

The Taylor brothers today: (left to right) Jack the finishing expert, Ken the wheel builder and Norman the frame builder.

# TAYLOR MADE

by Noel Henderson

THE telephone directory lists "Taylor, Jack, Mfrs." of Church Road, Stockton; yellow pages don't list him at all. When I paid my first visit to Jack Taylor's shop and works, I found him just as elusive as the cryptic entry suggests.

I approached Stockton town centre along Church Road, and reached the High Street without seeing a bicycle shop. Retracing my route, I tried again—again in vain. Perhaps I had the address wrong? No, a telephone kiosk with directory unharmed confirmed the address. How much longer I would have continued hunting remains a mystery, for a passing policeman gave me the necessary directions. Parallel to, and slightly above, Church Road, runs a service road leading to a small industrial estate. "Look for the green shed," said my guide. I looked for the green shed, which was a large brick building, found it, parked and went inside.

A middle-aged man was contemplating a piece of burnt toast which he brandished in front of a small electric fire. A few photographs and bits of equipment suggested that I had at least found somebody who was interested in cycling, but there was no sign of any shop. I introduced myself to the charcoal-burner who admitted to being Jack Taylor himself, and gave him a short list of items I wanted to buy, wondering whether he would conjure them out of thin air. "Just a minute," came the reply, and Mr. Taylor vanished. Two minutes later he was back, carrying every item on the list. "Are you the man who wrote that book on continental cycling?" he asked. I admitted that I was indeed. And then he began to talk.

Even within the trade, the name of Jack Taylor is less well-known than it deserves to be, except amongst those who have been around for some time. To the average cyclist, the name of Jack Taylor probably suggests a World Cup



referee who had a television programme last year. Yet I can remember admiring Jack Taylor bicycles over twenty years ago, and writing for price-lists, (but doing no more than that).

Nobody else came into the shed while I was there, except that one of Jack's brothers popped in with a question about a bike he was assembling. To a person accustomed to the brisk retail trade and social centre provided by the large lightweight shops in Leeds, this was, again, a little surprising. But Jack Taylor and his brothers have always been content to let their bicycles do the talking. Not that Jack himself is taciturn: once started, he can talk for hours, and not just about cycling, as I subsequently discovered on a visit to the Taylor home, a handsome bungalow on the edge of Stockton which Jack built himself seventeen years ago.

It is more than forty years since Jack Taylor's interest in cycling began, with pennies donated by a grandfather jealously hoarded in a money-box until there was enough to finance the purchase of a Raleigh sports model. Equipped with his first bicycle, Jack Taylor joined Stockton Wheelers, and began to enter their time trials.

There was no immediate success. "Percy Howes used to win all the races. When I got the results-sheet, I used to

start at the bottom to look for my name. I found it more quickly than if I had started at the top," he modestly claims. But time trials were only part of his interest in cycling. More time was spent on club runs through the hilly Yorkshire Dales, where the roles were reversed. "We might reach Buttertubs Pass after doing about fifty miles, and the fast men used to turn round and find an easy route home." Not Jack Taylor, for he could beat most of the testers up the hills, except perhaps Harry Topham, who idolised Gino Bartali, and whose bike, accessories and riding position were all copies of the Italian. Twenty years later, when Jack Taylor was on holiday in Como, he went to visit the church where Bartali's bike was kept as a memorial, so that he could photograph it and take the photo back to Harry Topham.

The big problem in those early days was a lack of specialist equipment, made worse by the few clubmen who could boast Claud Butlers. Jack Taylor had plenty of ideas, but no money, and this is where the bike-building really started. One of the great problems was the regular snapping of spokes.

"Good spokes were hardened at the point where they fitted the hub. The British hubs were countersunk on both sides, and, every time you hit a pothole, it was like a chiselling effect on the spoke.



a fact which forced the brothers to ride as independents.

One of the highlights of the race was the passage through London. One year Jean Kent, then one of Britain's leading film stars, met all the riders at the Mansion House. "All the French riders threw their bikes down and kissed her!" The English were, of course, far less effusive in their greetings. Eventually the publicity was reduced, as road-racing became relatively commonplace, and journalists began to complain that one bike was very similar to any other bike race. Nowadays it takes a yellow jersey, a dope scandal or a death before the national press is generally interested in cycling.

Brighton-Glasgow led to a Tour of Britain for Ken Taylor, but Norman and Jack were busy as full-time bike-builders, in the famous "green shed," originally leased from Stockton Corporation in 1942, now their own property and considerably extended. The friendships built up in those early league days were not forgotten, however. Other names became important, such as that of Ron Filsell, another early leaguer who was now prevailed upon to do the line-drawings for the Taylor catalogues. This was a field which later attracted other cyclists, such as Brian Walker, once a euphonium player with Acker Bilk, who now makes a comfortable living as a designer of catalogues in the United States.

While the early stage races paved the way for the Milk Race as we know it today, other races were becoming established as one-day classics: Wolverhampton-Llandudno, which eventually developed into the final race of the Mackeson Trophy; Dover-London in which Ken Taylor finished second; the Tour of the Peak which remains one of our finest events and the Cleveland Grand Prix, organised by Jack Taylor Cycles, flagged off by the Lord Mayor of Stockton, Alderman Ross, and finishing outside the Taylor works in Church Road. One of the officials borrowed from Brighton-Glasgow for this new promotion was Frank Guy, "the best commentator in cycling. We used to send him 30/- for his train ticket from London. When he got here, we all went to a dance on the Saturday night, and Frank used to take over the microphone to publicise the race, and get some extra prizes. On the race itself, he knew every rider by sight and by name."

When Guy was unavailable one year, Jimmy Savile agreed to step in, but the day of the race arrived with no Savile. Eventually, it transpired that he had been unable to afford the train fare to Stockton, so had accepted another offer nearer home.

To their business, the brothers brought the same quality which had distinguished their riding: meticulous attention to, and understanding of, detail. Jack freely

admits that he won places against better riders. "Riding as an independent used to be like being a pro- today. There weren't many of us, so we rode all the same events, and got to know each other really well. The gap in ability was enormous, but for somebody like me, it meant that I was always racing against the best riders, like Ernie Clements, and this improved my own racing." But the real reason for the relative success was the quality of the equipment used: brazed-on fittings became standard, modern gearing was adopted, correctly fitted and correctly used. The Taylor bikes worked. Riders like Wally Summers admired them and, when going to live in the United States, remembered. A local bike-builder, Colin Laing, followed Wally Summers to Colorado recently; he, too, keeps in touch with the small Stockton company.

By the mid-fifties, the brothers employed nine full-time assistants, for this was the peak of the trade in cheap lightweights, but the size of the work-force was misleading. Jack Taylor was established as a builder of top quality machines, particularly tandems and fully-equipped touring bicycles. Tom Simpson rode his first race on a Jack Taylor bicycle, and visited the Taylor stand at the 1966 cycle show, where he posed for photographers on a kiddie-sized lightweight. Sadly, those junior models are no longer made. The big companies churn out imitation racing machines for young riders at a price which, though possibly prohibitive to some parents, eliminates competition from small firms.

Contracts from abroad were increasing, some of them through the influence of Raymond Fletcher of C.N.C. Cycles, met at the Paris cycle show in 1950. "He makes about 2,000 bikes a year, all identical. He thinks we're crazy just building a few a week to individual orders." But, despite Mr. Fletcher's opinion, he was another contact who aided the spread of the Taylor reputation.

One amazing customer was a circus artiste, who complained that his "high-rise" unicycle was unstable. "What happened was that it only had a chain on one side, and the pressure was so uneven that it used to distort the frame. We built him a new bike for £67, using an eccentric bottom bracket from a tandem, so that he had a double chain system on both sides of the frame, and this spread the stress more evenly."

Exports were not only to America and France, but throughout the commonwealth, and even, on one occasion, to Russia. "That got us headlines in the press. They wanted to buy some bikes, but we hadn't enough sprayed ready. We had some white ones and some red ones built, so we did some blue ones, and the press did a piece on red, white and blue bikes being exported to Russia."

But the days of cheap building died, and the work-force decreased until there



**A Taylor "special" built for a circus act.**

were only the three brothers left. Yet, ironically, this was when the business really started to pay. "Our accountant used to tell us we were crazy. He said 'That's a hobby, not a business. It's time you got another job and built bikes in your spare time'. Now he invites me to sherry in the carpeted boardroom."

Today there are still only the three brothers, turning out five bikes per week. They had to turn down an American order, because it was too large—2,000 bikes! Imagine how long that would take at a rate of five per week. But the order-book is full, and the orders are remunerative. "You've got to build the bikes that show the profit nowadays. A lot of Americans order touring tandems, equipped throughout with Campag. parts. £600 each, plus air freight at £30, and some of the customers actually come to Stockton to order their bikes personally."

Norman builds and welds the frames, with Ken and Jack to help with the twisting and turning, particularly of tandem frames, to get the alignment perfect. The frames are aligned by working from machine faces off the bottom bracket. Then Norman sand-blasts, files, and taps out the necessary holes. Jack himself is the expert in painting - eight or nine coats





**Jack in his racing days crossing Carter Bar in the 1945 Brighton to Glasgow race.**

because "I like everything to have a good finish." The painting tends to clog the threads, so Ken re-taps them, builds the wheels, puts in the bearings, assembles the bikes and packs them. This is a lengthy process, because they don't believe in having dissatisfied customers who, after a six-month wait, find that their bikes have been damaged during carriage. The bikes are all insured, but the packaging is still done very laboriously to minimise the risk of damage.

Eighty per cent of all orders are for the American market, with touring tandems the most popular models. Technical innovations are constantly under review, the latest being the Shimano disc brake. Ken went on a working holiday to America

last year to see the brake being assembled. The main problem is one of alignment, since the brake works by having fibre pads which must be related to the discs perfectly to ensure even braking on both sides of the wheel. A Taylor bike with these brakes will probably be on show at the 1977 C.T.C. York Rally, even though Jack doesn't think them any better than conventional brakes.

Jack Taylor Cycles may not quite be a cottage industry, but it isn't far from it. All attempts at mass-production have been resisted, so has any pretence that good bikes are cheap. "You get what you pay for," says Jack, so if you want a touring bike made of cast iron but fitted with Campag. equipment, you can have one. The business has been established for over thirty years now and, despite fluctuations in the work-force, has changed very little. More and more of the bikes go abroad and the waiting period, briefly down to one month in 1975, is now

back to six months. Eventually, the Taylor brothers hope that Britain will experience the same boom in hand-built, beautifully finished machines that America has been going through in recent years. If this happens, and they are reasonably optimistic about its chances, they will be ready – not to churn out identical copies by the hundred, but to continue as they always have done, namely building bicycles to the minutest individual specification, with as fine a finish as can be found anywhere in the world, and with accessories to match the pocket of the customer.

It is said that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Certainly the humble brick building in Church Road, Stockton, gives no clue to the craftsmanship carried on inside. And perhaps anybody who decides that he does want a bike "Taylor-made" to his own specification will now be able to find that famous "green shed" a little more easily.

**First stage winner of the Brighton to London was Ernie Clements (now the Managing Director of Falcon Cycles) who receives part of the spoils of victory with a kiss from Jean Kent outside the Mansion House.**

That's why so many snapped. A pal of mine got me some hubs from France, so I started building my own wheels in a shed at the bottom of the garden. I used 14-gauge spokes, soft ones and not double-butt, in high pressure wheels. With these alloy hubs, they were cushioned against the shock. Modern hubs are the same now: Campag. hubs have an alloy flange that the spoke rests in."

Fashions have come and gone since: chrome spokes, stainless spokes, none of them any good according to the expert because, as soon as you harden a spoke, you make it brittle and it snaps when you hit a bump. Tandem riders sometimes specify wheels with 48 spokes. At the other extreme you have riders like Jacques Anquetil riding on wheels with only 24 spokes. How can a dealer cope with these extremes? Fortunately, no doubt, the British cycle industry solved the problem when, within a year, it had switched entirely to 36-spoke wheels, front and rear, which means that the same rim can be used for back or front wheels, the same spokes fit both wheels, less money is tied up in stock and the retailer can give a faster and wider service to his customers.

It was in the war years that the Taylor brothers—for by then Ken and Norman were keen cyclists also—began to establish themselves, particularly when Percy Stallard established the B.L.R.C. in an attempt to bring continental racing to British roads, thus incurring the wrath of the N.C.U., which controlled cycle racing in Britain. All three brothers joined the league, and were promptly kicked out of Stockton Wheelers, being re-admitted to the club only recently, to their great amusement.

Talking to Jack Taylor about the early league days is a real trip down memory lane. Out come the press cuttings and thousands of photographs, the names trip off the tongue lightly, and a superb musical background is provided in the form of New Orleans jazzmen, Jack Taylor's second great interest, helped considerably by an American colleague who manages to find him ancient classics which have long been deleted from British record lists.

Geoff Clarke, Ernie Clements, Ron Kitching, Percy Stallard: these are some of the names of the Taylor contemporaries. And one race, above all others, stands out in Jack Taylor's memory: Brighton to Glasgow—surely the greatest achievement of those early leaguers, and the forerunner not only of the Milk Race as we know it today, but of all British road-racing. The Taylor brothers rode Brighton to Glasgow five times. At their very first



attempt, they were the leading English team, despite the presence of some of the stars mentioned above. "We couldn't touch the French lads of course," comes the ready acknowledgement, "but we all finished in the first twenty. A hundred riders started and only twenty-seven finished, so we didn't do too badly. Most of the British roadmen trained very hard for single-day events, but we were tourists and clubmen at heart. The longer the race went on, the better it suited us. We didn't take it as seriously as some of them, and this seemed to help us."

The 1945 race enjoyed publicity which would turn a modern promoter green. In the austere days of the immediate post-war period, all sport flourished. Photographs show Brighton beach almost deserted, with thousands of holiday-makers assembled around the start of the race, which, being billed as the "victory cycling marathon", attracted colossal press publicity, much to the chagrin of the N.C.U., whose activities tended to remain anonymous.

The bikes were nothing special, even

then, and they were usually scruffy. "We had to keep them in back yards when we were on a race," we being the English riders, "but the French lads used to smuggle them under their beds and polish them so that they were always immaculate. They knew a lot more about their equipment than most of the British lads did, so they could handle early derailleur gears while we were still learning." The Taylor brothers favoured Osgears, to the amusement of riders like Geoff Clarke who used the early Simplex equipment, but the last laugh is the one that counts, and the end of the race invariably saw the Osgear riders ahead of the more ambitious ones, who couldn't handle their fragile equipment. Percy Stallard was another rider who invariably had the best, because the Wolverhampton lads were used to racing on Brooklands and Donington Park. They even had proper racing jerseys, while the Stockton trio managed, at first, by using dyed vests with pockets sewn on, until Ron Kitching imported a set of French jerseys for them, with the name embroidered on the front,