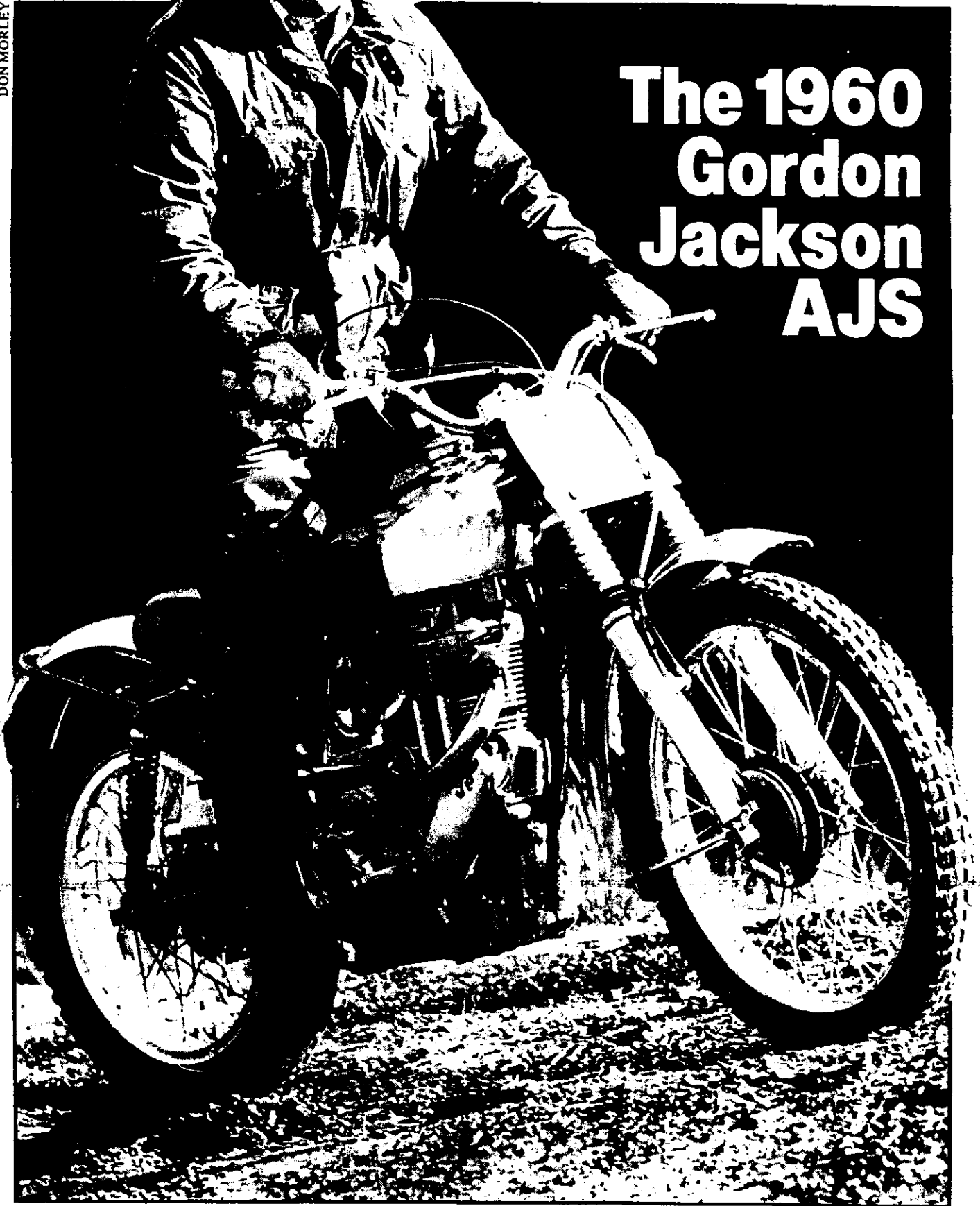


Riding the tria

DON MORLEY

**The 1960
Gordon
Jackson
AJS**



Riding the trials

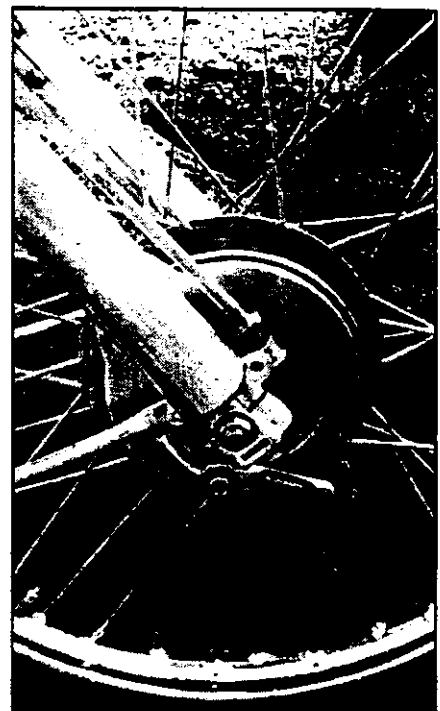
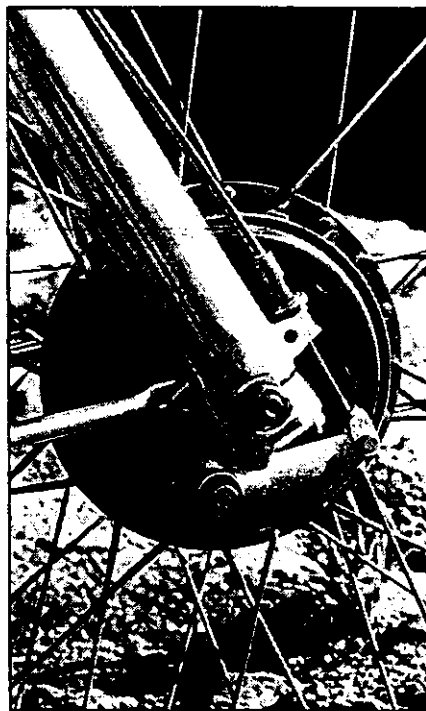
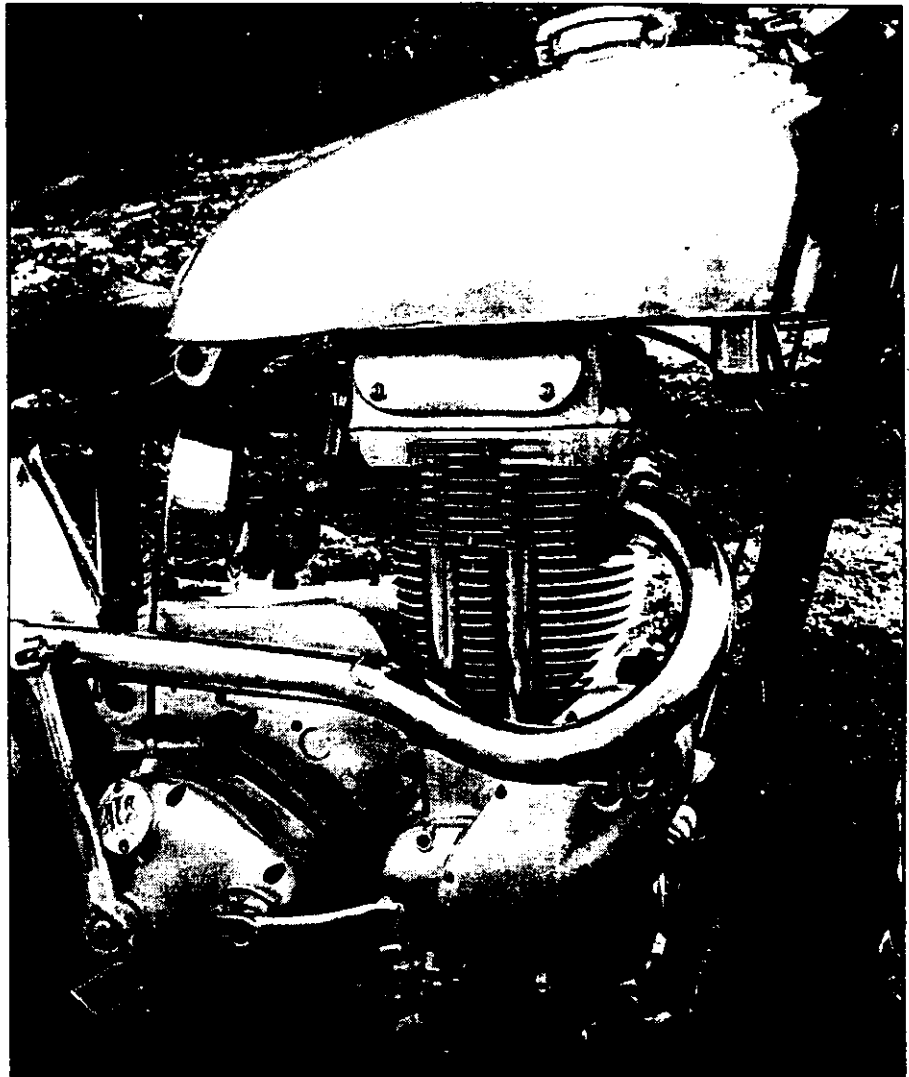
professed to be using what was being sold to the public, and on the other the trick bits were becoming more obviously visible. The BSA team competed on C15Ts that were so totally different to the over-the-counter versions that they might just as well have been another model. Royal Enfield used extensive electron castings and thinly disguised alloy single-sided hubs, and Sammy Miller's Ariel got lighter with every trial. AMC were much more clever, for although rumours abounded about short-stroke engines, special internals and engine-speed magnetos, the differences — if any — remained internal and unseen. There were many frame changes, but these had a tradition of being incorporated in the following year's production machines anyway.

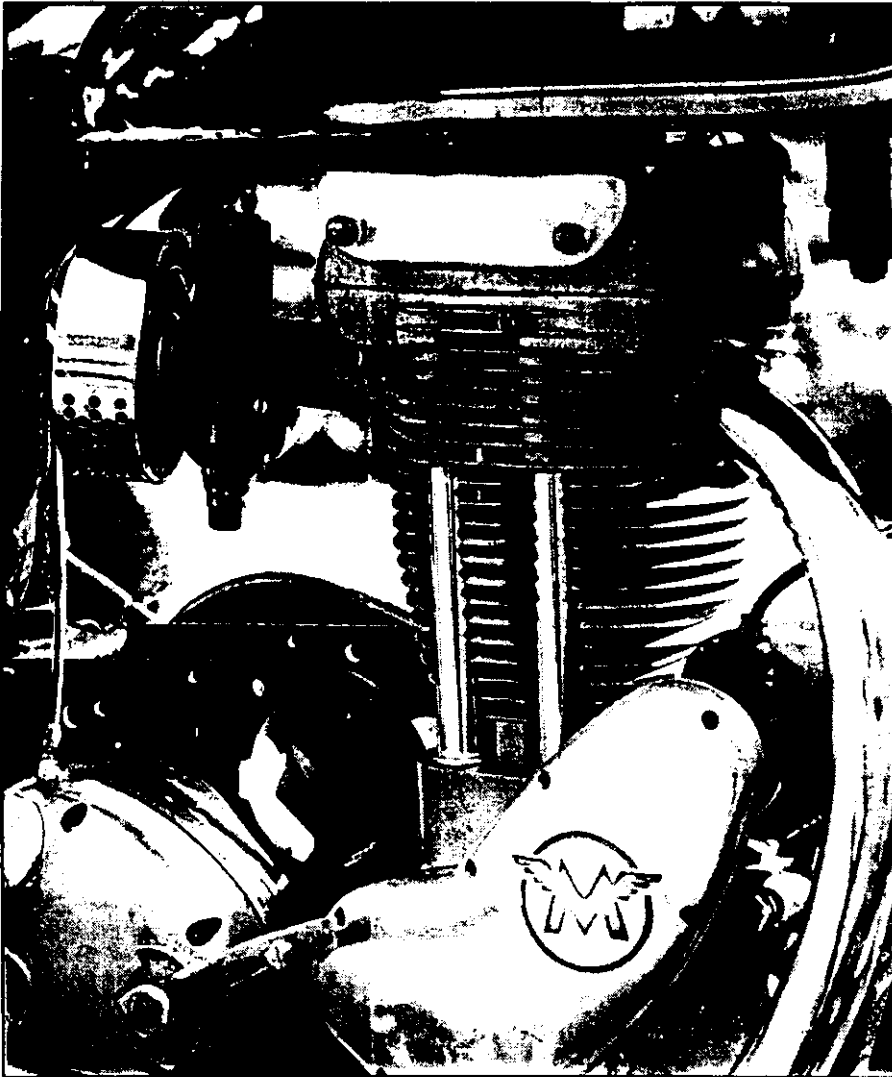
To return therefore to Aubrey Attrill's ex-Jackson bike, which was built in 1958 and was runner-up in the Scottish in '59 before its 1960 win: the dilemma was that it could well have been through too many uncaring hands since being sold to London dealers Comerfords in 1961 and Aubrey's acquisition in 1973. Could anything really be learned from it?

It's interesting to recall that a well known trials reporter of the era was allowed to test VYW 659 immediately after its Scottish win, and stated categorically that it was a standard as-sold motorcycle. There were, of course, no critical road tests in those days; instead, poor machines were discreetly sent back to the makers to be properly re-prepared for retest, and even then one had to learn to read between the lines to establish what was not being said rather than what was. The root problem was that honesty and advertising rarely seemed to work together. The mildest criticism would cause considerable ill will, and resulted for many years in a total ban by AMC on press tests of their products. So perhaps the said tester of Jackson's machine knew the truth of its specification but was merely toeing the party line in his report.

Certainly, we who were riding then knew that VYW 659 was a short-stroke model. After all, we could see daylight under the tank, and a simple count of the cylinder fins was evidence enough. This could even be seen all too well in the photographs accompanying the magazine test. And if the Jackson AJS looked different, it also sounded different. Sammy Miller, who had swapped machines with Gordon for an unofficial comparison session, had gone as far as to say that the AJS was darned near unrideable. Yet Jackson still won on it.

It was with some trepidation that Aubrey stripped the motor to begin restoration, to find what proved to be a very short-stroke engine indeed. Dimensions of 74 x 84mm, compared to standard figures of 69 x 93mm, were obtained from a 7R racing flywheel and





Powerplants of the ex-works AJS and the standard Matchless. The AJS has alloy engine plates and an alloy oil tank. Holes in the Matchless engine plates locate a dynamo, if fitted.

Standard AMC brake plate on the Matchless (far left) and the alloy version on the ex-works AJS.



Works mods on the AJS include lighter footrest and brake pedal components, which are also placed further rearward.



The Matchless relies on a standard steel rear hub and the infamously vulnerable 'long' Girlings.

con-rod assembly, with bore and stroke to match. The flywheels had been machined from a solid billet of sheet steel rather than cast, and were appreciably slimmer and lighter than the then trials versions, while at the top end the cylinder head had been ported and polished and fitted with the larger 1½in (standard 1⅓in) scrambler exhaust valve. A 1⅓in carburettor — standard was 1⅛in — with a highly polished cylinder head completed an ensemble which in those days was a most unlikely combination. In an era when bottom-end plonk was considered so vital, such a motor might well have been greeted with derision and disbelief if it had been offered for sale in the production bikes.

Aubrey's 1973 debut with the rebuilt machine, which also had the works-fitted later type frame and wheels, with special alloy brake plates and central alloy oil tank, was something of a fairy tale. Fittingly, that trial was the Gordon Jackson Cup for the then newly-promoted pre-1965 four-stroke class, and I have cause to remember his win well, for I was demoted after a period of successes on my ex-John Brittain magnesium-engined Royal Enfield. We continued to see-saw throughout the season with Aubrey eventually taking the South Eastern and Star group championships, with my Enfield runner-up.

The following season the bike reappeared, very obviously back in long-stroke specification. A chance question to Aubrey, a competitively cagey character, brought casual gestures that the Jackson motor was just being rebuilt, and it was merely a question of time before the bike would re-emerge in short-stroke form.

Now, nine years later and with the pressure of work no longer allowing me regularly to contest the championships, I thought Aubrey might consider letting me ride his ex-works bike to see for myself: was it the rider or the machine that was the winner?

On a beautiful October day, with the kind permission of the Surrey Hills club, I sampled the AJS at their Star group trial — and was disappointed to find that after all these years the bike was still fitted with the non-works long-stroke engine. It took some pressure to persuade Aubrey to admit why. It seemed he had found, as Sam and the AJS works runners apart from Jackson had concluded, that the short-stroke motor was just too fierce. In Aubrey's words, 'It's no bloody good for the nadjery these days.'

I felt anti-climax because I wasn't going to ride the bike as campaigned by my hero Jackson, and in any case I've owned several long-stroke trials AJS and Matchless models. My bikes have even included an ex-works 500, but eventually I sold them all as I considered them gutless and dubious handlers. So what

Riding the trials



'Scout's honour, Don, it's the long-stroke.' Owner Aubrey (left) allays the suspicions of tester Don Morley.

could I possibly learn from Aubrey's machine? Doubly disappointing was that following Jackson's incredible 1961 one-dab Scottish win, AMC had eventually gone short-stroke for the production machines. But only a handful had ever left the factory before the comp shop was closed with the entire group in dire financial difficulty, and I had never even managed to scrounge a ride on one of these.

For a second opinion I had taken along my old riding mate Brian Amos, also an Enfield trials man, and additionally Aubrey provided a stock 350cc Matchless of the same era for us to compare. Brian had never ridden a trials AJS before so as we sat on the two AMC bikes my unbiased (!!) instructions were to watch for a front wheel tucking in on drops into steep gullies, gutless top end performance, and a much higher centre of gravity compared to Enfields.

However, preconceptions have a nasty habit of backfiring, for although the Matchless played up with a sulkily magnet⁹, we decided when comparing notes later that we liked both machines rather more, in fact, than we would have preferred. Far from feeling strange, we both felt immediately at home and able to point the beasts at a few challenging sections. Damn it, the forks were much nicer than on our bikes, as were the gearbox and clutch. Yet there was still that feeling, as Brian succinctly put it, that as soon as we had to tackle a tight turn the bike was the governor.

To say that AMC machines don't handle would be an exaggeration, but as I had found years before, no one would accuse them of being neutral. The rider must be the master, and this approach requires strength, especially at low speeds. The forks and front wheels didn't tuck under, but the AMCs were distinctly

'The other works riders hated the short

I only had two or three bikes from the factory from the time I started with them in 1952 on MUW 704 until I retired in 1962. Of course that first machine was a rigid-framed long-stroke.

We kept each bike for an average of 18 months to two years. The factory would recall them twice a year, just before the British Experts Trial and the Scottish, to refettle or replace them.

For two years starting in 1956 we got new bikes with AJS numbers. I had AJS 775 on which I won that year's Scottish, Bob Manns had AJS 776 and Hugh Viney AJS 777. Then in 1958 mine was replaced with UXO 194.

It was on this bike that we tried the engine-speed magnet⁹ after a suggestion by Jock West. It wasn't a twin-spark arrangement just firing on every stroke, but it was no use at all. In fact the bike kept catching fire on the intake stroke, so we dropped the idea. Then Bob Manns, who was also team manager, suggested trying a short-stroke engine.

The factory built three bikes based on the scramblers for us to try, but Bob Manns and the two Gordons, McLaughlan and Blakeway, could never get on with them. They hated the short-strokes and got their long-stroke motors back, but I liked mine and rode a short-stroke from then on.

The last time I won the Scottish on a long-stroke was in 1958 on the 1957 bike. In 1959 I was runner-up to Sam on what is now Aubrey's machine, and I managed to reverse the result in 1960. My best bike was the last one, 187 BLF, on which I won the Scottish with one-dab in 1961 and was runner-up in 1962. That had the only

trick frame I had ever had from the factory. The whole bike, Bob Manns once told me, weighed only 258lb (*only a few pounds heavier than a 250cc Greeves of the era and 50lb heavier than a Triumph Tiger Cub.* — Don Morley).

There was nothing really special about our bikes, but they were blue-printed, the bores honed and the heads polished, though not opened out, and they were well put together. My works bike was the next year's or the year after's production version.

AMC didn't spend much. I never got paid a salary in all my years as a works rider, just the trade barons' bonuses for winning events. Not that I minded — the arrangement with AMC suited me as I lived near the factory and I liked the bike, although the BSA and Enfield lads were getting a lot of money.

We used to swap bikes after a trial. I remember thinking, "Poor old John (Brittain)", with his swinging-arm Enfield. But of course he was beating us all, and I realised why when I rode his bike. The Enfield was a nice little machine and so was Sam's Ariel, although it was too snappy for me. Sam used to try and psyche us all out by flashing a new titanium part or some new lightweight mod every trial, but we weren't allowed to alter our bikes.

The thing about my short-stroke motor was that it revved, but it lacked torque. I tried a 500cc version but that wasn't a success. It would thump, but if I shut it off it would just stop. My 350cc machine was virtually a scrambles motor with slightly heavier flywheels and a soft cam. It was terrific on mud and rocks but no

good on greasy steps — the power was too fierce and I would just get wheelspin. The year I retired I was beating Sam in the Wye Valley Traders Trial until we got to the last group of sections full of greasy steps. But the bike just wouldn't go up them and I lost the trial.

The one thing that still sticks in my craw about AMC was that after the one-dab win in the Scottish, Bert Thorn of Comerfords came rushing over to congratulate Bob Manns and me. Bob had retired from riding then but was both team manager and a sales rep, and Bert said he wanted to order 200 replicas of 187 BLF immediately.

Bob went back to the factory so excitedly — we had had a win and the biggest order ever seen for a trials bike, an enormous order for those days. But AMC still went on producing the heavyweights and so we lost the order. It was things like that which caused the bankruptcy after old man Collier died and Donald Heather left. The accountants took over and the place just went down-hill. It wasn't the shop-floor men — they worked their nuts off — it was the management.

I remember in the fifties the comp shop people smuggling a 7R racing engine out of the back door for Brian Stonebridge to test in a scrambler. Stonebridge won everything on it that season, but the directors found out about it and demanded the engine back. It was years later when Bill Nilsson used a 7R to win the first 500cc world moto cross championship in 1957, but by then it was too late. We could have dominated international scrambling for years.

more top heavy than our Enfields, requiring a lot more determination to make them go just where we wanted. They stayed on line, though, despite the extra effort needed.

Ariel's HT5, incidentally, tends to suffer its handling problems when really motoring, while the trials Royal Enfield and BSA are equally good at either extreme. Triumphs alone, in my opinion, were camels at any speed.

It was ironic that the engine was so impressive on Aubrey's AJS, far more so in fact than on any other 350cc AMC machine I've tried. It was sharp for a long-stroke, more like a 500 and certainly much more responsive than my relatively short-stroke Bullet, yet it had tremendous torque, pulling happily at near-zero revs even in third gear. To be honest the AJS was so good that it niggled me and, convinced that it was going too well, I asked Aubrey what he

had done to it. Inscrutably, he claimed it to be totally standard, but that's where we came in. Being a trusting soul I surreptitiously counted the cylinder fins (sorry, Aubrey), but to no avail. It was depressing that no matter how Brian and I treated the AJS it would take our abuse in its stride without stalling, even on sections where I would have doubted my trusty Enfield.

Whether it is just Aubrey's machine that is so outstanding or those works machines of yesteryear really were something special, is difficult to say. The real answer probably lies somewhere in the middle: few riders or mechanics have the ability to put their engines together well enough, let alone sort out the so-vital-for-trials carburation, ever to experience the best a motor can offer. But Aubrey obviously had. In my experience the average road rider never possesses or needs the fine throttle

control on which a trials bike depends, and without which marks are lost on every other section. To make an engine run consistently under power on an even slower than normal tickover without sooting or wetting the plugs, and yet to respond immediately to the throttle being viciously whacked open to tackle a rock step, requires the touch of a carburation maestro.

Brian and I returned home in near silence, buried in our own thoughts. The day's experience had led me to ponder the value of putting an AMC lump in an Enfield frame with Norton long Roadholder forks, AMC hubs and Enfield chaincases . . .

My thanks must go to Aubrey despite his reminder that my Enfield reversed the South Eastern pre-'65 championship placing in 1974 when I loaned it to ex-works rider Peter Stirland. I don't think I'm yet forgiven.

stroke engine' — Gordon Jackson

I still follow trials as my sons Ross (20) and Drew (16) are both experts. Indeed, I saw my old bike with Aubrey Attrill riding it recently and scrounged a ride. I didn't tell him so but I thought it was a gutless wonder, maybe because I've ridden my sons' two-strokes in between.

Personally I think the writing's on the wall for trials. Two-strokes are now so light and powerful that the sections are becoming too dangerous to take marks off them. You can see a decline in the entries — only a couple of years ago there would be 200 riders in an event, but some trials are now down to 30 or 40 riders.

Someone's going to get seriously hurt in modern sections soon. I think Ralph Venables has the right idea — revert to road tyres. After all, trials tyres only came in during the late forties and in my early days, even in the Scottish, we used Dunlop block patterns or Goodyear Grasshoppers.

At first I didn't think Venables was right, but the trials car people decided to try the same experiment several years ago, and the idea has worked. We're now getting through the same sections without wrecking the ground for the future. The sections are safer and we're going back to land we hadn't been able to use for years because of ecological damage. With trials tyres, sections had become so rutted that they were impossible to use again for years as the centre of the car ground.

I only wish I could get 187 BLF back. I believe it's in Australia, and I would love to find it, bring it back and restore and ride it again. The last time I saw it after Comerfords had sold it was in Buckinghamshire looking very tired. 9



Gordon Jackson eases 187 BLF out of a stream bed during a slimy Hoad Trophies trial in 1961.