

A TBI special report. July 2004

I like a challenge. Many motorcyclists do, especially those with a penchant for classic machines. When Allan Hitchcock asked me to become a member of a team to recreate the famous 1964 Royal Enfield John O'Groats to Land's End odyssey, I leapt at the chance.

Allan's business, Hitchcock's Motorcycles is the largest supplier of Royal Enfield spares in the world and covers all the old Redditch models. However, over recent years the company has made a concerted effort to develop replacement and improvement parts for Indian-made Bullets. The result: kits for trials and café racer Bullets, as well as a range of performance-enhancing goodies that can transform any Indian Enfield.

"Now we want to show just what the Indian Bullets are capable of," Allan

tells me. "The factory's 1964 run of 22 hours and 20 minutes was a phenomenal achievement on the 250cc Continental GT. I want to take our GT café racer back from Lands End to John O'Groats and see if we can make it in similar time. This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that event so it is fitting to give it a go this summer." The date for the big event is 6 June 2004.

The original journey was a 'Boys Own' adventure. The purpose of the trip was to launch a new motorcycle, the Crusader-based Continental GT. Although the team comprised highly accomplished riders, including three members of the motorcycling press, Enfield was taking a big risk because future sales of the GT were essential to the survival of the business.

But the gamble paid off. The team of

five plus two race riders booked for fast laps at Oulton Park and Silverstone, rode from the most northerly point in Britain, John O' Groats, to the most south-westerly, Lands End, in under 24 hours. This was a terrific feat in 1964 purely on 'A' roads. The public was so impressed that the GT received tremendous publicity and sales far exceeded production capacity.

I travel to Hitchcock's Midland's base the day before the challenge to meet the rest of the team, help load up the bike and begin the 6½ hour journey to Land's End. In the van are Allan himself, Hitchcock's engineer, Charles 'Charlie' King and myself. We are all excited and optimistic.

Allan tells me about the bike as we work our way through Somerset. "This actually the bike I use day in, day out



1964. A local wishes Brian Crow good luck as he prepares to leave John O Groats on the silver-framed Continental GT.



*(L to R) Tim Britton, Mick Duckworth, Gordon May, Allan Hitchcock and Sharon Allen.*

and is about two years old. This is no new engine; it was removed for a while and used in our hill-climber, and has been raced twice in sprints. During one sprint was electronically timed at 117mph without a fairing.

With its polished alloy tank, mudguards and top yolk instrument panel, red trimmings and sporty clip-ons and rear-sets, the bike looks the part. But to me it seems as though the most radical changes are internal. "Not so radical," Allan points out. "Every item, from the billet steel crank to the gas-flowed cylinder head, is a bolt-on part available from our catalogue. We've used our belt drive kit and also converted the 5-speed gearbox to right foot change. We've added our stage 2 road cams and a 32mm Amal MK1 Concentric. The megaphone silencer is a demon. We've kept the cone in the end for this journey, which will cost us a little power, but at least we shouldn't get arrested for causing a disturbance!" he adds. "It produces 39.6 BHP at the rear wheel yet is very rideable."

After a brief walk round the Land's End complex we all opt for a very early night. What seems like seconds later we get up. It's 02.50. That's right, just before three in the morning. Because there are another 100 or so campers on the site, we decide to push the Bullet out onto the main road. None of them could have slept through the thunder of the bike's silencer.

A thick sea fog means we can barely see more than 30 metres at the Land's End signpost. We help Allan push the

Bullet back to the End to Ender's start line. Charlie and I climb into the van and reluctantly leave Allan to start the challenge alone. We need to get well ahead of him on a fast motorway route if we are to meet him at the first hand-over in Bath, Avon, in four hours time. We also want to be within 30 minutes drive of him at any given time should the bike develop any problems. It's 03.40 when we leave and the fog is getting thicker

Charlie and I take a wrong turn in Bath so Allan beats us to the filling station swap point by one minute. The next rider, motorcycle journalist and author, Mick Duckworth, has already fuelled the Bullet and is taping his route map to the petrol tank.

How did Allan fare? "No problems at all. The first hour was bitter cold. The fog was so thick I had to ride with my visor up. After that, it was a great ride."

Mick sets off for Silverstone,



*The Bullet has an alloy barrel and 9:1 high-compression piston Only 1/2 pint of oil was lost thanks to Hitchcock's 'breather kit' recycling oil back into the oil tank.*

Northamptonshire, and I climb into the back of the support van for an hours shut-eye. Next thing I know we're being marshalled through the plethora of car parks and pit areas which surround this famous race circuit.

Awaiting us are some of the original team of riders - David Dixon, Pat Braithwaite, John Cooper and Brian Crow. They are thrilled to be reunited and chat happily to each other and us. With them is another Hitchcock's café racer and a gorgeous pair of original Continental GTs brought by enthusiasts Mark Mumford and James French I spot Don Payne from Hitchcock's who is soon down on his knees checking the bike's ignition timing.

"This has made my year," says Brian Crow. "I remember leaving John O' Groats on the GT like it was yesterday," he explains. "It was really cold and I felt a huge burden of responsibility. The support van left me an hour before I was due to depart. Locals came to chat and wish me luck. I actually started with my rear wheel immersed in the North sea; there was no start and finish line in those days."

Brian was a Royal Enfield test rider in the 1950s and 60s and confirmed that the Land's End to John O' Groats GT had received some special attention. "The engine was assembled very carefully in the competition shop so that it ran perfectly. They used a titanium con rod so that it would stand up to the thrashing it was about to get."

Sadly, three of the original riders are missing today - former world champion Geoff Duke, journalist Bruce Mains-Smith and former trials legend Peter Gaunt. I am especially disappointed not to meet Peter as he had ridden my leg from Fort William to Carlisle. "He did that section in the middle of the night," Pat reveals. "He suffered frostbite and still feels the effects of it today. What happened was that he arrived at Carlisle ahead of schedule and no one was there to meet him. He was so frozen to the bike that he couldn't get off and had to stay *in situ* until the support van arrived." I swear I begin to shiver and hope the same fate does not await me!

We have worked hard to make sure we do not miss our allotted slot at Silverstone. Vintage racing Bentley's,

Bugattis and all manner of ancient four-wheeled roaring monsters hurtle around the track. Then it goes quiet. We are led into the paddock. John Cooper, wearing the famous red moon-eyes helmet which became synonymous with his racing successes, pulls out behind a pace car and begins his two laps. The bike looks and sounds delightful along the straight and as it moves a loudspeaker announcement explains the purpose of our presence and why we are recreating history.

When it is over Mick jumps back onto the Bullet and sets off for his destination, Penkridge, Staffordshire. After a round of handshaking we absorb the special atmosphere at the race circuit for one minute longer then run to the van and set off in hot pursuit.

Of course, to keep up with the Bullet we have to cheat again. We join the new M6 toll road which follows a northerly route to by-pass Birmingham and arrive at the meeting point just as the next rider, Sharon Allen, Secretary of the Royal Enfield Owners' Club, is pulling out onto the highway with her husband, Stuart, riding support on Sharon's Harley.



(L to R) David Dixon, John Cooper, Allan Hitchcock, Pat Braithwaite, Brian Crow, Don Payne, Gordon May, Mick Duckworth.

I manage a quick chat with Mick then we unload his classic BMW from the back of the van, wave him goodbye, then return to the motorway aiming to reach Oulton Park racetrack, a planned stop for the original GT team, before Sharon. We fail. The mobile phone rings when we are three miles short of Oulton Park. Sharon, Stuart and three other Royal Enfield riders who have come along to offer moral support are all standing around waiting for us.

In 1964 World Champion, Geoff Duke, was booked to race five laps round this circuit. However, when the bike arrived at 7am, the track was iced over and impossible to ride on, so the laps were cancelled and the machine continued on its journey southwards. We take pictures then Sharon gets back on the Bullet and heads north.

Allan and Charlie take turns driving up the M6 and we arrive at the petrol station handover 2 miles south of Carlisle in Cumbria 20 minutes ahead of schedule. We exercise to shake out those knotted muscles, and, despite my

nerves, I eat.

I put on my leathers and feel the tension grow within me. At 5.20pm we hear the unmistakable thump of the big single. Sharon arrives and jumps off the bike and it all action as we refuel and hand over. Sharon reports the bike is running sweetly, but road works on the A6 caused delays. "This was always going to be the hardest sector," says Allan. "Travelling through the Lake District on a Sunday afternoon is a nightmare." Sharon has done a splendid job for the team.

As I leave the petrol station I'm shaking! The Bullet is so powerful and sharp off the mark. I launch onto the M6/M74 for eight miles to bypass Carlisle then, once across the border and into Scotland, exit onto the B7076. What a fine road - straight, fast and thankfully quiet. I am soon up to a dashing speed and am able to maintain it for the next 42 miles before heading north east on the A73 to Lanark.

I encounter my first obstacle; a one-

way bridge with traffic lights. Green turns to red on my approach and I sit for a frustrating five minutes, gunning the Bullet's engine. When I reach the market town of Lanark, road works send me on a diversion through narrow back streets. A short queue waits for a set of temporary lights to change; this time I manoeuvre the Enfield to the front of the line of traffic and pull away quickly.

Because many of the roads have changed over 40 years we have been forced to alter the route in places. I have to join the M8 motorway into central Glasgow. I swing straight into the outside lane, fully open the throttle and hang on for dear life for 18 miles. And nothing overtakes me! I exit onto the Great Western Road and bless Allan for selecting a Sunday evening for this leg. This usually heaving central Glasgow district is eerily quiet and I cruise to my scheduled petrol stop.

I run out of the shop after paying for my fuel to see two bikers admiring the



*John Cooper sets out at Silverstone just as he did 40 years ago on the 250 Continental GT.*



cannot reveal my speed for 99 percent of the ride, simply because I was too focused on the road to look at the speedometer (... Honest, officer), but knowledge of the only two speed cameras helps alleviate the worry of constantly taking my eyes off the road to scan for them.

It starts to spit with rain as I enter the foreboding Glen Coe. Portentous black clouds obscure the glow of the setting sun and I worry that it will rain heavily because with an open-face helmet I will have to slow to less than half my current speed. Fortune is mine though because I experience no more than the occasion light smattering of rain and the swish of low clouds. The Glen has mile after mile of straight roads, just wide enough for two cars to pass. Again I keep the throttle all but fully open and cling on. Cross winds buffer me, an unnerving experience at full speed with vehicles approaching from the opposite direction, but the Bullet's rock steady frame and the excellent Hagon rear shock absorbers keep me on track and I make excellent progress.

*The Bullet has been bored and stroked to a mighty 612cc. It takes Gordon a couple of hefty kicks to get the knack of starting at the Carlisle handover.*

Bullet. I feel antisocial as I yell: "...In a Lands End to John O'Groats timed challenge. Goodbye!" Then I jump on the kick-start, it fires immediately and I pull out onto a dual carriageway.

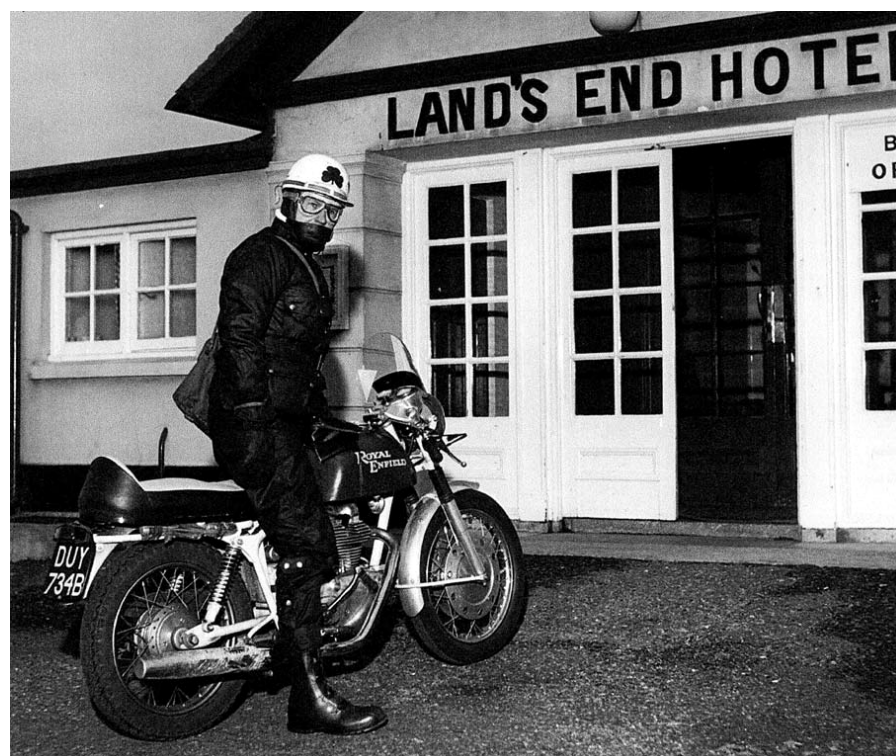
riding position, draws me into it both physically and mentally. I am completely absorbed in my work and simultaneously revel in riding such a magnificently responsive machine. I

Haring along the deserted streets of Fort William I come up behind a solitary white van within 200 metres of our arranged changing point. I can't believe it ... it's the support van - I've

Next follows a 10-mile section of fast two lane roads broken up by innumerable roundabouts and traffic lights. Again, nothing passes me - I even out-accelerate a Porsche Carrera from stationary.

Soon I am rushing along the side of Loch Lomond on the fast A82. Only peripherally aware of the beauty to my right, my focus is on the road and the cars I speed past. The Bullet's acceleration is electrifying. I have ridden many very fast Bullet conversions, but never for such an extended period and at such a consistently fast pace. I can pull in behind a car travelling at 70 mph while I wait for oncoming traffic to pass, then twist the throttle and shoot by in a flash. Mechanical rhapsody.

Famous tourist destinations such as Crianlarich, and Tyndrum are but a blur. The Bullet, with its forward



*1964. David Dixon was met at Lands End by Enfield Director Major Vic Mountford.*

caught up with it! I jump off the bike and start beating my hands, which are stiffening in the chill of late evening at this latitude. *Classic Bike Guide* editor, Tim Britton, is filling the Bullet's petrol tank while Charlie hurries around the bike checking all fastenings are secure. He then adjusts the handlebar position to accommodate Tim's tall frame. A quick time check reveals it is 21.05. I am ecstatic! I shout "awesome" over and over again. My 204-mile sector has taken just 3 hours 45 minutes and we are bang on schedule.

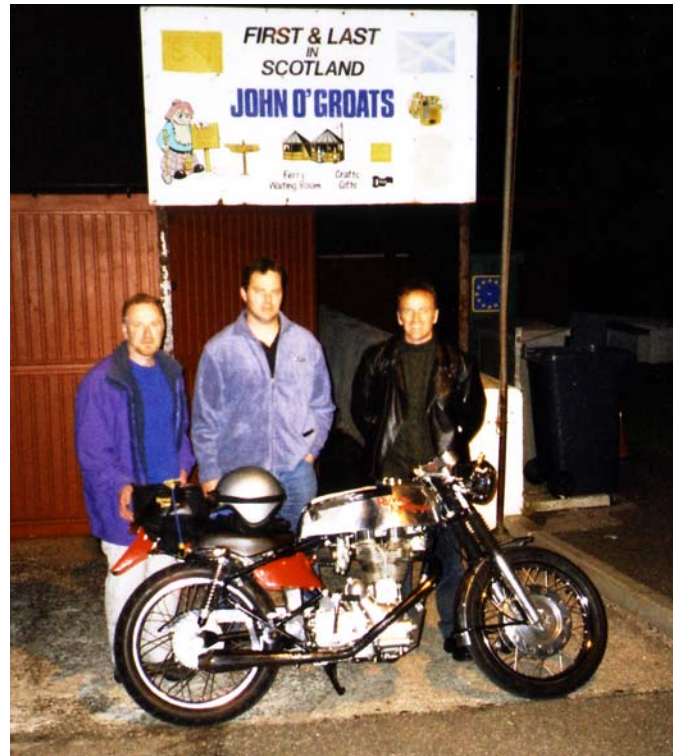
Tim is on his way within a couple of minutes and I join Allan and Charlie in the front of the van for the final stretch, which is a smidgen under 200 miles. We push the van along as fast as the narrow roads will allow - we are concerned that Tim will not find a 24-hour filling station along the route and that he will need petrol from the five gallon drum we are carrying. The one-way system in Inverness causes us considerable consternation and in the end we give up and take an alternative route which adds over 20 miles to our journey. By 11.30pm we know Tim has found fuel; we have not had a call from him.

Running along the side of the North

Sea, with its gas rigs blazing fire into the midsummer twilight, we are still 20 minutes short of John 'Groats when our mobile phone rings. It's a triumphant Tim. He is by the sea at John O'Groats and desperately needs a coffee. It is 01.15. Our total journey time is a stunning 21 hours, 15 minutes.

When we arrive we make Tim a reviving brew. He loves the bike which ran without any problems. He found it both fast and stable on the dark, narrow Highland roads. Our adrenalin is high as Allan tells Tim to dip the front wheel in the sea. Alan takes a photo and says: "That's for Brian Crow."

Eventually we begin to come down and we collapse into our sleeping bags. Just five hours later we're crawling out of them. We pack up to begin our journey



*Made it! Charlie, Allan and Gordon with the awesome Bullet.*

home. Allan reclaims his glorious Bullet and climbs on it and we unload Tim's Triumph from the back of the van and the pair ride off together. We are all immensely content and for the next 10 hours driving south we talk of little else except the Bullet and how incredible, versatile, reliable and, on this occasion, fast, this bike really is.



*Tim Britton returns the Royal Enfield to the North Sea. The journey of just under 1000 miles took 21 hours 15 minutes.*