



## WARRINGTON ROAD CLUB

1923-1998

### A SHORT HISTORY

*By: Johnny Helms (December 1998)*

There are two different accounts of the formation of Warrington Road Club. The first was in the first club magazine (The Wheel), published at the end of 1932 which states:

*The club was formed in 1923 by a band of enthusiasts who had decided that a cycling club is essentially a sporting organisation and that if the sporting spirit were not encouraged its days would certainly be numbered. The original members numbered five and if they lacked at all in numbers they certainly did not lack in enthusiasm.*

The second account was given in the club magazine published in March 1945 wherein Walter Pritchard wrote a "thank you" message when he was made a life member:

*It is a far cry to that Sunday afternoon, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1923, when George Rhodes our first secretary and I with thirteen others including George's sister Rachel and John Ward met in the front room of Ma Jones in Chester and decided to form a new club to be known as the Warrington Road Club.....*

As Walter was there this must be the true account. Harry Barker is named as another founder member in his obituary printed in 1947 but the names of the other founder members are lost in the mists of time.

The club was very active from the beginning. In 1924 John Ward became the first member to win an open event when he won the Warrington Whs 25 with a time of 1.14.32. In the same year the club ran its first open event, a 25 won by Aussie Hurlen of the Pheonix CC with a time of 1.12.26.

In 1925 the Fernhead course was used for the first time and in addition to the Open 25 the club ran club events at 25 and 50 miles. In 1926 the Shrewsbury and Back record was added and the first record holder was W.Clarke with a time of 5.43.40.

In 1927 club events at 30 and 100 miles were added to the programme. A year later the club introduced standard medals, gold, silver and bronze, for the first time. At the end of that first season, five gold, six silver and twelve bronze medals were awarded.

In 1929 a club hill climb and a club 12 hour event were added to the menu. It seems incredible now that a club could run a twelve hour event for its own members. The problems of organising the event led to Harry Barker, who was a leading timekeeper, to invent the "finishing circuit", a system which was soon adopted by every other cycling club. The first event was won by Johnny Irlam with a distance of 189 miles.

A year later the racing programme expanded even further with the introduction of an Invitation Novice 25 mile event and "extra" 25 and 50 mile club events were run.

The driving force behind all this activity was Harry Barker who was race secretary and timekeeper from the start of the club until his death in 1947. He was always regarded as the "Father of the Club" and was its inspiration. He was a workaholic for the sport of cycling and added to his burdens by organising the club's first Open 100 in 1933. Seventy five checkers were needed for the event and on the Sunday prior to the event they were all taken on a clubrun round the course and shown where they would be checking. They were asked to approach anyone they knew who owned a car to see if they could arrange for the loan of one or two vehicles on the day of the event. Checkers were asked to report to the Farmers Arms at 3:30am on the morning of the race.

The winner was J.Pitchford of the Anfield BC with a time of 4.40.23 and he led the winning team. The best Road Club rider was Jim Sutton who was third in 4.44.43 and he also gained third handicap award.

In the 1938 event Johnny Palmer (Rossendale RC) won with a time of 4.23.48 which was faster than the existing competition record – only to discover that Shake Earnshaw had finished the Westerly 100 ten minutes earlier with a time only seconds faster.

The club's first racing stars were Jack Webster and Jim Sutton. Jack started racing in 1926 and in his first season won open events and broke the club record for 30 miles. Jim Sutton started racing a year later and in his first season he too won open events and broke the club 100 mile record. In the following years they reduced all the club records time after time and between them won many open events and led many team victories. One of their most outstanding records was in winning a 50 mile tandem event with a time of 1.54.57 which, in 1930, was the fastest time ever recorded. This remained a club record until 1956 when it was beaten by Roy Dixon and Pete Robertson with a time of 1.53.52

Another outstanding rider in the early years was Joe Barke who managed to take away club records from Webster and Sutton on three occasions. Harty

Millington was a top performer on two or three wheels. He held all the club tricycle records and won three major national trophies, the Major Liles Trophy, the S.S.Edge Trophy and the H.W.Bartleet Trophy.

During this period the club was very active. The club magazine contained reports of sports days, hobo runs, paper chases and speed judging contests. The club ran public dances to raise funds, obviously necessary because the 1932 magazine reported that there was no bank balance and several pounds in arrears.

The magazines of the 1930s contain articles of members' tours in Devon, Yorkshire, the Lake District, Scotland, Germany and Switzerland. There were clubruns leaving Bridge Foot at midnight to ride down to Shrewsbury for the Anfield 100 and winter weekends at Clough House Farm in Wildboardclough, where members slept in the barn. Club riding was described as "of the hard riding variety". This is borne out by the report of a clubrun in October 1925 when a group of riders left Bridge Foot at 11pm to meet friends in the Rotherham Whs at Doncaster at 5am. At 2am they ran into a snowstorm and had to walk from Stalybridge over the Pennines to Honley, a distance of 15 miles. They met their friends at Cleckheaton. They started the return journey at 3pm, but once again the snow on the Pennines was too thick to cycle through, and they had to walk from Marsden to Dobb's Cross, another seven miles. They finally got home after midnight – hard riding indeed!

Club dinners were very different to today's functions. In 1936 a tea, prize presentation, concert party and dancing cost 4/6d (45p) and for those unable to attend the tea, the remainder of the evening including refreshment cost 1/9d (17p). Even at those prices it was a financial success!

In 1938 just as the reign of Webster and Sutton was coming to an end a new young star appeared on the scene. Fifteen year old Alan Barker, son of the club mentor, promptly won the club hill climb and the following year won three club 25s picking up two first handicaps and one second handicap. By the time he was called up into the RAF in 1943 he had broken the club 25 and 50 mile records three times each and also broke the 30 mile record. He won a number of open events and was a brilliant hillclimber. His photograph appeared in the magazine "Cycling" in the early 1940s with the caption that he was the fastest 40 cigarettes a day rider in the country.

When Alan Barker was called up a new star appeared on the scene. Inez Finch started racing in 1943 (when she was still Inez Povey) and she has raced every year since. Her record is remarkable. 55 years of racing that have included over 100 wins in open and association events, a couple of wins in road races, six times in the top six of the Women's BBAR including two third placings, Manchester Ladies BAR Champion fourteen times, and victory in the Women's National 100 mile Championship in 1977. She has broken age-related records at 10 or 25 miles, or both, every year since age-related records were introduced for women veterans.

Another star rider appeared on the scene in 1944. Harry Jackson started his racing career by winning all the club events in 1944 and 1945 and was club champion in 1945, 1946 and 1947 when he won his first open event. He became one of the leading riders in the north west. In 1948 he won a club 25 on Fernhead in exactly one hour at a time when only fourteen riders in the whole country had beaten the hour, and in the same year he also broke the club 50 and 100 mile records. The hour wasn't beaten on Fernhead until 1959 when Dave Keen did 59.06.

The club didn't have a clubroom until 1936 when it moved into the British Legion in St. Austin's Lane and remained there until the 1960s. Early reports in the magazine talk of members playing billiards, darts and cards, using a punchball, singing round the piano, and drinking in the bar. After leaving the British Legion the club had a number of headquarters until it acquired its present meeting place at the Causeway Hotel.

At the beginning of the war, the club had 147 members. Twentynine of them were called up and two were killed on active service. The club sent copies of the magazine "Cycling" to all its members in the forces.

After the war there was a large influx of new members and by 1949 the club had 227 members, 65 of whom raced with entries of over 50 in club events. In 1951 the club had 39 riders in the MDTTA 100.

One of the new members was Reg Devonport, a youngster from Widnes, and in 1950 he broke the club 50 and 100 mile records, the former also beating the Merseyside area record that had stood for fourteen years, and he also won the Merseyside Mountain Trial in record time. Other open wins followed but a promising career was cut short when he emigrated to the USA where he broke the coast to coast record.

In the 1950s the club turned its attention to 24 hour racing. The interest might have been cut short after their experiences in their first Mersey Roads 24 in 1950 when it rained for 17 hours and Arthur Vale went off course after 350 miles. Stan Lea's sterling effort when he finished third persuaded them to try again and in the following year Arthur Vale won the event with a distance of 436.8 miles and Stan Lea was third again. In 1952 Arthur Vale, Stan Lea and 17 year old Bill Bentham won the team prize with a total distance of 1285.6 miles.

In 1953 Arthur Turner finished third in the National Championship, gaining the club's first national championship medal. In the same year he held the club's 50 and 100 miles and 12 hour and 24 hour records, plus the club 100 mile tandem record. In 1954 he went one better and gained a National Championship Silver Medal with a new club record distance of 457 miles but in 1955 he was in contention for a gold medal when he was knocked off by a drunk.

Stan Lea's greatest triumph came twenty years after his first 24 hour venture when he won the 1970 Mersey Roads 24 with a distance of 441.9 miles, ten

miles less than his greatest distance two years earlier. He must be the club's greatest ever mileage eater. He rode thirteen 24 hour events and thirty consecutive Anfield 100s. His best performance was in 1953 when he was fourth fastest with a club record time of 4.30.23, won the first handicap prize, and led the winning team. He also did prodigious non-racing miles.

A 24 hour record that is unlikely to be beaten belongs to Johnny Gallimore. Riding his trike in the 1956 Mersey Roads 24 he smoked approximately fifty cigarettes, an average of one every eight miles.

The influx of members in the 1950s included John Atkinson, Pete Robertson, Brian Yuile, Jim Turner, Dave Keen, and Ron Spencer, all outstanding riders. Pete Robertson gained the club 50 and 100 mile records and the 25, 30 and 50 mile tandem records with Roy Dixon. In the short period before he was called up Jim Turner won the club championship with a record speed, won the prestigious Manchester Whs and broke the club 100 mile record.

Dave Keen was a 15 year old from Crewe when he joined the club. In his first season he won the Wagstaffe Award for the fastest novice in the Manchester area. He beat the hour for the first time as a 16 year old, a feat he was to repeat over eighty times. In 1959 when he was 18 years old he became the first club member to beat two hours for 50 miles and a fortnight later became the first member to win the Harry Barker 50 with a time of 2.0.11. In 21<sup>st</sup> place was 16 year old Ron Spencer, with a time of 2.17.13, who was on his way to emulating Dave Keen's feat of winning the Wagstaffe Trophy.

The following year the tables were turned when Ron Spencer won with a time of 2.0.15, and Dave Keen second in 2.0.31. Ron rode 26" wheels with wired-on tyres and a gear of 82" fixed.

The 1950s finished in a blaze of glory when, in 1959 the club gained National Championship Gold Medals for the first time with John Atkinson (5<sup>th</sup>), Brian Yuile (9<sup>th</sup>) and John Haddock won the team award in the National 12 hour championship with a distance of 747.7 miles. Nineteen year old John Atkinson had previously won the MDTTA 12 hour event and only a series of misfortunes robbed him of an individual championship medal. He had a puncture and mechanical problems and changed bikes six times.

The 1960s started badly when Ron Spencer was diagnosed with a "hole in the heart" condition but after many tests and hospital visits he was given the all clear. His racing was disrupted for a couple of years but by 1963 he was back to his best and won the National 12 hour Championship with 267.3 miles. In the same year he was second in the BBAR narrowly beaten by Peter Hill. If he had ridden a 100 mile event as fast as his first 100 miles in the 12 hour championship he would have been a clear winner of the BBAR. However, he won the Manchester Area BAR with a record speed and broke the club's 50 miles, 100 miles and 12 hour records. He was also selected for the Merseyside squad in 2 day and 4 day stage races. The following year he rode in the GB squad in the eight day Tour of Holland, and to show his versatility won the Merseyside Cyclo Cross Championship. In 1998, thirtyeight years

after he won his first Harry Barker, he is still one of the fastest riders in the club.

Success still came in the 1960s. Ron Spencer, Dave Keen, Alan Kefford and Alan Barber all won open events and Alan Barber was selected for an international track squad. In 1961 we had five lady members racing and one of them, Terry Riley, became the club's second most successful lady rider, winning a number of open events. In the same year Dave Keen left to join the merchant navy. In the mid-1960s Alan Boden left to live in the Midlands where he joined the Oldbury and District CC. He was a top time-triallist and he had a number of road race wins as a club member but had even greater success in the Oldbury club winning a number of national championship team medals.

In the mid-1960s a group of mainly younger riders led by Ernie Lightfoot left to form a new club, the Merlin RC. In 1969 the two clubs amalgamated again, and we retained the name Warrington RC, but changed the club colours to the present day red, white and black. The previous club colours had been maroon and gold. Originally all time-triallists had to wear an all-black costume of tights and alcapa jackets. The first relaxation came in 1942, when shorts and knee-length stockings were allowed. The next change was in 1951 when shoulder-flashes in club colours were allowed and finally, in 1953 the present day coloured racing tops were permitted.

After a few years in the doldrums there was a revival of the club's fortunes in the 1970s. Graham Daniels won the gold medal in the schoolboys' National Road Race Championship and another schoolboy, John Bailey, was selected for a national squad racing in Germany.

Another highly successful rider during this period was Howard Wilkinson who represented Great Britain in the amateur Paris-Roubaix event.

Paul Sherwen joined the club from the Weaver Valley in 1975 before moving on to the sponsored Altrincham Rotolac club and then turning professional and riding in the Tour de France.

Another rider who had professional experience is Trevor Horton who first joined the club in 1960 but left after a few months to join the Sale RC to pursue his interest in road racing. Success led him into joining the Merlin RC in 1965, moving on to a season in Brittany in 1966 and then riding professionally for the Broadhurst Biscuits / Sid Mottram team. After three years he disappeared from the cycling scene and didn't touch a bicycle for ten years.

He rejoined the Warrington RC in 1980. He soon found the form and the speed that had brought him success in the 1960s, winning time trials and road races including the MDTTA 50 mile championship and the MDTTA BAR.

In the late 1980s he began to organise the club's highly successful open 4-up 25 mile events. Trevor was himself a very successful team rider winning 2-up, 3-up and 4-up events with his clubmates.

Successes were rare in the early 1990s but the last two or three years have seen a revival in the club's fortunes. In 1996 Carl Miller won the Manchester Wagstaffe Award and Steve Hankey broke the club 10 mile record. The rivalry between these two friends resulted in both riders beating the hour for 25 miles and two hours for 50 miles. Both these riders, backed by Ron Spencer, won the team award in the 1996 (Golden Jubilee) and 1997 Harry Barker 50, and Carl Miller won the first handicap in the 1996 event.

In 1998 Steve Hankey has broken the club 30 mile record and won the MDTTA 50 mile championship, and Carl Miller has twice broken the club 10 mile record with rides of 21.01 and 20.49

The arrival in 1998 of Alf Hilton, formerly of the Leigh Premier, has given the club one of the fastest trios in the area resulting in a number of team victories and 2-up wins.

The club's 75<sup>th</sup> year has ended on a high note and with the expectation of more triumphs in the future.

In addition to a host of star riders the club has always had dedicated, hard-working and efficient officials. Pride of place must go to Harry Barker who guided the club from its beginnings until he died in 1947. In that time he was race secretary, race organiser and timekeeper. He paid entry fees for club members who were out of work and turned his hand to anything that would help the club.

When he died the club open 50 was immediately renamed the Harry Barker Memorial 50, and the club worked very hard to make it an event worthy of the man. The first one was won by Bev Chapman of the Manchester Whs, a very satisfactory result because Chapman's father was one of Harry Barker's best friends. In 1951 Rueben Firth (Altrincham Ravens) became the first rider to beat two hours in the North of England and in 1953 the Mersey RC broke the competition team record.

Three riders who won the Harry Barker 50, Vic Marcroft (five times), Barry Bucknell and Rod Brooks, while members of other clubs, later joined the Warrington RC. Barry Bucknell (25 miles) and Rod Brooks (100 miles) still hold club records.

The Golden Jubilee event in 1996 had a prize list in excess of £1100. It was won by Andy Wilkinson (Port Sunlight Whs) in a record time of 1.47.50. In the same year he won the BBAR with a record speed and broke the national 50 mile, 100 mile and 12 hour records. Warrington RC won the fastest and handicap team awards and the first handicap prize.

Not far behind Harry Barker in service to the club is his son Alan Barker our current president. He has been club president for fifty years and organised the Memorial 50 for over forty years. He has also served as race secretary, magazine and press secretary, timekeeper and handicapper.

Walter Pritchard served as club treasurer from 1923 to 1947. George Rhodes was timekeeper from 1923 until he went to live in Lincolnshire in 1946. Harry (Tot) Whitham joined the club in the mid-1920's and was either social secretary or magazine secretary for most of his years until 1950, organising many events and was always a leading entertainer at all the club's social functions.

Stan Jones has been minutes secretary and social secretary and has organised the club dinner for the last 36 years. He provides the lead car for all the club's road races and for many other clubs in the Manchester area. In addition he provides the same clubs with radio communications for both road races and time trials. In 1998 he was awarded a RTTC Certificate of Merit.

Johnny Helms joined the club in 1946, the same year that he had his first cartoon published in the magazine "Cycling". He was club treasurer for thirteen years and chairman for ten years. He has also been magazine and press secretary. He organised road races on the Moore/Halton circuit and ran inter-club 10s on the Cronton circuit for fifteen years. For his services to cycling he was made an honorary life member of the CTC in 1955 and in 1997 he signed the Golden Book of Cycling and was awarded the prestigious Bidlake Trophy.

Derek Devonport was club treasurer and also national treasurer of the RTTC. He organised the 1987 National Championship 50 and ran the evening criteriums for eleven years until his untimely death in 1995. After his death the three race criterium series became a single road race and has been renamed the Derek Devonport Memorial Road Race.

Brian Yuile is the first member to combine the onerous jobs of treasurer and general secretary.

Detailed pre-war race results are not available but the following table shows the number of wins by club members in open and association events. Only the top eight riders are shown:

Inez Finch	109
Ron Spencer	28
Dave Keen	26
Trevor Horton	19
Harold Gaskell	10
Terrie Riley	10
Barry Bucknell	9
Pete Robertson	9

The current (1998) club records are:

10 miles	Carl Miller	20.49
25 miles	Barry Bucknell	53.58
30 miles	Steve Hankey	1.08.58
50 miles	Ron Spencer	1.52.18
100 miles	Rod Brooks	3.58.19
12 hours	Ron Spencer	267.3 miles
24 hours	Arthur Turner	457.8 miles

Warrington / Shrewsbury and back:

Alan Boden	4.30.29
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No detailed records of road race wins are available.

The current women's records are:

10 miles	Inez Finch	24.00
25 miles	Inez Finch	1.01.06
50 miles	Inez Finch	2.04.06
100 miles	Inez Finch	4.22.18

This history has been compiled from club magazines and newsletters with the aid of the memories of a few members. Thanks are particularly due to Arthur Turner for counting the number of wins recorded by members.

The magazines and newsletters have often been sporadic and the recording of events and results has often been scanty. It is certain that some events and members are missing from this report and I apologise for any omissions. Whatever the shortcomings I hope this history gives a picture of a highly successful club.

J.E.H.  
December 1998