

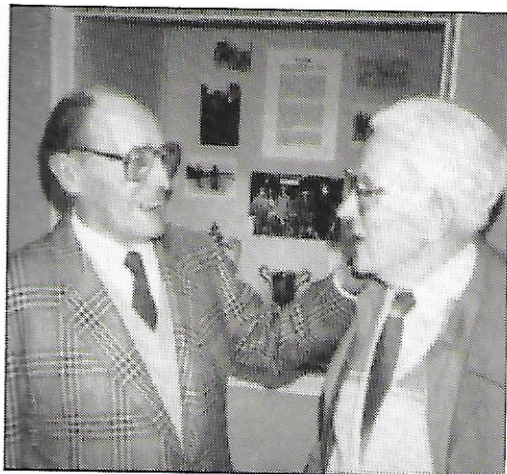
MADE IN PLUMSTEAD

Twenty years have passed since the closure of the AMC works, home of Matchless and AJS...

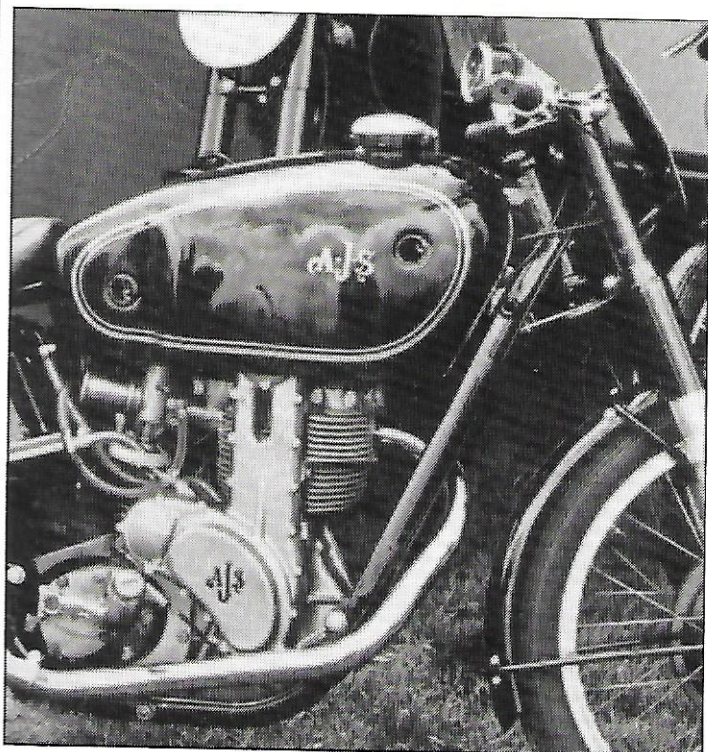
CROSS to the south of the Thames by the Blackwall Tunnel, turn left towards Woolwich and take the road that echoes the curves of the river it follows. Wind past the long grimy walls of the Royal Dockyard and soon you pass the Ferry, the Arsenal, the Woolwich mosque, and the Plumstead bus garage. You're on one of the last squares on the eastern edge of the London A-Z.

Carry on down Plumstead High Street, through a couple of miles of post-industrial griminess, and you've passed the site of the offices and showrooms on Plumstead road, and behind them the factory of "Colliers", as they always called the old AMC works at Burrage Grove. This was the home of Matchless, AJS and, latterly, Norton, until its closure just 20 years ago, in 1969.

The factory was soon demolished. Today a technical college stands on the site, and there's not a single indication that since 1913 this had been the home of the firm with the longest unbroken production of motorcycles in the industry of what was even in the late fifties the most modern plant in Europe producing motorcycles almost exclusively; a works employing over 1,500 local people, and in the peak year of 1955 producing 16,643 motorcycles. From the reliable 350



At the exhibition... Charlie Matthews (right) and fellow ex-AMC man Gerry Hartnell; and below, in the paddock... one of the most successful products made at AMC, the 348cc 7R racer



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G3L heavyweight plonking singles ("plonker" then — rarely used — meant something rather different than it does today) to trials and scrambles winners, and production road-race machinery like the 7R and G50 ohc singles, plus works exotica like the AJS Porcupine and 7R3, until the sixties all AMC machines were produced to a renowned high standard.

So it rankles with the men and women who worked there, many of whom were

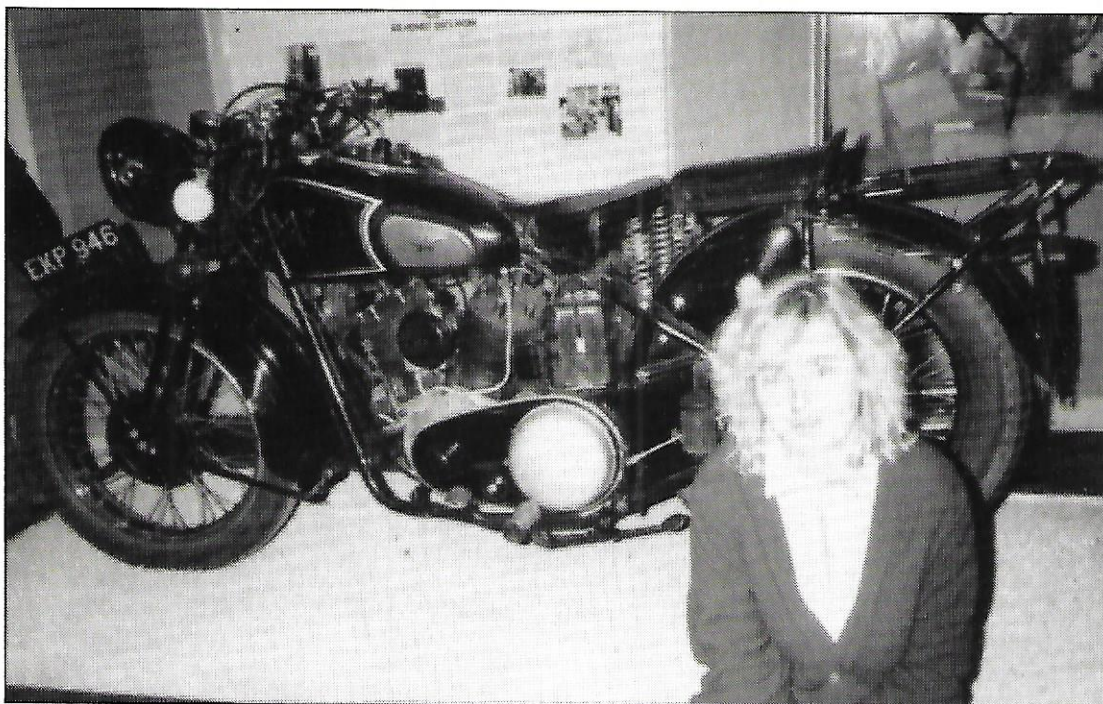
been pressing the borough for some time to commemorate AMC, and now the mayor, who had been expecting scruffy motorcyclists, saw the smartness and dedication evident on a VMCC occasion. He commissioned a feasibility study, and the result was the opening on February 19 this year of an exhibition running until May 14, and entitled "Made in Plumstead", as part of an effort to celebrate AMC's achievements.

The exhibition is being held in an upper room at the Greenwich Borough Library at 262 Plumstead High Street. It is primarily the

through a haze of fatigue as she had been up for 19 of the preceding 24 hours getting things organized. Meeting for the first time in sometimes 20 years, men and women stared at each other hesitantly or disbelievingly before recognition dawned, and soon people aged from 40 to 80 were talking with south-east London's own brand of humour about the old days. There was little sentimentality, and later when opinions were given it was usually almost diffidently; the more usual mode was jovial mockery of themselves and each other — "Don't believe a word!" and (in

*"Matchless Drive"
for a new street
near the site of the
factory was
rejected by
upwardly mobile
home owners...*

Exhibition organizer Fiona Davison. Behind her, a 1938 Matchless model X side-valve vee-twin



related to each other and who still live locally, that "in its own country" the skills and industry of what was in today's jargon "a centre of excellence" for motorcycle production have gone almost completely unacknowledged. In 1987 there was a move to name a new street near the site "Matchless Drive", but the new home owners were of the upwardly mobile variety and rejected the idea. The road eventually selected for the title is some way from "Colliers"... so called because Matchless Motorcycles, which became AMC — Associated Motor Cycles — in 1937 with the takeover of AJS... had been formed by local engineer and entrepreneur Henry Collier, and from then on his sons, Harry, Bert and Charlie, were active motorcyclists and directors. Many trace the decline of AMC from "Mr Charlie's" death in 1954, and some even earlier to the wartime crash that killed Bert Collier — as one man put it, after that "Somehow the accountants took over more and more of the administrative work, until their departments were costing more than they could save." A not unfamiliar story.

Things began to change on the recognition front in 1988 when the mayor of Greenwich, John Austin-Walker, himself a one-time Francis-Barnett rider, came to the VMCC West Kent run. VMCC's Alex Brett and AJS/Matchless OC historian John Allen had

result of work by Fiona Davison, a tiny blonde 23-year-old who hails from Middlesborough and has never been on a motorcycle in her life. But with questionnaires sent to a wide range of ex-AMC employees, followed up in some cases by interviews, Ms Davison assembled a really good range of unique testimony to the way things were at the works. This was edited to become part of the exhibition, in the form of large wall panels with blown-up photographs and paragraphs of testimony sketching in themes like working conditions, "fun and games", and what went wrong. Fiona Davison has done a fine, thorough job and has served the locals well, letting their own voices tell the story before the tide of time sweeps it away forever.

Otherwise there are trophies, posters, tools and three immaculate examples of the Matchless product — a 1938 vee-twin Model X, a 1959 G12 650 and, from Mark Stevens of Hy-Cam, the group dedicated to the Norton/Matchless hybrids of the 60s, a stunning red G85CS scrambler — though Mark says that it's a recent acquisition and that the silver Reynolds 531 lightweight frame needs attention.

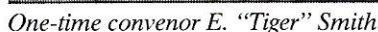
On the night the exhibition opened, as many as possible of the ex-employees had been invited, and over a hundred of them converged. It was a genuinely warm and moving occasion, which Fiona Davison saw

appeal, from one man scrutinizing a photo of himself 20 years ago), "Was I really that fat?" The largely unspoken sub-text was true pride in what they had shared and helped to create. It was a privilege to be present.

Prominent in every way was the former works convenor, E. "Tiger" Smith, a tall, imposing, upright figure with an air of command that absolutely belied his 78 years. Everyone joyfully recognised and remembered "Tiger" — "He was always a miserable sod!" one man laughed, but with affection and admiration. Hoarse-voiced, Dickensian, "Tiger" had come to Matchless in 1925, and like Gerry Hartnell, a repair shop man who had joined the previous year, he could remember the power cut caused by the 1926 General Strike, and how a 980cc model M3 vee-twin engine had been fitted up in the press shop, and all the shafts for the machinery had been run off it.

As well as his union work, "Tiger" Smith's job was truing the wheels, and on a full day that meant 60 or 70 of them — at its post-war peak in the 1950s Plumstead was turning out 80 machines a day. He could also remember aspects of the not-so-good old days. "The younger men here won't believe this — you used to have to clock on to go to the toilet. There was a one-armed chap sitting at a turnstile, like a station. He took your number and gave you a disc, and he had an old-

Partly thanks to “Tiger” in his union capacity and to works manager Bert Bassett, in contrast to some motorcycle factories, the post-war works enjoyed good labour relations, as all the interviews confirmed. In the fifties “there were no strikes as such, just a couple of union national one-day stoppages. There was the convenor and the works committee, so anything was thrashed out between them and management before it got to a stoppage.” There were hiccups, however — like one threatened stoppage over the absence of toilet paper. Assembly line monotony lay beneath this: “That was the reason for a lot of stoppages, it was boredom. If they could find something to stop the line and all sit there talking they’d



do it.” The work was particularly relentless because, as one testimony makes clear, “All the pay was based on bonus . . . they wouldn’t stop (the line), they wouldn’t lose their bonuses over you . . . The rate-fixer would come round and fix the rate for the job and the more work you’d done, the more money you earned . . . It was up to you when

Some jobs were particularly "gutty". In the polishing room "... the front of their overalls was about three inches thick with grease, and if they came to visit me round

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the forge, it used to melt and drip off.” Polishing shop men suffered from two afflictions in particular; their noses “would seize up, they used to go to hospital to have them cracked.” They also got piles, from the day-long straining. Conditions generally improved a little after the war, as labour became scarcer and had to be to some extent wooed by management, but they were never ideal.

“Tiger” Smith’s union chores meant that he had frequent dealings with the Colliers and with Donald Heather, the post-war managing director most associated with the company’s decline. Like many of the men, “Tiger” felt equivocal about Heather. The latter, like the Colliers, was at least a seasoned motorcyclist, and regularly rode the company’s products. One man questioned recalled sometimes having to provide “tea bikes” for the Colliers and Heather, ie, machines built and tested that day, for the bosses to ride home and pass judgement on (“And woe betide the tester or quality control person if faults were found”).

But Heather’s commercial acumen was less impressive. “He spent a lot of money for nothing,” said “Tiger” Smith succinctly. “I can’t understand — and 80 per cent of the men here would probably disagree — the money that was spent on racing.” AMC took the decision to plough the bulk of their profits from war work — and profits on the WD G3 machines and on sub-contract work had risen from a mere £2,000 in one pre-war year to £80,000 for 1945 — into road-racing, the development of the de-supercharged “Porcupine” ohc twin and the 7R and G50 singles. To “Tiger” this went against commonsense. Nortons, after all, had enjoyed their fabulous run of TT success — but in 1953 they still had to sell out to AMC. (As Tiger’s words imply, however, road-racing was popular at the factory, with an annual coach party leaving in the early hours of Thursday for the Senior TT — but back again in time for work on Saturday morning).

One man at the exhibition opening who was involved in racing, but had a telling anecdote of his own concerning Donald Heather’s lack of foresight, was Charlie Matthews. He was an extremely well-respected engineer and mechanic, exemplifying the deep knowledge that continuity, working throughout with motorcycles, can bring. “If you ever wanted to know anything,” said a former workmate, “you went up to Charlie. He didn’t have to look at drawings, he *knew* — he had dimensions, specifications, in his head.” Matthews ended up writing all the specifications for the Norton Commando, which few remember was actually designed at Plumstead, to suit a frame already built for an abandoned AMC rubber-mounted ohc twin project, the P10 — which is why the Commando frame is two inches too high for the Norton engine it houses.

Right: Ex-AMC roadtester Alan Jones. The bike? A 1959 Matchless G12 650 twin. Below: Hy-Cam’s Mack Robson and his Matchless G85CS



Charlie had joined in 1928, and moved from Repair to the race shop; as most men confirmed, there was little training as such except the on-the-job kind, by a senior hand to a keen youngster, with men starting wherever there was an opening and the talented enthusiasts gravitating to the more interesting and better paid jobs. Charlie’s was one such, asking questions and reading, and this paid off; he came to the race shop just after the takeover of AJS, and found the mechanics there in difficulty with the first cammy AJS that had come in for repair. They had it reassembled up to the timing stage; from his reading Charlie remembered a dodge which worked, and the foreman was highly impressed. Charlie became “No. 1 houseboy” to George Rowley, the AJS trials ace, travelling all over Europe with him for ISDT events. He was also racing himself, with TT man Matt Wright as his sidekick, and the pair did quite well on R7s; between times he worked with Wright on the AJS water-cooled V4 racer. After the war he was personal mechanic for racing star Les Graham, and the two grew very close. Charlie says Graham, who was later tragically to lose his life on the MV4, had one psychological fault — no matter how he tried, his fastest lap, though only by a second or two, was always his first one.

It was while travelling abroad with Graham and the Continental Circus shortly after the war that Charlie noticed the very large numbers of Europeans mounted on

small-capacity road machines. This seemed to Charlie to indicate a bottomless market for lightweights, and on returning to England he reported back to Donald Heather about it; but the latter just laughed off the information, calling Charlie “a pessimist”. Remaining firmly committed to big bikes, Heather would dismiss scooters as “a passing fad” until in the mid-fifties new sales of scooters had exceeded those of motorcycles, and the AMC group’s response, in terms of a James scooter powered by their problematic own-brand two-stroke single-cylinder engine, would be too little and too late.

The company did invest in some up-to-date plant, however, much of it from Alfred Herbert, the Midlands machine tool giant. In the fifties Plumstead’s heat treatment and inspection equipment, for instance, was among the most modern available in Europe. This was not always the case, however — one man, Jack Hall, worked with the same finisher, a polishing machine with a sanding belt, from 1914 to 1969! Another exception concerned welding. Frames were always of brazed-lug construction, and as J. Wren, a welder from 1957-69, pointed out, only old-fashioned oxy-acetylene welding was used until the late 60s, when electric arc and Mig-welding came in via Reynolds who built the Norton frames — and the old style was time-consuming. There was also no forge at the works, castings being bought in either from

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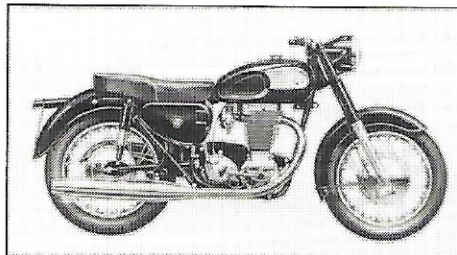
midlands firms like Bircal or Qualcast, or more locally from Maybury's of Croydon or Stones of Charlton, who supplied the sliders for the Teledraulic front forks.

Another aspect of Plumstead that many employees felt could have been modernized to increase output was the layout of production. The factory consisted of three floors and a roof shop. The ground floor was the main production shop, warehouse and dispatch. The first floor was where the bike frames were prepared for machining and plating, plus the painting, cadmium plating and enamelling shops. The next one up consisted of the tool room, tool service department and the cycle repair shop, and it was there that the testers brought the bikes back up in a large lift and carried out adjustments prior to dispatch. Above that, on the roof, in one of two corrugated iron-roofed buildings in which workers boiled or froze, the frames were actually assembled and brazed together in the first place. So the progression was from the top to the first floor, from there to the bottom, back up to the second and then back again to the bottom, and it can be seen that this organically evolved layout was something less than ideal in terms of flow. (It was on the roof, also, that you could get a haircut from "Albert Beaumont Esq.", just as the plating shop turned out chrome bicycle frames, tobacco tins and even chrome plated electric irons, and the hardening shop produced wrought iron work and coal fire companion sets. Well, all (company) work makes Jack a dull boy.)

In general the technology which produced the famous AMC quality of finish seemed to have been a mixture of reasonably up-to-date machinery, and individual skills honed to perfection over the years. As one of those questioned remembered, this became evident when the Plumstead works closed in October 1969 and Norton Villiers, which had been formed after the fall of AMC in 1966, moved production, now to be exclusively of Norton Commandos, to their new factory at Andover. "They went down there and left the know-how behind. We had a bloke here who used to bend exhaust pipes on a machine. He had all these little bits of wood and stuff as he was bending them — so they would come out perfect. And of course, when they got down there, they couldn't understand why the machine didn't bend the pipes right every time. It was the bloke's know-how, you can't buy this."

Ironically the same thing had happened when the management had shut down Norton's Bracebridge Street home in Birmingham and in 1963 moved production to Plumstead, with just five of the Birmingham men moving down as well. There's a hilarious story at the exhibition from the one Norton owner already in the factory, who was assigned to assemble the first Norton twin and with the Press present to

record the first Plumstead Norton, had got halfway through the task before he realized that the model he was working on was not a Dominator like his own, but a 350 Navigator. Worse followed, when the multi-spindle drill that processed the Dominator crankcases played up, so that 300 sets of crankcases had to be scrapped because the drill for their central bosses would not run true. When the Birmingham operative who had handled the drill was contracted, he simply asked "Didn't they take the plank with it?" The spindle's play had been taken up by holding a plank against it to stop it chattering.



Rationalizing. After the Norton takeover, AJS and Matchless models acquired Bracebridge Street-style forks and brakes

Beneath the Ealing comedy aspect, the growing Norton quotient at Plumstead, which inevitably increased in the Norton Villiers era and could always be justified as rationalization and because by then Norton's name was better known, gave offence to the workforce. As Tony Dennis, who started as a draughtsman in 1956 and ended as chief designer on the P11 and Commando, says, "Matchless had been a very well-built machine, so this Norton input was resented." Harry Lamer, an inspector, gave a concrete reason. He considered the amount of metal around the Norton twin's valve guides was insufficient, so that in production everything had to be absolutely precise for the valve guides to line up with the seat. He and others felt that the AMC twins were superior in that respect. This resentment stood in contrast to the factory atmosphere, where all agreed that inter-departmental rivalry at shop-floor level was non-existent — or at least confined to the fiercely contested cricket series. As Mr. Wren put it, "Each department tended to work in conjunction with other departments, as the majority of employees had pride in their product. The benefits of this co-operation was that every employee could see the end results of everyone's efforts and new models were often displayed in the factory canteen... a deep sense of pride was felt... co-operation often ironed out any problems in production."

Those of the workers who rode motorcycles, and they were not in a majority, usually did so on AMC machines. While the G3 and G80 singles were the backbone of the post-war range and cherished by many, there were also the twins, starting in 1949 with the very reliable and well-made 500cc Matchless G9/AJS Model 20 with their unique middle main bearing, spring-framed and alloy-headed from the start. Harry Lamer

HONDA TRANSALP RALLY

EUROPEAN owners of the Honda Transalp 600V are invited to join the 1989 Honda Transalp Rally between Strasbourg, Lisbon and Barcelona. The rally is open only to Transalp owners and passengers and is limited to 200 machines from the whole of Europe, so early registration is recommended. Participants will leave Strasbourg on July 3 and follow a 3,000-mile road and trail route through Andorra, Spain, Portugal, arriving in Barcelona on July 17.

Transalp owners will go to the snow-capped mountains of Andorra, the plains of Catalonia, from the beauty of mid-France to the bracing Atlantic coast of Portugal. Registration fees of 1500 francs (about £150) for rider and machine, plus 1,000 francs (about £100) for a passenger entitle participants to many benefits: route book and tourist information, back-up vehicles, medical and spare parts service, transport of luggage from stage to stage, and several Honda parties on route. Not included in the fee are petrol, Dover-Calais-Dover ferry tickets (for UK participants), food and accommodation at campsites or hotels.

Owners wishing to participate should register interest by writing or telephoning Graham Sanderson at Honda UK Ltd, 4 Power Road, Chiswick, London W4 5YT (tel 01-747 1400).

MICRO-CAR RALLY

THE Berkley Enthusiasts Club in association with the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre is holding its 10th annual micro-car rally on the weekend of June 24-25 at Quainton Road railway station, Quainton, near Aylesbury, Bucks.

The rally is open to all micro (bubble) cars, economy vehicles and self-built three-wheeler vehicles of any type ... Berkeley, Messerschmitt, Heinkel, Trojan, Isetta, Frisky, Peel, Goggomobil, Scootacar, Bond, Coronet, Astra, Brusch, etc.

As well as providing an opportunity to view these fascinating little vehicles, there is the chance to meet the owners, ask advice, join the respective club or maybe even find that odd spare part that could mean the completion of yet another restoration project. If you haven't got a micro, this might provide the chance to track one down. The railway centre provides a good backdrop with a fine collection of steam locos and other rolling stock. The centre will be running steam train rides during the weekend as well as having other exhibits on show. Within the centre's grounds there is a scale model layout.

Camping (facilities are basic) is free to entrants and marshals and £4 per unit for others and will be available from the Friday evening. Intending campers should contact Mike Millward, 4 Swallow Close, Wednesday, West Midlands (021-556-6142).

Entrance fee is £2.50 per adult, £1.25 for children and OAPs and covers entrance to the railway centre, the rally, and rides on the trains. Please contact Dave Ratner, Chairman, B.E.C., 6 Wollaton Road, Chaddesden, Derby. DE2 4HX.

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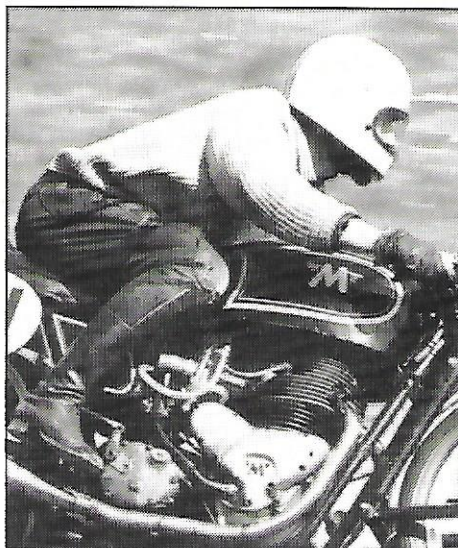
detailed the care that went into the construction of what he considered to be one of the best-designed twins on the road. The flywheels were balanced, and with them a pair of con rods were made and marked together, being weighted to within 10g of each other, and the same thing was done with a pair of pistons. All of this produced an exceptionally smooth-running 500, and later 600 twin, though much less so for the 650. Unfortunately the meticulous standards of preparation probably contributed to the fact that according to publicity man Ray Kennard, "the twins were said to have been produced at a loss since day one."

As mentioned, like all post-war Plumstead models these came in both AJS and Matchless forms, though differences after 1952, when the singles' magneto position was standardized, were almost entirely cosmetic. This badge engineering, as sales manager Jock West confirmed, with separate sales reps, dealers and publicity material, created a great deal of extra work. Publicity people eventually formulated the two marques' different images as "AJS — The Sporting Heritage" and "Matchless — Incomparable Quality", but despite being near-identical in reality, people remained who genuinely believed that one or the other marque went quicker. Tester Alan Jones thinks he may have an explanation. The bikes were built in batches by marque, and when whichever make it was came on assembly in the morning, the first batch would often have their timing set slightly out. By the end of the day, with the second make now being built, and the assemblers told by the testers of any problem, the timing would be spot on, and those machines would run better.

Not everyone rode; parking outside the works was not very secure, and thieving could extend to components as well as whole machines. More than one tester left his bike for a few minutes on a slight incline and returned to find it up, push off the centre stand and accelerate away in the approved manner, only to find himself rolling gently backwards because someone had made away with his rear chain!

Riding AMC was not just brand loyalty, as there were discounts available to employees on machines and also spares, as well as being able to get service jobs done on the spot. There were evidently also other fringe benefits. While some felt that "there were little fiddles, but they were very hot on the door," another judged "The pilfering was terrific. Chaps in the spares department were sending parcels of spares to agents and they were sending out parcels to their own address," and another stated "I've known people walk out with a complete engine and get Ted the doorman to hold the door for them!"

There were more legitimate compensations for the hard graft at Burrage Grove, from a good meal in the canteen for 9d, through the "Wills of the Week" competition to the children's Christmas party and



Based on the roadgoing G9, the 500cc G45 Matchless twin was a fair performer. Here, in an Ian Buckden shot, a 1956 version is ridden by Roger Durrant

the band concerts on the stage in the canteen (in the 60s there was a rock group called the Ajays), and not forgetting the Chrysanthemum Society, the darts and the cricket — "cricket was the great thing down there."

This family feeling in the works made the end all the harder to take. There was wide perception of the usual reasons — from the detailed — "what did bash our works was when the motorcycle insurance got put up" — to the generally accepted, the passing of the Collier family, followed by mismanagement, specifically complacency, "our machines not keeping up with the changing times" and with the Japanese — Robert Hutchings knew things were going badly "the day they dismantled a new Honda in the racing department, and the mechanic came into the engine shop and said "Pack your tools, Bob, this thing is built like a watch." But nothing prepared the workforce in 1969 for the actuality of closure. "I've not often seen grown men, of 50 and 60, actually break down and weep. But when they heard the news, there were lots of tears that day." And on the evening of closure there was not so much a leaving party as "a drunken orgy, but I think that was the only way those men could have left."

It's hard not to feel sadness at the waste, having seen the enthusiasm even now spring into life in the faces of men, often in their 70s, but with highly specific knowledge, skills and judgement fully intact. The only consolation is that the exhibition, and a companion one from April 1 to May 14, with more motorcycles on display, at the City Gallery, 147 Powys Street, Woolwich, plus a rally round the old factory testers' route on May 14, give some belated acknowledgement of how important the area once was to the motorcycle industry. "And", as Fiona Davison's commentary concludes, "of course there will always be the motorcycles themselves to stand as testimony to the skills of the Plumstead workforce." S.W.

FIRE RISK?

THE ACU Road Race Committee has decreed that helmet stamping — for helmets approved but not stamped by the manufacturers — will now cost about 5 per cent of the helmet cost, plus two-way post and packing.

However, the hardest charge to date is now about to descend on the road-race fraternity. In order, say our elected committee, to ensure that risks from fire in paddocks, etc., are kept to a minimum it is being recommended that in 1989 all competitors should carry a British Standard Approved fire extinguisher of 'the appropriate grade.' There can be petrol fire, a gas fire from welding equipment, a chip-pan fire from a tent or caravan, or a heat-generated fire from, say, a refrigeration unit in a motor home. So when 'appropriate grade' is mentioned, what do they mean — and why?

All major circuits have their own security-based fire fighting equipment and few, if any, paddock fires have been reported in the past 10 years. Will the requirement be one fire extinguisher per competitor? If so, how about the four or five competitors who share one transporter?

And who will check? The ACU will be interfering with individual privacy if they send their 'bulldogs' around the paddock campsites. Who is to say if a fire extinguisher is in working order? Will the ACU stamp an extinguisher with their little sticker every time one is inspected? And who will prevent wholesale movement of fire extinguishers from competitor to competitor as the inspectorate marches through the paddock?

The scene is set for 400 competitors awaiting scrutineering who now have to produce a fire extinguisher as well as their machine, leathers, boots, helmet, identity chain, licence and confirmed entry.

Mandatory fire extinguishers at 'negotiated supplier discount' will soon turn into ACU-approved fire extinguishers, with a cash benefit to the ACU from the compulsory sales of fire extinguishers.

If there is not a more pressing order of priorities in the ACU's affairs than imposing fire-fighting equipment on competitors, then it is time that the General Council reverted to the grass roots of the sport and asked where priorities really lie.

Where is the faster, better, less complicated scrutineering and document submission, and where — especially when certain members of the committee are in charge — is the common courtesy to all who have paid so much to compete?

Fire extinguishers now. Slopping out the caravan loos next. Guaranteed standards of barbecued foodstuffs thereafter?

Time, I suggest, to get back to racing and to make licensed circuits which charge several thousand pounds for a day's track hire provide adequate fire-fighting facilities. Brands Hatch does, Donington does, and so does Silverstone. It's time for a bit of a re-think Rugby way, isn't it? ICHABOD