

CIRCUS LIFE

AUSTRALIAN MOTORCYCLE RACERS
IN EUROPE IN THE 1950S

DON COX

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LEAD PLAYERS
Chapter 11

Jack Ahearn



The scene: roadside in an English Midland town. It's a Sunday afternoon in June 1955. Jack Ahearn to local policeman: "Officer, suppose you were the richest person in the world and you were starving for some lunch today, where would you go?" Policeman: "Sir, there might be something open in Birmingham." Ahearn: "I hope so officer; it's only the second biggest city in England!"



Jack Ahearn fettles one of his Nortons at Schotten in 1955. Opposite: IoM TT weigh-in '55. (Pictures by Bob Edmonds)

Some Continental Circus regulars reckoned they knew when Jack Ahearn was about to put in a “big” ride; he would, they observed, sit for ages staring at his bike. Ahearn rejects this as a crazy idea. “Looking at the bike? I just went because it beat the hell out of working. It was a pleasure to be paid to race motorbikes. We didn’t get paid much, but enough. I started with nothing and it was a battle to make money, but I kept making enough to eat.”

But that’s Jack, an odd mixture, often seeking to underplay how much effort he put into his racing. He claimed he didn’t take it too seriously, but he won three international events in his first European season, two in his first month on the Continental Circus. At Feldberg in July 1954, he was prepared to accept a crash after crossing the finish line to win and prove a point to another Australian. This was a man who had vowed a few years earlier he wasn’t going to crash again, after sustaining two broken wrists and a broken collarbone in a fall at Mount Panorama.

Ahearn was a late starter in international racing. He did not leave Australia for England until February 1954, at age 29, and he was at his best as an international in the mid 1960s. Always colourful, Ahearn was still railing against European promoters four decades after he last raced as a private entrant on the Continental Circus. When English journalist Mat Oxley phoned Ahearn in his 85th year, he found a “true blue, no-nonsense Aussie using ‘bloody’ at least once a sentence.”

The first time Ahearn was selected for the TT (in 1954), *New South Wales Motorcycling* ran a piece suggesting that he did not deserve a place in the Australian team. According to Bob Edmonds, Ahearn bumped into the editor of the New South Wales publication in December ’54 at Mildura. They were in the dining room of a hotel, having breakfast. Ahearn was about 180cm tall and a carpenter by trade. He walked across the room, stood over his critic, and told him he would piss on his grave!

Ahearn finished ninth in a rain-shortened 500 TT in his Isle of Man debut meeting, the best result for the three official team representatives. This would seem at odds with the idea he did not deserve his place. The same month as

"Yes, over there!" Jack Ahearn and Jack Forrest on a cold, wet day at Laxenburg, Austria in 1958. Forrest purchased at least one of Ahearn's Nortons for him in his early European career.





Jack Ahearn at the Waterworks on the Matchless G50 prototype during the 1958 IoM 500 TT.

the TT, Ahearn finished sixth in the Ulster 500 Grand Prix. It should have earned him his first world championship point, but the sport's governing body stripped the race of its world championship status. He had to wait another year to secure his first championship point at the 1955 West German 500 Grand Prix.

Ahearn did a fine "grumpy old man" double act whenever he met up with fellow 1954 debutante Bob Mitchell. Unlike Mitchell, Ahearn kept going back to Europe. He was chosen seven times as an official Australian Isle of Man TT representative – in 1954, '55, '58, and 1962-65 inclusively. He was on the Continental Circus in 1966 as well and last competed at the IoM in 1975.

He was a good international operator in the 1950s and an even better one in the 1960s, at an age when most would have retired from racing. In 1963 he was given a trial with the Geoff Duke-managed Gilera 500 team. In the years 1964-66, he recorded seven 500 Grand Prix podium finishes in three seasons and was, for a time, included in the Suzuki works team. This from a man who reckoned he didn't try too hard!

With Jack Ahearn, it pays to look at the record. He was sufficiently serious to lap the Isle of Man at 100mph on a Manx Norton in the early 1960s and become only the second Australian to win a world championship 500 Grand Prix. That was in 1964 at Imatra in Finland. Ahearn was the fourth oldest rider ever to win a premier-class Grand Prix at 39 years and 327 days. He went on to finish second in the 1964 world 500 championship, behind MV rider Mike Hailwood. So he was top private entrant and had recorded Australia's best finish to date in the world 500 championship, one place better than the third places achieved by Ken Kavanagh on works Moto Guzzis in 1954 and Bob Brown on a privately-entered Norton in 1959. Ahearn's official recognition was a medal from the FIM. He said he would wear his medal until someone bettered his result and true to his word wore it

PADDY DRIVER

Jack Ahearn would become good mates with Paddy Driver, whose black goatee beard made him readily identifiable in a pudding-basin helmet. Ahearn was fascinated by the high-speed transporters Driver built by cutting the rear cabin out of a Jaguar sedan and adding a station wagon body with barn-type rear doors. The result was a vehicle that could carry two people and two Nortons, and cruise at 130km/h. It was just the ticket for commuting to one-day English race meetings. Eric Hinton recalls that in 1966 when his van broke its gearbox in Europe, Driver's Jaguar comfortably accommodated his machines and towed his caravan at highway speeds.

to motorcycle race meetings on a leather strand around his neck until Wayne Gardner won the 500 crown in 1987. After that, it went into a draw in his dresser.

Apart from his victory in an all-private entrant race in the Finnish Grand Prix, he beat future multiple world champion Phil Read to finish second when both were on British singles in the West German 500 Grand Prix at Solitude. A picture of Ahearn with the winner's laurels at Imatra gives the look of a man who's done something tough; broad but slightly forced smile, crew-cut hair, five o'clock shadow and oil stains on his face, black leathers, black skivvy and grime-stained hands.

In late April 1965, a skinny Londoner named Barry Sheene was given time off school to mechanic for American rider Tony Woodman at the Austrian Grand Prix in Salzburg. Sheene was just 14 and a half. A quarter of a century later, he recalled admiring Jack Ahearn at the time, as a senior private entrant. In 1998, Ahearn was feted when he returned to Europe for the Centennial Classic meeting at Assen.

As Kel Carruthers said in the Foreword to this book, Jack Ahearn was one of Australia's best ever riders. He was still winning major races, such as the main race at Bathurst in 1969, in his mid 40s. Two years earlier, Ahearn had won the Bathurst 250 TT race on Carruthers' Honda 250-four. Australia's second world champion, Tom Phillis, had numerous domestic battles with Ahearn in 1957. "I admired Jack Ahearn's guts. He rode smoothly enough to suit his big frame and I just couldn't pass him," Phillis said.

Carruthers was still singing Ahearn's praises 40 years after Jack's last major win. "I had the most respect for Jack Ahearn. He was just about the epitome of a private entrant. The only factory bike he had was the four-cylinder "Whispering Death" Suzuki 250 and it nearly killed him. Jack was a good guy. Good rider, safe. I was asked recently by a US magazine what rider did I respect the most and I said Jack Ahearn. (My wife) Jan couldn't believe it, but he was the true privateer. He worked with his own money and own bikes. Only got hurt once and that was because he rode that Suzuki. Other than that, he would have come out of it with no major injuries. What more can you do? He was good enough for a factory ride and never really got one. I suppose he would have been bitching all the time at the team manager about something. In 1966, I went to Chimay or Mettet and didn't have a ride or didn't have a start in that race, so I was out giving pit signals. And there was a hell of a race going on with three or four guys going for the lead. On the last lap, someone pulled out of the slipstream and beat Jack by about a wheel. He abused that guy up and down the paddock!"

Ahearn was very much a character of the 1950s. Would he fit in to modern Grand Prix racing if he was reinvented today? It's hard to imagine. Too tall. Perhaps too old in riding his first Grand Prix at age 29. Probably too outspoken to fit into a world of sponsor meet-and-greet sessions, news grabs to camera and sanitised team press releases. He

claimed to have held one race promoter out of his office window for renegeing on a deal. And he just had to be involved in the Dutch TT riders' strike. It resulted in a six-month international suspension for the first half of 1956, so Jack stayed home.

He travelled again in 1958, as part of a push of new and returning internationals heading into a European scene almost devoid of works riders. It would be Ahearn's last year in Europe in the decade, but not for lack of success. He finished third in the 500 race at Imola at the beginning of April and by June he was riding a factory bike, when Associated Motor Cycles hired him to debut the Matchless G50 racer at the Isle of Man. It was AMC's long-awaited replacement for the twin-cylinder Matchless G45 as a machine for private entrants. Selecting Ahearn to ride the machine was superb irony, given his threat to convert a Norton to a chain-driven overhead camshaft arrangement.

Ahearn was born in at Bondi on October 8, 1924, son of an English-born show promoter who passed on to his son an interest in "flash" cars. Jack said the family moved to Lithgow, after their house in the famed beach suburb was demolished to make space for extensions to a pub. He rode in his first motorcycle race as a teenager in 1940, but world events meant he did little racing for the next six years. As he told English journalist Vic Willoughby in a 1954 interview at the Isle of Man, he served three years in the RAAF, including time in New Guinea, and did a carpentry course when he was de-mobbed.

The name Ahearn first figured in domestic road-racing results in 1948, when he was second in the Junior Clubman's TT at Bathurst on a Velocette. The following year, he rode an AJS 7R brought back to Australia by IoM representative Eric McPherson and at the 1950 Easter Bathurst meeting he took two podiums in the New South Wales Grand Prix – second on the AJS to Ernie Ring in the 350 race and second on a Velocette to Laurie Hayes in the Unlimited event. He began 1951 by winning the Victorian Unlimited Grand Prix at Ballarat on the Velocette.

Paddy Driver and Jack Ahearn take refreshments in the Sachsenring paddock, 1958.



But a crash at McPhillamy Park sidelined him for nine months. Sitting in Bathurst hospital with a pair of broken wrists, he uttered his famous vow not to crash again.

Ahearn had a new Norton 500 for 1953, purchased from Hazell and Moore in Sydney. He insists it was never a good machine and legend has it he rode the bike from Sydney to Bathurst with no lights. In the interview with Willoughby, he credited Harry Hinton Snr with boosting both his machine's performance and his morale. At Easter 1953 he rode it to fourth place in New South Wales 500 TT behind hot company in Hinton, Maurie Quincey and future IoM TT winner Rod Coleman. Impressed with the experience some of his rivals had gained in Europe, Ahearn nominated for a place in the 1954 Australian IoM team and was chosen alongside Laurie Boulter and Quincey. He postponed his marriage by 12 months to make the trip. Jack Forrest financed one of Ahearn's two Nortons and he sailed on February 10 aboard the P&O turbine-electric ship *SS Strathaird*, with freelance rider Dick Thomson as one of his travelling mates. As Jack tells it, he had enough spare cash to buy himself one daily treat, a Coca-Cola.

Ahearn hit the ground running in the lead up to the TT. During May he was second in the 500 event at Marseille (beaten only by a Gilera four) and third in the 350 race behind two works AJS machines. Then he won the 500 race at Bordeaux and the 350 class at Zandvoort. "I won a couple of the first races I raced in France and Holland, and I thought I was going to be a real contender, but they caught up to me," he said.

However, the 1954 TT began under a pall for the Australian team when the only man on the team with previous IoM experience, Laurie Boulter, was killed in a road accident before official practice began. Australia's representative to the Auto Cycle Union, Arthur Simcock, then had to make two decisions –select a replacement team member from the other Australians at the meeting and choose a new team captain between TT debutants Ahearn and Quincey. Simcock added Keith Bryen to the team and dashed Ahearn's hopes by giving Quincey the captaincy.

Ahearn and Quincey shared a fuelling pit for the race, and that had unexpected consequences. It was a seven-lap race and they agreed Quincey would stop for fuel at the end of the third lap and Ahearn after the fourth lap. However, conditions were so bad that the race was stopped after four laps, so Quincey made a fuel stop and Ahearn did not, with Ahearn taking ninth place from his countryman by a fraction of a second. The same pit-stop strategy

FELDBERG-RENNEN

Here's the eye-witness account from the 1954 Feldberg-Rennen, from Hansjoerg Meister, then a local school boy. "In the 500 race, Jack Ahearn took over the lead in the ninth lap, but Quincey remained very close in second position. On the home stretch they were exactly on the same level. Jack remained at full throttle although there was a right turn directly after the finishing line. Officially, they measured the same time for both drivers, but Jack was slightly ahead. Then happened what had to happen! Jack was thrown off the racetrack at 100km/h. He landed in a rain puddle and slid a couple of metres on the ground. Fortunately, he remained uninjured and could pick up his two cups: 500 first rank and 350 third rank. Quincey won two cups as well: 500 second rank and 350 second rank. Keith Campbell was fourth in the 350. The winner of the 350 class was August Hobl on the works DKW."

The poor 1954 crowd led the organisers to cancel the 1955 meeting, so Ahearn won the last solo race ever held on the circuit. The cancellation in turn caused another drama, because the Deutscher Motorsport Verband did not pay the riders who had been contracted to ride.



Betty and Jack Ahearn with Dick Thomson, pictured during a stop-over in Adelaide on the voyage to England in 1955.

affected the overall race result, with Norton's Ray Amm winning the race in a non-stop ride after Gilera's Geoff Duke stopped for fuel at the end of the third lap.

Ahearn was sixth in the Ulster 500 Grand Prix. In the next two classics, Ahearn was in the top 10 in three out of four starts, finishing ninth in the Belgian 350 Grand Prix, seventh in the Belgian 500 Grand Prix, and ninth in the Dutch 500 TT. A group of Australian private entrants then drove west into Germany, for the Feldberg-Rennen. It was round three of the 1954 German championship on an 11.5km road course around one of the country's most famous mountains. Ahearn was at the time still upset that Quincey had not stayed on at Spa-Francorchamps to attend Gordon Laing's funeral.

Riders with previous experience at Feldberg knew to expect a good reception, including accommodation in the local villages. But three days of rain ruined the hopes of the town and sanctioning body the Deutscher Motorsport Verband (DMV) for a repeat of the 1953 bumper crowd of 150,000, with only 30,000 people braving the conditions. Ahearn finished third in the 350 race and put in a memorable ride in the 13-lap 500 event.

Quincey led the race at the halfway point, but Ahearn caught up and they engaged in a head-to-head battle. As the last few laps counted down, Ahearn saw something in the circuit design and the day's conditions that might help him. Riders had to shut off before the finishing line, to negotiate the next bend. Ahearn realised that he could win the race if he didn't shut off before the flag. There was just one problem; a pond of rain water had formed on the outside of the first corner. Local teenager Hansjoerg Meister witnessed the resulting spill. Ahearn won the race in a virtual photo finish, but took a fall into muddy water! He later delighted in re-telling the story, with suitable embellishment on the size of the body of water.

Ahearn stayed on in Germany for the next fortnight, finishing ninth in the West German 350 Grand Prix at Solitude. This meeting was a complete contrast to the Feldberg-Rennen, with rain giving way blazing heat that melted the tarmac and 500,000 people attending. Next up, Ahearn was fourth in the Norisring 500 international,

UNDERSTANDING JACK

Chris Mitchell knows Jack Ahearn better than most. In the last 40 years, this no-nonsense car wholesaler has been Jack's helper at races, Castrol Six-Hour co-rider, employer and travelling mate on motorcycle adventures including the Centennial Classic at Assen. But Mitchell struggles to define what makes Jack tick.

Ahearn tuned 87 in 2011 and though healthy for his age, he stays around his long-time adopted home of Lismore. But in the days when Jack was a regular at the annual Old Timer motorcyclists' dinner, Mitchell would collect him at Central Railway Station, act as chauffeur and provide a place to stay.

"Jack is hard to understand," Mitchell said. "He's self-opinionated and self-motivated. In Europe, he stuck up for blokes – a protector for guys who were out there going for it. He has a good personality with people, but when he goes off, he goes off! He's a bloke's bloke, not interested in officials. The organiser would not pay at a race in Switzerland, so Jack held the guy out of his window...held him by his tie. Jack was banned for life in Switzerland for that. Then the Mercedes-Benz crashed at Le Mans in June 1955 and all road racing was banned in Switzerland, so it didn't matter! Another promoter wouldn't pay, so Jack grabbed the keys to his Porsche. He paid."

Ahearn did the rant better than most. Mitchell recalls travelling with Jack to the Isle of Man in 1975, when Ahearn sponsored Rob Madden on a Yamaha. "Word came out during the meeting that the organisers were planning to discontinue the tradition of awarding replica trophies. Jack got hold of a little reporter from English *Motor Cycle News* and let rip. He told everyone within 300 metres of his displeasure, how we hadn't come halfway around the world to ride for a lousy certificate. He had this reporter wanting to disappear into the ground.

"A year or two before that at Bathurst, the organisers wouldn't let our Ducati 750SS run in the Production race. They said you can't fit two people on the seat, it's not a touring bike. So got Jack got me and said, 'we'll f-ing well show them!' We got the two of us on the seat. It wasn't comfortable – we aren't little blokes – but they had to let the Ducati start."

Mitchell said that as a racer, Ahearn was always keen to provide a benchmark for up and coming riders, and to race at every opportunity. He told one protégé in the 1970s, "if there's a dog fight on, you be in it! "Jack was very particular about going to club races," Mitchell said. "He'd say we had to get some bikes and go to the race, adding that, 'you've got to go where the kids are'."

Ahearn was feted all around at Assen in 1998, but he was more comfortable with simple pleasures. Mitchell told the other Australians present on the second day of this huge historic gathering that Jack was happy. "He's got his ciggies, he's had a drink and he's found some women to talk to."

After Ahearn closed his motorcycle business in Ryde, he went to work for Mitchell at Chris's used car yard on Parramatta Road, Haberfield in Sydney's inner west. The days in the car yard gave Mitchell a bank of great memories and hilarious stories. "Jack came to work for me three days a week, but sometimes he was there six days a week and sometimes he was missing. He became part of the furniture. He was the best salesman I ever had. There were no troubles, no lies to customers. Just plenty of laughs! Plenty of fights too, but we got over those.

"Jack had a great selling technique. If a couple came in, he would sell to the woman – especially if she

seemed to like the car and the guy was wavering. Then he would take the guy just far enough to one side that he was half out of ear shot and say, 'you're going to get the best fuck you've ever had tonight if you buy this car'. You'd see the couple the next morning with big smiles when they came to collect the car.

"Jack would sell one or two cars a week that way, as a funny man. If I tried to do it I'd get hit! He has a good sense of humour, but you have to know it.

"He's just Jack." NB: Chris Mitchell was not related to Ahearn's life-long mate Bob Mitchell.

this time two places behind Quincey. One week later again at Villefranche-de-Rouergue, he was fourth on his 350 ahead of Keith Campbell. He then had to wait another month to again taste top-three success, finishing third on his 500 in the Eilenreide Rennen at Hannover.

Those results encouraged Ahearn to try again in 1955, travelling with new wife Betty. She would soon create her own niche, as paddock hairdresser to the Australians. Ahearn was selected in the TT team along with Quincey and newcomer Bob Brown. He took top-six placings at Imola and Hockenheim before heading to the Island. Once there, he found a stand-in helper in Bob Edmonds, who was taking a break from travelling with Keith Campbell to go touring on his road-registered Matchless clubman racer.

Ahearn finished 10th in the 350 TT and offered Edmonds a lift back to Birmingham after the races, so Edmonds loaded the Matchless into Ahearn's van for the trip. It was Sunday afternoon by the time the trio drove east from Liverpool, with Jack keen to stop off for some late lunch. But it seemed no pubs or cafés were open. Peeved at this situation, Ahearn stopped in one town and asked the local copper where he might find a café. Edmonds recalled that Jack had an unusual manner. Ahearn: "Officer, suppose you were the richest person in the world and you were starving for some lunch today, where would you go?" Policeman: "Sir, there might be something open in Birmingham." Ahearn: "I hope so officer, it's only the second biggest city in England!"

Nürburgring was the venue for the 1955 West German Grand Prix on June 26. A tough assignment, but Jack scored his first world championship point by finishing sixth in the 500 Grand Prix and a week later he was seventh in the Belgian 500 Grand Prix. Thirteen days after the race in Belgium, Ahearn was part of the riders' strike at the Dutch 350 TT. His 500 broke a valve spring trying to keep up with works bikes in the main race. The aftermath of the strike would affect Ahearn's future in Europe. Racing in some countries was already subject to cancellations, following the Le Mans 24-Hour tragedy. But racing continued in Germany, with Ahearn logging three strong finishes, beginning with fourth place (and first Norton 500 rider) in the Solitude-Rennen on July 24. Ahearn did even better in the Norisring-Rennen the following Sunday. According race reports of the day, he provided a fierce challenge to race winner BMW's Walter Zeller, and finished ahead of two other BMWs ridden by Ernst Riedelbauch and Tony McAlpine. Interesting, at both Solitude and the Norisring Ahearn rode Geoff Duke's personal BSA 350 to a pair of seventh placings.

But there were no more races for Ahearn for more than a month. It wasn't for lack of trying and at one stage he took a return flight out of Milan, chasing starts. Instead, the Ahearns camped for three weeks by Lake Como with the other Australian private entrants. The final straw came when the Italian Grand Prix organisers offered him an entry but no starting money. He drove north to a meeting at Hannover on September 11, where he repeated his 1954 result of third place in the 500 race. Back in England, Ahearn rounded out his year with visits to Scarborough,

Aintree and Brands Hatch. He had competed in more than a dozen meetings, even allowing for the time in the Isle of Man and by Lake Como. The Ahearns were already home when the FIM's sporting commission voted to suspend the Dutch TT strikers.

The suspensions were partially lifted two months early to allow riders to compete in non-championship events. Ahearn celebrated with a treble at Mt Druitt on May 6, 1956. In 1957 Ahearn had a successful domestic season with his Nortons and Eric Hinton's NSU 250, winning the Australian 350 Grand Prix at Bandiana, scoring a 250-350-500 treble in the New South Wales Grand Prix at Bathurst, and winning nine races across the four Mt Druitt meetings. He also set an Australian 250cm³ speed record at Coonabarabran. However, in the last Mt Druitt meeting of the year, Ahearn found himself upstaged by rising local star Tom Phillis, as well as returning internationals the Hinton brothers and Bob Brown.

In 1958 Ahearn mounted another European tour, beginning at Easter with an impressive third place behind two works MVs in the 500 race at Imola, then won the 350 class and took third position in the 500 class at a rain-lashed Laxenburg-Rennen in Austria. In the first four days of May he was third in the non-championship Austrian 350 Grand Prix and fifth in the 350 class at St Wendel.

Ahearn was racing private Nortons to this point. Come the Isle of Man, AMC rolled out its prototype single-cylinder G50 racer and race boss Jock West hired Ahearn to debut it.

Gearbox problems saw Ahearn finish 29th in the 500 TT, with an average speed barely faster than he'd recorded on an AMC-supplied AJS to finish 17th in the 350 event. However, the new machine soon showed its true potential when Ahearn was 11th in the Dutch 500 TT and runner-up to Paddy Driver at Cadours. Just a week later, on July 20, Ahearn was ninth in the West German 350 Grand Prix at Nürburgring. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, he was fifth in the non-championship East German 350 Grand Prix on the AJS and eighth in the 500 race on the Matchless. His last successes for the year were at Zandvoort (scene of one of his 1954 victories) on August 31, scoring second place in the 350 race and fifth in the 500.

Jack Ahearn's European adventure was over, only to be revived in 1962. Not a bad career for a rider who would later say: "it's lucky we travelled, because I wasted the best years of my life". It could have been worse. "Europe was beautiful in the '50s. You could park or camp anywhere. The police were nice. The public was madly enthusiastic, chasing autographs. There were wall-to-wall crowds, but it was the organisers who were making the money, not us. We raced every weekend for six months, starting in March. If there was a mid-week hillclimb, we'd do that as well if we could."

Ahearn had a motorcycle dealership in Ryde after he left the Continental Circus and continued racing into the 1970s. He sold used cars for his mate Chris Mitchell for a few years, and in 1976 moved to Lismore on the NSW North Coast. He still has 13 of his 15 IoM TT silver replicas. The other two? A few years ago, the local golf club wanted some trophies, so Jack took two replicas to the local trophy maker and had them rebadged.

Betty Ahearn's Diary

In 1955, Jack Ahearn made his second trip foray to the Continental Circus with wife Betty. They had married on January 22 and left for Europe two weeks later. Betty said she was seasick all the way. As part of the Circus, she soon found a niche as paddock hairdresser to the colonial riders.

Betty kept a diary in a red book embossed "My Trip". It's brief and to the point, less than 5000 words in total. But it colours in some of the "other side" of life on the road, as she chronicles the social activities, her friendship with Geoff Duke's wife Pat, the shopping trips, and how the Australians filled their days by Lake Como soon after the Dutch TT riders' strike.



Recently married Jack and Betty on the Douglas Promenade, before the 1955 IoM TT.

The strike makes an interesting case study, as Betty does not mention it at all. But she does reveal that she and Jack attended the prize giving that evening at the invitation of 500 race winner Geoff Duke and his wife Pat, and that Gilera team management shared champagne with them. This was the same day Jack was part of events that would see both the arch privateer and the reigning world champion suspended for the first six months of 1956.

There are unexpected gems, such as city of Nuremberg hosting Betty and another Australian woman to dinner and giving them flowers – after they arrived unannounced to a supposed men-only riders’ function. There’s the day Jack and Betty went water-skiing on Lake Iseo in Italy with Ken Kavanagh. And the bold visit to the NSU factory at Neckersulm to ask (unsuccessfully) if the German company would fit one of its beautifully crafted aluminium fairings to a British BSA racer. The BSA belonged to none other than Geoff Duke. Betty simply describes it as Geoff’s BSA 350.

A telling note says Jack is pleased to pocket £50 as well as receiving a silver replica for tenth place in the Isle of Man Junior TT, with a swath of works bikes in front of him. It’s June 8 and he’s been in the Island since May 18. Betty even mentions the supplementary prizes provided by local business houses at some non-championship meetings, including kitchen appliances and quality luggage.

Other times, the length of stays is revealing. Two weeks at Dieberg and another two weeks at Hannover waiting for the next paid appearance, as well as the long stay at Lake Como in August. Here are edited extracts, with the author’s additions in brackets.

Tuesday February 15 – The boat sailed at 11 at night (from Melbourne) in pouring rain, with Keith Campbell and Bob Edmonds on board.

March 7, Aden – Bought typewriter, electric shaver, dressing gown, sunglasses.

March 10 – Arrived at Suez on the 10th and it was boiling hot. Then had to get in convoy with about 15 other ships to

Friday June 10 – Senior 500. Not very good day for the boys. Nearly all the boys from Rose Villa retired. Dick fell off, also Maurie – very bad. I looked after the baby (a young Ray Quincey) while Betty went to the hospital. Went playing golf at Castletown with Geoff and Pat twice. We left IoM on the Sunday morning 11 o'clock and arrived in Liverpool at 3. Took Bob Edmonds with us as he had been good help to Jack. Arrived at Stormonts. Went on our merry way as far as Coventry, where we cooked the meal and slept. On way to Dover next day and caught midnight ferry to Dunkirk.

June 15-16 – Arrived at Dunkirk at 4 o'clock in the morning and drove on to within five miles of Armentieres, where we stopped for breakfast. Had a little look at Lille.

Belgian border 12.00 on Thursday. Drove through Belgium and arrived at German border at 9.30 Thursday night. Slept over looking Hoefen on our way to Nürburgring (for the West German Grand Prix). Arrived at Nurburg at lunch time and found camping spot. Jack did a few laps and we went back to camp. Bob (Brown) and girls (Margot and Dot) arrived next morning. Had a big clean up and then walked to a little on shop village. Geoff drove us into Adenau on Tuesday, then took us to dinner. We played skittles – under a huge hotel – with all the German race promoters. We walked up to the castle – not much left. Taken out to dinner with J. Hill Castrol. Lovely dinner. 8-12 today (Thursday) is first official practice. We are at present in an enclosure like a prison yard with nothing but the bikes and vans. Trucks everywhere. Jack sixth in Senior and 10th in Junior. (Race June 26)

Left Monday arrived Belgium (Francorchamps) Tuesday. Not much of a place. A long way from town. Jack was seventh and ninth in Junior and Senior. Went into town for weigh-in at the Casino in Spa. Then to play a couple of rounds of golf with Dot; then met Geoff, Jack and Bob and played beg golf. Also had a day in town with Margot and Dot for Margot's birthday; brought blouse and souvenirs. We left Francorchamps July 4 and drove on our way to Schotten, which was a nice drive and found a pretty spot and only a small town. Terrible weather. Rained till race day on and off. Nothing exciting happened. Jack fell in a ditch and sprained his ankle and of course could not have a good go at the races, as his foot was too sore.

Betty Ahearn by Lake Como with Ian Anderson.



Left Schotten Monday (after we went to presentation on Sunday night) at midday on our way to Holland. Left on July 10 and stayed the night on the way up to Arnhem, which is a lovely place. Arrived at Assen early Tuesday morning. The circuit is about five miles from the town, so had to get transport into town. First day with (Ceylonese rider) Rally Dean and wife. Pat and Geoff arrived. Pat and I went into Groningen for the day – bought new coat, skirt and sports outfit. Geoff picked us up and we had drinks and drove back for afternoon practice. Jack blew up his 350 Norton so he had to use Richie's bike instead. Went yachting and swimming.

Friday July 15 – After weigh-in, went with Pat and Geoff to Poterswolde, had a lovely time. Races on Sat. Jack blew his bike up. Then went to the presentation with Geoff and Pat, Geoff won the Senior. Had champagne given to us by Gilera.

Sunday went yachting with Ken (Kavanagh) and Isabella, Bob (Brown), Margot, Dot and Reg (Armstrong). Came home then packed up Monday ready to leave for Solitude. Stopped at a few places for souvenirs. Bought wooden shoes, etc. Drove on and off all day till reached the autobahn. Then Peter Murphy, Bob and us slept the night and continued on our way to Solitude race track. Arrived yesterday Tuesday 19 in afternoon for tea.

Went into town Wed 20. Had a lovely day with Margot and June (Murphy). Loved Stuttgart. All modern. Bought little odds and ends, going in again tomorrow. Bought clippers. Camped at circuit near Leonberg. Went into Stuttgart Wednesday and Friday and had a nice day looking around. Hitch hiked in and caught a bus back. Went into Leonburg, small village, on Thursday.

Jack rode Geoff's BSA 350 for the first time. Came seventh in Junior and fifth in Senior. (The actual result in the Solitude-Rennen 500 race was fourth.)

Won lovely suitcase and beaut Mix Master. We left Solitude with Jacky Wood and went to Neckarsulm (near Heilbronn, north of Stuttgart).

Neckarsulm, July 26 – Stayed at the NSU hotel at Neckarsulm for the night. Reg Armstrong was there also. Only small place. Jacky and Jack went to NSU factory to see if they could get streamlining for the BSA. No go. So we left Tuesday and drove to Nuremberg.

Arrived Nuremberg Wednesday. Bob and the girls had arrived. The camping area was situated on a lake opposite the huge coliseum and out the front of the big arena where Hitler used to have his big talks. This also was the circuit. Jack rode the BSA and came seventh once more and, on Norton in the Senior, came second. Won binoculars and bottle of brandy, also a cup. We went into town, lovely shopping centre. Also went to a dinner and was guest of the town. Only men supposed to be there, but Dot and I arrived so they had to have us anyway. A dinner was given by the Burgermeister for the riders. They gave us a bunch of snap peas. Drove to Karlsruhe, where we had our 350 fixed.

August 1, Karlsruhe – Had a few days to have motor fixed. Camped on the camping ground. Bought Dad a present and broaches for the aunties, also a tea set. Jack bought a projector. Stayed till Friday and left late afternoon on our way to Italy. We drove through Switzerland, camped there Friday night after driving through Austria. Came over Julier Pass also Maloja Pass and drove into the town of St Moritz. Had a look at shops, very expensive. Drove on to Italy. Called at Varenna to the Andersons. Keith Campbell was there. No-one else home, so drove through to Lecco to our camping spot at the side of Lake Como. Went to Mandello del Lario, called at Guzzi factory.

Lake Como, Monday – Washed and sent telegrams to Ireland. Tuesday we drove Jack to Malpensa Airport (Milan). Wednesday washed and swam in the lake. Went to Lecco shopping on Thursday. Swam Friday. Saturday Lecco shopping. Jack came home Tuesday afternoon after sleeping at airport Monday night. Wednesday washed. Ken and Isabella visited us, and drove Dot and myself to town for shopping.

Saturday, August 20 – We went to Bergamo to Isabella's place. They then took us water skiing at Sarnico (on Lake Iseo). I'm not much good at it. Had a lovely dinner and came back home about 9 o'clock. Sunday nothing happens.

A day out at Spa-Francorchamps in early July 1955 for Betty, Dot and Margot, to celebrate Margot's birthday.



Monday sunbaking. Tuesday went to Moto Guzzi – walked to village. Wednesday went to Moto Guzzi with Dot, saw Mrs Anderson, came home after shopping in Lecco. Thursday raining (at this point Betty stopped recording the date).

Left at weekend to go to Monza. Arrived there and left Dick and Larry at Lecco to follow. Wouldn't pay start money, so we left on our way to Hannover. Drove to Bellagio and bought shoes for Len's baby. Then drove on our way through Switzerland. Had a look over Brenner Pass. Shocking pass, to Switzerland then on to Germany and Hannover.

Stayed two weeks at the Hannover circuit in the middle of the park. Lovely place on the outskirts of the town. Bought an orange suit and Jack bought two pairs of shoes. Met an English couple (army person based in Germany) and then went to the NAFF stores and pictures. And drove like mad on our way back to Scarborough, through Dunkirk, where we were made to wait as my passport was out of date. Then on our way through London up to Pat and Geoff's place at Southport. Lovely house. Went for day to Liverpool for shopping, also had a lovely time in town at Southport. Pat bought suit and skirt. Pat and Geoff's house three storeys, right at the back of the ocean.

From there we went to Aintree, where we stayed (Pat and me) for one night at a villa right on the strip. Then we went on our way to Brands Hatch, where we stayed one night. Then to Birmingham to Stormonts, where I went for a trip to Paris with Barry, as he had to go on business and I hadn't been to Paris. So Jack stayed behind, packed the suitcases and things in the truck and took them to Tilbury. (Betty then describes her trip to Paris trip.) We left just as it was getting light from the airport at Birmingham. Arrived at Orly, then drove to Hotel Pavilion, where I had a room booked though Doug Ellis, who took the plane over. Then Barrie came and took me to see Eifel Tower, Seine River and Pigalle, where he left me for a night out. (Pigalle being the red-light district.) He put me in a cab and I went back to the hotel to have an early night, but ended up going on a tour of night clubs with all the plane passengers and a very nice evening. Then the next day went for a look at the shops and took some photos. Then Sunday night flew home to Birmingham, to Jack and the boys.

Betty adds that Keith Campbell and Bob Edmonds picked them up in Birmingham and took them to Tilbury, where they left for home on the Oronsay.