

## **Alan 'Nipper' Richards 1945-2017 a Sporting Tribute** *by John Taylor.*

*RRA and MRRA Record Breaker Alan Richards died on 25th April 2017, at his home in Normandy where he had lived for many years. His thatched cottage caught fire during the evening and, although the village neighbours called the fire brigade, nothing could be done to save Alan.*



My first recollection of Alan was in the early 1960's, seeing him at the front of a bunch of riders on the Solihull 'Bash,' a 40 mile evening training ride, which terminated in a sprint finish across the main Warwick road at Chadwick End just south of Knowle. The large group of riders would end up en-masse at the 'Cat in the Window Café.' The 'bash' not only contained club riders, but also top amateurs from other clubs, and Independents who

were sponsored and got paid for their efforts; men who were older than Alan. At that time he was still a junior (hence his nickname 'Nipper'), but he certainly knew how to handle a bike and hold his own in a fast bunch. B'ham St. Christophers CCC also had a regular 'bash' to the café, and that's how Pat Kenny and I got onto nodding terms with Alan. When busy, it was the sort of café where cyclists helped themselves to a cup of tea or orange juice, then gave a hand to the sole proprietor with any sandwich making, serving, and washing up.

On the death of his father, Alan took over the daily business at Tower Cycles in Erdington, and ran the shop along with his mother Nell, but despite the hard work and long hours, Alan still found time to ride his bike and race. At that time there were long distance riders and MRRA road record breakers in Alan's club the Solihull CC, mainly Cyril Lovegrove, Stan Bray, and trike rider Howard Bailey, and I'm guessing that's how Alan first heard about road records, then went on to break some of his own, starting in the mid-1970's. I only remember Alan's time-trialing and road record success and acumen, but I'm sure he also did well in road races, known then as 'massed-start' events. I followed his rise on the time-trial spectrum via the Cycling magazine and from hearsay amongst club riders. When they converted the A38 Lichfield-Derby Road into dual carriageway, it became Alan's favourite time-trial course the K16, on which he did many sub-hour 25's. He also rode other fast courses in the UK, but frame-building and the bike-shop started to take up more and more of his time.

With his time-trialing and frame-building skills Alan became a pioneer in custom-built bikes for speed, testing many designs himself on his favourite courses. He always looked for ways of reducing drag from wind resistance, and that was in the 1970's-80's, quite a long time before tri-bars and all the other electronic gadgets that riders now rely on for speed; but he also knew how to physically push, and punish

himself in training and competition, often going beyond his limits to get those results, and even when he wasn't completely fit, his fast times showed this flair he had. In his quest for more speed in 1976 Alan went to Plynlimmon looking for a fast course to attempt the National RRA straight-out 25 mile record, but found it too twisting to go fast on. Instead he and Tony Shardlow took the Welsh RRA 25 Record on the Heads of the Valleys course in 53-03. In 1977 he was finally successful at National level on the A38 between Canwell and Willington with a 46-23 minute ride; in that same year and on the same course he broke the trike record in 51-49, then took Tony with him on a tandem in 44-07, and Harold Harvey on a tandem trike with a time of 48-57. Four records in all, the most amazing being with pensioner Harold Harvey, 41 years after Harold's 100-mile trike record in 1932.

Alan was a generous man, both with his time and support for riders, and I remember him saying to his mom -'I'm off for a few hours Nell,' and those few hours could turn into a few days, but then he did have Louis looking after the shop as well. Tony Shardlow said Alan gave him great support taking teams to three Student World Championships in Belgium, Canada & Russia; Alan as a mechanic and driver was full of enthusiasm, and that's probably what gave him his zest for a continental way of life. Alan's record breaking wasn't restricted to just 25 miles; in 1978 he rode 50 miles on a tandem with Tony Shardlow in 1-42-46, riding south along the A38 from the M1 junction north of Derby to the outskirts of Birmingham, including the climb up Moneymore Hill. He also started tackling longer place-to-place records with Tony, first in 1979 the Birmingham to Llandudno on tandem in 4-49-20, then on the tandem-trike with 6-44-24.

Making use of the A38 dual carriageway at Tyburn Island to Bassetts Pole, then the drop down Moneymore Hill from Canwell to the Lichfield and Burton by-passes to Derby gave a good Birmingham to Derby and back record route; also by starting at Canwell, a good straight-out 25, and 50-mile route. All became available in the 1970's enabling Alan to break various '25's, and then the Derby and back with 3-35-14 on a bike, and the tandem-trike record with Tony Shardlow in 3-00-31. Alan then broke the B'ham to Hereford and back trike record with 5-51-13, and on tandem with Tony in 4-28-32; all bar the last records subsequently broken. He finished off his MRRA record breaking in 1984 on the B'ham to Shrewsbury and back route, firstly on his trike with 5-21-48, then on a tandem with Tony in 4-22-20, and again with Tony on a Tandem-trike in 4-40-20.

During the same period, Alan was having successful rides in CTT (then RTTC) events, regularly 'under the hour' for 25 miles on a bike, winning Trike events and breaking 10 mile Competition Record twice in 1978, and winning Tandem 50 mile events with Tony.

Pat Kenny and I were breaking RRA and MRRA records during those same years as Alan and Tony; Pat was also a fully fledged RTTC and RRA timekeeper by that time, and spent many hours supporting and timing record attempts, time-trials, even organising local events on occasions. Alan was also an avid stamp collector, as was Pat; spending many hours at stamp fairs, then poring over sheets of stamps looking for

printing errors, doing swaps etc, both earning 'bragging rights' as to who'd got the rarest stamps! Pat's road record breaking had started on a trike, way back in 1965, and I think he went to Alan's shop for repairs etc, and that's another way Alan eased his way into trike riding and record breaking, repairing and making trike frames.

When Pat and I turned up at Alan's shop on the tandem trike, he always commented on Pat's machine being a mish-mash of parts; well it was really, and already over 40 years old; made by a frame builder called Rensch. It had a narrow 24" width conversion-set brazed onto a short wheel-base pre-WW2 Claud Butler racing tandem frame with a curved rear seat tube. Despite having two full length diagonal strengthening tubes it was still very light. It handled surprisingly well, equally as good as a more modern machine like Alan's, with a much wider rear axle. By 1979 Pat and I were ready to tackle the Land's End to John o'Groats record held by Crimes & Arnold; we knew it was a very tight, tough record to beat, and so did Alan, but knowing our previous years of long-distance time-trials, and what our fitness levels were, and even though our chances were slim, he and Tony were very supportive of us.

Nothing was too much for our helpers who went all the way to Bonar Bridge, where the wind turned against us on the north-east coast with just over 80 miles to go. Prior to the attempt everyone, including John Arnold thought we could just about do it, but when we abandoned, Alan and Tony were the first to suggest we make another attempt once we had recovered. During that attempt, and seeing the state of my knee, which by Edinburgh had swelled to double it's size during the attempt, Alan used all his skills to alleviate the cause of the swelling; first by raising the saddle, then lowering it, then altering angles; he even contacted a garage workshop owner in the Highlands and asked if he could borrow a welding torch to raise the height of one pedal; all this at around midnight during the second night, after supporting us for over 40 hours on the road!

In the Highlands, Alan and Tony made us sandwiches, soup, and provided Pat and I with clean dry racing kit, albeit displaying VC Toutourien club logos, but we knew we were on a 'wing and a prayer.' On our journey home with a night's sleep at Dinwoodie, the full support crew and timekeeper Roy Moss said we had to try again. So two months later we were at Land's End once more, but time restrictions due to my being self-employed, meant we had to go as soon as the weather looked about right; but in our haste we read the weather forecast wrongly, and started in 80 degrees F, with very little wind.

That attempt was doomed almost from the start; even at 8am it felt as though we were breathing the contents of a hot oven; by midday the heat was unbearable and we were riding well behind schedule. We carried on in the hope of picking up a helpful wind, or even a breeze on the Bridgwater 'flats,' but instead, Pat noticed the top-tube was splitting and fracturing at the frame lug. 'That's it' I thought, 'now we can all go home;' but no, Alan wasted no time in putting Pat and myself on his own tandem trike to carry on; again in the hope of picking up a cool tidal breeze from the south-west as we approached Bristol. With Graham Dayman, Alan drove our stricken machine back

to his shop, and brazed a new top tube into the frame, by which time Pat and I had ridden up through Bristol, Gloucester, Worcester, Wolverhampton and into the evening where we swapped back to our own repaired tandem trike at Gailey Island.

All this had taken less than 10 hours to carry out, but the wind still hadn't materialised. We were amazed to think that Alan had done all that in such a short space of time, and when he asked us how it felt, Pat with a dead-pan expression said it was okay, but the colour of the new tube didn't match the rest of it. You can imagine Al's reaction - "you cheeky b- - - r" (*or many words to that effect*); but then he saw the funny side of it all, and everyone had a laugh. It lightened the mood and the fact that we were still way behind schedule; we continued on the A34 towards Stoke, but a decision was finally made for us to abandon at Trentham Gardens.

That still didn't blunt Pat's, and even more-so Alan's enthusiasm; the consensus of our helpers was that we try again. Like Pat, Alan was always looking at new ways of doing things, and the previous year had suggested we look at the west coast route from Carlisle, through Glasgow to reach Inverness instead of Edinburgh and the Grampians, this new route being less hilly. We did explore the new route, and despite it being a little longer, it also seemed flatter, so for our third attempt in as many months we set out from Land's End to take the new route through Scotland. To cut a long story short, we still didn't pick up a decent wind, and as we crossed the border we were behind schedule, but were still in with a chance. On reaching Glasgow it started to rain, and by the time we reached Loch Lomond it was torrential; we were soaked through, and getting colder.

We continued through the evening, and as darkness fell we had a choice to make, either to carry on towards Rannoch Moor and Glen Coe, or abandon and find somewhere to stay for the night. We'd covered just over 600 miles by this time, and again, we left the decision making to our helpers and officials; it was after 10pm, and we felt they were the better judges of our destiny. We'd reached the far end of Loch Lomond and found a small hotel at Ardlui, and felt it made sense to stop. Alan and Tony had driven and helped us for nearly 40 hours, and so had the RRA officials. From outside, the small hotel looked warm, comfortable and inviting, but being so cold and wet I would have slept on hay in a dry barn. We booked rooms, and had a quick look around the bar-cum-restaurant, but it was too late to get food. Tony reminded me that I was so tired and cold, it was suggested I got into bed, without even a wash. Pat was shivering, and we were advised to sleep close together to get warm.

Whether it was hypothermia, sleep deprivation or the fact that I'd seen nothing but a grey, wet Loch and Pat's back pockets for many hours I'm not sure, but the restaurant and lounge seemed colourfully decorated, with large flowery lampshades dotted around. Tony and Alan were enjoying a drink or two at the bar as I staggered off to find our room. Perhaps the heavy fire-doors held open by fire extinguishers in the corridor should have given me a clue as it just about registered into my sub-conscious state; I found the room, and closed the curtains before collapsing into bed.

It did seem cold in the room, but I was so glad not to be out on Rannoch Moor, and soon shivered myself to sleep. My recollection of the next few hours is hazy, I don't remember Pat being there, but I do remember hearing a 'colourful' but muttered description of how cold it was, and Alan checking to see if the windows were shut; I remember no more until being woken again and told to hurry, otherwise I'd miss breakfast. My legs were feeling very stiff, still cramping up after riding 600 miles, the last few hours of it in the rain. I went to have a peek out of the curtains to see where we were, and I suppose the curtains billowing should have given me an inkling as to why it was so cold. On drawing them a little wider, I was amazed, then very amused; first of all at the magnificent view down Loch Lomond, and secondly that there was no glass at all in two of the windows, letting wind straight in from the end of the Loch. A Fawlty Towers situation sprang to mind!

Alan's ribald remarks about the missing windows were - "what the - *bleep*, - no wonder it was - *bleep* - cold! Did you know there wasn't any - *bleep* - glass in the - *bleep* - windows?" Alan took a lot longer than me to see the funny side of it, and on sitting down to breakfast I noticed things didn't seem so bright and colourful as they had the previous night; on studying the room more closely I saw that some of the heavy flock wallpaper was held onto the wall by sellotape, and the lamp shades had been similarly repaired, with some of them tipped at a crazy angle! Perhaps I'd been hallucinating the night before, seeing such bright colours, I don't know, but the team thought the missing glass, the decor, and poor fire precaution was hilarious. I'm not too sure what Alan thought about it all, and on mention of it at odd times since then, he's always laughed a little, then muttered something about never being so- *beep* cold!

Those funny moments made it all worthwhile for me, and helped to take away some of the disappointment of failure, but as everyone said, 'record breaking isn't always about being extremely fit and ready, it's often down to luck, especially with the wind.' I got my taste of achievement and enjoyment a year later, by seeing and helping Pat Kenny break the solo trike End to End record by driving the following car for over two days. It also made me realise the camaraderie of those times, and Alan and Tony's dedication when helping Pat and myself. I mentioned being self-employed at the time of our attempts, as a crypton engine-tuner and vehicle tester at Moseley; with Al's interest in kit cars and sports-cars in general, and him driving and restoring a Lotus Europa,' I realised we did have other things in common.

My hectic road record breaking days being over, coincided with starting up a small cycle retail business at Bridgtown in Cannock, and I didn't see much of Alan, but when I did he was curious as to why I wanted a bike-shop (offering me his shop for a knock-down price). I told him I was pretty skint' but it had been my life-time's ambition to either work in a bike-shop, or to own one. Until composing my memories of Alan for this Tribute, I hadn't realised he'd inherited Tower Cycles from his father, and at the time of his inheritance, I was still at the stage of gazing into cycle-shop windows, mainly at racing bikes and lightweight equipment. I'd done so since the age of 12; Priory Cycles being my nearest, with Geoff and Brian, then Wilsons of Aston, with Dave and 'Big Jim' the mechanic. Alan to me was just a young rider, younger and better than me, and whereas I dreamt about bikes, time-trials and gazing in bike-

shop windows, Alan had been thrust into the bike business at the deep end, probably without any choice in the matter. In the late 1970's I did buy my best bike, a Viking Severn Valley, which I raced on for many years, and two 24"-wheel Viking Warlord junior racers for Lynne and Mike, all from Al's shop.

Owning and running my shop from 1983 onwards took away my enjoyment of bikes and racing; that magic I felt as a teenager had gone, so I can understand Alan's eventual disinterest in the U.K cycle trade, and whereas my daughter Lynne works in the shop and time-trials successfully, and my son Michael took over from me in 2005, Alan had no-one to pass his onto. Al and I did talk on the phone a couple of times a year, and he was always after news of Lynne's racing and End to Ends around the new millennium, as he'd known her from the age of 10, I also kept in touch with Tony on various aspects of cycling; RRA, MRRA. Occasionally we'd meet up with Al and talk about bikes, racing, the old days, and record breaking, but generally he seemed settled with his life in France. In fact it was there he phoned Tony from at 4am, just as Lynne was dropping from the Cairngorms on her final solo bike record in 2002, and we were able to tell him she'd picked up a following wind, and it looked promising for the End to End. He was pleased, and continued to keep in touch to the end of her E2E and 1000 miles records, which Tony had the great pleasure of timing.

When Harold Harvey died in the 1990's his will requested that his ashes be scattered the length of the RRA/MRRA 25-mile course on the A38, from Canwell to Mickleover, and that Tony and Alan carry out his wishes on a tandem. So they did just that, on Tandem Trike, in full racing kit, with a proper send off, scattering Harold's ashes as they rode along. Mary his widow, Liz his stepdaughter, and many of Harold's cycling friends from different clubs were there, as well as my wife Liz, Lynne and myself; Then we were all invited back to Harold's house on the A38 at Barton-u-Needwood for a cup tea etc. It was a time of very mixed emotions; obvious sadness, but smiles at the method Tony and Alan used to scatter his ashes; probably another unique first for record-breakers!

As far as I'm aware, Alan was (and remains) the only RRA rider ever to break and hold the same record on all four machines at the same time; the 25-miles on a bike, trike, tandem, and tandem-trike, all in 1977. His tandem record was with Tony Shardlow, and the tandem-trike with Harold Harvey.

The last time I chatted face to face with Alan was at Pat Kenny's funeral in 2011, and like me, he was very moved by his passing, and the fact that the driver got off so lightly, without even a jail sentence. Alan was a great help to Pat's widow Hazel in assessing and advising on Pat's huge book collection, and also his stamps.

Alan was a great Francophile and had become fluent in the language through his own immersion in the country, its history and its culture. After many years visiting and travelling through France, he decided to settle in the small village of Trouville-la-Haule, in the Normandy countryside not far from Le Havre, and just 1Km from the River Seine. There he was adopted by the locals as (almost!) one of their own,

although he did object when he was once accused of speaking fluently, though with a Birmingham accent!

Alan was a fan of cars and especially vintage sports cars. He had a small fleet of these, very well maintained. He became a well known figure in the MG Car Club of France, regularly taking part in their gatherings and even organising events. The memories and salutations of their members have been much appreciated.

Alan also had a fine record collection, especially of Jazz and Blues, but also including Classical and even Gregorian Chant. Some people may think that his favourite could have been Sinatra's "I Did It My Way", but in fact it was Dylan's "The Times They Are A'changing". Well, they certainly have now.

Sadly, apart from Tony Shardlow, Pete Swinden, Graham Dayman and myself, many of our old friends who continued to break RRA & MRRA records and helped on our attempts, or kept in touch from the 1960's onwards, are now deceased.

Thanks Al, for being just you; your support and encouragement will never be forgotten.

*John Taylor (with additional information from Tony Shardlow)*