

## **Chepstow Harriers at the Welsh Castles Relay 2007**

The Welsh Castles, a 20 stage road relay from Caernarfon nr Anglesey (not ON Anglesey, Chris!) down the length of Wales ending in the grounds of Cardiff Castle, celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year... and Chepstow Harriers were there to enjoy the party (oh, and to run through some stunning scenery and swelter in the heat).

Nine Harriers squeezed into the minibus, hemmed in by sleeping bags, tents and kit, to start the long journey up north. It was no surprise, on picking up Debbie, to find "DEB" writ large in black tiles on the roof of her house. We ended up in a 1950s style American diner just outside Leominster for some nosh. One huge (and rather revolting) Hot Dog later and once Eric had managed to drink his sugar (washed down with a sprinkling of tea) we were back on the road, headed for the Menai Strait. Unfortunately we forgot to turn off and crossed the bridge... disappointingly it wasn't THE bridge, but at least we managed to tick another part of Wales off the list. Onwards, to Caernarfon, to the leisure centre for a good night's kip (after of course, another detour as our wise old men (Eric and Dick) momentarily forgot where to go – and, of course, we had no map or directions to fall back on. Carl, Luke and Calum were already in the centre, deep into the beer, when we finally arrived – hopefully this wouldn't affect them as they were first off in the morning.

Saturday dawned, bright and sunny. We piled back into the bus and headed into Caernarfon to the castle. 59 athletes lined up (I've included Carl there, by the way) and "Go", the race was on. For the rest of the day, we hurtled along the roads of North Wales... to Penygroes (Debbie's airplane impression when approaching the water pistols)... to Criccieth (we missed him go, but Luke did well on the first of the mountain stages despite, gentleman that he is, helping a young lady to the finish)... to Maentwrog (Dave, or should that be Jeff?, running well)... to Harlech (Gerry, looking strong then wilting away as the temperatures rose, but buoyed by the new arrival (well done Grandad!)). Part way through we received a phone call from Colin – he wasn't going to be able to make it along tomorrow... Sue bravely stepped forward (or did I notice Eric hastily stepping backwards to get the same effect?).

At Barmouth we had ice creams as Helen set off in the sweltering heat... Dick took the opportunity to explain to all his criteria for "bottom rating" (of course, we were all truly shocked as we'd thought him a mild and gentle man). The stage to Dolgellau is away from the road, so we were unable to provide Helen with support en route. Eventually she appeared, dazed and dehydrated, but running well (I think she scored an 8 or 9), before collapsing in the shade demanding to be soaked in water (OK, perhaps she didn't explicitly ask, but it seemed the right thing to do). Yes, it was properly "warm" at 3 o'clock.

Mel Ellis, for those who don't know, is a recent recruit from Shaftesbury Barnet (who, if you don't know, are one of the "top clubs"). Despite her pedigree (and I thought, due to the high temperatures) Mel looked terrified on the start line. With good reason, I'd say, as Stage 7 may only be 9.75 miles, but it climbs for the first 5 and a half – from sea-level to 1200 feet – before dropping, seemingly off a cliff it's so steep, by 700 feet in the next mile. As we drove, in the minibus convoy, cheering and encouraging the runners, we looked nervously at every medic... several runners had collapsed on the climb and were being tended to as we passed. Where was Mel? Finally, and with relief we found her, streets ahead of the next lady and running strongly – she'd cleared the mountain pass and was on the gentle descent to the finish. Stopping to give water, the man she was running alongside tried to take a cup from Debbie. Big mistake senior! Like a shot (and despite the race earlier in the day) Debbie sprinted after the fast disappearing runners. In what looked like a deliberate attempt to sabotage the competition, she tried to trip up the poor fellow (who was only thirsty, after all) while handing Mel a drinks bottle. We piled back into the bus and headed for Dinas Mawddwy (I promise I'm not making these names up!). We found out later that Mel did, indeed finish as first lady, finishing 19<sup>th</sup> on what has got to be one of the toughest stages – and actually thrives on the heat!

Next out of the bus was Chris (who, by this time, had reluctantly given up control of the minibus, leaving the author to negotiate the poor attempt at a gear box). Eleven miles – and how this wasn't a mountain stage we couldn't understand – it just went up, and up, and up! Standing in the small village of Foel, we were asked to move from outside someone's house as his "daughter is visiting today and she won't be able to get on the drive!!

Jan (that's Jan, Mark, not Jane) was next to go – a nice flattish stage to Llanfair Caereinion. Flattish, that is, apart from the 1 in 4 climb at the finish. Of course, after running Stage 13 of the Rack Raid the previous weekend, I'm sure Jan would have been disappointed if there HADN'T been a sting in the tail. It has to be said that Dick was very disappointed that Jan chose not to run in the shorts that she'd been wearing all day... a pattern was emerging...

The last run of the day saw Martin step up to the line. He and Mel were sharing transport and we managed to miss the start. We set off to catch the race, but found ourselves behind another team's minibus. To illustrate just how tough this stage was, we almost had to push the other bus up the hills (despite the gear box, we obviously had the right bus for those roads... lots of power). Due to the traffic delays, we actually missed Martin on the course and so headed to the end – Newtown Leisure Centre – where we set about establishing Camp Chepstow amidst the field of tents. Carl, Luke and Calum had already arrived, set up camp and headed off to the pub. Andy Bray joined us having made his own way up and finally Martin and Mel appeared. By this time, it was getting late, so all thoughts of a club meal vanished – with three in the pub and Martin, Mel and Chris

heading back to Chepstow, the remainder grabbed a take-away and sat in the dark, next to a car park (oh, how glamorous life is) before heading off to bed.

An early start on Sunday – Nick had turned up for his run to Llanbadarn Fynydd: 12 and a half miles of non-stop hills and needed someone to drive his car to the end. Dick, Sue and I hopped in, leaving the rest to break camp and catch us up. A great run from Nick placed him 14<sup>th</sup> (our best of the whole weekend) and, not wanting to head straight back to his own campsite, where he'd wake the family, he thankfully joined in the merry band of supporters for a couple of stages.

At Llanbadarn Fynydd, Sue and I transferred to Andy Bray's car and, after giving him some well earned support (another late replacement – and very much appreciated) arrived at Crossgates. Here I was witness to a very unusual experience – an overexcited Spaniard singing karaoke requests over a loud hailer on a petrol station forecourt. Only in the Castles...

It was warming up nicely again as Sue set off for Builth Wells. Back in the minibus we chased down the race. Worryingly we came upon Sue first – fearing that she would be distressed and in dire need of support we were about to pull over when we passed Nick, recovered from his earlier run, ready and waiting with a bottle. This was great news as we had an appointment in Builth Wells – Mark was due to set off on the run of his life. We dropped Dick off along the way, to give additional support to Sue (and hopefully to be picked up by Nick!) and it was on to the start of stage 14: 11 long miles to the highest point of the race (the Drovers Arms), with a 1000 foot climb spread generously over a mile and a half (!) – this run would be Mark's "rites of passage". He looked strong as we passed before the climb (you couldn't have told this was the furthest he'd ever run) and, with Andy Bray now on the case and providing support along the route, we continued to the top.

My phone rang – it was Sue. She'd finished, and sounded chirpy. It turned out that she'd caught and overtaken someone – a heroic performance over a long stage at such short notice.

In the car park, Gareth Creed was waiting, itching to start his long descent into Brecon. Despite numerous attempts to deny that this was a "tart's leg" no one would believe him! This, stage 15, was an awkward one for us as we had to provide marshals at three points along the route. Deb, Jan, Helen and I piled into Gareth's car and headed out into the unknown... or at least, tried to as it was the first time I'd ever driven an automatic and, shall we say, it wasn't the smoothest of drives (we had the car park marshall in stitches as I tried unsuccessfully to move off three times). Reaching the marshall point, we dropped off Deb and Jan... only to bump into Luke et al just round the corner. They were at the wrong marshalling station! A minor communication breakdown meant that they should have been five miles back up the road... and the lead runners would almost certainly have passed that point by now. They leapt in Luke's car and roared off

back towards the oncoming race... I still don't know if they actually made it in time, but it was probably just one more black mark against our team (to go with the illegal water pistols, illicit watering from the moving minibus and flagrant ignoring of marshals instructions...).

I dropped Helen off at the third marshals spot – next to a church which probably appears in Dick's infamous "Book of the 1000 Best Churches" – and continued into Brecon to prepare for my own run.

Parking as agreed in Morrisons' car park, I followed the stream of runners into the town square. Eyeing up my rivals, I noticed a small and very slight guy in a Stroud vest – this was Dan Robinson (fresh from his 9<sup>th</sup> place finish in the London Marathon)! As the race started, I saw the Stroud vest for only a minute or so before he'd disappeared from view. A 9 mile climb lay ahead – at no point steep, but at no point flat (and only downhill in the last quarter of a mile). Luckily for the first time in the weekend, it clouded over as the race began. I say "luckily" as I didn't see a (Chepstow) soul for the first 5 miles. The main road out of Brecon (upon which we ran) was a slow moving traffic jam of mini buses, support cars (those containing Spaniards giving the loudest and most enthusiastic encouragement) and the poor locals innocently going about their business. Finally I spied Geoff, not strictly a member of our squad as he's on the organising team for the event, but he had a much appreciated bottle of water ready for me! A little later, several blasts on the horn told me that the minibus had finally arrived to water me. I reached the finish, a shade under 20 minutes behind Mr Robinson (the problem was, he only took three-quarters of an hour to complete the course) and only had a short wait for the bus to catch me again. There was a short delay while we waited for Deb and Jan – who arrived in style having hitched a lift with Lliswerry after being abandoned in Brecon. Lliswerry, as the only other local club present, were our biggest rivals and supporters throughout the weekend, getting the second biggest cheer from the bus after the Chepstow runners.

Of course, by this time, Syd had already set off on the descent to Merthyr – and incredibly it started to rain! We caught him just before the route went away from the road, so he got some support (and a soaking from the always-ready water pistols). Some disappointment was expressed at the lack of lycra shorts, but we just put that down to Helen's evident obsession. Dick continued to refute Mark's allegations of ungentlemanly comments regarding a (lady) runner on Saturday afternoon.

Merthyr to Abercynon was being run by Mally – somehow we failed to see start, middle or end of that race, which was a great shame as he put in one of our best performances of the weekend. We did manage to catch Nathan just before he set off towards Caerphilly – and saw him (and the rest of the pack) 30 yards behind the leader after only 100 yards! With almost the entire length of Stage 19 run along the Taff Trail (and hence not accessible by car) we decided to head straight for Caerphilly and the final leg of the odyssey. We heard later that

Nathan had a literal run-in with a car door and hobbled most of the 10 miles with an injured knee, despite the attempts of marshals and First Aiders to withdraw him from the race! A brave effort indeed.

In Caerphilly, standing outside yet another castle (along with Dick's 1000 Best Churches, castles were a bit of a theme for some reason at this event) we found Gareth Jones "fresh" from a hectic journey down from the TT on the Isle of Man. Sadly lacking his Union Flag shorts (but thankfully wearing a Chepstow rather than Caldicot vest) he took up the virtual baton and headed off towards Cardiff.

Jan took the opportunity to escape, eventually tracking down her family somewhere in Caerphilly. Dick elected to stay behind too, to ensure someone was there to greet Nathan on his (eventual) finish. Tired, but still hanging on, the remaining Harriers piled back into the bus and set course for the nation's capital. Mark let slip the fact that he'd walked up part of the hill (and finally ran out of peanuts to offer round, much to Eric's delight); Sue told me where I could stick my effing camera (didn't sound at all comfortable – I think the paparazzi effect was wearing a little thin); Helen continued to stress about her "shocking" hair; while Deb was put under strict instructions not to bring tinned fish in the bus next year!

The sun was shining once more as we strolled (hobbled) into Cardiff Castle. After a short while, Gareth appeared and brought the team home in a total time of 26 hours, 32 minutes and 22 seconds – not too shoddy for a race of 210 miles. 39<sup>th</sup> overall and 28<sup>th</sup> in the Open category, we had achieved an astonishing 15<sup>th</sup> place in the Kings of the Mountains sub-race (consisting of 6 particularly hilly stages). Helen lived up to her role as adopted Mummy for the weekend, buying a round of deserved ice creams (thanks!) and we crawled back onto the minibus one final time.

Thanks to everyone for making the Castles experience such an amazing one this year, with special thanks to: Eric for organising us all; Chris for doing most of the driving; Helen for the safety pins; Calum for supporting the team as a non-runner (and for keeping tabs on Luke and Carl); Llisbury Runners for rescuing Jan and Deb from Brecon; Bath AC for rescuing Dick from Caerphilly and, of course, Les Croupiers for putting on such a spectacular event.

It's a great weekend, especially "doing the Castles properly", tracking the whole race from the minibus – I couldn't recommend it more highly. I'll be back next year, even if not selected to run. Will you?

Andy Ost.