

Riders Roll of Honour (S): Part 2

Jacqueline Bickerstaff

Oh dear, once again this month I'm pushing the press deadline close again, so there is only time to prepare a single entry. Actually, Surtees really needs a column just to himself if Graham is to fit it into *MPH*. However, don't be fooled because this month is actually not about the illustrious career of John Surtees. Alphabetically, and historically too, Jack Surtees, John's father, comes first – and as it happens he is a worthy RRoH member about which there is plenty to say about his story too.

Jack Surtees: Jack Surtees made his name in the 1930s. In those days Brands Hatch was the best known grass track in Britain, and Jack was one of its stars. In 1936 the track was lengthened to one mile, and drew crowds in excess of 30,000 to see their heroes such as Jack, father of World champion John Surtees, Harold Taylor who would also be famous for his Vincent exploits in the ISDT, and Eric Oliver who raced a Series 'A' Vincent in the Senior T.T., before becoming a dominant force, and World champion in sidecar racing after WWII (but not, unfortunately, on a Vincent).



Surtees Senior. Photo courtesy: Jacqueline Bickerstaff

Post-war, Jack Surtees, who was a motorcycle dealer in South London, obtained the Vincent agency for that area, and so naturally he built a racing sidecar around one, to show off what he sold (and because of its power). At this time circuit racing, Jack Surtees, sometimes with young John as his passenger, continued to be a major force in sidecar racing, not just at Brands (turned over to tarmac in 1950) but also at the many airfield circuits that sprung into existence after WWII. In fact Jack Surtees was three times a British motorcycle champion. No doubt his sales and racing success helped him to get young John accepted as an apprentice at the Stevenage Vincent works, and started another Surtees story.

Jack Surtees Vincent machine was as special as the man himself, and a very significant machine in the history and development of the Vincent – it might even lay claim to being the prototype Black Shadow ahead of Gunga Din? Jack, with his dealership sales to lend weight to his request, wanted a special engine making up. The works then laid down two tuned engines, using the 1A code later referred to as 'White Shadow', these being F10AB/1A/70 – the Surtees bike, and F10AB/1A/71

– the famous Works development machine, 'Gunga Din'. They were sister machines with E7/7 pistons, ET4/2 big ends with a roller missing from each row, fitted with auxiliary valve springs, with polished ports opened up for 1¹/₈" carburettors, and drilled gearbox camplates. However, they were not identical, for the Surtees bike was built with a 56 tooth rear sprocket for sidecar racing, whilst Gunga Din received modified parts for a ⁵/₈" × ³/₈" chain. Brakes differed too, with the Surtees bike having ribbed front drums and malleable iron rear, where Gunga Din had 1939 pattern racing front brakes and standard rear. Jack also sourced and fitted his own carburettors.

Jack used this engine until 1948, when he returned it to the Works, where it was refurbished, and sold to Jose Amat (Cuba) in frame R2690. Unlike Gunga Din, which continued to be a development machine for Black Shadow and then Black Lightning parts, and became famous for its exploits – and even survives although much changed by the years, Surtees sister machine disappeared into obscurity.

Jack Surtees died in the early 1970s, leaving three children, John, Norman, and Dorothy (the same name as Jack's wife).

