



SCENTS

HISTORY

OF

Thames Hare & Hounds celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. Duncan Craig delves into the rich history of the world's oldest cross-country running club and looks to its future



‘Now remember, be considerate of other users of the common,’

says club president Mike Farmery, eyes fixed, and thumb poised, on the stopwatch in his right hand. He looks up and smiles through round, steamed-up glasses. ‘If, of course, there are any.’

We can see his point. The conditions are grim. Snow is falling in front of the clubhouse, and not that fluffy, festive stuff: this is spiky, nasty, sleet-snow that has the 70 or so of us on the start line hunched over and squinting. Underfoot is not so much waterlogged as just water, which the sub-zero overnight temperatures have crusted into ice in places. There’s a course under it somewhere; we just can’t make it out. Wind, ice, snow, rain: a full house of inclement winter conditions.

‘Proper cross-country weather,’ says a chap alongside me, eyes glinting. He’s wearing lightweight shorts and a running vest, and his skin is an alarming shade of blue.

We’re here for the Second Sunday 5, the monthly five-mile cross-country race across Wimbledon Common staged by Thames Hare & Hounds. The field is a mixed bunch: plenty of Thames shirts, their running tops bearing the club’s distinctive black saltire, but also a jovial bunch from Fulham Running Club, using the event as their Christmas jolly. Their colours are also black and white, albeit hoops. The untrained eye might conflate the two groups – but not those in the know. Because what we have here, side by side, is one of the country’s youngest clubs, and its oldest and most revered.

October 17 this year will mark the 150th anniversary of the first formal cross-country race staged by Thames. It departed from the King’s Head in Roehampton and was a handicap paper chase, a bloodless derivative of hunting in which ‘hares’ would set off first, marking their route with a trail of paper (the ‘scent’). The pack, or ‘hounds’, would then begin their pursuit, with the victor being the first to catch the hares.

The event was reported in the two biggest newspapers for Victorian recreation, *The Sportsman* and *Sporting Life*, and the club was born. What followed has been a century and a half of wild popularity, stagnation, self-imposed exile, reinvention, innovation and achievement. Its history has encompassed Olympic triumph, world records and pioneering moments in running history. And, in its unassuming way, it has helped to lay the foundations for much of what defines the modern running landscape, from Tough Mudder and parkrun to the London Marathon.

Following in the footsteps

Mike counts us off and we slide and splash our way south from the clubhouse across the Richardson Evans Memorial Fields, before turning sharply to trace the path of Beverley Brook. The brook has been a fixture of Thames races since the very earliest days. The 1867 Thames Handicap Steeplechase, the run organised by Thames Rowing Club that was the precursor to the formal foundation of the club, came along this way, with that seminal 1868 race following the opposite bank through what was then known, with a touch of Victorian elan, as the ‘Dismal Swamp’. I give up trying to skip over and around the standing water (the default of a road runner) and join my fellow competitors in ploughing through it.

I run with a sense of history. It’s humbling to think of young men



The earliest rules stated that ‘all members must be gentlemen by birth or education’



Clockwise from left: Hare & Hounds president Mike Farmery; a typical day at the races; the wall of fame; map showing the route of a race around Wimbledon Common

scuelling along these very same tracks – their gaits broadly the same, their breath also hanging in the damp winter air – barely a couple of years after the end of the American Civil War.

One notable difference (two, if we’re including the extravagant facial hair of the day) would have been in kit. Today, the club’s online store stocks Thames vests, wicking T-shirts and branded base layers. Back then, running vests were rather more rudimentary. Club founder Walter Rye came up with the black saltire and often this would just be pieces of fabric cursorily stitched on to the nearest available garment. In some cases, this approach persisted. ‘Right up until the 1970s, members had vests with two strips of black ribbon sewn on to them,’ says club historian and archivist Simon Molden. ‘Some of the older guys still wear them.’

From that first race, the popularity of cross-country running spread like a paper scent on a blustery December day. There’s a wonderful framed illustration in the clubhouse showing a group of strapping chaps hurdling a gate and running past a bewildered family gathered, open-mouthed, on their stoop. The antiquated caption



reads: ‘The Londoner is familiar with no sport so much as that of a paper-chase, for along even the most crowded streets of the city, in all sorts of weather, scantily-clad youths may be seen running for practice in the evening splashed from head to foot with mud.’ But this popularity was anathema to Rye, who also served as the first president of the club. He’d established Thames with a purist, gentleman-amateur ethos (the earliest rules stated that ‘all members must be gentlemen by birth or education’) and was thoroughly resistant to the idea of cross-country running as spectacle rather than simple athletic endeavour.

‘In the very early years we were strong and successful,’ says Molden. ‘We were involved in the establishment of the National Cross Country Championships, the very first of which was run in Epping Forest in 1877, and won two of the first four. But when Rye could not hold back the tide any longer, he withdrew Thames from the competitive athletics world and we became a backwater.’ By 1895 the club was almost dead. ‘The secretary was so pessimistic, he didn’t even publish a fixture book,’ says Molden.

Famous sons

What saved the club was an approach by Oxford and Cambridge universities the following year for Thames to host the annual cross-country Varsity match. It brought a renewed sense of purpose and – via the introduction that the Varsity race gave potential members to the club, its courses and its ethos – it also created a conveyor

belt of extravagantly gifted Oxbridge alumni that lasts to this day. A trio of these would become the club’s most celebrated members.

Alongside the kitchen counter in the clubhouse, from which I’ll be served some much-needed postrace tea, there’s a black-and-white shot of the famous three. They run in single file, in perfect synchronicity. At the front, wearing spectacles and a slightly goofy look, is Chris Brasher; bringing up the rear, stockier and more exuberantly coiffured, Chris Chataway; and between them, on his way to achieving what had been considered humanly impossible, Roger Bannister. It’s May 6, 1954, at Iffley Road, and Bannister, with his two friends and pacers, is in the process of breaking the four-minute mile. They run on a track – but the strength in their lean, wiry limbs was the product of years of cross-country.

This trio of Hare & Hounds went on to accomplish great feats, both on and off the track, establishing close links with Thames and helping to boost its profile. Retiring from competitive athletics with surprising haste, Roger Bannister was subsequently knighted for services to medicine. Brasher became Britain’s first athletics Olympic gold medallist in 20 years when he won the 3,000m steeplechase in 1956. He established the London Marathon in 1981, his magnetism helping to pull in the big names and make the race the unstoppable success it is today. Chataway was a government minister and the first BBC Sports Personality of the Year in 1954, mainly thanks to his extraordinary 5,000m victory on the cinder track of ➔



White City that year in which he beat European champion Vladimir Kuts in a world record of 13:51.6 – a moment also immortalised on the Thames clubhouse wall. There’s a wonderful story about Chataway turning out for a Thames-affiliated race in his later years. ‘Aren’t you Chris Chataway?’ a passer-by asked him, with something approaching awe in her voice. ‘I used to be,’ he responded. He loved the club, and particularly what he called its ‘streak of eccentricity’. ‘I remember Chataway as a member well into his 70s,’ says Molden, who joined Thames 20 years ago. ‘He’s much missed.’

These days, Thames’ membership is drawn from a far broader pool. Today’s race is open to all-comers for just a fiver, and if being a gentleman by birth or learning is still a prerequisite then I’m in trouble. Molden estimates that Oxford and Cambridge alumni now make up less than a third of members. But there’s still a steady flow of exceptional talent.

The women’s Varsity course record of 22:49 was set by Julia Bleasdale in 2003 and still stands. Nine years after storming around some of the very same tracks that I’m running today, Bleasdale was lining up for Great Britain in the final of both the 5,000m and 10,000m at the London Olympics. I catch up with Bleasdale from her base in the Swiss Alps. She loves it out there, and her Instagram feed is a paean to the beautiful mountains of the Engadine region. But her fondness for Thames endures, as does her membership. ‘It’s a bit like a family,’ she tells me. ‘I have a great affection for the club and those years with Thames after university were integral to my progression as an athlete.’

The appeal to her is not just the diversity, and renowned friendliness, of its members. It’s also the range of abilities. ‘Thames is so inclusive,’ she

says. ‘You get Olympians training with recreational joggers, and really good club runners with part-timers. There’s none of that overly competitive nature where people are trying to break one another. It’s just really healthy and non-threatening – it’s probably why they’ve been so successful and solid for all these years.’

Training for the track has a relentlessness, a fixation with splits and times and performance, that

Bleasdale admits can be emotionally draining. Cross-country can be the perfect antidote to that – a return to the grass roots, literally, and the joy of running for running’s sake. The variation in courses, terrain and conditions frees runners from the tyranny of the stopwatch, and helps them relax. Not that it’s a walk in the park, of course. ‘Cross-country comes back to that traditional approach,’ says Bleasdale. ‘Getting out there in the grit and the mud in all weathers and feeling the elements. There’s no pretence. Thames realises it’s about working your backside off, but enjoying it – enjoying that connection with the land in which you’re running. It’s very natural and it builds character.’

It’s in the mud

So, 150 years after Thames’ inaugural race, what is the state of the sport it pioneered? Cross-country is certainly in the shadow of its flashier, more telegenic cousin, athletics – rally-car racing to the latter’s Formula One. But it’s far from a quaint oddity. Seb Coe has spoken about the off-season conditioning benefits it can have, going so far as to say that until cross-country is a standard part of the preparation among middle and long-distance athletes (as it was for himself, Ovett, Cram and the like), Britain’s best runners would be forever hamstrung.

Many current GB athletes, notably Callum Hawkins and Laura Weightman, incorporate cross-country in their training. Coincidentally, at the same time as I’m making my ungainly way around the Second Sunday 5 course, Andrew Butchart is winning bronze at the European Cross-Country Championships in Slovakia to help Team GB finish top of the medal table.

Andrew Boyd Hutchison, author of the *Complete History of Cross Country Running* (Carrel Books), is delighted the sport is thriving, but he longs for courses to be more reflective of those very earliest races tackled by pioneering Hare & Hounds members. ‘The down and dirty has been missing,’ says Hutchison. ‘The hedge jumping, the ditches, the natural obstacles – the things that really differentiate the sport from a grass-track meet.’ To this end, he’s lobbying the IAAF for cross-country to be accepted into the Winter Olympics, and wants the organisation to stage tester races in snowy, wintry conditions in the likes of Norway and Switzerland.

When researching his book, Thames was one pilgrimage Hutchison had to make. To look around the clubhouse. To venture onto the Common. To experience what he calls ‘a hallowed site’. It was a 30C summer day, the tracks and paths around Wimbledon Common that he ran on were uncharacteristically firm, but he felt a strong sense of connection to the past. ‘You can feel the history, the names that have come through Thames, the influence they have, the trophies – the history is alive,’ he says. ‘If it weren’t for this motley crew of gentleman-amateur runners establishing and maintaining the sport, it may well not have expanded beyond England – and to the magnitude it is today.’

Hutchison believes it’s possible to draw a straight line from those Victorian pioneers all the way to Tough Mudder, and the countless other obstacle course races and mud runs. Parkrun, too. The sensation of, and appetite for, pitting oneself against the elements and the terrain, for having fun with friends and for getting drenched or filthy, is not a new one. He adds: ‘At Thames, you understand that the club is a special place forged out of the sweat and toil of a group of purists who did it purely for the fun of it rather than



‘The club is a special place forged out of the sweat and toil of a group of purists’

to be the best. If Birchfield Harriers is the New York Yankees of running, then Thames is something altogether more...authentic.’

The chasing pack

Birchfield is just one of the running clubs that developed in the slipstream of Thames, and its history is almost as storied; dissatisfaction among a group of runners at a bungled paper chase reputedly being the catalyst for its creation in 1877. More famous today for its track and field success – the likes of Denise Lewis, Mark Lewis-Francis and Ashia Hansen have graced its home turf of Alexander Stadium in Birmingham – its roots were in cross-country. ‘In the 1930s we won pretty much every cross-country race,’ says

club treasurer Suphi Bedevi. ‘But then track and field took off, with lots of our athletes starting to go to the Olympics. Our cross-country runners still do well, but we’re not dominating like we did in the good old days.’

Plenty of other clubs share similar histories, with the ‘harriers’ suffix a reliable indicator of cross-country provenance (the name comes from the small hounds used to chase hares in hare coursing). Tipton Harriers, with a whippet as its emblem and ‘swift and eager’ as its motto, marked its centenary in 2011. Blackheath & Bromley Harriers AC, meanwhile, which claims to be the oldest combined track and cross-country club in the world, marks its 150th next October. Other, so-called ‘hash’ clubs – an international movement – maintain the purist’s paper-chase tradition, using flour, chalk, sawdust or similar to mark a trail. And they don’t take themselves too seriously. Hash House Harriers describes itself as ‘a drinking club with a running problem’.

If you include closed institutions, then Thames’s claim to the mantle of world’s oldest cross-country club looks a little shaky. Shrewsbury School has records of races going back to October 16, 1831, and it’s clear paper-chasing had been going on for at least a ➔

Spanning history

150 years of Thames H&H in context

1868

Thames Hare & Hounds founded

1882

Australia beat England in a test match on English soil, giving birth to The Ashes

1888

The English Football League is founded

1896

First Modern Olympic Games held in Athens

1908

The marathon becomes 26.2 miles at the London Olympic Games

1930

First FIFA Football World Cup staged in Uruguay

1967

Kathrine Switzer is the first woman to (unofficially) run the Boston Marathon

1981

First London Marathon

2003

Paula Radcliffe sets women’s marathon world record at London

2004

First parkrun held in Bushy Park, London



Clockwise from top left: The Second Sunday 5 on Wimbledon Common; the grand history of Hare & Hounds; club runner James McMullan has a lot to live up to





Clockwise from left: veteran Andy Robinson (mile PB: 4:53.14); down and out to the day's event; taking no chances with gear (it can get muddy out there); Hare & Hounds on the run

decade before that. 'Drawings from the time show boys in top hats and long trousers haring around the countryside,' archivist Robin Brooks-Smith tells me from the Shropshire public school. There's no hint of any animosity that Thames took the idea and, well, ran with it, turning this endearingly eccentric pastime into a global sport. 'Thames is a very august institution,' says Brooks-Smith.

These days, new running clubs sprout up all the time, but in a saturated and increasingly diverse running market, success is far from guaranteed. 'New clubs turn up, do well and disappear again,' says Bedevi. He believes clubs such as Birchfield and Thames have 'an important role to play' – but a distinguished history is no guarantee of a viable future.

Alive and kicking

Six or seven years ago, Thames found itself at a crossroads, Farmery admits. The club needed to be true to its roots, and to its broad demographic of members, but recruitment was slipping and movements such as parkrun were gathering pace. 'We'd taken our eye off the ball,' says Farmery. 'We are unique, we are the oldest and we will always seek to maintain our character rather than be mass participation. But we recognise we need to move with the times.'

The monthly Second Sunday 5 race that I'm competing in was one such initiative to emerge from that period of soul-searching, and the encouraging numbers suggest they've pitched it just right. There are shirts for multiple finishers, à la parkrun, and a fun, irreverent tone that recognises that today's recreational off-road runner is far removed from the gentlemen amateur of yesteryear. 'Please don't wee in the bushes,' the website informs participants. 'The wombles don't like it.'

Weeing in the bushes is the last thing on my mind as I slide, splash and grimace my way through the final mile of the course. The field has strung out, but approaching the last mile I hear a panting behind me. Then, a few hundred metres from the finish, 55-year-old Phyllis Flynn flies past me. I'm not too upset; it transpires that Flynn's PB for this distance is considerably faster than mine and she's been taking it easy in the atrocious conditions. Until 1981, women weren't permitted to join Thames, which seems extreme until you remember that certain golf clubs are only rectifying that unpleasant anachronism today. Now, active membership of the club is a healthy 50/50, says Molden.

I catch up with Flynn in the clubhouse afterwards. She's here with her 19-year-old daughter, Hannah-Mai. Neither are members of Thames, but both are advocates of the running-club ethos that Thames helped to forge, and no strangers to Thames's history. 'You can't fail to

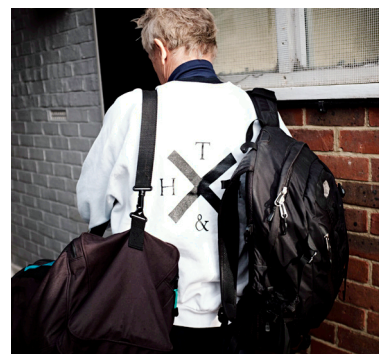
appreciate it, can you?' says Flynn, cradling a piping-hot tea.

The showers are also piping hot. Amid the chilblains and rivers of mud, running talk swirls around with the steam. Upcoming events; niggling injuries; today's course; next week's race. Then it's back to the main clubhouse room for tea and muffins fuelled atmosphere.

I do a lap of the room, scrutinising the trophies, the pictures, the names on the honours boards. One catches my eye – a JW Bryant, who dominated the club's 10-mile category in the 1970s. This is former club president John Bryant, the one-time deputy editor of *The Times* and editor-in-chief of *Telegraph Newspapers*, as well as a sports historian, author and coach to Zola Budd. 'He was a ferocious runner,'




'Drawings from the time show boys in top hats and long trousers haring around the countryside'



says Farmery. 'I think he was about 2:15 for the marathon.'

It's another example of the calibre and range of characters Thames has been able to count among its membership. Farmery tells a tale about a break-in at the clubhouse some years ago. It was such a rarity that no-one could recall who at the club was in charge of insurance. It transpired that it was Sir Peter Miller – then chairman of Lloyd's of London. Sir Peter joined in 1949, and is still a member.

So how is the club celebrating its sesquicentenary? There'll be dinners, a Thames mouth-to-source run and they'll be recreating a run over that first course (modern development permitting). But largely this major landmark will be marked in a restrained, well-attended and, above all, fun manner. As is the club way.

'It's funny,' says Farmery, 'no-one seems to leave Thames.' Like the Mafia? He chuckles. 'Yes, I suppose you could say that.' And with that, we pick up our kit and head out into the snow, warmed – as generations of Thames Hare & Hounds have been before us – by a sense of accomplishment and a muddy camaraderie. 

For more information on the club, go to thameshareandhounds.org.uk