

# 26.2 Miles

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## By Lizzie Coombes

In September 2016 I went to my first parkrun at Woodhouse Moor, and was amazed, I ran it. It was a month before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and I'd not long finished my Master's in photography. I needed to get back to being active after so much studying. I'd done little bits of running in Middleton Woods while my sons had been training with the City of Leeds swim team but I'd never gone to an organised run. I went back to parkrun the next week and the week after...

In November that year, after a chance meeting with a running group on Meanwood Road, and brief chat with the run leader (John Hayes) I turned up at my first Hyde Park Harriers session. I was nervous. I'd never imagined I could join a running club at any age, let alone 50, what if they left me behind?! No chance of that, the warmth of welcome I received hooked me right in, I felt I belonged, and I've barely missed a (pre Covid) Tuesday session with the Harriers since. I've also made lifelong friends.

In July 2017 I ran my first 10k race in Leeds. I remember the nerves, the many trips to the loo and putting on the 'off set white strip' colours for the first time. But mostly I remember the club support from those running, to those standing at strategic places on Kirkstall Road helping with their cheers and shouts. Since then I've run with the HPH colours on my back in many races, with distances from 1 mile to 13.1, on road and on trial, and in all weathers imaginable. I've enjoyed virtually all of them, although the snowy, muddy, freezing PECO in Middleton did make me briefly question my life choices.

I'd always said I wouldn't run a marathon but then of course that felt like the next challenge so in October 2019 I entered London Marathon for the first time and subsequently put my rejection letter into the club ballot. My name was pulled out the hat...

I was shocked, terrified, excited and with facial expressions to match. I didn't sleep that night, what had I done, I'd never run a marathon?! The furthest I'd run was a half, I like half marathon distance, why would I want to go further? Yet what an amazing opportunity, to take on and run in such an iconic race wearing the HPH vest. So, I started training. At the club we are blessed with many talented people who offer help and support and after the dust settled Kay Jefferies and I sat down and we chatted. Encouraging me with her knowledge and telling me I could do it, Kay wrote me a plan. I like a plan and I like to think I'm good at sticking to them, and so through the winter months I ran four sessions a week.

Most of the time it was dark, often it was cold, sometimes it was wet and a few times it was stormy and windy, but I had a plan and I was sticking to it. One of the craziest sessions was 11 miles on the track at Carnegie. To be fair to Kay she hadn't told me to run it there, it was just easier and safer in the dark to run on a well-lit track, but it sure tested my mental strength.

During this time news was filtering through of a virus in Wuhan and in February I started having slight concerns about whether the marathon would take place, but Covid-19 seemed very distant to our shores. And then it got nearer, and I became more uneasy, but I carried on training, getting to my 18-mile-long run before the news broke; London Marathon was postponed until 4<sup>th</sup> October. It felt hard to have got so close and then stop. October felt a long way away. I'd had a niggle in my hip, so I took a week off running to rest and think, and not long after the country entered 'Lockdown'.

My runs turned into my allotted daily exercise, I carried on training, often doing long runs around the car free outer ring road of Leeds. At this point all my runs were alone, gone were the long Sunday runs with friends, the club session and parkrun community. I took part in a few virtual challenges from the HPH relay and Tom's LURGY challenges (oddly starting with the one that involved running up Cockshott and Spen Lanes) to virtual races like St. Aidan's 10k (so good I ran it 3 times before I got the route right). I carried on training and London carried on insisting it was happening. With eight weeks to go eventually the announcement came, the run in the capital was for elites only, (they didn't call) so my London marathon was to be run in Leeds. I felt a sense of relief to finally know what was happening, but something was going on that was concerning me. I hadn't been feeling 100% for over a month. This wasn't Covid related, a cold or the menopausal symptoms I've been experiencing for the last year and a half, it was vaguer, but I recognized it.

Around the age of 24, and after a series of tests I was diagnosed with ME or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). For those who don't know ME/CFS is a chronic condition with an overriding picture of fatigue, the sort of exhaustion that isn't relieved by rest or sleep and a condition that at the time had no real cure other than time. Along with the exhaustion comes muscle aches and pains, the sort you get with flu, brain fog and breathlessness with any form of exertion, and a general heaviness in the limbs which meant I spent a lot of time sitting or lying down.

At the time I was diagnosed, CFS/ME had been labelled 'yuppie flu' and was the subject of much derision. I had no internet to search up the condition or connect me to others. I rang a help line; the woman who answered told me she'd had it for 12 years. I saw doctors who tried to give me Prozac and I attended one support group which spent half an hour discussing the merits of drinking a pint a milk (I've hated milk since I was a child). It was tough. Sometimes I could see friends, sometimes I could walk to the shops or take photographs and sometimes I could only wash my hair before going back to bed. I have a photograph of me from that time I occasionally revisit. I'm lying on my bed,

surrounded by draping, colourful fabrics, fairy lights, glittery ornaments and plastic flowers. I'm all dressed up with no energy to go anywhere.

I did get better, slowly and surely and I reached a point where the ME/CFS didn't feel a dominant part of my story anymore, (not quite the 12 years the woman quoted on the helpline, but it lasted a considerable time). Every now and then though it taps me on the shoulder to give me a reminder. I call it an 'echo', and in the summer before my first marathon that's what I was experiencing. The 'echoes' have nothing like the severity of the symptoms I experienced when I was younger, but they still have impact. My main concern in July was how long it would last, but I did what I've learnt (most of the time) to do, listen to my body, rest where I could, be kind to myself and most importantly accept it was happening. And so, I did, and slowly the symptoms crept away. My spark came back; I was going to complete this marathon, after nearly a year of training, I needed an end point.

Kay wrote an 8-week plan for me which gave focus and a frame to build my confidence. I like a plan. I decided my goal was about doing the distance and not concerning myself too much with the time, and by doing that I removed a lot of pressure. I wanted to enjoy the experience as much as possible. Thinking about time would be for when I (hopefully) run London next year, and so I designed a slightly crazy route round Leeds that I hoped would keep me steady. I stitched together some of my long run routes with the idea that the familiarity would make me believe I was just on an extra-long Sunday run! It started by zig zagging up Sugarwell Hill and on to the top Scothall Road. Up and down and up King Lane, through four fields, over several stiles, round Eccup, through Golden Acre out to Otley Old Road, on to a couple of laps of the Acre at Headingley campus before concluding with several laps of Woodhouse Moor and finishing at Rolf's tree. It also had over 1500 feet of elevation, but you can't run around Leeds without taking on a hill or two. To a large extent the route kept my nerves in check, though the wall to wall mud and puddles round Eccup and the water-logged fields did throw me. But I stuck to my plan and tried not to worry that my feet were soaked by mile 8. And so, on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020 I ran my first marathon.

But there's a bit more to the story than that because I didn't do it alone. My plans included my top running and cycling buddies. Clare Maxwell ran the first (very muddy and hilly) half, Caroline Sanders ran the second half (complete with pouring rain and laps of WHM) and TeeJay (magic hands) Jones was on her bike with all the liquid I needed to keep me hydrated and shouts of encouragement. I also had Pete White on logistics, meeting us halfway to stow Caroline's bike in our van and take it to the finish line (after a slight mix up over car parks at Golden Acre it went seamlessly). During these times of 'rule of six' and local lockdowns I was careful to do the run as responsibly as possible, particularly wearing HPH colours. I'd let people know what I was doing if they'd asked but it felt better not to overly advertise the run. On the way round there were Harriers out to cheer and encourage, Dote and Clare Evans on their bikes, Tom Thomas on his Sunday run and also Bart who I saw twice during his marathon on the

muddy paths of Eccup. Other friends were at Paul's Pond to cheer complete with bunting, and as I ran towards WHM Lou joined me fresh from a LURGY challenge. Entering the park, I saw more supporters socially distanced on various paths. Friends, who mistakenly believe that now I've run a marathon I'll stop going on about it...

I'd just under 6 miles left and I was about to discover it'd be the toughest 10K I'd ever run. The night before Rommi had sent me a good luck message, wishing me a 'steady and resilient time' and I clung onto those words as I edged towards the end. I kept a steady pace, a strong head and as much of a sense of humour as I could muster. Passing supporters, I'd shout out how many miles were left (for my benefit as much as theirs), and when I saw Anne Akers I smiled (mostly) for the camera (I really appreciate her fabulous photographs). I was joined by Kay, Pete and on the last couple of laps by my son Finlay who'd just been to the gym, done a leg workout, run home and then rushed out the house to join me wearing the wrong trainers (he rather sheepishly complained that his legs were a bit stiff later). I even saw my beautifully cool teenage daughter Riley, shouting and clapping, only ever so slightly embarrassed. So, with awesome people running and cycling round me I ground out those last few miles, 'steady and resilient'. And then with .2 of a mile to go, and cheers all around I found myself executing a sprint finish that left #teamlawless for dust as I crossed over my Virtual London Marathon finishing line in 5 hours, 4 minutes and 50 seconds.

I'd decided at the beginning of planning my route that I wanted it to finish at Rolf's tree. Rolf was one of the first people I'd got to know in my early days of running with HPH, and he'd been both kind and generous with his time and support. I felt it again as I held onto his tree at the finish. It was both lovely and moving to see Sharron with Alfie and Daisy at the end and so hard not being able to hug her and everyone else. Standing at the finish and with an overriding sense of relief I was lost for words, so I did what I generally do in those situations, I took a photograph of everyone there. It's not my best composition but it represents the conclusion of an incredible time. One of the hardest things I have EVER done but one of my proudest, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

So, here's to London 2021 and doing it all again, minus the stiles and running up Sugarwell Hill and here's to the Lizzie in her 20s lying in her bedroom all dressed up with no energy to go anywhere. If only she knew what she would achieve.

