

## Famous Brentwood Runner

Thomas Johnston was born in Burnmouth on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1874, the son of James Johnston and Alice Kerr. Tommy, as he was known, was destined for fame as a long distance cross country runner. He is listed in the 1881 census, a 7 year old schoolboy living with his parents at Cowdrait, Burnmouth.

He started running at the age of 17 and by the time he was 24 he had represented Scotland in international cross-country running seven times and for two years was captain of the Scottish team.

In 1898 he moved to Essex and joined the Thames Ironworks Athletic



Club. In his first year with the club he finished fifth in both the North of Thames Championship and in the Southern Counties Junior Championship.

When Tommy went to London his first lodgings were in Plaistow with Thomas Gray and his wife Elizabeth. Thomas Gray was from Eyemouth but had married an Essex girl. Thomas Gray is

described as a confectioner in the 1901 census and Tommy Johnston found work in that trade also. Plaistow had once been home to wealthy merchants, living in mansions surrounded by fields and trees. But by 1898, when Tommy arrived, manufactures abounded in the area. There were chemical works, candle makers, match makers and manure factories. What a shock to Tommy's senses after the good clean air of Burnmouth! The grand houses of Plaistow had been knocked down and now the dwellings were tiny and dirty with no gardens.

However, Tommy had not moved south for the scenery and was probably not too interested in his surroundings. Presumably the move was made so he could further his athletics career. When he joined the Thames Ironworks Athletic Club he had good results in the championships in 1888-89. In 1889 he joined Highgate Harriers and that year in the Southern Counties Cross-Country Championship at Wembley Park he finished third for his club and seventh in the actual race against hundreds of competitors. For 16 years he competed in championships

## Famous Brentwood Runner

and scored in the winning team. He peaked in 1908 when he was first for his club and second in the actual race.

Tommy married Ellen Maria Prior [no details of exact date yet] around the turn of the century. Tommy and Nellie, as his wife was known, had three children; James Thomas born 1903, Maria Ellen born 1905 and George William born 1907. The family lived in Brentwood which was a commuter town for London workers because of the rail link to Liverpool Street station. Vintage postcards portray Brentwood High Street as wide and clean with a good selection of shops. The shopkeepers lived above their shop premises. The street looks busy but not too crowded considering Brentwood was the main shopping town for the surrounding area. There are well dressed shoppers strolling around, cyclists wheeling their bikes and, in earlier scenes, horse drawn vehicles later to be replaced by motor cars. Brentwood was a residential rather than industrial town and although urban the area was surrounded by fields and trees.

The attraction for Tommy however would have been the fact that Brentwood had held Athletic meetings since 1881. He was a keen supporter of the local athletics and no one was better known in that circle or held in higher regard than T. Johnston. His name appeared in all the local sports programs, usually in the list of prizewinners. Not only did he win prizes locally but all over Britain and in France. He ran five times in Paris and won three medals. He had a Scottish International medal and won the Highgate Harriers 10 mile cross country championship seven times, dead heating with W. H. Brooks in 1909 – dead heating after a ten mile run! That must have been some race. He had to win a race in three successive years to be awarded several of his cups. In one instance the distance he had to cover was ninety miles before the prize was his. According to an article in the Essex Chronicle in 1921, the source of much of this information, he had won over seventy medals at that point in his sporting career. These included 11 firsts, 6 seconds and 4 thirds in the Southern Counties cross country Championships, 3 firsts, 4 seconds and a third in the National cross country Championships and medals in the Essex cross country

## Famous Brentwood Runner

Championship. Tommy attributed his many years of success to determination and consistent training. He was a non smoker but admitted to being not entirely teetotal.

### THE THREE NEVERS

There were three nevers in Tommy's life at the time the article appeared in the Chronicle: He had never been sick in his life, never had the toothache and never missed a day's work. This he attributed to a regular life and plenty of outdoor exercise.

Added to all his other medals were two for cycling. Yes, Brentwood had a cycling club and Tommy competed in that field too! The photograph at the top of the first page shows Tommy on the right wearing a shirt with the "gate" of Highgate Harriers emblazoned on the front. He is pictured with a display of all sorts of prizes he has won; watches, clocks and



cutlery sets to name but a few. The clock in the foreground of the photo is similar to one pictured left which originated in a house in Partanhall, Burnmouth and is still in existence to this day. Although it looks like marble it is actually wooden. The striking mechanism is a coiled wire gong and the clock strikes on the hour and half hour. There is a label on the back of it which gives the makers name as Ingram & Co. made in Bristol Connecticut. These clocks were American imports. They were popular around the early nineteen hundreds.

Tommy was still competing at the age of 47 and was considering leaving the Highgate Harriers but they would not hear of it saying he could just turn out when he felt like it.

The photograph to the left taken at Burnmouth shows Tommy in later years, second left in the back row and his daughter in law seated to the extreme right. Tommy died in 1962 at the age of 88.



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Apparently there is a pamphlet about Tommy's career. Does anyone know about it or any other details of Tommy's life?