

THE HISTORY OF THE CTC WESSEX CYCLING

A historical survey by Keith Matthews.

A history of the later years of our venerable DA is long overdue, and with our centenary looming in 2011 time to set down some of the record. I joined the club in 1976 and was a club official shortly after and can write with some authority of the recent epoch, although memory dims at times! The period that follows from the time of my honourable predecessor Bernard Miller's time until now is in danger of being lost. Fortunately, at the time of writing in 2007, there are still some members around who can help and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.. The club minutes dating back to our founding in 1911 are still in my safe-keeping., but make for some very dry reading. I suppose they should be scanned but my courage fails me here as there is so much. Photographs and news clippings are sparse though, for then as now, we prefer to just get out on our bikes without worrying overmuch about stopping to take pictures or report things to the newspapers.

Bernard Miller who wrote the earlier history had access to technology, for, from the date of his election in 1920 the minutes are typed. Advanced for then! After his history finishing in 1932, there was obviously some trouble in the DA during 1934, the result of the Eastern section wishing to break away and form a Southampton DA. The vote was lost, but Bernard Miller, being a Southampton man probably resigned as a result. Many DA records are lost from his period as secretary. Some points seem worth picking out from the DA papers of the time; the sections then were Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western and it seems that after having specifically excluded the Isle of Wight from the DA area in its early days, there was actually an IOW section briefly for a year or two in 1937/38. Over these years, a group of names begin to appear in the paperwork; Arthur Moss, Charlie Laine, Don Dickenson, Dudley Palmer and Cyril Neale. The young bloods of their time, they were to figure greatly later.

The Wessex DA celebrated its golden jubilee in 1961 with a relay ride, and a formal dinner which was adopted by the CTC as the national dinner. Cyril Scott, who was a founder member of the DA and was also secretary after the Great War, was DA President at the Golden Jubilee. There were two other names prominent at that dinner. Clifford Andrews, a Wessex member who had served as DA secretary during WWII, was at the time of the dinner Chairman of CTC Council. Arthur Moss, another Wessex member, a JP, and latterly Mayor of Wareham, was vice-chairman of CTC too by that time. Wessex DA had great influence nationally then. This involvement at national level continued in recent years as I served on National Council from 1980 until 1991 at which time Julian James stood in my place under my proposal to continue as CTC Councillor until the present day.

The Diamond Jubilee was marked by similarly in 1972 in the grand premises of the Bournemouth Pavilion. At this time Chris Freemantle was DA President and Cyril Neale Vice President of the DA. It is interesting that the keynote speech was one of the earliest promotions of environmental concerns on record. Ron Cook of Salisbury, the long-term DA Secretary, was awarded the club Certificate of Merit and feted for his mile-eating record. Shortly after this celebration and in an uncanny echo of the 1934 debacle, in 1975 there was an acrimonious breaking away of the Southampton section. This time the move was successful and they formed the South Hants DA. The Salisbury section had ceased to exist by this time and so this represented a further paring down of the Wessex area. At this distance in time and with current friendly relationships with our neighbouring DA, it seems entirely logical that Southampton should have split away and the hints of heated arguments embedded in the DA minutes now seem pointless and ill-conceived.

Having "lost" Southampton section, by 1976 the Wessex DA consisted of only two active sections. Here too there are hints of long standing rifts based on clashes of personality or philosophy. The Bournemouth and Poole section was seen as a city-based bunch of young tearaways and not "real" tourists at all. Many of the elder stalwarts of the club lived in Poole, notably Ruth and Jack Merchant, "Chis" Chisnell and some others regarded themselves as West Dorset Section and met at Fleets Bridge to join up with their runs while the Bournemouth section met at Bear Cross. "Chis" Chisnell was Chairman of the West Dorset section but lived in Poole Park! This was the culture in Wessex CTC when I joined it. The Bournemouth section did in fact have a tearaway element at that time and tried to burn me off on my first club run, which was not really good for further recruitment! Those other stalwarts of the DA, Jean & Ron Trill didn't ride with either section at that time.

A marked renaissance in the DA started in 1977. Jean and Ron Trill joined forces with Ruth and Jack Merchant for Wessex to host the 99th CTC Birthday Rides based on Salisbury. Shortly after that they formed the “Thursday Potterers” section to continue the camaraderie. The “Potterers” continue today. Their formation marked a significant shift in DA activities segmenting for the first time into groups with specific styles rather than geographic area.

SECTIONS: Wessex DA was reduced to two active ones by the 1970s but in 1978 new members moved into Salisbury and it was possible to re-form the Salisbury section under the guidance of Richard Nicholl and Alan Clarke. The Yeo-Valley section which had largely been run by G. Priddle folded in 1966. It was rekindled in 1981 under Chris Dury and Jim Gobert and contributed a lot to the fabric of the club for two years, but was not to prove hardy at this time. Cycling in this area had to wait until Richard and Margaret Nicholl left Salisbury for Yorkshire only to return at the turn of the new century to reform the group, renaming it the Blackmore Vale section.

The Bournemouth section had been very active from the mid-70s through to 1982 with riders travelling far and wide and participating in the Paris-Brest-Paris in 1979. However two younger stalwarts, John Burrows and Roy Wadey, started their working careers and I, as chairman, decided to get married. The section needed reviving and a new influx of active riders was forthcoming in 1984. Eric Watson and Shawn Shaw revived the “General Section” aided by Bob & Joan Courtney, Frank & Kathy Moorhouse, John & Joyce Foot, and Jason & Trish Clarke known collectively as the “icebreakers”. Frank Moorhouse ran the General section and Bob & Joan formed the “Intermediates”.

The number of active cyclists in the DA has increased throughout the last 25 years and aside from geographical areas have also split into groups with different styles. The Thursday Potterers have already been mentioned, but they were joined by the Jeanette King’s “Dawdlers” and Ron Lewis’ “Easy Riders” in the Bournemouth area. The “General” section became a hard riding group interested in travelling to Audax events and disappeared as a separate entity, although stalwarts Frank Moorhouse and Annemarie Manley continued to play an active part in the DA generally. The “Inters” effectively became the General section as they became fitter and more experienced. At around the turn of the century, a new group formed in Christchurch calling themselves the Riversiders. Although they did not continue, they did mark a new focus for cycling to the east of our region. Terry Walsh’s incredibly popular informal Saturday ride from Christchurch to Burley followed, as did the formation of the independent Christchurch Bicycle Club. The Saturday ride now runs without any organisation and is known to almost everybody that owns a bike in our region. Regular congregations of over 60 cyclists gather at Burley Tea Rooms every week. The CBC has a very large overlap of members with the Wessex DA such that the boundaries are often blurred.

In West Dorset, with Brian Archer as Chairman and Peter Loakes as secretary, George Fox founded the “Wednesday Wanderers” mid-week group aided by Johnny Read; always a stalwart of the “West Dorsets”. Now with Malcolm Howell as Chairman and Mike Durham as secretary there are Saturday rides too with the “Saturday Saunterers” as well as a special group, the “Thursday Folders” who make use of folding bicycles travelling on buses and trains to extend their range.

In Salisbury, ever guided by Alan Clarke who became a DA Vice President, and assisted by Graham Dudley, as well as the general Sunday section they run a mid-week evening group for hard riders. organised by Malcolm Walters.

EVENTS & RALLIES The Wessex DA has hosted the CTC Birthday Rides on two occasions. In August 1977 at Salisbury 280 members, including overseas participants gathered daily at the Elizabeth Gardens for the start. In those days only two groups were needed to cope with the numbers and the “A” rides were planned at 60 miles, the “B” rides at about 45 miles. Ruth and JackMerchant with Jean and Ron Trill were the chief organisers. In 2003, the DA again hosted the rides and took over the Haven Holiday campsite at Warmwell for the week. The rides were much larger this time with almost 1500 participants. David Durose was the lead organiser for the Wessex DA and was supported by his committee of volunteers who included Christopher Chaplin, Alan Linge, Annemarie Manley, Ken Reed. and myself. The rides were attended by Kevin Mayne, National Director (Secretary) of the CTC and Phil Liggett the President.

In 1981 the DA celebrated its 70th Anniversary with a catered lunch at Sturminster Newton at which Alan Leng, National Secretary of the CTC attended. The 70th anniversary was also marked with a relay ride around the regions of the DA at which nearly 60 people signed the attendance book. In 1986 celebrated its 75th Anniversary with a similar lunch but since that time the 80th and 90th Anniversaries have gone un-noticed. Hopefully this is not the forgetfulness of old age!

In 1983 the DA held a heat of the Veteran's triennial 100mile rides for the DA. It was organised by Keith Matthews.

In 1996 the Salisbury Section hosted the first South of England Rally organised by Graham Dudley and family aided by Alan Clarke. Formerly known as the Home Counties Rally, the CTC net had been cast wider to provide more variety. The headquarters was a large school in Laverstock on the outskirts of Salisbury. Salisbury Section too were responsible for hosting the 1998 CTC National Dinner in Salisbury City Hall, this time organised by Jimmy Walker.

In 1990 and 1991 the DA held a residential weekend rallies at Swanage named the "Purbeck Weekend" in the old Grammar School. Members of the Union Cyclotouristes Saint Lo attended here and our President, Barbara Johnston, took advantage of the contact to establish the "twinning" arrangement which exists to the present day. The arrangement is maintained today by Norman Payne and the St Lois last visited Wessex in 2006. We look forward to returning to see them in France in 2008.

AUDAX & RANDONNEE EVENTS: The formation of Audax UK made a significant impact on the DA and prompted me to found the "Dorset Coast 200km" in 1978. It has run ever since, celebrating the 30th event in 2007. There have been only three organisers for this, Audax UK's longest serving continuous event. I organised up to the year 1999 and then passed over to Annemarie Manley. In 2007, Peter Loakes took over the baton and the event is still in good hands. Over so many years there have been almost too many stories to be told, but one deserves particular recognition. In 1981, for the fourth event, I had contact with a group of French cyclists and had visited them. It was agreed that they would come to Dorset and ride in the Dorset Coast 200km. A good group duly arrived and enjoyed a catered lunch and a slide show given by Neville Chanin, however, to our collective horror we awoke the next morning to a cloth of snow right across Dorset. The reputation of the "Coast" was made - we were no longer a soft southern county. The French party were mortified and turned, understandably, at Weymouth for the ferry and home, but 69 riders of the main field completed against all odds.

At this time the Bournemouth section gained some new younger members and the West Dorsets too and relationships between them were pulled together by the new culture of running "open" Audax style events which involved both sections. At that time Ray Haswell organised a 300km "Breakfast Brevet" from Christchurch to Wiltshire and back in a big loop, and John Burrows a 400km which circled the New Forest and beyond. I added to this with the 600km "Wessex Star" based on Salisbury Youth Hostel through the good agencies of Mick Latimer who was both warden and Wessex member. The Wessex DA gained a deserved reputation for their Audax events at this time, which persists to this day due to the addition of the "Dorset Coastlet 100km", Shawn Shaw's infamous "Hardboiled 300km", Frank Moorhouse's "Dorset Delight 200km", Peter Loakes' "Dorset Downs 100km", "Devon and Dorset Downs 300km" and Peter Davenport's highly successful "Gridiron 100km". It is a tribute to these events that they still run today in 2007, with the "Downs" just celebrating its 20th year and the "Gridiron" in its 15th and attracting over 500 entries. For the dedicated headbangers who enjoy loads of climbing, Shawn Shaw's "Hardboiled 300km" was joined by the "Porkers 400km" and the "Hellfire 600km" to form the Wessex series of events. These ran for many years as open events and are at the time of writing offered as "Permanent" events within the structure of Audax UK.

For the off-roaders, Ken Reed's "Dorset Dirt" is a hardy perennial of 15 years antiquity. Now we also have a major series of events in the New Forest organised by John Ward. Wessex long-distance cycling events rightly bring us credit and continue with great vigour.

NEWSLETTER AND WEBSITE: The Bournemouth, Salisbury and West Dorset Sections have published a quarterly newsletter independently for the last 25 years, each adapting from typewriter to computer and desktop publishing and keeping pace with technology. In 1988 I adopted email for the first time, certainly one of the first officials in CTC to do so and in 1999 the DA published its website; www.wessexctc.org for the first time.

This marks a significant shift in communication. Bournemouth, Salisbury and West Dorset sections opened subsidiary sites after a few years so that information update could be kept local while the main Wessex site acted as a feed for them. Accesses to the sites have increased rapidly as our members, in common with the general population, acquired computers. In 2007, most members access the runs list and the entry forms for events “on-line”. Committee meetings are efficient gatherings, organised by email and with major issues already discussed in this way.

Ken Reed published the Dorset Dirt route for GPS in 2006 and Alan Clarke of Salisbury dreams of a Wi-Fi cycle mounted computer to enable him to access data on attractions as he cycles, but I think that whatever the technology, the carbon-fibre bike frame or the titanium fittings, the simple joy of cycling in Wessex will persist for many years to come.

NAME CHANGES: in 2008 it was decided by CTC council that the term D.A. be abandoned in favour of a “Member Group” structure. Under this regime, there is little change in Wessex immediately other than a change of name. Wessex DA became CTC Wessex Member Group and the three large sections became Member Groups in their own right although voting to remain subsidiary to the CTC Wessex umbrella. CTC Blackmore Vale remained as a CTC Informal group as a part of CTC Wessex

In 2011 CTC West Dorset voted to become a fully independent Member Group and detached themselves from Wessex. CTC Blackmore Vale became a full Member Group and effectively so did CTC Salisbury as under the new structure they had little alternative. Both wished to stay associated with CTC Wessex however. CTC Bournemouth took over the name of CTC Wessex Cycling and apart from their original area took over DT11 and kept responsibility for the blank area of the old Yeo-Valley section (BA20, 21, 22, TA10 to TA20) with a firm aim of re-establishing cycling in that area. In its centenary year, the CTC Wessex flame remains alight in the Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch area.

Keith Matthews, Hon Life Vice President. - December 2011