

Puddle Buckley Round

Patrick Wallis and Paul Williams

Clockwise Round, Llanberis start

Friday 9th September 2020

Total time: 15hrs 43mins.

Fully self-supported (all gear and food carried with no stashes or drops; no fell, road or water support)

The COVID lockdown in March 2020 resulted in the cancellation of all our planned events over the Spring and Summer. With empty diaries we began to look for an alternative unofficial challenge and, inspired by Peter Hayes' book "Wild Swimming in the Lake District and North East England", considered the possibility of the Frog Graham Round. A minor issue was that neither of us were competent swimmers! Although we both possessed a passable breast stroke, neither of us was able to pull off a sustained front crawl, especially in open water. With all swimming pools closed, we purchased wetsuits and began a self training regime in local rivers and reservoirs with the assistance of YouTube technique videos. Rather surprisingly this approach seemed to work and by the end of July we both felt comfortable (that may be an over-statement!) swimming in cold open water. We went on to complete a successful self-supported Frog Graham Round with our friend Mike Quinn on the 8th August in a time of 16hrs 32 minutes in perfect conditions with glorious sun, endless views, smooth lakes and only the lightest of breezes.

Having enjoyed the Frog Graham so much it was perhaps unsurprising that a week later Patrick started talking about another challenge to fit in before the end of the year, particularly now we were "swim trained". Mike raised our attention to the Puddle Buckley Round but would be unable to join us as a school teacher due to the imminent start of term time.

Acutely aware that the days were shortening and temperatures were cooling we pencilled in an attempt a few weeks later. We were keen to engage with the "spirit" of the round as much as possible but in reality had little alternative as we hadn't been aware of the round before and had no opportunity to perform any recce or organise support. We would need to attempt the route "on-sight" and fully self-supported. Work and family commitments only freed up one date so there was also no opportunity to wait for a weather window and we would have to go round whatever the conditions.

We arrived in Llanberis the afternoon beforehand feeling somewhat unprepared having not even decided on which direction we would set off. Sat in Pete's Eats with an OS map and a large mug of tea we finalised our route. The weather forecast was pretty average with very strong Southwesterly winds, low cloud and poor visibility and heavy rain due later in the day. We eventually decided, like several previous candidates, to attempt the round clockwise. This would ensure that the one night swim would be when we were warm and fresh and we would hopefully have all the swims under our belt before the conditions deteriorated in the evening as predicted. As we had not recce'd the route we had no schedule and planned to head off at a comfortable pace and see how we got on. However we noted from previous contenders' reports that the Puddle Buckley appeared much tougher than the Frog and therefore packed supplies to last us 20+ hours (predominantly cheese and pickle sandwiches and muesli bars) fully expecting to be out until late at night. We also packed considerably more gear than our Frog Graham Round as a result of the less than perfect conditions forecast. We would have no support and, to keep the round as pure as possible, did not want to

leave stashes or ditch any gear so would carry everything we would need from the start. Our rucksacks felt worryingly heavy....

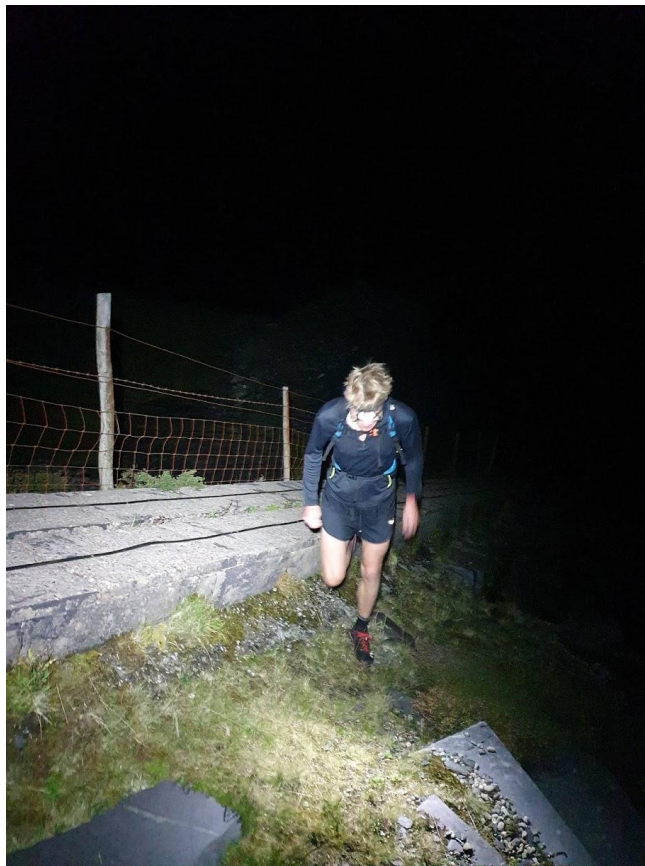


Patrick at the start (Llanberis sword). Deceptively benign conditions in the valley

An early rise at 03:00 and a quick bowl of porridge allowed some time for us to walk around to the landing point on the far side and leave two flashing bike lights on a boulder to give us a target to aim for. Llyn Padarn was our first ever experience of night swimming. It was moonless and pitch black and the water was cold due to recent heavy rainfall. However the surface was fortunately calm as the valley sheltered it from the wind and we pulled ourselves out in no time feeling quite exhilarated as we changed into our running gear.



Exiting Llyn Padarn



Up through the slate quarry

The climb up through the slate mines was a good straight slog with the bags feeling even heavier with wet wetsuits aboard. We had checked out the first hundred metres the night before, which we'd recommend as we would not have found it easy to find the direct path up from the museum at night otherwise. It was a struggle to not get drawn off the trackway early, but we made it with only a few minor diversions. Over the tops we started to hit the wind and it grew colder. Jackets were donned and remained on for the rest of the round. The best line was pretty clear here and the going was easy. Dawn sneaked up on us without much of a show and headtorches were extinguished

before the Glyders but views were absent on the summits due to thick clag. The climb and steep descent from Tryfan were easy to negotiate and the rock was dry.



Dawn between the Glyders



Adam and Eve!

By the time we got to the bank of Llyn Ogwen the wind was strengthening. We were now beginning to somewhat regret our decision to perform the round clockwise as it meant that the last 3 swims

would all be into a stiff headwind. The lake had some small waves which didn't prove too troublesome. Although the swims had looked quite short on the map beforehand we were pleased that the swim wasn't longer, and were shivering pretty vigorously as we changed afterwards. The swim exit by the wall was obvious, although the recent rain meant that the wall reached a surprising distance into the lake.



About to enter Llyn Ogwen



After the Ogwen swim

We chanced upon a good sheep-track based line up from the lake edge to join the main trail up Pen y Ole Wen. The summit came reasonably quickly, with some amazing views back over the valley, and

then the long run over the Carnedds moved fast. We saw a few other hardy souls, and even had a bit of a chat as one walker decided to jog along with us for a bit, but the wind and clag seemed to have put off most people.



Summit of Pen yr Helgi Du

From the summit of Pen yr Helgi Du (we visited both just to be sure) we had considered an alternative to the suggested route heading East to the Llyn Cowlyd Reservoir and down the footpath South to cross the A5 and river near Capel Curig and rejoin the trail. We ended up rejecting this because it went through a private field (not marked as open access on the map) and required vaulting a barbed wire fence, and we didn't want our round to be rendered void. So instead we bombed down the ridge to meet the end of the long valley track. An attempt to steal a more direct line turned out to be a mistake and after struggling with tussocks we regretted not following the main track. The 2 mile jog along the valley allowed some recovery but before we knew it we had arrived at Llynnau Mymbyr and were diving into a tough third swim. The wind was strengthening and the water was quite choppy and we were cold by the time we got out. We added waterproof trousers and thermal mitts to our layering which, with the weather worsening, stayed on until the end of the Round.



About to enter Llynau Mymbr. The photo doesn't do justice to the wind; this video is more representative! <https://photos.app.goo.gl/A3ghFtNNifiPQTFr5>



The exit from Llynau Mymbr

The ascent up Moel Siabod seemed endless, but the track was good and the briefly glimpsed views were wonderful while they lasted. We weren't sure of the best line on the ridge down from Carnedd y Cribau and might have been able to cut off west a little earlier. The route down to Llyn Gwynant was straightforward and well marked.



The ridge down from Moel Siabod



Descending to Llyn Gwynant (in the valley below)

Llyn Gwynant looked pretty terrifying with a fierce headwind driving waves directly onto the beach. Donning wet wetsuits was unpleasant and chilling. The swimming was the most challenging either of us had ever experienced and we had the bizarre sensation of feeling much safer when our heads were underwater with full sensory deprivation, rather than exposed to the waves and chop on the surface. The beach couldn't come fast enough.



Anxious looks before the final swim across Llyn Gwynant. The wind was very strong indeed now and directly on shore.



Pleased to be out of the water

After an interesting rocky traverse along the lakeshore we were almost dragged onto the main route up Snowdon but realised that we could cross back across the river and take a more direct route up the valley. A sheltered, gentle ascent proved to be the lull before the storm and when we hit the ridge we were in thick cloud with the wind really buffeting us. The summit of Snowdon was in appalling conditions and after a quick selfie we began our descent.



Snowdon summit. Luckily we didn't come for the views.

We bombed down the Snowdon Ranger Track relieved to be losing some altitude. The rain finally arrived in full force for the final summits but we were on the home run now and realising we had a chance to finish before nightfall we kept up a constant pace. The final ridge from Meol Eilio was a bit of a hobble as some old injuries started to slow us down a little, and we were glad to make it back to the Llanberis Sword just as dark arrived without having to get our headtorches out again. Glancing at our watches we realised we had finished in 15hrs 43 minutes - astonishingly the fastest known time, although relatively few people had attempted the round to date.



Job done. The Llanberis sword just before nightfall

Having fully expected to be out until the wee hours of the morning in the mountains we were somewhat surprised to find ourselves in Llanberis showered, dressed and fed by 9pm. We didn't need much persuasion to head to The Heights for a couple of pints to round off an extremely satisfying day!

After a quite tightly scheduled Frog Graham, it was quite liberating to head out on a big adventure with no schedule, or indeed any idea how long it would take to finish, and just enjoy the mountains and the feeling of self-sufficiency. We had quite a lot of food left at the end which added considerably to the pack weight, but we didn't regret this as we knew we could have stayed out much longer if our pace had been slower and still have got round. Carrying wet wetsuits for the whole route was also rather cumbersome, but unavoidable to keep this unsupported.

Overall, the route was excellent. We didn't see many major route choices although we definitely made a few minor nav errors and there were places we could have taken a better line. The route is definitely rockier and steeper than the Frog Graham, and felt more serious - though that may have been the weather and the fact that we went round later in the season. The swims were also more than long enough on the day and we found them more challenging than on the Frog Graham, although again that was mostly related to the conditions and in particular the wind! As relatively

inexperienced swimmers it certainly was a trial by fire for us and we certainly feel we have now graduated as real open water swimmers.



Dawn the following day - would have been a much better day for the Round!



Refuelling at Pete's Eats!