

75 at 75

Brian Cunningham

A year ago, at the end of May 2017, I attempted a **75 at 75** - which was a bit of a cheat as I was only in my seventy-fifth year, not actually seventy-five. Unfortunately, my 2017 run coincided with the hottest couple of days on record for Sutherland, with temperatures between 23°C and a sizzling 29°C. My attempt fizzled out after sixty-six miles when faced with a three-hour wait for the next ferry across the Kyle of Durness.



Kyle of Durness.

All photos Cunningham Collection

Despite having huge blisters on the soles of my feet, thanks to the heat and the miles on tarmac, I know I could have done the final eleven miles out to Cape Wrath. But, in the stifling heat, and with the prospect of kicking my heels for three hours waiting for the ferry, it just didn't seem worth it. So, Arthur and I went for an early beer and drove home. My 'never-agains' were rightly disbelieved and within a few weeks I was happily (and secretly) planning another go.

My route for the 'proper' **75 at 75** was the final leg of a long-planned and often-failed attempt to run in a single push from the Glenfinnan Monument to Cape Wrath. Five failures finally convinced me that it was well beyond my capabilities, so I opted instead to run it in three separate stages, the final one being from a mile west of Oykel Bridge to Cape Wrath. Conveniently, this turned out to be seventy-five miles. Rucksack Club long-distant legends will rightly point out that this route has too much tarmac. However, its saving grace is the twenty-five-mile leg from West Merkland to Gualin House via the Gobernuisgach Estate, Glen Golly and Loch Dionard. This spectacularly wild and remote stretch of Sutherland is my favourite bit of Scotland.



Chilly dawn on the Loch Dionard track.

On 25th May 2018 the conditions for the run were perfect and everything went well. I had clear skies with a cool headwind through the day, and although a thick mist descended during the night, it was never more than a minor inconvenience on the trackless stretch to the east of Loch Dionard. The ground was amazingly dry and crossing the river Dionard at the outflow of the loch was no more than a paddle.

For once, I had support throughout most of the route. My lifelong friend, and sharer of many adventures, Keith Burns accompanied me on his mountain bike on the cyclable stretches and our son Alistair, a sometime-ultra-running companion, led the crux pitch through the night between West Merkland and Gualin House. The three of us then did the long and weary eleven miles on the Lighthouse road to Cape Wrath together.

My moving time was 21hrs 30mins. Not surprisingly I was pretty knackered when we reached the lighthouse but, apart from that, I had nothing at all to complain about - no joint problems, no muscle strains and, amazingly, my feet were completely blister-free despite wearing the same pair of ultra-light IceBug Acceleritas 4 fell-shoes the entire way. The day after we got home to Bolton I was back running on Darwen Moor and I've run every day since. However, the 'never-again' is for real this time. I'm happy to have done a **75 at 75** but there'll be no more ultras for me!



Climb from West Merkland on track to Gobernuisgach.

Footnote: *These days there's a distressing number of activities focused on Cape Wrath. The (infamous) North Coast 500 Trail has dramatically increased the traffic in the area. There's a new Cape Wrath Adventure Race (£1,600 entry fee!) from Fort William to the lighthouse, a Cape Wrath Marathon and an increasingly popular trekking route from Fort William to*

Cape Wrath called the Cape Wrath Trail. There is also a mountain bike route which takes in Cape Wrath. It's not that long ago the bus to the lighthouse was an ancient banger and visitors were relatively few. Now there are four spanking new mini-buses shuttling a throng of tourists to and fro.



Cape Wrath Lighthouse.