

## **90 years of memories on and off the bike**

### **Gordon Mead**

It's not true. I may be old but I didn't start my cycling on a penny farthing. Actually it was a child's tricycle, so I suppose you could call it a three farthing! It didn't last long. Within a few weeks I'd had two accidents and the bike was taken from me for my own good.

At the time we were living in New Bradwell, a village now incorporated into Milton Keynes. Our road was one of several that ran horizontally across a fairly steep hill. The kerb on the other side of our road was about three inches deep but on our side, due to the sideslope, was 2 and a half feet high. I, of course, escaped from the house with the trike and rode along our pavement to the end where I dismounted and turned the bike round and proceeded to ride back. Unfortunately I met a woman with a pram on my way and in attempting to pass, my outer rear wheel went over the edge and I ended up in a heap half way across the road. I was fine, but got grounded for some time

But eventually I was allowed to ride in the rear entry to the house. This was ideal, being as wide as a road, it was used for deliveries of various goods because of the high kerb, but deliveries in those days were infrequent and slow-moving - horses and carts. There were three steep steps from the garden but Gran, (we were living with my maternal grandmother who looked after me whilst my parents were at work), could lift the trike up and down the steps for me. As was common at the time, front doors and back gates were always open. The one phrase I heard more than anything else was "it's only me" as someone or other entered. I was confused about everyone being called :me: but I was always called "You". But I was only two and a half and was confused most of the time anyway.

I enjoyed riding around in the back entry - it was wide enough for me to ride in a circle, which I couldn't do on the front pavement.

Unfortunately one day a barking dog appeared and I hightailed it to the garden gate, and rode down the three steps in a panic. This time I wasn't lucky I must have knocked myself out and suffered a few cuts and bruises, Though I have no recollection whatsoever.

The result - I was told my bicycle was broken. It hadn't, as I saw another boy who lived a few doors away riding it a week later. But that was the end of my cycling for some time.

My mother and father lost their jobs when the firm they worked for closed down. They had made furniture and wooden toys for Gamages, a London store. Just as cars and bikes were being mass-produced in factories, it was obvious that the same thing would happen with furniture. Many people were out of work. No jobs were available locally so my father moved to Coventry where mass production of cars was in full swing.

Being a cabinet maker was not the best of trades to be in when it came to car manufacture. Eventually “Carbodies” who made the London Taxi took him on. At that time the cabs were lavishly fitted with a lot of veneered wood. And so he found his niche.

Mother and I followed him to Coventry and were paying rent for a small, two bedroom terraced house. Not many people at that time owned their own home. Things were going well.

I turned three and suddenly found I had a brother. We moved to a 3-bed house to get a little more room, but then problems with the economy started to appear. My father was put on short time. But we managed, and we thought it was just something that would right itself. It wasn't. Cars were being produced faster than they could be sold. It turned into a slump. Factories closed for 6 months of the year.

My father repaired shoes and did re-upholstery. My mother did charring for the managerial classes who seemed to retain their jobs and income throughout the year. It was hard. At times we almost starved but we had to keep paying the rent or we would have been out on the street.

I don't remember going to Junior school though I know I must have done. Marbles, fivestones, tip cat, flickers, (fag card games) and a little later what we called “jump, tiddy, backache,” were all consuming. I don't remember too much of senior school either, except that it was always cold and draughty – Broadway School with its wide open doors and windows in all weathers was called a healthy school!

I was disappointed that I couldn't have a bike, but kept asking – recession meant nothing for me at the time. Shortage of money seemed like a lame excuse to me.

It took several years before things improved. Even then clothes and household items came before a bicycle.

I passed the school leaving exam at 10 years old with three scholarships on offer. I chose Bablake School and told my parents it was too far to walk- I needed a bicycle. They agreed and one Saturday morning my father took me to Curry's in Spon Street to see what we could find. – Not very Much ! Their stock was five large Hercules Roadsters. The assistant was quite dismissive and said a child's cycle would take several months to be delivered and would cost more than an adult bike. The cost was a bit of a shock to my father. Another customer suggested we try the rear trade entrance to the Kirmer Swift Factory in Corporation Street. (In 2019 it is now an Iceland store!)

They were really approachable but they had no suitable model in stock. They would check their schedule to see if one would come off the line shortly... It would possibly be in as little as an hour but it was a deluxe model! On asking the price it was cheaper than the Currys quote. They said if we liked to wait they could give us a tour of the factory and a cup of tea.... we accepted.

Having done the tour we returned to find the cycle being checked by a mechanic. My father said he would take it, but the salesman insisted the saddle was adjusted for position and ridden round the back entrance before it could be released. My father said I couldn't ride a bike – I said I could. Unknown to him I'd been riding friends cycles for some weeks. Anyway I mounted and rode around for a few moments then thought "I'm not giving it back" and turned into Corporation Street, left again and rode home. Mother was surprised to see me especially without father who turned up some time later in a foul temper.

Incidentally I didn't go to Bablake School. Instead I was allocated to King Henry VIII half a mile away!

This, my first bike was single speed with 24" wheels, Endrick steel rims, Dunlop sport tyres, pull up rod brakes and steel mudguards. 'Deluxe' meant it had better quality cranks, a leather saddle with leather tool bag. (Small but big enough for a puncture repair outlet and tyre levers) The black enamel finish had double coach lining in red and gold, even on the mudguards. The frame lugs were quite fancy with gold edging. I thought it looked quite smart – but I would have accepted almost anything.

Every spare moment I was out on the bike, even if it was just riding up and down the road. It was perfectly safe. There was virtually no traffic, and what there was, there was no problem. We never saw a car. Even during the working day a horse and cart might leave a pile of steaming

manure in the road but caused no other problems. Other cyclists were probably a bigger danger – and there were more of them.

The post was delivered several times a day. Post haste was the slogan – but the postmen pushed cycles with bright red frames and a large basket on the handlebars. We thought it was hilarious that they had bikes they didn't ride.

Rent, most people rented their home, was collected by cycle. Insurance agents, those running savings accounts, medical fee collections, (this was before the NHS), Paper delivery boys, of course, and even a knife and scissor grinder – all used cycles. At the time you could make a good living out of cycle repairs. You could even see ordinary domestic houses with a sign saying "Cycle Repairs" in the window.

I didn't ride to school but I was soon exploring the area by bike. There was no ring road and no bypass to hamper my journeys. Cheylesmore, Green Lane, even Allesley was a small village was a separate from Coventry which meant it was countryside wherever I went, except towards the city itself. I didn't bother with a map – I just set off, simply to explore. They were idyllic days. In my memory everything was perfect- even the weather.

There was however one problem - I had no watch or sense of distance, which caused consternation to my parents, but not to me! I was particularly late after returning on a trip to Wellesbourne, Banbury, Byfield and home – and I guess not via the shortest of routes. I was 13 years old !

I was into all types of sports – soccer, rugby, athletics. I represented Warwickshire for the under 14's national championships on one occasion and achieved a fairly respectable 6<sup>th</sup> place, but never followed it up. School became a problem. I started off doing 'Arts' but then was transferred to 'Science'. This suited me better except the homework seemed so much more excessive than before. I was finding it difficult to find time for cycling.

Then we declared war on Germany. Things became complicated. – we had insufficient forces and equipment – but they might attack us. Gas masks were supplied – for children in a cardboard box to hang round our necks, which we were told to carry at all times. I eventually carried an empty box.

Everyone was issued with a National Registration Number mine was QDON236/3. If that was sufficient to identify me, why does my latest passport need 30 digits?

Soon we started having air raids – but with only a few planes, probably more on reconnaissance than bombing. Air raid shelters were built – some small in back yards, or even in the house and looking like a re-enforced table under which you hid. We were warned to expect raids by paratroops –or in gliders. “Always be on your guard!” “Do not talk to strangers” – the Germans were thought to have spies everywhere.

I managed a few weekend cycle rides and noticed the signposts had been removed. Some had been pointed the wrong direction. It didn't affect me, I didn't need them. Maps were removed from sale. I was given an old one! A cyclists map of 25 miles around Coventry, priced 6d. It was simply black and white with all roads – narrow or wide - shown exactly the same thickness. It was never used.

Fields were being filled with wooden pyramid structures about 6 feet high to prevent gliders from landing. New regulations were announced almost every day. Initially many men had volunteered for the forces. Now conscription was taking its toll. If your job didn't help the war effort, you could expect call up papers. The only ones left were the young, the aged and the infirm. Conscientious objectors were sent to the coal mines.

The air raids got worse. Most nights were spent in shelters for the majority. Lack of sleep had more effect on people than the actual bombs.

We had made an assault on the Germans on the continent, but were not strong enough and were driven back. No official plans had been made for a withdrawal and it was left to volunteers to sail across the channel and save as many people as possible. They were hailed as great heroes, and were, but the whole thing was badly planned.

On leaving school I had hoped to become an Architect, and in fact I obtained an apprenticeship. However the government had other ideas! I was directed to the GEC factory in Spon Street – as a tool design draughtsman. The site was one of what had been three, two of which already bombed, that had been used by Rudge Whitworth Cycle Co. There were only six of us to start with. We were to be called Radio Works. This was convenient as factory already carried the initials RW in large letter on the roof top water tank. Our real task was to develop and

manufacture RADAR but this was not to be known by the public – and is still hidden to the present day.

My first wages were spent on a new cycle – a Rudge Whitworth sports machine. At last I had a bike with cable calipers brakes that actually worked, and gears, a Sturmey Archer 3 speed.

I was just in time. Cycle manufacture was stopped until well after the end of the war. It got difficult to get spares. Tyres, tubes, chains and even rubber solution were hard to find.

Working hours were long. One week I had to do 62 hours work – but that was an exception. The normal week was 8-6 on week days and 8 to 12.30 on Saturday.

There wasn't much time for cycling. The nights were often disturbed by sirens, indicating an air raid, but sometimes they flew over to a further destination.

I attended technical college one day a week and found it difficult to fit in the homework with all the interruptions. I also spent one night a week at work as a fire watcher. We were based on the roof of a 6 story building – the second most dangerous in Coventry (until the first got burned down). Armed with wet sacks we tried to extinguish the hundreds of incendiaries as they fell. It was no fun. To be honest, I didn't feel like cycling – I was too shattered.

By 1945 the war in Europe was over, but not in the Far East. And whilst conditions were easier, rationing of food and clothes continued. I considered joining a cycling club. The first two I tried were more interested in getting me out at an unearthly time on a Sunday morning to marshal a race rather than ride my bike.

However I decided to order what I thought was the right sort of bike for the purpose. The only success I had was at Stokes Cycles. Everyone else said they couldn't get the tubing or components. So that was it. I was duly measured and after about 6 weeks I was told the bike was ready. You could have any colour as long as it was blue and gold. Paint was still difficult to get.

That cycle was probably the worst I have ever ridden. It looked good but would have been better on the track rather than on the road. It had a short

wheel base with steep head angles. The front mudguard fouled your shoes when cornering.

I eventually found the CTC. At the time it almost seemed like a secret society. My membership fees were sent on July 1945 and I began riding with the 'social' section in the August. Before I knew it I was on the committee and soon after on the District Association(DA) committee. But then I discovered I could not be a member until my name and address had been published in the CTC Gazette for 6 months. Any complaint from an existing member and you were not accepted, no appeal was possible! (The rule was dropped soon afterwards when one member was banning people from joining because they were not Teetotal or were non-religious.)

The rides were not long at first but gradually built up over 12 months. Members were young but keen. There was bags of enthusiasm. I needn't have worried about having a suitable cycle, because cycles were not yet back in general production. Those used tended to be old and often in serious need of new components. Some girls who lived in hostels having been sent to Coventry to do war work, generally had the worst machines. It was necessary to carry a full set of tools, plus string and sticky tape.

Despite the problems we built up to doing quite long rides. Starting at eight o'clock and often not returning until late in the evening we often had 13 hours to fill. The day was broken up with quite lengthy stops – occasionally a kick around or a game of rounders. Lunch was carried as midday meals were almost impossible to find. Tea was booked at a suitable pub or farmhouse. Pubs at this time did not have the facilities to provide hot meals. The tea was quite plain - bread and jam, homemade cakes and as much tea as you could drink. Sometimes the tea destination was as far away as Weston Sub-edge or Ashby de la Zouche. Miles didn't seem to matter. 70-80 was the norm in the summer – and seldom did anyone suffer.

We met at the 'Towers', a large house on the left at the bottom of Warwick Road. It was the headquarters of the Cycle and Motor Agents association. We were told that the forecourt was large enough for a coach and horses to be turned round - I never saw a coach and horses!

The District Association committee used to meet once a month in the board room. Many of the members on that committee were unknown to our section members. They were generally professional people, accountants, solicitors, estate agents, insurance salesmen. Many had been

in at the foundation of the Coventry group. They seldom rode on a Sunday as it was considered by some to be very irreligious. They were often able to take a day off in the week. They published their own rides list, often showing a ride for every day of the week, but often there were only one or two riders who turned up. The only time we saw them on bikes was when we organized special events - sports day, standard rides tourist trials etc, but especially at the Annual DA Dinner.

When the ring road was built it led to the demolition of the Towers in Warwick Road. The Cycle Manufacturers Association then had a purpose built facility on a site opposite the Railway Station, known as Starley House. So we moved there and were made welcome. When redevelopment took place at the railway station, Starley House was demolished. Fate had struck twice. We moved to the park and ride area of the War Memorial Park. (The Cycle Manufacturers decided having two HQs taken from them they now occupy rented offices in the City Centre!)

We had some good support for our rides, sometimes there were several rides on a Sunday. Some easy, some hard. The most I can remember being at tea was 62. There were 3 sittings!

There were some favorite tea stops - Sweetzers at Barford was one. In the winter we used Mrs Nightingale at Fen End and mid-week evenings during the summer... 10d for double baked beans on toast. Mrs Copley at Warwick often catered for jockeys who often refused food as they were trying to keep their weight down, we were the beneficiaries! We never know what to expect but it could be bubble and squeak or bananas, - they were at last available) and custard. And it was all free!

Over the years there have been many special events. 1949 was when we borrowed old cycles from the Bartlett collection at the Transport Museum for a Courtesy Week procession. We borrowed others at various times for the Coventry Carnival procession. If there is any chance to borrow these old bikes again for such an event, be aware that it can be difficult and tiring to ride them at a slow walking pace – chose a trike or quad if you can !

There were many special events in the 1951 Festival of Britain. We had a horse drawn dray with a tableau - a sign post surrounded by several bikes with members dressed in old time costume, as were many of the outriders.



We also entered a team in the North Wales Hilly Hundred in Eight Hours. We travelled there over a long weekend riding to the Wirral and back and hostelling over 2 nights. We rode the Hundred itself in 6 hours and 25 minutes with two twenty minute breaks. Over the weekend we covered around 400 miles. (Different cyclometers showed readings of 390 to 406 miles.)

Hostellers by this time were arranging regular rides and formed a sub section which was to last 10 years. Some registered as bona-fide travelers to get extra food coupons. These were supposed to be handed to eateries when they supplied you with meals. Youth hostels never seemed to ask for them so they were used to supplement the normal rations at home. The hostellers were some of our fittest members - rides were long and relatively fast.

We had a hard riding group for a time – but I don't think they were as fit as the hostellers!

Over the years I had many bicycles. Two were outstanding. An early Claude Butler and a Carlton International. The latter was one of only 6 frames built when Raleigh withdrew from the Tour de France. They used tubing and specialized lugs left over. Both were standard 531 tubing, both reasonably light and extremely comfortable. I found with extreme lightness seemed to come vibration – not conducive to comfort on a long ride. At this time shorts were still not padded though some had a double thickness seat.

Cycling-specific clothing was beginning to appear though not in the choice of bright colours available now. Traffic was increasing and it was more important that you could be seen.

Components for cycles were now appearing, as it seemed, on a weekly basis. Some were good, however some appeared to be the result of a garden shed amateur mechanic.

New types of gears appeared regularly. The Cyclo Benelux was very popular. A 3/32 “ chain had replaced the 1/3” chain. It was designed with more sideways flexibility and made gear changes so much easier. Components from the continent were becoming more common and were very often better designed than home grown products. They were producing for a far larger population. More money could be spent on production costs without the product becoming too expensive.

A lot of aluminium was now being used in bicycle components and unfortunately not all of it of the right quality. There were many breakages to seat posts, handlebars and bar extensions etc. There were many serious accidents caused by faulty components and recommendations had to be sent to make manufacturers use more suitable alloys.

Lights were still a problem. They were just not reliable. The CTC opposed a law which forced cyclist to use back and front lights at night, until new and better designs became available. They lost and the trade continued to produce the same old rubbish. Acetylene lamps gave a very good light but could be a problem in windy weather. A piece of fine wire through the flame could get red hot and relight the gas but was not foolproof. Dynamos were OK in good weather, but troublesome in rain and snow. The hub dynamo would appear later and solved many of the problems. Now LED lamps have solved the problems. Coal was being phased out. The atmosphere improved and the normal fog (and slugs!) became less of a problem.

In 1955 the first ever cycle excursion came to our area. You may have seen the film taken that day.

In 1956 a second excursion came to Coventry and returned back to Leamington Spa. 350 members took part. Our organization was used as a guide to other events in different parts of the country. We followed this up with an excursion from Coventry to Matlock and we were joined by friends from Birmingham and Leicester.

Around this time we regularly entered the Coventry Carnival and often gained first prize. We had 3 teams training child cyclists in Road Safety. We were so successful we ran out of applicants.

Cycling began to decline in the early sixties, many people now had a car and the roads were becoming busy. Many parents didn't want their children to cycle. The trade was decimated and in an attempt to bolster sales most manufacturers turned to small wheel cycles. There were shoppers, choppers, the RSW 16 and many more similar, and they did sell quite well for a time. Unfortunately they were no use for club riding and we suffered badly. What made it worse was the number of members who were on the edge with time and money when they got married and had children. It was made worse when the CTC had to raise membership fees substantially to survive.

Coventry group survived .... Just. Many others folded. We only had a few members left but we managed to continue. Occasionally we were joined by members from Warwick, Leamington, Rugby and Nuneaton, where their local rides had ceased. Ray Hudson and I spent Saturdays talking to youngsters outside cycle shops about the benefits of the CTC. We asked proprietors to give a membership form to everyone who bought a cycle. The club magazine was placed in libraries and reading rooms with a runs list inserted.

Gradually things improved and a number of youngsters joined – and then some of them brought their friends, and sometimes a group of school mates would join together – safety in numbers. They were all young but were quick to learn. There had been a club room where various events were organized but we decided a different approach was needed. . We bought a table tennis table, obtained a dartboard and various other games. We opened every week and it was a great success. We did arrange an event once a month but there was always time for games before and after. Surprisingly the attendance for these events went up as fast as the games activities. We had as many as 80 or 90 at times. Attendances at rides did not rise very fast but it did improve.

By 1976 we were doing very well, with some family members returning. By 1980 enthusiasm was high – the bad years were forgotten. During this time members were starting to turn abroad for their holidays. It started just after the war with a few just testing the water. It certainly wasn't easy at first - Europe was in a mess. Transport was haphazard, roads and railways had been seriously damaged. Even getting across the channel was a problem – the ferry boats had sunk and replacements far from ideal. It was not easy to get foreign money or easy to discover the correct exchange rate. The only safe way was to use travellers cheques. I travelled to Southern Ireland in 1946 but didn't consider that as being abroad, though it was different to England - no food and clothes rationing and they had bananas!

The first real foreign tour was to Switzerland, though we had no idea when we set off that we would get that far. It took four separate train journeys. The rolling stock was terrible – plain wooden seats, though we hired cushions to ease the pain. On arrival we had problems changing our cheques – no one knew the correct exchange rate. For two weeks we thought we were in heaven, everything so different from conditions back home. We even climbed the Matterhorn – well apart from the last few yards, which were solid ice. It was a stupid thing to do - starting at 3 o'clock in the morning and stumbling back at 10 o'clock at night. We

were ill for two days afterwards. We were told it was caused by too much exertion, exposure and altitude.

Many overseas tours have followed, first to the rest of Europe, then Scandinavia. When air travel was available anything seemed possible. The Balkans, still under communism, were cheap – but standards sometimes left a lot to be desired. Yugoslavia, still under Tito, was possibly the best.

Long Haul holidays followed but by now we were getting more holiday time but often had to take a fixed two-week break in August. Not usually the best time to travel.

We didn't neglect home trips . Easter, Whitsun and September were when four day hostel trips took place. Rail travel sometimes was used but by now a few of us had cars. The best attended trip was to North Wales when 27 joined us.

There were occasional day trips with car assistance usually attended by a dozen or so riders.

However it was the day rides that kept the group going. Friends were made and kept for many years, but as I age (and so do the others) the numbers are getting less, only to be replaced by newer members. I hope they can enjoy the joys of cycling for as long as I have.

In 1986 we organized our most ambitious event – the Birthday rides. We used Warwick University as our base with the campers on the sports field next door. This was set up and manned mainly by friends from Birmingham District Association. It was well attended, 1,200 that we know about, but those members who chose to use local B&B were an unknown quantity. No other birthday rides have done as well.

Of course “Murphys Law” caused problems at the last minute. Firstly the woman who had agreed to do most of the catering sadly had a stroke. This gave us just two weeks to make alternative arrangements. Then they began renumbering a number of local roads. This was deemed necessary following the building of new motorways. This meant that many of our route sheets had to be altered. We managed to surmount these obstacles just in time!

My afterthoughts .....

What have been the biggest changes....?

Roads are smoother and much wider. Originally they had been intended for pedestrians or horse and carts. Many minor roads have now gone.

The atmosphere is cleaner in appearance but much more dangerous because of car fumes. Shortage of coal was a godsend.

The basic bike is still the same but lighter with better bikes and gears, though not as comfortable. Aluminium frames (I have had two) are terrible.

Cycle lighting has made the most progress

The map have been replaced by Satnav. A pity, they get you from A to B but do little else.

Cyclists are now much older when they join up.

What hasn't changed...?

The friends you make in the CTC are friends for life.

Over many years I have led hundreds of rides. I am lucky that I remember routes and don't need a map. I carried one for years and never used it. I preferred to just turn up, look at the weather, who and how many members wanted to participate. I would set off and develop the route as it progressed.

I held a number of jobs in the group, the one held the longest being club room organizer. This I held from 1946 until David Hearn took over. So in 74 years (and still counting) we have only had two club room organizers. In the early days it was held every week throughout the year and was run more like a youth club. It proved to be an excellent way of recruiting members. Sometimes it went on much later than expected.

I last rode aged 91 but only for about 500 miles in Spain. On my return serious knee problems occurred. Actually all my joints were quit painful. The hospital advised I must stop riding completely or I would end up in a wheel chair. An operation was considered but I said at my age I thought the risks were too great and I might end up in a worse state.

**So now I can only think back to the many happy days I had with the club and the many friends I made. It's not easy. I have maps, photographs of tours, but the most important things are the memories...as long as I am capable of remembering them!**

*Gordon*