"Running between the Lines"

A heritage project based on the involvement of athletes who were members of Birchfield Harriers who took part in the first World War (1914-18) otherwise known as the European War.
Introduction

Birchfield Harriers, based in Perry Barr, Birmingham, is one of the UK’s oldest and most successful athletics clubs. It was formed in 1877, and is still going strong. It caters for athletes of all ages, abilities, and disabilities. It has developed many international athletes, a number of whom have gone on to achieve World and Olympic titles.

This project is still on going and forms part of a series of programmes the club has been involved with in recent years, to research and subsequently promote the heritage of the club, to both its members and the wider public. Hence this entry in the open category as we feel it promotes the sport of athletics in a unique way.

The first project we did was completed in 2012. This looked at the general history and heritage of the club. It was entitled “Birchfield Harriers Sporting Tales” and was undertaken with the Beth Johnson Foundation, an organization which specializes in work with older people, and those with memory problems such as dementia and Alzheimer’s. They had been involved in similar projects with other sports clubs. They were able to help us collect “oral histories” from our members, who could share memories and record events so that future members could see what things used to be like. It is helpful to older people who are struggling with conditions such as dementia, as they can gain positive recognition for sharing their memories.

In this first project we developed good practice in collecting information and memorabilia which could be added to the club’s archive. We were also able to get local schools involved and put on exhibitions in the local area. The project gained funding from our National Lottery Heritage fund, this enabled Beth Johnson to provide administrative support and for them to employ a History graduate part-time, to help us (as a sports club) broaden our academic horizons, so that we could produce more than just a few pictures to put on the wall, we now have the stories that go with them which in many cases are far more valuable.

As part of this project many members mentioned a memorial plaque (photo – see cover) that used to be on the wall of the old stadium. The plaque has the names of over 250 members who took part in World War One. When the club moved to its new home in 1974 the plaque was put somewhere for safe keeping and has not been seen since.

Hence we decided on our current project “Running between the Lines” – and we have again been successful in obtaining Heritage Lottery Funding.

The Aim.

The aim is to find out more about this part of our history. It would be great if we could find the original plaque was, we keep getting told by older members we think somebody took it home and put in their garage to keep it safe, the move to the new stadium took some time and the new clubroom was initially too small to display all the club’s trophies and memorabilia and the plaque never returned.

We do have the photo of it – which with the use of modern technology we can enlarge it to gain a full list of names and what limited extra information it holds. A “K” denotes they were killed in action, a “-“ tells us they were injured, though we have subsequently found, several more died as a result of their involvement.
So our main aim has been to research the names and find out as much as we can about them. But other aims are to raise awareness of what they did, how their athletic skills were put to good use, how team spirit played an important part in the recruitment of soldiers, and how this relates to our current members. We have a broad membership and we are open to all who want to develop their athletic skills and be a member of a famous athletic club, we feel it is important they understand more about the club’s heritage.

Objectives.

- If we cannot find the original memorial plaque, we will replace it – work is ongoing to find what members feel would be most appropriate
- To produce a book based on the research, at the end of the project
- To raise awareness of the project and the members involved
- To improve the accessibility to the information and improve opportunities for others from outside the club to be involved
- To help members understand the context of their club’s heritage

Relevance to the development of athletics.

There is more to being an athlete than just being able to run, jump and throw – our sport offers many opportunities – and in today’s world it has to compete with other sports. Hopefully our present members will not have to go to war, but they will be faced with a world that faces many problems.

An athletics club, will naturally provide opportunities to get fit, to learn how to move more efficiently, how to eat/drink the right things, how to prepare for an event. What we often ignore is how an athlete sees themselves as a member of a team or club. In team sports such as football, it is much easier to understand, a team is on the pitch at the same time, indirect conflict with their opponents.

An athletics team can sometimes be disjointed, the hammer thrower might compete in the morning, then go home or back to the hotel before the 4x400 relay runners start to warm up. But in other ways athletics needs a wide range of skills and benefits from a having diverse characters working together.

This team spirit was very important in 1914. Without the distractions of 21st century media coverage, our predecessors had newspapers and word of mouth to understand what they faced. Historians to this day still debate the reasons for the savage, brutal conflict that blighted Europe and cost millions of lives. By studying the lives of those athletes and discovering why they went to war we can appreciate how fortunate we are to be living and being involved in the sport of athletics in 2016.

Methods.

- The club has a substantial archive, which in the previous project was added to and better storage and display options helped organize it better and help improve accessibility. Further development of this resource provides a good starting point
- Skills in capturing oral histories have proved useful in asking the right questions when following lines of enquiry
- Online searching. There are now many online sources of ancestry data. Data protection laws in the UK mean that census and other personal information are only just becoming available for the
relevant period, but we have found that there are progressively more newspaper articles from the period are being digitized and made available.

- Employing specialist staff. The HLF funding allows us to employ a part-time researcher and a project officer. Only 50 days between them – but it does allow them to give us their time, when they can concentrate on their roles and support the work of the other volunteers in the club.
- Presentation. Developing a web presence has been very important in sharing the project outcomes. It also helps organize the material. Funding has allowed us to recruit a young web developer who is keen to work on a project that is trying to engage the community.
- Events. Various events are planned to publicise the project

Findings.

We are approximately half way through the project, and have been successful in many aspects of our quest. Our academic researcher has been instrumental in obtaining further funding through his University to extend the project and broaden the scope to include other local clubs.

Our initial pass through the list of names is almost complete and the results fall into 3 categories, which for our evaluation purposes we are referring to a traffic light scenario

1. GREEN – those names for which have definite links and information that links the name to an athlete who was in the club and has a military record.
2. AMBER – those who are less conclusive, we may have athlete records, or a military link but can’t match the two.
3. RED – a limited number of names that we can find no clear information about them

Thankfully we have only a few RED names, and a large number of GREEN successes.

We start with the well-known athletes – those who went on to national and international success as athletes. We have found more athletes, not on the plaque who were members before the war and have military careers. Our first Olympian Vincent Loney was one and another representative at the 1908 London Olympiad, Cyril Dugmore who our research has shown led a very interesting life after the war.

Several other Olympians at post war events appear on the memorial. Freddie Hulford (picture on right) ran in the 800m in Stockholm, 1912. He then went on to be a leading official and was chief starter at the 1948 Olympics. His technical manual, which explains amongst other things, the rational for the starter to stand “sideways on”, was discovered in the archive and has already been shared with starters across the world.

We have proved at least 2 more gained Olympic selections, one after recovering from a gunshot wound in the calf. So there is that aspect of the project which sets a very high standard for others to follow. Present day athletes who complain of a slight hamstring strain can be reminded what a real injury is.

Birchfield Harriers is not, and never has been exclusively for the elite, it is often described as “a club of the people, for the people”, and was based very much in the working classes of the city of Birmingham
which was still developing at the time of the conflict. Several members in the study were employed in the jewellery trade, one of the main trades in a city of 1000 trades. One such member was Alfred Wilcox, he was a long distance walker, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery, he took control of various enemy trenches, his fitness and athletic prowess enabling him to survive. His nephew has ensured that his grave in a local church has been recognized, and is just one of the relatives we have traced.

Our research has found the son of Sidney Burrell, documental evidence shows he went into battle wearing his Birchfield vest, black with a stag motif, under his uniform tunic. His theory was it would make him run faster and survive the war. He survived and came home alive, we have found his son, who was unaware of his father’s war history as his father and mother had separated. The results of our previous project have been included in the British Athletics ICON exhibition at Diamond League meetings so his son was able to see his father’s picture on display. Burrell may have been an Olympian as we have found he won a trial event that we think would have given him a place at the Berlin 1916 Games had they taken place.

On a sadder note, we have discovered 2 members died on the same day, within 500m of each other. Edwin Skett and Frank Hussey were killed in action at the battle of Broodseinde on 4th October 1917. They were in different units of the Royal Warwickshire regiment, but may well have seen each other at their base camp just before they went to face their final battle.

Another friend of Hussey was Charlie Ray, the Midland 220-yard champion, was assigned to a unit of miners, this unit was engaged in tunneling and trying to destroy enemy trenches, Ray was often sent out to relight doused fuses, his sprinting speed made sure his accomplished his task with relative ease. He survived the war so it must have worked.

We have in recent years had athletes with various disabilities. A deaf girl joined us after she escaped from civil war in her native African country. She has competed in international deaf championships in 2015. One of the athletes in the picture below we believe from our research was deaf before he enlisted. He was eventually discharged due to this ailment. We have the names for this photo but not able to match
names and faces. We have asked our present day athletes to identify the deaf man in the photo, see below, they think number 16, and I tend to agree.

Discussion.

What has this project got to show us, over and above what we do every day to help athletes develop? There are several themes we have identified. Transferability of skills, perseverance in the face of adversity, adapting to change, team work, loyalty, bravery, the list goes on.

The Nou Camp, Barcelona FC’s home ground has “Mes que un Club” written on its seats, “more than a club”, a fine motto, Birchfield’s “Fleet and Free”, expresses a different sentiment but arguably is a similar expression of intent. Whatever the motto a club is made from a group of people getting together with a common purpose. A study of heritage gives us an appreciation of what our club means.

As a club we are hoping more of our members get selected for Rio in the summer. Our count is up to 94 if we include Paralympians so we may just reach the magical 100 this year. Not many clubs can match that achievement. The names on the plaque have long been forgotten, but there is something in the club’s psyche that attracts people to join us, and go on to achieve their goals.

Conclusion.

Our sport of athletics faces many challenges. Drug scandals seem to affect us more than other sports. We are not a sport that can produce world class performances every week. We tend to build up to major championships that last for maybe 9 days at the peak of the season. We survive on limited finances, a tiny fraction of what is given to football and other sports.
Getting involved in this project is taking valuable human resources away from the day to day running of the club, but the opportunity to research the past was too good to waste. We have in recent weeks lost an important member of our team. He was the club President and press officer for many years, he could tell you stories about all and sundry, but sadly died early and expectantly, so all his knowledge has been taken away. It does illustrate the need for urgency when undertaking these projects.

Initial skepticism was replaced by a realization that the project was worthwhile, so it was important to persevere and go with our gut feeling that it was worth pursuing. In the early days we thought we would only find information on a few athletes, working alone is impossible, a team approach is vital.

**Recommendations.**

What these stories show to our present day athletes is the fact that athletes are special, the skills they learn and develop can be applied in any walk of life. They can go on to achieve at the highest level. Winning a race can be transferred to life in general and they can be a success outside the sport. Another Birchfield athlete was involved in one of the most iconic Olympic races, not for winning, but not giving up when injured. Who can remember who won what in Barcelona 1992? But more people can probably remember the Men’s 400m race when (Birchfield Harrier) Derek Redmond was helped over line by his father. Sport is not simply work hard and make the most of your sporting talents. What makes an Olympic athlete is more than just physical presence.

![Image](image.png)

Any club that wants to promote its values needs to consider its heritage. Even if a club can’t look back 140 years whatever they do in the past can have a bearing on their future. You can put names on a board. The board may list a common achievement such as Olympic qualification, but there is more to it. A young athlete walks into a club room, sees the names on a wall, the pictures of successful forebears, the trophies in the cabinet. What really helps is when one of the athletes in the pictures walks into the room and gives some time to the youngsters. Success breeds success. Even if the athletes move on, you can still rely on the club’s volunteers to pass on their stories.

Birchfield’s members in 2016 have a diverse ethic make up, multicultural and drawn from various in economic backgrounds. A big difference from 100 years ago when the white working class in a grimy industrial city got together to form PALS regiments and went to war.
The original plaque was funded by members of the Alexander family. W. W. Alexander was instrumental in the early development of the club, he helped raise funds to buy their first stadium, using some of the profits from war bonds, purchased in the conflict. To raise awareness of the project we held a memorial event at the end of 2015, an incentive of an Alexander medal for the winners. The original Alexander medals were made in a Birmingham factory set up to employ injured soldiers from the war.

Runners in this event wore wristbands commissioned for the project. Each runner was given the name and short biography of the runner. A quiz night, a retro meeting, an art competition are several other events in the project, designed to raise awareness.

Looking to the future our next project will look at our “100 Olympians“. This might become a priority if we do well in the summer, but more likely we will be looking forward to 2020 and the land of the rising sun. Athletics is effectively an individual sport. To achieve Olympic selection is a great feat, especially in a country such as the United Kingdom, which has a strong track and field team.

If there is one recommendation to others who want to undertake a similar project, it would be to try and engage as many members of the club as possible, to give everybody ownership.

We have also gained some further funding to extend the project so we can work with other local clubs. This we hope will enable us to share our experience and help others enjoy the benefits of developing their club’s heritage, in the same way it has helped us.
Appendix.

A few pictures to illustrate some of the activities undertaken.

Art Competition – these are 2 of the leading entries for the competition.
"They were out one night, and had laid a mine to be exploded for the raid to be made. The fuse was lighted, but then a piece of shrapnel cut it about twenty yards from the mine. Sergeant Ray dashed forward with a match, his speed got him back out of danger and the advance was given and the trench taken."

Part of the database listing member’s Olympic appearances, including a number involved in WW1

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