

## RIDING THE BRITTS

IN AN AGE WHEN COMPUTER-TUNED FUEL INJECTORS, COMPLEX ENGINES AND SOPHISTICATED 'INFORMATION CENTRES' ARE BECOMING THE NORM, THERE'S SOMETHING RATHER RELAXING ABOUT THE CLASSIC OLD ENGLISH SINGLE. PETER WATSON REPORTS ON A 350cc MATCHLESS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BISHOPP.

THE TERM UJM, MEANING Universal Japanese Motorcycle or an across-the-frame four, seems to have eased its way effortlessly into English bikespeak over the last 18 months. But there have also been UBMs in the great British past of motorcycle manufacture. From the late 1940s on, the Universal British Motorcycle was the parallel twin, a type of design which dominated motorcycling long enough for people to begin to think that no-one would ever build a vee or flat twin ever again in this country. Yet long before Edward Turner set a new trend with the Speed Twin in 1937 motorcyclists had come to accept that the 350 or 500cc ohv single was *it* and probably always would be.

Times change, but the big overhead valve single, child of the early 1920s, changed so imperceptibly throughout its production run as a British motorcycle type that many of the models which were still being produced in the 1950s showed

signs of a visible side-valve single heritage. Norton even used the same bottom-end assembly and crankcases for both the ohv and sv models, for the new-fangled device with valves upstairs was just a development of the same old 79 x 100mm chuffer. Call it 'thoroughbred breeding' if you like; it was really an appalling stagnation of design and endeavour.

By 1960, when Dick Kimber's Matchless G3 350cc single began thudding down the road, the medium-capacity ohv single was a complete anachronism, a creature from the past that had somehow found its way into modern world of the Twist, the Fab Four and Honda's first Dream. Product of that huge conglomerate, Associated Motor Cycles Ltd, whose base was a factory in Plumstead, sprawling untidily among the south-eastern suburbs of London, the G3 and its chums had but a few more years remaining as the sixties began to

swing. In 1966 Dennis Poore and Norton Villiers took over the sorry mess of AJS, Matchless, James, Francis-Barnett and Indian that comprised AMC. The identikit AJS and Matchless singles would be continued said the new management. And promptly consigned them to oblivion.

So where does this leave Dick's Plumstead Plonker, apart from still thudding down the road in a manner which suggests that it will stop only when the oil finally runs out and not before? It's actually a very useable motorcycle. By which I mean that when Dick's two SR500 Yamaha's were off the road (a not infrequent occurrence) he hauled his carefully rebuilt 347cc single out of the garage and went British once more. It handles well — on Michelin M38 tyres — and squeezes 80 miles out of every gallon of three-star. Hardly a match for the ohc SR's 95mph (a new G3 was good for about 77mph; the 500 Matchbox would make perhaps 82mph), it will tonk

along in traffic at 25mph or less in top gear. Slow to moderately fast in sedate comfort is what this whole range of bikes, from the 350 NH Ariel to the Norton Model 50 and AJS 16M, is all about.

For me, swinging firmly down on the G3's kickstart (a non-original item; the pedal shouldn't fold and the 1960 item usually digs into your left calf) was a trip back in time. Nostalgia may not be what it was, but this is where I came into motorcycling: riding thirty quid, clapped-out British bangers. Even then I wouldn't have considered buying an AMC product. We thought that they were just common *junk* in the late sixties, searching out instead featherbed-framed Norton ohv singles or fragile aberrations like a 350 Douglas flat twin. A Matchless single had as much class as a Des O'Connor record. They were simply too common, too ordinary, and the fact that you could mix 'n' match parts from an AJS with a Matchless meant that it

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was far too easy to produce a runner from a box of nameless bits and pieces.

So, when Mr Calderwood was looking for a fresh victim in *Riding the Brits* it was obvious that we had to have a Matchless single, the archetype of this class of machine. There's no question that the final Matchless singles were quite the ugliest of their breed, which really begins with the 1941 350 G3/L.

The slab-sided oil tank and battery/toolbox, the 'deep catenary section' mudguards, the broad saddle and the rounded four-gallon tank all make the bike look heavy and uninspiring. In contrast, the post-war 350 — which like its WD predecessor featured telescopic Teledraulic front forks attached to a rigid frame — looks lithe and sexy. I saw a young guy working on just such a bike by the side of the road the other day. He was tightening up the float bowl screws on the Amal Concentric Mk1 he'd fitted in place of the original 276 separate float chamber device with the screwdriver attachment on his Swiss Army penknife. You feel that this kind of thing is okay on a Matchless: high-tech it isn't.

Dick's G3 also features a Mk1 Concentric, although when I spoke to him after taking the bike for a spin he told me that he'd just picked up a couple of brand-new Monoblocs and one would be going on the black 350. Yet despite the heavy, lumpen looks of the 1960 G3, it has the drop on earlier models in a number of important respects. First there's the duplex frame, actually the parallel twin chassis and introduced on the singles for 1960 along with those deeply valanced guards. Look at the drive side and you'll see a two-piece, aluminium alloy primary drive case. Hardly amazing for other manufacturers in 1960 (except Norton, who stuck with a pressed steel abortion until the singles disappeared in 1963), this replaced an absolutely awful tin device in 1958. The tin chaincase — it's a single-row primary chain, by the way — is supposedly sealed by an external alloy band. It's almost impossible to keep oiltight, and the alloy replacement also contains a Lucas RM15 alternator stator in its outer half. This lack of either a magneto ahead of it or a dynamo behind makes the barrel seem isolated in space. The contact breakers are located under a large two-screw cover on the right-hand side of the motor.

The engine itself is a long-stroke design, which produces maximum power (AMC never vouchsafed the actual bhp figure to the press for fairly obvious reasons) at around 5800rpm. That should give you some idea of the power characteristics and lazy, plonking

style of the thing. In 1962 the AMC heavyweights — so called to distinguish them from the AJS/Matchless unit-construction 'lightweight' 250/350cc singles launched in '58 — singles finally came into the so-called 'short' stroke motor. Instead of 69 x 93mm dimensions, this was a 74 x 81mm, 348cc design which had originally been fitted to the dirt racers in 1956.

Although the older engine is less powerful than the shorter stroke motor, I found that, like many 350 singles of the period, it revved easily and very smoothly. The combination of heavy flywheels and a lightish rod and piston make for some smooth running around town at up-to-40mph speeds. In addition, Dick's bike features the lovely AMC four-speed separate gearbox which Commando owners will immediately recognise. Although its lever throw is unfashionably long and the clutch only bit at the very end of the handlebar lever's travel, this box makes for a superbly slick and silent transmission. You lift your foot to engage first and then press down for higher ratios. It slips into gear with no notchiness, no discernible feeling at all. Sheer magic: it was introduced as a Norton gearbox in 1956 and then fitted to AMC's other products in 1957. It is more than man enough for the G3's puny power output, although a Commando will give it a hard time. You can kerb-crawl along in top, listening to the exhaust thump and the carb hiss, while the clutch — there's a rubber cash unit at its centre — and the gearbox just soak up each power stroke.

You can hear all this going on because the G3's engine is so remarkably quiet. A lot of people associate British singles with the rattlings and bangings of BSA C15s and Triumph Tiger Cubs. I mean, you can still hear a Triumph twin's valve-gear before you see the bike. But the AJS/Matchless singles — same bike, different badges — like Velocette singles, are mechanically rather restrained. I tried to listen for the pushrods clicking open the valves, which are controlled by hairpin springs, but I failed to distinguish anything above the fairly unobtrusive intake hiss and exhaust thud.

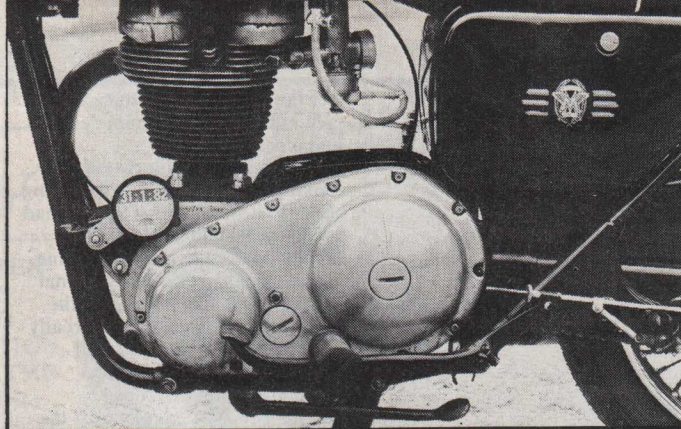
Many owners of British bikes polish and prink their darlings religiously, but fail to maintain them in good running order. You'll find worn wheel bearings, clapped brake linings and tyres so old and hard that they're all but fossilised. Dick Kimber, a 43-year-old draughtsman/designer, believes in total loving care, which extends to himself. So I quickly noticed the Michelins — 'great in the wet' —

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and the fact that the seven and eight-inch diameter drum brakes were in good nick. I wouldn't have said no to a twin-leading-shoe front brake, and the very last of AMC's heavyweight singles did have Norton Roadholder forks and Norton brakes, but at the G3's happy cruising speed of 55mph it would be merely extra insurance against lurching a nicely preserved motorcycle.

Going round the bike you notice a few odd touches. Although the Matchless uses what appears to be stock Girling suspension units they terminate at their lower extremities in a curious forked alloy shank. This is a hangover from the days of AMC's own Teledraulic rear suspension units. Pioneers in the field of hydraulic shocks, AMC's best-known units were the tubby 'Jampots' fitted to the singles from '51 to '56. These had forked mounts top and bottom, and the later Girlings were specially threaded to take a similar lower mount. Interesting, too, is the integral tommy bar on the rear wheel spindle and the fact that the singles retain the twin's sidecar mounting brackets.

This frame is much more substantial item than the earlier chassis. Like many 'classic' owners Dick has three similar machines: a '59 350 scrambler, the G3 and a 1957 G3/L. This last has both the old frame and the tin primary chaincase. Looking at the spindly, bolted-up frame, I could see why the stiffer duplex chassis of the 1960 model felt so secure. Matchless handling was never



appalling in an early-sixties Triumph sort of way, but it still falls short of Norton standards. At less than Mach 1 speeds the ride and handling felt safe, dependable. As I plodded around Dulwich in south-east London, thinking gentle, plodding thoughts, it began to rain. The sky just leaked a bit and the roads took on a greasy sheen that foretells an evil Bridgestone Slide when someone pulls up too sharply ahead. But the Matchless made me feel quite at home and unconcerned: in two miles I might have owned the thing for 10 years.

Now that is one of the G3's drawbacks. For all you have to do to start the thing is twiddle a switch to the right of the speedo on the headlamp shell, tickle the carb, kick it over and you're away. They're a thief's delight and Dick is understandably nervous about leaving his pride and joy parked anywhere for long. Stealing old motorcycles has become a popular hobby once more and he takes every precaution to safeguard this one.

What makes a bike like this a good buy today — at anything from £350 to £500 — is the fact that you get an awful lot of everyday biking for your money.

*Above: Concentric Amal isn't original but a Monobloc's on the way, says owner Dick Kimber.*

For the price of a secondhand Jap 125 you can have a machine with more than adequate spares back-up (although some pattern parts, notably silencers and exhausts can be pretty horrid) and, in terms of today's machinery, a certain amount of character and charm.

The real essence of the 350 and 500cc Ajay or Matchbox singles is that thud-thud-thud exhaust note and those plonking power characteristics, the very antithesis of modern four-stroke torque. Where a Jap multi's useable power is concentrated above 6000rpm, your Matchless has run out of breath by the time it has roared beyond 5500 revs. Tests of the period used to stress the flexibility of such singles by quoting 'lowest non-snatch speeds' in top gear. Whether the ability to shuffle along in fourth at 18mph was considered a worthwhile virtue, or whether this not altogether startling attribute was made much of because the rest of the bikes' features were pretty unremarkable, I've never been able to decide.

Obviously, with a 93mm stroke you can't rev the rocks off a G3 because piston speeds would reach dangerously high levels. Long before you reach such a stage the tiny 1<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub>in carb and floating valves stop things getting out of hand. An old acquaintance of mine who continuously over-revved an AJ5 Model 18 500cc single was rewarded with a loud bang and a seven-piece piston, but he could break anything. The bottom end consists of a triple-row roller big end, with a bush on the timing side of the crank and roller bearings on the other end. Because the 350 and 500 used common crankcases from 1948 onwards you can easily convert a 350 into a 500. There's really little point, however, as the performance figures reveal.

I can't say that I'm terribly keen on the sort of 1950s and '60s British bikes you see sometimes these days that are so flawlessly restored that you wouldn't dare ride them on a rainy day. And certainly not around south-east London's greasy, busy roads. Matchless singles of this era are for buying relatively cheaply, doing up at least cost and using. Last weekend I'd dropped in on a friend in south London to collect some bits and he showed me over a '53 350cc Ariel NH single he was selling. Its purchaser arrived before I left, and he proved to be an ex-250 Honda owner about to go British for the first time in his life. At £350 he got a bargain because the Ariel is all there and in pretty good condition.

Dick Kimber's Matchless is a more sophisticated example of the same type of machine: solid, dependable, once so very ordinary. That's the Plumstead Plonker — 1960's answer to the Honda Superdream but one hell of a single more durable. ■

## PLAYSCHOOL

### TEENY GIANTS TEST

#### YAMAHA RD125

unburnt hydrocarbons, and by keeping the power screwed on the whole time, my journey times for a 30-mile trip to the office on the RD weren't substantially down on the 50 minutes I usually reckon on when I'm on my 650. Constant screwing (sorry) is what the RD is all about and it's well able to take it. The test bike came to us straight from MCN without time for the usual service at Mitsui but there were no signs of trouble even though it had been through the obligatory timing-light thrash at MIRA with only a few hundred miles on the clock.

Riding around at 65-70mph whenever possible didn't do much for fuel economy, however, and it dropped to 46mpg on the commuter trips, compared to around 51mpg for my 650. Funnily enough, the RD doesn't have a tripmeter whereas the dual-purpose DT125 does.

In slow traffic, it could be ridden down to less than walking pace in bottom and still pull away, but the wide bars (nearly 3ft wide overall including the mirror) often meant missing chances of nipping through gaps in queues. Braking from the disc was adequate and the rear drum wasn't too fierce — A Good Thing in view of the almost universal tendency for beginners to rely solely on their bike's rear stoppers.

The riding position was OK although I'd have preferred narrower bars while handling was about what I'd expected given the mixture of a low, short wheelbase (48in) machine with a 5 foot 10 inch, 12 stone rider. Even on the firmest of their five spring preload settings, the shocks gave me a bouncy ride and the forks dived abruptly under braking, but maybe that's a legacy from its past.

Night-time riding was no problem thanks to the RD's excellent headlamp which gave such good illumination on main beam that I even took the bulb out to make sure it was only a 35W job. Dip beam wasn't quite so impressive but it was nicely conspicuous in daylight and I once again failed to see how the twin 15W day riding lights proposed by HM Government's tame boffins at the Transport and Road Research

Laboratory are going to make much difference. This is a good time of year to spot 15W bulbs by the way — they're most commonly used for jobs like lighting up corporation Christmas trees.

At the time of writing it still wasn't clear whether the Government was going to stick to its original plan of introducing the new test next month and the 125cc/12bhp limit next October or vice versa, but assuming it does the former, there are still 10 months left in which learners can legally ride bikes like the RD. You've then got to decide whether you want to buy one and face possible problems selling it when the learner market for secondhand RD125s dries up, or whether you want to go for one of the new generation of sports tiddlers like the Kawasaki AE80 or Yamaha's own up-to-the-eighties RD80LC, both of which will be learner-legal when the new law comes into effect.

The £689 RD has the advantages of greater size and extra power right now, even if it is destined to join the late lamented FS1E moped in the hall of fame reserved for bikes sidelined because somebody suddenly decided they were too much for your average beginner, whatever that means. ■

Brecon Quaddy