

**SUNDAY** on the Ripley Road! If you had been a young person working at a dull job in the London of the eight-nineties, that would have been the thought which would have kept you happy through the week.

The lucky ones could go for a spin on a Saturday afternoon. But most people worked on Saturdays, and for them Sunday was the great day. Then it was that they could mount their machines and make for the open spaces.

Those who cycle nowadays have to contend with almost continuous traffic on the Portsmouth Road. But to ride on it seventy years ago, when the cyclists called it the Ripley Road, must have been sheer delight. Apart from a few horse-drawn vehicles they had it to themselves.

The most hardy cycled down to Ripley even in mid-winter, and plenty were out on fine days in the spring and autumn. But summer was the time: on the Whit Sunday of 1894 no fewer than twenty thousand happy cyclists passed through Kingston-on-Thames, bound for Ripley.

The village was twenty-three miles from London—a convenient distance—and it lay along an old coaching road that was kept in good condition and had few hills. You rode past many old coaching inns—most of these were almost deserted, for people then travelled by railway and not by road. The Talbot at Ripley, for instance, was reported at that time to be "given up to solitude and mice".

When the first cyclists began to

use the roads the innkeepers were not interesting at all. They liked their old patrons, the folk who passed by in carriages or on horseback, and they had no use for these new-fangled machines or their riders.

People who start something new are often unpopular, and the cyclists certainly were. Nowadays we think of cars being a danger on the roads. But in the eight-nineties cyclists were much feared by the public.

Many of them were hauled before the Kingston magistrates—some charged only with riding without lights or bells, but a good many more with "furious driving". Gradually they lived down their unpopularity, and the inns began to open their doors to them. It was, in fact, the patronage of the ever-growing hordes of cyclists that saved many a roadside inn from ruin.

Once you were clear of London the ride was a really lovely one. You rode over Putney Heath and Roehampton Common, past open fields and through the little market town of Kingston, and on to Giggs Hill Green at Thames

Ditton. Many cyclists made a halt there at the Angel. They would often arrange to meet their friends at the Angel before riding on to Ripley. Here, too, races were decided on. It was 9½ miles from there to the Anchor in under half an hour. The faster men could do it. The local residents thought they went too fast and there were many complaints and not a

few prosecutions. Some of the racing clubs used to meet at the Angel and every year the Bath Road Club gave a supper to the sixty or more road-menders who kept the surface of the Ripley Road in such excellent order.

For the cyclist who rode slowly enough to enjoy it, the road beyond led through some very pleasant scenery—a succession of commons and heaths and

woodlands all the way. Ditton and Littleworth commons brought you to the small town of Esher, where at its famous inn, the Bear, you could see a relic of coaching days, an enormous pair of top-boots in a glass case. They had been worn by the postilion who used to drive the exiled King of France to his home at Claremont House forty years before.

Claremont then belonged to Queen Victoria, who loved it and often stayed there. Even if you did not catch sight of her or any of her family, you had the joy of riding through Claremont woods, whose shade was welcome on a hot Sunday morning (the modern A3 takes a different route at this point).

Then came Esher and Oxshott and Fairmile commons. Nearly all of Cobham village lay well off the road and riders saw little of it except

the White Lion, another of the great coaching inns. You crossed the river Mole by a charming old stone bridge and ran past Cobham and Wisley commons and Wisley lake with its fringe of pine trees. Finally Ockham common and the beautiful grounds of Lord Lovelace's seat, Ockham Park—and you were into Ripley.

Many cyclists made straight for the village green, where famous Surrey cricketers were often to be seen on a Saturday afternoon. Even on a Victorian Sunday, when there was no cricket, the green was a popular resort.

In the early days the cyclist would probably eat his picnic meal on the green, for Ripley's numerous inns had no wish for his patronage. Until two elderly sisters, who owned the delinquent Anchor Inn, decided to welcome cyclists. Annie and Harriet Dibble soon became prosperous and the other inns followed suit—but for most cyclists the Anchor remained their favourite.

The inn lay at the far end of the village, between the vicarage and St. Mary's church. No doubt the vicar saw the crowds of cyclists, their machines at the roadside and in the courtyard of the Anchor. He, too, decided to welcome them. He had a large

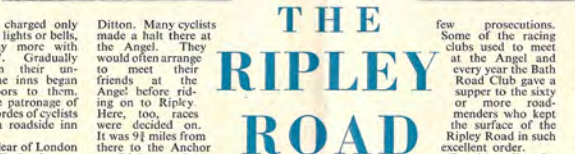
stable at the back of his house and allowed riders to put their cycles there. Many of them came to his services and he set apart special pews for them in the south aisle. Along the Ripley Road there are now very few reminders of the cyclists' heyday. The Angel, the Bear, the White Lion, Talbot and Anchor still have the characteristic old fronts that the riders knew so well. But none of them seem to have any photographs or other reminders of those days.

Ripley church is alone in preserving their memory. We can still see the stable at the vicarage and the cyclists' aisle in the church. A fine large window commemorating the Dibble sisters was erected by their cycling friends as a token of respect to their memory. Among the three saints who are depicted is St. Catherine, who has her hand on a large wheel that would do nicely for a bicycle.

A little further to the east are a window and a brass plate which were also paid for by cycling clubs. They are in memory of Herbert Cortis, a great racing cyclist of his day. He died in Australia while still a young man; but he must have loved Ripley best of all and it is right that his memorial should be there.



## THE RIPLEY ROAD



Wisley woods, still a favourite picnic spot along the Portsmouth Road, photographed in the days when to be "in the fashion" was to ride a bicycle

Below: modern cyclists—ancient wheels. Riders pass through Esher during one of the runs now held annually along this historic road by the Southern Veteran-Cycle Club



The Angel, Thames Ditton—always a popular meeting-place for cyclists whether touring or racing. Its general appearance has changed little since this photo was taken around the turn of the century