

Victorian invention fact file

Invention: The Penny Farthing

Date invented: 1870

Inventor(s): James Starley



The Penny-farthing bicycle is one of the most recognisable of Victorian Inventions, with the large front wheel and small back wheel that looks quite funny when compared to modern bicycles. However this design would not have been possible had it not been for the key Victorian invention of the tensioned spokes that hold the wheels together.

This came about when a Frenchman called Eugene Meyer invented a 'wire-spoke tension wheel' in 1869, followed closely in the early 1870s by the Englishman James Starley's invention based on a very similar design. This then led to Starley inventing the large wheeled bicycle that we now recognise as the penny farthing.

The Penny Farthing - so named because the big wheel resembles a penny, compared to the back wheel that resembles the much smaller farthing, was originally called 'The Ordinary Bicycle' or 'High wheeler' to distinguish itself from the other bicycle available at the time which was called 'The Safety Bicycle', and the name 'Penny Farthing' was not used until much later.

Some of the most important parts of the penny farthing weren't just its big and small wheels, but also hollow steel frames, solid rubber tires and ball bearings- making the bikes lighter and the ride smoother than ever before (until then, bikes were very experimental and had no way of stopping bumps in the road from jolting the rider- giving them the nickname boneshakers!).

What happened next?

Penny-farthings were only popular for a few years, from the 1870s to the 1890s, but their strange design has since become an icon of the Victorian era, standing for the innovation and experimentation of the Victorian age.

One problem with the penny farthing was that the big wheel made it easy for riders to fall over the front of the handlebars. Eventually safety bikes took over, but penny farthings live on today in clubs and societies all over the world, and Meyer and Starley's contributions to transportation haven't been forgotten.



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