

Czeching out Rossendale

It's 5.45am and I am lying in bed with the same thought going through my mind as I have had since yesterday evening. "I can't believe I forgot about yesterday's Aintree Race Meeting, silly Sod" (truth be told I am even more annoyed later in the week when I get told I've missed a reproduction four cylinder Gilera that was given its head for a few exhibition laps) Given that I'm not going to get any more sleep due to a very sober Saturday evening, I decide to get up and see what the weather has to throw at me. The BBC web site suggests rain in northern Lancashire and Cumbria but just cloud over the Rawtenstall area, my planned destination today.

After a leisurely bath and a bit of breakfast I am wheeling out the latest addition to my garage, a 1959 Jawa 355. 125cc of twin port single pot Czech commuter; destined (I hope) for a 120 mile round trip to the Rossendale Bike Show, via a processional ride-in with the Vintage Motorcycle Club to the East Lancs Railway Station platform. I've loaded up my Oxford tank bag with a flask, spare gloves and waterproofs, as well as my insurance docs and MOT certificate.

(I never normally carry these, so why am I doing so just because it says on the show's web site that I should have them with me? I'm becoming increasingly intolerant to David Blunkets ratcheting down of civil liberties and I see this sort of thing as just another extension of the policy, so I eventually take them out again muttering "buggerem" under my breath. After all if they don't want me there because I can't provide my documents, then they can bloody well goose step off in my opinion)

After filling the Jawa's 2 gallon tank to the brim with 35:1 two stroke mix, I flood the inlet manifold using the tickler and it kicks over on the second attempt. It's still only 7.30am so I walk the Jawa up to the end of the cul de sac so as not to annoy my neighbours as it "blat blat blats" on a slow tickover and gently warms up.

My route choice is vague to say the least, somehow I'm going to head over towards Standish and then northwards towards Chorley and Blackburn and eastwards in the direction of Oswaldtwistle and the Britannia Public House car park. I've noticed that I now say "Chor li" instead of "Chor lee" and likewise "Black birn" instead of "Black Burn", but I can't remember when the transformation happened, maybe I'm losing the Liverpool accent that most kids brought up in Rainhill in the 70's have got. Before the 60's Rainhill was a small Lancashire village to the south of St Helens that had a brass foundry and a history of file making to served the watch making industry of Prescot just two miles further down the Liverpool to Warrington turnpike (now the A57). I used to give a mate of mine a lift to St Helens RLFC's home matches, his name was Wilf and he was a Rainhill lad all his life from 1910 until he died in the early 90's. He used to tell me about turning the brass portholes for the Royal Yacht Britannia when working for Roby's foundry and the Swiss army knife that he gave me is now in my tank bag, just in case. It's one of my treasured possessions but I insist on always using it and keeping it sharp, Wilf

was a practical man you see, he wouldn't want it stuck in a drawer as a keepsake, "Ave it and get it used".

I pull slowly onto the empty A57 and head into Rainhill village, turning towards St Helens as I rise up the slope to Rainhill's Skew Bridge, the first one of its type built by Robert Stephenson in 183x. Every block of sandstone was individually cut to allow the archway over the Liverpool to Manchester railway to span the line at an angle instead using of the normal 90 degree approach. This prevented a dog leg being built into the turnpike and must have taken all the skill of the stone masons to get it right.

As I wait at the lights, the exhaust aroma fills my nostrils and reminds me why I love these old strokers. I've only owned this bike since last Friday, when I won the auction on Ebay. I thought that it was an unusual machine and given that it had over 6 months MOT on it, I thought it was worth an evening trip to Stoke on Trent for a quick once over. Once I had ridden it, I set a price in my mind and eventually won it for much less. The seller even rode it to my house in exchange for a lift home. A top bloke, he arrived like a drowned rat but the bike had done 55 miles in torrential rain and I knew I had bought a good'un.

On my right I pass the Brown Edge pub, a Burtonwood house that sparks memories of being mithered in the "best side" by Johnny Vegas when he used to work there pulling pints. As I throttle off down the slope into Thatto Heath, pop pop popping on the over run a white van man looks at me grimly as he is issued with a speeding ticket, probably for ignoring the 20mph zone limit as I have just done, poor Bugger. It's 7.35am on a Sunday morning for pity's sake, have you vultures got nowt better to do ?

Now then, those of you that grinned at the name of Thatto Heath should be told that this little crossroads has produced an astonishing amount of Rugby League internationals for its size, at the pinnacle of which sits the legendary Alex Murphy. Mind you, within the blink of an eye (half a mile at the most) I've passed through Thatto Heath, Nutgrove, Ravenhead and Toll Bar and to this day I've never been able to find anyone to tell me where one starts and the other ends. Suffice to say you will be guaranteed to insult anyone you meet from this tiny area if you presume to guess their geographical origins, best just to keep your gob shut or say "Sintellins" instead.

It's a long drop down into St Helens town centre, famous for its successful Rugby league team (and guardians of the Challenge Cup until next may), Pilkington's glass and directly ahead of me is the old Beechams Pills head office building with its distinctive tower. It's now part of St Helens College and houses the College Bar, a haven for real ale drinkers in the town with an ever changing list of guest beers and the friendliest place to watch the Friday night Superleague match in my opinion. For those southerners still grinning, 3 pints of quality bitter for less than £4.50 should wipe the smile off your face. Bring your CAMRA membership card with you for a 10% discount on beers.

I head out of town following the signs towards Wigan and the east lincs' road. Up through Billinge I realise that I'm now in dangerous border country, this lot have Wigan

phone numbers after all! You never know here just who you are talking to and whether their allegiance is to the mighty Saints or the “Owd Enemy” who play in Cherry and White. Ahead of me looms Billinge Lump (I say looms but its all relative, given it looms as much as anything does in St Helens, bar making the mistake of spilling a prop forwards pint) I can’t say for sure if the battlements are still there, but it is rumoured.

North of Billinge and the road opens up a little, the little Jawa seems happiest at 70kmh (approx 48mph) with occasional bursts up to 80kph, but it’s all dependent on the head wind and often I’m flat out at 50kmh and leaning forwards over the tank. I’m following my nose through Shevington and Standish where I join the A*** northwards to Blackburn just as the first drops of rain splatter my visor. I’m relieved that I wore a full face lid instead of my usual open face lid with sunglasses arrangement, as even at 50mph rains stings like hell when it is hitting you full in the face. Eventually I realise that it is time to stop and put on my one piece waterproofs, so I pull over at the intersection with the A6 and do that funny one legged rain dance. You know the one, where you hop around in a circle trying to get your second boot in the other hole, followed by the Border Collie impersonation where the right sleeve takes on the roll of a tail that just can’t be caught. Why aren’t I still in bed I wonder?

I ignore the temptation to head for Rivington Barn near Horwich to join up with one of the other ride in groups, as I’ve got my heart set on the heritage run instead so I can show these old British machines what Czech technology can do, even after 45 years. Anyway, I doubt if I could keep up with the rest of the group once they started off. The rain becomes harder and despite hopeful looking patches in the cloud ahead, it remains depressingly persistent, but the Jawa just seems to shrug it off and he has a few years on me, so who am I to complain as I reel in the last few miles to Chorley and cross the M61 on my way to Wheelton.

Unbidden the words “Ello little old Lady” come to mind as I remember the “Chorleton and the Wheelies” kids TV series from the early 80’s. Funnily enough, I’m heading to Rawtenstall that also spawned the “Rotten Trolls” kids show in the early 90’s. What is it about Lancashire town names and kids TV?

Then the music starts (in my head that is, as the Jawa was never fitted with the optional Goldwing accessory pack when it left the late fifties factory in Prague. It’s believed this model was built by Jawa, but assembled and dispatched by CZ as part of their merger after nationalisation) and I’m back enjoying Rush, the Canadian rock band that played the MEN arena the previous Sunday. The long climb through Wheelton is accompanied by Red Barchetta and Spirit of Radio and a persistent rain that makes liars of the BBC meteorology department.

In Blackburn I’m obviously irritating the car behind me with a multitasking blend of trying to navigate my way through a badly designed one way system with a misted visor, wet slippery roads and trying to engage first gear quickly enough when the lights change. Patience and anticipation are necessary traits that prevail with riders of older bikes due to characterful gearboxes and brakes that are often at best aspirational rather than functional. Unfortunately my little bubble of parental like indulgence doesn’t always emanate

outwards far enough to envelop other road users, but I treat myself to a little smile as I sail through an amber light, leaving Mr Impatient behind me watching a red light bulb and hopefully swearing profusely. Little victories like this are part of the joy of dealing with aggressive drivers, just like telling Mr BMW that overtook me last week in a 30 zone with a good inch to spare from my offside grip. At the queue onto the Rainhill Stoops roundabout, he got told he was an ar*ehole in no uncertain terms and stayed told. That day an open faced lid gave me free reign to express myself and is a luxury that I don't have today, thankfully.

As I head out on the Oswaldtwistle road, the rain clouds decide it is time for them to have a bit of serious exercise and the rain bounces a full six inches off the road ahead of me. Visibility is down to yards and that dreaded cold trickling feeling in the crotch area lets me know that my waterproofs have given up on their battle against the elements to keep me dry. Forget going via Ramsbottom, it looks like I'm going via Soggybottom instead. The Jawa ignores the rain of course, it's an old hand at this after all, so I pat the tank encouragingly; because bikes respond to these shows of affection, don't they?

I'm getting near to the meeting point now and as I pull up to a crossroads I'm a bit surprised to find the Britannia pub on my left, I'm here already, an hour early and it's still pouring down. At the back of the pub I settle down under a wooden porch with a flask of coffee and a piece of carrot cake courtesy of the Liverpool Crown Court Jury service caterers. Trust me, two weeks of sitting round doing nothing but read papers, drink (outrageously overpriced) tea and enjoying a good book is the sort of holiday from work stress that should be compulsory every six months. I feel wonderful for it!



Eventually I am joined by a chap and his grandson from Oldham on a 1960 BSA Super Star and as the rain dies away we watch and wave at the Rivington Barn ride-in group as they make their way to the show. Erm, it might just be me being daft but it's ten to ten and there are still only two of us here, this isn't going to be much of a heritage ride, is it? Two Lambretta owners pull up and after a brief discussion, one of them rides off in search of all the other old bikes that have ridden past us, only to find them half a mile further down the road at the next pub so we all pack up and join them. It appears that the VMCC had had a little falling out with the Britannia and decided to move the meeting point, but nobody bothered to update the web site. That was thoughtful!

We've barely ridden in when the instruction to start off again is given and my blat blat blat is lost in the thump of four stroke singles. It looks like it's just me and a Suzuki GT380 battling for the honour of the stokers. No problem, come on we'll have the lot of yer!

We snake our way through XXXXXX in a steady procession and I am forced to pretty much keep the Jawa constantly at full chat in order to keep up with the pace. I lose it a bit on the hill climbs but nobody seems to mind and I catch up again on the flat and downhill stretches. At one point I see 85kmh but back off again as soon as I notice, after all who am I trying to impress? Ahead of me is the pale blue Suzuki GT380 and of that a beautifully restored 50.s Moto Guzzi Falcone, often known as the Italian bacon slicer due

to its huge external flywheel, trust me you wouldn't want your boot laces to get wrapped up in it,



All around me is the smell of someone burning a fair drop of Castrol R and I'm in smell heaven, whilst behind me is a yellow Honda 400/4 super sport that I make time to examine closely later in the day. I'm surprised at just how few components it shares with my 1975 500/4 (built in 1972 apparently and stockpiled by Honda), they really are completely different bikes.

The last few miles into Rawtenstall are not much fun as we get held up by one set of lights after another that eventually splits us up into little groups of half a dozen riders. We arrive in dribs and drabs at the railway station whereupon we dismount and push our steeds through the front entrance and out on to the platform. There are quite a few bikes already there, many of which are gleaming and have obviously been trailored in, ours look a little mud splattered by comparison due to the rain and mud strewn country lanes that indicate the ploughing season has just started. After settling my Jawa on its stand I stand back and realise I'm grinning with the sheer fun of buying a 50's bike for just £500 and just a few days later trusting it completely by riding it halfway across the county through dreadful weather. It confirms what I've always suspected, that I'm not quite the full shilling, so to speak.

The rain has stopped, the sun is making fleeting guest appearances through the heavy clouds and its blowing a bit as the platform gradually fills up with some of the 50,000 visitors that are expected to frequent Rawtenstall today. All day they tramp up and down

the platform stopping to admire the two Manchester built DOT trials bikes, the AJS's, Nortons a lovely Villiers powered Greeves 250 sport and various Japanese 70's bikes that all line up in neat order, pinking gently as they cool. I'm delighted at the attention the Jawa receives, mainly because of its rarity if the truth be told, but after finishing my flask I pay my £2 and leave my bag and lid in the care of the railway station helmet park and wander off into the crowd to see what Rawtenstall has to offer.

There are mostly stalls selling the usual motorcycle clothing and accessories that you find at any bike show. However, apart from a considering a new set of boots some time in the future and maybe some new gloves I'm not really in the market for anything at the moment, so my brass remains firmly in my pocket. Heading across into the ASDA car park I spend 20 minutes watching the Minimoto racing around their dedicated course. They really do shift on these tiny little bikes whereas I'm not sure I could even ride one for even a couple of yards without my hips cramping up. Down the slope out of the car park, the trials rider display team are starting their exhibition of jumping their bikes around like demons on a snow field much to the admiration of the spectators that virtually block the road. Don't expect to rush around Rawtenstall today, just accept that the crowd dawdles along at its pace and to try and hurry is an exercise in futility, as you will just end up making a right show of yourself.

In all honesty, I get bored quickly with this sort of wandering about and I quickly return to the station platform where I end finish my flask whilst chatting to one of the stewards about his BSA Bantam that he and his late brother rebuilt. He had been keeping an eye on my Jawa as it was next to the platform shelter where he had ensconced himself for the day and he was just as pleased as me that it was getting such fond attention. As I was sat chatting, a typical Hells Angel type (large, hairy, tattooed and every other stereotype you wish to mention) biker stopped and started examining the 355 quite closely. I engaged him and (I presume) his father or Father in law in conversation and that was us for the next half an hour as he told me about his late 70's Jawa, then I mentioned my MZ and he mentioned his and before we knew it we were most of the way down eastern European memory Strasse. That's what I like about these little strokers, many of them gave faithful service at a budget price and are often fondly remembered by their previous owners, many of whom are delighted to see one on the road again as they are now a rarity compared to AJS's, Triumphs, Nortons and Beezer's.

My phone rings and I direct half a dozen of my mates to where I am waiting and we discuss the Jawa, their bikes, then throw around suggestions for our next bike holiday. In May we ended up in Prague via one breakdown, Colditz Castle and the MZ motorcycle museum at Augustusberg. Go if you get the chance, if only to see the radial engine bikes in their collection. The engine is mounted within the front wheel hub and is as barking as you'll get. The consensus of opinion is the Austrian Alps and a tentative dipping of the toe into Italy. Grossglockner and Timmels Joch here we come.

By 3.30pm the judging is over and people are starting to drift away. I notice that the Italian bacon slicer has been awarded the "Best Classic" award and deservedly so in my opinion. I didn't notice if the Rudge had won anything, but it was a pleasure to see it here

either way. Outside I start up the Jawa second kick after waiting forlornly for a Scott Squirrel to start and head off before me, just so I can hear its 2 stroke twin pull away. He seems happy to wait for me though, so no Scott yowl for me today and eventually I blat blat blat the Jawa into life on the second kick. The rain has dissapeared but the wind has picked up, so its going to be a slow journey home with this headwind, now if I can just lie flat on the tank I might coax another couple of kmph's out of it.....or maybe not, after all, I'm still not trying to impress anybody am I?