

# American Frank Cooper didn't just import AJS and Matchless machines to the States. He also developed them for desert racing

**BOB DALTON & MICK DUCKWORTH**

**F**rank Cooper was a founding father of off-road sport in California and one of the most influential figures in the American motorcycling business.

Cooper was on the American Motorcyclist Association competition committee. He created his own marque in the early Seventies, building 250cc two-stroke motocrossers at a factory in Mexico.

As well as being an Indian dealer, Cooper imported Benelli, Maico, Parilla, Royal Enfield and Yamaha machines to the USA at various times. But the peak of his commercial career was his 14 year stint selling AJS and Matchless products for London's Associated Motor Cycles.

Now in his eighties, Cooper lives in retirement in Southern California. Originally a New Yorker, he started motorcycling in the

Twenties, owning Ace and Henderson fours by the time he was 15. His earliest commercial venture had no connection with the two wheeler trade—he followed his father into the meat slicing machine business. Cooper had an office in Los Angeles, and the shop next door sold Harley-Davidson Servi-Cycles. It was run by Bob Bates, who went on to run the Bates motorcycle accessory company.

"I probably spent more time over at Bob's than in my own office. It wasn't too long before we joined forces," Cooper recalls.

That was in



Frank Cooper (balding) supervises refuelling of Del Kuhn's Matchless during 1948 Greenhorn endurance race

# DESERT STORMER

Cooper's shop front on the corner of Vernon and Figueroa, Los Angeles screams MOTORCYCLES to stop passing traffic



1939, and the two men sold US made Powell scooters from premises at 11th and Hope in Los Angeles.

Sales of new two-wheelers slumped in WWII but the shop did a hot trade in used Harley-Davidsons and Indians. Cooper struck out on his own and was so successful he soon earned a reputation, being appointed an official Indian dealer in 1944. After the war he became interested in selling British motorcycles, even though it jeopardised the Indian agency.

"I tried to get lined up with Norton, but they turned me down. They thought they couldn't produce enough bikes to keep up with American demand. I wound up going

with AMC from 1946, importing direct from the factory for the West Coast only," Cooper says.

Cooper decided that the best way to interest riders in AMC's 350 and 500cc singles was to prove that they were the best machines for cross country racing in the scrubby desert areas east of Los Angeles.

"I got together with Skip Fordyce, a Harley dealer in Riverside, and along with several other guys we started the AMA District 37

Sports Committee. We invited all the clubs in the area to promote more enduros, so motorcycle owners would have more places to ride and have fun."

Many riders in local events aspired to compete in the biggest and most prestigious desert race of the time, the 150-mile Big Bear Run organised by the Three Point Motorcycle Club.

For the 1947 Big Bear, Cooper lent a Matchless G80 single to expert desert rider Dutch

**"Riders who lost and started running the bike down didn't last long with me"**





Dave Ekins (left), Ralph Adams, and John McLaughlin pose for the camera before the 1955 Santa Catalina race on an island off the coast of California



To encourage sales of Francis-Barnett strokers, Cooper offered big prizes. Ekins (128, NSU) and McLaughlin (18, Velocette MAC) line up with Fanny B rider Adams (58)

Sterner, who achieved the first victory by a foreign make in the Californian off road marathon.

"That win really launched AJS and Matchless in the US market," Cooper says.

Desert racing boomed, with the frequency of events growing from a dozen a year to almost every weekend. Cooper expanded his sport sponsorship, lending top riders machines, or selling them spares for their own AMC machines at cost price.

"We had about 10 guys riding for us, and we'd sometimes take eight out of the 10 top places in desert races in the Fifties," he recalls.

"I insisted that my riders should always be enthusiastic about their machine. If they won, it was the bike that won, because it was so good. If they had an engine problem they were to play it down, fiddle with the chain or something. Riders who lost and started running the bike down didn't last long with me," Cooper says.

Off road experiences led him to advise

the factory on how machines could be improved. Cooper claims a role in persuading AMC to adopt swinging arm rear suspension for its road machines for the 1949 season onwards.

"Single cylinder long stroke engines gave AMC bikes usable traction. They were also best on rough terrain because they had the best designed seating position, footrests, handlebars. But swinging arm suspension was the greatest improvement of all. If a motorcycle is comfortable, you can ride it faster for longer."

But Cooper was eager to see further developments, and he says that persuading the factory to make changes for US conditions was a long running struggle.

"The British had scrambles and trials, which their bikes excelled at. But they never had to cope with the heat, sand and high revs common to our competitions."



American market 1961 Matchless Sportstwin 650 was developed from the 545cc twin Cooper sent to Plumstead

While founding Matchless director Charlie Collier was still alive Cooper says he could find at least one sympathetic ear at Plumstead Road.

"Mr Collier was most helpful at getting things worked out for me. He really listened and got a great many things changed to adapt machines for the American market. Air filters, oiling and engine size were usually what needed to be different," Cooper says.

Larger engine sizes were a major issue, firstly with the twin cylinder models, launched with 500cc engines in 1949.

"The American attitude was bigger is better. Conditions here were completely foreign to the factory people, who had a hard time understanding why we needed bigger machines. We didn't have their little country lanes; our wide open spaces and straight roads needed bigger engines."

Frustrated at the arrival of Triumph's 650cc twin, Cooper supervised the creation of a 545cc twin in California. A 1953 500cc Matchless G9 was uncrated and had its bore increased by 3mm to take special oversize pistons.

"The only other change was to the oiling system, to get it to work at high rpm. We cut a groove at the oil hole supplying the



centre main bearing, and cut a chamfer to form a sort of a scoop in the direction of rotation. This is an old car and boat racing trick which worked just fine on the bikes."

Cooper sent a modified engine to AMC, asking for a batch built as close as possible to the sample. He says the first 50 twins shipped to the US with 550cc engines were close to what he'd requested.

"The second batch was another story, though. The factory left out the oiling modification, and engines started blowing up on us. I had to strip and fix them at my own expense."

The bored 69 x 72.8mm G9B became standard for the US market, eventually superseded by the 72mm bore 600cc G11 of 1958, and finally a full 650 in 1959.

The first 600cc versions of the Matchless single, later to enter production as the export only G80TCS Typhoon were engineered on the West Coast, too. Thirty 500s were converted at Cooper Motors for desert racing by boring them, and lengthening the stroke by  $\frac{3}{16}$ in with an off-set

crankpin. A packing plate was added under the cylinder barrel, and lightweight BSA racing pistons fitted.

It was found that enlarged engines demanded a stronger bottom end than the standard 500cc G80, so timing side crankcases were altered to accept bigger main bearing bushes.

The factory agreed to build a 600 prototype, but, according to Cooper, they got it all wrong.

"I told them the machine would not work over here, where pulling had to be so strong at

speeds of 70mph through sand. I said, 'before we go any further, I don't want any of these. They'll just blow up'."

Cooper's misgivings were based on pistons that were almost 10 ounces heavier than the type he'd used, and AMC's retention of the standard sized main bearing bush. By the Sixties, the 89 x 96mm G85TCS was established in the US range.

When AMC introduced its own made gearbox to replace the Burman type in 1957, there were problems with cases

cracking and one of the gears breaking. Cooper says he had to act fast to stop worried multi make Eastern dealers from dumping AMC.

"I had a gear company in Glendale make some gears and shafts. Soon all my competition boxes had American innards. The factory would not use our parts: they kept saying that they were not experiencing failures in England, so there was no reason to make changes."

AMC's sales boss Jock West visited California once and tried his hand at desert riding, but otherwise contact was maintained by Cooper making regular visits to the AMC factory in Woolwich, which he recalls as being well equipped and having staff of a high calibre.

"You'd be surprised how much of the engineering on USA specification bikes was done in the pubs of south London. Part of the problem was their lack of familiarity with our street and competition conditions that made our requests seem outlandish to them. It was difficult to get them to make a change," Cooper recalls.

Over a few drinks in a pub, Cooper charmed AMC engineers into believing that the features he wanted implementing had been their ideas all along.



John Quick stripped lights from his Matchless for the Jackrabbit's enduro

**"Much of the engineering on USA spec bikes was done in the pubs of south London"**

Scrambles rider Jim Goldsmith with Sportstwin and sponsor Norman Reeves, AJS dealer in California





The Plumstead Road factory pressured Cooper to sell equal numbers of AJS and Matchless machines, which were essentially similar except for colours and badges. But Matchless always outsold AJS by two to one.

"Matchless was always far more popular: the name just sounded stronger than AJS," Cooper says.

In the mid Fifties the factory also sent batches of Francis-Barnett two-strokes to Cooper Motors. Interest in them was non-existent, so Cooper put up major trophies for a new 200cc class in the annual race on Santa Catalina Island, off the Southern Californian coast, and sales took off.

Cooper was a major protagonist of the legendary Catalina event, which gave its name to the US market BSA Gold Star off-roader. He did much to keep the islanders' goodwill, even paying out for flowers trampled by spectators or run over by out of control machines.

By 1955 Cooper had taken over as importer for the whole of the USA, then AMC's biggest single market. He picked up dealers wherever he could, usually encouraging small multi make shops rather than attempting to penetrate Harley's empire. An astute marketing man, Cooper wanted

shops on Main Street.

"Half a block off to one side was the same as 10 miles out of town as far as trade was concerned. MOTORCYCLISTS had to be the largest word on their sign, not Matchless. That stopped traffic," he explains.

Southern California was AMC's biggest market, but Illinois, Michigan, Texas and Washington State were big buyers too. Cooper encouraged dealers to buy only what they needed, and to buy often, rather than tie their money up in slow moving stock. They were urged to shift trade ins fast, and never to rob parts off a trade in.

He recalls that AMC's supply of spares was excellent, and it was not uncommon for warranty replacement parts to be provided free, although Cooper Motors had to cover warranty claims and absorb any labour costs.

Used to paying his own way on visits to Woolwich, Cooper was surprised when a 1960 summons to the factory came with air tickets enclosed.

"When I arrived in London they told me I was out of the picture. They said AMC had purchased Indian, and planned to use that organisation as both USA importer and distributor. It was the greatest shock of my life,

especially the abrupt way I was told they no longer needed me. That really hurt."

As far as Cooper is concerned, the changes of '60 were fatal for AMC's future.

"They decided that if someone was going to make money as a distributor, they wanted that portion too. They thought they could step right into it, but they had no real experience in the American market and that really came out fast. They simply fell down, down, down. By the mid Sixties AMC was history," he says.

"The Japanese invasion didn't help, but AMC's inability to listen to the customer was the biggest problem" **CB**

**Aub LeBard, on a Matchless in street trim, and Kuhn (centre), one of Cooper's best sponsored riders, line up behind Cooper's Chevy limo**

**Cooper on a Matchless G80CS, with Jock West, outside the AMC factory**

