

## BILL BROWN – OLYMPIAN, CENTURION AND CENTENARIAN

William C. Brown (or Bill, as he was known), one of the best British long distance walkers of the early 1900's, has a triple claim to fame – a Centurion, an Olympian and a Centenarian, in that order.

Bill Brown, born 17<sup>th</sup> December 1878, competed for Surrey Walking Club and the Polytechnic Harriers in London, and was a family relative of Australian walking champion Bert Gardiner. Some years ago, Bert's son Bob, a former Australian Olympic racewalker, passed onto me Brown's meticulously kept scrapbook, covering his major races and accomplishments.

I drew on the scrapbook liberally to complete my biographies of [Tommy Hammond](#) and [Tom Payne](#) but I did not think at the time to use them to do the same for Bill Brown. Alas, the scrapbook was returned to Bob and is now in the safekeeping of the State Library of Victoria. If I can get it back at some stage, I can complete this biography and add scans of some of the photos, but this will have to do as a first draft.

The early 1900's were a heady time for walking, with George Lerner dominant over the shorter sprint distances and with the likes of Tom Payne, Jack Butler, Edgar Horton, Bill Brown and the great Tommy Hammond soon to make their mark over the longer distances, made so famous by the nineteenth century pedestians.

The first London to Brighton and Back walk of 104 miles took place in 1902 and was then held most years up till when the First World War put paid to such trivial pursuits. When it restarted in 1921, it was scheduled approximately every 4 years till its last staging in 1959. A majority of the early British Centurions became members by virtue of completing this event - its distance of 104 miles was more than sufficient to satisfy the criteria for membership.

Bill Brown first comes to our attention in the third London-to-Brighton-and-Back race, held in 1907, when he finished third in the time of **20:38:01**. For this performance, he was retrospectively granted Centurion badge C12 when the Centurions formed in 1911.

### London to Brighton and Back, 104 Miles, 21 June 1907

1.	Tommy Hammond	Blackheath Harriers	18:13:37	<b>C10</b>
2.	J.R. Barnes-Moss	Middlesex WC	20:23:32	<b>C11</b>
3.	Bill Brown	Polytechnic Harriers	20:38:01	<b>C12</b>
4.	Henry Swabey	Surrey WC	21:50:37	<b>C13</b>
5.	W.G. Pryor	Surrey WC	22:56:38	<b>C14</b>
6.	F. Bland	Polytechnic Harriers	23:08:00	<b>C15</b>

Unfortunately for Brown, his performance was overshadowed by that of the winner Tommy Hammond who left the field in his wake. Hammond's time for the 104 mile distance was an amazing 18:13:37 and broke H. W. Horton's course record by over 2 hours. He covered the 62 ½ miles (over 100 km) to Brighton in 10:30:36 and passed the 100 mile mark in 17:25:22. Pundits of the day thought that this record would be unbeatable.

Brown was aged 27 at this time and had presumably been walking for some years, without significant success. But 1908 would prove to be a watershed year when that changed.

He competed in the very first Race Walking Association (RWA) 20 Miles Walk Championship at Ruislip in 1908, finishing second to H. V. L. Ross of Tooting A.C. who won with a time of 2:56:32. Brown was also part of the winning Surrey Walking Club team, along with C. A. Schofield, Tommy Hammond and A. Hubbard. I note that on this occasion, he finished 2<sup>nd</sup> while Hammond finished 5<sup>th</sup>.

Brown followed this up with an appearance in the 1908 Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) 2 Miles Walk Championship at the Shepherds Bush Stadium on July 4<sup>th</sup>, finishing 8<sup>th</sup>. This would not be of significance except for one significant fact – London was to host the 1908 Olympic Games and countries were allowed to enter up to 12 athletes in each event. For most countries, this was not going to happen, but for Great Britain, it was a chance to flood the Games with its own athletes and showcase their sporting strength. After all, this was the British Empire!

Brown was one of 11 British walkers selected to compete in the Olympic 3,500m walk on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> July 1908. The event saw 25 entries overall, split into three heats, with the top three in each heat advancing to the final. For the record, he was disqualified in his heat. His Games were over very quickly.

The Olympic 10 Miles Walk was held 2 days later, on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> July 1908. Again, Great Britain flooded the field, with 12 of the 25 walkers. The numbers paid off, with their walkers taking 7 of the 8 spots in the final and filling the first 6 positions.

In retrospect, Brown would have been better suited to the Olympic 10 Miles Walk and I am not sure why he ended up in the shorter 3,500m Walk.

Fast forward 2 months to the weekend of 11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> September 1908, when the first 24 Hour Track Walk of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was held at the White City Stadium in London. The event which included all the top distance walkers, attracted great media interest and it certainly lived up to the hype. This memorable event saw Tommy Hammond create a new track record for 100 miles of 18:04:10. He set up many other records along the way and eventually reached 131 miles 580 yards within the 24 hours.

Overall, the first 17 finishers all walked in excess of 100 miles – an impressive stat! The Surrey Walking Club Gazette No.3 1908 reports that “*Our member, Bill Brown, led at the start; then Jack Butler took the lead till the 11<sup>th</sup> mile ... Bill finished 23<sup>rd</sup> with a distance of 81 miles 586 yards.*” It was not a good result for Brown.

#### **Middlesex Walking Club 24 Hour Track Walk, White City Stadium, London, 11-12 September 1908**

1.	Tommy Hammond	White City	131 m 0580 yds	C10
2.	H.W. Horton	Surrey WC	121 m 1645 yds	C5
3.	F.J. Wakefield	Surrey WC	118 m 0301 yds	C6
4.	C.M. Sampson	Polytechnic Harriers	117 m 1223 yds	C16
5.	F.R. Leatherby	Middlesex WC	115 m 1613 yds	C17
6.	Tommy Payne	Lancashire WC	108 m 0783 yds	C18
7.	B.H. Warden	Polytechnic Harriers	108 m 0431 yds	C19
8.	A. Ormrod	Lancashire WC	107 m 0644 yds	C20
9.	F. Bland	Polytechnic Harriers	107 m 0344 yds	C15
10.	J. Iles	Unattached-Wales	106 m 0785 yds	C21
11.	Henry Swabey	Surrey WC	106 m 0743 yds	C13
12.	Bob Gillespie	Middlesex WC	106 m 0154 yds	C22
13.	H.J. Clark	Finchley Harriers	105 m 1504 yds	C23
14.	George Lind	Polytechnic Harriers	104 m 0851 yds	C24
15.	T.C. Habishaw	Queens Park	103 m 0465 yds	C25
16.	J. Harper	Small Heath Harriers	100 m 0586 yds	C26
17.	H.C. Taylor	Polytechnic Harriers	100 m 0586 yds	C27

Undeterred by this poor result, he was back the following year as part of the winning Surrey WC team in the 1909 RWA 20 Miles Walk Championship at Woodside, finishing 4<sup>th</sup> on this occasion.

While Brown had failed in the 1908 24 Hour Track Walk, he bounced back the following year, when a further track race was held at the same venue on the weekend of 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> September 1909. As in 1908, he led from the start, determined not to be caught so easily this time. He did not disappoint, leading for a little over 15 hours and setting new British Records at various distances from 51 miles to 85 miles and various time records from 9 hours to 15 hours. His **12 Hour Record was a superb 68 miles 1441 yards** and his **15 Hour Record was 84 miles 564 yards**.

Eventually, he was caught by Tom Payne who went on to win with a distance of 127 miles 542 yards (204.9 km). As an aside, 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. On his return to South Shields, he was given a hero's welcome, with a victory parade around the town.

Brown held on well to finish second, with a distance of **124 miles 1710 yards** but, once again, someone had taken the spotlight away from his 24 Hour performance and his numerous British records.

As an indication of the depth of long distance walking, 25 walkers walked 100 miles or more, 21 of them for the first time. The popularity of long distance walking, it seems, had taken a hold on the walkers of the day, certainly on the track anyway.

#### **Middlesex Walking Club 24 Hour Track Walk, White City Stadium, London, 10-11 September 1909**

1.	Tommy Payne	Lancashire WC	127 m 0542 yds	C18
2.	Bill Brown	Polytechnic Harriers	124 m 1710 yds	C12
3.	Edgar Broad	Surrey WC	120 m 1420 yds	<b>C28</b>
4.	R. Bramham	Sheffield United	117 m 0570 yds	<b>C29</b>
5.	Henry Swabey	Surrey WC	114 m 1502 yds	C13
6.	A.E. Gerard	Unattached-Grimsby	112 m 0155 yds	<b>C30</b>

7.	A.C.W. Buck	Bank of England SC	107 m 0369 yds	<b>C31</b>
8.	R.Lyon Parker	Highgate Harriers	106 m 1436 yds	<b>C33</b>
9.	E. Forge	Essex Beagles	106 m 0484 yds	<b>C32</b>
10.	H. Stessiger	Surrey WC	106 m 0172 yds	<b>C34</b>
11.	R. Bidmead	Stock Exch Boxing Club	104 m 0685 yds	<b>C36</b>
12.	A.P. Reid	Unattached-Newark	103 m 0713 yds	<b>C35</b>
13.	F. Webb	Middlesex WC	103 m 0577 yds	<b>C37</b>
14.	J. Harper	Middlesex WC	102 m 1040 yds	<b>C26</b>
15.	A.W. Jackson	Unattached-Grimsby	102 m 0062 yds	<b>C38</b>
16.	F.G. Downs	Vegetarians WC	101 m 1605 yds	<b>C39</b>
17.	E. Hailstone	Unatt. (Eastbourne)	101 m 0567 yds	<b>C40</b>

#### **Additional 100 Miles Performances**

1.	E. Parslow	Surrey WC	21:03:47	<b>C41</b>
2.	F.H. Wallis	Blackheath Harriers	22:55:46	<b>C42</b>
3.	W.T. Mitchell	Garratt WC	23:01:30	<b>C43</b>
4.	E.C. Haynes	Middlesex WC	23:05:56	<b>C46</b>
5.	A. Grubb sr	Highgate Harriers	23:06:27	<b>C44</b>
6.	F.T. Lock	Ashcombe AC	23:06:44	<b>C45</b>
7.	E.G. Mitchell	Lancashire WC	23:32:50	<b>C47</b>
8.	L. Norwood	Sheffield United	23:44:21	<b>C48</b>

Brown's 12 Hour Track Walk record lasted less than a year before being beaten by Tom Payne. Middlesex Walking Club's 12 Hour Track Race at the Stamford Bridge Ground on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1910 saw Payne walk to a superb 72 miles and 33 yards (117.5 km). Well, they do say that records are made to be broken.

That marks the end of Bill Brown's walking career, except for one final mention some years later when he finished second in the 1914 RWA 20 Miles Championship at St Albans, behind Ross again, and still part of the winning Surrey WC team. He was by then 35 years of age.

There is one final chapter to relate from his story. Brown had worked for the Ford Motor Company at their Dagenham factory until he retired in 1949, aged 70. In 1978, when he became the first Ford worker to reach 100 years, fellow worker and English Centurion Dave Ainsworth organised the birthday party for Brown, and it was only then that he discovered Brown's athletics past as a respected Centurion. The Centurions had lost touch with Bill - until Dave re-engaged the link.

Bill lived a 3 further years before dying, aged 103, in 1982.

Nearly 40 years on from his death, we acknowledge the excellence of his walking performances and honour his long life and his many achievements. In an era of champion long distance walkers, his name is not forgotten.

Tim Erickson  
Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2020

The newspaper article from Bill's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday is on the next page.

# TOAST OF THE TOWN

**A TOAST today to Will Brown. He's someone rather special.**

Will has just become Ford's first-ever centenarian.

He has clocked up a magnificent 100 years and cut himself a slice of company history.

It was way back in February 1949 when Will retired as a Dagenham time checker after 18 years' service. He was then 70.

He was at Dagenham while it was being built on the marshes and production was still way off.

When he finally packed in work, Will was earning a princely 3s. 9d. an hour.

Amid cheerful but quiet celebrations at his home in Westcliff, Will proudly received the traditional telegram of congratulations from the Queen.

There were many others, too. From Ford Chairman and Managing Director Sir Terence Beckett, for instance. And from the Amateur Athletics Association and the Race Walking Association.

Will was one of the best known British athletes at the turn of the century and is a member of that most exclusive club, the Centurions, for completing a 100-mile distance in less than 24 hours.

A number of special gifts from the company were presented by Pension Funds Manager Alec Pitt.



Congratulations to Will on his 100th birthday from Balmoral House Matron Monica Goodridge.

*Bill Brown's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday (cutting from <http://centurionsworldwide.org.uk/c12-bill-brown.html>)*