

SCOTT RACING DEBUT. Colin Heath.

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The Long Hot Summer.

It was soon after the heroic taming of a wild, bucking wobbly walking-stick in a small Buckinghamshire hamlet sometime in the mid nineteen seventies that Jean favoured me with one of her infrequent but considered opinions. Please do not misunderstand; opinions – frequent, considered opinions less frequent but far more deadly. Caution advisable. The considered opinion was that, all things taken into account, there seemed to be far too many motorcycles about the place.

I cannot remember how the decision was taken, how long I roamed amongst them before finally giving the hard word to one of my treasured friends, but I do clearly recall driving away from our home with the victim tightly constrained upon the trailer. Jean waved goodbye, but I could not determine in the diminished mirror image the exact nature of the tear that slid down her cheek. Joy and sorrow are close enough on the scale of emotions to sometimes be mistaken, or sometimes transposed.

I still cannot account for what happened later that same day. I returned to our peaceful valley – it was probably that long hot summer of '76 that went on for ever – with car and trailer intact and a blissful ignorance of my likely fate. Roped on the back, not one motorcycle but two!

It has taken almost thirty years for this incident to insinuate its way into Jean's repertoire of stories she likes to tell of her erring husband. The twin scars I bear, probably for the rest of my days, are evidenced by two things that I cannot for the life of me remember. Try as I may I cannot recall which machine I so brutally culled, and neither can I remember anything about the remonstrations or sanctions applied upon my return. Apparently severe trauma can have such lasting effects. How many tears may have slid down my cheek on account of this occurrence, and what indeed was their nature? Joy or sorrow?

What I wanted with the little Levis I do not know. It was the first belt-driver I had owned, and the last, and I rode it round happily that summer. It had a small engine and a big heart and I think of it fondly, but I was in the prime of life and not yet forty and it was passed on before long. My lasting impression is of the sheer amount of torque that such a small displacement two-stroke can produce, when the porting has not been sacrificed on the alter of speed and revolutions.

What I wanted from the Sprung-heeled Triumph twin was reliability and performance. I rode it for a season of Vintage Club runs and trials, and revelled in the reliability. I left it completely standard but made sure it was in good order and well adjusted, as well as any Thunderbird could reasonably be. I searched high and low for the performance until those wiser and more experienced quietly told me that it was a fruitless task. There was none to be found without radical changes and magical quotients like E3134 and similar

incantations.

A young and hearty RAF type came and purchased it, confiding in me that he was about to set the vintage racing world alight. I suggested that something like one of my Scotts would be more suitable for that, and he favoured me with one of those sneers that I remembered from my National Service days. I think that some of the junior officers were allocated with them in lieu of wisdom. Sneers that is, not Scotts.

I tucked his notes in my pocket and he tied the Thunderbird on his trailer, both heedless that our paths were fated to cross again in future.

We moved to Sussex soon afterwards, and I still remember that couple of years in the Bucks countryside with affection. Most of my riding was on the Three-speed Super alluded to earlier, and the Two-speeder outfit on which I taught Jean to ride. If only that lane had not been quite so narrow.

I met and made some good friends there. Mike Highfield was a neighbour and fellow conspirator, and Glynn Chambers was not so far away. Bill and Will Hodge were over by Eton. Graham Griffiths taught me that nothing was impossible, and that Scotts really ought to go racing. I enjoyed chatting with Dave Lecoq on the Vintage runs, and likewise our visits to the wondrous workshop of Dave Whiteside. Always something interesting on the go there. They all knew their stuff and although I like talking I made a concerted effort to also listen and learn. Each in their own-way helped to stoke up my Scott boiler.

Three factors in particular drew me into vintage racing: childhood memories, fear of the passing years and economic necessity.

I grew up in Lee in south-east London. Persuading my parents that cycling to school in Lewisham was more practical than the tram, I then had the teenage means of exploring the Kent countryside. One ride took us close to Brands Hatch, and the roar of the engines drew me like a magnet. I made sure that I knew the dates of future meetings from then on, and cycled off with my sandwiches and flask whenever possible. From Cliftons roundabout, where the south circular crosses the A20, it was straight down the main road all the way through Swanley and Farningham and up Gorse Hill to the circuit. Originally a grass track it was just the basic kidney shape then and only surfaced with asphalt shortly before this time, and was ridden anti-clockwise. A fence of wire and chestnut palings separated riders from spectators and provided somewhere to hang on to in moments of excitement. Later on the Druids Hill loop was added and direction of circulation changed.

I must surely have seen young John Surtees passengering for his father Jack - for it was in that era - but cannot in all honesty say I remember it. I do remember with awe and admiration the likes of Joe Dunphy, Alan Trow, Derek Minter and a host of others who went on to greater fame. One event from a later period sticks in my mind, when I had skipped Technical College on a Wednesday in favour of a visit to the Hatch. The circuit looked naked when devoid of spectators, but a few riders were testing. The Hailwood family of Stan and Mike were there with his Nortons – was it Bill Lacey who tuned them? – but they were upstaged for once by the two Johns, Hartle and Surtees with their

factory 'Fire Engines'.

So a young lad, not yet out of his teens, sat astride his Talisman Twin and watched the best in the world putting in lap after lap. I remember how excited Stan Hailwood became when he saw that Mike was able to maintain a thirty yard gap in front of the MVs for several laps, until they tired of the game and closed it in an instant along the top straight.

All of those riders were to me a race apart, not just the international stars but also the local riders. It was then unimaginable that I would ever ride around those circuits they visited up and down the country, much less race on them.

That was the childhood memory factor, leaving the anno domini and the economic necessity factors to be explained.

It would nowadays be called a mid-life event of some sort, but did not seem like a crisis at the time. My fortieth birthday approached, and part of me went along with the common view that it was all rather downhill after that. If I were to delay my track debut much longer, I reasoned, I might never make it to the top. (Actually, I might never make it as far as the grid was nearer to my true feelings.) Then the economic factor finally tipped the balance.

If you have a copy of those fine little booklets called 'The Vintage Scenes' by Bruce main Smith you will see some of the story played out. Graham Griffiths and his son, also Graham, raced a pair of Scotts. Graham Senior is on page 5 of the 'First Vintage racing Scene' and Young Graham can be seen on page 39 of the 'Second Scene'.

Young Graham had a chum known to us all as Jaybee, (final page of 'Second Scene') and I was encouraged to join the group by providing a machine for him to ride. This arrangement endured for the better part of a season, so we went to Brands, Mallory, Donnington, Snetterton and so on. At least I was finding out where the circuits were.

Jaybee was full of determination, and may have needed it to compensate for my early attempts at providing a competitive mount. Rider feedback was a repetitive, 'need more welly Col', from which I deduced that he would appreciate a more powerful engine. His race strategy was to make progress through the field and then part company in a spectacular fashion on the last lap. Never hurt, he must have had a high resilience. Higher than the Scott, which came back with me in another sorry state each week so that I could restore it for the following week-end. This was not very much fun for me, and the economic factor finally kicked in. I could save this trouble and some significant expense by riding it myself. I started the search for some generously cut Leathers, for the form of physique that found favour on the rugby pitch was not often encountered on the racetrack.

My First Race.

In at the deep end, for Oulton Park was the scene of my initiation. I took my battered racer along and it was accompanied on the trailer by a borrowed mount, for the standard class I expect. This latter was a late twenties long duplex frame machine with a longstroke engine, absolutely standard. Not regularly used, it really enjoyed itself. I have

information that it afterward returned to the same barn from which it emerged for another period of penury. What gratitude.

No suitable leathers had been found, so ingenuity had to be exercised.

I had a stout brown leather jacket for my normal riding, made to measure by Lewis Leathers some years since. I had also ordered matching trousers, but they could not even be persuaded to draw up over my lower limbs, let alone my nether regions. When the distraught shopkeeper phoned the factory, in my presence and at my insistence, he was told that they could not believe the dimensions sent and had adjusted them accordingly. I paid for the jacket and left without the miniature pants, but with wounded pride.

The required ingenuity was the re-discovery of my jumble sale leather trousers at the back of the wardrobe. These had been the height of chic at some former time, best described as leather jodhpurs and reputed to be the type worn by continental motorcycle police in some bygone age. In their favour was that their hue matched exactly the jacket. They were very flappy about the thighs. Biggles would have worn them without turning a hair, and Eric Morecome would have killed to have them for his famous flying sketches. The effect on my colleagues when I emerged from the changing room at the circuit was memorable. Hugh was close to hysterics, and had to be led away for his own good. His private vision was that my complete tool set was hidden in one leg, to be on the safe side, and that a generous picnic was concealed on the other side – just in case. It is quite a long circuit you know, and we were to be allowed the full extent to race on, including the steeply banked Esso bend.

I suppose that I took out each bike in practice. Only one memory survives, and I shall treasure it forever. The borrowed bike had an excellent turn of speed and also handled acceptably – I then had no real yardstick for comparison. It really got into its stride along the back end of the course, for they had not yet introduced any of the silly chicanes. I must have found a good line at the banked bend leading on to the back straight, enabling good speed to be maintained up over the brow and onto the downhill before the sweep into Clay Hill. Rapidly hauling in the bike in front, I had room and time to glance across and see what kind of machine was slow enough to be passed by a novice. That single quick glance showed me that it was a Sprung Hub Thunderbird, and I knew instinctively that it was my former mount now ridden by The Snooty One. And so it proved to be, and to my shame I do remember later making sure that he knew that I knew... Perhaps I was wearing lucky trousers after all.

The race itself was something else. As I tried to compose myself in the marshalling area, Hugh had another funny turn and had to be dealt with whilst others bit their lips and nodded encouragement to me. I was pleased to look around and see how aged were some of the riders, and how unsuitable and unkempt were their mounts. I had a reasonable draw on the grid and a good result looked to be on the cards. I just needed a good start, and in the event it all went well.

What did not go so well was what followed after the start. Every time I looked round there was someone on my tail, and years of ingrained roadcraft told me to let them pass if they wanted to that badly. The more I looked back the more people passed, and I would

not be at all surprised if I resorted to keeping left and doing hand signals. Such was my backward progress that when the race was red flagged – on the first lap –and we were required to form up on the grid for a re-start I was stone last. Despite looking back for stragglers to appear, there were none. The elderly, infirm, inept and unable were all in front of me, every one of them. I sat and waited, and thought hard and tried to reprogramme my reflexes.

A hard lesson was being learned, and by the end of the day I had forced myself to concentrate on what was happening up front and to ride my own race. In fact I think the restart of my first race enabled me to successfully stay away from becoming tail end Charlie. Well done Biggles.

Two machines in full running order were loaded up for the return journey. Mission accomplished. On the way back south I began to wonder at the amazing abilities and finely honed skills of those who were miles away in front of each race. Perhaps if I practised assiduously and learned well I would be able to finish on the same lap as them and one day, who knows, aspire to finish in the top ten.

In the fullness of time, as my fiftieth birthday approached and my son Martin joined me on the circuits, I managed to exceed these expectations on a regular basis and had to re-define my goals. Perhaps I can remember some of those times and recount them later on.

The next ten years were to be very hectic and very enjoyable, and marked at regular intervals by broken cranks and a few shattered crankcases. If only we could go back and do it all over again, but with a couple of sets of Moss Cranks secreted in our time machine. It may not have taken us too much further up the finishing order, but those long hours in the workshop would have been reduced.

In retrospect they were just too much, and that is not just my view. I can let you know in confidence that on more than one occasion Jean offered the same point of view as a fully considered opinion, and we know how serious that can be, don't we.