

## MY MOTORCYCLING DAYS Part 1 by Charlie Brown (circa June 1978)

I can always remember having an avid interest in motorcycles. Going down to Calcutta to see my Uncle Tom (not the black variety), was the highlight of my early years. Uncle Tom owned a motorcycle, a Harley Davidson I think, and I can remember riding on the petrol tank from the age of five.

Throughout my schooling days in India I was always attracted by any of the few motorcycles around, my favourite then was a Tiger Cub, it was just my size I guess. One day Dad came home on a brand spanking new Lambretta 150, he had been eyeing this machine whenever he passed the showroom and after he had a big win on the horses the machine was no longer in the window.

I did not get a lesson on the Lamby for a good many years, in fact the machine had covered over 25,000 miles. I clearly remember that my Dad was very excited when he realised that his machine had covered more miles than the circumference of the earth without any overhauls or repairs whatsoever. My Uncle Morton (who insisted that his initials stood for Deadly Savage also purchased a Lambretta 150 Deluxe about this time and when Dad was at work and Uncle Morton's scooter was stored with us I pestered Mum for half a day until, in frustration, she allowed me to ride my Uncle's scooter. Unfortunately Dad found out somehow and that was the end of my riding days then. I was restricted to enviously watching this rich shop-owner sedately riding his new, immaculate 250 BMW down the road daily and listen to stories of Dad's exploits on a 550 Royal Enfield before I was born.

When I finished school I went to England to further my career, did I look forward to meeting the land of the motorcycle then! My owner/riding days were hare-brain, hairy and out of this world. I find it hard to believe that I was so silly or suicidal. I used to ride my pushbike down Gascoigne Road in Barking, South East London on my way to work and I noticed this old side-valve Ariell hitched to an equally old Watsonian single adult sidecar parked there daily. Then one day I saw a new red B.S.A. Super Rocket and sports sidecar with the Ariel coupled to its back wheel. Seeing the bikes in this fashion for a few days led me to believe that the householder had brought a new machine and I considered enquiring about the sale of the old Ariel. I surveyed my finances, done in two seconds then; no bank balance (didn't know what banks were) and a regular apprenticeship wage of £5 to £6 a week. Come pay day I fronted up to the house and asked the owner if he wished to sell his old bike. Imagine my joy when he said that I could have it for £5. My money was out before he could think of fetching the rego papers and log book.

The Ariel was a 600 cc side-valve, model VB of 1950 vintage. The chair was a quaint, narrow, single seat sidecar body built like a boat with a prow, high sides, a door like a car, glass windows all around and a canvas sun roof. The striking feature was the narrowness of the thing. The machine had a month's rego. Left on it but I had no licence or any experience of even sitting on an outfit. This did not deter me

so with the pushbike sticking out of the top of the sidecar I set off home; using all the back roads I knew for the five mile ride to Forest Gate, London, E.7.

My first ride was both hairy and scary. Can you imagine the first time on an outfit with the sidecar pulling here and lifting there but I soon got quite proficient. I rode that bike about and to and from work for a month before obtaining my Learners Permit as I was still a shade under sixteen. I used to take my mates for rides through London. Can you imagine three in the chair and a pillion passenger. I soon got to know a particular idiosyncrasy with this bike. Whenever I exceeded about 50 mph there was a loud bang; even a big blue flash at night, and the bike coasted to a stop with a quiet 'fuff, fuff, fuff, fuff', a blown head gasket.

Now I got my first lessons as a mechanic, simple for a side-valve. Off with the head by removing five bolts, fit a gasket and then on with the head again. It never occurred to me to investigate the reasons for the blowouts. I imagine it was because someone prised the head off with a screwdriver at an earlier date and all that it needed was to shave the head lapped in and any future head-removal done by removing the head bolts and kicking it over.

Soon I was ready to do my riding test. When the tester learnt that I was riding an outfit he said "Good, I can sit in the chair". But when he stepped outside and had a good look at the combo he scratched his head and said "I will walk and observe. That sidecar is too narrow and there's no quick escape". My riding was faultless. The riding at walking pace to evaluate clutch control was a cinch.

Road regulation question time was a different matter, I couldn't answer the question, "What shape is a stop sign and a give-way sign?" He shook his head no matter what shape I gave him and when I questioned the value of knowing the shape when the words 'STOP' and 'GIVE WAY' were already written on them he said, "When we have a heavy fall of snow you won't be able to read those signs". With a grin on his face he told me the shapes and passed me. I went back to my mates bragging "How's that for first time?".

By now I travelled armed with about a dozen head gaskets in the sidecar boot. I had also managed to wring a best of 55 mph from this bike I had grown to love before it rewarded me with a rude noise and went on strike; I used to take the gasket changing as all part of travelling. It took me 10 to 15 minutes to do the job on average.

My average speeds worked out to the speed limit or under: What I used to gain in speed I lost in roadside repairs...

To Be Continued

## MY MOTORCYCLING DAYS Part 2      By Charlie Brown. (August 1978)

So Far.... Charlie has grown up in India and gone to England where he has mastered a V.B Ariel and sidecar and managed to pass his driving test, learning much about motorcycles in the process .....

I now, started taking an interest in a plunger frame 1953 Ariel NH 350cc in a dealer's showroom at the price of £15. As I could only afford cheap things this attracted me and it wasn't long before it was mine. After some familiarisation I had it up to 73-78 m.p.h. flat out. That pleased me as I could keep ahead of my friend Eddie on his 200cc Tiger Cub. About this time I joined the 'Flying Wheels Auto Club', there were about 18 members including girlfriends. We used an upstairs room in a pub in Barking for our meetings as we had been turfed out of our original premises at the Ford Sports Hall at Dagenham. They didn't appreciate our cream bun fights or the noise we made coming and going.

My mates rode a variety of machines, there was Eddie and the Cub, Dave and his T110 outfit, another Dave and his 650 Dominator SS, Ray on a very hot T110 with 11 to 1 pistons, twin carbs, E3134 inlet and exhaust cams set in needle rollers, needle roller mains etc., etc , this was a real Bonnie eater. I was told the frame whipped if you flicked the throttle wide at more than a ton, needless to say Ray was soon on the lookout for a featherbed frame. Brian had one of the then new Super Sport Honda 250's which boasted non-standard 10 5 to 1 pistons and some other hot bits which enabled it to rev to over 11,000 making it a true 100 m.p.h. plus machine. Another 'Mad Dave' had an Ariel Huntmaster 650 and platform sidecar. He sported 'L' plates and got over the law restricting him to 250 this way. I can remember him frightening old ladies and the like by locking his throttle at about 60 m.p.h. and then hopping onto the platform and commencing overtaking manoeuvres while squatting low and steering with his right hand. I'm sure he is dead or serving a long prison term. There was Banger with his Bonneville, Tony with an Ariel Golden Arrow followed by a Triumph Trophy and others with a 650 Matchless, Vincent Rapide, BSA Shooting Star fitted with Watsonian Sports chair and 16" wheels all round. Kipper had a 250 Royal Enfield Crusader Sports, the very first British bike to come out with 5 speeds and he only found that out by accident'.

I now began a long series of Club motorcycling, which I enjoy to this day. An era of weekend camping runs commenced together with the occasional rallies and road race and scrambles attendances. We even saw 'Moto-ball' matches, a game of motorised soccer played on a soccer field. The teams are mounted on lightweight trials type machines except the goal keepers who had Mopeds that were not running but held as shields

Our favourite places for camping runs were Camber Sands near Hastings, Cromer, Canvey Island, Southend, Beaulieu (where we often looked over the museum), Portsmouth and a few others whose names escape me.

One day while returning home from work the NH emitted a loud, crunchy noise and stopped. Attempts to kickstart it sounded like churning a bag full of nails in the crankcase so it took no guessing to realise that the big end had fallen apart. After pushing it for a mile, I tried bump starting it; this worked but I had to keep the motor on the boil and use only first gear. I soldiered home for the next two miles with the bike sounding like a forty-four stuffed full of nuts and bolts rolling down the road. I've never turned as many heads as I did that day.

Two weeks later I got the offer of a scrambles tuned NH motor for £10. I accepted and it wasn't long before I was rolling the way I liked, although I would have been happier if it was 'in money' too. My prowess as a mechanic was improving and that 'donk' was a real flier. At my normal speed trials (everything I buy gets the same treatment) my 350 saw over 80 mph. The plunger frame (no rear damping) could not take it though. Approaching that speed a slow wag appeared in the tail. This did not deter me and I ignored my wobbly flight to record, not once but several times, an indicated 95 m.p.h. This was more than I hoped for.

Later the old 350 slowly took on new guise, that of pseudo-racer. I obtained clip-on handlebars. A 3 gallon Manx fibreglass tank, clubman Goldie racing saddle, Goldie megaphone and a Matchy G50 sweptback exhaust pipe which a friend stole off a crashed and burnt out Matchy at Brands Hatch practise day. I also removed the kick starter, made rear sets and modified the rear brake pedal and gear lever. If my bike was fast, by heck it would look fast too!! I soon enjoyed the reputation of having the fastest 350 around, barring Clubman Goldies, in the Barking area. I suppressed a challenge from a 1956 Red Hunter VH leaving him trailing once we got over 75 m.p.h. Some sight with the tail wagging!! Sports Cubs and BSA SS80s were no match. I even frightened a G50 Road Rocket rider when I blasted past at 90 m.p.h. He soon regained his composure and left me eating his dust....

To Be Continued