

An Extract from VAC's Newsletter: Spring 2020

CROSS COUNTRY

A History of VAC's Wimbledon Common courses from 1990

Final time

The 2020 competition was the final time that a VAC championship would be run from the traditional start area at the south end of Wimbledon Common, near Camp Road. For 2021, VAC was required by the Wimbledon Common Conservators to devise a new course which would not encroach on the fairways of the Common's two golf courses.

Camp Road, 1990

Looking back to 1990, VAC staged at least four cross country races during the season, presided over by Bob Belmore, the Cross Country Secretary. He used a 4.8 mile course starting from the corner of Camp View and North View close to the first hole of the Wimbledon Common Golf Club and taking in two laps of the Thatched Cottage, Beverley Brook and horse-ride circuit before a run-in alongside Sunset Road to Camp Road. Bob Treadwell and Maggie Statham hold the course records (see table below). For the officials, Don Turner was always there as timekeeper, come rain or shine.

Caesar's Well, 1999 – 2013

Although the course was popular, there were sometimes disputes with golfers when the runners were warming up and assembling on or near the first hole. For this reason, in the 1999-2000 season, Bob decided to relocate the start of the races to Caesar's Well, a grassy clearing accessible from the car park at the end of Sunset Road. His new course avoided most of the golf holes and still picked up the traditional Beverley Brook and horse-ride elements of the old course. However, as each lap was fairly short, at around 1.9 miles, the races were run over three laps (around 5.8 miles) with an option for the women to run two laps.



The start of VAC's cross country championships in January 2009

The Caesar's Well course was used for 14 years, during which time attendances began to reduce and eventually the only race was the annual championships. It was fitting that the final race in 2013 saw Clare Elms blaze round to shatter her own previous course record and set a superb women's mark for the record books. For the men, Mark Critchlow posted an unbeatable time in 2001, which still stood as the record in 2013.

For many years, as well as Don Turner as timekeeper, the finish line was controlled by three men who epitomised excellent service and reliability. They were Cecil Gittins, Ron Hopcroft and Pete Mulholland, all now sadly deceased. The photo below of Cecil, Ron and Pete in action on the Common in 2010 will no doubt stir some memories.



Thatched Cottage, 2014 – 2020

In 2014 it was felt by some that the Caesar's Well course was too long and that a change was needed. Joe Aspinall proposed a new two-lap 4.5 mile course starting in the clearing near to the Thatched Cottage and preserving the Beverley Brook and horse ride sections. There were 22 finishers in 2014, a number which quickly built up to be in the fifties during the next six years. We even acquired a gazebo for comfort. Don Turner was still a regular timekeeper and the number of times he has supported VAC's events as an official must be in the hundreds. Records for the course were set and broken. Clare Elms again claimed the women's record. Her magnificent run in 2016 was never threatened. Mike Cummings demolished the men's record in the final race on the course in January 2020.

VAC Cross Country courses on Wimbledon Common			
Starting Point	Duration	Men's record	Women's record
Camp Road 4.8M	Before 1990 - 1999	Bob Treadwell (24:43 in 1993)	Maggie Statham (27:37 in 1993)
Caesar's Well 5.8M	2000 - 2013	Mark Critchlow (30:10 in 2001)	Clare Elms (34:11 in 2013)
Thatched Cottage 4.5M	2014 - 2020	Mike Cummings (23:47 in 2020)	Clare Elms (27:44 in 2016)

During the seven years use of the Thatched Cottage course, the Conservators and Rangers Office became increasingly aware of the possibility of interference with other users of the Common. Their main concern was the horse riders but in 2019 their attention shifted to the golfers to such an extent that a decision was taken to deny a permit to any races which crossed golf holes. VAC appealed for our race in January 2020, and we were allowed to go ahead one last time as long as we worked with the Wimbledon Common Golf Club to deploy marshals at points where our course ran on or near their holes. We became very familiar

with the names of the five offending holes: Long Hole, Heather, Long Butt, Running Deer and Paradise! To her credit, the General Manager of the Golf Club turned up on the day of the race and marshalled the Paradise Hole.

So, for 2021, we need to devise a new course of around 5 miles away from golf holes and within walking distance of Belgrave Hall which we would like to continue to use for the post-race awards.

A report of VAC's Cross Country Championships, 18 January 2020

Conditions were good for VAC's last race on Wimbledon Common's 4.5 mile "Thatched Cottage" course and it was fitting that a sparkling new course record was set by the winner, Mike Cummings of Herne Hill Harriers.

Fifty four members and guests competed on some very muddy stretches, but also firm tracks. Mike Cummings (M35) and Richard McDowell (M40) were locked together for the first lap and well into the second, until Mike pulled away at the top of the horse ride, to win by 16 seconds in a time of 23:47. Both men were well inside the previous course record of 24:48, set in 2016, and Richard's time of 24:03 was also a new M40 course record.

Megan De Silva of Ranelagh Harriers, 10th in the race and first woman, set a new women's record for the VAC Championships of 28:08. However, the record for the course still belongs to Clare Elms who posted a time of 27:44 at the Inter-Area match in 2016.

VAC Gold medals were won by Robin Jones (M45), Andy Bowen (M50), Gary Ironmonger (M55), Tom Morris (M60), John Grigg (M65), Mike Mann (M70), Peter Giles (M75) and Doug Milsom (M80). Peter Giles's time of 33:32 rewrote the previous M75 record of 39:06 set by Doug Milsom. Doug however had the consolation of similarly breaking the M80 record by nearly six minutes.

For the women, VAC Gold medals were won by Jay Hadfield (W45), Sue McDonald (W50), Lucy Woolhouse (W55), Carol Jones (W60), Jane Georghiou (W65) and Lesley Bowcott (W75). Sue McDonald was the first woman for VAC and won the women's trophy, as well as setting a new W50 championship record. Lesley Bowcott, already the W70 record holder, posted a great time of 44:54 which will serve as the inaugural and all-time W75 record for the course.

Maggie Statham-Berry

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