

THE NOTES OF A BROMLEY (KENT) CYCLIST (BROMLEY CYCLING CLUB 1877-1912)

Gleaned by Bob George from the notes of A.Non

These notes came to light recently. Bromley at the time was in Kent and situated on the A21, but is now classed a part of Greater London. I am not sure who penned these notes or when, but the writer refers to having ridden Boneshakers and Ordinaries "some sixty years ago". I quote from some of the more interesting parts as follows.

Of the "Velocipede colloquially called the 'Bone-shaker' the name" he tells us, "indicated the main characteristic. Any joy from riding the machine was purely the joy of having mastered it, and not of its smooth or rapid progress over the ground But this pattern soon gave way to what is now known as the 'High Bicycle' My own bicycle, I remember, had a front wheel sixty inches in diameter with a back wheel about the size of a soup plate, and two steps were required in order to reach the saddle. This was the type of machine which was in common use for road and track when Bromley Cycling Club was established in 1877.

The earliest reference to cycling in Bromley goes back to 1869, when the word 'bicycle' was scarcely known, the thing itself being called a 'dandy-horse' or 'Velocipede'. In the *Bromley Record* of June that year, under the heading 'Bicycle Mania' the following notice appears:

A highly amusing performance took place opposite the Bell Hotel on Saturday evening, the 22nd May. A meet-

ing had been announced to which all young gentlemen with any pretension to smartness were invited, to make preliminary arrangements to form a Velocipede Club. Some Dandy Horses were in attendance, and proved as unmanageable as unbroken colts, throwing off their riders as soon as they got on, thus creating an amount of fun worth going a mile or two to see..... In our opinion the pleasure of riding on a velocipede must be about on a par with that of the Irishmen in a sedan chair with the bottom out. But as a certain amount of skill is required in their management, emulation may supply sufficient inducement to make them popular among young gentlemen who have time on their hands. The exercise to propel them may be beneficial, and, if so, may be a further excuse for their use. Their utility otherwise appears doubtful.

In the same issue appeared an advertisement of the French Velocipede Company showing a rider mounted upon a machine, and announcing that Mr Walter M Walmisley, Wilton House, Palace Grove, Bromley had been appointed an agent of the company, and that machines could be secured from him at a price of £10, or 'payment can be made by instalments if preferred.'

In July 1871 an advertisement in the *Record* announced that a 'Phantom Velocipede Club' had been established for the



purpose of supplying each member with a 'Phantom' bicycle on payment of a subscription to the Club of ten shillings or one pound a month."

Apparently nothing else appeared in the local papers for the next six years, and the progress of cycle design progressed, while a local trade had built up in manufacture and distribution: "A local manufactory had been established in the town under the charge of Mr Bourdon, and in May 1877 probably on the initiative of Mr Bourdon, the Bromley Cycling Club was founded", with him, apparently, as Honorary Secretary. The club soon had 21 members, four of whom turned out on 11 Sept 1877 to contest a six mile race for the Club Championship. They were J F Arnaud, A Brown, J Doyle and W Bourdon. The course was mainly uphill from the Tiger's Head, Mason's Hill (Bromley) to Downe Church. (Downe is where Charles Darwin lived.) Two of the riders were apparently blown off their machines by the high wind and rain, and W Bourdon

completed the ride in 28 minutes without dismounting.

The following year the Club announced their season would start on 9 April 1878 with a run to Brighton. No details appear, nor of the 1881, 805 miles ride by Captain H Line and Club Secretary W Bourdon from Bromley to John o'Groats. In 1887 the Club celebrated its 10th anniversary with a fund raising concert, supported by the local Lord of the Manor, Mr Coles Child, who presented the Challenge Shield. About this time he also accepted the position of President of the Club, "and showed considerable interest in it."

The main interest of the club was competition and road racing, with some new names appearing, including one C L Newland who for the next ten years "practically monopolised the honours of the Club, and achieved national reputation as one of the finest riders in the country." However, problems began to raise their head. By 1890 the police were taking no-

Downe Church, destination of the four intrepid Bromley Cycling Club members on 11 September 1877. Little has changed today (in a quiet spell). Author's collection.

tice of road racing, and riders were liable to a summons. If this happened it could be awkward for the President of the Club, Mr Coles Child, as he was also Chairman of the Bench of Magistrates, and he had presented the trophy to be won. Talking with Mr W L Crossley, Chairman of the Club's Committee, it was decided to replace road racing with track racing, and in August 1890 the first of a series of races was held on Bromley Cricket Ground. However, road racing was not entirely abandoned until later. In 1891 C L Newland completed a seven and half mile ride on "hilly roads" in 26m 5s, and the same year the same young rider lowered the 100 miles record by ten minutes at the London County Council's Herne Hill Track clocking 5h 30m 12½s, without dismounting. This not only beat the 100 miles record, but all records above 64 miles. For some reason this achievement is not mentioned in the Badminton book, but was recognised by the NCU.

To 1892 and at the Club's AGM it was announced that the Bromley Cyclists (sic) Club was ranked third oldest in the Kingdom and held 37 records to date. In 1894 C L Newland and P O Monkhouse presented a Challenge Cup called the 'The Vivid Cup' to the Club. This was named after their Cycle Works and was competed for annually in a 100 miles race. The winner for several years was Newland himself, one of the donors, so he passed it to the man who came second. The holders were: 1894 W Ware, 1895 J E Ingles, 1896 S A Marples, and 1897 J Steer. In 1898 the 100 miles race was changed to a 50 miles one in the hope of attracting more of the public, as a race lasting over 4 hours was thought to be tedious to spectators. Again C L Newland won the first one, in 1h 56m 47½s on the Catford Track (South Lon-

don). This was after being thrown from his cycle in an accident with his pacers and having lost two laps on the others. Finishing with about nine minutes to spare, the cup was presented to second man L G Jezzi.

With track racing requiring a special track and Bromley not having one, the use of Catford track was proving detrimental to local interest and support. The advent of the motor cycle was also being felt. It was thought the career of the Bromley C C as a racing club was over, and a new direction must be sought, and in 1901 it was decided that the Club should concentrate on 'social aspects'. Two final race meetings were held at Crystal Palace to dispose of the various cups the Club held. It is reported these races were "something of a scandal" inasmuch there were only three entrants to win three cups and the competition was no more than a "crawl".

In 1902 the Club expanded to become the Bromley Cycle and Motor Cycle Club, hoping to attract motor cyclists too, and staging various events, such as country runs, paper chases, etc, under the efforts of Club Secretary Mr J E Carter. On its 30th birthday the club was faced with reduced membership and waning interest, finally closing in 1912. It well may be that local motor cyclists had joined the Wanderers Motor Cycle Club formed around 1909 by local man Malcolm Campbell. Yes, the very same one who set up a land speed record of 206 mph at Daytona Beach Florida in 1928. But the WMCC was limited to just 30 members.

To reiterate, I don't know who penned these words, or when. But I am glad he/she(?) did so. Do we know of any of the names mentioned? Does anyone have knowledge of, or remember 'The Vivid Cycle Works' and their products?