



# Cycling in the 1930s

The memory and CTC diaries of Edward Burdon – now 98 – provide an insight into cycling before WWII. Daughter **Sue Gullet** takes up his tale

**M**y father often speaks a little wistfully of 'the old cycling days' of his youth. Over the nine years leading up to the Second World War he cycled some 73,000 miles, and 70 years later he still has an almost photographic memory for the places he visited.

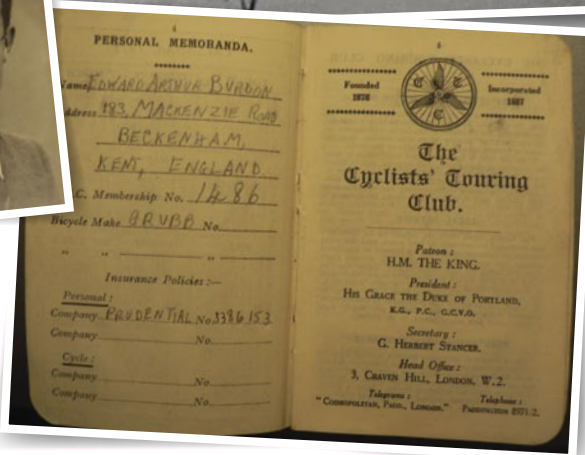
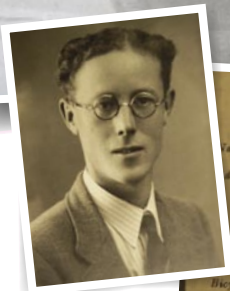
His rides are meticulously recorded in his CTC diaries. Each page of the diaries records the total mileage for the week and a running total. Cycling was his escape from a humdrum life, living with his parents in South London and working a 5½ day week in a tedious office job in the City. It took him some time to save up for a decent bike with its Sturmev-Archer 3-speed gears.

Once he had the bike, his world opened up. Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and the lighter evenings were spent exploring the countryside of Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. Sometimes he rode with a friend or with his brother, more often he went alone. He was never one for cycling in groups as he liked to be able to stop and explore whenever he felt like it. Each journey was recorded with the names of all the places visited, on day rides that were frequently in excess of 80 miles, sometimes well over 100.

One Sunday, shortly after the War broke out, Dad rode from Crawley to Chichester, doing the 50-mile return journey after dark. 'I had a little battery lamp with a shade over it, because of the blackout. It was a moonless night and I could see virtually nothing. However, I knew the road well and it didn't bother me. I passed Arundel Castle, which is at the top of a steep hill with many bends.

'Since I couldn't really see the road I was taking care and using my brakes. Suddenly, there was a tremendous light everywhere, lighting up the entire countryside. It was the searchlights in the Arun Estuary. It was a wonderful sight, the whole countryside lit up in brilliance. I let off my brakes and shot off down the hill and up the other side at top speed. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, the lights went out again and I finished my journey in the pitch dark.'

An annual holiday of one or occasionally two weeks was the



chance for longer trips to the West Country, Wales or Scotland, with his brother John.

'We hardly ever bothered to book accommodation in advance. Towards late afternoon we'd stop somewhere for tea – there was always somewhere you could get a cup of tea and a bit of cake. Then we'd look at the CTC accommodation guide and find somewhere fairly close. If we got there and it was full,

that was no problem – there'd be bound to be somewhere else nearby. We'd get an evening meal at the B&B – usually it was an enormous meal. Sometimes there was so much we could hardly get up from the table!'

The quiet roads made for delightful cycling and three gears seemed to be enough to speed them on their way even in the hilliest terrain.

They travelled light, with simply one change of clothing (they bundled up their dirty clothes at the end of the first week and posted them back to Mother!), cycle cape, camera, ½ inch maps and, of course, the diary. Everything fitted into a saddlebag plus one small bundle.

Dad averaged around 7,500 miles a year, but in 1938 he achieved his personal challenge of cycling 10,000 miles. He describes his last ride of the year. 'It was New Year's Eve and I was feeling rough with a sore throat and the shivers. But I was so close to my 10,000 miles – only 52 to go – and I was determined to get there. It was a bit of a struggle at first – I really didn't want to get on that bike – but what a sense of satisfaction to reach that total! What's more, by the time I got home my sore throat had gone!'

Dad is now 98 years old. He is blind, very deaf, and frail. Yet his memory of his cycling days is still sharp, and his recollections of those times of freedom and of exploring the beautiful landscapes of Britain are precious.