

Day trip to Derbyshire on two wheels!

County Tales by Alan Burman Published Sat 25th July 1997

It was a sparkling summer morning in the late forties, the air rushing on our faces was full of the scent of hedgerow flowers and the verges were waist high with keck.

The only sounds were the thrill of songbirds...and the swish of 60 narrow tyres!

I was out with the Northampton branch of the Cyclists Touring Club in the post war heyday of the bicycle boom.



Repairs-Trouble with a tandem

The Northampton group, officially known as the District Association, had existed on and off since the turn of the century and had been at its most thriving back in the 1920's during the enthusiasm for the great outdoors that spawned numerous hiking and biking clubs.

After the Second World War, with petrol in short supply and new cars only obtainable under priority purchase schemes, the bicycle again came into its own and the pastime blossomed once again. The CTC nationally had over 53,000 members at this time.

The Northampton section commonly met about 6am on a Sunday morning outside the cycle shop opposite the Town Hall. Riding two abreast in a long column we would set out heading for, perhaps, the Thames Valley, Bath or the Derbyshire Dales, distances on a day's ride that now fill me with awe.

Many other clubs would be awheel before the countryside was awake and it was common to meet and greet other clubs, some from large towns like Coventry and Birmingham, in groups of 100 or more swishing past in the opposite direction. We might see half a dozen such clubs before an early stop for breakfast.

Cyclists, at that time, had many well known and favourite cafes or teashops that catered especially for them. Indeed, the CTC was the first organisation to run an approval scheme for eating houses, well before the RAC, the AA or Egon Ronay!

Now and again a “tramps outing” would be run. These events had a long history in the bicycling fraternity dating back to the old pennyfarthing days. Dressed in old garb, we would cook up sausages and bacon over our little folding Primus stoves in the corner of some farmer’s field.

Once a year, we together with thousands of other cyclists, would converge on the Warwickshire village of Meriden, where a cyclists war memorial had been erected in 1921. Here, an open air service would be conducted by the Bishop of Coventry.



SPLASH - A ford always provided fun.

Well before the days when ancient bicycles were valued, an old gentleman from Coventry, a Mr Golby as I recall, had assembled a collection of historic machines and unselfishly loaned them out to be ridden to the service. The village was crammed with cycles - prewar tandems and sidecar machines, you name it and it was there.

Our local group included riders of some odd machines. One family rode out on a tandem with their son on a trailing attachment rather like a forkless bicycle attached to a pivot under the saddle. A younger child rode in a miniature sidecar alongside. Tricycles had had great popularity in the pioneer days of cycling, but by the fifties were uncommon.

Nevertheless, the Tremaine family, father and two sons, were great exponents on three wheels. The sight of the boys on a tandem trike descending the hill into Aldbury at speed, leaning below the level of the wheels to keep balance, the tyres screaming, and with the wheels flexing under the strain as the machine rounded the hairpin bend is indelibly imprinted on my memory.

The local CTC was one of the first groups to run a cycling proficiency scheme anywhere. The idea had first been mooted in 1947, a joint conception by the club and RoSPA, and shortly afterwards the Northampton section joined the Brixworth Rural District Council in initiating a training programme for young riders.

Now, 119 years after its foundation the Cyclist Touring Club is growing again, and boasts nearly 44,000 members. The Northampton group still survives and must be approaching its centenary. I wonder if today’s riders have as much fun as we did. I do hope so!