

In 1877, in a race at the Lillie Bridge track, Fulham, held over August 21st/22nd, 27-year-old John Edwin Fowler-Dixon walked 100 miles well within the timespan of a single day: 20 hours 36 minutes 8 seconds. Notable feats of 'pedestrianism' had been recorded throughout the 18th and 19th centuries – sometimes on the open road and sometimes in public halls such as the Royal Agricultural Hall, Islington – but mostly these deeds had been achieved as a result of wagers. There had been no regulations to follow, to thus ensure that such performances were genuine, and it even seems that a form of jogtrot had been acceptable.

Fowler-Dixon's effort was the first time that an ultra-distance performance was closely scrutinised – and he was an amateur, a status held very dear in the hearts of early organisers of Athletics. As a result, this accomplishment was maintained to be the amateur record for the distance, and it stood for 20 years. Fowler-Dixon went on to become a prominent sports official and administrator, a sports journalist and author, and a founder and life Vice-President of the England Amateur Athletics Association. As an official he attended four Olympic Games. He died at the age of 93 and is buried in the Highgate Cemetery in North London.

No other event of equivalent standing was held until Surrey Walking Club promoted a London to Brighton and back walk in 1902, over a course of 104 miles. In 1907 T.E. Hammond of Blackheath Harriers improved the 100 miles record to 18 hours 13 minutes 37 seconds, and then in 1909 Surrey Walking Club's E.F. Broad walked 120 miles 1240 yards in 24 hours.

By 1911 the idea of forming a "Brotherhood" was conceived by E.R. 'Bob' Gillespie. Bob had himself walked 106 miles in a 24-hour race in 1908. On 11th May, at the Ship and Turtle public house, situated at 131, Leadenhall Street, London, a meeting of like-minded individuals, including 13 men who had already achieved the feat, gathered to discuss Bob's idea, and the Centurions 1911 came into being. To become a member of this body it was stipulated that,

"A Centurion is one who, as an amateur, has walked in competition in Great Britain 100 miles within 24 hours."

Fowler-Dixon was present at the meeting, and as the first person to have achieved the requirement, 34 years earlier, was enthusiastically awarded the status of Centurion No. 1 and elected President for Life.

Surrey Walking Club continued to organise London to Brighton and back races every four years but there weren't many other similar events until after the Second World War. From that point on there was at least one 100-miler or 24-hour event somewhere in Great Britain every year. The London to Brighton Road began to attract walkers from Europe and in time similar Centurion clubs were set up in the Netherlands, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. By the time the Club's Centenary year was reached in 2011 there were 1082 Centurions.

The full distance of the London to Brighton and back was increased to approximately 106 miles in 1950, due to detours being introduced to negotiate the extension of Gatwick Airport. In 1965 the 'Brotherhood' became a 'Fraternity' when Anne Sinnema of the Netherlands became Centurion No. 380. Then, in 1971, ever increasing traffic on the Brighton Road resulted the event being replaced by the leafy circuit of the Open Ewhurst 100 miles.

Today's qualification is that:

"A Centurion is one who has walked 100 miles within 24 hours in a competition held under Race Walking Association (RWA) and UK Athletics rules in Great Britain."

We are confident that 24 Belgravians have achieved the feat of becoming a Centurion – some on more than one occasion – but we hasten to add that research is still ongoing.

Belgrave Harriers – Race Walking – Centurions

Centurion number and name	100 miles time	Race distance	Event	
64 J.B. 'Jimmy' Belchamber	20:03:35	104 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	24-25 Jun 1921
125 Colin F.D. Sutton	20.44.11	24 Hour	Metropolitan WC Track Race, White City ¹	14-15 Jun 1946
127 R. 'Bob' Martin	22.16.57	24 Hour	Metropolitan WC Track Race, White City	14-15 Jun 1946
142 Gordon S. 'Doub' Doubleday	23.26.41	104 miles	London to Brighton & Back	20-21 Jun 1947
143 A.J. 'Jack' Stirling-Wakeley	18.56.13	24 Hour	Track Race, Motspur Park	13-14 Aug 1948
164 Joe Wilson	21.04.46	104 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	6-7 Jul 1951
181 Sidney G. Spencer	20.09.45	100 miles	Sunday Dispatch Bath to London	3-4 Oct 1952
191 F.S. Herring	21.50.00	100 miles	Sunday Dispatch Bath to London	3-4 Oct 1952
235 H.W. 'Harry' Shields	20.02.22	104 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	1-2 Jul 1955
246 Percy Wilson	21.53.55	104 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	1-2 Jul 1955
258 Frank Jarvis	23.25.22	104 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	1-2 Jul 1955
344 Bernard Eglinton	21.28.57	106 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	5-6 Jul 1963
345 Cyril Yescombe	21.28.57	106 miles	Surrey WC London to Brighton & Back	5-6 Jul 1963
373 Douglas Fotheringham	21.31.09	100 miles	Chigwell 100 miles	8-9 Oct 1965
462 John Moullin	16.55.44	100 miles	Surrey WC 100 miles, Ewhurst	25-26 Jun 1971
473 John F. Keown	20.49.27	100 miles	Surrey WC 100 miles, Ewhurst	25-26 Jun 1971
474 John A. Morris	20.49.27	100 miles	Surrey WC 100 miles, Ewhurst	25-26 Jun 1971
716 George Beecham	22.45.12	24 Hour	Endeavour Motors Track Race, Brighton	22-23 May 1981
734 John Dunsford	22.12.40	100 miles	Leicester WC 100 miles, Congerstone	19-20 Aug 1982
750 Carl Lawton	17.51.51	100 miles	Surrey WC 100 miles, Ewhurst	24-25 Jun 1983
756 Ron Day	20.38.00	100 miles	Surrey WC 100 miles, Ewhurst	24-25 Jun 1983
855 Geoff Fitzgerald	22:04:58	100 miles	Hendon 100 miles	24-25 Jun 1989
897 Pat Duncan	23.01.11	100 miles	Leicester WC/Shoefayre 100 miles, Hungarton	31 Jul-1 Aug 1992
972 Paul King	22.48.59	200 km/24 Hr	Capt. Barclay Millennium Challenge, Newmarket	12-13 Aug 2000

Source material:

Centurions Walking Club, The; Surrey Heritage, <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk>

Centurions 1911; <https://centurions1911.org.uk>.

Surrey Walking Club; <https://surreywalkingclub.org.uk>

Carl Lawton, conversations with, 2024.

Centurions Worldwide; <http://centurionsworldwide.org.uk>

¹ Second-claim member of Belgrave H., Percy J. Reading, was race winner in the 24 Hour Metropolitan W.C. Track Race in 17.58.44. He was a first-claim member of Polytechnic H.