



ROADS WERE NOT BUILT FOR CARS

*It was cyclists not motorists who first fought for properly surfaced roads, as this abridged extract from **Carlton Reid's** new book makes clear*

In 1886, ten years before the arrival of motor cars, a group of well-heeled individuals created an influential organisation that lobbied for better road surfaces, and pushed for the nationalisation of Britain's neglected highways. The trailblazing Roads Improvement Association eventually became the cornerstone of the 'motor lobby' but it was founded, funded and originally run by cyclists.

Pioneer cyclists tended to be young, athletic, wealthy and time-rich. Their bicycles were rare, valuable and avant-garde. The trail-blazing of the bicycling pioneers is expertly described in a history of CTC, written in 1928 by James Thomas Lightwood, himself a pioneer:

No sooner had the bicycle become recognized as a new means of progress in this country than those who possessed them experienced a longing to get away from towns and streets and explore the countryside. This joy

of the open road was a new experience, giving all the charm of novelty mingled with a spice of adventure and a modicum of risk... Roads were bad, maps indifferent, sign-posts frequently illegible or misleading, wayside inns and country hotels were rarely prepared to receive guests... But those were the days of great adventure, and the first impulse of those who mastered the art of riding the bicycle was to go forth on voyages of discovery into the Great Unknown.

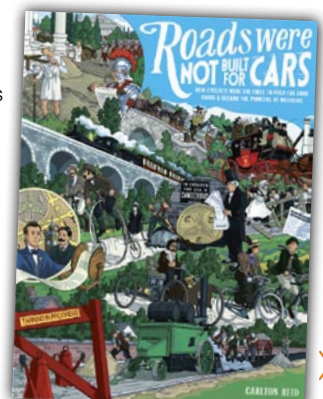
The 'Great Unknown' is over-egging it but those early cyclists were among the first travellers in a generation to set out to explore Britain via its neglected trunk-road network... [Meanwhile] those interested in racing their machines sought out the flattest, best-surfaced roads to partake in organised 'scorching'.

Nationally, two clubs that aimed to stimulate and organise cycle touring and racing were formed within six months of each other [in 1878]. The Bicycle Union and the Bicycle

Touring Club are still with us today as British Cycling and the Cyclists' Touring Club...

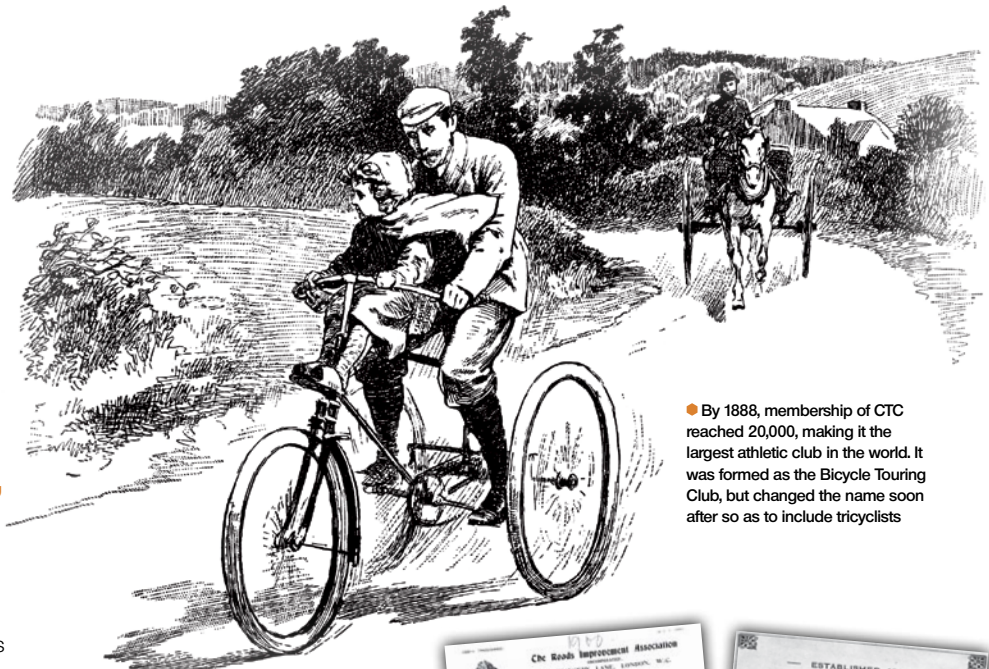
Ten years after its first meet, CTC's membership reached 20,000, making it the largest athletic club in the world. And its members were influential... Many 19th century cyclists volunteered to sit on their local highway boards, although their work in improving roads is rarely if ever linked to their love of cycling. CTC book author James Thomas Lightwood was a member of

● The book's first print run sold out. A revised edition will be published in early 2015



Above: Alamy.com

“Cyclists raised money to help pay for the superior road metalling they craved, stressing that the improvements would benefit everyone”



Left: iStockphoto.com

● By 1888, membership of CTC reached 20,000, making it the largest athletic club in the world. It was formed as the Bicycle Touring Club, but changed the name soon after so as to include tricyclists

» Lytham's Board of Improvement Commissioners and was Chairman of the town's Streets Committee for four years. At the same time, he was also CTC's Chief Consul for Lancashire, and a member of CTC's National Council.

In many regions, cyclists raised money to help pay for the superior metalling they craved, stressing that the improvements they were willing to part-fund would be of benefit to all road users. The Midland Road Fund was one of a number of private pots of cash, raised by cyclists, that helped pay for road repairs... The fund was also used to pay for court action against negligent surveyors. In August 1884, the National Cyclists' Union [formerly the Bicycle Union] and the Midland Road Fund lodged a court case against the highway surveyors of four parishes in the Midlands for 'neglecting to keep the main roads in a proper state of repair.'

There were further court cases in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Bedfordshire, with the cyclists winning each time. Such cases were easy to win – all the cycling organisations had to do was supply proof that the roads in question were not repaired up to the standard required by the Highway Act of 1835. The mere threat of legal action by uppity cyclists was enough to get road gangs sent out on repair missions.

19th century 'Fill that hole'

In 1888, CTC persuaded the Corporation of Birmingham to compare its road-making methods with that recommended by CTC's retained experts. CTC's methods were found to be superior, and were consequently adopted by the Corporation.

As well as employing the threat of court action and conducting 'road laying experiments', cyclists also enlisted the help of some of their prominent and well-connected members, applying pressure behind the scenes. One such member was Sir Alfred Frederick Bird, the elder son of the founder of Alfred Bird and Sons, the food business famous for its eggless custard powder. He was a champion tricyclist, and an energetic member of CTC, representing Warwickshire on the club council.

Bird was part of a deputation that went to the Corporation of Birmingham to protest at the

state of roads on behalf of cyclists. He kept up a long correspondence with the body.

Other cyclists also used this middle-class way of pushing for change – like Bird, they wrote a great many letters. [In 1886, a cycling magazine reported]

It only required a polite letter from a member of the Roads Committee to bring forth a gang of men who promptly filled up the ruts and holes in the macadam... In this matter, persuasion would seem to be better than force.

If the act of writing one letter to a single surveyor could produce positive results, cyclists surmised that a great many communications could have an impact nationwide. The roads committees of the NCU and CTC decided to pool resources and, in October 1886, they formed the Roads Improvement Association...

The RIA had some early successes. In its annual report for 1891 it was said that

Various roads in the parishes of Greenwich, Lee, and Lewisham, Berkshire and West Riding of Yorkshire, have been repaired and improved through the efforts of the Association... A Yorkshire correspondent writes as follows:- "The branch roads over the hills in the West Riding have been put into superb condition and are a treat to ride on."

[The RIA's successes continued.] In 1913, highway history experts Sidney and Beatrice Webb wrote that

It was the bicyclist who brought the road once more into popular use for pleasure riding; who made people aware both of the charm of the English highway and of the extraordinary local differences in the standards of road maintenance; and who caused us all to realise that the administration, even of local byways, was not a matter that concerned each locality only, but one in which the whole nation had an abiding interest.

The Webbs recounted that in the twelve years between 1890 and 1902,

...when the traffic was still almost wholly made up of horse-drawn vehicles and pedal



bicycles, the total expenditure on main roads in rural districts was nearly doubled, the mileage being greatly increased and the annual cost per mile rising from £43 to £66. The total expenditure in these years on main roads in urban districts was more than quadrupled, the annual cost per mile rising from £49 to £207. The increase in the aggregate road expenditure in England and Wales, between 1890 and 1902, outside London and the County Boroughs, was no less than 86 per cent.

Roads cash predates cars

This huge increase in spending on the roads of Britain cannot be pinned solely on the campaigning efforts of cyclists, but their agitation would have had some effect. Historians tend to emphasise, instead, the creation in 1888 of county councils, which gained much jurisdiction for main roads, and levied a charge on ratepayers for upkeep of these highways. However, there were thousands of road boards spread throughout Britain – there was no single, over-arching roads body. The cycling-based RIA supplied technical literature to the new county councils and wrote to all of the new county councillors spelling out their new powers – and duties – where roads were concerned.

If it's hard to pin the increased spending on the efforts of cyclists, one thing is certain: the funding increases came before motorists arrived on the scene. ●

For more details – or to purchase a digital copy (from £6) – visit the website roadswerenotbuiltforcars.com