

THE MATCHLESS G45 RACER.

Over the years the advent of any new British 500 road racing motorcycle has invariably been an occasion for fanfares and impressive splash pieces in the motor-cycling magazines. Strange then that the Matchless G45, which happened along at a period of intense racing activity, managed to slip onto the market virtually unheralded. At £366 the G45 represented excellent value for money and, if not the fastest metal on the circuits, it was a no-nonsense, rugged machine which, in the right hands, was even capable of showing a clean pair of heels to some of the works models of the day.

The G45 was the first serious attempt by Matchless to break into the racing field in which they had figured so prominently in the pioneer days before the first World War. Charlie Collier, the son of the founder of the Matchless company, had won the single cylinder class of the first-ever TT in 1907 and finished second in 1908. In 1909 the twins and singles competed on equal footing and it was brother Harry's turn to carry off the spoils. In 1910 Charlie scored again.

The Collier brothers rode consistently in the TT up to the onset of hostilities in 1914 but after the war the Matchless was a rarity on the racing circuits. One exception was the first entry of Jimmy Guthrie in the TT - his debut on the Island circuit was at the helm of a Matchless in 1923 but thereafter, apart from a lone entry in 1926, the marque disappeared from the entry lists. In 1931 Matchless and AJS amalgamated to form Associated Motor Cycles and during the thirties all the racing activities were carried out under the AJS banner.

After the second World War AMC produced a very successful road racer in the form of the AJS 350 cc model 7R and before long it became obvious that many racing men were buying the 7R in preference to the more sophisticated 350 Manx Norton and that a similar market for an AMC 500 probably existed. The Clubman's TT had sparked off a great deal of interest in high performance machines and AMC were marketing a Sports version of their lively performing pushrod vertical twin the G9. It seemed natural that the three bearing crankshaft Super Clubman version of the G9 motor should form the basis of a racer.

The prototype G45 appeared in 1951 when it was ridden in the Manx Grand Prix by Robin Sherry. That the project was in the experimental stage was evident and the only visible variation from standard was the fitment of special cylinder heads; frame and cycle parts were standard 7R AJS. Sherry put a fine performance in and was only headed by the 'Featherbed' Nortons of Dave Bennett, Don Crossley and Denis Parkinson - a formidable trio; all the more credit to the G45's 4th place at the first outing. Development proceeded, albeit at a snailpace, and the prototype got an airing in the 1952 TT - it was ridden by Australian Ernie Ring but he was forced to retire. Success finally came in the 1952 Manx Grand Prix when Derek Farrant won, setting new race and lap records in the process and beating Bob McIntyre on his 7R.

Justifiably chuffed AMC put the machine into series production for 1953 - only to suffer at the hands of a Board of Directors who were too busy exploiting the post-war boom in road bikes that they were blinded to the need for research and development of the racing machines. The dribble of money that escaped the Board's financial stranglehold had to support the 7R project and the not-so-successful 'Porcupine' 500 twin AJS racing programme. Ultimately this resulted in the incredible situation where the only work on the G45 programme between 1953 and 1958 was a minor modification to the cam followers, valve springs and inlet ports in 1956. Small wonder that the initial power of 48 bhp at 7,200 rpm never got beyond 50 !

The first production version appeared at 'Motor Cycling's' Silverstone Saturday in 1953. The engine differed from the touring G9 in that it had light alloy cylinders and heads, a steel crankshaft and roller cam followers. Twin Amal GP carburettors were fitted and the dry weight was 320 lb. With a compression ratio of 10:1 the G45 was good for 120 mph. The appearance made the machine a real beauty with all-black paintwork and polished alloy engine and gearbox. The winged 'M' on the fuel tank was the transfer like all the works competition machines of a silver letter highlighted by white traces apparently coming from lights high and left.

Perhaps its best feature was the reliability and ease of maintenance - but like most racers with a touring ancestry it was never really amenable to amateur tuning. The modest success over the years can be attributed more to the sterling qualities of the riders than the out and out performance of the machine. Derek Farrant, Gavin Dunlop, Derek Powell, Frank Perris, Harry Pearce, Leo Simpson, Peter Murphy and Derek Ennett rode the G45 with Ennett scoring fine 6th places in the Senior TT's of 55 and 56. The best TT placing was by Pip Harris in the 55 Sidecar Race when he rode what must have been a most unsuitable machine to third place. The great Bob McIntyre had several outings on the G45 in 1954 - he managed 2nd in the North West 200 to Reg Armstrong's Gilera 4. In 1953 Derek Farrant held the Blandford lap record at 85.91 mph, a speed exceeded on English circuits only by Geoff Duke at Silverstone. In the Commonwealth only New Zealand saw the G45 at its best and, in addition to Simpson and Murphy, Bill Collett and Harry Lowe mixed it with the hitherto invincible Nortons and GP Triumphs. In South Africa the only top rider to try it was Borro Castellani but the machine proved too ponderous for this hard rider.

The real G45 problem was not so much the absence of sheer speed as a lack of all-round race breeding. Reynolds, the frame tubing manufacturers, used a G45 as a test-bed for an Earles-type pivoted front fork. When Vic Willoughby tried it he was impressed with the 124 mph top speed on the Island and the steering and roadholding. He commented adversely on the braking and noted that the need to constantly use the gearbox to the full precluded success except in the most skilful hands. Eventually the penny dropped at AMC and they realised that an oversize 7R was a more viable project, the G45 was quietly discontinued in favour of the G50 - which was to be the last racing machine to bear the proud name of Matchless.

© Barry Sewell.

