

# PROFITABLE DAYS AT PLUMSTEAD

**Jock West, the successful road racer who became a sales executive, talks about his days at AMC to Mick Duckworth**

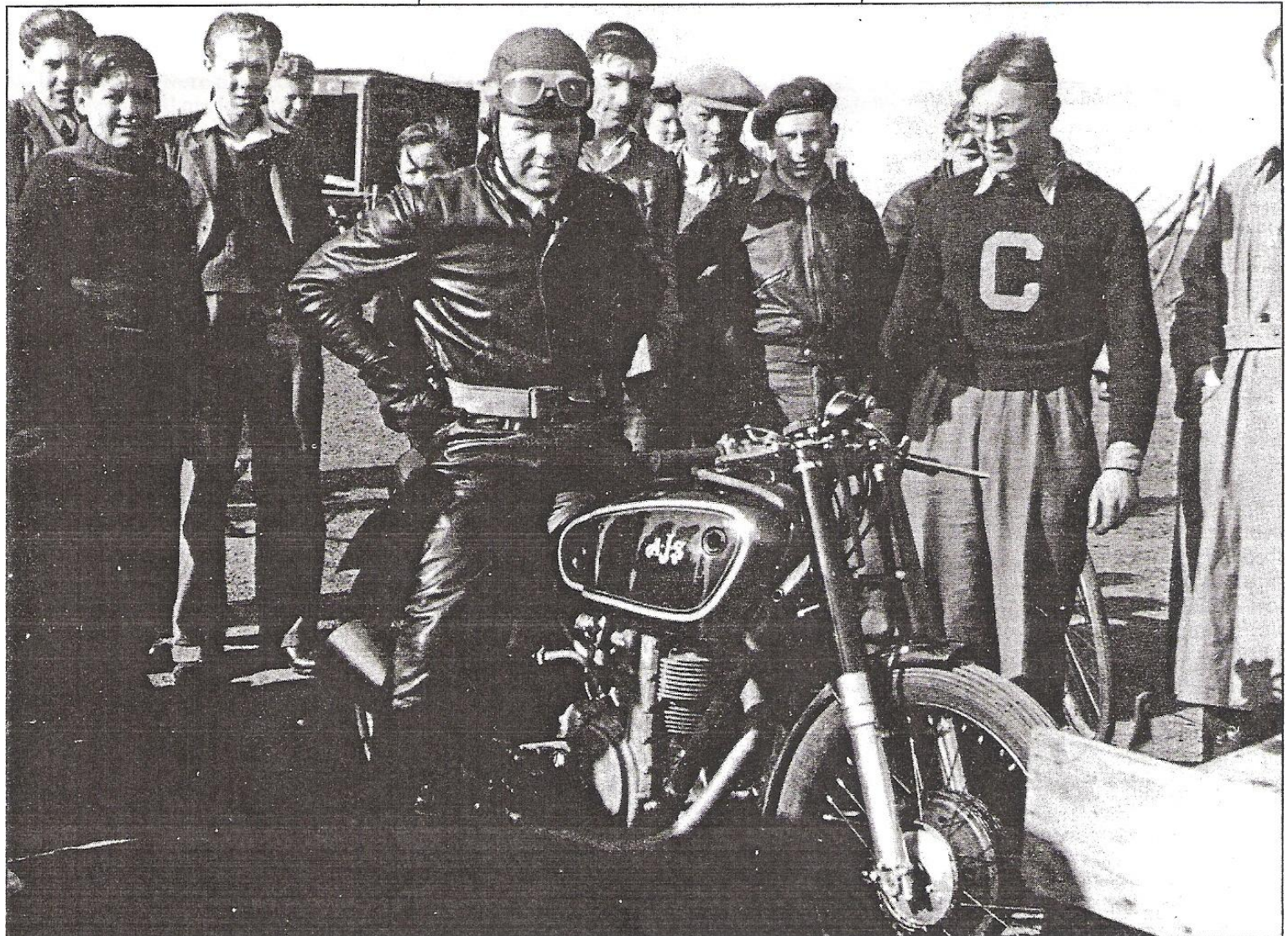


*West solders the petrol tank of the Vincent HRD on which he was eighth in the 1936 Senior TT. He recalls playing the blowlamp near the tank 'to frighten off some chaps from the press'*

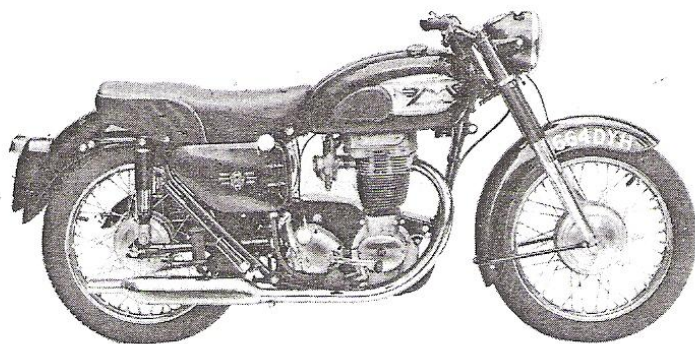
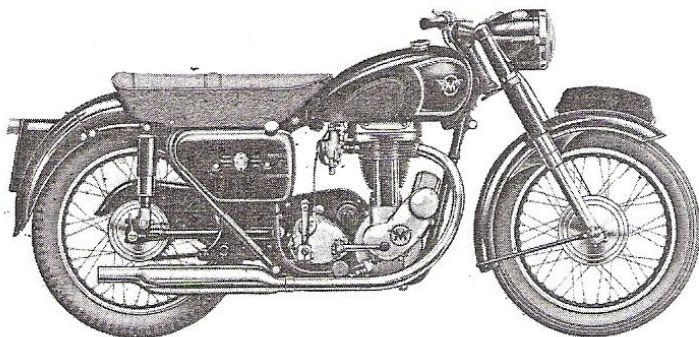
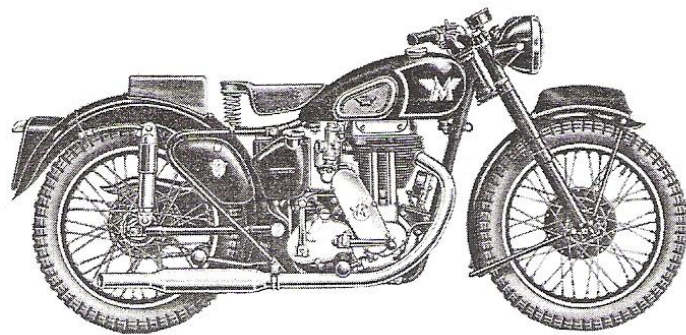
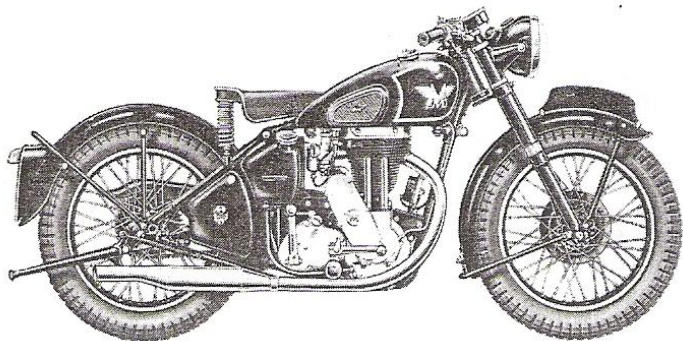
*Below: Jock West at Brands Hatch in 1948 astride the first post-war 350cc AJS 7R 'Boy's Racer' produced by AMC. The session at Brands and a run on local roads in Kent was the only pre-production testing the machine had, according to West*

TO progress from being a successful racer to holding a senior job in the motorcycle industry is an achievement that many must have dreamed of but few have realised. Jock West did it, when he became sales manager at Associated Motor Cycles after making his mark on international road racing and then joined AMC's board as sales director. West did a great deal more than just selling motorcycles, however, and job titles fail to reflect his true influence at AMC during the period when the company was the world's biggest motorcycle manufacturer.

Born to Scottish parents, John Milns West grew up in Belvedere, a south-eastern suburb of London not far from Plumstead, where the Matchless factory — later to be AMC's headquarters — was located. On leaving Erith grammar school, he joined the local firm of Fraser and Chalmers as a trainee in engineering: the works was engaged in the manufacture of heavy equipment such as hoists for the mining industry. He persevered with his training for five years, despite temptations to seek his fortune in the British empire. A chance



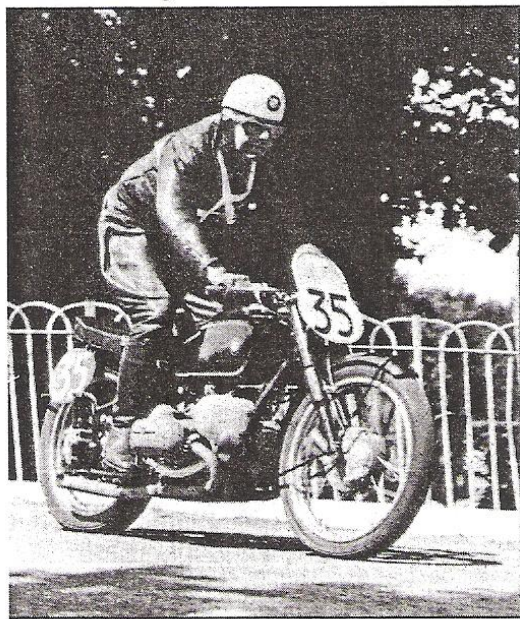




*Matchless single-cylinder models from the early post-war rigid model (top left), to the 1962 alternator model with West-designed 'knee-knocker' tank badges (above right), demonstrate AMC's conservative approach to machine development*

to work in India fell through when his uncle's tea plantation was washed away by storms, and he never took up an offer of a job in South Africa.

What West did get involved in was motorcycle racing on grass and on the track. He competed at Brands Hatch and Brooklands using an Ariel tuned by his long-time associate Lawrence Hartley. 'Its flywheels were discs cut from turbine shafts, and made at Fraser Chalmers,' he recalls. In 1931, when West was in his early twenties, he rode an Ariel four-valve sloper in the Manx Grand Prix, his first of many Isle of Man races on a variety of machines. In 1933 he graduated to the TT, riding a



*West aboard the supercharged 500cc BMW twin at Ballaugh Bridge on his way to second place in the 1939 Senior TT. As an employee of the British BMW importers he sold a set of the German telescopic forks to AMC*

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350cc ohc AJ's, then in 1934 he rode a 500cc Triumph. In 1935 he had works machines; a 500cc Triumph which retired in the Senior race, and a 350cc NSU ohc single which was the only one out of a team of three to finish in the Junior.

Another German connection came about in 1935, when West was offered the job of motorcycle sales manager at AFN, the Frazer Nash car company who were British importers of BMW vehicles. He commuted across south London to their base at Isleworth each day on one of the German flat-twins, and was eventually invited to Hanover to sample the factory's latest 500cc supercharged competition machine, with a view to a possible TT entry. This materialised in 1937, when West became a member of the BMW road racing team that was to become invincible during the late 1930s.

He won the 500cc class of the Ulster Grand Prix — then Europe's fastest road race — in 1937 and 1938, and was runner-up to Georg Meier in the 1939 Senior TT. The twins were more than a match for British singles on speed, and according to West they were easier to lay into bends because of their longitudinal crankshafts. Although dominance in motor sport was part of Hitler's Nazi master-plan, there was apparently no tension or unpleasantness at ground level in the BMW camp. 'It was all quite relaxed,' recalls West.

No machinery was available from BMW for the Ulster Grand Prix in August 1939, however: 'I think they were being tactful,' says West, who along with other British enthusiasts, travelled to the ISDT in Austria only to have to make a rapid homeward journey when war became imminent.

Before the end of 1939 he was serving

in the RAF, directly commissioned as an officer in the technical branch. Obviously his links with BMW had been drastically severed, but he retained his contacts with the motorcycling world in Britain, particularly with the AMC factory. Shortly before the war, West had sold the factory a set of BMW telescopic front forks, and whilst on leave from the RAF he was invited to visit Plumstead to try out the new AMC forks based on the German design. The new 'Teledraulic' fork was fitted to Matchless military machines, helping to make them the wartime despatch riders' favourite.

Later in the war, as victory for the allies became a realistic proposition, he was offered a post at AMC. Donald Heather, who had become managing director of the company, suggested that West take over the job of sales manager which he had vacated. On another visit to Plumstead while on leave from the RAF he was asked to give an opinion of prototype 350cc and 500cc models intended for the post-war market. They were single cylinder models fitted with swinging-arm suspension, and the works had already tooled up to produce them. 'They were beautiful bikes, and very nicely engineered, but they weighed a ton — they were a lot heavier than the army type — and consequently their performance was not sparkling,' West recalls. 'As world demand was to far exceed output for the existing models in the post-war period, the new design was never introduced and the prototypes were dismantled.'

Wing Commander West was awarded the OBE for his military service — he says modestly and cryptically that he got it for 'growing the biggest moustache'. Within a week of being de-mobbed in December 1945 he had taken up the



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post at Plumstead, where AMC had resumed production of civilian models. With the swinging-arm prototypes shelved, the factory did the same as most others in the industry; they picked up where they had left off in 1939. Even the allocations of machines to dealers were kept as they had been directly before the war. In the immediate post-war years, however, the export market took priority over home sales, with government exhortations to 'export or die'. 'It was go, go, go, but we got through alright,' recalls West. 'We exported ninety per cent of our output.'

For AMC, marketing work was doubled because of their policy of selling two separate ranges under both Matchless and AJS badges. There were separate representatives and dealers for

A good example of this philosophy is the way that the top nuts on Teledraulic front forks had their rough and ready hexagon heads refined into a domed shape.

Many detail changes were intended to help owner maintenance as well as improve appearance. 'When a lad bought one of our bikes he had mortgaged himself two years ahead and probably couldn't afford to have it maintained and repaired by a dealer: he had to be able to do it himself. Components had to keep their individuality, and be simple and straightforward,' says West, who was not an admirer of unit-construction power units. He sums up his approach in saying: 'A well-developed design is always better than a completely new one: a process of evolution was applied to the model range.'

Backbone of the AJS and Matchless ranges were the 350cc and 500cc singles descended from the days before AMC was formed, when the Collier brothers ran their Matchless factory at Plumstead. Charlie Collier lived until 1954, and West admired him greatly: 'He was no business man, but was

always about the place and very interested. He and I got on like a house on fire — he talked the language.'

All the major post-war design changes and new models were the work of Phil Walker. 'Tremendous credit must go to him,' says West, 'he not only designed the standard road bikes and competition models, he was also involved in racing.' According to West, Walker designed a parallel twin machine with a two-bearing crankshaft prior to 1945, but this project was abandoned in favour of the three-bearing type which came on the market in 1949 some time after the twins offered by Triumph, Norton and BSA.

One AMC design usually accredited to Walker is the 250cc AJS Model 14/Matchless G2 single which was launched in 1958, but West points out that while Walker did the drawings for this machine, it was actually he who was responsible for the basic design. 'It hadn't a particularly brilliant reputation,' West admits, 'but it was a good-looking little bike.' Many people felt that the AMC 250 was too heavy, and the fact that the gearbox held more oil than the engine was often criticised. West explains that the machine's bulk came about because he intentionally gave it a bulbous style in line with fashion: 'The expensive enclosure of air in cast aluminium,' as he describes it. The oil capacity anomaly was a side-effect of West's desire to build a power unit that appeared to be of

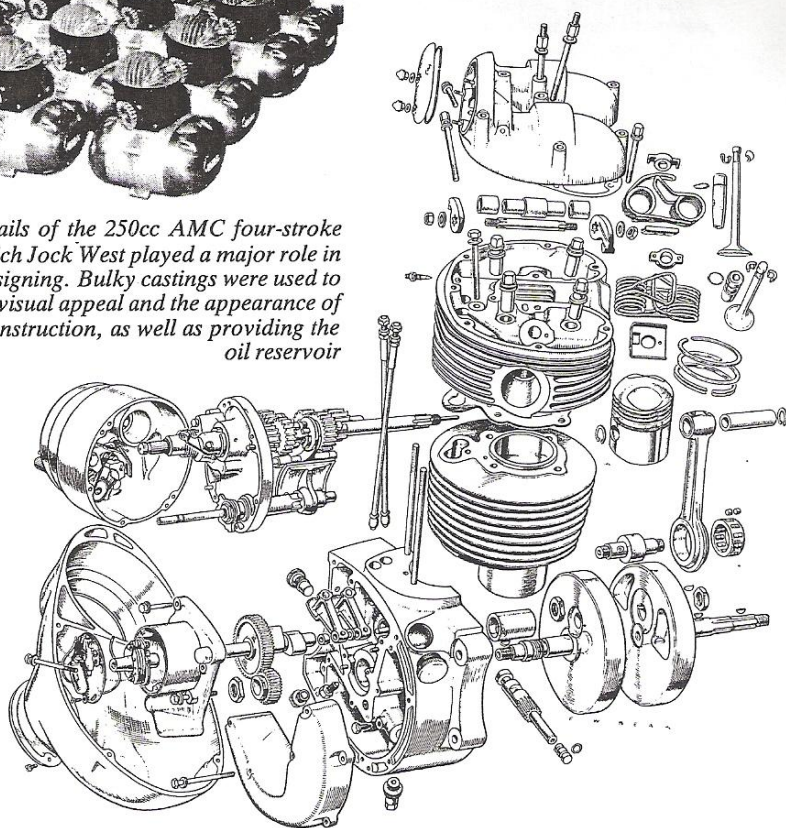


*A batch of AMC 250cc two-stroke engines for fitting to James machines. These units were originally built at Plumstead, but following technical problems they were assembled alongside rival products at Villiers in Wolverhampton*

each make in most countries where they were sold. 'It makes you wonder if it wouldn't have been better if one of the makes had been dropped then,' reflects West, thinking how much simpler business could have been.

Among the many tasks expected of the sales manager was the production of sales literature and the writing of advertisements. By the time one year's models were in production, West had already drawn up a list detailing those of the following year and he had an important say in specification changes made year by year to Plumstead models. 'My argument was that people became interested in buying a motorcycle from seeing a picture of it or looking at it in a showroom,' says West. 'Everything had to look good, with parallel, vertical and horizontal lines.'

*Details of the 250cc AMC four-stroke which Jock West played a major role in designing. Bulky castings were used to give it visual appeal and the appearance of unit-construction, as well as providing the oil reservoir*

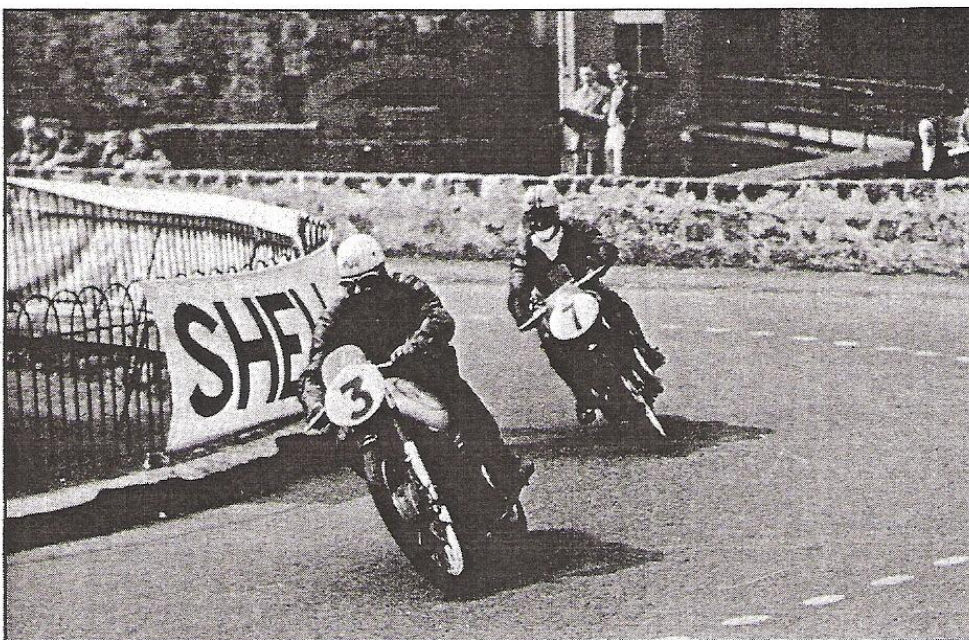




unit-construction, whilst actually maintaining the individuality of components that he believed in so strongly.

An aspect of the 'lightweight' that didn't entirely satisfy West was the need to use up James and Francis-Barnett cycle parts on it. These two small marques were absorbed by AMC in the post-war years, and in the early 1950's West was heavily involved in the production of Jameses at the factory in Greet, Birmingham.

When James was bought the company was running well, mainly because of a deal to export the lightweight Villiers-engined machines to Canada which accounted for almost all their output. This fell through in 1952, and West was asked if he would spend some time at Greet. This he did, and for about eighteen months he drove to Birmingham after a day's work at Plumstead, stayed in the Midlands for one or two days, then drove back overnight to resume work in London.



*Jock West on an AJS Porcupine leads Umberto Masetti (Gilera) in the 1950 500cc Ulster Grand Prix, a race West won twice before the war. Few factories could boast a sales manager who contested grands prix*



*AMC banned official press testing of their machines for several years but eventually relented. This 1960 shot shows Bruce Main-Smith sampling an AJS 650cc twin for Motor Cycling*

His job was to make James machines sell, and this was achieved by re-designing the cycle to improve its appearance. 'When something's not too good, it's fairly easy to make it better,' he laughs. 'The main problem was lack of symmetry and alignment — everything was on the "slantandicular", to use an expression that was coined at Greet. Their designer, Doug Cunningham, was very quick and competent and he soon got the message. The design of Jameses was greatly improved and they started to sell in very satisfactory numbers.'

Although West put a great deal of effort into the James machines, he declined an offer to become managing director of the company: 'I had a preference for larger capacity models,' he explains.

When AMC bought the Norton company in 1953 West remembers

thinking that it wouldn't be long before the Bracebridge Street company would be in trouble. 'You only had to look at their models like the 16H and the Model 18 to see that.' Within a few months Donald Heather acknowledged that Norton were in difficulty and asked West to do as he had at James. He was given unlimited jurisdiction, and a place on the parent AMC board.

'I spent many hours in the drawing office dealing with things that were visibly and mechanically not as they should be,' West recalls. 'Very soon sales improved substantially.' He was offered the post of managing director at Norton, but again he declined, mainly, he recalls, because he found Birmingham in the fifties a depressing place.

According to West, the plant and machinery at Plumstead was kept up-to-date, unlike the situation in some

other British factories. Advantage had been taken of government money during the war, and AMC performed contract engineering for several firms, including Rolls Royce and Ford, who were just across the Thames at Dagenham. Gearbox internals for the Anglia car were made at Plumstead, while Ford advised on the finishing of the nodular-iron crankshafts used in AMC twin engines. Interestingly, West maintains that all cranks for the three-bearing twins were made from this material, even though enthusiasts usually refer only to the late version as 'the noddy crank'.

In the mid-fifties, over half a million pounds were spent expanding the works, making space for the manufacture of AMC's own-make gearbox — to replace the Burman type — and a two-stroke engine and gearbox unit. 'The engine was not a success, and the gearbox cost more to make than it cost to buy units from Burman. Money spent on the new plant could have been useful when the sales recession came,' says West.

The engine — which was eventually to be assembled by Villiers in Wolverhampton, a company in which AMC at one time had a 25 per cent share — was, in West's words, 'of necessity' fitted to both James and Francis Barnett machines, and in its 150cc version it was horizontally mounted in the ill-fated James scooter. 'One of the James models had a pressed steel enclosed rear end which looked so clean it was decided to build a scooter on the same lines. It was a wonderful example of the "slantandicular",' recalls West. Even though its design was cleaned up, it was not a viable product, probably coming out too late to benefit from the scooter boom.

Although a board-member, West continued to be involved on the design side, including the creation of the AJS and Matchless 'knee knocker' tank badges, as they came to be called by



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riders. Known at Plumstead as the 'Flintstone specials', the cast-alloy flashes were specifically designed to make plating of tanks unnecessary whilst having a bright and modern appearance. 'If people don't like them, they can blame them on me!' West laughs.

Around the same time, West was also working on a new frame for all the AMC models. It had a large-diameter main tube connecting the steering head to the swinging-arm, which was also the oil reservoir. Its main advantages, he claims, were great rigidity, saving on weight and — importantly for AMC — it cost over £2.50 less to build than the normal frame. Prototypes were built using 350cc and 500cc single-cylinder engines in the frame, but West left AMC before it could be put into production.

Regarding the standard AMC frame, West offers an interesting explanation for the change from a single down-tube to a duplex design in 1960. 'We had a letter about frame breakages from our people in Cyprus. We'd never had such a thing happen before, even on the scramblers, so I jumped on a plane for Cyprus and discovered that corrugated roads there were causing the problem.' The result was the new frame, although West believes that the old frame was strong enough and blames the few failures on bottoming of the front forks under the abnormal conditions in Cyprus.

AMC's products were withheld from the usual testing by the press during the early post-war years, and he still defends this controversial policy. 'Everyone was happy with the bikes, and we had an enviable reputation. If anything, the singles had a performance reputation that

exceeded their actual ability. We couldn't see that road tests would serve any purpose.' When the embargo was relaxed in 1958, AMC organised the 100-miles-in-an-hour publicity exercise at the MIRA test track for the 600cc sports twin, carried out by Vic Willoughby of *The Motor Cycle*. According to West, the other large manufacturers then kicked up a row about mis-using MIRA, saying it was strictly for testing purposes. He recalls that the engine used for the stunt was standard, but it had been carefully assembled in the race-shop under the supervision of Jack Williams.

During his earlier years at Plumstead, West managed to be heavily involved in racing as well as carrying out his many other duties. He was closely involved in the Porcupine project, and was responsible for enlisting Les Graham as an AJS team rider: he'd been impressed by Graham's performance in the 1939 TT and had intended to sponsor him in 1940. As well as riding the Porcupine himself, West unearthed and raced the 500cc supercharged water-cooled four cylinder pre-war AJS racer and ran it at continental meetings for which it was eligible. He won a race on it at Chimay in Belgium and then blew the machine up in its swansong at Albi in France.

AMC were very active in racing during the post-war years with the 350cc 7R single and the 500cc G45 twin, as well as the 500cc Porcupine and E95 twins. By 1954, there was also the three-valve 7R3A, but the impossibility of introducing such relatively exotic machines for racing by private owners was responsible for the company's revision of racing policy that year, after which the works team only used basically standard models with modifications which would eventually be available to private racers. West feels that the specialised grand prix machines of the day such as the four-cylinder MVs and Gileras were 'absurdly complicated devices'.

Despite his adventures with the AJS four, he was against the idea of AMC producing multis. 'Two cylinders are the

maximum that an owner should be expected to cope with — this is a purely personal opinion, but no-one else at AMC suggested otherwise.'

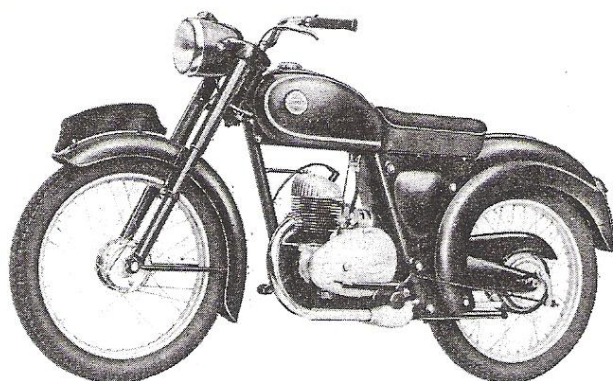
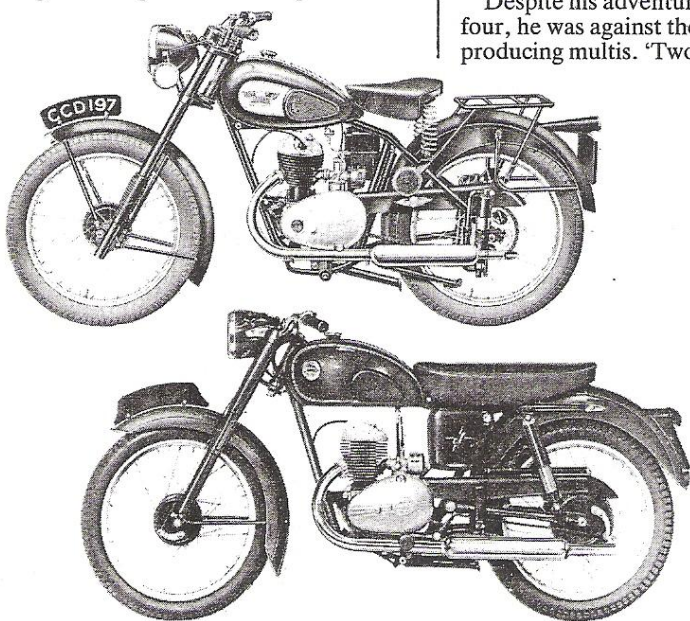
The Matchless G50 racing machine was originally Jock West's idea. During tests of the 7R and G45 at Silverstone, it was found that whilst riders preferred riding the twin, its lap times were no faster — despite it having a 12bhp advantage. From this he guessed that a 500cc version of the 7R must be faster than the twin even with a modest power increase. 'We got a Mahle cylinder and botched up a 500cc single,' recalls West, and the end result was the highly successful G50 model, launched in 1958.

With the multiplicity of engines — and their designers — in AMC's golden days of competition, West remembers that at one point there had to be two separate offices dealing with racing.

As the 1950s drew to a close AMC's future began to look less secure. West believes that the main problem was a world recession in motorcycling: 'We spent the first half of the year meeting the needs of northern hemisphere countries

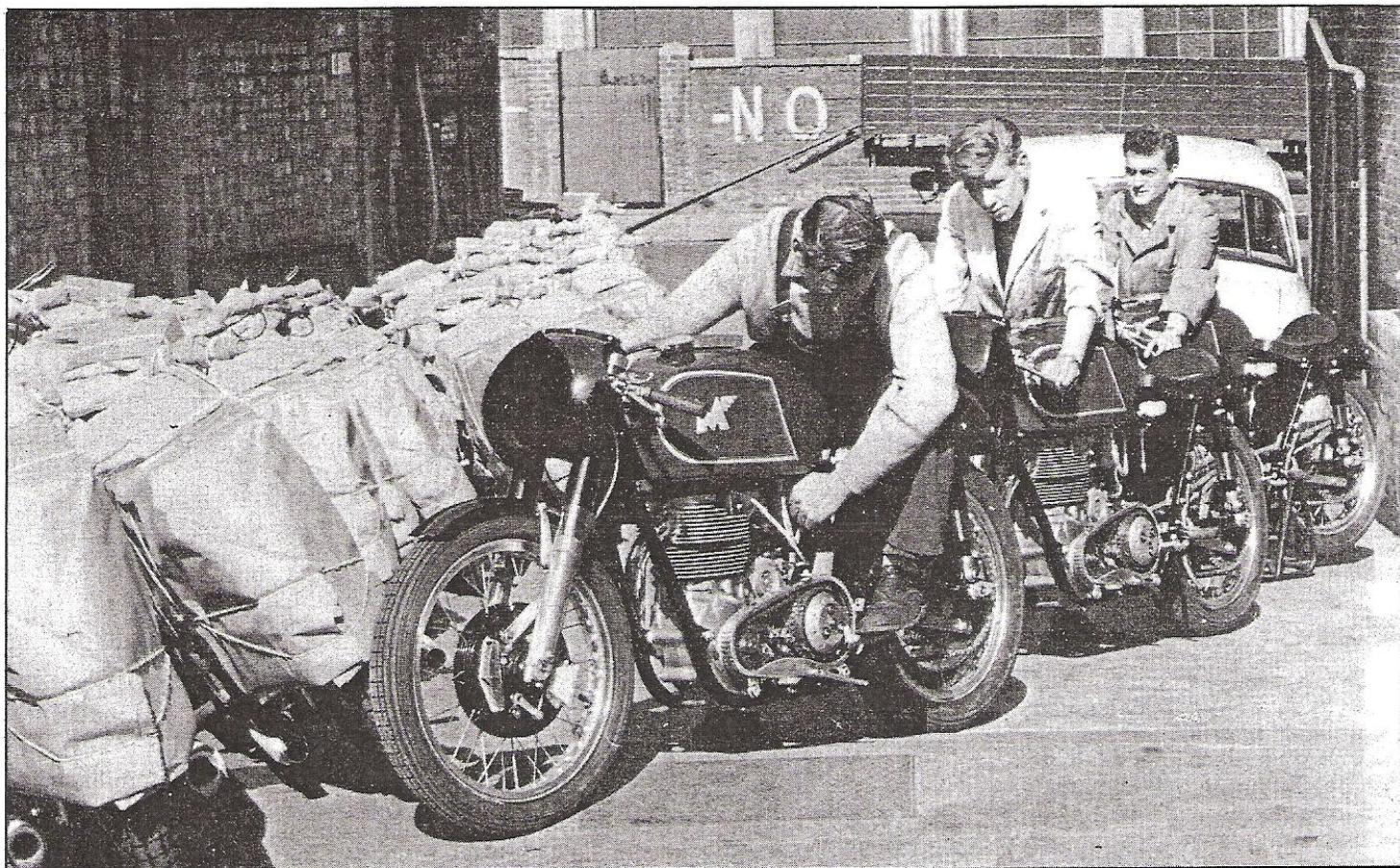


West (nearest the camera) rides a Matchless single in the Mojave Desert, California, during an American sales tour in 1958



How West smartened up the James: the 1951 200cc Captain (above left) typifies the untidy post-war lightweight, while the 1955 200cc Captain (left) and 1958 150cc Cadet (above) show the effects of cosmetic re-designing





*Matchless G50 racers ready to leave the Plumstead works in 1959 with roadsters wrapped ready for shipment at left. The 500cc racing single was originally West's idea*

and the second building for the southern hemisphere. This was fine until many of the southern countries seemed to run out of money. Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia — even Australia and New Zealand were becoming difficult markets. At the same time demand fell in the northern hemisphere: Sweden seemed to lose interest overnight. We were building bikes for which there was no outlet, and where in pre-war days employees were stood off for half the year, in post-war years if you stood men off you'd lost them — we had to maintain a given labour force.'

In 1960 Donald Heather, with whom West had always been on good terms, retired as managing director of AMC. He was succeeded by Jack Kelleher and Arthur Sugar, who became joint managing directors. West believed that the sales crisis could only be dealt with by offering the public something new and attractive at the right price: 'As long as we could sell our existing output we were right not to change the design, but we should have been tooled-up to produce new models when the recession came.'

This view wasn't shared by some members of the AMC management. West remembers being told on one occasion: 'Not one nut, not one bolt or split pin should be changed — what we need is high-pressure salesmanship.' His reply was that the public wouldn't buy a machine they didn't want, while if a product was made that they *did* want, at the right price, a sales department would hardly be necessary.

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Life at Plumstead became increasingly difficult for West. He was very shocked when it was suggested that all machines should henceforth receive two coats of enamel rather than the traditional three. 'I told them that it would only happen over my dead body,' recalls West. 'They replied that Nortons only had two coats. They did, and that's why they looked so rough!' Worse disagreements were to come, while AMC six-figure profits for 1960 plunged to a loss of £350,000 in the following year. A scheme that West believed to be 'madness' was the abortive proposal to move the factory to Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey, thirty miles down the Thames estuary from Plumstead. An architect was paid to design the new factory, and it was suggested that the workforce could travel to it by rail.

The final straws for West came in 1961, when it was suggested that selected dealers should be supplied at 'special' discounts, contrary to the code of the motorcycle Industries Association. He also believed that some after-sales problems were being covered-up by a faction in the factory opposed to him. He was even asked to go to America and sell the Indian operation, which was AMC's distributor in the US, a move he felt very strongly against. Meanwhile, the shareholders of AMC had called an extraordinary general meeting at which they demanded the resignation of all the directors except West, making his position at Plumstead very awkward indeed.

On August 4 1961 he tendered his letter of resignation, in spite of a long-term service agreement. It had been a very unhappy period, and understandably West is still reluctant to dwell on many of its events. Although relations had become strained with many senior staff at Plumstead, West always admired the work-force at large: 'There were some damned good blokes working there,' he says. They were to lose their jobs in the ensuing years, as the once mighty AMC group crumbled away and the Plumstead works finally closed in 1969.

West was immediately approached by the Trojan/Lambretta operation, and he joined them to be in charge of sales for over two years. Then he returned to the marque he had been involved with as a young man — BMW. He was successful in building sales of the German machines for the Glanfield Lawrence group of companies, the British importers, and he joined their board in the mid-sixties. He retired in 1975 after what he describes as a very placid and pleasant period in his working life. He now lives in a quiet part of Kent, and stays active by playing golf and shooting and fishing. He still maintains links with the BMW company and the AJS and Matchless Owners Club.

Jack West lived through the greatest years of British motorcycling, making a large — and probably underestimated — contribution to the sporting and commercial spheres. It is a tragedy that the crisis-torn AMC company eventually drove out one of the best men they had.