

Club cyclist

STEPHEN PHILLIPS

*In the 1960s, 12-year-old **Stephen Phillips** began riding with his local group – thanks to the encouragement of older riders like Jack*

Wheels are in my DNA. I spent my childhood on wheels: a battered trike; a home-made go kart; roller skates; and a scooter. At 12 I finally had my first bike and was determined to join a cycling club. My mum found that the local section of the Cyclists' Touring Club had a clubroom at a place called Bentley Heath. A recce was done and I was allowed to cycle into the rural lanes the following Wednesday evening.

The night air was cold so I had put on my school coat. The dynamo was humming. My bike was a Triumph Palm Beach with a bouncy saddle, a 3-speed Sturmey-Archer gear and a straight handlebar. At the point where country replaced town, someone sped effortlessly past me. This was no doubt someone from the cycling club so I gave chase.

My pursuit began fairly well, dynamo fizzing loudly. After a junction, the road climbed steadily and the red rear light of the other cyclist drifted further and further ahead. Sometime later I arrived at the clubroom with steam rising from me. There was, so far, just one other person there, the cyclist I had chased in vain.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise that you were coming here. I would have waited for you," said the cyclist. I had met Jack.

He had taken up cycling to encourage his son to have a go. The son did appear once or twice at the clubroom. Jack, though, had been bitten by the cycling bug – and here he was.

Jack showed me how to ride my bike properly and advised what to buy when I could afford to do so. He told me off when I stepped out of line and made sure I got home at the end of club rides. Sometimes he literally pushed me over the final miles.

The Palm Beach was replaced by a scruffy lightweight Jack Holland, which was gradually improved over time, and I was introduced to a



Stephen cycling in France recently – thanks to Jack
Below: Stephen, aged 14, on his resprayed Jack Holland

network of unspoilt Warwickshire and Worcestershire lanes. The weekend club runs would end at a 'tea place', often a cottage with tea served in the front room. Stories were told, ranging from funny to serious.

I did not appreciate at the time that I was witnessing the end of an era. Motorways were soon carving through the countryside, cutting across the lanes. New hygiene regulations seemed to put an end to the cottage caterers. Roads changed, there was creeping urbanisation and an astonishing increase in traffic. But the tradition of the club run continues still.

None of us foresaw the level of interest in cycling that has developed in recent years. Tea places are now a variety of cafés, pubs offering food or garden centres. Stories are still spun there.

Club runs have always had a rule of riding at the pace of the slowest person. Who this is becomes apparent, especially towards the end of the day. I had become a strong rider and I was on the front of the group one day, helping to bring us home.

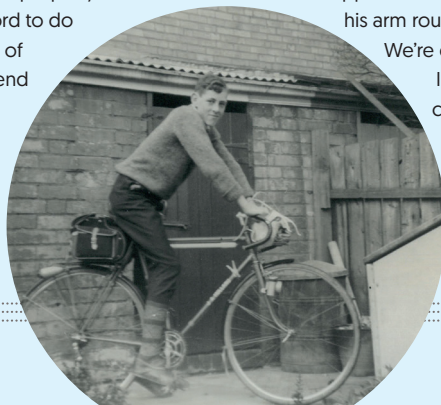
There was a call from the back: "Easy, Jack is down!" [i.e. has been left behind]. Further on came the call: "Better stop at the junction. Jack is well down!"

I brought the group to a halt at the road junction, by chance the same one through which I had pursued Jack several years earlier.

Jack appeared and rode straight past the group, stuck his arm round me and said: "Oi, you young strip!

We're even now, so you can slow down!"

I was lucky. The members of that cycling club could have told 12-year-old me to go away and come back in a few years' time. They did not. I am indebted to friends who supported me so much and sparked a love for cycling that I still have. ●



Juniors today

Many Cycling UK groups welcome young riders, with some provisos:

- Children aged 12 and under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian, or somebody acting 'in loco parentis' on rides; there is no younger age limit for accompanied children.

- Young people aged 13 and over may ride unaccompanied.
- Young people aged 17 and under should have a completed Parental Consent Form, which should be handed to the ride leader or event organiser.

For more details, visit [cyclinguk.org/article/legal-guide/safeguarding](https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/legal-guide/safeguarding).