

Our next monthly profile in the run up to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary taking place in December, is that of Clare Spacie (née Sylvester). Clare played a significant role in developing women's running in OUCCC, being the Captain to introduce the inaugural Women's IInds team: The Turtles. With an incredible collection of OUCCC memories, we are excited to share Clare's OUCCC journey and her lasting impact on the club today. Hers is a story of athletic development, lasting friendships and a community that enriched her life whilst she contributed to its expansion and progress.

*'OUCCC was a great find for me. It enabled me to make the best of the experience that Oxford offers. Having undergraduate and postgraduate friends across the University who were studying a wide range of subjects was great and I loved the friendships and sense of achievement that running for OUCCC brought. Running based friendships and the value of being part of a team have stayed with me ever since.'*

Name: Clare Spacie (née Sylvester)

College: Lady Margaret Hall

Years of Study: 1980-81 and 1982-1984

Degree: Law



### **Becoming a Runner: Early years and joining University**

Clare joined OUCCC without a formal background in running and discovered the joys of being part of a running club once at University. *'My school didn't do athletics or cross country'*. Instead, her sporting activities centered mainly around rowing, tennis, swimming and cycling. During her early teens, she was introduced to orienteering by her neighbours. They also introduced Clare to Miriam Rosen, an instrumental figure in the creation of the Women's team at Thames Hare and Hounds.

*'I went running a couple of times a week from about age 13, with a neighbour who was a very good orienteer. (I was a useless orienteer and. To be honest, only enjoyed it as a run in lovely countryside.)'*

Upon joining university to read Law, Clare initially continued rowing. Here she competed for her college during her first year and coxed, but after a year out through illness, on returning to Oxford she was ready to search for something different.

*'My hands and feet got so cold rowing that I literally couldn't undo the shoelaces or hold the blade properly (we weren't allowed gloves). How I started running at university was a bit unusual and should be an encouragement to anybody who would like to give it a go.'*

Like for so many at the time, word of mouth introduced Clare to Oxford's running scene. In her case, it was through a Blues 400m runner she heard speak at St Aldates Church, who mentioned the Cuppers Match taking place at Iffley Road the following Thursday.

*'He encouraged anyone interested to turn up at Iffley Road. So, I did - not realising you were supposed to be part of a college team. The run seemed a very long way (I think it was 5 miles) and I was very glad the last bit was downhill back to the track. I suspect some of the fastest runners were tucking into tea by the time I finished!'*

Following her racing debut, the Women's Captain (Kathryn Shore) invited Clare to join in a run at Shotover the following week. *'I went, got round and was hooked'*. It wasn't long before Clare made her Varsity team debut and became heavily involved in club life.

### **OUCCC Life: Training and Socials**

*'Cross country was great from a friendship point of view. There were a couple of keen runners doing DPhils in my college, one of whom became my boyfriend. I quickly became part of their MCR friendship group and friends with many of the XC runners in other colleges. Not many sports are so clearly university rather than college based. We all got to know each other well on the long bus journeys to away matches and in the Nags Head pub on Hythe Bridge Street (now the Oxford Retreat) after we got back.'*

A particular focus of the social side of the club was one of the student houses that had become something of an OUCCC institution. It had been rented by XC runners continuously since the 1970s, when the international runner Julian Goater lived there. *'It was down beyond the track and a bit of a cycle ride from LMH. But they had wonderful parties so it was worth it so long as you could avoid tripping over the piles of manky running shoes by the back door'*. Amongst the Crescent Road dwellers was also Nicky Braun, who won several Varsity matches and had an impressive 2:11 marathon time. Only Richard Nerurkar (who was men's captain the year after Clare was Ladies' Captain) bettered that. These two found their minty green arch-rival in Jerry Barton.

Many OUCCC traditions have been around for decades, and as far as training goes, it is no different. *'The Thursday club run was a top priority (we met at Exeter back quad and often went onto Port Meadow or up into Headington). My training changed so much over the two years I was running at Oxford. In my second year running with OUCCC, when I was much fitter, I did longer runs with my boyfriend such as out to Wytham Wood. I also joined the blokes for their weekly interval sessions'*

*'Unfortunately, there weren't many women XC runners at the time and none in my college, so the women mostly trained independently. A lot of the women runners were scientists with lab sessions most days, so the scope for training together in the middle of the day was limited. I organised a women's only hill training session in South Parks but this was our only shared training apart from the Thursday club run'*

## **Captaincy and the Committee**

As OUCCC became a bigger part of Clare's University life, she became involved in the organisational aspects of the club by joining the committee as Captain. *'I was the only woman on a small committee. I remember huddling in the Men's Captain's room for meetings – all of us trying to get as close as possible to a feeble fire - sometimes meeting to stuff envelopes with the newsletter. Delivering newsletters to everyone's pigeonholes was another training run of sorts. Unbelievable though it seems now, in 1983 nobody had computers or email.'*

*'My main aim as Captain was to grow the women's side of the club so we had a decent number of athletes and a good pool to draw upon for races. I also wanted us to improve our standard to increase our chances of beating Cambridge. Although it was understandable given the low numbers and variable standard, it rankled slightly that women's XC was only a half Blue sport at the time. You had to win the Varsity match individually or BUSF to get a full Blue. I wanted to build the foundations for us to become a full Blue sport, although I don't think I ever admitted that ambition to anyone at the time.'*

Further to these ambitions, the Committee was invested in ensuring the social community remained thriving. *'Apart from making sandwiches on numerous occasions (peanut butter and jelly were particularly popular), I remember organising a big buffet, persuading the LMH chef to cook a whole ham and some chickens and to lend us loads of platters for salads etc. Getting it all down to the track from LMH by bicycle was interesting. The most fun was a Christmas fancy dress run we organised around South Parks. I went dressed as the ghost of Christmas past with a ball and (paper) chain round my ankle, a nightshirt and my face painted a ghostly white. I got some funny looks cycling through the centre of town to get there.'*

## **The First Turtles Race**

*'The number of women turning up to training and to our home fixtures at Shotover was growing, partly because there was a vibrant OU Orienteering Club and the orienteers used XC as good training. Some of our other members were really good at other sports too, especially hockey, and also did XC as their second sport. I thought it would be good for those who weren't likely to get into the Varsity team to have something to aim for in terms of representing the University to show how much their contribution mattered. The Blues team was only 6 women with 4 to score which left a lot of people potentially disappointed. Several of my closest friends on the men's side ran in the second and third teams (there were 5 men's teams in all) and so it seemed logical to emulate them and introduce a second team event. We held it at Shotover and, from memory, the following year it was held in Cambridge. The men's captain and other Committee members were very supportive of the idea and at the time it didn't seem like a big deal to suggest it. I don't remember much about organising the race beyond suggesting it to the Cambridge Ladies Captain (Jo Lazenby I think) who was keen to take it up.'*

*When I saw how much the 2<sup>nd</sup> team fixture meant to people, how many people turned out and how it developed I realised that it was probably the best thing I did as Captain.'*

## **OUCCC Training and Training Camps**

With classic routes that the club still enjoys today, Clare's favourites included the likes of 'Mesopotamia', Port Meadow and Headington Hill Park. With the heavy workload during her final exams, Clare found that these runs, whether Port Meadow in the early summer or the Rainbow bridge circuit along Uni Parks, were a great way to wind down. Having done them again many

times since those days (her sister and a close LMH friend both live in Oxford), she remembers them fondly. During her time in OUCCC, Clare became a more experienced athlete, and so her training developed too.

*'I started joining the blokes for the 3 minute run sessions around the cricket pitch in the University Parks which I think were on a Monday. In 1983 Frank Dick, then national athletics coach, did a session for us at Iffley Road called 'Oxford Chop Suey'. It started with a pretty demanding mini-circuit in the gym and then we went out onto the track to do drills and laps of the track. I had never run on the track until I came to university and to me the distances felt so much further than when running to the next tree in a 'Fartlek' session. But Oxford Chop Suey was great fun.'*

Clare's training would, alongside her running, also feature cross training in the form of swimming, two or three times a week. On the weekends, races also improved your training base. *'Apart from the Varsity Match, the main focus for us was the Reebok League which had 4 races over the season. All the universities west of London in the South of England took part. Oxford was the furthest north and Exeter the furthest west. They had a strong team as did Bath. I also remember going to the Mike Sully open race near Bristol as one of the Varsity selection races and running round a rather flat course full of cow pats. Other memorable races were the Hyde Park Relays, the Whiteknights Relays at Reading University and the universities' championship in Norwich in 1984 where we literally ran in the river that had burst its banks.'*

Training Camps, as current OUCCC members will relate to, are a perfect opportunity to bond with the team whilst getting in some good training. During Clare's time in OUCCC, like today, this allowed freshers to get involved with the club early on!

*'We organised a training camp in the New Forest in September 1983 just before the start of term and we advertised it in Athletics Weekly. Quite a few freshers saw the advert and came along including Richard Nerurkar who had been at school with one of the leading OUCCC men, Andy Leach. We stayed on the outskirts of Brockenhurst at Foxleas, a Girl Guides facility and had some very mixed weather. Graham Tanner the OUAC athletics coach at the time led some of the sessions.'*

*(From her time running with Surrey University while at law college, Clare became good friends with Peter Lindsell who helped organise many OUCCC New Forest training weeks several years later. Clare recalls joining OUCC training camp 3 minute run sessions around Bolton's Bench in Lyndhurst when staying with Peter and his family and supporting OUCCC runners at the New Forest Marathon).*

*'Another memorable training camp was over New Year in 1983/4 based at Featherstone Castle in Northumberland which belonged to a relative of one of the club members. It was very spartan. We did long runs in the sleet, relays in the grounds around old POW camp facilities and practically got blown off Hadrian's Wall. We then ran the Morpeth to Newcastle 14.25 mile road race on New Year's day in really cold, windy weather after a boozy New Year's Eve party than finished in the small hours. Shivering in shop doorways before the start with only a bin liner for warmth as our kit was taken to the finish by bus was more memorable than most of the run! But I did have a good race.'*

### **Varsity and the Racing Calendar**

*'My favourite was definitely the second time I competed in my final year when I was Captain. I was so new to XC and in awe of the event in my first Varsity Match in 1982 that I am not sure how much I enjoyed it. Cambridge had a much stronger team than us with some really good runners up front. It was all a bit daunting. By my second match I had done a lot more races (and training) and knew everyone else in OUCCC. We still didn't have huge strength in depth or any star quality runners. But we had a good team spirit and more people competing for places than in the previous year. Team selection was based on performances in races earlier in the term. Mike Sully being an open event was a key selection race.*

*As Captain I was determined that we would give Cambridge tougher competition than in the previous year, and I wanted to run well myself, ideally to lead my team in. It was an incredibly cold beautifully bright, sunny day. I had a good run and remember trying not to let Sarah Springman get away from me. (She was a very tall Cambridge graduate student, a lovely person and brilliant triathlete – also now a world-renowned scientist). And I managed to keep in touch until the last downhill to the finish field when her long legs gave her the advantage she needed to pull away'.*

*'Things were a lot more formal back in 1983: for example, we didn't have champagne on the finish line. We were quite deferential to our hosts at what was then a rather old fashioned Thames Hare and Hounds. I remember being almost as nervous making my speech after the dinner at the Thames Rowing Club as I was at the start of the run: no booze for me till after that was over! And the room was absolutely freezing. There was as long gap after dinner before the coach home and no disco or other entertainment. A group of us developed a 'tradition' of going for a tube ride to kill time so we didn't get completely drunk. I think it only started the previous year, but all traditions have to start somewhere.'*

*'Apart from getting out a decent team for the Varsity Match and building numbers enough to introduce a second team fixture, I was really proud that Oxford won the Reebok League in my year as Captain. It showed what a difference having a group who were really committed to the team who could be relied upon to turn out for every race made. And I was chuffed to come third individually. The 2 pairs of Reebok running shoes I won as prizes came in handy too.'*

On the Athletics side of things, many XC runners ran the shorter distances on the track in the summer. With impressive track talent such as Diane Cheeseman the year before Clare joined, the team spirit was high but lacking stars in the years Clare was at Oxford so she was asked to make up the 1500m team. *'I enjoyed being part of the team and even had a go at the long jump.'* At the time, there were many some very talented athletes among the male XC runners especially in the long sprints: *'Matthew Power was a brilliant 400m runner. I remember cheering him on in the 400m relay to clinch the men's Varsity match for Oxford.'*

### **Post University**

After leaving Oxford, Clare went to law College in Guildford, where she introduced herself to the cross country club at the University of Surrey. With plenty of cross country experience under her belt, she enjoyed joining in with demanding, hilly training sessions and competing as part of their team. *'I was a better runner by now, so I felt I was making a good contribution to the team and its results.'*

Soon, she was working as a trainee solicitor with long hours and little time to do much sport. *'I really missed it. Via an OUCCC friend Diane Cheeseman, I contacted SLOW (South London Orienteers) and started going to an evening circuit training session they did in Hammersmith.*

*They also trained from the Thames Hare and Hounds premises on Wimbledon Common and quite a few of the orienteers were members of Thames. So, by a slightly circuitous route, I joined Thames in 1987 where I reconnected with Miriam Rosen, over 3 years after the Varsity match when she had first encouraged me to join. The women's side of the club was still very small but was growing and there were lots of good races to go to. And from then on, XC became the core of my social life again. A lot of the people I knew initially, including my flat mate, were very good orienteers who went to Thames as training for orienteering. Conversely, I went orienteering with them for a gentle run in nice places on a Sunday after a hard race on Saturday.'*

*'History repeated itself in that I got involved in the organisation of Thames. I became the first official Ladies Captain and was briefly Secretary. Once again, the commitment of a small core group of runners who turned out for every fixture was crucial to our success. Thames had been a very traditional 'Gentlemen's running club' so we had to be sensitive to that in developing the women's side of the club. Originally, there was a limit of 12 Lady members. We expanded gradually to no limit - and the truly balanced club Thames is today - via limits of '12 active lady members' and 24 lady members. Thames is very different now. It still has its traditions but is focused on its younger members and family friendly. We have had our first female club Captain, Dorchy Cockerell, with the men's captain in support'. We now have a very successful Ladies team; winning the Southern and coming third in the Nationals this season.*

When it comes to the Varsity match, Clare's dedication remained strong, working alongside Chris Brasher to track down every former Varsity match runner for the first Old Blues race in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Varsity Match. This event was a fantastic success, with over 100 participants of all ages, and former Blues runners from across the decades taking part. *'On the morning of the race The Times published a photo of Chris Chataway and Chris Brasher (both Thames members and former Oxbridge runners) going through the water splash which was reinstated for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary event and is still used now'.*

Today, Clare remains invested in the running community and Thames whilst being able to take a step back from competing herself. *'A dodgy lower back means that I can only run very occasionally now. I've even stopped doing Parkrun which I was very involved in for several years. I do a fair bit of hill walking and go to Spin classes at the local leisure centre several times a week. Its sociable, cardio, hard work and fun but doesn't beat being outside running in lovely countryside. More than 15 years after I first had to cut back on running, I am just about getting to the point where I don't feel jealous seeing other people out running. I am still a member of Thames and help from time to time.*

A few years after leaving Oxford, Clare was invited to an event regarding the plans to raise funds for and build the University Swimming Pool. *'I swam a lot at university at the Ferry Road pool in Summertown and would have loved to have a University pool to use for cross training and when I was injured. I met lots of other injured, frustrated runners at the pool. So, I knew a lot of people other than Blues swimmers and water polo players would be supportive. And a lot of people who don't think of themselves as sporty like to go for a swim'. Clare was co-opted onto the fundraising committee and helped with the project to build 'The Rosenblatt Pool'. 'I haven't swum in the Rosenblatt pool often, but it is a great facility and another thing I am proud to have played a small part in'.*

### **Working Career**

*'I studied law. Coming to LMH to do so was another fluke in a way. I saw an article in the Sunday Times about studying law and it mentioned that there was a 'find out about studying law' weekend run by students at Oxford. I went along and was amazed. The speakers were people like Lord Denning, then Master of the Rolls, and other luminaries of the legal profession. We were hosted by students from different colleges. I was staying in Merton but met up with one of the student organisers who was studying at LMH. She showed me round the college on the Sunday morning. I came away determined to study law, and to do so at Oxford. I loved the gardens and peace and quiet away from the centre of town, so I applied to LMH. I studied comparative and EU law as options and chose to train with a firm that did a fair bit of EU law. How passé that seems now! After law college I trained at Clifford Chance. After 10 years there I moved to the Government Legal Department. Until I left, I hadn't realised quite how much of a round peg in a square hole I was working in the City environment. Without sounding too Pollyanna-ish, what I do now has been so much more interesting and worthwhile. We actually do hard law rather than manage transactions and the culture is much better. Apart from sport, my other main interests are travel, going to the opera and theatre and art.'*

### **Most Memorable Running Moment**

*'It is hard to choose a most memorable running moment but I think – apart from the Varsity Match in my final year - it would be running the 'glory leg' in the Battavieren relay race in Holland with the Surrey (and ex Surrey) University guys in 1985. I've always preferred relays to individual events. The race is nuts. There are 20 runners and each is accompanied by someone on a bike. The first of the 3 stages starts at midnight and its last leg finishes at 5.30 in the morning. Everyone who isn't running or supporting that group kips over in a sports hall and stage 2 starts at 7 in the morning and finishes late morning. At the end of the third stage is the 'women's glory leg' into the stadium at Enschede University. It has a mass start followed by the same final leg for men. A key aim is to get through the first of 5 miles before the barriers come down at the railway crossing – usually about half the field are left waiting for the train to go through. I beat the train, ran one of my best times and was dead at the end of it. (The photograph is not pretty!). Another memorable run was the Orion 15 XC race in Epping Forest running for Thames in about 1988. Nearly the whole route was gloopy mud – afterwards I even had mud behind my ears. Finishing well under 2 hours ahead of several decent Thames male runners was one of my best runs and the only time I have really felt I was floating effortlessly rather than working hard with every step.*