

*The Cycling Craze of the 1890s in Wales**

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In the year that London hosted the official start of the *Tour de France*, when a Welshman, Geraint Thomas from Cardiff, competed in this, the greatest cycling race in the world, it seems somehow appropriate that attention be given to Wales' relationship to this exciting, fascinating sport. How many of the millions of people who lined the roads in London to watch the race were aware of the time when cycling was as popular in Britain as it has been on the continent in recent decades? How many people were aware of how popular and fashionable cycling became in Britain during the 1890s, a decade that saw cycling become the most talked-about activity that put even football and rugby in the shade?

Even fewer people are aware that a particular version of the cycling craze was experienced in Wales or that Wales produced many of the most talented, most famous and most controversial cyclists of the day. Just as modern cycling fans have been enthralled by the heroics and indeed infamy of cyclists such as Marco Pantani, Jan Ullrich and Lance Armstrong, so sports fans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed the exploits, victories and defeats of Welsh cyclists such as Jimmy Michael, Sam Linton and Arthur Linton. Perhaps if Rhodri Morgan were to follow Ken Livingstone's example and invite the *Tour de France* to visit Cardiff some time in the future, this would again focus minds on Welsh exploits in this sport and revive interest in this most fascinating aspect of our social history: the cycling craze of the 1890s.

This cycling craze had its roots in various technological changes that affected the bicycle in the years before that decade. A primitive type of bicycle, the hobby-horse, was devised in the late eighteenth century and further developments to the bicycle were pioneered through the nineteenth century. By the 1870s, the bicycle had developed into the penny-farthing, or the 'ordinary' as it was known. Cycling was not a popular activity during this time, primarily because these bicycles were heavy, expensive and dangerous, and therefore cycling was confined to the elite classes. But a number of developments in the late 1880s and early 1890s transformed the shape and technology of the bicycle and led to the development of the 'safety bicycle.' This bicycle had two wheels of equal size, was driven by a chain transmission, and was fitted with the new pneumatic tyres that were far superior and much safer than the solid wooden wheels previously used.

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Bicycling was transformed by these developments. It became safer, more comfortable, and, very suddenly, the prices of bicycles fell dramatically. It was possible to purchase a bicycle for 15 shillings at the start of the decade while by the end of the decade, as a result of competition between manufacturers, it was possible to buy a bicycle for about 7 shillings.¹ As a result of these developments, bicycling became extremely popular, and even very fashionable, as millions of bicycles were produced and purchased, and as newspapers and new, specialist bicycling magazines came to report on all the various aspects of the craze. The bicycle was perfectly suited to the *fin de siècle* search for novelty and technological marvels.

Observers and supporters of the craze made great claims for the benefits and advantages of cycling. To many people, cycling had the potential to improve society and civilise people. Such claims were made in Welsh contexts, for example, as it was claimed that the bicycle would allow the inhabitants of the south Wales valleys to escape their dirty, overcrowded communities, where morals were so imperilled, and venture forth into the surrounding green areas outside the coalfield. It was believed that colliers would return to their work on a Monday morning refreshed after a weekend spent cycling.² Bicycling clubs brought people together and forged closer bonds between them, and this was important in a time marked by worries about the communities being formed in south Wales. In a similar way, cycling was beneficial to the inhabitants of rural areas of Wales because it allowed them to break the monotony of rural life by opening up new horizons and possibilities.³ In fact, the bicycle was known as the 'poor man's horse' in this period because it offered new opportunities for travel to those who had not previously been able to leave their own locality so easily.

The bicycle was considered so very powerful that it was enlisted in the temperance movement: in an article entitled 'The Moral Bicycle', the bicycle was described as a temperance missionary or social reformer and it was reasoned that it was not possible to purchase both alcoholic drinks and a bicycle. Whereas previously young men wasted their meagre incomes on alcoholic drinks, now they were saving their money in order to purchase the latest racing machines.⁴ In fact, a Temperance Cycling Club was formed in the Rhondda valley in this period.⁵ Therefore, in the opinions of many, the bicycle was a powerful, civilising influence that developed strength, spirit and personality, and thus improved society.

The utilitarian value of the bicycle was also recognised and eulogised as bicycles were utilised by a whole range of different groups and occupations.

¹ R. C. Hunter, *Porthcawl as a Health Resort* (Bristol, 1892); advertisement for Morris Brothers' Cycle Works, Pontypridd, *Llanelly Mercury*, 4 June 1896.

² *Rhondda Leader*, 30 December 1899; 9 June 1900; 18 May 1901.

³ *South Wales Daily News*, 18 May 1898.

⁴ *Rhondda Leader*, 15 September 1900; see also *ibid.*, 12 October 1901; 24 May 1902.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1901.

Policemen, firemen and doctors adopted the bicycle in their daily work, while bicycle corps were established in the armed forces. The Bishop of Bangor visited the 'outlandish' parts of his diocese awheel and thus brought himself into closer contact with his poorer clergy, while female members of the main political parties canvassed for male candidates in elections whilst on bicycles.⁶ In fact, news of the relief of Mafeking was spread through the Rhondda valleys in May 1900 by messengers on bicycles.⁷ These various activities were reported in the local press as a means to show the worth of the bicycle.

Supporters of cycling attempted to win new believers for the cause by reporting on those public notables who had become new converts. William Brace of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, for example, was said to have 'succumbed to the seductive charms of the bicycle,' while coalowner and Member of Parliament D. A. Thomas was seen dodging vehicles on the streets of Cardiff on his machine.⁸ Similarly, Liberal MP Tom Ellis was injured after a fall from his bicycle but it was reported that he nevertheless appeared in the Commons the following evening despite his injuries, while another MP, A. J. Balfour, was elected president of the Newport branch of the National Cyclists' Union.⁹ In Carmarthen, it was reported that the town clerk, borough surveyor and chief constable of Carmarthen were all cyclists.¹⁰

An important aspect of the cycling craze was the formation of cycling clubs and a massive number were formed. Many were based on towns in Wales: examples include Merthyr Cycling Club, Newport Cycling Club, Aberaman Cycling Club, Barry Cycling Club, and so on. Others were established by workers in particular workplaces: Swansea Mannesman Cycling Club, Barry Dock Engineers' Cycling Club, Aberdare Workers' Cycling Club, Cardiff Municipal Employees Cycling Club are examples of such clubs. A variety of other clubs were formed that demonstrate the extent to which cycling penetrated all aspects of Welsh life: Cardiff Musical Society Cycling Club, Cardiff Jockeys' Cycling Club, Barry Athletic Union Cycling Club, and the cycling club connected to the Wesley Stow Hill Literary Society in Newport count as examples of this type of club. Some cycling clubs were connected to churches and chapels, although there was also some opposition to cycling on a Sunday and some controversies in local newspapers over the matter.¹¹ These cycling clubs were often arranged in ways similar to military organisations: ranks were held by officers of the club, such as captain and vice-captain, rides were started by a loud whistle on the club whistle, cyclists rode in ranks two abreast, and many clubs possessed a bugler who announced their presence on the road. One of the rules of the Swansea Amateur Athletic and Cycling Club was that cyclists were not allowed to pass the captain during a club run.¹²

⁶ *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 16 June 1899; *Western Mail*, 25 May 1895.

⁷ *Rhondda Leader*, 26 May 1900.

⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 27 August 1894; 26 May 1897.

⁹ *Y Goleiad*, 14 July 1897; *South Wales Daily News*, 15 June 1896.

¹⁰ *South Wales Daily News*, 12 June 1897.

¹¹ *South Wales Daily News*, 30 June 1897; 1 September 1897.

¹² West Glamorgan Archives, Swansea Amateur Athletic and Cycling Club, Rule book and membership form, c.1897.

As will be noticed from the names of these clubs, most were situated in the southern half of the country and it might be argued that south Wales was to Welsh cycling what Brittany is to French cycling or the Basque country to Spanish cycling, that is, the heartland of the sport in the country. It was reported in 1895, for example, when the craze was at its most frenzied, that there were no cycling clubs at all in Breconshire, Cardiganshire, Pembrokeshire or Radnorshire.¹³ Nevertheless, a little later in the decade, the existence of clubs was reported in towns such as Brecon, Aberystwyth, Newtown, Montgomery, Bangor, Rhyl and Bala.¹⁴ On the whole, however, cycling was far more popular in south Wales than in other parts of the country and popular among all classes of society rather than just the elites as it was elsewhere.

The nature of cycling clubs in Wales varied and the biggest difference was between those clubs where the members were overwhelmingly middle-class and other clubs where the membership was drawn from the ranks of the working class. Firstly, it seems that working-class cyclists were largely confined to the valleys while clubs outside the valleys were largely the province of the gentry and other elites; we might speculate that workers elsewhere in Wales were not paid enough to be able to afford bicycles. The cycling club at Bangor, for example, was decidedly middle-class in its character and was dominated by professionals and tradesmen; the club's officers included a doctor, a pharmacist, a dentist, a building society manager, a publican, a watchmaker and other tradesmen.¹⁵ In more rural areas, the gentry predominated. In Tenby, for example, it was claimed that the whole gentry of the area were keen cyclists.¹⁶ Similarly, at Brecon, J. P. W. Gwynne-Holford, Buckland, ex-MP, was president of the Brecon Cycling club, and among the vice-presidents were the honourable R. C. Devereux, the MP Charles Morley, Colonel John Morgan, Colonel Wood, C. Venables Llewelyn, D. W. J. Thomas, Senior Captain R. D. Garnons Williams and Senior Captain H. R. Jones Williams.¹⁷ Some clubs made efforts to ensure that membership remained a relatively exclusive privilege – the Victoria Cycling Club in Cardiff, for example, required a membership fee of 5 shillings and a further 5 shillings a year in membership dues.¹⁸ The emphasis in these more middle-class clubs was on cycle touring rather than racing. The clubs were a means to socialise, to enjoy the company of others, to see interesting and stimulating sights, and, of course, to obtain healthy exercise.¹⁹

Cycling clubs that were more working-class in character differed. The most famous working-class cycling clubs were the Clarion cycling clubs that had

¹³ *South Wales Daily News*, 27 May 1895.

¹⁴ *Montgomery County Times*, 5 June 1897.

¹⁵ *North Wales Chronicle*, 18 July 1896; *Slaters' Directory of North and Mid Wales, 1895*.

¹⁶ *South Wales Daily News*, 12 August 1895.

¹⁷ *Radnor Express*, 30 June 1898.

¹⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 15 May 1897.

¹⁹ For a good example, see the descriptions of the cycling meets of the Bangor Cycling Club, *North Wales Chronicle*, 18 July 1896 and 22 August 1896. Also, a description of an outing of the Bala Cycling Club, *North Wales Times*, 17 July 1898.

close links with the labour movement, but there is no evidence to suggest that any were established in Wales.²⁰ Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that working-class men, particularly in south Wales, took a keen interest in cycling, and cycle racing in particular, and established cycling clubs and cycling tracks. In 1897, for example, 118 professional racing licences were issued by the south Wales branch of the National Cycling Union.²¹

The commercial aspects of cycling were most obvious in the world of racing, and perhaps explain why the middle class, more wedded to amateurism, was relatively antipathetic to racing. Large sums of money were spent by the manufacturers of bicycles on races and the best cyclists were sponsored by these companies to use and promote their bicycles.²² When Jimmy Michael's contract with the Gladiator Company came to an end in 1895, a bidding war for Jimmy's patronage opened between the various bicycle manufacturers.²³ The bicycle industry became an important employer in the Midlands as companies such as Raleigh established factories. In addition, races were held in many communities in order to raise funds for various causes and as commercial events. In 1898, for example, three thousand people attended the sports festival at Tenby while a similar event attracted two thousand individuals to Brecon in the same year.²⁴ The popularity of such events, particularly among working-class people, was demonstrated when a series of races in Cardiff was held on Mabon's Day, the first Monday of each month that was designated a holiday for miners.²⁵

All manner of innovations and outlandish publicity stunts were utilised in the commercial aspects of this craze, all with the intention of attracting paying customers. In Paris, for example, in various endurance races that sometimes lasted for days at a time at the famous and fashionable tracks there, some cyclists fitted their bicycles with pipes through which they could urinate while cycling.²⁶ This was not in the least bit practical but the sheer absurdity and novelty value of it attracted attention and increased attendance figures. South Wales had its own variation on this theme with the races that took place between one-legged cyclists at different times, or 'monopedallists' as they were dubbed in the newspapers.²⁷ E. Barkaway, a successful professional cyclist from

²⁰ On the Clarion cycling clubs, see J. Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Class 1870-1914* (Manchester, 1995), 116.

²¹ *South Wales Daily News*, 21 May 1897.

²² See for example the notice posted by the Nimrod Cycle Company that the Aberdare cyclist A. J. Sheen intended to ride a Nimrod bicycle and not a Defiance machine, as previously stated. *South Wales Daily News*, 11 June 1894.

²³ *Aberdare Times*, 9 November 1895.

²⁴ *South Wales Daily News*, 8 June 1898.

²⁵ *Aberdare Times*, 12 October 1895. On Mabon's Day see Andy Croll, 'Mabon's Day: The Rise and Fall of a Lib-Lab Holiday in the South Wales Coalfield, 1888-1898', *Labour History Review* 72.1 (2007), 49-68.

²⁶ On cycling in Paris, see R. J. Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (London, 1981), chap. 5.

²⁷ *South Wales Daily News*, 4 May 1896.

Maerdy, only had one arm.²⁸ In such circumstances, cycle races more resembled freak shows and circus acts than sporting encounters, and promoters were always on the lookout to present the newest, most fantastic novelty to the consuming public. It is no coincidence that cycling formed, and indeed continues to form, an important part of various circus acts. In 1895, for example, a six-hour race was arranged between the Aberaman professional cyclist Arthur Linton and a team of six horses led by Buffalo Bill Cody at the Winter Track, Brussels.²⁹

This cycling world in south Wales produced a large number of professional cyclists and, indeed, some of the biggest stars of their day. Racing was so competitive in south Wales, and the urge to be successful so strong, that many Welsh cyclists went on to compete in the biggest races across Britain, Europe and North America. Decades before British cyclists such as Tom Simpson, Robert Millar, Sean Yates and Chris Boardman were thrilling British cycling fans with their exploits in the *Tour de France*, Welsh cyclists were world-famous cycling pin-ups in the 1890s. Arthur Linton, his brothers Sam and Tom, and Jimmy Michael, all from that nursery of champion cyclists Aberaman near Aberdare, became world-famous and their victories in Paris, Berlin and New York were reported in all the newspapers.

The first Welsh cyclist to come to such international prominence was Arthur Linton (see fig. 1).³⁰ Born in Somerset, but apparently proud to call himself a Welshman and a Welsh-speaker, Linton went to work underground as a door-boy at Treaman colliery at the age of twelve before becoming a haulier at the age of eighteen. Linton bought his first bike, a penny-farthing, from the tips he earned as a haulier, and began competing across south Wales in 1890 and 1891. He came to national attention when he won the Cucu Cocoa Cup, a 24-hour race, in 1893, against some of the crack racers of British cycling, and broke many English records into the bargain. The successes of this shy, taciturn man continued and, at the end of 1893, he went to Paris to compete against the best cyclists that Europe could muster. It was said that Welsh could be heard among the French, English, Spanish and Dutch spoken at the big races at the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* and the *Vélodrome Buffalo* as Linton and the riders exerted themselves in these endurance events in front of crowds of over twenty thousand people.³¹

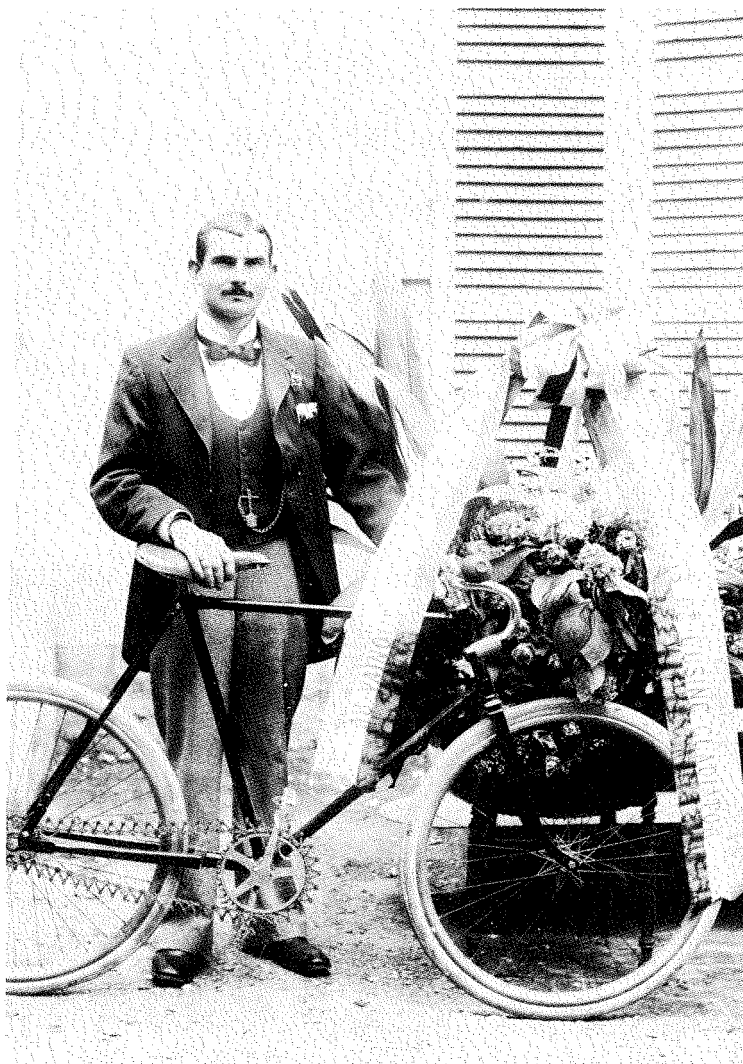
Jimmy Michael, another cyclist from Aberaman, was even more successful (see fig. 2). Unlike Linton, Michael was not a miner before becoming a professional cyclist but instead worked for his grandmother who owned a butcher's shop in Aberaman. Michael was employed to deliver meat to customers and did so on an old and heavy bicycle that developed Michael's

²⁸ *Rhondda Leader*, 1 June 1901.

²⁹ *Aberdare Times*, 12 January 1895.

³⁰ On Linton, see *South Wales Daily News*, 7 September 1897; *Aberdare Times*, 25 July 1896; 1 August 1896.

³¹ *South Wales Daily News*, 1 June 1896.



*Fig. 1 Arthur Linton, 'the Welsh collier boy', champion cyclist of the world.
(Photograph by B. Thomas.)*



*Fig. 2 Jimmy Michael, another of Aberaman's world champion cyclists.
(Photograph by C. H. Barenne.)*

*Photographs reproduced by permission of the Archives of the Rhondda
Cynon Taf Libraries.*

incredible strength from an early age.³² Dubbed the ‘Welsh midget’ and the ‘midget cyclist’ because of his short stature, Michael initially gained success in local races in south Wales before going on to win the Surrey Hundred at Herne Hill, the most prestigious track in London, in 1894. Following this victory, he was described in the *Aberdare Times* as:

an unassuming youngster in his teens . . . of a merry disposition, a thorough master of his machine, ever on the alert, as active as an eel, and as wise as a serpent in things cycling, and being quite good-looking is quite a ladies’ man. Although short of stature and slight of frame, Jimmy Michael is large limbed, and, as is evidenced by his performance, a veritable Samson in miniature as regards his pedometers.³³

In the same year, 1894, Michael went on to win an international championship at Antwerp and then, in 1895, the championship of the world at Cologne, Germany. Europe was clearly becoming too small to contain this towering champion and he travelled to America to compete against the best cyclists that that country could offer. Not only did he win the hearts of the American public through his mighty efforts, and the hearts of many female admirers, he also succeeded in winning ‘dazzling stacks of American dollars,’ in the words of the *New York Times* correspondent.³⁴ In fact, in 1898, he competed in a high-profile race against another Welshman, Tom Linton, brother of Arthur, in a series of races in different American cities. Crowds of over twenty thousand spectators witnessed these two lads from Aberaman compete at prestigious locations such as Madison Square Garden and Manhattan Beach, New York.³⁵ The sums earned by Michael in these races were astronomical to a former butcher’s delivery boy from Aberaman. He was earning approximately £2,000 a year in prizes in Britain by about 1896 and about that sum for each victory in America; in 1898 he signed a contract to compete in nine races for a sum of £4,500, although this did not stop him seeking sponsorship deals, including one for Paine’s Celery Compound.³⁶ By the end of 1898, Michael decided that he had won enough fame and money from cycling and instead decided to become a professional jockey. Unfortunately, he was not as successful a jockey as he had been a cyclist – owners of horses in America were not keen to trust their mounts to him since he insisted on calling the reins handles and the stirrups pedals.³⁷

³² On Michael, see *South Wales Daily News*, 28 November 1904; *Aberdare Leader*, 3 December 1904.

³³ *Aberdare Times*, 7 July 1894.

³⁴ *New York Times*, 9 January 1898.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 July 1898; 24 July 1898; 6 September 1898.

³⁶ *South Wales Daily News*, 7 September 1896; 31 May 1898.

³⁷ *New York Times*, 29 July 1899.

A number of people tried to explain Aberaman's success in producing so many champion cyclists. Emphasis was placed on Aberdare's topography and, in particular, the hilly nature of Aberdare Park that developed speed and stamina. Some wondered if there was something in the air in Aberaman but, unless coal dust is good for cyclists, this was probably not the cause of their success.³⁸ Others came to the conclusion that the obstacles placed in the way of cyclists from working-class backgrounds put them in a more favourable position than the privileged European cyclists trained on their excellent tracks in ideal conditions. Again and again, the humble backgrounds of these working-class champions were emphasised: Arthur Linton was continuously described as 'the Welsh collier boy' and newspaper columnists frequently insisted that he was a 'noble lad from such humble birth.'³⁹ For a period during the 1890s, cycling, similar to boxing, was clearly seen as a means for working-class men to escape the limits of their backgrounds and earn more money than could be earned in more conventional jobs and occupations. Gareth Williams has argued that due to the large numbers of young men in coalfield communities, and because of the attitudes towards the value of labour and effort in such 'frontier' communities, professionalisation was particularly strong in the area around Aberdare in this period, and in relation to cycling as much as football or rugby.⁴⁰

Whatever the reasons, these Welsh champions paid a high price for their successes. Both Arthur Linton and Jimmy Michael died early deaths in suspicious circumstances, and their deaths were linked by newspaper reports to the use of drugs in professional cycling. In recent years, the *Tour de France* has been mired in drugs scandals that have threatened the very existence of the race, but drug use is nothing new in professional cycling – it is indeed as old as professional cycling. Cycling is an extremely arduous sport and races such as the 24-hour races or the six-day races that were held in the 1890s required massive levels of stamina; in fact, the suffering of cyclists was part of the attraction of such races and promoters looked to offer their paying customers a requisite amount of suffering in their races. Cyclists competed in such races on a very frequent basis and were offered massive rewards if they attained success and so, from the very start of professional racing, substances such as caffeine, strychnine, cocaine, digitalis and arsenic were routinely used by cyclists to improve their performance.

According to the speculation of various historians, Arthur Linton was under the influence of strychnine, trimethyl or heroin during the Bordeaux to Paris race of 1896, and this was a factor in his death six weeks later.⁴¹ Similarly, Jimmy Michael died in suspicious circumstances in 1904 and, according to the

³⁸ *Aberdare Times*, 14 July 1894; Aberdare's Big Week Committee, *Official Souvenir Programme*, November 2nd to 8th, 1930, 53.

³⁹ *South Wales Daily News*, 7 September 1897; 26 November 1904; *Aberdare Times*, 14 July 1894; 1 August 1896.

⁴⁰ G. Williams, *1905 and All That* (Llandysul, 1991).

⁴¹ On 'doping' in professional cycling in these years, see S. Craig, 'Riding High', *History Today* 50 (July, 2000), 7.

correspondent of the *South Wales Daily News*, as a result of drug use. In his last years, it was reported, Michael was almost deaf, was dangerous during races because he strayed across the track without control, and was not as quick-witted as he had been in his youth. Arsenic was the source of his amazing stamina and his fantastic turn of speed, according to the correspondent.⁴²

Some historians have blamed the colourful and controversial trainer, Choppy Warburton. One newspaper noted in the 1890s that cyclists improved dramatically when they came under his care and it is noticeable that Arthur Linton's successes dried up when he left Choppy in 1895 but improved again when he returned to him in the following year.⁴³ In fact, Warburton was banned from cycling tracks by the British Cycling Union in 1896, just before the death of Linton, but the reasons for the ban were never made public.⁴⁴ Also, Jimmy Michael left Choppy and threatened to sue him over claims that Choppy had poisoned Michael.⁴⁵ Whatever the reality of the situation, Warburton cannot be blamed directly for the death of Michael since Warburton himself passed away in 1897. These Welsh cyclists, therefore, were perhaps the first in a long and sorry list of professional cyclists who have succumbed to the dangers posed by drug abuse in professional cycling which have claimed the lives of a large number of cyclists down the years, including most notably the Englishman Tom Simpson in 1967 and, more recently, the Italian climber Marco Pantani in 2004.

One very significant aspect of the cycling craze of the 1890s, in Wales just as it was elsewhere, was the involvement of women in the craze, or 'fair wheelers' as they were patronisingly described. Cycling provided new opportunities for women to gain exercise and fresh air. The old penny-farthings had not been suitable for women, according to the ideas of the time, because they were dangerous, difficult to use in skirts and, perhaps most importantly, it was not considered becoming for a woman to straddle anything in public. The new 'safety' bicycle therefore opened up new horizons to women. This greater freedom granted by the bicycle came at a time when women were gaining other forms of social freedom outside the home and as women were becoming more independent. In addition, cycling served to further these trends by demonstrating that strenuous exercise, such as that offered by cycling, was not beyond the capabilities of what were previously considered frail and sickly female bodies. The old image of the weak, helpless woman was replaced with a strong, energetic, self-sufficient woman for whom strenuous exercise on the latest technological innovation of the age was not a problem. This new technology was linked with the rise of the 'new woman' that contemporaries believed they perceived in the 1890s. These 'new women' demonstrated their refusal to be bound to the home or to be dependent on the men in their lives, and

⁴² *South Wales Daily News*, 28 November 1904.

⁴³ *Aberdare Times*, 1 August 1896.

⁴⁴ Craig, 'Riding High'.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, 19 December 1897.

utilised the bicycle in their battle with the patriarchal *status quo* to show their independence and confidence.⁴⁶

It is very difficult to know how many women in Wales were part of this cycling craze but there is some evidence. In Tenby, for example, it was apparently the case that there were almost two hundred female cyclists and lessons were being offered to them by the 'former Welsh champion' George Ace. Lessons were similarly offered to female cyclists by a bicycle shop in Llanelli.⁴⁷ Even in Merthyr Tydfil, not a place known for having an active female involvement in the public sphere at this time, cycling became popular among the women of the town, and it was claimed in 1897 that 'every other lady in the town seemed to be developing into a wheeler.'⁴⁸ According to the *Montgomery County Times*, large numbers of female cyclists could be found in mid-Wales, in towns from Montgomery on the border, to Newtown in the middle, and Aberystwyth on the coast, although it also needs to be noted that cycling clubs in the area did not admit female members until 1897.⁴⁹ It seems probable that most female cyclists in Wales were middle-class – only middle-class women had the means and the time to devote to cycling in this period.

In some places, clubs were established specifically for women. The women's cycling club in Newport, for example, had fifty members by 1895.⁵⁰ Aberaman Women's Cycling Club was established by Maggie Michael, cousin of Jimmy, in 1897; she became captain of the new club and Jimmy's wife was appointed treasurer.⁵¹ Some individuals were decidedly opposed to the founding of clubs for women and, indeed, the very idea of women cycling at all. Much of this opposition revolved around the clothing worn by women when cycling. Many considered long skirts to be the appropriate mode of dress for female cyclists but these were, of course, inconvenient and even dangerous. As a result, more adventurous female cyclists began to wear the new 'rational' dress, that is, 'knickerbockers' or 'bloomers', which scandalised so many observers at this time. These were considered to be unfeminine and completely inappropriate. None of the female cyclists in Tenby were brave enough to venture out in the 'rational' costume, it was reported, but some female cyclists from Newport could be seen on the road in and around that town sporting these costumes at this time.⁵² They complained at the treatment they received from the hands of uncouth men, who often threw stones at them as they passed; this especially happened in the vicinity of Cardiff. Some men were clearly threatened by these women wearing what they considered to be masculine and unfeminine clothes

⁴⁶ On cycling and the 'new woman' see A. Richardson and C. Willis (eds), *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (Basingstoke, 2000).

⁴⁷ *South Wales Daily News*, 12 August 1895; *Llanelli Mercury*, 18 June 1896.

⁴⁸ *Merthyr Times*, 7 January 1898.

⁴⁹ *Montgomery County Times*, 5 June 1897.

⁵⁰ *South Wales Daily News*, 19 August 1895.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26 May 1897.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 19 August 1895.

and wished to maintain the sexual *status quo*. They were clearly concerned at the greater freedoms being won by women at this time.

While there was a certain amount of opposition to the 'rational' outfit, there was even more opposition to women racing. There were fears in 1896 that a group of female professional cyclists were on the way to Cardiff to hold a race. 'Pneumatic', the cycling correspondent of the *South Wales Daily News*, was most decidedly against the honour of Cardiff being besmirched by such a thing and utilised a description of a women's race in London to whip up opposition:

The women's races at the Aquarium are becoming a pitiable example of what the desire to make money can produce. To see these poor women racing on a miserable track, all of them covered with bruises from head to foot, bleeding faces, sore hands, is a disgusting sight unworthy of a civilised nation like England.⁵³

Racing would make women less feminine and would further erode the differences between the sexes in the same way as 'rational' dress. Races were dangerous, aggressive and competitive, characterised by bodily strength and sweating, and, as such, were masculine in character and therefore inappropriate for women. Such chauvinists would clearly have been shocked at the recent successes of Nicole Cooke, easily the greatest British cyclist there has ever been and perhaps only second to the legendary Eddy Merckx as the greatest ever cyclist. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that female races were banned by the British Cycling Union, a group of female cyclists came to Cardiff in 1896. Among the French, Austrian, Italian and English cyclists was a Welsh woman named Bailey.⁵⁴

The year 1896 witnessed the peak of the bicycling craze. There continued to be a keen interest in cycling among a sizeable proportion of the population but it was not as intense as in these middle years of the decade. The bicycle became a utilitarian tool for travel rather than a technological marvel or a fashionable form of entertainment, and was replaced in the popular imagination by new electrical machines, the tram, and, most especially, the car. Fewer bicycles were sold with each passing year and the newspapers devoted fewer column inches to the exploits of the sport's stars. In the early years of the twentieth century, other crazes came and went: the ping-pong craze gripped the nation in 1902, while 1903 was the turn of the walking craze; roller-skating became popular near the end of the Edwardian period.⁵⁵ These crazes came to be reported by the newspapers according to the pattern set by the cycling craze of the 1890s but did not attain the same level of popularity. The cycling craze was clearly a unique phenomenon that was not to be repeated in the years that followed.

⁵³ Ibid., 11 May 1896.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22 June 1896.

⁵⁵ *Rhondda Leader*, 27 June 1903; 4 July 1903; 1 August 1903.