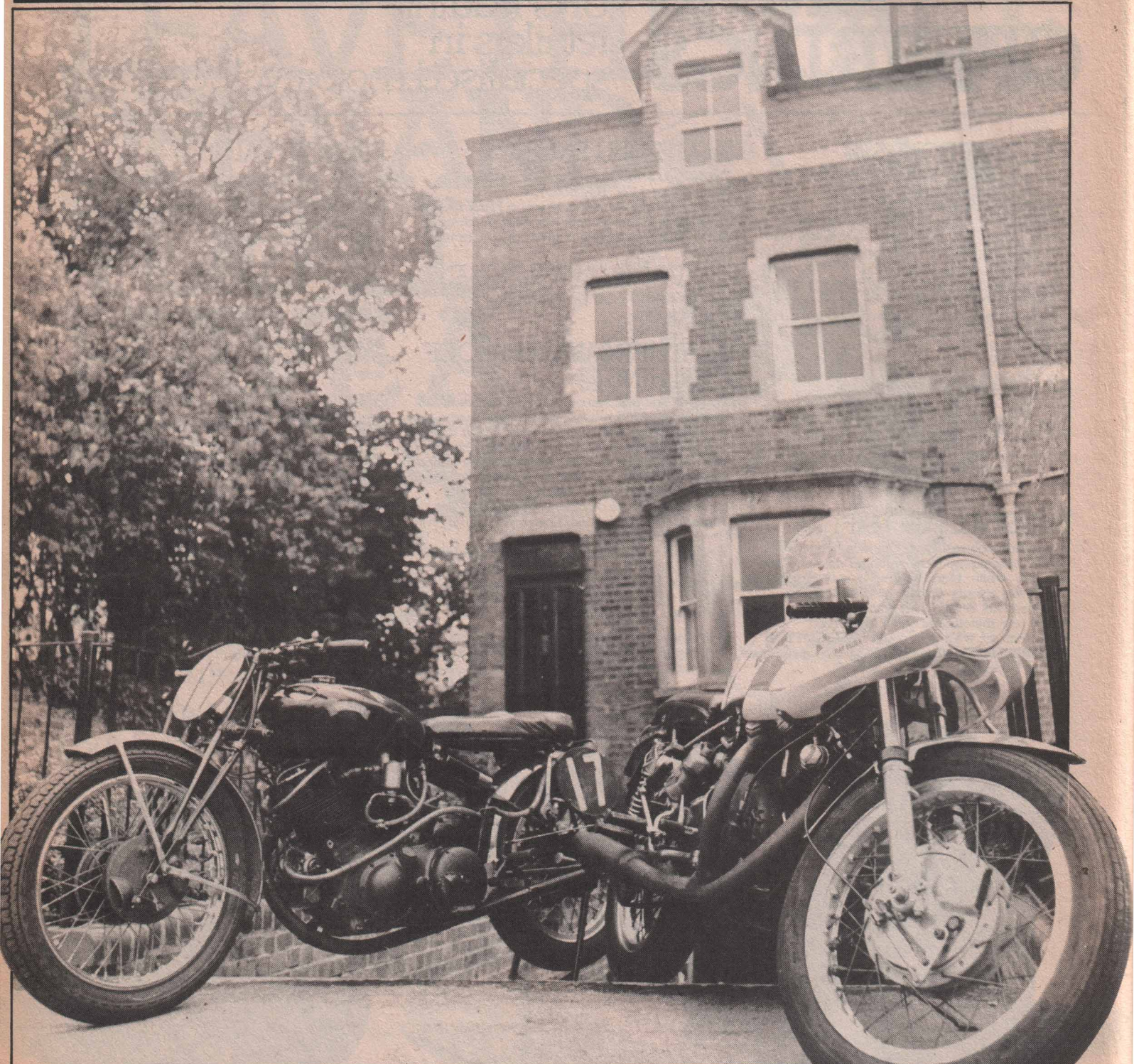


# Twenty seven is a dangerous age, Vincent

Dave Hamill burns rubber on the winningest drag bike



Meet Ray Elger. He's a toolmaker by trade, 37 years old and a quiet, unassuming sort of guy, except when he's talking about his favourite mechanical topic, Vincent motorcycles. Oh yes; in between times he's probably won more sprint races than any other rider in Great Britain.

Meet Ray Elger's bike. It's 27 years old, an Egli Vincent. The engine's done about 140 000 miles and it hasn't had a major rebuild in six years. That's right, even the piston rings haven't been swapped since

1972. All of which hasn't stopped the bike taking Ray to every single win in that record breaking run, which must be some sort of record in itself. They're quite a pair Ray and his Vincent, a winning combination that's kept on winning despite all the odds.

So how did it all begin? "Well I bought this secondhand Vincent Rapide sidecar outfit way back in 1959. I used it on the road for years as a solo with the standard frame. Then in 1963 I went along to a

sprint meeting as a spectator and ended up entering the Vincent when another guy didn't turn up."

Ray came third on that initial competitive outing; not bad for a bog standard completely unprepared bike. From that day onwards he became a dedicated sprinter and by the following season he'd rebuilt the bike with advice and guidance from

Ted Hampshire, an ex-Vincent engineer. "It just started winning and winning." It ran consistent 12.1 and 12.2 second ets and "handled like a dream", although from personal experience with Philip Vincent's somewhat, uh, erratic rolling chassis, I'm inclined to take that last statement with a pinch of salt. Whatever, there's no doubting that Fritz Egli's renowned Vincent frames are a byword for handling, and when the man himself raced and was beaten by Ray on one occasion he was so impressed that he insisted on making a frame for him. The result was that in 1969 Ray yanked the engine out of his Rapide (more of what happened to the frame anon) and dropped it into a brand spanking new Egli frame.

The new bike was some 50lb lighter, by Ray's admission more stable over bumps and more comfortable. It doesn't take a PhD in mathematics to figure out what this meant; faster ets. Like, the original Vinnie ran a best of 12.18 in 1966. In his first season with the Egli Ray dipped down into the 11s for the first time with an 11.97, and his best time to date is an 11.91 in 1976. Not bad for an engine that was built before I was born, huh?

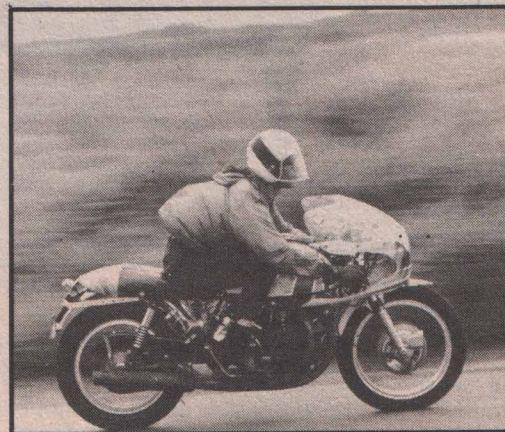
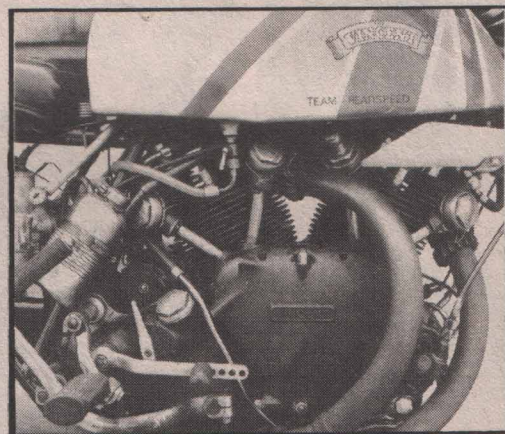
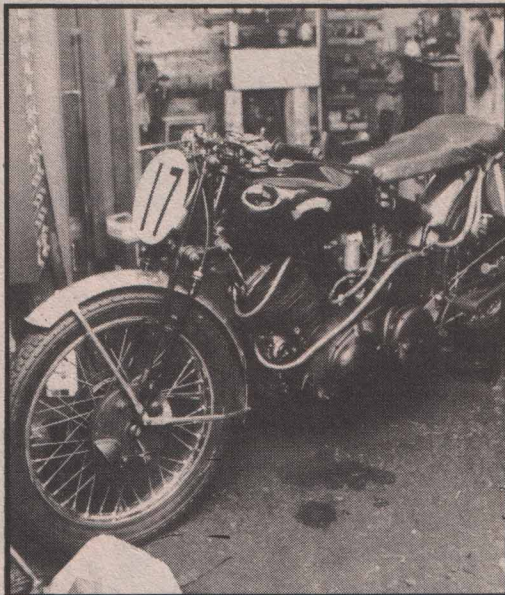
So what makes the bike keep on going and going? Well it ain't a rubber band, that's for sure, so at this juncture a closer look at the engine is called for. If you think that you're about to read a long list of trick imported go-faster goodies and hyper-sophisticated, hyper-expensive tuning techniques, you're in for a disappointment. The amazing thing about Ray's engine is what *hasn't* been done to it. The Rapide wasn't even considered to be the "hottest" motor of the range, and when turbocharged multis are becoming the norm in dragging and sprinting today, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that so much power can be extracted from such a seemingly mild specification.

Bore and stroke are retained at a stock 84 x 90mm respectively, but high compression pistons raise the stock Rapide's 6.45:1 compression ratio to 9.8:1. Big carbs too; Amal 36mm Concentrics. Ray usually runs the Egli with a Vincent Mk2 cam, but lately he's been experimenting with an American Andrews cam obtained via George Emmrich. Apart from an Alpha Bearings oversize crank the bottom end's stock, while Ray ported and polished the heads with an electric drill and plenty of emery cloth. Valve springs come from BSA Gold Stars. "Trouble with standard Vincent springs is that they let go above 6000rpm. Well this engine will go above 7000 so we needed something a bit tougher." Ignition system is the Lucas TT magneto which was fitted to Vincent's potent road racer, the Series C Black Lightning many moons before the advent of solid state sparks.

That just about rounds off the engine modifications and though they mightn't seem very drastic, they account for a healthy power boost for a motor that wasn't exactly considered short on bhp in its heyday. The official factory figure is 45bhp at 5300rpm for the 1949 Series C Rapide. Well, this engine puts out a genuine 60bhp at 3500rpm (l) and 64bhp at 6500rpm measured at the rear wheel. Sceptical? Don't take my word for it or, for that matter, Ray's. Those figures were measured on a rolling road a couple of years back, and it's interesting to note that on the same day a Kwacker 1000 was peaking at 19bhp

less. Maybe a CBX could beat Ray's 27-year-old Vinnie, but there can't be many other bikes around capable of bettering that performance.

OK, you'd expect Britain's winningest sprint bike to be pampered, wrapped in cotton wool and never allowed out on public highways wouldn't you? Not so, it isn't used every day sure, but the Egli's com-



pletely street legal and Ray takes it out on the road pretty often. So wossit go like then? Aha thought you'd ask that, so we took a trip up to Ray's home near Oxford and he let us have a blast on the beast.

My first thought was of how small the bike was. I mean, when you're used to seeing 1000cc motors coming in large—some would say impossibly large—packages it comes as something of a shock to find a massive, monolithic Vincent twin nestling in a frame that wouldn't look out

of place on a 250. Talking about 250s, with an all-up weight of approximately 370lb, the Egli must be in line for the slimmer of the year award. That puts it in the same league as a Honda 250 Dream (392lb dry) or Yamaha XS250 (366lb) and makes the current crop of 1000cc Jap bikes seem like obese behemoths in comparison.

Unlike the big Japbikes though, the Vinnie isn't the easiest of bikes to start. 'Fact I chickened out, pleading injury from a previous tumble as my excuse, and left Ray to do the hard work. "There's a knack to it", he said, "and once you master it you don't have many problems". It helps if you have leg muscles like the hind quarters of an ox, not that I'm comparing Ray with that well known beast of burden y'understand. Course he *could* have retained Vincent's valve lifter as fitted to the stock bike and saved himself hassles, but this item tends to leak oil so he junked it and relied on good old fashioned leg power.

And so to the great moment when Ray flooded the carbs and took a swing on the kickstart which wouldn't have disgraced a first division footballer. Nothing. Another swing. Nothing. An even harder swing and beads of sweat on his face. Nothing. In the end it took a determined push start to fire the beast, and the sound which issued forth from its twin home made silencers was memorable. Did I say silencers? Put it this way; silent is about the *last* word I'd use to describe the *basso profundo* bomp bomp bomp sound of the engine idling. To an engineer's ears—music. To a traffic cop—a good excuse for getting the notebook out.

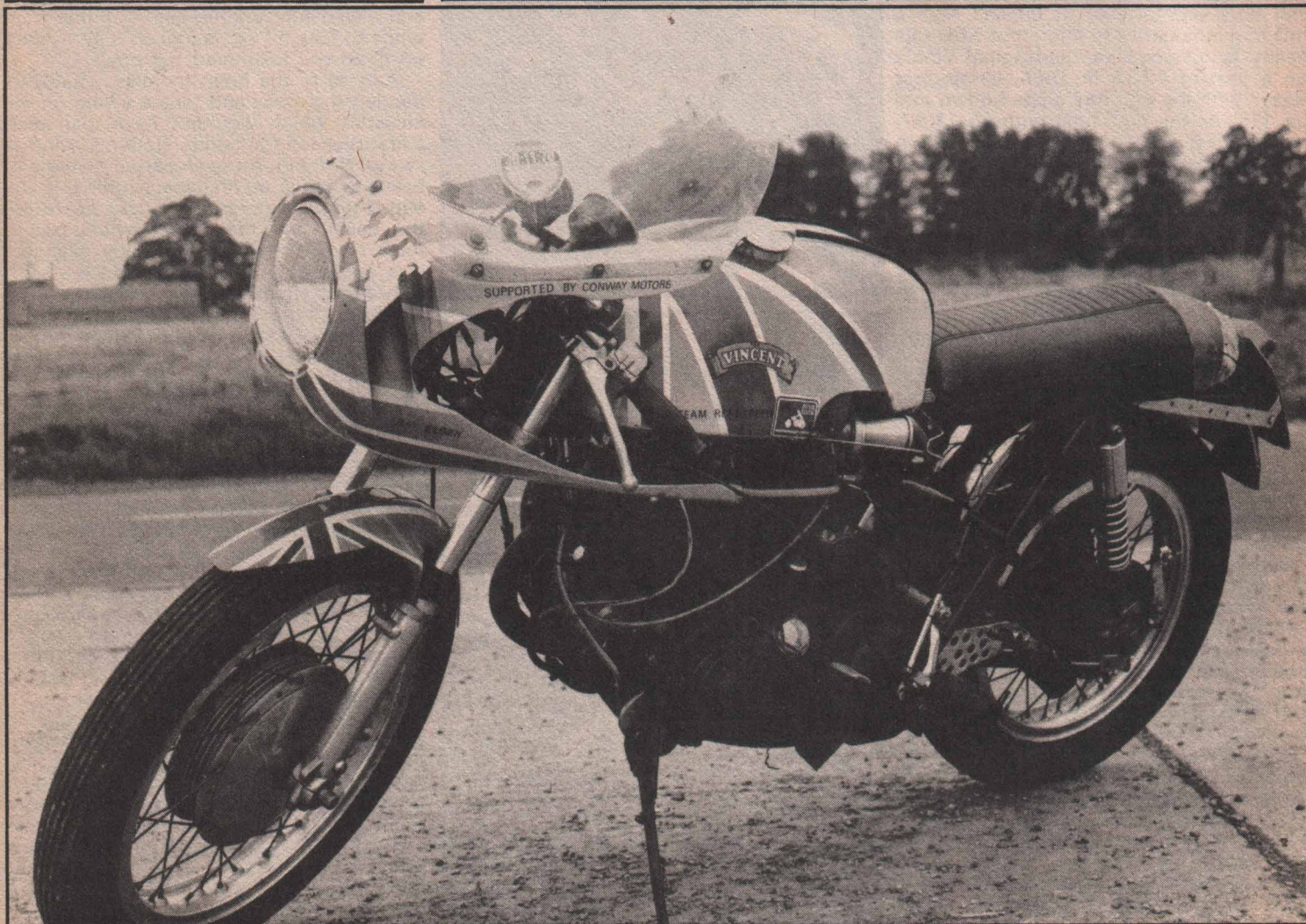
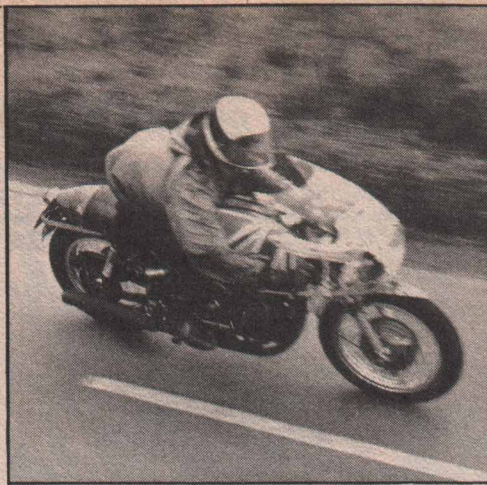
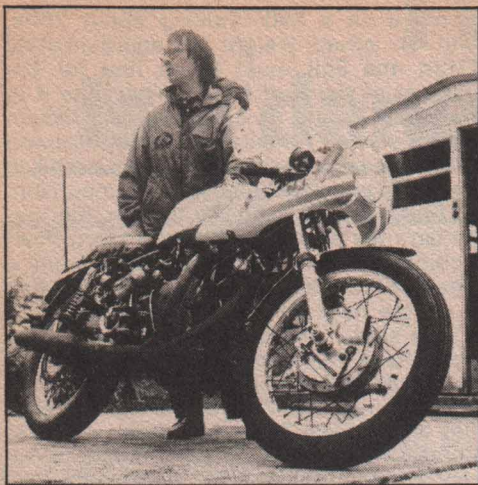
Sat on the bike my initial impression of compactness was reinforced considerably. Ray's a medium height wiry sort of individual. Me? I'm medium sized (*what!* BM) but I'm not admitting to anything else. With the bike in gear and rolling down the road, the time came for me to hike my legs up on the footrests. I did it with difficulty only to find that what I thought were the rider's rests were in fact the passenger pegs. Phew, it took a lot of contortions before I squeezed myself into the proper riding position which is, as Ray freely admits, hardly comfortable.

I'd been warned that the power came in brutally and the brakes weren't very wonderful. I agree. Even with a triple disc set-up a bike as potent as the Vinnie would be a handful to stop. With only a puny Norton drum brake up front (fitted with a John Tickle 2LS brake plate admittedly) stopping from 100mph plus is a long drawn out affair, and if you want to stop in a hurry, engine braking is a better bet.

Power's the name of the game on Ray's bike though, and what power. It comes in at around 2200 revs and from then on the bike pulls like an express train. No transmission of carburation lag; just power, great raw gobs of the stuff.

With a final drive ratio in top of 3.4:1—slightly higher than stock, but only slightly—the ton equals 4400rpm, and there's still a lot of power left at that juncture. I couldn't find out exactly how much power because the A40 in the middle of the evening rush hour isn't the ideal place to try these sort of things, so I contented myself with a "leisurely" 125mph and took Ray's word for it that 150mph at the engine's 6600rpm power peak is a distinct possibility.

I've had the same feeling of exhilarating, almost limitless power on only a couple



of bikes — the MV Monza and Laverda Jota spring to mind — but I wouldn't have thought it possible on a 27-year-old Vinnie until I had the pleasure of riding Ray's Egli. The bike's stable at those sort of speeds too; surprising considering how light it is, and some of the credit here must go to the Metal Profile front forks and Girling Manx Norton rear shox.

Corners are where you've got to be *really* careful on the bike. As I've said the power comes in savagely, and if you don't open the throttle very gingerly out of a bend or roundabout, you could easily find yourself being carried away on a stretcher. For all that though the engine isn't a touchy narrow powerband racer. It can be as gentle

as the next roadster, the difference being that when you twist the throttle on this un you're just going to keep on going.

Ray hasn't raced the bike regularly for a season, now, but like all lapsed drag racers I got the impression that it wouldn't take much to get him back into the fold. When the bike *was* racing, help and sponsorship came from Conway Motors in Shepherds Bush, John "Uncle Bunt" Reed who painted the tank and fairing and Matt Holder of Aerco Jig and Tool, the people who are all set to start building replica Vincent engines in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime he's sponsoring himself by making some of the most interesting and unusual jewellery I've seen in a long while and selling it at non-ripoff prices — interested wholesalers give us a

ring and we'll put you in touch.

Vincents seem to be a family business with the Elgers. Ray's brother races a 500 Comet on the circuits, and though they're not exactly family, Ray has close ties with Mathew and Margaret Mason, an Oxford couple who race a Vincent 1000 in Vintage races with great success. Remember I was going to tell you what happened to Ray's original Rapide frame? Well, it still lives on in the Mason's racer, the one you can see in the pix with the Egli, so it's certainly gone to a good home.

So if he suddenly rolled the big numbers on the sponsorship game would Ray stick to Vincents? "Yes certainly, although I think the next stage I'd go to would be a four valve head to give me more top end." One day Ray, one day.