

Golden Oldies

Any readers old enough to remember motorcycling in the early fifties will no doubt also recall that just about the only bike that could be bought new in the shops was the Douglas Mk. V. These days it is highly thought of by collectors but then the men who were looking for transport obviously felt different, for it never really sold. So when Douglas pushed out the boat and introduced a completely redesigned new bike, the Dragonfly, perhaps the majority of riders were like me and gave it scant consideration. I wouldn't claim to have been an expert in those days but, with the basic understanding that almost comes with being a motorcyclist I reasoned that if people who were better qualified to judge than I didn't think that it was worth buying then it couldn't have been much good!

In fact time has shown that, although it had a great number of attractive features it was one of the least successful bikes produced at the Bristol works of Douglas.

Britain once had a 350cc flat-twin that would make your eyes water with its advanced specification. Leading link forks and torsion bar rear suspension were only two of the features that gave the Douglas a fine reputation. *Bruce Preston* finds a mint example in deepest Hampshire. Photography by *Brian Griffin*.

There were a number of reasons why. The giant Westinghouse Corporation had taken over the company and, for the first time ever, many of the components were 'bought in'. Previously the Douglas company had made it almost a point of honour to make everything possible themselves. The scooter boom was just beginning too and there was obviously a much bigger market from the sales of Douglas Vespa scooter and, as it was merely imported from Italy, a sight less manufacturing hassles. So after only three years the Douglas Dragonfly was discontinued and the last motorcycle made at the famous Bristol works was no more.

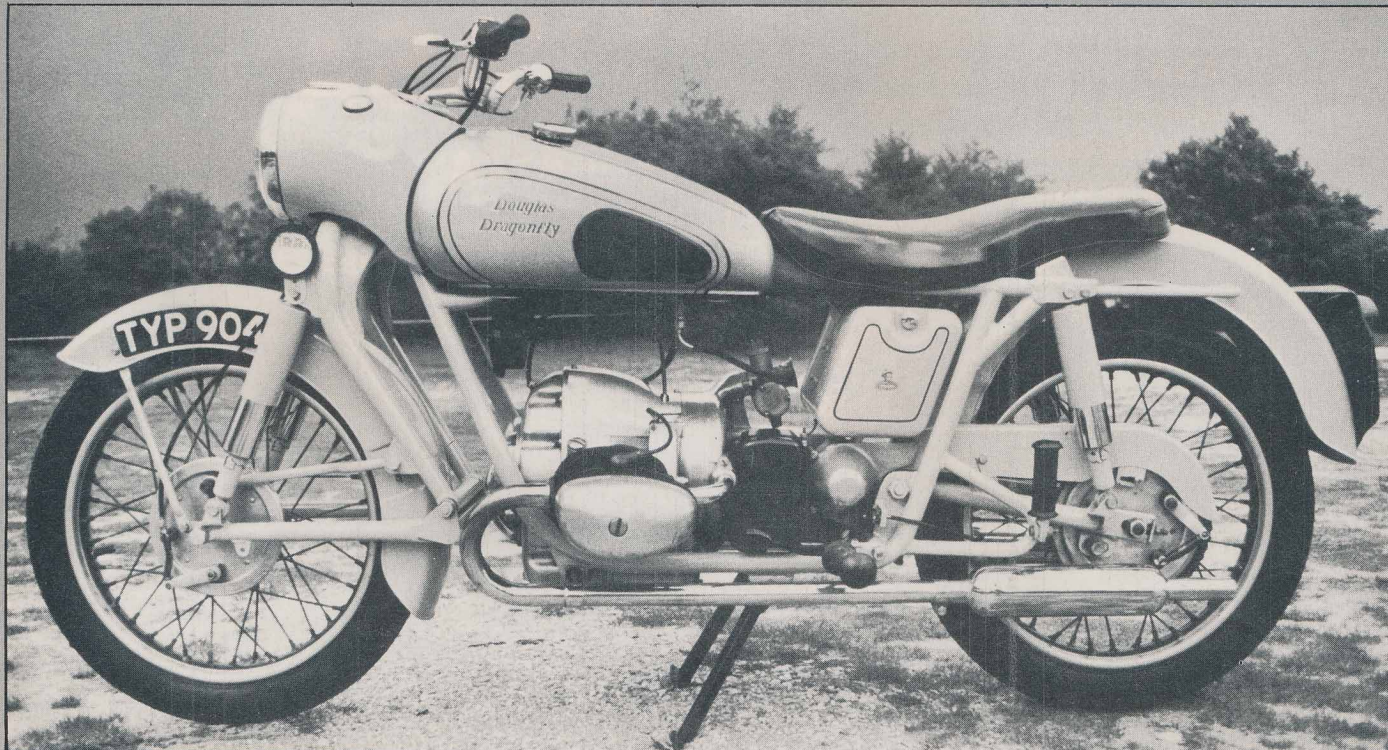
On paper it was quite an

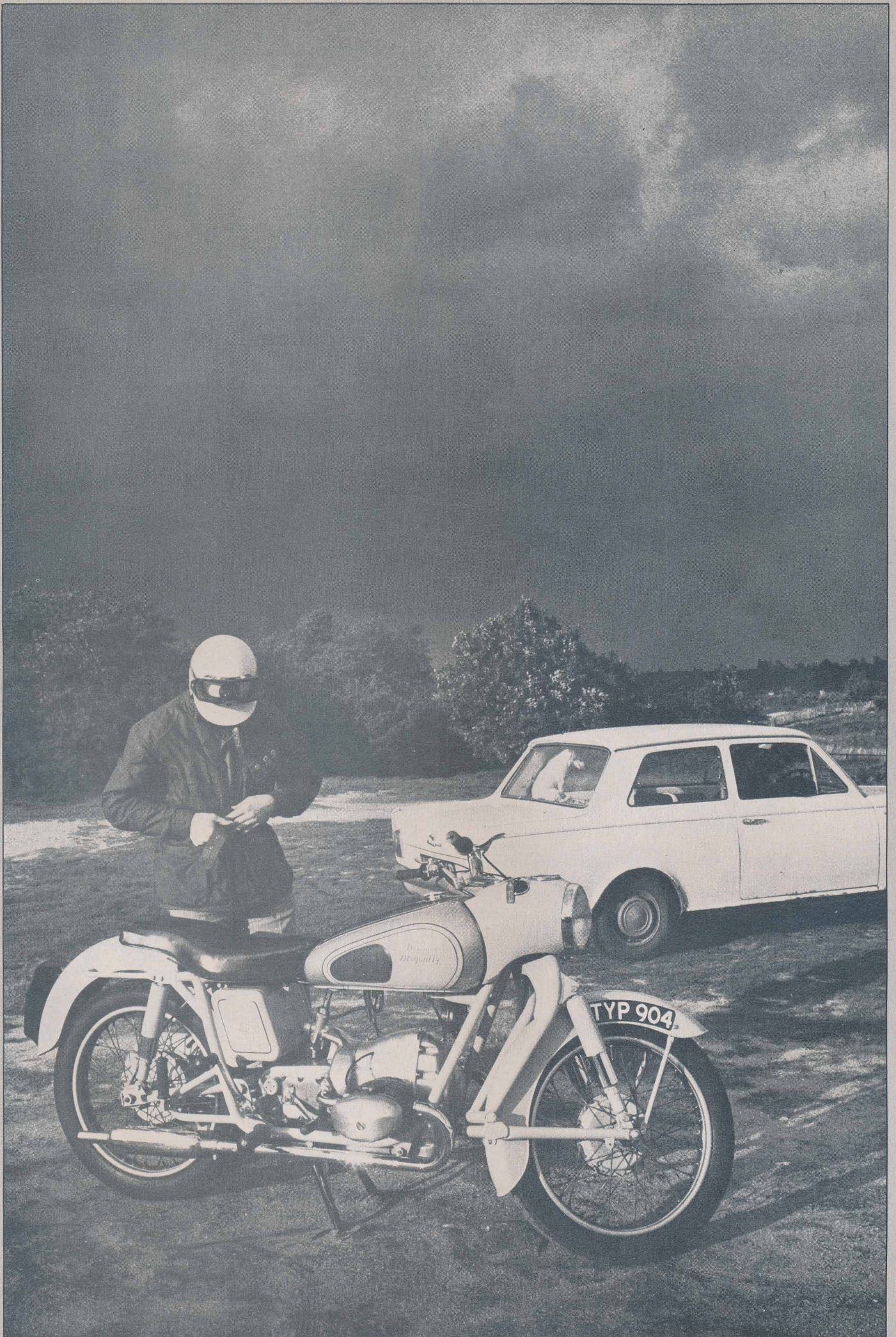
attractive motorcycle and it was ahead of its time in many respects. The front suspension was Earls type design that was later to be used by BMW and like the frame was made and designed by Reynold Tubes, who really built a unit strong enough to house some of today's 1000cc engines. It was massive and whatever other problems the Dragonfly gave no one complained about the handling. It looked futuristic with its headlamp built into a nacelle and pointing straight ahead as the forks were turned and, in spite of the solid construction, the dry weight of 365lbs seems almost light today.

The engine was in the tradition of all post war Douglas' with a 350cc flat

twin set across the frame. The engine unit was unusually smooth for its time, most engines still having that craggy look. The overhead-valve twin was not all that much changed from its predecessors. It had gear drive at the front for the timing and oil delivery and a Miller alternator mounted on the top of the engine. Almost everyone was using dynamos or magnetos in those days. The clutch, housed at the rear of the engine between that and the gearbox was a single plate car type with springs used for its compression. The right foot gear-change (left foot would have been unthinkable) was four speed. Final drive was by chain, which many thought a pity for this design was ideal for a shaft. Cost, of course, would have been the influencing factor here.

The big problem, or at least one of them, was the single carburettor mounted above the gearbox. It was very prone to icing in cold weather. Even so it allowed enough fuel through to propel the bike to about





70mph. Not outstanding by today's standards but about the norm for a 350 of the early fifties.

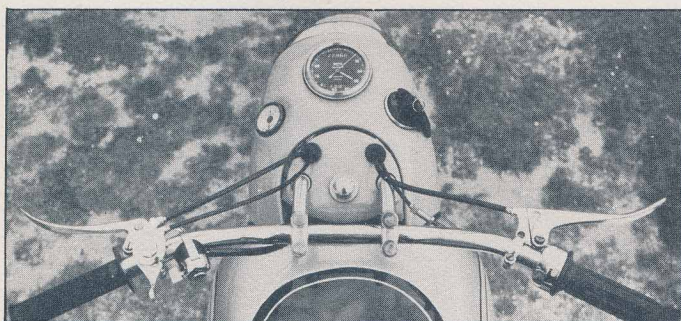
The finish was in stone with green trimming. It looked terrific but it is difficult to decide whether that, and its forward looking design, worked for it or against it. Remember motorcyclists were even more conservative than they are today and perhaps they weren't ready for a headlight that shone straight ahead and front forks that came up when you braked, even though both were excellent in operation. Whatever the reason, Douglas soon admitted defeat and the machines that had been selling at £195 were knocked out by Pride & Clarkes in 1957 for, if memory serves me correct, about £129.10s.0d. Even then there was no great rush to buy and I often went along to gaze in the window of Pride's and wonder if this could be the successor to my Velo.

THE OWNER JOHN TURNER

John is one of many thousands of ex-motorcyclists who found that a flame that he thought had long since died was still flickering deep down. After a break of fifteen years he hankered after a bike to keep him busy and, enquiring around it just happened that someone knew of a Douglas Dragonfly stored in bits. It is a familiar enough story and it is thanks to such people that there are well restored examples around for the new generation to look at and if they feel so disposed, criticise. A box of bits can be quite a headache when you have never seen the original and it took just under a year to figure it all out, get the parts brought back to better than new and the bike on the road. The stone colour cycle parts were really pampered, with no less than fourteen coats of paint lovingly layer-

ed on by a friend who works in a paint shop. The last five were half lacquer and half cellulose and the finished result could almost be compared to a Rolls Royce. It is superb and made all the more so because there are plenty of big tubes and flat areas, like the deeply valanced mudguards, to enjoy. I doubt if the finish was as good as this when the bike left the factory. The engine didn't need much doing to it but the top gear was missing so the gearbox needed work. The seat was recovered in a lightly non-standard mottled green, the originally planned green was not available. Apart from that about the only departure from standard was the throttle, which should be straight pull but on this bike doesn't. John has even found one of these which will soon be apart of the job.

I commented that if I recalled rightly the old Dragonfly used to rattle a bit. John agreed but said that, rattles apart, it went very well indeed. The performance was more plodding than exiting but he hasn't built it as a scratcher and the bits that matter are more than adequate. The brakes are surprisingly good for their size, the much maligned Miller electrics were excellent and it was as comfortable as a modern bike. He liked the 5 1/4 gallon tank and with fuel consumption around 60mpg there was no chance of the bike lacking range, for on longer trips it tends to get taken in the van. It gets used in local rallies and events but it's not really intended to be a workhorse. In its present condition it is too good for that and, given the present use the old Dragonfly (Johns was a '57, one of the Pride & Clarke batch) will no doubt give pleasure to both John and onlookers for some time to come yet. It's better than sitting in a box in the loft isn't it?



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