

Design classics

Raleigh Record Ace



Good enough for the great Reg Harris and Norman Sheil the Raleigh Record Ace lasted – in various incarnations – from the 1930s to the 1980s, as **Hilary Stone** discovers

Raleigh has featured more times than any other manufacturer in Design Classics. But there are good reasons for this: Raleigh has figured in more successful attempts than any other manufacturer, their list of world champions is deeply impressive – from Zimmerman in the 1890s through Reg Harris and Norman Sheil in the Fifties to Knetemann and Raas in the 1970s. And they are the only British cycle manufacturer to have built a Tour de France winner – Zoetemelk's in 1980. The Record Ace of the Forties and Fifties is part of this tradition, but its history goes back further.

It starts soon after Rossiter took the End to End record in 1929 and Raleigh's introduction of a Record model in 1930. The first Record Ace was a development of the Record at a higher price point. Raleigh announced its arrival for the 1933 season and although slightly old fashioned with 66° parallel head and seat tube angles it was the top mass produced clubman's machine available. Built with chromo steel main tubes and Reynolds High-Manganese steel stays and forks and equipped with optional sprint wheels it weighed under 20lb. Standard equipment included 26in Endrick pattern steel rims but a distinguishing mark was the radially spoked front wheel. And of course it had just a single fixed gear with single

brake – the mark of any self respecting clubman at the time. By 1936 the angles were modernised to 71° and in 1937 Reynolds HM tubing was specified. For 1938 the head angle was steepened to 73° and the 73°/71° geometry was to remain for the rest of the Record Ace's life until the name was resurrected in the 1970s. The Charles Holland variation launched for 1939 was named after Britain's first ever Tour de France rider.

It was after World War Two that the Record Ace really made its name. Raleigh announced its arrival along with the other new post-war models at a massive dealer show in March 1946 but it was not until the spring of 1948 that deliveries commenced. Priced at £39-9s-4d it was expensive – but the quality of workmanship and attention to detail of the Raleigh Record Ace (RRA) excelled. Braze-ons were fitted to the inside of the seatstays for a quick release saddle bag support. There were braze-ons on the inside of each fork blades for dedicated lamp brackets – it was common practice then for clubmen to fasten their front light to the left-hand fork blade in order to better direct the light down the edge of the road. And there was a special braze-on for the roller for the Sturmey Archer gear wire.

The RRA's chainset was a specially made item with very slender cranks – these were not very reliable and it's common to see Record Aces these

days with one or more replacement cranks. Its beautiful aluminium and steel pedals were also distinctive, with larger than normal bearings. The headset was special too – a separate stem clamp supplemented the normal Raleigh style screwed race. This specification was not to change for the rest of the classic RRA's life – and last featured in the 1954 catalogues. Special track versions were built for Reg Harris and Norman Sheil who both rode them to world track titles. Framesets were available in 1954, too, and were supplied to many top riders; Ray Booby broke most of his Road Records Association records aboard an RRA including his straight out record of three hours 28 minutes 40 seconds for 100 miles in 1956. In '57 the RRA was resurrected with the RRA Moderne model. For the first time this featured derailleur gears – a Cyclo Benelux; this model continued until end of 1958.

In the 1970s and 1980s the name was again used for a number of Raleigh's top road bikes. However, this time around it was not quite so special – there were several other models of similar quality Raleigh machines at the time. 

Thanks to Tony Deadman for the circa 1950 Raleigh Record Ace featured.

And thanks to Paul Whately, the Veteran-Cycle Club's Marque Enthusiast for all his research on the RRA.



GEARS

Through most of the Forties and Fifties the Record Ace was available with a choice of Sturmey-Archer gear – generally one of the close or medium ratio three or four speeds was specified – or fixed wheel.

OTHER EQUIPMENT

There were a large number of options: Dunlop HP rims were standard but Constrictor sprints or wired-on were available at extra cost. With the hubs there was a choice of Airlite, Harden, Solite or Coventry Ultralite. There were also different brake options available though most were fitted with GB aluminium callipers.

FRAME DESIGN

The frame geometry was identical to the immediate pre-war version across all the sizes and every size from 20.5in to 23.5in featured the same 22.5in length top tube. It was possible to fit either 26in or 27in wheels – the clearances were sufficiently well judged that 27s fitted with mudguards. With the normal long drop brakes the then current 26s could also be accommodated – particularly sensible for the shorter rider as the bottom bracket was kept down to 10.5in. Classic post-war frames were built entirely from Reynolds 531 double butted tubing.

FINISH

In the classic years the frame was capped off by a superb flamboyant finish with very ornate transfers on the down tube and seat tube.