

FREEDOM RIDERS FIRST



A chance encounter with a founder member in a petrol station that led to a life-long friendship with a group of likeminded motorcycling enthusiasts that continues three decades later and beyond.....

For me it all began in the Texaco Petrol Station in Rayners Lane, in the North West of Greater London as it was in the late 1970's, one typically English wet weekend. I don't remember if I needed to fill up with petrol or not, but I had spotted from some way back an unattended BSA A65 not a little unlike mine, leaning on its prop stand at the pumps.

I looked about for the owner and standing beneath a convenient shelter at a safe distance, was a leather clad individual, head bowed, completely undisturbed by my arrival quietly concentrating on rolling a cigarette. A silk scarf was about his neck, with cream white sock tops turned down over his black riding boots where they met with dark blue denims. A well worn and scratched white open face crash helmet with Mark 8 flying goggles attached was separating his feet and completed the picture. This was probably around 1977-8, which was some time before the matching bike and leather jacket was to become the fashion. This man looked every bit the motorcyclist from a previous decade as he sheltered waiting for the return of summer and the cold falling August rain to subside.

I wore a rather dishevelled light coloured flying jacket that had seen far better days but nevertheless was befitting attire for any wannabe 'Spitfire' pilot. My boots were Frank Thomas 'Steve' inherited from my older brother, long and black with a paled gear selector worn patch on the right instep. I always wore black Wranglers and my black gold and white Kangol was crowned with the obligatory stadium mk9 goggles with yellowing water stained and delaminating lenses of questionable visibility. I wore the finest Gold Top black leather gauntlets with a clutch worn thumb on the left hand and red and yellow BSA 'silky' scarf from Kay's of Ealing.

My passenger wore her previous acquaintance's rather shabby and much too big black leather jacket which was emblazoned with 'Speedy' in large but rather appropriately faded white letters across the back. Without the need for a crash helmet in the sidecar, her long dark hair would stream out behind as we raced along George V Avenue and the A40. Her black boots covered her dark blue denims up to her calf and from the day we met it was clear that motorcycles would play a major role in both our lives.

As we thundered in to the station forecourt the registration number HOP 108E, became visible and without any regard for the petrol station or the then stranger I began to scrutinise the machine that leaned heavily on its side stand; looking closely for any oil leaks and obvious detail differences with my own machine. This was a 1967 B.S.A. Thunderbolt model that represented a clear twelve months development from my trusted 1966 Spitfire Mk 2.

I have to say that in terms of originality my own B.S.A. was a poor representative of the marque by any standards. Built up from a box of parts of varying pedigree in my then girl friend's bedroom, (where else?) my pride and joy was best described as very clean, very uncharacteristically oil tight, very, very shiny and not very 'Spitfire' at all. The sidecar firmly attached to the nearside neatly avoided the need to deploy the side stand and any real requirement for any sense of balance on the part of the rider. The Unity Equip Siamese exhaust finished abruptly with a non-standard cherry bomb and ensured my arrival was clearly announced.

Looking back I think my Dad was right that it was a little bit on the noisy side and would almost certainly assure regular attention from the local constabulary. Of course for many years I knew best and pursued the loud and 'look who's coming' option until in later years my leaning towards a more discrete presence matured. It seemed like a good idea at the time, all the same and for all that it looked pretty good too.

Used as daily transport to and from work and away at weekends about the countryside of Gloucestershire and the localities of Harefield and Harrow, my B.S.A. combination was already becoming the dominant feature in my life. The sidecar offered additional carrying capacity for tools, wet weather riding gear and anyone brave or stupid enough to volunteer as passenger. My passenger and companion on that day was so for many years and remains a fond and distant memory of my earliest motorcycling days. This was the time when British bikes were fading away quietly without any real signs of recovery, deep into the mists of time.

Cars were not common within my circle of friends then; only really regarded as transport for softies by most of those amongst us. When it rained we were often wet through and somehow, albeit foolhardily, this was seen as an acceptable sacrifice to our chosen way of the open road. It was also more likely due to the poor performance of much of the available or affordable 'weatherproof' motorcycle clothing on offer at that time. On really wet days my Lewis boots would be replaced with Argyle steel reinforced wellington boots which lasted me well for several years.

This too, was an era when rider safety was not so keenly observed as it may be today and helmets were often ill fitting or antiquated hand-me-downs as were our leather jackets, Belstaffs riding boots and in some cases, the bike as well. I used to wear my uncle's Kangol open face, which I have only recently reluctantly sold on Ebay for a truly unbelievable sum. I still have and occasionally wear my Lewis Leather boots and jacket, which I later bought new and wore for many satisfying miles. Neither product ever kept me dry when it rained hard, but they have at least proved to be the quality and enduring item they claimed to be in their advertising. I only have to open a tin of Mars Oil to recapture that rather pleasing aroma that used to fill the air whenever I visited the old shop in Great Portland Street. The pint of Samuel Smiths in the pub on the corner was always a welcome addition to round-off the ride into the heat and stumbling traffic of the London metropolis.

As I strolled across to the figure leaning back with one foot against the wall drawing on his carefully hand-made cigarette, I called across to gain his attention. He looked up and there then followed a few words on the prevailing English weather. We then exchanged views on our chosen B.S.A. machines, the questionable reliability of certain other models and acknowledged a common dissatisfaction with the rapidly increasing number of Japanese machines that were becoming more popular on the roads of Britain. We tentatively agreed to meet again at somewhere called the 'Peggy Bedford' for a pint or perhaps two, on one yet to be determined Tuesday night.

That was to be my first encounter with Dave Mort and the 'Freedom Riders' but quite a few weeks would pass before I finally decided maybe I should ride out to the previously agreed rendezvous with that pleasant chap with the A65, somewhere then unknown to me, out near Heathrow Aerodrome.

In those dizzy distant days I used to live in Hatch End, near Pinner in another circle of friends, where our favoured water hole used to be the 'Hand in Hand.' My longstanding and dependable companion, Richard would join me for a beer either choosing to ride yet another B.S.A. A65 or on the odd occasion his little bright red, rather fragile sounding, BSA B40. It was a 348cc o.h.v. that appeared to be in splendid order, but it always sounded as though it was about to blow itself up at any moment without any warning.

Now Richard's A65 as I remember was a shiny black and chrome 1970 Lightning which was very well put together and pretty much to the standard factory spec. Very clean, oil tight and very obviously well maintained.

We would often ride out to Sarrat (The Boot), Hillingdon 'The Gate' otherwise known as *The Wheel Spin*, and 'The Hare' somewhere between Kenton where Richard lived and Hatch End where we used to particularly enjoy a pint or two of Long Life. Inde Coope; whatever happened to that?

It was the 'Wheelspin' that we favoured most where we would while away the summer evenings amusing ourselves with the different characters as they arrived at the bar. Customers would arrive in ones and twos, straightening their hair and looking round hopeful of seeing their friends through the pool of cigarette smoke and calling out above the din from the wave of chatter and thumping beat of the heavy rock pounding out from the wall mounted juke box that occupied the space above the long-time disused and empty fireplace.

One such character and frequent patron of The Gate, we had christened 'Coat Hanger' on account of his rather unusual and persistent posture of carrying his arms in such a way that he always looked as though in his haste to dress for the evening, he had left the coat hanger in his jacket or whatever else he chose to wear. We used to know when he was due and as the door slammed with a rattle of the latch we would look out for his arrival with some humour and anticipation. He very rarely failed to arrive and bizarrely, we never knew his name or where he came from.

Long before the power turn and wheel spinning antics most of us endure in our hometown today, the arrival and departure routine of certain individuals from The Gate was almost without exception heralded by some motoring antic of sorts. It was in those days, quite a spectator sport with the promise of some evening entertainment although the occasional visit from the local constabulary did tend to quiet things down for the weeks that immediately followed. It was a bit like the 'Highlander' on the Isle of Man during TT week back in the old days.

The ride back homeward was usually a slightly alcohol - influenced race to the traffic lights where we each went our separate ways until the next time.

Other times The Bandwagon in Kenton was another venue of Motorcycling interest where Heavy Music was pounded out and air guitars waved feverishly to the beat, by the usual suspects to the same old favourites almost without fail, every Tuesday night.

The array of motorcycles drawn to this musical emporium was always a spectacle and preceding entry, a survey of the attendant machines was regularly conducted rain or otherwise. There was usually a good solid range of British machines on view from BSA, Triumph and Norton with one or two AMC twins that would show up just now and then. There were plenty of Japanese and Italian machines to see that would outnumber the British contingent ten-fold, but I never really paid any homage to them as I manoeuvred in and out the limited space that had been left between each machine.

It was never quite the same place when it moved to 'The Headstone' in North Harrow or in fact the Queens Arms but at the Clay Pigeon normal service was resumed for a while, the plastic beer glasses apart. I would while away the hours talking BSA and Triumph with Ray the doorman and over the years and changes of venue we became good friends and companions on our regular excursions to the IOM TT. There were the Jones brothers and Geoff who would turn up from time to time and we would mock and rib each other in harmless merriment into the night and beyond.

Our carefree days of freedom and choice of venue each evening were for the most the good times to be remembered in later years when time is so precious and opportunities now few and far. I can say without regret they were indeed the best years of my life.

Today's disproportionate burdens of responsibility, Tax and time will ensure it could never be better than those good old irresponsible carefree days.

At least once every year those of us that are able, relight the flame of our youth and congregate for the summertime ride out to Devon at The Cricket Inn on the rather more secluded and weather ravaged front at Beesands in the last weekend of July.

There are always some of the old faces and even some of the old bikes with stories retold each year of campfires and caravans and rainy days with rides across the unfolding countryside with the wind in your face and exhaust note trailing behind.

The 'Peggy B' may now be long gone, but the memories of those far away summers will always remain.



Martin 2008