



Bill Smith

Bill Smith, a legend among fell-runners, was found dead on the Lancashire moors on October 1st, aged 75

TO BE a porter at Blackler's department store in Liverpool was not the best job in the world. Trolleys and boxes, down in the basement, morning to night. You had to be fit to stand it. By the 1970s the store had seen better days, too. But the staff were a good bunch, always ready for a joke and a quip over the fortunes of Liverpool (Red) or Everton (Blue). And Bill Smith, who lived so close to (Blue) Goodison Park that he could hear the cheers when his team scored, was as witty as the rest.

He wasn't like the rest, though. He walked the six miles to work and back, rain or shine, refusing the bus even when it stopped for him. And although he had been a porter all his working life, which had started at 15, and though he was a Liverpoolian born and bred, after 1971 he spent his weekends elsewhere. He would catch the train north, then take a bus—for he had no car—and somehow make his way towards the wide wilderness where the factory towns ran out and the fells began. The mountains, rocks and waters of the Lake District or the Bowland Fells became his home. And there, donning a skimpy vest and shorts that hardly seemed adequate protection against the weather, and slipping on his light spiked shoes, he would take off running.

To those back at Blackler's who won-

dered what he was doing, it was not cross-country running. He helped organise such races for various teams in Liverpool, but in his heart of hearts he thought it was tedious parkland stuff, and road-racing even worse. He didn't want level surfaces or follow-the-leader crowds. True adventure was to be alone. The terrain he traversed was steep slippery grass, or sheer clumps of rock where you had to climb or jump. Sometimes only shepherds or sheep had been that way before. Often you found your way just by eye and compass. If you were lucky, there was a good bright day, and close-burned heather to run on. If you were unlucky there was thick mist, loose scree, and a headlong descent down through rocks and bracken where you had to leap as much as run, risking a broken leg.

His best day occurred on one of the several occasions when he did the Bob Graham Round, 42 Lakeland fells (including Helvellyn, Scafell and Skiddaw) over 66 miles, with nearly 30,000 feet of ascent and descent, in less than 24 hours. It began in the pouring June rain and pre-dawn dark on a ridge of Helvellyn; improved when he made it down to Threlkeld for jam butties, hot tea and fresh socks; and improved yet more with the crimson glow of sunrise beyond Bowscale Fell, before he climbed the last two peaks. On the flank of

Skiddaw, looking up at the great grey mountain, he suddenly lost heart. But "Come on, lad," one of his pacers urged him. "You've nearly cracked it."

He ran for almost 40 years with a club, the Clayton-le-Moors Harriers, and spent much of that time giving the same encouragement to others. A runner gasping up to a summit cairn would get his cheery smile and his admonition to "Dig deep, lad." He would be seen stood in a puddle for an hour or more, holding a gate open for runners to pass. When he failed to turn up outside the Ram Inn to marshal the Thieveley Pike fell race on September 28th, it was the first hint that something was amiss.

The runners' bible

Other fell-runners revered him not just because he ran the tough races—coming second in the Fellsman Hike in 1973, 1976 and 1977—but because he was a walking encyclopedia of amateur fell-running. He knew all the history, the records, the meetings, and had set them down with exacting care in a book of almost 600 pages, "Stud Marks on the Summits", which became the bible of the sport. Talk of running gear with him, and he could mention that on Whitworth Moor in the early 19th century men would occasionally run stark naked, with their champion athlete, James Sanderson of Fold Head, sustaining himself on bread and treacle. Meet a dry-stone wall, and he could tell you that Ernest Dalzell, seven times winner at the Grasmere Sports in the early 1900s, would clear those with such lofting grace, and roll and rise so swiftly from the bracken afterwards, that he seemed more antelope than human.

His book, however, contained only half a dozen references to himself. It ended with potted biographies of the great runners, but his was not there. Always ready to chat, he preferred not to talk about his own life, alone at home with his gypsy-music records, or even about how his running had started, on the Todmorden Boundary Walk in 1969. Modesty was his watchword. He made no money from his writing, but gave his book profits to the Fell Runners Association. After all, amateurs didn't do things for money. The best fell-runners of old, mostly farm-hands, had been happy to get nothing for winning a race, save perhaps ten shillings and a watch, or a length of cloth for a suit.

As he got older his doctor in Liverpool told him he should wear glasses, but out on the fells he didn't need them, and they would have been a nuisance. Whether that was the problem, or whether his heart gave out, nobody knew. He seemed to have been running towards yet another race-meeting through the Trough of Bowland, on a ridge treacherous with peat bogs, in beautiful solitude, with his train ticket back to Everton safe in his pocket. ■