



Phil Price



BIG VELO

an ongoing history

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As I had only heard about 'Big Velo' in revered and almost mythical tones, when friend and new owner Phil Price of Christchurch telephoned to say he would be honoured if I'd race this piece of New Zealand history at the 2014 Burt Munro Challenge, the honour was most definitely mine.

In 1924 Veloce Ltd produced a single cylinder 350cc bevel driven single OHC engine: elegant, reliable and powerful, the model 'K' was the precursor to the highly successful KTT lineage. So impressed by the marque, top rider Alec Bennett offered his services for the 1926 Isle of Man Junior TT on a no-win, no-salary basis. He duly won the seven lap, 264.11 mile race in a shade under four hours at an average speed of 66.7mph: Jimmy Simpson, on the works AJS, was runner up over ten minutes adrift. Bennett's salary was not recorded.

Driven by the desire to achieve on the race track, the years up until the war saw concerted and focused development gaining Velocette a worthy reputation and

a large share of the growing international motorcycle market; this in addition attracted talented riders such as Freddie Hicks, Les Archer, Wal Handley, Walter Rusk and Harold Willis to the works. Willis, whose career best at the IOM TT was two second places (runner-up to Velocette mounted Alec Bennett in 1928, Bennett's 5th IOM TT win) eventually took charge of the Veloce Ltd race programme and decided that for the 1934 season the 'blue riband' 500cc class was to be contested. It was decided that Percy Goodman's conception of some ten years earlier to enlarge a 350cc 'K' series engine was a worthy notion, and so, in 1934, MT5001 'The Big Velo' was born. MT denotes factory experimental racing, and then Number 1 500cc is the rest.

The 350cc KTT engine was enlarged from a bore and stroke of 74mm x 81mm up to 81mm x 96mm, to give a capacity of 495cc. Running on 50% petrol benzol, the new 500cc motor produced a credible 38 bhp at 6000rpm. Housed in a rigid, heavyweight looped frame, guided by modified 'strutted' girder forks up at the front, MT5001 also boasted many 'works' parts: the forks, for example, were made by Webbs and were initially destined for sidecars, but the Veloce race department perhaps felt the extra rigidity provided by the triangulated struts may tame the additional power of the 500cc motor; magnesium also featured prominently with cam-box, gearbox and hubs all benefiting from such metallic dieting.

A LEGEND BORN

Debuting at the 1934 Ulster Grand Prix in the capable hands of Ulsterman Walter Rusk, MT5001 won the 200mile race at an average speed of 88.38mph with a new lap record at 92.13mph. The open country of Northern Ireland plays host to the Ulster Grand Prix which is held on the Dundrod circuit, complete with seven mile long Clady straight. It is always held a week or so before the Isle of Man TT and is thus a good opportunity for the works teams to blow up their motors and highlight any pitfalls in anticipation of the more highly prized TT victory. The fortnight after the Ulster, Rusk had a trouble free ride on the Big Velo, taking the machine to a fine podium in the Senior TT, finishing third behind the talented Norton team mates of Jimmy Guthrie and Jimmy Simpson. Rusk got the Big Velo round the seven laps in 3hrs 36mins 19secs, at an average speed of

Bill White and 500 Velocette

73.27mph, demonstrating the reliable nature of the bike; a trait which would stand it in good stead throughout it's long life.

Buoyed by such early success, Velocette continued development of their 500cc projects up until the war, seeing Stanley Woods take the new 'springer' framed MT5003 to second place in the 1938 TT, just 15 seconds behind winner Harold Daniell on the works Norton. They developed a DOHC version, then a 10 inch square 'huntly and palmer' head; but of the small handful of factory racing 500s made, only this one, via the factory, and one brought back by Rod Coleman made their way to New Zealand and it is in this direction the story now heads.

CONQUERING THE COLONY...

The summer of 1934 saw The Big Velo land on New Zealand shores; an intriguing export by Veloce Ltd given the early success and obvious potential of their relatively undeveloped 'first' 500cc racer in an era where performance on the lengthy European road races and the highly prized Isle of Man TT correlated strongly with reputations of reliability, performance and prestige, and consequently showroom sales. Why send it to the other side of the world?

It was a decision ultimately made by the Gutgemanns: a family originally of German descent who later became the Goodmans, the founders, owners and operators of Velocette. Conducting business based on



the underlying principles of trust, loyalty and the gentleman's agreement, long term relationships were formed between agents and riders alike and it was to one of these agents that the Big Velo was presented: William White.

The White brothers came to New Zealand in the 1920s having left Stafford in the UK Midlands where they worked in the motor industry, forming friendships with the Velocette team and factory. Bill became a team member, attaining a Gold star for lapping Brooklands at over 100mph on a 350cc Velocette. (I have also received an amazing photo which was kindly sent by Bill White's nephew, Ian, taken in the Isle of Man showing the 1928 Junior TT winning Velocette ridden by Walter Rusk and it's team; there on the far right stands one Jack White, brother of Bill). The strong ties and mutual respect between the Whites and Velocette seem very evident and it is clear the high regard Velocette felt for Bill White in presenting him with the Big Velo and trusting him to maintain and race the bike in colonial New Zealand and thus publicise the marque to aid sales.



10M - Uncle Jack extreme right

Jack and Bill set up the motor firm 'J & W White' in Newmarket, Auckland, which it remained until 1936 when Jack left to go farming and the firm became 'W. White', or simply 'Whites'. Throughout his business career Bill made a point of visiting the Velocette factory at least once every two years and the firm maintained a continual correspondence with the Velocette factory, which was good as there was a lot to tell them!

LEGENDS ENTERTWINED

Simply put, MT5001, 'The Big Velo' is New Zealand's most successful racing motorcycle, winning no less than eight national titles, five national beach championships and eight NZ TTs. The bike set a world and NZ track record in 1938 with a lap of the Hennings Speedway track, Mangere at 86mph. Every NZ race except one that the Big Velo started prior to WWII it greeted the chequered flag first (the exception was the 1938 Waiheke TT; Len Perry thought he was leading until, with five laps to go, to his horror he got the correct second place pit board. Despite breaking the lap record on each of those five remaining laps it still wasn't enough for the victor's laurels). Oh and it did some winning at the 2014 Burt Munro, but more of that soon.

Bill White himself won the first NZ national title on the Big Velo, the 1935 beach championship. Then two NZ TT victories on Waiheke in 1936 (C. Goldberg) and 1937 (A. Mattson) preceded the legendary Len Perry era, which began in 1938 and took a pause in 1950, racking up

eight national titles and five New Zealand TTs. Such reliability came from behind the scenes in White's workshop where the skilful Len Coulthard was giving the Big Velo thorough and meticulous preparation, much akin to what a works machine would receive. Each year for the TT, Len, assisted by John Jones, would strip and rebuild the bike, including wheels, fork spindles, bushes, the motor, gearbox and clutch. Special attention to the magneto was apparently given.

In 1950 John Jones was sent to England for a year, on Bill White's request, taking the Big Velo engine with him. I quote from an article he wrote on his experience as it makes for much more interesting reading than I could paraphrase.

"I was let loose in the workshop [at Velocette], working under Berty Goodman, with Frank Panes, Hedley Cox and Freddie Owens. I then proceeded to rebuild engine MT5001. The engine was stripped, cleaned, and to my surprise a selection of new unfinished conrods were dug up. These were all tested, until we came up with one with Vickers/Rockwell reading 6.33. Then hours of shaping and polishing produced a conrod which was acceptable. New crankpin assembly and piston assembly were also produced, and after weighing up the bits and doing our maths each flywheel was balanced to 25oz 3 drams, giving a balance factor of 70 per cent. The flywheels were assembled and tried, the cylinder was relined and the motor assembled. With all new parts, existing inner timing case was disposed of, and one fitted incorporating extra scavenging pump to cope with



overhead gear oil, i.e. oil return from bottom bevel housing to sump was blocked off, and the new pump intercepted this flow, and delivered direct back to oil tank. Consequently, there was less oil in sump at any time.

The motor was trundled up to the Test House and bolted on to one of the Heenan Froud Test Benches. It was fired up and run for half an hour with a few pounds load on the shaft, then after a quick external check, fired up again and run for two hours. The cylinder was then removed, the piston checked for bedding in, and eased if needed, assembled and run for another period. A total running of six hours, and another piston check. Then Berty Goodman announced that it was ready for bashing."

It was John Herd that 'bashed' it to victory at the 1951 Wanganui GP. Then Forrest Cardon went on a winning streak until 1954 and the Titirangi Road Race where he unfortunately came off second best against his phonetic namesake when he wrote off the front girders on a young Rimu tree. The bike was fitted with Triumph tele forks before being retired at the end of the 1954 season. Eleven years later John Herd persuaded that the Big Velo should roar once more and proceeded to win the 1965 NZ Beach Championship before (the evergreen and still racing today) Peter Butterworth did the same in 1966. Many beach wins by Keith Williams preceded a second retirement until John Jones gave MT5001 a thorough restoration in the 1970s. Trevor Discombe, and then the rightful Len Perry raced it again, until in the 1980s, following the death of Bill White, the Big Velo was bought by Ivan Rhodes, world authority on historic racing Velocettes and friend of the Goodman family. Ivan returned many of the original and correct parts to the bike, before decreeing quite honourably that, 'morally, the bike belongs in NZ.' Which I guess is how I found myself astride it, listening to the wonderful crack of an open megaphone, staring up the Bluff Hill.

Chris 'tickling' big Velo into life



STILL A GOODIE

Prior to the pilgrimage south, the Big Velo visited the workshop of Wellington Velo man Nick Thomson, thus continuing the tradition of fine mechanics and engineers who have worked on the bike. Together with owner Phil Price, Nick stripped the motor and gave matters a thorough and comprehensive check through. Valve timing was checked and re-set and the oil feed to the cams was subtly re-engineered. I made a new front brake cable and number plates, and I decreed the tyres to be satisfactory after a comprehensive 'thumbnail insertion' test. The motor was re-assembled by Nick and on first push Wellington was treated to the crack of an open megga. Oil seemed fairly reluctant to stay inside certain areas, so with a large supply of absorbent foam we headed to Manfeild for a shakedown at the NZCMRR's Spring Classic. We decided to race on the Saturday only, Nick being 'quite keen to replace the exhaust

valve soon,' and it was a joy, picking up where it left off thirty years ago in winning form. Nick decided to add an 'O' ring to the exposed valve pusher in a bid for oil tightness and then with a thorough check and service during the next week we ventured towards Southland.

I am impressed with how right Velocette got the bike all those years ago, the handling especially. Like any classic motorcycle, rewards come when you settle the bike on corner entry and accelerate towards the apex and beyond: slow in, fast out. The 21" front wheel and 19" rear means you don't have to lean too far to corner and you get a sense of being quite tall on the bike. The bike flows into bends nicely, not dropping in sharply but also not too lazy so you have to boss it around; it does what you ask. The Bluff Hill's bumps and surface changes are very 'pre-war' so although approaching matters with a modicum of caution, I had a feeling that all would be well and approached matters in a frame of mind to press on a bit.

I set the tyre pressures deliberately low at 24:26psi and was subsequently very pleased to discover that although it was a bit lively and bounced around a touch, the rigid and girder combination worked very well, behaving itself completely when you kept it driving. The 4-speed gearbox is faultless so long as you allow it the short time it needs to action. It has quite a high first gear, a moderate jump to second gear, and the remaining changes are quite close ratios. The motor gathers revs gradually, that long 96mm stroke smoothly surging and noticeably stronger from 4,000rpm to my self imposed limit of 5,500rpm (period reports suggest a limit of 6,000rpm), leaving a lovely spread of tractable power that the four cogs were more than capable of keeping the motor in. The brakes, considering they are single leading shoe front and rear with a fairly hefty package to stop, are excellent: progressive, powerful and respond well without fade to that oh so familiar 'oh hell I've overcooked this' final squeeze.

Phil with a piece of Kiwi history - Big Velo back in NZ





Best time up the hill was 60.11 seconds, not quite cracking the minute barrier but enough for fourth pre-63 and first girder forked bike, in addition to making that evening's One News. When asked about the bike and then my Grandad being a Velocette dealer, I felt I shared much historical insight of clear value to the average One News viewer, and subsequently considered the shiny shoes before me to be housing a well researched and informed type. So when he queried my current job in hand, which was securing absorbent foam around the exposed valve springs, I did wonder had I presumed too soon. Reducing the explanation to a simple analogy I made mention of Grandmas, old dears from 1934 and the inevitable leaks that needed some containment. I think he must have understood though, as it was this final 'sound bite' that he chose to use for the 6pm broadcast.

Rested at Teretonga, the Big Velo was next out at the Wyndham Street Races, where in previous years it has been South Island man Chris Frisken as the man to beat in the Girder fork class. The large capacity V-twin Indian he races so spiritedly is owned by 'Pumphouse Paddy' and it really flies. There was some debated whisperings around the paddock about the origins and eligibility of the Triumph twin leading shoe front brake the Indian sported, so as we took to the grid I was pretty focused on sidestepping paddock politics when the flag dropped. I got a good start and hit the front, pushed on and rode the Big Velo as hard as I could, and it responded brilliantly – just like a well sorted, genuine Grand Prix bike should. It must have been the open megaphone noise bouncing off the bales because on every bend I could 'hear' the Indian right behind me, so kept my head down to the

flag; most bemused when an empty track behind was revealed over my shoulder!

The second race went the same way and then Invercargill boy and all round good lad Rhys Wilson had his game face on for the third race and we had a real ding-dong right to the flag, the Big Velo winning by half a wheel against Rhys' very original and quick 4-valve Rudge. A great end to the week!

Thanks must go to Southland MCC and the Burt Munro Memorial Meeting for putting on such a fantastic week of bike sport (that every racer and bike enthusiast

should get themselves to at least the once) and supporting and publicising the commitment to bring this piece of NZ history racing once again.

Big thanks also to Nick Thomson for his hard work and Velocette wizardry. And a final huge thanks to Big Velo owner Phil Price for trusting me with MT5001, and for being in a refreshing minority of enthusiasts who believe race bikes are for racing and adding history to; not simply parading, or at worse, cold and lifeless in a museum or collection.



BIG VELO

SOME OF IT'S MAJOR SUCCESSES

BUILT AS A WORKS MACHINE 1934

First raced 10 May 1934. Finished first in 500cc class Ulster Grand Prix. Won at race record speed of 88.38mph, fastest lap 92.13mph. Timed for 7 miles on Clady Straight between Antrim and Clady. Presented to William White by Velocette Factory in 1934.

1935	Won NZ Beach Champs	William White
1936	Won NZ TT Waiheke	C. Goldberg
1937	Won NZ TT Waiheke	A. Mattson
1938	2nd NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
1938	World and NZ Track Record	L.V. Perry
	Hennings Speedway, Mangere, 86mph	L.V. Perry
1939	1st NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
	1st NZ Open Beach Champs	L.V. Perry
1939	1st North Island 500cc Beach Champs	L.V. Perry
	Time 16 mins. 29 secs - 20 miles	
1946	1st NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
1947	1st NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
1948	1st NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
1949	1st NZ TT Waiheke	L.V. Perry
1950	Rider crashed in lead, record lap	L.V. Perry
1951	Wanganui Grand Prix	J. Herd

BROUGHT OUT OF RETIREMENT...

1965	NZ Beach Champs	J. Herd
1966	NZ Open Beach Champs	P. Butterworth

