

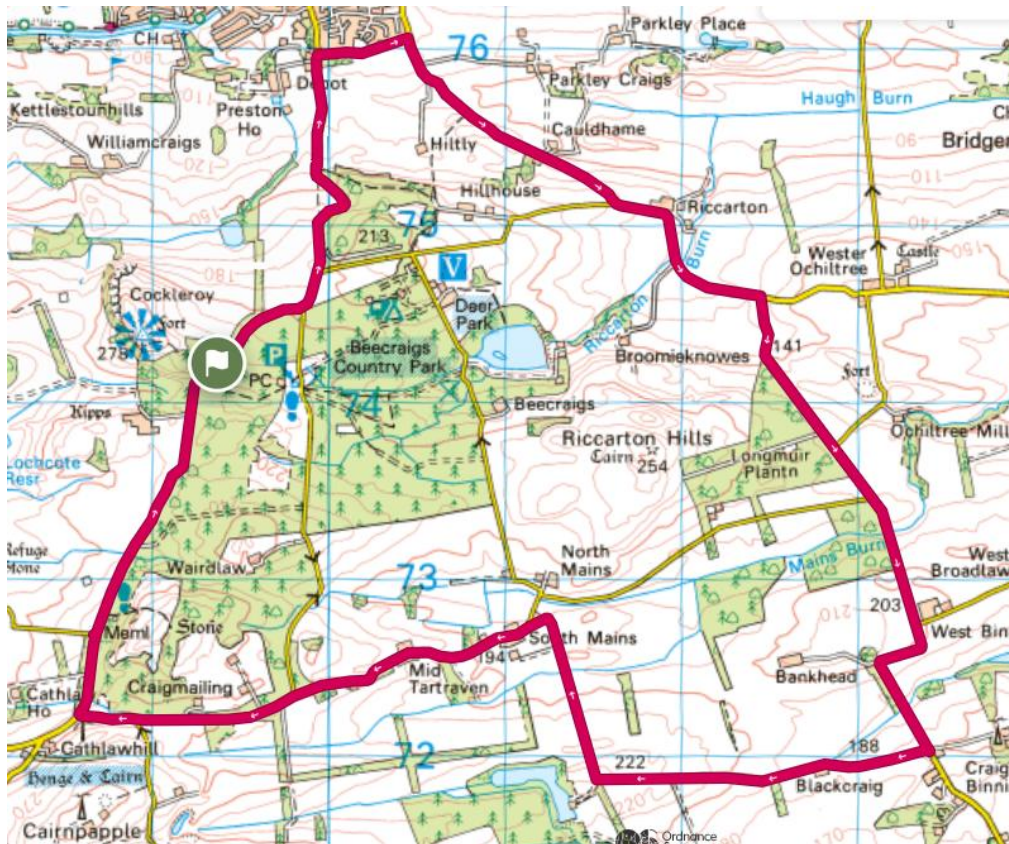
Lothian Running Club's annual **Festive Handicap**, held at Beecraigs on Boxing Day, has become an annual fixture during the 25 years of the Club's history, though Covid (2020) and extreme weather (2009 and 2010) forced cancellation. However the 'Festive Handicap' event has a longer history than a mere 25 years! What follows is a brief background to the event, along with some notable memories.

In the beginning: On a sunny, warm evening in late summer 1986, I was running, with Martin Hyman, on some of the roads in the triangle between Dechmont, the southern boundary of Linlithgow, and Cathlaw. I mentioned to Martin that I was thinking of organising an informal race around the area, primarily for the senior members of the running club we were (then) members of. Most were distance runners, and I ran regularly there with quite a few of them. Martin didn't dismiss the idea – always a good sign – but did highlight some of the issues:

- it was a tough route I was considering
- when was I thinking of as the fixture calendar was already busy?
- having a large group of runners on the road could create traffic and other problems

Within a couple of miles of our run, he'd come up with the idea of 'handicapping' the runners and staggering the start – road congestion problem solved. I settled on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year as a date – the first one was on 28th December 1986 – as I reckoned the roads were quietest on a Sunday and, at that time, most people didn't work on Sundays, and with few shopping distractions available.

58 runners took part over the 10+ mile route, starting and finishing at Cockleroy car park.



The route was tough, with steep downhill at the start and nearly 1000 feet of climbing, often made worse, on the long east to west stretch to Cathlaw, by the presence of a nice headwind. Weather, perhaps unsurprisingly in December, was a constant, annual talking point for everyone taking part.

First back in the very first race was John Biggar, just under a minute ahead of his son Alister. Fastest on the day was Scott Balfour in 63:37, and fastest lady Joyce Salvona, 74:26. The handicapping I'd used worked fairly well. The runners started over a 45 minute period and almost 85% finished within 10 minutes of each other. After that, we headed to Inveralmond Community High School for a bowl of soup and a blether. There was also a prize lucky dip – everyone put in a wrapped prize, and everyone got something back for their efforts. There was an entry fee of 50p to cover the cost of the minibus, used to ferry marshals and runners who needed a lift, as well as pay for the apres race soup.

A 50p entry fee was also collected in 1987, but thereafter the race was free. I borrowed marking signs from Martin Hyman's store, and depended on the good will of helpers as marshals, often standing for ages in pretty appalling weather. From the early 1990's, we stopped heading back to Inveralmond. Instead, John Coon, who at that time stayed in a cottage at Ballencrieff, a few miles from Cockleroy, offered his house for our post-race get together. The soup/bread would be augmented by whatever cake or beers, even warm punch, that runners brought along.

Numbers held up around the 50 or so mark in the two following years. The 1989 events almost didn't happen. The writing was really on the wall as far as the weather was concerned when, the day before the race, the course was inaccessible to all except those with a Sno-Cat, so no marking could be done. Later in the day, the forecast rain arrived and by the morning of the run, the road was passable and even, in places, runnable. In fact by the time the first runner set off about 11:00, the conditions for running were excellent and improved dramatically with the passage of a snowplough at about 11:50. The course was shortened by about a mile.

For the first time, a shorter, non-handicapped run of 4.2 miles was introduced. The route was also on road, starting and finishing at Cockleroy car park.



The 1993 start of the 4.2 run

Other notable statistics:

In **1990**, 37 started the handicap and 16 completed the shorter run.

1991 – from the Club's 'Lingo' magazine: *I apologised for the weather already. Don't blame me if you got sunburn or ended up dehydrated because "the weather in the Xmas Handicap should never be this good!"*

1992

From the first event, up to 2005, the race was a 'non-permit' event. In 1992, technically, runners could face penalties if they ran in non-permit races. This wasn't an issue for most runners, but if you were an international standard athlete, then maybe using a pseudonym was a prudent option. The first runner back, and with the fastest ever recorded time (53:17) for the long road route, was 'Richard Slicker' who typically abbreviated his forename.

1994

'The weather threatened to be a bit disappointing, with blue skies, cool temperatures and a light, west wind. However things improved and by the end of the run there was a decent amount of sleet and the wind was gusting to force 5.'

1998

Again from the Lingo: *The scene was like something out of a Hollywood 'B' disaster movie – the road littered with broken branches and twigs, fallen wires and cables, and almost blocked at several points with sleeping trees, their roots glaring at a now placid sky. Then a voice boomed out of the calm eeriness, from amongst a tangle of flattened conifers, at a point where the road (near Cockleroy) became completely blocked, the words prophetically accurate – 'There will be no road race around these roads today!'*

But a race did go ahead, starting and finishing at Bathgate Sports Centre and over a shortened route, and on roads that were just about open.

2000

The first Lothian Running Club hosted Festive Handicap. The plan was to hold the race as before, on the roads, but the weather conspired to dump a fair amount of snow, so the course was quickly switched into Beecraigs. Whilst I have some photographs, courtesy of John Coon, I can't find a set of results. I suspect they lurk in a long gone hard drive. If anyone has a set, please get in touch. The event was a success and the course needed only minor tweaking to become the preferred, safer, permanent location.



Mike Lieberman



Alan Robertson



Margaret Hyman

2001

The handicap distances became 7km or 14km - two laps of the 7km route. Each lap included the tough Sawmill Hill, plus an ascent of Cockleroy, with the start and finish at the car park. The route still had road crossings at Cockleroy and at the former visitor centre/deer farm, plus the short stretch on the road up Sawmill Hill.

Martin Hyman introduced a 1km 'Cockleroy Chaser, from the car park to the top and back, primarily aimed at youngsters. 9 took part in the first one, won by Jemma Toner.



Martin Leadbetter being chased by Santa (aka Colin Meek) as he powers up Sawmill Hill - 2001

2004

The event was held on Boxing Day, and that became its permanent date. In the Cockleroy Chaser, future 2022 World 1500m champion Jake Wightman was 3rd, behind Robert Inglis and Christopher Galloway.

2005

I took the decision to apply, for the first time, for a Scottish Athletics permit, making the race 'legal' for all runners. This also meant completing formal risk assessments and having first aiders in place. An upside was that the permit brought insurance (required by Beecraigs), and meant that the race featured in SAL listings. Unsurprisingly the numbers taking part surged, jumping from 48 in the handicap in 2004, with 15 in the Chaser, to 104 in the handicap events and 31 in the Chaser.

Numbers continued to rise, with 143 finishing in **2008**.

2009 and 2010

Both years were cancelled because of snow and ice. In both cases, significant amounts of snow meant that car parks were closed. In 2009, conditions were superb for running, if you like running in snow, but access was difficult. In addition, in 2010, many surfaces were hard packed ice that had partly thawed and refrozen making paths ankle-breakingly dangerous.

2012

Numbers peaked at 165 in the handicap event (and again in 2014.) I took the decision to cap entries in 2015 at 150 as I felt that the course/start area couldn't really comfortably handle more than that.

2015

In the months leading up to December, I did all the preparatory organising and planning, knowing that I was heading off to New Zealand and Australia, with Lachy Wallace's wedding in Melbourne on our last weekend there. (Lachy was a member of LRC when working in Scotland, and ran the handicap in 2005.) Included in the preparation was an on-site briefing of all the marshals. On the day, not only were the conditions horrendously wet, but one of the marshals got disorientated and didn't reach his point at a critical junction. As a result, 150 runners enjoyed running in Beecraigs, but not necessarily the correct route. Other marshals, who enjoyed a thorough soaking, but who saw few runners, still cast it up to me!

2016

Ted Finch/Kitst started electronic chip timing the event, bringing instantaneous results

2017

More snow, but it went ahead. Here's runners in the Cockleroy Chaser, not far short of the top.

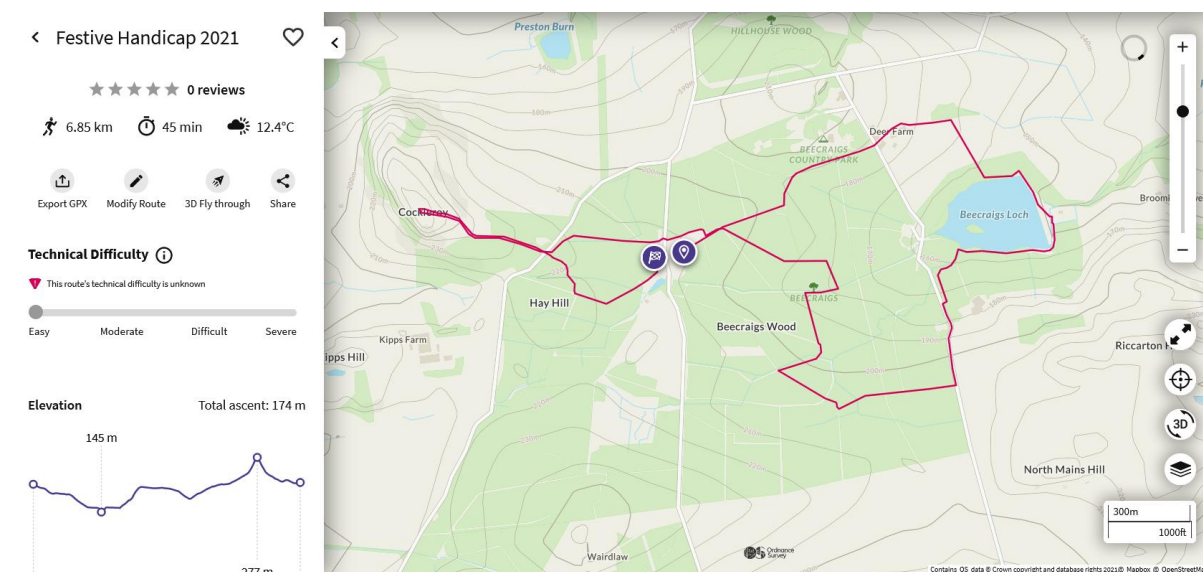
2020

The event was cancelled because of Covid restrictions.



2021

It returned with an altered route, now starting and finishing at Balvornie, and other minor route changes.



93 runners took part. There was also a short race, a bit longer than the 1km Cockleroy Chaser had been, starting and finishing at Balvornie.

I decided that after 35 years and 33 editions of the event, that the 2021 event would be the last one I would organise.

2022 to 2025

John Robertson took on organising the 2022 event, and, since then, Lothian Running Club's event management team have successfully continued it. Some things have remained the same:

- It retains a great, festive atmosphere
- It has remained free to enter – something that was important to me

There have been some brilliant changes (*'How come I didn't think of that?'*):

- Runners work out their own handicap/start time, aiming to finish at noon.
- Instead of an entry fee, runners are asked to bring a donation for the Food Bank

Like all events, the Festive Handicap couldn't continue without the help of volunteers. During my tenure, I had a core of family and friends who were persuaded to help each year. Some needed no persuasion: Ian Garvie usually phoned me in January to wish me a Happy New Year, and invariably asked, nearly 12 months in advance, *'put me down to marshal at my usual spot.'* (Road crossing at the former visitor's centre.)

Ted's chip timing (provided free) was an enormous advance. The land owner at Cockleroy was always keen to give access permission, and staff at Beecraigs were always helpful. John and Suse Coon, and later Jack and Marsie Ewing, provided great hospitality for post-race sustenance for a number of years.

Quotes:

"One abiding memory of the original route is that it was ridiculously tough and the only event that I 'trained' for. I can still feel the misery of being easily overtaken by runners on the high road back towards Cathlaw as the rain turned to sleet."

John Coon

"The key thing about the Festive Handicap is that it keeps changing but it stays the same. Most importantly everyone enjoys it!"

Ted Finch

"I remember being so cold in 2022, as I started the runners, that I thought I would never be warm again!"

John Robertson

Thanks to everyone who contributed to making this the fun event it has become, and hats off to the LRC Events Management Team for keeping it alive.

Peter West

November 2025