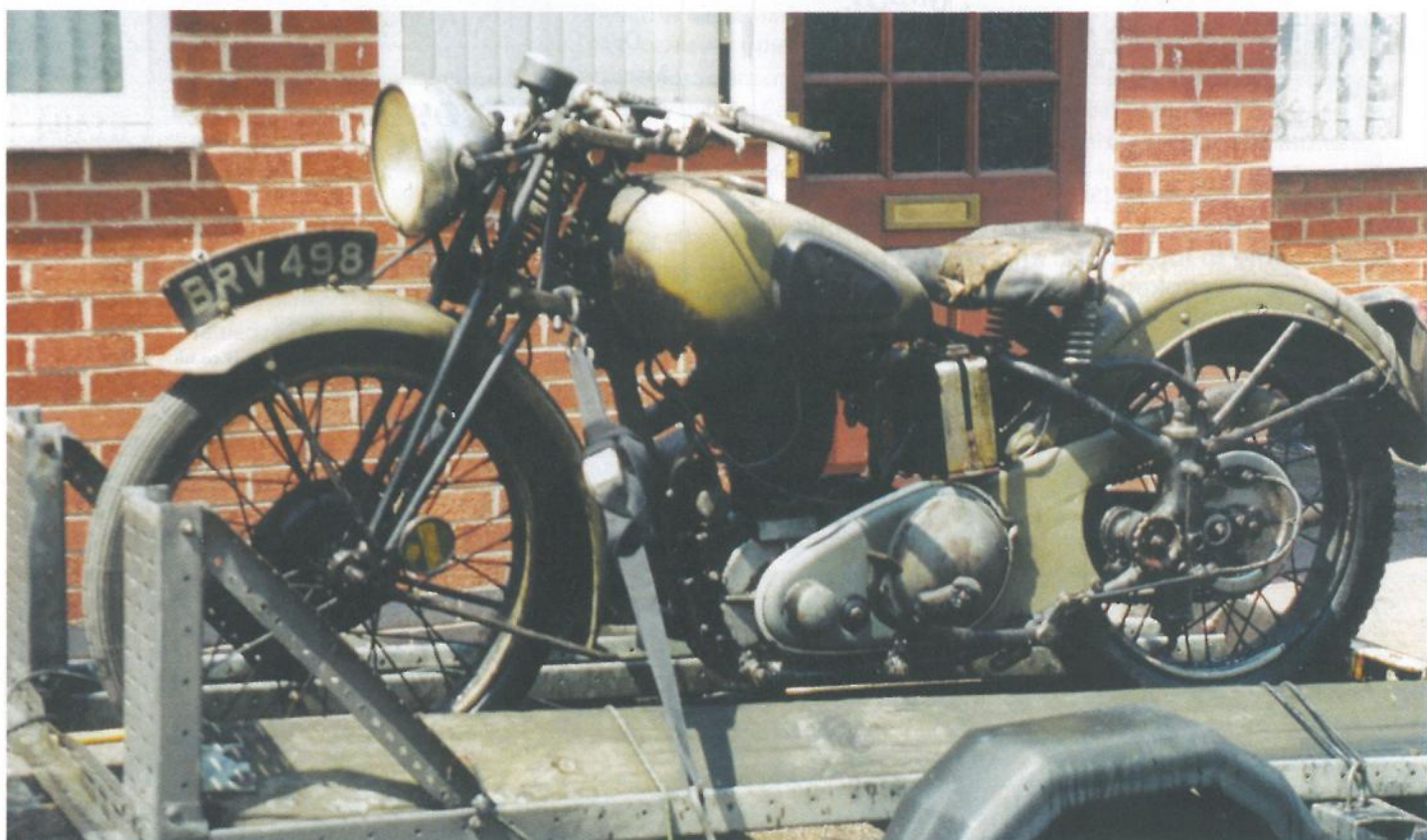


'OH 'ECK'

Pete Vines tells the story of an OEC, not the most familiar of the classic British marques...

Photos by Pete Vines



There's always a time of delicious anticipation when a new toy arrives, whether in boxes, in a car boot, on a trailer or under its own steam



Mostly there, mostly original and mostly together. A perfect find, then

Wandering round at a Banbury autojumble I met up with Fred. 'Do you know anyone who wants an OEC? I've tried advertising it but when people hear it's a special they're put off!' I told him I'd ask around; being a Velo man usually, I didn't understand quite what it was. Half an hour later I bumped into another friend who rode an OEC in Ireland most years. I asked him if he wanted another... the answer was 'No, but you do! It's ideal over Irish roads!'

So I called around to see Fred and we dragged the bike out of his overcrowded shed. He'd last ridden it over 40 years ago; the last tax disc showed he'd paid £3-15-0 to

tax it for the whole of 1960.

The bike was covered in old engine oil which had preserved its originality, and was painted olive drab with a grey chaincase, but with old chrome showing on fork links, handlebars and levers, headlamp and wheel rims etc. The reason it had been turned down by other potential buyers was that the log book (from 1948) showed the model as an 'Atlanta Special'. The registration, BRV 498, is from Portsmouth in 1939 (and the OEC's capacity is 498cc, so that's nice!).

The model is not listed. The engine is an AJS '90'; the forks are Druid; the front frame is AJS while the rear end is blessed with OEC's own design of swinging arm. This features a linkage which operates between two springs, running on a bronze bush over a steel rod

in a large springbox either side. Each leg is damped with a friction damper. The brakes are by Girling (who were once New Hudson!) of which more anon...

A deal was done then and there, and I took the bike away for restoration. This was June 2004. Mileage shown 47,645.

A check with the VMCC library showed that a Commander had the same brakes but 19" wheels – this has a 21" front wheel – while the Commodore had the same engine and forks but double-sided Girling brakes. My guess is that this particular bike may have been a sample for the military, but that OEC could not supply as they were put onto War Duties for the Navy from their base at the Atlanta Works in Gosport. Hence the name 'Atlanta Special'.

As this is a unique bike I felt I had a free hand on its colour scheme, so I painted the tank black and gold – after I'd had it repaired by C.W. Classics. It had been leaking around the front seam, and some gummed chrome paper had failed to cure it! The balance pipe under the front of the tank had perished and had leaked over the exhaust pipe.

Central Wheels (01675 462264) supplied coachlined chrome rims and spokes. Armours

(01202 519409) had made me a new pipe and silencer (quickly and cheaply); Stuart Towner had rebuilt the mag and dynamo, and supplied a V-reg to give me 12 volts.

The frame has as many nipples as a girl's choir (sorry, blame my old boss for that one), but no restrictions within the frame tubes. The more you pump grease, the further it goes. There was no wear in the rear suspension but it took ages with blowlamps to empty the frame before painting!

The engine needed a new exhaust valve as well as shiny new pushrod tubes and seals, plus a set of rings. A new kickstart spring sorted the gearbox. I replaced the very worn 5/8 x 1/4 chain and sprocket with 5/8 x 3/8 to get a better chain life – more anon...

This was a very simple rebuild and the bike passed its MoT test in March '05. In April 2005 I took over as President of the VMCC. One of my first events was with the North Staffs Section on their Museum Run. With my wife Chris on the back we rode 60-odd miles to the start. The OEC ran like a train (The Flying Scotsman not the Rocket) and I was given starting number 1. Halfway through the run the engine lost power, overheating and leaking badly. Back at the Froghall station ➤



Although a casual admirer could easily mistake the OEC for an AJS, a closer inspection reveals a lot of detail differences, like the engine number, for a start



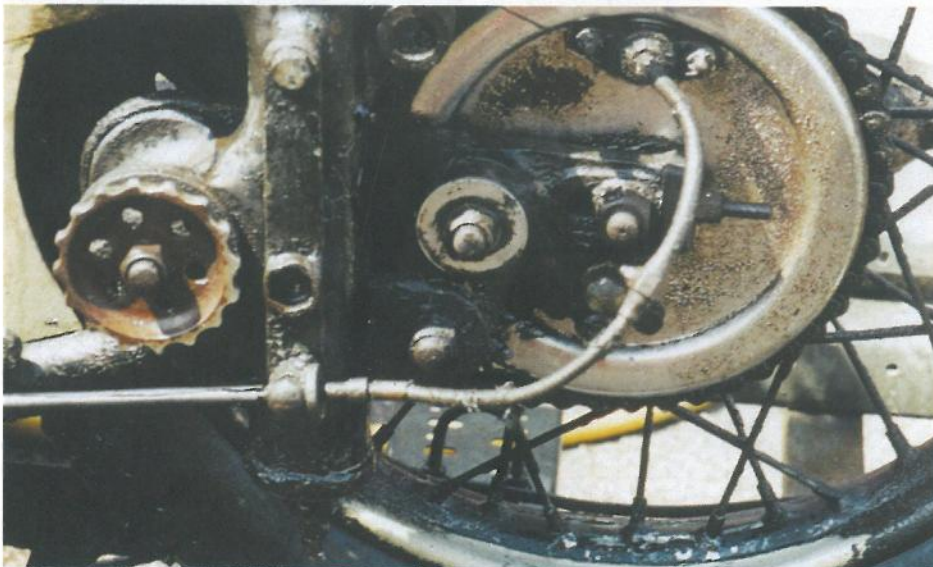


No-one could easily mistake this front brake arrangement for anything from Plumstead; in fact, it's mainly from Hall Green...

Steam Railway the mechanics found me a can of Morris oil. The tank had nearly emptied! On the way home I bought another litre which I drank happily. Mileage for the day: 210; oil consumption nearly 3 litres! I eventually found a small piece of gasket paper in the oil return line, cleaned the system and went back to virtually nil oil consumption.

The front brake was useless. There is no cam to turn to operate the Girling brakes; you are pulling a wedge out between the shoes. And you can't fit a new cable at the roadside; it has to be soldered up in situ! So I changed the front brake plate for a more usual 7" plate, make unknown, and this improved things a little.

At the South Durham VMCC Quaker Run, I thanked the stars for engine braking when I came over a blind crest into a 1 in 4 hairpin! So I found a pair of longer lever blades to give more braking power.



The anchorage arrangements at the rear are also interesting. It takes a moment to work out the operation of the brake ... and take a peek at the suspension, too



The other side of the double-sided anchor reveals how clever it is

We rode the bike down to the Banbury Run and left it on display while I helped the Mayor flag off 400 bikes and presented prizes after. The bike ran great all the way home; another 120 miles that day.

At the 50th TT Rally we set off on a run to Tony East's house and after ten miles or so the bike stopped. The gearbox adjuster bolt had disappeared; the primary chain had flicked off the dynamo chain, which had brought off the primary chain. What a disaster! So I ended up riding a freshly restored Triumph T110 lent kindly by Tony East (thanks Tony) on the next day's run. On this we were flagged off by Sir Norman Wisdom onto the TT course which runs from Ballacraigne to Kirkmichael to Peel and back to Ballacraigne. But I do have a certificate (pre-prepared) saying I'd done it on the OEC! That was a good week, meeting the Governor, Milky Quayle, Tommy Robb,

etc and sitting with Norman Wisdom at the prizegiving. After the TT I modified the gearbox by Loctiting a stud into the adjuster and fitting a nut and lock washer behind the engine plate. Even if the nut disappears the chain should not alter too much with the adjuster locked in place. I fitted a new primary chain, dynamo chain and modern clutch plates so it frees better from standing; it used to stick with the earlier cork linings.

Then up north again to ride in the VMCC Northumbrian Gathering. We also rode the OEC in the Cotswolds, rode it as marshals in the Anglo-Dutch Veteran Rally, and on the Saundersfoot run.

In Ireland for the Mountains of Mourne run, I used my vintage V-twin AJS for the first day, but the front wheel bearings were failing so I started the second day on the OEC. We managed one mile! The 1000 miles from new Renold chain snapped with 10 fractured side plates! I don't know where they are made now but I've managed to find some old stock for the future. A call to a friend in Dublin produced a Japanese chain from Mountjoy Motorcycles. They're a brilliant firm who opened up especially to help me. This chain has now done around 6000 miles and I've never even had to adjust it.

With this fitted the bike romped through the Irish International Rally – and the following three! That year – 2005 – we also rode it to the Banbury Section VMCC Anniversary Run and for ten days in Brittany. Then the Coventry Parade and the Taverner's Trial. Since then I've changed the front wheel for a cast hub and brake borrowed from a Velocette KSS, which was OK, but now I've fitted a double-sided brake which should remain for the foreseeable

OEC INFO

>>THE OSBORNE ENGINEERING CO gave its initials to the bikes it built from 1901 through to 1954, although they were occasionally described as Odd Engineering Contraptions which reflected the company's innovative (some said eccentric) approach to motorcycling

>>OEC BUILT BIKES with Blackburne engines after WW1 and adopted the marque OEC-Blackburne in the

1920s. They also used engines from JAP, British Anzani, MAG, Villiers, Bradshaw and others, and marketed still more models as OEC-Atlanta and OEC-Temple; the latter through their association with record-breaker Claude Temple

>>OEC EXPERIMENTED with unusual forms of suspension, including their famous duplex steering system where the front frame rails extend forward, almost to the level of the

wheel hub. The not-quite centre hub system provided a very stable and comfortable ride at the cost of a vast turning circle and poor low speed manoeuvrability. Leaning over is an essential component of the required cornering technique!

>>WATER-COOLING, twin rear wheels, a feet forward riding position, a two-wheeled car and a bicycle made for two (the Duo, oddly) were among OEC's other experiments. By the late

1930s, however, their range had shrunk considerably and was a little more conventional

>>IN 1934 THE MATCHLESS engine joined the line-up and in 1937 OEC switched to using AJS OHV single cylinder motors in their sprung chassis (with 'normal' girder forked front suspension). Introduced in 1933, way ahead of its time, the rear suspension could be adjusted by hand to suit the conditions

future. The hubs were cast-iron Norton 7" bolt-up type. A central section was ferried up for me by a Velo racing friend, Nigel Lines. This takes sealed ball-races. The right-hand brake is Velo KSS, the left-hand one is a mirror image of this which I made from a damaged KSS rear brake; I just cut bits off and welded bits on! This has been a very satisfying on-going project, possibly now in

its final form, but with many more miles to cover. The suspension works well, although I have pre-loaded the springs with two old Velo headrace cups inside the top covers to stop the tyre hitting the mudguard. I fitted a prop stand as the centrestand is one of the worst I've ever used. I've also fitted an Enfield toolbox to the nearside so I have spare tubes, etc.

Now why did I decide to write this? Because I've just been on a VMCC Wrinkly Run and someone pointed to a new crack in the gearbox end cover. I can't see why it developed but it's cracked almost totally across!

No worries; Fred was there and insisted on giving me another end cover f.o.c. the following day. Did you ever hear of 70 year-old bikes with 55,000 miles having a warranty? Nice one, Fred. **Rc**



The owner may suggest that this was a simple rebuild, but the result is a neat machine with a difference!