

The Great War and the Anfield Bicycle Club

By David Birchall

*Sometimes we stumble on a secret door
And listening guess what lies the other side¹*

This is the remarkable story of the Anfield Bicycle Club during the Great War. Through the pages of the Circular the many members caught up in the fighting shared their experiences in their own words month by month as the catastrophe unfolded. On the home-front, as conditions grew harder, those who remained behind told how the Club defended itself and kept life going. The depth and immediacy of the reporting is extraordinary: reading the accounts now is like stepping through a door to the world as it was then.

The Circular was the crucial link with members at home and abroad. It showed that the fellowship of pre-war days was alive and well; and it promised a return to normality when the war was over. But above all it was the inspired decision to send those on service gifts like tobacco and pipes, cigarettes, chocolate, tinned food, and writing materials that led to the steady stream of news and first hand reports of the war which were our unique reward.

Edwardian summer



Halcyon days – The annual photo at the Kilton Inn, Hoo Green, near Knutsford, taken during a rainstorm
June 1907

By way of context, at the start of the century the heart of club-life was the Saturday afternoon fixture, every week throughout the year. In the countryside round Liverpool and Manchester members would meet at comfortable inns for dinner served prompt at six o'clock following a ride of twenty-five miles or so. Good food, good beer, good conversation and tobacco round the fireside were the happy characteristics of these get-togethers.

¹ From *The Other Side*, Alec Waugh, March 1917: published in *The Winter of the World - Poems of the Great War*, Dominic Hibberd and John Onions, Constable, 2008.

Often, winter and summer, rather than turn for home, a few would make a weekend of it further afield. A pleasing prospect: allowing exploration of Welsh mountain tracks, Shropshire's pastoral countryside, and occasionally the Derbyshire dales.

During the winter there was time for more leisurely riding and social fixtures². Highlights were monthly smoking concerts at Hunts Cross in Liverpool with hot-pots on the menu followed by an evening of entertainment³. But for special occasions the meal could be elaborate.



Annual dinner 1901 Menu and Programme

² On a winter ride to the Lord Eldon Inn in Knutsford (11th January 1913) “after the excellent fare had been satisfactorily disposed of, the company gathered round the fire and the new Captain gave us, with some help from Cohen, a full report of the Annual General Meeting. We also talked of many other things – books, freak bicycles of long ago, and roads – especially roads, on which topic several learned discourses were delivered”. When the time for departure arrived snow was softly falling.

³ An “Entertainments Sub-committee” ensured that the smoking concerts went with a swing, like the evening of 4 January 1913. Our own “talent” kicked off with a pianoforte solo, followed by a mandolin recital, and a “sweet rendition of The Drinking Song from the Yellow Rose of Persia”. Then came a recitation of “The Green Eye of the Yellow God”, music from an ocarina, yarns and “nursery rhymes”. Then members were entertained by professional singers Messrs Evans (“a tenor voice of rare strength and purity”) and Mann “who brought down the house and compelled an encore”.



The Irish Road Club 100 mile Handicap, 4 August 1913

Then there were the official tours. 1913 was typical: we spent Easter at Betws-y-Coed, August in Ireland, and rode through the night to the dawn of a dewy summer morning in Aberystwyth. Rounding off the year the Autumnal Tints weekend took us to Llangollen. Last but not least, from April to September it was the racing season. The 1913 calendar followed a well established format with two 50 mile time trials for members on Saturday afternoons, and three invitation events: the 100 on Whit Monday, the 24 hour in July, and 12 hour in September. The 1913 season concluded with a successful attempt on the RRA

and NRRA 24 hour unpaced tandem bicycle record on 5/6 September (381½ miles). In all, fourteen members had competed for a prize fund which by the end of the year had dispensed £67/18/6d. This was a big purse when £1 could buy 80 pints of beer⁴ – on this basis the equivalent now of about £10,000 - £14,000.

It was not all sweetness and light, but then what vigorous club would be without quibbles and grumbles? Complaints were made that members who raced without supporting winter club-runs lay themselves open to the “unpleasant charge of pot-hunting”. In addition there was unhappiness over remarks in the Circular⁵. On this at the AGM the Hon Secretary diplomatically sought to smooth ruffled feathers: “I believe the offending paragraphs have not been written from malice, but purely in more or less successful attempts to be humorous”. Clearly, there were lessons to learn on that facet of club-life.

Despite the under-currents, it was clear that 1913 had been another golden year⁶. Indeed, club-life had followed this warm and sociable pattern from the start of the century, and 1914 promised similar. In addition to a full racing programme, a weekend in February was planned to Hawkstone, and the usual official weekends were arranged with Easter at Betws-y-Coed (thirty-six members and thirteen friends attended), an all-night ride to Penrith, August Bank Holiday in Dublin, and Llangollen for the Autumn Tints.



From an undated and uncaptioned snapshot: WP Cook is shown animatedly cheering on an unseen rider. One of the young ladies in the background could be his daughter who married Club Secretary FD McCann.

⁴ Circulars, November 1914, p6 (“... the cost of alcohol varied from 2d to 3d per glass, otherwise it was 1½d throughout the trip”); and January 1915, p7 (“It is the last time that beer can be purchased at 2d per half pint”)

⁵ Annual Report for 1913. The offending article was probably “For New Members” published in the September 1913 Circular (p2). It took a swipe at members who, by dodging marshalling duties, not attending club runs, and failing to notify the Hon Sec that they would be joining in tours, did not pull their weight.

⁶ Annual Report for 1913 (published January 1914) indicated that membership stood at one hundred and five - “about stationary”. Fifty-three fixtures had been carried out successfully, with an average attendance of 25.53, “an increase of 1.7” over 1912, ranging from fourteen to fifty-two.



Exploring the Wicklow Hills, August 1914

War declared

War was declared on 4 August 1914, the day after the Anfield party of twelve returned from the Bank Holiday visit to Dublin. The report in the Circular gave no hint that hostilities threatened, although there would have been awareness of events in Europe. As far as we were concerned, the trip had been a great success. Our racing men (Cohen, Collins, Grimshaw and Webb) had done well in the Irish Road Club Invitation 50, cheered on by the “touring” members. Two had made a week of it cycling from Cork, all had enjoyed the Wicklow hills in the company of Irish friends; and Dublin’s nightlife had been much to everyone’s liking.

The holiday atmosphere continued back to Liverpool aboard SS Kilkenny:

Collins was the ‘grand comique’, and, in the company of Theakstone, caused sore ribs to the majority of passengers in their locality. We landed in good time at the Princes Stage, and all voted it had been ‘some stunt’ of a weekend.

The war’s impact was immediate. First, support for fixtures fell away as the young “joined the colours” and older members volunteered for civic duties or took on extra work. Club-runs suffered severely “with attendances averaging a baker’s dozen ... thanks to this terrible war”. With club-life falling apart, EA Bentley, standing in for the Hon Secretary, appealed for normality.

Then racing was suspended. The third 50 (22 August) was cancelled “owing to the disruption of train services” as a result of mobilisation. And the 12 Hour Handicap, which should have taken place on 12 September, was stopped “through lack of entries directly due to the war”.



On the eve of war: Anfielders and friends at the Granville Hotel, Dublin. The photo is dated August 1914. Before the end of the month Lionel Cohen (first left) had enlisted with 1st Comrades Battalion, King's Liverpool Regiment, "placing all his 13 tubular tyres in the hands of WP Cook [third from left] for sale"; and President Dave Fell (sixth from left) was "drilling hard with the Civic Service League". JA Grimshaw (fifth from left) served with the Mechanical Transport Service from 1915.

Catering was also disrupted. The run on 8 August 1914, to the Wynnstay Arms, Wrexham, found members "quartered upstairs owing to the Army Service Corps being in command of nearly the whole hotel".

And there were visible reminders. On the road to Lostock Gralam, near Northwich (15 August):

We were kept aware that Old England was at war by the continuous procession of military on the way to Chester, which were met every few miles. The Cheshire Yeomanry in full war kit gave a martial aspect to the countryside, some of the squadrons being splendidly mounted. And the one and only conversation of course was the war, which was taken from all points of view, even the Kaiser's. Not only was the war settled, but the German Empire parcelled out to the satisfaction of all.⁷

By the end of 1914 ten of the younger and active had enlisted. Of these, Archie Warburton had been "at the Front from the outbreak of hostilities", and "through the fighting from the retreat from Mons right up to the present time". In addition Messrs Toft, Charlie Conway, and President Dave Fell were drilling hard with the Civic Service League, and RE Pritchard and FD McCann were helping the enlistment officials.

⁷ Circular, September 1914, p5

For those who return

*Those who return shall find that peace endures,
Find old things old, and know the things they knew,
Walk in the garden, slumber by the fireside,
Share the peace of dawn, and dream amid the dew,
Those who return.*⁸

Given the Anfield's traditions, borne from the tenacity and grit of our pioneering days, it should be no surprise that the response to the war proved robust. From the outset, amongst those over military age there was an awareness of the responsibilities to the young. Also evident was the strength of purpose to lead the club to better days when the normality of racing and social-life could be resumed. The first tangible action was to donate "an amount approximating to the value of the prizes which would have been offered for the two abandoned events to one of the War Relief Funds"⁹. We immediately gave ten guineas to the Liverpool Merchants' Base Hospital – and a further two similar donations were made to local war charities at the end of 1915¹⁰.

We also waived the subscriptions of "Active Members in His Majesty's Forces"; and, with a view to conserving the club's future, a new class of Junior Membership was introduced so that at the end of the war "the coming generation may be caught before they are ensnared by lazy forms of so-called sport and exercise"¹¹.

Older non-active members were engaged too. They were reminded directly of "a special charge laid upon them to do their utmost to keep the Club in working order". Active support was made a point of honour, and those whose interest had waned were encouraged back. One was Arthur Simpson, a talented musician and wordsmith. His editorship of the Circular from 1916 cemented the bond between those at home and on active service, reminding readers that when peace returned they would "find old things old, and know the things they knew". And new members were recruited – like WM Robinson "Wayfarer".

There were also practical considerations: by the end of 1915 subscriptions had become an issue. The question was: "Should the annual subscription be reduced?" The argument ran:

*A small agitation has been started with a view to its reduction [from 1 guinea] to 5/- [...] but only a superficial investigation is sufficient to show that this extreme would simply mean insolvency. Another suggestion is to cut the subscription in half, and this could possibly be manageable by the exercise of the strictest economy and cutting down the Circular to a bare sheet much to the regret of those serving their King and Country, as cumulative evidence in their letters clearly shows. Most of those now remaining as paying members are oldsters who have in normal years also generously contributed to the Prize Fund now suspended. And it must not be forgotten that it is easier to make a cut in subscription rates than to raise them again, while those of us at home are really paying for those away. Already 18 are free of subscription, and there will be still more free in 1916. Is it not much better to retain the full rates, continue a full Circular so much appreciated by those in His Majesty's Forces, and contribute out of any surplus to local War Funds?*¹²

⁸ *Who Made the Law*, Leslie Coulson, 1916 – as footnote 1

⁹ Annual General Meeting, 7 January 1915; and Annual Report 1914, p15. The abandonment of the 1914 Racing Programme meant that the prize fund had not been fully used.

¹⁰ See footnote 4 on comparative values

¹¹ This sentiment from the Annual Report caught the eye of "*Cycling*" – and was the basis of an editorial "When Peace Returns – An opportunity for Cycling Clubs" – which praised the ABC for setting an example for other Clubs to follow. (Reported in the Circular, May 1915, p2)

¹² Circular, December 1915, pp 2-3

Keeping club-runs going was another concern. Under the heading “*Feast or Famine*”, a plea was made for more consistent support:

If 34 can get out to Hunt’s Cross surely more than 9 can get to Chester! Fix up with others [...] and you will be surprised what fun you will get out of being on the open road again [...] while you will be adding greatly to the enjoyment of others and swelling the Club musters in a way absolutely essential if we are to keep the old ABC flag flying until “the boys come marching home”.

Perhaps the key event was a letter to CH Turnor, in the October 1915 Circular, from Jack Hodges, who was serving in Egypt with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Feeling a long way from home, he asked if prize money owed to him could be drawn to purchase essentials that would make life more bearable¹³. This was the prompt for sending Christmas gifts to all the members then on active service abroad. £7/15/6d was donated¹⁴ for parcels of tinned food, pipes and tobacco. Crucially, acknowledgements were expected, and each was mentioned in the Circular. There was no question that the gifts were greatly appreciated, so much so that from March 1916, on the instigation of WP Cook, it was decided to dispatch parcels at regular monthly intervals - a practice which then continued until the end of the war¹⁵.

From our own correspondents

Extracts from the letters of serving members were published from the outset. What is most striking is the immediacy of the accounts: written in dispassionate, direct language – and with humour, irony and wry observation. None ducked the realities of war – from the unspeakable horrors of the fighting in France to the boredom of life away from the front. The danger and menace were recognised by several, like Bentley (who lost his life at the end of 1916) and Robinson (who was one of our wounded). With all, commitment and duty were unquestioned.

There are descriptions of the British Expeditionary Force’s retreat from Mons at the start of the war; delivering despatches on an army bicycle under fire; driving field hospital ambulances in Flanders amongst the thick of the fighting; manning a heavy gun battery at the Somme where the bombardment lasted for weeks and the noise was “awful - one continuous roar day and night”. In this hell of wet, mud and cold, we learned that normality was living in rat invested dugouts with death all around and trenches smelling of “tear gas”; where being buried alive when shells exploded too close for comfort was considered a lucky escape.

On the high seas, Lieutenant Commander Jim Park (a veteran of the 1903 rain-blighted Anfield “24” – and WP Cook’s cousin), in command of HM Cruiser Talbot, had a lively start to hostilities: in November 1914 we learned he had been decorated by the King for “valuable services rendered in capturing a number of German vessels”¹⁶.

¹³ Jack Hodges wrote: “*I hope I will not be giving you too much trouble in what I am about to ask you. I have a few shillings left over from last year’s prizes with the club. Could you draw it for me, and, if the amount is equal to the strain, send me a tin bottle of some distillation which would be comforting to a stomach weakened by diarrhoea? Your West Coast experience will doubtless put you au fait with the correct spirit (verb sap). If there is anything left you might fill up with Horlicks Malted Milk.*”

¹⁴ In response to a letter dated 28th October 1915, from President David R Fell.

¹⁵ Content varied - chocolate and tinned herrings were popular, as were practical items like trench candles, matches, pencils (donated by the Pickwick Bicycle Club) and writing materials.

¹⁶ Circular, November 1914, p2

There were lighter moments too. In Ireland, George Stephenson found himself in charge of 500 army bicycles, before taking on the role of station-master at Leixlip near Dublin (“a splendid life”)¹⁷. In 1917 Clifford Dews (WP Cook’s nephew) was flying with the Royal Naval Air Service at Vendome (“a quaint old place” where fruit was cheap – “fresh peaches at 8d per dozen and Williams pears ½d each”) and Boulogne (“Hun planes dropped pills all around – a little too close to be pleasant”)¹⁸. Later with the RAF in Greece he and his squadron were entertained at Christmas by “the rich man of Vharos”, and attended a christening party at which the “oozoo” flowed free¹⁹.

Away from the action in France, those serving in Greece (Clifford Dews apart), Mesopotamia, Palestine and Egypt found life monotonous and often unpleasant “the mosquitoes are the limit, and cockroaches of enormous size are very plentiful”²⁰. All longed for home. Some found bicycles: though a 25 miles ride on a windy day in Ishmailia proved tough for Mahon²¹. Further afield in India Harold Band learned about horsemanship and discovered the monsoon “where even Cook would have to admit to rain”.

By the end of the war, in total, forty-one members had enlisted - a third of the membership. Four gave their lives: 2nd Lieutenant David Rowatt and Private Edmund Rowatt were killed at the Somme, David (age 26) on 1 July 1916 and Edmund (age 19) on 30 July 1916. Edmund’s body was not recovered. Corporal Edward Andrew Bentley was mortally wounded in October 1916. He died in hospital at Boulogne on 18 November 1916 aged 31, and is buried at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery. Air Mechanic George Poole died on 4 January 1919 (age 31) at Chester where he had been receiving treatment for severe frostbite suffered while on service in France.

For DC Rowatt, who joined us from the Bootle Bicycle Club in 1890, the war brought disproportionate tragedy. In addition to the two sons killed, another was severely wounded, and one more died in the 1918 flu pandemic at the age of seventeen.

Like pieces of a jigsaw put together month by month from September 1914 a broad and richly detailed picture of the war unfolds in the words of those directly involved. Tracing individual stories fragment by fragment has revealed tragedy and heroism as well as compassion and understanding. In future issues we hope to share more of this part of the Club’s heritage which the Circular has hidden for so long.

The Home Front

As a counterpoint to the reports of the fighting, those on the home-front chronicled life under the Defence of the Realm Act (nicknamed “Dora”). “Dora” was hated as a virago who restricted pub opening hours (which interfered with club-runs), watered down beer, and banned “treating” (buying rounds of drinks). While nothing could be done about the quality of the beer, the Circular detailed some of the ingenious ways we invented to get a pint and food out of hours. The mandatory use of rear lights was another annoyance which led to cat and mouse games with the police, and much derision (“even Dora is powerless against what one can think” was one heartfelt comment). And when the government cancelled Bank Holidays we did our best to carry on as normal. Also noted, often with

¹⁷ Circulars, June 1918, p3; and September 1918, p4

¹⁸ Circular, October 1917, p3

¹⁹ Circular, March 1919, Vol. XIV, No.157, p5

²⁰ Circular, December 1916 – p3 Kinghorn writing

²¹ Circular, May 1917, p4

regret, were the changes taking place in the countryside: “Prees Heath with its military huts for 20,000 soldiers seemed very weird in the moonlight”.

There were grumbles about get-rich-quick caterers who took advantage of the war by charging “ridiculous” prices for tea. The Shrewsbury Arms at Hinderton was one hostelry that came in for censure. Finding good landlords became a pre-occupation. It was very much hit-and-miss, so a place like the Farmers’ Arms in Moreton (Wirral) was worth celebrating:

*The night was black at Moreton. [...] But inside the Farmers’ Arms was light, and with it joy, gladness, mirth, pleasure and delight. The Bilale smile, the Madge smile, the Annie smile, the serviettes, the steak and kidney, the leg of mutton, the fat chickens; the roast, the boiled and mashed potatoes, the sprouts, the cabbage, the carrots and turnip, the cauliflowers; the gravies, the white sauce, the onion sauce, the mint sauce; the apple pies, the custards, the raspberry tarts, the lemon cheese cakes; the Cheshire cheese and crackers [...]*²²

By the end of 1916 food restrictions meant that many places had given up catering. The Boxing Day run was rearranged to Daresbury as the Lord Eldon was unable to look after us. Then we had our first experience of a club tea under “Lord Havenopotatoes”: “beef and boiled mutton weighed out at 2.9oz and bread was confined to one round”. Increased prices, no beer at the Bull & Stirrup, and vegetables cooked to eke out egg rations followed. We tried no-meat teas, bringing our own loaves, and using ration books to buy food.

When beer was available, its quality was poor. One writer lamented that “Government beer has done for England what St Patrick did for Ireland – it has banished snakes”. Dodging “itinerant specials and prowling policemen” for a pint, even if awful, was a risky business that led to one member’s appearance in Court as a witness in a case about contravening regulations.

News of the Armistice was delivered during a club-run at the De Trafford Arms, Alderley Edge on 9 November 1918:

*Over tea, the prevailing topic of conversation was the probability or otherwise of the signature of the Armistice coming through that evening. Host Mead came in to convey a telephone message that Bill [the Kaiser] had decided to turn it up, so far as he was concerned, which news was later confirmed in cold print. The ABC don’t require anything to put them in good humour, but this intelligence certainly contributed to the harmony of the gathering held in the little snug we prefer [...]*²³

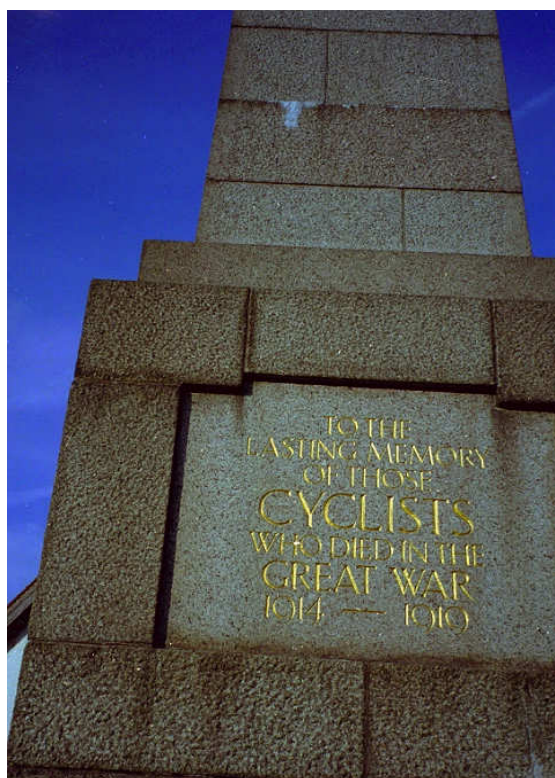
At last we could look forward “to the time in the near future when the sporting activities of the Club will spring into life again with freshness and vigour”²⁴. That was the hope, but unfortunately it was not so simple. Some returning who found “old things old”, decided that they wanted new: Sunday racing became an issue. Others sought better lives in far off countries. Nevertheless, against this restless background, now led by WP Cook, the Club prospered: membership rose to over 200, and in 1922 we ran the World 100 Miles Amateur Championship Road Race in Shropshire. In his own right, as a national figure, Cook campaigned in parliament for cyclists’ rights and he continued to play a leading role in fund raising activities which culminated in the Cyclists’ War Memorial at Meriden, unveiled in 1921.

²² Circular, March 1916, p6

²³ Circular, December 1918, Vol. XIII, No.154, p12

²⁴ Circular, December 1918, Vol. XIII, No. 154, Editorial, p2

But what truly marked the end of the war for the ABC was the death of Dora, also in 1921, “who passed away quietly on August 31st, unwept, unhonoured, and unsung after a lingering illness”²⁵.



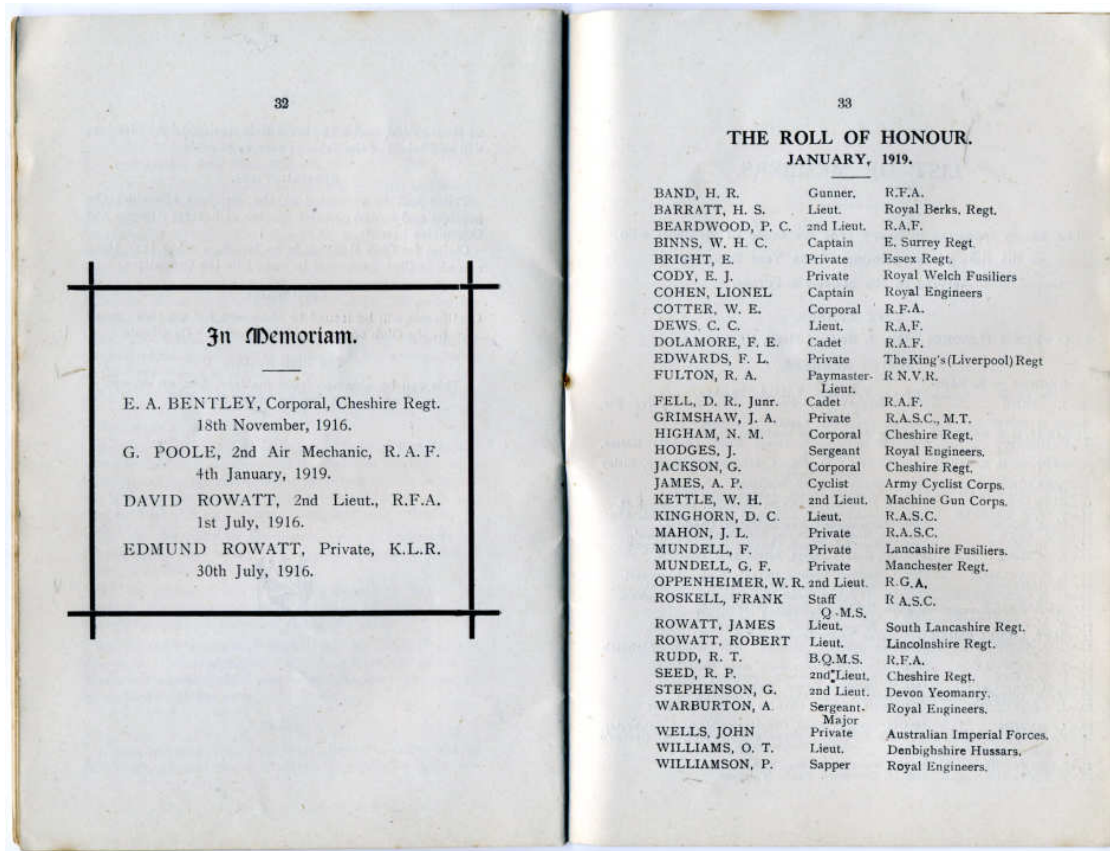
During the war WP Cook (left) worked tirelessly for members serving abroad; and as President of the Fellowship of Old Time Cyclists he was also a leading light in fund-raising for the NCU Prisoners of War Fund, and for the Cyclists' War Memorial which was unveiled at Meriden, Coventry in 1921 (right).



This photo shows Anfielders WT Venables, DC Rowatt, WR Toft, and WM Robinson on the weekend of “The Old Timers’ Rally”, Warburton, Lymm (18 August 1918). They are wearing ribbon lapel badges signifying that as members of the Fellowship of Old Time Cyclists they had donated to the NCU Prisoners of War Fund.



Halewood, near Liverpool, was the setting for the annual photograph on 1 June 1918. Amongst the forty-five members attending were two in uniform - Lt A Cheminais (row three from front, second left), and JA Grimshaw (centre, second row). Grimshaw, in "hospital blues", was recovering from trench fever.



Roll of Honour, January 1919

In addition to those on the Roll of Honour were another three who by then had returned to civilian life: Commander Jim Park RN ("released by the Admiralty to take up an important Mercantile Maritime appointment"); Rifleman WM Robinson ("discharged after wounds"); and Hubert Roskell who was awarded the Croix de Guerre as a Red Cross Field Ambulance Driver (Annual Report for 1918). And one further name, Lt Col GP Mills DSO, should also be added to the Roll of Honour (see - www.bedfordregiment.org.uk/7thbn/7thbn1916diary.html)