

PBM24 Report - 53rd Punchbowl Marathon – 11th February 2024

The day went well, even though storms, flooding, fallen trees and road closures in the lead-up hinted at how it could have gone quite differently. An early check at Elstead resulted in the new Flood route alternative being used on the 30 mile route. The early light rain that entrants collected on the way from the Car Park to drip onto the Registration sheets gave way to cloud with some sun. Despite some minor glitches on the day a good time was had by all for most of the time. The event remains popular, and one entrant completed the 50 mile Winter Poppyline on the 9th/10th - and then drove down to park and sleep in the hall carpark.

The 350 entry limit had been reached a few times, countered by 14 cancellations, and eventually there were 349 entrants of whom only 283 turned up (about 81%). It was good to greet the very last entrant and his friend at Registration. The former scraped in due to a last minute cancellation – coming from Sheffield to stay with the latter who was already doing it.

Both halls were/are needed at Tilford (the back hall had bags all the way round its walls). Choosing to have only one entrance open with dirty footwear left outside kept the place fairly clean (as did the sheeting put down everywhere). However, either an additional Marshal is needed to look after the Tilford Hall (getting out tables and chairs, checking snack food/drink levels) – or maybe the Retirements Driver could do this while waiting to be used ...

While there were no retirements, several tired late finishers needed help to get back to their cars in the dark (some had to phone for help): the Car Park closedown team had by then removed all the parking signage. Maybe in future the Car Parking closedown team should wait until the last entrant has left the Car Park before removing the signage – or provide a shuttle service from the Hall to the Car Park from nightfall until the last entrant car has gone.

While three entrants went missing after the Number Check (never went to CP3), they finished before anyone had to wait/look/phone for them. Their navigator had cut the very small road loop that would have taken them to CP3, making their last stretch more difficult for them (no food and drink stop) and earning disqualification.

Some adjustments from the 2023 route meant that two out of three wet weather paddling places were avoided: all visited Frensham Little Pond instead of the byway pond, and at Elstead 30 milers stayed away from the flooded River Wey riverbank. At 25 miles the Farnham Golf Club runoff had turned part of the North Downs Way (NDW) into a 300 yard long drainage ditch of up to 15+ inches deep water, and some golfers invited entrants to instead use the nearest edge of the Golf Course. Many did so, but some runners enjoyed the obstacle.

The NDW needs a wet weather solution here: perhaps a diversion route or a combination of culvert unblocking and ditching. But by eye maybe only 10 of the 15+ inches deep water could have drained away if the road “culvert” was unblocked – as the fall to the land beyond seems too little for surface water drainage, keeping the last inches of flood water until they soak away.

The LDWA website – and Pacer – stopped for a while, but was soon up again. Manual catch-up was then needed, but as the EE phone signal in Tilford Hall is weak (low bandwidth):
- it took some time for a photo of the manual paper backup to be received via Mobile Data/Wifi;
- voice calls were only reliable if stood next to the window facing the Green.
The Mobile Data WiFi system worked OK, and only needed to be rebooted once.

Catering amounts will never be “right” due to the inherent variability in how many entrants turn up, the ratio of runners to walkers, what foods are “in”, the weather, etc. – but use was made of supermarkets that would take back unopened provisions. Entrants suggested that CP menus should be less “samey” and all should have more than two savoury options, so better co-ordination of checkpoint catering is needed (NB: no separate Catering Marshal this year).

The organisation and personalities involved this year seemed to work fairly smoothly without too many toes being trodden on. No-one seems to want “out”, which probably counts as a win after the chopping and changing in recent years. Not having a Closedown marshal meant that Marshals had to be reminded to only go when they are sure they are no longer needed – to not just pack up and go as their time slot has ended, checking with Event Control (EC) if unsure.

The 350 Entrant limit will be raised to 400 next year. It would have made no difference this year as while 365 entered only 283 turned up! And even if more do turn up:
Parking (charged per vehicle): while almost full, more space has been offered for next year;
Tilford Hall Hire: both Halls were hired and are needed as the rear hall had baggage lining all walls. Some “table islands” would be needed to encourage use of the middle of the hall;
Late Catering: the team could provide more food, but need a Marshall to work the hall itself;
Late Eating & Socialising: the main hall was sometimes almost full, but maybe the baggage drop “table islands” could also double as an overflow eating “quiet zone”.

The 2024 Marshal team (some of whom had multiple roles) were: Jude Unsworth, Cathy Turton, Mike Tuke, John Stovell, Avril Stapleton, Alan Shons, Roger Sage, John Preston, Ann Muggeridge, Richard Ireson, Stewart Hilton, John Goody, Ertan Ali Falk, Elton Ellis, Frank Eberle, Simon Delph, Iaan Davies, Paul Chamberlain, Tony Cartwright, Matt Carolan, Fiona Cameron, Elizabeth Bryan, Jennie de Bossart, Henri de Bossart, Tim Bedwell.

Facebook comments by entrants included:

Many thanks for a great event at the Devil's Punchbowl. Fantastic area, fantastic route lovely helpers and check points.

Thank you for a cracking event at todays' Punch Bowl Marathon. The weather was kind, the mud consistency just perfect and the scenery absolutely stunning. All topped off with fantastic support from your crew of friendly and dedicated Marshalls!!

A big thank you to all the organisers and marshals of the Punchbowl marathon today. A big up, a big down, a bit of sliding, a bit of wading, and lashings of malt loaf and butter. I also learned that huckleberries can drive!

Thank you Surrey LDWA 🍀🙏. Another gorgeous days walking, running , countryside and giant puddles. Bless you, all the organisers and volunteers xx

LDWA Punchbowl 30 miles. Thanks to all the volunteers for an amazing event, gorgeous trails and huge puddles!! Fabulous Surrey countryside

I made it to the Punchbowl Marathon and back to London thanks to Colin Jones! Marvellous day out in the Surrey hills. Mostly, I think they were the Surrey hills and the North Downs. Beautiful hospitality as I remembered from some 10 years ago when I did these regularly. We

even had a glimpse of the February Sun ☀ after the morning rain. Thank you to all the great people, who put these events on for us. Will be back for more.