

History of Cycling in the Leatherhead Area

Leatherhead & Bookham were not famous as cyclists' resorts in the same way that Ripley was. Nevertheless, Leatherhead, being on a route south out of London, would have seen a good deal of cycling traffic, a certain amount of which would have stopped for refreshment, probably on the way to the North Downs or to points further south. This would have been from the time the high bicycle was popular (mostly the 1880s) onwards. One would guess that any cycling traffic at the Bookhams would have been mainly riders exploring the North Downs area. Also, of course, your husband's experience shows there was some east to west cycle traffic in the post-war period at least. A study of cycling periodicals, eg *Bicycling News*, would show if there was similar traffic in the late 1870s and the 1880s as club destinations were published at that time. My experience with the Guildford-based Charlotteville Cycling Club in the 1950s indicates that there may have been comparatively little west to east leisure cycling to Leatherhead and the Bookhams.

I did a little research last year for a talk I gave to the Leatherhead & Dist LHS from which I am able to say that it appears that Leatherhead did not appear prominently in the cycling press, but there are occasional references.

In *The Cyclist* of 1883 there is a note that "it seems that Leatherhead is popular with cyclists". The actor H Beerbohm Tree noted that the Swan had a large furnished room for members of the various cycling clubs, although some objected to being herded there rather than being able to use the coffee room.

2 years later the same magazine announced the formation of the Leatherhead Cycling Club with a HQ at the Old Bull. The motto was "Press Forward". The uniform was dark blue. Details of the hon sec and treasurer were given. Their patron was given as Mr Cubitt, MP. The club lasted only 2 years.

In the 1890s occasional sketches and photos appeared in *Cycling* magazine, mainly of the clock tower.

In 1899, after the 1896 heyday of society cycling, one John Cropley wrote in *Cycling* that he was very concerned about the "perfect pandemonium of cyclists and motorists down the main street on Sundays" at up to 20mph. But the magazine queried whether this was the same Mr Cropley who a little earlier was up before the Epsom Bench for furious horse-riding on the highway.

I would think that the area was busy with cycle traffic for leisure purposes as well as for more utilitarian purposes between the wars, and again principally for leisure purposes after the war, but I have no specific instances.

As regards cyclists' refreshment houses, the Cyclists Touring Club handbooks show recommended establishments. I have handbooks for 1908, 1926, 1934, and then an incomplete run from 1937 to 1970. 1908 shows one temperance place, "Merrylands", at Gt Bookham, and none at Leatherhead. 1928 shows the Victoria, High St., Bookham, and Willow Grange, Kingston Rd., Leatherhead. Moving on to your husband's period, in 1949 there was the Corner House Restaurant, Downsway, at Gt Bookham, and the New Bridge Restaurant, 26 Bridge St., at Leatherhead. By 1957 Willow Grange, 263 Kingston Rd., Leatherhead, reappears and continues until 1961 but disappears by 1964. The handbooks give details of meals, prices, and any accommodation provided. There may, of course, have been other premises not officially recommended and after cessation of recommendation premises may nevertheless continue.

If it's of any help you could study the books in my library here at Send Marsh Green. The CTC, now at Slyfield Green, north of Guildford, may have a full set of CTC Handbooks available for consultation, or they may have gone to the National Cycle Archive at Warwick University, which may also have copies of the other periodicals I have mentioned. There is, of course, also the British Library and the British Newspaper library.