

PATH END

Well, that's it then. The Deeside Orienteering Club annual Sandstone Trail Race (STR) has been run for the fortieth and final time. Before the outburst of tears and teeth gnashing starts it should be pointed out that the Race will be continued by Mike Harrington of Cute Fruit Events. Mike is a local runner who knows how popular the STR has become and intends to do his best to see it continue. Look his organisation up on <http://www.cutefruitevents.com/>.

Why did an orienteering club organise a running race for forty years without a break? This is a question asked by many club members over the years. It seems to have been accidental. Sometime in the mid-1970s a few young keenies (now much older not-quite-so-keenies) decided to run the length of the Sandstone Trail, 16.5 miles as it was then, as preparation for the Karrimor. It fairly quickly turned into a race, then three races with starts at Beeston and Rock Farm, all finishing at Barnes Bridge in Delamere Forest; these events were imaginatively titled the A, B, and C Races. The C race was dropped after a few years.

The STR was always a pain to organise. The one-way course, the entry system, the timing and results display, safety considerations and the complicated communication needed all demanded a lot of preparation and pre-planning. Although that took the time of a large group of people, marshalling was less of an issue. Runners were strongly advised to pre-survey if they were not familiar with the Trail, as they would be relying on the yellow Sandstone Trail signposting to find their way. Many did not take this advice, and every year groups of sweaty runners could be seen in Tarporley seeking directions to Delamere. The number of marshals did gradually increase but, even now, despite every twist and turn being marshalled or signed, one or two runners will sometimes manage to make unscheduled visits to local villages.

Initially, amateur radio enthusiasts Raynet, provided a level of communication, St John Ambulance have always been there for medical cover, and the police would create traffic jams on the main roads just for us. The police became more reluctant and eventually ceased attending, though insisting every year that we satisfy them we could manage safely. The route diversion via The Farmer's Arms resulted from the police absence.

Many of these early difficulties were eased by the development of electronic entry and timing as well as the spread of mobile phones, but replaced by tighter regulation leading to permission or at least cooperation being needed from several authorities. The friendly support of Cheshire's Countryside Rangers and the Delamere Forestry staff was some compensation for the bureaucratic stiffness of the other public bodies.

When BOF realised they were letting us register an event they had no category for, we had to look elsewhere for insurance cover. Fortunately the FRA allow us to pretend the Race is a fell race, and give us registration and entry in their calendar every year. The number of entrants has grown steadily, from rarely reaching the self imposed limit of 150 per race to 200 plus since the turn of the century, leading to waiting lists and a scramble for entry as the race date neared. Orienteers have featured less and less in the start lists, while club runners have adopted the Race as an annual 'must do'. The number of women competitors has also steadily increased.

Why so popular? I can only think that the attractive course combined with orienteering standards of organisation and results processing, along with a realistic entry fee, make the race stand out from the general run of athletic events.

Organising became increasingly time-consuming and involved a wide range of tasks. People were understandably reluctant to take the job on but the Race was fortunate in having a succession of competent organisers after the early 'keenies' gave up from exhaustion and burn-out in the mid-90s.

A Helsby runner and non orienteer, Geoff Shaw took over in 2008 and has safely guided the Race to its 40th anniversary; Geoff is a worthy holder of the Barbara Jones Trophy, awarded for consistent and steady service to the club.

As well as the dozens of Dee members who turn out to marshal every year, there has also been a core of dedicated helpers with key functions: Gwyn Thomas driving the van all weekend, Bob Elmes running the SI, Steve Ingleby running the finish and Jill Barnes overseeing the entries and numerous changes, as well as designing and selling the T-shirts.

The fortunes of the STR have waxed and waned over the last 40 years, and we often wondered if it could continue. Geoff is now retiring as organiser and, although the Race now makes a significant contribution to the club budget, present club activities move us further away from holding a pure running event. It is good to leave the STR on a high, particularly so as an orienteer, Chris Smithard, holds the record for both the A and the B Races.

Thank you to everybody who has contributed in whatever way to the continuation of our iconic event for 40 unbroken years.

Barry Barnes

NB: A results booklet has been produced every year (except this one). I have many gaps in my collection before 2004 and if anyone has a booklet for any of the previous years I would be grateful to know and arrange a copy.