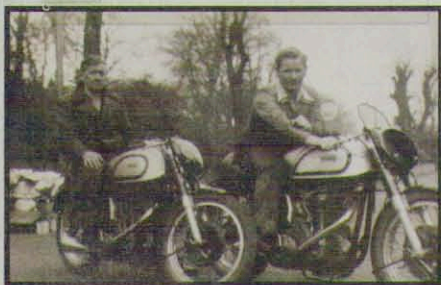
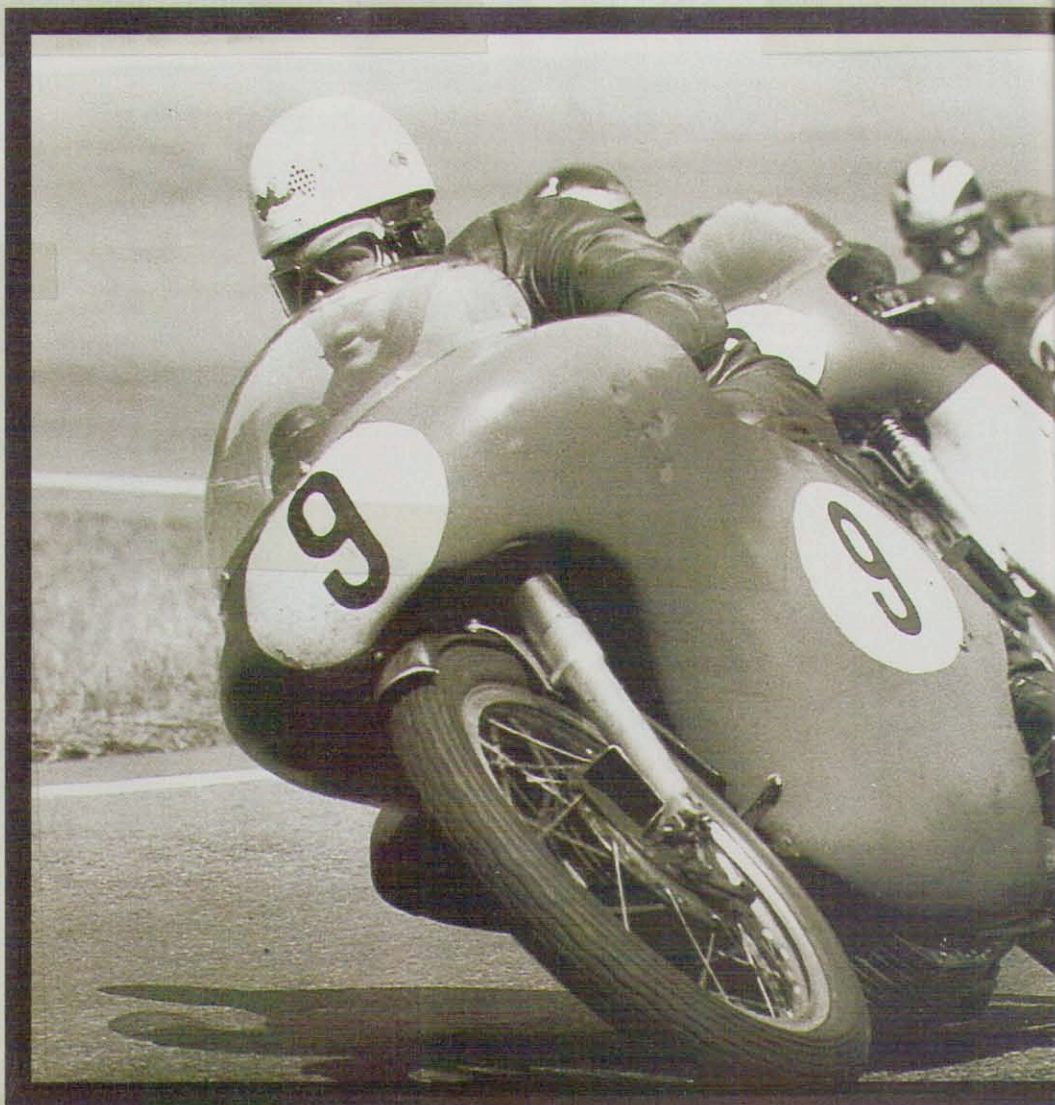


'You had to be a bit  
of a rat, otherwise  
you wouldn't

# Survive'

Until the arrival of Wayne Gardner, no Australian rider had done better in the 500 world championships than Jack Ahearn. He was a key part of the Continental Circus - a band of racers, living like gypsies and fighting a constant battle for survival, on and off the track

Words: Mat Oxley. Photography: Ahearn archive.



**Main:** leading Paddy Driver and Phil Read at the West German GP at the Solitude circuit, near Stuttgart, in 1964 – Ahearn finished second to Hailwood's MV, ahead of Phil Read on a Matchless. **Centre:** the Nurburgring paddock, 1955. **Anti-clockwise from top left:** on a Kawasaki H1R Triple at Bathurst in 1971; 1955, Ahearn (left) with his two Manx Nortons and a mate; foot down, dirt track style, over the cobbles at Feldburg; 1967 outside his bike shop in Sydney, Australia; 1964 Isle of Man TT, at Signpost corner on the bike he nicknamed Whispering Death, Suzuki's 250cc square-four; new in Europe, with the Manx Norton

## “ I’LL RIDE ANYTHING WITH WHEELS FOR MONEY ”

In 1964 Ahearn was offered a ride on Suzuki’s notoriously seize-prone square-four 250, undoubtedly one of history’s most malevolent race bikes.

“It was that unreliable they couldn’t get anybody to ride the thing. They tried to get Hailwood to ride it, but his old man said ‘No way’. When Suzuki asked me, I said I’ll ride anything with wheels on it for money. They used to give me 150 quid a race [about £2500 in today’s money]. It was danger money.

“I nicknamed the bike whispering death as a joke, but it was very close to that. It threw me down the road a few times and I got knocked out twice. You’d be whistling along at a million miles an hour and it’d seize up, but you got no warning because you couldn’t hear the engine [hence the choice of nickname].

Ahearn didn’t like two-strokes. “I had absolute contempt for anything smaller than a 350; if it was a two-stroke, to me it was a bloody lawnmower. I could ride my Norton all bloody year and not touch it, but with the two-strokes you had to be swapping barrels, swapping pistons. I didn’t want any of that silly caper. But they were good, quick bikes. They were okay to ride – it didn’t make much difference to me – I just wrung its neck and that was it.”

was usually garbage. They were a bit slow but dead reliable. The first time I hired a tuner was in 1965 when I was crook from a crash. I asked [famed Manx tuner] Ray Petty to tickle up my 500. I got to the Isle of Man, did my first practice lap and the bike was going like a bloody rocket. I thought ‘Holy Jesus! This is good’. Then on the second lap of the Senior a valve spring dropped off.”

In spite of all the difficulties, Ahearn loved life on the road, barnstorming from one town to the next with an adventure round every corner.

“There was always little meetings going on. You’d be in Spain one weekend, Italy the next. The grands prix meetings didn’t pay much at all, so if I could get a start somewhere else for a bit more money, I’d go there. And because there’d be no MVs, you’d be better off anyway because you could never beat an MV.

“I got tired of the bloody MV riders. God, you’d swear there was no one else in the world racing a motorbike. All the news was always about MV – but there were 30 other blokes racing who never get a mention.

“You’d could compare the way we lived to gypsies. We had a Thames van to live in. There was enough room for a bed and two bikes and a gas bottle and a stove, that’s all you wanted. It was a good life though. We Continental Circus blokes never made much money, so we’d help one another. The first one in from the race had to put the kettle on, then you’d all sit outside his tent and have a coffee.”

At the end of each season Ahearn would travel home by sea. “Some blokes stayed in Britain and got a job but I couldn’t take the winter so I went home. The boat trip took six weeks either way. I used to like it – we’d play deck tennis in the day and housey-housey [bingo] at night.”

**“I got tired of the MV riders. All the news was always about MV but there were 30 other blokes racing...”**

Ahearn’s spirit was fiercely independent. Although he did briefly race Suzuki’s square-four 250, he insists he was never interested in being a factory rider. “If you were a factory rider you were told where to go, when to practice, how to practice. I didn’t want any of that. I owned my own bikes and took them where I wanted. I was totally independent. If I didn’t feel like practicing, I didn’t bother, I’d have a lie down instead. I never owed anything to anyone. I was ten years in Europe before I won a GP because it took me a lot of years to get away from the poverty – to have good bikes, a spare engine, a good truck.”

Ahearn’s only GP win came at Imatra in August 1964 and it was partly thanks to the fact that the all-conquering MV team didn’t bother turning up.

“Mike [Hailwood] had already won the championship so there were no MVs. And I finally had enough money to buy a five-speed gearbox. I put that in and it was a piece of cake – I thought ‘Damn, I wish I’d had this earlier’.”

By the end of 1966 Ahearn had had enough of the itinerant lifestyle. He travelled home, opened a motorcycle shop in Sydney and finally began to make some proper money. But he did not stop racing altogether, he still made occasional outings at Bathurst and the Castrol 6 Hour. His final race, on a Norton Commando at the 1975 6 Hour – didn’t end well, due to an old head injury he had sustained in Europe.

“I was going real hard, too hard for the condition I was in,” recalls Ahearn, who was 51 years old at the time. “I blacked out for a second, then came back to reality with the bike sideways, so I had to jump off.”

Ahearn wasn’t badly hurt, but he wisely decided it was the right time to call a halt to his extraordinary career.

