



Pedaling into History

by Alan Clack, assisted by Sheila Whitcombe
Hampshire Constabulary History Society (UK)

Fate is a funny thing and I believe things are meant to happen for a reason. We could talk about fate for the whole of this article. Well, fate came to me in the shape of a dear friend early in February 2006. He explained that West End Museum (near Southampton, UK) was going to be doing a bit of refurbishment and in the exhibits storeroom was an old police bicycle. When the refurbishment was complete, there would be no room for it to be displayed. What was to be done with it? Was I interested in this bicycle?

I was asked to be the new custodian of the old police bicycle - I was over the moon! Why me you may ask? I am an ex-Hampshire Special Constable and in the fifteen years I spent on duty, ten of them were on patrol on a bicycle. I now study the history of police bicycles, from the old beat patrol bikes to the new models, which are very well-equipped Cycle Units. I have a growing collection of police bicycle photos from 1903 up to the present day and a cycle uniforms collection. I am a member of the Hampshire Constabulary History Society as well as Police Car UK (PC-UK) a club which restores and preserves classic police cars.

This particular bicycle has its own great history and with the help of West End Museum I found out most of its story, if not all of it. Luckily PC John Whitcombe had signed the visitors book at the museum and I have the date the bicycle came into the museum in 1998. He had kindly left his address and so I asked members of the Hampshire Constabulary History Society if anyone had any knowledge of the officer. I got a positive response by email and some interesting stories came to light, but as they say, that's another story!

I sent a letter to John Whitcombe at the address in West End and by the next day I received a phone call from Sheila Whitcombe. Sadly she told me that John had passed away in 2005. I told her the story about the cycle and Sheila was more than happy for me to look after her husband's bicycle. She told me that John was given the bicycle in 1967 by a next door neighbour. It was a Raleigh Rudge made in 1961 and I traced this from the Raleigh web sites list of frame numbers and dates they were made. John used the bicycle for beat patrol from Bitterne Police Station right up to his retirement in 1983. He had spent 29 years in the police service, starting in Shirley with the old Southampton City Police in 1954 and then Hampshire Constabulary after the Force amalgamations in 1967.

The old police bicycle is not hidden away though. It goes to Police Force open days and other emergency service shows around the UK together with my other ex-police cycles, which include a model Smith and Wesson Perimeter. This gives people a chance to see how the bicycle has changed in relation to the roles they have played in policing over the years.

This article was written in memory of PC John Whitcombe. Alan is a member of the Hampshire Constabulary History Society and Police Car UK, and a collector of police bicycles. He is a former special constable in Hants, and often rode a police cycle on duty. He can be reached at alan.clack@ntlworld.com.

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