

# Billy Bland's legacy

Words, by [Steve Chilton](#)

It is sometimes difficult to see what someone's legacy really is. In some ways it can be different things to different people. Researching a biography of Cumbrian fell-running legend Billy Bland caused me to wonder what legacy he is leaving.

In Billy Bland's case there is a mismatch between what many think it is and what he himself thinks. It is very easy to think that his Bob Graham Round time of 13-53 from 1982 is his greatest achievement and that his legacy revolves around that. But it is not as simple as that.

It is possible to list Billy Bland's running achievements, of which there are many. He won the Borrowdale fell race ten times, and the Wasdale fell race nine times consecutively. He also won the Lake District Mountain Trial nine times, the Ennerdale fell race five times, and lost his record for the Ennerdale by just a few seconds to current record holder Kenny Stuart (in 1985). He is still the course record holder for the Borrowdale (from 1981) and Wasdale (from 1982) races. But there is way more to it than just statistics.

One characteristic that perhaps gets overlooked about Billy Bland is his generosity, which he showed with his helping of others on their Bob Graham Rounds, and in many other ways.

A prize of a weekend for two was offered to the winner of the Borrowdale fell race. Despite his many wins, Billy Bland never took that prize. Instead ten different people went for dinner at the



*Billy Bland at the Ian Hodgson Relay in 1988  
(photo by Pete Hartley)*

sponsoring hotel each year.

Something else he did will never happen again. He won the Ben Nevis race one Saturday, the Lake District Mountain Trial the following Sunday and the Langdale fell race the week after that. He was the only one to do it. It can't happen again because of date changes. Billy Bland has a theory about competing, training and recovery in situations like that. "The Ben race use to do my legs in. Recovery is what I tried to

preach. If you train every day, then you are not doing anything different when training/racing after a hard race.”

Billy’s own view is that his Bob Graham Round time has been put on too much of a pedestal. “Obviously people do see the Bob Graham as special, but to me it was never as important as the Borrowdale, Ennerdale, and Wasdale races. Winning the Borrowdale race because I lived in Borrowdale all my life, it was my Olympics, and was more important than any race anywhere. The Borrowdale record is a good record, and so is the Wasdale.”

The fact that the Bob Graham Round record has been beaten now, but the two race records still not, lends weight to this view.

Those records were achieved in a golden era when there was a great group of fell-runners at the top of their form, in the 1980s. “Without a doubt. If you wanted to beat somebody when there were a batch of good ’uns then that spurred you on. There were less races. You had to race each other, which isn’t the case now.”

Billy Bland could have put his phenomenal endurance to other challenges and records. Two were the Paddy Buckley Round and the Charlie Ramsay Round, the Welsh and Scottish equivalents to the Bob Graham Round. Billy’s thoughts matched his life philosophy. “If the Bob Graham Round wasn’t in the Lakes then I wouldn’t have run it. I have lived all my life in the valley I was born in. I have been around a bit in the sport, and on the continent on my bike, and I like it when I go, but there is only one place for me and that is Borrowdale.”

Billy reckons that if he was able to start life over again, he wouldn’t approach it differently. “I had the enjoyment of getting better and of meeting other lads and talking about how many miles they did. I heard people talking 100-mile weeks and the penny dropped. I was not doing nearly enough, and I would never beat them. It is a learning process. I would always say to anybody who was a winner immediately that I was sorry for them. Because I think you need to get beaten a lot of times and serve your time. Then there is a lot more enjoyment when you get to where you want to be, or as good as you can be. I wouldn’t want to change owt really.”

One of the best summaries of Billy Bland comes from his biking friend Mark Wilson. He said: “In Borrowdale he is a legend. Billy has been very kind to our kids. He is also generous, and very loyal. He is unbelievably honest, to a fault. If he believes it, he will say it. That isn’t really a fault, but some people think so. He falls out with people, unfortunately. To him it doesn’t matter. If he thinks something is wrong, he says so. He is comfortable in his own skin.”

Another aspect of Billy’s legacy was his determination and application. His training was hard and consistent. It was relentless, and he was always well prepared.

At one of the public talks we did together someone asked if he ever took any short cuts. His reply came instantly, ending with a brilliant putdown of poor navigators. “There is no such thing as a short cut. People used to say I knew where I was going, well I did. You all start on the line together (normally), you follow me if you can keep up, and I will show you the



way. If you choose to go further than you need that is up to you.”

Talking with Pete Bland, and his wife Anne, they said: “Our youngest grandson is called Billy Bland, not because of Billy. A few months after he was born, I was talking to yon Billy at the Borrowdale race and said, ‘we have another Billy Bland in the family, just six months old’. ‘I hope he is not as cantankerous as this old bugger’, was Billy’s response.”

Anne then gave an assessment of Billy Bland: “Billy has relaxed a lot in recent years. He is a character, definitely. One thing about Billy is that he is honest as the day is long. He never fudges anything, just says it how it is (to him).”

I happened to be reading Johnny Cash’s autobiography shortly after the time of my interview with Pete and Anne Bland, and I was reminded of Roseanne

*Gavin Bland and Billy Bland (right) looking serious as they prepare to run a leg to support a Bob Graham Round in 2005 (photo by Boff Whalley)*

Cash’s comment on her father: “He believes in what he says, but that doesn’t make him right.” There is a sense of that in Billy Bland.

Billy’s wife Ann tells of Billy’s legacy and how it affected him at the time. Billy won a huge batch of trophies in the 1980 season, and one point was asked to get them together for a photo shoot before they all were returned to the organisers for the next winners, which in some cases would be Billy again. “It was a lovely day and they were in here [Billy’s front room] and the photographer took for ever to set up and he was going on a bit. When the photo comes out Billy is looking like thunder as he was so fed up.”



*Chris Bland and Billy Bland taking a work break (photo courtesy of Billy Bland)*

One tangible legacy is the Billy Bland Challenge, which gets full endorsement from Billy. It is a club relay based on the five legs of the Bob Graham Round. The challenge is open to all teams of ten, split into five pairs. Each of the pairs is designated one of the five legs and a baton is passed from one team to the next. The relay is to be completed at any time in the month of June. There are several categories, these include: all male; all female; open (any old mix); mixed (man and woman on each leg).

There are records for each category, and it is interesting to see how few teams

have beaten Billy Bland's solo time. It has remained the Billy Bland Challenge and not been re-named the Kilian Jornet Challenge, another nod to the status of Billy's Bob Graham Round record.

Something else that seems to have been named after Billy Bland is a rake on the side of Bowfell. It is mentioned in Nicky Spinks' 2005 Bob Graham Round report: "By the time I was at Rossett Crag I felt a lot better. The pull up Billy Bland's Rake was OK." On a website describing the route choices: "Often known as Billy Bland's rake, this is best not described: it needs to be seen. Take note of parallel shelves from Rossett's vantage and have faith."

I mentioned this to Billy, and he

replied: “if they are referring to this as Billy Bland’s rake, then they shouldn’t be. I think they are describing the Bob Graham line slanting up when you set off from Rossett. When you are on it you are thinking there must be a better way than this, but there isn’t.” Although he is reluctant to claim it, it is presumably the fast line that he pioneered on his Bob Graham record round.

There is also a visible legacy of the building and walling work Billy has done over the years. Take a journey round the Keswick area and you could see jobs he has done that he is particularly proud of. “I look at them with a good feeling when I ride my bike past them. For instance, there is a house in Thornthwaite that I faced but didn’t build.” Ann adds that, “you just need to go out our back door and there are three garages he built and stone-faced, as well as a bridge in our garden.”

The discussion concluded with Billy quietly saying, “I don’t know anyone that has criticised my work, ever.”

As far as Billy is concerned, stonework is there to be looked at, and therefore it should look good.

My assessment of Billy Bland is from afar, but from having come to understand him and his place in fell-running. No-one has shown the range of ability that Billy displayed. He won short races like the Blisco Dash and Latrigg, and absolutely dominated Borrowdale and Wasdale even when John Wild and Kenny Stuart were at their peak. His 13-53 for the Bob Graham Round remains an iconic and outstanding performance, as do his records for Borrowdale and Wasdale races.

As much as his longevity at the top of the sport, and all those facts are

impressive, it is the esteem that Billy Bland is held in by his contemporaries and by the current generation of fell-runners that confirm him as the greatest fell-runner of a time.

Billy Bland has always played down his own achievements, saying, “Quite a lot of people in my time have said, ‘Oh, I could never do that’. And I’ve said, ‘well, yes you could. One leg past t’ other – that’s all running is. If you get out there and train, you might be surprised what your body can do’.”

He was very satisfied when he first won Borrowdale, as he didn’t expect it. But there was no yelling “yees” or big celebrations. Billy was thinking it was job done. “Hit a target and that is satisfaction in itself. I have come in off training runs maybe a handful of times in my life and sat down and said, ‘I could have caught a pigeon tonight’.” Ann adds that there was a picture of him once clenching his fist at a race finish. That is about as triumphal as he got.

I once asked Billy if he had ever thought of moving in his later life, or whether he wanted to stay where he was. “I don’t know if I will live in this house till I die, but hopefully I will. Why would I want to go anywhere else? It is the graveyard next for me.”

Billy commented on his own legendary status by simply saying, “I was as good as I was. However good or bad Billy Bland was, that was as good as he was. That was me.” ■

*Steve’s fourth book All or nothing at all: the life of Billy Bland, published by Sandstone Press, is out now. He blogs at: <https://itsahill.wordpress.com>*