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From the Archive: "The Last T160"

Steve Rothera



Mike Armstrong is a man of many passions, including Orchids (a world authority on which he now lectures), Steam Railways (regularly drives a steam engine at a local preservation line, Kirby Green Light Railway) and Motorcycles (has a garage full of classics).

Recently semi-retired from life as a professional sports photographer, traveling the world getting the best action shots of motorcycle racing, he has, of late, spent much time and money supporting his son who had a great time racing on two wheels.

During Mike's career, he met many people involved with racing of classic motorcycles, and one good local friend is Alan Walsh. Alan was one of the fortunate few who bought a very early Trident T150T and forged a successful career racing it both on the Isle of Man and around many UK circuits. Alan's famous bike was fitted with a genuine works raised frame, and quickly became extremely competitive. Alan kept and raced the bike for many years, and thoroughly enjoyed some great tussles, often beating the likes of Alex George and Mick Hemmings in the Classic Production Championship.

At one time, Mike sponsored Alan in his racing efforts and in the process, like many of us, became a "triple" fan.

In the early 1990's Mike and Alan were having a walking holiday in Thailand. Mike had gone off around Chiang Mai, then hired an off road bike and went riding trails in the jungle. An unfortunate puncture in the middle of nowhere created another story in its own right! Another interesting episode involving local rum (he's an ex-Merchantman) earned Mike a permanent ban on travelling alone anymore! One day, as the trip progressed, and they were chatting about their mutual love of motorcycles, Alan happened to mention he had heard that his friend Phil Pick had a bike for sale, which "he really ought to buy".

When they returned to the UK, the two of them travelled to London to visit Phil and have a look at the machine in question. What greeted Mike, to be honest, were the remains of a bike, which looked as though it had been pulled through a hedge backwards. "Appalling condition" was how he described it. However, it was complete and had only 200kms registered on the odometer. Alan was insistent that he bought the bike, so a deal was done there and then, and the bike was transported back to Mike's base.

At the time of purchase, Mike didn't realise the importance of this particular bike, and the matching engine and frame number CN 07203 was irrelevant to him. As far as he was concerned, it was a T160 for restoration.

Obviously a Police Specification machine, it was thought that the bike had originally been sent to Saudi Arabia, but had been recently repatriated back to the UK in a pretty much unused, but bad cosmetic state. Some readers will recall in a much earlier edition of Triple Echo pictures of Police Specification T160's piled up in a Saudi scrapyards rusting and blasted by the incessant combination of sun, sand and wind.

Back at Mike's workshop, the bike was slowly disassembled, but even though only a couple of hundred kilometers had passed under its wheels, even the engine internals were shot. Unfortunately there hadn't been any oil in the gearbox for years, and when the cluster was removed all the teeth fell off the 3rd gears on both mainshaft and layshaft!

The mudguards fitted to later T160's were stainless steel, and fortunately they had somehow survived on this bike, just needing a good polish to bring them back to as new. Evidence of a life destined to be a police machine was found on the seat rail of the rear subframe. Here, the seat hinge pivot lugs were close together as a single saddle was originally fitted; on the Police bikes the rear part of the frame was fitted with a carrier for radio equipment. Mike's bike still carries this additional seat hinge lug, and a tubular clip is now used to attach the rearmost hinge on the now-fitted standard "civilian" dual seat.

Gradually the bike was restored back to its former glory, with Mike adding his own touch in the form of stainless steel fasteners, and replacement of the corroded wheel rims with smart alloy

versions when the wheels were refurbished.

Otherwise, Mike has tried to retain a near standard appearance to the bike, with the only other major deviation from standard being the addition of a properly mounted pair of "Raygun" silencers and a twin disc set-up for the front brake.

The engine rebuild involved replacement of all bearings and seals (plus the gearbox cluster!) as every component had been attacked by the sand and general corrosion. Standard tune was the order of the day, but with a careful check on everything being correctly set up to correct specification. It is suggested, for example, that the valve timing on T160's was deliberately changed to reduce warranty claims – and power output in the process.

The most intriguing feature on CN 07203, however, was inside the points cover. Here was written in felt pen:



"Very last engine built 2-2-76 F. Butwell builder".

(Freddy Butwell was the charge hand at Small Heath overseeing engine build and testing of the T160's, and obviously wanted to record his name on the last engine built!).

This amazing discovery therefore meant that 07203 had to be the highest engine numbered factory built T160 in existence! It also made Mike realise that Alan's advice to buy the machine was very sound indeed! The bike features a matching numbered frame of course, so it is safe to say that no other machine, which was factory built, carried a higher number. I mention "factory built" because it is believed that a few additional machines were built from spares after the demise of the Small Heath production line and the move of general spare parts to the Andover Norton premises. (See my footnote; even after the assembly line was dismantled at Small Heath, some machines were still constructed from the stockpile of components, right up until April 1976). As part of the complicated end to T160 production, some complete bikes were also moved to Norton Triumph's premises at Shenstone in the Midlands. It is known, for example, that the T160 destroyed in the NMM fire carried number AN 07500 – higher than Mike's bike, but not actually a "production" number.

One further issue towards the end of production involved the T160 frame. All bikes built had the traditional hearth brazed frames, with cast lugs. These lugs were bought in from a castings company, but towards the end of production, under the eye of the Official Receiver, the factory were unable to buy the next batch of head lugs required. A number of frames were therefore built with fabricated, tubular headstocks and some of the very last



machines carried these frames. The “fabricated” frames were also made available via Andover Norton as spare parts to replace accident damaged frames in service.

I have a letter, dated 6th July 1977, from F. Adderley, International Service Engineer at NVT Motorcycles, Shenstone, Staffs, which states:

“Since the standard Trident has been out of production for some time now, it is unlikely that there will be any left in dealers premises. However it is possible we may have a small quantity available by the end of the month and if you want to buy one on a cash basis, subject to receiving a 20 percent deposit, we can reserve one for you for direct purchase from NVT Andover”.

The accompanying price list with the letter,

dated June 1st 1977, lists 750 T160 Triumph Trident at £1414.80, and the 750 Cardinal at £1522.80.

I wonder if the “small quantity” referred to in this letter include the bikes assembled from spares at Andover? I know that some of the bikes made available at this time were ones returned from distributors worldwide (in an attempt to realise assets of the company which was now facing extremely difficult trading conditions).

An article in Triple Echo 153, December '04, outlines the in-production modifications to the T160's, but generally, identification of late built T160's also includes rubber mounted footrest assemblies, a modified top yoke which did away with the spacers required to mount the instrument binnacle, and the left-hand



rear engine plate did not carry the holes required for the original design of rider footrest. Stainless steel mudguards were fitted, (the leading edge of the front being a little more squared off than the original mild steel chrome plated 'guard) and the engine incorporated many subtle modifications such as a better oil pump and large bore feed from the oil tank. Gearbox, gear-change and neutral light switch modifications meant that the later T160's really could hold their heads high against the increasingly rapid and sophisticated competition.

In conclusion, it is remarkable to think that over 7000 T160's were produced over a 15-month period in such difficult circumstances, with the Official Receiver looking over the management's shoulder for almost half of that time. What is more remarkable is that so many of these iconic bikes have survived and are still in use today. 00102, most likely the earliest survivor, is in Canada, and 07203, the last one officially built by the factory, looks to be in very safe hands for the future!



With just 353 miles registered on the speedometer, in addition to those original 200 kilometers, it is also probably one of the lowest mileage T160's in existence as well!

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As a footnote, Nick Hopkins, Managing Director of Andover Norton International, confirms that no T160 motorcycle assembly took place at either Andover or Shenstone. T160 assembly was still taking place at Small Heath in April 1976, using up the remaining stock of components, (including Mike's "final" engine). Repairs to customer bikes did take place at Andover however, and "fitting out" of screens and panniers took place at Shenstone to machines, which had been stockpiled as a result of an unfulfilled Saudi order - and were subsequently marketed as "Cardinal" models.

