

THE TORCH

There cannot be many sporting events which can draw several hundred people out of their beds to stand alongside a country road at 5.30 in the morning. When the event is the passing of a lone runner not out to beat any records but with instructions not to complete his two-mile journey in less than fifteen minutes, its ability to attract so many spectators at that hour might seem to you rather mysterious - until you are given the information that it was not the runner they had come to see, but the Olympic Torch which he was carrying.

To take part in an Olympic Torch Relay is a privilege not enjoyed by very many. That particular year (1948) the Flame had been lit, as always, on the slopes of Mount Olympus, and had been passed from runner to runner, from torch to torch, until its arrival on board a destroyer at Dover. Thence it travelled northwards through Kent, westwards below the scarp of the North Downs, and anti-clockwise, in a wide sweep, around London on its way to Wembley Stadium. Each club through or near whose territory the route ran was asked to supply a runner and a reserve to carry the Torch. "Why," everybody asks (some in purely interrogative tones, others with an inflection which is not entirely complimentary) "were you chosen?" It so happened that, at the time, I was the Cross Country Captain of Blackheath Harriers (the job included responsibility for Road Relay teams), and when the club was asked to nominate a representative, the responsibility for doing so was given to me. But it wasn't as easy as that! There was one obvious person to ask - the great Sydney Wooderson, that year in his last season of competitive running, which rounded off an unsurpassed athletic career (during which, as I trust I don't need to tell you, he held world half-mile

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and mile records) by winning the Southern Counties and the English Cross Country Championships (both run then over a man's distance of 10 miles!). But Sydney declined the invitation. Since he would not do it, I saw no reason why anyone else but myself should!

So there I was, with my reserve runner (Derek Reynolds, my Vice-captain, one-time holder of the London to Brighton record) eating bacon and egg at 0345 BST (not an experience I would recommend to a gourmet) somewhere in Kent at the house of a fellow 'Heathen. On the way to Sundridge, where my "leg" was to begin, it was obvious, passing through Sevenoaks as dawn broke, that it was going to be a glorious day - and so it proved. But it was to be the forerunner of an unsettled period which vainly did its best to cool and dampen the enthusiasm aroused by the Games. The sun was just up as I waited for the previous runner to arrive, and I remember feeling, oddly enough, just as nervous as before a race. There was a great air of expectancy and excitement in the air - understandably, since this was probably the only time in their lives when most of those watching would see an Olympic Torch "in the flesh".

The two miles of the A25 to Brasted was a road I knew well, but I had never seen it with so little traffic and so many people. In Sundridge and Brasted themselves the road was lined with spectators, while small groups stood at every cottage gate, and larger groups where side roads joined, all applauding the passing of the Torch, and many taking photographs. The run completed, the next Torch having been kindled on the forecourt of the White Hart at Brasted, and one's own quenched in a bucket of water (the flame was guaranteed wind and rain proof!), the next ten minutes or so was spent posing for dozens of photographs and signing autograph books. I wonder how many people, looking back at those books, wonder who on earth "R.R. Choat" was!

The rest of the day was a bit of an anti-climax - but the memory of those first few hours remains vividly with me, and the Torch is certainly one of my most cherished athletic souvenirs.

Richard Choat.



The Kent team which won the Inter-County Cross-Country Championship in 1947: left to right — P. W. Green (founder of 'AW' and now consultant director), R. Ellis, R. C. Adams, R. R. Choat, J. Mahoney, J. C. Charlesworth (whose death is reported below), A. Macoy, G. F. Hearn and G. Lucas.