

Sandstone Trail Challenge 2017



It seemed a bit of a mad scramble getting ready for this year's Challenge, but we got there OK, and everything went well on the day, as far as I know anyway. On Monday 1 May I ran along the Trail with Ben and Ste Wiggins, to check there were no problems on the route. We found nothing to worry about, and the Trail was the driest it's been in the 7 years we've been organising the Challenge. It was a bit warm on the 1st, and in the following days it stayed dry and got warmer and sunnier. Then, on the day of the event I got up blearily at 5, and looked out to see a cloudy sky. I immediately thought "perfect conditions for fast times", and so it proved. Dry underfoot, no difficult ploughed fields, no overheating, no strong winds. We had a record number of finishers (206), and despite starting a few minutes later than usual, nobody had to be timed out and retired at the last checkpoint. There were a few sore feet at the finish, but overall the finishers appeared to be in a much better state than most years!

So, I got down to the Community Centre at 5:30 to open up. I already knew that the main toilets were out of action, so that was my main worry. Would we have to delay the start? Would I have a load of cross walkers and runners with their legs crossed on my hands (so to speak)? It didn't turn out too badly in the end. We speeded up registration this year by having two separate queues, and most people managed to get to the toilets before the coaches left. It did mean more people needed the toilets in Whitchurch though, so we were delayed a few minutes in starting – apologies for that. Mike McDonald (Mayor of Whitchurch) sent his apologies for not being there at the start – he was out of town and couldn't get back in time.



...And they were off. Ben and I had to get the list of no-shows sorted quickly, and give that to the Scout communications team, then hare off quickly to signpost the two small diversions near the start. We managed the first one without seeing any runners, then just as we were finishing the second one, the first two runners, Lee Ireland and Chris Fitzpatrick, hove into view, running in the wrong field! We sorted them out, and were still there as the next few runners came through, going the right way this time. We scrambled back in the car and got to Checkpoint 1 in time to see the leaders get there too. Lee and Chris were to go on in front for the rest of the way, swapping the lead from time to time, but well clear of the rest.

We dropped in on Checkpoint 2, then put up warning road signs at the three main road crossings before returning to the Community Centre to set up the finish. At some point I managed to grab a bit of breakfast, but there was no let-up this year before we had to start checking whether we could close down Checkpoint 1, get the finish laptop and printer connected and working, get the tables and chairs out. Nicola, Diana and Hilary were busy in the kitchen getting ready to feed everyone, the scouts were starting to arrive to help them, and Andy Smith arrived back from taking photos, so we could get a screen show up and running. All done just in time before...



Lee Ireland (left) and Chris Fitzpatrick: 1st and 2nd to finish respectively

Lee Ireland finished in a time of 4:37, with Chris Fitzpatrick (Helsby RC) 5 minutes behind him. No records broken, but very fast running, and they didn't seem to be in too bad a state either. Third to finish was Alex Mason (Delamere Spartans) in 4:57. Somewhere about this time Luci Lamb (Delamere Spartans) arrived at the Community Centre, having retired at Gresty's Waste. She was pretty disappointed, as she'd been going well, and may have been in line to beat the women's record (5:04) had she been able to continue. She hadn't recovered from food poisoning earlier in the week though, and had no choice but to retire.



Leah Leonard, first woman to finish

Runners trickled in after this, occasionally at first, then more frequently. Fourth was John Lamb in 5:03, 5th was Nick Wishart (Delamere Spartans), equalling the over 50s record set last year by Dave Clamp. First woman to finish was Leah Leonard (Whitchurch Whippets) in 5:28, with Sophia Rees (Vale Royal AC) second in 5:52 and Becky Wightman (Delamere Spartans) third in 6:05. 60th to finish was Sarah Gooda in 6:40, the first female over 50.



Sarah and Andrew Gooda, at the finish

A few minutes later the tattered remnants of John Dobie (Liverpool Pembroke and Sefton Harriers) staggered into the finish. John had a nasty fall during the race, and one arm had been heavily bandaged by Cheshire Search and Rescue at one of the checkpoints, costing John about 15 minutes. He'd then gone on, had another serious fall cutting his arms and legs all over the place. He finished, ate his pie and peas, and only then sought medical attention. He finished in 6:48, taking an hour and a half off the vet 70 record for the Trail. This was undoubtedly the performance of the day, and my hat goes off to him.



What was left of John Dobie, at the finish

The records don't end there though. Last year Pip Adamson was joint under-18 winner with Oliver Ormrod in a time of 9:28. This year he teamed up with 14-year-old Joe Wilson, coming in together in 7:45, taking half an hour off the old record. Just as important, they both beat their dads. Not long after this, 14-year-old Lily Moorhouse and her dad finished in 8:23. Lily took nearly 2 hours off the old record, set last year. Many congratulations to Pip, Joe and Lily!



Joe Wilson (left) and Pip Adamson



Lily and Jon Moorhouse

It's not all about records though, and for a lot of the walkers it's just about finishing and having a good day out. One of our regular entrants is Ian Pritchard, who first entered in 2012, didn't finish, and has been back every year since. He's finished every year since 2012, always near the back of the field. Last year he was the last to finish, and had a pretty hard time. I think we were both surprised when he strolled into the finish in a time of 10:10 this year, taking 86 minutes off his previous best time. Well done Ian!



Ian Pritchard, right with grey top

As usual we had the last walkers finishing as it was going dark, but this year everybody who got to the last checkpoint was there on time – usually we have to time some people out as they get there

too late to finish in daylight. As I said at the start, conditions were just about ideal, allowing everybody to get the best out of themselves.

The last walkers went off home, and we cleaned up the Community Centre and headed off home ourselves. I got home at 10:30. A couple of glasses of wine to wind down, then bed. I was so tired I spent Sunday afternoon asleep as well. Many thanks to all the walkers and runners who make this event such a good one, and many more to everyone who helped us put the event on. We couldn't have done this without: 3rd Frodsham Sea Scouts, 1st Helsby Scouts, Delamere Spartans, the Cheshire Scouts Event Support Team, Cheshire Search and Rescue and of course the members of Helsby Running Club. Special thanks this year to Hilary Fergusson and Graham Lloyd.