

THE INSIDE STORY

Cliff Brown

MPH 390

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[I am very pleased to be able to publish another "first" for MPH this month. Over the years we have had very many interesting articles, but I am fairly certain that this is the first time we have been able to read pre-publication extracts of a book.

Cliff Brown, brother of the late George Brown, has written a book in memory of George and this will be published on August 19th. After reading Alan Edwards' "Flash enigmas" in MPH, he decided that members might be interested in reading a couple of chapters, the first of which is reproduced here.

Cliff has also gone through his records and come up with the following numbers which will, no doubt, be of interest to all Vincent historians. The number of George Brown's Flash was FAB10/2921/2BX and John Hodgkin's was FAB10/2922/2BX. There were four Flashes made for the 1950 TT and their numbers were: F5AB/2B/4025/TT (this one came in 12th); F5AB/2B/4026/TT; F5AB/2B/4027/TT and F5AB/2B/4028/TT.-Ed.]

CHAPTER 11

I have built Black Lightning engines for bikes that have been exported to Buenos Aires, California USA, Paris, Cuba, Argentine, Elder Smith of Australia, Belgium, Switzerland, Turkey and Canada. Black Lightnings for Ken Wharton, Hartwell for his Cooper car, for a Cooper car for Francis Beart and Eric Winterbottom. I used to go to the hotel which he owned at Arrington near Cambridge to service his engine before it went to any meeting; he was later killed in the IoM in a racing car. George went to a meeting at Redcar sand racing and broke his own record from the previous meeting, standing mile 93 mph, flying kilo 136.1/2 mph. He found that he was undergeared for the kilo.

Mr Vincent decided to turn number 49 shed into a special engine assembly department, as I was too busy on development to build special engines. Denis Minnett was put in charge with Stan Duddington and Jack Lazenby. George used to test all the special bikes at Gransden. I know that when it was cold we used to take a five gallon oil drum pierced with holes and some coke and would call at a little shop at Gransden and buy a loaf of bread, some butter and a tin of beans and while George was going round Gransden, I used to do beans on toast and when it was ready I would wave him in.

Roland Free of the USA ordered a Black Shadow to break the American national record. I built the engine in the test house with polished con rods and flywheels, cylinder heads opened out from 1.1/8in to 1.3/16in, with 1.3/16in carbs and Mark 2 cams, with the compression ratio at 12.75, 7/11 pistons, exhaust pipe 1.5/8in diameter and 56 inches in length and intermediate gears in the gearbox. When I had finished assembling the engine Mr Irving and I fitted it to the test bed to power test it, that was in the morning, as the bike had to be dispatched next day. When the engine was on full power the drive side mainshaft broke, so off came the engine from the test bed, with George helping. I then stripped the engine, assembled some new flywheels and fitted them into the engine and retimed the valves and mag. As we had got a few readings on the brake test, Mr Irving suggested we take the bike to Gransden. So George and I loaded everything in the van and off we went. George did a few runs at 145 mph down the straight until Mr Irving said that's enough, so back to the works we went. The bike was then crated and shipped to America to Roland Free, where he broke the national record at Bonneville Flats, Utah, with a speed of 150.855 mph straight out of the crate, without doing anything to the bike. The engine number was F10AB/1B/900.

Valve timing with push rods just free and 0.005 lift was:

Rear cylinder exhaust opens 77° closes 49°

inlet opens 55° closes 64°

magneto front 35°

Front cylinder exhaust opens 78° closes 48°

inlet opens 56° closes 65°

magneto rear 36°

The next machine Mr Vincent wanted developed was a Comet for racing, so I modified one of the Comets we had in the test house, while I was modifying the engine, George was drilling and lightening the frame. The engine number was FAB10/2921/2BX.

Valve timing with valves just free and 0.005 lift, was:

exhaust opens 78° closes 52°

inlet opens 55° closes 68°

magneto 38° BTDC

It ran on pool petrol, with a 32mm carb with remote needle and float chamber. I opened the inlet and exhaust ports out as much as I could and polished to a mirror finish. The exhaust pipe was two inch diameter and 46 inches long. When the bike was assembled George and I went off to Gransden with Mr Vincent this time. George did thrash that bike up and down the runway: first gear 80 mph, second 100 mph, third 110 mph and fourth 115 mph at 8,000 revs on pool petrol. The first

meeting for the Comet was Eppynt in Wales, where it did very well. George and I used to call it the Eppynt Comet, but Mr Vincent said we ought to name it Flash as we had a Lightning Twin, so that's what we called it. The next meetings we entered for and won were Ansty, Brough, Towin Sprints, Silverstone, Prescote, Goodwood, Chelmsford, Scarborough and Trent Park. I built another engine and bike for Hodgkin of Hinckley and he used to race at Cadwell with George. It was identical to the Flash I had already built and did very well at meetings. I remember, when he was riding at Silverstone in the Hutchinson 100 that the Dural intermediate gear stripped during practice. As George and I were there with the van and his bike with spares, he came to me very down in the dumps and said his motor had blown up. I said I would have a look at it. I took the timing cover off and I knew what was wrong. I told him I would have to strip the motor down, but he said there was not enough time to do that. I then said he would get his bike in time and asked him to get a tin of petrol for cleaning the parts and engine. After fitting a new big-end complete, a new intermediate gear and retimed the engine. Away he went to come in third in the Hutchinson 100. He came and thanked me afterwards for what I had done.

It was a week or so before the 1949 TT that two crates arrived at the test house from Indians of America. When Mr Vincent knew they had arrived he came up to the test house and asked George and I to unpack one crate. He told us that we had to fit a Vincent Twin engine in the frame. As George and Phil Heath had entered for the Clubman's TT again, we hadn't much time, so Mr Irving helped George and I fit the engine in the frame in a week, with the help of welder Bill Munsden. When finished, it handled like a dream, you could go round in a circle one handed without any fear of falling off. The maximum speed was 115 mph and we called it the Vindian. Mr Irving, George and I used to take turns in riding it to and from work. I don't know what happened later, but we were told to take the engine from the frame, refit the Indian engine, re-crate the bike and dispatch both crates back to America.

Now I could get on with the Clubman's bikes, so I took both bikes from number 11 shed to prepare them for the 1949 Clubman's TT, this time to Black Shadow specification, as this year's Clubman's was only three laps, which meant there was to be no pit stop for petrol. As you could not fit a larger than standard tank, Mr Irving said we would have to cut down on jet sizes when we arrived in the IoM. Mr Vincent said I could go to the TT this time as there were about 12 Vincents in the 1,000 cc class and I had to look after the riders' needs on information and maintenance. I also had to fit the modified timing gears to bikes that had not been modified and on some bikes the riders wanted the new intermediate gear in the gearboxes. During the practice week the weather was terrible, rain and fog; George and the other riders were wet every morning. On race day the weather was good and George was going like a bomb until the bike went on to one cylinder. He finished the race to get a place, but Mr Irving had cut the jet sizes too much, as he didn't bank on George going so fast. When I took the bike down in the examining tent there was a lovely big hole in the piston and the centre of the plug had melted. George had ridden the Vincent for one and a half laps on one cylinder. I had to rebuild the engine with new mains, big-end, barrels and pistons on returning to the Vincent factory from the IoM. Later, both bikes were sold; I wonder where they are now?

Meanwhile Mr Vincent sold the Cadwell special as George had now got the Flash. I hope whoever has the bike now keeps it as well as George and I did. It was soon after the TT, 1949, that Vincent started to get a little shaky, as sales had dropped. Mr Irving resigned as chief engineer and in October returned to his homeland, Australia. That left me in charge of development. The bank took over the running of Vincents, putting Mr Baillie in charge. George still raced by entering the meeting out of his own pocket. I developed a new Lightning cam from the old Mark 2 by having the inlet opening built up with weld and grinding by hand, as I had done with the Mark 3 cam. I finally got the timing I wanted, which was:

exhaust opens 80° closes 50°

inlet opens 65° closes 70°

One set front and rear were made for Gunga and one set for the Flash; these were the only bikes with these cams. I marked them 2/1 and they put the maximum speed up on both bikes.

Reg Dearden, a motor-cycle dealer, purchased a new Black Lightning machine with standard cams, to break the world's land speed record for motor-cycles. Mr Vincent designed the new primary drive cover to hold the blower and also the timing side plates. Reg Dearden came to the works one Monday morning with the bike to see about fitting the blower to the engine when Vincents had finished machining and drilling the primary drive cover and plates. The bike was brought up to the test house for me to assemble the blower to the plates and cover. When I had finished, he took the bike away as he was going to fit the blower induction pipes himself. To fit the 1,000cc Shorrocks blower we had to extend the rear frame six inches and make a longer gearbox shaft to take the blower drive. After Reg had fitted the inlet blower pipes he came back to the works with the bike, as it would not start; also to have a rear frame made for the streamlined cowl. Mr Vincent came up to the test house and asked George and I to look at the bike, as it would not start. Reg and some service department mechanics were in the yard trying to start the bike, so George and I went to see what was wrong. As soon as we tried the compression I know what it was, so I said to Mr Vincent that the engine would have to be dismantled. We put the bike on a bench, where I dismantled the engine, found what was wrong and then re-assembled it. We took it from the bench with George in the saddle and two or three pushes up and down the yard it started. George ran it up and down the yard until Mr Vincent stopped him because of the noise as the grammar school was next door. I don't know whether the bike has ever been started since. The rear frame was bolted to the top bracket on the backbone and lower frame plates. We made a tubular steel sub-frame which extends beyond the rear wheel and carries the rider's seat, footrest and TT-type brake and gearchange pedals. We made the frame with the help of Bill Munsden, the foreman welder, who did all the welding. Reg Dearden then took the bike away when we had finished.

CHAPTER 12

It was not long before Mr Baillie found a new chief engineer from Vauxhalls, a Mr Alec Mitchell. He was a good engineer and designed a new rocker gear so there wouldn't be so much noise from the cylinder heads, and a new oil pump. We had a Comet slave engine running all day long proving them, but nothing ever came of the ideas. George and I got on very well with Alec and he helped Stan Appleby from the Drawing Office, George and myself to make a 1/4 x 1/4 inch caged roller big-end for the Flash and Gunga, which we had a lot of success with. We later had another good engineer come to the test house, George Buck, so we had a good team of men. Alec, the two Georges and I were always trying out new experiments which the management did not sometimes approve of. George's Flash was going like a bomb now, with the new cam and other work I had done on it. I remember stripping the engine one Friday to see how things were going and to check the big-end. I cleaned all the parts and the crankcase ready for assembly on Monday morning. In the meantime Mr Vincent came up to the test house to look around on the Sunday, as everything had to be spotless, and saw the engine dismantled. When I came to work on Monday he came to the test house and said, "now I know why George's bike is so fast and reliable". I had bored out the inlet port to 1.3/8 inch with a 1.3/8 inch carb, together with the exhaust port as much as I could and all the timing gears; I had also plugged the flywheels. Some of the race tracks George had been to with the Flash and won were Ansty, Brough, Towing sprints, Silverstone, Prescote, Goodwood, Eppynt, Chelmsford, Scarborough and many others.

It was while George was going home to Stopsly, Luton, one night that a car came out of a side road without stopping. George hit the side of the car and over the top he went, landing on his back on the grass verge. They took him to hospital with a suspected broken collar bone. As it turned out he was all right, but his back played him up sometimes, as happened in practice for the 1950 TT. Gunga's success was still going strong with a first in the 100 miles race at Chelmsford, lap records and wins at Ansty, Brough, Blandford, Hartlepool, Haddenham, Shelsley Walsh and others. George also broke his previous record at Redcar, sand racing, with a standing mile of 93 mph (was 91 mph) and the flying kilo of 136.1/2 mph. Both these records still stand.

As a member of the Luton Motor Cycle Club, I was asked by a member, Fred Young, and a Cambridge member, a butcher called Mr Brown, if I would prepare their engines for the 1950 1,000cc Clubman's race in the IoM. I built the engines with the same care as I had done with Phil Heath's and George's Twins in 1948-9. I fitted new big-ends, mains, polished the cylinder heads and drilled and lightened the timing gears. I prepared both these engines at home on the kitchen table and they paid me well for my work. They did very well in practice in the IoM, putting in good practice times. On race day I told them to take it easy and finish. They were both doing well until Mr Brown fell off and broke his foot, but Fred Young went on to come in third, so my efforts were not without results.

As the Flash was going so well, Mr Vincent persuaded Mr Baillie to enter three bikes in the 1950 TT. I requisitioned four Comet engines from the stores, with crankcases and parts for same. George's Flash and one other were to be used as spare bikes. The first thing I did was to clean up the crankcases, sawing off what I did not need to lighten the case and polishing the inside so that the oil would flow freely. I did exactly what was done to George's Flash to these three engines, including the Mark 2/1 cams which I had made for these four engines. The frames were all standard, lightened in the same way as the test house racing Flash. Mr Vincent had them enamelled grey, so he named them Grey Flashes. As I had a lot of work to do, I had to have help, so Mr Vincent let me have Norman Brewster, the service foreman, and Stan Duddington from the special engine department to build the frames with George, so I could concentrate on the engines. As a matter of interest, the four engines I built for the TT were numbered F5/2B/4025/TT (this engine was 12th in the 1950 TT), F5AB/2B/4026/TT, F5AB/2B/4027/TT and F5AB/2B/4028/TT. The four engines had identical valve timing and my new cams:

Exhaust opens 80° Closes 50°

Inlet opens 65° Closes 70°

Timing 38° BTDC fully advanced. 7/8 pistons.

The complete engine assembly was by me - all George, Stan and Norman had to do was to fit the engines and the pre-war Burman TT gearboxes made for the 1937 HRD. This was a special box made of electron, with the shafts and gears running on needle rollers. The time we had to build these bikes was just over two weeks and we were working late at nights. As they finished fitting one engine at a time in the frames, I used to go out and run them in as far as Six Mile Bottom on the other side of Newmarket and then back to Stevenage. I ran the last bike in on the Friday afternoon as the Vincent lorry was waiting to load the bikes; all the spares were already loaded on the lorry for us, also those for the Clubman's 1,000s. We were about to load the bikes when Mr Vincent came up to the test house and said he wanted some new camshaft bushes in RR77 Dural fitted. I had to take all the timing covers off the bikes and press the Oilite bushes out and fit the new bushes after they had been reamed. As I was finishing a bike, George was going up and down the yard trying it. Three of the bikes'

camshaft bushes seized, so Mr Vincent decided that I should refit the old bushes. This was about 5 pm and the lorry, with Dave Ratty driving, should have been on its way to Liverpool and the docks.

It finally left at about 6 pm. George, Norman, Stan and I followed later in a car. As the boat was sailing from Liverpool at midnight, we arrived at the docks at about 11 pm. The lorry, with the bikes, was already waiting, so Dave had made good time getting there. We all got on board the boat while the dockers were loading the bikes and the boxes of spares. We found that Vincents had forgotten to book any cabins for us to sleep in; before we sailed Mr Vincent arrived and we told him there were no cabins, so he wanted to know where he was going to sleep. George told him he would have to rough it like the rest of us. I slept in a coil of rope all through the journey to the Isle of Man. We arrived on the Island at 5 am Saturday and the next thing we had to do was to get the bikes and boxes of spares to the Howstrake Hotel, Onchan, where the workshops were. When we had finally finished, we had some breakfast which Mr and Mrs Cane and their daughter had prepared for us (they were the owners of the hotel). After breakfast we got down to finishing and adjusting the bikes, wire-locking all the bolts and nuts, and taking the wheels out so that Avons could fit new tyres ready for practice on Monday morning. The riders nominated by Mr Vincent to ride the three Flashes were George, C. A. Stevens and Manliff Barrington; the reserve rider was Ken Bills. On the Sunday we had to make the bikes fit the riders by altering the seats, gearchanges and foot brakes. The Howstrake Hotel was mainly for the TT riders and their mechanics, so they could all be together; it was also not far from the starting point. Staying at the hotel with us were Dickie Dale, Frank Lomas and his son Bill, Maurice Cann, Phil Heath, Les Archer and many others I could mention.

Monday morning was the first day of practice and we were at the start at 4.30 am to help the riders with the bikes. The first thing to happen was a big-end seizure on George's bike at Ramsey and valves breaking on the big port heads of Stevens' and Barrington's bikes through over-revving and missing gears. We had to send back to the factory for some new heads and big-ends before we could rebuild the bikes. That is all Norman, Stan and I were doing for all the practice week - fitting new big-ends and valves in the cylinder heads. We were working on the bikes until 1 am and then up again at 5.30 am for practice. Mr Vincent decided, in the end, to change the gearboxes from Burman to Albion, so we had to take the four engines out of the frames to fit the new gearboxes and drill the engine plates to take the Albion boxes. George then took the bikes out to Ronaldsway airfield with the Avon Tyres van, to get the right gear ratios. In the second practice week everybody was getting fed up with not having much sleep and missing our food. George withdrew from the TT because of his back, so I had to dash around preparing a bike for Ken Bills, the reserve rider, to qualify on. He just managed to qualify on George's short circuit Flash that we had prepared as a spare bike. Also, by taking note of George's instruction to keep the revs to 7,000 rpm.

After all the practice had finished we were still working on the bikes and we never saw any of the Lightweight, Junior, Sidecar or 250cc TTs. Stan and Norman said they had had enough and were going to Onchan Cliffs to have a sleep, so I went with them. That was in the morning; I think we would have still been asleep now if George hadn't come and found us in the afternoon - we hadn't been back to the hotel for any food and Mrs Cane was worried. When we got back to the hotel we had had our evening meal and then back to work finishing the bikes for Friday's Senior TT. On the Thursday we took the three bikes to the start for the riders, before the start of the race for the weigh in and scrutineering. On Friday George had a word with Ken Bills and told him we had put the gear ratio up and to keep the revs to 7,000, if he did so he would finish the race. Before the start of the race, we all went to May Hill, Ramsey, to watch the race in Nora's front garden. She was a great follower of the riders and the TT and she fed us with sandwiches, apple pie, tea or beer. After the race had finished we had a phone call from the start to say that Ken Bills had finished 12th, while the other two bikes had dropped valves through over-revving. Avon's van brought the bikes back to the hotel after the race had finished and after our late meal we had to start packing the spares into boxes ready to take down to the docks. We had to be up by 5.30 am on Saturday morning to take the bikes to the docks to be loaded on the boat by 6.30 am. By the time the boat sailed at 7 am we were dead beat from lack of sleep and arrived at Liverpool docks at about midday, having slept nearly all the way across the Irish sea. The lorry from Vincents was already waiting at the docks for the boat to berth, so while we were loading the lorry George collected the car and after having some food we started for home.

Come Monday morning and we were all back to work unloading the lorry and putting the bikes and boxes of spares into number 11 shed for storage. Later the good Grey Flash that Ken Bills rode was sold to Jack Surtees for young John to ride in short circuit racing, while the other three bikes were sent to the special engine department to be rebuilt and later sold; I'm afraid I lost track of them then. Later, George was made quality manager of production by Mr Vincent, which some of the management did not like, as he was too particular.

Denis Minett

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On another subject, without wishing to start a paper war, I think the statement made in Cliff Brown's Chapter 11 of "The Inside Story" appearing on page 21 of MPH 390, July, 1981, should be corrected. It is pointed out, however, that this chapter does not appear in the published book. He claims to have built the Black Lightning engines that were exported to 11 different countries, but this is not the case.

I was in complete control of the Special Assembly and Tuning Department at the Factory, where all the Black Lightning and Grey Flash machines were built and tuned in their entirety. This was done with the assistance of Stan Duddington and Jack Lazenby who attended to the cycle parts, whilst I assembled the engines and "ran in" the complete machine performing the final tuning at Gransden Aerodrome. Neither Cliff nor George Brown had anything to do with the machines or engines referred to above. They were solely involved with development work in the Test House.

In support of these statements I enclose photostat copies of a letter from Rollie Free dated 8th October, 1950, complimenting me on the . . . "top job done on the machine" . . . on which he broke the USA speed record at 156.77 mph and the reference given by the late Philip C. Vincent on resignation from the Vincent-HRD Company on December 5th, 1950, the contents of which are self explanatory.

When available I will arrange to forward a copy of the tuning data on all the machines under my care and which has already been published in Victoria with the title of The Denis Minett Notebook.

Hearthmont, Victoria, Australia.

DENIS C. MINETT.

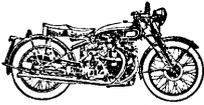
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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

Dennis Charles Minett has been employed by this Company from the 14th. April 1947 to the 5th. December 1950 in the capacity of Foreman in charge of our Special Assembly and Tuning Department in which all our production racing models are built.

During this period he has performed his duties to our entire satisfaction, and machines built under his supervision have annexed many National Records in overseas countries, including the One Mile, Five Mile and Ten Mile American National Records at speeds of well over 150 m.p.h. on September 11th. 1950.

He has proved a good time-keeper and we were perfectly satisfied with his personal character and behaviour.

He is leaving our employ in order to emigrate to Australia and we are very sorry to lose his services.

FOR THE VINCENT "H.R.D." COMPANY LTD.,

Philip C. Vincent
JT. MANAGING DIRECTOR.

Customers' Motorcycles are driven by our own Staff at Customers' own Responsibility. No Liability is accepted by this Firm for any Motor Vehicle, Motorcycle or Stock entrusted to them.

Above: the reference letter from P.C.V. that Denis refers to
[The letter from Rollie Free, to which Denis refers, would have been unreadable if reduced to fit a page of MPH, so I have transferred it to type. I am sure you will find it interesting-Ed.]

Dear Denis,

I sincerely apologise for not writing sooner, but alibis are cheap. As I told Mr Vincent, you did a top job on the machine and only the last minute work which resulted in not doing anything in top shape, at my end, let us down. I warned you that I was stubborn regarding the shell and I was and still am convinced that it is possible if intelligently done. The shell was never finished and I ran it anyway in desperation. You see I had given my word to Mobiloil that I would be on the Salt and run the thing. They, Mobiloil, spent quite a bit of money for the AAA timing, supervision, measurement etc. I learned a lot and will now have time to properly try the thing out. The figure that can be reached using the shell is too high to ignore and if one did obtain a record without streamlining it could be readily raised by a much inferior machine very easily by the use of streamlining. The problem is one of control and I was talked out of my idea regarding that by the aerodynamicists. Now I'm

going to use what we call horse sense. I've studied this deal for a long time and am certain of a number of basic facts. These I will now apply. However, I intend to give the machine a real go without the shell as well.

There is no room in a letter to tell you of all the headaches and troubles that occurred but I will say that the times we attained were accomplished with but two actually timed preliminary runs. I got so much wheelspin or slippage that I just picked a gear which would not let the rpm exceed 6,300 which was extremely hard to determine with the tach jumping 500 revs almost continuously. I have reason to be suspicious of the methanol used and was never happy in the knowledge that I had proper jets in the machine so I ran it rich and overgeared. The times for the north and south runs are dead giveaways because there was no good reason for such a variation in time. For example:

1 kilo north 160.10 mph, south 153.58 mph. Average 156.77 mph.

1 mile north 160.05 mph, south 153.26 mph. Average 156.88 mph.

I ran the above runs first and then as it started to sprinkle and was getting pretty dark I ran the full 10 mile course both directions, with these results:

5 kilo north 156.55 mph, south 153.1-3, mph equals 154.82 mph.

5 mile north 156.15 mph, south 152.81 mph equals 154.46 mph.

10 kilo north 154.96 mph, south 152.29 mph equals 153.61 mph.

10 mile north 153.92 mph, south 150.75 mph equals 152.32 mph.

The last two distances, 10 kilo and 10 miles, were run at the request of the AAA who had been granted permission by the ACU to run them from a flying start. They may therefore grant the times as records now that a place is available for a full 10 mile straightway with room for stopping and starting. They had 14.7 miles surveyed and measured.

The one, five and 10 mile records have been officially accepted by the American Motorcycle Association as American records, so we got a small consolation prize.

I spent more money than I could afford and in order to get it back I must finish the job. I certainly have the machine to do the job. So again my apologies to you for failing to do a proper job.

I appreciate very much the information and help you gave me in your letters. I'll probably have another question or so before we complete our attempts.

Sincerely, Rollie.