

King Offa's Dyke Race - Long race, long write-up – you have been warned!

Why this race? I wanted something to challenge me. I got that in 2013 with my first 100-miler on the South Downs Way, in 2015 with the Chiltern Way (132 miles) and 2016 with the Grand Union Canal Race (145 miles). But I wanted something that was going to put me on the edge of failure – to see if I would. From a fairly limited shortlist, the King Offa's Dyke Race fitted the bill well. 185 miles, so a substantive step up in distance, and 9,000 metres of climbing (more than Everest.). It was also a point to point, single stage, offered reasonable straightforward transport options, and didn't need a support crew. Being run every other year, I made the decision to go for it while I could, and entered at the start of the year.

The race starts in Chepstow, and then follows the dyke more or less the whole way to Prestatyn in North Wales, meandering along the national border for much of the way. Presumably the route of the dyke was chosen for its defensive potential – taking in as many hills as possible – rather than ease for the traveller. Race start was 8pm on Friday, with a 90 hour cut off (2pm on Tuesday), meaning a very relaxed average pace of just over 2mph required. There was also a 100 mile option starting at the same time (but stopping after 100 miles).

The build up

I'm not sure I've ever had a race where my training has been how I wanted it to be, and this was no exception. My work this year has seen me bounce between different clients in London, or long day trips to some further afield. This made it difficult to fit in any decent mid-week mileage. However, I did do better with my long runs, putting in a sequence of ten or so more than 20 miles. I also ran the T60 Night Race in May, to practice an evening start. The hoped for nice quiet week at work beforehand didn't happen, and I had a string of early mornings, some late nights, and a bit of stress. I did manage to take the whole Friday off work, so had a leisurely train journey down to Chepstow and walked the mile from the station to the race start. Nobody was there. Checked the race pack, realised race HQ was somewhere completely different, so walked the mile back to the station and the 1.6 miles to race HQ. What's a few extra miles when you're doing 185, and better to get the navigation errors out of the way now. Registration and kit check were all very efficient, and I had an hour or so to chill out before we were bussed to the rock that marks the start of the trail. It would be fair to say the room smelt of fear.



Leg 1 – Chepstow to Monmouth

As there were a few kissing gate bottlenecks just after the start, Richard the race director set us off at intervals to avoid a big queue forming. We were called up one by one, touched the rock, and given a replica King Offa coin. If we reached the finish we could swap the coin for a trophy/medal. If we didn't reach the finish, we got to keep the coin to nag at us until we re-entered the race when it is run again in two years. I really didn't want to keep the coin.

The first few minutes gave us an indication of what was to come as we immediately plunged down a steep hill for a couple of hundred metres, before climbing up the other side. It was a beautiful evening – a clear sky, a blazingly bright full moon, and soon we were out into the countryside, alternating between twisty trails through the woods and open meadows beside the river. I did a complete face plant over a tree route at one stage, and lost the trail for a few moments around the Naval Temple, but otherwise arrived in Monmouth at about midnight without further incident. I normally try to be fairly slick at the checkpoints during races, but figured for this one a quick sit down and a rest was likely to be a good investment for later in the race. So I had the first of many cups of tea, a small selection of ‘ultra tapas’ (sausage rolls, cocktail sausages, cheese cubes, flapjack etc.) and set off into the night again.

Leg 2 – Monmouth to Pandy

Apart from one wooded section, this leg was largely on farmland – and soon fell into a routine of reach gate, check direction of waymarker, cross field (avoiding cattle and sheep as required), try to find gate at far end of field – and repeat. This certainly wasn’t a race to do if you don’t like getting close to cows, although all the ones here were very docile. I did start getting a bit worried about the hills. There were a few climbs where I was really working hard – and these were supposed to be the easy ones. Arrival at Pandy Village Hall was about 4:30 (Saturday morning), where I refuelled with soup and a roll. I noticed here that some people were sleeping – but I had always planned not to for the first night.

Leg 3 – Pandy to Hay-on-Wye

After some more faffing across fields, this leg then brought the long slow climb up to the highest point on the course, and a 12km run along the ridge of the Black Mountains. We also saw the setting of the red moon, and the most amazing sunrise. One of those special moments when you are just glad to be alive. I had a bit of company for this stage which was nice – the usual chat about other races people have done and future plans. A mistake in picking the line through the final field meant a thorough soaking of shoes and socks in the long dewy grass, but we were soon into the third checkpoint at 9:15, and at 50 miles the first of three major ones where we could have our drop bags. I took advantage of this to change into some dry socks (which had to go back into wet shoes) and very much enjoyed the fried egg and bacon roll which was offered.



Leg 4 – Hay-on-Wye to Kington

This leg started off with a relatively flat section along the river, before climbing steeply up to the Hergest Ridge. I received some helpful advice here from a fellow competitor who knew the course well. If you ever get lost on the Offa’s Dyke trail just look around for the biggest hill you can see – because the path will almost certainly be going up it. The course profile was definitely getting more ‘spiky’ here, with successive sharp ascents and descents. It was also getting very warm in the midday sun, and I did take a few short breaks in the shade. The race distance also started to ‘loom’ a bit for me. Having done over 60 miles and missed a night’s sleep I was getting quite tired, but there were still another 120+ miles to go! Coming into Kington at about 2:30 (Saturday afternoon) I was ready for some more food as it was past lunchtime. I was therefore disappointed to find just a few cold savouries and the usual sweet stuff. This was a bit deflating, and was the only time when I felt the organisation wasn’t excellent.

Leg 5 – Kington to Knighton

More ups and downs on this leg, and I was also starting to get some waves of feeling properly tired, with my mind doing that wandering thing it does before you finally fall asleep. The scenery though was absolutely stunning – hills and forests all around bathed in glorious sunshine. At some point I fell in step with Hannah, who was doing the 100, and Simon who was doing the full thing and I had run with a bit earlier. Hannah was struggling with a sore back and finding running difficult, so we hiked the remaining distance to the checkpoint together, pushing along at a really good pace as various of Hannah's friends popped out at intervals to meet her. It was just getting dark as we arrived at the hall, and I had decided to have a short snooze here as the next section was going to be a tough one. On arrival I was asked if I wanted a warm Cornish pastie. Yep – that was exactly what I wanted! I was then offered a ham and cheese toastie. Well, it would have been rude to turn that down. I then adjourned to the quiet room to lie down for 30 minutes. The floor was hard, and various people were faffing about and being noisy, but I dozed off a couple of times, and felt better afterwards. Coming back into the main hall I spotted a packet of Frosties on the food table. Was this for real? I have literally never been so excited about something during a race.

Leg 6 – Knighton to Montgomery

As I was polishing off my Frosties and getting my stuff together another runner asked if I was setting off soon, and wanted to buddy up for the next leg. So John and I set off into the dark for another 18 miles. John had run the race twice before, which was helpful for navigation. This was a challenging leg, with some really steep climbs (to the extent of needing to put a hand down to steady yourself from time to time), and some awkward rocky descents where you really had to pick your way down carefully. At the top of one of these climbs we hit the halfway marker, which brought mixed feelings – half way is great but there's still a very long way to go. The weather was also getting a bit more interesting, with some squally wind on the higher ground. I started to get my first decent run of hallucinations along this stage – the leaves on the ground turning into a carpet with pictures on, the trees turning into grand buildings, and at one point five cloaked and hooded figures standing by the trail offering drinks to John (which turned out to be a plough). With a bit of faffing to find the hall, we strode into the checkpoint (100 miles) just before dawn broke. Given the hallucinations I thought another short snooze might be a good idea, so having polished off a jacket potato I laid down for another 20 minutes. As I had my drop bag here I also changed socks and shoes – which felt great after nearly 36 hours of soggy feet.

Leg 6 – Montgomery to Llanymynech

It felt good to have got past the 100 mile point, and I set off for the next leg under a cool and overcast dawn. After a couple of miles another runner joined the trail from a slightly random direction and asked if he could tag along to the next checkpoint. This was some more welcome company, particularly as it was probably the least interesting leg. Although it seems odd to be complaining about a lack of hills, the ten or so miles following the river were a bit dull, and the final couple of miles along the canal really dragged. Gordon and I rarely ran step by step, but it was good to have someone else around and we had the odd chat to pass the time. We arrived at Llanymynech Village Hall (120 miles) early on Sunday afternoon. Cornish pasties and ham and cheese toasties were on the menu again, which were gratefully taken, and washed down with the usual mug of tea.

Leg 7 – Llanymynech to Froncysyllite

I set off with Gordon and John (who I had done leg 5 with). I adopted my (now usual) role of leading the way by stomping off up the steep hills. After a bit Gordon caught up and said that

John had turned round as a knee injury was playing up. A few miles later we were caught by Hayley (first lady), and agreed to stick together for the rest of the leg. The route went through quite a few villages here, but we hardly saw any people, and there was a slightly eerie feel about things – I had to check my watch to see that it was still Sunday afternoon and not late evening. Light relief was provided by a local accusing Hayley of not being a proper runner as she hadn't done the London Marathon. As the sky got darker the trail got tougher – with sections over rough (and damp) fields or ankle breaking tree roots in the woods. There were also a few sections along the actual dyke itself, with rabbit holes and steep drops to trap the unwary. We were getting to the 'business' end of the race. As darkness fell a drizzle began, which then turned into a more persistent rain. Despite this we ploughed on, working as an efficient team with me following the paper map and pushing the pace on the climbs, Hayley using her GPS to check we were on track (which occasionally we weren't) and Gordon showing a remarkable memory of the course from a recce earlier in the year). We discussed sticking together for the rest of the race, and were pleased to note that we were in 8th place. We rolled into Fron before midnight, and as with all the other checkpoints were brilliantly looked after by the volunteers who fetched us food and drink, hung up wet clothes, put phones on to charge and generally made sure we were okay. The race medic took a quick look at people's feet – and declared mine the best he had seen so far (mini fist pump). Gordon promptly lay down on the floor right in front of everyone and was snoring after 15 seconds. Hayley adjourned to the back of the hall for a 30 minute sleep. I chatted to the volunteers for another ten minutes while I finished my pasta pot before having a short nap of my own.

Leg 8 – Froncysyllite to Llandega

The three of us set off into the rain after midnight, for one of the most remote sections. This one is all a bit of a blur for me. Although I was walking/running well, I was struggling to keep track of where we were on the map, and beginning to get cold from what was now a persistent rain. I was also hallucinating fairly regularly – with large gatherings of woodland creatures by the trail resolving into plants, the rocks looking like German army camouflage, and the trees forming towering buildings. We also lost the trail in a few places, and had some slightly hairy moments scrambling up the scree slopes to get us back on track. It was probably best that we couldn't see the drop. Looking back I'm very glad that I wasn't doing this bit on my own. We did overtake two other people here (one who had previously twisted an ankle, and one who I think was just flagging) – so now up to joint sixth. Our relief at arriving at the Llandega checkpoint (150 miles) was tempered by the knowledge that it was tents here, rather than indoors. However, the volunteers were really well organised. We were shown to the main tent, where we were encouraged to get some warm clothes on (our drop bags were here), eat as much beef stew as we could, and have a decent rest in a separate tent before the next stage. Gordon was all for carrying on straight away, but with it being just before dawn, and the rain due to ease off shortly, we agreed on an hour's sleep here. Hayley decided to take longer as she was very comfortably first lady and wanted a bit more rest in the bank.

Leg 9 – Llandega to Bodfari

The hour passed very quickly, which means I must have had a bit of decent sleep, and again I felt better for it. I nudged Gordon awake, and we returned to the main tent to have some more stew for breakfast and get kitted up for the next leg. It was now dawn on Monday, and overcast, chilly and still drizzling – so I took some more layers from my drop bag to wear (including leggings and waterproof trousers). Leg 9 was another tough one, with the many ups and downs of the Clwydian Hills. We were soon back into our routine of me leading the way on the climbs, and Gordon helping to push the pace on the downs. By having a shorter sleep we had managed to overtake two people, but they soon passed us, and I was quite happy still to be in sixth.

As the day warmed up I gradually shed my extra layers, and there was a bit of weak sunshine. I usefully learned the Welsh for “shoo” – which was helpful as the cows didn’t respond to my English. This bit really was hard work, and I was glad of some encouraging messages from friends and colleagues (who were now back at work on Monday morning).

After an interminable last section we arrived at Bodfari at lunchtime, where I very much enjoyed a fried egg and bacon roll. The volunteers asked if I wanted anything else. I said I quite



fancied the same again – which they were very happy to deliver. The Gordon-Ed partnership had taken a little wobble here, with Gordon worrying about Hayley catching and overtaking us. He seemed to get a bit more rational after some food!

Leg 10 – Bodfari to Prestatyn

Setting off for the final leg, I couldn’t believe how good I felt. My feet were really sore, but I was running quite strongly, and on the flats and downhills really tried to push the pace on. I’ve never felt this good towards the end of a long race – and perhaps I was cashing in on resting and eating well earlier. Despite this it was still slow going, with the trail seeming to wander around unnecessarily and more ups and downs. With a few miles to go we crested a rise and were met with the sight of the sea, Prestatyn in the distance, and Liverpool across the Wirrall. That was a good sight! The course had one last ‘treat’ for us by making us climb right up to the highest point of the ridge above Prestatyn, and then climb awkwardly down a set of large steps to the outskirts of town. I’d spent eight months wondering what this last stretch was going to feel like, and whether I was going to make it this far. Doing it for real was quite an emotional moment. We hiked through the town centre, ticked off the final climb over the railway footbridge, and then ran the last couple of hundred metres to touch the rock that marked the finish just before 7pm.

The aftermath

As ever, it was lovely to finish. I had an interesting moment in the changing room when I found my sock had welded itself to a piece of Compeed, which was in turn welded to my heel, and I had to cut it off (the sock... not the heel). Showered and in some fresh clothes I exchanged my coin for a finisher's trophy, and was looking forward to a sit down and some food. At this point it became clear that there had been a bit of a cock up with the sports centre where the finish was, and there was no hot food. Quick change of plan then – I had 15 minutes until the next train home, so grabbed a lift up the road, dashed into the chippy, and collected a sausage and chips to eat on the train, which I practically inhaled. I managed to stay awake for the three hour journey home (although it was a bit touch and go at the end) and my wife kindly collected me from the station. Quick bowl of cereal, bath, and finally a proper bed at about midnight on Monday.



Reflections

A few weeks on and I haven't quite sorted out how I feel about this race yet. I'm pretty pleased to have come sixth, but slightly disappointed not to be quicker. It was indisputably hard, but I found the bigger challenge was the mental one of just ploughing on even when there were hours and hours and hours still to go. I was kind of hoping it was going to establish my limit, and I can go back to doing normal stuff – but I reached the finish feeling as though I could have carried on for longer. It's made me very certain that I don't want to try longer and flatter (e.g. Thames Ring or Lon Las) but I fear the Hardmoors 200 in 2021 will be a siren call that is difficult to ignore. It was, however, an unforgettable experience and I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to do it, and the health and fitness to complete it.

Photos by Maarten Schön / BeyondMarathon