

100 YEARS AGO - THE 1908 OLYMPIC MARATHON

by Susan Toms

Many readers may be aware of this memorable race as it has become famous through the drama of the Italian runner Dorando Pietri, who collapsed a few feet away from the finishing line and was disqualified from winning the gold medal by the actions of his supporters, who carried him through the tape. But there was such a public outcry and so much sympathy for him from the spectators, including Queen Alexandra, that he was later presented with a gold cup, an exact replica of the one awarded to the winner Johnny Hayes of America. However not so many readers may know that this memorable race came through our area.

The route of 26 miles 385 yards, which became a precedent for all future marathons, started at the East Terrace of Windsor Castle and after Slough, Iver Heath and Uxbridge it passed through Ickenham, Ruislip and Eastcote and then continued to Pinner, Harrow and Wembley before finishing at the White City Stadium. (See Fig. 1)

The day of the race, 24 July 1908, was very hot and humid, which according to *The Times* was ideal 'for a bathe or a game of cricket perhaps, but terrible for a feat of endurance of mind, stamina, muscle and feet.' With temperatures in the high 70s the authorities along the route had arranged to sprinkle the roads to lessen the dust. It was also a relief for the 56 runners from 16 countries to be in the more shady roads of Ickenham and Ruislip after the open stretches of Iver Heath and Uxbridge.

However, despite the weather, no concessions were made for the athletes' kit. They had to wear 'complete clothing from the shoulder to the knees' and anyone not properly attired would be disqualified. Most runners had taken the precaution of wearing hats or soaked handkerchiefs to ward off the effects of the sun but many of the British contingent chose to run bare-headed with later unfortunate consequences.

One consolation for the runners was the plentiful supply of refreshments provided by the Oxo Company, the official caterers. Their menu included not surprisingly hot and cold oxo but also rice pudding, raisins, bananas, soda water and milk, all free of charge to the competitors. Many spectators also had beer, champagne and other spirits available to help the runners on their way. To modern readers it seems amazing that any runner could have completed the distance if they had taken advantage of all this food and drink. In fact according to Joe Deakin a British athlete who later commented on Pietri's collapse 'the problem was that people along the pavement were giving him glasses of brandy, instead of water. Pietri wasn't exhausted he was drunk.'

In 1908 Ruislip and Eastcote were small rural communities so no wonder there was great excitement and interest in the race with the course being lined with people. In nearby Uxbridge most of the shops closed between 3 and 5pm so that the employees had the opportunity to watch the race. A report in *The Daily Telegraph* recommended Uxbridge Common as an ideal spot since it was 'the highest point in the whole course' and it could easily be reached by tram or train. In fact the article continued 'a really keen spectator could follow the race by then catching a train from Uxbridge to further viewing points'.

Perhaps some of the many spectators (including 'a turbaned Turk' according to *The Times*) who gathered between Ruislip village centre and the Poplars Tea Gardens had taken this advice. Here at the halfway point the runners were preceded by a car with its occupants shouting "they're keeping good time boys and England is leading." The lead runner in question was Fred Price, with Charles Hefferon the South African second and another British runner Frederick Lord in third place, followed by Dorando Pietri sporting the number 19. Unfortunately neither Price nor Lord could sustain their pace in the hot weather with Price being

forced to retire at Eastcote while Lord later collapsed into the arms of a spectator, although he did recover to finish the race in 15th place 'very slow but sure.' All the runners were so affected by the heat that the 'national colours were running steadily down the jersey in liquid form as a result of perspiration.'

From Ruislip village centre the route went along the Eastcote Road passing the Ruislip National School, the Black Horse and the Eastcote Post Office which was then situated to the side of the Old Barn House. It then went up Chapel Hill, now Field End Road, see Fig. 2, to Bridle Road where it continued to Pinner Road and Harrow. At Eastcote all the villagers turned out to give the runners a cheer. In fact two motor accidents were reported to have occurred in Eastcote during the marathon because of all the traffic congestion. This was deemed newsworthy as the sight of any motor car in Eastcote was an unusual event at that time. It was also the first time that a bus had passed through Eastcote, see Fig. 3.

The famous local historian W.A.G. Kemp recollects in his *History of Eastcote* going to watch the marathon with a fellow teacher from Holy Trinity School after being granted the privilege of leaving school early. But they found so many people lining the road in Eastcote village that they made their way to Marsh Road, Pinner for a clearer view of the runners. No doubt many of the spectators

frequented the tea gardens in Eastcote since it was reported that they had been inundated and 'eaten out of business.'

There are further references to this area in an article in *The Times* written before the race describing 'a preliminary canter over the course'. The writer suggests that if a map of the course is turned so the finishing point is at the top, it would correspond roughly to an outline of the West coast of Africa. By this analogy Ruislip represents Cape Palmas in Liberia. On a more prosaic note he describes the course as going through beautiful English countryside with the route dropping down by Ickenham 'into real country with lines of willow fringing little streams of no importance.' It went past 'orchards fragrant with the scent of hay and meadow flowers, a grateful relief to the wearied dusty runners in the race.' At Ruislip he saw a motor car 'gay with the flat white and blue caps of three or four Swedes spying on the difficulties of the course.'

Local interest in the race continued for many weeks afterwards as demonstrated by the repeated mentions in *The Gazette* of the souvenir picture postcards for sale at Mrs Riddle's Shop in the High Street, Ruislip. Many no doubt wanted to extend their memories of the day an event in the first modern style Olympics came to these quiet rural villages and thrust them into an unexpected prominence.

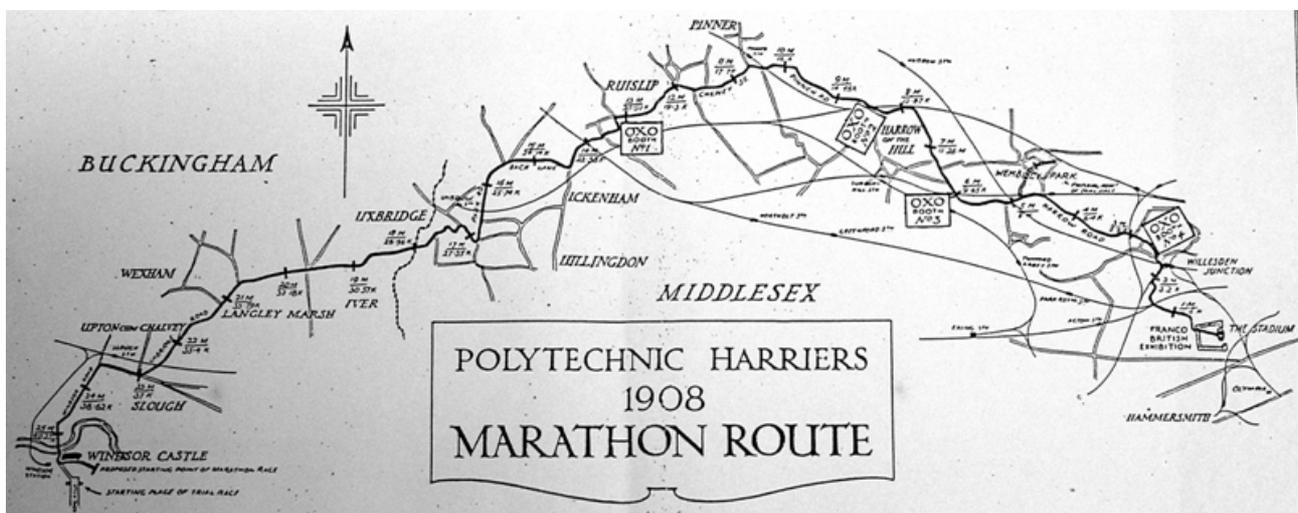


Fig.1



Fig. 2 - 'Waiting to see the Marathon Race'
Chapel Hill Corner (junction of Field End Road and Eastcote Road)

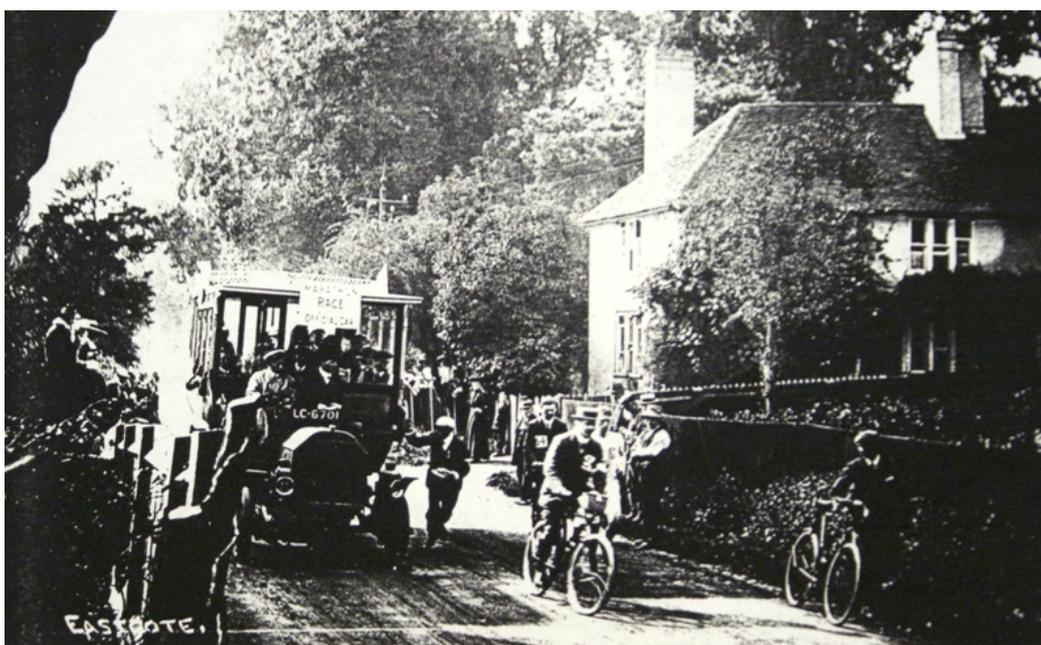


Fig. 3 - Marathon Race Official Bus passing Park Farm, Chapel Hill (Field End Road)

References:

W.A.G. Kemp *The History of Eastcote*, 1963

Keith Baker *The 1908 Olympics*, Sports Books, 2008

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