

The Flying Scot

A Short History

In October 1900, David Rattray and his sister Agnes opened their first shop in McAslin Street, Glasgow. In doing so, they laid the foundations of a company that would produce Scotland's premier lightweight bicycle, "The Scot", perhaps better known as "The Flying Scot". Over a period of eighty-three years, their cycle shop would grow to become a focal point and meeting place for many cycle enthusiasts from Scotland and afar, the Scot name representing what was thought to be the best in hand built lightweight racing and touring machines. Their reputation became so widespread that most cyclists in Scotland, owned raced or actively sought one.

From the small shop in McAslin Street, David Rattray progressed from cycle hire, to sales and servicing, and in 1913 moved to larger premises in adjacent Murray Street. In common with most shops of the time, they became agents for a number of established lightweight brands, for example Saxon, Grubb and Selbach and in later years for the larger manufacturers like Sunbeam, Dawes and Raleigh.

David Rattray was closely involved with the thriving road racing scene in particular in the West of Scotland, and had contact with many successful or aspiring "speedmen". When it came to sourcing bicycles for competition however, the absence of any substantial indigenous lightweight cycle industry in Scotland meant a limited choice of marques, from those produced across the border with virtually no input from the Scottish riders using these machines.

By the mid 1920s a few Scottish builders began to produce frames, designed to meet local riders specifications and requirements. Though a few were quite successful, these were generally one or two-man shops with limited production. In 1928 David Rattray with Jack Smith, by then his partner in the company, began producing the first of approximately 15,000 complete 'Scot' bicycles and frames that were to be hand built by the company until it's closure in 1983.

Through the early 1930s Scot frames steadily became the basis of the machine of choice for local clubmen, and towards the end of the decade had carved themselves a niche in the lightweight market. War in Europe intervened however, and the commencement of hostilities in 1939, saw many cycle shops forced to close down and manufacturers throughout the country, obliged to support the war effort by transferring production to essential war work. The high quality steel and steel tubing, necessary for the construction of lightweight frames, steadily became all but unobtainable. Reynolds, the main tubing supplier, became almost entirely focused on producing aircraft parts including for use in the construction of Supermarine Spitfires. The other British tubing manufacturer, Accles & Pollock. (A&P) were similarly affected.

Rattrays were not immune to the problems that the shortages created, and had to give up construction almost immediately in late 1939. The company did not close however, as they were extremely fortunate in gaining essential war contracts for the production of pins used in the manufacture of Bailey bridges. Additional staff were taken on at Murray Street, and were trained as machinists/turners, new machinery being bought to cope with a rather different sort of work than the company been used to previously. Whilst the war in Europe ended in 1945, wartime austerity and conditions continued in Britain for a further six years. As part of the drive to rebuild Europe, and to pay for national debt manufacturers were obliged to produce goods for export before those for home use. Out of both necessity to travel to work however and a rapid increase in the amount weekend cyclists, Rattrays found their products in great demand. Wartime restrictions on the availability of steel and components gradually evaporated and in 1947 the premises at Murray Street were rebuilt and enlarged to cope with an ever increasing amount of orders.

The purchase and opening around this time of a shop at 254 High Street (formerly Malcolm Smith's) gave another outlet on one of Glasgow's busiest streets. This was not the first time Rattrays had a "branch" shop, having previously had another shop at 212 Parliamentary Road, though they never achieved the popularity and success of Murray Street and latterly Alexandra Parade, being substantially smaller. The main shop could not have been better placed, being just around the corner from the clubrooms of the Cyclists' Touring Club (C.T.C.) Glasgow District Association at 379 Parliamentary Road.

In the early 1950s Reg Harris, then World Professional Sprint Champion, had a Flying Scot made for his wife by Rattrays framebuilder John Hamilton. Although it would have been the perfect advertising coup, Rattrays were not able to use any of the publicity from this as Reg was at the time contracted to ride for Raleigh.

Such was the popularity of the Scots and the products of the homegrown cycle-makers, that Rattrays as with many Scottish frame builders, saw little need to advertise their products nationally. Similarly they did not attend the national cycle shows held outwith Scotland. With modernised premises, production at it's peak, employing at least five framebuilders plus assistants to cope with the work on an expanding order book the company must have been in good shape. Sadly however David Rattray passed away in 1950 at the age of 72, leaving the company to be run by his friend and partner Jack Smith, with his wife Lottie as his business partner.

The company was always led from the front by Jack Smith, who with his salesmen appears to have known exactly what the customers wanted. He developed the business to the point where in Scotland purchasing a "serious" bicycle meant only a Scot would do, and the choice was really just what colour and finish, and what you could afford. Business wasn't only restricted to the home market, a steady stream of native and ex-pat customers ordered Scot's to take home, in particular to Canada, the USA and Australia. Rattray's also became a fully fledged wholesaler selling the Scot frames to other Cycle shops around Scotland and the North of England.

In the early 1950s areas all over Glasgow and the city centre were selected and planned for what was euphemistically called "redevelopment". Townhead was one of the last areas to be started and unfortunately Murray Street was located right in the middle, and in 1968 the company were served with a compulsory purchase order on the premises. The need to move from Murray Street was unavoidable, and came on the back of a lean period, when the car became the means for folk to get away at the weekend. The effect on the company and its finances was devastating. After a short period at 86/88 Dalhousie St, itself later subject to a compulsory purchase order, the company leased smaller and less suitable premises at 261 Alexandra Parade, at which they remained until closure. Fortunately for Rattrays the loyal customers they had built up over the years and the quality of their products ensured that they would be followed wherever they ended up in Glasgow.

Sadly though the company was dealt a further blow when on 15 February 1973, Jack Smith died aged 69. It was a sad loss for the family and not only to the trade but to the community. Over 300 people attended the funeral at Glasgow Crematorium (Maryhill) on the 20th, including representatives from the cycling clubs and from the trade, notably Brown Brothers, Dunlop, The North British Machine Co., Raleigh, Reynolds Tubes, Honda, Glasgow Corporation, Glasgow City Police, Glasgow Rangers Football Club, the Daily Record and Cadder Freemasons.

Clearly it was going to be a hard act to follow, and from Jack's death the company was run by his son John, with John's mother remaining as a partner. They did not, however appear to recover from the loss of Jack and the company fortunes began a steady decline. This was not helped a general downturn in the sports cycle market, and in particular in demand for lightweight specials, and despite Steyr-Daimler-Puch (GB) Ltd. taking a 49% share in the company as part of their efforts to gain a foothold in the British cycling market. Even the diversification into selling Honda motorcycles some years previously didn't halt the decline in the company fortunes. The final years at Alexandra Parade and the company's eventual demise have become somewhat shrouded by the passage of time. However, what is known of the last days tells a sad story about the end of what had once been Scotland's premier bike manufacturer.

As far back as the late 1970's, Rattrays was finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Against that background, even a well-run business would have struggled and, whatever the strengths of Rattrays, efficiency and good business practice were not words that could have been readily applied to the Glasgow firm as it faltered. Puch agreed to take over the company debts in exchange for the majority Rattrays shareholding of John Smith, ending the family involvement that had started more than sixty years earlier.

In 1981, at a cycle trade show in Harrogate, Evan Ritchie was approached by a senior figure at Puch (GB) Ltd, Peter Bolton, who said that they were keen to off-load Rattrays. Mr. Ritchie agreed to take over the business and the lease of the Alexandra Parade premises. "It was a very large premises, a 2000 sq. ft. shop, big workshops, machine shops, huge stores etc., It used to be an RAF fighter command headquarters and command centre for Scotland during WW2 in the RAF's fight against the Luftwaffe and was built like an air raid shelter, which to a certain extent it was," said Mr. Ritchie. "Apart from retail stock there were included quite a few boxes of Reynolds 531 tubing, forks, dropouts,

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handlebars, wheels, tyres etc., plus the basic machinery for making frames. The place was very poorly managed with rubbish lying about. Some of the anxious staff, envisaging no future in Rattrays, lacked discipline and felt neither pride nor motivation to do their best work. Puch were paying their wages from Nottingham and the supervision from there was claimed by some to be negligible. They (Puch) wanted to get rid of their big Glasgow headache. I therefore stated my own terms."

Mr. Ritchie's company, Barbour's Garages Ltd, inherited the Flying Scot and The Scot names and the company was, according to Mr. Ritchie, "Perking up, front shop and workshops cleaned and refurbished, redecorated, extended, orders coming in, sales going up, the staff happy and remotivated and all involved seeing the light at the end of the tunnel." The company was again "beginning to make money" when he ran it. During his ownership, the frame numbering sequence was changed to incorporate his initials (and the Queens!). "I still have ER2 here in Fraserburgh which is a beautiful machine in perfect working order and a pride and joy of mine," he said. "I was involved personally in the making of it and others, helping with sandblasting, spray painting, assembling, putting on the stickers etc." However, Mr. Ritchie and the accountant (Mr. A. J. Birnie CA) for Barbour's Garages, who was also a significant shareholder in Barbour's, were involved in a business dispute and Rattrays was eventually sold to the accountant for a 1p cheque as part his settlement for his shares in the garage firm.

It appears the staff were subsequently made redundant and Rattrays lease, the assets, including the machinery and tubing, were all sold off, with the Scot and Flying Scot names being sold to Jim Houston, owner of Glasgow bike retailer, Dales Cycles. Mr. Ritchie added, "It was it was a heartbreaking demise to the most famous Scottish cycle manufacturing company. Had it continued for a few short years till the BMX & Mountain Bike boom arrived, Rattrays could have been a company and the Scot a bike to be reckoned with." In 1983, Rattrays closed for good without a ripple of remorse from anyone.

Over the years, thousands of frames and complete bicycles were produced at Murray Street, and latterly at Alexandra Parade, Glasgow. All were built to the same high standard from club machine to tourer to top-flight racer. Each frame hand built with the same care and attention the like of which modern technology cannot replicate. Today, more than 34 years later, nothing remains of either Murray Street, or the once busy and thriving Parliamentary Road, the streets and the original premises having all but disappeared, flattened and replaced with modern low & hi-rise housing. Similarly all that remains of the Alexandra Parade premises is the land on which they stood.

It's not the end of the story though. Perhaps initially trading on the "Scot" name and reputation to some extent, Jim Houston restarted limited production using the frame builder, Dave Yates, at M.Steel Cycles. These however are entirely 'custom' built and produced to order and at present only "on request"

Despite their widespread popularity Flying Scots are disappearing fast from the cycling scene, though many do still exist. Three remain on show to the public in Glasgow, at the Museum of Transport at Kelvingrove. Of these, the 1950 mixte framed cycle belongs to Lottie Smith, Jack's wife, and is on permanent loan to the museum.

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