

CLASSIC BIKE GUIDE. THE MAGAZINE FOR CLASSIC RIDERS

CLASSIC BIKE GUIDE

Freshway
5 Hews

WHEN CAFÉ
WAS KING

METEOR MINOR
TRIED

TRIDENT
TESTED!



limited edition
NICK WARD
ILLUSTRATIONS
4 TO COLLECT

A FINE 500 COMET

ISSUE 103
NOVEMBER 1999
£2.75



THE BEST FREE READERS' ADS IN THE WORLD

ENFIELD MINOR

'A LITTLE-KNOWN TWIN, AS UNDER-RATED AS THE COMPANY WHICH PRODUCED IT'. STEVE WILSON SHEDS A LITTLE LIGHT ON A DESERVING CASE

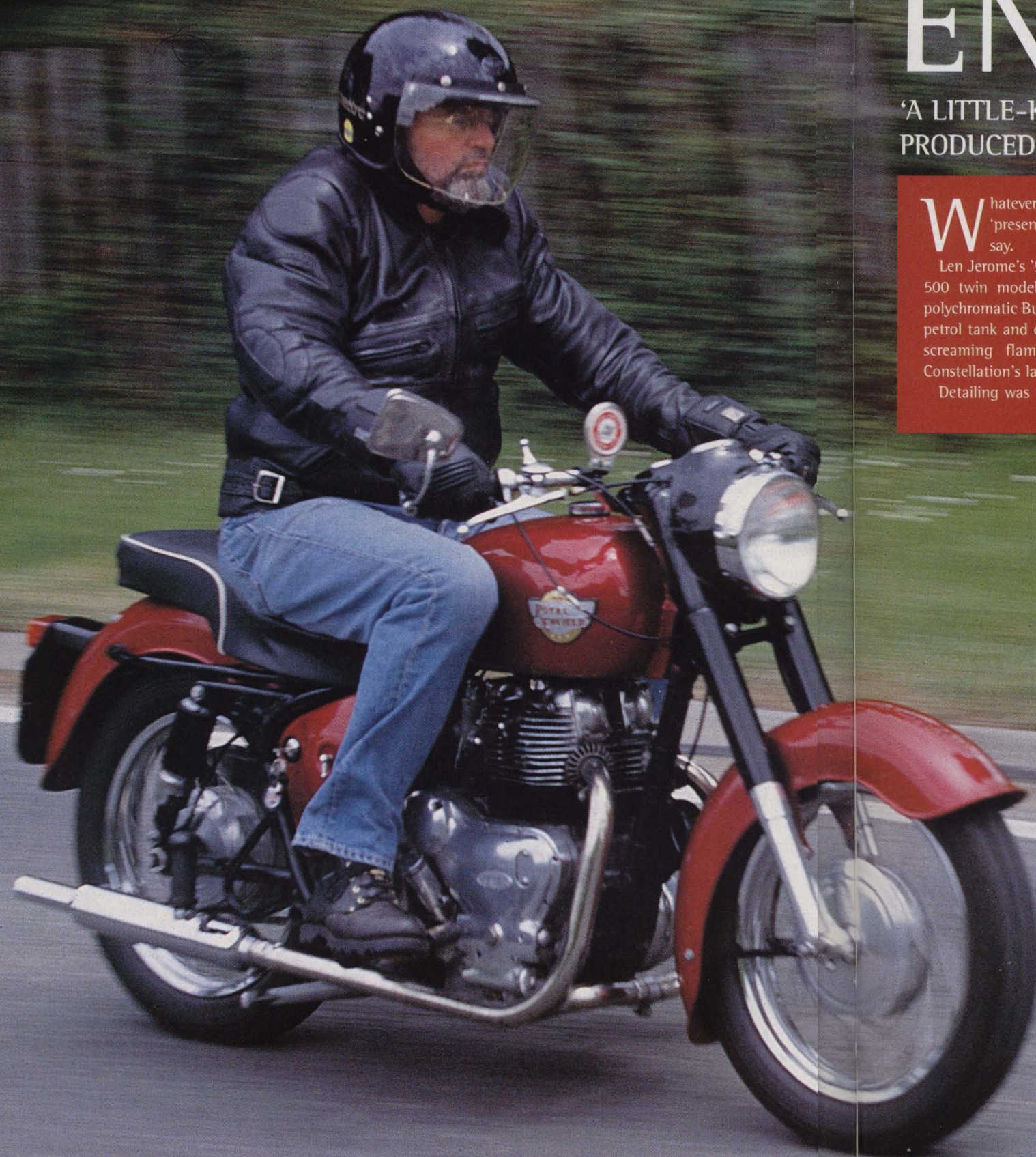
Whatever else, post-war Royal Enfields usually 'present well', as the estate agents would say.

Len Jerome's '58 Meteor Minor, the company's final 500 twin model, was no exception. The gleaming polychromatic Burgundy paintwork on the 3.75 gallon petrol tank and elsewhere was smart, yet without the screaming flamboyance of its big brother 700 Constellation's larger, hyper-chromed tank.

Detailing was nice, with brass inspection caps setting

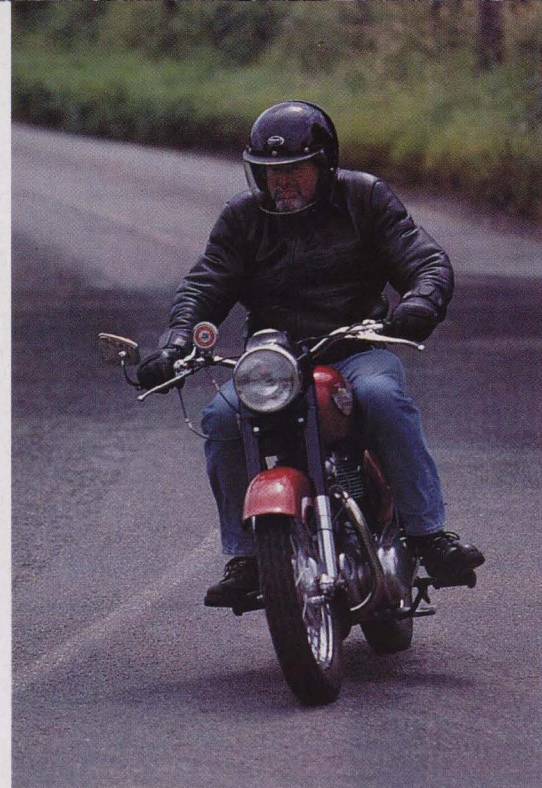
off the shapely alloy primary chaincase with its central single-bolt fixing, the idea Norton pinched for their Commando. The hoop-like siamesed exhaust system also echoed the Constellation, but there was no danger of mistaking the smaller twin for the big one, despite the similar look of their power-plants. Because the Meteor Minor rode on 17 inch wheels, with a nice low 29.5 inch seat height emphasizing its compact, practical nature.

So how had this good-looking 500 evolved? >





RE twin engine, seen here in non-dripping form, giving the lie to the 'Royal Oilfield' jibe...

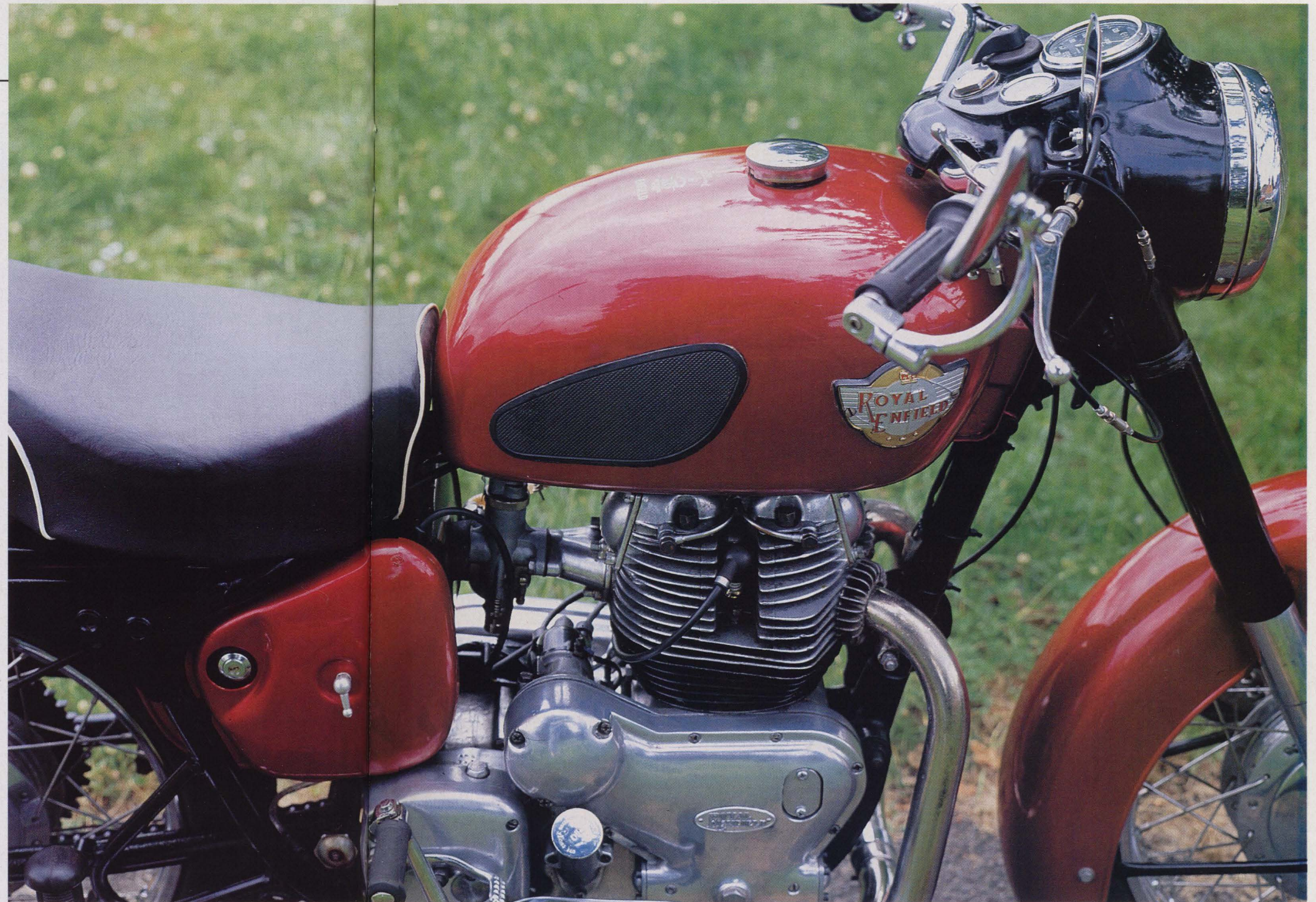


HALF-LITRE METEOR

Royal Enfield's first twin back in 1949 had been a 500, imaginatively named The 500 Twin. It featured the distinctive Enfield bottom end with the oil carried in a cast-in sump within the crankcase, as well as a one-piece crankshaft, pushrods at each corner, and separate heads and barrels, like AMC's twins. Especially in later ('56 - '58) versions, this 500 developed a good reputation among enthusiasts for reliability and soft charm.

But times change, which was something that, to his

Tester Wilson looks a little large for this motorcycle, it must be said. But he claims that it was comfortable enough from the saddle



credit, the Redditch company's MD Major Frank Smith realized well. Despite the Fifties' success of the heavy-weight Bullet single, and of big singles and 700 twins marketed as Indians in the States, Major Smith had realised, looking sideways at the Continent, that something lighter and more economical would be needed to capitalize on an ever-younger domestic market place. So for 1956 the company launched the Crusader, a unit 250 single, two years ahead of the BSA and AMC competition. And Major Smith also knew how to Think Modular.

Bert Hopwood, designer and industrialist, is the name most associated with the modular concept: that is, taking a basic unit - in motorcycle terms, usually a cylinder - and then doubling, tripling or quadrupling it to make up a full range at the same time as achieving economies of scale. But Hopwood freely acknowledged that the idea was at least as old as the great Churchwarden in the golden age of steam locomotives.

DESPITE THE FORGED FRAME, THE METEOR MINOR WAS CATALOGUED AT 388LBS DRY, WHICH COMPARED WELL WITH CONTEMPORARIES LIKE BSA'S A7 AT 425LBS...

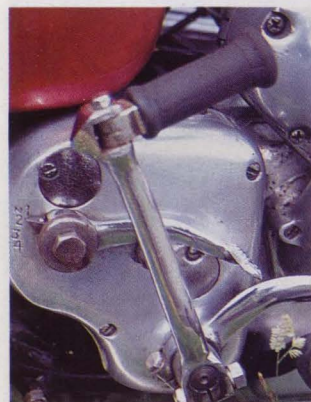
Royal Enfield had already applied the principle with their 700 Meteor and Super Meteor twins, which in some terms had been doubled-up 350 Bullets. Now they did so again in 1958 with the new Constellation and Meteor Minor twins.

All shared the 250 Crusader's bore of 70mm, so that similar pistons, rods, big ends and barrels could be used throughout much of the range. In a further stab at modularity, a prototype version of the Meteor Minor had been housed in a Crusader frame. But contrary to some accounts, the new 500's production chassis, like the Constellation's, was similar in shape to the current Bullet's; though unlike the '56-on Bullets,

the new twins' frame was forged, not all-welded, and hence relatively heavy. The Meteor Minor's use of a 250-style toolbox probably confused the issue. Not until the 1960 season would the twins share the Bullet's frame, suitably modified with the necessary lugs. For the above information I am indebted to leading Royal Enfield specialists Hitchcock Motors. They do seem to know their stuff.

Despite the forged frame, the Meteor Minor was catalogued at 388lbs dry, which compared well with contemporaries like BSA's A7 at 425lbs. Its 496cc engine was a short-stroke 70 x 64.5 mm, against the old Enfield Twin's 64 x 77 mm. The heavily-finned >

The Twin's lube lives in a container cast with the crankcases. The oil filler can be seen lurking between engine and gearbox



The Albion gearbox was a little dated, truth be told, but the neutral finder was always a useful feature



Big saddle and confident steering combine with a willing engine to make Enfield Mi a pleasure to ride

separate barrels were iron and the heads alloy, with the short stroke permitting the use of bigger valves than previously. The one-piece crankshaft, balanced both statically and dynamically, was of nodular iron, and ran on substantial timing side roller and drive side ball race main bearings. Alloy con rods now featured split shell big ends, and the electrics were by alternator and coil ignition, with a distributor housed in a small wedge-shaped pressing behind the cylinders. The Albion gearbox, as per big Enfields, was bolted up to the rear of the crankcase. One less happy feature shared with the bigger twin was the '58 - '60 'scissors' clutch, which could quickly go out of adjustment, first slipping and then losing all its clearance.

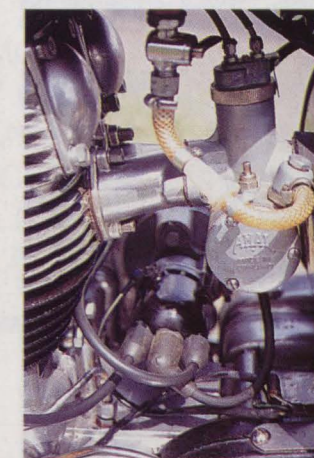
The new Meteor Minor was offered in stingy Standard form, with among other things a sprung saddle, exposed rear chain, and 6 inch front brake. The De

Luxe got a 7 inch front brake to match the rear, a dualseat with that year's new white piping, and rear chain enclosure of both upper and lower runs. With 8:1 compression and a single 1 1/16 this inch Monobloc 376 carb, the 500 was clearly intended as a sports tourer rather than a balls-out roadburner like the Constellation. It pushed out a respectable 30bhp at 6250rpm, which on test equated to a top speed of just under 90mph. A 1960-on 33bhp Sports Twin version would follow, hoisting top speed by a few mph; it would be the last of the 500s, produced until late 1963. Today Meteor Minors are relatively rare models, not only because Royal Enfield's production numbers were always low, but because the similarity to the 700 meant that often 500s were converted up to the bigger engine capacity.

LITTLE STAR

The Meteor Minor was respected by Those Who Knew as a reliable, smooth-cruising roadster. All Enfield twins, however, had a fundamental design flaw. The separate barrels eventually could lead to 'shuffling' of the crankcase mouths, producing oil leaks and distortions. This was exacerbated by the fact that the engine/gearbox formed a stressed member of the frame, and could work loose within it, with a similar effect.

Len Jerome is clearly a man with an eye for a good bike, as he also owns a '54 BSA A10 and a '66 AJS Model 31 650. The 1958 Meteor Minor, thankfully a De Luxe model, had been discovered 'in a bad state, but reasonable', and was rebuilt for him by his son Leon. Any parts needed were supplied by, you've



THE METEOR MINOR WAS RESPECTED BY THOSE WHO KNEW AS A RELIABLE, SMOOTH-CRUIISING ROADSTER. ALL ENFIELD TWINS, HOWEVER, HAD A FUNDAMENTAL DESIGN FLAW...

guessed it, Hitchcocks Motors (01564 783192). After gentle summer use mainly for Shows, three years ago the Jeromes noticed oil drips coming out of the end of the silencer. They took the bike to Crowmarsh Classics (01235-212727) who discovered that, possibly as a result of 'shuffling', the main bearing housing had cracked quite badly, and when it had got hot, cracks had extended into the Enfield's all-internal oil galleries. So Crowmarsh had sleeved all the oilways with brass tube coated in Loctite. They had to remount the holes as they could only drill them in a straight line; and then carefully measure the tubes so that they did not blank off the corners. It worked.

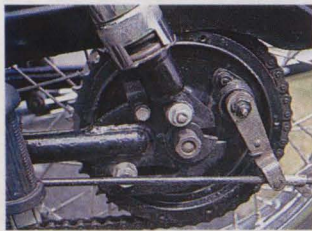
When we tested the bike, it was back at Crowmarsh for a 12 volt conversion. There had been problems with low output, and a dynamic test of the alternator had revealed that one phase was down. Three badly soldered wires were traced as the cause, and re-done as part of the conversion. At the same time one of the robust Harley ignition switches which Crowmarsh

favour was fitted in the original position on the left side tool/battery box.

The 500, extremely compact with its 17 inch wheels, 53.5 inch wheelbase and low seat height, proved an easy, first kick starter both from cold and twice again later, a civilised prod to stir it into life being all that was necessary. Despite the compactness, there was no feeling of constriction even for a six footer; this compared well, for instance, with BSA's early A65/A50 models.

The clutch was not the smoothest but the Albion box proved a good example of the breed, with neutral usually available at rest without resort to the Enfield patent neutral-finder, and just a couple of false neutrals encountered during the whole test. Changes were only marred by the fact that, for my big feet at least, the gear pedal was too close in to the side of the gearbox.

But these details were quickly over-ridden by the engine, which proved a very strong puller in any gear, >



A charming engine, in the great Brit 500 tradition!

with nice, beefy, solid power instantly on tap. It also turned out to be very smooth indeed, particularly at cruising speeds from the mid-40s to the low 60s. Royal Enfields were the happy beneficiaries of a 'dual cush' system, with rubber-segmented cush drive featured both in the clutch, and in the company's patented rear wheel cush hub. Combined with the 500's modest state of tune, this made for an exceptionally smooth ride, even at 60 - 65mph cruising speeds, where other twins would be getting into the vibromassage area. 65, though, seemed to be this particular engine's natural ceiling, and I didn't push it much beyond that.

Handling was well up to the performance, with 3-position Gurlings at the rear and a two-way damped front fork, which had been newly introduced for the '58 twins. The fork was mounted at the relatively steep-feeling angle which will be familiar to Bullet riders, and which you quickly got accustomed to. Steering was good and roadholding acceptable from the 3.25 x 17 front, 3.50 x 17 rear tyres, though there was some skipping at the rear on bumpy bends. Less happy were the brakes, with the front spongy and only adequate, while the rear at a certain point in its application released a terrible graunching noise which galvanized your tester every time and often gave Terry the photographer a jump too. Good thing the engine braking was effective.

The engine, indeed, was the thing with this bike, and its guts and responsiveness were very enjoyable over some mixed going. However, when it came to the to-ing and fro-ing for photographic purposes, the clutch held up longer than I would have expected from previous Constellation experience, though it did eventually begin to lose clearance... But it must be said that the engine got, and felt, perceptibly hot, as well as a bit bothered. This would probably not be a bike for regular use in town or heavy traffic. It likes the open road.

CONCLUSION

It's been said before, but 500 parallel twins continue to be one of the best-kept sleeping secrets in the classic world. If you usually ride solo, if you stay away from motorways, and if you don't often exceed the legal limit, then there's a bundle of fun to be had from the well-sorted 500 twins from the less fashionable marques like Ariel and AJS/Matchless, at significantly lower purchase prices than their counterparts from the Triumph/BSA/Norton Big Three - or than their 650 equivalents.

And to this roster must be added the Royal Enfield Meteor Minor, particularly if you're no giant. This 500 is a handsome package, put together in the light of much experience, both on-and off-road. The only trouble could be actually finding one.



A MINOR COMPETITION

I think you will agree that the Jeromes have made a pretty good-looking job of this 500's restoration. But there is one detail, involving a major piece of tin-ware, which they have got, shall we say, backwards.

If you can spot what it is, write in to me via CBG. First correct entry wins a copy of my book 'Norton Motor Cycles, 1950 - 1986'. Good luck!