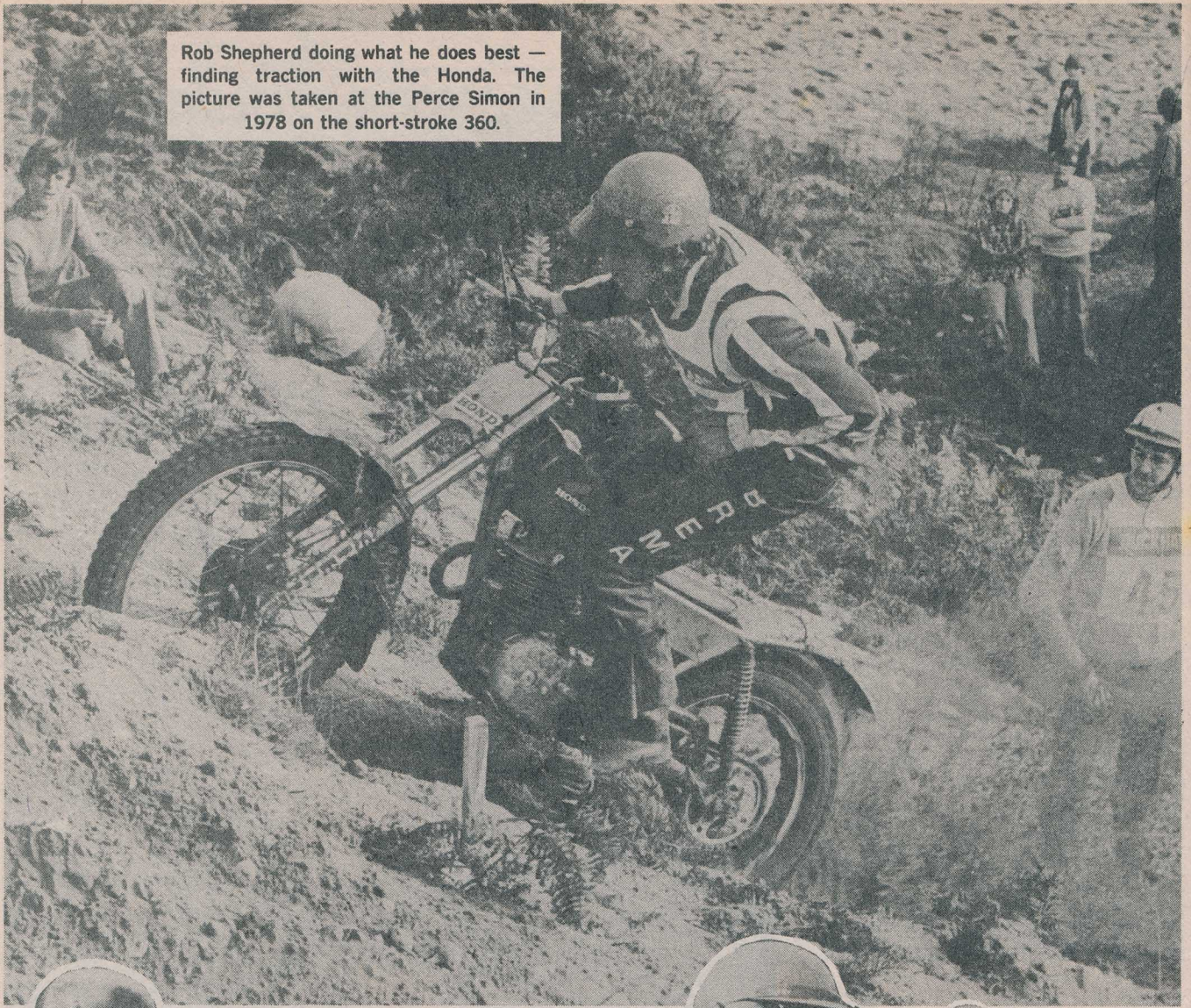


Rob Shepherd doing what he does best — finding traction with the Honda. The picture was taken at the Perce Simon in 1978 on the short-stroke 360.



"All right, Shep, it's only Kitch". Photographer Eric Kitchen catches Rob off-guard at the British Experts in 1977. Also pictured are brother Norman and Davy McBride. (Rob B)

SHEP — YORKSHIRE'S OWN PROFESSOR OF PLONK

YORKSHIREMEN are generally reckoned to be extroverts. Men like Martin Lampkin, Michael Parkinson and Freddie Trueman. But one man who certainly isn't is Rob Shepherd. If there is a quieter, more reserved person, then he certainly isn't involved in the trials world.

Trials riding is a sport where a lad with ability is likely to show it straight away rather than over a period of time, and Rob as a young lad certainly did just that.

It all happened when he was fourteen. The Wetherby club approached his dad, Alan, and asked to use their farm for a trial. From such an innocuous beginning Rob got bitten by the trials bug and was soon riding in similar events aboard an old Greeves Scottish.

Within no time it was apparent that Rob was likely to be a force in the future and his dad bought him a new Cotton with the Villiers 37A motor. Aboard this, Rob soon won a couple of novice awards in the Yorkshire centre and rapidly became upgraded to expert after he had switched to a Montesa when he was sixteen.

It was on this marque that he began to make a name for himself in national events which he attended with Mick and Bill Wilkinson — and who better to initiate him into the tough life of the top flight trials rider?

Rob soon began to confirm his early promise with a win in the Peak trial, his first national success. The year proved to be a good one for the Pateley Bridge farmer's son, as he also went on to win the Kickham and come second in the local Allan Jefferies behind Bill Wilkinson, as well as runner-up in the Clayton behind a man who was to be his future boss, Sammy Miller.

A year later, still on his own Montesa, Rob won the Peak again, and it was this ride that possibly convinced the Spanish company to recommend a factory bike for Rob.

The bike came through the old Montesa importer, John Brise, who wanted Rob to make up the team for the Scottish. Rob had a fair week in Scotland but his best ride that year was certainly in the Scott.

At just eighteen years of age Rob won this super-tough time and observation trial. And he did it the hard way, setting both standard time and being best on observation.

Just a few weeks after the historic win, Rob became a fully contracted Montesa factory rider, taking the red Mont to all the British and most of the World trials rounds.

Somewhat surprisingly, Rob never really showed super form on the Montesa during the three factory years, always seeming to be in the shadow of fellow Yorkshireman and Montesa number one, Malcolm Rathmell.

Success is only relative though, as Rob did manage several big national wins each season, plus the 1976 British Experts title. But even this title failed to reflect the year's performance which was one in the wilderness.

T + MX REVIEW

Shep in action at the 1978 Peak Trial, with the Honda finding grip where none exists.



A change of machine seemed likely for 1977 and on the first day of the year Rob was mounted on a Honda supplied through the UK team manager Sammy Miller. On the long-stroke 306cc thumper, Rob immediately hit form winning the Vic Brittain, the Colmore and the Cotswold. The long stroke was only intended as a stop gap until the all new 360cc short-stroke machine became available, and when Rob started to ride it he just couldn't get on with it.

Rather than stick with the short-stroke, Rob went back to the old long-stroke and stayed with the machine for the rest of the year and right up until the start of the 1978 Scottish.

It was a successful partnership as Rob finished the final batch of the 1977 World Championship trials with a win, a second, two thirds and a sixth to finish fifth in the World title. But he had an even better British year, taking the title by a single point from Martin Lampkin.

Right after the trial Honda announced their withdrawal from trials and for several weeks the whole trials scene was in the dark as to Rob's future. However, he knew all along the way that the tide was turning and at the start of 1978 the Honda camp was reorganised with Rob as the sole rider complete with his own mechanic and team van back-up.

The next new short-stroke arrived just in time for the Scottish and with the long-stroke now more than two years old, Rob had to ride the new machine. It was hardly a fairy tale

debut, for the magnesium based bike had many problems with the oiling all week, but Rob coaxed it home into fifth place.

The British Championship chase that year proved to be a ding-dong battle right up until the very end, with Martin Lampkin only just managing to win the title at the very last round, despite Rob winning the trial itself. The final points total was a tie, but Rob lost out on the number of wins.

Consistency has always been one of Rob's keynotes and in 1979 it was no exception. It wasn't until the fourth round at the Victory that he finished out of the first three, and this was almost certainly due to the fact he had undergone a wrist operation some days before and during the trial he found the bike difficult to control.

The '79 Scottish was another momentous ride in the career of Rob Shepherd. He took delivery of a much improved 360cc short-stroke for the trial and led the Scottish for three days before finally finishing fourth place, after being saddled with a poor number on the last and important final day. However, it was still his best position in the trial to date.

To thousands of trials fans, the steady rap of the four-stroke exhaust means that Shep is approaching the section. It also means they are soon to be treated to the sight of a four-stroke maestro in the best tradition of the old British masters applying some real torque to the hazard.