



The Journal Of the AJS & Matchless Owners Club Ltd

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1952

ISSUE 809 | DECEMBER 2019

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IN MY FATHER'S WHEEL TRACKS

80 years on, a nod to my father, motorcycle dispatch rider James Blower, 1920-1960.

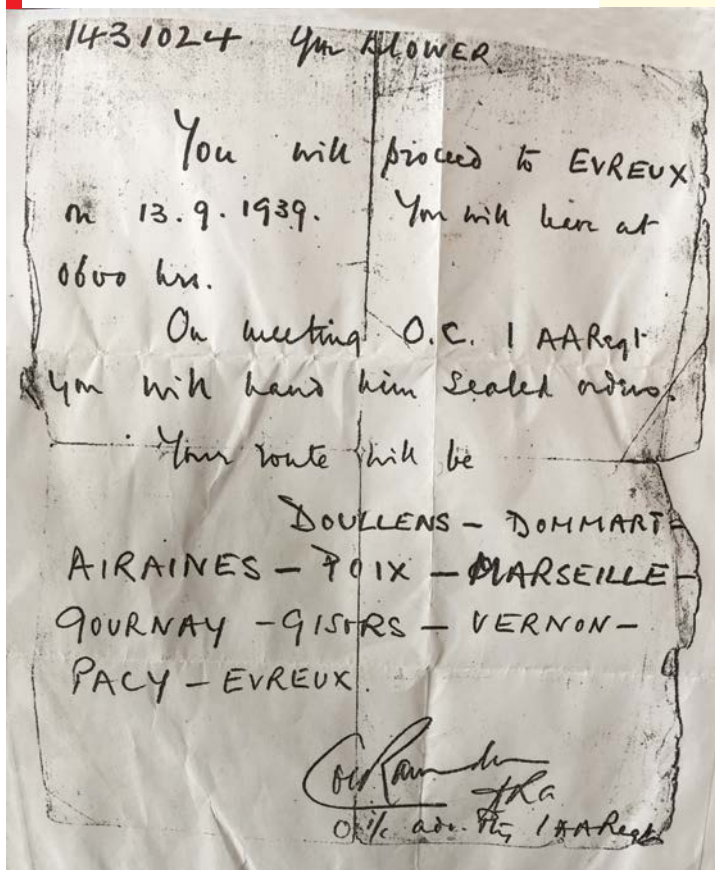
Words and pictures by Paul Blower

After nearly 45 years in the building controls industry I retired from the business in July 2017. I was determined to keep myself busy to avoid any pitfalls associated with retirement and decided I needed a project. A good friend and old colleague, Graham Kinross was in the process of restoring a basket case 1961 Triumph Thunderbird (which has since morphed into a magnificent Bonneville T120). I fancied a similar project and Graham introduced me to Allan Burgess who is a Triumph and Ariel Guru and who was helping Graham with his restoration. I explained to Allan that I had an ambition to follow a route through France that my father had taken as dispatch rider in 1939, the challenge was that I did not have a motorcycle licence or a motorcycle. I had never owned a motorbike and apart from a few sneak rides on my brothers Triumph Tiger Cub at the age of fifteen I had no real riding experience. Allan, was very giving of his time and experience, pointed me in the direction of



My father James Blower on the left in Rome 1944, with the Royal Artillery

A copy of the dispatch rider's orders detailing the route in Northern France 13 Sept 1939. Gunner James Blower was aged 19 at this time and was with the British Expeditionary Force



The Tom Tom sat nav map showing the route we followed. We arrived in Evreux on 13 Sept 2018, 79 years to the day of my father's ride





Paul Blower on the 1946 G3L somewhere on the road to Vernon.

a few marques and I started to do a little research. I discovered that the Matchless G3L was a model used by British dispatch riders during WW2 and that Matchless won the War Department contract to supply the machines after Triumph Factory in Coventry had been bombed. In

preparation, I started fitting out my garage as a workshop and took to the internet to find myself a G3L. I tracked down a 1946 Matchless G3L, which was being sold by a dealer in Northwich. Not wanting to waste any time I drove over to the dealership the same afternoon, asking Graham Kinross

to come with me for a second opinion. The moment I saw the G3L, it was love at first sight. I did the deal and she was delivered to my home the same evening. There were a few oil leaks, but overall, she had been kept in fantastic condition by the previous owners. I set to work with an oily rag and she started to come up like new! I downloaded the manuals and any other technical information I could find. The main oil leak was at the bottom of the push rod tubes and so I followed the manual and stripped down the head. Alan Burgess let me use his sand blaster to clean the head up and he re-ground the valve seats for me. After re-painting the head and grinding in the valves the bike was reassembled. Following the starting instruction contained in the manual I kicked her over and she started first or second kick. I continued to fettle the bike until I was as confident as I could be that she would be up for the trip. During this process I consulted Dave from the Jampot helpline with the various technical issues I encountered and he was a great help. I always came off the line from Dave with a greater understanding of the bike and measures I needed to take to resolve any problems.

When he heard what I intended to do, my friend Paul Harper from Aberdovey

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The 1946 Matchless G3L clubman.
Right to Left. Bob Hall, Paul Blower, Paul Harper





offered to join me. This was great news but Paul didn't possess a bike licence either, however he is man always up for a challenge and a bit of adventure. (With his wife Derry Paul he sailed around the world as part of the Blue Water Rally in 2009/10.) Paul won't be embarrassed if I describe his talent for conversing in any language! by adding an O or an E to the end of the English word and adopting the

local accent. This was very useful on our French trip.

I did some research on training organisations on the internet, then signed us both up for some direct route training with RJH Rider Training in Northwich. Rob and Lisa who run the training School were brilliant, always accommodating and full of enthusiasm. After some trials and tribulations, Paul H

and I obtained our full licences and had got the biking bug, I acquired a Honda VFR Crossrunner and Paul bought himself an Africa Twin. (After having a go on my G3L in France, Paul H got bitten by the sound and feel of the Matchless and has subsequently acquired a 1958 G3L, which he has been riding around mid Wales on some fantastic routes accompanied by his wife Derry on the pillion.)



Paul Blower and Jean Jacques Laine Laine in Roucourt.
Jean Jaques is the Grandson of Madame Laine Caulier who's family became friends with my father and the other young British soldiers who were billeted in Roucourt in 1940

Bob Hall a neighbour and good friend from Aberdovey offered to drive the LWB van that we needed to transport the three bikes down to Dover and across to Dunkirk. We left Aberdovey on Monday the 10th of September and returned the following Saturday.

For me, the trip through France was nostalgic and quite moving. I had a letter with me that had been written to my father in 1945 and from the detail contained in the letter we managed to trace members of the same French family that had befriended my father and his fellow soldiers in 1940 when they were stationed in the small village of Roucourt. We had some assistance from a lady whom we met outside the Mayor's office, who after some enquiries led us to the house of Jean Jacques Laine Laine. We were so lucky to find and meet Jean Jacques and his family. The family had lived in this beautiful village for over 200 years. I left Jean Jacques with a copy of his grandmother's letter to my father.



The 1946 Matchless G3L. The bike was almost faultless on the 240 miles covered. My thanks to Dave on the Matchless helpline for his advice in getting her ready for the trip

Roucourt
on the 5th June 1945

Madame Laine Caulier
Roucourt
par Cantin (Nord)

My dear Jimmy

I am very happy because.

I received your letter on the 2th June.

All the family is very well.

My soon Jean is married and

Mary is a young girl of nineteen years old. She is very happy of your letter.

We had understand your letter very well, for a English boy, it is very good and you write again in French and I answer in English for you learn French and I learn English.

I hope your convalescence is very good and than you will go in England in a little time.

We made it to Evreux on 13th September 2018 following the same route that Gunner James Blower had ridden as a dispatch messenger aged just nineteen on the 13th September 1939. I cannot be sure what bike my father did the route on, as sadly he died in 1960 when he was still quite young and we never really got chance to really know him. He was brought up on the Isle of Man and was a TT enthusiast. I feel sure that he would have been a fan of the G3L, as it was extensively used by the British military throughout the war years. I did 230 miles on my 72 year old machine during the trip and she performed like new. The one minor issue I had, was a reluctance to start sometimes without a plug change when she was warm. I think I have now cured this by tweeking down the oil feed to the inlet valve.

We made the route back up to Dunkirk on the bigger bikes, I wanted to give the G3L a well-deserved rest. Using the Tom Tom sat nav to choose the "exciting route" option, we virtually followed the same route back. Bob drove the van back up to the Air B&B where we were staying that evening and in the manner of the true gentleman that he is, had had a cold beer waiting for us when we arrived.

We visited the British War cemetery in Arras at the start of the trip and the Menin Gate at Ypres on route back up to Dunkirk, both moving experiences. We had passed smaller roadside British War cemeteries on the route down to Evreux and they were quietly acknowledged with a biker's nod.

Been on an adventure? Got a bike with a story? Share your story with other club members. We'd love to hear from you. editor@jampot.com is your contact.