

## **The London Marathon**

### **A talk to the Eltham Society by Francis Lee 6<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

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Francis Lee, a member of the Eltham Society who has completed 27 marathon races including London and Paris, talked to the society about the London event.

Marathon races commemorate the feat of Pheidippides, who fell dead having run 22 miles to Athens with news of the Greeks' victory over the Persians at the battle of Marathon in 490BC.

As a result of a miscalculation the modern race was originally set at exactly 26 miles and an extra 385 yards was added to enable the 1908 Olympic race to end at Queen Alexandra's royal box at the White City, London; that subsequently became the official distance of the race.

The London Marathon, first run in 1981, was the brainchild of Chris Brasher, an Olympic steeplechase gold medallist and pace-maker for Roger Bannister's celebrated first sub-four minute mile. Ever since, the race has always started at Greenwich Park; initially it ended on Westminster Bridge but now ends in the Mall.

Francis described the complex preparations for the event, including sorting the tens of thousands of applications (closing date six months before the race) a vast array of toilets for the start at Blackheath, providing cold-proof clothes before the start including special reusable paper jackets, although many opt for converted bin-liners; lorries to transport the thousands of runners' kit-bags from Blackheath to the finish; numerous start marshals; hundreds of helpers at the many water stations en route and a quick and efficient kit-bag recovery service for all the runners.

The first London Marathon attracted 6,000 runners - it is now about five times as big.

Complications arise from the separate races for elite men and women, the earlier start for wheelchair athletes and the thousands of charity and fun-run participants; as a result there are not three different starts (blue, green and red) with the courses converging at John Wilson Street, Woolwich where the rival streams often cordially boo each other.

It still takes about 20 minutes for the runners at the back of the pack to reach the actual starting line and extra congestion occurs at such focal points as the Cutty Sark. But so that each runner can be timed accurately, everyone has an electronic tag attached to a running shoe activated by mats at the start and finish of the course. Every finisher receives a commemorative medal and official notification of their time.

The race is very expensive to stage and is funded through entrance fees, TV coverage and sponsorship, with any balance after meeting the costs going to the London Marathon Trust (LMT). One great benefit locally has been the acquisition

by LMT of the Marathon Playing Field at New Eltham, preventing its purchase by developers and providing sports facilities for local youngsters.

In one important respect the London Marathon is well ahead of its counterpart in Paris. Whereas London provides hundreds of temporary toilets for competitors, Paris provides just six, so that the starting area near the Arc de Triomphe is virtually unusable for several days after the race!