

CLUB ATHLETICS IN ABERDEEN

W. Hunter Watson

August 2015

Revised: September 2018; and
December 2021

Introduction

This paper is a revision of an earlier one entitled "ABERDEEN AAC". The decision to revise was taken after access had been gained to some early Aberdeen AAC material, including the first of the Aberdeen AAC minutes books. The revision consists largely of the addition of a section entitled "Early Aberdeen AAC History". That begins by giving some indication of what is involved when a new athletics club is formed.

Athletics in Aberdeen

Aberdeen AAC was formed in 1952 following a public meeting held on 29 April 1952. Seventeen people attended, some by invitation and others who did so because they had seen a press notice advertising the meeting. Among those who attended was J. A. Cavanagh, the father of Ian Cavanagh who later that year won the S.A.A.A. youths' long jump title with a clearance of 6.39m. J.A. Cavanagh became the first Vice President of Aberdeen A.A.C. and remained in that post until 1955. That was an early example of a parent becoming involved with club administration, an example which was to be repeated many times in the future.

The newly formed club managed to arrange at least one match in the summer of 1952, one against RAF Dyce. (The team representing RAF Dyce consisted of young men who were then based at the Dyce aerodrome while doing their National Service.) Ian Cavanagh failed to win his speciality, the long jump, but did win both sprints and hence helped Aberdeen AAC to win the match.

Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War there had been several athletic clubs in Aberdeen and much competition had been organised for their members by a body called the North Eastern Harriers Association. Jimmy Adams, a former international athlete who eventually became a President of Aberdeen AAC, had been the Vice President of that Association. One of the

events which it had helped to organise was the annual Athletic Sports Meeting at Pittodrie Park, as Aberdeen FC's ground was then called. A study of the 1931 programme for that meeting reveals that there were then seven open athletic clubs in Aberdeen, four for men and three for women, though only two of those open clubs could be regarded as significant as far as inter-club competition was concerned. These were the Aberdeenshire Harriers (the Shire Harriers), founded 1887, and the Aberdeen YMCA Harriers (Aberdeen YM), founded in 1912. In addition, there was the Aberdeen University Athletic Club which at that time was active as a separate entity to a greater extent than it has been in recent years.

From 1928 or 1929 until 1946 the President of the Shire Harriers had been a man called Fred Glegg, who had also been S.A.A.A. President during the war years. Unfortunately, Fred Glegg died in October 1946. Had it been otherwise, the Shire Harriers might still have been in existence and hence have been one of Scotland's oldest Harrier clubs: the first Harrier Clubs, Clydesdale Harriers and Edinburgh Harriers, having been formed in 1885, only two years before the Shire. The Shire Harriers did function until at least 25 April 1950 when there was held an Annual General Meeting of the club. The minutes of that meeting reveal that all of the places on the Committee were filled except that of secretary. The previous secretary, Ralph Dutch, had completed his university degree and was then required to do his National Service, something that necessitated his giving up his post as the Shire Harriers' secretary. With no one being willing to take on the secretarial duties, the club ceased to function.

The YM Harriers had ceased to function when war seemed to be imminent. According to Arthur Lobban, the last secretary of that club, it held an Annual General Meeting in August 1939. At that AGM it was agreed that the club should go into abeyance until the war situation was clear. War was declared on 3 September 1939 and those members of the YM Harriers who survived the war did not immediately seek to resurrect the club when the war ended.

Clearly Aberdeen AAC had more success than the post-war Shire Harriers in maintaining the interest of its members and there are several possible explanations for this:

- the newly formed Aberdeen AAC obtained permission to train at Linksfield Stadium, a football stadium with a good running track;
- club members were encouraged to raise their sights and compete in major championship events; in both 1955 and 1956 an Aberdeen youth won the Eastern District Youths' Cross Country Championship while in 1956 Pat Bellamy and Alice Robertson (both Committee members) won three S.W.A.A.A. titles between them (high jump, 100 yards and 220 yards);
- press coverage, including that of the match against RAF Dyce, generated sufficient publicity to make people aware of the existence of Aberdeen AAC, something that increased the probability that it would attract new members.

One of those new members was Alastair Wood. He joined Aberdeen AAC as a first claim member on 29 August 1961 after purchasing a house in Aberdeen and after being released from Shettleston Harriers for whom he had previously been competing. Prior to becoming a member of Aberdeen AAC, Alastair had won the S.A.A.A. 6 mile championship in 1958, 1959, 1960 and 1961. In 1962 he decided to attempt the marathon and discovered that he had a talent for this and, indeed, for longer distances. In 1962, after being second in the A.A.A. marathon, he was selected to compete for Britain in the marathon in the European Championships; he finished fourth in that event. He continued to compete with great distinction in distance and ultra-distance events for many years thereafter and, directly or indirectly, inspired many Aberdeen AAC athletes to undertake the training that helped them to run fast marathons. Between 1966 and 1990 there were twelve members of Aberdeen AAC who ran a marathon in a time less than 2hr 20 min, a statistic that few clubs in the UK could better.

Aberdeen AAC played its part in promoting the marathon: in 1979 it organised the first of UK's city marathons. The winner was Aberdeen AAC athlete Graham Laing. Graham went on to win the S.A.A.A. marathon in 1980 and in 1981 he finished fifth in the first of the London marathons. The following year he represented Scotland in the marathon in the Commonwealth Games, something that his clubmate, Fraser Clyne, did four years later.

Unsurprisingly, the group of Aberdeen AAC athletes who were doing the hard distance training at that time did well in the Edinburgh to Glasgow road relay: in the ten races between 1980 and 1989 Aberdeen won three and were placed third in four of them.

Although Aberdeen AAC had considerable success in distance running, track and field competition was not neglected. Evidence of this was the decision of the club to be one of the eight to form the Scottish Athletics League in 1972. In 1995, and also in five successive years from 2015, Aberdeen AAC won the Scottish Athletics League title. It is possible that the club would have continued to win that title in subsequent years, but in 2020 the Covid pandemic necessitated the suspension of that competition.

In 1974 became obvious that there were some boys in the Aberdeen area who were talented athletically. As a consequence, a decision was made that Aberdeen AAC should apply to join the Scottish Young Athletes League, something that it did in 1975. That decision led to not only to many more boys joining the club but also to many more girls joining. That influx of girls led to Aberdeen AAC's joining the Scottish Women's Athletics League in 1976. Unlike the Scottish Athletics League, the Scottish Women's Athletics League caters for younger age groups, something that suited Aberdeen AAC well at the time.

When Aberdeen AAC was expanding rapidly, as it did after the decision to encourage young athletes to join, there was no policy of having a waiting list: applications for membership were accepted from all amateurs of nine years of age or older. Partly as a consequence, Aberdeen AAC became one of the biggest athletic clubs in the UK. In 1988 when the club's numbers peaked: subscriptions had been received from 606 members of whom 517 were aged 11 or over. In 1994, around five years after several road runners had left the club to form the Metro Aberdeen Running Club, the S.A.A.A. released data which revealed that Aberdeen AAC had then 494 members aged 11 or over. According to that data, Aberdeen was then almost 50% larger at that time than Scotland's second largest club, Pitreavie AAC which then had 337 members.

For a time, there was pressure from the S.A.A.A. on clubs not to admit athletes in the 9-11 age group, a pressure which was resisted by Aberdeen AAC for good reason. For example, among the boys who began competing for

Aberdeen AAC when in that age group were Mark Davidson and Duncan Mathieson. Both went on to represent Scotland at the Commonwealth Games, to set Scottish records and to win Scottish titles. Mark eventually became an excellent club president.

One feature of Aberdeen AAC has been the number of members who have continued to compete as Veterans, or Masters, as they are now known. At the Scottish Masters Championships, the club whose members are most successful is awarded a trophy. I have been informed by one of those veterans (Stan Walker, the club Vice President at the time of writing) that Aberdeen AAC was awarded that trophy for each of the ten years up to and including 2015.

Early Aberdeen AAC history

As the first of the minutes books of Aberdeen AAC reveals, the person responsible for convening the meeting on 29 April 1952 that led to the formation of Aberdeen AAC was a Mr W. Geo. Angus (Bill Angus), a man who had been a member of the Shire Harriers prior to the Second World War. Following that initial meeting there was another on 7 May 1952. At this meeting Bill Angus welcomed the highly respected "Mr Adams" (Jimmy Adams) who was invited to chair the meeting. That he did and Bill Angus was elected President of the new club. It was agreed that the name of this club should be "Aberdeen Amateur Athletic Club".

At the next meeting on 21 May 1952, it was reported that advice had been received from the secretary of the SAAA about the drawing up of the club's constitution. It was also reported that Culter Harriers had decided to wind up due to lack of support and that this club had offered to donate to Aberdeen AAC a javelin, a discus, a vaulting pole plus its remaining funds. (The Culter Harriers had been founded by Bill Angus when his daughter, Eleanore, had displayed an interest in athletics.)

On 2 June 1952 the new club colours were agreed. It was also agreed to affiliate to the SAAA and the SWAAA.

At an Extraordinary General Meeting held on 19 August 1952 a new constitution for the club was agreed.

At the Annual General Meeting held on 6 April 1953, Jimmy Adams was elected President. Bill Angus remained on the committee.

On 25 March 1954 it was agreed to seek affiliation with the National Cross Country Union.

On 5 July 1956 it was reported that the club had received 2 cups and a cheque amounting to £17-0-0 from the Aberdeen Ladies Athletic Club (actually the Aberdeen Ladies Hiking and Athletics Club), one of the prewar clubs which had ceased to exist.

On 6 September 1956 a discussion took place about how to make the best use of the 3 cups which the club had received from the Bon Accord Ladies Athletic Club and the Aberdeen Ladies Athletic clubs. (The Bon-Accord Ladies Athletics Club was another of the prewar clubs, allegedly a breakaway from the Aberdeen Ladies Hiking and Athletic Club.)

On 4 July 1958 it was noted that Steve Taylor had been fifth in the mile in the RAF championships with a time of 4:15.0. Steve, who had joined Aberdeen AAC on 30 October 1953 appeared to have improved significantly while doing National Service in the RAF. (Alastair Wood similarly had improved while doing National Service in the RAF.)

At the AGM of 10 March 1960, it was reported that Jimmy Adams had written stating that, due to ill-health he had found it necessary to resign his active interest in the club. That must have been a significant loss; his letters to me (now in Aberdeen University's Special Collections) demonstrate that Jimmy Adams had been an enthusiast and had been committed to Aberdeen AAC. Steve Taylor once told me that, in his early days in the club, he regarded Jimmy Adams as a father figure.

On 1 April 1960 it was reported that Steve Taylor had finished seventh in the National Cross Country Championships and, as a consequence, had been selected to represent Scotland in the International at Hamilton. It was noted that Steve was the first member of Aberdeen AAC to be selected for Scotland. (He was not the last as can be confirmed by studying the Aberdeen AAC Yearbooks held in Aberdeen University's Special Collections and also on the Aberdeen AAC website.)

In the Aberdeen AAC minutes of 1 April 1960, it was also reported that a letter had been received from Tayside AAC inviting Aberdeen to join a proposed North Eastern summer league. (There was at that time and for some years thereafter a North Eastern cross country league.) Whereas it is

now taken for granted that there are league competitions in the summer to provide interclub competition that was not always the case.

The invitation to join that league was accepted provided that one meeting was held in Aberdeen each year.

On 6 May 1960 confirmation was received that this league had been formed. There were two sections, one for men, youths and boys and the other for women and junior women. It is possible that this was the earliest of Scotland's athletics leagues and for many years it provided good competition for the clubs which participated. Unfortunately, not all of those clubs survived and this led to the league ceasing to exist. Happily, when that did happen, there was another league able to provide competition for clubs in the north and north-east of Scotland, namely the Grampian TV League. The North East League trophies were presented to that League to be used as merit trophies. The Grampian TV League remains in good health at the time of writing though its name has changed periodically as the sponsor changed.

On 10 June 1960 it was agreed that Aberdeen AAC should apply to be included in the Edinburgh to Glasgow road relay race. The application was successful and on 8 December 1960 it was reported that the club had finished a creditable sixth (out of 20 teams) and that Steve Taylor had recorded the fastest time over the long sixth leg.

As noted above, Aberdeen AAC was remarkably successful in that race in the 1980s but, unfortunately, increasing traffic levels eventually necessitated its being discontinued.

Concluding remarks

The information about athletics in Aberdeen that is contained in this paper was derived from material in the Special Collections in the Aberdeen University Library. Only a tiny part of the information contained therein has been included. Perhaps one day someone will use that and other sources to thoroughly research the topic and then write a book which will give a comprehensive account of athletics in Aberdeen from the time of the formation of the Shire Harriers in 1887. Ideally such a book would also cover the contribution of Aberdeen University to athletics in Aberdeen and detail the achievements of some notable Aberdeen University athletes, especially those

who gained Olympic selection: James Soutter (1912), Quita Shivas (1952) and Bernie Nottage (1968 for the Bahamas).

In 2021 Zoey Clark became the first member of Aberdeen AAC to gain Olympic selection. (The Tokyo Olympics should have been held in 2020 but were not because of the Covid pandemic and there was much opposition within Japan to their being held in 2021.) Zoey ran in the 4 x 400m mixed relay and helped Great Britain to reach the final in that event though outside the medals. However, Zoey had previously collected four medals while representing Great Britain in international championship events:

- silver in women's world 4 x 400m championships in 2017;
- bronze in women's world indoor 4 x 400m championships in 2018;
- bronze in women's European 4 x 400m championships in 2018; and
- silver in women's European indoor 4 x 400m championships in 2019.