

Round Norfolk Relay 2015 Race Report

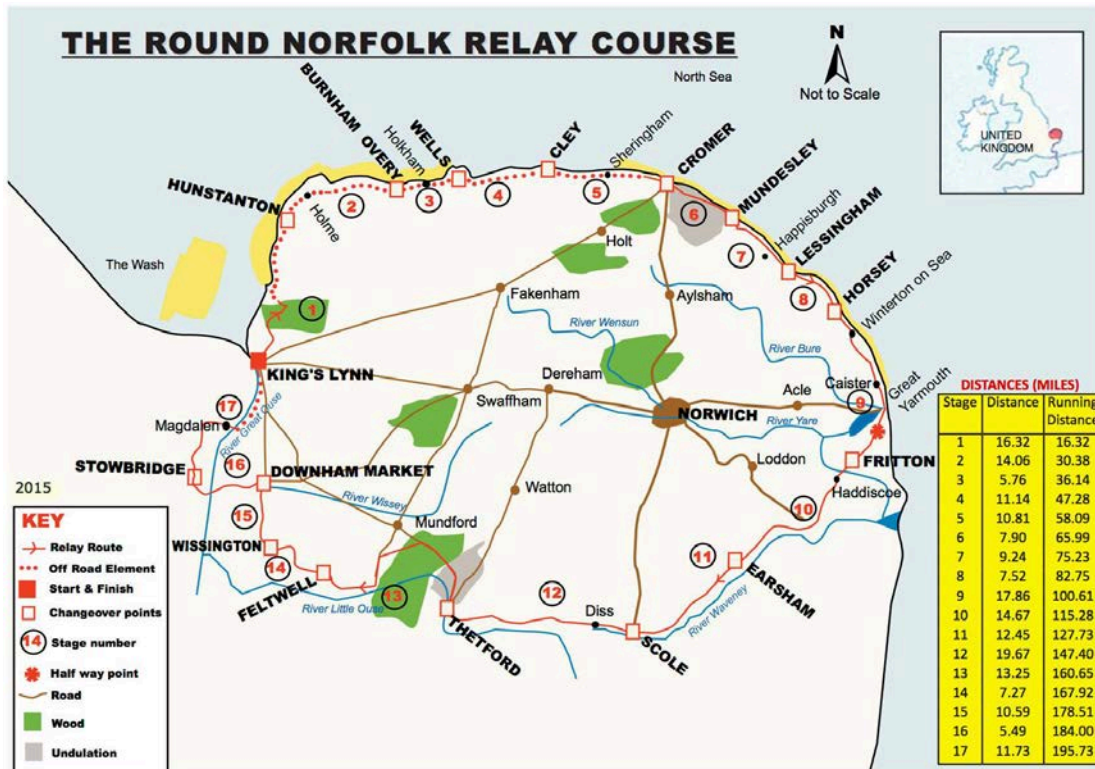


17 runners, 196 miles of running in 26 hours, some cycling, 4 cars, driving through the night and lots of fun...

The Serpentine team

Stage 1 – David Martin	Stage 7 – Giles Balleny	Stage 13 – Daniel Rourke
Stage 2 – Michelle Homden	Stage 8 – Samatha Day	Stage 14 – Nick Fairclough
Stage 3 – Helen Forsey	Stage 9 – Andrew Williams	Stage 15 – Grace Barnett
Stage 4 – Claire Alexandre	Stage 10 – Stephane Schneider	Stage 16 – Nicola Anderson
Stage 5 – Peter Holmes	Stage 11 – Clare Russell	Stage 17 – Federico Hinrichs
Stage 6 – Simon Watts	Stage 12 – Mike Harley	

The course - image courtesy of Round Norfolk Relay <http://www.roundnorfolkrelay.com/>



Friday 18 September 2015.

10:30 Unfortunately one of the team has had to drop out due to work commitments; he's also a driver. We've already called a couple of reserves so things aren't looking good.

11:00 We've found another runner (thanks Simon). Unfortunately it will mean swapping stages and drivers, but we'll deal with that once we get the team to Thetford.

18:00 Most of the team assemble at Sixt near Tower Bridge. Nick's picked up a minibus earlier in the day and is already nearly in Norfolk. The rest of us collect the other three vehicles just before they shut. They won't let our latest replacement driver drive, but we work out a plan that involves Claire acting as second drivers on two vehicles, and switching who's driving which car/minibus.

18:30 One of the minibuses breaks before we've got across Tower bridge; there's a problem with the gearbox. However the team get it working again although it'll be a pain when acting as a slow support vehicle on the night stage.

19:00 Having got as far as Shoreditch, we have a problem with another vehicle. It's run out of "AdBlue" and there's a warning saying that if we drive more than 20 miles we will not be able to restart the engine. Sixt tell us to drive to Heathrow to swap it. En-route we find a garage which sells AdBlue and ignoring the advice on Seat's website which tells us to go to a dealer to top it up, we decide that waiting for the RAC will be faster than the remaining detour to Heathrow. We then persuade the RAC operator to put us through to someone who knows where the AdBlue tank is located in our car (it's under the third row of seats in the boot, obviously).

22:55 Most of the team are now in Thetford. Some people have even found time to have a meal and a drink in a pub near the hotel. Mike, Clare and our super-sub Simon will be coming up by train on Saturday. Nick and David give a quick team briefing. The race is run as a real relay, with each baton passed from runner to runner at designated stage changeover points. This means that the start time for every leg other than stage 1 is an only an estimate. When on the road during the day, each



runner is accompanied by a cyclist. At night a runner each runner is accompanied by one of the cars or minibuses. We also need a timekeeper at every changeover. This means that at there are five roles at ever changeover and many of the team will be swapping vehicles quite a bit. David's created a detailed spreadsheet to keep track of everything. Our late team changes and revised start time (45mins earlier than we'd thought) mean that we need to change some of the print outs.

Saturday

05:30 It's time for the first group (Nick, David and Federico) to head to the start. David's running stage 1. Nick's driving. Federico will be accompanying David on the road sections of his leg. The start and finish are at the Lynnsport Leisure Centre in Kings Lynn. Nick and David collect the official race pack, which consists of some instructions, the baton, some DIY race numbers (the other teams all get proper ones, but ours were delayed in the post and unhelpfully arrived on Monday), some car parking passes for some of the stage changeovers & access points, and 24 small bottles of water. We make the final team declaration.

07:30 – 0 miles down. Stage 1 – 16.32 miles. Kings Lynn to Hunstanton

We're off. There are five other teams starting at the same time. One of the other runners has done the stage more than ten times previously, which reduces the number of times David has to consult the course instructions. After leaving Kings Lynn, the course snakes north on reasonably quiet roads for about 5 miles before reaching the Sandringham estate. Only the runners are permitted to cross the estate so Federico and the other cyclists wave goodbye to the runners. David and the other runners have a few lonely miles only encountering a few birdwatchers in the empty countryside. Nick and



Federico head to one of the mid-stage access points to give David some much needed water before heading to first changeover point. Despite the impression that Norfolk is completely flat, there are in fact a few hills. The first of which provides a sting in the tail at the end of stage 1, with the path zigzagging up the cliff to the changeover.

09:30:23 – 16.32 miles done. Stage 2 – 14.06 miles. Hunstanton to Burnham Overy



Many more of the team are now up and there's small welcoming committee as David hands over to Michelle. Federico is still on bike support duty. Nick heads away with most of the team to meet Michelle at some of the access points and collect Federico once he's finished the bike sections. The sun is now out. Michelle's stage has a couple of off-road sections along the coast

with a couple of miles of road running to link them. The route is now heading east. The first off-road section goes well, Michelle completes the road section and Federico loads his bike into Nick's minibus as Michelle heads back off-road at Brancaster. Both vehicles head to the second change at Burnham Overy. There are a couple of bends that mean we can only see about 100m back along the course and we have a long time to wonder where Michelle is. Unfortunately, she got lost on the second off-road section and ended up running for several minutes before realising that she'd gone wrong and probably added a couple of kilometres to the proper route.

11:55:07 – 30.14 miles done. Stage 3 – 5.76 miles. Burnham Overy to Wells-next-the-Sea

Helen's leg is entirely off-road so she'll have no car or bike support. Fortunately the navigation is simpler than on stage 2. There's a good mix of scenery: marshland at the start, then onto a beach and sand dunes, with the last half through woodland. Once Helen's set off, most of the rest of the team head over to the stage 3/4 changeover, where there's a cafe selling coffee, cake and ice-cream. David and Michelle head to the access point at Holkham – there's a big stately home and a fine beach nearby, but we don't have time to visit. Claire, our fourth runner, is already at the changeover, but David and Michelle now need to race Helen to Wells (1.5 miles for the Helen and a bit further for the car) as David will be cycling with Claire at the start of her stage.



12:57:18 – 36.14 miles done. Stage 4 – 11.14 miles. Wells-next-the-Sea to Cley-next-the-Sea

Claire's first mile is easy, heading in a straight line on a concrete path from the lifeboat station and cafe into the town. Unfortunately it's 1pm on a sunny Saturday afternoon so there are lots of other people on the path who need some gentle encouragement to step aside briefly for us. After a short stretch in Wells, the route heads onto the Peddlars' Way path, which Clare will follow for most of the rest of the stage. It's now time for Nick's minibus with the runners for stages 13-17 to get some rest and head over to Nick's parents' house.

There's an access point after about 4 miles where Andy's minibus meet Claire to give her some water, she's then back on the Peddlars' Way until she reaches Blakeney about a mile and a half from the end. The length of Claire's stage gives David and Helen a chance to grab some food from the cafe, but David's timetable hadn't allowed for traffic gridlock in Cley, necessitating parking before hitting Cley in order to join Claire as she finishes the off-road section. We're now starting to catch a few of the teams who'd started before us and as well as one who'd taken the shorter official route on stage 2. As Claire runs through the narrow main street in Cley it's clear that the race participants are causing a significant part of the traffic problem. The changeover is on the shingle beach where Peter is waiting to pick up the baton and many of the rest of the team are enjoying ice cream in the sunshine. We're all relieved to find that Stephane's picked up the reinforcements from Norwich station, so we now have a full complement of 17 runners.



14:39:50 – 47.28 miles done. Stage 5 – 10.81 miles. Cley-next-the-Sea to Cromer



Peter's stage heads east along the coast, climbing the cliffs a couple of times along the way. Again duties are split with Andy's car on water duty and David doing the cycling. We all plan to meet up at the car park at the end of the stage. However, Norfolk traffic gets in the way and the poor phone signal means that David can't find out when Peter set off to work out when he's likely to be back at the road. When the team re-establish contact it appears that David has less than 5 minutes to grab the maps, shout some instructions and cycle about 2 miles, hoping to get to the meeting point before Peter. Fortunately, Peter's progress is a little slower than his pre-race estimate; the undulating off-road stage together with obstacles such as styles and brambles have been slowing everyone down (and aren't taken into account in the age graded results). The final two miles are on tarmac and Peter picks up the pace, passing a couple of slower runners as he goes. We find out on Sunday that Peter's finished 5th for the stage, our highest stage ranking.

15:56:40 – 58.09 miles done. Stage 6 – 7.90 miles. Cromer to Mundesley

Simon's on his own for the first two miles, which take him down the cliff along the sea front and then back up the cliff over a golf course and then back to the road on the outskirts of Cromer. Fortunately, despite having been roped in at the last minute, he's been able to study the maps and directions and arrives at the road without mishap. The final six miles are on local roads, generally only a couple of hundred metres from the sea, with views over rolling green fields to the south, and the blue sea to the north. There's a windmill at Mundesley, which is a useful marker for the end of the stage – although it would have been more useful if the stage map had included another few millimetres of the next grid square so that we knew where in Mundesley it was (about 500m after the changeover point for future reference).

17:01:17 – 65.99 miles done. Stage 7 – 9.24 miles. Mundesley to Lessingham

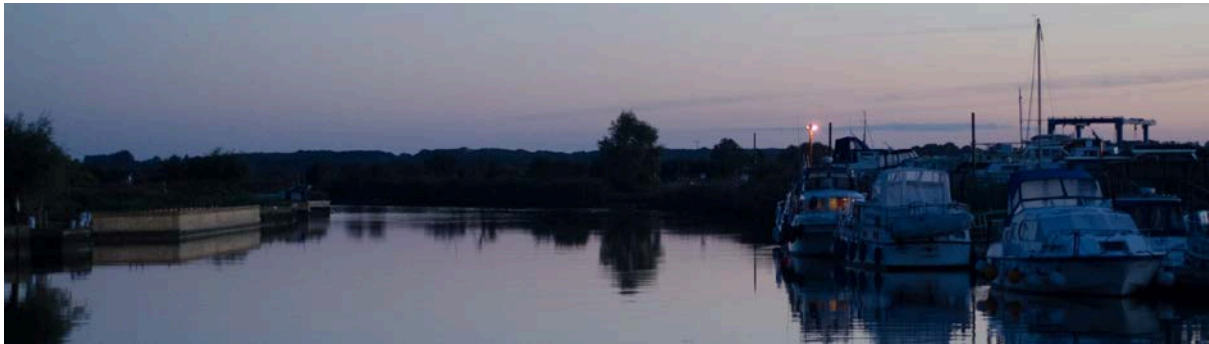
Simon hands over the baton to Giles; it's the first of several roadside changes. David pauses briefly to swap maps, water bottles etc before closing down the 100m gap that Giles had opened up. The route trends south-east, sticking to small roads, although mainly south or east at any given time. The runner's route is also the obvious route for the support team vehicles. We get some loud shouts (and cheesy music) from the Serpie cars/minibuses as they pass us and some more restrained

encouragement from some of the other teams. In addition to fields and picturesque coastal villages, we also pass a gas distribution station, with some very bored-looking security guards; unlike the children in the villages, they don't wave.

18:16:39 – 75.23 miles done. Stage 8 – 7.52 miles. Lessingham to Horsey Mill

Bizzarely we're now just 16 seconds behind the original time plan (the one without the start time changed and taking into account the consequences of swapping runners of different speeds from one stage to another). Sam eases into her leg, chatting a bit at the start before pushing harder for the second half. It's a flat stage on country lanes with a few twists and simple navigation.

The sea is close enough to smell but generally out of sight. In theory runners should be accompanied by a car, rather than a bike from 7pm, but most teams (including us) have opted for the simpler option of switching at the next changeover. The last few hundred metres are through the Norfolk Broads National Park and there are high hedgerows and trees and the vestigial sunlight can't breakthrough, giving us the first taste of the evening and night-time conditions to come.



19:18:24 – 82.75 miles done. Stage 9 – 17.86 miles. Horsey Mill to Fritton

Andy picks up the baton for the second longest leg. Unfortunately there's gridlock in the car park, so all cyclists are told to accompany the runners until the cars can catch up. The narrow lanes make overtaking rather difficult so it's a couple of miles before the support team in car 2 join Andy allowing David to return to the changeover point (narrowly avoiding being run over by a car recklessly overtaking one of the other teams).

After about 7 miles of country roads, the route enters the outskirts of Great Yarmouth. The wider roads are easier for the support vehicles, but it's hardly one of the scenic highlights of the route. There are then a couple of miles along the seafront, accompanied by some "encouragement" from locals who are already well past their first drink of the evening. In previous years, one of the changeovers was in Great Yarmouth, but parking caused problems, so stage 9 now ploughs on through the town and then for a few miles out the other side to Fritton¹. As Andy leaves the streetlights behind and passes through the halfway point for the race, the pattern for the night time stages establishes itself with slow moving cars and vans each sporting a flashing amber light lighting up the road for their runners and forcing the normal Norfolk road users to keep well clear.

21:30:55 – 100.61 miles done. Stage 10 – 14.67 miles. Fritton¹ to Earsham

Stephane, Clare and Mike have spent the late afternoon and early evening chilling in a nearby pub (with lemonades and cokes allegedly); however it's now their turn to run. Fortunately mobile phone reception is better in this part of Norfolk than the north coast, so the support crews can talk to each other and advise the runners when to warm up.

There's a brief moment when the race crosses into Suffolk, which causes minor consternation to Michelle, who's navigating, but within a few hundred metres it's clear that we're definitely still on the right track. The county boundary follows the river, but the route sticks to the main road (A143) which cuts across a loop at Bungay. The procession of flashing amber lights stretches in front and behind and a slow game of car leapfrog ensues, providing a small amount of entertainment for those in the support vehicles. Stephane makes good time and we overtake more frequently than we're

¹ Note, there's a change to the stage 9-10 changeover for 2016

overtaken, which is good. At the end of the stage, David, Claire and Michelle get a temporary break from support duties and head to Thetford for a couple of hours' sleep (maybe it was even three).

23:09:23 – 115.28 miles done. Stage 11 – 12.45 miles. Earsham to Scole

Until Friday evening, Clare had thought that she was running stage 6 (ie 8 miles in the afternoon). However, she's doing 50% more and will be running at midnight. She grumbled a bit, but then rose to the task and actually rather enjoyed the odd nature of it all. There isn't much to see in the dark and things are starting to get a little repetitive for those of us who've been going since early morning Saturday, but on the plus side the navigation is simple and there aren't many hills. Clare brings the team into Sunday.

Sunday

00:55:34 – 127.73 miles done. Stage 12 – 19.67 miles. Scole to Thetford

Mike has drawn the short straw with the longest stage which is starting at quite an unsociable hour. The RNR website says that these long night-time stages are where the race is won and lost and someone warming up next to Mike seems to be taking it to heart, with a warm up more suited to a fast-paced 10k than the upcoming leg. Still it gives Mike someone to catch and overtake, twice. It seems that in the haste of rejigged teams, many of the night time runners haven't realised that they're supposed to wear high-viz vests – and Nick's also got most of them in his car (and he's asleep at his parents' house). The marshals force Mike to stop and fortunately the team can rustle up a vest and he can get going. We're threatened with a time penalty or even disqualification, but manage to avoid further sanction.

Nick's parents have kindly offered beds and food to half the team (I suspect they didn't fully appreciate when we'd be leaving/arriving and how hungry people would be, but many thanks Mr & Mrs Fairclough from Serpies). Andy, Peter, Sam and Giles head there now, briefly overlapping with Nick and the last group of runners (Dan, Grace, Nicola and Federico) who've been there for the afternoon/evening who will be joining the third car at the Thetford changeover.

03:19:56 – 147.40 miles done. Stage 13 – 13.25 miles. Thetford to Feltwell

There's a change of scenery for Dan's stage, which is through the mainly coniferous Thetford and Breckland forest. Just to keep everyone on their toes, we also need to add a mid-stage switch of the support vehicle and transfer one of the passengers in order for everyone to be in the right place for the final few changeovers.

05:03:47 – 160.65 miles done. Stage 14 – 7.27 miles. Feltwell to Wissington

Nick's allocated himself one of the antisocial legs, the last of the full night-time legs, although it is one of the shorter ones. He sets off with the passion of a Norfolk local on home turf. The forest is behind us and we move into the fens, with correspondingly flat stages (the total ascent over the final 35 miles is only 40 or 50metres). By the time Nick finishes, there's tinge of colour in the sky. As the miles are ticked off, the stagger between the teams unwinds and there are now generally several teams within sight at all times.

05:57:42 – 167 miles done. Stage 15 – 10.59 miles. Wissington to Downham Market

Grace's leg will take us through from night into morning. Mist is covering most of the rivers, dykes and drifting over some of the fields. It's quite unworldly. Sadly the route leaves the fenland countryside and joins the A10, although at this time of day it's thankfully not busy. As Grace is running, David and Claire are trying to catch up; they've got a fixed time for the rendezvous, but only a rough idea of location and the team is further ahead



than expected, having caught up most of the lost time on the overnight stages. David jumps on the bike and Stephane's car gets to head back to the hotel for some much needed rest.

07:22:23 – 178.51 miles done. Stage 16 – 5.49 miles. Downham Market to Stowbridge

Nicola makes swift work of the shortest leg. After crossing the River Ouse, the remainder of the leg is through typical fenland countryside. The time is now civilised enough that some of the locals are out walking dogs and staring at us; the demographic is rather different to that we encountered in Great Yarmouth the previous evening. The final changeover involves crossing the River Ouse twice, in opposite directions on the same bridge. Most of the support team head back to Lynnsport at King's Lynn, leaving Federico and David to finish the race – with the roles reversed from how it started 24 ½ hours before.

08:01:32 – 184.00 miles done. Stage 17 – 11.73 miles. Stowbridge to Kings Lynn

Federico has the glory leg back to the Lynnsport stadium. After a final couple of quaint fenland villages, the route heads off-road to the banks of the River Ouse and across grass heavy with morning dew. Some teams have brought mountain bikes, but we didn't, so are limited to a couple of places where the road gets near to the river. Unfortunately getting back to the river at the outskirts of Kings Lynn is harder than it looks and Federico had actually gone past David by the time he got to the river, so Federico ends up running without a supporting cyclist for much of the final 2 miles whilst David heads the wrong way down the river in a forlorn attempt to meet him. The section through Kings' Lynn is probably the most complex bit of navigation of the whole course, but it's well signed and the marshals forgive us (we weren't the only team who had the same problem). After nearly 26 hours, Federico hits the tartan of the track and the noise of the supporters. Since everyone's started at different times, every team gets to break the tape to ensure that the stage and overall winners do it and just because it's a bit of fun.

09:29:46 – 195.73 miles done. We've finished. Our time 25 hours 59 minutes 46 seconds is uncannily close to our estimate of 26 hours, so we're advised to stick around in case we've won the time estimate prize. Sadly we were pipped to the post by Thorney AC who were just 3 seconds out. Then it's time for some well-earned coffee and cake before the drive back to London.



Report – David Martin

Photos – Grace Barnett, Mike Harley, Nick Fairclough, Samantha Day, Stephane Schneider