

Podcast 120 : Ultramarathon In Northumberland

{INTRO:

SEANNA: I know a lot of people do compare themselves to other runners and all of that, but I do find it's such a personal journey and it's just like you out there. And I have gone through periods of kind of being like, you know, I see great runners and I'm like, oh, I wish I could run like that, but I don't compare myself in the like beat myself up that I can't, because like my own journey is the one that matters, and I'm doing it to be out in the hills and having a good time.}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I'd give a life update at this point but I don't really have one? I've done a lot of walking, a small amount of running, had several existential crises, not been anywhere significant unless you count Bognor Regis, and am generally bumbling along, always conscious that I'm getting older and no wiser. I will say I'm falling out of love with beer, well, not out-of-love per se, more a kind of 'do you know, I'm not enjoying this as much as I should be'. Which is understandable when 80% of it is overly-juicy IPAs.

One might query Bognor Regis. It's definitely on-brand for someone going Beyond The Brochure, and if it was good enough for King George V, it's good enough for me. That said, he went there for a 'rest cure' in the Victorian tradition (hence the 'Regis' in its name), it being a seaside resort and therefore full of clean air. It didn't work, but then given his penchant for tobacco it's not surprising. I can't find any reference to how much he smoked, only that by the end of his life he needed oxygen tanks. He wasn't impressed with Bognor anyway; there's an urban rumour that, on the suggestion he go back there for another rest cure, his last words were 'Bugger Bognor'. They were not. But he may have had a point. I only went there to mark Bestie's birthday, and even then only because it was cheaper than Bristol. To be fair, the purpose wasn't Bognor itself, but nearby Arundel Castle, a place that's been on my hit-list since I started playing the regularly-mentioned-on-this-pod board game 'Kingmaker', which had the castle as one of its important locations, and the name of which I liked enough to co-opt into my own stories and personal culture. I have, however, been pronouncing it incorrectly all my life, because having never heard it before, and only seeing it written down, I originally read it as 'Arundel'. And old habits die hard. Anyway it's a quite spectacular castle, ridiculously large, so many different styles contained within it, and a correspondingly large gardens area that with every step you feel like you're in a different part of the world. The town itself is somewhat cute, with great farm-type shops and a couple of decent pubs. Definitely better than Bognor - a seaside town less interesting than Skegness, and only with a pebble beach not a proper sandy one. We did have fun watching people do pub karaoke though. And no, we didn't participate. Mainly because we were too late to ask.

Speaking of music, I have bought a ticket to a second concert this year, and like the one in August it's quite retro - Deacon Blue, a Scottish 1980s pop/rock/blues band I kinda like are touring and they've got two nights at the Piece Hall in Halifax in early July, so I thought it'd be cool to go. It does mean standing up for about 3½ hours in the open air, but you'd think a summer concert would at least bring summer weather. You would think. And yet. [That's partly a subtweet, but also a reference to my pod from 2024 about Travelling For Music].

I need to go to Glasgow at some point and get my hair recoloured. It's been so long now that I'm looking quite grey and old from the front; one of the two hair-related reasons I like wearing hats. It's still very purple at the ends though, so I'm still getting impressed vibes from random people. And then I'll need to get it touched up again in early October, because there's a period when I'll be doing A Lot, and some of it specifically designed

to impress people. Tho not those sorts of people. I'm not in the dating market. Yet.

{section separation jingle}

Last year I released a podcast episode called “How Not To Run An Ultramarathon”. I was reminded of that a couple of times recently, partly because the 2026 edition of the Calderdale Way Ultra took place at the end of April, and I, I mean I had FOMO, not gonna lie, but also, there's no way I was Ultra-Ready, let's be real I'm barely even Parkrun-Ready, but also because a couple of weekends ago I hiked over the last section of it, from Todmorden town centre to Heptonstall. By 'last section' I mean not only the final segment if you were to be running it, but also the last part of the footpath as a whole that I'd not yet been on. I'm not entirely sure how long a section that is, but it involves two hills that the race organisers lovingly dub “little bastard” and “big bastard” (the footpath goes back into Todmorden between the two, meaning there's far easier ways to do that bit of the journey!), and then later on goes past a great big rock perched by a junction of country lanes. In true 'River Avon' style, that rock's official name is “Great Rock”. The final section into Heptonstall goes past, well, above, the poet Ted Hughes' old home, that's now a writing retreat centre run by the Arvon Foundation, before spending the last half mile or so picking its way through some boulders in the middle of a thick wood with a dangerously-close steep drop to the right. Fantasy authors would love it.

Having now walked its entire length I'm much more aware of the task in hand were I to run it again. The route crosses the Calder twice, and I'm pretty certain the route on its northern side is much, much, harder and more intense than on the southern side, so maybe the 30-mile version (that starts in Brighouse) is much more suitable. We'll see. That's a decision for 2027 Nel to take.

2025 Nel, however, was not content with having tried and failed to complete an Ultra, and so later that year they signed up for a second one, just to prove to themselves that, yes, they were capable of moving that distance and they weren't lying to themselves. If you were listening to episodes I made at the time, you'll know I did finish it, and finish it pretty well, but that also I'd talk more about it at some point on an episode. I kept putting it off because I wanted to bring in Seanna, but for one reason or another, life events and more pressing podcast episodes were made. But having finally chatted with them, this seems like the right time to talk about it.

It was called “The Pilgrim's Ultra” as it largely followed the route of the St Oswald's Way footpath in Northumberland. All I knew about it when I signed up was that it was mostly flat, running as it does along the coast for much of its route, that it was an end-to-end route rather than a loop (so I'd have a series of logistics to administer), and that it being in mid-September, so after my 50th birthday, meant that I had a jump-scare when it came to assigning my race category – what do you mean I'm in the higher age category, that can't be right, oh bugger. I could also enter as non-binary, and we'll come back to that at the very end.

That it was mostly flat was why I chose it, not gonna lie. One might argue after the Calderdale Way, pretty much anything might be regarded as being 'mostly flat', but this one had a total elevation gain of 540m, which I'd probably achieved within the first couple of hours on the Calderdale Way route. I was also drawn to the coastal setting of it – it'd been a while since I'd spent much time at the coast and I did kind of miss it. Plus the route passed through a part of the country I'd been around much of on two of my childhood family holidays, a topic I'll be doing a podcast about specifically later in the year, and indeed the route went right through the village of Seahouses, where we'd stayed. I'd never been back to the area since, so I was interested to see if I remembered anything about it.

There were three race options: 50km, 100km, and 100miles. Let me tell you as soon as I decided to do it, there was absolutely no hesitation in choosing the 50km. I'd already over-estimated my abilities once that year; I wasn't going to do it again. As it turns out, one of my friends in the Queer Runnings group, Vic, had signed up for the 100km, and she was definitely prepared for a day of pain. I'd never actually met her before, so it was nice to catch-up just before the start of the race. Also there was another Queer Runnings member, Clo, who was an event photographer, so I saw her fluttering around at the start, and then at a couple of points on the way. She took a few photos of me that I posted to my Instagram feed a couple of days after the race.

Note by the way that the actual distance of the 50km was 51.9km, and the 100km was 102.3km, because actual race distances are vague beasts and determined by the path and end points, rather than the other way around. That said, if you're in the market for running 100km, an extra 2.3km at the end is probably fairly inconsequential. The 100 mile is reported to be actually 154.93km if you track the GPX file, which works out

at just under 96.3 miles, but I don't know if I'd feel short-changed about that. Honestly, I'd probably be quite happy to finish an hour and half earlier than I expected. Not that I'd finish at all, because, I mean yes I've walked 100 miles, but over the course of 4 or 5 days, with sleep and meals and beer in the interim. The cut-off for that race is 30 hours. No.

But let's go back a day. Because of the point-to-point nature of the race, working out logistics was a little tricky, and added to the expense. I mentioned on my previous pod that Ultra-Running isn't quite as accessible to all as you'd hope, given these extra logistical costs you need to factor in for a race. The race's hub, and finish of my 50km, was in a small coastal village called Craster, which is served by buses every couple of hours, but the start of all the races, and therefore all the check-in administration, was on Holy Island, about 25km NNW in a straight line, at around 8am – the organisers wouldn't set-up shop in Craster until everyone had left Holy Island. They laid on shuttle buses from Craster to Holy Island (at a cost of about £20), but that meant I'd still have to get to Craster for 5.30am or whenever they set off, and the buses don't run that early. Craster's not very big and not very convenient for, well, anything much, so I chose to overnight in nearby Alnwick, 11km away by road, and get a taxi in; I'll come back to talking about Alnwick itself towards the end of the pod. To get to the shuttles though, I ended up sharing a taxi with someone else doing exactly the same thing, at the suggestion of the taxi firm no less. Under normal circumstances I would question the safety aspect of this, but honestly, if you're going to run an ultra, that's absolutely not something on your mind; everyone knows who you are, and where you are (because we all have trackers), you'd wreck your race, and your fitness programme wouldn't allow for it anyway.

The shuttles left in the dark but by the time we arrived on Holy Island it was just dawning, and the final couple of miles were pretty awe-filled, with the sun rising over the sand dunes in an otherwise flat seascape. I don't know how many of you know much about Holy Island, but it's one of those places that's definitely worth a day trip on its own.

Holy Island, also known as Lindisfarne, is a small island off the coast of Northumberland, just south of the Scottish border. It's a minimum of 400 hectares in size (it shrinks and grows with the tide), which makes it a little bigger than New York's Central Park. I say 'island'; at low tide there's a causeway you can drive across and it's even possible to walk across the sands and mudflats if you know what you're doing (there is a marked path – it's part of two long distance footpaths). High tide floods both, so if your car battery dies because you're listening to too much cricket whilst parked outside the cafes, you're stuck there for six hours longer than anticipated. As happened to us last time I was here in the mid-80s on a family holiday.

The epithet Holy Island was given to it maybe a thousand years ago, on account of it having been a centre of religion for several centuries previously. An Abbey was founded here in the 630s, and there was some kind of monastery present from then until Henry VIII got rid of them all in 1536. It was one of the most important monasteries of the country for a time, and the two footpaths that start (or end) here are both named after Saints associated with it – Oswald (King of Northumbria who ordered its foundation by Saint Aiden, and whose path runs south along the coast before heading inland to Heavenfield near Hexham, where he won a battle), and Cuthbert (the Patron Saint of Northumberland who was both abbot and bishop here in the mid-late 600s, and whose path goes to Melrose Abbey in the Scottish Borders). It was kind of abandoned after being the first site in England to be attacked and conquered by the Vikings (June 8th 793, apparently, so roughly in line with this podcast episode), but rebuilt as a priory after the Norman Conquest. There's still substantial remains of walls of the later priory at least, so you can definitely get a feel for what it would have looked like. Some of the stone from the priory was used to construct Lindisfarne Castle in 1550; 'castle' is a bit grandiose for what was effectively only a defensive fortification, doubly so given the mainland is full of proper castles dating from earlier times when the Scottish and the English fought a lot; the Treaty of Norham that basically finalised the issues between them was signed on 10 June 1551, so again, prescient for this podcast.

There's also St Mary The Virgin church, built around the same time and still exists and is used, although it's been heavily repaired and restored in the interim.

It is possible to stay on the island, but for the purposes of this Ultra, it would have made the logistics of getting back after the end slightly awkward, let alone getting off the island to go back home on the Sunday. It would feel like a good place to 'get away from it all', like some kind of writing retreat (isn't that just a simplified version of what a monastery is), if it weren't for all the tourists.

As an aside, while waiting for the start, I had an able around the tourist sites. I have to admit I didn't readily remember any of them from my previous visit, but then I might only have been about seven or eight at the time. It being so early on a Saturday meant that none of them were open, but it also meant there were no other tourists around. I'm not saying the ruins of the priory itself were visited illicitly by a series of runners, what I am saying is that there would have been nothing to stop them clambering over some low stone walls to have a look around without paying. Runners are so rude and entitled. Er. Maybe.

Anyway, back to the race admin. The shuttle bus got us to the race check-in quite a while before the off of the race, maybe an hour and a half? Not everyone was on the shuttle-buses of course, and people kept arriving in bits and bobs the whole time. All they wanted to do at check-in was to make sure we were in fact registered, that we had enough of the mandatory kit to be comfortable, and to give us a spare paper map. As it was a point-to-point race, we could also arrange drop-bags of stuff to be picked up at Craster; this was mainly for the 100km and 100mile runners to use Craster as a 'lets swap out a load of stuff, get changed, pick up headtorches, etc' so they didn't have to run the first 50km with a whole lot of stuff they didn't need, but I used the facility too to ensure I had, for instance, my coat available to me at the end.

The weather forecast was mixed, with rain expected in the afternoon; it had been showery for a couple of days prior and while most of the run was on either roads or relatively firm coastal paths, this was the north-east so winds and weather can be quite 'fresh' at times. Weather had been one of the things I was concerned about on my previous Ultra, as a lot of that was on grassy and earthy paths, and y'all know how much I just love going downhill on mud. This route was more on solid ground and sand dune, but still, too much rain could make for miserable going. In any case, I knew there was a chance of rain at some point and I didn't want to have to make it back to my hotel resembling a drowned rat, especially if I was also not moving particularly freely after the race.

The race itself started slightly later than advertised, from a wide open field on the way to the castle. It was an interesting feeling, standing around in a shelter out of the breeze, before the start. I wouldn't say I felt worried. Possibly a little apprehensive because 30 miles is a long way; in the days before the race I was calculating in my head about how fast I'd have to be to make the cut-off of 8 hours, meaning I'd have to run an average pace of 15½ minutes per mile, which is slightly slower than my average walking pace but I can only keep that up for about 10 miles. I visualised myself sprinting through Craster with an electronic timer above my head counting up to 4pm and making it over the line at 3:59:59. But other than that I felt quite calm; my worry was the time more than the distance. I knew I'd done a similar distance, on my previous attempt at an Ultra, over much more challenging topography, and I knew this was going to be a much easier run on the body. I was also concerned about the weather; there was a small shower a few minutes before the start, and I've never been fond of running in the rain. But other than that, I think I was fine. I had a last-minute toilet visit, along with everyone else - you know you're in an Ultra when the queue for the men's toilets is longer than the queue for the women's toilets, because obviously men leave everything to the last minute, even if it's far easier and quicker for them to go surreptitiously behind a bush or tree.

Then, around 8.20am, we were off. All three races started at the same time, so everyone was running together regardless of distance. The first 4 miles were flat, over the causeway that we'd taken the shuttlebus in on, which meant we were stopping traffic pretty much the whole way. I don't know what the tourists in their cars would have thought of us as we passed; possibly annoyed that they were forced to wait and crawl along while they visited a time-dependent tourist site. I ambled slowly, getting used to moving, not pushing myself too hard - it's a long way and I didn't want to burn out too soon. It was quite nice to be running with people, and actually, it wasn't until close to the end of the race when I felt truly on my own, and even then it didn't last very long. I was ahead of Vic - this wasn't intentional as I'd planned to use her as a pacemaker for that first section, knowing she was doing double the distance that I was. But she was having, shall we say, Some Technical Issues and it took a little while for her to get moving.

The hill, or at least the mound - its highest point was around 154m -, was roughly a 7km section that started with a long straight country lane before meandering along a narrow trail through the woods. It was surprisingly pleasant, and didn't feel too onerous at all, but I guess that's what happens when you live and train in the moorlands. I had a map with me, as we all did, but it was hard to get lost as there was always someone a little way ahead of me. It also wasn't that rough underfoot - not nearly as muddy and slippery as I'd feared.

I reached the first checkpoint around 11am, so after about 2hrs 40min of movement. This was a small

gathering of marshalls and volunteers at the village of Belford, at the bottom of the hill but not quite yet at the coastal path. I didn't pause here long, just long enough to have a water-break, a packet of running gel, and some chocolate. I was 20km in at this point, so just under 40% of the way through already, and I felt absolutely fine, quite enthused even. And in a sense I knew the hardest part was behind me, so to speak – everything from this point in might be awkward at times, but it wouldn't be too hilly. If I were to maintain this pace I'd be done in about 6h55, which would be a perfectly respectable time.

The route to the coast went along more country trails, past farmers fields, and, at one point, directly over the East Coast Main Line, at quite a wide point too, with no warning lights, which felt a little precarious, not gonna lie, but fortunately at a section where you could see deep into the distance in either direction. The route itself also crosses the main A1 road twice, but at least at those points there were marshalls making sure everything was hunky-dory. But 5km after leaving Belford, and thus at the halfway point of the race, I reached the coast. Everything from here on in, aside from a short section just south of Bamburgh, would be on roads or coastal footpaths, with the sea to the left. It'd be very difficult to get lost on this route. It's not a spoiler alert to say that I didn't; there were a couple of points where I was a little unsure of the exact route, including on the way into the Bamburgh Checkpoint itself where the designated route slightly deviated from the St Oswald Way, but it was easily resolved, even if it did involve a little too much sand than I'd liked.

The checkpoint at Bamburgh was a proper setup, with several tables of snackage and drinkage. It was on the edge of a golf course and pretty much underneath one of the walls of Bamburgh Castle. It was at 30km, and I reached it about 12:30pm, after being on the move for a shade under 4hrs 8min. This put me on target for a finish of a shade under 7:10, tho I spent about 10 minutes there resting and taking on another gel and some nibbles, so I'd be targeting nearer 7h20; getting slower (and would continue to do so), but not alarmingly so.

According to Wikipedia, Bamburgh has a population of just over 400, which feels remarkably low and surprising given the town's provenance over the years. It's a nice little seaside settlement in and of itself, but its importance is very much historical. It may have been the capital of the ancient Saxon kingdom of Bernicia, which was later subsumed into Northumbria. It's kind of the gateway to Holy Island, and it's close to the main road that crossed the border between the English Kingdoms and the Scottish ones. Unsurprisingly its most notable feature is the castle. And indeed as castles go, it's one of the bigger ones – 46m high and standing on a basalt rock itself 55m tall, while Google Maps suggests the building itself is around 220m long and 65m wide at its most distant. What stands was originally built by the Normans not long after the conquest, and expanded as long ago as the reign of Henry II a hundred or so years later, but there's been some kind of fort here since, well, seemingly just after the Romans left. The castle's own website notes both a literary vibe (that it was the home of Sir Lancelot) and a historical one (that during the Wars of the Roses it became the first castle in the world to be captured using gunpowder). These days its one of those places that hosts re-enactments and jousts. Neither of which I noticed when I was stood outside it for 10 minutes going 'welp, 10 more miles to go, and the clouds are gathering'.

When I was making notes about the run for this pod, I wrote that the route beyond Bamburgh was "the wilderness years". By this point the field was quite spread out, though I was overtaking people more than being overtaken, which to be honest surprised even me. On the way into Seahouses we had the first really noticeable rain shower, although it only lasted a couple of minutes. The landscape became a lot more around sand dunes and salty air, quaint little villages here and there, well, maybe. The clouds became much greyer and sullen, the wind picked up, it definitely felt like there was more rain coming.

I passed through Seahouses relatively speedily, and through the golf course beyond, because everything up here seems to be golf courses if you get away from the cliffs. Despite having two family holidays in the town back in the early 80s, nothing at all about it felt familiar. I mean I know it's going to have changed quite a lot aesthetically since then, you'd've thought at least structurally and conceptually I'd remember the town layout, the beach, the surrounding vibes, but no. All I remember about those holidays seems to have been the town names and the failure to get out of Holy Island in good enough time. Off the coast are the Farne Islands, a series of around 15-20 islets, skerries, and other rocks that were once occupied by monks but are now largely empty save for some wildlife rangers. Like St Kilda off the far west of Scotland, the Farne Islands are home to a large number of seabirds, mainly puffins and guillemots but over 300 different species have been seen here over the years. I do recall my visit over there as a kid was where I first heard the word 'shag'. Even the lighthouses are automated these days; one of the reasons the Islands are vaguely known about is because in September 1838, a paddle-steamer called the Forfarshire ran aground here in some horrendously bad weather,

with 61 passengers and crew aboard. Nine left on a lifeboat and made it to shore, the remainder were left clinging to what remained of the ship, and then the rocks themselves. Most of them quickly failed. And that would have been that, had it not been for the intransigence of Grace Darling, the 22 year old daughter of one of the lighthouse keepers, around 550m from the crash site so definitely very visible, even in such bad conditions, who kept demanding to her father that they go out and rescue the remainder (she estimated 13 people were still in situ). He relented the next morning and they rowed out and, in two trips, managed to rescue the 9 people who were left alive by then. They were both well-rewarded, receiving medals from the forerunner of the RNLi, as well as a considerable sum from donations. You'd've thought this would have set her up for life, but sadly she died four years later from Tuberculosis, because life does that to people sometimes.

The next town I reached was Beadnell, where I was starting to feel the exertion. It was around 10 past 2, and I'd been moving at that point for 40¾km, and I paused for a couple of minutes to nibble, rest, and have another running gel, which did enough to perk me up for the next 5km. I parked myself on a low wooden fence/bench outside a beachfront grill place that was absolutely not open for the season. This part of the world is very definitely beach holiday territory, albeit a very different sort of beach holiday to that you might find in Skegness or Bognor Regis. This is much quieter, slightly more genteel, more home to the retired and to very young children rather than stag dos and karaoke parties.

The last 10km were mostly on trails through sand dunes and grassy mounds, which all felt quite a way from anywhere. This was the section where I felt weirdly more comfortable jogging than walking – or at least it ached less when I moved if I was jogging. There were a couple of guys running together and we kept passing each other as we alternatively sped up and eased back. I crossed a wooden bridge over a small river and I knew from my planning that once I hit this point I'd run a marathon, so everything left was in Ultra territory. I had a weird reaction to this; I kind of relaxed – it was almost as if I knew I didn't have anything else to prove, that I knew I was going to make it within the time, so I felt myself relax and chill out a bit. I also slowed down, or rather, I let myself slow down.

Halfway between Beadnell and Craster (apparently a shade under 46km) was the small village of Low Newton. I popped into a public toilet here for what may have been my first wee en route; had some more water but did not have a final running gel, for reasons I'll discuss later. Maybe it would have been better on balance, but honestly I don't think it mattered.

But this last 5km was horrendous. The route went alongside Dunstanburgh Golf Club, on a theoretical grass path that was basically entirely mud; I have little balance on mud at the best of times, so imagine how hard it was for me when I was basically a lumbering pool noodle. When I tried to increase my pace, I felt a twinge in my thigh that subsided when I returned to a walking pace. The people I'd been swapping positions with since Seahouses mostly all disappeared into the distance in this section, and I felt slow. The rain had started to come down too, and on the section past the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle, on a path mostly made of ragged pebbles, I felt very uncomfortable. Also by this point I knew I must be getting really close to the end, but every time I turned a corner, or went through a gate, or reached the crest of a small incline, there was no visibility of Craster at all. This was the only point where I really angsted about the difference between 50km and 51.9km.

Dunstanburgh Castle is a cliff-top ruin, one of those places that just feels evocative, especially in the grey skies. Standing on the cliff, looking at it in the distance, feeling like it's at the end of the earth. People have fortified this place since pre-Roman times, but it seems to have suffered from being owned by people who supported the wrong side in several of the civil wars over the centuries, as well as being too close to Bamburgh Castle (and equally not any significant town). It had decayed significantly even as early as the 1500s, and now it just stands as a ruin, weather-beaten but still just about standing, a bit like an Ultra-runner after 29 miles.

But soon enough the end was near, one final slight incline to the finish near a pub (the Jolly Fisherman). Crossing the line with about two or three other people felt kind of apt, and I was mostly exhilarated that I'd completed it, and apart from achy legs, didn't actually feel too bad for it. I wandered to what I think was the church hall where the checkpoint, more nibbles, and the drop bags were, sat down and could barely stand up having done so, got changed very slowly, picked up my medal and t-shirt, and then made my way back to the pub. I had over an hour before my bus back to Alnwick, and spent it in what turns out to have been a very crowded pub. I did at least get a seat after a while, at the bar, and because of my exhilarations and, while nowhere near as bad as after the Calderdale Way, I was having trouble swallowing, so it took me much of the

time I had to drink that one pint. I then limped to the bus stop just down the road, in the rain, and headed back to Alnwick.

I reached the end around 4pm, and my finish time was 7hr41m26s, so slightly slower than my earlier pace suggested but honestly, still within tolerances and, to be honest, I'm pretty happy with that. After my DNF at the Calderdale Way, I didn't tell as many people that my progress was able to be tracked online, but the Queer Runnings group knew and were very validating of my performance in their Discord's dot-watching channel.

As an aside, Vic, who was doing the 100km, reached Craster only 6½ minutes behind me. All I can say is that there's no way I could have done an additional 50km. I don't know if I could have done an additional 5km.

I didn't do a lot that night – my room in Alnwick had a large deep bath with all manner of jet points, which looked like it was going to be exactly what I needed, but sadly I couldn't get any hot water out the bath taps (only the sink taps), and the jet points didn't seem to work, but I went in anyway, and just about managed to get out of it afterwards. The rain didn't stop until long after I fell asleep, but at least for me it started just as I was finishing; had I had more of the run in it, I'd've not enjoyed it anywhere near as much.

The next morning I felt mostly fine – I was a bit slower than normal but certainly nowhere near as achy or troubled as last time. It was also quite a nice morning, weatherwise, so I had a little wander around Alnwick. It's a town that deserves a visit in more relaxing circumstances – for one thing it's the most significant town in the area (population about 8½ thousand), thus making a good base for the surrounds, which is exactly why I chose it. It's also notable for an old railway station building that's now a fabulous bookshop (Barter Books), and not only has its stone interior been kept but also the shop is full of railway memorabilia, even down to a small model railway operating above head height. Alnwick's most famous though for, as Bamburgh, having a large castle that was well-used throughout the years, and indeed is still inhabited (by the Duke of Northumberland) – Wikipedia tells me it's the second largest inhabited castle in the country (you don't need me to tell you the largest) and the tenth most visited stately home in the country. Alnwick Castle was also the birthplace of Henry Percy, also known as Harry Hotspur, a knight skilled and famous enough to have the ear of Kings at the turn of the 14th Century before he fell out with one and got killed in battle (this seems to happen a lot). He's known to modern audiences mostly for being a main character in a Shakespeare play, albeit Henry IV Part 1 isn't one of the more popular ones, and for being the reason Tottenham Hotspur football club are called Hotspur. Which I did not know until I wrote this podcast.

On my way back home I pondered about future Ultras, now that I know I can do them. I didn't book any though; that's the sort of thing most people do and I resisted. I have still resisted – at the start of the year I browsed through many of the ultras that were going to be organised in 2026 and made a note of a few of them as potentials, but even as of this podcast, I've not booked any of them. I had a very lethargic Winter, owing to the weather, so I don't feel fit enough right now. We'll see what happens by August, I guess.

{section separation jingle}

So, the route I did was officially 51.9km, with a total elevation gain of 540m, most of which was the hill between 7km and 15km. My average speed went down slightly after Beadnell (40km) but it's hard to judge exactly because it's so variable. And the graph is shared with the altitude so the x-axis is stupidly big. Except the first hour which was just under 10km/h. But that's because it was flat and I was running with a lot of people. It vibes though like until Beadnell I was going around 8km/h and after Beadnell it was around 5km/h. I can probably work it out accurately with photo timestamps tbh.

I finished roughly 101st, albeit about 4 or 5 people finished in a very similar time. I only recall one of them; a lady I'd done the last half mile with after a whole gaggle of people passed me in the fields after Dunstanburgh Castle where I was going 'surely I'm at the end now?!'. They finished about 7.37. A couple of people I kept overtaking in the last 6 miles eventually peeled away from me and finished 7:29/7:30.

119 people finished the 50km – a remarkably low dropout rate of 2.5%. The slowest time was 08:31:40, so I needn't have been worried about cut-offs. That said, the person who finished 108th did so in a time of 07:59:55, and 109th was 08:00:01, so I imagine they both had exactly the same kind of finish as had been in my head at the start. Three people retired, all at the Bamburgh checkpoint, though interestingly two of them were going considerably faster than I was, so I'm guessing they had to quit because of injury, which is always a shame but

also necessary because sometimes your body is telling you things that if you ignore, you'll suffer much more in the long run. Like Seanna in my previous episode.

Of the 122 entrants, 81 (or just under two-thirds) registered as male, including the winner (Harvey Martin) who completed in 04:09:02. Which means he finished just about the time I was wandering around the Bamburgh Checkpoint looking for the water tap. His average speed was around 8 minutes per mile, which when I was a teenager, was very slightly more than the speed I completed the Southport Half Marathon in. Less than half the length, even flatter, and no, there's no way I could have done another one immediately afterwards. The leading woman, Elizabetta Ghimenton, finished 4th, in 04:32:34; note she was also in the over40 category, 68 seconds behind John-Paul Hunt, the leading male over40. I also mentioned this in my last episode - Ultramarathons are a home for older runners. Of the 122 entrants, 57% were over 40, scattered all across the finishing times, and included two over 60s men. One of whom finished 8 minutes behind me, so there's still hope for me. The other, sadly, finished 12th, before I'd even reached Beadnell.

There was precisely one non-binary runner, who consequently was listed first in both their category and their age grading. I did not realise or appreciate this when I crossed the finish line; I was just happy to have completed the course and didn't even really care about my time, never mind that I'd just conceptually won something in a race for the first time in my life. I only found out when I looked at the results a couple of days later when I got back to Calderdale. I didn't get a special trophy or anything for winning; to be honest I think I'd've been slightly embarrassed to given I was the only entrant, and nor was I expecting one, but as Seanna said in the last episode, it's nice to be honoured if only to show other people that we exist.

As for the other races:

The 100km (with a cut off 18 hours) saw 42 entrants, 24 finishers, a drop-out rate of 43%, tho this includes one runner who didn't start. Many of them retired at Craster, and the majority of those being well ahead of me in time at that point. Which is something to consider - enter a longer race and see how you feel at the end of the shorter one. I'd argue it doesn't count to say you completed an Ultra, and because you entered the longer race you probably wouldn't get a medal for finishing the shorter one, but of course it's not about medals, it's about your own personal achievement - just as I say I ran an Ultra when I DNFd the Calderdale Way Ultra. It just wasn't the Ultra I was trying to run.

The winner was Sam Stephenson, in 10:42:52, or around 7pm. I was just about back in Alnwick by then, trying hard to walk. In keeping with the 50km, second place went to V40 female runner Kate Halliman. The last finisher was Queer Running's Vic, 17:44:15, around 2am. I think I'd stopped tracking her at that point because sleep was more important, given I wasn't staying an extra night and I needed to be in Newcastle by lunchtime. I saw the pictures and her thoughts the next day - the rain that I'd experienced not long after finishing continued into the night and that second 50km looked like it was incredibly unpleasant compared to the first half; exactly the sort of weather I was fearing.

As for the 100miler (with a cut off 30 hours), it saw 38 entrants, 17 finishers, a drop-out rate of 55%. The vast majority dropped out at Rothbury, the end point of the 100km, which feels kind of based. The winner, Graham Malthouse, finished in 19:39:40, or around 4am. Yeh, nah. The last finisher was Gary Butler in 31:32:55; a bit before 4pm Sunday afternoon by which point I was almost back in Calderdale. Also, nah.

The huge difference in dropout rates suggests very much that people who entered these Ultras were those that know they can do the distances. In fact if you look at where people dropped out, across all three races only 6 failed to complete an Ultra Distance - three in the 50km, and three in the 100km, including the non-starter; every single person in the 100miler reached 50km, and all bar one reached the Walkworth Checkpoint at 72km. I don't know why those who dropped out did so, but I'd imagine many of them were injury-related, which let's face it could happen even in a Parkrun, while some simply went 'you know what, I've done a lot, I've run an Ultra, I've had fun, but I've had enough today'. It doesn't feel like people felt out of their depth, conceptually at least, more a case of experienced people testing their limits - people who know they can do Ultras but are trying to push themselves to the next level of it.

Just to look a little more about the 100km specifically; its elevation gain is 1,169m which is twice as much as the 50km, and most of that extra elevation looks on the graph like it's almost entirely over the last 30km after the Walkworth checkpoint; not a 500m hill, but rather a long gradual rise reaching to 100m, with ups and downs along the way making it all mostly not flat. One of my cross-country teachers at school used to do 10 milers for

fun; he probably does Ultras even now to be fair - he could only have been about 6 years older than me - and he once said that after a few miles the downhill hurt just as much as the uphill. Even hiking on the Calderdale Way I can confirm this, and I guess after 72km, even a bridge is probably painful in both directions. This also might explain the large dropout here from the 100miler - it's at the end of a tougher section than the coastal path, and a convenient point to quit.

Having said which, the majority of 100km Ultras are going to be a lot more technical and tough, so if you were ever thinking of doing a 100km, this wouldn't be a bad one to start off with. If it were 80km/50mile, I'd be vaguely tempted, because it's going to be much easier than the Calderdale Way. But it's not. So it's unlikely.

But what do I know?

{section separation jingle}

Now, let's go back to my podcast about the Calderdale Way Ultra for a bit, and look at the 'lessons learned' from my experience, and see if I ended up following them in preparation for this one. Listener, I can see your wry grin from here.

The first was to, quote, "take training seriously, even if you intend to walk most of it". Now, I don't remember doing anything 'more' in the run-up to the Pilgrim Way Ultra than I was already doing, but I think in my head it was more a case of 'if I can do 50km on the Calderdale Way, I can do the 50km I need to on the Pilgrim Way'. My preparations were slightly stymied by a week in Norway, but honestly, I was walking around a lot even there and the hill at Sarkofagen was much more in keeping with Calderdale than Northumberland. I knew I could do 50km, and I certainly knew I could do 50km on the flat. I might not be comfortable with it by the end, but I knew I'd make the cut-offs. As an aside, I absolutely knew I couldn't have done the 100km, no matter how benign it was. That said, having already done 30 miles of an Ultra meant I absolutely took the race seriously, possibly too seriously if I'm being honest, I possibly overthought it, but that's I think better than timing out after 20 miles because of naivety.

Second: "do not go off too fast, and do not be influenced by those around you". The first four miles of the Pilgrim Ultra are completely flat. I was prepared for this before the start, and while I didn't walk them, I certainly kept to close to the rear of the field as much as possible. I was overtaken on the causeway by innumerable people, but you know what, that felt fine. In the country section up the hill, I slowly made my way back through the field, and it was only in the last 5 miles that I ended up dropping behind others, and by then I knew I was going to finish so it didn't matter any more. It would have been so, so easy to set off really quickly on that race, and it would absolutely have caught up with me by the time I reached the Bamburgh checkpoint. Although if I was fitter ... well, who knows.

Third: "make sure you can read a map, and can follow signposts and directions". The nice thing about this particular route is it's actually really hard to get lost. On the first section there's literally only one road, on the midsection there's enough other runners around to be able to follow, and once you reach the coast at about 14 miles in, the rest of the route is literally 'can you see the sea on your left? Yes? Then you're more-or-less on the right route'. There's a few sections where the path goes through the dunes rather than on the road, and in a couple of the villages there's possible ways of taking the wrong route, but ultimately even if you go wrong, it'll only be by a handful of meters, rather than a couple of miles. And also, I can't remember any point on the entire race where either I couldn't see anyone ahead of me, or where there was no possible alternative route to take. That said, I did take a map, and screenshots of a map, and look out for signs. If you're worried about getting lost though, this is an ideal Ultra to do.

Fourth and Fifth are to do with nutrition: "drink more water, or flat pop/soda. Don't wait until you're thirsty, as it'll be too late by then", and, related, "related: take food that's easy to eat, while still providing energy.". So. Having learned from my sore throat after the Calderdale Way Ultra, I made sure I had enough food and drink to manage throughout, that was soft and easy to eat. At km 8, the Tangfastics came out. I made sure my water bottles (plural) were filled up, making use of the checkpoints to do that, but also, I took several running gels; literally liquid fruit-flavoured sugar. Let me tell you now, they are like crack. At the Bamburgh Checkpoint I was feeling a little weary, but letting that much sugar and sweetness fall down my throat (stop it!) perked me up no end. It was weird. I'd never used them before, but I experimented with a couple of packets on my way to/from Halifax Parkrun a month or so earlier (and, not gonna lie, it did feel like I was taking some kind of

banned substance), so I knew I liked them and I knew I felt comfortable using them.

The downside of the gels is they tend to come out just as easily as they go in; I was feeling weary at Low Newton, a shade less than 3 miles from the finish, but I actively chose not to have a final gel (I think it would have been my fifth, possibly sixth) purely because I knew what would happen if I did. Sure, I finished about 20 minutes later than I would otherwise have done, but the toilets in Craster would have thanked me enormously. I don't know what I'd've done had I been doing the 100km. I was wearing a skort not a skirt; something I might have to bear in mind if I ever *do* do a 100km. One of the people I follow on Instagram recently ran a road marathon in a sundress, so there's a precedent in my bubble.

The last lesson-learned from my previous podcast was: “most importantly: choose your race carefully and take your ability level seriously; don't just go with the first you see cos you think it'll be fun”. And to be fair, I did choose this Ultra purposely, *because* although I felt it'd be fun, I also knew it was one I'd be likely to be able to finish. I knew what I was capable of, or rather, I knew what I wasn't capable of, in terms of terrain, topography, and distance, so I think I chose well. I mean, I finished it, so I was obviously correct!

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me next time for another adventure Beyond The Brochure. Until then, remember that quite often you're capable of more than you think you are, even if it takes something like pure sugar to get you to do it. And if you're feeling off colour, which you might be if you take too many of those gels, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Show-notes are available on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com.

Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}