

Eileen Gray

Eileen Gray was the Surbiton woman who became the driving force behind the development of female cycle racing. Born in Bermondsey in 1920, Eileen was given an old bike so she could get to work when the train service she used was damaged during the Blitz. Cycling gave her a newfound sense of confidence and freedom and she joined the only cycle club near her home that accepted women.

In 1946, Eileen and two other British riders were invited to take part in a women's track event in Copenhagen. The organisers thought it would be a 'novelty' event and the Danish team were actually a theatre troupe that did cycling as part of their act. Needless to say the British team won easily and the experience inspired Gray to get women's cycling taken seriously.



After giving up competitive racing in 1947, Eileen became involved in cycling administration. She founded the Women's Track Racing Association in 1949, which became the Women's Cycle Racing Association in 1956. However, her campaign to achieve international recognition for women's cycling ran into stiff opposition, particularly from the Dutch.



Her breakthrough came in 1955 when the UCI (cycling's governing body) agreed to recognise women's world records. Shortly afterwards, the WTRA organised an event at Herne Hill at which Daisy Franks set the first ever women's world record. In 1956, Eileen became a tour manager when a British team was invited to come and compete in a stage race in France, which they duly won. The publicity this received led to the holding of the larger 'Le Tour de France Feminine' the following year and France staging the first ever women's cycle championships in 1958.

However, British female cyclists encountered hostility from their male counterparts and one celebrated cyclist, Reg Harris, managed to get women cyclists banned from the track. Eileen recalled how at one meet in Leipzig a male 'colleague' deliberately stole all the women's spare tyres and tubes in an attempt to scupper them. Despite this, the British Women's Team returned home with two gold medals, a silver and a bronze.



Eileen served as president of the British Cycling Federation from 1976 to 1986 and was thrilled when women's cycling received Olympic status in 1984. Eileen was deputy commandant of the British team at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and a torch bearer for the London Games in 2012. If that wasn't enough, Eileen was also Conservative councillor for the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames from 1984 to 1998 and was Mayor for a year in 1990. She died in May 2015.