

BLACKHEATH HARRIERS

One of my aims during my OE in London was to find a good harrier club then get a job in the area. Graeme had competed for Cambridge in a match against Blackheath Harriers and recommended that I should try them. So after touring during the 1959 summer I contacted them and on 9 September travelled down to their headquarters at Hayes in Kent, met the members and being Wednesday night went out for a run with them – and decided to join!

Blackheath is one of the oldest harrier clubs, being formed in 1869 at the Green Man pub in Peckham adjacent to Blackheath, a large open space in SE London not far from Greenwich. After various moves, finally in 1927 they arrived at Hayes in Kent and purchased a property at 56 Bourne Way not far from the railway station. For me this was highly convenient as Hayes was the end of the line with frequent trains from Charing Cross from where District Line tubes went to Earls Court. Also along from Charing Cross at 415 The Strand was NZ House where I collected my mail. The clubhouse was 2 storied with change rooms & ablutions on the ground floor, club rooms on the top floor with a bar & kitchen – really lovely. A large car park and adjoining caretaker's house.

I hitchhiked up to Cambridge and borrowed Graeme's scooter "The Imp" to then scout out for a job in the Hayes area. The role I was offered by the Office Furniture & Partitioning Co at Croyden was as their London Representative, so it made sense to live in London instead of the daily commute from Hayes. Hence my decision to live at the OVC in Earls Court meant most training was at Hyde Park, apart from weekly Wednesday nights with Blackheath.

So I duly signed up and was elected a member on 5 October 1959. Unlike NZ the sport in the UK had separate organisations & clubs for men & women, so Blackheath was male only. Whilst the clubhouse was in a built-up area a path opposite led up onto the common where all races started with courses of 5, 7 ½ & 10 miles across an undulating green belt of farms, woods & country lanes. Back at the clubhouse the steward had the boiler going for the single shower to wash off the mud then you climbed into one of the nine 4ft square x 2ft deep tiled baths for a luxurious soak! Upstairs afternoon tea was served, the bar opened and those who stayed entertained with a "smoke concert" – members doing items. As the only Kiwi member in their first 100 years I was always prevailed upon to perform a "Native Dance" – usually Pokarekare Ana & Kamate Kamate !

On 17 October I had my first race – the 5 Mile championship and I had realised that there were a number of farm stone or wood fences that all the Brits climbed which, as a Kiwi I could vault, so used to gain advantages! I came 5th, but with the sealed handicap came 3rd and was awarded one of the club silver spoons. I had avoided the handicapper, who thought I was only 19, but he soon assessed me and it never again won another top handicap placing! Afterwards I was introduced to a small, slight man, thick glasses, who was our most famous member – Sydney Wooderson. He was the UK's champion middle distance athlete of the 1930s – the favourite for the 1936 Berlin Olympics 1500m, won by Jack Lovelock. Unfortunately he had badly twisted his ankle previously and didn't make the final. Quite a remarkable man, very humble, who bridged the war years and in 1948 won the England National CC title over 71/2 miles.

I had two good seasons 1959/60 & 60/61 with them, travelling down to Hayes most Wednesdays for training, usually around the country roads, passing Biggin Hill airfield, famous in WW2 and the London Police Dog School which always got them barking. Being midweek I was always amused in

the change rooms to see the “City Men’s” bowler hats, wing collar shirts & brollys etc.! You could book previously for an excellent 2 course supper afterwards. The Club Captain, Alan Wood, who lived at Hammersmith, had a car and used to drop me back to Earls Court. With my job finishing early afternoon I was able to run from Earls Court along West Cromwell Road and up Exhibition to Hyde Park and train around the Guards horse rides and into Kensington Gardens. That first winter London still had smogs and the heavy sand horse rides had trees each side which enabled me to keep in the middle. When I got back to the OVC I had black around my nostrils and my track top stank of soot etc – not very healthy. Fortunately that changed when smokeless fuel & zones were introduced.

During the week you received a card informing you that you had been selected to compete for the A team on Saturday and meet generally at a station where the captain would have the tickets. I kept my name on the list as Blackheath had traditional matches against another famous club or clubs in the Greater London area and as far afield as Oxford & Cambridge. At Oxford we changed at the famous Iffley Road track where Roger Bannister broke the 4 minute mile and at Cambridge (after Graeme had left) at the Fenners track and across the dreaded winter ploughed fields with tea afterwards in their Captains room in college, toasting crumpets over the gas fire!

We had Mob Matches against Orion (Epping Forest), Ranelagh(Richmond Park) & South London Harriers(Coulsdon –South Downs) ; all these were home & away alternate years, as were the other matches. All members of both clubs started and counted for places – the club with the smallest number, less two, was the final tally for each. At Blackheath we had the 5, 7 ½ & 10 mile championships and I also competed in the South of the Thames, Southern Counties and English Nationals. Our top men were John “Kipper” Herring (competed for GB in the 10,000m at 1964 Tokyo Olympics) and John Baldwin. I hovered around 3rd/4th with Tony Weeks- Pearson and Alan Brent.

On 12 March 1960 I competed in the English Nationals at West Bromwich, a dreary Midlands coal town, with snow on the surrounding slag heaps. The special train from Paddington had carriages marked with the club’s names, similarly the schools used at West Bromwich had classrooms allocated for clubs. The 7 ½ mile course was three laps of a large playing field area and adjacent rough land; 650 starters, 93 teams lined up in single file in roped start pens, I was 4th inline for Blackheath so had a slow start, running in single file for ages, often jumping over some poor bod who had fallen over. Being used to the NZ Champs with 50 starters it was very impersonal with this huge crowd. Officials around the course would call out rough placings so I managed to keep my pace and finished 149th, our 3rd man home and our team was 16th. My first experience of the funnel finish. Back at the school, out on the tennis court quadrangle 100s of tin bath were set out with the local fire brigade filling them with hot water for you to try and wash the mud off. You can imagine all these naked men shivering in the winter cold!

The other memorable event was the famous annual London- Brighton Relay on 9 April 1960, approx. 50 miles starting at Westminster Bridge, with 12 in each team for which there was keen competition during the weeks before. I ran lap 11, past Gatwick Airport and the Club Gazette reports “ Stevens struggled to hold 4th place.....” and we finished in 5th place. My social life at Earls Court had affected my training! This was true classic event with amazing sponsorship by the “News of the World” newspaper group which included a lavish afternoon tea at one of the top Brighton Hotels.

When Graeme came down from Cambridge in early 1960 and stayed with me at the OVC he also joined Blackheath and ran with me in Club events and some outside races, but after the stress of his PhD finals and the ongoing effect of the flu epidemic he was never able to show his true ability. But he enjoyed the camaraderie and when many of his/our Victoria University friends arrived in London they too came down to Hayes, some to run, but to enjoy the social life. We were able to secure tickets for them to attend the Annual Blackheath Dinner. This was held in the Members Dining Room at the House of Commons. Before I arrived in 1959 the host had been the local MP – none other than the previous Prime Minister Harold McMillan, in 1960 our host was Sir Wavell Wakefield – the famous rugby man. A black tie affair, we were given a tour of the Commons & Lords before gathering in the ante room for drinks, the our Kiwi group were seated at the Club Captain's table – an honour remarked on by some! As you can imagine it was a most memorable affair. In 1961 I was able to secure tickets for my OVC friends and on leaving Earls Court had great delight in saying "House of Commons please cabbie!" The cloak room attendant at Westminster looked askance when Clive Walker handed over his duffle coat. Our host that year was MP Chris Chataway – the famous British athlete – part of Bannister's 4 minute mile success.

In 1961 my job at the OVC with shift work & weekends meant I could only intermittently train or get out to Hayes, but after my mid-year trip to South Africa and decision to go home in December I visited Blackheath to say farewell and also paid up Life Membership – not knowing what the future held! This entitled me to receive a copy of the Club "Gazette" which kept me informed and whilst I still had a UK bank account made an annual donation.

Back in NZ one of the bonuses' in my job as a Travel Consultant was Educational and if they routed via London I endeavoured to visit Blackheath. A memorable occasion in 1969 was a match against Thames Hare & Hounds – claimed to be the original harrier club, the preserve of Oxford & Cambridge graduates. Their headquarters behind the Kings Head at Roehampton was unique for their ablutions – they had many ancient hip baths that you sat in like an armchair to wash yourself. Their course was on Richmond Park and I competed for Blackheath. I was honoured with the attendance of one of their old members, Sir Ian Maclennan, who as British High Commissioner in NZ had become our Scottish Patron and before retiring presented us with a cup in his name that, with hall marks, is the only genuine silver one we had. He had specially come up to London to see me and presented me with a copy of Thames H&H history.

When I was elected to the IAAF Cross Country Committee in 1991 I attended the annual World XC Champs – often held in Europe and often caught up with Blackheath folk supporting the event, also Ian Wilson as GB Team Manager. Graham Botley was the long time organiser of GB Supporters Tours to all the world athletic events and always invited me to their social gatherings. At the 1990 Commonwealth Games in Auckland we had a breakfast gathering of 15 "Heathens", some also being members of competing teams. In 1995 en route to the WXC in Durham I stayed with him and he invited me as a guest to attend the annual Vice President's Supper, during which I was elected a Vice President, an honour that I have greatly appreciated.

The sport in the UK finally reorganised the men & women into one organisation and Blackheath merged with Bromley Ladies AC to become Blackheath & Bromley Harriers & Athletics Club and even elected Lady Presidents!

In subsequent visits to the UK with Helen I was able to introduce her to the Club & members. Then in September 2009 we attended a special supper when I was presented with my 50 year membership plaque. I was particularly honoured with the attendance of 17 Past Presidents – only 2 of whom had been my contemporaries. I was particularly pleased to have as my guests Grant Wheeler and his wife Fiona make the trip up from Chichester where they lived. Grant of course was not only my Groomsman at our wedding, but our great Scottish Champion and member of the first two NZ Teams to the World XC Champs in 1963 & 65 where he ran against John Baldwin and the whole team visited Hayes. Ian Wilson in introducing my Award had dug up an extraordinary amount of my history which completely astounded me, but I was still able to perform the obligatory haka!

Over the years many have visited Wellington and/or stayed with us : Don Hopgood, Pauline & Ian Wilson, Denis Lawrie, Tim & Vicki Soutar, Margaret & John Baldwin. I keep in touch by visiting the Club website each Monday to check on weekend results and other news. In 2019 the Club celebrated 150 years with a dinner – again at the House of Commons. Helen and I planned a visit to include this, but as the culmination of the season's celebrations the date was set for November – too late & cold for us! Pity, as the only Kiwi in their first 100 years I had not attended that dinner in 1969, held as the guest of the London Lord Mayor in the Mansion House, as we were newly married and expecting our first child! However, one of the other events Blackheath was a 100 x 1 mile track relay and challenged other clubs to participate. I organised Scottish to do this in Wellington and struggled to obtain 100 genuine Scottish runners. Sir Ian Maclennan, our Patron, offered, so did the first lap, which gave us wide publicity in the media. He handed over to Graeme and I ran the 100th lap, so as Life Members of Blackheath we provided the link. Unfortunately it was a terrible, windy day at the exposed Evans Bay track and our time was not competitive, but Blackheath kindly sent us a commemorative baton.

In the 1980s – 2000 the track & field side has become one of the top clubs in England mainly due to the creation of the BEES (ie B&Bs) Academy for youngsters. Thanks to the devoted efforts of coaches, managers, officials etc these have matured into leading athletes that have seen their teams win National age grade titles and represent GB with distinction at European Championships. Two athletes in particular: Dina Asher-Smith and Adam Gemili – both medallists at major world events. With the summer sport based at Norman Park in Bromley the Club decided in 2019 to sell the clubrooms at Hayes and rebuild a new complex at the Norman Park track.

REPORTS



Above: The Blackheath team of (l. to r.) Barry O'Gorman, Les Roberts, Joe Clare, Jr., Ian Wilson, Chris Woodcock, Joe Clare, Sr. (team manager).

LE QUESNEY 1980

When "they" ask you, "Why do you do it?" the response varies with your current mood or the situation, but after a weekend like this a ready answer is easy. "To travel with a group of good friends

metre laps of the town. We followed at a respectful distance. Out of the town we went, on a quiet but wide road. It was too warm for an early effort. After about an hour's running we entered the pine

