

LIGHTWEIGHT NEWS - 19

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A Happy New Year to all our readers and, with another new year of cycling ahead of us, the first entry in our diary is for the third weekend in May which is when Terry and Pauline Pearce organise the classic Reading Lightweight Ride. For us in the UK it is the biggest event for the lightweight enthusiast with anything up to one hundred riders and Terry has the courage to start them all together but there is no problem as natural selection takes place and the field soon splits into smaller groups, especially at the first hill and then we all rejoin at the coffee and lunch stops and form small groups for the next leg. As you can imagine the selection of bikes is fantastic and there is just about everything you could ever wish to see on display.

The one machine I have never seen ridden at Reading is the Viking SBU Tracker although Peter McLeod had one on a static display a few years ago. I mention this because we recently put one up in Readers' Bikes on the website and although the design is rather crazy it stands out like the Paris Galibier, which is another example of mind over matter. When I was club riding in the late forties/early fifties the Galibier was an absolute no-goer whereas now almost everyone hankers after one due to the unusual configuration of the frame. We don't have one but pay homage to the Paris marque as we each have a Paris 'Tour de France'.

A few years ago I jokingly said that I was to spend the Christmas break cataloguing my collection of 4, 5 and 6-speed sprockets and was rightfully awarded first prize for nerd of the year. Now I've done it for real and it isn't even Christmas. I currently have some of mine bagged in sealable bags with the details of sprocket sizes, on a piece of card, showing through the clear plastic. I have spent ages sifting through them without seeming to achieve much. Having 29 freewheels at the last count (today) I appear to have just about every combination available apart from the one I want which is for an Osgear set up on a 1949 Rotrax namely 16-18-20-22. If I had a Regina 14-16-18-20-22 I could remove the overhanging 14 and this would reduce the overall width as well as giving me the gears I want. Annoyingly I have a (modern) Suntour with this ratio but removing the smaller sprocket wouldn't reduce the width and I wouldn't want to use a modern one anyway. Having catalogued the freewheels carefully I see that if I can change the largest sprockets over on two blocks I can get what I want which is to keep the ratios as close as possible to allow the Osgear to change smoothly and reliably. (Have since tried to change the two large sprockets over but could not move either of them, admittedly I was juggling with two chain-whips rather than using a proper vice made for the job - which I don't possess.)

When the Osgear was first used here in the UK I guess most riders had the ultra-close ratio of one tooth difference all the way through three, four, or in later years five-gears. Time-triallers had been very reluctant to switch to gears instead of their beloved fixed-wheel, so when they finally succumbed then they were disinclined to have more than one-tooth difference. I think most of the Osgears were sold to 'Leaguers' and the few Union riders who used to road-race. The problem for an old-stager like myself is that whilst I could probably organise chainwheels, etc to get a low enough gear for the hills I would encounter riding the Rotrax in its home county of Hampshire, the high gear would be so low that I would be 'twiddling' frantically to keep up with the group. The other problem with this is how to disguise the smallness of the chainring which shows up no end on the 24/25" frames I ride. Patricia can get away with them on her 19" frames though. A double chainset could be the answer but I don't think this would be appropriate on a 1949 frame. Double chainsets were available of course but they would only be 47/50, 48/51 or 49/52 - I'm sure I have bored you with the reason for these spacings in the past. There were touring set-ups but I never build my bikes as tourers as I never did this in my mis-spent youth, preferring to travel ultra-light with just a musette and a bottle of water, grabbing a cheese sandwich and a Lyons fruit pie wherever I could.

STOP PRESS: I have just bought, and awaiting delivery of, a 14-16-18-20-22 freewheel on ebay. I hope it is in good condition and that I will be able to remove the 14T. If so I should be in business again and hopefully get the Rotrax in good order with a gear which works on every change. Watch this space. A 42T ring would give a top of 71" which is a bit low and gives a low of 51.5" which is OK as long as I don't compare it with the 34" on my Van Nicholas! A 44T ring will give a 1949 high of 74.2" which I could live with at the pace of V-CC rides, the lowest gear would then be 54" so it's out of the saddle time then!

I have been known to cheat by building up the Stronglight/TA 5-pin chainset configuration to look like a Criterium but using smaller rings which really belong on the Tourist version. This way I have reduced the gap

between the two rings so as to allow the older rear changers to cope. An example is changing a 44/52 to a 44/48 by changing the outer ring. It is possible to use smaller ring combinations such as 40/44 or 42/46 by tracking down some of the touring rings – Patricia has some of these which she uses on hilly rides.

Good news is that the Hampshire Lightweight Section of the V-CC are organising a **Rotrax Ride** again this year and we hope they get a deservedly good turnout. It has to be admitted that the last ride was not well supported so we hope that the cycle is reversed this year – the marque deserves it and many owners live in Hampshire so no excuses there. The county is the home of this famous marque so get your bike there on 14 June. Starts at the Flower Pot Inn, Cheriton - fly the flag for this respected Southampton builder of classic lightweights. Wonderful cycling in peaceful lanes with watercress beds, thatched cottages, country pubs, old churches and all things nice. Other makes welcome to join in so if you just have a soft spot for Rotrax make the trip South. Contact: Chris Carter 02380 692658

Still on the subject of Rotrax.....we have had an email from Tim Maund pointing out that the Rotrax name is still up and going and they are still building frames. They can also help with decals for your restoration and have Rotrax shirts and capes amongst their sales items. Their website is www.rotraxcycles.wordpress.com - actually it is a blog but one can contact them via email from the page.

Cambridge now has its share of the **new breed of fixed-wheel machines** which are ridden, in the main, by youngish riders. They obviously have no pre-conceptions as to how a bike should look and I have been trying to work out why their bikes appear so different. In extreme cases they have no brakes at all and stop by jumping the rear wheel off the road, locking the legs and skidding to a halt when the wheel comes down. In the UK the law says that bicycles must have two brakes with a freewheel but if there is a fixed-wheel then one brake is legal.

A couple of days ago we uploaded onto the website a new 'Paris' Tour de France built by the licence holders Condor Cycles. See 'Classic Builders' > 'Paris' > 'Paris 2' This machine has unusual bars with a shallow drop and here the penny dropped as to why these machines look different. It is mainly the bars and quite often they use models known a few years ago as 'cowhorns'. They were used for time-trialling with tri-bars mounted on top. Now they are fitted on these machines on their own. If you should want build a bike this way it is possible to turn over a pair of conventional bars and saw off just after the bars begin to rise now they are inverted. Slightly off-topic here but it is interesting to see a throwback to the 50's as a fashion statement in the 21st century. This fashion in bars means that the bikes are ridden with just the one position for the hands, none of the 'on the tops' or 'on the bottoms'. Most of these 'street' machines have SPD type pedals as well. So far I have never ridden fixed with SPD's but would like to do so. I don't feel I can fit them to a 50's machine so perhaps I will need a later 'posers' model just to ride round town and show the youngsters how it is done – some chance. It is interesting to see the approach to braking, if any, and the ones fitted with a single brake tend to go for small levers often mounted near the centre of the bars. The smallest I have ever seen was not that of a 'fixie' poseur but on a very classic track bike ridden in a V-CC event – The Mad and Foolish ride in Herefordshire. The owner, Philippa Wheeler, had the brake cable connected to a motor-cycle 'compression release' lever – just about big enough for a couple of fingers at a squeeze. The Paris also has the 'Snowflake' spoking in the rear wheel – I have seen one or two of these machines with fancy spoking so maybe it is the thing to have – must speak to Mick Madgett about this! This craze for fixed-wheel (or 'fixies' as our cousins across the pond call them) machines started with the cycle couriers and spread outwards – this is the reason the price of used track frames has jumped over the last couple of years. At one time track frames were quite hard to sell, now they are the first to go at jumbles, etc. and they go to a new wave of buyers who are looking for street cred. You can see them in packs at jumbles which were once populated by much older brethren. I met three at Ripley once and they had opted to ride the 200k event at L'Eroica on fixed – believe me this takes some doing, especially as one of the riders was a woman. I think they realised that this was the sort of thing you do once in a lifetime as I heard them talking about gears for their next visit.

Since I wrote the above item I had reason to check ebay as someone had sent me details of a Pollard track machine he had for sale. I never found it actually, but tried putting 'Track bike' in the search engine. To my amazement pages of the above mentioned fixed wheel machines appeared for sale. At first I assumed they were from the States but I realised that at least one person in London is producing customized versions using new frames and components at very reasonable prices!

This new craze has created its own style of machine build and one can often pick them out from a distance just by the riding style they promote. Even today I was riding along with a friend when he proclaimed 'fixed' – looking up I saw a rider coming towards us on such a machine with cowhorn bars set quite low. In the thirties,

serious cyclists rode very small frames with lots of seat post and handlebar stem showing. By the late forties this had all changed and it was common to see bikes with the saddle almost on the top tube and the stem as low as it would go. Adverts for cycle sales in this period show machines set up in this way. Some people were excluded from this fashion – I was one of them - being six feet tall and only able to get frames with 24” seat tube I had to have about six inches from the top tube to the top of the saddle. One or two builders produced 25” frames but they were few and far between. I own two now but never had one when I rode as a youngster. One is a Mercian, especially built for Dave Keeler, Mercian’s star rider of the day and about 6’ 4” tall. The other is a Rotrax Super Course built very soon after the war. Some builders such as Gillott and Granby built these big frames and promoted the use of taper-tubes in order to stiffen the frames, especially in the bottom-bracket area. Today the ‘Tour’ riders bikes have lots of seat pin showing, using smaller frames to get a low bar position and then this exacerbated by a sloping top tube. Pictures of Coppi and Bartoli show the saddle almost level with the bars whereas today there is an amazing height difference. A couple of friends of ours collect 26” machines but they are so successful there are non left for anyone else.

A couple of weekends ago we were in Munich watching the **6-day Track Race** over two evenings, Friday and Saturday. We tend to drift to the track centre about 20-30 minutes before the big names are due on and one can watch their track irons being prepared for a hard night’s work and also meet the riders, if you are lucky. The mechanics put the wheels in every evening. I wonder if this is because they fit new tubs for each session or if they store them overnight with wheels on a different rack? Another option is that they take them to their hotel every night in the car but having seen the facilities on offer at Munich I doubt this would be necessary. Anyway they popped the wheels in, chain over the rear sprocket and pulled the wheel back to tighten the tracknuts. All straightforward. They then checked that there was just a little slack in the chain but here is the rub. With no problem at all the slack was identical wherever it was tested. I have never fitted a chain without it being tight at one place and slack in another and fitting instructions in older manuals tell you to find the tight spot and adjust accordingly. Is this another example of modern gear being so much better that the old stuff we tend to idolise? I have heard various reasons for this ‘tight-spot’ phenomenon: one is that the chainset has been plated and the polishing has distorted the axle hole causing the crank to ‘tip’ to one side when the cotter pin is tightened. An earlier Lightweight News had details of how to correct this distortion by bending the crank arms, especially on Chater cranks. I must admit I find it hard to believe that the platers spend too much time polishing inside the holes in the cranks. If they don’t of course then you cannot get the cranks back on the axles as the diameter would be reduced by the thickness of the chrome! One can have a similar problem when dismantling hubs to have the barrels polished. Here the polisher takes off some of the metal on the barrel and then the flanges are sloppy when refitted – but that is another story! Re-plating can throw up these problems of fit. Steve Griffith had a Major Taylor stem replated and now he cannot get the sliding clamp to tighten no matter what he does. Result is a stem which is now for show only and not usable. (If your hubs are sloppy in this way use a sharp tool to raise little nicks in the alloy flange to make it a tighter fit. Once the hubs are laced it is not so much of a problem. You need the tightness to stagger the spoke holes.)

I also noticed that the practice of re-taping the bars for the track riders every evening with cotton tape has been dropped and the bars now have the cork tape which has a longer life and is more comfortable. I guess it also gives a better grip when ‘slinging’ your partner. 6-day riders tape the bars all the way to the stem as they have to have a firm hold on the top of the bars when ‘slinging’. I wonder if some manufacturer produces longer tapes especially for this feature or if not having to do figure of eights around the brakes leaves just enough. Another of life’s great mysteries.

Father Christmas decided I could do with a light and lively up-to-the-minute bike to help me keep up with the young bloods on our Tuesday club ride. This ride started out as an outing for retired club members but now sometimes has half the club road racing team mixing it with the more sedate members. In the summer they chain-gang in the evenings but in the winter sometimes join us for what they would call an easy recovery ride. The problem is that if you can ride for hours at 30mph then 22-24mph is a nice little cruise and it is easy to hold it on the level and up the hills. It is good fun to get on their wheels and hang on in there but I need all the help I can get. Sometimes I send them on a harder loop whilst some of us take the easier route to the tea stop - doesn’t make any difference though they still come back smiling. Obviously Santa heard about this state of affairs when he was polishing his sleigh and grooming the reindeer (is that allowed?). The result is that I am now the proud owner of a Van Nicholas titanium winter bike to replace my 531 Bob Jackson. I realise that Patricia and I now have four machines between us which have the spoke nipples at the hubs rather than in the rims. This of course reduces the weight at the circumference and also does away with the sharp bend in the spoke which is where they usually break. I wonder how long before this becomes the norm?

Thanks to arrival of the Van Nicholas, I now have a bike for sale; not a classic lightweight as we define them but built by a well-known British builder: Bob Jackson winter/training bike; 24" lugged frame with 531 tubing (believed about eight years old), Shimano 105 STI group set; 3 x 9 gears - front 30/40/50, rear 12-25 nine-speed; Cinelli bars and stem; Flite Titanium saddle; 2 bottle cages; Open SUP rims with Vredestein Tri-Comp tyres (rear new), mudguards of course, Shimano SPD pedals. Cat-Eye computer , a bargain at £275 ready to ride away. Peter Underwood peter.underwood@tesco.net or phone 01223 565036 (Cambridge) There are a few chips in the maroon paint but no dents and the frame is perfectly straight, never having been in an accident. I expect it will sell here in Cambridge but you have advance information as our club newsletter is not out for a week or so. Only if you would be able to pick it up though, as I have only packed bikes ready for carriers once and don't fancy doing it again.

Stopwatch I wonder if we have any watch restorers amongst the readership. On a couple of my bikes I have a Terry stop-watch clip which holds, of course, a stopwatch of the old style, i.e. about 50mm diameter. I have such a watch I would like to use but it has a slight problem. It is a 60 minute stop-watch made by a Swiss company Excelsior Park and an external part is missing – the small loop at the winder which would be used for a securing cord (or watch chain!) if one was used. The winder seems to work but it just falls out. There is a groove around the shaft and I imagine that the missing 'loop' also secures this in place when it is fitted. I did ask a local watch repairer if he had such a loop but they are used to repairing modern watches; although they did enquire to see if their suppliers had the part needed ,without luck. I could supply images of the watch and winder if anyone knows how the watch may be repaired.

Clive Copland clive.copland@googlemail.com Phone/fax 0208 876 3728; mobile 07956 374623. Still has for sale, a 50's Paris frame 23" which was expertly re-sprayed by Cyril Wren in Kingston upon Thames around the mid 60's. There is some surface rust but otherwise the cycle is in more than presentable condition. He would like to offer the cycle to an enthusiast rather than advertise it on ebay or Loot. He lives in Richmond Surrey and the cycle is kept in Kingston-on-Thames. He feels quite sad at the thought of considering selling the cycle as he has had it so long and it appears to have been in his family probably since new. Clive can send images of the bicycle.

Steve Griffith says: One of the things that impresses me about many cyclists is their ingenuity, whether it is fixes to major disasters or home-made adaptations to components and machines. As examples of the former using a stick of wood to support a saddlebag (wedged between brake bridge and underside of bag) when the carrier has broken or, a drain used to straighten a buckled wheel . Examples of the latter: adding a top spring to a Campag rear mech to increase capacity and performance, attaching Mafac centre pull Racer brakes to braze-on pivots to increase braking power. Various home-made clamps to fit lights & fitting two rear side-pull brakes either side of the brake bridge and worked from a Mafac two cable lever to increase braking power. I would welcome further examples for an article I am currently researching for the VCC. Photos would be most welcome plus a brief explanation. steve.y.griffith@royalmail.co.uk

As we are on the last day of 2008 we checked our website statistics for the year and the number of page visits is just under one million which is about one thousand times what we expected when the site was set up in the first place just over two years ago. The Sunday Times gave us a recommendation a few weeks ago when they ran an item on the upsurge of Classic Bikes and an American magazine also gave us a glowing report about two months ago. Patricia always plots the upward blips in the statistics graphs when this sort of thing happens. We also act as a sort of unofficial Friends Reunited as happened recently. A retired cyclist searched for Blackpool Road Club and found a piece written by an old friend from over 50 years ago – we were able to put them in touch with each other again.