

# North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage Newsletter

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YouTube



## The Bicycle in Ireland

Michael Collins aboard his  
trademark bicycle, the "high nelly".  
(image from [www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie))

Close up of a vintage  
bicycle saddle



Are you interested in

## TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

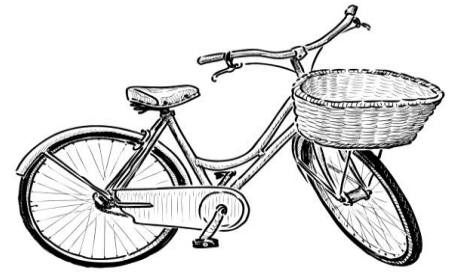


The  
North Mayo  
Heritage  
Centre

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Tel: 096 31809 [www.northmayogenealogy.com](http://www.northmayogenealogy.com) Email: [northmayo@gmail.com](mailto:northmayo@gmail.com) Email: [nmhmanager@gmail.com](mailto:nmhmanager@gmail.com)

## On yer bike – The Bicycle in Ireland



**In 1950s Ireland almost every household had a bicycle and cyclists were a common sight on Irish roads. But this was not always the case.**

The first pedal-driven bicycle, “the boneshaker”, appeared in Ireland in the 1860s. It was hugely uncomfortable with its solid iron wheels, heavy and very expensive. Its arrival was of minor significance as through the 1860s, the 1870s and into the 1880s, cycling remained an exclusive, male-dominated, middle-class activity and was considered an object of eccentricity.

However, all of this changed in the second half of the 1880s when factories began to mass produce the improved chain-driven safety bicycle with pneumatic (air-filled) tyres. They became relatively cheaper making them more appealing to people of all ages and backgrounds. Consequently, the enthusiasm for them became a vibrant part of the social and cultural life of Ireland with both genders taking to the wheel. Cycling became big business. Bicycle shops and mechanics prospered in this new, rising industry, all of which was captured in a newspaper, *The Irish Cycling News*, founded and run by a man who went on to become Ireland’s champion cyclist R.J. McCredy.

One 1895 cyclist wrote: *‘No outdoor pastime can be more independently pursued.’* City people saw the bicycle as the chance to escape from urban life.

The novelist H.G. Wells wrote of how he and his wife were using bicycles to *‘restore our broken contact with the open air.’* Rural people, for their part, could use the bicycle to get into towns. It was, wrote one cyclist, a thing which allowed for *‘unfettered liberty’, ‘a freedom machine’*.

The golden age of the bicycle stretched from the 1890s until the 1920s. Throughout these years, the bicycle became a vital vehicle for many as cycling was their only means of travelling long distances to work, for education or to religious services.

In addition, it proved indispensable during the Irish Revolution serving as a propaganda tool, for political campaigning and for guerrilla warfare as it was a largely silent mode of transportation and difficult to detect.

Perhaps the most important bicycle produced at that time and in Irish history was the custom made “high nelly” for Michael Collins in 1919 during the War of Independence.

Beyond these activities, the bicycle raced in competitions too. Cycling clubs spread across the country and in most towns, they had at least one club. Cycling races became an important part of the many sports days that grew in Irish towns and villages. The first known cycle club in Ireland was the Dungarvan Ramblers, founded in Co. Waterford in 1869.

The Irish Cycling Association (ICA) was formed in 1884 to govern the sport. St. Christopher’s Cycling Club was the first to be established in Castlebar in Co. Mayo in the late 1930s. Among them was the first lady cyclist club member, Dot Kelly, who later married another keen cyclist, Andy Redmond, in 1943.

Dot went on to become the queen of Irish dancing in the west of Ireland and in her early years cycled around the county with her fiddle in the bicycle basket teaching the dancing steps.

During World War II, ‘The Emergency’ in Ireland led to petrol rationing for vehicles and a rail service hindered by a lack of coal.

Hence, cycling became one of the primary modes of transport and saw thousands of people cycle great distances not only for work, but also to football and hurling matches. On big match Sundays, streams of cyclists pedalled across the country to Dublin city, with some 80,000 to the 1944 All-Ireland football final. As a reporter with the *Carlow Nationalist* wrote, *‘with the shortage of fuel the bicycle was back to its own’*.

### Sources:

[www.irishexaminer.com](http://www.irishexaminer.com)  
[www.museum.ie](http://www.museum.ie)  
[www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)  
[www.con-telegraph.ie](http://www.con-telegraph.ie)



**The starting line-up at the cycling road race at Main St., Castlebar, organised by St. Mary’s Cycling Club in the early 1950s. (Image from [con-telegraph.ie](http://con-telegraph.ie))**