

"IN THE BEGINNING."

*A copy of a talk given to Blackpool and Fylde
Athletic Club on the establishment of the Club
and athletics in the Fylde region*



By David Reader

Abstract

In 1995 Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club celebrated its 100th Birthday. As part of the celebrations a talk was given to members on 27th December, 1995. Contained here is an adapted version of the script and illustrations.

The athletic boom in the region started in the late 1800s mainly with professional athletic festivals. The first Blackpool Club was actually established in 1894 and not 1895, even though the Club is celebrating its centenary this year. Two Clubs were established in this year and their activities are detailed.

The dictotomy between professional and amateur athletics in this period is represented in the Blackpool region and this is also highlighted. The document concludes by offering some comparisons with the modern day Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club and the original organisation, and offers some thoughts for the next 100 years.

Establishment of athletics and
athletic clubs pre-1900

In the late 1800s, athletics was becoming very popular around the country and the popularity began to reach Blackpool and the surrounding area by about 1870. Before this time the only recorded organised sports fixture in the area was a cricket match, between a Fleetwood side (which was noted because it had a Blackpool player in it) and a side from Preston.

The boom in athletics had its roots in two areas. Athletics was split early on in its development between amateur and professional athletes (and this has really been carried through to the present day). The division was perhaps along class lines. If a man (men were the only sex to take part generally) had a job as a labourer, often he could then not join a sports club because he was considered to have an unfair advantage against the other members who would not be as physically developed as they did not have such a demanding job. This type of man, if still interested in athletics would often compete as a *pedestrian*. This was term given to an athlete who competed for money. An athlete who would not consider competing for money was called a *gent*. Therefore, from early on in the development of the sport, athletes were divided into two two classes - pedestrians and gentlemen.

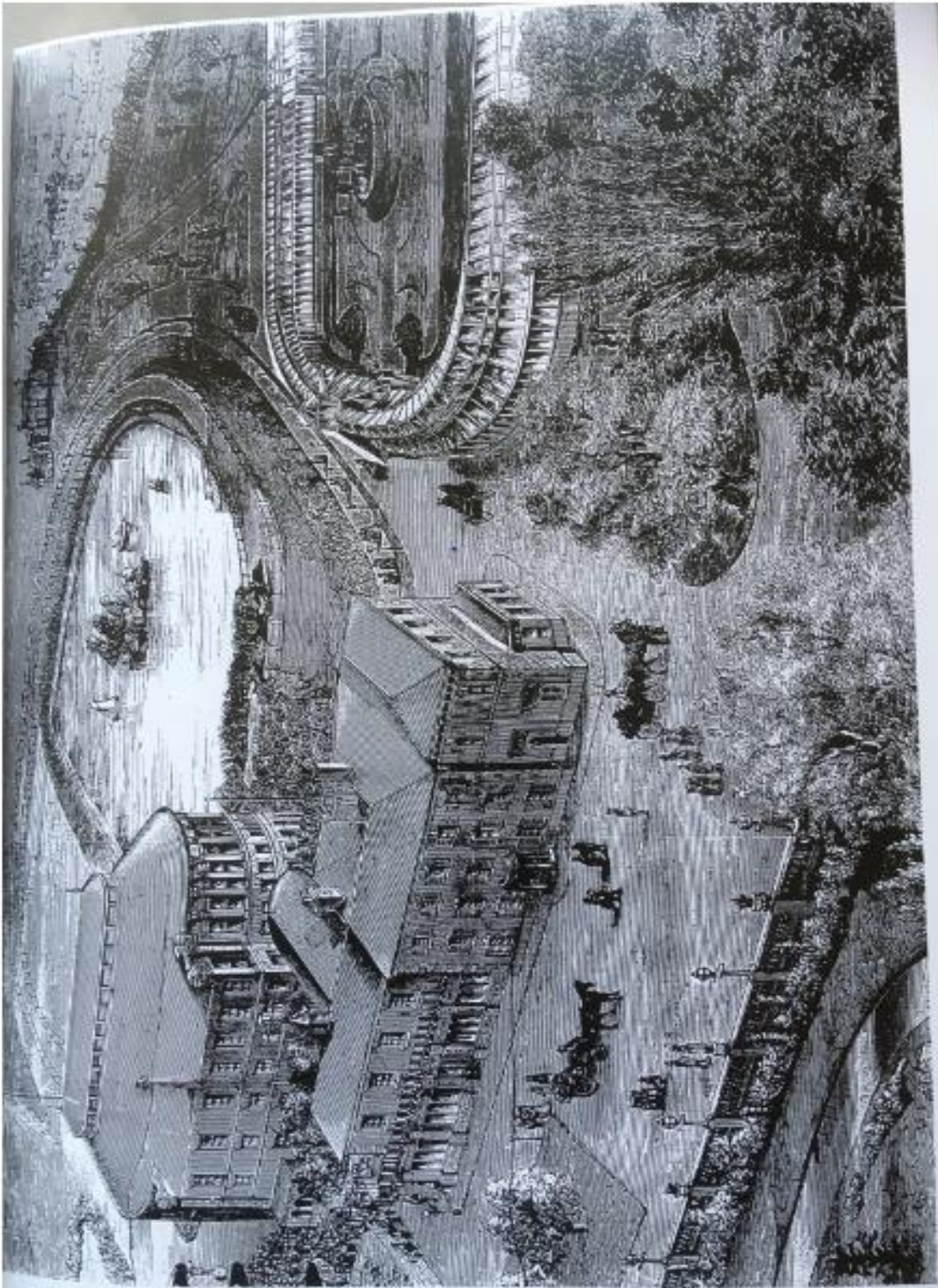
Athletics development in Blackpool was probably given the biggest push from the pedestrian element. The first recorded athletics meeting in Blackpool was in 1875 at Raikes Hall, where prizes were offered to the winners. The organisers were a group of men who wanted to make money from the event, by attracting as many competitors and spectators as possible. Entrance fee for competitors was 1s and the first prize for the 150 yard handicap was £3.3s. It attracted between four and five thousand competitors and was deemed a great success. Other events also commonly took place at these meetings, like climbing a greasy

pole. Most of the professional athletic meetings at this time were more like sport 'festivals', rather than 'meetings' because they incorporated many other types of sporting activity.

Blackpool's first track was provided by business men who saw a commercial opportunity by providing recreational facilities in the town. It was built as a joint cycle track (also popular at the time) at Whitegate Lane, built and registered with the Amateur Athletic Association (formed in 1880) and the National Cycle Union in 1893. It had a short life however, since it went in to liquidation as a company in 1894. It was known as the Royal Palace Gardens and was built near Raikes Hall. (See Fig. 1).

The establishment of an actual athletics club in Blackpool was probably as a result of a group of gents rather than pedestrians. Pedestrians didn't usually form their own clubs and the reason for this could have been because competition was provided for them by entrepreneurs who saw athletes as a money making opportunity (rather like horses and betting today). So it was left to the gents to form the clubs and organise amateur competition.

The first mention of an athletics club came in the Fleetwood Chronicle in 1870 and this was in connection with one of the athletic festivals like the one held at Raikes Hall (mentioned earlier). No evidence has since been found of this club after that date. In 1886 the Blackpool Gazette had a report about a Y.M.C.A. Harriers athletic club holding a run against Blackburn Harriers. Its headquarters were said to be in Church Street, but little other evidence exists about it and it is thought it was only short lived



Despite the modern day Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club holding its Centenary this year, it is probably true to say it should have been last year. All evidence points to the fact that the Club was formed in 1894, not 1895! In March of 1894 a meeting was called of all those interested in forming a cross-country and athletics club. Prior to this, an article appeared in the Blackpool Gazette highlighting the fact that Blackpool had no athletic or harriers club and that efforts should be made to form one (see Fig. 2). The Royal Palace Gardens (Raikes Hall) became the training and competition venue and subscriptions were set at 3s and 6d for active members and 5s for honorary members. The Blackpool Herald, a week after the Club's formation announced it had attracted 40 members already and that the Club had organised a cross-country run to Cleveleys.

RUNNING.

I have often wondered why Blackpool had not a Harriers' Club.

Nearly every other town of importance in Lancashire boasts of one, and why Blackpool has so long been left out in the cold, I really cannot say.

However, an effort is now to be made to form an organisation in the "Highway of the North," and a meeting for this purpose is to be held to-night (Friday) at the Royal Palace Gardens.

Several prominent runners have promised to become members, including Mr. C. H. H. H., late of Ormskirk Athletic Club, who won for several years the championship sprinter of Lancashire.

Mr. Canon, of Lytham, late N.C.A., 100 yards champion, has also been approached, and will probably become a member.

I hope the scheme will receive the support it deserves, and be brought to a successful issue.

Cross-country races might be run in winter, and athletic festivals held in the summer, which besides proving interesting would be beneficial to the town.

Figure 2.

In April 1894, the Blackpool Herald and Gazette reported that (Fig. 3), a Mr.G.L. McVittie had called a meeting with a view to form another athletic club. It was to be called Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club and it was to use the facilities provided by the The Athletics Grounds Company. The company also offered the Club the use of the tennis apparatus and the bowling green on the promise that the Club would attract a membership of around 100. The subscription was set at 7s 6d a year, the President elected was Mr.A. Herman and the Honorary Secretary was Mr.V.C. Thompson. There was also a ladies subscription (not always that common) included into the agreed proceedings of 5s. The Clubs stated aim was,

"...the cultivation, promotion and practice of athletics and gymnastics, and for the elevation of sport in the Fylde district."

Notice that gymnastics is included. The Club also has the use of a gym and catered for any gymnasts as well.

BIG ATHLETIC SCHEME.

PROPOSED NEW CLUB FOR BLACKPOOL.

Blackpool has long desired an athletic club that would really be worthy of wide recognition as an institution for the improvement of the physical condition of the rising generation and the development of sport and healthy recreation. A proposal for such an institution, recently made by Mr. G. L. McVittie, was therefore heartily welcomed, and at a meeting held at the Blackpool Town Hall, on Friday evening, to discuss the question, there was a large attendance, including Dr. Kingsbury, Rev. J. Crabtree (Morton), Messrs. G. Dearden, J. Allen (St. Anne's), A. Pugh (Lytham), H. Willis, G. L. McVittie, J. Douglas Johnson, J. Waddison, A. Hickrup, C. Whalley, H. Pagnam, A. Kay, J. Hackhouse, and others. Dr. Kingsbury was unanimously elected to the chair, and Mr. McVittie read over his scheme, which proposed that the new athletic club should include in its programme running, cycling, jumping, gymnastics, and other kindred exercises. Mr. Kay proposed that Mr. McVittie's suggestions be adopted, and that the club be worked on the same lines as the Fallowfield organisation at Manchester. He had secured a copy of the rules of that club, and thought it was quite time one of that description was formed in Blackpool, though he would suggest that, prior to any business being done, the Blackpool Athletic Grounds Company should be consulted with, so as to ascertain the probable cost of a contract for the use of their grounds. If they could be secured, they could have sports during the summer for their own benefit, and he saw no reason why they should not also have one or two meetings at the back end for the benefit of local charities. The club was seen to be a success, as in a place like Blackpool they would be able to get 100 men straight off the reel, and secure an athlete in the district who would hold his own in the best company.—Mr. Allen said he was very pleased to second Mr. Kay's proposition, because he thought the day had arrived when sports of the kind named were once to take. He therefore urged that the work of launching a club should be undertaken at once, and that a provisional committee be appointed to draw up rules, &c.—Mr. Dearden supported the motion, which was unanimously carried.—In answer to Mr. Allen, Mr. Kay gave a resume of the Fallowfield rules, and eventually seven committeemen were elected, as follows:—Dr. Kingsbury, and Messrs. A. Kay, A. Pugh, G. Dearden, H. Willis, H. Pagnam, and J. Allen. Mr. G. L. McVittie was elected hon. secretary, pro tem.—The next meeting was fixed for this (Friday) evening, when the committee's report will be considered.

Figure 3.

Prior to the formation of the Harriers Club, the town hosted the National Cross-Country Championships in March of 1894. This honour was secured in February of that year and the Blackpool Herald reported that special trains were to be laid on for the event. The race, which started and finished at the Athletic Sports Grounds, was won by George Crossland from Salford Harriers who went on to become a member of Blackpool Harriers. Salford won the team championships and boosted their status in the cross-country world which was already high. The event however, (which attracted 1500 spectators and 83 competitors) was over-shadowed by many accidents. The course was severely criticised (according to the Herald) by the national press for being badly devised and dangerous. After leaving the Sports Ground runners went into farmer's fields which were congested with barbed-wire fences. Runners had to get over these, the inevitable happened and many returned blood strewn. (Fig. 4)

Regardless of this poor organisation, the Championships probably served as a very important impetus for athletics in Blackpool. Just over a week after staging these Championships, moves were underway to organise a Club for Blackpool. Perhaps if it wasn't for these Championships coming to Blackpool the formation of a Club may have been delayed.

When it comes to the first meeting staged by the Harriers Club in Blackpool, the evidence is not all that clear. There appears to be some confliction in the reports that appeared in the local papers. It appears likely that the first meeting to be staged by the Harriers was in June of 1894 when two races (120 yards and 220 yards) were said to have been held at Raike Hall.

RUNNING.

THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AT BLACKPOOL.

The new Athletic ground at Blackpool was the scene of the all important eleventh annual National Cross-Country Championship on Saturday. Considerable interest was manifested in the event, and visitors came from all parts. Nine clubs had entered, but at the last moment Cheshire Tally-ho withdrew, and owing to several entrants not turning up, only 45 out of 150 advertised competitors started over the ten mile course. At a meeting on the ground Birchfield's objection to A. A. Smith, of Salford, was upheld by the committee, and the northern man thereby lost one of their best runners. Fine weather favoured the meeting, but as the recent rains had rendered the ground very heavy, the going told on the runners, and the course, it was said, was one of the stiffest over which the championship had yet been run. Every arrangement conducive to the success of the meeting had been made by the committee, in whom Mr. Douglas Johnson rendered valuable assistance. Crossland (Salford), champion of the Northern Counties, and H. Watkins, of the Walthamstow pack, the Southern champion, started favourites, and for about nine miles of the journey they alternately held the lead. The encounter was fitfully interesting, for at some portions of it the men were completely lost sight of in the mist in the course, but this served to intensify the excitement and speculation as to ultimate positions of the runners. When half a mile from home, Crossland forged ahead, and finished first in a fresh condition (58min. 17sec.), with Watkins second (58min. 35sec.), Martin, Essex (59min. 10sec.), Moran, Salford (59min. 55sec.), H. Dunkley, Birchfield (70min. 14sec.), and A. H. Mescham, Birchfield (70min. 35sec.) Sixty-three of the runners finished, Sid Thomas (Ranelagh) being 34th, and the positions of the different clubs were:—Salford 50 points, Birchfield 71, Essex Douglas 100, Walthamstow 151, Finnley 170, Ranelagh 181, South London 233, and Bolton 273. The prizes consisted of six gold medals to the winning team, six silver medals to the second, and six bronze medals to the third. In addition to which the winner outright receives a special gold medal.

Figure 4.

NOTES ON THE RACE.

There were two sights at the Blackpool Athletic Grounds on Saturday.

How delightfully pretty was the scene as the teams turned out, but how painful it was to see the runners reach their "journey's end" with torn and mud-beespattered garments, and limbs more or less blood-stained.

The bruises, I understand, were caused by barbed wire fences which were very frequent along the course.

The course has been described as very bad by the leading sporting papers, but I hope that before the next cross-country race is run, it will be considerably improved.

We had some of the best cross-country runners down on Saturday, but it was evident that the awkward course told upon the majority of them.

Crossland was the "hero of the hour," and he finished as fresh as a buttercup, some fifty yards ahead of all others.

Sonny Morton, who had all along declared his intention of being a spectator, again turned out for his old club, and wasn't he accorded a heart welcome?

He was a bit of a surprise packet, too, for he ran even better than in the Northern, but he was one of the victims to the "cross-country-like" course and failed to stay.

Watkins, too, was in grand form, and he was loudly cheered as he "jumped," at one spring the cycle-track fence at the south-west end of the grounds in the last round.

Sid Thomas wasn't in the best of condition but the old uns, namely: C. Booth, G. H. Morris, M. M. Eaton, T. Birch, H. Dunkley, and G. Martin were amongst the shining lights.

G. Lord (Bolton), "broke down," while C. Pearce, the four miles champion, ran until he could run no longer, and was picked up in one of the fields in a helpless condition, and had to be assisted to the tent.

Let me congratulate the Salford Harriers upon once more bringing the championship into