

THE BRISTOL & WEST ATHLETIC CLUB (1882 – 2021) 139 years

Bristol & West Athletic Club was founded in 1882, when athletics was in its infancy, making it one of the oldest athletic clubs in the country and indeed in the world. The oldest athletic club in the world being London AC founded 1863. The Bristol club's first colours were green and white hoops and the early name was 'South Bristol Harriers'. Reference to a 'Bristol & Clifton AC' can also be found in the National Cross Country results archive competing in 1882 showing that other local clubs existed but no connection is made.

Billy Horlick and Club origins

A giant banner was being erected across Bristol Bridge to advertise a sports meeting, when one of the men erecting the banner fell into the water. An onlooker contacted a local evening paper giving details of the 'rescue'.

The onlooker was William Horlick, the story was a hoax, arranged by 'Billy' Horlick for free publicity. He got it! With such an enterprising Honorary Secretary, it is not surprising that Bristol AC achieved much fame in its early history. For 55 years, Billy, who died in 1948, was the guiding light and inspiration of Bristol AC. It was said of him "give Billy a field and a threepenny bit, and he will run a sports meeting at a profit". He was the AAA referee for the famous 1903 Weston to Bristol walking race, which finished at Bedminster Bridge, and for which, it is estimated, 100,000 people lined the route through the streets of Bristol. The long distance Bristol walks and marathons were very popular at the turn of the century but declined in popularity in later years. The record for the Bristol (Bedminster Bridge) to Weston (Grand Pier) and return event was held by L. Butler of Bristol and was set in 1931 – 5 hrs 18 mins.

Billy Horlick was an AAA Official Handicapper for 41 years, serving Bristol AC as Secretary from the 1880's through to the 1940's. He was also Chair for a short period in the 1890's, and managed to combine with the Secretaryship, the post of Treasurer from 1913 until the 1940's. Billy Horlick was a great sportsman, and Bristol AC were fortunate to have the services of such a man.

1897 – Bristol AC

In 1897, the Club adopted the name 'Bristol AC' – one of the reasons being, that at that time, there was also in existence a 'Bristol Harriers' club. At this point in the Club's history, the President was Frank Bacon, Mine Host of the Masonic Hotel, North Street, Bedminster. Frank also started Bristol City FC off on its glorious early days and he remained as President of Bristol AC from 1886 until his death in 1917.

1957 Amalgamation - Bristol South Harriers

In 1957 Bristol AC amalgamated with another local club 'Bristol South Harriers' who were as the name suggests based south of the river and it is believed a different club from the original South Bristol Harriers. Most notable of their members was athletics icon Mary Bignal/Rand/Toomey who later became Olympic Champion and World Record holder at the Long Jump apart from also being a GB International at Sprints and Hurdles. Her World Record Long Jump distance is marked out in the pavement at Wells in front of the Cathedral to commemorate the achievement.

Athletics in past years

Athletics was more parochial in the early years. Competition initially was confined to the local West Country area mainly Road and Cross Country events which became the norm. Track & Field venues were at the sports grounds of large corporations where big sports galas were held annually. The Police and Fire Brigade also held sports galas that included athletics. Competition was generally based on Handicap races which created some exciting finishes with the top runners starting from scratch. Should you false start then you were not excluded from the race but obliged to start again one metre behind your original start mark. Many of these track events survived until the mid-1960's and normally started on Saturday afternoons as men generally worked on Saturday Mornings and of course Sundays were for worship only. Competition was confined to Men only races as it was considered not to be beholden of Ladies to compete.

Notable sports gala events were the 'Bristol Aircraft Company's Sports' at the now BAWA ground and the 'Douglas Sports' at Kingswood. I note that our past President & Olympian Jack Gregory ran the 100 yds in 9.7 secs (equivalent 10.6 100 m) at the Douglas ground in 1950 and that David Evans (the father of outstanding 400m hurdler Jayne Evans) jumped 1.88m at the BAWA Sports Ground in 1948. Euric

Omeregie a Nigerian student cleared 1.91m also at the same BAWA venue in 1952. Food for thought - note that the 100 yds was on grass and the high jump landing would have been onto sand.

1924 Breakaway club - Westbury Harriers

Westbury Harriers were formed in 1924 largely as an offshoot of Bristol AC. Their members living in the village of Westbury-on-Trym found traveling into Bristol difficult and Home fixtures seemed like Away fixtures by the time they arrived. Even in the early 20's, the village was completely isolated and surrounded by fields, and after leaving Chock Lane there was hardly a house or cottage to be seen until arriving at Manor Farm (now Horfield Common when travelling East). The local lads, therefore, used to train together and run through the village streets. In 1924 that a 40 year old veteran member called Gilbert Walker thought it would be a good idea if the village boys were to form their own Club.

Club base 1950's early 60's

Stapleton Cricket Ground amongst other locations was used by Bristol AC as a training venue in the early 60's with sprinting on the outfield areas and distance runs down through the woods and along the river to Snuff Mills.

Fry's Track

Excellent grass tracks existed. The best was on the sportsground of Fry's chocolate company situated at their Somerdale, Keynsham site.. It was a well maintained grass facility but had a moderate slope from one bend to the other. Although grass and not flat this track saw high class action as a fair number of top class athletes were employed by Fry's, namely Eddie Strong, John Gingell, Derek Smith and Bob Winter. An influential past Chairperson of Bristol AC Ron Rowles was also a senior Manager at Fry's.

Whitehall (Packers Recreation Ground)

'Packers Ground' was established for the use of employees of the Packers Chocolate Company. This Sports Ground was also used for company sports galas as previously mentioned. The existing adjacent building (now part of the junior school) was used for its changing facilities and the upstairs area was often used for Committee Meetings.

A 352m grass track (5 laps to the Mile) was marked out at Packers (now the site of Whitehall Arena) around the cricket square for training purposes and was used by Bristol AC on weekday evenings. A jumps pit also existed although it was put out of use on one occasion when a filled mine-shaft failed and a large subsidence developed. Much of Bristol AC's early track and field prowess was grafted out from these training evenings.

Rodway Track

Rodway School track was opened on 18th May 1962 at a cost of £6,000.00 and was a black cinder composition at which Bristol AC trained on Sunday mornings and used as their competition track. Interestingly the run up to the horizontal jump pit was later specially converted into the new 3M 'Tartan' all weather surface to provide a suitable facility for Olympic Gold medalist Lyn Davies to practice on prior to the Olympics because no similar facility existed at that time in Wales.

Greenway Track

Greenway School (Bristol Greenway) was of a red cinder composition 'Red-gras' and was used primarily by Westbury Harriers for training and for local competition.

Filton Track

A track at Filton High School was a little used black cinder track although the district schools did hold their annual track trials there on some occasions. Filton High became Abbeywood School and within planning requirements the track was reconstructed as a 6 lane all-weather track at the adjacent SGS/WISE complex and known now as the Kip Keino Stadium

Rodway track still exists untouched and is sometimes used by local athletes looking for a place to train. Greenway was demolished to make way for the David Lloyd Fitness Centre at Southmead. Fry's was more

recently used to construct a prestigious housing development following the demise of the Cadbury parent company,

National Track & Field League - 1970's onward

In 1968 the pilot National Men's League was formed and Bristol were invited to compete and finished in a meritable 6th place. The club now had the drive to succeed at a new level under the leadership of Club Chairman, Ron Rowles. With a useful sprinkling of high class International athletes within the membership including Eddie Strong, John Gingell, Peter Templeton, Bob Roberts, Phil Scott and Ken Holmes (who later became a long term Team Manager for the Club) Bristol AC launched itself in the National League as the athletes needed this league as a stepping stone to higher level competition to enable them to further develop their Athletic careers.

In the first year of the National League in 1969 Bristol AC were placed in Division 3 but regrettably with their full Team still developing they only finished in 5th place and were eliminated from the League.

In 1970 the team had strengthened further and bounced back into contention by coming 2nd in the Qualifying Match so in the following year their fightback began by finishing 4th in Division 3. In fact Bristol AC remained a permanent fixture in Division 3 for 13 years apart from the one year 1978 when they achieved just for that one year their 'highlight' in the heady heights of Division 2 (before the Premier League was formed of course).

Women's Track & Field - success in 1980

The organisation of Women's athletics lagged the Men's in those days with the UK Women's Athletics League formed in 1977. The Bristol AC team were prominent from the start under the leadership of Team Manager Mike Smith featuring in league and cup matches. Mike recruited young Welsh middle distance star Kirsty McDermott-Wade who joined Olympic sprinter Margaret Critchley-Williams and Jumps Internationals Julie Jay-James & Joanne Edwards-Willoughby along with hurdler Heather Ross and thrower Shara Spragg to form a formidable team. The team reached its peak in 1980 when that redoubtable team won Division 1 of the UK Women's League (There was no Premier Division in those days) and finished 4th in the Pye Gold Cup at Crystal Palace. The Club that year were also were 1st in the Women's Midland League Div 1 and won Division 2 of the Southern League with their 'B' Team.

In 1983 the Club declined in fortunes as happens to most clubs and despite frequent trips to the Qualifying Matches it took 9 years for the Men to get back into the League. During that period there was one highlight when the club won the BALg Plate, a cup competition for non-National league Clubs. In 1997 we again slipped out of the BALg and spent quite a few years of narrow failures to get into the top flight again. After requalifying again for the League in 2011 Men / 2012 Women, the Club has now gone from strength to strength and is again well established in both the BALg and the UK Women's League. However in 2019 the League was re-established as a joint Men's and Women's League and reverted back to its original name – the National League. Covid hampered the initiation of the League but when properly re-established Bristol & West AC will compete in the top flight, the Premier Division. The League was always an important part of our competition structure giving West Country athletes an aim to make the team and then to succeed at the highest level of competition that Clubs can offer. We are certainly back.

Young athletes also feature well in the Club history particularly under the influential Team Management of Reg Owen when in 1984 he led the Boys YALg Team to become National Champions. This great young athlete effect continued for many years and to this day guided by Hilary Nash.

1970's Whitchurch Stadium

Track & Field success also significantly coincided with the construction of the important Whitchurch Stadium in the City, one of the first all-weather tracks in the UK. Under specific pressure from Olympic medalist and Bristol Club President Jack Gregory (also a prominent Rugby player) Bristol City Council agreed to construct a new state of the art 3M's 'Tartan' all weather rubber track on part of the original Bristol Airport site in Whitchurch. Supporting the site was a Sports Centre which utilized one of the old Aircraft Hangers. (Indoor Athletics competitions were also held in this Sports Centre in the 1980's). The Whitchurch Stadium facility was formally opened by the outstanding Olympic 400m Hurdles Champion David Hemery and the great and the good of Bristol were gathered together to celebrate this massive step

forward for Athletics in this area. A match was arranged between Bristol, Birmingham & London and included many prominent guest athletes as well as local athletes.

Men's 'Road' - success in 1980

After a history of Road Relay success in the 1960's where they finished 3rd, 4th and 5th in the National Road Relay (the London – Brighton Relay in those days) Bristol AC gradually rebuilt on that success by magnificently winning in 1980 at Sutton Park with a new record that has not been surpassed even today. The team was led by influential Team Manager Tony Clark who was long time Club Secretary at the time and included Olympians Nick Rose and Tony Staynings, European Cup 5,000m record holder Roger Clark and future Marathon World Record Holder Steve Jones.

Cross Country

Bristol AC have always been prominent at Cross Country there is even record of us having 3 runners in the first 32 in the 1887 'National'. In 1963 International Eddie Strong finished 3rd and then in 1980 our great winner was Nick Rose. Roger Clark and Rob Whalley also finished 2nd in 1973 and 2005 respectively but sadly we have not yet won that Team Race although we did finish 2nd in 2018 at Parliament Hill Fields and have finished 3rd on 4 other occasions.

Our Women's team have worked in reverse to the Men where the best individual performance was in 2003 when Sharon Dixon came 4th but our Team performances are just great. We were first in 2004 & 2005 and were 2nd on 4 occasions which included that brilliant 'home' run in 2002 at Ashton Court.

1984 Breakaway Club – Yate & District AC

In 1984 Mike Smith a previous Chairperson and very successful Women's Team Manager of the Club and Vic Legrand an endurance Coach teamed up with Glory Wassell from Westbury Harriers to form Yate & District AC. Their remit at that time was to cater for youngsters in the Chipping Sodbury Thornbury and Yate areas whom they felt were not being properly catered for by the Bristol based clubs.

1980's – Bristol Cabot

In the mid 1980's an inner-city track 'Bristol Cabot' was laid within the 'Play' area of Cabot Primary School in St Pauls, Bristol. This development was the result of an effort by the City Council to settle unease about deprivation in the East Bristol area following the St Pauls riots. The whole area was a rubberised surface and the 200m track with a 100m straight-away and including a sand filled cut out for horizontal jumps was constructed. This development brought about a raising of interest in Athletics in the area. Although used by Bristol AC members it became the home of the Dynamo Athletic Club which nurtured a very strong 'Sprint and Jumps' section. Some of those members are now serving as Coaches and Officials with the present Club and their offspring are very prominent members. In later years the Cabot area was developed and the St Paul's Sports Centre was built on the site

1990's – Stoke Gifford Track (later rebranded as the Kip Keino Stadium).

This track was constructed as mentioned earlier as a replacement for the nearby Filton High School track which was built on to construct Abbeywood School. Initially it was little used by anyone except Students at the WISE / SGS College. Later in 2010 with the closure of the Whitchurch Stadium the Bristol City Council invested in its expansion from 6 to 8 lanes and fully equipping the facility. Immediately the facility was utilised by the Athletic fraternity with the Kenyan Olympic Team using it for the 2012 London Games and then by B&W AC for National League Matches and frequent Open Meets and County Champs.

2002 - Hosting the National Cross Country Champs

A milestone was marked in 2002 where for the first and only time in their history the National Cross country Champs were held in Bristol. After heavy lobbying from members Bob Lavis and Philip Parry and with the backing of Bristol City Council the ECCU agreed that these Championships be held at Ashton Court. The Club worked very hard to set up this spectacular where our Women had a field day. As mentioned before, the Senior Women were 2nd but our Under 20's with Olympian Kate Reed at the helm in 3rd place won their race and our Under 17's were 3rd. A magnificent achievement for the Club.

2004 - Change of name – Bristol & West AC

In 2004 led by the then Chairperson Mike Down the Club was re-branded Bristol & West AC its aim to take in any potential West Country athletes not properly catered for as the South West was not renowned at that time as an 'athletics hotbed'.

2011 – Whitchurch closes, Whitehall is constructed

Within the City's South Bristol Hengrove Park Development programme it was necessary to close the Whitchurch Stadium facility (although of course it has never to this day been redeveloped, still exists and is often used by marauding Athletes particularly during the Covid Pandemic).

As part of this development, money was invested in Packers Ground which included building a new track and renaming it Whitehall Arena. It also resulted in the expansion at the Stoke Gifford track into an 8 lane facility.

Bristol & West AC is now strongly entrenched at the Whitehall facility which is infact a return to its roots of the 1960's and is a place where it can continue and expand on its glorious 139 year history.

As a footnote many GB Internationals some of whom are Olympians competed for Bristol & West AC at senior level (including from those already mentioned) namely Colin O'Neill, Chris Ellis, Duncan Game, Vernon Samuels, Christian North, Chris Ridler, Nigel Gates, Harry Clayton, Erwin Hartell & Neil Winter amongst the Men and Jean Hiscocks-Hall, Emily Diamond-Leonard, Joanne Davies-Pavey, Venissa Head, Lucy Hasell-McAllister, Sarah Moore, Claire Willer-Hallissey, and Jean Randall-Lintern. amongst the Women. Sorry if we have overlooked anyone.

Similarly we have had some extremely influential Administrators (again excluding those already mentioned) including Fred Hill, Cy Knibb, Jack Sparks, Sid Upsher, Tony Hurley, H.S.L. McCarthy and George Tucker.

Compiled by Mike Strange – April 2021 and recognising initial research work by Alan Benn in 1970,

Acknowledgements:

'Westbury Harriers 75th Anniversary Club History' compiled by Peter Griffin

'Athletics before Hogweed Trotters' by Bob Lavis.

'50 years of the British Athletics League' BALg

'Running Tracks in Avon' by Mike Strange

Eugene Hechevaria.