

The Alf Engers Story

Written by Brian Keighley, Captain Otley Cycle Club in 2018.

Alf Robert Engers was one of the greatest short distance time trialists ever. In 1978 he became the first to go under 50 minutes for a 25-mile TT, a 30mph ride.

Most I have written here is from memory the rest is from mags and newspaper clippings I have kept from that time. I am not going to say I raced against Alf, only the very best riders of that time can say that but I was in a good many 25TTs that Alf rode in, and he came flying past me many times.

People who remember Alf doing that great ride are getting fewer and memories fade over the years, so I think it should be told, otherwise the story of how Alf did it will be lost forever. I hope you enjoy this tribute and find it interesting.

First of all I think it should be pointed out, that at the present time 40 years later (2018), a sub 50 minute ride for a 25 is only accomplished by the very best of today's riders and that back in 1978 there were no specialist TT bikes or equipment, for example, no skinsuits, disk wheels streamlined helmets or cleated shoes, no cycle computers. Alf didn't ride with a stopwatch attached to his handlebars as Beryl Burton did and had to rely upon helpers at the roadside shouting out his time or holding up boards.

Alf had no time for officialdom and was in trouble with the governing body of time trialling the RTTC often. He was suspended by the RTTC many times which kept him out of racing for long periods. When at school Alf was expelled for "misbehaving at every level" and received his first Road Time Trials Council official written warning at 16 years old.

I remember looking at the start sheet and seeing A.R.Engers, to us he was just Alf or to many 'The King' that was his nickname. Time trials weren't boring affairs when Alf was riding.

Alf Engers was born in Southgate in North London on 1st June 1940. He lived throughout his childhood over his father's bakery in North London. At school, Alf excelled at running and swimming, out of school he loved riding his bike. He eventually started riding with some lads from Barnet Cycle Club and later joined the club and that is when Alf's cycling career started to take off.

Alan Shorter a former top competitor in time trials with the Barnet CC and then a mentor and coach with the club, became aware of Alf and thought he had potential and so he took him under his wing introducing him to the proper world of club cycling with the Barnet CC in 1952. Although the club took part in both time trialling and road racing, Alf was to specialise in time trialling with its need for dedicated training, self-discipline and willpower, and he concentrated on short distance time trials above all else.

Unfortunately, at this time Alf's cycling was to take a downturn. When out riding one day he was hit from behind by a car. Alf's leg was badly injured and surgeons explained they would have to remove his kneecap and repair the injury by tying his ligaments together. They did a good job I would say considering what was to follow. For months Alf was barely able to walk, but eventually, he was able to ride his bike again.

Alf had now left school and started work in his father's bakery he was just 14 years old. Now he was able to dedicate a lot of time to hard training. He was very inspired by the Higginson twins who were both very fast time trialists of the era. He set himself the target of getting under the hour for a 25. These days this time is quite common but back then it was the wish of all the top

riders to break the hour barrier. Alf cracked the hour at the very young age of 16 and then set his sights on the Barnet Club record. By now Alf was getting under the hour regularly and it wasn't long before he held that record.

Around this time Alan Shorter rented a room at the bakery where Alf lived and worked and set up a business repairing tubular tyres (tubs) for the many riders who were racing in the area. Later on, Alan's business expanded into a shop which was a good source of good racing equipment, including frames which were built for him by a succession of builders. The frames were badged Alan Shorter or just 'SHORTER' and for years the name was synonymous with Alf's success. In the later years Alf rode a glittering all-chrome machine – always immaculately presented.

1959 was to be a memorable year for Alf but sadly it would herald the start of his constant battle with the governing Road Time Trials Council. It is safe to say that in the minds of most cyclists, mine included Alf was a breath of fresh air to the sport with his charismatic, perhaps flamboyant character, and he certainly livened up the world of time trialling. It seems his behaviour grated on the governing officials and he was soon to be closely watched wherever he raced. He was followed by cars with officials, journalists and probably some club officials jealous of his success.

There were some riders who were jealous of what Alf was achieving and given the slightest chance would submit claims of unfair riding. Not being able to beat him at racing they attempted to get him disqualified, knowing the RTTC was of the same mind.

The greatest sin in time trialling is to take pace from another rider but there was no chance of this with Alf it would hold him up no end as he flew past most riders he caught.

Another rule break is to take pace from cars. Many time trials were held on busy roads, the Boroughbridge course on the A1, a dual carriageway and back then one of the fastest courses in the country is a good example. When Alf was charging down the Borough he would be doing 30mph or more and it is true he did ride down the middle of the road a lot, I've seen him do it! He had to do, back then family cars and heavy lorries were not as powerful and many would not be going that much faster than Alf and some less, he had to get past them. The RTTC seemed to think that Alf should ride along in the gutter going slowly so as not to be going at the same speed as the traffic. Being competitive Alf wanted to keep at maximum speed which would mean overtaking slower cars.

In this year Alf entered his first National Championship aged 19 and finished 3rd in a time of 56m 22s and he broke the National 25-mile TT record with a time of 55m 11s.

The sad side to Alf's ambition to go under 50 minutes, is that it is a story of two halves, which have a gap of some five years in between. The gap was enforced by the RTTC who banned him from the racing scene, thus depriving cycling of an absolute star at the peak of his career. His offence was to turn independent, which was a class meant to act as a step between amateur and professional ranks. Alf rode as an independent for the Barnet CC. It didn't work out for him. Married and with a young child and working full time in the bakery, Alf couldn't devote the time to train needed to compete amongst the established road racers and he quit the independent ranks at the age of 24.

Alf's racing future was now in the hands of the racing officials who had been in a constant battle with him over his conduct on the bike in races and here was a chance to settle some old scores. It was possible to apply for reinstatement as an amateur after one year away, but this was turned down by the RTTC. Every year Alf applied to be reinstated and probably anyone else would have been successful but the RTTC doggedly held out until Alf decided to give it one more try at the end of 1967. At last, he was considered punished enough and his licence was granted. My own view is they thought that after five years out of the sport Alf would be now past his best and not able to match the speed of the best TT riders. If that's the case they were probably right about Alf being past his prime, certainly not right about been a match for the very quick younger riders.

Alf spent much of his spare time while out of racing at the waterside fishing, an activity which he loved and still does. Alf returned to racing at the age of 28 in 1968.

Alf with Alan Rochford his frame builder and Alan Shorter knew, that to do a sub-50-minute ride, he was going to need all the help he could get. Sir David Brailsford and Chris Boardman are probably regarded as introducing marginal gains to cycle sport all though they have never claimed that. Dave and Chris will have known that Alf and his team were trying this years earlier.

Alan Rochford was one of the best frame builders around and was able to make precision-built frames for Alf, always experimenting with frame geometry. There were no specialist time trial frames like now, back then they had to do it themselves. Sometimes Alf would turn up at a race with a bike where the frame was unpainted probably it had just been built the day before. Talk of cigarette paper thin clearances are not an exaggeration. When Alf was at a race I always liked to have a close look at his bike. After one race I remember looking, and the rear tyre appeared to be touching the seat tube, I had to get my eye very close in order to see any light between them.

To save weight Alf would drill holes in most of the components, chainrings, pedals, seat post, handlebars, brake callipers, brake levers. I only ever once spoke to Alf, or rather he spoke to me. Howard Scatchard and I had entered a 25TT on the Borough. Unusual for back then the race was held on a Saturday afternoon, most time trials started very early in the morning. It was a hot summer's afternoon and Howard drove us over there. Alf was there with Alan Shorter and we parked next to him. After Alf had finished the race he leaned his bike against Alan's van and went and sat down on the grass at the side of his Triumph Herald car. Howard and I went over to look at his bike. I was crouched down looking at the seat pin it was full of holes you could see right through it. There was this voice behind us "don't try that with your seat pin" I turned and it was Alf, Howard asked why, Alf said, "If you try tightening enough to stop it sliding down when you are riding the pin will buckle and distort". Howard asked, "so how do you stop that happening?" Alf said, "that's a secret" he then turned on his heel and walked back to his car. I learned some years later that they sprayed the seat pin with hair lacquer.

Alf started a craze and soon many cyclists were drilling holes in their bikes, they called it drillium. This practice is not without its risks of course. Back then Campagnolo was regarded as the best equipment to have and arguably still is. The engineers who designed the equipment made it as light as possible because that's what sells, but there is a limit to how far you can go, by making a component lighter you are reducing its strength, that is why the UCI has a minimum weight limit on the bikes pro-cyclists ride.

When Alf returned to racing in 1968 he was naturally above his racing weight and not at his normal level of fitness after years in the wilderness or (or on the riverbank). Alf entered his first race in early Spring which he won with a time under the hour. The result may have given him the impetus to get into a serious training regime and he set about wiping out the agony of those wasted years and get back the 25-mile record and to become National Champion again. Alf failed to become champion that year and didn't become National 25 Champion until the following year 1969, when he also regained the Comp Record with a time of 51 minutes dead.

He was to win the National 25 miles Time Trial Championship in 1969/72/73/74/75 and 76.

Although Alf may have seemed to pay dearly for his excursion into the independents, on his return to the sport there was to be no let-up by the RTTC in what was becoming more than ever like a vendetta against him. Over the years of his comeback the officials were to disqualify Alf three more times, to the consternation of most riders in the world of time trialling. Each time he was disqualified support for Alf would flood into the cycling press of the day. There was little backing for the official point of view. In 1976 Alf was once more suspended for one year after being fined £5 for dangerous riding. He was stopped by the police for riding down a slip road leading onto a dual carriageway at 50 mph! Following this last enforced season of fishing, he returned to the sport for one last try to break the 50-minute barrier, he was 38 years old.

During 1978 he kept himself tuned to perfection, so should he get the right conditions he would be ready to take advantage, and eventually on 5th August that chance arrived on the A12 in Essex.

So, what was it like to do that incredible ride? Well you are about to find out. Alf told his story to writer Peter Whitfield. The title is mine.

Somewhere a dog barks

In the bakery trade, Friday night is the busiest of all, with all the extra work for weekend. Usually I finished at four in the morning, but this time I rushed and was away by three. At home I ate a couple of cheese rolls and a tin of rice pudding, and went to bed until six. Considering the circumstances, I didn't feel bad. I never eat breakfast anyway, and contented myself with black coffee, eating mint cake on the way to the race. When I got to the start I heard that three girls had beaten the hour. I glanced at the main road and there seemed to be a lapse in the traffic; a short time later it seemed heavy.

I went for my usual hour-long warm-up, at slow and medium speed, and looked as usual for signs that would indicate super form. As usual there were none, but instead I had an incredible and inexplicable feeling of well-being. Back at the start I met my friend Alan Rochford, and we discussed the morning. Another rider told us the traffic was very heavy early on, and that there wasn't any wind about. To me it seemed quite windy and it was trying to rain.

Selection of wheels came next. We had three pairs with us, all small-flange 24s: a pair shod with road "ones" with a 12-up block; another with "threes" and a 13-up block; and a third with track "ones" and a 13-up block. I plumped for the third pair because, having ridden the course before, I felt I would be able to ride the 13 sprocket up the hills. On top of this I am always tempted to leave it in top gear, so for the first time that season I had only a 13 top. As I changed for the race I reckoned that all I could do had been done. I taped over the lace eyelets on my shoes as the final touch, and was ready to go. We had arranged for three time-checks, all on Derek Cottington, but as he was a non-starter because of a calf injury, they turned out to be on Eddie Adkins.

As I was waiting at the start I noticed that the traffic flow was increasing, and also that it was beginning to rain. As the pusher-off held me, I became aware again of a kind of inner calmness, something normally unknown for me in such circumstances. The timekeeper's count seemed spaced out, then came the off. After the initial starting effort, it seemed very fast, even into the wind. Then it started to rain quite hard, and my first thought was that this would allay the wind, so obviously it would be most advantageous to get to the turn as quickly as possible. The wind dropped and the rain almost stopped by the time I reached the first turn. Having rejoined the A12 I overtook a couple of vehicles. Looking ahead I could see a solid block of traffic, and behind it was the same. Descending the turn I slammed it into the 13 sprocket, and as it turned out I stayed on it for the rest of the ride. During the descent I thought what might happen if I burst a tyre now – then decided that it wasn't worth worrying about as I would surely be a dead man ten times over.

I was now overtaking droves of traffic, and as I got to the flat stretch adjacent to the finish area where everybody watches the riders through first time, traffic I had overtaken started to gain on me, and up ahead I could see a solid block of traffic in both lanes. I was acutely aware of the spectators as I started to catch traffic up; so as not to take pace, I kept as far out as I could in the inside lane, overtaking cars as I went. The dilemma was whether to stay where I was and risk breaking regulation 48, or to get off the road. At this point a handful of spectators put their own slant on the race, and coupled with race reports this had a devastating effect later on. I was first accused of riding in the middle of the road, then taking pace, and also of receiving help from a moving vehicle. Going through the finish area, I caught my minute man, and got a shout of "15

seconds up” from a spectator in a blue and white track suit. After this the traffic seemed to thin out, and the gear was going over easily, even up the hills.

In my mind’s eye I felt as though I was controlling myself from within, as if I was the driver of an alien force, deciding if and when more power should be turned on; perfectly relaxed, yet at the same time aware of everything. It was a strange feeling, something I have experienced only twice before. I have since found out that Americans are experimenting with this almost transcendental state for all sport, and they call it “the inner game”. As I approached the second turn I began to wonder if the wind would drop. At the top of the slip road Bill Houghton, the club sponsor, was waiting to give me a check on Eddie, which turned out to be 1:30 up. Then someone else shouted 25:30, which was the 15-mile mark. The wind hadn’t completely dropped, but it seemed possible to cut through it OK – a thin air day as I’ve come to call it. On reflection, on the previous occasions that I’ve broken the record, 1959 and 1969, the same type of conditions have prevailed: always dull and stormy, plenty of oxygen in the air.

Ideal conditions seemed to prevail still at six miles to go. Now I get a shout of 1:20 up, and there’s still no sign of a sell-out. The wind is still there, but bearable. Five miles to go and club-mate Jack Lacey is holding up a sign which reads “It’s on!” Between there and the finish the road drags, and I wonder if I’ll make it. Up over the last rise, and only the slip-road to go. The marshals at the top are going mad, waving their arms. I’m over – just – and the legs still in one piece. Left into the finishing straight and I can see Mike Fagg, and at this point I get a shout of “48 minutes”. With a wrench I’m up and past him, and, in the distance, I can see the finish. My legs feel like lead with a hundred yards to go. I’m at my limit and still I’m not there. Everything goes blank, but I still look for the flag. Suddenly it’s there, I kick, and it’s over ... People are clapping. Have I done it? I stop and my stomach heaves. Everywhere people are running. Alan runs up, kisses me, and says “You’ve done it, a forty-nine!”

I’m surrounded by people shaking my hand, and I can’t believe it’s over. Ten years of trying, the disappointments, the bad luck, are over. I look at the sky, expecting to hear a heavenly chorus. Instead, somewhere, a dog barks.

So at 38 years old Alf finally broke the 50 minute barrier, the record stood for ten years before it was broken with the aid of advancing technology. And what of Alf now at 83? Well, his old racing friends who visit him tell me they will very often find a note stuck on his door, “Gone Fishing”.



Alf in full flight on the all chrome Shorter, charging down towards the Red Wall on the Borough!
Note the drilled out chainring.



Alf after finishing a 25 on the Boroughbridge course

