

## JOHN CROOK - Cycling Experiences



My introduction to cycling was as a 12-year-old grammar schoolboy, when during the school summer term, we had French exchange boys who knew about the Wednesday evening track meetings at the Southampton Sports centre. A group of us attended these track meetings, being very envious of the French boy's bikes with their coloured frames, calliper brakes and derailleur gears. Compared to our own 'Sit up and Beg' black bikes.

It was also an opportunity to dream of having our own Claud Butler, Rotrax, Holdsworth etc. racing bikes ridden by the track riders and grown up spectators.

These track meetings were well supported by cyclists and public spectators, there was even a regular programme seller.

The track was well used by the 'Track League' club events and invitation events.

The 'end of season' promotion, by the Southern Paragon CC, was quite a big event, I remember Beryl Burton being one of the celebrity riders.

Sadly, the track was broken up (in the 80s?) to make room for grass field events.

Various sports people petitioned to keep it open, but the bulldozers were called in before decisions could be made!

On leaving school at 15, I started work as an invoice clerk for 'Kearley and Tongue', who was the food distributor for International Stores, another large chain of grocers which has disappeared. , Also, on leaving school I joined the CTC with another school leaver, which was a very good introduction to cycling. After a few months I heard of 'Massed Start Racing' at the Blandford Army Camp, so I made my way there several times where I met Mike Radford, a well known local cyclist (and enthusiast). As a result of meeting Mike Radford and several others, I joined 'Solent and District Road Club'.

Solent and District Road Club disbanded through lack of new young members many years ago, but ex Solent members have managed to maintain contact socially.

The demise of clubs such as Solent Wheelers and Paragon Clarion saw the birth of a very small and young Sotonia CC, which has developed into a strong successful club.

Back to Southampton Track, I rode a few junior track events prior to 2 years National Service.

National Service 1954 - 1956. This was delayed for several months because of contracting chickenpox - this was an advantage because I was called to Portsmouth instead of the original Deepcut RAOC (Royal Army Ordnance Corps). Fortunately, Portsmouth was cycling friendly, having had Charlie Blandford, a successful local rider based there. After training I was put on permanent staff at Hilsea, rather than posting to Germany etc. We managed some time off for training (Wednesday afternoon) and formed a team around John Holland, who had won the IOM **Veg** race in 1953.

We were given the day off to ride (there and back) to an Army Cycling Union 25 at Farnham, Surrey (April 1955). Luckily we won the team prize - this gave us confidence to ask for time off to ride events away. E.g. Catterick in Yorkshire.

We managed to get time off plus travelling time for away events (a long story) and finished the season winning the overall Army Challenge Cup for the 1955 season.

We were presented with the award by Reg Harris at the War Office, London.

We managed a complete season in 1956 before our demob, and won the runners up award.

Almost cut short due to the 'SUEZ' crisis.

### **Some favourite spectator events and riders**

Fausto Coppi Herne Hill 1958

Skol 6-day events Wembley 1960s (ran for 2 or 3 years)

Goodwood World Championships 1982 (Saronni, LeMond, Kelly)

Wincanton Classic Professionals at Brighton (ran for 2 or 3 years)

Stephen Roche riding in London after his epic 3 wins.

Paris 3 times for final day TDF winner. Marco Pantani, and Armstrong (twice)

J Anquetil anniversary rides in Normandy (about 10 in total)

Manchester Velodrome organised by John Ellwood, Chris Hoy, Victoria Pendleton, GB Team and Rob Hayles.

2 weekend rides by John Ellwood (1 year following) to Wiltshire and Sussex.

My first 100 in 8 was as a 15year old with the CTC. Also completed the Cycling Magazine 100 year. 40 years after.

One of the 50s highlights was the IOW weekend, I met my wife Janet who had recently joined the Solent and District RC, her sister Sheila had joined a few years before, on her first Easter weekend, she kept cycling after marriage until young family priorities took over.

**Best Part - Many long-term friends gained through cycling**