

## The National XC Championships – Parliament Hill – 24<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Every three years, the National XC Champs are held at Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath. In between, the venue is traditionally host to the Southern XC Champs. Either way, we have recently had the opportunity to run here every year, and it is always a spectacle.

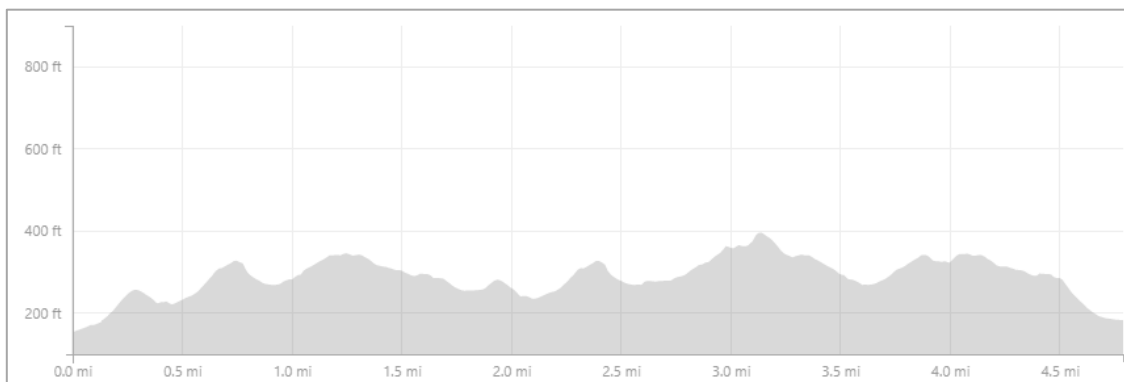
A record number of Reading Roadrunners were originally entered for the National XC Champs this year – 11 women and 25 men. We were grateful to the committee for agreeing to provide a coach; this saved us a lot of travel hassle, and really added to the team spirit on the day.

We arrived in good time and set up camp at the top of ‘The Hill’. The weather was mostly cold and clear, really nice for running, but with an occasional icy wind. This must have whipped up while the women’s race was on, as we returned to find an upturned tent, and a rather exposed spectator – poor Charlie Manton!

Before the races there was time to check out the course, or more specifically, how muddy it was, so that the all-important decisions could be made about how many clothes to put on, which shoes to wear, or how long the spikes should be. We were also able to watch some of the younger age group races, and do a bit of shopping for race merchandise.

The women’s race was scheduled for 2.20pm. With over 1000 women entered, each club was allocated a space in a pen. Thankfully, we were in pen 1, which was easy to remember, and in the best position for our spectators at the top of the hill. It was also the best position from which to spot our ninth runner – Marie-Louise Kertzman – flying down the hill with her two-pinned bib flapping in the wind. Victim of a ridiculously long toilet queue, there was only a minute to spare as she leapt the tape into the pen. With the chilly conditions, Ashley Middlewick had accompanied us all to the start, to allow us to wear an extra layer for as long as possible – what a gent! Then the gun sounded and we were off.

Having run this course twice before, I knew what to expect in terms of terrain and difficulty. Indeed, an article posted about the whole event the day before had mentioned its brutality and technicality. Our course was only 8k, compared to the men’s 12k, but it was lacking in neither undulations nor challenge.



Being a national rather than a regional event this year, competition was fierce. Even in the second half of the field, far back from the crop tops and pants brigade, there was a significant amount of elbowing, shoving, and very little space, particularly at the beginning. On the first downhill, I got stuck behind people who stopped – STOPPED! – when they encountered some deep mud. Had they never run at Tadley before?! As the race progressed, the field spread out as expected, and it was back to the usual ‘try to catch the person in front’ routine as the course upped and downed over one medium and one full lap. Of course, the gruelling uphill start can only mean an exhilarating downhill finish, which makes it all worth it. The final 200 metres is an amazing sprint over rutted mud, followed by an effort to remove a mud-caked chip from your ankle. At least they provided chairs for this purpose.

The winner of the race was Phoebe Law, a name we recognised from the Hampshire League and as the winner of the Southern, in a phenomenal time of 28.33. The first RR home was Sarah Dooley, an excellent V40 runner, in 333<sup>rd</sup> place, with 38.01. The seniors followed - Gemma Buley (39.36), Pip White (41.04), and Marie-Louise Kertzman (41.33). These four scorers gave the team 56<sup>th</sup> place, out of 112 complete teams – a very good result. Next in were the rest of the vets: Sarah ‘not bad for an old girl’ Alsford (42.19), me (43.56), Nicole ‘I’m not doing this without spikes again’ Rickett (45.08), Claire Seymour (47.22), and Maria Norville (57.02). \*quotes are the athletes’ own!



With the men’s race due to start at 3pm, most of us missed it. I heard a klaxon while still out on the course, and spared a thought for those who would now be facing the infamous hill. Our challenge, after cheering in the rest of our women, was to run back up the hill to cheer on the men, whose arrival on their second lap was signified by shouts and cow bells. With over 2300 runners, there was talk of frequent bottlenecks early on in the course; however, there was plenty of time for these to ease over the one medium and two full laps.



The winner of the men's race was Adam Hickey of Southend, the silver medallist from the Southern, in an incredible 39.35. First RR home was Rob Corney, in a hugely impressive 78<sup>th</sup> place, with 43.03 (he can't say he enjoyed it, though). He was followed by Matthew Richards (45.59), Chris Lucas (47.00) and Brendan Morris (47.55). Next in was our first vet, Andrew Smith (50.04), and, having come straight from work, David McCoy (the younger), in 50.12. These scorers gave the team 36<sup>th</sup>, out of 162 complete teams – an excellent result. Jamie Smith was not far behind (50.24), followed by Ashley Middlewick (50.39), David Ferguson (53.50), Tom Peirson-Smith (54.44), Tom Anthistle (57.49), Ian Giggs (58.05), Bill Watson (1.00.17), Alan 'my quads know all about the hills' Freer (1.01.50), David Fiddes (1.03.09), David Lennon (1.04.53), Colin Cottell (1.04.54), Gary Brampton (1.09.15), Chris Manton (1.13.23), Peter Reilly (1.14.54), an injured Brian Kirsopp (1.17.11), Peter 'love it and hate it' Higgs (1.17.20), and Pete Morris (1.25.06). An under-the-weather Lance Nortcliff did not finish, unfortunately.



After some recovery involving a bit of moving around, the obligatory debrief, hot drinks, and, most importantly, food, it was time to pack up and board the coach. Many hands definitely do make light work, and the tent seemed to be dismantled and packed away in

about five minutes flat – PB! It was nice for all the kit to be dry for a change. We had managed to get hold of a set of results for the first 600 finishers in the men's race (the women's results had sold out), so this made for some interesting reading on the way back, along with the photos, and social media and Strava posts that had already been made. Conversation soon turned to the following day's training (there were 17-20 mile marathon training runs planned for some), upcoming races (including club champs), upcoming parties (many of us were due to attend one that evening), and probably the most in-depth discussion about pizza preferences I have ever heard.

The big question is, would they all do it again? With the National to be staged in Leeds next year, I suspect we will be back to low (or no) numbers next year, but we can only hope that the Southernns will remain at Parliament Hill, so that we can get our fix.

As an aside, I noticed that shire horses would be working the land the following day, to repair the damage done by the XC. I wonder if we could get them at Ashenbury Park?

Photo credits: Brian Kirsopp and Gill Manton