

Stratford AC's senior women's cross-country team continued their best ever season with another highly successful outing in the third fixture of the Midland Counties XC Women's League. An excellent 11th place consolidated their 13th and 10th places in the first two meetings, bearing in mind that this is out of all the clubs in the Midlands as the league is not divisionalised. The meeting took place at Coundon Park in north-west Coventry; not the most interesting of parkland courses and, with all the Saturday afternoon football matches being postponed due to waterlogged pitches, the ladies weren't even able to distract themselves by watching the local talent! Unfortunately XC doesn't tend to get called off for anything, so our 8 hardy souls had to merrily set off on their rather wet 6K-course, although the weather itself was dry and ideal for racing.

As in the second fixture Kate Wright (26:08, 39th) and Debbie Cooper (26:36, 46th) provided the backbone of the team, and also pushed each other along with strong competition. The third scorer for Stratford was the fast-improving Tracey Bailey (30:28, 92nd) and, since all of the trio are over 35 (just), this gave both the senior and veteran women's teams a total points score of 177. Sarah Odell (30:41, 95th) showed Maxine Horsman (30:43, 97th) a slightly dirty pair of heels in a close finish, with the relatively inexperienced Helen Monk (32:54, 117th) running superbly behind them. As well as pushing many other teams' scorers further down the field these three would have also beaten 2 teams outright. Rather worryingly Annabel Richardson (36:34, 128th) seems to be greatly enjoying her first full XC season, while Natasha Watkins (40:28, 133rd) kept up a consistent pace all the way round to complete the Stratford team.

The 177-point total put the team into a marvellous 11th place out of the 23 full senior teams, behind winners Loughborough University, and even more impressively were only just beaten by Telford AC into second place in the veteran's standings. Rather frustratingly, the league doesn't publish the season's cumulative points and positions, which makes it rather difficult to set any sort of target for February's final fixture at Stafford. What is obvious though is that there has been a real sea change within the club this season - even with a number of good runners unavailable, including herself, team manager Lesley Kirk still did a fine job in getting such a strong team out competing.

Stratford AC's members enjoy getting involved in all the different forms of running and triathlon but, possibly due to geographical reasons, their involvement in fell running is probably the most limited. The traditional homes of the sport, apart from the Peak District, usually involve at least a 3-hour drive from Stratford so when the more local ones come round then there are usually a few takers. 'More local' recently meant the Mortimer Forest Hill Race, staged just outside Ludlow in Shropshire, and half a dozen runners from the club braved the strong winds, freezing rain and 1600 feet of ascent to take part in this extremely challenging 10-mile test. Even though the forest trails helped protect the 332 finishers from the elements, and the wind and rain got even worse after the race was over, the competitors still had to try and cope with a course that had very few stretches where they could get into a rhythm and recover their strength.

It took the organisers, Ludlow Runners, a long while to verify the results since the wet and cold seemed to cause havoc with the stopwatches, but once they got there it made impressive reading for the 6 Stratford competitors. Rob Minton (73:25, 13th) put in a

storming performance to knock a massive 4 minutes off his previous year's time, admittedly partly due to better footwear this year, whilst the Shipston strider Pete Hill (89:56, 85th) was another to thrive in the tough conditions, and nearly got amongst the prizes in his M50 category. Mountain goat Lynn Sherren (94:04, 125th), rumoured to have run up every hill, then went one better by improving her 2005 time by nearly 2 minutes; this excellent run winning her both the F50 age group and a nice bottle of wine! The fact that Lesley Kirk (97:10, 144th) had as good a run as she did, and didn't get into her age group prizewinners, indicates both the quality of the opposition and Lynn's achievement. A slightly shellshocked Dawn Davies (109:50, 241st), not particularly used to this type of race, never let it get the better of her though and finished well, with Maxine Horsman (123:14, 299th), running alongside Martin Ashworth, completing a character building experience for all! William Levitt (Wye Valley Runners) was a clear winner in a time of 63:12 minutes, with Amanda Wright (Birchfield) an equally comprehensive female victor in 77:08.

This Sunday morning sees one of the highlights of Stratford's athletic calendar with the staging of the Not The Roman IX race. The 12K event starts from the top of Knight's Lane in Tiddington, looping up the Banbury Road and through Loxley, before returning along the Loxley Road. The 700-limit was reached weeks ago and already the rain has been stopped and the temperatures lowered in preparation.