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Classic Bike

Restoring a Silver Arrow

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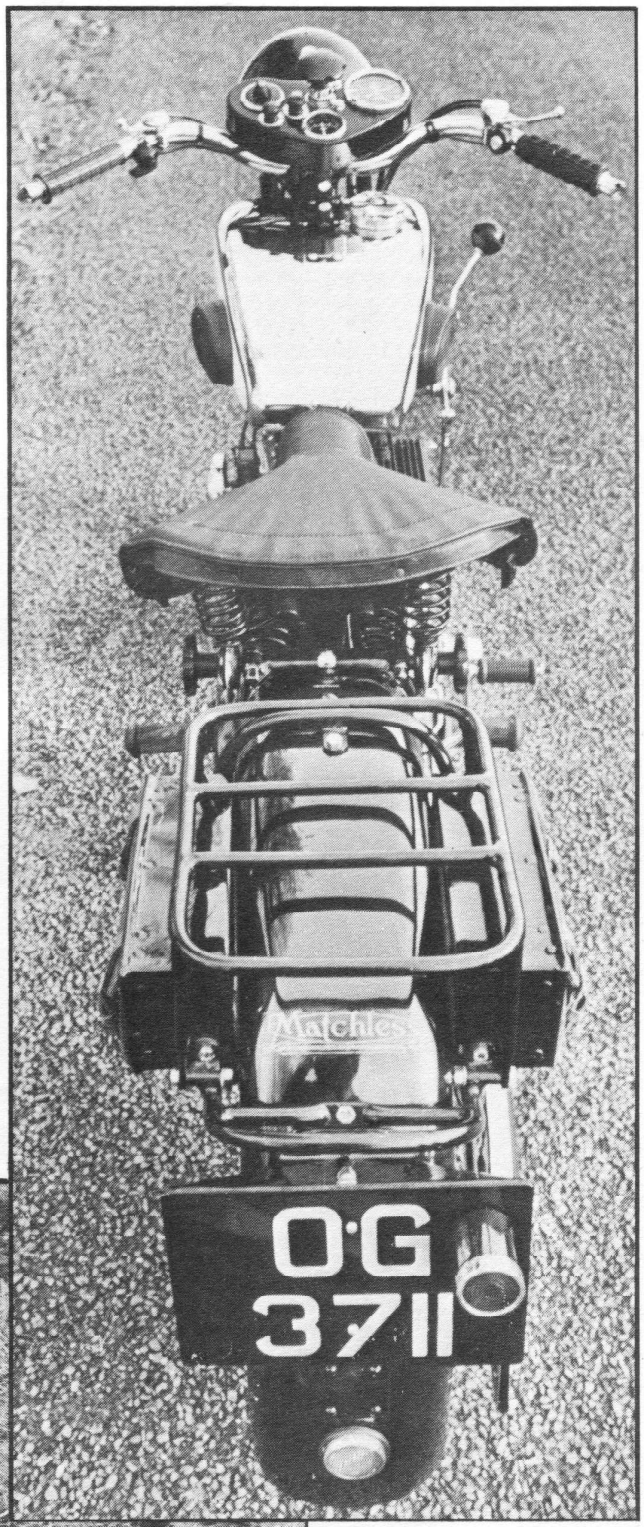
Mike Nicks learns how the Matchless Silver Arrow featured on this issue's cover and centre spread was transformed from a collection of rusty bits to an award-winning rally bike.

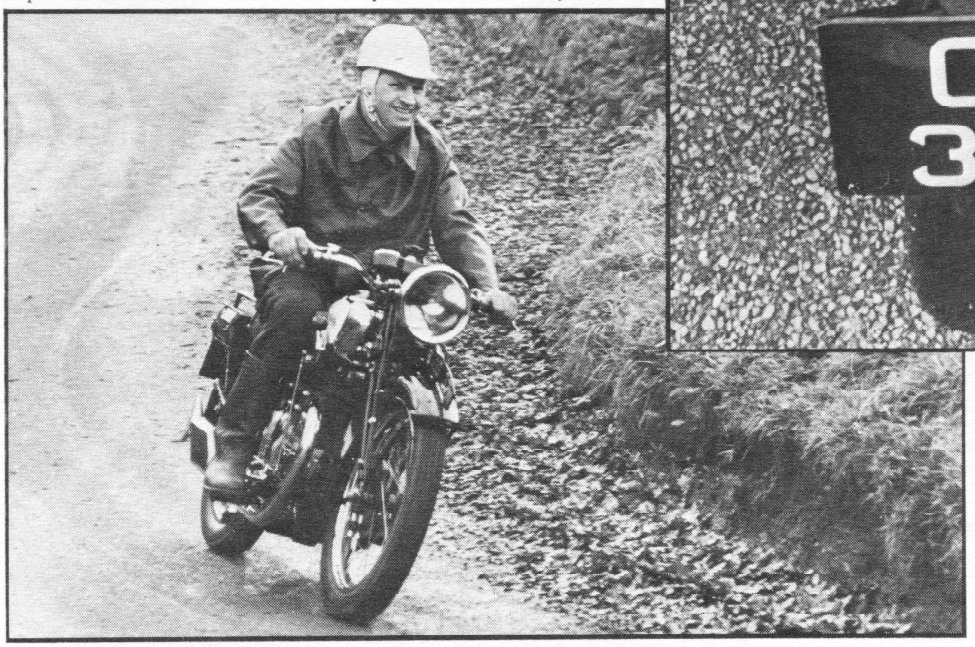
WHEN A LETTER appeared in an issue of *Classic Bike* criticising collectors, Jack Light took the attack as a personal challenge. The comments had been inspired by a feature on his 130-bike collection, which included a Matchless Silver Arrow awaiting restoration. The reader had accused 'the councours approach' of keeping historic bikes off the road and creating a dearth of spares — none would be manufactured if machines were not being used. And Jack's Silver Arrow would 'vanish underground' once the restoration work had been completed, the correspondent suggested.

It was a bait that Jack, a haulage operator in Somerset, couldn't resist. He and his brother Colin set about the 1929 397cc V-twin with a relish, using as a guide the back-cover photo of a fully restored model in the June/July 1980 issue of *Classic Bike*. When complete, the Matchless was successfully entered in a season of Vintage rallies in 1981, and took the overall award at the Wings of Wheels event in Shepton Mallet, Somerset, and the best vintage award at the Fleet Rally, Hants, the Sherborne Run, Dorset, and the Graham Walker Memorial Run at Beaulieu, where riders voted the sweet-running side-valver the machine they would most like to own.

The bike was also ridden in the Banbury run, although it didn't gain an award there; modern handlebar grips may have swayed the judges against it. The Silver Arrow would have competed in more rallies if a tank renovation firm hadn't delayed its start to the season by defaulting on a promise to deliver the repaired container in time for the Weymouth Run in May.



Above: The rear carrier is one of many parts Colin Light fabricated to achieve an almost 100 per cent original machine.



Left: Dressed for vintage rallying, Colin gives the Silver Arrow an airing in the Somerset lanes.

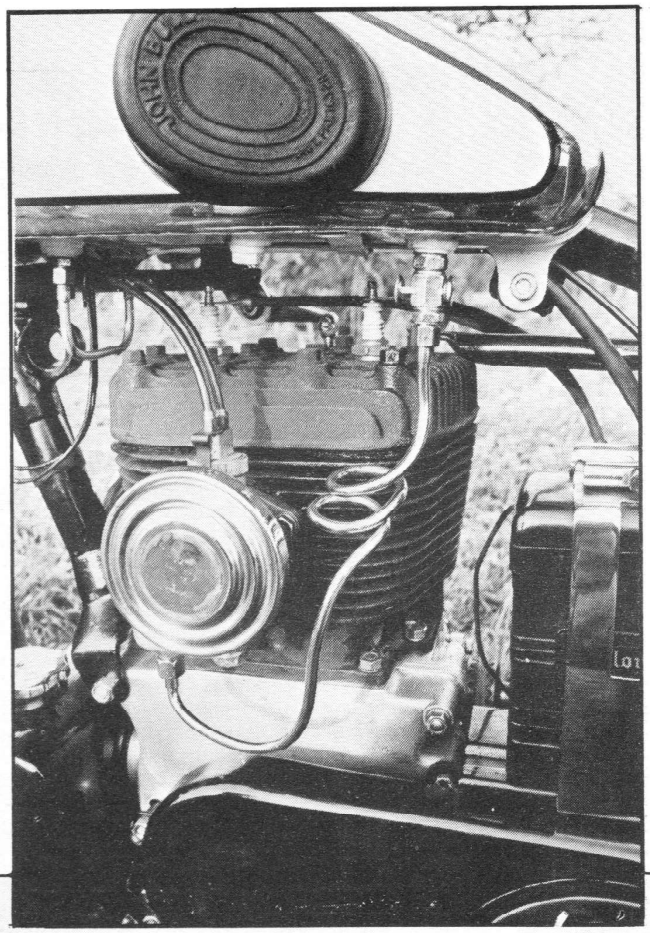
Exposed to light!

During the year the Silver Arrow performed faultlessly over 400 miles. This distance is probably nowhere near enough to pacify the more extreme anti-collectorists — most of whom probably don't run true vintage bikes anyway — but it hardly counts as going underground.

While tackling these events Colin, the works rider, as it were, for many of Jack's rally entries, was pleasantly surprised by the performance of the Matchless. When the model was unveiled at the Olympia show in 1929 it created great excitement — at that time a mediumweight twin was a real talking point — but its blend of traditional and futuristic features was propelled by only 16 horsepower.

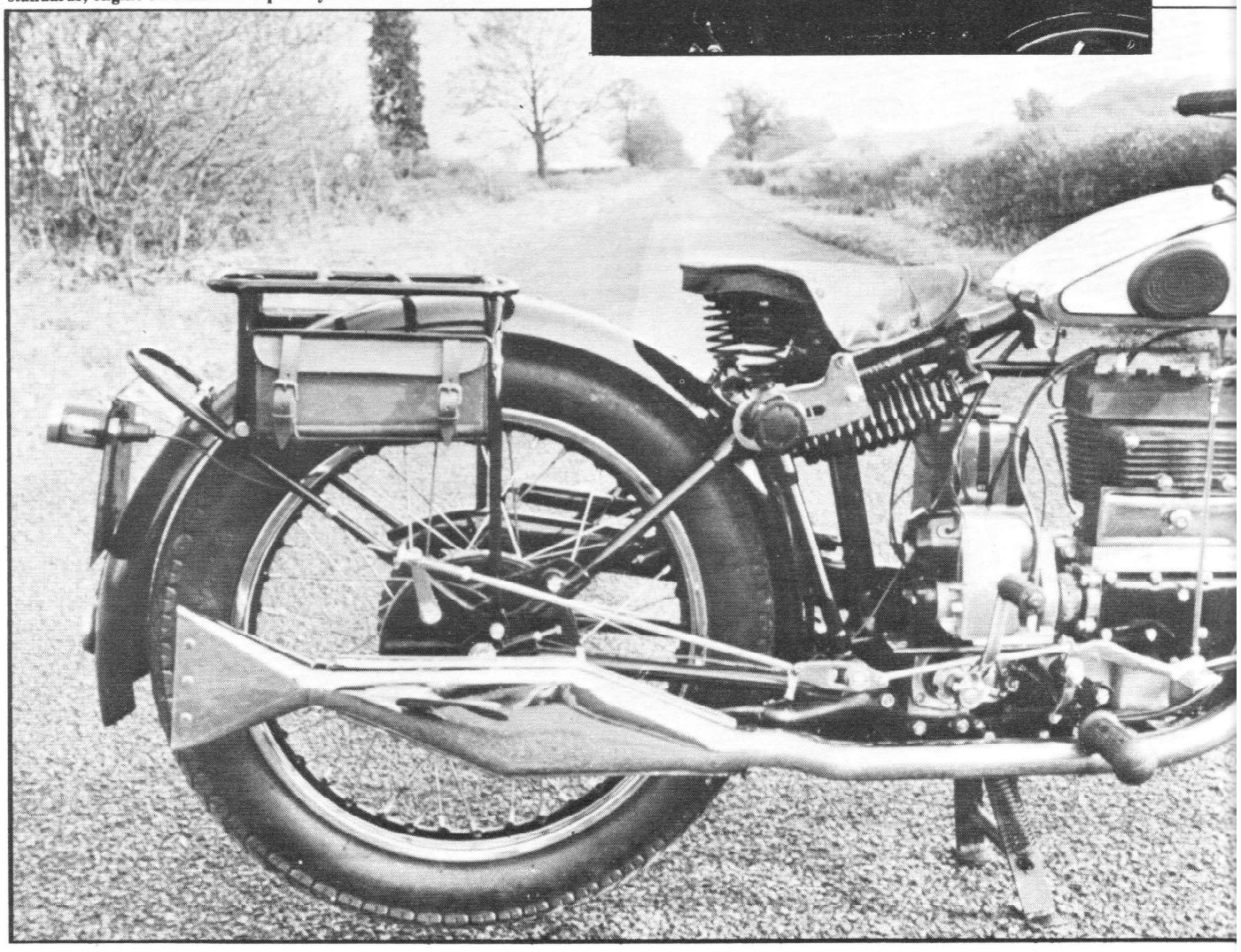
Already becoming dated were the side-placed valves and the lever type throttle. Modern thinking was represented by the cantilever-sprung rear end, the coupled braking system and the absence of external oil pipes around the engine. The styling, too, was much ahead of its time. The monobloc casting for the two cylinders made the Silver Arrow look more like an in-line twin than a Vee (although modern-day riders would consider this a flaw), and the car-type exhaust manifold and cylinder finning that ran horizontally instead of at an exact right angle to the cylinder axes added to the power unit's clean appearance.

But the Silver Arrow had been intended for touring riders, and top speed was only about 63mph. Colin, however, has enjoyed his runs on the bike, and reckons that it's far from being a gutless wonder, which is how motorcycling lore remembers it.



Right: Matchless chose a tight 26-degree angle for their V-twin. The side-valve unit is rated at 16bhp.

Below: Matchless gave the Silver Arrow very modern lines by 1929 standards; engine externals are especially clean.



'I can stay with most overhead valve 350s from the 1930s,' he reports. 'On the Fleet Run I kept with Jim Goodall's R7 AJS for 14 miles, and I've had it running happily at 60.'

He hasn't exactly thrashed the bike, as he feared the sheltered rear cylinder might overheat. But so far there has been no trouble from this source, and the handling of the sprung rear end, with its rather primitive friction dampers, has provided no alarms.

'More comfortable than a rigid bike from the same era, and no worse on handling,' is Colin's verdict on the Silver Arrow's roadholding for rally purposes. Flexibility is to be expected from a long-stroke — 54 x 86mm in this case — side-valver, and the Matchless accelerates from 10mph in top. The gearbox is a hand-controlled three-speeder by Sturmey-Archer; a fourth ratio was added when the 1930 models appeared.

Jack, an inveterate old-bike enthusiast who swaps or buys a machine about once every two weeks, acquired the Matchless three years ago after a tip-off from a car-dealer friend. It came virtually as a wreck in boxes. Missing were the headlight, leather toolboxes, rear carrier, linkages for the braking system, all handlebar levers, horn, tank rubbers, battery carrier, rear stand and valve springs.

The speedometer shell was too rusty to save, as were the silencer, fishtail and exhaust pipe. Part of the front mudguard had obviously rusted badly in the past, and an owner had hacked about six inches from its length. The primary chaincase was damaged where someone, presumably the same bodge artist, had apparently made an access hole so that the chain condition could be checked without removing the cover, and the magneto contained no armature.

Colin saved the front mudguard by welding a piece of sheet metal to it, and a headlight of the correct type was transferred from a 1929 Royal Enfield. He made the inverted handlebar levers, bought throttle and air levers at an autojumble, and fashioned an ignition lever to match. New internals went into the speedometer casing, and the ammeter was also replaced. Ignition and dash light switches were made from lorry switches.

The exhaust system proved a true test of the restorer's ingenuity and patience. Armours of Bournemouth made up an exhaust pipe, but Colin couldn't find a trade source willing to undertake a replica of the fluted fishtail from the battered original. So he made his own component — from sheet metal taken from an old office filing cabinet. A chroming company then chose this very item as the piece in which to leave three dents, and Colin had to produce yet another. The same office cabinet provided the material for the silencer.

All suspension components, including the Silentbloc rubber bushes for the rear end, were in good condition and still usable. The engine, too, was sound; 20-thou oversize pistons had been fitted by a previous owner, but looked as though they had seen little service.

Big-end and main bearings were replaced, and a shaft and one of the cogs in the gearbox required building up. Colin made the valve caps and pins, and springs came from Jack's stock of these items. Cylinder castings were made good by sand blasting and an application of cylinder blacking. Colin had to make up an armature for the magneto, which was then despatched for remagnetising.

A local saddler produced new toolbags, but the original saddle was reusable after a soaking in linseed oil to get rid of stiffness. Colin made up most of the pieces of missing metalwork, such as the rear carrier and stand.

After the initial mix-up over the fuel tank, the job was switched to E N Wall of Coventry, who chromed and panelled it and applied transfers. Colin applied 13 coats of cellulose to other parts of the machine. 'You can't stove an old bike like this because it would burn out all the filler,' he says. 'And anyway, cellulose is harder and polishes up better.'

The brakes were relined, and new rims and spokes ordered from the Central Wheel Company. Reg Mills built the wheels, but Colin took on the task of masking off each spoke to paint the rims.

Nuts and bolts from the engine cases came from Custom Fasteners, but the fixings on the frame and forks are original. Jack and Colin accept that perfectionists will complain about the modern identification markings visible on the new bolt-heads; the laborious and costly alternative would have been to grind the markings away and have the pieces replated.

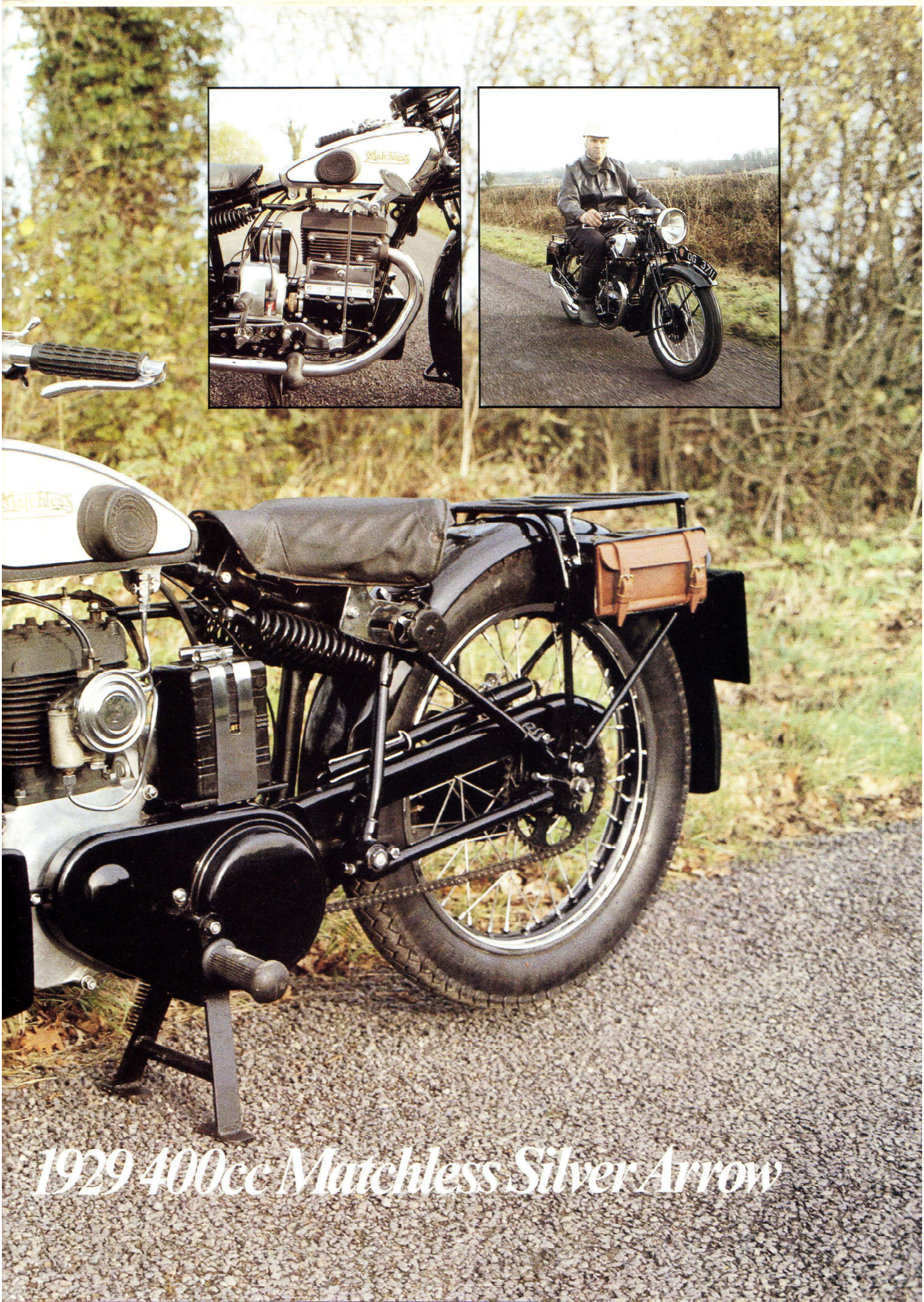
They also admit to moving the horn from its correct location above the headlamp because they felt it looked plain silly there. This deviation from originality may also have cost the Matchless marks at the Banbury Run, for one of the judges was Vintage club founder Titch Allen, who just happens to own a factory prototype Silver Arrow! At Beaulieu, judges complained about plastic plug leads, but this lapse has now been remedied by rubber components from a 1920 Sunbeam Talbot car.

But Jack laughs at one rather obvious error the concours judges seem to have missed — certainly, non of them has pointed out the mistake. What they haven't noticed is that under the Matchless titlepiece is the wording: *Associated Motor Cycles Ltd. Plumstead. London. Eng.* But it wasn't until 1937, when Matchless added the Sunbeam marque to their stable alongside AJS, that the Associated Motor Cycles name was registered.

Jack will not object to attention being drawn to the out-of-period tank transfers for the Silver Arrow has been entered in its last rally for a while. By now he and Colin will be busy rescuing other bikes from states of distress. To me it seems like they're bringing old motorcycles back to life instead of hiding them underground.

PARTS AND SERVICES

Fuel tank renovation: E N Wall, Siskin Drive, Toll Bar End, Coventry. **Rims and spokes**: Central Wheel Co, Lichfield Rd, Water Orton, Birmingham B46 1NU. **Wheel-building**: Reg Mills Wire Wheels, 74 Wareham Rd, Lytchett Matravers, Poole, Dorset BH16 6DS. **Tank Rubbers**: Vintage Rebuilds, Arkesden, Saffron Walden, Essex. **Nuts and bolts**: Custom Fasteners, 14 Bartleet Rd, Washford Industrial Estate, Redditch, Worcs B98 0DH. **Exhaust pipe**: Armours, 784 Wimborne Rd, Bournemouth, Dorset. **Magneto repair**: Auto and General Electrical Services, Churchfield Trading Estate, Salisbury, Wilts.



1929 400cc Matchless Silver Arrow