

OBITUARY

JACK BROWNHILL: born 5th April 1912 - died 5th October 2005

by his son-in-law; former Abbotsford member Ken Workman

Jack (he was actually 'John' but only used that name officially) Brownhill died suddenly at home from peritonitis on 5th October aged exactly 93 years and 6 months. He had been an icon of the Veterans cycling movement for over a quarter of a century and the example he set by his turnout, his manner and his all-round sportsmanship has been an example and inspiration to younger riders.

Jack was so well known and respected on the Veterans time trialling scene both locally and at national level (being a multiple Vet's national champion), that it seems like the end of an era. Indeed, he was so well thought of that in October 2004 Jim Ogden of the Altrincham Ravens CC, in his capacity as national chairman of the Veterans Time Trials Association had written to the government suggesting that he be considered for a national honour.

There is no doubt that Jack's passing, even for someone of his advanced years, was a very great shock. When he was not to be found on the day he died, I began to ring round local hospital casualty departments, confidently expecting to hear that he'd suffered cuts and bruises after being knocked off his bike once again. I firmly believed that he would eventually get the telegram from the Queen and then go on to outlive most of us.

Jack first came into cycling with the Audenshaw YMCA Wheelers in the early 1930's where he became club captain, but by 1934 he had joined the Ashton Road Cycling Club. From his photograph album he obviously participated fully in club runs and tours in England, Scotland and Wales as well as competing in time trials. One of his younger clubmates in the Ashton Road Club was Norman Grattage, who older club members will recall later becoming a stalwart of the Fallowfield track organisation.

Historical Note: The Ashton Road Cycling Club was one of the six Manchester area clubs which amalgamated to form the Abbotsford Park Road Club in 1942. This amalgamation was supposedly a temporary measure due to the majority of the male members of the individual clubs serving in the forces. However, due to the hard work put in by Gerry Gorman and others to keep some semblance of organised cycling and racing going through the war years, the club flourished enough to retain its identity when the servicemen returned to civilian life after hostilities ended.

As Jack outlived most of his contemporaries, combined with his reluctance to speak of it, not much is known of the first part of his racing career. What little we do know is due mainly to the excellent journal of Gerry Gorman, his pre-war clubmate in the Ashton Road Club and then many years later in the Abbotsford when Jack came back into the sport. The first time Gerry mentions Jack was for the 1936 season when he took second place to Gerry's elder brother Alan in a 30 mile event with a time of 1.22.33. Shortly after, he was again second to Alan, this time at 50 miles with a time of 2.19.46. The month of July however saw him victorious in the 'club' 100 mile event with 5.05.53. In August he also won the 'club' 12 hour event, beating eight other club members to record 214.25 miles.

Less is known about Jack's 1937 season except for a 2.24.34 in the Oldham & District CU 50 miler, but nothing is recorded for 1938. In September 1939 his pre-war racing concluded when he was 'timed out' in a 12 hour event at Monks Heath crossroads in Cheshire, rode home to Openshaw,

Manchester, where his father owned a corn merchants business, then went into the army the following day.

There is a distinct lack of photographs of Jack's 1943 wedding to Ann Vennells. Fred Barlow his one-time clubmate in the Ashton RC, (and Abbotsford founder member) was a keen photographer and he offered to do the honours. Unfortunately none of Fred's photographs came out! Notwithstanding this, Jack and Fred remained firm friends.

Once again, due to his reluctance to speak of it, little is known of his army service except that he was posted to Germany near the end of the war where he promptly caught typhoid and was sent back home to recover.

After their marriage, the couple lived with Jack's mother in Openshaw, Manchester, close by the area where Jack had grown up. On returning to civilian life, the pressures of starting and raising his family meant that his cycling was limited to riding to work.

Jack acquired a BSA solo motorcycle which for a time was kept in the pantry under the stairs, but around 1950 this was replaced by a motorcycle combination, and, with Ann and daughter Pat in the small sidecar, they made several long journeys for holidays with relatives who ran a dairy farm over-looking the rugged Atlantic coast of Cornwall. On one homeward journey after recurring problems with the bike's electrics, it packed up five miles from home. Jack sent Ann and Pat home by bus whilst he pushed the combination home. He sold it shortly afterwards.

In 1954, Jack went to work in Canada for a year whilst checking out the prospects for his family to emigrate there. Fortunately, (for me) at the last moment he decided that it would be too cold for them. He returned to find that Ann, who was convinced that the whole family would be imminently leaving for Canada, had sold his beloved bike! Years later, when Canadian national squad rider 'Big Ed' Heacock came to stay with Gerry and Irene Gorman whilst training for the 1978 Commonwealth Games, Ed and Jack had some good chats about Canada when out on club runs.

When Jack and Ann bought their present house in Denton in 1961, they were surprised to find an old but roadworthy Austin 10 in the garage. Jack went to see the house's previous owner who told him he that as he was no longer able to drive Jack was welcome to keep the car. The Brownhill family must have thought they had really gone up in the world; owning their own house and now a car as well!

When Jack's son John started racing with the Abbotsford as a teenager, it encouraged him to join the club around 1970, initially for club runs and then a return to competition in 1975. Talk about jumping in at the deep end! His first event for 36 years was at 100 miles when he recorded 5.22.17 and went on to take the first of his many Abbotsford veteran's championships.

In 1977, on retirement from his job at ICI Wallpapers in Hyde, when Jack was asked what he would like as a retirement gift, instead of the usual clock or teasmade, he surprised everyone by asking for a pair of lightweight cycle racing wheels. In view of the fact that by then he was training and racing on a regular basis he then sprang another surprise by taking on an allotment. It was completely out of character and this venture only lasted a few months.

In 1978, a full 39 years after his last 12 hour ride, Jack was one of four Abbots to enter the Otley 12 in Yorkshire, part of which was on the fast and famous 'Boro' course. Gerry Gorman and I were the feeding/helpers team. During the afternoon it rained relentlessly and all the riders were completely

soaked. Not all of them finished, but Jack did, recording 204 miles. He was in a very bedraggled state as I helped him into the back of the car, gave him a cup of tea and took off his sodden shoes and socks. After a few moments of reflection he said: "I may or may not, ride another 12, but as sure as eggs are eggs. I will never, *ever*, ride a ***** 24". (unprintable)

The following year he improved his 12 hour figure to 215 miles in Cheshire in the Manchester & District TTA event.

By 1980 Jack had obviously revised his thinking on the 24 hour as along with four other Abbots he entered the Mersey Road Club event incorporating the Veteran's national championship to be held over Cheshire and Shropshire roads. I believe it was our own Duncan Hamman who informed the Manchester Evening News of his plans to ride this event, and they printed an item and photograph of him. BBC local radio followed up by broadcasting an interview with him, but when a local TV company also wanted to take up his story, typically he thought that altogether too much fuss was being made and declined their offer.

With that 24 hour ride, he gained the first of his Vet's championships, coming out on top with 384 miles at the age of 68. With sterling backup from 'Ged' Atkinson and Eddie Timmons the Abbotsford also won the team championship. In that event the Abbotsford had four finishers from five starters, the others being David Osborne and young Michael O'Keefe who had previously only ever raced at 10 miles! Michael recorded 341.794 miles, but David Osborne was DNF due to back trouble and then sportingly joined the team of helpers.

This event marked the start of Jack's accumulation of 31 Veterans National Age Records, at distances of 10, 25, 30 and 50 miles and at 12 and 24 hours. When he reached the age of 90 he could have been forgiven for "hanging up his wheels", but far from it. In October 2003, 'The Times' reported on the West Pennine RC event when he rode a 29 minute '10' at the age of 91, (which was the last of his Veterans Age Records). It is the hope of all his remaining colleagues that they can retain their health and match his enthusiasm for as long as he did.

I have been gratified to hear from various (younger) 'old-timers' who considered Jack to be their hero. One of them is my Manchester Wheelers clubmate John Dawson who is also a competitive runner of some distinction. Jack sought advice from him about taking up running as a supplement to 'on the bike' training, but John advised against it as Jack was then already in his 70's. Typically, he ignored the advice and was then often seen jogging around the local reservoir.

In April 2002 Jack was the subject of a Manchester Evening News report and photograph when they learned that he was still racing at the age of 90.

After being hit by cars twice in the space of a year, the second one where he was thrown onto the car's bonnet, his helmetless head hitting the windscreen hard enough to crack it and where his bike was wrecked, meant that 2003 was his last racing season, particularly as shortly after he started to act as full time carer for Ann who had by then become housebound.

Jack's sporting interest was not confined to cycling; he was a regular spectator at the Velodrome, but he was interested in all types of sport, particularly boxing and motor racing. When he got satellite TV he was able to indulge himself watching sport to his heart's content. Jack and Ann's son John now lives in South Africa where he has his own successful business. The couple visited there some years back and Jack made full use of the loan of a bike that John arranged for him for the duration of their stay. (continued)

He is survived by his widow Ann, daughter Pat, son John, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Naturally there was a large contingent of Abbots in the near 'full field' of mourners for the committal at Dukinfield Crematorium, where Jack was cremated with the Blue and Yellow Abbotsford Park club badge next to his heart. His family were pleased to accept the offer of the service being taken by his niece, the Reverend Paula Vennells, who raised a laugh by recalling the occasion when coming home from school she met Jack returning from a training ride; she thought he had been to Stockport when he had actually been to Southport! Jack's son John made a short speech illustrating his Dad's sense of humour by recalling their phone conversation when Jack said he was contemplating trading his car in for a Renault Clio as this reflected his image – young and sporty! John was barely able to suppress the emotion in his voice when he said he could picture his Dad now riding the Colnago along the A1 in perpetual sunshine with the wind always at his back.

I made my own tribute speech concluding by saying that other than for his close family, the time for tears was past, and urged everyone now to celebrate Jack's life with smiles on their faces and gladness in their hearts. Afterwards there was a reception (not a 'wake') at the Boundary pub in Audenshaw and the family were pleased to see that there were no long faces – we all felt that was how he would have wanted it.

I must thank Alicia and Gerald Atkinson, who while both suffering from bad colds, took a lot of the pressure off me by ringing around club members to inform them of the sad news, then repeating the process when I was able to advise them of the details of the funeral.

The family would like to thank the many club members for their attendance especially Christine Ashworth who arrived back from America only that morning, we were very pleased to see them all. Many sympathy cards were received from Abbots, one which very kindly commented that Jack had played a full part in putting the club's name on the national cycling map.

I was also pleased that Alicia and Gerald also brought with them Irene Gorman without whose friendly influence I would have had no part in this story. Gerry and Irene's was always 'open house' to any Abbots particularly the younger members. One Sunday, around Christmas 1969 a gang of us called at Whalley Avenue on the way home from the club run. I had met Jack's daughter Pat at the club hill climb on Chapel Brow just a few weeks before but she had rejected several requests for a date. Gerry and Irene cajoled me into telephoning her one last time, so I asked her to come to Colin and Irene Downes' New Year's Eve party. My persistence must have worn her down as she agreed to go. The rest, as they say, is history.

Jack's family requested that flowers for the funeral be limited to those from family members and close friends and suggested a donation to charity from others. If anyone feels they would like to make a donation to a charity in his memory, may I suggest that as he was a member of the CTC, their Cyclists' Defence Fund which helps victims of cycling accidents, might be appropriate. Please make cheques payable to the CTC Cyclists' Defence Fund and send to CTC, 69 Meadrow, Godalming, Surrey GU7 3HS.