

# WHEELS

*Alan G. Clark*

There are so many ways in which life has changed since I was a Bitterne boy in the 1940s and 50s. At this moment I have in mind children's toys. These days it seems that the back garden of every house where children live is filled with gaudy plastic junk. Children's playgrounds have to be a garish mix of clashing colour, or else it won't be attractive to the little ones. Is this really the case? I don't believe so. When I was young we had far less in the way of toys but what we had was made of metal and of wood—materials that could be adapted and in many instances repaired—toys, perhaps most significantly, which left something to a child's imagination.

When I was about three years old, a highlight of any visit to my aunt and uncle's house in Radstock Road, Woolston, was being allowed to look at my cousin Peter's pedal car. To me it was just like a real car, made of metal and shaped rather like an old Austin. Peter was four years older than me and at the time I was very envious of his car and wished that I owned one. Of course, you can't travel far in a pedal car. Even gaining a few yards requires a great deal of effort, and wisely my father, an engineer, decided I should have a tricycle instead. This was my birthday present when I was four and whilst I might have been just a little disappointed that it wasn't a car, I took to it straight away.



**Alan at the top of Lance's Hill  
c.1950 view looking west.**

The tricycle was second-hand, although I didn't know that at the time and indeed it had been renovated to near-new condition. It was painted a pale blue, had a chain, brakes and solid tyres, and I remember riding it up and down our long front path for hours on end. The first time I escaped, I rode down Peartree Avenue and turned left into Spring Road, travelling nearly a mile before reaching my uncle Jim's grocery store, 'H.J. Garrad'. His shop lay fifty yards beyond Eassons Garages on the right. At that time, my parents didn't have a telephone that my uncle could use in order to report my arrival, and so he had to drive me home in his car. I have no memory of my mother's reaction to my disappearance but presumably she was glad to have me back.

My second escape, which must have occurred soon after the first, was much more ambitious, although I didn't think it too arduous at the time. My father worked for Fairey Aviation at the airfield off Hamble Lane, just before the village of Hamble. One morning I rode my trike up through Bitterne and along Bursledon Road, passing both the Elephant and Castle and the Target before turning right down Hamble Lane and arriving at the company's gatehouse at around lunch time. The total distance was over four miles. I must have told the gatekeeper who I was and that I'd come to see my dad, for my father was summoned to the gate and was totally amazed to find me there, having no idea that I would know where he worked, let alone how to navigate the journey. It was a great treat for me later that day to travel home with him, his workmates and my trike on the covered lorry used to transport employees.

Although my tricycle was a very satisfactory and swift means of transport, I still hankered after four wheels, and my friend Ken and I would spend hours constructing trolleys (what my children's generation would call go-carts) using planks and blocks of wood from my father's shed and a lot of nails. To make the bodywork we would scrounge orange boxes from a local greengrocer. One of these—I believe his name was Mr Mansbridge, was very good in this respect. He opened his shop in the early nineteen-fifties on part of the land now occupied by Sainsbury's and traded there for a number of years, originally selling just a couple of lines whilst building his business. Orange boxes were much sturdier than they are today and could be used in all sorts of ways but what we really craved were the Fyffes banana boxes. These were longer and narrower—rather coffin-like in fact, and made from much heavier wood, but Mr Mansbridge wouldn't let us take them because a returnable deposit applied. This reminds me that deposits were also paid on many bottles in those days and I remember scouring the village for 'returnables' and taking them to Peter's, the off-licence, in order to retrieve the deposit paid.



**My maternal grandparents' shop in Spring Road**

We built any number of trolleys at that time, although many must have left a lot to the imagination. One was a double-decker bus, using two boxes spaced apart, one above the other. Another was a covered wagon, employing a bit of canvas stretched across four sticks. The perennial problem however was wheels. We could never satisfactorily solve this problem; I had one pair of old pram wheels, about twelve inches in diameter and on an axle. They had been hanging up in my father's shed for years. Unfortunately they had no tyres,

and so not only was it uncomfortable to propel oneself along, but they were noisy and inclined to leave marks on the pavement. These being the largest, I used them at the rear of any current vehicle. My front wheels must have come from an old pushchair and were good in almost every respect, being eight inches in diameter and with good quality solid tyres. The problem was that they had no axle, and therefore each one had to be fixed to the front block using a combination of washers and a six-inch nail. This solution worked reasonably well, and indeed on one occasion the construction defect may possibly have saved me from serious injury.



**My father working on a Fairy Firefly, Hamble 1940s**

The incident to which I refer occurred one school day during the dinner break. I think our lunchtime must have lasted at least an hour and a half because there always seemed plenty of time to get into mischief as well as have dinner (as we called it) during the time allowed. On this particular occasion, after calling at home to pick up my trolley, I walked with two classmates, John and David (not their real names) down Peartree Avenue before turning right by Bayliss' grocery store into Gainsford Road and then right again into Braeside Road. John lived on the left, near the top of this road. Braeside Road is fairly short but extremely steep. Not only is it steep but at the bottom of the hill the road immediately turns ninety degrees right, giving no opportunity to see what vehicle or pedestrian might be approaching from around the corner. As far as any of us was aware, no boy had ever dared or indeed would dare to attempt the descent by trolley. I just wanted to experience what it would feel like to be on the lip of the hill, as if just about to set off on that impossible ride, and so I asked both David and John to hold a back wheel, whilst I positioned myself flat on my stomach, head first, gripping the front steering block with my hands, my chin protruding and a mere six inches above the pavement.

I expected it to be thrilling and it certainly was. No sooner was I in position and admiring the view than I found myself part of it. The temptation had obviously proved too great and my 'friends' had let go. With more presence of mind I might have swung the wheels into the fence immediately and taken the tumble before gaining too great a speed, but in the time it took for me to realise what was happening, I was practically flying, and fighting to maintain a straight line. In no time the corner was upon me. Should I carry straight on, and leave the pavement to risk meeting a car as I crossed the road at speed before crashing through someone's fence into their front garden? Should I try to make the turn, knowing I would surely roll over? Instinctively I chose the latter. I wrenched the front block violently to the

right as I reached the bend and immediately it felt to me as if a powerful brake had been applied. What had in fact happened was that the nails holding the front wheels in position had bent over due to the pressure caused by the turn and both wheels were now lying flat on the ground. I slithered on for a further twenty feet before coming to a gentle halt. For a few moments I just lay there marvelling at my good fortune. I didn't have a scratch on me—not even a grazed knuckle; I wanted that moment to last forever. I felt as if I could lie in that position all day, musing in wonder at my deliverance. In a moment John and David would come racing, breathless round the corner, fully expecting to discover my mangled remains and would find me lying here perfectly still. But not dead, as they might fear. A thought that left me feeling as if perhaps I were a bit of a disappointment to them.

And that was it really. I basked and revelled in my hero status for a minute or two before bending the front wheels back roughly to where they should have been and so making my way home. The incident passed into insignificance and was swiftly forgotten. Except that some things are never truly forgotten—like this and other associated memories that return to me in such vivid detail as I write, more than sixty years after these events occurred, and which it is my great pleasure to recall and recount in these short essays.