

One Piece at a Time

The story of Norton 650SS XLC 16G

This story started in 1967 at the AMC works in Plumstead, well strictly speaking it was Norton Villiers by then. I was nearing the end of my 5-year apprenticeship and working in the design office, which was to be my ongoing career.



One day I was in the experimental shop where I noticed a very tired looking 650SS. It was unregistered, having been used on trade plates, as a long-term test bike, and had done many miles.

As an apprentice we got to know most parts of the factory, and the people in them, and if an apprentice had a problem with their bike, even if not an AMC one, they would be helped to get it right. This help was even extended to the loan of prototype or other test bikes, if we needed it. I had never ridden this particular bike but had experienced a works Atlas and always wanted a Norton. After a quick word with the shop manager I found it had done its job and was to be sold. A trip to the front offices and it was mine for the agreed price of £40 !

So here I was with a three year old unregistered tatty Norton. I thought first of getting it home but then asked the experimental shop manager if I could strip it in his department during my lunch hour and take it home in bits. This was soon agreed and, as by then I had a car, the parts could be taken home that way. Now, as I said, as an apprentice we got a lot of help around the factory and knew who to turn to. It was not difficult to remove parts and take them to the right department and get them refurbished for free or a small donation. Sometimes this did not work as I expected. For example, the exhaust pipes were well rusty so it was natural to go to the plating shop to get them re-chromed. However, when I asked the operator, the answer was a flat no. I stood there puzzled as to what I had done, but people there were real jokers. I asked again what was wrong and why he wouldn't do them. With straight face he repeated 'No I won't do **them**, what you need is these' and reached up above his head and brought down a brand new pair, grinning as he did so. Was I happy!

However, some things could not be done with this sort of help, such as the frame. This was taken to the spares department and booked in to be re-enamelled. Anyone who has owned an AMC bike will know the quality of the enamelling process, so that was money well spent.

As the bike was stripped I had to get the parts home in my car. To do that I needed to satisfy the minimal security that all was in order. It was explained that I had bought the bike and was taking it home in bits so, if my car was parked outside the experimental shop at lunchtime, that was what I was doing. That was agreed and no more was said. Of course some parts went straight home to be worked on but security didn't know that many had made a detour into the factory to be refurbished first. Even if they had known I doubt they would have been bothered because, as I said, everyone was supportive if you were getting

things done for your own bike.

They drew the line at anyone stealing or doing things for profit.

Of course, working in the design office there were other perks and, by the time the bike was making progress, we were deep into Commando design and production. The Commando first shown at the motorcycle show in '67 was far from a production bike so there was much to do.

In the days before computer aided design it was often necessary to have the physical part that was being redesigned or that mated with the one being designed. In fact, at times, we had brand new bikes straight off the production line in the office, on loan as points of reference. This was not an easy task as they had to be manoeuvred through machine shops and then man-handled down a flight of stairs into the office. It sounds like a difficult task now, but we were much fitter back then. They were physically lifted onto low benches. The prototype Commando in Mick Duckworth's book is on one such bench just behind where I worked.

When it came to the smaller parts, we just had to obtain a signed docket from the chief draughtsman to get them on loan from the stores. You would not be surprised to hear that some parts were difficult to find when the stores wanted them back! Prototype parts were also sitting around the office. When the Norton Mercury was being specified, we had some prototype stainless steel mudguards which were not going to be used, so my Norton had those as it did a spare commando twin leading shoe front brake assembly. Another nice feature I liked was the Atlas centre stand and a trip into the factory soon got me one of those. The bike was now coming together nicely.

The final stage was getting the bike registered, which was much easier than I thought. There was no question of dating certificates back then so I was delighted to receive a '68 registration. These days we would be wanting one that reflected the true age of a bike but at that time having a bike that was by now four years old, but with a new plate, was a bonus.

All the joy came to a sudden end when the factory closed in '69. It was a blow to many, including me, and, although I had offers to go to Andover or Wolverhampton, neither appealed for various reasons. Despite joining Colin Seeley a year later my interests and priorities were changing and it was not long before I sold the Norton and a G80CS scrambler to raise money for other things.

Where is it now? Well according to the DVLA it has not been declared as scrapped but has not been taxed since 1980, and last changed hands in 1985. Is it sitting in someone's garage waiting to be restored, I wonder. I would love to know.

Bob Cakebread (Originally written for the Norton Owners Club Roadholder magazine)

Subsequent to posting the above story, Bob now confesses to being a serial offender, as far as scrounging bike parts is concerned, hanging his head in shame once again whilst relating his efforts to re-build an AMC scrambler on the cheap.

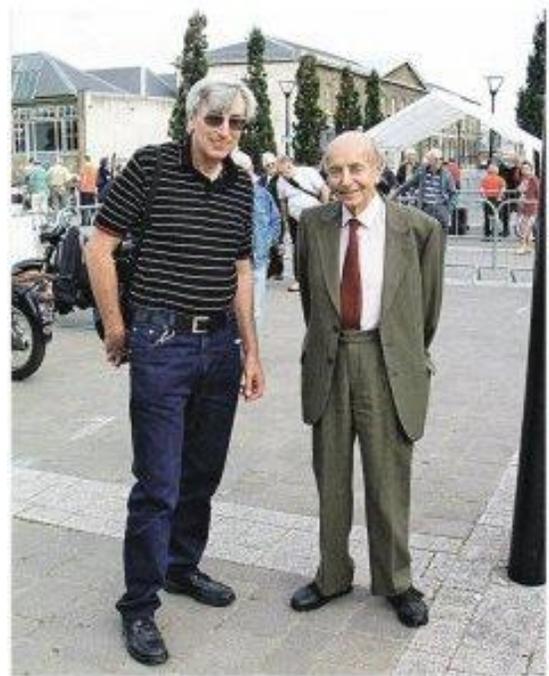
One Piece at a Time - the Prequel

The story of the Norton was all about a complete bike that was restored one piece at a time with a few added modifications. Prior to that was a G80CS scrambler, built along similar lines but all from parts. It all started when I was posted into the experimental and competition department to work alongside John McLaren, preparing the works scramblers and International Six Day Trial bikes. There were two works

scramble bikes given to riders of the day, one being Chris Horsfield, plus supporting other riders by preparing their bikes. At the time the factory had stopped supporting road racing and the department (apart from the experimental road bikes) had been relocated to the 3rd floor at the Maxey Road end.

John was a brilliant engineer and the scramblers at that time were very much of John's making and nothing like the G80CS production bikes. In fact the scrambler design went on to inspire the G85CS and the Norton P11.

My scrambler all started when a friend of John came in one day and had what he described as an ex-Vic Eastwood frame with front forks etc, seat and a few other bits. The swing arm pivot on the frame was broken off on one side but otherwise it was a light-weight frame not too dissimilar to the works bikes. John suggested I bought it, but what good was just a broken frame? John pointed out there were plenty of unwanted parts lying around "why don't I try and build one up from bits" and picked out a pair of crankcases with studs stripped out and suggested I start with repairing them. So that was how it all started. Of course there is not much to a scrambler compared to a road bike and I followed the design of the works bikes where much was hand-made anyway. Parts that came off of works bikes, which were still serviceable but not good enough for works machines. and parts destined for the scrapheap also contributed. A racing magneto with broken mountings was put to use by machining the sides of the housing, redesigning the mounting plate and a new clamp design. So that scrap magneto was put back in service. Likewise, an old fibreglass petrol tank that had split was duly repaired and repainted at home. The engine gradually came together and parts were modified in much the same way as they were for the works bikes; lightened flywheels and rocker arms, G50 piston, 12:1 compression ratio, works cams, GP carb and no retard mechanism. They were fearsome things to start up. John wasn't very tall so he used to stand with his left foot on a two gallon petrol can so that he could take the kickback with his right. More often than not he gave the job of starting them to me!



Bob, pictured with race shop engineer Jim Boughen at the 2007 Reunion event [held in the Woolwich Arsenal grounds.

For years after moving on from the comp shop I was still buying, making and scrounging bits but the frame remained a problem until some years later when I was working for Colin Seeley. Colin had employed Jack Wren, a most talented ex AMC welder brilliant at sif-bronze welding. Years before I had made a jig to hold the swing arm pivot in the correct position, so Jack kindly welded it in place. Finally the bike was assembled and that beautiful engine, running on Castrol R, fired into life and on open pipe sounded a treat. As with the Norton things in life were changing not least the closure of the Seeley enterprise and eventually Jack Wren bought the bike from me. As far as I know it stayed with Jack until he passed away but I have no idea where it is now. One thing is for sure there is not another quite like it.

Bob Cakebread