

Sun Motorcycle Centenary

or 101st year (Baker's Centenary?).

Peter Moorey

I dedicate this short history of Sun Motorcycles to the late Jack Sizer. He spent many years collecting and collating as much information as he could find, and then took the time and trouble to write and publish the book from which I have just cribbed most of the following. Jack was VTS, Sun and Villiers Marque specialist for both the VMCC and BTSC.

Motorcycle production is a story in two parts, started in 1911 or 1912. Jack states 1911/12 and later lists frame numbers from and including 1911. June 1994 edition OBM carries no. 42 in a series by the respected and knowledgeable Jeff Clews, he recalls when Sun offered Britain's Premier Lightweight. It is a much potted history of the Sun Cycles and Fittings Co. Ltd and a more detailed account from a road test report 1958 of the Overlander 250 Twin, he dates production from 1911.

On the computer research Wizardry, which is unlikely to catch on, there is a site or whatever.....when they claim 1911. They also state Villiers engines were used from the beginning, but Villiers started engine production in 1913 and two-strokes only from 1914, so I am more confused than usual. Then classic-bikes.net show a picture of 1911 Sun Precision TT veteran racer! Wikipedia quotes 1911, but also include Mopeds in their company description which is wrong! A link from this takes you to a history of Sun Cycles, which also quotes 1911 as the first year motorcycle production and states 1914 as the only year in Sun production where motorcycle sales exceeded cycle sales by £1,000 at £45,000. The handbook for my fine state of the art modern 1954 Sun quotes 1912, so we are all agreed then! Sun has reached its 100th anniversary of starting motorcycle production.

Founded by James Parkes, a well know Birmingham industrialist, who took his son Joseph into partnership as James Parkes and Son, Brass Founders of Alma Street, Birmingham. Among other things they made incandescent lamps, which led on to give the name "Sun" to the company with telegraphic address of "Carbon". During the 1880s they made frames, lugs and fittings for the cycle industry that was growing in that area, by 1887 this required larger premises so they moved to Aston Brook Street and changed the name to Sun Cycle Fittings Co. In 1907 the "and" was added between "Cycle" and "Fittings" when they became a Limited Company and his other sons, William, Thomas and Frederick, also joined the firm. Complete bicycles were manufactured under the Sun name, they also developed a lightweight race bike under the direction of F.E. Parkes, grandson of the founder. Sold as the Parkes Lightweight it became known worldwide and used in many world championship events with great success. But enough of treaders, this is about Motor Cycles.

The early days.....Jack's book lists great detail year by year, each model produced, pictures, drawings wherever possible and full specification. One model, 1916, takes 3 pages of exotic prose just quoting the Sun brochure for a VTS engine lightweight with separate oil feed and two speed cog box with cork clutch no less. Guaranteed to climb any hill in Britain and with six months warranty on everything except tyres and belts, for the exceptional price £34, or single speed £28, and a ladies model at £35.10s, the

price of dinner for 2 with the Surrey Section!! Much more detail than we have room for here.

The VTS (Valve-less Two Stroke) was made locally to the Sun factory, and it is believed (not proven) that VTS bought frames and fittings from Sun. There is a degree of confusion over VTS and Vitesse with machines being marketed as having VTS engines and sometimes referred to as Vitesse engines. However a letter written to the Motor Cycle, 29th March 1917 by William Parkes, a director of Sun, hopefully enlightened the readership by stating the VTS company of 303 Broad Street, Birmingham in 1914 named its engines Vitesse as is generally known to mean speed, and VTS spoken quickly sounds like Vitesse thus avoiding confusion with Velocette or Villiers (maybe). Sun supplied many British manufacturers with parts, part built frames, and complete frames. They also sold complete machines to companies who just added their names to the tank and sold them on, the export market included Australia (ewb) Africa, Canada, Russia, Holland (Burgers Vitesse,) New Zealand (Solar.)

During 1912 the range for 1913 was extended to 270cc, 499cc and 599cc still using precision engines with J.A.P. as an alternative if preferred, sidecars also offered. During 1913 Villiers started to manufacture engines OHV inlet, side ex valve 349 unit construction engine were taken up by Sun as well. 1913 also saw them market a TT model for use in local and national events. The success of riders in many countries were used to enhance their advertisements and sales brochures.

In 1914 Villiers introduced a two-stroke engine and initiated the long association with Sun that was to last until the end of Sun motor cycle manufacture. For 1915 a 6hp J.A.P equipped machine was introduced for sidecart use, but the onset of the Great War changed things. No contracts were awarded by the army, but the French used some and the report of the time said they were admired by all. Around this time Sun manufactured a V twin two-stroke and also continued to use the V.T.S. eventually taking the firm over. The Russian army took delivery of Suns until 1917. The factory kept busy during this time with munitions and other war work, with a reduced workforce as men were called up or volunteered. F.C. Parkes, grandson of the founder and later to become chairman, joined the Royal Engineers before being seconded to the Royal Flying Corps to fly fighters. Motorcycle production did not restart until the 1920 season with only the Vitesse being offered. But Sun entering two 250s in the 1921 TT, the first lightweight strokers to use a rotary disc in the crankcases. These engines, designed by John Duffey the founder of VTS engines, now owned by Sun, came 9th and 10th. Not bad for a start, they entered 3 machines for 1922, which they lightened

1954 197cc Sun Challenger Mk III



1957 99cc Sun Hornet in Saxe Blue.

and produced steel lined alloy cylinders and a foot change gearbox. At the last minute they drilled holes in the con rods and lightened the pistons which unfortunately created such vibration it shattered the fuel pipes. The riders were W.V.Bishop again joined by L.J. Lord and Gus Khun. Khun and Lord finished 12th and 13th after wrapping handkerchiefs around their fuel pipes. Kaye Don lapped Brooklands at more than 70 mph on a similar machine. Disheartened with what they considered a lack of success the directors pulled the plug on racing. But the rotary valve engine continued as a road engine for some years. Models were increased for 1923 with addition of 150 and 250 Villiers, 350 a choice of Villiers or Blackburn in solo or with sidecar, plus 300 JAP. These continued through "24 and "25 with the new for "25 Villiers 172 sports engine being added. Although not running a works team the company was still very keen to publicise successes by private riders, the 1925 brochure claims 18 first class awards, 6 second, 3 third plus 3 certificates and 3 special premier awards with firsts at Cologne, Breslam and Barman.

Sun continued to develop the range and changes were made as new engines became available. By 1930 commercial bodies were introduced for their sidecars really making them sidecars, with fabric covered box body with two doors, an open carrier and drop down rear flap. The depression was biting by 1931 and 1932 saw the introduction of a 98cc using the midget engine with 2 speed box for sixteen guineas cash, or 4 guineas down and one pound and two pence on the knock for 18 months. The 500s were discontinued. During 1933 all motorcycle manufacture ceased, reverting to supplying frames and fittings wholesale, fortunately the pedal cycle side flourished. Indeed, in 1938 a cycling news article pronounced them the Rolls Royce of cycles, Sun were very quick to pick up on this and used it extensively in their adverts for both pedal and motorised cycles.

Their decision to re-enter the market with a Villiers junior engined autocycle clashed with Mr. Hitler and his vision of the E.U. Neither being a good idea. So the autocycle manufacture turned instead to rivets, I do not know what they were intended for but they made six and a half million of them each week, plus munitions again.

Part two is really the last few years after the war. The autocycle appeared, now with the Junior DeLuxe engine for 1946-7-8. Towards the end of 1948 they showed prototypes of a new autocycle styled more like a motorcycle and a 98cc two speed motorcycle, both using versions of the new F series, both painted in brown and cream, with production to start in may 49. When they went on sale they were black, because that's what customers wanted! Well, that's what they got!!!



For £45 and £55 plus purchase tax (around £14). 1951 saw 125 and 197 models added, the Challenger had arrived with metal profiles telescopic forks and rear suspenders, the name previously used pre-war on their pedal cycles and not copied from a firm in Essex, several names were common to their products.

Post-war Villiers engines were used exclusively. With the introduction of the 125 TT Sun again entered a machine to be ridden by Syd Goddard, but it was C.W. (Paddy) Johnson who piloted it to 16th place at 48.18 mph not bad, eh! Alright he was the last finisher, but how many James, Fanny-bees, Greeves, et al, were in front of him? (I expect I will soon find out, with correspondence from grumpy of Westhampton in letters to the Editor) Being a member of the Leinster MC team he has the distinction of being the only man so far to have won an award for other than just finishing. Yes, a team prize (big round of applause here please). Production continued with 1954 being another milestone year with the adoption of pivoted fork rear suspension replacing the plungers used previously, also a 197 competition model was added. The highlight of the year, though, was a 197 8E Challenger DeLuxe, finished in pale metallic blue with chrome panelled tank and optional 4-speed Albion box, probably a fanfare of trumpets as she rolled off the line. It still receives much admiration to-day. Why, only recently the proud owner of a Norton made in the next street asked me to move it when I parked next to him at a VMCC gathering. I can only assume the poor soul suffered an inferiority complex. The 1955 brochure made much of the competition successes gained by the new machine and announced two new ones, separate trials and scrambles models. The works team of three entered in the Scottish Six Days all won awards, over 200 awards obtained worldwide, impressive or what! 1956 and another pedal cycle name introduced from 1929, the Wasp was applied to a new look Challenger with 9E donkey and Armstrong leading linkers. 1957 the Overlander arrived with the excellent 2T twin engine, later this was also called Wasp Twin. No wonder I am confused.

The board of directors, aware of the booming scooter market, dipped their toes in the water with the 98cc Geni

THE SUN OVERLANDER 250 C.C. TWIN

THE LEADING LIGHTWEIGHT OF THE YEAR

New colour scheme, silver polychromatic blue and dual colour tank.

The most outstanding Twin! The most Modern Design! No mudguard stays and, if you need it, 70 M.P.H. plus!

scooter, 4F, two speed with 15 inch wheels. During 1958 a prototype using the new 2L 173cc engine in a Wasp frame was tested by several personalities, Bob Currie reported very favourably but it did not enter production. The Geni now became mark II with service improvements and increased rigidity and price. During 1959 all motor cycles were quietly dropped. The Geni acquired 17 inch wheels and the 6F foot change unit and five pounds off the price. 1960 and the Sun Wasp name reappeared as a proper scooter with the 2L unit with electric start 3-50 x 10 wheels and 6 inch brakes in two tone grey or silver with crimson panels and a long list of accessories, basic price inc. PT £182.14s.11d. The Geni

November 10, 1960 MOTOR CYCLING

'glow' everywhere on the brilliant NEW Sun Wasp

STAND 47 CYCLE SHOW EARLS COURT

- * 2 pedal forward gear control
- * Electric starter £182.14.11 Inc. P.T.
- or
- * Kick starter £169.10.0 Inc. P.T.
- * IMMEDIATE access to engine and rear sus
- * Elegant styling
- * Larger full width glove and tool box

Sun CYCLE & FITTINGS CO. LTD., Aston Brook Street, Birmingham 6, E

slipped away in 1960.

Tube investment had bought the Sun Cycles and Fittings Co. Ltd. in 1958, owners of Raleigh Cycles they wanted the bicycle division. Fred Parkes, Sun's chairman, in announcing the takeover said production would remain at Aston Brook Street without any staff changes and that the separate identity of the company would be maintained (just like Kraft foods with Cadburys!). 1961 saw the Sun Wasp scooter listed but from the Raleigh industries address at 177 Lenton Boulevard, Nottingham. I do not know if they were made there or were just left overs being marketed by them. 1961 was the year they also killed off Norman. Motor cycle sales peaked in 1959 but were still good in 60-61. I suspect Raleigh were just not interested in manufacturing motor cycles. And so 50 years of Sun motor cycles came to an inglorious end. Raleigh continued to use the Sun name on a range of bicycles into the 1980s. Indeed, I purchased one in 1983, but the name now seems to be lost in the mists of time.

Although the factory was in Aston Brook Street, the Service Dept. entrance was round the corner in Bracebridge Street.

This year's 'pie and ear' run, organised by the Sunbeam Club, listed the following entrants were listed in their programme:-

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|-----|------|-----|-----------------------------|
| 107 | 1912 | 498 | from Ireland. |
| 235 | 1914 | 269 | Villiers Robert Hummerstone |
| 236 | 1914 | 269 | Villiers Alan Hummerstone |
| 324 | 1914 | 269 | Villiers |

Peter Moorey was the Sun Marque Specialist at one time but now limits his activities to organising the BTSC Croydon and South London Section.
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