

The Literary Club
Gibby Carey Budget
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Sic Transit

This assignment was to write on “youthful indiscretion.” To make sure I was on task, I went to Merriam-Webster online, and read that “indiscretion” meant either “lack of ‘discretion’ [meaning “good judgment]” or “an act at variance with the accepted morality of a society.” Although my youth offers fine sources of both legs of the definition, I thought it better to focus on the former. After all, hearing of “acts of variance with the accepted morality of a society” in our company might lead to the deflowering of our still-virgin ... defibrillator.

With a colossal lack of good judgment, at age twenty I bought from a friend a used Royal Enfield motorcycle. Buying any motorcycle from anyone could be seen as a lack of good judgment. But this was a trifecta of folly.

First, it was a *British* motorcycle. In fairness, the British “marques,” as they were often called in the ‘70’s, were cool. Triumph, BSA (the name was from “Birmingham Small Arms”), Norton, Royal Enfield. Just recite the names, and you feel like you’re adjusting your goggles in your Hawker Hurricane, readying for the Battle of Britain.

Compared to the hulking Harleys of the day, the British bikes were fast, nimble and light. Much-modified English Triumphs held the motorcycle speed record from 1955 to 1970. A classic Triumph model was named the “Bonneville” after the Utah salt flats where these records

were set. The Triumph “Daytona” and Norton “Manx” models commemorated those marques’ road-race victories in Florida and on the Isle of Man.

These bikes looked fast standing still, with teardrop tanks flowing into slim seats. The word “saddle” fit for the perch on many Harleys, but not for the classic Brits. If any equine terminology fit, it was that they were thoroughbreds to Harley’s Percherons.

Marlon Brando rode a Triumph in “The Wild Ones.” Steve McQueen rode a disguised Triumph in “The Great Escape,” and described that thus:

I was running a TT Special 650 Triumph. We painted it olive drab and put on a luggage rack and an old seat to make it look like a wartime BMW. We couldn't use a real BMW, not at the speeds we were running, since those old babies were rigid-frame jobs, and couldn't take the punishment.

With a heritage like this, why was my purchase indiscreet? Like their makers, British bikes had certain ... *eccentricities*. Such as engine designs that assured oil leaks: crankcases were typically split vertically, leaving oil sitting on a seam permanently -- or at least, 'til all the oil leaked out. Clutch and transmission covers were often secured with a single central nut, assuring that the covers would eventually warp, and leak. To British motorcycle owners, the story of King Canute ordering the tides to stop, was metaphor for trying to keep oil in their engines.

The nuts and bolts on these machines were, of course, British. Certainly British manufacturers couldn't use anything as Napoleonic as metric, or as colonial as American Standard. Most hardware was British Standard Whitworth, except for a few parts that for added fun would be

in British Standard Cycle. This paper led me to dig out my Whitworth open-end wrenches. Each end is marked as two sizes, for example, “1/2 W (presumably ‘Whitworth’)” and “9/16 BSF (presumably ‘British Standard Fine’)”. One might assume that the width of that wrench’s jaw would be one or the other of those dimensions. In fact, it measures 15/16 of an inch. The nominal size of a British spanner is not its “span,” the size of the bolt head or nut it would fit, but the size of the threaded shank of the bolt that head or nut belongs to. So, that wrench could fit bolts of either of those shank sizes. Why do sizing this way – clearly in defiance of natural law, if not divine? There are deep mysteries here. Stonehenge, Druids, and furlongs may be involved.

And then there were the British bikes’ Lucas-made electrical components, so famous for unreliability that they were the subject of jokes on both sides of the Atlantic – jokes like:

“Why do the English drink warm beer?”

“They have Lucas refrigerators.”

“What’s the work-motto of the Lucas plants?”

“Home by dark.”

Transcending the foibles general to British brands, mine was a *Royal Enfield*. The maker was venerable enough, starting as a maker of machine parts in the mid-1800’s. The company’s contracts to supply gun parts to the Royal Small Arms Factory in the town of Enfield led to renaming as Royal Enfield. The association with arms gave birth to the Royal Enfield motorcycle’s longstanding slogan: “Built like a gun. Goes like a bullet.” The “Bullet” is to this

day the name of a Enfield model made in India by a successor company; but while Enfield India survived, Enfield UK wouldn't.

As to the cool factor, I've searched in vain for iconic stars on Enfields in classic movies. There was promise in learning that James Dean owned an Enfield. He bought a used one in Indiana in 1953, and planned to ride it from his hometown there to New York City. What a great association! Except ... the Enfield broke down near Harrisburg, PA. There Dean traded it for an Indian that *did* make it to New York.

Maybe because of the brand's association with the British military, there's a common belief that T.E. Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia -- was riding an Enfield when he had the fatal road accident depicted at the end of David Lean's epic movie. If true, that would be a strange source of cachet, but the Enfield brand can take none there. Lawrence was a fan of the considerably tonier Brough ("Bruff") Superior motorcycles. He owned eight of them, and called them "Boanerges" ("sons of thunder") or "George." He died of the injuries sustained riding George VII.

There's another legend – disputed by the owner of the Brough business, who should have known -- that "George VII" was given to Lawrence by George Bernard Shaw. I'm sure Robert Smith can advise on the truth of that, and of Shaw's persona as a biker.

Lawrence wrote about riding a Brough in a way that explains my lure to the indiscretion of throwing a leg over a British motorcycle:

Another bend: and I have the honour of one of England's straightest and fastest roads. The burble of my exhaust unwound like a long cord behind me. Soon my speed snapped it, and I heard only the cry of the wind which my battering head split and fended aside.

The cry rose with my speed to a shriek: while the air's coldness streamed like two jets of iced water into my dissolving eyes. I screwed them to slits, and focused my sight two hundred yards ahead of me on the empty mosaic of the tar's gravelled undulations.

From "The Mint":

http://www.telstudies.org/writings/works/the_mint/mint_3_16.shtml

But back to my own indiscretions. In the late 1960's, Royal Enfield was bringing out bigger and faster motorcycles, to cope with growing Japanese competition. The 750cc "Interceptor" was a result. Unfortunately, the response didn't work. British production of Enfields stopped in 1970.

That was two years before I bought my Interceptor. In short, I bought a used specimen of an extinct brand. The seller was a high-school classmate whose father ran a used-car lot. My friend's favorite description of anything he was selling was "cherry condition" – a condition somewhere, I guess, between "mint" and "lemon." I should have taken the hint when he didn't apply that to the Enfield. "It starts" was hardly a good substitute.

Start it did, after more than a few kicks, and with earsplitting noise. Someone had replaced the tailpipes – originally nearly three feet long – with ones about eighteen inches. I didn't care. The gas tank was so beautiful! Admittedly, it was a little dented. And the "Royal Enfield" decals had gone missing. But still – it *was* beautiful.

I knew I was buying a project, after all. And priority one was to fix the noise. So began my custom at Skip's Motorcycle Junkyard. Remarkably, Skip's exists today, on Wooster Pike -- though the eponymous Skip couldn't possibly be there now. He seemed ancient forty-plus years ago. Back then, Skip's demeanor ran the gamut from cryptic to Sphinxlike. He might

open the gate for you. Or not. He might speak. Or not. He might make an effort to find a part. Or not.

At Skip's, persistence was a virtue. Visit and revisit, chat him up, and remind him that you needed Enfield parts, and he might waive you in the direction of the Enfield graveyard. Thus were Enfield tailpipes won. Remarkably, baffles to put in them to quell the roar could be found by mail order. The Enfield began to purr. I could ride it without post-ride ringing in the ears.

These first rides became explorations, in too many senses:

Discovery number one: the front suspension didn't work. Many tries to fix that by fiddling with the viscosity of oil in the front tubes led to this important observation: the front fork tubes were not parallel. This epiphany could have led to several outcomes, the most prudent being parking the bike until the upper and lower front fork parts were replaced. Since there proved no source for such parts on my defunct British bike, my actual decision was (naturally!) to take the fork to a hole-in-the-wall machine shop, and ask if they could bend things until the fork tubes were parallel. They could. And the front suspension worked wonderfully. I cruised down I-75 without reflecting on the stresses that those bent, and re-bent, pieces of metal had survived. If that lower fork had succumbed to those ... my diet would suddenly have included a lot of pavement.

Discovery number two: the clutch was impossible to adjust. Clutch plates were replaced, the cable was infinitely adjusted, and still -- the clutch would either drag at idle, or slip under power. My steed would chafe at the bit, or balk at the whip. The obvious choice: adjust for no slip under power, and hope to hell that I could get the thing into neutral at a stop. Likelihood of

success at that seemed to depend on ambient temperature, engine temperature, and unknown unknowables.

Discovery number three: when I leaned the bike just right, and accelerated, the aim-point of the automotive headlamp that someone had used to replace the original, worthless Lucas bulb would swing around sixty degrees or so. This added a touch of notable exhilaration to a night ride on a country road.

Discovery number four: although the Enfield didn't have folding foot pegs, its pegs would bend when encountering a German shepherd. This too added exhilaration to a night ride.

Discovery number five: it preferred to go straight. On twisty roads, this added exhilaration to both day and night rides.

You might think all these discoveries would have led to the sale of the Enfield as an act of self-preservation. In fact, we parted company because I wanted money to travel overseas. My *Enquirer* classified yielded a prospect with surprising speed. It turned out he was an Enfield collector. He asked if he could take it for a ride. The answer was yes, and he did. He came back, and paid asking price – and had a look in his eyes, as if he'd just taken a ride with James Dean, and Lawrence of Arabia.