

A CELEBRATION .
IN THE FORM OF
A BRIEF HISTORY
OF
THE BRONTE WHEELERS
CYCLING CLUB .
1929 TO 1989 .

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BRONTE WHEELERS C.C.

In 1929 a small group of cycling enthusiasts living in the Mytholmes and Oakworth districts of the Worth Valley, got together to form a cycling club.

The first secretary was Bill Leeming shortly to be replaced by Sid Peacock who was to hold the post for more than twenty years. Their choice of title was the logical outcome of the fact that most of the members lived within a short distance of the vicarage home of the famous Bronte family.

The membership increased rapidly, a strong contingent joining from the Silsden, Crosshills, Cowling area. The acquisition of a clubroom above the premises of Joe Frobisher's cycle shop in Cross Roads gave a further boost to recruitment, and by the time of the middle and late thirties membership was over the century mark. Indeed I remember occasional club runs which formed such a long crocodile that the members were requested by the police to split in three groups in order to assist motorists to overtake them. Happy days! There were less than 5 million motorists, and more than 11 million cyclists in the country at that time. Time trialling was the only form of racing on the road in those days, and the new club soon began to make its mark in this sphere. In 1932, the course record for the local 25 miles time trial course was 1 hr. 11 mins. held by one Donald (Gig) Lee. Many readers will know that Donald is still an active cyclist although now about 83 years of age. In the Bronte club 25 of 1932, three riders broke this record, all three achieving the sensational times of 1hr. 8mins. The writer made his time trial debut in this event, at the tender age of 16, and as he came in 5th with a time of 1:14:35 winning 2nd Handicap and Fastest Novice, he was regarded as a very promising young rider. Unfortunately, he never kept his promises!

This 25 was the first indication of the tremendous successes which were to follow in the competitive sphere in the next six years, only brought to an untimely end by the looming war clouds of 1939.

In a brief history such as this, only the merest outline of these successes can be given, but here are some of the high-lights. In the Best-All-Rounder Contest, a National competition decided by individual average speed over the three distances of 50 miles, 100 miles, and 12 hours, the Bronte Wheelers in 1936 had Norman Hey in 8th place, Harry Mc Kechnie in 104th place, Ken Robinson in 120th place and were 9th in the team contest. In 1937, we had Hey in 5th place, Reuben Firth in 13th place, Robinson in 32nd place and Mc Kechnie in 61st being third in the team contest. In 1938, we had Hey again in 5th place, Firth in 6th place and Norman Read in 8th, Robinson in 40th, E. Ackroyd and A. Granger in 162nd and 160th respectively. (remember that there were hundreds of time triallists competing in this contest, only those who exceeded an average speed of 20 m.p.h. were

published and received an illuminated certificate. The first twelve in the individual contest were national heroes to the cycling world and in January of the following year, at the B.A.R. Concert, they appeared on the platform of the Albert Hall in London to be presented with their medals and the Team Shield, and to be applauded and feted by thousands of cyclists. (the Albert Hall was filled to capacity on these occasions). In 1938, the Bronte Whs. had THREE men in the first twelve and won the team shield with a record average speed. Furthermore, we had a second team of three riders in 19th position.

There were no time trial championships in those days, but the de facto championship at the 100 miles distance was undoubtedly the Bath Road 100, held on the Bath Road on August Bank Holiday Monday every year. Competition even to enter this event was very fierce. (I was usually in the first dozen in 1st class open 100s in Yorkshire, but only just achieved a qualifying time). In 1939, in the Bath Road 100, the Bronte Whs. took all three medal winning places. R. Firth won the event with a time of 4:26:15; N. Hey was second with 4:28:42 and Bernard Rangeley was third with 4:29:22, all three riders inside the "magic" 4 1/2 hr. barrier. The team aggregate was a record breaking one which was to stand for many years. Team record breaking was not new to the club, Firth, Hey, and Ken Robinson had set up a new 100 aggregate two years earlier up at Tees-side, and Hey, Robinson and the writer had broken the 12 hour team record in 1937, only to have it superceded in same event by the Yorkshire R.C.

The onset of the Second World War brought all this glory to an abrupt and premature end in 1939, the B.A.R. was cancelled for the year with Norman Hey lying in second place, and poised to take the lead position.

The secret of the club's successes may have been in the rigorous programme of training which we imposed upon ourselves in the first half of every year. Norman Hey blossomed out from very average beginnings into being one of the leading riders in the country at 100 miles and 12 hours. His best 12 of 247 miles in 1938 would still be a source of pride to many riders 50 years later. Reuben Firth was a prolific winner of events at 25, 50, and 100 miles, but much less happy at 12 hours. One of our most promising young riders was Geoff Burgess, who at 18 years old broke the course record on the 50 course on the A.1 at Wetherby with a time of 2:7:20, winning the event by nearly two minutes. Norman Read and Bernard Rangeley were frequent event winners or highly placed (our top men tended to avoid one another in events, to some extent so that they could each win!) They were all nobly supported by a throng of, perhaps less rapid performers, but although many of these could have been Club Champion in most of the surrounding clubs, the thought of leaving the Brontes for this ephemeral fame never entered the heads of any of them.

The Bronte training club runs were the talk of local cyclists. Many a lad would boast, "I stayed with the Bronte training run from Keighley to Skipton"; but the supermen were heading much, much further afield than Skipton. Keighley to Bowness in 3 hours, 63 miles on low fixed gears!, was one scar that remains in my memory. Middleton-in-Teesdale for lunch followed by a circuit thro' Kirby Stephen and Kendal (a distance well over 160 miles) was another. All these rides were totally without quarter for those who fell by the wayside, and many a tale of agonies endured was poured out by stragglers as they rolled into the lunch or tea place. Only one of our lady members had the guts and ability to take part in these bashes. This was Edith Smith, better known as 'Dolly' because of her china blue eyes and flaxen hair. She invariably rolled into the stopping place just as we were leaving, and in spite of our unchivalrous departure, she persisted, and usually completed the run albeit often some hours after we had reached home. For her also the training paid off. She became one of the best 12 hour riders amongst the Yorkshire ladies with a best distance of 212 miles.

The term "chain gang" was invented by one of the Bronte riders. Ken Robinson, or Scarri as he was usually called (because he used to propel a carrier bicycle around the town, delivering goods for Scarr's Stores.) was the self-appointed clown of the club; and a proper nuisance he was during Saturday nights in the digs when we more dedicated souls were trying to get some sleep in preparation for heroic efforts the following morning. Scarri actually became a cycling clown when he retired from racing and he appeared several times on T.V. riding unicycles and other weird cycling devices which were often the product of his own brain and hand.

The majority of the club riders were of immediate military age and once the War was established, they rapidly disappeared to the four corners of the earth leaving the two or three members who were in "reserved occupations" to keep the club flag flying and to take on the health-undermining task of entertaining their military and naval club-mates (who were usually in much better training for drinking) when they came, one by one, home on leave. It is probably not true, but the writer seems to recall being continuously inebriated in the evenings from 1939 to 1945, due to the onerous duties of maintaining military morale of the combatants home on leave. We usually said when they arrived, "How nice to see you, when are you going back?"

As the war clouds finally rolled away, and the lads returned home to many years of hardship and deprivation due to rationing and other shortages, we slowly gathered up the remnants of our club. Many of our riders never raced again, the task of finding fitness again after years of no cycling proved too much for them. Except for a few, they were replaced by a new generation of club members. One wonders what glories were stolen from us by the war. For three of them, more than glory was stolen. Bert Banyard, Arthur Pinchbeck and Teddy Rees lost their lives during the six years of madness.

The history of the Club in the period immediately after the end of hostilities is difficult to record. Any records which survive are few in number and reliance on my own and other's memory is risky after the passing of forty years. However, to a certain extent, this is what has to be done. A re-union dance was held at Lees Council School in November 1948, and Club Dinners were held in 1951, 1952, and 1953, all well attended by pre-war members and by more recent recruits, although many of the older members were now pre-occupied with family concerns and did little if any cycling. A Club '25' was held in 1946 and quite a few of the returned pre-war riders "had a go". I well recall the consternation amongst almost all of them as they examined the finishing sheet which told them in no uncertain terms of the passage of years, and the loss of fitness. One said in a horror-stricken voice, "I didn't think it was possible for anyone only to do a 1:19 when he was really trying, but I was, and I have! Almost all of them were eight to ten minutes slower than they had expected, and some never got over the shock. The event was won by Reuben Firth, who had kept pretty fit by running and other sports on a land based 'ship' once the Armistice had ended his risky occupation as Naval signaller on the North Atlantic convoys. His time of 1:6:45 was quite good, considering the hilly course.

Reuben had married a Manchester girl, and was now living there. Some time later, he wrote to tell us that he had reluctantly decided to ride for the Altrincham Ravens C.C. but he maintained his contacts with the Brontes by mutual exchange of visits. As many readers will know, he had a second successful career as a Raven. He was the first man to beat 2hr. for 50 miles on Northern roads, won the Anfield '100' in record breaking time, was National Champion at '25', '50' and '100' miles, breaking Comp. Record at the latter distance, and appeared in the first twelve of the B.A.R. for several more years. What a pity his wife Phyl was not a Yorkshire lass!

New riders were now appearing to replace the ones who had retired. Bob Preston, Alec Whitaker, Colin Silson, and later Bill and John Fielding and Colin Hesketh all made their mark in Open time trials in the period between 1946 and 1956.

Alec Whitaker was a firm believer in the old Bronte tradition of long and fast miles for training, and became a very good long distance rider, taking third place in the Lancs. R.C. '12' in his first attempt at the distance with a total of 237 miles. He also won the Y.C.F. '100' in 1949 with 4:37 on a hard morning. Bob Preston took several places in open 25's and '50's with times in the region of 1:2 and 2:10, whilst Colin Silson and Colin Hesketh each did "one ones" for the 25, at a time when such rides were very thin on the ground.

With regard to administration of the Club, from 1942 to 1952 Sid Peacock was President and Harry Mc Kechnie was Secretary. The posts of Treasurer and Racing Sec. changed hands rather more frequently.

(classic) event.

After 1953, Sid Peacock's failing health induced him to step down as President, and Sam Smith, the Club's timekeeper was elected to the Presidency. At about this time, also, Alec Whitaker became General Secretary, and Colin Silson Treasurer.

Alan Barrett and Mervyn Coates had now joined the Club and both turned out excellent time trial performances especially at the longer distances. Donald Mitchell did some sterling rides for the Club in the mid 1950's, but something had departed from the Club spirit which had been present so strongly in the pre-war years. Members drifted away in search of work or promotion, the Club's activities gradually lost their vigour, and in 1956 a General Meeting was held at which it was decided to place the Club's affairs "under wraps" until better times should arrive. Harry Mc Kechnie was appointed custodian of the Club's finances and other effects, the remaining members transferred to the Keighley R.C. and the Bronte Wheelers became moribund for a period of nearly sixteen years.

Record Rides. There had been a long tradition of place to place record attempts in the Club's history, particularly the arduous Keighley-Morecambe-Keighley record, a distance of 104 miles over very hilly country. The record was established in 1933 by Harry Mc Kechnie with a time of 6hr.18min. and this was "modernised" by Fred Rushton in 1936 to 5hr:24min. Fred was a powerful rider, one of the very few to beat the famous Monckton C.C. trio of Earnshaw, Larkin, and Martin at their own pet distance of fifty miles. He must have had a particularly good day and been "on song" as they say nowadays, for successive attempts by Firth, Hey, and Mc Kechnie failed to dislodge his hold on the record. All three were within minutes of the record, and it has always been a particular regret of my own that I was robbed of the record by an untimely crossing gate at Kildwick, missing the record by one minute. It was certainly the best ride of my career!

Fred held the record for fourteen years until it was again "modernised" by Alec Whitaker in 1950 with a time of 5:20: a consistent ride of 2:32 out to Morecambe, and 2:48 back. He also set up a new Keighley to Settle and back record in 1950 with a time of 2hr.14min. for the 49½ miles

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In 1972, the writer was approached by Tom Macdonald, Paul Loftus, and Chris Wilkinson who were leading exponents of the Cyclo-cross sport. The trio were not happy with their present clubs, and proposed that I call a meeting of former Bronte members in order to re-activate the Club.

This was just what I had been waiting for, and I readily agreed to circularise my former club-mates for this purpose. A meeting was called for Tuesday June 20th 1972, was reasonably well attended and the proposal to re-activate the Club was unanimously agreed.

Thus was started a new era in the history of the Club. The Bronte Whs. now became very well known in that arduous sub-section of cycling sport where the competitors have to have the combined abilities of first-class cross country runner, first class time-trial cyclist and extremely expert bicycle handler.

The officials appointed at the inaugural meeting were: President Sam Smith, Secretary/Treasurer David Mc Kechnie, the latter being the first appearance in office of the second generation of Bronte Whs others were to follow. In 1974 and 1975 Sid Peacock returned to office as President and Eileen Cropper was elected as Sec./Treasurer. Club time trials and open Cyclo-cross events were promoted and Club Dinners were held.

Sadly, in 1975, after a lifetime of service to the Club our President Sid Peacock died of heart failure: his funeral was attended by a good ^{number} of Bronte Whs. of all ages. He was succeeded in office by his daughter Brenda now Mrs. Nolan. Mr and Mrs. Nolan intimated that they wished to donate a trophy as a memorial to Sid and after discussion lasting over several committee meetings, it was decided to award the trophy annually for meritorious service to the Club, preferably in some administrative office, but not necessarily so.

The first recipient was Harry Mc Kechnie in 1976 and he was followed by Tom Macdonald and subsequently by Paul Loftus; Eileen Cropper; John North; John Brooks and Frank O'Dwyer, not necessarily in that order.

Difficulties about venue for meetings were resolved by the kind offer from Brenda and Philip Nolan of accommodation in the flat over their shop 1 Cavendish St. This convenient venue lasted until the Nolans left the shop below, when we obtained much less satisfactory accommodation for rent in the Church schoolrooms of St. John's Ingrow. After a stay there, we moved to the institute at Cross Roads and thence to our present accommodation at the Church schoolrooms Exley Head.

In the competitive sphere our riders were doing very well indeed. The team of Macdonald, Loftus, and Wilkinson were Team Champions of the N. of England for five successive years and Yorkshire Team Champions six times, all these, of course, in the sport of Cyclo-cross. In the Three Peaks Cyclo Cross event, in which competitors cycle or run carrying their cycles over the top of the three mountains, Wharfedale, Ingleboro' and Penyghent, a punishing route

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of 26 miles, the Bronte riders won the team event eight times. They also represented Yorkshire as a team in the Inter-Counties Championships.

Individually, Tom Macdonald had won the Three Peaks in 1968 and was Yorkshire Cyclo-cross Champion in 1971. Paul Loftus was Yorks. Cyclo-cross Champion in 1974, and rode for Great Britain at home and abroad.

Chris Wilkinson won the Three Peaks for Bronte in 1972. A well-known cross country runner John North, had become interested in taking up the combined sport, and through his contacts with Bronte in the Three Peaks (runners are equally demented about this athletic challenge) he joined the Bronte Cyclo-cross team and became an active club member, cycling over from Lancashire to the Clubroom every Monday evening and becoming the Club Treasurer. John won the Three Peaks for Bronte in 1980, and still holds the amateur record for the route with a time of 2hr. 41 min. In 1978 John expressed the intention of attacking John Rawasley's record for Cyclo-cross riding, along the full length of the Pennine Way. Much preparation was involved, but in 1979, supported by a team of helpers from the Club, he triumphantly traversed the 204 miles, carrying or riding his bicycle in a time of 2days:8hrs:45min., a record which he still holds.

A youthful Phillip Webster now began to make his mark in Cyclo-cross events, and among other successes he became Junior Record Holder over the Three Peaks circuit which title has never been taken from him. The Cyclo-cross era was now coming to a close Paul Loftus moved out of the district, Chris Wilkinson started his own business and Tom Macdonald became interested in cross country running.

In 1976 another fundamental decision had been taken, that is, for the Club to seek the financial support of a sponsor. The Estate Agents McManus & Poole of Cavendish St. Keighley were approached, and consented to give support to the Club. This is a decision we have never regretted; McManus & Poole have been everything a club could wish from a sponsor. They have never interfered, but always been supportive on occasions such as Annual Dinners etc. and the financial support has always been readily available and passed over without demur. We were somewhat concerned that, as the Cyclo-cross successes came to an end they might feel that there was now nothing in it for them; but no such crisis arose, support was continued, and in the light of the story of the last few years, we hope that they feel that we in turn, have kept our side of the bargain by keeping the firm's name well in front of the public eye.

During the period from 1975 to 1981, Francis O'Dwyer had been the driving force behind the Club's activities, but he now indicated that pressure of home affairs compelled him to relinquish his post and a new set of officials had to be found. An interesting development in the Club life had been that due to

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(due to)the Club's interest in schoolboy cycle sport we were receiving a steady stream of young recruits, chiefly from Oakbank School. This source of recruitment is largely due to the Sports Master at Bronte School, Mr Rod Fletcher who is a member of ESCA (the English Schools Cycling Association) Our young recruits were receiving their impulse towards cycling sport whilst at Bronte School and taking it with them to Oakbank.

The parents of these young men became interested in the Club through their sons, and from these parents we received a new influx of mature members who quickly became involved in the administration of the Club. Keith Simpson our indefatigable Secretary, Fraser Dunn our Treasurer for seven years, John Robinson our present Treasurer, and Max Grange, committee member and general facilitator are only some of the products of this reversed infective process. David Webster who has promoted our Cyclo-cross Open for many years was similarly drawn in by the interest of his sons Steve and Phillip. At the time of writing, we are very well fixed as regards mature officials, but we must make sure that when these pillars of the Club begin to crumble, we have trained and prepared our younger members to snatch the baton from their failing grasp and to carry on the Club's successes far into the distant future. We have already made a start in this direction. Ian Hodgson is nobly bearing up under the heat and burden of being Racing Secretary, and we have several young members on the Club Committees

We are also now beginning to make our presence felt in the world of Road Racing. John Flanagan has had one or two good wins in this form of the sport and no doubt his successes will stimulate some of our young neophytes to partake of this form of self-punishment.

There are two other topics worthy of mention before I close. The circuit training established on Monday evenings by our Coach Bob Hainsworth has been running since he joined us in 1979. The weary air with which the devotees of this training drift in for their 'cuppa' afterwards tells better than words how arduous a process the circuit training is. As a good foundation for early season road work, it has proved to be without peer. Bob also meets the younger members on Saturday mornings to give help and advice on Cyclo-cross training. In this sport we now have a very promising band of young riders who are winning awards most weekends in the "cross" season. Bob's work for the Club has been a potent factor in our recent successes. Long may he flourish!

The Veteran Group in the Club, for members who wish to continue racing as time-triallists after the age of forty is also prosperous. Riders such as Stan Rowntree, Keith Naylor, and Mick Farrar set the standard by their "under the hour" performances and the rest of us follow in their wake and hope some day to emulate their feats. To cover 25 miles in times of 56 minutes at the age of 50 is only one example of the achievements of this group of riders.

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I would like to conclude this brief history by saying how happy it made me personally, to travel down to Derby on January 14th with a party of Club members to join in the rejoicing as our new crop of young supermen went up to receive their awards as Schoolboy Champion and School Champion Team at 10 miles. For readers who are not aware of these recent successes, let me say that Richard Robson, this year, won the final of the George Herbert Stancer Memorial Competition. This makes him Champion Schoolboy at ten miles for 1988, and with the able support of his club-mates Jeff Littlewood and Nathan Fox they also carried off the Schools Team Shield (which is ENORMOUS). The fact that they were superficially carrying the colours of Oakbank School cannot hide the fact that, at heart, they are Bronte Wheelers, and we had, once more, after a lapse of exactly fifty years, three Bronte Wheelers on the Championship platform.

There is also little doubt, because of these three young men and many others we have of similar ability, that the Club's name is about to ring throughout the cycling world, as it did in the nineteen thirties. I hope I survive to see it!

Harry M. Kechnie

Harry Mc Kechnie,

Club President.

January 1989.