

## REMEMBERING THE GREAT NORMAN WISDOM

I start with a trivia question: Have any feature films ever featured racewalking pieces? The answer is definitely yes.

One of the best known was the 1966 Hollywood film *Walk Don't Run*<sup>1</sup>, which was set during the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo and featured Carey Grant (in his final role) as a matchmaker, trying to flame the fires of romance between an expatriate English girl with one of the US Olympic team competitors. You don't find out till late in the film that the American athlete in question is a 50km walker, and the film features a wonderful segment in which Grant strips down to his boxer shorts and a T-shirt so he can pretend to be a fellow competitor and talk to the American during the Olympic 50km walk and try to heal the breach between the young lovers. It's well worth a watch.

But you can go further back to one of my favourite film sequences, set in the 1955 English film *One Good Turn*<sup>2</sup>, starring the famous **Norman Wisdom**<sup>3</sup>. Norman plans a train trip to Brighton, as he has never seen the sea. Alas, he loses his trousers on the train. On leaving the train, he disguises his appearance by stripping down to his boxer shorts and white tshirt (identical to what Carey Grant did 11 years later in his movie) and joins the final stage of the London to Brighton walking race. Due to his advantage in joining so late, he wins. I remember seeing the film as a boy and I still remember the sequence so well.

Check out the movie at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-P08ficdoFI>. Forward to the 35 minute mark and start watching. I still love it.



I grew up in the 1950s going to the local picture theatre every weekend and watching many of the classic movies of the time. English comedies featured highly on the menu and Norman Wisdom was at the peak of his comedic talent at that time. Wisdom, who had been born in London in 1915, often played the part of the hapless onscreen character Norman Pitkin. This was one of those occasions.

Wisdom's career revived in the 1990s, helped by the young comedian Lee Evans, whose act was often compared to Wisdom's work. His films for Rank were playing to new audiences via television screenings, with young fans in the United Kingdom and abroad. The high point of this new popularity was the knighthood he was awarded, for services to entertainment, in the 2000 New Year's honours list. During the ceremony, once he had received his knighthood, he walked away and again performed his trademark trip, at which the Queen smiled and laughed.

Somewhat surprisingly, Wisdom features on the cover of the August 1998 edition of the prestigious Race Walking Record<sup>4</sup>, one of the few occasions when a non-walker has featured. The occasion was the 1998 Parish Walk on the Isle of Man and Wisdom was amongst the starters.

1 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk,\\_Don%27t\\_Run](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk,_Don%27t_Run)

2 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_Good\\_Turn\\_\(1955\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Good_Turn_(1955_film))

3 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman\\_Wisdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Wisdom)

4 See <http://racewalkingassociation.com/Archive/ViewArchive.asp?mm=August&yy=1998&m=670&p=1&t=16>



The article reads like this:

*A record 595 entrants, including competitors from as far away as Australia, Netherlands, Denmark, US and Isle Man, of whom some 525 actually came under starters orders, made the 1998 Parish Walk, sponsored by Clerical Medical, the best ever.*

*Its popularity ensured the participation of local celebrities, Noel Cringle, Speaker of the House of Keys and Manx Hs President, Robin Oake the chief Constable, and Norman Wisdom.*

*The first two covered the veterans distance of 32.3 miles, from Douglas to Keel. Norman, whose team was called the Grimsdales, was seen at some point en route, but officially, he just vanished.*

Wisdom was actually a local, having lived for many years on the Isle of Man. When he died in 2010, aged 95, he was buried in Kirk Bride Churchyard in Bride, Isle of Man. It is worth reading the excellent Guardian newspaper obituary.<sup>5</sup>

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5 See <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/04/norman-wisdom-dies-aged-95>