

ANN SAYER – BRITAIN'S FIRST WOMAN CENTURION

The first lady to join the Centurions – ANN SAYER – was awarded the M.B.E. in the 2006 Queen's Birthday List. Ann is Honorary Vice President of the Long Distance Walkers Association, a Vice President of The Centurions and a member of Loughton A.C. As well as being the first lady in The Centurions, Ann has put up great times and graced the record books for many ultra-distance endurance walking feats.

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, 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 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.

Perhaps Ann's other most enduring feat is her walk from Lands End to John O'Groats (a distance of just under 900 miles) which she accomplished in **13 days 18 hours 10 mins** in 1983. This beat the previous running record by over 3 days and it was done walking!

When Dudley Harris read my article in the the last newsletter on Ann Sayer, the first woman centurion, he was inspired to put fingers to keyboard and send me his own contribution. Thanks Dudley.

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.

After trying herself out in Holland, Ann completed a second 100 miles in the English 'Bristol 100, on 15 October 1977, with a time of 20:37:14 - which, with reluctant permission, enabled her to become Centurion 599.



Ann in Puerto Rica at the World Veterans games in 1985 after the 10 km walk. With here are two Colombian walkers (photo from Lilian and Boyd Millen)

Happily, not all pedestrian organisations were so constrained, and she, and other women, were made welcome by the Long Distance Walking Association.

Then came the British Three Peaks event, one of those odd-ball events which are competed for on occasions chosen by individuals. The challenge 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. Not that that made for an easy task.

But 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 to top of Ben Nevis during her first day; thence via Hamilton, Lockerbie and Stonethwaite, to ascend England's Scafell Pike; 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.

What would Ann Sayer now do? She had demonstrated her ability of walking (with overnight rests) for some sixty miles a day for a week. Why not stretch the challenge to two weeks, taking in from SW England to NE Scotland: Land's End to John O'Groats - somewhat over 800 miles? It was, and maybe still is, a route (or rather two points) which all kinds of people had been trying. In reality, there is no one 'authority' to decide on the route, which changes as new road-works are completed; but many people had declared that they had 'done it' by a variety of methods ... on foot, bicycle, possibly roller-skates, and various kinds of motor-transport.

For Ann, 'whoever had already done what' was not the issue ... could she walk the entire way as a continuous journey - and do it within 14 days ?

And so her planning began. Among the problems was certifying that she had been seen by people other than her support-team at frequent intervals along the way. Which put a considerable amount of work on her team that would not apply if all that was required was to support Ann. They managed, including the redoubtable Lilian Millen (who had also supported Ann on the Three Peaks), and who would spend a short while in hospital after being hit by a 'hoon' motorcyclist who, it seems, had a record of daft behaviour.

Ann succeeded in reaching her objective on 3 October 1980 by walking 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 Sayer's triumph.