TRAILS, HILLS AND TIRED LEGS: A RUNNING OBSESSION

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The story of a developing obsession and a fond farewell to my playground.
Category: Observations

As the title suggests, this is another post about running. Those who have signed up to mailings from this blog to read about other stuff, should feel free to ignore this one!

Like most kids, I loved to run. I have a vivid memory from when I was seven or eight, of runningÂ along a piece of waste ground on my way to school. The route ran down a slight slope and it felt as though I was flying as I ran and jumped over the bumps in the ground. Fifty years on, I can still recapture that feeling on a good day.

While I loved to run, I was never fast; my friends would always have to wait for me to catch them up and I never won a prize at school sports day. However, it was in my teens that I discovered something new about running. Six days a week, morning and evening, I delivered newspapers on a route that was around two miles long. Despite the fact that I had to carry a big bag of newspapers, I could quite happily run the whole paper round. I wasn't quick, but I could keep running for a long time. When I stopped delivering newspapers, I continued to go out for a run every now and then up until my late twenties, when we went to live in West Africa.

For twelve hot and sticky years, I never dreamed of running - walking up stairs was more than enough effort in those conditions. By the time we returned home, I had somehow become middle-aged and overweight and running was far from my thoughts.

One morning in March 2009, I decided to get out of bed early and to go for a run. I walked up the hill behind our house and on into the woods then jogged the half mile down through the woods and home. It hurt. Then again, the woods were lovely and it was good to move; so I made a regular habit of getting up early three days a week to run half a mile down the hill. Slowly, the half mile became a mile, two miles, three miles and then I switched to running five miles, once a week on a Saturday. I always walked up the hill and adopted a route which brought me slowly downwards and back home.

I could have carried on running my five miles on Saturdays for years, but I got the silly idea of doing the High Wycombe Half Marathon. I downloaded a training plan from the internet and started running longer distances and more frequently. The following year, I got a place in the London Marathon and that was really serious. I spent hours, pounding the roads around Wycombe, building up my distance in anticipation for the big event. I enjoyed the challenge, but I have to say, I didn't particularly enjoy the running. The Marathon itself was amazing, but about half way through my knees began to get really sore and I had to half-run half-walk to get to the finish line. To be honest, I thought my running days were over, but a good sports physio and a set of exercises got me back running. However, I decided that pounding tarmac wasn't for me and I went back to running in the woods. By now, I was fitter and stronger than I had been and could explore the miles of footpaths in the Chilterns. Most weekends saw me doing ten to fifteen miles in the hills to the west of Wycombe.





Finishing my first ultra

It was a friend from my teenage years who suggested that I might enjoy running in some events in the Lake District. He assured me that they weren't as hard as they sounded and that the atmosphere was very friendly. I wasn't entirely convinced but in the spring of 2015, I lined up for the Lakeland Trails race in Hawkshead. It was blooming hard, with an unreasonable amount of hills - but I was hooked. Running in mountains is remarkably satisfying. The same friend, who mentioned the Lake District races also introduced me to the concept of "ultras", off-road races that are longer than marathons. I thought that I'd better give one of them a try, just to see whether I could do it and I signed up for a thirty mile jog along a canal towpath in Essex. Then last year, I decided to see whether I could combine the idea of running an ultra and running in the mountains. I injured my ankle during my training, but I finished the race and loved every minute - I'll be back for the same race this summer.

Somewhere along the line, I've stocked up on lots of running gear. I own more pairs of tights than any sensible middle aged man ought to and I would be embarrassed to own up to how many pairs of running shoes I own (five, since you asked - but there is a good reason for that).



Through this time, I've continued running in the woods around home in High Wycombe.Â I know every footpath for miles around and can run a twenty mile route avoiding roads and traffic. Training for ultras, I've ran down into the Hambledon Valley, onto the Thames footpath and into Henley, returning via the same route, but stopping for coffee and cake in a village shop. I regularly see rabbits, deer, pheasants and (of course) red kites, but I rarely see people. All this within less than forty miles of the centre of London. I know that someone somewhere actually owns the title to these hills and the footpaths, but as far as I am concerned, they are mine. I've ran on them in sun, rain, snow and (worst of all) wind by day and by night. Today, however, I did my last long, slow run in these hills. Next week, we move to Yorkshire and while I can't wait to get to grips with the high moors, I feel a touch of sadness at leaving the footpaths and woods that I've grown to know and love over the last seven or eight years.

I'm still not a fast runner and as I'll be sixty next year, I suspect that it's too late for me to get any quicker. But I can run for long distances. I've got vague plans to celebrate my sixtieth with a long, multi-day run in the Lake District - but that will have to wait.

I wish I'd discovered trail running thirty five years ago, but while I can still enjoy God's amazing world and while my knees and ankles hold up, you'll find me out there, shuffling slowly up the hills and running down them, feeling like a seven year old on his way to school.


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