



# Honouring fallen cyclists

A memorial service at Meriden each May commemorates those cyclists who died in the First World War. **John Bennett** is the organiser

It's 90 years since an obelisk of Cornish granite was unveiled on Meriden's village green, in memory of all those cyclists who had died in the First World War. More than 10,000 cyclists attended the dedication; many had ridden through the night to be there.

'It commemorates those pedal-cyclists – racing-men, clubmen, and tourists alike – who left the tracks and roads of the homeland to die on foreign fields of battle,' said Howard Gritten MP in his address on 21st May 1921. He noted that 'our idea of commemorating the unknown preceded the Westminster Abbey idea of the "Unknown Warrior".'

Gritten was the chairman of the committee that formed in 1919 to discuss how best to honour the cyclists who had fallen in the Great War. Key committee members were FT Bidlake and G Herbert Stancer, who set events in motion with a letter to Cycling magazine. The committee raised over £1,100 by public donation – equivalent to about £38,000 today.

Meriden was chosen for memorial site due to its location. 'It's supposedly the centre of England,' says John Bennett. 'There was a 15th century monument there already declaring it as such. You can imagine what it was like after the First World War. Everybody was relieved and trying to do something to commemorate the dead soldiers. Cycling was an important element both in the wartime and for people who returned from the War. Everybody cycled.' A further plaque was added to the memorial to commemorate those lost in the Second World War.

This year's service is on 22nd May. 'It's always the third Sunday in May,' says John. The Meriden service forms part of the Heart of England Cycle Rally that John organises. 'The service is the focus of the weekend, and the Rally has been built around that. It used



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to start on Friday night and people would come and camp. Now it's the Saturday, plus the Sunday service.

'A lot of people will come for just one day. On the Saturday we have two audax rides, of 160 and 100 kilometres, which are quite popular. We get around 200 riders. The Cotswold Challenge

is a lovely ride across the Avon Valley and into the Cotswolds. The Warwickshire Wanderer goes in much the same direction, but on a shorter route.

'This year we're offering two

shorter led rides and a treasure hunt circuit on the Saturday. So you can do the audax rides or if you want a more leisurely time you can join a led ride or just potter around on the treasure

hunt. We encourage people from Coventry and Birmingham and cyclists generally – CTC members, by and large – to come and do this if they don't want to do an audax.'

The Cyclists' Service itself takes place on Sunday at 11am on the village green. 'We try to make it now more a celebration of cycling, as well as a memorial service. So we have one or two readings from cycling books. We want people enjoying the cycling fraternity. We try not to make it too deeply religious – it's a more ecumenical approach.

'The local churches provide the sermon. For the service we have the Bulkington Silver Band, a local band who have given us very good support and some wonderful services. The trumpeter blows The Last Post.'

When the service is over, the cyclists retire to the village hall for coffee and cakes, then make their separate ways home.

For more, see [www.ctc-heartofengland.org.uk](http://www.ctc-heartofengland.org.uk)