

Nostalgia: Necessity Is The Mother Of Invention

The bicycle was invented by a Scotsman, Kirkpatrick MacMillan, as long ago as 1839. He was a blacksmith who hailed from Dunoon and Galloway. It was an amazing machine, made of wood, with iron-rimmed wooden wheels, a steerable wheel in the front and a larger wheel in the rear, connected to pedals via connecting rods. The world may not have known of this great invention if a Glasgow newspaper had not reported an accident in 1842 in which an anonymous "gentleman from Dumfries-shire . . . bestride a velocipede . . . of ingenious design" knocked over a pedestrian in the Glasgow Gorbals and was fined five British shillings. The gentleman was eventually identified as Macmillan.

Since those heady days of invention, today's bicycle has changed dramatically in material and style, but the basics remain the same – two wheels, one driven by man-powered pedals.

The arrival of the mass-produced bicycle made great changes to the world and Ipoh was no exception. There was no longer the need to walk everywhere. Families could go on outings to the park or cave-temples by bicycle; children could ride to school; goods could be delivered to shops or their customers, and the whole business of hawking changed



dramatically – mobile hawkers became truly mobile on two or three wheels, travelling faster and further afield than ever before.

One such famous hawker was the knife grinder and scissor sharpener. Do you remember him? He was a regular visitor around the rapidly increasing housing areas outside of the town. This was in the late 1950s and early 60s when the economy was looking up after many years of difficult times and Ipoh was expanding as never before.

But what of his bicycle? It was an ordinary two-wheeled machine with the normal straight handlebars and sturdy steel frame, the sort of vehicle we called the “Sit up and beg” when I was young. But, “Necessity is the mother of invention”, and a smart local engineer got to work. Two grindstones were mounted above the handlebars on a shaft driven by a pulley



wheel, which was driven by an attachment on the rear wheel, connected by a drive belt. A front and rear stand was added for stability and a steel basket was mounted above the front wheel to carry the tools. The knife grinder’s machine was complete.

Thereafter, the grinder would cycle around crying out “Grinder, Grinder” and when hailed by a householder. Then he would stop, put down his stands and, remounting his machine, would pedal away while honing the steel tools on the whirling grindstones until they were truly sharp. Many of us could do with such a service today as we struggle with blunt implements in our everyday lives.

Ipoh World (ipohWorld.org) has one of these bicycles in its collection. Could this be the only example in Malaysia?