

Museum Volunteers, JMM

Taking the Mystery out of History

H is for Hercules

by V. Jegatheesan

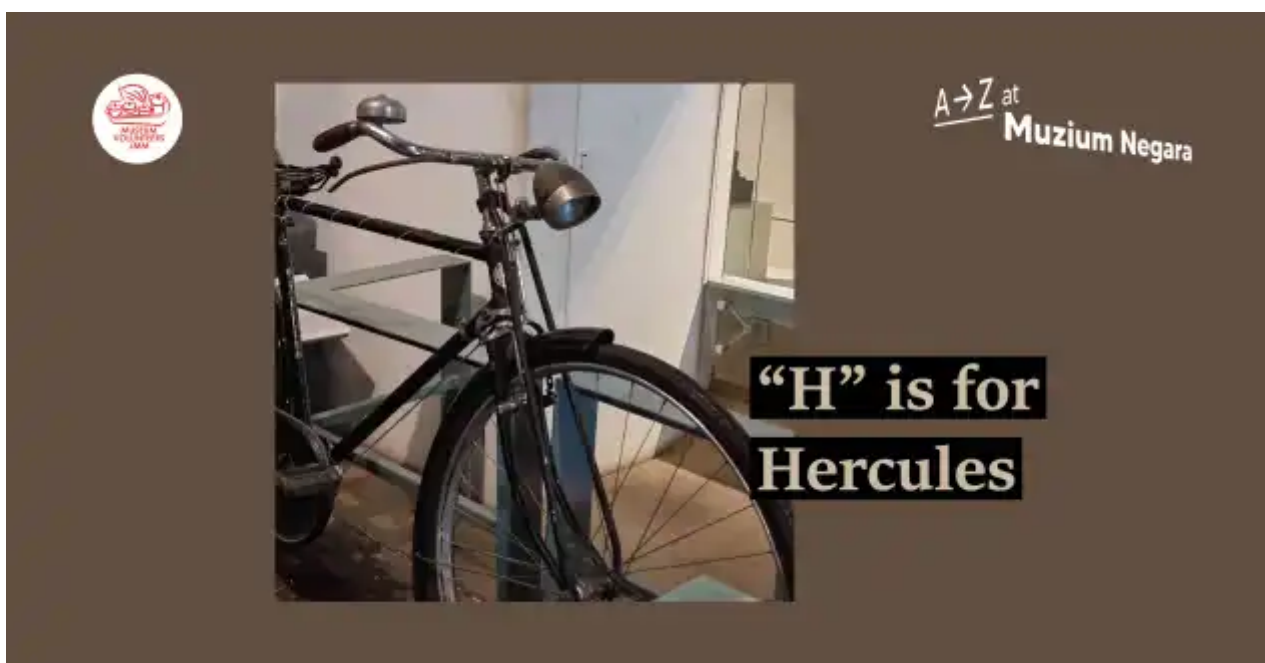


Image credit: Dennis Ong

“The Finest Bicycle Built Today”

... So read the advertisements for the Hercules bicycle in the newspapers of the late 1940's.

A British Hercules bicycle can be seen in Gallery C in the section describing the rubber industry in Malaysia in the early days. The latex containers on the sides are a clear example of how this bicycle was used as a transport workhorse of various goods in estates, businesses and elsewhere, now replaced by the motorcycle. Though Raleigh was the most popular as a regular bicycle, Hercules was the utility bicycle seen in towns and villages. Other Hercules models included those for racing purposes.

One never learned to ride bicycles using a Hercules due to its size and weight. The Hercules was bigger and higher than the regular brands, had larger handlebars with a flat carrier added at the back, sometimes also with a metal basket in front. This carrier is known to have transported, among others, sacks of *lallang* by cowherds, milk containers or a box for various things by tradesmen and of course latex containers for the smallholding rubber tapper.



At Gallery C. Image credit: Maganjeet Kaur

How exactly were these bicycles used in the estates? The trees would have been cut at a slant in the very early morning so that it does not coagulate as it flows into the collecting cups or harden too fast on the cut. Usually about 9 or 10 am, the smallholder would make the rounds on the bicycle, pouring the latex into the metal containers fixed on the sides. Depending on the size of the estate, more

trips would be made by the smallholder or collection made by a team of workers. When the containers are full, these are taken to the smallholder's shed where the latex is coagulated with formic acid and processed to make sheet rubber or block rubber. Larger estates used bullock carts with very large metal tanks while tappers used the '*kender*' or *kandar* stick on their shoulder with two containers hanging at the ends, all later replaced by trucks. Other competitor brands of bicycles would also have been used such as the Hopper, another bicycle of somewhat similar build.



Using bullock cart (left) and kandar (right) to transport latex. Credit for both images: [Arabis](#)

Old newspaper advertisements up to the mid-1950s reveal that a T. V. Mitchell and Co., of Singapore and Penang, were the representatives who imported, distributed and or sold these bicycles. They also sold through authorised agents in Malaya, Singapore and elsewhere, among which was the familiar Dunlop Rubber Company. They sold the bicycles, as well as spares and accessories via numerous dealers in Singapore and Malaya. Almost every town and village had a bicycle repair shop of some sort, as bicycles were a common mode of transport. Interestingly, a newspaper report in the Straits Times of 5th December 1952, quotes a Mr. P.J. D. Munns, the overseas representative of the Hercules Cycle and Motor Company Ltd., as saying that Muslims preferred dark green bicycles, possibly referring to the Malayan market at that time.

See this **WORLD FAMOUS**
TRADE MARK ON



The
FINEST BICYCLE
BUILT to-day



THE HERCULES CYCLE
& MOTOR CO. LIMITED,
BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND

*'World's largest
cycle output'*

REPRESENTATIVES:

T. V. MITCHELL & CO.
18, Battery Rd., S'pore
16A, Weld Quay, Penang

Hercules
CYCLES

SOLD BY ALL LEADING DEALERS.

*Advertisement in the Sunday Tribune (Singapore), 4 April 1948, page 11,
col. 2*

Few people remember the exact prices of bicycles; they only remember the price of a new bicycle to be in the region of 100 to 150 Dollars (of that time) in the 1940s and early 1950s. Most who bought paid by instalments usually to the bicycle shop while some saved up for theirs. Handing down used bicycles to children or relatives was also common. Newspaper advertisements in the late 1940s in Singapore reveal a healthy second-hand market with the bicycles selling for about 25 Dollars (of that time).

Hercules bicycles were manufactured by the Hercules Cycle and Motor Company and named for their robustness and durability. The company started in Birmingham in 1911. It was very successful and efficient, but, after 1946, it gradually lost out to competitors' better-streamlined production processes. By 1960, the company was part of TI Raleigh Industries which made Hercules in its

own design. In 2003, the original Hercules Company finally dissolved. However, the brand lives on in India by arrangement with TI Cycles of India.



Hercules logo on the bicycle at Muzium Negara

References

[The Finest Bicycle Built to-day \[advertisement\]. \(1948, 4 April\). Sunday Tribune \(Singapore\), p. 11 col. 2.](#)

[Spore is eastern hub of bicycle market. \(1952, 5 December\). The Straits Times, p. 12.](#)

[British bicycles find increasing sales in Malaya. \(1956, 15 June\). The Straits Times, p. 14.](#)

Personal recollections and conversations with relatives & friends.

In this Series

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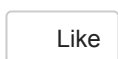


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Museum Volunteers, JMM / August 16, 2021 / A-Z at Muzium Negara

2 thoughts on “H is for Hercules”



Rose Gan

August 16, 2021 at 6:42 pm

Fascinating article. 100 dollars for a brand new bicycle was a lot of money at the time. A real vintage piece of everyday life in the old days. Thanks for sharing.



Jega

August 16, 2021 at 8:57 pm

Thanks for the observation and glad you like the article.

Jega.