

Sunday 8 July - Olympic Torch Relay - Day 51 – the Hemel Hempstead leg

My instructions came in a parcel with my Jimmy Saville lookalike suit. We were briefed in the Civic Centre on the procedures for lighting, holding the torch (tight), of how “the kiss” between torches was carried out, plus the procedures for transferring from the setting down coach to the recovery one after your “run”.

With an hour to go we boarded the coach and for the first time saw all our numbered torches in a custom made rack. Each torch is 800mm long with 8,000 holes representing the number of torch bearers and weighing just 2lbs, although it is very top heavy with the burner fitted. To meet up with the convoy from St Albans beyond the start point in Leverstock



Green, our route had to cover some of the actual torch route. There was a stunned silence on the coach when we saw the thousands of people lining every inch on both sides, then we all began to wave – this was now real!

While we waited for the police escorts and the sponsor’s convoy we shared the reasons why we were nominated - that would have been worth filming – there were some truly wonderful people on that bus. I was fortunate to have an extra section to cover as my leg began in the pedestrian precinct so I had to walk to my start point in the middle of Marlowes receiving extra encouragement along the way.

At the point when you are ready to receive the flame it is very emotional but also exciting particularly with so many friends and family, including my little grandson from New York, waiting with you.

Fiona (a most delightful lady who was nominated for starting a children’s hospice after losing her small son) came into view, actually you could hear the crowd way before you saw her. My torch was tested and then the two torches “kissed” and I was ready to trot with my Met Police escort. Amazingly I saw so many familiar faces in the huge crowd and the noise and enthusiasm made your hair stand up on the back of your neck. Thank you for being there.

All too soon I covered the 300 metres and handed the flame on and boarded the pick-up coach to a rousing reception from the previous runners. After the last torchbearer was on board at the top of Queensway there must have been an all points communication that free beer and sandwiches were available on the next leg as we immediately lost our police escorts and it then took another 45 minutes to return to the Civic Centre. Certainly a day to remember and savour!

David Butler