

VALE FREDDIE BAKER: 1932 - 2021

I was saddened to hear of the recent death of English Centurions legend **Freddie Baker (C266)**. Fred, who was born on 30th July 1932, passed away in November 2021, aged 89.

Fred was well known to us here in Australia as, in his retirement, he used to spend the English winter here in Brisbane each year, and he participated in a number of our Australian Centurion walks. But more of that later.

A member of Highgate Harriers and of Surrey Walking Club, Fred completed 19 English Centurion 100 mile walks between 1956 (aged 23) and 1989 (aged 57), starting with a walk of 22:30.13 in the testing 1956 Sheffield-to-Harrogate-and-back race. On that occasion, 21 of the 38 starters finished, 8 becoming new Centurions. His full list of English Centurion finishes reads as follows:

100m	22:30:13	06/07/1956	Sheffield to Harrogate	C266
100m	21:00:30	05/07/1963	Brighton to London and back	
100m	22:14:24	09/10/1965	Chigwell	
100m	23:13:36	26/09/1969	Bristol	
100m	22:31:12	25/06/1971	Ewhurst	
100m	22:32:06	28/07/1972	Leicester to Skegness	
100m	20:38:40 (PB)	21/09/1973	Bristol	
100m	22:04:06	27/06/1975	Ewhurst	
100m	22:04:14	28/05/1976	Woodford	
100m	22:50:22	22/06/1979	Ewhurst	
100m	23:17:23	25/07/1980	Leicester	
100m	23:38:10	23/05/1981	Brighton	
100m	22:41:12	20/08/1982	Leicester	
100m	21:45:18	24/06/1983	Ewhurst	
100m	23:36:30	14/09/1985	Colchester	
100m	23:08:26	30/05/1986	Woodford	
100m	23:08:17	25/07/1986	Leicester-Congerstone	
100m	23:27:19	26/06/1987	Ewhurst	
100m	23:03:17	29/07/1989	London Hendon	

Fred held the record of the most English centurion finishes, with 19, until eventually Sandra Brown surpassed that tally in 2005 (Sandra has now raised that mark to 32 successful finishes). Fred donated a new English Centurions trophy, *the Scorers Salver*, to record those who completed the English Centurions qualifier on 20 occasions. Sandra became the first name to be engraved on that prestigious piece of silverware.

Fred made a comeback in 1992, aged 60, to complete the Continental Centurions 100 mile qualifier in Holland, becoming Continental Centurion number 233 with a time of 22:14:22.

Fred served for a time as the English Centurions' Vice-President and was the Honorary Secretary from 1986 to 1995. He was also a regular in England's historic Roubaix squads.

Fred had been a high-ranking Civil Servant in his professional life and, when he retired, he spent the English summers at home in England and the English winters in Brisbane.

It was in 1997 that Fred, then aged 65, decided to try for one final 100 miler to become a Centurion on Australian soil. The occasion was our annual qualifier, held at the ANZ Stadium in Brisbane on the weekend of 27-28 September. His preparation was limited as he was a few years out of formal training but he felt he had a good chance.

Alas, Brisbane turned on a hot and sunny day and the start time of noon on the Saturday meant that the field had to endure nearly 6 hours of sunshine and heat before the evening brought cooler weather. The cumulative effect of this was seen during the early hours of the race and what had promised to be a very toughly contested race deteriorated quickly into one of survival. Plans fell by the wayside as walkers struggled to maintain pre-race plans and the pace slowed. Although the night brought ideal conditions, the damage was done and the bulk of the field retired in the early evening hours. Fred soldiered on for the full 24 Hours, reaching a distance of 124km, one of only 2 finishers (the other was Caleb Maybir who had qualified the previous year – this time around he could only manage 150km).

Fred was back a year later, in September 1998, for our qualifier at the George Knott Athletic Field in Clifton Hill. He had been training locally in Brisbane with **John Harris (C12)**, already a triple Australian Centurion (1975, 1998 and 2002), and they travelled together to Melbourne, both hoping for a 100 mile walk effort. Unfortunately, things did not

go to plan for either walker. John walked consistently but was just not fast enough and had to be content with membership of what he dubbed 'the nineties club'. Fred suffered badly with leg problems and had to adjust his expectations and settle for a final distance of 110.4km, eventually retiring at the 20 hour mark.

Fred made the trip from Brisbane to Melbourne three further years (2003, 2005 and 2006), the race being held at Coburg on each occasion, but he fell short each time (100.8km, 103.2km and 71.2km). Now going on 74 years of age, he had rolled the dice for the last time.



Fred in action in one of his Australian centurion walks – this time at Coburg in 2003

He continued to come out each summer and continued to go for the occasional walk locally with John Harris but his days as an ultra distance competitor were behind him now.

Fred had lived in Carlisle, northern England, in his later years, and was in a care home for his last days.

Apart from his love for walking, Fred had a great love for the gentleman's game of cricket. He had been a Kent County Cricket Club trialist in his younger days and he remained a club member throughout his life.

Fred leaves a wonderful legacy for those of us who have followed him into the world of long distance walking. He was one of the greats, a great walker and a wonderful person. Many words spring to mind as I remember him - gentle, kind, caring and inclusive. We remember him with affection.

Tim Erickson
Thursday 2nd December 2021