

## Memories Are 7Rs

● British collectors and restorers of motorcycling antiquities have one thing in common: they'd accuse me of solecism for failing to apply the formal 'vintage' and 'veteran' terms to the gleaming fruits of their mania.

Collecting is no subject for levity among the indoctrinated. It's a complete way of life: incomprehensible to the non-addicted who are to be tolerated most of the time, encouraged to stand and stare and admire some of the time, and remain uninitiated all of the time. You don't ask collectors why they indulge because you're expected to *know*, though in reality there is no single explicative reason other than the thrill acquired from collecting *anything*.

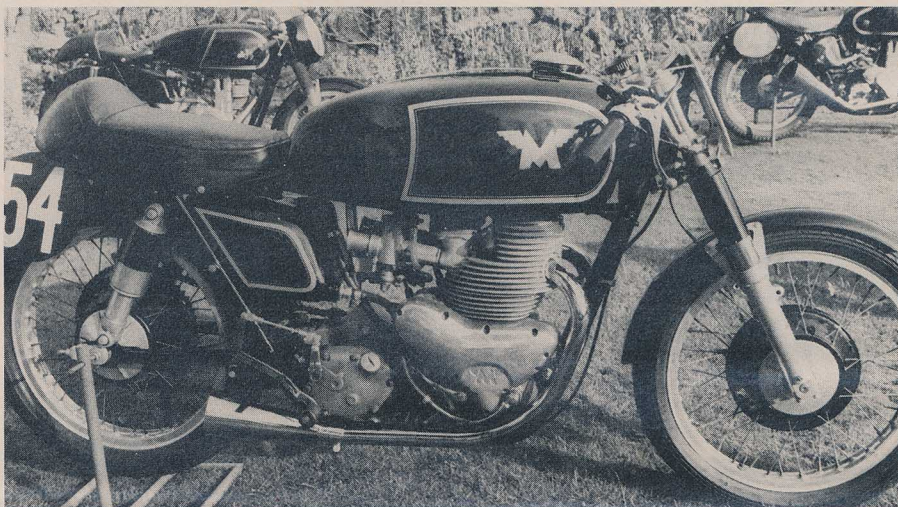
The collector for whom painstaking restoration is 99 percent of the battle stands apart from the "check book" man, who like the legendary art collector may be obsessed by a possessive urge for masterpieces to be admired in privacy. An assiduous character will spend a lifetime poking around old barns and grubbing under hedges in pursuit of something exclusive. Other collectors go for quantity, sometimes at the expense of quality, and there are those devoted to the single-marque conception. A minority will admit to collecting as a hedge against inflation, satisfied that a \$800 Manx Norton of three years ago fetches \$3000 at today's prices. As a generalization, you might say the whole object of collecting is to gain possession of *classic* motorcycles. But there is no consensus of what constitutes a classic.

Few would advance all-time-great claims for the 7R AJS, though it deserves minor-classic status as the foremost production racer of its day, and arguably the originator of the breed. The chain-driven single overhead camshaft 7R is best remembered in mid-Fifties form, when British Bangers meant privateer racing *per se*. A UK-based privateer would part with £450 (about \$1700 at the then-current exchange rate) and in return get an unfaired, ready-to-race, no-nonsense 350. His acquisition embodied no nasty surprises, and did nothing in the extreme. 40/42 bhp pushed the 285-pounder along smoothly and predictably. Usable power at 5000 rpm stretched to the 7800 mark, while off-the-band megaphonitis remained unpronounced. Handling filled the "British Single At Best" bill, and the 8-inch brakes functioned adequately. The four-speed gearbox tolerated a great deal of abuse, and missed shifts rarely led to disastrous consequences. Provided care and attention went into race-preparation essen-

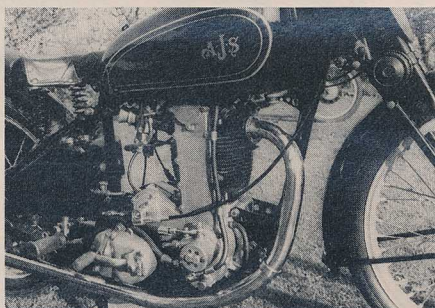
tials, you could finish with the same lot of components that started the season. The Ajay was everyman's racer: newcomer, intermediate, ace. A novice could over-reach his talents and be saved by the 7R's forgiving nature. An aspiring ace, searching for the limits of handling, would fit longer rear shocks to prevent engine mounting bolts from being graunched away. The superstars appeared to extract the ultimate performance; the startling angles of lean, instantaneous maneuverability, and the fluidity of six aces in close combat made racing look faster than it actually was.

the performance of a succession of bikes. Nobody enthused madly over the frame design, but its sheer practicality convinced most AJ-ites to leave well enough alone. On the other hand, when somebody discovered that a large shrunk-on aluminum disc helped prevent front brake drum distortion, it quickly became a mandatory extra.

After production ceased in 1962, 7Rs raced on and on, disputing supremacy with their old Manx Norton adversaries, and with the newer Italian Aermacchi horizontal cylinder jobs. Then the advent of 251cc Yamahas banished all four-stroke singles.



The G-45, a production racer based on the 500cc vertical-twin roadster engine, was built 1952-58.



The 1937 7R: cam chain and oil pump lived on the right side; BTH magneto hid behind the cylinder.

Unlike the Manx Norton, the 7R never engendered a tuner's mystique. You bought your racer and discovered you had an average engine, or one better than most. If average, you didn't rush out and buy a load of hotting-up specialties because they weren't to be had, though a few ex-factory cylinderheads went the rounds, upgrading

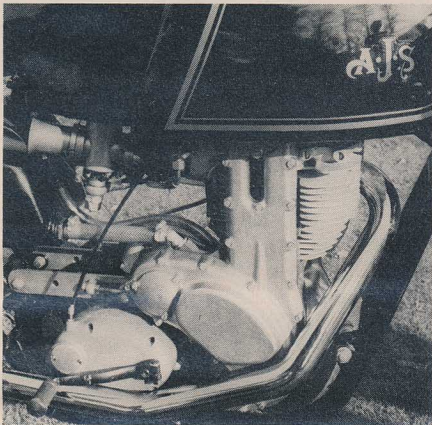
The first 7Rs appeared in 1937, listed at £87 as genuine track-tested and certified replicas of the "works" Isle of Man TT machines. They had alloy heads and barrels, exposed hairpin valve springs, BTH racing magnetos, and four-speed gearboxes. Turning at 7200 rpm, the Ajays produced 27 bhp and maximum speeds of around 100 mph. Factory handouts described the frame as "advanced duplex pattern," which meant that the engine and gearbox sat between hefty steel plates. The AJS camshaft-drive tunnel—barely altered in appearance since 1927—was there for everyone to see. But not heard in those days was the "production racer" term; the omission from contemporary phraseology being fortunate, as only 25 7Rs left the line prior to WWII.

In 1948, the 7R reappeared in greatly revised form. The updated power plant employed magnesium alloy for the crankcases, cam box and timing side covers, and

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all the valve gear had gone into hiding. Front forks and rear shocks were also decently covered with steel shrouds; and this being the pre-clip-on era, the long Teledraulic forks were surmounted by flat bars. The exhaust pipe culminated in a monster megaphone, held responsible for erratic behavior in the "five-five" region. But if the model had one chronic shortcoming it was the AMC rear suspension units, guaranteed to lose all semblance of damping within the first few miles. Running on the lousy low octane fuel found in post-war Europe, the 74mm x 81mm "long stroke" boasted a modest 8.5 to 1 compression ratio, spun to 7000 rpm, developed 30 bhp, and exceeded 100 mph in the most favorable of all circumstances.

Over the 14 years that followed, minor and major facelifts and numerous internal modifications transformed the 7R without diminishing the basic production-racer appeal. Front forks lost a couple of inches in length, and gained clip-ons. AMC "jam pot" shock absorbers arrived and departed, unmourned, giving way to Girlings. A new frame was introduced, and road wheels reduced in diameter to 19 inches from the old-time 21s. Virtually every engine component from valve rockers to crankshaft received attention until the 7R in its final guise



went to a near-square 75.5mm x 78mm, boomed out some 42 bhp at 7800 rpm, ran on a 12.2 to 1 compression ratio, and topped 120 mph at full tilt.

The 21-cubic-inch displacement ruled against a westward export flow to American shores, so the majority of 7Rs finished in British and European hands. Those that didn't remain in Europe generally landed in Australia and New Zealand, where they led double lives as road racers and grass trackers. More unlikely still, an overbored 7R powered Bill Nilsson's special to the 1957 European Motocross title. And back on the road racing front, a complex three-valve, triple overhead camshaft 7R3 won the Junior (350cc) loM TT in 1954.

Altogether some 700 7Rs were produced, of which 70 or so currently survive in varying states of repair. From these, at least seven will be found at the Ibstock (Leicestershire) home of 36-year-old George Beale.

Chemist Beale ("I'm a motorcycle maniac with a chemist's business") makes no mystery of his collecting motives. As a boy, he

was photographed alongside a famous rider's 7R in the loM, and vowed to race AJSs himself. For various reasons (including the usual shortage of funds) the ambition was not realized. But later on, when given the opportunity of buying a tatty-looking 7R, he hit on the notion of collecting and restoring the make he admired so much. He quickly brushed aside the temptation of becoming a museum owner, displaying stationary AJS untouchables. Instead, his bikes would be working examples of AJS's golden years, and all the time the parts situation allowed, real racing machines.

Beale's permanent collection includes 7R Ajs of 1937, 1948 and 1962 vintage, all three restored to immaculate condition. He hopes one day to add a "triple-knocker," but concedes that his chances are minimal. Of the 2½ known to exist, two are safely cosseted in museums in London and Leicester. The one-half triple-knocker is Beale's own property, but unfortunately in no condition for him to contemplate a re-build.

Competitive outings for the 1948 bike take in anything up to ten Vintage meetings through the season, where it regularly tangles with Triumph twins. As for the '37 device, rarity value (it is the only known example) constrains its activities to racing parades. The 1962 model, too young for the Vintage class and too out-classed for short-circuit scratching, gets an annual outing in the loM Manx Grand Prix, opening the floodgates of nostalgia and giving the rider an uneventful 88 mph trip into the top thirty finishers.

Beale has recently added an early G45 Matchless to his Vintage Racing stable, reasoning that since Associated Motor Cycles intended the twin to complement the 7R, the Matchless is really an AJS at heart. Introduced in 1952 and fitted into an unaltered 7R frame, the G45 racing engine made free use of pieces from the twin-cylinder range of Matchless/AJS road goers. Unhappily, the street-to-track transformation was tackled in desultory manner. The G45 possessed an unhealthy tendency for losing fire on one pot when cornering. Worse still, cranks and rods contrived to batter their way free of crankcase confines. Hardly surprisingly, G45s disappeared from the racing scene, leaving unfond memories behind.

But not everybody sees it that way. For collectors, restorers and preservationists, memories are the life and soul of motorcycling. Hence, the G45 has been saved.

Outside the racing environment, the 7R stands as an encapsulated history of the British motorcycle industry's preoccupation with a single design concept: the cammy banger. The 7R lineage reaches back to 1927 when A.J. Stevens produced a 350cc overhead camshaft racer in Wolverhampton. In keeping with the times, it had chain primary drive, separate gearbox, magneto ignition, and vertically split crankcases, of course. Thirty-five years later, the last 7R rolled from the Associated Motor Cycles Plumstead plant, with the same basic specification. It was finally killed off, condemned as being out-dated and uneconomical to produce. It was replaced by nothing better. Because it was replaced by . . . nothing.

—Jim Greening

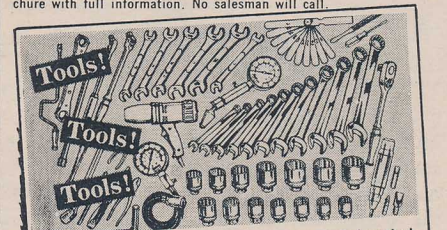


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