

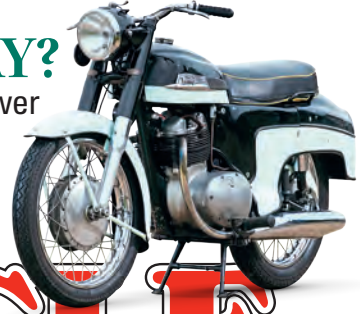


**SUPER SPECIAL**

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The Classic

# MOTORCYCLE

CIRCULATES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

NOVEMBER 2018

## Going green Douglas flat-twin



## TRACK DAY SWAP SHOP

Velocette and Morini at Cadwell Park



**PLUS** ▶ WEST KENT RUN ▶ BULTACO SHERPA T 250  
▶ BSA A10 TOURS SCOTLAND ▶ 1953 MOTORCYCLE  
SHOW ▶ REG ARMSTRONG PROFILE ▶ TRIUMPH REBUILD



# A real gem

While the herds went one way, with formulaic designs, Douglas went in another direction completely, with a quirky flat-twin. It worked well, too.

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**Photographs:** GARY CHAPMAN





**T**he famous motorcycle scribe, the late Jeff Clew, once said: “There’s something special about just sitting on a mark Douglas. I swear that if I was led into a completely dark room full of motorcycles and asked to locate which one was a Douglas, its riding position and feel would immediately give it away.”

I’m proud to say it was thanks to the encouragement I received from Jeff nearly 20 years ago I became a full-time motorcycle journalist and I’m sure if he was still alive today, he would be delighted to read about this month’s test bike. It’s a Mark V Douglas now owned by west countryman Ron Axon, a great

enthusiast who incidentally lives only a few miles from Jeff’s former home on the Somerset-Dorset border.

The ‘Duggie’ joined Ron’s eclectic collection of British and Japanese bikes in 2000, all of which – as regular readers will know – are largely unrestored examples that have spent most of their lives in local villages along the Jurassic Coast. However, this 350cc twin – wearing the number plate of 348 DMN – originally came from the island in the middle of the Irish sea and although it was complete, both the paintwork and the engine were in a rather ‘tired’ state, so it was treated to a total strip and rebuild by the





talented ex garage owner.

Ron, who has been a regular in the saddle since 1946, is a believer that bikes are for riding, and with the polychromatic green paintwork gleaming in the summer sun, the little twin probably looks better than the day it rolled out of the Kingswood, Bristol, factory doors in April 1953. Before we fire the engine into action, it's time to look back at some of Douglas' history and hear from Ron about his restoration.

The Douglas Manufacturing Company was founded in 1882 as a family business but another 25 years would pass until the first motorcycle carrying its name on the petrol tank appeared. Douglas had first ventured into motorcycle manufacturing in 1905 when one of its customers – Joseph Barter from Light Motors Ltd – designed the Fee (Fairy) system for mounting an engine into a bicycle, with the Kingswood company making the castings for the machines. Sales of the 2½hp Fee were disappointing in the home market and period reports would lead us to believe that of the weekly output of 10 machines, most of these were exported to Japan and New Zealand.

In 1907 Light Motors Ltd went into voluntary liquidation but it is said that through his acquaintanceship with Joseph Barter, William Douglas persuaded his father to come to the rescue and engage Barter as works manager in order to continue the manufacture of motorcycles at the Bristol works. William Douglas had plenty of optimism as to the potential of the Fee and, despite

some initial reticence from his father, a new department for motorcycle manufacture

## FINER DETAILS

### Douglas Mark V – 1953 (built 1951 to 1954)

#### ENGINE

OHV horizontally opposed twin

#### CAPACITY

348cc

#### BORE X STROKE

60.8 x 60mm

#### COMPRESSION

7.25:1

#### GEARBOX

Four-speed unit construction

#### ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

Lucas magdyno

#### SUSPENSION

Front: Radialdraulic

Rear: Swinging fork with torsion bars

#### BRAKES

7in front and rear

#### WHEELS

3.25 x 19in

#### FUEL CAPACITY

3 gallons

#### WHEEL BASE

54.5 inches

#### GROUND CLEARANCE

5.25 inches loaded

#### WEIGHT

365lb

#### PRICE

£180 + £50 purchase tax

was added to the works and the same year – with an increase to 340cc – the first 'Duggie' was born.

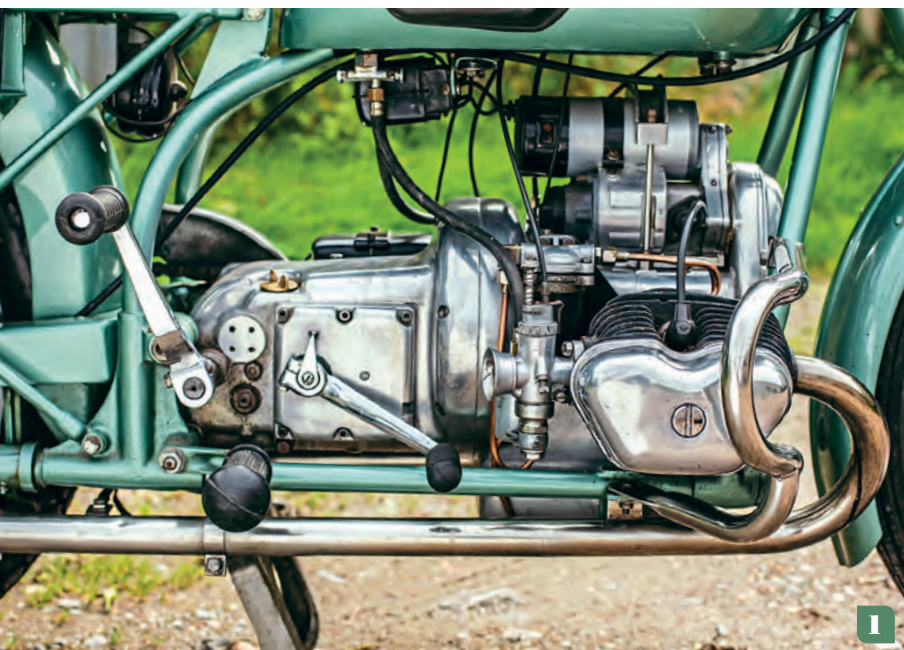
The well-constructed twins soon established a reputation for excellence both in competition and reliability and during the First World War, Douglas produced some 70,000 machines for the military, all of these with the engines mounted longitudinally in the frame. The neat and reliable engines were soon under close scrutiny by other manufacturers and if period reports are to be believed it was one of these machines that BMW's engineer Max Fritz borrowed from his works foreman Martin Stolle, and with engine reversed he created the now legendary BMW horizontally opposed twin. This horizontal engine mounted transversely in the frame was a format Douglas was to follow from the mid-1930s through to the end of motorcycle production in 1957. The Mark V was introduced in 1949 and by modern standards it's certainly a tiny bike as it barely comes up to your knees when you stand alongside it, but it bristles with innovation. Among these are a raft of patents including the oil damped Radialdraulic leading link forks – which give 5.5 inches of travel, torsion bar suspension at the rear, a butterfly valve carburettor and a four speed gearbox with final drive by chain to the back wheel. When the Douglas sprung frame was launched it set a new standard of comfort over the period opposition and the handling was described by road testers as "excellent by any standards".

With a top speed of just short of 60mph, the 350cc twin was not the fastest bike of its day but the 180° cylinder disposition offered a power curve free from vibration and to quote the Douglas brochure "...the Mark V represents one of the most highly developed models in the industry and has no rival for the motorcyclist who needs efficiency, comfort, reliability and perfect road holding. A twin is best and Douglas is the best twin."



*"Comfortable  
cruising speed is  
around 50mph  
– perfect for the  
back roads."*





Courtesy of an advert in the local evening paper, the Mark V came Ron's way in the summer of 2000. He takes up the story...

"I've always had a soft spot for the interesting and slightly quirky Bristol twins and when I saw this one advertised in the local *Evening Post* I decided it was too good an opportunity to miss. The seller was a man in Parkstone who traded as an autojumbler and had bought it – along with some other bits and pieces – from a private owner in the Isle of Man and although it was pretty rough the asking price was very reasonable, so I decided to buy it.

"Back home in the workshop I gave it a change of oil, checked the spark and with some new petrol in the tank it started and ran so I donned my helmet and riding gear and took it for a spin. Initially, it ran quite sweetly but on reaching the entrance to Dorset's Monkey World the engine seized, bringing the ride to a rapid halt. I had to be rescued, then, back home and with the engine out of the frame and stripped, I discovered the main bearing had turned in its case and the brass bush had climbed over its retaining pin, resulting in a total lock up. If the milometer is to be believed the engine had only done less than 14,000 miles from new and was still on its original pistons. Unfortunately first oversize pistons weren't available but after a fair amount of research I discovered those from a 250cc Honda fitted perfectly. While I was attending to this, the crank was sent to Cambridge for a rebuild and all of the bodywork was treated to a new coat of paint courtesy of a local sprayer Adrian Patten, a talented man with the spray gun who had also painted my Mk.III Jaguar 18 years previously.

"With the Douglas crank returned I rebuilt the engine with new big end and main bearings and was left impressed with the overall quality of the way the little Douglas was designed and put together – they obviously had a keen eye for detail.

"As standard, the Mark V was fitted with a small gauge drive chain so I decided to fit mine with a more substantial wider chain from the Kingswood company's trials bike which meant I had to modify the alloy cover at the back of the gearbox housing. The

**1: The 350cc engine isn't overly powerful, though is wonderfully smooth and an easy starter.**

**2: Unusual front fork, and brake, was all Douglas' own work.**

**3: Final drive is by chain.**

**4: Though it's a tiny motorcycle, the Mark V accommodated Andy Westlake's 6ft-plus frame.**

**Below: Ron Axon, who started riding in 1946, has a stable of interesting vehicles.**



wheel rims were shot but the silencers, carburettor, horn and control box were all sound and just needed plenty of elbow grease to bring them back to life.

"Thanks to the owners' club I discovered the bike was made on April 17, 1953 and was then dispatched to Bucks Motor Company in Aylesbury the following week. From start to finish the project took the best part of 12 months and I'm happy to report that with new petrol in the tank, the bike started first kick.

"With other bikes to ride during the last 17 years it's not seen a lot of action but whenever I bring it out I can guarantee it will start instantly and it always attracts a lot of attention when I take it down to Poole



for one of their bike nights in the summer.”

Most of the outings for Ron's Douglas are now limited to the summer months but this is a very different environment to when the newly announced twin was put through its paces by *Motor Cycling* in December 1952. Despite the cold and rain the well clad journalist waxed lyrically about the new model, with praise aplenty for the updated lubrication system with its easily accessible Vokes oil filter, easy adjustment of the tappets by the slackening of a large screw, 'soft' but torquey engine, excellent gearbox and top notch handling afforded by the excellent front and rear suspension. Whether the engine was hot or cold the test bike in the winter of 1952 was a one kick starter and I soon discovered this was the same on Ron's machine. One prod of the kick-starter had the horizontally opposed engine bursting into life with a purposeful but not anti-social exhaust note through the pair of long, straight twin silencers. With first gear engaged – very light clutch – a few revs had to be dialled in to get the 365lb machine plus rider on the move but once under way the little twin had a surprising amount of torque and was quite happy to buzz along through the Dorset lanes at around 50mph. As previously mentioned, the Mark V Duggie is a rather small machine and ideal for lady riders or those who might be 'vertically challenged' but thanks to the near perfect layout of footrests and narrow, flat handlebars, it accommodated my 6ft frame with ease. To change direction on the open road just



**Above:** Crash bars are fitted, and would help protect the cylinder heads in a tumble.

**Below:** Light green was an unusual colour choice – but a welcome bit of brightness in postwar motorcycling circles.

required a nudge on the petrol tank with the knees and although in built up areas the front end felt a bit 'heavy,' at speeds above 40mph the handling and comfort afforded by the torsion bar sprung frame and Radiadraulic leading link forks was, as *Motor Cycling* had reported in 1952, excellent.

Sadly my ride through the Dorset lanes was soon over and I had to return 348 DMN to its proud owner. With the takeover by Westinghouse Brake and Signal Company in March 1957 the news was given the following month that all motorcycle manufacturing was to cease at the Kingswood works and with it the end of the quirky horizontal twins. A bold effort from the little Bristol company and a fitting reminder that not all quality British twins were made in Birmingham. The Mark V Douglas is a real gem and it's easy to see why my old pal Jeff Clew fell in love with them – thanks, Jeff.

End

