

John Keen

John Keen was a carpenter's apprentice from Surbiton who became one of the most important pioneering figures in cycling history. His journey began in 1869 when he won his first *Boneshaker* race in Richmond aged 20. That victory marked the end of his carpentry career and he soon developed a reputation as the undisputed *Boneshaker* racing champion of Britain with a speed of half a mile in 2 min 45 sec.

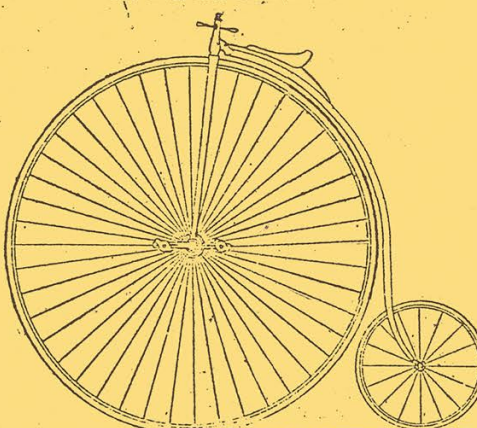
However, the limitations of the heavy and cumbersome *Boneshakers* led Keen and others to try and design something better. The result was the *Ordinary* bicycle with its iconic large front wheel and far smaller rear wheel. Like the *Boneshaker*, the pedals were directly attached to the front wheel, so enlarging it meant the bike travelled further per pedal revolution. The result was a machine far faster than its predecessors. It should be noted that the rather derogatory term *Penny Farthing* only became widespread decades later, once the bikes were out-dated. At the time, they were always known as *Ordinaries*.

Keen manufactured his 'Eclipse' model at his workshop in Victoria Road. It was widely acknowledged to be one of the finest *Ordinary* bicycles ever produced, noted for its height and lightweight design. Riding the Eclipse, Keen became the best all round rider Britain had ever known, as skilled on the track as he was on the road.



FIRST PRIZE MEDAL
AWARDED AT
INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION,
1873.

KEEN'S
"ECLIPSE" ROADSTER.
(REGISTERED.)



MANUFACTURED BY
JOHN KEEN, *Champion Cyclist,*
(Late of Surbiton.)
DALSTON LANE, DALSTON JUNCTION, LONDON,
(Nearly opposite Dalston Junction Station, N.L.R.)

Descriptive Price List, post free 1d., with Photograph 3d.

Three Trains every Fifteen Minutes from Broad Street (City); fare od.
Dalston Junction Station is accessible from N.W., G.N., S.W., L. E. & S. C., and G.W. Railways.
Frequent Trains from Willden, Kingston, Ken, Richmond, &c.

His arch rival was Fred Cooper, originally from Sheffield but based in Kingston, who had been the first man to beat him over a mile. The pair raced seventeen times for the mile title, all over the country and in front of crowds of up to 25,000; Keen won on nine occasions and Cooper on eight. At this time, Keen often delighted the crowd at Surbiton Race Track by racing against horses, against which he almost always won. He accepted several invitations to race against local opposition in the United States between 1876 and 1883 where he set several records and appeared on adverts for the Columbia bicycle.

Known as 'Happy Jack', Keen was said to have had an extremely cheerful temperament, which he would need in his rather sad later years. Keen continued to race until the age of 36, but the arduous nature of competition racing on primitive machines took its toll. His health was shattered and he faded in to obscurity and faced financial ruin. He died in 1902 of what doctors described as 'a general breakup of the constitution.' The *Sporting Mirror* reported that 'no rider has done more to develop cycling than John Keen'. Despite this, there were no more than 20 people at his funeral. Poignantly, Fred Cooper was one of the few that sent a wreath.