

Offa's Dyke FKT.

How this wannabe runner got an FKT.

I love running, I love being in the outdoors, I love exploring and I loved daydreaming about getting an FKT.

Maybe it was listening to Damian Hall's 'In It For The Long Run' (whilst running) that sparked the FKT dream. Dreaming like someone would about a life without having to work. It's not a thing that's actually going to happen and that's okay. I was very happy/am very happy exploring the world of ultra marathons and finding it reliably funny that someone who came last in every school cross-country event, can run for 50 miles without too much stress (yes, I walk up the hills, it's allowed). I was once listening to Damo talk in a webinar about FKTs. He said "anyone can get an FKT". Really? Anyone? Like me?

I was always going to do the Offa's Dyke...well, originally, I was going to 'run' the Pennine Way, but my window of opportunity shrunk so I needed something shorter (and easier maybe, it is my holiday after all...). Turning the trip into an FKT was a fairly last-minute decision. Camping was always the plan. I love wild camping. It's peaceful, it's beautiful, and ultimately, it's free. I know it's not technically legal but 'leaving no trace' is important to me and if no one sees a tent in the wild. Was it even there! If you didn't see it, it didn't happen!

I was confident I had limited my camping set up to a runnable weight and thanks to the loan of a fancy bag, I was good to go.

I am a 'green runner' and I live in the south west. I am also a supported 'into ultra' runner. Travel is expensive and I think carefully about unnecessary travel (for financial and environmental reasons) but I was also going to a wedding in Scotland, getting a lift in someone else's car...and was able to sweet talk them into detouring on their route home to drop me off at the start.

Let's go!

Day 1.

I got dropped off at 5ish and once I'd found the start and was sure it was the start (don't mess it up before you've even started!), I headed off at 5.15pm...slowly. The beginning of the path is at Prestatyn beach and within a few minutes I arrived in Prestatyn where I sought out supplies. I had intended to be more prepared with my first days food but the journey down from Scotland had been mildly stressful and it made sense to shop after starting and not before.

After getting some Welsh cakes, cashew nuts and some chips, I left town and set off up my first hill. It was thrilling to be running, which quickly turned into walking. The first couple of hours involved a lot of bag on, bag off and repeat. My water bladder was always either leaking or jiggling about far too much. After the initial excitement, I was losing water as well as my enthusiasm for running with a heavy bag. Thankfully, I was able to figure out why the bladder was leaking and as long as I drank the first liter quickly, the bladder would sit comfortably in the pack. Hurray for the future of running/shuffling/fast packing? Is this even fast packing? Who knows, I'm not sure if I do but I was able to get a 13min mile, which I considered a win. I braved my way through several fields of cows. For some reason, as I was so far from home, I had assumed these northern Welsh fields wouldn't have cows clogging up this national trail, not like they do in Wiltshire. I was wrong. So many cows. One thing I learned from this trip is that I am scared of livestock. I also learnt that I get really cold at night in August.

I kept going into dusk and began to look for camping opportunities. There was a lot of farmland mixed in with moorland. As dusk turned to night, a very noisy gate brought a local out of her house and she was able to inform me that I was soon to stumble on a perfectly decent place to camp. She was right. I then spent the next few days panicking that this might be classed as 'support'

which would nullify this silly FKT dream of mine. It doesn't, which is why I feel ok to tell you about it now. I pitched my tent and went to bed, but not to sleep. I was comfortable but very cold. I had only packed a 3/4 length race sleeping bag and thought it was smart to sleep in my waterproof trousers. If anyone suggests that waterproof trousers will make a warm and comfortable sleeping solution, they are wrong. Don't listen to them and get your advice elsewhere. Eventually I fell asleep but not for long enough.

15ish miles.





Day 2.

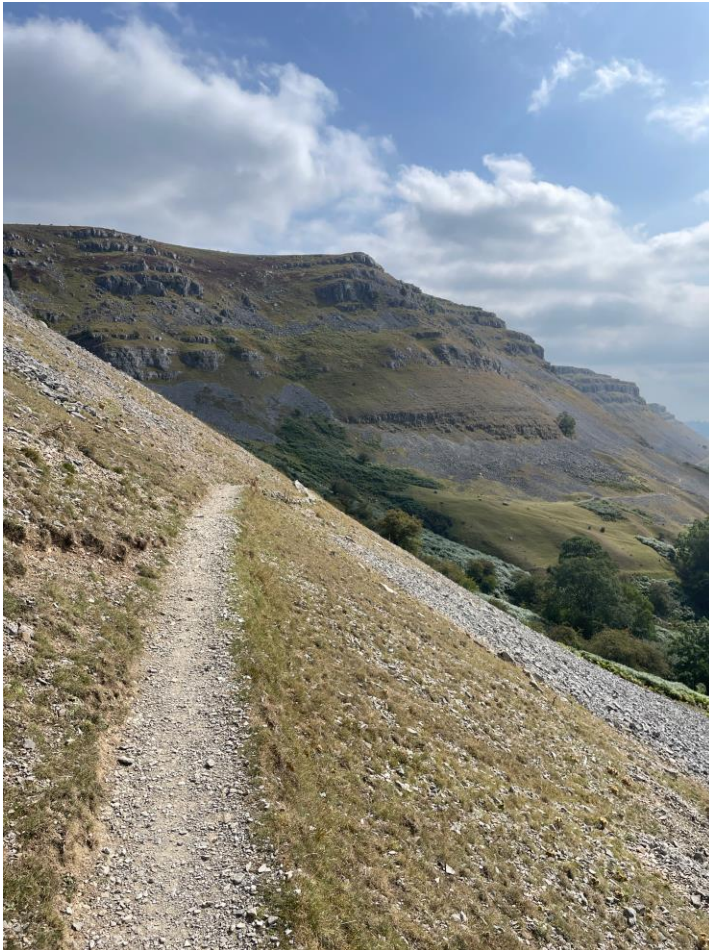
I was warm enough to sleep as the sun rose so I made the most of this and slept in until 7am. I got up, packed up and was back on the move by 7.45am. The morning was misty but I had left civilization and was moving higher. I loved the trails over Moel Famu Country Park. This felt remote and adventurous. I was doing it! The mist added to the drama and although the few runners I saw were whizzing past me, I was moving well. Walking up the hills and running (slowly) along the flats and downhills. A cafe on the map didn't exist but I was able to fill up my water at a farm/garage. Talking to the man who helped me remove the hose pipe, he asked me some questions about the trip: Are you doing the whole path? Yes. Which way? North to South. Are you expecting to do it in around two weeks? Errr...no, I'm hoping 5 days...5 days?? I don't think you'll be able to do that...I let him doubt my ability as I struggled to open the next gate leading to the hill I was about to walk up...

Llandegla had the dream community shop and cafe. Wonderful volunteer staff, a toilet with no queue and the snacks of dreams. I used to live on a boat. As a result, I hope I will always appreciate the luxury of

limitless water coming out the taps, being able to wash my clothes at home and post being delivered to my door. Jacket potato for lunch, a cup of tea and snacks felt like similarly luxurious wins. After Llandegla, I went through the forest to Cynr-y-Brain. Once through the other side of the forest, it was so beautiful that I cried. We make many choices and today I was making the best choice. After this was the beautiful World's End and then I got to run along the side of the stunning Eglwyseg Mountain. Oh my days.

The route is generally very well marked. If I hadn't seen a sign for a while, there was a good chance I had missed a turn off. This happened a few times every day. Thankfully, I was clinging to my map and occasionally checking OS maps on my phone, just to make sure. I missed a turning just after the mountain trail, it was all too beautiful to keep a careful eye out for turn offs.

Sometimes I missed a sign because the sign was obscured by a hedge or was on the other side of a gate. I was less forgiving of these moments.



I stopped off at Trevor and found one of the two pubs to get water and a pint (carb loading?!). Thinking about it, this is probably where things started coming unstuck. I wasn't feeling hungry and was optimistic that I could cover the next 13 miles in time for a delicious pub dinner in Trefonen. The next 13 miles were pretty hilly and began to follow the actual Offa's Dyke for the first time. Offa's Dyke is a massive ditch that was built 1300 years ago and now it seems to be a livestock haven. Fields upon fields of cows with calves and bulls all buddying up together, all exactly where I wanted to go. I tried to be a diligent follower of the Dyke, which often meant following a narrow path on the top of one of the banks. Avoiding bulls, moving slowly. I missed the delicious dinner I'd planned and camped on the other side of Trefonen in a very overgrown field to make sure I wasn't going to be trampled on by cows. I got some water from a nearby stream (thanks filter bottle for keeping me safe) and filled up on Welsh cakes and cashew nuts. 43ish miles covered.

Day 3.

I didn't wear my waterproof trousers to bed but instead tried to make a blanket out of them. If anyone tells you waterproof trousers will make a good blanket, walk away, they are wrong. This was a worse night of sleep, especially as it didn't seem to get warm with the sun in the morning. I was so stuck in the long grass that I don't think any sun could get through. This also meant that my tent was soaked. I packed up and got back to it, moving by 7.15am. I got breakfast and drinks from a local shop in Llanymynech. After negotiating a path closure (for canal repairs), I thoroughly enjoyed the flat of the canal. The day was getting pretty warm. After the flat stretch along the canal, I enjoyed the equally flat path following River Severn across the fields, before ending up on more canal rails. Flat became a bit mundane but was quick to move across, even if walking, so I embraced the progress. The Buttington service station was a small detour from the route but one worth taking. Filled up with water, snacks, cans of fizzy goodness, lunch...all the good things.

I made another stop at a pub in Kingswood to enjoy the quietness of their beer garden, drying my tent, my clothes and my feet in the sun. I was feeling confident in my progress with no idea of what was ahead of me. My next planned stop had been Montgomery but it appeared to be a good mile and a half off route so I made the (poor) decision to plough ahead. I had snacks, it would be fine. Soon after this I past and ignored a sign offering walkers water. I had enough and there was a tap towards the end of my day. If it is on the map, it must be true.

The Shropshire hills were horrible. Beautiful but horrible. For the rest of my day I pulled myself up steep inclines and was careful on descents too steep for me not to take great care. Again and again. I was hot, bored of sugary snacks, feeling nauseous, running out of water and daylight. I got to the water point spot on the map at nightfall and couldn't find it. But it was on the map! There was

a small river that was very shallow and moving very slowly but I reluctantly filled up my bottle to drink. I tried to pass through a farm to find camping but an untethered dog was growling at me and my calls for help fell unanswered. I retreated. I camped in a valley by the Dyke, out of site of any roads or houses. 39ish miles.

Day 4.

This was a bad day. It had been slightly warmer so I was able to get to sleep quicker but still woke up at 2.30am shivering. I had felt quite sick over night, and was sick in the morning. I blamed my dinner of skittles and cashew nuts and for not drinking enough, oh and the sun...that had to be playing a role too. I got some more water from the river and trudged very slowly to Knighton. Knighton is the home of the Offa's Dyke Centre and I was expecting a warm, enthusiastic welcome but it was closed. It did however have an open public toilet where I sat with my head in my hands for sometime. I couldn't face food but I knew I needed sustenance. I bought a protein drink and a smoothie and some oat cakes (for a time when food wasn't such a repulsive thought). This was a long day of feeling ill and being sick. Most of the smoothie ended up decorating some ferns early afternoon. I was sleepy and slow. I knew I couldn't run today but I could still walk. I also knew I couldn't camp tonight or if I did, I needed to have something warmer to sleep in. I made the decision to find a B&B and booked one just outside Gladestry. This meant I could pick up some coca cola and a tin of beans in Knighton and push onto Gladestry, over the Hergest Ridge, arriving just after 8pm. I managed half a tin of beans and a couple of oatcakes at 9pm. Not the dinner of champions. 26ish miles

Day 5

Beds are brilliant. I slept well and woke feeling nervous about what would be possible, but I didn't feel as awful as I had which was excellent. After a small breakfast and a croissant to go, I was back on the move and running! Everything was beautiful again, thank the world. Tonight was going to be my last night hopefully, so I decided to find another B&B. Once I had confirmation of this I made the decision to post 2kg of my camping kit back to myself. I didn't need to be carrying so much if I wasn't going to use it. The continuation of this trip had been in doubt so I didn't need to martyr myself by struggling with weight I didn't need. My grin was big enough to make the staff in the Hay On Wye post office fall about laughing, commenting I'd spent too long in the hills. Too long? Not long enough?! I still wasn't feeling great but I was feeling lighter and knew things were going to be a bit easier with a lighter bag. I stocked up on a cheese roll and a can of coke in Hay and made my way out of the town...after getting slightly lost in a car park...sometimes it's the simplest things which catch me out...

The Hatteral Ridge was straight up gorgeous. It was a long climb but noticeably easier and once at the top the views were tip top. I was running Offa's Dyke! I made a short stop in Llangattock Lingeod for water and crisps (and half a pint of beer). Although I didn't need it, I popped my head into St Michael's Church in Llanfihangel ystern-Llewern to see if it really was as warm and welcoming as the sign on the gate suggested. The kettle was there, ready to be used, even at 8pm. These gentle acts of generosity always make me well up. It takes effort to make a big difference, but not always a big effort. Thank you to whoever keeps that tea tray stocked up, you're brilliant.

After a few fields brimming with cows and calves and bulls, I made it to my bed and breakfast at 8.30pm for a hot shower and bed. The other guests I chatted with on arrival couldn't believe how far I'd travelled, I couldn't believe how much easier the distance had been without a tent on my back!



40ishmiles

Day 6

This was it, the last day. I knew I 'only' had 20-25 miles to go, so was keen to get going but my fellow guests were so lovely and chatty...I finally left at 8.30am. It was raining! This was the first rain of the trip. This was now a proper adventure I ran through Monmouth during the early morning and opted for the higher (original path) at Bigsweir House. The livestock I encountered continued to create the biggest barriers for me. I couldn't get past a huge goat in the path so ended up comically trapping myself in the goat's paddock. My shouts for assistance went unheeded (it was only a goat after all) before the goat decided to explore a different part of the farm, allowing me to get on with things. After bravely walking past a horse in a narrow path (so brave, so nervous!), I was unsurprised to find the finish at the top of a hill (a short hill, but a hill nonetheless). I had done it. 2.10pm. 22ishmiles



I walked back into Chepstow to get some well deserved lunch and then caught the train home. Adventure complete.

Total time 4 days, 20hrs and 55mins. Happy with that.



