

## Scouting for Gongs

Soar Valley Marathon, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009

And the Lord said unto Daniel, “Come forth”, but he came third, and they gave him a cardboard medal. And great was the tickling of ribs and splitting of sides and wetting of trousers thereof.

(From the Saga of Daniel, Chapter 42)

Leicestershire is famous for two kinds of hunting. One involves people in riding hats and bright red coats, chasing foxes. The other has people in buoyancy aids and boy-racer blue t-shirts in full pursuit of a more elusive and dangerous quarry: the out-of-region medal. It seems to be regarded as axiomatic that standards in Southern region are higher than in the rest of the country, and that going into the Midlands to race is some rather dodgy form of tourism. Well, show me the statistics, somebody. Anyway, the Midlands has a variety of really interesting rivers to race on: Severn, Wye, Avon, Leam, Trent, Derwent, Dove...and Soar. This is a little gem, twisting shallow and weedy through the northern suburbs of Leicester, lined with willows and herons, the visibility generally about a hundred metres.

We had been warned very firmly not to get promoted. So Debbie and David entered Div 7 K2 and I went for Div 6 K1. The course was about a mile downstream, turn round a buoy, up past the start and nearly another mile further to a buoy just below a lock and a weir, then down to the finish. Eight miles was simply two circuits. There was a scout camp in the next field, which gave the race organisers some problems. We couldn't use the usual jetty for getting in and for portaging, as it was seriously fenced off and decorated with menacing notices. “We have child protection issues,” a guy in uniform told us, half-apologetically. Don't we all, mate. If someone could explain to me how putting kids behind barricades, and running police checks on every person who wants to take a few teenagers out on a trip is going to stop the likes of Ian Huntley, I'd be most interested to hear it. We're lucky to have a club where adults and kids can learn together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Oh do shut up, this is starting to read like a mission statement of the sort of place that is usually surrounded by a spiky metal fence eight feet high.

I had the traditional awful start, surrounded (not for long!) by Div 5 and real Div 6 persons. Kathryn and Billie, I take your point about slap supports in general, but if I hadn't done one in that chop, you wouldn't be

reading this. After a while the Div 7 K2's came up from behind. "Here's your chance," they said. Well, I tried. Then it was the turn. Rudder over, edge the boat..."He's going in" one of the marshals said. "No he bloody isn't!" said I, and got round, carefully avoiding all the K2's who were closely inspecting the brambles on the right-hand bank. Another series of attempted washes, a bit more successful this time, up past the start... If you ever do this race, watch out for the second bridge above the start, Thurcaston Road it's called. Take the far left arch going upstream, or you will find yourself on the wrong side of a very serious barrier. Up to the top turn, a Div 7 paddler on my wash called out "coming through on the inside". "You're welcome to try" I replied, gave him enough room, but held him off for a good while longer: most satisfying. After passing the start again, it got suddenly much quieter, and the next four miles was just hard slog, but fun for all that. Debbie and David cheered me in at the finish, having come in fourth of seven boats. Don't be fooled by Tuesday's display of synchronised swimming. They are a formidable team, and a fiver says they'll be promoted before the year is out.

The winner of Div 6 K1, a bloke not far off my age, said an interesting thing, which struck a chord with me. "It takes me three or four miles to warm up properly." We may have a few other, shall we say, middle-aged people who would do surprisingly well at Div 6 races. Out of region, of course!

We stood in warm dry clothes and bright sunshine for the prize giving. "They won't give me a gong for coming last!" But they did, to rapturous applause from the Banbury contingent. That's the fourth trophy in ten years. Getting to be a habit. But it was satisfying to get a time within ten percent of the winner. And now, back to the real world.