

## FRANK O'REILLY – A GIANT AMONGST CENTURIONS

Frank O'Reilly stands as one of the giants of the Centurions. Born in Ireland in 1925, he spent his walking career as a member of Lozells Harriers and was based in the English Midlands where he worked as a foundry worker.

He walked for many years in English competition without great distinction and was nearly lost to the sport in 1958 when he was disqualified for the first time in a career of some 400 races. Luckily for us, Ken Matthews, Britain's fastest short distance walker, took him to his Erdington home and persuaded him to come back. The rest is history. Frank decided to try his hand at the long distance events and the result was instantaneous.

First up in May 1958, he won the Manchester to Blackpool classic (51¾ miles) in a time of **8:20:00**, only a couple of minutes outside the course record. This was seen as an outsider's victory. The only previous distance walk to his credit was 19<sup>th</sup> place in the 1956 London to Brighton in 9 hours 10 minutes.

His first Centurion attempt then followed in July 1958 when he came 2<sup>nd</sup> in the inaugural Leicester to Skegness 100 mile event. His time of **18:02:37** earned him Centurion badge 276.

In 1959, he was in even better form. He defended his Manchester to Blackpool title with a fine time of **8:15:50**. He then fronted for the annual Centurion event which was to be held over a 106 mile course from London to Brighton and Back. He was inside the famous record time of Billy Baker when he turned at Brighton (53 miles) before slowing due to stomach cramps but still won easily, clocking **18:56:47** for the full 106 miles. In transit he had passed the 100 mile mark in **17:46:47** to become one of the elite few who had beaten the 18 hour standard.



**Frank O'Reilly with the London to Brighton Trophy after his 1959 win**

The 1960 100 mile qualifier was over the Leicester to Skegness course once again. 45 walkers started in perfect conditions that held up through the night and the second day. 30 finished, 14 of them becoming new Centurions. Once again, O'Reilly was the winner. In fact he beat every expectation and every known time on road or track when he became the first man to walk 100 miles in under 17 hours. His time was **16:54:50** and it was his second win in successive years, a feat that had not been accomplished before unless you count Billy Baker's wins in 1926 & 1929.

O'Reilly was so far in front of the expected schedule that he caught the Skegness reception committee off guard and the Mayor was not there to receive him when he arrived on the seafront. The most amazing feature of his performance was his consistency. His time for the first 50 miles was 8:27:20 and for the second 50 miles, was 8:26:55. His pace had been just over 6 m.p.h. throughout the race, and when he realized he might be able to get home in under 17 hours, he pushed hard, covering the last 10 miles in 96 minutes 15 seconds!

He was immediately contacted by the Irish Olympic Committee and asked to stand by for a trip to Rome. Frank signed the paperwork, gave details of his career and birth and was duly selected. He thus became the first Centurion to represent his country in the Olympics where he came 20<sup>th</sup> in the gruelling 50 km event with a time of **4:54:40**.

Even though O'Reilly's sub 17 hour 100 mile road performance was far ahead of any other walker in the world, it could not be counted for record purposes and the 100 mile record still belonged to Tom Richardson for his 1936 effort (17:35:04). For some time Centurions and other long distance specialists had wanted a 24 hour track race in order to match themselves against the track performances of yester year. In order to meet this request a special invitation meeting was arranged by Walton A.C. at their headquarters at Stompond Lane, Walton-on-Thames. Apart from the long distance specialists, some of the fast men were also invited to attack records up to 4 hours and 50 Km. In the shorter event, Don Thompson, the recent winner of the 50 Km gold medal at the Rome Olympics, broke his own National records at 20 miles, 3 hours, 25 miles, 4 hours, 30 miles and 50 Km.

To return to the main event, 15 of the best long distance walkers in the country faced the starter. For the first 12 hours a thrilling race was in progress, but the record of E.C. Horton, No. 63, set up in 1914 remained intact. At this point some of the competitors began to fall by the wayside. One of the first to go was O'Reilly who was lying in third place at the time, having dropped back from second. He had covered 70 miles in just over 12 hours, such was the quality of this race. He was feeling very unwell but struggled on to reach 78 miles in 14 hours. He later regarded it as his one 'failure' in the various long distance walks he contested.

With O'Reilly out of the race, it was left to Hew Nielson to rewrite the record books with an amazing performance that saw him cover 133 miles 21 yards in the allotted 24 hours. This wonderful race is well described in the British Centurions handbook and deserves special treatment in its own right.

At the beginning of 1961 there was some uncertainty, with no Centurion race planned. Would the 10 year run of a 100 mile race each year be broken? Finally a group of enthusiasts from the Metropolitan Police decided to organise and promote a race. It was held on October 20-21 from the Met Police grounds at Chigwell, Essex. The race, held over a hard 10 mile course (probably the toughest course ever used for a 100), saw 19 of the 42 starters finish the course, the winner being once again the famous O'Reilly. His time of **18:03:45** saw him 1 hour 50 mins ahead of Nielson

In 1962, the 100 miler was held from Leicester to Skegness again. O'Reilly triumphed again, making it 4 wins in successive years. This was remarkable enough but his time of **16:58:16** was his second sub 17 hour 100 miler. He was now not only the only man to have beaten 17 hours but he had done it twice!

1963 saw the walkers back on the famous London to Brighton road but on this occasion, the race started in Brighton, went to London and then returned to Brighton. Right from the start it was that man O'Reilly who took the lead, a position he held for an amazing fifth time in successive years, right to the finish. He reached the 100 mile point in under 18 hours in dry conditions but the last 5 miles to the finish were very difficult as torrential rain began to fall, making it very difficult for all those behind him. An hour and a half later a bedraggled Hew Neilson finished in second place.

The 1964 event saw 57 men, the largest number so far, face the starter for the now well established Leicester to Skegness race. Most of the regulars were there plus a number of newcomers, including a good contingent from Holland. The main question being asked was who would come second to O'Reilly? Frank took the lead up to 30 miles but led by only 3 minutes from Karl Abolins No. 233, with Neilson a further 3 minutes behind. Abolins, who was no newcomer, having qualified in 1955 and finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the 1960 track race, soon took the lead which he held to the end in 17:32:16, proving his pedigree, O'Reilly finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in **17:47:00**.

It was the end of an era when, a week after the race, O'Reilly announced his retirement. Five wins, two seconds and one "flop" (as he put it) in eight starts, is a remarkable record in anyone's book, especially when two of those wins were sub 17 hours, the only man ever to achieve it. His retirement left the way open for others like Abolins, who had suffered in the shadow of his dominance, to show their worth.

Bill loved to pile the pressure on from the early stages, endeavouring to maintain his near perfect 10 minute mile pace throughout the race. He always emphasised his successes came from his ability to "cruise" at that pace for hours on end. His work as a foundryman ensured he had the strong physique which made him a formidable competitor in extreme conditions, whether hot, cold or wet.

A quiet dignified man with a laconic sense of humour, he is still remembered by many Midlanders for the occasion when he planned a course for a 20 mile championship, only to be directed off course during the race when leading with Peter Markham!

O'Reilly's Centurion Performances read as follows

18/07/1958	Leicester to Skegness	2 <sup>nd</sup>	18:22:14
03/07/1959	London To Brighton and Return	1 <sup>st</sup>	17:46:47
02/07/1960	Leicester to Skegness	1 <sup>st</sup>	16:54:16

20/10/1960	Walton		DNF
20/10/1961	Chigwell	1 <sup>st</sup>	18:03:45
06/07/1962	Leicester to Skegness	1 <sup>st</sup>	16:58:16
05/07/1963	Brighton to London and Return	1 <sup>st</sup>	17:48:08
03/07/1964	Leicester to Skegness	2 <sup>nd</sup>	17:47:00

Bill O'Reilly passed away on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2001, aged 76.