

FEATURE
The Tweed Run



In the photos
1 A river of tweed
2 He had a music stand as well...
3 No hi-viz, yet all of the cyclists got noticed
4 The spirit of the event, not authenticity, is what counts
5 High profile high wheelers. There's a prize for 'Best Vintage Bicycle'
6 But you can ride any bike, as these riders of a modern triplet demonstrate
7 How long until London's fixie-riding hipsters catch on to these caps?
8 What other cycling event has a prize for 'Best Moustache'?



PHOTOS SELIM KORYCKI & JACK THURSTON

NEED FOR TWEED

There's more to The Tweed Run than turning back the clock to an age of cycling elegance. Journalist and broadcaster **Jack Thurston** was there

My plus fours drew more than a few curious glances from other passengers on the train. Baggy, golfing-style numbers in brown check, they were set off by a bright red roll-neck sweater and matching socks, brown leather brogues, braces and a felt fedora. Not the typical commuter on a Brompton, but the Tweed Run is not the typical day out on a bicycle. On the short ride to the rendezvous point, I began to notice other cyclists from other eras, all heading in the same direction. With all the urgency of the cycling scenes in *Call the Midwife* (and many of the same delicately coiffed hair-dos), 500 immaculately dressed cyclists were converging on the main quadrangle of University College London.

There was not a bicycle helmet to be seen but there were bowler hats, top hats, trilby hats, deerstalkers, straw boaters, flat caps, pork pie hats, berets and even a pith helmet. There were cravats, bowties, braces, pinstriped morning suits, three-piece suits, shooting breeks, tea dresses, pleated skirts and nylon stockings (complete with seams down the back). There were bicycles of every kind: classic lightweights from venerable framebuilders, sturdy porteur bikes with big front racks, brightly coloured beach cruisers,

fixed wheels, small wheelers, high wheelers, low riders, loop-framed Raleighs, wicker-basket Pashleys and Dutch bikes with skirt guards, kickstands and pedal-back brakes.

There were pipes, monocles and pocket watches. Moustaches were waxed and lipstick applied. There were dogs in baskets, picnic hampers lashed to rear racks and cocktail shakers mounted in bottle cages.

LEISURELY THROUGH LONDON

This was London's fifth Tweed Run, and it has grown in popularity every year, with tickets now allocated by lottery. This year more than 4,000 entered for just 500 places. The success of television period dramas like *Downton Abbey* suggests a growing nostalgia for bygone eras when clothing was elegant and manners refined. For Craig and Jackie Appleton, riding a pair of Bickerton aluminium folding bikes from the late 1970s (memorably ridden by a nun in the TV commercial), it was their second time on the ride. 'It's the classic British eccentric coming out, it's a shame it can't be bigger,' said Jackie, 'People just love dressing up, don't they?'

The trilling of bicycle bells signalled the start and we processed out of the university and onto the streets of London, through Fitzrovia and a circuit of Regent's Park. On

our way south along Portland Place, we passed a coach filled with tourists from the Far East, faces pressed against the coach windows, straining for a better view of this very British parade. London is a city where people tend to mind their own business and remain unfazed by the most outlandish of spectacles, yet all along the route, crowds of passersby looked on with broad smiles, some venturing to ask what it was all about. The general idea is simple: a stylish bicycle ride in good company.

Dressing up for a bike ride goes as far back as cycling itself, and the very first cycling clubs adopted military-style uniforms with gold braid and peaked caps. This may have been because in the early days, cycling was regarded as a new kind of country sport, like hunting or shooting, practised only by those with the means to buy a bicycle and the leisure time to use it. As cycling became more socially widespread, formal uniforms fell out of favour, and were replaced by a more relaxed but nonetheless elegant style.

Frank Patterson's line drawings of the 1930s and 1940s immortalise the sartorial look of the golden era of British cycling: a Norfolk jacket with large pockets for a Bartholomew one-inch map, a lightweight cotton or linen shirt, and a pair of stout

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Photos: Selim Korycki

shorts tailored from thick Hebden cord. In cold weather, wool provided warmth and in wet weather a waterproof cape covered everything. Some of these garments are now being revived. London-based Vulpine produces pure merino wool cycling jerseys as well as a modern twist on the Harrington jacket. Scottish outdoor clothing company Hilltrek has revived the Greenspot Nomad jacket, made from waterproof Ventile fabric and much loved by cycle tourists of the 1950s and '60s.

The organisers of the Tweed Run favour no historical period over any other, nor do they insist on authenticity. It was clear that many participants were enjoying playing at being posh and there was more than the occasional what-ho and tally-ho as we snaked south towards Piccadilly. (Despite the fact that it is Jeeves, not Wooster, who would have been more likely to ride a bicycle.)

Charles Nishikawa, a London management consultant, was on his third Tweed Run. 'Everyone's smiling, taking pictures, that's what we need. It's a really good atmosphere and sends out a positive message about cycling. We have to understand each other and break down barriers between cyclists, drivers and pedestrians,' he said.

LYCRA-FREE CYCLING

Witty, gently anarchic, the Tweed Run is all about having fun. But buried somewhere beneath the thick wool serge and fine crinoline pleats is a more serious point: demonstrating that cycling can be stylish;

that riding a bike doesn't mean you have to get togged up in sporty or high visibility clothing; that it's quite possible to cycle in any clothing, from period dress to everyday wear. At the end of the ride, I caught up with Gordon Seabright, CTC's Chief Executive. (CTC was the charity partner for this year's event.) 'Cycling is not primarily a sport,' he said, 'And it shouldn't be such an oddly male activity.'

London Mayor Boris Johnson has said he wants to 'de-lycrafy London', to make city streets inviting to anyone who wanted to ride a bike. It is dawning on people that specialist, sport-oriented clothing may actually be counterproductive in terms of visibility and safety on the roads. In what has been dubbed 'the Mary Poppins effect', wearing normal clothes on an upright bicycle makes cyclists more visible to other road users and makes them appear less 'different' and thus deserving of care and consideration.

Tweed may not be everyone's idea of normal clothing but it is a lot more 'normal' than lycra. It is a more *rational* dress. If we want more people on bikes, especially women, rational dress is just what's required.

London's Tweed Run is an annual event and entries for next year will open in early 2014 at tweedrun.com. In the meantime, you could organise your own ride – it's great publicity for a local club or CTC Member Group.

Jack Thurston is a writer and broadcaster and the author of *Lost Lanes: 36 Glorious Bike Rides in Southern England*.

In the photos
9 Numbers are limited to 500
10 Hats, yes. Bike helmets, no
11 A proper tea stop is included



CTC'S TWEED

In the 1880s, CTC encouraged cyclists to move away from the military look, promoting a more understated club uniform in 'grey check' made from hard-wearing wool. Clothing was the subject of vigorous debate among members, and the letters pages of the CTC Gazette record discussions of the



merits of various styles and fabrics. In 1885, one club member caused a storm by objecting to the fact that a club uniform meant a baronet would end up wearing the same cycle clothing as a bricklayer. The response was swift from club members making the case for equality and fellowship of the wheel. Some years later the club even had its own tweed, sample swatches of which can still be seen in a clothing catalogue from the turn of the century. Cycling became closely linked with the 'rational dress' movement that sought to liberate women from suffocating corsets, heavy pleated skirts and high-heeled shoes and the CTC collaborated closely with the Rational Dress Association in devising women's cycle clothing that offered 'absolute freedom of movement for all parts of the body, as great lightness as is compatible with warmth' and 'a quiet and unobtrusive appearance'.

