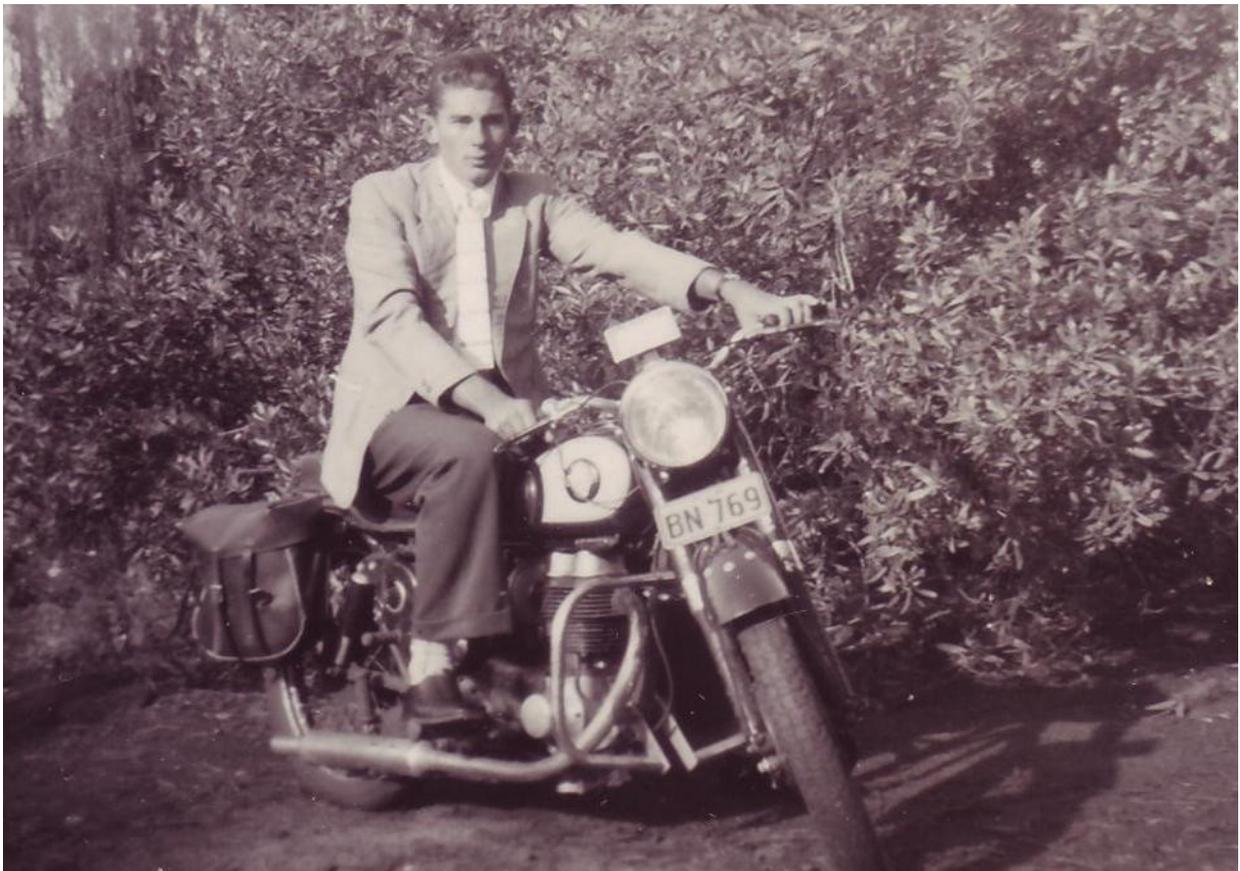


Die Ersten und die Letzten

The First and the Last - fifty eight years of BMW 'bikes - and my 64 years of motorcycling.
(*The mental meanderings of a somewhat arthritic octogenarian*).

I learnt to ride a motorcycle around Xmas 1953, on a friend's Triumph Sprung- Hub 3T. But, working on my father's farm at Hanwood, near Griffith, for "*ten bob a week and keep*", before I could buy anything in the way of transport , to replace my bicycle, I had to wait until I decided farming was not for me and had got a job in town that paid proper money.

It was mid-1955 before I had accumulated enough money to buy a dilapidated, rigid frame, 1949 BSA C11 250cc, which proved to be a mistake. The C11 proved to be a cantankerous and unreliable little thing. Six months of trying to cajole it into reliability proved more than long enough and I got rid of it - traded-in on a brand new 'bike. Another BSA and another 250, a newly released 1956 C-12 and, as I eventually discovered to my sorrow, yet another mistake!



1956 - in standard riding gear - 1956 BSA 250cc C12

Despite being reliable and, with its' swing-arm suspension, very comfortable, my little C-12 was struggled to maintain the 55-60mph cruising speeds of my mates on their "big" 500cc Matchies and AJS's. There were also a couple of 650cc "Gold Flashes", one "Tiger One Ten" and a "Road Rocket" around, but they were usually well over the horizon by the time I was off the centre-stand.

My little C-12 fought valiantly but, trying to keep up with "*the big boys*" on Good Friday 1957, it expired of a seized piston, only some 25 miles into the 290 mile ride (a lot of it dirt) to the Bathurst races. Lucky I was still close to home! Obviously it was time to get with the strength, so my 1956 BSA C-12 morphed into a 1954 AJS 500cc Spring Twin.



1957 - Power at last - 1954 AJS 500cc Twin

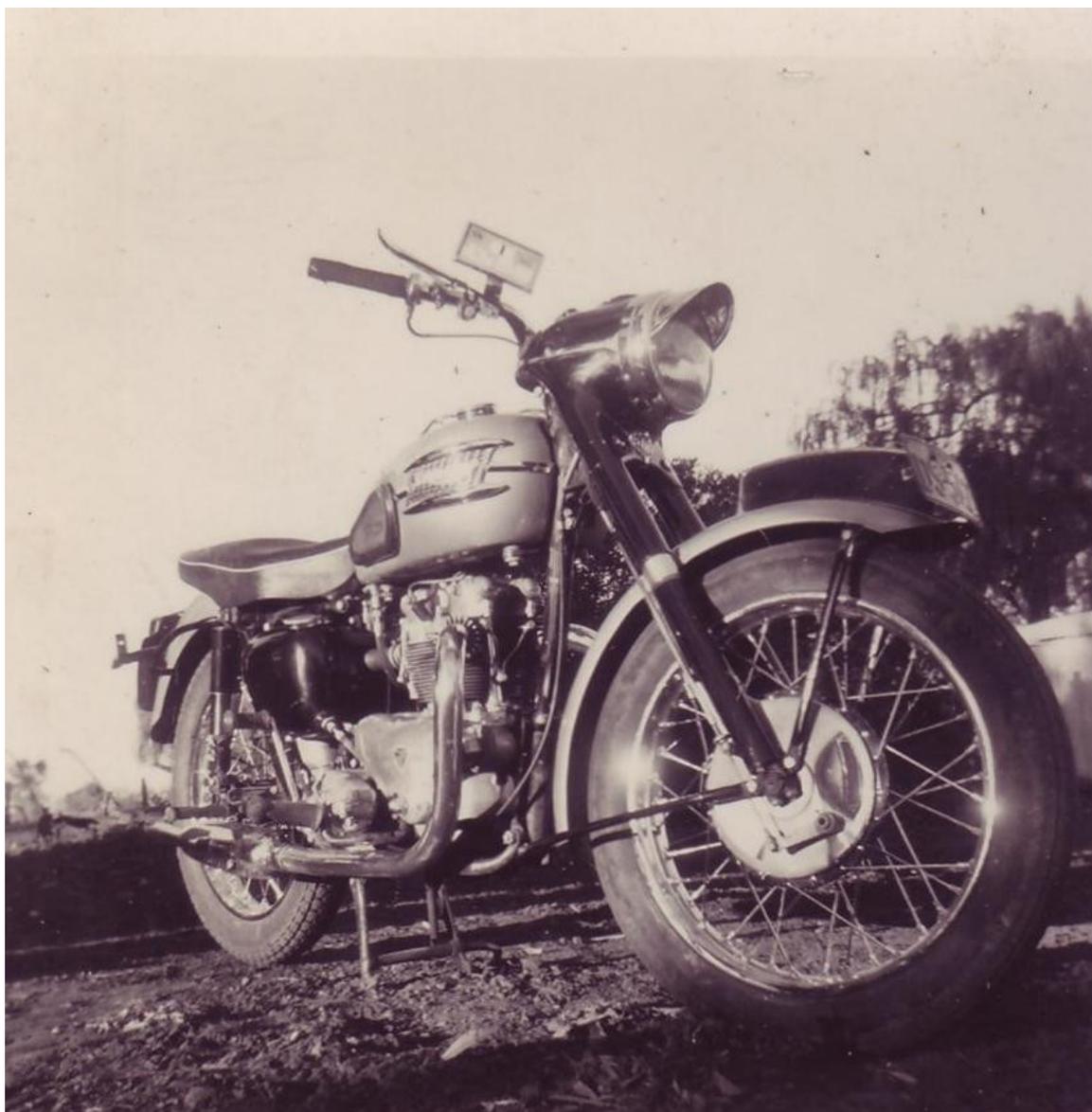
About this time, something important, and almost unfortunate, happened - I was riding pillion on a 650cc Aerial Huntmaster when we became airborne at about 70-75mph, departing a hump-back bridge over an irrigation channel (the third one we had "jumped"!). When we landed, the rear wheel collapsed under the load of two men, two spokes penetrating completely through the rear tyre.

We found ourselves unexpectedly dismounted and sliding very rapidly along the asphalt, with the 'bike in close pursuit. Fortunately, it was a frosty mid-winter night and we were very well rugged up in layers of wool and leather, with my WW2 multi-layered flying suit over all of that. We didn't hit anything or lose any skin and the bike didn't catch us. But I did severely tear some muscles on my left shoulder-blade, which for some time constantly reminded me "*do not jump bridges two-up*". But the really important lesson was that the scuff marks on my leather flying helmet showed that my head had been in **very close** proximity to the asphalt.

I took heed of that lesson and promptly bought myself a Cromwell "*Pudding Basin*" racing helmet. In the late 1950s wearing that helmet on the road caused me to be the butt of a few snide remarks but I persisted with my "*brain basin*" as I did not know whether Lady Luck would smile upon me again. No doubt that helmet would not meet today's safety equipment standards but when, in a fall in the Gippsland rain in 1958, I cracked the helmet shell against a concrete gutter, it did its' job admirably. That has allowed me to continue living and riding for another 60 odd years with nothing worse than suffering a rather "*crook neck*" for some decades. Oops! *Mind-wander* - it's an age thing!

Back to the bikes! With my power upgrade, I could generally keep up with the others on the "Ay-Jay" and it had the added advantage of continuously waterproofing my right flying boot with a gentle but steady stream of oil emanating from the generator seal. The generator retainer bolts stubbornly proved unwilling to stay tightened, the downside being that when it came properly loose, the lights eventually went out - quite disconcerting on a dirt road at night!

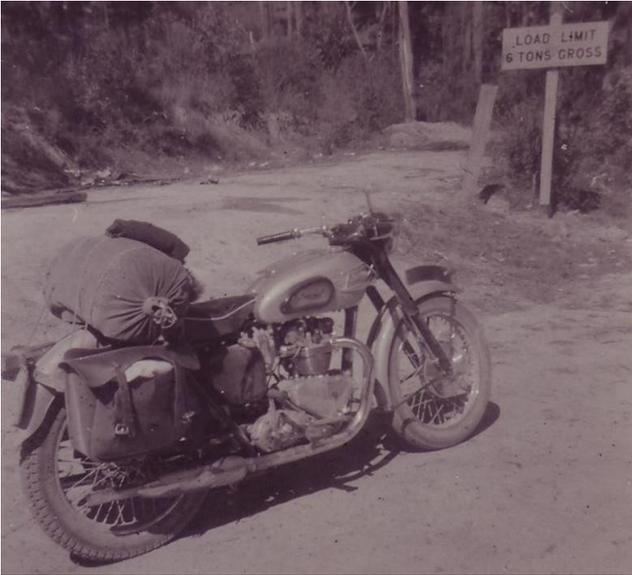
Once, far from home, was enough of that trick so, in early 1958, the AJS Twin was traded on a brand new "Trumpy", an *all alloy* 1957 500cc Tiger 100.



My Tiger 100 - 1958

For months I ran it in carefully and obsessively, with colloidal graphite in the oil, running it up and down through the gears and slowly increasing the rev range and top speed. It rewarded me with great reliability and, easily able to do "*the Ton*", it was the quickest T-100 around, almost equal to my mate's T-110 and faster than some of the other local 650s.

That alloy Tiger proved to be one of the most enjoyable bikes I have owned - it was comfortable, fast, light and reliable, even if it did vibrate a bit when travelling at 70mph. My Tiger took me hunting in the Riverina, exploring the South Coast and - over dirt roads in summer heat and, below freezing, into the snowy Victorian Alps in mid-winter - all over most of NSW and Victoria. Anyone interested in a 400 mile ride to Lorne for a hamburger? No? Then maybe 120 miles (2 hours) to Wagga for a milkshake at the Jazz Café?

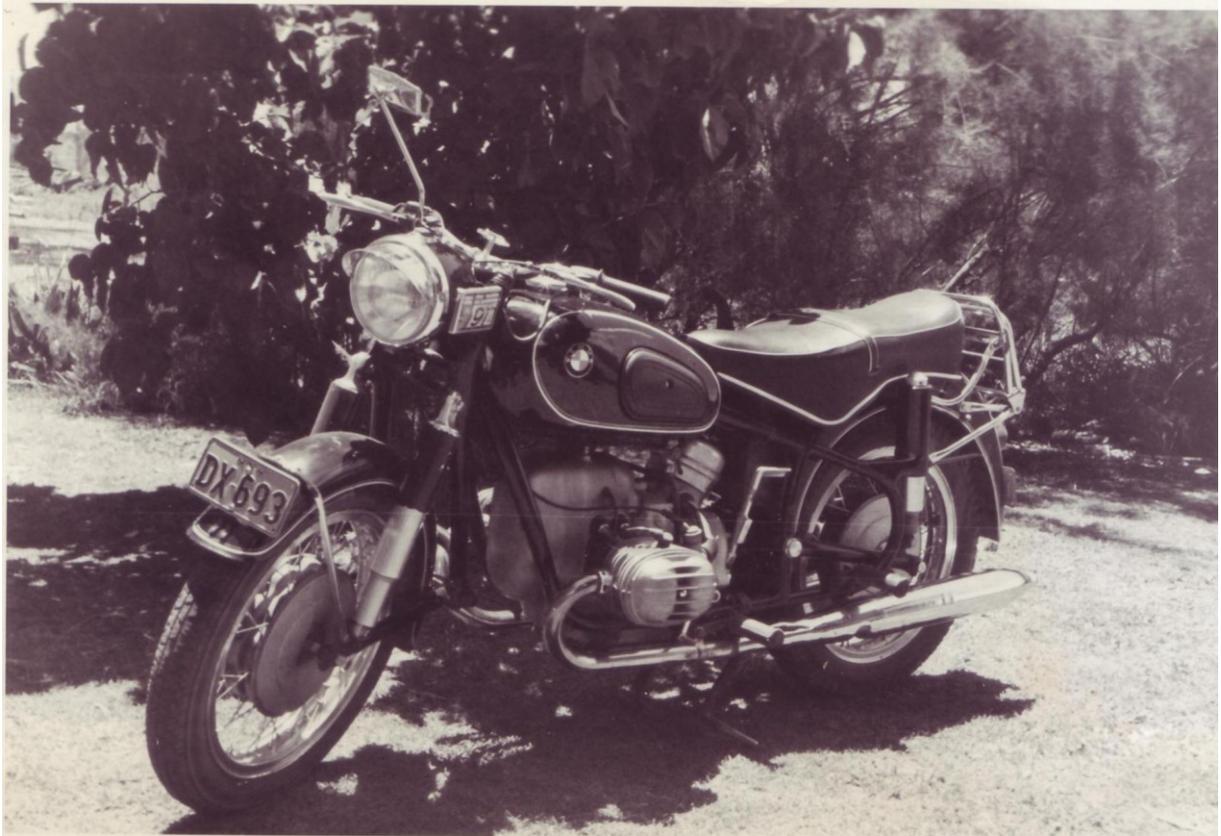


Great stuff for an unattached young man with a desire to see his land - whilst such status lasted!

But I eventually discovered there are *girls* and they really do prefer to go to out, especially when in a nice dress, in something more comfortable and water proof than a motorbike. So, inevitably, the Tiger 100 was traded on a Morris Minor 1000, ensuring social happiness and continued female company. The Morris was tarted up with a Lukey muffler, twin SU carbs, Monroe shockers and fox tail aerial. It handled well and sounded good but didn't go much faster. Maybe the fox tail held it back?

But the call of two-wheeled freedom remained strong and, when I eventually realised that I really was able to afford both two and four wheel conveyances, I gave in to that primal urge - much against everyone's advice that it was time to "*grow up and settle down*". *Not yet!* I hadn't seen much of Oz, much less *The World!* Jeez, I was only 23! So I bought another twin AJS, this time a 1955 M20, which also leaked oil. So I got rid of that and bought another - I liked the sound of twin Ay-Jays. But that one also leaked oil - *everything* British leaked oil!

So it came about that in late 1959 I did something that started my "*airhead addiction*" (some might say *airheaded?*), an affliction that I have now endured for some 57 years - I bought my first *BMW Motorrad!* It was a nice second-hand 1957 R50S from Tom Byrne Motorcycles in Sydney. The R50S was a "Sport" model, reportedly with higher compression and more power than the standard R50 but, sadly, it was not in the same class of speedsters as either the more famous R69S or even my much cherished Tiger 100. A couple of my mates, respectively on their T-110 and Road Rocket, reckoned it was doing 90mph flat out, but I only ever saw 86mph max on the BM's speedo, not much quicker than my old 500 AJS Twins. But in the 1950s BMWs were long range runners rather than speedsters and it filled the role over taking me around the country in comfort and with reliability exceptionally well.



Die Ersten, aber nicht die Letzten (my first BMW - but not the last)

Also, out in a country town, the Earles forks and enclosed drive shaft were a bit of a novelty. Initially, it was somewhat disconcerting to feel the torque effect when powering out of corners or to pull on the brakes and have the front end apparently “rise up” on the Earles forks, limiting the weight shift forward and loading up of the front brake, as occurs with telescopic forks. However, my BMW reliably fulfilled the need to go somewhere at any time over any distance in comfort, didn’t dispense oil over anything and, importantly, my lovely girlfriend was still quite pleased to come for a ride when the weather was nice.



1960 - BMW R50S and friend

But things change and, after 5 years, we were still not married when I turned 26 and my soul longed to see some adventure before I “*settled down*” and joined my mates - generally (but not always) happily coping with their irritating *ankle-biters* under foot. So I sold-up, packed-up and departed at the beginning of 1963 for the last place left on earth that had not been totally explored - Papua New Guinea. It really was the last wild place - fifty years later they were still making “*first contact*” with small isolated groups of tribesmen in remote mountain areas.

Fifteen months of living in tent camps in the jungles, mainly in New Britain, gave me just about enough of adventure. But I did get to expand my taste for exotic cuisine (crocodile, cassowary, jungle-perch, python, wallaby, cuscus and bush rat) - if it walked, crawled, slithered, swam or flew it was destined for the cook-pot - (except for flying fox, which the native survey gang ate gleefully but I thought smelled pretty bad). Anything meat-like to enhance the brown rice, *kaukau* and *pitpit!* But whilst edible, old croc is very rank and makes one smell like rather old catfish, so best avoided after the first experience. And when I walked the 21 miles (7 hours) into Cape Hoskins to collect my mail, I got to ride the *Kiap's* (Patrol Officer's) govt. BSA 150cc swing arm Bantam for a couple of laps of the patrol post. Oh joy!

In New Britain I got to do some interesting stuff, like map areas where few (if any) white men had been before, shower under gentle waterfalls, stumble upon overgrown WW2 aircraft and other war relics, explore old Japanese tunnels (with ordnance still in them) and climb into a dormant volcano, Mt Tavurvur, that eventually woke up in 1994 and destroyed Rabaul.

Despite the novelty of bush living and the opportunity to meet interestingly different people in 1964 I decided in to reduce the “explorer” component of my life and to get a job in civilisation.



PNG Highlanders circa 1964

In mid-1964 I found myself a new role, based in Port Moresby, where I luckily blundered upon and quickly acquired a nice 1962, T-120C Bonneville, unlike any “Trumpy” I had ever seen. It was a factory Clubman bike, with upswept pipes and set up for club events with a detachable headlight (a plug to maintain electrical circuit integrity) and almost everything except the frame and some engine parts made of alloy. It went rather well and was the first bike I owned that would easily spin-up the back wheel, on asphalt, when already moving.



The 1962 Triumph T-120C

It was so good that I shipped it back to Oz when I came home on leave at the end of 1964, taking it back to PNG when I returned. I again got into "*girlfriend mode*" and bought an Austin Healy Sprite. I hung on to the T-120C but eventually sold it as I was rarely using it and, when I felt like a riding fix, I could always borrow a mate's BSA Thunderbolt. Unfortunately, the T120C didn't survive - the idiot I sold it to totalled it and almost himself.

Time and years passed and by mid-1967 I was married (and the Sprite had morphed into another spots car, a Honda S-600 coupe,) when I fortuitously discovered that someone had paid a shipping deposit on a new Norton 650SS and, now it had arrived from England, could not come up with the readies. The importers were most unhappy and wanted rid of it ASAP. I made them what I thought was a very cheeky offer and was rather surprised when they accepted it.

But not as surprised as my new wife was when I rode it home and excitedly told her to come outside and see what I had - on her birthday! She said "*I don't ride motorbikes*"!! That was when, somewhere between my ears, the penny belatedly dropped and I hastily retrieved and presented her with the real birthday present. The day (and the marriage) saved - just! The Norton moved with us to Madang in 1968, where (strangely for an agnostic notional protestant) I became good friends with a priest who was also an aircraft engineer and pilot with the Catholic missions. In return for intermittent rides on the 650SS, he took to tuning the Norton to run well on a 50/50 mix of 115 Avgas and super mogas. And run rather well it did too, reaching indicated speeds on the 5400ft (1.46km) newly sealed runway of Madang airport of 115mph one way and 114 on the return run. When I returned to Oz at the end of 1970, I sold the Norton to my priest mate.

A new life in Oz required transport and one car was not enough between two, so (*only to get to work economically*) I got a Suzuki TC125 *aggie*. It had a high/low range gearbox that enabled one to climb brick walls but, to my great displeasure, when a mad moment urged me to open it up in low range, it unceremoniously dumped me on my butt. Fortunately that was in the backyard so no one else saw my disgrace. Another Suzuki appeared, a LS650 Savage, a *big*-single cruiser, to which was added a 1983 R65 BMW. The TC125 eventually went and was replaced with yet another Suzuki, a DR500 *chook-chaser* to better do the dirt roads.

This was about when my “*obsessive compulsive acquisitive disorder*” re-appeared and, to give me something classic (and take me back to my more youthful days), I bought both a 1958 Triumph Tiger 110 and yet another 1955 AJS Twin M20! The AJS was in due course rendered *almost* oil leak free and the Tiger One-Ten rebuilt after almost every rally - the Poms really did know how to put crap metal into 1950’s machinery! The LS650 Savage and DR500 went to other homes and were replaced by a Honda Transalp 600cc, which proved to be a very nice bike for dirt road touring, taking me many kms through SE Australia’s mountain country backroads. Sadly, it met its demise when a mate rode it into a large rock and tore the side out of the engine case. Fortunately, he survived after some hospital time but the Transalp didn’t make it.

By 1989 a proper touring bike was needed and acquired, in the form of another BMW, a 1985 R80RT. It took me reliably and in comfort (rain or shine) around Tassie twice, all over NSW and Victoria, along the Great Ocean Road to Adelaide, back to home across the dreaded Hay Plains and as far north as Emerald and Yeppoon.

Then the opportunity arose to get a really nice 1986 R65 to add to my growing BMW collection - but logic dictated that the twin-shock R65 should depart, which it eventually did. I’m not sure how, but a Kwaka 100cc trail bike also appeared. Then I found a sad 1985 R80 needing some TLC, so I took that home, attended to its needs, and then found it a good home. Another mistake, as the other Beemers got lonely. Joy! In 1996, in Sydney, a black and yellow R100 GS with only 17k kms was pleading for a good home. It was in excellent condition, was No. 10 of 40 commemorative “40th Anniversary Specials” made in 1994 for the Tom Byrne BMW dealership, which had, in 1959, sold me “Die Ersten”, the 1957 BMW R50S. Who could resist? Its colour made me think of a European bumble-bee so it was named “Die Hummel”. That year I also acquired my first HD, a black & yellow 1994 1200cc Sportster, which looked nice in the shed beside and complementing the black and yellow Beemer GS.

In 1998 we moved house and, sadly, the new home lacked the large garage and extra covered parking of our old home. So I rented a U-stow-it shed for a year before I worked out the true economics of paying to store a flock of road registered but very much underutilised motorbikes. Tears! Some of the accumulation of ‘bikes really did need to be disowned!

By early 2000 I was getting very sick of fixing my two “classic” bikes after almost every rally. But, in a mutually beneficial arrangement with the local Kawasaki dealer, I had been taking the demonstrator bike of the then newly released Kwaka W650 to nearby local classic bike gatherings. I got to ride a nice new bike that looked and sounded much like, but handled better than, a 1950s classic. I had a reliable bike to ride, left business cards on the seat at the rally and spruiked the delights of the W650 to anyone who would listen - and the dealer got his first couple of W650 sales. I even won a fuel economy “frugality” prize on the W650 - at a Ducati Club event! This bike was good, in an old fashioned sort of way that well befitted my aging status.

So good in fact that eventually I swapped the Tiger 110 for a brand new W650 - and sold the AJS to someone who loved British metal and oil. About this time another mono-shock R65 arrived which was done up and replaced its predecessor and yet another R80 passed through on its way to a good home. All these Beemers (when fixed) were nice to ride and were reliable transport whilst with me. After consolidation, in 2005 the fleet comprised of 3 BMW’s and the Kwaka W650, much like a well-matched set of golf clubs.



The Fleet - 2005

Unfortunately, in 2005 (at age 69) the encroachment of old(er) age brings with it retribution for the mishaps of youth and the decades of accumulated damage to my maltreated knees (judo, basketball, rugby, squash, skiing and motorcycling) finally demanded treatment. The repetitive surgical repairs over the years to my right knee had reached their useful climax and a new “*tin knee*” was required. Unfortunately, a mishap during rehab produced a setback that meant I could no longer flex my right knee sufficiently to even sit on, much less ride, motorcycles in a normal seated position.

After considerable agitation and mental anguish I bit the bullet - and ALL the bikes were sold! To keep travelling *al fresco* I bought a 1990 “*first release*” Mariner Blue MX5 sports car - almost as much fun as a bike and without need for all the riding gear - and I persevered with the knee rehab. Also, my wife was now happy to come on my runs - she didn’t “*do motorbike*”. And so it stayed until late 2008 when I went on holiday to Noosa and caught up with a mate who had bought my W650. He suggested that, as my knee was now bending reasonably well, I might like to try again riding my old bike.

To my great surprise, it was certainly manageable (*by sitting halfway onto the pillion seat*) and undoubtedly still enjoyable. I promptly hired a 650 Suzuki V-Strom from Aussie Biker in Noosaville and we rode the winding roads of the Sunshine Coast hinterland. Even with some discomfort, it was still great fun, so much so that I decided to buy another motor bike. My friend declined, promptly but not politely, my generous offer to buy back “*my W650*” - and that was probably a good thing as the knee was still a bit of a problem.

A rare moment of logic indicated that, if I bought another motorcycle at all, it should be another HD 1200 Sportster. So I found one - this time a 2005 “*Custom*” model with forward controls and lots of bling. Sportsters handle quite well in the twisty bits of our Snowy Mountain areas, so it filled the niche nicely - and I still had the MX5. That proved to be a nice balance of “*needs and wants*”, at least for the interim.



Mr Bling - 2005 HD 1200 Sportster

Perseverance brought improvement to the knee and by 2006 it again bent enough for me to ride seated in a normal position. Naturally, I then bought another W650 - and also tracked down "Die Hummel" - out at Condobolin in central NSW. It had only done 900kms in the year since I sold it and the owner was never going to again be in a position when he could ride it around Australia, that being the reason he bought it. After some protracted negotiation over a couple of months, I bought it back for what he had paid me paid, less the cost of going to get it. It was still in good condition and remains so to this day, as does the W650. But "Mr Bling" the Sportster has gone as he wasn't earning his keep - only 1800kms in two years really means "not needed"!

And now that, despite a couple of close encounters and broken bones, I have completed 63 years of riding and reached, still in reasonable repair, the ripe old age of 80 I am reviewing my options.

Over the years I have had a fair share of falls on wet roads or oily corners and have been lucky to have been really hurt only a couple of times. The first, in 1959 near Junee, resulted in a broken leg when, turning right at low speed, I was stuck from behind by another 'bike. I was quite fortunate that the car he was racing passed to my left! Being a young man at the time, I thought it lucky that my right leg had taken the major impact and the bike needed only little repair. My last fall, in 2000 on the long way home from Yeppoon, with a mate, from a BMW Safari, was on a wet gravel road in the middle of nowhere (somewhere near Werris Creek). That cost me 4 broken ribs, a collapsed lung and a hernia. And I then had face the rather unenviable task of riding the twisted R80RT, sans windscreen, for 2 hours to get to Gulgong, where I left it, got a lift into Dubbo, and hired a car for my mate to drive me back home to Canberra. I had to get home as we were going down to Rutherglen with friends for the weekend. My wife insisted I went to hospital, where they told me I was lucky! At age 64 I didn't enjoy the experience of either the fall or the recovery and decided it really was best to "keep rubber bits on the road"!

My New Year 2017 review of my travels shows that the last ten years have seen the distances ridden on any particular ride, and annually, slowly decline. This has been offset quite a bit by time spend in the MX5. Analysis of the past 2 years of my time on the roads shows

only 4250kms on the 2 bikes, 21,400 kms in my MX5 another 28,650 in my Subaru Liberty GT, giving an average of over 27,000 kms annually on the road, of which only 2k kms were on 'bikes. At least I am still busy seeing Australia - even if not on motorbikes.

Since New Year, I have done a 190km loop on the W650 and also taken "*Die Hummel*" out on a 170km lunch ride. But, even doped up on pain killers, my arthritic hands made both rides less than fully enjoyable. Notwithstanding that I still enjoy riding, maybe it is time to call it quits on the motorbikes. On nice days I can still enjoy driving around with my wife in the MX5 NC3, top down and with the wind in what is left of my hair.....



High in the Snowy Mtns with "*Die Hummel*" - *die Letzten*, my last BMW



And its successor - MX5ing at Noosaville 2016

Anyone interested in relaxed riding? I know of a couple of well looked after, nice bikes.



1994 BMW R100GS – 55k kms

No. 10 of 40 commemorative “40th Anniversary Specials” for the Tom Byrne BMW dealership



2000 Kawasaki W650 - 22k kms
Hepco & Becker frames and panniers

Ken Keeling

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