

Shropshire Fell Running

As a relatively new inhabitant of these parts, and having spent the last few years enjoying my fellrunning on the Shropshire hills, I thought I'd give you all a flavour of the area and its races and see if I can't encourage some of you to take a road trip down to enjoy another quiet, little-known area of the country.

The Area

The Shropshire hills to which I refer are, in the main, those roughly 25 miles west (as the crow flies) of the West Midlands conurbation and are roughly bordered by Shrewsbury to the north and Ludlow to the south.

The three main fell-running areas within these boundaries are;

- a) The Long Mynd – a high moorland plateau, not dissimilar to the Calderdale moors in feel, but penetrated by deep “batches” or valleys which extend into the heart of the moorland and provide the stiff climbs for which certain races are renowned.
- b) Across the A49 from the Mynd are the shapely hills of Caer Caradoc, The Lawley and Ragleth Hill. I regard these as more picturesque than the Mynd and several classic races take in these hills
- c) The Stiperstones – to the west of the Mynd rise these rockier hills, topped by tors reminiscent of Dartmoor

Outside of this area, overlooking the urban sprawl of Telford, is the Wrekin, an isolated hill but one which can provide plenty of testing running.

The Terrain

There's a big difference between Calderdale and Shropshire in terms of the terrain....one I've had to get used to very quickly up here. Naively, I assumed that if you wanted to get from A to B, you just ran in a straight line....I soon learned that wasn't the case up here unless you enjoyed knee-deep bog and thigh-high tussocks!!

And therein lies the difference – Shropshire consists of grassy slopes, short grass with few tussocks and it is therefore an area for very fast running. There's very little technical ground.

As I mentioned earlier, although the hills aren't big, the “batches” that eat into them assist in providing some of the toughest fellrunning outside of the Lakes.

The Races

1 The MUST-Dos

- **Long Mynd Valleys weeked** – first weekend in February
Some of you may have done the Valleys race when it was a championship counter a few years ago. If you have, you'll be wary of it!

At 11.5 miles and 5,000ft, it's a challenging race in its own right, but the thing that commands respect and catches people out is that 3,000 of those feet are crammed into 3 climbs in the last 2 or 3 miles!! A fast middle section always leads to some people pushing too hard at that stage and it's not uncommon to find runners staggering about on those climbs.

The nice touch is that, as well as the Valleys race on the Sunday, there is a shorter (3m/800') Titterstone Clee race on the Saturday and prizes are also awarded for combined scores.

It's a great weekend and I really urge anyone who fancies a challenge to head down and give it a go. I'm happy to lead a recce and I reckon I've got the route spot on now!

- **Stretton Skyline** – middle of September
If you've never been to the Long Mynd or nearby hills and want to see them all in one day, do this race!!

19 miles and 4,450 feet in a loop around the town of Church Stretton. The race initially goes up to the top of the Mynd, drops all the way down, takes in the three hills (Ragleth, Caradoc and the Lawley) on the other side of the main road, then heads back up to the top of the Mynd before one final fast descent into Carding Mill Valley.

Another “sting in the tail” race, that last ascent, up and through the dreaded Gogbatch, often catches out those who've not saved something for the climb.

You've just missed it for this year, but check your FRA calendar in the New Year and make a date for this one in 2010.

- **Cardington Cracker**
The Cracker takes place on Sunday 6th December this year....and it really is a cracker!! 9 miles and 2700 feet It always seems to attract wild conditions and, 2 years ago, it was difficult to stand up on the tops in the gale force winds. A wonderful route, taking in the Lawley (straight up the steepest side – a hands and knees job), Caradoc and Willstone Hill, before a flat section along “The Wilderness” (it's not!) and a fast descent through

fields to the finish. A cheery Christmas atmosphere prevails in the Royal Oak afterwards! (i.e. people drink beer!)

- **Long Mynd Hike**

The one I haven't done yet!! Basically, a 50 mile tour of all the above area PLUS further outlying areas including the shapely Corndon hill. Starting at 1pm, most people will find themselves still out there through the night!

It's taking place on 3rd October but unfortunately it's now full for this year. I know several Toddies are heading down for this....expect to see me at various places around the route!

2 Winter Series

6 races of varying length and difficulty. "Points" are awarded based on your time as a percentage of the top 10 times.

The Long Mynd Valleys is the toughest of the races, with the Cracker being the next hardest but the races at the Brieddens in October (near Welshpool) 8 miles/2,400 feet and the Wrekin in April 5.5 miles/1,700ft (and quite often a junior championship race) are well worth a visit as well.

My old club, Newport, organises the Wrekin Wrecker, taking place on 22nd November. Plenty of people will testify that, at 8 miles and 2,400ft, it is indeed a wrecker of legs!

3 Summer Series

Again, 6 races but these tend to be much shorter and are held on Wednesday nights from April to August. Warm summer nights, with a short dash up a hill before retiring to discuss matters over a beer or two is what fell-running is all about!!

4 Other Races

There are a few of other races worthy of mention;

i) Little Stretton to Stiperstones Time Trial

Held on 29 November this year, this race can be run solo or in pairs and the object is to get from Little Stretton (on the east side of the Mynd) across to the Stiperstones pub by the quickest route possible.

It's a great little event, not taken too seriously and it finishes at one of the best pubs in the area. There is transport available one way...but why not make a full day of it, have a few beers in the pub and then run all the way back!!!

ii) Boxing Day Devil's Chair Dash

Another race from the Stiperstones pub! If you find yourself in the area for any reason this Christmas, get to this race! A quick dash up to the rocky tor known as the Devil's Chair (it is said locally that the Devil sits in his chair when the mist is down!) and back down again...and then a warming fire, a few pints and some food! What more could you want?

If you're still in the area at New Year, there's the annual "Morning After" 5 miler on 1st January.

iii) Callow – 5 miles/2,500ft

Worth a mention 'cause you don't get many races outside the Lakes with so much ascent in so few miles! The story goes that the organiser had a great rivalry with another runner, who always seemed to pass him on the flatter sections but then be caught again on the steep ups and downs. So, asked to devise a new race, Russell put in as many climbs and descents as possible so that he'd always beat his rival at Callow!

5 LDWA events

There are a couple of LDWA events well worth a mention;

i) The South Shropshire Circular

This is held in February each year and always gets fully booked before the end of the previous year. The location and route changes each year but it's generally going to be around the 25 mile mark, with some excellent food at checkpoints and at the end! Well worth a visit but get your entries in now!

ii) Tinsel Trail

A great idea...a long-distance event on the last Saturday before Christmas, so you can feel really smug whilst all your friends are queuing to get into town centre car-parks and do their shopping.

This year, it's being held over the Stiperstones and promises 25 miles and 3,000ft. What better way to warm up for the festivities?

So, if you fancy getting out of the Calderdale area and trying somewhere different, I urge you to give Shropshire a go. Some lovely hills, some fine pubs and some friendly folk.

Church Stretton is a great place to base yourself, being right at the heart of it all. The aforementioned Stiperstones Inn does b&b, cheap food and good beer and is owned by a fellrunner. Alternatively for those who like camping, there's a decent basic campsite over at Little Stretton, just a short walk from the excellent Ragleth Inn.

I'm always happy to do a recce of a race or head down with others to do the occasional race so let me know if you fancy it.....Richard