

THE WINTER TANNERS

Incipit Prologus - compiled mainly from articles by Barbara Blatchford

In Billy Butlin's "The Big Walk" which took place from 26th February to 25th March 1960, 113 Men and 25 Women walked/ran 891 miles from John O'Groats to Lands End in times (ladies in brackets) ranging between 15(17) days 14(7) hours 32(30) minutes and 28(27) days 0(1) hours 0(45) minutes. Also in the news around the time were the many walking exploits of the eccentric Dr Barbara Moore, which included walking across USA from San Francisco to New York (3387 miles) in 86 days as well as Lands End to John o'Groats in 23 days..

These were great talking points which prompted The Epsom and Ewell group of the Youth Hostels Association (EEYHA) to discuss the possibility of a long distance challenge walk. Alan Blatchford, as the Outdoor Organiser of EEYHA, came up with the idea of a 30 mile Marathon Walk based on Tanners Hatch Youth Hostel which he subsequently organised on 3rd July 1960. This was only open to YHA members and was to be a once-off event.

The organising committee included Barbara Rhodes, who was Magazine Editor on the committee of the EEYHA. Alan and Barbara married 3 Years later.

By "Public Demand" it was decided to hold the walk again as an open event in 1961 and subsequently became a regular annual for the First Sunday in July. In 1964 The Marathon Walk was renamed The Tanners Marathon but it had become so popular that the facilities at the youth hostel were overwhelmed and for 1965 onwards the venue was transferred to Leatherhead - the sports ground for 3 years then The Football Club but there was always an alternative start at the hostel for those who wanted to stay there. In 1967 The Tanners Marathon Association (TMA) was formed as a committee directly responsible for organising The Tanners Marathon as the event had become too big for the EEYHA to handle.

Also in 1967, Chris Steer, after seeing The Tanners Marathon advertised in the Peaslake Post Office, took part and completed the 30 mile route. Chris was co-opted on to the TMA in 1968. Chris, Alan and Barbara (in LDWA membership number order) formed the Long Distance Walkers Association in 1972. The inaugural meeting of the LDWA was held at Tanners Hatch Youth Hostel.

The Tanners Marathon continued to be held on the first Sunday in July for all years up to 2010, except one due to foot and mouth restrictions being in force. The TMA committee members had all been serving for many years and decided the 50th event was the best time to pull out on a high. They tried to get another organisation to take it over but failed. The LDWA Surrey Group was the most obvious candidate but did not have the resources to add another major event to their calendar.

Footnote(1) Alan Blatchford went on to organise many one-off walking and running events which became very successful annuals. Also, apart from the LDWA, he was co-founder with Ralph Henley of the Mabac Fun Run League which is still going as The Mabac Running League.

Footnote(2) Alan Virgo was on the original 1960 committee and took a major part in organising every one of the 50 Tanners Marathons, ably supported by his wife Anna for most of them, in spite of moving to Peterborough in 1981. Their daughters Alyson and Sallyann, as little girls, used to run errands between the various officials and Alyson, when she was old enough, was co-opted on to the TMA committee. Subsequently Alyson's children, Philip and Cecilia, used to run errands between the various officials.

Footnote(3) Ann Sayer MBE is co-vice president of the LDWA with Barbara Blatchford. In September 1980, Ann walked 840 miles from Land's End to John o'Groats in 13 days 17 hours 42 minutes to put her in The Guinness Book of Records as the female who had completed the end to end on foot in the fastest time.

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A 30 mile challenge walk in the middle of Winter with the start/finish point in an open car park (no nearby toilets) and only 2 open air checkpoints at which cold drinks are served. No self respecting 21st century LDWA walk organiser would dare to suggest such an event yet this is the basis of the Winter Tanners, an event set up in the LDWA pioneering days which, after 39 events, is still very popular. But then it could be argued the Winter Tanners was never planned as an event. It just happened!

THE FIRST WINTER TANNERS

What is regarded as The first Winter Tanners was held on 11th January 1976 as an informal first walkout of the proposed route for the 17th Tanners Marathon. The Tanners Marathon has a different route every year which obviously has to be researched and developed virtually from scratch. This was down to Alan Blatchford who prior to 1976, with his many commitments, was finding July was approaching fast and the proposed route had not even been surveyed so the preparation of the route description was always being done at the last minute. He decided to adopt the policy of walking the proposed route on the second Sunday in January. My understanding is that he intended to invite a few friends to walk the route with him

so he would be committed and therefore not allow an urgent matter on another event he was organising to take precedent. Following a Surrey Group meeting held in Arthur Radley's House in Guildford (circa October 1975) with 7 members present the following item was included in the newsletter:

SUNDAY, 11th JANUARY "Winter Tanners"

A group walk in winter of the 1976 Tanners Marathon course. Meet 8.00 a.m. at Leatherhead Football Ground. For final details contact Alan Blatchford (Guildford 60085) after Christmas.

There was also the following entry under "Future Events" in the NOVEMBER 1975 (NUMBER THIRTEEN) LDWA National Newsletter (predecessor to Strider):

JANUARY 11th - WINTER TANNERS - Mid-Surrey

When the Tanners Marathon was originally planned, the first Sunday in July was chosen because there would be plenty of daylight and the ground would be dry and firm. Now there is to be a preview walk over the 1976 route (30 miles) when conditions are expected to be at their worst and daylight minimum. The event will be informal but only strong walkers should contemplate coming. Start and finish at Leatherhead, Surrey. Further details from Alan Blatchford, 11 Thorn Bank, Guildford.

This publicity was backed up by enthusiastic spin-doctoring from Jeff Ellingham who 'phoned a number of potential victims to ensure they were aware of the walk. According to Alan's rough notes on the back of an old envelope (there was no formal registration) and Keith Chesterton's counting part way along route this attracted an estimated 62 walkers/runners. This far exceeded the number Alan expected and although he had prepared one of those famous AWB sketch maps the supply available was woefully inadequate to fulfill the demand. Alan compiled a report/results list from his back of envelope notes and participants who phoned him. He issued certificates to those he managed to get times for.

THE BLATCHFORD YEARS

Once again, from the popularity of the pilot it obviously became an annual "informal" walkout graded as a "route proving exercise for The Tanners Marathon". The 1978 report mentions a route description but this was lacking in detail almost certainly being written from memory and the map.

The Winter Tanners, being advertised in Strider's Future events section, began attracting a number of entrants who were not aware of the informality of the event and although warnings were given of the basic nature in the advertising some were disappointed that there was no creditable route description. So for 1980, as secretary of The Surrey Group, I was "elected" to prepare a route description and I selected a team of checkers. This was intended to be the future routine but sadly Alan died in September 1980.

THE TAKEOVER

Alan had given me the map tracing for the 1981 Tanners Marathon just 3 days before he died. With the December Strider deadline date looming I took over as Winter Tanners organiser and developed Alan's route for both 1981 events. I also became the organiser for 1982 onwards.

I tried to follow the informality of the event and practices Alan had created but at the same time to formalise a pattern of practice to the extent that I considered necessary. I introduced entry forms for instance. My attitude was to try to keep it in a time warp regarding it as for people who were quite capable of going out on a 30 mile walk on their own but to introduce a social element of walking the route on the same day as others.



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My main concern, with various groups trying to outdo one another in prioritising getting the most Michelin Stars for their checkpoints, was to ensure any advertising made clear entrants would not be getting the gastronomic goodies which they got on most LDWA events.

Barbara Blatchford took over as organiser of The Tanners Marathon so devised the routes. Barbara told me the route and I continued to prepare the route description initially for The Winter Tanners. After the Winter Tanners had taken place I converted it to suit the different checkpoints etc of The Tanners Marathon and passed it to the TMA. They still managed to find wrinkles that had not been ironed but I hope it was an improvement from the pre 1980 days.

SUBSEQUENT ORGANISERS

Due to personal domestic circumstances I had to resign as organiser after the 1993 event. I came back later to see The Winter Tanners through to the 25th event but on the understanding that I would not continue as organiser after that. List of organisers are:

1976 to 1980	Alan Blatchford
1981 to 1993	John Westcott
1994 to 1997	Brian Haigh
1998 and 1999	Reg Chapman
2000 to 2002	John Westcott
2003 to 2007	Barry Harrison
2008 to 2011	Fiona Cameron
2012	No overall organiser (duties shared)
2013 onwards	Richard Ireson

I continued to devise the route and prepare the route description up to 2014. From 2015 to date I have devised the route and prepared a draft route description which Mary Dee has arranged to have checked and prepare the final for distribution.

THE VENUE

Up until 1983, the start/finish point was outside the Leatherhead Football Club gates - The Tanners Marathon venue being the Football Clubhouse. Whereas for the July event, a field was arranged as a car park, no such facilities were organised for the informal poor relation and so participants had to find parking space for themselves with instructions not to use the handy Leisure Centre Car Parks.

To facilitate convenient parking, for 1984 and until 2012, the registration, start and finish were in a municipal car park near to Leatherhead station which is free on Sundays. The street cleaning staff were very surprised to see so many cars in the car park on a Sunday when they collected their equipment from a shed in the car park. There was no undercover in the car park but we were generally lucky that the rain kept away during registration for most events.

In 1993 however it poured. We took refuge under the nearby railway arch on a very narrow pavement with traffic whizzing round the busy gyratory.

The pre-day entries were easy. Those nice people who headed my plea to enter by post (do you remember that!!) had the advantage of being sent a route description in advance with their walk number so all they had to do was to report to the departures marshal to have their time recorded. To encourage advance entries, the advance entry fee was 50p and the on-the-day entry fee was £2.50 and the advantages to themselves and the organiser was pointed out on the entry form but there were still a big proportion of naughty entrants who left it to the day to enter.

To illustrate pre day entry advantages I deliberately tried to take longer over setting up the registration tables etc to make the on day entrants wait while they saw their co-operative pre day entrants just going off as soon as they got there but helpful people grabbed the tables to erect them and find things I pretended I was looking for to nullify my intended delay. It is ironical that since the innovation of electronics there are no on-the-day entries. I was tempted to do the same in the old paper days. Mind you, when Alan was organising the event there were, in effect, no pre-day entries but those who let him know they were coming were sent what information he had regarding the proposed route.

For 2014 onwards, the registration has been undercover. 2014, 2015 and 2016 in a football pavilion part of the Leatherhead Leisure Centre - 2017 and 2018 in a unit on the Mole Valley Business Park near Leatherhead Station.

THE ROUTE

Barbara Blatchford resigned from The TMA after the 1990 Tanners Marathon following her promotion to Surrey County Council Principal Rights of Way Officer. The position requires neutrality when dealing with land owners and all rights of way users. Organising a walking event within the county may be regarded as creating conflicting interests. I was asked to take over devising the routes for the Tanners Marathon which obviously also meant The Winter Tanners. I did not join the TMA, preferring to act in a sub-contractor capacity, but I did attend a few of their meetings.

My objective in devising the routes, like Alan and Barbara before me, was to make each one as different as possible bearing in mind a fixed venue and Tanners Hatch Youth Hostel was always used as the last checkpoint on the Tanners Marathon. The policy I inherited was to include at least 1 section of the route each year that had never been used on a Tanners Marathon before. I have adhered to this policy for The Winter Tanners but cannot be sure for the Tanners

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Marathon prior to 1976.

Obviously some same paths are used on different routes, the ones with the best views many times, but by using different combinations, routing in opposite directions and not using the same “distant” area in 2 consecutive years it gives a fair element of the variety I seek.

ORGANISER WALKING THE ROUTE

Alan, of course, completed the route on the day for the first 5 events when he was organiser (1976-1980). He tended to form a group with other walkers who used his presence as a means of navigation. In an attempt to continue this tradition, as well as completing the 5 which Alan organised, I also completed the next 10 on the day. It was my practice to set off after everyone else and when I had completed the route, record later finishers in. Dave Green recorded finishers before I got there. Dave was in hospital for the 1993 event. I decided not to replace him so as well as seeing all starters off, after a quick spin round visiting the checkpoints in the car, I got back to Leatherhead to see all the finishers in.

I did keep my 100% record by counting my usual final route description check in December as a completion - the consolation was that whereas it rained most of the day of the event, the day I did it was lovely weather. This really coincided with when I reluctantly had to admit the early signs of senectus was dictating that I was unable to get round a 30 mile route starting at 9.30 and expect to finish it in a reasonable time to relieve Dave so I decided to forego the tradition for 1994 onwards.

CHECKPOINTS - Use of Tanners Hatch

By the very nature of the event there are fewer checkpoints than on most LDWA 30 mile events. In the main checkpoint locations are chosen to suit the route and often finding a suitable location influences where the route goes.

In Strider 25 Alan's “Future Events” entry for 1980 specifies 3 checkpoints but all Alan's route descriptions (or sketch maps) only show 2 - he never used Tanners Hatch for this purpose on the Winter Tanners. In any case, it would be more appropriate to call them refreshment points as walkers were not recorded through.

I advertised the event as having only 2 checkpoints. I did not use the word checkpoint in most of my early route descriptions but just showed “drinks” at the appropriate points. Up to 1984 there were just 2 of these and the walkers times were recorded at both points. Tanners Hatch was first used as a drinks point in addition to the 2 checkpoints in 1985 but it was a “help yourself” process and the walkers times were not recorded there.

From 1994 until 2009, we had 3 checkpoints, 1 of which was Tanners Hatch and walkers times were recorded at all 3. The use of Tanners as a drinks/checkpoint was as a result of Graham Peddie, the hostel warden, volunteering to deal with it. He arranged for the manpower and supplies - all I had to do was pay his bill. I still advertised the event as having 2 checkpoints regarding Tanners Hatch as concessionary to the advertised commitment.

When Graham left, the subsequent wardens allowed us to have the use of the hostel but we had to supply the manpower and get the equipment down a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile rough track. Some people, including myself, did not like taking their car down that track. The checkpoint marshals preferred to leave their cars in the Denbies Hillside Car Park (now regarded as Steer's Field Car Park for purposes of The Winter Tanners) and walk down to the hostel and back. I used to take the equipment from that car park down to the hostel in a wheelbarrow on the Saturday and collect it the same way on the Monday.

For 2010, it was decided that the advantage of having Tanners Hatch as a checkpoint (mainly water available) was not worth the disadvantage of having the cars $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away so since then one of the 3 National Trust Car Parks on Ranmore Common have been used for checkpoint 3.

In 2015 electronic recording was introduced with time recorders cutting their teeth on ‘Checkpoint’ developed by David Hodge of the Sussex Group We migrated to the LDWA's PACER in 2017. A top priority now for route design is to ferret out checkpoint locations with good cellular signals. How things have changed!

ASSOCIATION WITH TANNERS HATCH

The TMA always used Tanner Hatch as the final checkpoint on The Tanners Marathon so The Winter Tanners had to pass the Youth Hostel whether it was used as a checkpoint or not. As the last Tanners Marathon was in 2010, from 2011 onwards it was no longer absolutely necessary to pass the hostel and without being obligated by this static point, it created a greater choice of routes.

However, some may think it traditional that the route keeps in touch with the location after which the event is named. Maybe it is felt that the tradition goes further in that the inaugural meeting to form the LDWA was held here and the Winter Tanners should respect this link. Maybe it is thought passing the Alan Blatchford memorial seat is another symbolic tradition that the event should respect in memory of the man that made it all happen. I always mention the seat in the route description even though it is not really necessary.

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For 2012 a little flexibility was created by passing the hostel on the outward route instead of the homeward route. For 2016 the route did not pass the entrance of the hostel but, in my view, the tradition was satisfied by using a National Trust permissive path which I had earmarked for use for many years from which the hostel could clearly be seen on the other side of a field. In an effort to create an unusual route for the fortieth, the 2018 goes nowhere near the hostel but we certainly will be returning there for 2019.

TWENTY MILE ALTERNATIVE

Since 2000 we have had a 20 mile which uses the 30 mile route but with a shortcut between the outward and homeward routes. Only 2 checkpoints on the 20, usually 1 and 3. One disadvantage was that it attracted some of the regular helpers to take part.

THE MISSING YEARS

The first Winter Tanners was held in 1976 so if all went according to plan for an annual event, 2015 should have been the 40th. The extension to the 40th being held in 2018 is explained because there were no events held for the 3 years 1988, 1990 or 2013 called The Winter Tanners. The reason is the story of 3 storms.

1988: The high winds of the ferocious **storm** in the south east of England over the night of 16th/17th October 1987 left many paths blocked by fallen trees. Barbara Blatchford, not knowing which paths would be cleared by 3rd July 1988, could not tell me the proposed route of the Tanners Marathon in time for an the event to be held on 10th January. So to oblige the event as advertised, I devised a route more or less free of the devastation and called it "The Not the Winter Tanners".

1990: At the Surrey Group AGM on 17th January 1989, new officials were elected. As part of a new broom review, they considered the Surrey Group was over committed with challenge events for the support that could be mustered. They put this to a subsequent planning meeting and it was decided to restrict the holding of the Winter Tanners and the Punchbowl Marathon to every two (alternate) years. The **storm** of protest from would be 1990 participants, now deprived of their favourite winter outing in the Surrey Hills, resulted in restoration of both the Winter Tanners and The Punchbowl to their annual status.

2013: Snow **storms** prior to the date the event was due to be held made conditions difficult and roads treacherous. It was decided to cancel mainly out of consideration for the helpers but also because it was considered impractical to hold a 30 mile walk in those conditions.

FINAL COMMENT

The 40th Winter Tanners is scheduled to be held on 21st January 2018. Unfortunately Alan Blatchford, whose birth date was within 17 days of mine, only saw the first 5. I often wonder how the event would have developed had he continued to be the organiser. This is not one of Alan's most spectacular things he organised but it epitomises how his laid back charismatic attitude could be so infectious. I am sure it has been an influence in so many people volunteering to make The Winter Tanners so successful even though most of them never knew him.

John Westcott (LDWA 679)