

GEORGE PILKINGTON MILLS: 'THE GREATEST LONG DISTANCE RIDER THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN'

by
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1893: End to End in 3 days 16 hours 47 mins: GP Mills poses with his record-breaking Humber tricycle.

At midnight on 5 July 1886 the young George Pilkington Mills set out from Land's End riding a 53 inch iron-rimmed, solid-tyred Humber 'penny-farthing'. His objective: to reach John O'Groats, some 861 miles north in the fastest possible time.

The 19 year old mechanical engineer was a member of the Anfield Bicycle Club. With riders like Lawrence Fletcher, Artie Bennett and 'Doc' Carlisle, *the Anfield* was the leading long distance club of the day ¹. Mills' fellow Anfielders co-ordinated the record attempt: organising food and accommodation, ensuring that Mills rode in company and that local clubmen would act as guides along the way. Mills rode night and day, snatching little sleep. He faced roads which in the countryside were no more than potholed and rutted tracks, whilst in the towns and cities, cobbles, granite setts and tramlines paved the way.

From Cornwall and Devon, he made for the Severn valley. Through Shropshire, Cheshire and Lancashire he was on roads he knew well. North of the

Mersey the route lay through Warrington, Preston, Lancaster and Kendal. He climbed Shap before heading for the Scottish Borders. Local riders piloted him through Edinburgh, from where he crossed the Forth by ferry. North of Perth, intense cold and unseasonably strong headwinds delayed progress through the Grampians. The final stage north of Inverness took Mills across the Black Isle via the Kessock Ferry and into Caithness via the Meikle Ferry.

¹ Amongst the Anfield Bicycle Club's founder members, Lawrence Fletcher, Artie Bennett and 'Doc' Carlisle were outstanding long-distance riders, who both assisted and competed with G P Mills



In 1891, GP Mills allegedly shot five dogs while training in France for the first Bordeaux - Paris race.

Marking the northern end of the ride is the John O'Groats Hotel, which stands on a low promontory above a little harbour overlooking the restless waters of the Pentland Firth. It was 1.45am on the morning of 10 July 1886, when Mills, accompanied by fellow Anfielder Lawrence Fletcher, crested the brow of the last hill above the hotel. With lamps illuminating the gravel road, the two machines rumbled out of the darkness to sweep across the finishing line outside the hotel. Waiting to cheer their man home was a small band of friends who had provided support throughout the enterprise. The ride had taken Mills 5 days 1 hour and 45 minutes. The record was never beaten. Nor can it ever be bettered, as the 'official' record books were closed for penny-farthings when 'safeties' supplanted them in the 1890s².

Mills' energy and powers of endurance knew no bounds. Not content with the penny-farthing record, some five weeks later (16 to 21 August 1886), Mills repeated the journey, this time on a high wheeled tricycle: setting perhaps an even more remarkable record of 5 days 10

hours. Earlier in the same month he had taken the 24 hours (penny-farthing) bicycle record to 268.5 miles, and as if that was not enough, he then bettered it with 295 miles in October 1886. By the end of the season he had added the 100 miles penny-farthing record to his tally and the high-wheeled tandem tricycle records at 50 and 100 miles.

² The first LEJOG bicycle records were set by riders on machines that later came to be known as 'ordinary' bicycles (nicknamed 'penny-farthings'). Significantly, Mills' 1886 record was the last LEJOG bicycle record to be held by a rider on such a bicycle. Following the invention of 'safety' bicycles (and reliable pneumatic tyres), by the end of the 1880s, not surprisingly, the grand old ordinary rapidly fell out of favour. The new bicycles were safer (hence their nickname), and faster. Knowing this, in 1891, riding a Humber 'safety', it was Mills himself who set out to beat his own 1886 bicycle record. He succeeded, setting a new time of 4 days 11 hours and 17 minutes. The 'official' record books were closed for penny-farthings when 'safeties' supplanted them. The *Road Records Association* continues to oversee and approve long distance cycle records in the UK. Michael Broadwith is the current End to End bicycle record holder, with a time (in 2018) of 1 day 19 hours 25 minutes and 13 seconds.

Such prolific record breaking established Mills' pre-eminence as a long distance rider of the highest calibre. All his achievements were duly engraved on the Anfield's Long Distance Shield.

By 1891 Mills, now riding a modern 'safety' bicycle, turned his attention to the first Bordeaux – Paris race, which he won from fellow Anfielders and North Road riders Monty Holbein and S F Edge. This episode revealed another talent: Mills held a commission in the Bedfordshire Volunteers, and he was a crack shot. While training in France, Mills was so bothered by dogs chasing him, that allegedly he shot five with the Colt revolver, which accompanied him on rides for just such a purpose!

Such was George Pilkington Mills' dominance in France that his exploits led to the birth of the most famous of all cycle events – the Tour de France. The race was established as a means of boosting the French cycle industry and cycling muscle, and to counter the dominance of non-French riders like Mills and manufacturers like Humber and Dunlop who so rattled French pride³.

In the closing years of the century Mills again took up the End to End challenge: on the first modern bicycles, tricycles and tandems, he set a series of impressive records which led to him being described as 'the greatest road racing cyclist the world has known'.

With the new century Mills' attention, professionally and in competition, turned to motorised transport. Although there was no more record breaking by bicycle, Mills remained a force to be reckoned with. As Raleigh's Works Manager, at a time when the company took up motorcycle production, Mills characteristically gained the motorcycle record End to End! And later he raced touring cars.

During the First World War, Mills, now in his forties, served in France. He was mentioned in despatches three times, won the DSO, and reached the rank of Brigadier General⁴.

At the height of his cycling career, doctors had forecast Mills' early demise. How they were proved wrong! Mills died in 1945 at the age of 78.

³ *The Official Tour De France 1903 – 2004*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004: "How the Tour was born" – Serge Laget, p10.

⁴ George Pilkington Mills commanded the 7th Bedfords for a year, through heavy fighting at Arras and Ypres, and his DSO was probably in recognition of his command abilities in this period. Recognition of those abilities was confirmed when he was appointed as T/Brig.Gen. and GOC 54 Infantry Bde in the Autumn of 1917 (see - www.bedfordregiment.org.uk/7thbn/7thbntn1916diary.html).