Guto Nythbran and the athletes of the 1730s.

by Peter Radford

Summary.
Glanffrwd's accounts of Guto Nythbran's races were written down well over a century after they took place, but when they are compared with contemporary reports of other races in the 1730s, often by eye-witnesses, they seem to be entirely consistent with them. Guto Nythbran was only one of many men, women, boys and girls who ran races in Britain in the 1730s. Guto ran for money, as did many others, and for similar sums, and the distances he ran (4-Miles and 12-Miles) were familiar ones at the time. We know little about his 4-Mile race, but his 12-Mile race, from an unknown point in Monmouthshire to the church in Bedwas, was only notionally 12-Miles, and the time (53 minutes) was informally taken; and neither the precise distance or the precise time played any part in the wager itself, which was purely a race to see who got there first. He ran bare-footed, which was also a common practice at the time, and his sudden death at the end of the race also followed a pattern of other runners falling down after running hard in a race, and either dying, or being so ill their life was despaired of.

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Even Bernard Baldwin, who promoted Guto Nythbran and his accomplishments as hard as he could, admitted in private that the stories may have been mere legends, with little actual history behind them, or that, even if it was all true, it was now impossible to verify any of it. Nevertheless, Llanwynno, although a remote part of Britain, was an area with a variety of rural sports, fox-hunting, horse-racing, wrestling, running and jumping, and sport was a significant part of the Fairs where horses and cattle were bought and sold, and servants were hired. But how much credence should we give to Griffith Morgan's (Guto Nythbran) sporting achievements?

To start, we need to look at the other runners in Britain at the time when Guto ran; say, 1730 to 1737. Our understanding of them is far from complete and often reliant on single sources. Glanffwrd is our only source for the stories about Griffith Morgan (Guto Nythbran), and if Thomas Trundley had not written to the *The Sporting Magazine* in March 1794, we would know nothing about his six running "matches"; and we still know nothing about the "several other races" he ran because he chose not to tell us. Pinwire was one of the star runners of this period, and it was reported that he won 102 races between 1729 and 1733; but we only have details of one, though we do have a little more, later on! Perhaps, unsurprisingly therefore, we know nothing about Prince who ran against Guto in 1737.

Nevertheless, we do know that throughout Britain in the 1730s runners competed for large and small sums of money and over a variety of distances. Men, boys, youths under 18, old men, fat men, married men, bachelors, gentlemen, servants, lawyers, butchers, bakers, barbers, poulterers, parsons, vicars, chairmen, journeymen tailors, drawers (of pints),

merchants, fishmongers and, of course, footmen, ran races in Britain between 1730 and 1737. The term, *Footmen*, can be a little misleading at this time; there were *Running Footmen*, employed by the nobility or wealthy gentlemen, and they often ran races for their employers, as did their horses. But the word *pedestrian* had not yet come into use, and even *athlete* had not yet been adopted to describe runners; and so they were often described as *footmen*, not to be confused with *Running Footmen*, although, Running Footmen were footmen too. This multitude of runners raced on the roads, on race-courses, bowling greens, in parks, on moors and downs, and on any patch of ground that was suitable and available. They ran races as short as 100yds and as far as 400 miles, and they ran for prizes: hats, shirts, buckskin breeches, a suit, and much more. Some ran for smallish sums of money, but a few ran for big money stakes, as did Guto Nythbran.

We have records of two events in which Guto Nythbran ran, both of which he won. We have no evidence that he ran in smaller events for prizes; the two events that Glanffrwd writes about were head-to-head running matches for big stakes -

> a 4-Mile race at Hirwaun against an English Army Captain for £500, which he was said to have won "with the greatest ease." Hirwaun is about 4-Miles north-west of Aberdare at the head of the Cynon Valley. The date is unknown but it was probably in 1737, for the event below was in September 1737 and it was described as being, "shortly afterwards."
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> a 12-Mile race starting in Newport (Monmouth) and finishing at Bedwas, against Prince, an English Army Officer, "for a large sum of money" and with "many hundreds of pounds . . . wagered on the race." Griffith Morgan won, completing the 12-Miles in "seven minutes inside the hour." (i.e., in 53 minutes). This was on Friday 6 September 1737.

Were these races typical of the period? Who were the runners in Guto's time? How good were they? How typical were the distances, times, and sums of money that he ran for?

People. Guto's opponents were a) an English Army Captain, and b) an English Army Officer; and military personnel were active foot-racers elsewhere. For example, in 1732, Capt Richard Bell (a Navy Captain) ran against William Donkin on the Bowling Green at Scarborough, and in 1735 "the running soldier" ran along the Mall in London against a man from Sevenoaks. So, military personnel did engage in foot-races elsewhere in Britain in Guto Nythbran's time.

Griffith Morgan was a shepherd and we don't have any other records of a shepherd running in the 1730s (though there were several later) but there are reports of a drover; the Yorkshire Drover walked 400 miles in 6 days for £300-a-side in September 1737; he walked a 20-Mile wager the following year.

Distances. Guto's races were reported to be 4 and 12 miles. These were popular distances at the time. In 1730, Appleby and "a Footman" ran a 4-Mile race on Uxbridge Moor, and at

Fremington (Yorkshire) in 1736 there was a 4-Mile race for "Boys under 18 Years of Age". Indeed, in the 18th century as a whole, 4-Miles was perhaps the most often run distance.

In 1732, Appleby and Phillips ran a 12-Mile race on Uxbridge Moor, and "two footmen" ran "about 11-Miles" in London in 1734, and a lawyer ran 11-Miles on Moorfields (City of London) in 1730. So, these distances were familiar distances for foot-racers at this time.

Money. Guto ran for £500, and for "a large sum of money" in his two races. £500 was, of course, an enormous sum of money, but Capt Bell and William Donkin had also run for £500 in 1732, and in 1737 John Cresswell wagered 400gns (£420) that he could jump 80yds in 20 successive jumps, within 15 miles of London.

"Many hundreds of pounds" were said to have been wagered on the race between Guto Nythbran and Prince, but £1,000 was said to have been laid in bets on the race between the Running Soldier and the man from Sevenoaks, along the Mall in 1735. So large sums of money were raced for (and jumped for) in the 1730s, and very large sums of money changed hand in bets.

Times. Guto ran his 12-Mile race in 53 minutes - a time that would have been considered extraordinary anywhere, and at any time during the following 200 years; but, in 1730, John Appleby and Thomas Phillips were reported to have run 12-Miles in 57 and 57¼ minutes, respectively, on Uxbridge Moor. Appleby was said to have run 10-Miles in 52 minutes at Sherwood Forest in 1733 (equaling Phillips's 1720 time, at Woodstock), but only beating Pinwire by about 3 seconds. So, Guto's 12-Mile time was the fastest at that time (as we might expect), but there were other runners who were reported to be only 7 to 7½% slower.

So, the main characteristics of Guto Nythbran's races, as told by Glanffrwd, seem largely consistent with other events, run by other athletes in Britain at that time. There are, of course, big questions. Were the distances measured accurately, and can we believe the time?

Measuring distance. When a wager depended on it, distances in the 1730s could be measured very accurately, and when they did so (usually with an agricultural - or surveyor's chain) it would be reported that the distance was "computed", as was the 11-Miles that two footmen ran in London in January 1734. The 60-Miles that was walked at Fulham in 1735 was also reported to have been "computed". The 8-Mile race in St James's Square, in 1737, was also "computed". Nevertheless, this did not always guarantee that both sides agreed. In November 1737 a Journeyman Carpenter undertook to walk 100 miles in 24 Hours on a half-mile course measured out on the Newington Road. When he lost, he "had the Ground measured again" and it was found to be 3-yards too long - an error that would multiply up to 600 yards in the course of 100-Miles. This had an immediate effect on the paying out of bets, and it was said that eventually one or other party might have had to resort to the law to get their money. "The Dispute may possibly end at Westminster," the newspapers said.

There were many occasions, however, when the distance being precisely right didn't matter; when everyone concerned *knew* that the distance run wasn't correct. This occurred when the

race was held on a well-known horse-race course. For example, the "4-Mile course" at Doncaster was known to be 4 miles and 7 yards long. At Knavesmire (York), there were two "4-Mile" Courses but neither was 4-Miles long; one was 3 miles 7 furlongs and 127 yards, and the other was 3 miles 6 furlongs and 193 yards. The description - "the 4-Mile Course" was merely a guideline.

In races between one place and another (such as Guto and Prince's race from Newport to Bedwas) it did not really matter how far it was as long as both parties had agreed to run it. In those cases, the distance is also given as a guide.

In Guto's 12-Mile race, no claim was made that the course was computed; indeed the distance was immaterial. Those who represented each side in this race went to Carmarthen to meet and arrange the details of the race - known usually as the *Articles of Agreement*. They would have established the date, starting time, starting point, and finishing point, and how much money was to be run for, and who would hold it in the meantime. Once the details of start and finish were agreed, the detail of the distance was of no importance, and it is likely that the description of the race as being 12 Miles long was something added later, and not an integral part of the competition. Who added it, is now unknown.

Measuring time. Much the same can be said about measuring time and it is probably significant that there is no mention of the runners' times in his earlier 4-Mile race. A little later, time became very important when runners ran "time" matches; these were races against the clock, and usually with no other runners. For example, "I bet you that I can run 10-Miles inside an hour." In such an example, the measurement of the 10-Miles and the measurement of the hour would be of great significance, and great care would have been taken with both. But Time Matches were not particularly popular in the 1730s, and Guto did not run any of them anyway, so, the time would not have been part of the *Articles of Agreement*, and any time taken would have been taken by someone interested in checking it, but it would not have been "official", and the watch was almost certainly carried by its owner on horseback as he followed the runners.

This does not mean of course that they couldn't measure time (and distance) very precisely when they needed to. My data-base of footraces contains 54 footraces in Britain by males from 1730 to 1737 inclusive; only 23 give details of distance and time. The precision of the winning times was as follows -

to half-an-hour	2
to quarter-of-an hour	4
to a minute	13
to half-a-minute	2
to quarter-of-a-minute	1
to a second	1
	23

Guto Nythbran's time of 7 minutes within the hour (i.e., 53 minutes) is, therefore, typical of reported times elsewhere; it was reported in whole minutes. This may not be the whole story,

however; in 1730 when John Appleby was reported to have won a 12-Mile race on Uxbridge Moor, his time was given as 57 minutes (i.e., to the nearest minute), but the second man was Thomas Phillips, and his time was given as 57¼ minutes (i.e. to the nearest quarter minute). It is unlikely, however, that they were measuring the 2nd place man more precisely than the winner. In 1733, John Appleby ran a 10-Mile race at Sherwood Forest, and his winning time was given as 52 minutes. Pinwire was second, and his time was given as 52 mins and 3 seconds. Was Appleby's time measured to the whole minute, while 2nd place Pinwire's time was measured to the nearest second? It hardly seems likely. It also seems unlikely that Appleby's two winning times coincidentally finished exactly on the whole minute. So, was Pinwire's time estimated? If so, we have to consider the possibility that some of the times that were reported in the 1730s were a combination of recorded times and estimated times, estimated from the distance they were behind the winner. It seems strange to us, but something similar (though actually opposite) was used in the Sheffield Handicaps 150 years later. The sprint times that were reported were also a mixture of times and distances; there are hundreds of examples, but in 1879 Harry Hutchens ran a 200yds Handicap race in which it was described that he ran "six yards inside evens." He was off 68¾yds. No running enthusiast needed to be told that that meant he had run at the rate of 6yds faster than 10 yards a second (e.g., 100yds in 10seconds. In other words, 131¼yds in 12½seconds (actually, 5.75yds inside evens). This is an example of estimating *distance* (6yds inside evens) from a known time (12½seconds), whereas Pinwire's *time* may have been estimated from the known distance he was behind Appleby.

If timing to the nearest whole minute was the most common, Thomas Trundley, writing about the late 1730s, seems quite comfortable using seconds to record a complicated "trial" he ran - "I ran twenty half miles . . . in fifty-six minutes and ten seconds", he wrote, which sounds like a very hard session indeed, with very short intervals between each run. But then, Thomas Trundley was very good, and was never beaten, but his "ten seconds" could have been an estimation.

All the above description of measuring distance and time seems to suggest that 18th century running times, and their measurement of distance, was a bit chaotic, but that would be wrong. It was extremely rigorous once one understands it, and both sides in a wager checked and double-checked all elements, without which the winner's money would not have been paid out. In fact, so reliable are 18th century running times that when the times over distances from 2 to 25-Miles, in the 18th, 19th, and 20th century, were analysed for their internal consistency and the 18th century data were found to be very similar to those of the 19th and 20th centuries (18th century rms error = 3.750%; 19th century rms error = 2.587%; 20th century rms error = 2.910%)[1]

More about money. It was usual at that time for wagers to be made "a-side"; i.e., both sides would bet a sum of money (usually the same sum) against the other. This total sum would then be placed in the hands of an independent stake holder, who would pass the whole sum to the winner, once he was convinced that all the terms of the *Articles of Agreement* had been followed. This mean that a man who wagered £500 would have to give up his £500 to the

stake holder sometime in advance, sometimes days, even weeks. If he won, he would get his own £500 back and also the £500 from the man he bet against. Although this was well understood at the time, it can lead to confusion now. In the 1730s it might be said that a man was running for £500, but the sub-text would be that it was £500-a-side wager. We can see that Guto Nythbran's races fall into this category for we are told that Sian of the Shop wagered an apron-full of gold on him winning against Prince, but she collected *two* aprons-full of gold when he won - i.e., the one from Prince, plus the one she had originally staked herself. We can imagine the security in the churchyard at Bedwas, with the equivalent of two aprons full of gold around - protected by numerous big, strong-armed men, and several dogs, no doubt!

Bare feet. It is clear from the fact that when Prince got ahead, and his supporters scattered glass on the road to scupper Guto Nythbran's chances, that Guto was running bare-footed. Running bare-foot was common at that time; indeed, in the case of Richard Levet's wager to go 20 miles in 4 hours in 1731, the *Articles of Agreement* required it. He ran from St John's Street (just east of Clerkenwell) to St Albans, but when he got to Finchley Common, "the fleshy part of his heels loosened . . . and the blood began to flow plentifully, yet he continued his journey, and at St Albans he had them cut off for his convenience." in May 1733, however, a man engaged in a wager that required him to run up the Mall and around St James's Park, not only in bare feet, but stark naked. Running naked had been going on for decades, and would continue for more decades, but is outside the scope of this essay. But, we know that, in running bare-footed, Guto was doing what other runners were doing at the time.

Pace judgement. In Glanffrwd's account of Guto's race against Prince, Guto falls a long way behind, before catching Prince up on the final hill, and asks him cheekily if that was as fast as he could go. It reads as if Guto was playing with him and letting him get ahead, but it might have been because Prince started too fast. In all the races in the 18th century in which we are able to check the time over different parts of a race, it is usual to find that runners started fast, and then slowed. Pace judgement is never talked about and, clearly, not understood, but then no-one knew about the advantages of even-paced running before Arthur E. Kennelly (Professor of Electrical Engineering at Harvard University) wrote his paper, *An Approximate Law of Fatigue in the Speeds of Racing Animals*, in 1906.[2] Perhaps Mr Donkin (described alternatively as a fisherman and a fishmonger) was typical of many others when, in April 1732, he ran against Captain Richard Bell at Scarborough. "Mr Donkin pushing too furiously off, could not hold it, so was forced to walk . . ." Is that what happened to Prince?

Illness and sudden death from racing. In July 1730 John Appleby won a hard 4-Mile race by about a yard from a "noted footman", but was taken ill immediately afterwards and the newspaper reports said that "he now lies dangerously ill." Fortunately, he recovered for (as noted above) in December 1733 he beat Pinwire by 3 seconds in a 10-Mile race; but he died four-hours afterwards. Pinwire was also in a bad way after the race, so bad, the newspapers wrote, that "it was thought that Pinwherie (Pinwire) cannot live." Running long, hard races in the 1730s was clearly not for the faint-hearted. Tragically, Guto Nythbran's sudden death at the end of a race wasn't that unusual either.

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Before leaving the 1730s we should remind ourselves that running was not all about Guto Nythbran, Appleby, Pinwire, and Trundley, and the big wagers. The overwhelming majority of races were small and local, and they ran for prizes.

Prizes. Prizes were on offer at horse-race meetings, where the organisers wanted to pad out the programme with some foot-races, or at local Fairs, or when a community had a traditional programme of events on, say, Whit Monday, or Easter Monday. These prizes had to be paid for, however; sometimes it was done by charging an entrance fee, which then went to the winner, or the organising committee raised the money some other way. We hear that a Mr Byron made a collection to raise money for a hat to be the prize at a horse-race at Crosby in 1725; five "lads" eventually ran for it. Some such prizes could be quite desirable; a gold laced hat for a race in The Mall in 1733 (also a gold laced suit), a velvet cap for a race in Yorkshire in 1737. Sometimes they ran for money.

Occasionally, very occasionally, small amounts of money were available for prizes but usually the money came from wagers; half-a-guinea, 1 guinea, 5, 10, 12, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50 guineas-a-side; there was a wager for every purse. When it came to the big money, however, things were somewhat different. In 1734, the 11-Mile race from St James's to Edgeware Gate in London, for £100-a-side, between their respective Running Footmen, would have been produced from the deep pockets of Brigadier General Charles Churchill and Lady Jane (Lucas) Molesworth, respectively. The financing of the £500 for the race, once "round the Bowling Green" at Scarborough, would have been a different matter altogether, and the money was probably accumulated by subscription from many people.

Women and girls. We learn from an 1871 Welsh newspaper that Guto may have had a sister who was probably born in 1728. She, too, could run and even as a girl (he died when she was 9) would run with her brother and keep ahead of him for the first 400yds. There is no evidence yet of women runners in Wales in the 1730s but there were a lot in England and Ireland. They too ran for prizes and small sums of money, but not for wagers; nevertheless, there were probably more women runners in England than men runners. They had been running races in Kent for money and prizes for 100 years, but we also have records of them in the 1730s running in Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Leicestershire, County Durham, the Yorkshire Dales, Westmorland and London. Usually they ran for a smock (also known as a shift), caps, stockings, laced shoes and, on one occasion, for gold rings.

Typical, perhaps, was the race on Sandwich Salts, Kent, in 1730, when six "maids" (young, unmarried girls/women) ran for a shift valued at 1guinea; at one o'clock on Whit Monday afternoon. They each paid 6 pence entrance money, which went to the maid who was 2nd (so, she won 3 shillings). The shift was given by Capt. Smith. [6d in 1730 would have a purchasing power of £3.51 in 2016, and so the 2nd runner received the equivalent of £21.00.6]

They ran a “best of three” system in which all the runners started in Heat 1 and the winner was recorded. After a breathing space, they *all* started again, unless any of them had failed to reach the distance post - a post set some distance before the finish; which each runner had to have reached by the time the winner had finished, or that runner was eliminated. If the winner of the 1st Heat won again then she had won the whole thing; if another runner won, the whole process was repeated and they all ran again, until one runner won two heats. It was called the best-of-three system because anyone who won two races had won the best of three.

The distances that the women and girls ran differed but, at Selling in 1738, they ran 30 Rods (165yds); at Swingfield Minnis, Kent, in 1730, they ran 60 Rods (330yds - 301.75m); at Sandwich, in 1739, 440yds (402.34m); and at Marlborough Races, in 1739, they ran 2-Miles [3.22km]. Usually, the distances were relatively short and, in 1733, one newspaper referred to the “*women sprinters*” who raced along Pall Mall in London; so the term *sprinter* was in common use before the word *athlete*, or even *pedestrian*.

An event in Pall Mall is worth recording. In 1734, it was won by Hannah Williams, a butcher**’**s wife from Hungerford Market, and also known as *Bumbina’s sister*; she had won a similar even on The Mall (The Mall, and Pall Mall are straight roads that run parallel to each other in Westminster) earlier in the year. She had also won an event on Pall Mall the previous year, so it is not surprising that it was said that she was making quite a name for herself; but her husband made her sell her latest prize smock to buy two of a “coarse thread”, more “fit for the use she was to put them to.” Events along The Mall and Pall Mall attracted large crowds, and there were many such events; in 1732, for example, it seems that there were races on five consecutive days - one for women and four for men - but the women’s events seem to have attracted the biggest crowds. When the 1732 event was on, “Balconies of all the Houses in Pall-Mall were crowded with Spectators, and the Streets were never seen fuller of People on any Occasion whatever.”

Getting the approval of the crowds is one thing, getting royal approval is quite another. In 1733 Captain Litter, Adjutant of the First Regiment of Foot Guards, gave a smock to be run for by five young women in the park adjoining Hampton Court Palace. King George II was present and was so “pleased with the Race” he ordered two guineas to be given to the winner.

So, Guto’s sister was among very good company - women and girls ran races and won prizes all over Britain in the 1730s, they attracted big crowds and even received the approval of the King himself.

Jumpers. Before leaving Guto Nythbran’s contemporaries - the men and women runners of the 1730s - we should also mention the jumpers. The modern sport of Track & Field Athletics owes its first rules to England, which had a strong running tradition, but it has often been said that it was Ireland and Scotland that provided the history and tradition of jumping and throwing - but that is not entirely true. Glanffrwd tells of David of Ynyshir boasting that he once beat a champion at the Waun Fair in a jumping competition while still wearing his great coat. No date is suggested, but if Glanffrwd collected his stories from David of Ynyshir

in 1859, when he was 85, then we can estimate that the jumping competition at the Waun Fair may have been when he was 20, and so around 1794. Jumping competitions were popular all over Britain at that time, but they had been particularly popular in England sixty years earlier, in the 1730s; and we know that jumping competitions were an important part in Dover's annual Olimpick Games from 1612.

Jumpers did not High Jump, Triple Jump or simply Long Jump; they wagered how far they could go in multiple jumps. In April 1737 John Creswell wagered that he could cover 80yds [73.15m] in jump 20 successive leaps (jumps), for 400gns. He was a stone-cutter, and was the jumping star of the day, and he beat Thomas Farmer at Mouswell-Hill [Muswell Hill, in North London] in June 1737 for £200 in "the greatest Match that ever was known" - covering 40yds 19ins (37.059m) in 10 leaps, winning by six inches. To do so, Creswell had to perform it three times, and in another report he is credited with 41yds 9ins (37.719m). In November 1737, Creswell entered into a "considerable" wager to jump 240yds in 60 leaps at Marybon [Marylebone], and achieved it in 59, with two-feet over. His 59th leap was 13ft (3.96m). Another report claimed that he won it with eight-feet to spare.

So famous were the jumpers at this time that when John Roberts, another famous jumper, drowned in the Serpentine in September 1737, his death was reported in the newspapers. Dr Samuel Johnson, of the *Dictionary* fame, told the story of how, as a young man, he was travelling with his uncle (Cornelius Ford) when he stopped and read the inscription on a stone by the side of the road; the stone had been erected in honour of a man who had performed an extraordinary leap there, and to mark the length of it. His uncle then jumped it with his boots on. That must have taken place before 1731.

So, David of Ynyshir was only continuing a jumping tradition that had been going on for centuries.

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December 2017

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[1] P.F. Radford and A.J. Ward Smith, "British Running Performances in the Eighteenth Century", *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 21, 429-438, (2003).

[2] .. A.E. Kennelly, "An Approximate Law of Fatigue in the Speeds of Racing Animals", *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 42, 275-331, (1906).