

# The Lake District Mountain Trial

*- traditional and trend-setting*

With the plethora of fell races and triathalons on offer these days, it seems odd that 50 years ago fell racing was in its infancy and cycling was the sport of choice. Running the hills tended to be the domain of the pros, who took part in the short up and down Guides Races put on as part of local village shows. The fells were the province of established climbing and rambling clubs and the fellrunner had yet to come into being.

It was Harry Chapman, secretary of the regional group of the YHA, who changed this state of affairs when he was looking for way of celebrating the groups 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary. In 1952, he created a mountain challenge to appeal to the fit and active walkers and climbers who used the YHA's hostels. The condition was that they wore boots or 'stout' shoes to take in a set course - starting at the ODG and going to Bowfell, Esk Pike, Scafell Pike, Great Gable and returning via Esk Hause and Rossett Ghyll.

This was a far longer route, over more difficult terrain and a far more serious proposition than anything that had gone before. It was the first long fell race of its kind and undoubtedly would have been a 'trial' given the gear that was available at the time.

In 1953, a shortened version was created for the ladies. How forward thinking, when you consider that it took about another 25 years for the general fell running world to acknowledge that women were able to take part in this male preserve.

In 1956 the Trial gained a new sponsor in the Lancaster Evening Post. Harry Griffin became Chairman. Membership of the YHA was now no longer a requirement and the Outward Bound Schools, Mountaineering clubs and mountain rescue teams became members of the committee. The format was changed so that it became a test of mountaineering skill rather than a cross country event. From Seathwatie the runners needed to visit Pillar, Scafell and Scafell Pike (with Broad Stand out of bounds). This format resulted in competitors taking varied and interesting route choices, which is still very much a feature of the present day Trial!

Jane Buckley (nee Allsebrook), came to present the prizes for us at the 2006 Mountain Trial. She was the first lady in 1953 and the 27<sup>th</sup> competitor out of 32 in 1956. It seems by 1956 that the 'stout shoe conditions must have been relaxed as she told us how she "skipped down

Gable in tennis shoes and a gym skirt". History doesn't go into the reasons for the Trial reverting to a men only race, but for whatever reason, it became out of bounds to the ladies until 1978. In the organisers report for the previous year it said, 'It is possible we will be organising a ladies race in conjunction with next years Vaux Trial, so you have been warned!'

It seems odd, from where we are in the sport now, that the common thinking of the time was that women weren't capable of such stuff, especially given their participation in the sport twenty years earlier.

A major change came in 1957 when the committee decided on a secret course, (only revealed after the start), which would visit a series of checkpoints. This format, along with the different venue each year and the staggered start, (instigated by Harry Chapman), is still the format for the current mountain trial.

Over the years the fundamentals of the Trial have been retained. It is still '*a severe test of fell runners' mountaineering ability and stamina in the safe and fast traverse of the fells, where navigational skills and route choice have a direct bearing on each competitor's result.*'

This means that to get an entry in the Mens or Womens Trial you do need to prove experience of running and navigational skills so as to be self sufficient in potentially bad weather. What has changed though, is the requirement to accurately mark up a grid reference on the map. The introduction of pre-marked maps has negated one of the 'fun parts' of the Trial. To many, this was a step in the wrong direction, as many a runner used to come to grief from too hastily or sloppily marking up their map. Those that were able to stay cool under the pressure of their time ticking away would invariably make up the extra time in accuracy.

In 1998 the Short Trial was introduced - open to men and women. The aim was to attract newcomers to the Trial and cater for those who felt they were no longer up to the full course.

Chris Brasher who was instrumental in the creation of the Short course and ran it for several years said, 'I myself keep coming back to compete. I know not why - I passed my peak several decades ago. There must be something magnetic and it's not just the beautiful mountains of the Lakes but also the companionship of some of the most tough and



genuine characters - competitors and officials alike - that you are ever likely to meet anywhere in the world!

With three different courses, a lot of different prize categories and given the ruling that a person is eligible for only one prize (excluding team prizes), the process of working out who had won what used to be a highly complex job. The Sportident system of electronically monitoring competitors at each control has meant that the results can now be worked out relatively easily. It's a great system as it not only monitors the passage of runners through the controls but provides split times for every leg so you can spend hours analysing the results.

Two years ago we made the leap to on-line entry. The pre-race details and results, which used to be sent out in paper format and involved copious amounts of self addressed and stamped envelopes are now on the website. This technological advancement has proved to be rather a shock to Mike Walford, who has for the last 41 years posted his entry form ....it just shows that we all have different types of challenge.

It seems that the Mountain Trial has a lasting effect on many runners. In 1960 the Outward Bound team came second to Clayton. Two of its members, Bill Hunter and Ken Ledward have maintained their love affair with the Trial. Bill

Sue Parkin - planner of the 2008 trial



Ambleside, which is part of Lyon Equipment. Running for the Outward Bound team in 1966, Ben finished 3rd and he has taken part in most of the subsequent Mountain Trials. His great passion for the Trial has remained over the years and he is continuing to sponsor it through Petzl UK. Lyon Equipment is the sole UK and Northern Ireland distributor for many of the best known outdoor brands, including Petzl and La Sportiva. You may be aware of the new La Sportiva Crosslite fell shoe that's getting great reviews – there will be several pairs as prizes as well as Petzl gear and Climbers Shop Vouchers. But if you're not fast enough, old enough or young enough to win some of this great gear, you'll be able to buy it at the event as Compass Point and Pete Bland Sports will have their travelling shops there.

The Petzl Mountain Trial 2008 will be the planned for the first time by Sue Parkin. Sue has excellent Mountain Trial pedigree having worked at Eskdale Outward Bound School, had Ken Ledward and Joss Naylor as running mentors and for years she was a member of the British Orienteering Squad. So its not surprising that she holds a remarkable record - of the nine years that she entered the Trial, she won it eight times.

**The three courses are**

Mens	16 miles	7000'
Womens	12 miles	5000'
Short	10 miles	3,500

These are approximate distances and how far you go depends on your route choice. So whilst it's a great day out on the hill, it's a challenge and not to be underestimated.

Sir Chris Bonington, CBE, is known to us all for his mountaineering achievements. What is probably less well known is that Chris has run and Orienteered for years. He is also a Trustee of Outward Bound. This year he will be presenting the prizes, having had a quick run round the Short Course beforehand.

**If you fancy a go yourself, the 56th Mountain Trial is on 14th September and you can enter online at [www.ldmta.org.uk](http://www.ldmta.org.uk).**



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Chris Brasher on the Short Course



planned many of the courses since 1986 and has been on the committee for 20 years. Ken, at the decent age of 74 and with the help of a couple of new hips, is still running in the Trial.

1960 was also the year of Joss Naylor's first run. Joss recalls, 'I had no shorts, running shoes or anything to do with running, so I cut the legs off my work trousers and turned up at the start wearing my big work boots.' Joss has done the Trial ever since and won it ten times.

In 1965, the Trial was sponsored by Vaux Breweries. This support lasted for 18 years, with the first 11 being based at pubs around the Lakes. The free pint at the end of the race probably was partly responsible for the gradual increase in the number of competitors over the years and the Trial became known colloquially as 'The Vaux'.

The Ordnance Survey took over the sponsorship from 1983 to 1993 and the event benefited from specially drawn 1:50,000 maps on tyvex paper – quite an innovation considering competitors had previously used their own inch to a mile cut up maps.

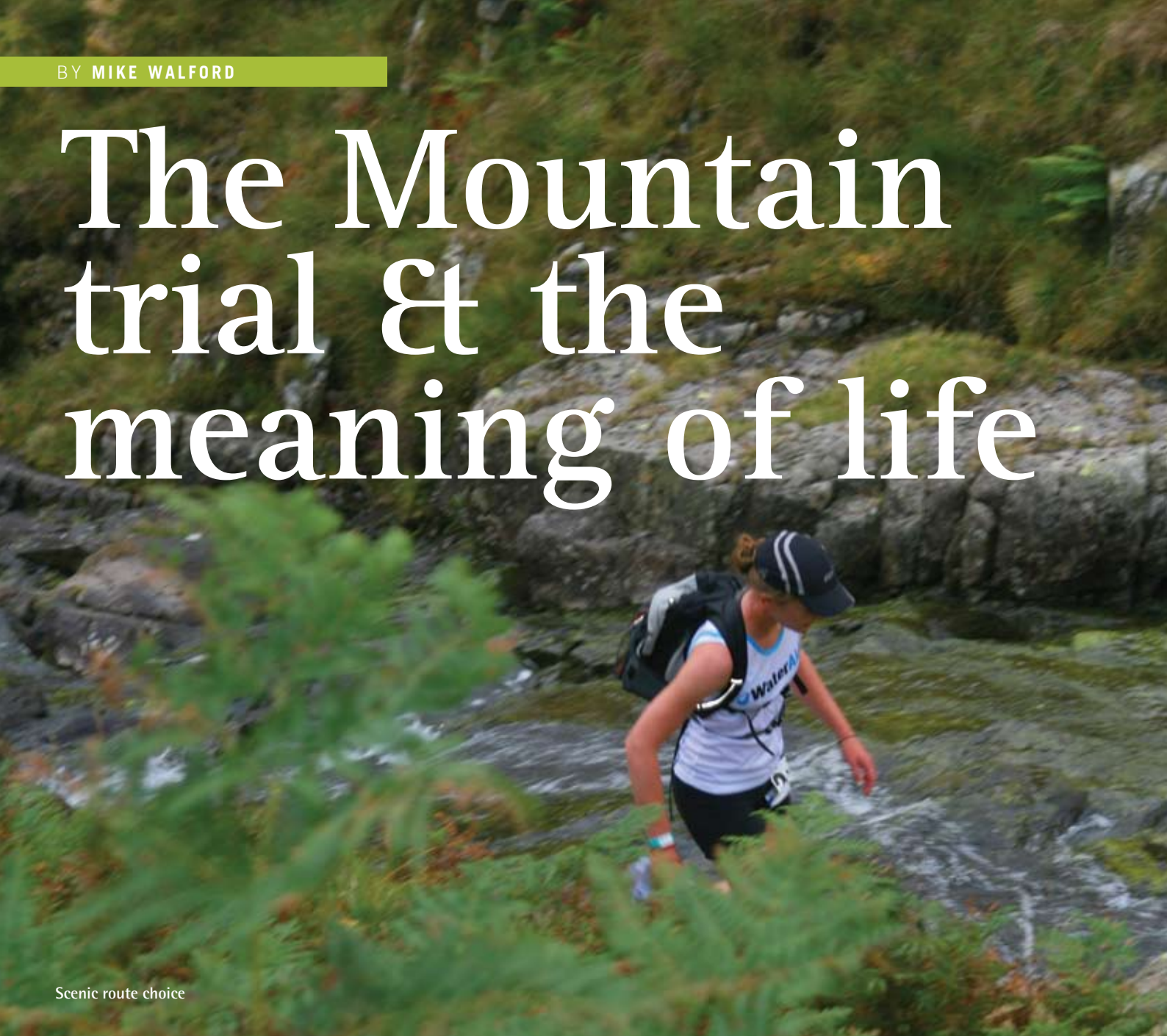
John Disley and Chris Brasher both worked for Reebok UK and were influential in obtaining sponsorship from Reebok for 3 years from 1994 to 1997.

For the last nine years, Ben Lyon has sponsored the Trial, through The Climbers Shop,

Ben Lyon and Gavin Bland



# The Mountain trial & the meaning of life



Scenic route choice

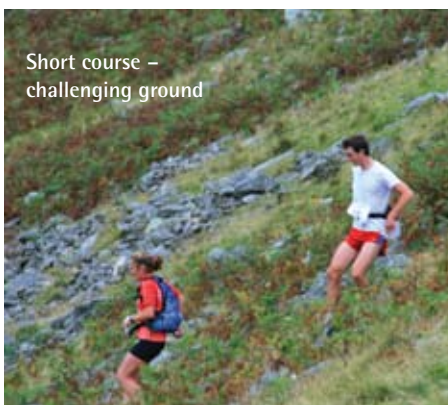
Bob Graham knew the answer to the meaning of life.

Another local inspiration has confirmed the answer; galactic super hero Joss MBE has completed 42 Mountain Trial long courses.

Last year I finished my 41st consecutive Trial. Will I be able to navigate the path to nirvana and 42 this year?

What is it about the Trial that is so compelling? It is my favourite one-day race. The combination of unknown course route, navigation, decision making, individual start times, off path running and considerable bonking potential all add up to the grandest day out on the Lakeland fells.

I was inspired by the Lakes at an early age; lucky enough to attend Preston Grammar School. Not only did we have tough mountain men on the staff, including EB Clarke, with many successful mountain trials, but a school camp at Nether Wasdale. Long days out on the fells were a speciality, giving me the background to do a RA Marathon. (4x Lakeland 3000 footers). A reasonable time brought me to the attention of some South Ribble OC lads, Tom Sykes and



Short course – challenging ground

Photo courtesy of Clare Regan

Maurice Dean. They were short of a third team counter but I was too young to enter; however, the late great Gerry Charnley of SROC was event organiser and he felt the rules could be bent! This precedent allowed a more talented Bland boy an underage entry in later years.

Therefore, my age was entered as twenty-one in the programme for three or four years, a fact that the much missed Sue Courchee

enjoyed to joke about, especially when I suddenly became 22.

This first trial, 1966 from the Woolpack at Eskdale, set me on the path to enlightenment. The course was planned by AH Griffin whose Friday articles in the Lancashire evening post were eagerly devoured. They were often tales of great doings by the Heaton brothers, Stan Bradshaw and Eric Beard.

His course covered the high tops of the central fells and it was a foul day. Perfect! It was all on familiar ground, crossed many times with school camp parties.

Running along the Crinkles crest to a non-existent checkpoint - the marshals were attending a plane crash just below them; I was chatting to a nice man who realised that I was a virgin Trial runner. He gave me loads of encouragement. I asked his name, "John Disley" This was at a time when he was at his Olympic super hero stage. I had that road to Damascus feeling. If the best can be so supportive to the wet behind the ears (literally) then this is the sport to be in.

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Photo courtesy of Clare Regan



Jane Reedy at the final control

The camaraderie of the navigation fell races has been a part of the meaning of life for me. I think the extra stress and excitement of being out there on your own makes for an even stronger bond between the runners than a standard fell race. The smug satisfaction of being the first of the SROC finishers certainly made life worth living that day.

Over the years there have been some mishaps, but all retrievable to ensure a finish. Sneaky good lines due to the advantage of local knowledge have more than compensated for the headless chicken episodes. I would not have been so clever had the trial been in Paddy Buckley country.

Poor visibility was always a bonus and one trial that stands out for me was 1994. Harry's Guardian article for the trial read, "All day towering curtains of rain swept down Buttermere, dark grey clouds crowded the summits and shattering gusts of wind whipped the waters of the lake." Of the 124 men who started, only 90 finished. I didn't put a foot wrong and achieved a placing of 4th, (at nearly



LADIES FIRST! Ken Ledward and Julia Laverack punching the final control

Photo courtesy of Rob Marriot

50). Phil Clarke was second, with Hugh Symons just behind me, enabling Kendal to take the team prize.

Apart from a surprise good run in 1997 at Coniston, (it was fine weather!) my performance has gone downhill. I'm now 59 and not even able to descend properly. If I am going to achieve the mythical 42 I will have to do some training. I cannot rely on local knowledge now as I know the Mediterranean Pyrenees better than I know the Lakes these days. I will have to get out the Wainwrights and Walshes; they were fed into the meaning of life computer to help determine that the answer was 42.

What happens next if I do complete 42 Trials? I will have to have a chat with Joss, but I don't think I have the energy to put so much back into the sport as he does. So what next? Perhaps I increase the number of our chickens from 12 to 42?! Can't be worse than taking up golf like Billy!

"With apologies to Douglas Adams who wrote *The Hitch-Hikers Guide To The Universe*, and recorded the meaning of life as 42"