

Concours Clubman



When a friend took his newly acquired motor car to a local garage for an MOT Dennis Kirk couldn't have imagined that such a seemingly routine event would lead to a 16 year love affair with a Matchless 500cc single.

Glenn Le Santo reports.

Dennis Kirk's motorcycling years started when he completed his National Service back in 1955. He had already expressed a desire to own a motorcycle, but his parents weren't keen and advised him to wait until he had completed his spell in the forces. At the age of 21 Dennis left the army and started a new job. He needed transport and it seemed like a perfect time to purchase his first motorcycle so he bought a 1947 Speed Twin. Dennis remembers the Triumph as "a nice job, very tough and looked like it was built from steam pipe". It was the start of a love affair with British motorcycles that was to see the likes of Vincents and Goldies sharing his Sheffield home.

He chanced upon the Matchless depicted on these pages after a friend bought a second-hand car. The newly acquired motor car needed an MOT and it was while waiting for the car to be tested that its owner was told of a Matchless motorcycle that was being disposed of. Knowing Dennis to be an enthusiast he immediately told his friend of his find. When telephoned, the garage owner informed Dennis that a relative had an old motorcycle to sell and had asked him to dispose of it via his garage. The chap described the machine and asked if Dennis would be interested. Dennis was already a keen collector of British motorcycles by then, but he was also shrewd and replied simply: "I'm interested if the price is right!"

The machine in question turned out to be a 1938 Matchless G80 Clubman Special, originally supplied by Percy Harris Motorcycles in Rotherham. The 500cc single had been stood, unused, in a



Out in the South Yorkshire countryside on the G80C.

shed for around 27 years. The previous owner, the garage proprietor's uncle, had formerly run the machine as a combination but, when he bought a car, he'd laid up Matchless in the shed. Now the uncle had died, the nephew had been asked by his aunt to shift it. Dennis liked what he saw and made an offer of £135 for the machine. The nephew, obviously a hard-nosed businessman, informed Dennis that he'd already had an offer of £135 and that Dennis would need to better it to secure the machine. Instead of upping his offer on the spot Dennis left the man to stew – he already had his eye on an Ariel Fieldmaster so he wasn't in too much of a hurry to do the deal. A few days later the owner relented and Dennis fetched the machine, paying his original price. The Fieldmaster still found a good home, Dennis tipped off another motorcycle enthusiast and the two machines were rounded up together.

Dennis showed me pictures taken of the machine when he first returned home with it. The machine was worse for wear, with extensive rusting on the chrome but it was essentially complete. He didn't even try to run the Matchless – all the petrol that was left in the tank had turned to varnish. What's more, the sidecar duties had stripped the splines from the output shaft so Dennis decided to kick the project off with a nut and bolt rebuild. Once the engine was stripped he set about replacing all

the bearings in the engine and gearbox. Dennis owns his own bead blasting equipment, so he blasted all the cases himself to remove the 27 years' rust and dirt. Apart from the output shaft, the engine was in essentially good condition and was soon back in running order. Now it was time to start on restoring the cycle parts.



The tank top instruments don't interfere with the machine's clean lines.



The additional 'check' springs fitted to the Clubman Special are clear in this photograph

Matchless

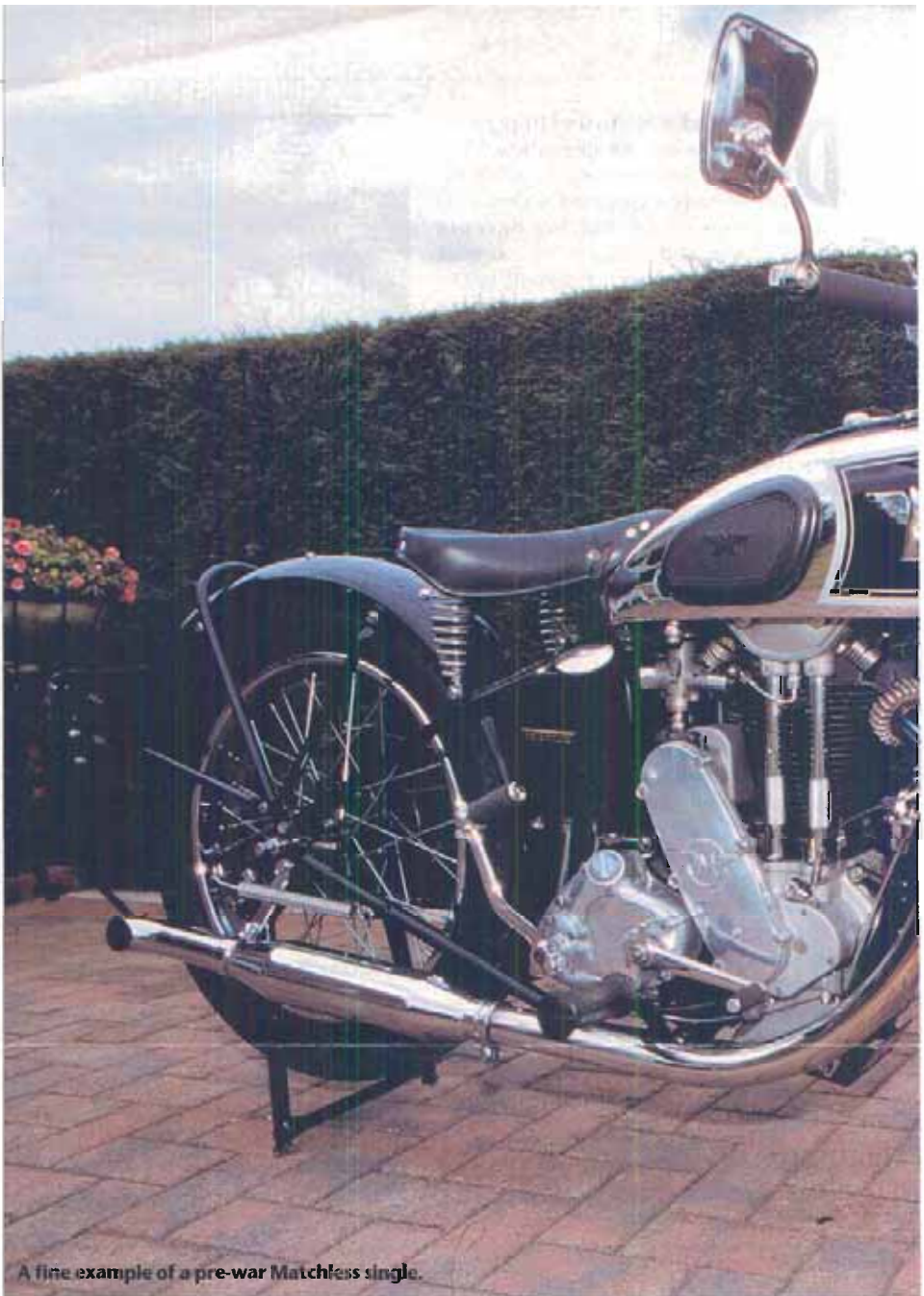
IN NAME & REPUTATION

The mudguards, originally chromed, had plenty of surface rust but even 27 years in a shed hadn't eaten away too much of the original steel. Instead of re-chroming them, Dennis elected to have them stove enamelled along with the frame and various other parts. A friend did the paintwork and asked for the princely sum of £35 in return for his substantial efforts. Dennis was so pleased with the job that he paid the chap £40! The fabulous chromed petrol tank was also in need of attention and was dispatched to Lewis and Templeton of Coventry (01203 604663) to be refinished. Jim Holmes of Anchor Fasteners in Sheffield handled the general stripping and polishing work. The instruments all needed attention, the speedo was refurbished by Colin Hancock of Dinnington and replacement ammeter was acquired at an autojumble. Dennis cut and carved the rear light unit to accept a double contact bulb and fitted a brake light switch.

The saddle also required some tender love and care. The original rivets had all rusted to nothing, so Dennis used replacements that were meant for the brake linings of commercial vehicles. He shortened and drilled them to fit before he polished them up. You have to improvise when restoring such an old motorcycle as the Matchless. The seat cover is the original. Dennis elected to raise the saddle at the front by a couple of inches to make it stand proud of the petrol tank, complaining that both it, and he, used to rub on the



Dennis Kirk's 38/C80C has the later type gearbox, as fitted to the 1939 models.



A fine example of a pre-war Matchless single.

tank. Many more of the details of the machine are original too, like the huge Lucas horn and the frame mounted hand pump for the tyres. Even though the tyre pump internals have not been replaced, it still works, although Dennis did have to replace the chromed clip from the top of the pump. He fabricated a new one by manipulating a piece of welding rod, which he then had chromed to replicate the original part that had rotted away. The Matchless also features a period RAC badge, which is the very same one that was fitted to the machine when Dennis acquired it. He reports that he's had many offers for that badge over the years – all of which he's steadfastly refused.

With the motorcycle complete it was time to sort out the documentation and get the G80 road legal. Dennis had acquired the Matchless with the original V5 document and the



The G80C is the single port version of the 498cc Matchless thumper.



registration number BET 523. He contacted his local vehicle-licensing centre where he was informed that if the number wasn't in use then he couldn't have it. However, if it was in use, he could attempt to purchase it from the present owner and have it transferred. It transpired that the number wasn't in use and thus, he was told, it was impossible to return the machine to the road with the original registration. This wasn't exactly music to his ears. Dennis was determined to ride the motorcycle complete with original registration number, so he joined the VMCC and spoke to a fellow member George Pollard about his problem. George runs a classic motorcycle shop in Dinnington, South Yorkshire, near to where Dennis lives and was soon able to organise the transfer, proving the licensing-centre wrong. With the correct number proudly displayed, the

Matchless was now ready for the road.

Being only one of many machines owned by Dennis, the G80C is reserved for select duties. "This is my favourite motorcycle," explained Dennis. "I use it regularly but not as my general knock-about. However, if I'm off anywhere special I'll take it for the ride. I've showed it many times and with great success. But if it looks like rain I'll take the BSA instead." Dennis also owns a ZB32, which he uses as his general runabout, and an immaculate DBD34 Gold Star that lives in a spare room in his bungalow.

Dennis runs the machine on regular unleaded petrol, adding Castrol Valvemaster to the fuel. He also adds a drop of synthetic oil to the exhaust valve from time to time and lets it run down. Unlike the inlet valve, which has an adjustable feed of its own, the exhaust valve doesn't have any lubrication. The display of cups,

badges and rosettes that fill his living room are a testament to just how well the Matchless has been received by the judges at various shows. Dennis has a rather amusing story to tell of a recent show, one that was mainly for classic cars but also had a class for two-wheelers. "I rode down on my Matchless," said Dennis. "There were three prizes for the motorcycles. The second and third prizes, which were won by a Triumph and a Scott combination, consisted of a bottle of beer and a tankard." When it was announced that first prize had been won by his Matchless, Dennis went up to collect his prize, expecting to receive a similar beer and tankard combination. To his surprise the first prize turned out to be a complete set of garden tools!

"I'd ridden there on my motorcycle so there was no way I could get that lot back home!" laughed Dennis. He returned to fetch his booty in the car.

Dennis admits that the Matchless isn't 100 per cent original, with details like the painted, not chromed, mudguards not being in absolutely ex-factory trim. It is, however a cherished motorcycle and one in which Dennis obviously takes a great deal of pride. So much in fact that he explained that he'd never let anyone ride the Matchless before, in his 16 years of ownership.

"This motorcycle's very dear to me," he warned me as I prepared to take the G80 for a test ride. "I've never even let any of my friends ride the Matchless – you're very privileged."

With these words ringing in my ears I eased the motorcycle out of his driveway and prepared to take my first ever ride on a pre-war motorcycle. I was a little apprehensive to say the least. Would it prove difficult to ride for a



Note the badge on the steering damper – typical of the level of detail and quality found throughout the machine.

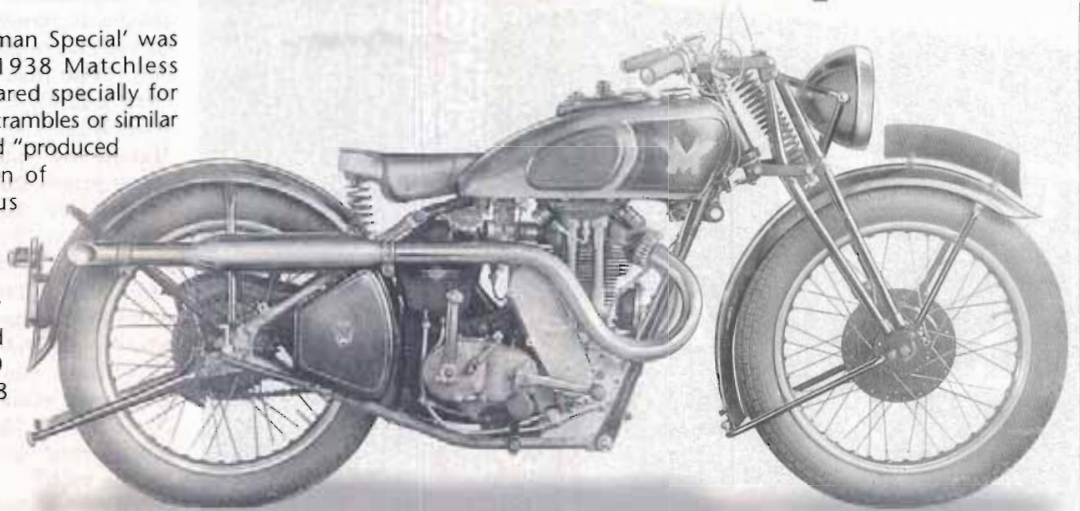
Matchless 1938 G80C / G80 comparison

The G80C, or 'Clubman Special' was described in the 1938 Matchless catalogue as "prepared specially for use in reliability trials, scrambles or similar competitive events" and "produced with the co-operation of several famous competitive riders". There were several differences between the 'Clubman Special' model, the G80C, and the standard G80 'Clubman', in the 1938 season.

The 1938 G80C was fitted with a "heavy-weight gearbox with special competition ratios". All

four ratios were different from the G80 – with the top gear ratio of the 'Clubman' being 13.1:1 compared to 17.5:1 on the 'Clubman Special'. The two models also had different gearbox sprocket, with 19 teeth on the G80C compared to 21 on the G80.

In keeping with its intended 'competition' role the G80C also featured narrow mudguards, mounted on 'exceptionally wide rear stays' with 'large mudguard clearances on both wheels'. The mudguards were chrome plated on the G80C, whereas the G80's



were painted. The G80C had 27in tyres instead of the G80's 26 inches.

The G80 was fitted with twin-port engine whereas the G80C had a single port head. Matchless sales literature of the time described the G80C engine as "specially tuned with single port polished heads". Both engines were mounted horizontally in the frame. According to the 1938 model information programme the G80C would have left the factory with a single high level pipe whereas the G80 was available with twin high or low pipes.

The G80C was fitted with a crankcase shield "to protect the crankcase from bad road surfaces".

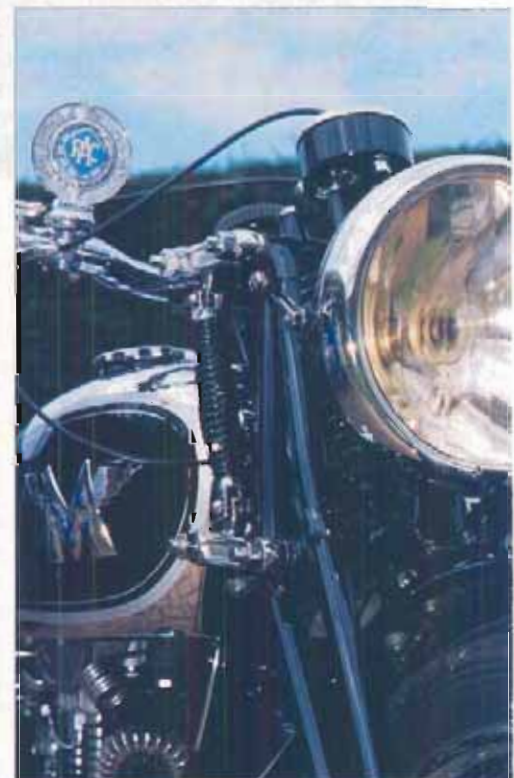
The 'Clubman Special' featured girder forks fitted with additional 'check springs'. The G80 came with a spring-up rear stand and a centre stand whereas the G80C had a prop stand in place of the centre stand. Both models featured the 'new for 1938' winged 'M' tank badge. The G80C was fitted with a smaller petrol tank, the capacity being "around two gallons" compared to the G80's three gallons.



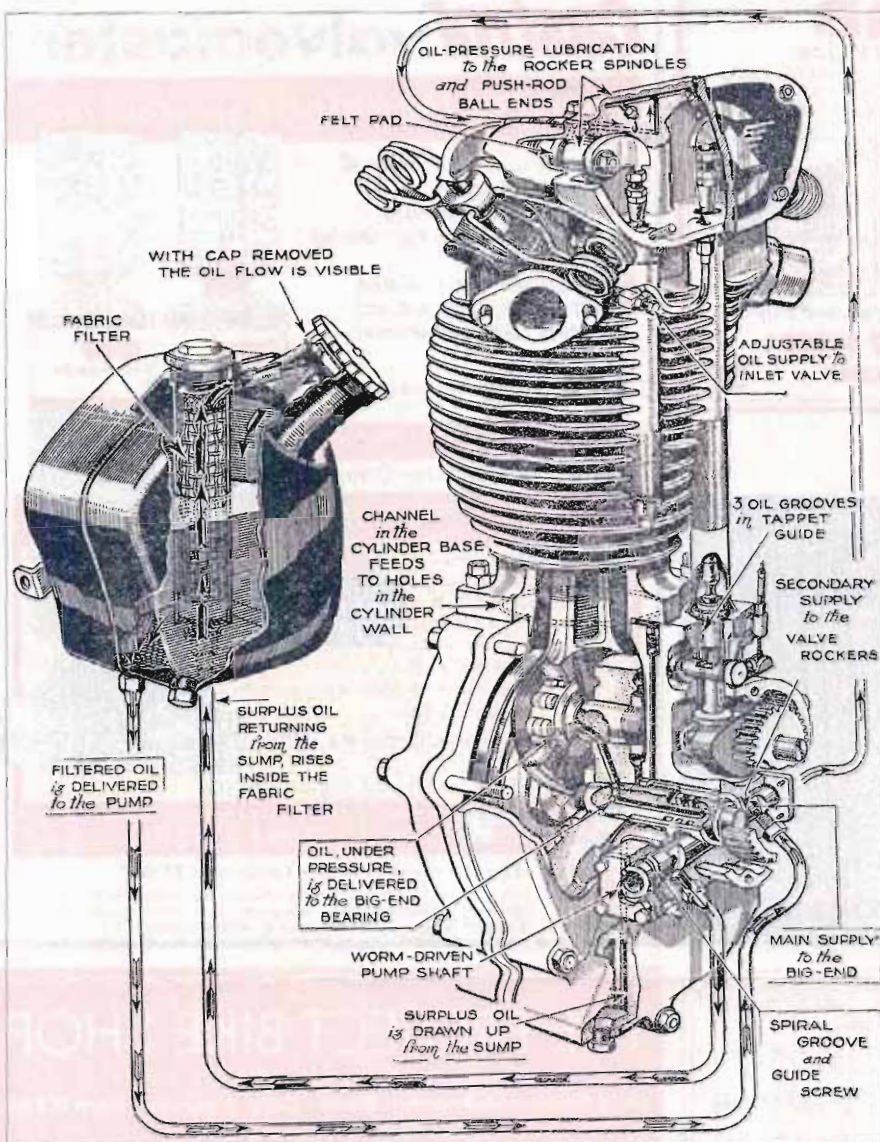
Le Santo enjoyed the ride aboard the G80C so much he almost forgot to return it!

fellow with experience of post-war machinery only? I needn't have worried. The Matchless turned out to have perfect road manners. The action of the wet multi-plate clutch was silky smooth and progressive with a wonderfully light feel at the lever. The grease-filled gearbox was equally user-friendly and it easily engaged any of the four ratios without protest, with neutral being just as effortless to select. The machine steered accurately and possessed a well-balanced feel and a smooth power delivery that aided low speed manoeuvrability. Feet up U-turns were a breeze. I didn't have a chance to take it for a more spirited ride, a shame because even on my short spin I could feel that the engine was smooth and powerful for a machine of its age and capacity. The exhaust note is worth a mention, the low-level pipe produced a satisfying bark to accompany every twist of the throttle grip. It's certainly a motorcycle that deserved the 'competition' status applied to it in period literature.

In all the years that Dennis has owned the G80 he's taken the total mileage to just over 30,000. During his tenure the machine has been very reliable with



The prized RAC badge. All offers for it will be refused.



An illustration of the G80 engine from the original owner's manual.

only a couple of minor problems and only once has the machine stopped while on a run and resisted any attempts to revive it on the spot. "Last year the exhaust valve spring broke while out on a ride," said Dennis. "It didn't stop though and I managed to get it home under its own steam."

Dennis admits that he expected the replacement hairpin spring to be hard to find and thought he might need to have one fabricated. He approached a stand at Rufforth Park that dealt in valve springs with a description of his needs. It came as a pleasant surprise, when he gave his model and year, the chap reached under his stall and produced a box full of the exact spring and asked Dennis how many he'd like! "I reckon the chap's got every valve spring you can think of," suggests Dennis. "He must have spent his life buying up job lots."

The only time he's had to push the machine home came as a result of magneto failure. Dennis recounts the

story: "I was returning home from a run when the machine slowed and then came to a complete stop. I was only a mile from home so I pushed it back to the garage. It was a red hot day and by the time I arrived home I was ready to collapse." It subsequently transpired that the breakdown was caused by a magneto failure. The age-old problem of the shellac coating melting had stopped the magneto from sparking.

"I whipped off the mag' and shipped it down to Peter Raggitt at Stocksbridge (????? ??????) for rewinding and I've never had a problem with it since," said Dennis. "Since then the first thing I do, and I'll recommend this to anyone restoring or running an old motorcycle, is to sort the mag out. Once you've done that, almost all of your troubles are over. You can even pick up an original new magneto on occasion, but even those should be sent straight off for rewinding or they will let you down."

The Matchless G80 had previously spent a long time neglected and



Le Santo takes notes as Dennis recounts his restoration story.

unwanted in a shed. A chain of coincidental circumstances led to Dennis Kirk owning the machine. Both man and motorcycle have benefited from those coincidences. Dennis has the pleasure of a cherished steed and the Matchless has found a careful owner.

"This is an old mate," said Dennis gazing fondly at his beloved Matchless. "I don't really consider myself its owner. The truth is we're more like caretakers, us classic collectors, we're merely looking after them all for the next generation."

Fact File

1938 Matchless 38/G80C 'Clubman'

Engine type	ohv single
Bore x stroke	82.5mm x 93mm
Capacity	498cc
Carburettor	Horizontal set Amal
Ignition	Lucas magneto
Gearbox	Four-speed grease-filled
Frame	Duplex cradle
Suspension	Girder front with check springs and steering damper. Rigid rear
Tyres	27in x 2.75in front, 27in x 4in rear
Equipment	Speedo, lights, toolbox, ammeter
Price new	£66 10s

Club contact AJS and Matchless Owners Club, 25 Victoris Street, Irthlingborough, Northants, NN9 5RG. Tel: 01933 652155, fax: 01933 653929.

Further reading We can supply a road test from The Motor Cycle on the Matchless 36/G80 (no. 874) at £4.95. An instruction book (36 pages) for the G80 and G80C at £12.50 and a spare parts booklet (24 pages) for the same at £10. A 1938 model line-up programme at £4.95 and a comprehensive sales brochure at £10.