

Cycle Speedway Article Introduction

When the war was over

In 1945, after the end of WWII, my father was demobilised from the army. He had served in Africa and Greece where for a short space of time, before he escaped, he had been a prisoner of war. He had a wife and two small boys aged 7 and 5 years who he hadn't seen for over four years. I was the 7 year old boy and had just returned from my evacuation to Pwll y Glaw, a small mining village in South Wales. My mother and small brother had been living with my WWI war widowed maternal grand-mother in Enfield Lock. Both Mum and Nan worked at Enfield Small Arms factory making munitions a fact that made the factory a high profile target for the Germans. As our reunited family were homeless and had a strong Islington connection, my father was allocated a two bedroom prefab in north Islington. This was supposed to be a temporary housing situation pending future permanent housing.

Bomb dumps & bombed out houses

My playgrounds were the nearby bomb sites and bombed out houses. Sometimes we walked to nearby Finsbury Park where we played in the concrete Barrage balloon and gun emplacements. However, as post war reconstruction got under way, by 1950 most of the bombed out houses had been demolished and the sites cleared and flattened preparatory to future rebuilding.

I was now nearly 11 years old and we found new amusements. Like most of the local boys, I desperately wanted a cycle but my parents couldn't afford to buy me one. (My father had just completed a 2 year Teacher Training Course and was a newly qualified teacher at his first school) My mother supplemented the very small family income by working as a early morning railway station cleaner and doing 'homework' for *Britains* toy company) So, like most of the lads I forever was trying to build my own cycles from parts that I found, salvaged or swapped.

Cycle speedway

It was about this time that I discovered cycle speedway which took place on the larger cleared and flattened bomb sites. It was an activity that we could all take part in and we helped the older boys lay out the track. When we rode on the home made track we would pretend to be our *Haringey Racers* motor cycle speedway heroes. We used to sing:

*'Roll along Haringey Racers roll along,
To the top of the League, where you belong,
Split Waterman may be fine, but we're leaving him behind'
Roll along Haringey Racers roll along'*

(Note: 'Split' Waterman was a famous Speedway rider with Wembley Lions Speedway Team)

I had almost completely forgotten about any of this until I saw Nicky Brown's post (23/06/2012 on this site. Her post said: *'I saw a photo of the Wolves speedway club which caught my eye. So, I wondered if you would like this photo (below) – It is a scan of a newspaper cutting – the John Brown winning the cup is my dad'*

Initially, I misread what Nicky had actually written. Looking casually at the picture I had assumed that the article was about the Walthamstow Wolves Speedway team. Out of interest I expanded the article so that I could read the newspaper cutting and read the article. To my surprise a rereading showed that this actually was a page of articles about Cycle Speedway racing in 1950. The specific article was about John Brown (Nicky's dad) who was Skipper of the Whipps Cross Comets winning the East London knockout trophy.

The articles took me straight back to my childhood and intrigued by the information in the articles, I did a little research. The result is this article that tells the extraordinary cycle speedway story in Walthamstow in the 1950's.

Cycle Speedway

The Beginning

When I started to research the subject, in my ignorance, I had assumed that Cycle Speedway had died out in the 1960's, to my great astonishment, I quickly learned that it is very much alive and well. Indeed, last year there was a British television story about the last Cycle Speedway team left in London. This is the *East London Cycle Speedway Club* that is based at the Canning Town Recreation Ground in Prince Regents Lane, E16.

The origins of cycle speedway are obscure. It existed by the 1920s and appears to have taken off in the wreckage of post-war cities in Britain. Tracks were cleared through the bomb site rubble. Using bikes that were not otherwise roadworthy, and under the influence of motorcycle speedway, cycle speedway grew haphazardly as a way for young people to enjoy themselves in cities.

Growth, Development & Organisation

London, with most bomb sites, led in organising races, in 1945. There were more than 200 clubs in East London by 1950, with more than 20 in Walthamstow alone. The sport spread across the country. The Birmingham league had 22 teams in its first season. Coventry, Leicester, Wolverhampton and Cradley Heath followed.

Intercity matches began in 1946 but they were hampered by inconsistent rules, This problem was resolved with the formation in 1950 of the National Amateur Cycle Speedway Association (**NACSA**).



Picture right and above: A typical 1950's cycle speedway race with Stepney's Arbour Atoms v Portway Panthers at Arbour Square, Stepney

Consistent rules opened the way to national competitions and championships and then to international tournaments.

Ten thousand people watched the first international between England and the Netherlands at the Empress Hall, Earls Court, London on 26 October 1950. After that the sport declined as bomb sites

were cleared and potential riders were drafted into the armed forces for National Service. Cycle speedway once more became a local enthusiasm and many clubs closed.

Enthusiasts tried to revive the sport in 1958 and organised a tournament billed as a world championship, with riders from Holland, Sweden and Poland. The sport then became divided by an administrative civil war, a situation resolved with the formation in 1971 of the British Cycle Speedway Council.

Countries affiliated to the International Cycle Speedway Federation include England, Scotland, Wales, Poland, Australia, the Netherlands and the United States. Cycle speedway also exists in Sweden, Ukraine and Russia. Riders from other countries including Austria, Germany and Malta have tried cycle speedway, and Ireland is regularly represented at full international level.

The Sport

According to the **British Cycling** website: http://www.britishcycling.org.uk/cyclespeedway/article/cys_About-Cycle-Speedway 'Cycle Speedway is 4 laps of intense anaerobic sprint and must be a contender for the title of the most intense cycle sport. Races are short – usually four laps of an outdoor 70-90 metre oval circuit lasting 35-40 seconds. Physical contact is legal and often necessary. Four riders contest a race, usually in pairs from opposing clubs.

Team speedway is essentially a Club sport, with inter- club matches within Leagues. Each match normally consists of between sixteen and twenty races. There are also individual championships, including a World Championship and some inter County series. These include regular 'Ashes' contests between England and Australia

Top riders are explosive sprinters but they must also possess stamina to keep them going through a long match. The skill level is high with slick cornering, starting and passing techniques. Strength is also required to deal with contact between riders.



Cycle speedway bikes are as simple as BMX or track bikes. There are no gears, brakes or quick release fittings. The frames are often converted from mountain-bikes. A helmet is essential and most riders cover themselves from the neck downwards to protect against falls and wear knee, elbow and hip pads'

Picture left: the opening of the Whipps Cross Comets track at Eton Manor in May 1950

Races are sometimes held in sports halls and other venues. The events are the same but the solid and smooth surface makes speeds higher. A sectional track is taken around sports centres in Britain for national events. Centre sections are added or removed to fit locations.

East London Leads The Way

According to an article in the Sports Reporter in May 1950, east London was leading the way in the development of the sport. There were cycle speedway teams in Hackney, Leyton, Barking, Stratford, East Ham, West Ham, Barking, Chingford, Tottenham, Edmonton, Wanstead, Woodford, Plaistow and Dalston. The paper reported that several teams were in the process of developing new tracks to

be modelled on speedway tracks. These included the *Whipps Cross Comets* who had acquired land in Eton Manor at

Hackney and had created a track with a electric magnet starting gate, fully equipped pits, an amplified loudspeaker system, track speed timing and track staff.

At the Chingford Town Football Club ground a new cycle track was being constructed with a dedicated shale surface, electric starting gate and lighting, a spectators cycle park and concrete terracing. This was scheduled to become operative in June 1950.

Walthamstow Cycle Speedway Teams 1950-1960

In the same article, the writer reports that 'Cycle Speedway is experiencing its biggest boom in East London districts where over 200 teams have sprung up in the last two years'. It goes on to list the east London areas where there are teams and goes on to say '*Walthamstow has more than 20 sides and Chingford, a high class residential area, had more than a dozen. Every week sees the formation of more and more teams*'

Some of the Walthamstow teams were: *The Walthamstow Cardinals, Diamonds, Giants, Hawks, Lions, Monarchs, Phantoms, Wizards and Wolves*. The best known of these, because of their association with the speedway team of the same name were: the *Walthamstow Wolves*.

The Walthamstow Wolves

The club's first track was on a cleared bomb site near St James Street station and later the track was in Low Hall Lane by the railway embankment. The club had three teams and in 1949 raced in division 2 of the East London League and 1950 they won promotion to the 1st Division. In 1955/6 they raced in the Hertfordshire League. The Club Secretary was R K Massey of Copeland Road who later became the Club Manager. From 1955 until 1958 the Club Manager and Team Captain was Terry Greenaway.



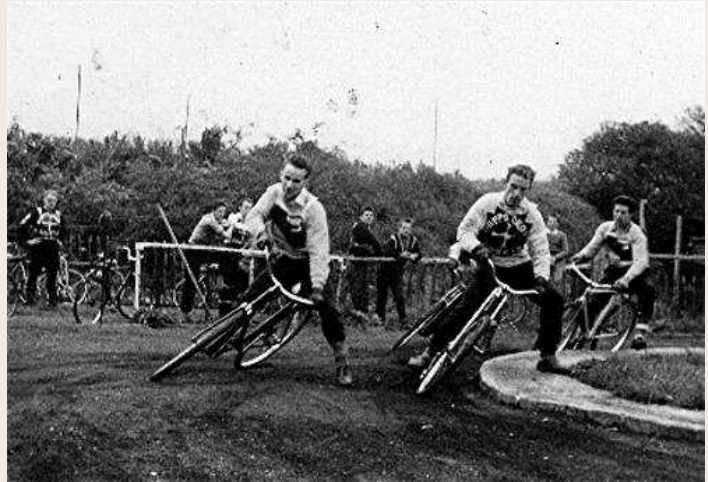
Demonstrating the close association with the Walthamstow Wolves Speedway Team, the Club President was the well known speedway rider, Dick Geary.

Picture left: July 1958 Walthamstow Wolves with the National Team Trophy. Photographed after the final against Tolworth Tudors at Hungerford . Left to right, Ronnie Gibbons, Terry Greenaway, Malcolm Bell, up aloft holding the Trophy

The Club was very successful and in 1955, Terry Greenaway won the Herts Individual Championship and

was 3rd in the National Individual final. In 1958, Pete Fraser won the Hertfordshire Grand Prix. The team were runners-up in 1956 in the Herts League, South Essex Senior Team Champions and National Senior Team Champions in 1958. A number of their riders went on to ride for speedway racing teams vis: Don Smith for West Ham and Stan Stevens for Rye House, West Ham, Romford, Cradley Heath, New Cross and Mildenhall.

According to the Walthamstow Post in the 1950's, even when *Walthamstow Wolves* riders were doing their National Service in Germany. they still hankered after the sport. Although hampered by the lack of cycles, two of them; Ted Gee and Chas Kaufman acquired a ground and started their own club in Germany. They both hoped to re-join the 'Wolves' when they returned to Britain.



Picture right: Walthamstow Wolves v Whipps Cross Comets at the Comets track at Eton Manor.

The Fading Out Of Cycle Speedway

I don't know when *Walthamstow Wolves* ceased to exist and I hope that some of *Walthamstow Memories* site readers will advise me. I suspect that it was a whole combination of factors that led to its demise. Motor cycling that once was the only affordable means of transport for working class



people became a minority means of transport with the increasing affordability of cars. The building boom of the 1960's took away the bomb site tracks that were the necessary infrastructure of the sport. Paradoxically, the development of affordable BMX cycles in the 1970's meant that cycle speedway was now not just the province of the those skilful riders who built and adapted their own cycles. BMX cycles were easy to ride on all terrains and were popular with both girls and boys.

Cycling Provision At The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

Although there has been much criticism from the London Cycling Campaign about access to the



facilities, part of the legacy from the 2012 Olympics is the Cycling Velodrome that was the scene of much British success, the BMX cycling trails and mountain bike layout and an open road circuit.

Left: The Olympic Park with the Velo Park and cycling layout

Ironically. Although originally planned to be part of the cycling facilities and although the location of the new facilities are virtually on top of the site of the old Eton Manor cycle

speedway track, there isn't any dedicated provision for Cycle Speedway. Apparently, this was lost as part of the cost control of the entire project.

Footnote

I don't know if the Chingford track was ever built at the Newington Street, Chingford Town Football Club ground. The club doesn't now exist and all that remains is the ruins of a burnt out pavilion. However, in recent years local BMX enthusiasts have created a circular track in the forest close by the ground. It is tempting to think that perhaps they are still riding on what once was the track used by Chingford cycle speedway teams.

Bill Bayliss
May 2014

Some acknowledgements and resources used in this article:

The first two sites below are a valuable resource for the history of cycle speedway and are where most of the images in the article are from.

The third site is where the articles of the *Sports Reporter* and *Walthamstow Post* newspaper articles can be found

The fourth site contains information on the Queen Elizabeth Park Velo Park facilities and map.

<http://www.cyclespeedwayhistory.org.uk/566.shtml>

http://www.cyclespeedwayvets.org.uk/arch_html/arc_sect2/vcsra_arc_sect2.html

<http://3318news.co.uk/about/>

<http://www.visitleevalley.org.uk/en/content/cms/london2012/velo-park/#mountain-biking>