

Article for the Veterans AC Newsletter, Spring 2021

VAC's 90th birthday

VAC's logo proudly proclaims that Veterans AC was "Founded in 1931" but we knew nothing about the circumstances or about the club's early history. Fortunately, Joe Aspinall who joined VAC in 1987, has a treasure trove of "Veteris" magazines published by the Association of Veteran Athletes in the 1970s. He tracked down an article written in 1973 by the late Jack Fitzgerald, telling the reader all about the formation of VAC and about its culture and personalities.

Here are some extracts. Jack's words, written nearly 50 years ago, speak for themselves.

"Veterans athletics is booming. New clubs and associations are springing up throughout the world to cater for the demand, and everywhere the "new" enthusiasm is keeping active athletes in the sport for so much longer. But the banding together of mature athletes is not as new as it would seem, for the Veterans Athletic Club of London has itself reached veteran status".

Jack goes on to describe the circumstances of VAC's formation at Stamford Bridge, the home of Chelsea FC. The VAC club photograph, below, was taken in 1933 with the stands of the White City Stadium in the background.



"**Where it all began.** The occasion is historic. It is the 12th of September 1931 and a very wet afternoon at Stamford Bridge with a number of veterans "out" for one of their handicaps. The handicaps are just part of the Autumn meeting staged by London AC, but rain has held up proceedings. A message is passed round that the veterans are to gather in one of the stands. Talk, crosstalk, proposal, counter proposal The club is born - Veterans Athletic Club with a membership of just 24."

"From those humble beginnings 42 years ago, the Club has grown in strength and today boasts a membership of more than 300. And the recruitment of 40 years old "youngsters" is growing rapidly, causing standards to rise in all events. Yet, back in 1931 the limit of competition was 150 yards, paradoxical when one recalls the fine distance runners who have been members since, ranging from Joe Binks (ex-World mile record holder) and Tom Richards (Olympic silver in 1948) to present stars such as Laurie O'Hara and Ron Franklin."

"That great sprinter "Jimmy" Tremeer was the first President of the Club and the first champion was Harry Wicks. Early Committee meetings were held in "The Coronet" public house, Soho Square, and the minutes for July 1934 recorded the first overseas win thus,

“Congratulations were proffered to Mr Baumann on winning the Swiss Clubs’ Veteran Cup. Celebrated in fitting manner, out of cup”.

“The first social occasion organised was a dinner, with concert and presentation of prizes at “The Feathers”, Westminster, on 1st December 1934. The dinner was a great success and established itself as one of the most popular occasions in the calendar. Of the 40 dinners held, the ubiquitous Harry Wicks has been toastmaster at no less than 37 of them.”

“As with most sports clubs in Britain during World War II, Vets AC found it difficult to continue their activities. But with the war over and a new influx of members, they went from strength to strength. The Championship programme was expanded, the jumps were introduced in 1947 and the 2 Miles run in 1948 (first champion, Frank Webb). The walks programme was also expanded and the Club boasts a very active walking section under the guidance of Fred Nicholls, with championships staged from 2 miles on the track to the Annual London to Brighton Walk.”

“Three of the most popular meetings for the growing band of distance runners are the cross-country championship over a tough five-mile course at Wimbledon Common, the 10 miles road championship held in Richmond Park, and the Marathon championship which is held in conjunction with an outside promotion, this year the Harlow Marathon.”

Jack tells the reader about two people whose names are perpetuated in VAC trophies which are still awarded today. He also makes a comment about VAC’s “men-only” status but acknowledges that women are appreciated when it comes to providing refreshments!

“Much of the Club’s success these last 20 years or so has been in no small part due to two men, very different in personality but with common interests at heart. The gregarious and affable Arthur Welling has been Honorary Secretary since 1952. His extrovert nature and his singular sense of humour are quite different from those of his colleague and Honorary Treasurer, Frank Webb. Of quieter disposition, his efficiency and popularity is no less than that of Arthur Welling’s. Together, they are a team worth more than the sum of their attributes and have provided the essential continuity all clubs need.”

“Veterans AC has always been a men only club, but its members recognise the support given by wives and daughters when it comes to recording, fund raising, provision of refreshments etc.”

Jack concludes by expressing gratitude to the original members of Vets AC who put in place the foundations upon which Masters athletics has flourished. 90 years on, we too are grateful.

“And if the budding young internationals of today have the sense to continue their activity through the veteran ranks then they will reap the benefits, not only of that wise decision from the physical viewpoint, but of the solid structure of veterans’ athletics founded by that small group of men in 1931 and perpetuated by their successors these last 42 years.”

You can read the full article, complete with old photos, in the [September 1973 edition of Veteris](#) which can be found online in the [BMAF’s Magazine Archive](#), on the News tab of the BMAF website.

Maggie Statham-Berry

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