

Life on tv

These unsung heroes have been around for more than 40 years, but here on Wearside, blood bikes are relatively unheard of. **Cara Houchen** caught up with members of the newly-formed North East branch.

IT all began on April 1, 1969, in Stevenage, when blood bikes founder Des Gibbons established a youth community action group named Freewheelers to encourage young bikers to use their riding skills to provide a fast and reliable transport service to local hospitals.

They carried blood, drugs, plasma, diagnostic specimens and even human organs on occasions.

Riders also delivered letters to doctors' surgeries and collected spare breast milk from nursing mothers to take to the special care baby unit at the local maternity hospital.

Forty years on and the concept is still going and some of the more established groups have been looking at ways to gain better collaboration between national groups. As a result, the National Association of Blood Bikes (NABB) was officially formed in 2010.

Now, for the first time, a group has been formed which will cover hospitals in Durham, Tyne and Wear and Northumberland.

They have just taken delivery of their first bike and chairman Peter Robertson says they can't wait to get started.

"It's all voluntary so we have to fundraise and rely on people giving up their spare time to make something like this work," explained Peter.

He first became aware of Blood Bikes while watching a documentary on emergency bikers.

A motorbike fanatic since his teens, Peter thought it would be something he could get involved in but there was no group, so he registered his interest with the NABB and in September last year, Northumbria Blood Bikes was formed.

Peter who is retired, said: "It takes about a year to set up a group as you need volunteers, bikes and a good relationship with NHS hospital trusts.

"A few of us who wanted to form the group decided to give it a whirl and started fundraising and trying to recruit members from bike clubs.

"We're a registered charity now and we have to demonstrate that what we do is in the public interest.

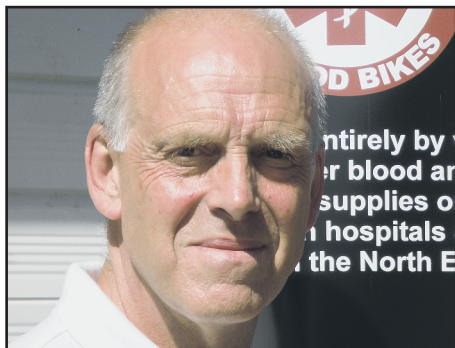
"It's a huge area to cover but there is a need for an out-of-hours service, as currently, taxis are contracted and that obviously incurs a cost and they can't get through traffic in the same way as a bike.

"We reckon a medium-size hospital spends £22,000 to £25,000 a year on transport, which isn't the wage of a doctor but it's still a lot of money which could be used for other things and if we can save a hospital that much or more, then we'll be happy."

The group now has 60 voluntary



IMPORTANT SERVICE: Above, Northumbria Blood Bikers Owain Harris, left, and Alan Ross. Below, ch



members, but they don't all ride bikes. Some of them contribute in other ways, such as fundraising and shift controllers, who look after the bikers from 7pm to 6am.

Peter, 59, said: "We operate out of hours for two reasons. Firstly, the NHS already has its own team during working hours and we would never want to put them out of a job and secondly, a lot of our volunteers have their own day job and they can only give their time when it's not tied up with work."

The group has raised £9,000 so far and now has its first motorbike, which has been given the official blood bike make-over and now sports the yellow and orange checks associated with NABB.

Peter explained the bikes have to be a certain type to be able to do the job, and to buy new they can cost up to £13,000.

"Ideally, to cover such a big area we would

need around 12 bikes," said Peter. "So that's why donations and fundrasing is so vital to what we are hoping to achieve.

"All the bikes are liveried up in orange and blue and fitted with blue lights, but those can only be used when authorised by the NHS themselves.

"And if we are authorised, we still can't speed. We are not the police and law still stands for us."

He added: "All our riders have to be advanced rider qualified."

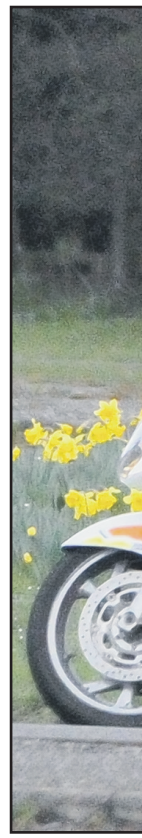
Although a lot of the volunteers are keen motorcyclists they will not be using their own bikes. Peter explained: "The problem with using your own bike is it's not very professional. They have to be liveried up so people know it's a blood bike, but if you are still using it for personal use, people don't want to see you popping to the shops or going to the cinema."

Northumbria Blood Bikes is hoping to start working with one of the three NHS trusts it has approached in the next two months.

Peter's main focus now, alongside fundraising, is to raise people's awareness.

He said: "It will take time to gain the trust of the hospitals but I'm confident we can succeed. Now we just want people to know we are here and what we are doing."

● For more information go to www.northumbriabloodbikes.org.uk or visit their facebook page www.facebook.com/NorthumbriaBloodBikes



SPECIAL D

vo wheels



chairman Peter Robertson.



DELIVERY: A blood biker on the move.

'Everybody benefits from this service, as you never know when you are going to need blood'

BEING able to use their hobby and passion for a good cause is something Alan Ross and Owain Harris are very happy about.

The pair are founding members of Northumbria Blood Bikes and they are keen to encourage not only bike fanatics but anyone looking to support the charity to come on board.

Ex-police officer Owain, from Washington, is in charge of the media and publicity for the group but this week he has been in charge of the charity's first bike, which it received this month. He took it on its first long-haul outing to Brighton, where it received a new paint job in the blood bike colours.

He said: "I got involved after retiring last year. I wanted to do something for charity and I've always been into bikes, plus my brother and sister are both fighting stem cell cancer and I felt this was a good way to feel like I was paying something back.

"Everybody benefits from this service, as you never know when you are going to need blood or a transplant. It's easy to sit back and think it will just be there when you need it, but the reality is, it might not be. It may be in another hospital miles away.

"The general public don't realise that taxis are used out of hours, which are not cheap, and that's where this service comes in."

He added: "At 2am on a Saturday night you would be hard pushed to find a taxi that wasn't ferrying someone home from a night out, but we are always available, and in traffic it's easier for a bike to get around than a car. We can respond quickly and that's just a few reasons why we think we can provide a better service."

The first bike is an ex-police bike from Scotland and the pair are hoping it will be the first of many. They also have several mini-motorbikes for kids to try out at awareness events in the same colours, which are proving popular.

Alan, who is a Computer Engineer from Penshaw, said: "We've got a smart-looking bike now and it's

prompting a lot of interest now people can see it – it's the catalyst and it's letting people know we are here."

Alan, 47, the vice chairman of Northumbria Blood Bikes, used to be a regular blood donor but had to stop due to a medical condition. He said: "I decided if I couldn't give blood I could take it instead.

"There's not a lot of awareness of blood bikes up here and the nearest one is Cleveland, which broke off from the North Yorkshire branch. We need people to know that we are here now and eventually the hope is that there will be national coverage where each group can do relay jobs between each branch."

He added: "The Nationwide Association of Blood Bikes statistics for 2012 show 25,896 runs between hospitals. Assuming that the average taxi journey costs around £30, that would suggest an approximate saving to the NHS of over £700,000 in one year alone.

"One of our members is a taxi driver and took blood from QE Hospital in Gateshead to Wansbeck General hospital at a cost of £38. That's one trip; add up an average of two trips per night, seven nights a week, over 70 hospitals in the North East region and it doesn't take long to add up what the weekly potential savings to the NHS could be."

The team will eventually provide an evening service and 24-hour weekend coverage to hospitals in the area.

Owain, 53, said: "The hours we will be working means not many people will actually see us out on the bikes, that's why we make sure we attend as many events as we can so the general public can see what we are about.

"We want as many volunteers as we can get and they don't just have to be bikers, we need help designing and printing leaflets, communications – there are so many roles which people can slip into."

Alan added: "Everybody needs blood and even if it's not them directly, it could be a friend or family member, so everyone will benefit from this service at some point in their lives."

