Good Friday Marathon – Stratford

Having enjoyed a trip up and down the canals on the previous day, I was quite looking forward to this.

Stevie had other plans, so I set off on my own to the cricket club in the centre of Stratford.

As I drove along the country lanes, I realised just how much rain had fallen the previous night. On top of the rain earlier in the week, this didn’t look too good.

The setup at the start was the same as on Thursday. Starts were at 15 minute intervals and I found myself in the 08:30 start again.

A small group of us left the cricket club, through the car park and over the tramway bridge.

Then it was under a bridge and onto the Stratford canal. We followed this to about the four mile point where we came off the canal to the Mary Arden hotel in Wilmcote, which was the base of operations for the previous day.

By this time, I had dropped off the back of the little group I had started with. I had been a little concerned as the next four miles were not on the canal and involved following LDWA type instructions.

Within 200 yards of leaving the Mary Arden, I made my only navigational error. A combination of the way the instructions were written, and my drizzle smeared specs meant that I missed a narrow passage between two houses. I may have lost 5 minutes here, nothing really in the scheme of things.

Once onto this path and the effects of the rain began to be apparent. There was now about three miles of mud, mud and even more mud.

The early part had a steep downhill, which had me clinging onto the fencing on one side in order not to slide down the slope.

From the bottom there was a little respite, then an equally steep uphill, with no fence to hang onto. Getting up was hard and I was trying not to think about coming down on the way back.

At the top we then had a number of field edges to go round. Again these were deep in cloying mud, which adhered amazingly well to running shoes, making them look more like clown footwear.

Eventually we left this behind and made for the big aqueduct, where we rejoined the canal, after a drink stop.

The canal path was much more treacherous than on Thursday, with the mud alternating between a slippy layer on top of a hard surface and deeper stuff. Some seemed able to almost glide over it. I was not one of them.

Onwards to Preston Bagot and an aid station in the same place as yesterday.

After this it was another 2.5 miles to an off canal 1 mile loop to make up the distance.

This point had the particularly well stocked aid station.

I definitely saw a box of cider here, so was probably not hallucinating on Thursday.

I was offered a slurp of tea which I took instead and tasted wonderful.

The loop was more grass and mud and then back to the aid station and retrace our steps to the cricket club.

There had been a lot of boaters out on Thursday but hardly a soul was out today. They evidently had more sense than us.

Sure enough, once we came off the aqueduct, we had the muddy field edges and the steep down then up to contend with.

I have no idea how I managed to stay upright during this, especially the steep downhill, with nothing to hold onto. It was as I was very carefully negotiating this that someone just bounded down past me. I was quite envious of his confidence and agility.

It was also during this section that one of my toenails made a bid for freedom. With each step, I could feel it tearing upwards. That was a rather unexpected occurrence and really rather painful. In fact, as I write this, it still is.

Nevertheless, I was looking forward to reaching the Mary Arden, as I could have something to eat and take advantage of the last four miles along good canal towpaths, which I did.

The cricket club had all of the facilities that you would expect and another good spread of food. I managed to get hot chips this time, always a bonus!

The haul of goodies included another towel, a small one this time, magazine, more biofizz products, a Mars bar and a nice medal.

These were both great events. Well organised and very friendly. The conditions on the Friday were certainly challenging but just added to the sense of achievement afterwards.

It’s a long way from the north east to Stratford (and a long way back), and I am very glad I went.

Ian Richardson

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