Marguerite Wilson and other ‘hard-riding ... feminine space eaters’: Cycling and modern femininity in inter-war Britain

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Marguerite Wilson and other ‘feminine space eaters’: Women, cycling and modernity in inter-war Britain

In 1939 Marguerite Wilson became the first woman to win the Bidlake Memorial Plaque. Instituted in 1934, the ‘Bidlake’ was awarded annually for the most ‘outstanding cycling performance of the year’. FT (Frederick Thomas) Bidlake had been regarded as the ‘greatest cyclist of his generation’ before his untimely death in 1933. It was he who had devised the unpaced time trial in 1895, which had since become the bedrock of the sport in Britain as opposed to massed-start racing in Europe, along the lines of the Tour de France. By 1941 Wilson held all sixteen records of the Women’s Road Records Association (WRRA), which included Land’s End to John O’Groats, along with the 12-hour and 24-hour records, as well as records for ‘50’ and ‘1,000’ miles. The cycling press were effusive in its praise for this ‘blond-haired girl’. Cycling grandee GH (George Herbert) Stancer stated that Wilson ‘is undoubtedly the finest rider of her sex that the sport has yet produced’, while Cycling’s editorial described her as ‘the phenomenal Bournemouth girl record breaker’, and that her Land’s End to John O’Groats and 1,000 records, accomplished in one ride, was ‘the greatest cycling happening of 1939.¹ Of particular significance was that Wilson was a professional cyclist, signalling new attitudes not only about women’s sport, but also women’s social and cultural status during this period. Wilson’s achievements were at a time of a bourgeoning popularity in women’s cycling both as a recreational activity and a sport. Moreover, she also embodied the changing nature of the modern woman in the inter-war period, who now ‘embraced life and spent her time in the pursuit of fun and enjoyment’.² This
article examines the growth of the sport of women’s cycling in interwar Britain in the context of emerging ideals about the new modern woman jostled with traditional notions of femininity. Women’s cycling both challenged and complemented ideas of femininity, although how much and how many women engaged in these debates is unclear. It is unlikely that all were unaware, but as Joyce Kay has argued with reference to female athletes in early post-war Britain, they probably ‘just got on with the job’ and paid little or no attention to contemporary discourses regarding female athletes.

The relationship between women and cycling dates back to the early days of modern cycling. However, following the invention and popularity of the ordinary (high-wheeler or penny-farthing) it was an activity largely restricted to men. Some women did ride tricycles while others shared a sociable machine with a male companion, but it was not until the 1890s that women began to cycle in large numbers. During the 1890s women’s cycling enjoyed a boom, which was mainly due to the invention of the safety bicycle and then the pneumatic tyre. As David Rubenstein has argued the bicycle offered freedom and independent travel, and was also a symbol of emancipation for women. Women joined clubs, established women-only clubs and rode long distances on bicycles, sometimes accompanied by men, sometimes by themselves, as well as participating in sporting competition. This craze was largely confined to the upper and middle classes as many working-class women neither had the time, energy or money to ride a bicycle. Nevertheless, the sheer visibility of women riding a bicycle challenged conservative and contemporary attitudes regarding their physiological capabilities as well as their role in society. Cycling accelerated, according to Jennifer Hargreaves, a disruption in social relationships. These developments were not restricted to Britain, but also included...
the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, France and Ireland, however, their uniformity and impact varied across different countries.⁷

Most of the work on women’s cycling has been confined to the nineteenth century boom with a focus on the relationship between cycling and femininity, which reflected the contradictory features of women’s sport more generally. While it has been argued that the bicycle was as an emancipatory machine for women, the nature of women’s cycling was also conditioned by prevailing ideas of femininity, which revolved around a woman’s perceived physical capabilities conditioned by the medical profession, what women should wear when cycling and how it should be done with grace and in moderation.⁸ These tensions continued deep into the twentieth century. In addition, Simpson, Dauncey, Kinsey and Hall have pointed out how women competed in sporting events. The first officially organized race between women on bicycles took place in Bordeaux on 1 November 1868, for example, while Simpson has traced the names of 80 professional female cyclists from different nations who rode in the 1890s, although like the cycling boom in general, the sport of women’s cycling had fizzled out by the turn of the century.⁹

Despite the considerable work on female cycling in the Victorian era, there has been very little on women and cycling in the twentieth century. One exception is Dave Russell’s excellent article on Beryl Burton, a predecessor of Marguerite Wilson. Wilson though represented a different age of cycling, which counter-intuitively it could be argued was more modern. Russell noted how Burton was at her most content amongst the cosy yet small amateur cycling fraternity.¹⁰ By contrast, Wilson (although very much at ease in club cycling circles) was ‘the first modern full-time girl professional rider’ who rode for bicycle companies, first Hercules and then Claud Butler, to ostensibly advertise their machines through her record-breaking
achievements.\(^{11}\) This article examines Wilson's career in light of cycling's burgeoning popularity, alongside the changing social context for women in inter-war Britain.

**The changing status of women in inter-war Britain**

Cycling's inter-war popularity among women reflected and reinforced both a creeping female emancipation and its modern tendencies. Selina Todd has argued the First World War accelerated the evolution of a new modern woman. In addition to women gaining the vote, the period between the 1920s and 1950s was one in which 'leisure, and financial autonomy became a general characteristic of young women's lifestyles'.\(^{12}\) Changes in the nature of the workforce was the primary reason for this development. Domestic service, as an occupation, declined and instead there was an expansion in shop, factory and office employment for women. As a consequence, similar to men, leisure time for many women was increasingly structured around an industrialized working day. This greater autonomy had important cultural consequences, especially in terms of female leisure consumption. Leisure consumption for young women was not new to the 1920s. But as wage earners there was a now greater sense within families that women were entitled to more leisure time, which relieved them of some household tasks, thus marking a distinctive difference from previous generations. Indeed, Todd has further argued young women were at times more prominent leisure consumers then men, and 'pioneers in the development of working-class youth culture'.\(^{13}\) From a more tempered perspective, Simmonds has argued that the social benefits of the war for women
were both mixed and not immediate. A minority experienced an ‘emancipation culture’ but it did not dislodge deep-seated male prejudices, while after the war most women returned to a life of ‘hearth and home’.\textsuperscript{14}

Nevertheless, cycling was part of a wider expansion in female physical culture during the interwar years. It appealed not only to the newly independent young women but also to married and older women from the middle and working classes.\textsuperscript{15} As a form of bodily freedom and independence for women, it also gave a sense of personal mobility.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued, the body was an important site for the construction of femininity as women began to free themselves from the constraints of the Victorian age. The growing popularity of women’s sport and physical exercise were also linked with a ‘duty to beauty’ discourse, which revolved around clothes and beauty products. Women were now in control of their fertility and thus able to maintain their health and beauty for the benefit of their family. ‘A modern, actively cultivated body was yet another aspect of women’s liberation along with political emancipation, greater gender equality, along with expanding employment opportunities after 1918.’\textsuperscript{17} Cycling, therefore, part of a growing female athleticism, became an emblem of modernity and was legitimised by the visibility of growing number of female cyclists on the roads.

**Women’s cycling in inter-war Britain**

Cycling in general experienced a boom during the inter-war years with more people riding a bicycle more often than ever before or since. It was the sheer banality of cycling during this period that was striking, along with how familiarity bred contempt
for the bicycle. During the interwar years cycling was the most common form of ‘autonomous vehicular mobility’.\textsuperscript{18} Its growing working-class image was reinforced through the sight of men and women cycling to and from work. In 1923 it had been estimated that there were 5 million cyclists in the country, a figure that rose to 10 to 12 million by 1939. This growth had been reflected in the manufacturing of bicycles. Despite a dip from the boom in 1896 to 1912, output almost trebled between 1924 and 1937 when 2,057,000 bicycles were built.\textsuperscript{19} One innovation was the lightweight bicycle, which was particularly suited to female riders, thus reflecting the growing market for women cyclists, although it’s likely that many women bought bicycles from a thriving second-hand market.\textsuperscript{20} An increase in the number of clubs and the membership of governing bodies mirrored cycling’s growth. In 1934 it was estimated that there were over 100,000 cyclists who were members of various organized bodies.\textsuperscript{21} The number of clubs affiliated to the National Cyclists’ Union had doubled over the interwar years, from 836 in 1926 to 1,790 by 1936,\textsuperscript{22} and its membership similarly expanded over the same period from 24,500 to 55,930.\textsuperscript{23} From its peak in 1899 of 60,000, membership of the Cyclists’ Touring Club had dropped to 8,546 by 1918, but numbers grew steadily thereafter. Membership reached 20,000 in 1925 and then 38,000 in 1936.\textsuperscript{24} The expansion of cycling was also a key agency in the development of the outdoor – or ‘back to the countryside’ – movement. Cycling both complemented and buttressed the growth of camping and the later creation of the Youth Hostels Association (YHA) in 1930.

The First World War gave a boost to women’s cycling. The sheer visibility of increasing numbers of women riding their bikes to work gave cycling, as a female activity, a greater legitimacy. By 1916, following the imposition of military conscription and increased industrial activity, almost half the workforce was made up
of women with many cycling to work in munitions factories. Other than munitions it was the service sector that saw the biggest increase in female workers, especially in London. In 1923 a Cycling editorial observed, ‘One of the striking features of the present season is the great increase in the numbers of ladies among the cyclists on the road. The increase is largely disproportionately to the general advance of the pastime this year, and it is a matter for particular satisfaction.’

London led the way in these developments largely due to the efforts of one woman, Mabel Hodgson. Hodgson was a great organiser as well as a modernizer, and before her unfortunate and untimely death in 1921, she was cycling’s ‘most outstanding feminine figure’. She was a member of the Cyclist’s Touring Club (CTC) who later became the only female member on its national council and the only woman on the Road Improvement Committee. In addition, she advocated ‘rational dress’ for female cyclists and also wrote a column in Cycling. Her most significant achievement was the ‘Ladies’ Cyclists’ Rally’. It was first run in May 1916 under the auspices of the CTC’s Metropolitan District Association, which Hodgson basically run on her own. By 1921 around 1,000 riders attended the rally, although these also included men, although they had to be accompanied by a female cyclist. The London rally later spawned imitators in Lancashire and Leicestershire. In the same year Hodgson organized a 106-mile all-female run from London to Findon near the Sussex coast. The 28 ‘hard-riding’ ‘feminine space-eaters’, all ‘rationally attired’, set off from the Royal Albert Hall at 7.00 am, and aimed to return 12 hours later; the youngest member of the party was 17.

By 1936 there was clear evidence of a growth in female cyclists. It was estimated that more than 10 per cent of the CTC’s 38,000 members were women, while out of the NCU’s 50,000 members nearly 20 per cent were women.
Highlighting how their stock had risen, four out of the 23 members of the CTC council were female. The profile of women’s cycling was given a further boost by the exploits of Billie Dovey (nee Fleming). In 1938 Dovey, then a 24 year old typist, cycled a record 29,603.4 miles in a calendar year for a woman. A member of the Southern Ladies’ Road Club, she became inspired by the emerging health and fitness movement, and in particular the Women’s League of Health and Beauty’s principles of moderate daily exercise. Her motivations were threefold. First, she just loved cycling. Second, she ‘wanted to something to encourage more women to ride bicycles as a simple and easy means of keeping fit, and also to see women’s cycling in a more flourishing and respected position’. In here self-appointed role as ‘the national advocate for women to cycle for health and fitness’, she became a celebrity and her exploits received nationwide media attention. Third, she was also a professional cyclist and was known as the ‘Rudge-Whitworth Keep-Fit Girl’ as it was their bike she rode and hence advertised, and meant she had to give up her amateur status. It was a radical departure from the image of Victorian female cyclists, but by the 1930s women cycling long distances, and in shorts, had become part of the cycling scene.

Despite women cycling in greater numbers, or because of it, debates over the appropriateness of women’s cycling continued throughout the period. How far should they ride, what should they wear and how should they ride were still central questions for some men and women. In general, though, these debates increasingly challenged and defied implicit Victorian notions about both a woman’s medical limits and femininity as well as a woman’s role in society. There had been increasing medical evidence that exercise was beneficial to the health of women. The body was increasingly seen as a machine that needed maintenance through exercise.
Moreover, during the late nineteenth century the sheer visibility of fit, active women had challenged the discourse of the ‘eternally wounded woman’ and that physical exercise was essential for women to produce healthy babies. Instead, debate now shifted around the vigour and intensity of female exercise, although even here the opinions of doctors was guided by cultural preference for ‘refined women’.  

It was beyond dispute even before the inter-war period that women could cycle long distances. The leading female cyclist of the late nineteenth century was Maggie Foster. Foster was a member of the Gaiety Cycling Club, named after the London theatre where she worked. In 1903 she rode to London to Brighton and back in a record, 5 hours 36 minutes 45 seconds; a record that would last over thirty years. From the late nineteenth century, Yorkshire Road Club female members had ridden in 12-hour time-trials. In 1908, Nellie Rodgers completed 356 miles in 24 hours, a few weeks after leaving hospital following a serious operation. In that same year, Kate Green, a member of the Leeds Road Club who rode regularly against men in club events, twice rode over 300 miles in 24 hours. It was noted that she showed no signs of distress, which was a common complaint and justification to oppose women undertaking vigorous exercise. By the inter-war years, feats of female long-distance were regularly reported in the cycling press. In 1924 a Miss L. F. Kemp of Kensall Rise in London had cycled 6,200 miles, while Mrs du Heaume, a CTC member from Great Missenden, had nearly doubled that total at 12,094 miles.  

However, while riding long-distances at an even pace became regarded as an acceptable activity for women, there was still opposition to competitive sport. In 1925 the NCU had permitted track racing for women racing, but it did not meet with universal approval. Track racing placed an emphasis on speed and hence a greater danger and chance of accidents. Even for the usually supportive Cycling – or at least
its editor – the prospect of women injured when racing was a step too far. As much
as what constituted the breaching of notions of feminine behaviour, it was perhaps
the possibility of damage to cycling’s wider reputation from images and reports of
women riders injured while racing that shaped attitudes.  

Writing in the early 1920s, ‘Cora’, ‘an experienced lady rider of proved speed
abilities’, was adamantly opposed. Women racing was ‘absurd’ – ‘cheapening
womanhood’ – as ‘[e]very natural instinct is against girls taking up racing’ while girls
should only be competitive in the field of protecting the weak from injury. She gladly
admitted she was writing from a Victorian perspective, as someone who abhorred
the prospect of open-mouthed women with ‘foam-flecked lips’ and perspiring bodies.
Rather than cultivate speed, consistent riding should be the aim for women,
reflecting wider ideas of moderation. It was as much a generational response, as one
based on middle-class amateur sensibilities.

Complementing debates over the suitability of cycling as a sport were those
regarding women’s cycling attire. During the inter-war years the movement for dress
reform gained traction, which advocated lighter clothing and for more exposure of the
skin to sunshine. By the 1930s, shorts had become part of the female cycling
uniform. Given the context, this transformation in female cycling attire was startling.
At the start of the interwar years, debates over female cycling fashion had been
firmly fixed within middle-class parameters with a focus on respectability and the
benefits of wearing rational dress rather than skirts and dresses. By the 1930s one
cover of Cycling was adorned with six women at the seaside riding their bikes – one
with her feet on the handlebars – in their bathing costumes. It reflected not only a
loosening of social conventions, but the popularity of cycling among working-class
women and girls. Unable to afford the expensive ‘uniforms’ that female writers prescribed, practicality was the most important factor in what they wore.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska has outlined how general shifts in interwar fashion were part of the construction of modern femininity that, along with the quest for a fit and healthy body, also included mass-produced beauty products. In the 1920s the Flapper look had been in vogue. Hemlines rose and women cut their hair short and there was a preference for a slender figure. By the 1930s a shift back to glamour brought an emphasis on broad shoulders and a return of waists. But rather than being superficial, ‘[t]his transformation of women’s appearance went beyond adornment, and the popularity of fitness activities points towards a widespread desire among women to acquire a beautiful, healthy and fit modern body’.

Women of all social classes embraced new fashions and beauty products. Adornment, including the use of make-up, was also promoted for female cyclists. By the late thirties cycling figures were keen to emphasise the link between cycling and beauty, something that was underlined by a series of features on the subject in Cycling. A book, Beauty on a Bicycle, written by Ann Seymour (the author of Women and Beauty) was also published in 1939 with further hints on protecting the skin from the weather. It was issued free by BSA bicycles and highlighted the importance of women’s cycling to the industry at the time. A male journalist, Alex Josey aka KMD, also felt compelled to give his thoughts on the subject. In another article, ‘Beauty on Wheels’, while claiming ‘that cycling is paramount among sports, as a way to beauty’, it also gave tips on how female cyclists could ‘make their looks a little more pleasing while actually in the process of cycling’. Tips included using hairgrips and applying vanishing cream to protect the complexion, while make-up was to be used sparingly. Bringing the emphasis back to health more generally, it was concluded
that ‘The real secret of how to look your best when you cycle does not lie entirely in make-u. The best thing you can do for your looks is to have a really good time.’

Nevertheless, not all female cyclists were enamoured with the focus on fashion and beauty. After experimenting with a range of articles, the editor of Cycling, Harry England claimed that the reaction of female readers was that they were ‘interested only in cycling and that feminine topics as such are not welcomed’. One female reader from Liverpool concurred, and was scathing at the maternalism of Billie Dovey’s articles on fashion and on being told what to wear. She was, however, ‘thrilled with the pages of ladies’ races and photographs of stars and also with good sensible articles on touring, racing, etc., by fellow girl-cyclists’, but added ‘please do away with these soppy feminine articles on personal matters, and if I ever see anything about make-up I’ll stop my order for Cycling right away.’

Cycling and Female Athleticism

While cycling was a mass activity in the inter-war years, it remained a minor sport. In general, it struggled for coverage when compared to the national sports of football and cricket. However, it had its own faithful band of followers, who consumed the sport through various publications, but mainly Cycling. The sport of women’s cycling, like the men’s in this period, was largely based around the unpaced time trial. The sport of road cycling in Britain had had a different historical trajectory to that in Europe where the main form of the sport was massed-start races such as the Tour de France and the Giro d’Italia. The unpaced time trial was invented in 1895 mainly due to safety concerns over the congestion of bicycles on the roads. Track racing
had also been popular in the Victorian period and there was also a tradition for challenging long-distance records such as Land’s End to John O’Groats. A governing body, the National Cyclists’ Union was formed in 1878. It catered for both amateur and professional cycling, but it strictly enforced its amateur regulations. Like other sporting bodies at this time, female athletes were excluded and there was no governing body solely for or run by women, although the Cyclists’ Touring Club had admitted women from its inception in 1878.47

Competitive sport acted as a marker of modernity in itself and the sport of women’s cycling emerged against the backdrop of an increase in organised female sport during the inter-war period. Whereas women’s sport in the pre-1914 period was largely confined to the middle classes in the south, after 1918 this expansion was across the classes and throughout the country. In 1921 the Women’s Amateur Athletic Association was formed and within four years it had had 25,000 members with over 500 clubs, while two years later the Women’s Amateur Rowing Association was formed.48 In cricket the southern-dominated and middle-class Women’s Cricket Association was established in 1926, while the English Women’s Cricket Federation – an amalgamation of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Women’s Cricket Federations – was formed in 1934 and catered for working-class women in the North.49 The most spectacular example – albeit briefly – of the growth in women’s sport during and after the war was football among the working classes. Around 150 teams emerged out of the factories across the country, the most famous being Dick, Kerr’s Ladies from Preston.50

The post-war growth of female recreational cyclists had not been lost on cycling’s establishment. It was noted prophetically that ‘[t]hey are riding faster, farther, and better than before and it scarcely requires a prophet to foresee the day
When the speed and stamina of wheelwomen will be tested in competition.\textsuperscript{51} The most striking sporting example of the early post-war period was the formation of a female-only road racing club, Rosslyn Ladies’ Cycling Club in 1922. Its members were mainly from working-class parts of North and East London, such as Forest Gate, Tottenham, Hackney and West Ham, while the club’s first president was Lady de Freece, better known as the music-hall star Vesta Tilley. They were described by Arthur Cook as ‘a well-run band of real tough ladies who could do the miles and sometimes the speed of a good many male cyclists’. He was well qualified to give an opinion as he later married one of these ‘hard-riding bunch of girls’, Nellie Kimmance.\textsuperscript{52}

The exact motivations behind the club’s formation are not known, but it may have been the desire to escape male prejudice towards female cyclists. Cycling clubs had mixed attitudes and policies towards the admittance of female members, partly because many men regarded clubs as masculine republics. Many clubs did accept and welcome female members, but any tensions usually revolved around the notion that women were too oriented more towards social activities, such as dances and concerts, than sport. In 1922, for example, Watford CC admitted women after ‘a close vote’\textsuperscript{53} while the Nomads (Hitchin) CC admitted women from its foundation in 1931.\textsuperscript{54} By contrast, the Forest CC was formed in 1900 and had initially been a mixed-sex club, but in 1912 it decided to exclude women.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, the formation of the Essex Roads CC in 1903 had essentially been a breakaway from the then fashionable Walthamstow Town CC, which had both male and female members but did not cater for the needs of those members who were much keener on racing. As a result, an all-male amateur racing club was formed, initially made up of young men from Walthamstow.\textsuperscript{56} These attitudes persisted deep into the twentieth century. In

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1944 the Manchester Road Racing Club, which was affiliated to the British League of Racing Cyclists, forced two women out of the club, just because they were women. Joyce Renshaw and Lillian Rea had been among the first members of this relatively new club who typically undertook many of its administrative duties. The majority of male members ‘did not mind females in the club’, but a handful called a meeting to vote on an all-male club. The vote initially went in favour of the women, but then the men in question threatened to resign from the club and the majority of the members caved in, forcing the women to leave. It was a rare event and not well received in cycling ranks with the club’s action condemned in a strongly worded editorial in The Bicycle.

The membership of Rosslyn Ladies’ Cycling Club stabilized around 50 during the interwar years. Other all-female clubs followed, although they were relatively few in number. In 1933 another London club was formed, Ross Wheelers Ladies CC, later followed by Southern Ladies CC. In the following year, it was reported that an all-female club had been formed in Torquay, while another women-only club established in Birmingham had been inspired by Rosslyn Ladies. A Scottish equivalent was the Heatherbell Ladies’ CC of Dundee, formed in 1929. By 1934 it had 60 members, including three-times Scottish champion Mary Stewart. The ‘Bells’ also claimed that their activities – track racing, road racing, touring and social functions – ‘excel in enthusiasm, execution and reputation, to no small degree, that of several men’s clubs in Scotland’.

Sport was at the heart of ‘Rosslyn’ from its origins and it held both open and closed time trials. By 1942 there were club records for 10, 25, 30, 50 and 100 miles, plus 12 hours for a single bicycle and 12 hours for a tandem. The club’s annual open 12-hour time trial became a de facto English women’s championship. In 1929 it was
won by W. Stansell for a distance of 195 miles and 6 furlongs, and was described in
a full-page report as a ‘neck and neck struggle between the first three’. The race,
its times and locations had been advertised in the daily newspapers. It not only
reflected a certain curiosity among the lay press about women’s sport, but also drew
criticism because of unwanted publicity for time trials and the damage that may have
caused to cycling more generally. Club members raced across the country,
including Ireland, and on the track. Nellie Kimmance won a silver teaspoon as a
prize at Herne Hill in a Ladies Only track race, which she was still using in the 1980s.
But the social side was also important – the club had both racing and social
secretaries – especially club runs on the weekends, which started from the Wilfred
Lawson Temperance Hotel in Woodford. It also had its own camp in the village of
Ugley in Essex on the A11, near to where it started its time trials. Unsurprisingly
perhaps as the membership of Rosslyn Ladies hardly changed, the number of
married women increased. In 1942 around 60 per cent of the members were
married, increasing to 75 per cent five years later.

By 1930 it was noted that in general ‘racing girls are increasing in number with
great rapidity’. A clutch of record-breaking female cyclists also emerged whose
feats received a great deal of press coverage. Moreover, they were also four
professional cyclists by 1939. Their media profile represented a stark contrast from
that of women cyclists in the early 1920s. These cyclists epitomized modern women.
They were described in various terms as athletic and were frequently pictured in
sporting outfits and typical cycle racing poses, which emphasized their sporting
prowess. Moreover, in purely commercial terms, it highlighted the growth in the
women’s bicycle market. The first was Lillian Dredge. In 1935 she attempted the
Land’s End to John O’Groats record. Riding (and advertising) a Claud Butler bike, in
1936 she set a new 24-hour record at 342 miles. In 1934 she had taken part in an international massed-start race over 54.5 miles on Belgium pavé, but was forced to retire after falling off on a number of occasions.  

In 1934 the Women’s Road Records Association (WRRA) was formed. It marked an important moment in the formalisation of the sport of women’s cycling in Britain as it provided a framework and structure for competition as well as a central focus for athletes and clubs. Like the men’s equivalent, the Road Records Association, it gave an official stamp of approval to record attempts, which were largely based on men’s distance records. By 1940 the WRRA had 15 affiliated clubs with three all-female clubs and the committee was largely composed of prominent female cyclists. The following year the Scottish Women’s Cycling Association was formed. Unlike the WRRA it was the governing body for both women’s track and road racing. By 1936 it had 30 individual members and was organising a programme of races. Some male-dominated clubs affiliated to the SWCA and also scheduled female races on their calendars, while in 1939 several all-male clubs relaxed their ban on female members.

With the growth in women’s cycling there was a corresponding increase in their presence of female journalists in cycling journals, giving women’s cycling a greater cultural legitimacy. The WRRA itself was dominated by journalists. Its first president was Mrs H. W. Parkes, aka the journalist ‘Petronella’, while Jessie Springall, its secretary and treasurer, also wrote for Cycling. Mabel Hodgson had been an journalists, while in 1930 a column in Cycling, ‘Femina’s Page’ was devoted to female cycling. Billie Dovey later wrote regular articles in Cycling on a variety of subjects such as female cycling fashions and advice on how women should cycle. Nevertheless, media representations of female cyclists were mixed, mainly because
cycling was a male-dominated sport. In 1939, one regular feature in Cycling, ‘People in the News’, invariably included a woman, while a regular cartoon concerned the cycling adventures of the blond-haired and curvy ‘Connie Nentle’, who had a passing resemblance to Marguerite Wilson. While it reflected a certain modernity in how the image of women’s cycling had changed with the character wearing shorts, the cartoon was also suggestive and reinforced perceptions of women as sexual objects, although to have a ‘curvy figure’ was a desire of many women during this period.

Women’s cycling reached a high-point in 1939. There were a number of significant landmarks in addition to Marguerite Wilson’s achievements. In particular, more women were competing than ever before. It had not escaped the attention of the cycling authorities and a June Cycling editorial noted that ‘The most noteworthy news in road time-trial circles at the moment is the tremendous interest of the girls’ and that it welcomed ‘these speedy, fit girls into the game’. A month later the same editorial was advocating the idea for an all-women track meeting, noting that it would ‘attract the crowd because of its novelty’. In one weekend in June 1939 six all-female events were staged, which included 10- and 25-mile time trials, with over 150 women competing. It was claimed to be the ‘Biggest Week-end of Women’s Road Sport’. By July, the Yorkshire Cycling Federation Open Ladies’ 25-mile time trial had attracted a ‘remarkable entry’ of 55. The event was won by Madge Ball of the Yorkshire Road Club who was Wilson’s main rival, although she would remain an amateur. During the war, like many others, women’s cycling as a sport declined in quantity, if not initially in quality, although ironically because of the demise of men’s cycling, the women received proportionately greater coverage in Cycling.
Marguerite Wilson: Pioneering Professional

In 1939 Marguerite Wilson became the first woman to hold a National Cyclists’ Union professional licence. Given cycling’s strict regulations on professionalism, it meant that she could never return to amateur competition. It was an important moment in the history of women’s cycling. Her background and entry into cycling had been typical of the period. She was born in March 1918 in Parkstone, near Poole Harbour, and came from an upwardly mobile working-class/lower-middle-class background.\(^78\)

Her father was a joiner and the family soon moved to Bournemouth, then in Hampshire, where Marguerite gained a place at Brockenhurst County School. A talented all-round athlete, she represented the school at netball, hockey and tennis, but was most successful at athletics. She had no thoughts about competitive cycling at this stage and she said that her role model was the American, ‘Babe’ Didrikson Zakharias. Zakharias won gold medals in the 80 metres hurdles and the javelin at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, before eventually becoming the leading female golfer of her era.\(^79\)

Like many other women, Wilson was introduced to cycling by a boy who had invited her to ride a tandem. Soon after, in 1934 she joined Bournemouth Arrow Cycling Club, which had a strong female racing tradition. She began racing the following year, while also enjoying club life more generally, which included club runs and its social activities.\(^80\) Initially, Wilson competed in 10- and 25-mile time trials, but in 1937 she won all eight of her time trials, including the Rosslyn Ladies 12-hour time trial. Typical of the amateur ethos, she like other competitors had to make their own arrangements to race venues, which could involve camping out the night before. She also rode the same bicycle she used for club-riding. In 1938 she joined West
Croydon Wheelers and broke a number of WRRA records, which brought her to national attention. These included the London to York (10 hours, 54 minutes), the 100 miles record (4 hours, 31 minutes, 8 seconds) and the 12 hours record (215 miles).

In 1939 Wilson was awarded a full-time professional contract by the Hercules Cycle and Motor Company, at the time the largest bicycle manufacturer in the world. She was one of six riders on its books, but the only female.81 From 1934 there had been a ‘record-breaking war between the big cycle making companies’.82 This ‘craze’ was not dissimilar to the short-lived boom in track racing during the 1890s. The year before, Frank Southall, then Britain’s most popular cyclist, had been employed by Hercules to attack Road Records Association (RRA) marks, but faced opposition from the Australian, Hubert Opperman who rode for BSA. Opperman later became the first recipient of the Bidlake Memorial Prize following his record-breaking Land’s End to John O’Groats and 1,000 miles ride in 1934. The following year he returned with two Australian team mates who regularly swapped RRA records with Southall.

In joining Hercules, Wilson was arguably Britain’s first full-time professional female athlete. In the 19th century, there had been numerous examples of female sporting entertainers who had earning money from sport. In 1880, for example, the natationist, Agnes Beckwith completed a 100-hours swim in six days and also competed in races against other female swimmers.83 Women’s cycling racing had been held in London in the 1890s, while earlier in 1889 at Seaton Delaval in Northumberland, five American female cyclists competed against local male champions. Later, the motor racing driver Dorothy Levitt was sponsored by Selwyn Edge, an Australian entrepreneur and racing driver, and earned a living from her writing.84 In 1920 Zetta Hills, both an entrepreneur and performer, unsuccessfully
attempted to cross the English Channel on her ‘Zetta Hills Water-Cycle’. Billie Dovey was also a professional cyclist, but her arrangement with Rudge-Whitworth was based more publicity for a national fitness campaign rather than specifically chasing sporting records. Whereas the financial arrangements for these female athletes and performers owed as much to informal arrangements and penny capitalism, Wilson was under contract to a company who paid her a salary in a strict sporting capacity; in this case to break cycling records. In 1940, indicating her commercial worth, Wilson joined another bicycle manufacturer, Claud Butler, after Hercules switched to war production. Moreover, at Hercules her manager was Bill Bailey, the former track cycling world champion, while a friend, Charlie Davey, advised her at Claud Butler.\textsuperscript{85}

As a full-time professional, Wilson was now subject to a strict training regime, which further highlighted professional-amateur differences. Training for Wilson had usually comprised of cycling to and from work, both in Kent and Bournemouth. When she was living in Kent she would also cycle to Bournemouth and back over a weekend, a total distance of around 250 miles. She sometimes rode during the night arriving in Bournemouth at 3am, which with the relative freedom of the road was typical of the time.\textsuperscript{86} Training with Hercules was under the supervision of Frank Southall, now its racing manager. He established a training camp at a hotel, Winter Garden, in Kingston-upon-Thames where Wilson spent around 4 to 5 hours on her bicycle on local roads, typically riding 75 miles a day. When the weather was inclement, she and fellow Hercules riders trained on rollers. The team also had its own masseur and trainer, Charles Fearnley, who was renowned for his expertise in physical training. A training room was also fitted out with a massage-couch and a heating lamp, reflecting modern sports medicine.
Southall put a great deal of thought and preparation into each record attempt, which included reconnaissance trips by riders, finding the fastest course for some records and also waiting for a tail-wind. Wilson’s attempt on the Land’s End to John O’Groats record between 29 August to 1 September 1939 was similarly carefully planned, although an anticipated tail wind did not materialise and instead she faced a strong head wind. She was supported by two coaches, her team mate Harry ‘Shake’ Earnshaw, a doctor and a chef with a mobile canteen as well as a caravan, which she used for rest; she spent 10.5 hours off the bike, with 3.5 hours taken up with sleeping. While she stopped for meals, she was also handed food on her bike. She was also accompanied throughout by a film crew along with WRRA officials. Throughout 1939, in preparation for long-distance rides, Wilson herself deliberately went to bed late to familiarise her with sleep deprivation, and sometimes rode from Kingston to Bournemouth on two hours sleep. Along the route, as per tradition, she was assisted by local cycling clubs whose presence was designed to boost her morale, although they were not allowed to pace her. In order to combat the inevitable psychological battle of loneliness, she tried to maintain a cheery disposition ‘and not worry unduly about the ride I had in front of me’. In 1938 Lillian Dredge had set the women’s ‘End-to-End’ record at 3 days, 20 hours and 54 minutes, Wilson’s time for the 870 miles was 2 days 20 hours and 52 minutes. She then went on to complete the 1,000 miles in 3 days 11 hours and 44 minutes.

To a certain extent, Wilson’s achievements led to some re-assessment of women’s athletic potential. Up until then only four men had beaten her time for the End-to-End – Harry Green, Jack Rossiter, Hubert Opperman and Sid Ferris – and only two – Opperman and Ferris had ridden the 1,000 miles faster. Charles Fearnley, for example, was convinced that women had more endurance than men in general.
A *Cycling* editorial noted approvingly that Wilson was ‘reducing the gap between the respective [RRA and WRRA] record lists and this in spite of the fact that concurrently with her efforts there are record performances of super quality … on the men’s RRA books’. In the *Daily Herald*, BW Best observed that, in Wilson, he had ‘seen a girl .. ride great distances uphill and down at great speeds, which would seriously incommode 99 out of 100 non-racing men cyclists who fancy themselves as riders’. Later, given her condition when she reached John O’Groats there was speculation on how close she could get to the men’s records’. Further highlighting shifting perceptions of a female athlete’s physical capabilities, one *Daily Herald* headline referred to her as ‘Machine-Like Miss Wilson’.

Nevertheless, views on women’s sport and their physiological capacity within a sporting context continued to vary in this period. At the 1928 Olympics, for example, there had been criticism of the women’s 800 metres because it was felt that some of the athletes had finished in a distressed state. As a consequence, this event was not put back on the programme until 1960. Between 1938 and 1939 the National Fitness Council established a medical sub-committee on the ‘Desirability of Athletics for Women and Girls’. An investigation ensued that revolved around the effect of competitive sport and certain events on a women’s menstrual cycle and as a consequence her ability to bear children. It did not find any substantial evidence that competitive and strenuous sport was dangerous to the health of female athletes, but there was continuing sense of patriarchal prudery amongst male doctors that violent exercise was just not right for women.

Adolphe Abrahams, a pioneer of sports medicine, had been the chair of this medical sub-committee and had opposed all forms of violent exercise for women. Instead, he advocated sports, such as golf, tennis and swimming, which
characterized ‘grace, lightness and rhythmicity’, while serious competition induced aggressiveness at the expense of a woman’s ‘softness and ductility’. However, by 1938, he was of the opinion that competitive cycling ‘was not harmful to the nervous system.’ Furthermore, highlighting how female cyclists were being perceived as serious athletes, Abrahams examined, from a physiological perspective, both Jessie Springall and Lillian Dredge (both photographed in a bathing costume) following long-distance rides and concluded that despite their exertions there was nothing amiss with them.

Thus, stereotypes of female athletes were constantly in flux during the thirties, which were reflected in media representations of Wilson herself. Given the predictable sobriquet, ‘the Blonde Bombshell’ – there was invariably references to her blonde or ‘flaxen’ hair in the media – it was perhaps unsurprising that bicycle companies exploited her appearance, as Zweiniger-Bargieloska points out there had been a shift towards glamour during the 1930s and Wilson personified a modern England of fashion- and health-conscious young women workers. During the inter-war years there was an increase in the use of female athletes in advertisements. More generally, the use of athletes by advertisers reflected the close link between sport and modernity. By employing a professional rider to advertise their products, Hercules and then Claud Butler were capitalizing on the growth in numbers of female cyclists. Women fitted the dominant image used by advertisers, which was ‘without exception one of a young attractive, fashionably dressed and feminine woman located within a modern setting’.

Wilson was represented in two main guises, partly because manufacturers had to satisfy different markets, as well as reflecting the contradictory forces between modern notions of femininity and traditional perceptions of a woman’s place in society.
in society. First, there were action shots of Wilson wearing the racing uniform of a black alpaca jacket and black tights, which were used in advertisements for the bicycle she was riding. It confirmed her image as a serious, modern professional athlete, and at the same time, reflecting a bourgeoning female athleticism. Second, in addition to her racing, she had an ambassadorial role for bicycle companies and to garner further publicity, she would appear at various functions. In order to satisfy the mass market, she was also photographed in more softer settings, which lent themselves to more traditional notions of femininity. In one such photograph, it was stated that ‘She is a devotee of wide open spaces, an attractive blonde with delightfully natural complexion who feels equally at home on a dance floor, a tennis court, or in a swimming pool, as when she is pedalling at full speed’. In 1940 Claud Butler produced a postcard of her smiling and waving, riding a bicycle for pleasure in shorts, reflecting the attire of the time. Inevitably perhaps a growing acceptance of the athletic merits of female cyclists was mixed with less modern male views. On the 1941 BBC programme *The Health Value of Cycling*, Alex Josey (KMD) claimed, ‘As for cycling causing girls to have fat or round shoulders, or muscular legs – well it’s not so. Look at Marguerite Wilson, the fastest girl cyclist in the country. She holds the 1,000 mile and other records and can even beat some of the men. But she is essentially feminine and I can tell you she has some very shapely legs.’

As much as her contribution to cycling, cycling also aided Wilson’s own social mobility. As Todd has argued financial autonomy contributed to a new lifestyle for young women, one different to their mothers. Her parents were from a working-class/ lower-middle-class background and she had won a place at an all-girl county grammar school. On leaving school, Wilson began work as a secretary with the Marely Tile Company in Poole. In 1938 she took up an offer of a job in Sevenoaks
before embarking on her professional cycling career. As a result of her earnings from cycling, she wanted to own a car – a major signifier of middle-class status in the thirties – but failed her driving test. In light of wartime conditions, she had stopped being a professional cyclist by 1942 when she joined the British Overseas Airways Corporation as a steward. She was later promoted to traffic officer with responsibility for planning flights. In 1948 she moved to Canada with her husband, Ronnie Stone, who was a BOAC pilot. On returning to England she was forced to give up cycling due to a spinal injury and took up the middle-class sport of golf where she played off a handicap of four. She played in mother and daughter tournaments with her daughter, Beverly who went on to represent England as a junior and Hampshire.

Conclusion

Between 1918 and 1939 women’s cycling was transformed. At the start of the period, it was a largely niche activity for women, by the end it had produced a national superstar in the form of Marguerite Wilson. Not only were more women riding a bicycle as a form of transport and leisure activity, but cycling was now a bourgeoning sport complete with its own governing body and records list to act as a focus. Moreover, through her feats, Wilson gave women’s both a national visibility and respectability amongst men. Indeed Wilson’s performances were infinitely superior to the vast majority of men.

During this period, women’s cycling also acted as an agent in the construction of the modern female body. Wilson’s career more generally was a reflection of the broader social and economic changes in the status of women. A growth in women’s
sport had been one outcome of these developments. Physical culture more generally led to the emergence of a more assertive and vigorous femininity, while cycling also offered new opportunities for mixed sex-sociability. However, as Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued, while there was a narrowing of gender differences more generally, gender roles were not transformed fundamentally.105

The legacy of Wilson and her fellow competitors from the 1930s continued into the post-war period through the performances of Eileen Sheridan, who like Wilson turned professional with Hercules and by the mid-1950s would beat all Wilson’s WRRA records, and even more spectacularly, Beryl Burton, arguably Britain’s greatest ever cyclist, male or female. Like Wilson, both won the Bidlake Memorial Prize, and in Burton’s case, she has been the only cyclist to win it three times. Nevertheless, despite the establishment of a Best All-Rounder competition for women in 1948 (the men’s began in 1930), women’s racing continued to lack the strength in depth of the men’s in post-war Britain, and standards actually declined, while it was only in 1958 a women’s world championships was inaugurated.

Women’s cycling, like cycling more generally, continued to be a minor sport.

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1 Cycling, 17 January 1940, editorial, 67. The prize had only recently been opened up to women.
2 Fiona Skillen, Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain (Oxford: Peter Lange, 2013), 181
3 Ibid., 216.
11 Ibid., 198.
14 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body, p. 237.
16 Millward, ‘Factors Contributing to the Success of the UK Cycle Industry, 1870-1939’ (Unpublished PhD: University of Birmingham 1999), 331, 159, Table 2.1.
17 See for example, Cycling, 26 October 1923, p. 351, Cover, p. 354, Editorial, ‘The Cult of the Lightweight’.
18 Cycling, 7 December 1934, p. 615.
19 Cycling, 23 December 1936, p. 900.
20 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.328/BU/2/8, National Cyclists’ Union Racing Committee, 9 April 1927; National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA) MT 34/131, Accidents, Order of the Road, Cyclists’ Touring Club and National Cyclists’ Union-Joint Committee Report; NCU, National Cyclists’ Union Committees-MSS.328 BU 2 8-Conference of Centre Officials 20 April 1929; TNA/ED 113/74, National Fitness Council – Minutes, Papers and Reports. Voluntary Organisations, The National Cyclists’ Union.
21 Cycling, 15 August 1930, cover page.
23 Cycling, 15 June 1938, 857.
25 Cycling, 19 April 1939, 548-9, 555.
26 Cycling, 8 December 1921, 450; 3 July 1935, p. 231.
27 Cycling, 26 February 1936, 253.
28 Cycling, 30 January 1925, p. 86.
29 Cycling, 20 November 1925, 442.
30 Cycling, 24 November 1921, 387.
32 Cycling, 12 April 1939, 528.
43 Cycling, 15 February 1939, 202-3.
44 Cycling, 1 February 1939, 143.
45 Cycling, 19 April 1939, editorial.
46 Cycling, 26 July 1939, 121.
50 Carter, Medicine, Sport and the Body, 156-8.
51 Cycling, 2 June 1921, 411.
52 MSS.328/N57/3/1/5, ‘Cycling Memories of Arthur Cook’.
53 Cycling, 19 January 1922, 44.
55 Cycling, 18 January 1951, 74.
56 MSS.328/N7/1/30, History of Essex Roads Cycling Club, 1953.
57 The Bicycle, 1 March 1944.
58 The Bicycle, 15 March 1944.
59 In 1929, membership was 54; 1932, 48; 1942, 54, 1947, 47, 1955, 60. MSS.328/M/249, ‘Rosslyn Ladies’ CC’; MSS.328/M/1333.
60 Cycling, 17 March 1933, 270.
61 Cycling, 2 February 1934, 107; Birmingham Gazette, 1 March 1934, 13.
62 Dundee Evening Telegraph, 23 February 1934, 7; Cycling, 9 March 1934, 232; 16 February 1934, 162. Rosslyn Ladies was run by a committee of 13 members.
63 Cycling, 30 August 1929, 192.
64 Ibid., 185.
65 http://www.classiclighweights.co.uk/clubs-reminiscences.html (Accessed 19 February 2015). Even in 1947 the shadow of Mrs Grundy was still evident as male visitors were only allowed on to the camp site between 7.30 pm and 9.30 pm on Saturday evenings.
66 MSS.328/M/249, ‘Rosslyn Ladies’ CC’; MSS.328/M/1333.
67 Cycling, 3 January 1930, 16.
68 Hendon and Finchley Times, 30 December 1938, 3. These included Dovey, Lillian Dredge and Marguerite Wilson, and possibly Jessie Springall., although not all took part in sporting competition.
69 Western Morning News, 18 September 1934, 7; Cycling, 8 April 1936, 483.
70 The records that they ratified were 25 miles; 50 miles; 100 miles; 12 hours; 24 hours; London to York; London to Liverpool; London to Birmingham; London to Bath and back; London to Brighton and back; London to Portsmouth and back; Land’s End to London; Land’s End to John O’Groats; Liverpool to Edinburgh; York to Edinburgh; 1,000 miles; London to Edinburgh; and Edinburgh to Glasgow and back.
71 MSS.328/N10/G/F1, Women’s Road Records Association, Year Book for 1940.
72 Cycling, 9 August 1939, 180-1.
73 Cycling, 12 October 1934, 402.
74 Cycling, 21 June 1939, editorial.
75 Cycling, 12 July 1939, editorial.
76 Cycling, 14 June 1939, 874.
77 After being knocked off her bike in July 1940, she sustained serious injuries and never rode again. She later contracted tuberculosis and died in 1948. William Wilson, Marguerite Wilson: The story of the first star of women’s cycling told in her own words and those of her admirers (Self-published: Poole, 2016), 48; Cycling, 17 July 1940, 59.
78 She died in 1972, possibly from cancer. A note written by a researcher at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, stated that she died of cancer and was cremated at Porchester crematorium. Cycling 26 June 1940, 568.
79 Wilson, Marguerite Wilson, 12-13.
80 Ibid., 18-21.

URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rsih
The others were two British ‘cracks’ Cyril Heppleston and Harry ‘Shake’ Earnshaw plus three Belgian road racing professionals Richard Kemps, Celestine Riga and Jeff Moerenhout. Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 59. In 1939 there were 13 professionals in the country.


*Cycling*, 26 July 1939, 110; Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 57.


Ibid., 59-62.

Ibid., 78-87.

*Cycling* 14 June 1939, 862.

*Cycling*, 26 July 1939, editorial.

*Daily Herald*, 20 May 1939, 19.

*Daily Herald*, 15 January 1940, 10.

*Daily Herald*, 24 July 1939, 12.

Quoted in Carter, *Medicine, Sport and the Body*, 164.


Quoted in Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 76.

*Cycling*, 26 June 1940, 568.

MSS.328/N10/A1, Health Magazine, The Health Value of Cycling by Alex Josey, 13 June 1941.


Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 14, 40. In 1936 she had been engaged to John McRae an electrical engineer who was four years her senior.

*Daily Herald*, 23 August 1939, 14.


Marguerite Wilson and other ‘hard-riding … feminine space eaters’: Women, Cycling and modern femininity in inter-war Britain

In 1940 Marguerite Wilson became the first woman to win the Bidlake Memorial Plaque. Instituted in 1934, the ‘Bidlake’ was awarded annually for the most ‘outstanding cycling performance of the year’. In 1939 Wilson had set a number of road time trial records, in particular Land’s End to John O’Groats and the ‘1,000’ miles record. FT (Frederick Thomas) Bidlake, who had been regarded as the ‘greatest cyclist of his generation’ before his untimely death in 1933, had devised the unpaced time trial in 1895, which had since become the bedrock of the sport in Britain as opposed to massed-start racing in Europe, along the lines of the Tour de France. By 1941 Wilson held all sixteen records of the Women’s Road Records Association (WRRA), which included the 12-hour and 24-hour records, as well as records for ‘50’ and ‘1,000’ miles. The cycling press were effusive in its praise for this ‘blond-haired girl’. Cycling grandee GH (George Herbert) Stancer stated that Wilson ‘is undoubtedly the finest rider of her sex that the sport has yet produced’, while Cycling’s editorial described her as ‘the phenomenal Bournemouth girl record breaker’, and that her Land’s End to John O’Groats and 1,000 records, accomplished in one ride, was ‘the greatest cycling happening of 1939’. Of particular significance was that Wilson was a professional cyclist, signalling new attitudes not only about women’s sport, but also women’s social and cultural status during this period. Wilson’s achievements were at a time of a burgeoning popularity in women’s cycling both as a recreational activity and a sport. Moreover, she also
embodied the changing nature of the modern woman in the inter-war period, who
now 'embraced life and spent her time in the pursuit of fun and enjoyment'. This
article examines the growth of the sport of women’s cycling in interwar Britain in the
context of emerging ideals about the new modern woman and how they jostled with
traditional notions of femininity. Women’s cycling both challenged and
complemented ideas of femininity, although how many and how much and how
many women engaged in these debates is unclear. It is unlikely that all were
unaware, but as Joyce Kay has argued with reference to female athletes in early
post-war Britain, they probably 'just got on with the job' and paid little or no attention
to contemporary discourses regarding female athletes.

The relationship between women and cycling dates back to the early days of
modern cycling from the late 1860s. However, following the invention and popularity
of the ordinary (high-wheeler or penny-farthing) in the mid-1870s it was an activity
largely restricted to men. Some women did ride tricycles while others shared a
sociable machine with a male companion, but it was not until the 1890s that women
began to cycle in large numbers. During the 1890s women’s cycling enjoyed a
boom, which was mainly due to the invention and mass production of the safety
cycle from 1885 and then the pneumatic tyre in 1888. As David Rubenstein has
argued the bicycle offered freedom and independent travel, and was also a symbol
of emancipation for women. Cycling accelerated, according to Jennifer
Hargreaves, cycling accelerated a disruption in social relationships. Women joined
clubs, established women-only clubs and rode long distances on bicycles,
sometimes accompanied by men, sometimes by themselves, as well as participating
in sporting competition. This craze was largely confined to the upper and middle
classes as many working-class women neither had the time, energy or money to ride
a bicycle. Nevertheless, the sheer visibility of women riding a bicycle challenged conservative and contemporary attitudes regarding their physiological capabilities as well as their role in society. Cycling accelerated, according to Jennifer Hargreaves, a disruption in social relationships. These developments were not restricted to Britain, but also included the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, France and Ireland, however, their uniformity and impact varied across different countries.

Most of the work on women’s cycling has been confined to the late nineteenth century boom with a focus on the relationship between cycling and femininity, which reflected the contradictory features of women’s sport more generally. While it has been argued that the bicycle was an emancipatory machine for women, the nature of women’s cycling was also conditioned by prevailing ideas of femininity, which revolved around a woman’s perceived physical capabilities conditioned by the medical profession, what women should wear when cycling and how it should be done achieved with grace and in moderation. These tensions continued deep into the twentieth century. In addition, Simpson, Dauncey, Kinsey and Hall have pointed out how women competed in sporting events. The first officially organized race between women on bicycles took place in Bordeaux on 1 November 1868, for example, while Simpson has traced the names of 80 professional female cyclists from different nations who rode in the 1890s, although like the cycling boom in general, the sport of women’s cycling as a sport had fizzled out by the turn of the century.

Despite the considerable work on female cycling in the Victorian era, there has been very-comparatively little research on women and cycling in the twentieth century. One exception is Peter Cox, who in his chapter, ‘Women, Gendered Roles, Domesticity and Cycling in Britain, 1930-1980’ from his edited collection, Cycling...
*Cultures,* examines the relationship between women and cycling mainly through cycle-tourism (although there is some reference to sport and Marguerite Wilson), highlighting how this activity was shaped by middle-class values.¹² One exception is Dave Russell’s excellent article on Beryl Burton, a predecessor successor to Marguerite Wilson. Wilson though represented a different age of cycling, which counter-intuitively it could be argued was more modern. Russell noted how Burton was at her most content amongst the cosy yet small amateur cycling fraternity.¹³ By contrast, Wilson (although also very much at ease in club cycling circles) was ‘the first modern full-time girl professional rider’ who rode for bicycle companies, first Hercules and then Claud Butler, to ostensibly advertise their machines through her record-breaking achievements.¹⁴ This article examines Wilson’s career in light of cycling’s bourgeoning popularity, alongside the changing social context for women in inter-war Britain.

The changing status of women in inter-war Britain

The re-emergence of cycling’s inter-war popularity among women during the interwar years reflected and reinforced both a creeping female emancipation and its modern tendencies. Selina Todd has argued the First World War accelerated the evolution of a new modern woman. In addition to women gaining the vote, the period between the 1920s and 1950s was one in which ‘leisure, and financial autonomy became a general characteristic of young women’s lifestyles’.¹⁵ Changes in the nature of the workforce was the primary reason for this development. Domestic service, as an occupation, declined and instead there was an expansion in shop,
factory and office employment for women. As a consequence, similar to men, leisure time for many women was increasingly structured around an industrialized working day. This greater autonomy had important cultural consequences, especially in terms of female leisure consumption. Leisure consumption for young, unmarried women was not new to the 1920s. But as wage earners there was a now greater sense within families that women were entitled to more leisure time, which relieved them of some household tasks, thus marking a distinctive difference from previous generations. Indeed, Todd has further argued young women were at times more prominent leisure consumers than men, and ‘pioneers in the development of working-class youth culture’. From a more tempered perspective, Simmonds has argued that the social benefits of the war for women were both mixed and not immediate. A minority experienced an ‘emancipation culture’ but it did not dislodge deep-seated male prejudices, while after the war most women returned to a life of ‘hearth and home’.17

Nevertheless, cycling was part of a wider expansion in female physical culture during the interwar years. It appealed not only to the newly independent young women but also to married and older women from the middle and working classes.18 As a form of personal mobility for women, cycling also gave a sense of bodily freedom and independence for women, it also gave a sense of personal mobility.19 Moreover, as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued, the body was an important site for the construction of femininity as women began to free themselves from the constraints of the Victorian age: ‘A modern, actively cultivated body was yet another aspect of women’s liberation along with political emancipation, greater gender equality, along with expanding employment opportunities after 1918.20 The growing popularity of women’s sport and physical exercise were also linked with a ‘duty to
beauty’ discourse, which revolved around clothes and beauty products. Women were now in control of their fertility and thus able to maintain their health and beauty for the benefit of their family. ‘A modern, actively cultivated body was yet another aspect of women’s liberation along with political emancipation, greater gender equality, along with expanding employment opportunities after 1918.’ Cycling, therefore, as part of a growing female athleticism, became an emblem of modernity and was legitimised by the visibility of growing number of female cyclists on the roads.

Women’s cycling in inter-war Britain

The First World War had given a boost to women’s cycling. The sheer visibility of increasing numbers of women riding their bikes to work gave cycling, as a female activity, a greater legitimacy. By 1916, following the imposition of military conscription and increased industrial activity, almost half the workforce was made up of women with many cycling to work in munitions factories. Other than munitions it was the service sector that saw the biggest increase in female workers, especially in London. This trend accelerated during the interwar period as cycling in general experienced a boom during the inter-war years with more people riding a bicycle more often than ever before or since. It was the sheer banality of cycling during this period that was striking, along with how familiarity bred contempt for the bicycle. During the interwar years cycling was the most common form of ‘autonomous vehicular mobility’. Its growing working-class image was reinforced through the sight of men and women cycling to and from work. In 1923 a
Cycling editorial observed, ‘One of the striking features of the present season is the great increase in the numbers of ladies among the cyclists on the road. The increase is largely disproportionately to the general advance of the pastime this year, and it is a matter for particular satisfaction.’ In 1923, the same year, it had been estimated that there were 5 million cyclists in the country, a figure that rose to 10 to 12 million by 1939. This growth had been reflected in the manufacturing of bicycles. Despite a dip from the boom in 1896 to 1912, output almost trebled between 1924 and 1937 when 2,057,000 bicycles were built. One innovation was the lightweight bicycle, which was particularly suited to female riders, thus reflecting the growing market for women cyclists, although it’s likely that many women bought bicycles from a thriving second-hand market.

An increase in the number of clubs and the membership of governing bodies mirrored cycling’s growth. In 1934 it was estimated that there were over 100,000 cyclists who were members of various organized bodies. The number of clubs affiliated to the National Cyclists’ Union had doubled over the interwar years, from 836 in 1926 to 1,790 by 1936, and its membership similarly expanded over the same period from 24,500 to 55,930. From its peak in 1899 of 60,000, membership of the Cyclists’ Touring Club had dropped to 8,546 by 1918, but numbers grew steadily thereafter. Membership reached 20,000 in 1925 and then 38,000 in 1936.

The expansion of cycling was also a key agency in the development of the outdoor – or ‘back to the countryside’ – movement. Cycling both complemented and buttressed the growth of camping and the later creation of the Youth Hostels Association (YHA) in 1930.

**Despite cycling’s suitability for rural recreation,** The First World War gave a boost to women’s cycling. The sheer visibility of increasing numbers of women riding...
their bikes to work gave cycling, as a female activity, a greater legitimacy. By 1916, following the imposition of military conscription and increased industrial activity, almost half the workforce was made up of women with many cycling to work in munitions factories. Other than munitions it was the service sector that saw the biggest increase in female workers, especially in London. In 1923 a Cycling editorial observed, ‘One of the striking features of the present season is the great increase in the numbers of ladies among the cyclists on the road. The increase is largely disproportionately to the general advance of the pastime this year, and it is a matter for particular satisfaction.’

London led the way in these developments largely due to the efforts of one woman, Mabel Hodgson. Hodgson was a great organiser as well as a modernizer, and before her unfortunate and untimely death in 1921, she was cycling’s ‘most outstanding feminine figure’. She was a member of the Cyclist’s Touring Club (CTC) who later became the only female member on its national council and the only woman on the Road Improvement Committee. In addition, she advocated ‘rational dress’ for female cyclists and also wrote a column in Cycling. Her most significant achievement was the ‘Ladies’ Cyclists’ Rally’. It was first run in May 1916 under the auspices of the CTC’s Metropolitan District Association, which Hodgson basically ran on her own single-handedly. By 1921 around 1,000 riders attended the rally; it also, although these also included men, although they had to be accompanied by a female cyclist. The London rally later spawned imitators in Lancashire and Leicestershire. In the same year Hodgson had organized a 106-mile all-female run from London to Findon near the Sussex coast. The 28 ‘hard-riding’ ‘feminine space-eaters’, all ‘rationally attired’, set off from the Royal Albert Hall at 7.00 am, and aimed to return 12 hours later; the youngest member of the party was 17.
By 1936 there was clear evidence of a growth in the number of female cyclists. It was estimated that more than 10 per cent of the CTC’s 38,000 members were women, while out of the NCU’s 50,000 members nearly 20 per cent were women. Highlighting how their stock had risen, four out of the 23 members of the CTC council were female. The profile of women’s cycling was given a further boost by the exploits of Billie Dovey (nee Fleming). In 1938 Dovey, then a 24 year old typist, cycled a record 29,603.4 miles in a calendar year, a record for a woman. A member of the Southern Ladies’ Road Club, she became inspired by the emerging health and fitness movement, and in particular the Women’s League of Health and Beauty’s principles of moderate daily exercise. Her motivations were threefold. First, she just loved cycling. Second, she ‘wanted to do something to encourage more women to ride bicycles as a simple and easy means of keeping fit, and also to see women’s cycling in a more flourishing and respected position’. In her self-appointed role as ‘the national advocate for women to cycle for health and fitness’, she became a celebrity and her exploits received nationwide media attention. Third, she was also a professional cyclist and was known as the ‘Rudge-Whitworth Keep-Fit Girl’ as it was their bike she rode and hence advertised, and meant she had to give up her amateur status. It was a radical departure from the image of Victorian female cyclists, but by the 1930s women cycling long distances, and in shorts, had become part of the cycling scene.

Despite women cycling in greater numbers, or because of it, debates over the appropriateness of women’s cycling continued throughout the period. How far should they ride, what should they wear and how should they ride were still central questions for some men and women. In general, though, these debates increasingly challenged and defied implicit Victorian notions about both a woman’s medical limits
and femininity as well as a woman's role in society. There had been increasing medical evidence that exercise was beneficial to the health of women. The body was increasingly seen as a machine that needed maintenance through exercise. Moreover, during the late nineteenth century the sheer visibility of fit, active women had challenged the discourse of the 'eternally wounded woman' and that physical exercise was essential for women to produce healthy babies. Instead, debate now shifted around the vigour and intensity of female exercise, although even here the opinions of doctors was guided by cultural preference for 'refined women'.

It was beyond dispute even before the inter-war period that women could cycle long distances. The leading female cyclist of the late nineteenth century was Maggie Foster. Foster was a member of the Gaiety Cycling Club, named after the London theatre where she worked. In 1903 she rode to London to Brighton and back in a record, 5 hours 36 minutes 45 seconds; a record that would last over thirty years. From the late nineteenth century, Yorkshire Road Club female members had ridden in 12-hour time-trials. In 1908, it was claimed that Nellie Rodgers completed 356 miles in 24 hours, a few weeks after leaving hospital following a serious operation. In that same year, Kate Green, a member of the Leeds Road Club who rode regularly against men in club events, twice rode over 300 miles in 24 hours. It was noted that she showed no signs of distress, which was a common complaint and justification to oppose women undertaking vigorous exercise. By the inter-war years, feats of female long-distance were regularly reported in the cycling press. In 1924 a Miss L. F. Kemp of Kensall Rise in London had cycled 6,200 miles, while Mrs du Heaume, a CTC member from Great Missenden, had nearly doubled that total at 12,094 miles.
However, while riding long-distances at an even pace became regarded as an acceptable activity for women, there was still opposition to competitive sport. In 1925 the NCU had permitted track racing for women racing, but it did not meet with universal approval. Track racing placed an emphasis on speed and hence a greater danger and chance of accidents. Even for the usually supportive Cycling — or at least its editor — the prospect of women injured when racing was a step too far. As much as what constituted the breaching of notions of feminine behaviour, it was perhaps the possibility of damage to cycling’s wider reputation from images and reports of women riders injured while racing that shaped attitudes.\(^{45}\)

Writing in the early 1920s, ‘Cora’, ‘an experienced lady rider of proved speed abilities’, was adamantly opposed. Women racing was ‘absurd’ — ‘cheapening womanhood’ — as ‘[e]very natural instinct is against girls taking up racing’ while girls should only be competitive in the field of protecting the weak from injury. She gladly admitted she was writing from a Victorian perspective, as someone who abhorred the prospect of open-mouthed women with ‘foam-flecked lips’ and perspiring bodies. Rather than cultivate speed, consistent riding should be the aim for women, reflecting wider ideas of moderation. It was as much a generational response, as one based on middle-class amateur sensibilities.\(^{46}\)

Complementing debates over the suitability of cycling as a sport were those regarding women’s cycling attire. At the start of the interwar years These debates were over female cycling fashion had been similarly firmly fixed within middle-class parameters with a focus on respectability and the benefits of wearing rational dress — a kind of de facto uniform — rather than skirts and dresses. During the inter-war years, however, the movement for dress reform gained traction, which advocated lighter clothing and for more exposure of the skin to sunshine.\(^{47}\) By the 1930s, shorts
had become part of the female cycling uniform. Given the context, this transformation in female cycling attire was startling. At the start of the interwar years, debates over female cycling fashion had been firmly fixed within middle-class parameters with a focus on respectability and the benefits of wearing rational dress rather than skirts and dresses. By the 1930s one A _1930_ cover of Cycling was adorned with six women at the seaside riding their bikes – one with her feet on the handlebars – in their bathing costumes. It reflected not only a loosening of social conventions, but the popularity of cycling among working-class women and girls. Unable to afford the expensive cycling attire ‘uniforms’ that middle-class female writers often prescribed, practicality was the most important factor in what they wore.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska has outlined how general shifts in interwar fashion were part of the construction of modern femininity that, along with the quest for a fit and healthy body, also included mass-produced beauty products. In the 1920s the Flapper look had been in vogue. Hemlines rose and women cut their hair short and there was a preference for a slender figure. By the 1930s a shift back to glamour brought an emphasis on broad shoulders and a return of waists. But rather than being superficial, ‘[t]his transformation of women’s appearance went beyond adornment, and the popularity of fitness activities points towards a widespread desire among women to acquire a beautiful, healthy and fit modern body’.

Women of all social classes embraced new fashions and beauty products. Adornment, including the use of make-up, was also promoted for female cyclists. By the late thirties cycling figures were keen to emphasise the link between cycling and beauty, something that was underlined by a series of features on the subject in Cycling. A book, _Beauty on a Bicycle_, written by Ann Seymour (the author of _Women and Beauty_) was also published in 1939 with further hints on protecting the skin from
the weather. It was issued free by BSA bicycles and highlighted the importance of women’s cycling to the industry at the time.51 A male journalist, Alex Josey (aka ‘KMD’), also felt compelled to give his thoughts on the subject arguing that through cycling ‘fitness does mean beauty’.52 In another Cycling article, ‘Beauty on Wheels’, while claiming ‘that cycling is paramount among sports, as a way to beauty’, it also gave tips on how female cyclists could ‘make their looks a little more pleasing while actually in the process of cycling’. Tips included using hairgrips and applying vanishing cream to protect the complexion, while make-up was to be used sparingly. Bringing the emphasis back to health more generally, it was concluded that ‘The real secret of how to look your best when you cycle does not lie entirely in make-up. The best thing you can do for your looks is to have a really good time.’53 Nevertheless, not all female cyclists were enamoured with the focus on fashion and beauty. In 1939, a female reader from Liverpool concurred, and was scathing at the paternalism of Billie Dovey’s articles on fashion and on being told what to wear. She was, however, ‘thrilled with the pages of ladies’ races and photographs of stars and also with good sensible articles on touring, racing, etc., by fellow girl-cyclists’, but added ‘please do away with these soppy feminine articles on personal matters, and if I ever see anything about make-up I’ll stop my order for Cycling right away.’55

Cycling and Female Athleticism
While cycling was a mass activity during the inter-war years, it remained a minor sport. In general, it struggled for coverage when compared to the national sports of football and cricket. However, it had its own faithful band of followers, who consumed the sport through various publications, but mainly *Cycling*. The sport of women’s cycling, like the men’s in this period, was largely based around the unpaced time trial. The sport of road cycling in Britain had had a different historical trajectory to that in Europe where the main form of the sport was massed-start races such as the Tour de France and the Giro d’Italia. The unpaced time trial was invented in 1895 mainly due to safety concerns over the congestion of bicycles on the roads. Track racing had also been popular in the Victorian period and there was also a tradition for challenging long-distance records such as Land’s End to John O’Groats. A governing body, the National Cyclists’ Union was formed in 1878. It catered for both amateur and professional cycling, but it strictly enforced its amateur regulations. Like other sporting bodies at this time, female athletes were excluded and there was no governing body solely for or run by women, although the Cyclists’ Touring Club had admitted women from its inception in 1878.

Competitive sport acted as a marker of modernity in itself and the sport of women’s cycling emerged against the backdrop of an increase in organised female sport during the inter-war period. Whereas women’s sport in the pre-1914 period was largely confined to the middle classes in the south, after 1918 this expansion was across the classes and throughout the country. In 1921 the Women’s Amateur Athletic Association was formed and within four years it had had 235,000 members with over 500 clubs, while two years later the Women’s Amateur Rowing Association was formed. In cricket the southern-dominated and middle-class Women’s Cricket Association was established in 1926, while the English Women’s Cricket Federation
– an amalgamation of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Women’s Cricket Federations – was formed in 1934 and catered for working-class women in the North.\textsuperscript{60} The most spectacular example – albeit briefly – of the growth in women’s sport during and after the war was football among the working classes. Around 150 teams emerged out of the factories across the country, the most famous being Dick, Kerr’s Ladies from Preston.\textsuperscript{61}

The post-war growth of female recreational cyclists had not been lost on cycling’s establishment. It was noted prophetically that ‘[t]hey are riding faster, farther, and better than before and it scarcely requires a prophet to foresee the day when the speed and stamina of wheelwomen will be tested in competition’.\textsuperscript{62} The most striking sporting example of the early post-war period was the formation of a female-only road racing club, Rosslyn Ladies’ Cycling Club in 1922. Its members were mainly from working-class parts of North and East London, such as Forest Gate, Tottenham, Hackney and West Ham, while the club’s first president was Lady de Freece, better known as the music-hall star Vesta Tilley.\textsuperscript{63} They were described by Arthur Cook as ‘a well-run band of real tough ladies who could do the miles and sometimes the speed of a good many male cyclists’. He was well qualified to give an opinion as he later married one of these ‘hard-riding bunch of girls’, Nellie Kimmance.\textsuperscript{64}

The exact motivations behind the club’s formation are not known, but it may have been the desire to escape male prejudice towards female cyclists. Cycling clubs had mixed attitudes and policies towards the admittance of female members, partly because many men regarded clubs as masculine republics and sites solely for male sociability. Many clubs did accept and welcome female members, but any tensions usually revolved around the notion that women were too oriented more
towards social activities, such as dances and concerts, than sport. In 1922, for example, Watford CC admitted women after ‘a close vote’ while the Nomads (Hitchin) CC admitted women from its foundation in 1931. By contrast, the Forest CC was formed in 1900 and had initially been a mixed-sex club, but in 1912 it decided to exclude women. Similarly, the formation of the Essex Roads CC in 1903 had essentially been a breakaway from the then fashionable Walthamstow Town CC, which had both male and female members but did not cater for the needs of those members who were much keener on racing. As a result, an all-male amateur racing club was formed, initially made up of young men from Walthamstow. These attitudes persisted deep into the twentieth century. In 1944 the Manchester Road Racing Club, which was affiliated to the British League of Racing Cyclists, forced two women out of the club, just because they were women. Joyce Renshaw and Lillian Rea had been among the first members of this relatively new club who typically undertook many of its administrative duties. The majority of male members ‘did not mind females in the club’, but a handful called a meeting to vote on an all-male club. The vote initially went in favour of the women, but then the men in question threatened to resign from the club and the majority of the members caved in, forcing the women to leave. It was a rare event and not well received in cycling ranks with the club’s action condemned as ‘selfish and unsportsmanlike’ in a strongly worded editorial in The Bicycle.

The membership of Rosslyn Ladies’ Cycling Club stabilized at around 50 during the interwar years. Other all-female clubs followed, although they were relatively few in number. In 1933 another London club was formed, Ross Wheelers Ladies CC, later followed by Southern Ladies CC. In the following year, it was reported that an all-female club had been formed in Torquay, while another women-
only club established in Birmingham had been inspired by Rosslyn Ladies. A Scottish equivalent was the Heatherbell Ladies’ CC of Dundee, formed in 1929. By 1934 it had 60 members, including three-times Scottish champion Mary Stewart. The ‘Bells’ also claimed that their activities – track racing, road racing, touring and social functions – ‘excel in enthusiasm, execution and reputation, to no small degree, that of several men’s clubs in Scotland’.74

Sport was at the heart of ‘Rosslyn’ from its origins and it held both open and closed time trials. By 1942 there were club records for 10, 25, 30, 50 and 100 miles, plus 12 hours for a single bicycle and 12 hours for a tandem. The club’s annual open 12-hour time trial became a de facto English women’s championship. In 1929 it was won by W. Stansell for a distance of 195 miles and 6 furlongs, and was described in a full-page report as a ‘neck and neck struggle between the first three’.75 The race, its times and locations had been advertised in the daily newspapers. It not only reflected a certain curiosity among the lay press about women’s sport, but also drew criticism because of unwanted publicity for time trials and the damage that may have caused to cycling more generally.76 Club members raced across the country, including Ireland, and on the track. Nellie Kimmance won a silver teaspoon as a prize at Herne Hill in a Ladies Only track race, which she was still using in the 1980s. But the social side was also important – the club had both racing and social secretaries – especially club runs on the weekends, which started from the Wilfred Lawson Temperance Hotel in Woodford. It also had its own camp in the village of Ugley in Essex on the A11, near to where it started its time trials. Interestingly, even in 1947, it was stipulated that male visitors were only allowed on to the site between 7.30 pm and 9.30 pm on Saturday evenings.77 Even in 1947 the shadow of Mrs Grundy was still evident as male visitors were only allowed on to the camp site between 7.30 pm and 9.30 pm on
Unsurprisingly perhaps as the membership of Rosslyn Ladies hardly changed, the number of married women increased. In 1942 around 60 per cent of the members were married, increasing to 75 per cent five years later. Even before the 1940s, By 1930 it was noted that in general ‘racing girls are increasing in number with great rapidity’. A clutch of record-breaking female cyclists also emerged whose feats received a great deal of press coverage. Moreover, there were also four professional cyclists by 1939. The first was Lillian Dredge who In 1935 she attempted the Land’s End to John O’Groats record. Riding (and advertising) a Claud Butler bike, in 1936 she set a new 24-hour record at 342 miles. In 1934 she had taken part in an international massed-start race over 54.5 miles on Belgium pavé, but was forced to retire after falling off on a number of occasions. Their media profile represented a stark contrast from that of women cyclists in the early 1920s. These cyclists epitomized modern women. They were described in various terms as athletic and were frequently pictured in sporting outfits: the time trial uniform of black alpaca jacket and tights and in typical cycle racing poses: hunched over the handlebars, which emphasized their sporting prowess. Moreover, in purely commercial terms, it highlighted the growth in the women’s bicycle market. The first was Lillian Dredge. In 1935 she attempted the Land’s End to John O’Groats record. Riding (and advertising) a Claud Butler bike, in 1936 she set a new 24-hour record at 342 miles. In 1934 she had taken part in an international massed-start race over 54.5 miles on Belgium pavé, but was forced to retire after falling off on a number of occasions.

In 1934 the Women’s Road Records Association (WRRA) was formed. It marked an important moment in the formalisation of the sport of women’s cycling in Britain as it provided a framework and structure for competition as well as a central
focus for athletes and clubs. Like the men’s equivalent, the Road Records Association, it gave an official stamp of approval to record attempts, which were largely based on men’s distance records. By 1940 the WRRA had 15 affiliated clubs with three all-female clubs and the committee was largely composed of prominent female cycling figures, including Dredge and Wilson herself. The following year the Scottish Women’s Cycling Association was formed. Unlike the WRRA it was the governing body for both women’s track and road racing. By 1936 it had 30 individual members and was organising a programme of races. Some male-dominated clubs affiliated to the SWCA and also scheduled female races on their calendars, while in 1939 several all-male clubs relaxed their ban on female members.

With the growth in women’s cycling there was a corresponding increase in their presence of female journalists in cycling journals, giving women’s cycling a greater cultural legitimacy. The WRRA itself was dominated by journalists. Its first president was Mrs H. W. Parkes, aka the journalist ‘Petronella’, while Jessie Springall, its secretary and treasurer, also wrote for Cycling. Mabel Hodgson had been an journalists, while in 1930 Cycling began a column in Cycling, ‘Femina’s Page’, was devoted to female cycling. Billie Dovey, on the back of her record-breaking exploits, later wrote regular articles in Cycling on a variety of subjects such as female cycling fashions and advice on how women should cycle. Nevertheless, media representations of female cyclists were mixed, mainly because cycling was a male-dominated sport. During 1939, one regular feature in Cycling, ‘People in the News’, invariably included a woman, while a regular cartoon concerned the cycling adventures of the blond-haired and curvy ‘Connie Nentle’, who had a passing resemblance to Marguerite Wilson. While it reflected a certain modernity in how the
image of women’s cycling had changed with the character wearing shorts, the cartoon character's curvy figure was also suggestive and reinforced perceptions of women as sexual objects. However, as Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues, this image needs to be set alongside female cyclists and other athletes 'who invoked modernity, health, and fun rather than erotic appeal'. More broadly, 'it was this transformation that made it possible for respectable women to appear in public in revealing outfits unthinkable a generation earlier.\textsuperscript{88}

- although to have a 'curvy figure' was a desire of many women during this period.

Women’s cycling reached a high-point in 1939. There were a number of significant landmarks in addition to Marguerite Wilson’s achievements. In particular, more women were competing than ever before. It had not escaped the attention of the cycling authorities and a June Cycling editorial noted that ‘The most noteworthy news in road time-trial circles at the moment is the tremendous interest of the girls’ and that it welcomed ‘these speedy, fit girls into the game’.\textsuperscript{89} A month later the same editorial was advocating the idea for an all-women track meeting, noting that it would ‘attract the crowd because of its novelty’.\textsuperscript{90} In one weekend in June 1939 six all-female events were staged, which included 10- and 25-mile time trials, with over 150 women competing. It was claimed to be the ‘Biggest Week-end of Women’s Road Sport’.\textsuperscript{91} By July, the Yorkshire Cycling Federation Open Ladies’ 25-mile time trial had attracted a ‘remarkable entry’ of 55. The event was won by Madge Ball of the Yorkshire Road Club who was Wilson’s main rival, although she would remain an amateur whilst Wilson turned professional.\textsuperscript{92} During the war, like many others, women’s cycling as a sport declined in quantity, if not initially in quality, although
ironically because of the demise of men’s cycling, the women received proportionately greater coverage in *Cycling*.

**Marguerite Wilson: Pioneering Professional**

In 1939 Marguerite Wilson became the first woman to hold a National Cyclists’ Union professional licence. Given cycling’s strict regulations on professionalism, it meant that she could never return to amateur competition. It was an important moment in the history of women’s cycling. Her background and entry into cycling had been typical of the period. She was born in March 1918 in Parkstone, near Poole Harbour, and came from an upwardly mobile working-class/lower-middle-class background. Her father was a joiner and the family soon moved to Bournemouth, then in Hampshire, where Marguerite gained a place at Brockenhurst County School. A talented all-round athlete, she represented the school at netball, hockey and tennis, but was most successful at athletics. She had no thoughts about competitive cycling at this stage and she said that her role model was the American, ‘Babe’ Didrikson Zakharias who won gold medals in the 80 metres hurdles and the javelin at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, before eventually becoming the leading female golfer of her era.

Like many other women, Wilson was introduced to cycling by a boy who had invited her to ride a tandem. Soon after, in 1934, she joined Bournemouth Arrow Cycling Club, which had a strong female racing tradition. She began racing the following year, while also enjoying club life more generally, which included club runs and its social activities. Initially, Wilson competed in 10- and 25-mile time trials, but
in 1937 she won all eight of her time trials, including the Rosslyn Ladies 12-hour time trial. Typical of the amateur ethos, she like other competitors had to make their own arrangements to race venues, which could involve camping out the night before. She also rode the same bicycle she used for club-riding. In 1938, after changing jobs, she joined West Croydon Wheelers and broke a number of WRRA records, which brought her to national attention. These included: the London to York (10 hours, 54 minutes); the 100 miles record (4 hours, 31 minutes, 8 seconds); and the 12 hours record (215 miles).

In 1939 Wilson was awarded a full-time professional contract by the Hercules Cycle and Motor Company, at the time the largest bicycle manufacturer in the world. She was one of six riders on its books, but the only female. In 1939 there were 13 professionals in the country. From 1934 there had been a ‘record-breaking war between the big cycle making companies’—a ‘craze’ was not dissimilar to the short-lived boom in track racing during the 1890s. The year before, Frank Southall, then Britain’s most popular cyclist, had been employed-recruited by Hercules to attack Road Records Association (RRA) marks, but faced opposition from the Australian, Hubert Opperman who rode for BSA. Opperman later became the first recipient of the Bidlake Memorial Prize following his record-breaking Land’s End to John O’Groats and 1,000 miles ride in 1934. The following year he returned with two Australian team mates who regularly swapped RRA records with Southall.

In joining Hercules, Wilson was arguably Britain’s first full-time professional female athlete. In the 19th century, there had been numerous examples of female sporting entertainers who had earning money from sport. In 1880, for example, the natationist, Agnes Beckwith completed a 100-hours swim in six days and also competed in races against other female swimmers. Women’s cycling racing had
been held in London in the 1890s, while earlier in 1889 at Seaton Delaval in Northumberland, five American female cyclists competed against local male champions. Later, the motor racing driver Dorothy Levitt was sponsored by Selwyn Edge, an Australian entrepreneur and racing driver, and earned a living from her writing. In 1920 Zetta Hills, both an entrepreneur and performer, unsuccessfully attempted to cross the English Channel on her ‘Zetta Hills Water-Cycle’. Billie Dovey was also a professional cyclist, but her arrangement with Rudge-Whitworth was based more on publicity for a national fitness campaign rather than specifically chasing sporting records. Whereas the financial arrangements for these female athletes and performers owed as much to informal arrangements and penny capitalism, Wilson was formally under contract to a company who paid her a salary in a strict sporting capacity; in this case to break cycling records. In 1940, indicating her commercial worth, Wilson joined another bicycle manufacturer, Claud Butler, after Hercules switched to war production. Moreover, she had her own advisers. At Hercules her manager was Bill Bailey, the former track cycling world champion, while a friend, Charlie Davey, advised her at Claud Butler.

As a full-time professional, Wilson was now subject to a strict training regime, which further highlighted professional-amateur differences. Training for Wilson had usually comprised of cycling to and from work, both in Kent and Bournemouth. When she was living in Kent she would also cycle to Bournemouth and back over a weekend, a total distance of around 250 miles. She sometimes rode during the night arriving in Bournemouth at 3am, which with the relative freedom of the road was typical of the time. Training with Hercules was under the supervision of Frank Southall, now its racing manager. He established a training camp at a hotel, Winter Garden, in Kingston-upon-Thames where Wilson spent around 4 to 5 hours on her
bicycle on local roads, typically riding 75 miles a day. When the weather was inclement, she and fellow Hercules riders trained indoors on bicycle rollers. The team also had its own masseur and trainer, Charles Fearnley, who was renowned for his expertise in physical training. A training room was also fitted out with a massage-couch and a heating lamp, reflecting modern sports medicine.

Southall put a great deal of thought and preparation into each record attempt, which included reconnaissance trips by riders, finding the fastest course for some records and also waiting for a tail-wind. Wilson’s attempt on the Land’s End to John O’Groats record between 29 August to 1 September 1939 was similarly carefully planned, although an anticipated tail wind did not materialise and instead she faced a strong head wind. She was supported by two coaches, her team mate Harry ‘Shake’ Earnshaw, a doctor and a chef with a mobile canteen as well as a caravan, which she used for rest; she spent 10.5 hours off the bike, with 3.5 hours taken up with sleeping. While she stopped for meals, she was also handed food on her bike. She was also accompanied throughout by a film crew along with WRRA officials.

Throughout 1939, in preparation for long-distance rides, Wilson herself deliberately went to bed late to familiarise her with sleep deprivation, and sometimes rode from Kingston to Bournemouth on two hours sleep. Along the route, as per tradition, she was assisted by local cycling clubs whose presence was designed to boost her morale, although they were not allowed to pace her. In order to combat the inevitable psychological battle of loneliness, she tried to maintain a cheery disposition ‘and not worry unduly about the ride I had in front of me’. In 1938 Lillian Dredge had set the women’s ‘End-to-End’ record at 3 days, 20 hours and 54 minutes, Wilson’s time for the 870 miles was 2 days 20 hours and 52 minutes. She then went on to complete the 1,000 miles in 3 days 11 hours and 44 minutes.
To a certain extent, Wilson’s achievements led to some re-assessment of women’s athletic potential. Up until then only four men had ridden beaten her time for the End-to-End faster: – Harry Green, Jack Rossiter, Hubert Opperman and Sid Ferris. – and only two – Opperman and Ferris had ridden the 1,000 miles faster. Charles Fearnley, for example, was convinced that women had more endurance than men in general. A Cycling editorial noted approvingly that Wilson was ‘reducing the gap between the respective [RRA and WRRA] record lists and this in spite of the fact that concurrently with her efforts there are record performances of super quality … on the men’s RRA books’. In the Daily Herald, BW Best observed that, in Wilson, he had ‘seen a girl .. ride great distances uphill and down at great speeds, which would seriously incommode 99 out of 100 non-racing men cyclists who fancy themselves as riders’. Later, given her condition when she reached John O’Groats there was speculation on how close she could get to the men’s records. Further highlighting shifting perceptions of a female athlete’s physical capabilities, one Daily Herald headline referred to her as ‘Machine-Like Miss Wilson’.

Nevertheless, views on women’s sport and their physiological capacity within a sporting context continued to vary in this period. At the 1928 Olympics, for example, there had been criticism of the women’s 800 metres because it was felt that some of the athletes had finished in a distressed state. As a consequence, this event was not put back on the programme until 1960. Between 1938 and 1939 the National Fitness Council established a medical sub-committee on the ‘Desirability of Athletics for Women and Girls’. An investigation ensued that revolved around the effect of competitive sport and certain events on a women’s menstrual cycle and, as a consequence, the ability to bear children. It did not find any
substantial evidence that competitive and strenuous sport was dangerous to the
health of female athletes, but there was a continuing sense of patriarchal prudery
amongst male doctors that violent exercise was just not right for women.\textsuperscript{112}

Adolphe Abrahams, a pioneer of sports medicine, had been the chair of this
medical sub-committee and had opposed all forms of violent exercise for women.
Instead, he advocated sports, such as golf, tennis and swimming, which
characterized ‘grace, lightness and rhythmicity’, while serious competition induced
aggressiveness at the expense of a woman’s ‘softness and ductility’.\textsuperscript{113} However, by
1938, he was of the opinion that competitive cycling ‘was not harmful to the nervous
system.’ Furthermore, highlighting how female cyclists were being perceived as
serious athletes, Abrahams examined, from a physiological perspective, both Jessie
Springall and Lillian Dredge (both photographed in a bathing costume) following
long-distance rides and concluded that despite their exertions there was nothing
amiss with them.\textsuperscript{114}

Thus, stereotypes of female athletes were constantly in flux during the thirties,
which were reflected in media representations of Wilson herself. Given the
predictable sobriquet, ‘the Blonde Bombshell’ – there were invariably references
to her blonde or ‘flaxen’ hair in the media – it was perhaps unsurprising that bicycle
companies exploited her appearance.\textsuperscript{115} As Zweiniger-Bargielowska points out there
had been a shift towards glamour during the 1930s and Wilson personified a modern
England of fashion- and health-conscious young women workers.\textsuperscript{116} During the inter-
war years there was an increase in the use of female athletes in advertisements.
More generally, the use of athletes by advertisers reflected the close link between
sport and modernity. By employing a professional rider to advertise their products,
Hercules and then Claud Butler were capitalizing on the growth in numbers of female
cyclists. Women fitted the dominant image used by advertisers, which Skillen asserts was ‘without exception one of a young attractive, fashionably dressed and feminine woman located within a modern setting’.¹¹⁷

Wilson was represented in two main guises, partly because manufacturers had to satisfy different markets, as well as reflecting the contradictory forces between modern notions of femininity and traditional perceptions of a woman’s place in society. First, there were action shots of Wilson wearing the racing uniform of a black alpaca jacket and black tights, which were used in advertisements for the bicycle she was riding. It confirmed her image as a serious, modern professional athlete, and at the same time, reflecting a bourgeoning female athleticism. Second, in addition to her racing, she had an ambassadorial role for bicycle companies and to garner further publicity, she would appear at various functions. In order to satisfy the mass market, she was also photographed in more softer settings, which lent themselves to more traditional notions of femininity. In one such photograph, it was stated that ‘She is a devotee of wide open spaces, an attractive blonde with delightfully natural complexion who feels equally at home on a dance floor, a tennis court, or in a swimming pool, as when she is pedalling at full speed’.¹¹⁸ In 1940 Claud Butler produced a postcard of her smiling and waving, riding a bicycle for pleasure in shorts, reflecting the attire of the time.¹¹⁹ Inevitably perhaps a growing acceptance of the athletic merits of female cyclists was mixed with less modern male views. On the 1941 BBC programme The Health Value of Cycling, Alex Josey (KMD) claimed, ‘As for cycling causing girls to have fat or round shoulders, or muscular legs – well it’s not so. Look at Marguerite Wilson, the fastest girl cyclist in the country. She holds the 1,000 mile and other records and can even beat some of the men. But she is essentially feminine and I can tell you she has some very shapely legs.’¹²⁰
As much as her contribution to cycling, cycling also aided Wilson’s own social mobility. As Todd has argued financial autonomy contributed to a new lifestyle for young women, one different to their mothers. Her parents were from a working-class/ lower-middle-class background and she had won a place at an all-girl county grammar school. On leaving school, she began work as a secretary with the Marely Tile Company in Poole. In 1938 she took up an offer of a job in Sevenoaks before embarking on her professional cycling career. As a result of her earnings from cycling, she wanted to own a car – a major signifier of middle-class status in the thirties – but failed her driving test. In light of wartime conditions, she had stopped being a professional cyclist by 1942 when she joined the British Overseas Airways Corporation as a steward. She was later promoted to traffic officer with responsibility for planning flights. In 1948 she moved to Canada with her husband, Ronnie Stone, who was a BOAC pilot. On returning to England she was forced to give up cycling due to a spinal injury and took up the middle-class sport of golf where she played off a handicap of four. She played in mother and daughter tournaments with her daughter, Beverly, who went on to represent England as a junior and Hampshire.

Conclusion

Between 1918 and 1939 women’s cycling was transformed. At the start of the period, it was a largely niche activity for women, by the end it had produced a national superstar in the form of Marguerite Wilson. Not only were more women riding a bicycle as a form of transport and leisure activity, but cycling was now a bourgeoning
sport complete with its own governing body and records list to act as a focus. Moreover, through her feats, Wilson gave women’s both a national visibility and respectability amongst men. Indeed Wilson’s performances were infinitely superior to the vast majority of men.

During this period, women’s cycling also acted as an agent in the construction of the modern female body. Wilson’s career more generally was a reflection of the broader social and economic changes in the status of women. A growth in women’s sport had been one outcome of these developments. Physical culture more generally led to the emergence of a more assertive and vigorous femininity, while cycling also offered new opportunities for mixed sex-sociability. However, as Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued, while there was a narrowing of gender differences more generally, gender roles were not transformed fundamentally.¹²⁵

The legacy of Wilson and her fellow competitors from the 1930s continued into the post-war period through the performances of Eileen Sheridan, who like Wilson turned professional with Hercules and by the mid-1950s would beat all Wilson’s WRRA records, and even more spectacularly, Beryl Burton, arguably Britain’s greatest ever cyclist, male or female. Like Wilson, both won the Bidlake Memorial Prize, and in Burton’s case, she has been the only cyclist to win it three times. Nevertheless, despite the establishment of a Best All-Rounder competition for women in 1948 (the men’s began in 1930), women’s racing continued to lack the strength in depth of the men’s in post-war Britain, and standards actually declined, while it was only in 1958 a women’s world championships was inaugurated. Women’s cycling, like cycling more generally, continued to be a minor sport.
1 Cycling, 17 January 1940, editorial, 67. The prize had only recently been opened up to women.
2 Fiona Skillen, Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain (Oxford: Peter Lange, 2013), 181
7 Jennifer Hargreaves, Sporting females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women’s sports (London: Routledge, 1994), 95.
8 Jennifer Hargreaves, Sporting females: critical issues in the history and sociology of women’s sports (London: Routledge, 1994), 95.
16 Ibid., 198.
20 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body, p. 237.
21 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body, p. 237.
23 Cycling, 24 August 1923, 151.
24 Millward, ‘Factors Contributing to the Success of the UK Cycle Industry, 1870-1939’ (Unpublished PhD: University of Birmingham 1999), 331, 159, Table 2.1.
26 Cycling, 7 December 1934, p. 615.
27 Cycling, 23 December 1936, p. 900.
28 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.328/BU/2/8, National Cyclists' Union Racing Committee, 9 April 1927; National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA) MT 34/131, Accidents, Order of the Road, Cyclists' Touring Club and National Cyclists' Union-Joint Committee Report; NCU, National Cyclists' Union Committees-MSS.328 BU 2 8-Conference of Centre Officials 20 April 1929; TNA/ED 113/74, National Fitness Council – Minutes, Papers and Reports. Voluntary Organisations, The National Cyclists' Union.
29 MSS.328/C, Cyclists' Touring Club Historical Landmarks; Daily Mail, 11 August 1938, 8.
30 Michael Cunningham, 'Ethos and Politics in the Youth Hostels Association (YHA) in the 1930s', Contemporary British History, 30, no. 2 (2016), 177-202; "Two Wheels Bad"? The Status of Cycling the Youth Hostels Association of England and Wales in the 1930s, Transfers, 8, no. 2 (2018), 1-22.
31 Cycling, 24 August 1923, 141.
32 Cycling, 15 September, 218, obituary. She died on 7 September a few hours after a fall from her bicycle following a collision with a pedestrian who was walking on the road. Cyclists' Touring Gazette, October 1921, 200.
33 Cyclists' Touring Gazette, October 1921, 194.
34 The Times, 14 September 1921, 5
35 Cycling, 8 July 1936, 68-9.
36 Fiona Skillen, 'Fleming [née Bartram; First Married Name Dovey]', in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, [Published online: 15 February 2018].
37 Cycling, 15 June 1938, 857.
38 Hendon and Finchley Times, 4 March 1938, 10.
41 Cycling, 19 April 1939, 548-9, 555.
42 Cycling, 8 December 1921, 450; 3 July 1935, p. 231.
43 Cycling, 26 February 1936, 253.
44 Cycling, 30 January 1925, p. 86.
45 Cycling, 24 November 1921, 387.
46 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body, 223.
47 Cycling, 15 August 1930, cover page.
48 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body, 239.
50 Cycling, 12 April 1939, 528.
51 Cycling, 15 February 1939, 202-3.
52 Cycling, 1 February 1939, 143.
53 Cycling, 19 April 1939, editorial.
54 Cycling, 26 July 1939, 121.
55 Cycling was first published in 1891. It has proved to be cycling's most enduring publication, despite some name changes such as briefly in the late nineteenth century, Cycling & Motting, and Cycling & Mopeds, briefly in the late 1950s. In 1896 it was selling 41,000 copies per week. By 1925 weekly sales topped 57,000 and continued to rise during the interwar years: 14 April 1933 – 64,762; Summer, 1934 – 79,000; 1935, weekly average, 82,000.


*Cycling*, 2 June 1921, 411.


*MSS.328/N57/3/1/5*, 'Cycling Memories of Arthur Cook'.

*Cycling*, 19 January 1922, 44.


*Cycling*, 19 January 1951, 74.

*MSS.328/N7/1/30*, History of Essex Roads Cycling Club, 1953.

*The Bicycle*, 1 March 1944.

*The Bicycle*, 15 March 1944.

71 In 1929, membership was 54; 1932, 48; 1942, 54, 1947, 47, 1955, 60. *MSS.328/M/249*, ‘Rosslyn Ladies’ CC'; *MSS.328/M/1333*.

*Cycling*, 17 March 1933, 270.

*Cycling*, 2 February 1934, 107; *Birmingham Gazette*, 1 March 1934, 13.

*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 23 February 1934, 7; *Cycling*, 9 March 1934, 232; 16 February 1934, 162. Rosslyn Ladies was run by a committee of 13 members.

*Cycling*, 30 August 1929, 192.

Ibid., 185.


http://www.classiclightweights.co.uk/clubs-reminiscences.html (Accessed 19 February 2015). Even in 1947 the shadow of Mrs Grundy was still evident as male visitors were only allowed on to the camp site between 7.30 pm and 9.30 pm on Saturday evenings.

*MSS.328/M/249*, 'Rosslyn Ladies’ CC'; *MSS.328/M/1333*.

*Cycling*, 3 January 1930, 16.

*Hendon and Finchley Times*, 30 December 1938, 3. These included Dovey, Lillian Dredge and Marguerite Wilson, and possibly Jessie Springall., although not all took part in sporting competition.

*Western Morning News*, 18 September 1934, 7; *Cycling*, 8 April 1936, 483.

*Western Morning News*, 18 September 1934, 7; *Cycling*, 8 April 1936, 483.

The records that they ratified were 25 miles; 50 miles; 100 miles; 12 hours; 24 hours; London to York; London to Liverpool; London to Birmingham; London to Bath and back; London to Brighton and back; London to Portsmouth and back; Land’s End to London; Land’s End to John O’Groats; Liverpool to Edinburgh; York to Edinburgh; 1,000 miles; London to Edinburgh; and Edinburgh to Glasgow and back.

*MSS.328/N10/G/F1*, Women’s Road Records Association, Year Book for 1940.

*Cycling*, 9 August 1939, 180-1.

*Cycling*, 12 October 1934, 402. For a further discussion of female cycling journalists, see Cox, ‘Women, Gendered Roles’.

*Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Managing the Body*, 248.

*Cycling*, 21 June 1939, editorial.

*Cycling*, 12 July 1939, editorial.

*Cycling*, 14 June 1939, 874.

After being knocked off her bike in July 1940, she sustained serious injuries and never rode again. She later contracted tuberculosis and died in 1948. William Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson: The story of the first star of women’s cycling told in her own words and those of her admirers* (Self-published: Poole, 2016), 48; *Cycling*, 17 July 1940, 59.
She died in 1972, possibly from cancer. A note written by a researcher at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, stated that she died of cancer and was cremated at Porchester crematorium. *Cycling* 26 June 1940, 568.

The others were two British ‘cracks’ Cyril Heppleston and Harry ‘Shake’ Earnshaw plus three Belgian road racing professionals Richard Kemps, Celestine Riga and Jeff Moerenhout. The others were two British ‘cracks’ Cyril Heppleston and Harry ‘Shake’ Earnshaw plus three Belgian road racing professionals Richard Kemps, Celatine Riga and Jeff Moerenhout. In 1939 there were 13 professionals in the entire country. Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 59. In 1939 there were 13 professionals in the country.


*See Carter, Medicine, Sport and the Body, chapter 6.*

Cycling, 26 July 1939, 110; Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 57.


Cycling, 26 June 1940, 568.


For example, *Far Eastern Review*, 36 (1941), 41. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.


Quoted in Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 76.

*Cycling*, 26 June 1940, 568.


Wilson, *Marguerite Wilson*, 14, 40. In 1936 she had been engaged to John McRae an electrical engineer who was four years her senior.

Daily Herald, 23 August 1939, 14.
