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# VETERAN

Photo by James Gunn



Featured rider - Caithness CC's super-vet Alasdair Washington



# CYCLE SPORT IS THRIVING IN CAITHNESS THANKS TO THE INSPIRATION OF VTТА MEMBER ALASDAIR WASHINGTON

*By Mike Penrice, with thanks to Alasdair Washington, James Gunn, Debbie Simmons and Malcolm Gray*

To many cyclists Caithness is a single road from Wick to John O'Groat's in the far north of Scotland. It's a windswept road through an open and barren landscape, to be ridden once as the final miles of a Lejog ambition and then deleted from the bucket list. But even in this corner of the UK cycling is prospering and the Caithness Cycling Club is thriving thanks in no small part to the enthusiasm and inspiration of 84 years old Alasdair Washington, a VTТА member since the 1980s. The club boasts that it is the most northerly cycling club on mainland UK, so is very remote from mainstream cycling activity.

Alasdair began his lifelong cycling career aged 14 whilst growing up in Cheshire. "I can remember at about 14 years old setting off with my pal and we did 120 miles that day, on really old bikes with no proper gears compared with today. That was an exception, but we did often go off for 20 or 30 miles in our early teens on these old bikes.

"In 1957, aged 19, I started racing with Sale Road Club, a BLRC road racing club in the Manchester Division. I was a 1st cat rider two years later and in 1960/61 was rarely outside the first ten, predominantly road racing but with the occasional time trial. In 1960 I had my best wins in the Macclesfield GP and the South Buxton RR. I also rode my first 50 and 100, both promoted by the South Lancashire RC, winning both, with 2:6:20 and 4:23:43. Not impressive these days but this was only 4 years after Ray Booty had become the first to beat 4 hours. And of course it was on a 23lb road bike, with 14oz Fiamme rims, 14oz Wolber tubulars and with two 500cc bottles on the handlebars the only drink available."

In 1962, at the age of 24 and with a wife and young son, a career move took Alasdair to Thurso on the north coast of Scotland, where he worked as a physicist at the Dounreay nuclear reactor, and he has remained in Thurso ever since.

Alasdair quickly became involved in the local cycling scene, such as it was - consisting mainly of track racing at the ever popular highland games. It was at one such games meeting that a number of riders discussed forming a cycling club in Thurso and thus Alasdair became a founder member of the Caithness CC. The inaugural meeting was held in February 1963 and they were soon running a programme of racing, club runs, weekends away and grass track meetings. Local cycle shop owner and former Caithness Track Champion Mack Mowat became the first Life President of the club and regularly drove members to weekend races.

Alasdair takes up the story, "In the club's first year, 1963, we were very successful, mainly time trials but also road and track races. In time trials I had many wins and we often took 1st, 2nd and 3rd placings, while on the track local rider Donnie Bruce won the Scottish 2 mile grass championship. We travelled as far as Dundee and Aberdeen, round trips of about 500 miles. We held track meetings, complete with a Caithness Bicycle Queen competition, races for boys and girls and novelty events. Entry fee was 2 shillings! We also held dinner dances, hostelling weekends and a Cyclists v Harriers event. My best times in 1963 were 23:23 / 1:0:37 / 2:5:30. For me family commitments then took over and my next race was a club 10 in 1977.

"The club went on to produce four outstanding riders who rode for Scotland: Sandy Crawford (b 1952) who won the Scottish 25 and 50m championships aged 18 and later signed a contract with Peugeot, Gary Paterson (b 1973) who rode for a French team in Brittany aged 18 and rode the Tour

of Britain, Alexander Ross (b 1986) raced for Scotland in Luxembourg, South Africa and Saudi Arabia and was selected for the 2002 Commonwealth Games but missed due to injury, and David Smith (b 1985), winner of the Junior Tour of Wales aged 18, rode in France for a French team for four years and rode the Tour of Britain twice. Also, in 1987 a second Caithness club, Wick Wheelers, was formed that produced Evan Oliphant, a member of several pro teams."

For many years the club have held 10 mile events and Alasdair regularly won these with 25mph rides and often won the club trophy for the fastest 25 of the year. Like so many 'younger' vets he did not join the VTTA as soon as he was able, but signed up to Scotland Group when he reached 50 in 1987 and has been competing in vets' events and competitions since then. He has achieved numerous Scottish age records at 10, 25,50 and 100 miles and been SVTTA 100 miles champion (std) and BAR champion (std. 25/50/100m) on a number of occasions, the last in 2018 and 2019. He was also the Scottish Cycling (North) Vet-on-std BAR for most of the years from 1981 to 2019 and in 1986 was Caithness Sportsman of the Year.

Being in the far north Alasdair is keenly aware of the difference in times on different courses, although this is not unique to Caithness. The only 'fast' course which he has ridden was the Dundee 25 course (DD25/1), which stopped being used in about 2000. Aged 51, doing around 1:1's at 25 miles, he went to Dundee and did 56:30 (on a bog-standard road bike), then back to 1:1s up north. He never did break the hour in Caithness but always did in Dundee, including a 57:37 aged 63. Luckily he has never really been one for fast courses, he just enjoys racing.

Alasdair remains a strong supporter of the Caithness CC, participating in their activities and riding club and open events whenever possible. The club promote 10s most Tuesdays, interspersed with a non-standard distance hilly once per month and a club hill climb. A racing highlight is always the

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annual interclub against Wick Wheelers, a distance of 19 miles between the outskirts of the two towns. The organising club and direction of the race alternates, so all are hoping for a tailwind ride - times vary greatly year-on-year dependent on race and wind direction. Alasdair stresses that this is a social event and the only prize is a team award (for best 8 team counters) so even the slower riders play an important part. He is President for Life of the club and in the words of club secretary Debbie Simmons is an inspiration to all the members and an icon in showing that age is not a barrier to competitive sport.

Debbie tells us, "Alasdair broke his hip 3 years ago on our 2018 Christmas club run - we ran into black ice and most of us fell off our bikes. Sadly Alasdair had to have a hip replacement and spent Christmas Day in hospital. Afterwards he had to undertake months of rehab which he did religiously every day and remarkably by June (6 months later) he was competing in our club open time trials weekend and he then went on to win the SVTTA 100 miles championship with a fabulous time. This is an incredible recovery for anyone, never mind a man in his 80's. If ever I have an injury and feel despondent, I think of Alasdair and it focuses me on what's possible when you have a positive 'can do' mindset."

There was no racing in Scotland in 2020 and in 2021 the only events in the Highland Region were the 10 and 25 mile events in Caithness at the end of June; these were his only races apart from a few club events. Club activities had virtually ceased and Alasdair was riding on his own until May of this year, when club events were able to re-start.

After a lifetime of cycling he has excellent stamina and maintains his fitness with about 3 rides per week, totalling approximately 100 miles. He is a reluctant turbo user, reserving it for building up race speed. Without competition honed speed he still managed 27:31 for the 10 and 1:12:20 for the 25, not bad for an 84 year old on deserted Caithness roads.

Caithness Cycling Club annually promote their weekend of time trials (under CTT rules) in late June. It makes a great weekend with traditional Scottish hospitality, mid-summer daylight which goes on for 2 hours longer than on the English south coast and with the opportunity to race on some traffic free roads. Anyone wishing to spend this weekend in Thurso could also make it a stopping off point along the scenic and world renowned North Coast 500 route.

Alasdair comments "We currently run our 3-event race weekend in late June, with a 25 on Saturday afternoon followed by a 10 and a 'hilly 11' on Sunday. In 2022 it will be on 25th/26th June. Being 110 miles north of Inverness we don't have large fields and a typical entry is 30 for each event with most entering all three. Small numbers do however make it



*Time trial U-turns persist in this remote part of Scotland, here expertly negotiated by Alasdair*

easier for everyone to return to our clubrooms for a good social get-together with plenty of home baking etc, the announcing of results and the prize presentation; this is typical of events in the Highland Region. Our weekend prizes usually total about £600 and include GC prizes and "names-out-of-a-hat" bottles of wine for our helpers. We may not be the fastest but we do have a very friendly time and we do encourage the not-so-fast riders as well as the speed merchants."Our 10 and 25 courses have little traffic but they have excellent road surfaces; in our 25 this year 15 out of 29 riders were under the hour, the best being 51:19. We had an award winning sports photographer on course and a full page article with 4 action photos in the local paper, the John O'Groat's Journal."

Alasdair has forged a strong connection with his local paper and during the season has written a weekly report of the club's activities for about 40 years, never missing a single week even when on holiday. He and the Caithness CC have also been frequent supporters of End-to-End record attempts, turning out and offering encouragement over those final excruciating miles, and Alasdair has an official role as an RRA recorder.

It is clear that much of the success of club cycling and racing in this remote corner of the country is down to Alasdair's love of the sport and his firm belief that the club must be all inclusive. " Our club 10's have been ridden on mountain bikes and if someone turned up on a 'shopper' they would be made most welcome. For several years after I had my first disc wheel I didn't use it for club events until several others had them too. In the North of Scotland CA (now SC(North)) I introduced a 'Special Series' of non-standard events, where time is less relevant. (No one asks what you did for a 17 mile hilly!) In our club I introduced a 'Handicap League' with points for every club race, because at the time the same folk were winning every week. This has proved very popular and is keenly contested."

As well as winning multiple honours Alasdair has shown what can be achieved, regardless of age, through dedication and hard work and by keeping as fit as possible. "People do say 'you're an inspiration to me' and I think that's great, I feel privileged," he said. "I'm probably only where I am now because I was really inspired by other people."



*Riders' get-together at the Caithness TT weekend (Alasdair 3rd from left)*

# AGE 80+ MEMBERS WHO COMPETED IN 2021

(Listed in decreasing age order based on date of birth)

Peter Horsnell	Chelmer CC	E Ang	91
Ken Stevens	South Pennine RC	N&EM	91
Ron Hallam	South Pennine RC	N&EM	91
Norman Harvey	Sotonia CC	Wssx	88
Les Hayman	Southborough & D Whs	Kent	88
Bob Loader	Sydenham Whs	Kent	88
Alex Munro	SVTTA	Scot	88
Derek Hodgins	Stockport Clarion CC	M&NW	87
Pete Wilson	Bath CC	West	87
Mike Daniels	Southborough & D Whs	Kent	86
Bob Ibell	Bynea CC	S Wls	86
Alasdair Washington	Caithness CC	Scot	84
Peter Norman	Wrexham RC	Mer	84
Brian Hygate	Fareham Whs	Wssx	83

Brian Lewis	Bicester Millennium CC	West	83
Nev Ashman	Manchester Velo CRC	M&NW	82
Malcolm Adams	De Laune CC	Kent	82
Stewart Mitchell	Deeside Thistle CC	Scot	82
Les Humphrey	South Eastern RC	S/S	81
John Murphy	Gloucester City CC	West	81
John Froud	Festival RC	S/S	81
David Stockley	A5 Rangers CC	Mids	81
Keith Alderson	Cleveland Whs	North	81
Colin Inett	Thanet RC	Kent	81
Alan Robinson	Central Sussex CC	S/S	80
Murray Kirton	A5 Rangers CC	Mids	80
John Howells	Corinium CC	West	80

List based on best available information. Please report any omissions to the editor.

Several of our older racing members had an enforced sabbatical in 2020 and have found it difficult to return, so the 80+ list is still shorter than pre-pandemic. Not so chart topping Peter Horsnell, whose 2020 'shielding year' still included regular daily exercise and cycling, albeit alone, but with a careful avoidance of excessive work in their large garden.

Making a comeback at 91 years old must present some challenges so Peter was advised by his personal physio/masseur to treat 2021 as a beginner and with little effort. Despite that advice he still managed to amass 7 age records during the year, 3 of which he subsequently updated himself. So either he ignored that well meaning advice or next year will be something really special! Peter gets assistance travelling to some races from the ever helpful Dave Nock but has to plan his year carefully due to his difficulty getting into the faster events. Of course he also has personal difficulty with caring for wife Mary, recently retired scribe in this magazine, who now suffers badly with arthritis and her sight.

We still have an 80+ list devoid of any female racing members. Perhaps some of them can be tempted out of retirement to ride one of the veterans closed circuit championships at either Croft or Goodwood in 2022. They are on safe, traffic free, and well surfaced roads and road bikes are welcomed if the TT bike has long gone.