

11. Two Wheels on the Ground and One in the Air – Part 2

The year was back around 1962 and to this day I can vividly recall my very first attendance of a motorcycle road racing event. Arriving late at the Snetterton race track, we literally ran to the first hairpin



bend, just as the start of the Sidecar event had begun. I had never before witnessed 'road racing in the flesh' and was totally unprepared for what followed. A small dirt barrier wall, about three or four feet high, circumvented the outside radius of the bend. It was there to protect spectators and to serve as an energy absorption medium to also protect the riders, in case someone spun off the track.

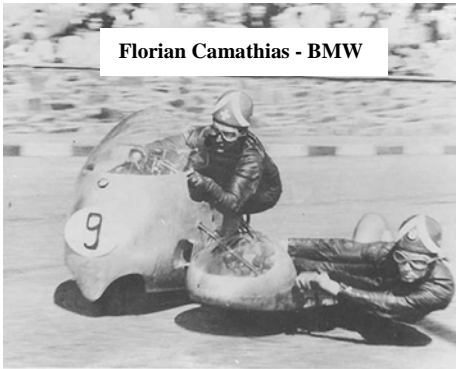
Through the speakers of the public address system ripped the deafening roar of the engines leaving the out-of-sight starting grid. I

strained vainly to see any of the machines in the limited sight from this vantage point. Murray Walker, the race commentator, his voice bursting with high pitched excitement, described the action as the riders entered altogether the first bend. Feeding off the commentator's nervous energy, I felt the excitement quickly arising in me. Then suddenly, far in the distance, I spotted them. The two leaders were side by side, with the rest of the pack snapping closely on their heels. Although I had seen this racing on television, the sense of action and speed is completely lost through that media. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, the riders arrived out of nowhere at the hairpin bend where I stood.



Max Deubel & Florian Camathias at Brands Hatch

My first reaction was of horror and of fear, "Nobody could possibly get around this bend at that kind of speed", I remember thinking to myself. Then in an ear-splitting roar they were into it, I thought they were coming straight at me. In a split second I saw the leader and his passenger literally fighting to control the outfit as the forks flexed, the tires screamed and the entire machine seemed to be bucking and weaving under the strain to stay on the track. I hit the ground behind the dirt barrier wall in a spontaneous reaction of self-preservation and waited for the moment of impact. It never came. I emerged from my fetal crouch behind the barrier as the last rider to pass through, sped off into the distance.



Florian Camathias - BMW

I think I expected to see bodies and wreckage everywhere. Instead, all that was left behind to testify the spectacle was the dust in the air and the acrid but addictive smell of Castrol R that seemed to linger all around the track for the rest of the day. This was my baptism of fire, my very first introduction at close range to the world of Sidecar Racing. A few years later I was riding my very own road going combination, my fear and awe were replaced by a

deep-rooted respect for what the professionals could make these things do.

Although there was the usual assortment of the solo classified races the sheer thrill and spectacle of the Sidecar class racing was a great favorite with the, as always, well versed and highly appreciative crowd of spectators. The best was always saved for the last race of the day, The Sidecar Handicap Race. As the majority of the crowd left the racetrack to 'beat the traffic', the diehard and hardcore sidecar racing fans would settle down for what in their opinions was the most exciting race of the day. Race times of all the riders in the earlier sidecar class event, from the first place rider to the last finisher, were meticulously recorded. Starting grid positions for the Handicap were determined by exactly the reverse order of the finishing times of the race. A time penalty for delayed starting was then applied to each individual rider in the entire field to equalize the different speed and rider capabilities for the final event. Of course, there were often instances where a machine broke down or crashed during the first race but the riders and mechanics were able to carry out a repair and out they would come once more for the 'Handicap Race'. Their starting positions and time penalty were factored in by the times they were recording before they crashed or retired from the race so these were always the 'dark horses' of the final. So, "The man who was first would now be the last".



Chris Vincent aboard the 654cc works BSA

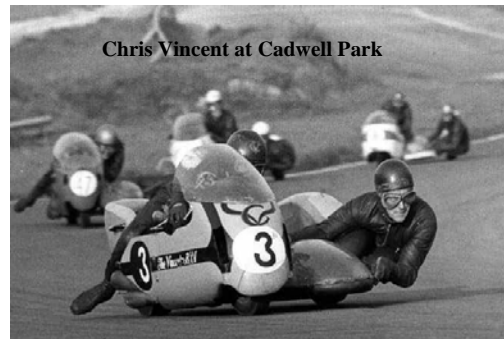


Chris Vincent at Druids - Brands

The virtually unchallenged master of this event was usually Chris Vincent, a works rider aboard an A65 654cc engine BSA Oil-In Frame chassis that was originally race developed for Sidecar Racing. He was usually the last rider to leave the grid by a seemingly horrifyingly long time lapse. Then he and his passenger would thrill the crowd with their fiercely aggressive riding skills in cutting through the back-markers and clawing their way back to take the lead on the last lap, sometimes at the very last bend. Sidecar racing was very much a 'family affair', most of the riders were not 'Spring Chickens' any more and often carried their wife or girlfriend as the passenger. They were and probably still are 'A breed apart', many of them came from a heritage involving a long line of father to son history in Sidecar racing. They were also the most colorful

characters and fun-loving bunch of the entire racing community and anything was possible, one could always count on something unexpected, either on the track or off it.

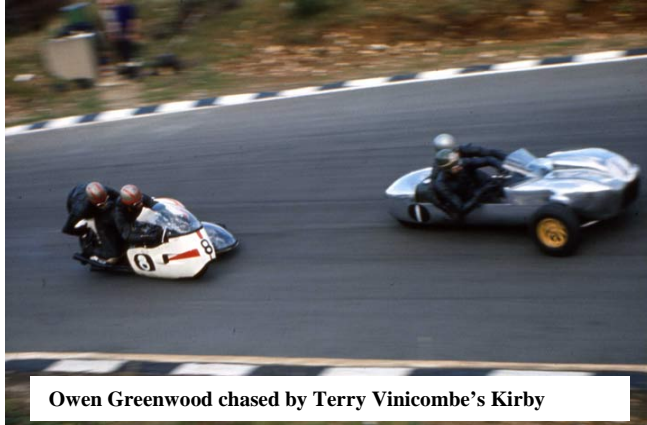
There were two basic classes for Sidecar road racing, the regulatory 500cc class that conformed to International specifications and rulings, then, there was the 'Unlimited Class' that usually covered anything over 650cc. Only BMW gave their full works support to riders in the World Championship series of racing. It was they who had a grip on the championship with their 500cc horizontally opposed twin engine. Riders like Fritz Scheidegger, Max Deubel and Florian Camathias were virtually unassailable on their machines and only BSA showed any real support out of the British manufacturers. Chris Vincent contested certain world championship events on his factory entered sleeved down 500cc A65 engine (Royal Star) and although his brilliant style of riding sometimes gave the BMWs a fright, his machine lacked the power, speed and reliability to really challenge them. Other British riders like Pip Harris and Colin Seeley rode BMWs but were not sponsored by the German factory and although fast and beautifully prepared, were never able to



Chris Vincent at Cadwell Park

seriously challenge the grip on the World Championship held by the other European riders. I believe Terry Vinnicombe had some support from Triumph on his Tom Kirby entered outfit but once again, his machine was just not competitive enough either in the international series. Not until Helmut Fath on his home brewed and famous URS Fath Four came along was the BMW supremacy broken.

It was in the unlimited class that the ingenuity and enthusiasm of the largely 'privateer' riders surfaced in such forms as Owen Greenwood's controversial Mini-Cooper engined 'trike', The Owen



Owen Greenwood chased by Terry Vinnicombe's Kirby

Greenwood Special, and the 1000cc Vincent powered Vee twin ridden competitively by Peter Brown. Many people, fans and riders alike, felt that 'The Special' had an unfair advantage over the conventional motorcycle engined outfits. I feel that Owen was a clever enough Engineer to see the loophole in the class specifications and simply but brilliantly engineered his way around them to still comply with the rules. Several years went by before the official racing body 'corrected the situation' and the Owen Greenwood Special was outlawed by the change to the rules. But for the most part,

these machines were piloted by largely un-sponsored riders who 'raced on a shoestring' and did so for the pure love of the sport. Prize money for winning was very humble and riders would put their lives on the line to win 'fifty quid', meaning 50 Pound.

Tom Kirby of Romford, Essex, remains close in my memory since his was my closest motorcycle shop and I had several dealings with him during my early motorcycling days. He was so highly respected in the racing world and his machines were absolutely immaculately prepared. To visit his shop was to maybe run into the likes of many famous riders like Bill Ivy, Terry Vinnicombe, Paddy Driver and Dave Degens, to name but a few. He even sponsored none other than Mike Hailwood himself at one point in Mike's career. Despite the meticulous preparation, Tom only ever had one win on the Isle of Man and it was Terry Vinnicombe on Tom's BSA Sidecar outfit that won the 1968 Sidecar TT race. Sadly, Terry died in 1969 from thrombosis. Only two BSA outfits ever won an Isle of Man TT race, Terry aboard Tom Kirby's outfit in 1968 and Chris Vincent aboard a works BSA in 1962.



Terry Vinnicombe & John Flaxman on their way to winning the 1968 Isle of Man Sidecar TT on the Tom Kirby BSA.

Special thanks to Richard, John Flaxman's son, for providing this great photo.

"On September 16th 2003, The National Motorcycle Museum suffered from a catastrophic fire. Around 500 motorcycles were either damaged severely or beyond repair. Around a third of the collection, some 250 motorcycles were saved. One of the machines that suffered major damage was the ex-Terry Vinnicombe Kirby BSA outfit which won the 1968 750cc sidecar TT at the Isle of Man. Chris Vincent's BSA outfit was spared by the fire."

The above passage and the one that follows are excerpts from the Pickett brother's website, 'The Kirby BSA Restoration Project, the site dedicated to the restoration of this famous racing machine. I would encourage anyone reading this article to pay this website a visit by right clicking on or copying this link:

<http://www.picketts.ukonline.co.uk/kirby.htm>

“The culmination of all the hard work.” The Kirby BSA once more takes to the track at Mallory Park with the Pickett brothers aboard. This is the first time that they have ridden this machine in anger for 25 years - - - .”

The story behind this project demonstrates the passion, dedication and camaraderie that is ever present in the world of motor cycle racing. I take my hat off to Roland and Graham Pickett and to all who helped them in this project. They are a terrific bunch of people and typify the spirit of Sidecar racers. Without people like this, an important piece of racing history at the grass roots of motorcycle racing would be lost forever. I dedicate this humble little article to them, may they and others like them continue to race these wonderful old classic outfits.



Original Kirby machine before the fire in 2003



Restored Kirby machine in 2006



Roland & Graham Pickett during the 1970's on the Tom Kirby BSA



Racing again, Roland & Graham on the 2006 restored Tom Kirby BSA

Note of Thanks: All material relating to the Tom Kirby BSA is by kind permission of “The Pickett brothers, Roland and Graham.

Roger Gooding

August 2, 2006

<http://www.picketts.ukonline.co.uk/kirby.htm>

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