

Our Stories

Northcote Snippets – a series of historical glimpses into Northcote's past

Ernest (Ern/Ernie) Bainbridge and *Le Tour de France* 1928

A forgotten sportsperson of Northcote and Preston is Ern Bainbridge (1891-1984). He was part of the first non-European team to compete in an early Tour de France.

Bainbridge grew up in Northcote. His father was contractor for council working with the cable tram amongst other projects. From 1911 Ern Bainbridge was competing in bicycle races, by now working as a carpenter. Four years later he was married. In 1916, Private Ern Bainbridge aged 25 enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and served in France. A gunshot wound to his left arm cut his fighting short.

Upon his return in 1919, he settled with his wife in Preston and returned to competitive cycling in 1920. In 1923 he finished third in the Warrnambool to Melbourne race. At the time it was biggest and richest cycling race in the world, and it made Bainbridge's name as a cyclist. A direct result of his high placing meant that three top riders were selected to compete in the *Tour de France*.

The Sporting Globe newspaper ran a public subscription to raise funds. Preston council and *The Leader* newspaper added their voice in particular for the local lad.

Ernie Bainbridge c1920s >

In 1928, a four man Australian/New Zealand cycling team headed to France: Bainbridge with Hugh Opperman, Percy Osborn and New Zealander Harry Watson. Being older and more experienced, Bainbridge was the senior cyclist.

At that time the elite European teams were made of ten men. It was a gruelling event over poor roads and bad weather. The under resourced Australasians were the first English-language cyclists to compete in the then infamous Tour, and they suffered injuries, saddle sores and illness. Despite all the hardships this race was the one that made Hugh Opperman's cycling career. In this very difficult Tour, only 41 riders finished the race out of 161 entrants. Of the four men in the Australian/New Zealand team, only Bainbridge failed to finish. He retired in Stage 15 with infected wounds from crashes and severe saddle sores, however he continued in the support vehicle encouraging his team mates.



Photos from 1928 Tour de France, showing the Australian/New Zealand team before and after Bainbridge retired.

Back in Preston, Bainbridge's bicycle was on display for some time in Sunbeam Cycle Works (Les Cox) at 127 Plenty Road in Preston, proudly announced *The Leader* newspaper.

A documentary in 2016, *Le Ride*, followed cyclists Phil Keoghan and Ben Cornell as they attempted to retrace the 1928 Tour route around the perimeter of France. Travelling the 3,500 miles (5,600 km), in 22 stages over 26 days on restored vintage bikes with no gearshifts was increasingly difficult and challenging as they tried to keep pace with the daily progress related by NZ cyclist Harry Watson in his 1928 journals.

P. Michell, 2018