



● Raymond Briggs: an enthusiastic CTC club rider in his youth



Raymond Briggs

Illustrator **Raymond Briggs** remembers his rides with CTC in the 1940s. Escaping into the Surrey countryside meant he was excused Sunday School

Why has the world gone cycling mad? It's on its way to becoming the new football, heaven help us.

But for me, cycling was once my salvation. My mum had sent me to Sunday School, as it was the respectable middle-class thing to do, though my parents never went to church themselves and were not middle class. Sunday School turned out to be even worse than church. We sat round in a circle of hard wooden chairs in the gloomy church hall. Here an old lady told us about this foreign chap with long hair and a beard, wearing something like my dad's old dressing gown, who got himself killed hundreds of years ago, out in the desert somewhere. And it was all about our sins! Sins? Golly! It certainly didn't apply to me, I hadn't done any sins yet. I was looking forward to getting started, but as I was only eleven, the sins would have to wait for a bit.

Then somehow I discovered CTC, the Cyclists' Touring Club. The sinful Cyclists' Touring Club luring wicked children away from Sunday School. It was perfect, we set out at ten o'clock on Sunday mornings, exactly the same time as soppy Sunday School. Hooray! The ideal escape. Even

Mum couldn't object to this healthy outdoor activity – fresh air and exercise in the company of responsible adults in long tweedy skirts or plus fours.

We would meet the others at Mitcham Green, then 20 or more of us would cycle out into the Surrey Hills. This was long before the Russian oligarchs had colonised most of the leafy arbours there.

Cyclists in those days looked very different from the helmeted, neon-clad spacemen we see flashing along country lanes today. With their plus fours, the men wore light cotton jackets in pale creamy colours. Cycling shoes had long fold-over tongues which lay on top of the shoe itself. A few members of the group had 'toe clips'. Really wild. No one wore a hat of any sort, let alone a helmet, but most of us had drop handlebars. Very sporty. These were designed to make your body more streamlined when tearing along at breathtaking speed. Behind the saddle was always the black leather saddle bag, and neatly rolled on top of it was the yellow oilskin cape.

Everyone had mudguards and a mud flap at the bottom of the front mudguard. Why on earth not? They weigh nothing, yet no cyclist today would be seen dead with

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mudguards, let alone a wide black mud flap as well. Now I often see cyclists, when they are overtaking my car, with a spume of mud up the middle of their back.

There were always tandems, too, rarely seen today. Husband and wife, with, of course, the husband on the front, in charge, the wife on the back, pretending to pedal but usually gazing down at her baby child in the sidecar.

Also, I used to go to Herne Hill track to watch cycle racing, there you could see the famous Reg Harris, the British sprint champion – him of the square thighs. Honestly, his thighs were as wide as they were long, unlike mine, which even today are still slim and elegant.

But my most vivid cycling memory is going out into Surrey with my dad looking for blackberries. We found a wonderful place, under the power lines suspended from huge pylons. There were masses of blackberry bushes but no ripe fruit. While we were still searching, the air became full of a tremendous hum and a deeper throbbing rumble which seemed to fill the sky. The very ground was vibrating under our feet. As a ten-year-old I felt quite frightened. What was happening? Then we saw the endless columns of tanks, guns and lorry-loads of soldiers go thundering by.

It was just before 6th June 1944. Too early for blackberries. ●

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