



grounds as the by now jaded spa town of Harrogate reinvented itself as a conference destination.

Today the site is the entrance to Hall M of the 1990s-era Harrogate Convention Centre. The building's Doric columns are reproductions; the originals were moved in 1964 to RHS Garden Harlow Carr on the edge of Harrogate, where they still stand today.

The first two North of England Meets were held opposite the Prince of Wales Hotel, a former coaching inn overlooking the western part of the Stray, Harrogate's expansive grassy common. No doubt some cyclists stayed at this posh hotel (which was converted into residential flats in 1960) and others along the Leeds Road, such as the Coach and Horses, the Golden Lion and the Clarendon but, according to an 1890s pamphlet, it was the Commercial Hotel which was the club's night-time HQ.

"The North of England Bicycle Meet took place yesterday at Harrogate under favour of fine weather," reported the Leeds Mercury, August 1878. "The clubs mustered on the Stray, opposite the Prince of Wales Hotel, at half-past twelve," continued the newspaper.

This army of cyclists, most dressed in the military-style uniforms favoured by early cycling clubs, were in town at the same time as the real army. "The 2nd West York Yeomanry Cavalry marched into Harrogate on Monday," reported the Mercury.



The hotel aims to offer bike hire

HIGH WHEELS, HIGH JINKS

According to memories published 20 years later in a souvenir booklet, many of the cyclists, and some of the Yeomanry Cavalry, stayed at the Commercial. After midnight, the two groups fought a bruising mock battle at the head of the stairs, with mattresses erected for barricades and pillows deployed as feather-filled weapons. There's no record of who won this battle but members of the Yeomanry discovered their tall boots filled with water the following day, and at least one of the cycling combatants was found comatose, wrapped in a ripped-down Union Jack.

These high jinks were booze fuelled (a Scottish club reportedly brought a barrel of whisky), and the resulting damage led to the banishment of cyclists from all of the hotels of Harrogate in subsequent years. Meets after that were held under canvas, with attendees sleeping in large tents in a field next to the town's cricket ground. Squint and their view of the Stray remains. Imagine the grassy tract filled with flapping flags, tents and marquees, and high-wheel riders.

A high-wheel machine of a different kind can be found adjacent to Coldstones Cut: an oversized mountain bike built to celebrate the Tour de France's passage through Yorkshire in 2014 and shod with gargantuan earthmover tyres. ●

Clockwise from top left: Nidderdale Greenway, Spruisty Bridge, Coldstones Cut, Nidd Viaduct

West Park Hotel

The Commercial Hotel beside the West Park part of Harrogate's Stray was built in 1838, replacing an earlier coaching inn on the Harrogate to Leeds turnpike road. It was renamed as West Park in 1899. The hotel's flagship suite is the £300-per-night Le Grand Depart penthouse that commemorates the 2014 Tour de France kick-off stage, which finished metres away. Even though this hotel played a starring role during the foundation of what became Cycling UK, I haven't found it mentioned in any cycling history book. www.thewestparkhotel.com