

George Wilson and Raleigh in the Irish Free State

By Anthony Hadland, Faringdon, Oxfordshire, UK

George Wilson worked for the Raleigh cycle group for 36 years until his untimely death in 1963 at the age of 68 in a car accident. He rose from Sturmey-Archer gears salesman to life president of the TI Raleigh group. He became the father figure of “the Raleigh family”, in which employees enjoyed not only an income but also a social life and a higher level of welfare than generally found in other industrial employment in the English Midlands at the time.

Born into Ireland’s Protestant governing class in the late Victorian era, George Wilson served Britain with distinction in

yacht clubs.¹

His upbringing, education, military experience, and time as a travelling salesman gave him an unusually perceptive understanding of how people and organisations work, and of what is important and what is not. This, combined with a skilful diplomatic manner, formidable negotiating skills and natural charm, made George Wilson one of Britain and Ireland’s greatest captains of industry of the 20th century. Even his opponents fondly remembered him as a friendly man of honour.

This paper focuses on George Wilson’s involvement with Raleigh in the newly established Irish Free State, as it

born into a middle class Anglican family in Dublin, on 14 May 1895. His Dubliner father Charles was a barrister who worked in the government’s estate duty office. His mother Jane was English and George had an older sister and younger brother.²

The family lived in a substantial house in Clonskeagh Road, Pembroke West, in south Dublin. They were sufficiently wealthy to employ a resident cook and a housemaid.^{3,4} The family later moved to a house in Ailesbury Park in the Merrion district of Dublin.⁵

Education and military service

George Wilson was educated in England, at Marlborough College. He later studied engineering at Pembroke College, Cambridge,⁶ where he joined the Officer Training Corps.⁷ In November 1914, a few months after Britain’s declaration of war on Germany and having abandoned his studies, he was commissioned as second lieutenant in the Army Service Corps.⁸ In the same month, his 15-year-old younger brother, Charles Huband Wilson, was killed when his ship was blown up in Sheerness Harbour.⁹

George Wilson was posted with the 10th (Irish) Division to Gallipoli, then to Thessaloniki, to Serbia and back to Thessaloniki.¹⁰ In July 1916, he was injured, presumably in the incident that won him the Military Cross.¹¹ He was evacuated to a hospital in Malta and recovered within six weeks.¹²

Early in 1917, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. By the end of April 1917, he was a flying officer, based in Egypt.¹³ In April 1918, the Royal Flying Corps amalgamated with the Royal Naval Air Service to form the Royal Air Force, and George was subsequently awarded the Air Force Cross.¹⁴ **[Figure 1]**

George Wilson, now a 23-year-old honorary captain, was demobilised in March 1919 and sailed home from Port Said.¹⁵ But his Irish homeland was now a very different place from what he had known before the war. The republican Easter Rising of 1916, and the harsh British reaction to it, had irrevocably changed Irish politics. Michael Collins was directing the Irish Republican Army in a ruthless war against the Royal Irish Constabulary and other agents of the British Crown. The Irish War of Independence was to continue until a ceasefire in summer 1921. The subsequent



Figure 1. George Wilson in the front (observer/gunner’s) seat of a Maurice Farman Short-horn biplane at Ismailia, Egypt, 1917. He said it was great for shooting ducks. (Courtesy of Glen Wilson)

World War 1, first in the army and later in the Royal Flying Corps. He became involved at a senior level in many organisations, including savings banks, higher education establishments, benevolent funds, and employers’ associations. He was a Commander of the British Empire, at one time a High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, and a justice of the peace. He was also a good shot with guns, an expert angler, and a member of two

evolved into the Republic of Ireland, fully independent of the United Kingdom. It also examines how Raleigh’s Irish connection became a foundation stone for one of the biggest mergers in the history of cycle manufacture.

Family background

At a time when the whole of Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom, George Hamilton Bracher Wilson was

Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed in December that year, led to the partition of Ireland. Twenty-six counties formed Saorstát Éireann, the new Irish Free State, while six north-eastern counties remained in the United Kingdom as the province of Northern Ireland.¹⁶

Against this background, where the future for Irish Protestants with strong cultural links to Britain and the Crown was uncertain, it is easy to see why George Wilson chose to live in England. He did not resume his studies at Cambridge University, but instead he found a job in the civilian world.

Dunlop, Sturmev-Archer, and Raleigh

In 1920, George Wilson joined the Dunlop tyre company.¹⁷ By summer 1927, he was living at 121 Derby Road, Nottingham.¹⁸ The rapidly growing Raleigh cycle company was based nearby, and his work for Dunlop would have brought him into contact with the firm.¹⁹ George Wilson learned of a job vacancy at the Raleigh-owned subsidiary Sturmev-Archer Gears Ltd., the United Kingdom's biggest maker of bicycle gears. On 24 June 1927, Sturmev-Archer offered him a job as a commercial traveller at a salary of £500 a year (worth about £27,000 today²⁰) plus £250 travelling expenses.²¹ He accepted the offer and never looked back, spending the rest of his career working for the Raleigh organisation. [Figure 2]

Two years later, he was appointed a director of Sturmev-Archer.²² About the same time he married Elizabeth Violet Glen.²³ He had a family home built at Bramcote, in the Nottinghamshire countryside within easy reach of the Sturmev-Archer works. He named the house The Curragh, after the large turf-covered plain in County Kildare, home to the Irish National Stud, to Ireland's premier flat racecourse, and to the famous Curragh army camp. The Wilsons had two children: Charles Glen²⁴ (born 1931, known as Glen) and Helen (born 1933). A few years later, the family moved to The Old Rectory, an imposing mansion in the Nottinghamshire village of Plumtree.²⁵ In 1931, George Wilson became a member of the main Raleigh board.²⁶

Assembly begins in Ireland

Raleigh's first representative in Ireland, W. A. McCrum, opened a cycle depot at 5 Leinster Street in Dublin in

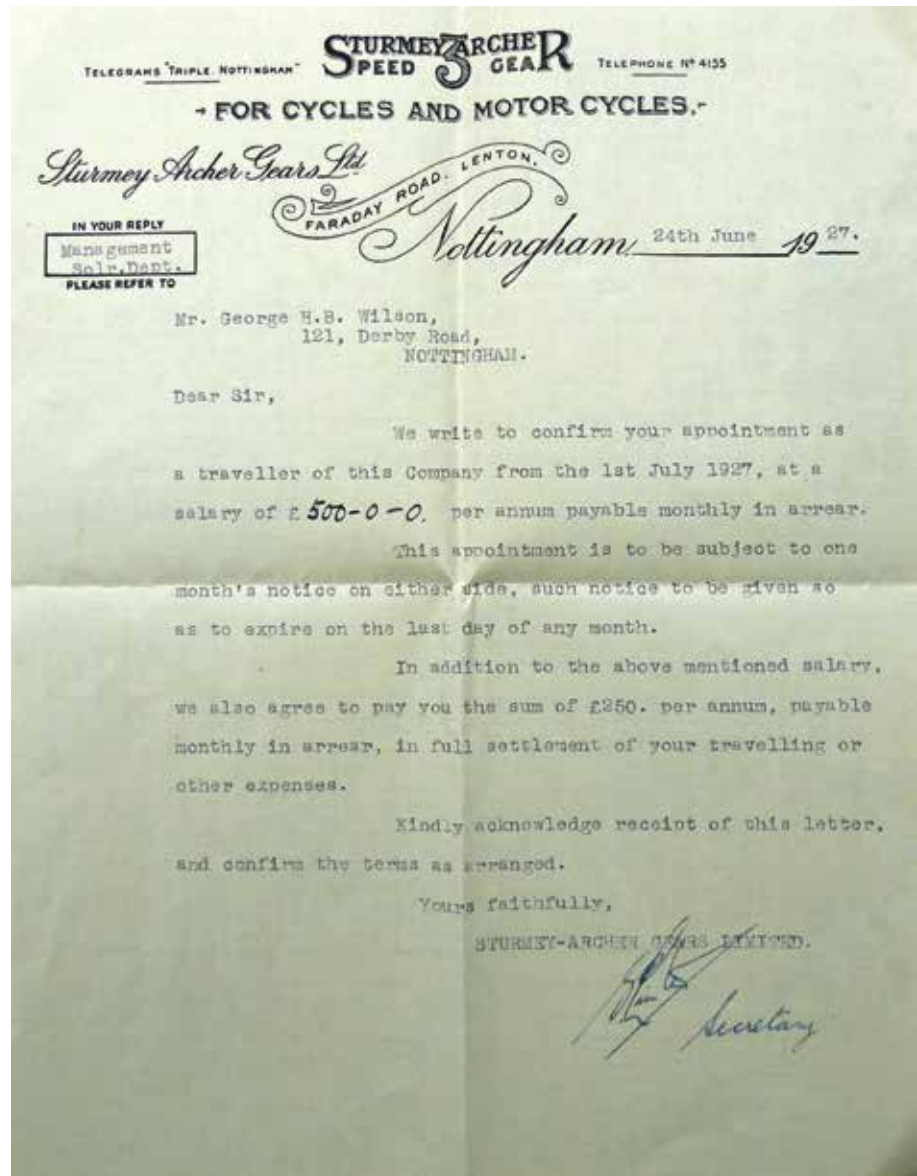


Figure 2. The letter that started George Wilson's career with the Raleigh group of companies, 1927. (Courtesy of Glen Wilson)

1895, about the same time that George Wilson was born nearby. Raleigh bought out McCrum in 1902 and three years later sent Samuel Guy over from Nottingham as manager. In the inter-war years, business expanded and a new depot, designed by Sam Guy, was created at 32 Lower Abbey Street.²⁷

In 1932, a trade war broke out between the Irish Free State and the United Kingdom, when Ireland cancelled annuity payments due to Britain for loans made during the 19th century. In retaliation, the UK imposed heavy import duties on Irish goods and the Free State responded in kind.²⁸ Consequently, Raleigh had to increase its Irish prices by a fifth. Assembling bikes in the Free State, using parts supplied from England, was a way to reduce the impact of this tax.²⁹

By this time, George Wilson had been a member of the main Raleigh board for two years. In view of his Irish birth, knowledge of Ireland and his contacts there, he was given responsibility to negotiate and liaise with the Free State government. Following Wilson's involvement, the board was soon able to obtain a new licence to assemble bicycles sold under the Raleigh and Humber brands in the Free State.³⁰ Sam Guy returned to Ireland after a period managing Sturmev-Archer's operation in Germany and supervised the Irish bicycle assembly depot. In summer 1933, Raleigh works manager William Raven visited Dublin and recommended taking a lease on another building for repairs and sundries.³¹

The following spring, Wilson and

Raven visited Dublin and concluded that the depot could now produce 500 finished bicycles a week. Later in the year, they decided also to assemble Sturmev-Archer hubs in Ireland, thus saving more duty per bicycle.³²

Assembly in Ireland went so well that, in February 1935, George Wilson travelled to Dublin to negotiate setting up a complete cycle factory. He met Seán Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce. It was clear that the Free State intended giving one company the sole concession to run a cycle factory and that several other firms were vying for this. Raleigh therefore decided to establish an Irish company and submitted a comprehensive scheme to the Irish government.³³

That summer, George Wilson again



Figure 3. George Wilson (foreground, left) hosts a high powered delegation from the Irish government at the Dublin Raleigh works in 1949. Seated next to Wilson is John A. Costello, Taoiseach (prime minister) of Ireland. (Courtesy of Glen Wilson, from *The Raligram*, Volume 2, No.8, September 1949)

visited Ireland, this time with Raleigh's company secretary. They met government officials and subsequently put forward another scheme, giving fuller particulars of Raleigh's proposals and proposed selling prices. The government suggested a site at Mullingar, 60 miles from Dublin, whereas Raleigh favoured a site at Naas, considerably nearer the Irish capital.³⁴

Profitability deteriorates

Thus far, Raleigh's response to the trade war between the Free State and the United Kingdom had appeared effective. But from autumn 1935 onwards,

the Raleigh board became increasingly concerned at the low profitability of the Dublin operation. The board decided to close down and dispose of the depot once negotiations with the Free State government about the new factory were concluded.³⁵

Wilson and Raven visited Dublin again in summer 1936 and provisionally agreed that a new Irish company be formed to take over Raleigh's business in the Free State. It would be "virtually controlled" by W. H. Cooper & Co., a firm of factors second in size only to Raleigh as cycle assemblers in the country. The new company would take over all outstanding debts and would also buy the existing depot.³⁶

The company would be a wholly Irish firm, with the capital owned and con-

trolled by citizens of the Free State. This would comply with the Free State's new Manufacturers Act, which required that two-thirds of the voting capital and 51% of the share capital be held by Irish nationals. George Wilson, a citizen of the Free State by virtue of his birth in Dublin, would control the company on behalf of Raleigh through his personal voting rights. For this purpose, the shares had to be held by him personally. Wilson was offered an honorary seat on the board

of W. H. Cooper & Co. and became chairman of Irish Raleigh.³⁷ His friends Desmond Beatty and J. Lindsay Crabbe became joint managing directors.³⁸

The Dublin depot in Lower Abbey Street was sold in autumn 1936, and the new Raleigh Irish company took over. The following spring, Wilson and Raven again visited Dublin. Raven considered the new factory building first class, with a capacity of up to 1,000 cycles a week.³⁹ It was a two-storey factory of 40,000 square feet (3,700 square metres) at Hanover Quay.⁴⁰

In 1937, Sam Guy, manager of the Irish company, suffered a stroke. On re-

covery, he resumed his duties part time, but Messrs Crabbe and Beatty now became Raleigh's senior men in Dublin.⁴¹

Complete manufacture in Ireland

Prompted by the sudden abdication of King Edward VIII, and by a wish to distance itself from the compromises of the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty, the Free State government drafted a new constitution. It was approved by a plebiscite in summer 1937 and came into force at the end of the year. The Irish government unilaterally dropped the title Irish Free State, replacing it with the Gaelic name "Éire" (Ireland). These constitutional changes prompted an urgent desire on the part of the Irish government to establish a manufacturing base more independent of the United Kingdom.⁴²

By autumn 1937, the Irish government was getting impatient and was ready to instigate a programme for complete manufacture of bicycles in Éire. George Wilson summoned a meeting of British cycle companies who, because of the trade war between the United Kingdom and Éire, had signed an agreement not to manufacture there. At this meeting, Wilson made it clear that Raleigh's Irish company considered it necessary to construct complete bicycles in Ireland.⁴³

Soon afterwards, Wilson formally notified the other companies of Raleigh's intention to manufacture frames in Éire. The rival manufacturers reacted with considerable ill feeling against Raleigh.⁴⁴

To mitigate this, George Wilson offered to help other British cycle assemblers supply their own frames via a separate Irish company, on which they would each have a board position. Later he went even further, offering Raleigh's rivals a seat on the board of the new Raleigh company, which looked set to control about 80% of the cycle trade in Ireland.⁴⁵

There were, however, no takers. Moreover, early in 1938, George Wilson learned that several companies, led by Rudge-Whitworth, were putting their own manufacturing proposition to the Éire government, aimed at upsetting Raleigh's position. Wilson was therefore relieved the following month to receive official sanction for the new frame factory.⁴⁶ (He may have allowed himself a wry smile five years later, when the Rudge-Whitworth cycle company was subsumed into the Raleigh group.⁴⁷) Meanwhile, at the age of 43, Wilson,

already Raleigh's general manager, became managing director.⁴⁸

George Wilson made several visits to Ireland during 1938. In the autumn, he and Irish Raleigh's principals met with the Free State government, who made it clear that they wanted a complete comprehensive factory. Raleigh rapidly responded with a suitable scheme. Wilson was in no mood for further conciliation with rival British cycle makers and the deal was conditional on Raleigh having a complete monopoly. However, after Britain's declaration of war against Germany in September 1939, the scheme went into abeyance.⁴⁹

The Emergency

In neutral Éire, World War 2 was referred to as The Emergency. It had a huge impact on Raleigh's Irish operation. Soon after Britain's declaration of war, Raleigh's senior man in Ireland, Sam Guy, retired with a pension, half paid for by the Irish company and half by the British parent. In 1941, the British Board of Trade stopped supplies to Dublin for the rest of the war and Raleigh started rationing supplies to its customers.⁵⁰

On a hot summer evening in 1942, the Raleigh building at Hanover Quay caught fire. The roof collapsed, destroying or seriously damaging several hundred bicycles. However, with considerable assistance from the parent company in Nottingham, a sizeable portion of the damaged stock was reconditioned and made saleable. The factory was rebuilt the following year and most of the original machinery was reconditioned and put back into use.⁵¹

Post war progress

Éire's Republic of Ireland Act 1948 abolished the few last remaining functions of the British monarch in relation to Ireland. The act came into force in April 1949, ending Ireland's status as a British dominion and formalising Éire's status as a republic. Éire thereby ceased to be a member of the British Commonwealth and Irish citizens were no longer treated as British subjects.^{52, 53}

Just a few months after the official birth of the Republic, Irish Raleigh hosted a major exhibition to show off their refurbished Dublin base and to promote their products. George Wilson played host to a powerful delegation of Irish government officials, including the Taoiseach, the min-

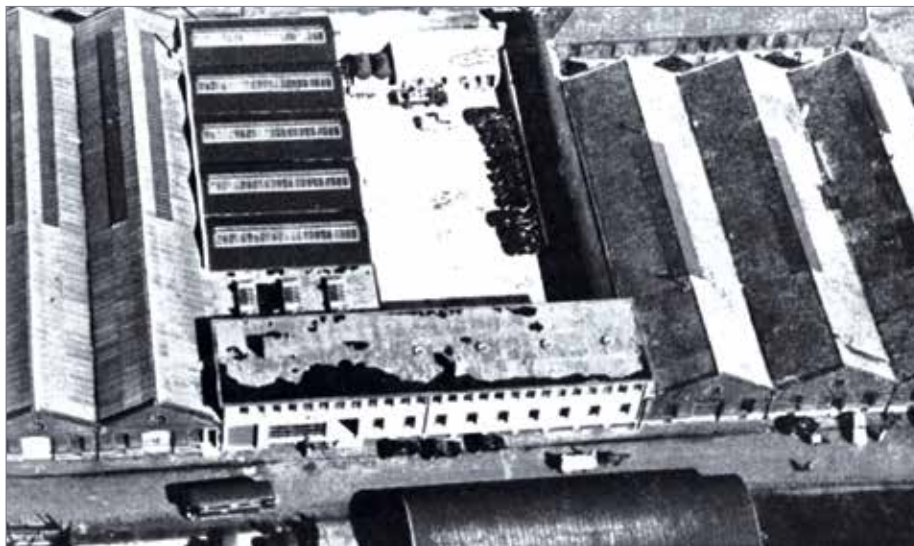


Figure 4. Aerial view of Raleigh's newly refurbished factory on Hanover Quay, Dublin, in 1949. (Courtesy of Glen Wilson, from *The Raligram*, Volume 2, No. 8, September 1949)

ister for industry and commerce, and the Lord Mayor of Dublin. Wilson stated, "As far as the Raleigh programme of manufacture in Ireland is concerned, this company is always prepared, at all times, to discuss any proposition with the Government."⁵⁴ [Figures 3 and 4]

The following summer, the Irish government took him at his word and put pressure on Raleigh to manufacture frames in Ireland, as had been agreed pre-war. Raleigh responded positively and plans for a new factory in the Dublin area to make frames and forks were complete by spring 1951. Irish Raleigh changed its name to Irish Bicycle Industries Ltd and made a public issue of shares. By summer 1952, the roof was on the new building.⁵⁵

However, by this time the Irish market was depressed and Raleigh's competitors had cut their prices. Wilson and Raleigh's financial advisor visited Ireland during 1952 and investigated the financial difficulties faced by the Irish company. The board agreed to increase the credit extended to the Irish company on favourable terms.⁵⁶

Frame production started in Dublin, reaching 1,000 units a week by mid-1953. It soon became apparent that BSA had broken an agreement with Raleigh and Hercules to limit manufacturing in Dublin. Nevertheless, in the following spring, Irish Bicycle Industries was working at full capacity, whereas the Dublin factories of BSA and Hercules had little business and were closed for considerable periods.⁵⁷

In summer 1954, Hercules increased

its agents' discounts in a bid to increase its Irish business and Irish Bicycle Industries followed suit.⁵⁸ In 1953-4, Irish Bicycle Industries broke all previous records for sales and output.⁵⁹ The following year, demand dropped, so the Raleigh board decided that cycles for Northern Ireland would be made in Dublin rather than Nottingham. This raised annual output of the Dublin works to about 65,000 units.⁶⁰

In 1957, Ireland was one of the few countries where the cycle industry was growing. Via a share issue, Raleigh Industries was able to buy out Irish Bicycle Industries Limited, which was renamed Irish Raleigh Industries.⁶¹

The road to TI Raleigh via Jo'burg and Dublin

Tube Investments (TI) owned Raleigh's biggest competitor, the British Cycle Corporation (BCC). In 1960, responding to a major slump in UK cycle sales, TI bought Raleigh Industries and merged it with BCC. George Wilson, who was by this time Raleigh's chairman and managing director, was put in charge of the merged organisation which was given the name TI Raleigh.⁶²

The TI takeover evolved from two earlier mergers of BCC and Raleigh interests, the first being in South Africa. A few years after World War 2, when Raleigh decided to build a factory in South Africa, TI already had one at Springs, east of Johannesburg. Fearing competition, TI offered Raleigh a share in their operation but George Wilson declined.⁶³ Raleigh's South African factory at Ver-

eeniging, south of Johannesburg, opened in 1952 and was soon producing 1,200 frames a week.⁶⁴

Early in 1953, George Wilson visited South Africa and met Major General Sir Francis de Guingand, chairman of TI's Hercules & Phillips Cycles (South Africa) Ltd. "Freddie" de Guingand had been Field-Marshal Montgomery's chief of staff during the war and became a friend of Wilson, whom he described as "a charming and able Irishman ... an expert fisherman and an excellent shot."⁶⁵ Wilson and de Guingand discussed buying components from each other on a reciprocal basis and envisaged considerable co-operation. Accordingly, in 1954, the Raleigh board agreed to a proposal from de Guingand that Raleigh buy shares in TI's Cycle Saddles (South Africa) (Proprietary) Ltd. and have a seat on the board.⁶⁶

But from 1956, the cycle sales situation in South Africa deteriorated rapidly. Freddie de Guingand therefore persuaded George Wilson to merge Raleigh's South African interests with TI's.⁶⁷ As de Guingand later recalled:

*To cut a long story short, eventually we concluded an agreement. We concentrated all production at Springs and took over some first-class members of their [Raleigh's] staff, including their works director. It was a complicated and difficult operation but in the end it proved a great success.*⁶⁸

The merger was agreed to in spring 1959, subject to ratification by the United Kingdom and South African governments.⁶⁹ Raleigh's Vereeniging plant was subsequently closed and, in return, Raleigh acquired a financial interest in TI's plant at Springs.^{70, 71} However, before the South African merger could be formalised, Raleigh and TI successfully merged their Irish operations. The warm relationship between the two ex-military men Wilson and de Guingand, and the South Africa negotiations already under way, made the Irish merger a much quicker and simpler operation.⁷²

Thus, an amalgamation negotiated by Wilson, involving the small island where he was born, became the precursor of the mega-merger that in 1960 created Europe's biggest cycle maker, TI Raleigh [Figure 5] ●

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to record his thanks to Glen Wilson, son of George Wil-



Figure 5: Portrait in oils of George Wilson, presented to him by Sir Harold Bowden, Chairman of Raleigh, at the end of World War 2. (Photo by the author, courtesy of Glen Wilson)

son, for his courtesy and assistance in researching this article and sourcing the illustrations.

End notes

- 1 *Who Was Who*, A & C Black, 1920–2016; online edition, Oxford University Press, 2014, [http://www.ukwhoswho.com/view/article/oupww/whowaswho/U58650, accessed 13 Jan 2016]
- 2 1901 Irish census.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *Who Was Who* op.cit. (see Note 1 above).
- 5 George Wilson's military service record.
- 6 *Who Was Who* op.cit. (see Note 1 above).
- 7 Letter to Glen Wilson from Ministry of Defence, 30 November 1995.
- 8 Tony Hadland, *Raleigh – past and presence of an iconic bicycle brand*. San Francisco: Cycle Publishing, 2011.
- 9 Ireland's National Roll of Honour, 1914–1921.
- 10 Letter op.cit. (see Note 7 above).
- 11 The Wilson family have no detailed knowledge of the circumstances leading to the award of the Military Cross to George. It appears that he never talked about it. Neither has it been possible to discover any further information in the online copies of the *London Gazette*. However, in a letter dated 30 November 1995 to George's son Glen Wilson, Miss L. F. Hearn of the Ministry of Defence stated that the award of the MC was announced in the *London Gazette* on 11 April 1918.
- 12 Military service record op.cit. (see Note 4 above).
- 13 Logbook in the ownership of Glen Wilson.
- 14 Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 3 June 1919.
- 15 Military service record op.cit. (see Note 5 above).
- 16 Peter Cottrell, *The Irish Civil War, 1922–3*. Oxford: Osprey, 2008.
- 17 *Who Was Who* op.cit. (see Note 1 above).
- 18 Letter dated 24 June 1927 from Sturme-Archer to George Wilson in possession of Glen Wilson.
- 19 Raleigh, despite making almost all components in-house, never made its own tyres but bought them in from companies such as Dunlop.
- 20 Using the historic standard of living calculator at the MeasuringWorth website, 2016. URL: www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/

- 21 *Raleigh* op.cit. (see Note 8 above).
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 *Who Was Who* op.cit. (see Note 1 above).
- 24 Glen Wilson worked for Raleigh for some years before leaving to run the Nottingham-based sports business Gunn & Moore, commonly known as GM, who are famous for their cricket bats. Helen Wilson lived for a time in Kenya.
- 25 Author's conversation with Glen Wilson, April 2016.
- 26 *Raleigh* op.cit. (see Note 8 above).
- 27 "The Irish Raleigh Cycle Company Limited", *The Raligram*. Nottingham: Raleigh, July 1947.
- 28 D. Ross, *Ireland: History of a Nation*, Geddes & Grosset, 2006, pp.337–9
- 29 DD/RN/1/2/6 (References commencing DD/RN are documents in the Nottinghamshire Archives.)
- 30 DD/RN/1/2/3
- 31 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 *Raligram* op.cit. (see Note 27 above).
- 39 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 40 *Raligram* op.cit. (see Note 27 above).
- 41 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 42 Wikipedia contributors. "Constitution of Ireland." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 23 April 2016.
- 43 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 *Raleigh* op.cit. (see Note 8 above).
- 48 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 *Raligram* op.cit. (see Note 27 above).
- 52 Wikipedia contributors. "Republic of Ireland Act 1948." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 9 April 2016.
- 53 Irish citizens still enjoyed some privileges in the United Kingdom not granted to other foreign nationals.
- 54 "The Dublin Show", *The Raligram*. Nottingham: Raleigh, September 1949.
- 55 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 DD/RN/1/47/21
- 60 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 61 DD/RN/1/47/25
- 62 *Raleigh* op.cit. (see Note 8 above).
- 63 Francis De Guingand, *From Brass Hat To Bowler Hat*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979.
- 64 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 65 From brass Hat op.cit. (see Note 64 above).
- 66 DD/RN/1/2/6
- 67 *From Brass Hat* op.cit. (see Note 64 above).
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 "South Africa and Eire", *The Raligram*. Nottingham: Raleigh, August 1959.
- 70 Bowden, pp.97–8
- 71 DD/RN/1/47/25
- 72 *Raleigh* op.cit. (see Note 69 above).