is getting deeper. My thoughts spiral faster than I can control them, looping and tightening until panic hums just beneath the surface. I remember almost nothing between Hut 1 and Hut 2 except misery, heavy, suffocating misery that presses in from all sides.

I see none of the beauty. None of the vast views or rolling hills. None of the climbs or descents that should have marked my progress. I know where I went. I know what I should have seen. But my memories belong

to April's joyful scamper across the Cheviots with Rel, not this slow, painful shuffle through heat and exhaustion.

My body is broken. Every joint aches, every muscle protests. I want to cry, properly cry, but when the sobs come, they are dry, violent things that tear through my chest and leave nothing behind. No tears. Not even that release. I am too far gone for tears.

Still, somehow, I keep moving.

I grit my teeth and ride the pain as it comes in waves. Paracetamol and cooling gel on my knee dull it briefly before it surges back again. Uphill is strangely easier; downhill sends sharp jolts through my legs that make me wince with every step.

The heat, though, the heat is unbearable. It wraps around me, presses into me, fills my lungs. It is all-consuming, oppressive, inescapable. My skin burns. My thoughts scatter. I feel myself slipping, untethered, half-wild with exhaustion.

Then, somewhere in the vast emptiness of the Cheviots, my searching eyes land on a bush beside the path. Ten feet high, unremarkable, except for the small gap beneath it, barely three feet between branches and ground.

And there, impossibly, is shade.

An oasis.

I drop my pack without thinking and scramble underneath like a feral creature, collapsing into the cool earth. The air is still hot, but the sun is no longer burning me alive. For ten precious minutes, I lie there, curled into myself, breathing, existing, letting the world narrow to survival.

A man passes and slows, staring longingly at the patch of shade. He says he wishes he'd thought of that. There might have been room for two, just, but before I can speak, he moves on.

Eventually, I have to stand.

I have no idea where the strength comes from. Every part of me wants to stay there, hidden, to sleep until it is over, until the pain, the heat, the effort all disappear. Lifting my pack feels impossible. Stepping back into the blazing sun feels worse.

I have never been in such a dark place.

And yet, somewhere beneath the exhaustion and the despair, something remains unbroken.

Stopping is not an option. Even under that bush, even at my lowest, I knew it. I had spent months picturing the final descent into Kirk Yetholm. I could see it waiting for me now, just within reach. This was the moment to draw on whatever was left, every stubborn, bloody-minded scrap of strength I possessed.

That dark place showed me who I am.

I do not know how I did it.

But somehow, I moved.

My body has completely given up and I am moving at less than two miles an hour. But I am still moving. Still progressing. One step at a time.

I return to an old trick, counting every step.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...

The rhythm becomes everything. Mechanical. Hypnotic. It dulls the edges of thought and numbs the feelings threatening to overwhelm me, shrinking the world down to ten steps at a time.

On the approach to Hut 2, I begin crossing paths with others. I slowly reel in a few ahead; a few behind eventually catch me. None of us look strong. All but one of us are stumbling down the endless descent, each person locked inside their own private battle. I stop again and again, bracing myself, trying to soften the glass-edged impact of every step downhill, silently begging my knee to hold together just a little longer.

Hut 2. The second and final mountain refuge.

Like Hut 1, it is staffed by the Safety Team and laughter drifts out across the hills. The atmosphere is lighter here, almost celebratory. We all know what it means; the end is close enough now to feel real.

I stop only briefly. Long enough to sit, force food down and refill my front flasks with the last of my water. The hut is warm, welcoming, dangerously comfortable. Staying would be too easy.

So I leave.

Less than twenty minutes later, I'm back on the trail, the safety team calling after me that it's just seven miles to go. Seven miles, a distance that would normally mean nothing, but at this pace it could still take more than three hours. And the Schil still stands between me and the finish.

Hut 2 gives me no revival. Within minutes, exhaustion crashes over me again, heavy and irresistible. My eyes refuse to stay open as I weave along the rough path towards the final climb.

The Schil rises ahead, the last real hill on the Pennine Way before the descent into Kirk Yetholm. Unlike the soft grassy Cheviots, it is harsh and rocky, jagged outcrops breaking through the hillside, demanding effort I no longer possess.

Halfway up, I surrender to the tiredness.

I set a five-minute alarm, sit directly in the middle of the path, lean my head against a rock and disappear into sleep almost instantly.

The alarm drags me back. For a moment, I don't know where I am. Then instinct takes over. I stand, pick up my poles and move again, surprised by a discipline that feels borrowed from someone stronger than me.

Near the summit, I meet a safety team member heading down to find me. They had been watching the trackers from the top and grew concerned when mine stopped moving. I explain about the nap. He laughs, warm and easy and for a brief moment the heaviness lifts.

The nap and the laughter buy me twenty, maybe thirty minutes of lightness.

I descend the Schil quickly, relatively speaking and smile faintly as I step across the quiet, almost invisible border into Scotland. A few steps later, the trail splits into the high and low routes.

Thankfully, the Spine follows the low path. I call back to a runner heading confidently up the high route; he doesn't believe me at first, pulling out his phone to check before turning back sheepishly behind me.

After resisting for 260 miles, I finally flip my watch screen to see how far I have to go.

Four miles.

Four.

On a good day, that's less than thirty minutes.

Not today.

Not today.

The black cloud crashes back without warning.

The trail winds through a fern-lined path, looping gently as I descend. A small herd of cows stands motionless in the shade of a lone tree. The deeper I drop into the valley, the hotter it becomes. The heat gathers and traps itself between the steep hillsides, thick and unmoving.

Through a deserted farmyard, the dirt trail turns to tarmac. Sheep scatter as I approach, bleating indignantly while lambs bound effortlessly after their mothers, all energy and ease, while I drag myself forward step by tiny step.

The heat radiates from every direction now, bouncing off the asphalt, rising through my shoes, pressing down from above. The suffering on the Cheviots feels distant compared to this. That was hardship. This is torment.

Anger rises.

Anger at my knee.

Anger at my feet.

Anger at the heat.

And most of all, anger at myself.

I had imagined this moment for months. The final miles filled with triumph, relief and overwhelming joy. Less than two miles from the finish line, I thought I would feel unstoppable.

Instead, I feel empty.

Disappointment that I am not able to run these final few miles settles heavily in my chest and the anger steals the joy I thought would be waiting for me here.

Occasionally, a tree casts a sliver of shade across the road and I pause beneath it, absorbing seconds of cool relief before forcing myself onward again. Tip, tap. Tip, tap. The steady rhythm of poles and feet. Somehow, the smooth tarmac feels harsher than any rocky climb in the Cheviots.

Then, ahead, roofs, buildings and signs of civilisation.

I stop briefly, gathering myself. I change the music to something louder, heavier, something with enough rhythm to carry me forward.

The final 400 metres slope downhill.

And then I see it.

The Montane finish arch.

I take a deep breath, steady myself and run.



The Finish

Waiting for me at the finish are the two people I had searched for in Malham: my Mum and Dad.

For a moment, everything else fades, the arch, the noise, the people and there they are. Familiar. Solid. Real. A small piece of normal life standing at the end of something that has felt anything but normal.

I hug them, awkwardly at first, my pack still on, poles tangled between us. I don't cry. I thought I might, but instead, there is a strange stillness, as though my emotions are lagging several miles behind my body, still somewhere out on the trail trying to catch up.

My Dad gently steers me towards the wall of the Border Hotel. I had completely forgotten that the finish line isn't actually the finish. Spine tradition says you must touch the wall to complete the journey.

I laugh, or something close to it and mutter a few choice words about the extra steps. After 264 miles, even five more steps feels like an unreasonable request.

I reach out and place my hand on the stone.

Cold. Solid. Final.

And just like that, it's over.

Then comes a moment I will carry with me forever. My Dad places the medal around my neck. Not an official handing-over, nor a race organiser, just my Dad, quietly finishing the journey with me.



©Spine Official Photography

The weight of the medal settles against my chest, but it's the removal of something else that I feel most.

I take my pack off.

I sit.

No watch to follow.

No checkpoint to reach.

No miles left to count.

Just stillness.

I'm done.

- **The finish:** Kirk Yetholm
- **Distance covered:** 264 miles
- **Elevation climbed:** 42,000ft
- **Arrival time:** 15:49:09, Friday 20th June 2025
- **Finish time:** 127:48:54
- **Sleep:** 8 hours (max)
- **Finish positions:** 40th overall, 8th Female



Touching the wall of the Border Hotel, the official end of the Pennine Way

Summer Spine | Epilogue

I sit here now, a few short months (ok, eight months) after crossing the finish line in Kirk Yetholm, and I think...

Was that really me?

Did I actually do that?

It almost doesn't feel real.

I look back at the race and struggle to reconcile the person in those memories with the person sitting here now. I wonder where I found the strength, the determination and the sheer stubbornness to keep going when I was so completely broken.

The anger I felt in the Cheviots didn't last long. Slowly, quietly, it dissolved into something softer. My race may not have ended with the joy or triumph finish that I had imagined, but once the disappointment faded, pride began to take its place.

I ran and walked 264 miles along the Pennine Way from Edale to Kirk Yetholm in 127 hours, on just eight hours of sleep.

For long stretches, I was entirely self-sufficient, responsible for every decision, every problem, every step forward. I managed myself well. I kept moving when stopping would have been easier. When every part of my body, and at times my mind, begged me to quit, I continued.

Somewhere along that trail, I discovered just how strong, determined, tenacious and stubborn I really am.

And yet, even now, it feels surreal. I read my own story and wonder who that person is.

Who is the woman who climbed Pen-y-Ghent, scrambled up Cauldron Snout by headtorch, slept on rocks and crossed vast, fog-covered moorland alone in the middle of the night?

Surely not the quiet, shy girl who once doubted herself at every turn.

Not the girl who held herself back, who stayed small, who didn't try in case she failed, or worse, in case people noticed.

But perhaps that is exactly who she is.

Because in many ways, I wasn't just running the Spine Race for who I am now.

I was running for who I used to be.

I ran for the teenage girl who skipped PE for an entire year because she believed she wasn't sporty and didn't want anyone to see her come last.

I ran for the eighteen-year-old who tried to get fit by running around her local park, stopped four times in the first kilometre and never went back because she decided she simply wasn't a runner.

I ran for the quiet girl in her 20s who never spoke up, never stepped forward and never allowed herself to take up space.

I ran for the version of me who had dreams but lacked belief.

Somewhere between Edale and Kirk Yetholm, step by relentless step, that belief began to grow. Not suddenly. Not dramatically. Just slowly, almost unnoticed, like progress so often is.

I proved to myself that I can do hard things. That strength is not loud or fearless, but patient and persistent. That courage sometimes looks like nothing more than putting one foot in front of the other when quitting would be easier.

Without doubt, it was the hardest thing I have ever done.

But it taught me something I will carry far beyond the Pennine Way.

Because when I think back now, the story doesn't really begin at the finish line in Kirk Yetholm. It begins much earlier, with a girl who didn't believe she was capable, standing quietly at the start of something she wasn't sure she deserved to attempt.

And maybe that's why it still feels unreal.

Because the person who crossed that finish line didn't appear overnight.

She was simply the same girl who once stood at the beginning, still unsure, but finally willing to take the first step anyway.

And that's my story.

Kit I used: What I wore

I'm always intrigued by other people's kit choices for long races like this. I find it fascinating and have picked up several great recommendations over the years simply from reading other runners' blogs.

I used hundreds of pieces of kit throughout the race, but these were some of the key items.

Pack: Ultimate Direction 30L Fastpackher

Whilst I didn't love this pack, it did the job. There was plenty of space for mandatory kit, but when fully loaded the weight sat heavily on my shoulders. The waist strap felt fairly ineffective and the pockets were difficult to access whilst wearing it.

If I were to do this race again, I would definitely explore other pack options.

Pack: Geeky Hiker Front Pouch

A superb bit of kit. I kept everything I wanted, quick and easy access to in here: my phone, headphones, antibac hand gel, tissues, mints, sunscreen and snacks. It also has handy loops for stashing poles, which proved far easier than trying to secure them back onto the UD pack.

Poles: Black Diamond Carbon Z

From Harddraw onwards, these were almost constantly in my hands, only stowed for longer downhill and flatter sections. They're poles; they do their job. I'm not generally a fan, but for this race, they were invaluable.

Watch: Garmin Fenix 7

I cannot fault this watch. Whilst it recorded the activity in the background, I turned off most data screens, using it mainly for time checks, heart rate during the early stages, navigation and feed alerts. The battery life was excellent and navigation was faultless.

Light: Ledlenser MH10 Headtorch

A superb headtorch. Bright, comfortable and with excellent battery life. As I only needed it for around six hours each night, a single charge lasted several days.

Shoes: Hoka Speedgoat 6

My go-to trail shoe for several years. Extremely comfortable and reliable across most terrain when comfort is the priority. They performed superbly and I genuinely cannot fault them. I also had a pair of Inov-8 Trailflys in my drop bag as backup.

DexShell Waterproof Socks

I wore several pairs up to Bellingham, where I eventually ran out of clean ones and switched to standard socks. I was very glad of them during damp overnight sections on the moors and I'm certain they helped keep my feet in far better condition than many others' until quite late in the race.

Montane Spine Waterproof Jacket

Rarely needed, but I was completely confident it would have kept me dry had conditions changed. Worn briefly in Edale before the start and again for a few hours between Tan Hill and Middleton.

Montane Spirit Lite Waterproof Trousers

Mandatory kit. They never left my pack.

Montane Fireball Insulated Jacket

My absolute favourite piece of kit! I wore it every night once temperatures dropped. I also carried a spare Lite version in my drop bag.

Montane Women's Protium Lite Hooded Pull-On Fleece

A brilliant layer. Lightweight yet warm. This went on first each evening, followed by the Fireball an hour or two later. With both layers and their hoods, I stayed comfortably warm even when moving slowly in bitter winds across the moors.

Montane Slipstream Thermal Women's Trail Running Tights

Part of the mandatory kit, but never worn.

Montane Prism Dry Line Waterproof Mitts

I carried Decathlon waterproof gloves to meet mandatory kit requirements (gloves with fingers were required), but I strongly prefer mitts with thin liners. You might not expect gloves or mitts to be necessary in summer, but the nights were cold and I wore these nightly.

What can I say... I clearly like Montane kit.

Unbranded Windproof Jacket

Picked up in a sale for £10 about ten years ago, this turned out to be an absolute bargain. A perfect in-between layer when I needed a little warmth but not a fleece or full jacket.

Shorts, T-shirts and Sports Bras

I rotated through various shorts and T-shirts throughout the race. Nothing particularly technical or heavily branded, aside from the Icebreaker T-shirt I started in. Decathlon shorts, old race T-shirts and even a merino top from Aldi all performed perfectly well. Sports bras were simple Decathlon crop tops. No complaints at all.

Next time, I would invest in lightweight UV tops to better protect my skin from the sun.

The Extras

Hundreds of buffs, liner gloves, a visor, sunglasses... and countless small items that quietly did their job without ever demanding attention.

Like every runner, I obsessed over kit before the race, wondering what would work and what wouldn't. In reality, most of it simply faded into the background, doing exactly what it was meant to do while I got on with the much harder task of keeping myself moving north.

Some pieces I'd change next time. Some I wouldn't leave home without. But all of it became part of the story of a long walk across Britain that, somehow, turned into something far bigger than just a race.



Jacob's Ladder ©Official Spine Photo– Much of my kit on show!

Food, what I ate...

Of course, kit is only half the story; the other essential element in keeping me moving north was food.

I had an hourly alert on my watch to remind me to eat. I tried very hard not to ignore it, even during my lowest moments.

On the trail

- Peanut Butter and Jam wraps. I pre-made a batch of about 20 that lasted me until day three.
- (Un)toasted tea cakes
- Potato cakes
- Graze flapjacks in a variety of flavours
- Nakd Bars in a variety of flavours
- Soreen Malt Loaf
- Mini oat bars (technically baby food!)
- Salted peanuts, pretzels, raisins and almonds.
- Bananas
- Tailwind in one of my flasks and I carried a small bottle of squash to add some flavour to water.
- Whenever I had access to hot water, I made up some instant oatmeal and a sugary coffee (Taylor's coffee bags for the win!)

At the checkpoints

- Hebden Bridge – A plain baked potato and a small portion of vegan pasta.
- Hardraw – Vegan chilli with rice when I arrived, oatmeal and coffee before I left.
- Middleton – At least four rounds of baked beans on toast
- Alston – Another four plus rounds of baked beans on toast...
- Bellingham – Four baked potatoes with beans, a vegan sausage and a handful of satsumas. Baked beans featured heavily...!

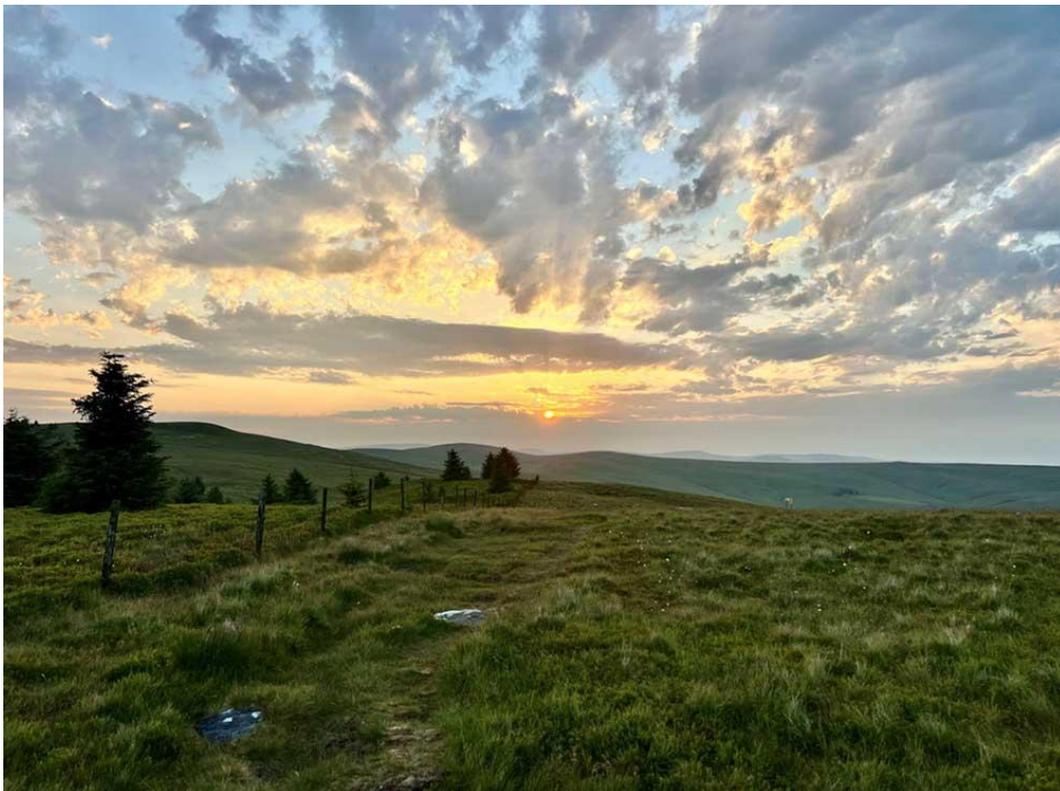
Food, much like my kit, became less about enjoyment and more about function. In the early miles, I paid attention to flavours and choices, but as the days blurred together, eating simply became another task on the checklist.

Eat because the watch told me to. Eat because I knew I had to, not because I wanted to. Some things tasted incredible in the moment, others were forced down purely out of necessity, but every bite was fuel for the next step forward.

Looking back, I probably didn't eat enough, something that undoubtedly contributed to the darker moments later in the race. But despite that, my body kept going, sustained by a strange mix of planning, stubbornness and whatever calories I could persuade myself to consume along the way.

Top Three Moments

1. Climbing Cauldron Snout in the middle of the night, lit only by my headtorch.
2. Early morning light on Hadrian's Wall.
3. Sunrise on the Cheviots.



Sunrise on the Cheviots

(A version of this article with more photos is on <https://photogirlruns.blog/2026/02/22/summer-spine-2025>)

THE STANZA STONES 50-MILE ULTRA (by Debra Bourne)

The Stanza Stones is a 50-mile ultramarathon on the Yorkshire Moors, starting at Marsden and winding to Ilkley. The race is named for six stones, Snow, Rain, Mist, Dew, Puddle and Beck, each with a stanza of a poem by Poet Laureate Simon Armitage, carved into the faces of the stones by local stone artist Pip Hall. The route passes each of these – some rather more obvious than others.

I had never raced or even run in the Yorkshire Moors, and this event came onto my radar only because of an online chat with an ultrarunning friend in October. We were telling each other about our race plans for 2026 and she mentioned that she was doing the 'Hunnypot 100' – the 2026 edition of the annual Long Distance Walking Association (LDWA) 100-mile Challenge, which would be in Kent, heading through Pooh Bear's beloved Ashdown Forest – hence the 'Hunnypot' in the name. My friend informed me that not only were there still places remaining for the Hunnypot, but that there was still one race in 2025 that would act as a qualifier - qualifiers for the LDWA 100 being a specific list of events, mostly LDWA events, that are suitable for both walkers and runners.

Which is why, towards the end of November, my husband and I set off north. My stepmother lives in North Manchester, so we were able to drive up on Thursday evening and stay with her. Saturday morning, the alarm rang at 6.30, to give us time to drive over the Pennines on the M62, then slide off to the small village of Marsden. My husband put the post code into WAZE on his phone, and confidently followed its directions down smaller and smaller roads until it took us up a steep, narrow lane, then stated 'you have reached your final destination. We were supposed to be at a cricket club. Instead, there were only a few houses on either side of the lane. Stopping, he put in the cricket club name, and WAZE issued new directions. Another mile or so driving on the winding lanes finally took us to the cricket club.

As soon as I had taken a last swig of tea and grabbed my backpack and drop bag, Aidan left so he could find one of the local parkruns. I hoped that WAZE took him there a bit more directly! [It did, and he was only a minute or so late starting.]

The detour meant that we arrived about 15 minutes later than intended, so I had a bit of a rush to get registered, kit-checked, and fitted with a tracker; give in my drop bag; visit the toilets; and apply lubricant. One of the volunteers asked me what time I was expecting, and I said I was hoping for around 12 hours, but that I didn't know the terrain and was getting over a bad cold, so I might be slower. She didn't make any encouraging noises on that estimate, and I started to mentally revise that timeline to 'probably slower' then 'almost certainly slower'. I'd suggested to Aidan that I might need to be collected from Ilkley at between 9 and 10 pm. Now I started to feel guilty that it might be later.

The race organisers had sent us a 'Roadbook', which I'd read, but between my cold and being busy at work, not everything had sunk into my brain properly. One aspect for confusion was the checkpoints. The roadbook had broken down the route into four vaguely-described 'legs' and I had absorbed that as meaning a checkpoint at the end of each leg. There were actually six checkpoints along the way, three outdoor and three indoor. These were identified in the Roadbook with place names and map coordinates, but nowhere had it said how many miles between checkpoints. As a result, not knowing the area and not having had time to study the map, I had literally no idea when to expect them. Looking again at the Roadbook after the race, the indoor checkpoints were indeed at the end of each of legs 1, 2, and 3 (or start of legs 2, 3, and 4), with the extra checkpoints being part way along leg 1, partway through leg 2, and towards the end of leg 4.

The same went for the Stones: place-named and map coordinates given, but no distances. The book said that Snow and Rain were in leg 1, Mist was in leg 2, and Dew, Puddle and Beck were all in leg 4, but again that was not much help. Distances would have been much, much appreciated. The roadbook said of the Stones: "There will be an orienteering kite at each of the Stones this year. You do not need to do anything with the kite, just touch each stone when you visit them and the tracker will be set to record your presence at the stone within 15 metres." Not having a clue where the stones were, I worried whether I would find them all.

It was chilly and the low, grey clouds were starting to drizzle on us as we gathered outside for the pre-race briefing. During this, the Race Director welcomed us to the first Winter edition of the race, which had previously been held in the summers of 2023, 2024 and 2025. I was still a bit flustered and checking that I

had everything, so not concentrating quite as well as I ought to be, while the Race Director explained about visiting each of the stones, with something about some being easier to spot than others, and said something about a stone circle we would visit near the end. He also said that while the race route wasn't specifically marked for the race, it mostly followed good, obvious paths. The 'mostly' part was a bit worrying; I hoped that the GPX file on my watch would be accurate!

At 9 am he sent us off. Lots of fit runners trotting off up the road at a good pace. Me rather nearer the back, already coughing and struggling to breathe. My nose was running and I wasn't sure whether that was the tail end of my cold or the exercise-induced rhinitis that I have developed in the last year or two – probably both. Uphill running wasn't going to happen, and even uphill walking was slower than usual, blowing my nose repeatedly, coughing almost incessantly. I reminded myself that all I needed to do with this event was finish, and that with a 24-hour overall cut-off time, to accommodate walkers, I didn't have to worry about running (or walking) out of time.

After a bit less than a mile we left the road and headed up Pule Hill, the gradient getting steeper. We passed a marker stone stating that we were on the 'Marsden Moor Heritage Trail'.



[Runners stretching away from me up the hill and into the mist. Trail marker stone]

By the top we had ascended about 600 ft from our starting point. We started to descend and at least I could breathe a bit better. Soon, only about 1.5 miles from the start, we passed the first of the Stanza Stones, 'Snow'. It was tucked out of sight, and I only saw the stone, and the orienteering kite, by following other runners doubling-back slightly. I already couldn't remember how close to the Stones we needed to get; I worried that I would miss one and be disqualified...



['Snow' – the only Stanza Stone I managed to photograph]

We continued our descent, dropping down about 600 ft in the next mile and a half, with a short road section before ascending a further 800 ft or so by five miles. I'm sure that on a clear day the views would have been lovely. Today the hills (and the runners ahead of me) simply faded into mist and low cloud.

Crossing a road, I noticed a sign for the Pennine Way - I hadn't noticed exactly where we had joined that route. This would be my first run on any part of the Pennine Way, and I was interested to see what it was like – maybe one day, when I was retired and had more time, I would be able to recce the route and decide whether to enter the Spine Race...



[On the Pennine Way for this part of the route]

At about 6.6 miles we stepped onto a footbridge to cross over the M62 motorway. I tried to fix some ground-based landmarks in my head so that later, driving along the motorway, I would be able to spot which bridge it had been. The time stamp in the photo I took [which I'm not including – it's a photo of a motorway!] says 10:48 – so it had taken me nearly an hour and 50 minutes to do the first 6.6 miles. Horribly slow: to be expected when breathing was inefficient and the cold air hurt my sore airways.

Onwards – muddy paths, a section of broken boulders with no evident path and nobody ahead of me to follow. I divided my attention between the rocks and the GPS on my watch, checking that I was still going in the correct direction.



[Random bit of the Moors with reasonable footing]

Having, as I said, not really taken in that there were six aid stations, I was taken by surprise on reaching the first outdoor marquee stop. It was great being able to stock up on food and water. I told a volunteer that I was worried about missing the next Stone. 'Oh, it's easy', she said, 'just remember after the reservoir to watch out for the bridge you need to cross and you can't miss it!' I always worry when someone says 'you can't miss it'. And indeed, trotting along a nice bit of gravelled track, along and past Blackstone Edge reservoir, I suddenly realise that the stone is there, right alongside me – but on the far side of a deep drainage ditch. Another runner is heading back towards me on the far side, having missed it. Looking back, I finally spot the little bridge, so I turn and reverse my course along the track, over the bridge and finally to the stone. I get my phone out to take a photo. Somehow my phone has turned itself off and it doesn't want to turn back on. I shove it back into my pack and continue, photo-less. [Garmin tells me for future reference that it was at about 9.75 miles – if I ever do this again, at least I'll know].

Meanwhile, a guy I had been playing hopscotch with for the last several miles, in brightly-coloured shorts, who had also missed seeing the bridge (so that was at least three of us, which made me feel a little less bad) has gone for the other option, slithering down into the ditch, through the water in the bottom and back out. Rather him than me, even if it was a bit faster!

Onwards. The route is fairly flat and on a wide gravel trail, so I'm still trying to run when my lungs let me – they are not happy with me and breathing deeply hurts. Looking back at Garmin's data, the program helpfully tells me that I started at Performance Condition -5, dropped to -6, then recovered to -4 for the remainder of the day. No wonder I felt that I was dragging myself along the route!

A level stretch along another reservoir, a bit of undulation, flat slabs forming a path. A huge, dark monument looms out of the mist on the top of the hill – Stoodley Pike Monument, completed in 1856 at the end of the Crimean War.



[Stoodley Pike Monument]

Onwards on the flat stones, then a descent to the first indoor checkpoint, at Mytholmroyd Community Centre, a little southeast of Hebden Bridge. Fuel up, fill waters. I've been on the go for nearly 5 hours and covered only about 18 miles. No point worrying about that. Keep going.

Uphill for the next couple of miles, then another flatter stretch over high moorland above Hebden Bridge and Oxenhope. Past another reservoir, the next (outdoor) aid station on Cold Edge Road, and soon the

Mist Stanza Stone – actually two rocks, from when the chosen stone had split into two before the carving started. A bit more ascent, then more gradual descent. It's somewhere along here, enjoying actually running (yay!), down a nice, easy-to-follow- track, that I spot two runners – wearing race numbers, so fellow participants, not simply a couple of people out for a run, heading back up the trail towards me. That's usually the sign of a missed turning – and so it proves. Back up the hill a bit, then we strike off from the visible trail, instead heading across featureless moorland. I'm really glad to have other people around at this point and not be worrying about the fact that if my GPX goes wrong I'll have no idea where I am. That doesn't stop me from missing another turning and going wrong a short distance a little later, and then choosing the wrong option out of two paths going up a hill, and needing to double back a bit. Oh well.

I've been getting ahead of a strong walker, then she's been catching me up when I stopped to consider the route. She's done the race before, in summer 2024, and knows the route reasonably well. After some time of this, I decide that honestly my 'running', limited by my impaired breathing, isn't going to get me to the finish that far ahead of her fast walking, and that I might as well stay with her and vastly reduce the navigational worries. She's willing to have company, so we continue together.

By 4.15 or so it's getting dark and it's time to switch the head torches on. I'm glad that I've got my LEDLenser Neo10R – getting a bit old, but I know that the battery will last a full night, and the extension lead means I can put the heavy battery pack into a jacket or pack pocket, not have it weighing down the back of my head. After a while a friend of my guide joins us. He did the summer race earlier in the year and remembers it very well. Two guides!

It's about 28 miles and nearly 6pm when we reach the aid station in Haworth. Food, water, toilets. Onwards. It's good to be with people who know the route. Uphill again, a flattish few miles, a more gradual descent. There's a wooded part where I would definitely have got lost and/or been incredibly slow and stressed by myself. With two native guides I simply have to watch the sometimes-treacherous footing. The extra time it's taking staying with them is well the reduced stress.

It's about 8.45 pm when we reach Bingley. I call my stepmother's house and admit that I'm going to be later finishing than I expected – quite a bit later. I've still got about 15 miles to go and that's going to take probably another 5 hours. I tell my amazing husband that he might as well go to bed for a few hours and not set out until about 1 am. I eat (vegan food both to eat-in and suitable for carrying away was available at all the checkpoints), and stock up on food and water.

Uphill again from Bingley, north then turning east. Our group of three has become five, and we chat about past and planned future races as we go. Through a coniferous wood, and we reach the Dew stone at about 41.5 miles. This one is easy to see, straight ahead of us on the trail: two large slabs with a small gap between them, blocking a disused gateway in a dry stone wall. We turn right, past the stones, following the trail, briefly onto a larger lane then back up the hill. Turning eastwards along the top of Addingham High Moor. The sky is clear now and if it were still daylight, we would finally have views of the surrounding countryside. Instead, looking up there's a gloriously starry sky. After a while, lights come into view ahead, some distance below – Ilkley, my local guides tell me – but we won't be getting there for some time.

We contour above the town, descending a bit, until on a stretch of lane we reach the final aid station at 46 miles – a large pop-up tent tucked into a bit of shelter. Volunteers are amazing! I wonder how long they have been here. I check my water supply, get some sweets, and I'm ready to go. We set off as a group of five and I'm surprised when I turn my head to continue a conversation with one of the other runners that she has vanished. So, four of us.

Up the road, then the GPS indicates a left turn up a steepish hillside. My guides tell me that it doesn't make much difference - the road swings around and meets the path further up. In my fairly minimal trail shoes I decide I'd prefer the softer ground of the path, so we part company. I rejoin the road maybe 50 metres ahead of the tarmac contingent, their route having been a bit longer, although less steep, and we continue. Once up the steep ascent, it's back onto flattish moorland. Very boggy, but there's a path of flat wide stones, so it should be runnable. My lungs and my legs, wonder of wonders, both agree: let's run. There's one small snag: the temperature has dropped quite a bit and a film of ice is now coating the flat paving slabs. The stones are slick, the surrounding 'ground' is bog and streams. Running is not an option. Instead, I gingerly pick my way along the slabs, concentrating on placing my feet carefully and not slipping. I can hear someone just behind me as I press on as fast as I safely can, worried that I'm holding them up, and

wishing I had brought my running poles, but when I finally look round, there's nobody there. I also realise that somewhere along the way, up on Rombald's Moor, I missed seeing a Stanza Stone. I hope that the path went within 15 metres of it.

By now I'm cold inside my windproof and waterproof jackets, running tights and waterproof trousers, hat, and gloves, and know that I really ought to stop and get my additional warm layer on, but it seems a lot of faff when so close to the finish – I'll manage with a bit of chill. Stupid in hindsight – it's COLD up here.

The path starts to descend, and I can see little red markers ahead of me, showing the route downhill and towards Ilkley – but there are also markers heading to the right. Have I somehow come from the wrong direction? Was there another event going on, and the markers are for those, not for us at all? I dither and the others catch up with me. The right-leading flags are the ones to follow first, to the little stone circle, the Twelve Apostles, which I had totally forgotten about – and around it, then back along and onto the descent – careful on broken rock and watching out for any ice. We're at about 49 miles. I'm definitely getting colder but don't want to hold the others up or lose them while stopping to put on my warm layer.

I'm having to be really careful on the descent, wishing again that I had chosen to bring my poles, and feeling bad about how slowly I'm moving – then one of the others compliments me: 'Your balance is amazing, I don't know how you're managing without poles!' – and I feel better. Finally, the gradient gets less steep, and soon after passing 50 miles on my watch we drop down into Ilkley, past the Beck Stone (although I honestly can't remember it!), a little further, and onto road. I walk faster, break into a jog. It can't be far now! Trotting along the road, wondering where exactly the finish is – finally a tall figure ahead on the pavement, my wonderful husband, who points me at the path into the school hall. Done, in 17 hours and 16 minutes. In the hall, I'm given my race memento – a piece of marble with the elevation outline on it (no medal) and lower myself into a children's chair at one of the low tables. There's a bit of a hiccup when the volunteers can't find my drop bag, but I manage to spot it tucked away in a corner, so I change into non-sweaty clothes and add extra layers. I'm chilled right through and definitely regretting not having put my warm jacket on, up on the hill.



[Me and my two local guides, holding our mementoes. Memento]

Post-race musings

It was a tough event, with my lungs not working properly. My slowest 50-mile race by FAR, but I know that I made the right decision in staying with fast walkers who knew the way rather than pushing on perhaps 0.5-1 mile per hour faster with additional navigation to worry about and added stress, when I had plenty of time and all I needed to do was finish. The weather could have been a lot worse, with only some light rain during the day, and a bit of wind, but the icy flagstones across Rombald's Moor/Ilkley Moor were not fun. I am amazed I didn't fall in that section – I only fell once, during daylight hours, and that was on nice soft bog, thankfully.

Memo to self: even if it's 'only' 2-3 miles to shelter or the end, if you're getting cold, put the extra warm layer on!

THE FALL (by William J Furney)

It is an odd feeling, lying on the street. Lower than the noxious fumes bursting from the long lines of passing vehicles as exhausted commuters inch their way home from another work-weary day in London, it is an almost peripatetic transition to an altered state of mind.

In an even stranger way, it feels comfortable; it is also comforting.

After the shock of the sudden skid on mud that almost toppled kind-hearted run leader Josef and the subsequent shock of a bang, I lay there wondering: Can I stay?

It felt guiltily intimate; I felt connected.

And then the voices from concerned runners, pulling me out of my reverie, forcing me to rise, to feel the pain, to exclaim. And the glance at my exposed and bloodied knee, black leggings shredded, complaints from my hands and shoulder, and I winced, wondering about the damage, if it might end my marathon hopes, and if I should call it a night on this dark, cold February night.

"Did you hit your head?" Josef asked again and again and I said no, and that I was fine. Our speedy and determined group of four continued and completed the hour-long run, and Josef, who seemed concerned I might not survive the jog home, asked to let him know when I got back.

Peeling off the shrouds of material in my flat revealed the true horror of my wounds: a dozen patches of scrapes and matted blood in an arc from knee to shoulder to hands. A right hand that had swollen, seized up and was refusing to function. A battered and bruised psyche that could scarcely believe I had slipped on a patch of mud while rounding a corner when I had always been wary, taken extra care, especially on icy evenings on recent runs.

After tripping over tree roots during a trial run the previous summer, sending me soaring and crashing into a bloodied mess, I had exercised caution as I exercised. But at least then, my blow was cushioned by the carpeted forest floor. This time it was a concrete slap.

Still, the following morning, as I hobbled about and consulted with my AI coach about the extent of my injuries ("It looks painful and messy but it's surface damage only."), I kept replaying the slip and slap and how being on the ground felt so nice, and why I had lingered horizontally.

A realisation appeared, that mostly we are isolated -- insulated -- from the world we're in, from the ground upon which we are standing, or, in this case, running on. The rubber soles that prevent us from making direct contact with Mother Earth may be the barrier that blocks true connection, a shield from nature thwarting grounding.

That's the pleasure of beaches, parks and other outdoor areas on sunny days, when we can cast off our footwear and really stand tall. It was why I was not worried about my caressing fall, however alarming it was to my Striders of Croydon running group.

Earthing ourselves, proponents say, allows a flow of the Earth's negatively charged surface electrons into our body. They can have the effect of helping to reduce inflammation and blood pressure, eliminating harmful free radicals and acting as a powerful antioxidant in a world where our bodies are polluted by external and internal toxins (pesticides in fruit and vegetables, for instance).

But unlike in my case, face-down on a muddy pavement, the best results are achieved when in direct contact with the soil, and ideally for between 10 or 30 minutes a day.

Writer Claire Munnings tried grounding for a week and loved it. "I can't say for sure if my week of grounding improved my sleep, or was the reason for my balanced emotions that week, but I do know that stepping outside in the fresh air was good for me," she said in an article about her experience in holistic magazine Natural Health.

“There’s something magical about connecting to the earth with your bare feet and hands, and it’s a reminder that the simple joy – and healing prowess – of the great outdoors should not be overlooked, even in autumn and winter.”

Perhaps I should take up barefoot running. After all, the cause of my bumbling slip and fall were flat-soled shoes with no grip to speak of, meaning you might as well be on ice the second you encounter something wet or frozen.

So the surprise of my fall wasn’t my sudden plummet. It was the jolt from the luxuriating contact with the Earth.



William (second from right) after our mob match against Croydon Harriers on 31 January

COMPETITIVE HIGHLIGHTS: DECEMBER 2025 – FEBRUARY 2026

On 13 December, Ally Whitlock was the fourth woman to finish the Centurion Winter Downs 100-mile race (20:52:31). In the Victoria Park Half-Marathon on the same day, Keith Simpson set a club M75 record of 2:12:14.

In the South of the Thames Cross-Country Championships at Wimbledon on 20 December, Elspeth Meakin was 61st in the women's race. In the men's race, James Rhodes was 73rd with Tom Gillespie 138th and Josef Freedman 171st. In the RunThrough Lee Valley 10-mile race on the same day, Keith Simpson set a club M75 record of 1:40:40.

The Surrey Cross-Country Championships took place at Dorking on 4 January. In the women's race, Consuelo Kennefick placed 46th while Elspeth Meakin was 104th. In the men's race, James Rhodes placed 85th, while Tom Gillespie was 136th and Josef Freedman 160th.

The third Surrey Cross-Country League matches of the season took place at Oxshott on 10 January. Striders' women placed 12th out of 15 clubs in their Division Two match. Consuelo Kennefick was 24th, Ally Whitlock 25th, Cindy Siu 79th, Stephanie Hunter 91st and Debra Bourne completed the A team in 96th.

Striders' men placed fifth out of ten clubs in their Division Three match. Phil Coales ran well to place eighth, with James Rhodes tenth, Marc Burrows 36th and Nathan Robertshaw 47th. Krzysztof Klidzia was first in the M60 age-group and 64th overall, while Steve Corfield was 70th, Tom Gillespie 74th, Liam Redmond 95th, Kerim Suruliz 101st and Erik Schrijnemaekers completed the A team in 102nd.

The South of England Cross-Country Championships took place at Beckenham Place Park on 24 January. In the men's race, James Rhodes placed 221st while Stephen Siu was 570th. In the women's race, Consuelo Kennefick placed 248th.

Striders had a record turnout of 82 finishers in the annual 'mob match' against Croydon Harriers on 31 January, held in conjunction with the South Norwood parkrun. Striders had the first two female finishers with Niamh Vincent placing 25th overall (21:28), and Ally Whitlock 29th overall (21:52). For Striders' men, Marc Burrows was third (18:47) and Daniel Finch fourth (18:48). Harriers had 63 finishers. Under the 'Thornbury' method, whereby all 145 finishers score in the match, Striders won by 5345 points to 5234.

The final Surrey Cross-Country League matches of the season took place at Lloyd Park on 7 February. Striders' women did very well to finish sixth out of 15 clubs in their Division Two match. They were led by Ally Whitlock, who placed 15th out of the 145 finishers. Niamh Vincent was 17th, Rachel Lindley 20th, Fiona Carr 73rd and Cindy Siu completed the A team in 74th. They placed eleventh in the final Division Two table.

Striders' men placed fourth out of ten clubs in their Division Three match, which placed them third in the final Division Three table. They were led by James Rhodes who placed eleventh out of the 169 finishers. Phil Coales was 17th, James Bennett 32nd, Conor O'Hara-Barrett 40th and Paul Thomas 49th. Steve Corfield was first in the M60 age-group and 50th overall. Liam Redmond was 57th, Krzysztof Klidzia 60th, Robert Lines 65th and Kerim Suruliz completed the A team in 66th.

The first Surrey Road League race of the year was the Valentines 10K at Chessington on 15 February. Phil Coales placed 25th out of 397 finishers (35:30), while Marc Burrows placed 54th (37:26). Steve Corfield placed first in the M60 age-group and 80th overall (38:58). They were 16th in the team event.

In the British Masters Indoor Championships at Lee Valley on 21 February, Steve Corfield ran very well to place third in the M60 800 metres (2:21.56).

Striders' men did well to finish second in the East Surrey League cross-country race at Lloyd Park on 28 February. Phil Coales was sixth, Tom Gillespie ninth, Robert Lines tenth, Krzysztof Klidzia eleventh, Martin Filer 16th and Bill Beattie 21st. Fiona Carr was the ninth woman to finish, placing 45th overall.

40 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN FEBRUARY – JUNE 1986

The final match of the Surrey Cross-Country League Division One was held at Coulsdon on 15 February. Aldershot had won the league championship for thirteen successive years, but Herne Hill went into the final match with a commanding lead of 144 points. Aldershot won the match by 42 points, but Herne Hill had still done enough to win the league for the first time. South London Harriers placed third, while Croydon Harriers placed sixth and were relegated to Division Two. The final match of the Surrey Women's Cross-Country League was held two weeks later, at a snow-covered Brockwell Park. Woking won the league title with 51 points. Croydon Harriers placed fifth (35) and South London Harriers sixth (28).

February 1986 saw the amalgamation of Mitcham AC with Sutton & Cheam Harriers. Both clubs had been based at Carshalton Arena (which was subsequently renamed Sutton Arena). The merged club was initially called Mitcham & Sutton AC; in 1992 it changed its name again, to Sutton & District AC.

The National Cross-Country Championships took place at Newcastle, on a snow-covered course, on 1 March. For Croydon Harriers, Dave Warren was 793rd while Mick Jones was 899th.

The East Surrey League held its annual road relay on 8 March, on the traditional course at Box Hill. The relay was won by Box Hill Racers, in their first year in the league. Croydon Harriers were second. Their team comprised Gary Bishop (10:24), Ken Penney (10:09), Alan Dolton (10:28) and Ian Statter (10:57). Future Strider Peter Yarlett ran 10:59 for Croydon's B team.

In the Reading Half-Marathon on 6 April, Simon Morris set a Striders club record of 72:59, which remained the club record for 29 years, until James Bennett broke it in 2015.

The East Surrey League held its annual road race at Ewell on 8 April. Box Hill had the first four finishers and won the team event. Croydon Harriers placed second, led by Ken Penney who was fifth (21:49). Future Strider Graham Hansen was tenth (22:16). Box Hill won the league championship with the maximum possible points total of 48, having won all four events during the season. Croydon Harriers placed second.

The sixth London Marathon was held on 20 April. Striders had ten finishers, led by Nigel Davidson who ran 2:51:50. He was followed by Steve Harman (3:06), Mike Meech (3:06), Ian Clough (3:32), Ron Carver (3:34), John Taylor (3:43), John Keen (3:44), Val Pinfield (3:58), Lynn Blackman (4:17) and Cecil Chisholm (4:17). Two future Striders ran for Surrey Beagles, with John McGilvray recording 2:59:10 while Nigel Bongers ran 3:16. This was the first year that Striders had not held a post-Marathon reception at City Link House (the post-race celebration was in the Blacksmiths Arms). For the first time, the club newsletter and press report had no reference to any competitors from the Cambridge or Halifax branches of Philips. Striders' newsletters had also changed their title from 'Philips City Striders AC Croydon Area Newsletter' to 'Philips City Striders AC Newsletter', suggesting that the club could now be regarded as a 'Croydon' club rather than as a club for employees and former employees of Philips.

The Surrey 10000 metres championship was held at Tooting on 27 April. Ian Lamplough of Box Hill Racers won in 30:26.9. For Croydon Harriers, Alan Dolton placed fifth (31:33.1) with Robin Dickson eighth (32:50.9). In the Brighton 10K on the same day, Graham Hansen placed tenth in a personal best 31:03.

In the Surrey Championships, at Motspur Park on 17 May, future Strider David McKenzie placed second in the under-17 200 metres in 22.9 seconds.

The Caterham Half-Marathon took place on 8 June. Bob Treadwell of Surrey Beagles won in 69:37. Striders' Simon Morris was the first M40 to finish, in 74:29.

On 21 June, Croydon Harriers' ultra-distance runner James Zarei placed fourth in the Ewhurst 100-mile road race (held over ten laps of a ten-mile circuit), recording 14 hours 14 minutes 25. A week later, he recorded 146 miles 1722 yards in a 24-hour track race at Gateshead.

In the Basingstoke Marathon on 22 June, Simon Morris set what was then a Striders' marathon record of 2:45:59. This remained the club marathon record until April 2000, when it was beaten by Gerry Crispie.

On 28 June, future Strider Michelle Edwards represented Great Britain in a junior international at Swansea, where she placed third in the 100 metre hurdles in 14.66 seconds.

30 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN JANUARY – MARCH 1996

The third Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two match of the season took place at Lloyd Park on 6 January. Croydon Harriers won the team event, while Striders finished a disappointing ninth. Second-claim member Juan Galvan made his only appearance of the season and led the team home in 25th place. Tony Sheppard was 31st with Lee Morgan 40th, Gary Wales 74th, Nigel Davidson 77th and Gerry Crispie 82nd.

The Southern Veterans Cross-Country Championships took place at Lloyd Park on 3 February. For Striders, Kevin Burnett placed fifth in the M55 age-group.

The Surrey Cross-Country League completed its 34th season with matches on 17 February. Hounslow won Division One by just 14 points from Thames Hare & Hounds. South London Harriers placed seventh, narrowly avoiding relegation after a close battle with Ranelagh. The final Division Two match of the season took place at Richmond Park. Hercules-Wimbledon and Croydon Harriers won promotion. Striders started the match more than 300 points adrift at the foot of the table. They again placed ninth in the match and were relegated to Division Three. Lee Morgan led the team in 31st place while Tony Sheppard was 41st, Nigel Davidson 52nd, Eric Parker 65th, Gerry Crispie 86th, John McGilvray 90th and Gary Wales 91st.

Striders' results for the past six years made interesting reading:

1990/91	3rd in Division Three. Promoted.
1991/92	10th (of 11) in Division Two. Relegated.
1992/93	2nd in Division Three. Promoted.
1993/94	9th (of 9) in Division Two. Relegated.
1994/95	2nd in Division Three. Promoted.
1995/96	9th (of 9) in Division Two. Relegated.

However, this marked the end of the club's sequence of promotion being followed by immediate relegation: Striders were now to remain in Division Three until 2002.

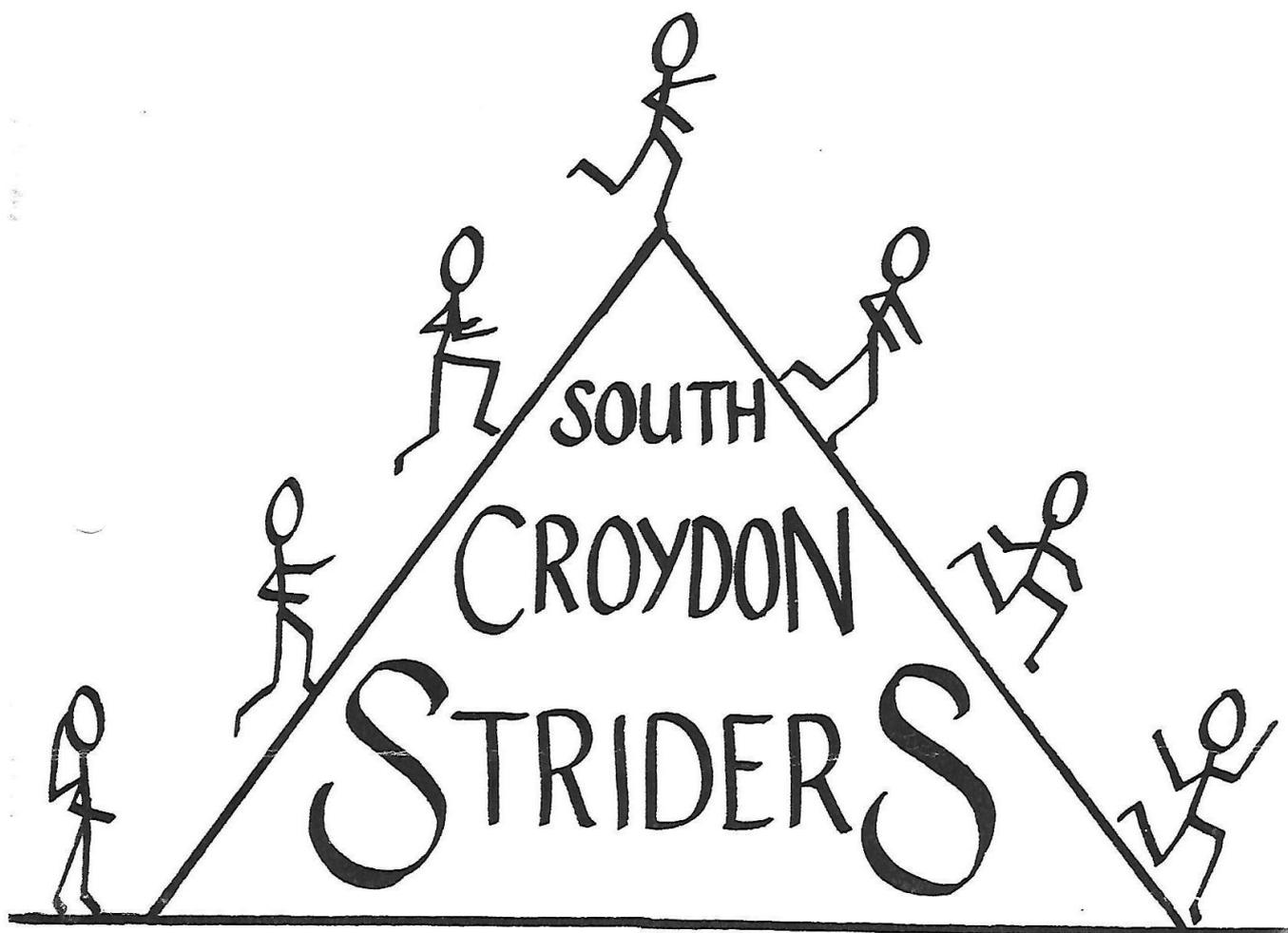
The Surrey Women's Cross-Country League completed its 17th season with a match in Lloyd Park on 17 February. The race was won by Jeina Mitchell of Croydon Harriers. Dulwich won Division One with Herne Hill second and South London Harriers third. Woking won Division Two.

In the Brighton Half Marathon on 25 February, held in very windy conditions, Eric Parker ran well to finish in 81:10, while club colleague Gerry Crispie ran 83:00. In the Woking 10-mile road race on 3 March, Lee Morgan set a personal best of 55:58.

The National Cross-Country Championships were held at Newark on 9 March. Striders showed good team spirit to field a complete team, placing 160th in the team event. Lee Morgan led them home in 969th place (52:20), with Nigel Davidson close behind in 978th (52:26). Tony Sheppard was 1308th with John McGilvray 1351st, Stuart Driver 1716th and Colin Cotton 1729th. Local rivals Croydon Harriers only managed to field three runners, led by Dave Warren who placed 517th.

During the early months of 1996, the saga of the change of Striders' club name continued. The Surrey AAA had angered most Striders by refusing to accept the club's application to change the name from 'Philips City Striders' to 'Croydon Striders', on the grounds that it would cause confusion with local rivals Croydon Harriers. Striders' club secretary Nigel Davidson persuaded both Croydon Harriers and the Surrey AAA to agree to the club being named 'South Croydon Striders', and the March 1996 edition of the club newsletter, edited by Stuart Driver, duly bore this name. However, the Striders committee, by a narrow majority, declined to ratify this concession. Nigel eventually secured the agreement of the Striders' committee to a proposal that the club should be named 'Striders of Croydon' rather than 'Croydon Striders'. And that is how we got our rather distinctive name.

The East Surrey League held its annual road relay on the traditional course at Box Hill on 16 March. Local club Box Hill Racers gained a convincing win, while their B team placed second with Crawley third. Striders' A team, who had finished in sixth place, were disqualified because Lee Morgan ran both the first and last legs after a selected runner failed to arrive. (Ironically, Striders had a complete B team: if the fastest B team runner had been promoted to the A team to replace the absent runner, the A team would have placed eighth.)



March 1996

Editor - Stuart Driver

A collector's item: the only issue of the club newsletter / magazine
to appear with this short-lived name

20 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SPRING 2006

On 4 March, Croydon Harriers held their annual inter-club cross-country race in Lloyd Park. Striders' Justin Macenhill gained an impressive victory, leading from start to finish and completing the 10-kilometre course in 38:56. He also led Striders to victory in the team event.

On 11 March, Striders placed third in the East Surrey League's annual road relay, at Box Hill. Matt Morgan gave the team a good start, running the first leg of about 3500 metres in 11:19, taking second place. The other team members were John Foster (12:21), Chris Morton (12:36) and Pawel Bal (11:49).

On 19 March, Justin Macenhill produced an excellent run to win the Cranleigh 15-mile road race. He covered the undulating course in 93:07, finishing 38 seconds clear of second-placed Chris Finill of Harrow. Damian Macenhill placed fourth in 95:15, while Don Kayum ran well to win the M50 category, placing eleventh overall in 1:48:49.

The Commonwealth Games took place in Melbourne in late March. Two Croydon Harriers ran for England, both in the 400 metres. Donna Fraser placed third in the women's race in 51.01 seconds, while 18-year-old Martyn Rooney placed fifth in the men's race, recording a new UK under-20 record of 45.35 seconds.

The 30th Croydon 10K road race took place on 9 April. The winner was Iain Lockett of Herne Hill in 31:26. The first Strider was Justin Macenhill, who placed seventh in 34:23. The first M50 was Bob Ewen, who placed 26th overall (36:44). The first woman was Alice Lethbridge of Aldershot, who placed 40th overall (38:16).

The East Surrey League held its annual road race at Ewell on 11 April. Striders finished fourth in the team event, ensuring that they took second place in the overall league table. Their leading runner was Justin Macenhill who placed fifth, covering the 6800-metre course in 23:39. Matt Morgan also ran well for ninth place in 24:39, with Paul Finch 13th (25:41). Chris Morton completed the scoring team in 21st place (26:27), closely followed by Mark Eardley (25th, 26:43) and David Batten (26th, 26:46). Epsom won the league with 46 points, ahead of Striders (37), Croydon Harriers (32) and Hercules-Wimbledon (30).

The 16th London Marathon took place on 23 April. Striders had 21 finishers. Their best performance came from Don Kayum, who set what was then a club M50 record of 3:00:28. (The record is now held by Krzysztof Klidzia, who ran 2:45:45 in 2016.) Paul Finch, making his marathon debut, also ran well to record 3:14:47. There were also some excellent performances from Striders' women, as our first four female finishers all set personal bests. They were led home by Kerry Backshell, who ran 3:28:16. She was closely followed by Stephanie Noyce (3:32:11), Faye Stammers (3:36:36) and Steph Upton (3:40:31).

The Sutton 10K, which was the first event in the Surrey Road League, took place at Beddington Park on 7 May. Striders had 15 finishers, and their men placed tenth in the team event. David Batten was 57th (39:54) with Dave Shaw 73rd (41:17) and Richard Edwards 89th (42:13).

The Rosenheim League began its 43rd season with a match at Battersea on 10 May. Striders finished fifth of the six competing clubs. Scott Antony did well to set new club records of 24.7 seconds for the 200 metres and 11.17 metres for the triple jump. Justin Macenhill also ran well to record 55.4 seconds for the 400 metres and 9 minutes 34 for the 3000 metres.

On 14 May, Don Kayum produced an excellent performance in the Surrey Half-Marathon Championships at Richmond. He placed third in the M50 category, and 49th overall, recording 83:57.

On 24 May, Striders' men did well to finish second of the six competing clubs in their Rosenheim League match at a very wet Croydon Arena. Croydon Harriers won the match with 55 points, but Striders' total of 46 placed them ahead of Hercules-Wimbledon (44), South London Harriers (39), Serpentine (31), and Herne Hill (26). Striders were given a good start by Matt Morgan, who won the opening event, the 2000 metre steeplechase. Justin Macenhill ran well for second in the 800 metres and third in the 200 metres. Scott Antony was second in the 400 metres, while Paul Finch was second in the high jump and fourth in the 1500 metres. Pawel Bal was third in the 3000 metres, and Striders also took third in the 4 x 200 metre relay. Striders' women were short of numbers, but placed third in their match, with Clare McFadzean running well to take second place in the 3000 metres.

10 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SPRING 2016

On 5 March, Striders did well to win an inter-club cross-country match in Lloyd Park, promoted by Croydon Harriers. Phil Coales ran very well to finish second, completing the muddy six-mile course in 37:39. Justin Macenhill was fifth (39:04), Krzysztof Klidzia sixth (39:33) and Steve Starvis eighth (39:39). Striders' first woman to finish was Amanda Barros, who placed 37th overall (54:58).

Peter Mills ran very well to finish 70th in the Inter-Counties Cross-Country Championship at Cofton Park, Birmingham, on 12 March. He was the fourth Surrey runner to finish. He was the first Strider to represent Surrey in this prestigious event since Jane Lansdown did so in 2000.

On 26 March, Peter Mills had another very good run to place fourth in the Maidenhead 10-mile road race, setting what was then a new club record of 54:17. (Peter's record was broken by James Bennett in 2017, but his time still places him second in our all-time rankings.)

Phil Coales ran very well to finish second in the East Surrey League's annual road race at Ewell on 7 April. He completed the 6800-metre course in 24:40. Lee Flanagan was ninth (25:25), Mick Turner 33rd (29:49) and James Burree 36th (30:31). Steph Upton was the seventh woman to finish, placing 41st overall (31:44).

Striders successfully promoted the sixth annual Croydon Half-Marathon on 10 April. The race was won by Michael Eccles of Norfolk Gazelles in 74:15. Striders won the men's and women's team prizes. Peter Mills ran very well to finish second (75:32). Simon Ambrosi was 13th (85:24) with Phil Coales 14th (86:17) and Graeme Drysdale 17th (87:17). The first woman to finish was Carole Penlington of Blackheath who placed eleventh overall (84:53). For Striders, Katie Chadd was the fourth woman to finish, placing 76th overall (1:42:03). Laura Walters was 175th (2:03:21) and Jennifer Hart 194th (2:10:28).

Striders had 20 finishers in the Brighton Marathon on 17 April. They were led by Bill Makuwa, who finished in 2:57:23. He was followed by Andy Perks (3:07:34), Steve Harris (3:16:31), Darren Woods (3:36:37), James Burree (3:42:20) and Michael Smaldon (3:45:59).

Striders had 27 finishers in the London Marathon on 24 April. They were led by Tyler O'Callaghan, who finished in a personal best 2:44:50. Krzysztof Klidzia ran very well to set a new club M50 record of 2:45:45. He was followed by Lee Flanagan (2:46:25), Matthew Smith (2:55:51), Bill Makuwa (2:57:42), Graeme Drysdale (2:58:27), Andy Perks (3:05:30), Mike Stewart (3:08:05) and Dave Shaw (3:08:12). Striders' women were led by Carolyn Storey (3:53:20). She was followed by Charlotte Letchford (3:55:25), Elanor Lim (4:01:19), Ally Whitlock (4:18:47) and Laura Walters (4:26:48).

In the Ranelagh Richmond Half-Marathon on 1 May, Lee Flanagan ran well to place 30th (79:48). Krzysztof Klidzia was 33rd (80:50) and Peter Laurence completed Striders' scoring trio in 184th (96:24). They placed 13th in the team event. Striders' women were led by Claire Oyediran who finished 569th (2:02:05).

Striders had 26 finishers in the Sutton 10-kilometre road race at Nonsuch Park on 8 May. Phil Coales placed 14th (36:29) with Lee Flanagan 22nd (37:22) and Graeme Drysdale 65th (40:36). They placed eighth in the team event. Striders' first woman was Selena Wong who placed 267th (52:21).

In the first Southern Veterans League match of the season, at Kingsmeadow on 9 May, Striders' men placed fifth. Paul Cripps won the M50 long jump (4.36) and placed third in the M50 100 metres (13.8). David Batten won the M60 long jump (3.34). Sam O'Dongo was second in the M40 long jump (4.50) and fourth in the M40 100 metres (12.8). Striders' women placed sixth. Lorraine Hunte placed second in the W60 100 metres (17.2).

In the second Southern Veterans League match of the season, at Ewell on 23 May, Striders' men placed equal fourth. Paul Cripps won the M50 triple jump (9.86) and was second in the M50 200 metres (28.6). Julian Spencer-Wood won the M60 800 metres (2:41.5). Lee Flanagan was second in the M35 800 metres (2:17.2). Striders' women placed sixth. Sandra Francis was fourth in both the W50 200 metres (37.1) and the long jump (3.12). Steph Upton was fourth in the W35 800 metres (3:17.7).

In the Edinburgh Marathon on 29 May, James Bennett ran very well to finish 13th in what was then a new club record of 2:36:40 (a year later he set the current club record of 2:32:50 in Berlin).



Phil Coales (above) and Selena Wong (below) in the 2016 Sutton 10K



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