

The Merriott Marathon

David Gibbs

(Article from A Miscellany of Merriott Memories)

*I*t seemed like a good idea at the time, this church fete so-called marathon, three times around the village. But then the weather changed and because of the excessive heat the smarter would-be competitors pulled out and the distance was reduced from three laps to two. Nevertheless, about a dozen of us still decided to give it a go.

I imagine none of us had much experience of competitive running, with perhaps the exception of the ex-grammar schoolboys who, apparently, used to do a spot of cross-country running on games afternoons. So, it was possible they knew what they were up to but I certainly didn't except for having a vague idea that in a distance race you should always try to stay in touch with the leaders and only sprint ahead at the last minute. That's what I planned to do, sprint ahead at the last minute, leaving the grammar school boys speechless. So, in my white plimsolls, white football shorts and blue shirt, there I was in the middle of the line-up raring to go. And off we went, out through the vicarage gates heading towards Newchester Cross.

Right from the start my sprint-ahead-at-the-last-minute plan seemed to be deeply flawed. I didn't reckon on the whole pack sprinting off at such a pace, especially the grammar school boys who ought to have known better. We were all running far too fast. How I kept in touch with the leaders I shall never know, but I did.

But by the time we'd galloped down Broadway and rounded Knapp into Lower Street we were beginning to stretch out a bit. Only one person was ahead of me, probably a grammar school boy but I can't remember who; I simply kept my eye on his dancing heels and stayed close behind him. Moreover, I sensed he was beginning to flag. I wondered whether I should take over the lead but with Shiremoor Hill looming up I decided against it. I reasoned it was best to take it steady and simply hold on in there, which is exactly what I did.

Bakehouse Corner, Bundle Chute, the first lap behind us, on we plodded, past the cheering onlookers assembled outside the vicarage and then on to Newchester Cross. The field was now so strung out it seemed to me there was just three or four of us still in the running.

At the top of Broadway I was wondering just when to try and sprint ahead. Not too early, I reasoned, but at the same time mustn't leave it too late. But as we turned into Lower Street for the second time, I went for it and in no time at all I was out on my own. By the time I reached the bottom of Shiremoor Hill I was puffing like a steam engine. I had to half walk, half run up the hill. And all the time, as I struggled to catch my breath and stay alive, there was somebody plodding along at a very

Feature of Merriott Church Fete

A new feature at the annual church fete at Merriott on Saturday was a marathon race run twice around the village. Because of the heat, however, the number of entrants was smaller than had been hoped and the distance was cut from three to two laps.

Winner was David Gibbs with a time of 21 mins, Derek Hamlin was second and John Trask third.

The fete, which was held on the Vicarage lawns, was opened, after a prayer led by the Vicar (Rev. E. F. W. Awre), by Mrs. Kimmins, of Marks Barn.

Introduced by the Vicar, Mrs. Kimmins said the annual expenditure of the church was some £630, and the Parochial Church Council depended on the fete for the last £90.

Mrs. Kimmins was thanked by Mr. R. G. Foxwell (people's warden) and was presented, on behalf of the Fete Committee, with a bouquet by little Rosemary Awre.

A perambulator race, run from the Vicarage to Hitchen and back to the gardens via Lower-street, caused considerable amusement. It was won by Tom Samways and John Trask with second place shared by David Gibbs and Aubrey Rowsell and Frank England and D. Martin. A special prize was awarded to Miss Ann Dicker and Miss Mary Parker the only female competitors to finish.

During the afternoon there were ankle competitions for men and women arranged by Mr. A. J. Manning, who also organised the marathon event. Successful competitors were Mrs. Pilcher and Mr. Wallace Hamlin. For the latter it was his second successive win.

Winners of other events were:—Mothers' Union flat race—1, Mrs. Awre; 2, Mrs. Fred Osborne. Men's hat trimming—1, Mr. Lambert; 2, Mr. A. J. Manning. Men's flat—1, Mr. Wallace Hamlin; 2, Mr. Frank England. Ladies' flat—Mrs. R. Waldron and Miss Ann Dicker (dead heat).

Stall-holders and competition organisers were kept busy by the many villagers who supported the event, the organisation of which was undertaken by a Committee headed by the Vicar as chairman, Mrs. Williamson, as secretary and treasurer, and backed by a hard-working Committee.

THE HELPERS

Helpers included: Ping-pong ball competition, A. Langdon and C. T. Thornhill; men's hat trimming competition, Mrs. Sprake; cake stall, Mrs. Lawrence and Mrs. Sprake; teas, Mesdames Foxwell, Hamlin, Damerel, Dicker, S. Dodge and Miss Mitchell; new stall, Miss K. Smith, Miss Bunstone and Miss Legg; competition stall, Miss Dicker and Miss Abbott; candle-lighting competition, Peter Abbott; ice-cream, Mr. W. Hamlin, Mrs. Thorne and Miss Wheaton; produce stall, Mrs. Greenslade-Norton and Mrs. Abbott; jumble, Mrs. E. Osborne and Mrs. A. Payne; skittles, Mr. and Mrs. F. Stickland; children's sports, arranged by Messrs. A. Robinson and D. Hamlin; gate stewards, Messrs. Fred Foxwell, senr. and junr.; flower stall, Mrs. E. Lambert, Mrs. B. Hutchings and Mrs. Dyke. Entries in a flower show competition, the winners of which were Mrs. Dicker, Mrs. Williamson and Mrs. Ruth Lawrence, were sold by Mrs. Dyke.

Newspaper report

steady pace, gaining on me. A grammar school boy, I feared. That spurred me on again.

As I approached the King's Head, I became aware of crowds of people standing on the pavement and hanging out the pub windows, cheering. For a second or two I was so elated I can't tell you! Fame and adulation at last! Then I realised who these people were, fellow contestants who didn't make it past the pub on the first lap! They'd stopped off for a drink or two. And they weren't cheering, they were jeering! But I kept going. Somebody was close to catching me up. It had a quick look behind. My fears were realised; it *was* a grammar school boy, Derek Hamlin. Much as I tried, I couldn't run any faster. Probably he was pretty whacked too because I reached the vicarage gates just ahead of him. I had won!

I paid dearly for my moment of fame. The following week I could hardly walk. My calf muscles objected to the pounding they were subjected to and were incredibly painful and stiff. Even on the day itself, the opportunity to wallow in my success was short lived. Immediately after the marathon, I was down to take part in a pram race. I believe the idea was that at set stages the occupant of the pram would change places with the pusher. But I was far too exhausted from my efforts in the marathon to meet that requirement and so Aubrey Rowsell did all the running and pushing of our pram and I did the falling out bit every time we crashed.

Reproduced below is a newspaper cutting showing a line-up of assorted prams and one very old-fashioned, very heavy, wooden invalid strolling chair as once used by the better classes when being pushed around by their servants. It was a three-wheeler with two large wheels at the back and a small central wheel in the front. The pusher and passenger of this chair were two girls, Mary Parker and Ann Dicker.

Down Little Lane we trundled, up across Hitchen, down Half Acre Lane, along Lower Street and then back via Hitchen to the vicarage. Aubrey and I shared second place. Mary and Ann received a special prize for being the only girls - the only girls in the lineup, as it so happens - to finish the course. How on earth they managed to do that with such a

heavy, cumbersome contraption, heaven only knows. They deserved their prize.

