



Pedal pushers pay tribute on penny farthings



High and spry: The penny farthing enthusiasts, including round-the-worlder Joff Summerfield, right, ride past the grave of Thomas Stevens in East Finchley Cemetery. Photo Mike Coles

By John Lawrence

What was it that brought 15 men, many dressed in Victorian and Edwardian outfits, to a particular corner of East Finchley Cemetery one Sunday morning in April to raise their glasses in a toast and ride around on their imposing penny farthing bicycles?

The answer was a fellow cyclist called Thomas Stevens. He was the first man to circle the world on two wheels, setting out from San Francisco on his own penny farthing in April 1884 and returning two and a half years later in December 1886.

Born in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire in 1854, he emigrated to the US as a child with his parents and in later life returned to the UK where he married and worked as the manager of the Garrick Theatre in the West End. He died in 1935 and was buried in East Finchley.

It was at his graveside that the modern-day penny farthing riders gathered to pay tribute to their hero on the 140th anni-

versary of the day he set off. "This is a man who should be revered as much as the first person to climb Everest. He was an inspiration," said Phil Saunders, of the Pickwick Bicycle Club, which was established in 1870 and is the world's oldest cycling club.

You feel every bump

Among those toasting Thomas was Joff Summerfield, from Kent, who equalled the Victorian's feat by cycling around the world on a penny farthing between May 2006 and November 2008. "I covered about 40 miles a day on a good day," said Joff. "It all depended on the terrain. On a penny farthing, you feel every bump come straight up through the saddle."

With no chain or gear mechanism, the most noticeable thing about the penny farthing, or Ordinary, is how silent they are for such big contraptions. Also at the graveside was Matthew Trott, whose family firm Trott and Sons still makes around 15 penny farthings by hand every year at their workshop in Horam, East Sussex. Prices start from £1,750.

On the same day as the East Finchley tribute, the American cycle club The Wheelmen were also riding their High Wheelers in tribute. There are plans to make it an annual event and a group called The Friends of Thomas Stevens has been created to raise money to restore and straighten his grave, which is tilting slightly.



Inspiration: Thomas Stevens took two and a half years to ride around the world. Image Wikipedia



Tribute: The riders want to make their graveside meeting an annual event. Photo Mike Coles

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