

TOM PAYNE – WALKER AND MUSICIAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

The name of **Tom Payne** has perhaps been forgotten by all but the most enthusiastic of walking historians but his is a story that deserves retelling.

Luckily, two self published booklets have survived

- [Thirty Years of Walking: Tom Payne](#)
Published by the South Shields Harriers and Walking Club, June 1936
- [Tom Payne The World-Famous Musician-Athlete](#)
Phosferine advertising brochure, 1920

as well as some archival race footage. I have drawn on these various sources to paint a picture of this wonderful walker.

Tom Payne was a giant of the road, winning the English classics for over 30 years, but he was far from a giant in stature, standing only 5 ft. 4 in. and weighing a measly 8 stone. Long before Don Thompson became known as the ‘mighty mouse’, Payne was known as the ‘mighty atom’.

Nature did not bless me with either undue length of body or length of limb (rather the contrary), nor strength out of the ordinary; yet, by hard, continuous training and Phosferine,¹ whereby I retained my fitness, I was able to overcome and defeat opponents who were much better gifted than me as regards build and strength.²



The diminutive figure of Tom Payne winning the A.A.A. 20 Miles Championship in 1911

Born in South Shields in NE England in 1882, this pint-size dynamo was not an early starter to walking. In fact, his early years were spent learning the intricacies of the violin. Securing a post in the orchestra of a Newcastle theatre as a young man, it seemed his career as a musician was set to dominate his life.³

It was while he was working as a musician in the Newcastle district of Byker that he began walking the 14 miles from his home in South Shields as a way of saving money. At that time, an annual 24 Miles walking race called the Spencer Cup was

- 1 Phosferine became the nerve tonic of choice for British servicemen in the South African Wars and in WWI. See later in this article for a discussion of this tonic.
- 2 See [Tom Payne The World-Famous Musician-Athlete](#)
- 3 Apart from his prowess as an athlete, Payne gained fame as a solo violinist. His specialty instrument was the Stroh violin, an expensive and relatively rare instrument favoured for playing on gramophone records, due to its amplification capabilities. He owned a quartet of these – two violins, a viola and a violoncello.

put on each year by the South Shields Recreation Committee and he was persuaded to enter in 1906, aged 24. Payne finished second, an outstanding performance for a novice.

With his interest roused, he walked a number of other shorter distance local races that year, finishing in the top three every time. At this time, Payne joined the South Shields Harriers and Walking Club, eventually becoming their chairman and patron in later years.

When he returned to compete in the Spencer Cup the following year, he won easily in a new course record of 3:37:12, beating the 50 Miles track champion Jack Butler, who had been prevailed upon to come to South Shields as a special attraction for the walk.

Success quickly followed upon success, and the next few years saw Payne reach the pinnacle of fame as a walker.

On September 11-12, 1908, the first 24 hour track walking race of the 20th century was held at the White City Stadium in London, with Payne among the starters. This memorable event saw Tommy Hammond create a new track record for 100 miles of 18 hours 4 minutes 10 seconds. He set up many other records and eventually reached 131 miles 580 yards within the 24 hours. Payne finished sixth with 108 miles 733 yards. When the Centurions were eventually formed in 1911, such performances were retrospectively recognized and he was awarded Centurion Badge number 18.

Another track race was held the following year (10-11 September 1909) at the same venue and this time, Payne showed how much he had improved in the intervening 12 months. He won in a much improved 127 miles 542 yards (204.9 km).⁴ 24 others, 21 of them for the first time, also walked in excess of 100 miles. The popularity of long distance walking, it seems, had taken a hold on the walkers of the day, certainly on the track anyway. But Payne's performance had an extra element to it in that he walked the entire 127 miles without stopping. His father kept him going throughout with a special mixture of raw eggs mixed with tea, and milk, honey, non-alcoholic wines, beef tea, rice and soaked biscuits. It was recognised as a world record for non-stop walking. It is still recognised today as a club record for South Shields Harriers.⁵ On his return to South Shields, he was given a hero's welcome, with a victory parade around the town.

Just as impressive was his walk at the Middlesex Walking Club's 12 Hour Race at the Stamford Bridge Ground on June 4th, 1910, when he walked to a superb 72 miles and 33 yards (117.5 km). It was another World Record, this time for 12 Hours Walking. The Sporting Life for June 6th reported: "*Finished as strong as he started, after breaking records from 51 miles upwards...the conqueror of one of the finest walking races on record.*"⁶



Tom Payne (number 7) is dwarfed by his rivals as they line up at the start of the Middlesex 12 Hour Race in 1910

4 Payne's 100 Mile split was 18:08:55, only 4 minutes behind Hammond's World Best of 18:04:10, set the year before.

5 See <http://www.southshieldsharriers.co.uk/about-records.php>

6 See [Thirty Years of Walking: Tom Payne](#)

He was awarded the Amateur Athletics Association Gold Record Medal for this performance.

Road records for nearly every important walk in the country were mown down like chaff before the wind by the relentless machine-like-pedestrian from Tyneside.

In this period, he won the Manchester to Blackpool Classic 3 years in a row (1909 48¼ miles 7:43:53, 1910 52½ miles 8:37:05, 1911 52½ miles 9:08:55), the London to Brighton (1911 52 miles 8:20:05) and the famous Bradford Walk, raced over the Yorkshire Moors each Whit Monday (1911 40 ½ miles 6:56:27).

He also won the 1911 British R.W.A. 20 Miles Championship in a record time of 2:50:30, a time 3 minutes faster than the previous best time for that event, and a performance described by *Health & Strength* as “*the greatest road walking race of modern times*”.⁷



Tom Payne wins the 3rd of his 6 wins in the Manchester to Blackpool Classic in 1911

It was not as if he had an easy time of it, having to compete regularly against the likes of Jack Butler, Edgar Horton, Bill Brown and the great Tommy Hammond.

His career from 1906 to 1912 saw wonderful performances over all distances, from the shortest 1 Mile walk to the classic 24 Hour walk. He was indeed a versatile athlete. Sadly, his chance for further glory was cut short by the First World War, which saw all the classics and championships put on hold indefinitely.

He eventually returned to racing in 1917, aged 35. He had lost 5 years and was now old enough to be called a veteran. But he seemed to have lost little if anything of his previous form.

He won the Manchester to Blackpool two further times (1919 8:18:07, 1920 8:41:17) to take his grand total of wins to 5. He won the London to Brighton two further times (1919 8:38:23, 1920 8:21:58) to take his tally to 3 wins. He won the Bradford Walk (now raced over 32¼ miles) five more times to take his tally to 6 wins (1917 5:24:17, 1918 5:22:05, 1919 a record 5:09:45, 1920 5:30:11 and 1921 5:14:11).

I need to say a bit more about the Brighton walks post-war. The first post-war London to Brighton Classic (52 miles) was staged in 1919, with Surrey Walking Club presenting the magnificent “Victory Cup” to the winner. It was of course won by Tom Payne, with 8:38:23. He won the event again the following year, but in a much faster time of 8:21:58, breaking the course records for every mile from Croydon (5 Miles) to Handcross (33 Miles) before falling behind Ross’s 1909 overall course record.

⁷ Ibid p15

The London to Brighton and Back (103 miles) was not staged post-war until 1921, and it was a tough task for the 12 starters, with heat wave conditions in effect. Only 3 finished the race, the other 9 retiring along the way. Tom Payne was amongst the retirees, being forced to stop at the 62 mile mark.

There are three wonderful newsreel videos of Tom Payne in action in 1920 and 1921, approaching 40 years of age but still winning the classics. These are as follows

- **Tom Paynes Wins 1920 London - Brighton Walk (issued 30/09/1920)**
"In 8hrs. 21m. 33 2/5 secs. Tom Payne wins Surrey Walking Club's Race over famous course - in splendid style".
<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/tom-paynes-wins-london-brighton-walk/query/walk>
- **Tom Payne Wins 1920 Manchester Walk (issued 30/09/1920)**
"Tom Payne (who recently won London-Brighton Walk) leads all the way and wins easily for the sixth time".
<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/tom-payne-wins-manchester-walk/query/tom+payne>
- **Tom Payne's fine feat - Glasgow to Paisley 1921 (issued 07/11/1921)**
<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/wonderful-walker-tom-payne/query/walk>

His last recorded race of this post-war period was early in 1921, after which he was forced to hang up his walking shoes. Tebbs Lloyd Johnson, writing in 1976, explained why

A musician by calling and a very fine violinist, he devised a stage act in which he burst through a large screen depicting the finish line at Brighton Aquarium dressed in a singlet and shorts and proceeded to give his violin repertoire.

This performance was considered by the AAA to infringe the amateur laws and he was suspended but around 1931, he applied for re-instatement and was once again accepted into the amateur ranks when I became acquainted with him and grew to like and respect him very much. I raced against him many times in the early and mid 1930s.⁸

When he retied his racing shoes in 1931, he was approaching 50 years of age. The racewalking scene had then changed radically by then, with the pace being set by Tommy Green, Harold Whitlock and Tebbs Lloyd Johnson, all destined to subsequently represent Great Britain as Olympians.

Yet, excel once more he did, rarely finishing outside the first 3 in races across England, against the best walkers and against walkers typically 20-30 years younger than him. I will simply cherry pick a few performances to illustrate

- February 10th 1932, South Shields Harriers and Walking Club Championship 10 ½ Miles
1st in a championship record of 1:22:10
- March 28th 1932, Sunderland to Darlington Walk, 31 ½ Miles
2nd in 4:54:50 behind 1932 Olympic 50km champion Tommy Green
- June 25th, 1932, English National 50km Championship, Leicester
4th (second Englishman) 4:48:30
- August 1st, 1932, Hastings to Brighton 37 Miles
2nd (5:59:27) to Harold Whitlock, both walkers breaking Tommy Green's race record of 6:00:35
- May 21st, 1934, Northern Counties 50km Championship, Bradford
1st 4:56:22
- June 1st, 1936, Bradford Whitsuntide Walk 32¼ miles
1st 5:08:48, a minute faster than his previous record for the course

8 See <http://files.northernracewalking.com/200030813-5e7945f756/AN%20%20ECHO%20%20FROM%20%20THE%20%20PAST.pdf>

On Saturday 27th June, 1936, South Shields Harriers organised a “Jubilee Walk” of 24 Miles, to celebrate Payne’s 30 years of competitive walking. The race, which took place over the same course (with slight variations) upon which he made his debut in 1906, saw him win by just over 2 minutes with a time of 3:37:18. The photo below shows him (far left) still looking fit and pencil thin.



Amazingly, he kept racing until he was 77 years of age, when he entered his last competition, a 10 mile walk. He died, aged 84, in 1968.

And now onto a few associated bits and pieces

An Echo From The Past (1934)
By T. Lloyd Johnson

This article, by 1948 Olympic 50km bronze medallist Tebbs Lloyd Johnson, concerns his race with Tom Payne in the Easter Monday 32 Miles Sunderland to Darlington 32 Miles Walk. See <http://files.northernracewalking.com/200030813-5e7945f756/AN%20%20ECHO%20%20FROM%20%20THE%20%20PAST.pdf>

“Comparisons are odious” so they say, and, I am not really going to make any but I think it is a good thing to occasionally turn back the clock and air some of the ideas and performances of the old time greats of our sport.

What prompts me to write is an excellent article by Julian Hopkins in the October 1976 issue of the Record on feeding before and during racing, an article that makes very good sense and is line with modern thinking and technology on the subject but, it does recall to my mind, the theories and practices of that great little Northern walker and erstwhile friend of mine, the late Tommy Payne. The name may not ring many bells among today’s heel and toe men and, perhaps very few officials either but, in his day, which was a pretty long one, Tommy was right at the top.

Standing only some 5ft3ins in height and very slightly built, he had the most amazing stamina.

He won the RWA 20 Miles Championship in 1911 in 2h50m30s over a very tough course and the equally tough Bradford Walk in 1911, 1917-18-19-20 and 21 - I am not giving his times for these races because he did a faster time in the same race in 1934, when finishing second to myself over the same course. He won the London to Brighton in 1911, 1919 and 1920 and the Manchester to Blackpool in 1909-10-11 and 1919 and 1920. He also walked 127 miles in 24 hours.

A musician by calling and a very fine violinist, he devised a stage act in which he burst through a large screen depicting the finish line at Brighton Aquarium dressed in a singlet and shorts and proceeded to give his violin repertoire.

This performance was considered by the AAA to infringe the amateur laws and he was suspended but around 1931, he applied for re-instatement and was once again accepted into the amateur ranks when I became acquainted with him and grew to like and respect him very much. I raced against him many times in the early and mid 1930s.

Now I have given something of the history of Tommy Payne, I come to the point of my story. Tommy had a theory which he expounded to me many times, that digesting food takes energy, energy that may be needed during a race, he had it all worked out - at least to his own satisfaction, how many calories were needed for how much effort and how long the effects should last and he claimed that there should be no diminution of strength for at least 24 hours and put forth many arguments and instances to support his views.

I could never reconcile myself to his way of thinking but in 1934 (incidentally my best year ever) I reversed the usual build up from short distances through the mediums and working up to the distances and started the season off in March with the "Bishops" 20 Miles in Birmingham and, on the invitation of Tommy Payne, entered the 32 Miles Sunderland to Darlington on Easter Monday and stayed with Tommy at his South Shields home over the weekend and I was able to witness for myself, his theories being put into practice. He took a carefully prepared meal at 6pm on the Sunday evening and did not have another thing until after the race the following day with the exception of one cup of tea while I had my breakfast.

Came the race and I was very confident that, early in the year though it was, I could comfortably stroll this with effort to spare, Tommy was around 50 years of age at this time and although he had given Tommy Green quite a race the previous year over this, his home course, I had easily beaten him on our previous encounters, also his unorthodox ideas did nothing to lessen my confidence.

I started quite comfortably but the rest of the field let me go out in front, I kept going easily and the first report from my attendant was that Tommy was lying second a couple of minutes adrift; going through Durham I was still two minutes ahead, another five miles and I was, yes - two minutes in front and so on, every check up was the same so I quickened my pace but the gap was still the same; twenty miles and still the little so and so was there. I began to get annoyed and really got stuck in and did draw away - at last I thought that I had him beaten but I had gone too soon and my lead dwindled, three minutes, two minutes, one and, just entering the outskirts of Darlington, that persistent little devil passed me and could do nothing about it.

I am not going to make any excuses by saying that I was not fit for the distance so early in the year, it was the same for both of us but, here I was, 34 years old in my prime, with three National Championships under my belt already - Tommy was around 50 - I had followed my usual well tried methods of feeding and refreshment - Tommy had I know, no sustaining food for at least 15 hours and no drinks or stimulants at all during the race, yet he had the greater staying power

Phosferine, the wonder nerve tonic

Way back on page 1 of this article, Tom Payne credited "*hard, continuous training and Phosferine*" as the two reasons for his walking success.

Phosferine became the nerve tonic of choice for British servicemen in the South African Wars and in the First World War. It was deemed to ward off many an impending nervous breakdown. But its claims were much more widespread than that - it was touted as a digestive, as a performance enhancer, as a general health restorative, and a proven remedy for everything from influenza to sciatica. Nowadays, you can still purchase it in tablet form but its many claims have been questioned by modern medicine.

Whatever, the claims and counterclaims, you can't argue with Tom Payne's record, which speaks for itself.



A typical advertisement of the period for Phosferine

In 2016, Lancashire Walking Club posted an article on the Manchester to Blackpool Trophy won by Tom Payne in 1910. See <https://lancswalkingclub.com/2016/01/02/putting-our-best-foot-forward-tom-payne-shows-the-way/>

The Shields Gazette reported on a 2009 exhibition at South Shields Museum to celebrate Walking Champion Tom Payne. See <http://www.shieldsgazette.com/lifestyle/nostalgia/tom-payne-world-walking-champion-1-1244608>.



Tom Payne with some of his many prizes from the various classics

Tim Erickson
Monday 24 September 2018