

St Cuthbert's Ultra – Race Against the Tide

Saturday 20th July 2024, Mark Crossland

This is a race along the Scottish Borders, starting in Melrose and finishing on Holy Island (aka Lindisfarne) in Northumberland (near Bamburgh). It follows the pilgrimage of St Cuthbert (c. 634 – 687) who was a popular medieval saint of Northern England, primarily Melrose and Holy Island although he also spent some time at the monastery at Ripon. He has several festivals, schools and churches named after him (including the church in Pateley Bridge where Ripon Runner Darryl Hall is the Vicar), and even a Co-op Society in Scotland (The St Cuthbert's Co-op Society, which opened its first shop in Edinburgh in 1859 and expanded to become one of the largest Co-op Society's in Scotland, now Scotmid).

The race is organised by Trail Outlaws and there is a 45-mile option (Melrose to Wooler) or the full 105km (65 mile) to Holy Island. The race used to be run from East to West, but they swapped it around in 2021 so that runners benefit from the prevailing South-Westerly breeze, and also to add the challenge of 'beating the tide'.

As the name suggests, Holy Island is an island, however fortunately you don't need to swim the last couple of miles to finish this Ultra!! When the tide is low, twice every 24 hours, you can cross to Holy Island along a causeway.

This year the race was on Saturday 20th July, and there were 2 start times – 2.30am for the majority of runners, 5.30am for the quicker runners. You have 19.5 hours to complete the 105km Ultra in order to 'beat the tide', this also allows some time to get off Holy Island before the tide comes in and makes it impossible to cross.

We had to register at Wooler YHA by 8pm on Friday night, kit is checked and you are issued with a GPS tracker. Most people leave their cars at Wooler, there was then a bus at 1am to take runners to Melrose for the start. Some book a room / bed at either the YHA or a local hotel / pub and try and get some sleep, others just wait around until the bus arrives being a true Yorkshireman I did the latter, not wanting to waste money on a room for only a few hours, the consequence of which was a whole night of no sleep!!

Then off to Melrose, which seemed to be a long way on the bus, especially knowing we had to run it back. After a bit more hanging around there, and a race briefing, head torches were switched on and we were off. The first section is all up hill, over the Eildon Hills, a good chunk of which is wooden steps. After that there's 60+ miles of beautiful countryside through woodlands, fields, alongside the river Tweed, over the Cheviot's and finally across the causeway to Holy Island. The good thing about starting at 2.30am is there are only a couple of hours of darkness before the sun starts to appear and you can put the head torch into your bag. There were 6 checkpoints along the way, each had water, coke, fruit, sweets and some snacks. You could also arrange for 'drop bags' at 2 of the checkpoints with your own personal food and drink. Like many people I struggle to eat anything mid-race, but I did manage a sausage wrap at Checkpoint 3 and some Super Noodles at Checkpoint 5.

The route is well marked, but it's also useful to have a GPS device to provide re-assurance, particularly if you spend time running / walking alone and the runner in front is out of sight. I only got slightly lost once, leaving Checkpoint 5 at Wooler, when suddenly a car pulled up in front of

me thinking it might be a race marshal to help point me in the right direction it was a surreal moment when Simon Arnold from Ripon Runners got out of the car he was on holiday in the area with his family and had spotted me running! Unfortunately Simon didn't know the route either so I had to wait until another runner came by who I could tag along with.

After around 62 miles you reach the causeway to Holy Island; the end is in sight but it seemed to take forever, running a bit then walking a bit. The organisation of the race and the marshals were all fantastic, my only gripe was that there was no food at the finish. It made the journey back to collect the car at Wooler on a rickety old bus slightly unpleasant. By the time I got back to the car I couldn't face anything solid to eat, but I had a craving for ice cream, so I headed for the McDonalds at Alnwick for a Mcflurry. Unfortunately the 'paddles' in the ice cream machine at Alnwick weren't working, so I had to drive almost another hour to Newcastle before I got something to eat ... not the best post-race recovery plan!!

The stats :

- 105 km completed in 16 hrs 26 mins
- Total ascent 7,848 ft, Total descent 7,949 ft
- 116 started the race, 66 finished
- First finisher 12:03:02, Last finisher 19:08:04



