

## The Line - 18th - 24<sup>th</sup> June 2023

The Line is a completely unsupported 6 day 'race' following the route of the Greenwich Meridian Trail (GMT). Running over 300 miles down the length of England, the race begins in Sand Le Mere (near Hull), passes through Greenwich (London) and ends in Peacehaven on the South Coast. The actual race route is slightly longer (330miles) with a detour inland to the Humber Bridge to account for the Humber Estuary.

### Planning and Preparation

My usual ethos of "prepare not plan" meant that I had not devised a detailed itinerary of daily targets or the location of every shop and sleeping place. That said, in the back of my mind I was thinking that:

- I wouldn't start too fast – and I would "run my own race"
- I would sleep the first night and try to bank some sleep.
- I would push on to get the Humber Bridge out of the way as that is the only cut-off.
- After the Humber Bridge I could then relax and get some hot food.
- The next aim would be to get to London (as I know that quite well).
- I had marked on my map the final subtle sleeping place before London. If I was on my own, I would sleep there, and then push on through central London without stopping.
- After London I had no plan at all!
- It would be nice (but not essential) to run some of the route with other people, as 6 days on your own seemed a long time.
- My ideal time for completing the race would be 5 ½ days.

I entered the race a good few months in advance, so I had plenty of time to train for it. As the route is fairly flat, I based a lot of my training runs along canal paths, for instance, the Rochdale Canal and Huddersfield Narrow Canal. To get used to running with a heavier pack, I did a solo 2-day trip along Hadrian's Wall.

### Saturday – Pre-Race

The race was due to begin at Midday on the Sunday, and although the start is quite near York it is not easy to get to on a Sunday using just public transport. I decided it would make sense (and be more relaxing) if I travelled to the start the day before and then I could have a relatively chilled Sunday morning.

My adventure started early Saturday afternoon with my eldest daughter Mary and myself catching the train from York to Hull. From Hull we then caught a local bus to Withernsea, a town about 3 miles south of the start. We had booked to stay in the Cedarville B & B which was easy to find as it's next door to the old lighthouse. At the B & B we were greeted by a very friendly Landlady (Steph) who informed us another competitor (Sarah) was also staying. Having checked in we went for a quick explore of the town, found a takeaway pizza, and returned to our room for a final kit re-pack and an early night.



### Sunday Morning

After a surprisingly good night's sleep we had a substantial breakfast and met Sarah and the ducks/chickens/dog/cat which belonged to the B & B. The landlady then asked how we were getting to the start and offered us a lift – perfect :-). Steph is a very nice lady, but I was proud of Mary for biting her tongue as the pair of them have very different views when it comes to the Royal Family!

A short car journey later and we were dropped off at the holiday park. Navigation to the start was then based on walking into the wind until we hit the coast and then turning right. Reaching the start with only about an hour to go we were expecting to see a crowd of people. Instead, it was just Mark and 2 other runners! I think Mark was beginning to get concerned, but then by 11:40am most people had turned up. A team photo and a race briefing later, and it was time to say goodbye to Mary and start the race.



### Sunday Afternoon

3-2-1 and we were off... at a fast-walking pace! The race began in single file over some rough ground making running tricky. Within a couple of minutes the pace began to pick up with the leaders managing to overtake at a slow jog. A road was soon reached, and the pack then began to spread out. This would be the last time I saw many of the other runners.

Heading towards the Estuary I was chatting with Richard, with a group of another 4 runners a few minutes behind us. Turning onto the Estuary path towards Hull we were met by Mark, whom we

would not see for another couple of days. The sun was now beginning to get quite hot and so I let Richard zoom off as I did not want to overheat so early on in the day.

At the end of the Estuary path, I was caught by Kendra, both of us dreaming of buying a bottle of iced coke. Unbeknown to us at the time, this was how we teamed up for the remainder of the race.

Reaching a pub, we saw Richard in the garden raising up a pint of coke. We dived through the door in order to join him, but soon changed our minds on seeing the queue for the bar. Instead, we retreated and continued down the main road into Hull until we reached a petrol station.

Reaching Hull town centre, the sky was now becoming quite overcast. Kendra and I had both previously run the Hardmoors 200, so we knew the route from there to the Humber Bridge well. This was fortunate as when we reached the footbridge before the warehouses, we found it was open to allow boats though for the next 40 minutes (or so). Not wanting to wait, we decided to backtrack and then continue along the road. At this point we met another runner called Frank and suggested that he joined us.

Other than the 6 days cut off for the entire race, there is a partial cut off at 9pm when the Humber bridge closes for pedestrians, (you can ring to be let through after that). The three of us decided that we wanted to be over the bridge before 9pm and so sped up the pace. The weather had taken a turn for the worst, and we were now quite wet – this would affect everyone in the race.

A brief interlude whilst we met Tina for a photoshoot and then we finally reached the bridge at Hessle and the three of us sighed in relief.



We reached the middle of the bridge at 8:30pm and joked that anyone dot-watching would assume that we had timed it perfectly. Leaving the bridge, we met a kind lady who had set out a stash of food for any of the runners to take. With the stress of the bridge behind us we now had time to get some hot food. This was straight forward as Barton-upon-Humber had no shortage of Pizza shops.

Kendra and I ordered a small pizza and a can of coke each. Frank (a man who doesn't mess about when it comes to fizzy beverages) ordered a pizza and three cans of coke. We had a few minutes to

wait so decided to get changed out of our wet clothes. I thought it would be frowned upon undressing in the takeaway so went outside to change my top. Not sure why I bothered as when I re-entered the takeaway the other two were in varying states of undress!

Fuelled by mushroom pizza we now began the start of the “world's longest road” towards Grimsby and Cleethorpes. The rain had about stopped, but everyone's feet were now soaked. This would lead to many cases of blisters / trench foot resulting in a lot of people dropping out.

We were now a nice fluid group of four, Richard, Frank, Kendra, and me making timely progress along the road, discussing our sleep plans for the night. Due to lessons learnt after suffering on the Lon Las, Richard stopped at a Church Yard at 11pm aiming for 4 hours of sleep.

Kendra and I were going to continue until about 2am (when the rain had hopefully stopped) and then get an hour of sleep.

Frank (who felt he was a slower walker than us) was planning to keep going.

### Monday Morning

A few hours later it seemed we had made no progress along the road, and we still had not reached Grimsby. It turned out this was due to the fact the route actually bypasses Grimsby. At around 2am Kendra and I decided to get out our Bivi bags and lie down on the grass by the side of a crossroads. This was fine other than the road got really busy at 3am(!) and one of us overheated. Another couple of hours later, at 6am we finally reached Cleethorpes. This turned out to be a bit of a pain as we had to hang around 20 minutes for Sainsburys to open (already a compromise as we had been dreaming of a café breakfast of hot tea and eggs on toast).

Sat on the pavement outside Sainsbury's, a fight suddenly broke out between two men on the other side of the road. With a mouth full of sandwich, Kendra mumbled “We need to go now!”. Fists were continuing to fly between both men as we frantically shoved our belongings back into our bags. 30 seconds later we were off and re-tracing our steps back down to the sea front.

Cleethorpes seafront at this time is covered with piles of rubbish everywhere and so we were glad when we finally left.

The next stage of the route was uneventful, and the town of Louth was reached. We decided to grab food from the petrol station and lay out on the grass for about an hour of sleep. At this point Richard caught and passed us, and Frank was still somewhere ahead.

### Monday Afternoon

Looking at the tracker we spotted a couple of things. Firstly, that it seemed at a lot of people had dropped out last night at the Humber Bridge, and secondly that Karl, Paul, and Frank were just ahead.

To try and keep a decent pace we decided to aim to catch the three in front of us. During the afternoon we slowly closed the gap until (unknown to us at the time) we passed a sleeping Frank. We would not see Frank again during the race.

Eventually Karl and Paul were met just before Tetford, and to celebrate the four of us descended on the pub (to the amusement of the locals) for a pint of Orange Juice and Lemonade. Karl had hurt his ankle earlier in the race and was not sure he was going to complete it. We played cat-and-mouse with them a few times before they shot off ahead.

A few miles later and yet again we were out of water. Reaching the sleepy village of Old Bolingbroke we hunted for the pub, which we failed to find (maybe it no longer existed). Time for Plan B, we would find a nice-looking house with a light on and knock on the door. This worked surprisingly well, we were met by a nice man and led around the back with open arms and pointed towards the garden tap.

Continuing down a country lane, we were passed by a car which suddenly stopped and then reversed back towards us. A lady (Georgina) jumped out and said, "I hope you don't think I'm crazy but I'm a runner myself and I'm interested in what you are doing". We explained what we were doing and pointed her in the direction of the tracker website. We continued on and a few minutes later she connected to us on Facebook.

Richard, whom we had re-passed as he slept in Lough, caught us up briefly before he headed off into Stickford to find a stop to sleep.

This meant it was now our turn to think about a Bivi spot for the night. We were going to continue on slightly further, but then we spotted a nice spot to sleep by the side of West Fen Catchwater Drain just before Stickney. Having just settled down a walker passed us by, which at the time I wrongly assumed to be Frank.

## Tuesday Morning

After an incredibly early start, we decided to push on to Boston to get breakfast. A tracker check showed us Frank and Richard were still behind us, Paul had retired, and Karl was in McDonald's in Boston. Reaching the town, we too decided to head to McDonalds where there was no sign of Karl – he had unfortunately had to retire. A couple of breakfasts later and we were feeling re-energised(ish).

From Boston the route looks very flat and fast. However, after a path detour and a quick nap, the 'jungle of doom' was reached. This is a mile long section of a very vague path and head-high stinging nettles. There is no escape until the end is reached. I am sure our average speed through this section was well under 1 mile per hour!





A couple of miles after leaving the jungle, Richard passed us, and we followed him towards Fosdyke.

### Tuesday Afternoon

We were both tired at this point, and the road towards Holbeach was a bit of a slog. The town was finally reached, and we headed towards Tesco, but even with our bags in shopping trolleys were barely made it around. Somehow, we met in Richard at this point, can't remember how as we had not seen him for miles!

After leaving Tesco's, on the advice of the trolley collecting man, we headed for a park just around the corner and collapsed. Kendra had the great idea of buying talcum powder and letting our feet air for an hour. This worked well and I expect saved our race.



Leaving Holbeach well refreshed we made great progress for the next few miles, along flat roads (avoiding a near car crash), through Parson Drove and onto Guyhirn. I think it was around here we were met by Karl and his girlfriend, wishing us good luck.

Approaching the town of March, it was Kendra's turn to fight with the sleep demons, after what seemed like ages after passing the Prison the outskirts were reached. We could not go any further, so we laid down on the pavement for a 10-minute cat nap. I think that was our boldest sleeping spot of the trip.

### Wednesday Morning

A mile or so later and we reached the centre of March. We really needed more sleep and fortunately there was a nice grassy area (West End Park) down by the river. Lying down in the shadow of the bushes on the far side meant we were complete invisible. After a decent sleep we were up and on the move again. It was still early in the morning before any shops were open, so we headed on towards Chatteris.

First however we had the "bridge of doom" to contend with. Just before the town you join the A141 to cross over the Curf Fen. Once you have crossed over you have to leave the bridge by descending steps into head high stinging nettles. Kendra held onto me, whilst I tried to find solid ground by feeling around with my foot. How the others managed this on their own I've no idea. At the bottom of the steps, we were unsure if to turn left or right. The right looked slightly more trodden, so we went that way. After fighting our way through some very overgrown undergrowth we reached an impassible fence and had to retreat and take the left path.

Once we finally emerged, I looked back across the river hoping to see Richard and somehow gesture to him to take the left turn, but alas he was still about 15 minutes behind us.

In Chatteris, on the advice of Kendra's Mum, we took a brief detour to the Tesco's on the edge of town. Feeling much better than during our previous Tesco visit we were quickly in and out, only stopping for 5 minutes to eat.

The route for the next few miles is completely straight until Somersham, meaning we made substantial progress down the country. Just before Somersham there is a nice country park with a lake well stocked with ducks. As we took advantage of a quick power nap, Richard passed us only stopping briefly to take a photo!



The next section was a bit of a blur, but I think it was on leaving Bluntisham that I discovered that Kendra has worse fear of cows than me! Pretending to be confident I led us through a small herd and safely through the gate on the other side.

### Wednesday Afternoon

Reaching the A14 we had navigational issues. The GPX takes you one way, but the signposts another. This combined with us missing a turning resulting in us heading down a parallel path towards the next A-road. We then passed Richard as he had dived off into a small wood for a sleep. This would be the last time we saw him.



Reaching the A road, we were met by Mark, who confirmed we had missed the turning, but fortunately re-joining the route was easy. Just before we met the route at Highfields Caldecote we spotted a mobile fish-and-chip van. After a five-minute wait we were served with the best chips I have ever had. (Kendra wanted chips-and-gravy but that hasn't made it down south yet!)



Whilst we were eating Richard overtook us by taking a later turning in the town. A few miles later we went through the village of Toft, and re-passed Richard who from the tracker looked like he was in the pub.

A few more small villages and we passed by Cambridge, and we reached the town of Melbourn. Although I had been there twice before, I did not recognise any of it.

### Thursday Morning

It was now my turn to fight with the sleep demons and eventually (5am?) we decided that we needed to sleep. I think we slept for 20 minutes, and then decided we needed another 5 minutes as we both felt terrible. On the stroke of 6am I rang my wife (Rebecca) for some encouragement, I think this caused Kendra to get more emotional than me! We decided to detour off to Buntingford to some much-deserved breakfast. We had cheese toasties, large coffees and paracetamol.



Feeling much better we rejoined the route and promptly got lost trying get through Alswickhall Wood. From there we pushed on, with London in our sights.

Checking Facebook, we got news the Adrain had crossed over the M25 and had settled down for a large meal in a café. Somewhat jealous of his progress we were spurred on and reached St Margarets and the top of the Lee Valley. It was another hot day, and we were out of water once more. Kendra abruptly stopped and accosted a man working on the outside of his house. “Any chance you fill up our water bottles”. No problem he said struggling to control his dog – would you like ice with that?

We then made the mistake of thinking that we had almost reached the M25 and the outskirts of London. However first we had to follow the Lee Valley for several miles, and I think it’s fair to say that this was Kendra’s least favourite part of the route.

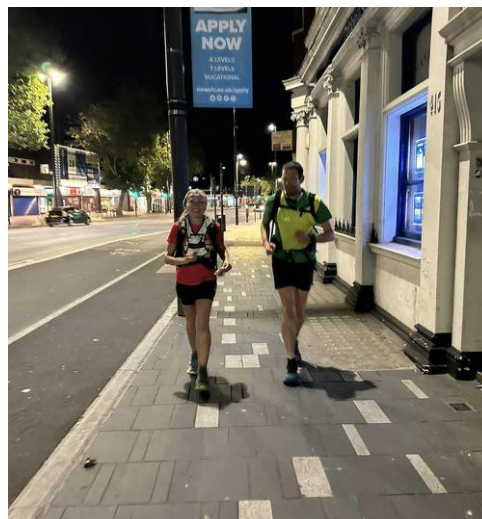
## Thursday Afternoon

Eventually, however, we reached Waltham Abbey and a McDonalds. After fuelling up, and fighting with phone/tracker chargers it was time to leave and cross the M25. Almost straight away we climbed up a hill to the golf course and were met by views of the London skyline. Of course, this was then followed by us missing a turning and two laps of a wood trying to find the obelisk.



We were now heading towards central London through a series of small woods, it was however getting dark and so this soon became increasing hard and dangerous. Common sense took over and we decided to skip the final wood by taking the parallel road. This worked well until we reached the round-about at the end. Our sleep deprived brains could not cope, and we ended up doing a complete loop. Fortunately, some hero on the internet was tracking us and came out and rescued us by pointing us in the correct direction.

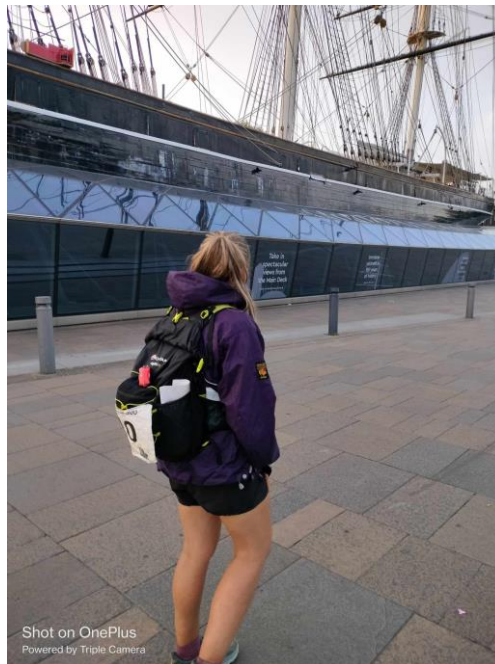
We then reached a complicated road junction, but fortunately another McDonalds was only a couple of minutes away. After our 2<sup>nd</sup> McDonald's of the day, we were meant by Tom Garrod who walked with us as we ran at full speed through Stratford. He left us at the Lime House cut and we pushed on to towards the Isle of Dogs. This was a one of the key points in the route for me, as it linked in with the 1066 route, I had done a few years previously.



## Friday Morning

Greenwich was close, but we had no food or water. How hard could it be to buy provisions in the early hours of the morning in Canary Wharf. We detoured off the route towards Asda in Mudchute, but alas it was shut. Instead, we decided to sleep for 10 minutes in their car park.

By this point we had learnt that every stop came with an extra 10-15 minutes of overhead where we had to force our feet through their pain and get our legs moving again. This was a bit more of a challenge this time as we wanted to be mobile before we reached the steps of the Greenwich foot tunnel. Clearly using the lift would be cheating.



After going under the Thames, we still needed to get water, so we decided to try the Ibis hotel. The night porter was great guy who gave us a free cup of coffee and topped up our water bottles. Dragging ourselves out of the hotel we were too early to get into Greenwich Park which unfortunately meant that we could not go directly past the observatory.

The route finding getting out of London wasn't straight forward, but eventually we got into the hang of it. Still too early for breakfast we called into a Newsagent, and I was introduced to Red Bull. This was to be staple part of our healthy diets going forward.

Passing Catford I got what felt like a huge blood blister at the back of my mouth. When it burst, I was slightly concerned as I felt like gallons of blood was streaming from my mouth and I had no idea how much blood I was swallowing. My sympathetic team member suggested that we did not have time for such things, and I was not actually dying and so it would be fine (and of course it was).

Eventually we found a café which was both open and had plug sockets for charging phones. After a swift breakfast we took advantage of their restrooms to remove some of the 5 days of dirt/sweat/sun cream from our faces.

We kept slogging on, getting slower and slower until we reached Oxted. There we stopped by a supermarket and give them our phones to charge whilst we collapsed on the grass the other side of the road for an hour or so.

## Friday Afternoon

We were now out of London and onto our final stretch, but we were aware that we were beginning to run out of time.

To be honest I was surprised to get as far as we did before hitting a serious cattle related incident. We entered a farm and crossed a field with a handful of cows in without too much trouble. The next field however was a different story. We placed one foot in the field and all the cows turned and ran towards us. We stepped back and they ran off in a different direction. I then tried a couple of steps into the field and again they turned and charged at us. This time we fled and jumped back over the fence into the next field.

Returning to the farm, Kendra approached the farmer to work out how to get back out of the field. (I don't think our brains were working at their best). The farmer told us there were 102 young cows in the field who liked to play – great....

Taking a parallel road, we bypassed the fields and rejoined the route at Lingfield. From there we passed a Car Rally at Dorman Park and made substantial progress to East Grinstead.

Whilst I topped up my water bottle in a Pub, Kendra was approached by a concerned family as she was sat on the pavement sticking her foot back together. She assured them she was fine, but they kindly returned a few minutes later with a box of blister plasters.

From here our next step was Lewes, but this section proved to be a complete nightmare. We had done some calculations based on our current pace and decided that we would not make the cut off. Kendra then made the point, that we are runners not walkers so we should be able to make it, and then she was off.

## Saturday Morning

We were alternating between thick woods with vague paths and misty moorlands. There were several obstacles, such as fences to climb and a campsite with drunk people sat around a campfire. Kendra was leading the charge at this point, doing a fantastic job of navigating, and keeping the pace. I on the other hand was a bit of a burden running at full speed trying to keep up with her, desperate not to lose her in the fog – as I had no idea where we were! She 'informed' me that I was only going walking pace and it was not fast enough. I suggested that she left me, and I could just lie down in the heather and sleep – that didn't go down well....

A combination of me stealing her remaining crisps, and some vocal encouragement (both emotional blackmail, and being shouted at) put my head back in the game. I felt like I was pushing harder than I had every run before, my heart was pounding and for the first time during the race I was out of breath. New batteries in my main head torch meant that full beam was now an option, no more stumbling on the uneven path. - we still had everything to play for.

Looking back on it, the next section was actually quite funny, with both of us hallucinating at the same time (sometimes about the same thing). A few highlights are....

A wrong turn led to us having to cross a deep ditch filled with (you guessed it) stinging nettles. Kendra had the great idea, "David you go first as you are taller. Then once you are in the ditch just lie forward to squash down the nettles. ". I dutifully followed the instructions, "great" she cried as she



leapt the gap without a care. (It was an enormous success if you ignore my wet feet and stinging hands).

After passing 'two evil looking gnomes', we entered a field with a large tree at the far end. Under the tree was a herd of cows innocently grazing. Kendra then asked, "are those cows real – if so, I'm not going in this field". I rubbed my eyes desperately trying to determine if this was just another hallucination. "WELL, ARE THEY REAL?" She demanded. "Ummm I don't think so" I ventured; (to be honest I wasn't sure what we were going to do if they were). As we reached the middle of field, one by one cows disappeared – we were fine. We paused briefly to watch a 'balloon display' and then turned to exit the field. The cows were now sitting in a tree, like decorations on a Christmas tree.

Faces were appearing in every rock, and I kept catching glimpses of runners out of the corner of my eye as they sprinted by. Kendra however was in a deep conversation with her own imaginary friends.

Gradually the daylight came, our heads cleared, and we closed in on the town of Lewes. It however had a sting in its tail – the final couple of miles were up a nasty hill which seemed to take forever. Like the rest of the route, with a bit of determination, the town centre was finally reached, the only shop open was Newsagents preparing its papers, so in we went for a breakfast of a large Mint Aero Chocolate bar and Red Bull.



Looking at our watches we saw that we were ok for time, but only just and we needed to keep pushing. We had assumed that the other three had long since finished.

Getting out of Lewes was made slightly harder due to the path being closed, but we worked out a route and soon reached the village of Iford. I had been having Déjà vu for several hours at this point and so was constantly convinced I had been in the location before.

From Iford we needed to climb onto the Downs and join with the South Downs Way path. This is another key point on my running map and as I had done that path on the South Downs ultra the previous year.

We were keen to complete the last few miles, but kept underestimating how far we had left to go. As we panted up the 4<sup>th</sup> hill, Kendra was questioning my claim that there was only one hill on this section. Eventually the coast was in sight, and we made the final turning towards the finish line. A last-minute panic, were we meant to be on the cliff top path or lower down at sea level? It turned out there was only path and that was the cliff top.



The meridian monument was in sight, but first there was a dog we had to talk to. Final push, could we run the remainder to the finish? Then I spotted Mary (who travelled down to meet me), Mark and Kendra's Husband, and so we knew we were close...

There was cheering, "come on and touch the monument to finish." A few seconds later and we were done, the line was complete, we had medals around necks and a series of photos were taken. It was then I spotted Adrain and Kev, and I thought that is strange that they are still around. We were then informed that they had only finished just over an hour before us, as Adrian had a shoe stolen by an animal during the night.



Thank you to all my friends and family for their support, especially Rebecca for keeping the world running whilst I was gone and to Mary for dropping me off and collecting me. A special thanks also goes to Kendra who managed to put up with me for a solid 6 days!

The End

## Appendix 1 – Packing List

### Medical

- Inhaler (not needed)
- Sun Cream
- Antihistamines (took 1, but not really needed)
- Sudocrem

- Vaseline
- Paracetamol
- Small First Aid Kit – including plasters. (Only the scissors were used).
- Fleecy webbing and rock tape. (Used for blisters)

## Personal

- Toilet Paper
- Toothbrush + Toothpaste
- Small Antiperspirant

## Sleeping

- Bivi-bag. (used for the three longer sleeps)
- Sleeping bag liner (also used as a blanket on the Isle of Dogs)
- Space Blanket (not used)

## Clothing

- Trail Running Shoes - Brooks Cascadia
- Hi-Viz Top
- Buff
- Sun Hat
- Sunglasses (not really used)
- OMM Waterproof Coat
- Cheap Waterproof trousers (good for stinging nettles!)
- 2 x Pairs of normal socks (worn together)
- Shorts
- Leggings (not really used)
- Hardmoors T-Shirt
- Thermal top
- Thin fleece top
- Gloves (not used)

## Electronics

- Fully charged Phone and cable + plug. (Route downloaded to Strava.)
- Fully charged spare (burner) phone and cable. (Switched off)
- Duracell battery pack + cable
- Led Lenser head torch + spare 4 x AAA batteries
- Spare torch (also takes AAA batteries)
- Red Light fixed to back of bag (with new batteries)
- Handheld GPS + Spare 4xAA Batteries

## Other

- Classic OMM bag with a 2-litre bladder
- Spork. (Used a couple of times)
- Money + Cards. (Split up in case I lost my wallet)

## Appendix 2 – Creating the Paper Maps

I overlaid the GPX route on Bing maps and tried various pen colours and widths until I found the one which printed the clearest. The best choice seemed to be purple (#5b1ba6) and stroke thickness 2.

With Bing maps opened in a browser I then worked along the route creating a screenshot of each section. These were then saved as 33 numbered png files. After creating the files, I double-checked that each file overlapped slightly.

The quality wasn't great when I printed them on my home printer, so I decided to use the professional printers in town (York Digital Image). This turned out to be a smart move as they also gave the choice of having them printed double-sided on waterproof (and tear proof) paper.

The final step was to clearly number the pages using a black sharpie pen.

Having 17 pages of waterproof A4 paper did slightly increase the weight of my bag. However, I personally prefer navigating in the daytime using proper maps rather than a GPS.

The maps themselves remained intact even after being held folded up in my hands for hours.