

New Thinking For Old (Bikes)

Metal Malarkey Engineering

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Independent bike builders



Every now and again, as one wanders through the pathways life directs, you meet people in places who confirm the more positive and optimistic aspects of our existence, in a world and society that, too often, is portrayed as in turmoil.

A philosophical opening statement to the third of our series on innovative and original bike builders, but appropriate to the experience I had when meeting Mal Sheperdson and his team. They operate Metal Malarkey from their engineering and mechanical workshop at Bishops Castle: a small town in the Shropshire hills that is as interesting for its pleasing geographical location as it is for the music scene and brewing that seems to denote its main cultural focus. And why not.

Mal and the team build bikes - beautiful modern classics based on British bikes. They also design and build frames, a unique girder fork set that is exported all over the world, exhausts and fork yokes that would not be out of place in an exhibition of modern sculpture.





His professional background is in aerospace engineering and welding, but his introduction to bike building came in the eighties. He told me an amusing story about taking his skill set to the Job Centre, where he was offered positions as a road manager to a rock group touring Scandinavia, mine clearing in the Middle East (must be Arabic speaker), and a motorcycle chassis builder for Metisse, in Bristol. He took that one and worked for a number years for Metisse, whose frame kits were renowned for making both British, and then Japanese bikes, handle superbly; and in road racing and motocross (scrambling), were wrapped around all kinds of engines.

Phil James has worked with Mal for over twenty years and is a motorcycle engineer in his own right; Lee is their mechanical engineer with many years experience on classic bikes; Jack is the resident IT guy, interpreting Mal and Phil's ideas using computer aided design tools (CAD); and there's Mal's son Reuben, who's currently studying mechanical engineering is and about to start work experience with a German engineering company.



Rickman T500

On the day my visit was hosted, there was a lot of two wheel interest parked up in the main workshop area. One of the bikes has been clumsily named 'Rickuki' by Classic Motorcycle Mechanics, on whose behalf Malarkey are building this unusual hybrid. It's a Rickman frame that cradles a Suzuki T500 two stroke engine that has a water cooling conversion. They 'inherited' the project from another bike builder, who was struggling with the frame design complexities. Bending down to examine the special engine plates Mal and the team have fabricated, I could see why – the progress of the build is being serialised in the magazine.



21st Century Classics - Norton commando

On a workshop ramp, next to this special, was a lithe and elegant Norton Commando in the final stages of preparation for a customer. Mal explained that this bike had been prepared in line with their ongoing 21st Century Classics project. This is a collaborative concept originated by three motorcycling brothers: Bill, Jim and Rob Gysin, who wanted to own and ride British 'classics', but recognised the shortcomings in terms of power, weight, handling and engineering reliability.

It's a regular cliché about the best ideas being conceived over pints, and in the case of the Gysin brothers in 2006, that was how their concept was born. Take a British bike with all its foibles, but basically a very desirable machine to own and ride. Then rebuild it with modern and reliable components and engineering and frame building expertise, while retaining classic looks that many customers want in their bikes.



21st Century Classics - BSA Lightning

That's where Malarkey plays its part in turning pint based ideas to real life. And as a result, the brothers now own and ride three very special bikes: a 1963 Triumph Bonneville, a 1969 Triumph Trident and an A65 BSA Lightning. Understandably, the attention of the classic bike magazines was easily roused, and each of the bikes has been the subject of detailed articles explaining the build processes, which can be accessed through the [Malarkey website](#), along with detailed specifications for each. There's also a short, but well-produced, video of the bikes traversing the mountain road in mid-Wales from Rhayader to the coast at Aberystwyth. Gorgeous.



21st Century Classics - Triumph Trident

The Commando's engine has been pushed out to 920cc, with a compression ratio of 9:1. The frame is a one off Malarkey design based on a Metisse Mk3, and the forks and yokes are from a Buell Cyclone. But what makes this bike, and others built by the team, to the 21st Century concept is how they have shaved off weight to create a sharp handling and an easily manageable motorcycle. The Norton weighs in at just 170kgs, and when it came off the ramp and I sat on the bike, the balance and riding position with Malarkey rear sets was easily accustomed.



Ducati 900 SS Special

The machine shop, polishing room, frame jig room and the main workshop, with all the accoutrements of 'old fashioned' engineering, could be thought of as the antithesis of today's IT automated and robotically driven companies. But, at Malarkey they have married the essential craft based expertise needed to produce the special bikes and components, with CAD (computer aided design) and an online-based project management system that keeps customers informed at each stage of their build and is interactive in terms of allowing two-way discussions of ideas and thoughts.



Ducati Single Race Frame

In past years, Mal has booked the Three Sisters race circuit, near Wigan, so that customers and their bikes could stretch out at a track day. In 2016, there's an alternative, as they will be riding at the Prescott Bike Festival Hill Climb (April 17th) where I rode this year - and where hundreds of enthusiasts will be sure to appreciate the innovation and build quality that Malarkey will put on display.

Also, the collaboration with the Gysin brothers is about to move into a new phase: taking the 21st Century concept and applying it to Japanese fours. Keep an eye on this one, bookmark the [Malarkey website](#) and enjoy the pics of the current bikes and projects.

What do you think of Metal Malarkey's work? Have you any bike building stories of your own? Share your thoughts and images with us at news@wemoto.com.

Edited By: [Daisy Cordell](#)