

On your bike!

In Western Australia's gold rush at the end of the 19th century, the bicycle competed with the camel to be the most effective medium of communication in the outback, as private courier stamps and covers reveal

□ Report by Ken Lewis

The 1890s was the golden age of the bicycle, a comparatively new invention which brought faster but affordable transport to millions whose only alternative was walking. But nowhere was it more significant than in vast, sparsely populated Western Australia.

Between 1895 and 1900, no fewer than 20,000 bicycles were sold in the British colony, and the little town of Coolgardie had more bikes per capita than anywhere else on the planet.

Coolgardie, 350 miles east of Perth, was at the centre of a gold rush. And the bicycle was essential to its rudimentary postal service.

Cycles versus camels

Four goldfields were established in the Coolgardie area, and their operators needed an efficient communications system. Formal postal services, telegraph lines and railways had not yet extended fully around the outback, and the humble bike became a stopgap solution.

It was easy to pedal over soft sandy tracks and rougher terrain, and needed minimal maintenance. Unlike the Afghan camels which were used to pull cart-loads of supplies and mining equipment from the coast, it required neither food nor water.

Enterprising cyclists amalgamated into courier companies to serve the needs of the mining community, offering a selection of short and long routes around the goldfields.

The most important long route was 120 miles westward to Southern Cross, a junction town on the main road to Perth. Others were 130 miles north to Menzies and 200 miles south to Esperance.

The rates charged by the couriers were based on weight, distance and urgency, and competition forced them downwards. The standard fee for a letter carried between Coolgardie and Menzies started at 5s,



ABOVE: Cover from Albany to Coolgardie, franked with a Western Australia 1890 2d bluish grey and additionally with a Coolgardie Cycle Express Company 2s 6d for onward local delivery

but was later reduced to 2s 6d.

A single cyclist could carry about 100 letters, and could be expected to cover more than 100 miles in a day. Even so, some companies used camels for some of the longer routes.

The cyclists had a symbiotic relationship with the camels. One local reported: 'Strings of pack camels formed smooth tracks, which delighted people on bicycles. On stony country, they very soon swept loose stones away, or if the ground was damp their broad feet pressed the stones into the soil. On sandy country, their feet trampled the sand, making it firm enough for a bicycle.'

Coolgardie Cycle Express

In the Coolgardie area there were two main courier companies competing for business: the Special Bicycle Express run by Percy Armstrong and the Coolgardie Cycle Express run by John Healy.

The latter was based directly across the street from the small post office in Hunt Street, convenient for forwarding mail to and from mining establishments not covered by formal postal routes. Its business card stated: 'We are prepared to convey

messages to any part of the field by day or night, at shortest notice.'

But what really distinguished this company from its competitor was that issued its own stamps.

First issue

The first issue of the Coolgardie Cycle Express Company comprised two stamps in 1894, with denominations of 1s and 2s 6d.

They shared a common design printed in blue, depicting a bicycle in the centre, framed by an inscription comprising the company's name at left, top and right, and 'Cycle Messages' at the base.

Each value was printed on unwatermarked paper in sheets of 35 (five rows of seven) on the presses of the local newspaper, *The Coolgardie Miner*, and roughly perforated 12.

In 1969, several complete sheets were discovered with copies of the 2s 6d imperforate between the second, third and fourth rows, so a new variety was recorded some 75 years after the stamp was issued.

Second issue

Shortage of stocks and rate changes meant that new stamps were needed

in 1895. By this time the company was making more use of camels on some of the longer routes, so Healy decided the new design should depict the animal instead of a bicycle.

Edwin Summerhayes, who was a former express cyclist working as an architect in Coolgardie, was asked design the new stamps.

He came up with a landscape-format with a central oval vignette depicting a camel and its rider heading towards a sunlit horizon, framed by the company name, with the value in words at the base and in figures in each corner. Perhaps too pretentiously, the words 'Western' and 'Australia' appeared at the left and right edges.

Equally extravagantly, Healy opted for two-colour printing, but the local press did not have the capability for this, so the printing contract was awarded to Hussey & Gillingham in Adelaide, South Australia, about 1,300 miles away. Not surprisingly, there were many delays before the new stamps were finally delivered in June 1896.

According to *The Australian Philatelist*, the print run was 2,000 of the 6d brown and green, 12,000 of the 2s brown and yellow, and 1,000 of the 5s brown and violet. The sheet size is not known, and the largest surviving block is of nine stamps.

Some of the 2s stamps can be found with the watermark of the papermaker, R Turner of Chafford Mills. Like the first issue, all were perforated 12, but the perforation was of much higher quality.

Usage

Many stamps were pen-cancelled, but some were given a handstamp that reads 'Per Coolgardie Cycle Express Co/Hunt Street' in violet ink.

Covers bearing these courier stamps are highly sought after and can command high prices, especially when used in combination with the stamps of Western Australia. ▷



ABOVE: Coolgardie Cycle Express Company 1s blue and 2s 6d blue, the firm's first issue locally produced in 1894, depicting a bicycle and inscribed 'Cycle Messages' at the foot

'Bicycle courier services played a romantic part in the opening up of the Australian outback and the exploitation of its gold deposits. But they were always likely to be consigned quickly to the history books'



ABOVE: 1896 cover from Adelaide to Coolgardie, bearing a South Australia 2d orange and the courier's 1s for delivery 'per Cycle Express'



ABOVE: Coolgardie Cycle Express Company 6d brown and green, 2s brown and yellow and 5s brown and violet, issued in 1896, illustrating a courier riding a camel

AUSTRALIAN BICYCLE COURIERS 1894-97

Indeed, offering this unofficial service and issuing stamps for it soon brought the Coolgardie Cycle Express Co into conflict with the colonial postal authority, which eventually decided to enforce its legally-enshrined monopoly. By December 1896, Healy was ordered to close his business.

Oddly, covers bearing the stamps are known used as late as July 9, 1897, presumably cancelled by favour as philatelic souvenirs. Healy, ever the astute businessman, had long been advertising his stamps for sale to philatelists to boost income.

Postscript

The private courier business in the goldfields of Western Australia was always likely to have a short lifespan, due to the building of telegraph lines, the opening of more post offices and the introduction of regular mail coach services.

Sure enough, the era of express deliveries by bicycle and camel was consigned to the history books within a few short years. But they had played a romantic part in the opening up of the Australian outback and the exploitation of its gold deposits.

An interesting postscript was provided by Herbert Hoover, the future President of the United States, who embarked on an inspection tour of mines near Coolgardie in 1897 on behalf of his employers, Bewick Moreing & Co. In a letter home about his travels by camel, he wrote: 'We were overtaken by a special bicyclist who had come from Cue, the end of the telegraph, in three days'.

In that time, the cyclist had travelled 390 miles to give Hoover an urgent telegram from London. □



ABOVE: Cycle Express 2s stamp tied to an advertising postcard by the company's violet two-line handstamp as a philatelic souvenir in 1897, when the service was no longer operating. The message reads: 'These are unique and in time will become rare to stamp collectors'

RIGHT: Rare complete sheet of 35 of the 1894 1s blue, roughly perforated by the local printer in Coolgardie



THANKS
Ken Lewis would like to acknowledge the help of Francis Kiddle, Dave Elsmore, Colin Lewis and Gareth James in researching this feature

DID YOU KNOW?

- The bicycle was invented in 1817 by Baron Karl von Drais in Mannheim, Germany, but his basic 'dandy horse' required several refinements before its popularity could really take off.
- In the 1860s, a Frenchman, Ernest Michaux, devised a rotating crank with pedals to drive the front wheel.
- In the 1880s, an Englishman, John K Starley, introduced chain drive to power the rear wheel, and the diamond-shaped frame that made the 'safety bicycle' easy and cheap to produce.
- Later that decade an Irishman, John Dunlop, added pneumatic tyres, which made cycling comfortable for the first time.