

“Backstage at the races!” (Part 1- Laying a course)

Saturday 10th October 2009 - The Worcestershire Beacon Race

6.45am - Gary Bailey (Race Director) and I rendezvous in a lay-by on Foley Terrace. The previous night's rain has passed on and a glow in the west begins to lighten a clear sky flecked with stars. It's still dark enough to require torches to illuminate our car interiors as we load up the paraphernalia required to lay the multi-terrain course; canes, fluorescent correx arrows (large and small), correx “caution runner” signs, event warning cards, cable ties, side-cutters, secateurs, rubber bands, club hammer and hazard tape.

We set out along the road to our first point of route marking - a “caution runner” board is cable-tied on a nearby road sign and a large arrow fixed, pointing up the steep, wooded zigzag track towards St. Ann's Well.

Laden with bundles of canes and armfuls of signs we trudge upwards, grateful we will not be trying to run up here later! When the path levels out we find that we have to employ the secateurs quite freely as there is plenty of bramble growth along the route. We cut back anything that may cause injury or trip the competitors and particularly overhanging twigs etc. at eyelevel that may not be seen in the darker wooded areas.

On reaching St. Ann's Well we meet our first hill-walker of the morning. The Well attracts a lot of visitors during the day and along with route arrows, we place our first card that warns the public of the event and requests they give the runners priority. Gary has the foresight to leave some of our cane bundles here, as we will be passing this way again shortly.

Onward to Happy Valley and the first mishap of the day, as we have to retrace our tracks to find the secateurs that I've dropped. We're making good progress and are soon at the grass plateau above St. Ann's; where the homebound runners will rejoin their outbound route. A glorious day is in prospect as we take a moment to look out across the Severn valley; the morning mist is still lingering and gives the impression that the valley is flooded; it's a magical sight and only seen at this time of day.

A few early-bird runners are encountered and we engage them, suggesting they'll be warmed-up for the later event; although local, many have no knowledge of the race!

We now have an easy section to cover as the track is relatively level and broad, but I take the opportunity to drop back down to the cars to collect more hazard tape, and then climb back up to meet Gary further along.

On reaching the Wyche Rd. we place a large arrow pointing upwards (it's a climb from now on all the way to the top), an event warning card, and then trudge on ourselves. The route up to the quarry is straight forward, but from here to the Goldmine there are a number of smaller tracks that fork from the route, so we are cautious here and place many more arrows and marker tape to avoid the chance of the runners going off-course.

At the Gold Mine we are nearly 3 miles on and here the course joins the tarmac road to the Beacon top and we only need to place an occasional arrow (as reassurance) for the competitors, rather than route marking.

We're always trying to make this job easier for ourselves and on the way up we come up with the idea of making “quivers” to carry the canes next year!

We get to the top (418m) by 9.30am, having climbed back into cloud, and the temperature has dropped with a stiff breeze. On descent to the saddle we lay extra arrows by line of sight (in case the cloud layer does not lift latter and reveal the route down).

The track from the saddle down to the well at West Malvern is obvious with no deviations so we only use a couple of markers, and around the back of Table Hill and North Hill is well

defined, as the Conservators have fenced along the path to contain their grazing stock; we place a few arrows here, just for reassurance.

Marshall point 22 (see map below) is at a spot height of 320m and just under 6 miles on and here we hammer in a couple of canes to fix a large arrow pointing down (the competitors will have it all downhill from here). Once again we're thankful that we are not going to have to make this treacherous descent at speed (Gary reminds me once again that, as a young WAC member he vowed never to run a Beacon Race!).

At St. Ann's Well we are now retracing our steps back to Marshal point 12 (see map below), which is the steep descent back down the zigzags. We set hazard tape around the trees at the bottom of the first drop and then debate if we should rope or plastic mesh this section, to stop runners at speed plunging down. We decide that as today we have 2 marshals on this section, one should be designated to police this area.

On returning to the cars it's a short drive back down Foley Terrace, and we can now finish this area of out-and-back route.

We arrive at the Rose Gardens about 11.30, unload more race kit and set up the finish funnel and start area. Gary makes a trip to collect the bottled water, and then we finish signing and trimming back the route out from the gardens.

By 12.45 we're back at the St. John Ambulance H.Q. in Portland Place, where early runners are already collecting numbers from Mark Hill and Andy Peach, who will be looking after entries and results. Gary has a brief respite to collect his thoughts before briefing the marshals at 1.30pm.

We've trudged over 7 miles with our kit and it will only be later, sat in a steaming bath that I'll realise (due to covering the course again, as sweeper) I can add over 15 miles to the training log! With fine weather, laying the course is a pleasure rather than a chore, and done at a comfortable pace. We could probably rush round and do it quicker and therefore start a bit later – but what an excuse to see such stunning early morning views.

Later in the day the race passed off successfully without incident.

Over 250 runners completed the course, led home by veteran Bill Nock of Halesowen A.C. in a time of 43:48

Congratulations also to the first female – Ruth Johnstone (another vet) of Malvern Joggers in 54:37 and the team from Malvern Joggers who carried off the prestigious Team Cup.

Footnote:

Bill Nock praised the quality of the event and the friendly marshalling, but was bemused to win again such a tough race at his age – “*where are all the young bucks....*” he queried?

Good question - 6 out of the top 10 runners were vets!

(Bill is a long term supporter of the event; twice winning on the original course – 1985, 1995, and five times on subsequent courses!)

C. Crosswell
October 2009

