

N.E. Cross Country Championships (13.12.2008)

John Stephens: One for the purists, this years NE Champs! The torrential rain over the preceding couple of days made the 'modified' Wrekenton course a bit of a quagmire, ensuring 'real' cross country for Saturdays 103rd running of the event. The course was basically that used for NEHL, with a bit of a loop across the football pitches and a switch-back coming off the second climb each lap, before heading back towards the start/finish area.

The club team was a bit decimated through injury, work commitments and Christmas revelry but Dave (Wright), Jonathon (Stephens) and myself toed the line in lets just say 'testing conditions' – cold, wet, bit windy! It has to be said one of the Saltwell lads providing the assembled field with a reminder for the Saltwell Races next week, just before the start, wasn't the most popular man in Gateshead. Some of the advice he was given is not quite fit for print in this report. However, with cross-country runners generally being a hardy bunch, there were also a few overheard comments relating to 'over dressing' on some competitors part e.g. one of the Wallsend lads accused one of his colleagues of looking as though he was "off shopping"! I was quite warm though following my extensive warm-up jogging back down to Low Fell and back prior to the start. After reminding Jon to remember his club vest I managed to forget mine which is a first, in 35 years or so of running! 'What good fortune' I thought I'll just run home and collect it – only to find that Vicky had gone out and I couldn't get in the house. However, some family balance was restored, with Jon reminding me to tie my laces tight in the muddy conditions – clearly he took my forgetting to pack my vest as a sign of decreased ability in dressing-related decision-making skills – only for him to lose a shoe on the first lap.

The mystery man of the day was Dave. Turned up and collected (Gerals) number from Jon, when I was off on my warm-up, never to be seen again! On the way home we did have concerns that he may be face down in the mud somewhere out on the course as a few folks did during the race – bizarrely one runner (again one of the Wallsend lads I think) had a huge mud splatter on the side of his head! Answers on a postcard for that one! Maybe he just bounced back up again? Anyway, back to Dave, and quite relieved to see his/Gerals name turn up on the results for a fine run in 177th place. Jon managed to recover his shoe and put in an excellent performance to finish 76th, after very little training over the past couple of weeks due to illness and holidays.

The race itself was brilliant! Three laps slogging through the mud, this is how Saturday afternoons are to be spent in the Winter months. Certainly knew you'd been in an event by the finish – legs a bit heavy on the final climb for sure. Thanks for support out on the course, saw Steve and thought I heard Dave Mc, but had a lot of shouts – 'go on Low Fell' – which with not wearing the club vest was a little strange. The folk of Wrekenton are, to the best of my knowledge, not known for their powers of clairvoyance. Have to be honest though, felt as though I had been run over when I woke up on Sunday! More than a bit sore initially getting out for a slow hour or so later in the morning.

Hexamshire Hobble Fell Race (07.12.2008)

John Stephens: Run over 10.5 miles with 1220 ft ascent, the Hobble is a 'Category C Medium' fell race, which basically means it's a tough run but not as tough as some!

This year was the 15th running of the event and it was great to see 4 runners complete this years' race who had taken part in the first Hobble. None more so than an amazing guy called David Wright who won the 0/60s category in 1993 and who still completed Sundays run at the age of 75 years. Another (quite probable) fact about David was that for those who ran in 2007, I believe he was the only person to record a faster time than last year. Conditions can only be described as 'treacherous', due to snow and ice. I think Lawrence was one of very few folk who didn't finish with bloodied knees due to at least one fall on the ice and snow.

Great course though that climbs out of Allendale following a short descent from the Fire Station up onto the fells via a rolling hill that can only be likened to a couple of Chowdenes but steeper. The course is a basic loop out around Hangmans Hill taking in another fairly stiff climb at around 7 miles returning on a downhill stretch (last ¾ mile on road) to finish at the Fire Station again. With temperatures around 2 degrees in Allendale, and with wind-chill probably sub-zero on the hills, hat, gloves, and thermal top were advisable with mandatory kit (including waterproof top, trousers, whistle, compass – usual stuff for this kind of event) to be carried. It's also advisable to take a little 'refreshment' up with you and whilst Neil, Mick and I were content to take a few sweets, Lawrence pushed the boat out with enough provisions to feed the entire field! If you don't believe me see the size of his bag on any one of his many photos up on the Northumberland Fell Runners website taken by Rob Stephens (no relation). Bit of a character Rob. He runs events with a digital camera happily snapping away as races and finishes quite well up – just behind Lawrence in this case, as can be deduced from the photos!

Anyway after a bit of a fraught start – mass rush down the hill from the Fire Station – once we got on top, I found myself in a group of 4 most of the way round. Good company in the conditions, particularly as this was the first time I've run this event. Spent quite a bit of time running through the heather as the tracks were very slippery with ice/snow – a bit like running on egg shells; lots of creaking and cracking never quite sure whether the ground was going to give way under you or not – so the heather offered a bit more of a forgiving surface. Back on the final descent it was everyman for himself in my little group, and I was relieved to get the better of the other guys to finish 5th overall, closely followed in by Neil who finished 13th. Mr consistent (Mick) followed up his excellent 39th place finish last year with (you've guessed) 39th this year – on a hat-trick for next year ... and yes no doubt Micks favourite film is 'The 39 Steps'. Lawrence, quite rightly, was really pleased with his 49th place to put him in the top half of the field – amazing for the conditions 123 finishers from 123 starters i.e. no DNFs. The race was won by Ben Abdelnoor from Ambleside, all the more remarkable as I gather Ben broke his back a few years ago due to a paragliding accident in New Zealand.

The post race refreshments are to be commended at this event. A cracking brew (all proceeds going to the local Fire Brigade) and some great cake. Neil endeared himself no end to the folks who had baked the cakes, waxing lyrical about the quality of the cooking (top notch) and thus ensuring a steady supply of cake throughout the prize giving and also picked up a spot prize into the bargain – eat your heart out Carl (in joke for all of us – including Carl I hope – who ran the Allendale 8 earlier in the year; hint, Mick and his 'steamer' as reported at the time). This was the final year that Tynedale will organise the Hobble, as next year Allen

Valley will pick up the gauntlet to continue with what is a great event in the local fell running calendar.

Gibside 'Fruit Bowl' 6.2 mile Trail Race (02.11.2008)

John Stephens: One of my favourite events of the running calendar enhanced its reputation no end as “not flat” through a necessary course modification this year. Apparently one of the flat bits down by the river is now actually part of the river so it seemed more than reasonable to a) cut this bit out and the course distance from 7 to 6.2 miles, and b) stick in another hill to compensate for a). This now leaves the run along the avenue at the start and finish as just about the only flat bits on the course.

Anyway, arrived in good time for the start with club photographer for the day (Jonathon). The organisation was excellent with plenty of accurate information about the course change. As usual for this event, a good turn out from the club with George looking as though he'd just about recovered from his Dublin hangover the previous weekend. George reports that for those contemplating a marathon, he can confirm Guinness with Vodka mixers at 0200 on race day is not the best pre-race fuelling strategy! As well as the usual suspects there was the surprise appearance of Davie Mc, not normally noted for his liking of trail/fell running.

At 1000 prompt, the whistle went (whatever happened to guns) and we were off, a large field of over 400 runners thundering down the tree lined avenue from Gibside Chapel – picturesque is not an overstated term here. Turning back on to the path, Neil Wilkinson (eventual winner) was already well clear of the field and went on to win by over a minute. Despite being a little slippery underfoot in places the vast majority of the course was good running as I found myself locked in a bit of a battle with Graham (Blackhill Bounders who beat me by a second in 2007), Mike Jones from South Shields, and one of the Blyth lads for most of the race. Have to say the ‘new’ hill was impressive, a fairly sharp, shortish climb up and to the right that eventually brought us out at (another way to get to) the monument. The course was well marshalled with even a dog in a marshalling jacket (take note Allan for the clubs races next year), who no doubt ‘barked’ out directions at some point. For a while I did think that our little group was going to make an impression on the group in front of us – kept reeling them in a bit on the uphill sections only to lose distance again on the faster downhill bits. Eventually managed to get the jump on Graham and Mike, and despite almost mistiming my final ‘burst’ (relatively speaking, you understand) back along the avenue – it is quite a deceptive finish; you’re kind of at the finish but not quite – managed to hold them off for a rather surprising 11th place.

Despite his almost pathological dislike of this type of race, Davie ran very well for 22nd place, with Mickey finishing in 30th. Carl couldn’t quite make it up to the ‘Shepherd and Shepherdess’ in this race, instead taking the sensible, if somewhat less exciting option of staying on course to finish 32nd. Laurence continued his fine recent form with an excellent run in 46th. Full club results can be found at another part of the website but special mention must be made of Melanie firstly to confirm to Mike that she is a female (my eyesight isn’t great but even I noticed that) and more importantly her fine run to finish 122nd overall and

15th lady. Also doing a fine job for the ladies was Christine who finished 9th in her category (L55s). Well done to one and all.

Finally, the good name of the club was upheld at the prize giving when we returned the prize for the 0/60 category won by Bill. An interesting conundrum, and not one to discuss here in public – just ask Bill, or Davie.

Tynedale Jelly Tea 10 mile (14.09.2008)

John Stephens: 0932, and it was reassuring to see the red C4 of Bill and Barbara turn onto Durham Road from Chowdene to pick up Jonathon and myself thus negating any operationalisation of ‘Plan B’ of getting to the race – drive, run the race and walk/jog back to Hexham from Ovingham. An hour later in Hexham, having met the challenge (along with Paul, Neil and Jonathon) of successfully deciphering the male/female toilet symbols, and jogging down to the start it was very impressive to note a) the size of the field, (around 600 I believe) even with it being the NE championships, and also British Veterans Champs b) the number of runners from the club – around 14 on my count looking at the results. Also notable that during warm-up I was asked by about 4 different people if George (Russell) was running – fame in Hexham.

Anyway, after what at first seemed to be a rolling start (jog from the ‘holding area’ down to the start) the race was away promptly at 1100, the tradition being that the race doesn’t commence until Bill (McGurk) jogs to the lead car and successfully pulls away – “Bloody car stalled last year” implied a rather pessimistic prediction from one of the Morpeth lads stood next to me as Bill shot-off at an impressive rate of knots (and I do not use the term lightly) leapt into the lead car, and the race was underway.

First notable event for the race was that it didn’t rain, which was a bit of a miracle considering the weather over the past 3 weeks or so, and has to be said was run in virtually ideal conditions. I would have to echo comments made at the start to thank Tynedale Harriers for continuing to put on the race, which I believe is now the only 10 mile event in the area, despite limited co-operation in some quarters. As all will bear testimony it’s a really scenic course, extremely well marshalled and organised. I can’t remember when I last ran the race (probably early 1990s when I seem to recall it was run on a Saturday afternoon), but memories of the course came flooding back once we hit the series of uphill drags from 3 ¾ through to 4 ¾ miles. Good to make the right hand turn to the halfway mark in the knowledge that some quicker running lay ahead with a negative split pretty much the norm for most on this course. Although enjoying the company of Brian Bewick and Paul Redman (from Sunderland Harriers), and Jason Allison (Crook) over the second half of the race, didn’t see anything of Jon (Archer) who after a 5 week break, ran an excellent “easy run” (in his words) to finish 4th. Don’t think there will be too many takers for a Sunday run with you there Jon.

Anyway, back with the group. Managed to pick up a few places and at around 7 miles Brian wound up the pace a bit and although he got away fairly quickly I was able to use the break to

get away from Paul and Jason and pick off a 2 or 3 more places as folks tired. Of course like everyone else, really enjoyed the little ‘sting in the tail’ that is the short, sharp climb at around 9 ½ miles and although making a bit of an impression on the little group in front of me couldn’t quite get on the back of them over the final half mile, but an enjoyable run all the same. Seemed to be the way with most of the runners from the club with strong runs from just about everyone; we managed to get 5th place in the team event and 5 runners in the first 100 – George hopefully satisfying his fan club with his very sound 64:29 clocking in 83rd place. Also really good to see 3 of the ladies (or is it ‘womens’, I’m just of a different era in all honesty) section, Cheryl, Vicky and Clare, competing and doing themselves justice with good runs.

The real business of the race of course starts at the finish, and the jelly tea. Be honest, how many people start to think ‘Mmm jelly’ in a hypoglycaemic Homer Simpson kind of way from about 8 miles? Good to see that as a real Dad, Andy (Hughes) didn’t let his children down promising strawberry jelly and there was. Perfect end to the day!

Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon (5/6.07.2008)

John Stephens: I’m aware that an e-mail has been circulated to all club members extolling the virtues of this great event from Shaun (Dunlop), but thought that a brief account of proceedings for those of you that Neil and I haven’t managed to bore to death so far, may be useful (if you fancy a go next year) and at the least hopefully entertaining.

For the uninitiated, SLMM is a two day event whereby teams of two (apart from Klets class – single, crazy people) navigate their way around a wilder part of the Lakes for a couple of days, carrying necessary kit (tent, sleeping bag, stove, spare clothing etc) and food. There is a choice from number of different classes to enter, differentiated by distance covered and total climbing for each day as well as previous experience.

Following a couple of glasses of red wine at Shaun’s place in February, bravado was in full flow with “well Shaun, what’s the highest class we can enter?” So it was that Neil, Shaun, and myself found ourselves travelling across to Fornside Farm (B5322, SE of Keswick), for the overnight camp prior to Neil and I competing in the Kirkfell Class – indeed the highest category we could enter without prior experience. Spent the evening getting some much needed tips from the experts – Shaun and his brother Paul, and also Ken (Maynard, Sunderland Strollers) an amazing guy who finished 3rd in Klets Class (yep, that crazy!) who seemed to manage to get all his gear in a rucksack the size of which it has to be said, would embarrass some ladies handbags – ‘compact’ is an understatement. Anyway, we were all set for a bit of an adventure in the Helvellyn range.

Day 1

“They usually like to send you up a steep climb at the start of each day.” Words of wisdom indeed from Paul (Shaun’s brother), as on being given the grid references for our seven points to visit on day 1, it dawned on us that our first point (a sheephold) lay beyond an direct ascent

of about 300m, straight up what appeared to the face of a small mountain, which then eased a little with a more gentle climb from 525m to the sheephole at 675m. Despite the rain and low cloud (very wet for two days), we decided to stay high and 'run' along ridge paths as much as possible, and descend to pick up points. This strategy worked very well for the most, but we came a little unstuck on missing the entry into a valley SE of Dollywaggon Pike and decided to make a descent down a rather steep gulley – made even more 'interesting' in that it turned out to be full of mud and scree. Anyway a bit bruised, battered, and even wetter, we picked up the next point (bend of a stream) without too much of a problem. The good news for the day was that we didn't have to go up Striding Edge – much too straight forward it seems, as we climbed (literally) over it via the 'Hole in the Wall'. Plenty of company though on this stretch. Anyway onward to the next point, and the long stretch to the overnight camp at Dornthwaitehead. Reflecting on our adventure through the gulley and over Striding Edge later in the day Neil succinctly captured events – “a bit of a low point really” – but at least we were still going and still (unbelievably) enjoying the day immensely.

The final test of character for the day came when we came off a path too soon near the overnight camp site, and wasted about half an hour trying to locate point six on our route. Really pleased when we eventually found it, and then made the descent from the clouds, and couldn't believe it when the camp site (at a farm) was right in front of us. Still, fantastic day and very pleased to finish 17th in our category.

Great thing about the overnight camp is that everyone, irrespective of event category, camps at the same place. So about 500 or so tents in a couple of fields with plenty of stores from peoples 'day out', and the opportunity (you need to carry about a fiver with you) to supplement your food as the organisers provide milk, soft drinks, and beer for sale. Never has a can of Murphys tasted so good. Tent up, and dried out – lets just say it was 'cosy' in our lightweight two man tent! After being on your feet for over six hours, sleep comes quite quickly! No more so for Shaun who in the evening, on seeing that the queues for the portaloos were a bit long decided to lie down in his tent until they went down a bit. Next thing he recalls is waking up at 0300, still needing the loo!

Day 2

Up for around 0630, breakfast of vegetable risotto which mysteriously had a bit of an aftertaste that lasted well into day 2. Perfect timing on fuel supply for the stove (particularly as I'm carrying it) as fuel ran out just as water was boiling for a final brew. Day 2 start is a bit more relaxed. Instead of getting grid references for the day at the start, you collect from around 0645ish for a 0800ish start, which provides plenty of time to sit in your tent and map out a route.

Day 2 start again commenced with a fairly steep climb back on top of the hills, to take generally speaking another loop south to finish back at Fornsidge. Weather wasn't quite as bad as Saturday with quite a lot more dryish spells. Overall we had a very good day – team work was so slick that we ended up falling in the same hole together at one point! I managed to get out “Watch out for the”, but was unable to finish before Neil clattered into the back of me as both went sprawling. Another team who were nearby provided some encouragement – “We'll not be following you lads!”

We stuck to a similar strategy on day 2 as used for day 1, in getting high and staying high on paths where possible, which worked really well as we ticked off point after point on our

route. After bagging the tricky point six (stream junction) on our route, and only about 1K from the finish it was good to hear familiar voices “You’re going the wrong way” – Shaun and Paul running over the hills and seemingly on their way out towards Clough Head. Managed to forgo the kind invitation to join them, and proceeded to the final point. On the way though was an unbelievable descent back to Fornside – ‘steep’ is not the word here, precede with a strong expletive and you’ll get the point I’m trying to make. Neil and I managed to rack up more falls on this final stretch than the previous two days – indeed, a couple that warranted marks for artistic impression – bit more battered and bruised! Not as bad as a young lady behind me on the descent. On hearing a very unhealthy sound of body on rock, I enquired whether she was ok and was somewhat relieved to hear “Yep, I’m fine but I’ve landed sat on a thistle” (ouch!).

Anyway, our sterling efforts on day 2 were rewarded with 5th place for the day, which pushed us up to 12th for the overall event in the Kirkfell class. The meal and brew from ‘Wilfs’ (event caterers – brilliant) was well worth the effort over the two days.

So that’s it really. Have to say one of the toughest things I’ve had a go at – and that includes marathons, and a 24hr relay (but I was younger then!) – but really was a fantastic couple of days. I would really recommend having a go at next year’s event – very much think we’ll be giving it another go. Check out the website at <http://www.slmm.org.uk/> If you fancy a go, first thing to do really is find a partner. Like most things in life, it’s not where you are or what your doing that’s important, but who you’re with.

Allendale 8 (31.05.2008)

John Stephens: In advance of marshalling the Trail Race on Sunday, six hardy souls (Davey, Jon, Mick, Carl, Paul and myself) travelled out to Allendale for the second running of the 8 mile road race. Well I say ‘road race’ - think more ‘fell race’ but on tarmac. Described as ‘undulating’ at the race information, this is a demanding event with some great scenery if you have time to have a bit look around. Organised by Allen Valley Striders (all 8 of them!) this is a really well organised and friendly event with the added bonus of being part of the Allendale Fair which looked to be a great day (or days) out – loads going on, including a few ropey but very entertaining Karaoke singers. ‘Fly like an eagle’ was a delight but I don’t recall Steve Miller singing it quite like that.

On to the race itself. Great course. Tough first 3.5 – 4 miles, long drag for the first couple, steep descent and equally killer of a climb at around 3 miles. Sharp descents not exactly conducive to the well being of my veteran joints – a few complaints from the old hips and knees in particular. Then a lot of ‘undulation’ through to about 5.5 miles which is around the high point of the course with some great running over a bit of a rolling road to gradually descend back to Allendale. The real surprise is the final 150 metres which is a steep climb to the finish line – you could virtually fall over the line from the top of the bank. Think about the steepest section of Chowdene and that’s about the measure of it. I believe its known locally as ‘the Peth’ – certainly thought our friends at Allen Valley must surely be taking the peth on a finish like that – and joking apart, is a great finish. They even had a photographer who must be one of Steve’s protégés being positioned about half way up the hill where everyone looks absolutely trashed.

Great day for the club as we won the team event and I broke the course record! I'll have to expand on the latter point here – ok it's only the second time the event has been run, and unfortunately the winner (Mark Swannell, Bolton Harriers, and incidentally a smashing bloke) was over a minute ahead of me. Great run from Jonathon to finish 3rd, with Davey in 9th, Carl in 13th (to complete scoring team) and Paul and Mick finishing 17th and 18th respectively. Mick also won a prize in the number draw after the race, so anyone receiving a 'steamer' from Mick this Xmas will know where it's come from. Carl was desperate to win a spot prize, but it was not to be. Come in number 205, your time is up! Rumour is that Carl and Davey put the team prize to good use - Saturday night out in the toon. Conversation of the day was at the finish between Mark (the winner) and myself; Mark "Here's another one of your guys in 3rd", me "Yep, it's my son", response unprintable here!

Finally, a very pleasant surprise to see Jimmy Bell (Elswick) at the race. As you know Jimmy has had a lot of ill health over the past couple of years or so. Absolute inspiration to see him out racing again.

Watergate Trail Race (01.06.2008)

John Stephens: In conditions that can only be described as 'aquatic', the inaugural Watergate Trail Race with well over 100 entrants can justifiably claim to be another success for the club. A big thank you to everyone involved in the organisation of the event both prior to and also on the day of the race – it was tough for the runners but equally so for all the marshals, officials, and helpers around the course. Obviously biased, but great job in terms of the relatively smooth running of the event particularly this being the first time that the race has taken place. Special thanks to Gerald in getting all the results out so efficiently, even though I seemed to have a bit of a problem in reading them out in the correct order – lost the O-35 ladies momentarily at presentations. The facilities at the race HQ provided valuable support for the race and the football coaches seem quite keen to stay involved with us using the building for future events.

Unlike the trail race's political namesake from across 'the pond' a few years ago (maintain the water theme here for a link), there was no scandal at this event not just in attracting a pretty large field for the first time of running, but also in the quality of both the men's and ladies race. Not surprisingly Nick Swinburne looked completely at home in the conditions to win in 34:28, over a minute clear of his Morpeth team mate Michael Morris who seemed to enjoy a great battle with James Buis (Heaton Harriers) in the race for second and third. Although the comment about the course record at the presentation of awards was very much tongue in cheek, I'm sure it'll prove a more than challenging target in future years even in dry conditions. James, in third, also had the consolation of leading Heaton to a well deserved team victory.

In the ladies race, Jane Mooney dominated the event from the start and looked in very impressive form to finish over 3 minutes clear of Angela Hunter (Chester-le-Street) in second place, with full marks to the Buis family in bringing some tidy symmetry to the event as Claire Buis (Heaton Harriers) took third place. There was no complete ladies team to win the award for that category – perhaps this is something we can work on for next year.

Within the vets categories there were also some highly notable performances that clearly underlined the future potential of the event. Although unable to complete part of the section in the woods for health and safety reasons it was a pleasure to see Ted (Johnson) turn out and get round his 'modified' course with a bit of assistance from race marshals. I'm sure he won't mind us mentioning his age – 84 years old (or is that young), and still a true 'Harrier'. Quote of the day has to be from Ted "What type of course is this? It's all up and down. Where's George Routledge, I'm sure he's dropping off and I'm catching him." Priceless!

Have some feedback from runners coming in about the race which we can use to build on in planning for next years event. Just a bit more tape for Allan and me to collect from the woods this evening – don't want to upset the Park Rangers. So thanks again to all club members, family, friends who gave up time to support the event and especially to all the runners for taking part. Hope to see everyone, and more, again next year hopefully with a bit better weather and even before then at the Angel Run in July, and the Watergate 5K in September. Finally, couldn't finish without acknowledging the valuable support for the event from Tony and all at 'Start Fitness'.

Edinburgh Marathon (25.05.2008)

Lawrence Johnson: Phew! What a weekend arriving in Edinburgh (by train) early on Saturday morning I discovered that Edinburgh was not flat (never been here since I was a kid) so after getting lost trying to find hotel going up and down some very large hills we eventually found it. We left our bags (couldn't check in until 2pm) and set off to find bus to expo (to pick up race no.) which was at Leith, up and down more hills. Eventually found a bus which went via Aberdeen? Took about 30 mins to go about 3 miles.

Found the expo but was very disappointed with what was there, but the organisation of picking up of numbers was very good, don't know why it wasn't in city centre? We went to get bus back waited another 35mins for bus. Eventually got back to town centre then another walk back to hotel.

Then another walk to get something to eat and you guessed it more hills. I was now looking forward to the marathon for a rest. Got back to hotel met up with George to give him his race no. He looked a bit worse for wear after a night on the drink!!

I decided to have a relaxing night and get my head down early.

We met up with George for breakfast (I thought George was going to clear the buffet) discussed tactics which in my case was get to the finish still running. We set off for the start and found a short cut only problem was that it was a very long steep set of steps called Jacobs ladder by the time we got to the top my warm up was done.

We met up with Shaun Who looked fresh and confident?

9 o'clock came and off we went downhill to start with and around holyrood park, stayed just behind George and Shaun for first mile went through in 6.25 oh s*** far too fast for me. George and Shaun eased away into distance. Got to the coast and turned towards

Musselburgh straight into a 17 mph head wind with 30mph gusts (according to the local paper) just what I need?

At 9 miles I passed the racecourse where the finish is, so still 17 miles to go. At 10 miles the course starts to climb very steadily but doesn't stop climbing until mile 18 (and a head wind!!). Passed half way in 1hr 37 felt ok but was too quick. At 16 miles the course went up a steeper hill turned around and came back down to where we started (someone said this was a flat course?) but Scooby doo was in worse shape than me.

Mile 17 we turned onto a gravel track very fine to start with like running on sand (multi terrain marathon?) but soon turned to hard packed track, around a large stately home and back on to the road at 18 miles. Now it was downhill with a tail wind.

Still felt good but now finding it hard to keep up pace even though I was now passing lots of people walking (Ha! Ha!). Lots of support from spectators some even shouting for Low Fell. Tried to find the zone that George was on about but he must have used it all up the week before. Kept pushing until 24 miles then legs decided they didn't want to play anymore but I wasn't going to walk now.

Got to Racecourse last 100m, with 50m to go I decided to do a Ross and sprint past a few people bad idea got cramp in hamstring so hopped across line trying not to scream like a girl, but a nice lady came and gave me a magic bottle of water.

I found George (who had explosive bowel problems during the race ask him where his gloves are?) and Shaun (who had a good race). And well done to Heather hope you were happy with your time.

I found my wife and headed back to Edinburgh laughing at all the runners in city centre who were walking rather strange, only to join them myself. On the whole it was an excellent weekend well organised and a good course but not flat!! I am already thinking about doing it again next year (faster I hope) as this was my first marathon I am happy with my time, role on the next one.

Ps don't buy an ice cream in Edinburgh city centre it cost us £5 for two 99s.

Pier to Pier Run (18.05.2008)

John Stephens: Hats off to Sunderland Strollers for putting on another excellent Pier to Pier event – near on 1000 entries, and from their website 871 finishers and rising, although I'm not sure that many would have gone for overnight B & B on the way from South Shields to Roker Pier. The race proved ever popular with the club also, 16 runners completing the run (see results). Just one query in that I don't recall seeing James there, but did see a dead ringer for Ian Holloway finish in a club vest at around 45 mins. On the other hand James could probably have swam round to Roker Pier in that time.

Anyway, back to the start. Ideal conditions; sunny but not too hot with a NE breeze to help us on our way as we all lined up on the beach at Shields. Really impressive sight as everyone

toed the line – good job the tide was out with such a big field. Managed to get a clean start at the gun along with Jonathon and Carl as we headed out across the beach towards Trow Rocks and the coastal path. As always a bit sapping battling across the soft sand to get up onto the path and then every man (and woman) for themselves as we made our way to Marsden Grotto and on towards Souter Point Lighthouse. I had managed to get a bit of daylight between myself and Jonathon and Carl by Marsden and found myself running with one of the Gateshead lads who didn't seem too keen to let me past, so had to be content with the ride for a while. Difficult to decide where we were position-wise as runners seemed to be appearing from everywhere. Anyway, from the Lighthouse felt quite fresh (must have been the sea air) and decided to push on a bit around the cliff top paths, picking up a place or three in the process.

I must take a moment here to take some issue with some fellow competitors wearing GPS. What the b***dy h**l is that all about! Guys, we're on the east coast of England, running south – keep the sea on your left and stop when you run into Roker Pier. It's the rather substantial structure sticking out into the sea at Sunderland, can't miss it. In addition we all know the distance isn't accurate (take your own route) but it's a race – last one to Roker gets the teas in – and just a bit of fun. Anyway whatever happened to the art of pace judgement. Ok, rant over and yes I guess I am just a bit of a saddo from a bygone era of running. Interesting chat with Glen Forster after the Wallsend Relays. We both agreed that like old rock musicians who mellow with age and play a bit of blues, old road/track distance runners just go on the trails and fells (for a bit of scenery).

OK, back to the cliffs. Fancied a change this year, so opted out of going onto the beach around Bents cottages and continued along the promenade. Well everyone in front of me (bar one – and we passed him) was doing this, so why not. Could see the two Elswick lads in front of me and although unable to make an impression, couldn't relax too much across Roker Beach as I could sense one of the South Shields lads fancying his chances a bit (too right there actually, I don't think I could have responded too convincingly to a bit of a charge). Anyway, rather surprised to squeeze into the top 10.

Great to see a 'super vet' win the event – handy run by Rob (Hand) of Durham to win (if such 'punery' is good enough for the Journal and the Sunderland Echo, it's good enough here) from Steven Armstrong and Gateshead's Mickey Thompson, who seems to have been around for ever and not gotten any older.

Some excellent runs for the club with Dave, Jonathon, Carl, Phil, Lawrence, and James (I mean Ian) finishing in the top 70, and with times that in previous years (certainly last year) would have placed them into the first 30 or so. The two ladies – Cheryl and Christine – had really solid runs, and what can I say about Stan? Tremendous stuff. I'm sure he must have been placed in the 0/70s?

I know Allan was a bit disappointed with his run just over the hour, but I'm sure he was exaggerating when he claimed that a rather rotund runner passed him and offered a piece of pastry by way of refreshment – the guy was only eating a sandwich when I saw him!

The report cannot close without mention of someone whose performance over the past 10 days at the Brathay Challenge has paled all yesterdays efforts into insignificance; well done George! The blog has been brilliant as we've followed your exploits. Concern, it has to be said, in some quarters of the club with all this hugging, hand holding and general tactile stuff

that seems to have been going on over in the Lakes. Hope it's not something you're looking to introduce at the club after sessions on training nights.

Gordon Smith Memorial Relays (07.05.2008)

John Stephens: There was an excellent turn out from the club (5 teams) for this very well organised and popular event with a total of 51 teams taking part. The weather was perfect for running, which combined with an interesting and challenging 2 mile loop for each relay leg made for a very pleasant evening.

The first leg witnessed a great battle between Davey Mc, Dave Nick and Martin (check times at results), for our A, B, and C teams respectively, to leave all three teams handily placed at the hand over to second leg runners. Although Mick and I did the social thing in setting off virtually together, Jonathon (Archer) seemingly had no such interest in any 'club' company, rapidly disappearing from sight to record the clubs 'fastest leg' of the evening with an outstanding 09:56 clocking. My own progress was hampered somewhat towards the end of the leg when on the final climb to the changeover I collided with a spectator who had strayed onto the course. Pleasantries were exchanged, and both of us were able to continue about our evenings business, uninjured and from my side, it has to be said, with little to no impact on overall performance.

Meanwhile as the final leg runners were away, Jonathon (Stephens) anchored the A-team to a very impressive 7th place, with Neil bringing the 'super vets' (B-team) home in 11th place. Added bonus for Neil in that his official time was a few seconds quicker than he had recorded at his own time-piece; maybe need to get a second hand for your sun dial Neil! Actually it was a bit of an evening for time related drama, as at the start Davey Mc hadn't remembered to put his clock forward when crossing the Tyne Bridge and was therefore still operating on Low Fell time (acknowledged to run 3 minutes behind Wallsend). Bit of stress for the team manager (Gerald) but I hear he is out of coronary care today.

At the sharp end, it was great to see the host club come home in first place well ahead of North Shields and Sunderland. A deserved win and just reward for putting such an enjoyable event. There really is a great spirit about the relays which is exemplified by their acceptance of allowing composite teams to enter.

Back with our C, D, and E teams, there were quite a few notable performances particularly from Gordon's son (J for John? Must apologise for my ignorance in not knowing your name) who turned in a very impressive 11:04 to help place the E-team 19th, just two places behind the C-team who finished in 17th position. Four teams in the top 20 – 'what's going on here?' I hear you ask! Indeed our fifth scoring team comprising 3 intrepid survivors from the Keswick ½ last weekend put together some solid runs so soon after that event to finish in 37th, although I have to say Bill did look a little less than fresh on the long drag up to the turn at the petrol station.

P.S. Thanks to Gerald in filling the managers role and sorting all the teams. Thanks also for all the support from family/friends for the club.

P.P.S. Good job Allan, getting even more trail race entries distributed. Thanks but no thanks for the form retrieved from under my windscreen – we'll both be busy on the 1st!!

Gisborough Moors Race (13.04.2008)

John Stephens: I journeyed down to run Gisborough Moors today and a 'canny day out' it was too. The race is a 12.3 mile event with 2200 ft of ascent and takes in three major climbs of Highcliff, Captain Cooks Monument (just the hill not the monument thankfully), and Roseberry Topping (very interesting ascent). Around 200 runners toed the line at Guisborough Rugby Club for the 1100 start, in bright but cool weather – around 7 degrees that dropped to about 4 degrees 'on top'. Conditions were 'very wet' underfoot and you could tell it was a proper fell event as I managed a fall, in fact a full blown 'Ronaldo' on the stretch of moorland at around 2 miles. Anyway, excellent event, great course for anyone who fancies something a bit longer on the fells.

Charlie Stead led from start to finish, or at least so I am reliably told (didn't see much of him apart from at the 'Northern Runner' stand) and NFR took the team event. After a steady start I managed to move through the field to finish 12th overall and 1st O/50 vet in around 1hr 35min 51sec. Of note during the race was a runner from North York Moors, who managed to trash two shoes, managed to replace the first (don't ask I've no idea) up on the moors and eventually finished wearing one shoe. The tone for the day was set at the start when the starter announced that one runner (can't remember his name) had left his cheque book in the toilet - again don't ask, I know nothing!

Arkendale 10k (30.03.2008)

Dave McAtominey: Mick Graham and Dave Mc travelled down to the village of Arkendale, near Knaresborough, for Arkendale 10K.

Both need to prove their worthiness for a place in the relay squad for the Northern (Micky returning from injury - too much wire brush?!). Dave going to Spain on the P again so misses Catterick - go on we can do it this time!!!!

After an hours drive we arrived at the village of Arkendale. Temporary parking had been hastily arranged at farm outbuildings, following torrential rain over the previous 24 hours (more of that later).

A quick reccy and warm-up took the chill off the wind and we were ready to go.

A quick word hear for the organisation. It's a very local race - organised by the Village with most funds going into the community, most of whom seem either to take part, marshall or bake cakes (for Micky!). There's a kids fun "dash" of 360 metres before the main event, race photos available, more cakes and....MEET THE SHEEP.down Gerald!!! Entries were closed at 400 with a good mix of club and fun runners. Mick and me being the most handsome - apart from Dolly.

We started on a farm track for a few hundred meters, and then onto an undulating road out towards the A1 to 1.5m with wind behind us - typically it was no help! The leading 2 or 3 were well away even by then. We then went onto the top of the embankment parallel to the motorway, for the next mile or so. It was very muddy and slippery here with a cross wind, road flats seemed a poor choice of footwear, but I told myself that all were suffering in the clarts.

Soon on the road again though and gaining on those in front. Decided to run through the puddles rather than veer for the mud to the side of the road as some were doing. It paid dividends, stealing vital yards to get to the next group. Between 2 and 4 miles it was quite fast running, depending on the wind direction, which was strong and constant (it's been like this for weeks now?). Gradually hauled myself into what seemed like the first 10? The small hills brought the Walton Classic 5 to mind as we returned into Arkendale.

At this point I felt relatively strong and fresh. We then turned away from the village towards the 5m (?) point and into the teeth of a fierce headwind with no shelter. We headed across a flat, but waterlogged field for 3/4m. Really tough going at that stage (I hate X/C anyway, but in flats?!)

Then a turn onto a narrow mud path, before gladly hitting the tarmac again. Could move again now, fended off the lad behind and back into the village, finishing on the grass, into the wind again, parallel to the start.

Bingley runner won (top club when I was a boy). I was 9th place in 39.10. Mick was 28th in 42.31.

All told a good event, well organised and not too far for a team to travel. With some new stars on the horizon - they could do well!!!

DMc

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, Prudhoe (01.03.2008)

John Stephens: The curtain came down on what must be the club's most successful season in the NEHL, with some 'real' cross-country at Prudhoe. As with previous visits, the testing course was complemented by the unique local climate that, on Saturday, made Low Fell look decidedly tropical by comparison. Conditions that can only be described as 'cold and breezy' added to the entertainment as we assembled at the uphill start to run directly into the teeth of what appeared to be a gale-force wind. Fortunately, although heavy underfoot in places (e.g. the gate halfway up the long climb for each of the two laps) there was a bit of shelter, and some respite, to be found on the lower parts of the course.

Ten runners from the club toed the start line for the final NEHL fixture with just 3 of the 10 running from the slow pack. This is a clear indication of the progress made by the club over the winter months. Dave (McAtominey) started, but chatting before the race didn't seem to think he should run (getting over the dreaded viral illness still doing the rounds) and proved his theory correct by sensibly retiring.

Adam (Knox) continued where he left off at Wrekenton with another outstanding run, this time from the medium pack to finish in 24th place. I can be quite definite about the quality of Adams run, having a good view of his back for the majority of the 8.5K course to place 30th . Martin (Alexander) made a welcome return after absence for a couple of the NEHL fixtures to finish 71st , with Neil (Morris) and Jonathon (Stephens) packing well to finish 94th and 97th respectively. Scoring was completed by Ross (Dagleish, 146th) who enjoyed another solid run, to place us 4th in Division 2. Sean (Dunlop, 166th) had a very sound race, no doubt feeling well at home on the climbs, in his first run out of the medium pack with Lawrence (Johnson, 184th) and George (Russell, 187th , warming up for Haweswater on Sunday) completing the turnout for the club.

I gather that Bill (Doidge) although not competing also set a PB of sorts in getting a replacement number for Adam, who had forgotten to bring his original. A special Kofi Annan award for the season goes to Bill in his somewhat tricky negotiations with admin staff – fancy not having change for a fiver! However, it has to be said that Bill along with Steve were a very welcome sight on the hill for the final climb. Thanks for the words of encouragement for one and all on the climb, but perhaps Steve could get the photos on the first climb next year – we may look a bit fresher! Seriously, some great shots even if we all look completely ‘knackered’. Have to say perfect timing for my photo Steve, as I appear to be leading Rob Hand and Stewy Bell up the climb. One for the scrap book, another couple of seconds and they both eased past me, very comfortably it has to be said!

Finally, this result should keep us in 4th place overall in Division 2, which is a real achievement. In the past we have usually done a Sunderland (sorry Bill, Keith) and gone straight back down. Thanks to everyone who has run, not forgetting Sadie and Sarah who turned out to represent the ladies on two occasions, Aiden (Dunlop) who ran in the U17s, and also to Steve for the photos along with everyone else who has come along to give a bit of support. Hope everyone has enjoyed the season. The fitness gained from a good cross country season should see a few decent performances and PBs over the Spring and Summer for those taking part. So onto the trails, fells and maybe even a bit of the tarmac!

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, Wrekenton (16.02.2008)

John Stephens: The sun shone on Low Fell not just in the geographical sense but also in terms of performance as the club romped (is that legal?) to victory in Div II at the 5th NEHL fixture at Wrekenton (well ok, we edged out Heaton by 4 points). This was easily our best result of the season, with our first four scorers finishing in the first 30.

Run in near perfect conditions on Saturday, the course at Wrekenton is just about the longest of the 6 NEHL venues at 9.6K (6 miles to you and me) but offers some fast running over a fairly flat course apart from the two climbs at each of the 3 laps – I’m sure someone jacked up the final climb a degree or three for the 3rd lap! Adam (Knox) made light of this in finishing an outstanding 6th place, even more remarkable considering that chatting to Alan (Elders) in the week we weren’t too sure which event Adam should run in. The other members of the ‘magnificent 4’ were Gerald (Bishop, 16th), George (Russell, 25th) and Shaun (Dunlop, 30th), who along with Adam, will be promoted to the medium pack for the final event at Prudhoe in two weeks time (well done lads). I managed to celebrate my first

race as a Vet 0/50 by finishing (appropriately) in the first 50 (46th) from the medium pack and with a very strong run from the fast pack by Mark (McDonald, 86th) we completed the scoring to secure the win in Div II with 64 points.

Another notable point for the event was that we had 17 runners from the club competing, with 13 finishers. Of the 4 DNFs, for Ben it was his first race for the club and turned in a very credible 2 laps before retiring, and Dave Mac jogged a couple of laps even though he was 'full of cold'. This left the two Al(l)ans (Elders and Clark) to battle for the crown in the subsidiary event to be our third DNF of the season. Alan managed to edge out Allan in retiring after a lap largely due to a rather over zealous Chinese New Year celebration the previous evening – new entry to the annals of running 'injuries' necessitating retirement. Seriously though, it was good to see both turn out particularly Allan (Clark, just about completing two laps) after quite a long period of injury.

Back at the main event, the scoring team were provided some great support by the remaining 7 finishers to deny valuable points to other clubs. Jonathon (Stephens, 127th) and Mick (Graham, 155th) enjoyed very solid runs to work their way through the field from the medium pack. Jon and Mick were backed up in this task by the remainder of our (ever diminishing) slow pack posse - Ross (Daglish, 131st), Kevin (Kerrigan, 223rd), David (Wright, 253rd), Bill (Doidge, 259th) and Geoff (Hume, 263rd).

So, onto the 6th and final fixture at Prudhoe in a couple of weeks time. We are now firmly in 4th place in Div II which must represent the best NEHL placing by the club for many years. Probably run out of events (no pun intended) in terms of finishing any higher, but it would be good to get another big turn out for the final race. Progress made by all runners from the club over the winter has been really impressive – at the first event (Blaydon), Mick and I cut fairly lonely figures in the medium pack yet at Prudhoe we could have as many as 9 athletes running from that particular group. Hopefully we can yet provide Mark with a bit of company in the fast pack sometime, you never know!

Finally, I see that we made it to print in the 'Journal' (NEHL results) on Monday but mysteriously by the time the 'Chronicle' was published the club had relocated to Tow Law!

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, Farringdon (12.01.2008)

John Stephens: The fourth NEHL fixture saw us travel across to Sunderland and the three lap course around the tracks and parkland at Farringdon. Consisting of a continuous series of climbs, descents and tight corners, this is a testing course at the best of times. The cycle of rain-freeze-thaw-rain over the first couple of weeks of the year made the going heavy and for most of us an afternoon of a) slipping b) sliding c) getting lacerated by brambles trying to avoid a) and b). Oh yes, and for the second week running there was a water feature to negotiate each lap. I made a bit better job of this one although didn't venture to leap across the stream via the higher route, as demonstrated by athletes in the junior event ... well done lads, but lets see you pull that one off in 30 years!

So, basically the race turned out to be a bit of a hard slog for one and all. This didn't seem to hold up Jonathon (Stephens) too much who, enjoying a bit of clear running at the sharp end

of the field, romped home in 12th place and secure promotion to the medium pack for Wrekenton. For the first couple of laps Jon was accompanied by Carl (Watson) who unfortunately (but quite sensibly) was forced to drop out – another victim of the dreaded viral illnesses doing the rounds at present. Looks like we could be on a hat-trick at Wrekenton on two counts – runners being promoted, and DNFs!

Another member of the club who revelled in the conditions, unsurprisingly, was Sean (Dunlop) who had a cracking run to finish 34th. Despite the conditions the club enjoyed a fantastic result finishing 3rd in Division 2 – all scoring athletes within the first 102 places! Some tight packing among Neil (Morris, 61st), Colin (Drummond, 58th) making a welcome return following viral illness over Christmas, and myself (54th), with a strong run from George (Russell) in 102nd moved us ahead of Heaton and just 8 points shy of North Shields in second place for the event.

The fourth NEHL saw our biggest club turn out this season not just in terms of runners (14 starters) but also photographers (3 – Steve, Alan, and Gerald). Although it was quite difficult to raise a smile over some parts of the course, the words of encouragement were most welcome as were the excellent performances from Ross (Dagleish, 151st), Mick (Graham, 155th), Lawrence (Johnson, 166th), Kevin (Kerrigan, 194th), Brian and Geoff (Hume, 218th & 258th respectively) and Alan (Elders, 250th) over this demanding course in backing up the scorers.

A hat-trick we did miss out on at Farringdon was having a representative in the ladies event – perhaps next time. However, a few of us did stay to give a cheer to Jane (Mooney, Morpeth Harriers)) who trains with the club occasionally, and who finished 2nd in the ladies event – not that we're trying to lay claim to anything here!

So, on to the 5th NEHL Fixture at Wrekenton on 16th February, and on a personal note my first race as an O-50. It's virtually a home fixture – most of us can jog up to the start from home – so looking for another strong turnout. Finally (courtesy of our colleagues at Wallsend); how many Low Fell runners does it take to take down a tent? Answers on a post card or e-mail please.

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, South Shields (05.01.2008)

John Stephens: My observation of the Temple Park course as being 'undemanding', at the report for the Cramlington race in December appeared a little wayward as the rain over the past week made parts of the course a little soggy underfoot for this, the third NEHL fixture. The heavy going in parts, combined with a couple of testing banks each lap didn't detract too much from some quick running over the parkland and sports fields that make up the three lap course. In addition I had quite forgotten about the 'water feature' at each lap, which unbelievably, I managed to make a bit of a pigs-ear of on the first lap – the air was blue with expletives at my ineptitude and quite unrepeatable here. I'm happy to report some much improved co-ordination in negotiating this feature at the second and third crossings. However, the sun did shine and temperatures did seem to at least get into high single figures

although the wind chill from the breeze across the sports fields brought it down a degree or two at that section of the course.

For the second fixture running there was representation from the ladies section of the club, as Sarah (Baharie) looked strong throughout and finished a highly credible 18th position in the U17/U20 women's event. Sarah's performance was all the more impressive as I gather there was a little confusion surrounding the start and determining exactly which category she was competing in.

In the men's senior event, twelve athletes started the race with eleven finishers. Special mention to Gerald who was the 'DNF' – turned out even though he was clearly far from well and gamely turned in a couple of laps before quite sensibly calling it a day for this one. There was a real 'monster' of a slow pack that set off on the whistle at 1315. Following 2:30 later, it was good to have a bit of company in the form of Dave (McAtominey) and Mick (Graham) in the medium pack. We'll be joined at Farringdon next week by Neil (Morris) who looked in very good shape from start to finish to lead the club home in 13th place. Neil was followed in by the rapidly improving Jonathon (Stephens) in 45th, with the old man not quite making up the necessary ground next, in 57th – maybe if I hadn't 'c**k*d up the water jump we may have been a bit closer, who knows! Although missing a couple of the usual scorers from previous fixtures due to work commitments, the club again finished an excellent 4th in Division 2, scoring team being completed by Carl (Watson, 83rd), George (Russell, 104th), and a welcome return following injury from Dave (McAtominey, 137th). Close to scoring were Lawrence (Johnson) who looked to be going really well when I passed him and Mick (Graham) in 147th and 160th respectively. Lawrence and Mick along with Kevin (Kerrigan), Brian (Hume), and Alan (Elders) turned in strong performances to do the honourable thing in denying valuable points to other clubs

Thanks to Ian Haig (Jonathon's father-in-law) for the photo's in Steve's absence. A case of boys toys, in that he was looking for an opportunity to try out a Christmas present and we were happy to oblige. Apologies to Sarah, who I think was the only runner Ian didn't get a 'snap' of – I think he'd gotten a bit cold and gone off for a cuppa.

On to Farringdon next week (12th) and hopefully another cracking day at NEHL. Hopefully the senior men can continue to consolidate the clubs position in Div 2, and the ladies can complete a hat-trick in terms of turn outs.

Saltwell Road Race (23.12.2007)

Lawrence Johnson: Being new to the club, and racing in general. This is the first time I have run this race.

Although not extremely hilly, after three times around, the hills felt a lot steeper than on the first lap. The day was clear, but it was very cold, making the course slippery, especially descending into the dene. Well done to all the juniors who ran. One of whom, unfortunately, fell going down in to the dene. But it shows they were not holding back, and only caught out by the slippery conditions.

There was a large turn out from the rest of club, but as yet I don't recognise all the faces (Probably because I could only see their backs). There was still no sign of the Ladies from the club, except as supporters. After Sadie's run at Cramlington I thought it might spur more on to have a go.

Thanks to Gerald (not running due to injury). Who was strategically placed at the top of the longest hill shouting encouragement. It definitely made a difference to my last lap.

As yet there are no results available (27/12/07). So not sure how everyone has done

In general the race was excellent, and personally thoroughly enjoyed it. I am looking forward to 2008 season "BRING IT ON".

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, Cramlington (15.12.2007)

John Stephens: Saturday 15th December witnessed the return of NE Harrier League to East Cramlington Nature Reserve. Alan (Elders) and I couldn't remember how long it had been since the venue was last used for a cross-country fixture, but we did recall that the trees were about 2 feet tall when we last ran there on what is reclaimed land from the coal industry. All due credit should go to Blyth Running Club for resurrecting the venue as a Harrier League fixture – and the accurate and informative description of the course as 'an undulating loop of 2 miles mostly over firm grassland, but with one soft area'. The grassland was indeed very firm in a couple of places due to the overnight frost and low race day temperatures (check out Steve's photos and you'll get the picture), but the 'soft area' was also very much in evidence on the approach to the climb back to re-enter the central bowl towards the end of each lap. So the going was pretty fast, over an interesting but in places testing course.

There was another tremendous turn out from the club, all the more surprising considering the previous evening was the club Christmas 'do' at the 'Imperial', although the word is that there was some regrouping of the main pack at the Beaconsfield afterwards with some members of the fast pack even getting across to the 'toon' for a nightcap. Big thanks to Angus for organising this, and we'll forgive your non-show at Cramlington. Special mention must go to Sadie (Gatt) who turned out for the ladies race. Hope this starts a trend.

Despite the previous evening's celebrations, there were some excellent runs all round over the 3 lap men's event, no more so than from Kristopher Russell (son of George) who, running from the slow pack, led the field from start to finish to record an outstanding win. Kristopher was backed up by very strong runs from Neil (Morris, 36th – was this a tactical finish to avoid medium pack?), Jonathon (Stephens, 59th) and Martin (Alexander, 65th). Although a bit disappointed with his 114th place, George had a steady run (ironically missed the night out – George, bit short on fuel on the 3rd lap?) and along with myself finished the scoring team. Indeed there was another excellent team performance to finish 4th in Division 2. Some good packing by Ross, Lawrence and someone impersonating Gerald (honest Cath, he just came along put the tent up and cheered us all on with Steve) around the middle third of the field and solid runs from Alan and Stan helped provide some great support to the scorers and deny points for other teams.

Another excellent day out was rounded off by everyone staying to cheer on Sadie who 'stuck to the task' admirably in competing over the two lap ladies event – no mean feat as temperatures did seem to drop a degree or two over the final lap.

The third Harrier League fixture is 5th January at South Shields with the fourth event, of six, at Farringdon a week later. This presents a great opportunity for the men's team to continue to consolidate our position in Div 2 and also hopefully a chance for a few more of the ladies to enjoy the Harrier League. It would be great to get a team out (4 runners). South Shields is a good place to have a go – flat, relatively undemanding course around the parkland next to the Sports Centre. Hopefully we'll also see the return of Angus and maybe Mark and Mickey for South Shields and how about Davey Mac - conspicuous by your absence mate!

N.E. Counties Cross Country, Hartlepool (08.12.2007)

Alan Elders: There can only be one way to describe the day, and that is wet cold and horrible, but it didn't stop 4 Low Fell Runners braving the elements as well as the hilly 4 lap course at Summerhill Country Park at Hartlepool.

The number of starters wasn't the greatest, but even after the one lap of the football field, the runners were spreading out into a long line.

Not long after this there was a drop down a hill and then across a small stream, but it just seemed to be one hill after another, with some flat bits in between.

Mark McDonald led the club home, and lapped me about 2/3rds the way round my last lap. George Russell and Lawrence Johnson completed the team, and had good runs.

Meanwhile i had a lonely last lap, but did manage to pass one other lonely tired and cold runner. On my 3rd lap it felt as if i had already done 4 laps! The going was muddy but firm under foot for most of the course.

I then went to the Newcastle match but missed the start, and Birmingham's goal.

Start Fitness NE Harrier League, Blaydon (19.11.2007)

John Stephens: There was an excellent turn out from the club for the first of this years Harrier League fixtures at Blaydon. Twelve runners from Low Fell RC toed the line for what is literally the 'grass roots' of running in the NE. Fortunately I was one of the twelve - due only it has to be said to the kindness of Alan Clark who loaned me his pair of cross country spikes (Al, could probably do with a half size smaller mate). Remarkably the twelve also included George (Russell) and Mickey (Graham) who had run Brampton the day before – hats off to you lads!

The going was good to soft on a fast and relatively flat 3 lap Blaydon 9.2K course. Greatest challenge was staying on your feet at the tight right handers for the switch-backs to climb the short bank four times each lap. I can back up Steve, the 'official club photographer' (see

results section) in that it was a tad chilly with temperatures around the 4 degree mark and a degree or three cooler (or so it seemed) down alongside Shibdon Pond. T-shirt, gloves, and for the follically challenged, a hat, were the order of the day.

With solid packing from Neil (Morris), Jonathon (Stephens) and George running out of the slow pack and some great support from Martin (Alexander) along with an outstanding run from Mark (McDonald) from the fast pack the club finished 3rd in Division II to provide an excellent start to the season. Backing up the scorers and 'nicking' valuable points from other clubs were some strong performances from Mickey, Ross, Lawrence, Kevin, Angus, and Stan. The support and encouragement from the likes of Alan, Steve and Bill around the course only added to the enjoyment. A great afternoon out.

Here's looking for another good turnout at the next fixture on 15th December. Cramlington I believe, and the day after the club Christmas night out which should make for interesting and entertaining running. Maybe we can see some ladies at that event or at some stage during the season. The Harrier League fixtures are all enjoyable runs (ok, I may be stretching a point with Prudhoe) with plenty of good company (usually 200+ runners) and provide some great opportunities for a bit of strength-endurance work for anyone looking to establish some baseline fitness with a Spring marathon or any Spring road races in mind.

Rother Valley 10k, Sheffield (28/04/2007)

Dave McAtominey: Dave McAtominey and Mick Graham drove down to Sheffield for the Rother Valley 10k on Sat 28th April.

Great course in a country park, reclaimed from open cast mining land. Very scenic course following the perimeter of 2 man-made lakes. Warm conditions of 22 degrees, strong headwind on 1 side of the lakes slowed most down on that side.

Clear winner was Billy Farquarson of Notts AC in 30:33!!! from a field of 569.

Dave Mc finished 16th overall, 3rd V40 Was aiming for sub 36 mins but only managed 37:24 – windy but not that windy!!

Mick finished 47th in 40:14 – wind again!

A great course and venue, highly recommended for a club day out. There is also a 3.5k fun run beforehand.

N.E. Counties Cross Country 2006.

Alan elders: This was a muddy undulating course over 3 laps.

It was a smashing day but a little bit cold.

Having ran the first lap hard I decided to run to finish after being passed by Geoff at the end of the 1st lap. We were a little bit depleted in runners, so yet again I was the 6th counter.

The event was very well organised, and I was 9th last, so 9 places better than last year!

Well done to all the lads who finished and supported us on the day, especially Gerald, Steve and Stan for their encouragement.

I look forward to us having more runners out in the National Cross Country, over this course on the 10th March.