

About English cyclist units under First World War, Part 1

Introduction

Over a number of years I have been searching for information on English cyclist units during the First World War and, as far as I know, there is no comprehensive presentation on this subject.

This article is a compilation of information from many different sources and is almost comparable to a puzzle where the edge and some of the pieces inside have been placed. My presentation thus does not claim to be an exhaustive description of the subject; I would be happy if any readers could contribute additional information.



Voluntary cyclist section, approx. 1900.

Simultaneous postcard, reproduced from Source 1.

The beginning

The military use of the bicycle began in the 1880s and individual battalions created cyclist sections. The army's volunteer units in particular adopted the bicycle.

In 1888, it was decided that each volunteer infantry battalion could set up cyclist *sections*. Each section was to consist of 1 officer, 2 non-commissioned officers, 13-21 privates, including 1 horn blower [1](#)).



Volunteer Cyclist, 13th Middlesex Battalion, Queen's Westminster Rifle Volunteers, c. 1900.

Simultaneous postcard, reproduced from Source 1.

In 1888, the first - and until 1908 only - cyclist battalion was also established - the *26th Middlesex Volunteer Rifle Corps* (after 1908: *25th County of London Battalion (Cyclists), The London Regiment*).

During the Boer War [2](#) (1899-1902), bicycles were put into use under war conditions - by both sides - among other things in the liaison service, but also on the English side as a means of transport for infantry. The bicycle was seen as a partial alternative to the horse.

Many of the cyclists were organized into companies under the volunteer "umbrella unit" - *the City Imperial Volunteers*. As of 3 March 1901, 8 cyclist companies of 120 men were formed, consisting of 1 captain, 4 lieutenants, 1 sergeant (*pay sergeant*), 4 sergeants, 2 hornblowers, 5 corporals, 101 privates and 2 medical bearers. The companies left England in May 1901, heading for South Africa.



Cyclists from the 2nd Life Guards, approx. 1905.
From a simultaneous postcard.

Many regarded the bicycle as a modern, civilian means of transport whose use for military purposes was limited.

However, the experiences from South Africa were so good that the volunteer forces in England after the war numbered 8,000 cyclists, divided into 100 companies and 50 divisions/sections.

The regular army also included cyclists on a smaller scale.



6th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment, 1912.
From a simultaneous postcard.

In 1908, the British Army's volunteer units were transformed into the Territorial Army (*Territorial Force* with the contemporary designation), and the many volunteer cyclists came to form the basis of a number of cyclist battalions:

Each of the 14 divisions into which the Territorial Army was organized had its own cyclist battalion. The battalions' tasks were in the defense of the English Isles

Department	Created/discontinued organization	
25th County of London Battalion (Cyclists), The London Regiment 1888-1920	A cyclist battalion consisted	of approx. 525 men, as well as 1 doctor and 1 field chaplain.
10th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Royal Scots	1908-1920	The battalion was (in 1908) organized as follows:
5th (Cyclist) Battalion, The East Yorkshire Regiment	1908-1920	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Battalion staff: approx. 25 ● Machine gun section: 20 8
The Highland Cyclist Battalion	1908-1920	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● companies, each with 60 men.
6th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Norfolk Regiment	1908-1920	This organization was in force at the time of mobilization in 1914.
7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Welsh Regiment	1908-1920	
The Northern Cyclist Battalion	1908-1920	
The Kent Cyclist Battalion 3) —	1908-1920	
7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Devonshire Regiment	1908-1920	
8th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Essex Regiment	1910-1920	
6th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment	1910-1920	
6th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment	1911-1919	
9th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment	1911-1920	
The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion 4) —	1914-1919	

1914

At the beginning of the war, bicycles were included in units of virtually all types of weapons, primarily as bicycle ordnance in the units' liaison platoons. In addition, during the mobilization, a cyclist company was created in each infantry division. Finally, there were the aforementioned 12 cyclist battalions from the Territorial Army.

Below is an outline of the three different unit types.

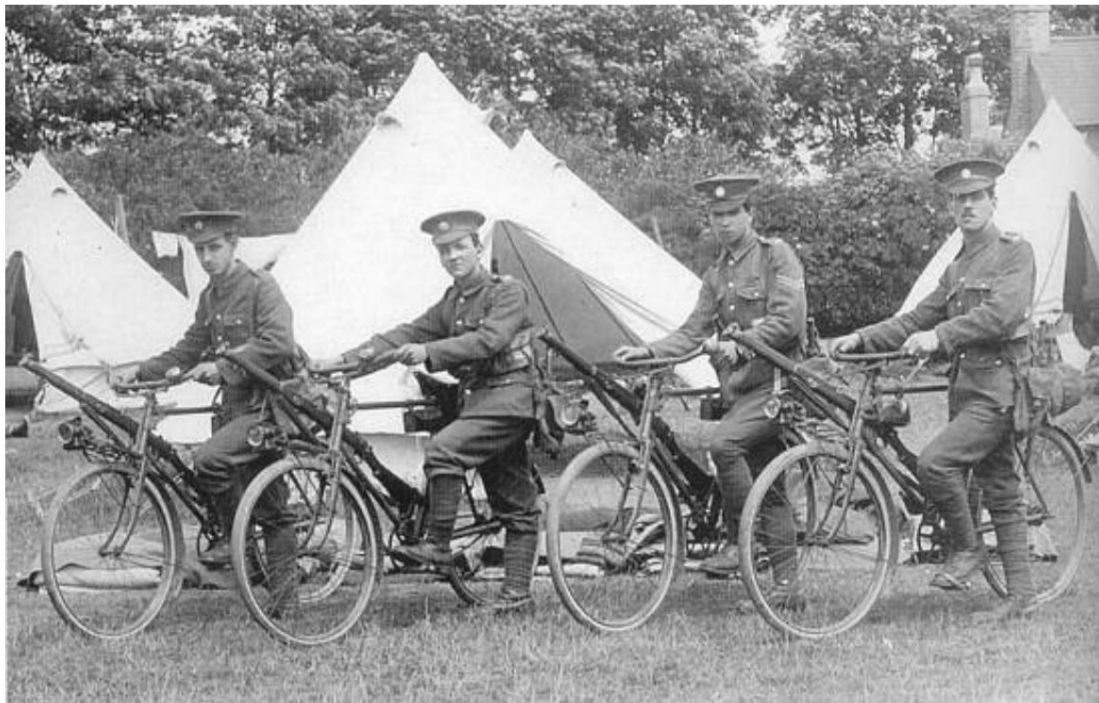
1. Bicycle ordinances

The units' signal elements were rated with a number of cycles, primarily intended for use in the link service.

The signal section in e.g. an infantry battalion consisted of:

- 1 sergeant
- 16 corporals, lance corporals and privates who were fully trained in signal service

The section had 9 bikes at its disposal. In addition, 36 corporals, lance corporals and privates were trained in flag signaling (semaphore); these soldiers were distributed in the battalion's subdivisions.



Bicycle ordinances of the Army Service Corps, ca. 1914 [5](#)).

2. Cyclist companies

Each of the Expeditionary Corps' infantry divisions contained a cyclist company. Together with a cavalry squadron, it formed the mounted forces of the division, whose main tasks were reconnaissance.

The cyclist companies were designatedst *Cyclist Company* (i 1st *Division*), 2nd *Cyclist Company* (i 2nd *Division*) and 1st so still.

At the outbreak of war, the organization of the cyclist companies had not yet been regulated, so their line-up had to be improvised. The personnel came from the battalions of the infantry division in question, while the bicycle equipment apparently belonged to the mobilization stocks of the cavalry division. The cycling companies were immediately ready to solve their intended tasks, which they managed brilliantly in the following months.

Although the organization was obviously not regulated, the personnel must have been fully trained for their tasks. My theory is that the cyclist companies were formed from the personnel that the infantry battalions had to provide for the disbanded mounted infantry companies in 1912. (See, for example, my article *English Mounted Infantry*.)



English cyclists, 1914 6). —

Source 3 mentions the cyclist companies in laudatory terms and despite their somewhat improvised formation, they must have had the same high professional standard as the other units in the Expeditionary Force.

The photo allegedly shows cyclists *on active service in Flanders*, but it is suggested that the photo may have been taken in England.

I have not found sources that mention the organization of the cyclist companies, but if the analogy with the mounted infantry companies holds, each of the division's four infantry battalions fielded one platoon - 1 officer and 32 non-commissioned officers and privates. If this includes guidance personnel and a smaller command element, then the force may have numbered approx. 150 men.

Much suggests, however, that the strength figure was rather approx. 115, as the cyclists did not need horsemen, which was usually 25% of the personnel of a mounted unit.



English cyclist, 1914 7).__

Source 10 mentions a sergeant, TH Cubbon, of *The King's Liverpool Regiment* who served in *the 3rd Cyclist Company*. During the mobilisation, he was given the following effects, among other things:

- 9 compasses
- 2 cans with 36 l (8 gallons) paraffin (oil) 4 rods
- approx. 1.8 m (6 ft.) 12 rods
- approx. 1 m (3 ft. 6 in.) 112 maps
- 1 container
- of grease.

The poles were used for signal flags, and were carried on the bicycles, attached to the pole; the long rods could be separated in the middle.

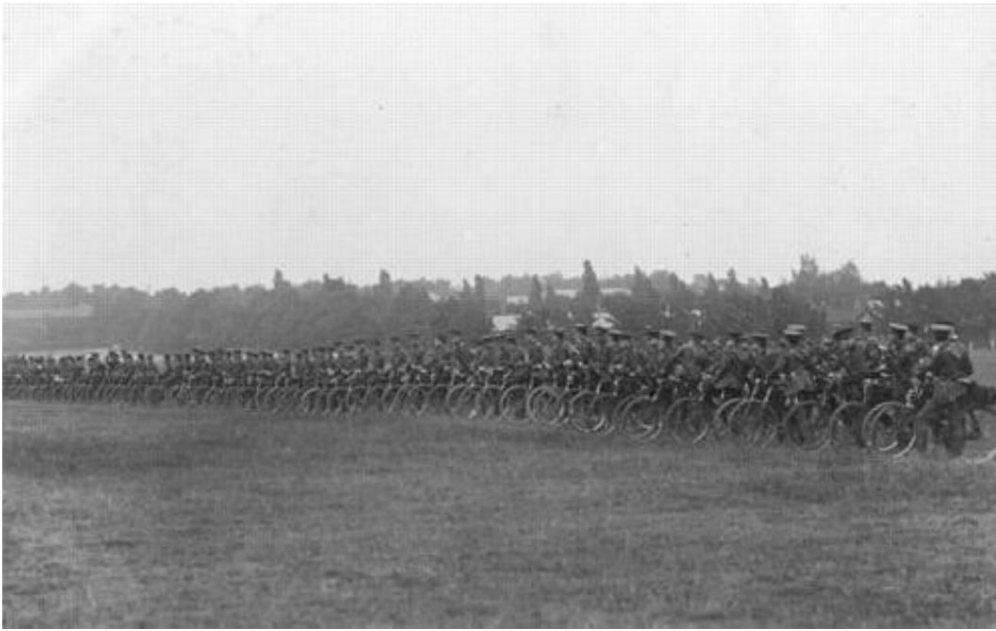
Although the picture is not one of the sharpest, you can guess that there are signal flag poles attached to the pole of the bicycle. It may be a soldier from one of the cyclist companies.

Of special functional equipment, the soldier carries a leather binocular case.

3. Cyclist battalions

During the mobilization, the cyclist battalions from the Territorial Army left to solve their military tasks, which included patrolling the coastal stretches.

The 1908 organization was in force as late as June 1914, when *The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion* is created; the manpower is stated to be slightly lower in the individual subdivisions.



Cyclist Battalion, Aldershot, c. 1914.
From a simultaneous postcard.

This battalion also had 17 motorcycles, including one with a sidecar. The motorcycles were primarily intended for ordinance service.

During their annual 14-day training period (in peacetime), the cyclist battalions could dispose of a fencing train consisting of two motor vehicles. If one can generalize from *The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion*, fencing training was also motorized after mobilization.

The 1908 organization of 8 (small) companies was not necessarily specific to cyclists, as English infantry battalions in the period leading up to the First World War generally used a similar organization. Some of the battalions of the regular army only switched to the later well-known organization of 4 (large) companies as late as in connection with the mobilization [8](#)), while several of the infantry battalions of the Territorial Army were mobilized with 8 companies. The manpower did not change significantly, as the eight companies were simply added two by two; this is often referred to as *the double-company system*.



1/7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Welsh Regiment, England, september 1914 [9](#). —

The majority of the cyclist battalions remained in England and those who - such as *The Kent Cyclist Battalion* - actively participated in the war, fighting as infantry battalions.

The cyclists here carry 3 cartridge pouches on each side of the waist belt, as opposed to the normal 5 belonging to the base Model 1908.

Many of the local organizations (*County Associations*) which set up and equipped the territorial units chose to purchase this edition for their units. The reason for this is not known, but economic conditions may have played a role.

1915

From the autumn of 1914 several of the cyclist battalions are duplicated, whereby units such as *the 2/7th (Cyclist) Battalion, The Welsh Regiment* are created. Later, additional battalions are created - e.g. *3/1st The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion - 2nd Line* and *3rd Line* respectively as replacement units/reserve units. The units are also referred to as units.

In 1915 [10](#)) *the Army Cyclist Corps* was established as a superstructure for the many cyclist units in the Territorial Army. The corps' detailed organization is not known, but it apparently functioned as an educational unit. It is mentioned, for example, that *The North Irish Horse* at the beginning of March 1918 was supplied with 1 officer and 28 men from *the Army Cyclist Corps*.

Until the early summer of 1916, the infantry divisions had a cavalry squadron and a cyclist company. In the newly established divisions, the cavalry squadrons came primarily from the volunteer cavalry regiments (*Yeomanry*), while the cyclist companies - presumably analogous to the cyclist companies - consisted of personnel who were assigned from the division's infantry battalions.



Corporal from the Army Cyclist Corps, approx. 1915.

Drawn by Mike Chappel. [12](#)) _____

As an example of a division's mounted units, it can be mentioned [11](#)) that the [31st Division](#) included the following mounted subdivisions:

- *B Squadron, 1/1st Lancashire Hussars* - from 27 November 1915 to 9 May 1916 [31st](#)
- *Divisional Cyclist Company* - from formation in August 1915 to 9 May 1916.

Both cavalry squadrons and cyclist companies were then given the status of corps units. Over time, the subdivisions are assembled into regiments and/or battalions.

Above the angles is a bicycle wheel, but I am not clear whether it denoted a craft function (eg bicycle mechanic) or whether, as in certain other units, it was a unitary addition to the degree sign.

Above the right breast pocket is the *Imperial Service badge*, showing that the corporal has reported for service outside England. The cap bears the Army Cyclist Corps regimental insignia.

1916-1917

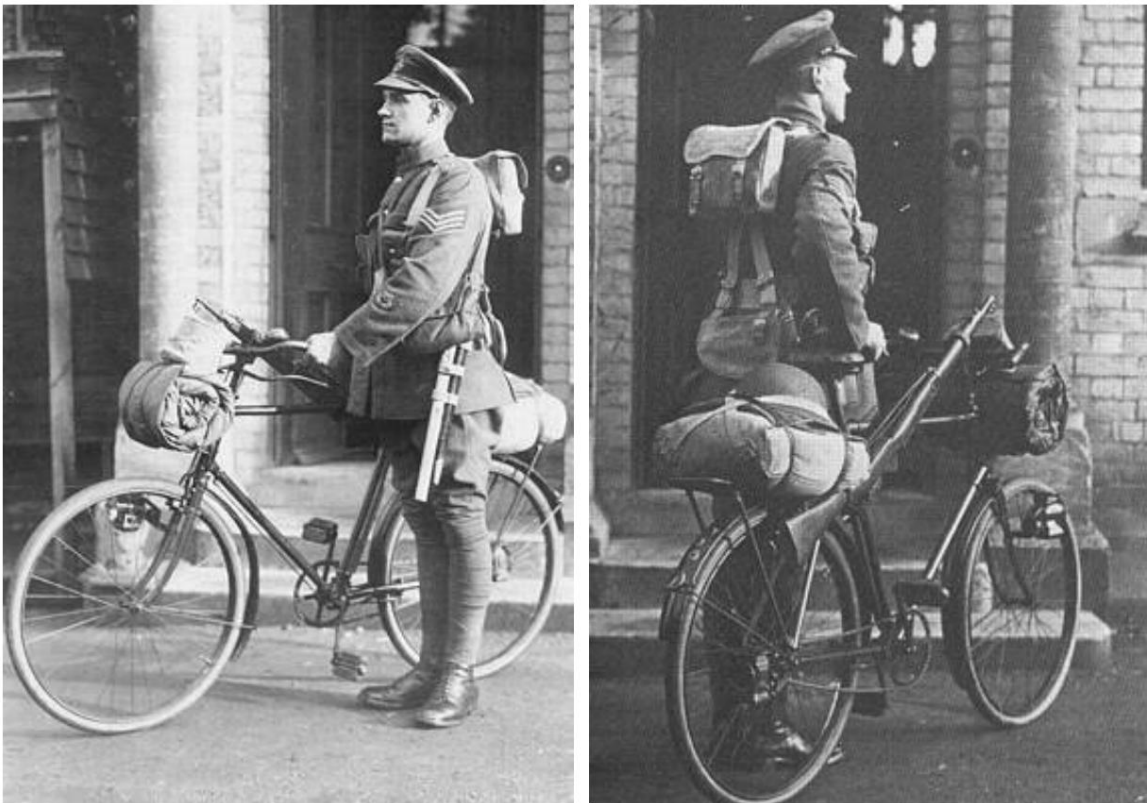
During 1916, a number of the volunteer cavalry regiments' *2nd Line* regiments were converted into cyclist regiments:

- 1st (Lovat Scouts) Cyclist Regiment
- 2nd (Pembroke and Glamorgan Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 3rd (Montgomery and Denbigh Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 4th (Royal 1st Devon and North Devon Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 5th (West Somerset and City of London Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 6th (1st and 3rd County of London Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 7th (Suffolk and Norfolk Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 8th (Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 9th (East Kent and West Kent Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 10th (Wiltshire and North Somerset Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 11th (Hampshire and Berkshire Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment
- 12th (Gloucestershire and Worcestershire Yeomanry) Cyclist Regiment

The need to spare horses from the units in England was very great, and in the summer of 1916 a large part of the *2nd* volunteer cavalry regiments in England replaced their horses in favor of bicycles. In 1916-1917, *the 1st and Cyclist Division* and later *The Cyclist Division*, which form part of the home army, were created.

In addition to the 12 cyclist battalions mentioned above, 29 *2nd Line* regiments are converted into cyclist regiments. The majority of these cycling units remain in the English Isles or are used as staff replacements in many badly needed units.

A cyclist regiment which served in England numbered 505 men and consisted of a regimental staff and 4 cyclist squadrons.



Sergeant from 2/1st Dorset Yeomanry, England 1916 13). —



English cyclist - Figure from the company Scalelink (SMB13).

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) *Records of the Scottish Volunteer Force 1859-1908* by James Moncrieff Grierson, William Blackwood & Sons, 1908; republished in 1972 by Frederick Muller Ltd., London, SBN 584-10936-9.
- 2) For a description of the use of bicycles during the Boer War, see e.g. *Bicycles in The Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902* by DR Maree, Military History Journal, Volume 4, No.1, published by The South African Military History Society.
- 3) A mention of the history of the battalion can be found on the website [The Kent Cyclist Battalion](#).
- 4) The history of the battalion, including the circumstances surrounding its establishment, is dealt with in detail on the [website The Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion](#).
- 5) From *the Army Service Corps 1902-1918*, by Michael Young, Leo Cooper, London 2000, ISBN 085052-730-9.
- 6) From *First Ypres 1914* by David Lomax, Osprey Campaign Series Nr. 58, London 1999, ISBN 1-85532-573-X,
- 7) From *A Photohistory of World War One* by Philip J. Haythornethwaite, Arms & Armour Press, London 1993, ISBN 1-85409-210-3.
- 8) E.g. 2nd Battalion, *The Royal Welch Fusiliers*, who had just returned from years of service in India. Mentioned in *The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1918*, edited by Captain JC Dunn, Sphere Books Ltd., London 1989, ISBN 0-7474-0372-4.

9) Fra *The Welch Regiment, The British Soldier in the 20th Century, Regimental Special* af Mike Chappel, Wessex Military Publishing, Hartherleigh, Devon 1989, ISBN 1-870498-07-0.

10) I have not been able to precisely date the creation - some sources state 1914, others 1915.

11) Fra *The story of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918*.

12) From *British Territorial Units 1914-1918* by Ray Westlake, Osprey MAA Nr. 245, London 1991, ISBN 1-85532-168-8.

13) The left image comes from *Service Dress 1902-1940, The British Soldier in the 20th Century, No. 1* by Mike Chappel, Wessex Military Publishing, Hartherleigh, Devon 1987, ISBN 1-870498-00-3. The right image is from *World War 1 Weapons and Uniforms* by Frederick Wilkinson, Ward Lock Ltd., London 1978, ISBN 0-7063-5739-6.