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Minor miracle

Despite perhaps not having the most glamorous of images, the half-litre Royal Enfield twin is an underrated machine.

Words by Roy Poynting
Photography by Terry Joslin

SOME PEOPLE SEARCH FOR YEARS to find the exact model of motorcycle they desire, while some buy the first thing that takes their eye. Me? I'm somewhere in the middle, as I've discovered the merits and pitfalls of both approaches.

I once bought the 650cc twin I'd coveted since my teenage years,

only to realize that it was unpleasantly hard work on the sedate Vintage club runs that make up most of my classic motorcycling. On the other hand, I've never regretted buying a flat tank New Hudson instead of the post-vintage Norton International I'd actually gone to view. That impulse saved

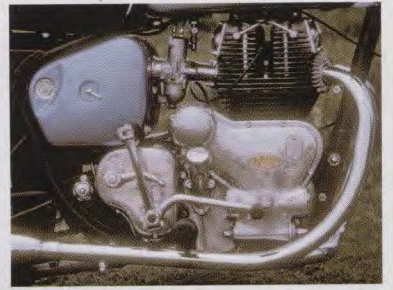
me three-grand, and enabled me to enter events like the Banbury Run.

And that partly explains why – after I'd decided that what I really, really, wanted was a butch Royal Enfield Interceptor – I ended up buying a comparatively svelte Meteor Minor instead. It wasn't what I'd been looking for, but it was

ROYAL ENFIELD METEOR MINOR SPORTS



The engine is a snug fit in the frame, with no unsightly gaps to be seen.



Roy crafted the toolbox himself after finding pattern parts wouldn't do the job.



Handsome headlamp nacelle has side lights set into it.



Front brake was probably originally on a Royal Enfield Continental GT, a fact given away by the cooling vents.



the right make, it was available locally at the right time and price and, given my track record, it might even turn out to be preferable.

Mind you, I transgressed one self-imposed rule. After previous struggles, I'd vowed to only buy restoration projects that were all there, and I could see at a glance that the basket case I'd purchased was lacking its petrol tank, toolbox and wheels. Surely that won't be a problem with something as common as a 60s Enfield, I thought...I was wrong!

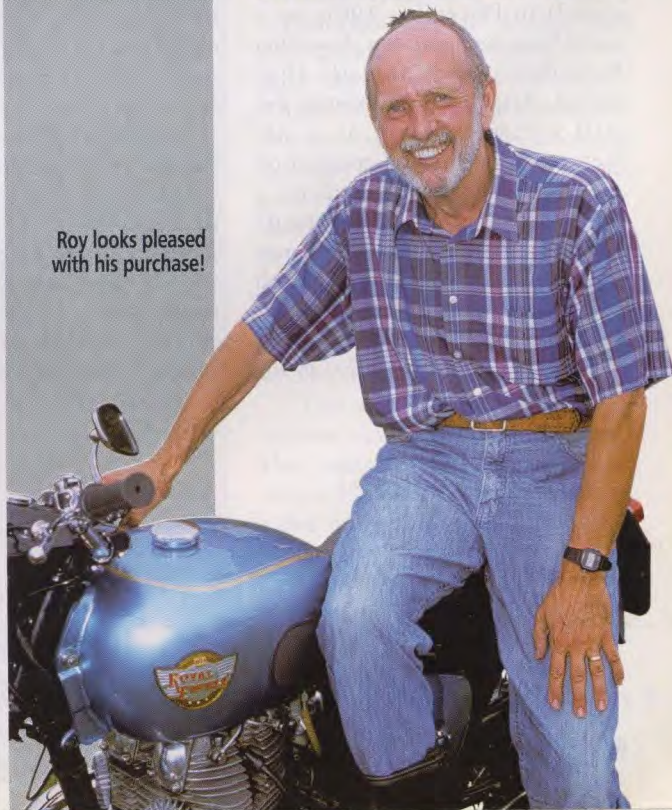
The initial omens were good, though. Burrowing through the grime to discover the engine and frame numbers, I shot them off to the RE Club's dating officer, Tom Kay, who immediately gave me the good news that these major

components started life together in the guise of the comparatively rare sports model.

The Meteor Minor was introduced in 1958, and was quite different to the long-stroke 500 Twin tourer that had preceded it. It shared the oversquare bore and stroke dimensions of the innovative 250cc Crusader and unsurprisingly mimicked its free-revving nature. The Meteor Minor Sports appeared two years later, and its slightly raised compression ratio and more ambitious exhaust camshaft gave it three extra horsepower.

More conspicuously, it had a different finish and slightly different cycle parts, and here I must start to explain the appearance of my bike to the (mercifully few) Enfield fans who worry about exact authenticity. In a

Roy looks pleased with his purchase!





▶ strange marketing ploy, Enfield gave the Sports model extra chroming and provided a take-off point for a tachometer, but then they made the instrument an optional extra and pitched the price lower than that of the standard model. To do that, they made other economies including the use of a single-sided non-quickly detachable rear hub. Since I didn't have a rear hub of any sort, I decided that seeking out and fitting a QD hub from the de-Luxe model made more sense.

My Meteor Minor was sent to Dunns of Sunderland (do they still exist?) in December 1961, so it could have been either a slow-seller from that year or an early 1962 model. After careful research I'm still not sure which, as it has features of both years' production runs. According to the literature, a 1961 Meteor Minor Sports should have been finished in a boring mist grey/black, while the dispatch records clearly state that mine was coloured in the burgundy that became an option in 1962. On the

other hand, my motorcycle has the peculiar clutch that had supposedly been discontinued on 1962 models.

Digressing slightly, the clutch was a typical case of Redditch making life difficult for themselves. The conventional push rod through the gearbox shaft was replaced by two scissor-action levers pulling on a pin with ball races at each end, and that lifted a cast iron pressure plate away from the rest of the assembly. It was more complicated to make than the existing effort yet it worked no better. It was also heavier (easily exceeding the 12lb capacity of our kitchen scales!) which meant that each pressure plate had to be individually balanced, adding further costs.

Perhaps my bike featured 1961 mechanicals in the next year's colour scheme, then. Whatever, RE's tendency to change their specifications at frequent intervals, and with seemingly little logic, gave me freedom to play around with the details. I seem to be in good company doing that because, when I

On the move... performance is impressive, easily a match for anything else in its class.

Roy's Royal Enfield was originally finished in burgundy, but he decided upon a blue paint scheme.



studied literally hundreds of Royal Enfields at last year's Redditch Revisited Rally, I concluded that no Meteor Minor was much like any other, let alone restored to original condition. So I chose to use the earlier shapely cigar-shaped silencer rather than the boring tubular barrel specified in 1962. And, whereas Royal Enfield economised with a vapour-blasted finish for the castings, I gave them a sheen they'd never enjoyed before. That seemed only sensible, as I had to grind them back to smooth metal after previous owners had let them be chewed by the kickstart, the brake lever, and the road (!)

The Meteor Minor Sports should have chrome-plated mudguards and tank panels, but the only tank I could source was too pitted to be sensibly rechromed, and the commonly-adopted option of painting the panels silver looks makeshift to me. I also thought that plated mudguards would look wrong with a painted tank, so I went for overall paintwork and haven't regretted it. Colour-wise, I selected



IT WASN'T WHAT I'D BEEN LOOKING FOR BUT IT WAS THE RIGHT MAKE, LOCAL AND THE RIGHT PRICE



the polychromatic peacock blue that was an alternative to burgundy in 1962. This was applied by JBS (01935 863676) whose founder, John Burton, was in the trade selling Enfields in the 50s and 60s. He saw peacock blue at first hand and agreed that the tint that I selected by memory was about right. "Mind you," he added with a grin, "I only ever knew one customer who opted for the blue!" Now I see the bike in the whole, I think the shade is probably a little light, but still think that it is very attractive.

The engine had been run with primary and timing chains so slack that they'd worn grooves in the castings, and had then been dismantled and left open to the elements, so it needed complete refurbishment. Remarkably, it is still on standard bores and crank journals, though, so it can't have done too many miles.

The rear hub was a nightmare as its four main components all came from different sources, and the fettling required to marry them up indicated that either RE went in for

SPECIFICATION

1961 ROYAL ENFIELD METEOR MINOR SPORTS

Engine type	ohv parallel twin
Capacity	496cc
Bore x stroke	70mm x 64.5mm
Output	30bhp @ 6500rpm
Compression ratio	8:1
Carburettor	28mm Amal Concentric (originally Monobloc)
Ignition	6volt battery and coil
Gearbox	Albion four-speed
Frame	open loop with engine as stressed member
Suspension	RE undamped telescopic front forks, swinging arm rear with NJB (01206 330631) units (originally Girlings)
Tyres	325x17in front, 350x17in rear
Brakes	7in s/s drums front and rear
Seat height	29.5in
Wheelbase	54in
Weight	388lb
Top speed	95mph (est)
Price new	£259
Price guide now	£3000

CLUB CONTACT: REOC, Sylvia and Mick Seager, 30/32 Causeway, Burgh-le-Marsh, Skegness, Lincs, PE24 5LT
Vintage Motor Cycle Club, National Secretary, Allen House, Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs, DE14 1TR.

FURTHER READING: Road test no. 1361 RE Meteor Minor 499cc 9.5.62. Instruction book for Meteor Minor £15. Spare and replacement parts list for 1961 RE Meteor Minor (De Luxe and sports) £15. For more details call Jane Skayman 01507 529423 or email jskayman@mortons.co.uk

selective assembly on an Olympian scale, or design details and tolerances varied wildly. I couldn't find a genuine back plate, but a Triumph one seemed a reasonable fit on the brake drum.

Unfortunately the correct ball race didn't fit the centre of the drum whose design Allan Hitchcock (01564 783192) told me was revised at about this time. He promptly supplied the correct brake drum-cum-sprocket, but then it didn't match the indentation in the back plate! By the time I'd machined out the plate's centre and riveted in a new piece, I was beginning to think I might as well have made the whole thing from scratch!

The front hub was only a problem inasmuch as it wasn't there. Here again, RE was undecided and during 1962 went from a 7in single-sided drum to a 6in double-sided drum and back again. Indian Royal Enfield dealer Kevin Ward (Forest Classics 01725 514422) – who had sold me the original basket case – came up with a suitable 7in drum. Its cooling vents mean it probably ▶



► came from a Continental GT, but it's smart, fits and works, and that's good enough for me!

Even if the toolbox had been present, corrosion would probably have set into the inaccessible crannies in its thin, spot-welded steel construction. Even lids were elusive, but I managed to buy pattern glass fibre ones, only to discover that they were far from being mirror images. However, with advice and GRP materials from Phil Primmer of West Country Sidecars (01425 656471), I made my own box, and built in an imperceptible taper to match both lids. The space between the engine and toolbox is so tight that a carburettor cannot be passed over the normal retaining studs, so Redditch used short retaining bolts. I further eased things by making a recess in the front of the box, and I also went for the slightly shorter Concentric carb instead of the original Monobloc.

The engine is such a tight fit because the frame is a modified version of the one designed for the taller, but shorter, Bullet engine. The prototypes were actually constructed in the tiny Crusader frame – which would surely have made this the liveliest 500 on the market – but that idea was abandoned before production. The forks still owe more to the Crusader than the Bullet, though, and like most post-WWII Enfields, they are surmounted by an aluminium 'Casquette'. Vastly superior to the pressed steel afterthought nacelles

on other makes, it acts as headlamp mount, instrument panel and top yoke.

Surprisingly, Crusader-style forks have no hydraulic damping, an omission the makers disguised by saying they were 'automatically lubricated'. The stanchions just dip into oil in the sliders with seals or shuttle valves, yet this apparently crude system gives a comfortable ride with virtually no pitching. It makes you wonder whether two-way damping for ordinary bikes is just a sales gimmick.

The frame itself works better than its single-down tube, open loop design would suggest. A Featherbed it's not but, when introduced in 1956, it at least equalled anything else on the British market. Another indication that mine is a late 1961 model is that it has phosphor bronze bushes in its swinging arm rather than the Silentbloc rubbers adopted in 1962. The earlier bushes would be more precise when in good condition and lubricated, while the later ones would be more tolerant of neglect.

The swinging arm has grease nipples at each end, so there's no excuse for ignoring this aspect. The centre stand is also greased, and is a good example of RE's over-engineering. It pivots on a floating sleeve fitted over a fixed stud, and both the internal parts are waisted so that there is always a reservoir of grease in the gap. Other clever bits of engineering abound, and I'm particularly impressed by the way

The Royal Enfield looks to be a compact package with a handsome, functional appearance.



Carburettor would originally have been an Amal Monobloc, though Roy has opted to fit a later-type Concentric.



Rear suspension units are NJBs, though originally Girlings would have been used.

the front engine plates are shaped to seal off that notoriously mucky space in front of the crankcase.

Generally speaking, everything about the Meteor Minor is in proportion and looks well together. There are, for example, no unsightly gaps between the comfortable dualseat and the frame, or anywhere else for that matter! The engine, in particular, matches the old criterion that there shouldn't be room to spit through and, as a result – especially with acres of polished aluminium – is one of the most handsome ever produced by a British factory.

I suppose I can't mention the engine, though, without touching on the hackneyed subject of oil leaks. Redditch made determined efforts to improve things, and the later Meteor Minor has a complicated breathing system with a valve-controlled tube between the crankcase wall and the oil compartment, and a valve in the drive side crankshaft breathes into the primary chain case. Another tube leads oil mist from the case to the rear chain.

Unfortunately RE never tackled the basic design problem that there is only a thin butt joint between the halves of the crankcase cum oil tank. Still, silicone sealant works wonders provided the halves are true, and the only significant leak I have is (annoyingly – because it's the most inaccessible part of the unit) from a core plug in the gearbox casting.

The gearchange itself is light and positive, and neutral is so easily found that I seldom remember to use the patented auxiliary neutral location lever. The gear ratios complement an engine that revs easily and smoothly, and yet will trundle along at under 30mph in top.

This is my own bike and a lot of work and expense has gone into it, so I'll leave an unbiased assessment to a clubmate who was in the trade throughout the classic post-war period and is the best, and most prolific, restorer I know.

"The little Enfield twins," he reckons, "were very underrated. They were as fast as the contemporary Triumphs but would run rings round them on handling and, while they leaked oil if they were thrashed, modern sealants can cure that."

Right on all four counts, say I – and they look good, too!