



The Borough of Kingston has a rich history of cycling, cyclists and bicycle manufacturing. The Community Brain is currently undertaking a project 'The Wheels of Time' to research and celebrate this heritage. We are extremely grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, Kingston Council and our team of volunteers for their support and help. If you would like to be involved please visit www.wheelsofetimekingston.org or email info@wheelsofetimekingston.org

'The Ripley Road' 1

The run to Ripley became one of the favoured routes for fashionable cyclists of the day. On Whit Sunday 1894 the police in Kingston upon Thames said that 20,000 cyclists had passed through the town and along the Portsmouth Road.

The Hub, an "Illustrated Weekly Journal for Wheelmen and Women" produced by the publisher of market-leading Tit-Bits tabloid in the 'bicycle boom' years of 1896 and 1897, described the road as "historic":

'Of all stretches of highway popular amongst cyclists, the Ripley Road, without dispute, is by far and away the most famous... The Ripley Road is known, at least by name, to cyclists in every part of the globe; and particularly in the case of American wheeling visitors... a 'run to Ripley' figures as surely on their programme, as does a trip to Stratford upon Avon.'

Twenty three miles distant from Westminster Bridge, Ripley was the perfect distance for a there-and-back day ride for metropolitan "cracks" on their fast and trendy high-wheeler bicycles.

Although primarily recreational the run along the old Portsmouth Road started as a road for racers. One of the first recorded mentions is of a party led by champion racer John Keen. The Portsmouth Road is once again home to cyclists with the new Go cycle lane

John Keen 2

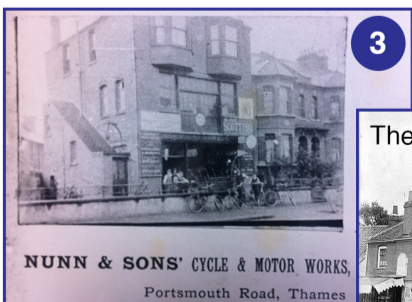
John Keen or 'Happy Jack' as he was born in Broadway, Worcestershire but subsequently attended St Mark's School in Surbiton. He was a carpenter's apprentice but his interest was cycling

Keen started racing as early as 1869 and was, according to an article in Wheeling World in 1885 'in the first rank of cycling celebrities.' He won his first race at the age of 20 on a Boneshaker developing the reputation as the undisputed British champion with a speed of half a mile in 2 minutes 45 seconds.

The desire to improve the design for faster speeds led to the development of the Ordinary cycle with its iconic large front and smaller rear wheels. This resulted in a machine faster than its predecessors. Keen manufactured his own 'Eclipse' model at his workshop in Victoria Road. Widely acknowledged as one of the finest Ordinary ever produced Keen became the best all round rider in Britain as skilled on the track as he was on the road

His arch-rival at the time as Fred Cooper, originally from Sheffield but based in Kingston. The pair raced 17 times for the mile title with crowds of up to 12,000. Keen won nine times and Cooper on eight. During this period Keen competed at the Surbiton Race Track racing against horses which he almost always beat. He accepted invitations to race in the United States between 1876 and 1883 where he set several new records.

Keen moved his workshop from Victoria Road to next to the Angel Inn on the Portsmouth Road. Kingston Museum has an example of a bicycle bearing a badge 'John Keen Surbiton Hill 1872'.



Both Cyril Wren and the Sphinx Cycle Company were in North Kingston



Carpenter advert from Sporting Cyclist May 1961 Based in Kingston the Carpenter shop became the centre of sporting cyclists in the area.

Frank Carpenter was a leading figure in the Festival Road Club and the shop became its unofficial second clubroom. Frank was President of the Club for many years.



Surbiton Race Track

Built in 1879 Surbiton Raced Track was sited on Balaclava Road and behind the Brighton Road. During the 1880's it was the premier cycle track in the London area with the slope down from the railway ensuring a fast start. A wide cinder track and banked corners meant it was known for speed and the lack of railings or fencing gave a reputation for safety as falling riders were not impaled.

The track consisted of four straights and four corners with four laps to a mile. Under the management of a 'committee of four gentlemen' the off track facilities were noted as 'lacking'. In 1889 Badminton gentlemen's magazine commented that there was no pavilion and the dressing rooms were 'very poor with not bath and few conveniences'.

However it seems the main problem was the considerable costs for cyclists getting to the track from London (4/6d return for third class with a machine) As a result the track became overlooked, fell into disrepair and by 1891 Badminton magazine wrote that it had been broken up and built over.

The adjacent plot of land was secured by a local cricket club and still exists as Victoria Recreation Ground today.

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