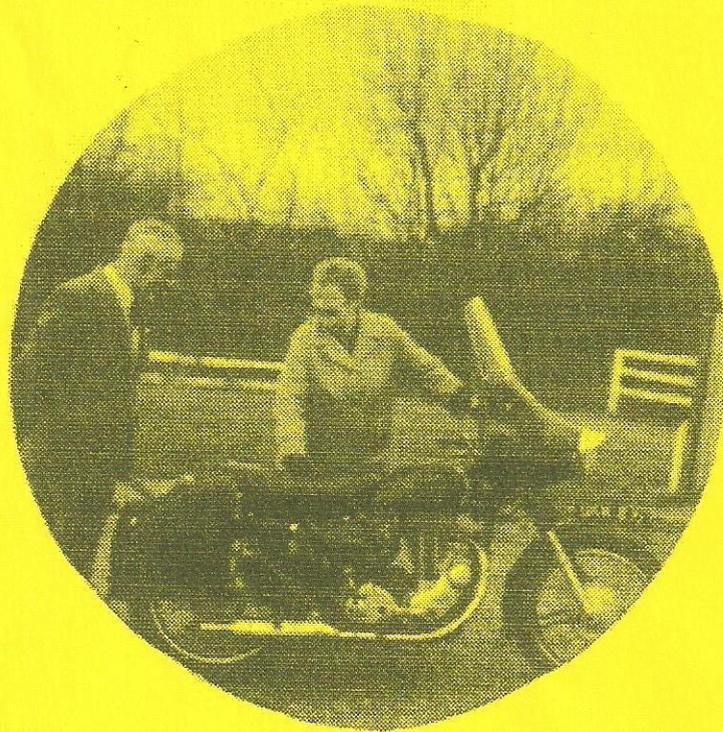


MEMORIES  
of  
**PLUMSTEAD**



recalled by

John & Rose Rourke

Produced by and from the property of Rob Harknett  
For the the AJS & Matchless Owners Club also wd-prewar-ajandmatchless e- group

This book was written as John & Rose Rourke spoke.

Local slang etc included. After many visits to the old couple , letters all the stories, I decided this should be recorded. I started recalling/writing up, conversations and letters. Later John wrote much in a note book which he gave to me. I then started to type all this up with the help of my sister, she could read his writing better than I, but did not make out many technical words and words relating to motor cycles. John read this manuscript and made many corrections. Quite recently motor cycling book author Bill Cakebread showed interest in the book and asked for copy perhaps to aid research for a new book. He very kindly in return for this, re wrote the original manuscript, making a few changes and including all the corrections noted by John Rourke.

My thanks to Bill Cakebread for doing this, he claims no copywrite for his work re writing the book. John & Rose have since departed this world, let their memories live on.

Rob Harknett.

## Memories of Plumstead

November 1987

Dedicated to Rob Harknett and Matchless and AJS owners everywhere with grateful thanks for your patience, understanding and tolerance. Also with deepest apologies for errors, omissions and muddle. Perhaps at times, flights of fancy and, most of all, an old un's maybe slightly faulty memory but it is as we remember and believe the truth.

John and Rose Rourke.

Note: The original, apparently barely legible, hand written notes were passed to Rob Harknett who arranged for them to be typed and interpreted as best as was possible by a legal secretary before adding his own corrections.

This typewritten copy was then passed to me in September 2010. I have incorporated Rob's corrections and have turned the notes into something that I hope will be a readable format to be enjoyed by a wider audience. I have turned the notes into sentences and have added punctuation where necessary. Many further errors have been found along the way. Only essential errors have been corrected as I have attempted to retain John and Rose's words wherever possible so that the spirit of what they recorded, even when their view of things is not entirely accurate and the English may be still less than perfect. It remains their personal view of AMC as they saw it over a very long period of time and I think that we should be grateful for that record.

W A (Bill) Cakebread

3<sup>rd</sup> October 2010

## Collier & Sons-later known as Associated Motor Cycles Ltd

Pre-1928; Learnt from hearsay from people who were there, old pictures in offices, old newspapers etc. unfortunately not in my possession.

The original company of Collier<sup>1</sup>and sons was founded by the old Mr H H (Henry Herbert) Collier who I understood was an ex or retired engineer employee from the Royal Ordnance Factories at Woolwich, South East London around 1885. I believe that at the Arsenal he was a very senior supervisor engineer. He lived in a large house in Herbert Road, Plumstead Common with stabling and a coach-house etc.etc. He was married with two sons, Mr Harry and Mr Charles (Charlie), both heading for their teens.

The old man started in their joint spare time by making replacement wooden rollers for the old iron mangles for local housewives. Exactly when I don't know, but Mrs Collier died and before long Mr Collier Senior remarried and a third son, Herbert William (Bertie) was born towards or just after the turn of the century<sup>2</sup>. More will be told of all four later.

When Goodyear brought out the first pneumatic tyres and the old solid tyres had gradually been superseded on pushbikes, Henry Collier made an early start and forsook mangle rollers in favour of a number of pushbikes. These were hired out to the young bloods of Plumstead for one old penny per day. The few became many and before long the Colliers fitted an engine into a pedal cycle. As far as I am aware, the details of this engine and its drive to the rear wheel have been lost in the mists of time. This first hybrid Matchless was the creation of the Father and his two sons and soon emerged onto the King/Queen's highway. All this was created from a shed/workshop in the grounds of the house in Herbert Road. I believe that success with these creations came early and easily. The shed soon became too small and soon the work took over the stabling and coach houses. I understand that when this success came and the district saw three Colliers and others riding around the area, there were nearly riots and the Colliers were extremely unpopular.

The gang of three were joined by half a dozen other enthusiasts; prophets of things to come. Later I came to know and, in some cases, become friendly with some of the six who were, Mr Bert Colver, Mr A Heather, Mr Fred Mill, Mr A Brooker and Mr Bert Bassett. Complaints about the activity in Herbert Road and also from the second Mrs Collier brought about the move to a small factory in Maxey Road, Woolwich. The team of nine were now in business and Matchless was born. All were engineers, enthusiastic motorcyclists and businessmen. Also around this time, two more names were added to the payroll; Mr Charles Wensley<sup>3</sup> and Mr G Timberlake. This marked the growth of a new industry and the day of the poor man's transport had dawned.

I understood from Bert Colver that production at this time was 3 to 4 Matchless machines per month. The working week was 80 or 90 hours including Saturday and sometimes Sunday. The

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<sup>1</sup> The company was described as H A (Harry Arthur) Collier and Sons but H A (Henry Alfred), was the eldest son.

<sup>2</sup> Bertie, born in 1907, was the 3rd son and 6th child born to the first wife of H H Collier. The second marriage was childless.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wensley married Gertrude Collier, the third child of the founder H H Collier

top wages were 22 shillings, or today £1.10p per week although all were married men with up to 4 or 5 children. According to Bert, they lived well and were considered to be passing rich. Although I don't know much about the period 1900 to 1914, Bert Colver told me that, although the old man wasn't interested, the boys wanted to fly and it wasn't long before the Collier brothers were attempting to fly over the Plumstead marshes in an aeroplane of their own construction.

Not long after man first flew (the Wright brothers at Kittyhawk, USA in 1903), the Collier brothers got off the ground for all of 60 feet and 10/12 feet off the ground but, after some half a dozen flights, their flying careers ended in a pile of boxwood, varnished bed linen sheets and fly fishing line<sup>4</sup>. The flight, on Plumstead and Erith marshes (now the Thamesmead Estate) was witnessed by Bert Colver, G Timberlake and Fred Mill. The aeroplane had 3<sup>5</sup> tier wings and was powered by a Matchless engine (what else?). Once again, the good people of Plumstead had been shocked by the Collier's disgusting exhibition as they wore no shoes or socks and, worst of all, no shirt or vest! The Colliers were certainly not seen as gentlemen in the area.

Their Father's dream, however, was the growth of Matchless and by 1909/10 he, like many others, saw that war with Germany was more or less inevitable. Bert Colver with Harry Strector and co. constructed motorcycle sidecar outfits in British Army scarlet and gold with a Gatlin machine gun mounted in a box sidecar. 1910/11/12 saw Mr Harry Jnr. and Mr Charlie's joint names in the new Isle of Man Tourist Trophy Races. I saw old photographs in their offices showing their triumphant stances, bikes with square or round petrol tanks, hand operated oil pumps, 28/30 inch wheels and belt drive (similar to Brammer belting) to the rear wheels. The rider's uniform was an ankle-length leather coat with a double-breasted 'lancer' front and a 3 inch leather belt. The coat had a fur collar and a silk scarf was worn together with a peaked cap worn back-to-front. Knickerbockers with lace-up brown boots and woollen stockings turned over at the top covered the legs and the hands were protected by leather gauntlets reaching halfway up the arms. They carried loops of wire and loops of spare belting for repairs, a medicine bottle of oil and another of petrol. With spanners in their pockets, they were ready for the starter's flag to go where no man had been before at speeds of about 30 mph! It must be remembered though, that this was not on a track but on public roads designed for horse-drawn traffic.

At this point, perhaps a description of the 3 men would not be out of place:-

As I saw them in 1928, Mr Harry senior (Henry) and Mr Harry Junior; one description will serve for both as Father and son looked more like brothers. They both had iron grey hair and were both 6ft tall with great big Prince Imperial moustaches, bushy eyebrows that beat Dennis Healey's and pebble lens spectacles. Pretty well the only difference between Father and son was that the senior one carried a stick due to his age that I would guess to have been 75 to 80 in 1928. Not only was the stick a useful aid to walking but also it was used for poking people when he wanted to emphasise his words. I always thought that one day I might get it across my bum.

Father was always seen dressed in a frock coat with a stiff shirt, collar and cuffs. Trousers were pin stripe worn with buttoned boots and grey spats. The jacket was always high buttoned and the

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<sup>4</sup> I believe that the aeroplane was more professionally built than this, being assembled in a wood-yard near the Woolwich Ferry where quality materials would have been available. After the experimental flights on the marshes, it was taken to Brooklands aerodrome where, after damage sustained in a heavy landing, the project was abandoned.

<sup>5</sup> A 3 tier wing is unlikely to have been used. Other reports suggest a monoplane similar to the Bleriot.

suit a dark blue serge. The younger brother, Charlie, was similarly uniformed but wore a dark grey suit. Each man always carried about his person a 36 inch folding steel rule, 1 inch and 2 inch micrometers, a piece of fine emery paper and a silver pill box<sup>6</sup> filled with engineer's marking blue.

At times they would tour the factory as a trio, sometimes just the two brothers and occasionally alone. Absolutely nothing missed their eyes, even the old man's. The procedure was that they would arrive at a department and then stop. No matter how long it took, they would wait until the Department Foreman arrived and then proceed with him through the shop. God help anyone who was working without a blueprint and instructions in a highly visible position. "Where's your drawing boy?" It was 'boy' whether you were 6 or 60. It didn't matter what they were looking at, if they didn't think that it was satisfactory, none of them was above taking their coat off and rolling up their shirt sleeves to show you how they wanted it done. It made no difference what the skill was, whether it was turning, drilling, grinding, press work, filing, welding or brazing, it was all one to them. The least that you could expect was for your work to be checked very accurately indeed and, of course, it was always the wrong one that they picked up to check. If it was a finishing operation like grinding, it would be rubbed one way with superfine emery against the grit and grain of the grind. It had to be dead on, not near enough. "Not good enough boy-It's got to be right!" Dirty hands bothered them not a bit-hands can be washed. A favourite comment with grinding was "What do you call this boy? Grinding? I've got a dog at home who can chew it off better than that!" Often when I was on the grinders, I was tempted to reply "Why the hell don't you bring him in on the job then?" but the discretion of silence was wiser.

Mr Charlie, Mr Harry's junior by 5 or 6 years, was the one to be really scared of. He was about 6 inches shorter than his Dad and big brother but he had a really serious character allied to an acid scathing tongue. He fooled many people until they had really been bitten hard by him. In later years when I had progressed in the company, I found out that Charlie was a golfing nut. No matter what the trouble was, I found that to whisper something about golf or let him catch you making an imaginary swing, the sun suddenly shone and his wrath diminished to practically nothing. This was very handy to know and in later years, when he learnt that as a kid in the country that I had caddied on the golf course and had seen some of the great players like Ben Hogan, Bobby Jones etc. play and could knock a ball around a bit myself, we nearly became mates!

Their joint view of machines in the factory was that if a machine was stopped for any reason whatsoever and wasn't earning money then it was a pile of junk.

In case I am giving the wrong impression of the Colliers; if they weren't loved they were certainly respected within the company. The reason that I make this emphasis is that in the neighbourhood they were neither loved nor respected at all. To understand this aversion, one must understand some of the history of Greenwich, Deptford, Woolwich and Plumstead. Deptford, going back before the time of Henry VIII, was the birth place of the Royal Navy. The same period saw the foundation of the Royal Ordnance Establishment to provide the fire power for the 'Wooden Walls' of England, the 'Heart of Oak' being felled from the Royal forests of Greenwich and Blackheath etc. At this time Woolwich became the testing ground for the guns of the day and the Royal Regiment of Artillery was born 'The Right of the Line' and senior regiment of the British Army. Up until about 1934, all officers of the Royal Academy and every

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<sup>6</sup> A pill box would have been an unlikely container in which engineer's blue could have been carried.

gunner started and finished their time in the same establishment from whence they started. Henry VIII's daughter Elizabeth built the Queen's House at Greenwich, now the National Maritime Museum and her Palace on the riverside, the Royal Naval College of today.

Even up to my time, the area had many famous associations; Peter the Great of Russia worked in the Royal Dockyards at Deptford and Woolwich, Nelson and Lady Hamilton lived for some time initially off Deptford High Street. I myself remember very well the Royal Prince, later King Farouk of Egypt, as an officer in the Royal Academy, once the equal of Sandhurst Military College. He looked very stern and handsome in his scarlet robe<sup>7</sup> and was a familiar sight in the area in my day. From all of the foregoing, it will come as no surprise that the whole of the employment in the area was connected with either Royal or Government establishments. On the other side of the Thames lay the East End, trader-mongers, cockneys, the world of Epping Forest and Dick Turpin. The area south of the river was, by contrast, the preserve of the Victorian and Edwardian middle and upper crust of society, their employment being by the institutions mentioned.

When the Colliers and Matchless came into being, they, together with their employees and their dirty smelly machines, were most unwelcome in the area. By the same token, this was not all loss for the Colliers because first, it got up their noses and engendered in them a determination to succeed and secondly, from the start it enabled them to impose their wages and conditions etc. on all who came into their orbit. They weren't popular so to hell with everyone was the rule. Within the Plumstead factory the Colliers ruled and no one dared to forget it. Even to this very day, witness the article by John Pilbeam Keat in September 1987 about the re-naming of

Matchless drive into Somerset Drive! Just imagine how much worse the horse and carriage mob would have reacted in the early 1900's. I don't believe that it was an exaggeration when I was told later that at times there were nearly riot conditions; at best, open hostility prevailed.

I apologise for relating all of this social history so will return to the pre-1914 Matchless history:-

Old man Collier was sure that war with Germany was on its way so the scarlet and gold sidecar outfit fitted with a V-twin model H (Harry?-I don't know but I guess) engine and a water cooled weapon became khaki. The War Office decided on a project for motorcycles for despatch and message carrying. With this early approval, the Colliers and Matchless were already past the start line<sup>8</sup>. The main customers were the Machine Gun Corps and the Royal Signals and Matchless, along with other makes, supplied the machinery. I believe that a few examples survive in museums.

The factory expanded along with the workforce which rose to around 200. Production rose to double figures for the first time until in 1912, 13 and 14 it jumped up the graph to 20-25 per week. As well as the bikes, shells and bullets were made and the creation of the Royal Flying Corps around 1915 brought yet more manufacturing to the company. Prosperity had arrived and with it came the most advanced Model H of its day with 5 forward and 2 reverse gears. I don't know how many of these monsters were made or if they were a commercial success but I actually saw two of them working from the factory. In 1928 I saw one with a big box sidecar with rider aboard going forward quite normally and then go backwards around a corner! It had

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<sup>7</sup> The word 'robe' has been inserted in desperation. It was actually typed as 'his scarlet tad boach'

<sup>8</sup> Unlike in the second conflict, Matchless didn't win any of the really major contracts in the First World War.

big cow-horn handlebars about 2ft 6in long, 9 inch long footboards and mudguards as big and wide as those on a car. It was fitted with an enormous acetylene brass headlamp and a large carbide/water tank as well as auxiliary oil front and rear lamps that looked as though they had come from a train or Hansom cab. The pulling power seemed to be phenomenal-enough to pull the proverbial house down. When seen, the box sidecar with a drop-down rear was being used to transport eight complete bikes, packed and ready for the road, to Woolwich Arsenal Station. The other Model H had a big flat platform alongside and what this one could carry was no-one's business. The platform was about 20 feet long and I saw what I believe to have been about 1.1/2 tons of steel rods aboard. They were bundles of 1 inch diameter rods, 10 to a bundle and there were 25 or 30 bundles chained fore and aft. When I first clapped my eyes on these two bikes, my hair stood on end.

### The Great War and the aftermath.

As stated, prosperity arrived not only through the sale of bikes but also through re-equipping the factory and sub-contract work. Government expenditure proceeded apace beyond 1918 and into the happier twenties. All was still well and business had the green light. The Collier's attitude was like that of Henry Ford—"They can have one in any colour as long as it's black". Although this attitude reigned, the climate was changing in many ways. Unemployment was rising and returning servicemen were bearing the brunt. Former high ranking officers were becoming door to door salesmen selling vacuum cleaners etc. Lloyd George's "land fit for heroes" was in the process of becoming a bitter myth. The ex-servicemen now knew that there was a great big world out there where men, no longer limited by how far they could walk or be carried by horse, could travel further from their birth place than their parents could have. With unemployment ever rising, what was needed was cheap transport for the working man so that, if there was a job to be had, the worker could get to it.

As the bitterness spread and the situation worsened, the motorcycle manufacturers seemed oblivious to the need and continued as before. More power was the panacea. Everyone was happy that the war was over so surely all was well? I don't know what the other manufacturers of the day did but this attitude persisted at Plumstead to my time in 1928 and beyond. At Plumstead, an example of the Model X, before its time as a solo machine, later gained limited fame as the power house for the Morgan Sports 3 wheeler. I can't say much about the opposition, i.e. BSA, Velocette, New Imperial, Rudge, AJS, the water cooled yowling Scott, the Belgian FN and the German BMW, names from which came the pre-war competition to Matchless. Power, power, was abroad everywhere; Brough Superior and HRD were the kings.

Unfortunately Plumstead saw the Matchless as an extension of the whole automotive industry instead of seeing the motorcycle industry as a separate entity for the manufacture of cheap transport for the working man. Instead of addressing economy, the desire for more comfort and weather protection dominated and prices rose from £40 to £60/£70 in old money. Petrol consumption remained high; true, it was only 10 old pence per gallon but, in the economic climate of the time, it was a significant factor.

### Where I started from

I was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1914, the son of a Police Inspector who retired in 1918.

1924 saw the three of us, Mother, Father and me, installed as country publicans at Piltdown in Sussex, just 4 miles from the main London to Eastbourne road. It was around 1925/6 that my love-hate affair with motorcycles began. One summer's day, into our pub for 3.1/2 pints of bitter came a young man in RAF blue. His hat strap was under his chin and there was nothing remarkable except that it was unusual for us to see the RAF in the area. However, when I, at about 10/11 years old, went outside the pub I saw this Brough Superior Alpine<sup>9</sup>. It had a gleaming nickel plated tapering petrol tank and, to me, the engine looked as big as the pub. As I gaped at the machine, RAF blue came out and a voice said "Want a ride on the back son?" I couldn't speak but only nodded. "Get on then". He was already sitting on the great big leather tractor type saddle and the engine was roaring. I can't recall how the Brough was started. It must have been by kick-start as it definitely wasn't pushed. Half scared to death, with my toe tips just touching the ground, my bum was just clear by 1/4 inch of the rock hard pillion. There was a roar and Brough with RAF was about a mile or two up the road. I was flat on my back in mud and muck! RAF realised that he had lost his passenger and came back. This time, with my bum firmly on the seat, my feet on the metal pegs and a gentler take-off, I was in heaven or what was near enough to heaven for me. Later I learnt from my schoolmaster that Colonel Lawrence of Arabia had joined the RAF as Aircraftsman Shaw. What speed we went I have no idea. I only know that I could not breathe and it felt like 300 mph to me. Not very much later Colonel Lawrence/Corporal Shaw crashed on his Brough and was killed. Now it was well known that Lawrence was well known to be gay so I have since wondered whether my ride was because I was a nice little boy. As it was me, I think that this is highly unlikely.

Next door to the pub was a cottage where Harry Thorpe, a 15/16 year old young farmer boy lived. He suddenly startled the population of Sussex with his little BSA, a fore-runner of the Bantam. King Elvis never ruled the young male and female population like this young cow-hand and I became his shadow. Four miles away on the main road was Maresfield Camp which was, like the Royal Artillery at Woolwich, a depot for the Royal Signal Corps. Our pub was in the bounds of the camp and Piltdown Common was a training ground for budding despatch riders. Young signals officers were trained there under civilian instructors and, although I have no proof, one of them may have been Hugh Viney. It was marvellous how many lifts a boy could get off the soldiers for a paper packet of Woodbines or Weights cigarettes (2 old pence) 'borrowed' from the bar or even more for a bottle of beer. Sometimes we could spend all day at Maresfield camp riding on the back mudguard (there were no pillion seats) over rough terrain, through ponds and rivers; everything was included. Being flat on my back was a familiar position for me but it didn't matter if you fell off as there was always another close behind. Even if they had all gone, there was usually a signaller on horseback or a wagon about and, failing that, there was always my own two flat feet. My parents never knew where I was and whether I was at school or not; more often not!

My Father was seriously ill for 2 or 3 years before his death with cancer. He was mostly drugged to the limit and my Mother, with a fairly busy pub to run seven days a week, had

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<sup>9</sup> Presumably the top of the range 1000cc 'Alpine Grand Sport' or 'AGS' model.

enough on her plate so that I was nearly free as a bird. We had two dogs, cats, rabbits and I had my own two ponies. If I asked for money the response was 'You know where the till is'. Money meant little or nothing to me but it all came to an abrupt halt in 1928. For the 4 or 5 years up to then, the King's sons could not have had a better or happier time than I did. Although a motorcycle was my dream, I had to make do with a push bike. My bike cost £2.5s.0p (£2.25) new, complete with Sturmey Archer 3 speed, dynamo lighting driven off the rear wheel, pump and saddlebag. When I went there, it took me the 7 miles to school where again there were motorbikes.

My youngish Headmaster owned an Alldays and Onions, a make that I had never heard of. He told me that it was one of only 25 made and that it had links to William Morris (Lord Nuffield). Before I left school at Christmas 1927, the Head had disposed of his Alldays and Onions bike for a car of the same make with a dicky seat. The boys at school fought to clean his bike as it had solid brass fuel and oil tanks and a hand oil pump that could be made to shine like the sun. His car had a radiator with a 3 inch high steam tower and screw cap and a bonnet made of the same material. Christmas saw me at home and work was on the agenda. My Mother and particularly my Father should not have been allowed within 1000 miles of a pub. Father was an over genial, happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care Irishman who liked his drink and gambling. My Mother knew then what I didn't and, one way and another, the £20,000 that she had inherited in 1917 was all gone. The pub was in debt as was Dad who, in spite of his many faults, was a good Father who I worshipped. She knew that with him gone there would be nothing at all left. His 28 shillings a week Police Inspector's pension for 28 year's service would stop the moment he died. Neither Police nor Publicans were insurable occupations so there would be no widow's pension. This was before the Welfare State.

After leaving school at Christmas, I helped in the pub as Dad was just a vegetable lying upstairs in bed. One day, early in the spring of 1928, a lady and a gentleman came in for a drink. I served them and, as the prospect of being a farmer's boy didn't fill me with joy and, by the Rover car parked outside, they obviously weren't local; I asked if they knew anywhere where I could get a job. The man asked me if I understood the decimal system and fractions and, after going into a huddle with my Mother, I was asked to write in my best joined-up writing to H. Collier & Sons Ltd, Plumstead, London, S.E.18.

Who the heck H. Collier and his sons were, where Plumstead S.E.18 was or what they did, I didn't have a clue. I only knew that it was in London and that they didn't have farms there as I had been born in the East End of London and had lived there until I was 4 years old. What the reply was to my essay, I never did know. All that I knew was that on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1928 at 6.00 a.m., I was on a train on my own en route to the big city. I was dressed in my best suit with double-breasted jacket and a vivid plum coloured waistcoat. I wore boots and a hairy tweed cap completed my world-conquering ensemble. Now these Colliers and London were about to learn something. Surely they would have the bands out when I arrived. At Victoria Station, surprise, surprise, no-one took any notice. Never mind, I thought, wait until I reach this Plumstead place wherever it might be. Somehow I found my way to Charing Cross but I didn't know that there were two Woolwich Stations-the Dockyard and the Arsenal. With no clue as to which one I wanted, I alighted at the Dockyard, 3.1/2 miles from where I should have been. Eventually, on very weary legs, I arrived at the factory entrance. After two hours waiting and standing to attention, I was eventually interviewed by a big very smart man, Mr Bert Bassett, who I later learnt was the Works Manager. At the end of this, I was told "Go home boy and we will write to

your Mother”<sup>10</sup>. I still didn’t know what the Colliers made or that the two storey factory at the junction of Burrage Grove and Maxey Road was where the motorbikes were made. I eventually reached the pub after 10.00 p.m., tired after another 10 mile hike from Uckfield to Piltown, hungry and more than a little fed up. I no longer wanted a motorbike, only my bed.

A sketch showing the location of the factory in relation to the adjacent roads was included at this point.

As you will see from the Collier’s letter to my Mother<sup>11</sup>, the following Tuesday, 27<sup>th</sup> May, saw me once more off to work. I had a small suitcase, an overcoat that weighed a ton, two cheese sandwiches, £1.00 for my lodgings, 5 shillings for my aunt for one night’s bed and breakfast, 2 shillings for my Lybro boiler suit and for wine, fast women, slow horses and song; I had just one silver Joey sixpence. Wednesday, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1928, dawned wet, windy and cold; real brass monkey weather. 5 a.m. saw me en route from my aunt’s house in the East End to Matchless with all of my impediments. It was to be my first sea voyage-across the Thames to Woolwich. Thank God for the free ferry, otherwise I would have two choices; walk on water or swim. At 9.00 a.m. I was taken through the factory doors into the noisiest, dirtiest stinking location that I had seen. It was my idea of Hell.

Before entering into this place, I had to sign that I had read, understood and agreed to obey six double-foolscap sheets of rules and regulations. This took one minute flat. Around my neck, on a chain, had been hung a red metal disc stamped with ‘Rourke. J. Clock No. 227’. This was my toilet disc and it must be worn and visible at all times while in the confines of the factory. The toilet time was 5 minutes in the morning and the same in the afternoon. At the toilets was a turnstile attended by a one-armed, black bearded old man. The routine was to surrender your disc to this man who recorded your time in and out when your disc was returned to you. Any time in excess of 10 minutes per day were totalled up weekly and every minute over the total was reported to the Works Manager. If you were a persistent offender, you were suspended from work for 3 days without pay and a doctor’s certificate was required before you were able to re-start. As you may imagine, after a long journey through the factory and then finding a queue at the turnstile, you were sometimes under pressure. How many never made it is unknown! By 7.10 a.m. I was standing on 4 inch duck-boarding trying to mill the dome ends on brake rod fork ends to a specific drawing. 7.30 a.m. saw me in the first aid room having 3 stitches put into a dome-ended finger. With stitches and an iodine pad covered with a bandage in place, I was back on my duck-board. At 10.30 a.m., the siren went. “Good”, I thought, “Work is shorter than a school-day”, and started to leave the duck-board. A voice roared out “Where do you think you’re off to now Twitty? Get back to work!” I think that ‘Twitty’ was one of the many terms of endearment that was used. The siren had been for smoking time if you had fags and matches on you. If not, you had to go without because your jacket etc. would have been hauled up to the roof at 7.55 a.m. and there it stayed except for emergencies until 12.29 p.m., dinner time. By 7.55 a.m., you were supposed to be at your machine with it already running to warm it up and with your overalls on ready to start performing before the 8.00 a.m. siren died away.

Timekeeping: Clock-on time was 7.57 a.m. At 7.59 a.m., 2 minutes late, 1/4 of an hour’s wages were stopped. 8.00 a.m., 3 minutes late, meant a loss of 1/2 an hour’s wages. After 8.05 a.m., an hour’s wages were lost and after 8.10 a.m., a day’s pay. If you arrived after 8.15 a.m., you were

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<sup>10</sup> The attendance of a parent at an interview was still a requirement for apprentices in the 1950’s

<sup>11</sup> A photocopy of this letter was appended at the end of the notes.

told to go home and to report again the following day with your clock card in hand. The Works Manager had to see you before you could re-join and, if it took all day too see him, that was too bad and another day's pay was lost until Mr A E Bassett granted permission for you to start and signed your clock card.

My Milling career was interrupted before dinner time and I was taken by Stan Ward, the Milling Foreman up to the factory entrance to meet my new landlord. Jack Lockyer, one of the two pipe-benders, looked to me like a member of the 'Black and White Minstrels'. The reason for this was that the pipes were coated with a red rust-coloured deposit on the outside and were filled with a black pitch-like mixture to prevent wrinkling of the bends when they were bent cold. I was told to meet Mr Lockyer outside the factory entrance at 12.30 p.m. with my suitcase, overcoat and the rest of my kit when he would take me to his home, my new lodgings. At 12.29 p.m., my coat re-appeared as if from heaven and it was necessary to clock off before getting cleaned up but there was no time for this for me. I trotted alongside Jack for the 2.1/2 miles to 76 Bramblebury Road on Plumstead Common for two corned beef sandwiches and a mug of tea before a jog back to the factory by 1.25 p.m. The same penalties applied in the afternoon for the 1.30 p.m. start as in the morning and I returned to my Milling duties until the 5.00 p.m. finish. Machining the dome ends posed problems for me; too fast or too heavy a feed cause the cutter to either jam or break or the fork end to be ripped out of the vice-like fixture. As I had never seen the inside of a factory before, let alone a milling machine, it was little wonder that by 5.00 p.m. I wasn't a skilled miller. If any of the above disasters occurred, a Setter had to come and re-set the machine. It was not a popular pastime. He lived with me. At 5.00 p.m. on that first day, outside the factory entrance, there was no Jack Lockyer. He was up on the second floor working overtime until 8.00 p.m. I didn't have a clue where I should be at dinner time as I could only remember a house with a brass kerb at the front door so it was 8.30 p.m. by the time I had been collected and deposited at No. 76 for a dinner cum supper of Irish stew and cocoa.

For my 30 shillings lodging money per week, I was to share a bed with an old Welshman. I was to be in by 9.30 p.m. latest. Taffy insisted on sleeping on the inside of the bed and after midnight didn't care where his feet landed after a session in the pub. Breakfast was at 6.30 a.m. Washing took place under a cold tap in the kitchen. The hot water in the kettle on the coal stove was for Jack's shaving and the teapot. No towels or soap were supplied but I had been hired a towel and some Sunlight carbolic soap for one shilling for the first week. There were no fairies at the bottom of the garden for me-only the outside toilet.

I had thought that I would only have to walk in and ride out again to world speed records at Donnington, Brooklands, Pendine and the Isle of Man. Parry Thomas, Railton, Sunbeam, Campbell and Bluebird wouldn't see which way I had gone. In reality I hadn't even seen a motorbike or smelt Castrol R (better than Brut or Chanel No.5). At 3 pence per hour, 8.00-12.30 and 1.30-5.00 Monday to Friday and 8.00-1.00 on Saturday, total 45 hours, less stoppages and compulsory deductions for HSA (Hospital Savings Association) and Red Cross, my take home pay was roughly 10 shillings or 50p per week. Was I on my way to fame and fortune? There certainly wasn't much evidence of either. My mother had to send me an additional £1-2s.-0p. per week; £1 was for my lodging and the 2 shillings was so that I could write home and use the public baths at either Woolwich or Plumstead. If cleanliness is next to Godliness, there was little hope for me. After paying my bus fares to get there, I found that I had a spare 4 pence every week that meant that I could go to the pictures twice a week.

Around this time the workforce, including me, numbered about 250 to 300 with an output of approximately 60 to 70 machines per week. These comprised the 250cc Model R, the 400cc side-valve Silver Arrow, the big Model X twin, one or two Model H's and, at the top of the heap, the mono-block Silver Hawk. This advanced machine sold for just under £100 and was well ahead of its time, only 75 to 100 Silver Hawks ever being built. Dynamo lighting and Kick-starters had become standard to replace acetylene or oil lighting and pushing and chain drive was ousting the belt.

At last I had discovered where the bikes were; they were upstairs on the second floor and outside the yard in Maxey where the testers (Gods to us) Tommy Neill, Reg Barber, Fred Mill and Ted Friend were to be found. This was the start of my downfall as a milling expert. The bikes were too strong an attraction and I was missing most of the time. Reg Barber and Fred Mill didn't make boys welcome. From them I usually received a clip around the ear or a kick in the pants. Ted Friend ignored you but Tommy Neill was the tops. He would let you push a machine out of the yard and, if he was on his own or had had a liquid lunch, give you a ride on the back mudguard. His goodness ended at Christmas 1930 when, after celebrating the festive season a little too well, he rode a Silver Arrow for about 3 hours round and round the coping stone ledge of the second floor roof before passing out with a beautiful smile on his handsome face. After the crowds and the Fire Brigade had gone, Tom re-joined the human race. When the Colliers had assured themselves that the Silver Hawk was undamaged, Tom left. He did not exactly leave on a cloud of glory. He just went. Later Squadron Leader Thomas Neill DFC returned from the Eighth Army Western Desert Bomber Command to become chief mechanic to Tom Farndon, speedway World Champion at New Cross (Old Kent Road) Speedway. This gave my wife and I free entrance to New Cross Speedway right up until its end about 1955. A few months after its closure, Tom passed away following a heart attack. He had lived gracefully and bravely. Rest in Peace, Tom.

There followed a short spell on the gear cutting millers and rear wheel sprocket tooth cutting before it was decided that my career as a miller was over; I had been missing for too long. For this reason I was transferred as far as possible from the yard and the second floor right to the other end of the factory to the Hardening and Heat Treatment Shop. I was to work under hardening genius Charlie Damyon, a short barrel of a man. Components for hardening were first clayed-up, that is, the portions that were not required to be hardened (threads etc.), were wrapped in soft wet fire-clay and set aside for drying out. A few hours later the parts would then be carefully packed into 24 x 12 x 12 inch fire boxes made of 1/2 inch cast iron surrounded by a carbon rich Charcoal mixture and the lid sealed with fire clay. The pots were then ready to be loaded into big gas-fired ovens. We all worked stripped to the waist with sweat pouring off us. In the summer, the temperature in the shop was about 110-120 degrees. Outside it felt distinctly cold. We had to pack about 120 pots and I often passed out, only to be revived by a bucket of cold water. You knew that you had done a day's work. My first initiation was all packing and claying which was done by Charlie Damyon's second in command, Harry Allcock, and two assistants. I didn't appreciate it then, but this preliminary preparation was the most important part of the process. Any fool could load and unload pots in and out of the oven. When 100 or 150 red-hot pots were unloaded to allow them to cool, they gave off an incredible amount of heat in the shop. Each pot would have a test piece inside and any time after 8 to 36 hours of 'cooking', Charlie would call for a test piece. It would be fished from the pot with a pair of tongs that were 4 or 5 feet long and, after Charlie was satisfied, you were told to unload the pot or give it another hour or two. All this was assisted by Charlie estimating the temperature of the

oven by peering briefly at the colour through a small circular spy-hole in the door. There were no pyrometers back then and he was rarely wrong.

Another activity was oil quenching; all thick black smoke and stink. During my short career as a hardener, I did, however, manage to graduate to the cooler end of the shop where the small electric ovens used for cyanide hardening were. Cyanide hardening was used to form a skin of hardness on small components and was useful for hardening any component with a hole in it where the surface of the hole itself needed to be hard; 20 or 30 components would be wire strung together and suspended in the molten cyanide. If there was the slightest dampness on any part of the string, there would be a satisfying bang and the resulting shower of molten cyanide droplets beat any firework display you ever saw. Of course, a 14 year old didn't give any thought to the danger of blindness or cyanide burns which could only be cured by weeks of treatment using mercury oxide ointment. I just thought it funny to see grown men jumping out of their skin and taking cover. Protective clothing; what's that? I was a damn fool but my come-uppance and a lesson was very near.

There were two other hot-forming jobs that were challenging. The first was hot forming the joining strip for the petrol tanks which were pressed out on an 850 ton press in two halves before being seam welded together. The tank strip was a piece of steel 2 inches wide and 1/8 inch thick and about 30 inches long with 24 1/8 inch countersunk holes in two rows. The strips were loaded into the oven on flat iron trays, 8 per tray with about 10/12 trays loaded at a time. By the time the first set of trays had reached a cherry red, you had to have the second set of trays loaded in readiness. The strips were then removed one at a time and the forming process could proceed. The system was to fit the hot strips onto pins on a jig in a fly-press.<sup>12</sup> It was tricky to locate the small holes on the pins using only the long tongs. The fly-press is a light, hand operated press which uses a weight shaped like a cannon-ball at one end of a horizontally pivoting shaft to provide the operator with additional force by its inertia. The operating arm and ball are close to head-height. The trick was to put all of your weight behind the swing, duck to avoid the ball and then catch the handle to stop the rebound. You then kept banging the top former down until the strip had cooled down enough to retain its correct curvature. The strip was then removed from the bottom former and stacked on its side nesting with the others to cool while the next strip was loaded. It was important that the strip was hot enough to form but not hot enough to cause the metal to burn or blister.

The second job was similar but simpler in that the formers on the press were replaced with large 6 inch thick flat steel plates that were used to flatten the rear wheel chain sprockets. The operation may have been simpler but it required all of your brawn and more. This was the job that promptly ended my hardening education. One afternoon, when I had about 100 or 150 sprockets, dark but still very hot, stacked alongside the press, Lofty, one of the 18/19 year old workers, hit me behind the ear with a piece of orange peel fired from a catapult. The result was that I forgot to duck and the flying cannon-ball smashed into the side of my head and I was sprawled onto the pile of sprockets. The sprockets scattered all over the place and everywhere I tried to scramble was hot. Everything that I touched burned. Thank God for Charlie Damyon for, with one hand, he grabbed my by the hair and with one heave dunked me in the oil quenching tank-right under. I don't know how long he held me there because I had passed out and, when I came to, six of them were smothering me all over, missing nowhere, with mercury

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<sup>12</sup> A crude sketch of a fly press was inserted at this point.

oxide ointment. Then Charlie covered me with a blanket and dumped me on a flat trolley with a completely unconscious Lofty alongside me. Charlie had had laid him out stone cold with a single punch that even Mike Tyson couldn't match! Charlie galloped us through the factory like an express train; me to the first aid room and Lofty out into the gutter with his clothes and his cards thrown on top of him. In first aid, I was stripped of my clothes (not a long job) and swathed like an Egyptian mummy in ice cold cotton gauze. I was wrapped in blankets, loaded into the box on the reversing Model H and taken, not to hospital, but to my lodgings. A doctor came, gave me two tablets and an injection and that was me-spark out for 48 hours solid.

As this was late in the week, I was told by my landlord that I needn't go to work on Saturday but that I was to be there bright and early on Monday morning as Mr William Barnes, the Welfare Officer, wanted to see me before I started work. It was a miracle as I didn't have a mark or a blister anywhere. Whether it was Charlie Damyon's actions or fate that saved me, to this day I don't know, but I think that it was all down to Charlie and the quenching oil bath that he gave me. I do know that I will never forget the supreme lesson that I learnt; never muck about at work as it can be dangerous. It is no good being sorry after an accident-try being sorry before it happens and there is a very good chance that there will be no accident at all. So it was that I met 'Daddy' (Bill) Barnes, the Welfare Officer; "Sit down John, have a cup of Coffee John. Now, about your lucky escape and the question of your clothing etc; You must realise, John, that if you insist on claiming, it will mean that you will be questioned by the Factory Inspector and you might find yourself in trouble for skylarking about at work. After all, John, the management have generously decided that your wages will not be stopped while you have been away and perhaps it would be best if no more is said about the matter. It has also been agreed that perhaps you are not suited for the Hardeners so from now on you will be working in the Inspection Department under Mr Timberlake." "Thank you Sir; it doesn't matter a bit about my clothes; I can wear my only other pair-the plums".

Yippee! I was going to be an inspector; checking other people's work!

Was I heck; instead, I was given a barrow to push taking components all over the factory. It was OK by me if there was anything to be taken to the Engine Shop or Erecting Shop; I was just the man to take it there. It was amazing just how long and how often I had to wait to get into the lift to get upstairs and down again. That worked quite well until Fred Neill was put in charge of the Engine Shop and he, together with Archie Ilsely, Foreman of the Erection Shop, whispered in Mr Timberlake's ear and the lift suddenly became a non-stop express. Everything then went reasonably well for me and my barrow for a while.

Meanwhile, the output of machines was still very reasonable indeed. The Motorcycle Show was held in November and, with luck, the orders were such that the factory was very busy-very much so at times. The men would work overtime and some departments worked a night shift to keep up with the demand. Towards late spring and early summer though there would be quite a fall-off. Most July, August and Septembers saw short time working-at times down to a 3 day week. There were sackings and lay-offs, especially if you were over 16 and were earning the big (?) money. Every September there was always 5 days holiday leave-unpaid of course.

The first holiday was a memorable one in my working life. 2.00a.m. saw me walking the 12 or 14 miles from Plumstead to Victoria Station. That saved the 1.1/2 pence train fare and I just made it in time to catch the newspaper train at 4.30 a.m. from Victoria to Uckfield which was reached at about 7.00 a.m. The bus from Uckfield was only one per day in each direction and, as

it didn't leave until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I had another 7 or 8 miles of walking to do. On the way, however, I became very tired and so sat in a ditch at the side of the road for a rest where I went sound off to sleep! When my Mother passed on her way to Uckfield at about 10 o'clock, there was her lovely son in the ditch looking like a tramp. Fortunately, while in the town, she met one of the local farmers who brought her back to where I still lay sleeping and I was loaded aboard with the other sacks of corn.

At the end of that week, it was obvious to my Mother that my Father wouldn't last long so she wrote to the Colliers explaining the position. The reply was to the effect that I should stay home as long as required and that, when I was sent back, I could resume work as before. I was surprised that they would have me back. Within 3 weeks of unpaid leave I was back on my barrow but before starting I was told that there would be another boy working with me. I was told that I was not to speak to him unless he spoke to me and that I was to ask no questions. So there I was with my new assistant and off we went here, there and everywhere together. There was not a word out of this 18 year old with his polished shoes and school tie but it didn't take long to find out who was walking alongside me; it was the youngest brother, Mr Bert Collier. After about a month without a single word, he just wasn't there one morning and I was inside the Inspection Department with no more a-roving with my barrow.

Before leaving my travels, I have previously mentioned the big presses. Once, during my barrow days whilst collecting boxes of washers, an operator had his hand cut off at the wrist. His hand had been pressed complete into the steel die and the operator didn't even notice that his hand was gone. There seemed to be no pain; there was no blood and the stump was more or less sealed. He just walked quite normally away to the first aid room. I never knew how he made out as regards to time off and compensation.

My time inside Inspection was spent between two jobs. The first was that finish machined cylinder barrels had to be washed in a tank of warm kerosene and all oil-ways cleaned with wires of various shapes and sizes and then blown through with your mouth to ensure that they were completely free of swarf. They were then racked up beneath a draught of warm air to dry. The second was that all cam-wheel teeth had to be lapped into mesh with a belt-driven master cam. The result was that you smelt, dripped and tasted kerosene without end. There was no need for mustard on your sandwiches.

I passed on from there to adventures new in the Drilling Bay and the Benders and I have strong memories of its Foreman and his assistant, Reg Smith and Frank Dent. Reg was a bully and a pig to those who worked under him. Poor old Frank Hunt was scared stiff of him as were most of the others but what a change there was when the elder Colliers made their tour one day and young Mr Bertie Collier became a temporary driller!

The Drilling Bay was my first encounter with the Bonus Earning Scheme. After a job had been running for one day, the Foreman, from a distance, would time the operation with a stop-watch. All timing was done first thing in the morning when everyone was fresh. I earned my first ever bonus! In my case it was a farthing and did not rank for payment as one penny was the lowest coin in the pay packet; rounding down also applied. Payment of wages was one week in hand and, as the working week was Wednesday to Tuesday, there was no payment for the first 10 days. Any bonus payment was payable 3 weeks in arrears and wages were paid on Friday night at 5.00 p.m. It was necessary to clock off first and line up at the table appropriate to your clock number for your card to be checked, each table catering for 100 employees. This card was then

taken to another table in another part of the factory where you lined up to hand over your clock card, collect your wages and bonus envelopes, sign for them and check their contents. No errors or mistakes were entertained once you had left the table. You were usually free to go by about 7 or 8 o'clock. If, when you received your clock card, you thought that there were errors in it, you had to line up again at the card table and report it to the wages clerk before passing on to the pay table. Any errors found were payable 3 weeks in arrears in a separate envelope. Any underpayment of up one halfpenny was not reportable and not accepted. Overpayment of one halfpenny was rounded up and deducted the following Friday. The Colliers were the inventors of one way streets!

### 1929-1933 Drilling; some lovely jobs.

Brake shoes, fabricated from two parts welded together and linings were placed in a jig like a dummy brake drum with two shoes and two linings in position and clamped with a wing nut fastening. You then drilled two rows of rivet holes, 1/8 inch diameter and 16 per shoe. Each lining was then removed separately and each hole was countersunk for the rivet heads. It was then necessary to wire the matching shoe and lining together and stack them neatly in steel ammunition boxes for riveting. It was dry drilling so the drill had to be released frequently to prevent the flutes from clogging. The linings stank and the brass content made rosy thorns in your fingers. A clogged drill meant a broken drill and big, big trouble before you received another. The allowance was one every six months. The bonus was nil; no-one ever got a penny. There was a dodge to get off the job. The linings came in sacks which were stored in cupboards uncounted and unchecked so the more linings you could break into pieces and dispose of down drains and toilets both inside and outside the factory, the quicker the cupboard was bare. With luck, you were soon off drilling the linings.

Another nightmare job was drilling the oil feedholes in Model A crankpins. The holes were drilled diagonally across the pin. The first drilling was with a 1/8 inch drill and only 1/8 inch deep, just to break through. The drill second and third drillings were the killers as these were only 3/64 inch diameter. The drill had to be constantly relieved and cooled with brush-fulls of water oil solvent mix from a can. The tricky KE805 steel made stringy flakes of swarf which made the drill clog very easily indeed. When about to break through into another drilling, it was necessary to hold the drill handle between a finger and thumb only and to use the lightest feather touch. A broken drill meant a scrap crankpin. It was another no-money spinner. Luckily the batch runs were only 200 so, if you kept your eyes peeled, you could possibly avoid them.

You might be passed on to the multi-spindle (12 spindle) nut tapping machines. Each spindle could cut a different thread at a different speed. The spindles were fed with nuts down a chute and each nut was pushed under the tap by a mechanical finger. When tapped, the nuts ran up the tap spindle. The spindle was raised by a foot-operated pedal and the tap was released from the spindle before being gently lowered into the next hole. All of the taps were fed with pressure oil jets and, while feeding the machine, your hands and feet were fully occupied all day long and an additional 5 to 6 pence per week could be earned. The plum job was countersinking nuts where you could take it fairly easy and make up two shillings extra a week. This job was mostly reserved for good boys or Mr Bertie for the three months that he was with us.

In about 1931-32 jigs and fixtures started to arrive from AJS at Wolverhampton. There were some complete bikes, loads of components; stationery and even toilet paper, all marked 'A J

Stevens & Co'. Old man Collier had died just prior to this and it explained why Plumstead had been on short time for such a long time. Many years later I learnt that the two elder brothers had certainly put their money where their mouths were. Both had mortgaged their homes in the middle of a worldwide slump with record unemployment. They not only raised the £32,000 purchase price for AJS but embarked on building floors 3 and 4 onto the existing factory and also replaced many worn out machine tools. Although this bravery did bring rewards, I don't feel that they were as great as they might have been for a number of reasons. Plumstead was not the home of innovation<sup>13</sup>. Copying and duplicating as near as patents would allow; yes. The management was aloof from the shop floor and communication was poor. Not until after the Second World War, and after for an all too brief period, did all this change but at a snail's pace.

### 1933 to 1935

After the impact of absorbing AJS had diminished, the World situation worsened. Short time descended heavily on Matchless and AJS. There was a three day week. The workforce was drastically reduced and the Drilling Bay comprised just six including two Foremen until one day there was nothing for me to do.

I was off to the Capstans to meet another old genius, Arthur Brooker, a gentle and kindly old boy who could make a Capstan lathe sing 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Bluebells of Scotland' at the same time. He could run his fingers along a turned shaft and say that it wants "another thou off" and, when you put a gauge or micrometer on it, he was always right; it did<sup>14</sup>. This was a happy shop under Arthur and he brought the best out in everyone. It was like upstairs in the Filing Shop which was staffed by Welshmen who sang all day long with some grand voices. They won numerous festival prizes with their choir. When we were singing, you couldn't tell whether we were happy or in pain. Some said there was no difference!

Some operations caused much hassle, like parting and chamfering valve ends, forming collet grooves, drilling front and rear wheel spindles and trepanning steering head ball races. You could earn a bonus on most jobs except one-crankcase dowel pins. The material came in 30 feet lengths of 1/8 inch mild steel; part and chamfer one end and remove parting pip. The cost was the cost of the steel plus my wages at 17/18 or 19 years of age, 5 to 9 pence per hour. The machine, belt driven from an overhead shaft, was over 30 years old. The output per day required by the time allowed was 2500 over 8 hours. There was no further treatment required and the cost over the spares counter to the customer was 12 pence each! My most vivid memory of the Capstans came a week later when Bertie joined too but to good old Arthur Brooker it made no odds to him who he was. To Arthur he was just another pair of hands. I always found that Bertie was a better Capstan operator than I was; if I could do 20 per hour, he could do 21 or 22. By the end of 1935, once again the smell of war was in the air and, unknown to the factory, the Colliers were in on the ground floor. In 1936 lots of Ministry officials started to appear from time to time. Also in 1936, in the Grinding Bay, a brand new Churchill centre-less grinder was installed and, Lord knows why, I was selected to operate it. Onto the centre-less grinder I went and, under the supervision of the Churchill machine demonstrator, I started to learn grinding. The centre-less was a very interesting tool. Grinding wheels, all on their own balanced

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<sup>13</sup> This seems an unreasonable criticism for a company that had, by John's own record, produced the innovative and unique Silver Arrow, Silver Hawk, an aeroplane, a car and a variety of other motorcycles.

<sup>14</sup> A dubious claim.

mountings, varied from 12 to 42 inches in diameter and revolved at revs that were equal to 120 mph surface speed on a 24 inch diameter wheel. The control wheels were rubber bonded, 12 inches wide and 18 inches diameter revolving at 100 revs per minute. The work passed completely through between the wheels resting on a satellite tipped angle blade. The feeding was by hand and the whole machine base moved forward to the grinding wheel. Thus, form and taper grinding could be accomplished by careful machine setting which the machine operator had to learn to do. A specially formulated coolant was supplied from a 500 gallon tank of its own. Grinding, by its precision and variation, fascinated me and this new life gave me real pride and job satisfaction. Although I shouldn't say it myself, over the next 18 or 19 years, I became a fair grinder. Like most Morse key operators, grinders can recognise a lot of their own work years after as each has his own particular accent of touch, feel and finish. Once again, while I was still a new grinder, Mr Bertie joined me.

The 1936 holiday week in early August saw me at the Sunshine Holiday Camp on Hayling Island where I met my future wife, Rose; more of her 18 years service later. By the end of 1936 and through 38 and 39, war became more and more certain. Work picked up, bikes sold and sub-contract work started to appear. By 1938/9 we were making quick release Irving parachute hooks, Rolls-Royce engine parts and Browning machine gun interrupter fire control bodies and gears. Nearly all of it required grinding work so the centre-less and I were busy. There was overtime and I had to train another operator while I did 18 months of continuous night shift.

Personal details must now intrude; August 6<sup>th</sup> 1936 I met Rose; August 6<sup>th</sup> 1937 engaged; August 6<sup>th</sup> 1938 Marriage; August 6<sup>th</sup> 1939 our son was born.

In 1939 war came and great changes began. Mr Bertie moved up to the top offices and became more of a power. Prior to 1939 we had started competition on trials, scrambles and works racing entries. Mr Bertie competed with fair success and privateers on Matchless and AJS machines appeared more and more at minor venues. We started to see our names more and more in the press. Territorial reservists were called up and women appeared as replacements in the factory more and more. My wages had reached one whole shilling (5p) per hour. Air raid shelters were dug and prepared. War was declared in September 1939. The phoney war ensued and a number of servicemen came back to the factory. In this period, I volunteered for the Royal Navy, putting my occupation down as a factory worker. The result of this was that I was in trouble for not disclosing that I was in a reserved occupation as a skilled grinder on vital war work. Prior to September 1939, parts and some complete bikes were being stock piled and the first week of war saw service lorries empty the factory of everything. All finishes became matt black, khaki, fire-service grey/green or battleship grey. Out went all of the shine. Girder forks were standard. Only two models were made, 350cc and 500cc. For a while, until Dunkirk, we were part of the silly season but Dunkirk put an end to that and it became more and more serious.

Before war was actually declared, a few German-Jewish refugees were given jobs. One working in the Grinders was Fritz Appler who had married the daughter of the Mayor of Southend at the time. At the weekend that war was declared, Fritz and his wife were with the family at Southend when, on the wireless, Fritz heard that "All aliens are to report forthwith to the nearest Police station". Fritz told me later that the desk sergeant asked him "Have you ever been in a black Mariah? "No Sir!"-"Well son, now is your chance. Get in!" Poor old Fritz was on his way to an internment camp on the Isle of Man. After 18 months he was released and he volunteered first for the Pioneer Corps and later for bomb disposal. He was blown to bits two weeks after the war

in Europe had ended in, of all places, Berlin; his birthplace. He was a good bloke and a good grinder. That's war.

The Battle of Britain came and went and the blitz on London got going. Matchless had its own Home Guard Battalion. Roads all around the factory were sealed off with 30 foot high barbed wire fences and the gates were manned around the clock by members of the home Guard with live ammunition. Entry passes with a photograph had to be shown going in and out. Abandon hope all ye who enter here! Production went on day and night virtually non stop. At first we used to shut down for air raids but everyone got fed up running in and out of the shelters so we said to hell with the raids. We would work on or stand against an outside wall. Night shifts left Charlie Tassell in charge and, once the shift had started, he would spend the night riding around a 12 mile area finding out where the bombs had fallen and if any of your family were involved. If they were, Charlie would have you on the back of his bike and, if it was humanly possible, would get you home. No matter what the obstacles, Charlie rarely failed in his mission. Considering that this was all done in total darkness and that he was a married man himself with two children, to us he was another unsung hero. War tales could go on for ever but the Plumstead factory earned a reputation for being the safest place in London. Two incendiary bombs came through a window on the third floor into a stock of 2500 tyres and tubes. A land mine snagged its parachute on an angle iron projecting from the wall and softly came to rest on the saddle of a G3 so that the springs were barely depressed. The thinnest tissue paper wouldn't pass twixt the mine and the saddle. Eventually the Bomb Disposal Squad found that it was a mine that had been sabotaged in the making in Germany. It had been a dud as also were four 500 pounders that fell in the Massey Road yard into the steel shavings bins which acted as a cushion. Under them lay the petrol, lubricating and cutting oil storage tanks. They were all duds as was the V1 buzzy bomb whose engine cut out lower down the river Thames, the bomb finally making a perfect three point landing on the factory roof.<sup>15</sup> With so many duds, we were beginning to think that Gerry was trying to tell us something. In 1944 Rose and I lost our four year old son, David. It was nothing to do with the war and as Rose became liable to Direction of Labour, she could have been sent anywhere in the UK or even be made to join the Women's Services. Mr Bassett told me that, if we liked, she could be given a job at the factory, perhaps under my supervision, in the Grinders. My reaction was "No bloody fear!" I already had enough on my plate as Deputy Foreman running 30 or 40 mixed male and female workers. We were running two shifts, day and night, 12 hours each and 7 days a week. Rose was taken on working a Brinell hardness testing machine in the View Room (Inspection).

She switched shifts as I did so we came and went home together. We made it a strict rule that, once we arrived at work, she was one employee and I was another. She was on her own and it was no good the entire factory knowing that she was Mrs so-and so. I just didn't want them to know, and even at the end of her 18 years service with AMC, very few people knew that we were husband and wife. Rose became an instant success at the factory. She was a good worker and very popular. She was afraid of no one and could call a spade a spade. On her first day, one of the chaps didn't notice her near him and let rip with a right bucket full of bad language. Instead of crying and carrying on complaining to management as many females did, when he said "Sorry Rose", she just replied "That's OK Bill. I would rather hear that than be deaf". As you can imagine, this soon spread around the factory and did her no harm at all. If I sound proud of her, I was very much so and I still am. She's a right good one.

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<sup>15</sup> As the V1 had no gliding capability once the power had cut, this would have been a miraculous occurrence.

Mr Bertie had lived at Sevenoaks in Kent and one morning in November 1941 he was riding a BMW up to Plumstead followed by his brother-in-law Jack Kelleher riding astern on an AJS. Bertie pushed into a tight left hand bend; no one ever knew exactly what went wrong but when Jack came round the bend, there was the BMW in flames and worse, much worse, among the rest of the carnage was Bertie lying dead with a shattered skull and a broken neck. Plumstead never recovered from this disaster. No words can describe what it was like inside the factory when the news broke. An Atom Bomb couldn't have done more damage. I am convinced, and I am not alone in the firm belief that but for this accident there would still be an AMC and a viable British motorcycle industry.

Wars do end eventually and after the World had gone mad for a while, the euphoria died a little. Mr Harry Collier junior retired and died not long after. For a while Mr Charlie became a complete golf fanatic but as time went on he carried more and more responsibility. The more he took, the more the company grew. A works racing team, a new Racing Department, Development etc. all came into being and big name professionals joined us. The war had meant that most of the old machine tools had been replaced except for a few odd museum pieces. A completely new spirit grew throughout the factory; we became a team and a family. Far too much took place under Mr Charlie's<sup>16</sup> leadership for me to detail here. Between 1945 and 1954, we reached peaks that were higher than Everest. Sunbeam, James, Francis Barnet and Norton joined Matchless and AJS under the AMC umbrella. In Australia, the Sydney Herald reported that it was the biggest factory in the World devoted exclusively to the manufacture of motorcycles. Although, under his direction, we reached over 3000<sup>17</sup> employees, still the Colliers weren't very popular in the UK and particularly not in South London<sup>18</sup>.

Big names like Jock West from BMW, Joe Craig and Matt Wright from Norton, Les Graham, Rod Coleman from New Zealand John Surtees Senior and the more famous John Surtees Junior, all became familiar faces to us. Paid holiday, paid sick leave, pension funds, profit sharing and a six monthly bonus, you name it and under Charlie it came. No longer remote; Charlie now spoke to all and sundry and when he said that something could be or must be done then done it was. Christmas became really festive in the works with a party that was free to all employees plus two guests. There were Christmas decorations inside and outside the factory and departments competed for Charlie's £25 prize for the best and most imaginatively festooned shop. We Grinders were the favourites with an illuminated Star of David 16 feet point to point and a mock television screen connected to the telephone. Each time the phone rang, the TV screen lit up in colour with 'The Grinders wish a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to All'. The competition was judged by a panel from 'The Motorcycle', 'The Daily Express' and 'The Times'. No AMC personnel took part in the judging and the prize went to our next door neighbours, the Millers, with a huge structure of a weather house with windmill sails with fairy lights on every sail. Male and female dolls popped in and out in time with the revolving sails and the coup de grace was a 5 foot diameter water driven mill enamelled and fitted with all of the AMC Group badges. This again had fairy lights and an old mill stream driving the mill wheel. In common with all departments, we had a Christmas tree under which, in a giant tub, gifts could

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<sup>16</sup> From this point on, the writer seems to have confused the brother's names. The only Collier brother to survive post war is repeatedly referred to as 'Mr Bertie' which clearly cannot be the case. It has therefore been replaced by 'Mr Charlie' in all instances.

<sup>17</sup> The highest estimate of employees for the Plumstead factory that I have ever heard claimed is 1500. This could possibly be an estimate for the whole group.

<sup>18</sup> With whom, I wonder?

be placed which would then be sent to the local hospital or children's homes together with Mr Charlie's personal cheque for £500. There was also a separate party for employees' children in the New Year. At the end of the four hour long party, each child was given fruit, sweets or a toy and a £1.00 note.

Under Mr Charlie also came the Porcupine, the G80CS and the 7R 'Boy's Racer' which, with Rod Coleman aboard, won two Junior TTs on the Isle of Man. If it was good for AMC then Charlie was all for it. Of course, it wasn't all sweetness and light but while Charlie was around it was all bearable. The innovations kept flooding in; Telescopic front forks, Jampot rear suspension etc.etc. We were making real motorbikes. Hugh Viney had joined us and was winning the Scottish Six Days and trial after trial in between running the Erecting Shop. Hugh was basically a shy character but once you got close to him, as Rose and I eventually did, he was a very nice person. Unfortunately his Erecting team failed to recognise his Stirling qualities. To see him preparing both himself and his bike for a major trial was to watch a master at work. Out went the pipe and it was gymnasium work-outs, diets and weight checks for him. Minute adjustments were made to the bike time after time. The engine was tuned, stripped and re-tuned time and time again. One of his favourite tests was with the engine just ticking over very slowly, plonk, plonk, plonk. With Viney then standing on the pedals, he would ride down five flights of stairs, about 40 or 50 concrete steps in each, on each landing making a 180 degree turn and standing still on the machine for a full minute before taking the next flight until he reached the ground floor. There he would ride under a specially constructed arch just high enough for man and machine to pass under before turning a complete circle and then re-tracing his ride back up to the roof again, all done against the stop watch. If he had to put a foot down ('dab'), there would be curses and no joy until the 'dabs' were well down into single figures.

The first Prototype Porcupine was hand built in the Tool Room using special castings and materials. I understood that the first off cost in excess of £500,000. In its day it was the most powerful machine in the World and even took World records but it was always marred by its handling which was never in harmony with the power available. In his turn, even the great Joe Craig could not achieve at Plumstead to the degree that he succeeded with Norton Featherbeds in 1949/50. Every single double-pannier tank was beaten out by hand by another old craftsman, Bert Colver. To see one sheet of metal plate flow under his hammers and dollies like water and then to see it solidify into that great twin fuel tank for the Porcupines was to watch the Michelangelo of panel beaters at work. There was never a wrinkle, bruise or dent to be seen or felt, just those beautiful aerodynamic flowing lines. Beautiful; really beautiful Bert,

The senior TT saw our first heartache. Rose and I joined thousands of others on motorcycles including 5 to 600 from Plumstead. We left Euston at 7.00 p.m. on Thursday evening to reach Douglas at 5.00 a.m. on Friday morning. Having breakfast at the Douglas Holiday Camp, we walked or ran to a vantage point; the start line, Hilberry, Governors Bridge, or wherever you could see. At Hilberry, Rose and I saw Les Graham go past in the lead. A lap record was on its way for the Porcupines and a first post war win for us and Charlie. A mad rush was made across the fields and stone walls to reach the finishing line and see the chequered flag fall. On reaching it, we find that Les' light is out on the Leader Board and, over the loud speakers, that Les Graham has stopped at Governors Bridge and is pushing in, believed to have run out of fuel. What stopped the lynching of Jimmy Barrett, Ginger Matthews and the rest of the pit crew, we will never know. Eventually there was Les, on trembling legs with a pale ashen face, pushing across the line where he dropped unconscious with the Porcupine on top of him. The filler cap

popped open and fuel poured over him. He stripped off his best English leathers, like wet dish cloths, and when he up-ended his boots, nearly a quart<sup>19</sup> of his sweat poured out. The whole crowd was dead silent. It was an utterly wordless 500 who made their way back to the 5.00 p.m. boat from Douglas to Lime Street, Liverpool and the night long journey back Euston on a pouring wet and foggy dawn. It matched our mood and we carried our own dead (drunk) with us. The pubs had been open all day on the Island and it was duty free on the boat where we left some two or three empty whisky bottles. Oh death, where is thy sting? A subsequent post mortem found that the disaster was caused by a broken Reynolds drive chain to the oil pump. Reynolds remains a dirty word in AMC. I don't think that Les ever fully recovered and he was later killed on another Porcupine at Monza.

Returning to personal memories in the factory, telescopic fork tubes were initially ground between centres on an ordinary grinder which required the use of 8 carefully adjusted steadies and a 1/4 thou. cut at the end of each traverse across a 3 inch wide grinding wheel. The molybdenum content of the steel acted with the friction of the grinding so that it acted like a very powerful magnet. It was an almost insoluble problem and we produce more scrap than good ones. The building of a new canteen had started at the back of the Grinding Bay and one day I discovered big 6 foot square holes about 50 feet deep. These were for the reinforced concrete to support the three floor building. The concrete pouring was due to start the next morning. This gave me a brain wave (or brain storm!); it would make an ideal place for the decent burial of 3 or 400 scrap tubes which would save my own and about half a dozen other operator's necks so, late that evening, down into the holes went the scrap. Unfortunately, that night it poured with rain and the holes filled with water. Unbeknown to us, the cement pouring was suspended until the holes could be emptied. About a week later, I went out to see the new columns but instead, waiting for me, was a welcoming committee made up of the Works Manager, Stan Bassett, etc. plus the building labourers, the Cooper twins. Henry and his elder brother George had gone off see if the pumps had got rid of all of the water and this had revealed a mass of rusty fork tubes. Not knowing what they had found, they had called the site Foreman who had the lot fished out in a pile-a big one. It was a toss up with odds in favour of me going to the bottom before the cement. The most upset person of all was Henry Cooper; "Blimey mate, if I had known; I would have kept my cake hole shut". Whenever I see him box on TV, I often wonder if he recalls when he was Champion of Bellingham Boys Boxing Club and I wasn't President of his fan club?

Rose also found troubles like when crates shipped to Los Angeles were opened and they found two bikes for the price of one; one side all Matchless badges and the other side all AJS! Quite how about 10 people must have handled it without it being noticed is unbelievable; at least no one let on if they had. I don't blame them; would you? It was a bit of free publicity in the National press but the funny side of it was only seen by the lower orders. I don't know quite why, but the new White Chief<sup>20</sup> of the company was now a long yard of pump water. In 1928 when I joined, he had been a 15 year old office clerk. His rise was due to two marriages, both to older wealthy women that didn't last too long plus an ability to poke his long nose into everywhere and making sure that any faults were reported to the top management. I don't believe that this individual had a real friend anywhere, just lots of spies and toadies. He had a very condescending and sneering manner and to all openly boasted that he didn't know, or want to know, a motorbike from a banana. In my hearing, I heard him say that as long as he got his

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<sup>19</sup> A slight exaggeration?

<sup>20</sup> See note on P29, assumed to be 'D. G. G'.

Rolls Royce each year with his AMC number plate on it, he didn't care much what happened. With his accession to power, the happy days were over for good. Stopped were all Christmas festivities and the profit share bonus and the pension scheme contributions went up while the ultimate pensions came down. The pensionable age went up from 63 under Charlie's scheme to after your 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. I opted out and got back half of what I had paid in. I firmly believe that, if he could have done, he would have revoked my senior staff status if he could have found a good enough excuse. I had achieved this working under Mr Charlie and, try as he might, he could not break myself or many others until we had had enough of him and his cronies between 1960 and 1962. But I anticipate too much.

After the Henry Cooper scare, we were at our wits end as to how to grind fork tubes successfully when, one sleepless night, it struck me that if we could use the centre-less to feed through gudgeon pins, which after all were just hardened tubes, why not fork tubes? After a lot of consultation, it was agreed that we should give it a go and after more blood, sweat, toil, tears and false starts, we found that by using two operators, one at the front loading in and another at the back taking the weight of the tube as it came through ensuring that it didn't drop and damage the ends, we had a super finish and found success. Fork tubes were no sweat. The output was trebled and the scrap was virtually nil. Under Mr Charlie's reward scheme, I estimate that there would have been at least £1000 to share out among the grinders. Under our new toffee-nosed boss, there was no reward for anything achieved in the works time using the works machines and materials; oh well; at least I had been spared a cement overcoat.

Memory is a queer thing as, to this day, for grinding the bore of cam wheels; I can still remember quite clearly the Plug Gauge number A5557 and the bore size 0.5 inch plus 1/4 thou. Time allowed 5.1/2 minutes each. From my Capstan days and working with dear old brother Brooker, I had learnt one maxim at least; don't ask any man to do a job on a machine that you can't do yourself. On any new job, do it and get it right first before you ask anyone else to do it and apply the same criteria to any new machine or equipment. If you master it first then at least, if those you are in charge of don't like you, they will give you a little respect. Arthur was a wise old bird and I can honestly swear that that in my working life I never deviated from these principles.

Back to grinding and to two special jobs. The grinding of the first aluminium Jampot rear suspension units and the first 600 sports Twin, the OHV Model 30, the grinding of the new 3<sup>21</sup> bearing crankshafts. Following Arthur Brooker's rules on how it should be done, the first 50 were mine, all mine, made on the centre-less grinder old machine number 854, the same as the shipyard number for the old Queen Mary liner. Aluminium is a swine to grind because the clogging of the grinding wheel causes the surface finish to tear. A mixture of cutting oil and kerosene helps a great deal but the chief element is gentleness and great care. Getting the diameter right wasn't too big a problem but when it came to the radii, that was a different kettle of fish as these had to be formed on the grinding wheel by using a hand-held diamond dressing stick and yards of emery cloth. All radii were a problem. Getting them to blend perfectly into the diameter adds strength to the component. Cast iron and aluminium are the worst materials on which to get radii completely chatter free. Getting it wrong was almost as bad as not honing a cylinder bore. Eventually the first hundred were completed and, having passed inspection checks, passed on to the Erecting Shop. A few days later it was discovered that 20 pairs had gone walk about. No amount of searching or questioning gave any clue to the mystery. I was

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<sup>21</sup> The 3 bearing crankshaft was introduced on the 500cc model initially.

number one suspect because of my previous record with the fork tubes. A fortnight later, all was revealed in an advertisement in the 'Green Un'<sup>22</sup>. It read; "Have your rear frame converted to luxury springing; inexpensive". One of the cheerful chappies in the Erecting shop had gone into business on his own. He had disposed of and fitted the 10 pairs before any customers got their hands on the factory models. Bloody fool! He got full marks for enterprise but there was no more £40 per week for him!

Our Jampots were in competition with the Triumph spring hub on their Special Twin for big Police contracts but it was Triumph who gained the lion's share of these contracts. I think that I am right in saying that all we received was 6 machines for the Cornish Constabulary but every one developed crankcase oil leaks when the 'Nick-Nicks' got them on duty. On cost grounds, the Jampots were eventually diamond-turned rather than ground and then, in 1957/8, rear springing became a bought-out item. Another big problem on the early 600 was the cam-followers wearing out, sometimes after only 100 miles. No-one could understand why the hardening of the faces was up the creek; Charlie Damyon had long since retired. For a time Stellite faced cam followers were tried but the materials and the extra operations made the cam followers more expensive than gold. It was eventually discovered that a reduction of charcoal in the hardening pots was the perfect cure.

With the introduction of the twins with Jampots also came the 3 bearing crankshaft; it was quite a lump of cast steel<sup>23</sup>. Previously installed in the Grinding Bay had been a new plunge-type Churchill Crankshaft Grinder. It was already to run but Alfred Herbert or Churchill could not send in a machine demonstrator for another 3 or 4 weeks. The Motorcycle Show was only 3 days away and the new twins were to be the highlight of the AMC stand. The engines would have no innards but 8 finished and sectioned crankshafts, tarted up with chrome and red and blue enamel would be displayed on black velvet on revolving mountings under individual spotlights. I can't remember what a crankshaft weighs on its own but with a 16 lb. counterbalance clamped to the centre bearing to counterbalance the throw; it was quite a lump to heave in and out of the machine centres. Luckily, the tailstock centre was foot operated for opening and closing and it was hydraulically powered. You just had to make certain that the centre point was in position, fully home and locked in position. The journals were approximately 1 inch diameter and 1 inch wide and the limit was 1/10 of a thou up or down. Each journal had to be parallel within itself, all journals had to be parallel overall and each bearing surface had to have 1/8 inch radii formed in the same operation. This was achieved by first grinding a test bar and then hoping that the bearing journals came out spot on as well. The grinding wheel was 4 ft. 6 inches in diameter, and being only 1 inch wide it didn't too much of a knock to break it and, at 120 mph plus, a chunk off the grinding wheel could, and did, take a great lump out of a concrete pillar 500 feet away. If it hit you, you were dead or damned nearly so. There was only one place to be and that was flat on the floor, making yourself as small as possible. One poor devil, Harry Coverly, didn't as I will explain later.

To get the crankshafts finished in 3 days was my baby. This meant that I had about 30 hours in total. I was ready; flat on the floor in an empty shop, I pulled the plunge lever with a long hook. Thank heavens that I did because Crash! Bang! Wallop! The grinding wheel had plunged in at speed before slowing down to clear the whole set up. That is when a lump of concrete was

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<sup>22</sup> The magazine 'Motorcycling' as opposed to 'The Motorcycle' which was known as 'the blue one'.

<sup>23</sup> Initially it was Meehanite cast iron. Production twin cranks were always cast iron.

knocked out of the pillar. The smashed grinding wheel, broken machine centres and a wrecked crankshaft lay in 10 gallons of cold sweat. After another 8 hours, going over the grinding machine with a fine tooth comb, I found the Depth of plunge limiting screw quite by accident and, after making a few experimental turns backwards and forwards, all appeared to be fine ready for trial number 2. It was 22 hours to the show opening time and there were 8 crankshafts to go plus 6 more grinding operations after the bearing grinds. Time was pressing somewhat as then the shafts had to be sectioned, chromed and enamelled so that, as each shaft was completed, it could be rushed to the show for the stand fitters. No one could help as there was only one crankshaft grinder and no other machines were big enough. The first crankshaft had taken just 6 hours to complete plus 8 hours at least for the setting time for the different operations. Then 'God' in his top office decided that the chroming would not be done until all 8 crankshafts had been ground complete. If he had said that in the first place, 5 hours of setting time could have been saved. It was still 7 crankshafts to go and 8 hours left. To cut this long saga as short as possible, the last crankshaft reached the show stand to be mounted in position just 30 minutes before the public poured into the show. The comment and reward that I received from the top dog was "I hope that isn't the best production that we are going to see from you Rourke". Talk about make you spit. As I was on senior staff, no overtime had been payable. I was a monthly servant (serf) but carnation-in-buttonhole 'God' was photographed with his hand resting on a crankshaft. I had to pay for my entrance to go up and have a look; no trade passes were available on the shop floor. When the machine demonstrator did eventually turn up he said "Oh, they have left off the graduated plunge limiter dial and pointer"!

Gradually crankshaft production increased but one hot summer's day poor Harry Coverly lost his temper and failed to ensure that the test piece was correctly located with the centres fully home and locked in position with the limiter properly set. The result was that Harry lost half his skull and forehead and for the rest of his life had a silver plated skull. It was only the fact that the Brook Hospital Neuro-Surgical unit was only 20 minutes away from the factory that saved Harry's life. The result was a mutiny amongst the grinders. They refused to operate the crankshaft grinder. It was too bloody dangerous; so for 6 weeks I, as senior staff, was ordered to become a production crankshaft grinder operator churning out 100 plus per week.

Not long after I had been elevated to staff by Mr Charlie, we acquired our first bike, a pre-war 350 rigid which, as the result of an accident, had lain in the open for 2.1/2 years. It was a mess but we could be mobile, we hoped. Once Harry had brought it home, we hoped for a free rebuild by the factory but the shutters came down with a big bang on that idea. One of the new boys on night-shift had just done that with his own heap and the bloody fool came back during the day shift with an almost new bike outside the factory. An elderly couple of gentlemen were standing looking it over and said to him "Is this your bike son? Isn't it in good condition?" Chummy launched into song, chapter and verse on what and how he had got it all done. The two gentlemen were Charlie Collier and Donald Heather so we were back to square one using elbow grease, Gunk and brushing enamel. Of course, it was very strange what I found in my pockets from time to time! Eventually the old rigid was running after a fashion; I passed my test at the first crack and we planned our first holiday. Only touring Devon and Cornwall would suffice so, with about £25 between us, at 4.00 a.m. on Saturday morning, we were away with our sights on Dartmouth as a first stop but the best laid plans of mice and men go awry and how. Just short of Salisbury, Bang! The back tyre and tube were in shreds. A broken beer bottle doesn't do a tyre a lot of good. Getting the back half to pieces on an old rigid was not an easy job for a novice like me. After about 2 or 3 hours of struggle, I left for a 4 mile hike to purchase a new tyre and tube.

I left Rose sunbathing and returned to find her with her head in the ditch being sick as a dog with sunstroke. "Oh, I wish I was dead". With the bike in bits and a sick wife, so did I. With Rose having decided to live at least for a while longer, I started to on the re-assembly in fear of trapping the inner tube but that part was a piece of cake. The Michelin went on like a bit of silk but what became of the chain link? Where, oh where, has my little link gone? With a wire hair-pin as a substitute, we were ready for the onward trek. I kicked and kicked until I was sick until, some considerable time later, I discovered a stuck exhaust valve. After a road-side de-coke and with the engine running once more, into Salisbury and a new chain link, maybe bike touring wasn't too bad. Eventually we booked in to a roadside cafe at Yeovil but as we rode into the car park there was another bang. There was a 2 inch French nail in the new tyre and tube. Late in the evening, with help from other bikers, the Matchless was roadworthy again and so to bed. On Sunday morning, loaded up with Rose mounted, we were advised by others to put some more air in the rear tyre. We hadn't left the car park when there was another bang; another nail; 3 inch this time: they were getting bigger and better all the time. The joys of motorcycling; we weren't finished yet. Dartmouth after 2 or 3 days on the road and then a spate of oiled up plugs, clutch slip and no oomph at all. It was guts aching stuff. Our money was getting smaller and smaller. What to do? Suddenly I had a brainwave; one of the bods from the repair shop had got a job at Newton Abbott so over the river to Newton we went. After visiting 4 dealers, the last choice was the right one. The welcome from Ray Learton was warm but, after a check of the old Matchless, the verdict was that the poor old lady was kaput. Ray asks "Why don't you have a new or nearly-so 1953 AJS 500cc springer?" After I had come down from the ceiling and calmed down, we were taken to see the beauty in the showroom. It had 200 miles on the clock; it was an HP repossession and not yet 6 months old. It was pristine. Ray saw the governor after doing some faking on the G3 and the dealer offered £45 exchange allowance with the balance at 5 shillings a week and included a free set of panniers, a tank top box, a rear carrier and a full tank of juice. If our insurance could be switched overnight, that dream dual-seat and all would be ours by 8.00 a.m. the next morning. We were waiting on the doorstep and couldn't wait to sign up. With pen in my hand, the governor with his guide in his hand said "Just a sec; if I cut the exchange allowance down, and if you can afford another 2 shillings and sixpence per week, I can let you have £30 cash now". We could hardly put pen to paper quick enough. On the new mount with 6 brand new fivers in our pocket. What man or woman could ask for more? Then-Lands End here we come! When Rose asked about Petrol, I said "Don't worry; this one's got a gallon in reserve-only got to turn the tap on". It was all true except that Dopey had got the taps mixed up and was already on reserve! 12 or 14 miles from Lands End to the first and last petrol station in England and on a boiling hot day, we are off and pushing with an empty tank. All of a sudden, a car stopped and back came Eric Ritson, Sales Rep. at Plumstead. We recognised him but he didn't recognise us and when he learnt that our trouble was no juice, poor Eric launched into his bull act. He was Sales Director at AMC! "Couldn't pass an AJS in trouble; would a couple of gallons be OK old boy?" He wouldn't hear of payment. "All part of the AMC service old boy". Our engine was purring like a well-fed cat. "Cheerio old boy" and off he went.

Some considerable time later at Plumstead, Eric and us had become good friends; when I asked him if he had a couple of free gallons to spare and added the magic words 'road to Lands End', Eric called us all the names he could think of for listening to him rabbiting without letting on that we knew who he really was at the time. By now he truly was the Sales Director! He enjoyed the joke as much as we did and he recounted the story many times from then on.

Back to grinding and the Works Manager's retirement; Goodbye Bert Bassett. The big man appointed 3 joint Works Managers; 3 former shop Foremen, the 3 M's; Moore, Mason and Martin. Good Foremen all, but they would be the first to agree, not Works Managers, especially under the new order. Moore committed suicide. Mason had a nervous breakdown and then had a fatal heart attack at work. Martin did last until AMC's end but finished as a white haired old man with worry. First there was a rumour that the factory was moving to a new site at Sheerness but when Rose and I went down to see the proposed ground, we found it under 8 feet of flood water. Locals informed us that at every high tide the ground was always under water to a greater or lesser degree. It never really dried out to more than mud flats yet a big banner proclaimed 'Site of New AMC Factory'. Incredible, isn't it. The next rumour was that we were going to Northern Ireland and then Kidderminster. As you know, in reality we didn't go anywhere in our time, only down the drain.

Our big kick in the teeth was when our lovely 500 was stolen from the factory car park-misery abounded. I applied under another of Mr Charlie's innovations; the Senior Staff Bike Scheme whereby you got a brand new machine at cost price. You paid nothing at all on collection but it had to be paid for after 12 months and before 18 months was up. I was lucky; my first 350 was bought by a young chap just around the corner from us. There was no shortage of cash in his family as his Father had a high rank in the Arsenal. My buyer was an architect. His younger brother wanted a bike as well so another staff purchase made him happy. All staff bikes went back into the factory for refurbishing tyre to tyre before sale so the buyers were always happy. They had a virtually new bike with a new speedo, no gremlins and at least £60 or £70 cheaper than they could get anywhere else. My mate and I were happy as we had 12 months of riding more or less free. We used to take boys into the factory so that they could choose what George and I would ride for 12 months before it passed on to them. To say that I was astounded at my application for this privilege being granted is the understatement of all time. Perhaps the Supreme Being and his book-keeper had some good in them after all although I never found it again. With the ascendancy to staff bike status, I was asked if I would leave the grinders and join the Progress Staff Office as Senior Progress Chaser so off came my boiler suit and on with tie, pencil and paper. As you will well know, no one loves a progress man. The factory always says that you want too much; Management say you have never asked for enough. I hadn't been progressing very long when I was summoned to the Holy of Holies. "Rourke; it has been reported to me that you are still eating in the Works Canteen and not the Senior Staff Restaurant. You will cease this practice forthwith". "Me-will I hell; I'll see you damned first. Those blokes are my friends and, if I know anything at all, it is what they taught me. I may be Mr Rourke, not having to clock in and out, but to myself I am Clock No.227 and always will be and, to me, those shop floor lads are better men than you can ever be. Now, Sir; if you want to dismiss me, do so but only after the shops know why I am going". "Get out! Get out!" Who was I to disobey an order? I still went into the works canteen; the grub was cheaper and more plentiful than upstairs but from then on I was a marked man.

In the next episode, I was asked to go up to the James factory at Greet, Birmingham, where some 50 automatic machines had been moved from Plumstead. I was to act as manager for Production Progress and Inspection. I was to go up on Monday morning and come back on Thursday evening to spend Friday in the parent factory reporting and consulting. When I arrived at James, I found that the automatics had only two ex-Plumstead operators acting as Foreman and his assistant. There were no patrol inspections and the View Room staff consisted of 3 sunburnt gentlemen, Azil, Mahmoud and Chalkie. The first two spoke only broken English and could not

read at all. Chalkie had been promoted from broom pushing to the Inspection Department with no micrometers, clock or gap gauges. No one knew how to set a machine and, if they did, there were no slip gauges to set them to. The list was too long to go into here. It was no wonder that the Automatic work reaching Plumstead from here was at least 75% scrap.

My first move was to ask for an interview with Mr Charles Summerton, Managing Director of James. This he granted immediately. When we met, it was as if Mr Charlie had come back to life. We took to each other straight away. Although he was Managing Director of James, he had absolutely no power and was denied access to the automatics; he ran James and the autos were Plumstead's and that was it. Charles' way at James was to hold a full meeting every Friday of all the Departmental Heads together with one assistant each and with them anyone who had a complaint levelled against them. Charles presided and in turn everyone said their piece, decisions were reached and that was that. Charles would discuss nothing but the direst emergency until the following Friday. "You had your say and will have another chance next Friday. Until then, you have a job to do and so have I. Good day". That was Charles Summerton. There was no Rolls for him, at least I never saw one, but I always saw him on a James and one was on call for me from day one. Although at Plumstead I could only make slow headway, with Mr Summerton's help and suggestions over a period, we jointly prepared a report for submission to the whole AMC Board. He would ensure that our report, jointly signed and with my name first, was circulated to all Board members and, if needed, to the shareholders at the Annual General Meeting. Who came first in my estimation, I am never sure; Mr Charlie Collier or Mr Charles Summerton.

The first reaction to the report came to me from D. Heather who informed me that he was calling an emergency Board Meeting. I was to present the report in person and Mr Summerton would be invited as his personal guest to be co-opted as a special Board Member and my supporter. Now we were getting somewhere but it would be an understatement to say that I was scared witless. Without Mr Summerton's and Mr Heather's encouragement and support I think that I would have cut and run but, as usual, the event wasn't as bad as I had feared in spite of some black looks from my mate, the Ayatollah of the day. In spite of him, money and equipment was authorised subject only to Mr Summerton's approval. As he had already given me that, we were up and running and gradually the scrap was reduced.

After some 18 months, my to-ing and fro-ing to Birmingham became the exception rather than the rule. By this time, 1959/60, I'd had more than enough of living out of a bag and Rose had had enough of only having a 3 day a week husband. Eventually I was given permission to advertise in the Birmingham Post for a replacement Chief Inspector and Departmental Manager. All applications went to Mr Summerton initially, some 250 of them, and when he had made a short list of 6, he passed the lot over to me to select my own 6 runners independently. At the end of the selection, when we compared notes, there was only one difference. He invited me to jointly interview, not 6, but 7 applicants; the staff appointment was made to a Fred Milia, brother of a Birmingham City Football Club back. At the end of his month's trial, I handed over a fully equipped Inspection Department staffed with 3 patrol viewers and 8 inspectors.

The weekend before I left Birmingham, at Mr Summerton's expense, my wife was invited up to Birmingham on the Saturday evening where Mr Charles gave a dinner party at his own home. He had us picked up at our hotel by hire car and returned thence. All of the auto staff was also invited; this was no black tie affair. He tried hard to persuade us to move to Birmingham permanently but neither of us fancied leaving Plumstead so, rightly or wrongly, we bade him and

Birmingham farewell. The sequel to this was that within 18 months, the whole Automatic Department was back in Plumstead; it had been an exercise in utter futility. On my return and resumption to progressing, the Great Being began to develop what I can only describe as a mental illness or maybe it was the male menopause. I found, installed in the Progress Office, one of his well known spies who 3 years previously had been a senior member of the staff of Start Bookmakers, a clerk well known to one and all by his trade mark flowing coloured silk handkerchiefs flowing from both jacket sleeves. Many suspected that, like his master, the pair had escaped from Burton's window. If anything needed to be kept under wraps, it was important not to let the chief spy see or hear.

The All Highest had upset Jock West who departed back to BMW<sup>24</sup> whence he came. Hugh Viney in his pre-AMC days had been a Motorcycle Riding Instructor in the Army and had under him Geoff Duke who he had recognised as a genius in bloom. When Geoff Duke came out of service, Viney brought him to Plumstead as a potential Works Racer. Mr Viney was told "Don't bring any more of your Army kids down here again" so not only was Geoff Duke lost to the AMC Racing Department but Mike Hailwood as well. Their feats are legendary and need no poor words of mine. Bill Doran and Rod Coleman both had their contracts terminated –they were too expensive. One of the first Hondas came to Plumstead via Comerfords of Acton. Although some £35 cheaper than our cheapest bare model, the Honda had as standard, electric starting, traffic indicators, a streamline wind visor, front and rear carriers, all round suspension, white wall tyres, toe and heel rocking foot change, steering head locking, a slightly better top speed and better petrol consumption. What was the two stooges' verdict? It was too flashy, built on a bowl of rice a day, too cheap to be any good and will never sell. It will never take off and be a serious competitor. Words fail me and then the real genius moves; we would make scooters. Lambrettas and Vespas had flooded the market before we even thought of designing. In the Design Department, people left in despair; Joe Craig to Vincent HRD, Matt Wright and some half a dozen others. Together with scooters, we would make James and Francis-Barnett 175 and 250cc machines plus our own gearboxes for the whole range. Sunbeam, James and Francis Barnett would all be sold or closed down. Norton would also be made at Plumstead and Bracebridge Street would also go. The Racing Department would be shut down and only a limited number of Boys' Racers, the 7R would be made each year and when that quota had been built, that was it for another 12 months, no matter who wanted to buy one. Re-tooling and re-equipment would be handed over in its entirety to Alfred Herbert Ltd, the Coventry Machine Tool agents. No-one on the Plumstead shop floor was consulted in any way whatsoever. Several million pounds of expenditure was involved and wasted completely. A prime example was a second John Lund reciprocating table, weight nearly 100 tons, building time and installation; 12 to 13 months. The old John Lund machine had a reciprocating table twice the size of the new machine yet the new machine was twice the size of the old. The old machine would take 36 con-rods per load for grinding both faces; the new machine would take 15 of the same rods per load. The table was twice the size, as was the whole surface grinder. Every component that we tried, it was the same result; the new machine was half the capacity of the old. In consequence, the new £36,000 machine was never used for production at all. All that it was ever used for was the bright surfacing of billets of steel for the Tool Room to then make into jigs and fixtures. If it was used for 3 hours per month, that was its absolute maximum use until eventually, along with many

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<sup>24</sup> I believe that Jock came to AMC from BMW importers AFN and went to Glanfield Lawrence when he left before moving on to BMW concessionaires.

more very expensive pieces of machines and fixtures, it was sold for scrap on the AMC demise at Plumstead.

Herberts had been given the idea by the AMC top brass that we wanted to be like Ford of Dagenham. A machine was designed and set up for one operation and one only for the whole of its working life, like Ford's on line production, i.e. lathe-miller-grinder to finished component. If there was any break in the line, a replacement machine, already set up, would be replaced from an overhead gantry and the faulty machine went out in the opposite direction by the same method. The stoppage time would be 2 or 3 minutes. We at Plumstead were trying to be Swans on a large lake instead of ducks on a small pond.

Another grave error was that two 1000<sup>25</sup> ton presses were located next door to the grinders while at the other end came a much enlarged hardening shop. With the vibration on one side and extreme heat on the other, accurate grinding became impossible. The problem was so severe that in a short time, machines in the Grinding Bay started to move on their bases, some by several inches and I saw some rocking on their locations. The scrap level became worse than the autos ever knew how in their heyday and then, miracle of miracles, it was realised that all of the subsoil under the factory was just white silver sand. Henry Cooper of the Canteen and fork tube incident could have told them why 50 foot piles had to be driven but no one wanted to listen, or if they did, they paid no heed. The flotation of 5 shilling shares had brought in not only money but Rolls Royces, AMC 1 to AMC 12. All of this was down to two men who had never cocked a leg over a saddle or soiled their lily white hands or silk hankies on a machine. I can only think that the poor Colliers must still be spinning like tops in their graves to this day. I could go on but what's the use?- I am only making you as sick as it all made me and Rose, and still does, as I pen this.

At the end of 1960, Hugh Viney had had enough as had many others. By 1961 the list included Mr D Heather and my time was nigh. February saw the ex-bookie, lanky Don, installed in the Board Room, his only superior being the Supremo. In March 1961, my own boss, Basil Austin, ended 30 years service, sick of it all, and one day I found on my desk a memo jointly signed by A.E.S. and D.G.G<sup>26</sup> which read thus; 'You are forthwith ordered and directed to assume duties of Progress and Production Manager'. I went up to the Holy Temples but they were empty; both gentlemen were abroad for 3 months. All that I got from the other directors was that it was 'their decision'. Salary?-only they could decide but rest assured the matter will be reviewed on their return. It was April, May, June, July and August over and not a word from them. Then, in September 1961, I found them both in the Senior Headmaster's office. "Oh yes Rourke, the matter has unfortunately been overlooked but you will be informed of the figure in the next couple of days". When I asked if my efforts over the past 6 months been quite satisfactory; "Oh yes quite-very much so. Confirmation of your increase in salary and your permanent appointment will be made public by Friday next". Fool that I was I went back to work. That Thursday, another memo appeared on my desk; there was no envelope, just an open sheet of paper. Certainly it contained confirmation of the permanency. 'Your salary will, from the end of the current month, be increased by £104 per annum'. There was not even a signature this time. As I knew that this £2 per week was exactly £28 per week less than my predecessor had had been getting and about £100 per week less than the bookie was getting, this was the final

<sup>25</sup> I can remember only one large British Clearing press of 200 tons capacity being installed.

<sup>26</sup> I assume that here he is referring to A. A. Sugar and D. G. Golding.

insult confirmed by them. "That's it Rourke. There is no more and the matter is closed". Thus ended 32 years and 9 months of continuous service; there was no more I could take, so on Friday evening at 4.30 p.m., I walked out of the factory for the very last time and never entered it again. There was one final dig on the Friday afternoon in the midst of my farewell party. Into the Progress Office came the unholy twosome; not to say goodbye and good luck but to sneer. "See you are still associating with the factory hands Rourke". Unfortunately for them, it was not only I that heard the insult but also, in dirty overalls, Charlie Hood from the Polishers and Harry Moore, the senior setter from my grinding days. Out of the office went the two of them, fortunately through the double doors and not through the glass panelling! Both went with somewhat more than their dignity and feathers ruffled and in some disarray.

Although out of AMC, through Rose's next year, from Rose and from her numerous mates, I heard of the decline and the disappearance of AMC from Plumstead. The shares on the Stock Exchange were suspended; you couldn't give them away. The work force was going down as anyone who knew anything about his or her job departed. This applied not only in the factory but in the offices and staff as well. Up and up went the scrap rate with more disastrous consequences. Charles Summerton was made Managing Director and Chairman by a desperate Board. His valiant efforts staved off bankruptcy and enabled what was left of AMC to move to Andover with some slight dignity and credibility left although it was not a lot. Even he wasn't able to raise the Titanic in spite of his getting contracts to make Mobo rocking horses etc. The two left the scene and, after a Homeric battle by Mr Summerton, eventual failure came and AMC was no more.

The tragedies were the death of Mr Charlie Collier, the AMC attempt of doing far too much and far too late, the substitution of engineers, craftsmen, motorcyclists and businessmen by snobs, bookkeepers and whizz-kids and the substitution of paper for work. The forgetting of the reason for our very existence; to make damn good motorbikes, get them to the customer, give him what he wanted when he wanted it and at a price that he could afford. Of not heeding Geoff Duke's report and his warning to the Motorcycle Manufacturers and Traders Federation after his two years in Japan as a consultant to Honda and Suzuki. He recently repeated on 'Top Gear' on BBC 2 in September 1987, the contempt and ignorance to which it was treated by the industry. Before finally leaving Plumstead in 1978, Rose and I, among others, shed not a few tears to see the factory at Plumstead become first completely derelict and then to be knocked down to become a huge hole in the ground. Today it is just another housing estate with not one feature recognisable or remembered of the great and, in spite of everything, a wonderfully happy place wherein lay buried a total of over 50 years of our two lives.

Finally, that happiness has been revived at least by a chance meeting with Rob Harknett and the other members of the Matchless and AJS Owners Club. For his, and their, great kindness and interest, from two old codgers we give our sincerest thanks and deep gratitude to you, Rob, in particular and to all you other gentlemen wherever your front wheels may go.

God bless you all.

John and Rose Rourke

November 17<sup>th</sup> 1987.

MEMORIES  
of  
PLUMSTEAD



recalled by  
John & Rose Rourke