

Lenham Cross Winter Marathon

New running outfit *Hit The Trail Running (HTTR)*, set up by top ultrarunner Tremayne Dill Cowdry (Western States 100 finisher amongst many other races) held its inaugural event Sunday 24th Feb. With warmer weather in the run up to the event, conditions underfoot on the North Downs were looking perfect and on the day we had clear blue skies and a beautiful warm start to the race with highs of 15C. The event sold out prior to the day, always great to see but especially promising for a new company – the route and team behind the race clearly had a strong pull. There were 121 sign ups with 98 runners on the start line and 97 finishers. The event covers 27.5 miles with a generous 8 hour cut off, starting from Detling village on a north-westerly 7.5 mile ‘lollipop’ through shady Boxley Wood and Westfield Wood before returning back to Detling Village to the starting point for the first check point. The route then takes you on an out-and-back south-easterly trajectory along the North Downs Way through Holingbourne for the second checkpoint at 13.1 miles and on to the foot of Lenham Cross for the turn-around checkpoint at 17.5 miles before returning you along the same track to the finish at Detling. There’s a decent 4,300ft of climb packed in and 90% of the course is off-road.

There was certainly a warmth and buzz amongst runners in the hall eager to get going on this new race. Registration was dealt with efficiently by the friendly team and it was nice to see a race with a stripped down mandatory kit list – nothing more than a jacket, cup, water bottle and mobile required. As part of registration you are issued with a good looking *HTTR* buff within your entry price, a great touch and it allows you to wear it on the day. The race kicked off bang on 9am from the pedestrian bridge over the A249 Detling Hill and from there you are immediately on to trail with a moderate climb to take you up on to the ridgeway – nothing too technical, just rolling woodland path from here with some amazing views south towards Maidstone including a beautiful cloud inversion on the day. At around mile 3, leader Stephen Hobbs of Thanet Roadrunners was already at mile 5 flying back past us mid-packers. Stephen went on to destroy the course in 3:21:27 – for a hilly trail (long) marathon that’s a superb time. From Sevenoaks AC Andy Ashlee finished in a brilliant fourth with a spectacular 4:02:55 and I came home in 6:02:29 (62nd)

Back into the 7.5 mile checkpoint at Detling Village Hall we were greeted by the smiles and cheers of the volunteers – quickly pouring coke, water and squash for those who wanted it. Overall the friendliness and quality of the checkpoints was very good. Largely just sweets on offer but I didn’t hear anyone grumbling that there wasn’t enough choice or volume. The race is chip timed so at Detling you are funnelled through to get your ‘beep’ and off to Holingbourne you go. Enticingly you have the *Cock Horse Inn* just feet from the check point – a reminder of where you’ll finish up after crossing the finish line! After a very short road section we hit a left hand turn and the view of the long slow climb up Detling Hill meets you. Beautiful and also a hint of what is about to hit you over the next 5 miles. The hills of the NDW are relentless here – this is where they have been hiding the 4,300ft of elevation. I lost count of the steps up and steps down but over the next 5 miles there are a series of 9 very sharp calf-busting and then quad-busting inclines and declines. As you conquer each one and catch your breath you remind yourself you have to face this all over again in the last 5 miles of the race! The views along this stretch I would argue are the best on the NDW and it’s not hard to take a minute’s rest to enjoy them. Thankfully once you’ve done the first round of hills you drop into Holingbourne for the next checkpoint – sneakily positioned next to *The Dirty Habit* pub to add temptation to the range of emotions you’re feeling. The last few miles to the turn-around at Lenham Cross are all on Pilgrim’s Way - a little stretch of road feeds into a dusty farm track skirting along ploughed fields before becoming a more rutted muddy stretch used heavily by tractor by the looks

of it. This in turns becomes undulating road passed the wooden sculpture of sleeping pilgrim Brother Percival. Inscribed is "Pilgrim bound by staff and faith, rest thy bones", I'm sure a good number of runners took heed and joined Percival on the bench. This entire stretch from Holingbourne to Lenham Cross is a welcome opportunity to get the pace up, a really enjoyable and runnable few miles. A quick stop at the checkpoint below the towering chalk cross and then back the way we've just come. It's a pretty punishing course – those final 5 miles of sharp climbs up and steep stepped descents will challenge most people but at least the final descent off Detling Hill is a fantastically fast blast and a flat few hundred metres of tarmac to bring you back home to cheers from finishers drinking their well-earned pints at the pub at the end. Inside the hall at the finish there was stacks of cake – I heard nothing but glowing reviews of the bakes. Superbly organised and staffed, great medal and buff, and a really fantastic course with outstanding views. I think this will be a winter classic for years to come.













