

An Appreciation of Bill Thorncroft

by Dick Spanton, ECCA President

Bill Thorncroft is now retired from all of his local cycling activities, but it was felt that his many friends and Cycling Officials would be interested in reading of the amount of work that he has contributed to the development of cycling in our area.

I have known Bill since 1947 and have been a friend for most of those years, so took on the job of writing his cycling history. My memory would not do him justice so a pub lunch was arranged and, with pen and paper to hand, we ate and talked. The following is an appreciation of Bill's life, but concentrating mainly on the cycling side.

Bill was born in 1921 and began cycling as most youngsters did then, when he was given a bike to cycle to school in 1934. His enjoyment of cycling freedom grew and in 1937 he was one of the founder members of the Brentwood Road Club. He became a Club official and in 1940 he was voted on to the RTTC and ECCA Committees.

May 1941 and everything changed when Bill was called up and drafted into the Royal Tank Regiment. Following training, he ended up in North Africa in 1942 in the drive to conquer Rommel's army. For Bill there was no armour protection or guns to defend himself because Bill's job was to drive a lorry laden with high octane petrol to refuel the tanks as they advanced across the desert.

At the cessation of hostilities Bill ended up at Bovington Camp near Wareham, prior to demob. Bill had his bike there and became friendly with a man called Harvell who was a member of the Poole Wheelers, and who had been a competitor at the 1932 Olympics. Mr. Harvell encouraged Bill to compete at the Poole hard track. Bill was finally demobbed in September 1946 and went back to his old firm before being head-hunted by a larger firm, where he was put in charge of a department, and where he remained until his retirement in 1984.

On the cycling front, Bill went back to the Brentwood Road Club. Most cycling clubs and organisations lost many of their members and officials due to enemy action and the immediate post war years saw them struggling to "pick up the pieces".

Bill threw himself whole-heartedly into the fray, not only with the Brentwood R.C., but also with London East RTTC and the ECCA and then the ECRA. One wonders how Bill found the hours to do it as well as riding a bike and earning a living.

His cycling C.V. includes Posts as Treasurer, then Hon. Gen. Secretary, followed by Chairman of the Brentwood Road Club until it ceased to function in 1977. Then he took on the job of Hon. Secretary of the RTTC London East and then as Chairman. Bill was also with the ECCA as Secretary for 31 years, then as Chairman followed by the Presidency. Bill is now a Past President and Life Member of the ECCA. As if all this work was not enough, he took on the Chairmanship of the ECRA for 30 plus years.

When the Brentwood R.C. merged with the recently-revived Essex Roads Cycling Club in 1977, Bill might have thought that he could take a back seat as far as Club jobs were concerned. The much-venerated Eddie Munson was the current Chairman, but he became ill and hospitalised in 1978 and Bill was voted into the Chair, and remained Chairman for many years.

With all this administration work it is surprising that Bill found time to ride a bike, but he did, and with a vengeance. Bill rode mainly Time Trials, but also joined in with post-war circuit races round parks and old aerodromes. Grass track racing was much in vogue post-war and Bill joined in the many Essex meetings. Also included was a bit of hard track and roller racing – mainly in the winter. Bill's "claim to fame" in the roller-racing sphere was when he beat the great Reg Harris in a flying quarter mile on the Isle of Man during Cycle Week.

Bill started and finished in thirteen 24-hour races, forty-eight 12-hour races and over one hundred 100 mile races. 25 and 50 mile events are too many to count. The peak of Bill's achievement in medals was when he won a National Championship Team medal in the 24 Hour Championship with Dick Poole and Dave Meisner.

For me Bill's determination to finish at all costs is best exemplified in the Kent Centre and Trike Association 12 hour race in 1952. The Brentwood team were Vic Gibbons, Dick Spanton and Bill. The event was run off in a dawn to dusk gale force South Westerly. I remember seeing trikes being blown backwards when they free-wheeled for a drinking station. The great Medway Wheelers had five or six of their best riders entered and the Brentwood trio ate them for breakfast, lunch and tea! Vic won the race, I was second and Bill did a very creditable distance to fill that important third team counter, to win the race. The hardest day I've ever raced!

As well as Time Trialling, Bill's steadfast determination lead him to attack and beat four ECRRA place-to-place records, two of which still stand today.

Bill's favourite part of cycling was touring and he has visited England, Scotland, Wales and Southern Ireland. Europe was grist to his wheels and he has covered Holland, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy. Other trips were made to Israel and Nepal. The other side of the world has also been included and he has made several tours to Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. In twelve visits to the U.S. he toured the West Coast to East Coast three times and North to the South Borders three times. Bill has toured in every U.S. State with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii! As one might expect, Bill has kept records of his mileage and this now totals in excess of 750,000 miles. A remarkable achievement.

Almost as an after-thought in our "over lunch" chat, Bill recalled his time-keeping exploits for London East, National and Record-breaking events and his event promotions. He has promoted over 200 ECCA events as well as events for the Brentwood R.C. and the Essex R.C and has promoted National Championships at 10, 25, 50, 100 miles and 12 hours.

Bill has made a truly remarkable contribution to cycling in his lifetime!

Bill recalls that he thoroughly enjoyed his job and does not regret one minute of all the work he put in to it.

Rest assured Bill that hundreds of us appreciate what you have done for us and cycling. We hope you enjoy your 90th Birthday.