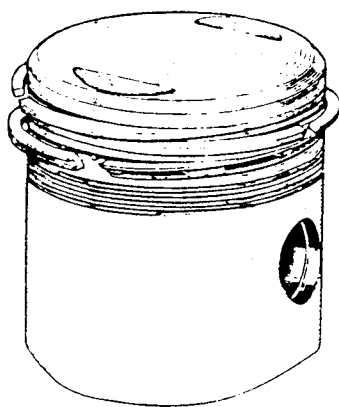


The 350cc model in G3/LC trials form; the author's rigid-framed roadster performed sterling work.

Matchless moments

Jeff Clew recalls good and bad times with heavyweight Matchless singles



AMC later fitted this wire-wound piston; the cross-section shows how the turns fit into the grooves and are then ground.

ONLY twice have I been fortunate enough to own a new motorcycle, and one of those occasions came about without any direct involvement on my behalf. While in the RAF in the forties I had managed to swap the 1930 GTP Velocette on which I began motorcycling for a 1931 350cc AJS ohv R6.

But by this time the AJS was well past its prime, and there were not many times when it returned home under its own power. The climax came when it broke down, completely in the midst of the Kentish coal-fields when I was home on leave. Air Force pay did not cover the cost of the salvage operations, and as my father had to foot the bills, he decided that a new machine was the only way he would preserve his sanity.

It was a kind and totally unexpected gesture. I wondered why my parents implored me to go straight into the garage when I returned home next, for usually they tried to keep me out of there until I had eaten. There, to my amazement, stood a brand new 1947 350cc Matchless G3/L, alongside the old AJS.

Why a Matchless? Although my father knew virtually nothing about motorcycles, during the Great War he had worked in the Woolwich

Arsenal, and there had met Charlie Collier, one of the founders of the Matchless marque; the association had been remembered.

The 1947 G3/L represented an improvement on the 1946 machine, which was basically little more than the ex-WD model in civilian colours. Chrome plating began to reappear in 1947, as evidenced by the handlebars and the wheel rims. There was also a chrome-plated winged 'M' affixed to the petrol tank by small screws.

The engine itself benefited from an improved oil pump, the use of a two-start thread on the end of the crankshaft doubling its speed, and hence its rate of flow. This necessitated the fitting of larger-diameter oil pipes. In addition, the connecting rod had been shortened by 1/2in, and the position of the gudgeon pin bosses in the piston lowered by a similar amount. It was claimed this permitted the piston to be run with a greater clearance, the stroke remaining unaltered, and that engine balance would be improved, with quieter running.

The front fork had been improved internally too, by the use of three-rate main springs. The lower legs now contained short buffer springs, all of

which added up to a lesser tendency for the rider to kiss the road when the front brake was applied hard. These and one or two other cosmetic features, such as more stylish number plates and a flare to the end of the rear chainguard, made it look a very handsome machine, aided by the new, clean sweep of the exhaust pipe.

The Matchless seemed to represent a very good buy for a machine of that era. It was quiet mechanically, averaged 75mpg, and proved utterly reliable, the last being an attribute hitherto unknown to me. It was treated carefully for 500 miles, using a running-in compound in the oil, and then gradually worked up to its full performance; its top speed was about 72mph. Sprung frames were then almost unknown, but a good saddle gave a reasonable ride and ignorance of anything better counted for a lot.

Soon after the full running-in period had been completed, piston slap began to manifest itself, which was highly annoying in such an otherwise quiet engine. The manufacturer's claim of more silent operation from piston modification seemed unproved, so perhaps this is why they soon changed over to a wire-wound piston.

Another problem lay in cold starting. In winter the grease-filled Burman gearbox made it difficult to give the engine a really good swing on the kick-starter. At least once a week I used to visit a friend, and

when I was set to depart at about 11pm, we employed our starting ritual. I would keep kicking the machine over until I was exhausted, then he would take over. At this stage the engine would revolve enough to give one single bang. Eventually, it would ease up enough to fire several times, after which there was no trouble.

I was badly let down by the separate dynamo supplied by Joe Lucas as part of the original equipment. It failed on two occasions, which necessitated replacing it. As any early Matchless owner will know, this is a difficult task which would have deserved many paragraphs in the Pitman book at that time had not its author skated round the dodgy bits and concentrated on how to learn to ride and where to insert the petrol and oil!

The bulbous shape of the Burman gearbox prohibited the removal of the dynamo from its housing in the rear engine plates after the drive chain had been detached, so it was a case of dismantling the whole primary transmission and dropping the gearbox. This guaranteed a couple of nights' harmless amusement, with the usual split nails, bleeding knuckles and navy-like hands. For the 1952 season AMC moved the dynamo forward to a position similar to that used by the equivalent AJS model, in the interests of streamlining production of the two separate marques. The profile of the Burman gearbox

shell was changed too — but all too late for the likes of me.

I found it easy to keep the Matchless in showroom condition, right up to the time I sold it in 1949, due to the excellence of its finish. It was still running extremely well and I realise now how much my father must have been dismayed when I returned with a secondhand Model 18 Norton from Comerfords — such is the brashness of youth.

A few years after I had sold the Matchless, another one came into my hands. I had just disposed of a rigid-framed Velocette MAC, when I came across a 1955 G80CS Competition Model in a showroom. Built to the scrambler specification with a sprung frame and Jampots, it was in full road trim, and presented a very handsome sight.

I rode it home gingerly because it was still shod with knobblies. The fitting of trials tyres effected a reasonable compromise, and it made an admirable bike for use on or off the road. With a silencer attached it was fairly docile, but when I rode it with an open pipe at a hill climb at the Devil's Dyke, Brighton, it was surprisingly competitive and in the final I was able to beat a 500cc Triumph Trophy twin.

I also played motorcycle football on it, competed in the hazardous sport of sledge racing, and even toured Devon and Cornwall. It served me well until one fateful day when my wife and I decided to ride it to a road race meeting at Crys-

tal Palace, where I was to be a marshal.

All forward motion ceased dramatically with a loud jangling noise. The complete lack of compression confirmed the worst — a valve had dropped in and clouted the piston. A passing friend got the Matchless into his van and took us to the meeting, where we conducted a post-mortem in the paddock.

The exhaust valve had bent sufficiently to prevent it from falling further and causing more damage. Apart from a mark or two on the piston, all that appeared necessary was a new valve and guide, the latter having fractured. But what had caused the valve to drop in when oil was returning to the oil tank when the engine was kicked over?

The answer was soon evident. The hairpin valve springs had worn through at their collars, due to the lack of lubrication. The oil pump guide pin had fractured, no longer controlling the movement of the pump and severely lowering the oil pressure, which in turn cut off the supply to the rocker box.

I could not understand how the guide pin had fractured, so I wrote to the Plumstead service department, returning the pin to them for examination. In the absence of a reply, I wrote again, whereupon they grudgingly admitted a whole batch of pins had been over-hardened, which had left them brittle. They offered no word of apology and not even a replacement pin, which would have cost a matter of pence. I was not impressed and from that point onward I never owned another AMC machine after I had disposed of the rebuilt Matchless to another club member.

It seems that AMC were never aware of the value of public relations, and even to this day their thoughtlessness has left me with an in-built prejudice towards their products which I have tried hard to correct. I still consider their plunger-type oil pump was not really man enough to provide adequate lubrication requirements with a satisfactory safety margin.

Viewed in retrospect, however, I wouldn't mind having my G80CS back today — or have I fallen into the trap of seeing it all through rose-coloured glasses?

1958-59 version of the G80; in CS form, it became an enjoyable dual purpose bike.

