

Birthday Celebrations at Chimay 2008. (Gert reaches Fifty!)



Last July, I, along with my wife Jen, pal Ron, my two Nortons (“Team-Morpeth Mafia”) and a strong North-Eastern contingent of like minded souls, travelled to Chimay in Belgium to participate in the annual “Internationale Trophee de Motos Classiques” road-races.

This year the 4-day event was to be held over the original and longer 9.5 kilometre road circuit, which weaves it’s way through the undulating Belgian countryside around the picturesque little town of Chimay, just south of Mons, which is world famous for it’s beer. Not being somebody who has done much “real road” racing, I experienced mixed emotions, of excitement and trepidation in anticipation of the challenge of the longer circuit.

Each year the Programme for the event, in addition to listing the current years events and riders and in keeping with the festival atmosphere of the event, also gives a review of events from 50 years ago, with reprints of current affairs, sport and even adverts from the era. This year reviewed 1958. Very interesting!

Now, apart from the fact that I can remember 1958 quite vividly from the perspective of a nine year old boy, i.e. Elvis, Skiffle, teddy-boys and the Manchester United air-crash, but not really any thing related to motorcycle racing at that time, except for watching the hundreds of riders making their way to Liverpool on their way to the TT, on the main road past our house on the outskirts of Liverpool, each June.

So, it was not until I was actually riding one of my bikes flat-out in a race at about 115mph, down the two mile flat-out section of the circuit, that the penny of realisation dropped and I realised that a milestone in history had occurred! The 350cc Manx Norton (family name "Gert") I was riding, was now 50 Years old!

Who would have thought that when the original owner, H.R.F.(Bob) Anderson, accompanied by his sponsor and mentor Geoff Monty, loaded the brand new, shiny Manx Norton into his van at Norton's Bracebridge Street factory, Birmingham, that it would still be getting used in anger 50 years later!

Manx Nortons were fast, tough, uncompromising bits of kit, made for longevity and long "classic" races on road circuits, with superb handling and roadholding. Think eight-lap TT races, over three hundred racing miles! They were also not cheap, Bob Anderson had paid £496.10.shillings (an average man's wages for a year in 1958!) for "Gert" in late June of 1958, about £15,000 in today's money! Also, "Joe Public" could not just go and get one, you had to have experience, form and a good dealer to sponsor you! These, Bob Anderson certainly had, having won the 500cc Manx Grand Prix in 1956 and finished second in the 500cc TT, to the works MV Agusta of John Surtees, just that June of 1958. He was a definite star in the ascendance and the co-rider of Geoff Monty himself in the respected Geoff Monty race team!

Another penny dropped during the Lansdowne Cup race at Chimay, as I was slip-streaming an AJS 7R along the same, never ending, 2-mile long flat-out section of circuit, toward the village of Salles, that this was what these bikes were made for and were extremely good at! I began to imagine Bob Anderson doing his stuff at the highest level, at similar tracks all over Europe and the TT, back in the fifties! I then also realised that it was almost exactly 50 years to the weekend that Bob Anderson had achieved his first notable success on Gert, a close and hard fought second place to "The Maestro" Geoff Duke, on the "works" Reynold Norton special, at the Swedish G.P., held at the ultra-fast Hedamora road circuit in the third week in July 1958. Duke eventually getting the result after being caught and passed by Bob Anderson, only for Bob to be baulked by a back-marker on the run to the flag! If only! However, some consolation went to Bob with the fastest lap of **98.5mph!** Some chap called Hailwood finished way back, in third place!

Next outing for the new combination, was the Italian G.P. at Monza in September. The result of the race was something of a foregone conclusion, with two works MV's being ridden by Surtees and Hartle, so the real race for most of the entry was for third place. Once again, Bob Anderson battled it out with Geoff Duke on the "works" Reynold Norton, swapping places with Duke for the whole race, before Duke snatched 3rd place on the last bend, the famous Parabolica!

In 1958, Bob Anderson, riding Gert, finished an impressive 5th in the 350cc World Championship. What followed next, over the seasons of 1959 and 1960, can only be described as incredible for a privateer!

The withdrawal of the Italian teams at the end of 1957, except for M.V.Agusta, had

“levelled the playing field” with few “works” rides available. Now, having left the Geoff Monty team, and as a solitary privateer, Bob Anderson mixed it with the best of the era on his Nortons. Geoff Duke, John Surtees, Bob McIntyre, Alistair King, Derek Minter, John Hartle, Bob Brown, Terry Shephard, Mike Hailwood et al.

During 1959, apart from many short-circuit successes at venues from Scarborough to Silverstone, Bob Anderson also contested the TT and selected G.P.’s. Although he had a 2nd place in the new Formula GP350 TT (a race of only three laps and with no four cylinder works bikes allowed), behind Alistair King and ahead of Mike Hailwood, his main achievement of the 1959 TT was a creditable 5th place in the open 350 TT, again narrowly beaten by his nemesis Geoff Duke on the lightweight Reynold Norton. The first three home being Surtees and Hartle on MV’s, and Alistair King on a “Pott’s” Norton. Not bad for the humble privateer on a “production bike”?

1960 brought more success at the highest level for Bob Anderson, and 5th again in the World championships, but a fall in a pre-season 350cc event in South Africa resulted in a back injury which had a lasting effect on him. With this in mind, and with the departure to car racing by John Surtees, 1960 was to be Bob Anderson’s last season in motorcycle racing. In 1961 Gert was sold and a career in car racing beckoned for Bob, initially in Formula Ford and then in F1, where he ran his own team. Tragically, Bob Anderson lost his life at Silverstone in August 1967, whilst practising in his F1 car. What happened to Gert between 1961 and 1971 is a mystery I am still trying to solve!

And what of our results for “Team Morpeth Mafia” at Chimay? Well, after a split cylinder barrel had sidelined the 560cc Dominator in the Unlimited class, “Gert” was elevated from being back-up bike to front runner and an unplanned entry in the prestigious Lansdowne Cup race was arranged to complement the 350cc “Authentiques” races already entered. The results? Two class wins in the “Authentiques” class giving an overall win and 3rd place in the 350cc “Lansdowne Trophy” race against stiff opposition. Also eighth place overall in the 350cc Group one class.

As good as Bob Anderson’s efforts all those years ago? No, not really, but let’s just consider that at my pace, Gert is now enjoying a gentle retirement, for a Manx Norton!