

biKER HERTFORDSHIRE

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FREE

CHARLIE MATES: **Local TT Hero**

Masterclass
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DIESEL AND ELECTRIC – ECONOMY BIKING







CHARLIE MATES

Local Hero

Local Hertfordshire biking hero
Charlie Mates talks about his
life and times on two wheels
and his success at the
famous Isle of Man
TT races

Words by: John Dalton



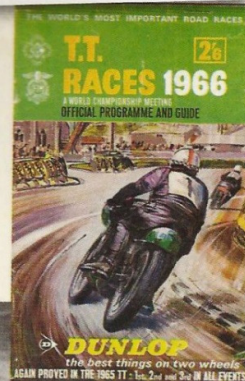
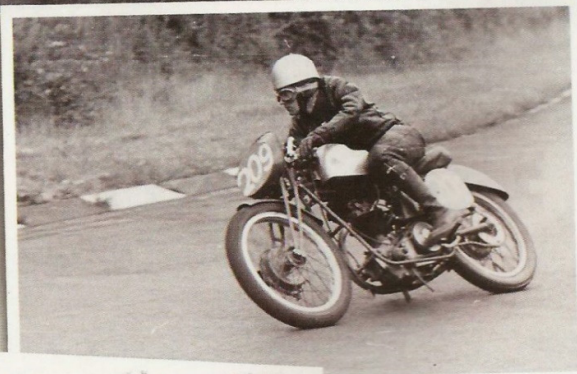
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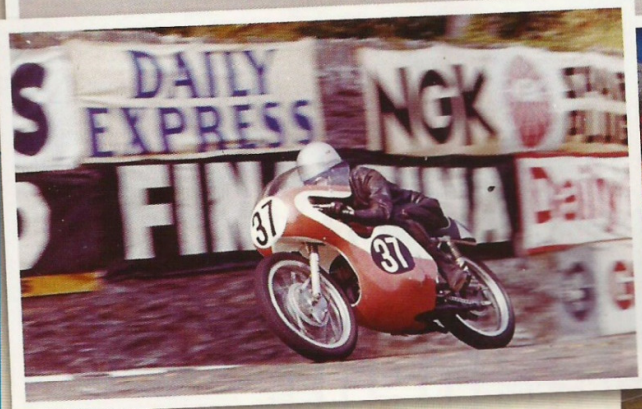
biker HERTFORDSHIRE **13**

When you consider Charlie Mates's 82 years and his many decades astride racing bikes, you might say to him, 'You've certainly had a wonderfully long career', thereby implying something of a past tense... Well, Charlie will have none of that: 'I still intend to have a great life on bikes!' says this forceful octogenarian. That determination has always been Charlie's attitude, and it has made him something of a living legend in the bike-racing world. His speciality was small-capacity bikes, for reasons that will become clear, and he raced them brilliantly for many years. In 1960, astride a 50cc ITOM, he achieved four firsts (at Crystal Palace, Brands Hatch, Silverstone and Cadwell Park) plus four seconds. In '61 he had three wins, two at Brands and one at Castle Combe, and in 1962 he won at Brands again, plus gathering many 2nd and 3rd places along the way. In 1964 he rode his 50cc Honda to three victories at Castle Combe, Brands Hatch and Scarborough, plus ten 2nds and 3rds. The following year saw two wins at Brands and another at Castle Combe, plus four 2nd places. He was also a private contender in the TT for many years, and in 1965 came fourth, a terrific achievement because – still a private entry – he was only just beaten by the Honda and Suzuki works teams. And the only riders in front of him were Luigi Taveri, Hugh Anderson and Ernst Degner... some company, eh? Charlie came 9th in the 1969 TT, too.

That was half a century ago, but this year Charlie rode in two parades of classic motorcycles and will be at more next year. Charlie belongs to the Classic Motorcycle Racing Club (CMRC) and goes to their southern events at Brands Hatch, Snetterton, Donington and Mallory Park. ➤

Top and top right: in the early days Charlie's weapon of choice was a 250cc Rudge Special. Here he is at Brands Hatch in 1954. Above right: our man waits for the start at the daunting Nürburgring in Germany in 1966 (with the event programme above). Right: where are the rest of 'em? Charlie on his beloved Italian ITOM on the way to winning a 50cc race – again at Brands Hatch, this time in 1962





Top: Charlie on a Honda RC115 replica he demonstrated around the UK. Above: pushing hard on a Tohatsu 125 at the Isle of Man in '65. Right: he is always tinkering in the workshop



Charlie was born in 1929 in Bethnal Green, and as a child suffered poor health and asthma. He was slight in stature and had to leave school at 14 due to illness and the war. The doctor advised plenty of fresh air, and one way to inhale that in quantity is on a motorcycle. His father bought him a Zenith with a 250cc JAP engine. Soon Charlie had friends with motorcycles. They spoke about racing them but somehow never did. Charlie took the idea seriously. Although he had been rejected by the Army on medical grounds, he certainly felt strong and skillful enough to ride well. He started racing an Ariel Red Hunter, and in those days had to ride the bike to the race and home again, because there was no money for cars and trailers.

But there was problem for Charlie: starting the bike.

'When I was a young man, to start the machine you had to run with the bike and push the starter pinion, which was called bump starting. Because I was so slight, weighing 8 stone, 6 pounds, I didn't have the physical capacity to start the bikes. Consequently, when I did get it going, the other riders had long since disappeared! Then I was introduced to the lightweight machinery and I was in my element!'

Charlie made his name on small-

engine bikes, and yet he believes that this is a part of motorcycling which is much overlooked. 'I specialised in the small-capacity machines, but the magazines are generally only interested in the big "zoomer-zoomers", shall we say. At the present moment I weigh just nine stone, so the bike doesn't have to work hard. I also prefer the smaller bikes because they're harder to ride. You have to keep the speed up in corners. You can't shut off for a bend because then you'd lose all your speed. The magazines, all they want is the blood and thunder of the big bikes. It's more spectacular, I suppose.'

If Charlie had been born in more recent years, the bump starting would not have been difficult, but he still thinks the demands of riding small bikes make them preferable.

'If I'd been a young man now, things might have been different, because there's no push-starting. But there are other differences. On big bikes you come tearing up to the bend, slam the anchors on, get around the bend and then open the throttle again. With a smaller bike you have to follow the speed through, and it's altogether more skilful riding.'

The first small capacity bike Charlie rode was a 50cc Maserati, which he raced at Crystal Palace and Brands Hatch. He did not win but was 'in the

frame' and realised that this type of racing suited him. He was then offered an Italian ITOM bike by Tooleys, the importers. He raced at Brands and came 2nd to Howard German's ITOM. Then he began to win, often keeping the bike flat out at 12,000 rpm and riding with consummate skill.

Charlie has owned many bikes over the years but currently has two, a Kreidler and a 125cc Honda. 'I've had Hondas, Kawasakis, Yamahas... you name it, I've had it. The Maserati was memorable. It wasn't too fast but it changed my potentiality, shall we say, because it was easier to start. It was good but not good, if you know what I mean. It was a very pretty bike. In those days bikes were distinguishable from each other. Today's machines, you can't tell one from the other, they're all the same!'

Looking back, there is one marque which particularly appealed to Charlie. 'I've always been a Honda man,' he says. 'I started riding them in the early 1960s and I did quite well with them. I had a 50cc Honda and a 125cc twin. I also had a rare machine called a Tohatsu, and I did quite well on that.'

Charlie not only raced - he also knew exactly how bikes worked and how to repair them. This helped him when he and his wife decided to live in Canada. ➤

› 'At first I couldn't get work, but then I went to a motorcycle shop. The first job he gave me, he said: "Can you mend a puncture?" and of course I could, there's nothing to it! That was in Vancouver. I didn't ride in Canada because I was too busy finding my feet. Your biggest enemy abroad is your fellow Englishman. Their attitude is – and I quite understand it – "I struggled, and so can you!" It's probably the same today.'

You might imagine that Charlie's life has been motorcycles all the way, but no, he has lived several other lives. He learned to fly planes and microlights, ride horses, play golf and do calligraphy. And he was a master stone mason for many years, 18 of them alone restoring Cliveden, the splendid Berkshire home of the Astors, near Maidenhead. He lived for years in a cottage in the grounds by the River Thames, his bikes stored in one of the rooms. He retired from Cliveden seven years ago and readily agrees that he long enjoyed the contrast of being a master mason, sitting quietly in beautiful surroundings and carefully shaping stone – to the opposite extreme: racing around the noisy track on one of his high-revving bikes. 'Yes,' he chuckles, 'I suppose I am a contrast, or a contradiction!'

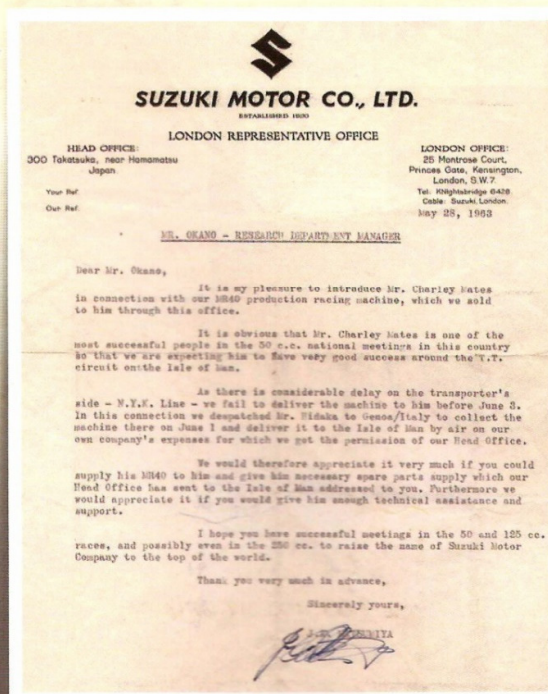
Another contrast is that Charlie has for decades not ridden a bike on Britain's roads.

'The modern car drivers don't have any respect for motorcyclists. And 40 years ago the roads were much less crowded, weren't they? Drivers were a bit more considerate. Nowadays, from what I can see of it, I wouldn't like to ride on the roads. When drivers get into their cocoon they change character, and not for the better. I change for the

worse when I get into a car! There are too many fatal accidents. There again, I'm thinking of getting a pushbike again, to get fit, and if I want to I can just jump off, a bit more easily than from a motorbike. But I went to a bike shop and was looking at some and the sales assistant, a young bloke, looked at me and said: "You're too old to be riding a bike nowadays, mate!", and so I piped up with "Buzz orff!" [actually, something stronger – Ed]. I don't pull no' punches!'

Charlie has seen many changes on the roads since he started, and one of them is the ease with which young people can buy a car. 'To have a car, all those years ago... you didn't dream of having one! You went from a pushbike to a motorcycle, and if you had a motorcycle with a sidecar you were king of the castle!'

He still enjoys riding his bikes at the meetings he attends. 'The joy of biking is freedom isn't it? And I'm just a man who loved racing fifties...' This year he took part in two parades of classic racing motorcycles, and at the time of speaking he was planning to go to a TT Riders' reunion lunch. 'I'll meet my old cronies there. Problem is, people come up to me and say "Hello Charlie, how are you?" and I think "Who the bloomin' 'ell was that?" You see, they



still recognise me because I haven't changed that much! I'm still the same weight but I've lost my hair. That's a pain that is: vanity!

Charlie Mates has lived a very full life so far, and intends to keep it like that, and may he inspire us all! ●

Above: Charlie was recommended to Suzuki HQ in Japan as one of the best 50cc riders in the country. These days Charlie's full attention is given to his 50cc Van Veen Kreidler (as seen on the cover) which he lovingly fettles and rides at every available opportunity. Compact and fast: just like its rider!

