

1980 Mersey - a first '24' at 45.

1978, particularly August, 1978 was responsible; from some encouraging 50 mile and 100 mile times, I gained a strong impression that I had some ability to write longer distances. The Welsh 12 (237 miles for my first attempt) added confirmation and I capitulated to a growing belief that it would be worthwhile to attempt a 24hour time trial. A strong contributing factor was the diet of 24-hour fellowship journals which Eddie Bray had fed me over the previous six months. The epic quality of the 'longer ones' and the Mersey in particular appealed to me. Certainly no short time trial ever made as much impact as tht most enjoyable and amazingly trouble-free Welsh 12. How misleading it was I discovered two years later when I had to contemplate riding for about 14 hours on one (fairly) good leg. But more of that later.

For sanity and family and I gave up training and time-trialling in 1979, riding only 2 25 mile events for laughs, and the Windsor/Chester AUK event out of ignorance of what that event demanded. Needless to say I was taught a lesson, experiencing my first ever DNS after only 220 miles. Late in 1979, I was lucky enough to win a cash prize for my scientific research and this presented me with an opportunity to buy new racing equipment for the first time. Plans for the 1980 Mersey 24 began and March 1980, the planned start of training, arrived.

Preparation was the usual; basic miles in March, quality training in April, 25s in May, 50s in June and 100s in July, the 24 being on July 26/27. A last-minute addition was another go at the Windsor/Chester at the end of May. Time trial results were generally poor and excuses got more and more involved. However, things weren't too bad and despite almost continuous rain for 26 hours, a finish in the Windsor/Chester reassured me that I could ride for 24 hours without falling asleep. Third handicap in the South Staffs 50 (a 2.20) on June 8th heralded some improvement although I was still eight minutes down on my 1978 best. The wet and cold truly did seem to handicap me not least because I find it hard to train when I'm not enjoying being out on a bike for its own sake. However, disaster was near in the form of the Monmouth 100; this was a wet, cold and windy event some of the rain being perilously close to sleet. It was won in 4.21 and I did 5.08! More to the point, I hobbled for a week from the pain in my right knee - an old cartilage weakness had been severely aggravated. Now followed a succession of debilitating humiliations, instead of the rising tide of planned success. Packed at 56 miles (outside evens) in the South Staffs 100, packed at 91 miles (just on evens) in the MCCA. These were the first occasions on which I had been DNS in time trials and my logic-based quitting was beginning to sound hollow: "to preserve my knee from further deterioration." Huh! Walsall 50 in 2.22 on a good day was to be all the encouragement I was going to receive. However at last the warmer weather arrived and the end of my 4500 miles training programme (a 124 mile ride to Shrewsbury and back and some 22 mile an hour laps of a flat 24 mile circuit near home). The knee pain was behind me and hopes were high that, as had happened in the Welsh 12 in 1978, I would suffer no recurrence of the problem. I found myself thinking twice when I found that Stan Bray's last 24 had been at 45 and I was about to do my first at the same age. However, reading of Albert Mansley's first and winning ride on the 1979 Mersey at the same age was an inspiration. I too had not cycled competitively until five years previously when my then 13-year-old son got interested. My helping team consisted of my wife and 17-year-old son, two workmates and Eddie Bray, his considerable experience of 24s and helping was to prove invaluable in educating his willing but inexperienced assistants. One feature of the preparations was the design and proving of a lighting system designed to allay my fears of riding fast with

poor lighting. The system was based on the rechargeable dry lead-acid cells used by Neville Billington in the 'Nightfarer' but employed six volts with normal dynamo head and tail lamps. The system caused so much comment and query during the night of the event that I will describe it in more detail elsewhere.

July 26 dawned fine and helpers and I set off at for Tarvin at 9:30 in fine conditions. Eddie Bray was to follow later after returning from a Pembrokeshire holiday. We had scheduled for 230 and 200 with half-hour meetings, after an unassisted first 104 miles (apart from a single feed at 64 miles). 4 ounces of Complian after 3¼ hours and every six hours thereafter supplemented by sweets (mint cake, Mars etc) for energy and fruit and malt loaf and honey for tummy fillings. Complian and a steady pace have always seemed sensible to me after noting the frequent suffering by other riders from tummy pains. The theory had been well tested in the 1978 Welsh 12 which I rode at very nearly constant pace throughout. Tea and Accolade plus occasional assorted official handouts provided the fluid intake. At 2:47, to heartwarming applause, I set off with a tail wind which made it feel like a race. A brush with some cows (my apologies to another rider for my clumsiness here) at Church Minshull and soon it was raining. By about 7 p.m. I passed Christleton Island in a cloudburst. The thunder roared and the lightning flashed; the road seemed to have a 1 inch deep cover of water plus huge lakes in sunken parts. It was very very dark, my lights were 20 miles away at Whitchurch, so fingers were crossed that the traffic could see me. A never to be forgotten impression was that of my clubmate, Brian Fogg, looming up out of the dark and chaos holding up a bottle and shouting, "Tea?" Whitchurch (104 miles) was reached in five minutes outside evens and I changed to my easy-angle long wheelbase touring bike for the badly surfaced Nantwich leg. I was delighted to stay close to evens on this 20 mile leg after which it was 'Tally Ho' for the Shropshire triangle. A rendezvous for hot stew, lights and nightclothes came in the nick of time before darkness fell. I'll never know where that 18 minutes went but that is what it took! Eddy's timings show that from now on, despite my excellent lighting, I began to lose out on schedule - 6 miles down after eight hours. At nine hours things started to fall apart on the Chetwynd Heath leg; those old enemies, both cartilages started to play up and it was on with the belladonna plasters when I returned to Ternhill. These had not been tried before but had been recommended by Margaret Buchan. 218 miles at 12 hours was a disappointing loss of 12 miles on schedule but things suddenly became much bleaker as something completely new occurred. Frustratingly, it was as I finally caught (for three minutes) B. Bailey, a rider from the Cheltenham and County, my own club's great rivals. The ligaments below the outside of my right knee began to cramp up and produce sharp lancing pains. The effect of these was to completely stop me pedalling every two or three crank revolutions. Increasingly, the only salvation was to 'carry' the right leg and pedal as slowly as possible; big gears are one thing but on one leg? So here was my first encounter with "those little setbacks which give the long races their special character" (Stan Bray). Finishing seemed impossible now but this is where one learned to live from one staging point to the next. Speed now fluctuated wildly depending on terrain. On the humpy Chetwynd Heath lake I slowed to 12¾ miles an hour - a humiliation. In desperation, Eddie stopped me and got me back into shorts despite concern that the early morning chill would make things even worse. Miraculously, things improved and the Shawbirch outward half was done at 17.75 mph. Cock-a-hoop I turned at the island, I took up a drink and promptly fell off. Fortunately the bike was okay but inevitably the pace fell again, sinking to 12¾ mph again. The crash had removed skin on right elbow, hip, ankle and of course knee and it seemed more like kill than cure. Struggling back to Whitchurch and then Wem, I was working up a suitable protest if I was sent to Redbrook when long delayed inspiration hit me.

As I came past my helpers waiting on the outskirts of Wem, I followed in the great tradition of riders who have driven their helpers crazy with impossible requests. "Get some ice and make up an ice pack for my knee", I cried. I was of course turned at Wem; with about 3½ hours remaining; my helpers were knocking on the doors of all the houses which had no fridge until at last they met with success at the price of having to explain what on earth was going on. The ice was packed in a tubular bandage, relief was instant and I did the 8 miles back to Wem fork at about 22s. This was Fate's last rotten throw however; as my helpers calculated that 400 was definitely on, the day grew hot, the ice no longer cooled, the black cloud over Chester, which promised more chilling rain, came to nought and the agony returned. I crawled back to Christleton island and on to Waverton where I had 1¾ hours to do two 15-mile circuits for my 400. It seemed possible but the pain in my right knee was really vicious and to cap it all, after 10 hours of steely self-control, the applause at Christleton Island suddenly converted me into an emotional jelly. Tears, rage at a helper who got in my way and then the plod round the lanes. The canal bridge nearly defeated me in bottom gear and I became terrified of stalling and falling off. Emotions blocked the reasoning which should have called for my low-g geared spare wheel. Instead, it was wobbly-wobbly at Austin's hill on one weak leg and terror at the traffic between Tarvin and Vicar's Cross. With no helpers near I convince myself that it was dangerous to continue despite the fact that I had nearly completed one circuit and there were 45 minutes to go. I got off and sat on the grass; some knowledgeable bystanders encouraged me to continue and finally I tried again, only to get off once more as I feared another spill. Crucially, it was my wife and one of my inexperienced helpers who found me and I was allowed to quit.

I expect some of you will knowingly nod when I say that at the time, continuing seemed impossible, but subsequently I feel that I simply lacked determination and courage. Perhaps it is impossible to judge after two weeks whether it was a character failure or a physical one but I feel certain that Stan Bray would have continued. So, my one and only 24 turned out quite differently from expectation. Certainly a test of character and resourcefulness was expected but not quite so much uncontrollable pain and certainly not the emotional storm on the circuit. An abiding memory is the night when Shropshire was taken over by bikies and the unidentified helpers offered succour. That was beautiful. The friendliness of most other riders and the warm applause at many of the turns. The excellent organisation and marshalling too. The Mersey is certainly a fine event and any timorous 'scrubber' like myself need have no fears if he chooses this event for his first 24. He will be well cared for.

My ride was always meant to be a farewell to my brief five years flirtation with competitive cycling. I seemed too old to start at 40 and, at 45, I certainly felt too old when I 'died' on the circuit. Strange therefore that after two weeks I am still trying to work out where things went wrong. To what purpose if I shall never ride another?

John Kirton

Lights for 24-hour time trials

During the night of the 1980 Mersey, I was frequently asked about my lighting system which seen to impress a number of riders. I was certainly surprised to see so many poorer and

particularly unsteady lamps in view of all the correspondence in this journal. Perhaps my avid reading was exceptional! In case the information is helpful, I'll describe my system. It grew out of a visit to Neville Billington after I saw advertisements for his 'Nightfarer' system. Neville felt his system was unsuitable for a 24 as its burn time was insufficient on full power. We discussed a 'standby' switch to conserve battery life when full power was not required but Neville thought this could only be done but switching between two bulbs. This entailed a large lamp on a poorly directed beam for at least one setting. Neville had investigated the possibility of a power reducing circuit but had been advised that it was not possible. Thus it was back to the drawing board but the rechargeable dry lead acid 'Cyclon' batteries appealed very strongly - they are quite heavy but I have a horror of riding fast without good lights and I've never seen the need for weight fanaticism in flat terrain time trials.

I consulted a colleague at work and he produced an electronic circuit which would indeed provide a reduction below full power with very little loss. To be sure of sufficient battery capacity, I decided to go for a six volt system rather than the 4 volt Nightfarer. Bulbs were more readily available and it was straightforward to buy the three interconnected and packaged cells to provide 3 W for 10 hours. I found Union head and tail lamps sufficient and retained the bulbs provided for dynamo at 2½ watts front and ½ watt rear. Coupled with a big rear reflector, reflective spots on the pedals and a white jersey I felt certain I could be seen. By the time the Windsor/Chester AUK event arrived, I still had not built the circuit for controlling power output so I settled for the simplest possible system with a battery substituted for a dynamo. The battery pack was carried in a handlebar bag, both 'live' and return circuits being wired to avoid frame earthing problems. Connections were six in number and were made as firm as possible. The Windsor/Chester night was wet and dark but there was never a flicker and I was delighted with my bright and steady lighting. At this stage, in the interests of simplicity (reliability in my experience), I abandoned the power switching circuit and had only to provide a suitable case for the batteries in place of a handlebar bag. I settled on a diecast alloy box with clips to fix it to handlebar or top tube. After several hundred miles in testing, I was happy that the top tube configuration was okay and did not interfere with normal pedalling.

As it happened, my Mersey was a painful disaster but my lights were perfect. Incidentally, they weigh about five pounds instead of 1¾ lb for the standard Ever Ready pair. The price of the batteries from the Chloride distributor in Bristol was £13. Other costs were a 6V constant voltage charger and the two lamps. I now have a frictionless system for touring and winter use

John Kirton