

Billy Clarke 1908 Olympic Marathon

100 years ago the Olympics paid their first visit to Britain the marathon was run from Windsor to London. The Marathon course had previously been 25 miles long. For the 1908 race the previously agreed starting line was moved to the Home Park at Windsor to allow the Royal Family to view the start; the finishing line was not changed. The resulting distance - 26 miles, 385 yards - has been the standard marathon distance ever since London. Northern athlete Billy Clarke played a small part in that historical event.

The most famous incident of the games came at the end of the marathon. It occurred when the first runner to enter the stadium, Dorando Pietri of Italy, collapsed several times and ran the wrong way. Not far from the finish-line, two of the officials took him by the arms, and brought him to the line. As a consequence, after crossing the line he was disqualified. The medal went to American Johnny Hayes who was second over the line, but the glory went to Pietri. Since he himself had not been responsible for his disqualification Queen Alexandra the next day awarded him a gold cup in recognition of his achievement.



1908 was a busy year for Billy Clarke of Sefton Harriers who won the Northern Counties cross country title at Haydock Park and finished fifth in the World Cross Country Championship at Paris, where he was a scoring member of the gold medal winning England team.

A short time later Clark was an emphatic winner of the Liverpool Olympic Marathon trial, but had a bad run in the Polytechnic trial and finished well down the order. However, he was selected for the Olympic team on the strength of the good overall form he had shown that season.

In the legendary 1908 Olympic Marathon, Clarke was an early leader but eventually slipped back to finish in 12th position.

Nevertheless, he had the distinction of being the first Briton to finish, and his time of 3:16:08.6 was an inaugural British Marathon record. In the December of 1908 he won the Hasting marathon from which these two photos are from.

After that Clarke turned professional.



He improved his best marathon time to 2:51:50 on a grass track at Salisbury on 29 June 1910, and on 17 March 1911 he was second in an indoor marathon at Dublin in 2:41.

Known as a stylish runner, Clark perhaps ran his best race at Navan on 4 June 1911, when he won a £75 sweepstake over 20 miles in a time of 1:55:47.

[How London shaped the history of the marathon an extract from John Bryant book.](#)



Thanks to Alex Wilson for background biography of Billy Clarke, Photo from Charles Gains, Norman Wilson and from Phil Thomas 'History of Northern Cross Country Association'

