



Ariel Racer

Suzuki T250



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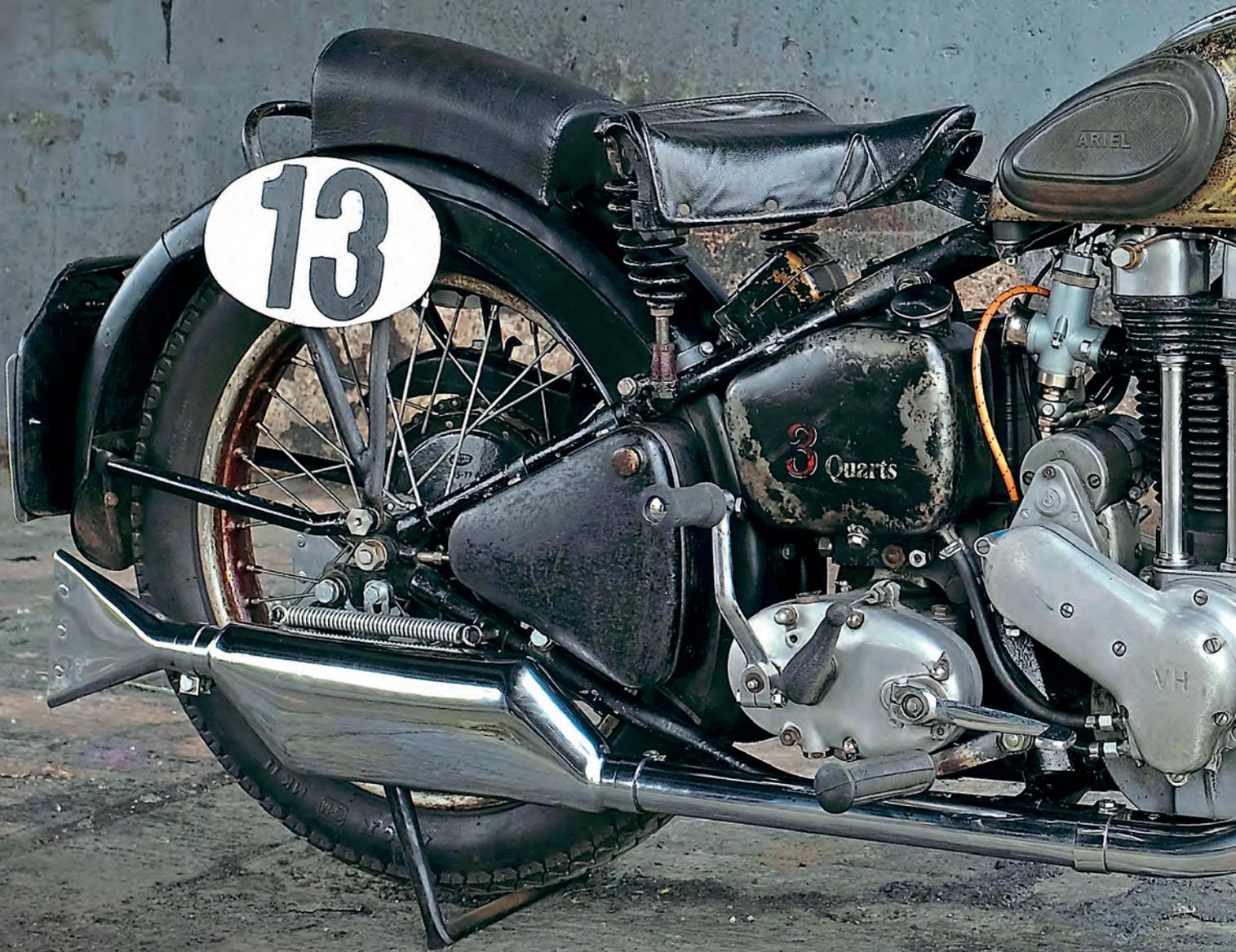
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# Ariel racer

Hugh Ramsey may have dipped in and out of Ariel ownership throughout his time, but the passion has always been there. Starting with a box of assorted parts, he's built a beautiful special that oozes character

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY STUART URQUHART







**H**ugh (The Prez) Ramsay has a deep passion for Ariel motorcycles and has been infatuated with the marque ever since he was a lad. Now that Hugh is enjoying his middle years, the Ariel ember still glows brightly. Presently he is the proud owner of no less than four Ariels – a 1939 VB 600 outfit, 1957 Red Hunter VH 500 and a 1957 500 HT bench project that patiently awaits his attention (and that of my camera). However, when a picture of Hugh's 1939 Red Hunter 500 Racer popped up on Facebook it became my mission to photograph and bag its story for *CBG*.

As many readers will have observed from the selection of photos, Hugh's bike is oozing patina like honey from a comb. It is simply delicious. Heads turn wherever this old master is parked, and jaws drop at the sound of its passing – usually at Hugh's downtown pub in the estuary village of Kincardine on Forth. His Red Hunter just looks so appealing, richly cloaked in its mature paintwork and tarnished chrome. And like any priceless relic, this old racer appears to have originality and history indelibly stamped all over its oily skin.

But, as the old adage goes: 'Appearances can be deceptive.' Which I discovered, is very much the case with Hugh's convincing classic racer – for its antiquity has been expertly forged.

#### FASCINATING STORY

From the outset I was looking forward to learning all about this attractive racer's heritage – only to be dumbfounded when Hugh revealed that his lovely Ariel was built from boxes of unrelated parts and spares he had unearthed on the autojumble trail. What follows is its fascinating story...

"As a boy I was brought up on outfits – that's sidecars to you and me," winked Hugh. "I had a BSA M20, AJS Model 20 and an Ariel VB outfit and I travelled everywhere on them – especially the VB outfit. Trips to the country, weekend camping with the lads, and runs to Anstruther for traditional fish suppers at the UK's most famous fish and chip shop – my formative years were happy times!

"I have lived in Kincardine for all of my life and I came across my first Ariel(s) at our local village garage

when I was 12 years old – a Huntmaster 500 and a blue rigid VB; the latter I fell instantly in love with. Both were owned by our local garage proprietor 'Harry the Spanner', and I pestered him at every opportunity to let me sit and play on his blue VB – we became good friends and he instilled within me a lifelong appreciation of Ariel.

"Then one day, at 19 years young, I bought my own Ariel VB600 and sidecar. I used it to impress the birds and the bees, and even took my outfit away on weekend camping trips. I soon learned from our village postman (and Ariel enthusiast) that Harry the Spanner fancied my VB. So, impulsively, I sold it on to Harry in order to raise funds for a holiday with my girlfriend – a decision that I would later live to regret; for I missed my old VB long before the girlfriend and holidays had become distant memories.

#### REUNITED ONCE AGAIN

"So I bought a decrepit, non-running Ariel Red Hunter 500, and restored it after a fashion," Hugh was careful to emphasise. "I then added the sidecar from the VB that I had sold to Harry, before having to remove it once again when crafty old Harry flashed a wad of oil-stained bank notes under my nose. So my old VB and sidecar were once again reunited, but now with Harry the Cunning Spanner," Hugh mockingly growled.

"Not long after, I swapped my restored Red Hunter for a Rocket Gold Star, and I ended up being Ariel-less for a very long time. Several bikes came and went, but I always yearned for my old VB outfit."

So, Hugh launched a campaign to hassle Harry the Spanner into selling the VB outfit back to him and 28 years later he relented and Hugh was reunited with his beloved VB outfit. Hugh then signed up to the Scottish Ariel Owners' Club which holds section meetings just yards from his front door and then began the hunt for another project – but most specifically for an Ariel single. Enter another of Hugh's biker friends and one who happened to own the local legend that was 'Martin's Shed' – a ramshackle building rumoured to be stacked to the rafters with old classic motorcycles (you know the sort!).

Hugh went on to explain that his friend Martin was

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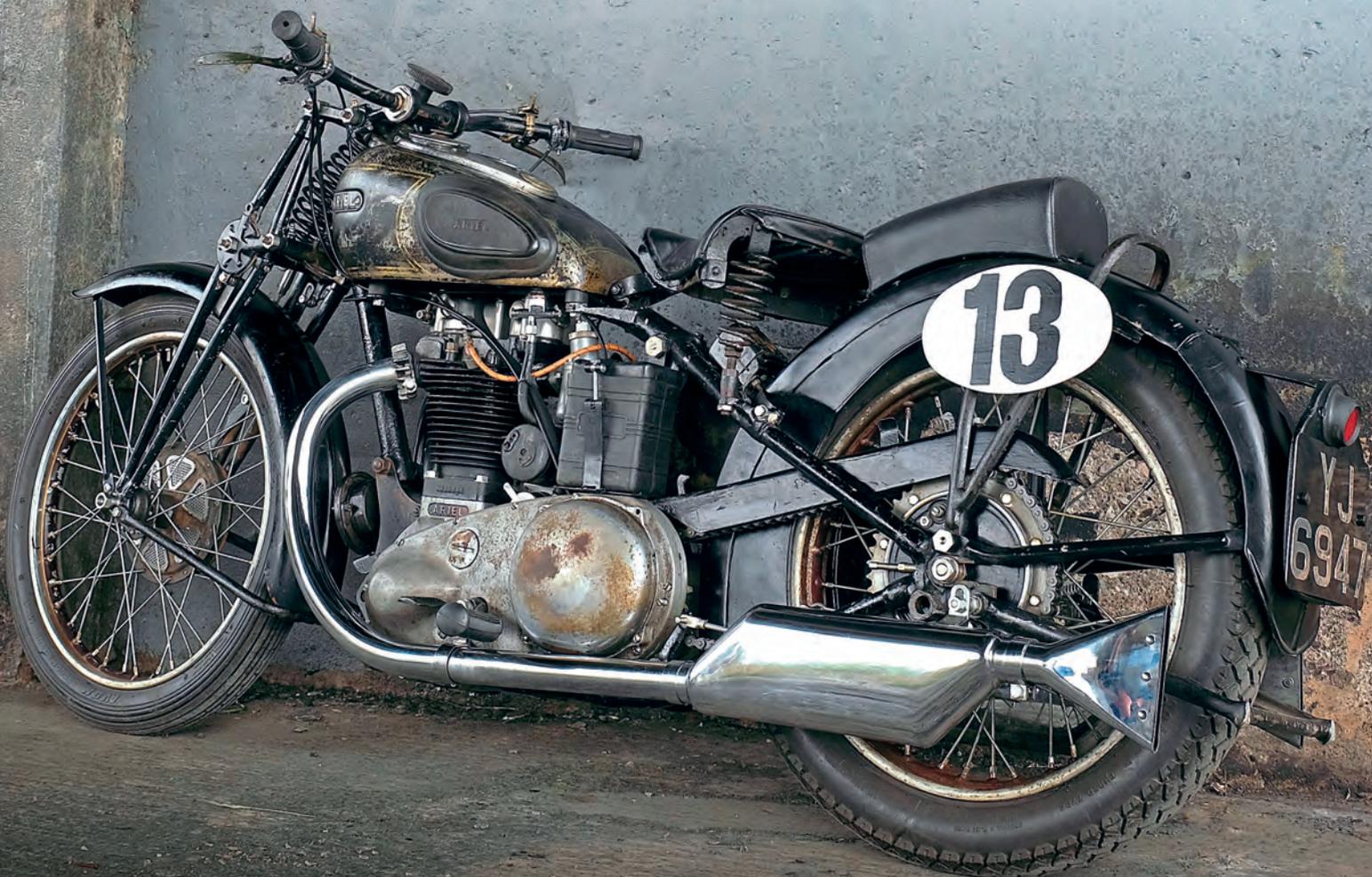
“When he departed, he promised to turn up the following weekend with a crate of beers and help me get the Ariel project back on track. He did, and I am eternally grateful for his help.”

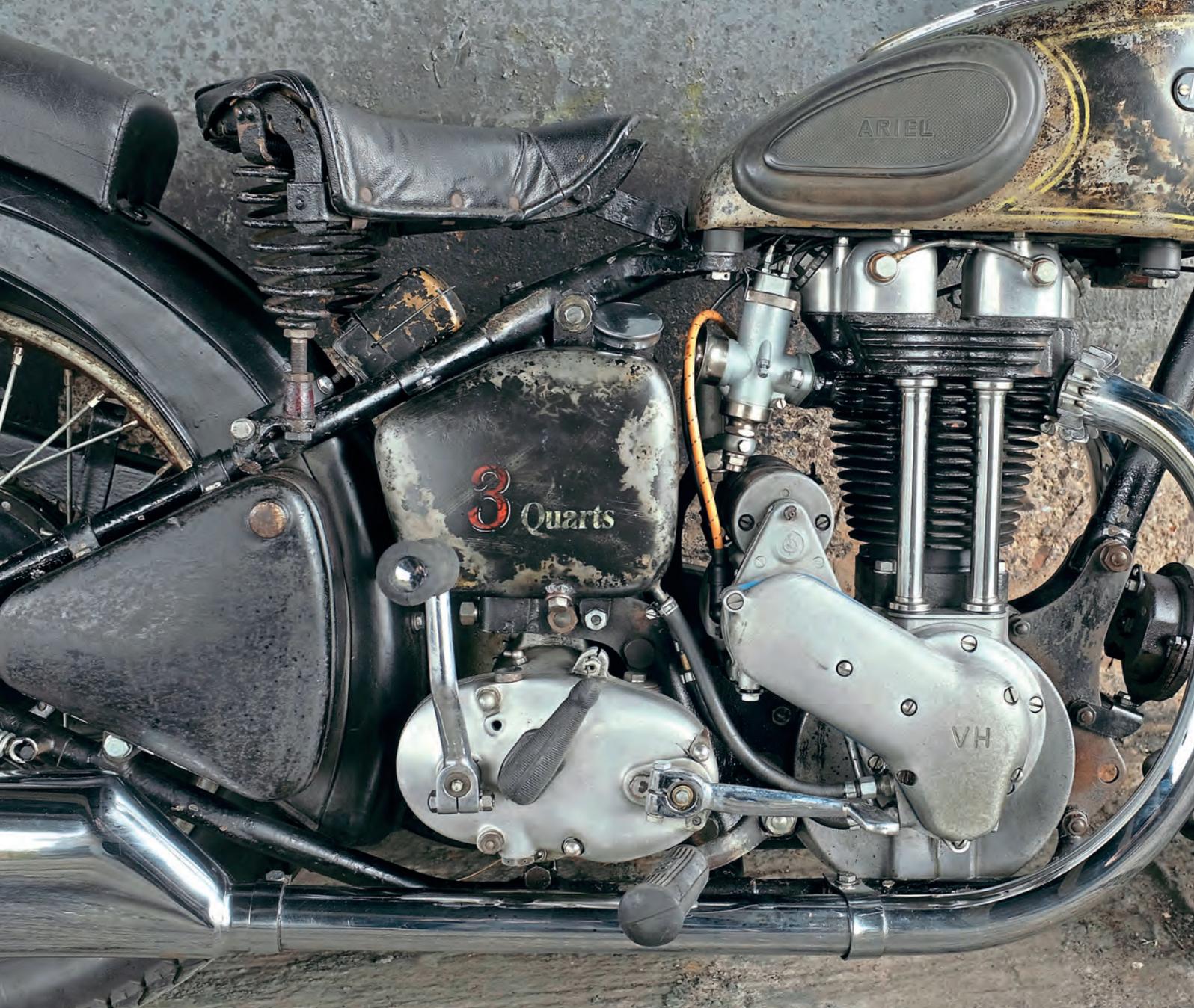
actually a hoarder first, and collector second; so true to form, Martin had a reputation for being ‘techt-fisted’ and ‘parted wi’ nowt’, to quote Hugh. Hugh however, had his eye on a pile of Ariel VH parts that Martin had acquired and stored in his shed with the intention of building himself a rigid Red Hunter sometime in the future. One night at their local pub, Hugh reminded Martin that he’d been boasting of building ‘this Ariel’ ever since the moon landings, and that they both knew this was never likely to happen. After several nips of whisky Martin relented, and Hugh became the new owner of Martin’s box of Ariel parts.

“Although I’d managed to get my hands on Martin’s Ariel, I knew I was facing a long-term build

to pull a motorcycle from the assortment of parts that I had spread across my garage floor – a pair of matching crankcases, one barrel and (rebuilt) twin-port cylinder head, a selection of rocker boxes, two sets of primary chaincases, a 1937 frame with front mudguard and stays attached, a set of bent girders, one saddle, two hubs, one front rim, two primed petrol tanks, one oil tank, one Burman gearbox and a pile of NOS small parts. I estimated that although I had many major parts, I only had 50% of a 1937 VH500.”

Undaunted, Hugh contacted several friends and members of the AOMCC and began to track down the missing parts. At the same time he began to restore many of the larger items that he had





liberated from Martin's Shed.

"While I was scouring jumbles all over the UK I began to formulate the idea of building an old prewar race bike – the sort you might discover in a ramshackle barn, and one that had been lying undisturbed for generations. The idea appealed to me, because as I began to accumulate larger parts such as missing mudguards, wheels and toolboxes, I soon realised they possessed a lovely patina. In essence, I wanted to build myself an authentic-looking motorcycle that could be passed as a genuine yesteryear machine. Little did I realise the calamitous journey that lay ahead," Hugh hinted with a mordant smile.

With a brief now clearly formed in his mind, Hugh began to farm out parts to specialist engineers and suppliers. Member John Budgeon rewound a used magneto supplied by the Ariel Owners' Club and a new Amal pre-monobloc carburettor was

supplied by Hitchcocks Motorcycles – both expensive, but important investments that would later prove worthwhile to achieving reliability and excellent running. The bent and worn girder forks were sent to another Ariel specialist – Jess Ryles, who fitted NOS bronze WD bushes (wrapped in original WD greased paper) and straightened out the girder's bent downtubes. In the meantime, Hugh began to look around for paintwork suppliers and a missing toolbox.

"While Jess was rebuilding my forks I contacted the Scottish AOMC parts stockist, Ian MacLauchlan – a man with an enviable reputation for rebuilding Ariel engines. Ian offered to strip and rebuild my engine in a day, provided I would bring it south to his Borders workshop and act as his 'apprentice and tea boy,'" beamed Hugh.

"So I went down to Crawfordjohn with a pile of engine parts and some teabags and I returned with a lighter wallet but a



beautiful new engine – one which had been transformed to Red Hunter specification. It was a privilege to watch Ian at work!”

Then as we chatted over coffee, I was horrified to learn that on his return from Crawfordjohn and during the approximate halfway stage of the Ariel’s rebuild, Hugh suffered serious heart failure, immobilising him for several months.

“My illness was payback for a misspent youth of hard drinking and excessive partying. But it was The X-Factor that got me back on my feet again,” laughed Hugh. “I kid you not, I just couldn’t lie on the couch and watch any more daytime TV, or have cups of herbal tea and rabbit food rammed down my gagging throat. I was becoming seriously depressed and needed to get back to building my Ariel.

“One day, while I was recuperating, an old pal ‘Cammy the Handyman’ popped in for a visit and immediately spotted my despair.

Cammy was an old school fixer-upper and odd jobsman. He was also an experienced craft-welder who could turn his hand to just about anything. When he departed, he promised to turn up the following weekend with a crate of beers and help me get the Ariel project back on track. He did, and I am eternally grateful for his help.”

Needless to say, all repairs and welds were traditionally gas braised by Cammy during the build. Hugh fitted original Ariel parts wherever possible; with the exception of the De Luxe model rear mudguard, pattern bum pad and new cables. All new parts were supplied by Ariel specialists, Draganfly Motorcycles. Hugh retained the original saddle which had a well-worn look that suited his brief. Other parts such as the WD green painted footrests, engine plates and brass levers were all autojumble finds.

Cammy extended and tapered the Ariel’s one inch diameter handlebars to 7/8ths at

each end – simply to allow the mid-section of the bars to work with Ariel’s peculiar handlebar rubber clamping mechanism – but also to permit fitting of the 7/8ths WD hand control levers Hugh had acquired.

As the rebuild was progressing, Hugh delivered the wheel hubs and one front rim to local wheel builder Barry Brown of Windygates. Barry supplied another scruffy rear rim complete with traditional centreline black trim and gold pinstriping, details that perfectly matched Hugh’s ‘Yesteryear’ concept. New wheel bearings, stainless spindles and plated spokes completed the wheels. From the pictures readers will note that the front hub has six unique brake vents, all of which required cutting, drilling and thread-tapping of the hub before they could be fitted. New brake shoes were also added.

When the boys had a rolling chassis ready, the engine and gearbox were offered ▶



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ARIEL

THUNDERBOLT

VH



to the frame and the bike began to take shape.

With Cammy's help the build progressed rapidly and without problems, spurred on according to Hugh, with a few beers. A new clutch, drive chain and sprockets were all supplied by Draganfly. The only new chrome items to be fitted were the fishtail silencers and downpipes supplied by Armours. The first set failed to fit correctly and they simply exchanged them without question – Hugh said he was very impressed with the service.

"I was fortunate to have a twin-port cylinder head within my box of spares, as it was always my intention to fit 1920s Black Ariel fishtails in keeping with my 'Aged Racer' brief. The 1937 Red Hunter would normally have a single high level exhaust and silencer fitted, which although correct, would look totally out of character," Hugh assured me.

#### **OLD RACER MASQUERADE**

The petrol tank is actually from a 350 NH model and has been propped up on extra rubbers to allow room for the long-stroke engine – few 'rivet-counters' have spotted this, so I believe Hugh has achieved the correct look for his prewar racer concept. But it is the paint finish that really pulls off the 'Old Racer' masquerade – especially the fake patina finish on the wheels, oil and petrol tanks. I was surprised to learn that the aged paintwork was the work of Hugh's tattoo artist Dave, of Crosley Custom Inc in Stirling.

"I'm a professional custom painter as well as a tattoo artist," Dave informed me, "and I agreed to help Hugh with his Ariel project after he had kindly chauffeured me in style to my wedding on his stunning VB outfit. But then I spent many weeks researching, experimenting and figuring out how I could achieve the vintage effects Hugh was after. I used acrylic paints and 'aged' them by rubbing and removing material before sealing with a matt lacquer. The petrol tank proved especially difficult, because Hugh insisted on traditional hand-painted, gold coach lines, and I had to learn the technique using long horse hair brushes and thinned-down gold paint before we achieved the desired result. Fortunately I have a steady hand, and much experience with paint effects.

"The oil tank's '3 Quarts' graphic was achieved using hand-cut stencils and by paint layering with an airbrush. It was much fun and we were both pleased with the end result – especially when Hugh overheard some customers waxing lyrical about the fabulous vintage Ariel parked in my spray booth! (You can view Dave's art works and custom paintwork on Facebook – Crosley Custom Inc).

The Red Hunter was the superbike of its

day – thanks to Ariel's brilliant engineers Val Page and Edward Turner, latterly of Triumph fame. Both had a hand in developing the model – reputedly capable of a real-life 85mph! (For a comprehensive history on the Red Hunter models, refer to December 2017 *CBG*).

Hugh's antique Ariel Racer certainly looked fast and I was extremely curious to know how well it performed...

"I am no engineer," insisted Hugh. "This project was a communal build and I'm indebted to Ian MacLauchlan for his knowledge and precision work on the engine, for it is a flier! The rebuild took us four months and when Cammy and I rolled out the finished motorcycle from my garage, I was utterly astonished when it fired up on the second kick. Once we had the fuelling and tick-over sorted I went for gentle rides, only travelling on short sorties at first. Although the Ariel ran very well, we were required to ream out a tight valve guide and replace a broken head bolt following several shakedown runs. Apart from these small teething issues there were no more problems.

"I've had it up to an indicated 70mph and there's still more to go. The ignition timing is set at one half inch BTC for 'fast running' as per the famous Waller manual – 'Book of the Ariel'. Normal running is 5/8ths BTC – but life is supposed to be exciting!" smiled Hugh. "The engine is very crisp with plenty of low down torque and the Hunter accelerates well from 30 to 70mph. The new clutch and transmission provide a reassuringly smooth ride, although the Burnam box is a tad clunky – unless you take your time. I count to three between changes and that works fine for me.

#### **DROP DEAD GORGEOUS**

"Handling is very good until you hit a pothole. But it's light and extremely easy to manoeuvre when thundering on, or if negotiating a series of testing bends. The fishtail exhausts provide a healthy bark and the accompanying soundtrack encourages you to ride forever. The back brake has much more bite than the front, but braking is much as expected from a prewar motorcycle – you just have to plan ahead," concluded Hugh.

I was thrilled to have a short blast on Hugh's Racer, and it would certainly leave my own 1938 Red Hunter 350 dead in its tracks. Hugh's 500 looked drop-dead gorgeous when we propped it up against a cement-rendered wall for the photo shoot and it sounds absolutely magnificent when thudding down the road on a full throttle. Hugh can be justifiably proud of his Antique Dream Racer, even with its redundant bum pad! **CBG**