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“JW” AND HIS RIDE TO LONDON, C. 1875

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In 2005, Lorne Shields bought a nineteenth-century hand-drawn and coloured cyclist’s illustrated route map from a print shop in Oxford, England. The map consists of three sheets of paper, each about 34 cm deep and of different lengths. They are laid down together onto a board making the complete map, including its borders, 38 cm x 127 cm.

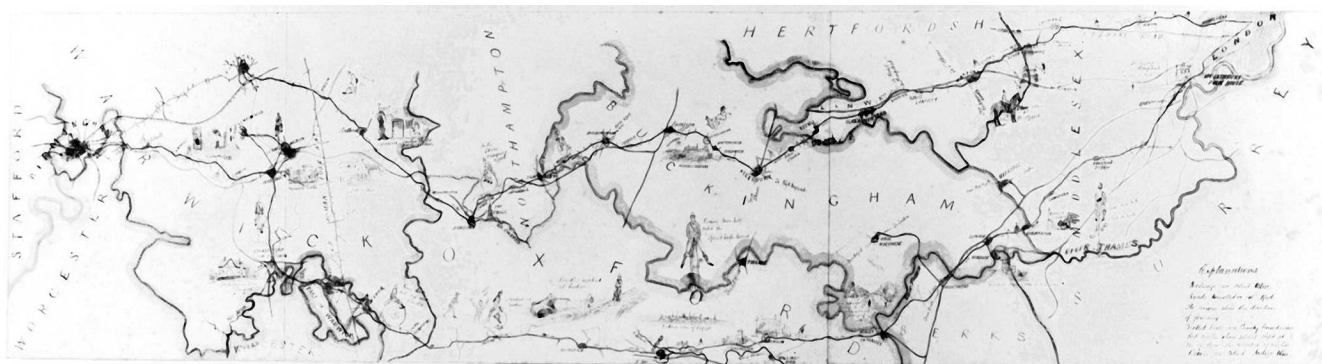
The map shows the route of a cycle ride made on an ordinary bicycle in the 1870s from Aston, a northern suburb of Birmingham, south and east through

Warwick, Stratford-on-Avon, Oxford, down the Thames valley to London. The cyclist then returns on a northerly route passing over the Chiltern Hills to Buckingham,

Banbury and to Coventry. Here he takes the train the remaining 20 miles (32 km) back to Birmingham. The total route cycled is 251 miles (402 km) and the whole ride appears to have been made in five days at an average of around 50 miles (80 km) a day.

The map is unsigned and does not name the cyclist, the maker of the map or the date on which the ride was accomplished. However, the map is profusely illustrated in

Below: Fig. Lawrence-1. The map of JW’s ride to London.



considerable detail and there are many clues as to who the rider was and the time at which he made his epic ride. The cyclist, indicated only as “JW,” is riding an ordinary or high wheel bicycle. The Ariel was patented in 1870 and this design and layout quickly became the machine of choice for all bicyclists. This “penny farthing” layout has come to define the bicycle in the nineteenth century and is the icon of Victorian cycling.

JW is shown at various points on the map going downhill and riding in those positions adopted by skilled and experienced ordinary riders with their feet off the pedals. He shows us the “spread eagle” with his legs spread wide and away from the flying cranks and pedals. He shows us the position with his feet over the top of the “handles.” But he also illustrates “going down hill with feet on rests,” which were small metal brackets attached on each side of the front fork and pivoted so that they could be folded up out of

the way when not in use. Even in the folded position, they must have been a nuisance and the rider risked catching the inside of his leg on them at every revolution of the pedals. For this reason, they were soon discarded and we do not see machines with foldable foot-rests after about 1875. This gives a definitive dating of the map. We can safely say, “not much earlier than, say, 1873” and not later than about 1876.

On the morning of his third day on the road, JW is illustrated leaving his hotel at 05.15.h. His bicycle does not have a lamp, so he left when it was light, indicating that he made his ride in June or July, when it is light in central England before 05.00.h.

JW rode from Birmingham to London and back in high summer, in about 1875. But who was JW? Diligent searching of cycling magazines and other records from this date yield some very interesting and fairly conclusive evidence. Our cyclist set out from a point which can be clearly seen as being just a mile or so north of today’s centre of Birmingham—that is the suburb of Aston. In that decade, *The Bicycle for 1874, A Record of Bicycling for the Year* by Alfred Howard, records the Aston Star Bicycle Club based at Alfred Place, Park Lane, Aston and the president of this club was Mr. J.R. Whitehouse. The described uniform of the Aston Star Bicycle Club was a grey

Fig. Lawrence 2. Typical high-wheel rider pretending to mount the machine, which is headed the wrong direction across the road.

knickerbocker suit and a Stanley helmet, exactly like the figure illustrated in the map.

By the time of the 1877 Bicycle Record, Mr. Whitehouse had already been established for some years as a maker of velocipedes and bicycles and is listed as the maker of The Excelsior Bicycle. He is based at number 52, Park Lane, Aston. In later editions he has moved to bigger premises elsewhere in the city. *The Wheelman’s Year Book* of 1882 now lists the Aston Star Bicycle Club, founded in 1874, as being “extinct.” JW had moved on by the end of the decade, but there is much which relates this cyclist with the initials JW to Aston, and the Aston Star Bicycle Club in the mid 1870s. I think we may have our man.

JW was a man who ran a business, could afford to take a week off to go cycling and, as we shall see later, stayed at good hotels or at the homes of friends who were equally well-to-do and who lived at good addresses in town and country. JW also had a particular skill which was taught as part of a good education in the nineteenth century. He could draw and illustrate maps and he used a surprisingly complex and sophisticated cartography to record his journey. Drawing and the creation of accurate visual records was a part of the education of a gentleman and, if we look at the Victorian explorers, navigators and military expeditions of this period, (this was the time of Livingstone and Stanley), we find the “expedition artist” or the “marine artist” as key personnel and essential recorders of the



scene. JW had these skills and used them to record his journey, but he also applied to the map the whimsical humour which typified the educated, gentleman amateur of the period.

His map uses a variable scale, giving him more space where he wishes to include illustrations and text but reducing the scale of the uninteresting bits. He also skews the direction of travel in order to produce a shape which would fit his chosen format. A consistent scale with a "north-at-the-top" orientation would have produced an almost square map with his route as a long, thin, diagonal ellipse from top left to bottom right. JW was a skilled draughtsman and cartographer to have produced so elegant and decorative a solution.

Evidence that JW himself drew the map can be seen by his entry into Henley-on-Thames along the spectacular Fairmile. It shows a tiny cycling figure with the note, "view entering Henley—the figure is meant for myself. JW." It's as good as a signed confession!

There was, at this time, a growing interest in exploring the country on what was the first really practical and reliable bicycle. Good accurate road maps had existed since before the beginning of the century and Britain had an official government cartographic office, the Ordnance Survey, founded in 1791. What these maps did not tell the traveller, however, was the true nature and condition of the road surfaces. There was continuous correspondence in all the cycling magazines which came into existence in the

1870s from cyclists who had actually ridden particular roads or who wanted to know the conditions they might expect for specific journeys. Titles such as *The Bicycle*, *The Bicycle Road Book*, *Bicycling News*, *Bicyclists' Handbook*, were all available in the mid-1870s. Typical entries recorded prevailing road conditions. (This is from *Bicycling* of 1876, and describes—in reverse—JW's run into London along the Thames valley),

A lumpy, macadam road runs to Hounslow through Hammersmith and Brentford, followed by a level run through Colnbrook to Slough. A good, but sandy, road leads to Maidenhead and Henley. Leaving the latter place, the road begins to undulate, and running down the Fair mile, the ascent of the Chiltern Hills commences. At Nettlebed their summit is reached, and the descent is smooth and tolerably easy, affording good running to Dorchester. The road becomes shaky towards Oxford...

Looking in detail at the route and the events of JW's ride to London, we see that on the first day, he rode from his home in Aston through the city centre and headed south and east through the Warwickshire villages of Solihull, Knowle and Haseley to the county town of Warwick. Surprisingly, (particularly when one also remembers that it has more miles of canals than Venice), Birmingham is one of the

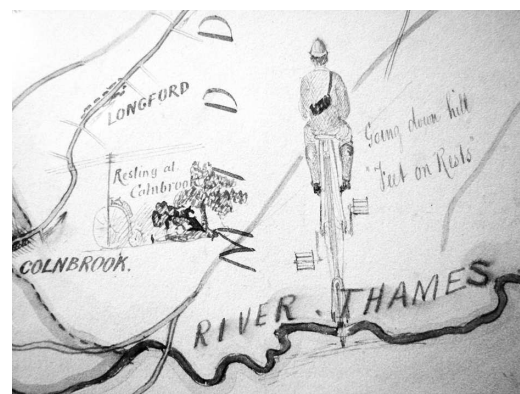
Right: Fig. Lawrence-3. "Feet on Rests" detail from JW's map.

highest altitude major cities in England at nearly 250m. above sea level in the city centre. So JW would have had a good, mainly downhill run from Birmingham to Warwick.

He continued to the fashionable spa town of Leamington where he stayed overnight. But he also made a detour to visit Kenilworth, a small town just 5 miles (8 km) to the north. He visited Kenilworth Castle, the location of the eponymous novel of 1821 by Sir Walter Scott. JW was an educated and well-read man who made a special diversion to see the setting of the famous work by one of the leading novelists of the day.

We do not know where JW stayed in Leamington. The *Bicycle Road Book* of 1880 lists three approved hotels in Leamington and one of these is The Regent Hotel in the main street which was known and frequented by the cyclists of the time and was used as the headquarters for early Midlands meetings of the Cyclists' Touring Club a few years later. This could well have been "JW's" lodging for his first night on the road. On that day, he cycled 34 miles (55 km).

His second day on the road was much harder riding. He



cycled over quite a big hill to Stratford-on-Avon, then a small market town but with a growing tourist reputation as the birthplace of William Shakespeare. JW includes a vignette illustration of Shakespeare's house but I wonder whether this and his view of Kenilworth, Warwick Castle and (later) Windsor Castle were, in fact copied from illustrated guides which were already widely sold in England by this time and which used certain clearly identifiable "standard" views of castles and notable houses.

The south of the county of Warwickshire is bounded by a range of hills, the Edge Hills and, after Stratford, these have to be climbed to pass into Oxfordshire. JW rode through Shipston and Long Compton over the Edge Hills. He must have pushed his bicycle up the main climbs. He descended into Oxfordshire and rode right past the gates of Blenheim Palace where, in the previous year, in 1874, a baby was born who was called Winston Churchill.

We have an illustrated "distant view of Oxford" in which JW might have been reflecting the contemporary poet Matthew Arnold and his 1853 poem *The Scholar Gypsy*, for the country

through which JW rode would have been as remote, as quiet and as unpopulated as that haunted by the wandering scholar of Arnold's poem of a couple of decades before.

On his second night, JW stayed at The White Hart at Benson, a name which, today, resonates for cycling historians. This Oxfordshire village is the home of Ned Passey one of the world's great collectors of historic cycles and so important in English cycling history that the village attracts a huge cycle rally each year in July. That day, JW had cycled 65 miles (104 km) and passed over one of the major ranges of hills in southern England. I am sure he dined and slept well.

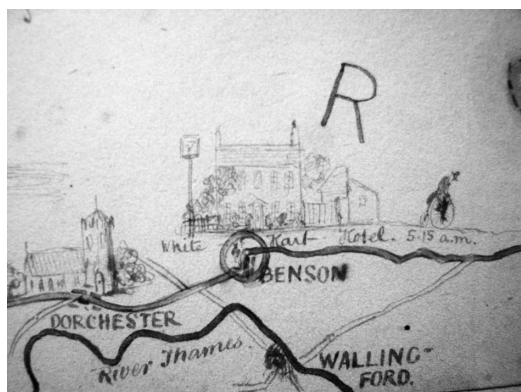
The following morning he was on the road at 05.15.h. (which tells us that it was mid-summer). He set off east along the Thames Valley toward London and approached Henley along the very grand double avenue, the Fairmile, and onward through Maidenhead and Windsor (where again he provides a little sketch of the castle).

The next few miles of his journey are extremely sad when viewed from the twenty-first century. JW cycled through the villages of Colnbrook, where he rested with his machine propped against a telegraph pole (very modern and hi-tech at the time), Longford and Cranford Bridge. These villages cannot be found on any modern map. They have been

totally obliterated and buried under the concrete and tarmac of Heathrow, the world's biggest airport, and JW actually cycled along the northern perimeter of the airport, along a road which, today, is a "drag-strip" of hotels, car rental depots and "fast food" outlets.

He continued though the western approaches to London, Hownslow via Brentford to "Mr. Lathbury, Park House"—written on the map in large letters. Park House stood on the corner of Chiswick High Road and Brackley Road in west London. It was a substantial, double-fronted house with a large garden. We know from the census of 1881 that the head of the house was, by then, Louisa Lathbury, a widow annuitant (living from a private pension) but she had a step-son Robert, a "civil engineer" who would have been in his mid-twenties when JW arrived to stay. He was a technically trained professional and just the sort of man whom a well-educated young Birmingham business man would have known from a mutual interest in the new sport of cycling. We can see the nature of "JW's" life and friends from this visit. On his third day out, our cyclist had ridden 39 miles (63 km).

JW's visit to London itself is curious but not altogether unexpected. He cycled into central London past Marble Arch, turned north over Hampstead to rejoin the Edgware Road via Hendon and Colindale. He gives the capital hardly a nod of the head in passing and does not appear to have stopped there at all. We can conjecture that JW made another



Left: Fig. Lawrence-4. "Leaving the White Hart, Benson" detail from JW's map.

stop in the capital and perhaps stayed an extra day with someone in north London, which would explain his curious diversion through Hampstead rather than straight up Edgware Road, but there is no firm indication of this on the map. [see note 1.]

It is only when he gets out into relatively rural surroundings that JW begins again fully to detail and illustrate his route and itinerary. His fourth day is another long day with some hard roads and big climbs northwest of London through what were, in 1875, small market towns and villages and what have since become the commuter-land of the ever-sprawling metropolis.

As JW passed through Tring on the south-eastern slopes of the Chiltern Hills he records and illustrates perhaps the most single important feature of the whole map. In a tiny vignette, little more than a couple of centimetres long, he shows himself on his bicycle meeting a steam powered traction engine hauling a farm cart with a man walking in front waving a red warning flag. It was worthy of remarking and recording and is one of the first indications of the surrender of those quiet, empty roads of the nineteenth century to mechanized transport. Here was the beginning of the end of tranquil cycling and the end of the brief supremacy of the bicycle.

By that night JW had cycled 57 miles (91 km) through west London and ridden (or more probably walked and pushed) over another major range of hills, the Chilterns. He stayed that night at Hurdlesgrove, an isolated

farm in north Buckinghamshire, occupying a classic eighteenth century farmhouse, extended since JW's time, but still clearly identifiable from his illustration. In 1875, the owner was a Mr. John Belgrove, aged 70 and the farm was 300 acres (200 hectares). Perhaps it was Mr. Belgrove's son, or even his grandson, a practitioner of the new sport of cycling, who made JW welcome at Hurdlesgrove. As at the Lathbury's, JW was well connected and stayed comfortably with prosperous friends or at good hotels.

The following day, "JW's" fifth on the road, was a bad day. He set off from Hurdlesgrove toward Banbury. Between Buckingham and Brackley we see JW cycling along with a visible smile on his face but, before he gets to Banbury, we see him wearing a full waterproof cape with the rain dripping from his Stanley helmet and water spraying from his front wheel. The caption reads, "In the Storm. Waterproof rigged."

On the long road north, we see JW in a stable "Another shelter from the weather" and later,

he illustrates, "The Tollgate at Ladbroke. JW within," with the rain pouring down outside. When the authors visited Ladbroke a few months ago, we were welcomed by the present owners of the tollgate and shown around the cottage where JW sheltered from the rain 130 years before.

Of this part of "JW's" route, *The Bicycle for 1874* says, "In fine weather this road is good, although rather hilly; but when bad 'tis bad indeed!" Fifty miles (80 km) in the rain on an ordinary on that road does not bear contemplation. JW plodded on through Southam and continued north to Coventry. This last part of his route is scarcely traceable today. The south-eastern approaches to Coventry were substantially destroyed by bombing during World War II and what was left has since been further obliterated by town planners and by road and airport building. But JW knew where he was heading. Descending the hill into the City of Coventry, there was (and still is today) a railway station. JW caught the train home to Birmingham.



Right: Fig. Lawrence 5. Ladbroke Tollhouse as it appears today (2007).

He had cycled 251 miles (402 km) in five days and travelled through an England which, over the coming years, was to disappear, largely as a result of the mechanization of road transport and the continuing movement of populations from agriculture into towns and cities.

JW may not have recognized that he was both at the vanguard of new technology riding his ordinary, but also toward the end of a time of the accomplished gentleman amateur, the educated Corinthian who could explore his own country alone on barely charted roads and find it empty,

isolated, idiosyncratic and exotic in a way which we shall never know again. He was truly a King of the Road.

NOTES

1. Shortly after the ICHC Conference in Tampere in August 2007, an advertisement was found in a copy of Harrison's "Finger Post" Bicycle Road Guide and County Map of Surrey of 1883, for the J.R. Whitehouse & Co.'s Excelsior Bicycle. Harrison is given as the London agent for the Excelsior at 259 Oxford Street., London W. JW's circuitous route through west London goes to this point on Oxford Street before he turns north out of the city. It is possible that the actual purpose of his ride to London almost a decade earlier was, in fact, to demonstrate a bicycle of his own manufacture and show its durability to his new or potential agent for the machine.
2. Despite a comprehensive search in local newspapers of the period, no trace of JW's business activities in Aston or in Birmingham have yet been found in the general press.
3. Dorchester, whose Abbey Church is illustrated on the map, was at the time on the main road but has since been bypassed and is now a quiet town but within commuting distance of London and Oxford.
4. Some of the sites of JW's illustrations, etc. are no longer identifiable, particularly the (?)New Inn shown at Stanmore Hill near London and the intriguingly named Small Beer Hall at Winslow which is noted but not illustrated.