

Help!

I need somebody...

Roland observes a cross-section of breakdown and recovery services playing with their tools



He was lying back on the seat of his battered black Lambretta 150 when we reached him, resting on the sleeping bag and spare wheel strapped to his immobile machine, his visorless helmet dangling from the handlebars. The scooter's engine cover was off, a few tools scattered around the Stevenage pub carpark, but Ricky Mills seemed not to care. A veteran of 22 scooter runs, five of which had led to him calling out the RAC, he'd seen it all before.

We'd picked up his Mayday call in the bustling, slightly shabby operations room above the RAC's smart shopful of maps and guide books in nearby Watford. "Loose wire to the condensor on a scooter in Stevenage" a controller had called, and patrolman John Whitbread had reached for his map book with the knowing smile he reserves for broken-down scooterists. A few minutes later we were off, John steering through the traffic with a practiced ease that belied the 670lbs weight of his tool-up Norton Wankel.

Half an hour later we were there; 20 minutes' scrabbling on the ground after that John got up to announce that no, he couldn't fix it either and they'd have to send out for a recovery vehicle. Ricky had been right—a wire to the condensor had come loose.

While John picked up his helmet to radio back to base, Ricky reflected on his wisdom in joining the RAC. He'd hardly begun the Bank Holiday run from his west London home to Scarborough on the Yorkshire coast and now he'd probably ask the RAC to take him there instead. "There'll be a bloke selling Lambretta bits at the rally and I'll buy a spare stator plate there. That should get me home all right," he said hopefully.

"Once I broke down a mile from my house and they took me to Margate, where the scooter run was. I got it fixed

there and then broke down on the way home and had to get them out again. They weren't pleased at all but it's a good service, the RAC, and I reckon I've had my money's worth out of it."

In fact Ricky ended up being taken to a local garage, who fixed the loose wire, and he made it to Scarborough and back under his own steam. His weekend had been saved, and you don't need to own a decrepit scooter to make membership of a motorbike breakdown organisation potentially worthwhile. The £20 or £30 annual fee would almost certainly be less than the single cost of calling out a repair vehicle, especially if you'd ended up motionless miles from anywhere or on a motorway in the middle of the night. The big two motoring organisations both have services especially for bikers—the AA's Rider Club and the RAC's Sprint—and most of the others offer motorcyclists the same service, for the same cost, that they do car drivers.

What they all give you is the right to call for free assistance, which should generally arrive within the hour, at any time of night and day. If the patrolman can get you going, he will: most

bike call-outs are for punctures or fairly minor electrical faults, for which you'll be charged only for the parts used for the repair. If you've holed a piston or done something equally terminal you're entitled to be taken home or to wherever in Britain you're headed, even Scarborough. The exception to this is that some organisations—National Breakdown and Europ Assistance, for example, as well as general membership of the AA or RAC—offer a cheaper 'roadside repair only' service. If they can't fix your bike on the spot you get taken to the nearest garage that can, but not home.

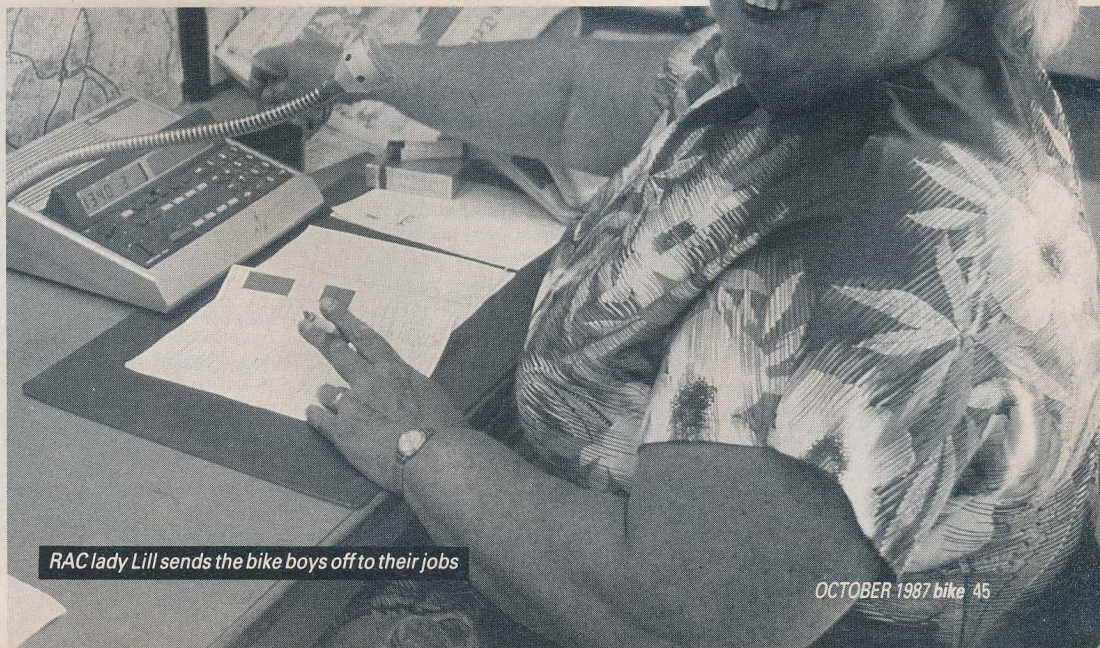
Most of the organisations also offer various supporting packages including schemes to cover you abroad (though these cost extra and can be had without being a member), travel information and technical advice.

AA and RAC membership entitles you to free legal advice concerning motoring offences and also free legal representation if you're hauled up in Court for something other than drinking and driving. The RAC, trying very

John Whitbread plays with his Norton's tools but they couldn't fix Ricky's Lambo (left)

hard, even gives away free BMF membership and a copy of the Fed's *Motorcycle Rider* mag, most useful for wrapping up in to keep warm while waiting for a patrolman to arrive.

Which organisation, if any, is best to join depends on your circumstances but the benefits are certainly attractive if you cover a lot of miles or ride anything Italian, British or more than a few years old (Europ Assistance won't cover anything older than 15 years but most firms aren't fussed). For most motorcyclists the big▶



RAC lady Lill sends the bike boys off to their jobs

two's specialised bike schemes are probably better value – at about £25 each (plus a fiver joining fee unless you take out a direct debit for an annual subscription) they're a few quid cheaper, and the AA and RAC cover a person rather than a machine.

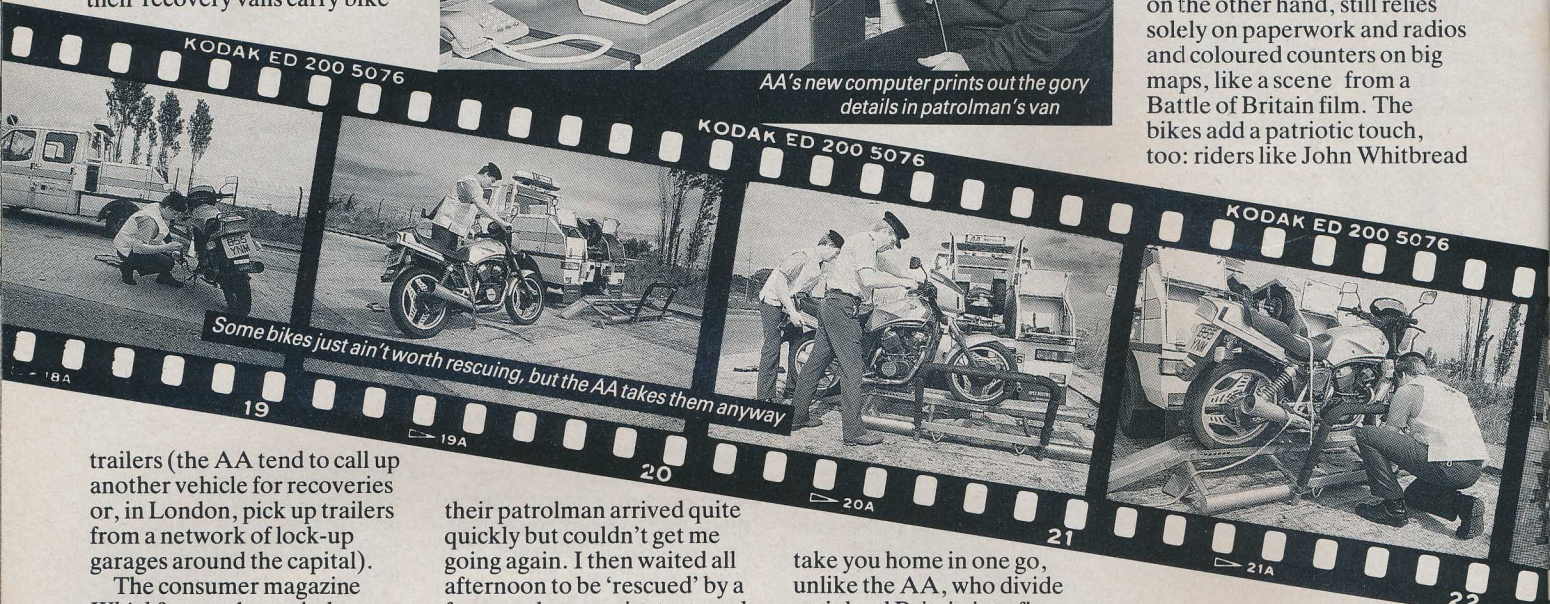
It's perhaps in the RAC's favour, though, that more of their recovery vans carry bike



AA's new computer prints out the gory details in patrolman's van

London was brim-full of computer terminals and they're in the process of introducing a system which transmits all the relevant information about a broken-down vehicle straight from a controller's VDU screen to a printer in the nearest available patrolman's cab.

The RAC's Watford office, on the other hand, still relies solely on paperwork and radios and coloured counters on big maps, like a scene from a Battle of Britain film. The bikes add a patriotic touch, too: riders like John Whitbread



Some bikes just ain't worth rescuing, but the AA takes them anyway

trailers (the AA tend to call up another vehicle for recoveries or, in London, pick up trailers from a network of lock-up garages around the capital).

The consumer magazine *Which?* recently carried out a survey of 10,000 readers in which the RAC came out fractionally ahead on speed of response, with 69 per cent of their patrols arriving within the hour compared to the AA's 63 per cent. Two-thirds of those readers pronounced themselves 'very satisfied' with both services (4 and 3 per cent were very dissatisfied) but most praise was aimed at the smaller Britannia and National Breakdown services – 85 per cent of the Britannia boys arrived within the hour.

That's all a very far cry from my own experience of the RAC's service some years ago when, after I'd picked up a puncture while on the way to a Mallory Park Transatlantic meeting on my Bonneville,

their patrolman arrived quite quickly but couldn't get me going again. I then waited all afternoon to be 'rescued' by a farmer whose ancient car-and-trailer combo proceeded to expire in Dunstable town centre.

In recent years both organisations have put more emphasis on helping motorcyclists, so things should be better now, but old hand Ricky Mills confirmed that all's still not perfect with the network of garages and agents who are subcontracted for many recoveries. "In my experience the RAC themselves are always quick – three-quarters of an hour at the most – but if they can't get you going the agents they call out aren't so good. I waited for four hours on the M6 last year on the way up to Scotland," he said.

At least the RAC always

take you home in one go, unlike the AA, who divide mainland Britain into five regions – Scotland, northern England, Wales and the west, the Midlands, and the south-east – and transfer you to another vehicle if your recovery route enters another zone.

The AA, of course, play down this point and claim that over 80 per cent of recoveries are handled by one trip (most are within one region anyway) and that they'd generally radio ahead and get another recovery vehicle waiting to take over. "We get very few complaints about it," a spokesman assured me earnestly. The AA seem to have the edge in modernisation, at least – their bright operations room at Stanmore in north-west

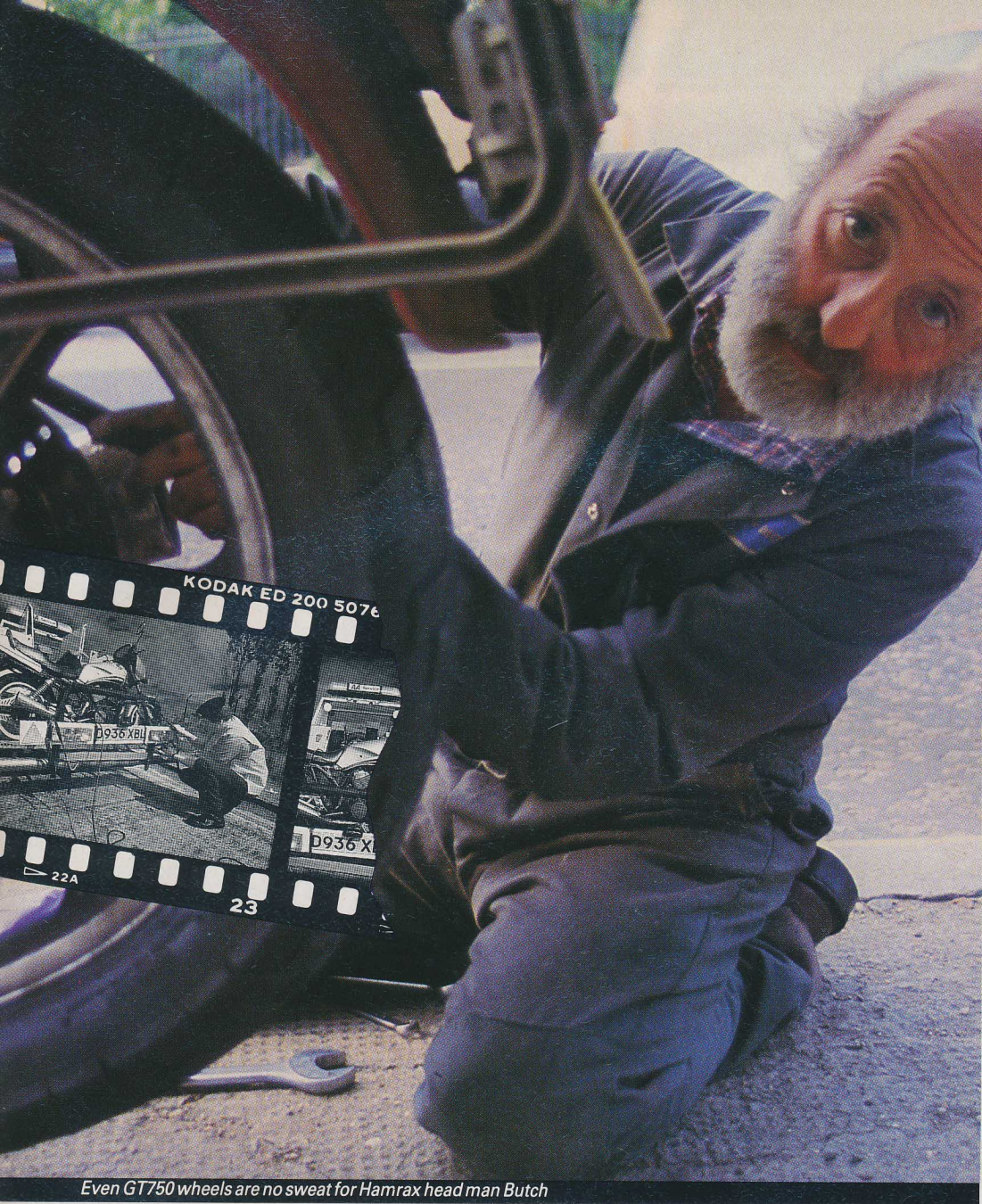
and Tony Fay use Nortons to beat the London traffic as they move from job to job, mending both cars and bikes or sending out for a recovery vehicle if necessary.

"We can fix most of the jobs we're sent to ourselves, normally in ten or 15 minutes," said Tony, a 26-year-old former self-employed mechanic who's been with the RAC since the Watford branch reintroduced bike patrols just over a year ago. (They're about to employ two more riders – ring 0923 33543, extension 300, if the job appeals.) "With bikes, the most common problems are electrical faults and broken clutch cables. Eighty per cent we can fix but the rate for bikes is probably a bit lower than for cars because the electrical problems are harder – when a CDI ignition goes there's nothing you can do to mend it and they're so expensive you can't just pop into a shop and buy a new one. But you get silly things too. One bloke the other day had put a tank-bag on and pulled out a wire from a coil. He was on his way in five minutes – to Sweden, I think."

"You do get some silly ones – sometimes a bloke'll say the engine's blown up and when you get there a plug lead's hanging off," said John, who's 28 and spent several years with the RAC on vans before volunteering for the bike patrol. "A lot of the bikers know all about it, though.

	AA Rider Club PO Box 50, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2ED Tel: 0256 20123	RAC Sprint PO Box 39, RAC House, Lansdown Road, Croydon CR9 4JG Tel: 01-686 2525	National Breakdown Rider Rescue Cleckheaton Road, Low Moor, Bradford BD12 0ND Tel: 0274 671299	Europ Assistance 252 High Street, Croydon, Surrey CR10 1NF Tel: 01-680 1234	Autohome Recovery Club 202-204 Kettering Road, Northampton NN1 4HE Tel: 0604 28730	Britannia Recovery Byram House, 22 Byram Street, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD1 1DY Tel: 0484 514848
Annual cost	£24.25	£26	£21 (roadside assist)	£19.50 (roadside assist)	£32	£31
Joining fee	£5*	£5*	£5*	none	£2*	none
Extra for get-you-home service	included	included	£14	£11.50	included	included
Extra for home repair service	included	included	£9	£8	£8.50	£6.50
Extra for legal assistance	included	included	£2.50 (see below)	not available	not available	included
Cost for second bike	included	included	50 per cent discount	no discount	£20 (rep & recovery)	50 per cent discount
Other services	travel information; technical advice; handbook/guide/badge; roadside phones; bike inspections (extra cost)	travel information; technical advice; free BMF membership; 10 per cent off Kryptonite locks; roadside phones; bike inspections (extra cost)	Total Protection service, including legal aid (but not home repair): £35	24-hour car hire, rail ticket or night's hotel bill to £100 if bike not repairable in one day	travel information; technical advice; bike inspections (some areas only)	technical advice; discount for Civil Service Motoring Association members

* joining fee waived if paying by direct debit



Even GT750 wheels are no sweat for Hamrax head man Butch

They'll say 'I would have fixed it but I don't carry tools'; then they'll want to pitch in and do it themselves."

Problems the patrolmen can't fix range from the catastrophic to the surprisingly simple. "We get a few CXs with timing chains gone . . . or camshafts coming through the radiator, I've had that," said Tony. But the RAC's policy not to touch problems to do with brakes, steering or suspension (they don't want to risk being liable for a subsequent failure) means that the bike patrols can't deal with motorcycle punctures themselves and are therefore rarely sent to the scene of one. Instead an agent is normally despatched immediately, and in London it's often Hamrax of Ladbroke Grove with their ubiquitous blue vans.

The west London British-bike spares specialists have been repairing and recovering broken motorcycles from the

city's streets for 30 years, although it's only since the Rider Club and Sprint services started up (they're agents for both, plus Britannia) that what was a sideline has taken off. Their four vans work solely with bikes and most of their work is provided by the punctures that the AA and RAC won't mend. "We probably get three punctures to every one other job," said 23-year-old Stuart Hopper. "And more if it rains – the rubbish gets carried to the middle of the road where all the bikes go."

Stuart has noticed a distinct pattern to his work. "We get punctures all the time but in the early morning the other stuff's mainly step-thru crashes – car drivers are in a hurry to get to work and just bump into them. After that it's generally despatch riders' CX500s and 250RSs going wrong; we get quite a few old CXs and Super Dreams that have just seized up. The other typical Honda

fault is the ignition switch – it doesn't have a cover so water gets in. And in the winter we get three or four people a week ringing up with an electrical fault that turns out to be the killswitch turned off under a pair of handlebar muffs.

"Kawasaki problems are often the electronic ignitions failing – we can't carry spares because you'd need a furniture van with a trailer for them all. Suzukis are just generally bad, especially the clutches. Round late-afternoon time people start coming out of their offices and finding they've got punctures; then after six o'clock we get the Power Valve boy-racers falling off on their way home. Yamahas are often a problem at night, too – they'll run but they lose their lights."

Some makes are better than others for ease of puncture repair, Hamrax have found, with Honda scoring black marks for such diverse models as Gold Wings, Spacy scooters

and inboard disc-equipped bikes like VT500s and CBX550s, all of which have to be taken back to Ladbroke Grove rather than repaired on the spot. "We've got just about every size of tube, compressed air in the vans and plus fuses and cables, and tyres up to 3.50 by 18 inches," said Butch, the gnomishly silver-bearded director of Hamrax who's been with the firm for 32 years. "We don't carry larger tyres. But we reckon to fix seven or eight out of ten at the roadside."

Certain big Kawasakis are also badly designed for wheel-changing, and when we found 23-year-old despatch rider Phil Cox, pint in hand after puncturing conveniently outside a pub in east London one Friday evening, Butch had already arrived and been forced to remove the nearside silencer before taking out the GT750's rear wheel. "I've been in the AA a month – the company pays – and I'd definitely pay to join myself now if I had to," said Phil. "The only mechanical problem I get is punctures but I seem to get them very regularly. I've had five in that Dunlop Arrowmax alone – it's a good tyre but I keep picking up tin-tacks, and this time a four-inch long screw."

Lurking in the background while Butch replaced Phil's tube with the efficiency of a man who's done the job several thousand times before was Richard Madigan, a New Zealander who'd been knocked off his Laverda RGS1000 earlier in the day and, uncovered by any breakdown policy, had been forced to foot the substantial cost of having Hamrax pick up his smashed bike and take it across London for repair. He hoped to get his money back eventually from the other driver's insurance company but was still kicking himself for not having joined the RAC since arriving in Britain.

"I actually sent off for the form a couple of days ago – it probably arrived in the post today," he fumed, hardly able to believe his bad luck. "I'll be joining next week, as soon as they open."

And the strange thing is that, having faithfully recorded all these words of wisdom, and despite riding bikes virtually every day of the year, I still haven't joined any recovery organisation myself. Well, it'll never happen to me, now will it? ■