

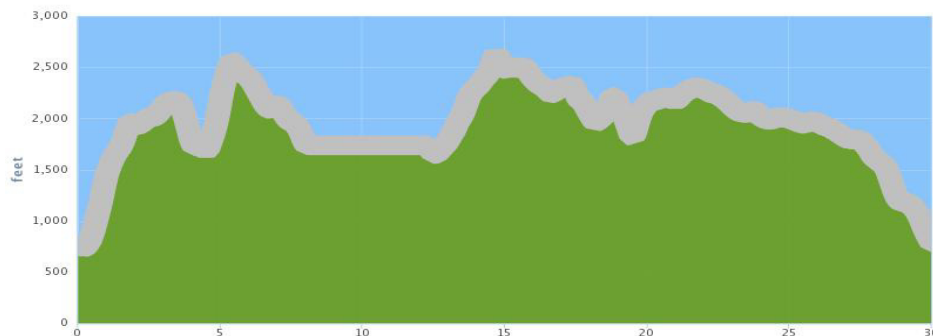
BIG BLACK MOUNTAINS CHALLENGE 2015

The Big Black Mountains Challenge (BBMC) was inaugurated by the Longtown Mountain Rescue Team (LMRT) 30 years ago in 1985. The event consists of a choice of three testing walks/runs of 30, 18 and 10 miles between them taking in 15 summits over 2,200 feet around the breathtaking scenery of the Black Mountains. The event starts and finishes at Llanthony Priory located in the Honddu Valley in the Vale of Ewys, between Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye.

This was my eighth BBMC and the third time I have run the 30 mile route, shown on the map below. Safety on the mountains is crucial and so there are 10 checkpoints along the route so that members of the LMRT can monitor the progress of participants.



The route involves an elevation gain of 5,517 feet and an elevation loss of 5,482 feet over its 30 mile distance, with 5 significant climbs to a maximum height of 2,660 feet at *Waun Fach*.



It was a chilly 7am start on Saturday 16th May at the enchanting Llanthony Priory, founded by the Augustinian Order in 1100AD , with a sharp climb of 1,170 feet over just 1.83 miles. Running is only for the “mountain goats” at this stage of the event!



Once at the top I broke into a reasonable pace along a blustery ridge, glad I had worn 3 layers, including a Pac-Lite water/wind-proof jacket, and passing groups of cheery walkers on the way. Next a knee-jarring descent of 850 feet into the next valley and fording a stream to the first checkpoint at 5 miles. This is followed by an almost vertical, lung-busting climb of 1,176 feet over 1.26 miles to the second checkpoint, after which at last an opportunity to open up for an 8 mile downhill canter along the edge of a forest and through fields of heather and bracken to the foot of the next valley. Here there’s another checkpoint, this time offering water and jelly-babies!

By now the sun was up and it was pleasantly warm. With the birds singing, the new lambs bleating and the Spring blooming in the meadows it was uplifting to run the flat path alongside a babbling brook to the end of the valley. Such delights don’t last for long on the BBMC as the charming path disappears and you start a seemingly never-ending run-walk-run ascent of 1,840 feet over 5.21 miles to the summit of *Waun Fach*, the second highest peak in the Brecon Beacons National Park. Here the temperature drops quickly and the wind picks up – time to don the Pac-Lite, a bobble hat and gloves whilst chatting to the marshals at the remotest check point of them all.



This is the part of the course I fear the most as, on the first time I ran this route, the clouds came down here and I lost my bearings in a white-out. It was cold and wet and you learn, the hard way, how dangerous mountains can be. Fortunately, I orienteered my way back to safety but only after a one-and-a-half hour scary detour to avoid the dangers of tight-contoured precipices! On this my third attempt the skies were clear, as was the way.

I took some time on the summit to marvel at the panorama: the shimmer of the Bristol Channel away to the south with the Sugar Loaf Mountain of Crickhowell partially obscuring the view; *Pen-y-Fan*, the highest peak in the Beacons, to the west and, just visible in the haze of the east, the Cotswolds. Surprisingly, at this point of the run, there were few other competitors to be seen – the walkers left far behind, the “mountain goats” probably already finished and the occasional solitary soul like me! Solitude in such high places is a mystical feeling, with Nature, her beauty and her threats, so close and so all-enveloping.

My muse was rudely interrupted by a fellow runner who asked me to take his picture on the summit with his iPhone! That task performed, we teamed-up for the next downhill stretch to the sixth checkpoint. Care was required as, due to the heavy rain the previous week, it was very wet underfoot and in places pools had formed. Of all the places to plant your foot into a deep hole of muddy water, with the risk of breaking an ankle or worse, the summit of *Waun Fach* is not the best.

Long distance mountain running is a bit like ultra marathons, you occasionally enjoy a chat over a few miles with a fellow competitor but at the end of the day it's *your* race and so you tend to separate and do your own thing. You must stick to your race strategy and not be forced to slow down or speed up to align with someone else's. So it was on this occasion as, after the checkpoint, I broke into a comfortable pace and my nameless friend was left behind not to be seen again for several hours when I spotted him in the Finishing Tent and went over to shake his hand in mutual congratulation.

It's now 20 miles into the run and, all-of-a-sudden, things get busier as the walkers from the 18 mile route join from the ridge to the south and share the next check point. There follow two sharp climbs: the first, known locally as *Twmpa* (but, more prosaically by the English, as “The Duke of Hereford's Knob”) of 215 feet over 0.58 of a mile and the second, Hay's Bluff, of 356 feet over 0.78 of a mile. Both knackered at this stage of the race!



Hay's Bluff is dramatically beautiful with glorious views over the patchwork quilt of the lowlands beneath. Hang-gliders hurl themselves off the cliff at the perilous start of their battle against gravity to the inevitable soft landing on the multi-coloured fields of grass, hay and oilseed a thousand feet below.

But there's no time to admire the view, as with some 8 miles to go, my back is killing me from the weight of 2 litres of electrolyte drink I've been carrying in the Camel on my back for the last 6 hours. That pain is, however, as nothing with the agony to come! That 8 miles is run along a stretch of the Offa's Dyke Path which straddles the ridge between the *Honddu* and the *Olchon* Valleys. To accommodate "weekend walkers" it has been unforgivingly paved with slabs or gravelled with course stones. Fine if you're wearing thick walking boots but I'm wearing minimalist Inov-8 "Roelite" trail shoes with deep mountain-bike-like treads and no cushioning whatsoever!



That last 8 miles is hell, with my feet, knees, thighs and calves protesting all the way! I soldier-on determined to run the whole stretch, except when I must stop to check-in at the last two checkpoints. The only consolation and distraction is the encouragement I get from the many walkers I pass along the path.

Eventually, there's a sharp right turn and the path slopes away steeply down towards Llanthony. On this hard surface strewn with trip-inducing rocks, it's dangerous to end with a sprint finish but, despite my aching knees, I hop-scotch my way to the luxury of the luscious grass field in front of the Priory, through a gate and over the Finish Line.



The time on my Garmin, which, like me is about to expire, shows 7:56:10 and I'm happy with that considering I stopped for between 4 and 6 minutes at each of the checkpoints to drink, re-fuel and convey my thanks to the marshals.

It's been a glorious sunny day with a tough but beautiful course, a perfectly managed event and then, the promise of which has been keeping me going for the last couple of hours, a truly delicious spread of tea, coffee, fruit juices and piles and piles of cakes in the Finisher's Tent, baked specially by the local WVS. I pick up my BBMC 30th Anniversary commemorative Finisher's Certificate, a pin-badge, a t-shirt and a goody bag containing a BBMC drinks flask and tuck-in to the Welsh cakes, chocolate brownies and lemon drizzle cakes, safe in the knowledge that my Garmin also tells me I've burned over 5,000 calories – so it doesn't matter!

