

History of the Radley Good Friday Walk **by Chris Gasson** **Event Organiser 2002**

Back in 1963, two Radley men Mr. George Steptoe and Jack Parsons sat in the Bowyer Arms and bet each other whom could walk to Oxford and back the fastest. The scene was set for a 'race' between them on the Good Friday of that year. The bet was that the loser would buy the other a pint of beer (1s 6d then). Little did they know then, that an annual event was born, now in its 39th year. Side bets on the day were made to who would finish first, and the proceeds would go to the local Darby and Joan Club in the village. Walter Long, the licensee of the Bowyers acted as timekeeper. The two friends walked the course side-by-side and finished in a time of 2 hrs 49 mins and 27 seconds – no mean feat for a 54 and a 52 year old. Jack Parsons was officially credited with the win – as rumour has it George bent down to pick up a coin in the road. The first event had been recorded.

The following year, naturally, a re-match was planned, but four others joined the two. The walk had already gained status. The two friends finished at the back in 2 hrs 38 mins 27 secs. The joint winners were 19-year old Haden 'Taffy' Braun and 23-year old Terry Hutchins in 2 hrs 7 mins.

Over the next few years, the entrants slowly increased and, by 1967, a huge 19 took part. A team from Kennington Youth Club – of which I was one – walked under the supervision of our Youth Club Leader, Alan Pope. One of my schoolmates, 14-year old Bernard Workman finished third in 2 hrs 9 mins. To this day, I remember it was the talk of the Kennington.

By 1971, the numbers had increased to 27 and the 2-hour barrier was broken for the first time. A dead heat of 1 hr 59 mins 2 secs was recorded by Michael Giles and Brian Johnson – both Radley locals. By now George and Jack, the founders, had taken a back seat and were content to watch the walkers come home!

The event continued every year traditionally on Good Friday, with entrants and trophies for different categories increasing. In 1982, Richard Murray of Stonhouse Crescent strode home in an event record time of 1hr 58 mins. Nineteen years had passed and never a wet day for the event had been recorded.

Come 1983 and trainers and shorts had become the fashion, a far cry from the boots, trousers and sports jacket worn by George and Jack so many years before. The 1980s saw two names dominating the results – namely Richard Murray and Mel Turner.

A recorded 44 walkers took part in 1988, the 25th anniversary, and the record fell again to 1 hr 57 mins. A silver plated salver was presented by Kitchens Store as a mark of the walk's history. Sadly, George Steptoe had died during this special year, but Jack now 80 still supported the event.

It wasn't until 1990, 27 years after the first walk that the records show a wet day (was this the start of global warming ...). Another wet event was recorded in 1993, but despite the bad weather 17 hardy people took part with umbrellas and anoraks the order of the day – such was the popularity of the event.

1994 was another eventful year for myself. Remembering my efforts some 27 years earlier, I decided to train for the event. Starting in January that year, I walked to work in Abingdon and back once a week. By March, this had increased to 3–4 days. I remember lots of people offering me lifts on the way, but I stuck to it. The event was quite windy and, while the course remained dry, Radley had a tremendous downpour. I finished in 2 hrs 24 mins taking the cup for first local man home, but some 20 minutes later than the winner Mel Turner.

1996 and a huge entry of 57 walkers. Darren Fox was the first home out of 29 finishers in a record-breaking time of 1 hr 56 mins. This time still stands today as the official event record.

Mention must be made also of Eric Blanks, a walker in earlier years, but the official in charge for over 20 years. This year Eric decided to call it a day, and I have taken over the reins. It will be a hard act to follow. I hope I will witness the 50th anniversary and that in many, many years the Annual Radley Walk will go down in history – the same way as when young William Ellis picked up a ball and ran with it.