

The recent Tour de France race through parts of England has certainly drawn attention to cycling while, in London, the Mayor is a good advertisement for bicycles in towns. Locally, one result of the downgrading of the old A5 is that the Bicton route is now part of a national cycle network. Groups or individuals, often clad in shiny lycra and 'high viz' tops, are therefore often seen passing through, especially in Summer. Less often seen are local workers and school children on their daily commuting, but this would have been a lot different in the past.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the gradual evolution of the modern bicycle from a gentleman's plaything to a form of mass transport available to all. Pneumatic tyres, improved chains, standardisation of parts and mass production in factories in places like Coventry all contributed to this. Improved road surfaces maintained by new highway authorities also helped.

In rural areas especially, workers were able to reach varied jobs more easily, as well as a wider circle of social contacts. (Ranging further afield to find marriage partners was always good for communities). Rural postmen, nurses and midwives, as illustrated on TV, could also perform their services much better. Hitherto, such mobility had been restricted to those who could afford at least a 'pony and trap'.

In Shrewsbury, directories reveal the rapid expansion of the cycle trade from 1890 onwards, with seven agents and at least one local manufacturer operating by 1900. The firm of Groves had a depot in Castle Street and a works in Claremont Street, where they made their 'Salopian' model. The basic design was available at £7-10s. (£7.50), but, for a little extra, it could be fitted with a 'free wheel' and 'rim brakes' as an alternative. Otherwise one had to control speed with the pedals all the time or rely on a front brake pressing on the tyre! Ladies and gents versions were available, with the former having both chain-case and net over the back wheel to avoid problems with those long Edwardian skirts.

By 1910, there were two such manufacturers and another eleven agents for other makes, one of which also offered repairs. These traders were both general stores, such as Della Portas and well established hardware merchants such as Shukers and Lewis & Froggatt, who were neighbours of Ernest Lewis in Frankwell.

As already discussed in this series, Ernest Lewis of Milnsbridge (Shepherds Lane), who had his watch-makers business in Frankwell, was a great user of bicycles. Apart from his daily journey to the shop, he also travelled around winding clocks in both public and private buildings. In addition, he was a keen photographer who worked 'out and about' rather than in a fixed studio. Significantly, some of his surviving photographs show people proudly showing off their new bicycles, even those ladies in long skirts!

Apart from such useful rural mobility, the period after WW1 saw flow in the opposite direction as townspeople explored the countryside. Nationally, the Ordnance Survey 'popular' editions of maps specifically targeted cycle tourists, while locally; several tea shops had already opened to cater for them along the Holyhead Road (William Proctor at Lyndhurst, John Ratcliffe at Rose Cottage). From the 1920s, the People's Refreshment House Association also took over the Wingfield Arms and the Four Crosses.

By this time local manufacture had ceased, but there remained fourteen cycle retailers in Shrewsbury. By 1940 there were still eleven during a time when cyclists were sharing the road with an increasing number of motor cars.

One piece of safety equipment developed at this time was the acetylene head lamp. Water was dripped from a tank into a lower chamber filled with calcium carbide, where they reacted to form that flammable gas. There were amusing stories of such lamps either freezing or running dry, and which were then revived with the help of one of the young men in the party!

As a reflection of the roughness of roads at the time, both acetylene and oil lamps were mounted on spring brackets to minimise vibration. Saddles were also well sprung. It is easy to understand why contemporary babies' prams also had large wheels like bicycles and large springs beneath the body.

With rising fuel costs and the need for exercise, perhaps we ought to get out on those old-style machines much more – but do take care!



Couple with their bicycles – Pre WW1



Pram as 'they used to build them'!

