

# Exploring the Oldest Cross-Country Club in the World

The Thames Hare and Hounds turn 150 years old next year. Traditions, landmarks, and history... What we learned from the sport's first gentleman-amateur club on the eve of their sesquicentennial.



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First Club Photograph: 24th July 1872.

Simon Molden, current secretary for the Thames Hare and Hounds, sits on a wooden bench on the interior of the club headquarters and begins the story: “The Thames Hare and Hounds were the first amateur cross-country running club, founded in 1868 — but the identity of the club was notably different than what might be found today...”

Mr. Molden was the gate-keeper on this warm summer afternoon on the edge of Wimbledon Common... a day unequivocally opposite of what might be found in the traditional late-autumn for cross-country running. And yet, within the confines of the club quarters — quiet, undisturbed, and basked in the rays of the afternoon sun —

there lay a deep and storied history that unveiled a link to a forgotten time steeped in distance running lore.



The origins of the Thames Hare and Hounds emerge perfectly with the pinnacle of “gentlemanly” outdoor sports in the mid-nineteenth century — those activities practiced by educated individuals who could afford to compete during leisure time in contests like rowing and cricket for the love of the game and for the thrill of competition alone. Truthfully, the longevity of the sport of cross-country today (along with its worldwide acceptance), despite its enjoyable and “rough and tumble” qualities, would never have been believed by the audience at its inception. James Ryan, author of the original club annals, summed up the occasion perfectly in September 1968:

*“Walter Rye, our founder, would have been surprised to be told that in due time his club would prepare to celebrate its centenary, and that someone would be found to write its history. In 1887, he wrote, “The future of paperchasing is doubtful.” For years, he fought a*

*losing battle for the ‘Gentleman Amateur,’ but this was essentially a fight for the purity of amateur sport. His idea of the gentleman amateur was decisively rejected, but his ideals prevailed. So that the father of cross country running would today be the first to acknowledge that his myriad followers were truly amateurs and gentlemen.”*



Paper-chasing, the act of running through the woods following a shredded paper trail laid by ‘Hares’ (and pursued by ‘Hounds’ ... hence the namesake of the club), had been almost exclusively undertaken by boys in the English grammar schools in the 19th century. That is until founder Walter Rye decided to host an ‘Open Steeplechase’ on Wimbledon Common in 1867 (inspired in part by Thomas Hughes account of the game at Rugby School). Roughly three years later, in January 1871, the *Sporting Gazette* filled in the background:

*“A little more than two years ago, some long distance runners of the London Athletic Club and Thames Rowing Club were struck with the idea that it would be practicable to institute paperchases in the Metropolitan District similar to those long in vogue at Rugby, Marlborough, and other public schools, and on 17th October 1868 the first open “hare and hounds” ever run took place in the southwest of London from Roehampton under the title of the “Thames Hare and Hounds.”*

*The idea soon spread and paperchases became comparatively common all round London, especially at Hampstead and Hornsey, but for a long while the Thames Hare and Hounds were the only club instituted solely for paperchasing, the other runs being identical affairs got up by different cricket or football clubs.”*

In the years since, ‘steeplechases’ became almost exclusively tied to the track (adapted by the English University Sports to surmount barriers and a water challenge,

standardized to about two-miles of running), while paper-chasing faded away to reflect only the most essential component of the original game: a timed run home through the woods. 'Challenge Cup Races' a more formal adaptation of this practice instituted by Thames Hare and Hounds also became popular, with short-course and long-course versions run annually on their home course on the Common since 1874.



Within it all Thames Hare and Hounds became the beating heart of the 'amateur' bastion behind cross-country running. Soon after inaugurating, Walter Rye had the club pull out of national competition to preserve the integrity of the gentleman-amateur movement. And when attendance dwindled, it was a resurgence and recapitulation towards a dual club-meeting between Oxford and Cambridge on the Common (believed to be England's second-oldest club cross-country meeting, behind the English National Championship) that brought the club back to prominence and helped to preserve membership through the 20th century.

Molden claims that about 50% of current club members come from these two esteemed Universities, and names like Brasher, Chataway and Bannister confirm that the *Oxbridge* tradition has held strong in the years since. In fact, Chataway's recount of his connection to the club (and subsequent commentary), serves as a wonderful insight into Thames Hare and Hounds through the years:

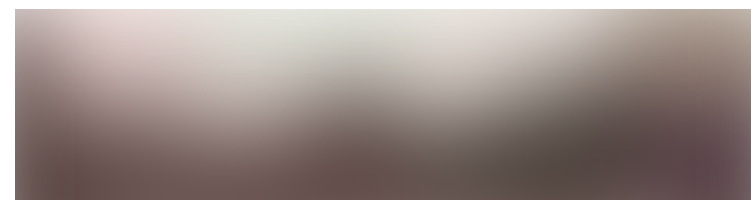
*"My first acquaintance with Thames Hare and Hounds was an unhappy one. I had won the University Race, which was a nice surprise. But then came the dinner. I wore my father's dinner jacket, which was too big for me and had rather obviously seen better days. Our hosts were grand and immaculate and mostly very old. Could these people have really spent time sloshing around in the mud on Wimbledon Common? What was I doing there?"*

*One of the old and immaculate rose to his feet and gave a speech — witty and elegant — praising me for my victory and eventually presenting me with a handsome silver rose bowl. And then the moment of horror. Clearly I was expected to reply. I stood up. Everybody looked at me. Absolutely nothing came into my head. An eternity passed — slowly. I just said "Good night." and sat down. Everybody was very nice. But the humiliation lasted for days. I just wished I had not won the race.*

*The story continues of the club's remarkable evolution from a fierce and increasingly isolated defender of the worst sort of amateurism, determined to preserve an enclave for gentlemen, safe from tradesmen and others likely to be contaminated with professionalism, into a successful running club.*

*There is no doubt about the credentials of older members, who shine in veterans' races. The old hip baths and jugs of hot water in the pub attic have given way to modern showers. Most remarkably of all, women have been admitted. If I had forecast that at my first dinner, the speech would have been even more of a disaster.*

*At a recent Olympics, Julia Bleasdale became arguably the most successful distance runner of either sex in the club's hundred year old Olympic history, finishing in the first eight at both the 5,000 and 10,000 meters. So the club has modernized, yet it is still not exactly like any other club. There is still a streak of eccentricity. It is not every running club, for example, that has a Carver and Commissary General."*





The 1948 University Race start (left). Roger Bannister (furthermost right) and Chris Brasher (number 9), feature. The "Watersplash" in 1946 (right).

Other traditions have persisted, and the record verifies many from the club's early history. With the strong ties to the Golden Triangle, an "old boy" culture and the "gentleman amateur" ethos produced a classically timeless profile within the club that went beyond the running — dating back to its inception. True even today (the club doesn't employ a track and field arm to their activities; only cross-country, road, and fell running), there is a healthy 'spirit' outside of the physical exertion on the Common, and this has been true for years. As one example, Frank Rye, Walter Rye's son and former Thames president, remarked after the club joined the Southern Counties Athletic Association in 1923 that "racing" was taking too a predominant place in the club's activities to the detriment of paperchasing.



The clubhouse door is inauspicious (left), while the original "Watersplash" exists near the current clubhouse, but now has a bridge (right).

Meanwhile, *The King's Head* in nearby Roehampton, with its inn, pub, and attached stable-attic, served as the club's headquarters for more than a hundred years and

played host to the revelry. John Bryant, a more recent president of the Thames Hare and Hounds, wrote of his experience in the 1960s:

*“When as a young Thames member straight out of my undergraduate chaos at Oxford, I wandered into the Thames Hare and Hounds’ headquarters, I took a step back in time.*

*Little had changed, it seemed, in the century that had passed by this ancient club. The steaming hip-baths, the attendant who would pour boiling water from huge enamel jugs (and whom you had to tip half a crown), the buzz of the quaint inn which had been for a hundred years or so the Headquarters, the smell of liniment, sweat and dampness, all spoke of a vanished world.*

*I was aware that this club had produced great runners. Just a dozen years before I joined, they had trotted out Roger Bannister, who had shared these same hip-baths to run the world’s first four minute mile. It was only a decade since Chris Brasher had romped through the fields to win Olympic Gold; his victory built on the back of many Thames handicap races. I sat on these benches in the changing room alongside the men who had fought their way through two world wars but still found time to run on Wimbledon Common. They carried with them echoes and traditions of the past, but more than that they brought with them a love of cross-country running and the friendships that the sport seems to bring.”*





After the "Great Fire" (allegedly due to arson), the club found their new Headquarters after 1975.

To maintain the sense of tradition and culture within the club, it was true that accounts spanning years or generations felt right at home in the modern day as they had at the time of their writing. Club practices that would seem quaint and dated were undertaken well into the 20th century. Written sixty years *prior* to Bryant's first impression of Thames, a member named Geoffrey Dawson gave his account:

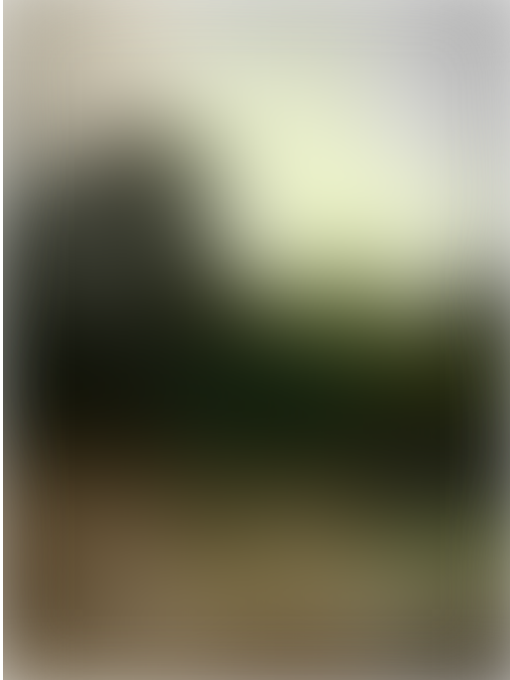
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*"I remember first turning up at the King's Head in 1903, coming in after the run and climbing upstairs to the changing room, sitting in a hip-bath. All the older members, yelling at our attendant, one Marlow by name, a Dickensian figure, who appeared to me to be always half-tight, at least chronically fuddled, hoisting huge cans of boiling water upstairs for members to wash in.*

*Down in the bar, I was introduced to my first port negus before we all sat down to supper... These suppers after the runs were a great feature and I never missed one if I could help it and well remember the charming and friendly welcome given to a new and rather shy young student.*

*There was a good deal of quiet badinage among the older members at the table, and I remember Frank Rye's clever and acid comments on occasion and the roars of laughter that greeted the end of some witty story or anecdote. A joke that was always practiced on a new member was to get him in conversation to mention the 'forbidden word'. I fell an easy victim myself and was fined one shilling on the spot, amidst great merriment."*

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The Windmill on Wimbledon Common still stands today (left), and was a crucial landmark from the very beginning (right).

Behind it all, the running on Wimbledon Common kept the beating heart going. And if nothing else, produced another reminder of shared history — not only for Thames, but for the totality of cross-country running alumni in the world.

To prove this, the account of the very first Thames steeplechase in December 1867 can still be retraced today. Observe an account 150 years old:

*"It was nearly 5 p.m. before the twelve starters (out of an entry of twenty-one) were sent on their way. No doubt they were helped by the moon as they splashed their way by the side of Beverly Brook through the Dismal Swamp to Coombe Bridge, where E.C. Rye was pointsman to check their names and turn them sharp left up the hill and as straight as they could make it to the Windmill."*

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So on a sunny afternoon, miles and years and strides away from the next race — the echoes of footsteps preserving the history of this fine club only served to verify what

was well known: cross-country running really was timeless, and one could only hope it would remain as celebrated and unchanged 150 years in the future.

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**Andrew Boyd Hutchinson** is the author of “*The Complete History of Cross-Country Running*” (available now for pre-order on Amazon — release set for January 2, 2018) and the lead contributor to the site [www.therealxc.com](http://www.therealxc.com).

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