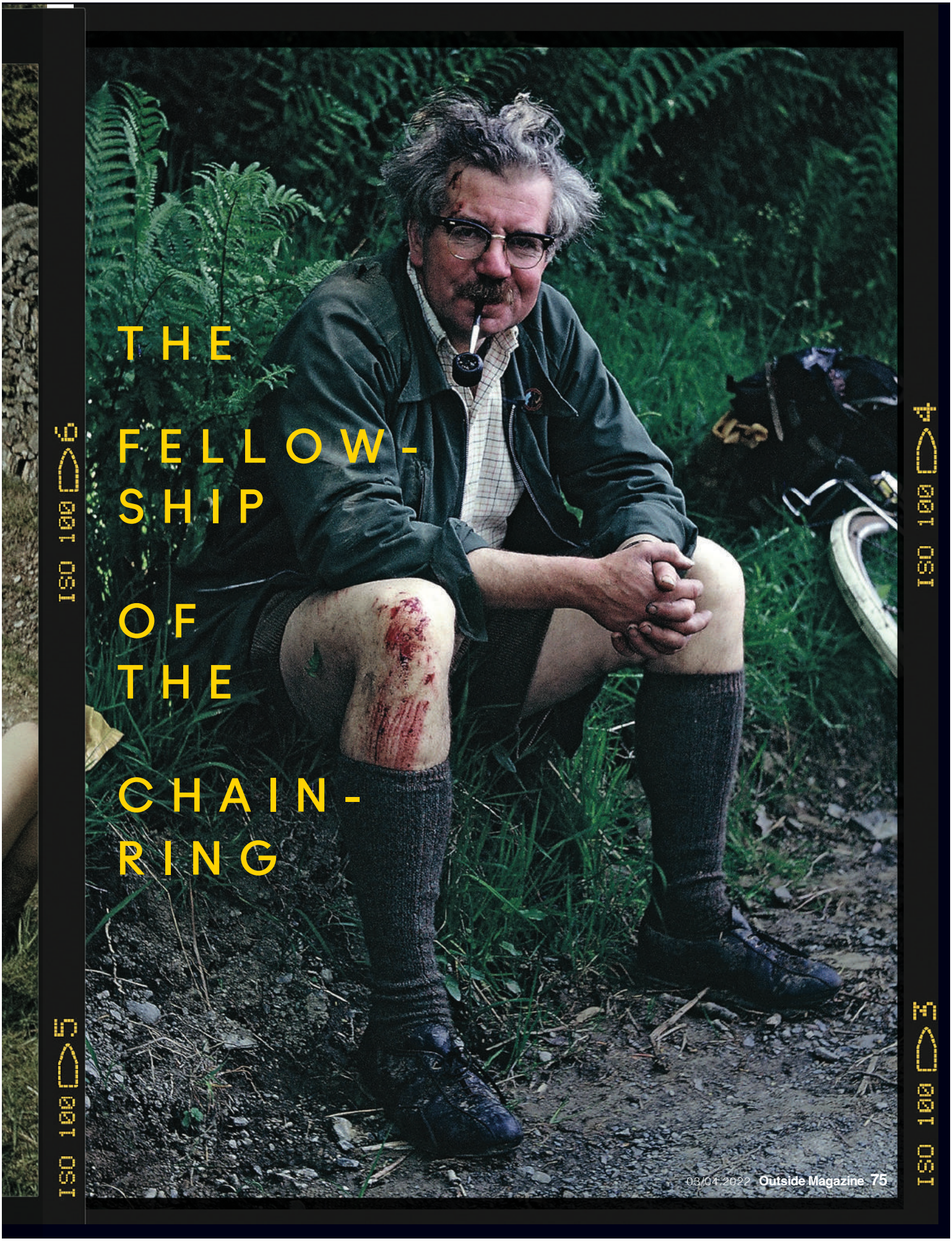

THE QUERY,

politely probing, came in the October 27, 1954, issue of *The Bicycle,* a British weekly. "Who wants to join a 'Rough-Stuff Fellowship?'" The letter writer, one W.H. Paul, had been prompted by an article, published a few weeks before, asking, "Are the rough ways losing their popularity?" Noting that he'd always "been a searcher of the remote, wild and more desolate country," Paul decried the prevalence of the "modern lightweight" bicycle, "with its Continental this and super that," which impels the rider "to keep on the billiard-table surfaces of the modern tarmac." He suspected there might be a "small, select circle who love the rough and high ways."

He was not wrong. His letter provoked other letters. "The sense of adventure and interest to be found in traversing country without signposts and metal highway is infinite," wrote one respondent. Penned another: "I feel that this aspect of cycling has been much neglected, because of the fact that it is too slow for the majority of modern club-folk."

Such was the collective response that a year later, over afternoon tea at the Black Swan, a hotel in the Herefordshire town of Leominster, a ragtag group of a few dozen cyclists gathered for the inaugural meeting of the Rough Stuff Fellowship. In a sign that this might not be your ordinary cycling club, the founding members of the RSF elected as their first president Sir Hugh Rhys Rankin, third baronet, who, as the *Daily Telegraph* noted upon his death in 1988, was "an extraordinary character whose eccentricity was remarkable even by the rarefied standards of the baronetage." A member of the First Royal Dragoon Guards calvary and a broadsword champion, Rankin worked as a sheep shearer in Australia, flirted with Islam (before eventually settling on Buddhism), ran for office as a professed "bloody red militant," golfed the most courses of any amateur in England, and of course was a dedicated off-road cyclist.

Decades before free-spirited bike geeks in Marin County and Colorado started rejiggering old Schwinns to bomb down hills, and nearly three-quarters of a century before the gravel bike became a commodified thing, the Rough Stuff Fellowship was established on a quietly radical proposition: that a bike's utility did not end where the paved—or even unpaved—road did. And so men and women, often couples, cheekily took their bikes where their bikes weren't meant to go: on chunky bridle paths, over forbidding fences, and through treacherous mountain passes (a pursuit members called "pass storming"). Sometimes they looked like they were cheating death; sometimes they looked like they were out for a Sunday picnic—often they probably did both. They did this not on the specialized all-terrain machines of today, but on the skinny-tired, fendered, internal-gear-hubbed, drop-barred, steel bikes they might also have ridden to work, and dressed not in Gore-Tex but in woolly sweaters, high socks, and boots, with nary a helmet to be seen. As often as not, they were pushing their bikes through unrideable bits ("I never take a walk without my bike," quipped one member, in what would become a club mantra) or shouldering them as they forded rivers or, roped, clambered down cliffsides. They typed up their expeditions in a hand-illustrated newsletter, whose editor claimed that he would accept "anything I can read, bearing on our pastime."

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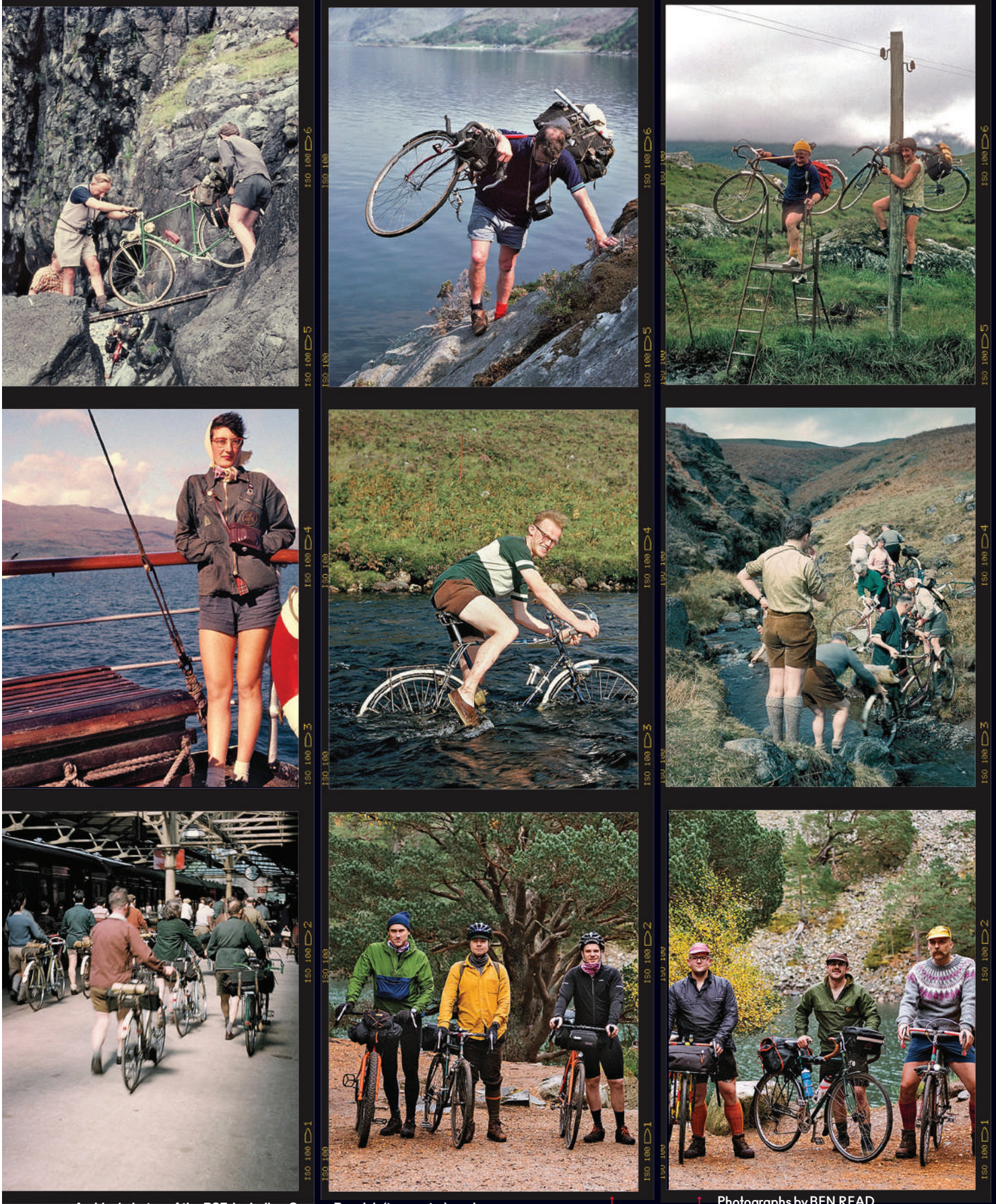
The idea of competition was anathema, with one exception: a yearly photo contest. Among the RSF were any number of keen lensmen, who documented the group with striking prodigiousness. When these pictures began quietly to appear, in 2018, on the Instagram account @rsfarchive, it felt as though we were witnessing the opening up of some Wes Anderson wormhole. Cyclists like myself, thinking we were living—now—through the historical emergence of a new kind of riding, were startled by these hardy Kodachrome emissaries from the past, outfitted in their plus fours and tweeds, floating bike-laden dinghies over Icelandic crossings, grinding down snow-covered tracks marked UNSUITABLE FOR MOTORS, puffing contemplatively on pipes in the Welsh moorlands. A book, *The Rough Stuff Fellowship Archive,* followed in 2019, and its success prompted another, *Further Adventures in Rough Stuff,* late last year.

I was bewitched by these images. Wanting to know what the "world's oldest off-road cycling club" looked like today—and desiring, as a kind of homage, to tackle one of its most iconic challenges—I headed to England.

"I HAVE AN INTEREST in old shit," says Mark Hudson, "as you can see." Fittingly for the official archivist of the RSF, Hudson's cozy flat on a tree-lined block of modest redbrick houses in Sheffield looks like a provincial cycling museum. There is a rack of obscure books *(The Veteran Cycling Club History Series #2)*, old advertising placards for Reynolds tubing, badges for rides like Paris–Brest–Paris, boxes of vintage derailleurs and other "new old stock" bike parts, and tens of thousands of historical images going back as far as 1930s-era hand-tinted slides from the rough-stuff pioneer (and inaugural RSF chairman) Charlie Chadwick, a working-class adventurer who for decades toured off-road England, his camera in hand. "It's a house of many hidden gems," says Ben Brown, a friend of Hudson's and a fellow RSF member, as we gawp at the room. Along with photographer Ben Read, we'll soon be off to Scotland, some eight hours away by car, on a rough-stuff pilgrimage to a place called the Lairig Ghru, a high mountain pass in the Cairngorms known for its stark beauty and unpredictable weather.

Hudson, 48, is tall, with a handlebar mustache, piercing eyes, a tweed hat covering a shaved head, and a collared shirt open to reveal a faded tee of the Smiths. He has been around bicycles most of his life, ever since he and his dad, having gotten friendly with the fellows at the local dump, began rescuing classic bikes from the landfill. He joined the RSF about a decade ago, years after he'd spotted an ad about it in the magazine of the Cyclists' Touring Club (now Cycling UK). Around 2017, he saw an advertisement in the RSF's journal seeking an archivist. "I got

ARCHIVAL IMAGES ON THIS PAGE, OPPOSITE, AND PREVIOUS TWO PAGES COURTESY OF THE ROUGH STUFF FELLOWSHIP; STOCKNSHARES/GETTY IMAGES (FILM FRAMES, OPPOSITE AND PREVIOUS TWO PAGES)



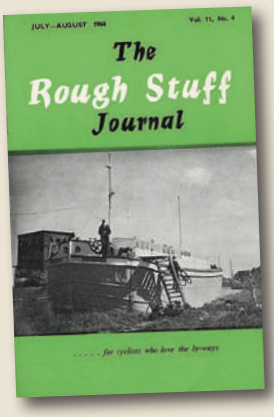
Archival photos of the RSF, including George Berwick (top center), and recent photos of the group from the author's trip (bottom right)

Photographs by BEN READ

Mark Hudson cruising through the Scottish Highlands

it by default, because no one else wanted to do it," he says with a laugh. "But I thought, well actually, it might be an interesting thing anyway, because I have a curiosity for vintage stuff."

In search of photographs and other memorabilia, he started cold-calling the group's 600 or so members, each of whom had been assigned a number; the lower it was, the longer the rider had been a member. Initially, he received some "crap from the seventies," but then he stumbled on a 10,000-strong collection of photographic slides, carefully stored and arranged in wooden boxes, from a member named Bob Harrison. One by one, Hudson held the slides up to a bare lightbulb—he didn't have a light box at the time—and was thunderstruck. "I had no idea," Hudson says. "It felt like a genuine discovery, not just the amount but the quality." When he began posting the images to Instagram, "things just snowballed." More leads, even bigger image troves. One person who saw those first RSF images was Max Leonard, a London writer and cyclist and the founder of Isola Press, which in time would publish the two RSF books. More than just striking vintage images of people, bikes, and landscapes, Leonard considered the photographs evidence of a vital overlooked social history—"like lifting a lid on a world you didn't quite know existed."



THE RSF'S members, Leonard and Hudson readily admit, were hardly the first to take their bikes off the beaten track. There was, for instance, "Wayfarer," the pen name of W. M. Robinson, a Liverpudlian insurance man and keen off-road adventurer, and a talismanic figure for the Fellowship. In one of his more memorable exploits, he crossed the snowbound Berwyn Mountains in northern Wales in March 1919. "Is this cycling?" he wrote in his popular column in *Cycling*. "Per se, possibly not. Some of the way over the mountains was ridden, but for the most part it was a walking expedition." Lest this appear mere folly, he stressed that the expedition was only made possible *with* the bike—a 60-mile ride beforehand and 50 miles more afterward. (The RSF, for its part, placed a plaque along the route, and members retrace Wayfarer's route every few years.)

In 1958, a few RSF members made what they thought was a pioneering ten-day expedition across Iceland's high desert, the Sprengisandur. Upon returning, they published an account of the trip, only to discover that Horace Dall, a British telescope maker and an avid cyclist, had crossed the terrain on a three-speed Raleigh decades earlier. "They were totally shocked, and I think a bit gutted," says Hudson.

ARCHIVAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ROUGH STUFF FELLOWSHIP; STOCKNSHARES/GETTY IMAGES (FILM FRAMES, BOTH PAGES)

Stopping for a "drum-up" at the Corrour bothy

Cyclists like myself were startled by these hardy Kodachrome emissaries from the past, outfitted in their plus fours and tweeds, floating bike-laden dinghies over Icelandic crossings, grinding down snow-covered tracks, puffing contemplatively on pipes in the Welsh moorlands.

But there seemed to be something in the air in the 1950s that coalesced this lonely pastime into the stirrings of a movement. As Hudson writes in the first RSF book, postwar Britain was marked by "men and women for whom bicycles were the sole means of transport and who thought nothing of riding large distances, whether to and from work or in pursuit of that relatively new idea, 'leisure.' " More than previous generations, he argues, "they felt they had the right to enjoy the open land beyond the town's end." What's more, the roads were increasingly filled with that new beacon of middle-class respectability, the automobile, which helped stoke larger fears that William Blake's England, that "green and pleasant land," was slowly disappearing. "That will be England gone," eulogized poet Philip Larkin in "Going, Going," published in 1972. "The shadows, the meadows, the lanes / The guildhalls, the carved choirs." What will remain? "Concrete and tyres."

The off-road urge extended to riders beyond the United Kingdom. One of the RSF's earliest American members was John Finley Scott, a sociology professor at the University of California at Davis and a tireless cycling advocate credited with inventing the first mountain bike. In a 1963 *Rough Stuff Journal* article, he details a ride he took ("the bicycle was wheeled and carried") to the White Wolf summit in Yosemite National Park on a British bike, built by Jim Guard Cycles of Southampton, bearing an RSF badge. "Personally I expect rough-stuff riding to increase," he wrote, "because there are many who are now both cyclists and enthusiasts for remote regions and rough terrain." He predicted "an American version of a British specialty."

And then, of course, came the whole mountain-bike boom of the succeeding decades, followed not just by gravel riding but by gravel *racing*. In a world where enduro riders shred the gnar on precipitous singletrack or professional cyclists hold nearly 300 watts for 200 miles of unpaved roads in events like Unbound Gravel, the exploits of the RSF may seem a bit quaint. It's just one of the challenges that current RSF chairman Geoff Smith articulates to me on a phone call from his home near Manchester. "Nowadays," he says, "pretty much every square inch of the old rough-stuff roads have been tarmacked over," he says. But because midcentury riders "couldn't afford cars," he explains, "they used to go to work on bicycles, then use those same bicycles on the weekend." Today, he says, people drive

Photographs by BEN READ

Photographs by BEN READ

On most RSF outings, members carry their bikes as often as they ride them.

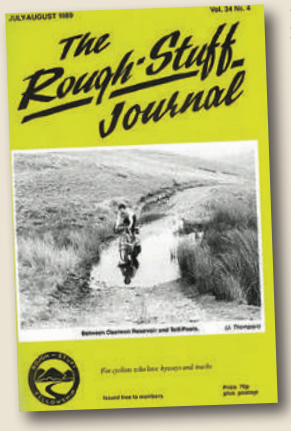
to the rough stuff: "I'm as bad as anyone. I drive to the ride with my bike on the car rack." Another issue is the group's aging membership. "I mean, even at 68, I'm considered to be a baby," Smith jokes. He recalls turning up at a cycling event in an old RSF T-shirt and being told: "God, I didn't know that was still going!" But the Instagram account, along with the books, he notes, have brought in new blood, boosting membership to its highest point in decades—somewhere north of a thousand.

Smith says that he, like many RSFers, has "thrown out the computer." He'll still use GPS, but he's not trying to notch any KOMs. "It's not about how fast you've gone," he says. "It's where you've been." Which is not to say that the RSF hasn't produced some incredibly strong riders. One of its most legendary is George "McNasty" Berwick, who joined the RSF in 1960. He is an unmistakable presence in UK cycling. Pictures show a man with wild hair, huge glasses, and a startlingly prominent set of front teeth, magnified by the fact that he always seemed to be smiling. When I spoke with him in November, he'd logged around 820,000 lifetime miles.

The day I call Berwick, he's already put in another 24 on the quiet roads around his house outside Dundee, Scotland. "I'm a bit low this year," he says of his 6,000 miles in 2021—at least 1,000 more than me. He's 81. He would have ridden more, he says, but his wife, Margaret, "has a wee bit of dementia, so I stay about more." Still, in three decades, he's had just three days off the bike. Apart from holding the Scottish 24-hour time-trial record, he's completed 60-plus 24-hour trials, basically one per year since he started riding. He last worked, he tells me, in 1980, for Singer, the sewing-machine company, when it still had a factory in Clydebank. "I married a rich woman," he says with a sprightly chuckle. "You couldn't expect me to work after that." The trip to the wedding ceremony, you may not be surprised to hear, happened on a tandem, as did the honeymoon. He hasn't crashed since 1964, when a drunk driver coming home from a Scotland-England soccer match hit him in Glasgow. These days he does a lot of his riding on a trike, for safety; he keeps a mountain bike in his 21-bike stable for "when it's snowy and icy."

Stories about Berwick are legion, like the time, at 69, that he rode more than 300 miles with a fractured down tube held together by zip ties. But he won't tell you those stories himself. That's another thing that is so appealing about the RSF.

Unlike today, when shouty IRONMAN tattoos and 26.2 stickers proliferate the landscape and social media feeds are filled with earnest pronouncements of the deep life lessons acquired on weekend rides or half marathons, the RSF was just out there, going where few people had gone before, simply because it was a labor, and, more important, because it was fun. "Doing hard things without making much of a fuss about it," as Leonard says. "It's probably a quite British way of looking at things." And yet he pushes back against my suggestion that the RSF is a sort of pre-social-media, pics-or-it-didn't-happen idyll of cycling, for the simple fact that they took so many photographs. People, he suggests, have always wanted to show the world what they did. Their 1958 expedition to Iceland, drolly documented in the journal ("Toilet paper," the trip's chronicler observed, was "supplied usually by British Railways or the Iceland Steamship"), even foreshadows today's sponsored efforts and the #KitGrids of Instagram.



> "Taking the bike places it normally does not go," another RSF mantra I'd heard, was fine enough in theory, but one could equally have carried an ironing board, an upright bass, or a potted plant for all the good it was doing.

Back in Sheffield, as we loaded the van for Scotland, I asked Hudson about the evening's dinner plans, envisioning some twee country pub along the way. "I'll just heat a tin of beans at the gaff," he said with proper rough-stuff nonchalance.

LIKE MANY RIDES these days, the Lairig Ghru outing began on WhatsApp. Weeks before, in a chat titled "Ghru crew," we were all introduced and started hammering out logistics. In addition to Hudson, the two Bens, and myself, we'd be joined by two Scots, Stu and Lewis, and a Brit, Robbie, living in Scotland. The chat was full of jokes and cheery bravado, bristling with new-to-me Scottish words like "howff." I tried to decipher comments like "if Fords of Avon are in spate there is a fair detour around the loch," and "weather's not hoorna cold yet." My earnest inquiries about which gear to bring, given the news updates I'd gotten about a recent Cairngorms mountain rescue, were met with piss-take suggestions of "country shirts" and "German cyclotourist boots." Lewis chimed: "Gna be a weird mix of *Outlander* and *Alf* cosplay on the go." When I asked if I might borrow a helmet, he offered: "I've got a heavily waxed safety cap you can use."

My advance reading on the suitability of cycling the Lairig Ghru proved no less unsettling. "Lairig ghru is it really that bad?," the headline of a post in the *Singletrack World* forums, was typical. (The answer was a unanimous yes.) "An undiluted mountain bike ride," counseled *Mountain Bike Rider*, "if your body can take it." On Trailforks, which rated it two stars out of a maximum five, a commenter advised: "Don't ever let anyone convince you to ride the full length of this."

On the eve of the start, we assembled before a warming fire—and a bottle of whisky—in the John Muir Cottage, a cozy bunkhouse near the town of Braemar. We talked about iconic RSF members like Bill Houston, a Scotsman featured in the BBC Scotland short "I'm a Kind of Mechanised Tramp." "He's just a guy you'd see at the pub," Lewis noted, "but then he's like, 'Oh, I went to Oman on my bike.' " We talked more about gear. "I'm still trying to be selective for tomorrow," Ben Brown said. "A friend gave me some binoculars." "He'll take shitloads," Hudson exclaimed. "I can guarantee his bike will be the heaviest." Lewis piped in: "I've brought some boules. They're ultralight bikepacking boules." And we talked about the state of the RSF itself. Stu recalled growing up reading his father's old *Rough Stuff Journals*. "I remember being young and saying, 'What is this madness?' " But mountain biking came along and stole the thunder. What had once seemed "spicy," he says, was now "just some 60-year-old man riding a bike with a rack."

We set off early the next morning. I was on a singlespeed hardtail **continued on page 102**

ARCHIVAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ROUGH STUFF FELLOWSHIP; STOCKNSHARES/GETTY IMAGES (FILM FRAMES, OPPOSITE AND PREVIOUS TWO PAGES)

"It's only a certain type of person that would do it," says Hudson, "which is sort of the appeal."

Photograph by BEN READ