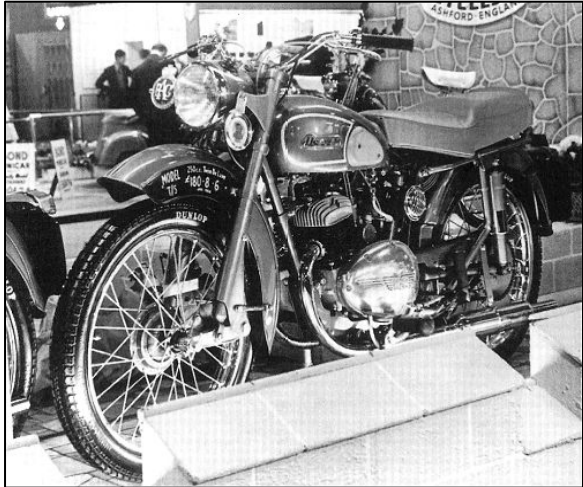


3. “Putting on the Style” - My Very First Solo Outing

“Putting on the agony, putting on the style,” sang Lonnie Donegan back in the UK with his mid-fifties top-ten hit song. That is exactly what I was feebly trying to do with outrageous futility when I came to grief during my very first solo motorcycle ride. It would probably be more fitting to call my motorcycling debut my “maiden voyage.”



British Anzani-engined TS at the 1955 Earl's Court International Show. (Many thanks to Andrew Pattle & David Beare of the UK for providing this photo & permitting me to share it)

A friend and neighbor, Ken Farleigh, owned a 1954 Norman, powered by a 250cc British Anzani twin-cylinder, two-cycle engine. Italian-born Alessandro Anzani was a true pioneer of the internal combustion engine. He lived in France for most of his life, and it was his three-cylinder, semi-radial engine that powered Louis Blériot's aircraft, in which Blériot became the first man to fly across the English Channel, in July 1909. British Anzani was better known for its aircraft and marine engines than for its motorcycle ones. The Norman Motorcycle Company replaced the Anzani engine with a faster Villiers twin engine of the same capacity some time in 1955. Today, the 250 Anzani Norman is a very collectible machine.

In 1958, I had just turned ‘sweet sixteen’ and was at last old enough to apply for a provisional motorcycle license. After helping my Ken work on the Norman one day, he asked me if I would like to take it for a ride. I accepted his offer

in a heartbeat, and he ran through the basics of all the controls. Proudly, I took off without stalling, eventually managing to synchronize the clutch and throttle sufficiently to make the change up to second gear, then I stalled the engine. It took so much time to achieve the maneuver that the bike had slowed down too much. Starting over, I quickly discovered that finding neutral without the engine running was also quite an art.

After a couple of laps around the block I was beginning to feel quite proficient and began showing off by down-shifting as well as up-shifting, whether or not it was really needed. I guess I just liked the sound the exhaust made, and of course the noise brought lots of attention. Bad attention as well as good, I hasten to add, but attention at sixteen is attention, whatever its form.

All at once, I spotted a couple girls from the school I attended taking a little dog for a walk. One of them I thought I knew and the other I wouldn't have minded getting to know. So, in my first display of unprecedented teenage idiocy, I dropped down a gear and screamed the engine, making a natty, racing gear-change just as I passed by them. A brief glance back over my shoulder in their direction told me I had indeed drawn their attention; it even looked like they had smiles on their faces. Being so preoccupied, I had totally miscalculated how soon the “U” bend in the road would appear. It dawned on me that the smiles I thought I saw were, in fact, snickers of anticipation and amusement at what they were about to witness.

There was no time to downshift or brake. I was heading into the bend at a far greater speed than the



This photo from the Norman web-site is fitted with a Villiers Engine. The car in the background is a Ford 100E, either an Anglia or Prefect.



**Robust Armstrong Front
Forks were made by
Norman**

motorcycle or I could possibly handle. I had little option but to try to somehow navigate the bend while only rolling off the throttle. Leaning the machine over as far as it would go, I could still see and feel it drifting towards the concrete curb-stones lining the edge of the road. “Another few yards and I’m going to make it,” I remember thinking to myself as I banked it over to the point of no return. That was when the fixed foot-peg rubber dug deeply into the road surface and all hell broke loose. The rear wheel low-sided and slid away as the bike and I careened towards the ever-beckoning curb. Somehow, I think both wheels struck it simultaneously and squarely, because the next thing that happened was that the bike ejected me from the seat like it was saying, “Enough is enough!”

With the breath knocked out of me, along with a great deal of dignity, I tried to regroup my senses as I lay there on the road. The bike was lying on its side, and I slowly became aware that the engine was still running, splitting the air with the roar from its twin exhausts. Somewhere in the distance I could see my brother and my neighbor running toward me, waving their arms wildly. At this point I think I must have succumbed to diminished senses and logical reasoning. Stooping to grasp the handlebars with both hands, I heaved with all my might and tried to pull the bike back to an upright position. With a screech of tire rubber from the back wheel, up came the front wheel. I had no idea how to cut the engine and had totally overlooked that the bike was still in gear. Had I been aboard it, this would have been the best wheelie I had ever pulled.

Now along came the masterstroke of sheer genius: I hung onto the handlebars. Any sane or normal person would have let them go, but no, I had to hang on. Pulled off my feet, I was dragged down the road with the front wheel flailing wildly in the air. Together, the bike and I hit the same kerb once more, only about thirty feet farther down the street, and then we parted company once again. The engine finally stalled, and it was over. Amazingly, the motorcycle was not badly damaged at all, a true tribute to the Norman brand. As for me, I was a wreck, with my jeans literally hanging in tatters along with my shirt and the uppers of my both my shoes scraped paper-thin. But apart from many bruises, a few cuts, and lots of little abrasions, I was still in one piece. The same could not be said for my ego or my “street creds.” Luckily, it turned out that the two girls I set out to impress were not from my school, after all, so at least news of my lunatic antics never made it back there.

The final *coupe de grace* came from my parents. Quite understandably – my antics aboard the BSA Bantam and now this amounted to two wipeouts in a twelve-month timeframe -- from that day on I was banned from ever going even close to another motorcycle. It would take another three years for me to pay my penance for these two events.

(1,099 words)