

7. “Be Careful of What You Wish For - - - You Just Might Get It!” (1,871 words)

I fell in love with Vincent motorcycles during my mid-teens; there was always something very majestic about them as they effortlessly swept by virtually every kind of vehicle I ever rode in or was aboard. The deep-throated roar of the two into one, or “Siamesed” chromed header pipes rang out through the single Burgess absorption silencer with an absolutely unique sound that to this day, still makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. In my youthful eyes, it certainly lived up to its nickname as being, “The Rolls Royce of Motorcycles”. These legendary machines have had so many books and articles written about them, I shall avoid historical references as much as possible. Instead, I shall focus on some of the unique experiences that came my way as a result of being fortunate enough to actually own and ride one. While riding a bicycle around as my sole means for transport for the next few years, never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would ever come to actually own one.

The year was 1963 and I was twenty-one years old. I was serving an engineering apprenticeship at Ford Motor Company UK and earning apprentice wages when I got married. Driving my diminutive Vespa scooter to work and back daily, I was passed



regularly by a superb Vincent Rapide motorcycle, owned and ridden by someone who worked at the same building as me. He would sweep by me so fast that it seemed I was standing still and then he would disappear around the bends of the tiny country lanes. One day, while taking a leisurely lunchtime walk around the other side of the building where I worked, I spotted the Vincent motorcycle parked outside, under the canopy of a bicycle storage shed. A few well-aimed questions to people in the area soon got me the name of

the owner and the group he worked for and I was able to hunt him down on the telephone.

I told him of my admiration of his machine and we arranged to meet by the bicycle sheds at lunchtime for me to take a closer look. His name was Dave “Taffy” Thomas, a jolly Welshman, who worked as a developmental engineer on Ford factory-entered racing and competition cars. He explained to me that, what appeared to be a Vincent motorcycle was in fact a 1949 Vincent HRD “C” Series Rapide. He further explained that it was co-owned by a small group of fast-car and motorcycle fanatics who also were engineers that worked together at Ford. They had bought and developed the HRD as a group and it was very, very fast. But alas, it was not for sale.

For what seemed to be an eternity, I jovially pestered poor Taffy on every occasion I could muster to sell this bike to me. While working at my drawing board one day, I received a surprise visitor; his name was Dave Garrett, an American engineer working on location for Ford in England and was one of the enthusiasts who owned the HRD bike. He later became a prominent figure of the highly successful Ford Mexico Mk 1 rally car racing team that took Ford to several World Championships in the late sixties. We had lunch together and he explained that Taffy had told him of my interest and that he wanted to re-assure himself that I would be capable of handling this monster machine without getting someone killed. Although I merely owned and drove the little Vespa scooter, I had fortunately ridden quite a few ‘real motorcycles’ and was reasonably conversant with most aspects of riding them. Back then, I weighed in at around 9 stone, or 126 lbs. so physical handling could have been an important issue for a machine that weighed around 450lbs. I was very fit for my size back in those days though, and was convinced I could do it.

A few months passed by, then one day I was paid another visit, this time by Taffy Thomas himself. He told me that the group had just bought an “E”-Type Jaguar and that there was no longer enough room in the garage for all their toys. By consensus of group opinion, they had agreed that the HRD had to go and were asking if I was still interested. To my total disbelief, I was being offered ‘first refusal’. The

asking price was £75.00, approximately \$300 at that point in time. Being on apprentice wages and saving for our first house, I had to borrow the money to buy this machine. But I bought it, supplementing my income by fixing bikes belonging to friends and workmates in my spare time until I was able to repay the loan about six months later.

In view of my tender years and lack of bulk, I was not afforded the usual 'test ride'. Instead, I was invited to step aboard and take a ride on the back seat with Taffy at the controls. Like the rest of his group, he was a master rider. After riding slowly around as he explained the ride and handling characteristics, he slowed to a trickle, turned in the saddle and yelled back at me, "I'm going to demonstrate how good the acceleration is!" My pulse started to race in anticipation. "When you see my hand rise, I want you to hang on very tightly" he yelled back at me over the roar of the engine.

An experienced pillion rider, I gripped my knees tightly to the saddle, reached back with both my arms, firmly grasped the rear Grab Rail and braced myself by locking my elbows. Up came his arm, I leaned forward, and 'wh-o-o-sh', we took off with a screech and a roar like a drag bike in a standing quarter mile race. The next thing I knew I was ripped from the seat by the sheer power and acceleration and found myself sitting on my wrists, hanging on for grim death with my hands and my knees, waiting for an opportunity to come so that I could scramble back onto the saddle. It came as he made the first gear change, but no sooner had I re-located, I was thrown back again as he engaged second gear and let out the clutch in a perfectly executed racing gear-shift. I finally succeeded in making it back to the saddle and staying there after the fourth shift. What an adrenalin rush it all was, I could scarcely believe what had just happened. "My, what a Monster!" I mused, while wearing a grin like the proverbial Cheshire cat that had just gotten the cream.



Original photo taken in 1966 of my 1949 Vincent HRD with my son Russ aboard.

So, my first "real" motorcycle went from one extreme to the other, from a 125cc Vespa motor scooter to a 1000cc Vee Twin Vincent HRD. My first ride home went without a hitch. I kept this magnificent machine for three years, by which time my first child Russ was born. That's him sitting astride the gas tank in one of only two remaining photographs taken at that time of this bike. With the deepest regret, there finally came a time when I had to sell it. A famous dealership in London named Conway Motors gave me £130 (approx. \$260) cash for it and sold it less than a week later for at least double the price. Today, this machine, if it were still around, would be worth in the region of over \$30,000 to \$50,000.



Photo of my first sighting of prior owner, Tom Biddle's 1949 built HRD taken in 2004.

"HRD" stood for Howard Raymond Davies, the name of the man who founded the HRD Company in 1924. Phil Vincent bought the financially struggling Company in 1928 and re-named it the Vincent HRD Company Ltd. Along with Phil Irving, he created the Series "B" Rapide model in 1936. After World War Two, the US was a prime market for these incredibly fast but expensive machines. To avoid confusion in the US between the UK name "HRD" and the US name "HD", or, Harley Davidson, the "HRD" name was dropped and it was renamed "The Vincent" in 1950. After successfully

producing “The World’s Fastest Motorcycles” for almost twenty years, Vincent Engineering Ltd. went into liquidation in 1955.

Fast forwarding from 1963 to 2004, I attended a gathering of classic bike friends just before the good weather ended the riding season and winter set in. That day, I learned of the existence of a 1951 registered “C” Series Vincent Rapide, whose previous owner Tom Biddle had kept stored in parts in his basement for over sixteen years. The pile of bits had been transported to the meeting place where they had been arranged to loosely represent a partially assembled motorcycle. The instant I saw it I suspected it to be a 1949 model, not a 1951 and recommended that its history be re-checked. About forty of some of the finest motorcycles in the State were driven in by their owners and a great afternoon was had by all.

In 2004, our good friend and master classic Brit bike builder/restorer, Vic Schultz, bought the machine and commenced work on restoring it. This labor of love, time and money took almost two years to complete and the finished bike appeared at the 2006 “Battle of the Brits” Classic Car & Motorcycle show at Freedom Hill in Michigan. It was a masterpiece! It swept through a highly impressive array of almost equally rare and beautiful machines to win the “Bike of the Show” award. I truly believe that Vic is probably one of the most dedicated and best classic motorcycle restorers in Michigan. An article chronicling this project can be seen in a 2006 issue of The Michigan Motorcyclist magazine. It is also featured in Graham Clayton’s article in Vintage Bike Magazine titled, “Battle of the Brits Brings out the Best”.

When I first saw this bike, I could not believe my eyes. In 1949, Phil Vincent, owner of Vincent Engineering Ltd., was forced by manufacturing logistics to build batches of bikes in order to make the transition from HRD to Vincent logos. Each batch usually contained about sixteen identical machines. This particular machine displayed virtually all the same transitionally unique features as my 1949 HRD model. After extensive research, Vic discovered that although registered in the US in 1951, this machine had indeed been built as a transitional model in 1949 but was not shipped to the US until 1950. (Where it was sold as a brand new 1951 model)



1949 Vincent HRD – photo of bike as found by Vic Schultz, in bits.

This coincidence amazes me; our two bikes could well have been built but a batch apart, fifty-seven years ago. Many myths and legends surround the name of “The Vincent” motorcycle and I feel this further coincidence, discovered almost six decades later, is typical of what helps preserve its mystique and character. It truly deserves its nickname, “The Rolls Royce of Motorcycles”. Long may people like Vic Schultz continue to restore and preserve them, or even better, still ride them in the way their creator Phil Vincent, designed and engineered them to be ridden way back in 1937, almost seventy years ago.



Now owned by restorer Vic Schultz – the same HRD Rapide at 2006 Battle of the Brits Show



These last three photographs have been provided by Vic Schultz to assist me in this article. Many thanks, Vic.