

The Big Rounds



About the Author

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The Big Rounds

Running and walking the Bob Graham,
Paddy Buckley and Charlie Ramsay Rounds

by David Lintern



CICERONE

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Dedication

For my kids, your kids and theirs, who will inherit these hills and make their own stories in them.

Acknowledgements

Writing any book is a big deal for the person writing it, and writing my first book about the Big Rounds has been among the harder things I’ve ever done. While the actual graft was solitary and intimidating, the wider process has thankfully involved dozens of others, without whom the book would not exist.

First, here’s to Charlie Ramsay for his positivity and encouragement. Without meeting him, I might only have walked Tranter’s Round and no further. Charlie’s belief that the rounds are for all to enjoy resonated with my own values, and sowed the seed of an idea for what you hold in your hand. Second, to my partner Tanya, for cajoling me to try Charlie’s route despite family commitments, and continuing to cajole me over the following five years to write the whole blessed mess up.


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I’m indebted to Roger Smith for his forensic eye and attention to detail. Roger is the author of the famous little green book – *42 Peaks: The story of the Bob Graham Round* – and club member 117, so it was a genuine honour to have him check over the early drafts.


Plainly, this book would be nothing without the hill running community that inspired it. That community is the lion’s share of what makes the Rounds unique. Thanks in particular are due to Rob Bushby, Sue Walsh and Jasmin Paris for allowing me to share their Round accounts, and to Paddy Buckley for a glimpse into a lifetime in love with his own wild places. Part of his account of how the Welsh Classical came to be is also included here with his permission.


My thanks also to interviewees Nicky Spinks, Helene Whitaker, Jasmin Paris, Keri Wallace, Wendy Dodds, Jim Mann and Mike Hartell for their generous insights and undoubted achievements, as well as Morgan Williams, Selwyn Wright and John Brockbank for their wise words and advice early on, and Martin Stone and Jon Gay for their open and honest reflections.


Symbols used on route maps


- 

route
- 

alternative route
- 

start/finish point
- 

direction of route
- 

summit
- 

leg start/finish and support point

Contour lines are drawn and labelled at 50m intervals





Preface

Why the Big Rounds?

The hill running community will give you their own answers (some of them in these pages), but these are my own reasons.

I arrived at these rounds, not as a hill runner, but as a means of challenging myself in our island's wild places. Long-distance routes are not the province of hill runners only, and the hills are agnostic – they belong to all of us and none of us, and they don't care if we walk, run or crawl. Passion and persistence are what counts, and they aren't exclusive qualities. But all these statements are generalised, almost to the point of cliché. Why the Big Rounds, specifically?

It's no accident that each of the three includes the highest mountain in Scotland, Wales and England – the Rounds are 'big' in height and well as distance. But it's more than just number crunching that makes these routes appealing. Scafell Pike, Snowdon or the Ben may grab your interest initially, but these ambitious, circular rounds provide an unparalleled sense of journey. Each round is a grand tour on which you get far more than you bargained for.

The beauty of the rounds in my view is not just the tops themselves, but the places in between. For the experienced English, Welsh or Scottish hillgoer on home ground, they are an invitation to get to know familiar landscapes better in a continuous line. In my own personal conversation with these places, the Paddy Buckley in particular was a revelation. I thought I knew most of the ground well enough already, but it turns out I had no idea. I (literally) discovered new sides, faces or aspects to old friends, reached by tiny trods alongside rivers, through woods and over bwlchs (passes). Paddy puts it best: 'I'm delighted when people write to me to say that the Round helped them to make new discoveries – "marvellous country", they say.'

Similarly, the Bob Graham resulted in a more holistic understanding of the entire region, which

had previously been abstracted by road travel between discrete areas. The rounds are a perfect way to revisit the familiar as well as discover the unknown. Only the Scottish round was fairly new ground for me at the time, my first experience of one of the Big Rounds in one big greedy gulp, and therefore still my own personal favourite...very closely followed by the Welsh round.

What else? For UK hillgoers in general and the international visitor in particular, the Rounds are a unique opportunity to discover more about our island's peculiar variant of hill culture, and specifically, our unique mountain running culture. The Rounds are made as much of people and history as they are of mountains, and are a great example of how people and place come together, a modern, physical link between us and the land.

Over time, the Rounds have attracted runners from across our island nation (and now the world) to try their luck and test their mettle, and the sport of hill running retains a strong sense of community which sets it apart. Reconnoitring and pacing has forged friendships and competitive spirit across class, region and nation, as each person pushes their personal limit. Indeed, runners will help others to beat their own times, one challenge leading to the next. This camaraderie is something we return to throughout the book. It's not just why the Rounds are so special – it's the reason they exist at all.

For some, a 'Triple Crown' is the obvious ultimate goal. Charlie Ramsay said: 'I think today with the three rounds being unofficially linked as the Big Three, it keeps the challenges alive. The bigger challenge is to do all three, but there's less than 50 people who've done that.'

In addition, all three rounds pass through mountain towns and villages, and there are opportunities to engage with other hill folk (whatever their mode of conveyance). The towns of Llanberis, Fort William, Keswick and smaller settlements on or near the route still retain their

The Great Gable Memorial
(leg 4, Bob Graham Round)



own sense of place, something harder to find in many of our larger conurbations, and that's to be celebrated.

That sense of place is carried into the hills themselves. Mountain light can be hard and high contrast, or milky soft, and all the rounds face the sea and share a Celtic gentleness, but even so, for me each round has its own particular colour temperature. If Lochaber is pink, then Cumbria is blue and Snowdonia is gold. If this sounds absurdly romantic, then I plead guilty... just wait until you are on your first top for sunrise!

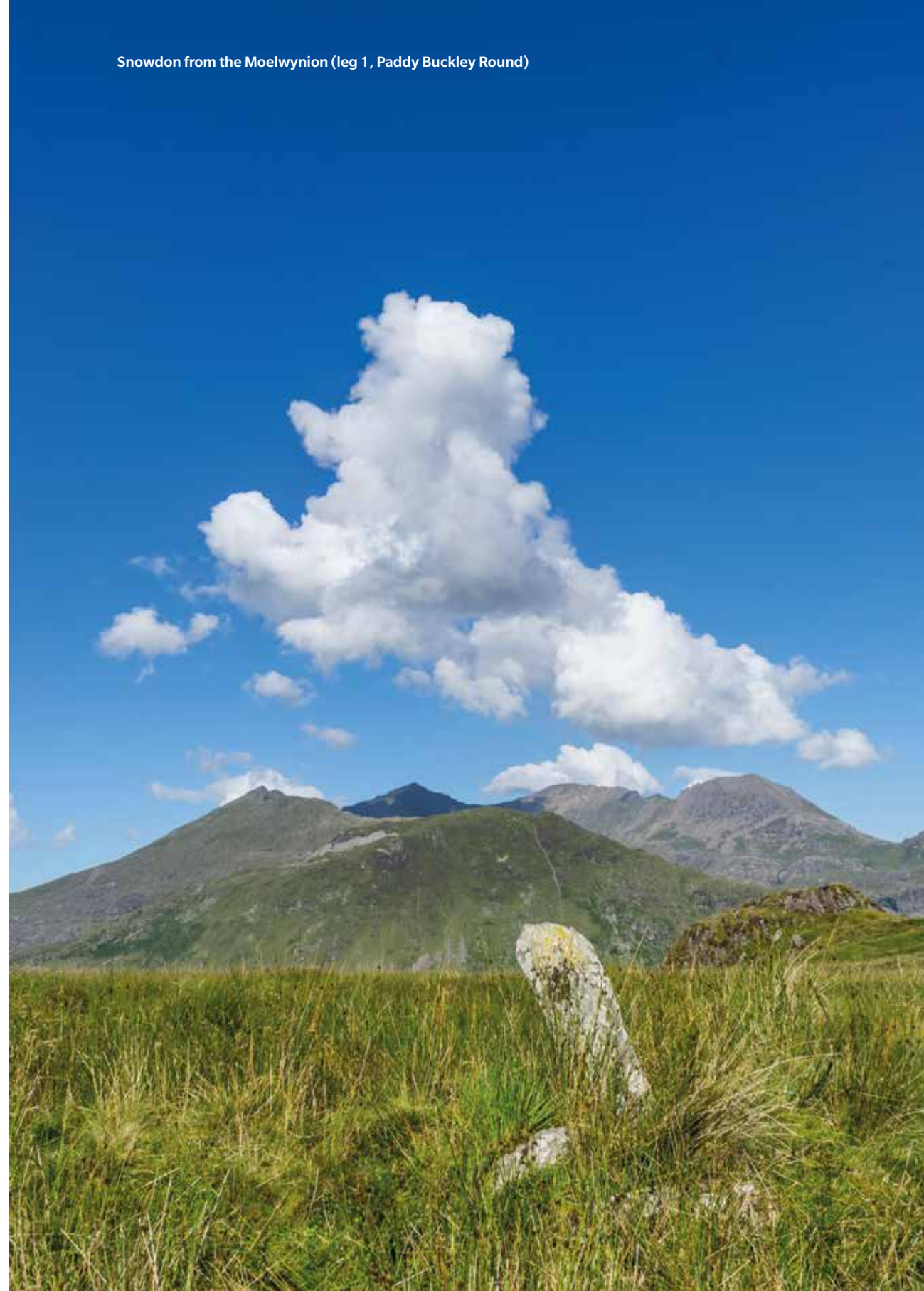
Before I get too carried away, the scale of these rounds is significant in the opposite direction, too. The Big Rounds are just that – big – but perhaps not so big as to be inconceivable. For runners, the ultimate challenge may be to get around in 24 hours or less, but for experienced backpackers they offer just the right amount of distance and ascent for a demanding week's walking holiday, with perhaps enough time for transport at either end. For those attempting them as a walk start to finish, the routes are all circular, which means that transport logistics are kept to a minimum and there are no time-consuming shuttles to worry about. So, the challenge is very real, but conveniently shaped and sized.

As such, they are a motivation to mountain lovers of all stripes. Talking to Nicky Spinks for this book, she tells how completing the Bob Graham was a key target for her, even before she had a running career. Success takes time and commitment, but is achievable. Nicky's came after only four years. It seems incredible to me that Jasmin Paris can achieve under 17 hours on a round (the Ramsay) that still takes me days to backpack, but then again, when I started this project, I didn't hill run at all. That's changed, and while I'm certainly not in the same league as any that feature here, I now enjoy running in my home mountains.

So, the rounds have changed me, and whether you are on the clock or not, I can pretty much guarantee they will change you, too. Whether it's how you engage with our wider landscapes, how you engage with your own outdoors practice or some of both...whether you go fast or slow, in whole or in part, all of the Big Rounds are genuine adventures to aspire to, and singular journeys to revel in.

David Lintern

Snowdon from the Moelwynion (leg 1, Paddy Buckley Round)





Introduction

What are the Big Rounds?

The Big Rounds – the Bob Graham Round, the Paddy Buckley Round and the Charlie Ramsay Round – are known to mountain runners as three of the most difficult 24-hour challenges in the world. Each round is a long-distance classic in its own right, rich in the history and culture of fell or hill running. Thankfully for walkers, they also make magnificent day and multi-day excursions deep into some of the most remote, exciting and beautiful country the UK has to offer.

Collectively, the 'Big 3' take in 113 mountain summits (including the highest peaks in England, Wales and Scotland), more than 25,000m (83,000 feet) of ascent and nearly 300km (183 miles) across three of Britain's most distinct mountain ranges – the Snowdonia National Park in Wales, the Lake District National Park in England, and a vast area of Lochaber in the highlands of Scotland.

Using this book

Unsurprisingly, the book is divided into three main sections, one for each Round. Each of these includes the route notes for the entire Round plus

guidance and rules, for those on the clock – which vary from round to round – as well as supplementary logistical information for both runners and walkers. There's also a history of each round itself and an individual runner's account of their long day on the hill.

The book is ordered according to overall difficulty – but not necessarily difficulty for runners! This is a book for all hillgoers, and each reader's mileage will vary. The Bob Graham is the mother of these rounds, and is considered the easiest of the three, and therefore comes first, although 'easy' used in this book is a relative term. The Paddy Buckley is often considered by runners to be the most difficult, but as mentioned elsewhere, it has less ascent than the Ramsay and is not quite as remote. The extra logistics involved for the Ramsay; travelling to reconnoitre, organise support teams at off-road changeover points for a timed attempt, plus the additional weather challenges in Scotland, means that for this book, Charlie Ramsay's Round comes last.

In addition to those main sections, this chapter includes practical information on how to

Route Guide

LEG 1 Keswick to Threlkeld

Distance	12.3 miles (19.8km)
Ascent	5272ft (1610m)

This is a shorter stage over two of the biggest hills on the round, which offer superb views and a feeling of space and remoteness, as well as some unforgiving ascent. There’s a downhill grade 1 scramble, and a tiring sting in the tail (in the middle of the route).

As with any micro navigation in towns, the beginning of the route can be a little confusing. Once out of town and onto the hill, it becomes more straightforward. Start from the **Moot Hall** in Market Square, at the southern end of Main Street in Keswick. Be mindful of the general public, especially if you’re running.

Head downhill (NW) on Main Street, and after a few metres turn right into the ginnel (alley) to the right-hand side of the Golden Lion Pub. Exit the ginnel and go diagonally across the car park, heading for Otley Road, to the left of Keswick Laundry. Once on Otley Road, turn first left then first right to find the path to the footbridge across the **River Greta**. The start of the path has a railing and a green hedge: veer right to go down it.

Once you’ve crossed the river, cross Lower Fitz Park, past a BMX track at the edge of the park, following a path to a small metal gate facing an old railway bridge. You can clearly see the break in the railway embankment on the map. Turn right out of the park and onto Brundholm Road. Follow this for approximately 150m and then take the first left on Spoonygreen Lane. You’ll join the Cumbria Way and follow this very straight road out of town over the **A66**. As you begin to climb, the road becomes a path and passes through some pretty woodlands.

Contour Latrigg and Mallen Dodd on this easy path to reach an open car park area at NY 280 253. Now follow the path NE and then NNW, contouring around Little Man for your first summit – **Skiddaw**. The going is fairly steep and sometimes eroded but it’s a wide and easily followed path to the top. Head north from the summit cairn for about 600m and then turn east, downhill on short grass to cross a

fence. Follow another fence to join the quad tracks through boggy, heathery ground to meet the path to Skiddaw House near a small, old stone bridge over a stream. Note that going by way of Hare Crag is now best avoided due to erosion concerns.

From this bridge, start directly up summit number 2 – **Great Calva**, heading NE. It’s possible to follow a line of shooting butts, if they are visible above the bracken! It’s a dull ascent but a characterful, rocky top, slightly marred by a fence divide. From Great Calva, follow this fence and descend south to the second summit, and then turn east. Continue to handrail (follow a linear feature) the fence through bilberry and heather to meet a circular sheep fold (a favourite landmark of Wainwright) in Wiley Gill. Pass this directly on the left, cross over the Cumbria Way briefly and then ford the **River Caldew**. Beware, this can flood. If in spate, head upstream until a fence crosses the river, and use this as a navigation handrail across.

Skiddaw ridge





Descending Hall's Fell

LEG 2
Threlkeld to Dunmail Raise

Distance	13.4 miles (21.5km)
Ascent	5895ft (1800m)

Going clockwise, a grand but gently undulating ridge enables swift travel, but is not to be underestimated in poor conditions. At Helvellyn, a series of ridges and coves drop away dramatically to the east and the ground underfoot becomes more engaging.

Turn right onto the A66, then take the first left towards Newsham, handrailing a concreted irrigation system on your left. Go through a gate at Newsham House and onto scrubby, then grassy

open fell. Runners may choose to approach summit number 4 – **Clough Head** – directly; make for the edge of the woods on your right, go through a gate and follow a path by a stream to meet the Old Coach Road, before climbing steeply up the north side of **Clough Head**. For walkers, it may make more sense to cut across the open fell SE to intersect Old Coach Road, and then follow it east until you meet an old railway car. Walk on a few metres until approximately NY 340 234, and then ascend on a rough and indistinct path on the spur, avoiding the boggy ground to the east of White Pike.

The going on top is easy and grassy and fantastic views open out towards Great Dodd. My preferred camp for backpacking is nearby. Head towards the characterful **Calfhow Pike** and camp there, or if you need water or shelter, descend SE to cross the beck for some flattish ground at around NY 336 208. Whether you are camping or not, this can be a good place to collect water, as the ridge is mostly dry until Grisedale Tarn.



Calfhow Pike, on the eastern ridge

You are now at the foot of a long and indistinct climb over **Mungrisdale Common**. It's a dull slog over grass and tussocks, before it eventually flattens out a little to become more mossy and boggy. Head left of the summit screes on the skyline, to reach summit number 3 – **Blencathra**. The actual

summit is slightly beyond the screes, and directly in front of your descent via **Hall's Fell Ridge**.

At the bottom of Hall's Fell, you'll reach a stream; turn right and take the left-hand stile, heading downhill on a bridleway to the farm. Then follow the old sign for the A66 into **Threlkeld**.

SAFETY FIRST

Hall's Fell Ridge is classed as a grade 1 scramble, and is fairly low in that grade, but it does require care especially after the first 200m or so. Those without a head for heights should not attempt these Rounds, and many accidents have occurred on this descent (some involving runners), so if in doubt, go around. There's a very pleasant and sensible descent option to the west, via Knowe Crag and Bleas Fell. This leads to the Blencathra centre car park, from which the road east can be taken into Threlkeld.