**Lincoln Men at the Four Minute Mile.**

**Thursday 6 May 1954 – Iffley Road Athletic Track – 6pm**

Who’s coming to see an attempt at the Four Minute Mile?” The cry comes from Front Quad at half past four on a chilly afternoon in May – not that anyone with a sporting interest at Lincoln would not know that Roger Bannister was down for the Mile at the Iffley Road Track. Lincoln was strong in track and road running that year. We won the Cross-Country Cuppers in February. Most men as teenagers at school in the years just after the war would fantasise over a scheme to capture this prize if they were keen on Athletics. Their parents would have told a son about the legendary Sydney Wooderson, an Englishman who set up a World Record for the Mile of 4min 6.4s in 1937, and was expected to break four minutes early in the 1940s. Further they would have known that two men in Sweden, Arne Andersson and Gunder Haegg, while the rest of the world was at war, between them, reduced the record time to 4m 1.4s.

Roger Bannister, who had read Medicine at our sister college Exeter in the Turl, was the natural successor to Wooderson in those post war years. In the twenty months since the Helsinki Olympics any appearance by him was assumed to be an attempt at the Four Minute Mile even if he is down, just, for the half mile.

This is not the only sporting attraction at the beginning of the Oxford Hillary term. Earlier that day Brian Southam and I were at the Parks for an hour, where Yorkshire had opened their season with a match against the University. They had sent a strong team which included Hutton, Illingworth and Truman. The game is into the second day; Yorkshire have declared at 293 for 4 and Fred Truman is in the process of demolishing the home side’s batsmen with an aim of securing an inning’s defeat. It’s an inauspicious start for the new captain, M. C. Cowdrey, who, incidentally, scored a duck.

It was a good time to be up at Oxford. Approaching my 21st birthday, I had finished National Service and was in my third term at Lincoln, reading Mathematics. The war was nearly ten years ago, austerity was behind us ; 1953 was the year of the last Ration Book. It was a frivolous time when, if you were fortunate enough to have a hard consonant in your name, the suffix ‘…ers’ could be added, giving one a certain social cachet! Hence: Banners, Chatters, Shakers, etc. It is difficult to believe, now, but I did not have to pay a penny for tuition, board or lodging for the three years I was up; this was met by the Local Authority to whom my parents paid their rates.

It was a time of optimism – Everest and the Coronation, but pre-Suez and pre–Cuban Missile Crisis; it was also pre-Beatles and pre–Permissive Society. We had to settle for Skiffle from Lonnie Donegan, Rock and Roll with Bill Haley and the Lord Chamberlain’s Permission.

It was, also, a time of opportunity. If I had known where to go, I could have sat at the back of a hall where C.S.Lewis, J.R.R.Tolkein or A.J.P.Taylor were delivering a lecture.

The evening fixture, traditionally, marks the beginning of the Athletics season in which Oxford plays host to the collective British Athletics talent (the AAA). It is, of course, an unequal match, one which in football terms might be called a ‘Friendly Match’. Billed as an evening event from 5pm to 7pm, in student terms – conveniently placed between tea and dinner; and, for colleges on the Turl, tea means Brown’s Tea Room in the Covered Market. As far as the Four Minute Mile is concerned, we have been here before – we address the next two hours with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

It is a short cycle ride to the ground at Iffley Road. Brian and I part with sixpence (equivalent to £1 today) for a programme, but as far as I can remember, entrance was free. We decide to sit on a raised knoll on the north side of the track, just above the second bend. The first thing we notice is the rostrum camera which the BBC had set up earlier in the day. Looking back, over the decades, we are immensely grateful for the footage which it delivered, adding veracity to remembered accounts of how the race unfolded.

We turn to the programme, and there it is: 6pm. Event 9. One Mile. And, on the card, for the visitors: R. G. Bannister, C. J. Chataway and C. W. Brasher. What was of particular interest to me, though, was a late insertion of T. N. Miller for the home team to match the three from the AAA. Nigel Miller was a contemporary of mine at school (same boarding house, actually) . Nigel is more surprised than me when he buys his programme at the gate – this is the first time he has known about it – his late notification never reached him via the unsatisfactory college postal system. He was unable to find suitable kit to wear, and his name is scratched from the card, we are informed over the Tannoy system.

The Bannister team got to Oxford in the morning. My copy of the Oxford Mail registered one-tenth of an inch rainfall that day – this was likely to have been in the morning when the team visited the track. A little bit of rain can be tolerated, but wind is a different matter if an attempt at a record is contemplated. To the north a couple of hundred yards away is the Church of St John the Evangelist. From its tower flies the flag of St George. It was raised two days earlier on a minor Saints’ Day commemorating the English Protestant Martyrs of the Reformation. We are reminded of a visit to Oxford, four hundred years before, of three other Englishmen for whom, though, the weather was the least of their concerns. This flag will be used during the day to assess the strength of a westerly wind.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would be fair to say that the weather improved as the day wore on; but not quickly enough for the reporters and photographers from the London Dailies, most of whom left for home mid-afternoon, assuming that any attempt at a record was off, and that they had better things to do.

However, for a crowd of perhaps two thousand spectators, we have a full programme of sixteen events and there is a Lincoln man in four of them. D. J. N. Johnson also appears on the front of the programme as Secretary of the O. U. A. C. The home side takes its first victory when Ian Boyd (B. N. C.) wins in the half-mile. Boyd will be in the finals, later in the year, with Bannister in Vancouver and Berne. The evening’s fixture could easily be justified, at a quarter to six, by Mike Pharaoh’s achievement of a British Empire Record in the Discus for the AAA. A very satisfactory start to the season for him.

Far from satisfied, though, is the Bannister team. Fifteen minutes to go, and the flag is fluttering in horizontal mode. Bannister is adamant that, as things stand, the record attempt is off. The spectators are un-aware of these discussions – they have come expecting an attempt at the Four Minute Mile. There is a mood of anticipation amongst a crowd of knowledgeable enthusiasts.

It is the stuff of dreams when, at five to six, the wind abated, St George lowered his standard – permission given - Roger Bannister nods to his two companions – the game is on!

Six o’clock , on the dot – bang – but, Brasher jumps the gun – false start. This builds up tension both on and off the track. Back to the start and Brasher takes the lead, and no harm is done. There is a simple plan. Bannister must try to run an even race of four 60 second laps; Brasher to pace for two laps, Chataway to take the third, leaving Bannister to tackle the fourth alone. In training he has run a three-quarter mile in three minutes, or less, many times; he needs to be delivered at the bell with enough in reserve. Each man must exceed his own best time for the attempt to succeed.

Bannister is cosseted between Brasher and Chataway as they enter the first lap. Bannister is heard to shout “too slow” in the back straight – so much for a simple plan. It looks fast enough to us as the trio sweep past below us for the first time. And so, it is. “57.5” calls the timekeeper at the quarter. Now this can mean one of two thigs: “You’ll pay for this later” or “Nice to get a couple of seconds under your belt, early on”. The crowd considers this dilemma, audibly and begins to take on a life of its own. The three men pass us for a second time; Brasher looks grimmer while the other two, paced men, seem relaxed.

“One minute, fifty-eight point two” calls the timekeeper at the half mile. The crowd is whipped up to a roar – “this looks good”. Brasher has, indeed, done a good job by pacing the second lap in a minute – he is a long-distance track runner and two laps in under two minutes stretches his capabilities, but he must push on into the third lap until he is relieved. Chataway initiates his manoeuvre at the start of the bend. He moves out to pass the two men in front, Bannister follows him and slips into the gap ahead of Brasher; like a baton change in a relay, there is no diminution of speed. Brasher is free to finish the race at his own pace (but he must finish properly). The crowd recognises this as a serious commitment and the noise is ratchetted up. We observe the strain on Chataway’s face as he sweeps past us for the third time; Bannister is relaxed since he has not had to make any decisions so far.

At the bell, the timekeeper calls out: “Three minutes and half a second”- *This changes everything!* Could this be it, after all the waiting years? Everyone is on their feet and the cheering increases even more. Chataway, like Brasher earlier, knows he must carry on at this pace – the next decision is Bannister’s alone. He makes his strike at the end of the first bend. As he leans inward, he finds an extra thrust from his spikes to shoot past Chataway.

Bannister knows what to do and he knows he has the capability. We in the crowd are also well informed – our job is to cheer him on. Our excitement can best be described by comparison with a punter at the Derby. We have money on the odds-on favourite and in the last furlong, he is a nose ahead of a relentless pursuer. For us the adversary is the reflected sweep of a watch’s second hand breathing down his neck like a narrow sword in the hand of the ‘Grim Reaper’. “Keep going, keep going”: We shout as we watch him sweep confidently past us for the fourth time. As he approaches the tape, he knows the time is close to four minutes – everyone knows; but which side?

He breasts the tape in full flow, collapsing into the arms of friends. His fate now lies in the uncoiling of a spring in the fists of a handful of middle-aged men in trilby hats. (Don’t mention the pipe!)

Norris McWhirter, a good friend, who trains with Bannister is in the process of compiling the first edition of the Guinness Book of Records. He is on hand that evening because he is running anchor in the last event, the sprint relay. He has made an arrangement with the Clerk of the Course that if the result is favourable, he would like to make the announcement. There is a pause while the necessary paper work is done; a nod from the chief timekeeper as one of these pieces of paper is handed over to McWhirter. After the obligatory crackle from the Tannoy, he embarks on his prepared speech, deliberately spun out for maximum effect. Most of it went over our heads, which explains why there were many versions when folk tried to recall the sequence in the years to follow. When it was time for ‘The Time’, all he could deliver was “three” – the crowd, deliriously happy, drowned the rest out.

Spectators cheered and jumped in the air and, in a spontaneous gesture, they swarmed onto the grass inside the track hoping, perhaps to congratulate the successful team. It had not seemed necessary to have marshals to control the crowd; it was not intimidating, and after they had gone off to change, the spectators were reminded, over the Tannoy, that there were seven more events on the programme.

The outstanding runner from the home team was, undoubtedly, Derek Johnson from Lincoln. He was a very versatile athlete – on a good day he could give anyone a run for his money from 100 yards to five miles. That evening at 6.20 he takes the 220 in 22.5 secs; half an hour later he wins the 440 in 48.0 sec - a time one-tenth of a second outside the English Native record. He could have been entered for any of the track events and, except for the Mile, come first.

I have had time to reflect on the collective feeling we, as spectators , felt that evening. The semi-religious word rapture, early on, appealed to me. But over the years, I have settled on a more frivolous description. We felt like ‘the cat that ate the canary’; we experienced something we were not fully entitled to, which could quite easily have fallen to someone else. It is similar to that of the late Queen - Princess Elizabeth, as she then was, on VE Day. She slipped out of the Palace, with friends, to mingle with the crowd, to stand at the gates and call: “We want the King” A fortuitous moment in British history, which can never be repeated.

In what way would spectators in 1954 be different, at a similar function, in 2024, apart from the absence of the i-phone or one of its multifarious derivatives? The crowd would be predominately white and male. It would be rare to see a man not wearing a tie. Competitors would be in dull track suits of grey or blue. One interesting fact, of a personal nature, is that when I look at my programme of 1954, I note that I placed the decimal point half way up the figure instead of ground level. I cannot remember when the change took place, even though I taught Mathematics for twenty-five years in the meantime.

Lincoln had a presence and left its mark that day. If one examines the Getty Image of Bannister breasting the tape, Derek Johnson is the man in white between Bannister and the tableau of timekeepers. In the same image, the face of the man just below Bannister’s outstretched right hand is Roger Pinnington (Pinners), wearing his college scarf and displaying an expression of awe, summoning up many people’s reaction. M. J. Wallwork and Fred Aldridge have their names on the programme. Lincoln contributed 12% of the competitors and took 12% of the ‘gold’ medals. It is inconceivable that anyone in the College Athletic Club group photograph that year was not at Iffley Road. We must, therefore add their names: Tony Wing, J van Smit, Steve Wright, D. Dougal, B. Ramsden, Peter Roberts, W. Fleming, Colin Kinghorn, Tony Wright, Mark Wallwork. John Tudor, N. M. St J. Murphy, K. J. Carter and, of course Brian Southam and Roger Shakeshaft.

Not present at the track side were Geoff Marsland and Peter Delisle. They were in the University cricket side at the Parks (17% of the team). This also was a race against the clock. The home side

 were ignominiously dismissed for 58 on Thursday and Hutton imposed the follow-on. Oxford made a remarkable recovery during Friday, in time restricted by rain, by reaching 239. This put them 4 runs ahead, thus avoiding an inning defeat. Before the start of the match, both captains had agreed on a 4.45pm finish unless the side at the crease would benefit from an extra 30 minutes play. A glance at the clock showed 4.40pm – it was thought unreasonable to expect a change round of innings in five minutes; and the match was declared drawn. Oxford got away with it by the skin of their teeth.

Back to Thursday evening. For Lincoln spectators it was a very satisfying sporting occasion involving twelve men of international standard, and along the way twelve records were established. Setting aside Roger Bannister, the other ‘Man of the Match’ was Lincoln’s Derek Johnson. Later, that year, at the Empire Games in Vancouver, he gets a Gold Medal in the Half Mile with a time of 1min 50.7sec which was a Games Record. 18 months later, at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, he collected a Silver in the 800 metres.

We move on, inevitably, to the last sporting activity of the day: ‘The free-for-all bicycle dash from the Iffley Road Track to colleges in the High, the Turl, the Broad and beyond.’ First, retrieve one’s gown; and there’s time for a swift half in Deep Hall, before the second sitting at dinner. We were so smug – it would not have surprised us if we had been invited to eat at High Table in our Commoners’ Gowns while Senior Members had to settle for hard benches next to the kitchen! Even so, we bored the pants off anyone who was prepared to listen, rehearsing a tale which will be related and repeated long into the Twenty-first Century.

**Dedicated to the memory of Brian Charles Southam. (d. 2010)**

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