



## RUNNING AND ATHLETICS

The history of cross-country running at Lingfield dates back as far as the late 1880s.

The East Grinstead Observer records a Sports Day being held by the Lingfield Cricket and Cyclists Clubs on August Bank holiday 1889. The 300 entries included many notable runners. However the competitors were reported as being somewhat disappointed with the prizes and would not have entered if they had seen them first. Frustratingly, the local paper does not report what the prizes were. The One Mile flat handicap was won by G H Pillin of Brighton AC, winning by 10 yards (he had apparently recently come second in the world championships). As well as athletics and cycle races there were events such as Throwing the Cricket Ball and Kicking the Football. The paper reports that in the latter event only three succeeded in getting the ball away at all.

On August Bank Holiday 1894 the Lingfield Cyclist Touring Club held their sixth annual sports day at Lingfield. Again it was a mixture of cycle handicaps and athletics. The winner of the 100 yards race was disqualified when it was found that he was not an amateur and the prizes were re-distributed. Due to the wet weather the cycle races suffered many spills. The three-mile team cycle race between Lingfield and East Grinstead proved very exciting, and was eventually won by the East Grinstead team. When distributing the prizes Mr J Gow commented on the advantages of athletic exercises as 'they kept young fellows in good healthy training and cycling enabled them to get about and visit many an interesting spot to which they would otherwise be strangers'.

At the beginning of March 1895 the Cyclists Touring Club held a Ball, reported by the local paper as 'an annual event which has become a popular social institution.' The Ball took place in the Lingfield Hotel where a supper of excellent character was provided. The paper also reported that "...the Grinstead contingent turned out in strong force and were accorded a hearty welcome." Dancing began at 8pm and "was sustained with unbroken energy until 4am". As the music was supplied by Miss Allin on piano and Mr C Baker on cornet one wonders what this combination sounded like.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June 1895 a meeting was called to form an athletics club in Lingfield, extending the existing Cycling Club. It was to be called the 'Lingfield Cycling and Athletics Club'. The Committee met to make arrangements for an annual athletics sports day to be held as usual on the August Bank Holiday.

This sports event was held at Haylands on a prepared track course of five laps to the mile and attracted about 1500 spectators.

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Once again the event was dogged by bad weather. The rain occasionally descended in torrents which “interfered with the general comfort and was the main cause of abandonment of the proposed team race between East Grinstead and Lingfield”.

The programme was a mixture of athletics and cycling handicaps. Twelve runners started in the one-mile handicap but only two finished; the winner being H Marchant who won by a couple of yards. There was a splendid variety of prizes awarded, ranging from prizes for 1<sup>st</sup> place of an inkstand; copper kettle; a liqueur case and case of fish carvers. Among the prizes for 2<sup>nd</sup> place were a glass pickle jar; cigar cabinet; and a case of spoons, while the prizes for 3<sup>rd</sup> place were a butter dish; preserve dish and a dinner gong. The day ended with a ‘capital’ concert in a marquee that was much enjoyed by everyone.

By 1896 when the Lingfield Cycling and Athletic Club held its eighth annual amateur athletic meeting the number of local cyclists had declined and all the cycle races were abandoned. The entries for the sports, however, were numerous and the races ranged from 100 yard sprint; 220 yards; quarter-mile, one-mile walk; kicking the football; high jump; sack race; 220 yards hurdles; 220 yards veterans; Band Race; Three legged race; obstacle race and climbing the greasy pole - for which William Wilkins won a leg of mutton.

At the end of February 1902 the Southern Cross-Country Championships were held at Lingfield as a forerunner to the Nationals to be held a fortnight later. There were 189 runners and the 10-mile race was won by Alfred Shrubbs in 39 mins 44 4/5 secs with Albert Aldridge seconds behind him.

On Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> March 1902 the English National Cross-Country Championships were held at Lingfield. The East Grinstead Courier reported that this 10-mile race held at Lingfield Racecourse and beyond was attended by 2,000 people. 159 runners competed and all but only 30 completed the course.

The two main rivals were the legendary Alfred Shrubbs from Horsham and Albert Aldridge from Redhill. The newspaper comments: “... the public got a splendid sight of a struggle which will be remembered as one of the best ever promoted by the Association.”

The rivalry was just as intense as that of Coe and Ovett in the 1970s. Shrubbs and Aldridge were side by side at the 3-mile mark and were stride for stride coming up to 7 miles until Shrubbs broke away and won the race in 56 minutes 56 seconds with a 200 yard lead.

The Championship was held once more at Lingfield on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1905. This time Albert Aldridge won the title (Shrubbs by this time had gone professional and was at the time in Australia). The paper commented that the attendance was lower that year and the London trains brought down very few although local attendance had quadrupled.

A fortnight before, the Southern Cross-country Championships were also held at Lingfield, although a cold wind and drizzling rain kept many away. This race was also won by Albert Aldridge.

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A local runner, David Gorringe, interviewed in 1980 when he was 96 years old tells of sports being held on August Bank Holiday:

*“...Generally we used to have a five mile cross country and that; I used to go in for that because I was a long distance runner. And then you came down the Hare and Hounds; they shifted it from one pub to another, you know round the village. I gave up running here and I joined the Crawley Harriers and used to run in the Southern Counties and the National I ran in, and South of Thames Cross-country Championships. That was before the First War.”*

Mr Gorringe continues *“... It never used to hurt me to run and I used to generally do ten miles in well under the hour. The fastest ever I done a mile was four minutes twenty-eight seconds, well that wasn't bad. But I used to run in the time of Alfred Shrubbs, the famous long distance runner. Of course we picked it up as boys because they used to come to Lingfield and run the ten miles there you see. On the racecourse and through the apple orchards. You see, ten miles cross-country it used to be Alfred Shrubbs, Albert Aldridge, and a man named Pearce from the Essex Beagles. They generally used to get first, second and third. Alfred Shrubbs, he came from Horsham and Aldridge came from Redhill. I knew Aldridge, he was a good man, a good runner; but you know he wouldn't stop having his pint. He took me for many a run after I joined the Crawley Harriers; he used to take me seven mile and a half. He'd make me run too. He never run at his best, you know but he'd run fast enough that I got tired.*

The Dormans Land Whit-Monday Sports in 1912 included a Two-Miles Handicap race open to residents within 6 miles of Dormans Land Church. This appeared to be an annual event and by 1920 had moved to the August Bank Holiday.

In 1964 the newly-formed Dormansland Athletics Club organised a 3-mile road race at the Dormansland Carnival on Whit Monday. This was won by Trevor Crowhurst, with Dave Foreman second and Robin Atkinson third.

The present-day Lingfield Running Club was formed in 1983 and today has over 120 members. Their original home was the Lingfield Leisure Club on the site of the old tannery, until that site was sold for development. Since 2008 the club now meets at the Victoria Sports & Social Club.

The modern Lingfield Marathon started in August 1981 as the brainchild of the late Derrick Delaney, initially as a project to purchase a Community Minibus for the use of everyone in the area.

The first Lingfield Marathon started and finished at the Red Barn on August Bank Holiday Monday 1981. The local MP Sir Geoffrey Howe, who was also Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, started the race of 350 runners for the 10-mile race through Lingfield and Dormansland and back to the Red Barn. There were check-points at the local pubs where runners had their sponsorship forms stamped and some stopped for a pint before continuing. The winner that year was Alan Dean in a time of 1:1:19.

Since that date the Lingfield Marathon has become an annual event. The minibus, with hydraulic lift for wheelchairs, was eventually purchased in 1983.

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In 1983 the race started from the Racecourse and was full half-marathon of 13 miles. It has since reverted back to 10 miles and in subsequent years the 6-mile fun run and 6-mile walk were added.

The first minibus purchased in 1983 was completely wrecked in the 1987 hurricane when 3 large trees fell on it where it was parked overnight. The Committee managed to purchase a second-hand one from Alder Valley Bus Company with the generous help of two anonymous donors.

The fund raising continued and the team was eventually able to purchase the present minibus, which is currently in continuous use.

From 1984 the race has started from St Piers (Young Epilepsy) and in 1987 the date was moved to the Sunday before May Bank Holiday. The various stalls and refreshment stalls all add to the atmosphere.

The Marathon's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2007 was a special event and many of the original runners who had entered the very first Marathon (named the 'Old Lags') were contacted to take part once again, the oldest entrant being Tony Tester, running in his 80<sup>th</sup> year. Another stalwart was Peter Butcher, who came all the way from the West Country to enter, having run in 24 of the 25 races.

Since its start in 1981 it has gone from strength to strength with one break in 2001 due to the foot and mouth outbreak.

Now in its 30<sup>th</sup> year the Marathon has raised thousands of pounds for local charities - long may it continue.

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### Sources:

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