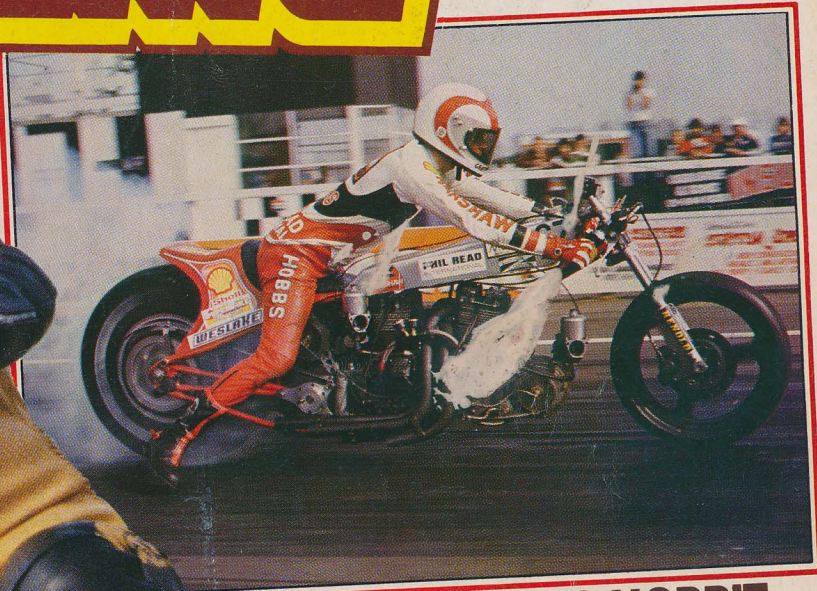


MOTOR CYCLING

MARCH 1980 60p

SPECIAL FEATURE
Pass your riding test first time



HOBBS ON HIS HOBBIT
Colour Poster and interview



ROAD & TRAIL
Kawasaki Z500 Marathon
Suzuki TS100 Trail Bike

WORKSHOP
Honda Trail Bikes Superserviced
Decoking a stroker by stages

MOTOR CYCLING

March 1980 No.53

WESTOVER HOUSE, WEST QUAY ROAD, POOLE, DORSET BH15 1JG. Tel: POOLE (02013) 71191

Editor: Charles Deane

Assistant Editor: Bob Goddard

Art Editor: Arthur Saluz; **Assistant Art Editor:** Cole Schnaar; **Senior Artist:** Steve Downton

Feature Writers: Geoff Carless; Neil Millen; Merril Boulton

Editorial Secretary: Audrey Gerrard

Advertisement Manager: Keith Price (01-261 6731)

Classified ad. dept.: Room 2337, Kings Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London SE1 9LS (01-261 5762)

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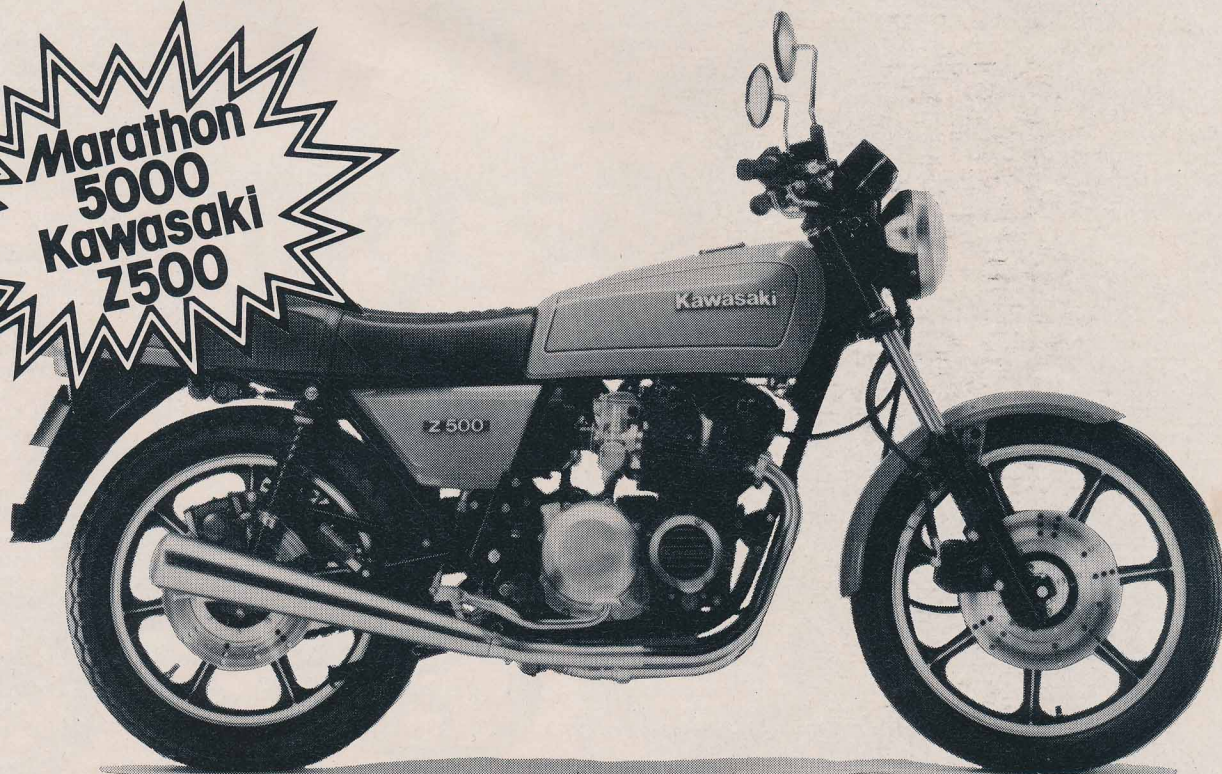
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Marathon
5000
Kawasaki
Z500





8 sec. Drag

... and aiming for seven! John Hobbs launches himself into a new career of sponsor and tuner.

BESPECTACLED, blond-haired, mild-mannered John Hobbs is the kind of guy you would expect to see taking the kiddies for a walk in the park on Sunday afternoons. But most weekends, this 32-year-old father of two is amongst the heady nitro-methane fumes and screams of tortured engines at the Santa Pod dragstrip.

Until he retired from riding at the end of last season, John was mostly seen as a leather-clad blurr being shot up the quarter mile by a 400bhp, fully blown, nitro-gobbling, double-engined missile called the Hobbit.

Now, after 13 years of sprinting and drag racing highly competitive, home-built motorcycles, culminating in the 8.07 second standing quarter mile, 1700cc, Weslake-powered Hobbit, John has decided to hang up his leathers. But far from retiring from the sport, which has absorbed all of his spare time, spare cash and professional engineering skills, John has re-doubled his efforts to crack the seven-second barrier by forming the John Hobbs Racing Team, a four-man operation dedicated to ever-quicker acceleration.

So what is the special attraction of 440 yards of rubber-scarred tarmac? What secret potion turns Dr Jeckell's like gas sales manager John Hobbs into the Mr Hydes who pilot fire-breathing missiles just for the hell of it?

In 1978, an average season in the drag racing life of John Hobbs, £4000 was spent on running the Hobbit... for just 14 minutes 10 seconds on the strip. That means a cost of £5 for every second spent racing! And if the expenditure to riding time ratio seems absurd, it doesn't even compare with the hundreds of hours spent in the workshop scaled against time on the bike.

Tiny fraction

John reckons his riding constitutes a tiny fraction of one percent of the total time spent involved in his chosen hobby.

Ironically, the very aim of the sport is to reduce still further the few mind-blowing moments that take the machine and rider from 0 to 180mph. And the quicker the bikes get and more competitive the sport becomes, the more money, time and effort need to be poured in to remain competitive and shave off each extra fraction of a second.

And yet speed and time are somewhat coincidental to success... The fastest bike is not necessarily the best in drag racing and, surprisingly, it is not always the rider with the quickest elapsed time who wins the race.

The winner in this knockout tournament is the rider who never gets beaten to the light at the top end of the strip and a rapid getaway can sometimes make up for a slower time.

Each rider's personal clock is triggered by his front wheel leaving the start line, so a late starter may put in a quicker time than his opponent, yet not catch him up.

Each race, a straight one-to-one duel between machines of roughly equal capabilities, is started by the rider getting a green light at the end of a series of signals from the 'Christmas Tree'. As its name implies, this starting device consists of a row of coloured lights vertically mounted on a central pole. The lamps flicker on in sequence, whilst the riders wind up their motors for take-off. If the bike's front wheel triggers the clocks before the green light, the rider gets a 'Cherry' or red light and is disqualified. But a split second's hesitation spells failure because the competition is so hot.

The launch

John Hobbs has developed a system which enables him to launch before the greenlight and yet trigger the start beam fractionally after it. He explains:

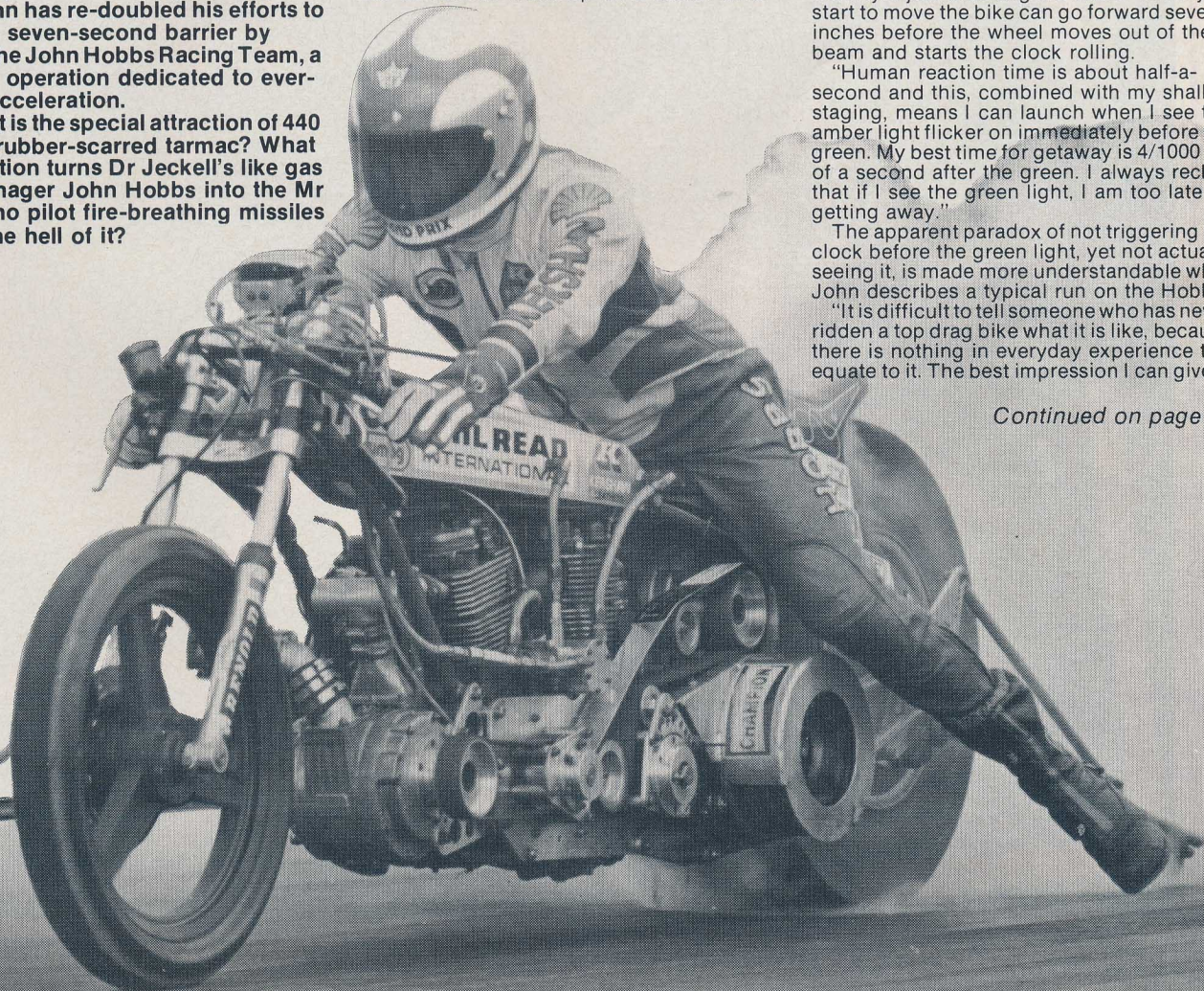
"The start light beam passes very low, about an inch from the ground, and starts the clock when it rejoins after the front wheel has passed. Consequently, the best plan is to stage, that means get set for starting with the front tyre just breaking the beam. When you start to move the bike can go forward several inches before the wheel moves out of the beam and starts the clock rolling.

"Human reaction time is about half-a-second and this, combined with my shallow staging, means I can launch when I see the amber light flicker on immediately before the green. My best time for getaway is 4/1000ths of a second after the green. I always reckon that if I see the green light, I am too late in getting away."

The apparent paradox of not triggering the clock before the green light, yet not actually seeing it, is made more understandable when John describes a typical run on the Hobbit.

"It is difficult to tell someone who has never ridden a top drag bike what it is like, because there is nothing in everyday experience to equate to it. The best impression I can give is

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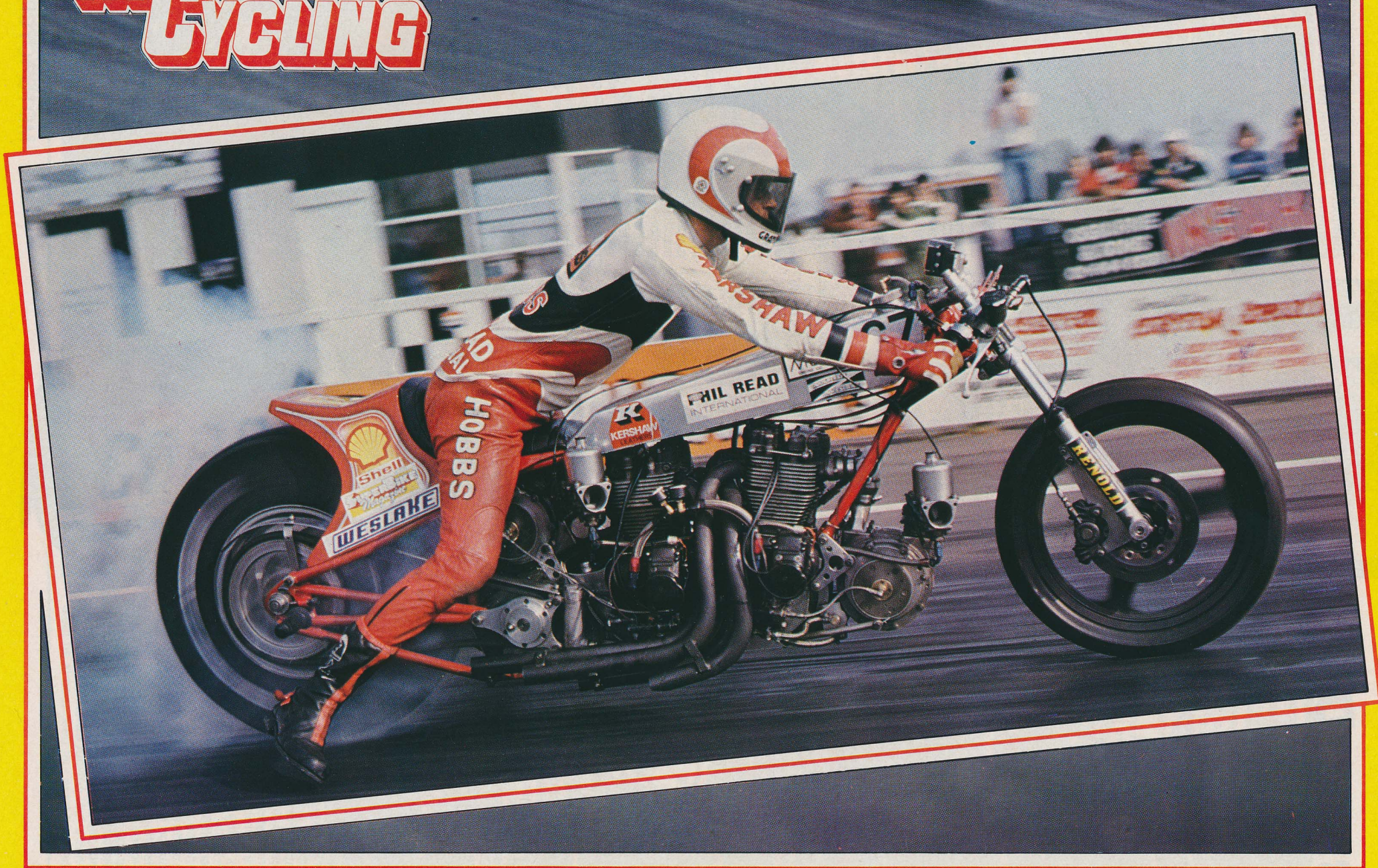
JOHN HOBBBS

on the Hobbit



MOTOR

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8 sec. Drag

that the difference between a standing quarter on a Z1300 Kawasaki and the Hobbit is about the same as the difference between a BSA Bantam and a Z1300.

"After firing up the engine, I roll towards the start slowly, then stop about 20 yards short prior to a rolling burn out to get the rear tyre sticky. To do this, my helper will put a little water immediately in front of the back wheel, I roll forward on to the water and spin the wheel to wet the tyre.

"Next my helper will examine the start line and indicate to me where he thinks the best grip will be. I roll towards this point and when about 10 yards from the start, crack open the throttle. The rear wheel spins wildly and the bike shoots forward in a cloud of smoke. I stop immediately, although I have probably gone 10 yards past the start. Helpers then push me back to the start again.

"As well as melting the rear tyre to give traction, I have also laid down a layer of rubber on the start line and I make sure I'm wheeled back on to this to keep the tyre clean. Then a traction compound, something like Evo-Stick, is put in front of the tyre and I spin the wheel just a couple of turns in this to spread it evenly over the tyre.

"Finally, the bike is manoeuvred to the exact position on the start line. This procedure may seem elaborate, but it is essential. In a few seconds time, you are going to unleash 400bhp and the rear wheel must not spin or you'll lose vital drive and most probably lose the race in the process.

"Now, in the last few moments, while my opponent stages, the Hobbit's engine is ticking over and sounds deceptively docile, although at the back of my mind I am conscious of the danger potential of what I am about to do and the power of the bike I am lying on top of.

Hurt your ears

"There's little time for thought though, because the starting sequence has begun and I start to increase the revs, holding the bike on the brakes as the automatic clutch begins to bite. The noise is tremendous now. If you were near the bike, it would certainly be hurting your ears. Suddenly the amber light flicks on and I drop both brakes in the same instant that I whack the throttle fully open.

"What happens next I'm not really too sure of. You don't black out, as some people have suggested, but you are not really aware of the first 20 yards or so. The acceleration is so severe it is numbing. One second you are sitting on the line with everything screwed up waiting to go and the next you are changing gear at about 100mph. The only real sensation you are aware of is a thump up the backside like being kicked by a bull elephant.

"I change gear on Hobbit by thumping a button on the left handlebar. You don't de-clutch or shut off and the effect is another hefty wallop up the rear. Time taken so far is 2½ seconds, speed about 100mph.

"At 5½ seconds, it is time to change into top by jabbing a second button. Speed now is 145mph. From here on the ride is quite leisurely, but there is only another 2½ seconds before it is all over and you're faced with the problem of stopping.

"By far the majority of spills occur after the finish lights. Current British drag bike record holder Jeff Byne had perhaps the most fearful experience when his throttles stuck wide open at the end of the strip. He flicked the cut-out button but the bike continued accelerating — pre-ignition is prevalent on nitro-burning engines. He grabbed the front brake and the front wheel turned into a threepenny bit, so he jumped off at 150mph. He escaped with bruising, but now every drag bike has a fuel cut-out switch fitted.

"The run I have just described is an ideal



one, when the rear wheel hooks up (doesn't spin) and the bike runs straight and true over the quarter. But in reality, this only happens one in ten runs. Mostly the bike will need a lot of riding to persuade it to go where you want it. The front wheel is so light for the first half of the run, that there is no effective steering and the rider must control the bike by moving his body weight and steer to some extent by utilising wind resistance.

"All sorts of strange things can happen. The rear tyre, which gets folded up by the torque of the engine, can produce weaving by collapsing more on one side than the other. Or it may cause the bike to hop down the track by winding up then releasing in rapid succession.

"One common problem is wheelies. We all have wheelie bars at the back to prevent the bike flipping over, but often the machine will travel the first half of the strip without the front wheel touching the tarmac once. When it does, the bike is doing over 100mph and the wheel is stationary. Like the wheels of landing aircraft it skids and smokes until it has accelerated up to the bike's speed."

John wasn't troubled with wheelies on his first sprint bike, his 125cc Bantam-engined Maserati road bike, when he started in the sport in 1966. But he soon yearned for more power and built a 500 Triumph sprinter.

"I cut my teeth on this bike. It was a complete disaster and rarely got down the quarter mile without something going wrong."

For 1967 the ageing Trumpet (a 1954 model) was rebuilt into a more successful formula, achieving 11.9 seconds on straight methonal and a GP rear tyre that year. With a

supercharger fitted for '68, John put his name on the UK drag race map by becoming British champion and stealing the standing start kilometre record from the Gilera factory, which had held it for the previous 11 years.

Over the next three years, the Triumph was developed further, finally cracking the nine-second barrier in '71, the first under-750cc bike to do so. For '72 John decided to put two supercharger 500cc Triumph engines into one bike and, three months later, reached a terminal speed of 160mph at the end of a quarter mile. Later that year, he broke the standing start kilo record with a 17.8 second run and decided to up the engines' capacities to 750cc for 1973.

But '73 was not a good year for John. The extra power outstripped the transmission's strength, but by 1974 the problem had been solved sufficiently for John to run a 9.16 second quarter.

Sponsorship

Then in '75, John got a big break when he received sponsorship from Motor Cycle Weekly, our sister publication and from Westlake; the factory supplying engines for the new machine — the Hobbit.

MCW helped by getting the transmission, a Crowderglide slipper clutch and two-speed Lenco automatic gearbox from the States. Running on a nitro methane — methanol mix, the new machine put out nearly 300bhp and ran 8.4 seconds in its first year. With subsequent development, the machine's power has risen to 400bhp and times dropped to 8.07 seconds with a terminal speed 176mph.

The current three-speed gearbox is epicyclic, which means gears can be swapped under full power without declutching and it is operated by hydraulics triggered by two buttons on the handlebars.

The two 850cc motors are fed their volatile diet via two Shorlocks 1400cc superchargers, which deliver 20lbs of boost. The two, two-inch SU carbs are fed directly from a fuel pump which injects the juice at 50psi. The machine uses about three-quarters-of-a-gallon of fuel on each quarter mile. Cost of this alone is £10 a go!

If all this sounds exciting, why not make your way to one of the meetings at the Pod this year to see the phenomenal Hobbit in action for yourself? Rider this year will be Chris Stevens, ably helped, encouraged and advised by John Hobbs, Chris Tee and Ray Baskerville.

Bob Goddard

