

THE BEGINNING...

The date was Thursday August 11th 1977 and it was another age as far as road running was concerned. From January to August of that year, only six events on the road took place in the Cork region - the well-known Cork to Cobh '15', two four-milers in Ballymore (which had 26 runners), and Ballyhooly, a five-mile race in Mallow, a six-mile in Kildorrery (where 16 ran), and the popular relays around the Lough organised by St. Finbarrs.

August 11th was a week after that Ballymore Festival race, and commitments had been received there from most of the runners to come to Ballycotton, including winner Ray Treacy. The work in organising the race had started some weeks before, with the local shops and business people being approached for donations. One of the few firms in the area at the time contributed five pounds, as did three of the businesses. Two more gave two pounds and one pound each, and even the 50p from another was appreciated. The total came to £28.50.

Trophies and plaques were purchased as prizes, costing £29.75. Entry fee was either 20p or 30p, and no race numbers were issued. Instead, as each runner finished he was handed a card with his finishing position on it, and he then gave his name to the recorder. We say 'he' deliberately, for at that time no women ran such a distance as five miles!

The race started at the old Post Office (just above where the race now finishes), and the course was the same as is used at present, although the finish was outside the School Gate. As measuring techniques were not as advanced as nowadays, it was slightly short of five miles.

Local interest was a mixture of curiosity and bemusement. Some people asked what a road race was - "is it a cycling race, or what?" When Phil McGrath and John Walshe went out to mark the road, one local person told them that the County Council would object, as they considered painting on the road graffiti!

First to enter was Michael Healy from Youghal, one of the top cross-country runners in Cork at the time. Tens of thousands of entries for a myriad of events have been received since, but Michael can take pride of place as the first runner to have 'No. 1' alongside his name in a Ballycotton race. BLE County Board Chairman, the late Paddy Hartnett, sent the 34 runners on their way. John Murray from Ballybraher (who has also passed away) was a spectator on that fine August evening and he was asked to act as lead car, which he duly did, accompanied by reporter Joe Duggan (also now deceased) from the 'News and Star'.

Michael Long of Leevale, along with his girlfriend Ellen, volunteered to time the runners. It is worth noting that virtually no races in those days did this, apart from maybe taking the winners' time. In fact, in his newspaper report Joe Duggan stated that, "the time of all the competitors was taken, a rare feat in Cork in athletics." At the finish line the numbered cards were handed out by Seamus Hartnett, there to see the race with his parents, and who would go on to be the area's top runner in years to come.

The other locals involved were John Walshe and Dan Donovan (who both ran the race), along with Phil McGrath, and his brother Fr Tom, home from England. At the prize-giving in the local hall the trophies were presented by the late Fr Bertie Troy, C.C., Ballycotton.

THE RACE...

The race itself saw Ray Treacy, then based in Cork and running for Leevale, win easily in a time of 23:46, well ahead of Richie Crowley and Donie Walsh. As Joe Duggan's report put it, "at four miles he was close on 500 yards ahead of the bunch and in parts was travelling at 14 miles an hour, timed on the speedometer of Mr John Murray's car." In fact, both Richie and Donie could have been even further back as a herd of cows came out on the road (after Ray had passed) with over a mile to go and almost brought them to a standstill!

In fourth position and first novice was Noel Shannon, while Liam O'Brien could only manage fifth on the night. Murt Coleman of Liffey Valley, who had ran internationally for Ireland in the marathon and Kevin Treacy from Loughrea, both working in the Cork area at the time, finished sixth and seventh respectively. In eight was another well-known marathoner, Jerry Murphy of Leevale.

On the back of this little booklet we publish the names of the 34 runners. Sadly, both Dave Ainscough and Joe O'Flynn have passed away, but the remainder are still around and some still running, although their times (along with their hairstyles!) have receded somewhat. A few have gone on to foreign lands and bigger things, such as winner Ray Treacy who is now Head Track Coach at Providence College in the USA.

THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED...

The following year, the race date was moved to June. Only 24 ran, with victory going to Richie Crowley. Of course that was his second local victory in 1978, as in March he had won the inaugural Ballycotton '10'. Ray Treacy returned to win in 1979 and the following year Liam O'Brien won the first of his 14 Ballycotton '5'

titles. 1981 saw Marcus O'Sullivan, later to become World Indoor Champion on three occasions, take the Ballycotton honours.

In 1985, Liam O'Brien established a course record of 23:41 which still stands, but the previous year of '84 was also special. Just four days after qualifying for that year's LA Olympics when setting a new Irish 3000m steeplechase record at Crystal Palace, Liam showed his loyalty and commitment to the sport by turning out and winning yet another local race.

At this stage the Ballycotton Summer Series, comprising of four races, was well established. Although the Ballycotton '5' had been held in June since 1978, in 1985 it was decided to swap the August date with Shanagarry, as it seemed more appropriate to finish off the yearly proceedings where it had all started from.

Women ran for the first time in 1979, with just two taking part, Ellen Whelan of Leevale and the winner, one Mary Dempsey from Youghal. She may be better known nowadays as Mary Sweeney and is still winning prizes. Like Liam O'Brien, her enthusiasm and support of local events, as well as her love of the sport, is an example to all.

Numbers taking part continued to increase, reaching 124 in 1982 and topping the 200 mark the year after. Of course in the past few years we have reached a new level with around 550 - 600 now the norm for each of the Summer Series events. In 1993, 92 runners finished under the 30-minute barrier at Ballycotton and it is a reflection on present day standards that less than half that number (43) did in 2013, although the number of participants had more than doubled.

THIRTY SEVEN YEARS ON...

Nobody involved in that first race could have imagined what lay ahead. The Dublin Marathon was still three years away, with London following six months later. Nowadays, the popularity of the Ballycotton '10' is only too apparent to anybody who tries to enter, and the numbers taking part in races, along with the variety of events, is at an all-time high.

A total of 181 five and ten mile races later, the statistics show in excess of 78,000 finishers and, with the participation of international stars and Olympic medallists, it can be safely assumed that the Ballycotton events have now reached a global audience.

August 1977 is also remembered for another very different reason entirely. Five days after that Ballycotton race, the world was shocked to hear of the death of Elvis Presley. It was, one could say, the end of a legend; although of course his music will always live on.

In its own small way, that Ballycotton race five days before was the catalyst of a movement which in the intervening years has also gained a legendary status, albeit of a very different nature.

Yes, the 'King' may be dead, but road running is certainly alive and well in this picturesque area of East Cork. However, it wouldn't have transpired but for those pioneers below who turned up in Ballycotton village to run five miles on an August evening in the year of 1977.

BALLYCOTTON '5' - Thursday August 11th 1977

1 Ray Treacy (Leevale)	23:46	18 Michael Joyce (St. Finbarrs)	27:34
2 Richie Crowley (St. Finbarrs)	24:16	19 Batt Kearney (Leevale)	27:56
3 Donie Walsh (Leevale)	24:21	20 Joe O'Flynn (Leevale)	28:02
4 Noel Shannon (Leevale)	24:29	21 Der O'Riordan (Leevale)	28:14
5 Liam O'Brien (Midleton)	25:17	22 Ger Coulihan (Leevale)	28:23
6 Murt Coleman (Liffey Valley)	25:33	23 Russell O'Brien (Grange)	28:33
7 Kevin Treacy (Loughrea)	25:46	24 Pat Whyte (Midleton)	28:45
8 Jerry Murphy (Leevale)	25:59	25 Denis Forde (St. Finbarrs)	29:15
9 Micheal Healy (Youghal)	26:18	26 Michael O'Riordan (St. Finbarrs)	29:43
10 Jerry Martin (Midleton)	26:28	27 Billy Griffin (Midleton)	29:51
11 Liam Horgan (Leevale)	26:30	28 John Walshe (Midleton)	30:09
12 John Delaney (Leevale)	26:43	29 Dave Ainscough (St. Finbarrs)	30:14
13 Mick Murphy (Leevale)	26:55	30 N. Doherty (Glounthaune)	31:01
14 Jack O'Leary (St. Finbarrs)	27:04	31 Willie O'Mahony (Youghal)	31:13
15 Flor O'Leary (St. Finbarrs)	27:15	32 Bernard Lynch (St. Finbarrs)	31:29
16 Mick Carey (Leevale)	27:21	33 Tom Houlihan (Midleton)	33:40
17 Gerard Lambe (Glounthaune)	27:23	34 Dan Donovan (Midleton)	34:40