

"The Southern 50 Challenge Hike" - 2004 Report

- Imagine a major County event celebrating its Silver Jubilee;
- Imagine folk from far and wide taking up the challenge of walking and navigating their way round a new long distance course each year;
- Imagine throughout the past 25 years every member of each team reaching a combined mileage equivalent of over 10 times round the World.....

This isn't imagination – it's reality. The Greater London North sponsored Southern 50 Challenge Hike is steadily and annually increasing in popularity. For the second year running, the choice of three routes, 50 miles, 50 kilometres and 30 kilometres has proved that the event has moved with the times with a resulting increase from 56 teams entering in 2003 to 74 this year. A total of 15 Scout Counties were represented.

So let's flash back to see what happened at a foggy start on Valentine's Day in Great Missenden, nestling within the folds of the Chiltern Hills. The teams of 300 walkers set off at 2 minute intervals from 0600 hrs on a circular course taking in the delights of Prestwood, Spring Coppice Lane, Lily Bottom and Pulpit Wood. At this point the 50 milers headed north to walk nearly the complete circumference of a boggy Aylesbury Ring. Following a short distance along the Grand Union Canal towpath, they then headed back into the hills at Wigginton, taking in Hengrove Wood, The Lee, Potter Row and down hill back to Great Missenden. The 50 kilometres walkers cut across from Pulpit Wood to the canal via Coombe Hill, Wendover and Aston Clinton. The 30 kilometres event for Explorer Scouts remained in the hills with the first four teams walking superbly to finish in under 7 hours. The winning Explorer Scout Team of four girls from Southgate District completed the distance over 90 minutes faster than last year's winners. Runners-up, The Four Musketeers, were a new team from GLNE.

The 50 kilometres teams, a good mix of young and old, produced a clear winning outfit. The GLSW 21st Purley Old Boys (not so old really, as they are all aged thirty-something) finished in a minute under 7 hours, nearly 2½ hours quicker than the second place Don't Rely on the Army – a Leaders' team from 12th Southgate who are more used to winning the event rather than coming runners-up.

Finally, the 50 mile Blue Riband event followed the form book. The first two teams were never more than a few minutes away from each other until the last few miles when GLN's 1980 Late Finishers opened up a 46 minute gap. This team featured four well known faces from times gone by, including five times previous winner Tony Davis who took part in the first Southern 50 in 1980 when he took the County Trophy away with him. Second team home were 3 Toy Boys and a Wench. This Croham Valley team from GLSW won the event two years ago and this time the same three males returned with "a different wench". They checked in some 20 minutes in front of the fast finishing Undertakers from Essex who caused confusion at the start by claiming that they had lost a body after a team member had run off to the loo.

None of this would have been possible without the help of over 100 volunteers. (That's a higher ratio than taking Beaver Scouts on an outside activity). This Centurion army fought its way through cooking, cleaning, operating checkpoints for up to 15 hours at a time, staffing Central Control, driving supplies to checkpoints and then driving back retired walkers, and running Saturday evening entertainment for 80 Explorer Scouts. All this must have had a positive effect on the walkers because they achieved an 85% successful finishing rate – something of a record for such a tough challenge.

Over the past 25 years walkers have chomped their way through 10,000 dodgy pies, drank more cups of tea than the entire population of the Isle of Wight and eaten a total of 3 miles of sausages. And what's more we'll be back again next year on 12th February 2005. Just keep clicking on to the official Southern 50 website for regular updates – www.scouts-gln-southern50.org.uk

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