

## **The Resurrection of BSA**

The group of motorcycle chassis developed by engineer Eric Cheney, who has died aged 76, were the last British designs to win a Grand Prix world road-racing championship, a British motocross championship, and the manufacturers' award in the International Six Days' Trial. All top British enduro riders used Cheneys, and at least one film star - Steve McQueen. He also produced world-beating suspension technology, and remote-controlled submarines for the Royal Navy.

Eric designed intuitively. A frame would be drawn and redrawn in chalk on the workshop wall until he knew that it was perfect. Then the metal would be cut against this sketch, a bike built and the production jig constructed from this initial pattern. Engineering sense said that this was an impossible method of working - but for Eric, it was the only way to design. "I know when it's right and it screams at me when it's wrong," he told me.

Eric was educated at the Lancastrian School in Winchester. He joined the Royal Navy when he was 18 and served on wartime motor torpedo boats. Asked why he worked so well under pressure at race meetings, he told me that being stuck in the English Channel with a pair of Messerschmitts shooting lumps out of his MTB had developed his incentive to work fast and get engines running.

After the war, Eric joined the motorcycle dealers Archers of Aldershot as a mechanic. The job gave him the chance to compete, with Les Archer, in continental motocross meetings. Archer went on to become 1956 European champion. Eric was as highly rated as Archer, but for him, motocross was a way to pay the bills - not a road to glory. His racing career ended in 1961 when he contracted a serious blood infection after competing in Algiers and could not regain his former speed.

Eric decided to concentrate on bike preparation. His big breakthrough was to take the ageing BSA Gold Star and build a lightweight chassis for it. On this bike, Jerry Scott battled with the works BSAs to such an extent that the Birmingham factory signed Scott to ride their team bikes. This started a love-hate relationship between Cheney and BSA - then the world's biggest motorcycle manufacturer - with Cheney receiving covert help from the factory, and the BSA competition shop gaining tuning and development information. Eric refused to work officially for BSA, and the factory probably would never have tolerated his very individual approach.

His greatest success came after the BSA competition department had closed. In 1972, Eric came to an agreement with the ex-BSA race team leader, John Banks, to make a serious attempt to win the motocross blue riband - the 500cc world championship.

The venture was uniquely British. The bikes were designed and built on a shoestring budget in little more than a domestic garage. But the results were spectacular. Banks finished second in the

American Grand Prix and won the British motocross championship. Only the over-developed, unreliable BSA engine stood between Banks and more success.

BSA were delighted and offered to sell Eric 500 engine kits to build into his Cheney chassis. With the backing of BSA dealer Ken Heanes, Eric was initially enthusiastic, but the daily grind did not excite him, and only 225 of the 500 bikes were finished.

The best of these were known as John Banks Replicas. Racing a JBR is magical, a window on Eric's genius. Ridden hard, the bike comes alive, with the chassis working with, and for, the rider in a way which makes every other bike of its era feel porcine. While Banks was winning at motocross, Eric's Triumph-engined bikes also dominated enduro motorcycling. Eric considered road racing "too easy - the corners are in the same place every lap". But he still made the chassis which won Phil Read the 1971 250cc world championship.

With major backing he could have been lauded as the best-ever frame designer. But for Eric, still working within weeks of death, his vindication was in his motorcycles. He never worked for any manufacturer, preferring to make motorcycles in his own way, caring nothing for status, security or wealth, utterly eccentric, marching to the peculiar beat of his own drum.

If we look at the history of British motorcycle manufacturers after the second world war, there are three names that stand head and shoulders above the rest; Triumph, Norton and BSA.

Triumph had the glamour, Norton the racing success and BSA had the sales volumes, even if they did always seem to have a slightly mundane image, producing a wide range of uninspiring machines that nonetheless sold massively around the world. In fact, in the 1960s, BSA, by then incorporating Triumph motorcycles, was the largest producer of motorcycles in the world. The Birmingham Small Arms Company Limited was formed in 1861 by a group of gunsmiths, specifically to manufacture guns by machinery developed in the US that helped increase output without the need for more skilled craftsmen. Not only did this method of manufacture allow for interchangeability of parts but, when the company branched out into bicycle manufacture in 1880, the machinery enabled large quantities of standard parts to be accurately machined at low cost.

In 1910, BSA debuted in the motorcycle market with the BSA 3 1/2hp being shown at Olympia in London. They were immediately successful and production sold out for the next three years. During the First World War, the company naturally concentrated on gun manufacture, but in 1919, a 770cc v-twin, side-valve engined bike, the Model E, appeared and BSA took up from where they had left off before the war.

BSA motorcycles were sold as affordable machines with reasonable performance for the average user. The company's fortunes were built on a reputation for reliability and a large dealer network, alongside large fleet orders for the likes of The Post Office and the AA, who used sidecar outfits

as mobile patrols. There were so many BSAs on the roads of Britain that they were able to boast that '1 in 4 is a BSA'.

It was in the inter-war years that BSA started using the 'Star' name for some of their models. First there was the Blue Star, which became the Empire Star, commemorating the Silver Jubilee of King George V. This model eventually became the famed Gold Star on the eve of the Second World War, a machine whose success continued after the war and well into the 1960s in both 350 and 500cc capacities.

Whilst rival manufacturer Triumph pioneered the parallel twin engine design, which BSA along with every other British manufacturer copied post war, BSA also continued to produce its large range of single-cylinder models. If you owned a BSA 'A' model, you had a twin cylinder engine between your legs. A10 (650cc), A50 (500cc), A65 (650cc) and A75 (the 750cc triple-cylinder) models often matched rival machines for performance, but always lagged slightly behind in appearance, even if the names suggested otherwise; Golden Flash, Rocket Gold Star, Thunderbolt, Lightning and Spitfire. The 'B' series of bikes were single-cylinder models, the 'C' range was small-capacity singles and the 'D' range was the Bantam, not actually a BSA design but that of German manufacturer DKW, handed to BSA as war reparations. Some estimates put Bantam production as high as 500,000.

Anand Mahindra, the chairman of the Mahindra Group conglomerate, is the main backer of a plan to restart production by the BSA Company, assembling motorbikes in the Midlands as soon as the middle of 2021.

The revived BSA Company will shortly begin building a research facility in Banbury to develop electric motorbike technology, before launching motorbikes with internal combustion engines closely followed by an electric battery model by the end of 2021.

BSA, which stood for Birmingham Small Arms, was originally founded in 1861 to manufacture guns at Small Heath, a setting for the hit BBC drama Peaky Blinders. Its metalworking factories were later turned to bicycles and then motorcycles. By the 1950s, it was the world's largest motorcycle maker, but it went bankrupt and ceased production in the 1970s.

In 1951, Triumph owner Jack Sangster sold Triumph to the BSA concern, ostensibly to avoid death duties and much to the consternation of Edward Turner, Triumph's mercurial chief engineer and designer. The two companies operated as separate concerns although Triumph's profits were often diverted into BSA's books, as BSA was not nearly so profitable. BSA also acquired Ariel, Sunbeam and New Hudson (all also owned by Sangster) and it was the cost of developing the disastrous Ariel 3 three-wheeler that put a large nail in the coffin of the parent company.

Sadly, in line with the rest of the British motorcycle industry, BSA's out-of-date designs, rash investments and a failure to appreciate and recognize the progress the Japanese were making in

motorcycle design led to its demise and, by 1972, it was no more. A sad end to a once great name.

Anand Mahindra, who is worth \$1.7bn (£1.3bn) according to Forbes magazine, said he had chosen to invest in the UK because of its history of motorcycle production. The company also received support from the UK government, which awarded the BSA Company a £4.6m grant to develop electric bikes, in the hope of creating at least 255 jobs.

“The UK was the leader in bikes right from the start,” Mahindra told the Guardian. “That provenance is something that we really want to retain.”

Mahindra Group is the world’s largest manufacturer of tractors and the 20th largest carmaker by sales. It owns the Reva electric car brand that produced the G-Wiz city car, and it is also the world’s biggest producer of three-wheeled electric rickshaws.

Mahindra also has experience in reviving motorcycle brands. In 2016, it picked up a controlling stake in a company that had bought the BSA brand, as well as Czech brand Jawa. Jawa was relaunched in 2018, with 50,000 sales in its first full year, an achievement Mahindra now wants to repeat with BSA.

The project is being run by Anupam Thareja, a former investment banker who initially bought the BSA brand. He said he wanted to continue the “quirky English charm” of the original BSA company. Thareja said he hoped to build a factory near the original Small Heath site but declined to give estimates on annual production.

Mahindra said its experience with electric bikes would help the broader group in its eventual move away from products that burn fossil fuels, although he said the company would not “be dismantling our [internal combustion] engines” until the market reached a “tipping point”.

The new BSA Company plans to start with assembling traditional internal combustion engine bikes costing between £5,000 and £10,000 with parts from various suppliers in the UK and beyond.

Thareja said it was wary about possible tariffs for exports under a no-deal Brexit, but believed motorcycle brands could benefit from customers’ desire to travel once the worst of the pandemic is over.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same” is an old chestnut that continues to have relevance in the world of motorcycle design, and in the case of India, especially so. In case you hadn’t noticed, India (and the South Asian market writ large) is gaga for retro rigs. For proof, you need look at just the last three years, when no fewer than seven trademark applications have been filed in support of resurrecting classic badges, and in some cases, leading to collaborations with existing brands. That includes familiar stalwarts like Royal Enfield and Triumph, but lately, classic Brit also-rans like BSA and Norton have entered the fray as well.

Of course, there are plenty of other two-wheeled styles to be had on the Indian subcontinent, even if you adjust for the overwhelming crush of sub-100cc motos dominating the landscape. For example, BMW has an agreement with India's TVS Motor to build its G310 R (the first BMW not to be built in Europe) and G310 GS models there, while the KTM-Bajaj partnership has resulted in the 125, 200, 250, and 390 Duke models being manufactured in India (as well as the RC 390), with all enjoying great popularity in the local markets. Homegrown Hero MotoCorp and Bajaj Auto regularly swap positions as the top sellers in India, with most of their bikes being of the standard or naked variety. But they just don't bring the same cachet and brand reverence as classic marques from early days, and the Indian thirst for retro-style bikes is clear whether you're talking about Royal Enfield's ubiquitous Bullet 350 or the more up-to-date, '70s-influenced Honda H'ness CB350. The latest moves in the segment show an influx of British retro reboots; TVS bought the remains of Norton earlier this year, and Mahindra is signaling the debut of a new BSA model shortly. All that action is in addition to the new Triumph-Bajaj cruiser set to debut sometime in 2022. There are others nipping at the edges too, including Czech-based Jawa, and of course Harley-Davidson retains a foot in the Indian subcontinent with dealers still selling its bikes.

So why the classic-style popularity? There's the fact that the once-thriving British bike industry had deep roots in its former colonies (like India, Malaysia, and Thailand) and its retro designs and motorcycling history have infiltrated much of the culture. It's also pure economics: India is the world's largest bike market (recently surpassing China), and it's also home to some of its biggest manufacturers. Economic developments have also led to middle-class growth and an increase in both leisure time and disposable income for the population.

There's also the sense that retro-style bikes are easier to build and enter into the market for manufacturers, are usually better suited to rough Indian roads, and provide an affordable alternative for new riders. In India, the retro boom is also widely seen as a response to the rapid growth of Royal Enfield, which has seen remarkable sales increases in the last few years.

### **Currently Active Brands:**

**Royal Enfield:** One of the world's oldest bike brands has been building machines in India since 1925 and, since its acquisition by India's Eicher Group some 25 years ago, is close to being Indian bike royalty—even if its actual overall sales are well below those of market leaders Hero and Bajaj. It also means British-bred Royal Enfield has deep pockets and more R&D resources; the brand has scored major successes with its newest in-house designs. The modern Interceptor 650 twin, for example, is the best-selling middleweight motorcycle in the UK in 2020, and is selling briskly in the US as well. The brand's smaller-displacement 350cc models are huge sellers in the home country.

Even though it only plays in the middleweight segment (250–750cc class), Enfield's regional sales have grown 88 percent in the last year, and it's looking to expand across Asia even more,

with recently announced plans to open a new factory in Thailand. “It’s a long game we are playing in the international market,” Siddhartha Lal, managing director and CEO at Eicher Motors Ltd., said recently.

The brand also just launched the 650cc Meteor model in India, but there’s been some speculation that RE might enter the more premium heavyweight segment as well, fueled by the cherry KX concept shown back in 2018. RE’s Lal has even said that all the hype around Harley when it first entered India gave cruiser biking new appeal; riders would come check out new Harleys but ended up buying more affordable Enfields. The KX might be the heavyweight they’re looking for.

**Triumph Motorcycles:** Triumph Motorcycles and Bajaj Auto formally announced their partnership only last year, but by all accounts, are still on track to release the joint venture’s first new model, a cruiser, in 2022, even with supply-chain issues due to COVID-19. Overall, the two companies will be jointly developing a stable of midsize motorcycles to be manufactured in India, ranging in size from 200cc to 750cc, to serve emerging markets. There are no official details on the individual products as yet, but some have speculated that a mini single-cylinder Bonneville with a sub-300cc displacement would make for a solid competitor to the new-generation Royal Enfields. That would make sense, seeing as how the Street Twin is currently Triumph’s best-selling model in India.

**Honda Motorcycle:** Big Red’s got the street cred, so why not join the fray? Honda officially launched its own classically styled bike with the recently unveiled H’ness CB350, which comes in DLX and DLX Pro trims. The model is seen as Japan’s direct response to Royal Enfield’s Classic 350 and follows in the footsteps of Honda’s CB1100 EX and CB750, bearing the same CB silhouette, and even though it did get some tech updates, it still bears that unmistakably retro design. Of course, Honda’s no stranger to the Indian market either, though most of its current catalog in the country consists of scooters and small-displacement commuter bikes.

**Jawa Motorcycles:** Classic Legends (part of the Mahindra Group) bought and revived the Jawa bike brand back in 2016 in a bid to tap into India’s booming retrobike market. The Czech-born marque has enjoyed a devoted, almost cultlike following in India since the 1960s, but Classic Legends released a range of new retro-influenced designs in 2018 based on its existing Mojo platform, followed closely by the bigger Perak bobber model, though the roll-out was plagued by production issues and delays early on.

Toward the end of 2020, Jawa issued a statement saying it had sorted out the problems, and announced sales of more than 50,000 units in the Indian market in “12 months of full operations,” which is both impressive but also a bit misleading. Jawa currently has five bikes in its portfolio—the Jawa, Jawa Forty Two, Jawa 42 2.1, Jawa 42 Bobber and Perak—all of them competing in the small to middleweight classic segment; the Perak bobber packs a liquid-cooled

334cc single, six speeds, and ABS as standard. Jawa has said it's started exporting bikes to Nepal and Europe.

**Norton:** TVS Motor bought another classic UK motorbike company, Norton, out of administration last April. India's third-largest motorcycle maker purchased the iconic 122-year-old British brand as part of a distress sale through one of its subsidiaries, and according to TVS's joint managing director Sudarshan Venu, the firm would offer "full support for Norton to regain its full glory."

TVS is probably counting on Norton's expertise in the cruiser segment to give it some ammo in a battle with Royal Enfield, though the new bikes are being built in England and it's not clear whether models will also be specced for India; the current portfolio boasts larger-displacement bikes which will open up new markets for the Chennai-based manufacturer, though not necessarily back home. TVS has recently restarted the production lines with the first new bikes built at the UK facility to be the popular Commando models, according to the company's interim CEO John Russell. That will be followed by outstanding V-4 models, and then the 650cc Atlas models. In short, TVS may eventually bring Norton to India, but some house cleaning is in order first.

India automotive manufacturer Mahindra & Mahindra acquired the BSA brand back in 2016 with the intent of moving into the premium motorcycle market, but four years later, we're still waiting to see results. The Indian giant owns 60 percent of the Classic Legends label, which will be behind the revival of the century-old bike maker, with the latest report mentioning plans for a technical and design center as well as a factory in England, with bikes also being assembled in the UK.

Post-Brexit, Classic has understandably adopted a wait-and-see approach for the long term, though the first new internal-combustion BSA is still due to debut sometime in 2021, with an electric-battery bike to follow at the end of the year. (Mahindra also said it had been focusing on clearing the Jawa backlog first before turning to BSA.) When the lines start rolling, BSA plans to export the majority of the bikes to the US, Australia, and Japan, after which it will supposedly make its way to the Indian market.

## Questions:

1. Analyze the market trends and report your predictions regarding the revival of retro-style bikes, and the difficulties faced by a brand to compete in that segment.
2. Would the already established subsidiaries of Classic Legends hamper the sales of its cousin BSA?
3. The relaunched BSA Gold Star, being priced similar to the 650-Twins Royal Enfield has to offer, what are your thoughts on the marketing strategies employed by BSA?
4. Given the task, how would you approach with the revival of BSA?

**Source:** The Guardian, Top Speed, Cycle World.