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JULY 2017

Reasons to believe

Velocetté's super single



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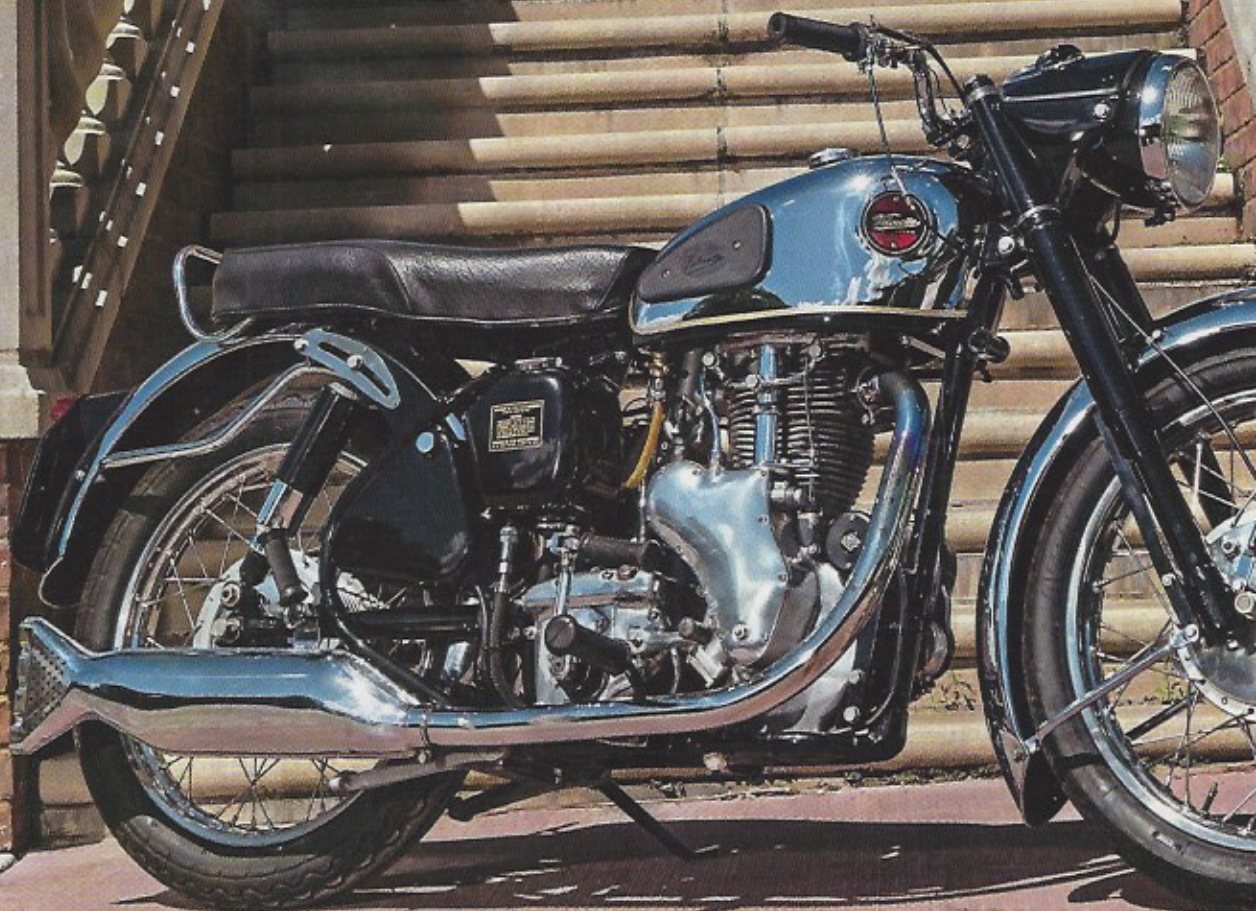
*"I was determined to beat Mike Hailwood.
That was all I wanted..."*



Super single

A conversation at the Stafford show prompted some thinking...
and a subsequent feature...

Words: JAMES ROBINSON
Photographs: MORTONS ARCHIVE





There's a story I often recount about an event which happened to me some years ago. My brother Simon and I had gone out for a ride, him on his Velocette Venom (actually, a converted Viper, but a Venom to all intents and purposes) and me on my Vincent Comet.

We'd had a lovely day's riding and were on our way back to Simon's – only 10 miles away or so – when suddenly the Vincent cut-out. It just stopped dead and after a few checks – and two new plugs, one after another, but not so much as a flicker of a spark – it was apparent it was kaput. At that point, it had electronic ignition on it, and clearly something had gone amiss. Anyway, my van was parked at my brother's so it was decided to leave him sat on the side of the road with the Vincent, while I borrowed the Velo and headed off to get the van.

Before I was even halfway home, I'd decided to sell the Vincent, a machine I'd always wanted, because, frankly, the Velocette was just so much nicer to ride.

My desire for the Comet went back to childhood, when dad had one and I loved it, though he, a man who had his first Velocette Venom in 1960, was always threatening to sell it and swap back to a Venom. Eventually he did, in 1995 (when I was 16) selling the Vincent for £3800 (I still remember the figure) and with the money buying a 500cc Velocette – the same converted Viper my brother still has – and a rigid framed B31 for me, my first proper 'old bike'. However, I lamented the Vincent's passing, and always wanted one.

When eventually I bought a Comet of my own, I used it lots and did love it. Unfortunately I never actually had enough money for it to be properly sorted – it was always a bit bodged together, hence the electronic ignition after the mag (which I seem to think had come off my dad's Comet years before...) had packed up and I was too skint to have it rebuilt, though by that time I was in this job and my riding

experience had widened considerably, meaning I'd had access to all sorts of machines, including a good number of Venoms.

However, the Vincent was what I'd always wanted and I persevered with it for a long time, despite evidence to the contrary and what everyone (well, all my Velocette riding friends and family!) told me.

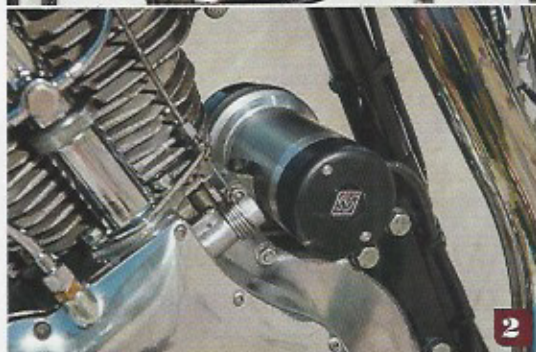
That was my epiphany after the breakdown.

Though I sold the Comet, I never did buy a Venom, and have never owned one. My interest (and funds) went into older machines but over the years, I've probably ridden more Venoms – or Velocettes, certainly – than just about any other make of machine and so many of the friends I have in the 'old bike' world have a Venom, that, really, the message was writ large and clear. In deference to my friends the Rosenthals – father and son – I'll say that the Venom, alongside Richard and Peter's preferred Gold Star, is the finest of all the British 500cc single cylinder machines built. And while a Clubman Gold Star will monster a standard Venom in terms of outright performance, there's not much between a Thruxton Venom and a DBD34, in terms of performance... and impracticality... whereas a standard Venom doesn't really sacrifice too much in terms of usability and practicality compared with say a B33/G80/ES2 (or its own MSS stable-mate) for more performance, though of course it isn't possessed of the 'slogability' of the BSA/Matchless (or AJS)/Norton.

The idea for writing something about the Venom came to me a couple of weeks back, as I stood in the auction at Stafford, alongside a dealer who had just bought a Venom, and was in for several more. We discussed the model's appeal and how, we felt, they were probably suffering a 'dip' at the moment in terms of popularity (well, price). Said dealer had just picked up a Veeline (so fully faired) Clubman-specification job, nicely presented and with some tasty bits on it, including an electric start...



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1 & 2: Details of the Alton electric start, surely the answer for those who want to continue enjoying a Venom, but are struggling with starting. Or alternatively a solution for those for whom the worry of starting a Venom has put off ownership.

3: Adjustable rear suspension, one of the features of Velocette's RS frame.



4

4: A 'big tank' Venom, with Thruxton seat, rearsets and normal bars, a set-up that gives a comfortable riding position.



Belge finish – sorry, 'dove grey' – looks a bit crème brûlée, with a hint of custard cream. But it's attractive, nonetheless.



Starting

The most common reason people don't get on with Venoms is, far and away, starting. Sure, the clutch divides opinion (but what is inarguable is that functioning as it should, it's remarkably light) but the most frequent complaint levelled at the products of Hall Green is that they are pigs to start.

Actually, they're not – but there is a definite 'knack' to it and as long as the correct drill is followed; so that's find compression, valve-lifter in, slowly right to the bottom (so not just over compression) of the lever's travel, lever back up, and kick. Okay, it's not faultless, but a Venom just won't go if frustration takes over and one kicks and kicks... and kicks...

It's a case of just being methodical, which is much easier said than done, especially when a collection of wise old sages have gathered to say 'they all do that' and the kicker is dressed in bike kit, getting hotter with every futile lunge at the kickstart, the only sound – apart from the noise of blood pumping around your head – being the teeth-sucking by the gleeful onlookers. Best thing to do, I've discovered, is to have a fresh plug to hand, for such situations, with a quick plug change normally providing the remedy – as much as anything, it gives a couple of minutes to collect thoughts and catch breath. New plug in, follow the drill. Away she'll go. Normally. As I say it's not faultless. A pal of mine, a Velo man of years standing, insists 'they smell fear...'

Another option is the aforementioned electric start. Look closely at the gorgeous black-and-chrome machine in our pictures; it's fitted with an Alton electric leg, discreetly hidden behind an extended and modified dynamo belt cover.

Developed by French company Alton, the electric start and 12v alternator kit is a straight fit for Venom, Viper, MSS and Thruxton, and will also fit KSS, KTS and Iron MSS. Okay, it's not original – but if it allows you to keep riding (or even take away the anxiety of buying a Velo) then the £1190 asking price (in the UK through Grove Classics) is well worthwhile.



5: The single leading shoe front brake.

6: Famous Velocette Venom engine. It could be traced back to the prewar MOV.

7: There's little that beats riding a good Venom out in the countryside. This one belongs to Paul Charlton.

Development

The history of the Venom is fairly well-known and oft told. Launched in late 1955, the 500cc overhead valve single came in Velocette's traditional black, with chrome, as well as a strange off-white colour, called dove grey but actually more the colour of crème brûlée, or a light custard, I've always thought.

Velocette was no stranger to some slightly off-the-wall colour schemes; there was red-and-black (the colour of my dad's first one, 464ANG, bought new by his brother, my uncle Mick, while another pal had an identical one, 314ANG), white and black, green and chrome and, later, a really light blue, to name a few. All of these models – which included the budget, light blue Special – shared the smaller three gallon tank.

The 'big tank' – so 4½ gallons – was first implemented for 1963. Based, I believe, on the same mould used for the MkVII/MkVIII KTT petrol tank, it featured press aluminium grills and plastic and Perspex tank badges, though still with the famous Velocette script in them.

As for riding. Personally, I think that the big



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C tank models really want to have rearsets fitted, as otherwise the rider's feet feel too far forward, owing to being pushed back further on the seat by the bigger fuel receptacle. The long-legged may of course find the extra space agreeable. A pal of mine has a MK.II Clubman which has rearsets and MK.VIII KTT handlebars, which give a lovely riding position. I've been fortunate enough to ride that one on several occasions – and with its reversed gearchange set-up (he prefers up-for-up), big black tank and KTT bars it really does provide a very similar sensation to riding a MK.VIII KTT, in terms of its flexibility and speed.

With the small tank machines, it feels like the normal footrest set-up is more correctly placed – a glance shows why, with the footrests nearly under the nose of the seat, whereas on the bigger tank machines there's a gap of a few inches.

Cheaper option?

There's a south coast-based Velocette enthusiast who has around 30 of the Hall Green-made machines, and he reckons that of all his Velos, his favourite to ride is his spring-frame (so RS) mid-1950s 350cc MAC. I know a guy in Ireland who has had his MAC from the early 1960s, when he was a student, and has never owned another motorcycle. And it's not difficult to see why. They are, simply, quite lovely machines all round, just a nice motorcycle.

They look – especially the late-1950s jobs – the same as Venoms, and for gentle back road use, are probably a better bet. For a Sunday tootle, an easy club-run machine, but a little bit different to the more mainstream offering, definitely worth considering.

1: Riding Mark Huggins' tweaked 600cc Thruxton. A real pleasure.

2: With the twin-leading shoe brake plate fitted.



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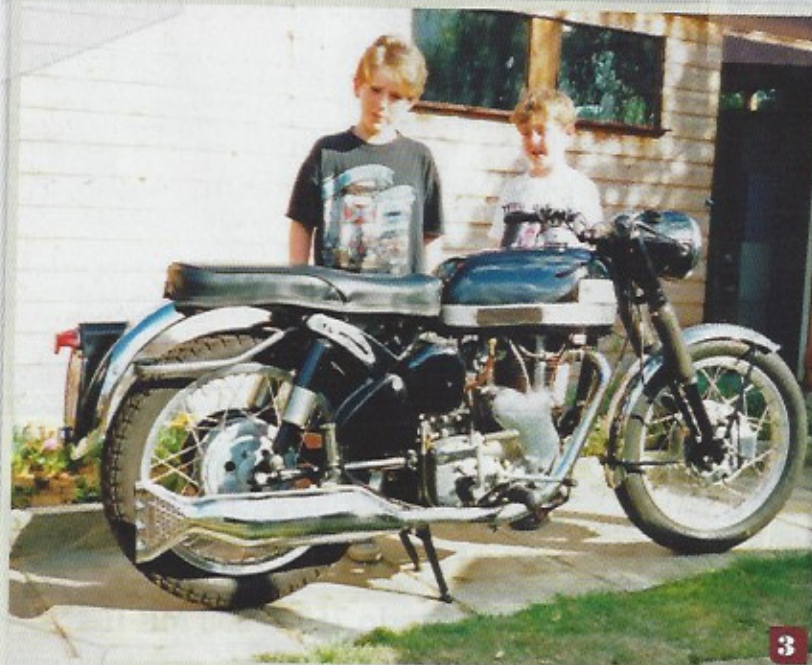
We've had one for years – it's currently on loan at a mate – and it is just a nice thing to ride, my brother doing at least one Irish rally on it, as it's better suited to events like that (so quite a lot of low speed work on single track roads) than say a Venom would be.

There's the 500cc MSS too, again a machine I've ridden a fair bit (dad currently has a 1966 one) and although it lacks the urge of a Venom, it's a fine machine and, again probably more suited to the riding lots of us too, its lower state of tune meaning there's not the gear-changing one has to do on a Venom.

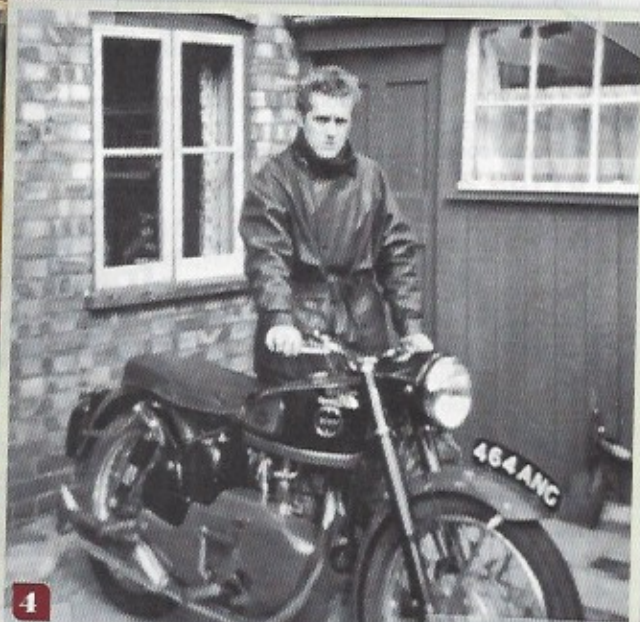
What about Vipers?

The 350cc Viper was launched in tandem with the Venom. Nowadays, we don't tend to fully appreciate how advantageous the 350cc class was in terms of insurance premiums, hence the popularity.

The thing with a Viper is that it's almost as quick as a Venom, it just needs to be revved a lot harder through the gears, not having the torque of the bigger machine. Today, we classic riders are a lot less likely



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to wring the neck of our 60-year-old motorcycle than 1950s and 60s teens were, so the 350 doesn't feel like it performs as well. Conversely, if one is intending to use the machine for gentle club runs and such, the Viper – which does tend to be a bit easier to start as well – is a good option.

The competition

Because I never wanted to go down the same route as so many people I know, I've attempted to plough my own furrow and looked at – and tried – all sorts of alternatives. For example, I was tempted by a Gilera Saturno, but, performance-wise the one I rode was more MSS than Venom.

As a left field option, I'd say the Ariel VH Red Hunter is worth considering, and I remember being particularly impressed with a black-finished (though staid looking) example, which certainly had plenty more poke than say a standard, contemporary ES2.

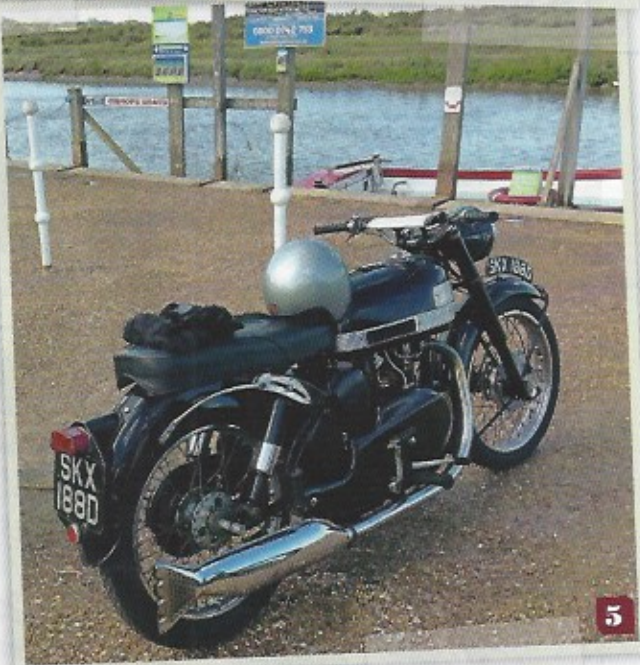
From twin-cylinder options, in terms of fun, I think the mid-to-late 1950s Tiger 100 is the pick of

3: My brother Simon – here on the right – and me, with the 'big tank' Viper/Venom that Simon now owns. At this point (circa 1990), it was owned by a friend of my dad's.

4: 'Dad' Robinson, Brian, with his first Venom circa 1961. He's never been without a motorcycle in the intervening years but still reckons that first Venom was: "My best-ever bike."

5: Having borrowed my dad's MSS, this is it parked on Blakeney Quay on the Norfolk coast.

6: Bob Platten's red and black, relatively recently-restored Venom. Small tank, normal footrests, rev-counter.



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the bunch; it's not difficult to see why 'kids' loved Triumphs, with the acceleration providing grins aplenty. Being a parallel twin guy or gal is a different thing altogether, and I've realised that, basically, I'm a singles man.

In conclusion

If you fancy a Venom, there are generally plenty to choose from, with classified ads, dealers and the internet all providing rich pickings. There's all sorts of upgrades too, such as the electric start mentioned, plus five and six-speed gearboxes from Gerry Cain. It's a case of deciding what you fancy – small tank, big tank, Clubman or even Thruxton – and seeing what's out there. The Velocette Owners Club (www.velocetteowners.com) offers a monthly magazine, full of technical advice, help and information.

End

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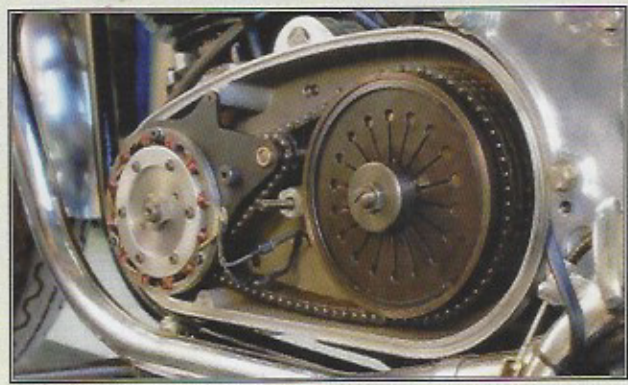
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