

# Branching Out

A parkrun tourism journal for University College's Brewster Scholarship

Maria Ordovas-Montanes



The 'branching out' theme of my travel journal stems from (yes, that is an arboreal pun) the parkrun logo. This series of 5k running events happens every Saturday across the year, is free to all participants, and is run by volunteers. The parkrun community represents my favorite event that is in the UK but has yet to become popular in the US. It is delightful to know that several thousand people across the UK have the same idea of a great Saturday morning, and there is a satisfying feeling in knowing that you are part of a bigger movement than just a jog around a local park: at 9am GMT, everyone is starting a 5k run across 600+ locations in the UK. I am an avid listener of parkrun podcasts such as "Free Weekly Timed" and "With Me Now," which have sparked my desire for parkrun tourism and other challenges. Tourism involves visiting parkruns farther afield than your local parkrun, and there are various challenges such as getting a personal best time, running a milestone number (50, 100, 250, or 500 events), completing a parkrun starting with each letter of the alphabet, and stopwatch bingo which is collecting all the seconds from :00 to :59 as finishing times. Part of the appeal of parkrun tourism is that you are done with the event in the morning and then you have the rest of the day to explore nearby; I have included these post-run activities in my journal as well.



At the time I wrote my Brewster application there were 581 events in the UK and as of October 2019, there are 643 events, which speaks to the growing popularity of these events. Therefore, the possibilities for collecting alphabet letters through parkrun tourism are numerous, so I decided to create a shortlist of unique and picturesque parkruns.

My priority events were Whinlatter Forest and Fountains Abbey, which are included in this travel journal. UK events that are still on my to-do list include Penrose (near Looe Pool of Excalibur fame), Severn Bridge (starts in Wales and crosses into England), and Crosby (scenic seafront). I also engaged in some shorter haul tourism in Abingdon, Marlow, Bicester, and Newbury, which helped me make progress in the alphabet challenge without having to travel very far. Ready? On your mark... get set... go!



# Lake District via Peak District

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Whinlatter Forest parkrun tourism

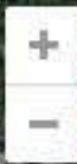
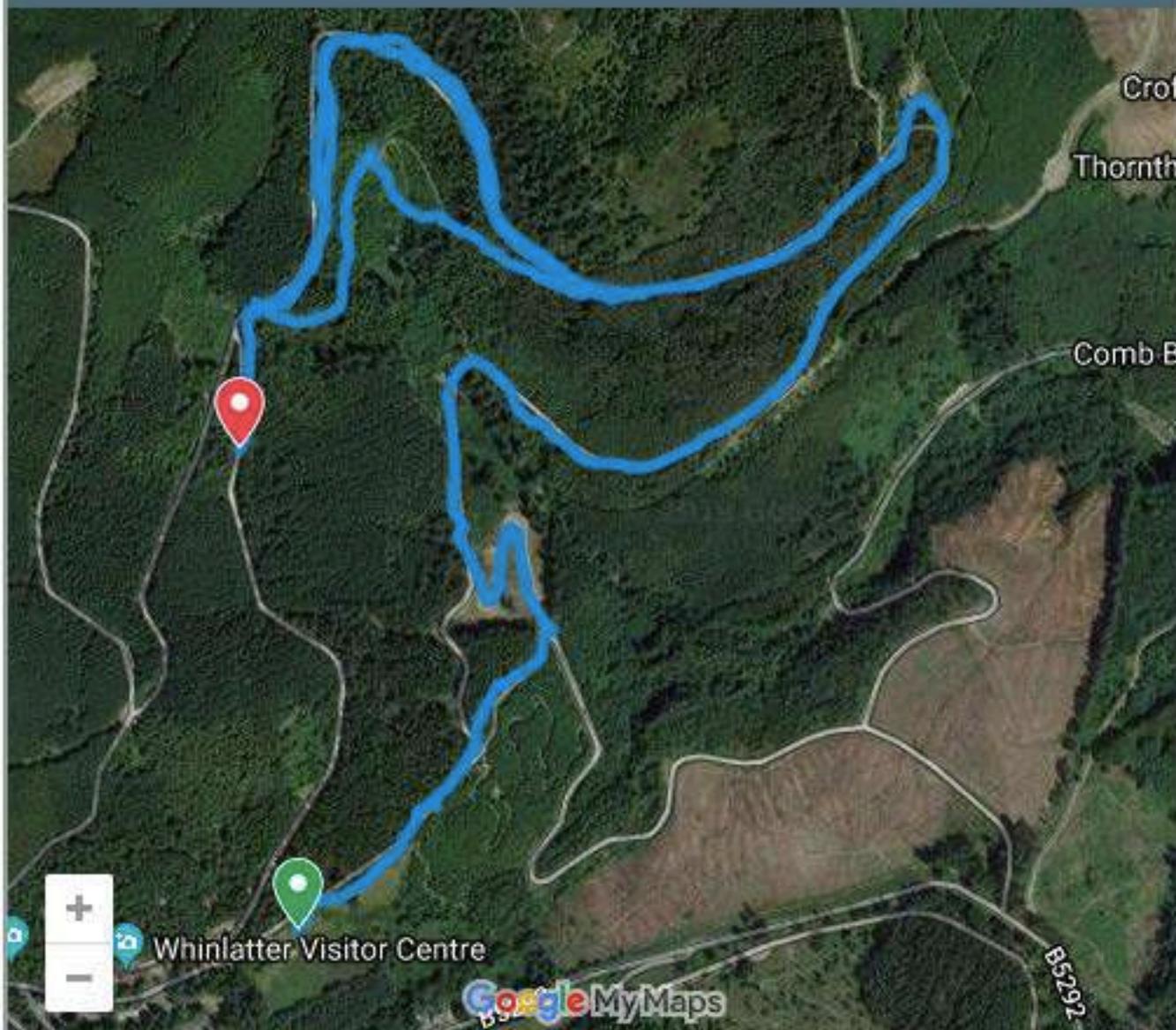
A weekend of reaching new heights

31 May – 2 June 2019





Whinlatter Forest parkrun ★



One of my travel journal motifs is food from Hamblin Bread on Iffley Road. Depicted here is the selection from 31 May, part of which fueled us through the weekend. After stocking up at the bakery we set off towards the Lake District, making a stop in the Peak District for some climbing.





My travel buddies included Meg (carrying a baby), Dave (carrying our bouldering mat), and Dan (carrying our snacks). I met Meg and Dave a few years ago while climbing at Brookes, and I met Dan that morning; he did his DPhil at Nuffield with Meg. Our first stop on this trip was Stanage in the Peak District, where we did a bit of walking and bouldering. The highlight here was the hiker who asked why we had a small mattress with us. I must admit that I have napped on this mat while resting from climbs in Fontainebleau last year, so this man was not wrong, though its primary purpose is to protect climbers when they come off a boulder.



A Hamblin country loaf went well with the soup that Meg and Dave prepared. The bouldering mat served as our table. It was quite windy so we hid behind a rock to try and protect our food from flying away.



A Hamblin ginger cookie taking in the Peak District landscape



Did I mention it  
was windy?

The highest point at Stanage is High Neb at 458 meters above sea level. The ascent onto this marker was trickier than the ascent to the peak!



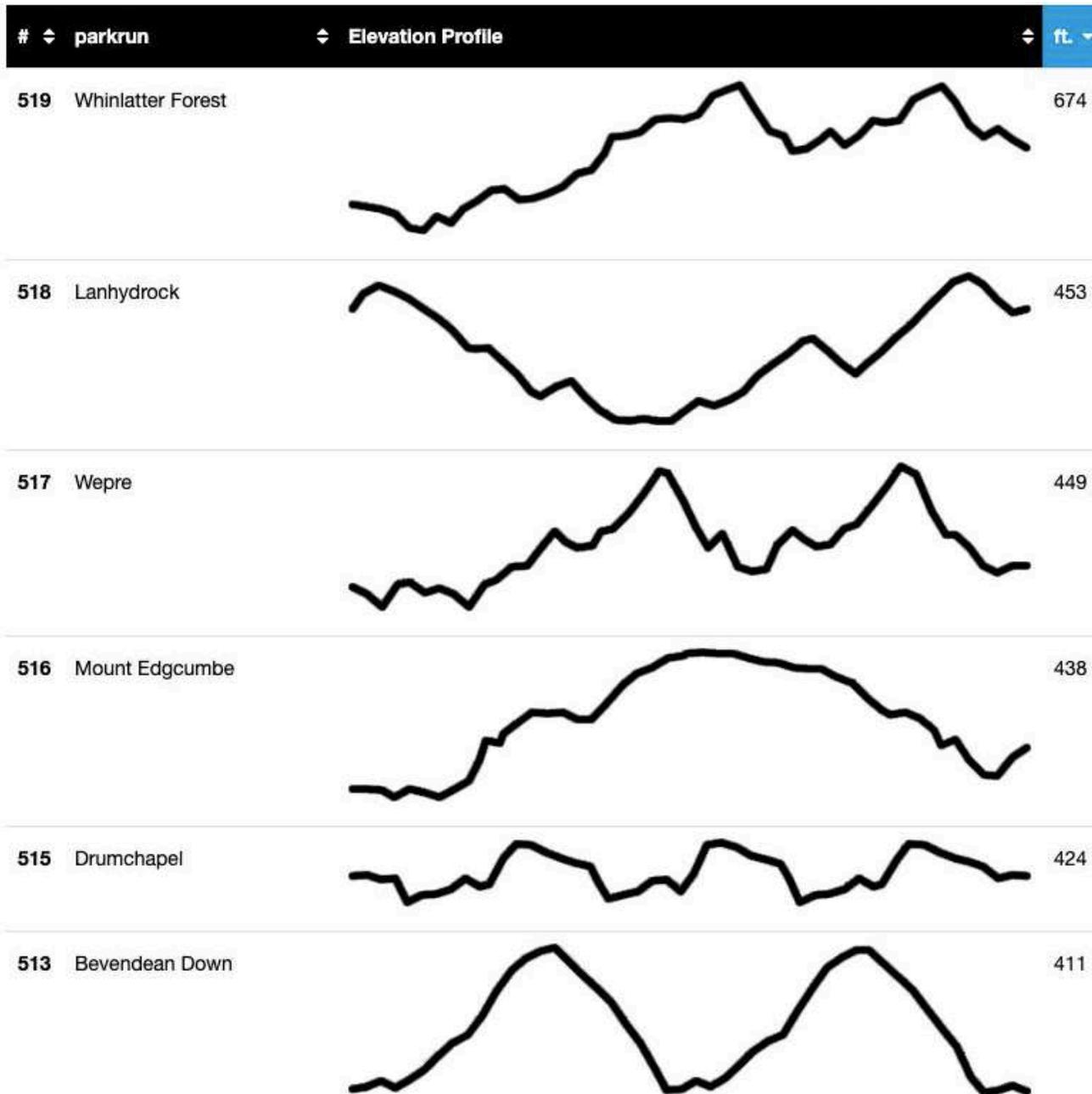


On our way to find some boulders, Meg and Dave balanced on an old millstone.



After we arrived at our Airbnb in Drigg, I tested out my newly-acquired waterproof hiking boots. They worked and only my ankles got wet when the tide came in higher than expected! Then I looked out pensively onto the Irish Sea, as I mentally prepared for the next day's parkrun event.





One of the appeals of Whinlatter Forest parkrun is that it tops the charts for UK parkrun events based on elevation gain, at 674 feet. These rankings were compiled when there were 519 events. Flatts Lane (which was my backup parkrun in North Yorkshire) comes in at 510 with 380 feet of elevation gain. Not flat. For reference, the Oxford course has 84 feet of elevation gain.



An enthusiastic volunteer explained the layout of the course to the attendees, which were about 80% - 90% tourists (by show of hands). There was even a wedding cake presentation during the run briefing for a groom who was getting married later that day.



We were climbing within the first five minutes



This was one of my slowest events – not just because of the elevation profile but because I stopped to take pictures. I had never done a parkrun with this kind of scenery! Whinlatter is England's only mountain forest.



Meg nearing the finish line at six months pregnant, sporting her '50 events' parkrun shirt



I got a chance to meet the week's Run Director and talk to her about my Brewster Scholarship and parkrun tourism. I made sure to wear my Team Univ shirt. She wrote this up in the run report.

We met Maria from Oxford University who is undertaking some parkrun tourism research on behalf of the University. Our event is certainly one you'll remember and we're so pleased you could join us. We wish you all the best for happy parkrun travels and look forward to seeing your research!



It seems like my message got lost in translation and they thought I was doing parkrun research. Maybe I should go back and collect soil samples?



I spotted Kendal Mint Cake when we got to the Whinlatter Forest gift shop. This peppermint tablet supposedly originated from a confectionary accident in which Joseph Wiper left a boiled solution of glacier mints out overnight and it turned into a mint cake by the next morning. Robert Wiper (Joseph's great-nephew) marketed the mint cakes as an energy snack. They were even on board the *Endurance* for Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton's trans-Antarctic expedition. On a personal note, Shackleton has been my favorite Antarctic explorer since I did a school project about him in fourth grade, so it was nice to find this polar reference as we prepared for our post-run hike.



Our post-run snack included hazelnut and raspberry cake from Hamblin

We did a clothing change to account for the forecasted wind and rain and then started heading up Grisedale Pike, the 40<sup>th</sup> highest of the 214 Wainwrights in the Lake District. The Wainwrights are peaks (or in Lake District terms, fells) that are included in Alfred Wainwright's guide from the 1950s. All but one are over 1000 feet in height.







We encountered some *steep* sections





We had many clothing swaps with the ever-changing weather but fortunately we all had waterproof layers and bag covers! And waterproof boots, as I had determined the previous day in the Irish Sea.



As you can see, the view from the top was astounding! I was fooled at an earlier point by one of the subsidiary summits but here we are pictured at the true summit at 791 meters above sea level.

Our lunch stop was brief given the persistent drizzle. We had some of the previous day's country loaf and more soup to sustain us. I am quite proud of my bread-keeper color choice.





I pretended to slackline, which is something we do to practice our balance for climbing



Do not be fooled, this is actually a picture of me descending Grisedale Pike. With all of the uphill and downhill that morning, my quads decided they were too tired and I adopted the backwards-descent strategy I learned from the “How to Run 100 Miles” documentary at the Banff Film Festival.



It was too rainy to properly eat lunch on Grisedale Pike, so I assembled a gourmet post-hike snack of boiled chicken egg and dehydrated potato on sourdough country loaf.



This is probably one of the best views I've had from an Airbnb. At times we could see horses and cows.



Saturday night was spent at a local pub to watch the Champions League final. Dave is a Liverpool fan so he was happy with the result.

Then Sunday morning we made a quick trip to the beach. You may recognize this sign from Mark Chonofsky's 2018 Brewster journal.



Meg and I tested the water temperature before driving back south. It was cold and refreshing!



We made a quick stop in Manchester to visit my former Oxford climbing partner. I was inspired to plan more trips by this map in the Patagonia store.

# Abingdon

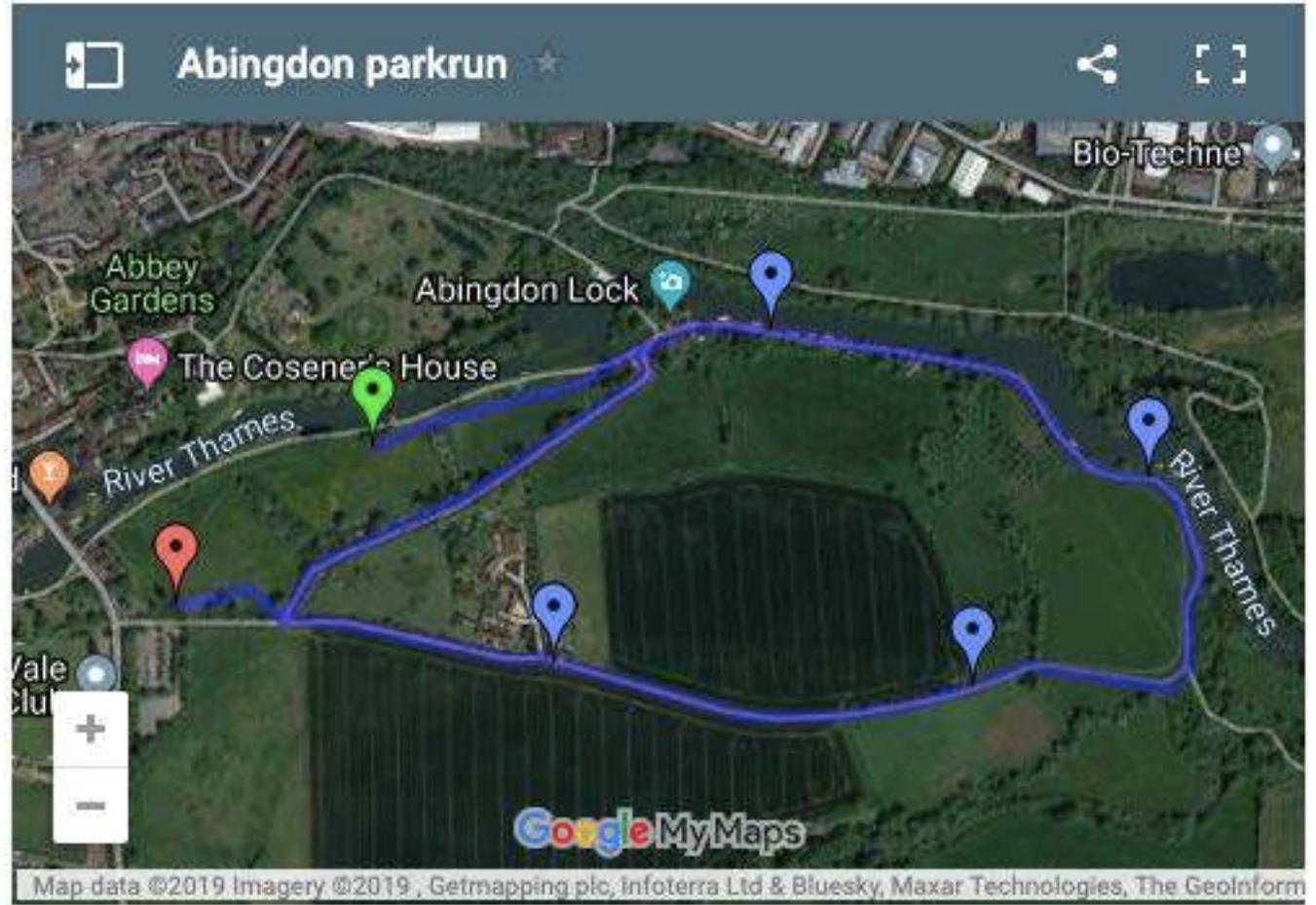
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Abingdon parkrun tourism (sort of)

Probably the hottest parkrun event I've done

29 June 2019







Abingdon parkrun still counts as tourism because it is not our local Oxford parkrun. Meg volunteered as a marshal (known as voluntourism) while Dave and I ran, along with two of their Oxford parkrun friends. There was particularly high attendance on this Saturday which created bottlenecks at the lock gates (as in, standstills without running). This is probably the hottest event I've done, at 33°C; the runners felt it and Meg had to spring into action to help a lady with heat exhaustion!

Marshal Meg took a photo of me running past in my Town and Gown shirt, which I wore to represent Oxford. I should note that it is the junior 3k shirt and not the 10k one. The adult sizes were too big for me so the volunteers at the finish line gave me a leftover youth shirt.





The shade was welcome at the finish funnel. Also, I took a photo of my post-run Hamblin ginger cookie seconds before they completely disassembled the finish line.



This was my first time wild swimming in the Thames! After much hesitation (clearly depicted in the photo on the right) I made it in the whole way. This past summer I ended going in the river at the halfway point of almost all my runs. My last plunge was in September and since then the water temperature has gotten much colder!





We had time to refuel with some pizza at Hamblin before I had to rush off to lab for an afternoon timepoint. Having done Abingdon parkrun, my NENDY (nearest event not done yet) is now Witney.

# Thames and English Channel

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Higginson parkrun tourism

Going from freshwater to saltwater in one weekend

27 – 28 July 2019





Higginson parkrun, Marlow



Map data ©2019 Imagery ©2019, Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, Landsat / Copernicus, Maxar Techn



One month later, I moved down the Thames from Abingdon to Marlow. This Saturday was originally planned for a standup paddleboard (SUP) daytrip with my climbing partner and chauffer Ivan, but when I figured out that the rental place did not open until 10am, I decided we had time for a 9am parkrun.

I had been using paper barcodes to scan at the finish line, but this weekend I upgraded to a flatband that was gifted to me upon completing my internship with the Public Engagement team at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Given the rain, we decided to leave our phones in the car so I have no pictures of the course. You will have to take my word that I was the only runner to go in the Thames as soon as I finished the 5k (even though it was colder than the day I did Abingdon parkrun).

This was Ivan's second parkrun and first event with an official barcode. I paced him to negative splits (running each mile faster than the previous one) and he challenged me to a sprint finish at the end where I got 51<sup>st</sup> place and he got 52<sup>nd</sup>. The man in 53<sup>rd</sup> place did not see us coming!





After the parkrun, we paddled around 6.8 miles in 5 hours. We stopped for a packed lunch somewhere near Medmenham and posed with our Hamblin oatmeal raisin cookies. Ivan was more intrepid and took his cookie over the water.







After Saturday surrounded by freshwater, I decided I wanted to spend Sunday with some saltwater. This brought us to West Wittering Beach.



After having a quick swim, we walked along the shore and had Hamblin cinnamon buns for a snack. It was good to have a rest day after an active Saturday.



# North Yorkshire

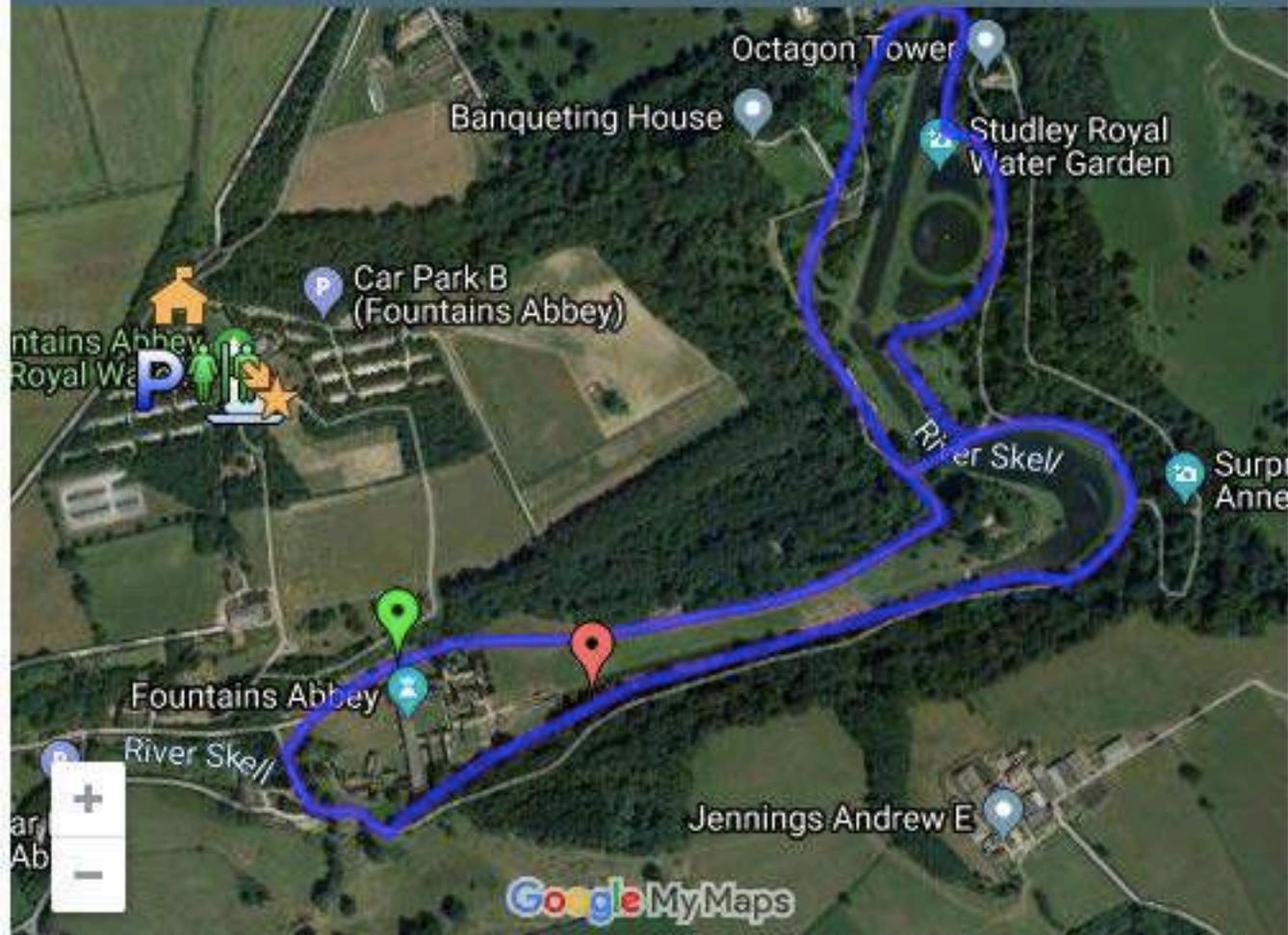
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- Fountains Abbey parkrun tourism
- The only parkrun I've done with live musical accompaniment
- 24-26 August 2019





# Fountains Abbey parkrun





Ivan (of Higginson parkrun and SUP fame) joined me for a North Yorkshire trip. We strategically got an Airbnb in Hutton Rudby, which allowed us to be between Ripon for parkrun, Saltburn for surfing, and York, where he did his undergraduate and I had never visited before.

We started off our Saturday morning with an idyllic walk from the parking lot to the start line.



I highly approved of being able to explore the ruins of Fountains Abbey before the event. It is one of the largest Cistercian monasteries in England and is currently owned by the National Trust and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While other parkrun events take place at National Trust places, I cannot find other parkruns at UNESCO World Heritage locations, so this may be the first.





The course also took us around the Studley Royal Water Garden, next to the abbey



According to this weekend's run report, 119 of 434 finishers were either first time parkrunners or first-timers at Fountains Abbey.

While I've occasionally had parkrun spectators playing music from a speaker to cheer on runners, this was the first time I've ever run by a string quartet. This was a special performance by the Vacation Chamber Orchestra.



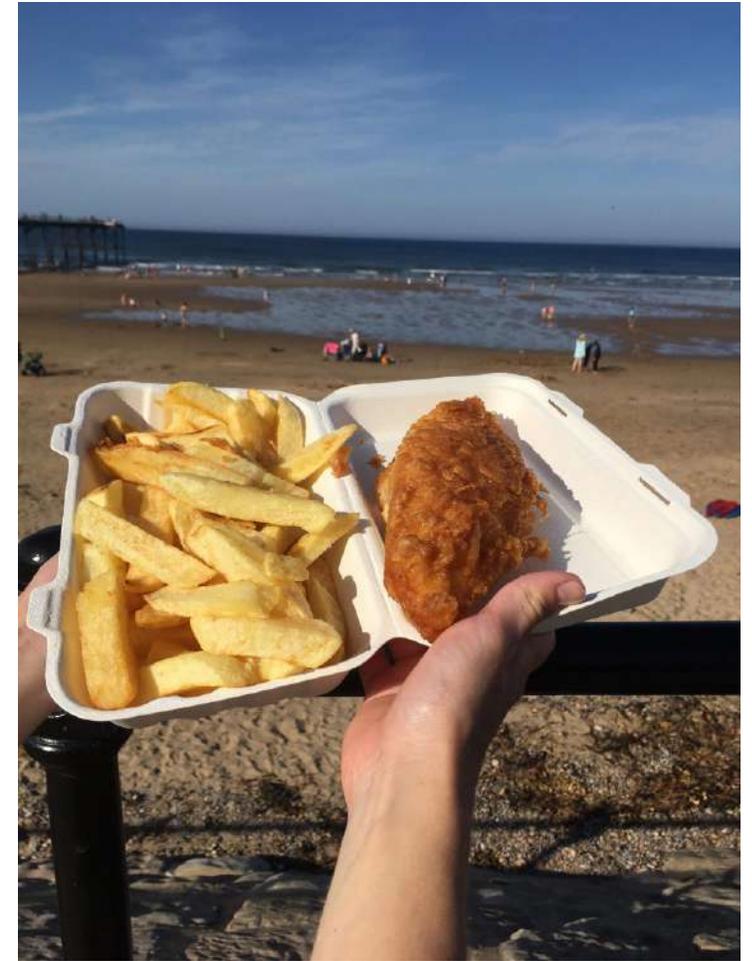


When parkrun becomes  
your religion...









I started surfing in March 2019 during a trip to Croyde. Since then I took part in a women's surf weekend in Newquay in May, and Saltburn was my third time surfing. Some day I will head to warmer waters where wetsuits are not required! This was Ivan's second time surfing, his first time being in Hawaii. The waves were relatively small but it was still nice to spend time on (and in) saltwater. We shared an obligatory seaside fish and chips lunch.



Dinner that night was at The Pheasant Hotel in Harome. This choice of establishment was based on a running joke (not *running* but running) we have in which we spotted some birds during a walk in the Aston Rowant Nature Reserve in mid-August. I thought they were quails and Ivan thought they were partridges. We found out they were pheasants, based on signs the farmer had put up. Of course, Ivan ordered the quail that was the special that evening.



I used the Segment Explore feature on the popular running app Strava to map out a route for Sunday morning that took us from Swainby, through the Huthwaite Plantation, around the base of Knolls End, up Whorl Hill, and down through Whorlton. I tried to have a staring contest with the local sheep and I lost.



I had no idea that Whorlton had a (ruined) castle, as it did not show up in my initial map, so this was a pleasant surprise for both of us. Whorlton Castle was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the motte-and-bailey style. We got to explore the parts of the inside that were open to the public.





After our North York Moors run, we headed to York where Ivan served as my tour guide. He wanted to show me York Minster but we arrived an hour too late, so we got ice cream instead.



We stayed in the shade and practiced some acroyoga in the Yorkshire Museum Gardens, which has Roman ruins. After this we walked around the York City Walls, which served to defend the city.



When we drove to our running spot for Monday morning, we had to wait for these sheep to get off the road.



We did a shakeout jog around Cod Beck Reservoir, which was full of families and dog walkers (not pictured) on this Bank Holiday Monday.

Despite doing a short run, we still had some elevation gain and got a good view over Osmotherly.





We made a quick stop at the blend café in Nottingham, which was recommended by one of my climbing friends who travels between Nottingham and Oxford for field work.

You might have been wondering about the lack of Hamblin treats during this trip – they had their summer holiday in August 2019 so we had to wait until their return in September.



Once back in Oxford, we went straight to Meg (then over eight months pregnant) and Dave's baby shower. Many avid parkrunners were in attendance and they enjoyed hearing about Fountains Abbey. Meg's mom (well, mum) is from Australia and has the best age-graded parkrun score in the whole family. I was introduced to a Swedish game called Kubb and it got very competitive!

# Bicester

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- Bicester parkrun tourism
- Run and then shop 'til you drop!
- 31 August 2019





Bicester parkrun ★





Hello Maria,

## Bicester parkrun results for event #174. Your time was 00:27:00.

Congratulations on completing your 27th parkrun and your 1st at Bicester parkrun today. You finished in 118th place and were the 27th female out of a field of 330 parkrunners and you came 6th in your age category SW25-29. [Take a look](#) at this week's full set of results on our website. Well done on your first parkrun. We have set this as your PB.

By the end of August, Ivan was now turning into an avid runner and needed to stock up on some more athletic gear. We decided to precede our Bicester Village shopping with the Bicester parkrun, of course. This was another event where we decided to leave phones in the car so we have no photo evidence from the course, but a highlight in this park is getting to run by a mini Stonehenge. Also, I am not sure whether it is planned or a coincidence that the event nearest the shopping center is shaped like a boot?

I might have made parkrun history without meaning to. It was my 27<sup>th</sup> event and I finished as the 27<sup>th</sup> female in a time of 27:00 in my 27<sup>th</sup> year of life. I have e-mailed the "Free Weekly Timed" podcast (they keep track of parkrun niches) and I hope they read my message in the next episode when they come back from summer break.



This was my first trip to Bicester Village (right) and it reminded me of the Wrentham Outlets in Massachusetts (left). A new outfit purchased on this day features in the final travel journal entry.

# Newbury

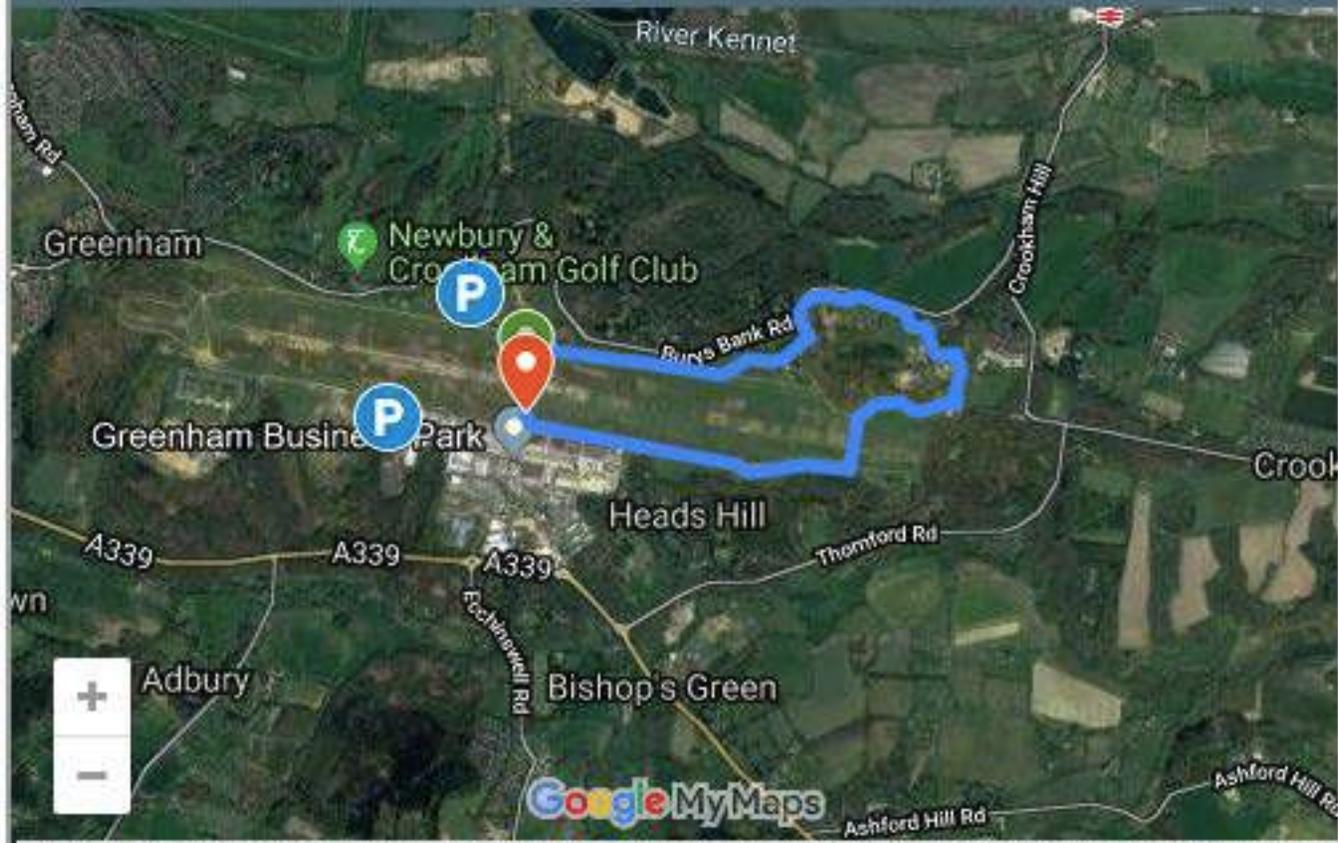
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- Newbury parkrun tourism
- The warmup was in a holding pattern
- 7 September 2019





Newbury parkrun



Google MyMaps

Map data ©2019 Imagery ©2019, CNES / Airbus, Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky, Landsat / Copernicus

The weekend after getting our Bicester 'B' event, Ivan and I got our 'N' at Newbury. This 5k takes place at the RAF Greenham Common, which is known for protests in the 1980s and is now a site of Special Scientific Interest.

A game I have played with Meg, Dave, and Ivan while waiting for parkrunners to arrive is to guess the attendance for that weekend. I had won all preceding weekends against Ivan by being the closest but this time he won and got the exact number right: 550 runners! I had to buy him a drink.





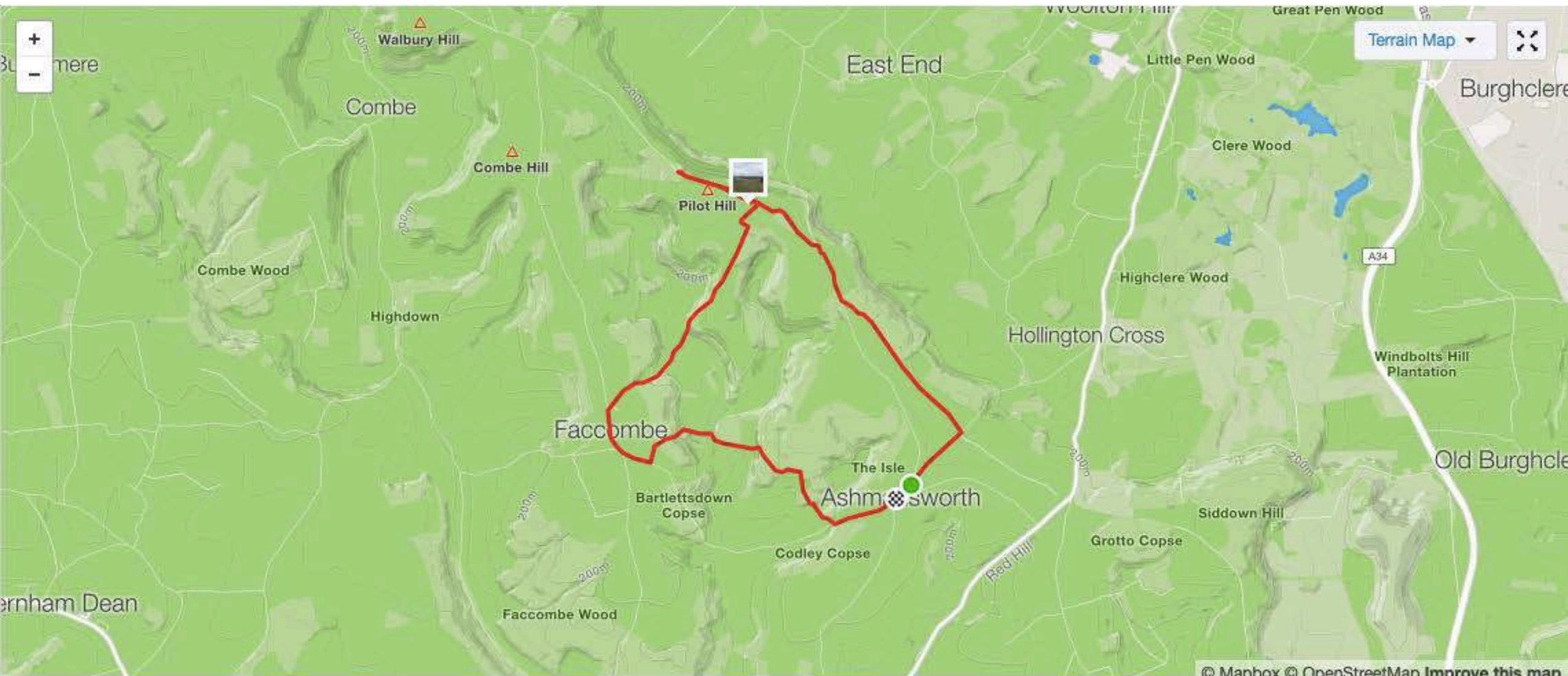
I took this photo because I liked seeing two '100 event' shirts and a '250 event' shirt all together. It is inspiring to be running alongside such committed parkrunners!



I finished in 208<sup>th</sup> place in 27:04 at my 28<sup>th</sup> parkrun. I could not upstage my 27-themed performance from Bicester.

From Newbury we  
drove to  
Ashmansworth to  
begin a post-run  
run/hike (there was  
significant elevation  
gain) along part of  
the Brenda Parker  
Way. It was meant  
to be under 10k but  
it ended up being  
more after we  
missed a turn. This  
route was meant to  
give us views of  
Wiltshire, Berkshire,  
Oxfordshire, and  
Buckinghamshire.







Ivan was sporting an outfit from last week's Bicester Village outing.





Ivan was ready with an emergency compass! It did not end up helping us as much as two ladies that were out walking their dogs; they pointed us in the right direction towards Faccombe.



We had some blackberries as a mid-morning snack.



We saw a bouquet of pheasants (this is the technical term) during our run (shown on the trail in this photo). We also had lunch at The Pheasant pub in Highclere. We did not know about this pub in advance but found it after taking a wrong turn during the drive. Ivan and I were glad to continue our pheasant-themed dining.



We ended up logging over 15k that morning and running by cows in RAF Greenham Common as well as all sorts of wildlife (mainly pheasants and sheep) around Pilot Hill; the highest point in Hampshire county.



Epilogue

Event ▾ Run Date ▾ Run Number ▾ Pos ▾ Time ▾ Age Grade ▾ PB? ▾

	Tøyen	21/09/2019	88	36	28:14	52.42%	
→	Newbury	07/09/2019	408	208	27:04	54.68%	
→	Bicester	31/08/2019	174	118	27:00	54.81%	
→	Fountains Abbey	24/08/2019	276	205	28:04	52.73%	
→	Higginson, Marlow	27/07/2019	46	51	25:48	57.36%	
→	Abingdon	29/06/2019	402	281	30:36	48.37%	
	Oxford	22/06/2019	391	236	27:31	53.79%	
	Fælledparken	08/06/2019	399	81	27:28	53.88%	
→	Whinlatter Forest	01/06/2019	70	66	30:13	48.98%	
	Worcester	25/05/2019	420	294	29:03	50.95%	
	Harcourt Hill	06/04/2019	227	69	26:13	56.45%	
	Woolacombe Dunes	30/03/2019	16	42	32:49	45.10%	
	Ruchill	23/03/2019	93	58	26:53	55.05%	
	Poolbeg	09/03/2019	81	92	26:40	55.50%	
	Harcourt Hill	16/02/2019	220	69	27:10	54.48%	
	Oxford	15/12/2018	365	136	25:38	57.74%	
	Harcourt Hill	20/10/2018	204	52	24:43	59.88%	PB
	Oxford	13/10/2018	356	149	26:53	55.05%	
	Oxford	22/09/2018	353	164	26:21	56.17%	
	Jamaica Pond	18/08/2018	21	20	25:25	58.23%	
	Harcourt Hill	11/08/2018	194	48	25:48	57.36%	
	Oxford	04/08/2018	346	111	24:36	60.16%	
	Harcourt Hill	28/07/2018	192	43	25:03	59.08%	
	Oxford	07/07/2018	342	143	26:07	56.67%	
	Oxford	30/06/2018	341	108	24:00	61.67%	PB
	Oxford	09/06/2018	338	169	24:44	59.84%	
	Oxford	19/05/2018	335	110	24:14	61.07%	
	Oxford	17/03/2018	328	76	25:22	58.34%	
	Oxford	27/01/2018	322	114	24:14	61.07%	

As of the first week of October 2019, I am at 29 completed events and I hope that my 30<sup>th</sup> will be back home in Boston at Jamaica Pond next weekend. I have done 15 unique events so my tourist quotient is 51.72%. Once I get to 20 different events I will be considered an official tourist. After 100 events you can apply to be part of the Cowell Club (named after Chris and Linda Cowell who were the first to complete 100 unique events). I have 11 of the 25 available alphabet letters. Events covered in this travel journal are indicated in blue arrows.



My home parkrun in Oxford is shown in purple and the events I have completed in the UK and Ireland are shown in green. Not shown are my events from Norway, Denmark, and the US.



Annabel Joy Scott, who joined for Whinlatter Forest parkrun and Abingdon parkrun, was born on 8 September. Here she is 3 weeks old. Only a few more years until she can line up at the start of a junior parkrun event!

## Tips for parkrun tourism

- Don't forget your barcode.
- Bring snacks and water.
- Check to make sure the parkrun is not cancelled (due to poor weather or lack of volunteers) before you make the trip. Keep in mind other nearby events as a backup plan.
- Given two parkruns that start with the same letter, opt for the more scenic or unique parkrun – you will enjoy it more! Try a one-lap course if you've only done two- or three-lap courses.
- Get there early to park if you have to drive, or run-commute if it is an option.
- Socialize with runners who have shown up on their own.
- Remember to thank the volunteers.
- Remember to give back your finish token.
- Think of some activities you might like to do post-run (besides brunch and nap) to experience more of the local area.
- I used to worry about my time and often attempt to get a personal best (PB) 5k at many of the events in 2018, which made me tired for the rest of the day. In 2019 I decided to slow down and enjoy the scenery, community, and overall experience.





I would like to thank University College for making my parkrun tourism possible through the Brewster Scholarship. I was able to see beautiful parts of the UK that have been on my travel list since I started my DPhil.

I would also like to thank my travel buddies and chauffeurs: Meg Scott, Dave Scott, Dan Kaliski, and Ivan Alvarez.

Thanks to Louise Wright and Mark Chonofsky for encouraging me to apply to the Brewster Scholarship. And Lara Hayward for helping me during the brainstorming phase of my application, and for making pre-Brewster tourism possible.

Final thanks to Paul Sinton-Hewitt for founding parkrun (then called the Bushy Park Time Trial) 15 years ago in London. You have created a weekly event that is accessible to all, has improved the mental and physical health of many, and is often the highlight of my weekend.

I am looking forward to continuing my tourism around the UK and in other countries, and hopefully earning my '50 events' shirt in the next year.