

Frank Charles d 15 July 1939 in a glider accident in Derbyshire

After I'd led a walk around Rampside Churchyard in May 2019, I was asked "Why didn't you mention Frankie Charles, the famous speedway rider." I'd heard of him, but not seen the grave. Later, after showing me the grave (which he later cleared to find overgrown stones), this correspondent informed me: My aunt Mrs June Miller-Watt (nee Allen) lived next door to the Charles family, who had a bakehouse. She remembers Frank getting annoyed because his mother used to get him to do the bread deliveries and grease the loaf tins, when all he wanted to do was ride his bikes.

Her father (Albert Allen) was his bike mechanic for some time during a period of unemployment and travelled with him to Wembley and Belle Vue, Manchester. Frank kept his bikes in a shed on the allotment garden opposite where he lived on North Row. Whenever he was tinkering with his bikes the young Roose lads would gather round chatting to the village celebrity. Sometimes he would do daredevil stunts, like riding his bike on top of the wall round Roose school, or get his accordion out and entertain them.

She remembers being at the Sunday school party picnic and sports day on the field behind Roose school when Mr May, who lived opposite the school, came over and announced that Frank had been killed in a gliding accident. She said everyone there fell silent and the crowd quickly dispersed and went home. The party was definitely over.



IN
LOVING MEMORY OF
FRANK
BELOVED HUSBAND OF
EDITH CHARLES
DIED OCT. 10TH 1934
AGED 51 YEARS
ALSO THEIR GRANDSON
COLIN FRANK JACKSON
DIED NOV. 1ST 1952
AGED 22 YEARS



This is Frank Charles' son's grave, also Frank, who died in 1948 aged 15.



Frank Charles's father's grave (above left). Frank Charles the speedway rider is also buried here, with a stone at the foot of the grave (left)

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
FRANK
BELOVED HUSBAND OF DORIS CHARLES
DIED IN A GLIDING ACCIDENT JULY 15TH 1939
AGE 32 YEARS

which reads:



The photo (left) comes from the *North West Daily Mail* 17 July 1939, which headlined:

SPEEDWAY STAR'S CRASH TO DEATH
FRANK CHARLES KILLED IN 300FT FALL
CABLE PULLS GLIDER DOWN
BRILLIANT RIDER AND PILOT

Ranking among the most popular figures on the English "dirt track" to-day, and rapidly coming to the front in the world of gliding, Frank Charles, Barrow's own speedway rider and instructor to the Furness Gliding Club was killed when the glider he was piloting crashed after taking off at the National gliding contests at Great Hucklow, Derbyshire, on Saturday.

Charles was flying one of the latest types of sailplane. When he had been enclosed in the covered cockpit the winch at the end of the flying field was started and the glider was pulled along the ground for about 50 yards. It rose into the air, but when half-way across the field the winch stopped. The glider continued its flight until almost directly over the winch, and then, flying down-wind, increased speed.

It was noticed that the winch cable appeared to be hanging from the glider, and as the craft flew on the wire became taut until, at a height of 300 feet, the glider suddenly somersaulted owing to the drag of the cable and struck the ground with a terrific force. Charles died within a few minutes. The sailplane was completely wrecked. It was the second fatal accident of the meeting. On Tuesday Mr. W. F. Godson, of Romiley, Cheshire, was killed when his glider crashed.

Mrs. Charles and her two young sons had been staying at Hucklow during the week. They returned to Barrow after the tragedy.

Charles, whom many people in Barrow and Roose will remember as the driver of his father's baker's delivery "outfit", rose to be one of the most brilliant speedway riders in the country. His home was in South-row, Roose.

BEGAN IN 1928

Motor-cycles were in his blood, and his fellow-townsmen watched with interest as he rose to the front rank of national and international speedmen. He began speedway racing in 1928, and his name soon became one to be reckoned with on the North of England tracks.

He transferred to Wembley at the record fee of £1,000, and there he swept the board and won the league championship.

He had a spell with Burnley before going to Preston in 1929, and it was at Preston that he began to make his name by consistently good performances.

Later he went to Belle Vue, had a spell at Leeds, and returned to Belle Vue to form the famous partnership with Joe Abbott. Latterly he had been riding with Wembley, and it was as a Wembley rider that he won the national speedway championship, winning all his five races and riding like a man inspired.

This was typical of Frank Charles, for he had a great love for speed and the faster his machine travelled the better he liked it. He was among the competitors in the sand events at North End, Walney.

He often appeared at local field and track events when motor-cycle racing was at the height of its popularity in Barrow. He was quickly marked as a daring and skilful rider.

PROMISED TO RIDE AGAIN

He retired from speedway riding at the end of last season, but a little while ago he visited Wembley speedway, and before he left he promised to race again for the team.

He was undoubtedly one of the most popular riders in the country, and was the first English leader to win all his races in the England-Australia Test match in 1936.

Gliding and sailplaning were his hobbies and when he retired from the track he was able to give his undivided attention to the art of flying an engineless plane. He made several quite remarkable flights, became instructor to the Furness Gliding Club, and was one of the most popular figures on the club's Ireleth flying ground.

He had planned to go gliding with Frank Varey, his friend and another track star, yesterday.

The following day, 18 July 1939, the *North West Daily Mail* reported on the inquest:

Jury See Demonstration of Crash TRAGIC FLIGHT OF BARROW SPEEDWAY RIDER INQUEST STORY OF DOG ON LAUNCH CABLE

A demonstration of the crash of the glider in which Frank Charles, the Barrow speedway rider met his death, was given to members of the jury at the inquest at Great Hucklow, Derbyshire, by Mr. A. L. Slater, chief instructor of the Derbyshire and Lancashire Gliding Club, who used a small model glider and a piece of string.

By this means the jury were able to follow the course of Charles' fatal flight from beginning to end. The glider was placed at one end of the table and a piece of string fastened to the nose stretched to the other. Mr. Slater, who acted as official starter on Saturday, when the tragedy occurred, explained the method of starting by slowly pulling the string with one hand and tilting the glider with the other. At the end of the launch he levelled out the glider and then turned it, exactly as Charles had done.

With the string still attached he moved the glider back towards the launching point and showed exactly how the towing wire tightened and eventually pulled down Charles glider, causing it to crash. He admitted that he was surprised that the launch was stopped at 400 feet, as Charles had told him that he intended to have a high launch.

"I saw him turn," Mr. Slater continued, "and as the glider approached I saw to my surprise that the cable was still attached. Immediately after the cable came into view the glider nose-dived and hit the ground."

In response to questions by Major A. Goodfellow, of Manchester, representing the British Gliding Association and the High Coroner, Mr. E. M. Brooke Taylor, Mr. Slater made it clear that the pilot was bound to know that the wire was fastened on to the closed hook as he did not fit it there without the pilot's knowledge. In fact Charles had to pull the release and open the hook to enable this to be done.

RELEASE GEAR IN ORDER

Mr. Slater demonstrated the quick-release gear with the actual apparatus from Charles's own glider. This, he showed, was in perfect order.

Mr. C. L. Faulkner, of Ethel-road, Bramhall, who was the winch driver, said that a dog shot across the wire when Charles was at a height of about 400 feet, which he considered perfectly safe. He stopped the winch, or the dog would have been cut in half. He saw Charles level out his machine and believed he had dropped the cable.

Major A. Goodfellow (representing the British Gliding Association): Your first thought was the safety of the pilot, and when you had got him to a safe height you could think about the dog? – Absolutely.

Mr. Basil G. Meads, the chairman of the Derbyshire and Lancashire Gliding Club, said no machine was allowed to take part unless a certificate of air-worthiness had been produced and, as an extra precaution, the club insisted on a daily examination of the machines with a certificate signed by a competent person. Charles actually signed such a certificate himself.

The jury, without retiring, returned a verdict of accidental death.

On 20th July 1939, the *North West Daily Mail* carried the report of his funeral.

LAST TRIBUTE TO FRANK CHARLES

MANY MOURNERS AT RAMPSIDE FUNERAL

SPEEDWAY AND GLIDING ASSOCIATES PRESENT

Roose was in mourning yesterday for Frank Charles, the England and Wembley speedway star and top rank glider pilot, who was killed in a glider accident at Great Hucklow, Derbyshire, on Saturday and whose funeral took place at Rampside. Charles, whose home was a 26, South Row, Roose, was one of the most popular men in the town, a favourite whom success had left unspoiled, and there was a throng of mourners to pay a last tribute. A long line of cars followed the hearse to Rampside Church, where the vicar, the Rev. H. Robinson, conducted the service.

Speedway colleagues and gliding associates were among the mourners, the former including Mr. Lionel van Praag, captain of the Wembley team of which Charles was a member.

The principal mourners were: Mrs. F. Charles, widow; Mrs. E. Charles, mother; Mr. and Mrs. C. Jackson, brother-in-law and sister; Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Parramore, father-in-law and mother-in-law; Mr. and Mrs. J. T. Walker, brother-in-law and sister-in-law; Mr. W. Parramore (Gosport), brother-in-law; Miss W. Parramore, sister-in-law; Miss C. Barker, Mrs. Postlethwaite and Mrs. Smith, aunts; Mr. E. Barker, cousin; Mr. T. Searle (Brierfield), uncle; Mrs. Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, Mr. F. Smith, cousins; Mr. H. Parramore, Mr. and Mrs. H. Swindlehurst, Mrs. Beamish, Miss Beamish, Mr. and Mrs. McLeod, Mr. and Mrs. J. Bramwell, Miss. V. Watson, Mr. W. Raby, Mr. W. P. Kay, Mr. W. Bell, Mrs. Nesbitt.

Bearers were members of the Furness Gliding Club, Messrs. W. Smith, E. Skirrow, J. C. Redshaw, James Bramwell, W. A. Stevens, W. Butterfield, W. Gatehouse and W. Raby, the club also being represented by Capt. J. Fisher, chairman, and Mr. V. Foster.

The new Air Cadet Corps, in which Charles was interested, was represented by Capt. G. J. Locke and Messrs. Burgess, Glead, Gale and Hutchinson.

The Lancashire and Derbyshire Gliding Club, organisers of the event at which the tragedy occurred, was represented by Messrs. C. Faulkner and Thompson.

In addition to Mr. van Praag, speedway representatives included Mr. A. Jackson, manager at Wembley, Messrs. Cliff Parkinson and Eric Gregory, Wembley riders, Mr. P. Fryer, of Wembley, and Messrs. W. Kitchen and R. Harrison, Belle Vue riders.

Among the general mourners were noted Messrs. J. W. Hackett, P. Haslam, J. Quirk, J. Blackshaw, E. Davies, W. Armstrong, Mr. and Mrs. J. Wardle, Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Middleton, and Mrs. James.

WREATHS

Wreaths included those from the chairman and directors, Wembley; Team Mates (*sic*) Wembley; Wembley Speedways Supporters' Club; Speedway Control Board; Wembley Speedway mechanics; West Ham Speedway; Belle Vue team of riders; E. O. Spence and officials of Belle Vue Speedway; rakers and firemen, Belle Vue Speedway; five Wembley Speedway supporters; V. and S. Martin, Ltd., Tottenham; management and directors Harringay Speedway;

Furness Gliding Club; Furness Air Cadet Corps; manager and employees (*sic*), Roose Garage; the people of Roose village; Derbyshire & Lancashire Gliding Club.

Funeral arrangements were made by Messrs. William Ormandy and Sons, Ltd., Church-street, Barrow.



Frank Charles' son, Frank, died 13 July 1948. The Rampside Burial Record gives the address as North Manchester Hospital, though the death notice in the Barrow News 17 July 1948 reads:

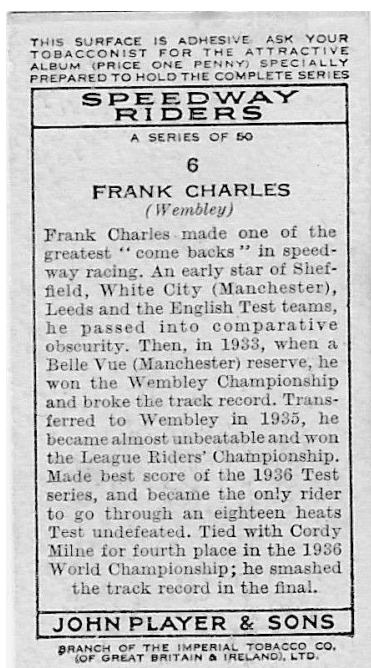
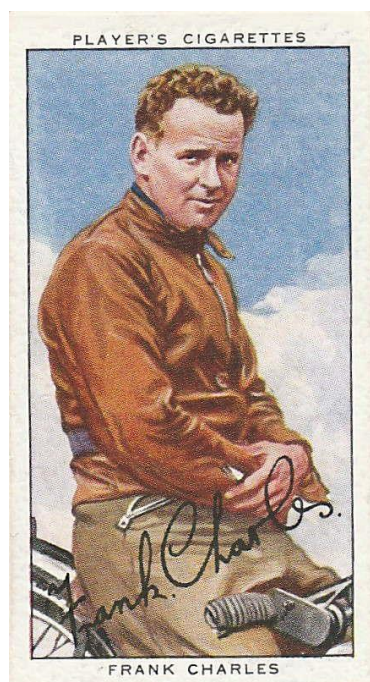
CHARLES.—July 13 at 27, Long-lands - avenue, Barrow, Frank Charles. 15.

According to *Wikipedia*: Prior to taking up speedway, Charles worked as a baker and grocer, and performed in music halls with a piano accordion. In 1929 Charles rode for Burnley, in 1930 for Manchester White City and then for Leeds Lions and Belle Vue in 1931 but was badly injured and lost his form, and so retired from the sport. In

1933, the Belle Vue Aces tempted him out of retirement, and looked to have regained his former form when he won the Wembley championship that year, also breaking the track record. In 1934 Charles' father died, so he returned to the family business. In 1935 Wembley Lions paid £1,000 to sign Charles, where he became the club's top scorer and was selected to ride for England against Australia. He went on to win the Star Riders' Championship despite only initially taking part in the competition as a replacement for Ginger Lees. In 1936 he topped the club's scoring again, was top scorer for the England Test team, and qualified for World Championship final, tying for fourth place with Cordy Milne, and broke the track record during the meeting. He qualified again for the 1937 final. At the end of the 1938 season he decided to retire to concentrate on his long-term hobby of gliding.

On 15 June 1939 he made a return to the Wembley Lions team. However, after being excused a test call up on 15 July 1939, Charles was killed whilst taking part in a national gliding competition.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Charles_\(speedway_rider\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Charles_(speedway_rider))



From the *Nostalgia* column of the *NWEM* 5 September 2017:

The Mail on Tuesday, July 8 in 1930 noted a visit to Barrow by Frank Charles which was packed with records and incident: "Every one of the 5,000 people at the Barrow Dirt Track on Monday evening had enough thrills and spills to last a long time.

In one case the spectators marvelled at the luck of one of the riders. H. Wilson, Barrow, skidded, and was run over by one of the riders following.

One of the features of the evening's sport was the riding of Frank Charles, captain of the White City, Manchester team and the only real dirt track star Barrow has so far produced. Other

star riders were Claude Rye, Eric Airey and Jack Tye, all of Preston.

Two new records were set by Charles, the first a new record for the track held by Eric Airey with 18secs. Charles, however, lowered this to 17 and two-fifths, equal to 42mph. His other record was for the five laps, which he lowered to one minute 30 and one-fifth of a second. Owing to crashing, Charles was compelled to retire from the race for the Golden Helmet, which was won by Claude Rye. Charles recovered to win the final race over five laps against Airey, Rye and Tye."

He had been born at South Row, Roose, in March 1907 and his fascination with motorbikes saw a first practical outlet at the age of 15 when he was making deliveries for a bakery on his father's 500cc Dunelt with sidecar. It was said that the daring young man would ride over the parapet of Jubilee Bridge or down the steps from Michaelson Road Bridge.

At 18 he had a new 493cc Model 90 Sunbeam and took part in the popular beach races or time trials before trying his hand in stadiums built for the new craze of dirt-track.

His success saw him compete for a host of professional teams including Belle Vue, Preston, White City, Leeds and the Wembley Lions. Even at Wembley he still commuted to London on a motorcycle!

It was a career dotted with retirements as he tried his hand at running a grocery shop and as a gliding instructor but it still saw him captain England and win the Star Championship final in 1935 – forerunner to what became the world championships. He rode against the USA, Australia and several international select teams.

A fortnight after his third comeback in 1939 he was picked for England and helped the team to a narrow victory against the Aussies. He turned down the chance of another international match to compete in the National Gliding Championships in Derbyshire but his machine crashed while still attached to the launching wire.

<https://www.nwemail.co.uk/features/nostalgia/16436348.star-of-the-dirt-track-frank-charles-breaks-records-to-thrill-crowd-of-5000-at-barrow/>

An Aviation Safety website has the following record:

Date: 15-JUL-1939

Time: day

Type: Slingsby Petrel

Owner/operator: Furness Gliding Club

Registration: BGA382

C/n / msn:

Fatalities: Fatalities: 1 / Occupants: 1

Other fatalities: 0

Aircraft damage: Written off (damaged beyond repair)

Location: Camphill, near Great Hucklow, Derbyshire - United Kingdom

Phase: Take off

Nature: Private

Departure airport: Camphill, near Grest Hucklow, Derbyshire

Destination airport:

Narrative: Slingsby Petrel BGA 382, Frank Charles, Furness Gliding Club; Written off (destroyed) 15/7/39 when dived into the ground on winch launch, Camphill, Derbyshire. Pilot - Frank Charles (aged 32) - was killed. Frank Charles (born 10 March 1908 Barrow-in-Furness, England - died 15 July 1939) was a former international motorcycle speedway rider who won the Star Riders' Championship in 1935 and rode in the first ever World Championship final in 1936.

At the end of the 1938 season he decided to retire to concentrate on his long-term hobby of gliding. On 15 June 1939 he made a return to the Wembley Lions team. However, after being excused a test call up, on 15 July 1939, Charles was killed whilst taking part in a national gliding competition at Camphill, near Great Hucklow, Derbyshire

The 1939 Nationals at Camphill

The last Nationals held until post WW2, Sunday 9th to Sunday 16th July. This was not a good competition! Firstly the weather was poor, which is reflected in the total points for 1939 being 2797 as against 3312 in 1938 and 2924 in 1937, this despite the overall standard of pilotage being significantly better. Secondly, and very sadly, there were two fatalities.

The first fatal accident occurred on Tuesday 11th when W.E. Godson got into a spin over the site from which he could not recover. He was flying a Kestrel which he'd built from plans. It's worth noting that all of the Wrens and Kestrels were prone to spinning if mishandled.

The second accident was on Saturday 15th when Frank Charles flying the prototype Slingsby Petrel could not release the winch cable and dived into the ground from 200 feet."

<https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/wiki.php?id=208454>

Cumbria BMD

Frank Charles (speedway rider) married Doris Parramore in 1932 @ St James's. They had 2 sons:

Frank Charles born 1932 *d 1948 see above*

Brian Charles born 1934 d 1997

Mrs Charles remarried William T. Shaw in St James's in 1940.