

The Sandstone Trail Challenge 2014

Before the Deluge

Friday 6 June was a lovely day, sunny and warm, perhaps a bit too hot to be perfect for a long walk or run, but pretty good really, and the ground had dried up pretty well after a few days of dry weather. However, the Sandstone Trail Challenge was on Saturday 7 June. A front was forecast to move north across Cheshire during the morning, with a Met Office alert issues for torrential rain and thunderstorms. I got up at 5 with a feeling of trepidation, wondering just how bad it was going to be. My 16-year-old daughter felt much the same, as she had entered the event, the first she'd attempted over 26 miles long. It was looking a bit cloudy, but there'd been no rain, and at least it was warm. So far, so good.



Off to open up the Community Centre in Frodsham then. It was hello to old friends & new as the team got together with the walkers and runners, registering and sorting out gear. We managed to fit everyone's cars into the grounds, and then the usual heart in mouth until the coaches arrive. We'd be sunk if they didn't turn up, so I'm nervous every year, but Carvers Coaches have never let us down, and they didn't this year either. A quick pep talk to everyone on the coaches and they were off, with me following on in my car a few minutes later. Still no rain. I thought to myself "with a bit of luck at least they'll be able to set off in the dry".

The Weather Attacks

Of course, as I drove towards Whitchurch the rain started. By the time I was approaching Whitchurch it was torrential, with thunder and lightning overhead, and so much rain the A49 was awash. I caught up with the coaches just as they got into town to deliver everyone into the deluge in the Tesco car park to visit the public toilets before starting. Meanwhile I headed for the start to meet the few drowned rats waiting to be registered there. As I expected, they were all huddled in their cars, but they emerged once I arrived, and I started getting them on the entry list from my car seat, leaving the window open about two inches so I could talk to them and hand them tally cards etc. Even so, I got soaked, the inside of my car got soaked, and I had a job keeping the registration list dry enough to write on. And then I spotted, over in a corner of the car park under a big umbrella, Cllr Rob Hewson, the Mayor of Whitchurch. He had kindly offered to turn out to see the walkers and runners off, but I'd hardly expected him to turn out in this sort of weather. Full marks to him – we had a brief chat, and I thanked him of course.

Everyone else was arriving now, in a stream down the road from the town centre. We got them organised as quickly as we could, the Mayor gave a quick few words of welcome and good luck, then we set 189 wet and bedraggled walkers and runners off into the downpour. I thought “I wonder how many are going to get as far as Frodsham this year?”



Out the Other Side

Well I shouldn't have worried. Only 15 dropped out, which was even fewer than last year. The rain stopped soon after the start, and although there was a bit more rain from time to time, there were no more storms, and although it was overcast for quite a while, it was dry most of the time, from the ankles up. Later on the sun came out, the sky was blue, and conditions were really pretty good. From the ankles up that is. And as long as you weren't wearing shorts.

The Bridge

Every year we warn everyone they may need to wait for the bridge at the canal junction, as every boat that passes has to open it and close it again to get through. It's never happened until this year, and not only that, this year a boat had opened it and gone on its way without closing it again. As it is opened from the opposite bank this left a large proportion of our runners and walkers stopped at the brink drawing straws for who was going to swim across and close the bridge. Luckily it didn't come to that, and a passing boat closed the bridge again. Even more luckily, this delay didn't endanger any record attempts by runners, as far as I'm aware.

The Nettles

Two weeks ago I walked most of the Trail to check it out, and although there were some overgrown fields, the nettles weren't bad. I walked in shorts, and didn't have any problems. In those two weeks the nettles grew like Topsy, so quite a few people got a lot of nettle stings on the day, particularly in the first few miles after the canal, which don't get a lot of traffic. I think it was mostly the early runners who suffered – certainly I saw some legs I was glad weren't mine among the first to finish. They will have taken most of the stings on their way through, so it won't have been so bad for the later runners and walkers. The good news is that the event will be in May in 2015 (the 9th), so we shouldn't have this problem next year.

The Mud

This was the main feature of the 2014 Sandstone Trail Challenge. The rain around the time of the start turned the whole route into a mudbath. The first few miles after leaving the canal can be really hard work, with a lot of mud that's very slippery, making it hard to make progress. That's what it was like this year. Although it gets a bit easier once you hit the sandstone hills, with plenty of sand now mixed in with the mud for grip, there were plenty more muddy and slippery sections all the way to Frodsham. I've rarely seen a muddier bunch of finishers at any event!



The Finishers

The first thing to say is that I take my hat off to all of you who finished, in what were such difficult conditions underfoot. 189 started, and 174 reached the end – far more than I was expecting. The outstanding achievements were:

1. Nick Wishart of Delamere Spartans, who finished first in a time of 5:09. This was after a 4-way battle all the way to the end, with Nick managing to out-run Pete Ackerley, Martin Cliffe and Alex Mason in the final stretch. There were only three minutes between the four of them. Nick was 9th in 2013, but he somehow managed to be 17 minutes faster this year, despite the conditions.



2. Caroline Hall of Wirral AC, first woman to finish in 5:40. Caroline still holds the women's record of 5:04, set in the 2012 event.



3. Our own Andy Smith, past Helsby RC chairman, who was astonished to learn he was first man over 50, in a time of 6:42. It was great to see this, as Andy's had more than his share of injuries in recent years.



4. Jan Jeffries, first woman over 50, in 6:47. I owe Jan my apologies, as we missed the fact she won this category when she finished, and by the time we realised, she'd already gone home. I'm posting her trophy on to her.
5. Adrian Sumption, who was 24 minutes faster than last year, finishing in 8:41. Adrian has also turned 70 since last year's event, which means he is now the men's V70 record holder, having beaten Ian Hilditch's time from last year by 9 minutes.



6. Gabriel Fallows is 15 years old. Walking and running with his father he finished the Challenge in 8:27, making him the first person we're aware of under 18 years old to complete the Sandstone Trail in its current form. He's certainly the first to finish the event in the four years we've been running it, although others have tried. He looked pretty fresh

when he finished too – a brilliant achievement.



7. Esther Robinson is 16, and she's also my daughter, so I'll have to watch what I say here. She walked the Trail unaccompanied, and finished in 12:23, making her the second under-18 to complete, and the first woman under 18. I'm very proud of her!



The Helpers

It takes a lot of helpers to run an event like this. Their job is to help make the day an enjoyable and safe one for all, and part of my job is also to make sure they have a good time too. Yet again they all did a great job I think. All the groups that helped are listed on the webpage so I won't repeat them here. Thanks to all the walkers and runners who gave us such positive feedback about the day. I'll be thanking all the helpers by email shortly.

Donations from friends and family for drinks and food at the Community Centre raised £71-71 for Sightsavers International this year.

See you all on 9 May 2015!

Andy