

## Charles Palmer and the New Rapid

By Christian Wignall, San Francisco, California, USA

In 2008 I bought a New Rapid ordinary. I knew almost nothing about old bicycles, but quickly learned that a number of New Rapids survived on both sides of the Atlantic. The badge on the backbone declared that it had been made by St. George's Engineering Company of Birmingham, England. As luck would have it, a reproduction of the 1888 catalogue of New Rapids was readily available and therein was my bicycle, the Light Roadster, in all its glory.<sup>1</sup> The catalogue revealed that the St. George's Engineering Company was owned by Charles Palmer, and it promoted two distinctive features of New Rapid ordinary bicycles: the True Tangent wheel and the Palmer handlebar. This whetted my appetite, and I set off to find out more about Palmer and his bicycle. The tale I unraveled revealed a man who was a remarkable athlete, innovator, entrepreneur, businessman, public citizen, and philanthropist. Moreover, the life and times of Charles Palmer highlight some of the seminal moments in the development of cycling as a sport and an industry.

### The Early Career of Charles Palmer

Charles Andrew Edward Talbot Palmer [Figure 1] was born in 1859, to Thomas and Martha Palmer. The name Talbot comes from his mother's side of the family, the Talbots apparently being a well known family in Birmingham at that time. He had at least three siblings, an elder brother, John Henry, an elder sister, Elizabeth Mary - and another sister, Evangeline Martha (who remained a spinster and outlived them all.)

Charles' father, Thomas Palmer, was a machinist who - like so many small-scale businessmen in Birmingham - turned his hand to whatever was in demand at the time. Thomas Palmer had plunged into the velocipede business in 1868. "By the way, I think I saw the first bicycle brought into England", Charles Palmer recalled later. His father had been given an order to make 500 copies of the original brought over from Paris, by a foreign (French?)

buyer. "A bad 'spec' it turned out, as they got very little money from the foreigners who owed it."

Charles' elder brother, John Henry, was one of the very earliest velocipede racers, riding to victory at a championship race in Paris in 1870 and coming second in Aston the following year. These 500 bicycles were the only bicycles Thomas Palmer made in that early period. The gun trade in 'Brum' got brisk shortly afterwards, in consequence of the Franco-Prussian war, and 'boneshaker' making discontinued.<sup>2</sup> In 1870 Palmer Brothers was listed in *Hulley's Birmingham Directory* only as sewing machine and breech-loading gun-action makers. Although Thomas Palmer of 21 Victoria Road, Aston, was still listed as a maker of breech-loading gun-actions in 1878, in that year he decided to resume the production of bicycles. Wire-spoked wheels and better cheaper steel had transformed the clumsy boneshaker into a more rideable machine, bringing about a revival in demand.

Palmer and Son, as the business became in 1879, touted the fact that their bicycles were produced on the 'Interchangeable System'. In other words, parts were machined with such precision that they did not require custom finishing to ensure they fitted together. Broken or worn out components could be readily replaced by standard parts ordered directly from the manufacturer.

Thomas Palmer's younger son, Charles, left school at the age of sixteen and was apprenticed into the jewellery trade. Two years later (1877 or 1878) he followed his elder brother, John, into the employment of the National Arms Ammunition Company, but this was not where his enthusiasm lay. Charles was a keen sportsman, excelling in swimming and football before he took up the new sport of cycle racing in 1878. He first cropped up as a champion cyclist in July 1878 when he was 19 years old.

Two years later, he became the centre of a bitter controversy which gives us an in-



Figure 1: Charles Palmer (courtesy of Handsworth Golf Club)

sight into the status of competitive cycling in England when it was still struggling to gain a measure of respect and autonomy from traditional sports associations.

On June 5th, 1880, a cold, windy and drizzly day, C.A. Palmer took part in a one mile handicap cycle race at Aston. According to *The Cyclist* magazine, after shooting into the lead, Palmer mysteriously eased up and let rival Vaughton win by a couple of yards. Although Palmer raced "tooth and nail" against R. Baugh in the subsequent three mile race (but neither man managed to overtake the overall winner, Vaughton), he "was greeted with hisses and groans on all sides in condemnation of his performance in the mile." When he was hauled up before the committee of the Midlands Counties Amateur Athletic Association (the MCAAA) and asked to account for himself, Palmer explained that "he had been ill for some weeks and being out of training was suddenly run to a standstill." Although neither he nor anyone on his behalf had placed bets on the outcome of the race, the MCAAA suspended Palmer for three months, noting that it had been asserted that, prior to "roping" the finish, Palmer had deliberately called upon his competitor to "come on".

The Moseley Harriers Sports Association, who had hosted the racing event at which Palmer supposedly misbehaved,

asked him to leave the club. Although the initial report by *The Cyclist* had been skeptical in tone, the journal now swung firmly in Palmer's favour. "We feel the MCAA have placed themselves in an absurd position, and they have Mr. Palmer in an unjust one... No sensible person would ever believe that if any rider really wanted to 'rope' he would be such a simpleton as to do it by a sudden stoppage a few yards from the post." *The Cyclist* reported that the Charles Palmer suspension was 'the talk of the Midlands'.

Cycling clubs affiliated with the MCAA took matters into their own hands and passed resolutions ignoring the suspension. Foremost among them was the Birmingham Cricket and Football Club - since Charles Palmer was its Honorable Secretary - and he competed under its name in cycle races a few weeks later. The North Warwickshire Bicycle Club and the Speedwell Bicycle Club also took Palmer's side. *The Cyclist* was now in full cry, eager to excite a full scale rebellion, calling upon all the bicycle clubs who belonged to the MCAA to withdraw their names and give their adherence to the Bicycle Union. 'Every man in the Union is a practical rider'. It was risible that cyclists' issues should be adjudicated by committees of cricketers and footballers. Cycling as a sport was coming of age.

Charles Palmer continued to be a champion bicycle racer for the following two years, winning many trophies including the Speedwell Cup and the North of England Championship Cup. Perhaps his most memorable triumph came in 1882 when in April he fought J.F.Griffith of the London Bicycle Club to a dead heat for first place in a fiercely exciting ten mile race. At a specially arranged play-off which took place in June, Palmer romped home with a clear win and thus became that year's winner of the Surrey Challenge Cup. By beating the "safe" (meaning 'certain') winner from London, Palmer earned himself the moniker as the "safer" man. Perhaps because he suffered injuries from some cycling mishap in that year, he gave up competitive cycling, but he was to be a keen sportsman for the rest of his life.

Charles Palmer does not appear to have had a straightforward relationship with his father's company. At the end of 1880 at the age of 22 he was attached for four years to William Andrews, one of the most notable cycle firms in Birmingham and makers of the Sanspareil.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at least

part of the time he raced on a Sanspareil machine, and they proudly advertised the fact. He was still at Andrews at the beginning of February 1883, showing off the Andrews patented detachable handlebar at the Stanley Show,<sup>4</sup> but here the record becomes confusing, because Charles also crops up briefly as manager of his father's cycle business in 1883-4.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps his father became ill or died in 1883? Then perhaps Charles was given leave by Andrews to return to the family firm to sort out its future.<sup>6</sup> Very tentatively we may suppose that he engineered the absorption of his father's struggling business into Andrews in July 1884. Thereafter he felt free to seize an opportunity at the

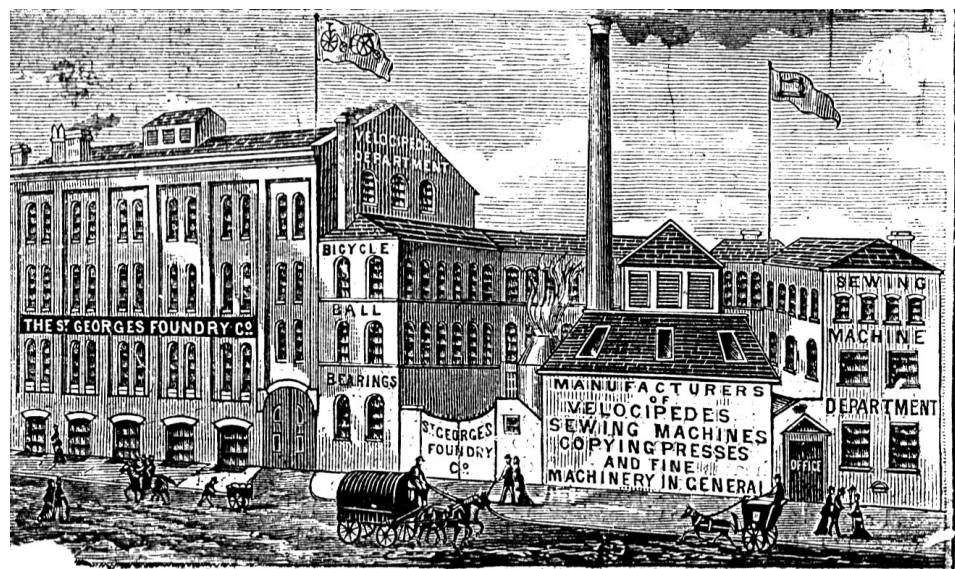


Figure 2: Woodcut of the St. George's Foundry from a Newton Wilson sewing machine catalogue of about 1882-1884 (from Dincum.com)

St. George's Foundry at 52 Pope Street, Birmingham, of being a bigger fish in a bigger pond.

### St. George's Engineering Company

The St. George's Foundry had been established back in 1847. [Figure 2] In 1866, William Newton Wilson, the sewing machine pioneer, took over the foundry to make sewing machines, but then was quick to cash in on the craze for velocipedes at the end of the decade. He loved publicity stunts so in July 1869 Mr. R.J. Klamroth from the firm of Newton Wilson attracted a lot of press coverage by riding over 400 miles from London to Edinburgh on a velocipede, sustaining himself along the way with enormous breakfasts and liberal amounts of sherry.<sup>7</sup>

Newton Wilson, a rather erratic businessman, went bankrupt in 1877 and the

St. George's Foundry appears to have been ceded to the mortgagee, John Cornforth.<sup>8</sup> When Newton Wilson emerged from bankruptcy in 1880 he continued to market sewing machines which were made at St. George's and he was also selling "A.B.C" or "Acme Bicycle Company" machines, emphasizing their high quality ball bearings - presumably also made at the St. George's Foundry. In the 1880s, Newton Wilson gradually withdrew from business, closing down his London showroom at 144 High Holborn at the end of 1882 and moving to other premises. The A.B.C. name disappeared, but St George's Foundry (still owned by John Cornforth)<sup>9</sup> continued to make cycles and continued to

trumpet the quality of its bearings.

The new name St. Georges Foundry chose for their products was Rapid. It is clear that it is the bearing which is called Rapid, whence the cycles derive their name. They produced various types of tricycle, which gained some favorable comments, but their Rapid ordinaries were well respected but not outstanding. Henry Hewitt Griffin's 1882 annual review of bicycles devotes most attention to the design of the bearings and is not enthusiastic about any of the other features. St. George's produced three classes of ordinary: the cheapest (Class 1) sold for £15; the best (Class 3) sold for £24. They continued to offer these same cycles with minor improvements until the 1884 season. So when Charles Palmer joined the company as foreman of the cycle department on September 1st 1884, St George's

was already a long established sewing machine and bicycle maker, albeit not a very innovative or successful one.

Under Charles' leadership, the foundry was re-named St. George's Engineering Company and the cycles were re-launched

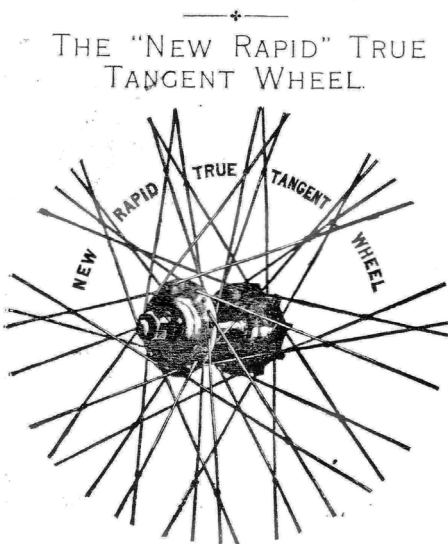


Figure 3: The extremely rigid New Rapid True Tangent wheel which won a gold medal at the International Inventions Exhibition in 1885.

as the New Rapids at the beginning of 1885 at the Stanley Show. The bicycles won enthusiastic reviews on account of their True Tangent wheels. [Figure 3] Unlike radial spokes, tangential spokes effectively transmit the torque from the axle to the rim. The innovation was not new: J.K. Starley had beaten them to the punch with a patent some time earlier, but the New Rapid wheels were immensely strong and uncompromising. The spokes weren't merely crossed; they followed the rigorous dictates of true tangents, crossing no fewer than seven other spokes from flange to rim and being tied at the sixth and seventh crossings. The new wheels were exhibited at the Stanley show, the Speedwell exhibition in Birmingham and, later in the year, at the International Inventions Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London, where they won a gold medal. (There were 88 exhibitors of innovations in the cycle industry, reflecting its status as the high technology growth industry of the day.)

Another innovation introduced on the New Rapid was the Palmer detachable handlebar. [Figure 4] The bar could be removed from the bicycle quickly and easily by the removal of two pins, facilitating repair and replacement. Though probably

standard for the U.S. market (because it enabled more compact packaging for export), the 'Patent Detachable Handle Bar' was initially offered only as an option in Britain for an additional five shillings, but in 1887 it became a standard feature. (There are at least two New Rapid ordinaries surviving which are without Palmer heads, one of which, #2324, is the earliest New Rapid surviving.)

Although universally admired, the New Rapids were in truth the last late flowering of the art of the ordinary. At the very same Stanley show in 1885, Starley introduced the Rover safety bicycle which was soon to make all further refinement of the high wheeled bicycle irrelevant. Nevertheless, the New Rapid was to enjoy several years of tremendous popularity.

But they did not go unchallenged. There is a curious and acrimonious correspondence in the pages of the *Cyclists' Touring Club Monthly Gazette*, triggered in April 1886 by an anonymous Liverpoolian who enumerated several flaws in the New Rapid he had acquired in August 1885. Only a minor sideways fall, he said, had caused a "grand collapse" buckling the wheel because of defects in its manufacture. This was a direct blow at the main selling point of the New Rapid – its immensely strong wheel. Charles Palmer wrote an impassioned response speculating that the writer was motivated by professional rivalry. The Liverpoolian retorted that his motives were pure. Meanwhile another correspondent wrote in to criticize the 'Diana' tricycle - also produced by St George's. Palmer disowned the tricycle: it was, he said, produced before he took over responsibility at the works. They had ceased all production of tricycles when he took over in order to devote all their resources to

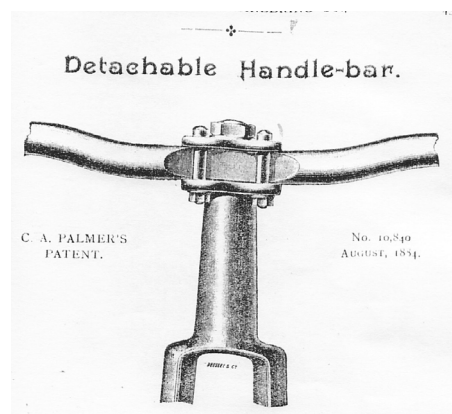


Figure 4: Palmer's detachable handlebar. Note the patent date (August 1884) is prior to his joining St. George's.



Figure 5: A New Rapid Roadster photographed for the U.S. market. (from the collection of Lorne Shields, Toronto, Canada)

fulfilling the rush of orders for New Rapid ordinaries.

The Liverpoolian slanderer was tracked down and taken to court. John Cornforth, owner of St George's Engineering was the plaintiff. Legal counsel was retained on both sides and expert witnesses came down from Liverpool in February 1887. The defendant, Mr Hughes, backed off, apologized for relaying hearsay and Cornforth magnanimously declared he sought no financial redress, merely to clear the name and reputation of St George's. The deputation from Liverpool were then treated to a tour of the Pope Street works by Palmer to general satisfaction.

Perhaps the earliest New Rapid ordinaries did indeed have teething troubles: the Liverpoolian would have been in receipt of one of the earliest of the new models. In 1886 the company changed from using Warwick hollow rims rolled from thin sheet steel to hollow rims made with thicker steel on the inner (axle-facing) surface. In addition, the later bicycles appear to have more robust heads. Whatever the truth of the matter, the *C.T.C. Gazette* decided to do its own road test report, which appeared in the July 1886 issue. The machine received a glowing review: "The Wheel is as rigid as a rock, and it runs with minimum labour. As a hill-climber it must necessarily rank second to none..." They tested the quality and hardness of the parts the Liverpoolian had criticized and found them fully satisfactory- "...we believe the machine to be one of the best upon the market." [Figure 5]

The *C.T.C. Gazette* drew attention to the fact that "the present makers of the "Rapid", although the successors

of, are by no means identical with, the *St George's Foundry Co.*, a firm whose cycles a few seasons since were alleged to give but qualified satisfaction in several instances that came under our notice. The *St. George's Engineering Co.* is practically a new firm, and the master mind that presides over the mechanical detail is that of Mr C.A. Palmer..." He was 27 years old and already a star. On September 19th 1886 the dashing young 'master mind' married the petite 23 year old Miss Aida Pountney at Trinity Church, Handsworth, near Birmingham.<sup>10</sup>

### Exporting to America

Samuel Clark [Figure 6] of Baltimore, Maryland (a founder member of the League of American Wheelmen and an importer of bicycles since 1879), had been the U.S. agent for Palmer's former employer, W. Andrews. When he heard that the New Rapid had won the Gold Medal at the Inventions Exhibition in 1885, he came over to England and struck a deal with Palmer to become the exclusive agent



Figure 6: Samuel T. Clark, sole U.S. agent for New Rapid. When Palmer moved from W. Andrews to St. George's Engineering, Clark moved his allegiance as well.

for the new bicycles.<sup>11</sup> He held a sale to unload his inventory of Sanspareil and Coventry Machinist cycles and by the late spring of 1886 was aggressively promoting the New Rapid and recruiting distributors around the United States. He took an initial consignment of 250 bicycles from Charles Palmer and thenceforth represented only New Rapid bicycles and Quadrant tricycles.

A few catalogues from Samuel T. Clark & Co. survive. The 1887 catalogue offered

the New Rapid Roadster, the New Rapid Light Roadster, the New Rapid Racer and the New Rapid Safety. The Light Roadster had been developed the previous year and was about four pounds lighter than the Roadster (36 lbs versus 40 lbs for the 50 inch), deploying a slightly narrower backbone and forks, and main bearing cases welded directly into the bottom of the forks rather than attached with a knuckle joint. The catalogue asserted that the New Rapid bicycles were made stronger for the American market to cope with the rougher roads. The safety was a 'Rover' type safety, not the Kangaroo-style hybrid which St George's had offered earlier in England.

Because of their more complicated design, safeties were initially more expensive than ordinaries, but the gap narrowed rapidly, and in 1887 St George's began offering their first Rover-style safety in the U.S. market for \$135 – the same price as their mid-range ordinaries. A review of their safety in *The Cyclist* on February 1st, 1888 puts the weight at a chunky 52 lbs - still much heavier than an ordinary at that date.

Demand for New Rapids was strong so on Tuesday and Wednesday, 13th and 14th September 1887, the company held an auction to dispose of all their sewing machine manufacturing equipment, the tools, patterns, patents, and inventory, to make room for the expansion of their bicycle facilities.<sup>12</sup> The following year Charles Palmer bought St. George's Engineering Co. from John Cornforth.<sup>13</sup>

The 1888 catalogue of their US distributor, which had become The Clark Cycle Co., was offering both the New Rapid Roadster and the New Rapid Light Roadster for \$130 for a 50 inch model in enamel - a reduction of \$5 from the previous year. It was still offering the ordinaries in its 1890 catalogue but had cut the prices again by \$5: it was very close to the end of the road for these bikes.

Prices had always been lower in England.<sup>14</sup> The 1890 British catalogue priced its Roadsters at £18 each (the equivalent of just \$87), but as a last desperate effort to sustain demand they also offered a 'special' at the knock down price of £13 without (quelle horreur!) the True Tangent wheel, and solid rather than hollow rims. Together with longer saddles, the rear wheels of the roadster and light roadster were increased from 18 inches to 20 inches, a belated move to shift the center of gravity back and give the ordinaries a

slightly safer and smoother ride. In 1891 the ordinaries were offered with little comment or exposition, the bulk of the catalogue being devoted to lengthy and somewhat defensive explanations of the various features of their five different models of safety bicycles and the pros and cons of cushion versus pneumatic tyres. Although still more expensive than the ordinaries, their No.3 (£20) and No.5 (£23) safeties adopted the diamond frame and their weights were down to less than 39 lbs. Pneumatic tyres were offered for £5 extra. Having been pre-eminent in ordinaries, they were me-too in safeties.

They continued to make a fuss about their True Tangent wheel, noting a further improvement which was to use perfectly straight spokes attached to nipples which were inserted in holes in the flanges of the hub. This eliminated the weak point where a conventional spoke was bent to attach it at the hub. Originally patented by Palmer in December 1885, this more expensive system of spoking a wheel does not seem to have been deployed on ordinaries, but it was used on the rear wheels of some of the solid-tyred safeties.

### The stock market boom of the 1890s

Production of ordinaries had almost certainly ceased when, on 1st October 1893, the business of St. George's Engineering was reorganized into a limited liability company prior to an offer of stock to the public in April 1894. The prospectus for the issue reveals that the business achieved profits of £9,054/0/9 in the fiscal year ending September 30, 1891, £8,584/0/7 in fiscal 1892 and £10,335/4/4 in fiscal 1893. The company was to have total capital of £60,000 consisting of £40,000 in ordinary shares and £20,000 of debentures (bonds). The company was probably producing at least 7,000 cycles per year by 1894.

Charles Palmer retained one third of the stock and subscribed to half the issue of debentures. He undertook to remain the chief executive for five years and to hold his stock and debentures for that period. But his business interests had already extended well beyond St George's Engineering: he had become the chairman of Hudson & Company Limited, 'tube and bicycle manufacturer of Selly Oak and Bournbrook' in 1892, and shortly thereafter the chairman of the R.F.Hall Manufacturing Company, manufacturer of cycle components and accessories. In 1894 both companies were absorbed into the newly

formed Cycle Components Manufacturing Company Limited.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, cycle components were lucrative, but they were dwarfed by the opportunities in pneumatic tyres.

John Boyd Dunlop's (re)invention took the cycling world by storm in May 1889, when a safety cycle equipped with pneumatic tyres defeated two of the famous du Cros brothers on ordinaries in a cycle race at the North of Ireland Sports Club in Belfast. Their father, Harvey du Cros, turned the setback into an opportunity, enlisting Dunlop in an enterprise to exploit the invention, 'The Pneumatic Tyre and Booth's Cycle Agency Limited'.

The new firm had barely been incorporated in December of that year when C.A. Palmer arrived on the doorstep eager to do business. Palmer, as proprietor of St. George's Engineering, partnered with M.D. Rucker of the Humber company to lead a group of the most powerful cycle makers to secure a license for supplying and fixing pneumatic tyres from du Cros's newly formed company. In those early days the method of attaching the tyre to the rim and the puncture repair technique were still in flux, and it was envisaged that such activities would be a lucrative business requiring specialized professional expertise and equipment. The initial reaction from the directors of the Pneumatic Tyre etc. company was favourable, but the consortium was too greedy, proposing that licenses be granted to only four companies at a royalty of 9d per wheel. The board reconsidered their position and on December 27th, 1889, resolved "to throw the pneumatic tyre open to the trade." In other words, anybody could have a go at repairing punctures.<sup>16</sup> The decision was instrumental in ensuring that Dunlop's pneumatic tyres would quickly become ubiquitous.

Starting with capital of less than £15,000, over the following six years under Harvey du Cros' leadership, the 'Pneumatic Tyre and Booth's Cycle Agency Limited' grew as fast if not faster than any internet technology company a century later. In April 1896 it was bought for £3 million by the stock promoter, Ernest Terah Hooley, who promptly stuffed the board with aristocracy and floated it on the London stock exchange as the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company for an astounding £5 million.

Although rebuffed in 1889, Palmer didn't give up. Following disputes with his fellow directors, John Boyd Dunlop

quit the board of the original Pneumatic Tyre Company in the spring of 1895. Jealous of the explosive growth of the du Cros' family enterprise, Charles Palmer and others persuaded Dunlop to get back into the fray - and get even - by establishing a competitor. In April 1896 this new consortium bought the Birmingham-based 'India Rubber and Tyre Manufacturing Company' from Capon Heaton, and the



Figure 7: The logo of the New Rapid Cycle Company, which took over the business of St. George's Engineering in 1897.

patents for tubeless pneumatic tyres from Henry Albert Fleuss and James William Smallman. Putting these pieces together, the new business was awkwardly called 'The Tubeless Pneumatic Tire and Capon Heaton, Limited'. Dunlop became the chairman and Palmer a director, and the new entity was floated on the Birmingham and Dublin stock exchanges. Palmer ebulliently demonstrated how punctures became trivially easy to repair on the new Fleuss tubeless tyres when he was interviewed by *Handsworth, A Local Society Magazine* that summer.

But his interests were not limited to business; he was becoming a pillar of the local community:

*Although not yet out of his thirty-eighth year, Councillor Charles Andrew Talbot Palmer has won for himself a position in the commercial world which is distinguished even in these days of rapid progress. Thorough-going, eminently practical, quick to see and prompt to act, filled with a laudable ambition and endowed*

*with robust health, it would indeed have been strange had he not risen above the common level. Whatever his hands have touched has been well done. An enthusiastic sportsman, he was a few years ago famous throughout the length and breadth of the country for his remarkable cycling feats; a manufacturer of the first rank, he is the controlling genius of companies whose names alone are a guarantee of the best work and the best workmanship; a philanthropist, willing and able to assist in charitable enterprises, he is a governor of the General Hospital, the Children's Hospital, Dental Hospital, the Graham Street Dissenting Charity School, and similar institutions.*

He was a councillor on Handsworth District Council, a Justice of the Peace and a notable philanthropist. In 1898 he donated a drinking fountain (which still survives) to Victoria Park in Handsworth, and he and his wife hosted events for the local horticultural society. He was admired as a man of phenomenal energy, engaged in so many activities as would exhaust a lesser person.<sup>17</sup>

1896 marked the height of the cycle share mania. Having rushed to put together and float The Tubeless Pneumatic Tire and Capon Heaton Ltd, Palmer decided to do the same for St. George's Engineering. But the rather dowdy name would have to go. The business of St. George's was acquired by the newly formed New Rapid Cycle Co. Ltd. [Figure 7] Fellow Handsworth councillor and fellow director of St. George's Engineering, George Henry Capewell Hughes (the founder of St Stephen's Ariel Wheel Works, who was already deputy chairman of The Tubeless Pneumatic Tire and Capon Heaton Ltd.), was invited to become chairman of New Rapid Cycle Co. Ltd, which listed 130,000 shares (one pound par value) on the Birmingham stock exchange in March 1897. The original debentures of the St. George's Engineering Co. were replaced with New Rapid debentures, of which Palmer continued to be the largest subscriber, taking over half the issue.

Charles Palmer was almost too late. The cycle industry in total raised over £17 million in capital in the space of twelve months, triggering an over-expansion of capacity, a glut, and the consequent collapse in profitability. To make matters worse, the export market (mainly the United States) collapsed in the second half of 1897. Less than a year after the flotation,



Figure 8: In 1898 New Rapid cycles were struggling to remain competitive.

the New Rapid Co. warned that business was unlikely to meet expectations for the year. Things deteriorated further and the company reported an operating loss of £682 for the year ending September 1898, and other expenses and a write-down of a bad debt resulted in a total loss to shareholders of £14,037. The company slashed prices by 40% in an attempt to retain market share.

The company was still losing money two years later. [Figure 8] It made a trading loss of 431 pounds and an overall (after debt service etc.) loss of £4,304 in the year ending August 31st, 1900, and the stock price had fallen from the issue price of £1 to a mere 6d by the middle of 1900. The shareholders meeting was mutinous, and after some altercations, Palmer was ready to submit to a reconstruction of the company, offering to convert his holding of £13,000 of debentures into ordinary shares provided “shareholders found the money to pay off the bank overdraft of £12,000.” In other words, if he were to do his bit to ensure the survival of the company, the other equity holders ought to chip in some more money to eliminate the debt of the company.

The company went into voluntary liquidation in January 1901, and the court appointed R.T.Johnson as liquidator. Palmer continued to be heavily involved as advisor to the liquidator and manufac-

turing operations continued. Relief from debts and presumably cost cutting and other measures improved the business so that in the year ending August 1901 they achieved a trading profit of £2,192 and a net loss of £306.

The improvement continued in the year to August 1902, such that the company achieved a trading profit of £3,681 and even a net profit of £710. Palmer reported that the severe price competition of the past few years appeared to be stabilizing, and it was resolved to continue operations. There is a mention in the December 3, *Motorcycling and Motoring News* that the New Rapid Co. was to introduce a motor-cycle with “a 2 1/4 HP Kelecom engine”.

The company exhibited at the Cycle Show at the Crystal Palace in November 1903. They heavily promoted long cranks as their distinguishing feature, but the public didn't take to them, and their bicycles, while universally acknowledged to be soundly built, were too heavy. In July 1904 the company gave up. The liquidator admitted defeat having been unable to make a go of the business or find a buyer. The debenture holders (in effect, Charles Palmer who owned half the total amount) took control and appointed E.V.Sharp, chartered accountant, as the Receiver. The Pope Street premises with all inventory, fixtures, fittings and machinery were auctioned over three days, October 12, 13 and 14th, 1904.

Who bought them? In all likelihood it was New Hudson. Somebody was still using the New Rapid name in January 1906, when the *London Daily News* commented on a letter received from the “new New Rapid Cycle Co. of Birmingham” which expressed amazement that their predecessors had spent so much on long cranks with so little result. Significantly, advertisements for New Hudson Cycles, Armstrong Triplex and New Rapid often appeared grouped together in various publications until 1907, but thereafter the trail goes cold.

The last year the New Rapid company appears in *Kelly's Directory for Birmingham* is 1909. By then, the St. George's works had another occupant, The Armstrong Triplex 3-Speed Co., manufacturer of three speed hub gears. It had been incorporated in 1907 and in 1908 it moved to the St. George's address. By June 1907 New Hudson (and only New Hudson) was advertising bicycles with Armstrong Triplex 3-speed hubs, which strongly

suggests the companies were affiliated in some way. The New Hudson Cycle Company<sup>18</sup> acquired Armstrong Triplex 3-Speed Co., Ltd. in 1915 and used the St George's Works to produce bicycles in the subsequent decade, before switching over to motorcycles. My best guess is that New Hudson acquired the Pope Street works and the rights to the New Rapid name at the 1904 auction.

Why did New Rapid fail? From the tenor of the catalogues and what we know of the bicycle industry at that time, it is likely that New Rapid never properly adjusted to the harsh realities of mass production. Their emphasis was always

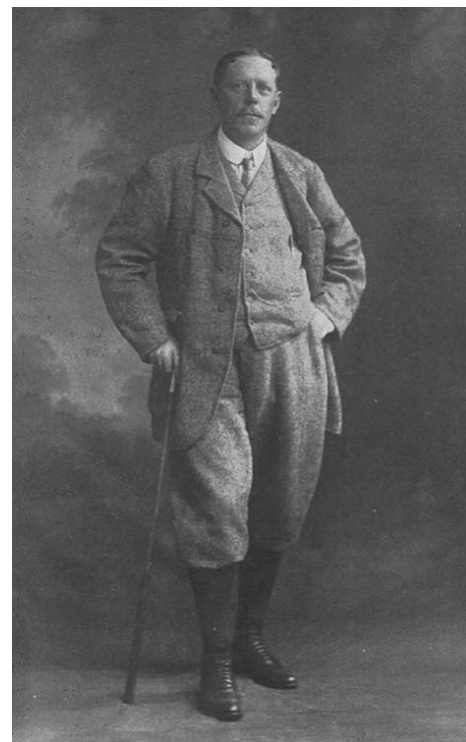


Figure 9: C.A.Palmer, a man of property and proprietor of Capon Heaton, the rubber company.

on their premium product (one of the reasons their ordinaries have survived and are prized so much today) whereas by the late 1890s, the safety bicycle had become commoditized, and the key to survival was ruthless efficiency and economies of scale. In contrast, New Hudson used the latest machine tools to maximize productivity while pitching a product aimed at the new mass market, and as a result, while New Rapid was still hæmorrhaging losses, New Hudson was actually profitable in 1899/1900 and survived until it was absorbed into BSA in 1942.

Palmer's other famous business, Capon Heaton, fared better - although it was also



Figure 10: C.A.Palmer's house, Park Hill, Handsworth, where he lived from the 1890s until his death in 1932. (source: digital Handsworth)

in financial trouble by 1900. The Fleuss tubeless pneumatic tyres didn't prevail but Capon Heaton continued to manufacture conventional bicycle tyres (Boothroyd Cycle Tyres)<sup>19</sup> and other rubber goods for many years. It continued as an independent business until it was sold to Avon Rubber in 1964. [Figure 9]

Having been a swimmer and soccer player as well as a cyclist in his youth, Charles Palmer took up golf in his forties and quickly "worked his way to the front rank of amateur golfers"<sup>20</sup>. He won the Irish Open Championship in 1913 at the age of 55. Indeed, to the extent that he is remembered and celebrated at all today, it is as one of the most illustrious members of the Handsworth Golf Club, where, so it is said, he had a bit of a reputation as a lady's man and members of the Handsworth Golf Club still compete for two Palmer Cups.<sup>21</sup> Every Friday, Palmer would award a Capon Heaton golf ball to the winner of the day. Like his bikes, his golf balls had a premium reputation and were priced accordingly. (Early Capon Heaton golf balls fetch fancy prices on eBay today.). He was also a life-long shooting enthusiast, maintaining a property for that purpose at Brampton Bryan in Herefordshire. It appears that one of his last active roles in business was as the chairman of the local Aston beer company, Holt Brewery.

Charles Palmer's wife, Aida, died in August 1932 and Charles passed away a month later at his home, Park Hill, on 27th

September 1932 at the age of 73. [Figure 10] He was a very rich man, leaving an estate which was valued at £219,597 even at the bottom of the Great Depression.<sup>22</sup> He does not appear to have had children, but back in the 1890s, he and his wife had taken into their home an orphan, Carl Bretherton. Palmer passed on to Carl his love of golf, and the two of them, putative father and son, count among the greatest golfers in the history of the Handsworth Golf Club. Bretherton was one of the executors of Palmer's will and was himself one of the largest beneficiaries of Palmer's estate. In addition to Carl, Palmer left his estate to his sisters and sisters-in-law, vari-



Figure 11: The Wheel motif over the Office Entrance of the New Rapid Headquarters.

ous charitable hospitals and small amounts to his servants. His funeral at St. John's Church was attended by a large crowd, reflecting his broad range of business and sporting interests.

The original St. George's Foundry at 52 Pope Street no longer exists, but sometime in the 1890s, Palmer acquired the neighboring premises on the corner of Icknield and Pope Street. There he built a new factory into which the newly floated New Rapid Cycle Co. moved in mid-1897.<sup>23</sup> It was into these facilities that first Armstrong Triplex and then New Hudson moved in the twentieth century. Today, the red brick building is boarded up awaiting redevelopment as part of an inner city renewal project. On current plans the façade and the name will be retained (but as St. Georges, without the apostrophe, in keeping with this post-literate age). Above the Office Entrance in the decorative brick work can still be seen four tangentially spoked bicycle wheels which are the only visible sign that these were once the premises of the New Rapid Cycle company. [Figure 11] ●

<sup>1</sup> From Greg Barron of Rideable Bicycle Replicas, HYPERLINK "<http://www.hiwheeler.com>" www.hiwheeler.com

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from an interview with Charley Palmer in *The Athletic News*, Tuesday June 14, 1887.

<sup>2</sup> In 1880 Andrews relocated to 3 Steelhouse Lane and, in 1881, the first mention is made of his new career as a bicycle manufacturer. The story goes that one day a customer arrived in the sewing machine shop and, after purchasing one, asked if he might place a bicycle he wished to sell in the front window of William's shop. William replied that if it sold he would go into the bicycle manufacturing business. The census of 1881 shows William and his family living at 3 Steelhouse Lane. He is listed as a master machinist employing six men and two boys and he was able to afford one servant. He continues to be listed as a sewing machine manufacturer until 1884 when it would appear he closed down these works and moved the bicycle works to Victoria Road in Aston. The name Sanspareil lived on as the name of his topline pennyfarthing." (source: In search of William Andrews by Andy Brockway in *ISMACS NEWS*, July 1996.)

<sup>4</sup> *The Athletic News*, Wednesday February 7th, 1883. The detachable bar was a safety feature, if hit simultaneously by the thighs of the rider the bar would fly off, enabling the rider to land on his feet rather than do a 'header'.

<sup>5</sup> There is even a piece of evidence that his relationship with Andrews continued well after he moved to St. George's in 1884: he is mentioned as representing Andrews at a cycle exhibition in 1886.

<sup>6</sup> His father's business went through a number of changes in the early eighties; from being Palmer & Son - makers of 'Interchangeable' bicycles - in 1879, it became Palmer and Holland in 1881. Obviously things didn't work out with Holland (whoever he was) because in 1882 it was back to just Palmer

& Co. Then Charles Palmer was listed as the manager of 'The Interchangeable Bicycle Company' at the Victoria Works, Aston in 1883. The following year the Palmer family company disappears and in July 1884 Andrews takes over the Victoria Works.

<sup>7</sup> *Bicycle: The History*, David V. Herlihy, 2004. Yale University Press, page 150.

<sup>8</sup> There was a notable Cornforth family in Birmingham at that time who were manufacturers of steel wire.

<sup>9</sup> The St. George's Engineering Co. catalogue for 1890 requested that cheques be made payable to John Cornforth, but the following year that had been altered to C.A.Palmer, suggesting that Cornforth owned the facilities from 1877 to 1890, although other sources state that Palmer bought the business in 1888.

<sup>10</sup> Aida Pountney had at least two other sisters, one of whom, Nance, was the secretary of the Ladies section of the Handsworth Golf Course club in 1906.

<sup>11</sup> *Springfield Wheelmen's Gazette*, September 1886

<sup>12</sup> *Birmingham Post*, 1st September 1887.

<sup>13</sup> The year of this transaction comes from the profile of Palmer published in *Handsworth, A Local Society Magazine*, July 1896. available at HYPERLINK "http://www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk" www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk

<sup>14</sup> The U.S. imposed a 35% tariff on bicycle imports in

the 1880s. In 1891(the McKinley tariff bill) the tariff was increased to 45%.

<sup>15</sup> Cycle Components was to become one of the larger and more successful cycling shares traded on the stock market. Its chairman was Harvey du Cros, the driving force at the Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company. In February 1897 the cycle tubing division (formerly Hudson &Co.) was spun out again in a scheme devised by the notorious cycle stock promoter, Hooley, and subsequently collapsed leaving a trail of angry litigious shareholders seeking recompense. Hooley himself went bankrupt in 1898.

<sup>16</sup> *Wheels of Fortune* by Arthur du Cros. Chapman & Hall, 1938. p 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Handsworth, A Local Society Magazine*, July 1896. available at HYPERLINK "http://www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk" www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk

<sup>18</sup> There was no connection between the Hudson &Co, of which Palmer was chairman in the early nineties and the New Hudson company.

<sup>19</sup> There is no connection between Charles Palmer's bicycle tyre company, Capon Heaton, and the much more famous Palmer Tires of the U.S.A.

<sup>20</sup> *Golfing Magazine*, 10th September, 1913.

<sup>21</sup> *History of the Handsworth Golf Club* 1995, by R.L Neale. I am indebted to Reg and Mary Neale for their hospitality and help in researching Charles Palmer for this article.

<sup>22</sup> 219,000 is equivalent to about 40 million in economic power (relative to per capita GDP) in 2015 or over 100 million relative to total GDP.

<sup>23</sup> A letter from the company to *Bicycling News*, May 5, 1897 reports that new premises were nearly ready for occupancy, without stating the address.

How many New Rapid Ordinaries were Produced?

In a paper presented to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in October 1885, a Mr. Robert Phillips stated that there were more than 170 cycle manufacturers in Britain producing more than 500 models and employing more than 5,000 people. He estimated that the industry was producing about 40,000 cycles per year. The St George's Engineering Co. employed about 500 people in the mid-eighties though only a portion of them would have been engaged in bicycle production, suggesting that it represented at most 10% of the total industry. Assuming the productivity of St. George's was comparable with others, they were therefore probably producing fewer than four thousand cycles per year. In their 1891 catalogue the company claimed that they had made upwards of 3,000 machines with True Tangent wheels during 1889, but this number would have included safeties, which at that late date would almost certainly have been in the majority. So these numbers suggest that an annual average of a thousand ordinaries a year would be a ballpark guess at the output of New Rapids in the second half of the eighties. And this estimate accords with the serial numbering of New Rapids. No New Rapid ordinaries survive with a serial number either below 2000 or above 5000.

## Conference Moment



An 1860s velocipede and an 1980s road bike resting after a ride during the conference.