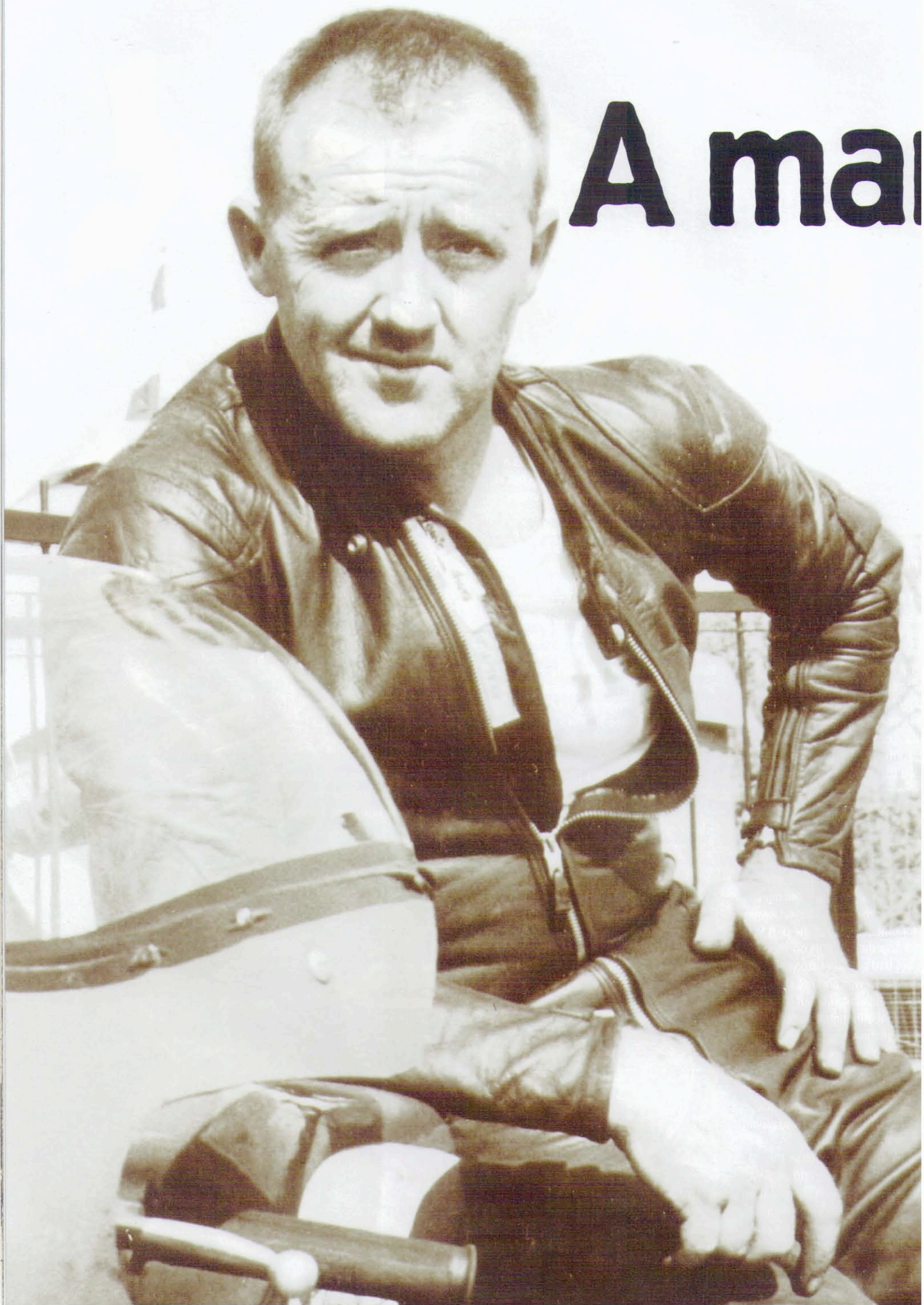


A man



for all reasons

Jack Ahearn

Story: Michael Robinson

A close friend of the writer's emigrated to Australia in 1966 and has fond memories of sharing a four berth cabin in steerage on a P&O liner with a laconic Aussie named Jack Ahearn.

The latter had just come first in the British 500cc Championships and two years earlier had come second in the World 500cc Motorcycle Championships. In both instances, Jack achieved these lofty goals as a privateer, something that is simply not possible now and was almost as impossible then. As Jack says of those days, 'If you had a good bike you virtually won everything.'

Jack had very adequate bikes in the form of 350 and 500 Manx Nortons but they were dating fast in the face of the MV Augustas, Benellis and Moto Guzzis being ridden by the top aces of the day. Despite these limitations, Jack Ahearn was standing on or very near to the podium a lot of the time.

His wonderful road racing career started in the late Thirties on the mainly dirt circuits around the Western Districts of New South Wales. He had a 350 ohv Triumph single that doubled as his road bike. Unfortunately, World War 2 put an end to the fun and when Jack turned eighteen he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force.

After nine months of flying training, Jack qualified as a fighter pilot and was 'stood by' to be sent to either Canada or England to learn how to fly Spitfires. He and his fellow pilots, all itching to sit behind that legendary supercharged V12 Merlin engine, were to be vastly disappointed. Before they could set off, the 'big ones' were dropped on Japan and there was no further need for potential Spitfire pilots.

Jack opted for an immediate discharge from the RAAF, brushed the cobwebs off his little Triumph and headed for the nearest race track. For the next two decades and more, he made his living exclusively from racing.

"I rode the little Triumph at the first meeting around Mount Panorama," Jack says, "but I stuffed it up because I put the pushrods in upside down. It

didn't last long! I loved that bike. I rode it for five years and never saw the big end, that's how good it was. I've been looking for one ever since but I've never found one."

Jack followed the Triumph with an Ariel Red Hunter, then with a KSS Velocette.

"That was a beaut little thing," Jack says. "Then I decided to get a proper race bike so I bought Les Slaughter's old KTT. Mostly people raced road bikes then and they were real good times. There weren't any big Works rockets floating around back then."

His first real result at Mount Panorama was on the KTT Velocette, with a second place in the 1948 Australian Junior TT. From then on, the record books are littered with the name of Jack Ahearn. He even managed to break the Australian flying quarter mile and half mile speed records in the 250 and 350 classes at Coonabarrabran in NSW in 1957¹.

Jack first ventured to Europe in early 1954 as the Auto Cycle Union's official Australian Representative in that year's Isle of Man TT. There was no sponsorship, no money, no equipment, no travel allowance (apart from a modest grant from the ACU) and no support: simply a letter of introduction and a blazer with the emu and kangaroo on the breast pocket.

Jack purchased a 350 Manx Norton from the factory in Bracebridge Street through local agent Hazell & Moore and had only enough money left over to buy a steerage class ticket to Bombay, figuring that he'd hitch-hike the rest of the way to England from there. His girlfriend did give him ten shillings though, and that was his entire bankroll.

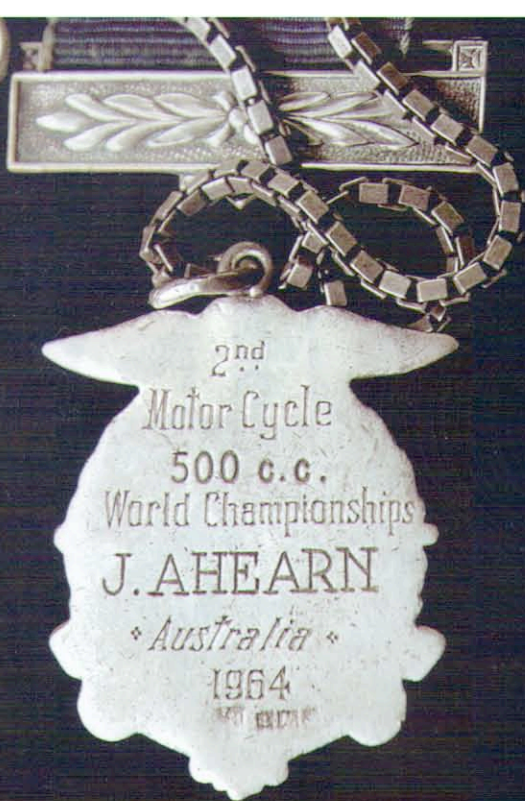
Bombay came as a horrible shock. Jack took one look at the seething, squalid city and headed back to the boat at the double, where the sympathetic purser, an Isle of Man TT enthusiast, concealed Jack >



TOP "The track goes that way!" The two Jacks, Ahearn (left) and Forrest, masked Aussie bandits at Norisring in East Germany, 1955

ABOVE Preparing to successfully assault the Australian 350cc flying quarter and half mile records on a Norton at Coonabarrabran, NSW.

LEFT Hanging tough! An essential attitude for a privateer in the Sixties.



in a vacant cabin and slipped him enough food to keep him alive for the rest of the journey to Blighty.

Fortune then gave Jack a glimmer of a smile. His friend Jack Forrest had intended to travel to Europe with Jack but circumstances kept him back in Australia. He'd ordered a 500 Manx from Norton and made it available to Jack on the condition that he brought it back home after the season. Jack also managed to get fifty pounds from the Shell Oil Company and he joined the Continental circus.

"It wasn't too bad in those days," Jack says. "The race tracks were pretty agricultural and going to Eastern Europe was something else back then. Once we went to Czechoslovakia but were allowed in only for the race meeting, on the proviso we didn't leave the main road to and from the track. Well, when I crossed the border and had gone down the road a bit, I was feeling pretty tired so I pulled off and parked beside a little creek. I'd only been there for thirty minutes when trucks full of police armed with rifles had me surrounded. I thought I'd end up in jail for sure but I told them what I was doing and they let me go. It was a rough joint, Eastern Europe, in those days.

"I always had two new bikes so I had a petty good run. I'd bring them home to Australia at the end of the year, do a few meetings on them, sell

them, then get on the boat and go back and buy two more."

A boat trip between Australia and England in those days took between five and six weeks.

"I spent three months each year lying on the deck of a boat, sunning myself. It was bloody lovely, except I've got skin cancer a bit now."

At the end of that first year in Europe (1954), Jack had come ninth in the 500cc World Championships but the following year his bike packed up.

"Old Joe Craig had invented a new system of putting chrome plating on the cams and halfway through the first race the plating came off, so that stuffed that. Then at the end of '55, I was disqualified. There was a big strike at the Dutch TT at Assen"

This famous incident resulted when the organisers dropped the riders' start money from fifty pounds to twenty pounds, pleading that the cost of improving the circuit had made it necessary.

A group of competitors, including Jack, Keith Campbell, Bob Brown, Tony MacAlpine and Geoff Duke, got together and decided that, for such a pittance, they'd do just one lap in the Junior race, and then pull into the pits, which they did.

"It was pandemonium," Jack recalls with a laugh. "The Dutch organisers were running around and they were going to hang us. And we said, all right, and

TOP LEFT One of the great peacetime badges of courage - the 1964 FIM Medal awarded to Jack. He wore this around his neck until a fellow Aussie rider did better he had to wait for 23 years before Wayne Gardner relieved him of the burden.

ABOVE Jack heads up the mountain at Bathurst in 1955. Garrick and Bryen are in hot pursuit.

unless we get the right money, we're going to do the same in the Senior. So they decided to pay us that amount and we did the Senior but they decided to report us to the Auto Cycle Union anyway"

After a lengthy inquiry into the incident by a committee from the Federation Internationale Motocycliste (F.I.M), fourteen riders from the ACU and Motorcycle Union of Ireland were given six months International suspension from 1st January, 1956

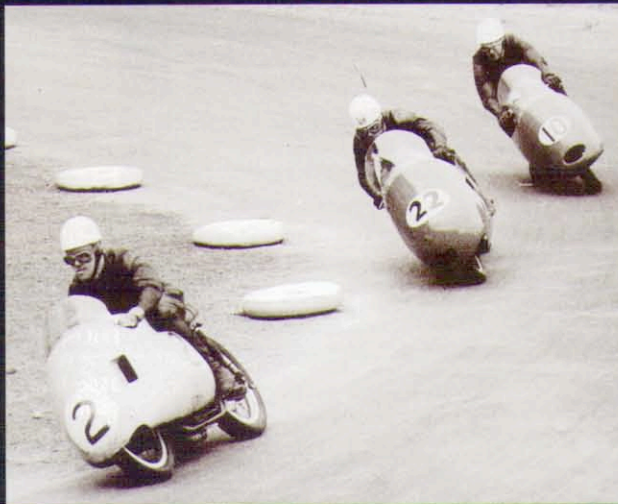
Jack returned home, unable to continue his racing for half of the year, and remained there during 1957, occupying himself with buying a block of land in Sydney and building a house with the benefit of a War Service Loan. Much to his chagrin, he later discovered that he could have raced in Australia as the ban didn't apply to local racing.

Now a seasoned International, and with good machinery at his command, Jack went to Bathurst in 1957. Hazell & Moore made a 250 NSU available to him and he rewarded their confidence with a first place in the Lightweight TT. He then went on to win both the Junior and Senior TTs on his Manxes, making it a most satisfying hat trick.

1958 saw Jack heading back to the Isle of Man where he switched allegiance from Bracebridge Street to Plumstead Road, with the offer of an NSU 7R for the Junior and the newly-released Matchless G50 for the Senior.

FAR LEFT The helmets of the era served at least one useful purpose - a place to park your goggles before and after the race.

LEFT Days of wine and dustbins. A vintage Jack Ahearn (2) at Longford in 1962 leads Laurie O'Shea (22) and Bob West (10).





"I thought, hello, this'll be good," Jack says, "but you could kick your hat faster than the 7R and the G50 was just a bored-out 7R that wouldn't rev. out. It was the first experimental model and by the time the Senior race was finished it was virtually stuffed. It ended up with only one gear. All the others had packed up and when they checked it later they found they'd forgotten to harden the gears."

"Later on they built a proper G50, a full five hundred, and they turned out to be very good bikes but I never went back. I couldn't fit on them. They were too short for me so I continued on with Manxes. 1958 turned out to be a dead loss for me so I came back home and raced here."

Jack then set about assailing Bathurst, winning the Senior GP in 1959, the Australian Junior and Senior TTs in 1960 and the Senior GP in 1961. He placed second in the Junior that year behind Kel Carruthers on the ex-Tom Phillis Honda 250-4, a machine that would dominate Australian racing for the next five years.

"This was bloody boring," Jack says (as if winning three Bathurst Seniors in a row was of no real consequence), "so in '62 I went back to Europe and stayed there for another five years."

He went to the I.O.M. with Tom Phillis and his family in 1962, the year Tom tragically died at Laurel Bank in the Junior TT. On the way over, Tom told Jack that if he wanted to get a bit more out of his Manx he should take it to a bloke in Birmingham who had prepared Tom's Manx the year before.

"So I went to him all right," Jack laughs, "and left the bike with him for a few days. Then I went back to pick it up and go to the Island." This was in 1963. "I didn't start it until the first day of practise and when I pushed off it went 'clatter-clatter-clatter' and that was that. This old bugger had taken my beautiful 500 head off. He was looking after a sidecar that had wrecked so many heads that he was running out of heads. So he put my head on the outfit, put a 350 head on my 500, screwed it down and gave it back to me. So that stuffed that one."

Asked if he had any other 'works' rides, Jack said, "I got the 250 Suzuki in '64. They wanted a crazy experimental jockey with very little in the brains department and a strong right wrist. This thing was totally lethal. Four cylinders. Went like a stung black. It was faster than Jim Redman's Hondas but it seized up,

so it chucked me down the road a couple of times. They had what they called thermal water-cooling, which meant that when you went off in the Isle of Man, the engine was stone cold. If you flattened it, the thing wouldn't get half way to Ballacraine because the thermal water hadn't circulated and warmed up the whole engine, so what you were doing was operating a cold engine with red hot pistons and it would lock up one pot."

The following year they solved the problem with a water pump but as Jack says of the earlier model, "If we'd had any sense we could have boiled the water first, put it in the bike and heated up the barrels a bit."

Despite the Suzuki's propensity for letting him down, his Manx Nortons certainly didn't and in 1964 Jack came 2nd in the World 500cc Motorcycle Championships behind Hailwood's MV Augusta. (Having already secured the title, Hailwood gave the Finnish Grand Prix at Imatra a miss, and Jack proved he was the best of the rest by winning the race and becoming only the second Australian to take out a 500cc Grand Prix).

This was an achievement of monumental proportions, especially when you consider that he did his own mechanical work. >



Jack Ahearn, winner of the "Ryans of Parramatta" classic machine race on Peter Lane's 1962 Norton Manx 500. Amaroo Park 1974



TOP LEFT

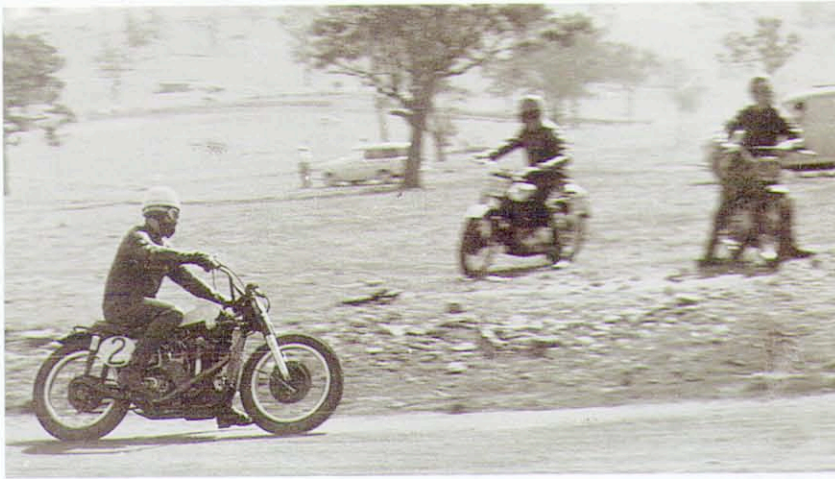
Privateer transporter, c. 1955. Purchased from Paddy Driver for fifty quid. Able to carry two Manx Nortons. Sleeps none.

TOP RIGHT

The dirty old privateer meets the rising star. Kel Carruthers polishes an apple for Jack, or is it a bomb?

ABOVE

Jack on his self-named 'Whispering Death'. The very fast Suzuki was prone to seizing at the most awkward moments, due to a very dodgy water-cooling system.



Jack says, "No, I wasn't a mechanic. I rode them as they came out of the factory. I would just change the sprockets and the chains and the plugs, and get Avon to put the tyres on, and the bikes never got touched. They'd do the whole year's racing and I'd bring them back to Australia, race them here, sell them and buy two more from Bracebridge Street for the following season in Europe."

It was then that Jack took to wearing his FIM medal, vowing to keep it on until another Aussie did better in the 500cc World Championships. It took twenty three years for Wayne Gardner to take this historic little milestone from around his neck.

Jack enjoyed riding on the Isle of Man. He allows that it was dangerous until one got used to it. "Once I'd been there for a few years, I knew where I was going. Also I never had any trouble with Manxes because I owned them and nobody touched them but me."

When asked which rider he admired most on the European racing scene, Jack didn't hesitate. "Derek Minter? That little bastard could ride a motorbike like no one else but he was like me, he had a big mouth and he made a lot of enemies. So did I."

"Minter and Mike Hailwood were the first two to do a hundred mile an hour lap around the Isle of Man on a single cylinder machine. I laughed because Mike's father, Stan Hailwood, (Stan the Wallet, Jack calls him) said he'd pay a hundred pounds to the first bloke to

do it, and that was Derek, so he got the hundred quid, not Mike."

Was Jack the first privateer to do a hundred mile an hour lap around the TT circuit? "Probably." Jack says, "though Derek was a private owner too but all his bikes were tuned by Ray Petty. Now Hailwood's single Nortons were always tuned by Lancefield, who was the best tuner in England anyway; so much so that old man Hailwood hired Lancefield to exclusively tune Mike's bikes. But he ruined the racing to a certain extent because although now Mike is regarded as the best rider we've ever seen, he always had the best bikes."

"Anyway, I was the third rider to do a ton around the Island on a single. Derek and Mike did it in '62 and I did it in '63."

When asked about the difference between today's road racing and that of his era, Jack says, "It was a cruel sport in those days and I saw a lot of blokes die. One year, fifteen blokes were killed in one season."

"I was right behind Keith Campbell on a little circuit in France and the sidecars had dropped oil on this big sweeping corner. Well, Keith went straight into the middle of it, up the road and hit a big bank. I saw what happened and went round the oil but poor old Keith got killed. I saw Gordon Laing get killed. And Bob Brown, when he hit a big puddle and went down. I was right behind him and managed to swerve that too. Didn't do him any good, though."

"The riders these days are little blokes but in my day, a 500 rider on those lousy circuits, you had to be big and strong or bloody stupid, or all three. Harold Daniell and all those other fellas, they were big like me. But now you can be six stone wringing wet and that's what they want."

When Jack finally gave up racing in Europe, he opened a motorcycle shop in West Ryde (one of the very few jobs outside of professional racing), and on adding to the legend in Australia. He rode in the first five Castrol Six Hour Races at Amaroo Park in western Sydney and was still competing in Classic races as late as 1974, when he won the Ryan's of Parramatta event.

Jack now resides in the historic city of Lismore in northern New South Wales.

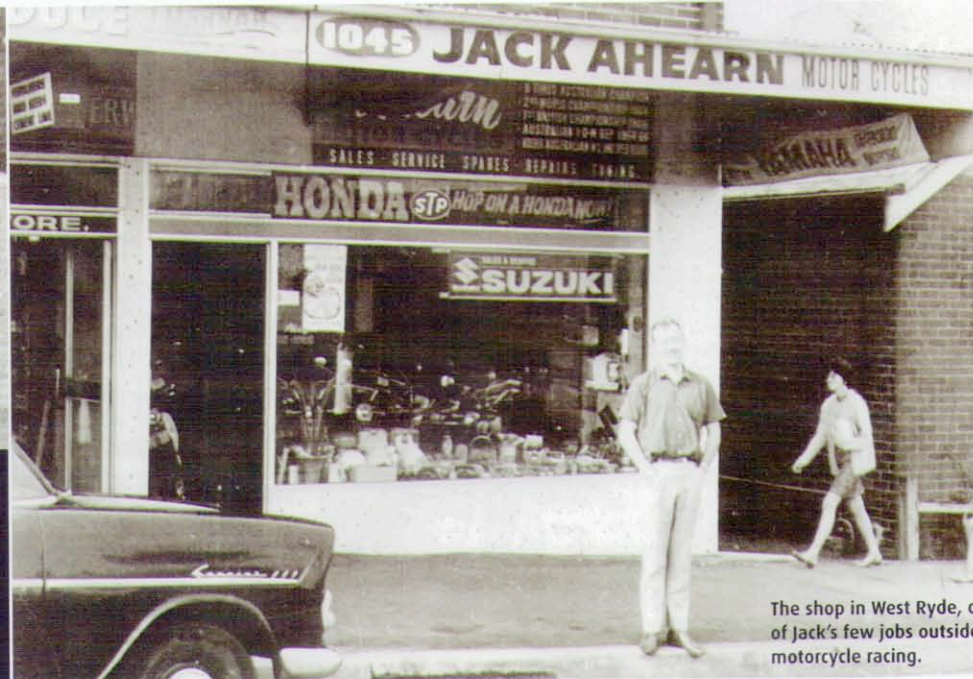
There are no pots of gold at the end of his brave and persistent rainbow, no M.B.E.s, no Orders of Australia. His only accolades are Life Membership of the Willoughby District Motor Cycle Club and now Patron of the Northern Rivers Classic Motorcycle Club. He drives an old Mercedes-Benz saloon and likes to spend mornings at his friend Paul Gill's 'car air and sound' business in one of Lismore's small industrial estates, where he hangs out in his special armchair. Jack reminisces, says hello to admirers who come by to see the great man, has a few fags and, occasionally lapses into the arms of Morpheus.



TOP LEFT A lack of road racing dates forced Jack back onto the dirt in 1961. After hand-cutting the rear tyre of his 500cc Manx Norton, Jack takes to the track at Musswellbrook in the Australian Short Circuit Championships. Photo: Nev Stumbles

TOP RIGHT Jack Ahearn - Suzuki 250-4, 1967

ABOVE Jack contesting the East German Grand Prix in 1967.



The shop in West Ryde, one of Jack's few jobs outside motorcycle racing.



LEFT Jack looks back over the spoils of yesterday's wars.

BELOW LEFT No opposition in sight... again! Jack on the Kawasaki H1R, Bathurst 1970.

BELOW RIGHT Jack at the famous Assen track in 1975 - a great gathering of past riders and machines. Jack was flown there, feted, wined and dined, and given a ride on the excellent Summerfield Manx. If only it had been like that twenty years earlier.

Jack was unlucky enough to be a great motorcycle racer in an era that made it doubly hard on Dominion riders: to get the best bikes, to be given the necessary support, and perhaps a few quid for something to eat along the way.

Conversely, he was lucky enough to race at a truly great (although truly dangerous) time, where an endless list of immortal motorcycling names rubbed shoulders with Jack Ahearn, on and off the track. Best of all, he managed to come out of the other end of a top-level career relatively unscathed.

"I only fell off about five times in 35 years of racing and none of them were my fault. I never ran out of road in my life."

(This excludes an incident when he blacked out during the 1974 Castrol Six Hour race on a Norton

Commando. At that stage, he was old enough to have been most of the other competitors' grandfather, and one would have to say it was a mere aberration in an otherwise flawless career.)

The trophies under his house would make any motorcycle museum curator's eyes water. There are ten of motorcycle racing's most coveted award, the Isle of Man TT Silver Replica for being within eleven tenths of the winner's time.

"I had twelve of them," Jack says, "but I gave a couple away to friends who like that sort of thing."

The shelves are littered with tarnished silver, dusty enamel and dull bronze, engraved with a litany of successes in famous and obscure places.

"I've never polished them," Jack explains. "I was too busy winning them."

Jack Ahearn is perhaps the last living Aussie hero of a bygone era of glorious motorcycle racing, no less in its competitiveness, ferocity and excellence than today's. At the age of 81, he is very lucid, has a wonderful memory and still reads without glasses.

Despite his attitude to trophies, Jack is immensely proud of his achievements and for not allowing the circumstances that made them so hard to attain get in his way.

There are many legends of Australian Motorcycle Racing but I suggest to you that only one other can truly be mentioned in the same breath as the great Jack Ahearn. ■

Notes

(1) The list of Jack Ahearn's motorcycling achievements would fill another complete article. For those interested in tracking the great man's career, see Jim Scaysbrook's books, 'Australian Motorcycling Heritage' and 'Bikes and Bathurst', and Don Cox's and Will Hagon's 'Australian Motorcycle Heroes 1949-1989'. Even these excellent books don't come close to listing Jack's amazing achievements.

(2) The original 'Secretary General's Report on various irregularities' is still in Jack's possession. His is probably the last copy in existence, at least in Australia.

(3) When Jim Scaysbrook, OBA editor, asked his friend and racing partner Mike Hailwood this question, Mike's answer was the same as Jack's.

