

# 25 Years of Sudbury Court Running Club

**By Martin Garrett**

So, as we celebrate the club's 25th birthday, thought it might be interesting to update our club history and have a quick look back at our quarter century of athletic (and other) endeavours giving newer members an idea of our 'journey' so far and prompting, hopefully, a few memories for those of longer standing. Have culled the following from notes of past meetings, newspaper clippings, and monthly logs, so, fingers crossed, should be a reasonably accurate rundown, however if you spot any obvious inaccuracies, errors or glaring omissions please let me know.

## **Beginnings**

As it happens, the formation of the club was no overnight affair. Our Tuesday night group, composed principally, though not exclusively, of Serpentine RC members had been running out of Vale Farm Sports Centre in Wembley since the early eighties, and it was the closure of the centre in the Summer of 1997, due to an outbreak of Legionella bacteria, that was to act as the catalyst.

One or two regulars, who also belonged to Sudbury Court Sports Club on East Lane, suggested we use the club's bar for post run 'refuelling', joining as social members. After a spell getting changed in the back seats of cars, and a brief flirtation with Bannister Stadium, we returned to run out of Vale Farm until early 1998 (whilst still imbibing up the road) when we decided to take up the option of Sudbury Court's facilities full time. Even then, despite the promptings of a number of our group, in particular **Tom Blacker** and **Jim O'Leary**, it was still over a year before we 'took the plunge' to form the club, partly, as it were, to commit more fully to the main club, and partly in the hope of attracting a few new faces as we were getting a little thin on the ground at the time. Our tenure at Sudbury Court lasted until June 2004 when the parent club's financial problems led Brent Council to take the premises back into their own hands. Through the offices of one of our members, **Gavin Imrie**, who had been one of those to point us in the direction of Sudbury

Court previously, we found temporary accommodation at Wembley Cricket Club for three months before **Chris Stagg**, our Chairman, negotiated a move to Wembley and Sudbury Tennis & Squash Club in Sylvester Road which remained our base until Covid, amongst other matters, including the loss of the tennis club bar licence, and certain facilities, prompted a rethink, and a permanent return to Wembley Cricket Club in 2021 (with **Mark Mulvenna** and **Tricia Edwards** to the fore in negotiating the arrangements). One upshot of the move meanwhile has been to see the club form closer links with Metros, with several members joining our neighbours as second claim to take advantage of increased training opportunities.

## Inaugural Meeting

The inaugural meeting of the club was held on the 18th of May 1999 with the first AGM on the 23rd of November, where, in addition to the officers: **Chris Stagg** (Chair), **Jim O'Leary** (Secretary) and **Bev Thomas** (Treasurer), **Mike Maddison** (Website), **Gavin Imrie** (Membership) and **myself** (Club Captain) were voted on to the committee. Over the years things have remained fairly steady 'at the helm', the club having boasted only three Chairs **Chris** (to 2010), **myself** (2010-2019) and **Yvonne Walker**, three Secretaries: **Jim** (to 2002), **Louis Smyth** (2003-2022, and from 2024) and **David Heathcote** (2023), three Club Captains: **myself** (to 2019), **David** (2019-2022) and **Tony Watson**, and indeed only two Treasurers: **Bev** and **Tricia Edwards** (from 2020) in its history. Outside the 'inner circle' meanwhile, membership records have been maintained by **Chris**, **Gavin**, and **Tricia**, the website overseen by **Mike**, **Gowan Clews**, **Mark Mulvenna**, **David**, and **Tracey Nobbs**, and kit put in the hands of **Chris**, **Sue Davison**, **Laurence Klein**, **Victor Tsui**, **Mark**, and, most recently, **Ryan Thompson-Kelly**

## Still Standing

Of the 23 members listed at the 1st of September 1999, four (**Sue Davison**, **Gavin Imrie**, **Bev Thomas** and **myself**) are still active within the club whilst a further five (**Chris Stagg**, **Jean Gale**, **Ruth Jackson**, **Dee Lynn** and **Mike Maddison**) have pride of place as either Honorary or Life members, a sixth **Bob Davidson** having sadly passed away earlier this year at the age of 93. Over the years meanwhile, membership has fluctuated from around the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties with well over two hundred runners having been 'on the books' at one time or another. As befits a club situated in one of London's most diverse boroughs, we've had the pleasure of welcoming members from a wide range of countries over the years including Spain, Sri Lanka,

Hungary, Romania, Sweden, Nigeria, New Zealand, Taiwan, the USA, and South Africa (the list goes on!) whilst there's always been a strong Irish influence at our heart. Sadly, if inevitably, we've lost a few good friends along the way including **Les Niewiara**, **Patricia O'Leary** (with Sue, and Jim both donating trophies to be awarded to the club 10k race winners in memory of their respective partners), **Alan Cook** and **Ian Whyte** (of the Tennis & Squash Club, who ran the bar for us in the early days), **Russ Elder**, and, of late, **Bob Davidson** (previously mentioned) and **Jean Walerych**. Russ was one of life's true gentlemen, and for a decade made an exceptional contribution to the club particularly in helping welcome, and nurture, beginners joining the club, and also following in Alan and Ian's footsteps and keeping us 'lubricated'. Jean meanwhile was a staunch supporter of our club handicap races, and, yours truly being something of a technophobe, also helped out inputting our Summer League results for a number of years. All are sorely missed. A number of members meanwhile have gone on to pursue their running 'careers' elsewhere: **Mustafa Readdie** and **Peter Nagy** at Dacorum, **Andy Hope** and **Debs** and **Julie Newstead** at Marlow Striders (with Andy and Debs our only matchmaking success so far!), **Ruth Gloster** at Clapham Chasers, **Sarah Ferns** at Tunbridge Wells, **Mark Greig** and **Victor Tsui** at QPH, **Colin Goulding** at Ealing Eagles, **Simona Cristea** at Watford Joggers, and **Rita Scollan** at St.Albans Striders though, sadly, there has been no real matching influx!

## Competitive Events

Since our formation, members have competed in a multitude of events, both here and abroad, over distances from a mile to the Marathon and beyond, with **Ruth Jackson** currently holding the 'distance record' (one I can't see being challenged for a while!) having tackled the Heart of Scotland 100 over two days in 2010, whilst a number of races ( the Watford Half Marathon, Harrow Hill Race, Beachy Head Marathon and Perivale 5 immediately spring to mind, along with the Summer League) have become regular features in our calendar.

Early races included the West London 5 (8/8/99), Ricky 9 (30/10/99) and Hatch End 5 (21/11/99), whilst, heading a little further afield, we entered three teams of three in the Luton Marathon Relay in the December (an event we supported annually until its demise in 2010, peaking in the final year when our team of **Tim Marques**, **Nic Neklesa-Ford** and **Colin Goulding** finished 16th out of 133 in a time of 3.06.36). The following year then saw the club put on its inaugural 10k race, at the suggestion of **Nicky Rosewell**, to raise funds for the Great

Ormond Street Hospital Foundation for Children with Leukemia in memory of one of her pupils, **Jenny-Rose Lotter**, with **Chris Stagg** pulling everything together as Race Director, a role he held until handing over the reins to **Louis Smyth** in 2011. 51 runners were sent on their way by boxer, **Lloyd Honeyghan**, with **Danielle Sanderson** (Watford Harriers) leading the field home in a time of 37.16. After a decade supporting GOSH, funds were subsequently raised for Roy Castle Lung Cancer, and Pancreatic Cancer UK before we linked up with the local St.Luke's Hospice in 2013. A 5k was introduced in 2009 in an attempt to boost numbers, and the event re-branded as Run Wembley in 2014. Sadly, despite the efforts of all concerned, our race limit of 250 was never seriously tested, the highest turnout for the 10k being 142 in 2004 (with an average of 95 finishers over the twenty years), whilst the 5k averaged 34, with a high of 67, the tough decision being made to hold the final running in 2019 the event having become increasingly difficult to organise given our limited resources. On the plus side however we did manage to attract a number of top athletes over the years with at least two Olympians (**Claire Hallissey**: women's race winner in 2016, and **Pamenos Ballantyne** (St.Vincent& the Grenadines - men's winner in 2010) gracing the event. Most successful runners over the race's history were the aforementioned **Danielle Sanderson**, who, as well as taking the first overall title, also won the women's race in 2004 and 2007, and **Eric Vamben** (QPH/Serpentine) who equalled her feat by winning the men's race three times (in 2004, 2007 and 2008), whilst **Nigel Rackham** (Metros) in 2009 and 2011, **Jamal Mohamed** (Newham & Essex Beagles) in 2012 and 2013, **Thomas Grimes** (East London Runners) in 2018 and 2019, **Barbara Yff** (Serpentine) in 2002 and 2003, and **Karmen Pardoe** in 2012 and 2014, all 'did the double'. In fact, as it turned out, the demise of Run Wembley did not see the end of our fundraising activities, as Louis organised a Virtual 10k event for St.Luke's during the Covid lockdown, whilst eight members also took up spare charity places held by the Hospice for the Royal Park's Half Marathon in 2021.

## The Summer League

The next major landmark in the club's history then came on the 6th of May 2001 when we made our debut in the Summer League at Ealing, our squad on the day consisting of **Alex Mitchell, Spiros Lappas, Brian Kaufman, Dave Strain, Jim O'Leary, Ruth Jackson, myself**, and the entire Smyth clan, **Louis, Ellen and Molly** (the latter pair representing our 'youth policy' being 11 and 7 respectively at the time!). Our first season in the league saw us finish in 5th spot (ahead of Victoria Park Harriers & Tower Hamlets, and Mornington

Chasers) which, to date, has proved to be our 'high water mark' having been equalled in 2002, 2004 and 2006 but never since, our best performance in an individual fixture being our second place at Ealing in 2006. Over the years the size of the league has varied between seven and nine clubs with Metros, Serpentine, Dulwich Park Runners, Mornington Chasers and ourselves ever present, whilst other members have been East London Runners ( one season in 2006), Victoria Park (who dropped out in 2010), Queen's Park Harriers (joined 2009), Hayes & Harlington (joined 2011), Ealing Eagles (joined 2012), and Ealing, Southall & Middlesex (who took a brief hiatus from 2016 to 2018). For the record, 121 different runners have represented the club over the years with our record turnout, 91 Runners over 5 races, coming in 2019, whilst six clubs have shared the titles: DPR and QPH (5), Ealing Eagles (4), Mornington Chasers and Serpentine ( 3 apiece) and ESM (2).

## Parkrun

Whilst our annual 10k and the Summer League remained central to our activities over the years, a third major strand was added in 2012 when we, effectively, fully embraced the phenomenon that is Parkrun for the first time. In fact, the first parkrun had taken place at Bushy Park on the 2nd of October 2004, with a field of thirteen Runners, and members had been sampling the odd event here and there ever since, but it was only when we were instrumental in helping set up Brent's first parkrun that things really took off. Prospects, initially, didn't look too bright as apart from Louis and myself, and lone representatives from the Council and Parkrun, **Bill O'Connor** (Queens Park Harriers - and London Marathon ever present) was the only other person to turn up at an exploratory meeting at Bridge Park Community Centre in the April, however the 'tipping point' came when **Glen Turner** (an Australian who'd previously had experience as a Run Director at Gants Hill) was persuaded to take on the role of Event Director and a 5k course was mapped out in Gladstone Park, the first run eventually taking place on the 30th of June with 53 toeing the line and **Abdul Basit** our first runner home. Louis, and Sue Boucher trained up to join the original group of Run Directors, with **Mustafa Readdie, Peter Higgins, Tony Watson and Gavin Imrie** (the latter pair at Kenton Rec.) following in their wake, with other members regularly volunteering for other roles to get things ticking. The rest, as they say, is history. Gladstone having got things in motion, further local parkruns were then set up at Harrow (2015), Canons Park (2016), and Kenton Rec. (Junior) (2018), with Canons, in particular, again benefitting from considerable Sudbury input. For the record, by the end of 2023 members had clocked up appearances at 285 different parkruns, here and abroad, with nine

'currently on the payroll' (**Tony Watson, John Walerych, Sue Boucher, Liz Abrahams, Louis Smyth, Peter Higgins, Gavin Imrie, Mark Mulvenna, and myself**) having qualified for their 250 run T-Shirts. Would of course have been more if the pandemic hadn't closed Parkrun down from March 2020 to July 2021! To add a little 'spice' to proceedings, we then challenged Queens Park Harriers to a Mob Match in April 2013 (the result to be decided by average age-graded scores). With the format proving successful, Metros were then added to the 'fixture list' in 2015, Watford Joggers in 2018, and Ruislip Runners in 2022. Currently, in terms of series scores, we lead Watford Joggers 3-2, and Ruislip Runners 2-0, Trail Metros 1-6, and, sadly, still await our first win against the Harriers after eight attempts! In addition, our popular 'away days' were introduced, the brainchild of **Angela Tomusange**, in 2017, the first outing being to Rickmansworth in the September.

## Limited Success?

Our successes over the years, it has to be admitted, have been limited (on the face of it, we'll never need a large trophy cabinet!), though we have had our moments. 2000 saw our women's squad (**Jean Gale, Bev Thomas, Dee Lynn, Ruth Jackson, Lee Dron and Sue Davison** - not sure who were the scorers!) finish in second place at the Sevenoaks 7, before our men's team (**Abdul Basit, Nick King, Gavin Imrie, and Nic Neklesa-Ford**) surprised everyone (including themselves) by taking top spot at the Moor Park 10k in 2007. This remained, to the best of my knowledge, our lone team triumph up until 2018 when we outdid ourselves, not only picking up the West London 10k trophy (**Mark Greig, Tony Watson and James Kerr**) but also being crowned Middlesex MV60 cross-country champions (Tony Watson, Louis Smyth and myself) at Royston (for want, it has to be pointed out of any opposition. Still, as the saying goes, you've got to be in it to win it!). The following year then saw both our women's (**Simona Cristea, Yvonne Walker and Tracey Nobbs**) and men's (**Tony Watson, Gavin Imrie and Peter Higgins**) teams triumph at the London Spitfire 10k. Seemed we were on a roll, but then, of course, came Covid! Individually meanwhile, **Ian Brixey** became our first overall race winner in 2009 at the Melmerby Scar Challenge race in Cumbria, and remained in splendid isolation until 2018 when **David Heathcote** was first home in our own Run Wembley 5k race. **Simona Cristea** then added gloss to the final running of our 10k the following year, winning the women's race. Away from these, we can also boast a number of age category awards in the Summer League (with **Yvonne Walker, Liz Abrahams** and **Tony Watson** for the seniors, and, in the last year or

so, the Wilbys and **Harriet Kelly** for the juniors, to the fore), as well as a couple of County 10k individual medals.

On the home front, an annual Summer Handicap competition over six races, has been held since the club's inception, the original trophy, the Docherty Shield (first contested in 1985) being inherited from the Vale Farm Tuesday night group with the event overseen by **Ken Lynn** up to 2005, **Mark Mulvenna** 'taking up the reins' after Ken and Dee emigrated to New Zealand. The *Docherty Shield* was eventually 'retired' in 2017, to be replaced by the *Russ Elder Shield* in memory of our late stalwart, Russ's daughter Jo, and grandson, Harry, joining us to make the first presentation of the new trophy, to **James Kerr**, in 2018. Skilful handicapping has meant we've seen twenty-two different names inscribed on the two trophies over the years, with **Gavin Imrie** (2000, 2004 and 2022) the only three time winner in the club's lifetime.

## Social

Of course, whilst our athletic activities have naturally taken 'centre stage', the social side should not be forgotten. In addition to the annual expedition to Eastbourne, over the years we've held quizzes, magic shows (featuring the one and only Baron/Count Wizzo: aka **Eddie Oatley**), and pizza evenings (a number to raise funds for the club race clock, jointly purchased with Serpentine), amongst other things, as well as arranging trips to support members in their various theatrical efforts (Elisabeth Hobbs in "Salad Days" at the Watersmeet Theatre in Rickmansworth (2006), **Laurence Klein** in "Ruddigore" at the Questors Theatre in Ealing (2011), and, most recently, **Mark Mulvenna** in a number of pantomimes for NORMAD, whilst the club Christmas party (featuring Santa, and the draw for our guaranteed London Marathon place) has always been a highlight of the calendar. As it happens, we've actually expanded our quiz activities over the last year or so, having finally emerged victorious at St.Luke's annual quiz in 2022 (the last year it was held, other activities obviously proving more remunerative in the current economic climate!), supporting the Preston Road Library quiz on the first Monday of the month, and the Windermere's quiz night (the last Thursday) in the guise of "*Keep On Running*" New recruits always welcome!

Well, there's obviously so much more I could mention, but, hopefully, the above will have given something of the flavour of the club. We're still 'going strong' and here's to many more years of pounding the pavements!