

# CYCLING



*The Cyclists' War Memorial, Meriden - how **Cycling** pictured the dedication ceremony, May 21st 1921.*

*The crowd was estimated at between 10000 and 20000.*

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# The Anfield Bicycle Club and World War One

## The National Cyclists' War Memorial

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

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### Pilgrimage to Meriden

Two years after the end of the World War One, 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.*

**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 contingents from London, Liverpool, Southampton, Leicester, and*



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

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*Lancashire. These are only a few of the clubs that were present; they are merely those with whom we discussed their journeys.*

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*’.

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## Unveiling and dedication



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.

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.

## Design, siting, and funding

A ‘National Cyclists’ War Memorial’ committee had been set up in November 1919 after a public meeting. 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*’.

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. 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



How the Cyclists' War Memorial will appear when complete.

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raise £1000. At a time when a pint of beer cost 5d that equates to about £150,000 now. The key to success was recruiting the Anfield Bicycle Club's President W P Cook, as chief fund-raiser. He was a formidable personality. In 1935, when he received the CTC's Alfred Bird Memorial Trophy, he was described as '*the greatest cyclist the World has ever known*'. He cycled more than half a million miles in his lifetime, held key positions in many national cycling organisations, and served as cycling's expert on the Parliamentary Committee for the first Highway Code. Although his views were uncompromising, he was blessed with compassion and a keen humour.

During the war, which he had regarded with utter dismay, Cook had worked tirelessly for ABC serving members and for the Cyclists' Prisoners of War fund. He was not a man to cross, and had no time for those who questioned the national war memorial scheme: "*cash rather than criticism is required*" he thundered in one exasperated letter to the **CTC Gazette**. For Cook the Cyclists' War Memorial was a personal crusade. It would represent '*our four Members who made the Supreme Sacrifice*'. Writing in the **Circular** (August 1920) he claimed credit: '*It is the Anfield that has assured the Memorial on Meriden Green*'. It was no idle claim: ABC members had donated more than 20% of the total cost.

The project's successful completion was a fitting tribute to the single-minded determination of the War Memorial 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.

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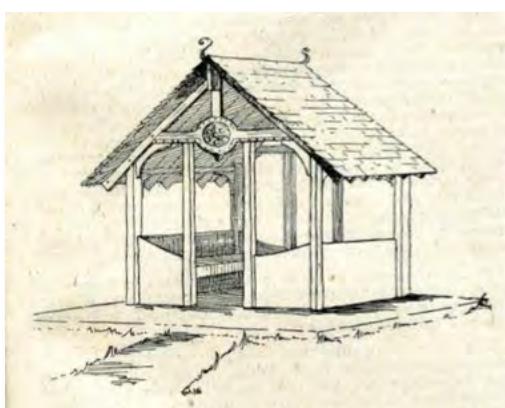
### The background - national or local, practical or sentimental?

When war was declared on 4 August 1914 the impact on cycling and cycle clubs was immediate. The Anfield Bicycle Club was typical. Support for club-runs fell away and racing was suspended as the young joined the colours. Others, too old for active service, volunteered for civic defence duties. 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*'. 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 and oak, at Newland's Corner, near Guildford. 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 members; and there were calls for practical help - like the endowment of '*beds in hospitals, sanatoria, or similar institutions*' for the benefit of members.

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). It was sold (for £100) to the highest bidder, the Rev Bourchier (who subsequently consecrated the memorial).

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 Metropolitan DA. He suggested merging with the national fund, but the DA continued to go its own way. In the end the lych-gate scheme raised only £100, well short of the target, though sufficient for a more modest shelter in the form of a 'covered seat'. Intriguingly, no evidence has yet come to light that it was actually built, or, if it was, for how long it survived.

In contrast, progress on the national memorial 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*

The Club recorded the weekend in the *Circular*. 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 - the Cyclists' Annual Service of Remembrance.

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 now.

Ninety-three years have passed since the memorial was unveiled. In that time, 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*',



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

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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. The Imperial War Museum records that there are also plaques, one at Twickenham commemorating Rugby Football Players, and another in Preston, at the national football museum, to Football Association Players. 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.



*18 May 2014: Dedication by the Bishop of Warwick of the new plaque 'In memory of all cyclists who fought and died for their Country'*



*The Cyclists' War Memorial, Meriden Green - CTC commemoration, May 2014*

## Remembering World War One



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

### 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 shortenei 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.

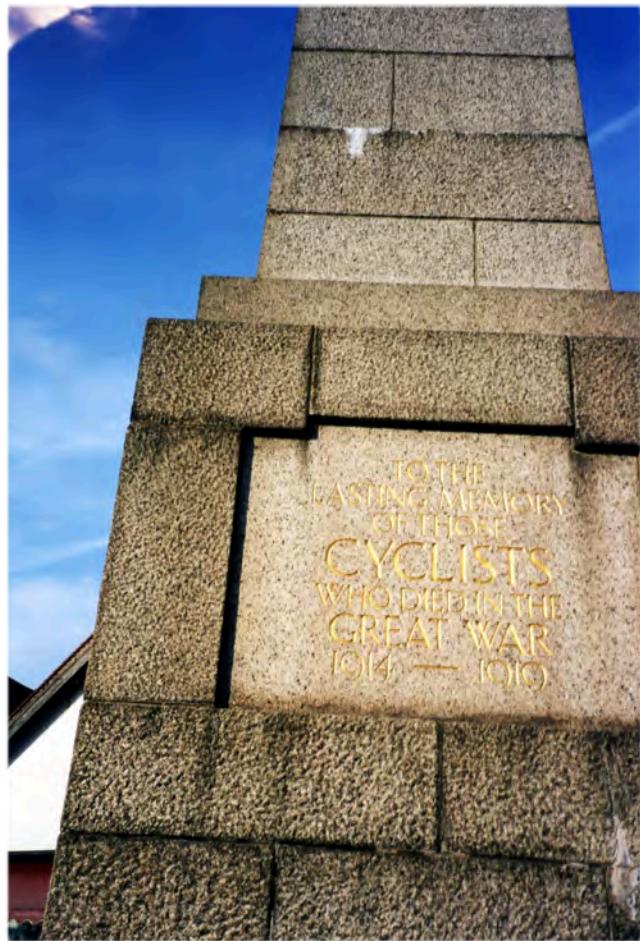
Edward Bentley, Corporal, Cheshire Regiment. He died 18 November 1916, age 31, from wounds sustained a month earlier. He is buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery. After his death, the Circular published a poem 'In Memoriam E A B'.

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



Original dedication and World War II plaque