

The Café Racer Phenomenon

Places like the Ace Café and Busy Bee had opened their doors in the '30s, and back then were known as 'pull-ins'. All kinds of delivery drivers, commercial travellers and Sunday drivers used these cafés, as Britain had no motorways until 1958.

Triton-builder Dave Degens recalled that as a child in the '40s, he would visit the Ace Café with his father:

“Dad would drop in the transport café section during the week, but on Sundays, with a collar and tie on, he would take us to the posh half of the Ace, which was a fully kitted-out restaurant. We might have a legendary knickerbocker glory ice cream there – magic.”

Many cafés had a so-called youths' section, which was separate from the transport café or tourist-orientated half of the business. This area would often have a jukebox, table football maybe, plus an espresso coffee machine from Italy. Some cafés, like the Ace and the Busy Bee at Watford, were open 24 hours a day, a novelty in an era when most of Britain closed shop at 5pm, on the dot.

It doesn't sound much, but in mid-1950s austerity Britain, teenage lads suddenly found they had a place where they were welcome, parents were rarely seen, and girls regularly showed up.



The Café Continental was on the main Manchester Road in Oldham, and riders would gather to speed test their machines from the '40s onwards, or meet up before going to watch a trials event on the moors nearby.

The picture is believed to have been taken in the '50s, and shows a pair of 350cc Velocette Vipers. A group of men, probably trials riders or keen spectators judging by their sturdy clothing, watch the action. Note that only one rider appears to own a crash helmet, which was typical of an era when flat caps, or no headgear at all, was the norm. (Courtesy Harry Scarsbrook)

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Pete on his Norton-Velo special, ready for a ride in the '70s.

over 90, but he recognised the valves as being from a 1938 Gold Star 350 immediately. What was even better was that he had brand new, boxed-up spares, plus gasket sets, pistons – everything.”

Pete used the parts to make a Goldie 350 café racer, housing the 1930s single-cylinder engine in a Manx Norton frame and using an RRT2 gearbox. He still rides it to this day, alongside a Hailwood Rep Ducati 900SS, which ‘Mike the Bike’ actually sold to Pete back in 1980.

“Mike Hailwood was one of my heroes because he was so ordinary, he raced for the fun of it. I was at the 13th milestone in 1978 when Read broke down on the Honda, and as Mike came past on the final lap he took his hand off the ‘bars and flicked the V-sign at Phil. That was Mike all over, anything for a bit of a laugh.”

Sticking with specials

John Hartas in Darlington began riding in the ‘50s on a Velocette MAC 350, graduating to a Triumph Tiger 110. His local café was at Charter Hall in the Scottish Borders, where he used to wait in lay-bys for someone to come past, then dice with them on the undulating A-roads.

John went on holiday in the ‘60s to Gloucestershire, saw a Triton café racer in a dealer’s window, and bought it on the spot.

“It had an open primary chain case and we had to keep stopping to lube the chain whilst I carried on my holiday. When I got home my dad persuaded me to strip it down. We put 9:1 pistons in it, did the timing properly and it flew! I owned that bike for over 25 years, commuted to work on it – didn’t own a car until the ‘70s. Lovely thing it was – I sold it to a mate and he put a 650SS Norton motor in it in the ‘90s and restored the bike.”

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The Tahiti in Leamington Spa in 1967. (Courtesy The Mike Cook Collection)

Paul Dunstall

Paul Dunstall said he “reversed into the motorcycle aftermarket industry, almost by accident.”

As a teenager in the 1950s, Paul ran a scooter shop in Eltham, South London and made enough money to buy himself a Norton Dominator. After burning off a few guys on the road, 18-year-old Paul went road racing and then began to search for ways to make his Dommie quicker.

“I had a bloke bend some pipes for me, making them fit closer to the engine and upswept, to improve ground clearance. I took a guess on the design of the

megaphone pipes as regards improving power – as it turned out, I guessed correctly,” recalled Paul.

Having had six pairs of pipes made in case of crashes, Paul hung the exhausts in his shop, and found motorcycle riders started asking to buy them. Suddenly Paul Dunstall was in the aftermarket business and he quit racing, sponsoring his mate Fred Neville, then later Ray Pickrell, as his Dunstall-Norton riders and testing engine tuning mods, brakes and exhausts on the track before selling them.

Paul was also quick to pick up on Colin Lyster’s early disc brake success with Dave Croxford, Phil Read and others, offering a Dunstall single or twin front disc setup on his tweaked Atlas and Commando models.

Like Dave Degens at Dresda, Paul Dunstall entered his specially built bikes in production class road racing events in 1967, knowing it would stir up controversy, which helped spread the Dunstall name. In fact, the Dunstall Nortons of the era were registered and taxed as being road legal, production motorbikes.

When the Japanese companies began making larger bikes, Paul Dunstall could see an opportunity.

“I was already exporting a fair bit, so the Dunstall name was known,” said Paul, “We worked with Yamaha in Holland,



A fully 'Dunstallized' Suzuki GS1000, offered for the '78 riding season.



Phil Turner from *Motorcycle Sport & Leisure* magazine takes the café racer-styled Enfield clubman for a refreshing spin.

“We wanted to create a retro single-cylinder café racer, something inspired by the old Continental GT,” commented Peter Rivers-Fletcher at Watosnian-Squire. “We took the basic 500 Bullet and added our own exhaust, bigger carb and the traditional single seat, clip-ons and long alloy fuel tank.”

Re-engineering the past

Motorcycles get in the blood, and it’s often the case that a lifelong passion for speed and all things two-wheeled is passed from father to son. Café racer builder Steve Carpenter was born and raised in London, into a family of motorcycle enthusiasts.

“My Dad told me stories about how he and mates raced from London to the Busy Bee at Watford, or to a café in Birmingham back in the ‘40s. He built a Brough Superior special to try and win. All of them were dicing flat out, with no helmets, just work clothes on. Talk about finding out who had the biggest balls!”