

When Ann Sayer passed away on Wednesday 15th April 2020, aged 83, another victim of the COVID-19 coronavirus, the ultra distance walking world lost one of its legends. Ann had been living in a nursing home and her health was failing, but that does little to lessen our loss.



Ann at the 2011 LDWA walk

Well done to Kathy Crilley on what must be the definitive bio, published only 2 days after Ann's passing. You must start with that read - <http://www.centurionsworldwide.org.uk/ann-sayer-mbe.html>.

Ann, born on 16th October 1936, had been a champion rower in her younger days, part of the small group of women who – almost entirely at their own expense, which included buying boats and blades – were responsible for there being GB women's international eights and fours in the early 1960s. In the face of dominant Eastern Bloc crews, their and her 'finest hour' was at the 1962 European Women's Rowing Championships in Grunau, East Germany, when they came second in the repechage to qualify for the final, eventually finishing fifth.

There are two wonderful appraisals of Ann's rowing history at these links - again, compulsory reading.

<https://rowingstory.com/people/ann-sayer/>

<https://rowingstory.com/2020/04/16/in-memoriam-ann-sayer/>

She was a powerful rower, standing 183cm (six feet in the old terminology) in height and weighing in at 68.5kg.



Ann is on the left of the GB eight at the 1962 Women's European Rowing Championships. Behind her are Frances Bigg, Daphne Lane, Marg Chinn, Jill Ferguson and Marrian Yates (photo <https://rowingstory.com/people/ann-sayer/>)

Ann got into rowing in an unusually calculating way. *“When I went to university [Bedford College, part of the University of London], I thought, ‘I want to do something a bit energetic.’ I’d hated sport at school so I wanted to take up something where I wouldn’t be at a complete disadvantage because other people had done it, whatever it was at school... so I looked at three sports. I thought of swimming, and fencing and rowing. I went swimming a couple of times... but I didn’t like the chlorine up my nose and it was cold! And I went to the rowing and gradually got drawn in. I never got to the fencing.”*

By March of her second year, 1957, Ann had gained her purple and in 1958 she was in the university’s first eight. Within a few years, she was a core member of the British Women’s Rowing Team and was part of the British women’s eight in the Women’s European Rowing Championships in 1960 (4th), 1962 (5th) and 1964 (6th). When GB only sent a four to Prague in 1961, she went as a supporter, and she went as GB Team Manager in 1965 to Amsterdam.

After 1965, she remembers, *“I didn’t do anything much at all. I got unfit. I also got ill at the same time and I couldn’t distinguish much between being ill and being unfit but I didn’t like it, whatever it was! But I got my health sorted out and the very next year I went on an alpine mountaineering holiday. And that was the start of the mountaineering, mountain walking and rock climbing which I did.”*

She described her entry into long distance walking thus: *“I drifted in via mountain walking. The Long Distance Walkers Association had been started in 1972, and I was told about it and the second event that I did with them was the annual 100 mile event (their website records her as finishing their 1974 event in 35 hours 26 minutes, the fastest of the three women who completed the distance and 19th overall). And I went from there, and I used to do a lot of LDWA events of 20 miles, 30 miles, 50 miles, that sort of thing.”*

She continues, *“And then a couple of years later I did another of the LDWA 100 miles, and I think it was after that I thought, ‘What shall I do next?’ I’d heard of these people who walk 100 miles in 24 hours – I’d read about them in a Sunday newspaper... so I found out about them and I discovered, of course, that women don’t do that sort of thing. But that didn’t stop me.”*

The rest is history!

The July 2005 edition of the Essex Walker had the following article on Ann and it is timely to reproduce it here for all our Australian Centurion readers.

In May 1977 experienced fell and cross country walker **ANN SAYER** appeared in the second Dutch 100 Miles race at St. Oedenrode, in her race walking debut over the distance. **21 hours and 46 minutes** later Ann had become the first British ‘Continental Centurion’ and also the first British female Centurion.

So when the 3rd BRISTOL 100 MILES, was staged over a 10 laps course at Winterbourne in October 1977, Ann (of Essex Ladies) submitted an entry. So did another lady – **DIANNE PEGG** of Medway A.C. Dianne nowadays resides in Milton Keynes and is known as Dianne Bullard. The Bristol race had already attracted controversy, as the R.W.A. were thought to be insisting that no tracksuit bottoms be worn during the event. Overnight in the Bristol suburbs during October is a very cold place, and the organiser – the late and much respected CHARLIE SHELLEY (Centurion No. 356) – threatened to withdraw the entire promotion if the rule were to be strictly applied. Much vitriol could be heard and abrasive letters appeared in the Record. The rule was relaxed during the hours of darkness and the race went ahead – started by His Grace The Duke of Beaufort. Also among the starters was a Member of Parliament, Lieutenant Colonel DICK CRAWSHAW (Labour M.P. for Liverpool Toxteth), who had made a name for himself by completing endurance walking stunts. He went well, but didn’t quite have the speed to complete the full distance in under 24 hours.

Ann (**20.37.14**) and Dianne (22.05.30) both finished, but they were not permitted to be listed on the main result sheet. A separate ‘Ladies Result’ was published with Ann and Dianne listed as 1 and 2 respectively.

Seven went sub-20 hours including ED. SHILLABEER (4th in 19.31.31) and the victor – Manxman DEREK HARRISON (17.43.00). Among those completing the distance for the first time were JACK THOMAS (22nd in 21.57.19) and Enfield’s PETER EMERY (53rd in 23.41.17). JACK raced in the host club’s colours (Bristol R.W.C.) in his first ever race in excess of 20 miles. *“I didn’t do any overnight training sessions in preparation. I’d never walked more than 20 miles before, and in this race, I just kept going”* recalls Jack. In race walking terms Jack is still active (representing Welsh Veterans last year at Luton) and he’s just been appointed Joint Chief Judge for the upcoming 100 Miles race at King’s Lynn – Congratulations!

Of course, that’s not the whole story. The following is taken from ‘The Centurions – A History’.

The third edition of the Bristol 100 was held on 14th -15th October, when 84 walkers faced the starter, His Grace

The Duke of Beaufort. The winner for the second year in succession was Derek Harrison No. 466 in 17 hours 43 minutes. For the first time in British 100 mile history, two women were allowed to compete on equal terms with the men, they were Ann Sayer and Dianne Pegg. Both of them duly completed to number amongst the 56 finishers, but their performances were recorded separately at the end of the race results. Is this equality? They were also qualified along with 27 others to be eligible for membership of the Centurions!

At the A. G.M. held a week after the race, the subject was discussed at great length. Assistant secretary Frank Jarvis No. 258 who was against women becoming Centurions alongside the men put forward a motion that a women's section of the Centurions with numbers W1, W2 etc. should be formed. The motion was not seconded. George Halifax No. 580 put forward a more severe motion 'that women should not be admitted to the Centurions'. This also failed to find a seconder. As there was no substantive motion that could receive a negative amendment, the opposite motion was put and properly seconded 'that qualified women should be admitted to the Centurions'. This was agreed on a majority vote. It was pointed out that these two women complied with rule 2 of the 'Centurion Society', i.e. they were amateurs and had walked 100 miles within 24 hours. It was then proposed and seconded that women should be awarded Centurion numbers in chronological order of their performance as per rule 3. This was agreed on a majority vote (three against). Finally it was proposed and accepted that all those walkers, having complied with the Centurions definition, be elected to the society. The three objectors could have voted against this final motion and therefore rule 5 would have applied as in the case of James Aldred, but fortunately common sense prevailed, and so Ann Sayer and Dianne Pegg became the first female Centurions, being awarded numbers **599** and 608 respectively. When the allotted numbers were adjusted to include the two ladies, it was noticed that Geurt Reeringh No. 412 had been allotted number 620 and so another mistake was narrowly avoided.

As NZ historian Dudley Harris wrote in 2006

Ann Sayer had the misfortune to be not only a competitive walker at a time when women were decried as athletes, but also she chose to take on men at ultra-distance. Not that she wanted to race only against men, but rather because women were shunned from competing at distances of over 12 km. And shunned not merely by men. In the late-1970s, it was the Women's Amateur Athletic Association that still had rules preventing women race-walking more than 12km.

As an afterword to the above discussion, Ann and Dianne, who were also LDWA members, remained in the spotlight and 2 years later Surrey Walking Club's Ewhurst 100 saw a whopping 107 face the starter. It could have been 109, but this wasn't to be as Ann and Dianne's luck ran out when their entries were refused by Organisers, who stated there were insufficient facilities at the venue to accommodate ladies. This issue featured prominently in the National press!

Undaunted by such pushbacks, Ann threw herself into long distance walking, looking for even tougher challenges.

One of her first was the **British Three Peaks event**, where the aim was to reach the top of each of the highest mountains in England, Wales and Scotland in the shortest possible time. The rules were, shall we say, lax, as they were set by whoever wanted to 'have a go', whether running or walking., but it was never an easy task.

When Ann decided she would try the Three Peaks, for her it would be a continuous walk; and unlike some of her predecessors, Ann would have a support team. Starting on 8th September 1979 at sea-level in Scotland, Ann reached the top of Ben Nevis during her first day; thence via Hamilton, Lockerbie and Stonethwaite, to ascend England's Scafell Pike; then down again and on via Lancaster to Caernarvon, for a night ascent of Wales's Snowdon and back to sealevel.

Ann went to bed for about 7-7½ hours for the first six nights, after which she stayed awake until her record-breaking journey of 424 miles (682 km) was completed on the 15th September 1979. Her overall time broke the existing men's record at the time.

What would Ann do next? She had demonstrated her ability to walk (with overnight rests) for some sixty miles a day for a week. Why not stretch the challenge to two weeks and walk from SW England to NE Scotland: **Land's End to John O'Groats** - somewhat over 800 miles? In reality, there is no one 'authority' to decide on the route, which changes as new roadworks are completed; but many people have 'done it' by a variety of methods ... on foot, bicycle and various kinds of motor-transport.

Ann warmed up with two outstanding walks on the continent. In May 1980, she completed the Torcey 200km in France, finishing as first lady with a distance of **189,900km**. Then a month later, she completed her second Continental Centurions 100 miler in St Oedenrode (Holland), her time a superb **19:32:37**.

Fast forward 3 months to September 1980. Ann's aim was to complete the LEJOG walk within 14 days. Among the

problems was certifying that she had been seen by people other than her support team at frequent intervals along the way. This put a considerable amount of additional work on her team, which included the redoubtable Lilian Millen (who had also supported Ann on the Three Peaks), but they managed. Ann succeeded in reaching her objective on 3 October 1980, having walked the entire **840 miles in an elapsed time of 13 days 17 hours 42 minutes**.

The 'Guinness Book of Records' people were so impressed with the support-crew methodology (of confirming the route and times frequently every day) that they not only put Ann in their Book, but they also decided to cancel every other claim lodged before Ann's triumph.

One of Ann's most memorable races of this period was in April 1982 when she competed in a 48 hour track meet in Nottingham, setting new track records for 100 km (**13:42:09**), 100 miles (**22:43:58**), 200km (**29:23:54**) and 48 hours (**294.114km**).

It was not always about long distances, as Ann also took part in shorter racewalks. She recorded her 20km PB of 2:02:49 in April 1983 at Battersea Park in London. She also travelled to Puerto Rico in 1985 for the World Veterans games to compete in the 10km walk - pictured left with a couple of Colombian walkers.



Ann in Puerto Rica at the World Veterans Championships in 1985, seen here with two Colombian walkers after the 10 km walk, looking every inch of her 6 feet height (photo from Lilian and Boyd Millen)

Even nowadays, her ultra walk performances, many of them nearly 40 years old, continue to rank near the top in the British Rankings (see <http://www.gbrathletics.com/uk/wh99.htm>)

Category	Rank	Performance	Venue	Date
100 Miles Road Walk	3	19:32:37	Sint-Oedenrode, NED	1 Jun 1980
24 Hour Road Walk	2	190.700km	Torcy, FRA	4 May 1980
100 km Track Walk	2	13:42:09+	Nottingham	11 Apr 1982
100 Miles Track Walk	2	22:43:58+	Nottingham	11 Apr 1982
24 Hours Track Walk	2	186.730km	Timperley	20 Jun 1982
200 km Track Walk	1	29:23:54+	Nottingham	12 Apr 1982
48 Hours Track Walk	1	294.114km	Nottingham	12 Apr 1982

1992 saw Ann finally compete in the Paris-Colmar classic. She had qualified in Bazancourt in March that year by walking 172km in 24 hours and she duly received her invitation for the big event for which the women's distance was 333km. She was following in the footsteps of Richard and Sandra Brown who had competed the event in 1989-1991 and who were also in the 1992 field. The race took place on 17-20 June 1992 but it saw Ann retire after 200km, one of her very few non-finishes. She also competed in the Paris-Colmar in 1995, retiring at 266km.

April 1994 saw yet another milestone for Ann, when she completed the 200km/24hr event at Bazancourt (France). Her third place finish with a distance of 164km earned her a place in the Guinness Book of Records, as her selection at the age of 57 made her the oldest British female GB representative athlete. In recognition of this feat, she was invited to the official launch of the 1996 Guinness Book of Records.



Ann with Guinness Book of Records Norris McWhirter at the launch of the 1996 Guinness Book of Records

After Ann's racing days were over, she continued her involvement in the sport, turning up in all weathers to lap record at both local race walks around the London area and further afield at the Centurions 100 mile races, sitting out for the whole 24 hours.

Ann was awarded an **M.B.E.** in the 2005 Queen's Birthday List, a fitting tribute to one who has given so much to our sport. She was at that time the Honorary Vice President of the Long Distance Walkers Association, a Vice President of The Centurions and a member of Loughton A.C. It was one further accolade for a woman who had broken one of the many glass ceilings for women and had led them into the world of ultra distance walking.

In 2013 Ann was elected President of the Centurions - the first woman to hold this office. This was somehow fitting for the first female British Centurion. During her 3 year period as President, Ann presided over the Committee with considerable calm and common sense. After stepping down from the Presidency at the 2016 AGM, Ann remained on the Committee as one of the Vice Presidents.



2013 - Ann, Sandra Brown, Sue Clements and Bill Sutherland at the grave of C1 JE Fowler Dixon in London

I think Chris Flint, Past Hon. Secretary Centurions, summed it up nicely

It's probably not possible to say in a few words that would do justice to a quite remarkable athlete who scaled the heights not just in her walking exploits but also as someone who led from the front. She was a most respected President of the Centurions 1911 who guided its committee with invaluable advice, she was a campaigner to allow females to take part in the 100 miles events, and was one of the founders of the LDWA. Personally, Ann's passing is a great sadness as we have lost a lovely lady and remarkable friend. RIP.

Tim Erickson, Saturday 18 April 2020