

On Scooters - by Paul Whittaker

Recently, I've noticed some disparaging comments about my love of scooters from friends and in particular my motorcyclist friends which, really, border on blind prejudice. Actually, a lot of people find these insults these quite funny, seemingly provoked into comedy or at least a disapproving frown. These are not about my race or ethnicity, nor about my work, my sexuality or my age, rather, the comments gently poke fun at my love of and use of fabulously iconic machines, Motor Scooters.

In fact, during a period when I worked in the centre of the city, I scooted around a corner one day, just as a powerful V8 utility swung around the other way. The fellow behind the wheel, bearded, tattooed and at a guess, probably 6' and 200 kilograms, burst out laughing, spraying spittle as he did so, eyes wide as he spotted the little blue scooter, sporting a full size windscreen and matching top box. I have to say that I was somewhat taken-a-back, not expecting such a colourful reaction, particularly from a guy I would have expected to easily stare down his angry Sergeant at Arms at the clubhouse. This experience did seem to confirm that these little bikes did however provoke passion in many.

This predilection of mine does requires some explanation. However, I do not wish for this story to be seen in any way as defending my attraction to, in particular, Italian utilitarian two wheeled transport devices. In fact, it is more an expression of a possible and latent artistic side, yet to be fully explored, because I see beauty and art in the design of these machines, much more so that the often beautiful but agricultural style of most motorcycles. I do understand that some do not see what I see but, in the spirit of arrogant superiority, I will forgive them their mistake.

I too also have had an enduring love of motorcycles, and I too have been smitten by the beauty of some. The excitement and dynamics of motorcycles and scooters are very different, but the pleasures of both are some of the best life can offer.

Chapter 1 - Origins

For those who don't know, the Scooter was first invented in about 1894 in Bavaria, Germany. It had the characteristic step-through frame, a platform for the operator's feet and was driven by a twin cylinder engine. In fact, it was the first Motorcycle to be commercially available.

These distinguishing elements were present on many early motorcycle designs, particularly those which were more advanced than a mere bicycle with a small



engine strapped onto the frame. It was not until Piaggio, ([piaggiocompany](#)) however, an Italian company who built fighter planes and trains, before these factories were destroyed by Allied bombing, decided that what war-torn Italy needed most was cheap personal transport.

Using the company's experience in aero design, Piaggio's prototype motorcycles (Scooters) were built and available from 1946. It was nicknamed *Vespa*, Italian for Wasp, because of its narrow waist and bulbous rear-end appearance, as seen from above. The design was a huge success. The use of an integrated steel frame and body cowlings and single sided suspension clearly show those aircraft influences.



In reality, some of the features and ideas which inspired the Vespa, in 1946, and Lambretta a year later in 47', should be attributed to the Cushman's Airborne scooter, which the Allied forces dropped by parachute into the European theatre in 1944 and 45'.

Following quickly on the heels of the Vespa, Lambretta, America's Cushman, and many others, filled the growing popularity of this style of transport. These companies included MV Augusta, Motor Guzzi and dozens of small manufacturers.

Growing up, my understanding of what a Scooter looked like was limited to my own leg-powered pressed metal *Cyclops*. This was pretty cool as I recall, and allowed rapid commuting between mates' houses and the odd steal away to the shop to cash in bottles and buy some musk sticks or, if in summer, a Sunny Boy ice block. I suppose like most other boys, I became tired of it and progressed to a push bike, the first being a Malvern Star which I did up in royal blue and gold with my Dad. Interestingly, whenever I see an adult male riding a leg-powered push scooter, they seem popular again, I see a man who is still a child. It seems somehow, inappropriate.

The pushbike however really was a revelation, with speed and distance being the goal on every outing. The fact that it was special, even bespoke, added to my love of the thing and I had that bike for many years until sports pushbikes came onto my scene. My first really fast bike was a Bennett *Super Sports*, a model name that I would come to revere in future years, and in its day one of the best road bikes on the market.

I won't reveal my motorcycle buying and riding history here, quite frankly because it is just too painful, the money wasted, rare and exotic bikes sold off unappreciatively, such regrets are difficult.

What I do want to reminisce about are Scooters. The motorized, two wheeled types, most famously exemplified by the Vespa, of course.

I can't say that during my early riding years I had any attraction to them. They were strange, noisy and smoky machines which seemed to have even stranger riders. Pudding basin helmets, old duffle coats and old canvas lap-rugs did not seem very modern or likely to attract the fairer sex, at least I didn't think it likely then. The only thing I knew about them, Scooters that is, was that my uncle was killed riding one home to Maroubra in southern Sydney, late one night after work.

This is what I was led to believe in various discussions with my family and it wasn't until years later that I learned he actually died of a heart attack while riding his old Lambretta.

Even then, as now, the temptation for mothers to lie to their sons about the dangers of motorcycles was too much for them to resist.

This family tragedy had no effect at all on my interest in bikes and my first road going motorcycle was a 1947 BSA Bantam, 125cc of raw energy. I just arrived with it at home one day expecting a telling off from the folks. My mother told me years later that she said nothing in a fruitless attempt at reverse psychology, hoping that I would lose interest and move on to a nice little car. That would have been too many years to wait.

Alas, for her, I did not lose interest. As I said, I won't be regaling the reader with the horrors of my lost motorcycle opportunities, except the say that the next one was a 1971 Suzuki T250 Hustler and the first one I actually rode, legally, once obtaining my learners permit.

For those of a certain age getting a bike or car license was a natural rite-of-passage, or to misquote Thomas Jefferson, *'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that [all men are created equal](#), that they are endowed by their Creator*

with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are the right to [Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness](#) and a motorcycle :

This inherent desperation for personal mobility was surely desired by everyone, or so I thought. Those years of sitting in the back of a car while looking for houses or visiting relatives was one of my driving factors. I was even kidnapped as a baby, when forced to share the ride with my parents. We had been visiting an aunt and I was placed in the car asleep while the goodbyes were said. Some malcontent tear-away, probably a late 1950's version of a Mod, sans his scooter, also desiring mobility, jumped in the already running Holden and drove off into the dark.

My wife likes to interject if I relate this event (the fact that I have no memory of it has not prevented the story) that when the thief saw my ugly face he dumped the car and ran for it. It is not surprising then that I was destined to ride free and make my own way in the world. Luckily for me, I was recovered without harm when, following some panicked action by parents and local police, the car was found not far from the crime scene. I slept through it all.

Today, there is an inexplicable trend towards teenagers and some much older, to not bother getting a license at all. I suppose their parents are slave to their needs or they are happy to be a drain on the public purse by requiring whole systems of transport to move them about, pathetic really.

In any case, this rite-of-passage involved a visit to the NSW State Motor Registry. My closest was at the overpass on the Neutral Bay side of the Cahill Expressway in North Sydney.

In these days a motorcycle or car learner's permit could be obtained once you had reached 16 years and 9 months of age. On the very day I turned this age, I rode to the registry. The idea was to ride the registered and fully functioning beast (250 cc limit) to the registry, fill out the forms and wait for an assessor to come to you. A stern chap with a flyer's moustache found me and his instructions were; *'Ride out that gate and up to Crow's Nest shops and back here. When you get back come and see me'*. This was it, he didn't follow me or watch, so I tentatively moved off and out the gate, heading across the overpass west and back to Crow's Nest. I got up to the big five ways intersection and bravely negotiated a U-turn once through it. I was so anxious, I overshot the U-turn and scrapped the opposing gutter with the Suzuki's left hand muffler. Wobbling away, I saw a couple of uniformed Fireman across the road. I pictured them laughing at me. I just prayed the assessor didn't see that or he would have failed me for sure.

Upon my return he asked; *'How was it son'*. I was so very conflicted as to whether to tell him about my slight mishap, in case he had spies along the route. I lied and without further a-do he handed me a Learners Permit and a yellow and black cardboard 'L' plate.

I have never really reconciled how such a ruthless authority (NSW Motor Registry) was able to simply ignore the fact that for a young bloke like myself, to get to the registry to take the test was done without skills or a license. I supposed that at the time, the prevailing wisdom was that if you survived, you must have done something right. Nowadays of course they sting you for a permit to do anything, before you can do it. In any case, I survived and went on to bigger and better motorcycles.

I can't actually recall the process for getting a 'P' plate, but it certainly would have involved an eyesight test, a short written examination and the payment of a fee. I also obtained my car license around this time as well, so the bike 'P' plate might have been automatic.

On the road

Of course, part of this rite-of-passage was to experience the riggers of actually riding on the highways and byways. On one lovely afternoon, I was doing just that, driving my mother's car (yes, yes, I know) out near Wiseman's Ferry and listening to *2JJ's Nude Radio* programme on the car radio with two friends, when I inadvertently exceeded the speed limit.

This ABC associated radio station introduced a new style of radio programme which featured Holger Brockman and Doug Mulray, very irreverent and at times stretching the decency standards of the day. When FM radio was introduced it became Triple J, and remains a main proponent of modern independent music.

On this day however, the recently introduced 'radar' checked my speed at 82 in a 60 zone. Around this time, the metric system had only recently been introduced (1974) [Metrication in Australia](#) and allegedly some of the older signs were still showing around the various state council areas, well at least this Miles-Per-Hour signs fiasco was unsuccessfully used by some as an excuse for speeding. It didn't work for me either and the penalty was three months suspension. In fact all the old signs speed advisory were changed within a week across the whole country.

This automatically extended to my motorcycle license as well. Interestingly, I contested the ticket and was required to go to a traffic court situated someway up a set of famous steps, the Moore Steps, near the Opera House. These lead

from the waterfront at East Circular Quay up to Macquarie Street. I believe that the first recorded murder of an Australian policeman occurred at the top of those steps, when a trusted convict, appointed as a Constable, stabbed his patrol partner to death.

The traffic appeals court was in a small stone convict built building close to the bottom and shared the foyer with a Venereal Disease clinic. Yes, clearly, those who were audacious enough to challenge the power of the state were also to receive an education in other elements of self-preservation. Following a very brief appearance before the Magistrate, I caught the ferry home. The stairs still exist but they are now flanked by high class restaurants, like Aria and luxury apartments, dubbed the Toaster, overlooking Circular Quay.

For three months I was forced to endure public transport or seek a lift somewhere, anywhere, from friends or family.

The Suzuki T250, quietly awaiting my return to mobility, however, was my first two stroke experience. This relationship was OK, not too many arguments or breakups, it did its job and got me to school and back and to my first proper job in fine form. It looked pretty as well with that tone of candy apple orange only ever seen on bikes of the 1970's. I did realize however that not everyone thought my bike was awesome. The older brother of a friend regularly pestered me to let him do 'burnouts'. I think the high revving two stroke style brought out the hooligan in him. I had too much respect for fine machinery. There was certainly something about screaming two stokes. That friend also borrowed it one day, returning with a few scratches and some gravel imbedded in his knee. The gravel and scar is there to this day.

It is heartening that some of these bright and interesting colours are returning, they are referred to by the manufacturers as 'hero' colours and are supposed to call to mind nostalgic feelings of youth and a happy, a less complicated time. Imagine thinking the 1970's was a happy or less complicated time. Most of Asia was at war, the Cold War fears of annihilation had everyone seriously considering building nuclear shelters and the oil crisis was in full swing, along with major changes to the social norms of most countries.

Yet, despite these fears and issues, I was quite happy, riding around on a succession of fast and exotic motorcycles, working at new jobs, studying new things, finding my way in the world. Some of these bikes included a couple of Triumphs, a 500 twin, a Bonneville and a Trident, a Norton, a quite special BSA 650 Lightning, a 51' Matchless 500, and few other outrageously unreliable and frustrating machines.

Need versus want

I found myself with a new job at King's Cross.

No, it isn't what you are thinking, I wasn't in that 'industry', spruiking for the strip clubs or walking the street looking for love at a price, the job was in the sales team at Budget Rental Cars. This was the firm famously owned by Reg Ansett of Ansett Airways. He was a controversial figure in Australian business, as it seems are most offspring of seriously famous people. He was American and insisted on working the front office himself on his many visits to the stores. The Budget-rent-a-car shop on the corner of William Street and Crown Street had no staff parking and I did not have a bike I wanted to leave unattended for long days.

At this time I was running a Triumph Trident T150. The Triumph triple had a very stiff and noisy clutch, it was heavy, and it stalled and kicked back and overheated. It sucked fuel like a jet plane and at the time was one of the most stolen bikes on the planet.

Lovely old thing 1973 Model T150

While there was a certain perverse pleasure in riding such a difficult and tough bike through traffic, and across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and into the city, what I really needed was something convenient that wasn't a damned bus.



I didn't know really what I was looking for but I knew it had to be economical and clean, as I had a new uniform to maintain, and of inoffensive style that would not attract thieves or the grey bombers. The Grey Bombers were of course parking officers who worked for the city of Sydney. Their uniforms were a dull mauve-grey colour.

About a decade earlier, Australia invented the Bankcard. That's right, there had been some credit and charge cards such as American Express and Diners Club, but an Australian economist designed and created the first Bankcard system (1974-2006) which allowed you to borrow money at a huge variety of locations

and charged you interest to be paid back over a number of days, months or never, as many poor souls soon discovered.

I know this because one of the creators of Bankcard was Bill Gwynne, (*William Gwynne, BCom (NSW), MA (Lanc), MBA (Cran),*) once one of my lecturers in commerce at Kuring-Gai College of Advance Education, Lindfield, a fabulous campus recently absorbed into University of Technology, Sydney.

The significance of this revolution in finance and the ease in which a fellow could borrow money is probably lost on more recent generations; but it was used with relish by everyone. You can see how injecting motorcycles into a situation can even add a positive spin to that most negative of inventions, debt.

The downside was there were borrowing limits. Mine was about \$1400 at that time. I was able to convince the Bank that owing to my previous willingness to be fleeced, I could handle such a large amount.

So it was one morning, armed with that Bankcard, I walked up and down Elizabeth Street in East Sydney, the famous Sydney motorcycle hub of which I was quite familiar. I once worked at one of the stores selling accessories and helmets, amazing how many friends visited seeking discounts. Regardless, it paid well and satisfied my need for total immersion into the world of motorcycles.

I had written to many of these shops seeking work at the beginning of my working life and one famous owner and road racer wrote back, *'thank you for your interest in working for Tom Byrne, I would however caution your passion for such a Cinderella industry, good luck in your quest'* I took a Commercial Trainee position with BP instead, starting in the mail room. Alan Border was another trainee at this time and worked in the room next door. He was famous for his baseball prowess then and shortly after became the cricketer we now know. How's that for name dropping, a brush with fame.

Despite the warning, the industry survived the coming of midnight without turning into a pumpkin, as did I, and Sydney's bike precinct thrived. There were second hand bike shops, accessory and tyre dealers, new bikes like Triumph, BMW, Norton, Harley, Suzuki, Laverda, Moto Guzzi, Yamaha, Kawasaki and Honda. A new and aggressive business, a multi-franchise bike dealer, Action Motorcycles had opened not long before. A really great team and who went on to do even greater things, like sponsoring a race series and all things motorcycles, and more recently to create Deus Ex-Machina in Sydney. [Homepage](#)
[/ Deus Ex Machina | Deus Ex Machina](#)

I'm sure that the young dealer and his father did not envisage such a success as this.

On this day, I went into Action Motorcycles and they had a very large Harley Davidson Electra Glide for sale on the floor, a favorite for me still today. It even had a name, 'Blue Hawaii'. Airbrushed artwork adorned all the painted surfaces, including ghostly images of Elvis. I think it was named after one of his movies.



The dealer advised that it was heavy and hard to ride. I took it for a run around East Sydney and I was very surprised how easy and maneuverable it was. It felt powerful, had mountains of torque and had just so much presence. I was reminded of my many Easters at the Bathurst motorcycle races and one of the very exciting and interesting

subcultures I observed was the arrival each year in Mount Panorama's MacPhlamy Park of the Harley Davidson Owners Club of Australia. This was a long time before HOG clubs and company supported outings which today binds riders from all sorts of marques.

The vast majority of these chaps rode Electra Glides. The Electra Glide, let me write that again, *Electra Glide*, is surely one of the most emotive model names, ever. I just loved the way these impossibly big machines arrived and the fact that they always looked so comfortable and cool. It was also a bit different because the men on these machines always had their wives and women with them.

This was something significant and was missing from my motorcycling. So they were both cool, comfortable and had the right sort of company. These guys were not the outlaw bikie types either, who mostly rode Harley choppers and Norton's and behaved rather badly, if entertainingly. Things such as setting fire to a Channel 7 camera car, throwing Molotov's and bricks at the police, that sort of thing.

One of my first experiences of the 'bikie' type, was in the pouring rain in a crowd at Bathurst, up on the hill watching braver and drunker men than me doing burnouts, feet up in those days, on hotted-up Honda Fours and Kwaka

Nines. As I was milling about, the crowd separated in haste as a shape emerged from the shroud of rain and exhaust fumes, slithering and sliding in all directions through the deep mud and slush of the campground. A Harley, covered in thick brown mud thudded past, ridden by a totally naked bloke about 50, sporting the *Hells Angels* emblem, the winged skull and rocker, as a Tattoo covering his whole back. He seemed to be having a lot of fun scaring the 99%'ers. I couldn't, or rather wouldn't, criticize his commitment to the colours.

In a much more civilized place and time, I returned the Harley to Action and was immediately struck by my inability to afford this machine.

The salesman did however point out, probably as a jibe, that Honda had released a new runabout called the Honda Lead. They came in three sizes. 50 cc, 80cc and 125cc. The 80cc was blue, the 125 red and I can't recall the others colours, perhaps white.

Here was my chance to buy the machine I needed, rather than the machine I had dreamt of. Really, a bloke should never be faced with this dilemma. Need verses want, a nasty position to be in!

Baby Blue

The baby blue 80cc model was \$1200, registered and ride away. It was mine with the swipe of a card machine, a check of the credit alert list and a phone call to the bank by the dealer. There was no internet linked computer-pay-waves in those days. Within an hour I rode it home to the delight of my friends and family who thought it was a piece of garden furniture.

Regardless, it was the machine I needed and I rode it to and from the Cross, parking it in a disused doorway at the rear of the shop. No one stole it, I paid no tolls or parking fees and it got me to work and back dry and comfortably. It was however, as you may have guessed, a little underpowered and I had quite a few moments traversing the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Did you know or realize that there is a hill in the centre of that bridge, you find it when you have only 80cc to play with. The downhill run along the north side was always exhilarating.



Baby Blue as opposed to Blue Hawaii.

This was my first Scooter and a fine little Scooter it was. I had it for a few years, along with a few other bikes of course, until the mid to late 1980's, when the new BMW K100RS came into my consciousness.

I had met my future wife at this stage and obviously the scooter would not do. Great to park but as my work had moved from the Cross' to Homebush, I now needed something bigger and better. I test rode the BMW at Collins' Motorcycles in Parramatta and when the salesman asked if I had a trade, I gleefully advised him I was quite happy with the Honda and wasn't sure if I was ready to move up. In a classic pincer movement, he asked me what it would take for me to buy the BMW, if the trade-in was to my liking.

As it happened, I had moved into an apartment in the inner west and the only safe place to park was in the basement laundry. This was through two narrow doors and down one step.

The BMW, of course was a lot wider than the Honda and so I asked if the side mirrors were removable. With one strike, which I took to be a bit too eager, he smacked the right hand rear vision mirror forwards and it just popped off the fairing and dangled from its indicator light wires.

My last excuse not to buy the BMW was removed and so a deal was made. It is frightening how the mind conspires with itself to reconcile that want is actually, need. I was able to park it in the laundry space after all. I can imagine what he said to his fellow salespeople later about the trade he had made today, the fastest and hottest BMW on the market, reputedly capable of 250 kilometres per hour, for a blue scooter, actually capable of 80 maximum. He obviously had no conscience, nor should he, buyer beware rules.

Foreign influences

My next Scooter experience was when deployed with the UN in Cyprus. This was in 1999 and 2000 and this lovely but troubled Mediterranean Island had its own style altogether. There were a few motorcycle subcultures here and they remind me that it takes all types to make the world go around.

The Capital of the Republic Of Cyprus is an ancient fortified medieval walled city called Nicosia. This remarkable city at this time was the last truly divided city left in all of the conflict zones. The most famous being Berlin, both East and West. It of course had its wall come down in 1999. Not so Nicosia, which was divided in places by a 3 metre strip of contested land, basically an inner city street or lane, diligently patrolled and policed by the UN. It remains divided even today. In a charming cobblestone café district, I was seated one day on the Greek side of the town enjoying a coffee when I saw a young man dodging his way through the shoppers and diners. He was riding a small scooter of obscure origin but a two stroke of course, recognized by the putt-putt-putt of the engine, probably no more than 50cc.

He rode it one handed and in his other, a gold serving tray about 40cm in diameter. On the tray were several small fine bone china cups of coffee and some sweets, baklava, probably. To the tray at equal intervals were three cables about 20cm long running to a connecting ring, which he held with his spare hand. The whole rig swayed and swung as he wound his way through the street. He possessed amazing agility and I marveled at his skill. It also occurred to me that this use of a motorcycle was far from any I had ever conceived of and it gave new meaning to the idea of a utility vehicle. The scooter suddenly had a cultural and practical character I had not considered before.

Following these coveted UN deployments, the habit was to take extra leave and use the time to explore Europe or the Middle East. Cyprus was invaded and conquered many times, by Greeks, Romans, Saracens, Venetians, the French, various Christian Crusaders, the English, the Turks and others, precisely because it offered this strategic opportunity, easy access to Asia, Europe and the Middle East. My wife met me in Cyprus following a tortuous trip via Germany and after a wonderful adventure in Egypt, we arrived in Italy.

Italy, synonymous with fine art, food and emotive sport cars, is also very beautiful, with fascinating old cities and towns perched on nearly every hill. Some are medieval towns surrounded by fortifications, all adding to their charm for Australians starved of such historical marvels.

It is of course also a bike and car spotters' paradise. In the north, in Tuscany, I saw Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Maseratis, Ducatis, and Moto Guzzis, dozens of exotic and desirable machines. I also saw many thousands of scooters, modern types styled after their manufacturer's race winning Grand Prix bikes, and classic style scooters like Vespa and Lambretta and the Vespa Ape. This is a three wheeled Vespa which uses a Vespa scooter as its base to offer a small and maneuverable utility. Utilities are of course an Australian concept, being invented by Ford Australia in the 1930's. Of course there is dissent as to who invented the Ute. Australia certainly invented the combination of a two-seater sedan with an incorporated metal sided rear tray.

In a similar light, Piaggio also offered such a versatile workhorse. Called the Vespa Ape (Italian for Bee) it was a scooter with covered cabin and a two wheel cart grafted on the rear over the top of the engine.

Its worth was obvious in these old walled cities, where cars and trucks are either prohibited or unable to function. So wandering about in the towns and villages we were regularly interrupted by the passing of a Vespa Ape carrying all sorts of goods, luggage, fresh fruit, meat and fish, firewood and coal, you name it, these amazing machines carried them all to and fro.



The Vespa name has resonated with me ever since.

The Café Society

Upon my return to Australia, I moved to a new job again based in the centre of the city.

Once again, I found myself needing transport which I could use to cover the 3 kilometers from home. As is always the case my justification for buying something new was concocted by a combination of need and want.

It didn't make sense to use my usual touring motorcycle (another BMW at this time) to ride the short distance to work. Of course the obvious answer was another motorcycle, one that offered cheap and simple transport. I had the promise of a parking space in the basement of the office, nestled in against a pylon or up against a wall. It's easy how one can justify a new bike, just think about the needs in your everyday world and a new bike of some sort will help.

Having experienced the scooter as both a transport and cultural icon in Italy, I could look further than Canberra Vespa Dealer, Motorini.

Vespa had been developing with the times since its inception in the 1940's and of course each new design was a milestone of design chic. At least in my mind.

The Vespa ET4 had been on the market in Australia for a short time and it was known as the Café set's Vespa. They all seemed to me to have that trendy style usually associated with the Café set. Notice that this is very different to the Café Racer set, of whose ranks I have filled at various stages of my motorcycle career.

In fact, one such bike I owned and loved and one that exemplified the genre, was the Ducati 750 Super Sport. As I relayed earlier, I am reluctant to discuss my motorcycles in a story about scooters because they have been emotionally and financially destructive at times.

For example, I was riding with friends along the Putty Road, out past Windsor, one fresh spring morning, dicing and slicing with big Hondas and another earlier model Ducati 750 Super Sport.

Mine was a most lovely 1978 model 750, one which was a re-run of the famous earlier Green-Frame and fiberglass tank versions. I'm told that some 200 of these newer 750's were made, based on the 900's engine, frame and ancillary bits.

Apparently five were imported to Australia and this one went to Bob Brown racing in Melbourne, apparently excess to needs and sold off. This version had a slim line steel tank, the traditional side covers and a dual seat and special 'gold line' Brembo brakes. Ducati enthusiasts will know how special these were. It had smaller carburetors than the earlier Dellorto 'pumpers' but was, never-the-less fast and sweet.



This is the 1978 Ducati.

It sounded absolutely fabulous with its Conti exhausts.

My favorite daily experience was the early morning commute to Lindfield from Lane Cove, the bellow of the exhaust bouncing off the glass fronted shops and

buildings along the Pacific Highway as it wound its way through Sydney's northern suburbs.

This was a great way to start every day, but at 6am the residents along the road probably wouldn't agree.

On this particular weekend morning however, I was riding along the Putty Road admiring the workmanship of the convict road builders. There is a section of the road where a beautifully crafted drainage gutter snakes alongside the

roadway for many miles, hugging close to the cliffs and cutaways that slice through the northern expanse of the sandstone plateau forming the basis of the whole Sydney basin and the Harbour, expanding north to Newcastle, south to Wollongong and west to the Blue Mountains.

Some of the more solid craggy outcrops angled down into these gutters and it is one of these that I collected head-on, having lost traction on a damp section of a corner.

The bike slid sideways, and back again, high-siding me through the fairing and over the frontend. My efforts to correct restricted by the narrow steering lock and my lack of ability.

I did recall flying through the air, just missing an oncoming car and landing heavily, sliding across a dirt verge at the other edge of the road, rolling to a stop some 50 meters from the outcrop. I also sickeningly recall seeing the bike lie down on its left side, flip over onto its right side, prop and land on its rear end and spin out of control behind me. Very little of the bike was spared.

I won't mention the injuries except to say that Singleton Hospital was well enough equipped to deal with the result.

Following several months of rehabilitation, I began the mammoth task of rebuilding this rare and iconic piece of exotica. The frame was bent beyond help and most of the external and peripheral parts were destroyed or damaged.

I imported a brand new frame from the factory, specially stamped with the same frame number of the destroyed one. It matched the engine number and included the preface for the special edition run. A nice touch for authenticity, but one I later realized was probably not allowed by our design and insurance rules. It wasn't insured.

To thwart thieves, I had the habit of chaining the bike to a 5BX running machine squeezed in front of the car. A 5BX running machine was one which incorporated a number of tensile and resistance devices apparently designed for use by the Canadian Special Forces. It wasn't used much by my family but had pride of place at the front of the car in the car port.

About a year after the rebuild began I was back on the road, albeit with some paint matching yet to finish.

I was up one night watching the Grand Prix racing and in the morning (of my birthday!) came out to go to work and discovered to my horror that most of the bike had been stolen by some lowlife scum. All that was left was the front

wheel and forks, a bare frame and crankcases, the mismatched seat. The bonnet of the car had been used as a convenient workbench by these very quiet and evil intruders. The hardened chain I used to secure the bike however and the Master padlock were intact.

Defeated, I sold the wreck to an anemic overdressed vegetarian restaurant owner from Paddington. He seemed quite keen to rebuild it. Perhaps it was his lack of a protein rich diet. You can surely see now why I'm reluctant to discuss my motorcycling experiences.

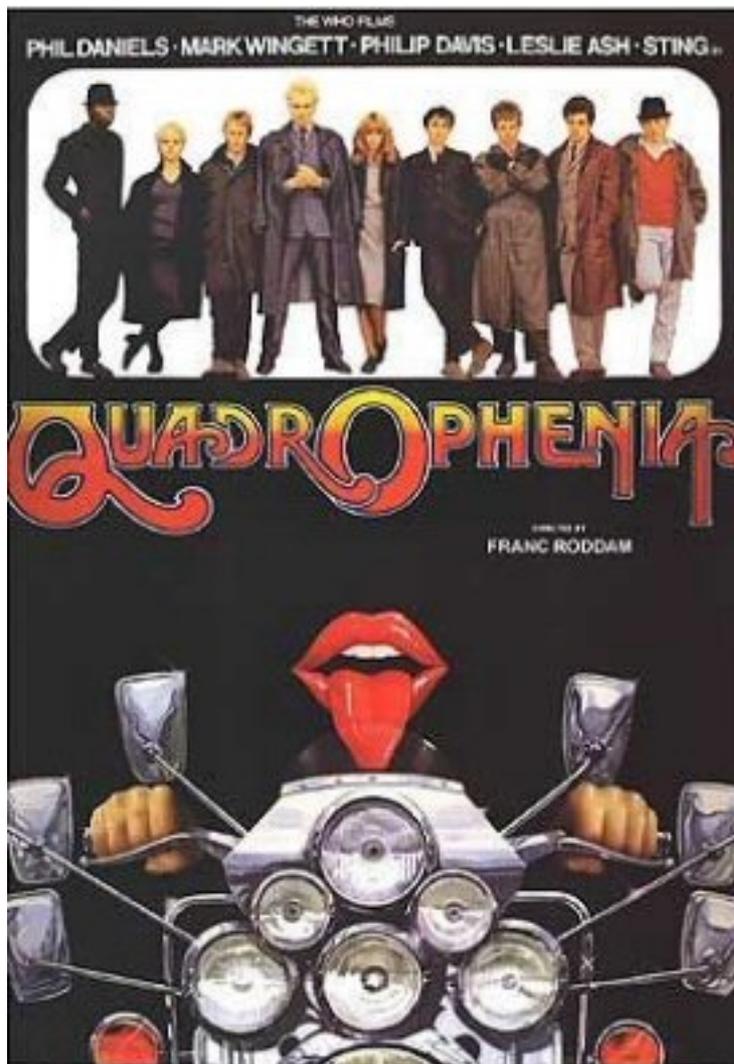
In any event the ET4 was a lovely little machine. It was the first 4 stroke Vespa and built to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Vespa in 1996. It was the first truly modern Vespa. It did have a habit of running its battery low but was easily kick-started to get going again. It ran beautifully, faultlessly and did the job for a few years. It was a great machine and I just loved the look of it, modern and classic all at once, cheap to run, easy to ride and while it received some aggressive reactions from some sexually inadequate quarters, it was a hoot.

It is about this point in any discussion about scooters that the tribal biases reveal themselves. There is of course a subculture of Mods, emanating in 1960's Britain, when famously the Bank Holiday weekend was spent brawling with the Rockers or normal motorcyclists, along the coastal towns of eastern England. The movie Quadrophenia, starring some great classic scooters and the music of The Who, best expresses the era. A revival in the late 1970's and the early 1990's was certainly missed altogether by me, so I had no real aversion to modern scooters.

I had of course experienced the same cultural biases in the motorcycle world when I insisted on riding Triumphs and Nortons when the rest of the world had moved on to faster and more effective Hondas and Yamahas.

The argument still rages today in both classic bike clubs and in the motor scooter world. I choose not to be as exclusive as the so called purists, and I see the machines for what they are, modern interpretations of those very same classics.

Having said that I am looking for an old 1970's or 80's Vespa to restore and ride, and perhaps I will change my views when this happens. In the meantime, I like the style, the amazing usability and the very real magic that these modern 'Autos' demonstrate.



Copyright : The Who Films

Once again my job and the role differed and the little scooter was superfluous to need. I regret selling it absolutely, but at the time there was a greater need for a new Triumph Bonneville. Yes, I had had owned and ridden many Triumphs and other British icons over the years and I suppose in reality I had had my fill of the maintenance and unreliability issues. Even as an old classic bike to be ridden once in a while I found the fact they never really started properly or ran well, rather frustrating. I can understand what drove the success of Honda and Yamaha in the 1960's and early 1970's. People suddenly had a better motorcycle and they discovered that they could ride them as well as work on them.

A controversial statement I'm sure and one that risks having me drummed out of the ACT Vintage, Veteran and Classic Motorcycle Club (VVCMC).

Still, my experiences were real, even in their day as new bikes, the British machines required more effort to stay working than was reasonable or right. The fact that I have vehemently held onto a love of these bikes is strangely ridiculous.

Perhaps then this is the key to explaining the inexplicable. It's all about those intangibles. Visceral and personal elements such as the feel of the bike, the sound, the style, nostalgia, culture and history.

That's all very well but in deciding whether I needed a new Triumph, and when one's generous and loving wife herself suggests that she might buy it for you, well, all other considerations evaporate.

Actually the new era Bonneville was released in 2001 with the first one arriving here in Australia in early 2002. I wasn't quite taken by the colours and I decided to wait. I read somewhere that the next year, 2003, was to reintroduce the traditional engine style and colours. I saw an advance photo of polished engine cases, instead of the chromed ones on the then current version, shiny and glossy black on black with some proper chrome.

This had to be it, it looked to all the world as a proper Triumph.

So, with my infatuation for the new shiny toy, the pretty little blue ET4 was relegated to second place.

Just as my heart had earlier been stolen by the Italian, my deeper affection for a larger, more masculine machine prevailed.

The scooter was sold off unceremoniously to a young girl who was to use it to get to work.

So, as always, in my quest to find just the right sort of compromise between need and want, I found myself with want outflanking need, particularly as the darling wife paid for it.



The Triumph looking very traditional with screen and panniers in country Victoria

I still have the Triumph despite on several occasions thinking about selling it. It's great to ride, it looks so good and it owes me nothing. Each time I bring it out to service or clean it, I like it so much that I just can't bring myself to do so. This is it, it is lovely, isn't it?

However, within a short time I was distracted and once again fell for an Italian. During one of my regular visits to the Vespa dealer, I spotted a new limited edition GTS250 ie. There she was pouting in the showroom, dressed in a very 1970's shade of pale brown and metallic gold. This was 2011 and of course I simply needed her, if only to give the Triumph some respite.

I was too taken to resist and with top box and sports windscreen as part of the deal the Vespa was mine.

This one is a gem. The recent GTS range is well regarded by many and I can see why. It is quite powerful, certainly it can move when it wants to, runs easily and smoothly up to about 120 kilometers per hour. Yes it does actually run to this speed and it been tested against other machines with more accurate speedos.

At this speed, mind you, it is somewhat unstable, requiring concentration and a free hand on the bars. In normal use it has a wonderful looping gait and supple suspension. It really is very luxurious, far more than I expected. Of course it has all the usual attributes of a Vespa such as storage space, economy, about 80 miles to the gallon, fabulous looks and, as you can gather, I absolutely love it.

The GTS 250 has been around now for some years and has continued today even with the newer GTS 300 Super adding more torque and a few performance niceties like racing stripes and sportier seating.

The ABS on the newer machines is something really worthwhile, given the main purpose of the bike is to get you to where your going safely and happily. If it was available retrospectively I would have it fitted along with a slightly louder exhaust pipe, just for that fruitier sound, of course.

If you have not tried these newest Vespas, then do yourself a favour and take one for a ride. Be warned though, have your money ready, they are intoxicating.



Here is a bunch of modern scooters I spotted in London in 2014.

Next Instalment - Spain