

THE SURREY SUMMITS

(a 100 kilometre challenge walk over the hills of central and western Surrey)

The planning of the Surrey Summits goes back to when a line of chalk hills was formed from east to west across what was to become the county and a line of greensand hills half way across the western half running parallel with and about 2 to 3 miles to the south of that chalk ridge. A few billion years later on 13th January 1976, Chris Steer introduced an AOB item at the Surrey Group meeting "wouldn't it be a good idea to devise a long walk over the toughest route that the best paths in Surrey can offer". Chris, Alan Blatchford and Jeff Ellingham then devised a 100 kilometre clockwise route stretching from Box Hill in the east to Gibbet Hill in the west with a start/finish in Guildford. A route description was prepared, stating the route to be 7000 feet of climb, and was ready to be tried out over the weekend of 1/2 May 1976.

The first Surrey Summits was really a jumbo social walk split into 3 groups labelled fast, medium and slow led by Keith Chesterton, Chris Steer and Barbara Blatchford respectively. It started at Guildford Station. There were no checkpoints but most of the 26 who took part called in either the Plough at Coldharbour (39 Km) or the Leathern Bottle near Alfold (58Km) and sustenance was provided at 2 points later on. The finishing point was 11 Thornbank, Guildford where Alan Blatchford, in addition to his role of baby sitter, plied hot drinks and beans on toast to the wilting walkers as they collapsed on his back doorstep. Although it was really a pilot for what became a very popular challenge walk, the 1976 traverse is recorded in Surrey Summits history as the first.

The same route was converted into a challenge walk to take place over the weekend of 23rd/24th April 1977. The registration and finish were at Henley Fort on the Hogs Back above Guildford but, having registered, the summiteers had a 1 mile warm up walking practice to get to mingle among the Saturday morning shoppers in the High Street to await the start. The signal to start was the first stroke of 12 midday by the town hall clock. All to finish by 4.p.m. Sunday (time limit 28 hours). There were 27 checkpoints, 6 of which were manned. In keeping with the pioneering days of the LDWA, all the manned checkpoints were in the open. At unmanned checkpoints summiteers were required to answer a question on the checkcard.

This was the basic pattern of the 1978 to 1980 events. Major amendments to the arrangement for subsequent years were:

1981 Chichester Hall Witley (home of the Punchbowl Marathon) was used as the first indoors checkpoint (67.5Km).

1982 The start/finish point changed to Chichester Hall – no more walking from registration to the start. The route was reversed to anti clockwise. The start time was changed to 10.a.m and all to finish by 12 midday Sunday (time limit 26 hours). The venue remained at Witley until 1996 apart from 1985 when the original arrangements starting in Guildford were used to celebrate the 10th.

1988 Staggered start introduced whereby walkers could choose to leave any time between 9.30 and 10.a.m.. The route changed to a figure of 8 with Blackheath Cricket Club checkpoint being used twice. This made the main part of the route longer so the eastern loop that included Box Hill and Mickleham Down was cut out. Critics pointed out that omitting 2 of the major summits, the event could no longer be regarded as "the toughest route that the best paths in Surrey can offer". For 1989 to 1991 Blackheath was only used once so Box Hill was restored but not Mickleham Down.

1992 The route was shifted further east as far as Headley Heath now going clockwise. This meant all the section west of Witley, including Gibbet, Kettlebury and Crooksbury Hills, was eliminated. No event for 1997 as the Surrey Group were organizing the Downsman 100.

1998 The start/finish point was moved half way across the county to Downsend School Ashted with the route being shifted even further over to the east as far as Mogador. The comfort of checkpoints by now had graduated to 1 & 2 in open car parks, 3 in a barn, 4, 5 and 6 in halls, 7 in an open car park. The people manning 7 particularly requested an overnight checkpoint in the open. These arrangements, were retained until the final year.

A combination of a reduction in entrants, difficulty in getting marshals and the committee feeling they had just had enough prompted the decision to see it through to the 25th and then close the annals on this classic event. Due to the foot and mouth restrictions in 2001 the 25th had to be delayed until 2002.

In an early report, Alan Blatchford pointed out "although Surrey may lack mountain and moorland it does have enough open space and moderate hills to provide a hard and challenging walk". He added "The Surrey Summits is fast becoming the southern equivalent of the Fellsman Hike of Yorkshire and who knows we may have to draw lots to see who fills the allotted places" (450 in the case of the Fellsman). This proved to be an optimistic prediction. The highest number of entrants the Surrey Summits achieved was 250 in 1993 with 225 starters.

The Surrey Summits was always advertised as 7000 feet of climb in spite of the changes made to the route. In 1999 this was challenged by one of the walkers taking part carrying a cumulative altimeter who said it was 9000 feet. My little girl who measures distance and elevation for me these days, Ann Quett, tells me the 1999 route was just over 9200 feet. She also tells me the 1976 (original) route was 9703 feet of ascent and 9401 descent – remember it finished on the Hog's Back (one of the summits) but started at Guildford Station (down in the valley). Incidentally, the Fellsman was advertised as 11000 feet of climb.

John Westcott (LDWA 679) - Dec 2011

Some quotable quotes from the first (1976) Surrey Summits:

Keith Chesterton (1Km): The summiteers, having walked sedately up to the first summit (Pewley Hill) to be together for the photograph, Keith said trying to get the proper walking started "I shall be proceeding at an average pace of 6¹/₂ kilometres per hour and anybody who wishes to join me may do so".

Keith Chesterton (39Km): Ian McLeod, joined the walk ¹/₃ the way round and although at the time was fairly new to long distance walking, starting fresh in the company of others who had walked 20 miles, thought he would walk with the fast group. Keith said as Ian tried to join his group "I think you will be more suited to one of the slower groups".

Chris Steer (45Km): After climbing the very steep south face of Holmbury Hill the count revealed 2 of the group missing much to the annoyance of Chris. Eventually 2 torchlights came over the edge of the summit plateau and the 2 missing walkers staggered towards the rest of us and flopped out exhausted on the summit seat. Chris said "Good, now we can go"

Jeff Ellingham: (88Km): In the conservatory of Oak Tree Cottage, Elstead – Jeff's mother's house. Jeff having walked with the fast group had called it a day here, showered and changed looking sprightly in his nice clean track suit and trainers when the medium group arrived. They had been complaining about sore feet due to the stoney tracks. Now sitting on the comfortable cushioned wickerwork furniture enjoying Mrs Ellingham's refreshments, Jeff said "you may

have noticed some of the tracks are very stoney. This has been done on purpose because the Cleevland 100 has similar underfoot conditions". Jeff in his advertising of the event had promoted it as good training for the Cleevland.

Scope for questions at the unmanned checkpoints (mainly on the summits) was limited so the same questions were repeated year after year. Regulars had a note of all the trig numbers, as well answers to other questions so used to complete most of the answers on the checkcard at the start. Where there were no natural feature to formulate a question, a number was pinned to a convenient tree but one year the person who should have been putting these numbers up was diverted so they were not in place causing much confusion and annoyance. One of the questions was to give the colour of a turquoise door and the variation of answers were very amusing. The unmanned checkpoints were ultimately discontinued for the 1988 event onwards and all subsequent events had 6 or 7 checkpoints all of which were manned.

Although most LDWA events accept runners/joggers, the Surrey Summits was for walkers only. This obviously deterred some from taking part. Unfortunately, even though entrants signed they would obey the rules, a small minority who did take part quite clearly were caught running. Nobody was ever actually disqualified but several had their time eliminated in the results

Originally there were 2 trophies awarded to teams of at least 3 who completed the event the fastest all walking together. The Leith Trophy awarded to teams who all lived outside Surrey and the Gibbet Trophy for teams who all lived in Surrey. Because it was thought the competitive element encouraged walkers to contravene the "no running" rule, the rules were changed in 1985 for the trophies to be awarded to the 2 registered teams from the relative geographical areas with the most to finish. The trophies were discontinued in 1988.

John Robinson helped on many Surrey Summits and always elected to serve on an overnight open checkpoint. His bonfires were a feature much appreciated by the walkers. On the 1984 event, John also erected a temporary bridge over a flooded section.

When I became the organizer in 1980 I must have been desperate to find people to staff the checkpoints. Roy Barnsley, who was not a member of the LDWA at the time, after an evening session in the public bar of the Sun with me found himself committed to helping on an overnight checkpoint at Kettlebury Hill. Roy subsequently became a member of the LDWA and completed 4 Surrey Summits as well as the 1982 Pilgrim's Hundred. He also became my brother-in-law.

Also in my first year as organizer, my cousin's husband, Barry Rodwell who lives in Bexley Kent, came with his family to visit us over the weekend and found himself being entertained by serving on 2 checkpoints including the overnight checkpoint at Puttenham Common.

Another friend of mine (I am not sure whether he still is) who fell victim to my persuasion during a drinking session was Les Rose who, although he had walked the Guildford Boundary once, was not a member of the LDWA. His day job was to cause as much traffic congestion as possible by parking his lorries in awkward places while he went down a manhole to fiddle about with some wires on behalf of SEEboard. He helped out on an overnight open checkpoint in Crabtree Lane on the 1999 event. His professional expertise was certainly appreciated with the 2 tents being lit much better than any indoor hall. I am afraid I could not persuade him to help out again.

The actual location at Kettlebury was just below the hill under some pine trees. Soup

was on the menu being kept warm in an open cauldron. Through the hours of darkness the soup was very much appreciated by the walkers but it was not until daylight came that it was noticed the heat had caused the trees to shed their needles and a thin layer of them had settled on top of the soup.

In 1981 there was a snow storm just as darkness fell which lasted for about 3 hours causing a high retirement rate. Those who persevered however until after the storm stopped were treated to some lovely scenes particularly the shimmering moonlight reflected over the plateau of Gibbet Hill.

When Chichester Hall Witley was first used as a checkpoint in 1981, the kitchen having 2 big ovens, I arranged for proper baked potatoes to be on the menu. Dave Challenger, who is even more opposed than me to the Egon Ronay syndrome which has evolved in LDWA events (where the planning of the checkpoint menus seem to be more important than the planning of the route), blames me for starting the trend and I do not think he has yet forgiven me 30 years later.

Ken and Ricky Mayhew were well known for their dedication in helping on checkpoints. In 1988 they were asked to serve stew at the Blackheath (main) checkpoint. On several days prior to the event they had stew for their evening meal using the ingredients they would be supplied with to ensure they got the right proportions.

Vince Smith, on checking his supplies and equipment at the checkpoint, found he had not been supplied with a teapot even though he was to serve tea. He made one out of an empty fruit tin.

In 1987, Phil Hastings stuck his umbrella in the ground while he took refreshment at the Pitch Hill checkpoint and another walker, with a similar umbrella, took Phil's by mistake. The subsequent effort to catch the culprit to recover his umbrella is said to have improved Phil's time considerably.

The Puttenham Post Office stayed open all Saturday night when several of the events were taking place. They said they particularly did a good trade in plasters.

In 1988, LDWA members Martin and Linda Dixon made the garage of their house (Keepers Cottage in the Punchbowl) available for a checkpoint and in 1990 and 1991 another member, Ian Ditchfield did the same for us as a checkpoint in Dorking. However, Ray Bardsley (a work colleague of Ralph Henley and nothing to do with the walking world) made available his carpeted living room as a checkpoint for the 3 years 1986 to 1988. The carpet was an old one put down for the occasion but it must go down as one of the most luxurious checkpoints ever. The address was 2 Milton Cottages and Ralph called it the Milton Hilton. Hindhead Youth Hostel (also in the Punchbowl) and its annex, Gnome Cottage, were used on several occasions making a cosy checkpoint at around the 90K mark from which many walkers were reluctant to leave even though they were very near the finish.