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The legacy of George Singer: an Australian perspective

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This is a short look at the cycle company started by George Singer in 1875 during its most active developmental period, through a collection of serial numbers started about 15 years ago. Of particular interest is the company's astonishing success in Melbourne, beginning with the Great Exhibition of 1880.

Introduction

The Singer Co. claimed by the late 1880s to be the largest cycle manufacturer in the world. Luckily for us, Singer serial numbers are sequential and tell us how many machines were sold during this period on an annual basis. In developmental terms this was one of the most exciting periods, with The Singer Co. offering a huge variety of two-wheeled or multi-wheeled devices. Australia was a long way from the

mother country, but regarded itself as 'affluent and modern' and enjoyed keeping up with the cycling world. This paper will be illustrated with some of the more unusual machines made by the Singer Co. and some of the machines still in existence in Australian Collections.

The Veteran-Cycle Club does not have a marque specialist for Singer Cycles. This is surprising for the self-described 'Largest Makers

of *Cycles in the World*. Singer described himself as this in 1878 and followed it up in catalogues and adverts over the following ten years. H. H. Griffin in one *Bazaar and exchange and mart* describes him in the early 1880s as 'the largest maker in the universe'.

The study and how it started

Following a discussion in the mid 1980s about the large number of late nineteenth century Singer bicycles that seemed to be in Australian collections, and our inability to pin down the exact year of manufacture of these machines, Warren Edwards in South Australia instituted a list of machines, owners, salient features and their serial numbers.

This became rapidly expanded with other contributors i.e. John Pinkerton and Rod Safe in the UK. I added further serial numbers with description of salient features from bikes and my wanderings through private and public collections around the world. Warren also started the search for copies of catalogues, which ultimately yielded most years between the years of 1878 and 1891. Matchless bicycles serial

numbers meshed immediately into the Singer system.

The idea for this paper came from Andrew Millward who suggested at the 2nd International Cycling History Conference in Saint-Etienne that production numbers could be estimated from serial numbers. The Singer system for marking machines is straightforward. Each machine that left the factory was marked with a plain sequential number irrespective of the type of machine once its construction was completed. When this system was instituted in the mid-1870s, Singer and Co. would have had no idea of the future growth of the firm and the wild variety of machines to be constructed during the 1880s. Most makers used coded numbers for the obvious reason that plain sequential numbers would give your opposition information about production details that most makers would want kept secret. Perhaps it was a form of boasting or perhaps that was just the straightforward way George Singer ran his business. A note of caution is added here as Andrew Millward suggested in Japan that some makers began altering serial numbers to inflate the apparent size of their business. John Pinkerton suggested that Singer may not have started from zero (would you buy no.1?).

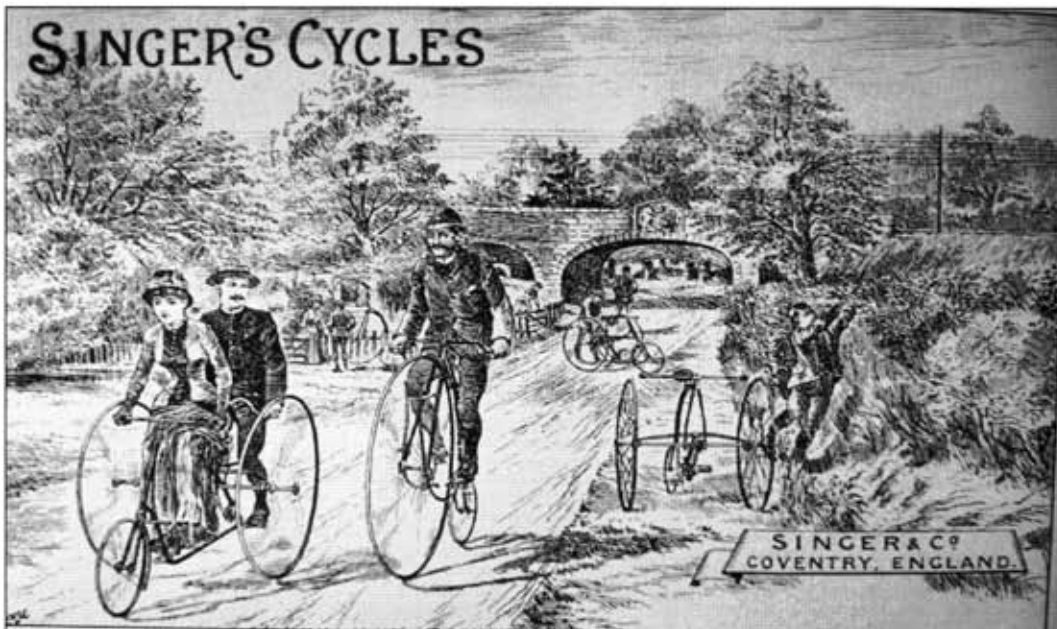


Fig. 2-1. The idyllic world of cycling in the mid-1880s.

George Singer - a brief history

George Singer was born in Kingston, Dorset (Thomas Hardy country) in January 1847. He moved to London to take up an apprenticeship with John Penn the marine engineers. Singer was recruited by Josiah Turner, a friend of John Penn, to work in Coventry at the newly established Coventry Sewing Machine Co. in 1861. Singer was in illustrious company as he left London with James Starley, the new works foreman and shareholder, and a group that included Bayliss, Herbert, and Hillman. In 1869 when the company changed its articles to making boneshakers, Singer was there at the birth of a new industry. James Starley and William Hillman left the boneshaker manufacturing firm in 1870 to start up on their own for the construction of the first high wheel bicycle, the Ariel. George Singer followed suit and left in 1874 to work for the Paragon Cycle Co. This company did not prosper, and in 1875 he joined his brother-in-law Charles Stringer to found a new company known as George Singer

and Co (it could have been 'Singer and Stringer'). The growth was so rapid the company moved within the year to 'The Challenge Works' where Singer had the opportunity to expand as other tenants moved out. These premises lasted until 1890 when they moved for the last time to purpose-built premises. The company was publicly listed in 1896 with George staying on as chairman for three years before his retirement. He was mayor of Coventry several times during the 1890s.

Why there are so many Singer machines in Australia

There are plenty of Singer cycles in existence all over the world especially the US and Canada and continental Europe. Interestingly by the late 1880s there are Singer clones starting to appear with bearing systems and various other parts copied (or licensed) from Singer.

Singer and Co. worked on their export market. They established depots all over the UK and quite early on in Boston USA. They were one of three makers to exhibit at the 1880 Melbourne Great Exhibition that was the wonder of the age in Australia. They almost certainly set up their supply lines here during this exhibition. The Melbourne Great Exhibition was open for over a year with thousands of makers and countries displaying their wares to an enthusiastic public. Singer and Co., the Coventry Machinist Co., and Hickling exhibited. Singer won the prize for the best cycle, with merit for the wheels and free-running bearings.

Interestingly eight years on, Singer was just one of the crowd of bicycle makers at the Melbourne Bicentennial Exhibition and had a much lower profile. This may have been due to their massive exposure to the public with their inner Melbourne Depot.

Fig. 2-2. George Singer.



The Australian connection

‘... at a monster meet held here last Saturday 138 machines were on the ground, there being 84 Singers to 54 of all other makes.’

This letter was written by H. C. Bagot of the Melbourne Bicycle Club. It was printed in the 1891 Singer catalogue. What it does not mention is that Bagot was the agent for Singers from 1880 until well into the 1890s. It also does not mention the date written.

Bagot was a founding member of the Melbourne Bicycle Club in 1878, and an enthusiastic bike rider and racer. He was listed in local newspapers, cycling journals, and even in Karl Kron’s 1887 book, *Ten thousand miles on a bicycle*, as a rider of some note. His small ads

started to appear in the *Argus* and *The Age* newspapers in Melbourne from 1878 offering bicycles. From 1880, during the early part of the Melbourne Great Exhibition, his general advertisements started to predominantly specify Singer bicycles. Over the next 5 years the advertisements got bigger and better, before starting to dwindle. I am certain that one of the reasons for Singer’s market penetration in this part of the world was Bagot’s promotion of the cycles to the influential club members of the day. Most other makers were using ironmongers, engineering businesses etc. After the mid-1880s either Bagot or Singer seemed to lose interest, as their adverts declined in size and number. It is known that Singer started selling some of their UK depots at this time so may have had a policy of disengagement from retail. Bagot married in 1887 and the *Australian cycling news*

Fig. 2-3. Proud owners of Singer cycles.



ruefully devoted an article on how many great riders the clubs lost when this occurred. Bagot is listed as a machinery and metals dealer as well as bicycle salesman, and a little later as representative of the NSW government in Victoria. As an aside one of his adverts in 1883 offers the racing bicycle of the then late Herbert Liddell Cortis for sale at his depot in Melbourne. The aforesaid gentleman set the world record of twenty miles in one hour in 1882 on this bicycle before moving to New South Wales.

It is worth remembering the general degree of affluence in Australia at this time - gold and agricultural produce made the citizens of Australia and Victoria in particular some of the wealthiest per capita people on the planet. The climate was good and its citizens naturally athletic. The idea of personal transport was of obvious appeal as has been seen by other transport modes since.

There was a great deal of interest in keeping up with all things British. Australians then and now did not want to be thought about as being behind the times despite their isolation.

Bicycle production benefited from economies of scale and Singer and Co., like many manufacturers since, realised that dealing with the Southern hemisphere offered out-of-season customers to keep the workers occupied during the 'down season'. The *SS Great Britain* arrived in Melbourne in 1850 and the era of

steam meant a halving of the time to get from UK to Australia, and a predictability that had hitherto been unknown. Allegations were made then, as now, about old fashioned out-of-date machines being dumped in Australia when not saleable elsewhere.

The machines and products

Features of Singer cycles that made for their reputation were the butted spokes and the Challenge and Apollo bearings. Club reports of the day mentioned the British Challenge as the bench mark cycle of the day that all other machines had to live up to. It was not light but was robust for the rough colonial roads.

Singer incorporated a number of his own patents in the design of his cycles but was not afraid of purchasing other inventors' patents. Notable in his failures was the turning down of the Dunlop patent offered to him for £300.

There were during the mid-1880s a staggering number and variety of machines on offer. A glimpse through the catalogues shows how Singer and Co. made machines that were utterly unique to them like the Xtraordinary, Velociman or delivery tricycle, and other licensed tried and true typical machines of the day such as the Speedcycle (a Kangaroo look-alike) or the Humber-patented Traveller tricycle.

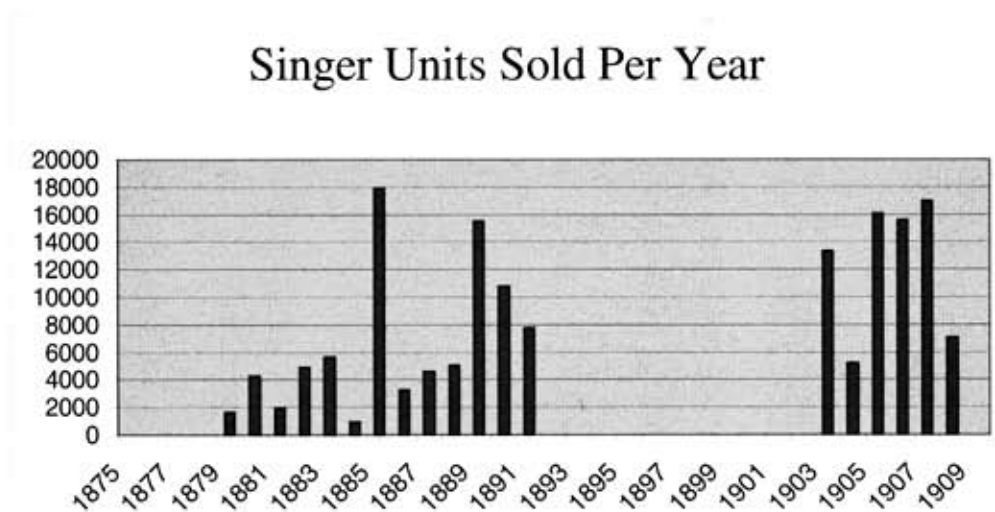


Fig. 2-4. Singer units sold per year.

Singer marketed many products for other manufacturers such as lights, bags, tools (patented Singer adjustable spanner), bells, bugles, cyclometers, raingear, maps, oil, locks, whistles, tool cabinets, and even cuffs and collars for cyclists. A one-stop mail order bike shop.

Despite the number of machines being made it is important to realise they were high priced objects being made in batches quite commonly to order. The more popular machines were made ahead of time in a production line as were parts like wheels, pedals, seats, handlebars and grips that could interchange on various bikes. (See article in *Bicycle gazette* of February 2nd 1879 when Singer shows journalist "The Works")

What the list tells us

Assuming a formula of X% of all goods made still exist after 100 years (where X is unknown in the cycle world but probably well less than 1%) one can see an awful lot of high bicycles were produced especially in the middle years around 1885. Thereafter they seem to plummet and virtually disappear after 1887.

The Extraordinary machines still in existence all seem clustered around 1882 despite this machine being in the catalogue from 1879 to late 1880s. That was obviously its period of maximum interest.

As expected tricycles are probably not represented adequately in view of their storage problem, although we cannot estimate how many of this type of machine were produced with this system of sequential numbering.

Singer was late entering the market with safety bicycles especially the semi-diamond and diamond frame (1887-88) but sales seem to have been healthy from the large number of these cycles that are still around when compared with the small numbers of solid-tyred safeties from other makers.

Although virtually no figures have been collected from the 1890s this earlier list has been meshed with the post turn of the century figures from Andrew Millward to show approximate sales numbers of the company over a thirty five year period. Most interesting from Andrew's numbers are that sales were still quite high during the 1905 period when it is usually quoted that the industry went into depression and bike sales plummeted. The reality was the larger companies maintained sales as they were able to trade with discounts of 60-70% with little profit for themselves or shareholders.

Analysis of the figures

In producing the graphs several issues arose. There seemed to be a few wild spikes which is

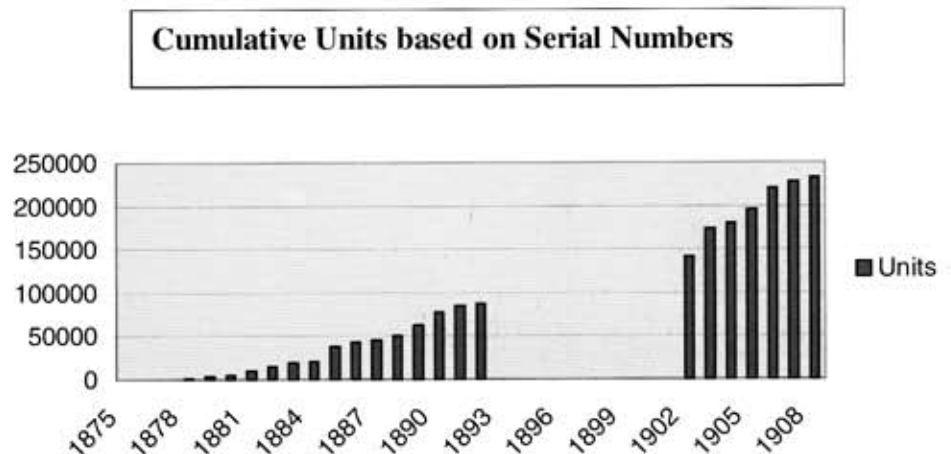


Fig. 2-5. Cumulative units based on serial numbers.

possible with sales of ephemeral technology like cycles. However more likely is skewing of the figures by machines which may have been incorrectly dated. Some machines with particular characteristics could not be moved from one year to another. But where possible with descriptions that were vague, machines were moved to adjacent years to smooth the spikes out. Similarly machines in the Millward group can be seen to sit on the floor for a year or more before being sold. This is particularly of note around 1885. This affects the figures as it is the date of manufacture being considered. However it is the general picture we are interested in.

Business took off like a rocket and by 1880 was at about 4000 units a year, 1890 about 9000 and after 1900 about 15,000 a year.

Serial numbers are still being collected. If you have any to add, especially for unusual machines of the period, please make contact. Some numbers of the 1890 machines would help to complete the picture along with catalogues of the period also. There are currently about 80 machines on the 1870-80s data base.

Acknowledgements

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Post 1900 figures courtesy of Andrew Millward.

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Fig. 2-6. Challenge No 1 Singer Tricycle c1880. Farren Collection.



Paul Farren is a cyclist, cycle collector and orthodontist. He is fortunate to have time, money and a forgiving wife that allow the above and much more to be squeezed into one amazing life. Born in Cardiff, South Wales, Paul now lives in Melbourne, Australia.

