



# 50 YEARS OF JURA

Ross Brannigan on why the Isle of Jura Fell Race is such a classic in the fell racing calendar

The Paps of Jura rise like the masts of a huge ship on the horizon, their quartz scree-slopes standing out like stubble on a weatherworn face. Zooming our way quickly towards them, packed in with a dozen or so other runners, we are undertaking a fell running pilgrimage which first began in 1973.

The Isle of Jura Fell Race has become a rite of passage for fell runners. When asked about it, awe and anguish pass across the faces of those who have taken on this formidable race, as well as an almost maddening glee.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the race, established by George Broderick in 1973. George, an academic, visited Jura as part of six-week tour of the Hebrides. Having already created the Manx Mountain Marathon in 1970, George was captivated by the dramatic pull of the Jura hills and, in an attempt to address the dearth of A-class fell races, began the planning for what would become a jewel in the fell running calendar.

**“THE GROUND IS DEVOID OF PATHS, THE THREE PAPS ARE BEDECKED WITH SCREE... AND A FELL RACE MOUNTED ON SUCH TERRAIN WOULD CHALLENGE THE HARDIEST OF FELL RUNNERS”**

he said. Following his first recon of the 28km route, which took around 10 hours, George wondered whether such a race was even *possible*. The logistics, the terrain, the danger... was it feasible? Ultimately, he took the plunge and the first Jura Fell Race (then the Bens of Jura Race) was held on 14 July 1973.

LEFT: Runners ascending Beinn an Oir, the second Pap, in the 2022 Isle of Jura Fell Race © Adrian Davis





ABOVE: A rainbow of fell runners' tents, and bicycles, on the lawn in front of the Jura Hotel © Martin Beastall

Stepping off the ferry at Craighouse on the May Bank Holiday weekend, we see a tapestry of tents pitched outside the Jura Hotel, bikes laden with panniers adorning every spare inch of fence. It has become tradition for runners to leave their cars on the mainland and catch the ferry to Islay then on to Jura, before making the final 8-mile cycle to Craighouse. It is clear George's mission to create not just a race but a weekend-long experience for fell runners across the country has come to fruition. The atmosphere is buzzing and that's not just the midges in our ears.

"It's surely one of the most social hill races in the calendar, with so many runners preparing to race and then partying together afterwards," says Finlay Wild, who holds the men's record for the race at 2:58.09. "Watching evening light deepening on Beinn Shiantaidh from the campsite is a delight: a beautiful, chaotic pile, the whole slope an ancient boulder field."

After completing registration, pitching the tent, donating some blood to the local midges and stopping to talk to seemingly every other runner, it was time to line up outside the Jura Hotel. Looking around, I easily pick out famous faces: Finlay Wild, Angela Mudge, Nicky Spinks,

Jim Mann. Jura is a prestigious race and you need to qualify with two AL races in your palmarès, so everyone here is worth their salt. All too quickly, a countdown is called: 5... 4... 3... everyone chimes in... 2... 1... GO!

Galloping off, we follow in the footsteps of decades' worth of fellow fell runners, jostling their way across the narrow bridge to the skirl of the bagpipes, turning up the gravel track to face the challenge ahead.

The field quickly strings out as we leave the sanctuary of Craighouse. Suddenly, the gravel path ends and we are launched into the bottomless bogs at the foot of the first climb. I watch as several people's legs are swallowed by the marsh. Navigating safely around this first obstacle, I find myself in a group with legendary Deeside Runner, Alan Smith, on his eleventh Jura. "Perfect", I said to myself. "Stick with Al. He knows where the good lines are."

Knowing the ground is a valuable skill when it comes to this race. One man who can certainly boast such knowledge is Winter Hill Runner Albert Sunter. With 30 Juras under his belt, Albert is repeatedly called back by its unique terrain and the lifelong friends he's made here.

"Jura is unique," he says, "there is no other race like it! Just getting there takes lots of planning and the local people are brilliant. My first visit stays in my mind as we had no idea how we would get back after the race! The ceilidh went on until the sun came up and we hitched a ride back in the back of the mountain rescue wagon all the way to Port Ellen." One of Albert's fondest memories is of receiving the whisky glass for breaking the coveted four-hour benchmark, something many Jura runners can only dream of.

Up and over the first summit we go, the first of the endearingly named 'Pips' of Jura. These initial three climbs are the orb of the Jura anglerfish, luring you in before the bite of the Paps. Dashing up and over the rock-studded grass, I begin to think I might even be feeling pretty good today. Over the third summit we go, and the clag is rolling in before the precipitous descent into the belly of Gleann Astaile.

Looking ahead, my jaw drops. Rising up, up, up to a summit lost in cloud is the first of the Paps: the 733m Beinn a' Chaolais. Pushing the impending 600m climb to the back of my mind, I refill my bottles in the river before joining my fellow pilgrims in the next stage of our journey.

Hands on knees, knees to chest, bodies bent double at the effort, we strain up the behemoth of Beinn a' Chaolais, the reality we have four more summits to come slowly dawning upon me. Taking a moment to look behind, I see the multicoloured dotted line of runners stretched out behind me in this wild corner of the country.

Thinking back to George in the 1970s, I wonder at what a logistical challenge a race of this scale requires. This year's event was put together by Westerlands Cross Country Club (AKA Westies). "It was a daunting task", Jenn Ruddick of the organising team said. "Jura has such a legendary reputation among the Westies that saying no didn't feel like an option. The location of the race definitely adds a complexity not present in lots of other hill races! We couldn't have done it this first year without an amazing handover from Emily, the previous organiser, the team of professionals she'd assembled and support from the local community."

For Jenn, one of the important things she and her organising team brought to the table this year was a surge in female participation, up from 39 in 2022 to 66 this year.

"We worked with *Girls on Hills* and tried to apply the SheRaces guidelines, but there is still a lot to do." (Jenn said that if anyone



LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Albert Sunter, who's completed Jura over 30 times, on the ferry over to the race in 2022 ©; The start of the inaugural event in 1973, then called the 'Bens of Jura Fell Race' © George Broderick; The 40th year of Jura, 2013 © George Broderick







wants to get in touch about increasing female and non-binary participation at the race, email [organiser@isleofjurafellrace.co.uk](mailto:organiser@isleofjurafellrace.co.uk)).

Cresting the summit of the interminable Beinn a' Chaolais it was time to face the infamous Jura scree. A small group of us plummet off the side of the mountain like the stones which bounce around us, dropping down towards the bealach, which marks the start of our climb up Beinn an Òir.

At 785m, Beinn an Òir is the highest of the Paps, and it is perfectly placed in the race to ensure you hate every one of those metres. Beginning our climb, the weather is really coming in, with wind and rain battering us. Slogging our way up, we wonder whether it's time to don jackets.

Suddenly, my fellow runners pull away from me and the first pangs of cramp grip my hamstring. *Ouch!* Picking my way through the rocks strewn across the hillside, my movements become awkward as I try to avoid another immobilisation. The majority of the climb is spent preoccupying myself with replacing salt and sugar, vainly trying to regain some of my earlier glory.

Two walkers, out to support the race, appear on the horizon. I grimace when they ask how I am doing, before they stick a bag of Jelly Babies under my nose – the legal doping of the fell running world. Rejuvenated with fresh glucose coursing through my system, I make the final push to the summit, occasionally using my hands to cling to the moving hillside as rocks slide beneath me.

The marshals at the summit are truly getting battered now. The wind strengthens and the mizzle stings exposed skin, and I know my efforts are easily matched by their commitment to staying on this summit. Pulling out my map and compass in the fog, I navigate to the shallow bealach and drop off the ridge onto another cascade of scree.

I have been out for almost three hours. Beneath the clouds, Finlay Wild is tearing along the final stretch of tarmac to win the race by over 15 minutes.

Finlay, known for his many race records and particularly his 11 wins at Ben Nevis, has in recent years turned his hand to long-distance feats, such as the three Big Rounds, Tranter's Round, the Mullardoch Round, and the Cuillin Ridge Traverse. For those latter achievements, he places an emphasis on Jura as a formative race for him. "Jura for me was always quite intimidating in my earlier running days," he says, "so it took me a while to get there. Once I did, though, I thoroughly loved it. The rocky, technical lines were something I could really get into."



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Runners on the climb up Beinn an Oir, 2018 © Harsharn Gill; another runner on the same climb © Harsharn Gill. ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Runners on the ascent with Beinn Shiantaidh in the background © Harsharn Gill; Another Jura tradition - Bryony Halcrow on the final road section, in 2022, with her partner Tom Simpson supporting her on the bike, shortly after finishing the race himself © Martin Beastall

A love for technical ground is an absolute must for those wanting to do well at Jura, which fellow record-holder Jasmin Paris also shares. "I was so happy the day I broke the Jura record," she said, of her 3:38.43 run in 2015. "It felt very special. It was something I'd dreamed about, but it wasn't until that year that I started to believe it might actually be possible. We'd just returned from a week of hiking and wild camping in the mountains of Greece, and I think that fitness came together just in time to leave me feeling great on the day of the race.

"I'm probably most pleased with my Jura record out of them all," said Finlay. "Jura has been a good proxy for my progression as a runner in general, from the initial intimidation, through learning the route and finding my legs, to the satisfaction of getting the record and then the chronologically-tidy sub-three-hours in 2022."



I, however, am not on for a chronologically-tidy sub-three-hours. After a gruelling ascent of Beinn Shiantaidh, I have just one more scree slope before the last climb to Corra Bheinn. By now, every muscle below the waist is taking it in turns to seize up with cramp, making the occasional slides on a scree slope that bit more exciting.

Dropping down the first waterfall of stones, I pick my way across the larger boulders before traversing left towards Corra Bheinn. With the clag so low, my faith is now firmly in my compass bearing. Eventually, as I leave the boulders for a trail, I hear a distant sound coming from ahead of me: the skirl of bagpipes. It lifts something in me and I make for the sound, skirting through the maze of lochans and surrounding marshlands.

The sound is carried away by the wind as I struggle my way up the multi-layered climb to Corra Bheinn. Haribo is thrown down my throat as I push past looming boulders, dreaming of crisps and sandwiches at the finish line.

Emerging above the rocks I spy the summit – but I am too far left! I watch hopelessly as other runners ascend from the right, dashing from the summit towards the final challenge below. Once I finally reach the penultimate checkpoint, I turn my nose towards the sea and the sound of the pipes returns on the wind, tantalisingly close! I finally locate the source of the noise: a group of lads (most likely from the start line) are cheering us along, dancing on the path with bagpipes blaring. For a moment, the cramp recedes... But it rudely returns as I make as controlled a descent as I possibly can to the bogs below. There, small but clearly discernible, is the Three-Arched Bridge, which marks the start of the road to Craighouse.

“There it is!” shouts a woman behind me euphorically. Yet, a small part of me curls into a ball. Whilst a sign the end is near, Three-Arched Bridge is where the turmoil of the tarmac begins; 5km of solid, uncompromising, unfriendly tarmac to lead you to the finish. Having successfully made my way to the bridge without cramping and falling head-first into a bog, I stuff a random mixture of sweets into my mouth at the checkpoint and begin the final run in.

“Head up, quick feet, pump the arms”, I think, pushing the cramp somewhere to the back of my mind. I follow the runner ahead, never gaining and never losing time, just hold on! Finally, we are into the final kilometre. Looking to my right, the hills of Jura rise above the houses and trees, huge guardians to this island; a chaotic jumble of

rock, whose puzzle I had not cracked this time but will go over in my mind for days to come.

Pulling past my pacer, I make one final push to make an honourable finish. There it is! The finish! Crossing the line, I get a shake of the hand and a smatter of applause before flopping on the grass next to friends. I am absolutely burst.

After devouring the sandwich and crisps I’d been dreaming of, I raid the village shop trying to replace lost electrolytes and sugars. All around, muddy runners with hair pasted to their sweaty faces lie in the spring sunshine, soaking up the delight of finishing the jewel of the fell running crown.

Runners continue to trickle across the line as others shakily get to their feet and retreat for a shower or a swim in the sea. Later, as my wife and I sit eating dinner outside the chippy, prizes are handed out and words of thanks given. Halfway through, the final finisher arrives to the loudest applause of all. Welcomed as a hero after his battle across the mountains.

“When I set up the race back in 1973 the fell running scene was not as developed as it is today”, said founder George Broderick. When I ask if he is proud to see what it has become, he responded: “Possibly. In that I’ve made a contribution to a special sport from which many a participant has derived much satisfaction, pleasure (and probably pain) over the years.”

The partying carries on well into the dark, with stories of the satisfaction, pleasure and pain of the day shared over drinks. In my case, those stories are swapped while throwing stones into the sea, blethering with friends not seen in a while and trying (in vain) to hit the nearest buoy. As the sun dips behind the mountains with the hubbub of post-race chatter all around, it feels a satisfying end to one of the great experiences of the fell running calendar.

RIGHT: The checkpoints (including start and finish) on the Isle of Jura fell race, map designed by Andy Ford, contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2023) © Otter Maps, ottermaps.co.uk

