

SIX DAYS IN WALES



Oily Boot Bob and his courageous companions are re-tracing the route of the 1949 ISDT on an array of Royal Enfields. One machine has already retired – will the others all reach the finish line?

Photos by Oily Boot Bob and Mortons Archive

**PART
THE
LAST**





The culprit, an escaping detent plunger. Fixed by the roadside



A jammed gearbox on one of the Constellations called for major maintenance

Back in 1949 some 240 competitors rode around 250 miles each day across the loosely surfaced and rough roads of Wales in the ISDT. Last year, half a dozen Enfield owners followed in their wheel-tracks...

A very experienced motorcyclist on the more orderly roads of the Netherlands, Inge was still quite new

to her Bullet. She was un-learning the binary gear-changing action of modern bikes to slowly coerce the Albion pinions into useful partnerships. Inge's glossy 2003 Bullet was rebuilt by Klaus, a friend in Germany, whose business apparently makes Indian Bullets autobahn-friendly. He built the sporty stainless exhaust system and gas flowed the head himself, to match the new valves, forged piston and 28mm Wassell concentric carburettor. The roller big end which replaced the

regular floating plain bush is served by lubrication modifications which remain unmapped and undisturbed territory to date, yet evident from the strange external plumbing. And it goes very well indeed.

Inge herself is no stranger to adventure. She casually mentioned – when we were gathered around the gas cooker one evening – that she cycled from the Arctic Circle to Cape Town on her own, which put quirky gearboxes and twisty Cambrian roads into a new kind of perspective. And talking of Albion gearboxes – something that no Royal Enfield story is complete without – we experienced our second breakdown of the re-trial...

To the south of Llangollen there are ➤



some very steep lanes which punish any poor gear changing, and Kelvin's gearbox on the Constellation was not behaving well. His complaints about stiff gearchanges weren't taken seriously until he was left behind, fiddling at the roadside, unable to move bike or gear lever. Peter's mighty tool bag swung into action, gear oil was drained into someone else's tool tin and the right-hand gearbox casing was removed, all within twenty minutes.

Up to his elbows in oil, Peter presented to the four supervisors the offending component, while Kelvin whispered quietly that the gearbox had not been touched during the machine's recent rebuild. There may be a moral there somewhere.

Inspired by a test ride on Vince's tidy and very original Constellation, Kelvin, our youngest and most recent convert from modern two-wheeled missiles to classic bikes, set out in the search for one of his own, which soon led him to a rough but complete bike of

Most of the distance was covered on tarmac, but old green lanes offered occasional alternative routes. Inge takes gate duties this time



The RE-Triallers endured such stunning weather that they were hard pressed to find any shade to park the bikes during a picnic lunch. In Wales!



Far Left: Bob's Bridge must be around here somewhere, muses Bob himself, possibly missing the point



Peter's 1995 Bullet appears to be decaying slightly faster than the old building it's posed in front of

unknown provenance, it having spent many years in a dusty dormant state. The presence of sparks and a free turning engine in a rolling chassis were too inviting for Kelvin, who soon had it running with seemingly no problems for several months, until the engine came to a rather harsh full stop.

The disaster, the rebuild and further rebuild could easily fill another article, the central theme being one very unusual crankshaft discovered when Vince helped Kelvin split the crankcases. Both sludge trap end caps were missing, prohibiting any normal oil feed to the big ends, which were further restricted by just one oil hole apiece. Surprisingly, if the radius on the drive side big-end had been ground correctly, it may not have broken; the factory reject could still be turning, kept alive by the very random splash-feed.

Back at the roadside with two hours of

daylight left, we had to work fast to fix the jammed gearbox. Like Triumph and BSA gearboxes, the Albion unit uses a spring-loaded plunger which indexes on cut-outs in the cam plate at gear engagement. The finger-tight plunger holder had almost completely unscrewed from the gearbox cover, allowing an insecure plunger to jam sideways, preventing the cam or any pinions from shifting.

Improvising with the tools available, the plunger holder was centre punched to create a new retaining dimple, taking care that the plunger could retract freely against the spring, but not pop out of the end again.

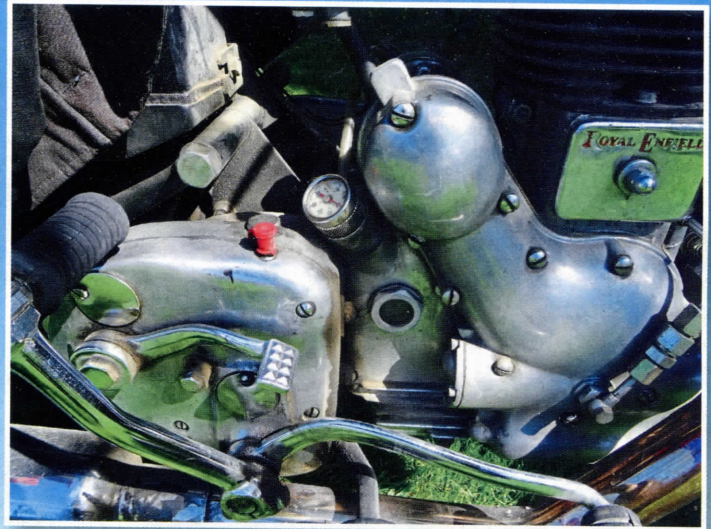
The Albion gearbox is undeniably crude, but its simplicity does make for easy maintenance, exemplified on this day by doing a roadside rebuild and being home in time for supper – home being the campsite.

But this wouldn't have been permitted in the ISDT. All major parts including cylinder heads, crankcases and gearboxes were marked with special paint in a way that would show up any illegal disturbance, a fundamental law of the reliability trial.

By midweek on our ride, the almost Mediterranean temperatures had returned while we upped sticks and decamped to our second HQ, searching out some wild trails near Bala lake on the way south. Threading the front wheel of an aging road bike – shod with smooth road rubber – between the grass and gravel of green lanes requires a certain amount of concentration, heightened all the more by the burden of camping luggage, but it was fun and no one fell off. Our six-man caravan formed into a slick relay team, each taking a turn to open and close gates across the shimmering green countryside.

Green lanes are ancient unclassified roads which missed out on numbering and hard surfacing at the beginning of the last century. Although most are rough tracks, they were, until recent legislation, still open to all forms of transport, which sometimes caused conflict between the various interest groups, so you need to be sure before you set forth.

By early afternoon we were looking out for a shady spot to ➤



Above and Below: Inge and her modified Bullet travelled from the Netherlands to participate in the 2019 ISDT RE-Trial



have our picnic lunch. How often does a motorcyclist need to shelter from the midday sun in Wales?

Our second camp site near Llandovery was better than the first in every respect, except for the clouds of hungry midges. How can a fly no bigger than a full stop draw blood? They must have very high-tech cutting tools.

The next day dawned sunny and warm once more, perfect for a dip in a cool mountain river. The Abergwesyn water splash seems to have featured in most Welsh trials, and we weren't going to miss a chance to wet the wheels in the river Irfon. Peter, undeterred by an enormous gravel heap deposited on the bank at the crossing place, demonstrated the tricky business of maintaining momentum, traction and balance across the slippery river bed, where some 220 riders had done the same in the 1949 trial. A stone-built bridge now stands in the place of the wooden one in the photograph of an otherwise unchanged landscape.

Apparently, 'several British riders went like the wind between the water splash and the home check. As soon as they arrived they set about changing their engine oils and, in some cases, fitting new tyres.' The latter act was to save part-worn and 'nicely rubbed down' tyres for the next challenge...

A speed trial was always held on day six of the ISDT, lapping around an improvised circuit against the clock. Seventy years ago, a portion of the narrow roads through the Sennybridge army range provided a five and a half mile triangular route known

Below: The RE-Trial team about to enter the army range at Eppynt, where the final high-speed test of the 1949 trial took place. 'Eppynt's roughly surfaced, approximately triangular 5.2-mile circuit glimmered as it lay surrounded by the beautifully tinted Brecon mountains,' reported The Motor Cycle



The Abergwesyn water splash featured in most Welsh trials and the 2019 RE-Trial team couldn't resist the temptation to wet their wheels in the river Irfon.



'It was interesting to watch the tactics (perhaps antics would be a better word) used by competitors to cross the splashes,' said The Motor Cycle in 1949



'Some went through unconcernedly, each deliberately giving a steady dab. Some of the foreign riders rushed through obviously with the idea that momentum was needed to get them safely across



'FH Whittle on a 600 Panther sidecar came through with a very definite lean-in on the outfit. It was later learned that his chassis had broken...'



Just 15 minutes for maintenance were permitted on each morning of the trial: the 2019 team may have taken slightly longer in their parc fermé. Back in 1949, Olga Kevelos had to fit a new primary chain to her Norton 500 and ran out of time to complete the task. Undaunted, she fired up the bike, rode it over the start line, finished the work and then rode like a demon to make the first checkpoint on time. She went on to win a gold medal





In 1949, Charlie Rogers (on an Enfield Bullet no less) and JB Evans entered the roman road section... followed seventy years later by the RE-Trial riders

as Myydd Eppynt. Riders were required to complete a scheduled number of laps determined by the capacity of their engine, gaining bonus points for any laps exceeded, which was well demonstrated by the Czechoslovak team mounted on 150cc CZ 2-strokes, holding their own against the traditional 500cc machines.

Unless the gates are closed for army exercises, the Ministry of Defence roads are open to public traffic across the wild plateau, whose altitude provides spectacular uninterrupted views in all

directions on a clear day. If it weren't for the unfenced and unpredictable sheep dotted all around, it would have been very tempting to open the throttle and get down some enthusiastic ISDT-style riding on those well surfaced, ribbon-like army roads.

A much older military road was the high point of our final day. Some 440 metres above sea level, the remaining length of the Roman road connecting Brecon to Llandovery posed our final challenge. The silver Cornish Connies had departed earlier, leaving four of us to set off along a very

straight narrow lane, knowing that the tarmac would soon give way to rough track, which occurred just beyond the signpost indicating halfway, where I couldn't help whistling a Billy Fury tune.

The *No Through Road* sign presented an irresistible invitation to the Bulleteers to continue bouncing up the track and out of sight. At this point the rocks of the rocky track had become the size of bricks, perfect for breaking the spokes of a heavy motorcycle, so Mike and I turned our 700 twins around to take the easy route along the A40 to Trecastle instead. The eastern end of the Roman road provided a more forgiving surface up to the highest point with beautiful scenery where we all said our goodbyes.

The photos on these pages may give the impression that our aim was to punish our pride and joy on the rough trails of Wales, but this couldn't be further from the truth. No classic bikes were harmed in the making of this adventure. Probably less than 5% of our six days was spent 'off-road', but these experiences were more memorable and made more interesting photographs than most of the road riding. ▶

All four 700cc twins were in normal road trim, yet were as capable as most road bikes of riding on gentle green lanes in dry weather, once you get the hang of steering on a loose surface with a bit less air in the tyres. Deeply rutted or rocky tracks are a very different story and best avoided with a 420lb steed like my Super Meteor, yet still manageable for short distances if you take your weight on the footrests instead of the saddle, which itself is tiring on the legs with the forward mounted footrests on 1950s British bikes.

The two rubber cush drives – one in the wheel and one in the clutch – certainly help to protect the 1930s gearbox from unavoidable snatching power delivery on the rough stuff, creating a short delay between engine and rear wheel response like winding and releasing a rubber band; it's something you get used to on large Royal Enfields.

But above all, concentration on the 'road' ahead is probably the most important requirement, giving yourself time to choose the best way for the front wheel to lead you and the bike following behind. A relaxed moment on unfamiliar terrain could find your wheel taken away from you by a tractor rut, with disastrous results.

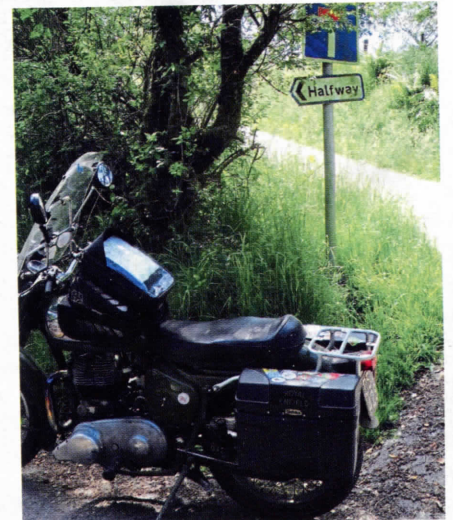
The 1949 routes chosen by CW Stagg, Major A Lewis-Jones MC and AR Lowary provided a most interesting and sometimes challenging basis for a two-wheeled tour of unchanged Wales. We covered less than half of the original roads, leaving plenty of scope for a return trip in future... if only we can book the same weather again! **Rc**



There's a moment when you're riding a big touring twin that discretion quite rightly overcomes valour, and turning around seems the lesser of two evils...



The victorious British team in 1949



Halfway indeed, on a Roman road, probably in between two places...