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## CHAPTER 8

### WOMEN, GENDERED ROLES, DOMESTICITY AND CYCLING IN BRITAIN, 1930–1980

Peter Cox

#### **Introduction: The Gendered Bicycle**

The safety bicycle is a quintessentially gendered object (Oddy, 1995). The existence of two distinct styles – diamond and open frame – is not based on human biological difference but on the expectations of the type of clothing to be worn by the rider. The diamond frame requires the rider to wear divided leg garments, the step-through, open frame being designed to allow the rider to wear full skirts. Although step-through frames have a whole range of advantages in ease of use, such is the ubiquity of this gendering of the artefact that the terms ladies' and gents' bicycles are still expected today when bicycles are described. As an aside, it is perhaps worth observing that my last insurance policy could not cope with the possibility that the bicycle was neither a “gent's” nor “ladies'” model. Faulkner (2001) points out that such gendered technologies also both conform to, and reproduce, broader normative roles. In the case of the bicycle, a discourse of normalcy arises, such that the diamond frame is not just the default design, but “normal” or “proper”: variations on it become “other” and of lesser value (see Salleh, 1997 for a broader philosophical treatment of this theme). It was not until the advent of the small-wheeled, “F-Frame” Moulton bicycle in the UK at

the end of 1962 that there was a mass-produced bicycle designed and marketed explicitly for “universal” or “unisex” use. Frequently, however, it was derided in reviews as not being a “proper”, or “man’s” bicycle precisely for its lack of a top tube. (Which begs the question of whether the top-tube acts as a penis substitute.)

Discussions of the early relationship of women and the bicycle are relatively well rehearsed, especially in relation to the “new woman” (Bleckmann, 1998; McGurn, 1999; Norcliffe, 2001; Strange & Brown, 2002; Herlihey, 2004; and Ebert, 2010). Although arguments circulated about the inappropriateness of bicycles for women in the late nineteenth century, these were curtly dismissed in most quarters: “A woman no more sits upon her genital organs when riding the bicycle than a man sits upon his when riding a horse” (“Cycling for Women”, 1894). However, women’s ridership during the years after the First World War, as the bicycle became mass transport in the UK, is less well examined. This chapter approaches the relationship of women, gendered roles and the bicycle with a specific focus on the United Kingdom, and largely through cyclo-tourism, that is, cycling conducted for its own sake, as an explicit leisure pursuit. Much of the activity of cycle tourism was conducted through the aegis of organized cycle clubs. Indeed the Cyclists’ Touring Club (CTC) in the UK was the very first bicycle club, founded in 1878: well before the advent of the safety bicycle. The period under study here is, roughly speaking therefore, the second fifty years of the CTC. At its half centenary in 1928, the club was dealing with a number of simultaneous problems. Rapidly increasing numbers of

bicycles on the road, mainly for utility use; increasing accident rates, especially due to conflict with the growing numbers of motorists; and tensions between the club's traditional middle-class touring membership and the need for it to act as a representative body for all cyclists in the face of largely hostile social elites, all required consideration. It was in this context that the CTC began to address the issue of women and cycling as a specific topic.

The monthly *CTC Gazette*, together with its successor *Cycletouring* (from 1963), provides a snapshot insight into the expressed concerns of organized UK leisure cyclists through the twentieth century. While not necessarily or definitively representative, we can use archival material to provide an insight into the ways in which processes of identity are constructed and social norms are advanced (compare Johnson & Lloyd, 2004; Deegan this volume). The half-century span considered allows comparison of the construction of women's roles across a rapidly changing social landscape. We should also be reminded that this span can be framed in a single lifetime. In the October/November 1977 issue of *Cycletouring*, a two-page illustrated article featured an interview with 90-year-old Ivy Donaldson, still riding almost a half century after taking part in her first overseas CTC tour in 1929. This and other biographical examples may assist in conceptualizing how we understand macro-level changes in both practices and discursive processes and relate them back from the sociological abstract to the personal and experiential.

### **Women and Cycling at the End of the 1920s**

By the end of the 1920s, cycling was a normal means of transport for a substantial proportion of workers. It also remained an archetypal leisure pursuit for the lower middle classes in Britain. Notably, Langhamer (2000) makes the observation that cycling was a cheaper leisure pursuit than others, since, once a bicycle had been acquired, little other financial outlay was required, unlike the trip costs incurred in, for example, rambling, and no further transport costs accrued. But it was still the lower-middle-class riders who formed the majority of the CTC membership. The total number of cyclists in 1930 was estimated in Parliament to be around 7,000,000 (Nathan, 1930). There is some difficulty in obtaining accurate figures for this period, but French bicycle registration was over 7 million at the end of the 1920s and was understood at the time to be similar to, or slightly less than, the UK. Compared with this mass bicycle usage, the 28,000 CTC membership was numerically insignificant, but the organization was at the forefront of defining a representative role against widespread social prejudice against cyclists (Cox, 2012).

The *Gazette* was the mouthpiece of the organization for CTC members, sharing news of events and activities, developments in the trade, and classified advertisements. The bulk of each issue's copy comprised reports on touring: describing rides and acting as inspiration and aspiration for activity. The lively letters page provided a mouthpiece for CTC members themselves to pursue specific topics and to take issue with staff writers. The very celebration of touring and leisure activities – against a national background of mass unemployment and the level of social inequalities that led to the hunger marches

– indicates how firmly rooted in middle-class experience and lifestyle the CTC was at this point (Gardiner, 2010). In relation to expanding cyclist numbers in the 1930s, the *CTC Gazette* grew in confidence both as a news sharing service, gathering reports and comments on cyclists in press and parliament, and ultimately developing an advocacy role in response to perceived threats.

If the tone of the *Gazette* was firmly lower-middle-class, then it should also be noted that it was precisely lower-middle-class women who were seeing the most dramatic transformations in lifestyle in the interwar years. Marriage remained the socially expected norm, despite the perceived shortage of eligible men. Nationally, some 5.5 to 6 million women were in work, but 84% of these were single, widowed or divorced. Marriage, especially for middle-class women, signalled a retreat into the confines of the domestic sphere. Once married, a woman was expected to re-orient her primary concerns around home and household. It was to these women that a new genre of women's magazines, for example *Woman's Own* founded in 1932, was addressed. Yet the sharp division between single and married lifestyle patterns was not unchallenged and it was this particular divide that was strongly addressed in the pages of the *Gazette*.

The articulation of a specific stance vis-à-vis the modern woman cyclotourist was forcefully made in May 1930, in an article headed "Cycling in Childhood". A guest writer under the pseudonym of "Petronella" wrote, "Motherhood is the greatest thing in Life, but there is no reason why every other joy in life should be given up for it" (*Gazette*, May, p. 170). She suggested that there was no need to spend more than six months off the bike around

the birth of a child. Once a child was three months old, she argued, a “well-sprung sidecar” attached to a tandem could provide an eminently suitable baby carriage, with the added advantage that it made the carrying of camping gear easier.

“Petronella” was a CTC Councillor, Mrs E. Parkes, vice-president of Shropshire District Association (DA) and the wife of a Midlands cycle manufacturer. The CTC was, and still is, organized at local level through DAs, local clubs autonomously responsible for organizing rides and other social events. It was run by a series of elected councillors at various levels. She was therefore, relatively well placed within the organization and not a marginal figure. Her links to manufacturing should not be taken to indicate a connection to large-scale production, however. Throughout the period under consideration, alongside large-scale manufacturer for the mass market, craft-scale or independent artisanal building of bespoke frames was relatively common in the touring scene.

Although outwardly reinforcing the social role of women as mothers, Petronella’s advice can also be read as undermining existing expectations of appropriate behaviour in motherhood. The tenor of the article illustrates a tension which was to recur in the *Gazette* for the next decade. The destiny of women in marriage, and in taking responsibility for childrearing and domestic life, was not in itself challenged. But in contrast to the observance of these wider social mores, cycling, properly organized, was being presented as a means by which the restriction of these activities within the domestic household could be broken. Where motherhood conventionally signalled withdrawal from public life (and

into dependence) for the middle-class woman, Petronella's advice was a direct confrontation. The gendered division of labour remained unchallenged, but the public/private spatial segregation assumed to be integral to it is redefined. Debates on the appropriate social and domestic roles were certainly not unique to the CTC, but part of a broader response to dramatic changes in fertility rates in post-First World War marriage and the consequent renegotiation of familial roles (Irwin, 2003). The social roles of single women were changing, especially as a significant number of older women remained single. Echoes can also be heard here of previous generations of explicitly *socialist* cycling advocacy: that the bicycle could provide the means by which the countryside and public space could be made available to all, not just remaining the preserve of a privileged few (Pye, 1995; Cox, 2015b).

Similarly, Petronella's advice can be seen to reflect earlier framing of the relation of the bicycle to women's emancipation. While living in London in 1927, the American socialist feminist Crystal Eastman, reflected that "Bicycles were the beginning of women's emancipation" (Eastman, 1978). What they had offered to the previous generation was the opportunity for unchaperoned, autonomous and independent mobility: precisely those codes of action constrained by rigid social roles. Eastman and other militant feminists campaigned through the 1920s for the abolition of laws and provisions for the special protection of women, arguing that equality for women must mean equality at all levels (see especially her writings in *Time and Tide*). Whilst not explicitly advocating women's equality, Petronella's initial column

can be read as an implicit endorsement of what were, at the time, radical feminist views.

The small-scale and artisanal production, alongside a creative “do-it yourself” mentality fostered in the club, provided the technologies that made this liberation possible. Tandems were much more common in the UK in the 1930s than in the early twenty-first century, and (apparently) used in greater numbers in the UK than elsewhere in continental Europe. The reason for their greater availability may well lie in the relative proliferation of independent manufacture. Individual cycle businesses would often braze their own frames from standardized tube and lug-sets. Thus tailor-made bicycles and short batch, individualized production were more common than they are today and tandems, especially, benefit from bespoke construction to match the riders’ physiques. Frequently ridden by mixed couples on social rides, tandems became a means publicly to signal the connection between the riders. Numbers were sufficient for some CTC DAs to organize specific tandem and family “runs” (as rides are generally known). “Juvenile Sidecars” were built and advertised by numerous recognized manufacturers, but were also frequently home-fabricated by enthusiastic riders. Family cycling became a regular feature of photographic reporting in the *Gazette*. The sidecar functioned as an enabling device for both parents of children, allowing them to continue with normal social life.

If the first barrier to be overcome concerned *when* women could and should ride, a second obvious question concerned *how far*? A letter published in the *Gazette*’s correspondence pages later that same year, posed exactly

that question: “How far should Ladies ride?”. The author tentatively suggested that, “my own idea has been that providing no ill effects are felt there can be little harm in going as far as you wish, and this distance for me, averages about 70 miles” (August 1930, p. 287). The *Gazette* firmly responded that:

lady members of the club commonly ride much greater distances than those mentioned, and there can be no possible harm if there is no feeling of exhaustion. Naturally some women can cover many more miles in a day than others, even 300 having been exceeded by one of our lady officials.

A third question, concerning *where* to ride, can be illustrated through the recollections of Ivy Donaldson, (mentioned above). She was one of four women riders (out of nineteen) who took part in a CTC guided tour in the Alps during the summer of 1929. Donaldson was given no more than a short interview at CTC head office to assess her suitability before embarking. Three weeks later the group had ridden no fewer than fourteen Alpine passes, including the 9,000 ft Stelvio. Many of these routes were still unsurfaced at this time. The answer to the question of where to ride appeared to be “anywhere you want”. Note also, that here we have single women participating in a mixed group holiday. In the wake of enfranchisement and of rapid changes in employment law and practices, it appears that the idea of appropriate and inappropriate leisure behaviours for women was also in a state of flux.

### **“Wheelwisdom for Women”**

In the *Gazette* of September 1930, (p. 321), hope was expressed “to make the ‘ladies’ page a regular feature”, and from the following month it became so: a one- or two-page feature, appearing under the headline of “Wheelwisdom for Women”, written by “Petronella”. One may speculate on the choice of pen name. Ford Madox Ford’s poem “To Petronella at Sea” had not long been published (there shall be no refuge for you and me/who haste away) but another, perhaps more likely, reference might be to the powerful and influential twelfth-century Countess of Leicester, recorded in chronicles as a woman in her own right, not just as wife of Earl Robert (Johns, 2003). The column, usually a page, sometimes two, was to run for a decade until the summer of 1940, when the *Gazette* reduced in volume as restrictions on paper were imposed. The topics of these monthly articles are remarkable inasmuch as the concerns reflected in them have become perennial topics for discussion of women and cycling, in successive generations of cycling magazines, and now, today, in online forums.

The September 1931 article focuses on correct adjustments to clothing and cycles for fellow riders. “I have wondered how many girls there are who have given up the game, feeling that they are physically unsuited for it, when it is, perhaps, only their machines and equipment that are unsuitable.” (p. 321). Further, it recommended that the solution to these basic problems was in some degree of familiarity with machine: “It has been said that women have unmechanical minds. This is, I believe, like most generalities, untrue. It is not women’s minds that are at fault but their training.” (p. 321). The reason for

frequent inappropriate choices and for lack of mechanical aptitude was also identified.

That is the worst part of being a woman; there are so many jobs that our menfolk consider are not fitted for us, and they have carried us about for so long that it is small wonder if we have become, for the most part, just bundles of inhibitions.

Petronella's advice was gently revolutionary.

The initial (September 1930) foray into the subject of children and cycling prompted a number of letters in response. To appease those who expressed dislike of the effects of sidecars on handling, a photograph in the October issue (p. 373) showed a home-built design of child-seat. Maintaining a tone gently subversive of roles, this was shown on a cycle ridden by a male rider, whilst immediately adjacent was another picture showing the award of the Dunlop challenge cup for a women's race at Herne Hill velodrome, as if to offset the exclusive association of women's cycling with childcare and domestic concern. The third news item in the column was the announcement of an initial set of classes to be given by a professional mechanic in Birmingham to offset the general lack of mechanical training provided to women in normal social and educational activity. Other training schemes run by members around the country involved in the trade, continued to be mentioned throughout the following decade. Even in the twenty-first century, this topic is still perceived as a particular problem, tackled by, for example, the *Wenches with Wrenches* programme (see Welke & Allen, 2004).

Allied to the issue of the mechanical aptitude (or not) of women, the question of appropriate bicycle design was

also a frequent topic of discussion. Bicycles designed and marketed for women have, since the 1890s, been characterized by a lack of a top tube (running horizontally from just below handlebars to just below saddle), a style usually described as “open frame”. Note the definition of women’s frames as “lacking” a top tube, even the language assisting the gendering patterns. The usual substitution of this top tube with a parallel down tube (from above the steering forks to the crank axle) tends to make the frame more flexible. This characteristic is exacerbated when the bicycle is laden for touring: hence the reason why “women’s” frames were frequently criticized. (Modern open frames avoid this problem by using use large diameter hydroformed aluminium tubing.) The advent of a dropped top tube frame – where the top tube meets the seat tube halfway up - was seen by Petronella to be an encouraging innovation at the 1930 Olympia Cycle Show (*Gazette*, December 1930, p. 432). The second problem with cycles marketed for women was that they were almost always significantly heavier than their diamond framed counterparts (18–20 lbs for a standard lightweight, 25 lbs for a women’s model).

For touring and other leisure use, Petronella argued continually that women should ride the best cycles possible, ideally a standard diamond frame. Only the continued wearing of skirts whilst riding could necessitate a deviation from this. However, it was also recognized that those women who used cycles for everyday purposes, for work rather than leisure, still needed to wear skirts and so clear distinction had to be made between machines for everyday and leisure cycling. “When will they [manufacturers] wake up to the fact that there is a big and

ever-growing demand for a really light, speedy, well built and good-looking open framed machine?" she asked (*Gazette*, November 1932, p. 342). Instead, working women were forced to ride heavy utility machines even when their tasks necessitated considerable amounts of riding.

We should not assume that utility riding during this period was somewhat incidental and only of low mileage. An example provided in the *Gazette* (May 1939, p. 147) was of two city nurses who, in the first three months of 1939, accumulated totals of 900 and 780 miles respectively, fully laden with all their bags and equipment. Given that "women's cycles" constituted 22–25% of the output of a major manufacturer such as BSA, and that significant numbers of women rode standard diamond frame cycles, the potential market was not an inconsiderable one (*Gazette*, December 1939, p. 339). By mid 1940 the proportion had doubled to 48%. (*Gazette*, July 1940, p. 155). The failure of manufacturers to recognize this market-share was vocally lamented.

The "lightweight" was a peculiarly British machine – a sporting bicycle (with "dropped" handlebars to accommodate multiple hand positions for long rides) but equipped with mudguards and saddlebag. It was constantly reaffirmed as essential to the idea of riding for pleasure (*Gazette*, November 1930, p. 402). Although utility might be got from a town bike, only the agility and easy running of a lightweight, it was considered, could allow the rider, male or female, to truly take pleasure in riding. Reports of tours in Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands frequently commented on the rarity of British-style lightweights and suggested a direct

correlation of the relative scarcity of touring and leisure riding in those destinations. In line with the extension of pleasure riding to a greater audience, “Wheelwisdom” also regularly reported on and supported a wider variety of local rides organized by DAs. Of especial note were “Loiterers’ Runs”. The word has slightly shifted in meaning and connotation since the 1930s, but these were designed to be ridden at a gentler pace, with more opportunity to stop and linger; an easy way to introduce newcomers to social riding in a more convivial atmosphere.

Petronella’s interventions into women-specific equipment came in response to experience. “[F]rom my correspondence it is obvious that far too big a percentage of girls suffer from saddle-soreness and in some cases the riding of an unsuitable saddle has led to lasting injury”. Consequently many women were being forced to adapt to existing saddles “instead of being able to select a saddle most likely to suit her from a range designed anatomically for women” (*Gazette*, September 1933, p. 295). Women’s saddles, designed for a broader pelvis, had been widely advertised and produced from the 1890s. Petronella was identifying a specific sector of the quality leather-saddle market which seems to have disappeared by the end of the 1920s. She was not afraid to be explicitly outspoken on the topic, using her column to respond (without having to print what would clearly have been unpublishable) “Your trouble is caused by pressure on a nerve and I should imagine that your saddle is to blame. Make sure that you are not sitting too high.” (*Gazette*, October 1934, p. 357.) This ultimately resulted in the production by Dunlop of a range of women-specific leather touring saddles.

### **Clothing and Femininity**

Of all the topics to vex not only women correspondents but also to provoke male comment was the subject of dress. In Petronella's words, "of all the questions that affect feminine cyclists there is one that always seems to be recurring. It is the question of clothes" (*Gazette*, February 1937, p. 36). Petronella firmly advocated plus fours or shorts, according to the weather, coupled with layered wool and silk to protect against winter cold (see *Gazette*, January 1931, p. 7; March 1932, p. 68; January 1934, p. 31; July 1934 p. 237). Divided skirts, although popular with a number of women, and apparently especially popular in the Netherlands and Austria (*Gazette*, August 1937, p. 269) were not her preferred solution. However she was prepared to accept that they allowed some to feel more comfortable and patterns were even discussed (*Gazette*, August 1934, p. 239).

For some CTC members, shorts remained anathema, even on men. On women, they were truly beyond the pale (see correspondence from CTC Board member C. W. Cooke, *Gazette*, March 1931, p. 90). Although shorts or plus fours provided ideal riding wear, when touring women faced the problem of the unacceptability of shorts once dismounted. Petronella's preferred solution was to carry a wrap-around skirt in the top on the saddlebag which could be put on quickly and without difficulty so as not to cause offence (*Gazette*, July 1934, p. 238). In this, as in all her interventions, Petronella's approach was first and foremost dominated by pragmatism, especially when touring abroad:

Each country has its own ideas about women's attire (curiously enough, none of them seem to trouble about what the men wear) and my own rule in this matter is put in a nutshell by the proverb "When in Rome do as Rome does" with the mental reservation, 'more or less' (*Gazette*, September 1935, pp. 337–338).

Ultimately, the issue of clothing remained as much an issue of liberty and of rights as it had been in the era of rational dress campaigning. But Petronella did not hold out hope that rationality would hold sway over tradition and prejudice.

It is about time that girl cyclists were allowed to dress as they like (within reason) and as they consider most suitable for the type of riding they prefer ... I say it is *time* that all these things should come to pass. It is – but I have not the slightest hope that they really will, and even if I did have any hope at all I expect that it would be entirely dashed to pieces when I read the replies that I shall surely get to these remarks. (*Gazette*, October 1937, p. 342)

The kind of critic she was thinking about had not been reticent in responding throughout the life of the column. For example, a letter in the March 1932 edition (p. 80) read:

I regard "Petronella" as a keen enthusiast of the wheel game, but I am not keen to hear too much "more of the ladies". We might shortly hear too much! Cycling is a man's game first and foremost

and I would not wish there to be anything effeminate about the *Gazette*.

Nevertheless, such complaints remained a minority and ultimately, “Wheelwisdom for Women” became the most popular feature in the *Gazette* across the whole of its readership (*Gazette*, April 1938, p. 112). In its ten years of publication it ensured that Petronella’s depiction and analysis of the proper role of women was far more influential than might initially be thought from a single writer. Yet these perceptions did not appear to spread to manufacturers and advertisers in the *Gazette*: their copy continued to portray largely subordinate and decorative roles for women.

In its discussions of cycle touring, “Wheelwisdom” conforms to expectations of women’s primary concern as the domestic. Discussions revolve around the practical minutiae of cycle camping, details of equipment and means to make a tour more successful and more amenable. Suggestions were given for the best way to select and pack bags (*Gazette*, May 1939, p. 147). Instructions were even provided for making one’s own ultra-lightweight solo tent (weight about 1 lb) and how in “these days of depression” old camping kit might be shared and basic minimal cost equipment could be made (*Gazette*, June 1933, p. 183). The relative merits and aesthetics of dress styles are a constant theme:

Why two inches of leg visible above a stocking top [ending below shorts] should look far more disreputable than six inches of bare knee, or even than bare leg and ankle sock, I have not the least idea; I only know that one offends my eye while

the other definitely pleases. (*Gazette*, July 1934 p. 237)

Problems of skincare and maintaining a fair complexion are also dealt with (use plenty of vanishing cream and leave it on while riding: *Gazette*, December 1934, p. 421).

Yet, beyond the domesticity and clichéd femininity of these concerns, “Wheelwisdom” was simultaneously advocating solo and independent camping as entirely suitable and appropriate for women. Women, either solo or as paired companions, are regularly depicted, visually as well as in-text (See *Gazette*, June 1939, p. 126). Petronella’s own long tour of central Europe in 1937 was in the company of a Mrs Mary Dodds. In subsequent descriptions of their travels, comparison of women’s uses of bicycles in various countries provided an ongoing theme. Even the etiquette of shared responsibility in tandeming came under comment. For mixed couples riding tandem she suggested (rather radically and against the general mechanical advice which puts the heavier rider at the front) that they should be free to sort out their own dynamic. It is often more appropriate, she argues, for women to ride as pilot rather than stoker (in the front seat rather than behind) (*Gazette*, November 1935, p. 391). Importantly, this latter is justified by women’s social condition: “women as a whole are more highly strung and nervous (I do not mean neurotic), and that the complete faith and self-surrender which a man takes for granted is much more difficult of an attainment than he imagines”. Her attribution of these qualities is far from essentialist. She clearly recognizes that these conditions are socially constructed, resulting from women’s historic lack of

opportunity (see previous comment on mechanical aptitude).

Petronella used comparison with the place and status of women cycling in other European nations to highlight the degree of construction present in gender roles. Reflecting on a tour of Germany in 1936 she commented that current German conceptions of

womanhood and manhood ... [are] allied to the fundamental idea of the nation's welfare. ... That has led to the transformation of recreation into training, and – rightly or wrongly – to the condemnation of everything that does not accord with current ideas of womanliness. (October 1936, p. 335)

Implicit recognition was given here to National Socialism's fetishization of women as mothers, and the denigration of activities that might be construed as a "search for pleasure" (Durham, 1998, p. 19). Although appearing to be even-handed and non-political in her writing, the tone is highly critical and she is clearly aggrieved at the social restrictions imposed by pro-natalist discourses and policies (also in place in France at this time). Consistent in her analysis that problems for women were inextricably intertwined with (and constructed through) broader social role expectations, in the early 1930s she had toured in Spain and in the Pyrenees and commented negatively on the likelihood of full emancipation for Spanish women (*Gazette*, November 1931, p. 351). She acknowledged the many changes ("good and bad") brought about by the coming of the republic, but even though the right to vote had been granted she thought that it would need considerable

intervention and education for women to take full advantage of its possibilities (*Gazette*, April 1933, p. 115).

The overt concerns of “Wheelwisdom for Women” are domestic detail, the roles and responsibilities of a gender stereotype. More subtly, though, the column acted to redefine women’s roles. She acted to change the perception of women as cyclists. Her championing of women as cycle tourists showed them riding for riding’s sake and not for ulterior motives, that is, solely for utilitarian need (*Gazette*, January 1939). This may seem insignificant but it carefully places women cycle tourists as social agents. For example, in May 1935 (p. 174) she wrote:

My own impression is that, because the modern girl is trusted more, is not watched so closely and is left more to follow her own devices than to have her actions decided for her, she develops her individuality to a much greater extent, and is not so likely to have an inferiority complex, as was the girl of previous generations.

Alongside championing women as cycle tourists (including “ladies” [women-only] rides), Petronella also reported in the exploits of women riding in speed and endurance events.

In the 1930s, the dominant form of cycle sport in Britain was the time trial. Massed start road racing was still forbidden by the NCU (National Cyclists’ Union). Since 1888, the Roads Records Association (RRA) had ratified claims upon achievements ridden on the road. It recognized rides made by men over given distances (from 25 to 1,000 miles) and times for fixed point-to-point routes. The Women’s Road Record Association (WRRRA)

was founded in the latter half of 1934 to recognize women's achievements and immediately prompted numerous notable rides. By 1939, Petronella could point to a pantheon of (professional) riders who had set significant achievements, which could not only inspire but disprove any idea of women's inherent inferiority (*Gazette*, February 1939, p. 39). Even today, the achievements of these women challenge preconceptions. "Billie" Dovey rode almost 30,000 miles in 1938, touring the country and giving lectures on health and fitness in the evenings. Lilian Dredge set a women's Land's End to John O'Groats record of 3 days 20 hours and 54 minutes. Pearl Wellington of the Vegetarian Cycling Club broke five WRRR records between 1935 and 1938. Marguerite Wilson set records at distances from 10 miles all the way up to a new Land's End to John O'Groats of 2 days 22 hours 52 minutes and a 1,000 mile record of 3 days 11 hours 44 minutes. This was a largely unheralded and unrecognized athletic achievement; she was unfortunate that this ride was completed on 2 September 1939 and was rather overshadowed in the news. In addition women's cycling also appeared not infrequently in newsreels: Evelyn Hamilton's achievement of 10,000 miles in 100 days (100 consecutive "century" rides) also made headlines in 1938. She was filmed numerous times by Pathé News as an example of athletic achievement and featured in film and at cycling exhibitions as a rider of Charles Mochet's velo-velocar and other recumbent cycles (even if film shots spent an inordinate time lingering on her ankles) (Cox, 2013).

Petronella's columns in the *Gazette* portrayed women as having the potential to be independent and self-reliant.

Such qualities were not automatic but needed to be trained and nurtured: especially given the social forces with which they were contending. The strength of the social norms of marriage and responsibility for house holding and child rearing need not mean a retreat from public space. Instead, cycle technologies enabled a child to accompany its mother in her own social activities, through sidecar, child-seat, (Rann) trailer-bikes and finally into independent riding. Petronella was careful to extol the capabilities of girls' riding, for example, reporting a ten-year-old girl's first "century" ride (that is, a 100-mile distance. Peckham to Kings Lynn, 102 miles, *Gazette*, February 1939, p. 39) alongside her coverage of established professionals. The presentation of women cyclists as both heroic and capable role models is similar to the popular celebration of women's achievement in other mobility spheres at the time, for example, in the celebration of and widespread public fascination with Amy Johnson. It was easier for women to break through and define more equal roles in these new areas of activity than in areas of life where power and privilege were more firmly entrenched.

In sum, the situation for women in the 1930s cycling scene was of dramatic achievements in the UK and contains clear elements of role equality as an emancipatory process. The gains made in suffrage were being matched, at least in these lower- middle-class ranks, with changes in the expectations of social behaviours and obvious redefinitions of the public and private spheres, alongside changed considerations of parenting and domesticity. These gains were to prove short-lived.

### **The War and its Aftermath**

As the bicycle became the primary household transport mode for many middle-class car-owning households in the face of petrol rationing, the war years saw a further boost to the numbers of utility riders. Additionally and perhaps counter-intuitively, wartime also saw the beginning of massed-start cycle racing on British roads and the founding of a new rival organization to the NCU (see Cox 2015a for further analysis of post-war British cycling). In the CTC, women began to take a more visible role in organization and leadership (*Gazette*, May 1940, p. 116). But paper rationing reduced the journal to a minimum and Petronella's pages disappeared, along with most other regular columns. At the end of the war, "Wheelwisdom" was not reinstated. Its potential replacement, "Wheels and the Woman", penned by CTC Headquarters staff member Val Tomlinson, did not appear until April 1949 (p. 55). Tomlinson's initial comment questioned the lack of women as representatives in committees and decision-making bodies in the CTC. Despite providing some one-third of applicants for overseas tours, and a considerable proportion of local runs leadership, women, she complained, were largely invisible at the national level. "Wheels and the Woman" was short lived, lasting only a year, and only appearing as a bi-monthly article towards the back of the *Gazette*, rather than as a leading feature as "Wheelwisdom" had been. Topics reverted to familiar issues, breaking no new ground. When considering clothing, emphasis was on the need for a tidy personal appearance, not the practical and pragmatic approach of Petronella. When reviewing the 1949 Cycle Show, Tomlinson argued the need for open

frame versions of popular models: in order to allow for the possibility of riding in skirts. It appeared that the radicalism of ten years before was firmly dismissed, transformed by the flux and retrenchment in gender roles brought about by the aftermath of war.

After another gap without any specific women's advocacy, in August 1951 (*Gazette*, p. 411) seventeen-year-old Winifred Munday began what was to become an occasional feature under the title of a "Girl's Eye View". The degree of change in the broader outlook can be gauged by her observation that "there is something about a women's column [in the *Gazette*] that makes men laugh" (*Gazette*, October 1951, p. 361). Again, regardless of the numbers of women taking leading roles in CTC activities, gender roles had become considerably more ossified. "When writing your women's page, extol women riders for their grace and for their womanly contribution to the club, but keep at the back of your mind that cycling is fundamentally a man's game" wrote A. F. Searle (*Gazette*, April 1952, p. 570). Although a defence was given, Munday's response lacked the scorn of Petronella's stylish put-downs of male detractors. Responding to the accusation that women were not reliable long-term club members, leaving to start families, Munday's reply was muted: "A bird of passage she may be, but when her responsibilities as home-maker are over, she invariably returns – or at least makes it possible for her male partner to carry on" (p. 571). It was left to male correspondents in later months to point out that the majority of men also only ride for limited time periods and are equally unreliable long-term members.

Although Munday covered many of the same familiar topics in the five years of her writing in the *Gazette* (clothing, saddles, women riders), the reduction in the title of “Women” to “Girls” served only to marginalize and infantilize women’s contributions. Increasingly, women’s riding was associated only with family riding, the solo woman rider being almost entirely invisible. Women made their appearances only as an adjunct to men: this despite women like Val Tomlinson being a key CTC Alpine tour leader throughout the 1950s (*Gazette*, November 1956, p. 328; February 1959, p. 47). The post-war situation of gender roles within the club had become radically transformed. Despite the emergence of a new generation of record-breaking women road riders such as Eileen Sheridan, and later Beryl Burton, there were few visible role models in the touring scene. The *Gazette* became an almost exclusively male preserve.

The barriers maintained by (mainly older) men in the club that Munday had complained about (*Gazette*, September 1952, p. 768) were firmly entrenched by the 1960s. The *Gazette’s* editorial in March 1961 (p. 55) places the dominant male understanding of women’s place and role in cycle touring in perspective.

‘The Ladies’ has always been a favourite toast at club dinners, but during the past few months the proposers have, in many cases, spoken with a tinge of regret that there are not more of these charming companions to make the wonderful game of cycling more wonderful still.

Is it any wonder that women left and stayed away? The article went on to comment that women had never made up more than one-third of members (without noting the

irony of this as an extremely high level of participation) and displayed its own inability to see women as other than wives or prospective wives, emphasizing that “our leading cyclists have consistently shown that they can look as attractive as any other sportswomen”. Women had become no more than decorative.

Correspondence only served to reinforce these gender role stereotypes: “It is a waste of time to go out of one’s way to cater for lady members ... we must face the fact that cycling does not appeal to women very much” (*Gazette*, March 1962, p. 58). The larger reality was that these comments were being made against a background of rapidly falling numbers of cycle users among the entire population and dramatic falls in club membership. Women appear to have become a scapegoat for broader changes. In reality, however, women’s cycling was in far less of a decline than men’s during this period (Pooley et al., 2013, p.23)

Sexist comments and attitudes did not go unopposed. “If the CTC really wants more women members might I suggest that a less patronizing attitude on the part of the male cyclists would help”, stated the headline letter in October 1963, singling out for particular attention the cartoonist “who usually shows the ‘little woman’ in a humorously derogatory way”. Overall, however, such protestations were rather lost. The focus of the entire journal throughout the 1950s had been increasingly narrow and introspective, lacking in the broader focus and outward perspective of its pre-war editions. Women had become all but invisible in the *Gazette* as club membership dwindled to less than 8,000 (excluding the 5,000 or so life members). Cycle touring became an

increasingly esoteric activity as other leisure possibilities expanded alongside increasing car ownership among the middle classes who had made up the core of the pre-war members. Yet among these die-hards, photographs in indicate that women still made up typically one-third of CTC organized touring parties in the 1960s – just as they had always done (See *Cycletouring*, April/May 1978, p. 87).

### **A Minor Resurgence?**

Re-launched in 1963 as *Cycletouring*, the club journal began to return to its pre-war style (though in a bi-monthly format). It deliberately presented a broad range of touring-related topics in order to give a broader appeal as more of a general interest magazine rather than the insiders' newsletter it had become. But radicalism and the sense of leadership visible in its earlier presentation of women was conspicuously absent. Not until 1973 – a decade after the revolution in unisex cycle design that the Moulton had initiated – did the issues of women's touring reappear. Major changes had occurred in British bicycle use in the 1960s, with mass sales of small-wheel bicycles marketed as style and fashion articles: an image powerful enough to have halted, at least temporarily, a long-term decline in British cycle sales (Hadland, 2011). Apart from some generally sceptical reports (and interminable correspondence) on the merits or otherwise of small-wheeled bicycles, the changes in riding patterns from organized club activities to increasingly casualized leisure, almost entirely bypassed the CTC. Similarly the social changes in women's lives that also began in the 1960s were agonizingly slow to filter through, but in

1973, *Cycletouring* published its first acknowledgement that changes were a wheel.

Anne Taylor wrote about her experience of women-only touring groups: “we abandoned our children (we prayed for them) to their fathers’ care”, she wrote, making light of the situation of organizing a women-only ride (*Cycletouring*, April/May 1973, p. 81). The fact that the article needed to be headlined “Women’s Lib” signalled just how unusual this perspective was in *Cycletouring*. Referring to the division of childcare to allow one parent a day of activity to themselves she wrote that, “In this enlightened age the time may well come when she is the one to cycle away”. Thirty-five years previously, women’s continued riding, even whilst caring for young children, was a normal and expected activity. The comments shows just how significant had been the degree of retrenchment in gender roles. The gendered identity of cycling even extended to children’s riding. Bill Rann, who worked for both Holdsworth and Grubb cycle manufacturers, developed the Trailerbike (one wheel with saddle and pedals attaching to the rear of the adult’s machine) in the mid 1930s as an alternative to the childback tandem, the other frequent means to allow children to cycle with a parent. When Bill Hannington started to build trailerbikes in the late 1970s (as Hann trailers), he felt the need to produce them in both boys’ and girls’ versions (with and without top tubes) as opposed to the universal design of the original Rann. Even children’s first forays into riding had now become clearly gendered.

It may be argued that the almost complete absence of specific consideration of women’s cycle touring in the

pages of the post-war CTC journals could be an indication of gender neutrality. However, in a situation of inequality, not to address difference is to perpetuate that inequality. Through the 1930s women's social roles and appropriate behaviours had been presented as malleable, open to negotiation and experimentation. Domesticity was a fixed social obligation but cycling was presented as a means by which the isolation of householding could be overcome. The solidification of perceptions around women as non-cycle tourists, or as cycle touring only as accompanists of men and as guardians of children, is very much a post-war phenomenon. It needs reiterating that this analysis reflects the experiences of a strongly lower-middle-class organization, but oral testimony appears to bear out these findings from a wider group (Langhamer, 2000).

But during the 1970s, the changes in women's lives in wider society began to be reflected in organisational life. As the CTC approached its centenary year in 1978, the visibility of women in the pages of *Cycletouring* grew considerably and it reflected more of the reality of women's cycle touring. Overall numbers were now also increasing: up to 28,000 in 1975, approaching pre-war levels. For some, such as Molly Given (writing about solo touring in the West of Ireland, June/July 1978, pp. 130–132), the issue of gendered roles is not even worth a mention. Accounts are presented in *Cycletouring* of the personal reflections of touring and one cannot tell from the writing the sex of the journalist concerned. Many reports similarly reflect the experience of couples on tour together. For other women writing, the issue of lack of mechanical aptitude – even of basic practices such as mending a puncture – remained noteworthy. At grass

roots and local level, women still made up significant portions of the backbone of the club's mundane riding activities. Although data is hard to come by, it appears that much of the local organizing fell to women in the individual sections. Cycle touring offered a social and leisure practice and a normal way of life, which may not be entirely unconnected with the gendered status of driving licence ownership during this period. Although 50% of households had access to a car at the beginning of the 1970s, driving was a predominantly male activity. The bicycle still offered the only real means of mobility for the majority of women. In the 1980s, a new image of women riding appeared, spurred on by the foundation of magazines such as *New Cyclist*. It reflected new thinking about the social and political role of the bicycle, but existed largely outwith the activities of the CTC.

### **Conclusions**

The overview presented in this chapter opens up a number of avenues for further exploration. Questions can be asked around technologies and their affordances. The relationship of women's cycling to the presence (or absence) of particular technologies is complex. In the 1930s, women drove design innovation in order to create more appropriate technologies. In the 1960s, as cycles were increasingly marketed specifically at women, they re-created an image of the bicycle as a plaything. These tangled relationships continue to the present.

Women-only rides have become very significant in the past recent resurgence of organized cycling, not only in Britain. These are connected, as before, with the imagery of (and in the twenty-first century, actual support

by) sporting celebrities. Once more, cycling magazines are filled with pages of discussion on appropriate clothing and presentation issues for women on bikes. On a more theoretical understanding we may consider the evidence produced above in terms of theories of social practice. Shove et al., (2012) identify practices as comprised of interacting elements of technologies, meanings and competences. We might use this example of women's cycle touring to explore how a single social practice of cycle touring has generated dramatically changing meanings and competences, relating to other forms of social roles and social practices. Above all, perhaps, the study demonstrates the complex and shifting identities produced and reproduced in women's cycling. Focusing on the cultural construction of these images, in the context of broader social roles, brings them into sharper focus.

Cycling was a signal of emancipation not only in the nineteenth century. Right up until the Second World War, it continued to provide a means of liberation and a way to redefine gender roles for British women. In the years when the enfranchisement of women was still recent news, the bicycle became a vehicle through which to express the newly emancipated state, as well as (as Eastman observed) having been one of the means by which the argument was made in the first place. In the post-war years, however, the assertion of cycle touring as a masculine activity appears to have restricted women's range of acceptable activity to narrower confines which would take many decades to be challenged. Cycle touring shifted to being one of the arenas in which hegemonic masculinities were performed (despite the reality of women's constant presence in touring as an activity). As

women's riding re-emerged into visibility in the 1970s, it did so as a reflection of increasing emphasis on women's visibility in other spheres of life, not as a means to realizing that liberation.

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