

THEY WORKED AT STEVENAGE

Ted Davis

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This one is of people: men, women, girls and boys who found their way to Stevenage just after World War Two to start, for many, a lifetime association with that magic name that began with "V". Some were to lose their lives, some became old enough to retire and are still alive today; many still work in Stevenage today. All of them, I am sure, enjoyed working at Vincent's whether it was known as The Vincent-HRD Co, Vincent Engineers or Vincent Engineers (Stevenage), depending which critical financial stage the old firm was passing through.

We may have made legendary motor-cycles at Stevenage, a little town of 6,000 souls straddling the A1. (Now there are around 60,000 mainly faceless souls and the main products are rockets and ball-point pens!) But we didn't make money; history maybe, but never money.

This was no American-type democratic concern, thank goodness (no offence intended, US members), where the boss called you by your Christian name and ate(?) in the works canteen. Few workers spoke to P.C.V., who, in turn, rarely spoke to any of them, other than his close management and some of his old timers like Ted Hampshire, Cliff and George Brown etc, most of whom still called him Mr Vincent or P.C.V.

No, it wasn't really working for P.C.V. that kept everyone happy, it was the product (yes, I know it was P.C.V. inspired). Nothing keeps the team spirit going better than a living, breathing end product; each and every bike was like an increase in the family - none was stillborn. This may seem like an exaggeration, or at least putting it a little strongly, but it may help to explain why Triumphs have hung on so long and why so many of today's workforce are so dissatisfied - so few firms make, assemble and sell a complete product today, much less one that hit the headlines somewhere in the world, almost every week. Many of us had experienced several years of destroying things, now we were building things again, things which were to become a legend in our lifetime.

The factory was old, the heating poor, the roof leaked, but it was people who made it a happy place to work and it is those people I am about to recall here. Not the Ted Hampshires, Phil Irvings, Jack Williams, the brothers Brown etc, who each made such tremendous contributions and whose exploits are so well known to us all, but the little heard of small wheels, without whom the big wheels would never have turned. Names like Norman Peach, Joan Scott, Jack Ward, Jack Godfrey, John Surtees, Bill Bruce, Joe Harmer, Norman Brewster, Jack Lazenby, Bob Brown, Bill Todd, Stan Duddington, George Buck, Bob Clements, Danny Thomas, Mrs. Legget, Ethel Chelson, Dave and Ted Ratty, Archie Feast, John Clark, Tom Kinolty, Kevin Drury, Henry Pinnington, Tom from Lancashire, Alf Searle, Jack Furness, Jim Sugg, Dennis Burdett-Coutts, Alan Rennie, Tom Clement, the Swain Brothers, Tom Crocker, Harry Smith, John Bland, Geoff Manning, Denis Minnet, Eric from the paint shop, Ron Eatly, are some that come to mind.

In recalling these people I am, of course, remembering them as I saw them, pulling no punches, making no apologies. I guess their recollections of me might well be even less complimentary. If I do offend it is not intentional, I look back on them all as friends and members of a great team, who can proudly say they helped P.C.V. build his dream. As for me, I am fortunate indeed to see my own collection daily and to be able to enjoy riding them over the same roads on which each and every one first saw the light of day - many of which I was the first to ride.

Too many of the old faces are now missing, which tinges my enjoyment with sadness, but not sorrow, I have no regrets, as, I am sure, no one has who went to "Mecca". Of those no longer with us, it is perhaps Henry Pinnington and Paul I miss most;- both of them were larger than life and both departed this life with dramatic suddenness. Henry losing his life while testing a Black Shadow and Paul's more recent sudden death in Holland.

We will start in the order I listed them previously. **Norman Peach** (ex-RAF) was in charge of wheel building. He was the owner of a Rapide and a Comet in those days. Norman was a little more affluent than the average, his wife also working in the company. He was meticulous, perhaps even cautious, and would be an asset to any company. He is still working locally, though not motor-cycling any more, I gather.

Joan Scott was secretary to Paul and myself. She was an excellent tennis player and very helpful and enthusiastic. She even appeared in the ads as the glamorous pillion rider. She stayed until the bitter end and still lives in Stevenage.

Jack Ward took over the assembly line from dear old Ted Hampshire. Jack was a clubman racer before the war; a keen motor-cyclist, still living in Stevenage.

Jack Godfrey was the chargehand in the Service department. Jack knew his business well, he was always helpful and loved to come to race meetings with me. He also still lives in Stevenage.

John Surtees, you all know, worked as an apprentice. John was a natural with bikes, shy, and with a one track mind: bikes. Mum and dad paid frequent visits to pick up bikes, Jack being a Vincent agent as well as a racer.

Bill Bruce was one of the firm's stalwarts. He worked for years on special projects. He was responsible for re-working the Monthéry bikes and George Douglass' Clubman's TT winner. His picture was in MPH last year as one of the clandestine group in the IoM. Bill died a few years ago.

Joe Harmer was a road tester, still wearing his Army battledress. He was quite a character, he didn't really have a clue about bikes and threw them up the road a time or two. He left Vincents in 1950 and I have no knowledge of his present whereabouts.

Norman Brewster, one of the originals, was foreman in the service department and deaf as a post. He was the enthusiastic owner of a Series "A" Comet and very helpful. Unfortunately he is long since dead.

Ex-tail gunner, **Jack Lazenby** was one of the elite, building Black Lightnings etc. His experiences with Picadors would make a great story, travelling around the world with them as he did during the test flights. Jack works at Vauxhalls now.

Bob Brown, ex-Army, I believe, became chief road tester after serving many years as assistant chief tester under Jim Sugg. Bob was seen recently on the front cover of MPH riding the last Prince out of the factory yard. He now lives and works in Amersham, I believe.

Ex-RAF, **Bill Todd**, tall, good-looking, pipe smoker who built Twin engines on the line in the Series "B" days. Any engine Bill built was a good 'un. I've no idea where he is today.

Stan Duddington, another top line fitter who worked with Jack Lazenby on racers, Picadors etc. Started in the early days building "B"s, rode an R7 AJS and early camshaft 7R. Stan is about somewhere. Come in Stan and be counted!

George Buck worked in development with Phil Irving. George is now at Jaguar, responsible for the V12 among other things. He still rides in vintage events at Mallory with his Triumph and 7R.

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Bob Clements was chief maintenance for both plants from pre-war days. Bob has now retired and lives in Weston, near Stevenage.

Alex Mitchell, brilliant chief engineer after Phil Irving returned to Australia in 1949. He died in his office chair at Vauxhalls where he became chief engineer, new designs and projects.

Danny Thomas, from Wales, was Series "B" assembly man. He was ex-Merchant Navy and later became a road tester. He owned a Rapide and did some sand racing; he failed to qualify for the Monthéry record team. He was rather forgetful and unreliable - he screwed up my Clubman's pit stop - but he was good hearted. He is now a vehicle driving teacher back in Wales.

Mrs. Legget, the canteen manageress, must have been 70 then and subject to much unjustified abuse. The canteen still stands preserved for ever under the Ancient Monuments Act - such were our modern facilities! Mrs Legget is no longer with us.

Ethel Chelsom, P.C.V.'s secretary, was an attractive blonde, whose perfume made a change from petrol and oil. She left to marry a banker at the end of the forties. Present whereabouts unknown.

Dave and Ted Ratty ran the transport department, at least the driving and maintenance side. It was Dave who tipped all the Earls Court models into the road en route for the 1954 Show. Dave appears in one picture alongside the old aircraft loading the first Series "B" sold "down South America way". They are both still working in the Stevenage area.

Archie Feast, the jolly storeman, could always tell you who would buy sub-standard bits! He was a happy soul who is no longer with us. His aide, **Eric Pitcher** was ever-pleasant. He is also departed.

John Clarke became service manager and it was he who modelled with the Series "D"s, with our Joan on the pillion in the recent catalogue picture in MPH. John is now a rep with an agricultural outfit in Bedford.

Tom Kinolty was in the design office and was a patient and devoted draughtsman. His present whereabouts are unknown.

Kevin Drury was chief draughtsman during the Series "D" development days. He had a thick black beard (just like my present one). He went off to Australia where I guess he still is. I'd like to hear from you, Kevin.

Henry Pinnington was one of the real characters. Racer extraordinary, road tester and fastest man on two wheels on public roads. He was a TT place man and winner of the Leinster 200 in 1933. He was killed on a road test Shadow near London Colney.

Tom, from Lancashire, was a Triumph man who built the early Series "B"s. He came to the Island with me in 1948; I offered him a kip in my bed - I didn't realise he slept in the nuddy!

Alf and Jack of Furness and Searle are still working on bikes today, as most members know. Alf, who had his picture on the front cover of MPH 366, worked on the bikes in various departments and his wife worked in the offices. Jack was in the new plant.

Jim Sugg was chief tester and ex-Manx Grand Prix rider. Wealthy in his own right, Jim was a real gentleman. He died a few years back.

Dennis Burdett-Coutts; crazy Dennis used to challenge me to races round the factory yard with his Rudge Special, which often caught fire. Dennis still lives locally and is in business producing castings etc.

Alan Rennie and Reg Hubbard still keep in touch through the Herts and Beds Section. Rumour has it that Alan is building his Comet! Meanwhile, he has Paul Richardson's Honda four for everyday transport. Those two certainly built the bikes properly.

The Swain brothers were in the manufacturing business until recently when they were sidelined by ill-health.

Tom Crocker was the man who honed the cylinders. He went to Borg Warner's with Paul and myself, where he was in charge of the grinding section.

Bill Munsen was our welder, the man who produced the bodywork for the three-wheeler; despite the way it originally looked, he didn't use old dustbins! Before that he worked in the frame building and welding department. This is now preserved as an ancient monument. -One peep in there in 1948 and you would agree that the pipe bender should have been kept there - it would have brought out the Japanese cameras today!

George Rose was originally on the cycle part assembly line, then road tester. He has now retired to Wales, to Brecon, which is not far from Pendine where he once -kept my lap score in the sand, only to have the tide wash it away when an argument arose as to who had won.

Harry Smith, who rose to the dizzy heights of road tester after he had built a Triumph engine into a Series "A" frame and raced it. He is now an inspector in the aircraft industry in Stevenage.

John Bland (no, not the past Section Surveys Editor) was stores and office manager, but left for greener pastures before the final collapse. He is now a director with a large company in Luton.

Bill Brown was the engine assembly storeman and a canny Scot. Rumour has it that he once blacked out Stevenage by burning cut-up tyres in the Salvation Army stove! He ran a BSA sloper outfit.

Geoff Manning joined the sales staff in the early 50s. He was side-lined whilst setting up the Monthléry record attempt when he was side-swiped by a French car driver. He died in Rhodesia in the early 60s.

Denis Minnet was foreman of the engine assembly, then the race shop. He was a brilliant exponent at Brooklands pre-war and now lives in Melbourne, Australia. You can read all about him in Francis Beart's book, Single Purpose.

Ron Eatly was works manager and rather fond of the odd whisky. He was not a motor-cyclist, but quite a character, often to be found nodding off. He died a long while ago.

Vic Waugh was a road tester and ex-Spitfire pilot. It was not unusual for him to drop off to sleep while adjusting the tappets. Poor Vic was killed by a runaway car while in his front garden, after leaving Vincents.

Then, of course, there was the last sales team that managed to sell 200 NSU Foxes, hundreds of Fireflies and thousands of NSU Quicklies, when everyone else thought the job was impossible. I often wondered if their previous position had been selling refrigerators to Eskimos.

With senility rapidly approaching - at least that is what my grandsons say - I have surely forgotten many names; for which I apologise. No one should be left out, not even the very short-time employed inter-factory truck driver who dumped an Avon 300 x 20 tyre over the railway bridge daily for collection later that evening! The two Vincent factories were, of course, sited one to the east and one to the west of the main railway line north.

There are many wives- left behind, Frankie, Ada and Elfrida being the ones that come to mind first; they are, just three who have to face the future without their well-known and respected husbands. Our thoughts will always be with them.

Finally, let me say that it is hoped that this memory will in some way express the thanks of all those mentioned; to P.C.V. for making a chapter in our lives so meaningful. His inherent shyness to strangers explained his apparent aloofness, and once in his confidence (which, for some, often took years), no one could have had a better friend. His happy marriage to Elfrida must have been a great inspiration and help in the later difficult years. Phil's legend is all that is left, except the memories of their happy years together and their daughter Deidre. But was a fabulous legend to leave! To Elfrida and Deidre: long may you both enjoy Vincents and all that goes with them.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

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In one of my memories that appeared in MPH towards the end of last year, I reminisced about the Works and some of the people who worked there. This seemed to create quite a bit of interest and people have been asking what has happened to those people. So, I have done a bit of detective work and have come up with the following information:

Ken Mainwaring (Sales Manager), now lives in Salisbury, Rhodesia.

Ian McNally (Assistant Sales Manager), now lives in Cape Town, South Africa and has retired.

John Griffiths (Engine Assembly), now lives in El Paso, USA and is a business consultant.

George Rose (Road Tester), lives in Brecon, South Wales and has retired.

Harold Maddox (Inspector and Tank Liner), lives in Knebworth, Hertfordshire and is semi-retired.

Dennis Burdett-Coutes (Cycle Assembly), now lives in Stevenage and is in the foundry business at Leighton Buzzard.

Kevin Drury (Chief Draughtsman), now lives in Sydney, Australia.

Jack Lazenby (Race Shop Chargehand); lives in Stevenage and works in Vauxhall's experimental department.

George Buck (Development Department), lives in Coventry and is chief development engineer at the Jaguar V12 engine development department.

Joan Scott (Secretary to Paul Richardson and Ted Davis), now lives in Hitchin, Hertfordshire.

Denis Minett (Race Shop Manager) now lives in Melbourne, Australia.

Hans Edwards (Draughtsman), now has a camera shop in Old Stevenage.

Danny Thomas (Road Tester), lives in South Wales and is a driving instructor.

George Aylot (Paint Shop), now lives in Weston, Hertfordshire and has retired.

Jack Godfrey (Service Department Foreman), lives at Stevenage and now works at BAC, Stevenage.

Murray Crickman (Tool Room Foreman), lives at Stevenage and also works at BAC.

Jack Ward (Cycle Assembly Foreman), he too works at BAC..

Arthur Barlow (Tool Room Inspector), again working at BAC.

Terry Wade (Service Department), yet another BAC employee.

Norman Peach (Wheel Building Department Foreman), now works at French and Wickham, Stevenage:

Obviously this is only the tip-of the iceberg and it will be interesting to see how many other ex-employees are known to members. I'm sure John would be only too glad to publish a further list if you all write to him.