Maundy Thursday Marathon, Stratford – 2 April 2015

I seem to have a thing for canals. Maybe it’s because we don’t have them in the North East.

Whatever, they are very pleasant and pea it'ceful things to run alongside.

Stevie and I made the long trip for the Easter double, run by Chris Seeney of Broadmeadows runs, and stayed in the faded but very friendly charms of the Studley Castle Hotel.

Thirty some of us made our way to the Mary Arden Hotel in Wilmcote, 4 miles to the west of Stratford, which formed the start and finish for day one.

It had been billed as an out and back ultra, and then a marathon option was introduced, which we decided to do, to save a bit for the following day.

This was very much an event and not a race and runners were set off at 15 minute intervals from 07:45 to 09:00, based entirely on when they were ready to start, rather than expected performance.

We set off in a small group at 08:30 in weather that promised well for distance running. It was overcast, but dry and only a very light breeze.

The instructions provided were in the LDWA type format, but were not really necessary for a canal out and back and there were some signs out for bridge crossings and the like, which made it all very easy.

After a few hundred yards we were onto the Stratford canal and stayed on canals until the same point on our return.

The surface underfoot varied quite a lot. It went from packed gravel, nice and firm to run on, to slippery, muddy parts where maintaining balance could be a challenge, given the rain in the preceding days. This meant that you did need to have your wits about you and couldn’t just switch off.

There was quite a bit of canal traffic and the boaters seemed a very cheerful and friendly lot. Pretty much everyone had a greeting for us, adding to the overall enjoyment of the occasion and surroundings.

Just before the splendidly named Wootton Wawen, we passed over the longest aqueduct in England, which was interesting. The footpath was below the level of the water so it felt like running alongside an extremely long bath!

After six miles, we reached the first aid station at Preston Bagot. Water, squash, biscuits and nibbles sent us on our way after a bit of a chat with the volunteers.

We then went onwards to a little over 10 miles and a rather splendid aid station with extra goodies including an excellent ginger cake, aka parkin.

I believe cider may also have been available here, but I may have been hallucinating.

At this point, we left the Stratford canal and made for the Grand Union canal for nearly three miles to the marathon turnaround point at the Black Buoy pub. Ultra runners carried on for another two miles then turned back.

After a brief chat and some biscuits, it was back for more ginger cake on the return leg to the Mary Arden hotel.

Stevie managed to be offered a cup of tea by one of the boaters after she made a fuss of his dog. As it would be rude to refuse, she accepted. It was that sort of event.

At the pub/hotel , there was a fine spread laid on for us with sandwiches, quiches, pizza, and chips. Good healthy stuff!

The goody nag was rather fine too.

As well as a nice medal, I now have an large embroidered towel, a couple of running magazines, some Biofizz products, which I’ve not had before, and a water bottle.

No, wait. I forgot the bottle of cider and beer mat.

An excellent haul after a good day’s running.

Well organised and with excellent volunteers who encouraged us all the way round, it really was worth the journey, and there was day 2 to come.

Surely it could only get better?

Ian Richardson

6 April 2015