

club, up to this time they had all been bicycle or tricycle clubs. The Rye Club continues to this day, though its title was changed to Rye & District Wheelers in 1925. Unlike the Hastings & St. Leonards, which has had 140 years of continuous activity, the Rye club has had several periods of inactivity.

In the 1890's more than 1,000 cycling clubs were active all over Great Britain, by now the 'penny-farthing' was being replaced by the diamond shaped 'safety bicycle. Pneumatic tyres were now common and cycling was in the reach of all classes of society. The clubs became a bridge between rich and poor, even ladies were encouraged to take up the sport. The camaraderie within cycling clubs forged friendships and bonds that only those that have been a member of a cycling club will appreciate. It is the same today as it was then. The custom of recognition between all cyclists on the road has also been carried through the generations since those very early days.

The late Jack Southerden, a long time racing member and historian of the Hastings club, wrote in "80 Years Awheel"

*Of the very large number of cycling clubs of the nineteenth century many, including some that were once famous, have ceased to exist, and the oldest survivors are the Pickwick B.C., which for some years has been inactive as far as corporate cycling is concerned, the Peterborough C.C which has been in existence since 1874, and about five others, including the Hastings and St. Leonards Club, of the year 1876.*

*We may be sure that there were not many bicycles in the district of Hastings and St. Leonards during the year 1876; bicycle riding must have still been something of a novelty, with a very limited appeal, those who did take it up being mostly athletic young men who were undeterred by the discouraging attitude of many people and restrictive customs and conventions of the day. In those days, when wage earners worked long hours for little remuneration, bicycle clubs drew most of their members from the class of professional and business men.*

*It was considered to be more difficult to establish the Hastings and St. Leonards Club than some of the other Sussex clubs, and it is remarkable, not only that it was formed so early, but that it survived in a district which for a long time was considered to be one of the very worst for cycling owing to the hills and the exceptionally bad roads. In the days of the ordinary bicycle, hills had to be treated with respect, which meant that many had to be descended on foot.*

*So many things have changed since those early days that it is hard to appreciate the difficulties and*

*enthusiasm of those riders who get some satisfaction out of pedalling high bicycles, or heavy cumbersome tricycles, on solid tyres, over the so-called roads, many of which were unrideable at certain times of the year.*

*Most main roads were surfaced with granite stones, gravel or chalk, and they were usually in a very bad state, potholed and rutted, very dusty and loose in dry weather, muddy and slippery in wet conditions. Frequent tumbles and breakdowns were all part of the game, and for the riders of the "seventies" there was much prejudice and even some hostility to contend with. We were told that, for a time, the cyclist was looked upon as a pariah, with almost every man's hand against him, fair game for the taunts, sarcasm and brickbats of every hooligan. This unfriendly attitude helped to draw all cyclists together and it was found that company riding, especially such as afforded by the uniformed clubs, was the safest way to carry out a ride.*

*Life in some respects may have been simpler and more placid than it is today, but the cyclist had an adventurous time, which was not always fun, and his toughness and keenness will be greatly admired by the rider who realizes how much he owes to the pioneers of his sport and pastime.*

*Hastings and district club cyclists can always be proud of those who started the Hastings and St. Leonard's Bicycle Club on its long run.*

On Wednesday 21 February eighteen seventy-eight the Hastings club celebrated its first annual dinner. It took place at the "Swan", in one of the most imposing and historic assembly rooms in the town, members of other clubs, including the famous Sidney French of the Maidstone Club, were present to hear A. J. Lovett's welcoming speech to visitors and friends.

Membership rose to about 20 by April and it was around this time that it was decided to find a new headquarters closer to the centre of the town. The Seaside & Pier Hotel became their new home and it was from here that members set out on their runs. The season started at Easter with a ride on Good Friday to Hawkhurst where they met up with the Maidstone club for lunch. Daytime runs were undertaken whenever weather and road conditions allowed and as soon as it became light enough, evening runs were undertaken on a regular basis.

The first members to take part in an organised race were Ted Gilbert, Sam Philcox and Arthur Lovett. They took part in one of first race meetings in the area, promoted by Eastbourne Bicycle Club at Devonshire



Park in July 1878. As far as we know they rode well but failed to win any prizes.

Jack Southerden's account of crashes from the high ordinary bicycles illustrates the skill needed to control these tall machines.

*In common with other riders of the high bicycle, members of the Club had their share of tumbles. Most riders got used to taking a fall without coming to much harm, but not always. Early in July E. C. Gilbert fell from his large size machine and was picked up in an insensible condition in Hastings High Street; and later in the same month S. Philcox had a bad fall, which put him out of action for some time, when he was practising on the Catholic Ground at Hastings. Earlier in the year a local rider had received some severe injuries when thrown over the handles, as a result of the not uncommon occurrence of a tyre becoming detached from the big wheel, while descending Hastings Hill.*

On Wednesday 16 October 1878 The first race ever organised by the club was a two rider affair to decide who would be the sub-captain. It was a one and a half mile event along the Bexhill Road, finishing at the Bo Peep Railway Arch. Harold Style out sprinted Arnold Lovett in an exciting finish. A silver bugle was presented to the new sub-captain at a supper held later that evening.

A 2 mile amateur bicycle handicap was included at a sports fete which took place at the Hastings Central Cricket Ground at Easter. It was won by E. Runtz, Pickwick B.C., with J. Horn, Lombard B.C., second, and C. Fitzgerald of Ashford, third.

The success of this event encouraged the organisers of the August Bank Holiday Fete to include a similar race at their event. This was won by H. Joy, the only local entrant, with F. T. East, Surrey B.C, second from scratch, and H. Hart, Eastbourne B.C. third.

Frederick T. East was the fastest bicycle rider in the country in that year. Although he did not win an official title, he rode a mile in 2m. 56s. at Portsmouth, 2 miles in 5m. 58.8s. at Alexander Palace, and 3 miles in 9m. 4.5s. at Lillie Bridge. Being shorter than many other riders he used a 56 inch gear Ordinary against the more usual 60" or even 62"

1879 saw a steady increase in the number of active members. E. C. Gilbert was still club captain with H. F. Style the sub-cap-

tain. A bugler was nominated, Charles Palmer was a new member but proved the perfect selection. These were the days when members wore uniforms and rode in military fashion, responding to the call of the bugle for assembling, mounting etc. The bugler rode close to the captain, transmitting his instructions by various signals. The sub-captain rode at the rear, also using a bugle at times. In the summer months the group would raise a cloud of dust off the dry roads, much the same as a platoon of horse cavalry.

The club's first cycle racing success came at the 1879 Easter Monday Fete at the Central Cricket Ground when A.T. Lovett finished second to J. R. Hamilton (Druids B.C.) a famous racing cyclist known as the 'Prince of Peddlers' in a 2 Mile handicap, another Hastings club rider, E. C. Gilbert was third.

The club held it's own Championship Meeting at the Central Cricket Ground on Wednesday 9 July. The results, as reported by Jack Southerden in his book were

*One mile Club Championship, scratch; C. A. Palmer 1st; E.C. Gilberts 2nd; S. Philcox 3rd. 13 riders made up three preliminary heats.*

*2 miles mounting and dismounting (once each lap) handicap, an event which called for skill in the correct mounting and dismounting of a high bicycle; A. W. Chesterfield won.*

*150 yards slow race; Most of the competitors fell from their mounts to be considerable amusement of the spectators, and A. T. Lovett won the final.*

*Five miles Club Championship: C. C. Gilbert 1st; S. Philcox 2nd; S. Thomson 3rd.*

*One mile consolation: H. Davis.*

Sir Ughtred Kay-Shuttleworth, M.P. for Hastings was nominated as the first Club President at a meeting held on October 2. (1878) He had been a Member of Parliament for seven years and was a highly respected man in the town. He went on to become a Peer of the Realm.



Central Cricket Ground



F.L. March 1925