

## Dating Very Early Hetchins

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*Subject: Hetchins frame serial #H297.*

*Date: 22 February, 2006 11:57:59 CET*

*Hi All,*

*I think that H297 does not fit in a sequential run, nor does 336 (Liffen). The provisional patent application [for the vibrant stays] was made in Nov 1934 and the announcement in **Cycling** of 'Something very novel' was in the Jan 23rd 1935 issue. I would not think that production started much before then. Production for August to December 1935 was 106, about 21 a month, so 336 frames/cycles by 16 March 1935, John Liffen's receipt date, is not possible. I guess we shall never know.*

*Regards, Len (Ingram)*

A very early Hetchins changed hands; the new owner approached us for help in dating it, and during the course of trying to do so, it occurred to me that how we go about it might be of interest. So, my two cents (five pages)...

Hetchins began frame production in January 1935. We do not know what frame numbering system was used. The earliest frame extant and verified by sales receipt was from March of that year: a model Brilliant curly, no. 336 (no 'H'), sold to Mr. Liffen (whose son still owns it). The sales records list one other three-digit number, sold in January 1936. Two four-digit numbers are listed, both sold early in 1936. None had a leading 'H'.

In August 1935, a date-coded numbering system was introduced. The first frame bore the number 3581. Decoded, it read (19)35 for the year, 8 for August, 1 for frame number 1.

How many frames were built before the introduction of date-coded frame numbers is not known. Production from August to Dec 1935 was 106 frames, or 21 per month average. The reason for the introduction of date-coded frame numbers is not known but may be plausibly attributed to Hyman Hetchin's business acumen: it was important for him to know how many were being built each month and to tally his monthly expenses against his income.

The prefix system of one or two digits for the year and one or two digits for the month, plus a continuous production sequence suffix, proved cumbersome. The 1,000<sup>th</sup> frame, produced in November 1937, required seven digits (and that had already knocked off one digit from the year). The dating system was modified (ostensibly simplified, but for historians complicated) many times.

Hyman's bookkeeping year started in Sept of the previous calendar year. This probably co-incided with trade shows in the fourth quarter where tradesmen would display wares for the follow-on year. Automakers call this a model year. This had an effect on frame numbering. From 1940, frames made in Sept to Dec of a calendar year may have borne year prefixes for the following year, and from 1941 month codes were dropped altogether. While this made good business sense to Hyman, it is counter to a common-sensical approach to the

dating of frames. Dated serial numbers are accurate to the month only from August 1935 to August 1940.

**When is a frame born?** For the purposes of historical research, a frame is born when there is *evidence* for it. And that means, evidence we can see and assess now, in the present, not what someone might have seen had he been in the shop in 1935, and not what might seem 'logical' to someone trying to figure out or guess a system in retrospect. Hetchins used several systems over the years, and it is the transitions which are tricky to identify. H297 appears to fall into one of these transitions. You know the old saw about the man searching for his keys under a streetlamp, not because he lost them there, but because that's where there's enough light to see—where he lost them, it's too dark to see. That is our situation vis a vis very early Hetchins frames. We look where the light is, which is not necessarily what we'd prefer. We do not have production records (except for a few years of builders' cards from the 1950s); what we have are *sales* records. So we go by what we have, not by what we wish we had instead. Preferred evidence includes, for example, original owner documentation, builder's cards, reliable anecdotes from original owners (or their offspring, as is increasingly the case). Where preferred evidence is lacking, we make do with other evidence. 'Other evidence', for example, might consist in when certain models or other physical features (such as fork crowns) were first introduced in the catalogs and/or when certain models were first presented to the press (magazines or trade shows). However, we know from sales records that some models were actually produced prior to being presented to the press or appearing in catalogs. So dating a frame (in the absence of a sales receipt or builders card) is a matter of weighing many factors. It is not an exact science.

In addition, we do not know what constituted definitive identification criteria for every single model. Most were identified by lug pattern, but not all. Some were identified by frame geometry or by other distinguishing characteristics (such as the fluted seat tube on the Six-Day model, or the special dropout on the Trio), whereas still other models were apparently distinguished by the components they were delivered with or by the finish (more or less or no chrome, as was the case with two of the three Competition models, for example). Doubts are greater regarding the very early models from the 1930s (Superbe, De Luxe, Ideal, Brilliant 1, 2, & 3); they are mentioned in the catalogs, but we do not know whether they were distinguished by lugs, or geometry, or components, or some combination. This makes it difficult to date a frame such as H297, since we're not even sure what model it is. It looks Brilliant, but there were three listed in the early catalogs, and we know of only two distinct Brilliant lug patterns from the 30s (not counting the Brilliant comeback in the late 50s and early 60s). So what was the distinguishing characteristic of the three early Brilliants, if not lug pattern?

**When was a frame born?** So far as we know, frames were stamped after being brazed and filed (and presumably quality-checked by Jack), before being primed and sprayed. Days could elapse between brazing and filing, and the man who brazed a frame did not always file it. We do not know who stamped them, whether the brazer, the filer, or Jack. All of these functions

would of course have been Jack's when he was alone in the shop, as he was in the 1930s; but in later years there were up to three frame builders, and any one might have brazed, or filed, or stamped any given frame. In addition, there were assistants and apprentices, such as Dick Swann and Ken Janes, who were entrusted with setting up frames and probably also filing them after brazing. Setting up a frame included cutting and mitering tubes. Apprentices may also have done some brazing under Jack's supervision. So when was a frame born? When the order was taken? When Jack worked out the tube lengths and angles? When the tubes were mitered? When it was brazed? Stamped with a number? Painted? Some frames hung around the shop for years in primer but unpainted. I really don't know what to say. Birthing was a process, not an event. As far as Hyman Hetchin was concerned, the critical date was more likely when it became an asset and no longer an expense, i.e., when the till jingled.

During times when several frame builders were employed in the shop (Denny, Stratfull, and Broom), sequential frame numbers do not necessarily map to sequential days of production. This can be seen from extant builders cards, which show both dates and frame numbers.

As if that weren't complicated enough already, we also know that partial assemblies sometimes hung around the shop for years and were finished off when a suitable customer walked in the door. It is a fair bet that frames in various states of partial assembly were on hand at different times. We do not know whether there was a policy or a typical practice regarding the numbering of partial assemblies.

Given the above vagaries, it is reasonable to base the dating of frames on the documentation we have to hand, which is sales records, and to supplement or refine that basis using other evidence where and when it becomes available in particular cases. Neither Len nor I think there is anything to be gained from speculating when a frame might have been made as if Hetchin had used a strictly sequential system and as if Jack Denny had produced frames at a constant rate. For historians, there is no god's-eye view in which all events are fixed in a rigid matrix of space-time coordinates. For historians, it is not the event itself, but the proof of the event, which is relevant, tangible, credible, and reportable in good faith. It may not be common-sensical, but it is a well-founded practice in historical research generally, not only in cycling research.

In the absence of preferred evidence, we compare a frame number with those already known from the Hetchins Register. The work was started by Hilary Stone; Len Ingram has carried it forward. There are some anomalies in the Register, a few misprints, one or two Chater Lea bottom bracket article numbers left over from when Hilary started the list, a peculiar run of 1000-series numbers we do not know how to interpret, and one number Len swears has a trailing H instead of a leading H (but I say he's reading it backwards and that the number on the steering tube clearly shows a leading H). But, by and large, the frame numbers listed in the Register are well attested. Over 1,200 frames are listed, or roughly 10% of the total Hetchins production. We learn more as other frames are reported.

Where a nearby number is not known from the Register, we go by the physical evidence of the frame itself: lug patterns, fork crowns and rakes, top eyes, drop outs, fitments and fiddly bits (not necessarily in that order).

*Now, to the case in point, frame number H297.* We lack every form of preferred documentary evidence: no sales record or customer receipt, no builder's card. It is the lowest frame number known to me. Len knows of at least one lower. The frame number 297 by itself looks to be prior to August 1935 when four-digit date-coded frame numbers were introduced; it bears a similarity to Liffen's 336 (if you discount the 'H'). There are very few three-digit numbers in the Register (with or without a leading H), all of uncertain date.

It is unlikely that pre-August 1935 frame numbers represented sequential production. Our reasoning is this: the earliest known frame verified by sales receipt is the Liffen curly, sold in April 1935 and bearing the number 336. Hetchin applied for a patent on the curly stays in Nov 1934 and announced it to the press in January 1935. Liffen's frame was made in March 1935, and it is unlikely that 336 frames were made from January '35 (or even Nov '34) to March '35. First, they were probably just tooling up at that time; and second, over 100 frames per month doesn't tally with either Denny's production capacity or the sales records (106 sales from August to Dec 1935).

Another possible system would be a month/production code: 336 would then decode as 3 for March and 36 for the 36<sup>th</sup> frame made in March. That would be stretching Denny's production capacity by over 50%, and applied to 297 it would be impossible. Denny couldn't produce 97 frames in a month. 106 were sold in the last five months of 1935, so it is unlikely that nearly that number were made in only their second month of production.

We do not know what the three-digit number represents, but we can infer what it does not represent: neither a cumulative sequence, nor a month plus a monthly sequence. Perhaps the explanation is really quite simple, but it is not obvious to us.

The frame number H297 alone does not yield enough information to date the frame accurately, so we have to estimate a date based on the physical evidence of the frame (lug pattern, fork, crown etc.). Len has provisionally persuaded me (on the basis of period fotos and extant frames known to him from 1937) that the lug pattern, fork crown, and fork off-set correspond to frames from 1937, not to frames contemporary with Liffen's (1935).

In sum, we don't know whether H297 was made before or after 336, nor do we have a good explanation why, if it was made after August 1935, it does not bear a dated frame number consistent with known 1936-40 frames. The physical evidence indicates it is certainly from the period 1935-37. Len thinks more towards 1937 on account of the fork crown and off-set (though it is remotely possible that the fork is a later replacement). The head badge is certainly not original 1935, which is evidence of later work having been done; badges first appeared in 1939. We still have to research the lug pattern, which

Len says is identical to one of Jean Ingram's frames from 1937. Until we see a documented frame with the same lugs earlier than 1937, a more accurate dating of H297 remains open. If this frame was made before 336, then it is *prima facie* the earliest surviving Hetchins; but the evidence to date does not conclusively show this. A very early frame it is, beyond doubt.

Neither the frame's genuineness nor its historical interest is in doubt. Congratulations to HetchinsPete on another sensational acquisition.

Cheers and tailwinds,  
Flash & Len (Watson & Holmes)  
22 Feb. 2006  
<http://www.hetchins.org>



H297, fotos courtesy of the seller.