



Neil Redley fixes me with a hard stare. “Don’t call me a Velocette collector,” he says. Then his face cracks into a smile. It would be difficult not to call him that, after all. He has his own private museum/Velo den at the rear of his house, with a long row of Velos competing for my attention – and the only bike at his Hampshire home that didn’t roll out of the Hall Green works is a solitary Matchless that’s been banished to the garage. “I just like unusual Velocettes,” explains Neil, almost apologetically.

He has no reason to apologise, though. His Velocettes – which are definitely not a collection, of course – have won countless awards and been featured in any number of magazines over the years. But he’s offered *CB* a ride on four of his more recent acquisitions – and I’m not about to turn down an opportunity like that.

Tracing the roots of Neil’s Velocette addiction is easy enough. He’s happy to talk Velos all day. “My first bike was a 1936 GTP with a Halfords megaphone exhaust,” he reveals. “I absolutely loved that bike. I was living with my mum in Northampton back then and working in the stock room at Woolworths. I paid a fiver for the GTP and then rode it for weeks without a dynamo belt, because I couldn’t afford one. Once I got a belt for the dynamo, there was no stopping me.”

After sweet-talking his mum into lending him £85, Neil sold the GTP for £8 and bought a MAC from his local dealer.

That further cemented his love for Velocettes and, though he moved on to a succession of other marques, he never got the passion for Velos out of his system.

“Bikes took a back seat for years after I became manager of a Halfords branch, though,” Neil continues. “Then, when my son got into racing in the ’80s, I got back into bikes. And when I’d got my own business up and running, I found that I had a bit of time on my hands and decided to build a shed at home. That turned into a complete rebuild of the house and left me with the space to have a few more bikes, so naturally I started buying Velocettes. I’d go for anything that was a bit out of the ordinary. That was in 2004 and now look at me.”

The quartet of bikes that Neil has lined up neatly outside his Velo-cave are certainly out of the ordinary. There are a couple of the Tartarini-designed Indian Velos (that’s Indian as in American rather than the sub-continent) for a start. Then there’s an example of Velocette’s ultimate sporting single, the Thruxton – and the very first Venom to have been built. It’s time to take a closer look and get them out on the road...



■ A quartet of distinctive Velos awaits us...

‘THIS WAS THE FIRST VENOM OFF THE PRODUCTION LINE, AN ORIGINAL SHOW MODEL’



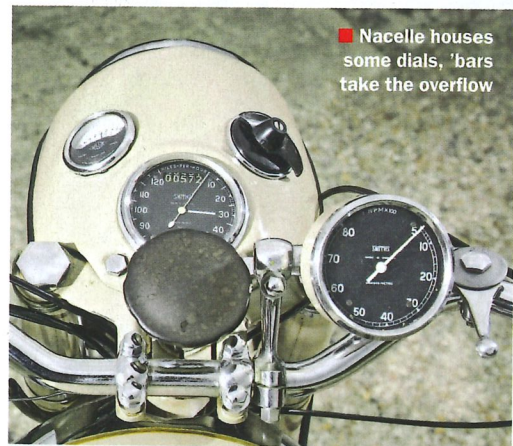
SPECIFICATIONS
1955 VENOM

| ENGINE/TRANSMISSION | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Type | Air-cooled, ohc single |
| Capacity | 499cc |
| Bore x stroke | 86mm x 86mm |
| Compression ratio | 8:1 |
| Carburation | Amal Monobloc |
| Clutch | Wet multiplate |
| Gearbox | Four-speed |

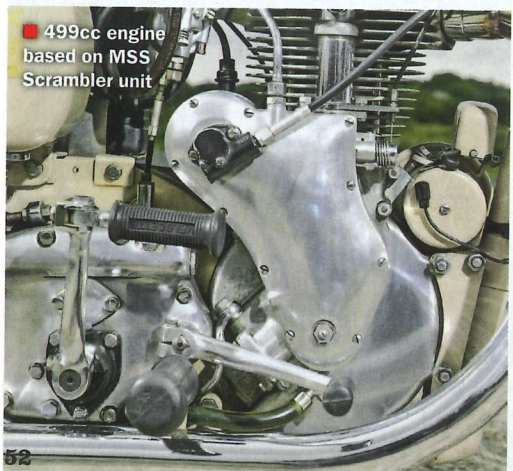
| CHASSIS | |
|------------------|--|
| Frame | Tubular single downtube cradle |
| Front suspension | 1.24in telescopic forks |
| Rear suspension | Twin shocks |
| Brakes | 7.5in (190mm) s/s drum (f) 7in (178mm) s/s drum (r) |
| Tyres | 3.25 x 19 (f), 3.25 x 19in (r) |

| DIMENSIONS | |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| Dry weight | 385lb (175kg) |
| Wheelbase | 53.75in (1365mm) |
| Seat height | 30.5in (775mm) |
| Fuel capacity | 3 gallons (13.6 litres) |

| PERFORMANCE | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Top speed | 95mph |
| Max power | 36bhp @ 6200rpm |
| Fuel consumption | 50mpg |
| Price new | £266 19s 4d (1958) |



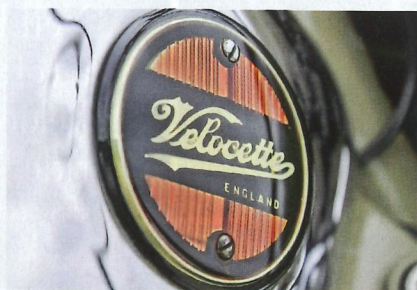
■ Nacelle houses some dials, 'bars take the overflow



■ 499cc engine based on MSS Scrambler unit



■ Only around 12 Venoms were finished in beige



■ This badge acts as a magnet to owner Neil



■ Fishtail exhaust is classic Velocette style

1955 VENOM

This is the bike that appeared on the Velocette stand at the 1955 Olympia show. It’s the first production Venom model and had only had three owners before Neil acquired it in 2011.

The 499cc Venom engine was based on the factory’s experience with developing the MSS Scrambler unit. It was intended as a sports roadster to complement the 349cc Viper (also based on the MSS Scrambler design) while the MSS itself took on the role of the touring model in the range. The Venom engine ran slightly lower compression than the fiery MSS Scrambler and employed a split-skirt piston rather than the solid skirt type used on the scrambler, a fact which necessitated a smaller running clearance. It also relied on a different Amal carburettor, using a Monobloc rather than the TT carb of the MSS Scrambler.

The Venom became the top-of-the-range model for Velocette at its launch for the 1955 sales season, although a Clubman version appeared in 1960 for those who wanted even more performance. The latter featured a compression up to 9.3:1, close ratio gears, an Amal TT carb and BTH racing magneto as the main improvements, backed up with a range of optional extras including rearset footrests and a megaphone exhaust.

But for Neil, the attraction of his “number one” Venom is the fact that it was the first Venom off the production line and one of the original show models. And, of course, it’s finished in that very unusual beige colour. “Only about a dozen beige Venoms were built,” says Neil. “The first owner actually painted it black, but the next owner returned it to its original colour when he restored

it in 1981. After that, the Velocette Owners Club bought the bike and it later passed on to a consortium of four club members; it was displayed at both Donington and Beaulieu museums. I bought it in 2011 and didn’t touch it until I recommissioned it for this year. I’ve only ridden it a few miles. See what you think.”

Neil has drilled me on the prescribed Velocette starting ritual. I have to bring the piston up against compression, then ease it over using the decompressor and carry on to the bottom of the kickstart lever travel. Then, let the kickstart return to the top of its stroke and give it a firm swing with no throttle. Result – the Venom chuffs into life.

We’re heading for the wide open spaces of the New Forest and the Venom is a superb tool for exploring the B-roads. The controls are light, the riding position supremely comfortable and the gearbox and clutch are almost as light, positive and slick as a modern bike – although the gearchange lever has a long throw. And, while the Venom is no lightweight, its sturdy brazed and lugged frame tracks true and securely over indifferent road surfaces, complemented by supple and effective suspension.

It’s no slouch, either. I slip onto the M27 on the way back to Neil’s and surprise more than a few commuters as I blast past them at 70mph-plus on a 60-year-old bike. Velocette enjoyed an enviable reputation for the quality of their engineering and the way the Venom performs today has confirmed that.

In fact, the Venom performs faultlessly all day. The engine feels unburstable, it stops and goes well and to cap it all off it’s a real eye-catcher in that pale beige finish. Back in 1955 it must have been a real eye-opener, too.

SPECIFICATIONS

1966 THRUXTON

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

| | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| Type | Air-cooled, ohc single |
| Capacity | 499cc |
| Bore x stroke | 86mm x 86mm |
| Compression ratio | 8:1 |
| Carburation | Amal Monobloc |
| Clutch | Wet multiplate |
| Gearbox | Four-speed |

CHASSIS

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Frame | Tubular single downtube cradle |
| Front suspension | 1.24in telescopic forks |
| Rear suspension | Twin shocks |
| Brakes | 7.5in (190mm) s/s drum (f) 7in (178mm) s/s drum (r) |
| Tyres | 3.25 x 19in (f), 3.25 x 19 (r) |

DIMENSIONS

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| Dry weight | 385lb (175kg) |
| Wheelbase | 53.75in (1365mm) |
| Seat height | 30.5in (775mm) |
| Fuel capacity | 3 gallons (13.6 litres) |

PERFORMANCE

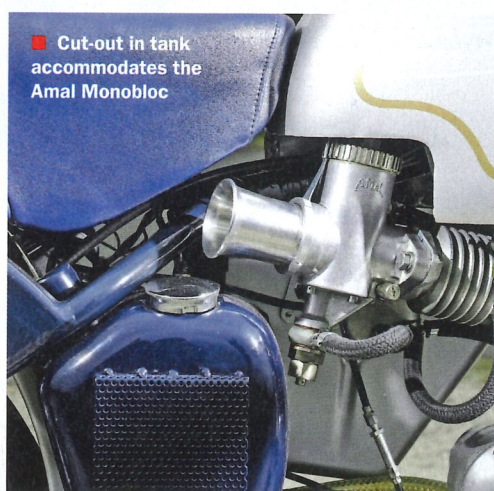
| | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Top speed | 95mph |
| Max power | 36bhp at 6200rpm |
| Fuel consumption | 50mpg |
| Price new | £266 19s 4d (1958) |



■ Right: Front brake gives positive feedback when you get enough heat into it

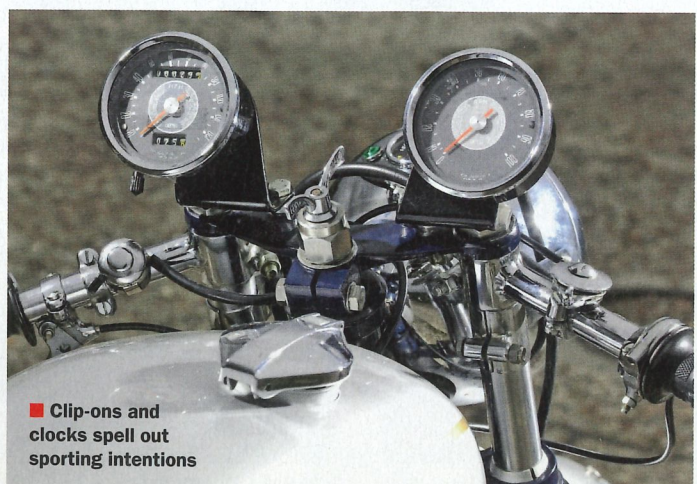


■ Below: Adjustable shock absorber mounts are another Velo hallmark



■ Cut-out in tank accommodates the Amal Monobloc

■ Best British sporting single ever? Thruxton is right up there...



■ Clip-ons and clocks spell out sporting intentions

1966 THRUXTON

After successfully experimenting with racerised Venoms, Velocette took the plunge and offered a production version in 1965 – the Thruxton. With the axing of the Gold Star from the BSA range, the door was ajar for another manufacturer to produce the finest sporting single money could buy. But it took development work by Reg Orpin, workshop manager at leading Velocette dealer L Stevens in London, to convince Velocette it might as well be them.

Velocette had offered the Venom Clubman – essentially a tuned version of the existing Venom – since 1960. Orpin had also developed a number of accomplished Venom racers and started experimenting with a modified cylinder head from US Velocette importer Lou Branch. The modified head – actually built by Dick Brown of Modern Cycle Works for Branch – featured a big two-inch inlet valve and a bigger carb. Power was significantly improved and Velocette decided to produce their own version of the new head to offer as an optional extra for Venoms. Orpin produced what was effectively the prototype of the new Venom Thruxton, with the new head, swept back exhaust, rearsets, clip-ons, and a Tickle twin-leading-shoe front brake.

It was shown on the Velocette stand at the Earls Court show in November 1964, though production versions – the first of which Velocette kept – differed slightly from the Orpin bike. The first Thruxton to actually leave the factory went to L Stevens, fittingly, in early June 1965 and there were some 38 differences between the new model and the standard Venom. The Thruxton used the new big-valve head, fitted with the standard Venom cam – though with 1¼in radius followers rather than the one-inch followers of the Venom to give quicker valve opening and closing. Then there was the 1⅜ in Amal GP carburettor and that elegant silver tank with a cutaway at the rear to accommodate the downdraught inlet tract for the carb. Power was up to a claimed 41bhp (from the 36bhp of the Venom), with more to come when a racing megaphone was fitted. Double-damped forks as used on the MSS Scrambler improved the front end

and Velocette's own twin-leading-shoe front brake (based on the Tickle units used on the show bike and some early production models) provided superior braking.

"I think the Thruxton was a step up from the Gold Star," Neil insists. He may have a point. When the Gold Star was dropped from the BSA range in 1963, Velocette carried on honing the Venom to create the new model. BSA claimed 42bhp for the DBD34 Goldie – one bhp more than the Thruxton. But, while the BSA weighed in around the 410lb mark, the Thruxton was closer to 385lb. Certainly, *The Motor Cycle* journalist David Dixon was impressed by the prototype, finding it as docile and civilised as a stock Venom at low revs, yet capable of 90mph cruising and providing the brisk acceleration of any Velocette he had ridden.

That's praise indeed from an experienced road tester and accomplished racer. Now's my chance to see how the Thruxton performs 50 years later. Neil's bike is a 1966 model he bought from former dealer Jim Gleave in 2005. "I've never even looked it over until I was getting it ready for today," he explains. Hope it isn't too grumpy at being re-awoken...

The Thruxton more than lives up to its billing, though. Powering through fast, sweeping bends is where it's most at home. The Thruxton is fast, focused and – thanks to its high-mounted rearsets and low clip-on 'bars – slightly front-heavy. It's no all-rounder, but it is a superb sporting single. Slim, planted and supremely stable, it's a delight to ride fast.

The high-camshaft overhead-valve Velo engine feels remarkably smooth and sophisticated – it seems it really could go all day at 90mph as Dixon suggested. The one-up, three-down gearbox is positive – though first gear is fairly high – and the front brake feels ever more positive as I get some heat into it. No wonder Thruxtons dominated the 500cc class of the first Production TT in 1967, with Neil Kelly coming home first and Keith Heckles second. One of the bikes recorded 121mph through the speed trap at The Highlander, but production bikes were reportedly good for 110mph. Neil's assertion that this is the finest sporting British single ever produced seems to stand up well.

I probably wouldn't want to ride the Thruxton through town. But out on the open roads crossing the heathlands of the New Forest, it really is a class act.



1970 INDIAN THRUXTON

By 1970 Veloce Ltd, the manufacturers of Velocettes, were in trouble. The world had moved on, but Velocette's range hadn't. BSA and Triumph triples looked light years ahead of Velocette's singles and the Honda CB750 was even further advanced. Singles were going out of fashion – fast. Money was tight and Veloce Ltd were relying more on general engineering work to keep themselves afloat. But there was to be one more twist in the tale of the singles that had been the mainstay of the Velocette range for so long.

In 1967, former Indian West Coast distributor and *Cycle* magazine publisher Floyd Clymer bought the rights to the Indian name. His dream was to relaunch the marque and he got as far as a joint venture with German manufacturers Munch and Horex to build prototypes of a new breed of Indian. Those projects faltered, but Clymer realised his dream by sourcing Venom and Thruxton engines from Veloce and combining them with Leopold Tartarini-designed frames built by Italjet and Italian-sourced cycle parts. The result was the Indian Velo and, as befits a man with a passion for unusual Velocettes, Neil owns two of Clymer's dream bikes.

The 41bhp Thruxton-engined bike from 1970 (the year Clymer's death brought the project to an end) is one of around 120 Indian Velos built. It's a great looking bike that arguably represents what Velocette should have done in terms of updating their singles. The all-welded frame saved 20lb (9kg) compared to a standard Velocette and the total weight saving was an impressive 45lb (20kg). The rest of the cycle parts were top notch, too, with Grimeca front brakes, Ceriani forks and 18in wheels. It should have been a recipe for success, but sales were poor and London Velo dealer Geoff Dodkin ended up buying a batch of 50 unsold bikes in early 1971, selling the Venom-engined models for £525 and Thruxtons for £550.

The Indian Thruxton is the most recent addition to Neil's collection. "I bought it at Stafford show last

October," he says. "It had the wrong front mudguard and side panels, but I used the panels from the Venom as patterns to make new ones. I'll do the same with the front mudguard this winter. It's finished in Mercedes Obsidian Black. I got confirmation from an American source that a few late examples were black. I had a bit of a job finding the correct handlebars and headlamp lens – I found them on ebay in the end. The headlight was also used on AMF-period Harley-Davidsons, I discovered. There are a few more things I need to do to the bike – it's a work in progress."

It might be, but it looks pretty good to me. How will it compare to the Velocette-built Venom and Thruxton, though? Well, the Tartarini-designed frame works brilliantly and feels even lighter than its 360lb (163kg). The riding position is a great compromise for town and country work; I'd prefer the footrests a little further back, but otherwise I can't fault the ergonomics of the bike.

Like all the Velocette singles I've ridden today, the engine is super-smooth for such a punchy single-cylinder unit and it's flexible, too. I can drop to 3000rpm in top gear, wind open the throttle and the bike just quietly gathers momentum. To me, it doesn't feel quite as potent as it should, though. Neil agrees. "I think the exhaust might be restricting it a bit," he concedes. "I'll get it sorted over the winter."

Handling is typical of an Italian bike of the period. The suspension is firm and taut, complementing the light and stiff frame perfectly, while the big Grimeca stopper hauls what contemporary road tests claimed as a genuine ton-up machine down from ill-advised speeds quickly and easily.

Once Neil liberates the full power of the Thruxton engine, this should be an amazing machine, rather than just a very good one. "The Thruxton engine has to be the ultimate British sporting single," he says. "Apart from the Gold Star, there's nothing that can hold a candle to one."

That sounds like a satisfied customer to me.



■ Light, stiff chassis gives taut handling



■ Top-notch cycle parts are a fine complement to the lightweight frame

'IT'S A GREAT LOOKING BIKE – MAYBE WHAT VELOCETTE SHOULD HAVE DONE TO UPDATE THEIR SINGLES'



■ Thruxton engine mated to Tartarini frame made Clymer's dream, but buyers didn't agree



■ Rear light is compact by '70s standards



■ Italian frame designer's name graces tank

1970 INDIAN VENOM (THRUXTON DIFFERENCES IN BRACKETS)

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Type | Air-cooled ohv single |
| Capacity | 499cc |
| Bore x stroke | 86mm x 86mm |
| Compression ratio | 8.6:1 (9:1) |
| Carburation | 30mm Amal Concentric |
| Clutch | Wet multiplate |
| Gearbox | Four-speed |

CHASSIS

| | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Frame | Tubular single downtube cradle |
| Front suspension | 35mm telescopic forks |
| Rear suspension | Twin shocks |
| Brakes: front | 8in/205mm t/s drum |
| Rear: single | 8in/205mm s/s drum |
| Tyres: front | 3.25 x 18in |
| Rear | 4.00 x 18in |

DIMENSIONS

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Dry weight | 360lb/163kg |
| Wheelbase | 56in/1425mm |
| Seat height | 32in/815mm |
| Fuel capacity | 2.5 UK gallons/3 US gallons/11.4 litres |

PERFORMANCE

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Top speed | 101mph, Cycle Guide test (105mph) |
| Max power | 37bhp at 6200rpm (41bhp) |
| Fuel consumption | 50mpg |
| Price new | £1295, 1970; £525 (£550) in the UK, 1971 |

1970 INDIAN VENOM

This is a bike that most certainly meets Neil's criteria for desirability. It's rare alright – even though, according to most Velocette sources, Floyd Clymer bought just 45 Thruxton engines and 77 Venom-spec units, making this Venom-engined example one of the more common Indian Velos. And, on paper, Neil's Indian Venom seems pretty similar to his newly acquired Thruxton. Certainly – apart from its striking bronze, black and white finish – it looks the same. It shares the Tartarini designed frame, proprietary Italian cycle parts and the distinctive Hall Green engine, but somehow it feels a different machine.

Neil agrees. A man who can wheel any amount of stunning Velos out of his garage declares the Indian Venom as his favourite bike of the four we've got on test. "It's got a lovely smooth engine, it's great in traffic and it handles beautifully," he enthuses. "I bought the bike in 2012. It had been restored by David Sketchley from Coventry and he'd done such a good job on it that it won best in show at Stafford in 2014, when I displayed it on the Velocette Owners Club stand. I ride it regularly and love it. It's a first-kick starter and a pleasure to ride."

It's the last of the quartet that I get to take for a ride and, by now, I've just about mastered the starting drill. Immediately I can tell that this is a bike that sees regular action. The engine settles down to a dependable tickover after just a few moments and, as I pull away, the bike has that well set-up feel that only regular use can ensure. The front brake is the best of the bunch, with plenty of feel and the sharpest bite. I can tell the linings on the eight-inch twin-leading-shoe unit have well and truly bedded in.

The engine picks up delightfully from any revs. It'll slog or rev and I'm sure only the upright riding position would be any barrier to the Indian Velo topping the ton with ease. And oh, that noise. Neil had a silencer made for each of the Indian Velos and the sound from this one is sublime. It has just the right mellow tone and if I died and went to heaven this is what all the big singles would sound like there. I find myself cracking open the throttle for no better reason than to hear the glorious sound of the exhaust.

As you'd expect, the handling is indistinguishable from the



■ The odometer still clicks over – Neil rides this bike regularly

Thruxton-engined bike – and feels sharper than either of the Hall Green bikes. Neil has fitted electronic ignition (post-'68 Velos have coil ignition as standard), but otherwise he's kept the bike as Floyd Clymer intended. And that's no bad thing. In hindsight, maybe the Indian Velo was just the sort of machine Velocette should have produced themselves. But, by 1968, when the first of the Indian Velos went on sale in the US, the Venom/Thruxton engine was starting to look a little long on the tooth. Multis for the masses were on the way – along with five-speed gearboxes, electric starts and indicators. Singles were suddenly old hat.

For a committed Velophile like Neil, though, all that matters not a jot. He's never wavered from the Hall Green faith. And no matter how rare it might be, he's happy to enjoy his Indian Venom for what it is – a fine sporting single. Slim, light, snappy – the Indian Velo is a great reworking of a great Brit single. No wonder it's his favourite. **CB**

■ A great example of a cool-looking bike, it's a Stafford show award-winner



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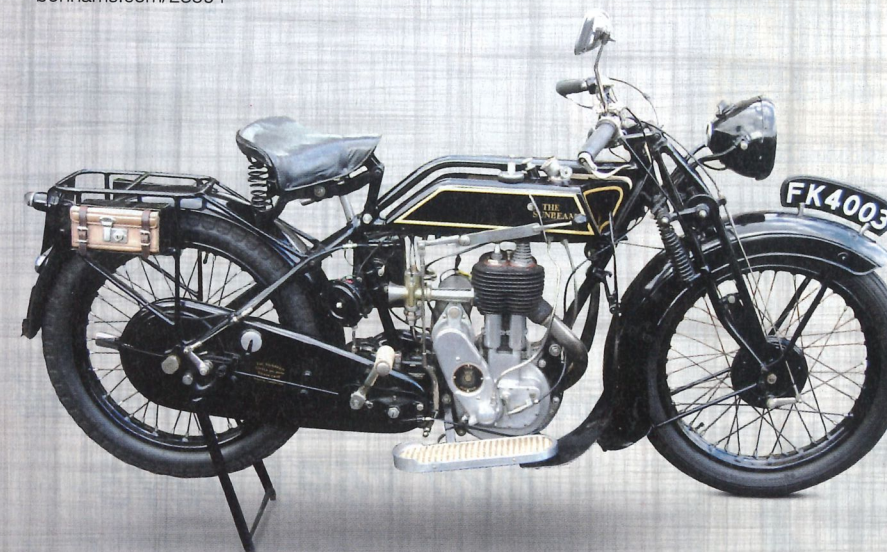
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