

Long Service Model

The Classic Motorcycle (UK), February 2002; Roy Poynting

*Bill Shepherd bought his James brand new in 1929. It proved a shrewd purchase as it served as his main transport for the rest of his life. **Roy Poynting** samples this fully documented, original and unrestored vintage two-stroke.*

At school, history lessons were pretty straightforward, weren't they? William conquered England in 1066, so he was called William the Conqueror...that sort of thing. Years later I learnt that real historians refer to what are called primary resources - parish records and the like - and draw their own conclusions. Of course there aren't many unstudied records about world-shattering events, but they still exist in our own little sphere of interests. I've just been privileged enough to study some totally genuine historical documents charting the life of one unassuming - yet remarkable - little vintage motorcycle.

I guess we all keep some paperwork about our bikes. If only to look back at, and wonder why we bankrupted ourselves to buy some worthless old hack. But imagine being so satisfied with your purchase that you kept it until your death, and along the way, you kept all the paperwork which went with it.

Bristolian Bill Shepherd was such a man. a life-long bachelor who never drove a car, he was apparently fiercely independent and was reluctant to even accept a lift. In old age he sometimes resorted to public transport, but otherwise, he went everywhere on two wheels. In 1927, he bought a Rudge Whitworth pedal cycle, and kept its bill of sale among his records. Then in 1929 he went to Tinklin and Daish, motorcycle agents of Cleveland, Bristol, and ordered a Model A9 James. And that was that! The Rudge cycle and the James motorcycle were his sole personal transport for the rest of his life.

It didn't restrict Bill Shepherd's activities, though. He thought nothing of taking a week's holiday and riding the the other end of the country to watch the Scottish Six Days Trial! When he had had the James a mere 32 years he proudly wrote to Villers saying how happy he had been with its two-stroke engine. At that time-at that time-less than half way through his ownership-it had propelled him over more than 100,000 miles!

But to return to the historical records, Bill Shepherd meticulously kept them all. They begin with an individually typed letter from Tinklin and Daish-dated 25/6/29, and signed by Mr. Daish-stating that: 'we beg to inform you that we have placed an order and hope to be able to notify you of its delivery in the course of a week or so.' The delivery date was slightly optimistic, but on 15/7/29 Mr. Daish wrote that: 'We beg to inform you that we now have had delivery of your James motorcycle...We shall be pleased to see you at any time that is convenient to you.'

Bill duly took delivery-he even kept the guarantee card which had been dangling from the handlebars - and registered his purchase with the manufacturers. On the 1st of August, the James Cycle Company sent a typewritten personal acknowledgement promising: 'Should you at anytime require information, or other assistance, our Services Department will always give you prompt and careful attentions'. How sad that we have abandoned such leisurely courtesy in just one man's lifetime.

If you hate two-strokes, or think that anything less than 500cc is only for wimps, you'll not understand how a little James can inspire much trust or affection. Well, I have to declare an interest here. I've owned an almost identical motorcycle (a 1929 James A8) for quite a while. It has done numerous VMCC events - including Banbury Runs where it sails up Sunrising Hill - carried me to John o'Groats to Land's End (TCM August 1996) , and taken my wife to Lands End and back on a charity ride. It has been cheap, reliable and fun, and I quite understand why Bill Shepherd refused to be parted from his Jimmy.

If you've not ridden a bike like this, you are probably thinking that I am easily pleased or over-sentimental (the James was my first vintage bike, after all). But the attractions are real. If there was an end of the term report comparing motorcycles against the contemporary competition, there'd be barely a single 'could do better' comment for the vintage two-stroke James. Take the frame for starters. It's a full loop with a bolted on rear section. Both it and the forks are simple, rigid and light. While the handling of some vintage machines is heavy and vague, the James's steering is light and precise. And there are proper brakes. At a time when some more prestigious marques were still fitting feeble tobacco-tin sized efforts, the James's are as good as, or better than those of most post-war lightweights. Comfort is never going to be a strong point with a rigid frame machine, but - despite its dinky proportions - the Jimmie avoids the knees-in-your-ear syndrome which afflicted more fashionable late-vintage machinery.

I can't deny that mixing oil with the petrol tends to produce an exhaust haze, but if he'd wanted to Bill Shepherd could have forked out another two quid for Villier's sophisticated automatic lubrication set-up. Speaking from experience, I think he was wise to opt for the less temperamental petrol system. Anyway, smoke is not a great problem with modern oils, and they have all but eliminated the old two-stroke bugbears of coking up and plug-whiskering.

The James's Villiers 1E engine is a direct antecedent of the range of the 200cc engines which ran right through to the 10E fitted to the James Captain in the late-Fifties. Like all E-range, it is economical, and starting is instant provided everything is in order. And like all Villiers flywheel-magneto engines, the 1E sulks when it is hot if its flywheel magnetism is substandard. The fitting of a decompressor might puzzle unbelievers, but it helps a lightweight rider spin the engine, and it's an easy way of stopping the engine which - with the benefit of a substantial flywheel - has a remarkably steady tickover. Power? Well the 1E has a deflector piston which inevitably trades top end speed for bottom end plonk. But photographer Joslin - anticipating a tedious crawl behind the James in his car - was staggered to find that it was romping up hills at a steady 40 mph! Three speeds are quite enough with a torquey little engine like this. In fact two normally suffice, as bottom is a crawler, and is only required on the steepest hills. Overall, the Villiers 1E engine is an object lesson in why small four-strokes never gained a grip on the economy end of the market.

The lighting system is undeniably pathetic. Six-volts and very few watts - direct from the flywheel are shared between a dim 4 volt headlamp bulb in series with an almost invisible 2 volt tail lamp. But otherwise, comparison of the James A9 with a rigid 200cc James from the early Fifties, leads to the inevitable conclusion that our engine and frame manufacturers had been marking time for a quarter of a century.

Bill Shepherd would not have been human if he had never considered changing to another motorcycle. But such thoughts would have soon evaporated, because he obviously belonged to the 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' school. He added a few items to the basic specification on purchase. The carrier was a factory option costing eight schillings and sixpence (42 1/2 p), and the fork dampers were quite an upmarket feature at 18/6 (92 1/2 p) extra. Thereafter, changes to the James's original specification are few and far between. Notably the silencers are not the originals. Again, speaking from experience with my own James, he may have changed to ones which were more easily decarbonised. He also swapped the lever throttle control for a twistgrip. Bill apparently initially spurned the factory option of a factory-fitted lighting set (three versions were offered at prices ranging from £1 10s to £5), but within a couple of years he fitted an aftermarket set made by Miller.

For the next 60-plus years, Bill Shepherd confined himself to essential maintenance. The original instruction book and spares list are among the documents, and make their own contribution to the historical records. For one thing, they are devoid of the filthy fingerprints that point to the unskilled tinkerer. Equally tellingly, the few items neatly underlined in the spares list show that the only cycle parts he needed were cup and cone bearings for the steering head and the wheels.

When Bill Shepherd wrote to Villiers in 1961, he owned up to replacement of a few engine parts. Four sets of small end bushes, piston rings and gudgeon pin end plugs, together with one gudgeon pin and a couple of carburetor needles was the sum total. It was a pretty modest list by anybody's standards, and at that time he estimated that the James had cost him a penny-farthing (1/2p) per mile to run. Villiers were delighted with the story, and ensured that it ran in both the weekly magazines in May that year.

Reliability and economy, what more could somebody obviously unconcerned with speed or status want? And the James continued to deliver more of the same. Amazingly, even today, the James is still on its original bore, and only those gudgeon pin end plugs have needed replacement...again.

I've heard of other cases where a motorcycle remained in the same ownership for many years, but I've never come across a story like Bill Shepherd's. It bears repeating that for nearly 70 years, the James was his only mechanized transport! Not a family heirloom, not a sentimental relic, not a toy, but an actual working motorcycle. And what makes Mr. Shepherd even more unusual is that while he was still running his old motorcycle because of its reliability and economy, he also realized its historical significance. Bill was an early member of the Bristol Section the Vintage Club; and while others were restoring Big Ports and V-twins for Sunday best, he was actually riding his vintage James day in and day out.

As he approached the end of his long life, Bill Shepherd wondered what to do with his unique motorcycle. It would have been unthinkable to entomb it in a museum, or sell it to somebody who would change or not appreciate it. The answer was close at hand. His friends in the Bristol VMCC knew and revered the machine, and Bill simply left it to them in his will so that it would continue to be used in the proper way. He also left them the Rudge cycle, which he kept equally roadworthy and original.

So far, six members of the Bristol Section have ridden the James, and it is now in the guardianship of retired electronic mechanic Trevor Wells. He is a two-stroke fanatic who learnt to ride on a pre-war Francis Barnett, so he is ideally suited to the responsibility. The James has done Irish Rallies, Banbury Runs and Flat Tank Weekends, and it has completed the Bristol to Land's End Run. Apart from have the unrecognisably scruffy tank re-painted, Section members have done little to the uncomplaining little workhorse, other than pile yet more miles onto a total which must now exceed 150,000!

On their advertising material and tank badges, the Birmingham company immodestly referred to their products as the 'The Famous James'.

Sometimes that was a bit far fetched, but if ever a James deserved the adjective, this is the one.