

The Hour Tandem Record that stood for 63 years

On the 18th August 1937 the weekly magazine *Cycling* floated the idea of a public fund to send E. V. Mills, a member of the Addiscombe Cycling Club, to the Vigorelli track in Milan to attack the Hour record currently standing to Maurice Richard with 28 miles 368 yards. *Cycling* launched the appeal with a £5 donation. The objective was to send Ernie and his trainer, Charlie Davey, to Italy for two weeks at an estimated cost of £40. Ernie Mills was selected because the previous week he had taken a full second off the one mile unpaced record set by the great Frank Southall, 3/5th of a second better than the World record. Reference was also made in *Cycling* to the British tandem hour record that Ernie Mills and W. G. 'Bill' Paul had broken in 1936.

One week later, Dunlop and H.W. Bartleet, President of the Fellowship of Old Time Cyclists, had endorsed the Fund and *Cycling* invited manufacturers, cycling clubs and interested sportsmen to subscribe. It was further announced that any surplus money would be used to send W. G. Paul and the tandem.

Cycling on 1st September, proudly announced 'Big cycle makers and clubmen co-operate. A question of British prestige' and there followed a list of subscribers to date that makes interesting reading nearly 80 years on. Such is inflation. *Cycling* and *Dunlop* were top subscribers at £5 each followed by four donations of £2.2.0, ten donations of £1.1.0, and donations of one shilling (equivalent coinage today 5p) and 6d (2.5p) from many club cyclists.

By 8th September the Fund stood at over £100 and with Harry Hill, Sheffield Phoenix CC, also emerging as a contender for the Hour record it was decided he should be included in the party. Meanwhile Ernie had put in a schedule to attack the British Hour record at Herne Hill though sadly the ride was called off due to inclement weather. Two weeks later the Fund stood at over £140.

Early in October plans were finalised. Charlie Davey was unable to travel so Frank Slemen was appointed trainer/manager and Alex Josey, better known to readers of *Cycling* under the pseudonym of 'K.M.D.', would be accompanying the riders.

The party left Victoria Station at 2 pm on Sunday, 10th October 1937, seen off by many well wishers including a large contingent of Addiscombe club members who had diverted their club run.

It is interesting to note that Mills, Paul and Hill had early that morning ridden in the Comet 25 miles time trial in Essex.



Let Bill Paul take up the story (taken from his own account)

‘We did not arrive in Milan until 2.30 pm the following day feeling very tired as we were forced to sleep sitting upright in the train. In our carriage there were five of us, Ernie, Harry, Alex Josey from *Cycling*, Frank Slemen the manager, and myself. It was Alex’s job to report and photograph the attempts. Frank had a few hotel addresses but the difficulty was finding them or making the taxi drivers understand. We eventually found a driver who seemed to understand us and we all crammed into the back of his car. What a ride it was. A very fast drive over cobblestones, barely missing other vehicles, brought us to a little hotel just behind the Cathedral.’

KMD reports they had to pay a £5 deposit to secure their cases and equipment to appease officialdom on entry to the country and that later, Signor Gastone Vello, a charming young man who spoke excellent English, did much to ease their passage and make their arrangements with the Federazione Ciclistica Italiana.

‘The next day we went to have a look at the Vigorelli Track and it took our breath away. Compared to Herne Hill Track with its shallow bankings the Vigorelli was like the wall of death. The banking was so steep it was impossible to walk up it. We managed to get a few laps in after we had unpacked our machines and got them ready for riding. We rode our singles and when I came off I thought to myself “What is it going to be like on the tandem?”’.



‘Next day we returned to the track and after riding our singles for a few laps we got the tandem out to see how we were with it. At first we were rather unsteady but after a few laps we got used to it. Even so we were not riding like we usually did, we were ragged and not nicking together at all. As we were rather worried about it we decided to get as much riding in as possible the next day. This we did and by the afternoon we were getting back into our usual style of riding. We were riding some very fast laps, fast enough to break the record but the nagging doubt at the back of our minds was that we had to keep that speed up for an hour, unless we got back onto form we might not be successful.’

‘Frank Slemen thought it would be a good idea if we made an attempt on records up to 20 km the next day, the Thursday of our first week. We were back at the track early and rode the tandem for a few laps and were satisfied that we were fit enough to attempt some records. We got back to the hotel and had a light meal and a rest before returning to the track for the attempt. When we got back everything was ready for us to try and do our best. The track was measured by a yellow line around the inside edge on which was periodically placed small tightly packed sandbags. If you made a mistake of riding over one, which Ernie did on one occasion, you certainly knew all about it.’

While the English boys had been still at home packing, the professional French pair of Richard and Pecqueux had travelled to Milan and established new tandem figures for the Hour and intermediate distances. This had not deterred the Brits and in the Thursday ‘warm-up’ for the big attempt, Mills and Paul excelled themselves in beating the week old records over 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 15 and 20 km.

Bill Paul continues the story:

‘It was decided that we would make Sunday the big day and go for everything up to the Hour and the 50 km. Some of the officials would have preferred another day because on Sunday there was an important football game at the stadium that they did not wish to miss, but as our time was very limited we had to insist.



‘We started our attempt at 2.30 pm. Frank had prepared a schedule and arranged for the lap bell to be struck and that a person would move to a certain spot if we were beating the record on that lap. From the word go it was tough. For a start we had a gear of 116 and the rules did not allow even the slightest push. To get going from a dead start with a gear that size was hard. It was not long before we got into our stride and round the bankings Ernie was just missing the sandbags, following the yellow line as closely as he could. We soon got inside our schedule and were riding a lot better with the gear of 116 than we had previously with the gear of 105 which had been too low. We were inside our schedule on every lap except one about half way through, when we drifted back a couple of seconds. The next lap we were back beating the record again, and we carried on for the hour and were only 1 second over the hour for the 50 km.



‘We were over the moon when we had finished, not only because we had beaten the records but also because we had justified the support of all the people who had subscribed to the fund and made the trip possible.’

For Mills and Paul the trip resulted in ten World Tandem Records from 1 km to 50 km, plus 49 km 991m for the coveted ‘Hour’, an improvement of 955 metres over the previous record. They also set twelve new records from 1 to 30 miles and 31 miles 113 yds for the Hour. Harry Hill returned home with three solo World records plus the best solo amateur performance at the Hour. *Cycling* magazine devoted four pages to the success story in their 20th October issue and a further five pages the following week.

Despite the fact that in 1948 the UCI slimmed down their list of officially recognised World records, over the years several attempts were made in Britain on the Hour tandem record. In 2000 Simon Keeton and Jon Rickards of the Rutland Cycling Club, riding at Manchester Velodrome, finally brought the Mills and Paul Record to an end with a ride of 50.068 km and Bill Paul was one of the first to send his congratulations. In 1937 it was Bill’s reported comment that the Vigorelli was a difficult track for a tandem although in later years he considered the reason their record had stood for so long was the tighter bends on modern tracks.

Ernest Victor Mills died in October 1972 following a long illness with multiple sclerosis. William George Paul was still riding his bike in his late 80’s. He died in January 2003 aged 92. They are immortalised in John Player’s set of Cycling cigarette cards, No 45.