

A History of SPOKES, CLIPS and the Bridge Irregulars

Sam Webb

It all started out on the kitchen table in Walnut Tree Cottage in Chartham. Robin Townsend brought round a copy of "The Mudguard", a cycling magazine produced by Moose Publishing from somewhere in Bridge near Canterbury, plus a copy of a Leicester SPOKES newsletter. We decided between the three of us that we could and should form a cycle campaign group and publish a newsletter ourselves.

Sheila and I had been running cycle rides through the aptly named CLIPS which started life as the Chartham Ladies Intermittent Pedalling Society with three members and a token male which then branched out as Chartham Local and International Pedalling Society following a trip to Boulogne with the CTC.

The Mudguard was the brainchild of "Moose", brother of Emily Shirley. We had heard of these Shirleys, mythical creatures from Bridge, who went everywhere on their bikes, had lots of kids and a bicycle weathervane on top of their oast house. We also heard they organised irregular rides from pub to pub. So we met up in the White Hart Canterbury, the monthly meeting point for Beatrice Shire's Canterbury Cycle Campaign Group.

We had also heard stories that the CTC seemed to be into serious cycling, cotton duck saddlebags and mudguards. Not true.

Then there were the Wednesday Wobblers who cycled to a pub each week and may have been the same people as The Potterers who cycled to a different pub from various points of the compass every Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. Their motto is *Usque Ad Mortem Bibendum*. The Potterers also belonged to Le Portel, a French club from Boulogne. We found this out cycling through a wood in the Pas de Calais. A mysterious finger beckoned us from behind a tree where about ten members of Le Portel sat dressed in blue from head to toe and surrounded by many bottles of wine. They spoke amazing English, which wasn't surprising really as they all seemed to come from Ramsgate. We were rapidly discovering that not everything was what it seemed in cycling circles.

Then international stardom came for CLIPS in 1994 when the Tour de France peloton swept through Chartham like an arrow. There was Channel 4 coverage, free Channel 4 tee shirts, flags to wave and a mention for CLIPS in the Official Tour Programme. To say nothing of the coverage in the Chartham Parish Magazine avidly read from as far away as Australia and the Solomon Islands. We decided to call our new group SPOKES.

The first newsletter rolled off the presses in August 1994 as a slim A4 sheet folded once. It has since become a collector's item. Within a short time the first printing had gone and we were busy on the next issue. Many of the articles have a prophetic ring about them. Colin Hattersley-Smith penned a piece on the first Cycle Challenge for the June 1994 National Bike Week and the way cyclists had found routes into Canterbury that they didn't know existed. Sheila Webb planted the idea for Canterbury route maps and the need for maps showing safe routes into the City. She talked about advanced stop lines, safe crossings and bike racks. There was a very informative piece about air pollution pointing out high levels of atmospheric pollution that had been reached nationally but with no Government Directives to cut down on the use of cars. Since the May election Canterbury is one of the cities involved in a pilot study to reduce pollution from car exhausts. The only idea that hasn't yet materialised is One-Day Bike Hire or City Bikes. Now even that could change.

The first indication that we were having a major impact came with the large numbers of riders who turned up for our bike rides. In May 1995 some 75 riders came on our tour of a 7-mile ride around the new cycle paths of Canterbury. When our first issue came out in May 1994 there were about 2 miles of signed cycle route in the whole of Kent. Now there are well over 120 miles. We started to get supportive letters from councillors and officers and the membership steadily increased. It was time to buy a proper box for the card index. One of the first things we did was to collect official cycle maps of Kent. The major one from KCC carried stickers warning cycle tourists that it was too dangerous to cycle out of the ports of Dover, Ramsgate and Sheerness. They would be better off, it said, going by train. We decided we should look into this and survey safer routes for everyone.

And really, the rest is just history...