



THE INSIDE STORY OF MOTOR CYCLING

On Two Wheels

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On Two Wheels

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NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

Touring – *Bruce Preston*. For most motor cyclists there is little to equal the joy of a sunny day, a clear road and a fully fuelled machine. Touring can be tremendous fun, but a long trip, if not properly planned and organised, can turn into a nightmare. Next week we look at some of the things you need to bear in mind when planning a trip. All it needs is a little knowledge and thought and the world, literally, can be your playground. Bruce Preston, himself a vastly experienced tourer, passes on some of the more vital tips gained over years of practice.

Tourist Trophy – *L.J.K. Setright*. There is no other place like the Isle of Man, nor is there any other race like the Tourist Trophy. Like it or loathe it, the TT has been the single most important sporting event in the history of motor cycle competition. Many have tried to kill the TT over the years, but none has succeeded. The TT has become the race that refused to die.

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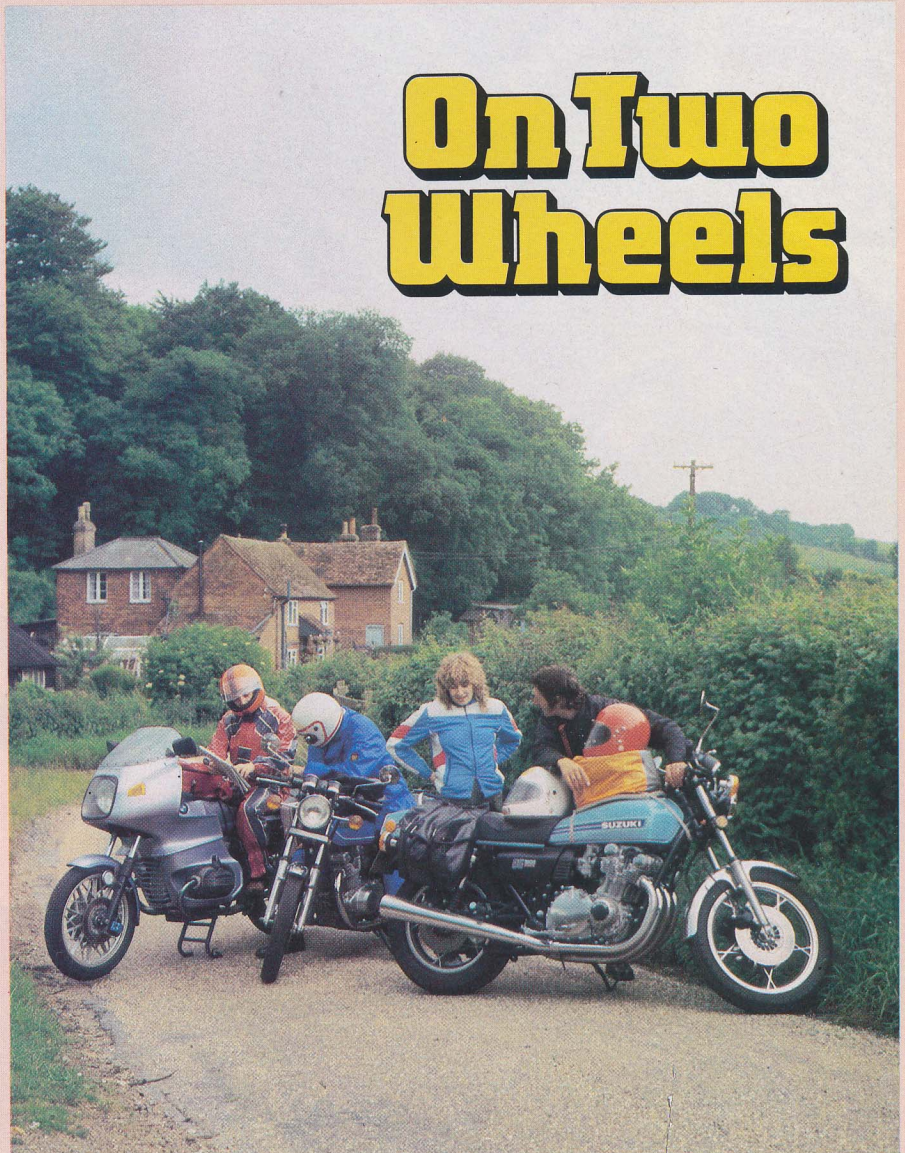
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A Chequered Career



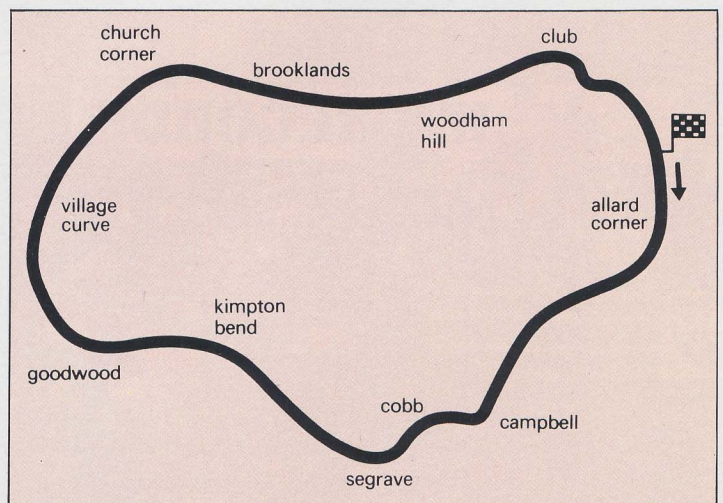
Thruxton circuit, some five miles west of Andover, Hampshire, is nowadays the home of the British Automobile Racing Club and regularly hosts major meetings for the four-wheeled brigade. Its rise from wartime aerodrome to international racing circuit, however, owes much to motor cycle sport and to the Southampton and District Motor Cycle Club in particular. The mainstay of Thruxton's two-wheeled calendar for many years has been the Club's 500-mile Grand Prix d'Endurance which became a round of the FIM's Coupe d'Endurance championship. The race has always been the highlight of a calendar which includes a variety of races from club to national level each season.

During World War II, Thruxton was a hard-worked base for both the Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force, a satellite of nearby RAF Andover, officially opened in May 1941. It was used by fighters, bombers and troop carrying gliders during the hostilities but was gradually allowed to run down towards the end of the war, finally becoming inactive after the war in 1946.

The Southampton and District Motor Cycle Club had been formed two years earlier, in 1944, from the remnants of a Home Guard Motor Cycle Platoon. From its inception, the Club had sporting inclinations but was without a permanent venue. During 1949, one Squadron Leader Doran Webb from the Wiltshire School of Flying – which was based at Thruxton – wrote to the Southampton Club to draw their attention to the possibilities of the airfield as a circuit for sporting events. As well as the three main runways, the facilities at Thruxton included a perimeter track which, unlike those at most airfields, followed a curved path. It was on this perimeter track, originally narrow and bumpy, that the racing circuit came to be based, although at various stages in the track's history several

Above: Charlie Williams (5) hurls his Honda endurance racer through the Chicane during the 1977 Thruxton 500 event. The pace of the race has already taken its toll and rider number fourteen, Roger Nicholls, pushes his machine back to the pits

Below: a diagram of the 2.356 mile Thruxton circuit



layouts using combinations of the perimeter and runways have been used.

In the autumn of 1949, acting on Squadron Leader Webb's lead, Neville Goss of S&DMCC set up the organisation which promoted the first motor cycle race meeting at the circuit, on Easter Monday 1950. The original layout, shown to the Press

Thruxton / THE TRACKS

on 1 January 1950, was of 1.89 miles and used two of the runways and part of the perimeter. Squadron Leader Webb had suggested at the time that the circuit should be available for racing on for about four days a year and, in fact, the S&D MCC went on to hold a total of three national meetings in that first year. On August Bank Holiday Monday 1951 came the first step towards international prominence when an ACU British Championship round was held at the circuit. Thruxton was to host such a round until 1958, after which the 500-Miler became the major event of the year. National meetings were held on Easter Monday every year between 1951 and 1965 and even in the early years, when the circuit was marked out with straw bales and oil drums, and spectators were kept at bay by rope fences, attendances were as high as ten to fifteen thousand.

As well as its use for racing, Thruxton was also being used regularly for testing; on production of a letter of introduction from the S&DMCC, the Wiltshire School of Flying was happy to allow members to use the track and it was common for six or more bikes to be there on three or four days of every week.

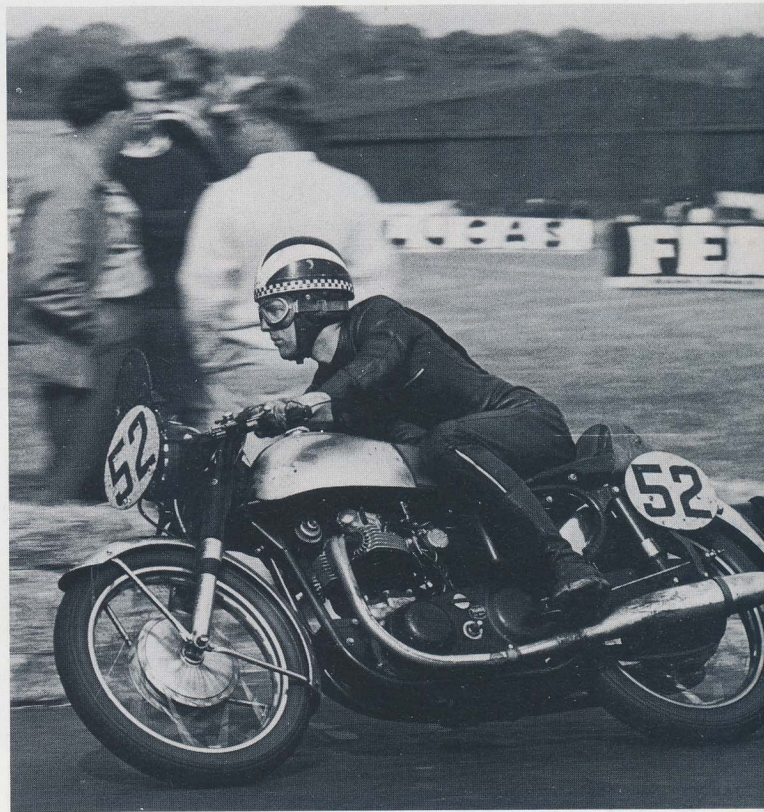
It was in 1955 that the idea of an endurance race was first tried and the inaugural nine-hour event was won by Eddie Dow and Eddie Crooks at an average speed of 67.7mph on Dow's 499 BSA. The format which came to be developed for the 500-Miler, a race open to sixty machines, each crewed by two riders required to ride alternate sessions of two hours was so successful that it was accepted in toto for the Isle of Man production races when they were introduced. The idea of racing what were essentially silenced production machines, with the emphasis on safety modifications only, was aimed at creating a showcase for British manufacturers to prove the

Right: a very young and promising Phil Read hustles his production Norton round Thruxton during the endurance event held at the friendly little Hampshire circuit in 1961

Below: the field lines up for the start of the 1976 Thruxton endurance event. The eventual winners were the French works Honda riders Roger Ruiz and Christian Huguet. This race was run over 400 miles rather than the usual 500

quality of their wares, and prove it they continued to do: in 1956 the overall winners came from the 350 class with K.W. James and I.I. Lloyd averaging 72.30mph on their 348cc BSA Gold Star; BSA riders made it a hat trick of wins for the marque when F. Webber and R.A. Avery won overall, again by winning the 350 class, at 67mph.

1958, when the race was first run over 500 miles, saw another British marque take the honours when Mike Hailwood and Dan Shorey won the 1000cc Multi-cylinder class on their



649cc Triumph Bonneville. Until now BSA and Triumph had shared every class win between themselves but in 1958 there came the first interloper when B.F. Herbert's Norton, shared by G. Turner, won the 1000cc Single-cylinder class.

Thrupton was by now beginning to show the first signs of the problems which were eventually to cause its temporary closure. Since 1955, spectator attendances had begun to fall, leaving little money for track maintenance. The effects of bike, and now also car, racing and testing were compounded by local firms using part of the circuit for lorry and trailer brake testing and the surface was rapidly deteriorating. It became necessary to use different layouts with almost every meeting and 'first aid' for the surface was needed even between races.

In 1958, the British Championship round ceased to be held at Thrupton, partly as a result of an accident involving spectators the previous year. A further possible blow came in 1958 when the Air Ministry sold the circuit but fortunately the new owners allowed racing to continue. S&DMCC continued to hold three meetings a year up to 1965, including the Grand Prix d'Endurance and the first Commonwealth Trophy motor cycle race meeting.

The first non-British machine to win the 500 was John Lewis's and Bruce Daniel's 592cc BMW which covered the distance at 66.88mph in 1959. British bikes were back on top in 1960, when Ron Langston and Don Chapman won on an AJS. 1961 belonged to Tony Godfrey and J. Holder on a Triumph and then began a run of victories for Norton – soon to be associated with the circuit in other ways too. Phil Read and Brian Setchell scored a double in '62 and '63 and Setchell went on to complete his hat trick in 1964 with Derek Woodman, all the wins coming on 647cc Nortons.

Sadly, the old perimeter was now breaking up very rapidly and in 1965 the 500 was moved, first to Castle Combe and later to Brands Hatch. The ACU promptly withdrew the track permit and Thrupton's future suddenly looked bleak. The new owners, however, expressed their intentions to restore and even improve the circuit. It was in January 1967 that a local road surfacing company visited the circuit to meet Geoffrey Woodhouse, representing the owners, and a representative of the S&DMCC. By June of that year plans were in hand for a new track following the full perimeter course. The British Automobile Racing Club now became responsible for the planning, while Mr Woodhouse footed the bills on behalf of Shonleigh Nominees. A BARC subsidiary, British Racing Circuits Ltd, was set up to run the circuit which was opened, one day behind schedule, on 2 March 1968 when it was made available for a practice day. This was the circuit which remains in use today. The perimeter had been surfaced to a uniform width of 48 feet, spectator banks had been erected, marshals' posts sprouted, a system of twenty telephones was installed and pits for thirty cars or bikes were erected, along with a race control building.

From the gently curving startline straight the circuit follows a quick right, left sweep through Allard, into the very quick approach to a complex of corners named Campbell, Cobb and Segrave – after British Land Speed Record holders. These three follow a tight right, left, right line onto a fast downhill curve known as Kimpton, after a neighbouring village. Kimpton is followed by a fairly severe right hander – Goodwood – and then a series of extremely fast sweeps, Village, Church, Brooklands and Woodham Hill which bring riders back to Club, a difficult chicane leading back to the startline.

Eight motor cycle meetings were on the calendar for 1968 and in 1969 came the big day when the Thrupton 500 returned to its real home, to become the 500-Mile Grand Prix d'Endurance, a round of the new FIM championship. The return of the race saw victory for Percy Tait and Malcolm Uphill on a works 650 Triumph, at 84.3mph.

In 1969 Norton had moved part of its operations to nearby Andover and a test and development department was soon

opened at Thrupton itself. This paid off in the extremely wet 1970 500 when Peter Williams (who worked at Norton's Thrupton Performance Shop with Peter Inchley) and Charlie Sanby took a convincing win on their Commando. This race also inaugurated a prototype class for the race. Williams almost repeated the win the following year but dropped his bike just ten minutes from the end of a gruelling six-hour ride when leading by several laps. The race was won by Dave Croxford and Percy Tait on a 750 Trident. Croxford also won the 1972



Above: a view of the crowded pit front at Thrupton prior to the start of the 1976 Thrupton 400 mile endurance event. In the forefront of the picture are the works Honda team machines, one of which eventually went on to win the race

event, this time sharing a Norton with Mick Grant.

In 1973 Rex Butcher and Norman White won again for Norton but by now the writing was on the wall for British bikes and Kawasakis won the re-named Motor Cycle Powerbike International in 1974 and '75, first with Barry Ditchburn and Kork Ballington on a 750 and then Alais Vial and Jacques Luc on a 1000 version at 86.33mph and a record 87.47mph respectively. Japanese bikes continued to dominate, but now in the form of Honda. The company sponsored the 1976 race – which was actually run over only 400 miles – and were rewarded with a win by Roger Ruiz and Christian Huguet on the latest 941cc racer. Honda's Christian Léon and Jean-Claude Chemarin clinched the 1977 title by finishing third behind Stan Woods and Charlie Williams, also on a Honda, in the tense final round run at the Hampshire circuit.

Even with its new surface, permanent grandstands and the weight of the BARC behind it, Thrupton had its problems; in 1970 a public inquiry was held following local protests about noise nuisance from the circuit. As a result, the amount of racing and testing usage was severely restricted and when the BARC moved its headquarters to Thrupton in 1974 it became obvious that the lion's share of the allotted race and practice days would be used for the Club's car race calendar. For 1978 it seemed that the 500 was again on the move and yet more twists were in store for the circuit's bike racing future. BL