

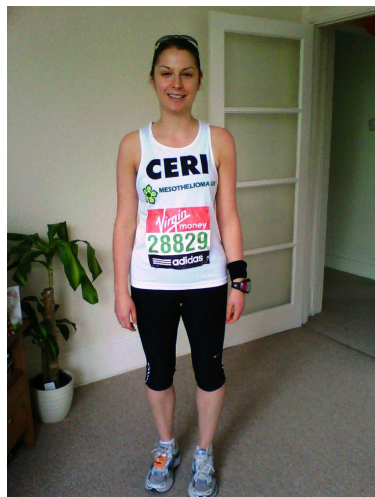
Ceri's birthday London Marathon April 17th 2011

Well this is it. Race time! It's been 5 years since I started running, 3 years of failed ballot spots so I guess you could say that my Marathon journey started way before my hard training commenced 5 months ago in November. The last 5 months have been blooming hard work – a combination of sensible(ish) eating, raging appetites, reduced alcohol consumption, incredibly long distance weekend runs with ridiculously early starts, shorter interval spurts, kettle bell weight training, a lot of experimentation with energy gels and recovery drinks, fundraising, cake-sales and all of this with a full time job. However the question which has bugged me all along remained – will it all have been worth it? Only one way to find out...

I arrived in Blackheath on Saturday evening as my 2 lovely friends Hayley and Rik very conveniently lived about 100m from where I had to be on Sunday morning. This was a complete luxury for me. I'm a terrible traveller as I always allow too much time to get anywhere when public transport is involved, but with only 100m to walk I didn't have to worry! I had a lovely chilled evening with Hayley and Rik – a light dinner followed by a film and bed. They'd even given me their bed and instead slept in the lounge, I insisted this wasn't necessary but they wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you guys – it really meant a lot. I even slept for most of the night!

Race day, which also happened to be my 29th Birthday, my alarm went off at 6.45am. First things first – breakfast!!! I then nervously dressed, smothering my arms in Lanacane chaffing gel, my feet in Compeed, and my arms and heat in factor 30 suncream. I then packed and re-packed my bag a 100 times whilst watching the Marathon coverage on BBCNews 24. I could hardly believe all of this was happening just down the road from where I was. I had to get down there!

A few posed 'before' pictures which I immediately posted to Facebook for my friends and family who weren't able to make it down today – technology just astounds me these days! Then at 8.30am it was time to leave and Hayley and Rik walked me down to the start area. A few almost teary (me by the way) goodbye hugs and I was off on my own! I was in the green start which was for the celebs, and anyone associated with Virgin Money (since I'd won my place in the marathon through a Virgin Money competition). I felt incredibly lucky to be in this special start area. There were a mere 3000 of us rather than about 15,000 in each of the red and blue starts. Bag in, and time to join the long loo queue. I chose the queue next to the celebrity pen so I could get a good glimpse of who was about – my spottings included; James Cracknell (swoon), Matthew Pinsent, Cheryl Baker, Sophie Raworth, Mike Bushell, Jamie Baulch, Iwan Thomas, Nell McAndrew and Agyness Deyn. Not a bad set, but I really wanted to see Will Young...



Dressed and raring to go!

Anyway... at 9am we saw the elite ladies set off on the big screen, I was really rooting for Liz Yelling having met her twice at the Virgin Money training days I'd been too. Not long after we were ushered into our pens. I was in the back one. Most people were quiet and contemplating the race ahead. I'd expected people to be really chatty but maybe it was just nerves.

At 9.45am my worst fears were upon me. Oh yes they were playing that blooming M People song "What have you done today, to make you feel proud". I don't even like M People and I can't stand this song, but the mere sound of it, especially on a TV montage usually leaves me drowning in a pool of tears. However thanks to the poking fun in my current favourite comedy show Miranda all it did was make me giggle. Accompanied to the bellowing sounds of Heather Small I crossed the start line a mere 2 minutes after the starting gun – I really couldn't quite believe it only took that long. Here's my mile by mile account of the epic journey from Blackheath to the Mall...

0 – Leaving Blackheath: Soon enough we passed Hayley and Rik's house where they were waiting for me with a huge 'Ceri' banner. I wasn't quite expecting that. They bellowed at me and also shouted Happy Birthday, which got quite a few looks from the rest of the crowd and runners too, made me feel really special. Slight pain started in my right shin. Was hoping I just needed to warm up and it would go away...

1 – Converged with the blue start: Because there were so many more runners in the blue start most of the runners at this point of the field were faster than me. Was a little disconcerting to have so many people passing me, but I tried to put it out of my mind. I then saw my friend from work Natasha with boyfriend Matt in the crowd. It was great to have support so early on. I think I saw them before they saw me though which startled them somewhat!

2 – Charlton: Strong South-East London accent hollers "Go on Serrri". Oh dear, it starts....Was it really a good idea to put my name on my shirt in big bold letters, knowing that most of my life I've had problems with the pronunciation of my name? (Welsh names in Surrey – a big no-no!). There were lots of shameless men peeing up against various walls at this point – I had started to need the loo again and this just made me a little jealous that women just couldn't get away with this! Cue lots of tut-ing women!

3 – Woolwich: Here we converged with the red start, resulting in a lot of booing! I'd read that this usually happens and all contributed to the fun and friendly atmosphere. A lovely stretch downhill eased the pressure a bit, trying desperately not to run too fast. I was starting to feel really hot, and I wasn't sure if this was because it was actually hot, or whether the dense field of runners added an extra few degrees to the temp.

4 – Crowds really building now and along with that the volume of the cheering. Lots of supporters were already drinking pints along the route (It was 10.30am!) Thirsty work cheering??? – try running! I was still feeling good, and enjoying the journey so far. Trying to ignore how much further there is to go.

5 – New Charlton: Now just a mere 21 miles to go. In my head was trying to think of the last 5 miles as a warm up with the 21 ahead being the race (21 miles also equal to the furthest I'd run before today). Here we passed a Lucozade station, and as well as almost getting my feet stuck to the tarmac with all the spillage everywhere I also narrowly avoided being knocked out by an idiot runner who lobbed a finished bottle within a hairs breath of my head..

6 – Towards Greenwich: I'd been in Greenwich last weekend and also Friday night so it was comforting to be somewhere familiar. The town centre was packed with supporters and the cheering got quite deafening. I randomly saw a girl I was at school with in the crowd who looked quite startled to see me! First slurp of my honey energy gel – it was rather warm...

7 – Past Greenwich: Was a shame that we didn't get to go past the Cutty Sark – such a landmark from all the years of watching on the TV. Apparently we have extra steps to fit in around Canary Wharf instead, will look forward to that later...

8 – Deptford: Strong smells of Chinese food (why do I remember that?) and some awesome London Fire Brigade showers. The heat was really beginning to rise and they were very welcome. There were lots more showers on route and I managed to navigate myself through every single one. What on earth I must have looked like!

9 – Surrey Quays: My sister Rhian, her fiancé Barry and my Brother Rich were going to be in Surrey Quays and I was both excited about seeing them and nervous that I would miss

them. I scanned the crowds for about a 10 minute stretch and then out of nowhere I heard a familiar scream as I saw them and grabbed my coconut water drink that they had carried for me – nice work guys! It was warm but really refreshing and I hoped it would give me that extra hydration I needed. I hardly had time to say hello, but then I was running a race so I'm not sure stopping for a chat and a cup of tea would have been the order of the day. Took the drink in over the next 10 mins but it did make me want to pee... Thought best to avoid the next few water stations, just in case...

10&11 – Rotherhide: Trying desperately to avoid all thoughts of needing the loo I bargained with myself that if I saw a loo with no queue that I would go, but in all reality I knew this probably wouldn't happen. I was so desperate to complete the race without stopping, and after all my preparation I didn't want this to get the better of me. Maybe if I sweated a bit more I wouldn't need to go...

12 – Bermondsey: A few runners had already started to drop out and the St John's Ambulance crew were doing a fantastic job of massaging cramped up calf muscles and nursing dehydrated runners back to health. They were also on hand with pots of Vaseline. I saw an opportunity to take a scoop and smothered it all over my arms just in case, but then I had Vaseline all over my hands – yuck, not even a swish of water or wiping my hands on my trousers could get rid of it!

13 – Tower Bridge: This was just awesome, and I had been really looking forward to it, signifying almost half way as well as being one of my favourite London landmarks, which I had passed so frequently in my training. Just as I turned the corner onto the bridge had a holler of "Ceri" which I recognised as louder than a general cheer, so turned my head just in time and caught my work friends Megan and Ingrid jumping up and down screaming and waving at me. This put a huge smile on my face as I crossed over the bridge. I was half way at 2hrs 18. Not quite the 2hrs15 I was hoping for but by this point I was so hot and bothered I was just glad I still felt good and had more to give!

14 – Shadwell: This is the part of the race that you get 2 parts of the race in different directions – with the other side already at 22. Just a little bit jealous of all the faster men who only had 4 miles to go. Oh well, I'd be there in 9 miles time a mere 90 minutes from now... By this point the mispronunciations of my name (Cherie, Seri, Cherry, Sherry, Geri, Teri) were starting to drive me crazy so I moved to the centre of the road to avoid the crowds. Rather annoyingly this meant that I missed my siblings, but I hope they'll forgive me for that. Having people constantly shout out your name is a really strange feeling – it makes you think that everyone in the crowd knows you, almost a little like being famous, and they really are wishing you along wishing you a champion journey and that was such an awesome feeling, I wish I had been prepared for how to react to that as it caught me by surprise!

15 – Canary Wharf: Had the promise of my school friends Alex, Gems, Hayley & Rebs somewhere around this point. Just after the tunnel I heard a familiar whoop and was greeted by screams, purple sparkly banners and a rendition of Happy Birthday. Wow! I was absolutely touched with their effort and this really spurred me on. Then 2 minutes later I saw university friends Fi and Ioan who had come all the way from Cardiff to see me. Brilliant! I knew they were both planning on also being around mile 19 so I just had to keep going for another 40 minutes till then.... If only my supporters knew how much their presence had motivated me from one spot to the next! (well secrets out they know now – thanks sooo much guys!)

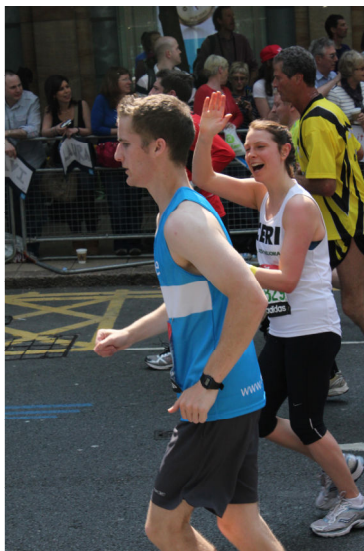
16 – Isle of Dogs: Uh-oh the roads around here were rather narrow and keeping up my pace was becoming more of a challenge. There were runners stopping all over the place and this was a really difficult mile, not least because I thought I was at 17 but then I saw the 16 mile banner. Pants. Then to make matters worse out of nowhere I got a cramp on the left side of my tummy. Hoping this was a phase I did lots of deep breathing and it eased slightly.

17 – Millwall: Still struggling and it was getting really really warm and with no shade to hide behind. Salty sweat crystals all over my skin. Crowds offering bananas, haribo and even chocolate biscuits left right and centre – very kind but think I'll pass.

18 – Are we still in Canary Wharf? This section of the course was going on forever! Though as I knew I would see my girls again soon, I really didn't want them to see me struggling. I concentrated hard on lots more deep breathing, taking on plenty of water, and keeping as upright as possible as my drooping posture was starting to give me backache...

19 – Hooray, saw both the gangs again. This pulled me together and I found the strength from somewhere to keep hanging in there. My 4hrs30 goal was rapidly disappearing but I kept telling myself that as very few people ever run a marathon, I really shouldn't be so hard

on myself. Just being in the race was an amazing achievement, one that just 5 years ago I would never have dreamed of. Then there were all the many people who had sponsored me and had faith in my abilities to nail the race, not least my Mum who'd been singing a song from The Producers down the phone at me all week #“You can do it”. I still actually have no idea what song she is talking about but it kept me going nevertheless. No way was I going to let anyone down now.



Still smiling at mile 19

20 - Almost out of the Canary Wharf peninsular at last with just 6 miles to go! Hooray that's just the same as mere 10k race which meant just an hour of running to go. Keep plodding and remember that running is simply the art of putting one foot in front of another. That is all.

21 - Limehouse & heading back down towards Shadwell: I was so relieved that the miles were ticking down. Just 5 more, just 5 more. I felt very sorry for the walkers on the left side of the barriers who were only just past the 13 mark – it must be so soul destroying. I was greeted to my right by Rhian, Rich and Barry accompanied by shouts of “you're doing really well”. Yes I am!! Must keep on going.

22 – Tower hill: That's more like it, back with the familiar sights of the London I know well. “Just pretend this is your Tower Bridge training run” I kept telling myself, not long to go now. Then the unbelievable happened. I realised I had run further than I've ever run before, I hadn't yet hit 'the wall' some uplifting loud music was playing and that wonderful feeling of euphoria washed over me. About blooming time – it had only taken 4 hours!

23 - Canon Street: With the euphoric glow still all over me I glided down Thames Street and really believed that I could up the pace a bit. Just Final slurp of my energy gel which coated my throat in a really unpleasant way whilst I desperately tried not to choke.. 3 miles to go – just 30 mins – come on!!

24 – Blackfriars Tunnel: Usually reserved for cars Blackfriars tunnel felt dark and long. There were runners walking everywhere and a few who'd collapsed on the roadside. Must keep going. Do not stop now. Legs please do not fail me.

25 – Embankment: I was expecting Mum by Embankment Bridge and frantically scanning the crowds kept me going all along the Embankment. The crowds were so thick and the cheering so loud it was almost impossible to notice the Thames and all the sights of London I usually love to absorb. I spotted a green crowd of ladies (the Epsom Allsorts in their matching jumpers) and there was Mum, practically hanging over the railings waving and cheering, it felt amazing to see her and to be able to wave and actually smile “See you at the end” I shouted, and with that I knew I had a mere mile to go. Oh goodness – I was actually going to finish this race! It finally felt real. Then as I turned the corner into parliament square, I saw Megan and Ingrid, and then the girls again. You CAN do it – just a little bit more!

Well that little bit more went on forever. I really wanted to find the power within to up the speed into St James Park but I just had nothing left to give. 800m to go then 600m to go, then the 385 yards to go sign as we turned into Birdcage Walk. I don't remember seeing a

sign for 26 miles – perhaps I was deluded at that point or maybe there wasn't one? Feeling a little light headed I ploughed on determined not to stop and facing just a little bit more... Goodness this was the longest 385 yards of my life. The crowds were screaming but all I could focus on was the end. Nearly there, nearly there... I didn't even notice Buckingham Palace. Then low and behold the most amazing sight was before me – the finish line! Hooooooooooooay!!!! I crossed the line at 4hrs44 and knowing I was 2minutes behind this I realised I had achieved my goal of completing the race in between 4hrs30 & 4hrs45. True, it would have been truly awesome to be nearer to 4hrs30 but given this marathon lark was unknown territory for me, and territory not that many people ever cross I was just plain glad to have finished! 4hrs 42 minutes and 28 seconds.

My legs turned to jelly as I finally stopped and was ushered into a queue to have my tag removed and to get my medal. I then did the most stupid thing and kissed my medal. It just felt like the thing to, I mean did I think it was an Olympic gold or something? Well to me it might as well have been. I did it! Surreal and beyond all my belief I'd run a whole marathon.

I'd almost forgotten it was my birthday, and once I'd picked up my bags and found my friends and family I was treated to an embarrassing rendition of Happy Birthday – I loved every second of it. Everyone was telling me I looked so fresh and at that moment I actually didn't feel too bad. The human body really is an amazing machine!



Mum and me at the finish in St James' Park

Anyway, it was off home for a shower, some birthday presents, some fresh clothes and straight out to the pub for a large steak, cake and a few drinks (mostly water mind) to finally celebrate my birthday. I still couldn't believe I'd run a Marathon, someone pinch me please because this is one surreal dream! Would I do it again?? You bet I would, but just not for a bit... I'd quite like my Sunday lie-ins back.

It couldn't have been a more perfect way to run a marathon – staying in Blackheath, starting in the exclusive green start, amazing weather, a huge crowd of personal supporters and all of that on my birthday. I felt like a very lucky girl.

To date I have raised over £5,000 for **Mesothelioma UK** and the **Mick Knighton Mesothelioma Research Fund**, and I couldn't have done this without the amazing support network of my family, friends and colleagues. Whilst I felt like a very lucky girl on Sunday, beneath it all the fact remains that my mother has an incurable cancer which isn't very lucky at all. I just hope that by doing something positive for these charities and raising such a phenomenal amount, one that I could never have dreamed of, will in turn make someone else feel lucky for a bit.

www.virginmoneygiving.com/cerijones1982