

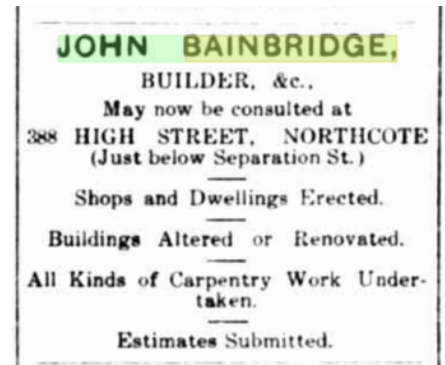
Ern (Ernest / Ernie / Bainie) Bainbridge – WWI & Le Tour Competitor 1928 (1891 – 1984)

P Michell, 2018

A forgotten sports person of Northcote and Preston is Ern Bainbridge (1891-1984). He was part of the team of first non-Europeans that competed in an early Tour de France.

Earlier he'd enlisted to fight in France.

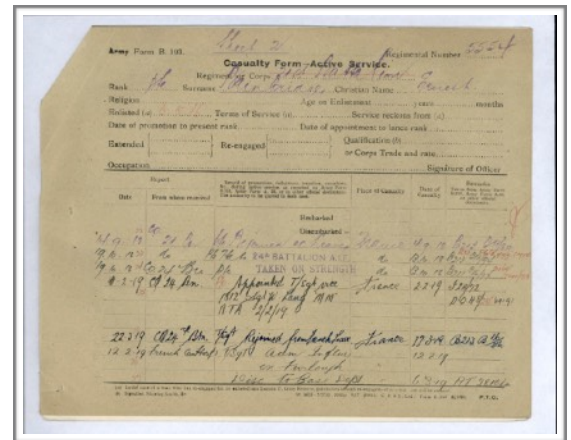
Bainbridge grew up in Northcote. His father John Bainbridge advertised as builder. Doing contract work for Northcote council including tendering for polling booths in 1890. Later he was advertising the erection of shops and dwellings. Twenty-eight years later Bainbridge Snr worked on the cable tram shed extension in Thornbury.



From at least 1911 young Ern Bainbridge was a carpenter. Likely working for his father at 388 High St.

He was a keen sportsman – entering cycling races. On New Years day in 1915 he competed in Ararat in various bicycle races. Eventually coming first in the prestigious Ararat wheel race over two miles. Same day he raced in a one mile race where he was declared winner on appeal. Unfortunately returning home by train from Ballarat, was robbed of his winnings of £15, plus another £5. He often competed in other races sometimes against Herbert Opperman. Even going as far as Tasmania for races.

Like many young men at the time, Ern enlisted in October 1915. In December married Lydia A Clarke, fifth daughter of William and late Minnie Clarke of 'Toolern', 15 Andrew St., Northcote. Ceremony taking place at All Saints church in Westgarth with Rev Kellaway. (Previously the Clarke family had settled in McLachlan St at *Helmwetch* between Cunningham & Westgarth Sts.)



By 1916 Bainbridge was serving on the front line in France with 21st battalion. A gunshot wound in 1917 to his left arm interrupted his fighting. Recuperated in England. By 1918 was back at the front in France. In Feb 1919 he was appointed T/Sgt, though in April reverts back to Private before shipping back home to Australia.

Whilst away at the Front, in 1918 the Thornbury Bowling Club honours its serving soldiers with a display of twenty-seven photographs, including the Bainbridge brothers Ern and Driver R W B. (His brother also returned safely back home.)

Once united with his wife, they settled in Preston and Ern Bainbridge returned to competitive cycling. Around this time his father, John was having financial difficulties.

Bainbridge returned to competitive cycling in 1919. In October, he competes in Cycle Traders 100 mile event – Warrnambool to Melbourne race - with 101 cyclists. A



significant race with the fastest time carrying the title of Long Distance Road Champion of Australasia. Bainbridge comes fourth despite a handicap of 16 mins. Winning prize of two guineas for third soldier to finish. In 1924 he came second. Though not placed in 1925 and 1926.

In 1920 finishing 18th in the [Goulburn to Sydney Classic](#).

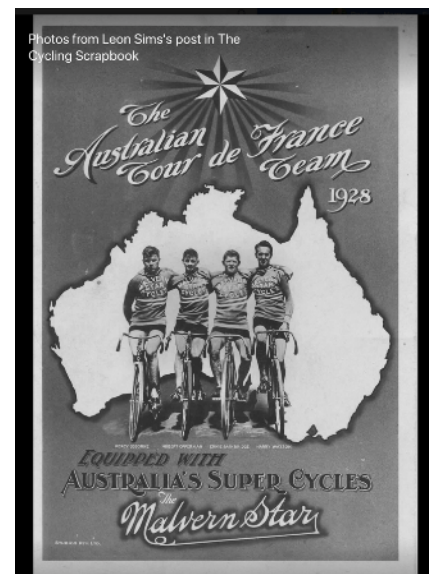
In 1925 the Sporting Globe describes Bainie as the ‘well known road rider’.

The Warrnambool was not held in 1927 as it was replaced by the [Dunlop Grand Prix](#), which at the time was the biggest cycling race in the [British Empire](#) and the richest race in the world. The race was held in four

stages from the 14–19 November 1927, covering 690 miles (1110 km). Hubert Opperman dominated the race, winning all four stages. Bainbridge finished 4th in stages 1 and 3 and 2nd in stage 4, finished third overall, behind Opperman and Harry Watson.

This result solidified Bainbridge’s name as an endurance cyclist. A decision was made to select four riders riders to compete in the Tour de France the following year. Of course they would have to fund their way.

Some influential people decided to field an Australian cycling team in the prestigious Tour de France. In early 1928 the Sporting Globe newspaper ran a public subscription to raise funds. Preston council and Leader Newspaper added their voice in particular to cheer the local lad – ‘Bainie’.



In 1928 the four man Australian / New Zealand team headed to France. Bainbridge with Hugh ‘Oppy’ Opperman, Harry Watson (NZ) and Percy Osborn. Bainbridge was the senior cyclist with more experience. He’d been to France before.

Was however much older, thirteen years older than Oppy and the others. At the time the European teams were ten men. However the Australasian team would only have four riders. (Another six riders were never added in France.)



This Australian team was the first non French speaking team ever to compete. Later this was where Opperman

established his name by winning the prestigious 'Bol D'or' in Paris.

The 1928 Tour de France was a gruelling event over poor roads and bad weather. Cyclists averaged 240km per day on 22 stages for nearly 5400km. By comparison the current Tour de France is just over 3500km over similar time!

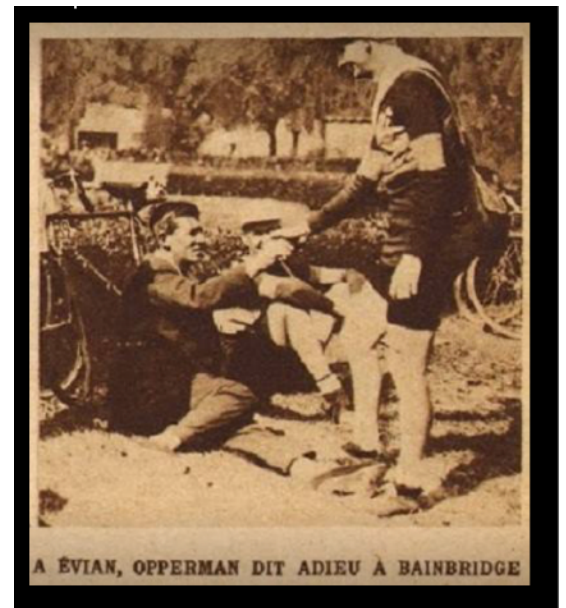
This fledgling team had vastly inferior bikes, and lacked international experience, not to mention that the team of four was up against ten man European teams. After Bainbridge's retirement Percy Osbourne became the lead rider enabling Opperman to achieve an 18th overall.



The severely under resourced team suffered ongoing injuries, including severe saddle sores and illness from the cold and heat. Bikes were single speed. They could be adjusted by manually shifting the chain to another gear on rear wheel.

That meant stopping to change gears! Despite all the hardships this was the cycle race that made Hugh Opperman's cycling career.

Only 41 riders finished the race out of 161 entrants. Of the four man Aust/NZ team only Bainbridge failed to finish. He was forced to retire by a doctor in stage 15. Suffering severely infected wounds from crashes and large saddle sores. He was thanked for his hard work by Oppy at Evian. However he was in the support vehicle for the remaining stages, encouraging and assisting his team mates.



CYCLISTS.—See Ern. Bainbridge's French Cycle at "Sunbeam" Cycle Works (Les. Cox), 127 Plenty Rd., Preston. All Cycle Goods in stock. All Repairs done on premises.

Bainbridge returned to Australia in late September and met by his wife. The French bike he rode was prominently displayed at Les Cox's 'Sunbeam Cycle Works' including photos of the race.

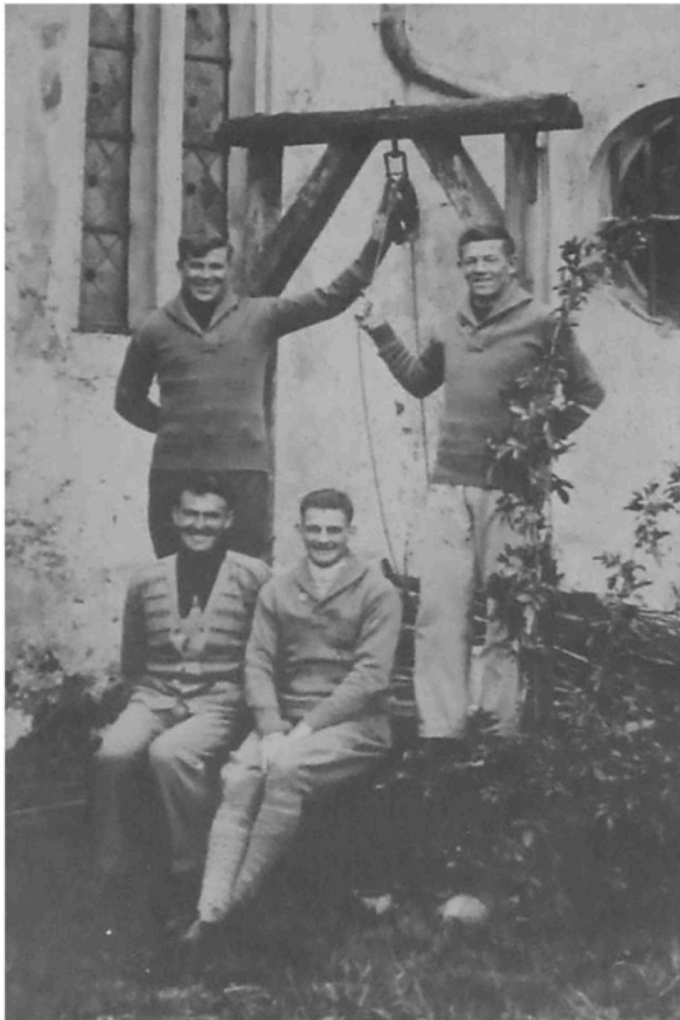
By the mid 1930s Ern was a coach for Preston Bullants football club. Now residing at 30 West St, Preston. In 1932 in a newspaper article 'Up Memory Lane – Old Timers Austral Wheel Race' celebrities of the past Bernie was included.

An interesting note – Arthur Bainbridge, a cousin, was also a competitive cyclist in the mid 1930s. Winning some junior races.

In 1940 Mrs & Mrs Ern Bainbridge celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. A year later the 1928 Tour was again remembered by Oppy and published in newspapers across Australia.

In 1984 Ern Bainbridge passed away aged some 93 years.

A recent film has revisited this endurance race. Le Ride (2016) with Phil Keoghan and Ben Cornell. Like the original race both men rode non-shift changing gear bicycles.



Australia's team for the 1928 Tour de France, clockwise from back left: Percy Osborn, Ern Bainbridge, Hubert Opperman and Harry Watson