

# An Aspect of Hitchin Transport: The Bicycle



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by

Patricia Gadd

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Transport through the ages has taken many different forms as man felt the need to move outside the small circle of his own environment. In the beginning the only way to travel was on foot; later, on horseback, greater distances could be explored. Subsequently a variety of carts, gigs, traps, chaises and coaches were harnessed to the horse, enabling more people to become mobile. Coaches grew larger, needing more horses to pull them as they made increasingly longer journeys. Hitchin became a centre of coaching activity between the year 1706 and 1850. Being on the main route between London and Bedford, many passengers sought rest and refreshment at Hitchin inns. When the railways came, in 1850, the romantic coaching era came to an abrupt end, but the horse was to play a useful role in the town's transport for the next hundred years.

About the time the first train steamed into Hitchin station another contender to the supremacy of the horse was under survey. Various people in Paris were trying to improve on the hobby horse, or dandy horse as it was sometimes known. This was a crude contraption, the forerunner of the bicycle, consisting of two wheels attached to a wooden bar over which man would straddle and propel himself along with his feet, often attaining quite a good speed. In 1840 the somewhat eccentric owner of Letchworth Hall, the Rev. John Alington, enjoyed riding one of these early velocipedes madly round his great hall as though it were a horse, whipping and spurring wildly. Many attempts had been made with cranks and chains to propel the hobby horse, but it was 1861 before the first bicycle was marketed in Paris by Pierre Michaux, a pram-maker. This had pedals attached directly to the front wheel, and a smaller back wheel; both were made of iron with wooden spokes similar to the carts of the time. They had a vertical front fork and a primitive brake applied by twisting a cord at the handlebars.

By 1865 four hundred models a year were being manufactured in Paris, and in 1866 one of these machines was exported to England by Rowley B. Turner who was connected with the Coventry Sewing Machine Company. This firm agreed to build these machines for export back to France. The Franco-Prussian war at that time, however, prevented this, and the velocipede was put on the British market.

It was one of these cumbersome models which was to be seen in Hitchin in 1869. One can easily picture the crowds which no doubt gathered, and their excitement, as agape with wonder and amazement they watched a man balancing on two wheels riding through the town. The bicycle soon became very popular among the more daring young men who could afford the ten to fifteen guineas it cost to purchase one of these exciting new toys. Other manufacturers were soon producing this strange contraption, and although it was seen as a passing craze, local engineering firms were being asked to build cycles for their customers. About this time the front wheel was being made larger (sometimes up to five feet in diameter) to enable the rider to attain a greater speed, while the back wheel was made smaller to keep the weight of the bicycle down. These models became known as ordinary bicycles, and affectionately as "pennyfarthings".

Many other improvements were soon made, including raked forks to improve stability, and a back step for easier mounting. Tensioned spokes were fitted to some models, and these became known as 'spider wheels'.

Cycling became very popular in Hitchin, and a cycling club was founded in May 1875, including among its members Francis Ransom and Francis Shillitoe. Arthur Latchmore, the founder of the Blue Cross Temperance Brigade, was the proud owner of a Spider Wheel, and introduced the boys of Woodlands School to this exciting new pastime. They no doubt sustained many bumps and bruises as they learned to mount their high bicycles on the muddy and rutted

Bedford Road – but they soon progressed to a track of their own in the school grounds. Ian Falconer, the son of Lord Kintore and a close friend of Arthur Latchmore, cycled in 1874 from Bournemouth to Hitchin – a distance of 135 miles – in 19¼ hours. In 1876, after training on the Woodlands School track with three fellow Cambridge undergraduates under the direction of Canon Lewis Hensley, Ian Falconer again made history by winning the first Oxford and Cambridge bicycle race from Hatfield to Cambridge in three hours nine minutes.

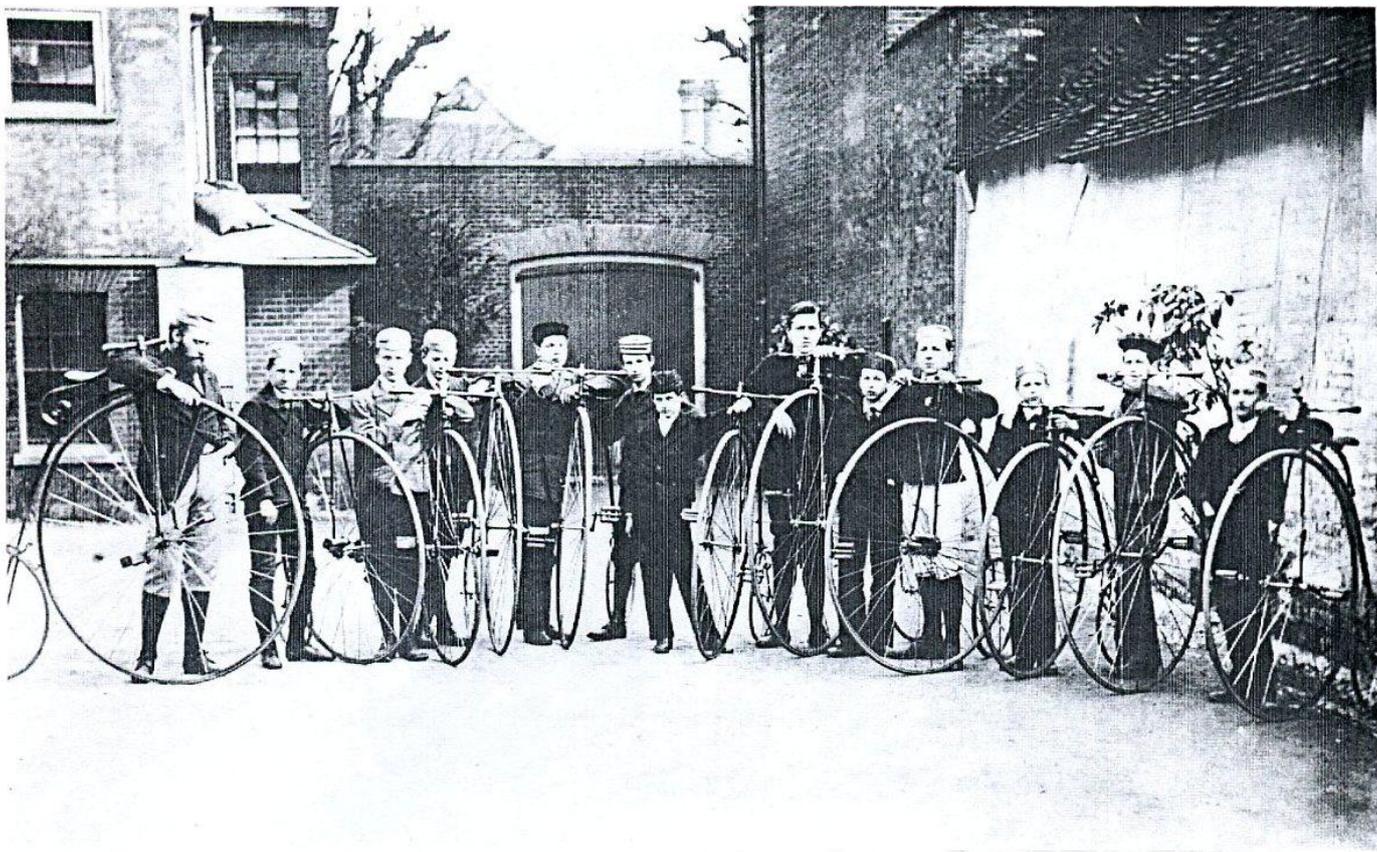
Bicycle race meetings were held on the Top Field, and many big names in the cycling world attended them, including Mr. A. Holbein (who later became known also as a cross-Channel swimmer). Holbein led his competitors on 24-hour races starting in the Marketplace, and these races sometimes covered as much as 300 miles. S.F. Edge also attended – he was later to become a champion, covering with J. Bates on a tandem 100 miles in 53 hours in 1890, a feat commemorated on a cigarette card. Dan Albone, a young agricultural engineer from Biggleswade, developed a cross-frame safety bicycle with equal-sized wheels which was introduced to the public on the Top Field. Albone is famous for his development of the first practical tandem in 1886, and also for the development of a lady's cycle in the form in which we know it today. This latter machine gave the freedom of the road to the more adventurous of Victorian women.

One of the first women in Hitchin to venture onto a bicycle was Emma Florence Jeeves, a telephonist at the Post Office, then in the Market Square. Her bicycle was made locally for her in about 1890 with a fixed 26" back wheel and a 28" front wheel. It sported footrests on the front fork (for use when riding down hills) and a lever-operated brake. Miss Jeeves on her bicycle soon became a familiar figure in and around the town, and she surely did not lack gallant escorts on her longer runs, which sometimes went as far afield as Northampton. Several other girls in Hitchin took up the challenge of the bicycle, some riding in tandem with their husbands or fiancés, others riding solo.

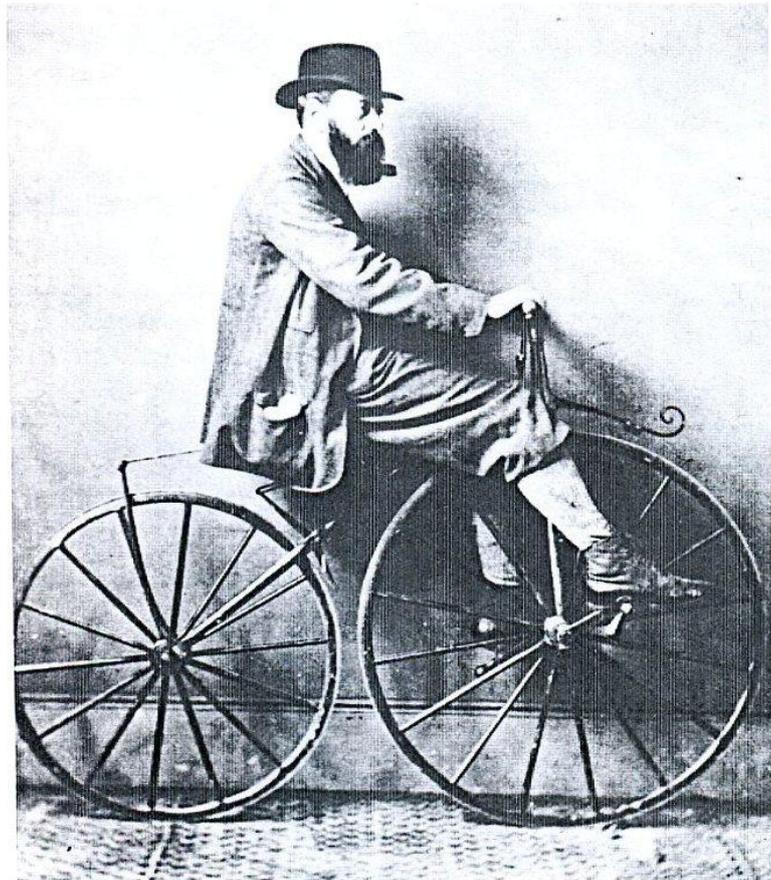
The emphasis in the early days was certainly upon group activity, aided and encouraged by the manufacturers who made tandems, both in Albone's pattern, with one rider behind the other, and in the aptly-named 'Sociable', where the riders sat side-by-side.

Of the cycling clubs formed in Hitchin, as men felt the need to pit their skill against each other in their efforts to attain greater speed, the Hitchin Cycling Club, captained by Francis Shillitoe, the Blue Cross, founded by Arthur Latchmore, and the Hitchin Rovers were among the earliest. Social events were frequent. Annual picnics were eagerly anticipated – popular rendezvous were Lilley Hoo and the riverside at Bedford, whither special trains were booked. When the Hitchin Cycling Club met there, to enable family and friends to join in. Boats were hired on the river, and a good time was enjoyed by all.

London clubs found the ride to Hitchin pleasant, the Great North Road Touring Club often stopped off in the town, and the Barnet Wheelers found refreshment at the Kirklands Temperance Hotel, next to the Lister Hotel. Once again Hitchin inns were offering rest and refreshment to the travel-weary under the sign of the Cycle Touring Club. Major Knox Holmes, a leading cyclist and writer, claimed in a national cycling magazine that the Rose and Crown at Hitchin was 'the most comfortable house for cyclists, where they were welcomed with kindness and good service from the proprietors, Mr. and Mrs. Males'. Another participant in cycle touring wrote in the Hertfordshire Express 'The day was hot and sunny on the road to Northampton which caused us to doff our coats and string them on our handlebars, however, not wishing to seem like a class of people I know as outsiders, we stopped about a mile outside the town, and dressed to enter Northampton as respectable wheelmen'. It would seem that there was a certain degree of snobbery attached to cycling in the early days.



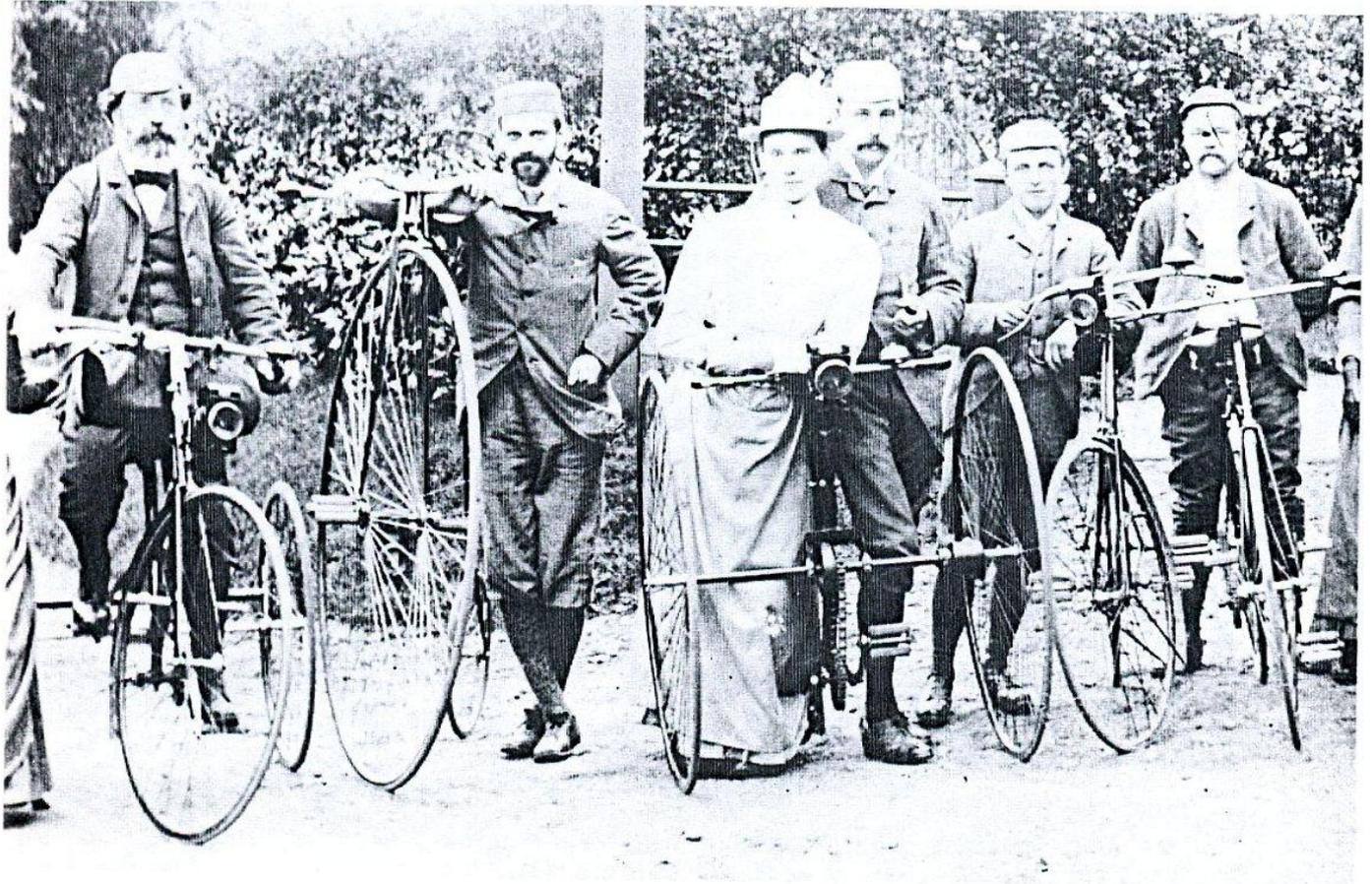
The Woodlands School cyclists in 1876.



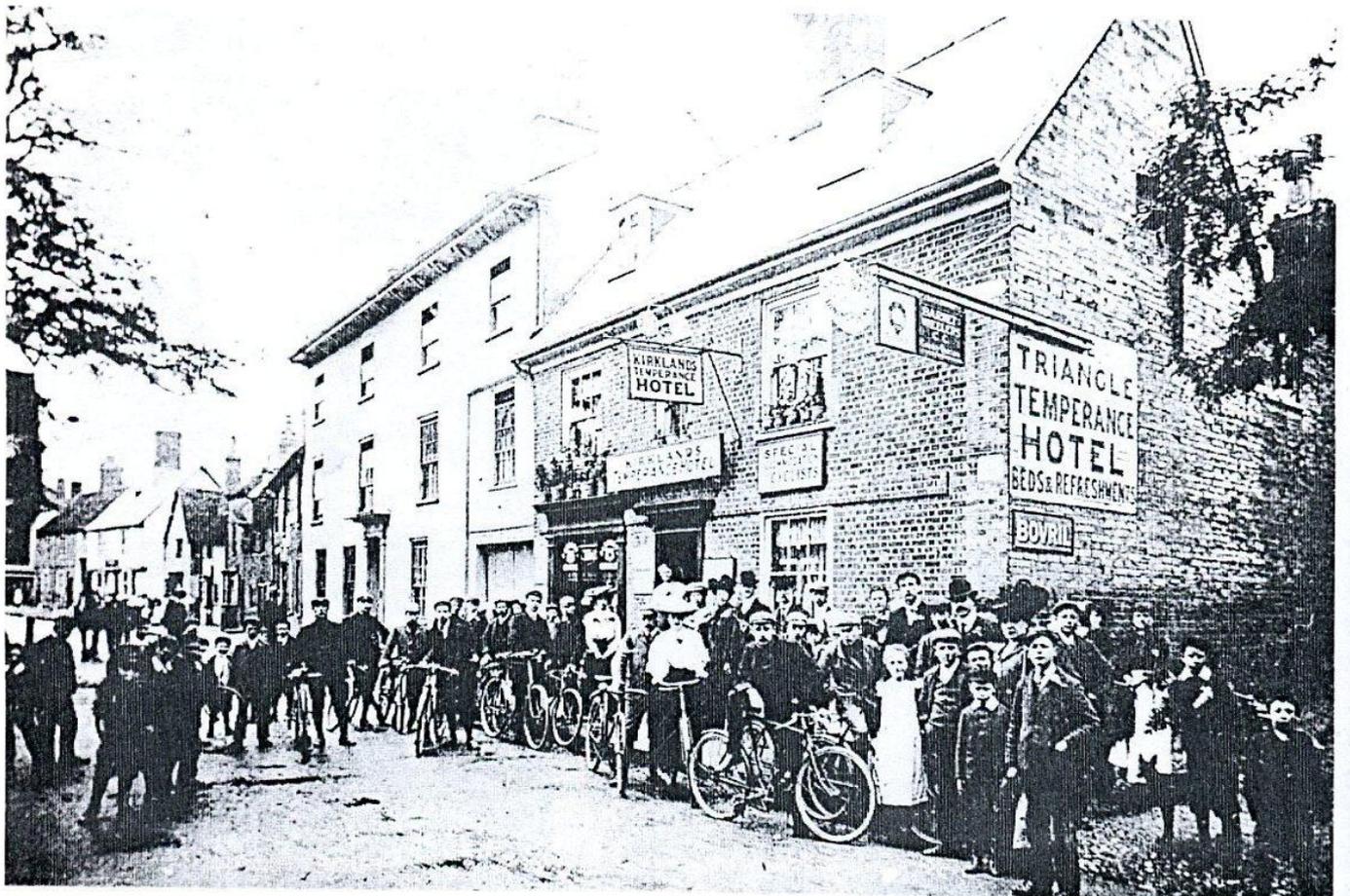
J Beck on a Hedges English boneshaker, 1869.



A delivery boy outside Garratt's baker's shop in Bridge Street around 1890.



The Blue Cross Temperance Brigade Cycle Club outside the Hare & Hounds at Old Warden.



A club outing pauses for refreshment at the Kirklands Temperance Hotel at the junction of Queen Street, Park Street and Bridge Street.



Delivery boys outside the London Central Meat Company's shop at No. 2 Churchyard.



**CYCLE RACING, 1893.**

**HITCHIN ROVERS CHAMPIONSHIP,**  
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21.

The 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th,  
and 8th

MEN IN THIS RACE, THE FIRST TWO  
ON "IVELS," RODE MACHINES  
SUPPLIED BY

**G. C. FLANDERS.**

THEREFORE YOU SEE THE BENEFIT  
OF BUYING A CYCLE OF A  
PRACTICAL RIDER.

CALL OR WRITE TO

**G. C. FLANDERS**

Sole Agent for "Ivel," "Hadley," "New Hows,"  
"Raleigh," "Mohawk," "Rodge," "Ormonds."

A large stock of Second-hand Machines cheap  
Repairs of all kinds undertaken.  
New and Old Pattern Pneumatic Tyre Repairing a  
speciality at the

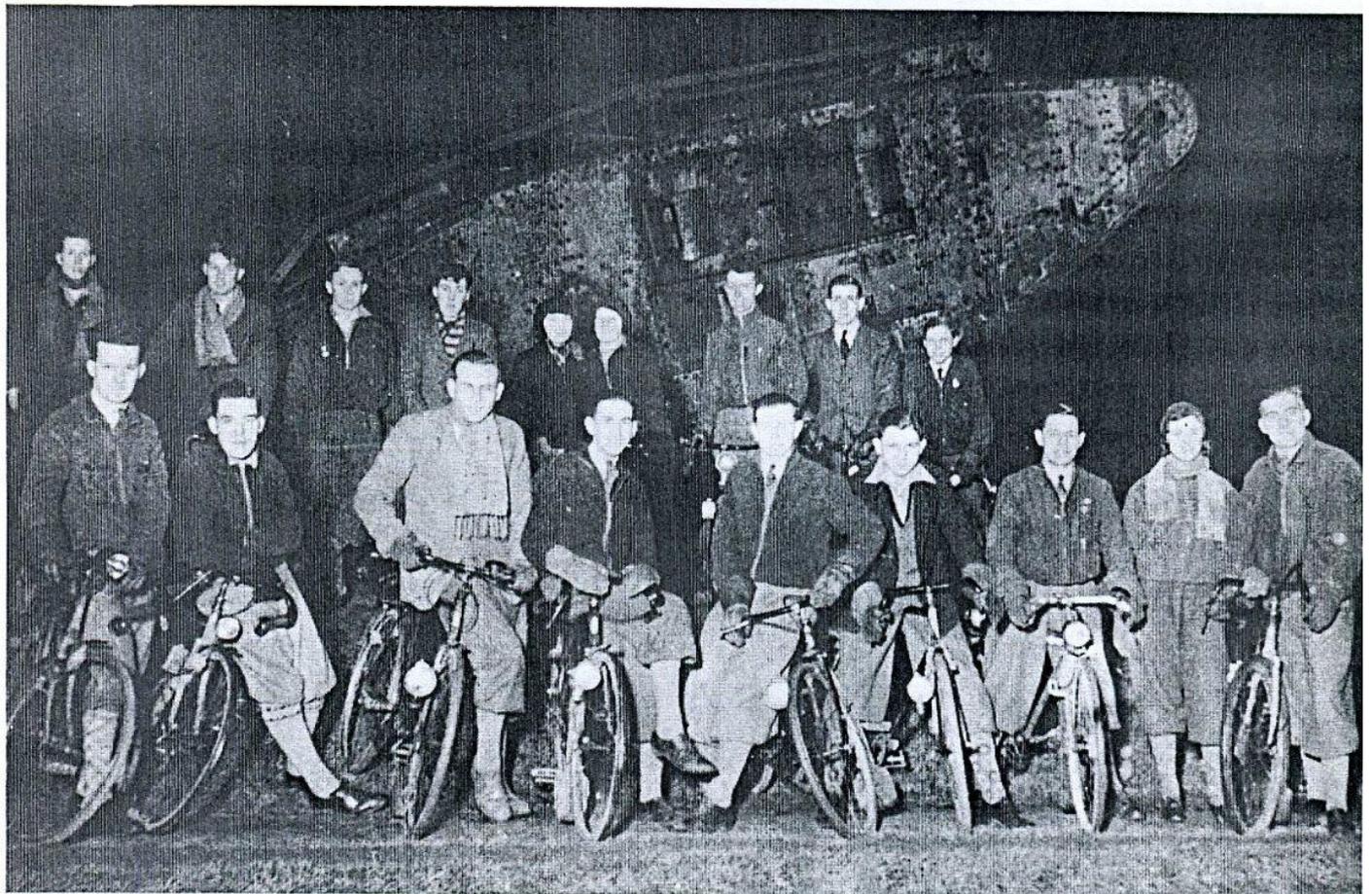
**CYCLE DEPOT**  
BUGKLESBURY, HITCHIN.



Nurse Ottley, the District Nurse, in the High Street in 1920.



The Hitchin Aces riding against the Ruskin Flyers at the Bury Mead track around 1950.



The Hitchin Nomads ready for a night ride, beside the tank 'Fearless' on Butt's Close.

Time trials were a popular form of racing, and many clubs enjoyed the challenge. A milestone situated at what is now the entrance to the King George V playing field on Bedford Road was the starting point. Stanley Lee, now in his eighties, can remember seeing as a boy the London clubs arriving in Hitchin on their machines, taking part in the trials, setting off for a round trip to Northampton, and then, after taking tea at The Cricketers on Bedford Road, setting off for the return ride to London.

The ladies also took part in racing. On May 18th 1897, Mrs. F. Ward left Hitchin from Bedford Road milestone at 9.55.a.m. in an effort to reduce the record set by Mrs. Grace. Against a north-easterly gale, Peterborough was reached in three hours 35 minutes and 25 seconds. After a rest of fourteen minutes, the return to Hitchin was accomplished with a favourable wind in two hours 36 minutes 15 seconds, thereby knocking three minutes 35 seconds off Mrs. Grace's time. To pedal one of those heavy machines in long skirts on inferior roads was no mean achievement. Dress was a problem. The dresses which were fashionable at that time were not apparently very practical for cycling, and a long divided skirt with matching bloomers was the fashionable alternative, worn principally by the liberated miss. Albone's lady's bicycle meant that most women could wear a conventional skirt with little difficulty, providing their machine was fitted with skirt guards. The fashionable was however not always acceptable to the older generation.

‘Two ladies – or as Grandpa says, two shameless females – in bloomers bicycled through the village yesterday, and some of the women were so scandalised that they threw stones at them. I didn't dare to say so, but I thought they looked very neat, though I don't think I should quite like to show my own legs to the world like that'. †

Despite early problems of this kind, the bicycle became not just a form of transport, but a sport, a hobby and a pleasure; pedalling along the open road with the sun on ones face became synonymous with freedom. Riding a bicycle, like swimming is a skill once learned, never forgotten, and many look back with nostalgia on earlier cycling experiences : Reginald Hine was a keen cyclist, and in his History of Hitchin he recalled how he regularly cycled from his home in Newnham to Hitchin to sample the cheesecake from Logsdens shop in the Marketplace. "Those cakes were beyond praise and almost beyond description". Many other well known local people were regular cyclists. James Rennie, the colporteur of religious tracts, could often be seen pedalling around the town on his tricycle, except on Tuesdays when he would be attending his stall on Hitchin market. Miss Wilkie of Dacre Road cycled to St. Pauls Waldenbury every day to give lessons to Lady Elizabeth Bowes Lyon, now H.R.H. the Queen Mother. When ill health and bad weather forced Miss Wilkie to give up cycling, Lady Elizabeth and her brother David were brought to 'Lopside', Miss Wilkie's home, in a pony cart for their lessons. Doctors of the day were generally in favour of this energetic new pastime, cycling, and some in fact succumbed to the lure of the bicycle and made their rounds by this means. Dr. Hughes of Walsworth Road was a familiar sight on his lady's bicycle; Dr. Shillitoe however chose to ride a tricycle with his black bag fixed to the back, and Miss Latchmore can remember local children imagining he carried babies in the bag for their mothers. A national cycling newspaper told of a man 83 years old and crippled by rheumatism who had decided to try the exercise of riding a tricycle. During a period of several weeks at Hitchin he enjoyed daily rides, some of great length, and at the end of that time it was found that he had actually developed new muscle, a thing unheard of in one of his years.

Many refinements were made to the basic bicycle over the years, including sprung saddles, gears, and best of all pneumatic tyres developed by John Dunlop. Francis Ransom had experimented with these and was the first to use them in Hitchin. Early lighting was either by candle or oil. However, by 1888 the acetylene lamp was in use in the U.S.A. and it soon became available in this country; acetylene gas was obtained when water was dripped onto calcium carbide.

In 1893 the trade carrier, which was the fore-runner of the errand bike, was produced. This eventually replaced the large hand carts pushed by lads, which were such a feature of the delivery service in towns. Merchandise such as coal was of course still delivered by the faithful horse and cart, and milk was still to be carried in churns on milk floats for several decades to come, but by the turn of the century local shops were providing their errand boys with bicycles which had the name of the shop across the bar. Moss's, Perks and Llewellyn's and Halsey's, as well as many butchers as time went by found the bicycle good for trade, as they could provide customers with a swift delivery service. The whistling errand boys were still part of the scene even ten to fifteen years ago. Some services, such as district nursing and the G.P.O. still use bicycles, and it was the latter which spawned one of the most unusual variants of the bicycle. The only example of a five wheeled bicycle was produced by one Gibbons for the Post Office parcels service in 1881. He called his machine the 'Ideal', but it was known as the 'Hen and Chickens' when used by the postmen, as the design was of one large central driving wheel with four small wheels surrounding it, and it was extremely heavy and complicated. By 1887 postmen were using twin-driver carriers, and the later penny-farthings were in general use.

The coming of the motor-car made little difference to the cycling fraternity, as very few people could afford a car, particularly in the early thirties. The bicycle represented a cheap and practical form of transport for many : Perce Anderson, the well-known cricketer of the time was a keen supporter of Luton Town Football Club, and cycled to their matches for many years, and Nurse Ottley too was a familiar figure on her tricycle with her walking-stick Over the handlebars and her nursing bag fixed on the back, going about her business as the District Nurse for St. Saviour's.

Many Hitchin people worked in the expanding Garden City and cycled there every day; as late as the second World War it was quite usual in the early part of the morning to reach Letchworth without encountering a single car.

In 1931 the Hitchin Nomads Cycle Club was founded, and their first committee meeting was held in Bedford Road at the home of E.C. Tomkins, one of the club's founder members. Allan Porter was also a founder member and is now the Honorary President. For almost fifty years club members have competed in many open and club events, including road and grass track racing, hill-climbing and organised club runs. Tony Huckle was a keen track cyclist, and has donated a cup for this event, while the David Gudgin Memorial Trophy, in memory of a member tragically killed on the road, is also a coveted cup. Cyclo-cross is held once a year at Oughton Head, an event involving running with the bike and rough riding over fields and bridle-paths. For this, the bicycles are fitted with special knobby tyres and low gears. David Renny, one of the touring members, covers about 150 miles a week when in training, and in one season covered 60,500 miles.

It is interesting to note that, until 1968, the club time-trials started from the same spot in Bedford Road as their predecessors, the milestone having unfortunately disappeared during the last war. Since 1968, the starting point has been the New Inn, just outside Hitchin on the Bedford Road. The club time-trials colours are blue and yellow, although in the early days members wore black. Most events are now held out of Hitchin – often at Girtford Bridge, where there is a memorial garden to F. Bidlake, a famous cyclist who formulated the time-trials. Nowadays, of course, the cycles include refinements undreamt of by the pioneers, such as lightweight frames, different varieties of gears and tubular tyres, refinements which must be dearly bought, as racing cycles can cost upwards of £200. In 1934, the Nomads cycled-in the New Year, and today the club still enjoys an active social life.

Hitchin once boasted its own cycle speedway, started in 1948 by several cycle-mad young lads, including George Prowse, Sid Springett, and Ginner Williams. They removed the brakes and mudguards from their cycles and competed against each other in the King George V. playing field. However, they very soon progressed to a track of their own on Bury Mead, which Sam Masters helped them build. It was as good a track as any in the county, and large crowds would gather to watch the races. At first the boys used any old bikes, but as the team grew and competition became stronger, they saved hard, and each member purchased a new machine from Munts at a cost of about £27, which was of course quite a lot of money at that time. They raced against other local teams, among them the Paynes Park Panthers and the Walsworth Boomerangs. Teams from further afield, such as the Bermondsey Bashers and the Ruskin Flyers also took up the challenge, each race being of four laps. The Hitchin Aces, as they called themselves, joined the Hertfordshire League and went from strength to strength as they raced against all the county teams; indeed, two of the boys, Sid Springett and Ginner Williams were selected to ride for England against Sweden. It was a great pity that the Hitchin Aces club should only have lasted for five years, for many young lads today would enjoy the challenge of cycle speedway.

In the 1950's over one hundred veteran cyclists, half of them over 60 years old and some of them over eighty, stopped in Hitchin for tea at the Lister House Hotel during a 100 mile tour organised by the Cycle Touring Club. Their President, 78-year-old G.H. Stancer, was well to the fore on his tricycle throughout the journey. A quarter of a century has elapsed since that trip; in the intervening years the tempo of traffic has increased, the accent is now upon four wheels, and the automobile, with its comfortable interior, is supreme. The roads around the town, upon which the cyclist once was king, are now almost entirely taken over by the noisy confusion of the motor car. At our inns and hotels, bleak car parks have replaced the stables, the travel-weary arrive on four wheels, and the cycle racks are almost defunct – almost, but not quite.

In Britain today there are over twelve million cyclists, and we in Hitchin have our share of people who still enjoy the pleasure of cycling. Serenely we go, amid the ceaseless, soul-less rushing traffic. Road tax, parking problems, licences, petrol shortages – none of these things are of any consequence to the cyclist. A puff of air in our tyres, a little oil in the works is all that is needed. While it is true that when it rains the cyclist gets a trifle wet, this was ever so in the long years of cycling history, but the lure of the bicycle still holds strong.

The unknown man who rode his bicycle into Hitchin over a hundred years ago pedalled his machine into the beginning of an illustrious future. Cyclists have enjoyed great prestige in Hitchin – what will the next hundred years hold for this remarkable invention? I doubt if we will emulate Stevenage in providing twenty miles of cycling tracks, but in sport, leisure and usefulness the bicycle is supremely versatile, and will, I am sure, continue to hold its own. The bicycle is here to stay.

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<sup>‡</sup> Quoted from a letter in *A Hundred Wonderful Years : Social and Domestic Life of a Century, 1820-1920* by Mrs C. S. Peel.

**SOME CYCLE DEALERS KNOWN TO HAVE TRADED IN HITCHIN**

- Arthur Appleby ..... 32 Nightingale Road
- A.G. Ansell ..... 61 Nightingale Road
- Henry Barham ..... Sun Street
- Thomas Brooker ..... Bucklersbury
- John Chalkley & Son ..... Brand Street
- Cummings..... 51/52 Redhill Road
- Curry's Cycle Stores Ltd..... 19 Market Place
- G.C. Flanders ..... Bucklersbury
- C. Frost ..... 94 Walsworth Road
- Gatwards Swan Iron Works..... Market Place
- Albert Green..... 8 Bearton Road
- H.E. Hutson (later Cummings)..... 51/52 Redhill Road
- T. Issott (later Ansell) ..... 61 Nightingale Road
- James Langley (Gun & Cycle Maker) ..... 5 Bucklersbury
- Matthew Bros. & Co..... 16 Golden Square (Moss's Corner)
- Morgans Cycles ..... Sun Street
- Munts Cycle Stores..... High Street
- Thomas F. Pepper..... Station Road
- Sudbury's Cycles Ltd..... 30 Sun Street
- W.H. Walker ..... 27 Bridge Street

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Front Cover : James Rennie, the Hitchin colporteur, on his tricycle.

Back Cover : Vic Wayling presents a trophy to the Captain of the Hitchin Aces.

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Market Square, Hitchin.

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All kinds of Refreshments  
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Lucas's Fine Ales & Stout.

Good Beds.

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**“SINGER”**

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every description. Official Repairer to the O.T.C.  
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