

# Cycle Speedway: Tolworth Tudors

## Cycle Speedway

Cycle Speedway is a form of bicycle racing on short oval dirt tracks typically 70 to 90 metres long. Sometimes riders compete as individuals, but usually it is a team sport with different riders from two teams competing against each other in a 'match.' Two riders from each team contest each race meaning there are four riders on the track at any one time. A match can comprise of anything from eight to 24 races, each race is four laps of the track. Points are awarded for placing's: four points for first, three points for second, two points for thirds and one point for last. The team that accumulates the most points over the course of the match is the winner. Typically, a team consists of seven to eight riders. The riders use lightweight, robust bicycles with no gears or brakes. The sport became popular in Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War. Children would create their own tracks from the rubble of bomb-damaged buildings and emulate their motorbike speedway heroes. The fact that all that was needed was a bicycle, some friends and some rubble meant the sport spread quickly across the country. The exciting races meant it was a popular spectator sport too. In 1950, over ten-thousand people watched an international match between England and the Netherlands at Earls Court. However, later that decade many of the original riders were drafted in to National Service and the bomb rubble began to be steadily cleared away. As a result, the sport began a slow decline. Still, for next three decades cycle-speedway remained a flourishing minority sport. Teams from all over the country competed regularly in different leagues and competitions. However, in the early 1990s the sport suffered a serious dip in participation with many clubs folding.

## Tolworth Tudors

Tolworth Tudors were formed in 1953, initially racing on a track on waste ground on Davis Road. Between 1965 and 1971 the club had a track near Berrylands Station on a former council tip. In 1975, the club moved to a new track on Jubilee Way where it remained until the club folded in the early 1990s. Its riders wore red shirts with white trim, black trousers, red socks and white breastplates embossed with a red Tudor Rose. Made up entirely of local lads, the first Tudors team was one of the most successful cycle speedway sides in the country. They became National Senior Champions in 1956, beating Warwickshire's 'Kingstanding Monarchs' by 52 points' to 43. The club would continue to win regional league titles and cup competitions throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

## In Conversation with Chris Rasom and Peter Giles

We spoke to two former Tudor Tudors: Peter Giles who was one of the original members of the club and raced until being called up for National Service in 1957. His son-in-law Chris Rasom rode for the club from 1975 to 1980.

### How did you first get involved?

Peter: Well there was Richard Whicher and Ray Wallace they got together and there was about another half dozen of us who used to ride around on a bit of waste ground and they said why don't we just form a team. Richard Whicher was more on the clerical side he got us into a lot of the friendlies and made the breast-plates mucking up his aunties' sewing machine... I remember that vividly! We then built the track between us. Me and Wall' were both engineering apprentices and we built ourselves a starting gate for us. That track was in Davis Road and nobody ever knew who owned that bit of land. We could never find anybody who owned that bit of land. We must have been there for over 10 or 12 years... We were four engineering apprentices in the same team. We worked at Mollart Engineering, down Roebuck road. It's still operates. I worked there for 50 years. They were very good cos they closed a bit of a blind eye while we was working on all the starting gates and bits.

Chris: Personally, my first involvement was when the new track started to be built in Jubilee Way in 1974/75. At the time, me and friends at school were all speedway mad. We used to go to Wimbledon Speedway to watch motorbike speedway. So we built bikes to look like speedway bikes, you know -cow horns and long saddles and stuff and we marked out our own track; one at Copse Lane and one in Surbiton at Ferguson Avenue, so we used to mess about on them and then someone said: 'Someone's building a proper track.' at Jubilee Way, so off we went to have a look at that and then we used the track a couple of times and then we bumped into the actual guys that were building it and obviously they were more than happy for us to come and join the club as they needed young riders.

### So cycle speedway was popular...

Chris: They used to get very good crowds to a lot of these, particularly in the fifties to some of the big meetings. What was going on in Tolworth was going on all over the country. It wasn't unique they just happened to be the best team. A bit of that was make your own fun stuff cos it was post war days. There was a lot of austerity around people hadn't got much, so make do and make up your own entertainment

Peter: Once you got a bit of support it was great. But sometimes there was interference. At one of the matches, I can't remember which one, the Teddy boys all walked in and stopped the match. You remember the Teddy boys and the Mods don't you. I tell you what there's been a few fights in the pits when they all turned up I tell you. We used to get one every week. There'd always be some stropky person. Sometimes we used to have floodlit test matches, 12 o' clock nighttime the start

### Are crashes part of the sport?

Peter: Yeah! But there's rules in it believe me.

Chris: There's rules you know but like all rules they can be broke, but generally I think an analogy sometimes used is rugby on wheels Because you were allowed to shoulder barge and stuff like that as long as it was a fair contact. You weren't supposed to hook your foot over someone's wheel but I can show you some photographs where that did go on but yeah, you got four guys trying to move pretty quickly in pretty small proximities, so inevitably things go wrong. And there were some dirty riders as well.

Peter: The pressure you used to put on the bikes as well was unbelievable...the power you put into it. I've had bottom brackets shear off, had, pedal arms shear off you've had handle bars come off and smack you in the face

### Were Tolworth Tudors a successful team?

Chris: Pete's team got to the national final in 1955. And then they got back there the next year and won. Now bearing in mind there was probably some 200 clubs would have entered that, to get two finals back to back and then win the second one was quite some achievement. You basically you beat the Dutch national team as well didn't you?

Peter: So I was 18 then. We went to Hilversum and we went to the Hook of Holland on a boat and everyone was sea sick. I remember it - we didn't have eight bikes we only took six so when we got to Hilversum they closed the roundabout down then they put built up scaffolding stands - six thousand odd people in there...seriously actually six thousand in there! We won that match then we went from there to Utrecht in Belgium and that match was in that Marine barracks in there and gosh that was a hectic day! It was all cobble stones and it was real teeth- battering that was. And we won that one. One thing about them was they rode odd size wheels. They had like an ordinary twenty- six inch wheel in the front and something like an 18 diameter wheel in the back - crazy it was and they had real high pressure tyres cos I remember one exploded half way round. I thought I'd been shot because it was in a big barracks that echoed- sounded like gunfire. Also their track was genuinely a lot bigger than what we was used to. We used to call ours the Tolworth saucer.

### What was the later track at Jubilee Way like?

Chris: Well, when I first arrived there it was pretty much a bare track. You know they'd marked out the outside with concrete stones and we had and the inside oval was created Then a shale surface was put on it. We then got some money from the Council to build a fence around it, so we spent the winter cutting up bits of wood making this fence. It was very much do it yourself stuff; built the pits area. It was a pretty tidy little circuit by the time we finished. The Council gave us the bit of land but they didn't construct the track. It was all done by the club members. My mum and my nan used to man the tea bar to help out. For the big meetings we used to get some scaffolding erected to make some sort of tiered seats in a certain area and then we made a very special one for the mayor when he came we... Peter: Took the splinters off!

### It sounds like it became a big part of your lives...

Chris: It was. I mean it became my social life for sure because the friends that I made through cycle speedway are still friends now. You end up spending a lot of time with those people because if you're racing at weekends as we did you know, driving off to different parts of the country to compete there isn't really much time left for other people. And of course you get friendly with people from other teams etc so, as a 14 year old I went in as, it's part of your life - it forms your life. It was great cos you have a good experience and you end up knowing people all round the country -everyone knows one another. If you're turning up for one of the bigger national meetings there's going to be a lot of people there that you know. I think that before that I wasn't really good at any sports because I didn't have the confidence, but I took to that one like a duck to water and then within a couple of years I raced in a National Junior final so you think yes, actually I can be good at something and that is a great thing in life because I then got confidence to take on other things in the future.



Peter Giles (left) and Chris Rasom (right)



National Champions, 1956



Chris takes a tumble, Jubilee Way Track, 1978



Chris competes the U18 National Final. Bristol, 1977