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Historical accounts of the beginnings of the bicycle in England in the late 1860s and 1870s have focused largely on technological and manufacturing aspects and the evolution of design, and have charted the brief flowering and the public reception of what was widely acknowledged as a “craze.” It should be remembered that the two-wheeled “velocipede” was a brand-new phenomenon. Later critical accounts have noted the appearance of the many contemporary pamphlets and newspaper articles on the subject. These short publications were mostly of the “how to” variety, intended to give general background information on velocipedes and instruct new riders on choosing a machine and learning to ride it. The authors frequently added a brief, and invariably inaccurate, history of the velocipede, as if to give its arrival status and viability. Two typical titles were, *The Velocipede, Its History and How to Use It and Velocipedes, Bicycles and Tricycles, How to Make and How to Use Them, With a Sketch of Their History, Invention and Progress.*

The earliest competitive aspects of bicycling have not, however, received much critical attention. This paper therefore examines the origins and early evolution of the sport of bicycle racing in Britain. How much evidence is there of the earliest bicycle competitions and races? What kinds of events were they? What was the economic and social stimulus behind them? Who organized them and where were they held? What sort of people were those who competed and spectated? Who made the bicycles which were used, and what kind of relationship did the bicycle makers have with the riders? This article also poses some further, broader questions about the social, economic and sporting context in which these competitions took place. Between 1869 and about 1880, how typical or untypical were they of athletic contests in general, and what were some of the characteristics they
shared with other contemporary sports events? From a social and class perspective, how should they now be viewed, how were they perceived at the time, and what kind of an audience might have attended an early bicycle race?

The year 1869 has been chosen as the starting point of this study because that was the year in which the sport can really be said to have begun in England; 1880 was more arbitrarily chosen as the chronological limit because by then, the sport of bicycle racing had assumed a remarkable degree of definition and institutional organization. These earliest years of the existence of the bicycle saw not only the manufacture of the machine itself, and its sale to those men with an interest in a somewhat risque, dangerous, athletic activity (women were in general excluded from velocipeding), but also the rapid development of a brand-new sport. The emerging bicycle competitions could at first be found in the context of a variety of existing athletic and social institutions before they evolved and developed their own more distinct characteristics. The well-documented velocipede “craze” which erupted in England in 1869 was, from its inception, as much concerned with sport and entertainment as it was about the potential of the new vehicle for personal utility and transportation, and leisure entertainment, sport and utilitarian transportation were three separate but interconnected aspects of this technological and social movement. The new sport of bicycle racing in England in the years 1869-80 gave a powerful economic and manufacturing stimulus to the young bicycle industry, and racing and rapid design improvements interacted and mutually stimulated each other in the early evolution of the bicycle.

Bicycle competition and racing was introduced into England, diffused from and stimulated by the sport that had already begun in France and the United States, at a moment when English bicycle making was still an embryonic industry. But from early 1869, velocipede activity exploded with displays and competitions of various kinds. Competitions were organized in a variety of locations, on road and track, outdoors and indoors—anywhere a promoter could hope to make a profit, a social festivity be justified, or a faster time over a known route be achieved. Riders competed for money, for equipment, or for a valuable cup. Indoor racing was held in halls and gymnasiums, and outdoor racing on fields and prepared tracks. Bicycle racing was integrated into horticultural shows and into athletic meetings, which also included running, jumping, hammer-throwing and horse-riding. A predominantly urban phenomenon, race meetings frequently included exhibitions of new bicycles organized by makers and costume competitions for the riders.

Professional athletics (running, walking, prize-fighting, horse-racing) was already well developed in the 1860s, and organized amateur athletic activity was beginning to emerge as a distinct social arena within the old universities. Some of the early bicycle racing grew in a social and class context similar to that of the older sport of pedestrianism, in which races were either held on an enclosed track or place-to-place on the open road, although the initial cost of a bicycle may well have been prohibitive for a working-class athlete able to compete cheaply as a pedestrian. But in other respects, indoor bicycle competition was closer to circus or music-hall entertainment. Indeed, to the unaccustomed eye, balancing on a velocipede may well have appeared to be a trick, akin to juggling and other balancing acts. This early bicycle competition was well documented and widely reported in the
British press. During the early 1870s, the sport became more specialized, and began to elaborate its own particular forms of organization.

Early bicycle racing provides an excellent example of the creation of a new mass-spectator sport in the mid-19th century, during which there was an urge to both market and consume a novel spectacle. Bicycle makers were galvanized into activity; promoters likewise saw the opportunity to make money; good riders sought other riders to compete against, and mostly urban spectators (both men and women) had enough leisure time and disposable income to attend events. The sport emerged from its varied origins extraordinarily quickly and began to exert its particular priorities and needs, foremost among which were smoother, faster surfaces and lighter, stronger, bicycles. By the mid-1870s, bicycles had enormously improved, and cycling had elaborated its own institutions and clubs and become a well-established professional and amateur sport, supported and sustained by a flourishing manufacturing industry. From necessarily improvised beginnings, an extensive network of amateur clubs and race meetings had grown up, and national caliber professional “champions” such as James Moore, Fred Cooper, David Stanton and John Keen emerged, travelling from place to place to compete for substantial sums before of large crowds of spectators. International racing was also established between England and France, and national and “world” championships organized.

The Beginnings of Commercial Bicycle Production, 1868-69

The hobby horse or “pedestrian accelerator,” popularized in England in 1818-19 (and slightly earlier, in Germany, as the Draisine), was the first commercially-produced vehicle which enabled a man to balance on two wheels and “ride.” It had no drive mechanism, but was powered by the legs pushing alternately against the ground. The period 1820-60 saw well-documented, if only occasional and not always consistent or coherent, experimentation in three- and four-wheeled velocipedes, and possibly the successful building of treadle-and-crank-driven two-wheeled velocipedes by Scottish artisan-mechanics Kirkpatrick Macmillan and Gavin Dalzell. These Scottish vehicles were probably the earliest “bicycles,” in the sense that they were two-wheeled machines which could be balanced at the same time as being propelled continuously forward. Although there is evidence of hobby-horse races in 1819, and occasional subsequent three- or four-wheeled velocipede speed trials, the vast majority of these machines did not progress beyond the prototype stage, were not put into production, and consequently could not effectively enter into any kind of competitive or sporting context.

The first front-wheel driven bicycles were produced in Paris in 1865-68 by Michaux and Lallement, creating a fashionable craze which included a considerable amount of racing. The United States followed closely behind, while what was widely called “the bicycle mania” in England began early in 1869. The bicycles we are concerned with here were initially heavy machines with cast-iron frames and wood-spoked wheels rimmed with a metal band. These earliest machines were initially the product of an advanced carriage- and blacksmith-shop technology, but were soon mass-produced using more sophisticated processes. Technical development was extremely rapid, however, and by about 1873 the heavy early velocipede was transformed, with a light, tubular frame and wire-suspension wheels with solid rubber tyres, produced within a more complex production
process. The reports and discussion within the periodicals and newspapers of the time demonstrate that sport was a crucial factor in this early evolution of the bicycle. Racing brought together the latest designs and technological developments in a conspicuous and competitive testing ground, and demonstrated clearly the weaknesses of old ideas and the strengths of new approaches. An identical competitive testing ground for new components can be seen in the contemporary professional racing arena, typified by the annual Tour de France.
Charles Spencer’s Gymnasium

A memoir of one of the earliest appearances of the bicycle in England links the importation of French bicycles into England, manufacturing activity, the selling of sporting commodities, and the pursuit of physical fitness as a leisure activity. In an account published in 1875, John Mayall Jr. (the son of a well-known London photographer) described how in the winter of 1868-69 he had gone to Charles Spencer’s Gymnasium in the City of London, “to look at some monster hollow dumb-bells that had just been made for a “professional” to make a sensation with at a Music hall, “when a packing-case containing a French velocipede brought from Paris by Rowley Turner was brought in and unpacked. This was evidently the beginning of involvement with the bicycle for Mayall and Spencer, though Turner, agent in Paris for the Coventry Machinists Company which manufactured sewing machines, had already been exposed to the velocipede craze there. It was not the first appearance of the bicycle in England, but was certainly an early and significant event. Rowley Turner would take this velocipede on to the Coventry Machinists Company factory, where the earliest large scale English manufacturing activity would occur.6

Charles Spencer was an ex-champion gymnast and an entrepreneur who manufactured and sold sporting goods. The velocipede was thus introduced into a context of athleticism, for Spencer’s gymnasium was a center of physical fitness and gymnastic endeavor in London, and velocipeding was at first very much an acrobatic activity, concerned with the skill of balance, taking place mostly indoors. Mayall recollected that “the energy with which I went into velocipeding in its early days was essentially a part of my gymnastic tastes.” With his business partner Snoxell, Spencer lost no time in marketing the velocipede. In mid-February 1869, The English Mechanic, one of the most important scientific and manufacturing journals, carried an advertisement announcing the company as “Velocipede and Gymnastic Apparatus Manufacturers” who had “introduced the best Paris

Reproduced from The English Mechanic, 19 February 1869.
Model of the New Two-Wheel Velocipede, and having made several important improvements thereon, are now prepared to execute orders to any extent."7

These men who featured prominently in its indoor gymnastic beginnings in London also took the bicycle out onto the road. They were soon practicing riding in Regents Park, London, and in February 1869 they rode to Brighton. "They had a preliminary run around Trafalgar Square, and then started off at the rate of eight miles an hour on roads which proved to be generally good, but against a very strong wind all the way."8 This event was intended to advertise and promote Spencer’s business and the sale of the velocipede, and was widely reported in the press. It proved that the machine was useful and could be used to travel a longer distance.

By 1870, Spencer’s business was no longer associated with Snoxell, and his catalogue advertised him as “Manufacturer of Gymnastic Apparatus, Velocipedes, and all Athletic and British Sport Requirements.” He was also “Contractor for fitting up all the Military Gymnasia to Her Majesty’s Government for Home and Foreign Stations.” The catalogue included many gymnastic and weight-lifting products, as well as fencing, football, cricket, hockey and croquet supplies. He also supplied velocipedes, “of first class manufacture only;” one model was “guaranteed for long journeys and hard wear” for £12, another “for ordinary use and racing” for £10. The catalogue also advertised his two books, The Modern Gymnast and The Bicycle Its Use and Action.9

For Spencer, the events described here were the start of a long involvement with the bicycle, as rider, journalist and publisher. In 1873, as is described later, Spencer and three companions rode from London to John o’Groats, the northern-most tip of Scotland, a pioneering exploit. Spencer’s Bicycle Road Book, giving details of mileages and road conditions throughout Britain, went through many editions in the 1880s and was the prototype for the many route books published for cyclists in the 1890s.10 Although it was especially significant in early bicycle history because of the connection between Rowley Turner, Charles Spencer and the Coventry Machinist’s Company, Spencer’s gymnasium was but one of many points of diffusion of a new consumer fad and a new sporting entertainment.

Bicycle Competition as Athletic Novelty and Public Spectacle

The British public could read accounts of velocipede racing in France as early as 1867. The Sport reported “the mania for velocipedes” in Paris, where aristocrats were among those who raced, some of whom “have become so skilful as to go 24 kilometres (15 miles) an hour without the least fatigue. Some grand races during the autumn are at present being organized, the course to be gone over extending from the Champs Elysees to Saint Cloud. . . These gentlemen are about to form a velocipede club, to be devoted to the new sport.”11 By late 1868, The Mechanic reported that Parisian velocipede races, generally held on a “fete day,” were “rather exciting affairs”:

The racing-ground is all marked out with flags, and there is certain to be a large cluster of banners flying at the starting place, near to which, in some reserved enclosure, scores of velocipedists are exercising their docile steeds. A certain number of them wear jockey caps and jackets of various coloured silks, and all appear to have their legs encased in high leather boots. The moment of starting arrives, and the competitors are duly drawn up abreast The fair sex mount on chairs and wave their little hands and flourish their
pocket-handkerchiefs, and laugh and almost scream with delight as at the grounding of
the starter’s flag their several favourites dart off, working their legs up and down . . . After
the lapse of a few minutes, the crowd opens to allow of the passage of the victor, who
drenched in perspiration passes the winning post amidst the cheers and laughter of the
crowd, who enjoy the sport more than they would the finest horse-race; and as soon as he
has dismounted proceeds to dip his sun-burnt beak into a foaming glass of Strasburg
beer.12

The many journalistic accounts of the earliest bicycle competitions in Britain contain
frequent expressions of surprise, emphasizing the novelty and sensation of the new sport.
The fact that the machine could be balanced and ridden was at first sufficiently astonish-
ing. The new “two-wheeled velocipede” was promoted and reported in a variety of differ-
ent competitive and entertainment contexts and promoters of events appear to have ex-
perimented to see what would entertain and make money. There was clearly a strong
“show business” element at work. In the marketplace, velocipede competitions quickly
took their place among the diverse forms of popular, commercial entertainment. Events
were also staged by more “respectable” amateur social gatherings and velocipede clubs.
Bicycle racing was clearly “modern,” a sport created by a progressive, industrial, techno-
logical society. Participation demanded at least access to, if not outright ownership of, the
expensive machine and rental arrangements for the general public and cooperative credit
schemes for club members facilitated access for the less well-off.

A successful commercial entertainment formula, however, was not predictably or
easily created. An established London sporting journal was at first sceptical of the new
sport: “The large hall at Islington seems governed by magic influence in its changes of
attraction,” The Field commented sarcastically on 19 June 1869,

fat cattle, monster balls, popular concerts and horse shows have followed in rapid suc-
ession, and now a “bicycle race” is the object of public interest; indeed we are not sure that
it is any longer the “Agricultural Hall” as the enterprising manager has named it anew the
“Velocipede Cirque.” . . . There is no doubt that the spectacle called a race was got up with
a sole view to profit, and in all probability, so far as that was concerned, it answered
excellently well but whether such an exhibition will prove a permanent source of
profit we will not venture to predict.

On that occasion, The Field was disappointed with the poor quality of the racing in Islington,
North London. “There is no doubt that as yet good riders are too scarce to make such
contests interesting . . . We have certainly seen many better workers of the bicycle on the
road than the majority of those who competed for the silver cup.”13

At this race, the cup offered was “said to be worth £20.” Twenty–three riders were
each charged a 10s entry fee, and spectators paid 1s. Even though the promoter in Islington
had spent £500 on installing a floor and stands, the event was still profitable. Perhaps the
betting, which The Field regretted, helped to fill his pockets. But it was a risky business,
and together with the risk of loss went the possibility of fraud. The value of a cup easily
could be inflated, the results could be fixed, prizes left unpaid.

The new sport arrived quite suddenly, and was capable of attracting and fascinating
large crowds. Promoters were quick to capitalize on this new sensation. Judging by the
volume of press coverage, organized outdoor races and indoor contests were to a great
extent responsible for the surge of popular interest in the new machine, as also were the
frequently romanticized and somewhat sensationalized press accounts themselves. An ele-
ment of “hype” was in the air. Many people saw the machine for the first time because they paid to see it. But such displays demanded skilled riders and a recognizable entertainment formula. One such was the “Velocipede Derby” at the famous Crystal Palace at Sydenham, South London. “The Crystal Palace Company, ever on the alert for novelties, were not likely to let the velocipede mania subside without duly utilizing it . . . ,” commented The Field on 29 May 1869:

The announcement of a velocipede race was sure to draw many hundreds of that faithful British public who, day after day, from year’s end to year’s end, go everywhere to see anything. They may be disappointed, but their faith remains unshaken . . . Accordingly, young and old went down to the Palace on Thursday to enjoy this latest sensation. We wish we could add that they did enjoy it, but the weather was dreadful, and the contests were neither exciting nor well conducted.14

The Crystal Palace promoters quickly learned the lesson of successful promotion, however, and staged many interesting and important races at the ideally located South London venue through the summer of 1869.

Crowds did not only assemble in an indoor arena or around a track, although that was the easiest way for promoters to guarantee themselves a box-office fee. In April 1869, a “Great Bicycle Race” was held on the road between Chester and Liverpool, a distance of 13 miles. The road was “laid with macadam, but some portions of it were complained of as detrimental to bicycle travelling, owing to numbers of loose stones being scattered on the surface.” The Liverpool Mercury carried a long report of the race, noting that “the excitement caused by this singular race was something marvellous”:

A considerable gathering of spectators was expected, but scarcely anyone imagined that there would have been such an enormous crowd of persons assembled to see this novel contest. The competitors were announced to start from Chester about half past two o’clock, but long before that time thousands of people, rich and poor, thronged the Chester-road for miles, and up to four o’clock the thoroughfare from Birkenhead was dense with pedestrians. An immense number of well-dressed persons crossed the river from Liverpool and the Rock Ferry steamers alone, between one and four o’clock, carried over to Cheshire upwards of 3000 passengers. Besides pedestrians, there were vehicles of all sorts and sizes—bicycles, velocipedes, carriages, cars, gigs, spring carts, donkey carts, etc. At some points from Rock Ferry to Bromborough the road was almost blocked up, and farmers and others who were returning home from Birkenhead had great difficulty in making a passage through the crowds of people. In many parts the hedges were also lined with spectators . . . at all the villages on the route through which the bicycles passed there was a general turn-out of the inhabitants.15

The spectators were so dense, in fact, that they obstructed the competitors, who “had difficulty in winding their way through the crowd.”16 A good race could hardly be held under such conditions, and other road users would certainly have had just cause to complain about the obstruction of their right of way, and of the perhaps unwanted disturbance of rural harmony by city-dwellers—an issue that continued to be a problem for organizers of events and riders racing on public roads through the 1880s and 1890s.

Liverpool was a momentary hotbed of velocipede competition, because soon after the road race, the Liverpool Velocipede Club was obliged to stage an extra evening performance of its “Bicycle Tournament and Assault at Arms” at its Gymnasium because “it was found utterly impossible to accommodate the whole of the people who applied for tickets for the first and the committee of the club was anxious to meet this popular demand.”
The Gymnasium programme included members of the club “Tilting at the Ring, Throwing the Javelin and demonstrating general proficiency in the various modes of managing the Bicycle.” Tickets were 3s reserved and 1s unreserved. Just as it had been earlier at Spencer’s gymnasium, the velocipede was found here in a gymnastic context, and the “Tournament” was a revamping of current gymnastic displays to capitalize on the entertainment potential of the new fad (with a hint of mediaevalism thrown in for good measure!), though the bicycle was also perceived as having potential as “a safe and rapid means of locomotion.”

The *Liverpool Weekly Courier* carried a long appreciation of the “Tournament”:

The public, who have been accustomed lately to see this latest novelty in locomotion under the unskilful guidance of venturous youth wobbling about the streets in an apparently unmanageable manner, in peril of being run down by the cabs and other vehicles, would scarcely conceive the absolute control under which the machine is brought by successful practice. Though this forms no part of the curriculum of physical education received at the Gymnasium, the bicycle has found there a patronage and encouragement sufficiently liberal to have enabled a large number of its admirers to attain a remarkable degree of perfection in its management, so as to place beyond doubt the fact that it may be made a safe and rapid means of locomotion. The skill of the riders and the efficiency of the various kinds of these machines which have been introduced in rapid succession since they were brought, still recently, before the attention of the public, could not be more thoroughly demonstrated than by such tests as those to which they were put in the Tournament on Saturday . . . The Gymnasium was thronged with eager spectators, the majority of whom were ladies, to whom the novelty of the joust afforded great diversion.

In Liverpool, the “Bicycle Tournament,” staged by men, was graced with the presence of many “ladies,” whose presence validated it as a respectable social occasion, and the crowd-pleasing potential of bicycle entertainment was also evident in London. For the already mentioned “Velocipede Derby” at the Crystal Palace in May 1869, which was repeated at frequent intervals throughout the summer, “a large number of visitors was induced to go down to Sydenham with a view to witnessing the properties of a machine which has lately engaged so much public attention.” At the Agricultural Hall, Islington, where “Grand Bicycle Races” were held for several weeks in June and July, opening night attracted “about 1500 persons,” and on a subsequent Saturday night “there was a much larger assemblage of persons present than on any past occasion,” allowing a reduction of the admission charge from ones to sixpence.

Crowds of people continued to attend bicycle racing at popular venues in English cities as the sport expanded into open-air tracks and the initial craze appears to have solidified into a sporting habit. On a Saturday afternoon in April 1870, three thousand people were reported at Aston Cross Grounds, Birmingham for “the championship of the Midlands . . . The large space fronting the green, the great gallery, as well as the trees, were literally crammed, the green being reserved for the ladies, of whom a fair sprinkling were present.” One thousand people were reported at Vauxhall Gardens, Wolverhampton, on Monday, 6 June 1870, to see “William Turner’s All-England bicycle contest for amateurs who have never won any prize.” In August 1870, to watch matches at Molineux Grounds, Wolverhampton between the international calibre racers John Keen, E. Shelton, James Moore, J.T. Johnson and others, “nearly 2,000 persons paid for admission on Saturday, and another 2,000 on Monday.”
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Barely a year after the sport had begun, an attendance of 2,000 people appears to have been fairly common at tracks in the cycling centres of England when well-known riders were competing, and there was soon a small group of “champions” who could be marketed as stars in the important racing cities: Birmingham, Sheffield, Liverpool, Manchester, London, and especially Wolverhampton.

Links Between Manufacture and Sport

While there was no unifying organizing principle at work in the geographically widely scattered exhibition and racing events, the common factor that could be said to link them was that they tended to take place in those areas where the manufacturing and marketing of bicycles was most active—Birmingham, Sheffield, Liverpool, in and around London, Wolverhampton, and Manchester in particular. Reporting racing at the Molineux Grounds, Wolverhampton, in June 1873, the Wolverhampton Chronicle suggested that “Bicycle riding seems to have localized itself in Wolverhampton as an amusement no doubt owing, in a great measure, to the favourable nature of these grounds, but aided by the district being the principal seat of the manufacture of the two-wheelers.”

Especially in the larger cities, competitive events also gave promoters and manufacturers an opportunity to mount exhibitions of machines as an additional attraction and source of income, an indication that the sport was, from its very beginnings, used as an advertising vehicle for the bicycle industry. Even in an unusual rural location, racing was linked with an exhibition of the very latest developments. At Studley Pleasure Grounds, Yorkshire, “within the shade of that famous and most beautiful of all monastic ruins, Fountains Abbey,” as part of its “11th annual exhibition of plants, flowers and vegetables,” the Ripon Horticultural and Floral Society organized a velocipede exhibition which historian H.H. Griffin wrote “brought together the finest display of cycles ever seen up to that date,” held at a moment “which was very prolific in new ideas.”

A document which provides telling evidence of this strong link between the sport and the industry in its very earliest days is the Wolverhampton Velocipede Clubs Rules from 1869. The Club was formed to buy velocipedes and make them available for the use of members at the Clubs “practice room.” Membership was one guinea (21s), and lessons were ones each. The rules provided that “when the members are efficient in the use of the machines, excursions into the country will be arranged by the Committee,” and that “all races between other Clubs, and meetings, etc., are to be first submitted to the Club for their approval, and the Committee shall decide on the terms of every such Race and meeting.” Most significantly, the back page of the booklet carried an advertisement for “Forder and Traves, Manufacturers to the Wolverhampton Velocipede Club,” an extraordinary mid-Victorian model of the kind of sponsorship relationship for the provision of equipment which still exists throughout the sports world today, including modern bicycle racing.

A probably slightly earlier account from the Wolverhampton Chronicle suggests that the Club was originally conceived as the Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Velocipede Company or Association, formed “for the purpose of promoting velocipeding in the town and neighbourhood.” Members would buy shares and earn the right to buy velocipedes “by paying £10 in monthly instalments . . . They would buy velocipedes, rent practice
grounds, teach velocipeding and lend velocipedes to members.” Alderman Bantock attended a Saturday evening meeting at the Agricultural Hall and “recommended the use of the velocipede as a means of pleasant relaxation and healthful enjoyment.” Forder and Traves demonstrated “the ease, rapidity and security of the bicycle” and “entered into an arrangement” to supply machines to the Company.27

A technological and athletic logic mediated the relationship between riders and makers, and also made it likely that riders would become makers and vice versa. An ordinary customer might ride a velocipede occasionally, tolerating deficiencies. But serious riders were more demanding; they were acutely aware of discomfort, inefficiency, bad design, heavy weight, harsh suspension, and technical problems. The key concern for racers was speed, but speed achieved through a difficult balance among efficiency, comfort and ease. Speed and comfort depended then, as now, on overall design and quality manufacture, rigidity, light weight, and maximum mechanical efficiency, as well as the skill of the rider and the kind of surface ridden upon. All these aspects were debated constantly within racing and manufacturing circles and tested in competition. Thus, racers became the most critical and demanding of users, and gave the most valuable feedback to makers.28

Londoner John Keen, who participated in world professional championships at various distances between 1870 and 1880, winning at least eight of them, was the preeminent example of an outstanding “champion” who was also a distinguished maker. He was credited with having played an important role in advancing early bicycle design and technology. Amateurs and professionals alike coveted the Keen Brothers machine for the state-of-the-art technical edge it gave them. In November 1871, a writer to The Field reported “the greater efficiency of Keen’s “Spider” bicycle, the superiority of the “rigid wheel,” the lightness, durability and rigidity . . . No other maker has brought the bicycle to such luxurious excellence as he has.” Another report in the same paper, in May 1872, commented that the Keen Brothers’ “Spider” bicycle “has come to be extensively used . . . on account of the prompt manner in which certain well-tested improvements have been adopted.” A strong, light, wheel was a crucial design element in this early period, and Keen’s wheels were among the best in the business, allowing the wheel to increase to as much as 60 inches.29

The complex experiments and evolution of the early years of bicycle design cannot be discussed here in depth. Speed was greatly affected by “gear,” defined as the size of the pedalled front wheel of the bicycle, and thus the distance covered with each pedal rotation. Attempts were made to “gear up” this wheel mechanically, but the easiest way to cover more ground with each rotation of the pedals was to enlarge the drive-wheel, resulting in a slight “edge” for a taller rider, with longer legs, over his shorter rival; this could, however, be nullified through better, quicker, pedalling technique. By about 1875, the high-wheel bicycle had thus emerged and would dominate bicycle design for the next ten years, continuing the strong athletic and acrobatic tendencies inherent in the early velocipede displays. Throughout the 1870s and into the first half of the 1880s the high-wheel, or “ordinary” bicycle, was the kind of bicycle upon which athletic prowess was demonstrated—both speed over short distances and endurance over long—and those riders proud of their skill on this machine were often initially scornful of the chain-driven “safety” bicycle when it was first introduced in 1884-85.
Varieties of Competitive Activity

Indoor races were held in the halls where people first learned to ride the velocipede, growing in fact out of demonstrations of the new sensation. The arrival of a French velocipede at Charles Spencer’s gymnasium in London in January 1869 may have marked the beginning of indoor riding in England. Perhaps it was the rainy and cold climate which encouraged indoor riding, or the crowded and dangerous state of the city streets. The velocipede rider in public did not have an easy time on rough cobbles amid hectic horse and carriage traffic, and was frequently laughed at. Demonstration riding soon led to indoor tournaments and racing, events which were part advertising and part entertainment, at which an entrance fee could be charged and machines displayed and sold.

In late April 1869, the Liverpool Velocipede Club promoted its already mentioned “bicycle tournament, an entertainment of a most novel and completely modern character,” according to the Liverpool Mercury. “Of course that which created the greatest interest and caused the most amusement was the exhibition of skill in the management of the bicycle under the most difficult circumstances, such as tilting, throwing the javelin and broadsword attacks.” The Field reported “a curious display” at the Velocipede Riding School run by Snoxell and Spencer in London. A young French expert, seventeen-year-old Henri Pascaud, was invited and pitted against John Mayall and others. “The leading English amateurs present displayed much excellence in the new art . . . But Mr. Pascaud stands alone. The feats he accomplishes have never been approached in this country, and it was amusing to remark the utter amazement of the velocipede teachers and pupils.”

![The bicycle tournament at Liverpool. Reproduced from The Illustrated London News, 1 May 1869.](image-url)
These small-scale beginnings led to public performances by experts where the public could also rent velocipedes, one such being the Agricultural Hall in Islington, where races were held from June onwards. “The arena, where the horses have been in the habit of displaying themselves, is boarded over as evenly as the floor of a dancing saloon,” reported The Field. “At each corner of the inclosure a huge tub of flowers is placed, about six yards from the barricading, and the course was nine times round the arena between these tubs and the outside barricade.” An improvised indoor track tended to be slow and confining, however, and entertainment aspects, slow and trick riding, were frequently as important as racing. The Field reporter was disappointed:

A contest that partakes so much of the “show” element is not likely to be attractive to the muscular athlete who goes plodding down lanes and unfrequented streets at least half the velocipedists who competed on Saturday were mere scramblers on their bicycles, and could not even sit them when going a perfectly straight course; and it was this want of proficiency that rendered the contests less interesting than they might otherwise have been.32

The teething troubles of such events did not prevent the crowds from flocking to them. The price of a ticket in Islington was reduced from one shilling to sixpence on Saturdays, and the North London News reported that there was “no diminution in the rage for velocipedestrianism, if one may judge by the daily increasing patronage bestowed upon that excellent arena for practice, the Agricultural Hall. 1,200 people paid admission the following Saturday.”33

Indoor events on a better-organized scale later became a mainstay of winter bicycle racing, and can be found throughout the 1870s. Wooden tracks were purpose-built and the turns slightly banked. The longer the race, the greater the box-office earnings. Indoor cycling endurance events, the forerunners of later Six Day racing, were sensational and were closely related to long-distance pedestrianism. The earliest English Six Day races were promoted in 1876 in Wolverhampton and Walsall, near Birmingham, and attracted large crowds. French champion Thuillet (at the Molineux Grounds, Wolverhampton, in front of 10,000 spectators) and Frank White (at the Arboretum, Walsall) each rode alone for six days to establish records in September before they came together to compete against each other in October in the presence of “an immense assemblage of spectators.”34

Place-to-place rides on the road created a good deal of “noise” in the press. They proved that a strong velocipede rider could rival a horse or the coach. In February 1869, as we have seen, Charles Spencer, Mayall and Rowley Turner stage-managed a 60-mile ride to Brighton, arranging to have a reporter from The Times, Mr. Collins, accompany them in a horse-drawn carriage. As a publicity stunt, the ride was evidently successful, for it was widely reported in the press and credited with popularizing the velocipede.35 Journalist H.H. Griffin wrote later that “to these three riders fairly belongs the honour of introducing and popularizing, by proving its practical utility, the use of the bicycle in this country.”36

At the end of March, two members of the Liverpool Velocipede Club rode from Liverpool to London in four days. “This is stated to be the longest bicycle tour yet made in this country, and the riders are of the opinion that they could have accomplished the distance in much less time,” reported the Liverpool Mercury. But such pioneers encountered the surprised and sometimes hostile reactions of a rural public, for
their bicycles caused no little astonishment on the way, and . . . at some of the villages, the boys clustered round the machines, and when they could, caught hold of them and ran behind till they were tired out. Many inquiries were made as to the name of “them queer horses,” some calling them “whirligigs,” “menageries” and “valaparaisos.” Between Wolverhampton and Birmingham attempts were made to upset the riders by throwing stones.37

Strong, adventurous riders were prepared to take on the challenges of empty roads and unpredictable conditions, however, and newspapers reported the longer place-to-place rides. In August, 1869, a Mr. Klamrath rode from Edinburgh to London in 5 days38, while in October, Edwin Goddard, an employee of Soper’s Engineering Works, Vauxhall, London, rode 60 miles from London to Newbury “on a bicycle of his own make . . . Goddard’s physical powers are good, and he completed the journey without the slightest inconvenience to himself.”39 In June 1873, Charles Spencer, with three other members of the Middlesex Bicycle Club, George Hunt, William Wood and Charles Leaver, rode from London to John o’Groats, 800 miles in fourteen days, in a ride sponsored by James Sparrow, a London bicycle manufacturer. It was, thought Spencer himself, “a really important exemplification of the practical purposes to which a bicycle might be put.”40 The Daily Telegraph thought that

a more extraordinary journey, prepared under more extraordinary conditions, has been seldom recorded. A distance of 800 miles has been covered in 14 days, at a rate of 60 miles a day. To say that the work would tire a horse is a feeble description of it. The strongest horse would break down under such a journey As an example of what a bicycle enables a man to do, the bare fact of a journey so made is full of interest.41

The journey dramatically demonstrated, for the first time, that it was possible for a man to go from one end of the country to the other on a bicycle.

Though not races as such, these early long-distance place-to-place rides certainly tested the athletic ability of those who undertook them, and laid the foundations of an important later component of the sport. The easily understood place-to-place record rides were to become one of the most visible and publicized aspects of bicycle racing in England and France in the 1890s providing crucial publicity for the bicycle and tire makers who sponsored them.

Velocipedes also raced over a measured distance on the public roads, usually where smoother, well maintained, stretches could be found around large cities like London and Liverpool. Both The Field and The Daily News reported a very early two mile race in Dulwich, South London in January 1869, “in which four gentlemen travelled over 2 miles of ground for a sweepstake of £20,” won by a Mr. Waloski.42 The Liverpool road race was held in April 1869, on a macadamised road, “perhaps a thoroughfare better adapted for the purpose could not have been fixed upon in this locality, as it is tolerably level and straight the whole length.” There were 19 entries, though only 12 started, and they were handicapped according to the size of their driving wheels, those with bigger wheels starting later since the bigger wheel was considered to give them an advantage. The winner, Henry Eaton, a member of the Liverpool Velocipede Club, rode a “Miss Julia” machine and covered the distance of 13 miles in 1 hour 27 minutes under very unfavourable circumstances—a strong head wind and a crowded road. When Eaton reached the winning post he appeared to be greatly exhausted, and was carried from his bicycle into a garden where he was supplied with a little brandy, which soon rallied him. He was enthusiastically cheered by the spectators.43
The “Miss Julia” machine which won this race was “gendered” as female, an interesting example of men imputing femininity to an inanimate object. Newspaper reports of the race included a starting list of riders, possibly the earliest documented start-card in British bicycle racing, and identified the makers or names of the bicycles ridden. The *Liverpool Weekly Courier* provided information about the origin of some of the bicycles involved. “Several of the bicycles were manufactured by Messrs Brown, of Liverpool,” it said, “but there were several of French make, of which the second in the race was one.” Henry Eaton won “a handsome silver bicycle” for his afternoon’s work, “the gift of Mr. W. H. Brown, bicycle manufacturer, Sir Thomas’s buildings.” Once again, a manufacturer sponsored a race by providing a substantial prize, the unmistakable inference of the newspaper report being that the Liverpool-produced bicycle was in direct competition with the imported French model.

A bicycle race could also be held on almost any good-sized field, or on the grounds of a tavern. This was where, at a primitive level, outdoor track racing began, and such an event was frequently promoted by a tavern owner. One such was Jack Warner, who held the licence of the Old Welsh Harp Inn, in still attractively rural Hendon on the outskirts of north London, where he provided skating, swimming, boxing and wrestling matches, hunting, shooting and fishing for a socially varied London clientele. He also sold beer and food to his customers. Warner possibly organized the first bicycle race in England on his grounds. Primary documentation of the event is still lacking, but one well-informed source claimed that the race took place on his grounds on Whit Monday, 1 June 1868, and that it was won by Arthur Markham. It is exactly the kind of place, and exactly the kind of festive occasion, where such a race might be expected to have happened, close enough to the city to be in touch with the latest trends. The suggestion that it is not implausibly early for English racing to be occurring in mid-1868 is reinforced by a report in the *Cambridge Independent* as early as May 1868 describing the popularity of velocipedes in that city, where “there is talk of establishing a velocipede club.”

Another tavern owner and promoter was McGregor, the proprietor of the famous Molineux Arms and Gardens in Wolverhampton, who started promoting bicycle races at his own establishment in 1869 after seeing the success of the first Wolverhampton races organized by manufacturers Forder and Traves at the Vauxhall Gardens. He was responsible for building his establishment into probably the most important venue in the country in the early 1870s making Wolverhampton England’s bicycle racing Mecca.

Reviewing the season of 1870, the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* praised highly the bicycle contests which had taken place at the Molineux Grounds during the year, “both as regards the number of visitors and the quality of the riding. They have not been confined to Wolverhampton and the district, but have been open to All-England, and have, therefore, brought together some of the best riders in the kingdom.” Prizes were good, a first prize of £15 being offered by the “Sun Bicycle Association” (perhaps organized or owned by McGregor himself) at the final races. “In the evening, about fifty of the members and friends of the Association sat down to an excellent dinner provided by Mr. McGregor, the proprietor of the grounds.” Perhaps this generosity was one of the secrets of McGregor’s business success.
Racing was also promoted as a component of larger, not specifically sporting, social events. The 1869 Crystal Palace “Velocipede Derbys” were a prominent showcase for British makers and for the young sport, held at a famous international exhibition site which attracted large audiences to many different kinds of entertainment events. The bicycle races began in May and continued throughout the summer. French professionals were brought over to challenge the home-grown amateurs. Late in May, Monsieur Biot “was easily recognized by his white cords and hot boots,” reported the Sydenham Times, and easily beat his opponents in “an excellent race.” It was “a day to be remembered in the annals of the bicycle, notwithstanding the drenching showers.”

French expertise was a great advantage. “It was very plain that Biot is much superior to any of the other competitors,” reported The Field, “and, so far as we could see, his advantage was principally owing to his position on his bicycle. He sat well back, and thrust the cranks forward instead of sitting over them and treading them down, as many of the English competitors did.” But The Field was critical of the organization of the races and the sharp turning point of the course, which in one heat caused all the competitors “to come to grief together.”

The Crystal Palace’s role in publicizing the velocipede during the summer of 1869 culminated in the autumn with a month of almost continuous racing and the promotion of the International Velocipede and Loco-machine Exhibition. The seriousness of this exhibition as a commercial endeavour was expressed in a publicity letter published in the English Mechanic. The purpose of the Exhibition was “to hold conferences having for their object to examine the possible application of velocipedes to practical business purposes and to discuss their scientific construction.” The Exhibition should be viewed in the context of a year-long process of high-profile velocipede activity. Dr. Thomas Clarke, of Cheshire, read a paper to the Conference entitled “Scientific principles which should guide in the construction of velocipedes.”

This Exhibition attracted 200 machines, representing more than 70 companies, and was certainly a ferment of commercial, technical and social exchanges. Advertisements, run in many daily papers, tout a great Velocipede Contest and Competition which will take place daily, forming an afternoon’s amusement of the most popular character. These exciting and interesting Velocipede displays, in which all the latest improvements in bicycles are exhibited, must be seen to be appreciated. They have interested those who have already seen them to an unusual degree.

Once again, continental riders were brought in, including “Mons. Moret and Mons. Michaux, of Paris and Mons. J. Johnson, the Belgian champion.” There were races nearly every day in the “Velocipede Circus,” and a show business atmosphere prevailed, the bicycling events being intermixed with opera and the sensational Blondin on his tightrope. At the already mentioned Ripon Horticultural and Floral Society’s Feté at Studley Pleasure Grounds, bicycle racing was incorporated into a traditional community festival. “Cheap trips were run from Leeds, Halifax, Bradford, Manchester and other places,” and on the grounds there were fruits from the hot house of the Earl, the conservatory of the squire, the greenhouse of the amateur and the garden of the cottager. Every available space was occupied with good plants, flowers, fruits or vegetables. Ingledew’s celebrated Leeds model band played a choice selection of music, and attendance during the afternoon was of a highly select and fashionable character.
And surprisingly for this rural location, “the south side of the field was occupied by a numerous array of bicycles and tricycles of various kinds of workmanship, which were to be judged by “Mr. Dunnington, a joiner, and Mr. Mountain, coach builder and coach proprietor.” The “novelty of the velocipede races,” run around the lake, took place on Saturday, near Fountains Abbey. The Abbey green was crowded with spectators, who were in general disappointed because, as with many such early outdoor races, there were organizational difficulties. The problem was the hill: “the race in the case of the bicycle was not with the strongest man, but the man who was an expert in mounting his machine after ascending the hill; if he could do this quickly he was soon far ahead of his opponent.” The first prize was a silver cup or £10.53

The momentary popularity, the fashionableness, of the new velocipede tempted many organizers of social and sporting events to feature it. In September 1869, for example, the Licensed Victuallers Asylum sponsored a “Grand Gala Fete, Bicycle and other Races, as well as a Cricket match” at Lord’s Cricket Ground.54 The early amateur bicycle championships, held under the umbrella of the Amateur Athletic Association from 1871 to 1879, were similarly included in existing athletic events, usually at the same time that “pedestrian” (running and walking) events were held. The differing needs of the bicyclists, however, their increasing specialization, the expansion of the sport and the need to include many different categories of bicycling events, made it inevitable that separate championship events be promoted.

**An Elite Emerges: Match Racing and Championships**

Match racing was the purest form of early bicycle racing, where pure athletic skills—speed, strength, experience and tactical finesse—were most needed in a race between only a few competitors. An elite group of international-calibre riders emerged, who competed against each other at the highest level. At first, these top-level riders were all British or French and included James Moore, Hippolyte Moret, André Castera, John Keen, David Stanton, J.T. Johnson, J. Palmer, T. Shelton, Rowley Turner, Fred Wood, George Waller and A. Forder.55

The most important races between leading champions quickly became de facto national and world championships and were advertised and reported as such, and from 1870–71 onwards professional and amateur world championship honors were contested between members of this elite group, usually in London or Wolverhampton in the early years.56 Traditional wagers between contestants, managed by promoters such as Wolverhampton’s McGregor, with the stakes often held by an impartial outside body like one of the newspapers (Bell’s Life, Sporting Life or The Field), were the basis for most professional challenges and championships from 1870 onwards.57 And, through a working relationship created between the southern clubs and the Amateur Athletic Club, amateur bicycle championships were held under AAC jurisdiction from 1871 until the formation of the Bicycle Union in 1878-79 (there was an overlap in both 1878 and 1879, when both organizations held bicycle championships).

In June 1870, the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* reported that “upwards of 1,000 people” were at the Vauxhall Gardens, Wolverhampton, “to witness William Turner’s All-England bicycle contest for amateurs who have never won any prize,” where, despite the event’s
announced national aspirations, most of the riders were local. In August 1870, the Chronicle reported “champion bicycle contests,” including “the All-comers Champion Cup race of one mile” for a £30 cup and a “first-class amateur race” for a £5 silver cup and “a handsome wine flask.” There was a prize for “the wearer of the neatest costume,” which was divided between Shelton and Turner, Shelton being “attired in a rich mazarine blue jacket, with white sash” and Turner “an emerald green jacket, and white breeches.” The championship, contested in a number of heats, was won by the Parisian James Moore, who rode a state of the art 43-inch French Meyer Spider bicycle, using toe-clips, over John Keen. McGregor’s two-day promotion attracted 2000 spectators on Saturday and the same number the following Monday. The 1871 professional championship was held at Aston Cross Grounds, Birmingham. The prize was again £30 in cash, “for which half a dozen of the best performers in the kingdom contended, the conditions of the competition giving the winner the title of champion of England.” The winner was J.T. Johnson over J. Palmer, with James Moore third.

At this point, most races were already specified as for either amateur or professional, although an “all-comers” race was open to both classes. “Professionals” were those who earned their livings as athletes, or worked in the industry, and those to whom the “mechanic, artisan and labourer clause,” as defined by the AAC, might apply; “amateurs” were those who did not. The “mechanic, artisan and labourer clause” was a segregationist measure, designed to exclude lower-class competitors from amateur competition. Muscular “mechanics and artisans” were ostensibly considered to have a physical advantage over the soft-living “gentlemen,” but were in fact excluded from the amateur sport because the “better class” of athletes did not want to have to rub shoulders with their social inferiors—or risk being beaten by them.

The circumstances surrounding the first official amateur championship, promoted by the AAC at Lillie Bridge grounds, Fulham, London, on 12 August 1871, throw into vivid perspective the social and class divisions defined by the “mechanic and artisan clause,” and provide significant evidence of the striking class divisions within the early sport. The championship race was a four-mile event, and according to historian H.H. Griffin, “Out of about twenty entries, seventeen were ruled out, and protests were lodged against two of the three starters, and it was almost a walk-over for H.P. Whiting, a public-school man.” It was hardly surprising, therefore, that contemporary chronicler Nahum Salomon was able to report that “Mr. Whiting, though opposed by one or two other competitors, had not the slightest difficulty in winning.” The result might have been very different had Whiting had to confront the best of the tough Midlands professionals that year, although the fact that Whiting went on to win three further amateur championships from 1873 to 1875 shows that he was hardly an inferior rider. It was hardly surprising, either, that those “professional” bicyclists excluded from this event would have preferred in the future not to bother with the AAC events; this 1871 championship exclusion may well have been decisive in determining the future direction of the sport as it defined and emphasized the social distinctions between amateur and professional riders.

By the end of 1874, Nahum Salomon was able to write in his Bicycling: Its Rise and Development, the earliest published history of the sport, that
during the last three years the Bicycle movement has rapidly advanced in public favour
. . . The newspapers have fully recognized the importance of the movement, and duly
record the achievements of its votaries. Ten thousand persons have assembled at one time
to witness a Bicycle contest The records of matches and feats are sufficiently full to
furnish material for a history of Bicycling.62

The sport had expanded extraordinarily quickly. On Boxing Day, 1875 (26 December),
in the dead of winter, at the Molineux Grounds in Wolverhampton, which under the
enterprising management of proprietor McGregor had become the Mecca of English
bicycle racing, the Wolverhampton Chronicle reported with astonishment that an incred-
ible crowd had gathered to watch championship races between leading professionals Fred
Cooper, James Moore, John Keen and David Stanton, even though invited French star
Camille Thuillet had been prevented from crossing the Channel by bad weather.

The fact that bicycling is an extremely popular sport in Wolverhampton has been fre-
quently shown. but it was scarcely to be expected, however, at this season of the year,
that nearly 18,000 spectators should gather together to see four bicyclists run, but the
quality of the four made up for their deficiency in quantity.

The first rule of promoting a sport had been thoroughly understood—stars draw crowds.
The people at the Grounds “covered the green hill like a swarm of locusts” and the en-
trance gates were “a veritable pass of fear. The crush could not have been greater on the
occasion of a Drury Lane pantomime first night and many ladies were quite afraid to
encounter such a very unloving “squeeze” as they would have been subjected to.63 The Bicyclist thought that “the monster attendance of between 15,000 and 16,000 people”
was “a great proof of the immensely increasing popularity of bicycling.” The weather was
“dull and dispiriting, and accompanied by a fine Scotch mist,” but the event was still “one
of the largest gatherings ever known in this district to witness an athletic performance of
any description.”64 Such rapid growth and acceptance of a sport poses special questions
for the historian. How exactly can the hunger for such an event be explained? Was it
widely and heavily advertised by promoter McGregor? Was it held in connection with an
already well-established Christmas sporting tradition? Further research in Wolverhampton
will hopefully provide answers to these questions.

Cycling Creates Its Own Institutions

A widespread and rapid movement towards the institutionalization of cycling can thus be
seen in the approximately six year period explored so far. Small, community-based, clubs
were organized first. The Liverpool Velocipede Club was in existence by April 1869 and
promoted events.65 The Wolverhampton Velocipede Club also was organized by April
1869, buying velocipedes and hiring an instructor “who shall have power to prevent any
member from using the new machines, whom he does not think can ride sufficiently well
to be entrusted with the charge of a new one.”66 A correspondent complained to the English Mechanic in September, 1869 that there was as yet no “veloce club” in London. It
was time, he said, that “the young men of London made a step forward, the world is in
advance of us.” Three weeks later, another correspondent responded that, indeed, there
was “a veloce club” in Hackney, London called the St. Katherine Club, and had no doubt
that there were “several clubs on foot in the suburbs.” He urged “a more extended endeav-
our to bring the importance of veloce clubs more prominently before the public, for the
cultivation of an exercise as healthy as it is pleasurable.”67
In London, the Surrey Bicycle Club was formed in Kennington, the Pickwick in Stoke Newington, and the Middlesex in Kensington, all by 1870. By 1873, according to Charles Spencer, there were 7 bicycle clubs in London and 22 outside. The creation of these London clubs appears to have further widened the distinction between the amateur and the professional sport, between the heavily professional North and the increasingly amateur South. The distinction was based largely along class lines, the majority of the leading professionals being working-class, while top amateurs were more likely to be from the middle-class. In 1874, 50 riders participated in the first combined “meet” of many clubs took place at Hampton Court, Surrey, demonstrating the organizational capacities of the bicycle movement; the following year, there were nearly 500 riders. Also, by 1874, The Field regularly published a bicycling “Fixtures” list advertising at least five club runs in the greater London area every Saturday. In 1877, Alfred Howard’s The Bicycle for 1877 listed 23 clubs in London and more than 100 in the rest of Britain. His review of the 1876 racing season presented more than 60 pages of results, with racing beginning in early January and continuing until 30 December.

The acceptance of bicycling at the two oldest universities marked a further stage in its social penetration, and especially in the growth of the amateur sport. The Oxford University club was formed in 1873, the Cambridge University Bicycle Club in 1874, and Inter-Varsity races were held from 1874 onwards, at first on the road. The 1874 road race was “one of the most celebrated amateur matches that has ever yet been ridden.” The Field reported a novel proceeding, a bicycle race between members of Oxford and Cambridge Universities... By some persons the art of bicycling may be thought to have degenerated, but thanks to the recent vast improvements which have been made in machines, this mode of locomotion appears to be fast gaining popularity, as to a certain extent evidenced by the race in question. At Cambridge the greatest enthusiasm prevailed, for nearly the whole town turned out at 5 o’clock to witness the finish. The road from Trumpington to Cambridge, a distance of two miles, was lined with people the whole way, most of them on foot, but some on horseback—some in cabs and traps of all descriptions, and not a few on locally-built bicycles, which contrasted very unfavourably with the splendid machines used by the competitors. In fact, there must have been at least five thousand persons present at the close of the match.

In May 1874, an aristocratic student athlete, the Honourable Ion Keith-Falconer, of the Cambridge University Bicycle Club, rode from Bournemouth to Hitchin, a distance of 135 miles, in 19 hours. “Mr. Keith-Falconer’s name had much to do with popularizing cycle riding,” wrote the zealous proponent of amateurism, George Lacy Hillier, and the fact that the ride was reported in many newspapers as a very fine performance “illustrated emphatically the manner in which one good name, such as his, assists the development of a sport.” The Cambridge University Bicycle Club Rules and Bye-laws from “October Term, 1876” filled a 20-page booklet and underlined the formalization and bureaucratization of the amateur sport within this bastion of tradition and privilege. Members of the club, taking part in club races, for example, “are required to wear the Club Race-cap, or the straw hat with Club ribbon, as uniform, and are requested to do so when taking part in races elsewhere.”

The Bicycle Union was established in 1878, to look after the legal and legislative interests and rights of cyclists, “to examine the question of racing in general, and to frame
definitions and recommend rules on the subject. To arrange for annual race meetings, at which the amateur championship shall be decided.” The Bicycle Union declared itself open to both amateur and professional riders, but in practice was heavily biased towards amateurism, and typically for the period sought to exclude professionals from amateur contests. The Minutes of an early meeting of the Bicycle Union held in London on 4 April 1878 reported that the “Racing Committee” decided to hold “amateur championships” at 2 miles and 25 miles on 11 May 1878, and
resolved that the following definition of professional and amateur should be recommended to the Council of the Union: A Professional Bicyclist is one who has ridden a Bicycle in public for money. An Amateur Bicyclist is one who has never done so, and who has never competed with a Professional Bicyclist in public (except at a meeting specially arranged by the Bicycle Union), and who has never publicly engaged in any other athletic exercise for money.74

On occasion, recognizing the legitimacy of the public’s desire to see the best amateur and professional riders pitted against each other, the Bicycle Union gave its official sanction and blessing to such events, reassuring selected licensed amateurs that they would not forfeit their amateur status by competing against professionals. One such match was held in Cambridge on 21 May 1879, when top amateurs Cortis and Keith-Falconer met veteran professionals John Keen and Fred Wood, and was widely reported.

In the early 1870s, however, there was no umbrella institution imposing rules and regulations, and no stable, formal structure of championships and records. Such organizational rules as were adopted were customary and borrowed from other sports, especially amateur athletics. The dominance of the Wolverhampton tracks in the early professional sport led to the emergence of a code of conduct referred to as “the Wolverhampton rules,” mostly governing conduct and fair play on the track. They stipulated, for instance, that “Riders must pass each other on the outside, and be a clear length of the bicycle in front before taking the inside; and the inside man must allow room for his competitor to pass.” In an attempt to keep the racing honest, the rules also included the stipulation that “If the judge is convinced that two riders arrange for the winner to divide any prize, they shall be disqualified, and the prize given for a race at the next meeting.”75

The intensity of the activity around bicycle racing through the 1870s the large number of competitions, the high-profile popularity of the sport, all contributed to the February 1878 formation of the Bicycle Union. But the existence of such a national institution was to increase tension between London and the Midlands and North, and its attempt to codify and regulate a wide variety of sporting and economic interests related to club life, bicycle racing and the industry, tended to be seen as an unwelcome bureaucratic intrusion by those who had no real interest in centralized control, particularly professional and working-class riders in the North who disliked being dictated to by middle-class London amateurs.

Charles Spencer wrote in 1883 that it was “a proof of the high estimation in which the sport of bicycle racing is held by its votaries” that in 1881 225 bicycle race meetings, consisting of considerably more than 1,000 separate races, as well as 30 tricycle meetings, had been held in Britain.76 Nearly all of these races were documented in the press. The attempt to exert bureaucratic control over this expansive sporting activity was inevitably slow and incomplete, however. Even as late as 1880–81, when racing on the “high wheel”
bicycle was firmly established (with a pattern of annual, national championships), and a
network of cycling clubs was doing much of the race promotion, some of the racing was
still taking place in the context of the kinds of general athletic and social organizations
which have been outlined for the earlier period, rather than under the jurisdiction of the
Bicycle Union.

One of the principal voices of the sport, *The Cyclist*, on 25 May 1881 advertised a
total of twelve upcoming race meetings for bicycles (and tricycles, which were just starting
to be featured in racing), many of them for the Whitsun Bank Holidays on Monday and
Tuesday, 6–7 June, and it is worth looking more closely at them. The Sutton Bicycle Club,
the Stanley Bicycle Club, the North Kent Bicycle Club, the Lombard Bicycle Club and
the London Bicycle Club all advertised bicycle racing, some specifying that the racing
would be “Under the Rules of the Bicycle Union, and open to Amateurs as defined by the
Bicycle Union.” The Belgrave Road Grounds, Leicester, advertised three continuous days
of professional and amateur bicycle racing, including the “1 mile professional race for
championship belt,” a “1 mile Bicycle Race for the Championship of Leicester,” as well as
a steeplechase, a “Grand Assault at Arms,” a “half-hour go-as-you-please” and the “Royal
Original Clown Cricketers.” The “Sixth Annual West of England Bicycle Race Meet” at
Bristol was also advertised, as were the “Athletic Sports” to be held in Liverpool and at
Loughborough. The Coventry Independent Order of Odd Fellows held “A Grand Fete
and Amateur Athletic Sports,” which included running, sack racing and hurdles, a bicycle
exhibition, and “grand theatrical entertainment,” as well as bicycle and tricycle racing,
while at Leamington there was to be the “Midland Counties Bicycle Meet and Monster
Fete,” including “Leonati, the Bicycle Spiral Ascensionist, the Wonder of the Age” and a
“balloon ascent by Mr. Adams.” That left only the Leicestershire Cricket Ground, which
would be holding its “Annual Amateur Athletic Sports” including cycling and running
races, and the Tricycle Association, which was advertising its “Amateur Championship 50
mile Road Ride.”

Clearly, although the sport had evolved greatly since 1869 to the widespread institu-
tional structure of 1881, there remained many similarities concerning the integration of
bicycle racing into a wider program of athletic and social activities. Perhaps the most
notable feature of these events advertised routinely in 1881 was the preponderance of
amateur racing. The promoters at the Belgrave Road Grounds, Leicester were the only
organizers offering professional racing and cash prizes—“£200 in prizes.”

A race program from only three years later illustrates the further development of the
sport by the mid-1880s. A “25 miles Amateur Championship Race Meeting” was held at
Gateshead-on-Tyne (near Newcastle, in northeast England) in July 1884. It was held
under the jurisdiction of the National Cyclists’ Union Newcastle local centre, who ap-
pointed a distinguished team of officials, including George Lacy Hillier (judge) and Harry
Etherington and Henry Sturmey (umpires); the officials included in all eight umpires, a
timekeeper, a handicapper, a starter, six clerks of the course, and four laptakers. Fourteen
riders contested the 25 mile championship. The programme listed the NCU amateur
cycling championships since 1878, giving compelling legitimacy and status to the Cham-
pionships, which were codified according to distance, name of rider, club, time, date,
place and category of event. In 1878, there were only two categories of championship
event (2 miles and 25 miles), but by 1884, this had increased to seven (1 mile, 5 miles, 25 miles and 50 miles bicycle, 1 mile, 5 miles and 25 miles tricycle).78

The Nature of Early Bicycle Racing

The characteristic which was, perhaps, the most remarkable about bicycling was the suddenness of its arrival as an athletic activity and the rapidity of the sport’s development. Alfred Howard, the Secretary of the Surrey Bicycle Club, wrote in 1874 that “of all the

Reproduced from race programme (author’s collection).
pastimes and athletic exercises with which we are acquainted, none has so rapidly come into public favour, and retained its hold thereon so firmly, as the art of bicycle riding.”

In the same year, Nahum Salamon corroborated Howard’s opinion, writing that “during the last 3 years, the Bicycle movement has rapidly advanced in public favour.” By 1876, an editorial in a national newspaper called bicycling “a great national pastime” which “has become not only a popular but a fashionable amusement,” and Alfred Howard wrote that

the year of grace, 1876, will form an important period in the history of bicycle riding, for the pastime has increased rapidly and surely amongst all classes, and in place of being looked at with derision and curiosity is regarded and recognized as a useful and healthy exercise, and a valuable addition to the means of locomotion.

Racing, then, was one significant component of the novel activity surrounding the emergence of the bicycle as an agent of sport, recreation and utility. Early bicycle racing, often a commercial enterprise, was from its beginning a heavily “professional” activity, although some races were described as being exclusively for “amateurs,” in accordance with the Amateur Athletic Club’s use of the “mechanic and artisan clause.” The use of the complex, expensive, new machine in the young sport tended to establish a functional economic, athletic and social relationship between competitors, promoters and manufacturers, and required a more precise distinction between amateur and professional riders. This dichotomy remained an ongoing issue in the sport through the rest of the century, and was of constant concern to governing bodies in Britain, France and the United States.

Wolverhampton Velocipede Club, for instance, already had a sponsorship arrangement with makers Forder and Traves in 1869, and Forder, a professional rider, was a member of the Club. Frequently, riders were in effect “sponsored” by a maker who was interested in putting his machine before the public and demonstrating its superiority. A competitor was frequently an actual maker or an employee of a manufacturer, that is a “mechanic,” who exactly fulfilled the gentleman amateur’s conception of a “professional.” As the sport developed, the proponents of amateurism sought to distance themselves from the commercialism inherent in the expanding bicycle industry, with its strong need to promote and advertise its products.

Early bicycle racing was a testing ground for the design and manufacture of machines, and in this respect was already strikingly prescient of the economic role of the bicycle industry in the later development of the sport in the 1880s and 1890s, indeed right up to the present day. Between 1868 and about 1875, racing—the desire to go faster—was the crucial factor in the increase in size of the front wheel and the emergence of the high bicycle, and in technical developments such as the development of light tubing, ball bearings and tangent-spoked wheels.

Early bicycle racing took many different forms. It was an adaptable sport and appeared in public outdoors and indoors as a “spectacle” and “entertainment” for paying spectators in a variety of contexts, as well as in self-motivated tests of speed and endurance on the road, where the role of spectators was less important, but which were widely publicized in the press. The early sport flourished indoors in large halls adapted for the purpose and outdoors in fields marked out or on existing grass or cinder running tracks. It also flourished in competitive place-to-place rides on the roads, which were either run as mass-start events or as individual time trials.
Early bicycle racing was similar in its promotional and organizational aspects to other contemporary sports—athletics, gymnastics, pedestrianism or boxing. Running and walking races and feats of strength and endurance belonged traditionally at county agricultural fairs held in the summer months, and bicycle racing on a grass or cinder track fitted easily into this setting. In the winter months, long distance pedestrianism and circus-like displays of strength and skill were presented indoors, and here too the novel bicycle could be presented and promoted on a relatively easily prepared track. The promoting of one personality or “champion” against another quickly became the best method of advertising and choreographing the contests.

A promoter was invariably involved in very early professional velocipede racing, usually a tavern or gymnasium owner, because there were as yet few clubs or specialized institutions. McGregor, for example, presided over activities at the well-known Molineux Grounds in Wolverhampton. This was most definitely a profit-making activity, in line with other leisure-time entertainments and amusements, such as the music-hall or theater. The beginnings of the exclusively amateur sport can be found in events promoted by amateur athletic clubs, which quickly began to include bicycle races in their programs.

Some events called “tournaments” or “velocipede circuses” were not intended primarily to demonstrate speed but other entertainment aspects of the velocipede, such as slow riding, trick riding, jousting, and dramatic sketches. The locations in which these events took place, indoor halls and gymnasiums, were much too cramped for fast speeds to be achieved, and the accounts of indoor races speak of frequent crashes. These indoor competitions were, however, the earliest embryonic track races.

The speed of velocipede riders in the early period was relatively low, particularly on the road, and was judged by comparison with walking and horse-riding. Except for the rare macadamized surfaces on the outskirts of large cities, road and track surfaces were bad. On the flat, even in sprint races, racing speeds were still quite slow, mechanical breakdowns and accidents were frequent, and winners often won by quite large margins. Contemporary commentators appear to have been most impressed by the long distance place-to-place rides, in which stamina over rough roads was the most admired quality, and elapsed times could most easily be compared to the other ways of covering the distance—on foot, on horseback, or even by train. As bicycle technology improved, however, speeds increased quite dramatically, reaching a sustained 20 mph on a good track by the early 1880s although road speeds were of course much slower.

Early velocipede racing can be seen in the wider context of a proletarian and lower middle-class culture where feats of strength, speed, and endurance had long been admired and were increasingly being “marketed” in the mid-Victorian period. Many racers were from the “mechanic” class (that is, wage-earners employed in manual trades by manufacturing industries) in London, the Midlands and the North, though middle- and even upper-class athletes did race bicycles as the amateur clubs grew. The best-known of the upper-class racers was the Hon. Ion Keith-Falconer, of the Cambridge University Bicycle Club. Charles Spencer commented that as the sport became popular at Oxford and Cambridge universities, the term “velocipede” was increasingly discarded for the word “bicycle” because “
to the word “velocipede” there seemed to be now attached a soupçon of vulgarity little to
the taste of the undergraduate. To indulge in a sport which had become ridiculous by its
popularity with the "hoi polloi," to take up with a toy just discarded by the outside
vulgar, was not to be thought of.85

The bicycle, however, was socially “modern,” in the sense that many of its devotees were
from the emerging “middle-class” of wholesale and retail merchants and the urban profes-
sions.

About the audience, the spectators, it is more difficult to speculate. What kinds of
people went to early bicycle races? It probably depended on the social context within
which each individual race meeting was promoted. Whereas there were frequent descrip-
tions of the crowd as “select” or that “the greatest order prevailed” at a race, there are fewer
clues as to the social background of the spectators. Industrial Wolverhampton, for ex-
ample, might be assumed to have been a typically working-class city from a sporting point
of view, and yet the Wolverhampton Chronicle, reporting a race in 1873, noted that the
large crowd “represented all classes of the community” and suggested a fashionable event,
approved as moral and respectable by the presence of many women:

The view from the upper terraces was exceedingly beautiful, for, comìngled with the
husbands of the present and the future, the feminine element of our population largely
patronised the scene, the varied colours of their costume and diverse style of bonnets,
relieved the uniformity of male attire and afforded a study of the fashions which many of
our Black Country lasses no doubt carefully treasured in their mind.86

Such a report contradicts the assumption that a typical audience for a bicycle race might
have been almost exclusively male.

Some riders were women, even at the dawn of bicycle racing. They raced in Paris and
they performed in London, but entertainment rather than athletic exertion was the main
reason for their performances, which were perceived as decidedly risqué. Diarist Arthur
Munby decided, after he had seen two women riders from the Paris Hippodrome perform
in London in June 1869, that “there was nothing indecent in their performance, or in the
girls’ behavior, if once you grant that a woman may, like a man, wear breeches and sit
astride in public.”87 Women’s presence in this early popular entertainment milieu was
prophetic of their greater later participation in the 1880s and 1890s though we may
safely suggest that even up into the 1930s it was frowned upon for a woman to race,
seriously, on a bicycle.

The early history of the velocipede was well documented in the press; it was a novelty
and attracted attention. Nevertheless, the precise moment of arrival of the new velocipede
in England is difficult to pinpoint, probably because it diffused gradually in many loca-
tions, like any widespread social phenomenon. Probably there were very few velocipedes
available on a commercial scale in England before the Mayall-Spencer-Turner introduc-
tion in London in the winter of 1868-69; however, there were isolated cases of French and
American velocipedes arriving, and racing was reported in Dulwich, South London, in
January 1869. Liverpool may well have been very precocious in importing the Pickering
velocipede from America, which may help to explain the early development of competi-
tion there.88

If the arrival of the Parisian velocipede at Spencer’s gymnasium is interpreted as the
most important single commercial event in the continuum of the introduction of the
bicycle into England, then the development of the sport was extraordinarily fast. At the
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beginning of April 1869, 19 riders, riding 19 different kinds of bicycles, competed in a road race outside Liverpool. Could all these machines have been produced so quickly by English makers, or were many of them imported French or American machines, or even “home-made” machines, made by blacksmiths and “mechanics”? If they had been imported and “home-made” for as much as a year, then it would not be unreasonable to suggest that racing had indeed already occurred by mid-1868. The “first bicycle race in England,” reported in a secondary source but as yet unsubstantiated by primary documentation, may yet be found in a newspaper report by diligent searching and proved to have occurred at the Old Welsh Harp, Hendon, (near London) in 1868, where the news from Paris would have been loudest and clearest, and the sporting “buzz” most intensely felt. 89

Special thanks to Les Bowerman, Nick Clayton, David Herlihy, Lorne Shields, John Weiss and Ted Williams, who supplied me with significant quantities of references and research material. Thanks, also, to Iain Boal, who read my manuscript in preparation and made helpful suggestions, and to Dave Wiggins, for creative editorial advice and assistance.


3. The term “velocipede” was most commonly used in the earliest period, although “bicycle” was used from quite early in 1869. Through the early 1870s “bicycle” was used more and more frequently, while “velocipede” usually indicated the older style, out-of-date, machines, and came to have a pejorative and unfashionable connotation.


We plainly foresee another “field-sport” about to be added to our slender American catalogue, or at least another athletic game. The Paris velocipede is now so firmly naturalized here, that we have simultaneously a local report of two-wheelers racing in Central Park . . . and one of a race in Boston. We presume that “velocipede clubs” will now be formed, and velocipede contests waged: then of course will follow velocipede matches for the “Velocipede Championship of the United States,” and then international matches for the “Championship of the World.”

The San Francisco Chronicle, 28 Jan. 1869, reported that “Velocipede races are much the vogue in France, and New Yorkers also indulge in them. They are largely patronized and generally by a better class of persons than congregate at horse races.”

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Chapter two of Andrew Ritchie, *King of the Road* (London: Wildwood House, 1975), “Amateur Mechanics,” includes extensive discussion of the period 1820–60. The role and place of Kirkpatrick Macmillan in the 1840s is problematic and controversial. Can he, in fact, justifiably be called “the inventor” of the bicycle? The tendency of current examinations of the historical role of Macmillan is to minimize his importance and to question the reliability of the documentary evidence and surviving machines. Recent accounts of Macmillan include N.G. Clayton, “The First Bicycle,” *The Boneshaker* No. 113 (Spring 1987) and Nicholas Oddy, “Kirkpatrick Macmillan: The Inventor of the Pedal Cycle or the Invention of Cycle History?” *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Cycling History* (Glasgow, 1990). I have recently written an account of Macmillan, as yet unpublished, in which I argue for the credibility and coherence of much of the complex and problematic historical evidence.

Mayall’s account is entitled “Recollections of the first days of the bicycle,” and was published in *Ixion*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan. 1875). Accounts differ as to the exact date of this event, which is only of importance to us here in that it affects evaluation of the precise date when the earliest bicycle racing in England would probably have been documented. Mayall dates it to “the early part of January 1869.” Bartleet, on the other hand, writes that the machine was “brought to England by Rowley Turner in November 1868.” Bartleet emphasized that this was not the first bicycle to arrive in England: “There is no doubt that a few bicycles were purchased by English visitors to the Exhibition, who brought them home and used them in England.” *Bartleet’s Bicycle Book* (London: Edward Burrow, 1931), 28. The Exhibition referred to was the 1867 Paris Exhibition, where French maker Michaux exhibited his velocipedes and where Rowley Turner also showed sewing machines made by the Coventry Machinists Company, for whom he acted as Paris agent. *Coventry Herald and Free Press*, 27 Nov. 1868, reported, “The sewing machine company . . . have just received a novel order for a number of velocipedes from Paris, where these locomotives have lately been all the rage, and it is expected will soon be in general use in London.” *Coventry Standard*, 1 April 1869, contains the first known advertisement for the Coventry Machinists Company’s bicycles. Andrew Milward, “The Genesis of the British Cycle Industry 1867–72,” *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Cycling History* (Glasgow, 1990), gives many instances of commercial manufacture of velocipedes by small makers and tentative importation of French and American velocipedes into England in 1868, though many of these are documented in secondary and therefore not thoroughly reliable sources. The period is problematic and needs further careful research.


The catalogue, dated 1870, is in the Lorne Shields collection in Toronto.

Spencer’s publications include *The Modern Gymnast* (London: Frederick Warne, 1866); *The Bicycle: Its Use and Action* (London: Frederick Warne, 1870); *The Modern Bicycle* (London: Frederick Warne, 1876); *Bicycles and Tricycles Past and Present* (London: Griffith and Farran, 1883); *The Bicycle Road Book* (London: Griffith and Farran, various ed. from 1880).

*The Field*, 10 Aug. 1867, quoting from *The Sport* (date unknown).


*The Field*, 29 May 1869.

*Liverpool Mercury*, 5 Apr. 1869.

*Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 10 Apr. 1869.


*Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 1 May 1869.

*The Times* (London), 28 May 1869.


*Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 Apr. 1869.


*Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 10 Aug. 1870.
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25. Ripon Gazette, 1 Jul. 1869; H.H. Griffin, Cycles and Cycling (London: George Bell, 1903), 35.
26. Wolverhampton Velocipede Club Rules (Lorne Shields collection, Toronto). This pamphlet is not dated, but from further reference to the Club, can safely be dated to 1869.
28. Abundant evidence of the quest of makers for a strong, light and fast machine can be found in makers' advertisements from the mid-1870s. W.J. Boden of London claimed his machines "are made as light as possible, consistent with durability," John Keen of Surrey, "Champion Bicyclist," advertised "the most perfect machine of the day. For Speed, Durability, and Neatness of Design, it has no equal;" John Dedicoat, Coventry, advertised that his bicycles had "Lightness, Strength, and Freedom from more than absolutely necessary Friction" (quoted from advertisements in Ixion, Jan–May 1875).
30. Liverpool Mercury, 26 Apr. 1869.
31. The Field, 8 May 1869.
35. The Times (London), 19 Feb. 1869; according to an account by Rowley Turner published in Bartleet's Bicycle Book (London: Edward Burrow, 1931), this Times report was syndicated to and used by more than 300 local newspapers.
37. Liverpool Mercury, 30 Mar. 1869.
40. Charles Spencer, Bicycles and Tricycles.
42. The Field, 30 Jan. 1869, and Daily News, 28 Jan. 1869. The reporting of this event provides additional evidence that other velocipedes had already arrived in England well before the January 1869 events at Spencer's gymnasium.
43. Liverpool Mercury, 5 Apr. 1869.
44. Liverpool Weekly Courier, 10 Apr. 1869.
45. See H.W Bartleet, "Half a Century of Speed," Cycling, 27 Feb. 1919. Bartleet repeats this claim in Bartleet's Bicycle Book:

This exhibit was purchased from Mr. Arthur Markham, who for many years carried on a cycle business at 345 Edgware Road, London, and who claimed to have won the first bicycle race ever held in England; this was run in a field near the Welsh Harp, Hendon, on Whit Monday, 1868 (before R.B. Turner came to England), the prize being a silver cup presented by a Mr. Warner, landlord of the Welsh Harp Hotel.

A Hendon local history (unfortunately untitled when photocopies were sent to me) provides further corroborating information about the Welsh Harp:

Its leisure potential was enthusiastically exploited by Jack Warner, who held the licence for 39 years from 1859. They provided a huge range of entertainments, including skating, swimming, boxing and wrestling matches, hunting, shooting and fishing, a concert hall, a menagerie and a skittle saloon . . . . In 1870 the enormous Bank Holiday crowds persuaded the Midland Railway to open Welsh Harp station.
46. Cambridge Independent (exact date unknown), quoted in Messager des Theatres (Paris), 25 May 1868.
47. Wolverhampton Chronicle, 30 Nov. 1869.
49. The Field, 29 May 1869.
51. According to English Mechanic, 1 Apr. 1870, which published a summary of it, the paper was subsequently published, but I have been unable to locate it.
52. Morning Advertiser, 27 Sep. 1869.
53. Ripon Gazette, 1 Jul. 1869.
56. See Andrew Ritchie, “Professional World Championships, 1870–92,” The Boneshaker No. 142 (Winter 1996). The precise identification of early “world championships” is problematic, since there was no governing body to give official status to events, and “championship” status was certainly used as an advertising gambit. Realistically, however, only the best available riders could be featured in a “championship.” “Championship contests” were often reported in the press and in cases where several “championships” were contested in one year, it appears to have been agreed in newspaper reports that the “world championship” designation be awarded to the race with the largest, most international and highest-calibre field competing. Championship level events and the more important races were usually held at one of the following prominent locations:
   Star Grounds, Fulham, London
   Lillie Bridge Grounds, Fulham, London
   Tufnell Park, Holloway, London
   Queen of England Grounds, Hammersmith, London
   Aston Cross Grounds, Birmingham
   Queens Grounds, Sheffield
   Bramhall Lane, Sheffield
   Molineux Grounds, Wolverhampton
   Vauxhall Gardens, Wolverhampton
   Melbourne Grounds, Northampton
   Powderhall Gardens, Edinburgh, Scotland
57. Typical examples of wagering can be found in Bell’s Life for 24 Sep. 1870, under the title “Velocipedism”: “A Challenge to Velocipedists—Mr. W. Jackson of Pimlico, London, who has just arrived from Paris, is anxious to test the capabilities of his velocipedes, and will run his tricycle against any other three or four-wheeler of the same weight from London to Brighton, for £20 or £40 a side,” and
   Howard v. Johnson—The whole of the money, £50, for this interesting bicycle match of 12 miles has been staked with Mr. Whewman, the Bricklayers’ Arms, Tonbridge Street, Euston Square, and the match takes place at the Star Grounds, Fulham, on Monday next. Both men are very fit, and a good race is anticipated.
58. Wolverhampton Chronicle, 8 Jun. 1870 and 10 Aug. 1870. See also Nick Clayton, “Who Invented the Penny-Farthing?” Proceedings of the Seventh International Cycle History Conference (San Francisco: Rob van der Plas, 1996), which emphasizes the crucial technological importance of these early championship races in the evolution of the high-wheel bicycle. They were the scenario for a demonstration both of state-of-the-art manufacture and bicycling technique. James Moore, who won the championship race, later wrote,
I myself won the Paris championship on a tension wheel of Meyer’s make in 1870, and raced at Molineux Park, Wolverhampton, in the early summer of 1870. I was riding a 43” Meyer tension-wheel bicycle and used toe-pedals, whilst my opponents were yet pedalling from the instep on Phantom 36” wheels.

On 21 Sep. 1879, the Wolverhampton Chronicle reported that at a race between progressive builder John Keen and a rider called Wallace, from Aberdeen, “the latter, whose machine, though of fine build, was somewhat antiquated for these days of ‘phantom’ and ‘spider’ wheels, for a long time refused to strip, averring that he had no chance; at length, however, he came on the course.”

That wheel size was an important factor in races between 1869 and 1871 is underlined by the fact that wheel dimensions were frequently listed in newspaper reports and were made the basis for handicapping riders. A letter to the English Mechanic, 23 Dec. 1870, stated,

The machine of the present day is a very different affair from the old clumsy articles which were in vogue two years ago. We thought then that we were doing well when we covered a mile in 7 minutes and a 36” driving wheel was the maximum size. Now the time for a mile run on a course is 3+ minutes, and the driving wheels are from 48-50” in diameter. What has enabled us to obtain such good results is the introduction of the “spider” wheel.

61. Salamon, Bicycling, Its Rise and Development.
62. Ibid. Salamon’s book was a collection of various historical information and a guide book to English and Continental roads. In his preface, Salamon wrote:

During the existence of the wooden-wheeled velocipedes, and when in 1869–70, those vehicles showed some signs of vitality, several books appeared on the subject. When wooden-wheeled machines went out of use, these books became valueless, and now not a half-a-dozen lines in any of them would be found applicable to the Bicycle of today, and not a word in them would be of the least instruction to the Bicyclist . . . In the face of these facts, it must appear strange that there should not be in existence a single book of reference, or guidance on this subject. We have, therefore, ventured to supply the want with a brief volume, which will, we trust, be found practical, trustworthy, and instructive.

In 1873, Salamon was London agent for the Coventry Machinist’s Company and appears to have been involved in the bicycle trade through the 1870s changing the name of his London operation to the Bicycle and Tricycle Supply Company in 1881.

63. Wolverhampton Chronicle, 29 Dec. 1875.
64. The Bicyclist, Feb. 1876.
65. See references in notes 17 and 18. The Liverpool Velocipede Club may well have been in existence since 1868, since the velocipede appeared very early there and American machines may have been imported.
66. Wolverhampton Velocipede Club Rules (see note 26).
68. Charles Spencer, Bicycles and Tricycles, 62, 68, 72–73.
73. A copy of Cambridge University Bicycle Club Rules and Bye-laws is available in the Cambridge Public Library.

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Bicycle Union aims and objectives quoted in Spencer, *Bicycles and Tricycles*. Minutes of the Bicycle Union are quoted from photocopies in the files of *Cycling Weekly* (London). The Bicycle Union was renamed the National Cyclists' Union in 1883 and became a significantly more powerful organization, playing a greater role in racing. The Bicycle Touring Club was founded in 1878, concerned more with travelling, touring and road-riding as a leisure activity, and the rights of cyclists and their accommodation while travelling, and not involved at all with racing or the sport. The Bicycle Touring Club became the Cyclists Touring Club in 1882.

77. *The Cyclist and Bicycling and Tricycling Trades Review* (London and Coventry), 25 May 1881. This was an influential weekly journal edited in London by C. W. Nairn and in Coventry by Henry Sturmey. The extremely rich documentation of the early sport is found in the burgeoning cycling press, perhaps the most extensive specialist commercial and sporting press of the late 19th century, as well as in the national and regional newspapers.
78. National Cyclists’ Union race programme from 26 Jul. 1884 (author’s collection).
84. After several unsuccessful attempts in 1880 on the much-coveted record of 20 miles in an hour, Herbert Liddell Cortis achieved it in 1882. On 27 July 1882, he rode 20 miles in 59:31.8 at Crystal Palace; six days later, 2 August 1882, he set a new record in Surbiton, Surrey, of 59:20.2.
89. See notes 6 and 45.