A.J. JOHNSON - CYCLING IN THE 1880s

*Bicycle Adventures of A G Johnson* gives the modern reader an invaluable insight into cycling in the 1880s. The two volumes, covering only two and a half years, are written in the fluid, neat hand of the well-schooled of the time. It serves to note that Johnson was only 16 when he began his record. It is likely that he kept his diary in ‘rough’ then copied it out long-hand at each year end, given how well it is fitted to the pages. It is presented in a typical clerk’s style, using black with red lines and accounting presentation for lists. The handwriting tends to deteriorate as we go along, but this is more than compensated for by the descriptions of the runs, which get progressively fuller. Sadly, the accounts end at the close of 1884, although space remains to continue, it seems that he never got round to writing up 1885.

Equally absent is any indication of how Johnson learned to ride. The first entry on July 1st is for a run of 26 miles. This is not the stuff of the learner, although Johnson was clearly still a novice when the book begins, given the statement that it was ‘my first longest ride in one afternoon’.

When Johnson wrote his cycling diary, bicycling had become well established as a leisure activity for young men, usually from the middle and upper social classes, who could both afford the machines they rode and had the time to ride them. Bicycling was almost entirely masculine, largely determined by the type of bicycles being ridden. The ‘ordinary’ bicycle was so-called because it was entirely that. Any other type of bicycle was exceptional and, of these, very few did not have a ‘backbone’ that precluded their being ridden by someone wearing a long skirt. It would take another decade for the concept of ‘bifurcated’ garments for women to be seriously considered as possibly acceptable outside of the circus or theatre, and for there to develop bicycles that could be ridden by women who did not wish to challenge dress conventions.

When the ‘ordinary’ had been displaced by the rear-driven safety bicycle in the 1890s (similar to those made today) it became derisorily termed ‘penny-farthing’ and seen as an eccentric bygone. This serves to conceal the actual qualities of the machine and its cultural impact on the road. When Johnson set off on his bicycle he was amongst an elite, riding the fastest vehicles on the road with nothing better to do with them but to enjoy themselves. Not surprisingly, cyclists were viewed with the same mixture of disgust and envy by the larger population that their successors driving fast cars tend to enjoy today. To counter the image of cycling as being self-indulgent and anti-social, many cyclists joined clubs that made a feature of formal riding in military formation with strict uniform regulations and codes of behaviour on the road. Today, most would be seen as promoting the ideal of ‘muscular Christianity’ where healthiness and control of the body was a sign of Godliness. What was to become the club-of-all-clubs was the BTC (Bicyclists’ Touring Club). It worked in exactly the same way as the AA and RAC would later do for motorists, lobbying government against adverse legislation, arguing for better roads to facilitate fast riding, and ‘appointing’ hotels and agents which supported cyclists on the road. Note the ‘touring’ in the title, telling us that cycling at this time was not about ‘utility’.

While it seems that Johnson enjoyed the camaraderie of the road, it is notable that he was not a club member for the period the diaries cover. And this might be the key as to why 1885 was never written-up. Johnson continued to be actively interested in cycling at least until 1887 and possibly for longer before his early death from acute pneumonia on 10th January 1893 aged only 26. We will see that it was during 1884 he was introduced to ‘cycledom’, the close-knit network of cycling clubs, competition and group activities. It might be involvement with this that took the interest out of recording what had hitherto been a purely personal activity; or, it may just be that, like many teenagers today, a diary is something that belongs to a particular time in life that ends as adulthood overtakes it.

Today, historians prefer to use the term ‘high bicycle’ to describe the sort of machine Johnson was riding. Some cyclists today consider it to offer the most ‘pure’ cycling experience, in which the mechanism is reduced to the bare minimum of a cranked axle. At the time Johnson was riding the machine was close to the apex of its development, with finely tapered, drawn hollow tubing and dustless ball bearings, in effect a modern bicycle in high form. The large front wheel, fitted to the rider’s inside leg, provided a ‘natural gear’ in the wheel diameter that is still used today. One turn of the pedals of a chain driven bicycle geared to 60 inches is equivalent to the distance travelled by one revolution of a 60-inch diameter wheel on a high bicycle. Johnson rode a 52-inch wheel. While the large wheel made for speed, it also made for comfort, its scale provided shock absorption and was particularly at home on ‘water bound’ roads consolidated by fine grit, which were the standard of the time.

Indeed, as will be clear from the diary content, Johnson had to negotiate many different classes of road. In England and Wales roads were not brought under local government control until 1888. Many former toll roads (‘turnpikes’) that made up the main road system had fallen into decline having succumbed to railway traffic and maintenance was patchy. Johnson makes frequent reference to road conditions. For instance, ‘very heavy’ would mean soft and muddy. Mud (which was often well mixed with horse manure and cattle droppings) is a factor in many of the descriptions. This did not mean that all roads were dreadful, if they had been, no one could have bicycled, but it did mean that bicyclists had to be wary, particularly of ‘loose’ surfaces where rolled stone chippings had begun to deconsolidate, as ‘side slip’ was a particular danger on a high bicycle. Moreover, for speed and efficiency the high bicycle was best ridden as close to top-dead-centre as possible, this made the centre of gravity quite sensitively balanced. The rider had to certain of a clear road; hitting a large stone, pothole or open gully had a good chance of pitching the rider forward. At speed, the rider’s legs would be trapped under the bars throwing the rider and bicycle round the driving wheel, whereupon the machine would ride over the unfortunate victim, an event that cyclists termed an ‘imperial crowner’, presumably because of the bandaging of a broken head. While Johnson never seems to have suffered this, he did go ‘over the handles’ a number of times.

High bicycles had little in the way of effective braking. A spoon brake on acting on the front tyre was the standard fitting and had to be used with care for fear of locking the wheel and pitching the rider forward. Many ‘serious’ cyclists, including Johnson, removed it for this reason and to reduce weight. This left nothing more than the rider slowing down on the pedals (there was no free-wheel clutch); therefore, by far the greatest hazard was a downhill slope. A ‘dangerous’ hill was one on which it was unlikely that the rider’s leg muscles could hold his feet on the pedals against the momentum of the machine. As soon as the feet were disengaged the machine would be entirely free. A rider faced with a downhill slope would either get off, or take a gamble that the road ahead was clear and in good enough condition to ‘ride out’ the hill.

We have a good example of the perils of this in the second run recorded in the diary. ‘…very hot,- roads about two inches thick with dust. I had a steep hill to go down…I had no idea of it being so steep till I got half way down; it then being too late to stop, having no brake on. I went down at a tremendous speed + it is a great wonder that I did not go over the handles and brake a few bones…at the bottom of the hill the road was blocked up with two carts + one donkey cart. Seeing what a fisc I was in. I shouted and rang my alarm…’.

The next run Johnson decides to take action. ‘I tried for the first time to put my legs over the handles.’ But, ‘I managed to get one over, but in trying to get the other one over, I capsized the machine; but by good luck no damage was done to myself or steed’. Here Johnson was learning how to ‘*sit* out a hill’ with his legs *over* the handlebars, a standard practice amongst experienced riders. Riding ‘legs over’ ensured that, if the machine was pitched forward, its rider would land feet, rather than head first. In the diaries there are a good number of references to long and usually exhilarating coasts downhill in this manner. For example, on Sunday 23 Nov 1884, ‘Had a grand run down, legs over, for nearly a mile into Welwyn’.

But, no matter how experienced, there was nothing a rider could do against the unexpected; at such a height falls were inevitable and there are many recorded here. On Monday 17 Mar 1884 Johnson has what seems to have been his worst experience ‘…going down a stiff hill, I went over a stone, which threw me over the handles, not having legs over I landed on my face and hurt myself very much cutting my chin, nose + lips, also loosened four of my front top teeth…’. He and his companion retire to a pub where he washes, then remounts and pedals on ‘without further accident’. Otherwise, though thrown to the ground quite regularly, rarely does Johnson admit to any serious consequences, ‘crossing the footbridge over the river I ran against the post + was precipitated over the handles, not much damage done. Arrived in London 8.30am feeling very sleepy’.

In the safety-conscious twenty-first century all the above might make readers wonder why anyone would ever ride such a machine. However, to a market of young men in the 1880s, its danger added to, rather than detracted from its charms, giving it the quality of having to be mastered, and this mastering was a confirmation of masculinity and fearlessness. The riding position, as high as on a horse, meant that all but other cyclists and equestrians had to look up to gain eye contact, the cyclist could easily believe himself ‘king of the road’ as he looked down on foot traffic and enjoyed views of landscape over hedges and walls that the mere pedestrian could not. And there was the speed, which could be sustained well after a horse was exhausted, nothing like it could be experienced except on a railway, and on that one was merely a passenger, not driver.

Over the diaries Johnson’s performance improves, but not hugely. He was clearly a tourist and not into competition, even against himself. He only formally records time on the road in 1882. On his first run he was not in a hurry, averaging slightly under 5mph. We see him moving close to 7mph average on faster journeys and over the year he returns an overall 6.4 mph. In fact, using what he gives us in the later entries, over the whole it seems that something about 7mph could be expected; when average performance is over 10 miles in an hour he tends to record it as particularly fine going. These would not be fast timings to many cyclists of the time, but at what today is a low gear of 52 inches, an average 7 mph is quite reasonable without ‘pushing’ the machine. The regularity of performance will be familiar to those who ride single-speed machines as there no option to gear down and only when coasting does one really speed up. What changes dramatically is the distance ridden, he rides only 254 miles in 1883, eighty less than in 1882, but this moves up to 2842 miles in 1884.

Early in 1884 Johnson buys a new mount ‘intending to give it a good trial this year’, which he certainly does. He buys a Howe. Made in Glasgow, Howe was the only first-division Scottish maker in the 1880s. It has all the most advanced features of its time. Johnson clearly liked a bit of glitz; he has it ‘half-plated’, meaning it was nickel plated to half way up the backbone, with plated bars, hubs and probably fork ends. This finish was often frowned upon as being too conspicuous, most machines were finished all-black with a minimum of ‘bright-work’.

Johnson was no ‘fair weather cyclist’, he went out in snow, ice and pouring rain. Possibly the most impressive feature of his riding, from today’s point of view, is just how much was after dark. Dark, as Johnson would understand it, is nothing that can be experienced today within the south east of England, where street lighting abounds, casting a pall of light pollution over the whole region. In Johnson’s day, beyond the quite limited gas lighting of the metropolis and larger towns, darkness would be equivalent to that one can experience in areas like the Scottish Highlands today. Unlike many, Johnson seems always to carry a lamp. This will have been an oil lamp hung from the hub inside the spokes of the front wheel. This way it was low enough to give a sweeping light over the road surface. As road surfaces were usually light-coloured, an oil lamp refracted well, so long as the road was dry. In the wet, it merely reflected off the surface giving little effective information. Sunday 5 October 1884 sees ‘friend Homewood’ and Johnson complete the last 25 miles of a 74 mile run in darkness such that they ‘could hardly see over our hands before us’. Stopping for a drink en-route they made the distance in four and three quarter hours. It might be noted that even then, this is somewhat faster than his first run in much better conditions. It had been pouring with rain; so, ‘roads very muddy’. On a high bicycle in pitch black this would be a treacherous run at any speed and the time it took reflects the fact. However, the high riding position did have a huge advantage, placing the rider well above the surface it is notable that the closing comment is ‘Machine frightfully dirty –covered all over with mud’. Johnson, himself, will have suffered little more than splattering on his trousers and shoes.

It is worth dwelling on this run longer, because it includes two stops. The first was at ‘The Anchor’ in Ripley for tea and then at ‘Thames Ditton’ for a drink. The latter will almost certainly have been ‘The Angel’. Both these inns on the Portsmouth Road (now the A3) were hugely popular with metropolitan cyclists. They were well-placed on a gently undulating and well maintained turnpike that led through some of the prettiest environs round the city, first the villa suburbs of Richmond, then the small town of Kingston, thence villages and open countryside, without any of the urban sprawl of the 1890s and after. The overall distance (25 miles) to Ripley was convenient for an evening spin and, unlike some publicans and innkeepers at the time, Annie Dibble, the landlady of the Anchor, made a feature of welcoming cyclists. The two unmarried daughters of the house were doubtless part of the attraction to the mainly young male clientele. The Anchor became internationally famous as ‘the Mecca of all good cyclists’ and it seems that anyone who was anyone in the cycling world who visited London made an effort to ride there. Annie Dibble asked all cyclists to sign-in and her ‘Cyclists’ Books’ (now in the Surrey History Centre, Woking) provide the modern researcher with a good idea of just how busy the place was. Johnson makes his first visit to The Anchor on Sunday 2 March 1884, ‘determined’ to have dinner (or lunch in modern terminology) there. He was not disappointed, writing that ‘about 70 bikists + trikists sat down to a substantial dinner provided by the Dibble family’. He then becomes a regular visitor for the rest of the year.

This visit seems to have been important to Alfred, as it likely introduced him to the conviviality of cycle clubs, joining the Clarence Bicycle Club soon after his introduction to the Anchor and his later visits are often with the club.

Cycling and hostelries went hand in hand. There are few longer rides where Johnson does not call in on one pub or another. Many cycling clubs had their meetings and headquarters within them and outside of many larger cities there would be an equivalent of ‘The Anchor’. It was also common practice for retired professional cyclists to use their winnings to buy pubs or inns that would provide them with steady income into old age. Dan Albone, a famous racing cyclist, then cycle builder, was born into the pub trade, and remained connected with it to the end of his life, in spite of having extensive interests in the cycle and motor trade. In the early 1880s Albone was in his early 20s and already well known. Sure enough, on Saturday 9th August 1884 we find Johnson putting up at ‘“The Ongley Arms” Kept by Dan Albone. The local crack.’

Indeed, the convivial and not so convivial nature of cycling is well illustrated in the diaries. On his third run on Sunday 9 July 1882 ‘a little further on I met a fellow bikier…I promised to meet him next Sunday on the corner of Praed St.’ Sure enough, they meet on Sunday 16th to cycle to Kingston.

It was typical of cyclists in this period to make friendships with others met casually on the road. Given the tight demographic, a rider could be fairly certain that another would be very much of the same social class. Social class was important; on this run they avoid Wimbledon because the road was ‘crowded with rough people + half-tight soldiers’. As toffs on wheels, cyclists were a target for ‘rough people’. The problem of negotiating them, and dogs, is a common theme in many cyclists’ dairies of the period. In general, avoidance was the usual tactic. The entry for 15 Sep 1882 gives a very good account of the tribulations that the cyclist had to endure.

There were, of course, far more robust methods of dealing with unwanted attention. At the most extreme, a whole class of small revolver is still termed a ‘velo-dog’, pepper shot being available to deal with aggressive dogs, footpads and other undesirable individuals. This left them smarting and burned while one rode on to safety. ‘Road clearers’ in the form of miniature pistols that fired only blanks were also an option that were less likely to contravene firearms regulations.

Returning to London on the same ride, they find ‘a tricyclist upset, the cause being a little timid coming down such a steep hill, he put the brake on too much, + was of course tipped upside down – but fortunately he was more frightened than hurt.’ This was relatively unusual for a tricycle, if common enough for a bicycle. Today we tend to overlook tricycles, but in the 1880s they were the machines of the very wealthy. They were far more expensive than bicycles, required space to ‘stable’ and one did not need to go through the unseemly business of learning to ride one. Importantly, they could be ridden by women wearing conventional dress and could be effectively designed as two-seaters. Most were very stable and had far more effective braking than a bicycle.

There are many other gems of cycling history to be found within the pages of Johnson’s dairies and in bringing them to publication, I hope that they will be the first of a series of facsimiles to be issued by Cycle History Publishing Limited on behalf of the Cycling History and Educational Trust. The Johnson Diaries are still in the ownership of his family and the Trust is hugely indebted to them to be allowed to reproduce them. However, the Trust owns a number of other significant manuscript cycling diaries which it intends to publish in due course. If you cannot wait until then, you can look at them in their original form at the National Cycle Archive in the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University.

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