

# SIXTIES

A vintage Harley-Davidson Streetfighter motorcycle is the central focus of the image. It features a black and lime green paint scheme, a large round headlight, and a prominent chrome engine. The motorcycle is parked on a paved surface in front of a building with a sign that reads 'FOOD STORE' and 'W. HU'. The overall aesthetic is that of a classic motorcycle magazine spread.

*Claire Leavey  
went out to play  
with a big friendly dog  
called Norvin. James  
Walker threw raw steak  
while Jack Burnicle took  
some pictures*

# STREETFIGHTER

**W**hen you say 'custom motorcycle' to most people these days, their first thought will be of the low-slung Harley-Davidson with huge ape-hanger bars so beloved of our sister magazine *Back Street Heroes*. Their second thought – if they're that way inclined – might be of the viciously powerful Japanese-based genre known as streetfighters. You may remember the red gold and green example belonging to Ian Wallis which I snapped at Worcester Autoclub for the last issue of *CBG*.

People who get the itch to construct madcap suicide machines like this find themselves following a tradition which stretches back to at least 1924, when Charles Hobbs enlisted George Brough's expertise in transforming his SS100 into the monster special 'Moby Dick'. Frank's the expert of course, so I'll leave the history lesson to him – but suffice to say that these frightening streetfighter things are direct heirs of their café racer forebears.

This particular behemoth has to be the ultimate in caff specials. I thought Tritons were nice and I was aware of the Norvin phenomenon – but until I went to see Linda Smith a little while ago, Norvins had always occupied that compartment in my mind shared by calorie-free chips and co-educational convents. The compartment marked 'rare' and 'unlikely'.

In 1955, a photograph taken by Geoff Duke in Australia appeared in *Motor Cycling* magazine. It showed a motorcycle created using a Vincent engine shoehorned into a Norton featherbed frame. A Norvin. It must have stimulated a few imaginations, that picture, because from that date on, examples of the hybrid began to pop up all over the place. One of those that popped up was this delicious example belonging to Linda and Dave Smith.

Dave built this hybrid around twenty-five years ago, when the monster specials craze was still chewing up the nation's youth and spitting one or two of them out again. He acquired the raw materials in a straight swap for his Dunstall Norton Atlas, since he wanted what he reckons to be 'The Special' and this was the only way, lack of funds preventing, that he would ever be able to get close to owning one. The Atlas, bought new from Paul Dunstall in London, had given Dave endless problems – and when he discovered that a Liverpool friend had collected the bits to build a Norvin but had bitten off more than he could chew, Dave proposed the exchange.

What he put in his garage that day was a Series C Rapide 998cc Vincent engine and gearbox, and the slimline featherbed from an early unit twin. All rolling equipment was standard Norton – but didn't stay that way for long. Dave's friend had got as far as making the

engine plates, but had drilled them wrongly, so the engine sat too far forward. He soon rectified this, blocking the engine up and lifting it in and out of the frame by hand until he'd got it right. To start with, Dave attempted to fit the engine with its rear lug intact. This proved impossible, so he chopped it off then replaced it – however, that's not to say the engine/gearbox have been cut down any further than that.

At the time, Dave was working as a mechanic at Liverpool's main Norton dealership, and so was ideally placed to perfect this dream motorcycle. He and Linda refurbished the motor, she taking charge of the scummy jobs (isn't that always the way?); grinding in the valves, fitting the pistons and suchlike. He made up a centrestand to fit – incorporating a

### *This Behemoth has to be the ultimate in caff specials!*

rather neat clip to secure it when not in use, and installed a Commando steering damper. A fibreglass seat and tank unit came from the now defunct Chuck Customising, to which Dave fitted the tail light, a Britax Lucas-pattern item. Within a couple of months the bike was on the road, and this is really when the serious mods began. The original Manx Norton front brake proved to be a sorry stopper for the torquey Vin, and so Dave had a now rare AJS 7R drum hub laced into the otherwise standard Norton front end. He machined his own spindle for the purpose.

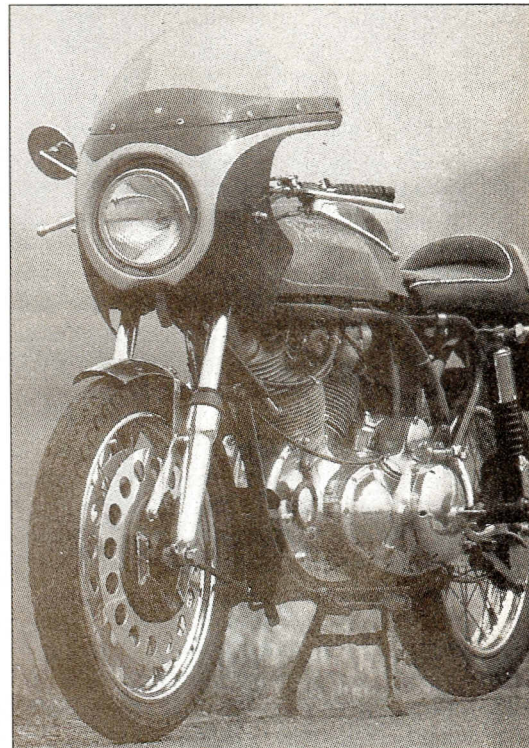
Other modifications came about in a similarly organic fashion. Every journey would have Dave back in the garage at his lathe replacing a footpeg, the brake pedal, or whatever had proved irritating at the time. Thus almost every part of the machine has been refined and upgraded in the twenty-five years of its life. The nosecone went on as a result of too many neck-breaking fast miles. Those neat pointy-uppy clip-ons and the minimal pillion pegs are Dave's own work, and quite unique in design. Another of his fabrications is the central oil tank of folded and welded sheet steel. This replaced a fibreglass item of the Dresda design with a kangaroo pouch to hold the battery. Vibration and heat caused the batteries to fail constantly, so Dave made up the steel tank, and stashed the battery away beneath the tail moulding – no problems since.

The engine remains standard but sorted, with improved breathing thanks to a few neatly machined brass nipples here and there – and a clump of breather pipes poking out the back under the tail. Exhaust gasses shoot out into

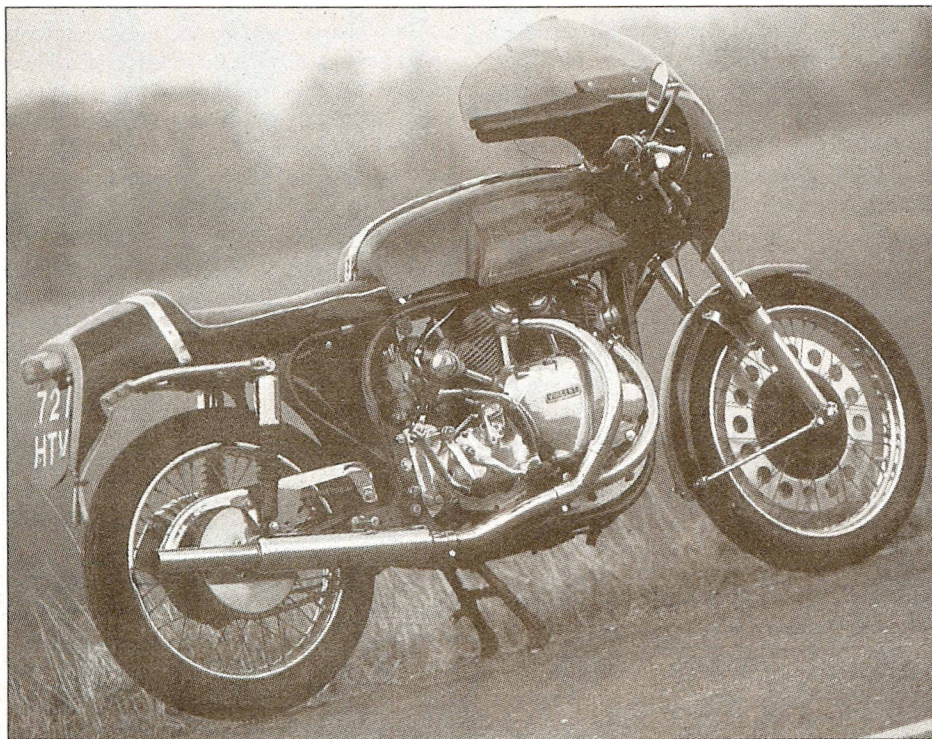
the atmosphere through Vincent downpipes, which Dave grafted into a single Ariel-pattern silencer. The other sort of breathing is through a pair of Amal 930s whose internals Dave replaced just before he was forced to lay the bike up back in 1989. The three-and-a-half slides he tried out cause a slight constriction to power, and spit back rather alarmingly when the engine is cold or under hard deceleration. Another symptom is the motor's reluctance to tick over till properly warmed up. It's a minor problem though – and would be easily rectified, Dave told me, by replacing the number threes he took out.

The back end has a standard Norton hub, reversed to take the right-handed chain. Dave made a polished alloy plate to cover the sprocket, providing a neat finishing touch – and another noteworthy feature at the rear are the Royal Enfield snail cams used to adjust the chain. The chainguard is a chrome Commando item, and those grabrails secured by eye-catching milled stainless nuts are again the fruits of Dave's own labour. Shocks are standard Norton units which he uprated with slightly more resilient springs, and braking is effected by a smart combination of Norton Commando Lockheed caliper and a Mini Cooper disc – a sterling example of Great British Ingenuity.

Dave has been impressed by the gearbox, which is exceptionally smooth and responsive for a Vincent item. The clutch was not so good, and so he replaced it with a Norton basketful – which still proves a little snatchy, particularly when the bike's been standing for a couple of months, since the plates stick together to give



*Sixties streetfighter oozes menace*



the first rider of the season a bit of an unexpected thrill. This our James discovered when attempting to pull a right out of Linda's drive into the busy main road. He looked distinctly green around the gills when, for the second time the clutch went 'spong' and the engine went cough splutter die.

Starting had been an exercise in itself. I had a go when James collapsed, red faced and desperate on the seat, and could barely force the giant scythe of a kickstart round. Then I realised that it would be much easier if I used the valve lifter – but still could make no impression on the 998ccs of squashed-up mixture. This engine has a relatively low compression ratio: 6.8:1 without a compression plate – but there's a lot to compress. At length James was sufficiently recovered to have another go – and managed it. The little garden filled with that rorty, rich thunder, and the bike began to vibrate so violently it marched backwards on the centrestand. Oil began to flood from an invisible breather just behind the engine – and Terry, Linda's boyfriend, took his life in his hands to lie beneath the quivering monster in an attempt to identify the source.

Luckily, the problem was that it had simply been overfilled, and at length the sustained squirting slowed to a trickle and then to a tiny drip. The bike was pronounced fit to ride – and then cut out. James was getting the hang of it now, and within a couple of kicks, that gut-knotting roar sprang up once more. Then he discovered the clutch. Although up until that

Above: Every café racer's dream, the Norvin  
Right: The ride is as good as the looks!

Norvin needs a lot of exercise, and enjoys regular trips out. It particularly likes going to the Isle of Man, where it has made many friends over the years. Dave and Linda Smith can no longer keep up – and so are letting it go to a good home. But not for free – you must be kidding! Telephone Linda on 051 489 0382. You know it makes sense.

very second I had been envying James with a vengeance, when I saw him lurch towards the traffic I began to feel a certain amount of comfort. Bloody relief, in fact, that it wasn't me about to surge off the pavement aboard this unruly bruiser.



The upside-down gearing caused him a few moments of furrowed brow as he worked out why the motor was stalling when he tried to pull away. He sussed it, and with the clutch gradually freeing up as use burned the gun from the glued-together plates, I could tell he followed that he was starting to enjoy himself the cheeky beggar. We went out onto a broad sweep of dual carriageway heading into the countryside near Linda's Huyton home. Laid out splayed around the vast engine, arms hoiked forward gorilla-style over that bulky forty-gallon tank, James looked like a man with a mission. A very serious mission indeed.

A couple of roundabouts disappeared into memory, as James flicked round them as though the road were straight. On the straights he allowed himself a slightly larger handful – and the engine note bellowed like a jet aircraft leaving the runway. In the interest of not getting totally carried away on someone else's bike, he kept under ninety but there was still plenty more where that came from, and the engine's performance improved the harder it was pushed. When he throttled off, it sounded as though that same jet aircraft was coming in to land on top of my head. Phew, wow, and gosh. I started to envy him again.

At last we found some scratchy little country lanes where Jack took the picture you see before you. Here the Norvin was in its home environment, and it chewed up bends and bumps, spitting them out with macho disdain. The suspension passed quite a lot of the road surface on to James' posterior – but the surefootedness of the machine was unquestionable. And he was suffering for his art, after all.

On the way back to Linda's house, James came over all funny. The big Vincent lump roared with pleasure as he gave it just a little more stick. We lost him. He flickered off over a roundabout, his left knee almost kissing the tarmac, and I watched in consternation as the two of them disappeared together down the sweeping straight, leaving a wake of rich noise reverberating in the air. He was still feeling a bit peculiar when we eventually caught him up at Linda's. His eyes were swirling like a couple of catherine wheels, and we fretted that we might have to take him straight to hospital to have his grin surgically removed.

Dave describes the Norvin as 'powerful but gentle'. Certainly, by comparison with its streetfighter nephews, the big Vin is a gentle giant. It's easy on tyres – in twenty-five years of hard riding, Dave's had to replace them only twice – and petrol consumption is a staggeringly economical fiftyish to the gallon.

Dave built his dream bike for riding – and when we went for our splendid day out, ridden it was. And James? He was pooped.

