

# OUTER LIMITS

## SON OF QUASAR

Mark Revelle meets Malcolm Newell, the man behind the all-enclosed feet-first Quasar who is moving on to other projects. Photography

by John Perkins.

'Films should have a beginning, a middle and an end,' said the French director Godard, 'but not necessarily in that order.' Malcolm Newell's stories are a little like that. They wander everywhere as his alert mind leaps from one subject to another. His language is always colourful and undisciplined and there is always the need to read between the lines. 'When I was in Borstal, I studied industrial archaeology,' he says. 'But it wasn't on the curriculum so they threw me out.'

Borstal was Exeter Art School, where he actually studied Fine Art. The tutors thought his art perhaps not fine enough — 'Why don't you try using a creosote brush, Newell? It couldn't look much worse.' — so he became apprenticed to a printer. 'Only to please my old Dad,' he admits cheerfully.

Ironically for a man who loves to talk, his interest in literature and language is minimal. He speaks so quickly, and in such a variety of accents and funny voices that much of his voluble outpourings are distorted, particularly his pronunciation. 'To me, for me it is not logic. I have no time for prose, poetry. What is literature, except of course, *The Hobbit*? Though I love music. Beethoven (sic).' His speech patterns reflect his nervous and irrepressible mental energy. He is much more at ease, though equally provocative, when dealing with mechanical concepts which can be proved by being built, by having a physical

end product. The end product of his more recent efforts has been the Quasar.

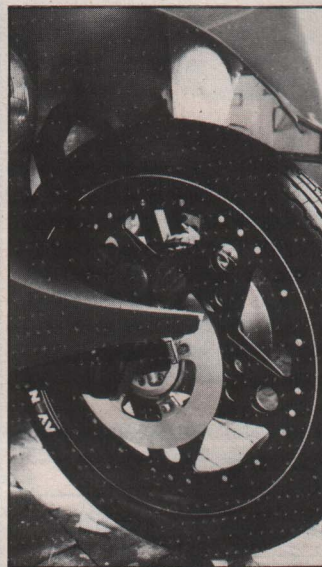
You're more likely to have seen the Quasar in the press than on the road — it could be described as being a bike with a great future behind it. Since the first pre-production model was assembled in 1976, only 15 have been sold. The wedge-shaped, fully enclosed, feet-forward machine created a huge stir on its first appearance. Five years on and it appears to have been little more than a legend in its own launchtime. Malcolm however is as breezily confident as ever. The Quasar was the first of the motorcycles of the future. In time, all motorcycles will be based on it. The process is slow, but inevitable.

But is it?

In his opinion, the lack of public response to the Quasar was the direct result of poor marketing and a lack of nerve and imagination in the development company, Wilson Engineering. Malcolm became involved with them when he sold them Rowden Engineering, a company he owned with Ken Leaming which manufactured vending machines, notably for the London Rubber Company. For a while, Wilson toyed with the idea of producing the Newell-designed trike, 'Revolution', but when he and Leaming came up with the Quasar designs, the trike project was dropped. The Quasar aroused great public interest, especially in the States, but Wilson wasn't prepared to gear up sufficiently to exploit the potential. As interest subsided, the project dragged, and little was

produced between 1976-78. A frustrated Newell found buyers for the company, but Wilson's asking price of £500,000 was extremely high. Eventually the Romarsh group agreed a deal by which it now manufactures Quasars under licence. Newell still owns 13 percent of the company but the patents are Wilson's. The Sports Quasar, featuring a new hub steering device designed by Bob Tait, was carefully conceived to circumvent the patents.

Several years of hope and efforts apparently wasted might have broken a lesser man, but the indomitable Malcolm just smiles broadly. He is not easily shaken. His overall philosophy of life is



Above: hub centre design is a Bob Tait creation. Malcolm feels the Difasio system used on the Quasar is old-fashioned and unsophisticated.

Right: in the midst of chaos — order. Once the decision had been taken, this prototype was built in five days.

firmly based. His belief in the value of mechanical engineering ('the highest form of art') and in the rightness of his own designs is absolute.

His engineering and manufacturing skills come from years of working with specialist car builders: he knows what he is doing and loves doing it. He lives simply with his wife and three children in a thatched cottage in Wiltshire. Access is across a field for the right of way over which Malcolm pays the owner one shilling a year. His bikes, a Quasar and a Kawasaki 1300 are parked back at the road. The cottage is entered by its garage which, instead of being full of old hay carts and



The Phasar is built to take a choice of three engines, CX500, BMW or Z1300, all with shaft drive.



ploughs, houses a Marcos, several scooters awaiting restoration for his teenage daughter, and his work in hand, provisionally entitled The Phasar.

Well, its more than a Quasar. Featuring Bob Tait's unique hub steering, it is in effect a kit, or rather three kits built to take engines from the CX500, the BMW or the Kawasaki 1300. You provide the engine, gearbox, swing arm switch-gear and controls and for £1,700 your mundane Bee-Emm can be transformed into a futuristic Dan Dare-style personal mobile. Yes I know Dan Dare was a character from the fifties; he was decades ahead of his time. Malcolm stresses the advanc-

ed development of the Phasar as against earlier models and current competition. Other fairing manufactures he dismisses airily as having 'ideologically outdated airflow systems'. The difazio hub steering is comparatively 'old-fashioned, unsophisticated'. He pre-empted attacks on his designs himself: 'you wouldn't get an O-level for this fairing. An aircraft man wouldn't even look at it,' he grins hugely.

He is clearly happy to be back as his own boss. The nine to five mentality is anathema to him, and he fitted in uneasily at Wilson's, whose three directors he called directions, so divergent were their opinions on anything. His rhythms of work

weren't appreciated at an establishment where clocking in was mandatory. His intense dislike of imposed discipline (he refers to anyone in authority as the Gestapo) and of external restraints doubtless reflect some childhood trauma, but they find a positive expression in his provocative challenging of conventional wisdoms. He has an eye for the main chance and great determination; once he decided to exhibit the Phasar at the NEC show it took him just five days to produce the prototype. He received three firm orders on the first day.

A genuine outsider, he preaches happiness a little too much to be a truly happy man himself, listing his own

particular highs as street racing, New Orleans jazz, and fornication, and as often as not his smile is just a challenge to take him seriously, but he is engaging and stimulating in conversation. He has invented a paper house for temporary housing in disaster areas — Oxfam told him to fuck off — and a dozen less memorable objects. His mind is always active.

I am not a convert to the feet first idea myself and see Malcolm as a Canute-like figure imperiously rejecting the tidal wave of adverse public opinion. But he won't shrink if he gets his feet wet. He'll plunge head-first into it. And he'll keep afloat, somehow.

WB?