

# HISTORIC LOOK AT CANADIAN SPEEDWAY THROUGH THE EYES OF JOHN HYAM

CANADA has always been very much a backwater of speedway racing, writes John Hyam. Only two riders - both from the 1930s and 1940s - have achieved recognition at international level. They were Eric Chitty, who made his mark with West Ham, and Jimmy Gibb, who had two pre-war seasons alongside Chitty at Custom House in 1938 and 1939. Post-war, Chitty had several excellent seasons with the Hammers while Gibb came back for the first time in 1949 when he rode for Wimbledon. He stayed in the USA in 1950, but had another season with the Dons in 1951.

There were other Canadian riders who came to Britain in the immediate pre-World War Two seasons. Undoubtedly the best of these was George Pepper, who first turned up at West Ham in 1938, but was posted by the First Division club's promoter Johnnie Hoskins to his newly formed Second Division track at Newcastle.

In 1937, Pepper was on the verge of dropping out of cross-Atlantic speedway to follow a career in road racing, but was persuaded by Chitty and Gibb to try British speedway racing. He arrived in Britain in 1938 with the purpose of riding in the Isle of Man TT.

Pepper was an immediate star at Newcastle and became the track record holder, which stood well into the post-war seasons. He developed into one of the Second Division's top riders and many experts predicted that he was destined for the sport's highest honours. Had war not started in 1939, it is certain he would have joined Chitty and Gibb at West Ham for the never held 1940 season.

Jeff Lloyd, who was a post-war star at Newcastle, New Cross and Haringay, had some vivid memories about the hard racing style of Pepper. When racing for Middlesbrough in 1939, Lloyd was going for a maximum against Newcastle when he met Pepper who went on to beat him. Lloyd said of Pepper's tactics: "Considering my inexperience, Pepper was far more aggressive than he need have been in beating me." But that was probably typical of Pepper - as it was of Lloyd. Both wanted to be the best and rode to achieve that.

Pepper volunteered for war service in September 1939 and after initial pilot training served with the RAF's 29 Squadron, firstly flying Blenheims, then the Bristol Beaufighter. He distinguished himself by shooting down six German aircraft and was awarded the DFC and Bar. Pepper was 26 years old when he died in a flying accident on November 17, 1942, and is buried in his home town Belleville, Ontario, Canada. Eric Chitty recalled the tragedy that befell his fellow countryman. He said: "One day he took a plane up for a test flight. The engine cut out and Pepper failed to get out before it crashed into the ground."

Pepper's last meeting for Newcastle was on August 28, 1939, when 10,862 fans saw them beat Sheffield 48-38. He scored a maximum 12 points. The following Sunday, September 3, war was declared and speedway virtually closed down in Britain. He did, however, race in a handful of the 1940 war-time meetings at Belle Vue.

Chitty arrived at West Ham in 1935 to fulfil an invitation made to him some years earlier by Hoskins who had seen him racing on tracks in the USA's Eastern States. He struggled for some two years to make the grade, but when he did show improvement, Hoskins decided he wanted more Canadian riders. There were restrictions on European and American riders getting contracts with British teams but, as was the case with Australian, New Zealand and South African riders - who were citizens of British Empire countries - there were no restrictions on Canadians.

Gibb made his mark in Britain from the start, and was probably a shade ahead of Chitty in racing ability. Besides his experience in the USA and Canada, Gibb had also campaigned with Americans Jack and Cordy Milne in Australia in the mid-1930s. When war broke out in late 1939, Gibb was the tenth highest scorer in the National League's Division One, although Chitty was only a few places behind him in the charts. For their part, both riders were proving themselves on a par with their Trans-Atlantic cousins from the USA like Jack and Cordy Milne, Wilbur Lamoreaux and Benny Kaufman. But while the Milnes and Lamoreaux made a major impact on the World Championship scene in the immediate pre-war years, Canada did not enjoy the same success.

In 1937, Chitty was 16th with four points and in 1939 was the 10th leading qualifier in a final postponed because of the start of World War Two. Gibb went to the 1938 world final as a reserve but did not ride in the meeting. In the post-war British Riders Championship, which replaced the World Championship between 1946-48, Chitty qualified for all three finals. In 1946 he was seventh with nine points. The 1947 championship saw him move up to fourth place with 10 points, and the following season he was 12th, scoring five points.

Chitty had come to the forefront in 1938, starting that season with a sensational win in the London Riders Championship at New Cross. This was then a highly regarded event - attracting the top riders from the host track as well as Wembley, Wimbledon, Harringay and West Ham. Such was the wealth of talent assembled for the LRC, it was generally regarded as a pointer towards who might be crowned that season's world champion. With the outbreak of war, Chitty stayed on in Britain, and after serving briefly as a War Reserve policeman, tried to enter the Army. By then, he was also engaged on essential war work and his bid to enter the forces was refused because of the work he was doing.

Although speedway to all intents and purposes ground to halt for the war years between 1939-45, a few meetings took place in early 1940 at Crystal Palace, Southampton and Rye House. As a London-based rider, Chitty appeared a couple of times at Rye House. In later war years, he became a regular in the Saturday afternoon war-time meetings at

the old Belle Vue track at Hyde Road, Manchester. It was in these meetings, racing against topline stars including Jack Parker, Ron Johnson, Bill Kitchen, Frank Varey, Eric Langton and Joe Abbott, that Chitty honed his racing skills. Proof of this was his victories in a couple of the unofficial British Riders' Championships. And when the war ended in 1945, Chitty was also a member of a NAAFI team that went to Germany for a series of international meetings to entertain British soldiers. He was very much the star rider of the group.

This sort of form made Chitty a 'must' for the West Ham side when speedway resumed on a league basis in 1946. Former Hammers' rider Arthur Atkinson and his partner Stan Greatrex, the old New Cross favourite, who had taken over the Custom House promotional reins from Hoskins, had no hesitation in appointing Chitty as their team captain.

Gibb, however, was missing from the riders who returned to Britain for the early postwar seasons. In the early 1930s, Gibb had flourished on a series of tracks centred on New York State and had also been winner of both the Canadian and USA Eastern States Championships. He preferred the cut-and-thrust of individual racing, and after the war resisted offers to come back to Britain.

By then, Gibb was also holding down a well paid job as a film studio cameraman in Hollywood, and was combining this work with racing at various tracks in California against old rivals like the Milnes, Lamoreaux, Charles 'Pee Wee' Cullum, Manuel Trujillo, Bud Reda and Chuck Basney.

It was something of a surprise when Wimbledon promoter Ronnie Greene enticed Gibb to Plough Lane just after the start of the 1949 season. He immediately added muchneeded punch to a flagging Dons team and showed all the brilliance associated with him by British fans some 10 years earlier.

But the late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of economic depression. When the pound sterling was devalued against the US dollar just before the opening of the 1950 season, Gibb decided it was not financially viable to make another racing trip to Britain. But he was back for one more try in 1951 at Wimbledon and also raced in Sunday meetings at Shelbourne Park (Dublin). And, to add debate about his nationality credentials, some claimed he was really an American, he also rode for the touring USA team in their test series against the England 'C' squad.

ERIC Chitty, Jimmy Gibb and George Pepper are the Canadians recognised as having made most influence on the British scene in the years either side of World War Two. In the conclusion of his analysis, JOHN HYAM records the efforts of lesser known Canadian riders.

THE pre-war years brought other Canadians besides Eric Chitty, Jimmy Gibb and George Pepper into British racing.

One of them was Harold Blain, who fleetingly flitted across the Birmingham scene in 1937, while Johnny Millett was another Canuck who came to Britain but failed to get a team place after trials at New Cross and Birmingham. In 1939, then West Ham promoter Johnnie Hoskins intimated he was prepared to give Blain a second chance in Britain, but the deal never materialised.

Blain and Millett had been early 1930s starters with Chitty, Gibb and Pepper at the Ulster Stadium track in Toronto, Canada, and on the USA's Eastern seaboard. For around five years, they were accompanied on this racing schedule by Goldie Restall, Crocky Rawding, Bob Sparks, Elwood Stillwell and Bruce Venier. These riders also turned up in Britain in the last two pre-war seasons. Sparks, Stillwell and Venier lined up with Pepper at Newcastle in 1938, while Rawding and Restall were associated with New Cross.

Another Canadian was Eddie 'Flash' Barker, a former all-in-wrestler, who rode at West Ham in 1938 and 1939. Barker also went for a race-winning trial at Crystal Palace in June 1939, only for the track to close after the meeting because of lack of support.

At the time, another Canadian Charlie Appleby was just holding down a reserve berth at the Palace. Appleby, who served in the RCAF during the war, died from injuries on October 8, 1946, while a member of the Birmingham team. He was seriously injured in the previous night's meeting at Newcastle when he crashed when avoiding a rider who had fallen in front of him and died from his injuries. Appleby had originally turned up in Britain at Hackney in 1938 and following the Palace's closure in mid-season 1939 returned to Waterden Road. During the war, Appleby flew on 150 missions as an air gunner with Bomber Command.

Barker came back to Britain after the war in 1947 and resumed his wrestling career with some success. In his speedway days at West Ham, Barker was a great favourite with Johnnie Hoskins. When the 'great man' first signed the 14-stone Barker he said: "When he's around the Hammers side, we know there'll be no physical problems from the other team."

Bruce Venier spent the 1938 season with Newcastle, in a race term where he also competed at the Marine Gardens in Edinburgh. Pepper and Stillwell came back for 1939, with Pepper racing regularly at Newcastle, Marine Gardens and White City Glasgow. Stillwell was out of favour at Newcastle in 1939 but raced 10 meetings at Glasgow and in three meetings at Marine Gardens. Another Canadian who turned up at the Scottish tracks in 1939 was Fred Belliveau, a 24-year-old who originally signed for Wembley. They loaned him on to Middlesbrough and when that track closed in mid-season he moved on for trials with Stoke, who also dropped out of the league.

Restall and Rawding both had misgivings about racing in England. When Restall arrived at the start of 1938 he said: "It will be difficult to adapt. Tracks on the USA East Coast are mainly clay rather than cinder surfaced, while many races are rolling rather than clutch starts."

The reason was that on the East Coast USA and in Canada, at many venues speedway was only an additional class to motor-cycle flat-track racing and races were run largely according to the rules of the latter formula. Most of the Canadians tended to race at these venues, whereas Gibb and Chitty had done much of their racing at purpose-built American speedway tracks and consequently adapted more easily to British racing conditions.

By August 1938, Restall was down to second-half rides at New Cross and made an unsuccessful bid to go on loan to Second Division side Bristol. At the end of the season, he was not retained by New Cross, but appealed for another try with the club for 1939 and was brought back. He showed marked improvement and had scored 54 points when the sport ground to a halt because of the outbreak of war on September 3.

New Cross, also signed Rawding for the 1939 season. He originally came to England with Belliveau to ride for Wembley. There was a row between the two clubs before Rawding opted for New Cross. Like Restall, he was disappointed with his form in Britain, and found British track conditions hard to adapt to. His reputation had been built on tracks around New York.

In 1935, Rawding was runner-up to Gibb in the USA Eastern States Championship, was second to Benny Kaufman in 1936, then in 1937 and 1938 was beaten by former Wimbledon rider Bo Lisman. In his first match for New Cross, Rawding crashed and broke his collar-bone. When he recovered he moved across south London and was a reserve rider for Wimbledon and up to September had scored 17 points.

Venier was a surprise starter for British racing in 1947, when Ian Hoskins signed him for Glasgow White City. The Canadian made his debut on April 9 in a challenge match against the Oliver Hart Select, and the following week turned out in a league match against Norwich. He fell in all his races in both matches, although in one meeting he was twice in the lead when he crashed. In both matches, the Canadian was riding the White City track spare and using borrowed leathers. In Venier's last match, Hoskins recalls that when he crashed he tore the seat out of his borrowed leathers and vanished to the dressing rooms. He added, "I was surprised when Venier presented himself at White City. He had no equipment, just a reputation gained at Newcastle before the war. On that, I gave him a chance."

The next day after his last rides at White City, Venier turned up at the stadium and persuaded Hoskins to lend him £10 for the fare to London, from where he planned to return to Canada. Hoskins never heard from him again, but years later told me: "I was in Toronto in 1980 and heard that Venier was driving taxis. I never found him, so I'm still owed a tenner."

Two other Canadians who turned up in Britain immediately after the war were Bill Matthews and Mike Tams. It was Eric Chitty who persuaded Matthews, a top performer on one-mile and half-mile dirt tracks in Canada and the USA, to try speedway at West Ham in 1947. But try as he did, despite a mid-season loan spell to gain experience at Second Division Birmingham, Matthews never made the transition to speedway. Matthews was winner of the annual 100-mile dirt track race at Daytona in 1941, and

repeated the feat in 1949. Because of these achievements he is recognised as being one of Canada's top riders in this form of track racing and has a place in American motorcycling's 'Hall of Fame.' Mike Tams, who had arrived in Britain pre-war with his family as an 11-year-old, decided on a speedway career in 1946 and was a member of that winter's Harringay training school at Rye House. He linked with Third

Division Eastbourne for 1947 where he mainly rode in second-half races.

Wembley made an inquiry to buy Tams but their team boss Alec Jackson balked at the Eagles' £500 valuation. In 1948 and 1949, Tams was rider-promoter at Santry in Ireland, then in 1951 rode for Newcastle in the Second Division, before spending a couple of seasons with Southampton. In 1955, Tams turned out for Ringwood in the Southern Area League, and was at one-time holder of the section's match race championship.

His stay in the SAL was brief - the Control Board banned him from the competition on the grounds he was 'too experienced.' Disillusioned, he returned to Canada. In 1960, Newcastle promoter Mike Parker signed him to lead the 'Diamonds' in the newly-formed Provincial League. At the last minute, Tams dropped out of the deal, staying in Canada to promote speedway at Dundas and then Welland with former Stoke, Motherwell and Liverpool rider, Englishman Stan Bradbury.

Mike Tams' younger brother Les also had a spell with him at Eastbourne in 1947, but declined the chance to move to Hastings the following season when the Eagles' moved there. In 1948, Les and Mike were involved in a bid by then Belle Vue rider Wally Lloyd to promote at Belfast in Northern Ireland before linking with Santry in the Irish Republic.

It was then that Les became known as Les Gordon. Mike explained, "It was felt that one Tams around a place was enough for most people!" On August 29, 1948, Les scored two points for Ireland who lost 39-33 to England at Santry.

Mike added, "Early in 1949, Les gave up racing. He went to work for Ford at Dagenham, then reverted to his trade of plumber and for many years was involved on housing developments in the south of England."