

## A Matchless Performance

### Norton's TT claim overshadowed the real performer

OR

Those magnificent men on their frail machines.

By Dennis Bates  
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Nestling on a shelf in the library of the RAC Country Club, is a collection of Automobile Club journals, from the days before the appendage "Royal" was added. In those far-off days at the turn of the century the weekly reporting of motor sport covered both two and four-wheel activities.

What would any self-respecting motorcyclist do under the circumstances? Take a look, of course and there, lo and behold, was the contemporary report of the Auto-Cycle Club's Tourist Trophy Races of 1907, surely a gem? How many of us have ever seen let alone read a contemporary report of this historic race? The writer had been there, seen the day's sport and written it in the style of the educated Edwardian that avoided over emphasis, slang expressions and the unnecessary use of emotive adjectives so common nowadays. Indeed the ability to convey an accurate, absorbing and comprehensive report in plain English became a lost art somewhere in the late nineteen fifties, one exception being the incomparable Bob Holliday of *Motor Cycling* who's coverage of the 1947 "Scottish" should be an object lesson to all who have a story to tell. But I digress. Quaintly (to us) F W Applebee's machine was described as being 'detained' by a collapsed tyre. Probably it was either a blow-out or a puncture. Still the accuracy in recording the fact wasn't in doubt.

H. Rembrandt Fowler was listed, as we all know, riding a Peugeot-engined twin-cylinder Norton, and there on the page was the famous picture of him standing by the machine, wearing the scruffy macintosh tied with string at the waist.

But beyond that was the intriguing part of the report rarely if ever quoted in the histories of the TT. To understand it you have to look at the end before returning to the beginning, for the results set the story in context. Sure enough Charlie Collier on the 3 ½ hp JAP (Matchless) received the first prize of £25 and the coveted trophy of winged Mercury donated by the Marquis de Mouzilly St. Mars. All very fine and confirms what everyone except, possibly, Norton knew or accepted---Charlie had decisively won the first Tourist Trophy Race.

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Rem on the Peugeot-Norton twin had a similar cash prize for the twin-cylinder class and was credited to receive the Doctor Hele-Shaw Trophy. Alas, the good doctor never came up with the promised silverware and thus what might have run in concert with the winged Goddess of Mercury trophy never appeared to grace motorcycle sport. For all time, therefore, the trophy received by Charlie became the premier TT award as was right and proper because the Tourist Trophy race was originally a single contest with a single economy figure of 90mpg, it being considered that no twin-cylinder motorcycle would attain such a fuel consumption. Poor entries for the race soon altered that so in came the Hele-Shaw trophy designated for this new twin-cylinder class for which a fuel consumption figure of 75mpg was allowed.

As we know Norton Motors Limited spent the following decades trumpeting that they won the first TT and many, if not most in the following years thereafter until, that is, Yamaha rested that particular accolade from them. Also, while Pa Norton used a French Peugeot engine to power his entry, the Colliers brothers were all-British; one of J.A. Prestwich's single cylinder engines housed in their own-make Matchless cycle frame. Both brothers, Charlie and Harry, had previously competed in the Isle of Man over a Douglas-Castletown-Ballacraigne-Douglas course in 1905 when Harry finished overall second on a Matchless-JAP. This was the International Auto Cycle Cup Race whose short life entailed discord and unfair competition thus forcing the end of the series in 1906 after just three years.

The idea for the TT was born on a train journey back from Austria among whose originators were Freddie Straight, first secretary of the Auto-Cycle Club, and Harry and Charlie Collier. In January 1907 at the Auto-Cycle Club's annual dinner the idea was mentioned during the drinking of a toast and that set in motion the organisation for the first Tourist Trophy Race.

As in modern times there were limitations and restrictions imposed by the ruling authority. It was claimed that racing improved the breed and the regulations were designed to do just that. Then was no restriction on engine capacity but the fuel consumption was strictly defined. Pedalling gear was allowed, and there was an enforced fuel stop halfway through the 10 laps---that was all.

Now we go back to the events unfolding in the race. In the single cylinder class Collier's 3 ½ hp machine weighed in at 171lb. While Collier himself turned the scale at 10st 4lb, making a combined total of 315lb. At that weight Charlie's fuel consumption had to be no less than 90mpg. Rem was given a figure of 75 mpg for his 5hp motorcycle weighing 182lb, that and the rider's 10st 6lb brought the total to 328lb.

And so it was on the morning of Tuesday, 28 May 1907 that the riders gathered at the starting point. At ten o'clock the first two men were despatched, the other riders followed in pairs at one-minute intervals. The twenty-five strong field was divided into the single cylinder and twin-cylinder classes. In the former there were 18 riders, but numbered 1 to 19 because number 13 was not issued, a practice that remains to this day. Among the single cylinder class were future TT winners; Jack Marshall 3 ½ hp. Triumph and F W Applebee 3½ hp. Rex.

Eight riders formed the twin-cylinder class, including last man, F A Applebee Jnr on a Rex (later in 1912 he would take a Scott to victory in the Senior TT). Rem's riding number was 22.

Using the Peel course both classes would have to cover 158 1/8<sup>th</sup> miles over roads that were little more than farm tracks. Rem's Norton was capable of 60mph and he used this speed to put in the fastest lap of the day for the class at 42.91 mph his time being 22m 6 2/5 sec. That occurred on his sixth circuit after the compulsory fuel stop on Lap 5. Given the course conditions it was hardly surprising that there was a variance in lap times the worst being on the seventh lap which was more than eleven minutes slower at 33m 7 1/5 sec. possibly through having to struggle through a blaze that enveloped another machine as he struggled up to Kirkmichael. The remaining three laps were covered in 25 minutes, the variations in seconds being consecutively 54 1/5 sec., 24 2/5 sec. And 13 1/5 sec. His overall race time was a triumph of human endurance and determination at 4hr 21m 52 4/5sec.

Collier possibly had an advantage because his racing career was much greater and longer including extensive bicycle race experience, circuit racing at Canning Town, also record attempts. The roads were strewn with sharp stones, cast-off horse shoe nails, rutted tracks, the ever present risk of straying cattle and sheep, so machine failure or the dreaded puncture were ever-present risks. Despite all this of the ten laps in the race Collier's consistency was remarkable, varying between 23 and 25 minutes except for one slow lap; the first four laps each completed within the 23-minute bracket, then three more at 24 minutes including the fuel stop, a slow 29m 52 2/5sec on lap 8, followed by the last two laps in 25 minutes

It was a series of punctures suffered by second place man, Jack Marshall, on lap 3 which allowed Harry Collier to move up a place. One lap later came the fastest lap of the day at 23 min 5 3/8 sec (41.81 mph) before an exhaust valve broke on lap 9 and put him out of the race.

Collier's winning time was 4hr 8m 8 1/5 sec. That put him 13 minutes and 45 seconds ahead of Rem Fowler. In fact the report showed him pulling steadily away from Rem Fowler throughout the race. Nevertheless, both finished without penalty with Collier's machine returning 94.5 mpg but the Norton's consumption wasn't quoted.

Second man home was Jack Marshall on his Triumph 2m 6 sec. on time ahead of Fowler although, of course, he was competing in the single cylinder class. It is significant that those series of punctures on lap 3 failed to deter Jack who went on to record the second fastest race time of the entire entry. It took Rem's runner-up another 31 minutes to complete the race; that was W H Wells on a twin Vindec. W M Heaton (Rex) surely could claim his five-hour, eleven-minute race time for third place to be unique among leader board TT finishers.

There were other dramas. The petrol allowance caught J A Dent (5hp Peugeot) who was disqualified, while J P Le Grand (3hp GB) finished outside the allotted time and was likewise excluded. Of the twenty-nine starters twelve succumbed to various maladies of rider or machine. The real miracle is that anyone survived the arduousness of the race. (Just try averaging these speeds over the modern TT course on say a 125 machine today and you'll find how hard it is and, if you could, would you try to beat that average on a frail, belt-drive machine with virtually no braking capability remembering that today you'd be on excellent roads, of stray cattle there would be none, nor would you have to dismount to open gates). Charlie, Rem, Jack and Harry with their fellow riders deservedly should be known as those magnificent men on their frail machines.

The study of this historic race raises some interesting points. With the value of hindsight why did Norton give up the reliable Peugeot twin power unit for their own version? Why then abandon that for the single cylinder that would not bring a Norton victory until the 1924 Senior? Why didn't Matchless and thereafter AMC proclaim the first-ever TT victory long and loud? Why did they stand back and let Norton's claim to winning the first TT go unchallenged for decades?

All too soon the book was closed, the study incomplete (what about the fire which Rem Fowler encountered?) The thought crossed my mind that it may be many a long year before another visitor eyeing the ranks of books takes down and reads the contemporary report of that first-ever TT.

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