



The “Invicta Motor Cycle Club” and My Memories of Motor Cycling

by Les Miller

The Invicta motor cycle club was started in the early 1930's. It was first affiliated with the Eltham club of south east London before breaking away and becoming a club in its own name. As a schoolboy I remember attending two gymkhanas organised by the club, the first was on the old Ramsgate Football Ground at Dumpton, and the other on Jacky Baker's sports ground where I sold chocolate bars from a tray suspended in front of me by a strap over my neck.

I understand that the founder members were, Charlie Philpott, his brother Roy, Doug Whitling, “Jonka” Spain, Bob Aust, Johnny Nunn, Roland Butler and Lionel Kempe. Before the war they held regular club night meetings every Thursday, at The Casino café, just outside Wingham, on the Canterbury road. It is a garage/car sales depot now.



Charlie Philpott was keen on racing and performed on grass tracks and on the hard sand at Sandwich Bay. In 1936, he built the garage and showrooms at the bottom of Nether court Hill with a fine selection of petrol and oil pumps on the forecourt. Later as his family grew, an additional room was added on top of the building.

Charlie Philpot's brother Roy was his clerk with Mr Fred Lines assisting in the office. Doug Whitling was in charge of the motor cycle repair section. The garage was taken over by the army during WW2 who managed to knock over some of the oil pumps.

Charlie re-opened for business as soon as he could after the war was over and I bought my first motor cycle from him, it was a second hand “Francis Barnet Cruiser”.

I had some very hairy moments when I first tried to ride it as I was used to driving cars where the throttle automatically went to idle on gear changes, with the motor cycle I had to learn to shut the thing off first then swiftly move my right hand down to the gated gear lever on the side of the petrol tank. Phew! It was just as well that the road traffic was light in those days. I was all over the road.

For those of you who don't know, the twist grip throttle control was invented by Mr Norman Laslett who lived and had an Electrical business in Ramsgate. Before that, throttles were controlled by a lever mechanism on the handlebar, close to the hand grip.

New motor cycles were in short supply with nearly all going for export, but there was the occasional new one in the showroom for a short while before being bought and on occasions ex army bikes appeared. Roy had an ex army Royal Enfield for everyday use, he lived at Broadstairs and did the journey four times each day on this as he did not want to wear out his prized, pre war, ES2 Norton that had a spring frame, a rare item, and he was much envied by all other motor cyclists. I bought the next ex army bike that came along, a 350cc Aerial and this was a much easier to ride than the F.B.

Our club nights were held in an old wooden hut at the side of the Sportsman Inn where we were very comfortable. The Brewers then decided to build a proper function room there to replace the hut and we shifted our meetings to the Windmill Inn at Newington while the work was in process. We then went back to the Sportsman Inn, but it didn't feel right and we then used The Eagle in High street, Ramsgate.

As a club we used to meet on Sundays to go riding together. There were regular grass track meetings at Brands Hatch and the track was ridden in an anti clockwise direction. After many years of use, the track became very worn and quite dangerous and I remember seeing Jack Surtees, - the father of John Surtees who later became an expert road racing motor cyclist-, getting off the Norton sidecar outfit that he had just raced with and collapsing from exhaustion with the effort of the strenuous ride. The track was replaced eventually with a tarmac surface over a longer distance. They used another track there for moto-cross racing and this was very enjoyable to watch at selected points on the course such as one section where a descent into and then up out of a chalk pit feature.

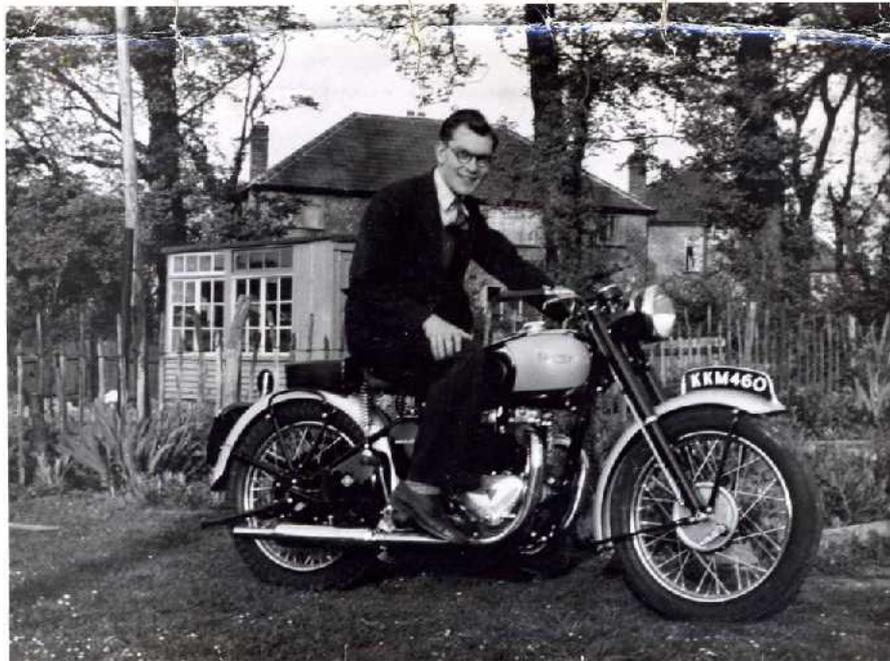
At some time or other during the late 1940's the government decided to only issue petrol coupons for persons needing to travel to work and a rally was held at Brands Hatch where sundry radio personalities were invited to protest after which a large gathering of us disgruntled riders, were invited to ride en mass around the track while television cameras recorded our protest. It did no good of course so we wasted our petrol by going to it.

On three occasions I rode with Jonka Spain, Reg Hall and other names that I have forgotten, to Liverpool in order to cross to The Isle of Man to witness the senior TT race. We left Ramsgate late on Wednesday night, rode through the night to arrive at Liverpool dockside on Thursday morning then, after leaving our motor cycles and heavy clothing at a garage - and the last time on a bomb site because the garage had closed down prior to re development of the area -, we crossed to the island, found lodgings for the night and slept until it was time for breakfast before moving to our selected viewing point on the 31 mile course. I think the first year it was the top of Bray hill, the next year on the mountain near The Bungalow and the last time at Hillberry Corner. There was some excitement here as a mad Irish rider, Ernie Lyons, got too near to a steep bank and actually clipped it with his left handlebar, sending up a shower of earth but continuing on his way without a check to his speed. I have good reason to remember these visits, the first time I drew Geoff Duke in the boarding house sweep stake and he won the race. On the last visit, I climbed up onto a lifeboat cover to sleep on the crossing back to Liverpool, and found that somebody else had been there before me and had lost the contents of their pocket, a nice collection of silver coin.

After the Ariel I bought a brand new A J S that had been on show in the window of the, A & B Garage in Grange Road, later selling that to buy a Triumph Tiger 100 from Philpot's. Two other members had this model and they were very attractive machines. When mine arrived, the government had suspended the issue of all petrol coupons for pleasure motoring. I could not miss this opportunity to own this machine, and as it was un-licensed, I had to push it to my home and then wait for many months before coupons were re-issued. It had a spring rear wheel fitted and was the first one with this luxury in this part of Kent. This was a top of the range machine, (£204.0) and I had to buy it on a hire purchase agreement.

During this time a fellow club member went to live in New Romney and, having sold his machine, I used to collect him and together we visited a number of race meetings at Silverstone, Boreham Wood, an Army camp at the back of Bournemouth and other places that I have forgotten.

I had a few problems with the Tiger. Sometimes in wet weather, the throttle slide would stick and I would find myself approaching a corner too fast, having to brake heavily and press the engine cut-out button at the same time, in order to slow down. It also had a noisy engine and on one occasion I took it back to the factory in Coventry to have it put right but was still not happy with it. I sold it and learnt a valuable lesson. When I went to Canterbury to settle the hire purchase agreement I was shocked to hear that I would have to pay the full amount of interest for the three year period, even though I was settling up before the first year was up. Eventually they reduced the amount by £5 but I never went in for hire purchase again after that.

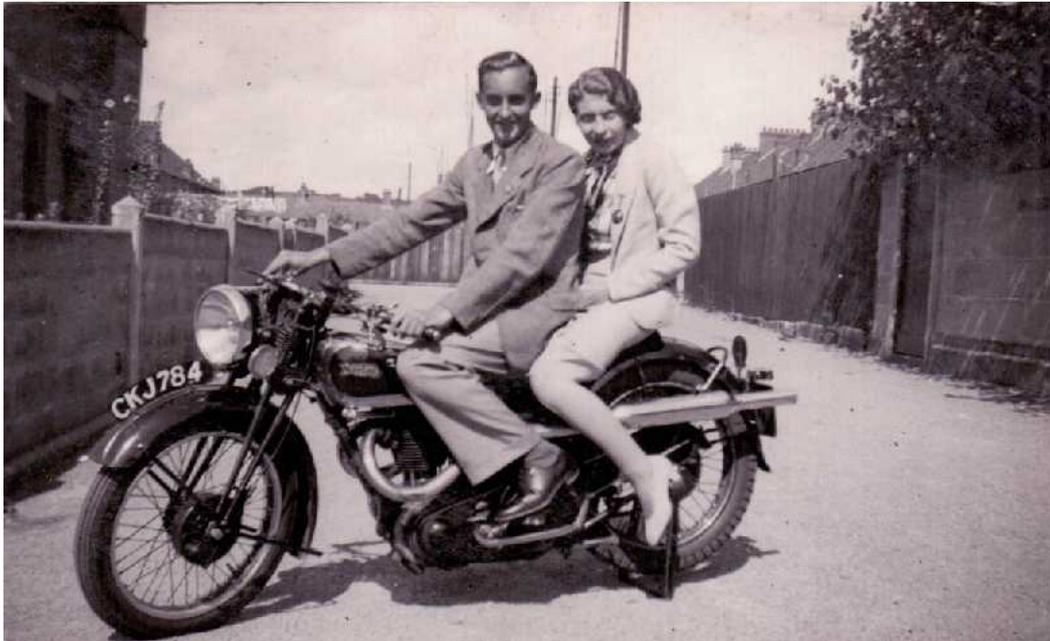


I regretted my next purchase even more. It was an old Manx Norton, a road racing machine that had been well abused. It had no kick start and was in very poor condition. I spent a lot of time and money trying to do something with it but in the end it had to go. I then bought an old P & M Panther for £9. It was only 250cc but with the original girder forks, it rode well except for a habit of jumping out of top gear, forcing me to hold the pedal down whilst in that gear. It steered like a train and I had a lot of fun with that one.

I then bought a new 350cc Matchless from Philpotts. This had a twin seat arrangement and a spring frame and was very comfortable to ride. I actually ordered a Royal Enfield Bullet after that as it was a very nice looking machine but then decided to cancel it as by then my future wife was on the scene and I needed to liquidise my assets. Shortly after we were married, Charlie decided to build a new house next to his garage and to move into it with his growing family. He obtained permission to do this on condition that his old living quarters over the garage were turned into two flats. My brother -in-law, Lionel Kempe, and myself were offered the flats and my wife and I occupied one and Lionel and my sister Lily had the other. We did buy one more new Matchless but after spending one weeks holiday, riding to Devonshire, getting wet through from the time we passed through Canterbury until we arrived, having one good day during the week that we were there and then having an even wetter ride back to Ramsgate, we got rid of the bike and eventually bought a second hand Austin 10 saloon.



This photo shows a group of Club members, probably taken in 1947 as Bert Pritchard was still in his RAF uniform and sporting his Air Gunners badge.. He had flown in Liberators in the far-east.



One of the Invicta Club's founder members Lionel Kempe with his wife Lilly on their Norton. Lionel was the son of Ramsgate's famous "Top Hat" Mayor, A.B.C. Kempe

We had one more motor cycle experience after this. Many years later we rented a Suzuki 125cc two stroke on the Greek island of Cos. It did not perform well and was exchanged for one that had a spring frame. This proved to be no good as the rear brake came into action every time we hit a bump, not too bad on the flat but disastrous on inclines where we were soon down to a stop. The third exchange was o k and we had a lot of fun with that one.



I really enjoyed my motorcycling, the club members and the freedom that it gave to attend events wherever they occurred. I came off once on the wooden block road surface by Ramsgate harbour that had been laid in the days when trams ran in Thanet, but I suffered nothing more than embarrassment



This last picture features Stan Howard, the gentleman under the top hat on a sidecar. He was a club member and a member of the local police force. One Sunday morning I had been for a ride around Ramsgate and after coming down Madeira Walk, I turned right into Harbour Street. At that time there was always a policeman on point duty in our market square to direct the traffic and as I came into his view, he held up his hand to stop me. I thought that it was Stan mucking about so I promptly gave him a V sign. Too late, I noticed that it wasn't Stan and at the same moment remembered that Harbour Street had been made a one way Street. There followed a very uncomfortable few minutes for me as I explained matters and I got a further ticking off from Stan at our next meeting.

Also in this picture is Jonka Spain, riding his Triumph Tiger 100 sidecar outfit. I have a very good reason to remember this outfit as one Saturday afternoon we were working on my machine at Jonka's house, I needed a tool that I had left at home and I couldn't use my machine due to the work that we were doing on it. Jonka told me to take his outfit but I didn't fancy that as I had never ridden a sidecar outfit before. However, he insisted and I set off very slowly on the journey with a pal riding in the sidecar. All went well until I passed a left turning where there was quite a severe camber on the road surface, this caused the outfit to turn left and I was un-prepared for this sudden change of direction and I wasn't helped by the fact that Jonka had set his throttle control to be very responsive. The left turn pulled the handlebars left and as I was holding the throttle control in my right hand, it opened up the throttle, before I could get control, we had mounted the pavement and come to a stop against a dwarf wall, knocking it completely over in the process, with my pal hastily jumping out of the sidecar. It cost me more than a weeks wages to have the wall rebuilt but Jonka was very understanding about the damage I had done to his sidecar and soon had it repaired.

The man under the Mexican hat is Jack Acott. He was a skilful engineer and made many of the alterations to the motor cycles featured in the gymkhana, including building eccentric wheels that when attached to m/c's adorned with stuffed wild animal heads, gave a good imitation of bucking bronco's.