

OUT

Jim Whitham — the early bird who got caught

by John Brown

JIM Whitham, arguably the pick of Britain's current young racing talent, could not have picked a more apt setting for his first excursion on the public highway.

At the crack of dawn on his 16th birthday, Jim was astride an FS1E Yamaha he had saved up for and was heading off round the streets of Douglas in the Isle of Man.

The massive speed differential between the little two stroke and the 750cc Formula One Suzuki he was to power round the TT course just four years later goes without saying, but it still only took the holidaying lad from Yorkshire ten minutes to fall foul of the law.

"Pulled first time out, not a good start I suppose," said Jim who was glad to get away with a telling-off from the policeman when he "only looked" instead of stopping at a halt sign.

Already a keen road race fan, Jim was in the Island to watch his pal Dave Leach race in the Manx Grand Prix but he decided to waste no time getting on the road himself. "As we went over before my birthday I got Dave to put the little Yam in the van," said Whitham.

His interest in motor cycles started before he was seven with encouragement from father David who later planted the idea of racing in his son's mind. Jim was only five when the family moved from Halifax to a house near Huddersfield which adjoined a private airfield belonging to David Brown Tractors.

"When things started to go downhill for the company in the late sixties cutbacks were made and one of the first things to go was the airfield," said Jim. "My father, who was interested in flying as well as motor cycles, took out a loan and bought it. From then on, with 80 acres of land there was never any problem finding land to ride or drive things on."

There were lots of cars and tractors to keep young Whitham amused but it was not long before the first two wheeler arrived on the scene. "My father bought me a step through Raleigh Wisp and I started out on my two wheel career," he said.

The next machines were a TR125 Yamaha and a CG125 Honda, both described by their owners as a 'load of rubbish'. "Still I did have some fun on



Whitham in 'working clothes' off...

them," admitted Jim who acquired the necessary cash to buy the machine by doing a paper round.

When the time came to buy the FS1E the restrictor law for 50cc machines had been introduced so Jim decided to overcome this by getting a secondhand one not covered by the ruling. "Actually I think it was a bit clapped — one with a restrictor would have been faster," he said.

"It was my pride and joy. Because I could ride it I polished it every day and once back from the initial outing in the Isle of Man I became the first in the class to arrive at school on a motor cycle."



... and on his Suzuki 750cc racing machine.

When he left school, Whitham got a job at an aircraft factory in Blackpool and although he lived in digs he used the Yamaha for the trip home at weekends. "It was a 70 mile run but over the months I got the journey time down to under two hours," he said. "I got the job sorted by finding all the short cuts and even going through car parks to miss traffic lights."

When it came to taking a test Jim didn't fancy the two part structure and decided to get round it by taking it on a sidecar outfit. "This meant I only had to go through the old one-part test," he explained. "I got hold of a 250cc X7 Suzuki and my father and I got £60 together to buy a sidecar. Neither of us had any idea about setting up an outfit so the result was that it handled like a pig. In addition there was so much weight it could hardly move. It was probably a good job really — you didn't dare let go of the handlebars because it immediately went out of control!"

Jim took his motor cycle and car tests at about the same time in January and passed both first time — fortunately for him because the outfit rapidly developed into a wreck. "It ruined the engine and bent the frame of the X7 — it was a scrapheap job," he said.

The current British Production champion he started racing within weeks of his 16th birthday and because of this never bothered about riding big bikes on the roads. "I get my speed from racing so when I am away

from the track I like trail and trials riding," he said. "I had a DT175 and in fact I rode my first trial before I went road racing."

Jim's father is a close friend of Clifford Leach and it was his son's success in road racing that encouraged young Whitham to have a go. "We used to go and watch Dave race and when I said I fancied trying it my father agreed to buy me a machine," said Jim. The machine in question came from Mal Carter and was the 125cc Honda that Ron Haslam raced on a couple of occasions in the 125 Honda championship. "It had only done 500 or 600 miles and an added bonus was that we got it with heaps of spares," said Jim. His big problem was that he did not have enough money to buy the required clothing. It was then that Mick Grant, then international racer and now Whitham's team manager, came on the scene.

"Mick was using the airfield for testing at the time and he said he would lend me boots, leathers and the like but at that time he offered no advice about racing," added Jim. "It was only when I switched to a 125 MBA and started to get some good national event results that he really started to help me." Grant suggested his protégé should race in the Manx GP and TT but his first visit for the 1985 Manx was far from successful. Armed with a Kawasaki KR250 loaned by Halifax based Lee Brothers Motor Cycles he entered the newcomers event but never made the start line.

"I fell off in practice and although I wasn't badly injured I spent most of the time recovering in hospital," he said. The following year he went back to the Isle of Man with a 250cc Suzuki Gamma and considered that to be his first real race outing on the Island.

One of his recent off-road acquisitions was a PE175 Yamaha. "It was in a pretty poor condition and belonged to an old school friend of mine who couldn't afford to do it up," he said. "I had a Bultaco in the shed doing nothing so I agreed to swap machines. I have spent £200 on it replacing the crank, brake shoes, cables and sprockets and it's a nice little bike now."

A regular partner these days for his trail and green lane riding is Suzuki team mate Phil Mellor. "We simply meet up and head for the hills," said Jim who at just the age of 22 starts his third year with Suzuki at the Daytona 200 Classic in March.