

Biking memories from an Ex-Tutor

Q. When did you first become interested in motorcycling?

A. It was when I left school at 15 and started work in Ipswich. Many of the other guys owned motorcycles and this led me to buy my first bike when I was 16 years old. One of the senior apprentices was into grass track sidecar racing and we would spend hours chatting about the sport. One day he said his passenger was leaving and he was looking for a new 'sidecar monkey'. "How much do you weigh?" I remember him asking. "10st 10lb" I replied. "That's about right for a monkey. Wanna have a try out ride at Sunday's grass track meeting near Sudbury?"

So along I went and after a few vital instructions about where to be on the sidecar for corners we roared around an empty area near the paddocks. "Think you'll do" Jim replied. And that was the start of several years of spring and summer weekends full of excitement and thrills. Sidecar racing really can get the adrenalin going. Winters were filled with building the next season's outfit and preparing everything from the transporter to ourselves.

Q. When did you pass your motorcycle test?

A. When I was 16. I borrowed my brother's moped – one of those old pedal twist-go sort. The test comprised a guy standing at the side of the road, me riding back and forth and at one point he jumped out in the road for the emergency stop. All sounds very dangerous by today's standards but I passed ok and my brother could have his moped back.

Q. What were the early days of biking like for you?

A. Exciting and a tremendous sense of freedom. I lived in Ipswich and my girlfriend lived in Colchester so having a motorcycle meant that I could ride over to see her after work during the week. That, together with the time spent on grass track racing, meant it was a great time.

Q. What was the most frightening bike you were ever on?

A. I think it is probably a grass track sidecar outfit. It was a highly-tuned Triumph 650cc, with a supercharger fitted and running on ethanol. This all happened because Jim, my first driver, decided to get himself married and gave up racing. Another club member, Roy, was looking for an outfit and a deal was done. Roy bought the grass track outfit and the passenger (me). In a way, I was sold along with the outfit! Roy proved to be an incredible person. He had a friend in the RAF who managed to 'procure' an aircraft supercharger, which Roy fitted into the frame. Not content with a supercharger, he decided it should also run on ethanol ('dope' as we termed it). The power was something I had never ever experienced before, nor since. In the dry, it was unbeatable. In the wet, it was useless! It just spun and dug the rear wheel into the mud. I could not believe the

power that a 650 Triumph could produce. It really was hang on and hope I'm still on the sidecar for the first corner.

After a couple of years we decided grass tracking racing was a dirty and muddy pastime so we had a new outfit built for road racing. There were two sidecar classes – up to 500cc and over 500cc. We decided that if we designed the frame correctly we could fit in either a 500cc, or a 650cc engine. And so we did. The following season was a steep learning curve. By the end we had perfected the art of swapping out a hot 500cc engine for a cold 650cc in about 45 minutes. Perhaps not F1 standards but it allowed us to enter both classes at the same meeting.

We raced at most of the UK road circuits – Snetterton (obviously), Brands Hatch, Cadwell, Mallory, Donnington, Oulton, Castle Combe, etc. Castle Combe was always a good circuit for us, very flat and always scheduled for a Saturday meeting. This usually allowed us to set off after work, drive overnight on Friday, practice and race on Saturday. We'd drive back towards London, park up in a lay by for a few hours and arrive at the Brands Hatch Sunday meeting bright and early to cook our full English breakfast. Brands was probably my favourite circuit with the hills, fast corners and really good paddock facilities.

This halcyon way of life continued into my twenties. However, when I left the UK to work in the States it all had to stop. But I still have fond memories plus a few black and white snaps to remember it by.

Q. When did think about advanced motorcycle training?

A. I think it was in the 1980s. I was riding home one dark, wet evening and rounding a bend found a car stopped in the centre of the road, waiting to turn right, indicator on, with oncoming traffic. I was going too fast to stop on the bend in the wet and, with a tight bum, squeezed through the offside of the waiting vehicle and the oncoming traffic. Not advanced riding! When I arrived home, I sat down and decided something had to be done. I'd been reading an article in a motorcycle mag about advanced riding and the IAM. I contacted them and within a couple of weeks, I was an associate with IAM.

Q. What are your memories as an associate?

A. My Observer was much older than I was and like many people thought I was pretty good on two wheels. Again, a steep learning curve followed. At our first ride out he asked if I'd read the *Highway Code* and *Police Motorcycle Manual*. "Yes, all read and understood" I replied. "Great. Now forget it all. We're going to start learning about motorcycling that's going to keep you alive and let you enjoy yourself."

Rides followed and I remember the day he pulled me in on the back road from Blythburgh to Leiston. "You're bl**dy useless." He then gave me a good rollicking about how I rode around bends and off we went again. After about 5 miles, he came past and pulled me in again. Oh no, what's he going to say now?

“Finally got the idea I see. Now keep that up and we can start to make some progress.” Start to make progress! What had we been doing up until then? He was an example of the old school and I think I was probably the reason he left the Observer team in despair! Never to return.

Q. What are your memories as an Observer?

Many and varied I think is the short answer. As a new full member, I was out on a wet and miserable group ride following the Chief Observer through Hempsall and was amazed at the smooth and progressive way he rode in such appalling conditions. When our group debriefed he asked if I'd any thoughts of being an Observer. “Me?!!” Having just seen the fantastic ride he'd given, how could I ever achieve anything like that. “Well if you think I might be OK, I'd love to.” What followed were some pretty intensive training sessions culminating in a ride out with the Examiner on a cold, frosty morning. For the first part of the ride he led. Then it was my turn. I finished the ride sweating profusely in almost zero temperatures. Over the years, I became a National Observer and later joined the Suffolk RoSPA group to become a Tutor. Yes, I've met some great people being an Observer/Tutor and would recommend it to anyone who has a bit of spare time and the desire to help others stay safe and enjoy biking. Looking back, I did a quick count of my associates over the years and reckon it's nearly 100 in total. If I've only made a few safer and given them the chance to enjoy biking I've done my job.

Q. Any frightening moments with associates?

A. Yes. Well there's got to be a few hasn't there! I remember hauling one associate's bike out of a ditch near Morningthorpe, patching up another associate's hand with plasters who had slid off in the wet on the A140, fixed several punctures and watching the air ambulance air-lift an associate to Addenbrooke's, while comforting his wife and child who arrived on scene before the helicopter lifted off.

Q. How many bikes have you owned and which has been your favourite?

A. Not that many. I started on an NSU 250cc single (probably a bike no one has ever heard of). It was bright yellow and one I won't forget! This was followed by a Royal Enfield 500cc Bullet, and in later years a Honda 550cc Super Dream before going for BMW Ks, of which I owned three. I tended to keep my bikes for long periods. In fact the first K (K100 1000cc) I had for twenty years and put just under the 100,000 miles on it.

Q. Most memorable motorcycle journey you've ever undertaken?

A. I think there would be two. The first when I had the K100 and rode to the foot hills of the Pyrenees to stay with a friend for a few days. Left Ipswich around 2300hrs and caught an overnight ferry from Dover arriving in Calais just before

dawn. Rode off the boat and into thick fog. Managed to find the correct motorway and as dawn broke the fog and mist lifted in a matter of minutes to reveal the French countryside. Fantastic! Had a really good ride down arriving around 1600hrs gasping for a cuppa. Alas only red wine seemed to be on offer. Never mind. Not going out on the bike again today.

The other journey was from Norfolk to Newquay, Cornwall for the annual IAM bikers' get-together. Met up with another Ob at Scole and it started to rain. It rained and rained. We stopped at the A303 Little Thief for a bite to eat.

Returning to the bikes, still in heavy rain, I noticed the nice car driver next to whom we had parked had knocked off my offside mirror. There it was, hanging on its wiring. The K mirrors will clip back so long as you line up the three points. Not easy in lashing rain in a windy car park. Eventually the mirror was back and we rode off. It did stop raining when we rode through Bodmin. Arrived at the hotel and saw that most bikes were parked at the side of the hotel. We followed and parked up. Removed the panniers and started to head for the hotel entrance. A big crash came from behind. Turning I saw my precious K on its side. How could this happen? I put it on the centre stand. Well the tarmac had given way to reveal a big hole into which half the centre stand had descended. Hauled the bike upright only to find the offside mirror and fairing badly damaged. Too damaged to be ridden. I called the recovery guys who said they would collect next morning. Just finished my full English and looked outside and saw my friend's bike being loaded onto the recovery vehicle. Dashed out and asked what was happening to be told they were collecting a motorcycle! They had the reg number on their form. I looked at it and said you've got the wrong bike mate. My reg number was just one digit different from the Kawasaki. So an unload, a load and my K, the recovery driver, and me were on our way back to East Anglia. A long slow drive.

So yes, two memorable rides. The first enjoyable. The second not so. Both memorable for different reasons.

Q. Finally what's the favourite bike you've ridden?

A. I think it must be the last bike I owned – BMW K1200S. To me it did just about everything I wanted from a bike – with one exception. It was an expensive machine to keep running well. It got to the point where it was just becoming more and more costly and it was time to find it a new home.