

Tally ho to Cheshire

If you'd like to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, the Cheshire Tally Ho Club is the place for you
 Words: Marjorie Henderson

IF YOU like the idea of running through the countryside in all kinds of weather, getting stung by nettles, being covered in mud, followed more often than not by a washdown in a tin bath, and all in the name of fun, then the ancient rites of the Cheshire Tally Ho Hare and Hounds Club are right up your street.

Dedicated followers of this type of sport obviously enjoy their fortnightly winter outings enormously – the club has been in existence for more than 125 years and is possibly the last of its kind in the world. And yes, there are compensations: the camaraderie of like-minded human beings, beautiful country to explore and above all that welcome pint and a meal in the pub at the end of the run,

One of its most loyal members, George Dobson of Cheadle Hulme has always had a lifelong interest in running and joined the club 26 years ago. 'We are so fortunate with Cheshire and Derbyshire on our doorsteps,' he says. 'We have a radius of 50 miles to run around with beautiful countryside, herds of deer, wild animals and birds and flowers to look at and a shared emotion which, yes includes some pain after two and a half hours running up and down hills. But there's always that welcome drink and meal at the end of it. There's a special kind of friendship between members – a camaraderie you don't

often find in groups. And there's an old saying that people who eat together stay together. That is true of our club.'

Age is no barrier. There are members in their 80s. Others are in their 20s and lots are in between. Doctors, solicitors, accountants, bank managers, university lecturers chemists even a vicar are or were members. Judge Mike Blackburn who died last year and is sadly missed, donned the red and white hooped sweater signifying membership of the Tally Ho Club.

Each member during the season must organise a circular route which must begin and end with a suitable hostelry: note that the Tally Ho Hare and Hounds Club does not have or need a club house. The run always finishes back at the pub where members have a washdown in a tin bath, usually with cold water, before consuming a delicious meal and several pints.

Occasionally they get lucky and land up at a pub or hotel with showers and hot running water, Then the tin bath remains in the back of the social secretary's car. It is, of course, a pre-requisite that the secretary has a car big enough to cart the bath round in. Today's galvanised bath (it used to be a plasterer's bath) may be some indication as to why there are no women members. 'Your legs get very filthy going through farm yards and ploughed fields,' says George. 'You might even land up in



Top: Tally ho on the fells
 Above: Trotting past Mudlark



members but more are always welcome. Age is no drawback because fast, slow and middling packs leave at different times.

The Tally Ho Club was formed at a Wilmslow pub in 1873 by a group of people who enjoyed a good, sometimes competitive run followed by a group meal.

The social aspect of the club, even today, is one that separates them from the usual running clubs, plus the fact that they prefer ploughing through the mud of the countryside rather than along roads.

President is Tom Cropper of Hazel Grove who is 83 years old. He has been a member for 50 years, president for 17 and secretary before that. Today's secretary is Mike Eastwood of High Lane. He is the person to talk to if you fancy joining this unusual club. You'll find him on 01663 762334 or contact the club's web site on www.cheshiretallyho.org.uk/History.htm

The 'Bass Bottle On The Lakes' weekend – or the Fell Race as it is known, is one of the highlights of the season. Members stay at a big stately home and have to RUN up to the top of an almost vertical hill. It takes them 25 minutes – again on a handicap. The winner gets the prize of a plastic bottle of bass complete with cork, which stands 4 foot high. Your name goes down in history on the bottle! ■

Ready to run



cow pat if you jump over a wall. As long as you can get the worst off the bath you can then clean up enough to go into the pub.'

The trail is laid by the two hares who set out two or three hours ahead of the pack of hounds. 'You take both paper and sawdust with you,' says George. 'It should be clearly visible to the hounds but there can be problems. When the weather is bad and the wind is blowing you have to put a stone over the paper or place it in a pool of water. We even wrap it round bushes, trees or barbed wire fences. Sawdust can often blow away. We should get back about 20 minutes before the fast hounds come in but there have been occasions when they have caught up with the hares.'

One very scary moment came when they were walking over Helvellyn during a weekend in the Lake District. 'The top was covered in snow. Even the air was white,' says George. 'Our social secretary Mike Burston of High Lane wanted a picture of us. He walked backwards, camera in hand and just disappeared. The wind was howling and nothing could be heard. You could see the edge and nothing else. We were all convinced he had crashed to his death. But there was a happy ending. The rescue mountaineers came and a helicopter and eventually Mike was found. He had managed to climb back up to where he could be helped over the lip of the snow. He was uninjured.'

At present the club which is essentially non-competitive, has 36

Tally ho facts

- FROM its foundation in 1872 the Cheshire Tally Ho Hare and Hounds Club has kept comprehensive records which tell the story not only of the club but of the birth and evolution of cross country running. The records also throw light on the social and economic circumstances of the day and the pressures and changes that formed and influenced both the club and the sport. Thanks to the efforts of club member, Jim Morris, in the early 1990s there is a copy of all the records in the National Sporting library at Birmingham University.

- While the 'uniform' of the club has not changed much over the years the footwear certainly has. Originally, 125 years ago the runners wore leather shoes or boots. Then came the pumps. But for the past 30 odd years trainers have come to the fore and prove more than adequate for the occasion.

- Weather is a significant factor in the club's activities but the Tally Ho had a proud record of overcoming all sorts of weather conditions to stage their runs. In the early days with venues closer to Manchester, the minute books describe the 'pea soup' fogs which they ran in. The occasional blizzard presenting a severe challenge. Then came another type of disaster – foot and mouth disease in cattle. Members had to forego running through fields and stick to lanes and fenced paths.