The August Bank Holiday weekend is a busy time for marathon running. I had the choice of going with friends to either the Guernsey Marathon, (£55 entry), the Boston 6 Hour race, (£25), or enjoying the hospitality of Pauline & Bill Howes and accompanying them to their local Sandwell 6 Towns Marathon, (£5 to enter.) I chose the latter.

Organised by Sandwell Borough and the local Ramblers group the off-road marathon is an annual challenge event for runners and walkers held in conjunction with the Sandwell Community Show – believed to be the biggest free event of it’s type in the UK. There are three distances to select from; 26, 18 & 14 mile – all with separate start times from Sandwell Country Park. The marathon race, with approx 50 of us in the field was first to go at 8am.

The idea of the event is to link up the 6 towns that make up the Borough of Sandwell by using country parks, open spaces, but mainly by making full use of the extensive canal system that was the life-blood of the Black Country during it’s Industrial Revolution heyday. In many respects it reminded me very much of one of my favourite LDWA events, the Birmingham Canal Canter with, at times a sense of déjà-vu as we ran along some familiar canal towpaths.

The route description was another one of those 4 page affairs of the “go left/go right” variety explaining how to navigate to the grid references of the 4 checkpoints we needed to reach en route. This time though the description was both unambiguous and easy to follow, due mainly to the fact that so much of it was spent running along long, flat stretches of canal towpath. Apart from having to pass through a couple of housing estates linking one canal to another, this was a surprisingly scenic run in a part of the country not generally known for it’s scenic beauty.

The event did, however, have a nasty sting-in-the-tail taking us through the 2.8 km long Netherton Tunnel – the widest, longest and last of the great Victorian canal tunnels, built at the cost of 9 lives,(said to haunt the tunnel), and many serious injuries. The organisers had warned us to beforehand that a torch was essential equipment for the route. Guess who forgot to bring one! It was quite unnerving attempting to grope your way through flooded walkways in pitch darkness with water dripping onto your head from above. I only managed by holding on to the railings with one hand and clinging on to Bill, (who’d remembered his torch), with the other. This has to be the most unusual experience I’ve encountered on any marathon!

The fresh start to the morning grew hotter and more humid as the day progressed but, fortunately, as is usual in events of this nature, there was plentiful food and refreshment en route as well as at the finish. When we’d set off at 8am the park was virtually deserted. We returned to side-shows, circus and stalls and could hardly reach the finish line for the thousands of visitors to the Show. This was an excellent day out for £5 and tremendous value for money. Can’t help but wonder what extra the runners got for 11 times that amount at Guernsey!

Jim Manford
August 27th 2012

A Strange Creature (right) we met in the dark Tunnel!