

RALEIGH

Celebrating 125 years



RALEIGH AND FASHION

The first golden age of the bicycle in the 1890s coincided with, rather than instigated the feminist movement.

Whether or not women rode, and what they wore when they did, were nonetheless pivotal battlegrounds in the long war for women's suffrage. Bicycle manufacturers like Raleigh, of course, wanted women to ride: it meant they sold more bikes. The bicycle companies had been making ladies models since the very earliest 'prototype' bicycle in 1817 but in very small numbers. However, the safety bicycle – the style of bicycle we ride today – changed everything. Cycling became the first popular athletic pursuit for women.



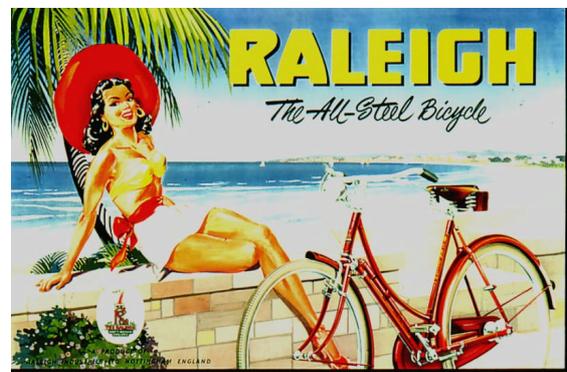
In September 1893, Tessie Reynolds caused a national sensation when she rode from Brighton to London and back on a man's bicycle, wearing 'rational dress' – a long jacket over a pair of baggy pantaloons cropped and cinched below the knee. It was a turning point in the acceptance of practical clothes for women, most of whom then cycled in voluminous skirts, corsets, petticoats, long-sleeved shirts and jackets with tight neckbands. The event made headline news and later, when the Suffragettes campaign of civil disobedience reached its height in 1912, the incident was seen as a milestone.

'The stand [a woman] is taking in the matters of dress is no small indication that she has realised that she has an equal right with a man to control her own movements,' American activist, Susan B. Anthony said. As the leading suffragette of her day, she knew. In June 1894, Annie Londonderry set off from Boston with some spare clothes and a pearl-handled revolver, to cycle round the world. Witty, clever, charismatic – the Becky Sharp of her age – she self-consciously

took up the mantle of women's equality, starting with dress. She was a paragon of 'New Woman', an American term for the modern woman who behaved like the equal of men. The bicycle, dubbed the 'freedom machine' by historian Robert A. Smith, mandated 'New Woman'.

In a bold step for a young company, Raleigh embraced the radical ideas Reynolds and Londonderry were purporting. Not only were they manufacturing and marketing ladies' models; at the 1894 National Cycle Show, Raleigh poured oil on the flames by displaying its own fashionable, 'rational dress' outfit for female riders.

The bicycle boom around the beginning of the 20th century coincided with what's been called the 'golden age of illustration'. Cycle manufacturers snapped up around 10% of all print advertising in Britain and the US. The legacy is a glorious collection of colourful Raleigh poster art from the era,

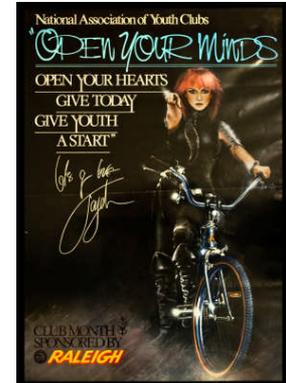


including many images marketing bicycles directly to women. That trend, for adverts showing fashionable women riding elegant bicycles (usually downhill, or at least without any effort) is reflected in the 21st century, urban vogue of 'cycle chic'. It's also reflected in Raleigh's contemporary 'Classic' range of bikes like the 'Classic de Luxe'.

Yvonne Rix, an influential product manager and then marketing director at Raleigh through the 1980s and 90s, assertively promoted the needs of female cyclists. She had very strong views on the importance of marketing women specific bicycles directly to women. Somehow, in the aggressive expansion of the business overseas and the various takeovers during the mid-part of the century, Raleigh had forgotten how to do this. As Rix said, the company needed 'totally creative, stylish images and fantastic looking bicycles that people want to buy.' The Raleigh Wisp (not to be confused with the 'Wisp' moped Raleigh made in the 60s and marketed with Twiggy) was a Rix concept. The bike had a 'mixte', step-

through frame finished in pale blue with dark blue flashes and matching handlebar tape and saddle, both finished in blue suede. It was swish. Launched in 1983, it sold 50,000 in the first year.

The Cameo and Misty models formed part of the same range as the Wisp: the bikes were presented more in the manner of fashion clothing than a mode of transportation. Rix was also responsible for the Raleigh Bomber, an early version of the mountain bike before the MTB craze. It was marketed through an advertising campaign featuring the pop star Toyah Wilcox, one of the faces of the 80s.



Most recently, Raleigh has collaborated with the iconic British style house, Red or Dead, to produce a collection of women's hybrid bikes. Rix must be delighted. There's nothing out of the ordinary about the bikes – they're regular, aluminium-frame machines for everyday use. However, the design and paint scheme on the frame, the saddle and handle grips are fanciful and exotic, elevating the bicycle



from its quotidian responsibilities into an object of desire. The French nickname for the bicycle is *La Petite Reine*. Red or Dead and Raleigh have come up with a small collection of 'little queens' that Tessie Reynolds would have ridden with delight.