

Matchless

Reprinted from
"Motor Cycling"
April 4, 1957

ASSOCIATED MOTOR CYCLES LIMITED
PLUMSTEAD ROAD, LONDON, S.E.18. Telephone: Woolwich 1223

THE STORY BEHIND THE NAME

MATCHLESS

The Romance of London's Own Motorcycle Factory which began with the Turn of the Century, Won the T.T. Fifty Years Ago and Now Produces Some of the World's Finest Machines

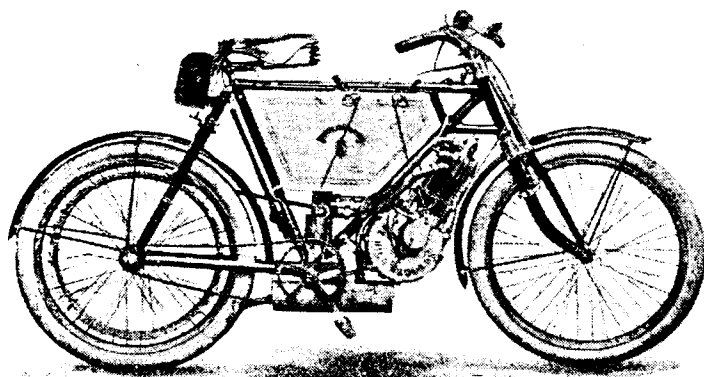


The late Charlie Collier, one of the founders of the factory and who was the last to survive. He died in 1954.



The late Harry Collier, brother of Charlie, who helped to lay the foundations of the company. He predeceased his co-founder by 10 years.

Told by JIM SHELDON



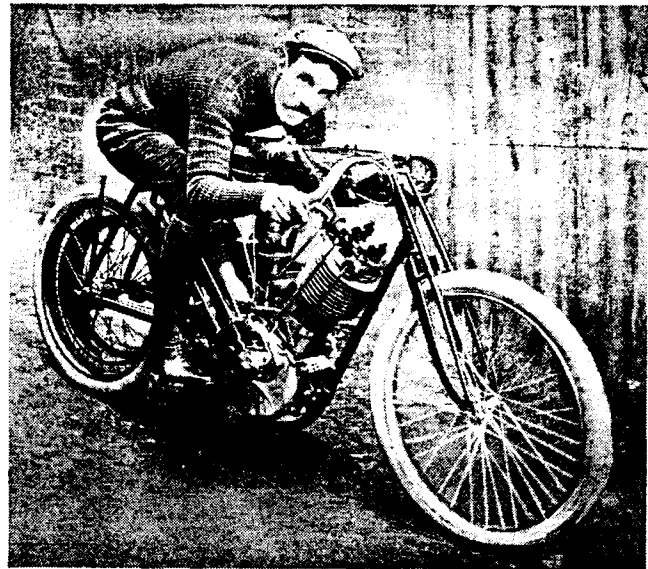
Inclined single, 1902 type. The first production model, with a De Dion Bouton engine.

IT has been said that the Matchless story is the story of the whole motorcycle industry from its inception. The name goes back into the last century when Mr. H. H. Collier started to make his "Matchless" brand of pedal cycles at Herbert Road, Plumstead, in South-east London in 1878. With the coming of the first continental motorcycles, his two elder sons, Harry and Charles who had joined the firm to form H. Collier & Sons, had tried motorizing his push bikes as early as 1899 with an engine over the front wheel, but they were quick to appreciate the disadvantages of this design, and the firm went into production with a machine having the engine slung beneath the front down tube, in the first year of this century. They used the famous De Dion Bouton engines and when the Puteaux marque became car-minded continued to use the English edition of the design marketed by the M.M.C. people. They were early users of the Longuemare spray carburettor in place of the surface type, too. The rather obvious limitations imposed by the engine position had them trying other sites for the power plant, such as at the back of the saddle tube, where there was certainly no more room. Soon

diamond framed models started to appear, with the engine mounted vertically where the pedals used to be.

Harry and Charlie Collier had started racing the Plumstead-built machines round the small London tracks, Canning Town, Crystal Palace and so on, with much success, in those first few years of the century when the sport was still associated with cycle racing. In due course the brothers, together with H. V. Colver, became particularly adept at wringing the last knot out of an engine while record breaking, but still seeing it finish in one piece—an experience which was to stand them in good stead in the future.

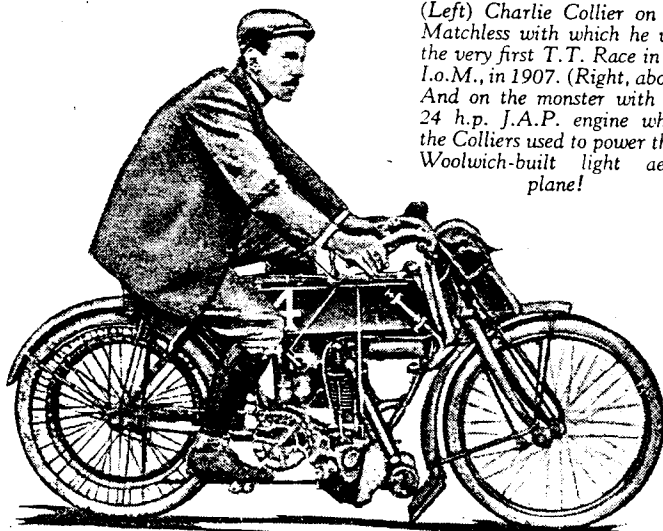
The family-business background may have been only one of the reasons for the success of the enterprise, for many of the early firms ceased to produce motorcycles while the Colliers continued successful on both track and road. From the first they fitted an efficient



(Left) Charlie Collier on the Matchless with which he won the very first T.T. Race in the I.o.M., in 1907. (Right, above) And on the monster with the 24 h.p. J.A.P. engine which the Colliers used to power their Woolwich-built light aeroplane!

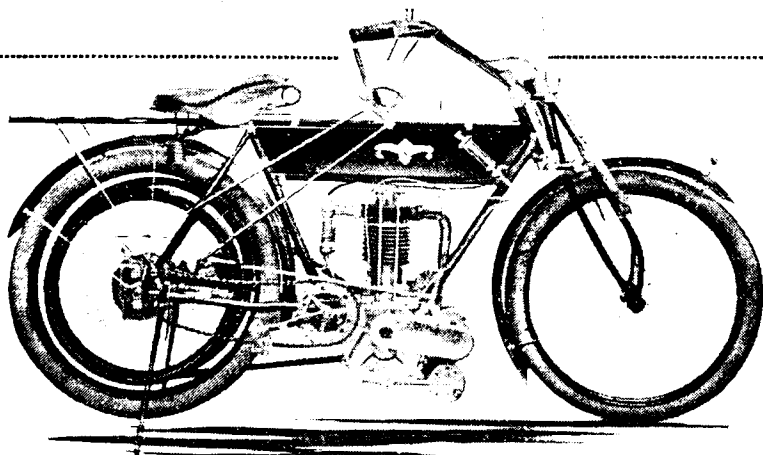
silencer on all road models. As early as 1903 they thought up a pillion seat for the De Dion engined models, a second saddle being mounted on a rearward continuation of the top tube, with stays to the rear axle to complete a triangulated subframe. In 1904 they were producing a tricar, with a Bath chair for madame between the two front wheels. In 1905 they had added chain drive and, alas, so much coachwork to it (as had every other tricar firm) that the tricar's fate was sealed, or the sidecar's future ensured, whichever way you like to look at it. But they also produced a new V-twin motorcycle, a result of their association with John A. Prestwich, who was making his J.A.P. engines over at Tottenham in North London. Moreover this model had leading link front forks with springs in tension behind the fork blades, and swinging fork rear suspension of a type not unlike that favoured in recent years. This by the end of 1905, please note!

Probably their sporting highlight of 1905 was when Harry qualified to represent Great Britain in the International Cup motorcycle race in France, following an eliminating test in, of all places, the Isle of Man! He and Charlie had been over to France to watch the

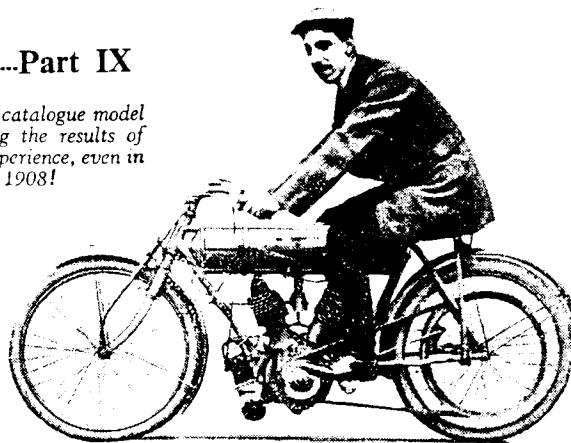


IN response to many requests we resume, in these pages, a feat previous issues, described the fascinating stories behind the name (1948), B.S.A. (December 30, 1948), DOUGLAS (March 1949), FRANCIS-BARNETT (August 24, 1950), INDIAN (Ju

Part IX

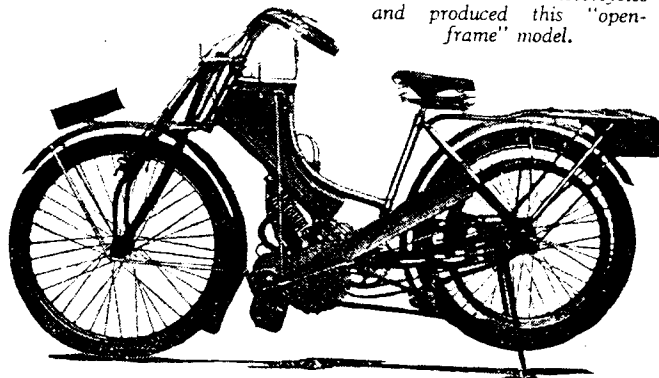


(Left) A catalogue model embodying the results of racing experience, even in 1908!



(Above) Charlie Collier, in 1909 raced this twin in the Island.

In 1910 Matchless' recognized that women used motorcycles and produced this "open-frame" model.



event the previous year, and were duly shocked by the current attitude to the admittedly ridiculous rules, such as that stipulating a maximum weight of 50 kilos (110 lb.), for the machines. For 1906 young Charlie, Matchless mounted, joined his brother in the British team, the first (and last) time that two machines of the same make were to represent us. Thanks to a win the previous year the Austrians organized the event, and won it again, but the records state that Charles R. Collier (Matchless) was a good third. The team should have been in the charge of the Hon. Leopold Canning of the R.A.C.'s Auto Cycle Club (now A.C.U.) Committee, but he was unable to go and persuaded a relative, the Marquis de Mouzilly de St. Mars, to take his place. A fine linguist and a great enthusiast (he was President of the Richmond Club at the time), the Marquis was invaluable as a team manager.

In due course the team entrained for home. Somewhere in a carriage on its way across Europe the Marquis and Mr. H. H. Collier talked it over. They had every reason to be pleased with that third place; but were they? The ridiculous rules meant a minimum of motorcycle, below even the safety limit for an engine of sufficient power, and just asked for sharp practices. Mr. Collier did not want his boys to race freak machines either. He wanted them to prove his ordinary touring Matchless motorcycles. But how, without a weight limit, could they keep out, for instance, the French track monsters of anything up to 20 h.p.? The noble Marquis saw his point. The obvious thing was a limit to cubic capacity—or to petrol consumption. Probably the latter would be best. But would the Isle of Man authorities be interested enough to close their roads again? Would the A.C.C. be interested enough to organize such a race? They could count on two entries at least—Harry and

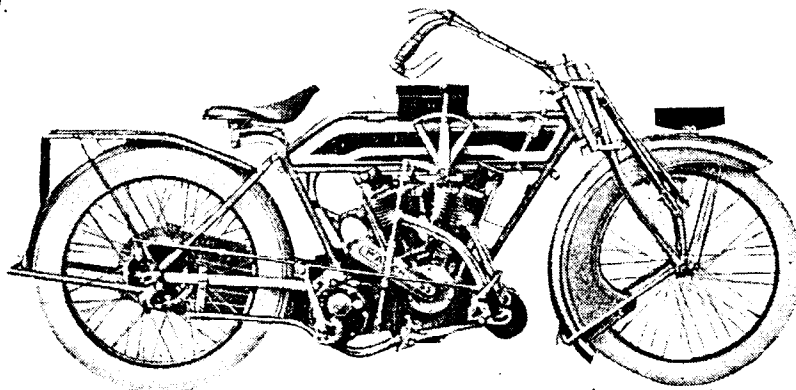
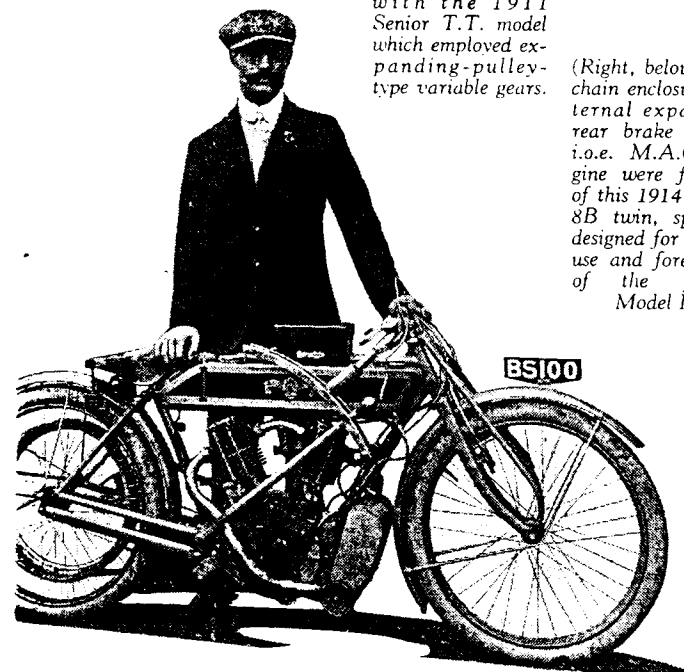
Charlie, dozing in the corner of the carriage. Yes, and a Trophy to ride for. A Tourist Trophy, from the Marquis, would make the object of the race self evident . . . !

That chat in a railway carriage passed into the pages of history the following year, 1907, when the A.C.C. organized the first Tourist Trophy Races in the Isle of Man for the Marquis' Trophy, and the first name to be engraved on it was that of C. R. Collier (Matchless), which was only poetic justice, after all.

The winning machine had a push-rod operated, single cylinder, o.h.v., J.A.P. engine, a B. & B. carburetter and leading-link front forks, and it gave a petrol consumption of 94½ m.p.g. while averaging close on 40 m.p.h. It was on the Matchless Stand at the Show at the end of the year, and a production edition followed for 1908, together with the sprung V-twin and a two-speed lightweight. There was also a colossal racing V-twin, with push-rod J.A.P. engine of 120-mm. bore by 120-mm. stroke, and a two-to-one gear. Magnetos had been coming in, though the Colliers had used accumulator ignition in the Island, and Matchless now fitted them, enclosed in a neat leather case. They also entered their silencer for the A.C.C. silencer trials

(Left) Harry Collier with the 1911 Senior T.T. model which employed expanding-pulley-type variable gears.

(Right, below) Full chain enclosure, internal expanding rear brake and a i.o.e. M.A.G. engine were features of this 1914 Model 8B twin, specially designed for sidecar use and forerunner of the famous Model H.



ere which was begun by R. R. Holliday and which, in
s of A.J.S. (February 12, 1948), ARIEL (August 12,
17, 1949) EXCELSIOR (February 2, 1950),
e 28, 1951) and JAMES (July 10, 1952).

and achieved fourth place against an amazing assortment of special contrivances calculated to give a maximum of back-pressure.

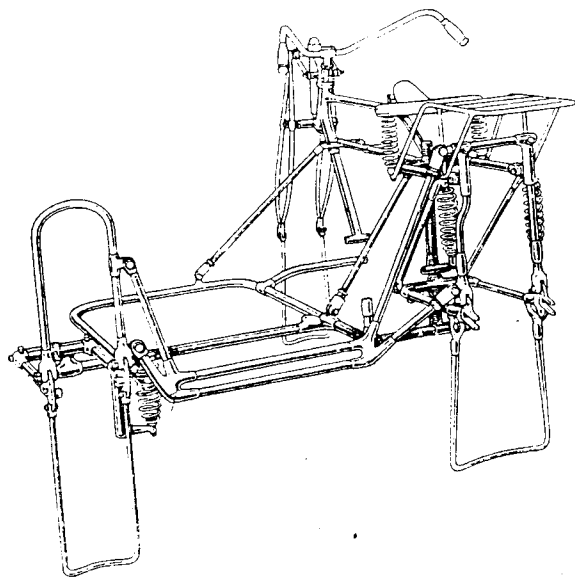
One other trivial matter, or so it seemed at the time: The little family business from South-east London became a limited liability company. They also arranged Colonial and overseas agencies. Hereabouts started that tradition of financial stability which has been the background of the firm for half a century.

By the end of the first decade of the century both Charlie and Harry had T.T. wins behind them, not to mention a whole row of track successes down at the new circuit near Weybridge. Brooklands they called it. In 1911 Charlie split the all-conquering Indian team in the Senior T.T. but was disqualified for taking on fuel other than at his pit. The American Indian star Jake de Rosier suffered a similar fate at the hands of officialdom, and a sensational three-race match between the two was arranged at Brooklands before the end of the year. It just did not work out, for after Jake had won the first of the three races by a hitherto unheard-of ploy which we accept as slip-streaming today, which enabled him to get up by a single length, he suffered tyre trouble in the second race, while Charlie had ignition trouble in the third and final race, to leave it to Jake at two wins to one. But Charlie put the "World's Fastest" record up to 91 m.p.h. before the end of the year, and his actual machine was on the Matchless Stand at the Show, finished in bright red! They say that Jake tried to buy it.

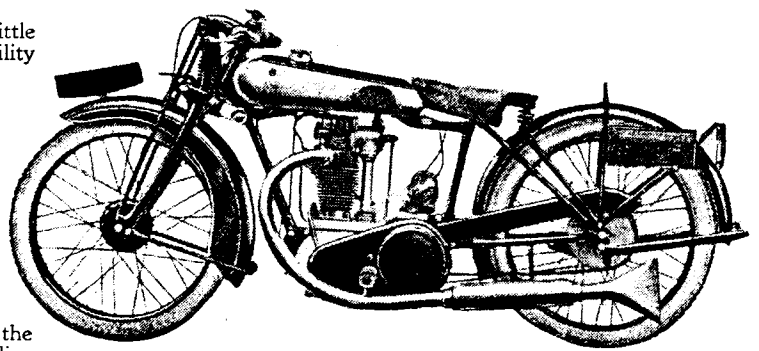
The spring frame had been dropped as it did not mate up with the new three-speed gears which were coming in at the time. In addition to hub-gears you could also have the T.T. type of six-speed gear, in which there was an adjustable pulley and a movable rear wheel to retain belt tension, a sort of combination of the Zenith Gradua and Rudge-Multi of later years in principle, on some models. Another feature was the grey green finish which was to be a Matchless characteristic for many years, as was the front fork with enclosed spring and with the forward girder oddly curved at its lower end. For 1911 the larger models had a dropped top tube to lower the saddle height too, a point which became a general feature of motor-cycle design during the next few years.

The most important feature of the 1912 range was a new 3½-h.p. Matchless-built engine, their first "own make," a single cylindered job not unlike the J.A.P. it replaced, of almost square dimensions, the power-unit measuring 85.5-mm. bore by 85-mm. stroke. In fact, the range extended from lightweights to heavyweight big twins for sidecar use, though during the next two years the former were dropped and by 1914 the range consisted entirely of V-twins, pride of place going to the Model 8B with M.A.G. inlet-over-exhaust-valve engine, three-speed countershaft gearbox and fully enclosed chain drive. There was even a kick starter, and an internal expanding rear brake, and—typical of the marque—an oversize silencer. In keeping with the current trend of design a flat-twin was developed for 1915.

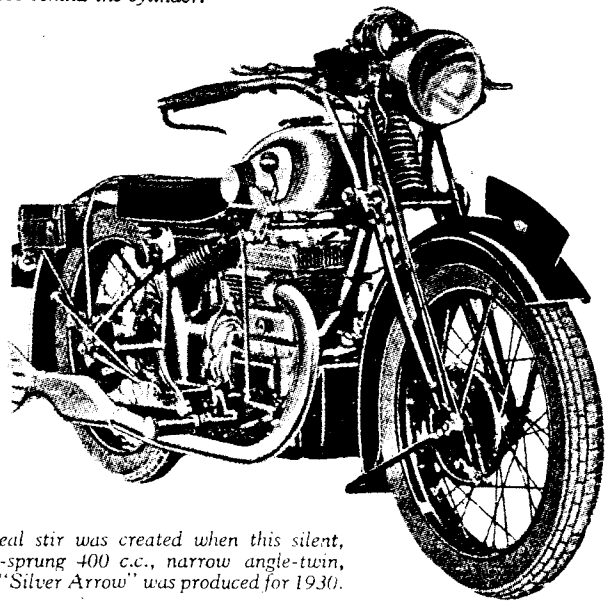
In the Island Harry and Charlie finished 3rd and 4th in the 1912 Senior, but after that their luck was out and neither finished again,



One of the few machines ever to be built, with its sidecar, as a complete combination was the Model H. Here is a drawing of the all-sprung "frame-cum-chassis" in which both machine and sidecar featured swinging-fork suspension. It flourished from 1919 to 1928.



(Above) The 1926 350 c.c. Super-Sports o.h.c. model which had the camshaft-drive behind the cylinder.



A real stir was created when this silent, rear-sprung 400 c.c., narrow angle-twin, s.v. "Silver Arrow" was produced for 1930.

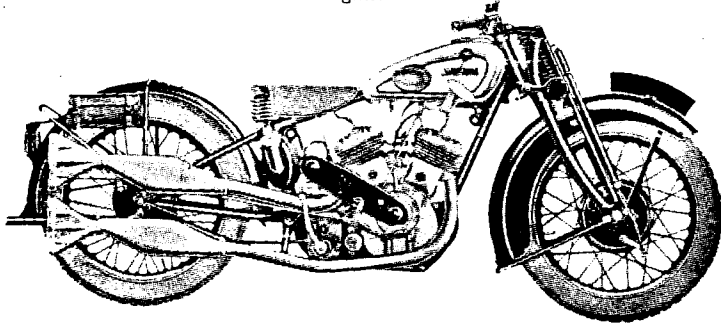
Charlie retiring in their last race, the 1914 Senior, when in the lead. The little J.A.P. twins they used had featured three-valve pent-roof heads with one inlet and two exhaust valves, and years later, in the light of more modern practice, it occurred to J. A. Prestwich's son and successor, Teddy Prestwich, to try the old engines with the heads the other way round, with two inlets and one exhaust valve in each head. You can imagine the result.

Incidentally Charlie was much in favour of the old 1907 course in the Island as opposed to the Mountain course used first in 1911. He held that the fast bends on the latter constituted a major danger, as did many other riders, but when poor Victor SurrIDGE was killed on the new course it was pointed out that it was where the course overlapped the old circuit.

During the 1914-1918 war the Plumstead factory was occupied on munitions, and aircraft parts, the latter to a degree of accuracy one would expect from a firm whose trade-mark had, for so long, been two hands using a micrometer. After the war, when at last the Ministry of Munitions lifted its embargo on civilian motorcycle production, Matchless came back into production with their 1914 range of V-twins, one of which was aptly named the "Victory" model. Pride of place, however, went to the famous Model H, which was a post-war edition of the Model 8B, with its advanced specification, including all-enclosed chain drive, to which were added such features as swinging fork rear suspension and even electric lighting. It was to continue almost unchanged until 1928. The model J, with side-valve J.A.P. big twin engine gave a good account of itself at Brooklands, but there was no T.T. model to revive the old Island glory.

At first the range was devoted to sidecar outfits, "The Perfect Passenger Motorcycle" said the adverts, with two-seater sidecars, folding chassis and similar features, but in 1923 the Model L appeared, a pleasant side-valve 348-c.c. single-cylindered solo machine with rather more conventional forks than the twins and an up-to-date specification in such matters as all-chain drive and hub

One of the much-loved 'tween wars big twins—the Model X2 of 1930 with its massive 990 c.c. s.v. engine.



brakes. Hereabouts the works signed on a poet who produced the immortal stanza:

*Don't starve your engine or feed it in lumps
Matchless machines have mechanical pumps.*

they also signed on a team which included Jimmie Guthrie for a return to the Island, for the 1923 Junior T.T., but with no success.

The single was soon the subject of development, a very sporting edition appearing with an overhead camshaft driven from behind the cylinder, inlet and exhaust ports being on either side. Later there was a bulbous plated tank, and another team in the Island in 1926 though with no more success. A single cylinder sidecar outfit designated the Model M, with 591-c.c. low compression o.h.v. engine, was introduced, and in 1926 came the first of the R series of 250 c.c., a little side-valver with a black tank. The range now extended from a small side-valve "250" to a V-twin "thousand," and for 1927 the only type of machine hitherto missing from the range was produced when a sports "500," the Model V, made its bow with a Broughish plated tank and single-port o.h.v. engine.

Mr. H. H. Collier Senior had died in 1926, and the company became Matchless Motor Cycles (Colliers), Ltd., a public company for 1928, when an entirely new range of models, designed by Harry Collier himself, was introduced. The modern shape of motorcycle with short deep saddle tank and high steering-head came into being with the new models, which immediately set the fashion with their welded white panelled tanks, and two-port cylinderheads. This range of 1928 models saw the Plumstead factory through the slump which decimated the industry around 1930, with no more significant changes than such minor items as chromium plating and the introduction of the famous "M" monogram which arrived on the 1931 models.

"The Whispering Wonder"

It was at this time that Matchless chose to explore an entirely new market with their Collier-designed "Silver Arrow"—the whispering wonder. Introduced for 1930 it gave the impression of a monobloc vertical twin but was actually a narrow angle (26 deg.), side-valve V-twin of 397 c.c. with a very fine spring frame and a de luxe specification even down to such items as an instrument panel. It was followed in 1931 by the "Silver Hawk," a narrow angle V-four with overhead camshaft engine of 593 c.c. in a similar frame, with a special sprung-wheel sidecar for "chair" men. By the standards of their day the two machines were not expensive, being priced at £55 and £72 respectively as against the V/2 (500 c.c. o.h.v.) Model's £53 10s. in the same range, but the market was not ready for them, and their production was eventually discontinued. I often wonder what would have been their future had they been within the 350-c.c. and 500-c.c. class limits.

Hereabouts the A.J.S. concern passed into the control of the Matchless Company, the models of the old Wolverhampton factory being henceforward produced at Plumstead. To get our history quite straight it should be added that the Stevens family who had started the A.J.S. concern continued separately.

The other models from 1931 followed the current fashion for a forward-sloping engine, and great efforts were made to produce machines within the taxation weight-limit of the day, of 224 lb. The Model D/5, a 498-c.c. side-valve machine—the "Light Five-hundred"—actually weighed 220 lb. fully equipped, and cost £35 solo or £51 with the special light sidecar produced for it. The straight-sided tank had given place to one of pleasantly rounded contour, and the white panelled tank became all black after 1932.

Meanwhile the big V-twin, redesigned in 1929 to bring

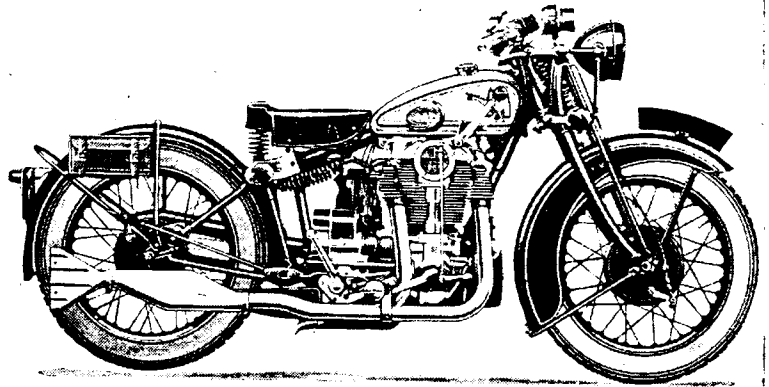
And now—the 498 c.c. G45 vertical o.h.v. twin. It is one of the most successful production racers of 1957.

it into line with the rest of the range, was continued as the Model X and was to be produced right up to the outbreak of war.

For 1936 the G series was started, with vertical engines, and soon the "Clubman" and "Clubman Special" (the latter a Competition Model) were carrying all before them. Incidentally the "M" grew its wings in 1938.

And so, again, to war and no fewer than 80,000 G3Ls produced for the forces. In 1941 they appeared with the "Teledraulic" front fork, which was probably the first practical improvement in the design of motorcycle front suspension for a quarter of a century. Harry Collier, the eldest brother, died in 1944, and Bert, a younger brother who had been well known at Brooklands in the 'twenties, had been killed in a road accident earlier in the war, so that Charlie, "Mr. Charlie" as everyone in the Works at Plumstead called him, was left—the last of the founders.

In 1938, following the acquisition of Sunbeams, the Matchless enterprise, together with its associate concerns became Associated



Who does not recall the remarkable "Silver Hawk," a rear-sprung o.h.c., narrow-angle-Vee-"four" which appeared for 1931.

Motor Cycles, Ltd. To its boardroom it has brought men who have grown up in the game, and who understand motorcycles, motorcyclists and motorcycling—Charles Collier, Donald S. Heather, J. M. ("Jock") West and so on, and one feels that in such hands the industry can face the future with equanimity. In subsequent years, of course, Nortons, James and Francis-Barnetts came into the A.M.C. fold.

And so to the end of our story. Back to peace in 1946 with the 350-c.c. and 500-c.c. Clubman Models with their all-black finish. They were soon in the news too, as Hugh Viney, the Ratcliffe brothers and Basil Hall, among others, established them among the leaders in the trials and scramble worlds.

In 1947 the share capital of the company was doubled. In 1949 a modern vertical twin was added to the range and motorcycling finally accepted the type of rear springing which had so often, down the years, been a Plumstead feature. In 1951, after a lapse of over a quarter of a century, the famous Matchless name came back to the Isle of Man too, when, in the hands of Robin Sherry, the first of the G45 vertical twins finished 4th in the Manx Grand Prix, Derek Farrant, similarly mounted, winning the same race outright the following year.

"Mr. Charlie" died, in his office and still at work, in the summer of 1954 in his seventieth year. His last event as a competitor was the 1951 Pioneer Run in which he took one of the 1912 big twins to Brighton. He had seen the whole story unfold, and had played a leading part in it throughout.

