

Billie Fleming

Cyclist who in 1938 pedalled nearly 30,000 miles around the British Isles, setting a women's world record

BILLIE FLEMING, who has died aged 100, set a women's world record in 1938 for the greatest distance cycled in one year.

Billie Dovey, as she then was, was a 24-year-old secretary and typist who had become inspired by the ideas of the Women's League of Health & Beauty, an organisation founded in the 1930s by Mary Bagot Stack as "a league of women who will renew their energy in themselves and for themselves day by day". A keen cyclist, Billie Dovey decided to put principles into action by embarking on an extensive cycling tour of the British Isles.

The cycle maker Rudge Whitworth agreed to provide her with a bike – a heavy steel machine fitted with a three-speed cycle derailleur gear – and to arrange sponsorship, in return for her agreeing to ride the bike every day of the year and to help promote the company. One of her sponsors, Cadbury, provided her with 5lb of chocolate every month in return for her appearing in their advertisements.

The "Rudge Whitworth Keep Fit Girl", as she was billed in the press, set out on New Year's Day 1938 from the New Horticultural Halls, Westminster, and rode to Mill Hill, Aylesbury and then back to Mill Hill, a total of 71 miles. After 365 days she had ridden her bike 29,603.4 miles – 35 times the distance from Land's End to John O'Groats, more than eight times the distance from London to New York and almost three times the distance from London to Sydney. "I just got on my bike in the morning and kept



Billie Fleming: she posted 'checking cards', signed by witnesses, to *Cycling* magazine. She also agreed to promote Rudge Whitworth, who provided her bike

cycling all day. I rode all over the country," she recalled. A hard day's pedalling was often followed by a promotional visit to a Rudge Whitworth cycle dealer, and then sometimes a talk at a village hall or cycling event.

Billie Dovey had no pannier on her bike – just a small saddlebag with a change of clothes and a few tools. She carried no water and relied on local cafés and shops for food. Apart from one puncture, the bike suffered no mechanical problems. To prove she had travelled the miles she claimed, Billie Dovey had to complete "checking cards" and get them signed by witnesses and posted back to *Cycling* magazine. She had a cyclometer on her bike and she had to go to the magazine's offices

in London at intervals to prove that it had not been tampered with. Although her average was 81 miles a day, there were days when she did far more. One morning, in York, she decided to cycle back home to Mill Hill, a distance of 186 miles.

In 1942 an Australian woman cyclist set out to take the record from Billie Dovey, but her claim to have cycled 54,402.8 miles in a year was dismissed after the Australian cycling authorities scrutinised her log books. Despite the advent of bikes made with lightweight alloys and fitted with multiple speed gears (a trend Billie thought ridiculous – "three is plenty"), her record is thought to have remained unbroken to this day. "I was young and fit and ready to take on anything," she recalled.

The eldest of three sisters, she was born Lilian Irene Bartram on April 13 1914 in Camden, north London, just three months before the outbreak of the First World War. Her father was a toolmaker. She attended the Lyulph Stanley Central School, Camden, which she left aged 16 to become a typist.

She developed a passion for cycling when she met a boy at a youth club who rode a bike and took her on to the Barnet bypass in Mill Hill to teach her how to ride.

After her record-breaking journey in 1938 she had planned to ride across the United States, but was prevented from doing so by the outbreak of the Second World War, during which she worked in the buying office of an aircraft company. She consoled herself in 1940 by

breaking three cycling records riding a tricycle – the 25-mile, 50-mile and 100-mile distances.

Before the war she had married Freddie Dovey, with whom she had a son. The marriage was dissolved, and in 1953 she met her second husband, George Fleming, another keen cyclist and the first man to have cycled 50 miles in less than two hours. They enjoyed cycling together, and in 1957 rode the entire Pyrenees mountain range from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

George Fleming died in 1997, and for the last seven years of her life Billie Fleming lived in a care home at Abbotsham, Devon.

She is survived by a stepson.

Billie Fleming, born April 13 1914, died May 12 2014