



Nigel Birkett struggles desperately to avoid a five during the 1978 Inter-Centre team trial in his native Cumbria.



Nigel weaves his Montesa through the stream at Bridge End in the 1978 Scott.



Perfect poise as Nigel crests a rise in the British Championship Peak Trial.

TRIALS PROFILE — NIGEL BIRKETT

'BUTTERFLY' BIRKETT — PRIDE OF CUMBRIA

FRENCH biking journalist Michel D'Awans provided the perfect analogy at Pipeline during the 1979 Scottish Six Days Trial.

Martin Lampkin, heavily engaged in his duel with Rathmell, had powered up that endless, rocky climb as if the hounds of hell were in close pursuit.

Nigel Birkett bobbed and weaved and jinked his way up, turning a sudden front-wheel deflection into a recovery of such grace and balance that it seemed to have more to do with ballet than bikes.

Said Michael: "Two hundred years ago Lampkin would have fought with a sabre — Birkett would have been an artist with a rapier."

It's why they call the slim, 26-year-old Cumbrian "Butterfly" Birkett. He seems to flutter through sections. Even Yrjo Vesterinen, the great Finn, has been known to express his admiration at Birkett's artistry. And that is the ultimate testimonial.

Nigel, from Broughton-in-Furness in the middle of Cumbria's rugged fell-land, started riding at the age of eight on an ex-GPO James which he used to belt round his father's coal yard. He started his competition career as a schoolboy scrambler on a converted 80cc Suzuki — and won his first event.

The little Suzy was swiftly followed by a crashed 125cc Yamaha which his dad, Bill, converted into a pukka scrambler. Nigel won many races in those early days of the schoolboy movement, and achieved second place in the national schoolboy championship riding a Puch Dalesman.

At that stage the lad looked set for a career in motocross. He left school and joined Suzuki specialist Eddie Crooks as an apprentice mechanic, scrambling a 250 Ossa. Then Eddie gave him an Ossa trials bike, and Nigel showed his outstanding natural ability. That year he missed by a whisker a special first in the SSdT.

He was to have one final season in motocross on a 250 CZ and a 400 Suzuki. But he wasn't very successful and decided that perhaps his destiny lay in the trials world after all.

At the back end of 1973 he packed up scrambling and went straight in at the deep end, contesting the British trials championship on a 250 Ossa. And he went well right from the start, picking up some good places and finishing the year in the top 12.

He went so well, in fact, that he was offered a works ride with Kawasaki, then fighting to get a foothold in the trials world. His first ride for Big K produced a creditable sixth place in the Allan Jefferies trial.

This immediately opened the path of Europe. The ex-scrambler with little trials experience found himself riding against the aces in the last four world championship rounds.

T + MX REVIEW

Nigel lifts the Suzuki through a section in a Northern Centre event during his days as a Beamish works rider in 1977.



But it all ended on a sour note. Kawasaki, worried at the costs of developing a competitive trials bike, cut their budget and tried to re-negotiate their contract with Nigel and team-mate Richard Sunter on a "bike and bits" basis with no more world series action. Both men declined.

So Nigel went back to his Ossa as a privateer again until just before the 1975 Scottish, when Graham Beamish phoned Eddie Crooks with the offer of an RL250 Suzuki.

At this stage Nigel was off Japanese bikes and he wasn't over-keen. And he still wasn't after riding the 250 in a club trial. Then, just days before the annual Highland classic, Beamish laid on a new 325 Suzy.

It turned out to be a great Scottish for Nigel. He was sixth on the first day, third on the second and on the Wednesday, was in second spot only a dab behind Vesterinen!

But it wasn't to be a fairy-tale debut. The motor went slightly off song — the trouble was later traced to a broken reed valve petal — and Nigel finally finished in eighth place.

But it was a great ride, to be rewarded with a two-year-contract from the Beamish organisation.

At this stage, young Nigel was going like a bomb. In the world title series he was 6th in Sweden and Finland, and second in the Swiss. At home he won the Perce Simon, the Vic Brittain and the Kickham. And his efforts played an important part in the development of the RL Suzuki.

However, came the end of 1977 and Nigel felt like a change. He thought he was getting a bit stale, and he was frequently fed-up with the constant trips from Cumbria to the Beamish HQ in Sussex. He accepted a new contract with Montesa importer Jim Sandiford just an hour's drive away in Lancashire.

Nigel and his Cota 348 had a fantastic start to 1978 with a string of National victories. He eventually finished fifth in the British championship and also had some consistent rides in the world series.

And 1979 started with a bang, too, with a third and a fourth in the early world rounds and a win in the Kickham. This splendid start was followed by a flat period in the summer of the kind faced and feared by all the aces.

Whatever the future holds for Nigel Birkett, the likeable lad from Cumbria has already made his mark as one of the sport's greatest stylists.