

Cycling Time Trials in the 1950's in the United Kingdom

I wonder just how many of you Walthamstow people are aware that for many years now there has been a parallel world operating in the early hours of the morning in the British countryside.

These people who cycle around the highways and byways at dawn are known as the cycling time trials fanatics, and they were governed by an organisation called the RTTC which stands for 'The Road Time Trials Council'. Now taken over by 'Cycling Time Trials'

These are a band of people who for years now, since the beginning of the group in 1922 at least, have been getting out of bed at the crack of dawn on Sunday mornings and competing in the Cinderella sport of cycling time trials.

When the sport first started the riders had to be completely clad in black clothing from head to foot in an alpaca jacket and black leggings and they always had to be completely off the roads at an early hour or they were prosecuted by the police.

The sport was really started by a guy named Frederick Thomas Bidlake in the late 19th century and here is a link that will explain a bit more about what life was like in those days. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Thomas_Bidlake
Unfortunately Frederick was hit and killed by a car in 1933 so maybe he was also a forerunner of that popular pastime today i.e. 'let's hit the cyclist' and it happens all too often these days as we are aware.

Actually there is a memorial garden to F. T. Bidlake on the Great North Road and here is a link to that area. It is easy to miss but it is worth a visit if you are in the area. <http://www.bidlakememorial.org.uk/Memorial%20Garden.htm>

Around the mid 1950's when I was participating in the sport in the United Kingdom, officialdom was slightly more relaxed, but events would still start at 6am or earlier on Sunday mornings all over the country, and with up to 120 riders starting at one minute intervals this meant that the last man (or woman) was given the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, OFF and started on his or her journey by 8am.

And so in a 25 mile 'out and home' event (ride out to a turn marshal and home along the same stretch of road), the road would normally be clear by 9.30am. Or later if the event was over a longer distance.

Thus the normal Sunday motorist would be unaware that the road has been covered in lots of cyclists just a short while ago, and maybe the only evidence

might be a banana skin thrown into the hedgerow here and there, or a discarded bidon (drink bottle).

If a motorist did go that way early in the morning he may have been surprised to see many cycling capes at the side of the road, these would be left near a guy with a stop watch in his hand, as guys would leave their belongings under the waterproof cape whilst they went out to try and get a P.B. (personal best time).

I don't remember ever getting anything stolen but it would be a different story today I think.

I should perhaps explain that although there can only be one winner in a time trial the object really is to try and beat your own best time over the distance i.e. to get a P.B.

Remember the old adage 'it is not winning that counts, it is taking part that is all important'.

When you see the effort that the top performers put into a ride, that old saying is hard to believe. In the old days you would be lucky to get a cheap medal for a place on the podium; but these days everyone takes cash as a prize and the old true blue amateurs are just beings of the past.

There is a nation wide annual competition that has been in existence all of this time and it is known as the BBAR competition, this is 'The British Best All Rounder' competition and it is based on 3 distances that are 50 miles and 100 miles and the 12 hour time trial. The first two distances are usually raced over 'out and home' courses.

In the latter events the riders start at one minute intervals and they ride all over the countryside on a carefully measured distance for a period of 12 hours exactly and the rider who covers the greatest distance is the winner.

The winner of the BBAR has the best aggregate speed over those three distances (50,100 & 12hr) and it is usually a very hard won competition with some guys travelling from England to Wales and beyond to try and get a fast morning on a fast course, this would happen all through the summer season.

Of course there are events conducted all over the British Isles and there are many recognised courses and some are faster than others.

In the East Anglia district the two most commonly used courses were the E1 which was on the A11 road and the start was usually at the 32nd milestone which is near the village of Ugley, just past Stanstead Mountfitchet and Bishops Stortford.

Of course this village is more widely known the world over because it hosts 'The Ugley Women's Institute'. Nowadays there is a nice pottery shop there too.

The other course was the E3 which started and finished on the A127 more commonly known as The Southend Road. Now who hasn't ridden their new bike down to Southend, or at least claimed to have done so?

This course was recognised as the fastest course in Britain despite the fact that there were numerous roundabouts and Raleigh cutting to negotiate, I recall that there was even a bike path alongside the road; but as it was always full of bottle glass it was never used.

Everyone will have heard of the legendary British cyclist **Beryl Burton**, well she once came down from her home in Morley to the E3 course as she was looking for a fast 50 mile time for the women's BBAR and I am proud to say that she caught and dropped me by more than five minutes on the day, it was something to boast about to my grandchildren in my later years.

She was a legend in her own lifetime and it was a tragedy when she died aged 59 from a heart attack whilst riding her bike. Here is a link to perhaps the greatest female cyclist of all time: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beryl_Burton

Actually I think the E3 is no longer used now as it had become too dangerous to ride on, this being due to the many cars that frequent the roads now.

In this present time only the diehards will cycle to the start of a race as nearly everyone has a car now. Also the machines have become so much more technical and so light that they are only suitable for racing. A typical machine will weigh less than 7kg and cost around 5,000 pounds sterling and some fanatics will spend even more.

At another level was a guy named Graeme Obree who developed his own bikes and became a world record holder on a bike that he constructed out of parts from a washing machine.

They made a film about him and several books and he was known as 'the flying scotsman' here is just one link to his story:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Graeme-Obree-The-Flying-Scotsman/104526719586865>

But in the 50's us ordinary club guys would put our lightweight tyred wheels on two brackets on the front wheel and then ride to the start of the event. Usually if I was riding on the E3 course I would leave Markhouse road at about 4am to get to the start in time to change the wheels over and get into my racing attire which consisted of the club jersey and black shorts. Nothing was made from Lycra in those days.

But when an event was being held a Sunday on the E1 course it would be a bit too far to ride in the morning so it was necessary to ride up the A11 on Saturday afternoon and then spend the Saturday night somewhere in Stansted or Bishops Stortford and a B&B in those days was about 2 shillings and sixpence.

I recall one year, I think it was 1959, Ian Moore and Brian Harvey and myself had entered for the Westerly R.C. 100 mile Time Trial on the Bath Road which was a legendary fast course.

So we rode out to Reading on the Saturday and stayed at a B&B house and then raced in the 100 mile Time Trial on the Sunday morning and we won the team prize for the best aggregate time for 3 riders in a club.

After that we rode home via about 4 different pubs and had a few pints to celebrate our victory. That was a great weekend to remember.

Actually some of the London based clubs were quite well off, and several had their own headquarters near the airport in Stansted before it became London's 3rd airport, these were usually timber houses or large huts which comprised of basic sleeping arrangements and a kitchen and living area.

Some of these places still exist today and I am told that they still let non club members stay there for an overnight fee, probably a bit more than 2 shillings and sixpence these days I would think.

Usually the ride up the A11 was done at an easy pace with a lunch stop at Epping or in Sawbridgeworth where there were several 'cyclist friendly' cafes and on Sundays it was a common sight to see a couple of hundred bikes parked one on top of another at 'The Cosy Café' in Sawbridgeworth. This would be a rendezvous for the racing guys and the club run guys to meet up.

Cycling clubs in the 40's and 50's were a very sociable way of cycling and meeting people and many marriages have been initiated with a Sunday club run up the A11.

Every year our club which was called 'The Marsh Racing Club' had its own club events and we also had our own BAR competition, this was simply the club 'Best All Rounder' and it was also over the same 3 distances afore mentioned.

Now I have been reliably informed that The Marsh R.C. originated in Walthamstow at The Marsh Street Youth Club and it had many Walthamstow members and others from outlying districts too.

The club still has one or two annual reunions every year but due to problems with distance (living in Australia) I have never been able to get to one.

Maybe one day before they have all passed away I may get there or at least be the one who turns out the lights as I depart.

I still have many of those long ago time trials in my memory and there were many good riders in the club, amongst them were Irishman Ian Moore who went on to be a great rider who even went to Europe to race and then there was Brian Harvey who was an ex George Monoux school boy who was a very fast cyclist.

Others were Ted Pigeon and George Bland and the Ockmores, John and Derek, and so many others and that was only the males and there were also some very fast ladies in the club too including Pat Ockmore (nee O'Malley).

One event that still sticks in my memory is the ECCA (Eastern Counties Cycling Association) 12 hour time trial that I rode in 1958, this was held on the E1 course and it started this time just outside Bishops Stortford.

It was such a long time ago that I can't recall exactly where the course went but I do know that it went up to Cambridge as far as the O.E.G. (old English gentleman) and also around Dunmow and we would then continue to cycle out our 12 hours around a finishing circuit near Takely where there would be a timekeeper sitting at every mile around the circuit and when my time ran out say at 6.10pm the time keeper I was approaching would say "times up" and then the total distance was calculated and thus a result obtained.

My total distance on that particular day for the 12 hours was 250 miles and I remember every one of them. But that was only good enough to get me 5th place in the event as the winner was a man named Bryan Wilcher of the Zeus R.C. who did over 260 miles.

One strange occurrence happened during that 12 hour day, in which I never got off my fixed wheeled bike at all (no need for a pee as it all goes in perspiration) was

the arrangement that I had made with a petite lady cyclist named Pat Ockmore (nee O'Malley) who was a club mate at the time.

Now Pat told me that she would make me a coffee drink laced with Brandy and hand it up to me as a pick me up in the final miles and I was eagerly awaiting this happening.

Pat told me that she would be wearing a red parka (anorack) and thus I would see her in the distance and thus I could get prepared for the pick up of the bidon whilst travelling at speed.

Well there I was peddling for all my worth towards Takely and the finishing circuit when I spotted the red parka in the distance; however I nearly fell off my bike with disappointment when the red parka suddenly turned into one of those **red GPO post collection boxes** on a pole at the side of the road.

I suppose fatigue was having an effect on my mind after my 12 hours of supreme effort and I was just seeing things.

Over here in Perth in Western Australia I am now 72 years old and I still ride time trials with ATTA (Australian Time Trials Association) but they are usually over various distances and they are nearly always hilly. However the club still has a BAR competition but it is over 40km, 80km and 160km, they don't hold a 12 hour time trial.

I spend rather more time competing in races run by a club known here as 'The West Coast Masters Cycling Council, we have races for veterans (over 35) of all ages every week so it is just continuing a way of life that I adopted all those years ago in the United Kingdom.

Of course there were bunched (massed start) races in our districts over there in Essex in the 50's and many of those were held at Stapleford Tawny Aerodrome near Abridge and also at Dunmow aerodrome as they were closed circuits and not used for flying aeroplanes anymore.

There were road races on open roads but they were not quite as popular as the time trial which is sometimes referred to as '**The Race of Truth**' this is because it is just you racing against the clock with no one else to draft behind.

I don't think the sport will ever die but the competition records are there for breaking and somehow they get broken year after year as mankind develops better machines and more scientific approaches to the training of athletes, and then of

course you get occasionally get the super human types with low heart rates and the killer instinct to be 'The Winner'.

Personally having seen the current traffic situation in the UK I don't think I would care to even ride a bike over there now, and I certainly would not risk life and limb by competing in races on an open road, no matter what the rewards would be.

So there you have it, just a bit more from the old memory banks and I do hope that if you have any questions you will not be shy so contact me by email at:

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