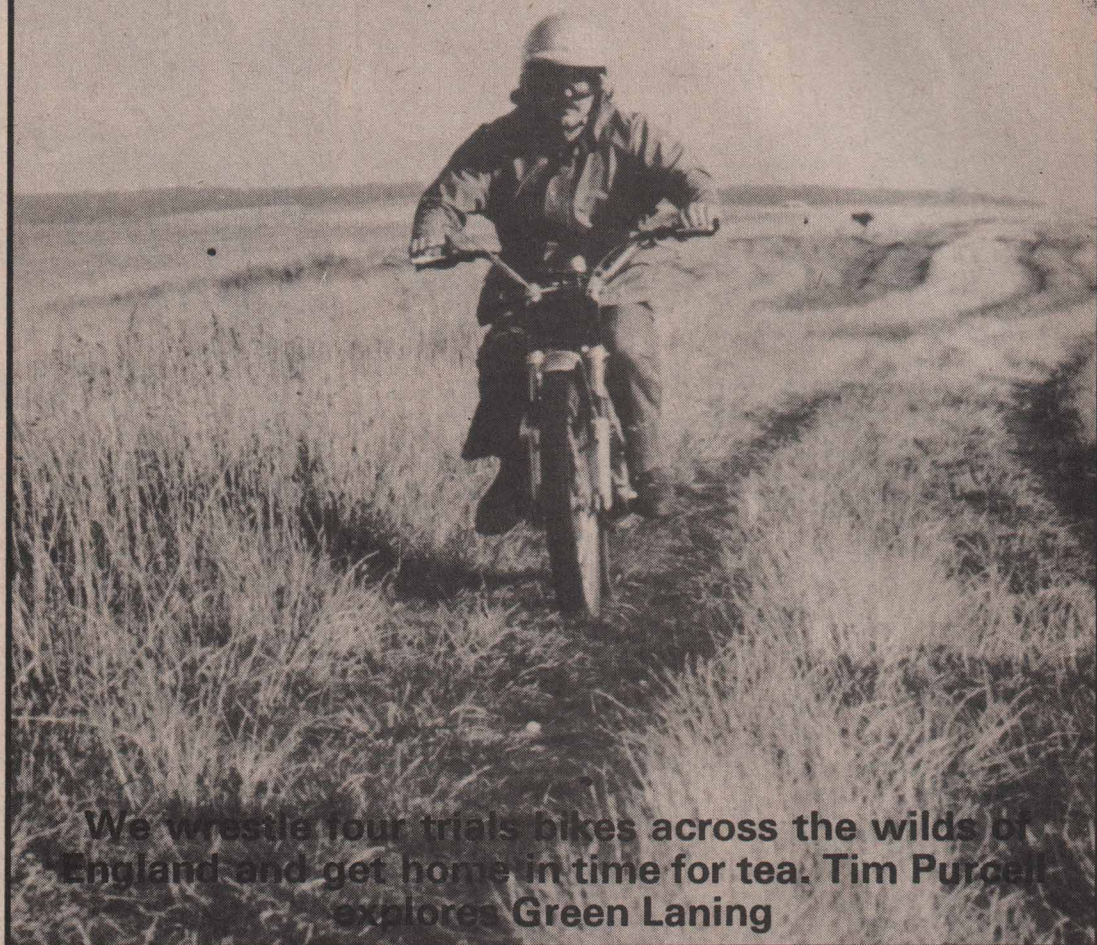


A COSY ADVENTURE



We wrestle four trials bikes across the wilds of England and get home in time for tea. Tim Purcell explores Green Laning

In an encampment just west of Wantage 4000 years ago, a wizened New Stone Age man was perfecting the wheel. An Iron Age tomb, guarded by the ghost of a Roman centurion, bears the fruits of his labours on a crude wheelbarrow. Ancient forts dotted along the Ridgeway survive to protect our heritage. On the highest point of the Berkshire Downs an albino stallion, hewn out of the natural chalk, surveys the scene. Away to the east four *SuperBike* loons disturb this tranquil history on a fleet of Spanish trials bikes.

Trail riding is whatever you want it to be. A ride into the past, an affinity with the undulating countryside, or simply somewhere to escape on an off-road machine. The temptation to treat these wide open tracks as an excuse for a burn-up has to be held in check. Being "responsible adults", we

observed the unwritten code of the Trail Riding Fellowship, and reduced our speed to a respectable canter on encountering two legged traffic.

Already the might of the Ramblers Association has been brought to bear on local councils, and succeeded in closing some 2000 Green Lanes to all but pedestrians and equestrians. Yet in the past two years the sales of trail bikes have increased by 50 per cent, but the trade still refuses to become embroiled in this controversy.

The Trail Riding Fellowship fights on with its teeth in braces. Now they have added the owners of four wheel drive vehicles to their list of antagonists. It only takes one act of abuse to bring the wrath of all opposition descending on the heads of the two-wheeling enthusiasts. Unless these Green Lanes are kept open many

trail riding clubs could come to an abrupt demise.

Armed with an ordnance survey map, as the only means of locating these tracks, we set off to experience the arguments in favour. While the Peak District abounds in these delights, the more southerly regions are sadly lacking. The Sevenoaks Weald in Kent, offers an interesting challenge, but no sooner have you risen on the pegs than you are obliged to resume a more conventional posture for a stint on the tarmac. So it was that we ventured on to the Ridgeway. A wide band of grass and earth that slashes through the country from East Anglia to Swindon, Wiltshire, with barely a mile of highway to mar a perfect ride.

Acquiring the necessary hardware posed almost as great a problem as locating the trail. Numerous phone calls resulted in

PLAYING DIRTY

impulsive promises, later to be revoked. We were determined to tackle this venture on anything but Japanese. Unfortunately CCM were unable to rush their new 350 trials bike off the production line in time. A CZ, VE Hagon and a Maico all proved to be far from street legal. An important consideration, as these trails are designated public thoroughfares.

Finally we secured a pair of Bultaco 350s from Deens of Beckenham and an Ossa 350 and a Montesa 247 Cota from the Windsor Comp Shop.

The day dawned; what was to be a full working day's ride was reduced to a three hour sprint. Having been unable to contact Deens on the previous Friday the promised Bultacos were unprepared when MS arrived for collection. Meanwhile I twiddled my thumbs at the Windsor Comp Shop between two warmed up machines.

Three hours late, and within sight of the Ridgeway, we discovered that the Ossa gear change pedal was non-existent. While the rest of us savoured the delights of the local brew, MS made a mercy dash back to Reading, where he was able to borrow the necessary equipment to get the quartet mobile.

We eventually hit dirt in mid afternoon, with Roger the Photo frantically consulting his light meter.

The Ridgeway proved far less taxing than manoeuvring a shopping trolley through Tesco's, but there was a feeling of freedom not to be experienced on any of the highways or byways of rural England. With few exceptions, the entire course was little more than a gentle roll, which only just kept us out of the saddle and on to the pegs.

Even so, it doesn't pay to allow the concentration to wander. A few concealed humps sent us soaring unexpectedly into the air. Dropping the leading wheel into an overgrown ditch could also eject you over the bars. Loose rocks can cause a slide, but more so at



slower speeds.

There was one particularly bad section which revealed itself without warning as we rounded a tree lined bend. The washed out gully had developed deep, jagged ruts, which had a tendency to throw the machines off course. With each bump the throttle was involuntarily forced open, accelerating the bike over the next ridge. Trying to stop would have proved more hazardous. So it was a question of barreling forward, regardless of the consequences. The Montesa seemed to pick its own

line, as if following a railway track, devoid of any control I may have commanded. Finally I emerged on to the smooth grass verge, with an impregnable thorn thicket precariously close.

After your average Jap compromise trail bike, these light weight competition trials machines were a doddle. Their perfect balance enables you to ride the rough with no more effort than leap frogging the water board's abortions in the city streets. The exceptionally low gearing holds the speed down, but in the easy con-

ditions of the Ridgeway it meant you could stick with top. While the handling was faultless, the gear boxes were a unanimous disaster. As MS observed after a slight tumble in the mud, the biggest injury was to his foot, trying to change gear.

In this respect the Bultacos had a slightly superior edge. The wider peg made it somewhat easier to hook your boot underneath, while the Montesa only responded to a sharp kick, and then the delayed engagement came with a knock. By the end of the day MS had resorted to hand-changing the obstructive Ossa.

Of course, pure-bred trials bikes are too highly specialised for such menial leisure activities as mild trail riding. And the Ridgeway is mild. In South Africa, MS opined, it would be a pretty ordinary dirt road; and we even saw one guy taking a Norton Interstate along it (though in truth he didn't get far). The biggest drawback is simple discomfort. Trials seats are small, very hard and very low. Take a trail bike, rather: what you lose in knife-edge control you gain by missing out on unsightly bruises.

Aside from these irritations the experience was worth repeating, at leisure. Sussing out a route in advance could result in a ride of greater duration. The abundant villages for which the English countryside is renowned could provide accommodation on an extended excursion. Contrary to the persecution complex harboured by the Trail Riding Fellowship, the reception we received from farmers and hikers was more than amicable.

The only other drawback is the range of these trials' machines. Within a mile of the trail's end the Montesa spluttered into extinction. With the others making base on reserve I was left to push the machine on, until they returned with the necessary juice.

Suddenly the quiet peace of the countryside rammed home. Trail riding is great fun; but bloody noisy!

