

Narrative of a Fellrace

Rod Holt - Artist and Fell Runner



Above: Jostling for position at the start of the Hades Hill fell race (1981 or thereabouts). Below: Showing off my trophy! Brown Wardle Fellrace (1980)



My first experiences of fell running came back in the early 80s when I started running whilst at university and stepped it up on leaving in 1980. I had a good training partner Gordon Hart and also ran with an old school mate Geoff Read and his brother Pete. I won the Brown Wardle Fell Race in 1980 and took part in the Pony and the Snowdon Marathons, but my leaning was for the fells and along with Geoff, Pete and another Rochdale Harrier Kevan Shand I moved up a peg – cycling out to such races as Thieveley Pike, Pendle Hill and Kinder Downfall. I also started doing the harder local races like Turnslack, Wardle Skyline and the fantastic Blackstone Edge (organised by Kevan to this day). The running was also a springboard to a cycle trip around France. On my return cycling took over and I spent some years cycle racing.

One of the achievements I am most proud of is the National Three Peaks in 1996 (along with my friend Nigel Hill). We combined cycling and running to do a non-stop journey from Ben Nevis, Scafell and to Snowdon.

I have always lived near to the Pennines, firstly in Littleborough and now, since 1993, in Glossop where I live just on the edge of the Peak District and I feel that my recent work reflects a profound attachment to the wonderful Dark Peak landscape: an emotional element that may have been missing from my earlier work.

In my pictures, I want to capture the wildness and beauty of the wider landscape that you take in whilst running through it – the paths

leading away to the distance, the steep hillsides retaining a few scraps of snow and the fantastic skies above – but I am also fascinated by the richness and delicate intricacy of things close too – the gleam of wet rock; frosted footprints on a path; bushy spikes of ling and shaggy clumps of wimberry.

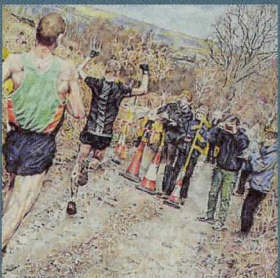
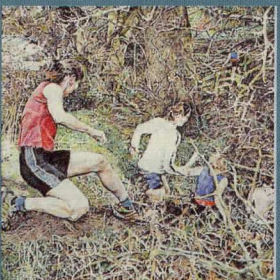
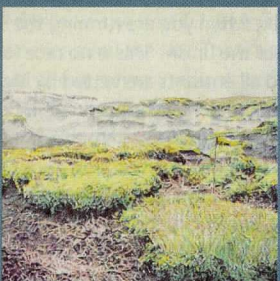
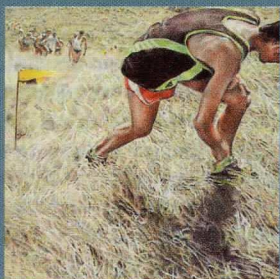
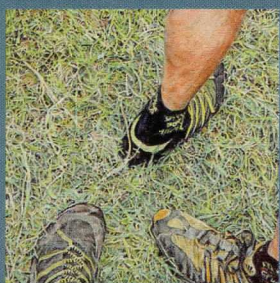
I trained at Rochdale College of Art and read Graphic Design and Illustration at the University of Northumbria, graduating in 1979. At first unsure of my career I explored various directions, including a couple of years in the Greater Manchester Police and then working for Rossendale Groundwork Trust. I also had six months cycling around France, earning money along the way by doing on-the-spot commissions. In 1986, I became the Graphic Designer at UMIST and spent 18 years working on publications, displays and illustrations. However, in 2004 the opportunity arose to take voluntary severance (when UMIST merged with the Victoria University of Manchester) and we (that is my wife Alison, son James and myself) took the collective decision that now was the time to take the plunge and return to my “true calling” as an artist.

I have set up my own company – Newleaf Designs Ltd – so that I can publish and sell limited edition prints of the original pictures as well as accepting commissions. Over the years of full-time employment, I’ve always managed to produce some artwork, mainly detailed, urban pictures plus a much larger piece showing

the cyclist Chris Boardman at the Manchester Velodrome, achieving the world Hour record in 1996. I also hosted a couple of exhibitions and won a special prize in the BBC’s “Look Northwest” art competition.

Perspective is a key element of the composition: I love to find an unusual and unexpected point of view, and I think this is a something of a “signature” theme in my work. *Water over the Edge* shows the view towards Kinder Reservoir from behind the waterfall itself so that you get all the intensity of the water droplets spraying through the air and falling onto the rocks before your eye is lead into the distance. With this picture, I was fascinated by the geological processes at work, continually casting up and wearing away the mountains, and the subtle yet irresistible, energies of water, ice and wind.

The medium I use is a combination of ink (from a ball point pen, first used on my cycle trip round France – avec bic) and watercolour pencils (Caran d’Ache or Derwent) on paper. Each larger piece takes up to two to three months to complete and its hard work at times! I take a lot of reference sketches and photographs and often run back to the settings in different conditions to see if there is something new I can add. When I was drawing *Overexposed*, which shows the wreckage of the crashed superfortress called ‘Overexposed’ on Higher Shelf Stones, I was struck by the stark contrast of the metal fragments, some still



gleaming untouched by corrosion, against the muted tones of the exposed peat and sandy gravel. There is beauty and tragedy up there: and also hope as the runner approaches, strong and full of life. *Close on the Heels* is an evocation of running: the freedom and exhilaration of pursuing an adversary down a tricky path that is still icy.

I have recently taken up fell-running again and the experiences of ascending the Pennine moors after a 21 year absence. I raced the Kinder Downfall for a second time and came 13th winning a vets prize! I also travelled back to Littleborough to do Blackstone Edge again and much to Kevan's surprise won the 1st vets prize. I've also completed some of the races I missed the first time round like the 3 Peaks and Calderdale Relays and supported a friend on the two final legs of the Bob Graham. In 1995 I took part in the World Masters Hill Running Championships in Keswick and Alison and I also won our club championships.

No stranger to injury like most runners I developed bursitis in my heels and had to back off a little, and concentrated more on my artwork, however leaning on a hard drawing board for hours gave me a similar condition in my elbows. Team mates found it very amusing that I couldn't go out because I had injured myself drawing!

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The starting point was wanting to draw a race on the fells, but broken down in order to capture the progression and the changing aspects of it in 'snapshots' from a runners point of view.

So you get close-up detailed pictures but also subtle, almost abstract ones. Images of muddy footprints, alongside a procession of runners making their way up the ascent and brief glimpses of the surrounding landscape. I have been able to work quickly on these pictures, concentrating on the composition because each picture has to move the narrative forward and work as an individual picture. I hope that this will widen its appeal but still have integrity amongst fellrunners, as a true representation

of a race on the hills. Also, it's a celebration of taking part – each race has only one outright winner but everyone has covered the same ground and endured the same obstacles, felt the same exhaustion and elation. So it is a piece of collective artwork for everyone and I hope people will have a sense of recognition that I've captured something familiar and special.

I am having a limited edition print with all the pictures, but also each one will be available as a stand-alone print.

Mountain Rescue Fund Raising

Water Over the Edge was printed as a greetings card and 25p from each card sold are donated to Glossop Mountain Rescue Team to help with their equipment and premises requirements. I sold nearly 1000

cards in the immediate pre-Christmas period and sales have continued since as it is not a specific Christmas card and is still selling.

Several friends and fellow fell-runners are members of the rescue team and I am pleased to be able to help their work in this way. Cards and prints are available direct from my website (www.newleaf-designs.co.uk).

I have now had my work taken on by 'The Blue Apple Gallery' in Hope, Derbyshire.

Along with the precision of execution, I would like people to see new and unexpected things each time they look at my pictures and for each picture to work on different levels – either because it is highly detailed, or because of the particular location or subject matter. I want people to look and then look again and think.

"Wow – how did he do that!"

In summary, "taking the plunge" has had its chillier moments but I have never been happier, nor more sure that I am finally on the right track, pencil in hand and fell-running shoes on my feet!

