

Interview with Eileen Gray CBE

June 02, 2010; by Belinda Sinclair

One of the 50 Cycling heroes named in British Cycling's Hall of Fame was Eileen Gray CBE who attended the Gala Dinner earlier in the year. British Cycling sent correspondent Belinda Sinclair to see her in London and capture a glimpse of her amazing life and struggle for Women's cycling.

Talking to Eileen Gray CBE It's very easy when you are used to just doing things, to assume that it has always been that way. After all, why wouldn't you? But reality is that things that we often take for granted were derived – quite recently – from hard fought battles, the details of which quickly slip into oblivion once the outcome takes root.

Take for example Women's racing. Although arguably opportunities are still not as commonplace as men's, particularly at the lower levels, women cyclists, women's races, and women champions are now very much established within the sport. And much of the credit for that must go to the very determined Eileen Gray CBE, a woman recently inducted into the BCF Hall of Fame, and without whom, the likes of Victoria Pendleton, Rebecca Romero, Nicole Cooke or indeed Beryl Burton might never have had the opportunity over the years, to spin their wheels as successfully as they have.

Eileen Gray is the sort of woman who you just know means business. Now ninety, she still has that air of confidence and calm determination that coupled with pragmatism and clear vision, means that she will achieve what she sets out to do. And according to her, that is all that she needed to set up cycle racing for women and set it on course for the world stage that it now occupies. Well, that and a bike of her own.

Finding her love of the bike in the War years

Recalling her early years, Eileen explains "I was really shy as a young girl. Timid and very mousey. And I would probably have stayed that way had it not been for this old bike that I was given during the war. I can't remember where it came from but I do know that it was the one thing that changed me from that shy young woman into the confident person that I became. It wasn't planned, it just happened, and I don't think I really realised quite the impact it made until much later on. It sort of opened that way for me I suppose."

One of a large family, Eileen was born in Bermondsey, but moved to Dulwich as a youngster. She lived not far from the Herne Hill Velodrome and although she remembers pre war cycle events there, the cycle bug did not bite her until well into the war years. "It started as a bit of a 'I'll show you' sort of thing really. Mum was ill and in the Maudsley Hospital, so I didn't get called up for the forces but went into a reserved occupation instead so that I could look after her. I had always been good at maths and so I went into engineering."

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"I was based over near Harrow Road, which was a bit of a trek but I always got there on time and did my thing checking bits of engine and then stamping 99 on them to show that I'd quality controlled them. But one day, all the buses and trains went on strike and I was late. Not very late, but late enough and although the supervisor knew about the strike and that it really wasn't my fault, he told me off. I thought 'right, you're not getting me again'. So after that, I rode that old bike to work. The way I looked at it, anything that happened then was down to me and me alone. So I rode to Harrow Road and back everyday – round the rubble and the potholes, through all weathers, night and day, but I was never late again, and he never had another opportunity to tell me off."

But the permanent move to two wheels did something to Eileen, and she was never the same again.

"Well, it was the freedom! I loved it. I could go places and see things that I would never have seen if I'd stayed home and I was my own boss. Nobody had any money then, so if you wanted to do stuff, you had to just get on and do it. So cycling became the thing for me. Years before, a doctor looking after Mum had remarked that I was different from the rest of my family and when he discovered that I cycled, he said 'that's it, that's what's made you different'. I didn't really think about it at the time, but getting on my bike after the episode with that supervisor, I knew the doctor had been right. I was very determined, even back then and I knew I wanted to be in control of my own life, not have people – especially men - making up rules for me while they did as they pleased."

And so, Eileen joined the Apollo Cycling Club.

"They were near to where I lived in Dulwich but I had to join them because none of the other clubs – not even the Addiscombe or the Paragon - allowed women to ride. But the Apollo was great and very welcoming. I made so many friends. Sid Butler and his wife Ann (parents of Keith, later to become a pro and now promoter of the Surrey Road Race League) became particularly good friends and really encouraged me. Mind you, I had to be pushed home from my first club run because I was so tired, but I kept going back for more!"

Eileen continued cycling throughout the remainder of the war, joining the National Cyclists Union (NCU) who ran 'Holidays at Home' as part of the war effort. By the time the war ended, she was an accomplished cyclist who rode her bike everywhere.

Eileen (with the microphone) wowed the audience at the 2010 Gala dinner with just one of many stories she has to tell.

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A first for Women

Post war Europe was a very broken place but sport began to emerge as a means of rebuilding international contact and generating new ties and relationships. Cycling became central to that, being one of the few methods of transport or leisure relatively unaffected by damaged vehicles or roads, or petrol shortages. In 1946, a track cycle event was held at Ordurp in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Unusually, the organisers decided to stage a curiosity event – a women’s race and invited three British women cyclists to ride the exhibition event. One was Eileen Gray, and it was the first ever British Women’s International team.

“It was a great opportunity for us. I mean, not only were we being invited abroad but we were going to be allowed to ride our bikes against a Danish team; Stella Farrell, Joan Simmons and me. It sounds daft now, but being allowed was a big thing. People today would laugh at even the suggestion that permission had to be given by half of society to the other half to do something that they did as part of everyday life, but that’s the way it was back then.”

“Men ruled women and women had to wait to be invited, never mind they’d kept the whole country and the war effort going on their own for six years, as well as looking after their kids and doing women stuff - and all for only two thirds of the pay. But this was our chance – an invitation to show what we could do!”

Not surprisingly, Eileen and her two equally determined compatriots romped home to an impressive victory but unlike the men’s event, there were no medals or titles.

“Oh no, they just wanted us there as a side show but what they didn’t realise was that they’d given us a platform, visibility, and a chance to show what we could do. And other women saw us too and must have thought ‘if they can do it, so can I’ and from that point on, something started that they couldn’t stop. And what’s more, we found out later that the Danish girls we’d been up against were part of a theatrical troupe who rode bikes as part of their act. Well, they made a big mistake there because we were all good cyclists and we knew how to race, so we won very convincingly and really stood out.”