Newark Castle marathon – 28 November 2015.

I had looked forward to this event, as it looked possible to do it from Newcastle by train the same day. I have become so used to long drives and overnight stays that a Saturday event in a town was an attractive proposition. It was also a new event.

From my first attempt at entering, it was full and I went onto a waiting list. I was then informed that a Sunday version was being added, so I entered that. This did entail booking a hotel due the late start of trains on a Sunday.

Then, two weeks before the event, I receive an email saying that the council were not allowing the Sunday event to go ahead, which does make me wonder if it ever had a permit.

My choice was then to convert to the Saturday, which was supposedly full, or get my money back. The hotel was non-refundable but the train tickets could be changed at additional cost, so I finished up as an entrant on the Saturday, making a trip there and back the same day.

The start was by Newark castle itself and similar to our own in its low key nature. There was an 11k and also a half, with the 11k due to set off at 9:45 and the half and full at 10 on a two lap race.

The 11k didn’t start until 10 and the rest of us after 10:15.

Even from the start, it seemed a very artificial construct as we were led in a loop around a park, back to the finish then for an out and back loop, mostly on muddy paths, returning to the finish after about 2.5 miles.

Then it was across the park again, a couple of hundred yards on road, over a stile, another couple of fields and another couple of hundred yards before what is certainly a first for me. We had an enforced walk of 200M, marshalled and DQ if you didn’t obey this ruling. Apparently this was a council ruling as this stretch passed the outside of a few terraced houses whose front doors opened out onto the wide pavement.

It really does make you wonder about how the process of applying for and securing permits, works in Newark. Badly, it seems.

The marshals were great and their enthusiasm was helpful here, as we had to do this bit four times.

The course was described as a mixed terrain of paths, pavements and fields. No indication of their relative proportions.

After about half a mile on footpaths following the walking section we were turned onto more muddy paths and some bewildering, but well marked trails where we kept passing the same drinks station by means of loops that were the same in parts and different in others.

After two and a half of these loops, we were led back to the road to the walking section and then to the finish.

Of course, it wasn’t the finish. We still had to repeat the 2.5 mile loop that we started with.

After this loop, the half marathoners could stop. The full marathoners then had to do this loop for a third time before heading off on the main part of lap two.

The drinks station at the finish was for both the half finishers and full runners and was completely devoid of any drinks when I passed it.

As I was now utterly confused and there was no signposting near the start/finish I tried asking where I went next, to be told to do what I had done the first lap. Having just finished the 2.5 mile loop for the third time, that really wasn’t very helpful, but I got sorted and set off to run the second lap, having already done the first 2.5 miles of it as my third loop.

This may read as confusing as it was to be there!

I think that if I had had my car there and was able to leave when I wanted, I would probably have packed in after the first half.

I’m glad that that was not the case and that I persevered with lap two as I began to enjoy it in its rather odd way. It was really a case of switching off judgement and just going with it.

It was helped by really good volunteers, plentiful in number and very encouraging.

I do wish some of our own members would offer to volunteer when they are not running. It would make a great difference to the events that we would be able to put on.

There were two other drinks stations out on the lap, with cups of water, squash, and also sweets. Much like our own events, in fact.

My challenge as lap two wore on was picking off those who were slowing down and beating the forecast high winds and heavy rain.

As I was feeling good, I managed both of these things, and passed the finish to do the 2.5 mile loop for the fourth time, finishing at last in 4:11, for 14th out of 54 finishers in the full marathon.

The medal was a nice individual one and there were 9Bars supplied by the race sponsor. I also managed to get a cup of coffee, before heading off to get warm and changed as the weather was turning.

My thoughts on the event overall are:

Pluses

Marshalling was excellent and enthusiastic

Signage, except where it had been stolen was very good.

Access was easy by train and there was a big car park about 100 yards away, with toilets.

Minuses

Course design was really poor and lacked creativity. The sheer number of stiles, gates and steps was more reminiscent of an LDWA event, but without the £10 price tag and slap up feed at the end. I like lapped courses, but these loops felt very artificial.

Confusion and lack of drinks at the finish point. This could have been resolved by keeping the half runners to one side and having someone make sure that drinks were available at all times. Also signs to replace the stolen ones.

Relationship between course organisers and the local authority. I am sure there was a lot went on of which we were unaware, but if the event was open to entries before a proper local authority permit had been issued, I would be very disappointed.

As I had a really good run, I can overlook a number of the failings, but would certainly not venture back without some significant improvements to the course.

Ian Richardson 29 November 2015.