

# New capital, new marathon

Syntegra Edinburgh Marathon, Great Britain. 13 June 2004

The 19th century "Irish Question" befuddled the British Parliament for decades. A similar question, posed to the Scots in the late 20th Century, got a response with astonishing rapidity.

Since 1707 Scotland had been governed from Westminster, but from 1999 there has been a Scottish Parliament. Even before then, following the national referendum in 1997, there had been plans for a building.

A site was secured, a design approved, and then the complications arose. Costs rocketed, and controversy followed. Still the new Parliament building is not complete. It should be finished before the end of this year.

But nation building is not only done with bricks and mortar. Events play just as important a part in cementing a national identity, and Scottish history has certainly been eventful.

Modern-day events are more celebratory than world-shaking: Hogmanay, Burns Night, the Edinburgh Festival – and from last year, the Edinburgh Marathon.

The Marathon has a history of its own, struggling to establish its place on the streets. When the great running boom hit Britain in the early 1980s, Edinburgh was no exception to the rule that every city and town in the Kingdom must possess one.

Bust quickly followed boom for many such marathons, and it was not until 1999 that another was staged in Edinburgh. It started in Fife, crossed the Firth of Forth

Bridge and, like both the 1970 and the 1986 Commonwealth Games marathons, it finished in Meadowbank Stadium.

Like the new Parliament project, that marathon ran into difficulties. It was only in 2003 that the current race was born, run entirely within the City of Edinburgh.

The first edition attracted 3000 runners, which immediately made it Britain's second biggest marathon. This year a new 4-stage marathon relay was added, and it proved a big hit with corporates, charities and running clubs. Marathon entries were boosted from 4200 individuals to nearly 5000 once the 780 relay teams had been added in.

The start and finish were in the picturesque Holyrood Park, a rural haven within a stones' throw of the new Parliament building. This year's route was reversed to allow for a prevailing wind from 14 to 23 miles, while from 9 to 13 miles the route is on sheltered cycle paths.

The one common feature with last year's inaugural race was the sharp, narrow, climb in the first mile around the rocky peak of Arthur's Seat. This, and the cycle paths, may be dropped next year, as numbers increase. The field is expected to grow to 10,000 runners in the near future.

A pipe band performed first, then the marathon start was signalled by a 12kg canon. The weather was fine and runners had spectacular views of the city around the 2-mile point before descending to complete the lap of Holyrood Park after three miles.



The course then exits the Park by the Parliament building and begins another lap in town, to the west. This time runners circumnavigate the high ground on which Edinburgh Castle is perched.

Runners pass below the battlements along such historically named streets as Cowgate, Grassmarket and King's Stables Road. On reaching the West End, runners return east along the full length of the famous Princes Street.

This main commercial street has shops only along the north side. The south side is simply

railings, giving on to gardens, which allow an unobstructed view across to the Castle. The railway lies in a deep cutting within the gardens.

Once runners pass the Sir Walter Scott Memorial at five miles, they turn back over and above the railway tracks at Waverley Station. Then they join the Royal Mile, on its eastward descent from the Castle.

The course follows the lower half-mile, as it approaches Holyrood Palace. The Palace has been a home to Scottish, and then British, monarchs since 1501. Runners re-enter Holyrood Park





by going through the Palace forecourt.

At this point the leading relay team headed the Marathon leaders, and they were never caught. Turning off Princes Street, five miles into the marathon, Thomas Abyu increased the pace and by the six mile mark, re-entering Holyrood Park, it seemed to have become a two-horse race between him and John Mutai. In the women's race South African Tanith Maxwell was leading, on 2:35 pace.

After going through Holyrood Park for the second time the course by-passes Meadowbank

Stadium on residential roads. At 15km, runners descend onto the bike paths that trace their way through the city with rarely a glimpse of any building through the lush green foliage.

The halfway point comes just before leaving the bike paths, and Mutai and Abyu passed through together in 1:10:01, 200m ahead of Eric Kiplagat and Konstantin Permitin. Maxwell passed this point in 1:18, two minutes clear in her debut at the distance.

Shortly after the turnaround point, on the banks of the Firth of Forth, Mutai opened up a gap on the tiring Abyu. It quickly grew.

Back towards town, through the Leith Docks where the Royal Yacht Britannia is now permanently moored as a tourist attraction, Mutai was on his own.

From 32-35km the course loses identity – it is just a long road to be run with little to distract attention before reaching the promenade at Portobello. Runners are then rewarded with fine panoramic views out across the lower reaches of the Firth of Forth.

But by this time many will just have their heads down, concentrating on sustaining themselves towards the finish. It seemed so for race leader Mutai,

MEN:			
1	John MUTAI	KEN	2:21:45
2	Erick KIPLAGAT	KEN	2:21:55
3	Thomas ABYU	ETH	2:23:04
4	Konstantin PERMITIN	RUS	2:23:37
5	Jeppe FARSOELT	DEN	2:30:45
6	Ty BERG	GBR	2:39:10
7	Andreas MERDE	GBR	2:39:12
8	Andy FOOK	GBR	2:42:58
9	Ole Kjell LANGMYREN	NOR	2:46:59
10	Raymond PEARCE	GBR	2:46:59
WOMEN:			
1	Valentina POLTVASKA	UKR	2:47:24
2	Tanith MAXWELL	RSA	2:48:42
3	Joanna GRONT	POL	2:54:45
4	Nathalie CHRISTIE	GBR	3:12:38
5	Claire GORDON	GBR	3:14:31
6	Janet LAING	GBR	3:14:34
7	Michelle THAM	GBR	3:19:11
8	Sarah MILLAC	GBR	3:20:21
9	Valerie YOUNG	GBR	3:22:33
10	Lucy SHORT	GBR	3:22:54

as his pace slumped in the final 5km.

By then a resurgent Eric Kiplagat was chasing Abyu down and setting his sights upon Mutai, 500m ahead. In the final stages, on uphill roads through residential streets, he closed to within 50m of the race leader at the finish.

Tanith Maxwell suffered from her early ambition as she approached Holyrood Park... as Mary Queen of Scots had done 400 years before. Maxwell 'died' just in the athletic sense, and it was only the experienced Ukrainian, Valentina Poltvaska, who came past.

Between Arthur's Seat and the seat of the new Scottish Parliament, Scotland has been furnished with another historical landmark. Even on race day it never physically amounted to more than a few tents and a few thousand people clustered together, but its has laid down its marker. As those thousands filled up the lawns of Holyrood, it seemed clear that the Edinburgh Marathon is here to stay, and will provide a source of celebration and pride for the renewed nation.

Pictures: Sandy Young and Pete Brady

