



Feature

THE FIRE STILL BURNS

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH A GROUP OF TOUGH OLD RIDERS INTRODUCED JOURNALIST **RICHARD BAYNES** TO THE WORLD OF ROAD CYCLING. LIFE HAS NEVER BEEN THE SAME SINCE

In a clearing in a small wood, just off a narrow lane a few miles outside Glasgow, a group of men sit talking around a wood fire. They're wearing

shorts and the brightly coloured tops of cyclists everywhere. Expensive road bikes rest against trees, and laughter and banter rise up with the smoke from the fire.

The men have craggy, worn, lean faces, but every one has a sparkle in his eye. Some are in their late seventies, some older. One man, Bobby Brodie, is 89. All have ridden here, some covering more than 20 miles. Later, they'll ride home – and next week they'll do it all again. Sometimes someone is unwell, or the weather is so foul not everyone can get out, but there are always some of the

group pedalling along the lanes on their swift, slim machines. They descend on this spot, a few miles south of the city, light a fire and then talk bikes, tell old stories, and rib each other endlessly.

I first come across them after a chance encounter with Bob Mair, a retired tax officer. Bob, from East Kilbride, is on his bike climbing a long hill across a moor; I'm out for a walk in a brief bit of autumn sunshine. We stop to talk, and he mentions there's a fire lit at a spot down the road. A little later, I make my way over a stile and into the trees to find the group. The welcome is instant, the men are relaxed, and there is the feeling that laughter could break out at any time. I think of my own parents, around the same age, cooped up in a nursing home with locked doors and constant care, coping with the



Near left: The Herald & Times Group. Far left: Andy Whitehouse. Opening pages: Alamy

(Left) Participant in the Bob Cliff Memorial Cheshire Cycleway Rides. (Above, static photo, L to R) Bob Brodie, Charlie Donnelly, Bob Cunningham, Eddie Brown

awful decrepitude of stroke and dementia, and I hope to heaven my old age is like this.

From somewhere or other, blackened tin cans, wires threaded through their rims for handles, are produced and propped up among the embers. The water boils and I'm given tea. Then someone takes pity on me for having no food, produces a couple of sausages and cooks them for me. Listening to the stories the men tell, I realise I have stumbled on a piece of a world that is almost gone.

ESCAPE FROM THE CITIES

There was a time, starting after the First World War, when men and women poured out of cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen every weekend, to escape the factories and foundries, offices, shipyards and docks, and the smells and smogs of town. They didn't come in cars, ready to drive back as soon as they got wet or hungry or needed to sleep, but on bikes, in buses, by thumb and on foot, with rough camping gear, old cans for kettles, and battered penknives.

To begin with, many were walkers and climbers. By the 1950s, hundreds of others would cycle out from Glasgow and the surrounding towns, part of clubs such as the Nightingale, St Christopher's, and the Glasgow or Glenmarnock Wheelers. They would race, time trial, or just enjoy the long, looping rides

around the Campsies, Loch Lomond and Strathaven – and often further afield. The men I meet were among them.

They talk of lighting campfires on the shores of Loch Lomond, where smoke would be seen rising from a dozen such 'drum-ups' of a weekend. Sunday night meant a return home for work the next day – and if you were slow packing up, the rival clubs would ring their bells as they passed, challenging you to send out your best men for the weekend's finale. The groups would start to cluster on the road, and with the first lights coming on at the edge of the city, the unofficial race, or habble, began.

Eighty-year-old Charlie Donnelly joined the Gilbertfield Wheelers as a young man in the 1940s. 'After a run, we'd be coming down the Loch Lomond road and we'd meet the Douglas Cycling Club,' he says. 'We'd be talking nice to these guys as we rode along: "How did you do in your 25-miler?" "Oh, very good, and how was your 50?" Then one of them jumped [raced ahead] – and that was the habble. Two racing clubs, the whole road, and it was a race into town, heads down and arses up, to Anniesland to see which club was top.'

Donnelly is a former shipyard worker, and the sheer physicality of his life when he was in his twenties is startling. Every day, after doing a manual job, he was cycling on the

track or road, weightlifting, or indulging in his other great passions, ice hockey and skating, before Sunday's racing finale. He and his friends would think nothing of pedalling down to Blackpool for a holiday, sleeping in barns on the way. 'It was the freedom of it we loved: the bikes could take us anywhere.'

Now this weekly gathering is probably the last of the drum-ups. Landowners have become stricter and cafés more popular. The hordes of riders have shrunk away and there are not so many who remember those hard, happy days.

TALES OF WAR AND INDUSTRY

Over the next few weeks I pass by the drum-up a couple of times, and call in to chat. There's a steady core of eight or ten men there, but there are also younger cyclists they've met on the road, and acquaintances from years back. Tales of wartime Glasgow spin out, the bombing and fire-watch duties; then later of working in the foundries, and the old days when Springburn was a centre of the rail industry. Then there were the races and the time trials, from Port Glasgow to the Cloch at Gourrock and back, and the long runs to the Highlands or the Borders and into England, and the trips cycling in America and Europe.

Camping by Loch Lomond on the way to Inverness in the late 1940s, one man put all the soaked leather cycling shoes to dry by a fire. The heat shrank them to the size of children's shoes, so they cycled barefoot to Fort William before they could buy more.

I'm sitting next to Jimmy Docherty, and he's telling me about a new Cannondale bike he's acquired, and how he still has the cycling >

“They talk of lighting campfires on the shores of Loch Lomond, where smoke would be rising from a dozen drum-ups”



Right: Alamy

shoes he bought in 1948. He's 78, and says he often cycles about 20 miles to meet up with the gang, coming up the long way round on a good day. His wife wants him to carry a mobile phone but he'll hear none of it. Her concern would be understandable given his age alone – but the fact he was half-paralysed by a stroke 22 years ago, and still has limited use of his right hand, makes it rather more so. 'You won't stop me cycling,' he says with a smile.

Eddie Brown, a former steel worker aged 77, has been riding since he was a teenager. He shows me a photograph of himself – a shy-looking, dark-haired boy – out on the road in the early 1950s. He still gets out cycling twice a week. 'It doesn't make you live longer' he says. 'But it does make you happier. When I got to my fifties, lots of fellows I knew went down with heart disease and strokes, and I could have been one of them. But I was able to keep going. Doing things like this makes you enjoy life more, makes it worthwhile.' A few weeks ago, Eddie tells me, he caught a salmon on a stretch of his local river. 'Getting out, doing stuff... that's the secret.'

The others feel the same. Bob Cunningham is 80 and works two days a week at Tunnock's confectioners in Uddingston. Bob Grieve is the same age and still plays ice hockey. Jack Maguire, another 80-year-old, is an old friend of the gang from New Jersey and has turned up on his bike. He's on holiday, but that doesn't mean sitting around doing nothing.

“Doing things like this makes you enjoy life, makes it worthwhile”

Bob Mair, the man who introduced me to the group, is 70. In the summer, he completed a 550-mile trip to the Highlands, setting off from Glasgow to Ardrossan, taking the ferry to Arran and crossing to Kintyre before reaching Oban and taking the ferry to Barra. He cycled half the length of the Outer Hebrides, caught a boat to Skye, cycled to Glen Shiel, climbed half a dozen Munros, then pedalled back home.

He's done Land's End to John O'Groats twice, the last time seven years ago, and marked the start of his retirement by riding around the coast of Ireland. The only difference from his younger days is a little caution: 'When you get older you don't want to fall off because it takes time to heal. I cracked some ribs in a fall and it took forever to sort out. You don't want a broken hip now.'

THE 'BABY' AT 65

A few weeks later I borrow a good road bike and, on a bright autumn morning, join a little peloton climbing up out of Glasgow, behind the seemingly tireless legs of Terry McGee. The baby of the bunch at 65, he is a former council worker and merchant seaman who began his retirement with a ride across Australia's Nullarbor Plain. He smokes roll-ups and I think this might mean I have a chance to keep up with him.

After tea brewed on the fire at the usual spot, we head out again for another 10 miles, across the hills, with one glorious descent of about three miles. The target, a café, is a mile or so off – so McGee, who now captains the Glenmarnock Wheelers, announces a sprint finish and I take the lead. Fifty metres from the line, I'm panting – and my 65-year-old rival sails past, arm aloft in mock triumph, not even pedalling.

On the way back it's mainly downhill and I begin to revel in the speed of the bike,

BACK IN THE SADDLE WITH CYCLING UK

Dan Joyce writes: Rides of 40 miles or more may be daunting if you've had a break from cycling. But whatever your age, you can still start cycling again – or learn for the first time.

'We've seen a lot of retired senior citizens taking to two wheels, having not been on a bike since they were children,' Cycling Development Officer Lesley Easter told me earlier this year, talking about the Walsall Arboretum group. 'Our oldest member is 85! Their confidence and ability have improved immensely.'

Walsall Arboretum is a Cycling UK affiliated group that offers weekly 'learn to ride' sessions followed by social rides. It's free to attend. Distances are modest to begin with, but participants progress from the beginners to the advanced group as they gain skills and confidence.

To find out more about Walsall Arboretum, visit cyclinguk.org/local-groups/walsall-arboretum-community-cycle-club or tel: 01922 650465. To find a Cycling UK group in your area, visit cyclinguk.org/groups-listing.





Right: Alamy © Steve Fleming

An 80-year-old rider in Sportive Lakes' 'Velo Retro' event

cornering fast and feeling its responsiveness. Then I hit a pothole at about 25mph and come crashing off, skidding along the road and into the verge. A bit bruised, I lag at the back on the rest of the ride home. We've covered 40 miles, a fairly easy day by the standards of men 30 years older than me, and that evening I'm bone-weary. But the thrill of taking the light, fast machine out across the hills stays with me. I think I begin to understand what this cycling game is all about.

As winter approaches and rain and frost gain the upper hand, I expect the ranks at the drum-up to be thinned, but these men are made of sterner stuff. Out come the fleeces and the waterproofs, on go the warm hats and gloves, and the wet, the wind and the cold are just another small problem to be overcome.

Eddie Brown is a vision in a pair of ripped overtrousers, waterproof top, woolly hat, helmet and wraparound sunglasses to keep the low-lying winter sun out of his eyes. Apart from that, there are few concessions to the season. Perhaps they'll put a few more logs on the fire and build it a little higher. Maybe they'll fit winter tyres with a slightly sounder grip.

On my last visit to the spot, I speak to Bob Mair and tell him I want to write about the days I've spent with the group. He is happy to have it recorded: like the rest, he treasures these

days on the open road and by the smoky fire. But he makes me swear not to reveal the locations of their meetings, for fear someone, somewhere will object.

I say it seems like a little piece of history, from a time when the idea of escape from the city burned bright in the minds of people whose everyday existence was a struggle.

'Aye, they're the dying embers, though,' he says.

That may be, but it seems they'll be a long time dying. And as I head home I wonder what will finish these men, what could ever stop them climbing on their bikes and cranking up the hills, into the wide, blue, wherever-the-hell-it-takes-them.

POSTSCRIPT

That was seven years ago, and I still call in at the drum-up spot a few times each year. The difference is I usually go on the bike – my small taste of life on the road with the veterans of the Wednesday Wobblers, as they call themselves, opened up a world of cycling for me.

The year after meeting them I rode the Etape Caledonia on a restored Glasgow-built Flying Scot, and a few weeks later Terry McGee led a small team of us on the 'Cri', a 130-mile day looping out from Glasgow to

Crianlarich and back via Loch Lomond. It was exhausting but fantastic.

I take the bike to work now as often as I can, and it's taken me down the Ayrshire Coast, deep into Argyll, and over to the east coast: it's a fixture in my life thanks to Bob Mair, Charlie Donnelly, Terry McGee and the rest.

One of the highlights of my year is a Christmas party at the drum-up spot where, whatever the weather, we cluster inside a rough shelter they have built there, for the best cheer of the year. There's plenty of food, Santa puts in an appearance, and we toast each other's health in tea.

Inevitably when you become friends with a group of men in their eighties, it ends in tears: this year saw the death of the oldest of the gang, Bob Brodie. The tough 89-year-old, nickname Bottom Bracket, was a man of few words but he did tell me how in the 1940s he had cycled to the Lake District from Glasgow on a tandem with Helen, his young wife, their baby daughter in a sidecar. He had continued cycling until he was 94. Helen had died a few years earlier; he told me he missed her badly.

Others in the group have had to stop cycling but still turn up to talks with their friends; there are a few bikes with electric boosters leaned against the trees, and some familiar faces are less frequent visitors, but a new generation is hitting retirement and filling the places of those who no longer appear.

The tradition of the drum-up spot, relaxing around the fire with old comrades and new, looks like it will continue one way or another long enough for me to enjoy it in my old age. **Q**

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