

12. Men of Substance 2 – Needle in a Haystack

About five years had passed since selling ‘my very last motorcycle’ and my son was then six years old and my daughter four. The year was 1971. We had moved up to the West Midlands of England and were living in a quiet little suburb to the west of Northampton called New Duston. I hadn’t so much as given any thought about my past motorcycles in some time and had become a fully focused family man at last. We all have to grow up sometime! Sunday mornings became a time for bundling the kids into our little ’65 Mini and exploring the quiet and beautiful countryside of Northamptonshire (a rather well kept secret from the general public) by ‘getting lost’.

It was great fun driving the little Mini around the tiny twisting country lanes, sides lined with bright green grass banks and the little hump-back bridges flanked by low stone walls and the kids really seemed to love ‘getting lost’. “Wouldn’t it be nice to drive a motorbike around these lanes?” I’d sometimes catch myself thinking, only to dismiss the thought quickly before it had chance to gel. Then, one day somebody asked me if I knew of anyone who might be interested in buying the wreckage of a 1958 AJS CSR twin. After giving the question deep thought and due consideration (that took all of 60 seconds) I replied, “Yes, - - Me!!!” After a tortured late history and under the management of the AMC group,



An AJS CSR similar to the one I restored.

AJS/Matchless had closed their factories in 1966. No more 4 stroke machines were built after that so I knew getting parts was going to be a bit of a challenge. There was rather extensive accident damage. The front end was completely wrecked along with the gas tank and exhaust system, but somehow the frame itself remained unscathed and true. “A great project for my son and I to undertake”, I remember thinking at that time. The town of Northampton back in the late sixties was not exactly a stronghold for motorcycle enthusiasts, but one notable exception was a highly colorful

character by the name of Bob Adnett, or, ‘British Bob’ as he was known at the time. At the height of the Japanese motorcycle invasion, British Bob, forever the last loyal patriot, adorned his shop with Union Jacks and ‘Buy British’ signs. He was a goldmine of information and an excellent source for many of the hard to find or repair parts.

Now British Bob was another example of the larger than life type of individual that simply abounds, even to this day in the classic motorcycle community. He was a solidly built man with a loud booming voice and used it to its full advantage to publicly humiliate anyone he knew well. It was his own quaint way of showing that ‘he liked you’. Of course, some new customers who had not yet come to know him often found this intimidating. One day I recall seeing out of the corner of my eye a poor kid waiting patiently for Bob to finish delivering a tirade of verbal abuse at me, he was clutching a broken throttle cable in his hand. Once Bob concluded, he turned to the young fellow with a winning smile and asked what he needed. Bob carefully studied the cable with a frown as he took some quick measurements and assessed the situation. Flashing an evil wink at me on the young fellow’s blind side, he turned to him and with narrowed eyes he asked in his booming voice, “What’s it off son?” The young man was visibly daunted as he replied

in a trembling voice, "It's, - - it's off a Honda Dream!" Bob about exploded. "What the Hell are you doing bringing a part from a foreign machine to British Bob, are you as stupid as you look?"

The poor kid went beet red and started shaking. Bob lowered his voice a couple of decibels to a mere holler and growled, "I suppose you bought the bike from that fancy Honda dealer on the other side of town?" The kid nodded. Thrusting the broken cable back in the lad's hands he told him, "Well, you'd better take this back there and ask them to replace it!" As the lad reached the door to leave Bob's voice boomed again, "Now come back here a moment son, give me back that cable a minute!" Bob's face now split from ear to ear in a broad grin as he wrapped a big hairy arm around the boy's shoulder. "Pay no attention to me lad, I'll make you up a Royal Enfield cable 'that Honda copied' and it'll fit right on your bike, perfectly". Bob was an intimidating man to the core but with a great big heart of gold.

Finding parts like fork steering yokes (known as triple trees in the US.) sliders and bushes were proving to be a problem for my AJS project. After weeks of unsuccessful searching, British Bob told me one day that I should look up a friend of his who had his own machine shop and 'mysterious sources' for finding parts. Taking my near empty pack of cigarettes he lit the last and used the empty packet as a small sheet of makeshift note paper and started writing on it. The finished note read, "George, please help my customer if you are able, he needs some new parts or old parts fixed for his 1958 AJS CSR. Yours, Bob". Handing me his hastily scrawled note he gave me directions to his friend's shop. "Oh, he warned, he's a bit hard to make contact with these days. You may have to go there a few times before you are able to get his attention. Just keep hammering on the big green doors to the machine shop that are on the side, down an alleyway. Don't bother going to the front door of the shop, its nailed shut and hasn't been opened for years. Tell him 'British Bob' sent you hand him this note".

It took many attempts to contact 'Mysterious George'. His shop was easy to find, it was in an older residential area to the northwest of the town. Located at a 'tee' junction, it was right on the corner and looked like a converted residence. The shop window glass was dark green with the man's name proudly standing out in gold lettering. Under his name it proudly proclaimed, "Motorcycle Engineer". It was the sole shop in the entire neighborhood at the intersection of two long rows of terraced houses. Sure enough, the front door was locked and nailed shut. I proceeded to the side alleyway and found the double green doors and heard the roar of the shop machinery from within. I hammered on the door repeatedly with both my fists, but to no avail. Finally, a couple of weeks and three trips later, I hammered on the door once more and this time I heard a voice yell back from inside. The machines came to a slow halt and the door opened to reveal at last the owner. Giving me a deeply suspicious look he asked me who I was and what I wanted.



I introduced myself and handed him the note that British Bob had given to me. Pulling out a pair of glasses from his work suit pocket he read it, nodded and beckoned me to come inside. It was like stepping back in time, the turn of the century workshop was filled with a full quota of machine shop equipment. He even had a blacksmith's forge with a couple of anvils. A large 'modern' turbine now supplied the drive for all the machines using a main driveshaft, leather belts and pulley system to drive each machine. But it was immaculately clean, as was the owner himself. It was difficult to assess his age, but I estimated that he was probably a bit older even than the machines in his shop. I explained my problem to

him and showed him the AJS parts that were damaged or worn beyond repair. He studied them for a while, talking quietly to himself as I stood taking in the sight of the museum piece machines. Finally he told me that he could probably locate some of the parts but the rest he would have to make himself, if given the time. I agreed and volunteered to make drawings for the new parts since I was quite a good engineering draughtsman back then.

Offering me a cup of tea, he asked me if I would like a tour of the shop and I eagerly accepted both offers. Over the tea I learned that he had been an apprentice at the Royal Enfield gun and motorcycle company in northwest London and had been a motorcycle engineer his entire life. He also told me that he had never married but was engaged to a 'young lady' for over sixteen years. "Marriage is a serious business", he said with his eyes twinkling, "I don't believe it's something to go rushing into". I smiled quietly to myself as I tried to visualize how old his fiancé might be. But he was being deadly serious. I also learned that he lived above on the floor above his shop.

With tea finished we rinsed our mugs in an old Butler porcelain sink basin, placed them on a wooden draining board to dry and began the tour. Every machine was in perfect working order and there was no trace of unswept swarf anywhere to be seen, not even on the floor. I asked him about the shop front that could be seen from the street. He explained that at his age he was no longer available for the public to just walk in. Access to it from the inside of the shop was locked too with a huge brass padlock. "That's my 'Holiest of Holies' in there lad", he told me, "but I'll let you take a look". Unlocking the padlock he beckoned me to follow. Inside the shop-front the sunshine struggled to penetrate the green paint on the window glass and a green glow illuminated the room. There was no carpet, just worn wooden floor boards and the counter top was strewn with cardboard boxes containing antique motorcycle parts and components. Shelves lined the walls and on some of them were rows of acetylene lamps of all shapes and sizes. These were used as lighting on vintage and veteran vehicles and were very rare and expensive. Carefully lifting a cloth sheet draped over a machine standing before the shop window he revealed a Royal Enfield multi cylinder motorcycle. I never knew 'multi's' were even around at the turn of the century. "It belongs to the Motor Vehicle Museum at Beaulieu and I'm giving it a service and tune up for this year's (1971) London to Brighton Veteran Vehicle run. I'm the only one still alive who knows what makes it tick", he went on, "I worked on it when I was a young apprentice and it's a one of its kind you know! In return for preparing or fixing it, 'His Nibs' Lord Montague lets me ride it from London to Brighton every year" he concluded with a proud smile.

Finally, I thanked him for his hospitality and leaving the AJS parts in his care, headed for home. I pondered on how I would explain to my wife my disappearance for over three hours to perform such a seemingly simple task. Time I still remember until this day, even if some of the finer details have become a little unclear.

I visited 'Mysterious Georges' shop every Saturday afternoon to follow up on progress. Each visit I took mating parts that fitted to the new parts and eventually the entire Front Fork assembly wound up there. Finally everything was complete and assembled, AJS would have been proud of the end result. It had the quality and craftsmanship of a finely made Swiss watch and functioned to perfection. It was a work of art and a labor of love, something almost extinct in the world today. His asking price for the entire project was so reasonable that I cannot even remember what it cost. In today's world it would be more cost effective to simply throw it all away and buy a brand new bike made in Korea.

I had been lucky enough to strike up a friendship with this delightfully eccentric old gentleman and when my restoration project was completed, I took the bike to show him first. His criticisms were most constructive and I heeded his advice, but any praise was 'praise indeed' coming from a man of his integrity and caliber. I met his fiancée for the very first time that same afternoon. She must have been similar in age to him and told me that 'he was such a show-off' going on the Veteran Vehicle run that she had talked Lord Montague into loaning her another veteran motorcycle just to accompany him and make sure he didn't get into mischief.

Two seasons passed and it was Spring before I was able to pay 'George' another visit. From inside, the machines lay silent as I hammered with my fists on the big green door. After what seemed an eternity, I heard the draw bolts being pulled. His face wore a look I had never seen before and I instantly knew that something was horribly wrong. In silence he put the kettle on the gas hob for our customary mugs of tea and I noticed for the first time that he was unshaven. I finally broke the silence by asking him what had happened. He gazed around the shop for a long time, turned to face me and taking a deep breath he said in a shaky voice, "She died you know". There was no way I knew that could comfort the poor man. I never saw him again after that, soon after my family and I moved from Northampton to Oxford where I had found a new job. But after all these years I can still reflect on and savor the brief year or so that I was privileged enough to have made his acquaintance and enjoyed his quiet but dry sense of humor.

Throughout this article I have referred to him as 'Mysterious George' because his full name is still a mystery to me. I knew him only by his first name and after all this time can no longer be certain that it was in fact, 'George'. Not knowing this and being unable to validate the multi cylinder early 'Royal Enfield' with the museum at Beaulieu, tracking this very private man's existence is like, - - - "Looking for a needle in a haystack".

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