

North Birmingham News

NEWSLETTER

The Final Words On Edward Butler

In 1952 Mr L.R.Higgins wrote several articles in the motor cycling press concluding his research over the long standing controversy - - - The Story Recapped :-

Edward Butler applied for a provisional patent on his machine in 1884 and brought it to the notice of the public at the Stanley Cycle Show of that year. The patent was not granted, I understand. He subsequently modified the design quite considerably and put in another patent application in 1887. At about the same time Butler's Patent Petro-Cycle Syndicate Ltd was formed to manufacture the machine and a prototype was completed before the middle of the following year. While this was being tested, the syndicate reached the conclusion that the Petro-Cycle could not be successfully marketed owing to the existing state of the law, which prohibited the use of motor vehicles on the roads of this country. It was decided to concentrate on Butler's engines for marine and stationary use. The syndicate was wound up in 1896.

The machine had three wheels, the general arrangement was not dissimilar to a pedal tricycle of the period. Accordingly, should its creator rank as *the pioneer of motor-cycling* as far as Britain was concerned? That is the question around which the controversy had revolved.

The claim that he was the first man in the world to embark seriously on a motorcycle manufacturing project has been contested on two main grounds. The first was that there was no substantial evidence that the machine was practical. Mr St John C Nixon, the leading authority on automobile history called for proof that the Petro-Cycle actually ran. Secondly there were, and still are, those who consider that it was not a motorcycle at all. It would have been incredible if no-one had bettered the Butler design before 1900, considering that no development had been done on it for almost 10 years, during which time technical progress has been rapid as well as constant. That others surpassed Butler in that period was no fault of his, but the fact that they did so must be apparent to anyone with some knowledge of the motoring history. What we have to determine is what class of machine the Petro-Cycle was *in fact*.

One Approach To The Problem:-

The first problem to find an answer is "What is a motorcycle?"

There a difficulty arises for the simple reason that the term has acquired a different meaning in the course of the years. The first change can be said to have come when the motor tricycle dropped out of common use about half a century ago, subsequently to that, a motorcycle could be defined as a two wheeler, which might however be fitted with a sidecar or other form of attachment.

But while bicycles alone have for long been classed as motorcycles, further distinctions have been introduced. We have the autocycle category, and those of the motor-assisted cycle and the motor-scooter. This development was justified and even inevitable, but it tends to complicate the issue when subjects of long past history are under discussion.

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An entirely new Method for the Mechanical Propulsion of Tricycles and other light Vehicles.

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This method, as comprised in the "Velocycle," consists of the generator containing a supply of Petroleum, enough for a run of 3 or 4 hours, from which is evolved by the aid of two small compressing pumps, the Gaseous Mixture for consumption in the two Engines, in combination with the compressing pumps, affixed to the frame of the vehicle in front of the driving wheel, and seat.

The ignition necessary for the expansion of the Gaseous Mixture is effected by means of sparks from a tiny Electric Machine at the early part of the outgoing strokes of the pistons in connection with cranks on driving wheel shaft.

To start the Velocycle in motion all that is necessary is to open communication from the Small Receiver containing the compressed Gaseous Mixture to the admission valve chambers of the Engines.

This new method tends itself well for the complete control of the vehicle, and the cost of travelling may easily be deduced from the small quantity of Oil required to keep up the supply of fuel.

The weight of the Velocycle is 250 lbs., and the cost of manufacture about £70. The inventor has other designs embodying the same principle for seating 2 or more persons. Provisional Patent No. ²³⁵⁴/₁₈₈₄

"It will be seen that in this simple method of affording the excitement of Cycling entirely without the aid of manual exertion. No resource is had to either Gun-cotton or other dry explosives as a motive agent; or to heavy Batteries for Electricity, or Reservoirs for Compressed Air, both of which require constant and inconvenient re-charging; or is energy to be stored up in Metallic springs; neither is resource had to the restricted application of Steam for this purpose."

For further particulars, Sale of Patent Rights, etc., apply to—

EDWARD BUTLER,

36, GUILDFORD STREET, RUSSELL SQUARE, W.C.,
LONDON, MAY, 1885.

A Butler "hand-out" at the International Inventions Exhibition, in London, 1885. A hospital now stands on the site of No. 36 Guilford Street.

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But while bicycles alone have for long been classed as motorcycles, further distinctions have been introduced. We have the autocycle category, and those of the motor-assisted cycle and the motor-scooter. This development was justified and even inevitable, but it tends to complicate the issue when subjects of long past history are under discussion.

For that purpose I feel that a simple rule should be followed, which indeed seems only commonsense. It is that any machine is to be classified according to the standards of its time and not those of a later date. If it was to be a motorcycle when produced, then it did not become something else a few years later owing to a change in ideas.

What "Motorcycle" Means

Fifty years ago most models in use were of a type that would now be classified as "clip-ons." But to refer to them as such would be absurd. Just as it would have been to call the Ariel motorcycle a "tricar" when those came in, or a "cyclecar" at a rather later date. Unless we keep to the rule suggested, the history of motorcycling is likely to get into quite an alarming tangle. Going further, it appears that the simplest as well as the earliest definition of all is the one for use in such cases. It is that "motorcycle" means precisely what it says; that is a cycle, which may be of any type, fitted with an internal combustion engine. No further qualification seems necessary, whatever may be the position when we are talking about today's machines, and to make any would be historically incorrect when dealing with the pioneer period.

What was a cycle at that time? It could be a bicycle, either of the "bone-shaker" or "penny farthing" variety, or a tricycle or even a quadricycle. The first named of the bicycle types was on the way out. The "safety" had not been invented, or at any rate popularised; tricycles of many varying patterns were becoming increasingly into favour, and for that reason the bicycle touring club deemed it well at the end of 1882 to change its name to that of the C.T.T. Of interest was that Butler was a member of the club.

That was the set-up of the cycling world as he found it. Indeed it remains the same now, in that tricyclists are admitted to membership of cycling bodies and that racing and record-breaking on tricycles remains a recognised branch of the sport. When Butler sort to apply his engine to a cycle it was very understandable that he should have adopted one of the excepted three-wheeled arrangements.

Butler began by thinking in cycle terms, and quite apart from the names that he chose for his machine, (it was first called the "Velocycle", the better known title being evolved later.) In a memorandum of 1886 he refers to it as a motor tricycle, while one of the earliest advertisements claimed that his invention gave "the excitement of cycling entirely without manual exertion".

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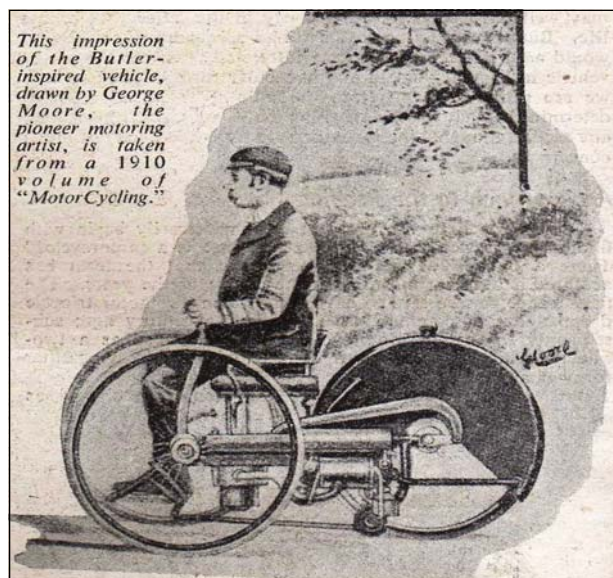
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From all this there can be no doubt about his original intentions, however his ideas may have changed later. And it was clearly some considerable time before they did so.

In 1897 he wrote a letter to a technical journal reminding his readers that he had been the first to apply the petrol engine to cycles, which shows that he had not altered his view by that date, some ten years after the project was launched.

So much for Butler himself, what did his contemporaries think? As to that there is some quite interesting evidence. The letter mentioned in the preceding paragraph was mainly written as a gentle protest against the action of the makers of the Bollee in advertising their machine as the "In Petrocycle", which they had lately begun to do. As Butler pointed out, the imitation was obvious and hardly to be justified. Incidentally, another concern was then offered from what they called a "Petracycle" which indicates that the name of Butler's choice evidently caught other peoples fancy even if his design has failed to do so.

At that period it is also clear that the Bollee was generally considered to be a tricycle. Moreover when the notorious Pennington introduced a three-wheeled contrivance that he called an "Autocar",



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there were protests from purists who maintained that it was quite obviously a cycle and not a carriage. That was the distinction of the time, the determining factor being the character of the vehicle and not the number of wheels that it possessed.

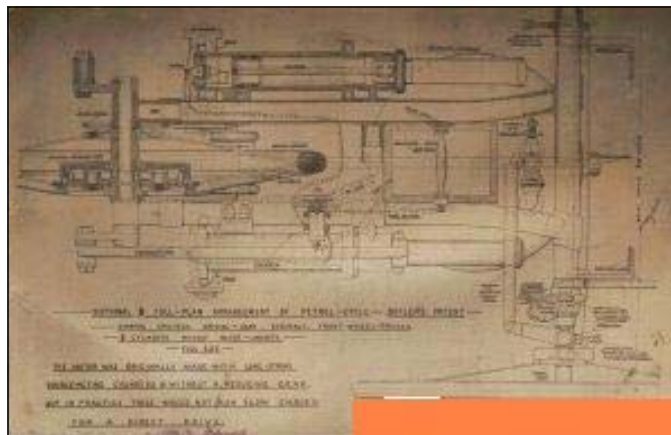
Only one conclusion can be drawn from all of this, Butler's machine came in its day within the cycle category. So its creator evidently believed, as did current opinion. Before concluding, what of those who anticipated Butler? Karl Benz had his first vehicle running in 1885. While he built it as a three wheeler for the sake of convenience, it was never the less a carriage, and we are accordingly not concerned with it here. Benz was the inventor of the automobile. In the same year Gottlieb Daimler completed his experimental motor bicycle and moreover ran it, first over private ground and then on public roads. Mr St John Nixon has provided the dates of the tests and there the matter ended. While a patent was taken out, Daimler made no attempt to develop the design. Whether he saw any future in it we do not know.

To conclude the findings may be summarised as follows:

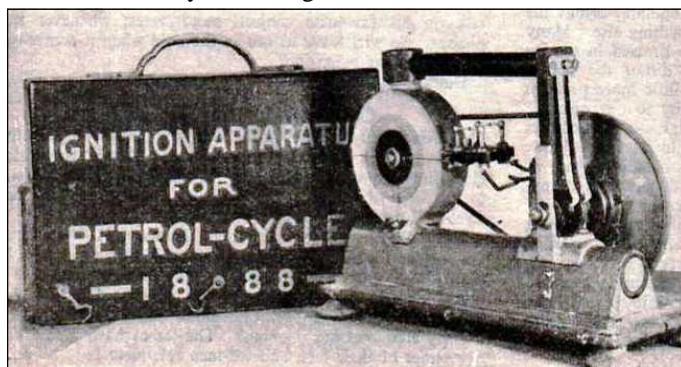
- 1) Butler was the first Englishman to produce a motor vehicle which ran under its own power. In that he was anticipated by the two German engineers just mentioned.
- 2) The vehicle was, by the then standards of the motorcycle type. In that Butler had been anticipated by Daimler, although we must make the reservation that the latter never seriously exploited his invention in the way that Butler was attempting.
- 3) 3) There is no evidence that Daimler ever intended to embark on motorcycle manufacture. The likelihood is against it, his eye was on the possibilities

of the automobile. Certainly Benz had no intention. Butler had been pursuing that aim since 1884. He was therefore the first man to devote himself to a motorcycle project and the original pioneer of them all. The fact that the undertaking failed to attain a commercial success does not in all circumstances affect the

A line diagram of the design



The only remaining item for Butler's machine



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From the Archives The Spring Run

In the Wolverhampton Express and Star, dated 15th May, 1961, there was a brief report of the North Birmingham, VMCC's Spring Trial. The route was out and back to the Fighting Cocks, Wolverhampton. The event was won by Geoff Davison (of Levis Cup fame) riding a 1917 Douglas. The course was 36 miles and took in, Tong, Shifnal and Bridgnorth, with the main observed hills at Compton Holloway and the Hermatage.

Best performance by a veteran machine was that of the 1913 Williamson sidecar ridden by Felix Burke of Cheltenham. The best performance by a vintage machine was Les Wooding on his 1920 Rover. Les was tragically killed in the Banbury some time after this when his mount hit oil in the road. There were concourse awards and an award for the best performance on a sidecar which went to John Round riding a 1921 New Imperial sidecar. I might be wrong but I thought John was riding an ABC. Maybe they were just referring to the side car, perhaps John could elucidate on this.

Left: Early 1920's sidecar.

Below: John Round in 1962.



John

F O R T H C O M I N G A T T R A C T I O N S F O R 2 0 0 7

CLUB NIGHTS	
APRIL 25th	A talk by Frank Dolman on Douglas Motorcycles
MAY 30th	Slide show by Richard Thomas on the "President" Steam Narrowboat
JUNE 27th	Ride a Bike Night
JULY 25th	Fish and Chip Supper
AUGUST 29th	Arrive on Your Bike Night
SEPTEMBER 26th	A talk and slide show on "Works trials rider" by Scott Ellis
OCTOBER 31st	Slide show by Stephen Mills on the History and development of Morgan, AJS, Austin 7, and the pocket watch.
NOVEMBER 28th	Bring and Buy evening
DECEMBER 26th	No Meeting

CLUB RUNS

DATE	RUN	ORGANISER	Tel No
April 22nd	Spring Run	Paul Harris	01902-842732
May 6th	Trent Valley Run	Brian Empsall	01543-264968
May 20th	Girder Fork Run	Martyn Round	0121-550-1547
June 1/2/3rd	The Welsh Weekend	Josie Stanley	01902-607293
June 10th	Josie's Jaunt	Josie Stanley	01902-607293
June 17th	Banbury Run		
June 27th	Ride A Bike Night	Frank Ashton	01902-372719
July 8th	Roger's Run	Roger Greening	01562-730464
July 29th	Long Mynd Run	Ian Harris	01952-299118
August 5th	Breakfast Run	Rob Pell	0121-624-7674
August 19th	Picnic / Concours Run	Peter Ashen	01562-882854
September 9th	Flight of Fantasy Run	Trevor Bull	01905-778917
September 16th	Levis Cup Road Trial		
September 30th	Clun Run	Paul Harris	01952-299118
October 14th	Autumn Run	Andy Briggs	0121-544-5938

Contributions by John Walter.