

## LILIAN SALKELD – WALKING PIONEER

I produced a small article on a couple of young and long forgotten walkers in one of my 2020 newsletters. The article is captured at <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/Lilian%20Salkeld%20and%20G.O.%20Edwards.pdf>. The two walkers in question were 15 year old **Lilian Salked** and 10 year old **G. O. Edwards**.

I have since been chatting with N.U.T.S. statistician and archivist Andy Milroy. Andy has been doing a lot of research on the 1920s and 1930s when women's distance walking became popular. In this context, he has been able to shed more light on the forgotten story of these two young walkers.

The story begins on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1920, when two women started in the Manchester to Blackpool 51 mile walk. They were **Miss Winifred Green** from Bolton and **Miss D. Huntington** of Manchester and they started two hours before the male competitors from the Albert Street Police Station Parade Ground in Manchester. When the women reached Chorley at about 22 miles, Miss Huntington was forced to retire because of a heel injury, but Miss Green went on to complete the race in 12:32:35, in 24<sup>th</sup> place. She explained her participation in the 51 mile walk. "*Women had taken part in tennis and golf competitions and why should they not go in for walking, the very simple exercise?*"

Fast forward to 6<sup>th</sup> June 1921, when a 15 Miles Championship Walk for Girls was organised in Manchester. This race introduces us to **Lilian Salked** who won in 2:58:15 ahead of 14 year old **Barbara Halliday** (3:02:28) and 15 year old **Elsie Osman** (3:07). The race was organised by Albert Edwards, an experienced race walker. Edwards had a vested interest. His precocious son, **Georgie (G. O. Edwards)**, although only ten or so, was already competing. Teenage girls made good opposition as he built his son's reputation as a walker.

In late August that year, a 33 mile event was held in aid of the Stafford Hospital. Lilian covered the distance in 7:02:39. Two hours later Lilian and Georgie Edwards went head to head over a mile, tying in 9:44.

It may have been at this time that Albert Edwards began coaching Lilian. An obvious target for them was Winifred Green's time in the 1920 Manchester to Blackpool race and Liian and Georgie were both starters in the 1921 edition. Unfortunately Lilian had injured her foot three weeks before the Blackpool race and she was forced to drop out around the 33 mile mark because of her injury. Georgie continued on, finishing in a very impressive 11 hours and 43 minutes.

These 1921 performances of Lilian and Georgie have been captured captured for posterity in the British Pathe newsreel archives.

The first newsreel dated 06/06/1921, shows **Lilian** winning the 15 Miles Championship Walk for Girls in Manchester. See <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/girls-walking-race>. In fairness, the newsreel only shows the girls for the first 20 seconds (Lilian is wearing number 5). After that, it swaps to a display of Master G.O. Edwards walking in the later Manchester to Blackpool race. It seems a case of improper editing when the newsreel was created or recreated.



The second newsreel, dated 01/10/1921, is titled: *Wonder Boy Walker. Master G.O. Edwards aged 10, establishes World's record in walking 52 miles in 11 hours 43 minutes Manchester to Blackpool. Lancashire.* It shows Georgie striding along the road and then finishing. The second half of this newsreel is titled *Lillian Salked, aged 16, gave up after going 38 miles* and shows Lilian as she walks towards the camera and takes a drink from a bottle. Check it out at <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/boy-walker-1>.



By 1922 Lilian was looking for a new challenge and she set her sights on the London to Brighton Walk. A **Miss Doris Joel** had previously stated her intention to walk from London to Brighton, to demonstrate that girls were also able to perform long distance walks, but nothing had come of it. A **Miss Maud Brown** and **Miss Christina Wright** challenged Miss Joel to a contest over the course, and subsequently Lilian joined in, challenging the other three.

Lilian stated, *“I expect to do the journey in about thirteen hours. My diet will be oranges, bananas, bread and butter and a tomato. My last meal before starting out was two eggs, bread and butter and an orange. I am practically a vegetarian, but not quite.”*

*“I have already done 42 miles without feeling any the worse.”* This mark is not on the list of her known performances and suggest she also undertook the long standing Bradford to York race as well, which would have been good preparation for the London to Brighton.

On the day, Miss Joel, Miss Brown and Miss Wright seemed intimidated by the large crowd, described by some newspapers as a mob, apparently intent on stopping the women from racing. Despite that, the race started at 8:10 pm.

Lilian wore a short skirt, with ankle socks. The weather was bitterly cold and she later put on a jumper and warm, woollen gloves. Her long, firm stride particularly impressed the crowds lining the route. All through the night she maintained a brisk pace, walking in the glare of the headlights from the following car in which her mother rode, along with her father and her trainer Albert Edwards. The car had been lent by a London firm.

Her rests were few and brief. Once she changed her footwear, putting on racing shoes with light, leather rubber soles . Occasionally she stopped to eat a banana or a tomato and to have her face sponged with eau de Cologne by her mother.

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the race was that Miss Brown and Miss Wright covered the whole distance in “everyday attire” and wearing shoes with heels. Before they set out they had finished a full day’s work at the Gamages store. As they made their way to Brighton they halted for five minutes every hour. (As shop assistants they would have been used to spending many hours each day on their feet.)

They commented before the race *“Our biggest effort was over fifty-eight miles the year before from Brentwood to Clacton.”* Miss Wright had proclaimed *“We shall do it, you bet!”*

Lilian strode out, accompanied by the young Georgie Edwards who was to retire at 30 miles with blisters. Doris Joel did not actually start and Miss Brown and Miss Wright were soon overtaken by the young girl from Manchester.

Lilian was well ahead by Croydon Town Hall, 10:06 pm to the 10:21 pm of the following pair, who walked together, occasionally chatting but showing nothing like the firecracker determination of their Manchester rival. By Redhill, the leader was timed at 12:20am with the chasing pair passing at 1:09am. She passed Horley (25.25 miles) in 5:20:30. She stopped once to change into goloshes after 35 miles.

At 41.25 miles, the challenging Dale Hill, Lilian was timed at 10:37:58. When Lilian finally saw her goal of Brighton Aquarium she was walking well but looked rather fatigued. She finished in 12:20:40.8 and was given a rousing reception by the assembled crowd of women and girls. She then went and had a substantial breakfast at the Bed & Breakfast establishment where her family were to be staying. Her comment at the finish shows the motivation behind the walk, *“It shows that what men can do, girls can do also.”*

Miss Maud Brown and Miss Christina Wright finished in 15 hours 20 minutes. One of them commented at the finish that they were longing for a square meal.

Lilian's London to Brighton walk is also captured on newsreel, dated 04/05/1922 and titled *Wonderful Girl Walker - 16 year old Miss Lilian Salkeld accomplishes London to Brighton walk in 12 hours 20 minutes*. A 53 mile walk, done in a little over 12 hours, not a bad effort in anyone's measure! See <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/lilian-salkeld-aka-wonderful-girl-walker>.



Andy Milroy believes that Lilian's mark was influential in the development of Women's long distance racing. The British Pathe Newsreel would have been widely shown in the rapidly growing cinema theatres across Britain. Thanks to the telegraph, news of her performance would have gone around the world.

However he suspects that sharing a car for over 12 hours with the opinionated Albert Edwards, her coach, was probably too much for Mr and Mrs Salkeld. Although there was some talk of her attempting the slightly shorter Manchester to Blackpool race subsequently, it does not appear to have happened that year.

The following year, in April 1923, a race from London to Brighton, organised by the Ministry of Pensions Walking club, was held, with fifteen girl clerks, many wearing silk stockings and walking shoes and everyday frocks, competing with nineteen men. The women had two and a half hours start, leaving Big Ben at 7 pm. The race was won by H V Henry. In third place was **Miss Doris Grasty** in 12:02, eighteen minutes faster than Lilian had done in 1922.

When asked where the men were, her reply was a dismissive "*Oh, I believe they're coming along.*" She also commented "*In my mind all the way was to beat the men*". She had had a two and half hour start on the men. The male walkers took the hint and the following year the women had just a half hour start over the men.

Lilian's next documented race was as an unofficial competitor in the 1926 Manchester to Blackpool race, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1926. Not content with merely competing, she covered the 51 mile course in the fastest time yet by a woman, setting a new standard for the 50 mile distance – 11 hour and 22 minutes. Although her performance was unofficial, it was recognised by the civic authorities and when asked what prize she would like, Miss Salkeld asked for the works of Charles Dickens.

By the end of the 1920s, the wider society of women had well and truly discovered the joys of walking. In 1928 a newspaper reported noted that twice as many women as men took part in rambling societies and that many London offices had their own groups. The gender imbalance following the carnage of the First World War meant many women went out to work and then sought their leisure pursuits in a less restrictive environment.

By way of postscript, Lilian married South London-born Reginald Thomas Castell in Manchester in 1941 (the exact date of their wedding is not known.) Their ages at marriage were unusual for the period. In 1939 the average age at marriage was 26.5 years for men and 24.2 years for women. They were 35 or 36.

Lilian died in Blackpool, aged 87, on the 21<sup>st</sup> December 1992, probably the last representative of the young women pioneer walkers of the 1920s and 1930s, whose efforts have been largely forgotten.

Tim Erickson, Monday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021

With thanks to Andy Milroy for his comprehensive investigations.