

# Club Profile : Mercia Fellrunners

## from Paul Cadman

The Fellrunner of October 1992 featured an article entitled "Mercia Fellrunners - who? The story so far....." written by Richard Day (FRA Chairman 1997 to 2000 and now honorary life member and the current President of Mercia Fellrunners). In that article Richard described the club's first six years and why it was formed, namely to:-

1. promote fell running for Midland Athletes
2. allow Midland athletes to compete in the same team in fell races.

Richard also explained that the club was named after the Kingdom of Mercia which stretched from the Wash and Humberside to the North Wales coast, down Offa's Dyke to Bristol and bounded by Wessex in the south. Prior to the club's formation, Midlands based runners had to compete on the fells in their Athletic club colours.

As an example: on the start line of the Welsh 1000 metre race (early 80's), a race which he went on to win from Kenny Stuart, John Wild (wearing a RAF Cosford vest) warned fellow contenders not to get caught-up in a sprint finish with "that Wolverhampton & Bilston lad". In all probability, only the "lad" (then a naive 17 year old) would have got the joke, meant as a reference to W&B's prowess on the track and NOT on the fells. John's comment made the "lad" feel excluded from the fellrunning world and it wasn't until the early 90's that he joined Mercia in a quest for inclusion.

A lot has changed since the Club's early days and it's interesting to note that in 1986 the club was very conscious of its newness and lack of fell running credentials and was concerned with promoting the club, its races and effectively earning the respect of REAL fellrunners (was John Wild a real fellrunner? - letters to the Editor please). The early members eagerly set about the task of gaining acceptance by organising races (some now having classic status locally and some Nationally e.g. Long Mynd Valleys), completing Bob Grahams, Karrimors and lots of fell races. They shared transport from the Midlands to distant events and often squeezed two or even three races into one weekend!

The enthusiasm of such people as Richard Day, Dave Smith, Eddie Harwood, Tony Thompson, Paul Greitz and Nick Kingston was infectious and through the nineties new members joined steadily; yes steadily and at a pace somehow dictated by an unwritten and very subtle kind of vetting process. There was a risk that new members might be less committed to real fellrunning and efforts were made to ensure the right kind of people were attracted and the wrong kind deflected back to their athletic or harrier clubs.

And there was good reason for such caution. When Mercia won silver medals in the 1993 FRA relays they were booed - presumably by fellrunners who thought Mercia was a contrived team of road /cross country runners undeserving of such success. It is pleasing to note that half of the members of that team are still racing on the fell regularly at a respectable level now, Dave Neill in particular, and have gone on to prove that they weren't just pot hunting back then.

Mercia's very first newsletter, dated "1986 : No.1" was written by the then editor Eddie Harwood (designer and instigator of the Long Mynd Valleys race). In it Eddie talks about the poor timing of Mercia's inauguration; coming a little too late for inclusion in a new book "Stud Marks on the Summit - A History of Fell Running" by Bill Smith. Eddie goes on to say, "It's a pity the book was finished in 1983 as a lot of development has occurred since, particularly in the Midlands and perhaps if it were written next year Mercia Fellrunners might be mentioned". There is certainly no lack of Mercia mentions in the latest Book on Fell Running by Richard Askwith. In his "Tale of Fell-running and Obsession" entitled "Feet in the Clouds" the author makes regular mention and in chapter 4 writes of two anonymous Mercia characters - a foul-mouthed "grim looking man" who claims to

have done everything and a "skeletal young man" who prejudices all Southerners. Incidentally, no member has come forward yet to reveal themselves to be either character - I wonder why?

### LONG DISTANCE

In 1992 Mike Hartley's incredible achievements are listed:-

Setting records for the Pennine Way (2 days, 17 hours and 20 minutes), Cross England, Southern Uplands and West Highland Way. Not to mention his triple Round completion in June 1990 when he did the Ramsey Round in 21.14, took six minutes rest at Glen Nevis Youth Hostel before travelling to the Lakes in 4 hours 25 minutes then did the Bob Graham Round in 23 hours 53 minutes, travelled to Snowdonia in 3 hours 7 minutes and completed the Paddy Buckley Round in 33 hours 35 minutes. 86 hours and 20 minutes in total!

In addition to Mike Hartley's Pennine Way, Mercia has another winner of the BGR Club award. This time for the "Cuillin Round", which was established by Rob Woodall, who managed to visit all of the peaks on the Black Cuillin Main ridge, including a few extras, the Red Cuillin peaks, the remaining peaks of the Greater Cuillin Traverse and a finish over Sgurr Hain and Sgurr Stri in twenty-three and a half hours! Remarkable when you consider what an exclusive feat it is to complete the notoriously difficult Black Cuillin Reidge in a single day.

Gill Harris is Mercia's indefatigable Long Distance female. Gill did her Bob Graham in 1998 and went on to be only the fourth woman and first lady VET to complete the Paddy Buckley in under 24 hours when she completed the round in July 2002. Gill is also a regular Elite mountain marathoner with her current teammate and multi race organiser Keith Richards. She also, and rightly so, holds the women's record for the Long Mynd Hyke.

A new round was established in 2003 by a Mercia Member. In the tradition of such rounds carrying the name of the originator, the Terry Davies South Shropshire Round consists of an 85 mile circuit with 12,000 feet of ascent. Terry completed it in a time of 21 hours and 18 minutes.

Mercia now has 10 Bob Graham Round Club Members namely:

Richard Day, Tony Thompson, Gill Harris, Rick Robson, Rob Woodall, Paul Cadman, Pete Vale (when he was 17), Andy Davies, John Clements (who this year, celebrated his 25th anniversary of the BGR by completing a Joss Naylor Round on the exact day) and the tenth member being the phenomenal ex-member - Mike Hartley.

This wealth of experience, coupled with an excellent Mercia Machine (i.e. the support crew for members attempting rounds) will



Mercia members with Joss Naylor at Wasdale Photo - Paul Cadman

undoubtedly encourage others to add their names over the next few years. Auntie Pauline's catering is the best – full stop and QED!

The club has just two Paddy Buckley members (Gill Harris and Rob Woodall) but, as with the BGR there is no doubt that Mercia will increase its percentage of the membership very shortly.

Medals have also been won in the Lakeland Classics Series, individual and team; Ian Cowie winning the Super Vets category in 2004. Ian and his partner Glen Davies have competed in, and completed, more Elite Mountain Marathons than they'd care to remember and in doing so have both shrunk by two inches! Back in 1998, during the Howgill storms, Glen was mountain rescued off the hillside suffering with advanced hypothermia. But do you think that stopped him – of course not!

Andy Davies, who lives in Church Stretton, won Joe Faulkner's GL3D event in 2005. Joe is also now a Mercia member having relatives and friends in Church Stretton, which has pretty much become the home of Mercia Fellrunners having relocated from the original assumed home of Cannock Chase.

Last Autumnan enthusiastic gang of members, including Charlotte and Joanne Cadman, Mark and Rachel Bollom and daughter Caroline, Dave and Elaine Nicholls, Barry Nicholls and Graham Hughes set to work with their pickaxes on a footpath restoration project for the National Trust (owners of the Long Mynd). So we can safely say that we both wreck 'em and repair 'em.

#### ACTIVE MEMBERS, CHARACTERS AND COMEDIANS!

The Day family were the lifeblood of the club for many years, Richard being a founder member and accomplished runner along with his elder bother Mike. Their parents Marjorie and Norman Day produced all the newsletters using a spirit duplicator and were behind their sons in everything they did but Marjorie and Norman were also race organisers – the Trig Point Race became theirs and for many years they arranged everything, even down to the late Marjorie's secret recipe biscuits. Later came Jane and Sue (the brothers' wives) and there was no escaping Mercia for them! Somerset based Mike and Sue made an annual pilgrimage to Shropshire to organise the Shropshire weekend – this they did for around ten years.

Rick Robson and his adventurous family Jan, Sam and Bess can be found most years cycling over to Jura along with a number of other intrepid members like Polly Gibb & kids Amber & Finlay, Ian Cowie, Glen Davies and sons on the island hopscotch from Arran, to Kintyre to Islay and Jura.

Edward Davies, farmer and father of Tim and Andrew, is one of those special breeds who seems to be made of something tougher and more resilient than most humans. To watch him descend is like watching a mountain goat fleeing from danger – and at fifty years plus he is all but winning the midweek race series and, of course, finished fourth in the World Masters trophy at Keswick.

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Lots of members ran blindly into the darkness of the Burway Hill (a steep road above the Carding Mill Valley) earlier this year to celebrate Keith Richards' fiftieth birthday. It was a two-mile, uphill only race intended to be a "one-off" but so much fun was had that I'm sure the demand for a repeat will be too much to resist. Oh, and a similarly bizarre celebration involving off-season fireworks on the hillside triggered the unexpected arrival of an air ambulance – much to everyone's complete embarrassment!

Club training sessions are quite common despite our disparate membership. Favourite locations include the Wrekin, where you'll find John Coombs, Andy Smith and "Mr.Hard Sunday Trainer" Matthew Clewes going up and over and round again. Fast vet Andy Wright and the other fast boys can often be found over on Cannock Chase, and the Club also indulges in Windy Winter Weekenders with ex-Mountain Rescuer Dr.Gavin Stewart.

#### CLUB ORGANISATION

It is fitting that this article appears in October 2006 as that is exactly 21 years since the club was conceived and it has officially been in existence for 20 years.

Every year the club holds its AGM, immediately after the Little Stretton to Stiperstones Time Trial, another Mercia event organised apparently effortlessly and seamlessly by Mr Starter - Charlie Leventon. Charlie is the only other honorary life member who can't compete himself now due to injury but has the sort of personality that Richard Askwith (in Feet in the Clouds) attributes to Fred Rogerson – the inspiration behind the Bob Graham Club. The Fellrunner of June 2005 ran a feature entitled "the Leventon Line" – this is he. Each November Charlie's Time Trial prize presentation is the prelude for Mercia's AGM, held at the popular Stiperstones Inn which is owned by club member John Sproson. And ever since 1992 the Members attending the AGM have voted for the same Chairman – namely Paul Cadman. This year will be different though as Paul has declared his wish to stand down making way for "someone else to inject new leadership energy into the club, leaving me free to use my experience to support and encourage from within".

The success of the club is in part down to the efforts of the Committee members who meet two or three times a year to organise what jobs need to be done. The Committee consists of the President (ex officio), Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Editor, Team Manager, Social Secretary and two Co-opted Members. Others, such as Eddie Austrum (the website designer – see [www.merciafellrunners.co.uk](http://www.merciafellrunners.co.uk)) and Phil Harris (race director extraordinaire, tail-end-Charlie and resident rock climber) attend as necessary.

An annual presentation Dinner takes place in March where the club awards prizes for its own championship and a special merit award known as the Outstanding Achievement Award. The latter is awarded only when the Committee consider a member to have achieved something extra ordinary. The kind of criteria used is "that no other club member could have performed the same feat and the same time".

Previous winners include:-

**Tim Davies** - 4th in World Trophy, Welsh International, three times Snowdon Winner

**Gill Harris** - for her Paddy Buckley Round

**Rob Woodall** - Greater Cuillin Round

**Simon Bailey** - British & English Champion 2004

**Dave Neill** - British & English Veteran 40 Champion

**Mike Hartley**- Pennine Way Record

Traditionally the club has been held together through the natural geographical bond of being Midlands based and through a regular Newsletter – produced over the years by Richard and Jane Day more than any other but members (Arthur Clare Hay, Tim Werrett, Dave Coley) have always stepped in to take on the task when the editor inevitably started to flag.

The Club Secretary is now Jessica Taylor who, along with husband and club stalwart Chris Taylor have a second home in Flookborough, Lancashire – a very convenient base for the Lakes and a few



Mercia's Jura contingent outside the Distillery before the off Photo – Paul Cadman

members have prevailed upon them to put them up for the night on route from the Midlands to the far North.

There has been a recent influx of new members from the Welsh Borders and beyond, presumably coaxed across by our own Graham Spencer. These include Rowland Stafford, Ross Powell and former Eryri die-hard Trefor Jones, all of whom will be an asset to Mercia's Vets Team - very pleased to have them.

### CHAMPIONSHIPS AND INTERNATIONALS

Until recent years team competition for Mercia was confined to the FRA relays. The club has a proud tradition dating back to 1993 when a team of Dave Neill, Phil Bowler, Steve Willimott, Dave Troman, Paul Cadman and Dave Miller surprised almost everyone to finish second. Still relatively unknown as a 'national' outfit this achievement was backed up by fourth the following year, a year in which the club also tried its hand at the Ian Hodgson Relays. This proved not quite such a successful venture with one pair getting hopelessly lost, the club resigning itself to the notion that local knowledge was a major advantage! A lean period followed in which senior teams were always still entered in the relays but never with any distinction. The trend had diverted to the Vets team, which ironically became a much harder team to make! With top 'senior' runner Dave Neill always persuaded to run for the Vets, the team was never far off the medals and in 1997 got its reward with third place. With 1999 being the first year a senior team was not entered in the relays, it was decided a team manager should be elected in order to restore some pride to a club with flagging fortunes.

Progress was slow at first and wasn't helped by foot and mouth disease in 2001. 2002 was to be the year of revival. Team manager Tim Werrett was keen for the club to not only do well in the relays but also in the English and British Championships. It was difficult to motivate people at first but all began to pay dividends with members not only running better but also getting to know one another better. It can be difficult to form friendships when there are no regular club meetings. "We like to think the club has gained socially as well as athletically!" 2002 saw us finish sixth in the English Championships and sixth in the relays at Langdale. The following year saw sixth again in the English and eighth in the British. 2003 was a particularly special year for the club as it was awarded the hosting of the FRA relays in Church Stretton.

Being on home soil as it were, the club once again felt it had a chance of medal success. With a team of internationals and largely runnable terrain Salford were the favourites. However it shouldn't have been forgotten that Mercia had 'half' a team of internationals and beat the 'favourites'. They just couldn't quite beat Pudsey & Bramley. An inspired anchor leg by Mike Bouldstridge (the fastest of the day) made it agonisingly close but silver it had to be, just like ten years previously. Onwards to 2004 and people seemed buoyed by the relay success, more motivated than ever to help the club continue to do well. Perhaps this 'feel good' factor radiated itself outside the club too. Top



Mike Bouldstridge and Simon Bailey in Relay action  
Photo - Paul Cadman

runner Simon Bailey decided he wanted to be part of a club with a good team and was just the tonic Mercia needed! With this being the year Simon dominated both championships there was another reason to be enthusiastic. Those in the previous year's relay team helped him secure the club's first ever medals in the championships. Bronzes in both behind Borrowdale and Pudsey. The relays that year were in Hayfield and hosted by Pennine. With Simon now on board and Tim Davies coming fifth in the World Trophy Mercia were now the favourites!

Off to the best possible start with Tim Davies on leg 1, Tim Werrett and Mike Bouldstridge held onto the lead going into the navigation stage. The 'navigation' has made or broken many a team over the years and Mercia, in the past, had always relied on top Mountain Marathoner Paul Cadman to do the job. In 2003 the baton was passed to local man Andy Yapp who (with Roger Lamb) did not disappoint. This year, with the team even stronger, it was down to Pete Vale and Rob Little. Despite navigating with distinction it was Dark Peak's superior knowledge of the Kinder plateau that broke Mercia hearts as we were second again, two years in a row. But a medal in all three championships was a far cry from where we were a few years ago and a totally different standing for the club than in its early inspirational days of the 1980's. Almost beyond the wildest dreams of the founder members and those that have worked hard to develop the club.

Just as Mercia was 'revived' so it seems were Dark Peak who have since gone from strength to strength. Mercia is consistently fourth, the

'worst' position to finish they say (!) behind Borrowdale, Pudsey and Dark Peak. Fourth in the 2005 relays, the highlight was Pete Vale and Andy Yapp running the day's fastest time on the navigation leg - and in Alva, Stirling, hardly the back yard! Simon defended his English title in 2005, Pete Vale and Tim Werrett have made the top ten of the championships. Thankfully the days of "will we have a team?" seem to have been replaced by "how good is the team?" Long may it continue.

Stop Press: Mercia had three in the top seven at the recent Peris Horseshoe British Championship. First home was Tom Owens, a 26 year old newcomer to the club. Tom had a fantastic race, coming through strongly at the close to beat many of the established hard men of the sport including his club mates Pete Vale (5th) and Simon Bailey (7th).

### THE LOCAL SCENE

The Shropshire Weekend - Founder Member Eddie Harwood established this event in the early 80's and Mike Day organised it for many years. It continues as a Mercia anchor event and the Long Mynd Valley has twice been used as an English Championship. Mercia was pleased to re-introduce the Cannock Chase Trig Point Race again in 2006 thanks to Bob Dredge. The Trig Point Race will be held on Sunday 7th January 2007.

The success of the Shropshire Summer and Winter Series "has been the ruin of the Mercia Club Championship" admittedly so, but it has provided the people of the Midlands, though not exclusively, with a fell race series of their own. Keith Richards, wife Pauline (Mercia's Social Secretary) and their able assistants have a winning formula that has recently seen Keith having to re-format his results spreadsheets and points allocation to cater for larger entries than ever envisaged.

As with all articles such as this, there are many more lovely people who it hasn't been possible to mention - sorry! One last word though for the man who keeps many of us running well past our sell-by date. It has to be Club member and Chartered Physiotherapist Richard Fallows. he is one of the very best and Mercia members are very fortunate to receive such high-calibre treatment. (His practice is in Wellington, close to the Wrekin. Telephone : 01952 260983. Not an advertisement - honest!!)

### AND FINALLY ..

A fitting end to the club profile are the words of founder member, Nick Kingston (Chairman 1986 - 92) in his summing-up at the Club's Annual Dinner 2005 when he said:-

*"Let's appreciate how fortunate we are. We share this club, which means these friendships. We love a sport that is clean, healthy and still unspoilt and unpretentious. We hold our hills and mountains, in all their moods, dear and wish to conserve them for others. We thank whoever introduced us to the hills and to fell running. I wouldn't swap with Wayne Rooney and his sport for all the money in the Premiership. Give me a pint and a post race presentation in the Buck's Head any day."*