

RENÉ MILHOUX'S RECORDS

Phil Irving

MPH 400

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Although his name does not crop up nearly as often as those of other Vincent exponents, the Belgian rider Rene Milhoux did much in 1948 and 1949 to add lustre to the name, especially on the Continent where we were wooing the export field.

The first of the three episodes in which he was the central figure took place shortly after the Black Shadow had been announced in February, 1948; our Belgian distributors, the Etablissement Moorkens, suggested that it would be a good idea to run a Shadow in the annual Kilometre Lancée (which loosely translated means Flying Kilometre). It had been won in 1947 by a private owner of a Rapide at a good, but not startling speed, and Moorkens' view was that if the performance was as good as P.C.V. claimed, we should be able to win the solo class at something around 120 mph and the sidecar class at over 100, with a small Imperial chair which Moorkens could borrow from the makers. One snag was that the English monetary restrictions were very tight, and I would only be allowed to take out £10 in traveller's cheques, plus half that amount in folding money, but when, at a meeting in Stevenage, Moorkens offered to pay all the cross-Channel expenses and also provide transport and accommodation for me, the project became both feasible and attractive and the offer was immediately accepted.

The obvious choice of machine was the hotted-up Rapide with engine number F10AB/1A/71 which George Brown had been racing with considerable success for about a year, and which had been christened "Gunga Din" by the Motor Cycling reporter, Charles Markham. The power unit of this machine was virtually identical to a Black Shadow with 7.3 to 1 compression ratio, 1.1/8 inch carburettors and Mark I cams, and although part of its performance was due to Cliff Brown's careful assembly, it would not be deception to claim that it actually was a Shadow, except that the engine wasn't black. That deficiency was easily rectified with a brush and a tin of enamel under Paul Richardson's eye in the Service Department, in which all the road-going equipment, including a five inch 150 mph speedometer and registration plates with the figures JRO 389 were fitted.

When all was ready, including re-lining the rear brakes, I set off on March 20th, 1948, to ride to Harwich and catch the night boat to Ostend, but with about 20 miles still to cover, the combination of an unsuspected T-junction, too much haste and locking of the new rear brake linings when heavily applied, resulted in the front wheel smiting a brick wall, causing much damage to the machine, and temporary unconsciousness, a smashed hand and facial injuries to the rider. There is a perverse streak in my nature that compels me to try to complete a set journey, so even though poor old Gunga Din was unrideable and useless for the intended purpose. I managed to get out of this predicament with the help of a total stranger and get myself and the bike on board the ship, amid many expressions of sympathy from the passengers on account of the plaster on my face, the sling supporting my right hand and my tattered riding coat, all evidence of a monumental pile-up.

For some unknown reason, this accident has been related elsewhere as being a prelude to the record attacks which took place in 1949, but the entries in an expired passport prove that it took place in March 1948; besides the record-breaker could not be ridden on the road. Maybe the full story will be unfolded at a later date, as at this juncture the details of the journey are not relevant to the issue of-the performances in Belgium.

Milhoux was waiting on the quay at Ostend, but his welcoming expression changed swiftly to one of surprised alarm when he beheld a distinctly part-worn Irving tottering down the gangway, and then to utter horror when the wreckage was hoisted over-side by crane. However, I had ascertained on board that the damage was virtually confined to the front wheel (ovalled) and the Brampton forks (badly bent), and en route for Antwerp in the van which Milhoux had providentially brought along, I propounded a scheme to rectify the position, which was delightfully simple, but involved the agreement of Monsieur Moorkens. Still, having expended a lot of money to get the machine to Antwerp, it was unlikely that he would refuse the loan of the front half of one of the Rapides he had in stock and so it turned out. In fact, Moorkens was so impressed with my bullheadedness in getting to Antwerp at all, that he agreed to the scheme immediately and detailed a mechanic to work with us all night if necessary to re-furbish the model.

Thanks to the frameless construction, it was a simple matter to install the complete front end and UFM of a new machine, check everything over, and fit the Imperial sidecar, with a quickly-detachable chassis and a diminutive body, which though conforming to the then-current FICM dimensions would have been a tight fit, even for a two-year-old child. The job was completed by midnight, although, with one hand out of action, my contribution amounted to little more than standing around uttering encouraging cries at suitable intervals.

The annual Kilometre Lancée was the first speed event to be held in Belgium following the winter break, and every budding tuner was anxious to test the results of his labours. Strictly speaking, it was not a flying-start event, as the run-in was only about 200 yards long and there was a slight rise approaching the finish; for both reasons the electrically-timed speeds were bound to be less than the true maximum velocities. It was also not easy to decide the best gear ratios and there was no chance to vary them, because there was no practice and each competitor had only one run per class, but in my estimation the standard 46 tooth solo and 56 sidecar sprockets would suffice, being equivalent to 5,700 rpm at the target

average speeds of 120 and 100 mph respectively, and 5,800 or more on the fastest part of the course. This was situated on one side of the dual Antwerp-Brussels road, temporarily closed to traffic for a few hours.

It was a perfect day for speed and attired in his usual record-breaking garb of thin stockinette overalls resembling Long John underwear, sandals and a diminutive helmet, Milhoux made a faultless solo run which nearly sent the announcer into hysterics when the speed was recorded as 193 kph or near enough to 120.5 mph. His excitement was understandable considering that the second fastest solo speed was only 104 mph., achieved by a full-house Manx Norton. The sidecar run of 97.5 mph just failed to reach our target figure, but nonetheless was quite impressive, being fast enough to win the sidecar class easily, and was actually the fourth fastest speed for the day. Monsieur Moorkens was delighted with the results which received eulogistic notices in the papers, helped by the fact that Milhoux was a popular rider, referred to as "recordman du monde", on account of the many records which already stood to his credit. The reporters were also impressed by the rapidity with which the solo was made ready to run with a third wheel, but were not made aware that they were actually witnessing two half-motor-cycles, temporarily combined to win their premier speed event.

Meanwhile, the damaged wheel and forks were straightened sufficiently to be replaced and make Gunga Din wheelable though not rideable, and we went back to Stevenage by boat and train. P.C.V. was naturally very pleased with the result, but the Browns were by no means overjoyed, as George wanted to race Gunga the following week. They were much more concerned about the mechanical damage than about my broken hand.

Later the same year, news came that Colonel "Goldie" Gardiner intended to attack world records with the Magic Midget car on the autobahn at Jabbeke in Belgium, not far from Ostend, and although he would have first claim to the road and the services of the official timekeeper, the facilities would be available for other selected motor-cycles for the space of two days. Moorkens again offered to cover the expenses of an attempt on world records with Milhoux still being the pilot. The Black Shadow built for John Edgar and Rollie Free in the USA and fitted with the first of my hand-made Mark II cams and other goodies, had been tested in solo form to over 143 mph by George Brown, so it seemed that attacks on the standing kilometre sidecar record held by Eric Fernihough at 80.49 mph, and the standing sidecar mile to the credit of Ernst Henne at 91.35 mph were quite likely to be successful. Accordingly, Gunga was put into proper record-breaking trim, with the second set of my three hand-made Mark II camshafts, 13 to 1 compression ratio and 32 mm Amal TT carburettors jetted for methanol: The front brakes were removed entirely, except for the vestigial remains of one brake-plate for carrying a speedometer gearbox (not used) and only one rear brake was retained so that sprockets with less than 44 teeth could be used. A rev-counter was also fitted and the front number plate JRO 389 was left on - being needed to be able to obtain the documents required for export and re-entry of a vehicle.

In September 1948, Gunga and I crossed over to Belgium by train and boat with only £20 in traveller's cheques, plus a few spares, including a carton of 12 Champion NA14 plugs. On spying these, a Customs official declared that plugs were a prohibited import and tried to confiscate them, but after Milhoux had explained that they were special racing plugs, not made by the Belgian factory, and moreover quite useless in a touring car or bike, the man relented on condition that they were taken out of the country on our return. The Etablissement Moorkens had moved from Antwerp to Brussels, and we spent a day in that city fitting the Imperial sidecar used before, and a locally-made handlebar with the grips cranked forwards and angled downwards to enable Milhoux to stretch out almost flat on the tank. The entire equipage, including Monsieur Moorkens, then drove down to Jabbeke and took up residence in a private house close to a garage where we could (and did) work at night if necessary.

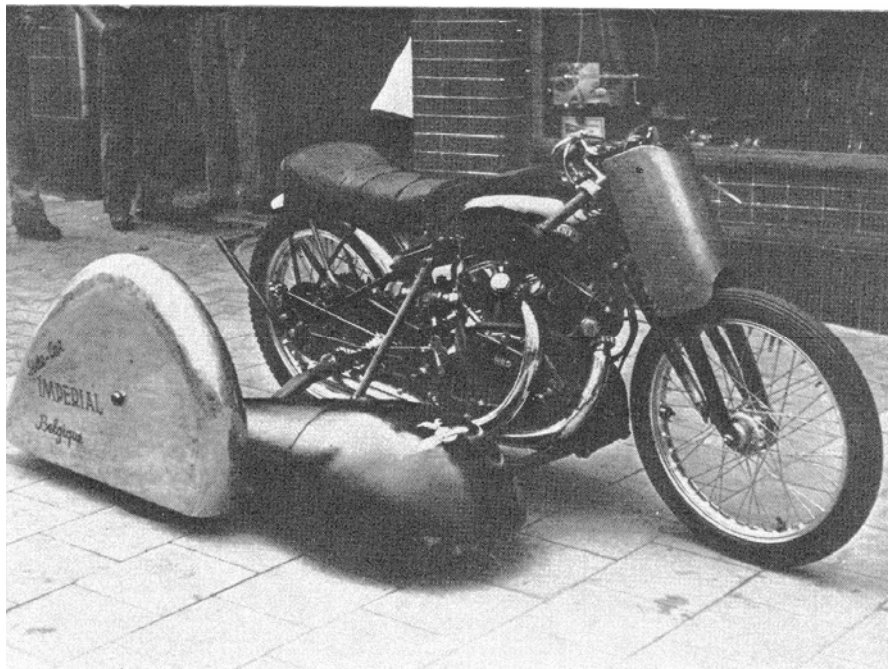
From then on, nothing went quite according to what little plan we had. Almost immediately it became obvious that Colonel Gardiner was the king-pin of the exercise and we were very small fry. The double-track motorway was originally intended to go right across Europe, but it stopped some distance from Ostend and ended nowhere, hence there was little difficulty in closing both sides of the road for a couple of days, one side being used for record attempts and the other acting as a service road. The timing tent was located at one end of a measured kilometre in the centre of a level stretch about 20 miles long, and there were other timing points arranged for the five and 10 kilometre and five mile distances, all being connected to the timing mechanism by underground cables. The passage of a vehicle was registered by breaking a fine thread which actuated a switch and the times of each passage were registered on a moving paper strip, so that there was a permanent visual account of every run made. It was all very crude by today's electronic standards, but seemed, to work quite well.

Being on flat ground near the sea, there was usually a wind blowing along or across the course for most of the day, but towards dusk there was almost a flat calm as the wind changed from a sea-breeze to a land-breeze (or vice-versa). As the "Magic Midget" disliked cross-winds, Gardiner just sat there for hours waiting for the wind to drop to a safe speed and all we could do was practice standing starts on the service road with different rear tyres. Tyre technology at that period was not very advanced and we only had some Avon Supremes with road-racing tread patterns and hard rubber in 3.50 x 20 inch and 4.00 x 19 inch sizes. After several trials, it was found that a 4.00 inch tyre with most of the tread pattern buffed off gave the least wheel spin, but even so there was enough to limit the amount of throttle that could be used.

As the five mile flying-start sidecar record stood at only 104.3 mph, breaking it looked to be a push-over, so we registered a claim for an "Attempt at record" using a 50 tooth sprocket and 1200 jets. When Gardiner consented to allow us to run, Milhoux set off down-wind with the revs going to 6,300 in third gear and 6,000 in top, but long before the finish the engine tightened up and dropped the average speed for the run to 106 mph and a return run could not be made. This was the first time that the engine had been run continuously at full bore for more than half a mile, and when it was dismantled during the night the front piston was found to be badly seized on the front or non-thrust side. It and the bore were cleaned up, the jets increased to 1400 front and 1300 rear, and the sprocket reduced to 48 teeth for the next day's work when fortunately there was little hindrance from Colonel Gardiner. Alas, disaster struck again! After about four miles, the engine again tightened up and was throttled off to obviate serious damage. This made any more attempts at long-distance records pointless and after a few quiet runs on the service road to free up the engine, Milhoux attacked the kilometre and mile standing-start sidecar records, which could both be timed consecutively on two runs in opposite directions. Although wheelspin was excessive, the result was favourable, the kilometre speed being increased from 129.54 kph (80.5 mph) to 134.53 kph (83.5 mph) and the mile speed rose from 92 to 94 mph. In neither case was the improvement really shattering, but nonetheless, Milhoux and Gunga Din had set new world records for the first time a British machine had done so since the outbreak of war.

After these short bursts, the engine seemed to be running freely and Milhoux decided to try for the record solo speed attained by a Belgian national. With a 42 tooth rear sprocket (no brake drum), the Girdraulic forks in the solo position, and the run-in limited to about half a mile to give the engine more chance of survival Milhoux got his record with a mean speed of 143.2 mph, the best one-way velocity being 145.8 mph, which was not far off the 150.7 mph that Rollie Free had attained the day before at Bonneville to annex the American Record.

For a record to be recognized the engine must be measured on the spot, or else officially sealed straight away and measured later on. The final run had been made right at the end of the second day and we could not locate any of the official sealing or measuring crew, who apparently had retired to Ghent. So we towed-the bike there, located the missing personnel enjoying a drink in a cafe, and prevailed on the plombieur to affix his wire and lead seals. All this performance was highly irregular and could have resulted in the record not being "homologated" (meaning accepted by the FIM) if any unfriendly party had got wind of the unobserved lapse of about two hours between the record runs and the sealing). The dimensions were naturally found to be correct when officially measured in Brussels next day, but the front cylinder again showed signs of impending seizure on the forward side, indicating that the cylinder was shielded by the front wheel and therefore got less cooling draught than the rear one at high speed.



Gunga Din as it was used by René Milhoux to attack the records in Belgium in September 1949. As Phil says, the machine looks very standard, but that "sidecar" is really something, isn't it?

When preparing to return home in a very happy state of mind, the racing Champions were presented to Milhoux, and the carton re-filled with a dozen decrepit plugs of the same make, but assorted sizes. At Ostend the alert Customs man demanded to be shown the plugs which were supposed to go back to England and after a cursory glance at the grisly relics signed a clearance rather to our relief, as this species of official can be devilishly awkward if he suspects any hoodwinkery is being committed.

P.C.V. was highly delighted with the records and lost no time in advertising them as being gained with a Black Lightning which, in effect, Gunga Din had become.

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Milhoux's third *tour de force* occurred just a year later when the Belgian authorities arranged matters better by obtaining closure of the road at Jabbeke for three days instead of two. Colonel Gardiner was again scheduled to be present, but entries were also invited from several aspirants to records in several motor-cycle categories. Moorkens offered to defray all expenses and supply accommodation for me, in order that Milhoux could have a shot at the five kilometre and five mile sidecar records. The former stood at 199 kph (124 mph) and the latter at the surprisingly low figure of 104.4 mph. As success seemed to be possible, the offer was gratefully accepted by all except George and Cliff, the former being really upset at not being permitted a crack at world records: he simply seemed unable to appreciate that the attempt could not take place without Moorken's financial assistance and it was they who had the right to nominate their own rider. However, the Browns prepared old Gunga with their accustomed carefulness, except for one oversight, omission to change the oil-pump worm as I had requested. The rear wheel had both brakes in place for better stopping power with no front brake and also quick changes of ratio. Mindful of the currency restrictions still in force, a length of chain was wrapped round the idle sprocket, a couple of pistons and a spare magneto were located somewhere on the machine for possible re-sale in Belgium, and off we went again via Dover and Ostend using the firm's Austin van for transport.

Preparations in Brussels included fitting Rene's cranked handlebar and another Imperial sidecar chassis with a different, but still regulation-size, body and an enclosed streamlined wheel. Some rudimentary fairing was added to the Girdraulics, but stowing 132 pounds of lead ballast in the sidecar turned out to be difficult. It was in the form of two long billets and they could only be installed if cut in half. Have you ever tried to saw through a three inch bar of lead? An ordinary hacksaw simply clogs up, but a woodsman's saw with very coarse teeth finally did the trick.

We installed ourselves in the same house in Jabbeke on September 14th, 1949 and when the gallant Colonel permitted us to make some short distance record attempts at the end of the first of the three available days, Milhoux attained mean speeds of 207 kph (128.8 mph) for the flying kilometre and 128.1 mph for the mile. They could have been higher except that the engine was reluctant to run above 5,800 rpm for no discernible reason, until I spotted a wet patch on Milhoux's left leg, evidently caused by flooding of the front carburettor. Milhoux had already remarked that with the new design of sidecar, some vibration was noticeable at 5,800 rpm, so during the night the front inlet pipe was cut in two and joined with a piece of radiator hose to provide some flexibility for the carburettor.

This panic measure proved to be successful next day, permitting up to 6,800 rpm without flooding, but no record attempts were possible for the simple reason that there were no timekeepers! The gallant Colonel had told them that he did not intend to drive the "Magic Midget" that day, so the timekeepers just kept away too!

That left only the next day for record-breaking, but for some unknown reason the flooding returned, though it was not quite so bad as before. On the first record attempt covering the kilo, mile, five kilo, and (we thought) five miles, the timing gear failed to record, so the run had to be repeated, the kilo, mile and five kilo being covered at 206.26 kph in one direction, and about the same in the other direction, except that near the end the engine suddenly tightened up and Milhoux crossed the line with the clutch out and a dead engine. Despite this, the speed for five kilometres worked' out at 203 kph (126 mph) which constituted a new record for this distance but much to our surprise and Milhoux's wrath the speed for five miles was given out as a mere 106 mph and it was pointed out very forcibly that Milhoux would have had to get off and walk the last bit to make such a huge drop in speed between the five kilometre and the five mile marks. Great argument then ensued: the head timekeeper insisted the time was correct and I must admit that, from the figures shown in the chart, it was correct. The assistant timekeeper had his doubts, while Milhoux refused to accept the result and after half an hour's altercation, everyone went away in a great state of frustration. It later appeared that the assistant timekeeper thought that maybe the time was right but the distance was not, and in the morning he was found to be correct. The timing strip had been placed at the 10 kilometre mark, whereas five miles is actually eight kilometres but the speed had been calculated for five miles, hence the apparent drop in speed. Further examination showed that an irate farmer who objected to the road closure had chopped through the true five miles cable, so the run would have been abortive anyway.

Back in Brussels, the authorities refused to allow our request to have the speed recalculated, but agreed to allow the 106 mph to stand. As this comfortably exceeded the existing 104 mph figure, it gave us the five mile record, even at a ridiculously low speed and as we had annexed the five kilometre record at a more respectable velocity, Messrs Moorkens and Milhoux were quite satisfied with the outcome.

In 1948, I had had great difficulty in cashing my meagre traveller's cheques due to inability to sign my name with a damaged hand and a bandaged face which bore little resemblance to my passport photograph, but the bank manager finally relented. In 1949 the situation was even worse. Britain went off the gold standard on September 16th and not a

soul would handle traveller's cheques, except a few shifty individuals who were buying them at less than half their value. That's when my supply of spares came in handy; Moorkens bought the lot and my traveller's cheques remained uncashed until they were back in England, where an inquest was held on the engine trouble. It was suggested that someone had failed to fill the oil-tank, but I knew that was not so. The cause was soon found to be big-end seizure due to a stripped oil-pump worm, it being one of a very early batch made of incorrect material. Had this worm been changed, or if the timing gear failure had not forced an additional run, 'the speeds recorded might well have been higher. As it was, 'Vincent could now use the slogan., "The World's Fastest Sidecar Machine" for a while, anyway.

Some time later, the sidecar category was replaced by a class for three wheeled vehicles, with no stipulation about body size or vehicle dimensions and it was permissible to hang a tiny third wheel on the end of a flimsy frame-work. This relaxation, in conjunction with streamlined fairings, allowed much higher speeds to be attained and made the previous figures seem very inadequate. In my view, all the original sidecar records should have been allowed to stand as such and a new record list started for the three-wheeler category, which could even include such monsters as Craig Breedlove's projectile - capable of well over 400 mph.

In conclusion, it may be worth noting that during the progress of Gunga Din from being a warmed-up Rapide into becoming a Black Shadow and finally a record-breaking Black Lightning, very few components were changed; in fact it can be seen from photographs, that the original sand cast timing cover was retained. Apart from polishing con rods and flywheels the major internal alterations were to pistons, cams and carburettors, everything else being of standard design, dimensions and materials. Even the much sneered-at cageless roller bearing big-ends were fitted and managed to avoid the *hari kari* until the last moment, when a total lack of oil caused an instant lock-up which would have occurred even if caged bearings had been, used.