

Cycle Racing in Earlsdon

Before Earlsdon was fully developed with all its residential streets and community spaces, the area near Spencer Park played an important part in Coventry's early cycling history.



Three Spires Bowling Club

Today, in Morningside we can find the Three Spires Bowling Club, which was established in 1912, but before the bowls club opened this area had been home to the Styvechale Track, a cycling and running track opened in June 1878. Known as the Midland Counties Bicycle and Athletics Ground, this oval cinder track was sited between what is now Morningside and the Kenilworth Road where it hosted races for riders of "penny-farthings," such as Tom Sabin.



Tom Sabin and his penny-farthing

THE MIDLAND COUNTIES
**BICYCLE AND ATHLETIC
 GROUNDS,**
 WARWICK - ROAD, COVENTRY.

THE SECOND AMATEUR
BICYCLE & ATHLETIC SPORTS
 WILL TAKE PLACE
 TO-MORROW (SATURDAY), JULY 20, 1878.

P R O G R A M M E .

- 1.—One Mile Bicycle Race, Handicap.
- 2.—One Mile Tricycle Race.
- 3.—Quarter Mile Hurdle Race, Handicap.
- 4.—One Mile Bicycle Race, Handicap.
- “Godiva” and “Meteor” inter-club race.
- 5.—Half Mile Bicycle Race, Handicap.
Open to Youths under 15.
- 6.—One Mile Flat Race, Handicap.
- 7.—Three Miles Bicycle Race, Handicap.

PRIZES TO THE VALUE OF £40
 Will be given

Handicapper and referee for Bicycle Races, Mr.
 T. SABIN, of the “Sportsman.”
 Admission, 6d. ; reserved enclosure, 1s. Seats
 will be provided for ladies. Tickets may be had
 of the Hon. Sec. or any of the Committee. Gates
 open at 2.30, to commence at 3.

The BAND of the COVENTRY RIFLE CORPS
 will be in attendance.

D A N C I N G
 After the Sports, at 7.30.

For further particulars see handbills.
 A. S. TOMSON, Chairman.

Programme of events for the Styvechale Track 1878

Tom Sabin was the son of a farmer from Allesley. In 1876 at the age of 25, he won a cycling event on a penny-farthing. It was a three-mile event organised by William Penny Brooks at the Gaskell Recreation Ground, Much Wenlock in Shropshire. The competition was part of the Much Wenlock Games seen as the predecessor of the modern Olympic Games. Baron de Coubertin a French historian was a spectator at the event and went on to found the first Modern Olympic Games. Tom followed his first success with wins in one and three-mile races in 1878, firstly at the Styvechale Track and later at the Butts Stadium.

Move to the Butts

By the mid-1880s, however, racing at the Styvechale Track had declined sharply after the opening of a new track at The Butts. It offered a 440-yard oval with a better cinder surface making racing faster and safer. The Butts Sports Ground had hosted cricket matches since 1872. Its central location made it easier for spectators to attend, helping it become one of Coventry's most important sporting venues.

Cycle Track

The Butts cycle track was first laid out in 1879 by local businessmen. Measuring 440 yards it was mainly flat but had banked corners and a cinder surface. In 1936 a concrete surface was added, an innovation that divided opinion. It remained until 1954 when a new 440-yard track, 21 feet wide with 14-degree banking was installed.

The Rise of the Butts

The Butts became a hub for Coventry's thriving cycle industry. Local manufacturers such as Ridge Cycle Co. in Spon Street and Humber & Co. in Upper Springfield Road used the track to develop and test new models. The area also attracted numerous accessory manufacturers including John Harrington & Co. known for producing springs and saddles.

Notable Riders at the Butts



Tommy Godwin was born in Connecticut to British parents. The family returned to England in 1932 when he was eleven. Aged sixteen he went to work at the BSA cycle factory in Birmingham and later became a professional cyclist. He was a regular entrant at the Butts which was a local track where he won the 1,000 metre event on 29th July 1939. He went on to win two bronze medals as part of the team pursuit at the 1948 Olympic Games in London.



Constance Eileen Sheridan (nee Shaw) 18th October 1923- 12th February 2023

Eileen Sheridan was born in Coventry in 1923 and became one of Britain's most celebrated cyclists breaking numerous records during the 1940s and 1950s. She joined the Coventry Cycling Club in 1944 with her husband Ken, and later became the club president.

Reflecting on her early days, she recalled: "We used to ride in our baggy shorts, not padded of course, and a sweater with a pocket on the front where we kept our food. It opened like a sail as we cycled! I wore chamois leather shorts when I was racing but that's as smart as it got! There were no showers or anything. We used to finish, check our time and ride home."

Eileen won her first race at The Butts in 1947. On 21st October 2024 a blue plaque was unveiled at The Butts to commemorate her remarkable achievements.

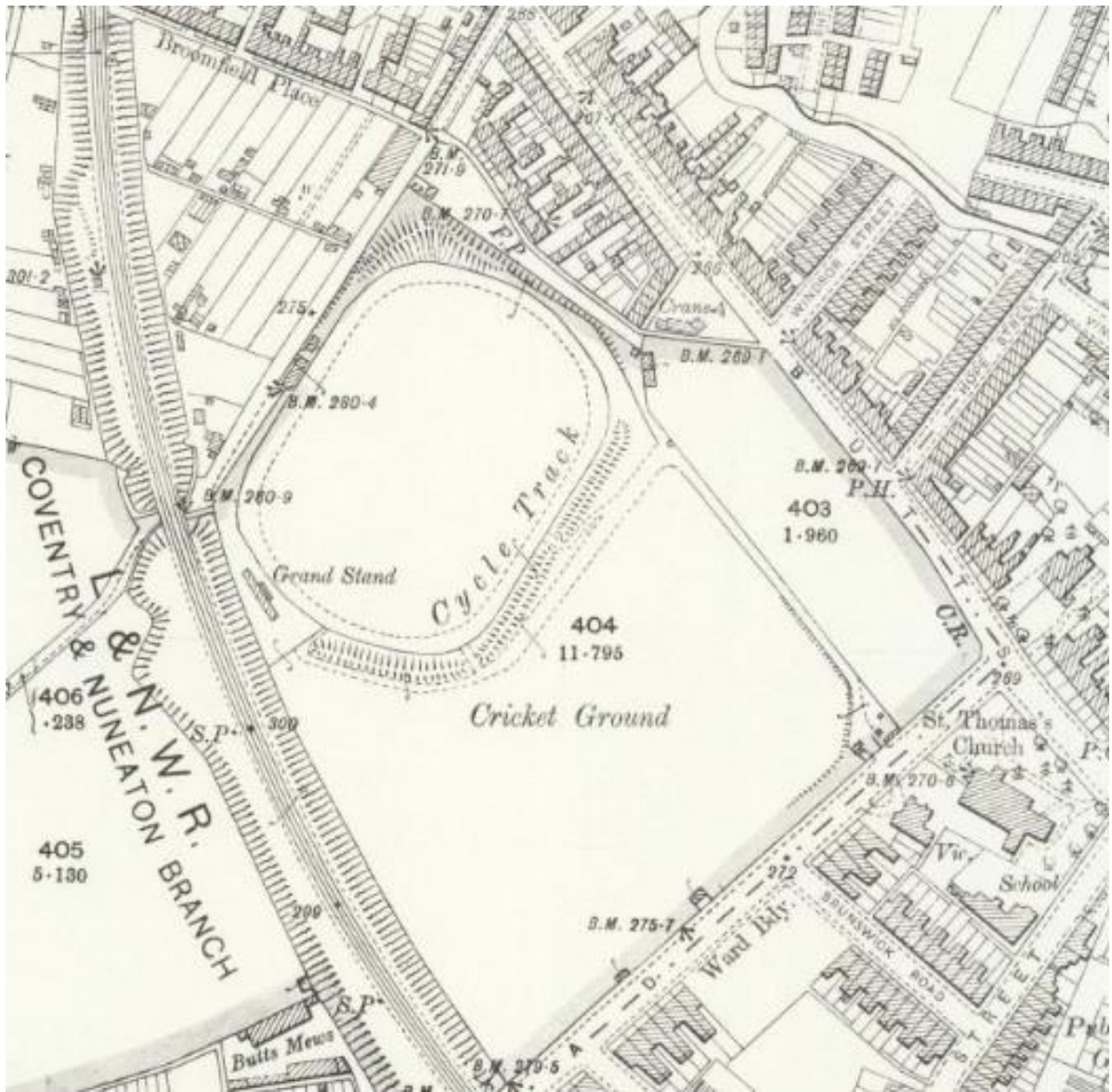
Decline of Track Racing

The Butts Stadium continued to attract top quality cycling events through the 1960s, until in Leicester in 1969 a National Track Stadium opened on a concrete based track which was re-laid on timber in 1978. This local alternative venue had a serious effect on attendances at the Butts. In April 1987 a local newspaper reported that national track racing was returning to the Butts for an Easter Monday meeting for the first time in almost twenty years. However, racing there continued to decline until the track closed around 2000.

Impact of Cycle Racing

Local cycle racing played a significant part in the development of Coventry's cycle industry. The need for lighter faster bicycles led to advances in materials and mechanisms. Many bicycle designs and innovations were tested and proved locally.

The accidents and fatalities experienced with penny-farthings accelerated the development of safety bicycles, while the racing success helped boost the reputation of Coventry based cycle makers.



Butts Stadium 1906 (enclosed in 1878)

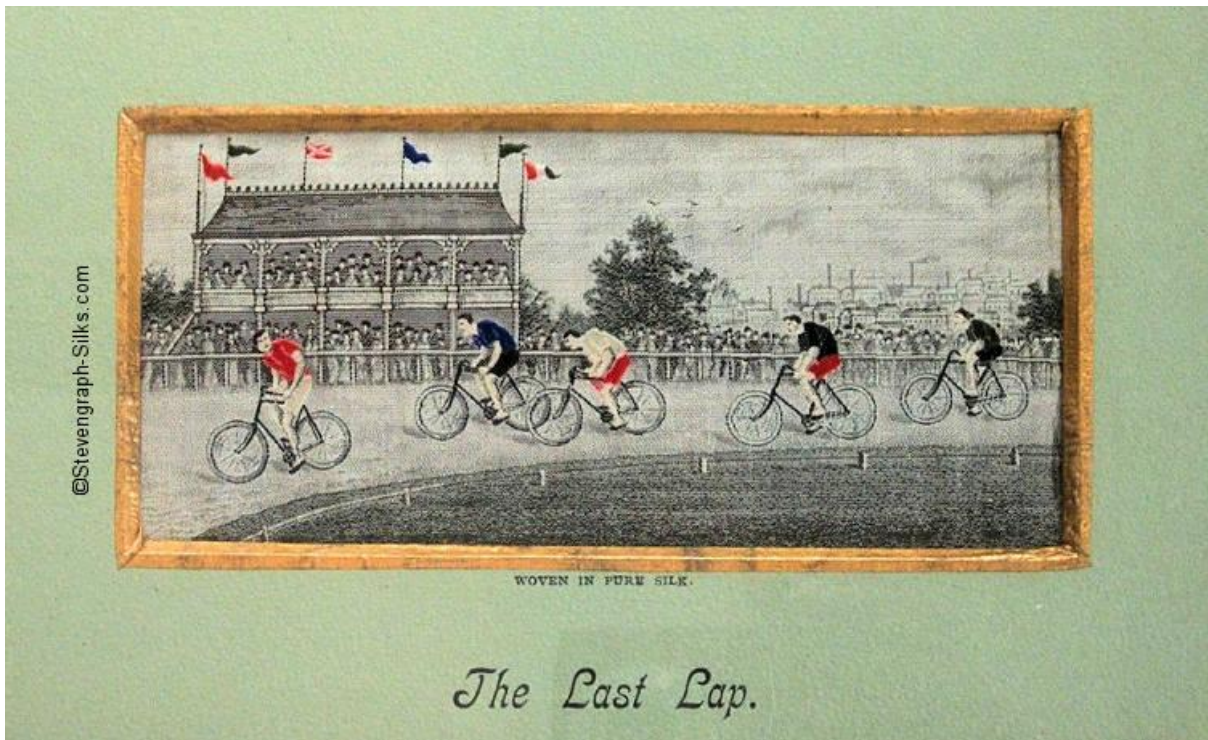


In 1912 Three Spires Bowls Club moved onto land where the Nursery was



Modern day map featuring Morningside, built in the 1940s

Some more cycling images

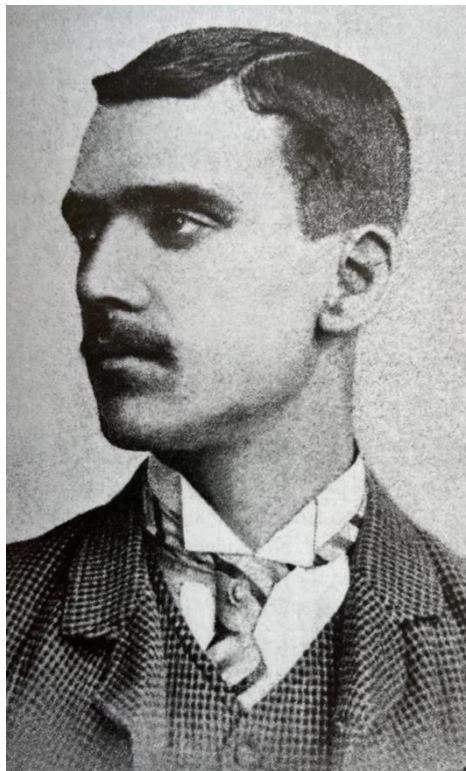


The Last Lap - A Stevengraph made in Coventry Design first registered 31st October 1879

Stevengraphs were silk pictures manufactured from 1862 in Queens Street and later in Cox Street. The Stevens family lived at Holly Bank on Earlsdon Avenue, near to the Styvechale Track.



*Coventry built 'Ordinary' cycles known as Penny-farthings
left to right Walter Browett, William Thackhall Browett and Alexander Pridmore
rode from Coventry to Land's End on their Coventry Machinists bicycles in 1875*



Fred Allard became a professional cyclist and in 1887 was "Safety Champion of the World"



Harold Wingrave took part in the first cycle race at the Styvechale Track, before going on to a distinguished medical career



Eileen Sheridan



Tommy Godwin



Cycle racing at the Butts

A report from the earliest days of racing at the Styvechale Track

While competing on 26th July 1879 William Bird a solicitor's clerk was injured and taken to hospital where he died on the following Tuesday. He was a 28-year-old married man the son of a weaver, who had been brought up in Much Park Street, as detailed in the following contemporary newspaper account of the inquest held at Pitts Head Inn in Far Gosford Street before the city coroner Mr. T. Dewes.

FATAL BICYCLING ACCIDENT AT COVENTRY

On Wednesday afternoon an inquest was held at the Pitt's Head Inn, Far Gosford Street, before Mr. T. Dewes, Coroner concerning the death of William Bird, solicitor's clerk, Gosford Green. In opening the enquiry the coroner commented on the painful nature of the case and said that at some times he was afraid that it might summon a marked effect. He had taken every precaution to prevent the jury being taken by surprise and had requested the attendance of Mr. Walker who was riding near to the deceased at the time of occurrence. He was present and was, he understood prepared to give every information to the Court. The first witness was Frederick Bird, watch manufacturer, who identified the body as that of his brother. He added that deceased was 28 years of age and was a solicitor's clerk. Deceased. Mr. Charles Edward Walker (who was present) and a Mr. Hart were competing in a bicycle race, on the Bicycle Grounds, Warwick Road, on Saturday last. Witness was on the grounds but not near enough to see what happened. The racing was friendly and the contests were for a charitable purpose. He did not believe there was any intention on the part of Mr. Walker to run against the deceased.

Charles Edward Walker of Leicester was then sworn and said: On the 26th instant I was riding in a bicycle race with the deceased and Mr. Hart. We had one mile to run 5 laps. It was a little after four o'clock when we started. We ran about 5 laps and were nearing the finish, naturally riding as fast as we could. The course was ample for three bicycles but I do not think it wide enough generally. Hart was first, deceased next and I was last. I made a push to pass deceased. When my front wheel was level with deceased's back wheel he suddenly fell. I did not run into him. I did not notice his turning round to look at me. I thought deceased's machine was too big for him; I did not think he was a perfect master of his machine- it was too big for him. I'm sure it was a perfect accident. When his machine came down we collided and deceased's machine struck my hand. I have since noticed a defect in his machine - the right-hand pedal is fixed but that may have been caused by the jar in falling. I had not noticed it at the time of the race. I don't think my machine touched him before we fell. I think his machine bounced back. Deceased was in the centre of the track, and I was near the ropes.

Henry Sturmeay, schoolmaster - King Street said: I was present at the races. I was in the reserved enclosure exactly opposite to where the accident occurred. It appeared to me that Mr. Walker was attempting to overtake the deceased and was about overlapping him in passing. He approached him very closely and my impression was that he slightly touched the side of the deceased's back wheel, but I would not be positive. They were going at 17 to 20 miles an hour. Mr. Walker evidently found himself too close and sheered off to the right, and deceased fell on his left side, the opposite side to where Mr. Walker was. It appeared to be a

fairly ridden race, but I thought Mr. Walker was too close to the deceased. There was nothing to lead me to suppose that Mr. Walker purposely collided with the deceased. My opinion is that the deceased felt something going wrong behind, lost his presence of mind and fell. I had heard that he was a nervous rider. When he actually fell, Hart was a little in front and Walker a little behind. Deceased fell on his left side and his bicycle to the right against Mr. Walker.

Mr. Josiah Turner, manager of the Coventry Machinists Company said : I was at the race on Saturday and near the spot where the occurrence took place. There were three riders - Hart, the deceased and Walker. Hart was inside, deceased was alongside and Walker was on the outside coming up. Walker made a push to pass the deceased. Deceased turned his head slightly to the right to look after Walker and swerved his front wheel outwards towards Walker's course. It was sufficient to alter the course of deceased's running and to bring him into Walker's line. The swerve would be quite six inches. I think it was a sudden turn of the wheel. I think that Walker was too near and the two machines collided. I don't think for a moment that Walker did anything purposely. I have known Bird as a rider for some time. He had an ordinary riding machine - it was a 57-inch. That is a large machine for a man like deceased. I think he was a master of it. I did not consider he was a good rider - he was an unequal one and nervous. I did not see the machine immediately before the accident. It was a very good machine, a "new" build expressly for the deceased.

Dr. Wimberley said he was on the ground when the accident took place. He saw it, and ran up to the deceased. He was in a state of collapse, quite unconscious and apparently dying. He remained with him till he was taken to home and for three hours afterwards. He saw him each day afterwards. By direction he and Dr. Lynes had made a post mortem examination of the body. The following was their joint report :-

"We found bruises on the left cheek and temple and on the left shoulder. On removing the skull the surface of the *dura mater* was found congested, but there was no blood effused between the bone and *dura mater*. On removing the *dura mater* the whole of the upper surface of the hemispheres of the brain was found congested, with a thin layer of blood effused on various portions of the surface, particularly in the hinder portions. There was a small clot of blood in the lateral ventricle and the serous membrane, covering showed signs of inflammatory action. There was no fracture of the skull nor any broken bone in any part of the body. We are of the opinion that the deceased died from concussion of the brain caused by the fall."

Dr. Lyons concurred.

Sarah Davis, trained nurse at the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital, said she took charge of the deceased on Sunday and remained in charge until he died on Tuesday at twenty-nine minutes past one. He remained quite unconscious from the time she took charge of him until his death.

The jury then retired to inspect the bicycle and on their return the Coroner again remarked that it was a most painful case. The deceased being in the Town Clerk's office he was well known and generally respected - he was always so respectful and well behaved; and it was a grievous thing that his life should be put an end to by an accident like this. The evidence had been given most clearly, and he was perfectly satisfied that Walker was no more to blame than himself, or any other gentleman in this room.

The jury, after a few moments, returned a verdict amounting to one of accidental death.

From *The Coventry Times*, 6th August 1879