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The Diaries of the ABC and Leeds Ramblers Bicycle Club 1881-1883

Elsie Huntington

These diaries encapsulate the camaraderie and cycling exploits of a group of young men, all ex-Quaker School pupils. Their detailed narrative, illustrated with watercolour and pen and ink sketches is unusually well presented and represents a valuable social history of those times. I obtained them following my chance contribution to a local radio phone-in programme.

When I first saw the diaries I am about to share with you I was delighted by them. They contain writings and illustrations by people who revere nature and revel in freewheeling so they were my kind of people. They used their ordinary

bicycles to explore the countryside as well as to expand their riding skills. Legs-over descending is for them “a delightful mode of progression, the nearest approach to flying, known only to the cyclist”. I know what they mean, though my

freewheeling is usually on a 1910 Rover safety. The three volumes record the rides made by a private group in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Given that the final rule in the 1881 diary states that:

the existence of this Club be kept a profound secret, with the exception of relatives, unless a unanimous vote decrees otherwise.

it is possible that they may never have reached the public domain.

I will introduce you to the Club, highlight some of its activities and include illustrations where appropriate. Their language is so well constructed and descriptive that I will do it no justice to paraphrase it, so I will quote some of the narrative. In 1881 the Club was called the ABC, the Ackworth Bicycle Club, due to its members having been pupils of Ackworth School. One of them, Benjamin West, a consistent contributor and secretary at the cessation of the diaries was a relative of the previous owner. Ackworth School was founded

in 1779, a Quaker boarding school, near Pontefract in the West Riding, which still exists today. Quaker is a familiar term to describe a member of the Society of Friends, a religious body founded in 1647 with no formal creed or ceremony whose members espouse steadfast, peaceable and tolerant beliefs and abstinence from alcohol. Four members of the West family and three Jespers formed the core of the Club; Theobald West being the Captain for the three years of its existence. There do not appear to have been more than thirteen listed members but others are included in the text, if only by initials. By 1883 the oldest riding members did not exceed twenty two years of age:

The Ramblers were a cycling Club of Leeds, a Yorkshire town. They numbered five - all bachelors - from two and twenty down.

Most of the young men seem to have worked in Leeds which they frequently referred

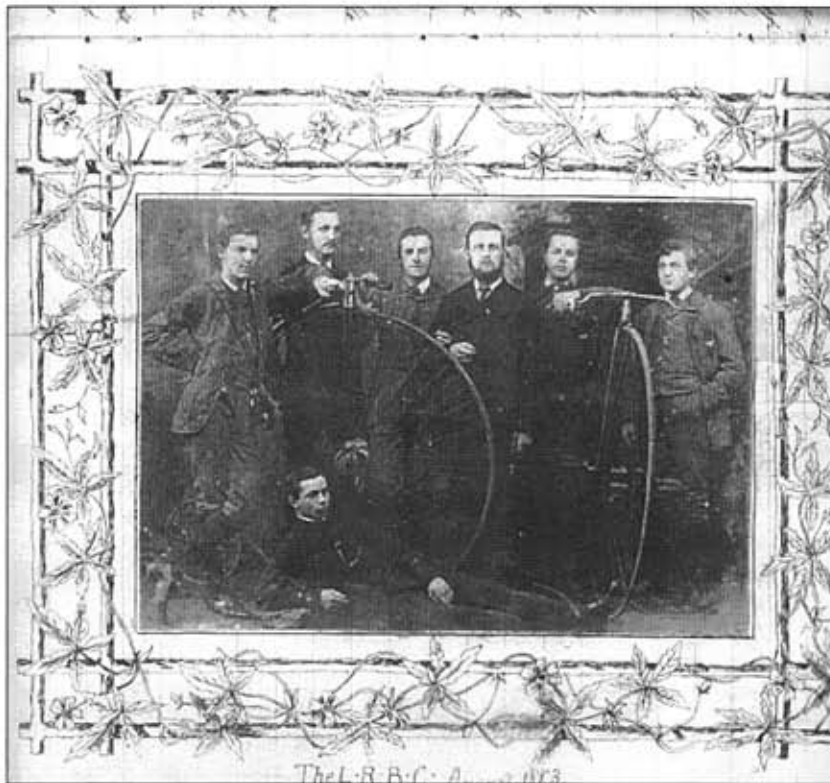


Fig. 8 - 1. The Leeds Ramblers Bicycle Club 1883.

to as a noisy, dirty town - a place from which to escape as frequently as possible:

Four young men rode out from Leeds,
All astride their iron steeds.
The road was good, and the sky was fair,
And their hearts within them as light as air
Save one of the four, who was not so spry,
A big ham sandwich had made him dry.

Recounting journeys in verse is a feature of this Club's record but I'll spare you here the 237 lines of verse which complete the telling of that 21 mile journey. In 1881, when the Club formed, at least ten other clubs existed in the Leeds/Bradford area. The ABC was, I suggest, typical of many other clubs at the time, small in numbers, unrecorded in yearbooks, and known only by chance documentary remains. One such club was comprised of staff and pupils of Bradford Grammar School, begun by Aurelius Sigismondo de Ratti, my husband's great grandfather, who lived in parts of Bradford cycled by the writers of these diaries. It is a fascinating thought that Aurelius may have cycled or exchanged greetings with the ex-Ackworth boys. The shared Ackworth background seems good enough reason to define the ABC but at the end of 1881, for reasons they don't reveal, the Club changes its name to the Leeds Ramblers Bicycle Club.

It was not uncommon to find clubs whose remit encompassed other sporting activities; in Bath, the Ariel Rowing and Bicycle Club existed while in Dorset the Wandering Minstrels Bicycle Club strikes a chord with the bugling activities of the LRBC. The name change had no effect on the content of their reporting, but a new rule 'earnestly requested' members to submit as many sketches as possible, of incidents *en route*, and the quantity and quality of the sketches in the 1883 diary reveals that this request had been heeded; some members even foregoing evening rides in order to take evening classes and examinations to improve their artistic skills. The sketches are inserted into the text, this being written up from notes supplied to the secretary. Matter-of-factly, they report:

Hellifield Gap was a prominent feature in the landscape long before we reached the place, and gave us a chance of sketching it while riding along, the road being in fair order.

The format of the diaries is similar for each year. An illustrated frontispiece is followed by a list of officers and members and a statement of their Rules and Regulations. Typically, the reported ride, whether taken by a single member or a group, records the date of the ride, the mileage covered (with monthly and running totals) and usually, times of departure and at points throughout the journey, all written up in a copperplate hand, with annotations and thumbnail sketches in the margins. A report of the Club's Proceedings for each year is included as well as indexes of 'Towns and Villages Visited' and 'Illustrations'. Reports are given of

Fig. 5 - 2. From the diaries of the Leeds Ramblers Bicycle Club 1883.



the Club's Races which they held each year. Whilst this organisation is for the benefit of Club members it is clear that the contents were for the consumption of friends and family. The 1882 diary has a page entitled 'Remarks' in which "Friends reading this book are requested to make note of grammatical and other errors in the writing and illustration" but in 1883 'Criticisms Invited' provides this function.

In 1881 they record sixty club rides, one taken by two members was a journey of 115 miles from Leeds to Bassenthwaite in the Lake District. On a Friday evening when the works closed for a midsummer holiday, they set off to cover the first 25 miles. Progress was hampered by the attentions of a dog, a boy:

who received a hard dig in the back with the knee and treadle of the rider.

and a fall due to ruts in the road. They suffered anxieties due to a shortage of matches; not a problem when riding in town where shinning up the nearest gas lamp solved that dilemma. It was 11pm by the time they had selected the Old George Hotel as an 'appropriate' place to stay; bicycles were padlocked and they slept until 4.30am. Breakfast was taken, at a cost of 1/4d, which they had paid for on their arrival, and they resumed the journey after they had oiled their machines. References are made throughout the text to minor maintenance by the riders but major incidents involving broken wheels and bars were dealt with in Leeds at Singer's or Atkinson's, riders on occasion returning there, with the damaged machine, by train. Tying requirements, it seems could be dealt with at local saddlers. By noon, with nothing to eat since breakfast but a few raisins (which they always seemed to have in their pockets) they'd experienced a 'great collision', with each other and a race with a coach, something they could never resist, which they:

passed triumphantly up the steep hill which leads to Kirby Lonsdale.

They were heading that day to the home of a friend whose cottage lay on the edge of Bassenthwaite Lake, a 90 mile day, a demanding ordinary ride for most people through hilly terrain, on roads that had been rained on for several days. It was on 31 July they passed through Kendal, Windermere and Ambleside 'crowded with tourists' even then, but they chose not to stop to satisfy the curiosity of the crowds and continued to Grasmere where they had a 'very good tea' at the Temperance Hotel. They did have a map, they did ask for directions and they spent:

some time bugling and disturbing the peace in various other manners.

(at 11pm) at the Pheasant Inn but they were unable to reach the cottage that night.

As it had rained heavily for the last part of the journey they decided to seek shelter in a barn but behind the unlocked door was the unwelcome sight of a large fox so they reluctantly returned to the General Waiting Room at Bassenthwaite Station where at 1am the following morning they resorted to rest on:

the bare wooden benches round a bare unfurnished, slightly draughty room,

cold, wet and supperless, frustrating close to their goal. Next morning they finally made it to the warmth and comfort of Elm Cottage where they stayed for a fortnight.

They record observations of an extensive heronry, the pencil factory in Keswick, from which:

emanated a strong but pleasant odour of cedarwood,

wild raspberries which they consumed, the haymakers at work, and the exorbitant price of oil in Penrith. On their return journey 'an exciting episode' occurred:

a young wild rabbit that TW was carrying in his coat pocket suddenly jumped out and made a bolt for the hedge. Instantly jumping off, and dropping his machine TW made after it - whilst I, depositing my steed in a more gentle manner and picking up his, assisted him in the search.... securing it, we again mounted and before long came to a toll bar where was a farmer in a light gig. Noting us, he flourished his whip.

and the inevitable race ensued. Their bravado and youthful arrogance is so often tempered by writing of great sensitivity, as later that day:

steadily we rode on through the darkness, now we could tell we were crossing moorland, now cultivated land - still on - the only sounds on the loose sandy road, - the wail of the peewits as they rise startled from their

grassy beds and the crash made by frightened rabbits as they tore through the hedges and underwood.

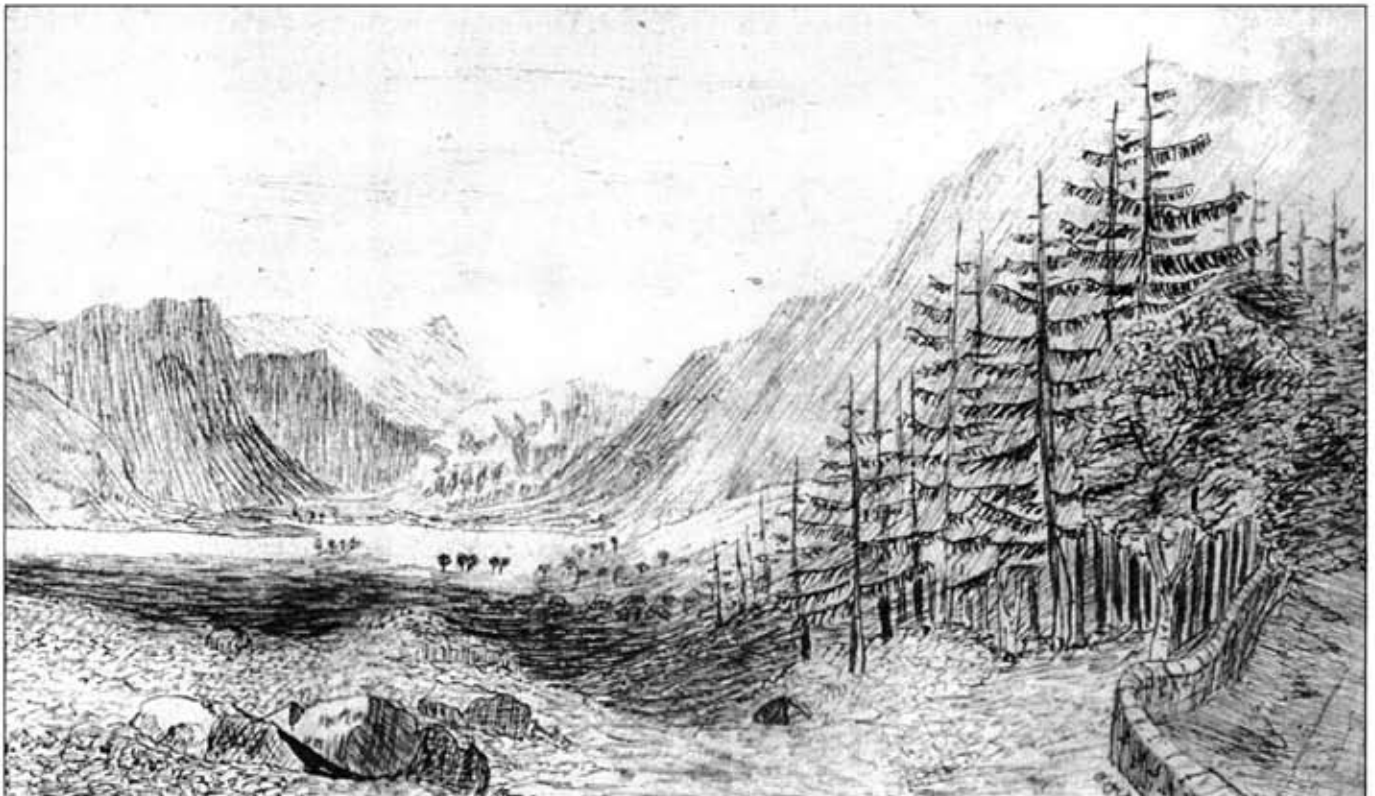
Night-time riding, with or without the aid of the moon was among their greatest joys, second perhaps only to the 'Noble Art of Legs-Over'. They do discuss their Cooper's hub lamps in complimentary terms. Their return to Leeds took them via Darlington, the home town of the West family; interestingly, they avoided certain parts of the town to prevent being seen:

riding through the streets in their travel stained garments.

The final leg of their journey is annotated 'Return to the land of smoke'.

The midsummer visit to the Lake District became an annual event for some members of the Club though accomplished with greater ease in subsequent years. Wherever they journeyed their interest in natural history is noted. They

Fig. 5 - 3. From the diaries of the Leeds Ramblers Bicycle Club 1883.



record architectural and geographical features en route and comment on events beyond the boundaries in which they cycle; after an idyllic visit to Ilkley in May 1882 they set off on their return journey at 7.30pm:

and little did we think of the foul assassinations being committed in Dublin precisely at the same time - and it was as well that we did not know or we should not have enjoyed our ride back much.

Their educational background was undoubtedly privileged but comments ranging from the cost of milk at a farmers doorstep to the identification, in Latin, of rare plant species, as well as the fact that they were working men, in spite of their youth, suggests to me that they were fairly well balanced commentators.

I hardly need say here; theirs was a minority mode of transport but through the eyes of the LRBC we can see who else travelled the roadways. Apart from the commonly encountered farmers gigs, we hear of four in hand coaches, a travelling menagerie, the fire brigade, encamped gypsies and on one occasion a race with a luggage train. When Wombwell's Menagerie was on its way to Shipley Feast our riders encountered some young lads who threw caps into their wheels. One lad was unwise enough to repeat the misdemeanour so he was sternly dealt with and:

there rose in the still night air an agonised howl — one youngster, at least, having in all probability been cured of the dangerous habit of cap throwing.

On another occasion a group of youngsters, including girls, much to their surprize, stoned the riders but they rode on. They confidently defended their rights in the road; a lady dog owner was politely held responsible for the repairs to an ordinary and the rider's broken watch when her animal caused an accident and further she agreed to send it for training.

They comment on other cyclists but do tend to keep each other's company, even when seeking out refreshments. Good quality food at reasonable prices was a matter of great importance to them; cold roast beef accompanied by copious amounts of bread and butter, washed down with fresh milk was their idea of a good breakfast. Cocoa houses, Temperance Hotels and small tea rooms were their usual haunts and roadside springs and village pumps were regular sources of water when travelling.

Regular midweek evening runs were occasions to perfect their riding skills, to encourage new members and to engage in natural history forays:

to visit a defunct rat put there in the hope of its attracting burying beetles.

for instance, or a nearby woodland to try 'sugaring for moths'. Apparently, painting the bark of trees with a solution of rum and sugar was as technique used to collect moths and they did pick up caterpillars en route when the occasion arose. Specimens of:

the numerous species of ferns, many of them rare.

were taken when in the Lake District. They surmise that the falling numbers of herons is due to culling by gamekeepers, kingfishers also being under threat. However, their own collecting of flowers by the bunchful, to decorate their rooms, bicycles and helmets they indulge without qualm, though the entanglement of a bunch with the front wheel did cause a serious fall.

The earth was covered with hyacinths and forget-me-nots, these from a distant point of view looking like a blue carpet, while scattered about were groups of ferns and the yellow dead nettle, a local rare plant.

Their romantic view of the landscape contrasts markedly with passages of factual description of their place in it:

Ingleton is situated on the Doe Beck which flows down the latter Dale (Chapel-le-Dale) and unites with the Lingsdale Beck, near Ingleton, forming the Greta River, a tributary of the Lune.

The language they use must be a reflection of their education and background and does throw up some examples of usage which are not current today. They invariably treadle, not pedal; shove, not push machines uphill; and politely refer to policemen (bobbies) as Roberts.

Out of season they met as a Literary Club but other than noting that fact we are told nothing of its subjects. They:

rejoiced in having machines of first class make - able to stand much using,

but we are told remarkably little about them. I am not aware that any were purchased new. The models mentioned are 48 inch and 50 inch DHF Premiers, a Hallamshire, and Theobald's 54 inch Humber, weighing 38lbs, on which he came first in a two mile race in 6 minutes 45 seconds at the Gentleman's Ground in York in 1883, for which he was awarded a handsome marble timepiece.

Whilst the diaries do nothing to further the knowledge of cycle development their social history content is of value and the extract which follows is the most significant to the early cycling literature.

6th August 1883: August Bank Holiday: A Visit to the Harrogate Meet

A great and pleasant surprize it was to be told during the previous week, that the warehouse would be closed on August Bank Holiday - and from the first intimation - how to spend the day

was the pre-eminent question to be solved; not that I was afraid of being unable to use the holiday, but the question of which was the best thing to be done, was the perplexing thought. Knowing that I should have to enjoy myself alone however, as the other members of the LRBC were away on their summer holidays, I soon decided to accomplish a long anticipated ride to Studley Royal & Fountains Abbey and as the West of England Annual Meet of Bicyclists was to be held at Harrogate on the same day - I had a second inducement for turning my attentions to the Harrogate and Ripon Road. So on Monday am I packed my paints, pencils, sketchbook, bottle of cold tea and sandwiches and at 8.20 set off. I expected I would be too soon to see many of the Leeds Clubs en route to Harrogate and had crossed the moor and reached Meanwood before I saw any fellow cyclists. I here saw several pushing their machines up Meanwood hill and soon passed them and was not long in finding I was mistaken as to the time of starting of a great many riders, as I passed several more in the 'legs-over lane' and on reaching the Harewood Road and Moortown another set of bicyclists and one triquist were passed, all bound for the Meet. The inhabitants of Aldwoodly and Moortown were quite interested in the procession along the high road of so many vehicles and undoubtedly it was a sight worth seeing. On reaching the foot of a hill beyond Aldwoodly I saw wending their way up - mostly on foot - a motley group of bicyclists, tricyclists and occupants of traps. About half a dozen riders were pushing their machines from behind while one or two of them had the good sense to ride them instead. I was going at a good speed so overtook a lot more

bicyclists up Harewood and found drawn up in front of the Harewood Arms a collection of about 20 tricycles - 2 or 3 lady riders being among the group of bystanders. Harewood was reached and left at 9.30 and I rode on down the Castle Hill and across the bridge over the Wharf and up the Harrogate Road. I soon overtook 2 more bicyclists and when about 4 miles from Harrogate made my first dismount as a sharp shower commenced and I took shelter for 10 minutes under a hedge. Pannal was next passed and then a nice legs-over brought me to the foot of Humphreys Bank, up which I walked, following the example of some more bicyclists. One tri and 2 or 3 bikists rode up, but I was satisfied with feeling that what man had done, man could do without troubling to exert myself a second time. From the top of the hill it was but a few minutes ride into Harrogate (10.15) where numbers of bicyclists were already talking in groups or riding about the town. It now began to rain heavily and the beautiful sunshine vanished, and in a few minutes the sky was all overclouded and it looked very foreboding for a wet day. I thought it would be well to get under shelter at once so rode up to the cricket field where was the camp - for about 100 cyclists camp out for 3 or 4 days during the meet, many coming long distances on the Saturday and staying under canvas - instead of stopping in the town, where indeed it is hard task to find a bed at this season. I first saw the inside of the refreshment tent, and then rode along the race track back to the camp and went to one of the machine tents, stabled my horse and spent the next hour, while it poured with rain outside, in the machine tents; two in no. which constituted a perfect exhibition of tricycles and bicycles

from a £60 plated 'Sociable' down to machines of all sizes, shapes and quality. Tricycles were in great no's. Rudge carrying off the palm for the quantity, if not the quality of his Rotary and other machines. The American 'Star bike' was there with its little wheel in front and its long straight backbone and strange crank levers -; the machine is said to have peculiar advantages such as the rider being able to mount 6" logs without fear of a cropper. The owner of the Machine - a Yankee was there to show its capabilities and seemed to make easy work of it, mounting by the hubs and

Fig. 8 - 4. A welcome drink.



pedalling away with his knees on a level with his chin. There was also a double bicycle consisting of 2 big wheels connected by a long horizontal backbone. The two riders of this tandem also seemed quite at home on it, and it was said that the rear-man can ride a foot or two to either side of the man in front, to look out for stones or ruts. The 'Facile' or 'Extraordinary Bikes' (or 'Camels') were also represented, besides several ingeniously contrived trikes. The procession round the town was to have started at 12; on the Stray, but was postponed for an hour, when fortunately the clouds broke soon after 1pm and the bugle was calling to the procession all who intended taking part in it. I rode to the Stray and took up my post at the starting point - where a large concourse of people had gathered. The Clubs to the no. of nearly 100 were then ordered to their various positions in the line of march (or pedal) headed by the American riders and the Yorkshire Clubs in order of date of formation. 650 riders took part in the procession which was watched by thousands of people and about 400 riders did not join in, fearing the rain, so that more than 1000 cyclists were on the spot. Several ladies on sociables were in the procession and one gent. on a single trike had a nice box attached behind the seat in which was seated his baby, seemingly quite interested in the proceeding. Silver plated bugles were given to the 2 clubs mustering the largest no. of members in uniform - and were obtained by the Leeds Harehills and the Halifax Clubs with 46 and 42 riders respectively.

The diaries are now revealed, in part, to those interested in the literature of early cycling. I believe the original works should always remain in Yorkshire but I intend to repeat some of the

journeys undertaken by the LRBC and add a current documentary to the original text to make a publishable work. I share the LRBC's love of cycling and of nature but certainly lack their eloquence so I turn again to the diaries to close as they do:

In conclusion we may say that now there is a prospect of the Club being somewhat altered in character, owing to one or two members leaving Leeds to fight the Battle of Life in other towns, we shall always look back with feelings not unmixed with regret, on the days of long ago, when together we rambled through the sunny lanes and walks of Wharfedale and Airedale and when it was our fortune:

*To greet the brightening beams of morn,
To watch the dew drop glistening on the thorn,
At noon to seek our home beneath the trees,
Where rustling leaves make music in the breeze,
Beside the tranquil lake at eve, to stray,
To catch the lingering beams at closing day.
To range at purple twilight, calm and still
When mystery clothes each mountain, vale and hill,
When sunset's latest tinge has taen its flight,
And all is wrapped in silence, peace and night,
Anon to mark the silvery moonbeams glide,
Along the trembling bosom of the tide,
Or find their way beside some murmuring stream,
And light us to our rest, to sleep, to dream.
Twas ours to wake enamoured by the scene,
When Springtime first enfolds her beauteous green,
When blooming lilacs scent the morning air,
And all Creation teams with all that's fair,
When glorious summer crowns the woodland glade,
Twas ours to seek out some silven shade.
And still twas ours when summers charms were gone,
When Autumn brings the field of ripening corn,*

*To watch the transient hues and trees unfold,
As steals the first chill wind across the wold.*

Acknowledgements

The *Cyclist - wheel world annual 1882*. Edited by CW Nairn and Henry Sturmev.

***Elsie Huntington** has been cycling on early bicycles with her husband and three daughters since taking part in the Rover Centenary Ride in 1985. Since then they have become deeply involved in pre-1900 bicycle restoration work. They very much enjoy travelling on their early machines.*

