

## **Motorcycling memories.**

I was born in 1951 in Sway in the New Forest in Hampshire , and lived there until I was 18 leaving home for university. I was sent away to school in the depths of rural Somerset, this was because my father worked as a commercial pilot for BOAC and frequently had to live and work abroad and he took my mother with him.

The New Forest , is an area of natural heath land, and forest /woodland plantations on poor gravel based soils basically in a rough square between Bournemouth and Southampton on the coast up to Salisbury plain. And covers an area of about 350 square miles. It dates back to 1066 when William the Conqueror decided he wanted a “new” place to hunt deer so he designated it a New Forest, with all the strange local laws and rules that still persist today

I believe we ended up there in the first place because all the pilots of what was the new airline BOAC, once they had returned from the war, were told that the new national airport would be at Herne , an old military airfield. However once they had all moved there the plans changed and they developed Heath row but all the pilots stayed in the Forest.

At that time it was a number of fairly distant isolated villages, and communities mostly of “locals” with a smattering of “incomers” like us trying to fit in. There were also a few small towns and the bigger towns mentioned previously although they are not strictly in the forest. I was once asked were I came from and as I could not be bothered to explain said simply , Bournemouth, to which came the reply, “ people don’t come from Bournemouth they just go there to die.” It had always had a retirement atmosphere even then.

The whole area was serviced by an adequate set of railway branch lines until the arrival of Beeching who shut the lot and isolated the communities’ even further at a single stroke. The bus service was wholly inadequate if you lived out in the sticks as I did from about 1963, in a place miles from anywhere called Bisterne Close, near the village of Burley two miles up a seriously challenging dirt and gravel track.

Up until the age of sixteen I had kept in touch with my limited social life by bicycle. The main problem with this was that to see anyone required at least a twenty mile round trip frequently longer, and one feature of the Forest is because it is quite close to the sea it is subject to high winds particularly on the most open roads, which was most of the ones I cycled.

When I got to sixteen , and because I was staying on at school to do A levels, the expectation was that I would get a job over the summer holidays.. Fine by me as it would give me some financial independence, so long as I could find something. I got a job three miles from home in a country house hotel called The Burley Manor, as a waiter, I don’t remember the wages but it was long hours for not much money but I did learn how to do silver service, I skill I have never used since. I think I did this job for about seven weeks and because there was nothing to spend the money on and no time to spend it, built up to about £30.

I developed a plan, I would buy a motorcycle and solve all my transport/ social needs. The only trouble was my mother who was obsessively anti risk of any kind and that included motorcycles could have ignored her protests and bought one anyway, after all it was my hard earned money, but I knew I would never live it down

and the issue would be raised again and again and I simply could not be bothered to put up with that. One day I was in the town of New Milton, looking in the local bike shop window. There was a reasonably new Raleigh M3 Runabout moped. OK it was not my dream machine, it looked pretty naff just like what it was really, a heavyweight bike with a little two stroke engine attached, hardly "The Leather Boys", but I reckoned I could persuade my mum it would be just the thing both of us needed safe and convenient. This I managed to do and my lonely life changed forever.

The New Forest has a number of its own highway hazards. The best know to most is the ponies. According to William 1 laws in the Forest ponies have right of way, hit one and you are in trouble in more ways than one. They also like to congregate under the road bridges in the summer to get in the shade and away from flies. Finally the trippers who come to The Forest often like to feed them, which is illegal because it encourages them onto the roads.

The second hazard is little patches of fog which accumulate particularly in the many road depressions as they pass through the wet boggy heath either side. These are most frequent at night or early morning and frequently have, you guessed it , ponies in the middle of the fog.

Finally what are known locally as "Water splashes", everyone else calls the fords but in the Forest they are water splashes. There are hundreds of them, usually quite slippery, and often with , you guessed it again, ponies drinking in them, which is probably why they are slippery.

The Runabout served me adequately for about eighteen months until I took my car test, . My mother was so keen to get me off two wheels she then lent me her car. This suffered a freak accident while I was driving to see a mate when a decent sized female deer jumped over a hedge and landed on the bonnet. It was quite a shock, but one of those "forest" things.

I do remember mates from home having Puch Maxis, Royal Enfield Crusader sports and an Ariel Huntmaster, all of which |I rode occasionally, and a James ML which we found in an old outbuilding, with the hand change through the tank.

Away at school there was also a secret shed we borrowed and filled with decrepit old motorcycles Cubs C15s, even a Triumph twin. We would occasionally be able to get them going, funds and expertise allowing, and get the odd ride. On Friday afternoons my school insisted that we all play soldiers, which seems utterly pointless to me until they started the MT section which I was allowed to join. There I learnt the ways of Army mechanical fault finding through a test we had to sit at an army camp near Yeovil , the test was called certificate T and it taught me one essential lesson. In all fault finding only change one thing at a time", A lesson I have usually followed and which has stood me in good staid. In the summer of 1968 I did ride down from Salisbury to St Maws in Cornwall about 150miles on the back of my mate Newts LI150 Lambretta scooter. Very cheap trip we were going on our first holiday ever away from parents. Staying in a free flat and eating boiled limpets off the beach to save money for beer. We rode each others bikes, a C15 and a Suzuki super six and the Lambretta. I told my mum I was going in Newts car a 600cc fiat but when I got to his place it would not start.

Then came University and marriage in 1971 and my dad gave us his old Triumph Herald estate car as a wedding present. I learnt a bit more engine maintenance, and what it cost to run a car when not having any money. My father in law was an ace amateur mechanic and taught me a lot. 1972 saw me working as a research student and we were living in the middle of London near Camden Town. So to be honest we didn't need a car, which we could not afford. Then came the OPEC oil crisis and petrol went up to 50p per gallon, and was informally rationed at filling stations to one or two gallons per vehicle.

I suggested to Shelley that we get rid of the car and buy a motorbike and she agreed, so off we went to Pride and Clarkes in Stockwell road. As I did not have my test, it was a choice between a Suzuki Bloop or a 250 BSA Starfire. I figured that to carry a pillion I needed at least a 250, in addition to taking and passing a test, so went for the BSA. I got £75 for the car, because "no body wants a car at the moment due to the cost of petrol," and paid £125 for the BSA because "everyone wants a motorbike because of the cost of petrol." I rode it back from Stockwell road right through the rush hour up Southampton Row, learning to ride a proper bike with gears etc all the way home. Agh the stupidity of youth.

So started my continued ownership, riding, maintenance and re building of motorcycles, from the gutter to the workshop, from the ordinary to quite exotic.

The BSA was not a good bike, it was an over tweaked C15 which had had a series of unforgiving owners over its 5 year life. The handling, frame brakes and forks were quite superb, the engine and especially the kick start mechanism which appeared to be made form cheese, were not good, still I learnt a lot of mechanical things form a group of "helpful" passers by as I squatted in the gutter by the main road outside our flat, wi9th the bloody thing in bit. To be fair I did meet some really helpful folk many of whom lived in the empty terraced houses down the road as squatters and they had access to workshops they had converted and in which I could occasionally work on my bikes. I suppose if you had shoulder length hair, a beard, a pair of what were known as "loon pants" and then a motorbike, you fitted in pretty well to what was a Hippy existence. I remember going to the workshop down the road to work on the bike to find it closed because they were filming a pornographic film in among the bikes. Don't know how the performers didn't get all oily, as I never saw the end result.

We used to regularly ride down to see our parents who were about 100 miles away, and mostly we got back with a bit of roadside fiddling.

Then I passed my test and the BSA had to go, I sold it with a broken kick start as the spares simply were not available from any of the North London bike dealers, and I inhabited them all.

Exchange and Mart was scrutinised and a trip to "The Right On Trucking Company" (remember the Robert Crumb cartoon character in the Keep On Trucking cartoon and the cartoons on the cover of the first Janis Joplin album, "Cheap Thrills". That was what inspired this bike dealership. You entered to the smell of petouli oli and dope, But there was my dream a 1962 650cc Triumph Bikini backed 6T.

It had had a bad engine rebuild judging by the amount of gasket goo on the outside and it had a lot of its tin ware missing. But it ran and had an MoT. And I loved it, bought it for £150 and rode it home to Tufnell Park.

For some reason I decided I liked the original semi clad look of the bike even though much of it was missing, I could have ripped it all off and replaced with more modern looking parts, which was commonly done in 1973. I used to meet to cartoonist Paul Sample of Ogri fame in the cue for parts at Humphries in Islington and he had completely re styled an S \* Sunbeam with his own elaborate tank paint job , all rather "Easy Rider" . So to decide to put the 6T back to original aesthetic spec was probably an odd choice. However in London at the time were dozens of parts suppliers selling off basically old stock from Triumph and BSA , Hamrax motors came up with most of the missing tin ware and the rest as they say is history. The bike got used for commuting, travel around London , and trips back home to the south coast and the New forest. I never added up the miles but in four years of ownership must have been 30 or 40 thousand. Not trouble free by any means but always fixable.

In order to make a few extra pounds I bought a range of derelicts from my squatter pals and sorted them out , MoT, rode them for a bit and sold them. I remember a full bathtop distributor 3TA, which had appalling breaks and dreadful soft suspension , and a rather nice A10 which was a fine smooth machine to ride, but I needed to money so it had to go.

I found a Yamaha 90 step through in a big bin at lab I was working in and asked around. I was pointed to the owner who said I could have it for a fiver, which seemed bit rich as it was in the bin but I was looking for a bike for Shelley, so bought it and got it transported home to the curb side workshop. It was really good apart from a stripped kickstart which was fixed by a bob of weld from a mate. Shelley passed her test on it and used it a lot

In 1976 I had finished my research project got my higher degree and managed to get a job eventually with the new Severn Trent WA as a contract fisheries researcher based in Malvern and working across Shropshire into mid and North Wales. So we needed to move. We bought a BMC J4 van off a couple of Australians who were going back to Oz , loaded up the tools , the Triumph and a recently acquired Enfield Bullet and headed north to Malvern with the intention of camping out in it until Shelley arrived nearer Christmas having worked out her notice. Fortunately one of my new work colleagues took pity on me and I slept in his spare room for a couple of months. The bikes stayed largely in the van.

Eventually we bought an 18<sup>th</sup> century Malvern stone cottage in West Malvern, the first house we had ever owned, quite cheap and no more rent to pay and I had a workshop in the back scullery, the only downside being wheeling the bike through the main kitchen to get there. The house was down a seriously unmade pebble strewn cul de sac with a one in five slope on it. Which made setting off for work and returning quite interesting and probably encouraged my later interest in trials riding. We both went out for rides together through the Malverns, me on the trusty 6T and Shelley on the newly rebuilt Royal Enfield model G. With no more rebuilding to do I wanted another project and spotted a 1929 model F Ariel for sale in exchange and Mart for £100 just down the road in Ledbury. I bought it , it was nearly complete missing a front mudguard and cylinder head and exhausts, so it went into the

workshop while I decided how to tackle a really old bike. That was my introduction to vintage bikes, I still have it and it is my go to bike for reliable two up vintage riding, It does not have a speedo but considering I have owned it for nearly fifty years and have used it for commuting and motorway travel I reckon I must have done seventy thousand miles on it, in both solo and sidecar trim. I have personally rebuilt it three times , but once was after a bad accident. I joined the VMCC and the AOMCC soon after buying it and the rest as they say is history.

Some weeks after buying the Ariel Shell and I walked into our local pub, the Brewers Arms for a late night drink. As we had entered I noticed a rather battered BSA M20 leaning against the pub wall in full military trim and loaded to the gunnels. We got our drinks and went to sit down near to a man in a dark corner wearing a large riding coat and with a pudding basin helmet on the table. I assumed he owned the M20, and asked him about it. "I am coming back from work, I live down the Purlieu. Just popped in for a rum and orange" I thought it was a bit late for leaving work, "where do you work, are you on the late shift?" No I work in Tripoli for Save the Children and have just ridden home" So started my thirty year friendship with one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met, Peter Ward. One of the very early members of the VMCC, who a year previously had ridden non stop from Lands End to John o Groats on a 1911 Edwell single speed motor cycle, using A roads and the odd motorway section on Acetylene lights. He completed the trip in about 19 hours Shelley didn't like the Enfield as it was too heavy, so it got sold to a dealer in Worcester. I decided I wanted a change and sold the 6T, and with the money from both I went for something completely different, an S8 Sunbeam. Not a good choice, ponderous in performance and handling, and complex to keep running correctly. I kept it only for about four months. By this time it was 1978 and I had got the Ariel on the road, my first event in the VMCC was the International Assembly held at Cheltenham race course, Shelley and I went with the bike, I rode it over and she went in Peters van. About four miles out from home the bike tightened up and came to a grinding halt. Peter pulled up and walked up to the bike, I described what happened and he felt the engine and gearbox with his hand. "What is in the gearbox?" "Grease" as it says on the top." "Never put only grease in one of these grease gearboxes, always add about 25% oil, it does not matter if it comes out." Lesson learnt it has never seized again although it does have lubricant on the outside after a decent run.

The VMCC Internationals were held until about 20 years ago either at Harrogate, Cheltenham and later at Beverley. They were time trials of about 100 miles and very popular. Always having a good overseas contingent who all took it very seriously. Over the years the number of people wanting such events declined as did people prepared to organise them so they stopped. A shame in my view but a reflection of the way the club changed. The only similar event left is the West Kent International, which I have done a couple of times, but it always seems that the roads around there are too crowded for my liking.

Following a disappointing few months with the S8, I noticed a very odd machine in the window of the dealers in Worcester to whom I had sold the RE. This was a motorcycle made in Denmark, by the Fisk Nielsen vacuum cleaner company called a Nimbus, and ohc inline four in a riveted spring steel frame with shaft drive. Made in about 1939. What was not to like? So I did a deal with the S8 and brought it home.

Trouble was it had been bought into the country by a Danish VMCC member at the previous International and swapped for a British bike , so it had no papers or reg number. It also had no proof of import so it cost me an extra 10% import tax just to get it registered, However it was a really nice machine. Smooth good handling and performance but a bit under geared as it had a sidecar ratio final drive. Still I rode it a fair bit, and still had the Ariel for safekeeping.

We also helped Peter ward out on his autojumble stall, he had been doing these for as long as anyone could remember and had a reputation for finding unusual items to sell. If you mix with dealers you end up dealing so over a few months a number of bikes passed through my hands. If I liked them I kept them and rode them if not I passed them on. Ones I remember were a very original D1Bantam which I managed to break my big toe on by hitting the fixed footrest when kickstarting, lesson, don't use slippers to kickstart a motorcycle even a 125 two stroke. An Ariel colt 200 cc from about 1954, pretty gutless and unmemorable also bought a kit of parts for a 1939 square four, on the misguided basis that if you are into Ariels you had to have a Square Four. How wrong you can be.

By the end of the year, 1979 I had had to get another job because the contract money had finished, so we moved up to Derby, and I commuted on the Nimbus until I ran the big ends. I stripped the bike in the shed of my digs in Etwall and a real old fashioned motor engineering firm called Cotters in Derby re metalled , the con rods and caps, and ground the crank. Making a superb job even though the guy who did it all had to be brought out of retirement because no one else had done anything like this for such a long time.

We bought a house in Mickleover with a big garage that leaked badly and our first son appeared so all things changed again. I also took up trials riding.

Over the next year I put the Square Four together. It had come from a VMCC vintage racer who had kept the forks and front wheel for his racing bike. Fortunately someone had discovered a large batch old WD Ariel girder forks at a military supply depot and from being unobtainable they became plentiful over night. So long as you could afford them, and did not mind that they were 1 inch longer than the civvy ones, which I didn't. On the positive side they were brand new so needed no refurbishment which saved some cash. The front wheel came from Bolton autojumble and was another fortunate find.

All together it looked handsome and I decided to hitch it to a Watsonian sidecar I had got hold of in another deal. It looked good and the first ride was an eye opener, smooth, powerful , decent brakes and suspension. Then fifty miles in to the trip it stopped and would not start until completely cool. This pattern kept repeating itself, and I got fed up with taking it out and having to wait until it cooled to come home again.

I entered the VMCC International assembly again held at Harrogate, on the Model F and met another competitor riding a 1939 Square Four like mine. But he had rigged up a coil based ignition system, it turned out that the problem was common with all these early pushrod fours. Basically the magneto is bolted onto the crankcase immediately behind the rear cylinders, and got so hot that the insulation on the windings broke down, and you lost sparks. Apparently this had happened when the bikes were made and Ariel kept paying for replacement armatures, but to no avail.

My armature had come as a new old stock item from an old dealer so was probably a faulty replacement anyway.

I did the Heath Robinson coil conversion which, worked OK but was not perfect, and my confidence was blown so it had to go.

I took it to the Beaulieu autojumble that September and sold it to an American within a few minutes of getting it out of the van, £1000 , the most money I had ever got for a bike. It burnt a hole in my pocket straight, as a few hours later I spotted on a stall an early flat tank White and Poppe engined Ariel missing forks and hubs which had been converted into a saw bench. I knew these flat tank Ariels were rare so it had to be mine, for £120. I also saw another Ariel, a 1953 500cc spring frame VH, so bought that and put it in the van as well.

So at a stroke I became one of those loony motorcycle collectors, with a favourite Marque completely by accident.

Those two bikes got put together and running over the winter and next spring, I took the VH for a ride and just outside Coalville on a long sweeping bend I dabbed the back break and nearly ended in the ditch. On getting home I checked everything, all was as it should be. Then I got talking to other owners, "yes they do that, it is the routing of the rear brake cable and brake arm which can self servo if you apply it while hitting a bump in the road." Apparently Ariel changed the design for the next year, but did not bother to put anything about it in the manuals. I just had to swap the position of the brake arm. However confidence again damaged so I fitted a Jet 80 sidecar, and used it for the 8mile round trip to work.

For various reasons, I decided I needed to have a modern bike, so put the Nimbus up for sale, and a guy from Lancashire rang and asked if I would swap it for his Mk3 Commando. I thought it sounded like a good idea so the deal was done and I rode up to Nelson one November and did the swap, riding the Norton home, in the freezing cold in the dark.

On first acquaintance it was a nice bike. A bit heavy but smooth and powerful. I commuted on it and we went on a camping holiday in Belgium and Holland on it. I always felt the clutch with its diaphragm spring was heavy but returning form Brighton through the centre of London was absolute agony , I got to the stage where I had to stop just to rest my clutch hand. In addition it did not like running in traffic and the tick over became increasingly erratic, add to that fact that the electric start did not work most of the time, and it became clear that the customer was sorting out the build issues of the manufacturer. It went to someone who really wanted one. I used some of the money to buy most of an Ariel Fleet parcel truck. Obviously the madness was at its peak by this stage. This truly awful device was built by Ariel in 1931/2. It weighted about 8 hundred pounds and was powered by a 550cc side valve engine de tuned to a CR of 4.5 to 1. O to 25 in two minutes , according to the road tests. I found an engine for it from a wood yard by the Dartford tunnel, cleaned painted and assembled all the mechanical parts including the Ackerman suspension/ steering, which was heavy, and the Dunlop disc wheels which were very heavy. Stood back to look at my handy work and asked myself out loud, "what the bloody hell have I got this for."

The madness passed and I swapped it with a man who had a 1911 single cylinder Indian which he had taken to bits including the frame, and did not know how to put back together. My first veteran.

As if that was not enough to do I wanted to ride in VMCC off road trials, having been persuaded by Titch Allen's youngest son Roger who I had become friends with through the Notts and derby VMCC section.

I needed a bike, and at a country fair near Ashover in the stationary engine section, I met a man, who seeing my crash helmet asked if I would like to buy another bike a 1939 BSA 250, no forks or wheels and currently being used as a home made cultivator on his allotment. This seemed to me to be the ideal basis for a trials bike, I have no idea why. But it was £20 so I bought it and turned it into my first trials bike.

In terms of rebuilding bikes I was still at it. For some unaccountable reason I got heavily into Ariels from the 1931/ 32 period.

Like many manufacturers in that post financial crash period Ariel were in the process of going under.

They had been a very successful middle sized company, making and marketing a limited range of motorcycles which used a large number of common parts. In 1930 they made a 250 ohv, a 550 side valve, and three versions of the 500 ohv one of which had four valves. And they were dabbling with the early ohc Square Four. But a small range, very efficiently produced using many common parts. Come the fall out of the Wall street crash, markets shrank. The companies' response from my perspective was madness. They opted to go for a huge expansion of models. To at least eleven, there may have been a few more but some are so obscure, I may not be aware of them. They had 250s, 350s with engines leaning forward 15 degrees. 500,s sv, ohv two valve and four valve all engines sloping at 30 degrees, 500 vertical engine models sv ovh 2 valve and 4 valve, and an OHC square four. If the range expansion was silly, and an attempt to chase fashion, then the lack of the use of common components was ridiculous, Nothing was interchangeable between the different model groups and also between models so the 250 used different bottom end to the 350 for example. The outcome was financial disaster. Most of the bikes were quite good but in a shrinking market, there was only one way to go down. The company did rise from the ashes, and for 1933 it was back to a much smaller range with lots of common parts again.

So for some unaccountable reason I was attracted to these bikes. I picked up an absolutely complete MF32 350 OHV inclined engined one from a guy in Huddersfield, brought it home and restored it in two months, Its history spoke volumes of that financial period, Made mid 1932, sold to a customer first time in 1936, a very slow market.

I built the bike for Shelley to ride which she did , but as the kids grew it became too small two up, and I found a 500 OHV sloper 1932 kit of parts and decided to build that.

By that time we had moved to a house on Fauld camp, which had recently been released by the MOD , it needed a lot of work and also had no garage. So we had two kids a house under reconstruction and three motorcycle in the rooms. Friends allowed me to leave stuff with them, while we built a garage over the following winter and summer.

I kept the 350 for a number of years and I rode it a fair bit, when Shelley wasn't using it. It was a very nice , nippy machine which handled very well. It had clearly been built down to a weight, as it fell into the special low weight tax bracket introduced in

1931.I remember having to get it weighed on a weigh bridge to get it taxed. It was physically a bit small for me but otherwise a nice machine. Well thought out and executed. I have recently built and ridden a 250 sv version of this machine and that was truly appalling.

The 500 OHV Sloper was another matter. A real Gentleman's machine. Smooth, unhurried, well mannered and to be frank a bit dull. Whereas all previous 500s had had a long stroke motor a la JAP from which they owed much of their design. The Sloper was a square bore and stroke, which made it quite revvy, and unless you did rev it its performance was sedate. However Shelley rode it quite a bit as you could get a largish child on it, even if they were practising their swimming strokes as they rode along.

By now we had moved to Beamhill in Burton to be closer to the kids school, This meant I was commuting about forty miles a day to Derby and back, mostly I was doing it on the R80GS which was fine but when the mood took me a trip through the back lanes to work was accomplished on something a bit earlier. We had a BSA threewheeler car which was a great bit of kit, I had got it a few years before as a barn find in Essex and rebuilt it including a new body. They were a tenth the price of Morgans, and in my opinion, just as good. In some respects they were better although they did not have the gut wrenching performance of a Mog they did not have the constant desire to self destruct under the pressures of engine vibration and value engineering, common Mog attributes. We used it a lot in rallies and the kids were carted about in it even though they did not always want to be seen in it as it damaged their street cred particularly outside the school.

In pursuit of a change I decided we should go MCC trialing together in a car, so did a deal with a fellow competitor, his Mk 1 Dellow trials car for my R80GS and some cash. The Dellow trials car was built especially for trials in the 1950s into the early 60s.The chassis was massive tubes which were chrome molybdenum steel from a batch that the builders Mr Delingpole and Mr Low had bought as army surplus after the second world war. It had originally been meant for the production of four inch diameter mortar tubes. Onto this very rigid, reasonably light chassis was mounted a steel tube space frame, clad completely in Aluminium. All the mechanical parts came from E93A ford side valve components supplied direct by Fords. This was not a kit car. Ours originally had a supercharger fitted but that had been removed, less power, but the engine lasted longer. As already said I was not as good in a car off road as on a bike. I was at least quite competent, on the latter.

Anyway we needed space in the garage, the kids could be carted around on bikes so the BSA trike had to go. I swapped it for a complete Model X matchless motorcycle in solo trim. A really good bike. Masses of power, low down. Decent brakes and decent steering and handling so long as it was not windy. Shell and I even went green laning on it two up through Grizedale forest on a VMCC South Lakes Mountain Run.

Probably not the best option but we came to no harm. The bike was heavy with a lot of weight on the front wheel in addition it had a very large front mudguard, which tended to catch the wind. So riding at lower speeds on a windy day could be interesting.

I kept it for a couple of years and then was offered a series B Vincent Rapide, by Geoff Davies of the North Staffs section. He had bought it off the estate of the late

Gordon Griffiths but could not get on with its overall size. It was a well-known bike in good nick, these chances don't come up very often so I sold both the Model X and the Ariel AKD V twin to raise the money. Oddly both these bikes went abroad which probably reflected the UK economy at the time.

We kept the Vin for about fifteen years and rode it a lot, I had started working in Stoke so was commuting sixty plus miles a day and often used the Vin for this. It was comfortable for both passenger and rider, went well, stopped well and steered well. Basically the previous long-term owner Gordon had had it forty odd years and it was completely sorted, with some very sensible mods. He had even replaced the Vincent clutch with a Norton one, which certainly worked fine.

I did have a couple of engine problems and had to take it apart once. I asked a well-known Vincent specialist what I needed to do this, and was told. "a lot of cardboard boxes and a lot of labels". Not very helpful, but not wrong. I believe some cynics used to say they were a series of engineering solutions looking for problems to solve. I can't comment, it worked well for me but it did have a lot of parts.

It was also not very good in the dark so I did not tend to commute on it, in the winter. To avoid riding it into the ground I bought a modern bike, an MZ Skorpion, with a Yamaha engine, Designed by Seymors, it was a good looking bike, and I rode it for about four years up and down the A50 to work and back, but the finish was shocking it could not stand the winter salt and the paint fell off in shards, and the unsealed wheel bearings, rusted solid in a few thousand miles. Eventually I took it to DKs in Newcastle, who claimed that as it had a very high mileage about fifty thousand, they would have the scrap if they took it in part exchange for a one year old BMW F650. I said I didn't mind what they did so long as they let me have £1000 off the BMW as an exchange price. After a lot of muttering they agreed. I used the BMW, which seemed a great bike with its Rotax engine, over the summer and continued commuting on it, until Friday night of the second week in Dec 1999. I was stopped and turning right from the Tutbury to Burton road, about a mile from home, going up into Longhedge lane.

I remember a squeal of tyres and nothing else, I came to lying face up with the drizzle landing on my face. I was aware of my right arm sticking out into the traffic, which was still driving past. I tried to move it and nothing happened. I had to pick it up with the other hand and move it like that it felt weird.

Apparently a nurse from the Burton hospital had run straight into me at about fifty miles an hour. The bike shot out from under me and disappeared into the opposite hedge and I was thrown under the wheels of a small truck. So that was Christmas 2000 taken care of. There followed a series of about six operations on arm and leg. Brian Slack leant me his wife's spare wheel chair for six months and I ended up with one arm and one leg shorter than the other.. What to do next? At least I wasn't on the Vin.

Once I had convalesced it became obvious that my somewhat asymmetric skeleton could not do what it used to do. There was no way I could sit in the saddle of a rigid bike for ten hours and two hundred miles straight, so MCC trials on a bike had to stop, just too uncomfortable. I had already dropped one day trials due to knee and neck problems. So we decided to continue MCC trials in a car, and bought a very competitive Marlin kit car that had won the ACTC championship. We used it for

about three years and entered both MCC and ACTC events, the latter being much harder . I did get better at it, but never quite good enough so eventually, decided to call it a day on MCC trials as we were no longer really enjoying the experience. I did passenger a couple of times for a friend who was just starting, but all in all I had done it, so calling it a day was the obvious option.

I still worked thirty miles away and had to get there, unfortunately, although I could kick start the Vin with my left leg, it was not easy and I did not want to run the bike into the ground by commuting on it. An old friend in the Ariel club had a Moto Guzzi engined three wheeler, called a JZR which he was getting rid of so I went for a test drive and bought it. I had had a few three wheelers by this time from Reliant, the less said the better, through BSA to Morgan, so was used to them. The JZR was a cheapish version of the Triking produced as a self build Kit car, and this one had been quite well built. Thrashing up the A50 at the same height as forty ton lorries wheel nuts was a bit alarming, but it did the job and I could get my walking sticks in and just about climb out of it. We took it on holiday on a tour of Norway during the summer and it caused a sensation with local reporters wanting to talk to us and keeping on asking us "is this the only car you have brought to Norway?" To the answer "Yes" they always asked "Why". The only slightly unnerving aspect of this trip was due to the fact that Norway has many unlit tunnels some of them 10 to 15 KM long. The lights on the JZR were not that reliable. So we would try to go as far into the tunnel as we could only using sidelights. Not always a great idea as the main other traffic was lorries.

Once I was fully fit I sold it and went back to commuting by a mixture of bike in the summer and car in the winter. Somehow I had gone off riding at night, I wonder why?"

In the end I changed jobs again and went to work in Wolverhampton travelling twenty-five miles across country from where we now lived in Kingstone. I had worked out a few different cross country routes so went back mostly to riding an old bike, whatever I had at the time and explored all sorts of lanes between Cannock Chase and Wolverhampton. My favourite was called Sheepwash lane which ran along the sides of some commercial vegetable fields which always had a different crop, but if you rode it in the dusk you could see the lane absolutely covered in Rats wandering about up to no good. I think the most I counted in one trip was about 150. I always imagined that if you fell off on the lane in the dark they would eat you and no trace would be left.

I carried on restoring bikes as the fancy took me. Some quite challenging work. I built a 1926 V twin Royal Enfield from a kit of parts, more frame repairs were needed and I had to have a casting done for the 8 inch front brake. I made the pattern from an old Cortina brake drum and John Goodall supervised my use of his massive lathe for me to machine it. His only condition was that I took all the swarf away, so I set off home in our car with three big boxes of oily swarf in the back. Unfortunately I had to do an emergency stop and they all fell over. Not good as I had to clean it all out of the back of the car by 5 o'clock before a prospective buyer for the car turned up.

I still have the Enfield and use it a bit, it is like a two-wheeled earth-moving vehicle and even two up you almost never have to change gear. It is heavy on petrol though. I also bought a 1926 Ariel model E super sports. These bikes were guaranteed 90 MPH out of the factory. Which was a lot in 1926. This particular one had been used

competitively before the war and then completely stripped and put under the floorboards of a cottage in Norfolk, not being rediscovered until sixty years later. It made a very nice bike and a pretty easy restoration as it was all there. I mainly built it for Shelley to start riding again but she found it simply too quick. I rode it to work for a couple of years and eventually swapped for another 1923 Ariel, which is an easy flat tank bike to ride and very original spec.

I eventually got to the point where my ability to run and jump onto my Precision engined 1912 Victoria which I had had since selling the Indian twenty five year before, had become unreliable, so I put it up for sale and it went back to its country of origin Scotland where it is getting a lot of use.

In the end I decided to give up working for others and sold the Vincent to fund my earlyish retirement. I had had it seventeen years, and have to say that it was superb as a do anything go anywhere bike at a decent speed and comfort.

I still ride a fair bit for pleasure and do the odd restoration. I have just finished a two speed Scott as I had never had one before. When I rode it it took about ten miles to show me I did not like its frenetic style. Far too twitchy and quick for me, giving no time to look for rats. So I swapped it with a friend for a Douglas which seems quite nice and calm.

In summary, I came to motorcycling by necessity of living in an isolated area. It turned out I liked doing it, so when it became a practical solution to London commuting I went back to it and simply kept going. I fixed my own bikes because I could not afford to pay someone else to do it. I also like learning new things. So apart from learning to do things mechanical, I learnt to weld, machine build wheels etc etc. It is amazing what others can teach you if you just ask the right person. Pat Davy taught me to align flywheels, John Goodall taught me about machining accurately, Brian Walker taught me to time the valves on a V twin when my mind went blank on the issue. Motorcycling has given me a wealth of friends.

I have been riding for 50 years, owned and ridden about 45 different machines. The worst being an Ariel Pixie, BSA star fire, Square four and a 1903 Clement Garrard, which nearly gave me a heart attack at the age of 37. The best, the Triumph 6T, the Vincent Rapide and the 1929 Model F. The latter has given me more smiles per mile than any other.

Motorcycling has given me a wealth of stories memories and observations, I have managed to ride in every part of the UK and every county, on 15 different marques, and what a pleasure and privilege it has been.

They say that certain things in life you choose to define you. For me part of my self-definition is as “a Motorcyclist.”

At the end of my working life, I earned a lot of money and told a lot of people what to do. I remember walking into the vice chancellors office in November and getting

out of my gear, and changing my shoes. Someone looked at me and said. "Why do you still ride that thing, cant you afford to drive a car?" It was said in jest but still grated, but I was able to use a reply I had recently read on someone's T shirt. "If you have to ask that, you'll never understand."