

LIGHTWEIGHT NEWS - 11

(September/October 2007)

Editor: Peter Underwood

56 Kingston Street - Cambridge - CB1 2NU Tel: 01223 565036

E-mail - peter.underwood@tesco.net

www.classiclightweights.co.uk

'also incorporating news from the Lightweight Group of the V-CC'

My story of Club bikes used through the post-war years:

My first-hand knowledge of club cycling centres around the late 40s and early 50s and then from the 90s to date. In the early 50s I was conscripted into the RAF and carried on cycling for a while when I came out but later succumbed to the joys of motor cycling and then cars. I vaguely followed cycling news and from time to time would acquire a decent second-hand road bike and do some reasonable rides. During this time I spent some 30 years involved in competition sailing. This went on until I started windsurfing on waves, a hobby which involved a lot of hanging around waiting for the right wind and wave conditions. Some of my fellow windsurfers spent part of the time competing in Hawaii and brought back to the UK some of the first mountain bikes to enter the country. We used to ride them around the paths through the sand dunes and it was not long until I acquired one of my own. This was what got me back into cycling in a big way. I met Patricia in 1992 and although not a cyclist she soon took to it (on a mountain bike). After a few months we completed the London to Brighton charity ride which was a very hilly - 62 miles - followed by a 2-week holiday cycling down the Romantische Strasse in Germany. We also did a few Audaxes and soon decided to start riding road bikes as well. Eventually I traced some of my cycling friends from the 50s and one, Mick Thompson, had restored a beautiful Ephgrave which he had owned from new in 1953. Thus started my interest in classic lightweights.

But back to the beginning. I had started cycling as a schoolboy in about 1947 when I acquired a very bog-standard mass-produced machine, possibly a Hercules, stripped it down and replaced the upright bars with drops. In my sweet innocence I figured that if I put a 12-tooth fixed sprocket (no locknut as the wheel was built for single-speed freewheel) I would be able to go like the wind. My father had no interest at all in anything cycling as he was an obsessive radio ham – G5UD to those who know.

In those days one could earn some money as a part-time post sorter for the Royal Mail in the run up to Christmas and I did this in the evenings and at weekends. One day I pedalled into the garage of the local sorting office on my 99.66 inch gear when a friendly postman asked me why I was grinding round such a high gear. I explained my theory that a big gear must mean fast speed and he started to explain to me the errors of my schoolboy theory. It turned out that he had been the King's Lynn CC champion in the pre-war years and was still a keen racing member – his name was Tish Legget. The outcome was that I lowered my gear and went out on my first club run a couple of weeks later. Club runs were very long in those days but I got round and was hooked. I soon realised what a bike should be like and bought a very cheap second-hand frame (Claud Butler – much too small really) and some bits to build up a half-decent machine, probably using some of my money from the Christmas sorting. I can't for the life of me remember how I learned to dismantle and reassemble bikes with virtually no proper tools.

From then on I spent almost every spare minute on a bike and slowly replaced the frame and components with slightly better ones bought second-hand, mainly from Wisbech Wheelers riders who were relatively well off as they worked on the land and were paid men's wages although they were mere teenagers like myself. Labour was very hard to get in these days but the youths who had decided to learn a trade by apprenticeship got paid peanuts.

Cyclists were a 'picky' lot in those days and it was everyone's ambition to get the cream of equipment. Only two mass-manufactured frames were acceptable, Dayton – just about - and Carlton, who produced some very classy machines. Due to the tax system in place virtually everyone purchased a frame and then built it up with their own choice of components – this way they paid no purchase tax whereas a complete machine had the tax levied. You may notice in adverts that a frame often included headset and chainwheel. I think you could just keep out of the tax band with these components as they were considered part of the frame. This was a time when all classic frame-builders tried to sell to the clubman with their quality and craftsmanship. Their advertising would extol this and sometimes also listed the 'dodgy' practices which they accused other builders of employing (such as lug bending or pulling).

A great percentage of the racing done in this era was time-trialling and the almost universal set-up for a machine was fixed-wheel, one brake, and no mudguards, although everyone had to have a bell to time-trial. The pusher-off and timekeeper would check this as every rider came to the start. One serious competitor had one side of his

handlebar break off half-way through an event. Not only did he finish the race using the in situ half but he carried the broken piece with him as it had his bell on it! It was fashionable at this time for time-triallists to ride the biggest frame possible. The seat pin would only protrude an inch or so and the bars and stem would be set as low as possible, resting on the headset. Some riders realised that they wished the bars to be lower in relation to the saddle than was possible with this set up, hence the Merkens 'droopy' stems and bars with severe drop. Major Taylor stems were used with the adjuster suspended rather than on top of the slider. A study of Continental 'Tour' riders such as Coppi and Bartoli will show that the stem was almost on the same plane as the seat whereas today the difference can be 15cm or more.

It would be impossible to list the frame-builders around at this time as there must have been hundreds, from the one-man concerns to the larger builders who employed up to thirty workers. The 'big' names such as Claud Butler, Ephgrave, Hobbs, Hetchins, Bates, Paris (Rensch), Carpenter, Gillott, Holdsworth, Macleans and Mercian plus Flying Scot in Scotland were to be favoured in clubs all over the country. However, in addition to this, many clubs also had 'fashionable' (to them) smaller builders which they supported. This was often the place all their members would gravitate to, rather like a second clubroom where they would hang around for hours on end. Frequently the owner would provide a very simple method of credit for the larger purchases. Often this was no more than a customer card on which payments were recorded and a shop ledger in which the owner or his wife would enter the payments. Some owners were very friendly but many were grumpy or even downright rude, probably due to the amount of time taken up seeing to time-consuming riders who didn't even buy anything. At this time the main subject of conversation amongst any group of cyclists would be frame angles and dimensions. As most would have frames built to their perceived ideal the poor frame builder would have to endure hours of discussion on the matter before securing the order. Probably at this point the rider would switch his attention to the paint, lining and chrome finish, as each frame was finished to the individual's choice.

There was of course some track racing in the country and often riders had a road/path frame which they used for time-trials and track racing. Thousands of these frames were sold just to be used for time-trials as their lively yet rigid structure was considered ideal, especially considering that virtually everyone was on fixed-wheel anyway. Most also had mudguard clearance and eyes so they could be used in the winter for training. I have one such machine, an Ephgrave, which even has pump pegs under the top tube and I know that the owner did some grass-track racing. It is interesting to examine photographs of events such as international track events on the Continent taken in the late 40s/early 50s. The British riders will stand out as they would use what were known as Continental 27 sprints which were actually what we now know as 700c. These were being used in frames built also to take 27" HPs with mudguard clearance for the winter and resulted in great gaps between the wheels and the frame. You will notice that the European competitors would be using frames with a 'fag-paper's' clearance. I have seen images of both Eileen Sheridan and Dave Keeler using such 'gappy' frames at World Championships. Reg Harris of course, being an out-and-out trackie, had his frames built with minimal clearance but such frames were in the minority in the UK.

Most club riders were time-triallists and they were the ones looking for the fancy-lugged frames. Others took to road racing, mainly through 'The League', opted for the 'Continental' way, and had frames built with well-finished but much plainer lug patterns. Some frames in catalogues will be described as 'The Continental' or listed as the builder's answer to this up-and-coming style. Often builders described their frames as 'Continental' style but with true British craftsmanship. This description of traditional was carried over to components as well, i.e. Chater chainsets, Harden Hubs and GB brakes. These were contrasted with the 'Continental' Stronglight and Simplex chainsets, sprints built on French and Italian hubs, Universal brakes and to add insult to injury (wash your mouth out with carbolic soap) – gears!

If you get hold of a late 40s/early 50s edition of *Cycling Weekly* you can bet the main subject on the letters page will be fixed versus gears. The old brigade would defend to the bitter end the superiority of fixed and proclaimed it akin to treason even to mention the dreaded word 'gears'.

The relationship between builders and riders carried on into the 50s but soon the market would start to shrink allegedly due to availability of motorised transport on 2 or 4 wheels. Firms, both large and small started to close down as fast as they had started up and this resulted in a consolidation within the trade.

Eventually this settled down with a few of the old brigade such as Condor, Mercian, Pennine and Bob Jackson surviving the storm along with some of the smaller builder/dealers who often supplemented their trade with mopeds, motor accessories and the like. Many of the well known 'names' were banded around between larger firms who merely badged up some of their inferior machines with names such as Claud Butler, Holdsworth and Macleans. For

some such as the lightweight enthusiast it was less painful to see other names such as Ephgrave disappear rather than be used on mass-produced inferior frames. Some reappeared much later when the names were used on what could be called retro machines such as Paris, Bates, Hetchins and Baines.

Obviously the club scene would change now with fewer makes being used but it was still possible to purchase a well-built lightweight frame, although the rider by now was more willing to accept what was best described as an off-the-shelf machine.

Things carried on in this way for a long time, with makes and names coming and going into and out of fashion. Most machines were fairly conventional but in 1984 Francesco Moser broke the hour record on a revolutionary machine with disc wheels and with a smaller wheel at the front. This enabled the frame 'top tube' to slope dramatically down to give the rider a very streamlined position. Some two years later in 1986 Greg Lemond went on to win the Tour using an early version of tri-bars.

A noticeable change was now to come with the acceptance of welded frames. Using such techniques the constraints of lug usage would disappear. Images of Eileen Sheridan racing in the 50s will show that she was stretched out on a 21" frame both too big for her and with a top tube much too long, this was all the builder felt he could do in those days. By contrast Patricia has a beautiful custom-made 45cm (17³/₄") frame with matching sloping top tube to give a good step-over height. By utilising 155 cranks it was possible to have this machine built with 700c wheels. This frame could only have been built by welding. It used the latest Reynolds tubing at the time, 'Millennium 531', which was specifically built with welding in mind. It would of course been possible for this machine to be built in the 50s but builders couldn't or wouldn't think 'out of the box', as they say. Patricia was talking to Eileen at a V-CC event and she really would have coveted such a frame had it been available in the 50s. The same builder, Paul Donohue, built me a welded 58cm frame in 853 tubing and to this day it feels like a racehorse when I ride it. Eileen told us how, as soon as she was comfortable on the bike, she would be compelled to take up a lower position again.

To recap, at this stage a visit to a large time trial would show most riders on UK built machines but a big change was in the offing.

In the Far East, frame building factories were being set up in answer to the demand for large-scale production (including mountain bikes) in the States and some British builders realised that they could have a frame built for a fraction of the cost of building it themselves. Also alloy was fast becoming the material of choice. These factories in countries such as Taiwan were either modern concerns with fully computerised building facilities or, at the other end of the scale, labour intensive concerns where large numbers of operatives were producing hundreds of frames each week by hand. The UK cycling publications would show that more and more suppliers here were purchasing such frames and merely spraying them up and fitting decals. To some extent this still goes on today.

A visit to a big club event or a time-trial today will reveal a marked change in equipment in that the majority of riders will be on 'big name', off-the-peg machines made by firms such as Giant, Trek and Specialized from the States plus Italian machines such as Colnago, Pinarello or De Rosa. Some makers now merely supply small, medium, and large frames, doing away with sizing as we know it – to some extent this is due to the expensive business of tooling up exotic carbon frames. The all alloy frames are now fading away to be replaced by composite frames with carbon forks and perhaps rear ends to make them more comfortable. Carbon frames which were very exclusive a few years ago are being sold in great numbers now as are, to a lesser extent, titanium frames. Specialized for example now sell a very attractive looking 'Tarmac' carbon frame with good middle of the range equipment for £1500 but it is possible to pay around £5000 for a top of the range Colnago C50 with top equipment. In spite of this there are plenty of these around.

This has been a very anecdotal view of bikes throughout the years and isn't intended to be comprehensive. If you feel able to add meat to this piece please send in your comments. If you don't you may have to read more from me!.....*Peter Underwood*

Kevin O'Hanlon (kphan@dsl.pipex.com) says: The reason for my Pat Hanlon enthusiasm was that I went to school near her shop and had to pass by twice a day. At the time everybody in the shop seemed so much older than me but in the afternoons I sometimes got invited into the back of the shop and watched the general bustle of repairs and builds going on around me. I think the engineering principle of, if it looks right it is right, sunk home by just looking at the frames hanging up and listening to owners chatting about rides they had done, without incident.

At the time, the price of a new bike was more than my pocket money would allow and my mother wouldn't sanction me riding the 20+ miles to school, so the argument of fare saving didn't work (alright we actually got bus passes - so it didn't work anyway)

But judicious saving got me to a point where I had enough for Pat to build up a bike for me. I rode for thousands of miles and then finally succumbed to car ownership. Pat bought the bike back and it went to another lucky owner. Years later I talked to Pat about building another one but the cost was more than I could justify. Sadly, when I could afford it Pat had died.

Anyhow, now I have, much to my wife's irritation, a few older bikes. An early Pat Hanlon 22". It had very rough paintwork when I bought it and unfortunately the restoration shop I went to didn't, as they had guaranteed, supply original transfers, they just sprayed it. It's really too big for me - but rides superbly. I have a later 1980's small frame, not in the same class as the earlier one and it's in need of attention. I have chased all the transfer specialists and unfortunately nobody has any. Maybe there are enough VCC owners to justify getting some made up.

As you know, Tom Board built many of the frames and I have an immaculate example of one of his that gets ridden on high days and holidays. It was actually built by Tom for a girl who used to work at Mosquito Cycles. Unfortunately she became very ill and hardly rode it. Subsequently she had to move and sold it to me on the basis I would give it a good home and keep it "for ever".

Oh by the by, I believe Pat Hanlon's own bike is owned by the woman who owns (?) Mosquito. She bought up Pat's stock when she closed the shop. Unfortunately the build records were not found. Maybe they will come to light some time.

Steve Carson steveanddebbie1@tiscali.co.uk has recently acquired a 'Quinns' machine and is interested in the history of this marque, in particular the year of manufacture. It is a Reynolds 531 double butted frame and appears to have original paint and chrome with Campag rear dropouts and is built for 27" wheels. He believes that Quinns must be related to Harry Quinn and the bike has wheel stickers denoting Edge Lane, Liverpool. The serial number appears to be under the bottom bracket but is illegible due to some over painting; he would be prepared to investigate if this will help in dating.

Derek Taylor Your remarks about buying and subsequently updating one's machine certainly rang a bell. In, I think, the late 40's/early 50's my father bought me a Rudge 'Pathfinder' with a S/A 3 speed. ALL accessories were steel, no alloy whatsoever. It weighed a ton!! How I managed to ride 100/150 miles on a Sunday with the local CTC Hardriders I simply cannot imagine today! Eventually, of course, upgrades were managed but in those days it was a matter of beg, borrow or buy second-hand off older clubmates!!

CHANGE OF DATE. The Curly and Tapered (Hetchins) Weekend will be held at Kingsland, Herefordshire on 4th, 5th, 6th July 2008. Please note this is a week earlier than the date given in the list of participants that was given out at this year's event.

If you have access to the web, have a look at:

<http://www.northwoodwheelers.org.uk/GoldenRoads1951.html> it is just like reliving the 50s in detail – I chuckled my way through it. Be warned that you won't get any jobs done for hours, if not days, once you start! It is amazing that the writer was still at school and doing a paper round for spending money. I loved the entry when his friend had bonk so badly that he ordered egg and chips plus 6 cakes for lunch. Later in the evening the same chap ordered double egg and chips so had three plates of eggs and chips (or eggs and chipsies as the diary says) in a day. One could do things like that without putting on weight thanks to the massive mileages done. I am told that in a certain cafe (as a vegetarian) I always ordered cheese sandwich and a mug of cocoa plus the inevitable Lyons fruit pie in a box – we certainly knew how to live in those days! My other claim to fame was, when limping home late in the evening with terminal bonk and twenty hard miles to do, I spied a sugar beet in the road conveniently squashed by a passing lorry. I did a quick u-turn and ate the lot – convenience foods are different nowadays!

Another piece from the diary: (my italics) "Alan Tunaley left us here as he was going for a week's tour of the Cotswolds and Mendips, *and we turned right down the A 5* through Markyate, Redbourn, St Albans and then through to the 'Rookery' at Hatfield for tea. Here we picked up Tony Tucker. After tea we came home through Radlett and Aldenham. Went round to Dudmesh's house and got his rear hub which I am going to have built into my back wheel for my gear. A very nice day.

Mon Apr 2nd 20 miles Took my back wheel and new hub into Prangley's; going to collect it on Wednesday. Met Tony Tucker in the afternoon. *He is coming to help me file my chainring down tomorrow morning.* I bought a 3/32" chain for my gear. Went to the club in the evening. Took 7 dinner and tea bookings, and about 6 or 7 people want to come to Canterbury at Whitsun. I am going out on Wednesday if my gear is working! Cleaned my front wheel (with Duraglit) until it gleamed!

Tues Apr 3rd 28 miles Tony Tucker came round in the morning and filed down my ring. He did it very well, but when I put the ring back on the bike *it had about a 1/2" buckle – so grabbed my hammer! Its all right now, dead true, 3/32" and everything!* We then went round to Bunting's [*local bike shop*] and ordered my freewheel block (15, 16, 18, 20 teeth) which will give me gears of 82, 77, 69 and 62". Going to collect it, and my wheel from Prangley's, tomorrow."

"On another subject – after they had slipped off to do a League race: (not my italics this time)

Mon Apr 30th 10 miles Went up to the club. Took five bookings for Sunday's run but there will probably be many more out. Gave back the money to the blokes who were going to Canterbury at Whitsun. Stan gave us a 'little talk' about yesterday's 'event' after Tony Tucker (the silly idiot) put up a result sheet on the notice board [*because it involved talking - let alone racing - with members of the BLRC! See below*]. Later on Stan calmed down and told us how he burned off 'league bods'. During the 1950s the argument between BLRC and NCU clubs raged with considerable ferocity. The Northwood Wheelers was a staunch NCU-RTTC club and we were 'not allowed' to even mix with 'the enemy'; hence Stan Boyes's lecture to us up at the clubroom."

CALENDAR.....

Sunday 2 September - (Hants) The Rotrax Ride from Wallington Nr Fareham - Chris Carter Tel: 02380692658

Sunday 2 September - (East Midlands) Leicestershire Ride - Dave Fossard 0116 2364 131

This ride in East Leics takes in part of the "East Midlands Classic" race route. It may best be described as "lumpy", and most suitable for geared lightweight machines, though fixed is possible. Meet at "The Windmill", Wymondham, Landranger sheet 130, Grid Ref. 850 193 at 10.30 for 11.00 start, where refreshments will be available.

Sunday, September 9th – Cambridge Section – Ephgrave Lightweight Ride. This year we are using our 'hilly circuit' for the Ephgrave Ride.

Start at 10am at Whittlesford Parkway Station Car Park – just off Junc. 10 of M11 at its intersection with the A505. Leave A505 at signpost to 'Whittlesford/Shelfords' – then take 1st Right SP 'Station'. (This railway station bisects the road – we use the side nearest Duxford Air Museum/M11. If you end up in the other half of the road it is no problem if you don't mind crossing the line by footbridge but there is not much parking there.) Car park is £1 for the day on Sunday.

There have been no trains between Cambridge and Bishops Stortford on Sundays for weeks now and the timetable shows a replacement bus which won't carry bikes!!

This is a hilly ride of about 30 miles - either be fit or have gears! Having said that, last year it was done on fixed with no problems.

We will have lunch at the excellent Ickleton Lion where they serve everything from sandwiches to full roast. Sorry but no coffee stop or toilets at the start.

Peter Underwood % 01223 565036 or e-mail peter.underwood@tesco.net

Sunday, September 16th – Lightweight Group Ride organised by Rikky Pankhurst from Theale (near Reading).

The start will be from Theale railway station car park which is well sign-posted from the A4 at junction 12 on the M4, 9.45 am start. Please warn those with roof racks that there is a height restriction at the entrance of the car park. Rikky's home contact number is 0118 9304054. Lightweight Group Rides are for pre-1960 machines. (Patricia and I will be there and hope to meet any L N readers or Classic Lightweight website users who do the ride).

Sunday, September 30th – Cambridge Section - Mercian Lightweight Ride Meet at 10am by the village pond/sign on the crossroads at Comberton (B1046) some 7 miles from Cambridge. There is a lightly used wide road, Green End, where it will be possible to park.

For Comberton leave M11 at Junction 12 onto A603 towards Sandy, i.e. away from Cambridge. In app 1/2 mile fork right onto B1046 through Barton to Comberton (in all about 3 miles from M11).

Chris Barbour of the New England Section, USA is planning a visit to Cambridge UK. Chris runs the pre-1970 Mercian website so we are organising a Lightweight Ride for him with a Mercian theme.

Other makes will be welcome of course. We have planned out the route so as to be different to all of our other rides. It will start in Comberton, some 7 miles from Cambridge, and take in Kingston (coffee stop), Bourne, Great Gransden, East Hatley, Croydon, Arrington, **to lunch at the Hardwicke Arms Hotel (Arrington A1198) close to Wimpole Hall (NT)**. After lunch through Wimpole Hall grounds to Barrington, Haslingfield and Harlton back to Comberton. Even we were amazed what a super run this is with loads of interest on the way, and we live here. I have two Mercians and hope to get them both out for the ride.

Contact – Peter Underwood % 01223 565036, email peter.underwood@tesco.net

We have had to change the lunch venue for this event as Wimpole Hall are having a big themed day on the 30th and their restaurant will probably be packed, with queues outside the door. We have organised lunch at the Hardwicke Arms just outside the rear gate to the estate. They will have a selection of sandwiches and ciabattas to cater for our block booking.

Patricia and I are having to rationalise our collection of lightweights due to space restrictions. Some will have to go and I am giving readers details in the first instance:

Mal Rees road frame; 21”; 1951; Nervex Professional lugs; round section forks; finished in dark grey with white lining, etc; - £120 (can be seen under Readers’ Bikes on website).

Rivetts of Leytonstone; 21” road frame; believed 1952; Nervex Professional lugs – recently resprayed and not built up but has some slight scratches; - £135

Pat Hanlon – complete road machine 21½” frame with history relating to Rosslyn Ladies CC – original paintwork in good condition; 1973 shown in Readers’ Bikes on website - £300