

BARKING ROAD RUNNERS - A POTTED HISTORY

Throughout May 1984 the local newspapers reported the intention of my wife Lesley and I to start a running group in Barking and on Sunday June 3rd the club was born; 19 people met in Barking Park and jogged and walked approximately a mile.

By the end of August, Tuesday and Thursday evening meetings had started so that Barking Park was now the venue for three weekly runs attended by up to 20 people. September, October & November saw the fledgling club in many local races.

April 1985 saw Barking Road Runners in the London Marathon for the first time and other members helped on the London Road Runners' drinks station in Northumberland Avenue. June saw the Barking Park 4 km race - the forerunner of the club's present day August Bank Holiday 5 km race.

The growth in membership, the search for a suitable base and affiliation to the sports governing bodies meant that the club could no longer be run by one or two people - it needed structured organisation. On August 7th six people sat down for the first meeting of the club Committee; of those only I am still with the club.

In October the club moved into the University of East London (then known as the North East London Polytechnic) in Longbridge Road, which remained its home until the new millennium. Somewhere to shower and change was very welcome after more than a year of car parks and street corners, and the opportunity to sit and chat over a drink after running improved the club spirit and was a feature which attracted more new members.

The city of Paris was on the receiving end of a visit by a dozen members for the 20 km race in October; it was a great weekend and the first of many enjoyable foreign excursions for the club.

In March 1986 Barking Park was the venue for the first ever race in the club Handicap series and the first Grand Prix series started with a 5 mile race in Feltham the same month. In April the club also entered a team in a county championship race for the first time, the Essex 20 miles held at Chelmsford, and races in May included an evening London League fixture in Battersea Park.

The Dagenham Town Show in July featured 5 km and 10 km races and, for the first time the club put on its own display stand at the show, a feature which raised the club's profile and helped recruit new members. The August Bank Holiday Monday saw the club co-host a London League fixture with East London Runners at Hainault Forest.

November also saw the club's first Annual General Meeting and a successful trip to Benidorm for the half marathon.

In May 1987 the club had its own London marathon water station for the first time; located in Poplar High Street at 15 miles, it quickly became acknowledged as one of the best.

Narrowly missing out on the team trophy at the first Dagenham Town Show half marathon in July was a disappointment but the wait for the club's first success did not last much longer; the Chelmsford half marathon team title was won in August. In September eight men headed north of the border for the Glasgow marathon.

At the February 1988 Annual General Meeting Junior Membership was introduced and the regulations governing the Grand Prix and Handicap series were incorporated

into the club rules. That same month a party of more than 50, made up of members, families and friends took to the skies heading for Malta. With the half & full marathon races out of the way the party settled down to a very enjoyable weeks holiday. In March the club were voted runners-up in the Club of the Year category of the Barking & Dagenham Sports Council awards.

April 17th was London Marathon day; the street collection at the drinks station and runners sponsorship meant that the club's first charity appeal raised £6,850 for the Great Ormond Street Wishing Well Appeal.

In July the club again took the team trophy at the Dagenham Town Show half marathon and in August the club held its first mile championship at Cricklefields track in Ilford. October brought the club's first fixture in the Today's Runner cross-country league, still a popular race series today, and in November a small party from the club headed for Split in Yugoslavia for a half marathon and some winter sun. Other trips during the year had seen members in action in the Berlin and Paris marathons.

In March 1989 the club again received the Club of the Year runners-up trophy in the Barking & Dagenham Sports Council's annual awards, and in April the club raised over £1,200 to buy sports equipment for the borough's learning-disabled athletes. This was the first year that the Tuesday/Thursday pattern for the Handicap Series was introduced. In June the club's 5th anniversary was celebrated with a Thames riverboat disco.

In January 1990 the club hosted a Today's Runner Cross Country League fixture at Hainault and in March 20 members headed for a weekend in York to run the half marathon there. The London Marathon in April found the club at its new drinks station in The Highway.

Club trips during the year took members to Jersey in May for a half marathon, to Bruges in June for the European Veterans 10 km Championships, and to Berlin and Dublin - both in October - for marathons. Team trophies were won at the Dagenham Town Show half marathon and the Canvey Island 10 km. The year also saw the introduction of the club's Standards Scheme and the Members Cup was awarded for the first time.

In 1991 the Handicap Series moved to Mayesbrook Park and increased to seven races. July brought another Dagenham Town Show team trophy and October saw the club's biggest ever turn out - over 60 runners - and it's best ever placing - 13th out of more than eight hundred teams - in the National Fun Run at Hyde Park. In September we used the new Mayesbrook Park track for our multi-event night and began a year long - ultimately unsuccessful - battle for regular use of the new facility.

January 1992 saw a club team at Parliament Hill Fields to compete in the South of England Cross Country championships for the first time and in February the same team went to Newark for the English National championships.

In May the club's eight-strong team won the 60 mile plus London - Brighton relay in a new course record and in September a 10 man team won the Essex Way relay - 70 miles plus from Epping to Harwich.

In 1993 the Essex Way relay was won again and in 1994 the club won the Essex County Team marathon title. In June 1994 members ran through the night, at New Rush Hall School in Hainault, as part of a sponsored 24 hour relay to raise funds for a new school mini-bus.

1995 saw our first day trip to Le Touquet and a double in the Essex Way Relay - both A and B teams winning their races.

With costs at the University of East London becoming prohibitive the committee were started looking for alternative premises and in February 1999 talks started with Dagenham 88 Runners regarding a possible merger.

Membership had peaked at just over 100 in 1989 but the decline in running generally saw numbers drop and a host of local races disappear. Throughout the period 1996-99 most of the runners who had made our teams so strong moved on to other clubs or quit running to take up other pastimes. In January 2000, when the club moved to its present base in Barking Abbey School, membership was below 40 and the club seemed to be in terminal decline. Despite this the February 2000 Annual General meeting threw out a proposal to merge with Dagenham 88 and efforts began to revive the club. The club website was set up later that year.

Hard work by a number of people - including the present committee - has seen an upsurge in membership, particularly women, as well as a return of the social spirit which was such an important part of the club's early success. The club should be looking ahead to its Silver Anniversary in June next year with confidence.

Brian Phillips
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