

Cycle Industry in Cheltenham

Cheltenham's fame and fortune could well have taken an entirely different turn had the town persevered with an industry for which it became noted towards the end of the 19th century.

It could have vied with Coventry and Birmingham as a great centre for the manufacture of bicycles, and, in the sequence of events, motor cycles and cars.

This is brought home by a new book on the history of cycling "The Story of the Bicycle" by John Woodforde (Routledge and Kegan Paul 32s).

Commenting that by the mid 1870's there were about 50,000 high-wheelers (later known as "penny farthings") on the roads of England, Mr Woodforde says that at least 30 firms were making them. The main centres of manufacture were Coventry, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Birmingham, London, Brighton and Cheltenham.

My boyhood memory takes me back to the time when on the south bank of the Chelt on a spot at the corner of Sandford Park now graced by public conveniences, a firm of engineers known as James's operated in a large ramshackle building. My recollection is that flaking once-white paint on a dull red background announced "Cycle Manufacturers".

RIVAL SEVEN

Wondering whether this might have been the firm on which the town's industrial future could have rested, I made research.

brake, and the saddle had no springs !

Mr Miles writes that Mr Davis, of Sherborne-place made the first machine, and that he copied it.

"On Whit-Monday, three of us about 15 years of age with these bone-shakers, as they were called, rode to Gloucester. The roads were then wagon ruts. We had to keep our bicycles in it (the rut), or over we went.

"It took us about two hours to get to Gloucester, and with the skin worn and torn off our bodies we put the machines in the train and came home, rewarded with the knowledge that we could not sit down for days.

But for more information on Cheltenham's association with the cycle industry, back to the directories.

In the "Royal Directory" for 1870 there was an advertisement "P. Peacey, Bath-road, near the Baths, entrance to workshops, Wellington-street, Coach Builder (in small letters). Bicycle and Perambulator Manufacturer (in large). From the latest designs. Bicycles of every description let on "hire". Incorporated as an illustration of a "boneshaker".

Peacey's, it would seem likely from the address, became Stretton's, who obviously went in for cycle manufacture in a really big way.

MADE THE "MILLION"

Advertising in the "Ed. J. Burrow" Guide to Cheltenham" 1897, they announced themselves as "Manufacturers of the well known make of a Million Cycles", 300 of which had just been ordered by a Belgian firm who were "struck" by the excellence of their exhibits at the last National Cycle Show." Stretton's went on to say that they were sending out machines to all parts of the United Kingdom and the Colonies.

Yes, James's way was well and truly in existence as an old-established concern at the turn of the century, but in the Cheltenham and District Post Office Directory for 1891-2 no fewer than seven cycle manufacturers were listed.

They were : Mrs (yes Mrs) C. Davis, 21 Sherborn-place: John Gardner, 23 Bennington-street, A Hughes, Pittville Street, E J Hanks, Killburn House, J. James, Field Lodge, College-road: E.A. Stretton, 7 Bath-road; and D. Voyle, Suffolk-road.

Going back in ancient directories from there, I found that James Davis & Co. and Voyle were listed in 1887; James (then of Little Bayshill-terrace) and T. Davis & Co. in 1880; James and T Davis in 1878, and T. Davis was the solitary representative of the industry in 1875.

So I investigated the history of Mr Davis, who would appear to be the pioneer, and found that other than being a man of engineering enterprise he was singularly unfortunate. He met with an untimely end when an emery wheel broke from a lathe and hit him on the head.

This would probably account for the fact that a Company being his name was formed, and ultimately for the name of Mrs Davis appearing in the list of cycle makers.

BONESHAKER RIDE TO GLOUCESTER

But Mr Davis did not begin with penny-farthings. They were a later refinement. He started with the "bone-shaker", development of the "hobby-horse" on which Regency bucks had sport.

For this information we are indebted to the late Alfred Miles, coach builder and county councillor, and his voluminous "History of Cheltenham " in the public library.

He relates how he himself in 1868, at the age of 15, made a "safety bicycle" of wood and iron - "The frame was made of a stout piece of ash wood 2 in x 2½ in. lined with iron, with a prong of iron each end to take the wheels, which were of wood, and an iron tyre 7/8 in. wide". There was no

Illustrating the advertisement is a picture of Master Stretton, wearing a sailor-suit with a quite modern-looking bicycle.

From this it looks as though Stretton's on the site now occupied by Wicliffe Motors, were the firm that put Cheltenham on the cycling map.

Incidentally, "The Story of the Bicycle" makes intriguing reading. John Woodforde has got a remarkable fund of information and anecdote, and he shows the impact that the bicycle has had on society at all stages. One strange factor to emerge is that the "pennyfarthing" provided a remarkable smooth ride for those who braved its terrors. The nearly 100 contemporary drawings make a history on their own.

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A photograph of the front of Mr Stretton's Cycle Depot, Bath Road, appears in a "Pictorial History of Cheltenham printed by Walser & Grist in 1892.

In the Gloucestershire Echo of 1898

Strettons Ltd were advertising new and second hand machines, bought, sold or exchanged. Cycles for hire at 6^d an hour with use of Riding School free.

Lessons by expert Teachers. Repairs by experienced men. The "Million" cycles were advertised as the highest, fastest, strongest, and cheapest mounts in the world. There was a branch depot at Montpellier Villas.