

The Gloucester Motorcycle Club, 1924–1926

In the early years of the twentieth century, Alfred and Elizabeth Soars moved their large family from Bowman Farm to the Gloucester River, and finally into the township of Gloucester, New South Wales, in 1907. Alfred established himself in business, owning the billiard hall next to the Royal Hotel. By 1908s, Alfred and Elizabeth had fifteen children, and by 1924 their four youngest sons, Albert, George, William and John, were young men in their late teens and early twenties.

This generation came of age at a time when motorcycling was still relatively new, offering both freedom and a sense of adventure. In 1924, the four brothers, together with Les Parish (husband of their sister Ethel), Chas Ellis, and his brothers Tom and Ike, formed what became known as the Gloucester Motorcycle Club. It was not a formal organisation, but rather a loose association of enthusiastic riders, united by a shared interest in the machines of the day.

The group rode a variety of motorcycles typical of the period. George and William each owned $2\frac{3}{4}$ horsepower BSA machines, Albert rode a $1\frac{1}{2}$ horsepower two-stroke Waratah, while Chas Ellis had a Douglas $2\frac{3}{4}$ horsepower. These were modest by later standards, but to their riders they represented speed, independence and no small degree of prestige.



An example of George and William's 1920's BSA $2\frac{3}{4}$ side-valve motor bike.

Most outings took the form of rides into the surrounding countryside, for picnics, exploration, or simply the enjoyment of the road. As later recollections make clear, the

young men saw themselves as confident and capable, with more than a little swagger. Whether that view was shared by the wider community is less certain.

In 1987, Chas Ellis wrote to Alfred Soars's grandson, also named Alfred, providing a detailed account of those years, supported in part by earlier correspondence from Les Parish in 1975. His recollections offer a vivid glimpse into the character of the group:

"The Soars boys, my two brothers Tom and Ike and Kate Norman Jones, we were always racing about burning petrol at 1/10 and 3/- a gallon. Engine oil was 1/- per pint. We mostly used Castrol C racing oil, because it made a big stink and we thought we were real speed merchants, like Billy Conoulty etc the speedster of the day."

"We would often remove the silencer to gather attention and we would ride very fast, speed, smoke and noise"

Such behaviour inevitably attracted attention. The riders were known to thunder through Gloucester's Church Street, racing one another and creating what many residents regarded as a public nuisance. Complaints to the police became frequent, citing excessive speed, noise and smoke.

On one occasion, George Soars was racing another rider through the town when Albert suddenly cut across his path. The resulting collision was severe enough that onlookers feared the worst. Albert initially believed his back to be broken and required several weeks to recover, while George, remarkably, escaped more lightly. The incident did little to improve the group's standing in the town, and further complaints soon followed.

The police eventually resolved to take action. According to Chas Ellis, a plan was put in place following another of the group's excursions, this time to Copeland:

"Before leaving they decided to remove their motorcycles' silencers so the engines would make a louder, more impressive roar. They thundered through the town, attracting the attention of the local police, who promptly set up a roadblock at Billabong Bridge with the intention of arresting them when they returned for riding illegally modified machines".

Albert, who had been working at the sawmill, noticed both the riders passing and the subsequent police activity. He rode out and intercepted the group on their way home but still several miles out of town and warned them of the trap. His motorcycle, better suited to rough ground, allowed him to undertake what became a memorable solution. The group sent him back to retrieve the removed silencers, which he then carried across paddocks to rejoin them.

"Albert arrived heavily laden with jangling silencers all over him threaded on a piece of rope and after a bit of work we were all able to putter, putter, putter past Sergeant Bolton and Constable Canal waiting on the Billabong bridge."

Not all of their adventures were confined to the roads. The surrounding countryside, with its abandoned mines and remote river locations, provided further opportunities for exploration. Picnics, often involving whisky and the company of local girls, were a regular feature of their outings.

One such excursion took the group to the abandoned “Mountain Maid” gold mine near Copeland:

“I remember we went to Copeland only 10–11 mile from Gloucester to inspect the abandon gold mine ‘Mountain Maid’. We, George Soars, Albert Tom and Ike and myself and Norman Jones, all motorcyclists went into the tunnel for about a mile over old shafts covered with just rotting wood (planks). The noise was deafening. We came to a fall in the tunnel so we turned and had to come out. As we headed out we could see the light away ahead. I stood up and being six feet and not being able to see well for the light my bare head hit a overhead brace. I don’t know how I survived. Big scar still there today.”

The years of the Gloucester Motorcycle Club were relatively short-lived. Formed in 1924, it had largely faded by the end of 1926. As was often the case, the transition to adulthood brought change. The brothers married, began families, and moved on to more settled lives. Chas Ellis gave up riding after his encounter in the mine, while Les Parish was already establishing a family. Albert continued to work for a time at the mill, though his later life would take a more troubled course.

Yet the memory of those years endured. In every letter Chas Ellis wrote, he returned to the motorcycle days, recalling a time marked by friendship, risk, and youthful confidence. By 1989, all of those involved had passed on, but through their letters, their experiences have been preserved: a brief but vivid chapter in the social history of Gloucester, and in the lives of the Soars family.

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