



Unsung pedigree

Ken Bryant runs his own motorcycle restoration business and will handle almost any make of machine. But he makes no secret of his love for his personal bike, a 1938 500cc G90 Matchless.

Photography John Wallace

'THOROUGHbred' is a term often applied to pre-war motorcycles of good, bad or indifferent reputation. My dictionary defines the meaning of the word as 'of pure breed, or having the spirit or grace associated with it'. However, somehow I cannot reconcile those phrases with some of the mechanically noisy, oil-leaking, ill-handling, bad-mannered items often raved over by the vintage fraternity.

Oddly enough though, in all the articles printed in the various magazines, one marque remains conspicuous by its almost total absence, and the lack of mention of its achievements. It is among the oldest established of all the British makes, and one that outlived most of the others. A family company from its origins in the 1890s almost until its end, it was one of the few firms that could boast of a director of the old school who was capable of sitting at a drawing board and single-handedly evolving an entire new design through to a commercial proposition in the dealers' showrooms. This factory played an important part in motorcycling history from its principal role in the formation of the Isle of Man TT races, through such milestones as

producing the first (and still the only) ohc V4 to be manufactured and sold in this country, to the making of the first practical and commercial hydraulic tele-forks.

What other brand could I be talking of but the Mighty Matchless? Not only did its owners, the Collier family, help to evolve the concept of the TT races, but Charlie Collier won the single-cylinder class of the first event in 1907. He repeated his TT win in 1910, while his brother Harry won in 1909 and both applied their talents to designing machines such as the 1930 400cc Matchless Silver Arrow V-twin and, for 1931, the sensational 600cc V4 Silver Hawk.

This article concerns one of the lesser known Matchless products, the 1938 498cc ohv G90 Clubman. But my experiences with this bike may help to enlighten a few souls as to the qualities, as I see them, of a truly thoroughbred motorcycle that offers a performance equal to that of some of its more exalted ohc rivals.

The G90 is basically a G80 Matchless with the optional Clubman's tuned engine. This was a variant little promoted by AMC for some reason, and consequently examples are somewhat rare. My model came into my possession some ten years ago, after the death of its only previous owner. It offers excellent handling, and a taut and compact feeling that derives from the duplex cradle frame

that was used on all the 350 to 500cc Matchless models before the war. The outstanding girder forks, which are identical to those fitted to the AJS R7 racers, contribute to its qualities.

Above average stopping powers come from the seven-inch brake drums, which instead of being the usual pressed-out saucepan affairs or distortable cast drums, are turned with customary Matchless thoroughness from steel. If maintained in good order, they are well up to the performance of the bike, which was road-tested at 85 mph in 1937. The rear wheel, as is to be expected on a machine of pedigree, is a qd type (take note, Meriden!).

The 82.5 x 93mm engine gained its extra speed over the standard G80 model from polished and enlarged ports and a higher compression piston. Standard G90 compression ratio is 5.9:1, but I've removed the compression plate on my engine to raise things to 7.24:1. My bike features the one-piece cylinder head and integral rocker box with hairpin springs that was used for about 18 months prior to 1939, when a more familiar style of head was introduced. The latter had coil springs, and was a distinct improvement as the earlier head weighs a ton, and it can be difficult to assemble the springs without the correct tool. Even then the job is very fiddly. I've replaced my hairpins with coil springs, which fit with no problems and are easily obtainable.

In fact this version of the engine is not especially notable apart from its outstanding reliability and longevity, which is no doubt due to the fact that everything is copiously lubricated, with some features that many a modern superbike would benefit from. For example, the G90 has an efficient oil filter and positive feeds with a cool, freshly-filtered oil supply to the piston skirt and rocker shafts, and even to the valve guides. Instead of the usual dribble down the guide to coke up the valves and create a trail of smoke, the oil gives just a wet to the valve stem as it passes on its way to the rocker arms and other points. The cam gear literally swims in oil, and wear is virtually unheard of. Under it all lives the ingenious Matchless reciprocating oil pump, with only one wearing item, and that readily replaced from outside the engine. In fact, these same basic features were to be found on all Matchless singles almost to the end. This is surely the major qualifying factor for a pedigree machine — an unmistakable lineage, traceable back through all its ancestors.

When the bike came into my possession some time in 1967, machinery of this era was still regarded by vintage 'enthusiasts' as dross, and could be picked up in running order, as this one was, from the council tip to which it had been relegated. It was ridden about for some months as a hack, almost in its as-found condition, and covered a considerable mileage both in the course

of my daily grind and at weekends, when its true potential began to show.

I decided to restore the bike after a visit to a vintage rally and because, at about the same time, I became much more interested and involved in post-vintage machines, as they were to become. The old bogies (no money, no time) prevented a serious start on rebuilding being made until about three years ago, the machine being laid up after its one inherent fault had come to light — breakage of the exhaust stub casting where the ports were bored oversize.

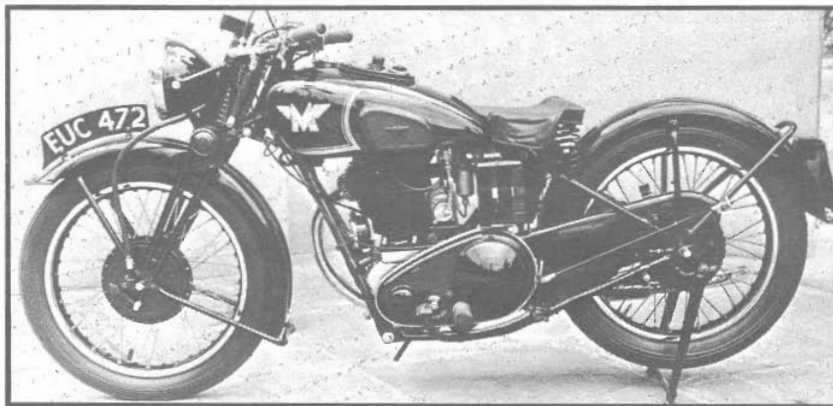
But the time was not wasted, as I was constantly accumulating spares deemed necessary, and searching for a few of the odd parts that were missing. At times I was able to take advantage of some lucky finds. The prime object of the renovation was, for reasons I now forget, to attain total originality, which is a state that 75 per cent of so-called concours rebuilds never seem to reach. As a matter of fact the project proved to be a bit of a pain at times, and I would never attempt it to the same degree again. But the rebuild went without any major upsets or drama because the bike had been in good condition when I originally found it. A fortunate find in a south London breaker's was a new head, with correct G90 ports. Also among lucky finds were such tasties as original Matchless lined wheel rims still in their wrappings, and period AMC handlebar grips, etc.

The longest job was finding a silencer of the correct pattern to copy, as a

member of the family had kindly disposed of the original because it was rusty! Equally painful was finding a stove-enameller worthy of the name. Undoubtedly one of the biggest helps to any restorer would be a published list of some of the bodge artists in the enamelling and plating business, who are incapable of painting graffiti on a wall.

From the start, only new Matchless genuine parts were used throughout the rebuild. They were not hard to locate as so many spares are common to Matchless machines over many years. This principle of avoiding pattern parts was also applied to non-Matchless manufactured components, for example the magneto, dynamo and carburettor, which were replaced with new or maker-reconditioned parts of the correct era. This policy has paid off, resulting in a bike with the exceptional mechanical quietness typical of Matchless designs, a very brisk performance, and effortless starting. Nothing looks worse, I think, than the ill-maintained but shiny machines often seen at vintage gatherings being bullied or coaxed into recalcitrant life. My G90 is now, I maintain, totally original in all its fixtures and fittings, from the original varnish-applied transfers to its correct period spark plugs and control cables.

But it's all a waste of time when all is said and done, as a bike like this is made to be ridden hard, as indeed it is, and so will at least provide material for another restoration job in the future!



Left: Ken Bryant's G90 Matchless is a rare example of an immaculate restoration that is still ridden hard on the road.

Below left: improved porting and higher compression allowed the clubman's engine to push the bike at 85mph.

Below: these girder forks were also used on the AJS R7 racers, and contribute to the G90's excellent handling capabilities.

