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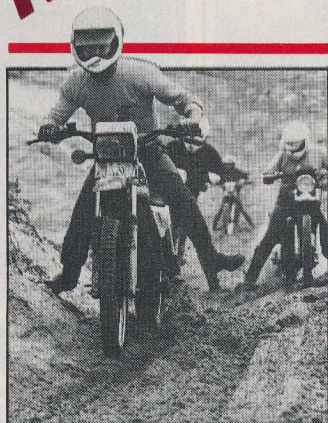
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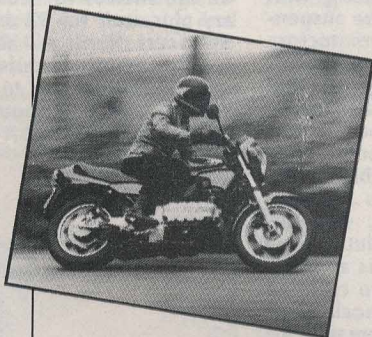
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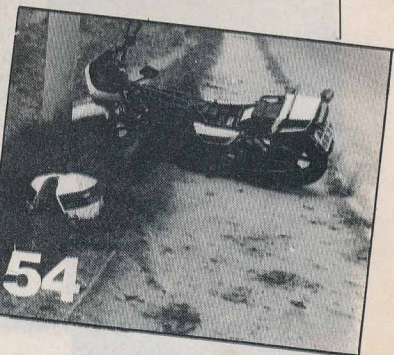
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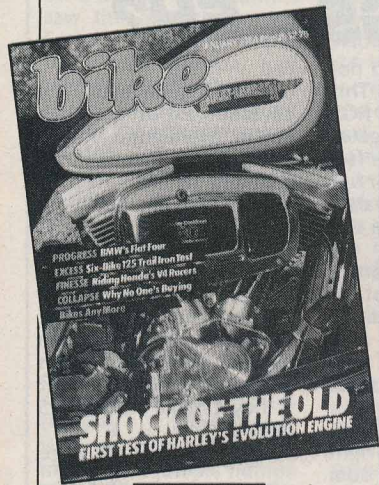
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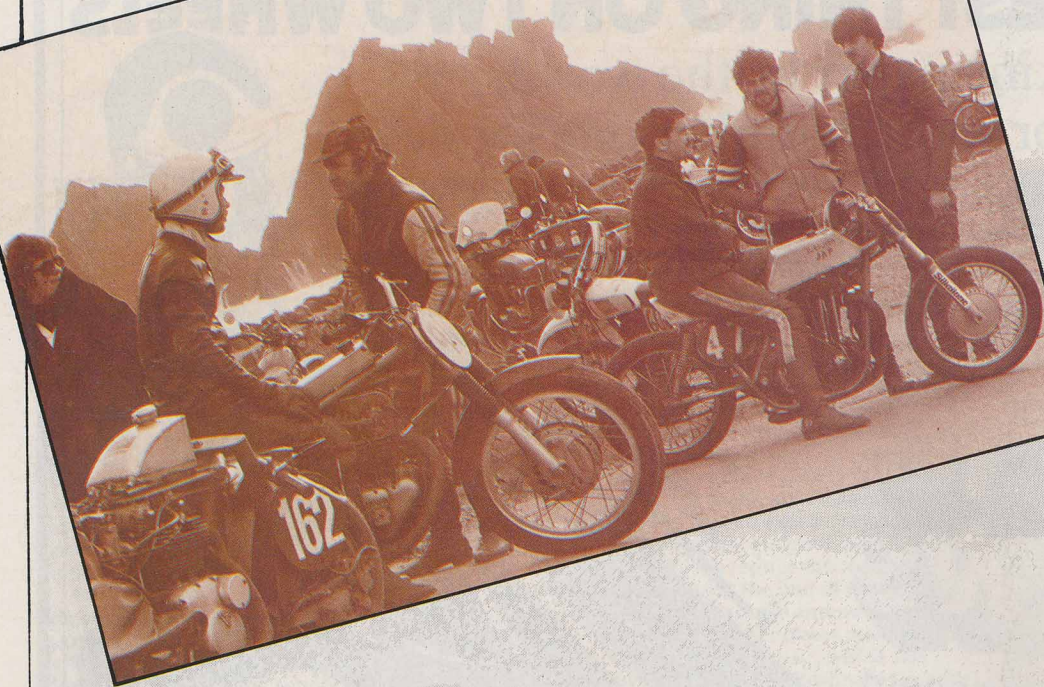
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Richard Stevens

heavy grey sky. 'Against?' One man in an oversize macintosh held up his hand, saying he was cold and wet enough already. Russell Hawkins, the secretary of the meeting, grinned through his moustache: 'Right, that's it then. Give me ten minutes and then we'll need a dozen people to help put out the straw bales.' The St Audries Bay Hill Climb was on.

A hill climb consists of a series of individual timed runs over a

short, usually uphill, course, with a rider's single best time counting. Machines vary hugely, from trail bikes and bog-standard roadsters to motocross-engined two-strokes, old Velocette singles and the definitive hill-climbers: pared-down specials powered by methanol-burning British big twins. The sport exists on little publicity and in Britain is based almost exclusively in the north and south-west of England, with a few events in the Midlands. This mid-October weekend was the last of the season, today's meeting in Somerset being followed by the final championship round at Hartland Quay in north Devon on Sunday.

The St Audries Bay climb starts at a holiday camp; a few caravans and chalets tucked away at the bottom of a narrow lane that winds down from the coast road. The lane looked more like a river

when I arrived in the pouring rain and rode carefully towards the mist-shrouded Atlantic, getting the uneasy feeling half way down that perhaps this was the course. I was right: shortly after we'd made the decision to go ahead a few blokes set off up the hill on a large trailer, dropping off straw bales to cover some of the nastier-looking fence-posts and walls.

Meanwhile I was getting my bike ready for scrutineering. The old-style Yamaha 350LC lent by Mitsuis had been misfiring when I arrived but I'd nipped back up the hill to buy some WD40 (scoring some unofficial practice on the way), which seemed to have done the trick. I made up some numbers with tape, unscrewed the mirrors, wired up the stands and headed off to the barn where a group of riders were waiting to have their bikes checked over. The variety was amazing: a green KX250 trail bike was propped up next to a 350 Morini V-twin and an old Mini-engined three-wheeler; next to them were a couple of big-single hill climb specials, an RD400 with expansion chambers and racing tyres and a Guzzi T3 with sidecar, its massive battery mounted on the chair, whose owner had apparently ridden over from Kent.

Scrutineering completed I thought it might be a good move to get a close look at the course. I

BY TEN O'CLOCK THE CARS had stopped arriving and stood motionless with steamed-up windows and heaters on full, owners not caring to venture out and unload bikes from the trailers behind. Small groups of people in waxed cotton and wellingtons gained what shelter they could in the porches of deserted holiday chalets as rain continued to pour down. This was not a day you would choose to go racing motorcycles anywhere, let alone up a hillful of hairpin bends.

At last a meeting was called; a few dozen of us gathered round a van and a stocky man with a moustache jumped up onto the back and announced that there would be a vote to decide whether we'd go ahead. 'All those in favour raise their hands ...' Twenty or so Belstaffed arms made their way slowly towards the

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

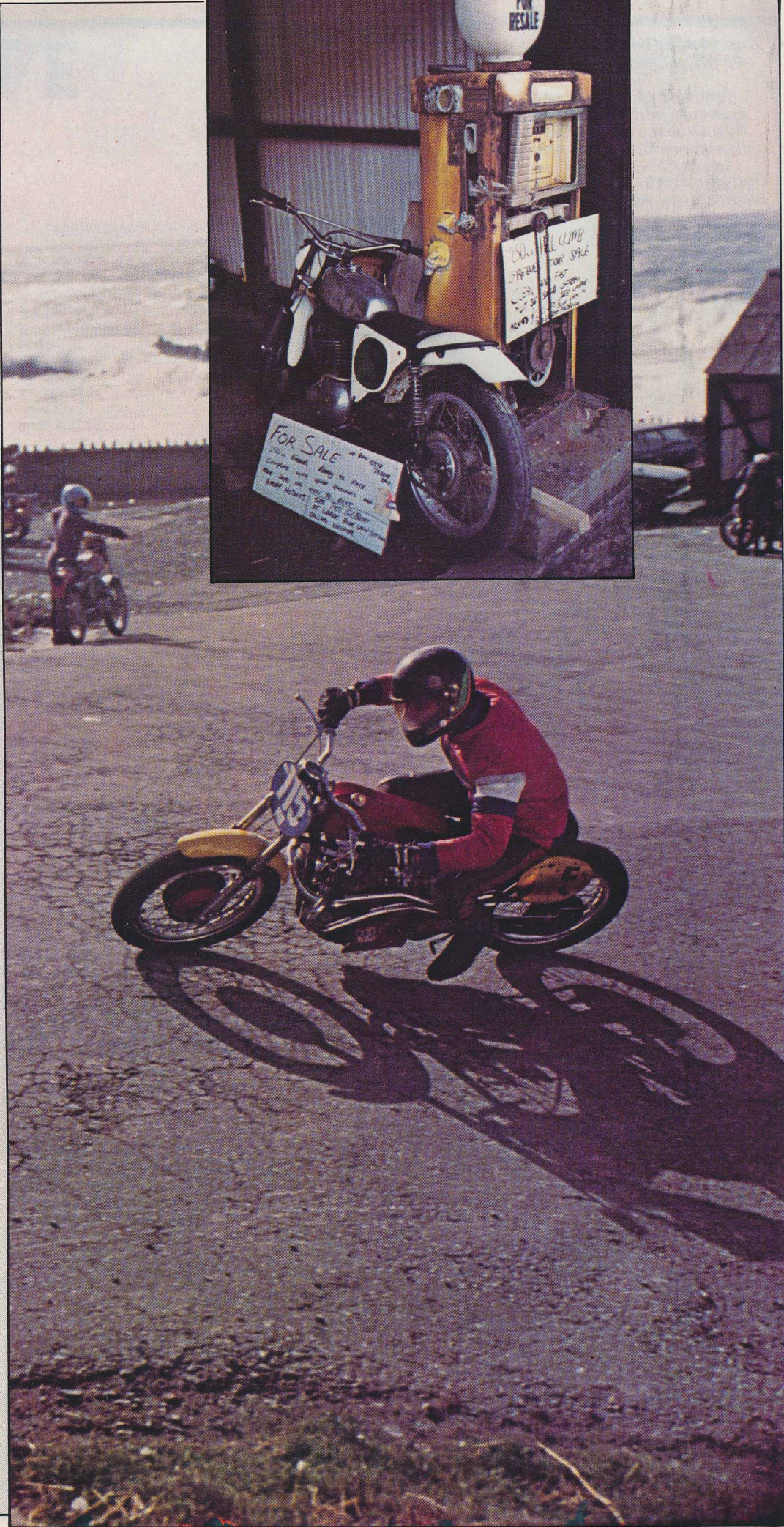
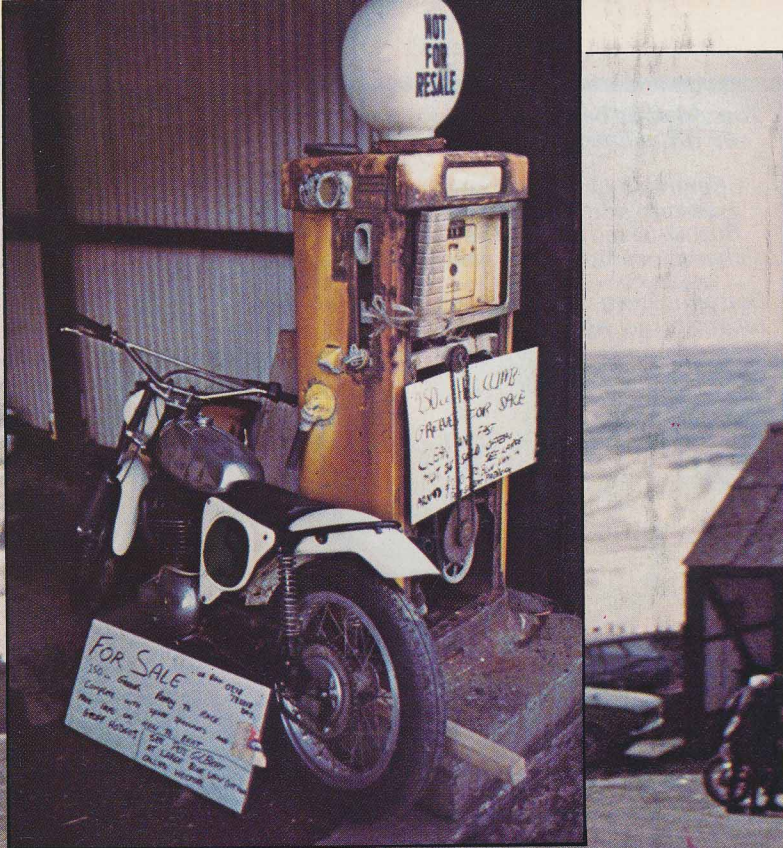
with the sound of bikes of all shapes and sizes racing against the clock. Roland Brown visits a pair of hill climbs in the West Country

clumped off round the first lefthander and up a steep, straightish bit to a righthand bend where the rain was forming deep puddles and then flowing on down and across the road. Very dodgy, though at least there was some grassy run-off and only a hedge to hit. Then it was through a farmyard with a right-left wriggle, the walls on either side partially shielded by straw bales which were breaking up and leaving bits all over the road.

The next steep righthander led onto a short straight before a nasty-looking right, where a wire fence was waiting to do unnatural things to anyone who went straight on. I made a mental note to bottle out on that bend. The last two lefthanders were relatively straightforward so I splashed down again, pausing to reassure the patiently waiting ambulance driver that we'd be getting going soon and reaching the bottom to find that timing lights had been set up. Eventually Russell Hawkins appeared, waving his arms to indicate that we could start. The rain appeared to ease a little and as engines began to fire up all around I rashly ripped off my waterproofs and kicked the LC into life.

There was no particular starting order; people just joined the rapidly forming queue and screamed off one by one, some of them first holding on the front brake and spinning the rear wheel in an attempt to warm up the tyre. I passed on that one and came to the line where one man lined up my front wheel at the light and a second then put a block behind the rear wheel to stop the bike rolling back. The red light went green to show the course was clear and the wheel spun slightly as I set off, foot out round the first bend and the handlebars shaking as I went into second going up the hill and just hit third before slamming on the brakes at the top. Second was too high for the right turn but I lost time getting neutral instead of first, then on through the farmyard, screaming towards the next righthanders in second, gently round, then on and down to first for the last tight bend, bars flapping again as I went through the lights with the power hard on.

The whole thing had taken less than a minute but you get a lot of incident into that time. The LC was running fine, with lots of power and not too much weight, though the forks could have used some attention — namely thicker oil and a steering damper. Still, there wasn't much I could do about that, or about the rain. It started lashing down as I reached the top of the hill, where those

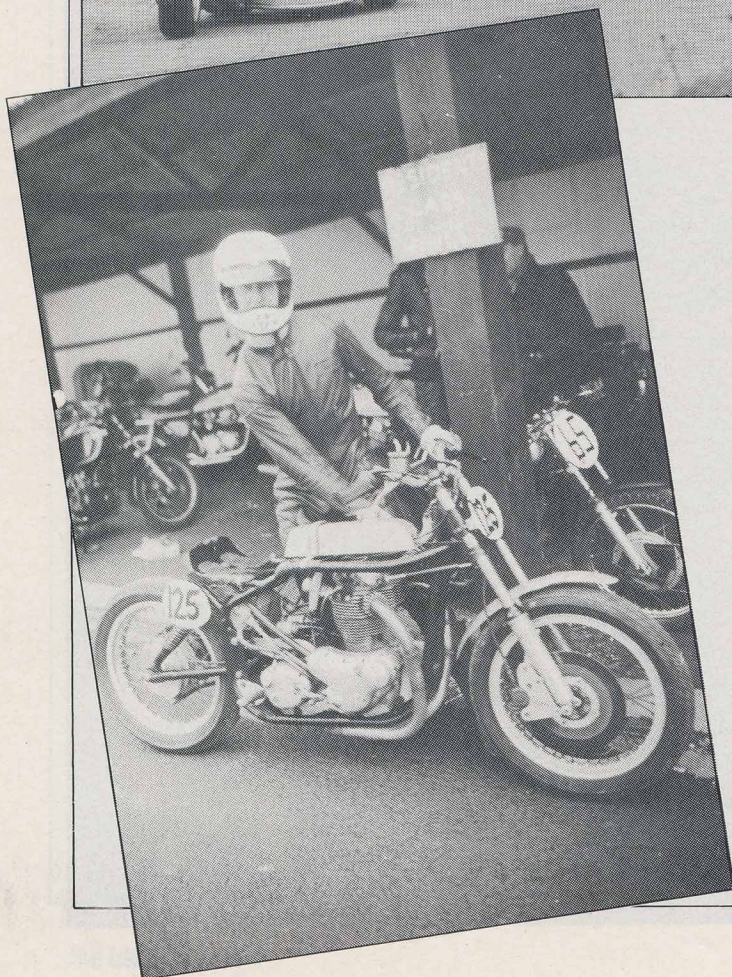


Top: Man at back searches for floating mines as RB is lined up at the St Audries lights

THE HILLS

Centre: Ray 'Tiddles' Aldworth and Phil Hawkins skirt the Atlantic on their GS750 Suzuki-based outfit. They took the sidecar championship with a new Hartland record.

Bottom: Steve Sherbird and his Norton took a record to go with the 1300cc and Overall titles



who'd made it were waiting to come back down. Everyone else was still wearing waterproofs and I could see why: there was no shelter and all I could do was sit there while rain soaked through my leathers and began to run down my back.

Next time round I was a bit smoother and didn't miss any gears, and when a delay allowed us to come down early I took the chance to walk up to the first bend to take some photos. Very entertaining it was, too: people were getting in all sorts of trouble on the slippery surface and in one sequence three riders out of eight found themselves sliding towards the hedge with a scrape and a puff of steam.

No one was hurt and one guy on a cut-down scooter got going again with a push. Others weren't so keen — the rider of one big twin declined my offer of help and abandoned his bike in disgust. The difference between the average and the really quick guys was obvious: some were footing round gingerly or ending up in a heap but others came storming round the bend and flashed past us. Pete Short was one, accelerating away with the front wheel of his RD350-based Yamaha off the ground on his way to first place in the 350cc class. Some of the big four-strokes were equally impressive, sound clattering off the farmhouse walls as they roared between the buildings.

No time for a break before the third run, the first one to count although the others had been timed. My run was almost uneventful, and at 54.67 seconds my quickest yet (though it looked a bit sick compared to Pete Short's 48.76). I was sticking my leg out going round the corners more because it seemed to be the thing to do than because I felt it made me go any faster — it's just that everyone seems to ride like that at hill climbs. Even Peter Browne, this year's 750cc champion, wasn't sure why he puts a foot out. 'I don't think I've ever had it actually save me from falling off. I think it just makes you feel better, makes you think you're in control. To be honest, at a corner where I think it's going to slip I try to keep my foot up.'

On the fourth run I nearly ended it all. Coming up to the right-hander with the wire fence I grabbed too much front brake and the wheel locked up: I released the lever in time but the momentary skid had put the bars in a wobble and with no steering damper they refused to straighten up. There was no way I could brake again with the front wheel flapping from side to side so for what seemed like minutes I was heading straight for the one bit of fence I'd particularly wanted to avoid — but with rare forethought

I'd left a fair bit in reserve and just got the bike back under control in time. The last couple of bends were an anticlimax after that, and although my start had been a bit quicker I'd lost too much time to improve on my third run. I was glad to settle for that; as I climbed the hill for the last time, loaded down with tools and gear on the way to Hartland Quay, I was relieved to have made it with everything in one piece.

Opening the curtains at the Harland Quay Hotel next morning revealed a memorable sight: the massive waves of the Atlantic Ocean were rolling in about 50 yards from the window, breaking below us to send clouds of foam swirling over the car park where the hill climb was about to begin. Hartland is some 70 miles down the coast from St Audries, almost to the Cornish border. The Hotel bar had been full last night, with a large contingent of northern riders and their families who'd made the long trip down.

The Quay consists of a row of cottages with the hotel at one end, joined to another, larger car park at the top of a hill by a steep and narrow tarmac track: the hill climb course. After the initial hairpin at the start there are a further four blind bends to be taken, and they come at you fast — the course record is under 26 seconds. The skies had cleared overnight and, with a strong wind drying the track after a shower, there was a good chance that the record would be even lower by the end of the day.

My first problem came before practice, when the LC refused to fire properly on the way up to scrutineering. I suspected more water in the electrics but half a can of WD failed to have any effect. Fortunately Mitsui had included a pair of spark plugs in the toolkit: both the original B10s were burned out and replacing them with the spare B8s put it right in time for my first run.

That opening bend was really tight and made me wish I had a steering damper again as the bars wiggled and the LC drifted towards a vertical rock face on the way out. A short straight with the sea in the distance followed before you braked for the long first right-hander, just into third going back along the hillside then down into second for the first of a pair of left turns. I wasn't sure how tight they were so I came out feeling I could have gone much faster but the Yam bottomed out on a big bump anyway before scooting off up the hill to the last right-hander.

As I sat on the bike to watch the remaining riders come round the last bend, an American who was waiting to go down to the Quay wound open his car window and

ARE ALIVE

asked what was going on. He thought he had just stumbled on some quaint old English tradition (not unjustifiably) and was content to watch — unlike a coachload of Canadians who arrived a couple of years ago. They parked at the top and insisted on their right of way, marching down the course while the hill climb was in progress. I later found out that while I'd been down at the bottom, a van had appeared and the driver had refused to wait, ignoring protests and a straw bale thrown under his wheels. There's a radio link from the top to the bottom of the hill, and flag marshals on each bend, so nobody was hurt but it illustrates the problems of running an event like this on a private road. They might have to ask the police to attend next year.

The location of Hartland has its advantages too. After the second run we stopped for lunch and the Hotel bar filled rapidly. Belstaff jackets were much in evidence even with the sun out, the riders wearing them over one and two-piece leathers that were usually black and occasionally blue or red but never showing the bright colours of club roadracers. Hill climbers don't go in for all that business.

Timed runs started after lunch, split into two sections with the 350s and 500s first to go in numerical order. I was second away out of 62 and wobbled a bit round the first bend, hesitating going into the second, unsure of the line. But I improved on the way up and recorded my best time, 30.22 seconds, which was nowhere in the overall placings but was enough to give me third best in the road-legal bike class. Winner of that class was Peter Burton on a quick Curtis-framed Yamaha XT500.

Up at the top I propped the LC against a grass bank and went down to watch the others. Again there was a huge difference in speeds, with the well-silenced roadbikes seeming very tame in comparison with the thundering twins. Steve Sherbird was particularly impressive on his 850 Norton, hacking past to set a new record of 25.26 seconds. New records score two points in addition to the six for a win (five for second and so on) but Sherbird didn't need them because he'd tied up the 1300cc championship before this round. Even so that didn't stop the Cornishman going for it in a big way on his fourth and last run, so much so that he crashed. Russell Hawkins was also in trouble. His Triumph Trident-powered outfit, which he was sharing with Julie Burrow, the secretary of this meeting, hit a bank as they went over the line and overturned, catching fire with Russell lying senseless beside it. Fortunately he recovered quickly and they were not badly hurt, though Russ wasn't

feeling too well afterwards. My last run was, thankfully, much less dramatic.

When everyone had finished we trickled back down and I got the LC ready to be ridden home. By the time I'd finished Peter Browne had loaded his Weslake-engined bike onto the trailer he was sharing with his brother Neil. They're from Exeter, both in their late 20s, quietly spoken and good-natured. But there must be a streak of aggression that appears when they sit on a bike: Peter had just broken the 750cc course record and Neil's time was the fourth best of the day although he'd been riding with a huge mitten covering the bandages put on his hand after he'd hurt it crashing into the farm wall at St Audries yesterday.

Their bikes are purpose-built and ideally suited to the short, uphill hill climb courses. They have the distinctive look of hill climbers: low and spartan, with wide, flat bars, an oil pressure gauge the only instrument, small alloy fuel tank, solid single seat, Michelin front and Dunlop rear racing tyres and big, twin-cylinder engine. Peter's is a 741cc Weslake in a Bandit frame, Neil's an 841 Weslake housed in a Norton Featherbed. Both are basically sidecar grasstrack engines; they run on methanol and put out lots of power. 'It's really exhilarating, the old Weslake. The beauty of it is you don't get a rest. The second you turn the wick up it's off and you've got to hang on,' grinned Peter.

His bike's main weakness is the front drum brake which was fine for the steeper courses, he said, but faded to nothing on a couple that were more level. The stopper will probably be changed by the start of next season, which will be their ninth. They started in a small way on road bikes and now ride in the dozen championship rounds and several more; they have even been to France. As only the best seven scores count towards the championship, in theory it would be possible to win it without going to the further-away rounds. But it's important to do them all to stop rivals winning in your absence, while the two extra points for a record are often vital.

One of the good things about this sport is that people don't go hill climbing just to win. As they finished loading up Neil's bike and prepared to leave, Peter didn't even know he'd just broken the course record. 'We do it for excitement, purely for excitement. It's less important whether you win or not — we haven't even looked at the results today. Obviously you like to win. Certainly at the end of the season you like to have won your championship. But that's what it is to us — excitement.' ■

Top: Mods on a hill climb? This scooter crashed on the first corner at St Audries

Centre: Yet another test of the water and wear-resistant properties of Belstaffs

Bottom: Neil Browne set fourth best time at Hartland on his Norton-framed Weslake — after hitting the farmyard wall at St Audries. Note the mitten protecting his right hand

