

1969 - Roy Cromack's record 507-mile ride

Written by Brian Keighley, Captain Otley Cycle Club in 2021

In the United States there is a passenger train that runs from Chicago to New Orleans, it's a long way. The name of the train is The City of New Orleans. In 1971 a songwriter called Steve Goodman wrote a song about the train. It's a country folk song called The City of New Orleans and I am sure many of you will have listened to it. It's been recorded by many singers Arlo Guthrie and Willie Nelson the most notable. There's a line in the song "I'm the train they call The City of New Orleans, I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done" Even on a train 500 miles is considered a long way.

In July 1969 Roy Cromack rode 507 miles in 24 hours. This is his story

Like Beryl Burton, many of you reading this will have never heard of Roy Cromack. Although Beryl has become more well known after her death than she ever was before she died. This is not Roy's fault or Beryl's or many of the other world class cyclists we have produced in this country over the years whose achievements have gone unreported and ignored. It's the fault of the media who chose to favour sports such as tennis where success at world level is few and far between and in my opinion these overpaid prima donnas are not fit to oil Beryl's or Roy's chains! Make no mistake about it, Roy Cromack is one of the best athletes this country has ever produced.

Like many of cycling's best riders Roy Cromack is from Yorkshire, he was born in Doncaster.

Turn the clock back 52 years and you reach one of those truly historic dates in time-trialling history: July 1969, which saw Roy Cromack become the first man to crack the 500-mile barrier for the 24.

I remember going to work the day after he had done it. I was having my lunch break with my work mates chatting and reading the daily newspapers, when I said a cyclist rode 500 miles in 24 hours yesterday, over 500 miles in one day. They all looked at each other and smiled, then one of them looked at me and said "don't be daft Brian you can't even do that in a car!"

If there was ever a man that looked like an athlete Cromack did: tall, lean and long limbed. I remember the first time I saw him. It was in the club open 100 and I was at the side of the road helping with a feeding station. I could see him approaching away in the distance, he was easy to spot wearing British Team kit, which at the time was an all-white shirt with a Union Jack on each shoulder. As he came closer I held out a bottle, with a quick wave of his hand he indicated he didn't want it. He looked awesome, his upper body rock steady his head dead straight and his eyes focused on something far ahead, like a Cheetah bearing down on its quarry.

Those were the days when there were still four 24 hour races every year, but that year (1969) the 24-hour Championship was the fearsome Mersey Roads Club 24, a race for riders who could "Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, and disguise fair nature with hard favour'd rage" Anyone who entered who was ever caught eating strawberries and cream was refused entry!



Roy Cromack was a member York's Clifton CC. Some of the best time trialists in the country were members of Clifton, along with Roy were brothers John and Peter Watson and Pete Smith. All were winners and record breakers. Back then in the sport of time-trialling they were known as The York Mafia because if they turned up at a race everybody else could forget picking up any prizes.

That year, 1969 The Mersey Roads event was one of the most dramatic ever seen, and Cromack's superbly judged ride set up an awesome record.

So much of that race was unusual, starting with Cromack himself. A 29 years-old maths teacher from York, he had never ridden a 24 in his life. Instead he was a roadman who had finished in the Peace Race, and a trackman fast enough to set national records. He had been a member of the team time trial squad at the Mexico Olympics, along with John Watson and Pete Smith. He had won the 1967 12-hour championship, and he was a sub four-hour 100 miler, but he refused to be pigeonholed as a time triallist, and had no desire to join the small group of specialist 24-hour men, like Nim Carline, Eric Matthews and Cliff Smith, all of who were due to line up against him in the 24-hour championship.

Carline was the current record-holder, and expectation was high that the 500-mile barrier was now destined to be broken. But the real excitement in the field was the formidable Beryl Burton, (formidable) inspiring fear and respect through being impressively powerful, intense, and capable: all of those things and more. Beryl was known to be determined to beat all the men and to write her name in the history books as the first to reach 500 miles.

Now a little bit about Beryl and Nim Carline. Along with Roy all three are Yorkshire hard stock. These riders are not from the land of Milk & Honey, they are from the land of Old Peculiar and Tripe.

Beryl Burton

Many of you reading this will now be aware of Beryl's achievements. Much has been published about her since she died in books and magazine articles and I know many of you went to see the wonderful play by Maxine Peake, Beryl. Seven times Champion of the World, 25 times British Best Allrounder for consecutive years. The French invited Beryl to ride in The Gran Prix de Nations a Time Trial for the world's top Pro riders which she did and competed with the best pro riders of the day, Anquetil, Gimondi, Poulidor, I believe she remains the only woman who has ever done this.

Beryl was a good friend to Otley Cycle Club and after her 12-hour record she was Guest of Honour at our dinner and awards night. If ever you were in a TT in which Beryl was riding she would always pass a comment as she came past which usually always happened. There were no cycle computers back then, Beryl always rode with a stop watch on her handlebars, so she could tell by looking at your number how you were doing. She would give you words of encouragement and if she knew your name she would call you by it, "Keep at it Brian, you're on a good one" or sometimes "Come on Brian you can do better than that".

Beryl would sometimes join us on club runs in the winter time with her husband Charlie and sometimes Denise. Back then all the club rode together, there were no sections. Beryl was never a member of Otley Cycle Club, she was a member of Morley Cycle Club, but on a club run she would have no hesitation in laying down the law. I remember one run on which Beryl was there. A few of us young lads were on the front, we were on our racing bikes with no mudguards. It wasn't raining but the roads were wet, when Beryl came up alongside of us "What do you think you're doing, you've no mudguards on, you're wetting everybody through, get to the back and stay there" Without a word and no back chat we all did as we were told. You didn't argue with the Champion of the World.



Club Captain Ian Walsh pushes Beryl off at the 1967 Otley Cycle Club 12-hour. Beryl rode through the entire field and broke the competition and course record including the men's record with a distance of 277 miles which stood unbroken for over 40 years

Nim Carline

Nim Carline was a Rhubarb farmer and cyclist. Like Beryl he was a member of Morley Cycle Club, he and Beryl were good friends. When Beryl wasn't racing or training she worked on Nim's rhubarb farm. Now to say that Nim was a hard man would be a big understatement. How can I describe him. Let's just say that for his breakfast he would maybe have a nail sandwich sprinkled with some iron filings and a nice Castrol R sauce.

Nim was a long-distance TT specialist and won The National 24-Hour Championship 5 times and The National 12-hour Championship twice. For TTs up to 12 hours Nim would usually ride out to the start, then say ride a 100-mile TT and then ride back home. I know he once rode up to Teesside to ride a race with his racing wheels strapped to his back. After the race he tied his wheels on his back again and rode back home to Leeds. He liked to do solo long-distance rides.

George Baxter who knew him well told me he would set off and ride up to Scotland, then turn left and ride across to the West coast turn left again and ride south down the coast until he was south of the Lakeland fells then turn left again and ride home to Leeds. He didn't do this all in one day of course. He never stopped in bed & breakfast or take any sleeping gear with him, he would sleep in a barn or under a hedge. **He and his cycling mates set off and rode all the way to India, this is no wind up, he did this. While in India he went trekking in the Himalayas.** I remember Steve Howells saying Nim once passed his father when riding a 100 on the Boro. When Nim came up alongside him he looked across and said "Fancy a scrap" he said my dad told him to buggar off, what a character. When he was riding through the night in a 24, and the temperature dropped down low Nim would don his cold weather gear which consisted of a woolly jumper and a flat hat.



Philip Whitehead (OCC club member)

One other example of just how tough these riders were is our very own Phillip Whitehead. At 94 years old Phillip is the oldest member of Otley Cycle Club and is also the longest serving member with continuous membership for over 70 years. When Phillip was a young man, he was one of the top long distance time trial riders in the country and has many achievements. Phillip never drove and would often ride out to many races. When riding the Mersey Roads 12 hour he would ride down to Merseyside stop there overnight, ride the 12-hour next day, stop a further night and then ride back home to Otley the next day. Phillip usually rode fixed gear which of course means 12-hours of none stop pedalling. He did stop twice when he won the YCF 12 hour. When he got to Easingwold, George Baxter was there waiting for him. Phillip stopped and George took him into a cafe and bought him breakfast he then cycled on for a few more hours then stopped again walked into a pub and sank a pint of Guinness. He then carried on and still won the event! After his win Phillip and his mates from the club went out in Otley to celebrate, Phillip drank 12 pints of Guinness, one for every hour. When it was Phillip's 90th birthday many of us went to The Black Horse with him to celebrate, he sank 5 pints of Guinness that night. Phillip lives on Newmarket, I often visit him and we go out for a drink and a chat about the great days, guess what he has to drink? Phillip rode 29 12 hours for our club, a great rider of a great club.

Back to the story...

Some of what you read now is by Roy himself taken from an interview he did for Cycling Weekly.

As the race got underway Cromack was watched with interest, but he wasn't the favourite how could he be when he had never ridden this distance before? The same was true of Beryl too of course, but two years earlier in the Otley CC 12 hour she had set her incredible 12-hour record of 277 miles, beating the entire field and the men's record too. Beryl's record stood unbroken for over 40 years, long after Beryl had died. Obviously, she was planning to do the same thing again and make history once more, and few people were prepared to bet that she couldn't do it.

One of those few however was Cromack himself. He was a shrewd, determined rider with very clear-sighted ideas of what he wanted to do and how he could do it. His background as a mathematician probably had something to do with his image as a ruthless calculating machine, and perhaps that image had an element of truth to it. What no one knew was that his 24-hour plan had been maturing quietly in his mind for a very long time indeed.

"When I was 14 or 15," recalls Cromack, "I used to do a lot of long-distance rides on my own and always enjoyed them. I had no serious thoughts of racing then, but I knew about the 24-hours and somehow, I became convinced that I'd be capable of 400 miles when I was older, so I suppose that was when the ambition took root. However, I did nothing about it until I won the 12 championship in 1967, three miles outside comp record on a foul day, and that was when I realised that I could ride a serious 24. It sounds big-headed, but I thought I could beat Nim Carline, because I believed he went about it the wrong way, with his all-out start to smash the opposition, then hanging on to the finish. In his record ride his splits were 262 and 234 miles, which just can't be right; to my mind an even-paced ride has to be the answer. I wasn't too worried about Beryl, because I had ridden against her many times and she had never beaten me. I also suspected that, because she was Nim's friend and training partner, she would imitate his style, and start like a bomb, then crack."

The most unusual thing about Cromack was his 24-hour preparation was exactly the same as his normal training: very fast and very hard, but rarely more than 60 miles at a time. His self-belief was such that he felt he had achieved the necessary, physical condition already, while the crucial thing was the mental approach, to form a plan and stick to it. His only concession to the threatening distance was a couple of long rides, one of them a night ride of 170 miles, just to experience the darkness and the sleep deprivation. Otherwise it was his normal roadman-style training, "All on and no messing," as he puts it. He worked out a race Schedule that aimed at 501

miles, with 258 as the 12-hour target. The race itself started at 5pm on 26 July in light rain which soon stopped, but not before Cromack had lost a little time with a puncture.

"I knew from the outset," says Roy "that the key to success was to ride my own race, and not be panicked by whatever Nim or Beryl or anyone else was doing. I knew the time I had to hit at all the checks, and I was determined to keep the gears down to the mid-80s for the first half of the race. Nim started before me, so I guessed he would draw away early. Beryl was off last, and I was prepared for the fact that she would probably catch me. When she passed me just after the 100-mile mark, she called out cheekily, 'What's been keeping you, Roy!' She was churning a huge gear and sounded full of confidence, I let her go".

Beryl did push massive gears. If you are standing at the roadside watching a TT it's difficult to judge the effort a rider is putting through the cranks as they speed past, but if you are in a race it's far easier to judge your own effort against a rider who comes past you. I remember I was riding a 50 many years ago, I thought I was doing well keeping a good gear turning into a stiffish head wind. Then Beryl came past me, to echo Roy's words she was churning a huge gear every peddle stroke sending her yards up the road and she soon disappeared into the distance. It was astounding, the power and effort it must take to continually turn a massive gear like that. I also thought about the stress and strain it must have put on her body and wondered if it might take its toll in later life. We all know how great Beryl is through her many achievements, but it was that moment that showed to me that only the very best riders would be able to match or stay with her with the tremendous ability she had.

Roy again: "My 100 time was on target at 4:24; hers was 4:11, and at that rate she was going through the entire field.

"It's a cliché that everyone has a bad patch at some time in a 24. I had two, one as early as 125 miles, and another around dawn between 240 and 250 miles. The second one was worse, but it didn't become a crisis: by changing down the gears and maintaining my cadence, I came through it. I then had a scrap with Carline for quite a few miles before he gave best, and climbed off soon afterwards. This was when Beryl had her maximum lead over me, around 27 minutes at the 270-mile point. After that I started to gain steadily on her. When did I feel I could win the race? It was at the 300-mile mark I think: Carline was out, Beryl was coming back, Matthews was 20 minutes behind me and I was feeling OK, sticking to my schedule. When I re-passed Beryl, I must admit I was ungentlemanly enough to repeat her earlier remark to me: 'What's been keeping you, Beryl!'.

"Soon afterwards I got the news that she had stopped" Beryl was having a problem with her knees which were becoming sore and painful. They gradually got worse until Beryl was no longer able to carry on, I don't think Beryl raced again that year but she still won the British Best All-Rounder competition.

"I called for ice-cream at that point it wasn't in celebration: I had always enjoyed an ice-cream in a 12.

"The big psychological moment for me was when I got onto the finishing circuit, and I had almost 5 hours left to do 95 miles: that was when I knew the 500 was on. It was getting hard now hot and quite windy, but I managed to keep riding smoothly. When I came up to the 500 miles though I got a bit carried away and put on quite a sprint, which was a big mistake, even though it looks good. I really paid for it, and slowed up badly after that. There was still 20 minutes to go, but I had a job to last out. They tell me I came to a halt and sort of flopped onto the grass. It was 507 dead-in both senses of the word! My dad and brother had been helping me, and they were as shattered as I was. We had a quick pint on the way back to York, but they were falling asleep, so I sat talking to mum about it all until midnight.

"I never rode another 24. I never had the intention of doing so once I got the 500 record. I put a lot of effort into pre-race planning, and stuck rigidly to the game plan. I told anyone who would

listen that that was the way to do it, but it was Wilko who really listened to me when I advised him in 1997. I was with Andy that day when he got the record, and I had to fight back tears, but they weren't tears of disappointment. I had never imagined my record would stand that long. I believe a number of riders were physically capable of breaking it, but they didn't approach it properly. I never discussed the race with Beryl to get her perspective. It was only later in both our lives that we started to get on really: I think we were both a bit bloody-minded, and wouldn't make any concession to each other.

"I made an End-to-End attempt in 1974. The conditions were good and I was going well, then I crashed near Exeter while taking a feed. I clouted my knee hard, and started to lose time, and had to stop at Whitchurch. I didn't race after that. It may sound strange but I didn't really think of myself as a long-distance man: believe it or not, the 10 was my favourite distance! I also really enjoyed the Madison racing on the track, partnered by Trevor Bull. Looking back, I take a lot of pleasure from what I see as a well-crafted ride, but not an inspired one. I don't think it's in the same bracket as Ray Booty's or Alf Engers records for example. I think people were in awe of it because it was like riding from London to Aberdeen or something like that, so they could relate to it"

Roy Cromack was a man who was very sure of himself, very certain of everything, but here I disagree with him: it was an inspired ride, something he had been building up to for years, something no other rider of his time could match, or for decades afterwards. 27 July 1969 is one of those special time-trialling days that will be talked about as long as bike racing exists, and Cromack is without doubt one of the history-makers of the sport.



I only met Roy Cromack once. A cycling friend who lived in Horsforth had moved to work and live in York and had joined Clifton CC. He got in touch and told me that Cromack, John and Peter Watson and Pete Smith were giving a talk in a pub in York and would I like to come along, so I did. I don't remember much about the talk it was a long time ago. I do remember sat round a table having a drink and chat afterwards. Someone said to Roy how he had been described earlier as the great 24-hour rider. Roy said, "You know that really gets on my wick, I think of myself as an all-rounder" which of course is what he was winning at every distance. He said "I only rode one 24" but then if the 24 you rode results in a distance of over 500 miles and breaks and sets a new record that stands for many years, I don't think described as great is out of place. After all why ride another, you have nothing to prove." I said to my friend Mike he seems a mild mannered quietly spoken man, he said "Yes he is and he's very approachable, but you or anyone wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of him he's as strong as a Clydesdale Stallion."

As I said earlier very few of you will have heard of Roy Cromack or what he did. Anyone who was into time trialling or anyone who was a member of a cycle club back then will know of Roy, but we are getting less and less. In my opinion what Roy did is one of the greatest sporting

achievements ever in this country, and I think Roy deserves that a few more people should know about it, don't you?

Roy passed away on 10th November 2017 aged 77. His record stood for 28 years.

BK, Captain Otley Cycle Club

