

# 'DEDICATION'

Old Harleys, like the EL Knucklehead, are rare enough in the States, let alone over here. But don't tell John Burgess. This is his story —



BACK at the turn of the century I was running a chopped Norton 500. For the period it wasn't a half bad custom, which I guess means it wasn't so hot by today's standards, but we covered a lot of miles together, so I wasn't grumblin'. Then, about the beginning of the summer of '73, I heard that a guy named Shane Kenneally was selling his really clean Harley 45. I had seen the bike at the Crystal Palace Custom Show and it was later featured in Custom Car. It had a raked frame with extended springers, Sportster tank, drag pipes and a four-speed Triumph box. Outasight!

Trouble was, I wasn't the only person

with the Harley bug and by the time I got to Shane, he'd sold the bike a hundred times over. Well, he musta felt sorry for me or somethin' because he offered to build me a replica and come the beginning of '74, I was riding my very own Harley wheels.

What do they say? Pride comes... would you believe one of the front brake shoes came adrift inside the drum and locked the wheel up solid; dumped me on my butt and put a nasty kink in the bike's front end. My only consolation was that I had insurance to cover the cost of repairs and that the two guys who finally got the job — Ray Leon and John Wallace — were as dedicated to ol'

Harley Davis as me. Finally? Yeh, well you try persuading an insurance company a bike made back in 1943 is worth maybe five, six hundred quid.

Leon-Wallace Customs, down on Putney Bridge Road, was a regular meeting place for chopper riders from all over in those days and after my bike had been rebuilt and given a fresh lick o' paint, I used to get over there pretty regularly and made good friends outa Ray and John. We'd talk about what was goin' down and what new bikes were being built and some time or other I came around to thinkin' that the only thing I'd ever replace my 45 with would be a fat-



bobbed Harley Knucklehead, H-Ds first big inch overhead valver and still a firm favourite with many bikers on the other side of the pond.

It was just a daydream then and I didn't know if I'd ever manage to get hold of one, but I put the word about all the same and late in July, Ray heard of an old man over in Clapton (East London) who had a Knucklehead combo up for sale. I gave the bloke a ring but — yeh, you've guessed — the bike was already sold; all he had left was a spare engine.

These days, I'd jump at an offer like that, but knowing that I'd missed the complete bike kinda knocked me flat for a while, so I said I wasn't interested.

#### EARLY AUGUST 1974

So I changed my mind, I'm over to Clapton in a blindin' flash, take one look at the engine and it's mine for £70. It turns out that the old bloke has been a biker all his life and is a diehard Harley buff no less. Trouble was, he wanted to get a new place and as the rip-off building societies wouldn't give him a loan, he was having to sell off all his stuff including the Knuckle and three 45s — how to bleed a man dry.

Anyhow, Project Knucklehead was under way and with the engine safely stashed at the bottom of my wardrobe — don't laugh, the oil stains are still there to prove it — I set about huntin' down the rest of the bike. I picked up a genuine diamond primary chaincase and a back wheel complete with 5.00 x 16 Avon tyre and tube, courtesy the spare parts grapevine. Then a bunch of us got together for a run to the BMF Rally.

#### OCTOBER 1975

Good news and bad. Keith had got a taste for the American Way and with the offer of a place to stay he shut up shop in good ol' England and headed for New Jersey. We all missed him down at the pub — like every time it was his round!

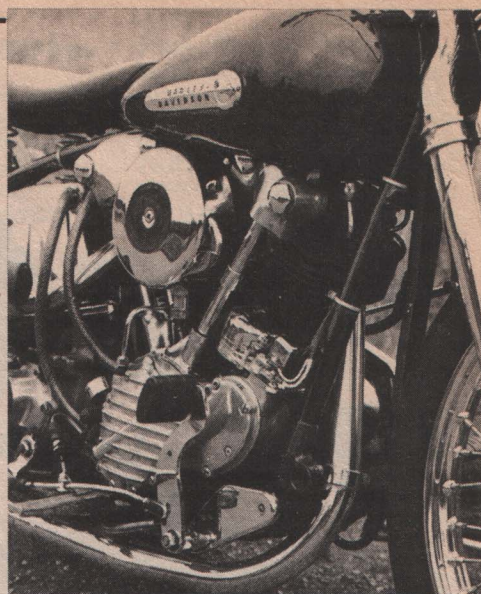
On the bright side, I now had a dependable source of secondhand parts and during the next few months Keith was able to send me many items which would be almost impossible to find such as the kick stand, the old, wide-style Bates seat and the rubber mount dog-bone risers.

#### SUMMER 1976

Ta-da, my first trip to the States. Keith had met up with a bunch of New Jersey bikers and one night, whilst down at their garage, I spotted something interesting in the dust bin. After a quick rummage I pulled out a pair of bent Duo-Glide handlebars. Not a lot of use, I guess, but the throttle cable was good!

Those guys must've been thinking we're really desperate for Harley parts in England if we have to search their trash cans for them. I don't suppose they'd have been far wrong, either.

During my month's stay in NJ, Keith and I did the rounds of every Harley and chopper shop we could find. Looking back, the whole episode was like an incredible dream, but there was one place in particular I don't think I'll ever forget — Ted's Cycle Shed in Newburgh, up-state New York. It was like a Harley graveyard



I rubbed my fingers raw cleaning up that frame and then, together with the tank and rear mudguard, I shot it over with a thick coat of Midnight Blue cellulose. The engine came out of hiding and I tore it down to discover two neat score lines down the bore of the rear cylinder. Evidently the gudgeon pin had come adrift at some stage, but fortunately the damage was nothing a rebore couldn't cure.

The bottom end seemed good enough to be left alone, so the lump was re-assembled and dropped into the frame which, in the meantime and thanks to a set of stock springers from Dave Williams, had now become a rolling chassis.

Pause for a break and to sort out the final details like bending-up the sissy bar and finding a suitable exhaust system. I'd already bought a couple of header pipes from Jammer as part of the original consignment. What was needed now were some upsweeps and a pair of fishtails. Another good bro, Gary Drake, came to the rescue with some old 45 exhausts and I was ready to fire the Knuck up for the very first time.

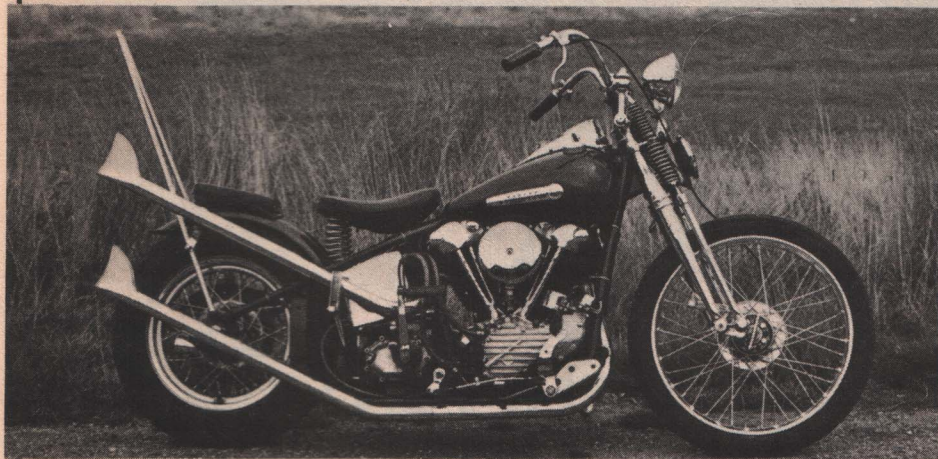
#### AUGUST 1977

Yeh, a whole eight months into the new year and I was finally filling-in all the paperwork to get my Knuck registered. It caused quite a stir when I trucked it down to a local scooter shop for a general safety check. Well, you have to admit it ain't every day you see a great big, beautiful, blue an' chrome fatbob sittin' at the curb, and the bloke from the shop had to fight his way through a small crowd to take a dab at the footbrake, bounce on the saddle and roll his eyes heavenwards as he signed the DoT form.

With that little lot safely in the post, I made my second visit to Keith and the New Jersey bikers, although this time I managed to stop myself going through *every* dustbin I happened to pass. I stayed with one of the guys I'd met the previous year, Al aka Fuji, an ex-member of the Breed MC, one of the heavier outlaw clubs on the East Coast.

No sweat, Al is one of the nicest guys I've met; he and his wife fed and housed me for all of my month's stay and when I was leaving they wouldn't take a cent for it. There were only a few little things I needed now — bulbs and glasses for the dash warning lights and a running light for the rear end — so I was able to relax more, enjoy riding Bob's Sporty and generally have a good time. But, I guess in the back of my mind I was secretly looking forward to getting home and riding that Harley of my own.

as told to Phil Mather



#### MAY 1975

The BMF reckons to be the happy, smiling face of British motorcycling, but at least one guy floggin' old bike stuff in the flea market hadn't got the message. I dug out an unused, ribbed rear mudguard and was just about to hand over the bread when I let slip that I was building a chop.

Presto! The instant disappearing mud-guard routine. The jerk flatly refused to sell it to me, but with a little help from a short-haired buddy who has a good line in 'I'm restorin' this classic British mo'cycle to *absolutely* original condition and bla bla bla' patter, it was soon back on my list of goodies.

It was pretty obvious that sooner or later I was going to have to lay out some big money to really get the ball rolling, so just before Easter '75, my good bro Keith and I robbed a bank and mailed an order for over \$300 worth of parts to Jammer Cycle Products (D&D Distributors as was), Keith for his 45 and me for the Knuck.

Within three weeks of sending the cash — via the Bank of America in 'Frisco — the stuff was with us. So what's this I hear about a spares problem with older machinery?

with flathead 80s, VLs, JDs, Panheads, Knuckles and Servicers everywhere, most of them just rotting away. If only I'd had the money to hire a Jumbo jet.

I made a good friend of a guy named Bob and before I left for home, he gave me an oil tank and an old stock hooter. By now my collection of parts was really coming together — that and my understanding of the brotherhood shared by the American bikers. When I was lucky enough to visit the States the following year, Bob lent me his Sportster just so's I could get around.

From the time I touched down in London, right the way through the winter of '76, every spare minute of the day was spent knocking the bike into shape. Just before I'd left for the US, the grapevine had scored one of my greatest successes, thanks to Ray Leon. Ray had mentioned to a friend, Dave Williams, that I was interested in any Knuckle parts I could lay my hands on and Dave 'phoned me with the news that he had a frame and gearbox for sale.

By now I wasn't in the habit of thinking twice. I bought them for £100. Dave turned out to be a really great guy and from then on he was a constant source of help and advice, not to mention difficult to find parts, for which I am eternally grateful.