

The Kew Flyer

The City of Boroondara's inventory of infrastructure to support the art of cycling includes several popular bike routes including Yarra Boulevard, Main Yarra Trail and Capital City Trail. It also advises that there are many informal cycling routes that lead into Kew Junction, and that there are secure bike parking hoops along High Street and Cotham Road. The response of the City to the needs of cyclists takes into account the need for sustainable transport options, and potentially that 43 per cent of Australia's, and perhaps the City's population own bikes.

When the safety bicycle, the prototype of the modern bike was invented in England in 1885, millions of people, men and women, took to the roads. In Melbourne, even with the depression of the 1890s, the bicycle became a form of mass transport, and cycle races attracted crowds comparable to those at football matches. Strange as it may seem, Kew was the location of one of Melbourne's most notable manufacturers of bicycles. This however, is a forgotten history, as is that of the Kew Social and Cycling Club, which was established in 1909.

Barnard's *Jubilee History* of Kew (1910) provides two clues. Under the heading 'Sports and Pastimes', Barnard notes that 'Several cycling clubs have been born and died, suffering chiefly from the migration of the leading spirits in the organisations, but since 1900 the Kew Flyer Road Race, instituted by Mr. H. F. Cooper, has been the cycling event of the year among local riders'. If we were to believe the historian, cycling had a promising but interrupted history at the turn of the century, yet in 1941, *The Argus* was able to report that the Kew Flyer race was the '... oldest established of the traders' cycle races in Victoria'.



Figure 1: A 'Kew Flyer' bicycle. Photograph: Tony Michael, 2013.

The other reference within the *Jubilee History* includes two photographs (see p.9), the first of H. F. Cooper's shop in Cotham Road, and the other of 'officials and competitors' in a Kew Flyer road race. The group is photographed in front of Meagher's Travellers Rest Hotel.

Which takes us, temporarily back to the present day. Tony Michael, a member of the Kew Historical Society, and an inveterate collector of 'all things Kew', recently saw an advertisement for a 'Kew Flyer' on an online trading website. Tony recounts how he '... was determined to win it at auction but not at any price, which is a bit of a gamble if there is another bidder'. ... At the end of the auction there were no bidders so the vendor re-listed the bicycle at a lower price which I won and was ecstatic to own a piece of genuine Kew. The next step was to collect my prize, which was in Leongatha. Walking up the vendors driveway, I was keen to learn the provenance of the Kew Flyer but the gent was less than approachable, and regrettably I handed my money over, wheeled the bike down the driveway and with it safely in the back of the car headed home.'

The bike bought by Tony would not have been ridden in a Kew Flyer Road Race. He describes it as having '... a steel frame, most likely from a kit whereby the tubes and connection were slip-fit into place and brazen to fix them. It is a girl's bike for a younger person, as the wheels are 24". Most likely produced in the 1930's or 1940's, the logo 'Kew Flyer' clearly appears on both sides of the frame painted in a pale blue colour. The tyres are Dunlop Atlantic made in Australia. As the tyres are perishing, they will be replaced with modern ones with new tubes so the bicycle can be moved around although it will never be ridden.'

So, where was the Kew Flyer made, what were its origins and what role did it have in Victoria's cycling history? The National Library of Australia's website includes a repository of many

newspapers from 1800 to 1960. Included in these are *The Argus* (1848-1957) and *The Box Hill Reporter* (1889-1918), which between them are rich source of information about this significant Kew manufacturing business.

A Cotham Road Institution

When it finally closed in 1949, the 'Kew Flyer' had been an established business at 8 Cotham Road, opposite the Kew War Memorial, since the turn of the century. Established as a cycle manufacturing business by H. F. Cooper in 1893, it was to move to Brougham Street in 1900 and then to Cotham Road in 1901. The Society has in its Collection a postcard, 'Tramway Terminus, Kew' which depicts, in addition to a tram, the buildings known as 'The Block'. Cooper's business at 8 Cotham Road was part of The Block. [The shop, now number 14, is currently the Kew Junction Optical Clinic.]



Figure 2: 'Tramway Terminus, Kew'. Kew Historical Society.

Later newspaper advertisements were to claim that Cooper had established a cycle manufacturing business 'in the district' in the 1890s, however a search of the Sands and McDougall postal directories could only find a listing of a cycle business run by a Harry Cooper in Fitzroy in the mid 1880s. The Directories, which were purchased by the Society with the assistance of a grant from the Bendigo Bank's Kew East Branch, do however confirm that H. F. Cooper had opened for business in Cotham Road in 1901. He was to retain ownership of the business until 1936.

The Kew Flyer Road Race

As previously noted, Barnard claims that Cooper had begun the Kew Flyer Road Race in 1900. While this may be so, the first record of the race occurring was in *The Argus* (11 July, 1904) which recorded that '... a good crowd witnessed the race, which started and finished in East Kew. The distance was 10 miles, from the six-mile post to the 10 mile post, on the Bulleen Road, and return'.

By 1906, the location of the race had changed to White Horse road (*Box Hill Reporter*, 21 September, 1906). In 1907, the journalist of the *Reporter* recounted that: 'Two hundred drags and a number of private vehicles, accompanied by some hundreds of cyclists, left the Kew Post Office shortly before three for Blackburn, and a large crowd had assembled at the starting point, viz, the Travellers' Rest Hotel, Blackburn. Prior to the start the competitors and officials were photographed, as were also the ladies, quite a number of whom had travelled up in drags and on cycles' (25 October, 1907). The course was reported to be from the Travellers' Rest Hotel to a point near the Ringwood Post Office, out and return twice! First prize was a 'silver hot water kettle and a chocolate jug'. Other winners were awarded prizes that included tyres, a sweater, and a pair of claret jugs. For the fastest time, W. McLean and C. Witchell were given a 'silver egg cruet and toast rack combined'. One wonders whether they had to split the prize. The trophies were to be presented at a smoke night in the Kew Town Hall.

The Race had significant benefits for Harry Cooper's business. In 1908 he was able to advertise that 'Coopers Kew Flyer Cycle & Sporting Depot opposite the Kew Post Office' had an enlarged shop, new workshops, and the latest lathes and cycle building tools. It was, the advertisement continued 'now one of the most up-to-date cycle works in Victoria' (*Reporter*, 29 May 1908).

The annual smoke night in 1908, at which the trophies for the Race were awarded was held in the Federal Hall in Denmark Street. 'The tables were beautifully decorated, pink being the chosen colour, and roses the predominating blooms. Mrs. Cooper and her assistants (Misses Cowcher and Donaldson) had transferred the room into a veritable fairy bower' (*Reporter*, 13 November, 1908). Gracing the night was Cr. Henningson, Mayor of Hawthorn, who was also the president of the East Suburban cycling club. The seating was apparently 'taxed to its utmost capacity'. Addressing those in attendance, the chairman, Mr. F. Pitcher, noted that the Race '... had grown importance, and he trusted Mr. Cooper's business would prosper, as a result of his enterprise'.

Perhaps, due to the importance of the Race, cycling flourished in Kew. In 1909, the Kew Social and Cycling Club was formed. Its colours were green and gold. It was to hold its first 10-mile race

from the Harp of Erin Hotel in May. Many of the participants in the race were also competitors in the Kew Flyer road race. Harry Cooper's association with the Club was evident in his being elected delegate to the ICCA (Inter-club Cycling Association) and his appointment as press correspondent.

World War I brought about changes to the fortunes of cyclists, employees and employers. In May 1915, *The Argus* reported the death of Private Robert Richardson of Gladstone Street, who had previously worked as a motor mechanic in Harry Cooper's business. In January 1917, the *Hawthorn, Kew and Camberwell Citizen* reported the death of Private H. Herbert who was killed in action in France. He had been the winner of the Kew Flyer Cycle Road race in 1913. Meanwhile, with changes of technology, Harry Cooper was to begin retailing Precision Engines motorcycles from his Cotham Road shop.

Bicycles were however to remain central to the business that began in 1893 and that Harry Cooper was to sell in 1936. The new purchaser was to be N. A. Freaan who was own the business until 1945. The Kew Flyer Road Race was still being run during the Freaan period. In 1941, it was recognised as the '... oldest established of the traders' cycle races in Victoria' (*The Argus*, 27 October 1941). From 1945 to 1949 the business was to be run by F. Langland but the end came with an ominous notice in *The Argus* that Langland had sold the business. 'Men's, Ladies', Boys', Girls' models. Brand new. Famous Kew Flyers. Owner sold out. Stock must be cleared within seven days to make way for a new business'. The new business was to be the Jolly Wash Laundry!

Perhaps Tony's purchase of a part of this forgotten piece of Kew's history came from the sale. Regardless it is a valuable and rare item that has returned to Kew. Tony meanwhile has caught the research bug and is inquiring far and wide to find out more about the Kew Flyer. He also intends a faithful restoration of the bicycle.

Inserted Text Boxes at end

A historian's account

The Kew Flyer '... is run on the White Horse Road at Blackburn; the upper illustration shows the party about to leave Kew, while the lower one is a group of officials, competitors, &c. The names of the winners are: W. Mansfield, J. Scott, C. Witchell, D. McEwing, H. Witchell, S. Pyle, J. Scott, jun., and R. Smith (1910).

Barnard, FGA 1910, *The Jubilee History of Kew*.



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