

How did it all start – the who, when, where and why?

“Jog on, jog on the foot-path way” A Winter’s Tale

It’s Spring 1981. Prince Charles announces his engagement to Lady Diana Spencer. Bucks Fizz has just won the Eurovision Song Contest with “Making Your Mind Up” and the Sinclair ZX81 is launched as the first home computer.

Now it’s Thursday 9 April 1981 and local runner, Ken Laidler, has booked a room at Tring School for an open evening. Ken has no idea who, if anyone, will turn up.

Ken had not taken part in any serious athletics since leaving school. He cycled and played rugby until his late thirties but when he stopped, he lost fitness and gained weight. However, in his late forties, he found himself in the midst of a running boom in the UK. More and more people were becoming aware of the benefits – both to physical and family well-being - of regular exercise.

In 1978, the Sunday Times had set up the first National Fun Run and it turned out to be the biggest participatory sports event ever held in Britain. 12,000 people descended on Hyde Park, London. As the newspaper reported *“there were fit runners who ran hard and there were the unfit runners who got puffed and ran slowly”*. In the terminology of the day, there were very many who just jogged round.

Inspired by the running boom, and, in particular, the announcement that London would host its first marathon in 1981, Ken determined to get fit again. He started jogging. Then, from October 1980, Ken followed a training schedule – The Beginner’s *Sunday Times* 21-Week Crash Programme – and on 29 March 1981 duly completed the first London Marathon.

It was a highly emotional experience. Afterwards, Ken said;

“It took the best part of a week following the race to be able to discuss it rationally and without bringing a lump to my throat. It does seem stupid, a grown man of forty-seven talking this way, but it’s true”.

But in that week, Ken isn’t idle. He wants to know if there are others in Tring who share his new-found passion and he figures that the best way to find out is to issue an open invitation to meet at Tring School. To his great surprise, about 40 people attend.

Ken Laidler was described by his friends as *“a little terrier”* and someone who held *“pronounced and outspoken views on every subject under the sun”*. No

doubt, therefore, he impressed upon the curious group at the meeting the joys and benefits of jogging. He clearly won them over because 5 days later, on Tuesday 14 April 1981, Tring Jogging Club met for its first official running evening.



Whilst Ken was the driving force, four families formed the nucleus of the club – the Barlows, the Elliotts, the Johnsons and the Newtons - and they were to be prominent in the development of the club in those early days. Other early members and regular Tuesday participants included Barry Whitburn, Roy Callow, Derrick Butcher, Sue Monkman and Jenny Payne.

The early years

Tring Jogging Club started life as part of the Athletic Club of Tring (ACT) which itself had only been established in 1980.

In January 1982, at the ACT annual general meeting, the Honorary Secretary noted that 1981 had seen *“an explosion of interest in marathon running mainly as a result of the London Marathon”*. The Secretary noted that Tring had several participants in inaugural London Marathon and that *“the interest it engendered gave rise to the formation of a Jogging Group in the town”*.

A year later, the ACT committee minutes recorded that several members of the Jogging Group would be running in the 1982 London Marathon. In TJC’s first newsletter, published in Spring 1982, Ken Laidler mentioned that *“Nine of us have committed to that 26.22 miles in May and that has been at the expense of the general wellbeing of the Jogging Club and its aims”*. He said that after London, he intended to *“bring things more into perspective and look for more... enjoyment and participation for all members”*

Tring Rugby Club in Cow Lane was established as the base for TJC. Tuesday was club night and runs were kept as reasonably social occasions. Ken Laidler set the tone in a 1982 newsletter:

“ By all means push it on the way back from the turn but on the outward run it should be at the speed of the slowest. Any thing else is unacceptable. I believe our 7.25 mile run is a suitable limit in the winter and dark nights. Nearer the marathon if one’s schedules demand longer runs, by all means do them, but try to run earlier, finishing at the club at the usual time so that we can still enjoy your company”

Back at the Rugby Club, the bar was operated by club members on a rota basis. It was a real family affair. Jen and Terry Elliott's son, Tim, contributed a piece to the newsletter. Things were clearly very liberal back then:

"Being a junior member of Tring Joggers is quite good except for being pushed out on a five mile run by your Mum and Dad. It is also good after your run as you can help behind the bar, have a drink and a chat to the others. However, I think it would be better if the people who go on a short run could open the bar as they come in [because] if we wait until Ken comes back, it is usually too late to have a good drink (as there is school in the morning) and we have to be back by 9.50pm"

In those early days, the focus seems to have been on road running and races, especially half and full marathons. But within the club there was an appetite to try out other types of run. An early version of the "Predict A Run" (every entrant nominates their time over a two mile course and the winner is the one who finishes closest to their time) was proposed to mark the club's first birthday. There was the annual club outing to the Sunday Times National Fun Run. And even the road marathon runners ventured off-road – the severe winter weather in February 1982 didn't interrupt the training with circuits of Tring Park, knee deep in snow.

Indeed, running round the roads in Tring in the early Eighties sounded distinctly perilous. In the build up to the first London Marathon, many journals published advice and training schedules for novices to follow. Cliff Temple, international coach and Athletics correspondent of the Sunday Times, followed up his advice with a comprehensive book "Marathon, Cross Country and Road Running" (pub. Stanley Paul 1990) which included accounts written by people who had followed his schedule for the marathon. Ken Laidler was one of them and he described Tring in almost Dickensian terms:

"As most of my running had to be in the evenings, and I live in a very small country town, I was unfortunate that most of my runs took me into dark, badly-lit areas. The pavements were either rough or non-existent, and so I had to run on roadsides which were rough or on steep cambers.....We improved our training conditions by travelling the 7 miles to Aylesbury and taking advantage of the well-lit streets there"

As TJC's first anniversary approached, Ken reflected on the year in the newsletter:

"The formation and progress of the club has been beyond my wildest dreams. Other clubs warned me that the first year would be difficult and that the club would almost certainly fold up during the first winter. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The camaraderie, friendship and general participation has been fantastic. I am certain this is due to the family spirit that prevails"

By Spring 1982 the club had thirty members, six of whom completed the second London marathon. Others took part in the Abingdon and Coventry marathon as well as the Windsor Great Park half.

During this initial period of the club's existence, it was constituted as part of the Athletic Club of Tring. ACT had itself only formed in 1980 and its main focus was on track and field and cross country running. TJC's affiliation to ACT meant that the Jogging Club members enjoyed insurance cover when entering races. It also facilitated the Jogging Club organising its first event open to the public in Autumn 1982 – the Ridgeway Run One-Third Marathon (see chapter.....). Due to TJC's affiliation to ACT, the first Ridgeway had to be organised in the name of ACT.

It was a great success. So much so that TJC immediately resolved to hold the event again the following year. However, the joggers decided that the 1983 Ridgeway should be held in the name of the Jogging Club and this could be done only by splitting away from ACT.

Tring Jogging Club goes solo

On Monday 13 December 1982 TJC called a general meeting and Ken Laidler noted that, as well as the issue with the Ridgeway Run, the joint interests of TJC and ACT were now much further apart than eighteen months previously. The members agreed and TJC's first independent constitution and committee were set up. A senior member subscription in that first year was £3.00.

The club continued to meet at Tring Rugby Club's premises in Cow Lane but relations with the Rugby club were strained at times. The facilities were not great, especially the lack of showers for women runners. At an early Ridgeway Run, the Rugby Club failed to let TJC know that a rugby match would be taking place leading to congestion on the playing fields as the Ridgeway finished and some abuse being directed towards runners.

The rugby club also requested that TJC change its meeting night from Tuesday. After conducting a poll of members, the first Wednesday club night took place on 4 September 1985. It has remained on Wednesdays ever since.

From Cow Lane to London Road

Many of the traditions that continue today in Tring Running Club were started in the 1980s. Members took part in a wide variety of road and trail races and the London Marathon was always a focus, with the suspense of applying for entries and then committing to the training. The tradition of gathering together in the evening after London also started early in the 1980s.

A club record time for London was set in 1985 by Ian Robinson finishing in 2 hours 37 minutes (this record was lowered to 2hrs 33mins in 2016 by Luke Delderfield). In the 1987 London Marathon, Bob Garland became a TV star with the BBC showing him staggering from side to side at 25 miles and

commentator David Coleman commiserating with Bob's sorry state. The local newspaper ran the story:

"Millions of people saw Hemel Hempstead runner Bob Garland go through the agony of the marathon"

TJC took part in the Chiltern League cross country matches, organised social events and breakfast runs, and held invitation evenings for other local clubs, all traditions that have now continued for nearly 40 years.

Competition within the club also started early. A club league was established in 1988 by Bob Garland. The rules were complex but essentially similar to what TRC today calls the Road Running Championship. There were two 'divisions' for men and one for women and the first winners were Ron Blastland, Len Cousens and Helen Thompson.

From 1986 the Athletics Club of Tring arranged a 10k and 5k road race from Cow Lane. TJC awarded a trophy to the first TJC member in the 10k race. The first winner was Keith Moore and in 1990 and 1993, current life member, Clive Cohen took the trophy. A trophy for the first woman member didn't start until 1991 and even then only in the 5k race. Equality in trophies was only achieved in 1994 when TJC members, women and men, competed for the honours in both the 5k and 10k. ACT ceased organizing the races so TJC did its own version for 1995 and 1996 when the event finished. The last winners were, in the 5k, Alison Harding and Mike Mitchell and in the 10k, Mary Ward and Nick Hadland.

Whilst few members were involved in fell running in the 1980s, Dave Fryer took part in the Box Hill Fell Race in 1988 and encouraged others to try it out the following year. Box Hill has since become a staple of TRC's recommended race calendar (see chapter...for the history of TRC's fell running achievements).

Towards the end of the 80s, relations with the Rugby Club were strained. Whilst the Rugby Club was planning a new building, the existing facilities in Cow Lane, and their availability to TJC, were limited. When the Rugby Club sought a significant increase in the rent payable by TJC, the committee started to sound out alternative venues. It found a warm welcome at Tring Park Cricket Club on London Road. On 6 February 1991, almost exactly 10 years after the club's formation, TJC duly took up residence in the old pavilion at TPCC.