

AN EARLY HISTORY OF THE LAKELAND LONG AS: 1968-85

by **Bill Smith**

Over the last few years, Graham Breeze has contributed a series of articles on “Classic Fell Races”, covering the period from the mid-80s to the present, and this, allied with the fact that Graham is also the originator and organiser of the Lakeland Long As Championship, gave me the idea that an article covering the early history of the Long As might be of interest.

Ennerdale

The Ennerdale Horseshoe is the oldest of the Long As, having been launched in June, 1968, by the late Joe Long and Frank Travis, pioneers of amateur fell racing and orienteering in West Cumberland. The Horseshoe had become popular with walkers over a hundred years ago and Frank and Joe based their route on information supplied by aged locals.

Jos Naylor didn't train much in those days and had only two runs – both typically long ones – behind him in preparation for that first race, having been encouraged to enter by Joe Long. Representing the newly-formed West Cumberland OC, he was up with Chris Fitt (Kendal) and Mike Davies (Reading) on Great Bourne but trailing them by 2 minutes on Red Pike, a deficit which he reversed over the rougher ground to Black Beck Tarn. Davies, who had completed a run of four consecutive Three Peaks victories earlier that year, began to fade around Pillar but the aptly-named Fitt, a Civil Engineer from London then working on the M6 extension, maintained contact up to beyond Iron Crag, from which point Jos began to pull away to win by 3 minutes in 4.00.00. There was one retirement out of 20 starters.

Naylor went on to win the next eight Horseshoes, gaining his ninth and final victory in 1976, when he was awarded the MBE. By 1970, he had joined Kendal AC and from that year to 1973 his closest rival was Dennis Weir of the Rucksack Club and Sale Harriers. However, Jos had become so fit and determined that up to 1976, when he turned 40, no one was able to finish anywhere near as close to him as Chris Fitt had done. 1976 runner-up Mike Short (Horwich), the first double FRA champion, won the 1977 race after a terrific battle with Billy Bland (Keswick) resulted in only 28 seconds separating them at the finish, reached by the Lancashire lad in 3.41.11. Jos came in 3rd and sportingly agreed to present the prizes. His six-year-old record of 3.30.40 was finally broken the following year by Andy Styan (Holmfirth) with a time of 3.27.00, over 8 minutes ahead of Stuart Bland (Jonny's father) and brother Billy, this pair having reversed positions on the descent from Crag Fell. Styan reduced this mark to 3.23.44 in 1979, having forged ahead of Jos and Billy beyond Iron Crag, these two also recording personal best times of 3.27.27 and 3.27.45 respectively.

Many competitors strayed off-course in the rain and mist of the 1980 race but Billy Bland made no mistake, storming home to another new record of 3.21.04, with Styan placing 2nd. Similar conditions, allied with gale force winds, prevailed the following year when Bob English of Warrington lost his life after falling below Crag Fell. Billy won this race too, and gained his fifth and final victory in 1987, two years after his clubmate Kenny Stuart, the reinstated champion guides racer, achieved his second win to set the still-existing record of 3.20.57.

Women were first allowed to compete over the Horseshoe in 1980 and that year's ladies' champion, Pauline Haworth (Keswick), later to become Mrs Pauline Stuart, led home the five finishers out of seven starters in 4.37.47, some 33 minutes ahead of Joan Glass (Eryri), with Janet Sutcliffe (CFR) 3rd. All three girls had come from a solid background of long-distance fell-walking. The 1982 race was won by Sue Parkin (Airedale & Spen), a triple British Orienteering Champion, in 4.40.32, while Clayton's Linda Lord triumphed in 5.29.57 the following year, reducing this time by 31 minutes in 1984 when she finished a close 2nd to Pauline Haworth's 4.55.52. Pauline set a new record of 4.27.52 a year later, some 33 minutes ahead of Alison Wright (Durham University), and also secured her third championship win that season.

Wasdale

Wasdale is undoubtedly the most demanding of the Lakeland Long As. Launched by the CFRA in July, 1972, that first race differed from future ones in that it did not conclude with a descent of Lingmell but took the more direct line down Brown Tongue and Lingmell Gill. Heatwave conditions accounted for most of the 14 retirements out of 36 starters, and in fact several other runners reported to checkpoint officials that they were retiring but changed their minds after having a short rest and were allowed to continue. Jos Naylor was naturally the pre-race favourite but didn't start due to an injury incurred on his farm a few days earlier. Two future FRA champions, Jeff Norman (Altrincham) and Harry Walker (Blackburn), headed the field at every checkpoint, though not always taking the same line between them, and jointly set the inaugural mark of 4.25.10.

A cool, showery day with mist shrouding several parts of the course led to several navigational errors the following year, including straying onto Red Pike from Seatallen, and Naylor scored a decisive victory, returning to Brackenclough with a new record of 3.48.55. Norman, Walker and Dave Halstead (Blackburn) all missed the new checkpoint on Lingmell Nose and were directed back to it, eventually finishing 3rd, 4th and 5th respectively behind runner-up Andy Churchill (Clayton). This highly-promising young athlete came back a year later to defeat Halstead and Naylor with a time of 3.53.12 on another misty day which saw, among other route-finding errors, Harry Walker descending from

Scafell Pike into Eskdale but getting back on course to finish 17th. Jos was back to his best form in 1975, lowering his own record to 3.41.49 after an early battle with Mike Short and Walker, but the following year was relegated to 3rd behind runner-up Short and a comparative “unknown”, the late Ian Roberts (Holmfirth), who clipped over 3 minutes off his record with a time of 3.38.35. Short’s persistence paid off in 1977, however, when he came home 5 minutes ahead of Walker in 3.53.15 with Naylor, now a veteran, again 3rd.

Following his 1978 Ennerdale triumph a month earlier, Andy Styan stormed around the Wasdale course to finish within 40 seconds of Roberts’ record and in the perfect conditions of the following year set a splendid new mark of 3.30.51. Billy Bland had been runner-up in both these races but turned the tables on Styan in 1980 with a 3.37.51 clocking, while Pauline Haworth bested Janet Sutcliffe to set the inaugural ladies’ mark of 4.51.20. Billy ran most of the course solo in the next race, winning from brother Stuart by 20 minutes in 3.35.10, then outpacing Bob Whitfield (Kendal) by almost the same margin in 1982 to set a new record of 3.25.21, which still stands. A shorter ladies’ course descending from Pillar to Brackenclough had been introduced the previous year but Sue Parkin chose to run with the men this time out and finished 69th out of 149 starters.

Bland once more ran mainly by himself in the heatwave conditions of 1983, when Bridget Hogge (Eryri) led the ladies home in 5.35.45, but twelve months later he secured his narrowest victory yet, just managing to hold off Hugh Symonds (Kendal) by 35 seconds with a time of 3.42.27, while Bridget again dominated the ladies’ race with a 5.08.28 clocking. Billy achieved the sixth of his nine consecutive victories in 1985 – a brilliant record to rank alongside Naylor’s nine Ennerdale and ten Mountain Trial wins (Billy also winning the latter event nine times, incidentally).

Langdale

September, 1973 saw the inauguration of this classic round of the Langdale tops, promoted by David Meek and the Langdale Fell Race Association. A heavy blanket of mist shrouded the fells and as the main bunch of competitors approached Thunacar Knott, the mist suddenly cleared for a brief instant to reveal some of the faster lads approaching from the direction of High Raise ! Jos Naylor didn’t have any such problems, however, winning in 2.08.20 from Mike Davies, now turned 40, who was nearly 6 minutes in arrears. 76 finished out of 81 starters and it may be of interest to note that in those early races, most competitors used Stake Pass to get from Thunacar to Esk Hause, then followed the ridge to Ore Gap and later descended Redacre Gill to the stream-crossing before contouring the fellside on a narrow path through the bracken to the final control.

Jos lost out by 17 seconds in 1974 to a young newcomer, Mike Short, who achieved his first-ever fell race victory in 2.10.27, while in the cool, sunny conditions of the following year, he established a new record of 2.05.38. Another misty day in 1976 accounted for further navigational difficulties around Thunacar Knott, with Ian Roberts, Short and Bland being among the culprits. Billy then led the way to Angle Tarn, beyond which point Short took over, only to go off-course again, allowing Bland and Naylor to catch him up at Ore Gap. This trio then became involved in a closely-fought contest over the remainder of the course, with only 25 seconds covering them at the finish: Short 2.08.28, Naylor 2.08.45 and Bland 2.08.53.

Andy Styan had created quite a stir at Burnsall in 1974 when, as a complete “unknown”, he’d defeated the likes of Harry Walker and Martin Weeks (Bingley), and he caused no less of an upset at Langdale three years later by reducing Short’s record by over 10 minutes with a time of 1.55.03, which has never yet been beaten. He had Billy Bland to contend with between Esk Hause and Blisco, closely followed by Mike Short and Alan McGee (Keswick), a short race specialist who was to become that season’s FRA champion. Andy finally dropped Billy on the concluding descent to win by 14 seconds, crediting his victory to the fact that he’d lost 1½ stone during the summer, with McGee beating Short into 3rd place. Bland turned up at Langdale a year later having won the Ben Nevis and Mountain Trial on the preceding weekends and was widely tipped to become the first man to complete a hat-trick of victories in these three tough mountain races. He not only fulfilled this challenge but did so by the wide margin of 20 minutes over Martin Hudson (Dark Peak) with a time of 2.07.00. Women were able to compete over the full course this year and international orienteer Ros Coats (Lochaber) stood a chance of completing the same hat-trick but in the end had to be content with 2nd place to Bridget Hogge, whose time was 3.13.00, with Pauline Haworth finishing 3rd.

Styan gained his second victory in 1979 after a close battle with Harry Jarrett (CFR), finally winning by half-a-minute in 2.01.00, while among the ladies, that seasons’ champion, Ros Coats, scored a convincing win over Haworth and Hogge to create a new record of 2.37.57. Styan was relegated to 3rd place the following year, however, by Billy Bland in 2.05.24 and Bob Whitfield in 2.07.11, with Pauline Haworth reversing the previous year’s result in beating Ros Coats by 4.12 in 2.55.19, Bridget Hogge again taking 3rd place. A mere second separated Bland and Whitfield in 1981, Billy winning in 2.02.56, while Pauline again led the ladies home. Due to an apparent lack of helpers, the 1982 race was not run over the Horseshoe route but on an out-and-back course to Scafell Pike, which was the only checkpoint, and Kenny Stuart was first back in 1.36.50 out of 173 finishers.

There was no race held in 1983 but a new series was launched in 1984 by Ambleside AC, assisted by the Achille Ratti CC. Billy Bland came home a clear winner by almost 12 minutes from Andy Styan with a time of 2.06.46, and Pauline Haworth was the fastest lady by an even wider margin: 2.40.14 to Bridget Hogge’s 3.04.32. On a fine, clear day the

next year, Colin Donnelly (Eryri) and Kenny Stuart were the first to Blisco summit but then went astray, allowing Jack Maitland (Pudsey and Bramley) to romp home with a time of 2.00.31, 21 seconds ahead of Sean Livesey (Ribble Valley Harriers). A new ladies' record of 2.34.28 was set by 1983 FRA champion Angela Carson (Eryri), 10 minutes in front of Stephanie Quirk (Kendal), and there was also a record field of 439 starters as it was a championship event that year. Billy Bland gained his fifth and final victory in 1987, while his nephews have accounted for eight more since, Gavin winning five and Jonny three.

Borrowdale

Inaugurated in 1974 by Keswick AC and sponsored by Miles Jessup of the Scafell Hotel, Rosthwaite and the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, Langdale, the original course was planned to link the two hotels. However, a horseshoe route was eventually devised by the late Chris Bland, Andy Ewing and others, and the first race took place on a warm, sunny Sunday, with the last checkpoint being located in Tongue Gill for this one occasion only. Dave Halstead held a 2-minute lead over Andy Churchill on Great Gable and although the latter closed the gap crossing to Honister (most runners then following the ridge to Grey Knotts), Halstead had opened up a 4-minute lead by Dale Head summit and descended to victory in 3.05.07, followed by Churchill in 3.12.22 and Short in 3.13.37.

Heatwave conditions prevailed for the second race and Mike Short led at every checkpoint, hotly pursued by Mike Nicholson (Kendal), 4th the previous year, whom he finally defeated by 3.24 with a time of 3.13.30. Billy Bland proved to be a formidable rival for Jos Naylor in the 1976 race and broke away from the Wasdale sheepfarmer going up Great Gable, after which he never looked like being beaten, storming home to a splendid new record of 2.53.30, over 6 minutes clear of Jos. This event marked the fell racing debut of Billy's 30-year-old brother Stuart of Thorneywaite Farm, near Seatoller, like Billy a former amateur footballer, and he took off on the scree descent from Scafell Pike and worked his way through the field to eventually finish 3rd in 3.02.33, also inside the old record.

However, this mark was to stand for only 12 months. Short, Naylor, Walker and Billy Bland all contested the lead along the ridge from Bessyboot to Scafell Pike, but here the two Lakelanders dropped their Lancashire rivals by virtue of their superior descending skills. Undeterred, Short overtook Naylor on the ascent of Great Gable, only for Jos to once again lose him on the way over to Honister, where Billy had been forced to retire with stomach trouble. Mike set off up Dale Head after Jos and had opened up a 5-minute lead on reaching the top, returning to Rosthwaite with a new record of 2.49.03, with Walker placing 3rd. Short reduced the record still further in 1978, despite rain and mist, beating Billy Bland by over 9 minutes with a time of 2.44.52. A sunny day the following year was overshadowed by the news of Ian Roberts' death by lightning in the Dolomites and Jos Naylor paid tribute to him in a short speech prior to 2-minutes' silence before the race began. Billy Bland opened up a commanding lead beyond Bessyboot and achieved yet another new record of 2.37.11, Short taking runner-up spot 16 minutes in arrears, followed home by Naylor in 3rd. Bland beat Short again in 1980, 2.41.31 to 2.53.22, with Bob Whitfield 3rd. 184 finished, including six ladies, of whom the fastest was Pauline Haworth in 2.50.45, 79th overall, with the noted orienteer Carol McNeil (Edinburgh SH) 131st in 4.24.30.

Another new mark of 2.34.38, which is still the record, was established by Billy Bland in 1981 after another masterly display of front-running throughout. Bob Whitfield shook off the attentions of a 7-strong bunch between Scafell Pike and Gable to come home 2nd in 2.43.27, almost 5 minutes ahead of that season's eventual champion, John Wild (RAF Cosford), who hadn't yet become accustomed to long, rough courses, this being virtually his first year of fell racing. Ros Coats, in her second championship season, set a new ladies' record of 3.30.30, with Pauline Haworth 2nd in 3.36.03. The 1982 event was run in low cloud, resulting in many competitors straying off-course and even the checkpoint officials for Bessyboot being unable to locate the summit! Such conditions presented no problems for Bland, of course, and he went round in 2.43.38, nearly 16 minutes ahead of Bob Whitfield, with Stuart Bland a close 3rd. Rosie Naish (Eryri) was the fastest lady in 3.55.13, 75th out of 193 finishers, with Nicky Lavery (Eskdale OBMS) 2nd: 4.32.14 and Linda Lord 3rd: 4.45.13.

Billy had to take a back seat the following year, however, finishing 4th behind Kenny Stuart, who had had a great battle with John Wild, the man whose championship title he was to usurp at Thieveley Pike some seven weeks later, winning by 29 seconds in 2.45.25. Kendal's Daphne Varney was the first lady in 3.54.30, followed by Bridget Hogge 4.10.53 and Carol Walkington (Horwich) 4.14.04. Bland came back in 1984 to beat Kenny by almost 10 minutes with a time of 2.37.45, while Pauline Haworth set a new ladies' record of 3.26.05. Billy then secured the seventh of his ten victories in 1985, defeating Andy Ligema (CFR) by nearly 13 minutes in 2.42.13, with an unattached runner, Sarah Haines (Peter's wife), being the first lady in 4.13.43. Another great record to be added to Billy's Wasdale and Mountain Trial achievements.

Duddon

Ken Ledward promoted a weekend of truly "open" fell racing in June, 1978, from his "local", the Newfield Inn at Seathwaite, as he then lived at the western foot of the Walna Scar Road. An open race to Ken meant allowing both amateur and professional runners to compete together at a time when such practices were banned by the AAA, and indeed the entrants included two local guides racers, Chris Hartley and Fred Reeves. First back was Billy Bland in 2.47.00, followed by Jos Naylor and Billy's cousin, Anthony Bland (Keswick). Jos had given Billy a hard time over

Harter Fell but the Borrowdale builder and stonewaller had begun to draw ahead beyond Hardknott. Ladies and juniors ran an 11-mile course and there was an orienteering-type event held the next day.

There were 24 retirements out of 74 starters in the second long race, many of them due to navigational problems in low cloud. Billy Bland was again the winner but this time by the narrow margin of 30 seconds from ace navigator Mick Garratt (Mandale), the former's time being 3.10.00. Andy Styan made his debut over the course in 1980 to finish 4 minutes ahead of Stuart Bland in 2.51.38, with Naylor claiming 3rd place and Billy Bland finishing 14th after uncharacteristically "blowing up" on White Pike. He made no mistake the following year, however, when he set the still-existing record of 2.43.10, over 10½ minutes in front of Styan, with Stuart Bland 3rd. The clear conditions of 1982 saw Billy being closely tracked by Kenny Stuart, then awaiting reinstatement, only to be pipped by a mere second in 2.46.10. Bland was back a year later, however, to outpace his clubmate Martin Hudson, winner of the following day's navigational challenge, by the narrow margin of 78 seconds in 2.46.39. Derek Ratcliffe (Rossendale), 3rd in the last two races, improved to runner-up in 1984, 15 minutes behind Bland's 2.48.36, and at last returned victorious the following year in 2.57.40 over Alex Smith (CFR) who arrived 2 minutes later. Billy eventually notched up a total of eight victories in this event, while Gavin had an unbroken run of five from 1992 to '96.

Dockray Helvellyn

This race hasn't been run since 2002 but it was launched in 1983 by Barry Thompson of the Royal Hotel, Dockray (now of Glenridding) as the Royal Dockray Fell Race, with 4,250' of ascent over 17 miles. Tony Richardson (Kendal), an accomplished orienteer, set the inaugural mark of 2.12.56 in defeating Graham Huddleston (Black Combe) 2.15.28 and Duncan Stuart (Keswick), Kenny's brother, 2.21.47. Another Lakeland Long A which is no longer run is the Buttermere Horseshoe, which began with 24m/9,000' in 1983 and was revised to 20m/8,000' two years later. Billy Bland created the original record of 4.26.26 ahead of brother Stuart 4.35.41 and Martin Hudson 4.35.43.

Three Shires

This event was inaugurated in September, 1983, by Ian Stephenson of the Three Shires Inn, Little Langdale, together with his sister Elaine and her husband Selwyn Wright. After a misty crossing of Wetherlam and Swirl How, Billy Bland began to assert his lead on the gradual climb to Blisco, here pursued by Colin Valentine (Keswick), though in the end it was Martin Hudson who proved to be the most dangerous threat to Bland's success, closing to within 19 seconds at the finish, where Billy crossed the line in 1.56.19. Linda Lord set the ladies' mark of 2.43.19, 31 seconds ahead of Alison Crabb (CFR), 78 ran.

A good day in 1984 saw the ascent of Blisco once more proving to be the decisive factor, for here a trio comprising Billy Bland, Bob Whitfield and Mark Rigby (Ambleside) pulled away from the chasing bunch, with Whitfield finally winning by 28 seconds from Rigby to set a new record of 1.53.08, with Bland a further 11 seconds down, although all three were inside the latter's inaugural mark. Not to be outdone, the first two ladies also broke their old record, with Pauline Haworth clocking 2.18.44 and Clayton's Vanessa Brindle (now Mrs Tony Peacock) 2.40.33. Mark Rigby triumphed in 2.01.10 in the abysmal conditions of 1985, the placings going to two 0/40 veterans, Dave Spedding (Keswick) 2.07.46 and Derek Kay (Bolton) 2.08.03, while Stephanie Quirk was the fastest lady in 2.54.18.

Billy Bland's sterling performances in the foregoing events must surely make him the greatest long-distance fell racer of them all – and he was no slouch over lesser distances either, having many short and medium race victories to his credit.