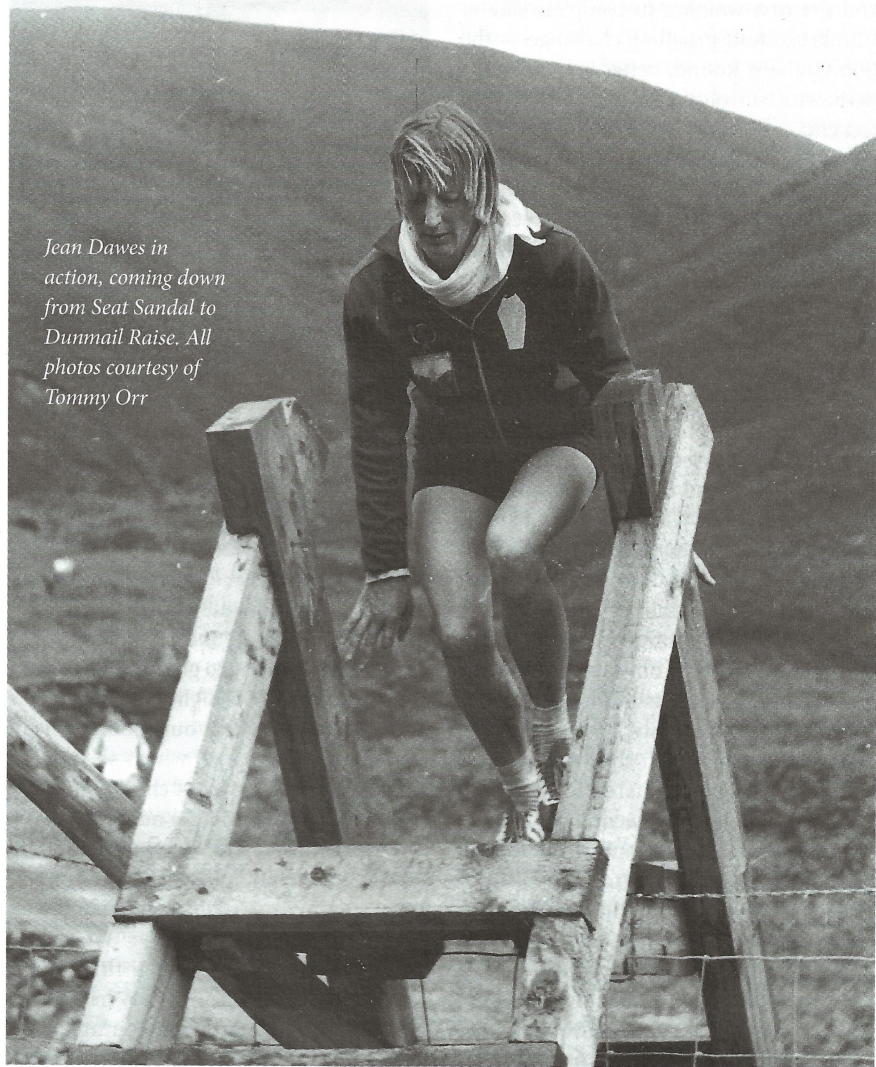


Queen of the Fells

Steve Chilton on a Lakeland record-maker

Jean Dawes in action, coming down from Seat Sandal to Dunmail Raise. All photos courtesy of Tommy Orr



She was ahead of her time, a woman in a hurry, a leader of the pack. Her name was Jean Dawes, and she was a remarkable trailblazer who overturned orthodoxies to make history.

Jean was only the sixty-ninth person, and the first woman, to complete one of Cumbria's most gruelling challenges – the Bob Graham Round, better known as the BGR, which involves a sixty-six mile, 27,000 foot circuit of forty-two of the highest Lake District peaks – all within twenty-four hours.

It was on June 25, 1977 when Jean undertook the challenge, and as was later recalled: “The weather was now dry but windy. More food was consumed at Stake Pass. It was cold on Bowfell, and Dawes took on salt tablets and worked through Roman Halenko's supply of butterscotch.

“Dawes had huge self-doubts halfway around, thinking of packing up at Wasdale, but didn't want to let her supporters down. She recalled: ‘Broad Stand, wet in places – slape you might say. Chris Bland and I went up first. Chris counting heads as they appear over the rock edge. Rough descent of Scafell and the rest of the team catches up. Chris leads us down a beautiful scree run. We sit and remove stones from our shoes. Then down to Brackenclose Lane for our supper.’”

Jean Tatham was born on February 16, 1941 in Kendal. When she was younger, she didn't have much interest in sport, and attended a girls-only secondary school, playing hockey, tennis, and netball. Both her parents were rock climbers, and they all had camping holidays in Langdale and enjoyed many holidays at Seathwaite Farm in Borrowdale.

By the early 1970s, her husband, Pete Dawes, was training for the Bob Graham Round, which he completed in 1974. Jean



Keswick high street

recalls: “The support and camaraderie of so many friends willing to give time and effort, running through the night, carrying drinks and waterproofs, was outstanding.” Jean also provided support, which she admits was mostly brewing tea at checkpoints and transporting pacers to the next section.

Meanwhile, Pete was considering entering the two-day Karrimor Mountain Marathon in Ennerdale in 1975, and Jean said to her friend Liz Emery: “We can do that” – and they entered their first mountain event. Jean adds now: “My navigation was non-existent in the beginning, it was a case of ‘learn or get lost.’” The following

year, in May 1976, Jean competed in her second event, a sixty-mile Fellsman Hike, and the following month, made her first attempt on the BGR. Pete had encouraged Jean to have a go at it.

“Training during the week was running along the back lanes above Ulverston, sometimes with a head torch. Then weekend runs in the fells, with my lovely grandparents looking after the children. I was enjoying running on the fells and doing longer routes but I wasn’t fast enough really,” Jean said.

Her first BGR attempt took place from midnight July 31, 1976. It is recorded in detail by Fred Rogerson in the brilliant resource that is his loose-leaf ‘publication’ *History and Records of Notable Fell Walks, 1864-1972, Within the Lake District* (which was updated to include some later efforts). He starts by calling Jean “a housewife with three children”.

He then writes: “Prior to the start, Jean expressed her intention of completing the round irrespective of time taken. Never more than a few minutes adrift of the scheduled times, it was after leaving the last summit, Robinson, that her body demanded sleep. From Newlands valley, with darkness upon us, the steep descent of Robinson was under constant observation.

“Torches were observed descending the ridge, but very slowly. They became stationary for what seemed to be ages and then downward movement for a short distance, then stationary again. Several thoughts crossed my mind but with time slipping away, the hopes for a successful attempt by the first women was not now possible.

“At Honister Hause, even though she appeared tired, Jean was full of determination. On her arrival in the Newlands valley we learned of the trouble. Jean was

asleep on her feet and fighting sleep, she continued along the road to Keswick. Her courage and willpower, which she possesses in abundance, kept her going.

“After finishing, Jean departed from Keswick and was soon fast asleep in the caravanette. She slept [some more, at Fred’s house] until 9.30am when she was up and assisting Margaret, my wife, making breakfast, seemingly little the worse for the previous days endeavour. No blisters, swollen ankles, or stiffness.”

Jean had taken 24 hours, 50 minutes, and said at the time that she was “hoping if I can get fit enough to try again in June 1977”. She recalls clearly “falling asleep as I trudged from Newlands to Keswick and ran out of time”. But encouraged by Pete, and Fred and Margaret Rogerson, and many of her friends, Jean did indeed have another go the next year.

So, in 1977, Jean set out on a clockwise round at 8.00am on June 25. An impressive list of pacers was lined up, with Chris Bland agreeing to start things off along with Pete Dawes. They had rain and mist on Skiddaw, but husband Pete’s navigation was up to the mark. They descended Blencathra via Halls Ridge to a welcome cup of tea at Threlkeld.

Boyd Millen and Steve Tosh led off up Clough Head into more mist, gathering more runners as they went. Jean commented that she had the chance to “catch up with all the news from Joan (Lancaster) and Anne-Marie (Grindley). Boyd said: ‘Save your breath for running,’ or words to that effect”. There were drinks at Grisedale Tarn, before misty ascents of Fairfield and Seat Sandal. After the refuel at Wasdale, as mentioned earlier, at 9.58pm they were off up Yewbarrow. Jean was now feeling tired and

lost the pacers temporarily in the dark, and then dropped and broke her torch on Kirk Fell. A short sit down to mend the torch, and she nearly fell asleep before moving on. They met Pete Dawes coming up from Beck Head and took some tea with a drop of brandy before hitting Great Gable.

Soup and tea were taken at Honister at 4.05am and Jean set off with Bill Smith leading the way over the last three peaks.

Eventually, they came over the rock steps of Robinson and down to the river path, with just the road home to do. There was not much running, but there was an attempted sprint up the main street to finish in 23 hours 27 minutes, and included a total rest time of 1 hour 23 minutes. The first women's Bob Graham Round was in the bag. 🐣

An extract from Steve Chilton's Voices from the hills: pioneering women fell and mountain runners, Sandstone Press. To be published in April.



Breakfast at Threlkeld with Joan Lancaster

Jean's own report (again in Rogerson's *Notable Fell Walks*) ends with: "What can you say about a day like that – a day spent with friends in high places – I've been lucky to have had such support and encouragement. My grateful thanks. It was an unforgettable day."

It is good to see that Jean had Carol Walkington helping her on the hill, as well as Joan Lancaster and Anne-Marie Grindley, and Jane Sutcliffe on road support: all top fell-running females backing a colleague. Jean was happy with that successful BGR, but she never pursued any of the other big rounds. She says now: "I don't think my main objective

was ever to break any records. Every event has always been a personal challenge. It is always satisfying to know that the training has been successful in getting me to the finishing line, without me having to lie down halfway round. Physical endurance is only half the task, the other half is mental endurance – the determination to get to the finishing line when you're knackered."

Jean Dawes gave back to the sport later, becoming a committee member for both the Bob Graham Club and the Lake District Mountain Trial Association. She says she still feels guilty about consuming all of Roman Halenko's butterscotch!