

10. Two on the Ground and One in the Air 1 - Wheels That Is

My first exposure to 'Outfits', as they used to be called back in England, was when I was about 10 years old. My next door neighbor had a new BSA Golden Flash hitched up to a Single Adult sidecar which



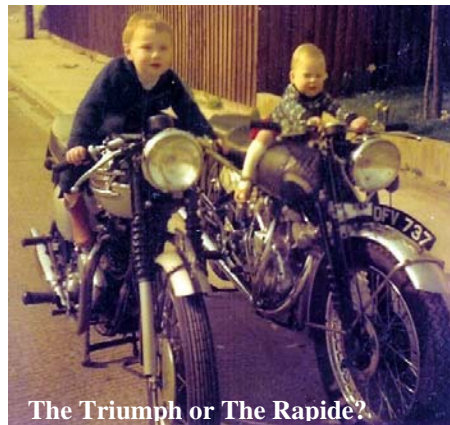
1952 BSA Golden Flash & Watsonian SideCar
19.6.2005

I believe was a Watsonian. When invited to take a spin in the sidecar I leapt in without a moment's hesitation. The sound of the engine as we took off thrilled me, I couldn't believe the fierce acceleration compared to cars I had ridden in. Tucked down behind the windshield, I watched as the world flashed by us and the engine became a deafening roar as we cruised on the main road to town. An occasional whiff of the exhaust reached my nostrils as we slowed and stopped for the traffic lights. I never wanted the journey to end but when it finally did, the little boy who stepped out of the sidecar with windswept hair and eyes that glowed was hooked on motorbikes for life.

There comes a time in a hardcore biker's life when he has to decide to 'graduate' to the three wheels of a motorcycle and sidecar, or take the plunge and finally get a family car. When the need to make this decision came to me it was in 1964, I was living in England, but buying a car while retaining my motorcycles, was too much of a drastic change. The financial stretch was too big to sell them and to buy a car. I was twenty three years old and the proud father of a two year old son. I already owned a Triumph 650cc Twin and an HRD Rapide, all I had to decide was what kind of sidecar to get and which bike to fit it to.

After much deliberation I decided upon a Steib S501 Single Seater Sports version. But Steib went out of business in the late 50's so finding a good sound one was not easy or cheap. I started out planning to attach it to the 49' HRD Rapide, since it had the higher torque and larger capacity engine. I even got as far as rebuilding the front wheel to a sidecar specification in preparation and fitted an Avon 3.50 in. block tread tire. After months of searching I eventually found a Steib that cost about the same price as my 62' Triumph itself. The next task was to find a specialist to install it.

Like so many apparently simple things, there is a science to installing sidecars to a motorcycle. Fore and aft position in relationship to the center of gravity of the machine is the first consideration. Toe-in and Camber Angle are as important ingredients as in setting up a car. Last but of perhaps most importance is the method and system of attachment to the frame itself. Forces during driving become highly concentrated at the attachment points and are capable of causing mechanical failure or localized frame distortion. It was popularly believed that once a machine had been used for pulling a sidecar, the effect of these forces on the frame geometry rendered it useless for solo riding at a later date.



The Triumph or The Rapide?



Careful research and networking finally led me to a man named Dick Mares of Upminster, who was a veteran of motorcycle racing and at the age of 76 was still competing in Grass Track sidecar racing. His revolutionary 'moving parallelogram' hinged outfit had gained him great success. What a character he turned out to be! My first visit to his shop and workshop left me hammering endlessly on his locked front door unanswered while he could be plainly seen talking to a colleague through the clear glass window. It was only after I had walked around to the back door and entered the workshop that he spoke to me. He said,

"Who the Hell are you? Get out!" I quickly explained that I had been referred to him by a friend of his. Suspiciously he made a quick phone call to verify this and then he relented, explaining that he was retired and no longer open for public business. He then asked me what the problem was.

After much discussion and a couple of cups of tea, I described my dilemma of which machine to select for the sidecar. He recommended that I use the Triumph because of its frame configuration and the easy availability of parts during service. I transported the Steib sidecar to him that same evening and drove the Triumph down to him the following day and caught a train home. His last words to me were, "Don't be pestering me with phone calls son, I'll phone you when I'm done and tell you when you can come and pick it up!"

During the time the outfit was away I rode the HRD daily, often pondering the prospects of no more high speed bend-swinging or 'zigzagging' around the many 'S' bends that abound in the English countryside. I considered the prospects of down-gearing the outfit to cope with the weight burden of the sidecar, and of removing my prized 'Ace Bars' to get better leverage on the steering. I also tried to focus on the positive aspects of now being able to ride all year round, even on snow and ice due to the additional stability of three wheels on the road. My Insurance Company cut reduced my annual premium saying that an Outfit had the best safety record of all motorized vehicles. This proved to be the most subjective statement of all time. By the time I received the 'Its Ready' call from Dick Mares I considered myself to be completely mentally prepared.



Rear View of the Steib S501



2006 Replica by Dauntless

Catching a ride straight from work from one of my friends, I went to pick up the outfit. It looked terrific; Dick had done a wonderful job of setting it up and to me, it even looked fast as an outfit. I paid him his asking price without any haggling. Handing me the ignition key, he suddenly frowned and asked the question I'd been dreading. "Have you ever ridden an outfit before son?" With my face becoming hot then red with total embarrassment he held me in a fixed stare for a second. Sparing me the dignity of not having to reply, he shook his old gray head in disbelief.

The large back yard, in which the finished bike was standing, was surrounded by a stout chain link fence and the ground was covered in loose cinders. With great deliberation he headed for the open double gate and grasping it with both hands he dragged it shut with a loud crash and snapped the huge padlock in place to lock it. I was trapped there. "Now you can fire your machine up son and spend the next hour or so doing figures of eight in this yard. There's a long straight-away on which you can practice acceleration and braking and when I see you are capable of handling it without killing some poor devil out on the road, maybe, just maybe, I'll let you out." Turning, he disappeared into his workshop.

All the talking, all the reading and all the mental preparation I thought I had done could never have prepared me for what followed. Starting off entailed a lot more throttle to avoid stalling the engine and why the Hell is the machine turning left on its own? Compensating by counter-steering to the right was very tricky, but seemed to be a solution. I started out by driving around the oval periphery of the fence, leaning left with all the meager 130 pounds body weight at my disposal, to prevent the sidecar wheel from becoming airborne on the left hand turns. Then I discovered that hitting the brakes for turns caused an equal and opposite weight shift from the sidecar that caused the outfit to head for the fence. Slowing down on the engine brought about the worst case of 'tank-slapping' by the handlebars that I'd ever experienced at such a slow speed. It was time to crank down on the steering damper. It took every ounce of strength I had, just to turn the handlebars, leaning didn't work any more. I was beginning to learn why most sidecar racers are very highly muscled in the arms, shoulders and upper body regions.



What the HRD Combination would have looked like. This is a 1949 'C' Series Rapide with a Steib S501 sidecar.

Then I moved on to the figures of eight. Oh what a nightmare. I noticed however, that making the right hand turns was quickly becoming great fun, as I started to power slide the back wheel on the loose cinders. After about an hour of this and flushed with false self-confidence, I stopped the outfit and asked Dick if I could now leave. It was then that I learned that not only was he watching me, but he'd invited a bunch of his buddies to enjoy the spectacle too. The consensus of opinion was damning, "Get back out there and now do the same thing in the reverse direction! We'll tell you when you can leave!" he roared.

It was a warm summer evening and the sun was beginning to descend leaving a bright bronzed color in the sky above. This was proving to be a strenuous workout and I was grateful for the cool evening breeze that helped cool the hot sweat that had spread over my entire body. The engine was now running a little hot too, without any high speed air rush to cool it, and I could detect the unmistakable aroma of Solvol Autosol residue from my recent polishing of the side casings. After what seemed an Eternity a loud shout reached my ears and I could see Dick and his cronies at the door of his workshop.

"Me and the lads (all four of them were in their seventies) have had a little discussion, and we think it's time for you to make your way home, while there's still some daylight left. We don't think you are quite ready for this, but if you take it real easy and drive slowly, I think you'll make it." He unlocked the large padlock from the gate and opened it. I must concede that it was an immense relief, since I was beginning to feel a bit like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*. "Now remember lad," he went on, "as soon as you get home you must give me a phone call, to let me know you arrived safely." It was a very hair-raising ride home and my heart jumped up into my throat several times. I finally made the twenty

mile trip and did so in pretty good time too. I called Dick from a pay phone close to home, since we didn't even have a telephone installed back in those days.

So began a three year love and hate relationship between myself and 'Combinations'. I never did change the Ace Bars and I did not find the need to gear down the rear sprocket. I fitted a Steib Windshield, Tonneau Cover and Storage Rack for the Trunk Lid, but never installed a full hood. During this period I destroyed my crash-free driving record but never was involved with another vehicle. Leaving the road with the sidecar wheel aimlessly flailing in the air on a left hand bend I managed more by luck than by judgment to avoid oncoming cars and two parked cars on the opposite side of the road; only to discover that a lamp post occupied the remaining space.



There was another wheel in the air crisis that took me through a hedge, finally coming to rest in the middle of the hapless and astonished property owner's front lawn. Then months later, while power-sliding my way round a right hand bend on a country lane, I hit a huge patch of freshly laid cow dung. A farmer had led a herd of cattle across the lane to another field earlier and the road surface was covered in mud and fresh dung. My bike and I leapt right over a drainage ditch and landed in a ploughed field. No damage was sustained by either me or the bike but my pride took a big hit. My respect for Sidecar Racers, or 'Chair Men' as they were called at the time, soared during this humbling period of my motorcycling life.

Finally mastering the driving of these contraptions, I drove that 'combination' for many thousands of miles, often with my young son Russ fast asleep and strapped down in the sidecar seat. About two years later, when my daughter Allison was born, I was finally forced to give up the two and three wheel vehicles and to conform to the small European family car, which was a 65' Morris Mini. The Triumph/Steib combination remained in my family for several more years in the hands of my brother Malcolm, until he too finally 'graduated' to a car.

(Word count: 2,173 words)