

The Anfield Bicycle Club and World War One The National Cyclists' War Memorial, Meriden

by David Birchall



Long before the unveiling, Meriden Green was thronged with cyclists. In the background the Memorial is seen.

'It is the Anfield that has assured the Memorial on Meriden Green, and to us it will represent our four members who made the Supreme Sacrifice.'

W P Cook, Anfield Circular, August 1920

Pilgrimage to Meriden

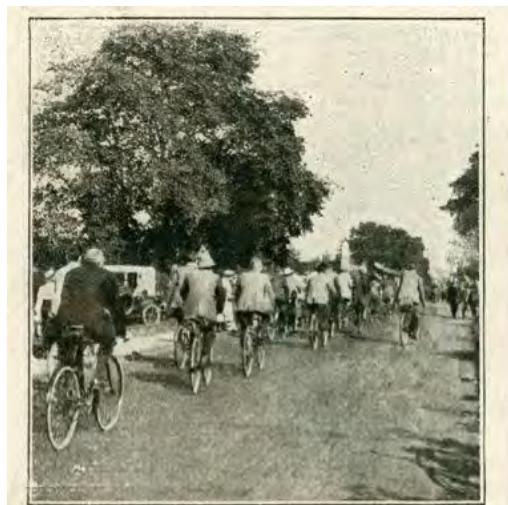
Two years after the end of the Great War, on a perfect summer's day, many thousands of cyclists, '*the greatest assembly of cyclists the world has ever seen*', were riding in small parties and club groups through the heart of rural England from all parts of Britain. Their destination was the '*old-world village*' of Meriden near Coventry and the occasion was very special: the unveiling and dedication of the national memorial to all cyclists who had given their lives in the war.

The roads to Meriden were '*thronged with quiet processions of men and women making pilgrimage, many with the dust of distant places still upon them*'. The **CTC Gazette** estimated the crowd to be '*at least 10,000*', reporting:

Meriden, on the perfect summer evening of May 21st 1921, was the scene of an event unparalleled in the history of cycling. Never has there been such a concourse of cyclists from all parts of the kingdom assembled in the common cause of recognition of the heroism of their comrades fallen in war. Never again can such an occasion recur, and every individual of the many thousands who filled every square yard of the Green must have felt that the day was one to remember as long as they live. There was nothing to mar the simple perfection of the whole proceedings.¹

Cycling reckoned there were 20,000 on the Green:

They seemed to come from everywhere in England, as their badges testified. The Anfielders made a straight journey from Liverpool, a party of 38 strong, and among the London clubs who rode through in the day were the North Road, Bath Road, Century, and Kingsdale, while the CTC had strong



The roads leading into Meriden bore a constant procession of cyclists.

¹ CTC Gazette, June 1921 p115

and Kingsdale, while the CTC had strong contingents from London, Liverpool, Southampton, Leicester, and Lancashire. These are only a few of the clubs that were present; they are merely those with whom we discussed their journeys.²

Whether 10,000 or 20,000, so large was the crowd, which had been gathering from early afternoon, that there was not enough space for all the cycles. Many were looked after by ‘*the people of Meriden ... and to the credit of villagers let it be said that we heard of no single case of extortionate charges being made for storage*’.

Unveiling and dedication

The centre of attention was the memorial, ‘*beautiful in its simplicity*’, partially shrouded in a Union Jack, awaiting the unveiling and dedication service.

Shortly after 6 p.m. a bugle called the assembled crowd to silence. Then Mr W G Howard Gritten ‘*the cyclists’ MP*’ delivered the introductory address, and Lord Birkenhead (the Lord Chancellor and president of the fund) spoke in remembrance of the fallen and released the Union Jack to reveal the memorial. To close the ceremony, ‘*as the great flag fluttered down, buglers sounded the ‘Last Post’, and the dedication [by the Rev B G Bourchier] followed*’.

The ceremony, as simple and dignified as the memorial, was widely reported with detailed accounts in **Cycling**, the **CTC Gazette**, and local newspapers. It had also been filmed by Pathe News.



Mr. W. G. Howard Gritten, the cyclists' M.P., makes the introductory address. On his right is Lord Birkenhead, and on his left the Rev. B. G. Bourchier.

Design, siting, and funding

A ‘National Cyclists’ War Memorial’ committee had been set up in November 1919 after a public meeting³. Ignoring calls for a plebiscite of ‘subscribers’, the type of memorial and its placing were quickly settled. It would be a granite obelisk, 30 feet tall on a base and plinth 7'6” square, ‘*simple in design and commanding in its proportions*'; and it would be placed ‘*in the heart of England and, appropriately enough, in the district that forms the centre of the cycle industry*’.⁴

There would be no cycling symbolism: no ‘geometric designs’, no ‘winged wheels’, no ‘figure[s] in cycling uniform’, and no ‘carved cranks, [or] other component parts of machines’. The committee took the view that such things were ‘*quaint rather than dignified*’. Instead the memorial would rely entirely on words deeply incised on the base to indicate its purpose:

‘*To the Lasting Memory of those Cyclists who died in the Great War 1914-1919*’.

It would be built from enduring Cornish grey granite, so hard it would resist damage, guard against defacement, and minimise upkeep costs long into the future.

As to location, a position on Meriden Green with a backdrop of ‘*fine elms*’ was agreed, that would ‘*not in any way interfere with the existing ruined cross*’, which according to tradition marked the centre of England.

² *Cycling*, May 26 1921, p396

³ *Cycling*, May 26 1921 listed the Committee as follows:

Patron of the Fund - the Duke of Portland (President of the CTC)
President of the Fund - the Right Hon Lord Birkenhead (Lord Chancellor of Great Britain)
Vice-Chairman - Mr F T Bidlake (North Road CC)
Hon Treasurer - Mr S M Vanheems (Bath Road Club)
Hon Secretary - Mr P C Beardwood (Anfield Bicycle Club)
Fund Raisers - Messrs W P Cook (Anfield Bicycle Club) and A J Urry (MC&AC)
Committee Members - Messrs H Surtees Lugg (North Road CC), C K Mills (North London CC), S E George (Etna CC), G H Smith (Anerley CC), G H Stancer (CTC), and H Farmer (Kingsdale CC).

⁴ *Cycling*, November 4, 1920

Approval was adroitly secured from the Lord of the Manor (the Earl of Aylesford), the Rural District Council, and the Parish Council.

Not surprisingly a major concern was money. The challenge was to raise £1000⁵. At a time when a pint of beer cost 5d that equates to about £150,000 now⁶. The key to success was recruiting the Anfield Bicycle Club's W P Cook as chief fundraiser. He was a formidable personality - uncompromising yet blessed with compassion and humour. During the war, which he had regarded with dismay, Cook had worked tirelessly both for ABC serving members and also for the Cyclists' Prisoners of War fund. He was not a man to cross, and had no time for those who questioned the national scheme: "*cash rather than criticism is required*"⁷. Cook together with the other fund-raisers, S M Vanheems (Bath Road Club) and A J Urry (MC & AC), were so accomplished that at the dedication ceremony they were singled out for praise.

The project's successful completion was a fitting tribute to the single-minded determination of the committee which had had to contend with a lot of well intentioned but nebulous ideas which could easily have threatened progress. However, from start to finish, the project had run flawlessly.

The background - national or local, practical or sentimental?

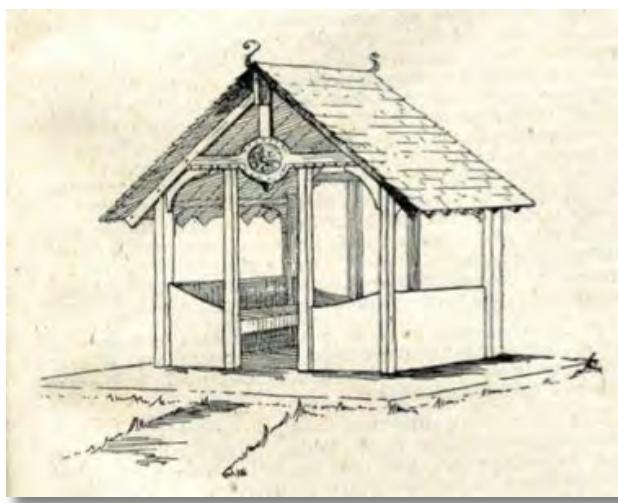
When war was declared on 4 August 1914 the impact on cycling and cycle clubs was immediate. Typical was the Anfield Bicycle Club, several of whose members were later prominent in the National War Memorial scheme. Support for club-runs fell away and racing was suspended as the young joined the colours, and as others, too old for active service, volunteered for civic defence duties. The unique story of how the Anfield BC kept going through the war is not for here, but many clubs did not survive. Some were so decimated that they disbanded, while others including the CTC were weakened financially and emerged with fewer members.

In the armed forces, cyclists, whether racing-men, club riders or tourists, were dispersed widely. Although some were directly called on to use their cycling skills for example as despatch riders, especially early in the war, and some served in the cyclists' battalions, most could be found in all arenas and on all fronts.

In the years immediately after the war, thousands of memorials to those killed in the fighting were being erected throughout the British Isles, but none were dedicated solely to cyclists.

The earliest idea for a cyclists' memorial was proposed by the CTC in June 1919 - a 'thanksgiving' fund providing practical help for the living '*to be used for the immediate necessities of the club*'⁸. But the idea was not taken up.

Then, in September 1919, the CTC Metropolitan District Association suggested a lych-gate, to be built of stone

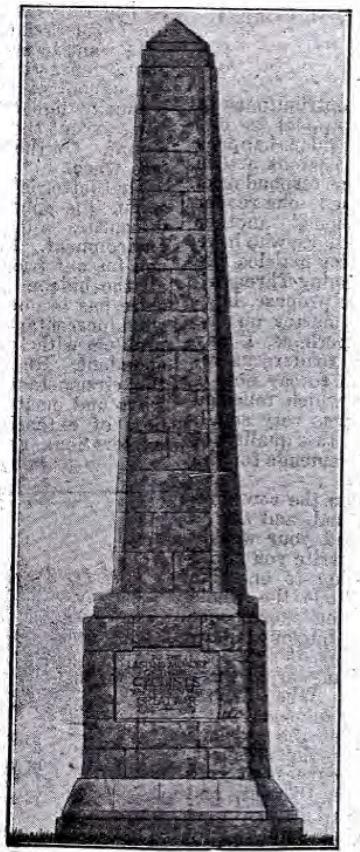


⁵ *Cycling*, December 18, 1919

⁶ Assuming a pint costs about £3 now. The average price of a pint of beer in 1919 was 5d - so £1 (240d) would have bought about 50 pints.

⁷ *CTC Gazette*, May 1920, p84

⁸ *CTC Gazette*, June 1919, p61 - letter 'A Thanksgiving Fund for the present emergency' from Alex Gregory



How the Cyclists' War Memorial will appear when complete.

and oak, at Newland's Corner, near Guildford⁹. The cost was estimated at £150 - £200. But this idea was not welcomed by cyclists universally. There were some who thought that the memorial should commemorate all cyclists who had lost their lives in the war, not just CTC members¹⁰; and there were calls for practical help - like the endowment of '*beds in hospitals, sanatoria, or similar institutions*' for the benefit of members¹¹.

Against this unsettled background the project could easily have gone wrong. Well aware of the undercurrents, it was at this point that senior CTC personalities ('big beasts' of the pioneering days of cycling) F T Bidlake and G H Stancer (in his role as Editor of *Cycling*) threw their weight behind a national scheme. Immediately the idea attracted powerful national support. Not only did the Lord Chancellor agree to be President of the fund, but the Prince of Wales also helped by donating a bicycle (his Rudge-Whitworth)¹². It was sold (for £100) to the highest bidder, the Rev Bourchier (who subsequently consecrated the memorial)¹³.

In a very short space of time the Meriden memorial had eclipsed the Newland's Corner lych-gate. Adding insult to injury Bidlake distanced the CTC from what he now claimed to be no more than a local scheme by the MDA. He encouraged the MDA organisers (who were led by Miss Mabel Hodgson, MDA Hon Secretary) to merge with the national fund, but they refused, and continued to go their own way¹⁴. In the end the MDA raised less than £100, well short of their target, though sufficient for a more modest shelter in the form of a 'covered seat'¹⁵, but even this was not built. Eventually in 1924, the fund was used to provide electric motors for the Lord Roberts Memorial Workshops, and, thereby, employment for disabled soldiers and sailors¹⁶.

In contrast, progress on the national scheme had been rapid: from conception to dedication the whole process had taken only eighteen months.

After the ceremony

With the ceremony and dedication over, the cyclists gradually dispersed. But there was still one more act of remembrance for many. The lower portions of the obelisk were very quickly covered with wreaths. Among them from the Anfield Bicycle Club was one of laurel and carnations, gently placed, with a card which read, simply:

*In memory of
Edward Bentley, George Poole,
David Rowatt, Edmund Rowatt
and Our Fellow Cyclists who died in the Great War
From the
Anfield Bicycle Club*



After the ceremony: Clubmen are placing wreaths on the shrine.

⁹ CTC Gazette, September 1919, p98 - The memorial was suggested by Mr A H Carpenter, C.T.C. Chief Consul for Gloucestershire.

¹⁰ CTC Gazette, December 1919, p140 - letter 'Memorial to the Fallen' from J. T. Masser

¹¹ CTC Gazette, April 1920, p70 - letter from George Milne

¹² CTC Gazette, April 1920, p1

¹³ The Western Times, 23 April 1920 (also reported by F T Bidlake - CTC Gazette, May 1920, p84)

¹⁴ Miss Hodgson, a leading light in the MDA (and womens' cycling rights campaigner), died tragically in September 1921 in a cycling accident (obituary: *Cycling*, 15 September 1921).

¹⁵ CTC Gazette, May 1921, p92 - £95 15s 2d had been raised.

¹⁶ CTC Gazette, April 1924, p94 - '... five motors have been purchased and presented to the Workshops ... as a memorial to those cyclists of London who fell in the Great War'.

The Club recorded the weekend in the pages of its newsletter, *The Anfield Monthly Circular*¹⁷. The main party made an all-night ride of it, cycling from Liverpool under a full moon and stars. They breakfasted in Stafford before riding to Crackley, near Kenilworth, the home of fellow member 'Jack' Siddeley, a strong racing cyclist in the pioneering days of the 1890s, whose career had led him into the automobile and aircraft industries. Riding home the party divided into small groups, although some first returned to Kenilworth where they '*were right royally entertained*' as guests of the Siddeleys for the night.

One Anfielder, (W M Robinson - the cycling journalist 'Wayfarer'), commented '*that the dedication of the memorial was the last great scene of the war from the cyclist's point of view*'. But it also marked the start of a tradition that continues to this day - with the Cyclists' Annual Service of Remembrance at Meriden.

Following the dedication of the memorial, its care and the balance of the fund (£118-1-6d) were transferred to a permanent committee of conservators - Messrs Gritten, Bidlake, Vanheems, Cook, and Urry, whose successors continue their work today¹⁸.



Since the memorial was unveiled, Meriden is no longer the 'old-world' village it was in 1921, with suburban housing and shops now fringing the Green. The memorial itself has evolved too with further inscriptions added - one commemorating cyclists killed in World War 2, and another in 2013 '*in memory of all cyclists who fought and died for their Country*', dedicated at the CTC's annual remembrance service in May 2014. Completely unchanged however is the memorial's design purity and simplicity.

There is also one exceptional quality which should be recognised. In the United Kingdom, there are many memorials to local sports clubs and associations. In addition, at Murrayfield, Edinburgh, there is a stone arch to Scottish Rugby Men who fought and died in the First and Second World Wars. There are also plaques, one at Twickenham commemorating Rugby Football Players, and another in Preston, at the national football museum, to Football Association Players¹⁹. But the Cyclists' Memorial at Meriden appears to be the only truly national monument commemorating all United Kingdom participants in an individual sport or pastime who fell in the Great War.

¹⁷ Anfield Monthly Circular, June 1921, pp 7-10

¹⁸ Anfield Monthly Circular, July 1921, p7

¹⁹ Information provided by War Memorials Archive, Imperial War Museum, March 2014

Address by Mr W G Howard Gritten MP (as reported in the CTC Gazette, June 1921)

My Lords, my Ladies, ladies and gentlemen, fellow-cyclists - We are met together to perform a solemn function. We are assembled to take part in this impressive ceremony, and to pay a last tribute to our dead comrades by the unveiling and the dedication to them of this permanent memorial. This occasion is, indeed, unique in the history of cycling. Nothing like it has happened before; and we pray that there will never again be such a great war as to make its recurrence necessary (hear, hear).

I am sure you will all agree that the conception of having this obelisk erected is a very beautiful one (applause). It is in every way an appropriate memento to our fellow-wheelmen who have passed to that bourne from which no traveller returns.

Let me point out that our idea of commemorating the unknown preceded the Westminster Abbey idea of the 'Unknown Warrior'.

Who then originated the conception? And how was it carried out? As to the origination, if the fact is not generally known to all of you, I may say that it first occurred in the early summer of 1919, to our well-known and deservedly popular friend, Mr F T Bidlake, that hardy veteran of the wheel, some of whose records still stand unbeaten and unsurpassed. The idea gradually grew, found favour, and developed - at that stage largely due to another great friend of ours, the then Editor of Cycling, Mr G Herbert Stancer. In this connection I desire to state that both under his editorship and under the present editorship of Mr Evans, that excellent journal has consistently given us the greatest assistance. Eventually, at Mr Bidlake's request, Mr Stancer called a meeting at Anderton's Hotel, Fleet Street, at which the chair was taken by your humble servant and Parliamentary representative. A committee was there and then elected, and I had the honour of being chosen as its Chairman (applause).

We set out to obtain an eminent and suitable list of patrons, and to raise the sum of £1,000. The list of patrons speaks for itself, headed as it is by the Lord Chancellor, to whom we owe much thanks for his presence here this afternoon (hear, hear). The obtaining of subscriptions was at first a slow process, as is usual in such cases, but the required sum was eventually raised, and, for the notable help they gave in this task, I must specially mention our Treasurer, Mr Vanheems, Mr W P Cook, president of the Anfield Bicycle Club, and Mr A J Urry, of the Midland Athletic and Cycling Club. The Fellowship of Old Time Cyclists, and practically every cycling club of any importance in the country rendered personal assistance and monetary support. Our thanks are also due to the Earl of Aylesford, whom we are glad to see on the platform (applause) for his kind permission, as Lord of the Manor, to use the Green, and to the District and Parish Councils of Meriden.

The committee met regularly and very frequently. It had a difficult work to carry out, and the members have shown such zeal and industry that it would be invidious to single out any particular individuals and thus imply comparisons. Suffice it to say they have performed the duty entrusted to them, and that they have achieved their object. There it is! (loud applause).

Ladies and gentlemen, I must remind you that this is a memorial purely and simply to cyclists proper - the users of machines which they themselves propelled, and not to motor-cyclists. In a word, it commemorates those pedal-cyclists - racing-men, clubmen, and tourists alike - who left the tracks and roads of the homeland to die on the foreign fields of battle. By their valour they helped to protect those at home, to confirm the security of these islands, to enlarge the Empire and enhance its unity (cheers). For these noble ends they nobly sacrificed themselves. Some perished in the summer of their years, but most of them, I am afraid, were cut off in the springtime of their manhood. There races here are finished, there earthly journeys concluded. They have passed from hence on that great wheel of change, whose cycle, we trust, will finally end in everlasting rest. On their country they have conferred a glorious joint offering. They have, also, eternally contributed to the fame of the cycling fraternity (loud applause).

Ladies and gentlemen, it was well said by the Athenian historian, that 'of brave men not merely the grave, in which they lie, but their whole country is the sepulchre'. For, not only do inscriptions on national and local columns record their valour and renown, but, beside the material monuments, there remains for ever among their fellow-countrymen the unwritten tribute of the heart (applause).

My Lord, you see before you a vast concourse of cyclists. Many of them have journeyed from the furthest parts of this kingdom. Some have ridden all night. All have come to pay their last token of respect and admiration to their fallen comrades of the wheel.

I have now the honour, my Lord, to request you to unveil the Cyclists' War Memorial (loud cheers).

In Memoriam



(above) Ted Bentley (with inner-tube) helps on tour in Ireland 1912; and (right) 'In Memoriam EAB', published in the ABC Circular, January 1917 to the memory of Ted Bentley.

IN MEMORIAM.

E.A.B.

Far from the Cheshire roads he loved
Our fallen comrade lies;
The sun, the sky, the pleasant fields,
Shut from his darkened eyes.

At duty's call he left his home,
His wonted joys forsook,
To help his country's noble cause,
His life in hand he took.

No more we'll read his witty notes,
Laugh at his pleasant jests;
His voice is now forever stilled,
His pen forever rests.

No more he'll tread the spinning wheel,
Life in each humming spoke;
His frame, discarded, rusting lies,
The chain of life is broke.

But though he's lost the race with
Death,
(A race that none has won)
Sure the Almighty Judge will find
His shortened course well run.

When the Cyclists' War Memorial was unveiled at Meriden the Circular reported that members laid a wreath of laurel and carnations in memory of the four members who died in war:

David Rowatt, Second Lieutenant, Royal Field Artillery, killed 1st July 1916., age 26. He is buried at Peronne Road Cemetery, Maricourt.

Edmund Rowatt, a Private in the King's Liverpool Regiment, killed 30th July 1916, age 19. His body was not recovered. His name is on the Thiepval Memorial.

Edward Bentley, Corporal, Cheshire Regiment. He died 18 November 1916, age 31, from wounds sustained a month earlier. He is buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery. After his death, the Circular published a poem 'In Memoriam E A B'.

Air Mechanic George Poole, died 4th January 1919, age 31, at Chester, where he had been receiving treatment for frostbite suffered during the winter of 1917-1918.

In November 2014, as in 1921, the Anfield Bicycle Club commemorated the sacrifice each made. On each of their graves we placed a simple spray of laurel and carnations and a card to their memory.



Second Lieutenant David Rowatt, Private Edmund Rowatt, Corporal E A Bentley, Air Mechanic George Poole