

# Between the ditches, Running the Butter Road

by Bertie Harte



Bertie welcomed in Millstreet by John Dineen at the end of the first leg of his run.



Jack Lane and Bertie speaking at the Kerryman's Table

I still wonder why anyone would want to run a marathon. For me it doesn't seem very attractive. I prefer to just throw on my runners and head off, if I run shorter or longer it doesn't matter, if I run faster or slower that doesn't matter either.

Running fires the synapses, opens the heart, lungs and mind to everything that goes on around us.

When we drive we pass over the landscape, when you get down low and run, you become part of it, the whole countryside comes alive.

Slow down, look around, see what you're missing. Wave at every car, say hello to everyone you meet, connect with people, that's the important part, connect.

I'm a family man trying hard to avoid a mid-life crisis, or maybe I'm deep in it and just haven't realised it yet. I took up running, or rather I returned to running, in late 2009 on medical advice. I was overweight, unfit, and if I'm completely honest, borderline depressed.

Initially I couldn't run, I was out of breath, in pain and didn't see the point of it.

Slowly, one foot in front of the other I kept at it, first 1km without stopping, then 1 mile, then 5km, 10km and so on.

I once commented to a work colleague why I couldn't understand why so many people run, and why so many want to run marathons? Why would anyone want to put themselves through 26.1 miles of discomfort, what is the attraction? Thankfully over the last 3 years I've come to a realisation.

Running is enjoyable, and if you run often enough and far enough it changes who you are, in a good way. I still don't know why so many people want to run a marathon. There's a lot more road out there.

### **The Butter Road: Tralee-Castleisland-Rathmore-Millstreet-Rylane- Tower-Cork**

I first saw this route on a map and wondered why there were straight roads everywhere, straight roads are generally man made, but this was

an old road. Roads usually follow old droving paths, follow old herd routes and meander through the countryside, working with contours and gradient, not try to plough straight through. I drove some of it a few years ago and didn't realise how important it had been. For me, at that time it was just a way to avoid traffic on a spin back from Kerry to Cork.

It was only much later; when I started to think about the idea of running it that I began to appreciate its history and significance. I read as much of the historical record about the road as I could find. I started to become intrigued about how much of the old road remained, not the surface, because this has been replaced time and time again, but the fabric of the road, the remains and ruins of toll houses, coach houses, inns, resting stops, water stops, everything else that would have been part and parcel of the original road.

From conversations and emails with Jack Lane of the Aubane Historical Society I finally began to realise that I had to run it. Of course Jack publically announcing my intentions during Heritage Week meant that I had to see it through.

### **Saturday September 29th 2012:**

The train pulled out of Millstreet for Tralee, turned on my ipod, battery flat, this was going to be a long day....

Standing outside Kerry County Museum at 08:50 I'm off, one foot in front of the other, it's only 57km on my own with no music and I know it's going to be hilly....

The next six hours and eight minutes were fun, it may seem odd to anyone who has never tried a long solo run, but trust me, it was fun. It was also painful, uplifting, depressing, invigorating, interesting, boring, cold, warm, overcast and sunny all in one short time on one day. At least it didn't rain. Much. I wasn't sure what to expect from the run.

Hills, no shortage of hills, that much I was sure of, but hills aren't too bad. At least before the hills started I had a flat 20km warm-up from Tralee to Castleisland

One of the things I like about long-long runs is how it isn't "normal," it must look odd

(judging from the looks I get) to see someone running with a back-pack, flashing led lamps front and back, energy gels strapped to the bag and a smile on their face.

It's all about the smile. The smile means that everything is in check. I also count to myself to keep pace. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-----499-500 that's another kilometre done. I can do that for hours on end - it's worrying.

I passed, and was passed by, a lot of cyclists around Castleisland. Everyone gave a polite nod, wave, or hello. The strangest look I got was running up the main street in the town as the early morning shoppers were out and about. I'm not sure if the smile at this point was friendly or manic.

An elderly man with a walking frame offered me a race, we laughed until I told him where I was going, he told me to go easy, and enjoy my day. After that the road got quiet.

### **May The Road Rise Up To Meet You.**

To say that it rose up to meet me is a bit of an understatement. Just outside of Cordal there is a hill, it isn't long but it is steep. The hill didn't come from nowhere. It didn't sneak up on me suddenly as I rounded a bend. It didn't hide behind the treeline, waiting to unveil itself. No, it announced itself early, I could see it for a long time before I got to it.

I could trace the outline of the road in the distance, cutting serpentine-like through the terrain, a serpent that evidently likes to climb.

When I got to the base of the climb it loomed large in front of me, the grey asphalt stood out against the verdant greenery, like a wall. A wall! I kept an eye on my pace and then it slowed to a walk, a slow uphill walk. Still, the views were nice. There was a lone cyclist who passed me, he didn't say much, can't say I blame him. The Gravity of the Situation.

What goes up must come down. I was enjoying the run/walk. The views across to Mount Eagle were fantastic. The views all around me were fantastic. If it wasn't for all of the hills it would have been perfect.

At the base of one of the hills there is a little bridge. I don't know how long it's there but there is an old feel to the place. It's difficult to explain but on my own with the light filtering in

from above, the shadowplay on the trees and the stillness of the air it felt like I had gone back in time. I'm not at all spiritual but there was something so calming about it that I started to think about my own place in the world.

I started to think about others who had made this journey, at a different time, under different circumstances. For me this was a day out, something I wanted to do for my own enjoyment. Others had made this journey out of necessity, and paid a toll to do so. Here I was, following the road, but I couldn't have been further from their footsteps.

As a nation we have moved along, but I'm not sure if we've moved on. The ghosts of our colonial past are scattered along The Butter Road. There is no record of what lay before its path. It cuts directly through the landscape, giving no quarter to anything the stands in the way. It doesn't deviate much from a straight line.

I started to feel that the road says something about where we have been and where we find ourselves now.

The fact that there is little in the way of historical record of the journeys made by those who relied on the road for their living says a lot. The Irish at the time didn't have a voice, they didn't leave any echo. It got me thinking that in our current economic predicament we appear to be silent. Are we speechless or censored?

A mental low after the hilly highs.  
*"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Jeremiah 6:16). I had to Google that.

On a hill outside of Ballydesmond I reached a crossroads. I had finished with the worst of the climbs, they were behind me. The road to Rathmore isn't flat, in fact it's really hilly, but there is a net drop the whole way there. So, in essence I would be running downhill, even if I was running (walking) uphill.

It's easier to think like that on long runs, I don't know why but logic and common sense have no place at 50km or above. Not only had I left the worst of the climbs in the past, my mood was lifting. I didn't realise it but the negative thoughts about our economic woes had taken from my enjoyment of the road.

When I came up from the heavily forested area and looked west towards Tralee and the mountains of West Kerry it was as if my eyes were opened to the majesty of the countryside.

We might have no money, but we have a beautiful country, all we have to do is slow down, take off the blinkers and look around.

It was then I realised that the run so far had been cathartic.

The section of the road I had just travelled was a link to the past, largely untouched by the excesses of the Celtic Tiger, no gaudy show homes, no automatic gates. It was pure, uncluttered and unspoiled. I had run through time, the surface may have changed, the recent plantations of non-native trees were alien, but the landscape itself remained. It was sheltered from modernity. Running through it stripped off layers of materialism, there was something fantastical about it.

A voice from the past had whispered to me, I hadn't heard it, so now it was shouting at me. History is still there, it hasn't left, it's up to us to go back and visit it again; it has a lot to tell.

At Barnagh bog the gates are locked and rusted. A reminder of an industry in decline. Some machinery is still there, but nature is starting to reclaim it, I stopped and looked through the gate. What should have been an ugly scarred landscape was full of life, butterflies and rabbits took off. An explosion of colour against the backdrop of the high bogs of Kerry. My mood was great, this was exactly what I was looking for in the run. I was smiling again, it's all about the smile.

*"It's easier to go down a hill than up it but the view is much better at the top."* (Henry Ward Beecher)

From Barnagh on I knew I was on the home stretch. I knew that there were lots of rolling hills into Rathmore, but it didn't seem to upset me. Each climb would be its own challenge and each descent its own reward. Simple, walk the ups - run the downs. One foot in front of the other.

What did surprise me however was how active the countryside had become again. There were houses all along this section, and people going about their busy Saturday activities. Farm machinery

on the roads, in fields and yards. People, actual human contact, for the first time in ages. It was nice to get to say hello again, it had been a long quiet day after Cordal.

The feeling on the road also seemed to up a gear, I had a spring in my step and was looking forward to getting to Millstreet, not so much looking forward to being finished, but I had a sense that I would complete the run with a bit of energy left, and hopefully not be too broken up by the experience. The countryside was alive, so was I.

The rolling landscape was great, the scenery appeared and disappeared into the dense treelines. Cluster of native woodland replaced the commercial forestry operations and the lush greenery was soothing.

A few buildings along the road caught my eye. Old buildings by the look of them, that had been modified and updated but still looked to be a snapshot of times long gone.

I started to wonder if any of them dated a far back as the original route, were some of these, toll gates, rest houses, feed stores? My mind was active, chasing glimpses of the past in the present.

I have my doubts about the longevity of the buildings, but even if these weren't original they may have been built over or on top of older structures, perhaps using the original materials, recycling before we even know what it was.

Again, I couldn't stop my mind from comparing then and now, our apparent progress weighing heavily on my mind. Except this time I didn't seem negative, I thought it's great how we can link back to our past without even knowing it. In fact I began to think that the best way to judge perspective is to position yourself as far back as you can, and a long straight historical road is a great visual aid to do just that.

*"My heritage has been my grounding, and it has brought me peace."* (Maureen O'Hara).

*"We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls."* (Anais Nin)

I've been asked, more than once, why I like long runs. There is no short answer to this, the reasons change with every outing. It started as a way of testing myself. It became a way of punishing myself, and even a way of rewarding myself. Currently it's a combination of all of the above. I

also seem to have found a nice way to deal with life pressures and keep myself on an even keel, of sorts.

I've been trying to convince my regular running buddy to join me, but he seems happy to aim for faster and faster marathons. He doesn't get me, I don't get him. To each their own. All I know, about my own experience, is that at a certain distance everything just clicks, gels, comes together. It's weird but I find the long runs, say 50km or above very relaxing. Below that I always try to run a fast time, above that the competitive switch goes off and I just drop into a regular rhythm and the distance glides by. It's almost as if I enter a dream-like state, conscious of everything around me, tuned in to the immediate but also tuned out from the background clutter.

The best way I have to describe it is "Zen-like" but that's far too close to spiritualism for me to be comfortable with.

I wrote earlier how running changes you for the better, I can't put my finger on the how or why, but I can say with absolute conviction that running is good for your mind. Another thing I've noticed is that longer distances are much, much more rewarding. There isn't the same pressure for time as with other distances up to marathon.

Run a Marathon and people will almost always ask "What time?" Equally they may have a benchmark by which that time is judged. The accepted time for "good" is under 4 hours, under 3:30 is "very good" and under 3:00 "fantastic".

I can't understand that fascination with time. Why does it matter so much? It's like that saying, "walk a mile in their shoes..." If you want to know what a time feels like, go out and do it, it may change your perspective.

So, I mentioned my fast running buddy earlier. If our goals are different how do our paths cross? Actually it works out well. I will gladly run with him for up to 3 hour slow runs, I will go off-road on forest trails and we will push each other along. So I think we sort of support each other in the common ground between longer slow runs and fast marathons.

That sort of sums up the whole reason why running is a positive thing, it's a great leveller. There are days I speed up, other days other people slow

down, but we can still meet in the middle and enjoy the company.

That's normal for standard distance training. It's a lot more lonely on longer runs. Clubs don't really cater for long long runs. So they tend to be solo efforts. I enjoy the solitude. It allows me to clear my head. It's free therapy. Doctors should prescribe it. The prescription would read.... Put one foot in front of the other, repeat.

### **The Road goes ever on and on**

*"The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say."*

(J.R.R. Tolkien)

Okay, so my run wasn't quiet as exciting as Tolkien's epic. And my feet aren't that hairy. But, something had happened to me along the Butter Road.

I made it over the rolling hills to Rathmore and turned for the home stretch to Millstreet. My legs were tired, but on balance I felt fine. I had already started to think about cutting out the section along Claragh road because I knew it had some abrupt climbs, and I had my fill of climbs. The section to Millstreet is boring, it's mostly ugly with the hedge line missing in places and deep drainage ditches slicing open the land.

One foot in front of the other, repeat, that's all I had to do. The finish was in sight. But what about the end? Does a start have to have an end? I knew I would finish the run, but what about the journey?

The volume of traffic bothered me, the speed of traffic bothered me, inconsiderate drivers bothered me. At one point, on a straight section of road, a line of cars approached me at speed. The first jeep indicated well in advance and moved well over to pass me. I could see the next car doing the same, indicating well in advance and giving me a lot of room. Even the third car recognised something must be ahead and gave a wide margin. The fourth car, a silver 08 Audi A4 was feeling "Curious" so the driver actually pulled in towards the margin (where I was running) to see why every other vehicle had

pulled out. I jumped up into the ditch and got nicely stung by nettles. It could have been worse.

I reached the planned turn for the Claragh road section. There is a petrol station/shop on top of the hill. I really, really wanted a strawberry or banana milkshake.

#### SEMI-INTERESTING FACT:

Long distance running allows you to eat vast amounts of rubbish, my normal recovery drink is a milkshake, because it has protein (milky goodness), carbohydrates (sugar) and goes down well. FACT, I read about it on the internet, so it must be true.

So, there I was with a milkshake craving, and there was a shop. Well, no way was I going to pass that up. I went in and while there were no milkshakes I did get a yoghurt drink. The woman in the shop was so friendly. She asked what I was up to, and when I told her she couldn't believe that I had ran from Tralee. She called her husband in and we had a great chat about the Butter Road, they were genuinely enthusiastic and gave me a pint of milk to drink free of charge. I asked how hilly Claragh road was and they both hinted that it was steep and the direct road to Millstreet might be a better option. I said my goodbyes and took their advice.

Full steam ahead to Millstreet, Claragh road will have to wait. The last few KM flew, the road was inviting, the turns gentle and I was in good spirits. Perhaps the worst bit was the final straight into the town, it's not especially hard but as it is a long straight it seemed to drag a little. I was also running on the concrete footpaths, which are harder on the legs than the road. I felt like I was flying, realistically I was not, I felt that I was fresh, I looked nothing like I felt.

I crossed the Junction at the top of the town near the church, I was counting down the seconds, my fancy GPS watch was counting down the meters to "The Wallis Arms".

100-90-80.... my heart was pounding. 70-60-50...I had goosebumps and nervous excited energy tingled, radiated from my core charging my whole body. 40-30-20...The relief, I could see the steps where I knew I would be stopping. My world slowed down. There was only colour, in glorious high definition, no sound, I was experience the greatest running high, I felt like I had stepped outside of myself. 10.....5.....

AND THEN I STOPPED RUNNING.

I had made it, against my own doubts, over the hills from far away I had reached the end point of the first leg of my run. I remember instinctively stopping my watch and sitting down on the steps. I heard someone talking, calling my name, "Bertie?" they asked. I was warmly greeted by the representatives from The Aubane Historical Society, John Francis Kelleher and John Dineen. They had been following my progress live using the GPS tracker I had. We're very high tech in North Cork.

We discussed my run and how enjoyable (or not) it was and my plans to do the second leg two weeks later.

My mind is a little blank on what exactly happened, I do know there was a photograph taken.

I was also aware that there was a wedding party exiting the Wallis Arms while I was standing there. I remember there was one woman in a blue dress with a pair of very high heels on. I remember thinking that I had just ran for 6 hours (and 8 minutes) and my feet wouldn't be as sore the following days as hers would be after her wearing those shoes for the evening.

A while later I began to feel the familiar burn muscle pain so I got a kind lift back to the train station from John Kelleher and collected my car.

When I got home my wife and kids were at the gate to greet me. They had been following me online as well. There was a cool bath waiting so I soaked away my aches and pains for an hour or so. Sent a few emails and slept for 2 hours. Then I went to work from 8:00pm until 2:00am.

*"I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be."* □(Douglas Adams)

The following day the rush had passed. I had taken on part one of my run and passed its test. I had mostly enjoyed the day and I had a feeling that I would run it again at another time. I posted the GPS history on the internet and a few of my fellow long distance runners sent their well wishes. There is interest in a re-run next year, how much remains to be seen as things don't always follow plans.

On a personal note I'm looking forward to running Tralee to Millstreet again. It was a fantastic

run and an even more rewarding journey. I know that a part of me stayed on the Butter Road that day, and it's nice to go back and revisit.

*"There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less."* (G.K. Chesterton)

After completing the first part I was looking forward to running the Millstreet to Cork leg. For me it was the "local" part, a road I was familiar with and a road I wanted to see at a slower speed. I plotted the map and counted the hills, 13 in all, unlucky for some? One foot in front of the other, repeat as necessary.

I woke on Sunday the 14th October and had a light breakfast, did a final gear check and drove to Millstreet. It was cold, -2c by the car display. A nice crisp morning, no cloud and a bright early morning sun.

My spirits were high, I had tackled the two big climbs of Tullig and Musherá before, my plan was to run as much as I could but mostly to enjoy the experience.

Millstreet - Outside 'The Wallis Arms' posing for a photograph for John Tarrant. He keeps asking me to put my hand out in a big "thumbs up". It's -2c, dry air and I'm freezing and I'm standing here trying to smile. With my thumb up, Looks like I'm hitching a lift.

Eventually I have to leave, I'm beginning to lose the feeling in my toes. Really, it was that cold.

A while later I turned off the Mallow Road and faced into the climb over Tullig and Musherá. I had run this road before, I knew where to slow down and where it was okay to push on. I had a camera with me to take some photos along the way.

The climb over Tullig didn't feel too bad on fresh legs, I actually enjoyed it, it was a nice way to get the blood (and heat) pumping. I crested the first of the big climbs and looked down across the valley of Aubane.

My thoughts turned to Jack Lane, who was instrumental in my undertaking this run, this was the type of view he would like. I stopped and took a picture, the view was unreal, bright early morning sun and a low mist cascading down the mountain, it looked magical (back cover.)

I ran down the hill and over the river at Aubane, I marvelled at the clarity of the river, and how pristine the countryside looked this early in the day.

I gave a cursory nod to the plaque and statue at Aubane Cross (The statue didn't nod back), only one way from here, up and over.

The climb over Musherá doesn't ease off, even the flat sections still point up, and the brief drops only make the next bits harder.

I stopped at the Kerryman's table to take a photograph, the camera wouldn't work, I kept getting low battery warnings. Thankfully my body appeared to be handling the cold weather better.

I ran onwards and upwards, the views were fantastic, the air was clear and looking northeast I could see for miles.

As I neared the top of Musherá I got a phone call from my running buddy Frank. I was due to meet him in Rylane, he would be joining me for the push into Cork. I gave him an idea of what time to expect me, then he told me he was bringing his brother-in-law along for the run. Charlie Byrd doesn't do slow runs, ever, and Frank is competitive, the latter stages of my run would be in the company of two men who don't do slow runs. Great.

As if sensing my thoughts the lovely wispy mist I had seen cascading down the mountain earlier turned into low lying cloud. When I reached the summit I couldn't see anything, it was really eerie, no noise, no sight, I was worried about traffic. Thankfully at that hour the roads are deserted.

A view would have been nice, I had taken on Musherá and ran most of it, I felt really good physically, strong and fresh, my reward? Running in low cloud. It reminded me of a picture I once saw, *"Wanderer above the sea of fog"*, by Caspar David Friedrich. Except in my case it was more *"wanderer in the sea of fog"*. I knew my destination, but wasn't sure what the in-between bits would be like.

*"Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known."* (A.A. Milne)

On the way down the other side I became aware of the sound of running water, fast running water, and lots of it. I could see a torrent of water

running down from Seefin on my left, I could track its path and as I was getting closer to the point where it cuts under the road the noise was loud. I stopped to look down into the stream, to take in the force of nature.

There was a fridge-freezer dumped over the ditch, lying broken and battered against the rocks. It struck me as sort of sad. Out here, in an isolated stretch of the country, someone had gone to the effort of dumping a large and unwieldy object. So much for progress. I ran on, not leaving it cloud my mind.

I remembered reading in Jack's pamphlet an account of an infamous highwayman who used to hide out in the unforgiving landscape, sighting his victims as they approached along the road. Pity he isn't around now, he'd make a great litter warden.

The countryside along here, just after the summit, is open, rugged, exposed and beautiful. Harsh, hard, moorland, low scrub and few trees. There is a sublime beauty in it.

But it doesn't stay that way for long, from once you drop down into the shelter of the valley the trees are back, greenery everywhere and signs of life. Fences give way to stone walls, give way to houses and farms and the signs of farming life. The landscape changes so much in a short distance that it is easy to put the mountain behind you. Houses, lots of houses, some new, some old, some abandoned but complete, more empty shells. Again I was looking at the remains and wondering how many, if any, reach back in time.

Compared to the first leg this section appeared as if it had been reasonably well populated, the signs of life were everywhere, and at one level the landscape was more accommodating, so it followed that people may have opted to locate here.

There also appeared to be a greater infrastructure in place here, more bridges for one. I can only remember passing over a few bridges on the way from Tralee to Millstreet, but it seemed here that I crossed over more rivers or streams on this leg. The landscape was also more undulating, it seemed like I was constantly either climbing up or going down, I wasn't too bothered, I still felt fresh but I knew I would feel the effects later in the run.

I also knew that from Rylane on there were some big rolling climbs. Before I got to Rylane I

reached another climb and then a fast drop over a bridge and a brutal sharp climb back up the other side. I opted to walk it, I met a man walking down towards me, we exchanged hellos, that was the first human contact I had since leaving Millstreet, and I hadn't even noticed, I was either really enjoying myself or not paying much attention. I'm going with the former, it was a great, interesting and challenging run so far.

Thankfully Rylane seems to sit on a plateau of sorts, the roads levelled a little and I was able to do a bit of damage assessment. I had been aware of how many gels I was taking, and how much water I was drinking, I was on-plan with both, a gel every 30mins or so and a sip of water every 15 to 20mins. My legs felt okay, the early climbs hadn't punished me too much but I could feel the early effects of all the rolling hills.

*"Most of us plateau when we lose the tension between where we are and where we ought to be."* (John Gardiner)

Rylane: 'The Anvil Bar' was to be the meeting place for my companions, but I was ahead of time, surprised? Me too, I had planned on running at around 6:00min/km pace but was actually closer to 5:40min/km. That doesn't seem like a lot but after almost 20km I was 7 minutes ahead of time.

I knew the lads were coming from Cork along the road I was running so rather than stop and wait I kept going, I met them further along. When they stopped the car all I heard was *"you're early!, you're going too fast, you need to slow down, see you in a bit."* I told them to park at the shop in Rylane and catch up.

I got to a junction in the road, for some reason I wasn't sure if they would know to follow me so I stopped running and waited. I waited for a few minutes but my legs were starting to cramp, I had to start running again. The pain was intense, usually it would subside after a few seconds but this time it lingered, especially my thighs. Eventually the lads caught up with me, we exchanged greetings and Frank asked how Mushera was.

I told him the truth, he thought I was crazy for running it. Charlie thought I was crazy for running the whole road but we all admired the views from up around Rylane. I mentioned in the first part how we miss out on things like this by being in a



hurry everywhere. A few cars passed us and the people inside were isolated from their surroundings.

Meanwhile, 3 men running along a historic road were commenting on how nice the countryside was looking, green rolling hills as far as the eye could see, a really great morning. We spent a while chatting about other routes we liked and how Frank should really think about going over 50km for a change instead of running fast marathons. He reckoned I was just jealous.

We also talked in some depth about how quiet the road was and how it would be a perfect tourist route; the only problem is the road would be ruined by buses.

My pace was beginning to drop off at this point, the rolling hills near Courtbrack were killing my legs, I ended up walking sections while my companions ran on ahead before looping back to get me.

We were still in high spirits but I was aware that if this pattern continued the lads would have a longer run than they wanted, and despite all of my climbing, my day was beginning to go downhill.

It was around this point that a lot of things started to happen. I was feeling poor, I was trying desperately to stay positive for the two lads who were good enough to have given their morning to join me. But, no matter what spin I put on things, and no matter how nice the views, it was obvious to them both that I was beginning to suffer.

*"Your mind will answer most questions if you learn to relax and wait for the answer."* (William S. Burroughs)

There is a state that distance runners reach. It comes before the euphoria of the runner's high. It can be mild, or it can be deeply unpleasant. It's referred to as "THE WALL!!!!" (My exclamations thunder in the background to make it seem more dramatic)

On that day, at that time, somewhere around Courtbrack I ran head first into my wall. It had been a long time since it happened to me on a run, I don't recall it happening on the Tralee to Millstreet leg, but I could feel it coming on fast.

I do so many long runs I know the build up intimately.

Thirst-Check.

Brief flashes of displacement, not really knowing what's going on around me - Check.  
Self doubt - Check.

Even more self doubt - CHECK!

Frank could see it, we run a lot together, he dropped back and tried to coax me into running, I hadn't even realised I had stopped.

I had to take off the long sleeved top I had on, it was wet with perspiration, I drank lots of water (loaded with salts), he had to stop me because he knew if I drank too much I would cramp or empty it back up.

I wasn't dehydrated, my sugar levels might have been a little low after all the hills so I took a few gels together. We walked for a bit, with Charlie circling out and back, offering words of encouragement.

We made it to the Shebeen Pub, I know that place, I had gone there once for a pint, it was a really nice pub. I remember it well, there was a half-door, and a few elderly men sitting inside, a turf fire and that wonderful sense of history.

It was a great pint too. It's closed now, has been for years, another casualty of the rural demise that seems to be an all too common a price for modernity.

I would guess that stricter drink driving laws were responsible, which in itself isn't a bad thing, but I can't help but feel that the more we strive to become more cosmopolitan, more European and assume airs of sophistication we lose a lot of our identity.

When we lose our rural traditions we lose our best link to the past, our oral tradition dies. Twitter, Facebook, Bebo, and whatever will eventually replace them are no substitute for personal contact. So, modernity and ease of transport and communication have shrunk the world, at the expense of a local identity. Is that a price to far?

I stopped outside the pub and Frank took a photo, it was only afterwards when I saw it I realised how bad I looked, my shoulders were slumped, my whole demeanour was one of defeat. The road was giving me a beating, worse still, I was allowing it to beat me. Instead of enjoying the experience, even

the bad bits, I was wrapped up in the negativity of my wall.

It was then that the two most significant occurrences of the day occurred. The first was when Charlie ran on ahead, he started to chat to a couple walking a dog. Frank, who had started to run ahead joined him. Eventually I struggled up the road, the two others had ran on but the couple with the dog started to cheer me on and express their surprise that I would even attempt the run, and were genuinely positive.

I was taken aback, I know Charlie and Frank were responsible, but it was exactly the lift I needed. I slowed again to a walk and we chatted briefly about the road. This couple were out walking it, but were oblivious to the history of it, so I gave them a very short account.

After I said my farewells I started to run again, proper running, lifting my feet to match my lifting spirits. At a guess the gels were kicking it about this time too.

Then as Frank rejoined me, we notice Charlie talking to someone through a car window, we ran on, gave a polite hello. Charlie joined us and explained how it was a group of American tourists who had taken a wrong turn. I laughed and said they had stumbled onto a hidden gem, and I hoped he had told them all about it.

A short time later the car passed us on its way back to Blarney, to visit the woollen mills and the castle. If nothing else it reaffirmed why I was undertaking this journey, it was as much to promote the route as a personal journey.

Physically I was still suffering, but mentally I knew that I would finish the run, because I had to. Plenty of others before me journeyed here, in far greater hardship than I can ever imagine. We owe a debt of gratitude to those before us, time for me to pay my respects.

People visit these parts and check out a stone in a castle, check out the woollen goods, but aren't informed that only a few short miles away lies a part of the very road that allowed trade to prosper in the region. The road should be advertised as an alternate route to Kerry, especially if people are already in the vicinity.

*"It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop."* (Confucius)

We ran on, we were picking out little glimpses of the past in the landscape, some houses had distinct feature that made it easy to see stables, and perhaps old blacksmiths workshops. Did we spot the remains of some toll houses?

I hypostasized that buildings, or the remnants of them, built right at the roadside may have been part of the infrastructure.

The lads agreed with my theory, not sure how to go about proving it, but it kept us occupied on the long drags heading towards Tower.

There is a lovely stretch of road as we were approaching the troubled Blarney golf resort. The road is straight, the mature trees form an elegant arch framing the horizon, it's not restrictive at all, it should be as it forms a tunnel, but it is actually very scenic. We talked at length about the golf resort and all of the lost promises it represents. We talked about how as a nation we faced down worse and came out the other side intact.

The tree-lined tunnel was the perfect metaphor, we could only see what was directly ahead, our view was restricted yet pleasant, but when we began to emerge the vista opened before us, the open countryside was there, static, waiting for our eyes.

Everything is temporary, everything fleeting, things change, the whole world is in a state of flux, if you stand still you miss it. The important bit is to keep moving forward.

Tower village was waiting at the end of the hill, we got some weird looks from the masses in their cars, I'm guessing that people don't usually run out this way.

Next stop, Kerry pike. The hills, the hills. They are steep, short and just in the way. I walked every one, I gave up trying to run them, but I didn't give up.

One foot in front of the other, repeat. I noticed rundown glass houses, perhaps from not too long ago when all we desired was fresh, locally produced fruit and veg. We had an organic movement long before it was cool, everyone I knew had home grown veg, we went to the local orchards to pick apples. Now we buy everything pre-packed, air freighted, everything is homogenous, everything looks the same. Apples are the perfect example red

or green, celery is crisp and we can get strawberries for Christmas dinner if we desire.

There's something so wrong about all of that, nature is not perfect, it's full of blemishes, apples should have the colour that reflects their growth, they should be mottled, rough and above all tasty. Celery should taste of the earth, the way beetroot does.

We were running through an area that would, at one point, have been the market garden for the city. Now it was scattered with displaced urban overflow, obnoxious one off buildings hiding behind automatic gates. Agriculture had been replaced by bricks and faux-stone. And eventually, as if by magic I climbed the last hill. I hadn't actually noticed it, I was on auto-pilot.

Clogheen Cross is the end of the rural stretch of the Butter Road, it's all part of the city from there on in. It's like a switch, Country to City in the blink of an eye.

Frank and Charlie had long since said their goodbyes, knowing that I had to finish as I had started, on my own, they had taken a turn at Mackey's cross and were heading back into the city along the Lee road.

So, after all of my troubles, and all of the day's highs and lows I was on the final straight, it was all downhill from here.

*"Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You have to win it."* (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Actually, the downhill bit came after the top of Blarney Street. It was great to know the end was near. My GPS watch was again set to display the countdown, meticulously plotted to the Firkin Crane. I was taking it easy on the way down, my upper legs had taken a beating on the climbs and now I was subjecting them to a long descent.

For a main street in a heavily populated part of the city it was really quiet. I'm guessing that it was Sunday Lunch time, maybe everyone was busy eating. The hill down is a great place, there are old interesting buildings, some great views and it was getting me closer to my end goal.

The only criticism I have is that the footpaths are really high. Every time I had to step down from one it hurt, and going back up the other side felt like I was climbing.

I opted to run on the road, no traffic, no pedestrians, just me doing a tired legged mix of running, falling and limping. What a sight.

Eventually, like all good things, Blarney Street came to an end. At the Junction with Shandon Street I turned left and up. Up, up the hill, the last punishment for me. No walking.

There's people looking at me, I must look a state. Am I smiling? More of a grimace?

Is that an open top tour bus? I crossed over the road, ran up the hill and turned onto Dominic Street.

My watch was counting down. 100-99-98-97..... Well to be fair I was going pretty slow at this point. I spotted the curves of the Firkin Crane, Left turn, there's the Butter Museum. I'm here. I stopped running, stopped my watch, and well..... Stopped.

I felt sick, my stomach was cramping, my lungs were screaming and my legs were on fire. I could hear voices, voices I knew. I looked up, saw my sisters and my father. They looked worried. One of them laughed a little as if to break the tension. I stood upright, gave a smile.

I'm not entirely sure, but I think the first words out of my mouth were along the lines of, *"I'm glad that's over, I'm not in a hurry to do that again."* I think that when I heard myself say it, I knew I was done, my goal was made, I had ran the Butter road.

All of it, every step from Tralee to Cork. No one, no pain, could take that away. I did it.

Paddy Maloney introduced himself, we chatted briefly and he had the good sense and courtesy to leave me recover a little before taking the photos for Jack. While I was there I did some stretches and Paddy got me a carton of milk, best tasting milk I had ever had. My mother-in law and sister-in-law joined the group, with them was my eldest son who came running up asking if *"Daddy won?"* I told him I had, not strictly a lie as I was the winner in a race or one. He asked me where my medal was.

There was a group of people waiting around, we got some strange looks. Waiting to collect their children from dance class in the Firkin Crane I

wondered if they knew anything about the buildings around them, how important they had been?

But, you know what? At one level I didn't care, at that point I was just so happy to have finished. There had been a point, earlier that day when I was close to stopping, I hadn't, I had pushed through. I was beaming, I had goosebumps. I said my goodbyes to everyone and drove home.

*“Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”* (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

### **The aftermath**

Was it worth it? Yes. Will I do it again? Yes. High point? Too many, views were great, the sense of loss while fitting in perfectly, the personal satisfaction for stepping outside my comfort zone on more than one occasion.

Low point? The pain, the countryside being ruined by fly-tipping and obnoxious development, the lack of any waymarks or information on points of interest along the route, the closed pubs, abandoned buildings.

Overall? Superb, a magnificent journey along the road, physically, emotionally and educationally. The road is fantastic. It is a great trip, it showcases the best we have to offer and even shows the worst. It's a slice of realism in a world of tweedle-dee-dee.

It's Ireland in a nutshell, a montage of where we were, where we are, and where we could be. It is challenging, rewarding, relentless and forgiving. It will take your breath away, especially if you run the hills.

It should be developed, it should be promoted and people should learn about it in school. This is part of what we are, it is a reason why the countryside developed and how a trading city survived for so long. We can learn from the past, but only if we look at it.

Whizzing around, sooner, faster, bigger, better, now. That's a way to exist, not a way to live. Slow down, relax, take stock, take pictures, take memories and pass the word around. It's on the doorstep. All you have to do is cross the threshold.

And above all, enjoy it. Smiles optional.

**Bertie Harte**



**Looking down to Aubane from Tullig Hill**